

## GREEKS IN THE MAHAVAMSA

*We, the Alexandrians, the Antiochenes,  
The Seleucians and the numerous  
other Hellenes of Egypt and Syria  
and those in Media, and those in Persia,  
and so many others  
With their extended dominions,  
and the diverse endeavours toward judicious adaptations  
And the Greek koine language -  
all the way in to Bactria we carried it,  
to the peoples of India*

(Constantine Cavafy)

Popular opinion, as much as mistaken scholarship, persists in the notion that the first Europeans to set foot on Sri Lanka were the Portuguese, whom “the vagaries of wind and wave” wafted to the island in A.D. 1505.

Few realize that the *Mahavamsa* holds evidence of something surprisingly different. This is that the first people from Europe to come to the island were the Greeks, predating the arrival of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British by as much as eighteen centuries, and doing so indeed no more than a century and a half after the reputed arrival of the Sinhalese themselves! Calling them Yona, our chronicle refers to them (even if cursorily) no less than six times as against the single reference to the Portuguese and the four of five times to the Dutch, whose arrival was relatively so recent as their impact was catastrophic.

First mention of the Yona in the chronicle is in connection with King Pandukabhaya’s settlement of the city of Anuradhapura (*Mhv.*XI.90). Thereafter the Yona find mention among the delegations sent by the thera, Moggaliputta soon after the Third Council held at Pataliputra for converting the people of the adjacent regions to Buddhism (*Mhv.*XII.4-6 and 5-6). This is followed shortly afterwards (*Mhv.*XII.34-36 and 39-40) by terse reports concerning the manner and success with which the respective missions were accomplished. True, these took place in India and in the reign of King Asoka, but they are drawn into our chronicle by way of preface to the conversion of the island itself through the friendship that existed between the kings Asoka and Devanampiya Tissa (*Mhv.*XI.19) and the similar mission led by Asoka’s son, Mahinda, which had already received fuller treatment in the *Dipavamsa* (XII.7 f).

The last of our references to the Yona in the *Mahavamsa* is once more to their presence in Sri Lanka – that delegation of bhikkhus who are said to have journeyed from distant Alasanda to Anuradhapura to participate in the ceremony

with which King Dutthagamani inaugurated the building of the Maha Thupa (Ruwanwelisaya: *Mhv.*XXIX.38-40).

Admittedly writers have time and again drawn these references to the Yona in our chronicle into their studies of the contemporary history of India. But, as far as I am aware, they have not been considered for their worth as evidence in the Sri Lanka context, in reverse reviewing them against the backdrop of India. For, scrappy though they be, these notices bespeak some degree of involvement of the religion and history of the island with the Yona presence in North-west India in those very centuries that saw them settle in those regions following Alexander, during which there was also the closest of relations with each other.

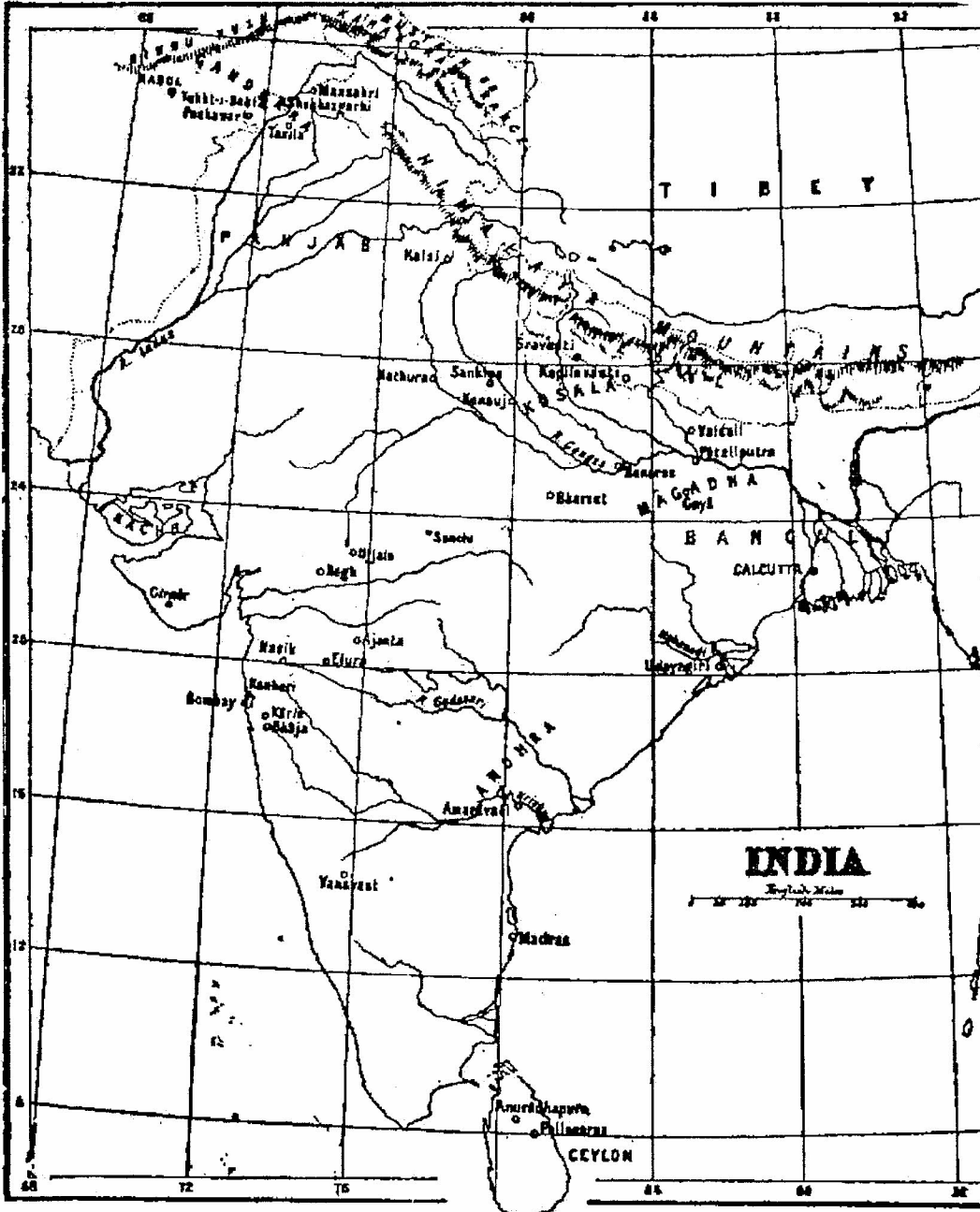
No one denies that by Yona in the historical context of those early years are meant the Greeks – even if, like V.A. Smith<sup>1</sup>, there may be need to concede that with time it took in some mixed or otherwise Hellenized people as well. The word itself appears to have originated among the Persians, whose immediate contact with the Greeks was with those who had colonized the west coast of Asia Minor during the tenth to eighth centuries B.C., calling the region and the adjacent islands Ionia after their eponymous hero, Ion. The Persians called these Ionians (Gk: *Ionioi*) *Yauna* – which in the Sanskrit is *Yavana*, in the Prakrit, *Yona*.

The name, and likewise the people so recognized by the Indians, appear to have predated the Greeks who poured into India with Alexander's invasion (327-325 B.C). For we find the grammarian, Panini (iv.1.49), who lived a century or so before this event, speaking of the Yavana and of their script, Yavananilipi while a reference in the *Majjima Nikaya* (ii.149) might imply that the Indian awareness of Greeks went even beyond that<sup>2</sup>. (These could have been of Ionians settled in the east in a few pockets like Nysa by the Persians when both Ionia and North-west India up to the Indus came under Achaemenid rule).

As is well known, Alexander was no Ionian – nor were his intimate troops; they were Macedonians from the mainland. Thus, calling them Yona or Yavana indiscriminately is comparable to the Roman appellation *Graeci* (after a small colony, Graecia, which they had known) for a people who called their land Hellas and themselves Hellenes after that small tribe in south Thessaly mentioned by Homer in his *Iliad* (ii. 683 f.) .Better still, of course, is the practice of the Hebrews. They, like the other Semitic peoples, called all Greeks Javan (*Yāwān*), as they

<sup>1</sup> *Asoka* Oxford (1924) p.132 n.2.

<sup>2</sup> See also *Dip.* XV. 47-49 for a curious reference to a drought and resultant famine among the Yonaka during a bygone world cycle. B.C. Law ed."Dipavamsa", *Ceylon Historical Journal* vol.VII (1957-1958). p.224 n.1 explains "Yonakas were the Greeks".Ref .his *Tribes in Ancient India* vol.II, London (1934) ch. XXXI.



consistently did in the Old Testament – once again, after the people of Ionia and the islands, who were their more immediate contacts.

North-west India had long ceased to be part of the Persian empire when Alexander invaded it in the spring of 327 B.C. Next year he advanced on Taksila and in May fought the Battle of Hydaspes (Jhelum) against Porus, raja of the Pauravas, winning a brilliant victory against him. Thereafter he came down to the Hyphasis (Beas) river.

But here his troops, weary of endless marching and fighting, mutinied, forcing him to abandon further conquests and return to the Hydaspes. Here, spending some months in building a fleet of ships, he journeyed down the Hydaspes, venting his frustrations on the native villages and cities on the way ( in the course of which he was near fatally wounded in a fight against the Malloi (Malavas)), then reached Patala in the Indus delta. In September 325 B.C. Alexander left India, taking his troops through the Gedrosian desert (Makran) in a punishing march, leaving Nearchus to sail the fleet down-river and along the Arabian coast to Hormuz in Southern Iran, the two forces reuniting in Carmania.

Just one and a half years later (on 10th June 323 B.C.) Alexander was dead, and his Asiatic kingdom came under the rule of one of his generals, Seleucus Nicator. Already large numbers of Greeks, along with others from the conquered nations, who came with, or in the wake of Alexander's invasion, appear to have moved into the regions on both sides of the Hindukush, occupying the rich territory of Bactria (Balkh) and the north-western frontier of India. These settlers brought with them their institutions, customs, art and literature, built cities and settled down among the local population as Greeks best knew how, resulting in a fascinating blend of cultures. Also, Alexander's campaign had opened up four distinct routes by land and sea, which brought the West into closer contact with India, facilitating trade and travel. Evidence of the prosperity of Central Asia and of a brisk commerce with India in the period that followed is amply supported by the several hoards of Greek coins found in these regions.

Seleucus' rule over his Indian territory did not last for much more than two decades, for when trying to consolidate his hold on them, he lost the Punjab to Chandragupta Maurya, then attempting to recover the lost possessions, he apparently had to come to an amicable settlement with him, whereby he ceded to him all of the Greek-held territory as far as the Kabul valley – Herat, Kandahar (Gandhara) and Baluchistan (c.303 B.C).

It is difficult to understand why Seleucus did so without putting up a fight. From the fact that he received 500 elephants, gave his daughter in marriage to Chandragupta and was accorded the privilege of an ambassador (Megasthenes) at the Mauryan court at Pataliputra, it would seem that, on the one hand, circumstances were such that he found it difficult to hold on to his Indian possessions, on the other,



that he had the assurance of the well-being of his Greek subjects under Mauryan rule. As for the elephants, we must presume that they were all or mostly war-elephants, which Seleucus may have distributed throughout the rest of his dominions to strengthen his hold over them.

Going by chronology, it must have been a group of Yona of this Seleucid era who find mention in the first of our *Mahavamsa* references. This is of a community, the only thing about which the chronicle tells us is that they obtained accommodation near the west gate, when Pandukabhaya was assigning places for the various communities, institutions and establishments in the city of Anuradhapura, which he was laying out at the time. As the text (*Mhv.* X.89-90) tells us- I quote from Geiger:

He laid out also four suburbs as well as the Abhaya-tank, the common cemetery, the place of execution, and the chapel of the Queens of the West, the banyan-tree of Vessavana and the Palmyra-palm of the Demon of Maladies, *the ground set apart for the Yonas* and the house of the Great Sacrifice; all these he laid out near the west gate.

These may sound motley surroundings in which to find a settlement of Greeks but there is no need to presume a ghetto of some kind, suggesting a degree of racial or other discrimination. The fact may be that the sites mentioned were, without prejudice of any sort, the more significant of those that were to be found to the west of the city, and quite possibly spread far apart from each other. Indeed, it may have been a concession to the Yona themselves, who would for obvious reasons have wanted to live in a kind of polity of their own as at Nysa, not to mention their numerous colonies among alien peoples in the Mediterranean basin and elsewhere.

On the other hand, what is more worth remarking is that even in this very first occurrence of the Yona in the *Mahavamsa* – and notwithstanding the centuries that had elapsed, our chronicler takes it for granted that his Sinhala audience knew right well who these people were whom he was talking about so as to need no further qualification from him. This is also confirmed by the fact that the *Tika* does not think it necessary either. Besides, we do not find any attempt to make good with the subsequent references to the Yona in the chronicle.

Be that as it may, the failure on the part of *The University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*<sup>3</sup> to explain the Yona here as Greeks appears rather to have a different reason, since it does so in both instances when the word occurs in the context of the

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<sup>3</sup> Colombo (1959) p.108.

missionaries sent by Moggaliputta Tissa Thera to various neighbouring regions of the Mauryan kingdom and beyond. But then again it completely ignores, not just who our Yona were but all mention of that remarkable delegation of Yona bhikkhus who came from Alasanda to Anuradhapura with similar other delegations from India in the reign of Dutthagamani for the ceremony with which work commenced on the Maha Thupa.

Doubts have been expressed whether the reference in our Pandukabhaya context is to the Yona at all, no matter who they were. The text has been deemed corrupt, perhaps by those even in antiquity who knew little or nothing of the Yona. So that the manuscript tradition has come up with more than one reading for *yonasabhāgavatthu*, “ground set apart for the Yona”. We have, for instance:

*so nam sabhāgavatthañca ; tthuñca;*  
*so tam sabhagavatthuñca ; sabhāgavatthuñca*  
*sonnasabhāgavatthañca ; yena sabhāgavatthuñca;*  
*yonasabhāgavattañca ; yojanasabhāgavattañca*

However, *yonasabhāgavatthu*, which is also the reading found in the *Extended Mahavamsa* (10.108) is generally agreed upon by most scholars, even when the fact of Greeks in Sri Lanka, and then too in such antiquity, must have come as a surprise to them – as it would indeed to anyone.

The text used by George Turnour<sup>4</sup> for his translation of the *Mahavamsa* apparently had the reading *sonnan sabhāgavatthan* and *pubbheda-gaharan*, which he accordingly rendered “a gilt hall for his own use, as well as a palace distributed into many apartments”. Nor do we find L.C. Wijesinha<sup>5</sup> faulting him for this but only observing that “the original words thus translated are of very doubtful meaning”.

On the other hand, Geiger himself has no qualms about accepting the reading *yonasabhāgavatthu* and translates accordingly “ground set apart for the Yonas”<sup>6</sup>. The independent scholarship of Ananda Guruge<sup>7</sup> confirms this reading as well as the translation, both being followed by Douglas Bullis<sup>8</sup> in his recent English rendering of the chronicle. Geiger’s weighty authority is the more to be respected,

<sup>4</sup> See George Turnour tr. *The Mahavamsa in Two Parts* with notes and emendations by Mudaliyar L.C. Wijesinha, Part I (1889) Reprint New Delhi (1996) p.43.

<sup>5</sup> loc. cit. and n.11 *ad loc.*

<sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Geiger ed. *Mahavamsa* London (1958) p. liv. and *The Mahavamsa or The Great Chronicle Translated into English*. Colombo (1950) p.74.

<sup>7</sup> *Mahavamsa* Colombo (1989) p.550 and n.69 *ad loc.* in p.790.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Bullis tr. *Mahavamsa, the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka* California (1998) p.141. He renders it “the borough of the Yonas.”

especially when he goes along with this reading, notwithstanding his opinion that “It is not probable that four centuries B.C already at Pandukabhaya’s time, Greeks had settled in Ceylon”. He assumes that what is being spoken of here is, not an extent of land but a building erected by the king, which may afterwards have served as a dwelling-place for nondescript foreigners (*Yona*) and may have got its name from this fact<sup>9</sup>. It must have been some such consideration as Geiger’s that had prejudiced Turnour in his translation and Wijesinha himself not to question the reading Turnour had adopted.

The word *Yona*, as we shall see, is used very confidently to mean the Greeks by Geiger himself in the subsequent contexts, especially at *Mhv.*XIX 39-40 (with n.2), when that delegation is said to have arrived from Alasanda to Anuradhapura in the reign of Dutthagamani, so that to use prejudice to question the very evidence of Greek settlers, taking the selfsame word then to mean some other nondescript “foreign traders, corresponding to the modern Moormen” who were then “not allowed to dwell in the city at the time but to stay in a kind of ghetto”<sup>10</sup> is not acceptable.

Bullis<sup>11</sup> for his part, tries to have it both ways, explaining these “Greek traders” as “Moors, perhaps mixed Greek-Moor traders”, adding that “No Greek records unambiguously confirm direct trade with Lanka during the fourth century BCE,” though again conceding that “Later in the *Mahavamsa*, ‘Yonas’ refers specifically to Ionian traders”<sup>12</sup>

The initial Greek conquest and occupation of North-west India dates from 327 B.C to 303 B.C., in which year Seleucus Nicator surrendered his Indian possessions to Chandragupta. Both *Dipavamsa* (XI.1-4) and *Mahavamsa* (X.106) say that Pandukabhaya became king at the age of 37 and ruled for full 70 years, dying (according to the generally accepted dating) in 307 B.C. If this be so, his rule in Sri Lanka is in part contemporaneous with the two decades or so of Greek rule in India aforementioned (325-303 B.C.). So that chronologically at least there is no cause for surprise if Greeks are heard of in Sri Lanka, which had but less than two centuries ago been colonized from these same regions of India (reputedly by Vijaya

<sup>9</sup> ed. *Mahavamsa loc.cit.* He refers readers to E.R.Ayrton *Ceylon Notes and Queries* vol.I (Oct.1913) p.viii.

<sup>10</sup> *loc.cit.*

<sup>11</sup> p.141, n.5.

<sup>12</sup> *loc. cit.* He contributes as his argument for this that the *ushnisha* or cranial bulge prominent in the statuary of the Buddha had originated with the Greek communities of Gandhara (he must be meaning the *o(n)gkos* worn in tragic drama) before it found its way into Buddhist iconography. I fail to see the point.

and his companions). and had maintained close relations with the peoples there from ethnic, political and sentimental reasons.

This evidence – supported, if necessary, by the subsequent references to the Yona in the *Mahavamsa* – is good enough evidence of the fact of a Greek presence in the kingdom of Pándukabhaya as against the flimsy presupposition upon which it is subjected to question by Geiger and but half-heartedly conceded by Bullis. Guruge is therefore justified when, having taken into cognizance the foregoing doubt, he nevertheless reaffirms the identification of our Yona here as none other than Greeks, translating the words in question as

There was a general quarter for the Yonas (Ionians i.e.Greeks).

If anything at all is discrepant with the presence of the Yona in Sri Lanka in the reign of Pandukabhaya, it has to do, *not with the Yona but the highly controversial chronology of Pandukabhaya himself*. For if he ruled for 70 years, ending with his death in 307 B.C, and the city-planning had begun immediately upon his assumption of kingship and went on for ten years only (after which he began establishing the village-boundaries over the whole island of Lanka (*Mhv.X.103*)), there were still four decades before the Greeks made their appearance in India, *yet which happened within the period of his rule*.

It is possible that Pandukabhaya lived longer than even Rameses the Great of ancient Egypt but it is highly improbable that he did so ruling up to the end of his 107 years. The chronological improbability can however be explained in favour of the well-established dates of the Greek presence in India (and Sri Lanka) if it be assumed that the 70 years given as of the king's reign had once again included the 37 years he had already lived before he became king. It may have been the naïve acceptance of the age and rule of Pandukabhaya that made L.S.Perera in *The University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*<sup>13</sup> hesitate to interpret the word. *Yona* in the context as in fact "Greek" – as he does afterwards.

It would be seen that immediately following Pandukabhaya's 70 years long rule comes a 60 years rule by Mutasiva, not to mention the awkward 17 year interregnum between Abhaya and Pandukabhaya himself – all of which has surely been occasioned by the desperate exercise of synchronizing the advent of Vijaya in Sri Lanka with the Nirvana of the Buddha. Likewise things would be easier if we assumed that the city-planning of Pandukabhaya did not cease at the end of ten years but was an on-going process, with the Greek settlement coming some time in the last

<sup>13</sup> 108. This, and perhaps (like Bullis) Geiger's misgivings about the possibility of Greeks in Sri Lanka four centuries B.C.

two decades of his rule (and life), during all which time the Greek were in occupation of north-west India under Seleucus and hence feasible for the purpose in Anuradhapura as well.

As mentioned, Alexander's troops mutinied when they found him wanting to extend his conquests still deeper into India. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentions that those who came with Alexander's expedition went even as far as Broach (Barukaccha, the Barygaza of the Greek writers). While Alexander's expedition itself did not get so far, a small colony was possible here in Mauryan times when the Greeks had contact with Gujarat, so it may have resulted in this assumption in the *Periplus*.<sup>14</sup>

The *Mahavamsa* evidence of our Anuradhapura Greeks, numerous enough for mention and numerous enough to be accorded a separate quarter in the city, is in this context quite exciting. For, without doubt these would then have constituted the furthest settlement of Greeks who came with, or very soon after Alexander's victorious troops, finding residence in a part of the world that (if at all) may only have been in his wild dreams.<sup>15</sup>

Alexander's conquest of the erstwhile empire of the Persians was by land. But when he withdrew to the Hydaspes after his troops mutinied at the Hyphasis, he took some months building a fleet, which Nearchus then sailed down to the Indus delta, and thence 1000 miles along the Iranian coast to Hormuz. It may be recalled that Darius, wanting to find out where the Indus joined the sea, had long ago sent an expedition under the Greek, Scylax of Caryandia, whose information and maps may have been available to Nearchus. To such Greeks, to whom sailing was second nature, it would have been no formidable undertaking to have made the voyage to Sri Lanka on the now much-traversed route along the west coast of India and to already well-frequented harbours about which they could have gained all the information and pilotage they needed.

<sup>14</sup> See R. Thapar *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* Oxford (1961) p.128.

<sup>15</sup> Vol I Colombo (159) p.108. But see D.P.M. Weerakkody *Taprobane : Ancient Sri Lanka as Known to the Greeks and the Romans*. Turnhout (1997) p. 38. He writes: "It is conceivable that during his (Pandukabhaya's) reign (377-307 B.C.) Greeks from northwestern India might have made their way to Sri Lanka in some numbers . . . . However, if one retains the manuscript reading (which appears stronger than the variants), then the establishment of a foreign quarter in the capital at this early date implies a very prompt reaction on the part of Sri Lanka to the new conditions brought about by Greek penetration into northwestern India after Alexander the Great, and an equally prompt penetration by the Greeks into regions further afield."

What is worth emphasis about these Yona whom Pandukabhaya settled in Anuradhapura is that they were no second or third generation Indo-Greeks. They were men who had just two decades ago at the most left cities in their Greek homelands themselves (Macedonia and Ionia inclusive) as camp-followers and come with, or in the wake of Alexander's troops. Now when their fellows had shown reluctance to push any further south, these had apparently done so.

Onesicritus of Astypalaea, Nearchus' lieutenant who steered Alexander's ship down the Hydaspes and wrote a romance of Alexander, perhaps got his information on Sri Lanka well before these settlers so that he may have owed nothing to them. Such information as was available to Onesicritus was without doubt available to Alexander himself, though whether he himself had the intention of pushing down to Sri Lanka is not to be known. On the other hand, Megasthenes would surely have had information piped back by these Yona settlers of Anuradhapura as one of his sources; for, unlike Onesicritus, he continued to remain in India, becoming afterwards Seleucus Nicator's ambassador at the Mauryan court at Pataliputra, and wrote a book in which he described the geography, people and products of the island, which was to become the basis of subsequent works on India by Greek writers. Conversely, these same people could have brought to Sri Lanka first-hand knowledge of their own homeland and her culture, of which the only recognizable traces that have come down to us of such influence are perhaps the handful of Greek myth-motifs that appear to have worked themselves into the tradition of three of the island's earliest kings – two of them, interestingly enough, being Pandukabhaya and Dutthagamani.<sup>16</sup>

The most significant question still remains to be asked about these Yona of Anuradhapura – which is, of course, what on earth they had come here for. Obviously they were no explorers like Skylax and his team; they were in number and had perhaps sought, and certainly received permanent accommodation from the king. Nor were they monks like the delegation that was to come to the island in the time of Dutthagamani.

Apparently Vijaya was no Buddhist; nor yet was Panduvasudeva, notwithstanding his arrival in the guise of some kind of ascetic. (*paribbūjaka*: *Mhv.* VIII.11-12), with his queen-to-be likewise disguised as a nun (*pabbajitā* (*Mhv.* 24-25). Pandukabhaya's new city in nowise suggests the worship of the Buddha either; we have to wait for another who was to be sprung from the house of Panduvasudeva for that – I mean Devanampiya Tissa (*Mhv.* VIII.15). Besides, the Greeks had but newly come to Buddhist India for them to learn about and convert in their numbers to the new religion that was fast spreading among the peoples there. Accordingly,

<sup>16</sup> See my *Mahavamsa Studies: Greek Myth in the Ancient Tradition* Colombo (2004). The first of these is, of course, that which gave us our Vijaya legend.

one cannot but agree with Geiger<sup>17</sup> and others that these Yona were in the island. to explore the possibility of trade.

Bullis<sup>18</sup> however hopelessly misreads Geiger when, describing these Yona, he takes them to be, not *like* Moormen, as Geiger described them, but Moormen themselves or perhaps mixed Greek-Moor traders – when in fact the word at this time (implying Ionian) may not even have included Hellenized others – as Smith was to think of them of some decades later. Bullis is surely misled by misreading Geiger's simile in the light of the much later use of *Yon* for Moor traders.

What items of trade interested these Greek traders we do not know, but they would certainly have included pearls and the many kinds of gems that were soon to be found in abundance in the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (*Mhv.* XI.8-15). At any rate they appear not to have thought commerce with the island worthwhile, for we do not hear of the coming and going of other such entrepreneurs thereafter. Nor indeed do we know what became of these pioneers themselves, whether they took ship and returned to their Indian kingdom or whether they remained and, with time, merged their identity with the rest of the population. Excavations conducted in and around the city of old Anuradhapura have failed to turn up evidence of such a Greek settlement - not even numismatic evidence, of which Bactria and the Greek regions of India have yielded a fair quantity.

Our second reference – rather, set of references, are better dated but (as said) though found in the *Mahavamsa*, pertain to the Mauryan empire under the rule of Asoka. They concern the missions initiated by the thera, Moggaliputta Tissa soon after the conclusion of the Third Council, which was held at Pataliputra (c.253.B.C).

This account of the missionary activity of the thera is occasioned by a delegation sent by Devanampiya Tissa, then king of Sri Lanka, to Asoka, bearing gifts of many wondrous things that had manifested themselves in the island upon his consecration, and which he thought deserved to be sent to the Mauryan monarch, his long-standing friend (even though the two had never met (*Dip.* XI.25, *Mhv.* XI.19). For, upon receipt of these, Asoka sent him equally handsome gifts in return, and then also requested him, like himself, to take refuge in the doctrine of the Buddha, the best of all gems, consecrating himself king once again under the new dispensation, a request with which King Devanampiya Tissa complied (*Mhv.* XI.34-36 and 42), already a few years before the Third Council and the missions of our concern.

When the thera, Moggaliputta, “the illuminator of the religion of the Conqueror,” had brought the council to an end, says the chronicler (*Mhv.* XII. 1-8),

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<sup>17</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> *loc. cit.*

looking to the future and seeing the founding of the religion in adjacent countries, he sent forth theras on proselitizing missions, one here, one there, as follows:

i	Majjhantika	to Kashmir and Gandhara
ii	Mahadeva	to Mahisamandala
iii	Rakkhita	to Vanavasa
iv	Dhammarakkita the Yona	to Aparantaka
v	Mahadhammarakkhita	to Maharattha
vi	Maharakkhita	to the country of the Yona (Yonaratta)
vii	Majjhima	to the Himalaya country
viii	Sona and Uttara	to Suvannabhumi
ix	Mahinda, with Ittiya, Uttiya, Sambala, Baddasala	to Lanka

The missionary activity of Moggaliputta was ardently motivated by the florescence of Buddhism in Asoka's kingdom itself (*Mhv.*XIV.13-14), but the observation that he did so "looking into the future and beholding the founding of the religion in adjacent countries" must be a projection of the *Mahavamsa* author himself from hindsight of the waning of Buddhism in what had been Asoka's empire at the time of the composition of the chronicle as against the firm hold it had gained in Sri Lanka. (This is that same hindsight, I believe, that had him make the Buddha declare to Sakka at the landing of Vijaya in the island, "In Lanka, O lord of gods, will my religion be established" (*Mhv.*VII 2-4).

The regions to which the missions were sent were in general neighbouring Asoka's empire, Sri Lanka being included as perhaps the furthest out, but from the special consideration which also included the king's son as the leader, with four others. They are again nearby countries in contrast to the missions sent by Asoka himself to such distant places as Syria (under Antiochus II Theos), Egypt (under Ptolemy II Philadelphos), Macedonia (under Antigonus Gonatas), Epirus (under Alexander) and Cyrene (under Magas), as he claims in Rock Edict XIII.

These were under Greek rule, and the friendly relationship of the Mauryan and the Greeks seen between Chandragupta and Seleucus seems to have continued, indeed spread further afield to the entire empire acquired by Alexander and now held by his successors, the Diadochi. Bindusara (298-273 B.C.), who succeeded Chandragupta, had maintained this with the neighbourhood Greeks and the Greek powers of Asia. The ruler of Syria, Antiochus I sent to his court an ambassador named Deimachus; Ptolemy, king of Egypt also sent an envoy, Dionysius. Evidently things seem to have been even more cordial with Asoka, if, far from receiving



political representations, he was in a position to send out even religious delegations to these several Western kingdoms.

In the circumstances it is both unfair and unreasonable of Rhys Davids<sup>19</sup> to have suggested that Asoka's claim to have sent missions like those of the thera, Moggaliputta to these distant Greek-ruled kingdoms as no more than "make-weight" and "royal rodomontade" His own opinion was that this was rather a gross exaggeration of Moggaliputta's missions, evidence to support which have however been discovered by Sir Arthur Cunningham in the topes of Sanchi. Davids has already been sufficiently upbraided for this by many historians.

As seen, the circumstances in no way vitiate the possibility of these several missions; nor, I believe, would Asoka have cared to make a fool of himself in the eyes of the numerous Greek residents of his kingdom, for whose benefit evidence from Kandahar shows that his edicts had also been published in the Greek language. Besides, it is unthinkable that he, of all people, was capable of rodomontade when he had not even claimed the legitimate credit of sending out his own son as one of these missionaries - evidence of which we have, and emphatically, in the Sri Lankan tradition.

Of the nine missions mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* as having been sent to adjacent countries (the last on the list of which is the one to Sri Lanka), two involve Greeks i.e. to Aparanta (iv) and to the country of the Yona (vi). In the case of the former, it is the missionary, Dhammarakkhita, who is the Greek, in the case of the latter, it is the people (surely a significant part of them, even allowing for a proportion of Hellenized others) who were Greek. Once again the *Mahavamsa* does not deem it necessary to tell us who these Yona were or what the Yona country was, much as if the readers knew right well.

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<sup>19</sup> *Buddhist India* London (1903); see 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Calcutta (1955) p.166. He writes "We may imagine the Greek amusement at the absurd idea of a 'barbarian' teaching them their duty" – then shows how much they needed it when adding "but we can scarcely imagine them discarding their gods and their superstitions at the bidding of an alien king". But see J. Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhara*, Memoirs of the Dept. of Archaeology in Pakistan, vol. 1, Cambridge (1960) p.4 He says: "The Greeks were very open-minded about religious matters, and the teaching of Sakyamuni, by its essential ethical character, by its logical reasoning, and by the stress it laid on free-will and the observance of the golden mean, was bound to make a strong appeal in the Greek intellect, notwithstanding that it was based on a new way of life altogether more negative and joyless than the Greek."

The Third Council, after which Moggaliputta sent out these missions, had been held at Pataliputra in the seventeenth year of Asoka's coronation (*Mhv.* V.280), not less than five years after the king himself had sent out the missions to the distant lands, (Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene in North Africa) mentioned in Rock Edict XIII.

It appears that by *Antas* Asoka distinguished peoples both in India and beyond, who were outside his domains. On the other hand, Aparanta, to which the Greek monk Dhammarakkhita was sent by Moggaliputta was a distinct geographical region which fell within the king's domain but not within his direct jurisdiction. Among these were the Aparanta Yonas, Greeks settled in India.<sup>20</sup> The exact location of their territory is not easily marked out, except that they are spoken of in the Edicts (V and XIII) in association with the Kambojas, people on the Kabul river. A Yona raja, Tusaspa by name, was appointed by Asoka as a provincial governor at Girnar, possibly in Aparanta.

Where the Yonarattha mentioned of as the place to which Maharakkhita was sent is even more uncertain from the extant evidence, except that it must have had, going by its appellation, a predominantly Greek population. Mookerji<sup>21</sup> is of opinion that these people, Ionians or Greeks, may have migrated to these places as early as Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes and the Gracco-Persian wars (490 and 480 B.C.)

Asoka seems to have been very active in the twelfth year after his *abhiseka* (c.257 B.C.), in which year he set up many inscriptions, including Rock Inscription XIII, which spoke of his missions to the various Greek-ruled kingdoms afar. In the next year Rock Inscription V says he created officers called Dharmamahamatras, to propagate the *dhamma*, among other peoples, among the Yonas and the populace of Aparanta. Now immediately upon the conclusion of the Third Council, held seventeen years after his *abhiseka* (253 B.C.), we find the president, Moggaliputta initiating missions of his own to some of the adjacent territories, which include Greek-speaking peoples, as well as to the island of Sri Lanka. As Alahakoon<sup>22</sup> writes, Asoka, who had been active among the Western Greek potentates from the eighth year of his rule, had in the twelfth and thirteenth,

<sup>20</sup> See R. Mookerji *Asoka* Delhi etc. (1962) p.167 n.2.

<sup>21</sup> *op.cit.* p.168 n.1.

<sup>22</sup> Hector Alahakoon *The Later Mauryas* Delhi (1980), p.123. The chronology adopted by him, as by most modern historians, dates the *abhiseka* of Asoka to the year 270 B.C., as against the Sinhalese tradition which places it in 242 B.C. This revision has been influenced by the dating of the Greek rulers mentioned in the inscriptions of Asoka. See *The University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon* vol.1, p.127.

become highly interested in the welfare of his own Greek subjects in the western borders. Now five years or so later the activity of converting the Greeks of the adjacent areas to Buddhism is carried on by Moggaliputta. From the subsequent notice in the chronicle (*Mhv.* XXIX.39) that 30,000 bhikkhus came to Sri Lanka from Alasanda, Alahakoon<sup>23</sup> thinks “we can safely conclude..... that Asoka had a large Greek population within his empire” and that “the territories ceded to the Maurya monarch by Seleucus Nicator had become the fatherland of these Greek inhabitants.”

The presence of a considerable Greek population within Asoka's empire is best borne out by the discovery in 1958 and 1964 of the two inscriptions from Kandahar, the first of which is in Aramaic and Greek, while the second is a Greek version of the end of the XIIth and beginning of the XIIIth Rock Edicts, possibly a fragment of a complete Greek version of the fourteen edicts engraved on a wall, the style of composition and even the lettering of which, according to Weerakkody<sup>24</sup>, conform to the usage current throughout the Hellenistic world and reveal the unity of Greek civilization in the Hellenistic period reaching its furthest geographical limits in the east. The Greek population for whom they were meant were by now comprised of either the descendants of the settlers from the Greek cities, who had dwelt in the region for some generations, or the “late arrivals on the scene, such as the veterans of Alexander or colonists of the Seleucids”<sup>25</sup>. Even granted there were Hellenized others mixed with them, as Smith<sup>26</sup> thought, these too would have spoken and otherwise communicated in Greek, which, as known, was the *lingua franca* of Alexander's empire, replacing the Achaemenids' use of Aramaic.

That the word *Yona* still implied “Greek” is evident from its use for the rulers of these distant kingdoms with whom Asoka was in touch, according to the IIth and XIIIth Rock Edicts. The same must be true when used to qualify the *thera* Dhammarakkhita, whom Moggaliputta sent to Aparanta, and likewise, for the most part, the people who were expected to hear Maharakkhita in “the country of the *Yona*” (*Yonaraththa*). Thus the implication is that both must have preached their respective sermons to their respective audiences in Greek – even if the latter may not himself have been a Greek since he is not so described, but of some other nationality, perhaps even an Indian. The same must be true of those teachers, whether bhikkhus or lay, whom Asoka had, a few years earlier, sent to teach the

<sup>23</sup> *op. cit.* p.122.

<sup>24</sup> *op. cit.* p.39. “The public of Kandahar, for whom they were intended,” he writes, “must have included cultured and intelligent Greeks, familiar with the Greek philosophical and literary language and thought of the time.”

<sup>25</sup> A.K. Narain *The Indo-Greeks* Oxford (1957)p.6.

<sup>26</sup> *loc.cit.*

*dhamma* in Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene. They would have been Greeks or Greek-speaking monks.

It is not known in what language the monk Nagasena discoursed with the Greek king Menander on the matters contained in the text known as the "Milinda Questions" (*Milinda-panha*). Mrs. Rhys Davids<sup>27</sup> conjectures it would have been in Prakrit, not Greek, since (as she points out) it is nowhere claimed that Nagasena was a native of North-west or Graeco-India, who might have come to learn Greek in his youth. Besides, she says, the learning of Greek would belong, not to monastic culture, but to worldly pursuits. On the other hand, she believes Menander, as also his four ministers (whose names have probably rightly been interpreted as Greek<sup>28</sup>) may have been bilingual and that the scribe who committed the content of the discussion to writing also did so in that same language, Prakrit, rather than Greek.

Matters could as well have been the other way round, for the missions of Asoka and Moggaliputta show that already Buddhism had been preached in several places in India and abroad in Greek, Greek being perhaps the first foreign language to be used to do so. Dhammarakkhita is said to have based his sermon upon the *Aggikkhandhopama-sutta* ("The Discourse on the Parable of the Flames of Fire") to a large audience, as a result of which a great many men and yet more women are said to have received *pabbajja*; Maharakkhita, expounding the *Kalakarama-suttana* to an even larger audience, is said to have had even better results when a larger number of his hearers was rewarded with the path of salvation and as much as ten thousand the *pabbajja*.

For what particular reasons these theras who addressed their Greek, or largely Greek audiences, selected the particular *suttas* upon which they based their discourses, there is no information – nor can they be surmised from their content in contrast to the fundamental questions of Buddhist doctrine raised and explicated in the discussion between King Menander and the thera, Nagasena in the *Milinda-panha*. Nor, as it seems, could these indoctrination discourses have taken anything

<sup>27</sup> *The Milinda Questions* London (1930) p.25-26. "I imagine, then, that the two men conversed in Prakrit and that the scribe took down his notes in that tongue, and in it wrote them out more fully. . . . But what of the recording in the brief after-inquiry by the four ministers as he is escorting Nagasena to the return visit to the palace? This will have been also carried out in Prakrit." Naturally she would have thought the same of the prelude to the main discussion – the discussion with the monk Ayupala.

<sup>28</sup> Devamantiya = Demetrius; Anantakaya = Antiochus; Mankura = Meneclis; Sabbadinna = Sarapodotos, or Pasidotos. See *op. cit* p.26, n.2.

comparable to that Socratic-like dialogue form which was maintained in the *Milinda-panha*, considering the numbers that would have attended each session (or - as is more reasonable to assume - series of sessions).

The *Aggikkhandhopama* seems to have been a popular *sutta* since it was used by Mahinda Thera as well for his sermon following the acceptance of the Mahamegha grove from King Devanampiya Tissa (*Mhv.* XV. 174-177) though its particular relevance was to those who lived in the guise of monks and accepted alms from the faithful while indulging in evil conduct. It is said that when first preached by the Buddha, 60 monks vomited blood, 60 left the order, while 60 others became arahats. The *Kalakarama*, on the other hand, "speaks of the Buddha's universal comprehension of whatsoever is seen, heard, comprised, attained and searched into etc. in the whole world, but of his not being himself subject to them".<sup>29</sup>

It is possible that the *Milinda-panha* discussion was, as Mrs. Rhys Davids thinks, conducted in Prakrit rather than Greek, which, she adds, Nagasena would not have known, being nowhere said to be a native of North-west or Graeco-India, who might have come to learn it in his youth. But the likelihood is as much, if not greater, that both the monks, Ayupala and Nagasena knew Greek than that Menander, his four ministers, scribe and accompanying retinue had been fluent in Prakrit. Besides, I find it difficult to agree with her of Nagasena (and then surely of Ayupala as well) "that it is practically out of the question that he would have learnt it (Greek) because he was a monk since this would belong, not to monastic culture but to worldly pursuits." Not only would Greek have been widely used in Seleucus' Indian territories but often enough monks like the non-Greek Maharakkhita sent to Yonaraththa would have been called upon to address Greek as much as non-Greek audiences. At the same time there appear to have been Greeks like Dhammarakkhita, the Yona, who was sent to Aparanta, and that quite different Dhammarakkhita, the Yona who led the delegation (which no doubt included other Greek monks) from Alasanda to Anuradhapura in the time of Dutthagamani, who would have taken to the robes. And would not those who were sent on the dharmadutha missions to the western lands by Asoka have been required to be proficient in Greek?

Already several jataka stories have been brought to light exploiting motifs from Greek myth, fable and historical anecdote as could have been authored only by

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<sup>29</sup> For the *Aggikkhandopama* see *Ang.N.* 128 f (No.68); for the *Kalakarama* or *Kalaka*, see *Ang.N.* II.482 f. (No.24) also *Gradual Sayings* PTS transl. vol.II p.26-28 (No.24). My thanks to my one-time colleague, Prof. P.B. Meegaskumbura, for his kind help with these references.

monks widely conversant with Greek folklore and literature – quite likely Greek monks<sup>30</sup>. Some of these stories, notably the *Nacca Jataka* (No.32), which simulates with birds the historical anecdote of the marriage of Agariste in Herodotus, and the *Kukkuta Jataka* (No.383), which points to the Aesopic fable of *The Vixen and the Cock* make their appearance in the bas-reliefs of the contemporary Bharhut and Sanchi stupas.

The numbers of those who are said to have heard the sermons of our respective monks are incredibly huge, even if we take them to be a cumulate of the audiences of a series of sermons. Likewise those who attained this or that state of enlightenment. The figures must be drastically cut down if we are to get anywhere near the possible, let alone the probable. Evidently this sort of exaggeration is the besetting weakness of the Sri Lankan chronicles with their avowed purpose of presenting history in such a manner as to evoke serene joy (*āsāda*) or empathic sorrow (*samvega*) at the happenings they record. If, on the other hand, they belong with the tradition derived from India, the blame must be assigned to the sources there, whoever or whatever they were.

Equally questionable are the names of the theras sent to preach to the Greek populations in Aparanta and Yonaratta. Not only do they reflect each other i.e. Dhammarakkhita and Maharakkhita, but also the names of two of the other leaders of missions, Rakkhita sent to Vanavasa and Mahadhammarakkhita sent to Maharatta. Doubt rising from this might reflect on the authenticity of the missions themselves, moreso when we find that the leader of the delegation of monks from Alasanda to Anuradhapura in Dutthagamani's time too had a similar name, Dhammarakkhita.

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<sup>30</sup> See my "Greek Story Motifs in the Jatakas" *JRAS(Sri Lanka)* vol. XXV(N.S.)(1980-1981) p.136-183. M. Winternitz (*Geschichte der indische Literatur = A History of Indian Literature* transl. from the German by S. Ketkar and H. Kohn, Calcutta (1933) p.57) writes: "It was Buddhism which brought the Indians more than ever before into contact with other peoples; and it is not probable that it was only the Indians who brought their stories to those peoples every time; they in turn must have received narratives from them too, especially from peoples who stood so high intellectually, as the Greeks, Persians and Semites. . . . In all probability, the Greek artists, who came to India in great crowds after Alexander's campaign and who helped to build and ornament so many Buddhist monuments of art also brought Greek narratives and motifs to India."

Bhandarkar<sup>31</sup> thinks the former all referred to one single person who was dispatched to various places in Western India, just as Majjhantika sent to Kashmir and Gandhara was none other than the Majjhima sent to the Himalaya country. To deny this is to be faced with a coincidence that is not too easy to accept despite the slight variations in the four names, especially when, as we saw, the Greek monk who led the delegation to Anuradhapura from Alasanda had a similar name. The best explanation which may not discredit the historicity of these delegations is that either these happened (notwithstanding the coincidences) to be their real names – or that these were popular substitutes for their real names, which had been forgotten with the passage of time.

Not only this oddity of names, but that of number as well figure in the last of our references in the *Mahavamsa*, i.e. the delegation of monks just referred to, who came from Alasanda to Anuradhapura in the time of Dutthagamani. For, apart from the leader's name, Dhammarakkhita, we are told that the delegation comprised of 30,000, a number which, even allowing 100 passengers per ship, would have required a fleet of 300 for the purpose throughout, if not at some stage of the journey!. Among the clergy that came from the various places in India we are told that

from Alasanda, the city of the Yonas, came the thera  
Yonamahadhammarakkhita with 30,000 bhikkhus –

the mention of these following immediately upon the mention of an even larger delegation of 460,000 Persians from Pallavabhoga (perhaps territory gifted to them for their military service). When however our chronicler goes on to say (*Mhv*<sub>2</sub>XXIX. 44) that “as for the number of bhikkhus dwelling in the island who met together from every side, no strict account has been handed down by the ancients,” he means that, as in all else he is relying on the traditions preserved in the so-called *Attakatha Mahavamsa*, or “Mahavamsa of the Ancients,” but by no means because he finds the figures embarrassing and wants to shift responsibility.

Geiger's first dating of Dutthagamani i.e. 101-77 B.C., is now considered 61 years too late. The alternate date of c.161-137 B.C. is accepted by *The University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*<sup>32</sup>, as by most historians of our time.

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<sup>31</sup> D. R Bhandarkar *Asoka*, Calcutta (1955) p.155. See also p.146 His own opinion of Asoka's claims as against that of Rhys Davids is that he was not fabricating, but rather, exaggerating the results he actually achieved in the Greek territories.

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In c.246 B.C. Diodotus had wrested power in Bactria and founded a Graeco-Bactrian kingdom. Five years later he was succeeded by his son, Diodotus II. His rule ended when Euthydemus raised a revolt and seized power over Bactria. Afterwards Euthydemus pushed the frontiers of his Bactrian kingdom southwards to include the lower portion of Afghanistan, then, before his death, acquired the former Mauryan possessions of Paropamisadae (Kabul valley) and Arachosia (Kandahar) and the other provinces which Seleucus Nicator had ceded to Chandragupta. Thereafter his son and successor, Demetrius once again extended Greek rule into India, acquiring the Indus Valley and probably part of the Punjab, but soon lost his hold of Bactria and part of his Indian possession to Eucratides (c. 175 B.C.). Rivalry between the Greek rulers weakened Bactria and it became an early prey to the Saka hordes, though Greek princes continued to retain power in their Indian possessions.

Notable among these latter were Apollodotus and Menander, mentioned earlier as the Milinda of the *Milinda-panha*. Menander had his capital at Kabul and invaded India in 155 B.C., advancing as far as Kathiawar in the south, Nagari near Chitor and Saketa near Oudh, though he failed to take Pataliputra. His rule would accordingly overlap the earlier years of the reign of Dutthagamani in Sri Lanka. In Kandahar Greek rule was terminated by the Saka invasions, but the Kabul valley remained firmly in the hands of the Greeks till 25 A.D., when the last king, Hermaeus was succeeded by the Kushana chief, Kujala Kadphises. And it is from this region, the Kabul valley, not further south-east that the delegation of our immediate concern had its origin.

Alexander, in the course of his conquests founded several cities, among them a number named Alexandria after himself – and at least one after his horse, Bucephalus. The most famous of these is the Alexandria of Egypt which became a great seat of learning in antiquity. Plutarch, in the early rhetorical work on his fortune, claimed that Alexander himself personally founded more than 72 cities, though modern research had reduced the number to 17 at the maximum and just 6 at the minimum. No single or simple reason can be given for these new cities. The majority of those called Alexandria were founded in eastern Iran and with the intention of controlling the empire; some were intended to be nodal points in the wide and complex supply and communications network of the empire; some arose for purely military purposes, while others became Greek-type *poleis* with all the institutions of self-government. Many of these took their name from the locality but in all cases the populations were generally the same, i.e. Macedonian veterans, often physically disabled from fighting, Greek mercenaries who had been for one reason or another demobilized, camp-followers of one sort or another and of course the descendants of such.

No one has contested Geiger's opinion that the Alasanda from which the Yona Mahadhammarakkhita brought his delegation to Anuradhapura in Dutthagamani's day was the Alexandria in the country of the Paropamisadae near Kabul, which we saw continued to remain under Greek rule.<sup>33</sup>

Had this taken place during the kingship of Menander, the devotion of these Greek Buddhists which made them undertake such a long and tedious journey by land and sea is understandable, seeing that Menander himself had espoused the religion to which these monks belonged. That Menander was a Buddhist and a zealous one, is a fact<sup>34</sup>, but Tarn<sup>35</sup> placed his death about 150-145 B.C., which is in the middle of Dutthagamani's reign, whereas, as we know from the *Mahavamsa* (XXXII.1.f.), work on the Maha Thupa began in the last years of his reign. Little is known of the successors of Menander but it would seem that this delegation took place when his son Strato I Soter<sup>36</sup> (whose mother Agathocleia acted as regent for him when he was a minor) ruled by himself. Plutarch<sup>37</sup> tells us that at Menander's death the cities of his realm divided his ashes, as was done with the Buddha's. Whether Strato was a Buddhist or was partial to Buddhism and had anything to do with the invitation from the Sri Lankan monarch and the dispatch of this delegation is anybody's guess, but it does appear that this region, once made to "shine with yellow robes and prize above all the three things"*(Mhv.xii.28)* by the thera Majjhantika<sup>38</sup>, was still devoutly Buddhist.

<sup>33</sup> *op. cit* p,194 n.2 to XXIX, 38-40 "Alexandria in the land of the Yonas, i.e. the Greeks, probably the town founded by the Macedonian king in the country of the Paropamisadae near Kabul." See Arrian *Anabasis iii.* 88, iv.22.

<sup>34</sup> See N.W. Ghosh *Early History of India* Allahabad ((1948)p.200.

<sup>35</sup> W.W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India* Cambridge(1951) p.226.

<sup>36</sup> E.J. Rapson in *Cambridge History of India* Cambridge (1922) vol.1,p.552. Agathokleia association with her son, Strato, then Strato, first by himself, then in association with his grandson, Strato II Philopator, who apparently succeeded him.

<sup>37</sup> *Moralia* 821D. Plutarch infers that the ashes were distributed because there were many claimants. According to Greek practice, it had to be all or nothing. The usual funeral obsequies (*kēdeia kata to koinon*) would have been Buddhist and the monuments erected to enshrine them (*nmēmeia*) toposes such as at and near Sanchi in which were found relics of distinguished Buddhist personalities like Kassapagotta, Majjhima, and Gotiputta.

<sup>38</sup> See *Mhv.* XII. 28:

*Tato pabhuti Kasmiragandhara te idani pi  
asum kasayapajjota vatthuttayaparayana.*

The three things referred to are the *Buddha*, *dhamma* and the *sanga*. See *Mhv.*I.32 and 61-62.

On the other hand, the route taken by these monks would undoubtedly have been the regular sea-way to Sri Lanka along the west coast of India. To get down to this they would first have had to sail all the way down the Indus to the sea, the ships then coasting southwards past Sopara (Supparaka) and putting in at Mahatittha or at the mouth of the Mahakandara river (wherever that was). From here on they would have come under the hospitality of the islanders and been conducted overland to Anuradhapura, their destination, where (as Pandukabhaya would have done with the Yona he settled in Anuradhapura) Dutthagamani would have met them and looked to their accommodation and comfort, even if for the limited duration of their stay.

It is to be expected that, unlike the Yona of Pandukabhaya's day, few, if any of these visitors would have had first-hand experience of their motherland; however they would have talked the language and been versed in the history, literature and culture of their people. Some of them may by now have been of mixed descent, some even Hellenized others. Nor were they traders come to explore commercial possibilities but savants of the Buddha. In turn the island to which they had come was no longer what it was when those other Greeks of Pandukabhaya's day had arrived - it had converted to Buddhism through the mission sent by Moggaliputta Tissa Thera under the leadership of Mahinda at the same time as those missions sent to Kashmir and Gandhara, to Aparanta, Yonarattha and all those other places.

Whether there were any of the descendants of those first comers (if they had remained in the island) to meet and greet their fellowmen is again unknown. If there were, and if they still knew the Greek of their forefathers one and a half centuries afterwards, they would surely have proved useful interpreters for our visiting monks from Alasanda. In the alternative there could have been monks competent in the language of both host and guest in the island. Otherwise of course - and which I think the more likely on this occasion - communication would have been in Pali, which it is reasonable to assume both parties knew well.

It may now be appreciated that our *Mahavamsa* evidence on the Yona, read along with the information available on the Greek presence in India, makes plausible both their settlement in Anuradhapura in Pandukabhaya's day and age as well as the delegation from the Kabul valley of the last years of Dutthagamani's reign. But they also focus attention on the remarkable likelihood that the Greeks were among the earliest people outside of the Indians to convert to Buddhism, doing so contemporaneously, if not indeed earlier than the conversion of the people of Sri Lanka to the religion by the mission of Mahinda.

The evidence likewise reveals the existence of learned Yona bhikkhus and of the use of Greek for the spread of the *dhamma* in the West as among the Greeks and others of India and the neighbouring regions, some being of such competence in

the *dhamma* as to head such missions. Last, though by no means the least, we are left with the likelihood that if the Yona who settled in Sri Lanka in the time of Pandukabhaya, brought with them their language, as they obviously did, classical Greek would have been heard spoken in a little part of the island not far from the west gate of Anuradhapura numerous centuries before it found its way into the curricula of our schools and university (through which the author himself gained his proficiency in the language) under British colonial rule. If, further, these same residents had not departed at some time but remained to merge their identity with the local people, our earliest polity would even have been enriched by the admixture of a streak of Yona blood with that of the reputed lion!

**MERLIN PERIS**