

MAHĀYĀNA THERAVĀDA AND THE ORIGINS OF THE MAHĀVIHĀRA¹

The reading of Sri Lankan Buddhist history during the Anurādhapura Period, which informs this essay, may seem a radical departure from what we thought we knew about that subject. On the basis of new interpretations of the extant evidence (*vaṃsas*, inscriptions and other archaeological remains, reports of the Chinese pilgrims), I maintain--at least for the sake of argument-- that the self-identity "Theravāda Buddhist", and also the self-identity "Mahāvihāra", were comparatively late developments in Buddhist history. Both had their origin only around the third or fourth century, A.D. I moreover maintain that the Theravāda was in its origin primarily a Mahāyāna or proto-Mahāyāna school, and that the Mahāvihāra's origin occurred in an explicit rejection of those dominant Mahāyāna teachings.

These surely *are* radical departures from the still-standard textbook portrayals of Theravāda as the original and exclusively Hīnayāna Buddhist school, and of the origin of the Mahāvihāra at the primordial moment (3rd century, B.C.) when King Devānampiyatissa was first "pleased" by Arahant Mahinda's explication of the Buddha's *dhamma*. But I suspect that readers who are familiar with the textual and epigraphic evidence, and with recent secondary scholarship on Anurādhapuran history and archaeology, will find the details of my argument so much in keeping with both as to appear mere summations of already-well-known facts.

The sense of departure comes from my having stepped back to see that, taken together, all these well-known facts render seriously problematic the very foundations of the standard account of ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist history. Even so, given that these foundations were laid by British Orientalist scholars of the early to mid-nineteenth century (especially Hon. George Turnour, Major Jonathan Forbes and Sir James Emerson Tennent) who derived them from sometimes uninformed readings of the Pāli *vaṃsas* and who lacked the wealth

¹ This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the Ceylon Studies Seminar, the University of Peradeniya, April 10, 1997. I am grateful to the organizers of the seminar for the opportunity it presented to think in macro-scale terms about the implications of some of my recent studies. I would also like to express my gratitude to Whitman College for sabbatical leave in which to pursue the research and writing of this essay, and to the Graves Foundation for a teaching award which made it possible for me to spend the first half of 1997 in Sri Lanka.

of critical scholarship and archaeological and epigraphic evidence long since available, it is hardly remarkable that the standard account should appear so full of holes to late twentieth century scholars.² Rather, what I find remarkable is that this early first attempt at interpreting the evidence of Anurādhapuran history persists so vehemently in educated circles all over the world today, as though the limitations of those pioneering scholars--their uncritical gleaning of "historical facts" from the *vamsas*, their virtual ignorance of the external evidence--were hallowed Buddhist truths.

Lest I be misunderstood--for I stand in awe of the Mahāvihāra's phoenix-like rise to glory, and in gratitude for its preservation of the Pāli Canon--at the outset I should affirm my own belief that the *Nikāyas* and the *Vinaya* preserve the actual teachings of the Buddha and his earliest disciples, as closely as we are ever likely to know them. Though it is now clear that the texts we have today were edited to reflect the refined grammar and orthography of Pāli, even as late as the time of Buddhaghosa,³ much more ancient manuscripts (of the 1st and 2nd centuries, A.D.) such as the Gāndhāri *Dharmapada* and the recently discovered Karoṣṭhi fragments of *Suttanipāta* and other portions of the *Suttapiṭaka* make it impossible to doubt that the Pāli Canon is faithful to truly ancient originals in some cruder, but comparable, vernacular Prakrit.⁴ I also believe that many institutions of the Mahāvihāra, including the Sacred Bodhi Tree and the Thūpārāma, truly had their origin in the earliest stages of Sri Lankan Buddhist history. Archaeology and epigraphy fully agree with the

² I have examined the history of the study of the Pāli *Vamsas* and have attempted to reconstruct the history of their original production in "Buddhist History: The Pāli *Vamsas* of Sri Lanka", forthcoming in Ronald Inden, ed., *Rethinking the Medieval* (Oxford University Press).

³ For a very useful discussion of the status of the Pāli Canon see Steven Collins, "The Very Idea of the Pāli Canon" in *The Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89-126.

⁴ See John Brough, ed. *The Gāndhāri Dharmapada* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962; London Oriental Series, volume 7). The Karoṣṭhi manuscripts, discovered in the last decade and recently purchased by the British Museum, appear to be the earliest Buddhist manuscripts now in existence. While editing has only just begun, some provocative samples were provided by Richard Salomon at the Annual Conference of the American Academy of Religion, New Orleans, November, 1996.

vamsas and commentaries on much of Mahāvihāran history.

But I want to argue that the Mahāvihāran authors of these *vamsas* and commentaries -- like all historians and commentators of all times and places -- were engaged in *interpreting* these ancient texts and monuments for particular reasons and according to particular ways of thinking which were current in fourth and fifth century Anurādhapura. In other words, the *vamsas* and commentaries represent fourth and fifth century *claims* about Buddhist and Anurādhapuran history. They should not be treated as transparent windows into the *actual* pasts about which these claims were made, although it is all too true that since the 19th century most of ancient Sri Lankan history has been written as a mere paraphrase of the Mahāvihāran texts. But proceeding as though the *vamsas* and commentaries had been written by 19th century German empiricists committed to some sort of "scientifically" objective narrative of the facts, rather than by medieval Buddhist monks who interpreted reality according to medieval Buddhist epistemology, is especially problematic because we know that at the time of their production, the Mahāvihāran accounts of history were fiercely debated and countered by chroniclers and commentators in the rival Abhayagiri and Jetavana *vihāras*.

Though these rival historical accounts and commentaries no longer exist to study in detail because of the ultimate triumph of the Mahāvihārans during the later medieval period, we can be certain that the rivals advocated very different interpretations of Buddhist and Anurādhapuran history. In their view, as evidenced by copper and gold manuscripts recovered from stupas at their respective monasteries,⁵ the early teachings (*Śrāvakayāna*) represent merely the first stage in an unfolding *Buddhavacana*, producing ever-more-profound insights into reality in step with an unfolding Buddhist future. The true meaning of the ancient canon was to be understood in the light of the later revelations known collectively as the Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*) and as a literary genre, as the *Vetullavāda* or *Vaitūlya* or *Vaipūlya sūtras*.

⁵ For a comprehensive consideration of Mahāyāna's once-strong presence in Sri Lanka, and its lasting impact in the hearts of Kandyan villagers into the present, see John C. Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avolokiteśvara in the Buddhist Traditions of Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a particularly startling Mahāyāna manuscript find see S. Paranavitana, "Indikaṭusāya Copper Plaques," *Epigraphia Zeylanica III* (1928-33): 199-212.

Moreover, as we can be certain from later Mahāvihāran citations, the rivals maintained that the Abhayagiri and Jetavana *vihāras* existed first, and that the Mahāvihārāns later broke off from them.⁶ That claim is worth repeating: the rivals maintained that the Mahāvihāra was a late, break-away corruption of the earlier and more venerable teachings and practices preserved by the Abhayagiri and Jetavana/Dakkinārāma monks and nuns. The virulence with which *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* refutes this rival historical construct would imply that some Anurādhapurans believed it viable even as late as the tenth century, A.D. Certainly at least the rivals themselves believed it; *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* relates that they wrote it down and stored it (*likkitvā ṭhāpesum*—this could also mean the rivals erected inscriptions to this effect). And the overwhelming evidence of the ruins themselves,⁷ not to mention the explicit statements of the Chinese pilgrims⁸ and even of the later Mahāvihāran chroniclers,⁹ is that for virtually all of Anurādhapura history the Abhayagiri and Jetavana *vihāras* were grander and more favoured establishments than the Mahāvihāra. This would suggest that, more often than not kings and courtiers also supported the rivals' interpretations. The Mahāvihāran historical construct, which maintains that the full meaning of

⁶ G.P. Malalasekera, ed., *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (London: P.T.S. 1935) I:175-76.

⁷ It was no mere coincidence that the attention of the archaeological excavation of Anurādhapura in the last quarter of the nineteenth century focused on the Abhayagiri; in the pre-excavation state of things its preeminence would still have been obvious. Even with so many of the splendours of the Abhayagiri now in museums in Colombo and London, the sheer immensity of the archaeological site there, not to mention the size of the stupa, belies its one-time glory.

⁸ See the accounts of Sri Lanka by Faxian and Xuanzang in Samuel Beal, tr., *Si Yu Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981 [1884]).

⁹ Even a cursory reading of the medieval chronicle *Cūlavāṃsa* will confirm this assertion. In addition to a great preponderance of kings in the portion of the Anurādhapura Period it covers (3rd-10th c., A.D.) giving more and better to the Mahāvihāra's rivals, these kings actually attacked the Mahāvihāra periodically. See for example Cv 39:15, 39:41-43, 41:31-32, 41:37-40, 41:96-99, 42:12, 42:43, 42:63-66, 45:29-31. etc. (citations to *Cūlavāṃsa* correspond to Wilhelm Geiger's Pāli Text Society edition of same).

the Buddha's revelation is contained in the ancient *Tiṭṭaka*, to be explicated through commentaries rather than the composition of new *sūtras*, and which therefore gives historical primacy to the Mahāvihāra and treats the Abhayagiri and Jetavana monks as decadent splitters-- this Mahāvihāran narrative of "the facts" that we all know so well from modern history books was not merely contested during the Anurādhapura Period; it was the minority opinion.

It is possible to be much more specific about the contours of these ancient historical debates on the basis of the extant Mahāvihāran texts themselves and also the basis of certain presences and absences in the epigraphic and archaeological records. A longer, technical paper appearing in another publication spells this out in detail.¹⁰ For the present, I hope it will suffice to look at three basic premises of the Mahāvihāran interpretation and discuss the evidence which calls them into question as "objective" records of "the facts". These basic premises are: (1) that the Theravāda tradition as such originated at the First Great Council (2) that the Sri Lankan Theravāda has always been an exclusively Hīnayāna ("Earlier Vehicle") school and (3) that the Mahāvihāra was the original and essential home of true Theravāda in Sri Lanka. I will deal with each of these three claims in a little detail, then at the end return to the more general discussion of this monastic rivalry and its implications for standard views of Anurādhapuran Buddhist history.

The Mahāvihāran commentaries and chronicles agree in repeating a basic history of the Theravāda tradition which has it originate in the mouth of the Buddha himself, get codified at the First Great Council, get re-affirmed in two subsequent Councils and get transmitted by Arahant Mahinda to the first Sri Lankan monks, at the Mahāvihāra.¹¹ But the problems with treating this narrative as an objective record of the facts far exceed the doubts raised by the numerous contradictory claims about the Buddha and his earliest followers, about the transmission of the True Dharma, and about the dissemination of the religion beyond Magadha, which are known to have existed among all the different

¹⁰ Jonathan S. Walters, "Mahāsena at the Mahāvihāra: Propriety, Property and the Politics of History in Medieval Anurādhapura," forthcoming in Daud Ali and Avril Powell, ed., *The Uses of the Past in South Asia* (Oxford University Press).

¹¹ The relevant texts of the Anurādhapura Period are: *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Samantappāsādikā*, *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* and *Mahābodhivaṃsa*.

Buddhists of ancient Asia.¹²

In addition, as historians we are confronted by the fact that there is no mention of "Theravāda" or "Sthaviravāda" as this separate Buddhist *nikāya* in any literary source prior to the early 4th century, A.D. composition of *Dīpavaṃsa*. The term is not found in its technical sense in any of the ancient canonical texts which we believe to have been codified at the First Great Council, nor for that matter even in the late canonical texts which self-admittedly postdate the Third Great Council. The term is also absent from the South Asian epigraphic record until the 3rd century, A.D., despite the fact that for three centuries prior to that date kings and other patrons had been making explicit donations to other well known groups such as Sarvāstivādins, Mahāsāṃghikas and Sammitīyas. This epigraphic date of 3rd c., A.D. for the origin of the self-identity "Theravāda Buddhist" corresponds precisely to André Bareau's conclusion, based on an exhaustive study of the known doctrines of the 18 schools, that Theravāda doctrine emerged out of a Sri Lankan branch of the Vibhajyavāda school only in the third or fourth century, A.D.¹³

And when the term "Theravāda" finally does first appear in the epigraphic record, in the third century, A.D., it certainly does not affirm the Mahāvihāran version of things. Though the inscriptions in question were found in India, at Nāgārjunikoṇḍa, they are explicit that the "Theriyas" at that site were not Indian at all; they were Sri Lankan (Tambapannidīpaka). The implication that Theravāda was originally and exclusively a Sri Lankan *nikāya*, and not an Indian one, is explicit in the later lists of the 18 schools preserved in Northern Buddhist traditions, which describe the branches of the Theravāda as Mahāvihāravāsī, Abhayagirivihāravāsī, and Jetavanīya.¹⁴ Rather than as an

¹² I characterize these debates and set them in their larger pan-Buddhist context in "Finding Buddhists in Global History," forthcoming in Michael Adas, ed., *Global History III* (Temple University Press) and as a separate pamphlet in the American Historical Association's series on global history.

¹³ André Bareau, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule* (Saigon: École Française D'Extreme Orient, 1955):169.

¹⁴ See for example, Andre Bareau, "Trois Traités 3: Le Compendium Descriptif des Divisions des Sectes dans le Cycle de la Formation des Schismes (*Samayabhedoparacanacakrenikāyabedhopadarcanaśaṃgraha*) des Vinītadeva," *Journal Asiatique* CCXLIV (1956): 192-200; Jiryo

Indian tradition which was later taken to Sri Lanka, the rest of the Buddhist world understood the Theravāda to be a Sri Lankan innovation which was later taken to India.

And not just to any place in India. The term "Theravāda" first emerged at Nāgārjunikoṇḍa, a site of extreme importance for the study of the origins of the Mahāyāna.¹⁵ In addition to numerous Buddhist tales which connect this site with Nāgārjuna himself, as well as other important Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara and Śrīmālā Devī, there is clear epigraphic evidence that this was a site devoted to the vanguard proto-Māhāyāna revelations of the day, being propounded there by Aparāśailas, Pūrvaśailas, Bahuśrūtīyas, Mahiśāsakas and other radical groups.¹⁶ The very presence of these "Theriyas" at the site suggests that they were what the Chinese pilgrims would later call the "Māhāyāna Theravādins" of Sri Lanka. Let me repeat that one too: in the ancient Buddhist world the phrase "Mahāyāna Theravāda"--which sounds so inappropriate to modern ears--was so ordinary as to require no further comment at all.

The Chinese knew that the Abhayagirivihāra was the richest, most favoured and most populated monastery in the kingdom, a cosmopolitan center where Hīnayāna *and* Mahāyāna scriptures from all over India were studied. Faxian specifically mentions that his long-term hosts at the Abhayagiri gave him

Matsuda, "Origin and Doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools" in *Asia Major* II (Lipsiae, 1925) 1-78.

¹⁵ For relevant epigraphs see D.C. Sircar and A.N. Lahiri, "Footprint Slab Inscription from Nagarjunikonda," *Epigraphia Indica* 33:247-50 and J. Ph. Vogel, "Prakrit Inscriptions from a Buddhist Site at Nagarjunikonda," *Epigraphia Indica* 20:22-23. I have discussed these references to Sri Lankans and the epithets used for them in *Rethinking Buddhist Missions* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1992) II:302-306.

¹⁶ These four are, together with the Sri Lankan Theriyas, actually named in the inscriptions. For legends associating the site with Nāgārjuna and the origins of Mādhyāmaka see Nalinaksha Dutt, "Notes on the Nāgārjunikoṇḍa Inscriptions," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 7,3 (September, 1931) esp. pp. 634-639. On Nāgārjunikoṇḍa as the site where *Śrīmālāsīmhanādasūtra* was composed see Alex and Hikedo Wayman, tr., *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā* (New York and London: Columbia University of Chicago, 1992) II:302-306.

texts in Buddhist Sanskrit (Fan), and the great Buddhologist Bernard Faure once told me that according to their colophons and the Chinese imperial bibliographies a sizable portion of the extant Mahāyāna *sūtras* in the Chinese *Tripitaka* was originally obtained in Sri Lanka.¹⁷ The presence and even dominance of these Mahāyāna Theravādins over their rivals at the Mahāvihāra, whom Hsüan-tsang tellingly describes as "opposed to the Great Vehicle and adher[ing] to the Lesser Vehicle,"¹⁸ is manifest in the archaeological and epigraphic records of the Abhayagiri's splendour.

Thus the Mahāvihāran claim that Theravāda is originally and exclusively a Hīnayāna school was certainly not universally believed in the ancient Buddhist world, nor probably was it believed by much of anyone except by the Mahāvihārans themselves. Even in Sri Lanka, even at the end of the Anurādhapura Period, this claim must have seemed absurd; the prominent contemporary displays of Sri Lankan Theravāda identity included huge Bodhisattva statues all over the Island--think of Buduruwegala!--and Mahāyana inscriptions and a lavish, cosmopolitan Abhayagiri, which Leslie Gunawardana has shown us sponsored pan-Buddhist dialogues, sent students to Nālāndā University and even established a branch vihāra in Java!¹⁹

Indeed, this claim of the Mahāvihārans--that they preserved from the beginning an original and exclusively Earlier Vehicle Theravāda--was belied by more than the sheer presence, if not the dominance of Mahāyāna (and some evidence suggests even Tantrayāna) Theravādins throughout the history of

¹⁷ This was an off-hand comment, in response to a question I raised at a seminar in Chicago a decade ago; I do not hold Prof. Faure to this view. A study of the role Sri Lanka plays in Mahāyāna literary history would be of great service to the field. Of course the most famous example is the *Lankāvatārasūtra*, supposedly preached atop Śrī Pāda. Prof. B. Karunatilleke pointed out, when I delivered an earlier version of this paper, that some legends make Padmasambhavā, Bodhisattva founder of Tibet's Tantric traditions, a Sri Lankan monk!

¹⁸ Beal, *Si Yu Ki*, 1:247.

¹⁹ See R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979) esp. pp. 250-55.

Anurādhapura.²⁰ More important, there are strong reasons to suspect that the identity "Mahāvihāran" itself--the very existence of "the" Mahāvihāra--was a late development which *post*-dated the rise of the Mahāyāna. This might be obvious even upon first glance--if on a pan-Buddhist scale the hallmark of Mahāvihāran Theravāda has been its staunch rejection of all Mahāyāna teachings, then how could this self-identity have existed prior to the Mahāyāna itself?

But this sort of question-begging is by no means our only basis for questioning the Mahāvihāran construct of its own history. Rather, we are confronted with the fact that, like the term "Theravāda", so the term "Mahāvihāra", in its technical sense, is absent in the literary and epigraphic record until a very late date.

In the canonical texts, the term *mahāvihāra* denotes only its non-technical sense of "big monastery." Even in Buddhaghosa's commentaries, the term is sometimes used quite generically. At one point Buddhaghosa glosses the term *mahāvihāra* as "large monasteries which held 12,000 bhikkhus, the same as the Abhayagiri, Cetiyaḡiri and Cittalappabata *vihāras*."²¹ The term was so generic that it could even be applied to major rivals! In the early Brāhmī inscriptions the term is never found, which makes us wonder how "the" Mahāvihāra could have existed at that time.²² In the later Brāhmī inscriptions

²⁰ John Holt (*Buddha in the Crown*) has discussed the evidence of Tantric practices in Sri Lanka. The sort of "Theravāda Tantrique" which Francois Bizothas identified in Southeast Asia also has strong remnants in rural Sri Lankan healing practices (involving the use of *pirits*, *mantras*, *yantras*, talismans, altered states of consciousness, manipulation of supernatural beings, secret lineages of teacher-student transmission, forms of initiation, etc.) Indeed, Roger Jackson has pointed to Tantric themes even in the "official" Theravāda liturgical text, the *Jinapañjaraya*.

²¹ W. Stede, ed., *Sumangala-vilāsini, Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīgha-nikāya* Pt. 2 (London: Luzac & Co., 1971) p. 478 (*Mahāpadānasuttavaṅṅanā*).

²² I make this statement on the basis of S. Paranavitana's *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume One: Early Brāmi Inscriptions* (Colombo, 1970). These early inscriptions, mostly carved on caves, date from about the 2nd c., B.C. to about the 1st c., A.D. They stand in stark contrast to the specifications of recipients that characterize the Later Brāhmī

we find numerous specific references to "Abhayagirivihāra" and "Dakkhinārāma" (a group which also [according to the *vamsas*, later] occupied the Jetavanavihāra) but only one reference to "Mahāvihāra," and that in a fragmentary inscription which primarily refers to the rivals and in which "Mahāvihāra" may just be a synonym for one or both of them.²³ Those earliest known Theravādins at Nāgārjunikonda similarly refer to themselves as "residents of the Mahāvihāra" even though they clearly did not belong to "the" Mahāvihāra as we now know it.

"The" Mahāvihāra is unambiguously named, for the first time, in *Dīpavamsa*, the fourth century, A.D. literary source which not coincidentally also contains the first literary reference to "the" Theravāda as an exclusively Hīnayāna school. In *Dīpavamsa*, there is no ambiguity; the terms Theravāda and Mahāvihāra denote precisely what we take them to mean today. This fact corresponds nicely with all the above-mentioned evidence suggesting that the terms took on these technical meanings around the third or fourth century, A.D. The question then becomes, what happened around the time of *Dīpavamsa* to produce a Mahāvihāran self-identity based strictly upon an Earlier Vehicle interpretation of the Theravāda legacy? If the historical construct propounded by *Dīpavamsa* and later Mahāvihāran sources is not a transparent window into an

Inscriptions of the 1st to about the 5th c., A.D. Compare Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume Two Part I: Late Brāhmī Inscriptions* (Moratuwa, 1983) and the following note. This source is hereafter cited as "ICILI" followed by page number.

²³ Thus, unambiguous donation to the Abhayagiri were made by Amaṇḍagāmaṇi (19-29, A.D.; cf IC II,i:46) and Gajabāhu I (114-136; cf IC II, 1:88) as well as by ministers or generals of Mahallaka Nāga (136-43; IC II,1:109) and Bhātika Tissa II (143-67; IC II,1:113). Gajabāhu also made a donation to the Dakkhinārāma (which would become the Jetavana division; UC II,1:87) as did several officials of an unidentified king around the beginning of the 3rd century (*Epigraphia Zeylanica* VII:99-106). The sole mention of "mahāvihāra" in the Later Brāmī Inscriptions which is taken to refer to "the" Mahāvihāra belongs to a minister of Bhātika Tissa II (IC II,1:116-17). For a comprehensive study of the evidence available for determining which regional monasteries were affiliated with which disciplinary orders, and similar conclusions about the importance of the Abhayagiri, see Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, esp pp. 8-21,36.

actual past, then when and why did it come into existence?

My answer is the same that all the Anurādhapuran historians apparently gave to this question: the crucial moment in Mahāvihāran and Hīnayāna Theravāda history was the reign of King Mahāsenā (274-301, A.D.) I certainly do not need to inform the readers of this journal that *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa* and *Vāṃsatthappakāsini* all end their narratives of Sri Lankan Buddhist history with this critical reign, even though we know from later sources that chronicling proceeded right throughout the Anurādhapura Period.²⁴ This odd fact has been dismissed by Wilhelm Geiger and others as an accident of the dislocations which Mahāsenā is said to have caused "the" Mahāvihārans. Because they had to vacate the Mahāvihāra for nine years, it has been asserted, there must have been some break in the chronicling tradition.²⁵ But this surely does not explain why fully seven centuries later the Mahāvihārans were still narrating all of history as a mere preface to the reign of Mahāsenā.

²⁴ The view that the chronologies and other details in the *vāṃsas* are mere fictions has long-since been disparaged, and is falsified constantly in practice by the sometimes uncanny correspondences between the Mahāvihāran histories and the external epigraphic record in Sri Lanka and on the Indian mainland, such as the details of the ascendance of the Pallava king Narendravarmasingha (636, A.D.). Compare Cv XLVII with E. Hultzsch, "Kasakudi," *South Indian Inscriptions* II,4(1913): 353-61. Despite the fact that the status of the Mahāvihāran chronologies still engenders considerable professional debate on a pan-Buddhist scale (as with the date of the Buddha, e.g., Heinz Bechert, "The Date of the Buddha - an Open Question of Ancient Indian History," in H. Bechert, ed., *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* [Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991]1: 234-36), in the case of Sri Lanka the 13th century authors of *Cūlavāṃsa* must have had access to records more or less contemporaneous with events described throughout the medieval history of Anurādhapura.

²⁵ See Wilhelm Geiger, *The Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvāṃsa and their Historical Development in Ceylon*, tr. Ethel M. Coomaraswamy (Colombo H.C. Cottle, Government Printer, 1908) p.64;cf. Regina T. Clifford, "The *Dhammadīpa* Tradition of Sri Lanka: Three Models within the Sinhalese Chronicles," in Bardwell I. Smith, ed., *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: Animus, 1977) pp. 40-41.

In other work on the *vaṃsas* I have argued that *Dīpavaṃsa* was in fact composed just after the reign of Mahāseṇa.²⁶ Though the king himself was already dead, the memory of his reign was still fresh. *Dīpavaṃsa* maddeningly omits to give any details of Mahāseṇa's reign because its audience is expected already to know them. Rather, its entire account of Mahāseṇa is devoted to an almost ranting attack upon certain powerful men nicknamed Dumitta (for Sanghamitra) and Pāpa Sona, who are said to have misled the king with lies about the true Dhamma and Vinaya, which *Dīpavaṃsa* refutes in minute detail.²⁷ These men were "agitated, like putrid corpses covered in black flies, disguised as monks but no genuine monks," "shameless rogues", "ivory whores," "immoral men dressed in delusion" who "secretly connived" to corrupt the king "for the sake of material gain".²⁸

The *Dīpavaṃsa*, which self-consciously represents itself as the story of "the" Mahāvihāra and "the" Theravāda of the Earlier Vehicle, was thus a polemical tract written just after the reign of Mahāseṇa by a group of Buddhists who were still smarting from whatever it is he did. This accounts quite nicely for the claim by *Cūlavāṃsa* that just after the death of Mahāseṇa his son and successor Kitti Siri Meghavaṇṇa approached the Mahāvihārans, listened to their report "from the beginning" of the damage done by his father Mahāseṇa, then affirmed their existence by processing a statue of Arahant Mahinda to the Mahāvihāra and building it up.²⁹ This report "from the beginning" might very well have been *Dīpavaṃsa* itself.

This then would explain why *Dīpavaṃsa* ends with the reign of Mahāseṇa. But the reign of Mahāseṇa was already well beyond living memory by the time *Mahāvāṃsa* was composed (last half of the fifth century, A.D.), and was truly ancient history when *Vaṃsatthappakāsint* was written in the tenth

²⁶ "Mahāseṇa at the Mahāvihāra," forthcoming and "Buddhist History: The Pāli Vaṃsas of Sri Lanka," forthcoming.

²⁷ The specific issues of contention were: the legality of ivory fans (negated by the Mahāvihārans) and the legality of calculating the age for higher ordination from conception rather than from birth (affirmed by the Mahāvihārans).

²⁸ *Dīpavaṃsa* (Oldenberg's edition)22: 66-76. These are my translations; the phrases are not in the original order.

²⁹ Cv 37: 53-90.

century, A.D.³⁰ The reign of Mahāsenā continued to be a watershed in Anurādhapuran history for the entire Anurādhapura Period. Historians continued to discuss and debate it because it continued to have relevance for their 5th or 10th century worlds. Careful exegesis of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Vamsatthappakāsini* accounts of Mahāsenā's reign--the final chapter in those works--shows them to be refutations of a complex series of arguments which were apparently launched by the rivals, including (1) a portrayal of Mahāsenā and his Mahāyāna activities as paradigmatic of outstanding Theravāda Buddhist kingship (2) an attack on the Mahāvihāran *vinaya* (monastic legal code) as late and corrupt (3) a denial of the integrity of the Mahāvihāran *sīmā* (liturgical boundary) and (4) a claim to particular tracts of land in Anurādhapura which the Mahāvihārāns also claimed.³¹ It is clear from certain statements in *Vamsatthappakāsini* that in arguing these points the rivals were even mustering the *Mahāvamsa* as evidence! In its explicit cursing to hell of the proponents of these arguments, *Vamsatthappakāsini* reveals its own polemical reasons for choosing to "comment" on the ancient chronicle.³²

The fact that *Mahāvamsa* and *Vamsatthappakāsini* were written for their own times should warn us against taking their narratives of Mahāsenā's reign--our only narratives of Mahāsenā's reign--at face value. The very fact of their being polemical indicates that there were other perspectives in the air, perspectives which were persuasive enough in their own rights to require such elaborate refutation. The later chronicles are not the accounts of eye-witnesses trying to be "objective", they are reconstructions made long after the fact. The eye-witnesses to Mahāsenā's reign were too angry and threatened to simply tell us what actually happened.

Fortunately, there is a piece of epigraphic evidence which helps us to make sense of the historical context in which *Dīpavamsa* was written. This is a badly defaced inscription which Dr. Paranavitana has shown to belong to the time of Mahāsenā, and which was discovered in what Paranavitana identified as

³⁰ Arguments for the specific dating of these texts (Dpv, ca. 302, A.D.; Mhv, ca. 460 A.D.; VAP, ca. 920's A.D. and 963, A.D.) are provided in my "Buddhist History: The *Pāli Vamsas* of Sri Lanka," forthcoming.

³¹ This oversimplifies a very complex argument about the accounts in these texts of Mahāsenā's reign, spelled out at length in my "Mahāsenā at the Mahāvihāra," forthcoming.

³² *Vamsatthappakāsini* (Malalasekera's edition)II: 683-84.

the Jetavana ruins.³³ In this inscription, an unnamed king censures the monks of the five residences (*paca-maha-avasa* = *pañca-mahā-āvāsa*) for certain transgressions (*pawe*) which were apparently described at length in the original. They are ordered to study and copy *Vaitūlya* (that is *Mahāyāna*) scriptures, and to recognize the superiority of the Abhayagirivihāra.

As Paranavitana argues, I think rightly, here "the five residences" together constitute what we now call "the" Mahāvihāra. This correspondence is clear in medieval Sinhala sources³⁴ as well as in the nature of the inscription itself, which attacked Buddhists holding the sort of view that came to characterize "the" Mahāvihāra and, according to "the" Mahāvihārans, that was the true essence of *all* Theravāda. What is startling about this document is that the errant monks are not referred to as "Mahāvihārans" at all; they are simply "the monks of the five residences." In this document, the epithet "Great Monastery" (*mahāvihāra*) is applied only to the Abhayagirivihāra, where the *Vaitūlya sūtras* are preached!

Thus I suggest the following scenario: as is clear from the epigraphic evidence, too, up to the time of Mahāsena there was no "Mahāvihāra" except the Abhayagirivihāra. Theravāda was one of the new radical schools of the day, which was experimenting with the same shift to Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna forms of thought and practice, and the same rush to carve out a separate self-identity

³³ S. Paranavitana, "A Fragmentary Inscription from Jetavanārāma now in the Colombo Museum," *Epigraphia Zeylanica* IV:274ff.

³⁴ On the Five Great Residences, and the problems caused by the fact that the constitution of the list of five changed over time, see Paranavitana, "A Fragmentary Inscription from Jetavanārāma." pp. 278-79. I agree with Paranavitana's general position that the term must be taken as referring to the monks of "the" Mahāvihāra, especially given the *Mahāvamsa* and *Nikāyasangrahāwa* association of the five with the Mahāvihāra during the time of Mahāsena's elder brother and foe, Jetṭhatissa, and their predecessor Goṭṭābhaya, who suppressed the Mahāyāna, respectively. I would add that the later texts (such as *Rasavāhinī* and *Suddharmālakāray* which include the Jetavana and Abhayagiri in the list of the five can be understood as the products of a time when the consolidation of the Sri Lankan Sangha under the Mahāvihāra umbrella, and the abandonment of Anurādhapura, made it seem perfectly natural that the term would refer to the five largest monasteries of the late Anurādhapura Period.

within the changing Buddhist world, which were occurring within similar schools across Asia. Though the Earlier Vehicle continued to be studied, it was supplemented with ever-new and no doubt profound revelations ascribed to the Buddha himself and transmitted in the *Vaiṭulya sūtras*. These were eagerly embraced by the main representatives of the Theravāda at that time, and for the rest of the history of Anurādhapura, who were headquartered at the Abhayagirivihāra.

During the reign of Mahāseṇa, and according to the *vaṃsas* during the reigns of his father and elder brother, a rebellion against this dominant order occurred. Certain monks and nuns, living in the comparatively old monasteries to the south of the city, attacked the vanguard trends we now call Mahāyāna. They rejected as inauthentic the new *sūtras*, and advocated stricter adherence to the teachings and practices of the ancient *suttas* and vinaya. But Mahāseṇa, under the tutelage of Sanghamitta, was a proponent of the vanguard Mahāyāna teachings. Indeed, the very inscription in question is carved on Andhran marble which was quarried for the construction of Nāgārjunikoṇḍa and carved in the precise Nāgārjunikoṇḍan style.

In whatever fashion, these monks in the five residences offended Mahāseṇa by rejecting his Mahāyāna views and his cosmopolitan connections. They were censured and forced to endure the humiliation of copying the very *sūtras* they so abhorred. When Mahāseṇa died and they were given the opportunity to make their case--to Kittī Siri Meghavaṇṇa--they constructed an historical narrative that was to have profound implications for the rest of Buddhist history, not only in Sri Lanka but even in the entire world.

This historical narrative, however significant, was actually quite simple. Constituting themselves as "the" Mahāvihārans, these monks and nuns argued that precisely because their monasteries were so ancient, and precisely because they defended the integrity and preservation of the most ancient texts, they ought to have a separate existence of their own. Though beginning with Siri Meghavaṇṇa himself--who brought the Tooth Relic to the Abhayagirivihāra--most later kings were more avid patrons of the Abhayagiri and Jetavana rivals, at the same time no later king ever again attempted to eradicate this "opposition to the Great Vehicle" altogether, as Mahāseṇa had tried to effect. Rather, for the rest of Anurādhapuran history, all three subgroups of the Theravāda, including the Mahāvihārans, were allowed their place and generally encouraged to prosper. It is after all part of Mahāyānist ecumenicalism that the Lesser Vehicle had and even has its usefulness--even if the Buddha did preach it to the *śrāvakas* as a mere preparation for the higher revelations of the Great Vehicle.

Dīpavaṃsa thus won the existence of an Earlier Vehicle Theravāda at a time when it must have appeared that Theravāda would become an exclusively Mahāyāna school. This was a remarkable achievement, made on the basis of what even today is an extremely persuasive case. No one could have denied, nor could deny today, many of the basic premises of the Mahāvihāran construct; their monasteries really did contain many of the oldest monuments in the kingdom, their canonical texts were universally agreed to be extremely ancient ones upon which all Sri Lankan monasticism had originally been based, and the rivals were only too happy to boast of their Mahāyāna cosmopolitanism. And as the painstaking research of Oldenberg, Geiger, Malalasekera and Adikaram, among others, makes most certain, the Mahāvihāran history really was based upon ancient sources which could be consulted right throughout the Anurādhapura Period. How else could we explain the detailed correspondences between the *vamsas* and the ancient epigraphic record, down to the names of specific temples which specific kings built? The stylistic faults of the *Dīpavaṃsa* are largely the result of its meticulous adherence to the original sources which it hastily strung together as proof-texts of its own threatened position.

But as I have already tried to make clear, there were simultaneously premises in the Mahāvihāran case which were anything but obvious and undeniable. Everyone agreed that the monuments in "the" Mahāvihāra were very old, but only the Mahāvihārans took this to imply that they themselves were so old. The rivals pointed out that the Mahāvihārans had their origin in a rebellion against the dominant religious society of the comparatively recent past, and attacked their claim to exist at all when they denied the legality of the *śīmā* by which the five residences were supposedly united into a single "Mahāvihāra". Everyone agreed that the texts of the Pāli Canon were extremely ancient, but only the Mahāvihārans took this to imply that the Pāli Canon alone was therefore worthy of study and commentary. The rivals maintained that precisely because it was so old, it was also old fashioned, worthy of study primarily by those who had not yet realized the real pith of what the Buddha was trying to teach to this world with so much dust in its eyes. Everyone agreed that the Abhayagiri was a rich, cosmopolitan community sporting the vanguard Mahāyāna teachings of the day, but only the Mahāvihārans saw this as a shameful degeneration of the True Dhamma. For the rivals, the True Dharma did not stop with the ancient canon but embraced it and superseded it, ever unfolding in new revelations appropriate to the ever-changing reality within which progress on the path is made.

So persuasive were these rival views that successions of kings in Anurādhapura favoured the rivals over the would-be champions of Earlier

Vehicle exclusivity. And why wouldn't they? The Abhayagiri was devoted to knowing and mastering the latest vanguard trends in a sophisticated, global Buddhist world. The Abhayagiri connected Anurādhapura with Indian universities, Chinese imperial courts, Javanese trading communities--and brought Indian scholars, Chinese ambassadors and Javanese traders to Anurādhapura. The Abhayagiri made Sri Lankan Theravāda--Mahāyāna Theravāda--a real player in the bigger cosmopolis of the day, dominated by Bodhisattva kings trying to transform all of Asia according to the Mahāyāna revelation of universal Buddhahood.

And the Abhayagiri--so far as we know--never denied the relative value of the Lesser Vehicle. They sported their own Lesser Vehicle canon, probably not much different from the Pāli Canon except in minor details. In fact the Chinese knew that the Abhayagiri disseminated its own Lesser Vehicle canon throughout Asia.³⁵ This made the Mahāvihāran case even harder to argue at the time, for whatever gem of wisdom they discovered in the Pāli canon could easily be assimilated into the ecumenical Mahāyāna vision, whereas any objection that other parts of this ecumenical vision strayed from the earlier teachings could easily be dismissed as proof that Lesser Vehicle adherents really just don't understand the Buddha's Great Message after all.

Still, many of us can find in our own minds the persuasiveness of the Mahāvihāran case. If we agree with the Mahāvihārans that it is hypocrisy to deem "Thera-vāda" anything other than what was taught by the Elders at the Great Councils, then we cannot help but follow them to the conclusion that true Theravāda is essentially and exclusively an Earlier Vehicle school. If we agree with them that the way to update a text is to invent an exegesis or an etymology rather than to compose new words for the Buddha himself, then we cannot help but follow them to the conclusion that the Mahāyāna revelations should be rejected as recent fabrications. If we agree with the Mahāvihārans that oldness itself is something good, something true, something worthy of veneration, then we cannot help but follow them to the conclusion that the Mahāvihāra and its traditions are most deserving of praise and adherence.

Indeed, the Mahāvihāran case finally did prove persuasive, not only for Sri Lanka but also for much of Southeast Asia and even southern China. Though the final victory of the Mahāvihārans over their rivals did not occur even in Sri Lanka until after the 12th century, if at all, at least officially Theravāda was exclusively an Earlier Vehicle school from the end of the Anurādhapura Period

³⁵ Beal, *Si Yu Ki*, 1:247.

right up to the present. So successful was their ultimate victory over the rivals that today only the Mahāvihāran version remains to be studied directly. So skillful was their use of historical sources that they continue to convince scholars to this day that history happened just the way the Mahāvihārans say it happened.

But however persuasive I do find the Mahāvihāran championing of the Buddha's own teachings as the teachings to study, and of the Buddha's own practices as the practices to employ, I am no longer persuaded by the Mahāvihāran historical construct as such. This of course makes no ultimate difference on the level of belief and praxis--whether they called it Theravāda or not, the Elders at the First Council proclaimed a Dhamma which has been preserved in the world, thanks to the Mahāvihāra Theravādins. But it makes a big difference when we set out to study the religious history of Sri Lanka.

By way of conclusion, then, let me return to the larger picture of Theravāda history. It should now be clear why I am so troubled by the scholarly practice of simply paraphrasing the *Mahāvamsa* as though it were some 19th century German encyclopedia of facts. This goes way beyond charges of "bias". The entire basis of Mahāvihāran historiography was challenged throughout the Anurādhapura Period by much-admired competing perspectives. To treat it as a straightforward narration of facts is to miss the rich history of their own times which texts like the *vamsas* can help us recover, a history of Buddhist debate about the past and its meaning for the present. It is moreover to whitewash earlier history according to the later Mahāvihāran construct--history is still being written by the winners--obscuring so much of Anurādhapura's one-time glory from our view.

In the Mahāvihāran version of things, articulated for the first time by *Dīpavamsa*, Theravāda history is "like a great banyon tree; nothing added, nothing lacking." The teachings of the Buddha himself are the roots of the tree, and its strong trunk is the unbroken Theravāda tradition passed down in direct succession through the Three Great Councils to the monks of the ancient Mahāvihāra, and through them to the Mahāvihāran monks of the present. All other Buddhists are like thorns that have grown upon that strong trunk, thorns which arose both in India and in Sri Lanka, at the Abhayagiri and Jetavana vihāras.³⁶ These Sri Lankan moments of the not-Theravāda are mere

³⁶ *Dīpavamsa* 5:51-2. Note that Dpv omits the final clause, about the thorns that grew up in Sri Lanka. Pleading for the very survival of their monastery, the residents of the five great residences were hardly in a position to challenge the Abhayagiri, which Dpv praises as "beautiful"

aberrations in an otherwise strong and straight tree. This image was codified in medieval texts like *Nikāyasamgrahawa* that portrayed all of Sri Lankan history as a history of protecting the true Theravāda from occasional Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna heresies. And here we can easily recognize our own modern construct: Anurādhapuran history is a pure trajectory of original Hīnayāna Theravāda which gets periodically polluted by some not-Theravāda then purified by the *katikāvatas* of some powerful king, such that it still is (or at least should be) today what it was at the very beginning.

But as I have indicated, key aspects of this construct plainly do not conform to the extant evidence. The Theravāda as such had its late origin in the Mahāyāna, both because the earliest, most favoured and most internationally famous Theravādins were Mahāyāna Theravādins and also because even the Hīnayāna Theravāda of the Mahāvihāra was produced after and in response to the Mahāyāna revelations. To take up a Mahāyāna metaphor; rather than a thorn on the Theravāda, the Mahāyāna teachings and practices of the Abhayagiri and Jetavana vihāras were long considered the flowers at the ends of the branches on the tree which we call Buddhist history. Surely that root--the trunk, the Lesser Vehicle--had to be there. So did all the branches, the eighteen schools which through commentaries and *Abhidharma* traditions supplemented the canon in Hīnayāna ways. But the trunk and the branches only existed, as it were, in order to ultimately make possible the flowers--the expression of the tree's real beauty, and the means by which it grows and spreads into the ever-changing future. In this vision, the Mahāvihārans were like over-zealous gardeners, trying to pluck the tree bare in some foolish belief that only the trunk matters and that a tree is altogether better off without branches or flowers at all.

If as historians we are committed to understanding development and change as it occurs over time, then I would suggest that this latter model, of different branches, *all* of them covered in flowers, growing out of a common, if somewhat gnarled trunk, better fits the extant evidence than does the theory of Mahāvihāran stasis and unanimity. In light of these considerations, I want to conclude by suggesting a basic, tripartite periodization of Theravāda history which emerges in my own study of the hard evidence.

Given the silence in the early epigraphs, it would appear that there was not any marked sectarian consciousness at all--Mahāvihāran or otherwise--during

and "supreme". The final clause is added only by *Mahāvamsa* (5:13), which was composed in a rare period of comparative strength for the Mahāvihāra.

about the first four centuries after Arahant Mahinda. We could thus term the first stage of Sri Lankan Buddhist history "The Period of Non-Sectarianism". The second stage would be "The Rise of the Abhayagirivihāra" or "The Period of the Mahāyāna Theravāda", which I would date from about the 2nd century A.D. right up to the tenth century, A.D. The third stage would be "The Triumph of the Mahāvihāra" or "The Period of the Hīnayāna Theravāda", which I would date from the tenth century to the present.

During the Period of Non-Sectarianism various Indian Buddhist traditions came to Sri Lanka and were entrenched here. During the Period of the Mahāyāna Theravāda, Theravāda identity was forged and the separate Theravādin *nikāyas* came into existence, with the Mahāvihāra a late and lesser third. In this period Mahāyāna Theravādins were seen by Buddhists in the rest of Asia as the true representatives of Sri Lankan Theravāda, and they took their Mahāyāna Theravāda to other parts of the globe. Though they too arose during the second stage, only during the third stage did Hīnayāna Theravādins finally succeed in gaining hegemony over their rivals. They were henceforth seen by Buddhists in the rest of Asia as the true representatives of the Sri Lankan Theravāda, and only then did they too take their Hīnayāna Theravāda to the far reaches of the globe.

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