Cultural Power Projection Across Borders in Ancient Sri Lanka: The Role of King Kithsirimewan

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Abstract

This article addresses what may be called a 'cultural power projection' project undertaken by King Kithsirimevan of Sri Lanka in the Anuradhapura period (4th century, CE) focused on Bodh Gaya, India. More specifically, based on travel records of Chinese travelers, Hiuen-tsang and Wang Hiuen-ts'e, this article explores the conditions that led to the construction of a Sri Lankan monastery in the Bodh Gaya area in the vicinity of the Mahabodhi Temple, which marks the site where the Buddha is believed to have achieved enlightenment. I argue that this seemingly religious project can be better understood as a matter of projecting cultural-political power across oceanic borders from the Kingdom of Anuradhapura to the Court of Samudragupta, in India, which institutionalized pilgrim practices and dynamics of diplomacy and international relations over centuries.

Keywords

Bodhi tree, Bodh Gaya, Buddhist pilgrimage, Meghavarman, Wang Hiuen-ts'e

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In December 2015, I undertook a hurried visit to the Bodh Gaya Archaeological Museum, situated adjacent to the Mahabodhi Temple, a major destination of Buddhists all over the world in their pilgrim travels. In a sense, Bodh Gaya is structurally very similar to what Jerusalem is for Christians and Mecca is to Muslims. The first thing that caught my attention as I entered the museum was a description of one of the artifacts on display, which was a fence-like structure in granite. The description took me by surprise. While referring to the Mahabodhi Temple, it also noted "a monastery was also built by the King Meghavarman of Sri Lanka for his monks…" (Bodh Gaya Archaeological Museum, n.d.). The structure was supposedly a remnant of this monastery. In colonial period records, this monastery is referred to as the Mahabodhi Monastery (Cunningham, 1892). While the whole world knows about the iconic Maha Bodhi Temple, most would hardly know anything about what this almost forgotten Lankan king had built in its vicinity, for what purpose, and what it means. Over the next few months, this single reference directed me to numerous ancient sources, colonial period records, and English language translations of Chinese travelogues, all of which later led to an ongoing study on Buddhist pilgrimage across international borders over time.

Figure 1. An Inscription referring to "Meghavarman" (Fleet, 1960, p.274). https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.463254/mode/2up

The king in question, Meghavarman, is also known as Sirimeghavanna, Kirthi Sri Meghavarna, and more commonly in Sinhala as Kithsirimevan. He ruled in the Anuradhapura period in the 4th century and is credited in local sources for his sponsorship of Buddhist infrastructure. He is also believed to have welcomed the

Buddha's tooth relic to Lanka. but does not occupy the public imagination, or the historical consciousness of the country or the Sinhalas, as do kings like Dutugemunu, Vijayabahu I, Parakramabahu the Great, and even mythical characters like Rawana. This is perhaps due to the warrior status of the latter kings, while Kithsirimevan was a monarch of piety and diplomacy. He is singularly important for his successful project of cultural power projection from Anuradhapura to the court of Samudragupta and, through him, institution-building in Bodh Gaya. He effectively built, as the Bodh Gaya Museum narrative says, a large monastery for monks from Lanka who visited the location on pilgrimage or for more long-term religious pursuits. But this is an ancient project about which Sri Lankan scholars in particular, or those working globally, have paid very little attention to. Why?

Hiuen-tsang's Descriptions of the Mahabodhi Monastery

The main question we can pose is: What were the politics behind this construction project? The earliest detailed information on this construction effort comes from the records of Hiuen-tsang (602-664 CE). In his account of the Bodh Gaya area in 629 CE, he offers the following narrative as part of the chain of events that we are told led to the construction of the Mahabodhi Monastery. According to this narrative, the brother of the king of 'Sri Lanka' went to 'India' in search of the places where the Buddha had visited and had spent time during his lifetime (Beal 1906, pp. 133-134). Neither the brother nor the king is named in Hiuen-tsang's text.

Unfortunately, at all the *ashrams* (convents) he visited, he was treated with disdain as a foreigner (Beal 1906, pp. 133-134). Upon his return home, the monk felt very upset at what he encountered in India and had even lost his capacity to speak (Beal 1906, pp. 134). Seeing his state, the king had asked the monk, "What has afflicted (you to) cause this excessive grief?" (Beal, 1906, p. 134). To this, the monk's response is recorded by Beal (1906, p. 134) as follows:

> I, relying on the dignity of your majesty's kingdom, went forth to visit the world, and to find my way through distant regions and strange cities. For my years and travels, during heat and cold, have been met with outrage, and my words have been met with insults and sarcasm. Having endured these afflictions, how can I be light-hearted?

As stated in the narrative, he is not merely explaining what he considers a personal affront meted out to him within the Buddhist sacred landscape during his pilgrimage in 'India.' Instead, he presents it more crucially as an affront to statecraft or established protocol, given the fact that he was the king's brother and his travel was undertaken with a reliance on the assumption that the dignity of the king's domain and authority would be respected in 'India.'

When the king inquired what could be undertaken to address this situation, the monk outlined the idea of establishing a string of monasteries in 'India': "In truth, I wish your majesty in the field of merit, would undertake to build convents throughout all Jambudvipa. You would thus signalise the holy traces, and gain for yourself a great name" (Beal, 1906, p. 134). Effectively, shrouded in a Buddhist sense of piety, what is being suggested is a significant political and cultural operation considerably beyond the island's political and geographic borders and immediate spheres of political and cultural influence. What the monk had suggested was a direct state intervention from 'Sri Lanka' in 'India.' This exercise was expected to identify the holy sites on the ground via a series of monasteries that would also simultaneously offer places of rest for pilgrims from 'Sri Lanka.' According to Hiuen-tsang's story, the unidentified 'Sri Lankan' king had sent a gift of precious jewels to the king of 'India', and in what appears to be a subsequent exchange of diplomatic messages, explained what he had learned about the hardships of pilgrimage, and made the following request according to Beal (1906, p. 135):

> I desire to build in all of 'India' a convent for the entertainment of such strangers, who may have a place to rest between their journey there and back. Thus, the two countries would be bound together and the travellers refreshed.

If we are to take Hiuen-tsang's words literally, they suggest that the idea for this political intervention was embedded in what may be thought of today as the rhetoric of international relations and cooperation, as suggested by the line, "Thus the two countries would be bound together and the travellers refreshed" (Beal, 1906, p. 135). However, instead of allowing the construction of 'Sri Lankan' cultural and spiritual edifices all over 'India', the king gave permission to build a monastery in "one of the places in which the Thatagata has left the traces of his holy teaching" (Beal, 1906, p. 135). As narrated by Hiuen-tsang, the immediate vicinity of the Bodhi Tree was selected as the site for the monastery not only because it was believed to be the place where Gautama Buddha achieved Enlightenment, but also because it was believed to be the place where all the past Buddhas had found enlightenment, as would all future Buddhas (Beal, 1906, p. 135). In other words, the monastery was to be located in the holiest possible place in the Buddhist universe.

Hiuen-tsang further notes that a proclamation in copper within the monastery established by the 'Sri Lankan' king stated the purpose of the monastery as written by Beal (1906, p. 135):

> *To help without distinction* is the highest teaching of the Buddhas; to exercise mercy as occasion offers is the illustrious doctrine of former saints. And now I, unworthy descendent in the royal line, have undertaken to found this *sangharama* to enclose the sacred traces, and to hand down their renown to future ages and to spread their benefits among the people. *The priests of my country will thus obtain independence and will be treated as members of the*

> *fraternity in this country*. Let this privilege be handed down from generation to generation without interruption.

Clearly, what has been described here is not a simple one-off construction of a building far away from the shores of 'Sri Lanka.' Instead, this was a well-funded and well-conceived project of cultural and political power projection that was meant to last well beyond the time of its sponsor. At one level, it was undertaken with a sense of Buddhist piety, and in that sense, it was meant for the benefit of all pilgrims irrespective of their ethnocultural origins, as the proclamation notes. But as it notes even more emphatically, it was also specifically supposed to mitigate the negative experiences faced by monks from 'Sri Lanka' so that they would be treated as equals among the Buddhist fraternity in 'India.'

Hiuen-tsang's description of the building, as well as the activities in it that he witnessed, suggests that these long-term political and cultural objectives of the monastery had been met, given that Hiuen-tsang's descriptions are from a time three hundred years after the monastery was built. He says, according to Beal (1906, p. 133):

> Outside the northern gate of the wall of the *Bodhi* tree is the Mahabodhi *sangharama* …. This edifice has six halls, with towers of observation of three storeys; it is surrounded by a wall of defence thirty or forty feet high. The utmost skill of the artist has been employed; the ornamentation is in the richest colours. The statue of Buddha is cast in gold and silver, decorated with gems and precious stones. The *stupas* are high and large in proportion, and beautifully ornamented; they contain relics of the Buddha.

Even a superficial reading of these architectural, spatial and artistic features would suggest that this was not merely a monastery, but a monastery that was meant to withstand the ravages of time, a place that was meant to impress as well as a place that was spatially marked as an independent entity, and meant to be defended (Cunningham, 1892, p. 43) as a specific cultural and political entity. Perhaps that is the very reason it still existed at the time of Hiuen-tsang's visit, and its legend was still known. It obviously continued to be well-funded and maintained even three hundred years after it was built. This indicates that it was considered important for the Simhala royalty's own politics, and its maintenance was systematized. Hiuen-tsang describes its spiritual life in the following words: "The priests of this convent are more than 1000 men; they study the Great Vehicle and belong to the sthavira school. They carefully observe the *Dharma Vinaya*, and their conduct is pure" (Beal, 1906, p. 133). He later observes these priests' land of origin: "… for this cause this convent entertains many priests of Simhala" (Beal, 1906, p. 135). Interestingly, despite Sri Lanka's association with the Theravada School of Buddhism today, the words "Great Vehicle" refer to Mahayana control of the Sangharama at this time. But within Sri Lanka itself, there

were phases of great Mahayana influence, which also led to considerable building efforts.

What Hiuen-tsang offers is a detailed description of the monastery and its maintenance by Simhala royalty in Jambudvipa that can only be understood in the context of pilgrimage and power dynamics related to this practice. The institutionalization of this monastery establishes, without a doubt, that pilgrimage at this time was the exclusive preserve of the clergy, the spiritual elite of the island, and that it did have a significant degree of facilitation by the precolonial state. Despite his details, however, Hiuen-tsang does not present any specifics on the personalities involved in this building and cross-border and cross-generational project of political and cultural power projection. But we know Hiuen-tsang came to India in 629 CE during the time of Emperor Harsha, so his description itself and what he saw can be timed with a significant degree of accuracy.

Wang Hiuen-ts'e's Descriptions of the Maha Bodhi Monastery

Compared to Hiuen-tsang, a second Chinese source offers more specific information about the personalities involved in this building enterprise, and therefore allows for more accurate timing of the construction itself. The *Hing-tchoan,* written by Wang Hiuen-ts'e, offers illuminating information not only of the monastery built by Sri Meghawarna but also the circumstances that led to it, though his descriptions are briefer compared to Hiuen-tsang's. Crucially, however, his records corroborate the general story reported by Hiuen-tsang. Hiuen-ts'e was a seventh-century military officer and Buddhist pilgrim from China who is known to have travelled to India at least four times, during which time he maintained extensive records. He notes, "Formerly the King of Chu-tzeu named Chi-mi-kia-po-mo.... directed two bikkhus to visit this monastery" (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). The words "this monastery" are a specific reference to the Mahabodhi Temple as suggested by contextual information in the text (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). Over the centuries, Chinese records have referred to Sri Lanka with a number of terms, while in this text, the term used is Chu-tzeu (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). Moreover, the Chinese name Chi-mi-kia-po-mo, which means "cloud of merit," has been identified as a reference to Keerthi Sri Meghawarna (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). Hiuen-ts'e also identifies the senior of these two monks as Mahanaman and the second as Upa (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). According to Hiuen-ts'e's narrative, the two monks did not get lodgings in the temple despite the distance they had travelled, so they returned home to 'Sri Lanka' after the pilgrimage (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). Once they came to meet the King, he asked them: "You went to pay homage to the holy places, what good fortunes do the omens declare?'"(Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). The monks' response was: "In the great country of 'India', there is no spot one can live in peace" (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). As narrated by Hiuen-ts'e, "The king hearing these words sent some people with precious stones to offer as presents to the king San-meou-to-lokiu-to. And that is why, up to this day, it is

bikkhus from the kingdom of ‘Sri Lanka’ who reside in this monastery” (Seneviratne, 1920, p. 75). Historians have identified San-meou-to-lokiu-to as Samudragupta (Seneviratne, 1920, p.74).

Both Samudragupta and Meghawarna are known to historians. Based in Pataliputra, Samudragupta’s reign lasted from 335 to 380 CE, while Meghavaman, who was based in Anuradhapura, ruled from 352 to 379 CE. The timing that can be culled from Hiuen-ts’e’s references makes the two kings contemporaries and suggests that Meghavarman’s monastery was a fourth-century CE state enterprise spanning significant geographic, linguistic, cultural, and political borders. Together, the two stories offer more contextual sense as well. Though Hiuen-tsang’s story does provide the names of personalities involved and offers no clues to the historical time during which the monastery was built, his suggestion that the mistreated monk was a sibling of the king in ‘Sri Lanka’ suggests he must have at least had close relations with the Anuradhapura court in the fourth century CE, given the king’s immediate action in building a monastery for monks traveling from ‘Sri Lanka’ to ‘India.’ However, both of these references from the seventh century CE are approximately 300 years after the monastery was constructed, at which time it was still functioning well, and its patronage was still known.

The Mahabodhi Monastery is not merely a lingering reference in seventh-century CE Chinese travelogues. Archaeological evidence unearthed in the late nineteenth century has also established its clear existence. Alexander Cunningham notes that the walls of the monastery were thirty to forty feet high, offering an initial sense of its scale (1892, p. 43). What he proceeds to describe is a massive structure closely in keeping with what had been described twelve centuries earlier by Hiuen-tsang:

While the remnants of Meghawarna’s monastery still remained at the end of the nineteenth century, the unfolding of latter-day histories had taken its toll. Hence, not only its general physical decline, but also the fact that one of its towers was, by then, within a Muslim burial ground. Cunningham further notes that the overall layout of the monastery “consists of 36 squares, six on each side, of which the four corner squares are assigned to the corner towers, and the four middle squares to an open pillared court containing a well” (1892, p. 43). Further, “a long-covered drain leads from the well to the outside of the walls on the north-northwest, ending in a gargoyle spout in the shape of a large crocodile's head, of dark blue basalt, richly carved” (1892, p. 44).

The point I highlight here is that the Buddhist sacred landscape beyond Sri Lanka’s shores was taken very seriously by both rulers and pilgrims in the pre-colonial past. Not only did they have specific knowledge of the sites in this landscape, but the virtues of visiting these places were part of an established religious discourse. On the other hand, as *Dambadiva Alankaraya* written in the Sinhala language in the Gampola Period (1341-1408 CE) of Sri Lankan history, has indicated, travel guidance and information were also formally available to pilgrims (Abeyawardana, 1978). Besides all this, structures such as the Mahabodhi Monastery were established for the specific

purpose of facilitating pilgrimage over time when the opportunity presented itself. These systems were put in place to function over a long period of time, as the long-term survival of the Mahabodhi Monastery itself attests.

Conclusion

The point I make in this brief essay is simple: at a time when many people in Sri Lanka are engrossed in resurrecting stories of mythological characters such as Ravana, his legendary aircraft, and his mythological adventures as evidence-based 'history,' which unfortunately included agencies of the Sri Lankan government under the Rajapakse regime, there are crucial moments of the past that have been well-documented, as in the case of King Kithsirimevan's monastery in Bodh Gaya. However, such documentation cannot be as easily seen in local sources when compared to the kind of sources I have referred to in this essay, such as seventh-century Chinese records and late nineteenth-century British colonial records. But these materials hardly receive any attention in formal Lankan historiography, popular non-fiction writing, creative writing, or popular imagination. A close study of these historical events would indicate important aspects of ancient diplomacy, international relations, statesmanship, politics of wealth, and cross-border projection of cultural power, which could possibly help us significantly rethink South Asia's past.

One must also wonder why King Kithsirimevan is not presented in the same 'heroic' mould as other kings in Sri Lanka's Pali chronicles, such as *Deepawamsa*, *Mahawamsa*, *Culawamsa,* and so on, even as his local religious pursuits are referred to. This is an important historical investigation that needs to be undertaken. On the other hand, narratives such as these can also offer fertile resources for imaginative creative writers to think of crafting epic works of fiction on the lines of well-known global examples such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *The Prague Cemetery*. Particularly in the realm of fiction, such information offers endless possibilities.

However, it is truly unfortunate that neither of these historical nor fictional journeys have been undertaken seriously in Lanka. This is simply because we are obsessed with fiction as history and amnesiac when it comes to well-documented accounts of the past. For me personally, if not for the unplanned museum visit with which I began this essay and the curiosity it engendered, my ongoing study on Sri Lankan pilgrimage would not have begun. It is therefore important to allow small things and seemingly minor incidents to expand one's horizons of thinking and to explore broader possibilities.

Acknowledgements

I contributed this article to this volume for two reasons. First, the museum that I visited and the historical exploration it opened up have led to a major research project on the pilgrimage of Sri Lankan Buddhists to parts of India and Nepal over time. I wished to reflect on the possibilities of small things or events that may lead to broader academic engagements. This article is also based on material from selected chapters in my forthcoming book on Sri Lankan pilgrimage to India and Nepal. Secondly, following the visit described, the first person I contacted for clarifications was my friend Sudharshan Seneviratne, whose initial guidance led to the progress of the historical aspects of the study.

Notes

1. This article is based on material from selected chapters in my forthcoming book on Sri Lankan pilgrimage to India and Nepal.

2. I use the words ‘Sri Lanka’ and ‘Sri Lankan’ in inverted commas here to denote the reference to the island in these older records. ‘Ceylon’ in the English translation does not refer to the Sri Lankan nation state.

3. I use the word ‘India’ in inverted commas here to denote references to areas within present-day India in older records such as these, which do not indicate India the nation state.

4. The word sangharama is in italics in Beal’s translation.

5. Alexander Cunningham, one of the first people to excavate the Mahabodhi Monastery notes the ways in which the defensive features of the monastery may have been used in latter times for clear purposes of defense and warfare: ‘The position of the Great Monastery [Mahabodhi Monastery] to the north of the Great Temple [Mahabodhi Temple] corresponds exactly with the extensive mound known as Amar Sinh's Fort. The lofty walls of the monastery, from 30 to 40 feet in height, would naturally have led to its occupation as a fort after the decline of Buddhism, in the 11th century’ (Cunningham, 1892, p. 43).

6. *Dambadiva Alankaraya* is not a widely available text. Only one ancient ola leaf manuscript of this text has been found (Abeyawardana 1978: xxi). More specifically, the only complete version of *Dambadiva Alankaraya* was found at the end of a version of *Sri Lankadwipaye Kada Im Pota* (Abeyawardana 1978:17). In this context, Dambadiva Alankaraya is a colophon of a well-known *Kada Im Pota* (boundary book).

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