

Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History

Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History

Edited by Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern



First published in 2017 by UCL Press University College London Gower Street London WC1E 6BT

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Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (eds.), *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, London, UCL Press, 2017. https://doi.org/ 10.14324/111.9781911307822

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ISBN: 978-1-911307-83-9 (Hbk.) ISBN: 978-1-911307-84-6 (Pbk.) ISBN: 978-1-911307-82-2 (PDF) ISBN: 978-1-911307-81-5 (epub) ISBN: 978-1-911307-80-8 (mobi) ISBN: 978-1-911307-78-5 (html)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781911307822

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1

Archaeology and cosmopolitanism in early historic and medieval Sri Lanka

Robin Coningham, Mark Manuel, Christopher Davis and Prishanta Gunawardhana

Introduction

This chapter will examine the applicability of the concept of cosmopolitanism in Sri Lanka during the early historic and the medieval period across a timespan of between c. 500 BCE and 1200 CE, utilizing archaeological evidence augmented by epigraphic and textual sources. It will focus on north central Sri Lanka and Anurādhapura but draw on wider references, comparisons and analogies where appropriate. Within an archaeological context, cosmopolitanism is a relatively underexplored phenomenon. While some volumes have addressed issues of identity and cosmopolitanism, they have been more concerned with how this may have been represented in the present (largely through cultural heritage), as opposed to exploring the nature of its ancient manifestations. Philosophically, cosmopolitanism may be taken to refer to the concept that all humans belong to a single community with shared moral codes and philosophies, and that such a concept should be nurtured.² However, to a wider public, cosmopolitanism has often been used to reflect multiculturalism, sophistication and a general worldliness. In an archaeological context, the former definition is inherently problematic and challenging; however, the latter set of definitions is more achievable to identify, but to varying degrees as will become apparent.

How archaeologists commence the process of defining and identifying cosmopolitanism within archaeological communities is, in itself, a challenge although one may simply acknowledge the presence of multiple communities in the past. On a more ambitious level, archaeologists may investigate the relationships between such communities more deeply and the influences they may have had on each other. In such a way, the concept of cosmopolitanism may assist the development of a greater understanding of the complex and multifaceted identities of individuals and communities in the past. For instance, individuals may have had allegiances to multiple communities, may have spoken numerous languages

and may have participated in various religious, ritual and belief systems. However positive an ambition, the inclusive and integrating nature of cosmopolitanism makes it difficult to define and even more difficult to identify within the ephemeral material remains with which archaeologists have to contend.

The focus of this discussion must also acknowledge the underlying and underpinning concepts of identity. Early archaeologists, such as Gustaf Kossinna (1858–1931), linked material archaeological remains with cultures, and variations within these cultural groups were attributed to ethnic diversity. Each clearly defined cultural province was thus correlated with an ethnic group and, simultaneously, also linked to contemporary nationalist concerns.³ Although in opposition to this political agenda, pioneering archaeologists, such as Vere Gordon Childe and Stuart Piggott,⁴ continued to identify and map cultural provinces across time and space in Europe and South Asia through differences and distributions of material culture, maintaining the assumption that cultural groups correlated with ethnic and linguistic groups. In Western Europe and, by imperial proxy, in South Asia, archaeologists utilized concepts of diffusion and migration to explain cultural and linguistic variations, for example in the debate over the development and spread of Indo-Aryan languages, linked with the ubiquitous Aryan invasion theory.⁵

Sri Lanka may be perceived as representing a microcosm of this latter Aryan question. Indeed, Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic identities have been created and curated on the basis of relatively modern distributions of Indo-European and proto-Dravidian linguistic communities, combined with references to oral and literary traditions relating to the Vijayan colonization of the island. Despite this long scholarly tradition, there has been a more recent and rigorous examination of concepts of ethnicity within archaeology, leading some scholars to reject the notion that ethnic identity was ever concrete or could be traceable to a definable point. Jones has suggested that 'ethnic identity is based on shifting, situational, subjective identifications of self and others, which are rooted in ongoing daily practice and historical experience, but also subject to transformation and discontinuity'.7 Archaeologists have also focused on issues of identity within the archaeological record, challenging preconceptions relating to age, gender, ethnicity and religion, and recognizing that 'identity... is not a static thing, but a continual process... Identities are constructed through interaction between people and the process by which we acquire and maintain our identities requires choice and agency'.8

Crucial within this quote is the recognition that identity is not singular but a plural concept. Individuals may hold many different identities simultaneously and this is something that becomes increasingly evident when examining the complex Sri Lankan past. This is equally true of the challenge of trying to discern religious identities from archaeological remains, individual objects or artefactual corpora. For instance, many monuments and motifs were commonly shared by a number of major religious traditions, making it difficult to offer firm affiliations. With regard to Sri Lanka, a number of deities, such as Ganesh, Viṣṇu and Kubera, continued to be venerated after the advent of Buddhism but their positions were reconstituted within a cosmography that placed the Buddha centrally.

The survival of old beliefs and the appropriation of new traditions can be traced throughout the island's archaeological sequence, ranging from the introduction of the Buddha image in the first half of the first millennium ce to the emergence of traditions associated with the terracotta artefacts of the so-called 'Tabbova-Maradanmaduva Culture' at the beginning of the second millennium ce. ¹⁰ In order to investigate cosmopolitanism in ancient Sri Lanka and evaluate the appropriateness of the concept itself, this chapter will examine a series of case studies. These range from the role of pilgrimage, in particular Buddhist, to and from the island; local and global trade networks and the impact these have had on the island's inhabitants; patronage within the island and Sri Lankan patronage elsewhere in South Asia; and the religious and economic landscapes of Anurādhapura and its surrounding hinterland. This study will focus on archaeological data but will introduce textual and epigraphic evidence where appropriate, and will begin by examining these sources and critically discussing how modern ethnic constructs in Sri Lanka have been intrinsically linked to the island's past.

Textual narratives and the linking of archaeology to ethnicity

The precolonial history of Sri Lanka has been constructed from a variety of textual sources, in particular the Dīpavaṃsa, Mahāvaṃsa and Cūḷavaṃsa. Wilhelm Geiger argued that the Dipavamsa's contents relied upon an earlier chronicle known as the Atthakathā-Mahāvamsa, 11 and that while the Dīpavamsa is viewed as a first attempt at collating Pāli verses, the Mahāvamsa can be seen as a younger, more elaborate, treatment of the same material. Geiger even went as far as to suggest that the Mahāvamsa represents 'a conscious and intentional rearrangement of the *Dīpavamsa*'. ¹² Although its authorship is unknown, the *Dīpavamsa* is believed to have been compiled in the fourth century CE, while the Mahāvaṃsa has been argued to have been written by various monks of the Mahāvihāra and compiled into a single document by the Buddhist monk Mahānāma in the fifth to sixth century CE.¹³ It narrates the history of the island from its colonization by Prince Vijaya through to the reign of King Mahāsena (r. 275–301 ce). 14 The Cūļavamsa was a continuation of this narrative, detailing the island's history up to the eighteenth century ce. 15 Initially scholars believed these narratives to be legends, but the rediscovery of palm leaf manuscripts by George Turnour at Mullgiri-galla near Tangalle¹⁶ led to the serious reconsideration of their contents as historical. Sir James Emerson Tennent, Colonial Secretary of Ceylon between 1845 and 1850 CE, stated that this 'long lost chronicle... thus vindicated the claim of Ceylon to the possession of an authentic and unrivalled record of its national history', 17

This rediscovery led to an increase in Western studies of the island's history, ¹⁸ paralleled by significant research undertaken by members of the Sangha whose translations of Pāli works into Sinhalese and correspondence with European academics facilitated the development of 'Oriental' scholarship. ¹⁹

Unique across South Asia, the chronicles provided a historical framework for the island from before the Mauryan Empire through to British rule and, with colonial endorsement, the chronicles became the privileged source of evidence for scholars studying Sri Lanka's past. This focus has produced what has been termed by Seneviratne as the 'Mahāvaṃsa view', ²⁰ reflecting the fact that ever since the rediscovery of the chronicles, the disciplines of Sri Lankan history and archaeology have been largely influenced by as the Mahāvaṃsa's narrative. ²¹ It has also been suggested that archaeological evidence from excavations in Anurādhapura, while often referring to 'popular' culture and history, has been used to reinforce academic narratives derived from the chronicles. ²²

The narrative itself details, as is widely known, the arrival of Prince Vijaya, the exiled heir to a kingdom in northern India, with his 700 followers on the uninhabited island of Lanka in the middle of the first millennium BCE. On arrival, Vijava slavs the demonic vakkhas who reside on the island, while at the same time having two children by the yakkhini, Kuveni. Descended from a lion, Vijaya refers to his followers as Sinhala, or 'people of the lion'. However, having borne his children, Prince Vijaya spurns Kuvenī in favour of an Indian princess, and Kuvenī and their children retreat to the jungle, forming the Pulinda people.²³ After the conversion of the Sinhalese to Buddhism in the third century BCE as a result of Aśōka's proselytizing (see p. 29), the Mahāvamsa makes its first reference to differentiated communities by mentioning Demalas, a term often associated with Tamils, although this is contested.²⁴ With the exception of those Tamil-speakers brought across as indentured labour for the colonial tea plantations, the Tamil communities of present-day Sri Lanka have often been directly linked with the invading South Indian Pandyas and Colas during the later phases of the Sinhalese rule from Anurādhapura.²⁵ The chronicles thus seem to establish within their narratives three distinct communities that have often been perceived to have been at odds with one another, rather than recognizing a framework for a multicultural island with a shared history. Frequently, the underlying question here has been to do with who the rightful autochthons were.

This link of past to present has often been translated into the notion of the Sinhalese as rightful 'heirs' to the island, ²⁶ while Tamils were portrayed as latecomers or outsiders. The reasoning behind this partially originates from colonial interpretations of Sri Lankan history. As well as endorsing the *Mahāvaṃsa* as history, Tennent equated the Pulinda with the modern communities of huntergatherers or väddās, often described as the aboriginal inhabitants of the island; the Sinhalese as the civilized creators of the architectural and engineering masterpieces of the northern plains or the Rajarata; and finally, the Tamils as the 'debased' destroyers of that civilization. ²⁷ These views became mainstream historical opinion, although other scholars sought to attribute a much deeper antiquity to the Tamil communities of the island, ²⁸ with some suggesting that sites such as Mantai were part of a separate early Tamil trading civilization, ²⁹ or that an early Dravidian population was already present on the island at the time of the Vijayan colonization. ³⁰ However, these latter views never garnered broader acceptance.

Central to colonial interpretation was the concept that Indo-European-speaking people had invaded South Asia from the north and west around the first millennium BCE, bringing with them a cultural package that included writing, iron, horse-riding and advanced social institutions. Within South Asia, the Indo-Aryan invasion was portrayed as part of a long pageant of historical precedents that helped to legitimate British control of the region as the latest wave of conquest elites following Aryans, Greeks, Persians and Turks. The civil servant and historian, H. W. Codrington, pursued these legitimacies in his *Short History of Ceylon*, when he reminded readers that the British invasion of Kandy and exile of the last king, Śrī Vikrama Rājasiṃha (r. 1798–1815 CE) was to deliver 'the Kandyans from their oppressors and the subversion of the Malabar dominion', Rājasiṃha being a South Indian Tamil by birth.

Episodes and events of oppression were also portrayed within the chronicles and they frequently referenced the destruction of Buddhist heritage by South Indian aggressors. For instance, during the reign of Mahinda V (r. 982–1029 cE) the chronicles recorded that Anurādhapura was abandoned, leaving the capital open to plunder by the South Indian $C\bar{o}la$ polity:

Thereupon they sent the Monarch and all the treasures which had fallen into their hands at once to the Cōla Monarch. In the three fraternities and in all Lanka (breaking open) the relic chambers, (they carried away) many costly images of gold etc., and while they violently destroyed here and there all the monasteries, like blood-sucking *yakkhas* they took all the treasures of Lanka for themselves.³⁴

These descriptions were also used during the anti-colonial Buddhist revival by leaders of that movement, such as Angarika Dharmapala (1864–1933 cE), who identified modern Europeans and ancient Tamils as 'barbaric vandals' of Sinhalese culture. This fitted a framework promoting Sinhalese and Buddhist concerns while noting European interference. However, colonial archaeologists also laid the blame for the destruction of monuments in antiquity at the hands of Tamils, utilizing similar narratives. Early archaeological interpretations drew from such descriptions and H. C. P. Bell, the archaeological commissioner for Ceylon between 1890 and 1912, described the stone Buddhist railing at the Jetavana monastery of Anurādhapura as damaged by an aggressor:

The indescribable confusion in which the fragments were found heaped one upon another, and the almost entire wreck of the railing, leave little room for doubt that this unique relic of Ceylon Buddhist architecture must have perished under the ruthless destruction of those invaders from South India at whose door lies the mutilation and ruin of the best works of the sculptor's art in Anurādhapura.³⁷

Such interpretations were not rare, as illustrated by the discovery of fractured Buddha sculptures in Jaffna recorded by Sir Paul Pieris. He noted that earlier

scholars, such as Sir William Twynam, the government agent for Jaffna, had suggested that Buddhist sculptures found in the north 'have been similarly mutilated – an undoubted sign, he thinks, of Dravidian invasion'. 38 Such viewpoints were not restricted to the infancy of archaeological enquiry but continued through the twentieth century. For example, excavations at Abhavagiri in Anurādhapura in the 1980s revealed Buddha statues lying flat with their heads removed and this was cited as evidence of the Cola destruction as narrated in the Cūlavamsa.³⁹ The latter findings were recovered from excavations conducted as part of Sri Lanka's major heritage programme, the UNESCO Central Cultural Fund, established by president J. R. Jayewardene in 1980. Tasked with excavating, conserving and presenting the ancient cities and Buddhist monuments of Sri Lanka, the sites of Anurādhapura, Polonnaruva and Sigiriya were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1982, followed by Kandy in 1988 and Dambulla in 1991.40 Although colonial Galle was inscribed in 1988, the focus on Buddhist sites was pointed out by Tambiah, who stated that while there should be no barriers to the sponsorship of the restoration of Buddhist monuments, '[i]t would also behove a Sri Lankan government to recognize at the same time that there are monuments, archaeological remains, and literary and cultural treasures that are neither Sinhalese nor Buddhist as these labels are understood today'.41

One of the unintended consequences of the increasing alignment of the state-sponsored promotion of Buddhist heritage with the Mahāvamsa's narrative was to focus the attention of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the symbolic importance of such monuments. 42 Indeed, the early methods of the Central Cultural Fund were also queried by one of its own directorsgeneral, Professor Seneviratne, who observed that 'interpretative studies were mainly commissioned to strengthen the Buddhist history of Anuradhapura and to authenticate the *Mahāvamsa* narration'. As Reflecting the new post-conflict era across the island, and the Central Cultural Fund Act, which states that the Fund was established 'for the development of cultural and religious monuments in Sri Lanka', 44 project offices have now been opened in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara, with recently inaugurated conservation programmes at the Sivan Kōvil at Trincomalee, the Yonakapura mosque in Dickwella and the Roman Catholic church at Duwa in Negombo, as well as the promotion of the intangible heritage of vädda, African and Malay communities. Furthermore, the Fund is sponsoring more inclusive research, such as the current investigations at Siva Devale No. 2 at Polonnaruva, which involves participants from across Sri Lanka including Sri Jayewardhanapura, Rajarata, Kelaniya and Jaffna Universities as well as international partners from Nepal, India, Australia and the UK.

On reflection, the character of the ancient heritage of Sri Lanka was far more complex, diverse and fluid than recently constructed identities and representations suggest. For example, although Sinhalese monarchs were guardians of Buddhism within the island, close marriage ties with non-Buddhist South Indian dynasties were formed, culminating in the accession of the Nāyaka dynasty to the Kandyan throne in the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ The current Temple of the Tooth in Kandy was partly constructed by a Nāyaka, Śrī Vikrama Rājasiṃha II

(r. 1798–1815 ce), a Tamil/Telugu-speaker from a Hindu dynasty of South Asian origin. The attack on the Temple of Tooth by the LTTE in 1998 therefore not only resulted in damage to a monument constructed by a South Indian dynastic king from the Nāyaka dynasty, but also damaged adjacent shrines to Pattini and Viṣṇu, 46 important to both Buddhist and Hindu communities. The patronage and protection afforded by 'non-Buddhists' is further reinforced by a Tamil inscription on a stone slab beside the Tooth Relic Temple in Polonnaruva. Known as the Aṭadāgē, this structure was built under the patronage of Vijayabāhu I (r. 1055–1110 ce) and the epigraph instructs guards from South India, Vēlaikkāras, to protect the Buddha's Tooth Relic within⁴⁷ (Figure 1.1). Part of a long tradition of 'Sinhala'



Fig. 1.1 Tamil inscription at the Atadage, Sacred Quadrangle, Polonnaruva, authors' photograph.

states employing South Indian guards, the Vēlaikkāras are stated to be adherents of the *Mahātantra*, and this further highlights the diversity and complexity of identity, religiosity and the construction of royal legitimacy within medieval Sri Lanka. All these complexities are crucial for the consideration of evidence for potential signs of cosmopolitan practices in the archaeological record.

Indian Ocean trade

Although Anurādhapura has been investigated for more than one hundred years, intensive stratigraphic archaeological analysis only commenced through the instigation of fieldwork programmes by Dr Siran Deraniyagala in the 1990s. One associated investigation was the excavation at trench Salgha Watta (ASW2), directed by one of the authors, which began in 1989 and continued into the 1990s. The trench measured ten by ten metres and was excavated to a depth of ten metres. While trench ASW2 identified and dated a sequence with more than 1,000 years of occupation, rebuilding and eventual abandonment at the site, it was also designed to develop a typological sequence for the island and, in so doing, allowed the identification of trade networks. Many early studies of the island's archaeology have attributed Sri Lanka's apparent peripheral position to its seemingly marginal geographical location, off India's southern tip. As a result, the island was assumed to have adopted a number of innovations, such as writing and urbanization, later than North India.

On a broader scale, this interpretation reflected a deeply rooted colonial concept, namely that contact with the Roman world was the catalyst for the beginnings of Indian Ocean trade. In line with his tradition of linking South Asian archaeology with established Western chronologies, Mortimer Wheeler presented the early, pre-Roman levels of his excavations at the port of Arikamedu in South India as populated by 'simple fisher-folk' living in 'a leisurely and enterprising fashion just above subsistence level'. 51 An adherent of the theory of cultural change through invasion, diffusion or trade, Wheeler believed that Roman traders provided the stimulus for the settlement to develop into an international hub.⁵² He felt supported by the presence of finds of Arretine Ware and other Roman goods. While he focused on the sequence from a single trade entrepôt, the ideas and concepts that he developed were transposed to Sri Lanka and into narratives of the island's development. Yet Begley's re-excavations at Arikamedu⁵³ and Coningham's trench ASW2 at Anuradhapura demonstrated the weakness of these models, the latter confirming the presence of well-developed trade networks across South Asia before contact with the Roman world.54

Archaeologists now recognize the highly diverse character of the wider region's trading communities. For example, the Italian excavations at Khor Rohri on the Omani coast have provided evidence of South Asian wares⁵⁵ and the presence of sherds with inscriptions in Early Brahmi, the *lingua franca* of early historic trade, at Myos Hormos and Berenike in the Red Sea suggest strong contact

with – and possible residence of – South Asian traders there in the first century CE. 56 The excavations at trench ASW2 also provide evidence of a diverse repertoire, indicating links across the early historic and medieval Indian Ocean. Objects demonstrate links with Afghanistan and Gujarat, with finds of lapis lazuli and carnelian in the first millennium BCE, but later expanded to include glazed ceramics from the Persian and Islamic worlds and Eastern Asia with delicate monochrome lustre ware bowls and Changsha stone wares in the first millennium ce. While some objects, such as the Egyptian glass kohl sticks, were already well-known artefact categories, other objects represented the introduction of new tastes. For example, during Period F (300-600 cE), 'torpedo' jars were imported from Sasanian and Early Islamic regions. Lined with bitumen to make them watertight, they were used to transport liquids. Gas chromatography-mass spectrometry and stable isotope analysis of torpedo jars from trench ASW2 identified that the bitumen was derived from Susa in Iran,⁵⁷ and while it was not possible to determine what liquids were transported within the Anurādhapura torpedo jars, it is likely that one of the commodities was wine.⁵⁸ Torpedo jars have also been found at Mantai,⁵⁹ Sigiriya⁶⁰ and Tissamaharama⁶¹ and undoubtedly represent a broadening of such consumption habits.

A more utilitarian development was also recognized within the sequence of trench ASW2 in the form of sherds with inscriptions. Predating Aśōkan contact, the presence of Early Brahmi script in levels dating to c. 400 BCE raised questions as to its presence within the island. 62 North Indian Prakrit, the direct ancestor of Sinhalese, may have been adopted as a trade language at that time. The communities using it at Anurādhapura may have been bilingual and gradually replaced their own language in favour of Prakrit – a process that resulted in Sinhala. 63 The striking nature of its presence within the city has been further stressed by the fact that only a single inscribed sherd was identified outside the walls during a major campaign of survey - restricting the cosmopolitan nature of its use to the capital and differentiating this settlement from its rural hinterland, where evidence of writing was again restricted to inscriptions at monastic sites.⁶⁴ The presence of early trade links at Anurādhapura and Mantai also demonstrate that distant connections existed long before scholars had suggested. Indeed, the excavations across the ramparts at Anurādhapura demonstrated that the urban nature of the site was defined long before contact with Aśōka in the third century BCE⁶⁵ and the supposed 'Mauryanization' of the island, while the earliest levels of the site (c. 800 BCE) also detail an extensive intra-island network of trade and exchange.

Although this evidence of trade goods in Anurādhapura may have informed us of the extensive trade networks flowing through the site, it still remains to be seen how these systems were organized. Were international merchants and traders residing within the city itself or was the port of Mantai established as a trading entrepôt with goods shipped to Anurādhapura by local traders? Were Sri Lankan traders setting forth to procure goods from around the world to bring home for local markets? The recent discovery of the Godavaya shipwreck off the southern coast of Sri Lanka promises to shed more light on the identities of the sailors and

their cargos.⁶⁷ As is often the case in archaeology, it is difficult to be absolutely certain and the answers are likely to be a combination of all of the above. The later travel itineraries of the Chinese pilgrim Faxian, for example, noted the presence of 'The houses of Sa-pho (Sabaean) merchants' within Anurādhapura, ⁶⁸ but scholars differ in their identification of the ethnicities involved. Note must also be made of the discovery of a Nestorian Cross at Anurādhapura. This was interpreted by early archaeologists as marking the presence of a church, ⁶⁹ but also recently reassessed by Prabo Mihindukulasuriya, who linked the find with records by the historian Cosmas and the presence of a Nestorian bulla from Mantai to suggest that Anurādhapura hosted a thriving Christian community. ⁷⁰ Although the presence of isolated artefacts may not necessarily equate to the permanent presence of particular groups, they do certainly call for a reassessment of the record. ⁷¹

Pilgrimage

The earliest contact between Sri Lanka and northern India recorded in the Mahāvamsa's narrative was the Vijavan colonization. The second notable contact was between Devānampiyatissa's (r. 250-210 BCE) kingdom and the Mauryan Empire, which had emerged in the mid-fourth century BCE from the internecine warfare between the various mahajanapadas of South Asia. 72 After his conversion to Buddhism, it is recorded that the Mauryan emperor Aśōka (272-235 BCE) sent missionaries to neighbouring states to spread the Dharma.⁷³ Aśōka's son Mahinda was sent to Sri Lanka and, after converting Devānampiyatissa, supported spreading Buddhism throughout the island.74 Later, Aśōka's daughter Sanghamittā brought a branch of the Bodhi tree from Bodhgaya, under which the Buddha gained enlightenment, to Sri Lanka⁷⁵ forming a centrepiece that is still venerated at the Śrī Mahā Bōdhi in Anurādhapura. Further relics were brought to Sri Lanka, such as the Buddha's alms bowl, while his collarbone was enshrined within the Thūpārāmaya in Anurādhapura. 76 Although the archaeological evidence cannot confirm these textual claims in detail, it can support the broader point that relics were moving across South Asia as diplomatic and religious gifts. There is a close parallel between the recorded arrival of the Bodhi tree and the advent of tree and swastika coinage in the third century BCE. The presence of Northern Black Polished Ware at Anurādhapura also constitutes 'physical evidence of links between the core of the Mauryan culture sphere and Sri Lanka'.77 Although a link can be identified, its exact nature is less certain, as the ware predates the rule of Aśōka and may represent down-the-line trade rather than courtly exchange.

Once Buddhism was established, the monasteries of Anurādhapura gained an international reputation and links throughout Asia continued to expand. In the late fourth and early fifth century ce, the Chinese pilgrim Faxian journeyed to Sri Lanka during his travels around South Asia visiting sites associated with the life of the Buddha and major Buddhist centres. In addition to describing

Anurādhapura and the religious ceremonies that occurred within the citadel, he described the wealth of the monasteries of the Sacred City. Here, Faxian reported that more than 10,000 monks and nuns resided, with the Abhayagiri Vihāra housing 5,000 and the Mahāvihāra 3,000 monks.78 The treasury of Abhayagiri was said to contain jewels and gems of incalculable value, garnered from patronage.79 The Sangha's networks continued into the medieval period but, after the purported damage to the Sangha caused by Cola incursions in the eleventh century CE, as recorded in the chronicles, it was reported that no ordination had been conducted in Sri Lanka for many decades. These networks were called upon to assist the restoration of the Sangha, and Vijayabāhu I was aided by King Anuruddha of Rāmañña, whose realm coincided with modern Burma/Myanmar, to bring monks to Sri Lanka to fulfil these duties. 80 In later periods, after the decline of Polonnaruva, a major mission of monks from Chiangmai and Pegu came to Sri Lanka in the 1420s cE to worship the Tooth Relic and receive higher ordination.⁸¹ The Indian Ocean-wide Buddhist worldview illustrated by these examples may have been encapsulated symbolically not only in textual sources, but also architecturally, with Tilman Frasch suggesting recently that the layout and structures of the twelfth-century Sacred Quadrangle at Polonnaruva represented a cosmogram of international Buddhist contacts.82

This is not to suggest that Sri Lanka acted solely as a receptacle for external impulses as there is also evidence for Sri Lankan communities influencing distant partners. For example, Pliny noted that a Sinhalese monarch sent an embassy to Rome in the second century CE⁸³ and an inscription on the Aśōkan period stone railing at the Mahabodhi Temple in northern India was translated by Sir Alexander Cunningham as the 'Gift of Bodhi-rakshita of Tambaparna (Ceylon)'. ⁸⁴ References to Sri Lanka have also been identified at other sites in India. At Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, an inscription recorded the Sīhala-Vihāra and the dedication of a shrine to the fraternities of Tambapaṇṇi. ⁸⁵ A decorated moonstone discovered at one apsidal temple, unlike other examples at Nagarjunakonda, resembles the ornately carved moonstones of Anurādhapura, decorated with elephants, lions, deer, horse, bull and buffalo, which may be connected to Buddhist communities from Sri Lanka. ⁸⁶

Later contact is confirmed by an inscription dating to 792 ce, found at a monastic site in the Ratubaka plateaux of Java, commemorating the founding of a branch of the Abhayagiri Vihāra of Sri Lanka in this locale. Soundberg has argued that the *pendopo* architectural unit at Ratubaka has similarities with the layout of Padhānaghara Pirivena, or double-platform monasteries, that have been identified on the western outskirts at Anurādhapura and at Ritigala. These sites have been linked to the fraternity of monks known as the *paṃsukūlika* or 'those clothed in rags from dustheaps', who rose to prominence from the eighth century ce onwards. The architecture of a Padhānaghara Pirivena is usually characterized by two quadrangular units connected by a stone bridge. These platforms are surrounded by an enclosing wall, occasionally a moat, as well as cisterns and ponds. Padhānaghara parivena do not possess typical Buddhist structures

or iconography such as $st\bar{u}pas$, but are often associated with meditational pathways. ⁸⁹ Sundberg has suggested that the Javanese pendopo shares these features such as a lack of ornamentation, cardinally oriented double-platforms, artificial rock-cut ponds and the presence of a compound wall. ⁹⁰ Although it is not clear whether the $pamsuk\bar{u}lika$ associated with the Padhānaghara Pirivena of Sri Lanka were present in Java, or vice versa, it is clear that there was communication and that shared architectural concepts existed across the Indian Ocean region.

Furthermore, inscriptions in Sri Lanka, such as two twelfth-century ce inscriptions from Polonnaruva, record the construction of a temple in South India⁹¹ and the construction of alms-houses abroad.⁹² Artefactual evidence is also suggestive of international Buddhist contacts, and it has been argued that a tenth-century ce bronze Buddha figure found in Thailand originated in Anurādhapura.⁹³ Textual sources also illustrate the influence of Sri Lankan monarchs overseas not just in religious matters. For example, Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–86 ce) is recorded as instigating military campaigns against Southeast Asian polities as well as sending an army to South India to assist a Pāndyan ruler against the Cōlas in 1169 ce.⁹⁴

Finally, it is worth noting that not all pilgrims to Sri Lanka came for 'Buddhist' monuments or 'Buddhist' relics. It has been hypothesized that the site of Sigiriya, a creation of Kassapa I (r. 473-91 cE) and historically a site that attracted large numbers of visitors and pilgrims, was constructed symbolically to recreate the city of Ālakamandā, the celestial home of Kubera, god of wealth. 95 Inscription 28 of the Sigiriya graffiti records: 'The resplendent rock named Sighigiri captivates the minds of those who have seen [it] as if [the mountain] Mundalind, which was adorned by the King of Sages, had descended to the earth.'96 Mundalind has been equated with Mount Meru and, continuing this symbolism, Paranavitana suggested that the lake at Sigiriya represented the celestial lake Anotatta, the whitewashed boulders before the outcrop stood for the snow-clad Himalayas, and the royal palace pointed to the abode of Kubera on the summit of Meru. The famous Sigiriya frescoes have also been interpreted in various ways, one being that they are depictions of divine cloud damsels representing cloud and lightning, reaffirming Kassapa's ability to control the elements. 97 If indeed viewed as the creation of Kassapa, the graffiti and cosmological symbolism of Sigiriya produced what is argued to be the clearest example of an urban microcosm in early Sri Lanka.98

This symbolism suggests the physical modelling of South Asian-wide concepts, such as Mount Meru at the centre of a cosmic universe, were already present previously in Anurādhapura⁹⁹ and continued into the medieval and post-medieval periods at the urban forms of Polonnaruva and Kandy.¹⁰⁰ The Sigiriya graffiti also demonstrate that individuals from various communities travelled from all over Sri Lanka to visit the site, ¹⁰¹ and not always for religious reasons. However, it has also been argued that Sigiriya was in fact not an urban centre, but rather a vast Mahāyāna-Theravāda Buddhist monastic complex, ¹⁰² and if this view held by Raja de Silva is correct, then another intriguing explanation for Sigiriya's design may exist. Rather than depicting cloud damsels surrounding the summit of Meru, de Silva argues that the paintings of female figures were representations of the

Bōdhisattva Tara. ¹⁰³ There is also the possibility that these two interpretations were both held side-by-side, again highlighting the diversity in symbolic meaning that could be attached to physical remains in the Sri Lankan past.

Patronage

While evidence from Sri Lanka's monumental centres demonstrates the breadth of connections throughout the Indian Ocean region, until recently the extra-urban networks around those hubs have been neglected. New fieldwork in the hinterland of Anurādhapura has begun to redress this imbalance, providing an archaeological dataset that has been combined with geoarchaeological, epigraphic and textual studies in order to understand the development of the city in relation to its wider landscape context. One of the key findings of this fieldwork is the central role of Buddhist monasteries in the administration of landscape, a state of affairs that had already been suggested from archaeological landscape surveys in Sri Lanka and India.

The two major site categories identified during six years of field survey in Anurādhapura's hinterland were Buddhist monasteries and small-sized ceramic scatters. These sites presented deep occupation sequences at monasteries as opposed to shallow ephemeral traces at ceramic scatter sites. Artefacts such as coins, precious and semi-precious stones, fine ware ceramics, as well as monumental architecture and, as stated previously, writing, were restricted to monastic sites, and these sites appear to have acted as both religious and secular administrators with jurisdiction over large temporalities in the hinterland. ¹⁰⁸ This pattern reached its climax in the early medieval period when the most dominant form of Buddhist patronage in the hinterland was through immunity grants, recorded in inscriptions on stone pillars, rather than the direct construction or maintenance of religious structures. Accounting for almost half of all donations and found across Anurādhapura's hinterland for this period, 109 these immunities alienated vast tracts of land and transferred authority from the Crown and local officials to the Sangha. 110 Creating an integrated landscape administered by monastic institutions, inscriptions found throughout Sri Lanka from the early historic period onwards corroborate the links between monasteries of the hinterland and urban monasteries of the Sacred City, recording the affiliation of monasteries to the Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri Vihāra and Jetavana Vihāra.111 However, the growing diversity and division within Buddhist sects ensured some heterogeneity to the hinterland in addition to the diversity of other religious practices present in the landscape, such as those indicated by the presence of terracotta figurines. 112

The fact that three distinct monasteries are referred to in the chronicles indicates in itself that the Buddhist Sangha at Anurādhapura was not monolithic. The chronicles state that the Mahāvihāra was founded in the reign of Devānaṃpiyatissa with the arrival of Mahinda's mission and incorporated the Bōdhi tree and the Ruwanwelisaya stūpa. The first major recorded schism occurred during the reign of Vattagamani (r. 89–77 BCE) and led to the founding of Abhayagiri

Vihāra, ¹¹⁴ often cited as a centre of Mahāyānist doctrines. Mahasena (r. 275–301 ce) not only founded the Jetavana *Vihāra* at Anurādhapura, but also, under the influence of a 'lawless bhikkhu', ¹¹⁵ withdrew support from the Mahāvihāra. This led to the abandonment of the Mahāvihāra for nine years, with the monks leaving for Malaya and Rohana. Construction materials were then taken from the complex and brought to Abhayagiri, which became wealthy under state support. ¹¹⁶ Later under the rule of Mahasena's son Sirimeghavaṇṇa (r. 301–328 ce) the Mahāvihāra was reconciled, ¹¹⁷ but all three major fraternities continued to receive state patronage.

Different sects of monastic orders have been identified architecturally within Anuradhapura. In addition to lena, natural rock-shelters with Early Brahmi inscriptions engraved along drip ledges, which represent the earliest extant category of monastic establishment known at present in Sri Lanka, 118 Bandaranayake identified three categories of monastic complex. The first was the organic or centric monastery, dating from the first century ce onwards. Termed 'organic' due to associations with locales with pre-existing traditions, ¹¹⁹ they are also designated as centric due to a layout focused around a colossal stūpa, and in this regard, the Mahāvihāra, Jetavana, Abhayagiri, Vessagiriya in Anurādhapura, as well as Mihintale fit this model. 120 These monasteries were often later elaborated by the construction of a focal-type stūpa, with such modifications dating to the early medieval period (600-1200 cE). 121 The second was the Padhānaghara Pirivena, also known as double-platform monasteries, mentioned in the previous section, and thought to be associated with the pamsukūlika fraternity. As stated above, these sites were built from plain ashlar blocks and did not possess typical Buddhist structures or iconography, the only decorated features there being the urinal slabs that seemingly depict images of 'orthodox' ornate vihāras (Figure 1.2). Such iconography can be interpreted as a visible, physical representation and reaction against the wealth and grandiose nature of the ornate monasteries of Anurādhapura. 122 Decorated urinal slabs, meditational pathways and the architectural style suggest that the Padhānaghara Pirivena represented a contestatory discourse from the other monastic categories of Anurādhapura. 123

Third, the *Pabbata vihāra* is a monastic form thought to date from between 700 to 1200 ce.¹²⁴ Believed to be a royal foundation, its architecture shows evidence of a preplanned scheme with a core monument zone of *stūpa*, image house, Bōdhi tree shrine and chapter house surrounded by individual residential structures within a major moated enclosure.¹²⁵ They have also been tentatively identified as having Mahāyāna affinities due to their resemblance to prescriptions outlined in the Mahāyāna architectural treatise *Mañjuśrī Vastuvidyāśāstra*.¹²⁶ This Mahāyāna influence has been illustrated at these sites through the recovery of copper plaques and plates inscribed with text from the *Pabbata Vihāra* of Vijayārāma,¹²⁷ as well as from stūpas at Mihintale and Jetavana Vihāra. This suggests evidence of the Mahāyāna practice of *Dharma-dhātu*, or venerating the word of the Buddha,¹²⁸ at monasteries with Mahāyāna leanings.¹²⁹ Bronze figures depicting Mahāyāna deities have also been excavated in *pabbata vihāras*



Fig. 1.2 Urinal stone at one of the Western Monasteries, Anurādhapura, authors' photograph.

within Anurādhapura. ¹³⁰ Mahāyāna traditions have also been recorded in textual sources. For instance, the first recorded Bōdhisattva image is attributed to the reign of King Mahasena (r. 275–301 ce) and was produced on his request at the Abhayagiri Vihāra. ¹³¹ Other Mahāyāna practices, such as *Dharma-dhātu* mentioned above, are attributed in the chronicles to the sixth century ce, ¹³² and a group of Sanskrit inscriptions provides evidence of Mahāyāna traditions referencing concepts such as *Trikaya*. ¹³³

The cosmopolitan aspect of Buddhism is further demonstrated in the *Cūṭavaṃsa*, in a passage narrating how the queen of Udaya I (797–801 cE) donated a monastery to a 'Demaṭa bhikkhu community'.¹³⁴ Although the meaning

of the term 'Demala' is contested, ¹³⁵ the fact that a distinction was drawn suggests a group with possible differing practices. As well as being identified in textual sources and in the architecture of monumental sites, such a pattern of architectural monastic variation was also apparent in the early medieval (600–1200 cE) hinterland of Anurādhapura. ¹³⁶ A *pabbata vihāra* site was identified at Parthigala (Z001) in the vicinity of the Nachchaduwawewa, located 4.8 kilometres away from a Padhānaghara Pirivena site at Marathamadama (C112). Although both sites appear to have belonged to different Buddhist traditions, they also appear to have been occupied contemporaneously. Furthermore, 'orthodox' monasteries of the focal type were also widespread at the same time. ¹³⁷

At an individual level of analysis, scholars have also been able to identify significant areas of differentiation within chronologically contemporary schools of sculpture and image-making. In a study of six sculptures, based on lead isotope and trace element scatter plots, Arjuna Thantilage identified two distinct groups and interpreted them as representing two separate schools of image production within the Anurādhapura period, possibly representing different Mahāyāna fraternities. There are also architectural differences in *stūpa* construction across the island. While perhaps reflecting differences in patronage or access to distinct building materials, the brick and stone constructions of Anurādhapura and Polonnaruva, particularly the examples of 'Buddhist giganticism', ¹³⁹ are in stark contrast to the coral and limestone *stūpas* in the Jaffna peninsula, as in the monastic complexes of Delft and Kantarodai¹⁴⁰ (Figures 1.3 and 1.4).



Fig. 1.3 Stūpas at Delft, authors' photograph.



Fig. 1.4 Stūpas at Kantarodai, authors' photograph.

That such diversity existed elsewhere within the island is illustrated by the presence of the free-standing crystalline limestone Avalokiteśvara statues, ten metres tall and dating to the seventh century CE, close to a free-standing 14.5-metre high Buddha statue at Maligawila. Furthermore, at Buduruwagala a large rock carved image of the Buddha, dating to the ninth–tenth century CE stands alongside possible depictions of Tara, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi holding a thunderbolt, Maitreya and either Viṣṇu or Sahāmpati Brahmā (Figure 1.5). Again, their co-existence demonstrates the variability and diversity of Buddhism and religious practice, as reflected though worship, patronage and architecture, within Sri Lanka. 141

The population of Rajarata was also anything but homogenous in terms of rank. Early Brahmi inscriptions dating to between the third century BCE and first century CE document a broad spectrum of patrons of early Buddhism, highlighting the diverse society at this period. If an analysis of the 458 inscriptions dating to the early historic period (340–200 BCE) within a fifty-kilometre radius of Anurādhapura, donations mentioning monarchs only accounted for 20.22 per cent of the corpus. Parumakas, identified as representing local chiefs, were the most prevalent at 25.22 per cent, while those where no definitive rank could be assigned accounted for 24.35 per cent. The role of those thought to represent monks was also important in the early patronage of Buddhism, providing 18.91 per cent of donations; with other ranks such as Gamikas (6.09 per cent), Gapatis (3.70 per cent) and Brahmans (1.52 per cent) contributing, as well as those where the donor was unknown (5 per cent). When analysed island-wide, the



Fig. 1.5 Rock carved images at Buduruwagala, Monaragala District, authors' photograph.

prevalence of donations by monarchs drops to only 6.4 per cent.¹⁴⁴ While the high frequency of donations by monarchs around Anurādhapura could be anticipated, the overall picture is in stark contrast to the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s narrative, whereby rather than an expected elite-driven process of conversion, under the patronage of Devānaṃpiyatissa, leading to the majority of donations being royal in origin, a broader swathe of segments of society contributed to the establishment and growth of Buddhism.

The disparity between the donations mentioned in the chronicles and those in the epigraphic record may be due to the rise of the Mahāvihāra and its capacity to shape memory. It has been suggested that the chronicles 'may represent a contrived ecclesiastical tradition legitimizing the contemporaneous status quo by awarding a central position to the successful kings of Anurādhapura and ignoring the contributions of the failed kings', ¹⁴⁵ as well as other segments of society. Indeed, it has previously been noted that in the Early Brahmi epigraphic corpus of Sri Lanka, only ten kings mentioned in the chronicles have been found. ¹⁴⁶ Senarat Paranavitana reported failing to identify a single inscription relating to a donation by Devānaṃpiyatissa. ¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the corpus of inscriptions reveals genealogies of previously unknown royal lineages, and lineages that have been either ignored by or edited out from the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s narrative. ¹⁴⁸

While the epigraphic corpus illustrates that many different communities and segments of society were patrons of Buddhism, there is also evidence that the Sangha was not the sole recipient. Indeed, pre-Buddhist beliefs are attested to in the chronicles in connection with the presence of Yakkhas. Yakkhas are also recorded in the Vijayan narrative 149 and in the narrative of the laying-out

of Anurādhapura by King Paṇḍukābhaya in the fourth century BCE.¹⁵⁰ In this description, additional religious groups, such as 'ascetics', 'heretical sects' and 'Brahmans' were alluded to but were located outside the city.¹⁵¹ Many of these orders are recorded as having received state patronage, with Paṇḍukābhaya building 'a monastery for wandering mendicant monks, and a dwelling for the Ājīvakas, and a residence for the Brahmans'. ¹⁵² Brahmans were recorded as undertaking important religious roles prior to the arrival of Buddhism, and it is noted that during the reign of one of Sri Lanka's first monarchs, King Paṇḍuvāsudeva, the wisdom of 'Brahmans skilled in sacred texts'¹⁵³ was called upon for important matters. This importance continued after the arrival and adoption of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, as shown by the twenty-two Early Brahmi inscriptions that mention Brahmans. While there is a possibility that the title 'Brahman' may have continued to be applied after changes in religious affiliation, there is also a possibility that Brahmanism continued alongside early Buddhism in early historic Sri Lanka. ¹⁵⁴

This suggests that the historical developments of the later Anurādhapura period and the shift of the capital to Polonnaruva, traditionally associated with the emergence of a polyvocality of religions and an increased South Indian influence, was not completely novel. In the chronicles, there are records of Anurādhapura's kings supporting non-Buddhist institutions, although for other reigns the only recorded events are the destruction of such institutions, such as Mahasena's demolition of the temples of Brahmanical gods. 155 Later, the chronicles recorded that Mahinda II (r. 777-797 cE) 'restored many decayed temples of the gods here and there and had costly images of the gods fashioned'. Sena II (r. 853–887) CE) was recorded as supporting Brahman rituals. 157 Conversely, Pathmanathan has also drawn attention to the Tamil inscription recording the establishment of a Buddhist monastery in the new Cola capital by a South Indian mercantile group, the Aiññūrruvar. 158 As stated above, the transfer of the capital to Polonnaruva has been portrayed as connected with a religious shift towards a more pluralistic and eclectic patronage at state-level, incorporating Buddhist, Brahmanical and Saivite practices. 159 Indrapala has suggested that in tandem with the widespread appearance of tenth-century Tamil inscriptions dated to the regal years of Cola rulers, there was also an increase in Saiva temples. 160 In the chronicles, it is also stated that Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–86 ce) constructed twenty-four temples to the gods, and Pathmanathan has recorded the presence of at least fourteen temples within Polonnaruva. 161 In support of this plurality, archaeological investigations at Polonnaruva have identified Saiva and Vaisnava shrines with bronze Nataraja, Śiva and Parvati images. 162 A twelfth-century inscription of Niśśańkamalla (r. 1187–96 cE) at Dambulla recorded the construction of a Hindu temple as well as the restoration and construction of Buddhist temples. 163 In Anuradhapura itself, structures north of Abhayagiri dating to the later phases of the city's occupation were identified as 'Hindu ruins' on the basis of their architectural layout and the recovery of several lingams, ¹⁶⁴ although this identification has been contested. ¹⁶⁵

Artefactual evidence from Anurādhapura's hinterland also illustrates additional 'non-Buddhist' religious and ritual practices about which the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s



Fig. 1.6 Terracotta figurine fragments from the site of Nikawewa (D339), including a depiction of a human face (right) and an anthropomorphic phallus (left), authors' photograph.

narrative appears silent. From a hinterland survey around Anurādhapura, a total of 489 terracotta artefacts from eight sites, the majority excavated at Nikawewa (D339), were recorded. 166 Dating to between 900 and 1300 ce, 167 these artefacts include human and animal figurines as well as anthropomorphic phalli (Figure 1.6). They were deliberately broken and may reflect a practice not far from that described in studies of the *Gammaduva* ceremony. 168 Deposited in caches across the Dry Zone and known from more than twenty sites, they display a distinct uniformity of design and were clearly restricted to non-monastic and non-urban sites. Traditionally categorized as 'folk' art, they have nevertheless been found associated with a monumental structure at Nikawewa. We have thus reinterpreted them as representing a powerful shared and formalized corpus of ritual practice parallel to Buddhism. 169 This example highlights the ability of archaeology to recognize groups operating outside official state or elite circles. It further suggests that early medieval Anurādhapura was capable of incorporating multiple religious and ritual networks. 170

Urbanism

Nestled within the diverse monastic landscape of Anurādhapura was the citadel, measuring one kilometre square, and defined by a ditch and rampart. This has been subject to more than a century of excavations.¹⁷¹ Early historic treatises, such as the *Arthaśāstra*, contain details of how urban forms should be planned; quadrangular, surrounded by three moats and a rampart,¹⁷² and internally structured by cardinally orientated roads and gateways.¹⁷³ Within the city, the *Arthaśāstra* advises that the inhabitants should be separated along *varna* and

occupational lines, with heretics and <code>candālas</code> (outcastes) banished outside the city walls.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, as outlined in the previous section, the description in the <code>Mahāvaṃsa</code> of the laying-out of Anurādhapura in the fourth century <code>BCE</code> by Paṇḍukābhaya records that the city was divided into four quarters, and that separate areas of the city were allocated for different social groups.¹⁷⁵ Such textual descriptions have been linked to the archaeological evidence¹⁷⁶ and, architecturally, Anurādhapura appears to match these descriptions as its moat, rampart and cardinally orientated structures seem to conform to the <code>Arthaśāstra</code>'s precepts and the description of Paṇḍukābhaya's city. It has been argued that Anurādhapura's layout 'was no casual cluster of buildings but a cosmography that reflected the universe'. ¹⁷⁷ This follows the argument of Hocart, who suggested that during the early historic period 'the doctrine of the four quarters […] had a considerable influence on the planning of cities'. ¹⁷⁸ As stated above, other Sri Lankan urban forms correspond to cosmological symbolism, with their plans recreating the universe in microcosm. ¹⁷⁹

However, much evidence from Anurādhapura now suggests that such plans were idealizations. Working on the premise that distinct social groups may be identifiable through artefactual variability across a site, Coningham and Young analysed craft waste and faunal remains from different areas across the citadel. 180 They found no distinct areas associated with specific crafts. The faunal record is particularly interesting in that species forbidden and permitted by the laws of Manu were found together throughout the city. 181 Following suggestions by anthropologists and historians that caste rigidity may be a recent phenomenon, ¹⁸² this analysis reinforces the notion that social divisions based on material differentiation were not present in early historic Anuradhapura – or may require more refined archaeological methodologies than those at our disposal in order to be identified. 183 This is not to say that Anurādhapura did not host various differentiated communities, as outlined above. It rather suggests that while there is abundant evidence for plurality, there were *also* widely shared practices. Cosmopolitan practices were compatible with both differentiation and unifying concepts and lifestyle choices.

Studying the cosmopolitan through archaeology in Sri Lanka

It is clear that Sri Lanka was not a uniquely Buddhist island but had strong Hindu influences as well as more localized traditions, as evidenced by the emergent terracotta cults in the hinterland of Anurādhapura. Rather than focusing on the religious and spiritual aspects of Buddhism, archaeological evidence suggests that the monastic institutions of Anurādhapura seemed to have played a dominant material role in the colonization, management and development of the wider landscape surrounding the city. Monasteries remained the only viable long-term structures within the hinterland, as attempts to secularize the management of the

landscape faded. The epigraphic record reveals how land was donated by kings and other elites to these monasteries, to the degree of completely alienating it from state control. Sri Lankan scholars have long hypothesized about this, with Leslie Gunawardana stating in 1979 that 'considerable powers were transferred to the monastic administration by withholding the authority of government officials to intervene in their affairs', ¹⁸⁴ Even more starkly, Dias wrote that 'lands and villages beyond the control of the central authority were given to the monasteries to bring some control over them [...] This way the monastic institutions became the landed intermediary between the central political authority and the people.' ¹⁸⁵

The recent research-oriented fieldwork developed in the hinterland of Anurādhapura has demonstrated the existence of a complex patchwork, itself consisting of intricate networks of religious and secular cooperation and communication. As noted above, six years of field research have allowed us to identify more than 750 archaeological sites, ranging from small scatters of eroded ceramics, through rock-cut caves, stone bridges over the Malvatu Oya, metal-working sites and a corpus of sites containing terracotta figurines, to monastic complexes several hectares in size. 186 The ceramic scatters can be interpreted as short-term villages linked to slash-and-burn (chena) agriculture. Monastic sites, in contrast, ranging from rock-cut shelters to large complexes, reflect a much more permanent and highly visible presence. This contrast led us initially to theorize about a 'Theocratic Landscape' in which monasteries functioned as centres of economic and political control (in lieu of towns), while villages kept shifting around them. 187 Since then, we have developed a more complex model of 'Buddhist Temporalities' and low-density urbanism, reflecting our growing awareness of multiple heterarchies in the Anuradhapura hinterland. Our Buddhist Temporality model reflects the complex relationship between monastic institutions and secular authority, contending that 'the city's surrounding landscape of villages and rural communities was not centrally regulated by the state through higher-order settlements and royal officials but through a network of Vihāras, closely linked to the great monasteries of the city rather than the throne'.188

Certainly, the critical reappraisal of archaeological evidence allows us to narrow the gap between Anurādhapura and Polonnaruva. While the latter has long been archaeologically interpreted as a cosmopolitan urban centre, similar evidence from Anurādhapura has been largely undervalued but is now overwhelming. The remains of Polonnaruva, traditionally dated to between 1017 and 1293 ce, have revealed Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples with bronze sculptures of Hindu deities. This has led some scholars, rightly in our opinion, to speak of religious plurality and harmony. Excavations within the Alahana Pirivena in Polonnaruva uncovered quantities of pottery with appliqué designs, including swastika, śrīvasta and vajra or triśūla, which have now also been identified in the city's hinterland (Figure 1.7). Bronze figurines excavated at Polonnaruva and representing deities such as Śiva and Parvati have been put forward as evidence of the presence of Hinduism in the city. And yet such evidence was not restricted to Polonnaruva. For example, figures of Śiva, Parvati,



Fig. 1.7 Appliqué *triśūla* on a pottery rim sherd from site Kalahagala (S360) in the hinterland of Polonnaruva, found during the 2016 field season of the Polonnaruva Archaeological and Anthropological Research Project, authors' photograph.

Kevalamūrti and Nṛtyamūrti, and potentially Ardhanarīśvara, were recovered from a pillar foundation at Jetavana in the 1980s. 192 Furthermore, three appliqué ceramic sherds with symbols similar to those from the Alahana Pirivena were discovered in the later sequence of trench ASW2 at Anurādhapura, 193 as well as in the vicinity of Jetavana. 194 The later evidence at Anurādhapura is striking in its similarity to the evidence usually given for plurality of belief in Polonnaruva, and yet Anurādhapura, persistently presented as an essentially Buddhist capital, is generally not advanced as a similar example of religious plurality. The transmission of the capital from Anurādhapura to Polonnaruva has been projected as an abrupt and singular event, yet recent research has shown the abandonment of Anurādhapura and its hinterland to have been a slow process that happened over several centuries. 195 We would argue that around Polonnaruva there is likely to be evidence of much earlier settlements and communities that would shed more light on the nature of early medieval Sri Lanka. To this end, the Central Cultural Fund and British Academy have sponsored successful pilot hinterland surveys around Polonnaruva, as well as excavations at Siva Devale No.2 and the citadel's northern wall.

We are, of course, far from constructing a clear narrative and it remains problematic to assign certain artefactual forms to particular groups. Widely shared symbols, such as the swastika and vajra / triśūla, highlight the difficulties inherent to South Asian archaeology. Indeed, they lead to questions about the



Fig. 1.8 Head from a Buddha image rededicated as an image of Ayanayake, Anurādhapura hinterland, authors' photograph.

extent to which artefacts can be defined as Buddhist, Hindu or Jain. The fluid identity of artefacts has recently been noted at a modern shrine to Ayanayake, lord of the jungle, in the Anuradhapura hinterland. The shrine was constructed using reclaimed pillars from nearby monastic structures damaged during road construction but was also equipped with an eroded Buddha head, which was painted with the trunk of Ayanayake, as the focus of the shrine¹⁹⁶ (Figure 1.8). While objects may be used in more than one context with changed meanings, the opposite may also occur, with similar architectural motifs being part of several traditions. Stūpas and vihāras share many traits with Jain and Hindu architecture. 197 A further challenge that needs addressing is the archaeological visibility of women within early Sri Lanka's history and archaeology. Indeed, Faxian noted the presence of nuns within the Sacred City of Anurādhapura¹⁹⁸ and inscriptions record donations by female devotees throughout Sri Lanka.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, communities of Buddhist nuns from Sri Lanka are recorded in an inscription at Nagarjunakonda in India²⁰⁰ but, in spite of this, there has been little discussion of this challenge within both archaeological interpretations and Buddhist discourse.²⁰¹ Gender is notoriously difficult to identify within the archaeological record, especially when dealing with the ephemeral remains of a subtropical landscape. However, if we want to truly understand the cosmopolitan nature of early historic and early medieval Sri Lanka, such challenges have to be acknowledged and then addressed.

The landscape we have been studying was highly contested, closely integrated into the secular and monastic core, yet at the same time divorced from the networks and linkages enjoyed by the urban elite. Tensions prevailed between the pressing need to participate in larger networks of exchange, patronage and religious merit through the royal centre and major monastic institutions of Anurādhapura, on the one hand, and the practice of non-Buddhist rituals, on the other. Such diversity continued into the late medieval period, as attested by the fifteenth-century trilingual inscription of Admiral Zheng He in Galle. The inscription in Tamil, Chinese and Persian records the veneration of an incarnation of Visnu, of the Buddha, and of a Muslim saint, providing evidence for the continued, diverse and dynamic linguistic and religious framework of the island. ²⁰² Taking all this together, we find evidence of what can be interpreted as a highly cosmopolitan society with broad international links and outlooks and considerable internal diversity. This society participated in an ever-expanding network of religious and economic exchange and patronage. Yet, at the same time, there were also distinctly pervasive traditions – subsistence, ceramic forms, craft manufacturing and patterns of low density urbanism. This apparently contradictory stance reflects the many possible facets of community identity, ranging in scale from the local to the regional and the global. The degree to which different communities had access to opportunities probably changed over time but the archaeological record overall strongly suggests that Sri Lanka, far from being a peripheral island, was at the very heart of many social, economic and religious developments of the Indian Ocean World.203

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Chapter 4

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