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# *Vijaya and Romulus: Interpreting the Origin myths*

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## *of Sri Lanka and Rome*

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### **Abstract**

*The story of Vijaya, has long been central to the Sinhalese idea of themselves as a distinct ethnic group of Aryan origin with ancient roots in the island of Lanka. The 'national' chronicle of the Sinhalese, the Mahāvamsa (circa fifth century CE) presents Vijaya, an exiled prince from India descended from a lion, as the founder hero of Sinhala civilisation. In a companion article to this, I argued that the narrative of Vijaya and other founder-heroes in the Mahāvamsa revolves around the theme of transgression, and that this puzzling fact can only be explained by a consideration of the symbolic logic of the 'stranger-king' in origin stories and kingship rituals worldwide. In the present article, I look at other ways of explaining the narrative of Sīhabāhu, Vijaya, and Paṇḍukābhaya. First I break down the narrative into four different origin stories and consider their distribution in a range of texts from South Asia in order to reflect on possible textual inspirations for them (and even consider parallels with the Greek tale of Odysseus and Circe). Second, I consider the possibility that the narrative concerning relations with Pāṇḍu royalty reflects immediate political imperatives of the fifth century CE. Do such interpretations negate the assumption that an organic communal process of mythogenesis has been at work? In the final section this methodological dilemma is approached through comparisons with the way in which scholars have looked at the origin myths of ancient Greek and particularly Roman society. Lastly, these reflections add further weight to the global comparative model of the stranger king, for the stories of Romulus and Vijaya share an emphasis on alien and transgressive beginnings.*

*In 2009 the Sri Lankan government finally destroyed the conventional forces of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) as the civil war that had afflicted the island since 1983 was brought to a violent denouement in the north-east of the Vanni region. From some of the subsequent celebrations by the Sinhalese majority, it seemed that the President Mahinda Rajapaksa was hailed not only for having rid Sri Lanka of a violent menace, but for having, in one sense, re-created the island. The country could now attain the kind of genuine independence and wholeness that had been lacking for much of the period following decolonisation in 1948. After the victory, Rajapaksa was hailed as a 'great king' and his admirers were not slow to draw historical analogies with kings and founder-heroes of the past. Such heroes typically have to wade through blood to obtain political mastery; the Lankan chronicles imply that such is the price that must be paid for the re-establishment of society or civilisation itself.*

Thanks to James Davidson, Jonathan Walters and Carole Newlands for reading parts of this or fielding questions. None of them, of course, can be held responsible for errors or infelicities advanced here.

For centuries, the Sinhalese have seen their origins in the arrival to Lanka of a prince named Vijaya from northern India who was descended from a lion through his father Sīhabāhu (“arm of the lion”). Indeed, it is this lion connection that gave rise to the very term ‘Sinhala’, which appears first in the Pāli chronicle, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (probably dating to the early fourth century CE), as a term for the island.<sup>1</sup> By the time the *Mahāvamsa* was composed in the late fifth or possibly early sixth century, the term was clearly being used to refer to a people, and it is here that the stories around Vijaya and Sīhabāhu are most fully elaborated. That narrative has been a fundamental means by which the Sinhalese have been able to think of themselves as a distinct ethnic and cultural group with deep roots in the land.<sup>2</sup>

This article is a companion piece to an earlier published article in which I sought to explain a curious feature of the stories of Sīhabāhu and Vijaya: that the account of their early lives should dwell on the theme of transgression.<sup>3</sup> They are ‘outsiders’ – outside the normal compass of human life – in more ways than one. This is emphasised by the following summary:

It begins in India with bestiality: the daughter of the king of Vaṅga, a willful, lustful child, leaves her parents and joins a caravan when it is attacked by a lion. She is abducted and imprisoned in the lair of the lion, by whom she bears a son and a daughter. When the children reach maturity, they flee the cave with their mother and are reunited with the royal family. The distressed lion begins ravaging the country in search of his offspring, so the king offers a great reward to anyone who would slay the lion. The son himself, Sīhabāhu, steps forward and manages to kill his father. Having thus dealt in parricide, the narrative proceeds to incest, as Sīhabāhu founds a new kingdom and takes his sister as queen. They have sixteen pairs of twins. The eldest son is a miscreant by the name of Vijaya who becomes a menace to the people, and is exiled as a result.

Vijaya, cast out to sea with his 700 followers, lands on the shores of Lanka, which was then only inhabited by ‘demons’ (*yakkhas*). As he arrives, the Buddha lies dying; he prophesies that Vijaya will establish and protect his teachings in Lanka. On the island Vijaya encounters a demon queen named Kuveṇī, who bewitches and traps his men. With the assistance of the god Upulvan, Vijaya manages to outwit Kuveṇī and take her to bed. The demons are massacred. Cities are founded and the followers demand that Vijaya be consecrated as king. They become known as the Sīhala (Sīmhala), taking their name from his leonine origins.

For all of the importance of this narrative and the attention it has attracted, the way it returns to the theme of transgression is normally glossed over. It is certainly difficult to reconcile with the mentality and aims of the Buddhist authors. I have suggested that it begins to make sense when considered in the light of the symbolism of kingship and society creation that we can find in many other societies. The first part of this article will briefly recap this argument.

<sup>1</sup>R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, “The people of the lion: The Sinhala identity and ideology in history and historiography”, in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, Jonathan Spencer, ed. (London, 1990), p. 47, which also provides evidence to suggest that the term was in use possibly as early as the first or second centuries CE.

<sup>2</sup>*Mahāvamsa, The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka*, trans. Ananda W. P. Guruge (Colombo, 1989), Chapters 6–7, hereafter Mhv; *The Dīpavaṃsa*, trans. Hermann Oldenburg (1879; reissued New Delhi, 2004), hereafter Dpv Chapter 9.

<sup>3</sup>Alan Strathern, “The Vijaya origin myth of Sri Lanka and the strangeness of kingship”, *Past and Present*, 203 (May 2009), pp. 3–28.

One implication of this reading of the story is that it did not arise simply or initially as a form of dynastic propaganda but reflected the needs of a wider community. And we might also infer that it had arisen through the oral, anonymous, collective processes that are usually associated with the generation of myths. Yet, I was conscious that there were other ways of accounting for how and why a story might appear in a text which might serve to undermine that interpretation. The main purpose of this article is to explore those other interpretative modes, partly to see how much damage they do to that analysis – or indeed to any form of symbolic interpretation which treats the story as ‘myth’. There have been two other attempts to adopt the latter approach towards the Mahāvamsa, and it can be no coincidence that they are also the only accounts which have considered the theme of transgression to be analytically interesting.<sup>4</sup>

Bruce Kapferer has argued that the Sīhabāhu–Vijaya material can be seen as expressive of a single logic relating to the workings of a cosmic hierarchy in which beings ascend the scale by encompassing lower forms of life but are equally prone to disintegrate as they move down the scale. In this way, the demonic must be incorporated on the way to becoming a god, but a god may collapse into demonic elements. Kapferer has clearly picked up on a feature of the narrative that will be central to our analysis too: namely, that “the demonic and destructive conditions of existence are also the source of the regeneration of the hierarchical order of society”.<sup>5</sup> Only someone loaded with associations of the negative, natural and marginal will be able to effect order. Yet, for Kapferer, this represents the disclosure of a fundamentally and particularly Indic worldview rather than a widely comparable paradox of kingship. Gananath Obeyesekere, also puzzling over why an aetiology for the Sinhala people should come laden with bestiality, parricide and incest, concluded that the Sīhabāhu story was formed as “the paradigmatic myth of the Sri Lankan Oedipus”: Sīhabāhu gets to slay his father and then marry his sister as a mother-surrogate, while Vijaya also rebels against his father and is banished to the natural world (as was Oedipus).<sup>6</sup>

But arriving at a rounded appreciation of the Mahāvamsa narrative reveals the limits to what we might call a ‘symbolic anthropological’ mode of interpretation. After all, we are confronted with the products of a literate society established upon a world religion and engaged in cosmopolitan relations with the vast civilisational ecumene of South Asia. We are compelled then to consider a ‘literary’ approach: out of what other texts was our narrative assembled? To what extent is it a collage reflecting the conscious decisions and idiosyncrasies of a particular author? And there is a ‘political’ approach to try out too: were some elements introduced into the narrative in order to support immediate political claims and projects?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See also R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, “People of the lion” p. 52. The explanations given in A. L. Basham, “Prince Vijaya and the Aryanization of Ceylon”, *Ceylon Historical Journal* 1 (1952), pp.163–171, of the lion element (that it reflects a Western Indian origin where lions were anciently quite common) and of Vijaya’s criminality (as a type of muscular Aryan pioneer) now seem very weak.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State. Violence, Intolerance and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (Washington and London, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Gananath Obeyesekere, “Myth models of the parricide: Oedipus in Sri Lanka” in *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago, 1990), pp.146–147.

<sup>7</sup>Other approaches are possible, such as the ‘theological’, which would focus on the didactic and doctrinal motives behind the text, and is the only explicitly stated purpose of the Mahāvamsa (see the translator’s “Prolegomena” in Mhv, p. 67).

How can we try to resolve these apparently conflicting attempts to explain the same narrative? It seems that we are struggling with methodological dilemmas that would beset anyone working on mythical or legendary material that has surfaced in a literate culture. The third part of this article then turns to some origin stories of Rome to see how scholars in another field (and one rather more thoroughly ploughed) have sought to handle these problems. This comparative exercise also throws up some intriguing parallels, such that it is surprising the two cases have not been compared properly before. A secondary function of this section, then, is to add further weight to the global comparative model of the stranger-king. Vijaya (which means ‘victory’) and Romulus (which means ‘forceful’) share dark and forbidding origins.

I suggest that the interpretation of the Lankan stories as reflecting the logic of the outsider hero survives all these challenges, but we are left with a much richer appreciation of its place among a whole series of discourses present in the text. And these discourses do not always abide peaceably. Even a mildly thoughtful consideration of the Mahāvam̄sa version will reveal that Vijaya is a very peculiar sort of founder-hero. He ends up serving few of the origin aims, or serving them only very indirectly: he is not, after all, a Buddhist so does not himself bring Buddhism to the island; nor does he sire a race of kings. The diverse source material and aims of the Mahāvam̄sa have left him semantically stranded, appearing to symbolise more than the narrative actually warrants – or less, one might say, than he once did.

### The Stranger-King Hypothesis and the Transcendentalist Revolution

In Marshall Sahlins’ recent work on the figure of the stranger-king, he has tried to explain why it is that so many societies – and apparently unconnected ones at that – should hold that their founder-kings were immigrants from distant lands.<sup>8</sup> Sahlins sees a typical origin story running like this: the hero is a foreigner who has been thrown out of his society for some crime or indiscretion; he has survived a perilous journey to reach the ‘home’ land and encountered there a native princess; he has had to overcome or acquire this woman through some sort of miraculous exploit. It fits the Vijaya plot with surprising ease. We might explain the male–female union element of such stories as simply an echo of an actual wave of elite migration and accommodation with an indigenous society – in the case of the story of Vijaya, there probably was such a migration from northern India. But then one has to ask why such a story would still be considered meaningful when any sense of continuity with that indigenous society has been lost?<sup>9</sup> And we are still left to explain the curious features of his ancestry and behaviour before he reaches Lanka.

<sup>8</sup>What follows in this section, apart from the passage on Paṇḍukābhaya, is something of a summary of my “Vijaya Origin Myth”. See Marshall Sahlins, “The Stranger-king: or, Dumézil among the Fijians”, in *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985), and “The Stranger-king: or, elementary forms of the political life”, in, *Stranger-Kings in Indonesia and Beyond*, Ian Caldwell and David Henley (eds.), a special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 36, (2008), pp. 177–199.

<sup>9</sup>And it seems such stories arise even when no such migration has occurred.

Sahlins' own explanation for the stranger-king motif is fascinating and wide-ranging, but there is not the space here to recount it. One should turn to the companion piece for that and for further parallels in the ethnographic literature with the symbolic construction of kingship. I suggested that the particular image of the founder-hero as an immigrant is just one example of a wider impulse to see kings and founders as having their origins in a journey from strangeness to domesticity, from the wild, liminal, supernatural, non-human zone to the heart of human society.<sup>10</sup> They are liable to be seen as beings that derive their power to create and sustain society by somehow incorporating and mastering those powers that could destroy it. In the case of Sīhabāhu, for example, he must both contain the lion within him – he is literally half-lion – and yet destroy his father the lion to create peace. More than this: it is precisely because he possesses such brute leonine force that he is able to perform this society-creating act. Many origin stories reconcile this paradox through chronology or plot: the brutal or awesomely supernatural side of the king is demonstrated by the events surrounding his childhood or the process of assuming power. But once he has acquired the throne – or taken a consort and founded a people – he is pacified, domesticated. He creates civilisation at the same time as civilising himself. In the case of our Vijaya story, it does not matter much then that, in one sense, the hero is less 'strange' than the indigenous beings he encounters on the island. The narrative works to brutalise or estrange him in other ways, by emphasising his adolescent delinquency, his shaven head.

In the companion article, I did not have space to show how the same logic appears to be shaping the stories around another 'founder-hero', Paṇḍukābhaya, the next ruler but one. Paṇḍukābhaya is not a stranger per se, even if he carries a lot of immigrant blood, but the narrative makes him into an outsider in all sorts of other ways.<sup>11</sup> First, his birth derives from a union that defies parental authority, just like the Princess of Vaṅga's wilful liaison with the lion. In this case, Paṇḍukābhaya's mother, the maddeningly beautiful Cittā, had been locked up in a tower because it was prophesied that if she gave birth to a son he would kill his maternal uncles. However, her cousin finds a way in and impregnates her. Second, he is associated with the supernatural throughout. Thus, as a baby and infant, he is protected by two *yakkhas*, the reborn spirits of two murdered accomplices of his parents. Third, there are the associations of danger and nature during his period in the margins before power: his life in jeopardy, the child escapes by such means as diving into a pond and staying underwater, or hiding in a hollow tree. Fourth – this is very striking – he gains power over established order through a union with a female supernatural animal spirit, this time the *yakkhiṇī* Cetiyā, who took the form of a beautiful mare. Paṇḍukābhaya eventually captures the mare and he "pierced her nose with the point of the sword and bound her by the nose. She came under

<sup>10</sup>Somewhat to my surprise, I have recently discovered that Jacques Derrida had been working on the apparently rather consistent associations between "beasts" and "sovereigns"; see Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Chicago, 2009). The work of Luc de Heusch, *Le Roi de Kongo et le Monstres Sacrés* (Paris, 2000) and other scholars of Central Africa plays an important role in recent explorations of the transgressive symbolism of kingship. See also David Graeber, 'The divine kingship of the Shilluk: on violence, utopia, and the human condition, or, elements for an archaeology of sovereignty' *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1 (2011), pp. 1–62.

<sup>11</sup>Mhv 9–10.

his control. He, of mighty power, mounted her . . . ”.<sup>12</sup> It is through her assistance that he defeats his uncles. When Paṇḍukābhaya eventually takes the throne, although he does indeed have a virtuous Kshatriya human bride, he places one of his *yakkhiṇī* accomplices on “equal seats”, and is represented thereafter as a friend of the *yakkhas*.<sup>13</sup> The mare-faced *yakkhiṇī* Cetiṃyā is housed within the royal precincts. Fifth, if Paṇḍukābhaya does not quite commit parricide, he is decidedly murderous to male relatives of the preceding and ruling generation, beheading all eight of his maternal uncles.<sup>14</sup>

The logic of estrangement displayed in these founder-hero stories is not specifically or even recognisably Buddhist. Indeed, the companion article proceeded to show how this vision of how kings and societies are created sits – rather uneasily – alongside an altogether different understanding: the ‘transcendentalist’ perspective of the Buddhist authors of the chronicles. The world religions sacralise kingship by associating it with the highest end of life: salvation, and the righteous path that leads to it. The crucial geographic interest is now not so much where power comes from but where salvific teachings originate. That place may be distant and foreign to the society in question but is imagined as a source of truth and light. In Sri Lanka’s case, the birth-place of ultimate truth was located in northern India, where the Buddha lived and taught, and where the first great accommodation of that truth to the exercise of mortal power was achieved by the paradigmatic Buddhist king Aśoka of the Mauryan empire (304–232 BCE). As for the powers of barbarism and destruction, they are not to be mastered, contained and transformed; they must be eradicated as simply evil and wrong. Whatever their ‘this-worldly’ efficacies, they are soteriological dead ends.

Furthermore, beyond such questions of high ideology, one would surely expect that the more cosmopolitan and connected a society becomes – the more the outer world is dragged into banality – then the more the model of the geographic outer realms as zones associated with the uncanny and the terrible would lose purchase or be cross-cut by other understandings. It should become clear in what follows that by the fourth century the world beyond Lanka could be conceived in many different ways. It might contain the terrible and the wild, to be sure, but it has been partially demystified to become a place of partners and rivals in trade, marriage, politics and religious learning. It contains foreign enemies that must be repelled or regurgitated rather than drawn in and digested. And now, like Rome, like any other great urban civilisation, there is also a keen sense that power and holiness may emanate from within itself to the periphery.

How do stories and rituals about outsider hero-founders survive these great cognitive and social upheavals? There are perhaps three ways. First, they may survive because they are particularly good at expressing the functions of what I have termed ‘magical’ kingship, where kings must demonstrate to their subjects the ability to deal with the superhuman forces that surround mankind.<sup>15</sup> And the crucial point here is that a stratum of such ‘magical’ royal

<sup>12</sup>Mhv 10.59–61. R. Weerakoon, *Mythology and the early Asian state* (Sri Lanka, 1998), p.60, sees shades of Demeter’s assumption of the form of a mare, and refers to later commentaries in which the sexual connotations of Paṇḍukābhaya’s encounter with Cetiṃyā are drawn out more strongly.

<sup>13</sup>Mhv 10.84–88, 104. Dpv 11.4 explicitly says that he was “enjoying sovereignty over men and Yakkhas”.

<sup>14</sup>Mhv 10.69–72. The ever-terse Dpv 11.2, has none of this, except to say that before he was king he “lived as a robber” (reminiscent of Vijaya’s delinquency), and then killed his seven uncles.

<sup>15</sup>“Vijaya Origin Myth”, pp.17–18.

attributes can exist alongside the transcendentalist vision to form a layered or bundled form of sacred kingship. Indeed, this is the model of Indic kingship in general. Buddhist kings often have divine and magical associations as well as being the protectors of righteousness.<sup>16</sup> The second means – and an important one – by which a narrative of stranger-kingship can survive is simply as a relic conserved by literacy, its original meanings lost but its place in the record too secure to be passed over. The third way in which they may survive is by providing some images which continue to resonate with the more perennial dilemmas of kingship. All kings have to use violence in order to bring about order. Even Aśoka walked a bloody path to the throne.

In the Mahāvamsa, then, we can see the expression of a variety of different understandings of kingship and society creation. Indeed, we can break down the narrative of the foundation of Sinhala Buddhist society into four stories as defined by their different functions. In the table of primary sources they appear as: (1) the origins of Buddhist civility, the marking out of Lanka as sacred space by the Buddha; (2) the origins of the Sinhala dynasty, which is located in India; (3) the origins of Sinhala society in Lanka, that is, the Vijaya–Kuveṇī encounter, and (4) the origins of a properly Buddhist royal lineage in Lanka, which is established by Paṇḍukābhaya.

Yet, these different stories, and the visions they embody, are not always neatly dovetailed. As an example, we can take the following highly significant narrative contradiction. The Mahāvamsa gives priority to the transcendentalist perspective by opening its narrative in Chapter 1 with the figure of the Buddha as the principal civilisation hero. In Story 1 he is credited with banishing the *yakkhas* and other uncanny beings from the island of Lanka. But they make an unexplained return with Story 3 in Chapter 7 when Vijaya has to defeat them all over again through his encounter with the demon princess Kuveṇī: it is now this hero whose foundational power must be emphasised. Now, the Mahāvamsa was heavily dependent on the earlier monastic chronicle, the Dīpavaṃsa.<sup>17</sup> Both texts are in Pāli but drew upon records and narratives in proto-Sinhala (*Sīhalaṭṭhakathā Mahāvamsa*) which are no longer extant. But the Dīpavaṃsa is not beset by any such inconsistency simply because it does not have the Vijaya–Kuveṇī encounter at all (see the Story 3 column in the table). Instead, Vijaya arrives on the island and merely starts colonising it. The author of the Mahāvamsa has inserted this romance with Kuveṇī into his text without due regard for coherence.

### A Text Assembled from Other Texts?

We have thus already disrupted any simple reading of the narrative as the disclosure of a single cultural logic. It is already looking to us like an occasionally untidy piece of stitching, sewing together different kinds of material from different world views and periods. But we can push that insight much further once we appreciate that neither chronicle narrative

<sup>16</sup>In Anurādhapura itself during this time, it is unlikely that kings were accorded divine associations. Note that my treatment of the connections between such existing outsider hero stories and particular types of kingship is much more complex than this summary suggests – as anyone negotiating the relevant passages of the “Vijaya Origin Myth” (pp. 17–21) will know.

<sup>17</sup>It is likely that the Dīpavaṃsa was the primary source of the Mahāvamsa but equally that both drew upon a common stock of records. See Guruge’s Introduction to Mhv, pp. 175–191.

simply emerges out of the silence of oral tradition but can be related to other texts. Will this method undermine an interpretation of the narrative as shaped by a local, collective mythic imagination? If so, does that matter? G. C. Mendis, for example, was sure that the Vijaya legend could not have arisen from popular tradition because of apparent borrowings from the Buddhist Jātakas, which are often dated to a written form around the third century BCE.<sup>18</sup> It is certainly true that there is no immaculate conception of myth, only a ceaseless flux; the life of such stories is subject to Buddhist circulation and recombination rather than Christian linearity and singularity.

In the table below, it will be seen that Story 1 occurs in nearly all the early sources we have regarding Sri Lanka, and is first present in perhaps the oldest one, the Rāmāyaṇa (often attributed to the fourth to second century BCE). To be sure, it is much debated whether the Rāmāyaṇa had in mind the island we now know as Lanka, and the story concerns not Buddha but Rāma as an incarnation of Viṣṇu overcoming the demon king Rāvaṇa. None the less, we have here ‘Lanka’ used as a geographical metaphor for the victory of dharma over evil or chaos.<sup>19</sup> And this metaphor is the single base note resounding beneath most of the melodies played on the theme of Lanka thereafter. In what is probably the earliest Buddhist deployment of this motif, the *Valahāssa Jātaka*, Buddha saves a group of shipwrecked traders from the man-eating enchantresses who inhabit Lanka, by bearing them to safety in the form of a white horse.<sup>20</sup> Here, the theme of dharmic victory over demons seems to have been connected to a seafarer’s tale of an island of deadly sirens that is very far-flung in time and space.<sup>21</sup>

So vague are our dates, it is in fact difficult to say whether the Story 1 motif originated within the ‘Hindu’ (Rāmāyaṇa) or Buddhist (Jātaka) traditions, but what we can say is that it begins as an Indian vision of the exotic outer realms – a region to situate the demonic, the magical, the enticing, the dangerous – which is then incorporated by the Lankan chroniclers to characterise the domestic realm! This inversion of perspective is facilitated by the fact that both the Rāmāyaṇa and the Jātakas have theologised the island. That is to say, if the island is initially associated with evil, it is also the place where evil is defeated by the good. Note that now the outer realms are seen as subject to the holiness of the centre. Thus the *vaṃsas* can merely shift the emphasis: Lanka may begin as *Saṃsāra*, a realm of sunken desire, but the principal point is now that it was then blessed and civilised. In this way the Dīpavaṃsa author(s) can advance the cause of its (proto) Theravādin emphasis on Lanka as a new centre, as the true home of Buddhist continuity.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup>G. C. Mendis, ‘The Vijaya Legend’ in *Paranavitana Felicitation Volume*, (ed.) N. A. Jayawickrama (Colombo, 1965) 264–5; and see: L. S. Perera, ‘The Early Kings of Ceylon up to Mutasiva’ in S. Paranavitana (ed.) *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1959–60), i, even if he thinks that the authors have woven this material into a ‘consistent whole’ (p. 105).

<sup>19</sup>S. Paranavitana, ‘Aryan settlements: the Sinhalese’, in Paranavitana, *History of Ceylon*, p.95; D.P. Mishra *Search for Lanka* (Delhi, 1985).

<sup>20</sup>See Mendis, ‘Vijaya Legend’, for a translation of *Valahāssa Jātaka*.

<sup>21</sup>John Clifford Holt, *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist Tradition of Sri Lanka* (Oxford, 1991), p.50; Merlin Peris, *Mahāvamsa Studies: Greek Myth in the Ancient Tradition* (Colombo, 2004), p.74.

<sup>22</sup>Jonathan Walters, ‘Buddhist history: The Sri Lankan Pāli Vamsas and their community’, in *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, (eds), Ronald Inden, Jonathan Walters and Daud Ali, (New York, 2000), pp. 99–164.



	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4		
	Wild island, populated by demons, conquered by dharma	Lion origins in India; hero a criminal banished to Lanka	Hero tussles with and overcomes female demons	Buddhist lineage of kings in Lanka	Name of protagonist on island:	Indian or Lankan source
Rāmāyaṇa c. 4 <sup>th</sup> –2 <sup>nd</sup> C. BCE	✓					Indian
Dīpavaṃsa Early 4th C.	✓	✓		✓	Vijaya	Lankan
Mahāvāṃsa Mid 5th C.	✓	✓	✓	✓	Vijaya	Lankan
Faxian Early 5th C <sup>23</sup>	✓					Lankan
Xuanzang I 7th C.		✓			Siṃhala	Indian (Lankan derived?)
Xuanzang II 7th C.	✓		✓		Siṃhala	Indian
Divyāvadāna 3rd–4th C. AGKs <sup>24</sup>	✓		✓		Siṃhala	Indian
4 <sup>th</sup> –7th C. Jātakas c. 3rd C. BCE?	✓		✓			Indian

Meanwhile, over the early-mid centuries of the first millennium, Mahāyāna Buddhists in India were continuing to draw on the fantasy Lanka as a spiritual or psychological metaphor. One of the principal texts in the formation of the Yogācāra school of thought, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (written some time before 443), is presented as a discourse by the Buddha to convert Rāvaṇa, who rules his castle Lanka, populated by Rākṣasas. In the Sanskrit *Divyāvadāna*, a Sarvāstivādin anthology of legends compiled around the third or fourth centuries, we have an appropriation of the *Vālahāssa Jātaka*, with two important innovations: the merchant hero is given the name Siṃhala, and the story is extended, again in a rather tortuous manner, so that Siṃhala returns to the island to conquer the Rākṣasas, accept the kingship and thereby lend the island his name.<sup>25</sup> In other words, we receive here a snapshot of the formation of an origin story out of free-floating story motifs and didactic literature. In the seventh century, the Chinese traveller to India Xuanzang would cite two different myths, drawn, he claimed from “Buddhist records”.<sup>26</sup> One of these (Xuanzang II in the table) is clearly the *Divyāvadāna* version, and the same story crops up in the *Avalokiteśvara-guṇa-kāraṇḍa-vyūha*

<sup>23</sup>Samuel Beal, *Si-Yü-Ki or the Buddhist Records of the Western World, translated from the Chinese of Hsuen Tsiang (AD 629)* (Delhi, 1994), p. lxxvii. I do not discuss Faxian in this article because the reference is brief and uninformative.

<sup>24</sup>*Avalokiteśvara-guṇa-kāraṇḍa-vyūha* sutra.

<sup>25</sup>Gunawardana, “People of the lion”, p. 50, prefers the fourth century; *Divyāvadāna*, (eds.) E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil (Cambridge, 1886), pp. 523–529. The island here is ‘Tamradvipa’.

<sup>26</sup>Beal, *Si-Yü-Ki*, p. 240.

sutra, a Sanskrit text dating from the fourth to seventh centuries, which identifies Siṃhala as another incarnation of Gautama and the white horse as Avalokiteśvara.<sup>27</sup>

What of Story 2, which tells of the origins of a dynasty in the union between an Indian princess and a lion, and the oedipal victory of their offspring Sīhabāhu? Does this story make a more plausible candidate for a more straightforward or untextualised form of mythogenesis? Some have seen a parallel in the *Padakusalamānava Jātaka*, in which a mare-faced *yakkhiṇī* (she-devil) attacks a caravan and imprisons a handsome Brahman in a cave – from which union is born the Bōdhisattva...<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the case of Sīhabāhu's incest – and, in particular its issue of sixteen pairs of twin sons – has counterparts in the foundation myths present in a great range of earlier Purāṇic and Pāli literature with which our author-monks would probably have been familiar. Romila Thapar interprets the earliest Buddhist examples as establishing the identity and land claims of Kshatriya 'tribes' which have come to dominate a particular *janapada* or territory.<sup>29</sup> But they do so within the context of oligarchic republics: these are explicitly not kingship stories. Thapar presents the Vijaya story as another such Kshatriya legitimisation device, "having all the elements of the traditional origin myth of the Buddhist texts", that has been refitted for a monarchical rather than oligarchic purpose.<sup>30</sup> One or two details of Story 2 originated in this way, but her account does not address the quite new symbolic repertoire loaded with other items of transgression which the narrative deploys for king-creation. The Pāli stories begin with incest in order to establish the purity of their civilised elite lineage; in the Sīhabāhu story, incest occurs only after the lineage has been dragged from the wilderness.

The original myth of the 'Sinhala' may have been simply Story 2. It is functionally complete in itself; it is etymologically more direct; all the Indian reports consider 'Siṃhala' the founder of Lankan society; and, most important of all, the Dīpavaṃsa does not carry Story 3. In the only non-*Vāṃsa* source to carry Story 2, Xuanzang (I), it is the killer (here named Siṃhala) of the lion who is banished because of his parricide and who ends up as king in Lanka. This may represent no more than a mangling of the chronicle story with details from the Indian traditions about Lanka, but it does at least show up how redundant, in some ways, Vijaya actually is. Note that Story 2 is central to the project of king-creation in Lanka in its establishment of the brutality of its founder but is absent in the 'Indian' traditions. The latter may include plot elements of kingship origin, but that is not their primary function. Arguably this is why their hero need only be an anodyne merchant. In the stories from the Lankan perspective, there must be a wild hero to be civilised by Lanka just as much as a wild Lanka to be civilised by the hero.

Whence Story 3, if it was not carried by the Dīpavaṃsa? Wells, it is certainly plausible that there was a strong popular local tradition regarding a meeting between the stranger-prince and the demons for which Lanka was famous that the Dīpavaṃsa suppressed simply because it needed that achievement to belong to the Buddha – here literally usurping the functions

<sup>27</sup>Holt, *Buddha*, p.51.

<sup>28</sup>L.S. Perera, "Early kings", p.101; Mendis, "Vijaya", p. 276.

<sup>29</sup>Romila Thapar, "Origin myths and the early Indian historical tradition" in Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi, 1978), from which Gunawardana may have taken some inspiration.

<sup>30</sup>See also Romila Thapar, "A historical perspective on the story of Rāma", *Thatched Patio*, 5 (1992), 1–23, p.9, on versions of the Rāmāyaṇa in which Rāma and Sitā are brother and sister, and relating this to brother–sister marriages in Buddhist origin myths.

of the stranger-king. In which case, that element was merely reinstated by the Mahāvam̄sa (also an ecclesiastical text but less determinedly so, and much more tolerant of heroic and royal material). Yet, although the table of sources might make it seem as if the Mahāvam̄sa is in good company here, recall that all the Indian traditions tell a tale of Siṃhala and the Rākṣasas. The Mahāvam̄sa is the only early source to express this basic story pattern through the plot of Vijaya and Kuveṇī.<sup>31</sup> So where did that come from?

Here we must consider a particularly outrageous but intriguing application of the diffusionist method. Although many commentators have been unable to resist off-the-cuff analogies with Greek myth, Merlin Peris has been the only one to push this logic as far as it will go. His efforts seem to have been largely ignored. The broad terms of the story do indeed coincide with those of the Odyssey–Circe adventure: a hero with his band of followers is shipwrecked on an island uninhabited by humans but the abode of superhuman denizens led by a shape-changing female enchantress; the followers are kidnapped by the enchantress; the hero tricks her and releases them; the hero and enchantress are united before he leaves her. But we may not be surprised that such broad terms coincide. What must deserve at least a moment’s consideration is that there are also at least four more specific details common to both: (1) the enchantress is weaving when our hero first encounters her; (2) the hero is aided by a guardian deity, who gives him a protective device; (3) the enchantress is made to swear an oath when at the hero’s mercy; (4) after restoring the followers, she provides a great feast for them all.<sup>32</sup>

Such parallels surely mean that the possibility of transmission requires serious thought, although we shall return to the question of the *significance* of any such transmission below.<sup>33</sup> The same analytical choices apply to the story of Paṇḍukābhaya, where the summary statements of the Dīpavam̄sa have been expanded into a narrative of mythic character in the Mahāvam̄sa. Is this the product of local oral tradition, or should one find both its causes and meanings by tracing plot analogues in material as far apart as the Jātakas, the Krishna legends of the Mahābhārata and the *Harivaṃśa*, and Greek myths of Perseus and Danae?<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup>See Peris, *Mahāvam̄sa Studies*, p. 47, on narrative inconsistencies resulting from the inclusion of the Vijaya–Kuveṇī romance.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 55–59, lists twelve but these are four I find arresting.

<sup>33</sup>Peris, *Mahāvam̄sa Studies*, argues for transmission from the Odyssey to the *Vam̄sa* authors both directly and through the Jātakas. For example, the detail of the imprisonment of men in a pool, discovered by the reading of one-way footprints, has been connected to the *Devadhamma Jātaka* (Perera, “Early kings”, p.101), but Peris, p.50, argues that it can be traced back to Aesop’s fable of *The Lion and the Fox*. As Peris’s book proceeds, and more and more Mahāvam̄sa material is attributed to Greek sources, skepticism of his method mounts. Nevertheless, contact with the post-Alexander Indo-Greek states or even with Greek traders is certainly possible (see, for example, Basham, “Prince Vijaya”, pp.169–170), so the question of the early material must remain open. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, 2007), p. 265, remarks on the possibility of a Greek stimulus to Indian literary production in general. It is also possible, of course, that these story motifs travelled via contact with the Roman world. See R. C. C. Fynes “Isis and Pattinī: The Transmission of a Religious Idea from Roman Egypt to India”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Nov., 1993), pp. 377–391, which argues that important elements of the Pattinī cult were introduced, in the first three centuries CE by traders from Roman Egypt who brought with them a cult of Isis.

<sup>34</sup>L. S. Perera, “Early Kings”, p.101 (for the mare-faced *yakkhiṇī*) and p.109; Peris, *Mahāvam̄sa Studies*, pp. 85–114; Mendis, “Vijaya”, R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, “The kinsmen of the Buddha: myth as political charter in the ancient and early medieval kingdom of Sri Lanka”, in *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, (ed.), Bardwell L. Smith. (Chambersburg, 1978). The story of Gilgamesh seems archetypal in some ways, Cavendish (ed.), *Legends*, p.91. It is even possible that textual records about the campaigns of an actual King Paṇḍukābhaya had survived

The point here is that we are now firmly entrenched in a literary mode of interpretation, being led to contemplate the possibility of an apparently conscious collage of a variety of sources. We are certainly dealing with motifs which have circulated with irresistible fluidity, moving across not only linguistic barriers but those of orality/textuality, Lanka/India, Hinduism/Buddhism, Theravāda/Mahāyāna, perhaps even Mediterranean/Indian Ocean, finding homes in different epochs and kinds of polity and drawn upon for purposes and genres as varied as chronicle, origin story, entertainment and religious edification.

### Political Imperatives behind the Text

At this point we can turn to a second mode of interpretation and explore the possibility that some elements were introduced in order to serve specific political aims at the time in which the chronicles were written. The Mahāvamsa tells us that the Vijaya–Kuveṇī offspring are excluded because Vijaya is informed that he must have a Kshatriya maiden as a consort in order to be consecrated. They therefore send to the Pāṇḍu king of the Indian city of Southern Madhurā; his daughter becomes Vijaya’s chief consort and other Madhurā maidens are married off to the ministers and people.<sup>35</sup> Now, this is another piece of plot not present in the Dīpavamsa. It must be relevant that between the composition of the two texts much of the country had been conquered by forces from India, and six Tamil rulers had ruled in succession from 428 to 455 before foreign dominion was cast off by Dhātusena (455–73 CE).

We know little about the fifth-century invaders except that they were first led by a ‘Pāṇḍu’, which has led many to suggest that they were Pāṇḍyans.<sup>36</sup> The bride episode in the Mahāvamsa surely then reflects some need to acknowledge a Pāṇḍyan connection that has outlasted the repulsion of Tamil/Pāṇḍyan power. It is possible that Dhātusena sought to enforce a form of overlordship over the Pāṇḍyan kings of Madhurā as an extension of his drive to secure Lanka. The extraction of a bride may thus signal a symbolic assertion of dominance. On the other hand, Dhātusena may have acknowledged the overlordship of Pāṇḍyan power in India in order to preserve his Lankan sovereignty: when the Mahāvamsa tells us that every year Vijaya “presented to his wife’s father chanks and pearls worth twice a hundred thousand”, this seems to suggest a form of tribute.<sup>37</sup> Beyond reflecting dynastic politics, the narrative suggests that Sinhala kings had come to define their kingliness by reference to their glamorous peers across the straits, the warring dynasties of Pallavas, Pāṇḍyans, Cōlas, Kalabhras – many of which also identified themselves with animal emblems.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, much more could be done to explore the way in which Sinhala dynastic representation developed through such ‘peer-polity’ interaction, building on Gunawardana’s suggestive discussion. (In

<sup>35</sup>S. J. Gunasegaram, *The Vijayan Legend and the Aryan Myth. A Commentary on Dr. G. C. Mendis’ Mahabharata Legends in the Mahāvamsa* (Jaffna, 1963) for arguments about the location of ‘Madhurā’.

<sup>36</sup>W. A. Jayawardana, “Successors of Mahasena: Srimeghavanna to Upatissa II”, in Paranavitana, *History of Ceylon*, I, pp. 292.

<sup>37</sup>Mhv, 7.73.

<sup>38</sup>Gunawardana, “People of the lion”, p 53, points out that the Pallavas used the bull as their emblem, and sometimes perhaps a lion. The lion was also used by some minor Cōla ruling houses, others used the Tiger. Pāṇḍyans used the fish. To my mind, this comparative point represents Gunawardana’s strongest argument for the dynastic origins or associations of Sinhaleanness.

the sixth century, for example, we find a Pallava king, Siṃhaviṣṇu, being praised for his ability to defeat the Lion [-form] of Viṣṇu).<sup>39</sup>

We are told that the Pāṇḍu king sent his daughter and the other 100 maidens, “along with elephants, horses and chariots, befitting a king, and craftsmen and a thousand families of eighteen guilds”.<sup>40</sup> Now, as an aside, we should mention that Gunawardana’s famous interpretation of the Sīhabāhu–Vijaya story (which is reconsidered in the companion article) places a lot of emphasis on those one thousand families.<sup>41</sup> He argues that the ‘Sinhals’ whose origin the myth was recounting were not a people but a political elite centred on a dynasty, and he suggests that the story accounts for the non-Sinhala masses by implying that they were the descendents of those one thousand families.<sup>42</sup> Yet from the foregoing it seems unlikely that they were mentioned for aetiological reasons (they are never mentioned again). Rather they are present in a list of gifts to show the new dynasty receiving the trappings of South Asian royal magnificence. The need to conduct foreign policy through marriage during the fifth century may have necessitated a stronger ideological commitment to the pursuit of a pure Kshatriya lineage in brides from abroad. To judge from later periods, there is nothing contradictory about a dynasty that has thrown off Indian power none the less bearing the influence of Indian means of conceiving power.<sup>43</sup> While the Dīpavaṃsa is most concerned to connect Lankan kingship with the legendary Buddhist sacred ground of the north, the thrust of the more worldly Mahāvaṃsa here is to establish kingliness in a more contemporary and concrete fashion – to bring its real life rather than mythical partners in love and war within the orbit of authorised history. One might be able to see a similar desire to recognise a contemporary ally in the reference to the scandalous princess as being the granddaughter of the king of Kalinga.<sup>44</sup>

If the Madhurān connection is indeed an interpolation made with immediate political considerations in mind, then we might expect it to disrupt symbolic and narrative impetus – and so it does. In order to conform to the main tradition, as in the Dīpavaṃsa, that Vijaya is left heirless, the Mahāvaṃsa has this celebrated Madhurān union go nowhere at all: Vijaya and his Madhurā bride fail to produce an heir. In what happens next we see an obvious layer of monkish concern: Story 4 is imposed, the origins of a properly Buddhist royal lineage in Lanka. Other elites in Buddhist South Asia had long claimed ancestry reaching back to the Buddha’s own clan, the Śākya, and now we find the same claim in the Dīpavaṃsa.<sup>45</sup> So, despite two attempts, Vijaya does not get to found a line of kings after all. With no heir apparent, he has to send home to request one of his family to come and take over the

<sup>39</sup>Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, 2007), p. 120.

<sup>40</sup>Mhv., 7.57–58.

<sup>41</sup>I should here rectify an error in the companion article “Vijaya origin myth”, p. 26, where I refer to the “thousand service castes”. I should have referred to “the one thousand families” (which Gunawardana refers to as service castes). Indeed, I also erred (p. 21, footnote 56) in suggesting that the ‘expanding rug motif’ used by the *Dīpavaṃsa*, was later deployed by the *Cūlavāṃsa*.

<sup>42</sup>See “Vijaya origin myth”, p. 27, footnote 77.

<sup>43</sup>To compare with the era of Parākramabāhu I (1153–1186), see Alan Strathern, “Sri Lanka in the long early modern period: Its place in a comparative theory of second millennium Eurasian history”, *Modern Asian Studies* (2009), 43, Part 4 (July 2009), pp. 809–864.

<sup>44</sup>Basham, “Vijaya”, p. 166.

<sup>45</sup>Thapar, “Origin myths”, p. 272.

throne. Vijaya's nephew Paṇḍuvāsa is sent. There then arrives in Lanka the beautiful princess Kaccānā who has been cast adrift on the ocean by her father, the Śākya prince Pāṇḍu, son of Amitodana. From Kaccānā and Paṇḍuvāsa are born ten sons and a daughter, Cittā. Seven of Kaccānā's brothers have also arrived in the land. One of them has a son who unites with Cittā to produce Paṇḍukābhaya, who then becomes king.

The point of all this confusing genealogy is to establish that Paṇḍukābhaya can claim ancestry from the Śākyan clan on both his maternal and paternal sides; he was, indeed, a great grand-nephew of the Buddha.<sup>46</sup> This could again be read as political manoeuvring, of an ecclesiastical sort this time, with rather contemporary ends in view if we interpret the Dīpavaṃsa as an assertion of the authority of both the Mahaviharan order and the Sri Lanka kings who protected it against rival lineages in India, both royal and monastic.

As for the narrative about Paṇḍukābhaya himself, we have seen that one could trace some possible antecedents and parallels for this material used to flesh out his life – but whatever information has been accessed or plot motifs plucked from the ether, one must ask to what end? We have already seen that this material was heavily informed by the logic of the royal outsider.<sup>47</sup> It is as if the Mahāvaṃsa author has felt deeply this injection of Śākyan blood as a regenerative occasion and pondered its implications. Kingship, it seems, must start over again.

One of the strangest results of this repetition of royal origin myth is that we have what seems to be an unnecessary replay of the urban colonisation theme, which jars all the more in that it takes the same form as that associated with Vijaya. Both the Mahāvaṃsa and Dīpavaṃsa tell us that while Vijaya builds for himself the city of Tambapaṇṇi, his ministers also found four towns, which take their names. One of these ministers “who was called after the asterism (Anurādhā) founded Anurādhapura”. Of course, this settlement would become the central seat of power in the island.<sup>48</sup> But two chapters later, the Mahāvaṃsa informs us that after the Śākyan princess Bhaddakaccānā had become queen, her brothers also arrived and wandered about Lanka founding towns with the king's approval. Three of these towns bear the same name as those founded by Vijaya's ministers, and one of these is Anurādhā.<sup>49</sup> Here again the result is narrative confusion.<sup>50</sup> But it seems to be driven by the need to mould Paṇḍukābhaya as a founding father. His story indicates his role as a unifier, gaining mastery over disparate regions and beings of Lanka, and as the founder of the urban civilisation to which the Anurādhapura-dwellers were heir.<sup>51</sup> He it is who chooses the site of Anurādhapura as his capital – he gives it law and order, religious establishments and, strikingly, its purity mechanism, in the form of various *caṇḍāla* men to do all the dirty work of sewage and cemeteries. As he urbanises the centre, so he domesticates Lanka as a whole

<sup>46</sup>Gunawardana, “Kinsmen of the Buddha”, p.101. In the Mahāvaṃsa, Paṇḍuvāsaudeva becomes and Kaccānā becomes Bhaddakaccānā.

<sup>47</sup>The epic quality and patriotic potential of this story are both reflected in a recent feature film by Jackson Anthony, *ABĀ*, released in 2008.

<sup>48</sup>Dpv, 9.35; Mhv, 7.43–45.

<sup>49</sup>Guruge (note 9 to Mhv 9): “evidently we have to do here with a different tradition as to the foundation of the same cities”. The Dpv 10. 6, refers to the seven brothers, but they don't do any founding.

<sup>50</sup>The only piece of smoothing over might be that the Mhv (7.43) has Vijaya's minister founding Anurādhagama rather than Anurādhapura, the former connoting a village rather than a city. Indeed the ministers are all described as founding villages, whereas the Dīpavaṃsa (9.35) has it that both Vijaya and the ministers found *nagaram*.

<sup>51</sup>Mhv, 10.73–104, Dpv, 11.2–3.

by establishing the village boundaries across the land. Vijaya is now like one of those august high gods who have lost day-to-day relevance: Paṇḍukābhaya has done all the hard work.

When we find sinful and supernatural associations also trailing around the origins of Duṭṭhagāmaṇi, it begins to seem as if each major *royal* figure must be treated as an *origin* figure in the Mahāvaṃsa.<sup>52</sup> It may again be profitable to locate this tendency in the actual political circumstances of textual production: namely the fact that in the recent past Sinhala kingship had had to be re-established under Dhātusena (455–473). Indeed, it seems most likely that the Mahāvaṃsa was commissioned by Dhātusena himself, but even if one accepts the contrary dating to the reign of Dhātusena's son Moggallāna (491–508), the events would be in living memory.<sup>53</sup> We have seen that Dhātusena's reign began in a campaign to throw off the established rule of Tamil overlords, and it has been suggested that Duṭṭhagāmaṇi is accorded so much importance by the Mahāvaṃsa because he could be presented as the first and paradigmatic resister of foreign power.<sup>54</sup> The *Cūlavaṃsa* tells us that Dhātusena takes refuge in the southern Rohana district and emerges from there to kill three Tamil kings one by one before he can re-take Anurādhapura.<sup>55</sup> The *Mahāvaṃsa* tells us that Duṭṭhagāmaṇi also emerged from Rohana, this time to kill 32 Tamil kings, but he had to transgress his father and brother's authority and cast the land into disorder and violence to do so.<sup>56</sup> Yet the motifs extend to Paṇḍukābhaya also: his war from the margins, his slaughter of his uncles at the centre, may also reflect a contemporary consciousness of the need to destroy before one can re-create. As the forms of recent politics and ancient legend blur into one another, behind all these biographies shimmers the transformation of the brother-slaughtering Aśoka the wicked into the Buddhism-dispensing Aśoka the righteous.

### Comparison with Rome

To what extent does the foregoing reasoning about literary parallels (and possibly debts) and political motives really undermine an understanding of the foundation stories as representing a mythic sensibility? We are confronted with what is essentially a methodological problem. One way out is to see how scholars have fared with dealing with very similar problems in the field of classical scholarship.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Mhv, 22.60–64, and see Kapferer, *Legends*, pp.57–65.

<sup>53</sup>And pertinent to the legitimacy of Moggallāna. On the question of the Mhv's date, I follow the reasoning of Walters, (p.c. 30/10/2007, 1/11/2007), and "Buddhist History", pp. 120–121.

<sup>54</sup>Kapferer, *Legends*, pp.57–65

<sup>55</sup>W. Geiger, (ed.), trans, *Cūlavaṃsa Being the More Recent Part of the Mahāvaṃsa*, trans. from German by C. M. Rickmers. (Colombo, 1952) pp. ii, 38.29–34.

<sup>56</sup>Regina T. Clifford, "The Dhammāpā tradition of Sri Lanka: Three models within the Sinhalese chronicles", in Smith, *Legitimation*, p. 42, comments: "Curiously, the blatant transgression of filial piety by Duṭṭhagāmaṇi poses no problem for sixth century Lanka, nor does it for subsequent generations". Compare, of course, with the filial piety of Romulus . . .

<sup>57</sup>I should say that Sahlins' various papers on the stranger-king make use of classical material in a somewhat different way. In "Stranger king", p. 179, he refers to Apollodorus's account of the story of Pelops, who appears in the Peloponnese as a stranger and wins the hand of Hippodamia, daughter of the native king Oenomaus. The king would only concede his daughter to whoever managed to speed away from his chariot in murderous pursuit. The chariot is tampered with, Oenomaus dies and Pelops succeeds to his kingdom. He thereby founds Greek kingship and provides the deed which is commemorated by that most Greek-defining of institutions, the Olympic Games. See James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love* (London, 2007), pp. 276, 286, plates 19, 20, for two image of Pelops where his foreignness is emphasised by oriental apparel, from fourth century BCE Amphorae. Although, Davidson

There may seem something far-fetched about the suggestion made earlier that the first image of Lanka in the Mahāvamsa as a pre-dharmic abode of demons is a trope borrowed from Indian tradition – an outsider’s perspective and perhaps a ‘literary’ (or textualised) one at that, if the Rāmāyaṇa is credited as the source. But consider the origins of many of the origin myths for Rome and other societies of the region. Romulus and Remus were held to have been fathered by the god Mars, while on their mother’s side they were descendents of the kings of Alba, a dynasty which began with a marriage between the Trojan stranger Aeneas and the daughter of Latinus, king of the native people.<sup>58</sup> Thus a figure from Homeric tradition was appropriated as an ultimate founder of Rome. But a Homeric hero was also used to provide an origin for the Latins themselves. In the first instance, this represents speculation by Greeks, who used the *nostoi* (returning heroes) of the *Odyssey* as a way to explain the ethnography of the wider world that was being opened up to them in their era of colonisation and exploration. A Hesiodic poet of the seventh or sixth century BCE first identified Odysseus and Circe as the parents of Agrios and Latinos, the rulers of the Tyrsenians (Etruscans). But the important point here is that this Greek perspective was apparently indigenised, given that some later Roman writers also record legends that mythic or founder figures for peoples of the region were descendants of Odysseus and Circe.<sup>59</sup> As Irad Malkin puts it, “the origins *mentalité* of nations is curiously susceptible to adopting the stranger’s opinion”.<sup>60</sup>

In the archaic period, then, Circe’s island was routinely located in the Tyrrhenian Sea off the west coast of Italy. If a ‘fictional’ island of magical beings can thus become identified with an actual place (even though the western location hardly fits with the textual *Odyssey*), and thence used to provide a social aetiology accepted by both observers and locals, it helps us to understand how the probably fictional and certainly mythologised Lanka of magical beings in the Rāmāyaṇa could become identified with an actual island off the southern tip of India and accepted as such by the Sinhalese themselves at some point before the composition of the Dīpavaṃsa (for the island was clearly known by other names, such as Tambapaṇṇi, for much of the pre-chronicle period).<sup>61</sup> In both cases the analytical distinction between insider and outsider’s stories is eroded by the fact of colonisation: there were real Greek colonists

(p.c. 20/7/2009) points out that there were also some thoroughly Greek representations of Pelops, including one on the Temple of Zeus in Olympia itself.

<sup>58</sup>T. J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome. Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000–264 BC)* (London, 1995), p.58. A great number of different origin stories associated with Rome have been preserved, which were combined and recombined in various ways: T. P. Wiseman, *Remus: a Roman myth* (Cambridge, 1995), p.44, lists more than sixty versions which differ from a ‘standard’ story of Romulus and Remus. Important among these is the story of a stranger-king from Greece, the Arcadian Evander; see James Davidson, “Polybius” in *Cambridge Companion to Roman Historiography*, (ed.) A. Feldherr (2009).

<sup>59</sup>Irad Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, (Berkeley, 1998), p. 187; Wiseman, *Remus*, pp. 49 and 62. T. P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter, 2004), pp 17–18: “Rome’s neighbour and early rival Tusculum was founded by Telegonus, the eponymous hero of Eugammon’s sixth-century sequel to the *Odyssey*. He was a son of Circe and Odysseus, as were Rhomos, Anteias and Ardeias, eponyms of Rome, Antium and Ardea who evidently presuppose a sixth- or fifth-century Latium in which those cities were of equal status.” Indeed, Telegonus (which means, wonderfully for our theme here, ‘born from afar’) is an excellent figure for comparison, given that his story is also replete with parricide and incest.

<sup>60</sup>Malkin, *Odysseus*, p.172.

<sup>61</sup>Gunawardana, “People of the lion”, pp. 51–52.



and traders providing an impetus to the origin of civilisation in that part of Italy, just as there was probably a real North Indian impetus to state formation at Anurādhapura.<sup>62</sup>

In both the Vijaya–Kuevni and Odysseus–Circe stories, the indigene is wild and the hero only a stranger in the strict sense of coming from beyond the boundaries of the island.<sup>63</sup> There is no need to pursue further plot parallels between these two stories here, as they were shown to be strikingly apparent when we considered the proposition that the Mahāvamśa itself drew upon the Homeric tradition. We saw Merlin Peris intent on proving that such borrowing occurred without asking why this sort of adventure story – not in origin an origin tale at all – should be deemed a suitable beginning for Anurādhapurian civilisation. The question of borrowing or diffusion now appears less significant than the question of why the same basic plot should be used for aetiological purposes by peoples in both the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. We are returned to its intrinsic logics.<sup>64</sup>

The Odysseus–Circe story was marginal to the Roman tradition itself. There, the Homeric but non-Greek figure of Aeneas was drafted in as a stranger-king.<sup>65</sup> In the lives of Aeneas's descendants, Romulus and Remus, one discerns other features familiar from the Mahāvamśa material: their birth defies established authority; they are cast out into the wilderness (with the Tiber a watery liminal zone instead of the sea); they are brought up by an animal there; they lead a life of brigandage for a while; and when they become the agents of order, it is not to inherit the old throne but to establish a colony elsewhere. Since the intuitions of Johan Georg von Hahn in the mid-nineteenth century, it has been recognised that, for all its particular resonances within the Roman context, their story follows the pattern of an 'ideal type' biography of the founders of cities, dynasties, peoples, religions that is found all across the Middle East and Mediterranean region.<sup>66</sup> Naturally, no single Lankan myth corresponds to it exactly, and we have cherry-picked a little in what follows – but it is surprising how little force is necessary, and how many cherries can be carried away. Tim Cornell summarises; my comments in italics:

The child is conceived in a union that is in some way irregular, miraculous or shameful: a princess and an unknown stranger or lower-class person . . . *In Śīhabāhu's case a princess and a marauding lion.* In the next stage the child is ordered to be killed by a wicked king (often the child's father, grandfather or uncle) who has been warned by a dream or oracle that the

<sup>62</sup>Compare Emma Dench, *Romulus' Asylum. Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford, 2005), p.14: Mediterranean descent myths "regularly feature the arrival of individuals from elsewhere and unions of locals and new arrivals; such stories articulate the connection of colonies with mother cities, the ethnic and cultural encounters . . ." See also p. 103.

<sup>63</sup>The extent to which this nonetheless reflects the logic of the stranger-hero is discussed in "Vijaya origin myth", pp.14–15.

<sup>64</sup>On the problem with diffusionism, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Split representation in the art of Asia and America", in *Structural Anthropology* (New York 1963), pp. 245–268, and Wendy Doniger, *Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York, 1999), p. 141.

<sup>65</sup>Aeneas is more unambiguously a stranger-figure than Vijaya and Odysseus. The latter are from foreign parts but meet non-human indigenes, whereas the Romans imagined a more substantial continuity with the Latins.

<sup>66</sup>See Jan N. Bremmer, "Romulus, Remus and the foundation of Rome", in Bremmer and N. Horsfall, *Roman Myth and Mythography* (London, 1987), and also the comparative survey in Cavendish, *Legends*, pp.399–401, which gathers far-flung examples of heroes abandoned in the wild at birth, parented or nourished by animals and growing up in exile, the effect of the latter being "that the hero comes to his adult sphere of action from the outside, as a stranger". This comparative analysis of the hero figure has a long history from Edward Tylor to Von Hahn, to Otto Rank (for example, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, (New York 1914)), to Fitzroy Raglan and James Campbell. See Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing About Myth* (Amherst, 1999), Chapter 8.

child will one day kill or overthrow him . . . *Sīhabāhu's parricide is not framed in this way; but Paṇḍukābhaya's uncle-massacre fits very nicely* . . . The method chosen is usually to abandon the child in a forest or mountainside, although in many stories, the child is placed in a box, boat or basket and cast adrift, at sea or in a river . . . *Paṇḍukābhaya sits firmly within this narrative, as he is smuggled into the forest, but note that Vijaya is cast onto the sea when he is exiled and Paṇḍukābhaya's mother Bhaddakaccānā is arbitrarily set adrift*. The most striking feature of many of the stories, however, is the intervention of an animal, which carries out the immediate rescue and sometimes itself suckles the child *Vijaya is not rescued by the lion, but he is clearly raised by him; Paṇḍukābhaya's fortunes turn upon a mare*. In many stories there is an element of rivalry, violence, and even murder. *Indeed*.<sup>67</sup>

Romulus has to murder his brother Remus before gaining power, and he establishes the city by a trick which allows a union with the indigenous Sabine women (with the assistance of Jupiter – shades of Upulvan). In the subsequent royal succession, one sees the same switch from a 'creative destroyer' to a ruler who entrenches stability.<sup>68</sup> Hence both Romulus and Vijaya are in the paradoxical position of being founders without issue, as the throne passes elsewhere. In Rome's case, the alternative royal stock is provided by the Sabine element; in the Lankan case by the Indian civilisation which Vijaya had cast off. Such is the unpredictable creative political potency of these brutal founders, perhaps, that biological impotency must be their fate – they are allowed to be seminal in one way only.

### Methodological Conclusions

Consideration of the Roman scholarship suggests the following methodological conclusions. First, it is widely felt that this sort of origin myth may be illuminated by a comparative perspective. Classicists have often looked for analogies in an Indo-European orbit, hunting down parallels in Iranian or Celtic material, for example. For all that the Aryan connection still resounds in the popular consciousness, and with due acknowledgement of the fact that the Sinhala language contains a strong Indo-European element, we would have to accept a very strong version of the Indo-European hypothesis to consider it an explanation of story motifs in the Sri Lanka of the early centuries AD.<sup>69</sup> More importantly, as Cornell realises, a diffusionist explanation cannot account for the parallels worldwide, which "must be seen as popular expressions of some universal human need or experience, occurring independently in times and places that are worlds apart". Cornell does not speculate on what those needs might be, but by now we should have some idea. Whatever objections one might raise to the anthropological reasoning introduced here, to the emphasis on the paradoxes of kingship or to Sahlins' theory, say, it is clear that they offer the *kind* of explanation that is required.

<sup>67</sup> Cornell, *Beginnings of Rome*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>68</sup> See also Sahlins, "Stranger-King", 1985, pp. 84 and 91.

<sup>69</sup> M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 2007), p. 427, discusses the motifs of exposure and rescue by animal in hero stories, but says, "I do not dwell on these familiar themes, which are neither confined to Indo-European traditions nor especially characteristic of the warrior hero as here defined." West (p. 417) does consider the recurring theme of union between a king and a horse more significant, which brings to mind Paṇḍukābhaya and Cetiya. It is striking that while the modern pursuers of the proto-Indo-Europeans (besides West, see J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *The Oxford Introduction to Proto Indo-European* (Oxford, 2006) p.33) seem to include the Sinhalese as part of Indo-European geography, they make no attempt to use or analyse Sinhalese material.

Second, once we enter the era of literacy, stories structured by the logic of royal transgression can survive ‘fossilised’ into eras in which that logic no longer obtains. During the monarchical period of early Rome, it appears that logic was not only appreciated symbolically but may have actually been played out. Cornell goes so far as to suggest that both the myths of early kingship and what we can dimly perceive of its reality indicate a general presumption that the king had to be a stranger, with members of the native aristocracy considered ineligible. Yet the Romulus and Remus story only survives because it was written down by authors working in the republican period when – in terms of contemporary politics – “the very idea of a king was viewed with an almost pathological dislike”.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the story itself could be an embarrassment. Shot through with the bestial and the criminal, it lent itself readily to exploitation by Rome’s enemies. It was incredible too. At one point the wolf was explained away as a reference to a prostitute (which was a slang meaning for *lupa* or she-wolf), much in the way that twentieth-century writers in Sri Lanka made *Sīha* into a robber.<sup>71</sup>

In the Lankan case, there is little direct evidence that the *Sīhabāhu*–*Vijaya* material was found to be indigestible or bizarre until the modern period – although one does sense a certain strain on the moral feeling and credulity of the Chinese commentator Xuanzang in the seventh century.<sup>72</sup> The Roman comparison underlines the plausibility of the notion that the transgressive plots are fossils preserved by writers simply because of their ineradicable place in popular consciousness and literary record. Yet, recall that we mentioned two other means by which the logic of the outsider hero may survive the transition to other understandings of political power.<sup>73</sup> In other words it is equally possible that this logic was at work structuring the creative processes of our author-monks.

Judgement on this point will be influenced by what one regards as the natural environment for mythological thought. If we consider true mythogenesis to require a compost of organic, oral and collective processes to get to work, then clearly the former hypothesis will have much more appeal. However, the point underlined by the Roman material is that these processes may feed off material that is itself far from organic, oral, collective or indeed local. Indeed the distinction between literate and oral creativity crumbles somewhat in the face of the Homeric tradition or its Indian heroic epic counterparts, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, or the Buddhist *Jātakas*.<sup>74</sup> Just because images or plot fragments can be traced back to earlier texts does not mean that one can infer ‘literary’ borrowing, for they may also have entered the bloodstream of popular tradition, becoming a common stock on which the subconscious must inevitably draw. Nor does the reception of plots from earlier foreign

<sup>70</sup>Cornell, *Beginnings of Rome*, p.148.

<sup>71</sup>Cornell, *Beginnings of Rome*, p.58; Wiseman, *Remus*, p.15, on the propaganda opportunity for Rome’s enemies.

<sup>72</sup>Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki*, and he leaves out the incest element. It may also be significant that, as Gunawardana, ‘People of the Lion’, p. 52, points out, the later *Vaṃsathappakāsini* states that *Sīhabāhu* was called *Sīhala* because he had caught the lion, not by descent from him, which goes for the *Dhampiya aṭuvā gātapadaya* (tenth century) too. This may suggest that a more ‘rational’ and less bestial origin was considered appropriate by this time.

<sup>73</sup>Because it continues to help describe some magical or divine attributes of kingship or simply that the stories contained enough plot features that resonated with more universal dilemmas of kingship.

<sup>74</sup>Equally, when G. Forsythe, *A Critical History of Early Rome. From Prehistory to the First Punic War* (Berkeley, 2005), p.95, comments on the “striking similarities between the tale of Romulus and Remus and the plots of Greek tragedies involving similar stories” (which is analogous to Lankanists presenting parallels between the *Vaṃsas* and the *Jātakas*), this is not to insist on textual transmission per se.

societies necessarily diminish the peculiarly local functions and understandings they acquire. Ancient Greek scholarship has its own Merlin Peris in M. L. West, who has argued for a huge number of parallels between the Homeric poems and Near Eastern epic. For example, if Merlin Peris traces the Vijaya and Kuveṇī plot back to Odysseus and Circe, West finds that the latter correspond in both nature and function to the story of the meeting between Gilgamesh and the divine alewife Siduru.<sup>75</sup> But even if some ultimate Eastern source is credited in this way, few would argue that this diminishes the way in which in the hands of ‘Homer’ (or the centuries, quite possibly, of oral transmission that ‘Homer’ stands in for) they are made to do quintessentially Greek work. This is the third conclusion. Plot motifs may float free and wide, but in the way they are gathered, tethered and strung together, one can discern the imperatives of deep local needs.

Distinctions between the mythic and the writerly imagination cannot be held hard and fast – but equally, it is the task of the classicist to know when and how to make them. The fourth conclusion, then, is that a text is not merely a vehicle for an immaculate origin myth but a medium that places its own interpretative demands before the reader. There is, of course, no intrinsic opposition between the mythic significance of a text and its other functions.<sup>76</sup> But equally those functions may well disrupt or reshape the content of what is presented as myth. This is particularly true for the Roman evidence, for while a few stories such as Romulus and Remus are usually granted an authentic mythic status, much of what might appear to be ‘Roman mythology’ is often considered to be literary confection spun by Hellenised antiquarians. Even for Romulus, himself, Cornell argues, “his biography is a complex mixture of legend and folk-tale, interspersed with antiquarian speculation and political propaganda”.<sup>77</sup> Indeed T. P. Wiseman has suggested that the figure of Remus is a relatively late addition, reflecting the “context of plebeian power-sharing in the fourth century BC” and arising through the medium of drama.<sup>78</sup> Whether he is right or wrong in this case, Wiseman’s apprehension that immediate political concerns may be smuggled into mythic tradition – he quotes Benedict Niese on the way in which myth “turns into a sort of contemporary history under a different name” – mirrors the suggestions made in this article concerning the Madhurān bride episode and the theme of rebellion in the Mahāvamṣa.<sup>79</sup>

Previous ‘symbolic’ readings of the early Mahāvamṣa material have not really addressed themselves to these possibilities – to the messy business of how the chronicle texts themselves originated.<sup>80</sup> This is perhaps more problematic for Kapferer’s analysis than it is for Obeyesekere, for the latter is more concerned with the profound work that the Mahāvamṣa material is made to do in a range of popular traditions thereafter as he is with

<sup>75</sup>M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1999), p.405. Indeed, Peris’s correspondences seem do not seem any weaker than West’s.

<sup>76</sup>What Obeyesekere, *Work of Culture*, p.202, says of the Sīhabāhu story over the centuries is of equal relevance to the whole section of the Mahāvamṣa we have been considering at its moment of composition: “it is *constitutive* of a variety of ‘domains’ and straddles different, even contradictory, universes of meaning and experience such as those born of psyche, bios, cosmos, and polis”.

<sup>77</sup>Cornell, *Beginnings of Rome*, p.119.

<sup>78</sup>Wiseman, *Remus*, pp. 118 and 158.

<sup>79</sup>Wiseman, *Remus*, p. 45.

<sup>80</sup>Kapferer, *Legends*, pp. 44–45. Kapferer hailed the “contribution of structuralist and semiotic analyses of myth [which is] to have examined myth as a whole and to have pointed to the inner significance of the logical structure of the myth”.

the original text.<sup>81</sup> However one responds to Obeyesekere's Freudian framework, few could doubt that these stories profoundly conflate the political with the familial. Indeed, it may be that what began as a myth of sociopolitical origins acquired a more generic power because of its capacity to access the psychological mechanisms that the hero-theorists such as Otto Rank proposed.<sup>82</sup>

On the other hand, we have seen that it would be equally reductive to assume that the mere presence of textual precedents, say, must destroy any sense of these stories as containing material that has passed through the filter of popular oral tradition. How then can we sum up the implications of these methodological steerings for our reading of the Mahāvamsa narrative? We can say that the most basic image of Lanka as an island of demons redeemed by dharma (Story 1) may go back to the Rāmāyaṇa, but at some point it became thoroughly internalised and was then given a strong theological-political import by the chronicle writers. The story of the leonine origins of a dynasty (Story 2) may contain a few plot elements which echo other and probably earlier stories, but it represents the most likely candidate for a rather pure oral process of mythogenesis, and it is also the story that dwells most insistently on the themes of transgression and alienity. The story of a tussle between a human hero and demon princess (Story 3) again has precedents in the Indian textual record, but the version of this that appears in the Mahāvamsa, the romance of Vijaya and Kuveṇī, is clearly distinctive. As to whether the latter story in particular derives from the Odysseus-Circe traditions in some way, we can leave as a moot point. But even if we were so impressed by the parallels as to imagine some wholesale importation of Greek myth into the narrative, we would still have to ask why this would be seen as an appropriate sort of story to use for such aetiology. Moreover, we would not know if such 'Greek' stories travelled only along the lines of communication established by learned literati or whether they had escaped into the imaginary of wider society. When we come to the story of Paṇḍukābhaya (Story 4), the founder of Anurādhapura, and we find the reappearance of the same symbolic register, the same evocation of otherness, violence, animality, supernaturalism, we must start to feel that there is an organic quality to all these stories, that at some point they have passed through a collective subconscious which has shaped them according to the same logic.<sup>83</sup>

In broad terms one can agree with Gananath Obeyesekere's suggestion that "myths that centrally define the origin and ethnic identity of a group permit little debate, unless people face problems pertaining to their origin and identity as a consequence of historical vicissitudes. No such questioning of this myth [of Sīhabāhu] has occurred throughout Sri Lanka's long history... (except perhaps in contemporary times among very small groups)".<sup>84</sup> Yet the Mahāvamsa story of Sīhabāhu and Vijaya has not been the only origin myth for the Sinhalese and their kings. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Rāmāyaṇa again began to exert an appeal over the historical imagination of the Sinhalese, and was deployed in origin myths recounted in works such as the *Sītāvaka Haṭana* and the

<sup>81</sup>Obeyesekere's work in general is methodologically closer to the one taken here, being suffused by an awareness of the interplay between the textual and mythic worlds and alive to the influence of two different civilisational modes split by the advent of ethics, the pre-Buddhist and the Buddhist.

<sup>82</sup>See footnote 65.

<sup>83</sup>I use the term 'collective subconscious' in the loosest sense.

<sup>84</sup>Obeyesekere, *Work of Culture*, p.147.

*Rājāvaliya*.<sup>85</sup> The latter even devised a genealogy for Buddha and Vijaya that began with Rāma. Once again then, the outsider's vision of a demonic Lanka was appropriated and creatively reworked. In subsequent Sinhala popular tradition, that perspective was noticeably subverted by an extension of empathy to Rāvaṇa.<sup>86</sup> Portuguese commentators of the seventeenth century generally reported origin stories derived from both the Mahāvamsa and the locally appropriated Rāmāyaṇa; perhaps the first experience of sustained European imperialism had already begun to engender a desire for more autochthonous figures.<sup>87</sup> To this day, sites associated with the heroes and heroines of the Rāmāyaṇa are strewn across the island.<sup>88</sup>

In this manner the Rāmāyaṇa material had long provided a shadow source of aetiology to the dominant Mahāvamsa, but in the Hela movement of the nineteenth century it briefly found its place in the sun.<sup>89</sup> The Hela thinkers were concerned to purify the language from Sanskritic influence, and could be found castigating the Indian bias of the Rāmāyaṇa itself. Yet it was the world of the Rāmāyaṇa they invoked when they spoke of the great pre-Vijayan civilisation as more ancient and glorious than could be exulted in by the West and one unsullied by the contributions of outsiders.<sup>90</sup> In fact, to turn the tables all the more completely, some speculated that the 'helas' of Greece were colonists sent forth by the 'helas' of Lanka . . .

Nevertheless, Vijaya easily won his colonial period tussle with Rāvaṇa: the authority of the Mahāvamsa was too formidable, and the apparent revelation of 'Aryan' stock too significant in the colonial context. In the present day there are signs that the Rāvaṇa cult is alive and well among certain groups.<sup>91</sup> The climate is certainly conducive to a revival. The historical vicissitudes of the last thirty years have been terrible enough to lend a new urgency to questions of origin, the significance of ethnic claims to the land has become overwhelming and Sri Lanka's relationship with India, always deeply ambivalent, has only

<sup>85</sup>John Clifford Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious Transformation, Politics and Culture* (New York, 2004), p.136. However, there are scattered references in literary works from at least the tenth century onwards. See V. Vitharana, "The Rāmāyaṇa in the Sinhala Buddhist tradition", in *Lanka and the Rāmāyaṇa*, (ed.) N. Somakandhan (Chinmaya Mission, Sri Lanka, 1996), pp. 33–52.

<sup>86</sup>Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu*, p.138; *Rajavaliya*, (ed.) A. Suraweera (Ratmalana, Sri Lanka, 2000), pp.14–19.

<sup>87</sup>Alan Strathern, *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth Century Sri Lanka* (Cambridge, 2007), p.238.

<sup>88</sup>Anuradha Seneviratne, "Rāma and Rāvaṇa: history, legend, and belief in Sri Lanka", *Ancient Ceylon* 5 (1981) pp. 221–236.

<sup>89</sup>Particularly associated with Munidasa Kumaratunga (1887–1944), and more recently with Arisen Ahubudu. In 1987, the latter wrote a play, *Sakviti Rāvaṇa*, in which the invasion of Lankāpura by Rāma was implicitly compared to the present day armed Indian intervention. When the text of the play was published, M. Kaliṅga Obeywansa was quoted on the back cover: "The neighbouring India for more than 2000 years made large effort to make Sri Lanka a colony. It is now clear that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which was compiled to tarnish the image of the great monarch *Rāvaṇa*, is a part of this conspiracy" Translated by Nirmal Dewasiri, in "Ideological power of popular history writings and Sinhala nationalism" (MS in progress).

<sup>90</sup>K. N. O. Dharmadasa, *Language, Religion and Ethnic Awareness: The Growth of Sinhalese Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1995). It is rather pertinent to our theme here that Vitharana "Rāmāyaṇa", p.51, should comment: "It might surprise the great poet [Valmiki] (if he lived) to be awakened to the fact that all the evil that he infused into the character of Rāvaṇa, has been interpreted by the Sinhalese to be the marks of his heroic prowess capable of inspiring them to collective achievement during a period of the anticipated national resurgence."

<sup>91</sup>See P. K. Balachandran, *Hindustan Times*, 23 September 2007 First Published:17:39 IST (23/9/2007), on Arisen Ahubudu and the Hela movement; and Nalin de Silva, "Vijaya came much later", *Sri Lanka Guardian*, 29 February 2008. The author's trips to Sri Lanka in summer 2007 and 2009 also gave rise to this observation. See also Nirmal Dewasiri, *ibid.*, on the popular television series, "Mahāsīnhalē Vāsakātava" ((the chronicle of the great Sinhale).

become more fraught.<sup>92</sup> There is again a certain desire to see the Sinhalese stand alone as the autochthonous originators of human society on the island, free from any suggestion that they may have once been civilised from without. For the moment, however, the Mahāvamsa version, however riddled as it may be with unpalatable or puzzling details, continues its reign. alan.strathern@history.ox.ac.uk.

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<sup>92</sup>Holt, *Buddhist Viṣṇu*, pp .332–333.