

CONFLICTS IN STATE-SANGHA RELATIONS IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF SRI LANKA

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Buddhism came to be established in the island of Sri Lanka in the third century B. C., as a result of the zealous missionary activity which followed the Third Buddhist Council. The mission to the island headed by *thera* Mahinda achieved signal success, due to several facilitating factors such as generous royal patronage extended by king Devānampiya Tissa (250-210 B.C.) and his successors, lack of opposition from other religious groups none of which seems to have had an island-wide following, the unreserved dedication of the mission to its cause, and the harmonious blending of the new way of life with the aspirations of the islanders in an early stage of social formation. The rapid spread of Buddhism in the island finds ample testimony in the glowing accounts of the Pāli chronicles, namely the *Dipavamsa* (4th c. A.D.) and the *Mahāvamsa* (6th c. A.D.) and in archaeological evidence, in the form of lithic records of donations to the *saṅgha* scattered in many parts of the country, apart from remains of numerous monastic complexes, *stūpas* and shrines. The principal monastery founded by Devānampiya Tissa at Anurādhapura, which came to be known as the Mahāvihāra (Great Monastery), became the pivot of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka.¹

The intimate relationship between the state and the *saṅgha*, which thus originated with the foundation of the new religion in the island, continued unabated during the centuries that followed. This bilateral relationship seems to have contributed to mutual benefit. Devānampiya Tissa gifted land to the *saṅgha*, built monasteries and *stūpas* in addition to the provision of alms and other requisites, a policy continued by his successors with equal enthusiasm.² As recipient of such generous support, the *saṅgha* on its part extended its goodwill and blessings to the rulers, thereby facilitating the harnessing of the allegiance of the people to the state. Thus the mutually beneficial state-*saṅgha* relationship continued along a smooth and even course but for rare exceptions of strain and uneasiness, leading even more

1. Rahula, Walpola *History of Buddhism in Ceylon, 3rd Century B.C.-10th Century A.D.*, Colombo, 1956, pp. 48-77.
2. *Mahāvamsa (Mv.)* ed. Wilhelm Geiger, Reprinted London, 1958; (first published, London, 1908), translated into English by the editor with the assistance of Mabel Haynes Bode, reprinted Colombo, 1950 (first published 1912); all translated passages cited in this paper are from Geiger's English translation, XV, 1-214, XVI, 1-65; Rahula, *op.cit.*, 62-91.