Kingship and the Saṅgha in the Polonnaruva Period
—Saṅgha Reform and Forest-Dwelling Monks—

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1. During the period of Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka, the saṅgha was divided into three sects: i.e. the Mahāvihāra nikāya, the Abhayagiri nikāya, and the Jetavana nikāya. Parakkamabāhu I (1153-1186), who reigned in the subsequent Polonnaruva period, is renowned for having purified and unified the saṅgha under the authority of the Mahāvihāra nikāya, with the experienced therā Mahākassapa at the helm. This event is also recorded in the Galvihāra inscription as the Katikāvata promulgated by the king. According to the Katikāvata, Mahākassapa was a forest-dwelling monk (araṇṇavāsin) who belonged to Dimbulāgala (Udumbaragiri) of the Mahāvihāra nikāya, which was based ten miles to the southeast of Polonnaruva. The role of the araṇṇavāsins in the Polonnaruva period was of critical importance in the transformation of the organization of the saṅgha. This paper attempts to provide a rough picture of the history of the unification of the saṅgha. In particular, I focus on the way in which the king took advantage of the power of araṇṇavāsins.

2. Sometime after the 10th century, in the late Anurādhapura period, the term araṇṇavāsin begins to make frequent appearances in the Cv. During this period, the northern plains of Sri Lanka faced severe hardships due to invasion from the Cūḷa dynasty of India. Many urban monasteries were destroyed and their property was confiscated. The araṇṇavāsins, however, flourished under the patronage of kings, and are described in the Cv. with a level of admiration previously unheard of. They are described, for example, as “the light of the tradition of the theras” and as “an ornament of the isle of Laṅkā”. However, while there are several references in the Cv. to araṇṇavāsins of the Mahāvihāra nikāya, there is no such information on those affiliated to the other two nikāyas.

Vedeha, who was an araṇṇavāsin and the author of the Rasavāhinī, a text composed in the 13th century during the Daṁbadeṇiya period, has given us, in the
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Colophon to this work, an account of the beginning of the school he belonged to during the reign of Aggabodhi II (608-618). According to this text, the origins of the school begin with the King of Kāliṅga, who, having resolved to lead the life of a recluse, came to Ceylon and joined this order under the famous therā Jotipāla who defeated the Vaitulyas in a debate during the reign of Aggabodhi I (575-608). Vedeha’s lineage of preceptors, which extends as far back as the Polonnaruva period, can be confirmed as follows: Vedeha → Vanaratana Ānanda → Dimbulagala Medhaṅkara → Sāriputta → Dimbulagala Mahākassapa. According to this lineage, the disciples of Jotipāla and the King of Kāliṅga are regarded as having been the predecessors of Dimbulagala Mahākassapa.

Mahinda V (982-1029) was captured by the Cola king Rājarāja I and the capital at Anurādhapura was destroyed. Vijayabāhu I (1055-1110), however, succeeded in defeating the Colas and came to power at his capital in Polonnaruva. After the death of Vijayabāhu I, his son, Vikkamabāhu I (1111-1132), as part of his struggle for sovereign power, proceeded to confiscate monastic estates and the city was once again devastated. Despite such destruction to the saṅgha, Dimbulagala (where, in the 12th century, Mahākassapa would have been active) escaped unscathed, as it was patronized and protected by Sundaramahādevi, Vikkamabāhu’s Kāliṅga-born queen. It is evident from an inscription issued in the sixth year of Gajabāhu II’s (1132-1153) reign that there were 500 monks living at Dimbulagala.3

3. After the death of Gajabāhu II, Parakkamabāhu I, the son of Mānābharana and nephew of Vikkamabāhu I, ascended the throne. Parakkamabāhu I rebuilt the city of Polonnaruva and carried out the purification and unification of the saṅgha. At the request of Parakkamabāhu I, four monks, Ānāpāla, Moggallāna, Nāgindapalliya and Nanda, were chosen to represent the great many monks at the synod, which was held under the supervision of Dimbulagala Mahākassapa. The names of these four monks are found only in the Cv. These monks were summoned not only from the city but from the outlying provinces as well (i.e. Sapara and Rohaṇa). Purification and reconciliation began with the monks of the Mahāvihāra nikāya and was followed by the other two nikāyas. This unification was based on re-ordination in the tradition of the Mahāvihāra nikāya. Parakkamabāhu I had Mahākassapa enact the Katikāvata, which was seen as the essence of the Vinaya and what every recluse should observe.
The Katikāvata that Parakkamabāhu I issued was the first Sāsana Katikāvata, which was called the Polonnaru Katikāvata, or the Mahā-Parakkamabāhu Katikāvata. This established the rules (upasampadā, general conduct, daily routine, basic texts which should be mastered, the management of monastic property, and so on) adopted by the saṅgha after the purification. It also regulated the lives of monks in accordance with the two courses, the vipassanādhura and the ganthadhura. Although this legislation was made to differentiate these two practices in monastic life, the Katikāvata stipulated that monks should acquire knowledge of both systems9).

Also under Parakkamabāhu I, the Jetavana monastery was erected. A great number of monks assembled at Jetavana and helped to compile sub-commentaries along with the theras in eight āyatanas, which developed from the three nikāyas, and Sāriputta who was a disciple of Mahākassapa10) and famous for his great wisdom as Sāgara-mati. According to the Katikāvata enacted in the Dambadeniya period, Sāriputta was the first thera who was conferred the title Mahāsāmi, or “head of the saṅgha”11). This fact tells us that the saṅgha was unified under common leadership and indicates the development of a new hierarchical dimension which differed from that found in the early saṅgha, where a head successor was not chosen.

4. After the cruel rule of Māgha of Kāliṅga, Vijayabāhu III (1232-1236) ascended the throne at Daṃbadeṇiya, the capital. According to the Daṃbadeṇiya Katikāvata, issued by the subsequent king Parakkamabāhu II (1236-1270), the hierarchy of the saṅgha was further revamped. According to this text, two administrative positions known as the Mahātheras (one representing the arahāvāsa and another representing the gāmavāsa12), who came second in command to the Mahāsāmi, were established. With this, the unity and organization of the saṅgha in the Polonnaruva period was further consolidated and strengthened.