The Hindu Sage Kapila, the Liberation of Bodh Gaya and Burma on the Eve of the Modern Era

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Abstract—The discovery in Upper Burma of a stone sculpture representing the Hindu sage Kapila highlights the key role that Brahmanical rituals played in the court life of Theravāda societies. Commissioned in Varanasi, this image of Kapila was transported in 1812 to Amarapura, the Burmese capital, where it was the focus of state ceremonies. Less than a year later the imported sculpture stepped onto the geopolitical stage when it became the centerpiece of an attack on India to free Bodh Gaya from British control before the invasion was aborted. How the palace, the sangha and court Brahmans balanced both Hindu and Buddhist perceptions of Kapila opens a window on the labyrinthine ties between Southeast Asia and Indian civilization.

June, 1812. Upper Burma

For those tilling their fields up and down the banks of the Irrawaddy in 1812, an unusual flotilla came into view shortly before the monsoon broke. Aboard the lead craft was a nearly life-size sandstone image of a Hindu deity named Kapilamuni, or Kapila the Sage (Figure 1). The sculpture was commissioned in Varanasi and conveyed to Amarapura in Burma (Myanmar), about 1,500 miles as the crow flies, or roughly the distance between London and Athens. Taken down the Ganges from Varanasi into the Bay of Bengal, it was then transported hundreds of miles up the Irrawaddy to Amarapura, just south of Mandalay in Upper Burma. Commissioned in Varanasi on orders issued by Bodawpaya (reigned 1782-1819), the sixth king of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885), the sculpture now resides inside a small brick shrine tucked away in the corner of a rarely visited monastery near the former walled capital of Amarapura. Once the focus of Brahmanical court rituals and flamboyant pageants, the stone image today receives only occasional floral offerings, its former importance completely unknown. While this sculpture was being received in Amarapura in 1812, there remained behind in Varanasi its twin, a near perfect match executed in the same workshop, that has remained under active worship at the Kapiladhārā Temple (Figures 1 and 2).

Each Kapila sculpture measures slightly less than five feet in height. Both show the sacred thread across the left shoulder and the V-shaped *ūrdhva-puṇḍra* (Sanskrit) marking on the forehead in shallow relief. A string of beads is held in the right hand while the other grasps a thin flower stem. The headdress shows the twisted locks associated with

Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 109, Pt. 2, 2021, pp. 103–130

Figure 1. Kapila the Sage, Kyaw Aung San Dar Monastery, Amarapura. c.1810–1812, sandstone, H. 4ft., 7in. Photograph by author.

Figure 2. Kapila the Sage, Kapiladhārā Temple, Varanasi, c.1810–1812, sandstone. H. 4ft.,7in. Photograph by author.

ascetics, with thick strands on both shoulders. Although Kapila is a sage, the prominent crown signals his divinity. The image in Varanasi is unpainted but its counterpart in Amarapura is repainted now and then. The sculptures are virtually identical and were certainly made by the same Varanasi artisans during the same period, that is, sometime between 1810 and 1812. The object taken to Upper Burma is located at the Kyaw Aung San Dar monastery, a few blocks northeast of the famous Mahagandhayon monastery in Amarapura. The first to draw the connection between this Kapila sculpture and the one known in historical sources was a learned local monk (U Pyinnya 1996: 153).

These paired Kapila images represent a Hindu deity but an altogether different mythical figure with the same name played a key role in Buddhist traditions. It is this Buddhist association that imparted a special layer of significance to the image in Amarapura. This was the sage named Kapila who offered his hermitage as a haven to exiled members of the Sakya clan, the same clan to which the Buddha, or Sakyamuni, belonged. For the Konbaung rulers, the sage Kapila held an honored position since the dynasty traced its origins to the Sakyas, beginning from its founder, Alaungpaya (reigned 1752-1760). This king was the son of a village headman and not of royal stock

and so tethering the Konbaung realm to the esteemed Sakyas affirmed the dynasty's right to rule. The dynasty's first capital, modern Shwebo north of Mandalay, was expressly compared to the Sakyan capital of Kapilavatthu. Even Alaungpaya's crushing of a Mon army of 40,000 to 60,000 was attributed to the martial properties attached to his capital that was also named Victory Ground (*Konbaungzet*: 1.66; hereafter KBZ). The court's ties to the Sakyas even extended to emulating Sakyan social conventions, such as royal marriages between half-brothers and half-sisters (*Royal Orders of Burma:* 23 January 1798; hereafter ROB). Tracing the deity Kapila in both Buddhist and Hindu traditions explains how these two distinct deities known by the same name came to play prominent but contrasting roles in the Burmese court.

The sage Kapila, the Sakyas and the Konbaung dynasty

The Sakyan clan's connection with the sage Kapila is found in numerous Pali and Sanskrit sources, with many slight variations. The legend's basic outline begins with a Sakyan king named Okkāka who ruled in northeastern India eons before the Buddha's lifetime. Okkāka promised his ambitious second queen to grant his throne to their son. Fearing then for the welfare of his other children conceived by his first queen, he sent his four sons and four daughters to safety to an unnamed location at the Himalayan foothills, recorded in the canonical *Ambaṭṭha-sutta.*[1] This tale of exile was summarized by a mere few lines in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta*, added almost as an afterthought (*Ambaṭṭha-sutta*: 3.1.15). However, this very sliver of an episode formed the basis of a vastly expanded narrative by the 5th-century Pali commentator, Buddhaghosa (*Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī*: 1.257-261). In this version, Okkāka's four sons and five daughters (one more daughter than in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta*) came upon a sage named Kapila who invited them to establish their new capital on the site of his hermitage. To retain the purity of the Sakyan strain, the four brothers and four sisters produced offspring and Kapilavatthu was thus populated. To record their gratitude to Kapila, the Sakyas christened the capital after the sage's namesake, that is, Kapilavatthu

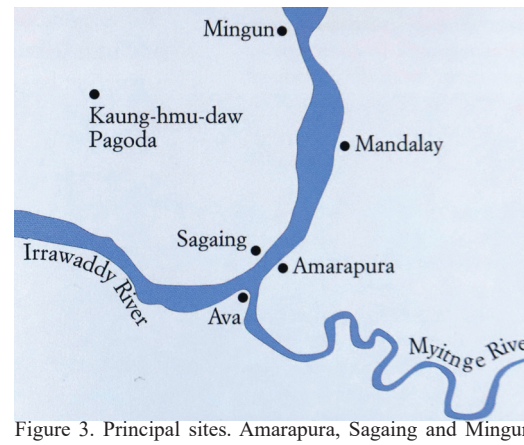

Figure 3. Principal sites. Amarapura, Sagaing and Mingun. After Stadtner, *Sacred Sites of Burma*, p. 233.

[1] This banishment of royal children mirrors the famous forest exile of Rāma and his half-brother, due to a boon given to one of their father's three wives. Okkāka's lineage began with the world's first king, Mahasāmmata, and included many former capitals which are listed with variation in Pali, Sanskrit and vernacular Southeast Asian sources. The *Dīpavaṃsa* cites no less than twenty Sakyan capitals (3.1-50). The *Mahāvaṃsa* also lists later groups of Sakyas in many capitals (2.1-15). In the opening chapter of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* Okkāka was the king of Varanasi (*Hmannan Mahayazawindawgyi,* 1.23-26; personal communication, Patrick Pranke). This first chapter was not included in the English translation of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (Luce and Pe Maung Tin: 1923). In the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu*, Okkāka is said to rule in Saketa (Ayodhya). Okkāka's capital is unspecified in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta*.

(Pali), or Kapilavastu (Sanskrit). Furthermore, Kapila promised the Sakyas invincibility and the strength to overcome all enemies. A single Kapilavatthu resident, for example, was capable of defeating 100,000 foes, a superhuman feat likened to deer triumphing over tigers. Konbaung chroniclers lifted nearly the same description for their capital Shwebo from Buddhaghosa's commentary or its later recensions (KBZ: 3.173). Even the dynasty's last capital, Mandalay, was compared to Kapilavatthu and King Mindon (reigned 1853-1878) declared that he was a 'true Sakyan' (ROB: 21 March 1862; 7 April 1856).

The singling out of Okkāka from among a lengthy list of legendary kings was purposeful, since King Okkāka is the Sanskrit King Ikṣvāku, the founder of the Solar Dynasty so important in South Asia. Belonging to this solar lineage, or the Ikṣvāku-vaṃsa, was none other than Rāma, the king and god par excellence. Selecting Okkāka was a tacit attempt by Buddhists to link the Sakyas to other dynasties in ancient India that traced their descent to the Ikṣvāku line (Thapar 2013: 395).

The history of the Sakyas continues eons later during the time of the Buddha when the clan was forced to flee again, in this instance from Kapilavatthu. The fullest account is found in an influential commentary on the *Dhammapada* (*Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*: 90-92). The problem started when a king from the neighboring kingdom of Kosala requested a Sakyan princess to wed. The haughty Sakyan chiefs considered such a union beneath them and so the king was sent a woman posing as a genuine princess. Her father was a genuine Sakyan but her mother was a slave. The offspring of this union was Prince Vidūdabha who later as king of Kosala discovered his debased ancestry. Vowing revenge, he then destroyed Kapilavatthu and slaughtered its inhabitants, "beginning with babes at the breast." (*Jātaka* 465). The Buddha tried three times to deter Vidūdabha from this genocide but finally conceded, recalling that the Sakyas in a previous existence had poisoned the fish in a river and so accrued sufficient bad karma to merit their extinction (Strong 2009). Much of this same narrative is found in Burma's *Glass Palace Chronicle* and also in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan and other Southeast Asian vernacular texts, each differing somewhat (Luce and Pe Maung Tin: 1-4; hereafter GPC). For example, a Tibetan chronicle identified the Sakyas with the Solar Dynasty and placed King Ikṣvāku at Potala, and it was from there that he sent his children into exile; the children met Kapila who granted them land for their new homeland (Rockhill 1884: 11).

Buddhaghosa recorded that two small groups survived the massacre at Kapilavatthu but they were accorded no subsequent role.[2] This narrative of destruction and the survival of some Sakyans however opened the door to later legends which claimed that certain family members escaped Kapilavatthu and fled elsewhere, though no ancient Indian sources refer to any Sakyas fleeing from India. Lore about the annihilation of the Sakyas was widespread in north India at the time of Buddhaghosa by the middle of the first millennium. This is attested by the best-known Chinese pilgrims, the 5th-century Faxian and the 7th-century Xuanzang (Li 2002: 186; Beal 1884: 4.20). Both were shown

[2] Vidūdabha's soldiers demanded to know who in Kapilavatthu were Sakyan. Some put reeds (*nala*) in their mouths, others grass (*tina*). Speech impaired, the two groups were spared the slaughter but they played no further role. (*Sumaṅgala-vilāsinī*: 1. 346-349, 357-361) This theme of destruction recalls the fate of Kṛṣṇa's Yadāva clan found in the *Mahābhārata* and elsewhere.

ruinous monuments in Kapilavatthu that commemorated the slain Sakyans. The dead, Xuanzang noted, numbered 9,990, and their bodies were once stacked like straw. Early archaeologists in India accepted this massacre at face value and searched for remains of the razed city but no physical evidence or inscriptions confirm the destruction of any Sakyan settlements (Mukerji and Smith 1901: 13).

The few Sakyans escaping Kapilavatthu's destruction were to play a profound role in the history of Sri Lanka in the first millennium and much later in Burma during the Konbaung period. Sources in Sri Lanka recorded that the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu experienced a premonition of an impending invasion by an unnamed outside force (*Dīpavaṃsa*: 10.1; *Mahāvaṃsa*: 8.18). Fleeing just in time before the attack was the son of the Buddha's uncle who reached the bank of the Ganges with his seven sons and daughters. His youngest daughter was then sent to safety by boat to Sri Lanka where she wed the brother of the island's first settler, Vijaya, who came from India but who was not a Sakyan.[3] Later, one of their descendants married a Sakyan prince who had settled in Sri Lanka and their offspring was the famous Paṇḍukābhaya, the founder of Anuradhapura and the Buddha's great grand-nephew (Gunawardana 1978: 102). Later kings stressed the linkage with the Sakyas by directly invoking the early Sakyan King Okkāka, together with the world's first king, Mahāsammata, and the Solar Dynasty (Collins and Huxley 1966; Wickremasinghe: 1.52; Wickremasinghe: 2.274; Wickremasinghe: 3.228). Sinhala savants thus brilliantly united the Buddha's Sakya clan, Mahāsammata, the island's founder Vijaya and the nation's first capital, Anuradhapura.

"…. the delicate seed of the Buddha …."

While the Sakyan connection to a dynastic lineage in Sri Lanka appeared in the first millennium, these very same traditions perhaps provided Konbaung age chroniclers with a template to assert that they too were descendants of Sakyan migrations, also deriving directly from Kapilavatthu.[4] The Burmese chronicles also stressed the role of Okkāka, said to be a descendant of Mahāsammata, and all were linked to the Solar Dynasty. To explain how Sakyans entered Burma, a Sakyan king named Abhiraja was introduced. After he fled India to Burma, he then settled in Tagaung, a town about 130 miles north of Mandalay on the east bank of the Irrawaddy. The cause of Abhiraja's exile was a defeat of the Sakyans at the hands of the Pancala kingdom and not the Kosala kingdom as Pali sources maintained (GPC: 1).[5] Later, at the time of the Buddha,

[3] A princess cast off on a boat for her safety by her father and wedding a prince in a far off location parallels the story of the Sinhala national hero, Duṭṭhagāmini, whose mother was sent to safety on a boat from Kelaniya (*Mahāvaṃsa*: 22.21). Other Sakyans settled in Sri Lanka who accompanied Asoka's daughter to Anuradhapura. The memory of the Sakyan ties to royal dynasties in Sri Lanka continued for centuries (*Rajavilaya:* 67).

[4] Pagan's King Kyanzittha (reigned c. 1084-c. 1113) was linked to the Solar Dynasty, or "*ādiccavaṃsa*" (Duroiselle 1919: 1.2.151, 167). In earlier births, Kyanzittha belonged to the royal family in Pataliputra and to the dynasty of King Rāma in Ayodhya, or "Ayodhapur" (Duroisselle 1919: 1.2.139). This association with the Solar Dynasty persisted in Burma through the Konbaung period (Tun Aung Chain 2004a: 132).

[5] Tagaung was probably singled out because it evoked a hoary past, being littered in brick ruins by the time of the Konbaung period. How abandoned cities, such as Śrī Kṣetra, have been incorporated into Southeast foundation myths is the subject of a future study.

a second wave of Sakyans arrived in Burma, led by Dhajaraja, who fled the onslaught on Kapilavatthu by Vidūdabha (Vitatupa, Burmese) (GPC: 3). Both legendary Abhiraja and Dhajaraja descended from Mahāsammata and Okkāka, described in the opening of the *Glass Palace Chronicle.* Many passages in the GPC drew extensively from Buddhaghosa's commentary but the Burmese introduced Abhiraja and Dhajaraja to explain how the fleeing Sakyans came to Burma (GPC: 1–4). The idea of Sakya migrations in Burma may have been distantly modeled on the Sri Lankan traditions treated above or the notion may have arisen indigenously. No archaeological evidence in Burma or Sri Lanka supports these migrations. Linking the Sakyas to a royal lineage in Burma developed only in Konbaung times since it is absent in earlier chronicles, such as U Kala's *Mahayazawingyi*, circa 1730 (GPC: *xiv*). The ties between Burma and the Sakyas endured even long after the overthrow of the Konbaung dynasty in the 1880s. This explains how a former Mandalay court official as late as the 1920s could muse that the Burmese royal family sprang from a "delicate seed of the Buddha" (U Tin 2001: 15).

Konbaung chroniclers stretched the basic myth even further by asserting that Tagaung was destroyed by invaders from the north, thus spawning yet more Sakyan migrations but within Burma. One group fled south to become the ancient Pyu at Śrī Kṣetra, near Pyay, and another subdivided into nineteen Shan principalities, such as the Nyaungshwe kingdom which included Inle Lake (GPC: 3). In Arakan, or Rakhine, fleeing Sakyans from Tagaung were also adapted to legends in which a Sakyan wed a local princess (Leider 2005: 6). In another version, the Arakan kingdom was founded by one of Abhiraja's sons who quit Tagaung after losing a competition to his brother (GPC: 2; Charney 2002). The Sakya migration myth thus evolved like a mighty tree with numerous branches. The Mon in Lower Burma however never connected dynastic descent to the Sakyas but were familiar with the basic narrative, known from a Mon chronicle dated to 1766 (Halliday 1923: 76).

Migrations triggered by military defeats were not limited to the Sakyas. The most far reaching instance in the West began when the legendary Trojan warrior Aeneas who, after escaping his conquered Troy in Asia Minor, fled to found Rome. This myth was immortalized in Virgil's *Aeneid* and entered European civilization, appearing in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Dante's *Divine Comedy.* One medieval tradition claimed that a grandson of Aeneas even colonized the British Isles, explaining why Julius Caesar, after crossing the Channel from Gaul, remarked that these 'Britons come from the same race as we do …. descended from Trojan stock' (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*: 107). In a similar way, royal lineages in later Burma and Sri Lanka shared a similar heritage born out of forced Sakyan migrations. The identification with the Sakyas also allowed chroniclers in Burma and Sri Lanka to connect royal lineages to the venerable Mahāsammata and the Solar Dynasty. Burmese political theory in the Konbaung period stressed Mahāsammata and the ruler's obligation to foster the codified "ten laws of kingly conduct" (Candier 2007: 16).

The story of Kapila and the destruction of Kapilavatthu was well known in all Theravāda communities but its adaptation to dynastic foundation myths was not universal. Sri Lanka stands alone in developing this connection in the first millennium and it was only adopted in Burma during the Konbaung age. Dynasties in neighboring

Thailand chose not to link dynastic lineages to any Sakyan migration traditions (personal communications, Chris Baker and B.J. Terwiel). The 14th-century *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, or the *Story of the Three Worlds*, refers to Mahāsammata but no connection is made between this first king and the solar line or to the Sakyas. The *Chiang Mai Chronicle*, from the first half of the 19th century, traced the Buddha's lineage back to Mahāsammata, through a lengthy list of kings including Okkāka, but nothing is included about the solar line, the slaughter of the Sakyas or migrations from Kapilavatthu (*Chiang Mai Chronicle*: 1-3).[6]

A great number of foundation myths in Southeast Asia were well outside the orbit of traditional Pali literature. Many share common themes but each is different. These myths explain the origin of kingdoms, cities or pivotal legendary kings and queen. Motifs included hermits or wizards coupling with snake goddesses disguised as maidens who abandoned one or more eggs in the forest that hatched to become human children and later kings or queens. The first royal patron of Burma's famous Golden Rock was born from one of two snake eggs and raised by a hermit. He became the King of Thaton. From the second egg came the future monk Gavampati, a major figure in Mon legends (Stadtner 2015: 159) (Figure 4). The Thaton Queen was also born from a snake egg and became, after a violent death, the principal 'spirit', or *nat*, venerated now at the Golden Rock. This myth involving the snake eggs is absent in 15th-century Mon inscriptions but appears only by the 17th century (Stadtner 2015:158). A late Thai chronicle opens with two Brahman hermits, brothers, whose descendants founded Sawankhalok and Haripunchai. A later Haripunchai king mated for seven days with a woman who was in reality the daughter of a snake. Their son, raised by a hunter, became King Ruang. The Buddha prophesied that this 'Serpent King' would become king and he assumed the throne at Satchanalai (Cushman 2000: 1-3). In Sri Lanka a myth claimed that even Kandy's great king, Vikramabahu (reigned c. 1469-c. 1511), descended from a young girl who hatched from a peacock egg on the lap of the great Devānampiya Tissa, a contemporary of King Asoka (*Rajaratnakaraya*: 75).

Another common motif in Burma and Thailand centers on a doe drinking the sperm-infused urine of a hermit and then giving birth to human offspring. This theme enjoyed great antiquity, appearing in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* and also a *Jātaka* wherein the urine of the *bodhisatta*, in his life as a hermit, was consumed by a deer (*Niḷinikā Jātaka* 526). In Burma, a descendant of Abhiraja in Tagaung traveled south to Śrī Kṣetra to wed a woman who was the daughter of a doe who gave birth to the legendary first ruler of Śrī Kṣetra, King Duttabaung (GPC: 16-18; Stadtner 2015: 207). The motif of the pregnant doe also appears in Thailand's Camadevi chronicle in which twins were born, a boy and a girl, who were raised by the hermit Vasudev; each child later founded a city-state (Swearer and Sommai 1998: 42). Such myths continue to emerge, with recent

[6] The Sukhothai King Lodaiya claimed descent from Rāma and Narāyaṇa [Viṣṇu], thus indirectly linking himself to the solar-*vaṃsa* in a 14th-century inscription, much like Kyanzittha earlier at Pagan (Griswold and Prasert 1973: 124). A later Sukhothai King Lidaiya included "Sūryavaṃsa and Rāma" in his formal title, following his *abhiseka* (Griswold and Prasert 1973: 136-137). The Ayutthaya dynasty used the connection with the Sūryavaṃsa sparingly but it continued for centuries, appearing in a treaty with Laos dated to 1563 (Griswold and Prasert 1979: 60).

Figure 4. A snake goddess coupled with a wizard, resulting in two eggs held by two hermits. Daw Pwint Pavilion, c. 1930s. Shwedagon Pagoda platform. Yangon. Photograph by author.

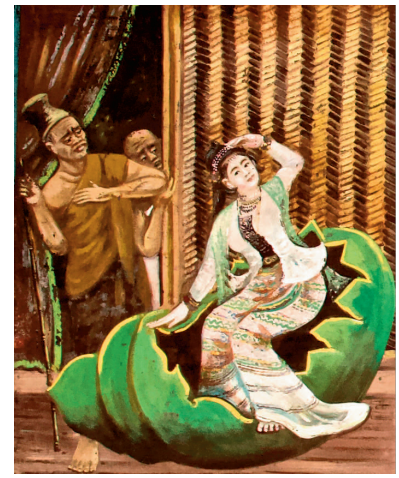

Figure 5. Mei Lamu, the mother of Yangon's first king, Okkalapa, emerging from the lamu fruit. Kyaikmaraw Pagoda. Mon State. c. 1970s. Photograph by author.

examples in Northeastern Thailand and Laos stating that that Buddha's sperm, spilled in water, impregnated a snake goddess who gave birth to the well-known Buddhist deity Upagupta (Strong 1992: 220).

Other origin myths center on births from vegetal forms. This theme also had ancient Indian roots, such as a female infant who emerged from a yam and then later wed the Hindu god Skanda. This goddess plays a major role in Tamil Hinduism in which she is consort of Murugan; she also is a major figure at Kataragama in Sri Lanka. In Burma, the earliest example of such a birth is King Kyanzittha (reigned c. 1084-c. 1113) whose mother "dwelt within" the fruit of a wood-apple tree (*Aegle mamelos*) (Duroiselle 1919: 1.2.151, 167). Another instance was the mother of the first royal patron of the Shwedagon Pagoda, King Okkalapa, born from a fruit of the *lamu* tree (*Sonneratia caseolaris*) (Stadtner 2015: 50) (Figure 5). Her popular Mei Lamu temple in Yangon (Rangoon) testifies to the unbroken popularity of such legends. These myths from Thailand and Burma are datable to the second millennium but little is known about their antecedents. Many such creation myths coexisted in later Burma and the compilers of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* openly wrestled with different versions before recording their preference for what they took as most authentic. Other examples are the conflicting legends about the founder of Pagan (Bagan) (GPC: 38).

Many themes, such as those centered on snake eggs or pregnant does, belonged to ancient Indic lore from which Pali traditions sprang. These varied myths were then probably absorbed in Southeast Asia from imported texts. However many myths were likely purely indigenous to mainland Southeast Asia and were blended with legends introduced from outside. Many myths conclude with prophecies by the Buddha that function as endorsements of the basic narrative. A comprehensive history of these numerous tales has yet to be written. Also, it is misleading to consider these as 'folklore', that is, accepted by only an illiterate peasantry, since the myths appear in dynastic and Buddhist chronicles and are still widely believed today by many members of society from all backgrounds. These creation myths, which at first glance seem so bizarre, are

not qualitatively different than the Buddhist story of the white elephant entering Queen Maya's side and the birth of the Buddha. Western civilization knows many parallels too, such as the creation of Eve from Adam's rib and Mary's Immaculate Conception. Miraculous births, both in East and West, affirm that these special beings came into existence without the taint of ritual pollution attendant upon human conception and birthing (Obeyesekere 2018: 42).

The Hindu sage Kapila

The influential Brahmans in Amarapura were well acquainted with the Hindu deity Kapila and his two principal pilgrimage temples in Bengal and Varanasi. The story of Kapila appears with variations in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* and a smattering of *Purāṇas* wherein Kapila was a sage. The tale unfolds with a horse sacrifice, or *aśvamedha* (Sanskrit), sponsored by King Sagara.[7] The plans went terribly wrong since the horse was abducted by the god Indra who feared that Sagara would acquire too much power from the ceremony. Indra thus ran away with the horse into the bowels of the earth, right beneath the noses of Sagara's 60,000 sons assigned guard duty. The enraged king then commanded the careless lads to pursue the horse that was eventually spotted outside Kapila's hermitage. Accusing Kapila of theft, the boys moved to kill him but not before the all-powerful sage reduced them to ashes and bones. Kapila was later mollified by Sagara's repentant grandson and the horse was returned. Kapila also promised to divert the Ganges River from the Himalayas to wash the burned remains of the slain sons into the Bay of Bengal. Popular old lithographs, with captions in Hindi and Bengali, feature a seated Kapila and a horse led by Indra to the sage's hermitage. The bearded figure to the side of Kapila is Sagara's grandson (Figure 6). On the other side is the goddess Ganges on her mythical crocodile and the young Bhāgiratha who interceded with Śiva to release the waters of the Ganges from the

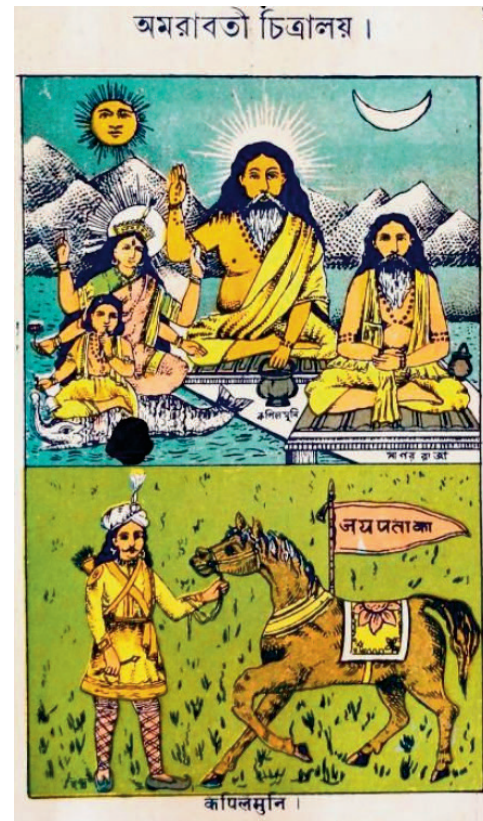

Figure 6. Kapila the Sage, top center, and Indra leading Sagara's horse. Hindi and Bengali captions, c. 1900. Lithograph. Private Collection.

[7] This synopsis is drawn from the *Mahābhārata.* A masterful recent study has unraveled the numerous Kapilas in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions (Jacobsen 2008). Sri Lankan Buddhists by the time of Parakramabāhu II (reigned 1236-1270) knew of the Hindu King Sagara, probably due to Tamil Hindu influence (*Cūlavaṃsa:* 87. 34-38). In the *Royal Orders,* Kapila is referred to as "Kappila *yathe*"; the Burmese word *yathe,* derived from the Pali *isi,* (*ṛṣi,* Skt.)*,* is commonly translated as hermit.

Himalayas.[8] Other depictions show Kapila touching his forefinger to his thumb and the other hand concealed by a red cloth, indications of a ritual in progress (Figure 7). The waves beneath Kapila signify the waters surrounding Ganga Sagar island.[9] King Sagara holds a jewel and a flower (Figure 8). This pair of watercolors belongs to the same early 19th-century period when Burmese missions were in Varanasi commissioning the Kapila sculpture.

Figure 7. Kapila the Sage. Early 19th century, possibly Patna, Bihar, watercolor on paper. British Museum (1800.0.2068).

Figure 8. King Sagara. Early 19th century, possibly Patna, Bihar, watercolor on paper. British Museum (1800.0.2072).

Brahmanical influence within Theravada courts in Southeast Asia is a well-trodden theme and the tight distinctions today between Buddhism and Hinduism had no place in Theravāda realms. Indeed, "King, *saṅgha*, and brahmans were partners in a complex organism of state protection and state welfare Buddhism." (Skilling 2007: 202). Brahmans in Amarapura even recited Buddhist protective verses, or *paritta* (Pali), and joined a Bodhi Tree celebration in Mandalay (ROB: 5 June 1789; 14 April 1879).

[8] These old lithographs are based on the three major stone icons within the shrine room of the Ganga Sagar temple. Kapila is shown with an unexplained snake hood, a feature absent in the lithographs. His raised right hand holds a string of beads while his lowered hand grasps the top of a water vessel. A miniature pot rests to the side and to the rear of the Kapila images in Amararpura and Varanasi (visible in Figure 2).

[9] Kapila (British Museum, 1880.0.2068) and King Sagara (British Museum, 1880.0.2072). These works were intended largely for British patrons living in India and belong to what art historians have styled the Company-School. Asceticism, or *tapas* (Sanskrit), and the concomitant acquisition of special physical and mental powers, so pivotal to Hindu civilization, also plays an important but much understudied role in Buddhism (Benedetti 2014-2015).

Numerous similar examples indicate how Brahmans and monks shared the religious landscape but at the same time were recognized as distinct. Brahman ritualists served in court settings in Burma for centuries, attested as early as the Pagan period (c. 11th-c. 13th century), but Bodawpaya's long reign of nearly forty years represented a zenith of such influence.[10] For example, there were over twenty-six Varanasi Brahman advisors and ritualists based in Amarapura at the time the Kapila image reached Upper Burma in 1812 (KBZ: 2. 175-181).

Many of Amarapura's Brahman elites hailed from Varanasi and Bengal where the deity Kapila enjoyed its greatest popularity. Kapila's paramount *locus sacer* was for centuries a small island named Ganga Sagar, located some fifty miles south of Calcutta (Kolkata) where the Hooghly River debouches into the Bay of Bengal. The island's annual pilgrimage is ranked among India's great ritual bathing destinations. The Kapila temple there marks the very spot where the sage dispatched King Sagara's 60,000 sons. Worshippers seek to tap the god's incalculable strength to benefit their own ends, echoing Bodawpaya's intentions (Jacobsen 2008: 150). The king's court Brahmans sailing up or down the Hooghly from Calcutta or Burma could not escape passing by Ganga Sagar Island or halting at the temple for a religious ceremony.

The second major pilgrimage site sacred to Kapila is the Kapiladhārā Temple in Varanasi that has for centuries been a key stop in the city's famous Pancha Kroshi Road pilgrimage (Jacobsen 2008: 3; Eck 1982: 353). The sculpture's original disposition at the Varanasi temple is unknown but it is now worshipped inside a small chamber of recent date adjoining the temple's platform. The present temple dates from the 1760s and was the subject of a lithograph from 1834 based on a sketch by the antiquarian James Prinsep (1799-1840) (Figure 9).[11] The complex also appears in two early hand-painted cloth maps of Varanasi's pilgrimage routes, the earliest attributed to the late 18th century and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Gengnagel 2011; personal communication, Jörg Gengnagel). The Varanasi Kapila image was never associated with the Buddhist Kapila, only with the sage Kapila who annihilated Sagara's 60,000 sons. The temple's earliest mythology celebrates Śiva's return to Varanasi, with no connection to the sage named Kapila. However, by the early 19th century the temple came to be also connected to the Hindu sage Kapila, due to the coincidental match between the name of the temple in Varanasi and the name of the sage celebrated on Ganga Sagar Island. (Jacobsen 2008: 171; Eck 1982: 353; Gutschow 2006: 257; personal communication, Knut Jacobsen).[12]

[10] Jacques Leider's pioneering study of Brahmans during Bodawpaya's reign is the most comprehensive treatment of this subject (Leider 2005-06). See also Leider, 2004. For a solid overview of the Konbaung dynasty and the role of Brahmans, see Thant Myint U. An important source is the *Treatise on the Administration of Burma*, compiled by a former court official, U Tin, circa 1920. It appeared in Burmese and later in an English translation by Euan Bagshawe (U Tin 2001).

[11] The lithograph's caption "Kulpuldhara Tulao" refers to the water tank (*talab*, Hindi) attached to the Kapiladhārā Temple. This is Plate 2 in Prinsep's series published in 1834, *Benares Illustrated*, based on his sketches. Prinsep noted in his text that the temple commemorated one of the feats of Śiva "when he designed to visit his favourite city."

[12] The name Kapila derives from a cow of reddish-brown hue, or *kapilā* (Sanskrit), which, together with other cows, filled up with milk the tank opposite the Varanasi temple. The temple's foundation myth is drawn from

Figure 9. Kapiladhārā Temple, Varanasi, lithograph, *Benares Illustrated* by James Prinsep. London, 1834.

Entering the water-filled tank at the Kapiladhārā Temple is likened to bathing at Ganga Sagar in Bengal.

Had this Varanasi Kapila temple and the temple on Ganga Sagar Island been unfamiliar to the Brahmans in Upper Burma, there would be scant reason to initiate a mission to Varanasi to commission the sculpture. Moreover, images of Kapila were uncommon, if not rare, compared to the great number of Indian sculptures depicting such gods as Gaṇeśa or Kṛṣṇa. The selection of this unusual deity was therefore not happenstance but made with forethought by Brahmans in consultation with Bodawpaya. The new Kapila image soon settled comfortably among other Hindu deities worshipped at court, but it was accorded special status at the outset, indicated by certain ceremonies treated below.

The missions Bodawpaya organized to Varanasi to obtain the Kapila image were among a number of embassies to India. Most were charged to collect what were taken to be the most authentic Buddhist and Hindu treatises. By 1786 over 300 texts had been brought from India, ranging over astrology, history, grammar, law, medicine, poetry and religious rites that when translated and copied yielded 6,945 folios of paper and 7,455 palm-leaves. (Than Tun 1961: 130*)*.[13] Missions in Bodawpaya's day and later also visited north Indian courts to probe alliances with Indian courts to thwart growing British expansion (Cox 1821: 215-217; Thant Myint U 2001: 99; ROB: 6 August 1824). Details about these diverse embassies to India are sparse but a handful of surviving

the *Kāśikaṇdha* of the *Skandapurāṇa* wherein there is no mention of Kapila (Eck 1982: 353; Gutschow 2006: 230; Gengnagel 2011: 28-32).

[13] Teams were employed to translate Bengali and Sanskrit texts. (ROB: 30 April 1810; 12 October 1810).

Figure 10. Burmese Mission in Delhi, c. 1817, ink and gouache on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (09.2271).

painted works by Indian artists offer a glimpse into this world. One example shows a Burmese embassy in the foreground and Delhi's Red Fort in the distance (Figure 10). This work is perhaps from around 1817, or two years before the close of Bodawpaya's reign (Losty 2008).[14]

"…. as the Chaldeans were about the kings of Persia…."

The Kapila sculpture is part of the larger story of Brahmanical influence in Bodawpaya's court. The impact of Brahmans during this period can be pieced together from indigenous sources and first-hand accounts by Europeans, notably Michael Symes, Francis Buchanan, Hiram Cox, Father V. Sangermano, and John Canning. These visitors were generally unsympathetic to Bodawpaya and Buddhism but their observations are many times corroborated in Burmese sources (Pranke 2008a). Brahmans were omnipresent in the court, "as the Chaldeans were about the kings of Persia, as soothsayers and wise men." (Buchanan 1801:168). This view is confirmed by Sangermano who lived

[14] Losty argued that this work in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, was a later copy of a painting now in private hands which showed the composition in reverse, produced by the pouncing technique. A third painting, unpublished, in the Freer-Sackler Museum, Washington, D.C. (F 1968.5), is nearly identical to the one illustrated by Losty. Within the central figure's headband is the name and title of the official in Burmese characters but he is otherwise unknown. The other figures are identified by short Persian inscriptions placed above their heads. The inscriptions are transliterations of Burmese, implying that the Indian artist received his information directly from his subjects. A fourth work, also unpublished and at the Freer-Sackler, shows only a single standing figure, dressed like the ambassador but with a helmet and also with Persian inscriptions (F 1907.225). The connection between these four related paintings has yet to be worked out. For the Metropolitan Museum work, see Welch et. al. 1987: 28, Fig. 11 and Archer and Falk 1989: 104.

in Burma during the same period, 1783-1806, and who concluded that "all is regulated by the opinions of the Brahmins [Brahmans], so that not even the king shall presume to take any step without their advice." (Sangermano 1966: 67). Brahmans were "consulted on all matters of importance …. [and] they bestow on their protectors, amulets, charms, and the like …. By such means they have procured many privileges" (Symes 1800: 169). Such pervasive influence sparked the ire of the sangha and Buchanan insightfully concluded that the Buddhist leaders were "probably in a great measure instigated by a jealousy, which they not without reason entertain against such dangerous intruders as the Brahmens [Brahmans]." (Buchanan 1801: 170).

The most important Brahmans conducted ablution rites. There were as many as fourteen occasions requiring such ceremonies, ranging from the installation of a prince to formalizing the possession of white elephants (Okudaira 2018: 74). However, the most critical was the coronation, or *muddhabhiseka*, (head-anointing), in which Brahmans and senior monks participated (Okudaira 2018:78). No king in Burma's history took coronations as seriously as Bodawpaya, having staged an unprecedented five such ceremonies during his thirty-seven year reign (Okudaira 2018: 74-76; ROB: 18 March 1795). To conduct the ritual properly, Bodawpaya dispatched ten Brahmans to Calcutta to acquire "treatises on worldly affairs". Further, a leading member of the king's Buddhist religious council translated into Burmese the Bengali version of an otherwise unknown Sanskrit text, *Abhiṣeka Sadan*, or *Consecration Compendium* (Okudaira 2018: 71, 77). Such efforts underscore the importance attached to ceremonies based on the most reliable texts from India.[15] Assembling the most authentic Buddhist texts was no less vital, with texts from Sri Lanka transcribed into Burmese characters and translations of works from Majjhimadesa [India] and Bengal (ROB: 8 July 1807; 3 July 1783) There was even an attempt to uncover in India the ancient script in which the canon was written; when the mission returned empty-handed, it was ruled acceptable to use Burmese characters (ROB: 10 July 1810).

Brahmans commanding the greatest status were from Varanasi, the epicenter of Hindu orthodoxy. As a measure of their status, Varanasi Brahmans were not required to prostrate themselves before princes and ministers, a privilege reserved for members of the sangha (Thant Myint U 2001: 96; ROB: 21 January 1810). The term in Burmese sources for foreign Brahmans was '*punna*' but Burmese Brahmans were also included within this broad rubric. Varanasi Brahmans certainly surpassed other groups in status. Many from Arakan and Manipur were unfamiliar with Sanskrit and relied on books "in the common dialect of Bengal." (Buchanan 1801: 169). Certain Arakan Brahmans however were eligible to join elite groups. (ROB: 4 February 1789). The *Royal Orders* reveal perennial discord among these diverse groups that competed for entitlements. One instance resulted in a court case that lasted more than a year. It centered on a false claim that a senior Brahman had an improper relationship with a lower caste woman barber

[15] The Burmese *abhiseka* borrowed much from Sri Lanka from a very early time. In a commentary on the *Mahāvaṃsa*, circa 1000 CE, key roles in the ceremony in Sri Lanka were played by virgin princesses, Brahmans and merchants, as they did in Konbaung *abhisekas* (Okudaira 2018: 78; Tun Aung Chain 2004b: 193; Symes 1802: 204; Malalasekera 1935: 1.305). The correspondence with Burmese *abhiseka* rites can scarcely be coincidental.

Figure 11 (above). Brahman from Rakhine, center, with two brahmans from Manipur. In *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, 1894. folio 52r. (detail). British Library, London.

Figure 12 (below). Two brahmans making offerings during the royal hair-washing ceremony. In *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, 1894. Folio 54r. (detail). British Library, London.

(ROB: 21 June 1799). Another incident involved a leading Brahman who shared meals with another Brahmin who was living with a woman of lower caste. The accused was ordered to perform certain observances over a six-day period and to eat with members of his own caste (*Ameidawhpyei* 1961: 299-301). That many of such cases hinged on questions of Brahmanical ritual purity indicates that the efficacy of court ceremonies could be thrown into jeopardy if the ritualists had a questionable pedigree or engaged in activities that degraded their 'purity.'

An illustration from a British Library manuscript shows a trio of Brahmans. In the center is a *punna* from Rakhine, while the flanking *punnas* are from Manipur (Figure 11). Another shows a pair of *punna* making offerings during a royal hair-washing ceremony (Figure 12).[16] Brahmans are usually depicted in white robe-like garments, with conical-shaped headgear. Court Brahmans are commonplace in later Thai mural art wherein

[16] *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, British Library, Mss Burmese 99. This section, Figure 11, is a detail from a page with many more Brahmans (f.52r). The Brahmans in Figure 12 are called "*gananta punna*" and are offering a plant, rice, sesame and salt. This class of Brahmans is also mentioned in the *Royal Orders* but their history and role in court have yet to be determined. This detail is from folio 54r.

Figure 13. Goddess Candī. In *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, 1894. Folio 32r. (detail). British Library, London.

they appear often in J*ātaka* scenes, such as the Brahmans who received Prince Vessantara's white elephant**.** How Brahmans were depicted differently by artists in Thailand and Burma during this age has yet to be studied. Hindu ritualists continue to play active roles in royal ceremonies in Thailand and are based at the Devasathan Temple, opposite Wat Suthat in Bangkok. This group traces its descent to Tamil traditions based in South India, unlike in Burma where Brahmans from Eastern India dominated.

A small number of Hindu deities were venerated in Amarapura with annual festivals featuring elaborate street processions. In many cases, the ceremonies were governed by the *Vitakkamukha-mandani* and a text titled *Rajamattan* but neither has been uncovered in India or Burma.[17] These two texts and others from India were probably in Sanskrit or Hindi or a mix. Brahmans chanted on numerous occasions in what was likely a combination of Sanskrit and Hindi or Sanskrit and Bengali, a practice in evidence in India today.

One prominent deity was Candī Devī, Śiva's consort in her ferocious form and depicted in the aforementioned British Library manuscript (Figure 13).[18] This goddess also appears in the *Royal Orders* (17 September 1787; 24 April 1794; 28 September 1839). There were a 140 Brahmans, both men and women, who conducted rituals honoring Candī Devī (ROB: 24 April 1794). Candī is also listed in the *Glass Palace Chronicle* among the Hindu gods responsible for laying out the Pyu capital, Śrī Kṣetra (GPC: 14). The Hindu god Skanda was also worshipped in court ceremonies. Even the production of a sculpture of Skanda, made of paper over a bamboo armature, was

[17] These two texts perhaps originated in Varanasi and may have been based on late works in mixed Sanskrit and Hindi or the texts may be native to Bengal or Arakan. The Pali *Vittakamukhha-mandani* was probably *Vitarkamukha-mardana* (Sanskrit). The content of the *Rajamattan* was far-reaching since it even recommended times for cultivation (ROB: 27 April 1810). A text with a similar name, *Rājamattanta*, appears in a list of manuscripts in a Pagan library, listed in an inscription dated 1442, but it is unlikely the same (Bode 1966: 108).

[18] The caption: "Sandi [Candī] goddess riding a tiger" (personal communication, Patrick Pranke). *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, British Library, Mss Burmese 99, folio 30r. (detail). On the same folio appears, from left to right, Sarasvatī (consort of Brahmā), Candī, Śiva, Gaṇeśa and Viṣṇu; all the deities sit upon their usual vehicles. A deity with exactly the same attributes, riding a tiger, is identified, in the same manuscript as "Pappatika, a *nat* goddess who protects a mountain" (folio 34r). This *nat* seems to be unknown in other sources. (personal communication, Ryuji Okudaira) The Hindu deities popular today in Burma, such as Murugan (Skanda) are mainly associated with the wave of South Indian immigrants to Burma in the colonial period.

supervised by Govinda, a prominent Brahman mentioned below (ROB 30 and 31 January 1810; 14 February 1810).

Another Hindu deity was the sage Agghaṁpati who was worshipped annually according to rites in the *Rajamattan* (ROB: 18 August 1817). He is shown standing within a jar floating on water, with a caption supplying the deity's name (Figure 14).[19] Nothing more is known of Agghaṁpati, suggesting how these ritual manuals, such as the *Rajamattan*, were important in Amarapura but probably reflected lesser known traditions that have faded completely both in Burma and India. Whether these many Hindu images mentioned in Burmese sources were imported from India is unstated but most were probably made locally and none have survived, apart from the stone Kapila image. However, two rare wooden sculptures now in the British Museum, London, were removed from the Mandalay Palace and depict a multi-headed Śiva atop his bull and the demon Māra, two deities also appearing in the aforementioned British Library manuscript (Isaacs and Blurton 2000: 75).[20] When the Mandalay palace fell in 1885, many Buddhist images were removed outside the walls to the nearby Shwe Kyi Myin temple. Which images presently at the temple once belonged to the Mandalay Palace has yet to be worked out but the temple's royal associations made it a favorite for senior military officials in the 1990s (Stadtner 2015: 290).

Figure 14. Agghaṁpati the hermit. In *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, 1894. Folio 30r. (detail). British Library, London

The reform of the sangha

Bodawpaya usurped the throne in 1782 and inherited a sangha that he felt needed a top to bottom reform. The next year a special Sudhammā Council was appointed whose task was to unite the various monastic lineages under a single banner and to frame a common syllabus on which monks were required to pass formal examinations. Orthodoxy was the watchword with a strong emphasis on monastic discipline. The Council soon took up the long-running 'robe-controversy', ruling in favor of those advocating the robe covering both shoulders. The decision was made in part because

[19] A translation of the Burmese caption reads "picture of the *nat-yathe* [*nat*-hermit] named Agghaṁpati." The reference in the ROB described him only as "Agghaṁapati-yathe", without labeling him a *nat*. This detail occurs on f. 30r. in the folding book.

[20] British Library, mss Burmese 99 (folios 30r and 32r). For images of Mara and his daughters see ROB: 13 February 1806.

the 'two-shoulder' argument was based on more orthodox texts (Pranke 2008b: 6).[21] The monk leading the defeated 'single-shoulder' group was disrobed and sent back to his native village in disgrace. By 1788, a young learned monk named Ñaṇābhivaṃsa was appointed Council chief and Sangha Patriarch, or *thathanabaing* (Burmese); he later became known as the Maungdaung Sayadaw. He convened a synod in 1791which crafted a new recension of the Pali canon and regulations with special focus on monastic rules. Missions were sent to forty-two locations throughout Burma to introduce and enforce these comprehensive reforms. One important delegation was sent to Toungoo, recorded in a contemporaneous text titled the *Vaṃsadipanī* (1793), tracing the history of the Burmese sangha from the perspective of the Sudhammā Council (Pranke 2004).

A vital step in effecting a genuine renewal was ensuring that errors in the past were never repeated. Accordingly, when a fresh set of glazed *Jātaka* tiles was required for the Mingun Pagoda in circa 1791, the hundreds of tiles on the exterior of Pagan's Ananda Temple, circa 1100, were scrutinized for Theravāda orthodoxy. Drawings of the Pagan tiles were ordered and the Maungdaung Sayadaw laboriously compared the depictions on hundreds of Pagan tiles from the Ananda Temple with the written Pali J*ātakas*. The learned cleric found that the treatment of certain Pagan tiles conflicted with descriptions in the Pali J*ātaka* text (Stadtner 1998 and 2003). For example, a tile at the Ananda Temple showed four hunters lifting a snake king whereas the snake was "carried by sixteen hunters on eight shoulder-yokes" in the Pali source (*Saṁkapāla Jātaka*, 524) (Figure 15). The new Mingun plaque was therefore designed with sixteen men, thus conforming to the J*ātaka* (Figure 16). This tile's incised caption is nearly a verbatim translation of the instructions dated to 1791 contained in the Maungdaung Sayadaw's *Questions and Answers* (*Ameidawhpyei*). Whether four men or sixteen held the snake played no role in the J*ātaka*'s storyline but this insignificant detail was seized upon and corrected in order that the tile adhered to authentic Pali textual sources. This example seems pedantic but it speaks volumes to the breadth and intensity of this quest for orthodoxy.

Burmese kings recognized that Buddhism had virtually disappeared in India but embers of that civilization were still to be uncovered. That the sacred Indian Buddhist sites dotted a landscape ruled by hostile Britain enhanced the court's sense of loss over its spiritual and dynastic homeland that the court inherited from its forbearers, the Sakya clan. One is reminded of Sri Lanka's famous reformer, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), who pressed English authorities in the 1890s to shift the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya from Hindu to Buddhist control. This later historical example is different in obvious ways, but it stems from the same sentiment that Bodh Gaya should be in the hands of Buddhists. While Christian missionary work had not yet started in earnest in Bodawpaya's day, the sangha was already mistrustful of Europeans as early as 1795. Some monks even substituted the name of Jesus Christ for Devadatta, the Buddha's arch nemeses in Pali literature (Buchanan 1801: 268). The inexorable British threat in the Bay of Bengal provides the background for the planned invasion of India to retake Bodh

[21] The best source for the Suddhamā reforms is Patrick Pranke's *Preface* to his dissertation (Pranke 2004). For other outstanding studies covering Bodawpaya's reign and the sangha, see Leider 2004 and 2005/06; Pranke 2008a and 2008b. See also Michael Charney 2006.

Figure 15. Saṅkapāla Jātaka, 524. Ananda Temple, Pagan, c. 1100. Glazed tile, roof terrace. Courtesy: Lilian Handlin.

Figure 16. Saṅkapāla Jātaka, 524. Glazed tile intended for the Mingun Pagoda. c. 1791 Shwe Settaw Pagoda museum, Shwebo. Photograph by author.

Gaya. Fears of British imperialism were well founded since large sections of Lower Burma fell to British forces soon after Bowdayapa's reign.

Next door in Thailand a similar reformation of the sangha was underway by Rāma I (reigned, 1782-1809) during the same decades as in Burma. The reign of Rāma I began with ten decrees, each focused on monastic discipline. The sixth decree for example admonished monks for "just feeding themselves like cattle or buffalo." (Baker and Pasuk 2017: 272). Further, a Buddhist council was convened in 1788 to revise the entire Pali canon. Also, unlike Bodawpaya's reforms that stressed ancient Indian Buddhist antecedents, the reform movement in the new Chakri kingdom emphasized a nostalgic emulation of the preceding Ayutthaya dynasty (Baker and Pasuk 2017; Wyatt 1994).

"…. bring back the image of Kapila the sage…."

The major events surrounding the Kapila image in Amarapura can be pieced together from the *Royal Orders* and the *Konbaungzet*.[22] The earliest notice records that two Burmese officials returned from Varanasi to Upper Burma on 29 April 1808 with a number of objects that included two stone sculptures of "King Sagara and Prince Sankha" (KBZ: 2.127).[23] On this mission was a leading Brahman from Varanasi based in Amarapura named Govinda.[24] It is tantalizing to speculate that Govinda returned

[22] Translations from the *Konbaungzet* were prepared for me by Tun Aung Chain. The selections here from the *Royal Orders* have been lightly edited. For the order dated 2 July 1812, the translation used here was made by Than Tun. (U Pyinnya 1996: 154) Much of this information is also summarized in the *Konbaungzet* (KBZ: 2.138).

[23] The size of these images is unstated and they cannot be traced today. Prince Sankha does not appear by that name in the myths but Prince Sankha is almost certainly Sagara's grandson. Several Sagaras are found in Pali sources but none is associated with offspring, so this imported Sagara must refer to the legendary Hindu king.

[24] Govinda's title, conferred by Bodawpaya, was Govinda-mahārajinda-aggamahādhammarājaguru. He

to Upper Burma with the images of Sagara and his prince in 1808 with the idea of familiarizing Bodawpaya with the Kapila-Sagara legend before the anticipated arrival of the Kapila sculpture in Upper Burma. A second mission, two years later, left Amarapura for Varanasi on 12 September 1810, also accompanied by Govinda, with instructions "to bring back the image of Kapila the sage" (KBZ: 2.136). This entry suggests that the sculpture had already been commissioned and its completion was expected by September 1810. The sculpture was not yet finished in 1810 however since it was only shipped to Upper Burma in 1812.

Govinda may in fact have remained in Varanasi after 1810 since he did not accompany the sculpture to Upper Burma in 1812. However, by 27 April 1814, Govinda returned to Amarapura with items that included treatises on astrology and medicine and sacred water from the Ganges and Jumna that may have been used for coronation rituals. These gifts, together with an unnamed eleven-year old princess, were presented to Bodawpaya from the king of Varanasi (KBZ: 2.146). The princess may have been the daughter of Varanasi's Udit Narayana Singh (reigned 1795-1835) but the young girl vanished from historical sources altogether. Govinda was a leading court Brahman and he himself was said to have been sent to Burma by the Varanasi king. Govinda's name even figured in the Mingun Bell Inscription, testimony to his important role (Tun Aung Chain 2004b: 197).

The first stop on the Irrawaddy was Pyay (Prome), between Yangon and Mandalay. The flotilla then proceeded up river more than 300 miles to Sagaing located on the river opposite Mandalay. A handful of *Royal Orders* between 1812 and 1814 tell the story.

21 June 1812. Royal Order

> Macava, the Brahman, brought a statue of Kapilamuni from Varanasi, in Majjhimadesa, and it has now arrived in Pyay; put it on a twin barge topped with a three-tiered pavilion towed by boats and accompanied by musical troupes, according to the *Vitakkamukha-mandani* composed by the sage Dhammadasa; one can pray for prosperity and longevity after making offerings at the shrine. The crown prince, other princes and ministers shall go to Sagaing to welcome the entourage and bring the statue to Mingun; common people shall also join the welcoming party with music and offerings.[25]

That the crown prince, other princes and ministers were ordered to attend the welcoming ceremony underscored the importance of the occasion. The sculpture was transferred after the ceremony some eleven miles upriver to Mingun where the massive

returned to Varanasi, leaving in Amarapura his two nephews, Viśvanāth and Gajānāth, and a disciple named Vasita. (KBZ II.127; Thant Myint U: 96; U Tin: 141).

[25] This royal order also listed the names of two officials who accompanied the image from Varanasi, a "Regimental Officer" from Rakhine and an officer in the Crown Prince Service. Five years later, a royal order indicates that expenses related to some missions to India amounting to 23,490 *kyats*, were raised in Rakhine; these included the project of conveying the Kapila image to Upper Burma (ROB: 29 July 1817). It is unclear how much, if any, from this amount went toward payment for the sculpture in Varanasi. Majjhimadesa, literally Middle Country, is a common term for India in Pali sources.

Mingun Pagoda was nearing completion in 1812 on the bank of the Irrawaddy (Stadtner 2000). The sculpture was soon moved again, from Mingun to the palace in Amarapura, about nine miles downriver. Here it was the subject of a pageant in which the king staged an elaborate pantomime requiring 100 men dressed as Bodawpaya's foreign subjects, also according to rituals spelled out in the *Vitakkamukha-mandani*.

2 July 1812. Royal Order

> *The king will undergo a rite before Kapilamuni* (italics by the author); compose a prayer after the style given in the *Vitakkamukha-mandani*; assemble 100 men in their native costumes with various gifts of tribute who request to become vassals; bring only the statue of Kapila on a special pedestal to the palace; a display of the armed forces during the ceremony is approved.

The 100 men posing as vassals belonged to Bodawpaya's imperial realm comprised of 100 countries, each described briefly by Buchanan. Many were located within Burma's modern borders, sometimes referred to by their ethnic classification. For example, Pegu (Bago) was listed as "Ta-lain" (modern Talaing, or Mon). Among countries outside of Burma was "Ta-rout", or China, usually known as Tarop in Burmese sources, Yoo-da-ya, or Ayutthaya, and Thi-ho, or Sri Lanka. The eleventh in this list is "Ku-la" (modern *kala*) which Buchanan glossed as "Europeans, or the natives of the west", that is, all those in India (Buchanan 1801: 226-230). In Burma today the term *kala* refers broadly to inhabitants of South Asia. These 100 countries were headed by Burma ("Myam-ma"), for a total of one hundred and one. These 101 'countries' were now and then even depicted in Konbaung murals (Green 2011; personal communication, Alexandra Green). In Amarapura these 100 faux vassals dressed in individualized costumes performed a ceremony according to rites in the *Vittakamukha-mandini*.[26] The ritual was overseen by Bodawpaya with the Kapila sculpture fast by his side.

Bodawpaya's self-aggrandizement was expressed also in the Mingun Bell Inscription, from about 1811, in which the king received elephants, virgin daughters and gifts from far-flung kingdoms which included Ayutthaya, England, Calcutta, and Manipur and a sapling of Sri Lanka's 'southern branch' of the Bodhi Tree (Tun Aung Chain 2004b: 197). A regularly updated map of these dominions was displayed within the Amarapura palace, indicating that Bodawpaya had a sound grasp of regional geography (Buchanan 1801: 225). This ceremony in 1812, in which Kapila played such a pivotal role, confirmed and celebrated the king's position at the apex of an unrivaled imperial and universal realm. The newly imported Kapila sculpture initiated the staging of this elaborate pantomime, an indication of how much importance was attached to this image.

Amarapura honored other Hindu deities with rituals and processions but these events were in the context of annual festivals. No other Hindu deity but Kapila assumed

[26] Such pantomimes were not unique to Burma. In Ayutthaya in 1639 court Brahmans, garbed as Hindu gods, were used in a recreation of the Three Worlds. (Baker and Pasuk 2017: 146; *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*: 223).

such political dimensions and none was accompanied by a display of armed forces. To the degree that this ceremony enhanced the king's prestige and his right to rule, it shared features with coronation rites. Less than twelve months after the pantomime an invasion was announced to free Bodh Gaya from British rule. Such an attack underscored the notion that Burma was the "the true heir" to the Buddhist homeland and that restoring Buddhist control over Bodh Gaya would be "perhaps the greatest merit-making exercise the Konbaung rulers could imagine." (Thant Myint U 2001: 94, 98).

11 April 1813. Royal Order

> No other king in Burma but Bodawpaya had any direct dealing with Majjhimadesa and no other king would know that the Maha Bodhi tree is still in existence there; the king's officers went there and reported its existence. The officer at Bodh Gaya said that the people of Varanasi and Majjhimadesa expect that the Burmese king will extend his rule over them; this was made obvious by the fact the Burmese king now had a statue of Kapila the Muni taken from their land; old prophesies maintain that the king was destined to visit the Bodhi Tree; prepare eighty groups forming 4,000 men for the Army of Victory. The king will march at the conclusion of the rainy season.

The invasion was no idle boast, since a decree on the very same day was issued to Arakan officials commanding them to plant new crops for the 4,000 troops slated to pass through to Bengal and Bodh Gaya at the end of the forthcoming monsoon season (ROB: 11 April 1813). The king himself was to lead the expeditionary force.

Figure 17. The original location of the Kapila sculpture, measured by U Win Maung, 2001. Shwe Kun Ok Temple, Amarapura. Photograph by author.

Why the invasion was shelved is unknown but recognition of its futility was probably the reason. The king also probably realized the difficulty of far-flung military campaigns after several disastrous attempts on Ayutthaya. Excuses for aborting the campaign may have even been supplied by Hindu court astrologers who were known to postpone action against "a nation of whom they [king and court] are afraid …. until a distant time being found propitious for revenge." (Buchanan 1801: 172). Nothing more is heard about the plans to free Bodh Gaya in Bodawpaya's reign but the hope of seizing Bodh Gaya from the British was never completely forgotten and another campaign was envisioned during the reign of Bodawpaya's successor (ROB: 11 December 1825). This passage above from the *Royal Orders* also indicates how the court perceived this Kapila image in Buddhist terms, highlighting the legacy of Kapila the Sage and the powerful link between the Sakyas and the Konbaung Dynasty.

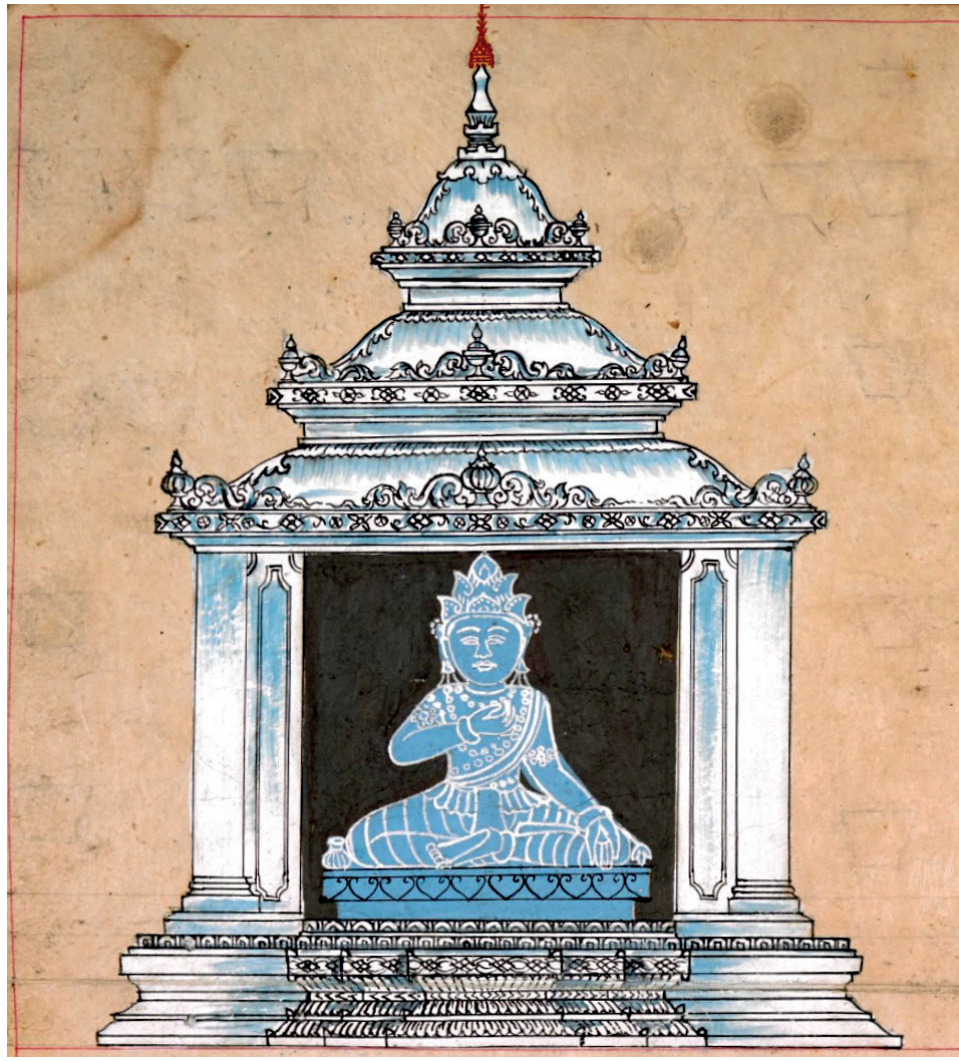

Figure 18. Kapila the Sage, in situ at the Shwe Kun Ok temple. In *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace*, 1894, folio 42r. (detail). British Library, London.

The imported sculpture probably remained somewhere within the palace precincts in 1813 until the following year when construction of a new shrine for the image was ordered on the west side of Amarapura's Shwe Kun Ok temple sited just inside the city's square brick walls, in the northeastern corner (ROB: 18 May 1814). The location of this small rectangular brick temple found on the west side of the Shwe Kun agrees perfectly with its description in the *Royal Order* in 1814.[27] The temple lost its roof long ago but its original plaster coating covering the interior walls was intact, apart from a rectangular vertical section in the center of the rear wall. The measurements of this missing plaster section accorded exactly with the dimensions of the Kapila stone image (Figure 17). That this marked the spot where the sculpture was established in 1814 is strengthened by a painted sketch included in the aforementioned British Library manuscript dated to

[27] The antiquarian U Win Maung and I surveyed the site in the cold season of 2001.

1894 depicting the image in situ (Figure 18).[28] The drawing's caption summarizes the shifting of the sculpture from Mingun to this very shrine in Amarapura. The elaborate frame shown in the illustration, made of lacquered and gilded wood, has left no trace. The sculpture was removed from this temple in 1908 to its present location, the Kyaw Aung San Dar monastery. Nothing is known about it after its arrival here but the image was placed inside a small brick temple built within the compound in 1981. The monastery's monks refer to the image as Kapilamuni.

Burma on the eve of the modern era

The decision to import the Kapila image in 1808 coincided with the steadily increasing friction between the king and his Sudhammā Council. This Council was disbanded only four months after the Kapila image drew up to the Sagaing jetty in 1812, followed in less than a year by the king's bold order to invade India. The ceremonies honoring the Hindu Kapila were not meant to be an affront or a rebuff to the sangha but it may suggest that the king felt more comfortable with his compliant court Brahmans than his estranged sangha. Brahmanical rites generated legitimacy and strength, as the ceremonies centered on Kapila clearly indicate. Bodawpaya strove to recreate a hoary past in which authentic Hindu rituals were harmonized within a Buddhist realm governed by ancient precedents. The dynasty's identification with the Sakyas assured its rulers access to the power that flowed from Kapila to the Sakyan descendants in Burma. For the court Brahmans, Kapila the Sage was also a familiar figure, defined by Kapila's amazing defeat of King Sagara's sons. During the early 19th century Kapila was well known to key Brahmans at Bodawpaya's court, in light of the two regionally important pilgrimage temples, the one on Ganga Sagar Island and the Kapiladhārā Temple in Varanasi.

Amarapura's Kapila sculpture traveled widely in the early 19th century, but its match in Varanasi never left home. Restricted to the perimeter of the Kapiladhārā Temple, the sculpture is the subject of offerings from thousands of pilgrims from every part of India. By contrast, only a handful of monks within the walls of the modest monastery in Amarapura are familiar with this imported sculpture that was once the center of court ritual and a projected campaign to capture Bodh Gaya. Although the pair followed such different trajectories, the two are forever coupled and together reveal how ancient Hindu and Indian Buddhist traditions came to be interwoven in the geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal on the eve of the modern era.

[28] This unpublished folding manuscript, or *parabaik*, was purchased by the India Office Library in 1912 and is now in the British Library (mss. Burmese 99). The translated title is *Designs of Things in Daily Use in the Golden Palace,* dated to 1894. Many of the illustrations depict subjects from Bodawpaya's reign, such as the Mingun Bell. This Kapila figure in the Shwe Kun Ok temple is a detail from a complete page (f.42r)**.** The manuscript was compiled during the reign of King Mindon (1853-1878) and later copies were made (Singer 1994).

Acknowledgements

A preliminary report on the Amarapura Kapila was presented at a conference in Yangon in 2005. I only recently returned to the topic, at the encouragement of Tun Aung Chain. Without his erudite guidance, corrections, and translations this study would have remained in my desk drawer. Special thanks also to Patrick Pranke who, over many conversations, patiently clarified Bodawpaya's reign in the broader history of the Burmese saṇgha. Others who shared their insights include Jacques Leider whose pioneering article on Brahmans in Bodawpaya's reign are cited throughout, together with his other articles. Further, it was Alexey Kirichenko who suggested at the Yangon conference that Amarapura's Hindu Kapila sculpture had an influential Buddhist dimension that merited examination. Ryuji Okudaira's outstanding book on *abhisekas* introduced me to this specialized subject, together with personal communications. Also thanks to John Strong for reviewing a draft and especially for assistance with the Sakyas. Knut Jacobsen was also always there to answer my questions about the elusive Kapila. Jörg Gangnagel kindly helped me understand two early Varanasi pilgrims' maps included in his major study on Varanasi. Thanks also to Claudine Bautze-Picron for pointing me in the direction of 19th-century British sources for Ganga Sagar island and to Swapna Bhattaracharya for translating the Bengali captions on several antique lithographs. For the photograph of the J*ātaka* tile, thanks go to Lilian Handlin.

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