THE FIRST RECORDED BUDDHIST MISSION
TO SRI LANKA

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The first Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka, as recorded in early historical traditions, is dated two hundred and thirty-six years after the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha. This date corresponds to the first regnal year of king Devānampiyā Tissa \(^1\) (250–210 B.C.), the Sri Lankan contemporary of the Indian emperor Asoka.

The mission was led by Mahinda Thera, the son of Asoka.\(^2\) He was accompanied by six others: four theras, Itthiya, Uttiya, Samhala and Bhaddasāla, a novice named Sumana and a lay devotee named Bhaṇḍuka.\(^3\) On the whole, the historicity of this mission has now been placed beyond doubt.\(^4\) However, the main source materials bearing on this subject could be profitably re-examined with a view to a further clarification.

In this respect we propose to re-examine two issues emerging from the accounts given in the historical introduction to the Samantapāsādikā, the commentary on the Vinaya Piṭaka and the Mahāvamsa, the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka. The two issues are the timing of the mission and the first meeting between Mahinda Thera and king Devānampiyā Tissa (250-210 B.C.).

After the third Buddhist Council, it was decided to despatch a Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka (Tambapawālidipa) in the month of November (Kattīka) with Mahinda Thera at its head. The Samantapāsādikā and the Mahāvamsa inform us that, after all the necessary arrangements had been made, Mahinda Thera postponed the mission.\(^5\) The reason for the postponement is explained...

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2. According to the tradition of the Northern Buddhists, Mahinda Thera (Mahendra) was a uterine brother and not a son of Asoka. But Paranavitana argues strongly for the Sri Lankan tradition that he was the son of Asoka. Ray, H.C. University of Ceylon History of Ceylon, vol. I, pt. I, p. 131 (UCHC).
3. Dv. XII. 38, 39; Smp. I, pp. 37.40. Mr. XII. 7, XIII. 16–18
5. Smp. I, p. 40, Mr. XIII. 2f.