

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 *Parinirvāna* of the Buddha. This date corresponds to the first regnal year of king Devānampiya Tissa¹ (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, Sambala 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 Devānampiya Tissa (250-210 B.C.).

After the third Buddhist Council, it was decided to despatch a Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka (*Tambapanni-dīpa*) in the month of November (*Kattika*) 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

1. *Dīpavamsa*, ed. Law, B.C. XII. 42, 43 (*Dv.*); *Samantapāsādikā*, ed. Piyaratana mahāthera and Sorata thera, SHB, pt. I, Colombo, 1929, p. 42 (*Smp.*); *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, W.P.T.S., London, 1968, XIII. 18 (*Mv.*); *Pāṭaliya*, ed., Surawira, A.V. 1961, p. 73 (*Pv.*); *Nikāyasamgrahaṇa*, ed. Samaranayaka, D.P.R. 1960 p. 71 (*Ns.*).
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. 1, pt. 1, p. 131 (*UCHC*).
3. *Dv.* XII. 38, 39; *Smp.* I, pp. 37, 40. *Mv.* XII. 7, XIII. 16—18.
4. Muller, E. *Ancient Inscriptions in Ceylon*, London, 1883, p. 30, No. 20. Cunningham, *The Bhilsa topes*, p. 287; *UCHC*, vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 130.
5. *Smp.* I, p. 40; *Mv.* XIII. 2f.