Forum: On Azfar Moin’s *The Millennial Sovereign*

3.

BUDDHIST TECHNOLOGIES OF STATECRAFT AND MILLENNIAL MOMENTS

ANNE M. BLACKBURN

ABSTRACT

There are striking family resemblances between models and modes of kingship in the Safavid and Mughal worlds discussed by Azfar Moin and those that characterized Buddhist kingship in the premodern Indian Ocean arena, which encompassed polities including Polonnaruwa, Dambadeniya, Kotē, Bagan, Sukhothai, and Chiang Mai. In courtly contexts, Buddhists—operating at the intersection of intellectual traditions in Pali and Sanskrit languages—depended upon protective technologies including astrology and interpreted threats and prospects according to millennial science. Working comparatively, across the premodern Indian Ocean and Indo-Persian worlds, can help historians of Buddhism and Islam to understand more clearly the intellectual histories and repertoires of royal practice according to which kings and strongmen within each sphere sought to gain and retain the throne.

Keywords: Buddhist kingship, śāstra, astrology, poetics, Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka, Sukhothai, Mughal, Indo-Persian

I read Azfar Moin’s *The Millennial Sovereign* with a delightful sense of recognition. As a historian of Buddhism—working centrally on the literary, ritual, and institutional traffic between Buddhist monks, monarchs, and strongmen in the premodern Indian Ocean region—I grapple regularly with the challenge of recognizing and entering into what Moin refers to as a “forgotten episteme” within which the life’s work of Buddhist kingship developed. *The Millennial Sovereign* is a deeply engaging account of how a wide range of intellectual traditions, expert technologies, and norms for the performance of sovereignty informed and reinforced one another within the Safavid and Indo-Persian ruling houses indebted to the traditions of Timur. Although it is a study of ritual sovereignty within an Indo-Persian and Islamic environment, *The Millennial Sovereign* is a valuable resource for the study of premodern Buddhist kingship in Southern Asia. There are striking parallels between the Mughal and Safavid contexts as understood by Moin and that of the Indian Ocean Southern Asian Buddhist world, a Buddhist

3. Throughout I use the term “Southern Asia” to refer to the regions identified in post-World-War-II parlance as “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia” to remind us that those inhabiting and traveling through these areas during the premodern period did not parcel out this space conceptually in terms of our now-contemporary nation-state or areal boundaries.
arena that was, at least by the end of the first millennium, largely dominated by a form of Buddhism that combined acceptance of a Pali-language scriptural canon, a wider ethical-devotional Buddhist literature in Pali as well as (gradually increasing numbers of) local literary languages, and a repertoire of technical sciences in Sanskrit, or translated or transposed from Sanskrit texts. For historians of Buddhist kingship, Moin’s elegant study is good to think with. It resonates with methodological concerns and historical puzzles faced by those of us who attempt to understand the intellectual-cum-ritual lives of Southern Asian Buddhists who inhabited the sphere of kingship, or sought to enter it. Working comparatively across the premodern Indian Ocean and Indo-Persian worlds can help historians of Buddhism and Islam to understand more clearly the intellectual histories and repertoires of royal practice according to which kings and strongmen within each sphere sought to gain and retain the throne.4

One of the important aspects of Moin’s work, from my perspective, is his assimilation of several generations of scholarship on the emergence of “religion” as a scholarly category, and his alertness to how the cores and boundaries of “religious traditions” are delineated by scholars. Although tracing a genealogy of ideas and discursive politics through which particular aspects of thought and practice have been understood by scholars as more or less central to Islam as a “religion” is not the central project of The Millennial Sovereign, the book shows traces of alert reflection on such matters. It is productively read with other scholarship that has begun to trace the complex historical processes through which “religion” was constituted as a category of interest to scholarly investigators as well as those engaged in comparative theology and what is often called inter-religious dialogue. Through these historical processes, certain texts and types of action came to be construed as more or less “religious.” Although it is beyond the scope of this brief essay to address in detail these conceptual histories and the boundary work (by both scholars and devotees) that informed them, it is relevant to note that Moin’s study of kingship responds in part to two ideas that came to occupy a central place in the fields of comparative theology and religion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cross-fertilizing with emerging conceptions of nationhood and Enlightenment rationality: The heart of “religion” is “doctrine.” “Religion” is not-politics and private.5

4. Much can be gained by developing analytical comparisons of evidence from Buddhist and Islamic spheres. See, for instance, Buddhist and Islamic Networks in Southern Asia: A Comparative Perspective, ed. R. Michael Feener and Anne M. Blackburn (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming).

The pronounced tilt toward these ideas, still evident among many identifying with religious traditions as well as among historians and scholars of religion and theorists of modernity, has made it more difficult for generations of scholars to recognize the sophisticated and intricate operational logics that undergirded the ritual and other performative activities in a number of traditions, including Buddhism. Moreover, it became much harder to discern how different textual clusters or genres interacted (such as astrological treatises, ethical digests, ritual manuals, sermonic narratives, and philosophies of time and personhood), since scholars often focused on a narrow set of textual materials that seemed natural because they fit into what was a roughly biblical framework. All this has left us struggling to recapture what it was to live lives (including, but not only, royal lives) at the intersection of these internally diverse textual traditions. For scholars of Buddhism this problem has been compounded, with especially striking longevity among scholars of Pali-oriented Buddhism (sometimes referred to as “Theravāda Buddhism”), by a preference for the study of so-called “Early Buddhism” (prior to circa 500 AD) and a remarkably enduring conception of Gotama Buddha as a ritually unfettered rationalist. In addition, the inclination by twentieth- and twenty-first-century nationalists to assimilate (narratively and epigraphically) celebrated kings of premodern Southern Asian realms into the lineage of new nation-states, has tended to support anachronistic readings of sovereignty and royal practice.

The “discursive realm” of kingship analyzed by Moin was a vast space geographically, stretching from Central Asia into Safavid lands and the Indian subcontinent. A striking feature of The Millennial Sovereign is its attention to the ways in which models for the enactment of sovereignty take form in one location but come to function in others, through processes that involve at once local inflection and trans-local imitation. In the premodern Indian Ocean space comprising what are now India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, we see similar processes at work. Indian Ocean trade and intellectual–ritual exchange, already well evident in the first millennium, intensified in the early second millennium CE. Those assenting to the protective power and intellectual acumen of Gotama Buddha and his monastic heirs participated in a rapidly expanding textual world. This was transmitted in Pali language as well as Sanskrit, and it included the technical


7. See King, Orientalism; Masuzawa, Invention; Philip C. Almond, The British Discovery of Buddhism (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Ananda Abeysekara, Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).


sciences of Sanskrit śāstra (whether conveyed in Sanskrit or mediated through other languages), as well as a host of ritual, narrative, and monastic disciplinary materials expressed in Pali and the growing number of local literary languages involved in the expression of things Buddhist. The technical sciences included grammar, prosody, mathematics, medicine, and astrology, as well as other fields. Innovations in one corner of this Indian Ocean Buddhist world were quickly felt in others, as we can see from textual as well as art-historical evidence.

Narratives of exemplary and powerful kingship were among those traveling the sealanes and rivers of the Indian Ocean world. By the early centuries CE, Pali-language sutta (Sanskrit: sūtra) accounts of the ideal cakkavattin (wheel-turning, perhaps “imperial” monarch), as well as vanśa (“chronicle” or “lineage text”) and apadāna (“biography”) reports of the third-century BCE subcontinental king Asoka, fed the imagination of rulers from kingdoms in Laṅkā (now Sri Lanka). The impact of these stories was increasingly felt more widely as changes in the ecosystem of Indian Ocean trade drew Tai, Mon, and Burmese lands closer together, and closer to Laṅkā. By the fifteenth century, if not earlier, the Asokan model was supplemented by that of the Polonnāruva king Parakramabāhu I, a twelfth-century ruler credited with achieving sovereignty over the entire island of Laṅkā for the first time since Cōḷa rule, and with unification of disparate Buddhist monastic factions within one fraternity, subordinate to royal authority.

Such models transmitted strategies for handling the often agonistic institutional relations between monks and kings, including the royal right to defrock Buddhist monks or to reorganize them administratively in the spirit of “purifying” Gotama Buddha’s dispensation. Although acts of purification might be triggered by a host of royal concerns, including the dangerous condensation of land and labor in monastic estates off-limits to the king, as well as aristocratic alliances between monastery and court factions, another important context for the royal reorganization of monastic ordination and administration was cosmological concern. Here, again, the Indian Ocean Buddhist context is fruitfully compared to the millennial trends discussed by Moin. All parts of the Buddhist world were, early on, informed by the understanding of a Buddha’s dispensation as subject to decline. Nothing, from the Buddhist perspective, is permanent, including the transformative-salvific teachings and institutions of a Buddha. According to the dominant interpretation in the Pali-oriented Buddhist world, the textual-institutional dispensation (sāsana) of a Buddha lasts only five thousand years, before its disappearance and the emergence of a Buddha-less period, which is eventually followed by another Buddha’s dispensation. This theory of decline might be construed as fatalist, but historically we see that millennial chronology inspired creativity and action among Buddhists in all spheres: textual, ritual, and institutional.


Tilman Frasch has suggested that the flurry of large-scale trans-regional Buddhist projects evident in the Indian Ocean Buddhist world during the fifteenth century may have been inspired at least in part by awareness that Gotama Buddha’s dispensation was near its two-thousand-year mark. This is not unlikely, and we find explicit expression of millennial concerns even a century earlier in the inscriptions of Sukhothai (now in Thailand) King Mahādhammarāja I (r. 1347–?) ruling approximately a century before the two-thousandth year of Gotama Buddha’s dispensation. This king’s inscriptions reveal a strong interest in establishing auspicious Buddha relics (including those brought from Lankā) on the terrain of his realm, relics (such as Bodhi [enlightenment] trees and Buddha-corpora) that would serve as the focus of merit-making ritual acts for the king and his subjects. Several of his inscriptions convey a tone of urgency, noting that Gotama Buddha’s dispensation was well into its history of decline, and that devotees should not fail to take advantage of human births with access to Buddhist relics and teachings, and should prepare themselves for the eventual advent of the next Buddha, Metteyya, to come only after a Buddha-less era. At first Mahādhammarāja I’s sense of urgency may seem surprising; there were after all still three thousand years of Gotama Buddha’s dispensation left to run. However, according to the cosmological framework of Buddhist decline theory, the deterioration of the sāsana was a gradual process according to which important components of Buddhist textual, monastic, and ritual power were lost in one-thousand-year increments. On this view, the two-thousand-year mark would understandably have incited considerable anxiety. After two thousand years, there were said to be no Buddhist monastics with a complete grasp of Buddhist practice and disciplinary precepts to guide and inspire devotees. After three thousand years, Buddhist learning and the authoritative texts of the tradition would disappear, though relics and some outward signs of monastic practice would endure.

If anyone asks, “How soon will Lord’s [Buddha’s] religion disappear?,” let this answer be given him: “Three thousand and ninety-nine years after this relic is enshrined, the Lord’s religion will come to an end.” “In the year of the boar, ninety-nine years from the year this relic is enshrined, the Three Piṭakas will disappear. There will be no one who really knows them, though there will still be some who know a bit of them. . . . [Additional losses are specified for each of the next one thousand years: texts vanish and monastic practice deteriorates.] . . . Last of all, in the year when the Lord Buddha’s religion will disappear altogether, the year of the Rat, on the full moon day of the sixth month, a rāy sann day [a particular planetary conjunction] in the Tai reckoning, when the moon is in the asterism of Baisākha: on that day all the Lord’s relics on this earth, as well as in the Devaloka and the Nagaloka, will fly through the sky, assemble together in the island of Lankā, enter the Ratanamālikamāhastūpa [a celebrated relic monument], and then fly to the śrīmahābodhi tree where the Lord Buddha attained the omniscience of Buddhahood.


14. See Nattier, Once upon a Future Time, 57.

15. These are authoritative texts foundational to Buddhist thought and practice, generally understood by Buddhists as the teachings of Gotama Buddha.
long ago. Then a huge fire will consume all the relics completely, and the flames will leap up to the Brahmaloka: the Buddha’s religion will disappear on that day as declared. From that time on there will be no one at all among mankind who is acquainted with the various meritorious action: people will constantly commit sins and be reborn in hell.”

From now on, all good people should make haste to perform meritorious action (in accordance with the Buddha’s religion) while it still survives. The present generation has the immense advantage of being born at a time when the Buddha’s religion still exists. So everyone should hasten to pay homage to stūpas, cetiyas, and śrīmahābodhi trees, which is the same as (doing homage to) our Lord in person.17

One of the responsibilities of a ruler operating according to the Buddhist theory of sāsana decline and eonic cosmology was to make the best—for him or her self, and for the devotees within his or her realm—of the current cosmological moment, with awareness of its risk and promise. Reading Mahādhammarājā I’s inscriptions with an alertness to cosmological thinking illuminates a long passage in Inscription 3 that emphasizes the king’s mathematical ability among a list of royal attributes. Although this portion of the description is badly damaged, enough remains to indicate that the king’s public persona was defined not only in terms of Buddhist ethics but also in relation to astrological knowledge and expertise in a wider set of technical sciences.

If anyone asks, further, “How can anyone know the number of years, months, days and nights of the decline so exactly? Who made the investigation and the reckoning, who calculated, so as to know it so exactly and so thoroughly?,” let this answer be given: “The person who calculated, reckoned and investigated is Brañā Śrī Sūryavamśa Mahādhammarājādhirāja himself.” [And if they ask] “And what other qualities is Brañā Mahādhammarāja known to possess?,” let this answer be given: “Brañā Dharmarāja observes the five [Buddhist nonmonastic] precepts at all times. He pays homage [illegible section] in the Royal Palace, never missing a single day or a single night [illegible section]. On full-moon days he goes to worship the relics which he himself [has enshrined (?) [illegible section]]. He listens to the preaching of the Dharma [Buddhist teaching], gives alms [illegible section] [On full-moon days (?)] he always [observes (?)] the eight precepts. Moreover, [illegible section] [he knows (?) the Three Pitakas, he instructs all the monks. . . He knows [illegible section] the heavens, more than a thousand names [illegible section]. [He can predict (?)] from the stars if there will be [illegible section] if there will be a tempest or a fire [illegible section]. . . Whatever territories there are, he knows them completely; he knows the śāstras [illegible section] medicines, he knows how to play skā and caturaṅga [games of strategy]. . .”18

Mahādhammarājā I is portrayed as a ruler skilled in computation and the reading of signs, fit to calculate the millennial transitions of the sāsana, as well as the smaller-scale calendrical observances according to which court and kingdom functioned. The Sukhothai king’s inscriptionally proclaimed prowess in matters mathematical and astronomical—within a wider epigraphic oeuvre that

16. These are forms of Buddha-relic monuments.
also reveals conversance with other intellectual traditions, including Buddha biography, cosmology, and relic theory—is an excellent reminder of the diverse textual corpora and intellectual fields that shaped (and were of course shaped by) educated (whether or not literate) Buddhist practitioners in the premodern Indian Ocean Buddhist world.

As in the Indo-Persian context discussed by Moin, scholars of Buddhism will find it fruitful to read outward from small-scale evidence of royal action (for example, an inscription, a moment of architectural choice, the arrangement of a painting, inscriptive voice, a landscape intervention) to recapture the interlocking spheres of knowledge that informed these royal moves, and that were used to cultivate royal selves.

Moin asks us to recognize a “science of the millennium”\(^ {19}\) that informed aspects of Indo-Persian royal action that might otherwise remain puzzling. His emphasis on millennial science and what he often refers to as “sacred kingship” intersects well with what we are beginning to understand about technologies of rule in premodern theist (later referred to as “Hindu”) and Buddhist Southern Asia.\(^ {20}\) As several scholars of the Indian subcontinental world have helped us see, including Ronald Inden and Sheldon Pollock,\(^ {21}\) expertise in the technical sciences was central to the functioning of premodern royal courts on the Indian subcontinent, and in other locations shaped by knowledge of śāstra. This was partly a matter of what we would now call symbolic capital: the ability to gather in one’s realm and court scholarly luminaries demonstrated a sovereign’s wealth, sophistication, and command of trans-local networks, including those that would bring the poet-as-publicist into the royal city. Yet it was not only a matter of symbolic power. The technical sciences were interrelated arenas of knowledge drawn into the technologies of rule.\(^ {22}\) These included forms of astrological and astronomical knowledge consonant with what Moin identifies for Mughal and Safavid domains. Military undertakings as well as many other matters of state (including those related to kinship) occurred according to the astronomical-astrological diagnosis of the most auspicious, or dangerous, temporal conjunctions. Refined achievements in grammar and prosody brought more than aesthetic pleasure. Technically correct deployment of language also made it possible to conduct successful ritual transactions with protective forces beyond the human sphere, including forms of Buddha and Buddha-to-be, deities, and planets.

The sāndeśa (message) poems composed from several Lankan kingdoms in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provide an elegant example of how the Indic sciences of grammar and poetics entered Buddhist technologies of statecraft in

---


the Indian Ocean Buddhist world. Written in an aggressively un-Sanskritic form of literary Sinhala (Eḷu), but according to many of the conventions of Sanskrit kāvya,23 sandeśa poems described the route of a bird-messenger across real or aspirational royal landscapes, moving between a royal city and a protective deity’s location.

Although it is not clear whether such poetic messages were written in response to royal invitations, they were elegantly crafted to impress readers/listeners at court and royal monasteries with the poet’s command of poetic technique, as well as the grandeur of cities, armies, and temples within a king’s or aspirant king’s domain. Composed in a ritual environment inhabited by a number of deities who might be persuaded to grant protection to realms, sovereigns, and subjects, sandeśa poems also sought to claim divine protection and intercession, as we see in Śālihiṇi Sandeśaya, composed in the middle of the fifteenth century.

O Lord of the Gods, with eyes seeing the three worlds, whose auspicious feet are wet with the sweet rain of fragrant flowers (fallen) from the crown of (your) divine enemies, pleasing the minds of others: Please grant a beautiful son-treasure endowed with longevity, success, wisdom and fame, to the renowned and illustrious Ulakudhaya Devī [Lōkanātha Kumarī] mature in sweet speech, accustomed to the work of kāvya, with overflowing devotion and love for the Pali-dharma of the Lord of Sages [Buddha], practicing without fail the pure eight precepts on lunar holidays.24

As has long been recognized, the authors of this era’s sandeśa poems from Laṅkā included eminent Buddhist monks. To some earlier generations of literary historians and historians of Buddhism this seemed anomalous, if not disturbing, since the focus on deity-protection as well as the erotic lushness of some scenarios witnessed by the avine traveler were at odds with the expected sphere of Buddhist monastic study, namely “doctrine” and monastic disciplinary prescription. However, as most of our historical evidence makes clear when we look at it with fewer preconceptions, learned monks were often deeply and broadly trained, and a Buddhist monk at home in the premodern courts of Southern Asia was likely to be familiar with one or more of the technical sciences, including kāvya, as well as the “three baskets” (tipiṭaka) of Buddhist learning ascribed to Buddha and his first disciples.25

Reading premodern narratives of royal donations, pilgrimages, processions, and military campaigns—as well as interventions that were made in the built environment of royal cities26—with eyes alert to the technical sciences that informed the royal houses of the day, reveals that the arena of Southern Asian Buddhist kingship was structured in ways bearing a family resemblance to kingdoms of


24. Śālihiṇi Vivaraṇaya, ed. Munidasa Kumaratunga (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Ratnākara, BV 2490 [1947]), verses 101-102. I am grateful to Professor P. B. Meegaskumbura for stimulating discussions of the messenger poems, as well as his generous consultation on the translation of more complex verses.

25. The three baskets are Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma.

the Indic/theist world from the first millennium CE onwards, as well as to the post-Timur Islamic realms investigated by Azfar Moin. To achieve sovereignty, claim it, and retain it required not only military prowess but also the ability to inhabit the role of the sovereign. A successful Buddhist sovereign ruled in accordance with circulating expectations of kingship (a discursive field), conforming sufficiently to past royal models to borrow authority from them. Sovereignty was informed by an interlocking set of intellectual traditions, including—but not limited to—Buddhist “scriptural” texts. These intellectual traditions included protective technologies related to past and future Buddhas, as well as diverse divinities and planetary forces. Thus Buddhist technologies of statecraft were implemented in accord with expert views on cosmological threat and potential. Buddhists, too, had their millennial science.

Cornell University