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Venerating Bodh Gaya: The Return of the Ceylonese to Buddhism's Holiest Site

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Abstract

In 1891, the Ceylonese Anagarika Dharmapala made his first pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya, the supposed site where Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, in northern India. Following his visit, Dharmapala established the Maha Bodhi Society and himself became a household name in subcontinental Buddhist circles, especially for his campaigns to reclaim Buddhist ownership over the Bodh Gaya site. While Bodh Gaya currently remains a popular pilgrimage location for Buddhists from what is today Sri Lanka—with various governmental, religious, and commercial initiatives established to facilitate pilgrimages—this was not always the case. Indeed, before Dharmapala's fateful visit, the island's Buddhists appeared to have little to no engagement with what was, in theory, Buddhism's holiest site and with the wider Middle Ganges region in which it is located. This article will provide a historical overview of how and why Sri Lankan Buddhists came to first accept, and then venerate, Bodh Gaya as a critical location in their Buddhist practice before Dharmapala. Referencing the scholarship of Indologists and the writings of Buddhists themselves, this article will describe the conditions that led to Dharmapala's pilgrimage in 1891 and the emergence of both Bodh Gaya and the wider Middle Ganges region in the orbit and memory of Ceylonese Buddhists. This article will further build on existing scholarship on pilgrimage and sacred spaces and demonstrate how Bodh Gaya and its surroundings became part of a tradition of sacred Buddhist geography fixed around northern India for Ceylonese Buddhists.

Keywords: Alexander Cunningham; Anagarika Dharmapala; Bodh Gaya; Buddhist pilgrimage; Buddhist Revivalism; Ceylonese Buddhism; Edwin Arnold; Indian Buddhism; Indology; Weligama Sumangala

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Bodh Gaya has loomed large in the imagination of Sri Lankan Buddhists. Believed to be the site where Siddhartha Gautama achieved Buddhahood in what is today the Indian state of Bihar, Bodh Gaya has increasingly become an important feature in the pilgrimage circuits of the island's Buddhists. Sri Lanka, of course, has long been a centre of Buddhist pilgrimage itself and continues to be so (de Silva 2016; Walters 1998; Nissan 1988). Indeed, records stretch back several centuries of pilgrims from across Asia venturing to its shores to venerate the Buddha's tooth relic in Kandy, footprint at *Śrī Pāda* (Adam's Peak), and a descendant of the original bodhi tree under which Gautama became the Buddha at Anuradhapura (Hewage 2022a). For Sri Lankan Buddhists, these traces of the Buddha across the island—and their continued veneration—have long been considered a marker of their island's parental role and preordained destiny to protect the religion long

into posterity (Blackburn 2017, p. 16; Dharmadasa 1992, pp. 23–24). Yet despite Sri Lanka's own rich Buddhist heritage and its long tradition of attracting pilgrims from elsewhere, northern India—and specifically Bodh Gaya—has become especially attractive for Buddhist pilgrims from the island.

In 2011, due to unprecedented demand, Indian Railways announced a new route from Chennai to northern India to cater specifically for Sri Lankan worshippers (Radhakrishnan 2011). In another move designed to attract the island's Buddhist devotees in 2023, Indian Railways again devised an all-inclusive pilgrimage rail route from Delhi to Bodh Gaya and other Buddhist centres across Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal—the first such tourist train departure following the COVID-19 pandemic (*Daily Mirror* 2023). Such is the current importance of the site, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake made time to travel to and pray at Bodh Gaya during his official three-day state visit to India in December 2024, meeting several state and district officials at its Mahabodhi temple complex (Fernandes 2024). Indeed, Bodh Gaya serves as an excellent example of how heritage can function both *as* diplomacy and *in* diplomacy between nations, with the site and its promotion becoming a key part of economic and political relations between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments (Winter 2015, p. 1012). Bodh Gaya's role in this heritage diplomacy between the two nations, however, is not without controversy. A 2013 visit to the complex by then Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa saw the arrest of over a dozen protestors critical of Rajapaksa's treatment of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority (*The New Indian Express* 2013). A 2025 hunger strike by Indian Buddhist monastic activists, demanding that Buddhists receive full administrative control over Bodh Gaya rather than share its management with Hindu trustees as at present, has also not gone unnoticed in Sri Lankan Buddhist circles (Surendran 2025; Kannangara 2025).

Yet the current importance of Bodh Gaya itself for Sri Lankan Buddhists is without question. Nevertheless, this was not always the case. Anagarika Dharmapala (1926, p. 149), a Buddhist pilgrim from what was then colonial Ceylon, ventured to Bodh Gaya in 1891 and found "that hallowed site was utterly neglected." Just four months after this visit, Dharmapala (1965a, p. 689) first established in Colombo the Maha Bodhi Society "to rescue" not just Bodh Gaya but also other Buddhist sites across the Middle Ganges, "to revive Buddhism in India which for seven hundred years had forgotten its greatest teacher." Furthermore, he insisted that the Society's "principal object" was to regain Buddhist ownership over the Mahabodhi complex there from its Hindu Saivite custodians who then occupied the site (Dharmapala and Gir 1895, p. 7). Appealing to Buddhists across Asia in the Society's periodical, Dharmapala (1923, p. 3) argued that "[w]hat Mecca is to Mohamedans, what Jerusalem is to the Christians and Jews, the Maha-Bodhi Temple at Buddha Gaya is to the Buddhists."

Though not the first islander to venture to Bodh Gaya following its "rediscovery" by Tibetans and other Buddhists during the modern period, Dharmapala arguably single-handedly popularised its Mahabodhi temple complex as the supreme site of veneration for Buddhists from his native Ceylon and beyond (Trevithick 2006). While Dharmapala and the Maha Bodhi Society undoubtedly laid the groundwork for Bodh Gaya to become a critical component of the heritage diplomacy between India and Sri Lanka today, the processes by which islanders came to understand and accept the importance of Bodh Gaya as a pilgrimage site of significance deserve further examination (Geary 2017; Surendran 2013). Aside from analyses of Dharmapala's own activities at and relationship with Bodh Gaya (Amunugama 2016; Kemper 2015; Trevithick 2006; Amunugama 1991), a paucity of work exists exploring the connections of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans more generally to the sacred site. Indeed, why did concerted appeals to encourage Sri Lankan pilgrimages to Bodh Gaya not commence until Dharmapala's own pilgrimage to the site in 1891?

The popularisation of Bodh Gaya for Sri Lankan Buddhists from 1891 onwards followed on, of course, from the growing interest in archaeological activities at the island's own ruined Buddhist sites—especially in the region around Anuradhapura. While colonial officials in Ceylon had first raised the issue of restoring Buddhist ruins during the 1830s, only after the establishment of the Archaeological Commission in 1868 did momentum gather among Buddhists for sites across the island to be excavated and studied (Sivasundaram 2007). The colonial archaeological project in Ceylon thus, in effect, became an endeavour to remake and commodify ruins so that modern audiences of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike could both perceive and appreciate their ancient glory and power. Indeed, as Pradeep Jeganathan (1995, p. 127) concludes of the growing interest in Anuradhapura and its significance during the 1870s and 1880s, Anuradhapura emerged as a "sign of the modern" given its elevation from a collection of "degenerate" ruins to an "aesthetic" commodity of value. The similar surge in interest in Bodh Gaya among Buddhists from Sri Lankan and elsewhere, following the activities of Dharmapala's Maha Bodhi Society, also helped to bring Bodh Gaya into the "modern", yet the processes which led to this development rather than the development itself is of key interest herein.

2. The Absence from Bodh Gaya

Sacred places in India have long been the focus of pilgrimage, a practice which likely extends back well before the period currently suggested by archaeological evidence. As John Guy (1991, p. 356) highlights, the earliest Indian textual reference to the importance of pilgrimage to holy places comes from a liturgical text attached to the *Ṛg Veda*, composed before 1000 BCE. Throughout the recorded history of Buddhism across Asia, Buddhists have also journeyed on religious pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with the Buddha and his relics (Deeg 2014; Holt 1982). Indeed, from the Middle Gangetic region in which Bodh Gaya is located, a "cult of the traces" has emerged where Buddhists bridge the remains and ruins from the Buddha's lifetime with the physical absence of the Buddha himself from their own lives (Falk 1977, p. 281). Noting how in Christianity these traces are always associated with specific spaces, Victor and Edith Turner (Turner and Turner 1978) write that these spaces are especially sanctified given their recognition *by all* who belong to the religious tradition. Buddhism, however, has arguably never had anything like a universally approved fixed and stable tradition regarding the geographic locations of Bodh Gaya and other Indian sites associated with the Buddha's biography until the early twentieth century.

Indeed, the present identification of sites such as Bodh Gaya, Kushinagar, Lumbini, Rajgir, Sarnath, and others across the Middle Ganges is based upon textual and archaeological scholarship rather than ethnographic authority. The specific notions of what constituted "authenticity" for archaeologists and Indologists in identifying these sites and others continue to heavily influence contemporary academic discourses on the geography of Indian Buddhism. Modern scholarship in Buddhist Studies continues to operate under the implicit belief that these locations, as Buddhism's foundational sites, are clearly defined and beyond dispute, making them a presumed and stable reference point. However, this uncritical acceptance has fostered a kind of scholarly inertia, limiting deeper, more critical exploration into how Buddhism has evolved (Huber 2008, p. 16). This issue is especially evident when examining how concepts such as spatial categorisation, geographic identity, sacred landscapes, and related practices like pilgrimage have functioned historically and continue to do so in Buddhist cultures today. Rather than focusing on the "contested" nature of Bodh Gaya—or any of the other Buddhist sites across the Middle Ganges—what is of importance herein is the historical role of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Buddhists as agents in reconsidering Bodh Gaya as a site of veneration as it remains today. Furthermore, this endeavour enables us to consider pilgrimage not only as a "religious duty" with soteriological rewards but

perhaps, more importantly, as a "broader intellectual and cultural quest" of discovery (Bose 2006, p. 233).

The earliest "evidence" we likely have of Bodh Gaya's direct association with the Buddha and of its visitation and veneration by later devotees, i.e., as a pilgrimage site for Buddhists, is from Ashoka's Eighth Rock Edict detailing a supposed visit to the location by the legendary Indian Emperor of antiquity. Doubts about the precise interpretation of the edict and its significance, however, remain (Schopen 1997, pp. 135–36, n. 3). The *locus classicus* for traditions of pilgrimage in early Buddhism, of course, remains the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which recommends visits to the central sites associated with the historical Buddha's life, yet the text itself does not explicitly identify Bodh Gaya either by name or geographical description (Huber 2008, p. 18–19). With an apparent absence of Buddhist devotees at Bodh Gaya from the fifteenth century onward, the modern history of pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya perhaps begins with the expedition of the Tibetan Garshapa Sonam Rabgye, who ventured to the site in 1752 (McKeown 2010; Huber 2008, pp. 177–92).

The Tibetan pilgrim made his journey on the advice of Newar Buddhists in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. These Newars, informed by the beliefs of itinerant Hindu Gosain ascetics, themselves began venturing to the area following Sonam Rabgye's expedition. One such Newari pilgrim, Amritananda, travelled to Bodh Gaya sometime during the early 1770s and recorded the similarities between its ruined temple complex and Buddhist temples at Patan and Jagannath in his native Nepal. Furthermore, Amritananda expressed his deep dismay at what he perceived to be the appropriation of sacred Buddhist symbols and imagery by Hindus within a site he regarded as fundamentally Buddhist in its origin and character (Hodgson 1827, pp. 221–22). Only a decade after Amritananda's visit did European interest in the area around Bodh Gaya take hold. Translating a stone inscription from "Boodha Gaya" in 1785, the co-founder of the Asiatic Society, Charles Wilkins (1793, p. 554), suggested that the site represented the location where the Buddha emerged as an "incarnation of a portion of Veeshnoo"—a belief connected with the Hindu religion.

The first recorded pilgrimage of Ceylonese Buddhists to Bodh Gaya during the modern period, however, took place almost a century later. The earliest evidence presented connecting the island to Bodh Gaya comes from an inscription, catalogued by the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham (1892, p. 16), on a railing around a bodhi tree at the site marking a donation from a Buddhist pilgrim from a polity named "Tabapana". While some Indologists understood the inscription to refer to the Tambapanni, a polity presumed to exist in Ceylon during the fifth and sixth centuries BCE, other contemporaries of Cunningham rejected the connection and believed the epigraph to refer to another unknown location (Mitra 1878, pp. 183–84). Despite the doubts regarding the identification of this Tabapana, its existence nonetheless highlights the historical centrality of visiting pilgrims and foreign missions in patronising the Mahabodhi complex (Guy 1991, p. 358). Subsequent epigraphical evidence from the sixth century CE suggests that a monastic from the island constructed a dwelling at the site (ibid., p. 359). Aside from epigraphical traces, the seventh-century CE travelogue of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang and an early nineteenth-century colonial gazetteer further describe the later involvement of Ceylonese monarchs in planting bodhi trees and constructing monasteries at Bodh Gaya (Smith 1902; Fleet 1886).

Corresponding chronological accounts of these events, however, do not appear in Ceylon's own rich chronicle literature, which records and relates the island's Buddhist history (Walters 2000). Furthermore, while architectural models and representations of the Mahabodhi temple—the earliest dating back to the tenth-twelfth centuries CE—have been discovered across the Buddhist world in eastern India, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, and China, no surviving models have been found anywhere in Ceylon (Guy 1991; Griswold 1965). The earliest authentic record we have linking Ceylon to Bodh Gaya comes not from

Sri Lanka or India but rather from Myanmar and its own Buddhist chronicles. Indeed, from the Burmese-language *Dhammacetiman Aṭṭhuppatti* and the Mon-language *Nidāna Ārambhakathā*, we learn of the fifteenth-century construction of Buddhist monuments at Pegu inspired by the Mahabodhi complex at Bodh Gaya. The plans for the structures, both chronicle texts maintain, were sourced from a Ceylonese merchant who supposedly travelled across Bodh Gaya and the Middle Ganges sometime between the 1450s and 1470s (Griswold 1965, pp. 186–87).

As Europeans also discovered during the colonial period, the Ceylonese themselves did not seem to have much awareness or attach special significance to Bodh Gaya or the Middle Ganges more generally. Indeed, in 1766, the then Dutch Governor of Ceylon Iman Willem Falck posed a series of questions on aspects of the Buddhist religion to the abbot of the Mulkirigala temple in southern Ceylon. Falck's queries and the abbot's responses were later translated into English and published by the English bookseller Edward Upham (1833) as "A Series of Ninety Questions and Answers on Points of the Budhist [sic] Doctrine" as part of a collection on the "sacred and historical books" of Ceylon. Asking about the locations of the areas associated with the Buddha's life, the abbot provided Falck with traditional textual descriptions and appellations of the sites but did not communicate to him their current locations as they then existed. Relaying the exchange, Upham himself noted to his readers that "[i]t would be vain to inquire where the places mentioned in these accounts are to be found." As Upham (ibid., vol. 3, p. 110) explained, "[t]hese are mysteries too great even for the [Buddhist] priests, who generally content themselves by saying that the places have perished in some of the destructions of the world."

Half a century later, the same questions about Buddhism's origins aroused the interest of English doctor John Davy, who resided on the island from 1816 through to 1820. The religion, Davy (1821, p. 232) concluded, "had its origin in the north-east part of Asia" and that was "the opinion of the Boodhists [sic] themselves." Asking a "learned native" for the precise location from where the Buddha propagated his religion, Davy reported the islander's reply that "[i]t is to the eastward of Ceylon, and further northward" from which Davy judged the area to be "pretty far north" of the island where "snow and ice" were prevalent. Published a decade before Upham published Falck's inquiries and the answers he received, Davy's account represents one of the earliest recorded instances of Buddhists themselves responding directly to European investigations about Buddhism's origins. His observations underscore that even well-informed locals lacked a precise understanding of the foundational sites associated with the Buddhist religion. What is nonetheless clear from these engagements, however, is that islanders considered the Buddha's origins as belonging to an area far removed from their familiar surroundings.

The Ceylonese, of course, were not the only Asian Buddhists who appeared to have forgotten about the presence and significance of Bodh Gaya and other Buddhist sites across the Middle Ganges until the modern period. As mentioned, Tibetans and Newar Buddhists began venturing to Bodh Gaya during the second half of the eighteenth century following the advice of Hindu mendicants. The Burmese, too, began sending embassies to Bodh Gaya during the early nineteenth century on the advice of Indian ascetics and merchants to Burmese royalty. As Indian archaeologist Rajendralal Mitra (1878, p. 224) noted in his monograph on Bodh Gaya, the Burmese monarch Bagyidaw inquired "from the Yogis and Brahmans who came from India, as well as from traders" about the location where Siddartha Gautama achieved Buddhahood. These Indians described to Bagyidaw the existence of a bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, which bore marks of a bough having been detached from it, and the presence of Burmese inscriptions in its environs.[1] According to later epigraphical evidence at the site, Bagyidaw, "after carefully weighing the facts",

concluded that the Mahabodhi site at Bodh Gaya was “no other” than that at which the historical Buddha achieved Buddhahood (ibid.).

Indeed, despite their apparent ignorance about Bodh Gaya and the geography associated with early Buddhism until the modern period, these other Buddhist communities seized upon the advice of Europeans and others to venture to the Middle Ganges and observe this sacred geography for themselves. The Ceylonese, while conceding that the sites associated with the Buddha’s life existed in some region of which they had no current memory or connection with, appeared to have little desire to seek them out. As to why the island’s Buddhists appeared to care little about discovering and venerating this sacred geography, the Irish-born Indologist William Knighton provides some clues. In a description of Ceylonese life published in 1852, Knighton described an exchange with a local Buddhist aristocrat named Marandhan to whom he addressed a series of polemical questions regarding the Buddhist religion. While Knighton made a mockery of the places and features described and listed in Buddhist texts, given the difficulty in tracing their present locations, Marandhan sharply rebuked him and defended his faith. The Buddha, he maintained, used geographical markers and descriptors already “prevalent” amongst his followers when preaching to them. “His object was to teach them far higher things than physical science,” Marandhan insisted, “and hence his acceptance of the geographical ideas then prevalent.” He further maintained that the Buddha “alluded to these localities as widely-spread objects of belief merely” (Knighton 1854, vol. 2, p. 374). Early Buddhist geography, according to Marandhan, appeared to have little spiritual significance for Ceylonese Buddhists, with the unearthing of the original locations associated with the religion of little importance.

Marandhan’s argument, of course, presents just one possible explanation as to why the island’s Buddhists seemingly placed no special significance on the sites associated with the Buddha, even while Indologists and other Buddhists gradually refigured them from the eighteenth century onwards. Nevertheless, these responses of Ceylonese Buddhists, as recorded by Upham, Davy, and Knighton when questioned about the origins of their religion, remain important in evaluations of how the islanders understood their Buddhist heritage. Indeed, they serve to demonstrate what Alan Trevithick (2006, p. 65) describes as a memory “gap” whereby the lack of an active Buddhist presence and community at Bodh Gaya and at other sites across the Middle Ganges with which Ceylon could connect diminished the wider region’s prominence for the island’s Buddhists. Indeed, before we analyse both how and why islanders began associating and connecting their Buddhist heritage with the region surrounding Bodh Gaya, the role of Buddhist developments within Ceylon itself during this process merits consideration.

Following the 1815 British conquest of Kandy, Ceylon’s last remaining indigenous Buddhist kingdom, the place of Buddhism within the island’s society underwent a significant transformation and reorganisation. In the Kandyan Convention, a negotiated treaty outlining the terms of Kandy’s surrender, Britain gave assurances that Buddhism would remain “inviolable” and vowed to uphold its “rites, ministers, and places of worship” (Vimalananda 1970, p. 89). Despite these commitments, British authorities steadily distanced themselves from their responsibilities tied to Buddhism on the island. Furthermore, following an inquiry launched from Westminster in 1849 at the behest of Christian evangelicals, the colonial state formally withdrew its endorsement of the religion in Ceylon (Malalgoda 1976, p. 214; Vimalananda 1970, pp. 83–84). In doing so, Britain ruptured the connection between the monarchy and the Buddhist establishment that had persisted on the island since the third century BCE (Hewage 2022b, p. 52). Moreover, this “disestablishment” of the religion in Ceylon gave rise to “secularizing displacements” across the island as an administrative shift occurred from the pilgrimage centre of Kandy in the highlands to the

commercial maritime centre of Colombo—a city then devoid of an institutional Buddhist presence (Scott 1996; Karunaratne 1965, p. 21).

To counter the disorder and turmoil of the decades which followed the consolidation of colonial rule across Ceylon, the island's Buddhists focused on rebuilding and reconstituting themselves as a singular Buddhist community against an unsympathetic colonial administration. The proliferation of Christian missions, encouraged and supported by the colonial government, further galvanised Ceylonese Buddhists who responded with oral and written defences of their religion and rebukes of the Christian faith and the institutional structures supporting its propagation (Hewage 2022b, pp. 52–53; Harris 2012; Malalgoda 1976, pp. 219–21). In India, the nineteenth century largely signified an extended period of Buddhist awakening, where Indologists, foreign Buddhists, and Indians themselves strove to uncover the mainland's Buddhist past and connect it to Buddhist heritage elsewhere (Ray 2014; Leoshko 2003). The same period in Ceylon, however, very much marked a period of reorganisation and revival given the unprecedented changes brought by the advent of colonial rule. There is perhaps then little surprise that Ceylonese Buddhists expressed little interest in exploring the foreign origins of their religious heritage given their preoccupation with addressing religious grievances at home.

3. Connecting Heritages

As mentioned, Indologists came to discover possible evidence linking the island to the site. Yet, while Bodh Gaya and its significance thus appeared to be of little importance for islanders, Ceylon nonetheless became especially influential in helping colonial Indologists understand Bodh Gaya's own role in shaping Buddhist history. Dennis Mahony, a visiting military official from the Bombay Presidency, first noted back in 1801 that the bodhi tree at Anuradhapura sprung from a branch of the "original tree" that was "brought to Ceylon in a miraculous manner". While he does not state where the original tree was located or of his awareness of the Mahabodhi site at Bodh Gaya, Mahony (1808, p. 42) nonetheless acknowledged that "[i]t was against this tree that Bhooddha [sic] leaned, when he first took upon himself his divine character." Though he again observed that the original bodhi tree "is held sacred alike" by both the Ceylonese and Siamese, nowhere in his account did he describe any meaningful effort by the islanders to search for and locate the site of the parent tree. Of the polities and regions described in Buddhist texts, Mahony implied, the Ceylonese only "pretend" to have a knowledge of their current positions (ibid.).

Mahony's engagement with Ceylonese texts predated a series of later endeavours by Indologists and their correspondents during the 1820s and 1830s who used the island's Buddhist chronicles to try to both connect Indic and European historiographies and geographically place the Buddha. Their efforts ultimately gave rise to a "sift and choose" method of analysis where the unverifiable aspects of Buddhist historical narratives were discarded in favour of Buddhist histories judged credible (Hewage 2022a, pp. 48–60). Nevertheless, as Indologist William Henry Sykes (1841, p. 248) later lamented, apparent chronological inconsistencies in "the texts in the language of the Brahmans" and in their "Singhalese versions" resulted in a turn towards Chinese texts from the 1840s to help "dissipate the mists" created by the records sourced from the subcontinent.

These texts, especially the travelogues of the Chinese monastic pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang who ventured to the subcontinent during the fifth and seventh centuries CE, respectively, proved especially influential in locating and describing ruined Buddhist sites across the Middle Ganges. Furthermore, these two travelogues greatly shaped the activities of the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham, mentioned earlier. Cunningham was not the first Indologist to document the sites now associated with the Buddha nor indeed the first to use Chinese pilgrim travelogues to chart a wider Buddhist geography across

northern India (Hewage 2022a, pp. 60–70). Nevertheless, from the 1860s onward, he pioneered a wider "formula" where historical travelogues were first compared to each other before then being connected to the physical ruins dotted across the Middle Ganges, resulting in the identifications of the sites we still acknowledge today (Deeg 2018, p. 67; Deeg 2019, p. 33).

Despite the diminished "historical" importance of Ceylonese texts for Indologists by this time, they nonetheless remained critical in Cunningham's formulaic approach. Whether it was in his descriptions of Bodh Gaya or other locations across the region, a close analysis of Cunningham's works uncovers his deliberate use of a "hierarchy of texts" to shape his scholarship (Hewage 2022a, p. 68). Often dismissing the narratives of the Chinese texts in favour of his own hypotheses, he nevertheless drew upon Ceylonese chronicles to frame and verify details found in the travel narratives. While Cunningham (1871, p. 429) acknowledged the superiority of the travelogues over the "distant chroniclers of Ceylon", given his belief that the Chinese had "actually visited" the Middle Ganges and recorded their travels there unlike the Ceylonese, the island's chronicle literature remained of use.

Indeed, his geographical reconstructions of the region are interspersed with references from chronicles such as the *Mahāvaṃsa* to support the Chinese accounts. He particularly valued the Ceylonese chronicles for their information on distances between ancient Buddhist landmarks, which he used to address discrepancies found in the accounts of Faxian and Xuanzang. In fact, Cunningham's reliance on Ceylonese sources was so pronounced that he even placed notices in the island's periodicals, seeking help in interpreting the Buddhist iconography he encountered in his archaeological activity (*Ceylon Observer* 1874). Cunningham's archaeological investigations directly resulted in other Buddhist communities—such as the Burmese, Japanese, and Tibetans—venturing again to the Middle Ganges from the 1870s onward (Jaffe 2019, p. 15; Huber 2008; Mitra 1878, p. iii). Indian archaeological discoveries, however, did not mark the first step in the Ceylonese connecting themselves to Bodh Gaya and its surroundings.

Linguistics instead paved the path for the islanders to reconsider their Buddhist heritage and its origins. Back in 1850, the Ceylonese Christian scholar James de Alwis (1850, pp. 250–52) first suggested that the Sinhalese language spoken by Ceylon's Buddhists was "unquestionably an Indian dialect". Two years later, he speculated that the language formed part of the "Arian" or "Northern" subcontinental language family as opposed to that of the "Southern class" (ibid.; de Alwis 1852, p. xliv). A decade later, de Alwis (1865, pp. 145–46; de Alwis 1862) connected the Pali language of the island's Buddhist literature to the supposed vernacular of the ancient region of Magadha which Indologists had by then associated with what is now Bihar. It was this same Magadha region, he claimed, from which the Buddha himself emerged. Furthermore, writing in 1865, de Alwis (1865, pp. 145–46) noted how a "greater thirst" for archaeological excavations of Buddhist sites among Europeans based in India was, in fact, motivating islanders to consider the possible Indian origins of their own heritage. Indeed, by the 1870s, Ceylonese Buddhist monastics themselves were referencing Indologist scholarship when describing early Buddhist geography.

In earlier times, religious communities across the subcontinent reproduced existing knowledge which passed from generation to generation (Cort 2012). The growth of the printing press within indigenous intellectual circles in Ceylon from the 1850s, however, enabled the island's Buddhists not only to reproduce and disseminate more broadly *existing* knowledge but also to create *new* knowledge which they could engage with existing scholarly convention (Hewage 2022a, p. 72). More than a century previously, the Buddhist abbot of Mulkirigala highlighted how Buddhist monastics simply did not know where the ancient sites associated with the Buddha were then located. In his 1876 *Itihāsaya*

("The History"), however, the Ceylonese cleric Weligama Sumangala expressed no such reservation when detailing the present locations of Gaya and other ancient localities. In a work best remembered today for its caste analysis and commentary rather than for its transformational impact on how islanders considered their origins, Sumangala's study makes ample use of Indologist scholarship throughout and explicitly references Cunningham's archaeological activities (Blackburn 2010, p. 85, n. 34; Sumangala 1876).

The pioneering scholarship of de Alwis and Sumangala suggests that the Ceylonese had come to accept the Indian origins of their Buddhist religion from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Yet there remains little evidence to show that these identifications held any special meaning for those beyond elite intellectual circles. Indeed, there still appeared to be little suggestion by the 1870s that the island's Buddhists felt compelled to elevate and venerate Bodh Gaya and its surroundings to a level comparable to Ceylon's own Buddhist sites. This all changed, however, with the discovery in India of relics connected to the Buddha. Claiming to have discovered physical traces of the Buddha's chief disciples Sariputa and Moggallanna, Cunningham received a letter in 1874 from the Ceylonese cleric Waskaduwa Subhuti who excitedly asked him whether the relics were indeed genuine (Brekke 2007, p. 276). Discoveries from the subsequent decade further aroused the excitement of the island's Buddhists.

Indeed, in 1882, the Indian archaeologist Bhagwanlal Indraji (1882) reported his discovery of the supposed alms-bowl of the Buddha at Sopara near present-day Mumbai—using, like Cunningham, the Chinese travelogues and the Ceylonese the *Mahāvaṃsa* to verify his finds. Following their deposit in a Bombay museum, Ceylon's foremost Buddhist prelate Hikkaduwa Sumangala managed to convince the then Governor of Ceylon James Robert Longden to transport and exhibit the relics in Colombo later that year (*Allahabad Pioneer* 1882; *Madras Mail* 1882). The island's Buddhists raised £500 for a reliquary to hold the Sopara fragments, and their exhibition attracted huge crowds eager to catch a glimpse of the physical traces of the Buddha's life. Furthermore, Buddhists in their thousands listened to speeches by local leaders who stressed the connection between the relics and the wider northern Indian geography from which they claimed the Buddha himself emerged (*Allahabad Pioneer* 1882). As mentioned, Ceylon itself plays host to several important sacred traces connected to the Buddha's life. Nevertheless, the public display of the Sopara relics in 1882 perhaps marked the first instance of Ceylonese Buddhists linking India's Buddhist heritage to their own outside of scholarly engagements and investigations.

In fact, from the 1880s onward, Ceylonese Buddhists themselves publicly communicated their recognition of Bodh Gaya and the wider geography of the Middle Ganges as an area of supreme sanctity. Indeed, during an 1886 meeting between the English poet Edwin Arnold and Weligama Sumangala, the Ceylonese cleric directly expressed his views regarding the obligations of Buddhists to these sites. As Arnold (1886, p. 270) recalled, "[a]fter many questions about the localities in the life-history of Buddha, which I had recently visited, [Sumangala] expressed an ardent wish that the Buddhists might some day recover the guardianship of that sacred ground at Buddha Gya [sic]". Sumangala further informed Arnold that "this place" was a spot "which ought no longer to be in any hands except those of Buddhists". He further promised to Arnold that he would "deposit in positions of the highest honour the leaves of the holy peepul tree [at Bodh Gaya], and the little carved stupa of stone," which Arnold had gifted him from the Mahabodhi site. As Arnold also noted (Arnold 1896, p. 311) elsewhere, a leaf from the tree which he had gifted to the temple housing the Buddha's tooth relic at Kandy was "prized" by the island's Buddhists "with eager and passionate emotion." Furthermore, he observed how the leaf was even placed "in a casket of precious metal and made the centre of a weekly service".

As the author of the well-acclaimed *The Light of Asia* about the Buddha in 1879, published to "aid in the better mutual knowledge of East and West", Arnold had greatly aroused the interest of both Victorian and Buddhist publics in the Buddha and his teachings (Ober 2021; Lecourt 2016; Harris 2006; Arnold 1879, p. 10). Indeed, Dharmapala's decision to make his own pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in 1891 and establish the Maha Bodhi Society can be directly attributed to Arnold's influence. As Dharmapala later explained in a lecture at Bangkok in 1894, "[i]t was he [Arnold] who gave me the impulse to visit the shrine" given the powerful emotive appeal of his 1879 work. Dharmapala further referenced Arnold's description of the Mahabodhi site and proclaimed (Dharmapala 1965b, p. 330), "if you waked in that spot which all these scores of millions of our race love so dearly, you would observe [it] with shame and grief". Moreover, scholarship has long followed Dharmapala's erroneous assertion that the idea of "restoring this Buddhist Jerusalem into Buddhist hands" originated with Arnold (ibid., Trevithick 2006, p. 63; Allen 2002, p. 252). Arnold's own writings, however, demonstrate that it was Weligama Sumangala who impressed upon him the significance of Bodh Gaya for Ceylonese Buddhists.

As Arnold (1896, p. 311) later described, "I gave utterance to [Sumangala's] suggestion that the [Mahabodhi] temple and its appurtenances ought to be, and might be, by amicable arrangements. . .placed in the hands of a representative committee of the Buddhist nations." As Arnold also highlighted (ibid., p. 312), "I think there never was an idea which took root and spread so far and fast as that thrown out" by Sumangala, as "the suggestion quickly became an universal aspiration, first in Ceylon and next in other Buddhist countries." Moreover, the words chosen by Arnold in his appeal to the then Governor of Ceylon Arthur Gordon reflect how strongly Sumangala and other Ceylonese Buddhists felt about the Mahabodhi site. Explaining how they "entreated" him to lay the plan before the Governor, Arnold wrote how the return of the complex to Buddhist ownership "would win the love and gratitude of all Buddhist populations, and would reflect enduring honour upon English administration." This was because, as Arnold insisted (ibid.), the Mahabodhi temple and enclosure are "the most sacred spots in all the world for the Buddhists."

4. Conclusions

While Dharmapala led and ultimately lost a legal challenge to regain Buddhist ownership over Bodh Gaya in 1895, Buddhists eventually became joint custodians of the complex in 1949 shortly after Indian independence following the prolonged campaigns of the Maha Bodhi Society. Despite Dharmapala's subsequent lionisation in Ceylonese and wider subcontinental Buddhist histories for his role in engaging Buddhists to rescue Bodh Gaya, he was not, in fact, the first Ceylonese to visit Bodh Gaya in modern times. A convert from Christianity, Edmund Gooneratne ventured to Bodh Gaya in 1884 and deposited there a marble slab to memorialise his journey (Cunningham 1892, p. 19; Monier-Williams 1890, p. 395). While we do not seem to know what specifically prompted Gooneratne's pilgrimage, his travel during a decade when islanders had finally begun to acknowledge the supreme sanctity of Bodh Gaya and its environs should come as little surprise.

Indeed, the 1880s saw a significant surge in interest among Buddhist followers in the region traditionally associated with the Buddha's life, and this trend was especially pronounced among devotees from Ceylon. Though the Ceylonese were preceded in their return to Bodh Gaya by Buddhists from Tibet, Nepal, Burma, and Japan, they nonetheless did embrace the site once they recognised the value in connecting their own Buddhist heritage to that of the region of the religion's origin. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century, the island's Buddhists appeared just as unaware of Buddhism's foundational locations as Buddhists from other Asian communities and inquisitive Europeans. While the

discoveries of Indologists across the 1800s compelled Ceylonese intellectuals to consider the origins of their heritage and their relationship to areas beyond the island, only towards the century's end did the value of these links seem to emerge for the wider populace. During the late colonial period, Anuradhapura and other island sites became "nationalised" for Dharmapala and other Sri Lankan Buddhists as pilgrimage centres where cultural and nationalist ideologies merged (Jeganathan 1995, pp. 127–30). The opposite, however, seemed to occur with Bodh Gaya and other early Buddhist sites across the Middle Ganges. These Buddhist centres, in effect, became universalised for the island's Buddhists with appeals focusing not only on their importance for individual Buddhist communities but also on their significance for all Buddhists regardless of origin or background.

As mentioned, the key consideration in transforming an otherwise ordinary place into a sacred space is a universal consensus of its sanctity and significance for a particular religious tradition. Through textual analyses and archaeological inquiry, Indologists had previously performed this function for Bodh Gaya from the late eighteenth century onward. Nevertheless, Dharmapala's 1891 pilgrimage—itself a legacy of the impact of Indology on the cultural and religious spheres—served to expand the popular appeal of the site beyond intellectual discourse for Buddhists across the world, thus laying the groundwork for the later globalisation of Bodh Gaya (Geary 2014, 2017). While not the first Buddhist to venture to the location or to encourage pilgrimages towards it, Dharmapala further contributed to redefining engagement with the site by rapidly expanding its appeal. Through the mission of his Maha Bodhi Society, Bodh Gaya moved from being a location of mystery and intrigue which "needed" modern Indology to uncover its past to a religious nexus central to Buddhism's future as well as its past. In a specifically Ceylonese context, the Society established itself around the shared Buddhist heritage connecting the island to the Middle Ganges. A heritage that—given Sri Lanka's enthusiastic embrace and participation in heritage diplomacy—remains crucial to Sri Lankan Buddhism today.

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Notes

[1] The Burmese seemingly considered this bough to be the sapling that was transplanted to Anuradhapura.

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