

## Article

# The Making and Unmaking of a Sri Lankan Buddha

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## Abstract

This article reconstructs a largely forgotten episode in the history of Buddhist studies: the period in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the Buddha was widely considered to have been Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) in origin. Contrary to modern scholarly consensus situating the Buddha firmly in northern India, early European encounters with Buddhism unfolded amid profound uncertainty regarding its geographical and historical origins. Drawing on colonial accounts, early translations, sacred relics, and the European interpretation of chronicle traditions, the article shows how Sri Lanka came to appear, within certain European scholarly frameworks, to possess a coherent and persuasive claim to Buddhist primacy, grounded in living religious practice, sacred geography, and continuous historical narratives. The article argues that the subsequent displacement of a Sri Lankan Buddha was not simply the result of improved evidence, but of a deeper epistemic transformation. During the nineteenth century, new standards of historical credibility—philology, cartography, archaeology, and comparative textual criticism—redefined what counted as authoritative knowledge. Through the interventions of figures such as Brian Hodgson and George Turnour, Ceylonese traditions were reclassified as local and symbolic rather than foundational. By tracing this shift, the article illuminates how scholarly consensus is produced through changes in method and authority, revealing how changing standards of evidence narrowed the range of historically credible possibilities.

**Keywords:** Brian Hodgson; Ceylonese Buddhism; Edward Upham; George Turnour; Indian Buddhism; *Mahāvamsa*

That the Buddha was Sri Lankan in origin is today a claim so thoroughly rejected that it lies well outside the bounds of mainstream academic scholarship. Within contemporary Buddhist studies, the geographical origins of Siddhartha Gautama, the prince who would become the Buddha, are treated as firmly settled in the Middle Gangetic region of the Indian subcontinent, anchored by a dense apparatus of philological comparison, archaeological correlation, and cross-referenced textual traditions. This consensus is so entrenched that it often functions less as a conclusion than as a presupposition: the Buddha's Indian provenance is assumed at the outset, shaping both the questions scholars ask and the kinds of evidence they are prepared to recognize as relevant. As a result, alternative geographies of origin—particularly those that locate the Buddha in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon)—are typically dismissed preemptively, relegated to the domains of nationalist mythmaking, devotional excess, or antiquarian confusion.

Yet this confidence, for all its methodological sophistication, obscures a striking and historically consequential fact. For much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there existed no stable consensus regarding where the Buddha—or Buddhism more broadly—had first emerged. European scholars encountering Buddhism across Asia did so in a condition of profound uncertainty, piecing together fragmentary observations



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without a unifying framework capable of ordering these materials into a coherent historical narrative. During this period, the very notion of “Buddhism” as a single, internally consistent religion was still in the process of formation. Its origins were debated not only in terms of chronology, but of geography, civilization, and cultural priority.

Within this unsettled intellectual landscape, Sri Lanka occupied a position of unusual prominence. Far from being regarded merely as a peripheral outpost that had received Buddhism from elsewhere, the island was widely entertained—within European scholarship, and occasionally in transregional Asian exchanges—as a plausible candidate for Buddhism’s homeland. Ceylon appeared to possess what other regions seemingly lacked: a living Buddhist tradition, sacred relics attributed to the Buddha, a landscape saturated with sites associated with his presence, and continuous historical chronicles that linked the island’s political and religious history directly to his life. While these chronicles did not explicitly relocate the Buddha’s nativity to the island, their integration of sacred presence, kingship, and territorial sacrality made the island appear—within certain European interpretive frames—as foundational rather than derivative. In the absence of a clearly articulated Indian Buddhist past—at a time when Buddhism appeared to Europeans as largely extinct on the subcontinent—Sri Lanka’s claims did not appear anomalous. On the contrary, they appeared coherent, internally consistent, and supported by multiple forms of authority.

The disappearance of this possibility from modern scholarship thus demands explanation. Rather than asking why contemporary scholars reject the idea of a Sri Lankan Buddha, this article asks how that rejection became so complete that the idea itself now appears historically implausible within the dominant frameworks of modern scholarship. To recover the moment when Sri Lanka could plausibly be imagined as the Buddha’s homeland is to confront the contingency of what now seems settled. It requires taking seriously the fact that scholarly consensus is not merely the accumulation of better answers, but the outcome of historically specific processes that determine which questions may be asked in the first place.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is neither to revive the claim that the Buddha was Sri Lankan as a matter of historical truth nor to challenge the substantial body of scholarship situating his life in northern India. Its aim is to explain when, why, and how the idea of a Sri Lankan Buddha was once intellectually viable, and how it was subsequently rendered untenable. Furthermore, this article does not argue that there existed a widespread belief among learned monastics that the Buddha was born on the island, and it does not suggest that monastic authors had previously maintained a doctrinal claim for a Sri Lankan nativity. Rather, it examines how early European interpreters, working through mediated translations of sacred geography, could construe Sri Lanka as a plausible locus of origin within their own emerging historiographical frameworks before disciplinary historicism foreclosed it. Accordingly, the focus falls on the genealogy of European scholarly authority rather than on Sinhala doctrinal innovation. In tracing this trajectory, the article situates the shift from speculation to verification within the broader nineteenth-century reconfiguration of historical method.

The professionalization of European scholarship on the subcontinent, with its insistence on philological consistency, cross-referencing, and chronological anchoring, marked the emergence of historicism and philology as technologies of truth that could distinguish the verifiable from the “fabulous” and reorganize sacred narratives within linear historical time (Walters 2000, p. 159). This transformation was not simply methodological but also classificatory, forming part of what Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) later identified as a defining feature of the nineteenth-century “science of religion”: a universalizing impulse that sought to order religious traditions by identifying their founders, points of origin, and sacred

homelands within a single, comparative historical framework. In parallel, this emerging historical consciousness reframed Asia's religious past within a universal temporal schema, situating Buddhist chronology alongside Greco-Roman antiquity and other world histories in ways that reflected what [Thomas Trautmann](#) (1997, pp. 28–61) has termed “Mosaic ethnology”.

## 1. Buddhist Origins Before Scholarly Consensus

By the late eighteenth century, European knowledge of Buddhism was still largely fragmented and provisional. Although European observers had identified connections between Buddhist traditions in Ceylon, Siam, and China since the late seventeenth century, colonial scholars based in Calcutta had begun to extend these comparisons by the 1780s to regions such as Nepal, Japan, Siberia, and Tibet, linking them to the more familiar Buddhist practices Europeans had previously documented ([Hewage 2022a](#), p. 24). Yet despite these connections, identifying a single point of origin for Buddhism proved extraordinarily difficult. For a time, Europeans entertained the possibility that the Buddha emerged in Africa or Central Asia ([Almond 1988](#), pp. 20–24). Within this broader landscape of uncertainty, Ceylon increasingly appeared to some European observers as a plausible candidate for Buddhism's homeland. This possibility did not emerge from a single argument or publication, but from the cumulative weight of textual testimony, material culture, sacred geography, and living religious practice encountered on the island. Taken together, these elements rendered a Sri Lankan Buddha conceivable—and, for some observers, persuasive.

This openness to locating Buddhism's origins beyond the Indian mainland must be situated within the epistemic conditions of late eighteenth-century imperial knowledge production. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by the simultaneous expansion of empire and the formation of “national culture”, processes intertwined with Protestant missionary activity and Christian models of sacred history that privileged identifiable points of origin. Indeed, central to this interaction was the way religion functioned as a key marker of difference, allowing Europe to imagine itself as the site of “history” and “modernity,” while colonies such as India were cast as domains of religion that appeared to exist “outside history” ([van der Veer 2001](#), p. 12). In this comparative framework, India was frequently represented as the land of “eternal religion,” whereas Britain was understood as “the agent of history,” a contrast that shaped how religious traditions were hierarchically ordered. Such assumptions were reinforced by utilitarian and evangelical critiques that portrayed Indian religion as dominated by “priestly superstition” and lacking historical dynamism (*ibid.*, pp. 12–13). Against this background, areas like Ceylon—possessing chronicles, relics, and a living Buddhist tradition—could appear unusually legible as sites of antiquity and moral order. The absence of a stable historical narrative for Buddhism in India, combined with imperial habits of comparison that privileged visible continuity over abstract chronology, thus created the conditions under which Sri Lanka could plausibly be imagined not merely as a recipient of Buddhism, but as its point of origin.

Furthermore, the emerging desire to fix Buddhism within a determinate geographical origin was not simply antiquarian curiosity. It developed within an intellectual milieu deeply shaped by Christian theological assumptions about sacred beginnings. Indigenous explanations of “historicized myth” describing the ancient past of Indic polities did not sit comfortably with early European scholars of the subcontinent, many of whom sought to reconcile Indian narratives with biblical chronology and to reaffirm Christian supremacy ([Bayly 2012](#), p. 53; [Dodson 2007](#), pp. 28–37). Though often genuinely enamoured of Indian civilization and convinced of a “hidden glorious past” awaiting recovery, these scholars nevertheless operated within a framework in which religions were expected to possess identifiable founders, foundational moments, and sacred homelands ([Kapila 2007](#), p. 494;

Pennington 2005, p. 121). Moreover, Christian missionary influence permeated Asian public discourse in the nineteenth century, particularly in debates over supreme sacred geographies and their origins (McMahan 2009, pp. 27–60). Within such a context, the question of where Buddhism began acquired theological as well as historical urgency. The search for a birthplace was therefore shaped not only by philological curiosity but by inherited Christian models of sacred history.

In their inquiries, early European observers repeatedly recorded traditions that placed the Buddha in direct relation to the island's kings, monastics, sacred geography, and ritual objects. Robert Knox (1681, pp. 72–75), an English sailor imprisoned on the island during the seventeenth century, described his belief how Ceylonese monks were “reputed and called sons of Boddou [Buddha].”<sup>1</sup> This Boddou, Knox wrote, was a “great God. . . unto whom the Salvation of Souls belongs,” and the Buddha, he continued, “departed from the Earth from the top of the highest Mountain on the Island called Pico Adam [Adam's Peak/*Śrī Pāda*]”. These were not marginal anecdotes but core elements of how Knox interpreted Buddhism to be understood and practiced on the island. Such claims were also echoed beyond Ceylon. Simon de la Loubère (1693, p. 10), writing from Siam in the late seventeenth century, noted that “Sommona-Codom [Siddhartha Gautama, i.e., the Buddha] whom the Siamese adore, was the Son of a King of the Island of Ceylon.” A century later, Colonel Michael Symes's inquiries in Burma revealed his understanding of the belief that Buddhism “came originally from Ceylon,” and that the Burmans acknowledged “the superior antiquity of the Cingalese [Sinhalese], and the reception of their religion and laws from that quarter”. The Burmese monarch, Symes (1798, p. 14) reported, had even sent messengers to Ceylon “to procure the original books on which their [religious] tenets are founded.”

These testimonies mattered because, at the time, no competing framework existed that could decisively invalidate them. Buddhism appeared largely absent from India, which European scholars increasingly understood as fundamentally Brahminic and “Hindu” in nature (Pennington 2005, pp. 112–18). By contrast, Ceylon presented a living Buddhist civilization that appeared to claim an unbroken continuity with the Buddha himself. Indeed, this continuity was not merely asserted but materially embodied. An 1817 narration of Ceylon's history described how “Boodh” came to the island from somewhere in “the east”, was married by the “Emperor of Candy”, and spent much of his life at the island's famed mountain before ascending to heaven (Philaethes 1817, pp. 193–98).<sup>2</sup> An English reference work from 1832 similarly explained that Buddhism emanated from Ceylon, where the Buddha was treated as a “divine personage” by some and a “good man of divine character” by others (Philipps 1832, p. 344). Objects of veneration further reinforced this geography of origin.

The bodhi tree at Anuradhapura, still extant and ritually central, was described in an 1817 narrative as having been carried by a retinue of eight brothers and sisters from a “country” on Ceylon's southern coast named “Madanpadipe” (Philaethes 1817, pp. 25–26).<sup>3</sup> Notably, nowhere in this narrative concerning the Anuradhapura bodhi tree and its provenance is there any mention of an Indian origin of the kind assumed today. Simon Casie Chetty, an intellectual belonging to the island's minority Hindu and Christian Chetty community, later added that a chieftain from the island's interior was a direct descendant of the individual who had carried the sapling, embedding the tree within a genealogical history that was unmistakably local (Casie Chetty 1834, p. 176).<sup>4</sup> The observations of Dennis Mahony, a Captain in the East India Company's Bombay Army, added a further layer of significance. Visiting the island in 1801, Mahony (1808, p. 45) noted that islanders related the bodhi tree's position to the geographical locations of all “countries.”

This symbolic geography becomes particularly important in light of Ceylon's claim to possess the Buddha's tooth relic, housed at the Sri Dalada Maligawa temple in Kandy. While the relic's origin was traditionally attributed to Kalinga—identified today with the region encompassing the Indian state of Odisha—Mahony (ibid.) recorded that this “Kalleengo” country appeared, in local understanding, to exist “to the right” of the Anuradhapura bodhi tree. Such spatial reasoning suggests that sacred geography was organized relationally rather than cartographically, with places deriving significance from their position within a sacralized landscape rather than from correspondence to fixed external territories. With the sacred tree, the mountain of ascension, and a physical trace of the Buddha's body, Ceylon thus seemingly possessed all the features of a Buddhist sacred landscape. Taken together, these elements did not merely commemorate the Buddha's presence but materially anchored it, rendering the island legible—both to its inhabitants and to early European observers—as a plausible center of Buddhist origin rather than a peripheral site of reception.

It is important, however, to clarify again that the plausibility of a Sri Lankan Buddha in early European discourse did not necessarily reflect a widespread emic claim among learned Sinhala monastics that the Buddha himself originated on the island. What rendered a Sri Lankan Buddha conceivable in European scholarship was less a doctrinal assertion by Sinhala monks than a misalignment between European expectations of cartographic precision and Sinhala modes of sacred narration. When European readers encountered references to the Buddha's visits to the island, relics preserved at Kandy, or genealogical connections between kingship and the *sāsana* (Buddhist religion), they sometimes inferred geographical origin where Sinhala tradition articulated sacral presence (Hewage 2025, 2022a; de Silva 2016; Walters 1998; Nissan 1988). The distinction between birthplace and sanctified landscape, as expressed within indigenous historiographical frameworks, was not always clear within early European reconstructions.

In these reconstructions, the island's own chronicles further strengthened the authority of claims for a Sri Lankan Buddha. The *Rājāvaliya*, which came into Mahony's possession in 1801, was possibly the first Buddhist text to be partially translated into English.

In translating its sixth chapter, Mahony (ibid., pp. 45–52) described the “Kimbool-watpoore” of the Buddha's birth, the “Raja Gaha Noowereh” of his residence, and the “Cooseamarapoore” of his death. Mahony did not explicitly identify these locations with places on the island, nor did he draw conclusions regarding the Buddha's geographical origin. Nevertheless, by presenting these locations within a broader discussion of the island's sacred geography—and by emphasizing the relational spatial logic through which the Anuradhapura bodhi tree was understood in connection with other places—his translation made Ceylonese chronicle geography newly available to European interpretation. The significance of Mahony's work lies primarily in providing one of the earliest English-language frameworks through which Buddhist biography, sacred geography, and Ceylonese historical tradition could be read together, rather than in advancing any direct claim about a Sri Lankan birthplace. It bears emphasizing that the underlying Sinhala text itself did not assert a Sri Lankan birthplace. Nor is there clear evidence that Mahony's contemporaries uniformly interpreted the chronicle in this manner. Rather, the importance of his translation lies in the interpretive possibilities it opened for later readers operating within a context of considerable uncertainty regarding Buddhist origins. His translation represented the earliest European catalogue of ancient locations linked to key moments in the Buddha's life, and as such, it helped establish the conditions under which a Sri Lankan Buddha could be imagined as historically plausible.<sup>5</sup>

Taken together, these elements explain why a Sri Lankan Buddha was not merely imaginable, but persuasive, to early modern observers. The claim did not arise from ignorance of India, but from the presence of a richly articulated Buddhist world centered

on the island itself—one supported by living religious practice, sacred objects, genealogical traditions, and historical chronicles that situated the Buddha within Ceylon's landscape. In the absence of a clearly articulated Indian Buddhist past, this convergence of textual, material, and ritual authority offered a coherent and compelling account of Buddhist origins. To understand how this world was dismantled—and how its claims were reclassified as error rather than alternative history—requires tracing the epistemic transformations of the nineteenth century, through which new standards of evidence, geography, and historical reasoning came to govern the study of the Buddha's life.

## 2. From Sacred Continuity to Critical Scrutiny

Indeed, if the dawn of the nineteenth century constituted a moment in which a Sri Lankan Buddha was intellectually plausible, subsequent decades marked the beginning of its fragmentation. This fragmentation did not occur because decisive counter-evidence suddenly emerged, but because the nature of inquiry itself began to change. The question of Buddhist origins gradually shifted away from living practice, sacred geography, and chronicle continuity toward textual criticism, translation, and comparison. In this transition, Ceylon's traditions were not immediately rejected, but they were increasingly subjected to forms of scrutiny that they were never designed to withstand. A revealing feature of this transitional moment is that Ceylonese Buddhists themselves did not possess, nor claim to possess, a fixed cartographic understanding of the Buddha's life. This should not be taken to imply that Sinhala authors were confused about the Buddha's continental birthplace. Rather, their historiographical conventions operated within a cosmological and relational sacred geography in which the Buddha's homeland and the island itself were conceptually distinct but narratively interconnected.

When the Dutch Governor of Ceylon, Iman Falck, questioned the abbot of the Mulkirigala temple in 1766 about the locations associated with the Buddha's life, the abbot responded with traditional names and descriptions drawn from Buddhist texts but could not identify their contemporary geographical equivalents. As the English antiquarian and bookseller Edward Upham (1833, vol. 3, p. 110) later summarized of the exchange, which he later published, "[i]t would be vain to inquire where the places mentioned in these accounts are to be found," since "[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." John Davy, an English doctor who resided on the island between 1816 and 1820, encountered a similar response. When he asked a "learned native" about the geography of the Buddha's life, he was told only that it lay "to the eastward of Ceylon, and further northward." From this, Davy (1821, p. 232) inferred a cold, mountainous region "pretty far north" of the island, marked by "snow and ice," unlike Ceylon itself.

Such answers underscore a critical point: Ceylonese Buddhism did not require precise geographical anchoring to sustain its authority. Its relationship to the Buddha was conceptual, genealogical, and ritual rather than cartographic. This epistemic stance did not reflect ignorance but indifference: the authority of these places lay in their sacred significance, not in their correspondence to present-day geography. Within this framework, the Buddha's life was known through names, narratives, and lineages transmitted in texts and ritual practice, rather than through an effort to identify their locations on a contemporary map. It was only when European scholars began to demand spatial precision as a condition of historical credibility that such responses came to be interpreted as deficiencies rather than as expressions of a different mode of historical understanding. Indeed, this flexibility became a liability as European scholars increasingly sought to locate Buddhism within a

spatially precise historical framework. Upham, who never travelled to Ceylon nor mastered its indigenous languages, represents a pivotal figure in this process.

As mentioned, Upham compiled Falck's questions and the abbot's responses from 1766 into his 1833 collection on the "sacred and historical books" of Ceylon. Despite openly acknowledging the inability of Buddhist priests to locate the Buddha's life geographically, he nevertheless maintained that Ceylon itself was the Buddha's homeland. In an earlier 1829 exposition, Upham (1829, p. 1) first asserted that "[o]f that island. . . the Buddha Gaudma [Gautama Buddha], the distinguished teacher and divinity of the eastern world, has chosen to make the scene of his birth, and the chief theatre of his acts and miracles". Upham, however, did not stop there. In his introduction to the *Mahāvamsa*—the island's most renowned chronicle text dating to the fifth century CE, he claimed that the monarch "Dharma Soka"—central to contemporary narratives of Indian antiquity but then unknown to European scholars—was, in fact, "one of the most illustrious sovereigns of Ceylon" (Upham 1833, vol. 1, p. xxix). Upham's claim is striking precisely because it stands at the threshold of epistemic transition. On the one hand, it preserves the island-centered logic of Ceylonese Buddhist tradition. On the other, it attempts to articulate that logic within an emerging European discourse of origins, scenes, and theatres—terms that presuppose spatial fixity and historical exclusivity. Furthermore, Upham stands as the final figure in European scholarship to advance, in sustained form, the claim of a Sri Lankan origin for the Buddha (Hewage 2022a, p. 59).

Upham's engagement with Ceylonese texts did not originate in an antiquarian desire to reconstruct Buddhist origins according to emerging philological standards, but rather in a colonial project of documentation and governance that preceded the "professionalization" of European scholarship on Asian affairs (Walters and Colley 2006, p. 148). His publications emerged from the manuscript-collecting efforts of Alexander Johnston, the then Chief Justice of Ceylon, whose stated purpose was not to produce a critical historical edition but to acquire materials necessary for colonial administration. Johnston explained that after "a very long residence on Ceylon as chief justice and first member of his majesty's council," and following "constant intercourse, both literary and official, for many years, with the natives of every caste and of every religious persuasion," he sought to frame "a special code of laws. . . scrupulously adapted to the local circumstances of the country [Ceylon], and to the particular religion, manners, usages and feelings of the people" (Upham 1833, vol. 1, p. ix). To this end, Johnston called upon monks, books, and other sources to procure for him what Upham (ibid.) described as the "most authentic information" that could be obtained "relative to the religion, usages, manners, and feelings of the people who professed the Buddhist religion on the island of Ceylon." Upham's role was that of an editor and publisher who brought these materials—understood at the time as authoritative Buddhist self-representations—before a European readership, at a moment before the imposition of later philological criteria of authenticity.

The three chronicle texts with which Upham worked—the *Mahāvamsa*, *Rājāvaliya*, and *Rājaratnākara*—belonged to a long-standing Sinhala historiographical tradition whose purposes differed fundamentally from those of nineteenth-century European historical criticism. The *Mahāvamsa* became especially prized by European scholars for its antiquity and for its "continuity in the past", given its purpose in drawing a sustained connection between the island, its people, and its Buddhism (Kemper 1991, p. 2). These chronicle texts were not conceived by their authors as neutral repositories of historical fact but as works whose authority derived from their ritual, political, and interpretive functions. They constituted a form of "Buddhist history" in which the past was narrated through textual strategies that linked kingship, monastic authority, and Buddhist doctrine into a single moral narrative (Walters 2000, pp. 146–52). The texts that Upham published were thus

not intended to establish precise chronology or geography, but to impose a single and continuous view upon the island's past. Upham's engagement with these texts therefore drew upon a tradition in which continuity, moral exemplarity, and the sacralization of place mattered far more than cartographic precision—an epistemic orientation that would soon be rendered suspect.

Indeed, the *vaṃsa* texts with which Upham worked belonged to a distinctive Sinhala historiographical tradition whose internal logic cannot be reduced to European notions of chronicle-writing.<sup>6</sup> These texts operated within what Walters (2000, p. 99) describes as an alternative “episteme. . .consisting of a temporal scheme and anthropology quite foreign to modern sensibilities”. The *Mahāvamsa* and its successors did not simply narrate political events; they articulated what Walters (ibid.) calls “successions of the Buddha's presence”, embedding kingship, monastic lineage, and territory within a two-dimensional conception of time in which the “calculable” and “incalculable” overlapped. Within this framework, the island's history was meaningful not because it could be plotted on a linear timeline, but because it reiterated and sustained the Buddha's dispensation across cosmic time. Kemper (1991, pp. 2–3) similarly emphasizes that the *Mahāvamsa* was composed to “celebrate the relationship between the Theravada monkhood. . .and the monarchy”, forging a durable connection between “religion, state, and what was to become the Sinhala people.” Its narrative imposed upon the island's past “a single and continuous point of view that is Sinhala and Theravada Buddhist”. This was not a passive recording of events but an active construction of political theology: the chronicle rendered kingship meritorious insofar as it supported the *sāsana*, and it framed the island itself as the privileged site of Buddhist continuity. Far from being merely an “object” of European inquiry, Sinhala historiography had long operated as a medium through which monastic authors interpreted political upheaval, negotiated orthodoxy, and reimagined collective identity. The *vaṃsa* tradition thus constituted a knowledge system with its own criteria of authority, temporality, and legitimacy—one that European philology would later discipline but not originate.<sup>7</sup>

Yet even as Upham defended a Sri Lankan Buddha, the foundations of that defense were eroding. While Upham's publications were initially well received—an 1833 review in the *Athenaeum* praising them as “the first” European translations of Buddhist “sacred books”—translation itself later proved destabilizing (Walters and Colley 2006, p. 146, n. 29). Mahony's early rendering of the *Rājāvaliya*, while groundbreaking, did not inaugurate sustained engagement with Buddhist texts—Upham's publications appearing nearly three decades after Mahony's initial encounter with the Ceylonese chronicle. During this period, the Asiatic Society—the pioneering scholarly association founded in Bengal by the Welsh polymath William Jones in 1784—remained the primary forum for discussions of Indic religion, but no further material primarily focused on Ceylonese appeared in its publications following a description of the island and its people from 1803. There were, perhaps, several contributing factors to this silence: administrative preoccupation following the transfer of littoral Ceylon from Company to Crown rule in 1802, the fall of Kandy to the Crown in 1815, and a broader reorientation of European scholarship on the subcontinent toward the Indian mainland (Hewage 2022b, p. 51; Scott 1992, p. 347).<sup>8</sup> More fundamentally, however, the island's Buddhist traditions did not readily lend themselves to the emerging scholarly desire to reconstruct antiquity through synchronized chronologies and interregional comparison.

As this desire intensified, attention turned increasingly toward northern India. Yet even here, certainty did not immediately follow. Early European interest in the region around Gaya was hesitant and inconsistent. A Newari Buddhist pilgrim from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley named Amritananda, who travelled to Bodh Gaya in the early 1770s, described the site not as the unquestioned locus of enlightenment, but as a ruined complex whose Buddhist significance had been appropriated by Brahmins. In his account, Amri-

tananda expressed shock at what he perceived as the Brahmin appropriation of Buddhist motifs, yet he seemingly offered no explanation for the site's significance to Buddhists other than identifying it as a Buddhist location (Hodgson 1827, pp. 221–22). This absence is, of course, revealing, suggesting that even for Buddhist pilgrims the site's meaning was not yet stabilized within a coherent biographical narrative of the Buddha.

European interpretations of Bodh Gaya, the site in the present-day India state of Bihar identified with the location of the Buddha's enlightenment today, were similarly unsettled. Translating inscriptions from Bihar in the 1780s, the Sanskritist Charles Wilkins (1793, p. 554) identified references to figures such as "Soogot" and suggested that the site marked an "incarnation of a portion of Veeshnoo [Vishnu]".<sup>9</sup> These early readings did not clearly distinguish between Buddhist, Brahmanical, and syncretic traditions, nor did they establish Bodh Gaya as the definitive site of enlightenment. Rather, they reflected a broader uncertainty in which Buddhist sacred space was interpreted through Brahmanical categories and integrated into existing Hindu cosmologies. As with Amritananda's account, the significance of Bodh Gaya remained inferential and provisional, emerging from textual fragments and material traces rather than from a stabilized narrative of the Buddha's life.

Indeed, epigraphy also served to complicate matters. A thirteenth-century Burmese inscription at Bodh Gaya found no fewer than three different translations in circulation during the nineteenth century, with the site variously interpreted as marking the spot where "Bhagawan [the Lord]" tasted milk and honey, where "Gaudama" ate charitable offerings, or merely where "Buddha took a meal," depending on the translator (Cunningham 1892, pp. 75–77; Mitra 1878, pp. 209–10; Burney 1836, pp. 161–64, 181; Prinsep 1834, pp. 214–15). The inscription's meaning shifted with each linguistic and cultural mediation, underscoring the instability of textual evidence itself. Later readings, however, suggested a more precise understanding of how the location was conceived by Burmese pilgrims themselves. Following the pioneering transcriptional and translational activities of Gordon Hannington Luce (1976, pp. 40–42) during the 1960s and 1970s, scholars came to understand the inscription as describing Bodh Gaya as the site of the "giving of alms rice" to the Buddha before recounting successive Burmese-sponsored restorations of the shrine between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Following Luce's transcription and translation, the inscription concludes with prayers for the attainment of *nirvāṇa* and rebirth in the age of Metteyya Buddha (the future Buddha), revealing an enduring Burmese concern with Bodh Gaya as a site of merit, patronage, and Buddhist origins rather than merely a local monument (Frasch 2021, pp. 61–62; Gongkatsang and Willis 2013, pp. 438–39; Than Tun 1991, p. 112). Significantly, Frasch (2021, pp. 62–64) further argues that the inscription preserves a specifically Burmese historical memory, reflected in its use of Burmese royal titles, Burmese calendrical reckoning, and references to monastic traditions associated with Pagan rather than India itself.

Only in the early nineteenth century, however, did Bodh Gaya begin to acquire clearer significance for Burmese Buddhists through contemporary efforts to verify its relationship to the Buddha's life (Frasch 2021, p. 61). A later Burmese inscription from the turn of the century, composed by a Burmese minister named Maha Zaya Thinkyan, records how King Bagyidaw "constantly" reflected upon the location of the bodhi tree and sought confirmation of its identity from Indian traders and Brahmins. Furthermore, this later inscription also recorded why Bagyidaw possessed such strong desire to definitively identify the original bodhi tree associated with the Buddha. According to its text, the Burmese king regarded the search as a highly meritorious undertaking that would generate spiritual benefits not only for himself but also for his ancestors and further believed that successfully locating the tree would improve his prospects for attaining rebirth as a Buddha in a future existence. Only after weighing inscriptions and textual descriptions did Bagyidaw

confidently conclude that the tree at Bodh Gaya was “no other than the birthmate of our Buddha” (Mitra 1878, pp. 224–25).

This broader episode illustrates a crucial shift, a shift which occurred within an intellectual environment already conditioned by Christian expectations that religions should possess an identifiable founder, a founding moment, and a sacred geographical center. The search for the Buddha’s origins became increasingly driven by textual corroboration rather than inherited tradition. Authority no longer resided in continuity but in verification. This change set the stage for the decisive interventions of the 1820s and 1830s, when European scholars increasingly evaluated Buddhist traditions through the criteria of philological comparison, textual criticism, and geographical verification. Ceylonese chronicles were not abandoned but progressively repositioned within a wider evidentiary framework that privileged corroboration across regions, languages, and textual traditions.

By the time these interventions occurred, the Sri Lankan Buddha was already under strain. He had not yet been refuted, but the intellectual conditions that sustained him were rapidly dissolving. What had once been sufficient—chronicle authority, sacred landscape, ritual continuity—was no longer enough. The unmaking of the Sri Lankan Buddha had begun, not with a single argument, but with a transformation in what it meant to know the past.

### 3. Textual Authority Recentered

If the early nineteenth century marked the fracturing of confidence in a Sri Lankan Buddha, it was the work of Brian Hodgson that decisively redirected European scholarship toward northern India. Hodgson did not merely introduce new texts into the study of Buddhism; he redefined the terms on which Buddhist history could be written. In doing so, he shifted the search for the Buddha’s origins away from chronicle continuity and sacred geography and toward philological lineage, linguistic classification, and transregional textual comparison. This intervention was neither accidental nor inevitable. It arose from Hodgson’s particular circumstances and intellectual commitments. Trained initially as a civil servant in Calcutta, Hodgson was posted to the “ultimate backwater” of Kathmandu in 1820, far removed from the nodes of Company rule across the subcontinent (Allen 2002, pp. 106–9). Yet this apparent marginality ultimately proved advantageous. Removed from the administrative pressures and scholarly orthodoxies of Calcutta, Hodgson devoted himself to the study of the Nepalese Buddhism which surrounded him.

Furnished with an extensive list of “Bauddha Scriptures” by a Newari Buddhist informant, Hodgson began to assemble a corpus of texts that appeared radically different from the Ceylonese materials that had previously shaped European understanding of Buddhism. His informant, none other than the pilgrim Amritananda who had journeyed to Bodh Gaya in the 1770s, relied heavily on the *Lalitavistara*, a Sanskrit text from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition likely dating to the third century CE. Although Amritananda himself did not acknowledge or concede this anywhere in his own responses, Hodgson emphasized the Sanskritic background of the texts he was shown and used this linguistic feature to argue that Nepalese Buddhism was of Indian origin. Hodgson (1829, pp. 239–40, 253, 256) further asserted that Buddhism entered Nepal either directly from India or via Tibet and China, and that the birthplaces of all previous Buddhas were “Indian,” with Gautama Buddha himself belonging to “an Indian race or family”. This argument proved consequential because it reframed the question of origin altogether, without requiring a direct refutation of a Sri Lankan Buddha.

Where earlier scholarship had treated the island’s Buddhist tradition as potentially foundational, Hodgson’s work implicitly repositioned Ceylon as peripheral. Significantly, Hodgson made no mention of Ceylon anywhere in his “sketch” of Buddhism, despite

perhaps being the first European scholar to recognize that Buddhism was divided into different confessional sects (Hewage 2022a, p. 53).<sup>10</sup> The omission was not incidental. By grounding Buddhism in Sanskrit texts and locating its origins within northern India, Hodgson rendered Ceylonese traditions supplementary rather than constitutive. Read before the Asiatic Society in 1828 and published and widely diffused across Europe during the 1830s, Hodgson's sketch exerted an influence far beyond its immediate claims. Although it later came to be regarded as a guide rather than an authority, its significance lay in prompting an intensive period of Buddhist textual analysis over the ensuing five decades (Gellner 1989, p. 8). This frenzy fundamentally altered the terrain of Buddhist studies. Texts became objects of comparative scrutiny rather than repositories of living tradition. Linguistic genealogy replaced ritual continuity as the marker of authenticity.

The consequences for Ceylonese Buddhism were immediate and profound. While Buddhists elsewhere in Asia, particularly those belonging to the Theravada tradition dominant in Ceylon, appeared increasingly willing to discuss Buddhist origins in explicitly geographical terms, Ceylonese Buddhists often articulated their relationship to the Buddha through different categories of authority. As earlier encounters had shown, islanders did not generally define their connection to the Buddha through cartographic precision or historical localization. Their relationship to the Buddha was more commonly expressed through sacred presence, relics, lineage, ritual continuity, and the island's role in sustaining his religion. As a result, European scholars increasingly interpreted authoritative knowledge about Buddhist origins as lying elsewhere. The tension between European expectations and Ceylonese epistemology is thus starkly illustrated in Upham's insistence on a Sri Lankan Buddha. As Hodgson's Indian Buddha gained traction, Upham's position became increasingly untenable. His reliance on indigenous interlocutors and chronicle traditions exposed him to criticism from later scholars who demanded philological rigor and external corroboration. While Hodgson initiated the reorientation, it was the subsequent consolidation of his approach that sealed the fate of the Sri Lankan Buddha. By privileging Sanskrit sources and northern Indian geography, European scholars helped establish a new consensus in which the Buddha's Indian provenance increasingly came to be treated as a premise rather than a proposition requiring sustained defence.

If Hodgson's Nepalese work redirected scholarly attention toward northern India, it was George Turnour who ensured that this redirection hardened into consensus. The decision of Turnour, a civil servant and one of the first Britons to be born in Ceylon, to undertake a new translation of the *Mahāvamsa* was driven not simply by antiquarian interest, but by a conviction that the chronicle could serve as a linchpin for reconstructing ancient Indian history according to the emerging standards of European scholarship. Published in 1836 with the title *An Epitome of the History of Ceylon*, Turnour's monograph was nonetheless conceived as a work that would establish lasting philological and orthographic standards for the publication of Pali texts in Roman script, functioning as a sort of "Rosetta Stone" for ancient Indian chronology by anchoring Asoka (i.e., the "Dharma Soka" first identified by Upham) "in the sea of time on the supposed terra firma of Megasthenes" (Walters and Colley 2006, p. 135).<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, this ambition aligned closely with the priorities of Bengal's Asiatic Society, which provided Turnour with financial support and commendation—Turnour had sent advance copies of his work to Society members in 1835 (Prinsep 1835, p. 408). From the moment that Jones (1799, pp. xii–xiv) observed in 1793 that Megasthenes linked an Indian ruler named "Sandracottus" with Greek figures associated with Alexander, European scholars working on the subcontinent remained keenly attuned to the possibility that Indian traditions might be anchored to the "rational histories" of Greece or Rome. The search for such points of convergence became a defining preoccupation of late eighteenth and early

nineteenth-century scholarship (Thomas Trautmann 1997). As James Prinsep, an editor based in Calcutta credited with deciphering the Asokan inscriptions which appeared to finally connect Indian and European antiquity, wrote later in 1838, “the moment any name or event turns up in the course of speculations offering a plausible point of connection. . . a speedy and spreading interest is excited” (Hewage 2022a, p. 58, n. 41; Prinsep 1838, p. 156). Following the completion of Turnour’s translation, his contemporaries further credited Turnour with having “done so much in restoring Cingalese history, in developing that of India,” a judgment that reflected his success in recasting a Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicle as a foundational source for Indian antiquity rather than as a record of island-centered tradition (Forbes 1840, vol. 1, p. 165).

In this context, Turnour’s *Mahāvamsa* was motivated by a dual objective: to displace earlier, non-philological engagements with Ceylonese texts and to secure for European scholarship what his obituary later described as “authentic materials for the history of the origin and progress of the religion of Buddha” (Anon 1846, p. 4). Turnour reorganized the evidentiary status of Ceylon’s chronicles in a manner that established the *Mahāvamsa* as a definitive historical authority, while simultaneously rendering the idea of a Sri Lankan Buddha increasingly untenable within professional European scholarship. In doing so, he completed its intellectual unmaking by disciplining the very texts that had once sustained that possibility. Yet his influence on Buddhist origins derived less from discovery than from method. Turnour’s approach was selective, critical, and explicitly hierarchical. Unlike Upham, who had relied heavily on indigenous interlocutors and treated Ceylonese traditions with relative openness, Turnour dismissed the very foundation upon which Upham constructed his foundation as fundamentally unreliable (Walters and Colley 2006 p. 145).

This dismissal is articulated most clearly in his reaction to Upham’s publications. Upham’s claim that Ceylon marked the “scene” of the Buddha’s birth and the “chief theatre” of his life provoked from Turnour one of the most forceful rebukes in early European scholarship on South Asia. As Turnour (1836, p. xx) wrote:

It is scarcely possible for a person, not familiar with the subject, to conceive the extent of the absurdities involved in these, and other similar passages. It is no burlesque to say, that they would be received, by a Ceylonese buddhist, with feelings akin to those with which an Englishman would read a work, written by an Indian, professedly for the purpose of illustrating the history of christianity to his countrymen, which stated, that England was the scene of the birth of our Saviour; that his ascension took place from Derby peak; and that Salisbury cathedral stood on Westminster abbey.

This analogy is especially revealing. By invoking Christian sacred geography, Turnour framed the possibility of a Sri Lankan Buddha as a category error—an inversion so grotesque that it could only provoke ridicule. Yet his intervention was not merely rhetorical. Turnour argued that Upham had fundamentally misread the island’s textual traditions and that claims about Buddhist origins had to be evaluated through philological scrutiny, chronological consistency, and corroboration from external sources. The issue, therefore, concerned a redefinition of what counted as legitimate evidence and who possessed the authority to interpret it.

His dismay also extended beyond Upham’s conclusions to the very fact that such works had been published at all. In the introduction to his monograph, Turnour (*ibid.*) lamented:

And yet these [Upham’s] are the publications put forth, as correct translations of, and compilations from, the native annals of Ceylon. Such is the force, respectability, and apparent competency of the attestations by which. . . [Upham’s works] are

sustained, that they have been considered worthy of being dedicated to the king, patronised by the court of directors, and sent out to this island, by the secretary of state, to be preserved among the archives of this government!!

What troubled Turnour was not merely error, but institutional endorsement from the colonial and British establishment. For Turnour, the credibility of scholarship depended on its ability to withstand philological scrutiny and to align with what he regarded as historical reason. The indigenous testimony, oral tradition, and chronicle narrative used by Upham were insufficient without their corroboration by inscriptions, synchronisms, or external textual evidence.

This methodological stance reshaped how the *Mahāvamsa* itself could be used. While Turnour relied heavily on Ceylonese chronicles to establish Indian chronology—particularly through their references to Asoka—he treated those same chronicles as unreliable when they appeared to place the Buddha in relation to the island. In this way, the chronicle was rendered authoritative only in so far as it could be made to serve a wider Indian historical framework. Turnour’s “sift and choose” method dictated how European scholars worked with Buddhist historiography for the remainder of the nineteenth century, establishing a hierarchical relationship between acceptable and unacceptable forms of evidence (Walters 2000, pp. 159–60). Unverifiable elements were discarded, while those aspects that could be aligned with Indian geography were retained, effectively recoding the island’s textual tradition from a source of origins into a subsidiary tool for corroborating an already presumed Indian past.

This shift had far-reaching implications. It meant that even when Ceylonese texts were employed, they were used against the possibility of a Sri Lankan Buddha rather than in support of it. The effects of Turnour’s approach were almost immediate, and suggestions that the Buddha emerged from the island largely disappeared in European scholarship after Turnour’s publication of his *Mahāvamsa* publication in 1836. Thomas Newbold, an English soldier in the service of the East India Company and enthusiastic Asiatic Society member, writing in 1837 was perhaps the last European scholar to describe a Sri Lankan origin for the Buddha. Nevertheless, even Newbold (1837, p. 1) acknowledged that he was aware of Turnour’s work with the *Mahāvamsa*—he presumably had not yet read it—and hoped it would shed more light into Indian antiquity. So discredited became Upham’s publications that Johnston allegedly removed the specific source manuscripts with which Upham worked from the collections of the Royal Asiatic Society in London where they had subsequently been stored (Allen 2002, p. 163). Another four decades would pass before another detailed translation of the *Mahāvamsa* was attempted, but by then Turnour’s argument—that the Buddha was unequivocally a figure of Indian provenance—was uncontested. The transformation can be observed not only in Turnour’s rhetoric, but in the changing citation practices of subsequent historians, for whom the *Mahāvamsa* became authoritative primarily as a chronological tool rather than as a sacred geography.

The decade that followed Upham’s first claims of a Sri Lankan Buddha in 1829 thus witnessed a transformation in European discourse on Buddhist origins following the subsequent publications of Hodgson and Turnour. In subsequent decades, engagement with Buddhist texts served not to explore multiple possibilities, but to confirm a predetermined conclusion. The Buddha was Indian; the remaining task was to determine how ancient Buddhist sites mapped onto contemporary geography. More than a simple rejection, the Sri Lankan Buddha had become increasingly untenable within professional European scholarship. Yet this resolution introduced a new paradox. While the Buddha was firmly placed in northern India, that region remained, in European imagination, fundamentally Hindu and Brahminic in character, just as it was assumed to have been before the Buddha’s

emergence. Buddhism was thus positioned as an ancient Indian phenomenon without a living Indian presence.

Ceylon, which continued to practice Theravada Buddhism, was recast not as Buddhism's origin but as its conservator—a repository of tradition detached from its birthplace. Turnour's work made this configuration possible by severing Buddhist origins from Buddhist continuity. Once origins were defined geographically rather than ritually, chronologically rather than genealogically, the island's apparent claims lost their force. The Sri Lankan Buddha did not vanish because he was conclusively disproven, but because the forms of authority that had made him plausible—sacred geography, relic veneration, dynastic genealogy, chronicle continuity, and the visible presence of a living Buddhist tradition—were increasingly subordinated to philological criticism, archaeological corroboration, and cartographic precision. By the late 1830s, what remained was an Indian Buddha whose life was still imperfectly understood, whose exact chronology remained uncertain, and whose sites were yet to be firmly identified—but whose geographical provenance was no longer in doubt. The final stage of this transformation would involve mapping those sites onto the landscape of northern India itself, a process that would further entrench the Indian Buddha while relegating Ceylon's traditions to the realm of local history.

Yet while the Buddha was now firmly located in northern India, the precise mapping of the sites associated with his life remained unclear. Following Turnour's efforts, European scholars agreed that the Buddha emerged from northern India, but the precise correspondence between ancient Buddhist sites and contemporary locations across the region was still uncertain. The task that remained was not to reconsider Ceylon's claims, but to reconcile Buddhist textual geography with the physical landscape of the Indian subcontinent. This task increasingly drew scholars toward sources outside the Ceylonese tradition. Chronological inconsistencies in the island's chronicles, acknowledged even by Turnour himself, encouraged scholars to look elsewhere for corroboration (Hewage 2022a, pp. 58–59). From the 1840s onward, Chinese monastic travelogues assumed growing importance. The accounts of Faxian, who travelled to the subcontinent in the fifth century, and Xuanzang, who journeyed there in the seventh century, offered detailed descriptions of Buddhist sites, distances, and itineraries (Deeg 2018, pp. 49–52).

These narratives provided what Ceylonese chronicles did not: a framework to source Buddhism's foundational sites that could be correlated with observable geography. The first European translation of the travelogues was published in 1836—the same year in which Turnour completed his work on the *Mahāvamsa*—and thirteen more translations of the accounts in either French or English followed over the course of the next century (Deeg 2019, pp. 18–19). These Chinese accounts later became central to the work of Alexander Cunningham, a military engineer who would become India's first archaeological surveyor. Cunningham's approach marked a turning point in the study of early Buddhist geography. Rather than privileging any single textual tradition, he developed a systematic method in which Chinese travelogues were compared with one another, with other Buddhist texts—including the *Mahāvamsa*—and then correlated with archaeological remains across the Middle Ganges (Hewage 2022a, pp. 60–69). This process ultimately produced the site identifications in northern India and southern Nepal that are recognized today as those associated with the Buddha's life and ministry.

What is striking about wider process is the role assigned to Ceylonese sources. The *Mahāvamsa* and related Ceylonese chronicles were not discarded; they were incorporated selectively. Their value lay not in articulating an alternative geography of origins, but in supplying textual descriptions that could be used to confirm Indian sites already presumed to be authentic. For Cunningham, the island's texts were especially useful for their references to distances between ancient Buddhist sites, enabling him to resolve apparent

discrepancies in the locational measurements found in the Chinese travelogues (Cunningham 1871, pp. 327–498). Reflecting the importance he attached to Ceylon, he also placed advertisements in Ceylonese periodicals requesting assistance from scholars intimately familiar with the chronicles to help identify Buddhist motifs encountered in the course of his archaeological work (Royal Asiatic Society 1874). The island's chronicles thus became ancillary tools in the construction of an Indian Buddhist landscape.

#### 4. Conclusions

This outcome should not, however, be mistaken for an inevitable triumph of truth. The transformation of Buddhist origins occurred alongside, and was shaped by, broader changes in the production of knowledge. The publication of translations of Buddhist texts by Upham, Hodgson, and Turnour marked a cultural transformation that established a new textual practice unprecedented in Buddhist history and aligned Buddhist studies with the emerging nineteenth-century disciplines of philology and historicism. Buddhist literature, traditionally interpreted within established monastic and scholarly communities and serving a variety of ritual, pedagogical, literary, and historiographical functions, was increasingly read by European scholars as a repository of biographical data from which the Buddha's life could be reconstructed. This shift altered not only what was known, but how knowing itself was understood. Reading Buddhist texts outside established pedagogical contexts was considered, and arguably still remains, folly (McMahan 2009, p. 17). Yet this very practice became foundational to modern Buddhist studies. As the professionalization of Indology took hold, cross-referencing, linguistic consistency, and chronological anchoring became markers of scholarly authority, reshaping sacred narrative into historical data. The Buddha was increasingly reconstructed as an object of historical inquiry whose life could be abstracted, dated, and mapped according to emerging philological and historicist standards, even though earlier scholars had already attempted similar reconstructions through different forms of evidence and authority.

The consequences of this reconstruction extended beyond questions of origin. By situating the Buddha firmly within northern India while acknowledging that the region remained Hindu and Brahminic in character, European scholars created a paradoxical historical narrative. Buddhism became an ancient Indian religion without a living Indian presence, while Sri Lanka became a living Buddhist society without a claim to origin. The making and unmaking of a Sri Lankan Buddha reveals a broader transformation than a change in historical opinion alone: the consolidation of a historicist method that reorganized religious traditions within linear time and territorialized space. It further exposes the contingent nature of scholarly consensus and the power of methodological shifts to redefine the past. The Sri Lankan Buddha was displaced as much through changing historical methods as through direct criticism, his plausibility eroded by a transformation in how history itself was imagined and practiced. What further distinguishes this episode is that the Sri Lankan Buddha disappeared less through a single decisive refutation than through a transformation in the standards by which claims about Buddhist origins were evaluated. The intellectual conditions that had made such a possibility plausible within early European scholarship were progressively dismantled. Sacred geography, dynastic genealogy, relic veneration, and chronicle continuity—forms of authority that early European interpreters encountered in Ceylonese religious and historical traditions—were increasingly reclassified under the emerging standards of nineteenth-century textual criticism as insufficient forms of historical evidence when measured against philological verification.

Indeed, the Sri Lankan Buddha disappeared from European scholarly discourse not through refutation alone, but through a broader shift in the evidentiary standards governing Buddhist history. Recovering this moment reveals how disciplinary standards

both illuminate and constrain the past. Once Buddhist texts were rendered into European languages and removed from their pedagogical contexts, they could be read not primarily within the ritual, pedagogical, and historiographical frameworks in which they had traditionally circulated, but as sources of biographical data. This shift enabled a new kind of inquiry—one that treated the Buddha as a historical individual whose life could be reconstructed through textual fragments and correlated with external evidence. What emerges from this history is a case study in the consolidation of disciplinary truth through epistemic closure, rather than a simple narrative of error corrected by evidence. Once Buddhist origins were defined primarily through cartography, philology, and archaeology—the core methodological pillars of nineteenth-century Indology—alternative ways of knowing the past were increasingly marginalized within professional scholarship. The Sri Lankan Buddha did not simply fail an evidentiary test; rather, the criteria by which such claims were evaluated shifted in ways that narrowed the conditions under which they could be sustained. This episode, of course, also carries implications beyond Buddhist studies. It illustrates how intellectual consensus is often achieved not through argument alone, but through the stabilization of methods that privilege certain questions and exclude others.

Origins, in particular, are especially vulnerable to such stabilization within historicist frameworks that treat beginnings as anchor points for universal narratives of civilization. They function as anchor points for broader narratives of civilization, and once fixed, they acquire a naturalized authority that obscures their own contingency. The Sri Lankan Buddha reminds us that origins are not discovered in a vacuum. They are produced through practices of translation, philological selection, archaeological correlation, and comparative classification, shaped by institutional priorities and the disciplinary norms of nineteenth-century scholarship. Recovering the moment when a Sri Lankan Buddha was thinkable does not challenge modern conclusions about the Buddha's life. Instead, it historicizes the processes through which those conclusions came to appear inevitable. In doing so, we gain a clearer view of how historical knowledge is made—and unmade. The fate of the Sri Lankan Buddha stands as a reminder that what appears unthinkable today may once have been persuasive, coherent, and meaningful. To recognize this is not to abandon scholarly rigor, but to apply it reflexively, acknowledging that our own certainties, too, are the products of history. In this sense, the episode illuminates not a forgotten Sinhala belief, but a moment in the formation of nineteenth-century historiographical method, when the criteria of historical plausibility themselves were in flux.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term *Buddhaputra* ("sons of Buddha") is an epithet commonly applied to ordained monastics throughout the Buddhist world.
- <sup>2</sup> Kandy served as the capital of the eponymous kingdom located within the island's interior.
- <sup>3</sup> The Anuradhapura bodhi tree is believed by the island's Buddhists to be a descendent of the original bodhi tree under which Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha.
- <sup>4</sup> Casie Chetty writes that sapling was carried over from Dambadiva, revered as the sacred homeland of the Buddha in Buddhist traditions.
- <sup>5</sup> Several Burmese Buddhist texts were published during the same year as Mahony's translation, yet these works offered little in the way of biographical detail concerning the Buddha's life. See (Buchanan 1801, pp. 163–308).

- <sup>6</sup> *Vaṃsa* literature refers to a genre of South Asian historical writing—especially in Sri Lanka—where history is organized as a sequence of lineages or dynasties.
- <sup>7</sup> Any attempt to recover indigenous voices through colonial-era publications must acknowledge the mediating structures of translation, preservation, and selection. The *Mahāvamsa* itself has long been embedded in layered reinterpretations, and modern understandings of it are shaped by colonial and postcolonial scholarly frames. The identification of *vamsa* texts with “history” in the modern sense reflects nineteenth-century interventions rather than precolonial self-understanding. The present analysis therefore works within the limits imposed by textual survival and colonial mediation, while attempting to attend carefully to the internal logic of the Sinhala historiographical tradition.
- <sup>8</sup> Britain first captured the coastal areas of Ceylon from the Dutch in 1796 before finally conquering the Kandyan Kingdom and bringing the entire island under British control in 1815.
- <sup>9</sup> The appellation “Soogot” refers to *Sugata*, a known Sanskrit epithet of the Buddha.
- <sup>10</sup> In 1825, the French scholar Eugène Burnouf prepared a Latin translation of the *Mahāvamsa* which was circulated around Europe while remaining unpublished. Johnston allegedly urged Upham to collaborate with Burnouf and to negotiate an edition of the *Mahāvamsa* with the French scholar. See (Kemper 1991, p. 86, n. 18; Bechert 1977, p. 84).
- <sup>11</sup> This article builds on the demonstration of Walters and Colley (2006) that Turnour’s publication reshaped the authority of Sri Lankan historiography. However, whereas Walters and Colley focus on the historiographical consolidation of *Mahāvamsa* scholarship and the displacement of Upham, the present study emphasizes the broader epistemic consequences of that shift—namely, the foreclosure of Sri Lanka as a plausible site of Buddhist origin within European scholarship.

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