

Representations of Queen Victoria in Sri Lankan Buddhist Monastic Art and Their Transformation

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THE PRESENCE of painted images of Queen Victoria (1819–1901) at prominent locations in Buddhist image houses, or *pilima geya* (a building with paintings and sculptures enshrining a buddha statue), in the Maritime Provinces, or the Low-Country, of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon), is an intriguing phenomenon found in the Buddhist art of the British colonial period (1796–1948). Significantly, these representations are not mere imitations of European portraits or photographs of the British empress; rather, they are innovations by local temple artists who modified existing images by adding symbols and visual codes. The majority of these stylized quasi portraits are found on the lunettes or tympanums of the image houses together with *makara toraṇa* (a dragon-arch decorations) above the main entrances to the sanctums—a conspicuous location often devoted to the figures of powerful deities or the bodhisattva Maitreya. As there were sporadic hostilities between the colonial rulers and the local Buddhist communities, the integration of such a Christian queen into Buddhist places of worship seems paradoxical. No other colonial ruler who governed Sri Lanka either prior to, or after, Queen Victoria ever gained such prominence in Buddhist art. This phenomenon did not occur throughout the country even though Queen Victoria maintained dominance over the entire island for sixty-four years from 1837 to 1901. Rather, it is confined to a particular geopolitical context: the Low-Country region. Thus, the integration of the visual representations of the British empress into prominent locations at Buddhist image houses poses three significant questions for art historians to consider: (1) Why did Queen Victoria become a prominent figure in Buddhist art in the Low-Country? (2) How is she represented in Buddhist art in this region? and (3) What messages are embedded in these depictions? In order to address these questions, I will analyze a series of visual representations of the British queen selected from Buddhist temples in the Low-Country region and will discuss their semiotic function as well as the internal politics surrounding their creation.

The British colonial period was one of the most crucial eras in Sri Lankan history, wherein many social, political, religious, and economic changes occurred. Before the British, two European powers, the Portuguese (1505–1658) and the Dutch (1658–1796), occupied Sri Lanka in succession. However, their rule was confined to the coastal region of the island. The British established their power in Sri Lanka by taking over the Dutch territories in the Maritime Provinces in 1796 and were able to conquer the entirety of the island in 1815 by seizing power from the Kandyan kingdom—the last independent political center of the Sinhalese.¹ The political power of the Kandyan kingdom was transferred to the British by means of the Uḍaraṭa Givisuma (the Kandyan Convention) signed between the Kandyan chiefs and the British in 1815.

This political transformation had far-reaching effects upon Buddhism in Sri Lanka as the British rulers became the decision-makers concerning Buddhist affairs from 1815. Thereafter, the British colonial government in Ceylon intervened in many activities of the Buddhist establishment such as approving the appointments of chief monks, issuing “Acts of Appointment” (Aktapatra), and making decisions concerning monastic lands, among other things.² Queen Victoria became the ruler of Britain and its colonies in 1837 and thus became a kind of patron of Buddhist affairs in Ceylon both theoretically and practically. The Buddhist organization needed the approval of the British empress or her agents in Ceylon to function as a legal body in such a colonized space.

The reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) marks the longest exercise of control of all the colonial rulers who governed Sri Lanka over the course of centuries. During this period, the colonial government issued a large number of Acts of Appointment to senior chief monks throughout the country. These documents, many of which contain similar content, are noteworthy sources that help us to understand how the colonial government attempted to keep chief monks under its control in matters concerning Buddhist affairs. One such example, the Act of Appointment issued by the Victorian government to a senior Kandyan monk called Kobbākaḍuvē in 1839, is given below:

BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONORABLE JAMES ALEXANDER STEWART MACKENZIE, Governor and Commander in Chief in and over the British Settlements and Territories in the Island of Ceylon, with the Dependencies thereof.

To Kobbea Kadduwe Sreenevansa Unanse

BY VIRTUE of the Powers in Us vested by HER MAJESTY and reposing especial confidence in Your Zeal, Piety, Learning, and Loyalty, We have given and granted, and by these Presents do give and grant to You the, said

¹ de Silva 2014, pp. 325–37.

² Wīrasūriya 1972, pp. 90–95; Gñānavimāla 2001, pp. 333–55; Maṅgalasiri 1996, pp. 55, 140.

Kobbea Kadduwe Sreenevansa Unanse the office of Under High Priest and ...[illegible] or Malwatte Wihare in Kandy during Pleasure.

You are therefore hereby directed and enjoined diligently to obey and execute all such Orders as You may receive from Us, or the Government Agent, and fully to discover and make known to Us or the constituted authorities of Government, all things which may come to Your knowledge affecting the public Interests and all Treasons or Traitorous Conspiracies which You may hear of against Her Majesty's Government. And all Priests and other Persons whom it may concern, are hereby peremptorily commanded to respect and obey You the said Kobbea Kadduwe Sreenevansa Unanse as Under High Priest and ...[illegible] so long as You shall hold the said office and to pay You all Honors not abrogated by Us, which You are entitled to in virtue thereof, by the Customs of the Kandyan Provinces.³

The content of the above text shows that the colonial government strategically assigned certain duties to those monks who received appointments, namely, supporting the work of the government's agents, implementing the government's orders obediently, and reporting conspiracies against colonial rule. Further, it reveals that faithfulness to the British monarch and the colonial government was a decisive factor in holding the given appointment. The colonial government in Ceylon issued a large number of such Acts of Appointment containing similar content to chief monks throughout the country.⁴

During the British colonial period, the Buddhist organization in Sri Lanka was comprised of two parts, namely, the Up-Country (*Uḍaraṭa*), or Kandyan, Buddhist establishment and the Low-Country (*Pātarāṭa*) Buddhist establishment. (The central highlands of the island were known as the Up-Country while the southern and western Maritime Provinces were known as the Low-Country.) The close relationship between the Up-Country and the Low-Country monks was damaged due to caste-based segregation that occurred in 1768.⁵ The monks of the *govigama* caste—agricultural cultivators—denied Kandyan higher ordination to non-*govigama* monks in the Low-Country because they were considered to be socially inferior according to Kandyan standards, and this was the key reason for this crisis. This denial, however, led to the emergence of a countermovement among Low-Country Buddhists in the form of influential new fraternities (and their branches) such as Amarapura (1803),

³ Document no. 5/63/22–2, Collection of the Act of Appointments in the British Colonial Period. Punctuation is reproduced as in the original. Underlined text indicates handwriting.

⁴ For two other relevant cases see document nos. 5/63/22–1 and 5/63/22–3, Collection of the Act of Appointments in the British Colonial Period.

⁵ *Mandārapura Puvata* 1958, vv. 823–62.

Amarapura Kalyāṇivamaṣā (1810), Amarapura Dhamrakkhitavaṣā (1813), Rāmañña (1864), and others.⁶

The emergence of these new fraternities transformed the Low-Country Buddhist establishment into a relatively independent body. However, at the beginning Kandyian monks did not accept the validity of the new fraternities, which they viewed as radical due to their having been established without royal or state patronage. This situation prompted the new fraternities to seek the support of the colonial government and develop amicable contacts with the colonizer in order to gain recognition within this colonial context. As part of their strategy to gain such recognition, some temples associated with the new fraternities, such as Doḍandūva Śailabimbārāmaya in Galle, began to display the British coat of arms in prominent locations at their image houses. Later, this practice was adopted by other fraternities (including the Siam fraternity) in the Low-Country, opening a space in which images of the British monarch could then also be integrated into temple decoration.

The Low-Country monks emerged from territories that had been under the control of colonial powers for centuries and differed in terms of sociopolitical background from that of the Kandyian monks. Their familiarity with colonial systems such as education, administration, and religion, among others, was an advantage for them in building up amicable contacts with the colonizer. For example, many Low-Country Buddhist monks received missionary education before entering the order, notably Ven. Vaskaḍuvē Subhūti (1835–1917), Ven. Kahavē Ratanaśāra (d.u.–1918), and Ven. Mohoṭṭivattē Guṇānanda (1823–1890). Also, some monks hailed from families who served in the colonial government. For instance, the father of Ven. Vālitara Gñānatilaka (1861–1941), a leading monk of the Amarapura fraternity, was a *mohandiram* (a post in the native headmen system of the colonial administration).⁷ Moreover, Ven. Demaṭaṭṭiyē Saṅgharakkhita (1709–1792) and Ven. Vāligama Sumaṅgala (1825–1905) belonged to families of high-ranking local officials who served in the colonial government.⁸

Low-Country monks with such exposure successfully adapted to the colonial situation by building up friendly contacts with the Victorian government. These monks implemented strategies to maintain a smoother relationship with the colonizer and gain tolerance from the British administrators. Among these strategies were eulogizing Queen Victoria in poetry, sending letters to the colonial government expressing their faithfulness, constructing belfries and planting trees celebrating the anniversaries of the British monarch, seeking the permission of the colonial government to make new appointments of chief monks, and organizing welcome ceremonies for British gover-

⁶ *Sinhala Viśvakōṣaya* 1963, pp. 640–43; Malalgoda 1976, pp. 87–139, 191–242.

⁷ Dharmabandu 1949, p. 78.

⁸ Dharmabandu 1949, pp. 23–31.

nors. The following translation of a poem written in Pali by a leading chief monk, Ven. H. Sumaṅgala (1827–1911), is an example of the eulogizing verses written by monks:

Your Majesty, loved by gods,
 living in the country known as England,
 shines like the crescent moon with splendor in the sky.
 Your fame extends to countries all over the world
 surprising even the great ocean.
 May your Majesty, Queen Victoria, live long in the world
 being of service to the people.⁹

Ven. Taṅgallē Siri Sumanatissa (1814–1896) is another monk who composed verses on Queen Victoria appreciating her kindness, righteousness, beauty, heroism, and compassion for the people.¹⁰ Among the events that took place to celebrate the anniversary of Queen Victoria's ascension to the throne were the planting of the bo tree of Dēvapatirāja Perivena in Kalutara and the construction of the bell tower at Vidyōdaya Pirivena in Colombo. Moreover, Ven. Doḍandūvē Piyaratanatissa (1826–1907), who established the first Buddhist school, was able to obtain a monthly stipend for the school by strategically organizing a grand welcoming ceremony for the British Governor Hercules Robinson (1865–1872).¹¹ Thus, by implementing a variety of strategies, the monks in the Low-Country were able to gradually expand their power in the Maritime Provinces while counterbalancing resistance from the colonial government.

While the Low-Country monks were inclined toward fostering amicable relations with the British government, the Kandyan monks often expressed resistance to British rule through repeated petitions, protest campaigns, and rebellions. The Kandyan monks were never content with the passing of the political power of their kingdom into the hands of the British as it disrupted the bond between indigenous royal sponsorship and the maintenance of the Up-Country temples. Colonial occupation also disturbed the supremacy of Kandyan monks who had enjoyed the royal patronage of Kandyan kings until 1815. The British government took a number of actions to control the Kandyan Buddhist establishment, such as instigating disputes among influential chief monks to weaken their authority, neglecting to support the Daḷadā Perahāra (Procession Held for the Tooth Relic at Kandy) from 1818 to 1828, temporarily removing the stipend given to the Temple of the Tooth (Daladā Māligāva), and abolishing the traditional feudal system (*rājakāri kramaya*).¹² Furthermore, the British

⁹ Sumanasiri 2001, p. 32. Translation by the author.

¹⁰ Gunasēna 1999, pp. 272–74.

¹¹ Gunasēna 1999, pp. 137–42.

¹² Malalgoda 1976, pp. 119–21; Vajira 1983, 317–18; Wimalaratna 1995, p. 217; de Silva 1965, pp. 197–98; Wīrasūriya 2006, pp. 394–97.

officially opened Kandyan territories for Christian missionary activities by building churches in villages and opening missionary schools.

The Kandyan monks responded to the British policies by organizing protest campaigns, sending petitions to the British monarch, and supporting anti-British rebellions.¹³ Some of the monks, such as Ven. Kuḍāpola Unnānsē (1795–1848), played leading roles in some of these rebellions. Under pressure from the missionaries, the Victorian government decided to terminate official contact with the Kandyan Buddhist establishment in the second half of the nineteenth century, violating the conditions that the British promised to implement in the Uḍaraṭa Givisuma. Expressing distress over this violation, Kandyan monks wrote in one of their petitions to Queen Victoria that they were not happy with her role as the ruler of Ceylon.¹⁴ This crisis-ridden political situation led to the diminished power of the Kandyan Buddhist establishment in the final phase of the Victorian era.¹⁵

The reign of Queen Victoria saw many relatively favorable effects upon Buddhism in the Low-Country. A Victorian religious policy that respected the religious practices of the colonial subjects was a relief for the Buddhist community in the Maritime Provinces, which had experienced religious hostility from the Portuguese and the Dutch in previous centuries. As a result, during the Victorian era a large number of Buddhist monasteries were either renovated or constructed in the Low-Country. Other advancements during this period included the expansion of Buddhist publications, the emergence of English-medium Buddhist schools, the establishment of monastic colleges (*pirivenas*), and the growth of Buddhist religious festivals. At times, the Victorian government supported some Buddhist educational centers by providing them with stipends, for instance, in the case of the Vidyōdaya Pirivena.¹⁶

The Victorian government also allowed high-ranking local officials in the Low-Country who served the colonial government to engage in public Buddhist activities. Many local officials of the British government, particularly *mudaliyars*, were actively involved in projects such as the renovation and construction of temples.¹⁷ *Mudaliyar* was a high-ranking administrative position in the colonial government and was later also used as an honorary title given to influential local capitalists. By the mid-nineteenth century, philanthropic acts, including donations to local religious establishments, were considered by the Victorian government when granting the title of *mudaliyar* to influential local capitalists.¹⁸ Some examples of such recipients include

¹³ For further information, see Jayawardena 2010.

¹⁴ de Silva 1965, p. 104.

¹⁵ Malalgoda 1976, p. 128.

¹⁶ *Vidyōdaya Ardha Śatasāvatsara Kalāpaya* 1923, p. 12.

¹⁷ Jayathilaka 2009.

¹⁸ Jayawardena 2007, p. 309.

Mudaliyar Simon Fernando Chandrasekara (1829–1908), Mudaliyar Andiris Perera (1809–1890), and Mudaliyar Don Carolis Hewawitarana (1833–1906).

Unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch, the Victorian government was not inclined to maintain close political relations with Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka based solely on religious affiliations. Accordingly, the British administrators sometimes warned the missionaries over their violent attacks on Buddhism. For instance, George Anderson, the governor of Ceylon from 1850 to 1855, strongly advised the arch-deacon of Colombo, Benjamin Bailey (1791–1853), not to incite Christian devotees against Buddhism after the latter had issued a pamphlet criticizing Buddhism in violent language in 1852.¹⁹ Christian missionaries were not satisfied with British religious policy as it was not supportive of the expansion of Christianity.²⁰

The moral and ethical codes that Queen Victoria tried to propagate in the British colonies related to family, motherhood, womanhood, gender relationships, and social life, and they were acceptable to the majority of Buddhist monks and laypeople in the Low-Country. For instance, members of Victorian society were expected to live upright lives and not to engage in excessive drinking or improper sexual behavior, or to display the body in any erotic way.²¹ Moreover, a respectable woman had to keep her arms, legs, shoulders, and feet covered. Patriarchal family units were emphasized in a Victorian value system that encouraged hard work, respectability, and religious conformity. The upbringing of children, including teaching them the difference between “right” and “wrong” in order to become moral adults, was a significant responsibility of parents. These moral and ethical codes apparently fostered a positive perception of Queen Victoria among the Buddhist community in the Low-Country.

The “superiority” of Britain during this era was characterized by rapid developments in various spheres. This period marks the culmination of the Industrial Revolution with Britain emerging as the most dominant and advanced European colonial power. This “superiority” had an impact not only on Sri Lanka but across the world, wiping out any uncertainty regarding Britain’s position as a global power. This made the British empress a globally powerful personality capable of consolidating Victorian structures, social codes, and value systems in the colonies under British control. Consequently, the new elites in colonial Sri Lanka readily accepted the Victorian model and transformed themselves culturally into Victorian gentlemen and ladies following the language, religion, and lifestyle of the colonizer.²²

Kumari Jayawardena notes that the British government had effectively used the “royal family” in order to dazzle, reward, and skillfully manipulate the new bourgeoisie in

¹⁹ de Silva 1965, pp. 119–21.

²⁰ Hardy 1841, pp. 9–10, 35.

²¹ Briggs 1988; Billington 1988.

²² Selkirk 1844, p. 60; Jayawardena 2007.

Sri Lanka, in particular the class of *mudaliyars* and *mohandirams*.²³ She further notes that loyalty to the British throne was an essential ingredient of colonial education. As a result, new elites who had colonial education engaged in a range of activities to demonstrate their loyalty to the British monarch such as publishing materials to promote Queen Victoria, displaying British emblems at their personal residences, celebrating the anniversaries of the British royals, and hanging photographs of the royal family in their houses. Gate-Mudaliyar Gunasekara Vijayasriwardena (1869–1931), for example, launched a magazine named *Gñānādarśaya* (1896) on behalf of Queen Victoria in which he admired her service to the cause of improving the lives of her colonial subjects in Sri Lanka.²⁴ Also, a well-known *mudaliyar* family in the south, the Obeysekara family, placed a molded British emblem over the main entrance to their residence, *Aṭadāhēvatta Valavva*, in Galle to show respect toward the British government.

This promonarchical behavior of the new elites in the Low-Country is noteworthy as many of them supported the construction of Buddhist temples in the nineteenth century. The majority of them had nominally professed belief in Christianity, the official religion of the colonizer, to avoid harassment by the colonizer or gain benefits offered by the colonial system.²⁵ While carrying out activities to show their goodwill to the British monarch, these local elites supported the construction of temples mostly along caste lines. The support given by *karāva* elites for Amarapura temples, *salāgama* elites for Kalyāṇivamaṣā temples, and *govigama* elites for Siam temples are some examples. This patronage is a significant factor in understanding the integration of the images of Queen Victoria into Buddhist art.

The Buddhist Revival Movement

The Buddhist Revival Movement in the Low-Country in the late nineteenth century is a significant turning point in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhist art as it provided the context for making some crucial changes in how Queen Victoria was represented at Buddhist temples. This movement opened a space to question and criticize the structures and values promoted by the colonizer. The successful theoretical counterattack by Buddhists against the challenges of missionaries at the “Panadura Controversy,” or *Pānadurā Vādaya* (the debate at Panadura between Protestant Christians and Buddhists in August 1873), drew many influential Western intellectuals toward Buddhism.²⁶ As a consequence of this debate, Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), an American Civil War army officer, came to Sri Lanka with Annie Besant (1847–1933) in 1880, and later,

²³ Jayawardena 2007, p. 311.

²⁴ Paññāsēkhara 1968, p. 379.

²⁵ Malalgoda 1976, p. 31.

²⁶ Malalgoda 1976, pp. 222–31.

many Western theosophists came to the island voluntarily to support Buddhist activities.²⁷ This was a decisive development unexpected by both the Christian missionaries and the British administrators. By this time, the Up-Country Buddhist establishment was in a weak position due to the repressive policies implemented by the British government, particularly after the Kandyan Rebellion in 1848. Of the many developments within Buddhism in the Low-Country during the late-Victorian era, I would like to highlight the five most significant ones.

First, Western support for the Buddhist campaigns after the success of the “Panadura Controversy” was novel and conspicuous. In addition to Olcott, such influential Western intellectuals as C. W. Leadbeater (1854–1934), C. F. Powell (d.u.–1890), and B. J. Daly (1844–1916), among others, arrived in Sri Lanka. They engaged in campaigns promoting Buddhist models of education, morality, and culture that differed from those of the colonizer, thus changing the mindsets and ideologies of the Sri Lankan Buddhist community. Olcott, for example, traveled throughout the country holding public speeches to make people aware of Buddhism.²⁸

Second, the establishment of the Buddhist Theosophical Society in 1880 laid the foundation for significant changes in the school system, festivals, ethics, and religious and cultural practices, among others. Some examples of the society’s activities included organizing speeches by renowned Westerners who supported Buddhism, founding English-medium Buddhist schools, starting English-medium Buddhist newspapers, inventing the Buddhist flag, introducing new dress codes for local Buddhists, and introducing the practice of sending Vesak (the annual festival celebrating the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and death) cards instead of Christmas cards.

A third significant development was the expansion of Buddhist education. Breaking the monopoly of missionary education, a large number of Buddhist schools and several influential *pirivena* (monastic colleges) were established in the late nineteenth century. The Buddhist schools promoted Buddhist ethics and indigenous value systems against those of the colonizer, and some of them subverted certain promonarchical activities of the missionary schools such as the singing of songs blessing the British monarch and the celebrating of anniversaries of the British royals.²⁹

Fourth, the number of pro-Buddhist newspapers, novels, dramas, and works of poetry increased. A number of newspapers that supported the Buddhist campaigns, such as *Lakmiṇi Pahana* (est. 1862), *Sarasavi Saṅḍarāsa* (est. 1880), *The Buddhist* (est. 1888), *Sinhala Jātiya* (est. 1904), and *Sinhala Bauddhayā* (est. 1906) inclined toward questioning the activities of the colonial government. For example, *Sarasavi Saṅḍarāsa*, a leading

²⁷ Jayawardena 2004, pp. 56–57.

²⁸ Olcott 1929.

²⁹ Jayawardena 2004, pp. 63–64.

Buddhist newspaper, requested the Buddhist community to boycott celebrations of the Golden Jubilee Ceremony of Queen Victoria in 1887, arguing that they were not appropriate for Buddhists.³⁰ Moreover, in 1896, *Lakmiṇi Pahana* questioned the injustice of the British destruction of the indigenous monarchy.³¹ At the same time, Sinhalese novels by Piyadasa Sirisena (1875–1946), stage plays by John de Silva (1857–1922), and poetry by Ven. S. Mahinda (1901–1951) aroused nostalgic sentiments concerning the history of Buddhism on the island, indigenous value systems, cultural heritage, and patriotism. These works garnered a large readership and thus became a powerful vehicle of communication that helped turn the mindset of many Sinhalese against British imperialism.

A fifth highly significant development was the emergence of a new generation of Buddhist leaders whose approach to the British colonizers differed significantly from that of the new elites in the Low-Country. Most notable among these new leaders were Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), A. E. Buultjens (1865–1916), and Walisinghe Harishchandra (1876–1913). The campaigns implemented by these leaders were adversarial to the colonial power base in Sri Lanka and fostered a new Sinhalese lifestyle that rejected the values of the colonizer.

By the late Victorian era, these dynamics helped pave the way for new undercurrents that were unfavorable to the promonarchical discourse in colonial Sri Lanka. Leading Buddhist newspapers began to publish articles criticizing the policies of the Victorian government with the intention of galvanizing the public to struggle for various rights. The following citation from *Sarasavi Saṅḍarāsa* on July 20, 1890, is one such example:

It is extremely hard to get beneficial things for people from the English government. Obtaining success is very difficult even though appeals are sent, and requests are made while crying and begging. Without those struggles, they would never have gained relief. To get freedom from the English government, the public must unify and struggle together.³²

Along with the growth of the Buddhist campaigns in the late nineteenth century discussed above, discourses against the British monarch began to develop among the

³⁰ Thilakasiri 2000, p. 431.

³¹ “Soon after the capturing of power over Ceylon by the English, all members of the Sinhalese royal caste were expelled from the country, paving the way to eradicate the Sinhalese monarch forever. The English nation too will not exist forever. One day, the British will also fall and disappear when unfavorable times arrive. As we do not have an indigenous monarch, we have surrendered to another nation. Well, if Rajasinghe [the king] was the villain, what were the faults of the other members of the royal caste? What is just in destroying an entire nation for the faults of one person?” Cited from *Lakmiṇi Pahana*, February 22, 1896. Translation by the author.

³² *Sarasavi Saṅḍarāsa* (published by The Buddhist Theosophical Society), July 20, 1890. Translation by the author.

Buddhist community. As mentioned above, some Buddhist newspapers suggested boycotting the royal celebrations of Queen Victoria; some Buddhist schools avoided the older practice of celebrating British royalty. Those schools taught a new version of indigenous history as opposed to the version recommended by the British colonial government. However, some local *mudaliyars* who patronized the construction of temples continued to show loyalty to the British monarch as it was an integral part of their service. For instance, E. R. Gooneratne (1845–1914), who participated in the Diamond Jubilee celebration for Queen Victoria, sponsored the construction of temples, edited translations of the Pali Text Society, and was an active member of the Buddhist Revival Movement. Therefore, the final phase of the Victorian era in Sri Lanka marks a complex period with many paradoxes as well as confrontations between anti- and pro-Victorian discourses.

Early Representations of Queen Victoria in Buddhist Art

Through the investigation of twenty-five temples in the Low-Country region, twelve sites with images of Queen Victoria (with or without the British coat of arms) were found. Since two of these depictions have almost faded away, only the representations found in ten of the temples are discussed in this article.³³ In addition, eight temples from the sample were found to contain the British coat of arms without an image of Queen Victoria, and seven were found to have no such political signifiers.

The earliest representations of Queen Victoria in the selected temples are found at Vālihiṅḍa Sudarśanārāmaya, Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya, Kuruṃburē Rajamahā Vihāraya, and Kataluva Pūrvārāmaya; these are believed to have been created in the second or third quarter of the nineteenth century. One of the common characteristics of these early depictions is that the queen is portrayed as a “superior character” on the tympanums or lunettes above the main doorways. Moreover, she is presented in a stylized version characterized by the features of local artistic practice, and therefore these depictions are very different from her portraits by European artists.

Vālihiṅḍa Sudarśanārāmaya in Matara displays two images of Queen Victoria; one is above the doorway to the Viṣṇu Dēvālē (shrine allocated to the god Viṣṇu) and the other is above the doorway to the Kataragama Dēvālē (shrine allocated to the god Kataragama). Those *dēvālēs* are located inside the image house but function as separate units from the sanctum, or *garbhaya*. The portrait of Queen Victoria over the entrance to the Viṣṇu Dēvālē is shown inside a medallion with a curvilinear frame accompanied

³³ These twenty-five temples were selected considering their sociocultural and political significance in the British colonial era. The sample covers five districts, namely, Matara, Galle, Kalutara, Colombo, and Gampaha, and therefore is strong enough to provide an overall idea concerning the use of images of the British queen at Buddhist temples in the Low-Country region.

by two standing lions, one on each side (frontispiece, close-up). The lions, which look like guardians of the queen, are seen resting on their hind legs and placing their upper hands on the curvilinear frame. Symbolizing the British royal crest, there is a relatively large crown atop the medallion where the queen is situated. The image of Queen Victoria is shown at the center of the composition, commanding attention as the key pictorial element. Below the queen are two large-scale figures of the protective deities Vatuka and Agore—manifestations of Śiva (frontispiece, wide shot). These demonic figures and the bright red background of the depiction have created a powerful and assertive setting for the British empress.

The other image of Queen Victoria from Vālihiṅḍa Sudarśanārāmaya is found above the entrance to the Kataragama Dēvālē (plate 1). It has many characteristics similar to the previous one: the royal crown atop the medallion, the figures of standing lions, the representations of Vatuka and Agore, and the bright red background. However, the scale of the queen's figure is smaller in the latter representation than in the former. The long-sleeved white frock of the queen and the greenish background of the medallion are among some other minor differences in the depiction at the Kataragama Dēvālē.

Both representations of Queen Victoria at Vālihiṅḍa Sudarśanārāmaya depict a frontal view with stylized characteristic features. The queen's figure is visualized through the imagination of local artists, perhaps based on their previously having seen images of her rather than on any one-to-one imitation of her European portraits. As a result, we can identify certain strange characteristics that cannot be seen in her portraits created according to contemporary conventions of European art: namely, wide-open eyes, a peculiar hairstyle, large and heavy earrings, a triangular-shaped nose, and strange ears, among other things. The queen, who occupies a position above the eye-level of the viewer, is depicted as looking at the viewer with a strong and powerful gaze. Hence, the British queen is portrayed as a dominant, powerful, and superior character, thus making the viewer "the inferior."

Another painted portrait of Queen Victoria, accompanied by two lions, is found on the tympanum of the right doorway to the sanctum of Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya in Colombo (plate 2). This image is crowned with an elegant *makara toraṇa*, which as mentioned above, is a conventional decorative guardian motif used mostly for Maitreya Bodhisattva, other major deities, and sacred religious symbols such as stupas. The fundamental pictorial scheme, location, and surrounding elements suggest that the queen is portrayed with honor and respect. A Western-style coronation crown worn above the veil and the royal crest atop the medallion are two noteworthy visual signifiers that imply the identity of Queen Victoria. An affable gaze with a slight smile on the face of the queen is still recognizable although some parts of the face have faded away. However, her gaze does not make direct eye contact with the viewer as it points obliquely away. This could be due to a lack of competence on the part of the artist in

handling human facial gestures, or perhaps her gaze might have been beyond the concern of the artist. The lower part of the queen's image is covered with a wavy pattern, probably symbolizing sea waves to suggest that the queen was from overseas.

A noticeable feature in the depiction at Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya is that a fruit—most likely a pomegranate—is seen in the right hand of Queen Victoria. The pomegranate cannot be seen in traditional decorative motifs found in Sri Lankan arts and crafts and, therefore, this might have come from a Western decorative context. According to Christian iconography, the pomegranate is a symbol of eternity and fertility as it has many seeds.³⁴ Since Christianity had a considerable impact on the Maritime Provinces, it is likely that this fruit was adopted from Christian symbolism. On each side of the queen, figures of guardian lions rest on their hind legs, looking at the viewer. The lion is a popular symbol of power, royalty, and victory both in Western and in local Sri Lankan artistic practice. Two crowns—one atop the oval frame and the other on the queen's head—can be seen in this depiction. These crowns are conspicuous signifiers affiliated with power and royalty. Characteristics such as the prominent location of the image on the lunette, the dragon-arch decoration, the surrounding deities, the pair of guardian lions, and the decorative background with floral and foliage motifs suggest that the queen is to be viewed as a respectable, powerful, and superior character.

Kuruṃburē Rajamahā Vihāraya in Matara has a stylized full-figure representation of Queen Victoria (plate 3). In this representation found on the tympanum above the doorway to the inner shrine of the image house, the queen is shown surrounded by an elegant *makara toraṇa* and a group of Sri Lankan deities, which lie outside the frame of the photograph. However, the scale of the queen's figure is reduced to position the entirety of her body inside the central medallion, which is placed between two unicorns. The images of unicorns are apparently based upon the figure of the “sinister supporter” (i.e., found on the *left*, from the Latin *sinister*) found on the British coat of arms. Although the figure of Queen Victoria is relatively small, she is positioned at the center of the composition as the key visual element. In this manifestation, the British empress, who sits on a chair, looks at the viewer with a thoughtful expression.

Inside the image house of Kataluva Pūrvārāmaya in Galle, two British coats of arms bearing portraits of two queens painted somewhere between the 1850s and 1880s are found above the two doorways to the sanctum. The image over the doorway on the right is considered to be Queen Victoria (plate 4) while the other, with gray hair over the left entrance, is believed to be her mother.³⁵ However, the reason for the inclusion of an image of the queen's mother is not clear. As in the previous examples, the

³⁴ Sill 1975, p. 56.

³⁵ This information was conveyed to the author by the head monk of the temple. Please note: the image of the gray-haired woman is not depicted in the plate.

British empress is found inside the tympanum crowned with an elegant *makara toraṇa* decoration. This particular space inside the tympanum is not neutral in the context of Buddhist art, as it has often been devoted to the images of powerful deities or Maitreya Bodhisattva.

The image of Queen Victoria in Kataluva Pūrvārāmaya is shown inside a medallion surrounded by a replica of the imperial crown, the unicorn (the sinister supporter), and the lion (the dexter, or “right,” supporter on the British coat of arms). According to a center-peripheral syntagm, the queen occupies the center of the depiction and is the key visual element of the composition. The official shield supporters of the British coat of arms, the imperial crest, and the Caucasian complexion of the queen are among the signifiers suggesting the identity of Queen Victoria. On the bottom banner, just below the figure of the queen, is a flower with a foliage motif, most likely a symbol of goodwill. As in the previous examples, compositional characteristics such as the prominent location on the tympanum, the *makara toraṇa* decoration above the queen, the surrounding figures of local deities (outside of the frame of the photograph), and the position of the image above the eye-level of the viewer all contribute to the appearance of the British empress as an eminent and superior figure.

The Transformation of Queen Victoria in Later Buddhist Temple Art

By the final phase of the Victorian era, significant changes can be seen in the representations of the British queen. The depictions of Queen Victoria in Toṭagamuva Subhadrārāmaya, Polvatta Gaṅgārāmaya, Karagampiṭṭiya Subōdhārāmaya, and Maraṁba Rajamahā Vihāraya, which were painted after the third quarter of the nineteenth century, demonstrate how the British queen came to be visualized in Buddhist art during this period. Some of these depictions contain the dating of their composition while the rest bear stylistic features that were prevalent in the Buddhist mural tradition after the 1880s. Although the origins of these temples go back to the pre-Victorian era, their representations of the queen are the result of repainting and overpainting in later periods.

In the depiction of Queen Victoria at Polvatta Gaṅgārāmaya in Matara, the British empress has lost her previous superior location on the tympanum above the main doorways. She has become a subordinate figure to the buddhas and is placed on a less prominent section of the wall (plate 5). Here, a series of bust portraits of Queen Victoria (twenty-four in total) performing a gesture of worship and framed by a medallion are placed above and to the sides of each of twenty-four previous buddhas (*sūvisi vivaraṇa*) along the ambulatory veranda, or *pratimā mālakaya*, of the image house. Close-ups of two of these portraits and their placement can be seen at the right on plate 5. The veil and small crown on the head of the figures are unambiguous signifiers pointing to her



Plate 1. Representation of Queen Victoria, second or third quarter of the nineteenth century, tempera, Kataragama Dēvālē at Vālihiṅda Sudarśanārāmaya in Matara.



Plate 2. Representation of Queen Victoria, second or third quarter of the nineteenth century, tempera, Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya in Colombo.



Plate 3. Representation of Queen Victoria, second or third quarter of the nineteenth century, tempera, Kuruñburē Rajamahā Vihāraya in Matara.



Plate 4. Queen Victoria with British Regalia, ca. 1850s–1880s, tempera, Kataluva Pūrvāramaya in Galle.



Plate 5. Representations of Queen Victoria within a *sūvisi vivaraṇa* ambulatory veranda, ca. 1880s–1910s, tempera, Polvatta Gaṅgārāmaya in Matara.



Plate 6. Representation of Queen Victoria, 1888, tempera, Toṭagamuva Subhadrārāmaya in Galle.



Plate 7. Representation of Queen Victoria, ca. 1880s–1910s, tempera, Karagampitiya Subōdhārāmaya in Colombo.



Plate 8. Representation of Queen Victoria(?), ca. 1880s–1900s, tempera, Maraṃba Rajamahā Vihāraya in Matara.

identity as Queen Victoria. One of the noteworthy features of these depictions is that the statues of the buddhas and the portraits of Queen Victoria belong to two different stylistic genres. The statues of the buddhas bear the stylized features of the Central Kandyan school that were prevalent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The portraits of Queen Victoria, on the other hand, contain rather naturalistic configurations adopted from Western portrait art, which became more popular in Buddhist art from the 1880s through the 1920s. Hence, this depiction demonstrates an intriguing combination of two stylistic genres representing both a stylized local art tradition and features of post-Renaissance European painting.

The stylistic differences described above indicate that the portrayals of Queen Victoria at Polvatta Gaṃḡārāmaya were integrated into the *sūvisi vivaraṇa* sequences at a date after their original construction, perhaps due to the sociopolitical needs of the time. As a result, several paradoxes and contradictions can be seen in these images. For instance, contextually and physically, there is no logical correlation between the images of the queen and the statues of the buddhas, who are blessing Siddhārtha in his previous births as a bodhisattva, thereby confirming his future buddhahood. The queen appears in a rather tight and miniature version pressed between the auras of the buddhas due to the lack of sufficient space. Therefore, without close inspection it is not easy to identify the portraits of Queen Victoria at Polvatta Gaṃḡārāmaya. Although Queen Victoria is shown performing a gesture of worship toward the buddhas, there is no logical interconnection between the queen's "action" and the "response" of the buddhas. Compared to the representations of Queen Victoria at Välihiṇḍa Sudarśanārāmaya, Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya, and Kataluva Pūrvārāmaya, the British empress's dominance has diminished due to its placement at a less prominent location, the miniature scale of her depiction, her gesture of worship, and her being portrayed as a subordinate figure to the buddhas.

The location of the queen above the auras of the buddhas, however, is not neutral because that space has often been used to depict divine beings in Buddhist religious spaces. Also, garland decorations around the queen's portraits and her luxurious attire reflect the majestic quality of Queen Victoria. Hence, the repeated integration of the busts of Queen Victoria into such locations presents the intriguing question raised by Bilinda Devage Nandadeva: Do these portraits represent Queen Victoria as a divinity, perhaps after her death?³⁶

Some characteristics such as the location above the auras of the buddhas, the sky-like atmosphere, and the bust decorated with bunches of flowers provide hints that could lead one to assume that the person depicted here is divine. Nevertheless, the most unambiguous signs of divinity in local artistic practices—the halo and clouds below the bust—cannot be seen in any of these depictions. The socioreligious context

³⁶ Nandadeva 2012, p. 7.

likewise does not support an argument for her divinity as no particular affiliation can be found between Polvatta Gaṅgārāmaya and the British monarch that might encourage her elevation to divine status. Rather, it seems that this particular location and the miniature-looking busts of the queen were chosen due to technological constraints: that is, a lack of space to depict the queen on the selected wall. Therefore, there is no evidence to suggest that the queen is here depicted as a divine being.

The representation of Queen Victoria at Toṭagamuva Subhadrārāmaya, where the queen's figure is found inside the British coat of arms, is a noteworthy one. Here, the British empress has been presented with a dual identity (plate 6). We find this depiction on the tympanum over the left doorway to the inner shrine of the temple. The queen's figure, which is placed within an oval-shaped medallion surrounded by the shield supporters of the British coat of arms, is positioned at the nucleus of the composition. The date of the depiction, 2431 of the Buddhist calendar (1888 CE), is found below her figure. The prominent location on the tympanum, the centralized position in the pictorial scheme, the *makara toraṇa*, and the other surrounding ornamentations suggest that the queen is the focal point of the visual schema. The slight smile on her face, the cluster of flowers in her hand, the decorative background filled with floral and foliated motifs, and the gesture of blessing combine to present a friendly persona to the viewer. Moreover, two angels of Western origin are seen above the crown sitting atop the medallion. Angels are a popular personification of goodness both in the West and the East and are seen as intermediaries between heaven and earth.

There are a number of markers supporting the notion that the person depicted at Toṭagamuva Subhadrārāmaya is indeed Queen Victoria: the Caucasian-looking fair complexion, the imperial crown atop the medallion, the shield supporters of the British coat of arms, and the Western attire and ornaments of the queen. Nevertheless, "Queen Mahāmāya" (i.e., the mother of Prince Siddhārtha) is written in Sinhalese letters in a rather hidden manner just below the bottom banner of the image. This image has thus gained an additional identity to that of Queen Victoria. The queen at Toṭagamuva Subhadrārāmaya possesses an intriguing dual identity, representing both the British monarch and a popular Buddhist queen. This raises an intriguing question: Could the intent of this depiction be to represent Queen Victoria *as* the mother of Siddhārtha Bodhisattva? There is, however, no solid evidence to support this notion as there was no such understanding in Sri Lankan Buddhist artistic traditions. The name written in Sinhalese is most likely a later addition by those who were unwilling to see the British monarch in a Buddhist shrine house during the period following the Buddhist Revival Movement.

At Karagampiṭiya Subōdhārāmaya in Colombo, a painted bust portrait of Queen Victoria accompanied by two unicorns occupies the tympanum above the entrance to the inner shrine of the image house (plate 7). The prominent location and sur-

rounding decorations, including the *makara toraṇa*, imply that the person depicted is powerful and possesses authority. A date referring to the founding of the temple as May 10, 2339, of the Buddhist calendar (1796 CE) is found below the bust of the queen. The stylistic characteristics of the depiction indicate that this image was painted after the 1880s, most probably during a later renovation of the temple. Queen Victoria is positioned at the center of the pictorial setting and is seen with her left hand raised as if blessing the devotees who enter the shrine house. The *makara toraṇa* decoration above the queen, two figures of standing unicorns, the background with foliage and floral motifs, the curvilinear molded frame around the queen, the location of the image above the eye level of the viewer, and the physical distance between the image and the viewer all contribute to enhance the eminence of the queen in this depiction.

The overall appearance and the complexion of Queen Victoria at Karagampīṭiya Subōdhārāmaya are more similar to those of a Sri Lankan woman than those of an Englishwoman. The queen is pictured with a slightly monotonous brownish complexion and wearing costumes inspired by those of South Asia. Consequently, Queen Victoria is transformed into someone of indigenous identity rather than depicted as a Caucasian. The symbol of the imperial crown, one of the dominant signifiers in the previous depictions, cannot be seen either on the head of the queen or atop the curvilinear frame, where the queen is placed. The Victorian identity of this image is thus disturbed by the indigenous physical appearance of the queen, her attire, the absence of the imperial crown, and the omission of the syntagm of the British coat of arms. Therefore, while representing Queen Victoria this depiction also opens a space for the viewer to interpret the image as any one of the Buddhist queens.

A portrait of a queen who is very similar to that of Queen Victoria is found in the image house of Maraṃba Rajamahā Vihāraya in Matara (plate 8). The identity of Queen Victoria in the previous examples has been confirmed by the resident monks of the temples and/or previous scholars; the person depicted here, however, has not been conclusively identified.³⁷ Some of the features present here suggest that the person depicted is indeed Queen Victoria: the small Western-style crown worn above the veil that was a unique feature of Queen Victoria; the fair complexion; and the Western boots that she is wearing, though these are not seen in the close-up image reproduced here. Moreover, this image is considerably similar to the portraits of the British empress found at Polvatta Gaṃgārāmaya, which is located in the same district. Hence, this depiction is most probably a manifestation of Queen Victoria. Also, the queen at Maraṃba Rajamahā Vihāraya has been placed by the side of one of the doorways to the inner shrine rather than above it as at Polvatta Gaṃgārāmaya. She is shown with

³⁷ Mahinda 2007, p. 83; Ulluwishewa 1993, p. 73; Chutiwongs, Prematilleke, and Silva 1990.

temple flowers (*araliya*) in her hand and turning toward the shrine room. Her gesture implies that the queen is getting ready to offer flowers to the Buddha.

Although none of the representations of Queen Victoria treated above have her name inscribed on them, certain clues suggest that her name may have been erased from some of the depictions during later periods, perhaps with the intention of concealing her identity. For example, a closer observation reveals that a carefully selected area below the image of Queen Victoria at Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya (plate 2), where her name was probably written, has been covered with a thick dark-blue layer of paint. By the early twentieth century, the practice of integrating the British monarch into Buddhist art had disappeared as a result of clashes between the Low-Country Buddhist leaders, who were engaged in the independence movement, and the British government. Many Buddhist leaders such as Anagārika Dharmapāla, A. E. Buultjens, and Ven. S. Mahinda supported anti-imperialistic campaigns aimed at political liberation from British power instead of the earlier policy of maintaining amicable contacts with the colonizer. Against this backdrop, many temples were repainted and renovated resulting in the erasure or removal of some of the images of Queen Victoria from temple walls. The space under the *makara toraṇa* was later occupied by representations of such things as Buddhist relics, the Buddhist flag, figures of Buddhist deities, replicas of stupas, and blessing poems.

The representations of Queen Victoria in Buddhist art were portrayed with intriguing diversity, variability, and multiplicity. No two depictions found at the selected temples are exactly the same. Nevertheless, in the earliest depictions of Queen Victoria in the examples seen at Vālihiṅḍa Sudarśanārāmaya, Kōṭṭē Rajamahā Vihāraya, and Kuruṃburē Rajamahā Vihāraya, the British empress was depicted as an authoritative and superior character. Yet after the third quarter of the nineteenth century, many significant changes in the representations of Queen Victoria can be observed. These include such modifications as placing her at less prominent locations, transforming the queen into a “double-coded figure,” changing her into a subordinate figure to the Buddha, and reducing the scale of her depictions.

Conclusion

The above discussion presents a timeline for, and the background to, understanding the presence of representations of Queen Victoria in Sri Lankan Buddhist temple art. These images are not isolated icons, but rather are intriguing visual responses by the Low-Country Buddhist establishment to the various political and socioreligious changes of the nineteenth century. The depictions of the British monarch were initially integrated into Buddhist art as a part of the campaigns carried out by Low-Country Buddhist monks to gain the goodwill of the British monarch and to counterbalance

resistance from the colonial rulers. Consequently, in the early depictions the British empress is presented as a powerful, superior, and authoritative character positioned at prominent locations in Buddhist image houses. However, initiatives brought on by the Buddhist Revival Movement in the late nineteenth century in response to religious controversies changed the procolonial approach that the Low-Country Buddhist establishment had adopted. These initiatives succeeded due to the support of Western intellectuals, the activities of the Buddhist Theosophical Society, the expansion of Buddhist publications, the growth of Buddhist education, and the anti-imperialist discourses of Buddhist leaders. In parallel with these developments, several significant transformations of Victorian portraiture also took place, namely, the transformation of the British empress into a subordinate figure to the Buddha, the reduction in scale of her depictions, and the loss of her placement in prominent locations at the image houses. The representations of Queen Victoria in Buddhist art in the Low-Country thus present a series of significant visual signs that reflect the cultural and sociopolitical dynamics of the British colonial period.

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