

The Mahinda Legend: Comparative Study

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In several countries around India, where Buddhism was flourishing, there were legends concerning sons and daughters of King Aśoka to whom was attributed some important historical events in the country concerned, i.e. the introduction of Buddhism, the foundation of the state, etc. In Ceylon, for example, there are legends of Mahinda in the Dipavaṃsa and the Mahāvāṃsa.

On analyzing the legends laid down in Ceylonese epics, one finds the following means which Theravāda Buddhists of Ceylon used in order to add prestige to their own country and sect: 1) emphasizing that their sect was the orthodox accepting the teachings of Buddha correctly; 2) seeking some connection with Magadha, the cradle of Buddhism; 3) tracing the relationship between the imperial family or important Buddhistic figures of Ceylon, and noble families of India such as the Śākya and the Mauryas.

By analyzing the Mahinda legend recorded in many historical materials of Ceylon, and also by comparing it with the Aśoka-Mahinda legends in Northern Buddhism, the author throws light on the genesis of the Mahinda legend as follows:

Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon mainly via Western India, the center of which was Ujjeni, around the period of Maurya dynasty. About this time, Mahinda, Buddhist monk of Western India, arrived in Ceylon and engaged in missionary works. Later, he was worshipped as the founder of Mahāvihāra, the oldest monastery of Ceylon. Now, he became the subject of many legends originated in the above mentioned three means, from which grew up the legend now extant that he was a son of King Aśoka.