

“Imperfectly known period of transmission” or ‘Dark Period’

Russel Bowden

B.C. Law in his ‘A History of Pali Literature’ (Varanasi Indica Books 2000) states that ‘*In between the closing of the Pali canon and the beginning of the great commentaries and chronicles we had to take note of an **imperfectly known period of transmission** which has become remarkable by the production of so great a work of literary merit and doctrinal importance as the *Milindha Pañha*, occupying as it does, the foremost place for its lucid, elegant and rhythmical prose style in the whole range of Sanskrit and Sanskritic literature*’ (p.629) and again ‘*In between the closing of the Pali canon and the writing of the Pali commentaries by Buddhadatta, Buddhaghosa and Dhammapala, there is a short but **dark period** of development of Pali literature which has not as yet engaged adequate attention of scholars*’ (p.349). Such statements from a distinguished Pali scholar cannot be permitted to go uninvestigated particularly for what this period might contribute to our understanding of the reliability or otherwise of the words and messages communicated by canonical texts as the transmission agents of the *dhamma*. Investigations, over a period of almost 900 years [483 B.C. to 410 A.D.], using four primary clues provided by Law as ‘landmarks’ proved to be less than easy because of (a) this being an ‘imperfectly known period’ and (b) the revelation of discrepancies produced results suggesting that not only might Law have been wrong but that the opposite to a ‘dark period’ of ‘bright sunlight’ possibly heralding the birth, development and ‘flowering’ of Sinhala literature founded on the Buddha’s Words and His Teachings are what these conveyed. These are all detailed and then assessed as obstacles or benefits to the reliability and integrity of the transmission processes of the Pāli Theravada Tipiṭaka.

LAW’S QUOTATIONS

The quotation in the title above is taken from the eminent Indian Buddhist scholar of the 1930’s and 1940’s – B. C Law – who writes [A] “In between the closing of the Pāli canon and the beginning of the great commentaries and chronicles¹ we had to take note of *an imperfectly*

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known period of transmission which has become remarkable by the production of so great a work of literary merit and doctrinal importance as the *Milinda Pañha*, occupying, as it does, the foremost place for its lucid, elegant, and rhythmical prose style in the whole range of Sanskrit and Sanskrit literature.” (Law, 1933; 629)

Law made an earlier, and less revealing, reference to this period [B] ‘In between the closing of the Pāli canon and the writing of the Pāli commentaries by Buddhadatta, Buddhaghosa, and Dhammapala, there is a *short but dark period* of development of Pāli literature which has not as yet engaged adequate attention of scholars. Broadly defined, this period extends from the beginning of the Christian era to the close of the 4th century A.D.’ (Law, 1933; 349) which indicates Law’s first dichotomy / discrepancy! Although it must be pointed out that a ‘period of transition’ and a ‘period of development of Pāli literature’ are not entirely synonymous. We intend to examine these opinions but not before noting some apparent discrepancies and considering how significant are these

DATINGS

In any historical examination of a long period of the transmissions of texts, [a part of which is being undertaken here] particularly those associated with events not recorded accurately as facts in any reliable history and many occurring in the period when writing down of canonical texts was, by traditions of the times, not permitted and writing for other purposes was more the exception than the rule, any reference to ‘an imperfectly known period’ cannot be permitted to pass without investigation.

To place this ‘imperfectly known period’ (or what I have referred to loosely as the ‘dark period’) in a precise time-frame or in any exact chronological period, despite Law’s attempt, is far from easy. Even Law, who identified it, is frugal with his application of specific dates [with the exception of the ‘B’ quotation]. In addition the two quotations provide dating that are not in harmony – i.e. the period’s possible commencement with the closing of the Pāli Canon and the beginning of the Christian era. These are two events separated by 247 years! Nevertheless it is only when more precise dates have been arrived at that one will be able to make any comments on the effects, if any, the activities in this period might have had on the transmission processes of the Pāli canon itself. So before we progress further we need to obtain a much clearer picture of the dates pertaining to Law’s two allegations of an ‘imperfectly known period of transmission’ [my ‘dark period’].

Law provides four primary clues [or ‘landmarks’] in the first reference quoted [‘A’] to more exact dates; the first is the ‘closing of the Pāli canon’; the second is the date for the creation of the *Milinda Pañha*; the third and fourth are the dates associated with the composition of the commentaries and the epic chronicles of Ceylon. In the second quotation [‘B’] he refers more simply to just two – the first is very clear and unchallengeable – the commencement of the Christian era and the second almost equally simple – the close of the 4th century A.D. i.e. circa 590 A.D. With the alleged commencement there is a discrepancy of 247 years between the dates but the possible ‘closure’ dates appear, at first sight, to be more contiguous.

The simple ‘B’ quotation, therefore, is the easiest for it is self-explanatory and requires no further comment except to point out that it serves as a useful over-all and broader time-frame in which to examine, in more specific details, Law’s four other ‘landmarks’ in ‘A’ and some others.

Turning now to the fuller [‘A’] quotation.

PĀLI CANON - CLOSURE

‘The closing of the Pāli canon’ is the easiest to which to fix a date – 246 B.C. Most scholars generally accept the Canon’s closure to have been in, or soon after, the completion of the Third Buddhist Council [with the exception of Moggaliputta Tissa’s ‘*Kathavatthu*’] after which the Emperor Asoka in 247 B.C. sent his son, the Arahant Mahinda to Sri Lanka. As N. A. Jayawickrama has so pertinently suggested the Emperor would not have sent the Pāli Theravada *Tipiṭaka* as a gift to the king of Lanka, had it then not been considered to have been a completed compilation.

MILINDA PAÑHA - CREATION

Turning our attention now the *Milinda Pañha* one notes that its creation is not open to any definite and agreed date. Von Hinuber is circumspect suggesting ‘between 100 B. C. and 200 A.D. (von Hinuber, 1996; 85) although Akira is more precise suggesting 150 to 140 B.C. (Akira, 1990; 223) Others however are more cautious - ‘The original Pali Milindapañha must have been completed before the fourth century A.C.’ (Jayawardhana, 1994; 94), and ‘the Milindapañha written at the beginning of the Christian era’ (Abeynayake, 1984; 15). However Malalasekera asserts that ‘It is believed that the book [Milinda Pañha] was compiled later than the time of the conversation.’ (Malalasekera.

DPPN II; 637) by which he means that alleged to have been held by King Menander with Bhikkhu Nāgasena. Jumping ahead one finds that ‘It is reasonable to assume that the Greek king reigned in or about the first century B.C.’ (Bharat Singh Upadhaya *in* Bapat, 1956; 173). The ‘Greek king’ most scholars seem to agree was Menander, a satrap and the son of King Demetrius, (ca. 189-167) (Bodhi, 1993; 4) who had been left in charge of the province of Bactria when Alexander, bowing to the requirements imposed on him by his own army in 324 B.C.² returned some of it back westwards by sea whilst he commanded the remainder for the march back on which he died in 323 B.C. in Babylon. (Cartledge, 2004; 192) History had, unknowingly, been made when, as Bikkhu Bodhi so perceptively points out, “The *Milinda* is the product of the encounter of two great civilizations – Hellenistic Greece and Buddhist India” (Bodhi, 1993; 13). Bhikkhu Bodhi proposes circa 150 B.C. (Mendis, 1993: 2) which may be exact but if it is not it suggests an acceptable compromise between the alternative dates offered by other scholars!

We now turn our attention to the last two of Law’s four ‘guidelines’ or ‘landmarks’ as to dates – the first - the commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā[s]*) and secondly - the chronicles (*vaṃsa[s]*).

COMMENTARIES

When precisely and by whom these earliest *aṭṭhakathā[s]* (commentaries) had been created history and scholarship have not thus far clearly revealed. Most scholars [Adikaram, Moro, Endo] it should be noted, seem content to accept their division into two categories – the first being those composed in India and brought to Sri Lanka along with the relatively recently-agreed canonical texts in the memories of the four colleagues who accompanied the Arahant Mahinda circa 246 B.C. Tradition has it that ‘the *Sīhalatṭhakathā* comprised the Commentaries brought by Mahinda to Ceylon and preserved there in the Sinhalese language’ (Adikaram, 1946; 11). It is these and any fore-runners to them on which their contents might have been founded that need here engage our attention.

Prior to this it is necessary to note that the scholarship and intellectual excellence evidenced today in some of their contents point with little doubt to their having had some association with the works of the Indian *bhānaka[s]* [although their compositions are not attributed primarily or solely to them as these monks’ primary responsibilities were concerned with the protection of the Words that served to communicate the integrity and truth of the Doctrine (*Dhamma*)]. Nevertheless it is generally agreed

that these *bhānaka*[s] and their *confrères* worked in the 236 year period from soon after the completion of the First Buddhist Council – that is soon after 483 - through the periods between the Second and Third Council that is until approximately 247 B.C. All we can state with certainty is that they pre-date 246 B. C. [the date of the arrival in Sri Lanka of Mahinda and his five companions with the only-then recently-approved texts of the Canon] fixed in their memories and these earlier-composed commentaries probably created closer to this latter rather than the former date. [However additions there later were – to the Mahā or Mūla atṭhakathā and Kurundi atṭhakathā - which must have been either later rather compositions or have had additions included into them - a fact proven today by the evidence that they contain Sri Lankan references indicating that they can only have been finally completed to reflect something akin to the texts available to us today after their arrival on the island.]

Further examination quickly makes it apparent that it is not these earliest commentaries to which Law is referring because their dates [post-483 through to pre-247 B.C.] then almost entirely pre-date the commencement of this ‘dark’ period and that cannot be! So clearly Law’s reference to any ‘beginning of the great commentaries and chronicles’ cannot refer to these! As a consequence we need to switch our attention then to the ‘later’ and not to the ‘beginning of the great commentaries’ and consequently concentrate now attention on the so-called ‘Five Great Commentators’ (circa 400 to 550 A.D.) of whom the first was Buddhadatta and the second and most significant Buddhaghosa. Between them they were responsible for 21 or 22 creations. Only two of the five were from Sri Lanka the others coming from India. With regard to Buddhaghosa the dates for which we are searching are traceable through the author’s own writings. Buddhaghosa himself states of the Visuddhimagga, his ‘trial’ text for the monks of the Mahāvihāra ‘it was begun by me in the twentieth year of the reign of peace of the King Sirinivāsa (Of Glorious Life)³ ... it was finished in the twenty-first year’ (Ñānamoli, Bhikkhu. 1956; xvii).

So we can date Law’s end of the ‘dark period’ to his ‘beginning of the great commentaries’ and - assuming that Buddhaghosa arrived from India in Sri Lanka in the year preceding his commencement of work - as 429 A.D. or 430 A.D. Any doubts about the date of its conclusion can best be allayed from the facts that the later compositions of the Commentaries achieved eminence and significance with the 21 / 22 creations of the ‘Five Great Commentators’ after which there exist doubts as to their continuation with Adikaram theorising that a remark in Buddhaghosa’s ‘*Suttavibhanga-vaṇṇanā*’ indicates that before his departure circa 450 A.D. he states ‘that the number of the *Bhānaka*[s] at

the time in question was comparatively small’ and that soon after that they seem to have disappeared from the scene. However ‘it is not possible to say when it came to an end.’ (Adikaram, 1946; 11-32). Norman associated himself with this theory on the grounds that ‘the canon had been written down for some hundreds of years’ (Norman, 1997; 48) so that the need that had brought the system into existence had passed and therefore their redundancy had removed them from the scene. It is an opinion not shared by Godakumbure who [in 1955 – that is 9 years after Adikaram and Norman 51 years after him] alleges ‘The Sinhalese commentaries, however, did not go out of use as soon as the Pali version were made; and from the surviving citations from them we know that they were in use among Sinhalese writers until at least the tenth century’ quoting as his authority ‘Quotations from the Helatuva (= Pāli: Sīhaḷatṭhakathā) are to be found in the Dhampiyāṭuvāvāgāṭapadaya, ed. Jayatilake, p. 103, p. 115, p.122’. (Godakumbura, 1955; 4)]

Nevertheless the earliest commentaries although not those to which Law wished to draw our attention – were without doubt those created in India in the 236 year period between the First Buddhist Council in 483 B.C. and the departure with the texts of whatever had been composed by then in the memories of Mahinda and his five companions in 246 B.C. but not at the commencement of this period. For ease of further references one might select [not too arbitrarily] a date such as 315 B.C.

Concentrating our attention further on these ‘earliest commentaries’ Law continues [‘Secondary Landmarks’ see Table 1] “The Pali commentaries, as we have them, were produced at a period far beyond the Mauryan and Sūnga, the Kānya and the Kūshāna.”⁴

Law continues “The Augustan period⁵ of Pali literature began with ‘the closing of the Pali canon’ and closed with ‘the beginning of the great commentaries and chronicles’. The former, as already indicated, is relatively easy to date [to circa 247 B.C.] whilst the latter two are less easily and precisely dated. Indeed difficult is it to be certain as to which of these many compositions Law is alluding.

CHRONICLES

The dating of these earliest Chronicles [*vaṃsa*] is comparatively easy. The earliest was the Dīpa-vaṃsa which Geiger has suggested was founded on an earlier *aṭṭhakathā* (commentary) known as the *Aṭṭakathā-Mahāvaṃsa* (Geiger, 1912; x) unfortunately no longer extant.⁶ Geiger reckoned this work to have been composed circa 380 A.D. [The later and

far more authoritative Mahā-vaṃsa Geiger suggests was “then a new treatment of the same thing, distinguished from the Dip. by greater skill in the employment of the Pāli language, by more artistic composition and by a more liberal use of the material contained in the original work” (Geiger, 1912, xi). Its author Mahānāma created it circa 520 A.D. Its continuation - the Cūla-vaṃsa - was composed later by Dhammakitti circa 1200 A.D. However of the earlier Dīpa-vaṃsa or its progenitor the *Aṭṭhakathā-Mahāvamsa* today nothing is known of the former’s author nor is anything known about the date of this *Aṭṭhakathā*.]

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE

In an attempt to provide further support to secure the earlier and better boundaries for these dates, we should consider an earlier quotation of Law’s (Law, 1933; 629) “The Pali piṭakas coupled with the Jain *āgama* texts” [which, in order to date them, were in *Ardhamaghadi* (Pischel, 1981; 18) - an opinion apparently supported by Colebrook who ‘called the language of the canon of the Jainas to be Māghadī’ (Pischel, 1981; 20). It seems to be dateable to circa the 600’s B. C.⁷

Law’s quotation continues “and some of the Sanskrit treatises like Pānini’s grammar” [attributed to a wide-ranging period between 500 and 450 B.C (Sastri, N Aiyaswami, 1956 ‘2500 years of Buddhism’; 308), and to 350 B.C. (Winternitz, ca 1907; 36) Law then continues further with a reference to “Kātyāyana’s *Vārtika*” [Katyāyana alleged to have been the *gotra* name of Vararuci, the creator of one of the oldest Prākṛit grammars ‘Prākṛtaprakākāra’, and Vārttikākāra who was ‘not simple a dry grammarian, but also a poet like his successor Patanjali and his predecessor Pānini’ (Pischel; 1900; 42). Vararuci was a contemporary of Kālidāsa – but this author’s dates are alleged, not too helpful as they are, to range from the 1st or 2nd century B.C. to between 450 and 600 A.D.] i.e. anywhere in this 700 or 800 year period!

Law continues “Patanjali’s Mahābhāṣya, and the contemporary inscriptions and coin-legends fill up a very important gap in history of ancient Indian humanity. The particular literature with which we are concerned developed under aegis of religion which was destined to be a great civilizing influence in the East, highly ethical in tone, dignified in the forms of expression, dramatic in setting, direct in narration, methodical in argument, and mechanical in arrangement. This wealth of literary output was shown forth in perspicuity and grandeur in the garb of a new literary idiom having a place midway between the Vedic Sanskrit

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[some time around the 500’s B.C.] and Ardhamāgadhi on the other”
[circa 600 B.C.]

‘DECADENT’

The further exact identification of these closing dates is not made any easier by the fact that Law continues ‘The period which followed was a decadent one, and it became noted only for the compilation of some useful manuals, some books of grammar and lexicography chiefly in imitation of some Sanskrit works of India, and a few metrical compositions exhibiting the wealth of Ceylonese poetical imagination and plagiarism” (Law; 1933, 630) which is a most elegant - but back-handed - comment of this author! We shall investigate this allegation further.

‘DARK PERIOD’ – “IMPERFECTLY KNOWN PERIOD OF TRANSMISSION”

Identification of Law’s ‘imperfectly known period of transmission’ -
Landmarks / Signposts

Post 600 B.C.
500-350 B.C.
350-100 B.C.
100-001 B.C.
001-150 A.D.
150-300 A.D.
300-550 A.D.
550>>>

A

Primary Landmarks

1. Closing Pāli Canon	246
2. Beginning Great Commentators	315
3. Beginning Great Chronicle	380
4. Milinda Pañha	150

Secondary Landmarks

5. Beyond Mauryan	232
6. Sunya	68
7. Kanva	70

8. Kushana	129
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Additional Evidence

9. Jain agamas	post 600
10. Ardhamagadhi	post 600
11. Panini's Grammar	500-350
12. Katyāyana's 'Vartika'	200-100

B

13. Beginning Christian era	000-001
14. Close 4 th cent	599

Table 1

THE PERIOD

The range of dates in which to identify this period of the 'imperfectly known' is very wide – too wide to be of use – stretching, as it does 1,000 years, from the year 600 B.C. to the 'close of the 4th century A.D.' We can rule out the relatively early post-600 B.C. as being too early and not even credible because it pre-dates the Buddha's Enlightenment and His first Teaching by almost 80 years. The date for Panini's Grammar too can be similarly ruled out because Sanskrit in these early years, until after the schism that preceded the Second Buddhist Council in 384 B.C., had no relevance to the transmission of the canon in Pāli. We are consequently left with dates [referenced in 'A' - in detail - and 'B' - far less detailed] commencing in 232 B.C. (the end of Emperor Asoka's reign and the Mauryan dynasty) which is a significant date given his authorization to his son to convey the Pāli Tipiṭaka to Sri Lanka, 14 years earlier, in 246 B.C. The other Law criterion date – here concocted to mark the conclusion of this period – is either the created-date of the Dīpavaṃsa. in 380 A.D. or the starting date for Buddhaghosa's first commentary circa 430 A.D i.e. a difference of 50 years!

In summary from this *mélange* of facts and dates it seems, from most scholars' opinions, as if the 'landmark' events referred to by Law, to which serious attention should be given, are his –

Commencement of the 'dark' period –

- (a) 'closing of the Pāli Canon' - 247 B.C. [and the end of the Mauryan dynasty in 232 B.C. – bracketed together for

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convenience to provide an ‘average’, ‘working’ date of 240 B.C.]

Middle -

(b) ‘date for the creation of the Milinda Pañha’ - 150 B.C

Conclusion -

(c) composition dates of the –

(i) commentaries - pre-dating 247 B.C [So, to provide a single ‘working’ date for convenience only] one might use 315 or a ‘rounded’ date - 300 B.C.

OR

430 A.D. and Buddhaghosa’s start on commentaries.

(ii) chronicles 380 A.D [Geiger’s date for the Dīpavaṃsa]

Law’s theory that ‘The period which followed was a decadent one . . .’ therefore seems, on the surface, to have commenced in 246 B.C. and continued until 380 A.D. (chronicle) or 430 A.D (Buddhaghosa’s works) despite his allegation in the second [B] quotation that it commenced at the start of the Christian era and concluded in the early 4th century A.D. [The last a date with which we do agree]. It is, therefore, a long period totaling 670 years the dates of which I contend are still too wide apart and embrace too long a period.

Far more significantly it includes the ‘discrepancies’ to which I earlier referred. Two of these are the most important earlier events in Sri Lanka associated with the transmission of the Pāli canon. – its writing down in 23 B.C. (or more likely 86 B.C. (Smithers, 1894; 60) [which date we shall use henceforth] and between 341 and 370 A.D. the translation out of Pāli and into Sinhala of some selected *suttas*. These represent major events in the canon’s transmission which cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be labeled ‘decadent.’ (Law, 1933; 630)

EVENTS

Unchallenged remain Law’s earliest dates. With no fully-agreed canon in existence to protect [until the Third Council in 247 B.C.] and no manuscripts containing the canon because of *srti* prohibitions available

until its redaction at Āloka Vihāra in 86 [or 23] B.C., such a date as 247 B.C. can be permitted to remain relatively un-contested.

After 86 B.C. and the redaction at Alu-vihāra Malalasekera avers that the Tipiṭaka in the ‘Āloka Vihāra edition’ began to become more widely available in monasteries throughout Sri Lanka ‘Manuscripts of the Alu-vihara edition were soon made and deposited in the Mahā-vihāra and other principal temples of the island’ (Malalasekera, 1928; 47).⁸ Thus providing strong evidence for the fact that the dark period of decadence could possibly have ended with the 86 B.C. redaction because recorded and agreed events would not have permitted its continuation after that date. We should recall however that this is greatly at variance with Law’s contended date of the early 4th century A.D. which is 161 years earlier.

Despite advantages accruing from writing down scholars seem to agree that these were unfortunately compromised by a reduction in the efficacy of the monks comprehending the Pāli language. As a consequence translations of some of the *suttas* by Mahadhammakathi between 341 and 370 A.D. would have further served to encourage access to the Theravada Tipiṭaka. Consequently it is difficult to conclude that between 341 to 370 A.D. there could have been any continuation of a period of ‘darkness’ and decadence. On the contrary one might, quite correctly, assume that these events heralded the very opposite – the birth, growth and development of a literature in Sinhala more readily available to those interested in accessing it and especially works founded on the Buddha’s Words and His Teachings that these conveyed.

In addition and in spite of these facts – but somewhat strangely in the context of Law’s earlier two quotations - he asserts ‘There is sufficient evidence to prove that Sinhalese developed as a vernacular with its wealth of literature as early as the 2nd century B.C.’ (Law, 1933; 630) This ‘squares’ well and relates satisfactorily with what Law has earlier asserted i.e. that this ‘dark’ period commenced with the ‘closing of the Pāli canon’ generally agreed to have been in 247 B.C.

The relatively short period of this 161 years representing the first portion (247 to 86 B.C.) of this period could not however, by any legitimate criteria, be classified as a barren and decadent period. The canon, in India, had just about been concluded to be followed almost immediately by Moggaliputta Tissa’s work, most significant to the Theravādins, his Kathāvattu. Sri Lanka was embracing Buddhism, the king’s nephew, Ariṭṭha, was circa 220 B.C, being ordained as the first Sri Lanka monk and the Lankan *bhānakas* thereafter were being established. Soon after that monks named in the *Thera paramparā* successions were to appear

[refer to Adikāram (1946; 59), Law (1933; 53) and Malalasekera, 1928; 29, 37)] and were to continue and continue to be identified until approx 400 A.D. Hardly one might assess a ‘short but dark period’ where decadence was prevalent – in these examples quoted here - very much the opposite!

‘FLOWERING’ OF SINHALA LITERATURE

In addition to these conclusions must be factored in what many scholars [most commenting later than Law in 1933] refer to as a period in which Sinhalese literature ‘flowered’. Unfortunately there exists little agreement amongst them as to when this might have been because their choices extend over more than a millennium! Adikaram [in 1945] identifies it earlier than any others placing it in the reigns of Mahacūli Mahatissa (17 B.C. to 3 A.D.) and terminating with Bhatika Abhaya (38 to 66 A.D.). Malalasekera [in 1928 - i.e. pre-dating Law] places it in two periods – in the reign of Buddhadasa (341 to 370 A.D.) and the last in the reign of Parakramabāhu (1161 to 1197 A.D.). Godakumbura (1953) also has two periods – in the reign of Mahinda IV (957 to 991 A.D.) and that of Parakramabāhu II (1153 to 1186 A.D.), Gunawardana (1978) from Sena I’s reign (833 to 853 A.D.) to the 1200’s. Law, himself, dates it from the 2nd century B.C. to 420 A.D. not surprisingly!! The point to notice is that in some cases the proposed dates for the ‘flowering’ fall plumb into the middle of what might be construed as Law’s ‘dead’ period of ‘decadence’!!!

Thus in these possible dates we can dispense with Malalasekera’s second period [1161-1197], Godakumbura’s two [957-991 and 1153-1186] and Gunawardana’s [833-853 and 1200s] leaving us with Adikāram’s 17 B.C. to 3 A.D. and 38 to 66 A.D. and Malalasekera’s first - 341 to 370 A.D. - and Law’s B. C. 2nd century to 420 A.D. The point to notice is that these dates in some instances coincide reasonably well with the alleged ‘flowering’ of Sinhala literature whilst others coincide with major events such as the redaction of the canon and translations of parts of it out of Pāli into Sinhala thus providing, it can [and here is] argued, strong proof for the authenticity of this ‘possible’ period.

RESOLUTION

If the date of 240 B.C. is accepted for the commencement and sometime between 374 [the Dīpavaṃsa’ creation] and 430 A.D [Buddhaghosa’s commentary] for the ending of this ‘dark period’ as well as providing the contexts in which the 2 major events occurred, as well as the significant

events that occurred in it that relate to the processes of transmission of the Pāli Theravada Tipiṭaka, then four questions arise –

- (a) was Law correct in his assertions that a ‘dark’ period did exist and
- (b) that it was represented by a period of ‘decadence’? or
- (c) is it now impossible [Law being long dead] to arrive at any conclusions as to the correctness or incorrectness of his assertions, or
- (d) that he was quite simply wrong in these assertions.

Finally whichever of these alternatives one is inclined to support what, if any, effects did the selected alternatives represent for the transmission processes of the Pāli Theravāda Tipiṭaka?

DEDUCTIONS

A number of deductions from these facts and this plethora of dates can be made. I believe the first is the elimination of the later period i.e. from the redaction say in 87 B.C. to 370 A.D because after the first date the canonical texts had been transferred safely to documentary sources thus increasing their availabilities and the last date - after which some of the canon had been made available in Sinhala so that its contents could be that more easily studied. Also we cannot ignore Adikāram’s and other authors’ contentions that Sinhalese literature ‘flowered’ between 17 B.C. and 66 A.D. which would seem to be in direct contravention of Law’s theory that ‘In between the closing of the Pāli canon and the beginning of the great commentaries and chronicles we had to take note of *an imperfectly known period* of transition ...’ It would be unbelievable to think that after the two momentous events of writing down and translations that a period not of darkness but instead of intellectual and religious light did not dawn and that was manifest in works of literature in Sinhala. A belief confirmed by many reliable scholars such as Adikāram, Malalasekera, Godakumbura, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Readers will draw their own conclusions as to what to believe from these facts and deductions.

I, in my turn, tend to think (a) that Law was not correct in his assertion that a ‘dark’ period did exist; (b) he was incorrect also in believing that a period of decadence occurred. [That ‘decadence’ did later descend on

Buddhism in Sri Lanka; Gunawardana - the effects of kings’ beneficence on the clergy; Malalasekera – Vaitulya heresies (56) and Mahasena’s royal edict prohibiting support for the Mahāvihāra monks (59); Godakumbura and his assignation of the times of literary excellence to later than Mahinda IV all taken together plainly provide evidence that such situations did later come into existence]. However the majority of these were not in the specific period under investigation. Too much progress [writing down and *suttas*’ translations; evidence of the ‘flowering’ of literature; the speedy spread of Buddhism; the emergence of a Lankan *sangha* and *bhānaka* traditions; the discoveries of scholarship and scholarly activities of Buddhaghosa etc] all provide further collaborative evidence to support the opinion as to the incorrectness of Law’s assertions.

Without these having been proved to have been correct, of course, there can be no consequent effects on the transmission processes of the Pāli Theravada Tipiṭaka.

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NOTES

- ¹ What would have been helpful would have been Law’s identification of the ‘great commentaries’ i.e. does he mean those from the so-called Five (two Indian and three Sri Lankan) Great Commentators? I suspect not. The ‘great commentaries / chronicles cannot be more easily identified I believe.
- ² By which time he had reached the River Beas that today flows through the Indian Punjabi city of Amritsar.
- ³ King Sirinivāsa is generally held to have been King Mahānāma who reigned 410 to 431 (Nicholas, 1961; 345). If the Visuddhimagga was commenced in the 20th year that would have been 430 A.D. and Buddhaghosa would have completed it in 431 A.D.
- ⁴ The Mauryan Empire speedily lost authority after the death of Emperor Asoka circa 232 B.C. It was finally destroyed by the general Puṣyamitra, approximately 52 years later, in 180 B.C.E.. He it was who founded the Śūnga dynasty that lasted until circa 68 A.D. The Kānva dynasty was founded by Vasudeva in approx 70 B.C.E. and lasted 45 years (i.e. until circa 25 B.C.). The Kūshāna dynasty, the strongest and largest since Asoka’s Mauryan, was first established in Bactria circa 129 B.C.E. and lasted into the 2nd century C.E. (i.e. 150 A.D.) under king Kaniska. (Akira, 1990; 223-232). Noticeably all these dates possess some relationships – however loosely – with Law’s alleged ‘closing of the Pāli canon’ (Law, 1933; 629).
- ⁵ ‘Augustan’ is a strange phrase to employ in this context - although certainly not incorrect – because it essentially alludes to European literatures where the dictionary (Concise Oxford, 1964) suggests ‘Connected with reign of Augustus Caesar, best period of Latin literature; (of any national literature); classical (in Eng. literature c. 18th c.)
- ⁶ However Geiger’s earlier 1912 theories are believed by some experts to have been overtaken by more recent opinions of scholars i.e. G.C. Mendis (1947).
- ⁷ To put a more precise date to Ardamāgadhi - although not impossible - is not easy. However a debt is owed to N. A. Jayawickrama who, in emphasising the difference between ‘Magadhan language’ and others carrying similar names, (Encyclopedia of Buddhism; 266) suggests “The language that had gained currency in Magadha and neighboring territories that came under imperial Magadhan rule during the Middle Indo-Aryan period, commencing in the 6th century B.C., was Magadhi”.
- ⁸ Thereafter one can surmise [but facts to provide proof there are not] that the Āloka Vihāra seems to have developed into a *scriptoria* thus increasing the availability of manuscript editions of the Canon in Pāli. Such a picture hardly corresponds to one of darkness or decadence.