Religion, Gender, and Politics in Medieval Sri Lanka: The Reconstruction of Buddhist Kingship, ca. 1070–1215. By Bruno M. Shirley. Arc Humanities Press, 2026. 280 pages. $175 (hardcover), ISBN 9781802703092.

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Bruno Shirley's *Religion, Gender, and Politics in Medieval Sri Lanka* is an ambitious and methodologically self-conscious reappraisal of the Poḷonnaruva period that challenges some of the most deeply entrenched assumptions in the historiography of medieval Sri Lanka. Rather than accepting later narrative chronicles as the principal lens through which the period should be understood, Shirley proposes a fundamental reorientation of the evidentiary hierarchy. Throughout the volume, he privileges inscriptions, architecture, sculpture, coinage, and other contemporary material remains over retrospective literary narratives, arguing that the latter are themselves historically situated ideological productions rather than transparent witnesses to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This shift is not merely methodological. It enables Shirley to reconstruct a strikingly different picture of Buddhist kingship, one that is cosmopolitan rather than insular, contested rather than static, multilingual rather than exclusively Pali or Sinhala, and significantly more attentive to the political agency of royal women than previous scholarship has allowed.

The point of departure is emblematic. Shirley begins not with a famous monarch but with the Potgul Vihāra, a structure whose history survives principally through a short donative inscription recording the patronage of Parākramabāhu I and two of his royal consorts, Līlāvatī and Candavatī. What appears to earlier scholarship as a relatively marginal monument becomes, in Shirley's hands, a methodological manifesto. He observes that Candavatī's inscription constitutes the earliest known Sri Lankan royal inscription composed entirely in Pali, a fact whose significance has largely escaped notice precisely because the inscription—and its female patron—occupy only a peripheral place in conventional histories. From this beginning, Shirley develops the central thesis that governs the entire monograph: The histories of religion, gender, and politics in medieval Sri Lanka cannot be disentangled from one another. He explicitly argues that the intellectual and

institutional histories of these three domains were "fundamentally entangled" (p. 6) and that historians therefore misunderstand each other if they isolate them from one another. Equally important is his insistence that later works such as the *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Pūjāvaliya*, and *Nikāya saṅgrahaya* should not be treated as neutral repositories of historical fact but as historically situated narratives reflecting the concerns of later monastic communities. The consequence is a "radical revision of Poḷonnaruva's history" (p. 6), grounded primarily in sources contemporary with the events under discussion.

The originality of the book, however, lies not simply in its preference for inscriptions over chronicles. Shirley's more substantial contribution is conceptual. He rejects the familiar assumption that "Buddhist kingship" denotes a coherent, stable political model derived straightforwardly from canonical Pali texts. Instead, he argues that kingship was continually reconstructed through engagement with multiple intellectual traditions operating simultaneously in medieval South Asia. Although Anne Blackburn's notion of "Buddhist-*inflected* sovereignties" (p. 7) provides an important point of comparison, Shirley retains the category of Buddhist kingship while redefining it as a historically contingent arena of negotiation rather than an unchanging institution.[1] Medieval rulers, he contends, consciously drew upon Buddhist, Sanskritic, Tamil, and Sinhala political languages simultaneously rather than operating within neatly separated religious traditions.

This argument receives its first sustained development in chapter 1, appropriately entitled "The Building Blocks of Kingship." The architectural metaphor employed there proves especially effective. Just as the great image houses of Poḷonnaruva combined local building materials with South Indian architectural forms, so too did medieval political thought emerge through the selective combination of multiple intellectual traditions rather than from a single doctrinal source. Shirley demonstrates that Sanskrit political theory, Pali canonical and commentarial traditions, Sinhala inscriptional conventions, and Tamil imperial idioms all constituted resources available to medieval rulers. The emphasis consistently falls on synthesis rather than replacement. Indeed, one of the chapter's most important historiographical

1. Anne Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties Across the Indian Ocean: The Pali Arena, 1200–1550* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2024).

interventions is its critique of scholarship that has treated canonical Pali literature as the exclusive source for "Buddhist political thought" (p. 41). Instead, Shirley argues persuasively that historical rulers were participants in a much broader intellectual world extending across southern Asia.

This cosmopolitan perspective continues into chapter 2's treatment of Vijayabāhu I. One of the book's recurring strengths is its willingness to question categories that have become almost axiomatic within Sri Lankan historiography. The conventional narrative portrays Vijayabāhu as restoring an authentically Sinhala Buddhist kingship after the interruption of Cōḻa rule. Shirley instead demonstrates that this apparent continuity was itself carefully constructed. Rather than simply reviving Anurādhapura institutions, Vijayabāhu selectively combined earlier Lankan traditions with models inherited from the Cōḻa imperial world and wider Sanskritic political culture. In doing so, Shirley shifts attention away from simplistic binaries opposing "Sinhala Buddhist" and "Tamil Śaiva" political cultures, replacing them with a more convincing picture of creative adaptation and political experimentation. Equally significant is Shirley's reconsideration of Vijayabāhu's celebrated restoration of monastic ordination. Instead of accepting later narrative accounts at face value, he demonstrates that contemporary evidence fails to support several elements of the received tradition. His discussion of the Vēḷaikkāṟa inscription is especially instructive, illustrating how contemporary inscriptions frequently present priorities quite different from those emphasized by later chronicles. Here, as throughout the volume, the strength of the argument derives not from dismissing literary sources altogether but from refusing to privilege them automatically over contemporary evidence.

If chapters 1 and 2 reconstruct the emergence of a new political vocabulary, chapters 3 and 4 deepen the book's revisionist ambitions by rehabilitating what has often been dismissed as a politically chaotic and religiously stagnant interregnum. Shirley explicitly challenges descriptions of the periods between Vijayabāhu I and Parākramabāhu I as "dark ages" (p. 86), characterized solely by fragmentation and decline. Instead, borrowing insights from Alastair Gornall's work on literary production, he argues that political fragmentation itself generated

opportunities for intellectual and institutional innovation.[2] Rather than viewing decentralization as merely destructive, Shirley demonstrates that competing centers of authority fostered new forms of patronage and political imagination. This reinterpretation illustrates Shirley's broader historiographical method in practice. Rather than asking whether political fragmentation delayed the inevitable restoration of centralized authority, he asks what new possibilities fragmentation itself created. The result is an account in which monks, military corporations, merchant guilds, regional rulers, and royal women emerge as participants in political discourse rather than passive recipients of royal ideology. The period ceases to be merely a bridge between two illustrious monarchs and becomes one of the most intellectually dynamic sections of the book.

Chapter 4 further develops this revisionism by reconsidering the reigns of Vikramabāhu I and Gajabāhu II, rulers frequently characterized as religiously deficient for their association with Śaiva institutions. Shirley demonstrates that this characterization depends heavily upon retrospective narrative traditions rather than contemporary evidence. Indeed, he argues that the Poḷonnaruva court itself remained a vibrant site of Buddhist patronage and intellectual activity. Particularly noteworthy is his discussion of Queen Sundarā, whose inscriptions reveal sustained engagement with Pali and with institutions later associated with Parākramabāhu's reforms. She appears not just as the wife of Vikramabāhu or mother of Gajabāhu, but as an independent patron whose linguistic and institutional choices helped shape later developments within Theravāda Buddhism. Perhaps the greatest achievement of these middle chapters lies in the cumulative synthesis they produce. Shirley never argues that earlier interpretations are simply "wrong." Instead, he demonstrates that they are incomplete because they privilege one category of evidence and one group of historical actors. Once inscriptions, architectural evidence, and neglected donors are restored to the narrative, a markedly more complex political landscape appears. Royal women emerge not as occasional anomalies but as consistent participants in religious patronage; multilingual political culture appears as the norm rather than the exception; and

2. Alastair Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism: Pali Literature and Monastic Reform in Sri Lanka, 1157–1270* (UCL Press, 2020), 213.

Buddhist kingship itself becomes increasingly difficult to reduce to any single institutional or doctrinal tradition.

This cumulative argument prepares the reader for what is arguably the conceptual center of the monograph: chapter 5's analysis of Parākramabāhu I. Rather than treating Parākramabāhu's famous monastic reforms as the inevitable triumph of Mahāvihāra orthodoxy, Shirley situates them within broader concerns about kingship, textual authority, political legitimacy, and institutional discipline. His reading promises not merely to reinterpret a celebrated monarch but to recast the relationship between political unification and religious reform itself—a theme that ultimately becomes the foundation for the remaining chapters on Niśśaṅka Malla, royal women, and the concluding theoretical reflections. Indeed, if chapter 5 forms the analytical center of the monograph, it also most clearly demonstrates Shirley's ability to move beyond simple revisionism toward a genuinely new interpretation of one of medieval Sri Lanka's defining reigns. Parākramabāhu I has long occupied a privileged position within both Sri Lankan historical consciousness and academic scholarship as the monarch who reunited the island politically and purified the *saṅgha* institutionally. Shirley does not dispute the importance of these achievements. Rather, he questions the interpretative framework through which they have conventionally been understood. Instead of accepting the later *Mahāvaṃsa*'s presentation of Parākramabāhu's reforms as the straightforward victory of Mahāvihāra orthodoxy over Mahāyāna or "schismatic" (p. 139) rivals, he returns to the Galvihāra *katikāvata* inscription and argues that the king's motivations were considerably more complex.

Among the chapter's most original contributions is Shirley's reassessment of the supposed Aśokan model behind Parākramabāhu's reform program. Modern scholarship has frequently assumed that Parākramabāhu consciously imitated Aśoka's Third Council, treating Aśoka as an enduring model for Buddhist kingship. Shirley carefully reverses this assumption. Through close examination of inscriptional evidence, he argues that references to Aśoka in the Galvihāra inscription should themselves be understood as innovations rather than inherited traditions. In other words, Parākramabāhu was not simply following an established Aśokan precedent; he was actively constructing such a precedent by invoking Aśoka in new ways. This subtle but important reversal exemplifies his broader methodological commitment to treating political discourse as historically contingent rather than timeless.

What is especially striking is Shirley's demonstration that even what was considered at the time the decisive triumph of Pali-oriented Theravāda, Parākramabāhu's own political language remained profoundly multilingual. Although the reign witnessed an extraordinary flourishing of Pali scholastic production, royal inscriptions continued to privilege Sinhala, Sanskrit, and Tamil, while architecture and artistic patronage reveal sustained engagement with South Indian forms. The chapter, therefore, undermines any attempt to equate royal support for Mahāvihāra scholarship with a narrow linguistic or cultural exclusivism. Instead, the emergence of later Theravāda appears embedded within wider regional exchanges rather than insulated from them.

The final two substantive chapters extend this emphasis upon plurality by examining political developments after Parākramabāhu's death. Chapter 6's treatment of Niśśaṅka Malla is especially valuable because it refuses to reduce the king's repeated references to his Kāliṅga origins to questions of "foreignness" (p. 174) alone. Shirley instead deploys the concept of the "stranger king" (p. 178) to argue that Niśśaṅka Malla consciously fashioned political difference as a source of legitimacy. The king's increasingly elaborate inscriptional program sought not merely to defend his accession but to redefine the very criteria of legitimate sovereignty through appeals to lineage, caste, geography, and dynastic memory. Particularly illuminating is Shirley's reconstruction of the chronological development of Niśśaṅka Malla's inscriptions, allowing readers to observe changes in political self-presentation across the reign rather than treating the corpus as ideologically uniform. The discussion of dynastic politics also showcases one of the monograph's recurring themes: the centrality of royal women to the construction of political legitimacy. Rather than treating queens simply as dynastic instruments, Shirley demonstrates how consorts functioned simultaneously as symbols of transregional alliances and as political actors whose visibility increased alongside moments of dynastic uncertainty. The treatment of Niśśaṅka Malla's queens, especially Kalyāṇavatī, reveals the degree to which family politics, succession, diplomacy, and kingship were mutually entangled. Here again, his wider thesis—that religion, gender, and politics cannot be analytically separated—receives persuasive empirical support.

The book reaches its most innovative and arguably most important contribution in chapter 7. Discussions of female sovereignty in

medieval Sri Lanka have generally been brief and heavily dependent upon the *Mahāvaṃsa*, where queens frequently appear as passive figures manipulated by powerful ministers. Shirley's reconstruction is radically different. Drawing together inscriptions, literary texts, numismatic evidence, and material culture, he argues that the reigns of Kalyāṇavatī and Līlāvatī represent not temporary anomalies but moments of genuine conceptual experimentation within the political culture of late Poḷonnaruva. Furthermore, he refuses to approach queenship solely by asking whether women exercised effective or real power. Shirley instead asks how political language itself adapted to accommodate female sovereignty. The resulting analysis of inscriptions, titles, coinage, and literary representations reveals multiple competing attempts to reconcile established assumptions about masculine kingship with the reality of female rule. Especially illuminating is the discussion of Līlāvatī's coinage and inscriptions, which suggests that she selectively appropriated masculine royal terminology while simultaneously maintaining explicitly feminine modes of representation. Shirley understands them not as contradictions but as evidence that the language of kingship itself remained open to negotiation.

In the conclusion, Shirley returns to the metaphor of reconstruction introduced in chapter 1 and argues that Buddhist kingship itself should be understood as an ongoing process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction rather than as a stable institutional form. Comparing the reused architectural stones incorporated into later buildings at Poḷonnaruva and the successive reinterpretations of political ideas throughout the period, he writes that just as monuments were physically rebuilt from earlier materials, conceptions of kingship emerged through continual recombination of inherited intellectual traditions. Consequently, "Buddhist kingship is not, and has never been, a stable and unchanging concept" but rather "a *location*, in which multiple participants constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed the proper relationship between king and *śāsana*" (p. 238). Shirley further broadens the study's implications beyond Sri Lanka. He argues that historians should be cautious about treating Buddhist political thought as a singular entity recoverable from canonical texts alone. Instead, political ideas emerged historically through the interaction of texts, institutions, material culture, local actors, and changing social circumstances. Such an approach has considerable implications not

only for the study of Sri Lankan history but also for wider scholarship on Theravāda Buddhism and premodern South Asia.

The book's principal strengths are therefore both empirical and methodological. Empirically, Shirley brings into sustained conversation a remarkable range of evidence—epigraphs, architecture, sculpture, coinage, literary texts, and archaeological remains—that few previous studies have integrated so consistently. Particularly impressive is the way these diverse categories of evidence are not simply juxtaposed but allowed to illuminate one another, producing interpretations that would be difficult to sustain on the basis of any single source type alone. In doing so, Shirley demonstrates the value of treating inscriptions and material culture not merely as supplements to literary narratives but as independent historical witnesses capable of reshaping long-established historiographical assumptions. Methodologically, he also demonstrates the importance of resisting retrospective teleology. Rather than reading the twelfth century through the lens of later Mahāvihāra triumphalism, he reconstructs political arguments as they unfolded contemporaneously. This approach yields genuinely fresh interpretations of several major historical episodes, particularly the reigns of Gajabāhu II, Parākramabāhu I, Niśśaṅka Malla, and the queens Kalyāṇavatī and Līlāvatī.

The monograph nevertheless invites several constructive observations. The first concerns accessibility. The density of linguistic discussion occasionally risks overwhelming readers whose primary interests lie in Buddhist history rather than epigraphy. Specialists will welcome the sustained engagement with Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala, and Tamil terminology, but graduate students or historians approaching the period for the first time may occasionally find the pace demanding. This is less a criticism than an indication of the book's ambition and the breadth of expertise it presupposes. Furthermore, while Shirley convincingly demonstrates that inscriptions deserve greater historiographical weight and his critique of uncritical reliance upon the *Mahāvaṃsa* is persuasive, as the argument is intentionally corrective, there are moments when the literary sources receive comparatively less interpretative attention than they might otherwise warrant. A fuller exploration of why later chroniclers reshaped earlier political realities—not simply that they did so—might perhaps strengthen the dialogue between material and textual evidence even further. Nevertheless, this emphasis

is clearly a conscious methodological decision designed to redress a longstanding imbalance rather than to establish a new orthodoxy.

These minor reservations do little to diminish the significance of what Shirley has accomplished. His work is one of the most substantial reinterpretations of the Poḷonnaruva period to appear in recent decades. Its integration of epigraphic, archaeological, architectural, and literary evidence establishes a new benchmark for interdisciplinary scholarship on medieval Sri Lanka. More importantly, it fundamentally reshapes the questions historians should ask about Buddhist kingship. Instead of searching for a timeless model derived from canonical texts, Shirley directs attention toward the historical processes through which political authority was continually negotiated among kings, queens, monks, ministers, inscriptions, monuments, and competing intellectual traditions. The result is a work of impressive originality, formidable scholarship, and lasting historiographical importance. It deserves to become required reading not only for specialists in Sri Lankan history but also for scholars of Theravāda Buddhism, South Asian political thought, medieval kingship, and gender history. By demonstrating that relationships between religion, gender, and politics "have never been set in stone" (p. 238), Shirley has produced a study that is simultaneously revisionist, theoretically sophisticated, and firmly grounded in contemporary evidence.