A PLAGUE ON BUDDHIST HOUSES: 
RETELLING DISASTER IN SINHALA POETRY

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Among the countless narratives that illuminate Buddhist teachings, some enjoy far more retellings than others.¹ The story of an epidemic plague that struck the Licchavi kingdom’s capital city of Vaishali (Sanskrit: Vaiśālī; Pali: Vesāli; Sinhala: Viśālā, Visālā, Visāla, Visal) is one that captured the imagination of many generations of Buddhists.² Its repeated retellings appear not only in canonical commentaries and other formal monastic compositions, but were transmitted through texts connected to ritual activities, composed by various classes of lay people. This article presents one such example from Sinhala literature of Sri Lanka, Licchavi Kathāva, or “The Licchavi Story,” a full recounting of the narrative in verse, meant to be recited at the conclusion of a bāli ritual to cure harmful astrological influences. I argue that this edition of the story reflects the sophistication of lay Buddhist literati in eighteenth-century Lanka, as the author crafts his own detailed version of the narrative that reflects his familiarity with a thirteenth-century Sinhala retelling. While some Lankan Buddhists and secular scholars presume bāli ceremonies fall outside the bounds of acceptable Buddhist orthodoxy, Licchavi Kathāva conveys nuanced expressions of Buddhist thought within its ritual context. After introducing Licchavi Kathāva to explain its literary history and Buddhist lessons, I offer a full translation of this text.

¹ Thanks to Roshni Patel for letting me retell this story so many times over the past few years. Thanks also to Tom Peterson for a generative conversation about Sinhala kavi when I was writing this piece. Finally, thanks to the anonymous reviewers at JIABS for their helpful feedback.

² For simplicity, I use the conventional English spelling of “Vaishali” in my own prose, but transliterate the different spellings of this city’s name when quoting sources.
Reiterating origins

The Licchavis and the city of Vaishali are mentioned several times in early Buddhist texts. The *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, for example, lists the Licchavis among those royal dignitaries endowed with relics after the Buddha’s death, and relays that Vaishali was where the Buddha spent his final monsoon retreat, falling ill with a sickness there that would ultimately prove fatal. Coincidentally, the Buddha had earlier cured Vaishali of its own terrible illness that plagued the city. One of the earliest extant texts to relay this narrative is the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu* (2nd century BCE–4th century CE), which recounts the glory of the Licchavis and their offerings to the Buddha, along with his heroics, although it omits any mention of the origin of the Licchavi lineage and their city (Jones 1949: 208–249). That origin story first appears in Buddhaghosa’s circa-fifth-century Pali commentary on the *Ratanasutta* in the *Suttanipāta*.³

It is an unusual tale where a queen of Benares gives birth to a lump of flesh, and, ashamed, sets it afloat in a river. The gods label the jar as containing royal offspring and protect it until a hermit finds it and cares for it. The flesh grows into the first two Licchavis, brother and sister, their name a pun on their physical state, meaning either that they are skinless, or have adhesive skin. The children are then adopted by cowherds, but behave violently and are ostracized. The cowherds receive land from a king and build their own city. The Licchavi line marries incestuously inside the city walls, which must expand to accommodate the growing family and its need for palace pleasures. The prosperity eventually comes to an end when a drought leads to famine, causing death and disease, which leads to more death and attracts demonic beings that also attack the citizens.⁴ Order is only restored when the Licchavis invite the Buddha to the city. He triggers a purifying rain and teaches the

³ As Oskar von Hinüber (2015: 361–362) notes, the commentary for the *Suttanipāta*, being part of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, was likely not done by Buddhaghosa himself despite tradition attributing it to him. In this case, “Buddhaghosa” is better thought of as a metonym for a commentarial style following his analytical methods.

⁴ This order of events leading to the onset of illness is a key difference from the *Mahāvastu*, which begins the story by attributing the disease to the offspring of a nefarious *Yakṣinī* being. A *Mahāvastu* styled version of the story is found in the Sinhala *sanni yakuma* ritual tradition. See Obeyesekere 1969, Sykes 2018: 80–82.
Ratanasutta to Ananda, who recites it to drive away the remaining evil spirits not already scared off by the Buddha’s divine retinue. As the Ratanasutta is an elegy of the Triple Gem of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, the commentary concludes that it is ultimately the power of the truthful words (saccavacanam) that does the curing of the city.⁵

The persistence of this story across generations of Buddhist literature in Sri Lanka is likely due to its connection to the Ratanasutta, which became part of a ritual compilation of texts designated as “protective” (Pali: paritta; Sinhala: pirit) – a set of suttas whose recitation creates safety and wellness for those in sonic range.⁶ In Sri Lanka, these texts were organized into the Maha Pirit Pota, or “Great Book of Protection,” and their recitation was evidently an established ritual from at least the time of Buddhaghosa, one that still enjoys widespread practice on the island (de Silva 1991, Saddhatissa 1991, Samuels 2005). Among these texts, the Ratanasutta is one of the most recited, easily done at only seventeen stanzas long. As this sutta has endured, its origin story about the Licchavis traveled along with it, persisting into the modern period, as Lily de Silva notes that “this episode is related at nearly all elaborate paritta ceremonies as the prototype of the present-day ritual” (1991: 141). Aiding this generational transmission, two landmark thirteenth-century Sinhala works enshrined the story in their compilations of Buddhist narratives. This was a fitting time for the origin of the Ratanasutta to be retold, as monastic reforms of this period emphasized the study of paritta, and a new commentary on this set of texts was composed, bringing these suttas and their older commentaries into what Anne Blackburn (1999a) calls the “practical canon” of texts with which Buddhists of the day would have been intimately familiar. One of these Sinhala compilations, Butsaraṇa (“Refuge of the Buddha”), was composed by the layman Vidyācakravarti to devotionally laud the Buddha’s virtues, with the story of Vaishali showing the Buddha as a refuge from every danger.


⁶ A likely precursor to the paritta set is the Khuddakapāṭha, a late-canonical compilation in which the Ratanasutta also appears. The Pali commentary for Khuddakapāṭha, also traditionally attributed to Buddhaghosa, relays the same story of the Licchavis and their plague.
Vidyācakravarti uses the term *pirit* several times in this story, emphasizing how the efficacy of the protective ritual stemmed from its words as well as the “*pirit* water” that Ananda sprinkled out of the Buddha’s begging bowl.⁷

Vidyācakravarti, however, did not include the origin of the Licchavi lineage in his recounting of the Vaishali plague. That was left to a monk known as Mayurapāda Buddhaputra in his own compilation of Buddha stories entitled *Pūjāvaliya*, composed in 1266. The entire *Pūjāvaliya* can be read as an expansion on the section about recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*) in Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaputra opens *Pūjāvaliya* with an exegesis of the Buddha’s *itipiso* epithets, and then uses a Pali stanza from *Visuddhimagga* (VII: §23) beginning with the word *pūjā* to close every chapter.⁸ Buddhaputra also closely follows Buddhaghosa in his retelling of the Licchavi story, but he does embellish the narrative by adding details, dialogue, and his own interpretive reflections. In recounting the fate of the royal lump of flesh, for example, Buddhaputra specifies that it was the river goddess who guarded the floating jar due to the children’s merit, and suggests that the hermit who immersed himself in the water to fetch the jar was initially motivated by hunger, “as he was chewing a toothpick that morning.”⁹ Such unique flourishes of *Pūjāvaliya* become signposts in Sinhala literary history, as we can trace their echoes in the *Licchavi Kathāva* retelling versified five centuries later (vv. 22, 26).¹⁰

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⁷ For the Sinhala, see Vidyācakravarti 2000: 166–168. This part of *Butsaraṇa* has been translated into English in Reynolds 1970: 117–130.


⁹ *e dā udāsana dāviṭi kana nisā* (*Pūjāvaliya*, 434).

¹⁰ Verse numbers cited throughout refer to my translation of *Licchavi Kathāva* using the edition of Silva and Perera 1889, consulted via British Library call number 14165.e.18. In the annotations to my translation, I highlight additional similarities between *Pūjāvaliya* and *Licchavi Kathāva*. 
The origins of *Licchavi Kathāva*

The 1889 print edition of *Licchavi Kathāva* includes little information about its sources. There is only a brief introductory “notice” from the publisher:

> Although this refined poem named *Licchavi Kathāva* is heard to have been composed about a hundred years ago by a poet named Vijēvikrama Muhandiram who lived in the up-country region, there is no evidence that can be accepted doubtlessly. Appearing here is the Licchavi King’s lineage and the Buddha’s proceeding to Visāla in order to remove the triple threat of famine, *yakṣas*, and disease, and bless and uplift the city. Due to the way the blessings (śānti) arranged for Visāla city were expressed, this is called the “Visāla Śāntiya.” Because this is a rare book of the country, made with loving care by ritual practitioners for enacting *bali*, and because a quite melodious poem elegizes the city, to make it useful for the general public that desires poetry, I have revised and published it.

As the publisher at this time, I reserve the right to print this again. Per these matters, H.K. Babāppuhāmi (Silva and Perera 1889: n.p.)

Here Babāppuhāmi reveals some motivations for sponsoring the project, appreciating the text’s rarity, ritual heritage, and literary beauty, as well as the poetry-hungry book market.\(^\text{11}\) Yet he says nothing of the source’s provenance, nor the methods of those whom the book cover proclaims “compiled and revised” the text, even though their names receive top billing, the first in a fancy Old English font: “Mr. H.E. Silva, Headmaster, Anglo-Vernacular School, Elpitiya, and D.D. Johannes Perera Appohami.” The phrasing “compiled and revised” suggests these editors worked among different versions with variations or grammatical infelicities, not unusual among the literary culture of ritual practitioners that was circulated through oral recitation and palm-leaf manuscript.\(^\text{12}\) The only hint of authorship Babāppuhāmi gives is an uncertain attribution to a late-eighteenth-century poet named Vijēvikrama Muhandiram.

Such a name and date do make historical sense, plausible due to the eighteenth-century literary revival in the up-country via Buddhist

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\(^\text{11}\) On this appetite for new print books, especially poetry, see Kariyawasam 1973.

\(^\text{12}\) They fall into the class of nineteenth-century editors who created a “text based on more than one ms., recording selected variant readings without identifying the mss.” (Suraweera 1992–1993: 91).
educational institutions, where the *paritta* texts were again central to monastic training and prestige (Blackburn 1999b). This literary revival also emphasized preaching to lay communities, coinciding with what Blackburn characterizes as “the emergence of a sophisticated literate community composed of lay men and women” (2001: 71). This makes it possible for the *Ratnasutta* origin story to be skillfully recounted by a layman like Vijēvikrama, who may have studied at a Buddhist vihāra that possessed a copy of *Pūjāvaliya*, as did many up-country temples renovated in the late-eighteenth century under Kandyan kings. Vijēvikrama’s Muhandiram title suggests he may have held official duties in the Dutch or British colonial government. If he hailed from the “up-country” (*uḍaraṭa*), however, it is more likely that he was an official in the Kandyan kingdom, whether a local sub-official *muhandiram* attached to a regional secretary (*lēkam*), or a member of the royal court itself, as many of the officers in the king’s retinue carried a title of *muhandiram*, including the head of the *kavikara maḍuva* – the royal troupe of poetry singers. In any case, Vijēvikrama’s title conveys that he came from a well-placed and well-educated family.

There are several points in *Licchavi Kathāva* that indicate Vijēvikrama’s familiarity with *Pūjāvaliya*, as he includes plot details that Buddhaputra added to the Vaishali story. An illustrative example is when the Licchavi king decides something must be done to stop the disasters (*vipat*), and his ministers suggest some itinerant teachers they could invite to heal the city. Buddhaghosa simply refers to them as “the six teachers,” although he names them elsewhere in his commentary. Buddhaghosa includes their names along with a polemical flourish against these competitors to the Buddha:

> At that time in Dambâdiva there were six thieving people walking around deceiving the world, namely Pūraṇa Kāṣyapa, Makkhali Gōsāla, Ajita

13 E.g., Blackburn 2002: 12, 20, 31, 38, 50, 56.

14 E.g., Pieris 1956: 17, 30–32.

15 *Licchavi Kathāva* is not unique in having such literary continuities, resembling other examples of eighteenth-century Sinhala versifications of *Pūjāvaliya* stories for ritual purposes (e.g., Meegaskumbura 2020).

16 Bodhi 2017: 676. For Buddhaghosa’s exposition on the six teachers, see pp. 914–915.
Keśakambala, Kakudha Kātyāyana, Sañjaya Bellaḍhī Putra, and Nigaṇṭha Nāthaputra, who, as though flinging sand in the faces of worldly beings, took mistaken views (mithiyadrusți) and continually said, “We are the Buddha. We are the Buddha” (api budumha api budumha) (Pūjāvaliya, 439).

Buddhaputra elaborates that these heretic teachers had qualities (guna) akin to the taste of burnt chicken. It took “a devout person” (śradhāsampanna puruṣayek) who knew the true Buddha’s Dharma, akin to the nectar of the gods, to leap up and preach to the royal assembly about why the Buddha was the only teacher to heal the city. In Licchavi Kathāva, Vijēvikrama condenses this moment into three verses (vv. 92–94), increasing the polemic tenor by suggesting the errant teachings of these false sages were what caused Vaishali’s afflictions, by encouraging people to neglect the Buddha’s true teachings. Incidentally, this is also one of only two places where Vijēvikrama uses a distinctly Tamil term, referring to the six teachers as arivan (i.e., arivāṉ in Tamil), meaning “sages” or “arahats.” According to the Tamil Lexicon (1924–1936: 177), the range of this term may include the Buddha, but for Vijēvikrama it reflects opposition, juxtaposed with the word muni, also literally meaning “sage,” which is the most common designation for the Buddha in Sinhala poetry. Vijēvikrama therefore modifies Buddhaputra’s bit of dialogue from Pūjāvaliya by saying these arivan sages erroneously proclaim: “We are the Buddha” (muni apiyai).17

Licchavi Kathāva made its own innovations to the Vaishali story, too. It provides a more detailed picture of the queen who births the original Licchavi twins, describing her pregnancy cravings (daru doḷa/upan doḷa) (vv. 13–14). This detail is not found in any other version, but reflects a tendency of Sinhala poets to versify this aspect of pregnancy.18 Furthermore, just as Buddhaputra builds on Buddhaghosa by specifying that the

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17 This point in the narrative was apparently a useful launching pad for polemics, the most extreme example being the fifteenth-century retelling by the monk Vidāgama Maitreya in his Buduguṇālāṃkāraya. This passage is translated in Reynolds 1970: 269–274.

18 In a poetic retelling of the birth of Siddhartha, for example, Queen Māyā’s pregnancy cravings are recounted in detail (Obeyesekere 2009: 29, 39–40). In a notable contrast with the Vaishali narrative, Queen Māyā craves acts of compassion and generosity, while a Licchavi queen desires a bigger richer city in Licchavi Kathāva (v. 51). See also Muṇasinha 2012: 29–34.
original father of the Licchavis was King Brahmadatta of Benares, who held a “pregnancy festival” (darugab maṅgul) with a “pregnancy procession” (gab perhara) in honor of his queen, Vijēvikrama thereafter includes more information about Brahmadatta’s ceremony, suggesting its ritual powers effected the pregnancy (vv. 7, 15–17).Likewise, Vijēvikrama adds detail to the part of the story where the queen sneaks the lump of flesh out of palace (vv. 21–23), and thereafter gives a longer description of the emergent Licchavi twins, including their uniquely magical origins as well as relatable traits one would find in any child (vv. 29–33). This extended treatment of the otherwise unnamed and overlooked queen and her offspring may have been for the benefit of female audience members in attendance at the bali ceremony where Licchavi Kathāva was likely performed. Such ceremonies were usually public events, with neighbors drawn to watch the drumming, dancing, singing, and ritual performances meant to heal someone in their community. Additionally, Vijēvikrama continues his innovations in describing Vaishali itself, focusing on the city’s natural elements more than other versions (vv. 72–74, 64–67, 78–79), adding the pišāca as type of unhuman creature who attacks the plagued citizens (vv. 85, 87), and creating a Lankan sort of Vaishali in his use of Sinhala literary conventions, evident in descriptions of merchants on a beachhead (v. 61), elephants (v. 62), or the local trees, fruits, and rice types growing in the area (vv. 66–67, 73).

Licchavi Kathāva certainly reflects the hand of a talented poet. In terms of bali ritual texts, Babāppuhāmi was correct to call Licchavi Kathāva rare. Its detail and poetic complexity exceed other extant Viśālā Śāntiya (“Blessing of Vaishali”) texts that contain more abbreviated versions of the Vaishali story. The fifty-verse Viśālā Śāntiya collected for
J.D. Sêdaraman’s expansive study of *bali*, for example, includes the story of the Buddha healing the city, but Sêdaraman opines that it is “unable to do expository elegy like a professional composition.”\(^{22}\) In contrast, *Licchavi Kathāva* is a highly professional composition, with a recounting of the Vaishali narrative in full detail ornamented with poetic embellishments. The *bali* ritual tradition is sometimes referred to as *pantis baliya*, or “the thirty-five *bali*.” These can be understood as the thirty-five different types of *bali* rituals, or the thirty-five different steps to a *bali* ritual. In the steps, the *Viśālā Śāntiya* and *Ratanasutta* come last.\(^{23}\) We might therefore imagine *Licchavi Kathāva* to have been a sort of grand finale to a well-endowed *bali* ceremony, with the polished poetry of Vijēvikrama commissioned for the task.

**The poetic qualities of *Licchavi Kathāva***

The final verses of *Licchavi Kathāva* mention *pantis baliya*, but Vijēvikrama overall seems more of a literary than ritual specialist. His composition differs from other *Viśālā Śāntiya* poems that typically use the Pali lines of the *Ratanasutta* in their verses to convey blessings for healing and protection. Vijēvikrama instead focuses his craft on the details of storytelling and poetics, ably relating the full Vaishali narrative within the formal requirements of various Sinhala quatrains (*sivupada*). The first seven verses are written in the common short meter, with each quatrain’s four lines containing nine, eleven, nine, and fourteen “syllabic instants” (*mātrā*), respectively.\(^ {24}\) These verses include an invocation of the Triple Gem focusing on the Buddha’s relics and using natural metaphors to revere the Dhamma and Sangha. Thereafter deities are invoked, a customary expression of poetic humility is given, and the subject of the poem is stated. Starting with the eighth verse, Vijēvikrama switches to the *samudraghoṣa* meter, containing seventeen or eighteen syllabic instants per line, and remains in this metrical mode for almost the entirety

\(^{22}\) *pohosat prabhandayakṣē varṇanā kirīmaṭa nupuḷuvan* (Sêdaraman 1967: 234).

\(^{23}\) Kāriyavasam 1986: 19–35, 98–100. Relatedly, a *Śānti Mangalla* comes last in W. A. de Silva’s list of the thirty-five forms of *bali* ceremonies (1911: 157).

\(^{24}\) A brief discussion of Sinhala meter appears in Reynolds 1970: 367–370.
of the poem.\textsuperscript{25} The switch to samudraghoṣa seems to signal another beginning to the poem, as the eighth and ninth verses return to an invocation of the Triple Gem and various deities before the story of the Licchavis commences.

Vijēvikrama’s quatrains display a great deal of technical skill. He not only fulfills basic expectations of syllabic consistency within verses and rhymes at the end of each line (eḷisama), but also includes many optional flourishes that demonstrate an adept ability to versify while still coherently narrating the story. In addition to end rhymes, most verses also include rhymes on the second or third syllable of each line. An impressive stretch of verses come when narrating the yakṣa and pīśāca attacks on the city (vv. 84–88). Here Vijēvikrama not only creates rhymes with the opening syllables of his lines, but also doubles the end rhymes so they land on syllabic instants fourteen and fifteen as well as seventeen and eighteen. Consider verse eighty-eight, for example:

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
a va ra digin biṭusaṇḍa dina ka rā sa rā
e va ra paṭan gena rudu haṅḍa pu rā go rā
pa ha ra demin niyagin gata i rā hä rā
ru di ra yakun boti muvaṅgin u rā pe rā
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

It is possible that a special rhyme scheme was applied to this part of the story because yakṣas are driven away during bali ceremonies, being the local agents tied to the planets that are responsible for carrying out the ill effects of astrological defects. This is why the final line of Licchavi Kathāva (v. 109) likewise mentions the banishment of yakṣas. We can imagine that the vocalization of the verses would have also changed here to draw out the pairs of elongated syllables, set alongside drumming patterns that likely modulated, too.

Vijēvikrama also demonstrates other poetic proficiencies. Wherever rhymes appear, he follows the yavahan rules, so when the rhyming

\textsuperscript{25} Exceptions are found in verses 58–60, which have sixteen mātrā per line: a meter known as peda virita. Verses 61–66 continue using peda virita while also incorporating two rhymes per line, landing on the eighth through tenth mātrā and the fourteenth through sixteenth mātrā. Thereafter, the poet returns to his usual samudraghoṣa style.

Samudraghoṣa is the most common meter in historical Sinhala poetics, used in both classical compositions of high complexity, as well as folksongs. See Kulatillake 1974–1975.
syllable is a ya, va, ha, or na, the preceding syllable is also the same across all four lines of a verse. The Sinhala grammatical treatise *Sidat Saŋgarāva* suggests this poetic imperative was commonly understood. Yet Vijēvikrama also demonstrates familiarity with more esoteric poetics, as in the first verse:

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\begin{align*}
sat & \text{ tisara esa} & \text{ rá} \\
vī & \text{ nedaman dada sisa} & \text{ rá} \\
tit & \text{ ātuṭa kesa} & \text{ rá} \\
vañdim & \text{ adarin tilō mitu} & \text{ rá}
\end{align*}
\]

As a ritual text meant for healing, *Licchavi Kathāva* should begin with an auspicious letter and syllabic arrangement. This is achieved by the first letter sa, which *Sidat Saŋgarāva* lists among the “divine letters” (*surakara*). Additionally, Vijēvikrama opens the poem with a triadic syllabic group (*gaṇa*) whose length follows a pattern of long-short-short: sat / ti / sa. This combination of lengths is listed among the auspicious types of syllabic arrangements in *Sidat Saŋgarāva*, bringing about the effect of a blessing (*set*). This is certainly appropriate for a śāntiya text meant to conclude a healing ritual.

Finally, Vijēvikrama engages in some striking examples of what *Sidat Saŋgarāva* would call “repeated meaning” (*punarut*), which includes repeated sounds (*yaḷa sada*). In overly simplistic cases, this can be considered a flaw, but Vijēvikrama and other poets also make such repetition a useful feature of their verses. In *Licchavi Kathāva*, this mainly occurs at the beginning of each line in several quatrains, and in one case is possible to preserve in translation (v. 105). Vijēvikrama also makes important use of such repetition at the end of each line in the quatrain where he introduces the name of Vaishali (v. 54). By ending each line with the word *visālā*, which is the Sinhala name of the city and the word

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27 *Sidat Saŋgarāva*, XI-4.
29 *Sidat Saŋgarāva*, XI-7-8. Gair and Karunatillake translate *punarut* as “tautology,” conveying a negative connotation. While I am loath to disagree with their expertise, it is notable that *punarut* is not actually called a defect (*dos*) like subsequent cases in this chapter. It is thus conceivable that *Sidat Saŋgarāva* left open the possibility that *punarut* could be done well.
for “huge,” Vijēvikrama creates a condensed version of Buddhaputra’s etymology for why the city got its name, which enumerated the various things about it that were huge. Vijēvikrama thus follows his literary forebearer, just as Buddhaputra had elaborated upon Buddhaghosa’s explanation for the city’s name, yet Vijēvikrama puts this narrative detail to work in service of his erudite poetic endeavors.

**Buddhist lessons in planetary perils**

Some Buddhists consider *bali* ceremonies to lie outside the bounds of orthodoxy. According to several generations of *katikāvata* texts that promulgate monastic constitutions, such practices are forbidden as livelihoods for monks. The *Dambadeṇi Katikāvata*, for example, written around the same time as Buddhaputra’s *Pūjāvaliya*, states that one “should not engage in improper activities such as *yakṣa* dancing (*yakṣa kelavīm*), *bali* offerings (*bali tibīm*) and *bali* ceremonies (*bali-bat kiyavīm*) on account of illness.” A *katikāvata* closer to Vijēvikrama’s time, issued around 1753, does not mention *bali* specifically, but concurs that “the study of worldly arts such as astrology (*nakṣastra*), medicine (*vaidya karmaya*), and exorcism (*yakṣa pralaya*) are prohibited by the Buddha.” Despite such prohibitions, the *katikāvata* acknowledges these activities were practiced, resulting in the decline of the Buddhist community (*sāsana*) in Lanka and requiring the issuance of a such a *katikāvata* to refurbish the monastic order. This pattern continued into the twentieth century when modern rulebooks like the 1921 *katikāvata* of the Siyam Nikāya also prohibited *bali*. Nevertheless, modern anthropologists have recorded continued flouting of this rule, as Premakumara de Silva observed “it is quite acceptable to perform these rituals for a Buddhist monk” (2000: 57), and Gananath Obeyesekere noted “Buddhist monks have taken over the astrologer role without too much misgiving” (2002: 133).

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30 *Pūjāvaliya*, 437. This passage is translated in McKinley 2021: 131.
31 *Dambadeṇi Katikāvata*, §90 in Ratnapala 1971.
Of course, as a layman, Vijēvikrama was theoretically less beholden to such monastic injunctions. Still, Vidyācakravarti, another Buddhist layman, portrayed bali as misguided and ineffective in his retelling of the Vaishali story in Butsaraṇa, when he notes that the Licchavi royals were unable to alleviate the calamities in their city despite “various bali ceremonies and invocations of deities.”34 The depiction of bali as ineffectual at this moment is a significant rebuke considering that the bali tradition claims this point in the Vaishali disaster for its own beginnings. Different ceremonial texts relay that the Buddha himself, or a Licchavi prince during his visit, performed the first bali ritual to cure the city (de Silva 2000: 34–35, Kāriyavasam 1986: 21, Licchavi Kathāva: v. 107). The clear rejection of bali by Butsaraṇa may have been a means to preserve the Vaishali story as the origin for only the Ratanasutta and paritta practices, without other less orthodox ritual offshoots also laying claim.

Despite orthodox objections, there are arguments to be made in favor of bali ceremonies and astrology having the capacity to convey core Buddhist teachings. For anthropologist Steven Kemper, astrology’s accounting for identities in terms of momentary positioning of people and planets at specific times and places encapsulates Buddhist ideas of no-self and impermanence: “Astrology suggests that a person is only a temporary aggregate of intersecting units which derive from multiple constituents” (1979: 491), which means “The person exists only to the extent that he exists in time […]. Buddhism goes so far to say that the individual has no timeless center, no ātman […] whatsoever. He is, without remainder, process” (1980: 746). As the workings of this process leading to personhood are often opaque, fields of knowledge like astrology attempt to supply some answers. For Obeyesekere (2002: 133), astrology represents a method of dealing with the “psychological indeterminacy” of karma, as we are always uncertain about past sources of karma and their effects on the present and future. Astrology lends the possibility of prediction to this predicament of unpredictability, crafting horoscopes from contingent moments of birth, but with caveats that the vagaries of celestial fate are still difficult to discern.

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34 noyek balikarma yā devatārārādhanā yā (Vidyācakravarti 2000: 156).
Such astrological concepts map well onto the story of Vaishali, as the Licchavi rulers are not directly responsible for the disasters that befall their city. Most retellings suggest they simply hit some bad luck, for when the Licchavis order their past actions examined, they are not found at fault for any un-dharmic behavior.\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Licchavi Kathāva} (v. 72) specifically notes that the initial drought that triggered the disasters occurred “naturally” (\textit{nisaṅga}). The city’s downfall was therefore outside the control of a single actor, governed by natural fates that for astrologers include the influence of the stars. For generations of Buddhists retelling this story, the plague at hand may therefore stand for more than literal illnesses, also representing a plague in the Shakespearean sense of any star-crossed curses upon our houses. These are the sorts of perils against which bali ceremonies are deployed.

Yet the story of the Licchavis is not without critical notes. When even seemingly random ills befall us, there is still some responsibility to bear. As Obeyesekere observes, our karma is bound up in our astrological fates, however opaque. The planets may affect actions, but the individual retains a certain karmic agency in how they inhabit their circumstances. Bali ceremonies exemplify seizing the reigns of fate, by performing a ritual invoking the Buddha’s virtues to reorient one’s fortunes. Some retellings of the Licchavi’s story suggest they were sluggish to respond to their crisis, having lost sight of key Buddhist truths. Buddhaputra highlights the Buddha’s teaching of impermanence in \textit{Pūjāvaliya} as a more ominous reason why the city gained a name that means huge:

Thus in an era of that oceanic Viśālā City, my Lord King Buddha explained how, “According to the Dharma, all aggregates of each form cease to be and are impermanent.” Those words of warning are true, and just like they were preached, in Viśālā City the peril of disease, the peril of famine, and the peril of inhuman spirits, those three dangers also became huge (\textit{Pūjāvaliya}, 437).

This passage appears immediately after Buddhaputra lauds the city for its massive beauty and wealth.\textsuperscript{36} Alongside the hugeness of grandeur


\textsuperscript{36} For a translation of this passage see McKinley 2021: 131.
there is the enormity of disaster that will inevitably befall it. Buddhaputra could relate to this lesson his own time, as he records in *Pūjāvaliya* the downfall of the old capital of Anuradhapura and subsequent shift of Buddhist thrones southward (McKinley 2021: 126–127).

Vijēvikrama executes a similar juxtaposition of the grandiose and its grotesque impermanence through his description of Vaishali in *Licchavi Kathāva*. He initially proceeds in the conventional manner of elegizing cities in Sinhala poems (vv. 54–69), which “express idealized visions of a city that exists both nowhere and everywhere” (Berkwitz 2017: 105). Vijēvikrama then deconstructs that same city when disaster strikes, transitioning from the king’s prosperity to disaster within one verse (v. 70), and then undoing the beautiful scene he set by detailing its destruction (vv. 72–82). There are clear parallels between earlier and later verses; for example, just as the Licchavi military retinue was once innumerable (v. 53), the dead are also innumerable (v. 76). Like Buddhaputra, Vijēvikrama may have written in memory of former wars, as the kingdom of Kandy was diminished by recurrent conflicts with the Dutch, including an invasion and incineration of the capital in 1765 (Raven-Hart 1964). *Licchavi Kathāva* might be read as a response to these conditions, albeit subtly done by way of retelling a common Buddhist story. In this way, Vijēvikrama’s work is comparable to what Stephen Berkwitz has shown with the poet Alagiyavanna Mukaveti during the period of Portuguese colonialism. Although Alagiyavanna did not level direct political critiques against his contemporaries, his compositions changed from conventional court poetry that lauded powers of Buddhist kings, to more moralizing Buddhist stories, so that “Power is no longer simply martial prowess […] power now has more to do with one’s strength of character” (Berkwitz 2013: 129). And so “the poet began to qualify beauty rather than to celebrate it unreservedly, and in doing so he modified the values and style of Sinhala *kavi* to edify an audience rather than simply delight it” (Berkwitz 2013: 130). A similar approach is seemingly taken by Vijēvikrama, whose poetic skills are used to retell a story of human rulers

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37 This is a subversion of the Buddhist convention of cities representing *nirvāṇa* (e.g., Hallisey 1993; Marino 2015). The downfall of a city instead conveys dangers of attachment to security and comfort. See McKinley 2021: 130–131.
being unseated by unpredictable forces beyond their control, so all the material beauties of their city that cause “minds to be attached” and “hearts full of desire” (vv. 61, 65) are ultimately undone through inevitable impermanence.

In the process, Vijēvikrama makes perhaps the most pointed political critique of Licchavi rulership found in any version of the Vaishali story. He does this by considering the problem of pride, thereby illuminating another Buddhist lesson in the narrative. Pride is a major hindrance on the Buddhist path, being part of unsavory lists like the “five poisons” (kleśa), the “ten fetters” (samyojana), or the “fourteen unwholesome mental factors” (akusala cetasika). The usual term in Sanskrit and Pali for such pride is māna, also translatable as arrogance or conceit. Writing in Sinhala verse, however, which often relies on its own vocabulary, Vijēvikrama uses another word for arrogance or pride – oda – which also carries senses of strength, vigor, or pleasure. Most instances of this word in Sinhala literature are positive. Sidat Saňgarāva also uses the term to mean an ambrosial nectar or essence (Gair and Karunatillake 2013: 157). The general positivity of oda, however, makes it all the more suitable to demonstrate the impermanence of such desirable traits. In Alagiyavanna’s Kusa Jātaka Kāvya, for example, the term oda is used repeatedly early in the poem to describe the invigoratingly pleasurable beauty of the female characters. At a turning point in the story, however, as the heroine Pabavati laments her fate to be cut into seven pieces and distributed among different suitors after rebuffing the ugly Kusa, her beautiful body is re-described as bound for destruction, with her “plaits of hair like peacock plumage” that had “increased oda in the minds of those who saw” now set to be “pulled and severed by yakṣa, bhūta, and piśāca.” Fittingly, Vijēvikrama has these same inhuman beings unleash havoc on Vaishali, breaking its own oda in the process.

Instead of invoking oda to describe pleasurable beauty, Vijēvikrama utilizes its connotations of strength, power, and pride to craft his critique. These senses of oda appear positively in prāśasti poetry, which lauds

38 Compare the Sinhala oda to the Sanskrit ojas and Pali oja.
39 Kusa Jātakaya, vv. 151, 231, 292, 495 in Gunasêkara 1897.
40 Kusa Jātakaya, v. 548. See also Berkwitz 2013: 118.
kings for their physical and martial prowess as much as their Buddhist virtue (Berkwitz 2016). In seventeenth-century elegies for Rajasinha II, for example, he is regularly described as mighty enough to kill (marā), break (biṅda), sever (siṅda), or subdue (māḍa) the oda of his Portuguese enemies.41 Alternatively, such elegies may use oda to describe the pleasing nature of the king and his retinue.42 In Licchavi Kathāva, however, the rulers of the glorious city that had just been elegized are the ones whose oda is broken by the disasters that ensue. In the first half of the poem (v. 48), Vijēvikrama describes how the Licchavi prince was appointed to the “office” or “position” (tanaturu) of “emperor” (agāraja). After disasters strike, however, Vijēvikrama explains that “oda left places where tanaturu were received” (v. 73). The assailing yakṣas further this process, with citizens’ “strength and pride broken by claw attacks” (v. 86). Here Vijēvikrama uses a phrase for pride being broken that idiomatically means “to humiliate” (odē biṅdē), ending a line with these words and thereby drawing out their syllables for emphasis. Thereafter, he makes clear that the city needed some humility to recognize the superiority of the Buddha – a healing teacher akin to the sun, whereas people “under the spell of attained oda” are merely the moon, in need of enlightenment from another source (v. 94). These points are consonant with the original commentarial teaching of Buddhaghosa, who lists all the wonderful gems of the world, including imperial monarchs, but reiterates that none are equal to the Buddha, meaning that all worldly gems must ultimately bow to the greatest gem of the world renouncer.43 In a time of political instability, such a teaching would allow Vijēvikrama to find “new sources for power and fame beyond the court of his kingdom” (Berkwitz 2013: 130). He looks instead to the moral lessons of the Buddha as expressed through the ritual arena of astrological amelioration.

Overall, the story of the Licchavis and bali ceremonies are a reminder that we worldly beings retain an ability to react even when faced with planetary perils outside our direct control. We may be subject to the

42 Rājasiṅha Varṇanā, v. 49. See also Narēndrasiṅha Varṇanā, vv. 39, 104 in Sēdaraman 1970.
whims of fate, impermanence, or natural disaster, but there are better and worse ways to respond. To react sluggishly by trusting in familiar sources of strength, pride, or pleasure is to invite further disaster. To investigate the possibility of sincere change through the intentional intervention of ritual attention is a prescription for healthier days ahead. For these reasons, the Licchavi story continues to resonate with those living through disastrous times, exemplifying Ezra Pound’s definition of literature as “news that stays news” (1951: 29).

The Licchavi story

1. That real and excellent perfect one,
   whose tooth soothes myriad people,
   who possesses very fine hair,
   worship lovingly this Friend to the Three Worlds.

2. The Buddha’s lotus mouth
   preached the beautiful pollen unerrantly.
   By reception, the mind is satisfied.
   Worship the Dharma lovingly, bee.

3. Sugata the lotus maker [sun]
   spread the Dharma ray multitude.
   Blooming at once,
   worship the great Sangha forest lotus.

4. Having made the sastras perpetual
   are Vishnu, Jupiter, and Venus.
   These gods of great majesty
   guard shining beings continually.

5. Noble Sage in the world
   proclaimed courageous pirit.
   I recite this story of
   the act of blessing worldly beings.

44 From Silva and Perera 1889. I translate Licchavi Kathāva as literally as possible while still striving for a poetic tenor. This naturally lacks the rhyme and meter of the original Sinhala. I have, however, maintained the original line order in almost every verse, and the word order where possible, to preserve the patterns by which the poet’s ideas enter the mind. Most verses have punctuation added for clarity of meaning. In certain descriptive verses, however, I have omitted punctuation to represent the imagistic quality of Sinhalaquatrains.
6. Thus being spoken, although the errors are not few, those accustomed to erudite poetry, adorn the jeweled earring of praise on the ear.

7. Once upon a time in Dambadiva, the Lord King noble Brahmadatta birthed the Licchavi Kings, having brought offerings that adorn a ritual.

8. Having attained clarity, arisen, and ascended the diamond throne, Buddhahood was received, the ten perfections fulfilled. Resplendent gems of Gautama Muni, Dharma, and Sangha, minds happily worship the Triple Gem born on the head.

9. The Sun, Siva, Brahma, and Ganesh
   The deeply learned cool Sarasvati and Venus
   These gods always give auspicious blessings infinitely
   With retinues to protect worldly beings continually

10. Having revered the glorious Triple Gem and gone ahead like this, the various gods and deities bless people who beseeched. The story of the prior origin of the kings named Licchavi is for minds to happily hear for greatest happiness.

11. With full glory across the sky of Dambadiva, the city of Benares is like the mandala of the full Himalayas. With his retinue, the noble Lord King Brahmadatta spent the days then in full comfort.45

12. Amidst the five-hundred queens of the royal palace are young bodies with the form of celestial maidens. Continually with the good chief queen, spending the days comfortably enjoying the five senses.

13. The face and other parts of her body becoming soft, enjoying desirous comforts in adorned compounds, the chest with soft breast nipples blooming, cravings of childbearing began for that royal queen.

14. Overheated mouth unable to eat cooked food, the juice of squeezed sour limes and mandarins warmed with water nourishes happily. The pregnancy cravings were told to the king like this.

45 Ancient Indic cities were ideally laid out in a mandala shape.
15. With the great army and the people of the four castes, the ones learned in all Vedic arts without confusion, and the great ministers who bring pleasing wisdom, the king spoke and a ritual was done as desired.

16. Bearing those words, received by the military ministers, fulfilled in the place according to the ritual order, processions and festivals were arranged in the womb of that radiant city, having worshipped the shining gods and offered tribute.

17. The way the belly grew on the girl was through divine power. Her body was sluggish and at night throbbed strongly. Milk arose and swelled her pair of colorful breasts. That queen’s womb was filled with the signs of children.

18. For that royal lady, ten months passed in an instant. Fierce labor pains striking in a corner of the body, shining marks like pieces of menses compounded the pain. Having entered, her right hand revealed a lump of flesh.

19. Not looking at what was before the eyes in repugnance, talking to herself: “People will talk and have fun with the story like a joke, thinking that the king received other children from women.” The thoughts very much struck and stayed with that queen.

20. “I will see what we shall do about this without delay.” Taking a new clay pot, she laid it in there and latched it. A cloth was bound around there so water did not enter, marks of a royal insignia were placed and it was covered with a lid.

21. Concealing it from high military ministers residing there, the guarding gatekeepers who are like their servants, and others who were like that, the pot was brought, laid, and given up there in the river.

22. The goddess who lived in that river saw, casting down divine eyes. She saw that pot and piece of flesh, laying down protection. “The son come from the womb of the queen of King Brahmadatta,” was written in a label in gold and vermillion, being affixed to the lid.

23. Not laying down a line of waves or a current, bringing it with a net without a hole, from atop the water, it was sifted out with little movement and subsequently went downstream with the seal.
24. At that time, at a village on the riverbank where cowherds lived, arriving for services in a well-made temple that was not large, coming from the neighboring place and receiving a meal to eat, there was a great man guarding pure ascetic virtues.

25. One day while passing the evening staying in that residence, that day in the morning descending to the shore of a riverbank and thus taking water for the face-washing basin without a doubt, that ascetic master saw the vessel there on the edge of the river then.

26. Needing a treatment for the emptiness in his mouth, by such a sight he became desirous, mind so inclined. Gone swimming over that water without delay, struck with happiness, that ascetic master took the pot.

27. Having seen the small lid as surely as a nelli fruit in hand, having gently opened the cloth like a flower without bruising it, when the ascetic master beheld, almost equal to the pot itself, the flesh that sat there looked like a row of rhododendrons.

28. At that time, having beheld the colorful form, he pressed down on a still fresh seed of a child. So convinced, the ascetic master accepted that pot. Then he carried it away and placed it for safekeeping.

29. Thereafter, when eight months passed, the flesh divided in two. Heads and four limbs with fingers toes and nails in line appeared on the bodies. Fluff on the heads became hair, along with two ears, noses, and bellies. In their bodies, bones arose, with skin as the new covering.

30. On the third day following the one like this, the complete conquering beauty of the bodily forms coalesced. The shining bodies being like two golden statues, like that, a prince and a princess were created.

31. The ascetic who saw them bore desire in his heart and tasty milk was sent down and given through his fingertips. The children’s bodies drank down that much and grew up. Thus those children were sated for seven months.

32. Like anything placed inside the front of a chrysalis, when fed milk, that quantity was visible outside the stomach. Fed rice after this at the auspicious moment fully, it was nevertheless laid down for the Licchavi prince and princess.
33. Showing their milk teeth, in their mouths little smiles shone. Words were given to the two precious babies that soothed them. Laying hands softly, taking white sand from the ground, the dust was spread place to place to sit and play.

34. Shining with love for the two children, cowherds entered and stayed in the nearby small town. Looking after the children by bringing and giving tasty food, the ascetic lord became extremely fatigued because of that.

35. Having seen that, the cowherds spoke against it, opposed to the children being looked after by the ascetic. “If you have a heart, to receive merit, hand over these royal children to us,” they said.

36. Having happily heard those words the ascetic master said “I will give them,” as if having gradually accepted the words. Having decorated the road, they were sent there after the pair when the cowherds arrived and alighted like that.

37. Having pleased the prince and princess with luxury while there, to hand over the two of them to the cowherds on a certain day, clarifying that they are not to be given away in marriage to others, the learned ones met and gave their words to that ascetic.46

38. Taking leave, having worshipped the ascetic’s foot, the cowherds in the midst of their retinue took the children as the five instruments sounded, and passed along the road and entered into the small town.

39. Bathing them in perfume and looking after them with daily offerings, taking various silken robes, they adorned them. The cowherds gave tasty rice, nourishing them. Thus those children were raised in comfort.

40. With various milk, butter, and curds, the cowherds made a collection of the five cow products and earnestly gave them out, pleasing the king, who supplied a village there that they made into a city.47

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46 This insistence by the ascetic that the two Licchavi children be married to each other is also found in Buddhaghosa (Bodhi 2017: 674) and Buddhaputra (Pūjāvaliya, 435–436).

47 The five cow products are also mentioned in Buddhaghosa (Bodhi 2017: 674), and specified in Buddhaputra as milk, cream, curds, oils, and butter (Pūjāvaliya, 436). Vijē-vikrama names the milk (kiri), butter (veṇḍaru), and curds (ḍī).
41. Having bound the banks with borders of creepers around, 
the mansions were arranged with decorated vehicles around. 
That day the children were brought and arrived at the palace. 
The cowherd retinue was arrayed around there keeping guard.

42. Happy to play with groups of cowherd children, 
the prince and princess furiously attacked their backs. 
Having gradually gone and told parents, 
they gathered and angrily spoke about this.

43. “The ascetic raised an abandoned son and daughter 
who are said to be presenting trouble to our children.” 
As the cowherds spoke, being united in those words, 
“Avoided” – Varjita – became a name for that former city. 48

44. Talking without mincing words about removing the children then, 
seeing and realizing they had to go, being squeezed out due to that, 
bodies colorfully shining, their bodily skin having toughened, 
that prince and princess went and left.

45. Sixteen years were fulfilled for the royals marked with youth, 
happily in the manner of fruitful trees bloomed with flowers 
that are like rows of eyes that worship the feathered sun 
in the whole belly of the sky that shines with adorned stars.

46. Their hearts were filled like the full moon, 
bodies like lakes adorned with the five lotuses. 
Like the milk ocean, replete with gems, 
were the limbs of the rambunctious royal youth.

47. The courageous cowherds saw that adolescence arrive and 
inquired into the right moment on the auspicious day said by elders. 
Having made the wedding procession with the fivefold instruments, 
they married that princess to the prince. 49

48. The lords and ministers amidst the retinue 
meanwhile came on both sides and were received customarily. 
While in the city of Varjita imprinted with prosperity, 
the prince was placed in the position of the emperor.

48 Varjita is where the Licchavis live before Vaishali, a plot point also found in Bud- 
dhaghosa, who calls it Vajji (Bodhi 2017: 675), as well as Buddhaputra (Pūjāvaliya, 436).
49 On the trope of the fivefold instruments see Seneviratna 1979.
From that point the noble Licchavi king’s heart became well attached to the queen. Through the days that passed royal prosperity was felt, and then the signs of children formed in the womb.

In one month the womb ripened tenderly. Ten and a half months passed auspiciously. One day in the morning, with like minds, a son and a daughter were born.

Thereafter, the noble Licchavi prince was coming to be king. At that time, the queen giving birth was accustomed to wealth. For that reason, another city was made well. At that time, it was the year 2000 in the Kali Yuga.

From so much, by each of the two queens, princes were given sixteen times. From the thirty-two, from their great grandchildren, came some 7,707 in number.

Adorned in golden divine robes of silk cloth, sixty thousand royal nobles ruled. The innumerable military retinue remained around. Minds of beings who saw were pleased, eyes receiving the fruit.

By thus bringing the military company that is huge, with a length and width three hundred leagues huge, and the five rows of arches with tied flags being huge, because of that, that city was named Visālā – “Huge”

As it lacked a boundary, the earth’s soil was gathered, from which a handful was taken to break it open, by which the rest was placed everywhere else widespread. Thus was the glory of that beautiful city like this.

From the mud, seven good water moats surround the outside. From the people, seven-thousand-seven-hundred feet are around. One by one having built separate mansions happily, [the city is] seen around that region in the glorious shape of the seven seas.

Setting these events in the Kali Yuga’s age of decline also occurs in other Viśālā Śāntiya texts from the bali tradition, including the first line of the version in Sēdaraman 1967: 234.

This number of 7,707 is also found in Buddhaghosa (Bodhi 2017: 675) and even more extensively in Buddhaputra (Pūjāvaliya, 437).
57. Homes are arrayed on both sides with shining spiral turrets, walls beaming with a white shining glow completely. Impressed on archways are nests of crystal rays, as if at once to set aflame the city mandala.

58. The city decorated with its sides shining The outer gates full of sapphire and gold Light rays quickly relighting the darkness Women who have received excellent gem necklaces

59. The thin-waisted ones who have lived in wealth Their bodies nearing the beauty of goddesses Pair of anklets artfully bringing mischief Those ladies of the city dance pleasantly

60. With topknot bunches tied with strings of flowers, with pairs of breasts like young swans on golden platters, were the beautiful groups of urbane lady goddesses. People who saw lived colorfully without trouble.

61. Spread over the surface of that city are shops and boutiques in the power of people who reside in the merchant caste. Descending onto the white sand beach eagerly, when their playful prestige is seen, minds are attached.

62. Ears casting down blows, bees are crushed. Bright against dark bodies, tusks are their crest. Where they are, the earth is shaken by their unruly nature. The whole beautiful elephant head is a mountain summit.

63. The sound of chariot wheels is given without ceasing. Voices of five instruments received, minds thinking. Horses go bound with bells tinkling; all this being the ocean thundering in the city continually.52

64. Channels on banks of ponds and banks of lakes ripen the farm fields and fertilize on the borders. Home-gardens are full of trees heavy with fruit. Worldly beings are made happy in that city.

65. The pollen of the blossomed and bloomed lotus is brilliant. Bees love the sweetness, it is the love of their noses, entering lakes, being joyful and making noise. When heard, filled with desire, the heart is full.

52 This special focus on the sounds of the city is shared with Buddhapatra (Pūjāvaliya, 437).
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66. Sal, champak, ironwood, beli, and kobalali ebony
   Trees that have bloomed with floral vines gleam and glitter
   Lines of pollen-drunk ones gulp and draw it out until empty
   The home-gardens allured along with the waterfalls

67. At that time, the comings and goings of the region were like this
   The neighboring rural villages shone limitlessly
   Those hal, champak, and jak fruit in abundance
   Visal City was like Sakra’s divine city

68. Palatial mansions pleasing with seven gems
   Lofts raised and filled with rice, salt, and preserves
   The women there happily bathing in cool water
   All the people happy in that city alongside prosperity

69. Made like the second city of thousand-eyed Sakra
   because that city received beauty like this.
   Though melodies of endless mouths would not capture the multitudes,
   somehow I elegize that prosperity with one mouth.

70. The heart of the king who accumulated felt prosperity.
   In the time when our Sage Lord Buddha lived,
   the three dangerous perils struck amidst that,
   as disaster befell the city through rough suffering of disease.

71. Our victorious Sage Lord preached the Dharma virtues,
   making people happy and destroying un-virtuousness.
   Having heard and understood this process from before,
   the description of the settlement of Visal City is affixed.

72. First, a three-year period without rain naturally came.
   Falls, streams, lakes, channels, tanks, wells, and ponds dried.
   The fruiting paddy in fields died and trees bore no fruit either.
   With meals of pulled arecanut husks, people felt fatigued.

73. In the midst of the good prosperous people’s city,
   in the granaries and lofts, the vī and hāl rice dried up.
   The chena crop cultivation did not yield fruits.
   Pride left places where noble offices were received.

74. Bright sun rays struck and dryness increased,
   drying up those springs, rivers, and streams.
   All the limbs got hot like when held by a pair of hands.
   Getting into the heads of the people, they went outside.⁵³

⁵³ I read the last word of this verse, nīṅgā, not found in any Sinhala dictionary, as the Tamil nīṅkal, or “outside.”
75. Having gazed above, they prattle and say there is no rain.
   “Rough wind without water,” they said and sat on the riverbanks.
   Exhausted by the water of undrinkable mud sludge slurry,
   stomachs taken with pain, they rolled from side to side.

76. Not a thing was placed in the mouth as a meal.
   With strong fatigue they lay around everywhere.
   They cried out in thirst for water.
   Innumerable people died there.

77. Not even dew drops rained over some places.
   In homes on the plains there was not even a leaf of crops.
   From the stench of the human carcasses coming quickly,
   the disease deemed epidemic occurred in that city. 54

78. Drawing acrid water, that city experienced tough times.
   Goats, cows, and buffalo died from place to place.
   To the dogs it came and struck.
   Budding trees and vines withered and dried up.

79. Where the western sun always went to recline,
   without end, less and less was given.
   Gaur, boar, elk, and deer herds
   met their end here and there in death.

80. Sons, daughters, and animals who spent lives there,
   heaved up and died, strewn about place to place.
   Having tied up elephants like lines of mountain summits,
   their trunks rolled up and they died upon the rocks there.

81. The disease having amassed, fever struck and fatigue set in.
   Aches banged as if fire sparks had been sprinkled.
   Everywhere not even a dewdrop rained down.
   People perished and the limitless city was ignorant.

82. With nonsense words in the mouth, some sat and spoke furiously.
   Not even a little meal of betel was given.
   They raise their arms out of insanity and rail.
   Without a loving-kindness, a multitude die there.

83. The suffering of this disastrous disease was seen in that moment.
   With all of them from every quarter
   quickly coming and descending into the mandala,
   the yakṣa armies went and filled that city’s every corner.

54 The term for “epidemic” is abhivātaka, also found in Buddhaghosa and Buddhaputra. See McKinley 2021: 137.
84. From seeing the people, golden eyes lighting up, various trees, ramparts, and foundations shaking, descending together as one and grappling, they ate human flesh, tossing it about.

85. Striking the body, the feverish disease was like sifting through poison, causing tumult and trouble for beings who come and go with good nature. Desiring the destruction of the group near the street corner in that city, having seen, the piśāca pounced, struck, threw down, broke, and ate them.

86. That suffering having begun, the coming pain felt, seeing beings’ minds shaken, they entered amidst that city. Striking and tossing, strength and pride broken by claw attacks, yakṣa armies cast down and ate humans, severing them severely.

87. The piśāca entered that city, truly into its belly. When the fierce stench was given off, their minds alit with arrogance. Brought by the allure of flesh, their mouths affixed without timidity. Leaping, they broke and ate people, pursuing and pressing in on them.

88. When the radiant sun descended in the western direction, starting at that time, the fierce roar filled fearsomely. Giving blows with claws, bodies slicing and opening, ferocious yakṣas drank with mouths sucking and straining.

89. Like this, the three perils struck those in that place. What of the others to whom disasters happen slowly? The learned and wise ones with great virtue and insight, the generals and great ministers were like that.

90. They gathered to be in the shade of the high king’s foot. “In five-thousand years no rain will rain down in your city. Disease has covered, and yakṣa perils and great famine have struck. Beings are being voided,” they advised, being destroyed.

91. Disease having struck, the king saw the disaster. Was there a way to stop those perils he heard? Wise ministers who had lived there for an age by every mouth continually described a danger.

92. The mighty among them knew the Buddha virtues. A wise minister uttered a statement like this: “Entering amid village regions, mouth guarded with lies, presently six itinerant sages have gone forth.”

55 “Sages” in this verse is the Tamil term arivan.
93. ‘We are the Buddha’ [they say] walking among cities. Living without remembering the Buddha’s transcendent virtue so that those words of the Buddha are established in the mind, the suffering of disease therefore befell this city severely.

94. The Lord of the Day illuminated to break the darkness. People under the spell of attained pride are but the lotus of the full-moon. Our Lord Buddha, supreme in the three worlds, there is no one except him to be the doctor for this suffering.”

95. The king of the lineage’s throne heard those words. To the Buddha Gem, who resided in the Bamboo Grove Hermitage, he had a vehicle sent to come to this city. Two kings left to go make the invitation.56

96. The kings at that time went and worshipped the sacred foot, and explained the chaos that arrived amid their city. The Sage Lord took on the betterment of the world when he said, “I will go to that Visal City.”

97. To guard, having superbly placed great armies around firmly. Ceremonially there were dance lines and instruments with fivefold sounds. From amidst the five avenues that had been decorated appropriately, they emerged, Visālā City having beheld well.

98. Happily with the invaluable retinue of five-hundred Theras, shimmering immortals carrying fine whisk fans around, and Nārāyan’s offerings of white sēsat fans covered in pearls, that Lord Buddha went atop a carpet of lotuses.57

99. Rising amidst that city where the Buddha refuge especially shone, a hundred thousand lightning bolts arose, entangling celestial beings. Thousands of clusters of great clouds arising to make rain, the human corpses floated up through the water to the ocean of fish.

100. The Lord is a friend to the three worlds like that city. Ananda Thera convened the Buddha’s clan. To go fill the lack of water, the full bowl was given. The full elegy of the Triple Gem was proclaimed.

56 The “Bamboo Grove Hermitage” is Vēluvana Ārāma.
57 Inclusion of Nārāyan among the Buddha’s divine retinue at Vaishali is another innovation of Vijēvikrama, reflecting the importance of Vishnu as chief guardian of the Buddhist order in Lanka (Holt 2004). Fittingly, he supplies circular “sesath” fans – a trademark of Lankan craftwork.
101. The way of the Sakyamuni Buddha gem was spoken. Shining noble Lord Ananda Thera eagerly sprinkled pirit water in that city. Struck, the yakṣas went to the outer rock of the universe.

102. The full Triple Gem is like a water crest from above for the mind that is like a fiery flame with its fears. Water drops being like brooks without channels, the yakṣas left that city to be coddled like cotton.

103. With the power of Dharma mantras that spread extensively wherever, thereafter pirit water was sprinkled throughout the whole city. From the places they entered, the yakṣas left, drowning in fear. Those lowly louts were driven from the place to the rock of the outer universe.

104. Oblations were done with pirit water being placed from above. Fleeing, the yakṣas place to place were struck with fear quickly. Having extinguished every disease and ill suffering in that city, crops of fruits and fields went on growing.

105. Filling channels, tanks, and paddy fields, water currents flow Filling blooming lake shores, the five lotuses grow Filling human minds, removing all illnesses Filling that city, various prosperity came and increased

106. The Buddha came and spoke in performance, summoning the power of the preached pirit at that time. At the moment, rain rained down on the whole country’s crops, the rituals there having removed suffering to great lengths.

107. By the majesty of the magnanimous Buddha, noble God Sakra and the four warrant gods and the mahabrahmas remained amid that city. As all various prosperities were remade and defects removed, from that day on existed these thirty-five bali offerings.

108. From the head that spoke is the initial offering of hands – at baliya, with the never-lacking well-made offering of rice – bat baliya. At the time to give children is the offering of flowers – mal baliya. These rites were established for the thirty-five offerings – pantis baliya.58

58 These are three of the thirty-five (pantis) types of bali, namely the offerings of hands (at), rice (bat), and flowers (mal). These three appear conceptually important in recounting the origins of bali, as in de Silva 1911: 156.
109. By warrant of the immortals who are courageous like this, being unable to rub out that city and so not remaining, taking the ceremonial offerings of that pantis baliya, the yakṣas entered the northern region and hid.

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