

# Images and Monasteries in Faxian's Account on Anurādhapura\*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Faxian's accounts on Sri Lanka focusing on important images and monasteries in Anurādhapura, the political and religious center of the island kingdom during his two-year stay in the early fifth century. Of particular interest are the records on the Bodhi Tree shrine, the installation of Buddha's Tooth Relic, and the blue jade image in Abhayagiri vihara. These subjects will be discussed in relation to historical records, archaeological sites, and surviving Buddhist images in an effort to demonstrate the significance of Faxian's accounts and pilgrimage.

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\* My research on the subject of this paper started while participating in the project titled 'East Asian Pilgrims and Indian Buddhist Monuments' (2004–2006) organized by Professor Rhi Juhyung at the Seoul National University. My initial studies were published in Korean in 2006 and 2009 (see the bibliography for full information).

At the time of Faxian's 法顯 two-year stay in Sri Lanka in the early fifth century, Anurādhapura was the political and religious center of the island kingdom. While Faxian's account addresses various aspects of the city, of particular interest to this paper are its records on the Bodhi-tree shrine, tooth relic temple, and the green jade image in Abhayagiri, all of whose architectural and artistic features are examined here in relation to historical records, archaeological sites, and extant Buddhist images.<sup>1</sup>

### Bodhi-tree Shrine

The sacred Bodhi-tree, one of the most significant objects of worship in Sri Lanka, is believed to be a descendant of the original Bodhi-tree in Bodhgaya under which the historical Buddha Śākyamuni attained enlightenment. According to the *Mahāvamsa* (Great Chronicle), King Aśoka's son Mahinda arrived in Sri Lanka in the third century BCE and transmitted the Buddha's teaching to King Devanāmpiya Tissa (r. 247–207 BCE).<sup>2</sup> Mahinda suggested that the king send an envoy to Bodhgaya to ask for the south branch of the Bodhi-tree, which was then brought to Sri Lanka by King Aśoka's daughter Saṅghamittā. From this grew eight boughs which were planted at eight different sites. In addition, thirty-two saplings that sprouted from four seeds were established at various temples throughout the island.<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that Faxian was well aware of the significance of the Bodhi-tree in Sri Lanka. He wrote that a former king had

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<sup>1</sup> For Faxian's account on Sri Lanka, see *Faxian zhuan*, T no. 2085, 51: 864c6–865c26. For a translation, see Legge, *A Record*, 100–11; Giles, *The Travels*; Adachi, *Hokken den*, 193–216; Adachi, *Faxianzhuan*, 115–23; Nagasawa, *Hokken den*, 133–48; Zhang, *Faxian zhuan*, 148–64; Yi, 'Goseung beophyeon-jeon', 536–42.

<sup>2</sup> The reign dates are based on Rahula, *History*, Appendix III, 308–11.

<sup>3</sup> Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa*, 88–155; Rahula, *History*, 48–49, 57–59; Kula-tunga, *Mahāvihāra*, 14–24.

dispatched an envoy to Central India to obtain 'beiduoshu zi 貝多樹子 (slip of a pattra tree)' and planted it alongside the Buddha Hall. He continues on in detail about how they planted the tree, how one of the branches bent toward the southeast and the king ordered it propped with a large post, and how a shoot from the branch grew to pierce the post. He also adds that under the Bodhi-tree was built a vihāra housing a seated image.<sup>4</sup>

Considering this rather detailed account of the Bodhi-tree and its shrine, it is curious that Faxian did not make any reference to Saṅghamittā. This is similar to the case of his account of a chaitya on Mihintale. Although Faxian wrote about the place, he did not mention Mahinda, who not only stayed at this monastery on Mihintale, but was one of the key figures of early Sri Lankan Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> It appears that Faxian referred to a source distinct from the tradition preserved in *Mahāvamsa*, most likely the chronicles of Abhayagiri Monastery.<sup>6</sup>

Within the grounds of the Abhayagiri Monastery where Faxian resided during his stay in Sri Lanka there remain three Bodhi-tree shrine sites. The oldest among them has been proposed as the Bodhi-tree shrine described in Faxian's account (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> In addition, several seated images that could be dated to as early as Faxian's stay in Abhayagiri were discovered at the oldest site, and it is tempting to make a connection between one of them and the image that Faxian described as having been installed in the shrine.<sup>8</sup> However, it is difficult to

<sup>4</sup> *Faxian zhuan*, T no. 2085, 51: 865a2–a7.

<sup>5</sup> *Faxian zhuan*, T no. 2085, 51: 865b8–b9. Legge made a similar observation, and mentioned that Faxian heard neither of Mahinda or Saṅghamittā while he was in Sri Lanka. Legge, *A Record*, 103, footnote 2.

<sup>6</sup> For the similarities and differences between Faxian's writing and the *vamsas* of Mahāvihāra and Faxian's reliance on the Abhayagiri literature that no long exists, see Deeg, *Das Gaoseng*, 156–76; Deeg, 'Abhayagiri-vihāra', 135–51.

<sup>7</sup> Guruge, *The Cultural Triangle*, 51–52; Kulatunge, *Abhayagiri*, 19–20; Jayasuriya, *A Guide*, 27–28.

<sup>8</sup> For the excavation of *āsanaghara*, see Wikramagama, 'Excavations', 348–51.



FIG. 1 View of *āsanaghara*, Abhayagiri. Photo by Kim Haewon.

make a case that the Bodhi-tree shrine Faxian recorded is not the Śrī Mahā Bodhi Shrine situated within the precinct of the Mahāvihāra complex, since this is the one directly connected to Bodhgaya's Bodhi-tree.<sup>9</sup> Also, in the context of Faxian's writing, he mentions the shrine immediately after the transfer of the Bodhi tree branch from India to Sri Lanka, so it appears more logical that he would have been indicating the shrine in the Mahāvihāra complex.

Since the initial planting of the Bodhi-tree at the site of the Śrī Mahā Bodhi Shrine, there has been a series of architectural and artistic activities, including the construction of enclosing walls and additional buildings and the installation of a stone throne and Buddha statues. Records of some of the efforts that took place before Faxian's time are preserved in several texts, including the *Mahāvamsa*. In the third century BCE, Devanāṃpiya Tissa erected a structure to house the Bodhi-tree. Around the first or second century CE, a temple complex was constructed and four Buddha

<sup>9</sup> Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 564; Central Cultural Fund, *Anurādhapura*, 12.



FIG. 2 Fragments of statues and architectural members, Śrī Mahā Bodhi Shrine. Photo by Kim Haewon.

statues were installed. In the third and fourth centuries CE, two bronze statues were placed on the east side of the temple along with three stone Buddha images at the west, north, and east entrances and a stone throne at the south. Moreover, two additional bronze Buddha images were installed on the west side of the temple.<sup>10</sup> While none of the bronze images remain, the architectural members and images scattered within the temple complex indicate the existence of various buildings and installation of Buddhist statues at the site (Fig. 2).

At present, the most prominent feature of the temple is the large Bodhi-tree with its lower portion surrounded by walls and corridor-like structures where altars are installed. To the east of the

<sup>10</sup> Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 564; Kulatunga, *Mahāvihāra*, 19–20. The construction works and installation of Buddhist images mentioned took place during the reigns of Vasabha, Vohārika Tissa, Gothābhaya, and Mahāsenā. As there are different opinions about the exact reign period of each king, only approximate dates are given here. Rahula, *History*, Appendix III, 308–11.



FIG. 3 Main Buddha statue with an earth-touching *mudrā*, Śrī Mahā Bodhi Shrine. Photo by Kim Haewon.

Bodhi-tree stands a shrine housing a Buddha statue (Fig. 3). The 3.3 meter-high Buddha with an earth-touching *mudrā*, something rarely seen in Sri Lankan Buddhist sculpture, is seated in the innermost center of the shrine. This stone Buddha attained its present appearance after 1911 when plaster and colors were added to its surface. The stylistic features of the original stone statue apparent in a late nineteenth century photo date it to the sixth century.<sup>11</sup> Given this, it is unlikely that Faxian could have seen this image, and it is potentially a replacement of an earlier seated Buddha image observed by Faxian.

### Tooth Relic Temple

The Buddha's tooth relic in Sri Lanka is, along with the Bodhi-tree, the most sacred object of worship in Sri Lanka and has long been

<sup>11</sup> Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 126 (25G), 564.



FIG. 4 Daḷadā Māḷigāva or ruins of a palace in citadel, Anurādhapura. Photo by Kim Haewon.

revered by the Buddhist believers of the island and beyond. It is currently housed in the renowned Tooth Relic Temple in Kandy. Prior to its arrival on the island it was venerated in Dantapura in Kalinga, but in the wake of political turmoil in this region it was transferred to Sri Lanka around 370 CE during the reign of Si-ri-Meghavaṇṇa.<sup>12</sup>

The tooth relic was first installed in Dhammacakka in Anurādhapura, which is regarded to be the Daḷadā Māḷigāva site in the citadel area located to the southeast of Abhayagiri (Fig. 4).<sup>13</sup> This site, where now stands a series of tall stone pillars, was identified based on a tenth-century inscription (Mahinda IV, 956–972) preserved on a stone slab discovered to the north of the ruined building. The

<sup>12</sup> Rahula, *History*, 93–97. It is believed that Dantapura was located near Pūri in Bhubaneswar, and it has been suggested that it was located where Jaganāth Temple now stands. Brown, *Indian Architecture*, 35, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 593.

*Mahāvamsa* also contains information about this ancient shrine. The structure was originally built by Devanāmpiya Tissa, and the King Siri-Meghavaṇṇa housed tooth relic here when was brought to the island. Considering the structure of later tooth relic shrines in Polonnaruwa and Kandy and relevant records, it is certain that this was a multi-story building.<sup>14</sup> However, it is difficult to confirm precisely when the upper level or levels were constructed. In Yijing's 義淨 (635–713) *Da Tang Xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan* 大唐西域求法高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks Who Visited the Western Regions in Search of Dharma during the Tang Dynasty), it is mentioned that after a failed attempt by a Chinese monk named Mingyuan 明遠 to steal the tooth relic, it was kept in a high pavilion.<sup>15</sup> Based on this record, some scholars believe that this would have been when the upper level was built. However, the construction date could in fact be earlier, since the building is already described to be several hundred *chi* 尺 high in Xuanzang's 玄奘 (c. 602–664) *Da Tang Xiyu ji* 大唐西域記 (The Records of the Western Regions during the Tang).<sup>16</sup>

Faxian's account vividly delivers the enthusiasm and piety expressed by Buddhist devotees toward the tooth relic. He wrote that its shrine was made with seven precious jewels, and in every third month the relic was brought out of it and transported to Abhaya-giri in a grand procession. A large crowd including the king participated in the ceremony and offered flowers and incense. Either side of the route was adorned with colorful representations of various *jataka* stories.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Central Cultural Fund, *A Guide*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Da Tang xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2066, 51: 3c2–c12.

<sup>16</sup> *Da Tang xiyu ji*, T no. 2087, 51: 934a10–a11. Xuanzang himself never visited Sri Lanka and wrote the section on this region based on the observations of others. It is likely that there is some exaggeration of the building's height, since one hundred *chi* would be more than twenty meters. However, it is undeniable that this record delivers the impression of the time that the building was quite high, and it is likely that the upper level had already been erected before Xuanzang's time.

<sup>17</sup> *Faxian zhuan*, T no. 2085, 51: 865a20–b8. The relevant text is important



It must have been through the verbal and written communications of pilgrims who visited Sri Lanka that Buddhist communities in East Asia learned about this tooth relic. Faxian's account was compiled only about forty years after its arrival in Sri Lanka and is significant as one of the earliest Chinese sources related to the relic. After Faxian, Xuanzang's *Da Tang Xiyu ji* served as another important resource.<sup>18</sup> The increased interest in the tooth relic can be seen in *Da Tang Xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan*, which shows that at least six among nine monks visited Sri Lanka in the seventh century paid homage to the Buddha's tooth relic.<sup>19</sup>

### Green Jade Image in Abhayagiri

Another notable sacred object about which Faxian wrote is '*qingyu xiang* 青玉像', a green jade image worshipped in Abhayagiri. Along with Mahāvihāra, this monastery was the most influential religious institution during the Anurādhapura period. Established in 89 BCE, its heyday fell during the reign of King Mahāsena in the fourth century CE.<sup>20</sup> It remained prominent well into the early fifth century when Faxian arrived in the city. The number of resident monks at the time was approximately 5,000, outnumbering that of Mahāvihāra by 2,000.

According to Faxian's writing, within the monastery was a Buddha Hall decorated with seven precious jewels and inlaid works of gold and silver. Inside the hall was an image made from green jade with a height of three *zhang* 丈, which is equivalent to 7.5 meters based on the standard measures of the Eastern Jin 東晉 (317–418).

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for the usage of the word '*bian*' as a visual representation. For more details, see Mair, 'Records', 3–43.

<sup>18</sup> *Da Tang xiyu ji*, T no. 2087, 51: 932b18–934c11.

<sup>19</sup> *Da Tang xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2066, 51: 3c2–4a1, 4b1–4c14, 8c19–10a13. For a more detailed discussion regarding the impact of the Tooth Relic on the East Asian Buddhist community, see Joo, 'Seurirangka', 133–65.

<sup>20</sup> Rahula, *History*, 93–96.

In the palm of the right hand was a priceless jewel. Its body glittered with seven jewels and showed majestic features. Faxian witnessed a merchant offering the image a fan made of white silk from the land of Jin 晉, which reminded Faxian of his hometown.<sup>21</sup> It seems most likely that this merchant was Chinese, or at least had arrived in Sri Lanka after a visit to China.

While no extant Buddhist statue precisely fits the description of this green jade image, several textual records and surviving statues enable speculation on the possible exchanges in Buddhist statuary and pertinent ideas between Sri Lanka and East Asia. One reference is found in the biography of Shi Huili 釋慧力 preserved in the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks), which mentions a jade image of Buddha installed in the famous Waguansi 瓦官寺 Monastery in Jiankang 建康. Having heard that the Xiaowu Emperor 孝武帝 (r. 373–396) sincerely venerated the Buddha's law, a king in Sri Lanka presented it to him, and it took ten years for this statue to be transferred to the land of Jin, finally arriving in the Yixi 義熙 era (405–418).<sup>22</sup> This could refer to a single incident in which a jade image was transferred to China, but considering Faxian's note on the merchant with a Chinese fan and also his and Xuanzang's accounts of the abundant jewels in Sri Lanka,<sup>23</sup> it seems plausible that Sri Lankan jade Buddhist images were known and sought after by certain groups of people in China. Most of the extant stone Buddhas in Sri Lanka are crafted from limestone or dolomite marble, but rare cases of Buddhist sculpture based on different materials do exist, as exemplified by a rose quartz image discovered in Dātava, Kurunāgala and housed in the Archaeological Museum in Anurādhapura (Fig. 5).<sup>24</sup> This fifth-century statue serves as an illustration of Buddhist images made of semi-precious stones or jewels.

As to the iconography of the jade image, it is difficult to determine

<sup>21</sup> *Faxian zhuan*, T no. 2085, 51: 864c25–865a2.

<sup>22</sup> *Gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2059, 50: 410b2–b5. A story about the same statue is also recorded in *Liangshu* (History of the Liang). Soper, *Literary*, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Faxian zhuan*, T no. 2085, 51: 864c11–c12; T no. 2087, 51: 932b21–b22.

<sup>24</sup> Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 128.



FIG. 5 Seated Buddha made of rose quartz from Dātava, Kuruṇāgala, Archaeological Museum in Anurādhapura. Photo by Kim Haewon.

whether it was of a Buddha or a bodhisattva. Considering Faxian's description of the seven jewels glittering on its body, it could be a bodhisattva image. However, given that it was a rather sizeable and prominent statue in the main hall of the monastery, it could also have been a Buddha image. In this case, the seven jewels could indicate ornaments added to the finished sculpture rather than the jewelry carved into it.

Another important feature of the jade image is the priceless jewel described as being held in its right hand. A Korean scholar Kim Choon sil noted this particular portion of Faxian's text in her article in 1985 on a particular type of Buddha image produced in the seventh



FIG. 6 Standing Buddha, 7th century, H. 31 cm, National Museum of Korea.

century Silla 新羅 (57 BCE–992 CE).<sup>25</sup> These images are made of bronze and thus dissimilar in terms of materials, but all of the extant examples hold a round object in the right hand (Fig. 6). No comparable example has been found in Chinese or Indian Buddhist sculpture.<sup>26</sup> Quite a few examples of Chinese Buddha statues holding an attribute can be found, but it is in the left hand instead of the right. Moreover, the shape of the object differs from those seen in Korean examples; it usually consists of a circle surrounded by a flame motif,

<sup>25</sup> Kim Choon sil, 'Samguksidae', 1–23.

<sup>26</sup> For English introduction of this type of images, see Washizuka, *Transmitting*, 222–23; Kim Lena, *Buddhist Sculpture*, 46–48.



FIG. 7 Standing Buddha, 6th century, Archaeological Museum in Anurādhapura. Photo by Kim Haewon.

as can be seen in a Śākyamuni Buddha Stele from the Wanfosi site in Chengdu, Sichuan Province dated to 533 CE, a Buddha excavated in Longxingsi Monastery in Qingzhou, Shandong Province, and a Buddha from Qishan County, Shaanxi Province dated to 592 CE.<sup>27</sup>

A link between the Silla images and the Buddhist statues of Sri Lanka becomes even more evident when comparing the robes, which in both cases are worn in a manner that covers only the left shoulder (Fig. 7). This type of garment was unprecedented in Korean Buddhist art prior to the seventh century. Kim Choon sil pointed out

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<sup>27</sup> Yang, 'Bojur-eul', 12–15; Kim Eun-ah, 'Jungguk', 15–23.

that Buddha statues from Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa in South India and Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka could have been the sources of this new style. She also formulated the theory that it was via a maritime route that South Indian and/or Sri Lankan models were transmitted to Silla, which was located in the southeastern portion of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>28</sup>

This view was further elaborated as more information on Chinese and Southeast Asian Buddhist sculpture became available in the late 1990s, including hundreds of Buddhist sculptures discovered in Longxingsi Monastery in Qingzhou, Shandong in 1996. Scholars noted that the garment type manifested in these Silla images was also quite popular in sixth-century Shandong. It was also pointed out that both the pleated and unpleated robes that appear in Korean examples can be found in examples from Shandong.<sup>29</sup> The link between Shandong and Silla became particularly notable from the year 553 CE, during King Jinheung's 眞興王 reign (540–576), when Silla conquered Danghang-seong Fortress 黨項城 and a nearby port called Dangen-po 唐恩浦 on the west coast of the peninsula. This opened up a much more direct route between Silla and China. Shandong would have been the gateway to China when representatives of Silla crossed the Yellow Sea from Danghangpo.<sup>30</sup> It seems undeniable that Shandong served as an important midpoint in the transmission of a new style originating in South India and Sri Lanka to the Korean Peninsula.

Interestingly, as was identified in a recent article by Kang Hee-jung, the hip-shot pose or *tribhanga* (thrice-bent) found in most Korean examples of this new type is rare in Shandong Buddha statues, but several cases are apparent in Indian and Southeast Asian

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<sup>28</sup> Kim Choon sil, 'Samguksidae', 1–23. Regarding the close relationship between early Buddhist images in South India and Sri Lanka, see d'Ancona, 'Amaravati', 1–17; Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures*, 96–111.

<sup>29</sup> Kang, 'Chilsegi', 188–89; Yang, 'Boju-reul', 15–22. For more discussions on the stylistic sources for Shandong Buddhist sculptures, see Su, 'Sculptures', 54–59; Howard, 'Pluralism', 67–94.

<sup>30</sup> Kwon, 'Silla', 2–7; Yang, 'Boju-reul', 19–20.



FIG. 8 Standing Buddha, Kedah, Malaysia, 8th century, H. 20.6 cm, Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

sculpture. These include the Buddha images on the façade of Cave 16 in Ajañṭā Caves, a sixth-century Buddha image from Kedah, Malaysia housed in the Asian Civilisations Museum, and a sixth-century Buddha from Nen Chua in Kien Giang, Vietnam (Fig. 8).<sup>31</sup>

The above discussion on the potential inspirations for seventh-century Silla Buddha images shows that the establishment of particular Buddha images in Korea involved multiple sources in South India, Southeast Asia, and China. It appears that while ancient Koreans may have frequently adopted new styles and ele-

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<sup>31</sup> Kang, 'Chilsegi', 190–97.

ments from Buddhist sculptures in Shandong, they maintained an interest in Indian examples, which resulted in a continuous influx of artistic stimuli not only from China, but from South and Southeast Asia as well.

Going back to Faxian, it is of course difficult to confirm that the green jade image mentioned in his account served as a direct model for the particular seventh-century Buddha images in Korea. However, his account still provides valuable material for the contemplation of the transit of ideas between South Asia and Korea and the complex network of communications that linked these regions.

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### Abbreviation

*T*            *Taishō shinsbū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. See Bibliography, Secondary Sources, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.

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