THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUNDING VIJAYAN KINGS OF SRI LANKA

V

THE POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUNDING VIJAYAN KINGS OF SRI LANKA

DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press

Published By The Ceylon Press 2024

Copyright The Ceylon Press

1

DANCING ON KNIVES

"If you're gonna make it to the top, get a grip on this rock, and get a grip on yourself."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

“If I want a crown,” remarked Peachey, hero of Kipling’s Man Who Would Be King, and unexpected alter ego of Prince Vijiya, Sri Lanka’s first monarch, “I must go and hunt it for myself.” If Peachey’s motivation was glory and riches, plain and simple, Vijaya’s was about raw survival, dodging assassinations and evading parental disapprobation. If, that is, the chronicles are to be believed.

And in this, Sri Lanka is exceedingly fortunate for it has not one but three great chronicles, claiming between them the title of the world’s oldest, longest historical narrative.

Although these turbulent chronicles muddle up man, god and magic with morality, history, and myth, they also lay a wraithlike trail of events and people through what would otherwise be a historical vacuum dotted with random and unattributable artefacts.

Prince Vijaya’s existence is known about only though the first two chronicles - The Dipavaṃsa Chronicle (complied around the third to fourth centuries CE) and The Mahavaṃsa, The Great Chronicle, an epic poem written by a Buddhist monk in the fifth century CE in the ancient Pali script.

These stupefying works, which put most soap operas and not a few Sci-Fi films to shame, open with Prince Vijaya’s arrival from Sinhapura, a lost legendary state in eastern

eastern India; and ends in 302 CE. At this point they hand the task of story-telling onto the third and last book, The Culavamsa or Lesser Chronicle, which covers events to 1825, an otherwise blameless year the world over with little more of note than it being the date of the first performance of Rossini's Barber of Seville.

But if love and eternal fidelity are rarely the subject of the three chronicles, gold, betrayal, and secrecy often are – though historians naturally debate the factual accuracy of the stories, in which the doings of men and kings take a poor second place to that of monks and Lord Buddha.

Even when the focus shifts from the divine to the secular, it is abundantly clear that, as with the most tenacious tales, history is inevitably written by the winners.

Although verified archaeological, still less documentary evidence for Prince Vijaya, remains tantalizingly absent, he remains from every perspective, the great winner, the shaved head fugitive with a penchant for what The Mahavamsa calls “evil conduct and ... intolerable deeds,” every bit the rebranded hero. Expelled by his appalled father, thrust onto a ship with seven hundred dependant followers and ordered to stay away on pain of death, Prince Vijaya has, though the centuries, still managed to take centre stage as the Sri Lanka’s paterfamilias.

Centuries later, over a shared arak and soda, and, courtesy of reincarnation, it is more than likely that the reformed villain would tell you that he finds his righteous reputation puzzling. After all, he never set out to be a hero, still less founder of a nation; and quite possibly not even a king, claiming, in his own lifetime, the much more modest title of Prince. Survival, a bit of fun, respect, of course, obedient followers, amendable wives, good food and the space to be his own boss was probably as much as he aspired to.

Indeed, so careless was he of his greater future that he almost destroyed his own fledging dynasty just as it was starting out, a nasty proclivity that was to reoccur just two generations later when his descendants tried to wipe themselves out. Twice, in under two hundred years the Vijayans, the dynasty that was to make Sri Lanka the world's only Singhala nation, came perilously close to obliterating it altogether. It was the sort of carelessness typical of rulers bereft of the value of hindsight, operating like sword dancers twirling on the tops of lofty stupas, and utterly reckless with their unfathomable dynastic destiny.

If so, he enjoyed the value of surprise for the shortest of times. The Mahavamsa, whose respect for divinity of any sort is

beyond reproach, has Lord Buddha task an acquiescent Hindu god with protecting the prince and reassuring him that the island he has alighted upon is pretty much empty.

"There are no men here, and here no dangers will arise," claims the god, helpfully disguised as a wandering ascetic. If one is to found a future nation, this sort of starting point is enormously helpful; and thousands of years later, so little is known about the real social and political structures that existed on the island at this time, that this myth of a largely empty island merely waiting for noble race to occupy it is more than validated by ignorance.

But lines are there to be read through and The Mahavamsa wears the cognitive dissonance of its gilded lines with confident ease. Almost from the start, they imply, the prince and his followers found themselves fighting for survival, dominance, and land. The many conflicting stories surrounding his fights with man-eating wives, flying horses, skirmishes with indigenous tribes, protection under Buddha and willingness to swap his local wife Kuveni, for a more glamorous and aristocratic Indian princess, are in fact key parts of the country's cherished creation myths. And curses too. For Kuveni, rejected, outcast and pushed to a shocking suicide, was to place such a curse on the king and his house as to taint "not only Vijaya but the descendants of Hela People (Singhala) as a whole," wrote an observer. It has," remarked

another mournful raconteur, "overflowed to each and every nook and corner of Sri Lanka and enwrapped her people over the centuries."

If the nation delights in the stories around Vijaya; those around Kuveni, a native queen of the local Yaksha tribe, cause much head shaking. For Kuveni was not simply a wife and weaver of cloth, a mother, lover, and queen - but also a demon, a metamorphoser, an outcast, an avenging fury, suicide, traitor, murderess, ghost, and mistress of deception. A descendant of gods, she is also a goddess to the country's still living aboriginal peoples. We may be forest haunters," said a Vedda leader recently, "but Kuveni our goddess." Small wonder then that Sri Lanka, in not knowing what to really make of the Mother of the Nation, choses to push her deep into one of its many locked closets.

Pulling his boats onto a beach of reddish-brown sand – "Tamba" meaning Coppe,; or as it was later known, Tambapanni, was the perfect spot for a settlement, commanding the access to a great natural harbour opening into the Gulf of Mannar and an almost inexhaustible supply of pearl oysters.

"Horse Mountain," is another alternative name for Kudiramalai and for centuries, amidst the ruins of an ancient temple, the ruins of a massive horse and man statue stood on the cliffs. Made of brick, stone, and coral, it is estimated to have been at

least 35 feet high, its front legs raised, its rider clinging to reins, bearing a lantern to guide ships into the port.Locals still point to some modest ruins, all that remains, they say of the horse and rider. And continually, raked by high waves and surf, broken bricks, pottery, and building materials, wash up on the shore.

Inland are a further set of ruins – mere pillars standing or fallen in the jungle and known locally as Kuveni's Palace. Here, where history is forever unprovable, the historian can either move swiftly on to the next footnote, or succumb to the impossible romance of possibility.

Succumbing is naturally the better bet; certainly the most entertaining one.

Although the Mahavaṃsa Chronicle portrays Prince Vijaya as the first and only Indian colonist to arrive in early Sri Lanka, it is more than likely that he was but one (albeit the most successful one) of a number of immigrants. Colonising the island from the north and west, moving inland along the banks of the Malvata Oya, other settlers undoubtedly arrived on the east coast and followed the Mahaweli River inland. Still others would have landed in the south, following other rivers inland to make settlements within Ruhana.

The Vijayan progress would have forced the preexisting tribes - the Rakkhaka, Yakkha, Naga and Deva - to retreat inland –

and accept a new status imposed on them by these migrants from the subcontinent, who brought with them a steely view on caste. Most of the main Sinhalese castes derive in some form or another from here. The Brahman bedecked the very top, below which would have been the Govigama (from govi – literally "housekeeper"); Kavikara (dancers); Batgama (labourers); Radava (dhobis); Berava (drummers and folk priests); Oli (astrologers); Panikki (barbers); Yamannu (iron workers); and the lowest caste of all – the Rodi (untouchable).

Fighting done, Prince Vijiya is said to have then founded the Kingdom of Tambapaṇṇi, situated in the northeast around Mannar and Puttalam. Nothing is known of how he spent his 38-year reign, except that he appears to have encouraged his lieutenants to set up allied settlements themselves, all of which would have retained some kind of respectful subservience to Tambapanni. All we have left of these places are their possible names: Upatissagama, Ujjeni, Uruvela, Vijita, floating erratically on maps of the northeast of the island, ephemeral as clouds in a blue tropical sky.

Unusually for a king of Sri Lanka, Vijiya was to die naturally, in 505 BCE. His achievements made up for his earlier criminal delinquency, with the Mahavaṃsa commenting, with immeasurable satisfaction, that he had "forsaken his former evil way of life," and ruled "over all Lanka in peace and righteousness."

In this the Chronicle is being more than kind. It is being disingenuous, for dying as he did, Viyaja inflicted on his family, kingdom, and reputation, the one crime that no king can ever really be forgiven for: he died childless, or at least without any respectable and credible heir lined up to fill his shoes.

That Sri Lanka's future should hang on so avoidable a problem as this seems hardly believable – but then Vijaya had no idea, gasping his last few breaths, that he was about to leave behind a dynasty that ran (ignoring regnal interruptions) for over 600 years, putting it comfortably ahead of Mings and Moguls, Valois, Bourbons, Hohenzollerns, Tudors, Stuarts, or Aztecs.

Or a country that, in the decisions it made and habits it formed around religion, language, writing, water, architecture, or civil administration (to name but a few), was to be like no other the world over, nor last 2,567 years, and still counting. Had he known this, he might have put a bit more effort into procreation; but instead, with an opportunism that was, after all, something of a personal hallmark, he left his problems at the feet of others, busying himself instead with the more urgent prerequisites of reincarnation.

Astonishingly, it is better than a one-in-two bet that his tomb still exists. It is said to be located on Medagama Hill in

Paduwasnuwara, halfway between Kurunegala and Puttalam. Certainly, the unmissable shape of a very ancient stupa can be made out. And astonishingly too, ashes found in its heart during conservation work were tested by the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and found to be at least 2,500 – 2,600 years old , placing them well within touching distance of his death in 505 BCE.

That the kingdom did not at this point merely implode is little short of miraculous. But then the Vijayans were ever the lucky dynasty – perhaps the luckiest of the lot and the prince's long-time follower and chief advisor, Upatissa took over, appearing unexpectedly content with the role of Caretaker King.

Upatissa seems to have had his own little statelet nearby - Upatissa Nuwara; and may well have realised, with a wisdom that later kings would look on as ridiculously old fashioned, that more (land, palaces, titles, concubines, curries, white horses, silk sarongs) is not always best.

For a year it seems he kept the throne warm whilst word was sent to Panduvasdeva, Vijayan's nephew in India, that the job was now his. The new king, Panduvasdeva, was to arrive in his new kingdom in the port of Gokanna, present day Trincomalee. The port was nearly 200 kilometres away from where Vijaya is said to have had his kingdom, indicating

perhaps that the little kingdom had been expert in soaking up other people's territory.

The new king exceeded in his fecund duties by producing ten sons and one daughter, a royal litter that more than made up for his uncle's derisory efforts, prompting The Mahavamsa to note, with understandable smugness, that "the monarch lived happily."

Ruling for 30 years from 504 BCE, Panduvasdeva was just what the nascent dynasty needed to entrench itself. His greatest achievements - ruling for decades and producing heirs, albeit ones fixated on familicide – was more than enough to secure his golden reputation. But he was also to move his capital to the fortress of Vijithapura, close to what would later become its great capital, Anuradhapura. And undoubtedly, like his uncle before him, he would have brought Indian craftsman, technocrats, and experts in a variety of practical fields to help him develop and improve his state, a reverse brain drain of the sort that Sri Lanka, with 13% of its population now living and working abroad, would now welcome.

What shortcomings Panduvasdeva had were largely in the parenting department. Fertile he may have been, but a role model or instiller of blameless family morals, he most certainly was not. Despite his bountiful prodigy, Panduvasdeva is chiefly remembered for the chaos that later enveloped the country as his

sons battled against the morbid predictions of a court soothsayer who predicted that they would all be killed by their nephew, Pandu Kabhaya, son of their only sister, Princess Citta.

That the royal nursery best resembles a pit of serpents was ever to be a hallmark of royal Sri Lanka, but in this case it was quite possibly aggravated by the fact that Panduvasdeva's offspring probably derived from a variety of (competing) wives. The harem was a key institution of the royal court, and a magnet for intrigue and politics until the last king of the last kingdom breathed his last.

Egged on by the Chronicles, at their dread and gossiping best, Panduvasudeva's death was said to have been promoted by a terrible and wholly incurable disease that could be traced back all the way to the curse Kuveni placed on the Vijayan clan.

This king's death in 474 BCE heralded the second and much more serious existential threat to the dynasty's future. But at this great distance from the events of the time, and with almost nothing to rely on in the historical record, counting leaves in a gale is likely to offer a greater degree of exactitude as to what really went on.

At first affairs seemed to move with reassuring predictably. Abhaya, Panduvasdeva's eldest son, took the throne from his

father, reigning for twenty years before abruptly stepping down for his brother Tissa in 454 BCE. This was no joyful abdication; but a renunciation forced on him by his nine brothers who accused him of plotting to ensure his nephew, Pandu Kabhaya succeeded him.

Spared his life, Abhaya retreated into a wise obscurity, sensibly declining his nephew's later offer to retake the crown, settling instead for the far less pressured job of running Anuradhapura.

Tissa, Abhaya's immediate replacement, was a haunted man. Chief amongst his brothers, he was eager to head off the sinister predictions of the court soothsayer. But it was not to be. His rule was characterised by an ultimately unsuccessful balancing act: feuding with his brothers (many of whom died in the troubles) whilst keeping at bay his nephew Pandu Kabhaya. As civil war rocked the new nation for well over ten years, Tissa's repeated attempts to find and slay Pandu Kabhaya, were all foiled and his reign (454 BCE – 437 BCE) came to a predictable end when Pandu Kabhaya killed him in battle.

Like London buses, problems, it is said, always come in threes; but Vijayan Sri Lanka was blessed: they only came in twos. One more and the lights would surely have all gone out. But they didn't. The tricky years of the country's most formative dynasty were over. It has survived – just.

father, reigning for twenty years before abruptly stepping down for his brother Tissa in 454 BCE. This was no joyful abdication; but a renunciation forced on him by his nine brothers who accused him of plotting to ensure his nephew, Pandu Kabhaya succeeded him.

Spared his life, Abhaya retreated into a wise obscurity, sensibly declining his nephew's later offer to retake the crown, settling instead for the far less pressured job of running Anuradhapura.

Tissa, Abhaya's immediate replacement, was a haunted man. Chief amongst his brothers, he was eager to head off the sinister predictions of the court soothsayer.

But it was not to be.

His rule was characterised by an ultimately unsuccessful balancing act: feuding with his brothers (many of whom died in the troubles) whilst keeping at bay his nephew Pandu Kabhaya.

As civil war rocked the new nation for well over ten years, Tissa's repeated attempts to find and slay Pandu Kabhaya, were all foiled and his reign (454 BCE – 437 BCE) came to a predictable end when Pandu Kabhaya killed him in battle.

Like London buses, problems, it is said, always come in threes; but Vijayan Sri Lanka was blessed: they only came in twos. One more and

the lights would surely have all gone out. But they didn't. The tricky years of the country's most formative dynasty were over. It has survived – just.

What was to come next were to be quite possibly the best years of the island's life.

Period.

2

HEAVEN ON EARTH

"When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!"

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

In the previous 100 years Sri Lanka's little Vijayan kingdom twice risked absolute oblivion, courtesy of its carefree kings. But twice too, in the following 170 years, the self-same state would step up, and prosper beyond all expectations, thanks to two other kings, both innate masters of nation building. For Pandu Kabhaya, and his grandson, Devanampiya Tissa, were to set the mark way beyond what any other island leader might later hope to achieve and, in the rarified world of royal hustings, emerge as the nation's two greatest monarchs by a country mile,

Like the prize ride in a fairground big dipper, that such a double-double whammy should even have happened is about as rare as throwing a dozen sixes in Monte Carlo. But little else should be expected of the Vijayans, the luckiest of all the dynasties, for whom every cloud had not one, but several, silver and gold, linings.

"The teeth of the dog that barks at the lucky man," avowed a somewhat orthodontist-orientated Singhala folk saying, "will fall out". If true, then over the reigns of Pandu Kabhaya (437 - 367 BCE) and Devanampiya Tissa (307 - 267 BCE), the island's dogs would have been on a strict milk-and-roti diet, to better manage their missing molars.

Over this period, the tiny Vijayan state was radically expanded, endowed with a magnificent capital city (Anuradhapura);

distinct laws; civil and administrative infrastructure; investments in agriculture and water harvesting; increased trade; and a new language – the earliest inscriptions in Sinhalese date from close to this period. And, most critically of all, a new religion – Buddhism.

The subtle and profound chemistry between these manifold factors were to combine to create, like the rarest of new life in a petri dish, not just the world's only Singhala state; but one that would still be flourishing, despite all manner of catastrophes encountered along the way, today.

Pandu Kabhaya's (improbably long) 70-year reign (437 to 367 BCE) would have come as a blessed relief to family and subjects alike after so much earlier dynastic squabbling.

Having outsmarted, out-manoeuvred, foiled, defeated, imprisoned, and killed nearly all his troublesome uncles, he took up his place as victorious head of the fledgling Vijayan dynasty and set in train the real beginnings of the Anuradhapura Kingdom when he made his home in the future capital and, in Louis XIV-style, began building.

By then the site of Anuradhapura was already some 200 years old and covered over 20 acres. Pandu Kabhaya took it to still greater heights for what followed was, to paraphrase Deborah Kerr and Carey Grant many centuries later, "the nearest thing to heaven".

In all areas of enterprise - from farming and engineering to administration and construction, his rule harnessed the best available expertise to build a capital with the hugest of hearts, and through it, dominate an entire island.

In the style of the much later and far away William the Conqueror and Doomsday Book, this king too commissioned a massive survey to take full stock of his domain – all the better the tax and manage it, plan investments, patronage, defence and yet further ascendency.

A later medieval record from just one location – Kurunegala – states that the king formed 1,000 new villages in the area, his grandson later despatching pedigree Indian buffalos to graze there.

Even allowing for the exaggeration of breathless flunkies; even knocking one zero off the total, it still amounts to colossal development.

Some thirty men were appointed in this area alone to be at the king's specific executive command, overseen by one Alakeswara Mudiyanse, a man whose name alone has survived these many hundreds of years.

From Anuradhapura right across the Rajarata – the King's country – and quite probably beyond, the royal writ ran. The Lord of Lanka's lands encompassed old settlements and new ones too, exacting a political and social domination that

would have placed the kingdom at the apogee of the other competing island societies that co-existed with it, for a time at least, and especially to the east and south.

In what was most probably something of a first for the Vijayan state, Pandu Kabhaya's rule respected his Vedda allies, the Yakkhas, Cittaraja and Kalavela, clans of the island's earliest original inhabitants. They had, after all, most likely been keen and critical allies in his fight against his many uncles. Now was the time for reward. The Mahavamsa records his beneficial diligence: ""He settled the Yakkha Kalavela on the east side of the city, the Yakkha Cittaraja at the lower end of the Abhayatank... and on festival-days he sat with Cittaraja beside him on a seat of equal height, and having gods and men to dance before him, the king took his pleasure, in joyous and merry wise."

Few areas of urban development escaped his planners' eyes and The Mahavamsa elaborates that "he laid out four suburbs as well as the Abhaya-tank, the common cemetery, the place of execution, and the chapel of the Queens of the West, the banyan-tree of Vessavana and the Palmyra-palm of the Demon of Maladies, the ground set apart for the Yonas and the house of the Great Sacrifice".

Cities need public servants – and here too Pandu Kabhaya seems to have missed nothing: "he set 500 candalas [low caste

workers] to the work of cleaning the town, 200 candalas to the work of cleaning the sewers, 150 candalas he employed to bear the dead and as many candalas to be watchers in the cemetery.

And public servants, however low caste, needed homes: “For these he built a village north-west of the cemetery and they continually carried out their duty as it was appointed. Toward the north-east of the candala-village he made the cemetery, called the Lower Cemetery, for the candala folk. North of this cemetery, between (it and) the Pasana-mountain, the line of huts for the huntsmen were built thenceforth.”

God too, in his many different iterations, was also provided for. “Northward from thence, as far as the Gamani-tank, a hermitage was made for many ascetics; eastward of that same cemetery the ruler built a house for the nigantha Jotiya. In that same region dwelt the nigantha named Giri and many ascetics of various heretical sects. And there the lord of the land built also a chapel for the nigantha Kumbhanda. Toward the west from thence and eastward of the street of the huntsmen lived five hundred families of heretical beliefs. “

Trade thrived exponentially; and there are even intriguing hints, documented by The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, of a small group of Greek merchants later living in the royal city itself. Nor did he appear to neglect the

utilitarian, and, in a marvellous feat of ancient engineering, constructed the first bisokotuwas to regulate the outflow of water from tanks and sluices and to secure them against destruction in the annual floods

Even health care was provided for. "On the further side of Jotiya's house and on this side of the Gamani tank he likewise built a monastery for wandering mendicant monks, and a dwelling for the ajivakas and a residence for the brahmans, and in this place and that he built a lying-in shelter and a hall for those recovering from sickness."

"Ten years after his consecration," concludes The Mahavamsa, never hesitant to call a spade a space, "did Pandu Kabhaya the ruler of Lanka establish the village-boundaries over the whole of the island of Lanka."

To claim to rule "the whole island" might have been stretching things a bit, but probably only a bit. Certainly Pandu Kabhaya ruled a lot of the island, an achievement that was nothing short of phenomenal. As the ancient Athenians were putting the finishing touches to the Acropolis and the nascent Roman Republic issuing its first tentative laws, the palaces and structures of Anuradhapura rose up through the jungle, a tropical Versailles, two thousand years ahead of Louis XIV, founded on land that betrayed evidence of human occupation going back to roughly the same time as when Solomon

became king of Israel far beyond Sri Lanka's Arabian Sea.

Anuradhapura was set to become one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities – and for 1,500 years was the capital of the island state. As the Dark Ages fell across the West and society there returned to wattle and daub, the kingdom's engineering, and architectural talents, nurtured over centuries, endowed Anuradhapura with an almost inexhaustible tally of spectacular new temples, pools, stupas, gardens, palaces, and dwellings.

Credited with ending the guerrilla warfare that marked the resistance of the original island dwellers against the Vijayans, Pandu Kabhaya's reign not only brought stability but bequeathed future constancy to the island, as his own son, Mutasiva, came to the throne in 367 BCE for a reign which, though dressed in a cloak of invisibility every bit as effective as Harry Potters', would most probably have been akin to that of a successful Continuity Candidate, reinforcing, extending and securing these most bankable of state policies, already in train. His reign was long, and he is said to have enlarged Anuradhapura creating Mahamevnawa, an enormous park noted for its flowering trees and fruits. And mindful of his dynastic obligations, Mutasiva also produced nine sons, five of whom would rule after him. Sometimes, not often, a country gets lucky, and with this father-son duet, Sri Lanka undoubtedly did. But it was to get luckier still with the arrival of

Pandu Kabhaya's remarkable grandson, Devanampiya Tissa who was to initiate yet another titan step change for his nation, every bit as transformative as Pandu Kabhaya's first.

But before properly encountering Devanampiya Tissa, the hapless historian has first to negotiate the spaghetti soup that is the early Vijayan family tree.

The problem begins with Pandu Kabhaya's unfeasibly long reign – some 70 years, to which must be added an uncountable youth spent tormenting and eventually killing his uncles. Such a lifespan defies all reasonable expectation of life expectancy then – or now.

Some scholars, fretting at the impossible arithmetic athleticism of the great king, helpfully suggest an extra king at this point – a shadowy name emerges from antique mists: Ganatissa, said to be a son of Pandu Kabhaya. Or was he a grandson? Or just a royal blind alley? Did Ganatissa precede Mutasiva for a while; or inherit from him later?

It is a mystery that is never likely to be cleared up but however the family tree played out, it must have done so with pacific grace, for civil war, which had rocked the reigns of Panduvasdeva's sons, draws not even the merest whisper in the chronicles. This period of calm government enabled the state to become increasingly centralised, and in so doing, embedded Vijayan rule and the

ascendency of the Anuradhapura Kingdom across the island. Mutasiva's peaceful death, in or around 307 BCE, made clear that the Vijayans were there to stay. And lift their kingdom's game.

It was fortunate that when Sri Lanka's paramount defining moment occurred, it had a king, in Devanampiya Tissa, who was talented enough to make best sense of it

Even so, in the decades after his death, all was nearly lost by feeble heirs and violent invaders.

"When a defining moment comes along," noted that unexpected philosopher, Kevin Costner, "you define the moment, or the moment defines you."

Devanampiya Tissa, old King Mutasiva's second son, and Pandu Kabhaya's grandson, is described by The Mahavamsa as being "foremost among all his brothers in virtue and intelligence".

To get anywhere close to this exceptional king, jump in a car and head to the Ambastala Stupa in Anuradhapura for there stands a modest, much weathered, armless stone statute of the king, just over six feet high, gazing out across the grand ruins and remains of the religious citadel; a statue that, argue the scholars, actually dates from very close to the death of this monarch.

Depending on which calendar you select (Gregorian, Julian, Hindu, Islamic, Seleucid, Assyrianism, Discordian or Aztec), which tribe of argumentative scholars you most favour, and frankly, whether the day is sunny or not, the dates of Devanampiya Tissa's reign are 307 BCE to 267 BCE; or 247 BCE to 207 BCE; or something artfully woven around both possibilities. But to get into baroque foot notes about such matters is an unnecessary distraction.

The main point about this king is how he adopted, indeed co-opted, a religion for his kingdom, using it, not just for salvation – but to anchor, with ever surer security, royal authority across a reign that lasted for at least three to four long and lingering decades.

Like the Vijayans, Buddhism also came from India - and it naturalised so completely across the island that it is impossible to grasp any aspect of the country's past or present, without first comprehending the centrality of this, its main religion.

It arrived through a series of intimate stories in which faith follows friendship. Devanampiya Tissa had struck up a pen-pal relationship with the celebrated Indian Buddhist emperor, Ashoka, the great Mauryan overlord of much of the Indian sub-continent, who was to claim, without a scintilla of modesty or restraint that "all men are my children".

Against such a royal inclusivity, Devanampiya Tissa must have counted as among Ashoka's most favoured children. Gifts followed letters, and a missionary followed the gifts when Ashoka despatched his own son, Mahinda, to Sri Lanka in 247 BCE. The young missionary prince was to live on the island for forty-eight years, out-living Devanampiya Tissa, and dying, aged eighty after a lifetime spent promoting Buddhism, the beneficiary of a state funeral at which his relics were interred in a stupa in Mihintale.

For it was at Mihintale that Mahinda first met Devanampiya Tissa. The king, it was said, was out hunting. Expecting a stag, the ruler instead found himself a feisty missionary. A testing exchange on the nature of things followed, and then a sutra was preached. The rest, as they say, is history.

Immediately after the encounter at Mihintale, the conversions began setting out an unalterable destiny as the country's history took the most definitive turn in its long journey, becoming - and remaining to this day - a Buddhist country first and foremost, with all that this entailed. So great were the number of conversions that the king built the Maha Vihare (The Great Monastery) in the pleasure gardens of Anuradhapura to house the growing number of Buddhist monks; and for centuries afterwards, the building was to become the centre of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The evidence for all this comes, of course, from The Mahavamsa Chronicle. But it is very likely that Buddhism penetrated the island much earlier. Even so, the impulse of the chronicle is certainly exact for it would have taken the backing of a king to ensure that the religion became so dominant so fast.

And, as it did so, it accrued some of the many rituals and ceremonies of the pre-Buddhist cults, especially those associated with agriculture and demons. It also helped spread a common language and script, and with it, the power of the centre for the king was also the formal guardian of the Sanga – the religious organization.

Clearly, Mahinda, the young missionary had painted a compelling picture of his new island home in his letters home for he was soon joined by his sister, the nun, Sanghamitta. She brought with her a golden vase in which grew a sapling of Bodhi-Tree taken from the very one under which Buddha himself is said to have attained enlightenment.

Accompanied by a number of other nuns, Sanghamitta landed in the north of the island and was met by King Devanampiya Tissa himself. The party were ceremonially escorted to Anuradhapura along a road softened with white sand. The Bodhi sapling was planted in the Mahameghavana Grove in Anuradhapura, where it still grows.

Sanghamitta later ordained Queen Anula and the women of the court in Buddhism and stayed on in the island, promoting the religion. She died in 203 BCE aged 79, her death prompting national mourning. A stupa was erected over her cremation site in front of the Bodhi-Tree in Anuradhapura.

The king himself built a monastery and temple caves at Mihintale, a site that over successive years grew and grew. Indeed, temple caves rapidly became the architectural hit of the time with ordinary people funding a stone mason to do all the necessary work. Between the third century BCE and the first century CE nearly 3,000 such caves were recorded to have been made.

Other notable buildings followed: monasteries, palaces, the 550-acre Tissa Wewa water tank, still in use today; and the Thuparamaya of Anuradhapura, the county's first stupa - which enshrined the right collarbone of Lord Buddha and whose remains today stretch out over 3 ½ acres.

Devanampiya Tissa's death after a thirty- or forty-year reign brought to an end almost 200 years of Vijayan peace and prosperity. But it had been enough. The destiny of the country was now unchangeable; and the Vijayans, despite their latest whimsical excesses and avoidable failures, would merit the accolade of being the country's greatest rulers.

3

CONQUER -ED

"You've no right to grow here," said the Dormouse.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

One hundred and fifty years earlier, and six thousand six hundred and one kilometres away, Thucydides, whose work, The Peloponnesian War, set such standards for history as to anticipate every conceivable future military and political ploy, had the perfect solution in mind to fend off the catastrophe that befall Sri Lanka on the death of their visionary king, Devanampiya Tissa in 267 BCE – or 207 BCE, depending on whether you accept the tempered chronology of such scholars as the impossibly talented Wilhelm Geiger.

That such advice could have been given or received is not as far-fetched as its first seems. The Mahavamsa refers to visits by what they call 'yona' to Sri Lanka in the fourth to third centuries BCE, "yona' being the word the Persians used for their arch enemy, the Greeks.

Other chroniclers note how Pandu Kabhaya established a special quarter of his dazzling new city, Anuradhapura, for foreign merchants, including, it is suspected, the Yona Greeks, sometime after 437 BCE.

Just across the Palk Straits, in India's current Bihar province, Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the Maurya court around 290 BCE, was busy mixing with, amongst others, those very same Anuradhapuran Greeks come to badger and barter with the Mauryas. Historian as he was himself, he was also the sort of bookish man who may have had a few spare

scrolls of Thucydides' main works to lend to the governing literati of the time, including the Sri Lankan kings and their associates.

But if there ever had been a loaning of scrolls, it seems that Devanampiya Tissa's successors failed to read them. Certainly, they missed Thucydides' most famous thoughts about the three "gravest failings;" namely "want of sense, of courage, or of vigilance."

For it was the want of all three, especially the last of these attributes, which was to tip the Vijayan kingdom not once but twice into such long and shocking periods of surrender that for well over half the intervening century it was a kingdom under occupation; its great city of Anuradhapura recast with a Tamil polish; and its plaintiff kings killed or exiled.

Back in 267 BCE, as Devanampiya Tissa moved into what all would have hoped to have been Pari-Nirvana (the post nirvana state of total release), this was far from what anyone would have thought even remotely possible. The great kingdom was utterly solid, surely? Unbreakable. Resilient. Or was it?

For glum historians inclined to search for the deepest runes and trumpet them loudly, Devanampiya Tissa's death was actually the start of a bleak three-hundred-year promenade that would lead to the dynasty's inevitable collapse, a journey that would also fatally

embed the country with an ongoing appetite for incipient disaster, regardless as to which dynasty, president, or occupying invader was calling the shots.

Over this sorrowful period, through the reigns of almost 30 kings, Sri Lanka was to enjoy just three short periods of peace; interspersed with three Tamil invasions and occupations; several decades of continuous regicide; and a concluding civil war in which the Vijayans turned their spears dhunnas (bows), muguras (clubs), adayatiyas (javelins), kaduwas (swords) and kunthas (spears) upon one another until there was no credible heir left standing, merely an preposterous and fleeting lookalike monarch, until he too was murdered by a group of nobles for whom enough was quite enough.

No-one saw the turmoil that lay ahead. That such chaos should await did not seem even wildly probable as Devanampiya Tissa's brother, Uththiya, succeeded to the throne.

He was to be followed by two more brothers, Mahasiwa, and Surathissa, all three of them, according to The Mahavamsa, ever on the side of neatness, to rule for respectably lengthy periods of ten years a piece. Whether they died in their beds or were murdered by their successors over this thirty-year period is a guessing game for clowns. The Mahavamsa maintains a prim muzzle on the matter. Certainly, the period was

suspiciously uneventful; unnervingly calm even. All seemed fine with the state – and yet something, somewhere, was going fatally wrong. "What goes up," said Isaac Newton, "must come down."

At best it is probable that nothing happened, merely a governing indolence that spread like rising damp or unseen termites Perhaps all three brothers were so distracted by the promise of enlightenment as they got to grips with the new religion their brother had introduced, that they forgot about all other aspects of good governance. Of vigilance, there was none; and over time the kingdom's defences, and its ability to dominate and control its own destiny became fatally compromised. As events were to later show.

For Uttiya, his role must at times have seemed more chief mourner than king as first one and then another all-consuming state funerals took place, the like of which the country had never seen.

First to go was Mahinda, prince, monk, missionary, and saint, "the light of Lanka," who had first brought Buddhism to the island from India. Dying aged eighty in 205 BCE, he was considered to have become an Arhat, one who, having gained insight into the true nature of existence, had been most happily liberated from the troublesome cycle of rebirth. Uttiya assiduously collected the evangelist's relics and busied

himself constructing stupas over them, laying him to rest, with a single hair of Lord Buddha, in Mihintale's stunning Ambasthala Stupa, surrounded by two tall rows of slender stone pillars caved with lions, birds and dwarfs.

Hardly had he or the country recovered from this devastating, step changing bereavement than a second struck just two years later when Sangamitta, Mahinda's sister, bearer of the bo-tree, princess, nun, and saint, died just a year short of eighty. Once again King Uttiya busied himself with stupa building, erecting the Sangamiththa Stupa over her ashes in Anuradhapura, his own reign drawing to a shattered finish just a few years later.

He was succeeded by his brother, Mahasiwa, whose own ten-year rule, from 257 BCE – 247 BCE, goes almost as unremembered - apart from the fact that he built the Nagarangana Monastery, whose location is now the subject of modest arguments. The king, noted The Mahavamsa approvingly, was especially careful to protect "the pious." He was said to have been very close to one of Mahinda's principal followers, Thera Bhaddasara, a relationship which may further indicate how preoccupied was the crown on matters spiritual rather than temporal.

By the time Mahasiwa's brother (or possibly uncle) Surathissa, took the throne in 247 BCE, things were clearly going most

seriously wrong, and the young country would have been wise to take to heart the words of the Egyptian writer, Suzy Kassem: “Never follow a follower. It's why the whole world is falling apart.” For by now the kingdom itself was falling apart. It had become so ineptly run and poorly defended as to lay itself wide open to invasion – the first recorded invasion of the country from South India.

Three kings, and three decades on from the kingdom’s apogee, the governance of the country had eroded badly. The systems, protections, administration, and defences put in by the last three great kings had broken down under the following three.

All The Mahavamsa has to say about this doomed monarch is that he was “zealously mindful of meritorious works,” though a preoccupation with forts, weapons, the latest foreign intelligence, armies, and ships patrolling the Palk Straits would have been a lot more useful.

The invasion came in the ignominious form of a couple of Tamil horse “freighters,” Sena and Guttik. Spotting the ultimate commercial opportunity (a kingdom) in the weak rule of King Surathissa, the traders met little resistance in conquering Anuradhapura and slaughtering the ineffectual Surathissa. With a ruthlessness that would have put Cornelius Vanderbilt to shame (“What do I care about law? Ain't I got the power?”),

they were to rule it for 22 years, the first of a succession of Tamil invaders.

Twenty-two years in the course of a dynasty's six hundred yearlong ascendance is no more troubling than celery in heat; but this first Tamil invasion, simply by virtue of it ever happening, presented the state then, as now, with a symbolic significance that was impossible to overlook, playing as it did right into the rowdy heart of Tamil vs Singhala political mythology.

Like football, the weather or when the next bus might arrive, discussions on this subject are fated never to be concluded.

Many, but by no means all, agree that, although the Vijayans themselves originated from northern rather than southern India, Sri Lanka was, from the outset, profoundly shaped by the norms of Tamil society and culture; in language, script, literature, pottery, architecture, and urban planning - to name by a few attributes. Tamil states within Sri Lanka, albeit subsidiary, co-existed with the Anuradhapuran crown for long periods of time. Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu were different and the same.

Even so, the gradual rise of a more distinct island culture, made later reflections on this invasion, as with other ones, appear more shocking than it probably was; and the differences between conquered and conquering were

more marginal than they were to seem later, seen from the platform of a discernibly different Singhala culture.

But although this humiliating first invasion presented King Surathissa with his reincarnation moment, it was not to put an end to the Vijayans, the lucky dynasty. Like the immortal jellyfish, Turritopsis dohrnii, dead, in this case, did not mean dead. The fight had not quite left them. Out there in the wilderness lay Asela, another son of old King Mutasiva.

After Surathissa was killed, Asela took refuge far south in the Kingdom of Ruhuna – a sub kingdom that had been established by Mahanaga, another son of King Mutasiva. Descending on the horse trader kings with much shattered dignity to put right, Asela killed them in battle.

After decades of poor rule, followed by a pair of asset stripping Indian merchants, there was much that King Asela had to put right.

But the task proved too much for him and his own rule was brought to an abrupt end 10 years later in 205 BCE when he himself was killed in battle by Ellara, an invading Tamil Chola. That he should meet such an end, after so much trouble to restore his family's right to reign, seems almost unfair – but as Nicholas Sparks gloomily observed ""life, I've learned, is never fair. If people teach anything in school, that should be it."

Unlike the first, the second invasion and subsequent occupation of Sri Lanka was an outcome no-one could miss, right across South Asia. Ellara was to rule the Anuradhapuran Kingdom for 44 years, smashing, with greater impact than his horse treading predecessors, the awesome edifice of Vijayan rule that had already given the island so much of its new cultural identity.

A good way to get up close and persona; with this unusual conqueror is to visit the northern Tamil city of Jaffa where stands a curious white clock tower, with Italianate windows, Roman pillars, and a little minaret.

Built by subscription to honour the 1875 visit of Prince of Wales, it was damaged in the civil war and repaired, partly with the help of a later Prince of Wales, Charles, in 2002. Before it, as if leading a charge, is a golden elephant, ridden by a golden king – Elara, or in Tamil, Ellalan.

Invaders are rarely liked and often forgotten. But Ellalan's forty-four-year reign merits much more than a modest footnote in the island's story. Unlike almost all other conquerors before or since, Ellalan cherished his kingdom as much as any man might his own home.

He came to rule – not rape and pillage, pulling back from an early bout of temple destruction; and

possibly even converting to Buddhism, as the horse-traders were rumoured to have done earlier, motivated, like the ex-Protestant Henri IV later, by the view that "(Catholic) Paris is worth a mass."

That he was not a total outsider is also indicate by some of the men he included in his conquering army who included Singhalese administrators such as Nandi and commanders whose names have come down to us as Deegejanthu, Gemunu and Isuru.

"The sword of justice has no scabbard," said Antione De Riveral. And so it was with Ellalan. He is a strange figure, his Tamilness eliciting not even a scintilla of condemnation in The Mahavaṃsa, which notes instead "a Damila of noble descent, named Elara, who came hither from the Cola-country to seize on the kingdom, ruled when he had overpowered king Asela, forty-four years, with even justice toward friend and foe, on occasions of disputes at law."

The ancient text then goes onto illuminate Ellalan's many acts of justice and generosity. Just, to the point of terrifying, he even executed his own son for transgressing the law.

Virtuous though he was, Ellalan was, all the same, a footnote for the Vijayans were still not yet finished with their rule. The main line of succession had been destroyed, but a cadet branch existed in the southern Kingdom of Ruhuna, a Vijayan

redoubt ruled over by the descendants of King Devanampiya Tissa's brother, Mahanaga.

The Kingdom of Ruhuna had never really been part of the Anuradhapura domain. Indeed, since at least the reign of King Surathissa the Anuradhapura Kingdom itself had begun to fracture, The Mahavaṃsa pointing out the presence of thirty-two semi-independent Tamil states coexisting alongside King Ellalan's Anuradhapura.

4

MERRY-GO-ROUND

"Haste makes waste, so I rarely hurry. But if a ferret were about to dart up my dress, I'd run."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

Known, not unjustifiably as "The Great," Dutugemunu was to rescue his car crash of a dynasty, only to watch it (albeit from the life thereafter) speed off the proverbial royal road yet again, and with such casual ingratitude as to make common cause with Mark Twain - "if you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and man."

In the hundred years that preceded Dutugemunu taking the throne, the dynasty had managed to get itself dethroned twice. In the following hundred years they were to do it once more, this time with much greater injury to the state.

Stability is rarely the embodiment of absolute monarchies; and Sri Lanka suffered more than most from almost institutionalized political volatility as if, just below the surface of the realm, with the constant rumbling and tremor of a gathering earthquake, yet another government eruption made itself ready.

Instability haunted most of the dozen or so kings that succeeded Dutugemunu. Five were rogue invaders from Tamil India; at least two were fated to be murdered by their scheming successors; and most of the rest reigned as if having signed up for a farce.

Only Dutugemunu and his later nephew, Valagamba, the Comeback King, were to move the kingdom progressively

onwards. For the rest, it was as if a life-changing ennui had floated into the palace throne room, a debilitating cloud that left every monarch much like Phil and Ralph in "Groundhog Day:

Phil: "What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same and nothing that you did mattered?"

Ralph: "That about sums it up for me."

Had he had any presentiment of what was to come, it is probable that even Dutugemunu, so famously proactive as to make a Long-life Battery appear idle, would have chucked in his chips, and moved on. But thankfully no plot-spoiling deity, soothsayer, or psychic was to interrupt his indomitable spirit; and for a glorious moment it seemed as if the Vijayan good times had returned. The lucky dynasty was back in business.

Although history has drawn back from letting us know Dutugemunu's height, it is probable that he was short, for if ever a leader existed with the Napoleon Syndrome it was this man, whose nature, evident from the many myths and tales of his childhood, was naturally geared to dominate, and control. "Growing duly, Gamani came to sixteen years, vigorous, renowned, intelligent and a hero in majesty and might," reported The Mahavamsa, with an almost palpable sense of relief and thanksgiving.

Dutugemunu's path to ruler of Lanka was far from straightforward, coming as he did from a lesser twig of the Vijayan family tree. Despite these disadvantages, Dutugemunu famously found his way through an obstacle course of family hurdles intended to arrest his monarchical ambitions. He even made a point of conquering the many mini-Tamil fiefdoms that had sprung up around and possibly within the Rajarata during Ellara reign – a far from straightforward task as the four-month siege of Vijitanagara illustrated. Here, having to calm his panicking elephants against incessant Tamil attacks using "red-hot iron and molten pitch," it was evident how the campaign was no walkover, but one that needed planning and determination to ensure victory. But the triumph was ultimately his. Power was consolidated; and his final victory over Ellara in 161 BCE left him ruling nearly the whole of the island – more territory by far than even that of the great king, Pandu Kabhaya.

And as if to confirm the return of Vijayan order, the construction of more buildings commenced. Anuradhapura expanded exponentially, its infrastructure, utilities, water resources so upgraded as to ensure that it would flourish for centuries to come, the longest surviving capital city of the Indian sub-continent.

Still more spectacular was the building of many more of what would become its most venerated celebrity structures. A

large monastery, the Maricavatti, was erected, together with a nine-story chapter house for monks, with a bright copper-tiled roof; and most famous of all, what is today called the Ruwanweliseya, the Great Stupa, which housed Buddha's begging bowl. The building programme was not restricted to the capital alone – eighty-nine other temples are said to have been constructed, along with hospitals and smaller tanks, in other parts of the kingdom.

The kingdom was return to order – exactly the kind of order that Megasthenes, the Greek historian based in India had noted just a hundred years earlier, relishing, with a commercial leer, the kingdom's "palm-groves, where the trees are planted with wonderful regularity all in a row, in the way we see the keepers of pleasure parks plant out shady trees in the choicest spots;" and how the island was "more productive of gold and large pearls than the Indias."

After decades of enemy occupation and incipient civil war, the Anuradhapuran state found itself a welcome prodigal returning to the honeypot table that was the Indian Ocean economy. Dutugemunu would have found little difficulty in rebooting trade, drawing back to its ports merchants from Arabia, Persia, India, East Asia and possibly even Rome; and, in so doing, wrenching back control of trade and custom dues from the merchants themselves for whom the laissez faire

regime of the earlier years had several commercial silver linings.

Accompanying this structural reform and state promoted capital investment was a new sense of nationalism. Dutugemunu's recapture of the Anuradhapuran state, the second in just a few decades, was not just a return to power for the Vijayans but for the budding Singhala country too, whose growing cultural differences to the kingdoms across the Palk Straits was accelerating as never before. "We own the country we grow up in," the Sri Lankan writer Michael Ondaatje was to write thousands of years later: "or we are aliens and invaders."

And own it they did, with Dutugemunu applying to the succession the most stringent of moral codes, most strikingly seen in how he disinherited his son Saliya, for having fallen for a girl from one of the lowest castes. The ailing king, dying before his eye-catching Ruwanweliseya Stupa was finished, ensured the throne passed instead to his own brother, Saddha Tissa in 137 BCE; enjoying, as he did so, an experience rare for most Sri Lankan monarchs - a natural death. And what an end it was.

"Lying on a palanquin," records The Mahavamsa's compelling heart-on-sleeve account, "the king went thither, and when on his palanquin he had passed round the cetiya, going toward the left, he paid homage to it at the south entrance, and as

he then, lying on his right side on his couch spread upon the ground, beheld the splendid Great Thupa, and lying on his left side the splendid Lohapasada, he became glad at heart, surrounded by the brotherhood of bhikkhus."

For the next thirty-three years it seemed as if life had gotten back to normal, or to whatever passed for normal amidst the seemingly indestructible building and gardens of Anuradhapura. King Saddha Tissa busied himself building the obligatory new monastery and, more usefully, a tremendous water tank, the Duratissa Reservoir which held three hundred and thirty-six million cubic feet of water. But as the late British prime minister Harold Macmillan remarked on the unpredictability of politics, the sudden appearance of "events, dear boy, events," was to unseat everything.

Saddha Tissa's death, 18 years later in 119 BCE, set off a power struggle, with his son, Thulatthana, taking the throne – though not for long. It also fired the gun to start the dynasty's race towards its next great disaster, just 15 years later fuelled by the bewitching pull of palace coups.

Thulatthana's coronation was a crowing too soon. He was not the next legitimate heir, that honour going to his older brother, Lanja Tissa. But Lanja Tissa was busy far south of Anuradhapura, in Ruhuna, and so not on site to determine the

right order of succession. Thulatthana, with the blessing of a Buddhist clergy unable to resist the opportunity to play kingmaker, took control.

Inevitably, war broke out – albeit briefly. Thulatthana was defeated and killed and from 119 BCE to 109 BCE, Lanja Tissa ruled the kingdom, with, no doubt, much justified satisfaction, causing no small trouble to those monks from Anuradhapura's leading Theravada Buddhist university monastery, the Maha Viharaya, who had earlier plotted to deny him his crown. But even the pleasures of revenge must end, and Lanja Tissa's death, ten years later, brought his brother, another son of King Saddha Tissa to the throne, Khallata Naga.

It was a damned succession. Within just six years, the kingdom disintegrated yet again, just as surely as it had when Sena and Guttika, or Ellara had so effortlessly seized the throne in 237 and 205 BCE. For over twenty years Dutugemunu's successors had failed to nurture their inheritance. Treason, regicide, dynastic self-harm, and rebellion had been normalised. Impoverished, neglected, unmanaged - the state was unstable. And ungovernable. "There is a great deal of ruin in a nation," said Adam Smith; and so there was in Khallata Naga's ragged inheritance.

Almost at once he found himself busy with a civil war against three renegade relatives: Tissa, Abha and Uttara, though The

Mahavamsa is blithely happier recording the "works of merit" that this careless ruler somewhat astonishingly found time to carry out – including well over thirty religious structures. Much good it did him. Killed by Kamma Harattaka, his chief general in 103 BCE, another messy power struggle broke out for the succession, this time between the general and Valagamba, Khallata Naga's brother.

Valagamba, who later events would show, had so unquenchable a sense of his own royal inheritance as bounce back from the darkest of setbacks, took the throne in 103 BCE by killing the general and – in an act of reckless trust - adopted Kamma Harattaka's son and married his wife.

But it was too good to be true. Barely was the celebratory kiribath digested when all the hounds of hell slipped their leads. A rebellion broke out in Rohana. A devastating drought began – a less than positive development in a land where the king was considered to have the power to cause rain. And, most ominously, the kingdom's preeminent port, Mahatittha (now Mantota, opposite Mannar) fell to invaders.

The third Tamil invasion of Sri Lanka was underway – this time led by seven opportunistic members of Madurai's Pandyan rulers who had seen in Sena and Gupta; and again in Ellara, just how easy it was to occupy Sri Lanka. It was a lesson that, once learnt, could never be unlearnt.

Valagamba, plucky to the last, met them in battle at a place called Kolambalaka, said to be near Anuradhapura, but ended up fleeing from the battlefield in a chariot lightened by the (accidental?) fall of his wife, Queen Somadevi.

In a 14-year tableau reminiscent of Agatha Christie's novel "Five Little Pigs" the once grand Anuradhapura Kingdom was then manhandled to atrophy. Two of the Dravidians returned to India, leaving one of the remaining five, Pulahatta, to rule from 104-101 BCE. At this point, history struggles to keep up.

Pulahatta was killed by Bahiya, another of the five remaining Dravidians and head of the army, who was in turn murdered in 99 BCE by Panayamara, the third Dravidian who had been unwisely promoted to run the army.

Proving those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, Panayamara was assassinated in 92 BCE by his general, the fourth Dravidian, Pilayamara.

And at this point Valagamba, the comeback king, begins his return. Having evaded capture back in 103 BCE, his subsequent escapes and hiding places illuminated the map of Sri Lanka like a Catch-Me-If-You-Can treasure hunt. His most famous hideaway was probably the Gunadaha Rajamaha Viharaya in Galagedera, just where the flat plains of the Anuradhapura Kingdom rise into the mountains that enfold the centre of the island, and with them, protection

and cover. Month by month, Valagamba's guerrilla tactics won ascendancy and the greatest of all compliments in the copycat campaign Ho Chi Minh would carry out centuries later in Vietnam. A milestone was reached when he managed to kill Pilayamara who had lasted all of seven months on the throne. With his death the throne passed to the last of the Pandyan chiefs, Dathika.

Given the murderous incompetence of the Pandyans, Valagamba's incremental skirmishes had the effect of pushing at an open door. His long, determined campaign marks him out as one of the country's pluckiest rulers. His defeat and killing of the Dathika in 89 BCE, gave him 12 years of real rule, and put the dynasty back at the centre of the state.

Valagamba set to work building a monastery, stupa and more memorably converting the Dambulla caves in which he hid during his wilderness years, into the famous Rock Temple that exists today. Less adroitly, Valagamba managed to drive a wedge between the monks, his favouritism of one sect for another, setting in motion the island's first Buddhist schism.

Despite this, it was under Valagamba's patronage that thirty miles north of Kandy five hundred monks gathered at the Aluvihare Rock Temple to write down the precepts of Buddhism. It was a momentous moment. Until then Buddha's

teachings had been passed on orally - but repeated invasions from India left the monks fearful that his teachings would be lost.

The challenge they had set themselves was immense. Firstly, they had to recite the doctrines. That would have taken several years. Then they had to agree on an acceptable version of the teachings before transcription. That must have taken even longer.

Finally came the lengthy work of transcribing them, using ola leaves from talipot palms.

The Pali Canon became the standard scripture of Theravada Buddhism's, written in the now extinct Pali language, an ancient Indian language, thought to be the language spoken by Buddha and used in Sri Lanka until the fifth century CE.

Scholars argue (as they do) about how much of the work can be attributed to one person or to Buddha himself – but believers are largely free of such elaborate debates. The Cannon lays out in unambiguous terms the doctrines, and rules of conduct Buddhists should follow.

Running to some 80,000 pages, the Canon is roughly the size of a dozen Bibles. The cave temple in which it was created still exists, with numerous caverns and old inscriptions to view, despite parts of it having been destroyed in the 19 CE Matale Rebellion.

The monks were probably still hard at work on The Pali Canon when Valagamba died in 77 BCE, bringing his adopted son, Mahakuli Mahatissa to power.

History hints that the Valagamba's succession may not have been entirely orderly; if so, then Valagamba's earlier trust in adopting Mahakuli Mahatissa, the son of his slain and traitorous enemy, can be read as a suicidal move.

But however he came to the throne, Mahakuli Mahatissa stayed the course for an surprisingly long fifteen years, though whether he did anything constructive remains a niggling historical curiosity.

What is known however, is that what came next proved right Calvin and Hobbes' astute observation: "It's never so bad that it can't get any worse."

5

BLOOD BATH

"The Duchess! The Duchess! Oh my dear paws! Oh my fur and whiskers! She'll get me executed, as sure as ferrets are ferrets!"

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

It took a hundred and twenty-eight years for the last Vijayan kings to travel the final road to oblivion, years that made the mafia tales of the Prohibition era or a Shakespearean tragedy appear tame.

But travel them they did – and with unforgettable horror – all eighteen monarchs, of whom at least two thirds were murdered by their successors, plunging the country into yet another civil war.

It all started with Mahakuli Mahatissa's heir, a succession which, on the face of it, seemed to go to plan. His stepbrother, Choura Naga, the son of King Valagamba, took the throne in 62 BCE and married Anula.

The kingdom, rescued from its third Tamil invasion by Valagamba in 89 BCE, had enjoyed almost thirty years of peace; and maybe even some nation rebuilding by the time Choura Naga and his new wife enjoyed their marriage's poruwa ceremony, witnessing the Ashtaka recite his religious chants at precisely the pre-ordained auspicious time.

As events were to later prove, the Ashtaka was to have his work cut out for him over the next few years, being in such demand as to become a nationwide celebrity in his own right. For Anula would turn out to be one of the island's more colourful characters; the kind of person Anne Tyler

had in mind in “Back When We Were Grownups,” writing “once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.”

What little is known of King Choura Naga is that he managed to get himself poisoned by Anula in 50 BCE, an act of realpolitik in which his wife quite probably played on her husband’s deep unpopularity with the traditional Theravada Buddhist monks who dominated the country.

This was not a school of Buddhism that won Choura Naga’s devotion - indeed he even went so far as to destroy eighteen of their temples, earning the eternal disapprobation of The Mahavaṃsa who recorded the poisoning with great satisfaction: “the evildoer died and was reborn in the Lokantarika-hell.”.

The political support Anula’s coup enjoyed is lost to all but the most pernicious speculation, but she filled the vacancy she had created by placing Choura Naga’s young nephew, Kuda Thissa on the throne. But not for long.

Anula was ever a lady short of patience. Tiring of her ward, she poisoned him in 47 BCE and installed her lover, a palace guard, as Siva I.

It was the start of the Love Period in ancient Sri Lankan history, every bit as deadly as a cobra bite.

Long term love was not to be the hapless Siva's destiny. He too was poisoned, and the queen installed a new lover, Vatuka, to the throne in 46 BCE. This was something of a promotion for the Tamil who had, till then, been living the blameless life of a carpenter.

By now Anula was well into her stride. The following year the carpenter was replaced in similar fashion by Darubhatika Tissa, a wood carrier – who also failed to measure up.

Her last throw of the love dice was Niliya, a palace priest who she installed as king in 44 BCE before feeding him something he ought not to have eaten.

At this point Anula must have reached the logical conclusion: if you want something done well, do it yourself. Busy women, after all, don't have time for excuses, only solutions.

And so, from 43 to 42 BCE Anula ruled in her own name, Asia's first female head of state, beating President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga by two thousand and thirty-six years. It was not a success.

After just four months her group-breaking reign ended at the hands of her brother-in-law, Kutakanna Tissa, who, having sensibly become a Buddhist monk during Anula's reign, remained alive and so able to rescue the monarchy. He did so by burning the queen alive in her own

palace in 42 BCE, bringing down the curtains on a royal career that eclipsed that of the entire Borgia clan put together.

As the queen's palace burnt to ash, a commendably clockwork form of royal leadership took the place of palace coups. For sixty-three halcyon years son succeeded father or brother, brother, for three generations, giving the kingdom a modicum of time to recover, repair and heal.

For eighteen blissfully uneventful years Kutakanna Tissa ruled with monkish devotion, adding to the many religious buildings in Anuradhapura including, with a filial devotion that contrasted strongly with the previous regime, the Dantageha Nunnery for his mother, who had become a nun.

He built a new palace and park for himself and, remarkably, also made time to restore and extend the kingdom's basic infrastructure. New walls "seven cubits high" and moats were built around Anuradhapura; two large reservoirs were established – Ambadugga and Bhayolippala.

Not the merest whiff of homicide hangs over Kutakanna Tissa's death; and he was succeeded by his son, Bhathika Abhaya in 20 BCE. The new king was to go down in history as one of the most religiously devoted monarchs the island had seen, no easy task given the stiff

competition from those of his predecessors who had chosen virtue over assassinations. Religious buildings were made yet more magnificent even to the point of being replastered in as unique building mortar that included a variety of sweet-smelling plants and pearls

New religious festivals and ceremonies were added to an already groaning ecclesiastical calendar and, for this most olfactory of monarchs, even the temple floors were ordered to be strewed with "honeycombs, with perfumes, with vases (filled with flowers), and with essences, with auri-pigment (prepared) as unguent and minium; with lotus-flowers arrayed in minium that lay ankle-deep."

Needless to say, the death of this "pious ruler of the earth," was a matter of deep regret to The Mahavamsa. Most unusually, his beatific statue still stands - opposite the Ruwanweli Stupa, built by the ancestor to whom he owed so much – Dutugemunu.

The King was succeeded by his younger brother Mahadatika Mahanaga in 9 CE, a king almost as pious, famed for his enthusiastic temple building and the land donations he made to monasteries. As with many, if not all the Vijayan kings, his wife was Tamil, and both their sons were destined to become kings. But with them the family reputation for dynastic devotion was to break down, giving way to something more in the spirit of Cain and Abel.

In waving a sorrowful farewell to his reign in 21 CE, The Mahavamsa obliquely notes a world soon to be forever shattered: "thus men of good understanding, who have conquered pride and indolence, and have freed themselves from the attachment to lust, when they have attained to great power, without working harm to the people, delighting in deeds of merit, rejoicing in faith, do many and various pious works."

Amandagamani Abhaya succeeded his father Mahadatika with exemplary order and propriety. A man almost as pious as his father, he continued the royal tradition of gilding the religious lily; and made a name for himself amongst vegetarians by banning all animal slaughter.

It was, with hindsight, inevitable that a man so totally out of touch with normal life, still less the practical needs of his nation, should end up being killed by his own brother just nine years into his reign. Kanirajanu Tissa, wielded the family knife, killing his sibling in 30 CE, his regicidal impulses heralding the dynasty's final moments – ones that not even the most sensational or improbable soap operas could ever hope to emulate.

Proving right the old adage that one's crimes eventually catch up with you, Kanirajanu Tissa's own reign was terminated after just 3 suspiciously turbulent years when in 33 CE, Chulabhaya, son of the assassinated Amandagamani Abhaya

became king. It is unlikely that Kanirajanu breathed his last with anything approaching a natural death

But Chulabhaya was to last no longer, dead in 35 CE, by which time it was clear that civil war and dynastic squabbling was the only song in the country's repertoire.

For four bleak months his sister Sivali took the throne, but the ascension of Sri Lanka's second female head of state probably did more to hasten, rather than slow down, the Vijayan dynasty's final tryst with oblivion. What she lacked in the blood thirstiness that had so marked out Anula, the country's first female ruler, she did not seem able to make up for with any counter balancing authority.

Perhaps it was too late for all that. For decades now the kingdom's rulers had demonstrated a greater interest in seizing the throne, or investing in the other-worldly than ever ruling it with wisdom or investing in its more practical necessities.

Sivali bobs up and down in the months succeeding her ascension vying for control of the state in what looks like a three-cornered struggle between herself, her nephew Ilanaga and the Lambakarnas. For by now the Vijayan dynasty not only had itself to contend with – it also had the much put upon and exasperated nobility, especially the Lambakarna family.

Little about this period of Sri Lankan history is certain, except that from around 35 CE to 38 CE an uncensored civil war preoccupied the entire country, leaving it without any plausible governance.

For a time Ilanaga seemed to be ahead of the pack. But he then seems to have scored a perfect own-goal when he demoted the entire Lambakarna clan. This abrupt change in their caste, in a country held increasingly rigid by ideas of caste, galvanised them into full scale rebellion.

The king – if king he really was – fell and fled into the hill country, returning 3 years later at the head of a borrowed Chola army to take back his throne in 38 CE.

The Lambakarna Clan were put back in their place, though it was to prove but a temporary place at best. Ilanaga's reign lasted another 7 years, before his son Chandra Mukha Siva succeeded in 44 CE.

Despite the chaos of this period of Sri Lankan history, and not without a little irony, it is astonishing to record how one of these last Vijayan kings – probably Ilanaga or his son Chandra Mukha Siva - still managed to find time to send an embassy to Rome. Pliny the Elder records the event which occurred at some point in the reign of the luckless Emperor Claudius (41 – 54 CE).

And at almost the same time a reciprocal one seems to have happened back in Sri Lanka with the (probably) accidental arrival of a Roman called Annius Plocamus.

Evidence of links between the two kingdoms can be found in both countries. Archaeologists working near the Via Cassia north of Rome identified an 8-year-old mummy from the second half of the 2nd century CE they called Grottarossa. Amongst her artefacts was a necklace of 13 sapphires from Sri Lanka.

And dating a few decades before this in Sri Lanka there is unmistakable evidence of Roman influences at the Abhayagiri Vihara monastery site in Anuradhapura. Here, nestling amongst the sculptured carvings of elephants and bulls are to be found winged cupids and griffins – and the acanthus leaves common on almost all Greek and Roman art.

Back in Rome, as the Emperor Claudius was getting ready to be murdered by his wife, Agrippina so ushering in the calamitous reign of Nero, back in Sri Lanka King Ilanaga's son and successor, Chandra Mukha Siva, was facing the same fate in 52 CE – albeit at the hands of his own brother Yassalalaka Thissa in 52 CE. The stage was now set for one of the most eccentric periods of island governance.

With the ascension of the regicidal Yassalalaka Thissa, the last chorus of the Vijayan throne sounded, in Frank Sinatra style:

“and now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain.”

With a story too bathetic to be encumbered by any inconvenient disbelief, The Mahavamsa recounts the bizarre end of this once great dynasty in 60 CE.

“Now a son of Datta the gate-watchman, named Subha, who was himself a gate-watchman, bore a close likeness to the king. And this palace-guard Subha did the king Yasalalaka, in jest, bedeck with the royal ornaments and place upon the throne and binding the guard's turban about his own head, and taking himself his place, staff in band, at the gate, he made merry over the ministers as they paid homage to Subha sitting on the throne. Thus, was he wont to do, from time to time.

Now one day the guard cried out to the king, who was laughing: `Why does this guard laugh in my presence?' And Subha the guard ordered to slay the king, and he himself reigned here six years under the name Subha Raja.”

Despatched by his own lookalike, Yassalalaka Thissa, the last Vijayan king died, one hopes, seeing the unexpectedly funny side of assassination. King Subha’s own reign lasted 6 years when, whetted by a 3-year rule back in 35 CE, the Lambakarna clan took royal matters back into their own hand and put the ex-palace guard to death.

A new Lambakarna king, Vasabha, was now to take the throne.

After 609 years, the Vijayan dynasty had come to an inglorious end.

Despite a rich choice of murderous would-be rulers, kings such as Vijaya, Pandukabhaya, Mutasiva, Devanampiya Tissa, and Dutugemunu, had been able to establish the confidence, culture, and mindset of an entire nation, giving it the ballast and energy necessary to propel itself forward for centuries to come.

With a writ running at times across the entire island, they transformed a series of unremarkable warring statelets and villages into a nation.

They bequeathed it with a legacy of literature, architecture, religion, and infrastructure that no other dynasty bettered.

Looking out at water rippling still over the great tanks they built with cutting-edge engineering; sitting in the shade of the magnificent palaces and courts constructed at Anuradhapura, reading inscriptions that point to the bounty of trade routes extending from the island to places as far away as Rome; in the ancient chants of Buddhist priests, the coinage, delicate statutory, frescos and books that survive to this day: in taking all of this in, you take as said an early nation every bit as impressive as any in the ancient world – and way ahead of most.

Its laws regulated an dynamic state, its armies and weapons defended it with a rigour that was effective.

Even as they disappeared from history, the achievements of the Vijayans lay before it in the indispensable foundations of an entire island-nation state.

THE CEYLON PRESS

A small island surrounded by large oceans. Sri Lanka is a well-kept secret. The Ceylon Press aims to make its story more accessible.

The Ceylon Press is based at and partially funded by The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, a jungle luxe retreat abandoned in war, reclaimed by nature, and now, gorgeously restored and there to be enjoyed by anyone in search of utter peace

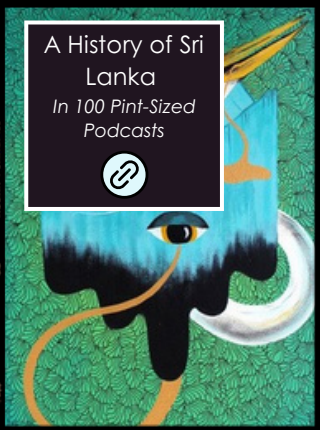
FT

Companions to Sri Lanka's

History; Travel & Place; Food, Fauna & Flora; Belief, Society & Culture.

A History of Sri Lanka

In 100 Pint-Sized Podcasts



The Story of Sri Lanka

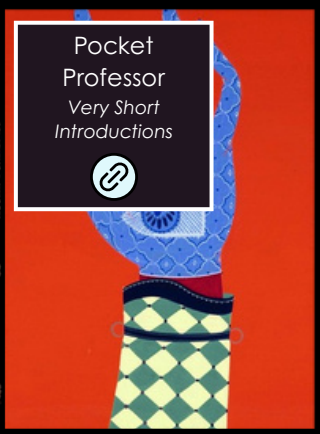
Podcast Pictures of the Island

Jungle Diaries

Podcasts from off the Grid

Pocket Professor

Very Short Introductions



Tiny Guides

Sri Lanka, Instantly

ALT Guides

Magical alternatives