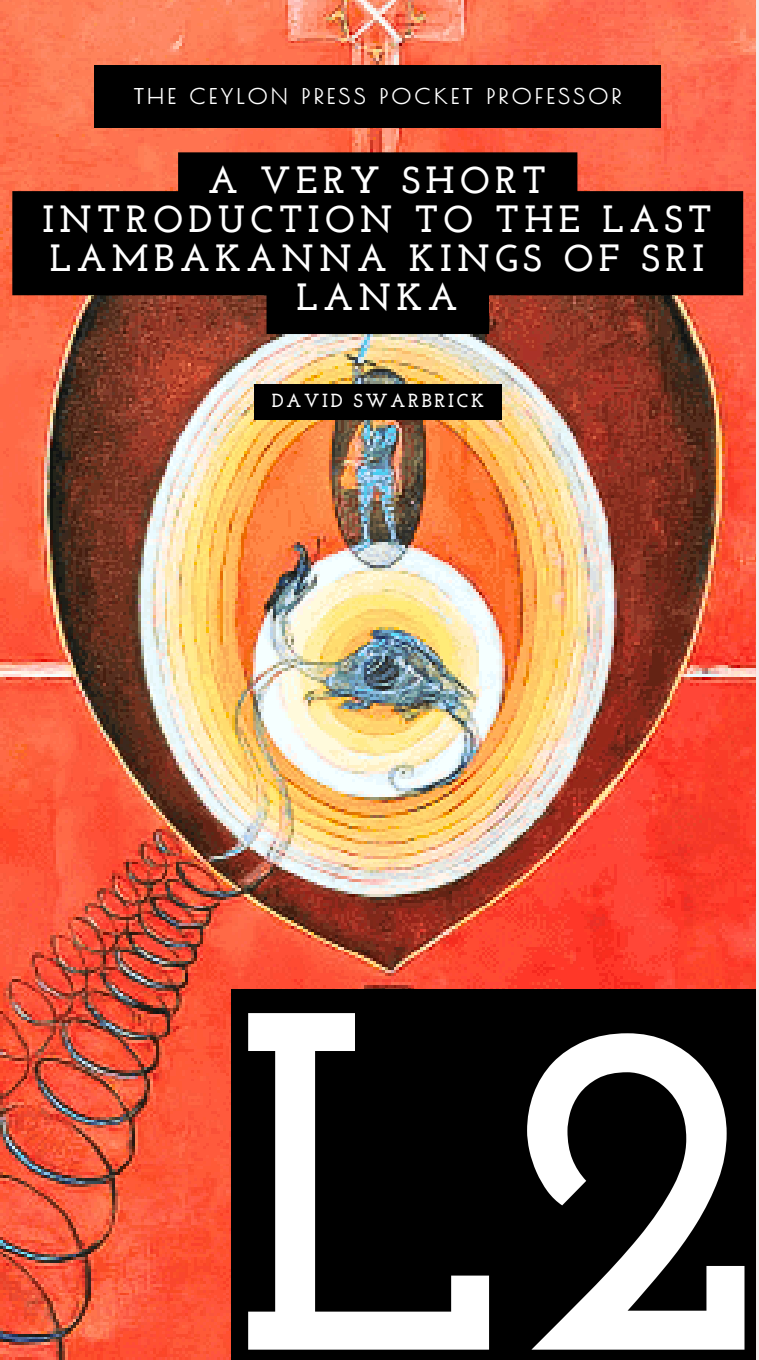

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A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE LAST LAMBAKANNA KINGS OF SRI LANKA

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TO RICHARD

The Cinnamon King

"Take some more tea," the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly."

The Mad Hatter
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll 1865

1

THE LAND OF PLENTY

"If," promised M.K. Gandhi, "you give me rice, I'll eat today; if you teach me how to grow rice, I'll eat every day." Gandhi only visited Sri Lanka once – in 1927 – which may explain why, erudite though his aphorism was, it remained, all the same, a lesson that had already been learnt long ago on the island - thousands of years ago, in fact, in the very earliest days of recorded Lankan history.

Ever since the first distinctive water technology was introduced by the early Anduraupuran kings with the creation of the massive Panda Wewa reservoir around 450 BCE, their kings could provide an ever greater abundance of water, delivered just when and where it was needed. It was a proficiency that enabled an entire island to feed itself without trouble. Tummies full, its people could focus instead on the other great matters of life – religion, for example, war, politics, poetry – or the slow contemplation of a temple lotus pond during a long post-lunch siesta.

This particular pastime – or ones not dissimilar to it – is still greatly prized here today. Sophisticated water technology made the island's paddy fields so fecund that the country barely needed to bother much with the enrichments of trade or the grubby task of making excessive money. As the ancient world's merchant ships crossed the Indian Ocean from China to Arabia, they may have made a point of stopping in Sri Lanka to buy its gems, spices, Mannar pearls, elephants, and hardwoods - but the riches this all brought were just icing. The country was already rich.

And it was this richness that the last Lambakanna kings had on their side as the kingdom they ruled moved to its apogee. The great gilded last moments of Edwardian England were fuelled by cotton; the Ming by the porcelain trade; and ancient Athens, silver from the Laurion mines. But here it was rice – plentiful, abundant, nurturing rice.

Rice would have arrived with the island's Mesolithic settlers, and it was first evidenced archaeologically around 800 BCE. Excavations made in the Anuradhapura area unearthed a remarkably large early Iron Age settlement – at least ten hectares, still with the spectral trace of irrigation systems and rice cultivation. The Mahavamsa Chronicle, starting a few hundred years later, around 540 BCE, noted that the island's first recorded queen, Kuveni, showed rice to Prince Vijaya, the country's founding

paterfamilias. Vijaya's hungry followers wasted little time, for the Chronicle goes on to document how they all then set about making themselves a fortifying lunch of rice and curry.

The plentiful supply of rice, even then, was due to small village tanks and their ability to harness and store water. They did so in systems that brought together up to 10 individual tanks within a small land basin measuring about 6 to 10 square miles, recycling water along the path from the reservoir to the field. Historians have estimated that in just one area in the north central part of the island – an area otherwise noted for its dryness – 450 such systems may have existed at some time between the second and the fifth centuries BCE, containing about 4,200 small tanks.

Ptolemy, writing in faraway Rome sometime between 127 and 170 CE, reported that the "country produces rice, honey, ginger, beryl, and hyacinth, and has mines of every sort, of gold, silver, and other metals. Large Tank systems followed the village ones – such as the Abhayavapi at Anuradhapura, the Tissa vava and the Nuwara vava. And from the fifth century CE onward, extremely long canals were added to the water network, opening up vast new areas for rice cultivation. By the sixth century, there was barely any suitable land in the entire Dryzone that had not been turned into paddy.

Of course, there were, from time to time, droughts, with at least six mentions of them cropping up in the ancient chronicles between 161 and 569 CE - but they seem to have been far less devastating here than in other parts of South Asia. The Samantapasadika, an ancient chronicle written by a monk called Buddhaghosa in Anuradhapura between 927 and 973 CE, notes the extreme care the state took to mitigate periods of water scarcity. "During the draught season," it states, "when water becomes scarce, water is released in intervals. If someone does not receive his due share during the interval allocated to him and the crops become withered, then another should not receive his share during his allocation. If any monk drives water from a secondary canal to a field belonging to someone else, to a canal or a field belonging to him or to someone else, or covers the catchment, then he has committed the offence of avahara."

The highly specific administrative and

legal infrastructure that the state wrapped around water collection and extraction gave it an unparalleled ability to manage droughts – a capability other parts of South Asia lacked to anything like the same degree. One ancient chronicler remarked that “by attending facilities for the cultivation of fields by means of tanks, he (the king) dispelled the famine in prosperous Lanka.”

By the time the last of the Lambakarna kings came to rule in 691 CE, the country had been functioning as a recorded state for over 1,200 years. Rice had become the petrol of the nation. In this, Sri Lanka was little different to most other Asian countries – but what set it apart was its sheer abundance, its ability to power the kingdom so very effectively through good times and bad.

Indeed, when the last of the Lankbranaka fell in 993 CE and the country embarked on hundreds of years of uncertain life, even this did not bring rice production to its knees. To hold this almost folkloric expectation - this expectation that you will not entirely starve - was a rare assurance in those pre-modern times; and the patriotic confidence it engendered is tellingly evident, even today. Other things may be wrong, even very badly wrong, but, so the feeling goes, we will feed ourselves, we will go on, we will get better. As one Singhala idiom puts it: "rather than cursing the darkness, it is better to light a lamp."

Famine, scarcity, hardship – these are not conditions unfamiliar to Sri Lanka, then or now, but the island has largely escaped the widespread devastation that has gripped its neighbours, a theme that runs through its history from its earliest recorded times. North of Sri Lanka, uncountable millions died of famine in British colonial India - 36 famines in around 200 years. So appalling were they that people’s bodies actually evolved to store food as fat differently, so that their descendants now face significant health complications. Even before this period, famine routinely crippled the sub-continent. Over 1700 years from the 1st century CE, over 75 famines are recorded, with some, such as that in the Deccan in the 1630s, the Punjab in the mid-13th century and South India in the 11th century, being monumentally destructive. But not here.

"Flowers grow beneath her feet,” wrote Rani Manicka in her novel, “The Rice Mother,” “but she is not dead at all. The years have not diminished the

Rice Mother. I see her, fierce and magical. Stop despairing and call to her, and you will see, she will come bearing a rainbow of dreams." In the simplest of algebraic formulas, advanced water technology enabled the plentiful production of rice, or, more directly, an innate island-wide self-confidence: however bad life sometimes got, it rarely if ever reached the draconian depths other countries encountered. Sri Lanka was different, and it was rice, the very thing it had most in common with all other Asian countries, which set it apart.

Rice still sits at the epicentre of all the island's Buddhist services, at Pereheras, Yak and Bali ceremonies, distributed at every important occasion, not least its own bespoke festival, the Alutsal Or Alut Sal Mangal Yaya. This, the New Rice Festival, is the traditional agricultural thanksgiving ceremony that marks the harvest of the first crop of the Maha season, usually in January or February.

Today rice production accounts for some 20% of the country's land use – but despite producing between 2.5 and 3.5 million metric tons, the country still needs imports to meet the needs of its peckish citizens, who consume up to 120 kg annually in curries, kothu roti, lamprais, hoppers, sweet puddings – kiribath.

Although healthier red rice varieties command more favour in Sri Lanka than in most other countries, the island once supported over 2000 other strains. Heirloom varieties like Suwandel, Maa-Wee and the dark Kalu Heenati (considered something of an aphrodisiac) are now making a modest comeback.

Little in its preparation has changed since ancient times, and its cultivation, though improved by mechanisation and disease-resistant varieties, remains elaborate. The crop is planted in two seasons per year: the Maha (bigger) season from September to March, fed by the northeast monsoon; and the Yala (smaller) season between May and August. The overall paddy track or Kumburuyaya is subdivided into smaller plots – liyadi - around which ridges (niyara) are made, pierced by vakkadas to let water in. Often, small areas are left wild to feed the birds that might otherwise simply eat the paddy. Harrowing or preparing the land, once done by ploughs and oxen, is now mechanised. The land is levelled and seeds, often pregerminated, sown across the

watery track – the water itself is typically kept at around 5 cm above the soil. Then the weeding begins. And never stops: patience was ever a virtue best exhibited by rice farmers. Harvesting is usually a manual process, followed quickly by drying, storage, and milling, with rapid drying being the most critical step.

Entire social groups and agricultural occupations were organised around rice – including the Bathgama, an agricultural caste associated with rice production, their name deriving from Sinhala: Bath (rice) and Gama (village). Seen everywhere, rice is most iconically – albeit agreeably obscurely – best honoured in the battered stones that make up the little-known Kiribath Verhera. This now almost entirely ignored temple in Anduraupura was built as long ago as 267 BCE by Devanampiya Tissa, the king who brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

Kiribath is, of course, the default national dish of the island, a dish that even those not blessed with domestic-goddess tendencies can easily master. Simply boil rice with coconut milk, water, and salt until all that's left is a thick ricey goo. Cooled and cut into any shape, it can be added to sturgeon eggs, bacon and eggs, white truffles, or dhal to give you a clearer idea of what the better gods consume when hungry. No dish better celebrates rice than this. No king, least of all the last of the Lambakannas, ate better. It remains a dish that leaves you feeling better off than ever before.

Destroyed, probably in 993 CE by Tamil invaders, the Kiribath Verhera was overtaken by jungle and only rediscovered in 1890. Like so much else on the vast plains of this devastated ancient city, there is nothing much to help you make sense of what you see. Writing in 1939, Hubert Weerasooriya, recorded how "another half mile of tramping through the jungle path brings us to a grass-covered mound similar in shape." From studying the modest excavations made by the Archaeological Commissioner, he concluded that "it was one of the oldest of the larger dagabas completely built of brick, but unlike others, it has no stonework, such as flower altars or cornices. Another point it differed from similar structures was that its quadrangular courtyard was laid in brick and not paved in stone. "A shaft thirty-six feet deep was sunk through the centre of the dagaba. That it had been earlier stripped of its relics and other treasures it had contained by Tamil

invaders was proved by the gutted relic chamber."

"About 200 yards to the northeast of it," he noted, "a few roughly cut stone pillars stand in bleak solitude, disclosing an image of a house in utter disrepair. Here it is to be seen: a piece of a giant statue of Buddha. The portion above the neck, which is in fair condition, measures about 2 feet, while the whole piece, which is only up to the waist, is about nine feet long. Now it is lying on its side, fallen from grace and badly damaged, a sad change from the lofty, exalted position the statue must have occupied in the time of Anuradhapura's glory.'

Clearly, it once stood in the centre of a great garden. One of the inscriptions on the pillar, mentioned by the earlier explorer HCP Bell in 1891, records the granting of a garden notable for its protective tolerance toward criminals, who were explicitly safeguarded against arrest if they had gained sanctuary within its boundaries.

And up to the very point when Mahinda V, the last king of the Anuradhapura, last of the great Lambakannas, nibbled on his kiribath in his palace next door to the Kiribath Verhera sometime just before 993 CE, it must have seemed to many that this was a time of long drawn out sunsets, an era of India Summers whose ending was unimaginable - the ultimate glorious golden age of the one-island state, buoyed on a tide of surplus and achievement - its last great long moment when everything worked – until, one day, it didn't.

"Begin at the beginning," the King said, very gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

The King of Hearts
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll 1865

2

REDEEMER VICTORIOUS

The day earmarked for the destruction of the Kiribath Vehera was still long to come, over 300 years away. When the returning Lankbranaka regained their throne in 691 CE, there was much to put right in a country that had been wracked by decades of civil war, caused in large part by themselves but, in no less measure, by the tenacious ineptitude of the reigning regicidal Moriyan dynasty. The Lambakanna, revived and determined, were to rule the kingdom for 326 years, an innings only slightly shorter than the 370 years earlier when the dynasty had occupied the Anuradhapura throne between 66 CE and 436 CE.

Their first administration much resembled their second in its beginnings: throwing up a man who would grow into a great king, putting the country to rights. But thereafter the resemblances ended. The first Lambakannas had seen their power whittled away largely by an over-fondness for palace coups, botched successions, murder, and the occasional over-reliance on soldiers – sometimes mercenaries – of dubious loyalties.

During the administration of the second Lankbranaka, a period of unique regal Ahimsa reigned, as successor after a successor displayed such great reverence for the life of the then-reigning king that it ended naturally, not at an assassin's sword.

Of the twenty-six late Lambakanna kings, it is hard, indeed almost impossible, to find a whisper of malicious gossip about how they may have gained the throne. Neither ancient chronicles, nor pillar inscriptions, nor the testimonies of travellers, nor the study of coinage and buildings indicate any other than matchless manners in the matter of would-be homicide. Perhaps the wholesale slaughter of the preceding 228 years, when half the kings were murdered by the other half, had branded the kings to come with an appreciation of successional non-violence. Certainly, the returning Lambakannas, in the form of the new king, Manavanna, could not have failed to understand the awesome cost of such violence - to the state, still less to themselves.

Manavanna’s own father, Kassapa II, had won his throne by killing his predecessor, and his own death had triggered a final bout of civil war in which Tamil mercenaries, in shifting alliances with the Lambakannas and Moriyans, won and lost power in pirouettes of dizzying complexity. But

Manavanna's own path to power lay more ominously through the wharves and great temples of the ancient Pallava port city of Mamallapuram, north of Sri Lanka in what is now Tamil Nadu.

For over 600 years – until 897 CE - the Pallavas had been one of five dynasties that ruled over southern India, occupying their time, as dynasties like to do, brawling with other neighbouring dynasties for land and power. For hundreds of years, the Pallavas fought with the Tamil Cheras who ruled the Malabar coast; the Pandyans in Madurai; the Karnataka Chalukyas; and the Cholas, who, from their capital at Thanjavur, came to occupy most of Southern India, as well as much of Sri Lanka, parts of the Ganges and Sumatra. Sri Lanka's late Lambakanna rule can only really be understood by first knowing a little of what was going on just north of the Palk Straits, in southern India, for the repercussions of these Indian wars were to have a transformative impact on the island.

Manavanna fled to India with his wife Samghamana shortly after the death of his father, King Kassapa II, in 659 CE, to escape the suicidal political instability that enveloped the island when Hatthadatha seized Aunundupura and proclaimed himself King Dathopatissa II. Manavanna was to spend almost 20 years there, befriended by the Pallava King, Narasimhavarman I. Charismatic, so physically dominating he was known as "the great warrior", determined, smart, expansive, as much a master of the arts and sciences as he was of war, he began his reign avenging his father's death by sacking the Chalukyan capital at Vatapikonda and killing its king. He returned home with the almost-sacrosanct Vatapi Ganapati statue of Lord Ganesha, an adornment in keeping with his growing reputation for creating architectural masterpieces - for the shore temples, pavilions and shrines he commissioned in the shapes of temple chariots hewn from the granite rocks at Mahabalipuram are one of Asia's greatest religious structures. Mahabalipuram was also expanded into a major port and naval base, helping the Pallavas dominate trade with Sri Lanka and part of the Indian Ocean trade routes.

With the ancient sources modest on details and the other historical evidence often baffling in terms of dates, it is hard to assess exactly what Manavanna did for Narasimhavarman I over those two decades, but, sword bearer as he

was, it is unlikely that he was idle as the Pallava king scrapped his way through southern India, when not building his masterpieces. And ultimately, it was in Narasimhavarman's best interests to have a compliant power in his far south in the form of a new king, Manavanna.

With the military help of Narasimhavarman, Manavamma's first attempt to capture the island almost succeeded. The Anuradhapuran king, Dathopatissa II, fled, but the mercenary army ground to a halt when Manavamma fell ill. The aspiring insurgent returned to India for many years, securing victories against other South Indian states for his Pallava paymasters whilst also fathering three sons who would, in turn, become kings after him - Aggabodhi V, Kassapa III and Mahinda I. The Chronicles note that he lived in no discomfort, for the king put him "on an equal footing with himself regarding food and lodging and honour and equipage." But a second invasion attempt, made with a larger mercenary force in 691 CE, did succeed, as both the Mahavamsa and the Kasakudi copper plates confirm.

In truth, his campaign was probably more like pushing on an open door, for by 691 CE, Anuradhapura was little more than a playground for Tamil merchants under Poththakutta and only loosely loyal to Hatthadatha - aka King Dathopatissa II. Much of the country was beyond the writ of any law as the hapless Poththakutta was soon to discover. Fleeing from the besieged capital after Hattadatha himself had been killed, the Tamil merchant leader was poisoned by a friend who, in a dither of mixed loyalties, chose to kill both himself and Poththakutta. From all who survived that day, it was a job well done. The Lambakanna had regained their erstwhile throne, Manavamma had got himself a kingdom, and the Pallavas had ousted rival Tamil power groups from the island, the better to keep it under their own influence.

Thirty-five years stretched beyond the new king, a length of rule few earlier kings had ever enjoyed - and none very recently. Given that he spent 20 years in India and would have gone there at around 10-15, he may have been around 35 when he took up his crown. He brought to the task qualities and a mindset that few others had offered over more than 1,000 years of island kingship. He was a tested and assured military commander. The son of an earlier king, he would have harboured no

doubts about his own rightful destiny to rule. And over the decades in India, he would have seen at close hand the detailed functioning of one of Asia's most successful states, for the Pallavas were not simply military masters. They also dominated trade, built influential relationships to control commerce with Java, Sumatra, Cambodia, and China, harnessed religion to their benefit, managed an economy that produced abundant rice, collected taxes efficiently, issued credible coinage, and ran a kingdom through a polished and proficient bureaucracy.

Manavanna would have had no doubt about what a successful state should look like. He began by giving himself the title Senaḍipati, the first island king to use the word. It indicated that he was king by right of military power. And as such, he rebuilt the army, and, as archaeological evidence suggests, military defences too. Rebellions ceased.

His strong military ties with the Pallavas eliminated the threat of other Tamil dynasties interested in opportunistic invasions, and it is likely that the various mercenary groups linked to competing Indian dynasties would have retreated, left, or sued for peace. There was nothing left to fuel the old Moriya-Lambakanna dynastic conflict, and of the Moriyans we (almost) hear no more. Government was stabilised; the centre was back in control. "From that time," The Cuḷavamsa Chronicle writes, "Manavanna set up in the island the umbrella of his domain, warding off therewith, as it were, all harm from the inhabitants of the Island."

Irrigation systems were overhauled and repaired, and there is substantial archaeological evidence of his improvements in the creation, repair, and maintenance of tanks, along with the associated administration and infrastructure. Eight large new reservoirs were created. Archaeological surveys indicate that over 30,000 tanks were in use during this later Lambakarna rule, and many of them would have been restored by Manavanna. Rice production could recommence, creating surpluses and fortifying the very heart of the economy. State administration, tax collecting, and bureaucracy would have been restored. His Pallava alliance, which was to last for almost the entirety of Lambakanna's rule, gave the island preferred access to trade links to South India and beyond.

Monasteries and temples were repaired, and reendowed; and new

ones built, especially those linked to Theravada Buddhism, with a return to traditional piety – and not just in Anuradhapura but in Matara too. The iconic Lovamahapaya - Brazen Palace – was reroofed.

His death, in 726 CE, triggered the calmest and most orderly of clockwork successions, a clear testament to the peace Manavanna had brought to the island. Three sons, already elderly by the time of their father's death, were to rule after him - Aggabodhi V, for 6 years until 732; Kassapa III, for 7 years and Mahinda I, for 4 years, with not the faintest of rumours in any ancient chronicles of coups, rebellions or subversive rival factions ready to obstruct so mannered these successions.

And yet the king bequeathed more than a pacified, confident, and prosperous state to his heirs. He also passed on one that was demonstrably dependent on the support of a powerful outside ally – the Pallavas. There is no evidence that the Pallavas abused this position: it was, after all, in their best political and commercial interests to have such a firm and functioning island ally in the Lambakannas. But that proximity brought with it a proliferation of sharing and of Indian influences in everything from royal brides and trade to architecture, which is ever more evident from this time on. The protection offered by the Pallavas was only effective as long as the dynasty itself held strong, and when its lands were conquered by the Chola kings about 880 CE, the clock on Andhra-Urban independence was set ticking once again.

But this was still to come. For the next 15 years, this band of brothers, who had come of age in India, ruled, carrying on much as their father had.

"That's the reason they're called lessons," the Gryphon remarked: "because they lessen from day to day."

The Gryphon
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

3

WALKING ON AIR

As Aggabodhi VI took up his crown in 741 CE, a sense of new beginnings would have struck the land. For with his ascension came a generational shift in rule. For 50 years, the island had enjoyed the Pax Manavamma as first the great old liberator king and then his three sons ruled the land. Given that most people then lived little beyond their mid-thirties, most, still less their fathers, would not have known of any other kings. The change would have felt seismic – but in all the nicest of all possible ways, for here at last came kings whose age brought them closer to their subjects.

But like so many apparently seismic moments, this one was all rather beside the point. What distinguished the next nine kings was not so much their age as their cheery, freewheeling approach to kingship. To them fell the fruits of a kingdom, wrested from hell and made secure just five decades earlier. For almost 100 years these particular descendants of king Manavamma would rule over Sri Lanka, point it here, prod it there, tinker with it – but still make plenty of time to get on with other, less arduous pursuits: with palace politics, temple building, calming down intemperate monks, resisting rebellions, not to mention all the more domestic distractions that, for most other people, pass as a full and busy life.

These were, in the words of The Wizard of Oz, the tra-la-la years. "Ha ha ha, Ho ho ho, And a couple of tra-la-la's, That's how we laugh the day away, in the Merry Old Land of Oz!" Were it not for the accession of the reforming Sena II in 866 CE, this laissez-faire approach to kingship would have left the kingdom drifting into a never-never land, a victim of happy, unwitting neglect, instead of netting, for one last time, another 100 years of life.

The new era began with a steadiness not to be seen in later reigns, for Aggabodhi VI had already built a strong reputation within civil administration, the army, and the Buddhist orders as a leader who well ruled the eastern province for his uncle, Mahinda I, between 738 and 741 CE. He must also have wisely spent time getting his cousin, Aggabodhi, King Mahinda's son, on his side, for his accession to the throne does not seem to have been disputed by him. His cousin, who sub-ruled Ruhuna for the Anuradhapura Kingdom, would later go on to become a king himself, as Aggabodhi VII. The new king made his own son, Mahinda, the head of

the army and promoted his cousin to the rank of Uparaja – or crown prince - to rule over the plum Eastern province. The new crown prince seems to have had a rather wobbly moment a little later, organising a half-hearted rebellion against his uncle, but the uprising was easily put down, and Aggabodhi VI married his daughter to the Uparaja, thereby ensuring that what might have grown into a rivalry became a long-term alliance that worked in both their interests.

Like his predecessors, the new king was clear about his preferred support for the country's traditional Theravada Buddhist orders, and they in turn were careful to give the king all the authority due to one described as the protector of the Dhamma – those fundamental teachings of Lord Bhudda, from the Four Noble Truths to the Noble Eightfold Path, and everything that may have lain in-between that this particular conservative branch of Buddhism deemed relevant. Most notably, he commissioned a multi-storied hall in Anuradhapura within which the grander monks could study Theravada doctrines in greater comfort - and the decrees that have survived are strictly and, for the establishment at the time, reassuringly Theravadin in their in their language. But his religious patronage was even more widespread. Significant new temples and monasteries were built or enlarged in Vaparani, Managgabodhi, Hatthikucchi, Punapitthi, and Mahaparivena. A large refectory was built for the iconic Abhayagiri Viharaya, and the entrance to the stately Ruwanweliseya stupa was repaired.

Unlike his illustrious grandfather, the king kept his focus on the home front rather than abroad, and Sri Lanka was spared any involvement in the internecine warfare going on in India between the Chola and Pallava kingdoms, which by the end of the century was to produce a major turning point, one not in the Pallavas' favour. Even so, trade continued to be well supported. At least 4 diplomatic missions are known to have been sent by him to the Imperial Tang court in China in a balancing act that sought to bring the island closer to this distant superpower without alienating the Pallava superpower closer to hand. Playing India off against China remains the day job of any Sri Lankan President. When the celebrated and Chinese-oriented monk Amoghavajra visited Sri Lanka sometime around 746 CE for a seven-day palace sleepover, the

state put out all its ceremonial bunting – including a daily ritual bathing with fragrant water from golden vessels. Queens, ministers and even the crown prince, all on their most saintly behaviour, were in full attendance.

When he died, naturally, in 772 CE, it could be said that his greatest achievement was just keeping the great show on the road, emollient and trouble-free. The state continued to work well, taxes collected, irrigation systems managed and improved, the religious establishment respected, and the odd rebellion crushed with kind cunning. This itself was no small thing, but though nothing of major importance seems to have been done, and chaos continued to be averted, there is little indication that he read the runes of what was happening in southern India to better prepare his Pallava-oriented realm for what might be to come.

The succession to his cousin and son-in-law, Aggabodhi VII, the son of Mahinda I, went without any known squabbles, but the new king had been a king in waiting for decades by the time he came to the throne, and, old as he was, his reign was predictably short - just 5 years.

As with all Manavamma's successors, Aggabodhi VII was the continuity candidate. With little evidence of any departures from form or policy, the grand old kingdom show carried on. And grand it was for in him the country had a king who was not only the son of a previous king, but also the husband of the previous king's daughter. There could be no doubting his royalty.

"Thereupon," noted the Culavamsa, "the Uparaja Aggabodhi, the fortunate, became king, son of the wise Adipada Mahinda." For decades, he has effectively been his own king – albeit a sub one, ruling various outstation provinces for his uncle, the king. He knew the ropes, the people, the power bases, the religious establishment. And they all knew him. As the Uparaja – or crown prince – he was at the heart of the establishment. He sensibly moved his cousin, Mahinda, the head of the army, to take command of a distant province, made his own son the new Uparaja and settled down to enjoy his brief tenure without risk or family rebellions.

The Culavamsa also has him down as a king who received the laws, saying: "To the Order and to the laity he showed favour according to merit....By legal acts, he carefully

reformed the Order of the Conqueror (Buddha) and, judging according to justice, he rooted out unjust judges." It was perhaps in response to this that he became known by the affectionate diminutive "Kuda Akbo".

He took care to patronise Theravada Buddhist establishments, repairing the temple of the Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura, constructing two new temples in Kalanda and Mallavata, but also gave to other orders. "He had rice by allotment distributed to the inmates of the three fraternities," notes the Culavamsa in reference to the other Buddhist chapters, "and delicious foods fitting for himself, to the Pamsukulins." This would have been quite a treat, for the Pamsukulins – or rag-robe wearers – were an especially austere group of Buddhist monks whose adherence to the monarchy was not in the least bit troubled by their determination to live as simple and poor a life as possible. Given quite how much land – and paddy – was actually controlled by the various religious orders, this degree of royal favour was another way of ensuring that the logistics of the national food supply worked without trouble.

He was, however, less adroit in his death, for he passed to the next world unexpectedly (but not unnaturally) - and in Polonnaruwa. It was perhaps a blessing that his own son, who had been appointed Uparaja, had recently died, for it offered his nephew, Mahinda, the son of the previous King, the opportunity to become the legitimate heir himself, and not be a rebel in search of a kingdom. Mahindra duly took over as Mahinda II in 787 CE, reigning for 20 years until 807 CE. But securing all this created the most enormous clamour and tumult – the scale of which left an ominous reminder of troubled times in the long-distant past, and of still more troubled times over successive reigns. Winning the family politics that now ensured was his first and greatest challenge as he faced off against an operatic troupe of cousins, aunts and others every bit as jealous and dramatic as Carmen, Tosca, Antonio Salieri or Lady Macbeth

Racing to Anuradhapura from Mannar to secure the capital and army, he had to pause to put down a rebellion of tax protesters in the northern province. He next headed for Polonnaruwa with the intention of marrying the late king's widow, a union of dubious benefit. The window's initial reply to this unlooked-for romantic proposal was to poison him. When this failed, a siege

commenced, and Mahinda – the victor - bound her in chains before marrying her all the same, "as he thought, she could neither be set free nor slain. It turned out to be an unexpectedly good decision and the Culavamsa went onto note, "she became with child and brought forth a splendid son who bore on him the signs of (former) merit. After that, she was very dear to the King, who granted his son the dignity of uparaja with the revenues."

But his troubles did not end there for another cousin (or nephew) - Dappula mounted a new rebellion against him from Ruhuna and the east. Mixing military might, bribery, being nice to demanding monks, and winning over other disgruntled (imprisoned princes), Mahinda saw off the challange, "mounted his tried elephant, broke through a gate like a down rushing thunderbolt, and began with his thousand warriors the irresistible combat."

It worked. He imposed a treaty on his defeated relative with reparations in the form of elephants, horses, and treasures, and with state boundaries redrawn to better entrench royal power. "Thus had the powerful prince freed the Island from all briers, as sole monarch, he entered the capital and lived therein happily," concluded the Culavamsa, in the manner of one concluding an especially instructive fairy tale.

And yet, there was a terrible cost to all this – a payment a much later king would have to make. For this insidious, ever more present, phoenix-like internal threat to the state's autonomy was to make later kings far more willing to give time and resources to deter homegrown troubles, rather than build the defences of the state against the external ones that would eventually overwhelm it. Over the seas, in not-so-far-away India, the Pallava kingdom was nearing its collapse, with Dantivarman, its king at the time, losing wars against a variety of other states, most especially the Chola, who captured its bread basket – the vast region of Tondaimandalam. An unstoppable new power was assembling across all of southern India.

Predictably, statues, monasteries, temples, and accessorising religious structures were built at Dama, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, and Hemasali. He even repaired the embankment of the Kala Wewa, a vast seven-mile-square reservoir that supported most of Anuradhapura's agricultural needs.

It had been a perfectly respectable reign. Perhaps exhausted by the battle to begin it properly, it is unclear whether Mahinda II went on to do anything of real lasting importance, except that, for the better part of 20 years, the country was safe, calm and functional. No one – not even the cattle – starved, as the Culavamsa tells: "To the lame, he gave bulls as well as the needful maintenance, and to the Damilas, he gave horses, as they would not take cattle. The poor who were ashamed to beg he supported in secret, and there were none on the Island who were not supported by him according to their deserts. Pondering how food could be provided for cattle, he gave them young corn full of milky juice from a thousand fields. " This was a victory of sorts – but just as he himself had faced so great a disputed succession, so too did his heir, his junior and perhaps only surviving son, who took the throne as Dappula II in 807 CE.

His accession was greeted by a rebellion in the chronically rebellious North East. Sending his son and heir, along with his main general, rather backfired, as both joined the rebels. Dappula's solution was terminal. "He slew the twain," recalled the Culavamsa, not one to linger long on the pros and cons of filicide, "took possession of everything they had, slaughtered all their accomplices."

Although Dappula's reign was short, he seems to have been a shrewd operator. His intelligence network uncovered a plot involving Tamil mercenaries, which he thwarted before it could begin, and he nimbly divided the power bases in Ruhuna so none would be strong enough to challenge him as overlord. He did all the right things as far as Buddhist orthodoxy was concerned, building and repairing alms houses, temples, and religious colleges in such places as Nilagalla, Mahalekha, Ambuyyana, Giribhanda, and Mihintale.

The filicide that baptised his reign in blood notwithstanding, he seems to have been mindful of his (complaint) subjects' needs, and Culavamsa lists how "to those among the bhikkhus who were engaged in the hardest studies, he presented bronze alms bowls, and he left undone nothing of that which one calls a meritorious work. To widowed women of good families, he gave ornaments, and when they wanted food, he handed it to them at night. To the cattle he gave young corn, to the crows and other birds rice, and to the children grain with honey and syrup." Eccentric

though it sounds to make bird feeding a national policy, it probably had the sensible purpose of protecting crops and paddy at key times. "Thus the King with his attendants performed meritorious works, and after enjoying the earth, he had to leave it after five years."

Little is known about the short and unremarkable reign of his son, Mahinda III, who ruled from 812 to 816 CE. No one seems to have disputed his ascension, and he took care to quickly associate himself with religious orthodoxy, adopting for himself the additional title of Dhammika Silamegha – the "Righteous Cloud of Rock." He even found time to improve irrigation, repairing tanks and other water infrastructure in Karakala and Ruka.

He was succeeded in turn by his two brothers, the first of which, Aggabodhi VIII, was to rule for almost 12 years from 816 to 827 CE. Strife and mutinous relatives did not seem to have followed him up the chamber of the throne room, and he took to his reign with all the tranquillity of a swan on water. No wars, local or foreign, are recoded, and he extended the usual if unremarkable patronage to the religious establishment. He seems to have been a stickler for outward rectitude, prohibiting the sale and movement of meat or alcohol in the cities on Uposatha days – those manifold lunar days when Buddhists are meant to purify their minds and listen to sermons and prayers.

He seems to have been a textbook Mommy's boy. The Culavamsa devoted many plush stanzas to his filial fondness, which speak eloquently for themselves. "The King," it says, "found pleasure in the serving of his mother day and night. He went to wait on her already early in the morning, rubbed her head with oil, perfumed the parts that were moist with sweat, cleaned her nails, and bathed her carefully. He clad her himself in a new garment, pleasant to the touch, and the cast-off raiment he took and cleaned it himself. With the water therefrom, he sprinkled his own head together with the diadem and worshipped her perfectly with fragrant flowers as a cetiya. After making obeisance before her three times, and walking with right side facing round her, and giving her attendants raiment and the like to their heart's content, he offered her delicious food with his own hand, partook himself of what she left, and strewed thereof on his head. To her attendants he gave the best food such as was meant for the

the king, and when he had put in order her chamber, fragrant with sweet odours, he carefully prepared there with his own hand her couch, washed her feet, rubbed her gently with fragrant oil, sat by her rubbing her limbs and sought to make her sleep Then with right side facing, he walked round her bed, did reverence three times in the right way, ordered slaves or servants as guard and without turning his back on her, went out. At a spot where she could no longer see him, he halted and did reverence three times again. Then, happy with his action and ever thinking of her, he went home. As long as she lived, he served her in this way."

The king even had his mother sell him to a monastery and then buy him back to ensure his continuing freedom. Meanwhile, as he dallied in almost late Bourbon style, the war across the Palk Straits was hotting up, with the Colas and Pallavas now seriously engaged in what would soon become the endgame for determining the next Indian Ocean superpower.

How much of this troubled him? We do not know, nor is there any evidence, of how the Anuradhapuran kingdom positioned itself to best manage whatever the outcome was.

Another 16 years passed on with general passivity as his younger brother, Dappula III, took over from 827 to 843 CE. The usual emollients were distributed to the religious establishment. The buildings around the sacred Bodhi tree were overhauled and gilded. Monasteries and temples were built or repaired in places such as Hasthikuchchi, Vahadipa, Jeta, and Lavaravapabbata. An ominous-albeit wholly unverified – cautionary note creeps into the account in the multi-authored seventeenth-century Rajavaliya Chronicle mentions that Anuradhapura was briefly plundered by an unspecified Tamil army.

The almost-model succession of his son Aggabodhi IX followed when Dappula died in 843 CE. A mild contretemps briefly erupted between Aggabodhi IX and his testy cousin, Mahinda, but the new king took the helm – briefly, for "the King went after three years to behold the reward for his faith in the three sacred objects, driving, as it were, in a heavenly chariot to death. Thus," cautions the Culavamsa helpfully, "all corporeal beings are impermanent. Even the all-wise Buddhas are doomed to die. Hence, a prudent man giving up everything that proceeds from the lust of being, will keep his thoughts fixed on nirvana." The by-passed

cousin, Mahinda, however, had fled to India, where he took refuge at the Pandyan court, hoping to stir those kings sufficiently well as to propel himself to power.

But it was not to be. When Aggabodhi IX's younger brother took the throne in 846 CE as Sena I, his first act was to send an undercover assassin to the Pandyan court to terminate the troublesome Mahinda. Job done, Sena set about doing what Sri Lankan kings were all too often wont to do, and he is recorded as building, repairing, or enlarging at least 20 monasteries and temples from Ritigala to Polonnaruwa, as well as endowing many more. Given that his was a 20-year reign, it's arguable that he ought to have done a lot more. But his entire government was overshadowed – emasculated even – by the shattering invasion by the very Pandyans with whom his cousin had earlier sought an elusive safety.

When Srimara Srivallabha, the Pandyan king, decided to invade Sri Lanka sometime soon after 846 CE, his reputation would have already run far ahead of his actual armies. Known to many as "the Confounder of the Circle of his Enemies," and to others merely as "unparalleled warrior" or "one who caused confusion among enemy forces," he was not the sort of foe to have breading down your neck as annihilated Chera and Pallava armies would testify. Plunder, rolling back the frontiers of the Pallava empire still further, even revenge for poor assassinated Mahindra, all may have played a part in inspiring this peppy Pandyan warrior to take to his ships and sail across the Palk Straits.

Decades of good living and poor investments in defence left Sena's kingdom so ill-prepared for the assault that its defeat was guaranteed. "The Island army's leaders," writes the Culavamsa, "were absent, were without zeal; it scattered in fight and fled in all directions. The great army of the Pandu King broke in at the same moment, crushing in onset the people, like the hosts of Mara. When the King heard of the dispersion of his army, he took all his valuable property, left the town and turned towards Malaya." Sena's younger brother and heir apparent committed suicide, and another brother, Kassapa, was slain during the fighting. Anuradhapura and the surrounding territory were captured, and the city was sacked. Dolefully, the Culavamsa recoded how "the Pandu King took away all valuables in the treasure house of the King and

plundered what there was to plunder in the vihara and town. In the Ratanapada, the golden image of the Master Buddha the two jewels which had been set as eyes in the stone image of the Prince of Sages, likewise the gold plates on the cetiya in the Thuparama, and the golden images here and there in the viharas — all these he took and made the Island of Lanka deprived of her valuables leaving the splendid town in a state as if it had been plundered by yakkhas."

Sena had little option but to sue for peace – or lose his crown altogether. It was a most unequal negotiation. Sena "agreed to everything, bestowed favours on the ambassadors to their hearts' content, presented them with a couple of elephants as well as with all his jewels. When the Pandu King saw all this, he was highly pleased, handed over the capital to the messengers on the same day, evacuated the town, and betook himself at once to the seaport. There he embarked and returned to his country."

Barely had the Pandyans left when the hapless Sean faced rebellion in the southern province of Ruhana, where his nephew had been disposed of in his inheritance of the subkingdom.

Sena was able to put him back in power and consolidate matters with a set of complicated marriages, but it was hardly his finest hour. When he died in 866 CE after a 20-year rule, it was clear that only a miracle could now help the kingdom avoid going up in smoke altogether.

"Somehow you strayed and lost your way, and now there'll be no time to play, no time for joy, no time for friends – not even time to make amends."

The Cheshire Cat
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

4

THE LONG GOODBYE

That catastrophe did not immediately envelop the kingdom was due in part to the next king, Sena II, and his adept handling of the deadly new South Asian realpolitik that had drawn Sri Lanka into its magnetic field. From his accession in 866 CE, the Anduraupuran kingdom had barely 125 years left to live. Were it not for the phenomenal capabilities of Sena himself, who did much to arrest the decline of the previous decades, his 12 successors are unlikely to have had the opportunity to reign at all.

The Pandyan capture of Anduraupura under Sena I was no accident. The easy-going dominance of the Pallavas, which had protected the island since that dynasty had helped Manavamma gain his throne in 691 CE, was all but over. In their place was a steelier freeholder, one given to absolute conquest. Clinging on to what they had was all the Pallava kingdom could now do. In the four-sometimes-five-cornered fight across southern India between the Pallavas, Cheras, Pandyans, Chalukyas and the Cholas, it was the Cholas who were to emerge as the new superpower. Around 848 CE, they captured Tanjore and then focused on driving Pandyan and Pallava kings into ever-tighter corners. The Cholas were to eventually extend their boundaries from a kingdom to an empire of such political, military, and economic dynamism that the whole of Southern India, the Maldives, large parts of eastern India, Malaysia, and Indonesia fell under their influence. But the fight was messy, and at any given time, a different power seemed preeminent. In this stately spaghetti soup, today's allies were tomorrow's enemies - in the blink of an eye. Keeping one step ahead of this was the greatest challenge the Anduraupuran kings would now face.

Depending on which chronometric school you follow, Sena II's reign began in 866 or 853 CE and ended in 901 or 887 CE. Either way, he ruled for a colossal length – over 30 years or almost a third of the entire time it took these late and last Lambakanna kings to trek to their final fateful nemesis.

Although he inherited a defeated and shattered kingdom, he began his reign with several handy advantages. He was royal, the nephew of Sena I. He had few, if any, rivals, all of Sena's brothers having died during the earlier Pandyan invasion. He had the army on his side, being the king's general in chief. And he had a powerful local regional base of his own, coming as he did from the Ruhana side of the family, with a

wife, Samgha, who was the eldest daughter of the late ruler of Rohana. The family politics that had eroded the effectiveness of previous kings lay dormant throughout his entire reign.

By any reckoning, he was a busy king, the sort of ruler who would multitask in his sleep. Repairing the trashed irrigation systems in his kingdom, especially in the dry zone, was an immediate priority if economic strength was to be restored, famines avoided, and taxes made available for payment. Many tanks, canals, and catchment areas were mended, including two of pivotal importance: the Sorabora Wewa – the Sea of Bintenna, a huge tank in Mahiyangana - and the Minipe Ela irrigation system, which included a massive canal that diverted the Mahaweli River to carry water from the wet zone towards the dry zone and nourish a vast area of the dry zone. The state's bureaucracy was replenished with new hires, and, as two stone inscriptions made clear – the Mihintale plinth inscription and the Mamaduwa Wewa slab inscription - the small specifics that properly regulated a functioning state were put right – in this case, the prohibition of stealing fish from reservoirs and the collection of tax in gold from merchants.

He did his dutiful best, putting things right with the Theravada religious establishment. Many temples and monasteries were repaired. The gorgeous Brazen Palace – the Lohamahaprasada – was restored. A sacred golden Buddha image—looted during the Pandyan assault— was returned to the eminent Abhayagiri Monastery, and a hospital was built for the Mihintale Monastery. Lapsed Buddhist festivals were revived, including what is one that remains the country's paramount festival for the sacred Tooth Relic. And, in a move guaranteed to delight the orthodoxy, he stationed coastal guards in his ports to clamp down on heretical monks entering the land.

Most importantly, he repaired the county's defence, which had been so neglected that it enabled the Pandyan invasion during the reign of Sena I. The Culavamsa notes that "he made the Island hard to subdue by the foe and made it increase in wealth like the land of the Uttarakurus. Living beings on the Island who in the time of the former king had been in distress, felt themselves delivered in that they came to peace as from heat into the shade of clouds."

But perhaps, most remarkably, and in what was probably a first for Sri

Lankan kings at any time, he intervened militarily and effectively in the political struggles within the ascendant Pandyan state. The Culavamsa records that "at that time there arrived a son (thought to be Varaguna) of the Pandu King who, ill-treated by the king, had made the resolve to gain the kingship for himself. When the King saw him, he rejoiced greatly, treated him as was meet, betook Himself then to the seaport Mahatittha and while he sojourned there, collected a great force as well as all the appliances of war completely, like to a war-equipped army of the gods."

The king went to war, after first making an alliance with the Pallava king Nrupatunga I. The plan was for a joint pincer operation against Srimara Srivallabha, the Pandyan king. A fleet crowded with soldiers crossed the Palk Strait, landing on the Pandyan coastline and marched inland to besiege the Pandyans at their capital of Madurai. The Pandyans were in no fit state to fight, having recently suffered a series of withering attacks by the Pallavas. Madurai was taken and sacked, and Srimara Srivallabha himself was killed in the action, leaving the throne open for a more Sri Lankan-friendly ruler - Varaguna. Sena concluded what amounted to a long-term friendship pact with the new king, a change of alliance that would come back to haunt his successors.

Among the plunder brought back to the island was much of what Srimara Srivallabha himself had stolen earlier, including the revered golden Buddha image, purloined from the Ratanapasada. High-ranking hostages were patriated to Anduraupura and Sena returned in triumph and "restored all valuable property in the Island as it was heretofore, without partiality, and the golden images he set up in the places where they belonged," concluded the Culavamsa happily. Or did he? Near contemporaneous Pandyan sources – such as the Sinnamanur Plates - argue quite the opposite – that the invasion was repulsed. But the Culavamsa account is corroborated by a further stone inscription- the Iluppakaniya pillar inscription – that records Sena II as the Madhura-dunu, the "Conqueror of Madhura.

What is certain is that Sri Lanka had gone to war, and although the fight may have been a terrible reversal of fortune for the Pandyans, in an obdurate way, Sri Lanka's victory was also something of a prophetic

disaster. Its new alliance with the Pandyan kingdom committed the country irrevocably to the hell of South Indian politics. As the Pallava, Pandyan, and Chola busied themselves trying to annihilate one another, there was no longer any get-out for Sri Lanka. Whether it liked it or not, it too was now part of the battle – and in time it would find itself locked grimly to the side of the eventual loser.

The great king spent the rest of his years kingdom-building and ensuring a good name for himself in the afterlife. The Culavamsa observes how he "dispensed raiment, umbrellas, shoes which had come to himself, further rice for wayfaring bhikkhus and baths with cheer. After the mighty Prince had thus carried out all kinds of works of inferior merit, he passed away in the thirty-third year of the King's reign in accordance with his doing."

Sena was succeeded by his nephew, Udaya I, who reigned for about 10 years (the dates are, as often in this period, casually opaque), from 901 CE. The new king paid due respect to the Buddhist establishment and is recorded as having built an alms house, a religious college, and several image houses. Given the island's new exposure to South Indian politics, he is also recorded as having improved Anuradhapura's ramparts and moats and invested in the infantry, in the form of elephants and horses. But apart from a minor rebellion of baroque complexity in the north, which he put down with ease, little really troubled the kingdom, and the Culavamsa is effusive in the praise it gives him for his many acts of charity, concluding that "having thus performed these and other meritorious works which lead to Heaven, he entered after reigning eleven years, into the company of the gods. The gold that he had spent in these eleven years was estimated at thirteen hundred thousand kahapapas."

A branch of kingly Kassapas followed him: his nephew Kassapa IV from 912 to 929, and Kassapa V from 929 to 939 CE. The first of these, Kassapa IV, after the usual disbursements to religious orders, set about reorganising his provinces, bringing Rohana and Malaya more directly under the central government's control. There is no evidence of internal dissent at the time, so perhaps it was merely a shrewd pre-emptive move. Strengthening the home base was all the wiser, given that Kassapa IV proved unable to resist the pull of South Indian politics.

His Pandyan allies, faring the worst against the Cholas, persuaded him to send an army to help out in 917 CE. It was not a success. The accounts are mixed but include hearsay about Chola attacks that resulted in heavy Singhalese losses, the outbreak of a pestilence that crippled the army and very strained supply chains. The army retreated to avoid any terminal defeat.

The Culavamsa describes the foray in the kindest of terms, saying, "while thus the Sovereign of Lanka held sway in justice, the Pandu King was vanquished in battle by the Cola King. To gain military aid, he sent numerous gifts. The King, the Ruler of Lanka, took counsel with his officials, equipped military forces, appointed his Sakkasenapati as leader of the troops and betook himself to Mahatittha. Standing at the edge of the coast, he spoke of the triumph of former kings and, having thus aroused their enthusiasm, he made his troops embark. With his army, the Sakkasenapati thereupon safely crossed the sea and reached the Pandu country. When the Pandu King saw the troops and him, he spoke full of cheer: "I will join all Jambudipa under one umbrella". The King took the two armies, but as he could not vanquish the King of the Cola line, he gave up the fight and retired. The Sakkasena-pati set forth once more, with the purpose of fighting further, made a halt, and died of the upasagga plague to the undoing of the Pandu. When the Ruler of Lanka heard that the troops were also perishing of the same disease, out of pity, he had the army brought back."

His son, Kassapa V, took over the throne in 929 CE for a further ten years, the succession a done deal as the old king, noted the cheery chronicle, "in the tenth year of his reign entered happily into Heaven." It was a busy and productive decade. Hospitals and dispensaries were built in Anuradhapura.

A code of fines was introduced for errant monks. Several new monasteries and temples were constructed, such as the Sangsen monastery, and, in a move that must have delighted the Theravadan establishment, a ban was placed on royal officials from entering certain important religious educational centres, meditation halls, and nunneries, or from felling the trees adjacent to them. The army was improved too, a specialised attack unit established called "The Red Army" on account of its distinctive dress, and there are faint reports,

impossible to verify, of some further ineffectual interventions in South Indian politics.

A pair of kings, both called Dappula, followed next - the first, Dappula IV in 939, the son of Kassapa V. Despite there being no evidence of the succession being disputed, still less of foul play, the new king had the shortest of lives. The Culavamsa states rather gnomically, "and then the King who in the town maintained the pious ways of former kings, unable on account of former deeds to enjoy this kingdom for a longer time, fell in the seventh month of his reign into the jaws of death."

Luckily, his brother was available and took the throne in 940 CE as Dappula V for a 12-year innings. Barely had this latest Dappula sat down than the viperous call of South Indian politics tested his mettle. A deposed Pandyan king, albeit one bristling with treasure and the royal regalia, pitched up in Anuradhapura in need of protection and backing, in full retreat for the Cholas under Parantaka I - now pretty much the only superpower in town.

A series of torturous intrigues then followed among the two kings, the Anuradhapura political elites, and, no doubt, many others, over what to do. The king, who favoured intervention, was finally talked out of it, leaving his princely refuge, regalia free and languishing alone on the Malabar coast. The very minimal evidence of the usual donations to religious orders and reforms in the administration, army, and clergy is all tellingly absent throughout his reign, suggesting that the king was wholly preoccupied with negotiating a safe road through the Pandyan-Chola conflicts. Dappula V's death in 952 marked the moment when Sri Lankan politics entered utter turmoil.

The reign of the new king, Uday II, his brother, began badly in 952 CE with a revolt in the subjugated province of Rohana by his nephew, which had to be quashed by his son, Prince Mahinda. With affairs in southern India ominously quiet, the king spent his 4-year reign making minor improvements to his realm – and enjoying himself. The Culavamsa was quick to censor him as "slothful and a friend of spirituous drinks to the undoing of his subjects." Even so, he managed to find time to repair the Mayetti Tank, and the evidence of 18 surviving inscriptions documents his charity to monasteries, hospitals, and villages. Rather generously, this included gilding the roof of the Thuparamaya, one of the oldest

stupas on the island, showing, to some degree, that the money still flowed from the state's coffers.

But he was to be interrupted in all this by the demand of the new Chola king for the return of the royal regalia that the last Pandyan king had left behind in Anuradhapura. The blank refusal he met with provoked " the mighty Cola to equip an army and sent it forth to fetch them by force." Sri Lanka had been invaded – again. This time, however, the Chola were routed – "they turned and betook themselves through fear from here to their own country," to which Uday took the fight, and "laid waste the border land of the Cola King and forced him with threats to restore all that he had carried away from here as booty.

The spat was won, Udaya II died obligingly, and the throne passed to his brother, Sena III, around 955 CE. The Culavamsa heartily approved of this new king. "The King was wise," it wrote, "an excellent poet, learned, impartial towards friend and foe, ever full of pity and goodwill." With little evidence, little is known about what happened over his 9-year reign. The Cholas, in temporary decline over the Palk Straits, were in no state to cause trouble, and perhaps that is exactly what happened over this time – nothing of note.

His successor, Udaya III, succeeded in 964 CE, an interesting addition to the rolls of kingship, as he seems to have been, at best, a very distant Lambakanna relative, but, more importantly, a "great friend" of Sena III.

The lack of any known challenge to his accession perhaps indicates a state in which the central government was in control, to the detriment of family politics. Almost nothing is known about his reign – possibly a good sign – and on his death in 972 CE, he was succeeded by Sena IV, a relative of a previous king – the chronicles argue about exactly which one.

Even less is known about what this new king got up to – except that he died 3 years later, in 975 CE, and was replaced by his brother, Mihindu IV. Certainly, the old king had left behind a kingdom that had succumbed to lawlessness, though it is unlikely that this was simply the result of the past 3 years. For several decades, the kingdom appeared to be drifting, with little thought given to anything beyond making modest repairs and religious donations.

Over the next 16 years, Mahinda IV seems to have done his best to avert the decline. Stone inscriptions found in various places in Sri Lanka suggest that he recodified the laws on criminal offences, prioritising capital punishment, beatings, and increased fines. He also had to resist two attacks from India – one predictably coming from the resurgent Cholas who, under the command of Parantaka II, invaded the island, only to find themselves invaded back by a surprisingly resistant Mahinda. A stalemate treaty was concluded, and Mihindu next had to deal with a second, surprising attack by the Indian Rashtrakuta king Krishna III. The Rashtrakuta dynasty, a Deccan-based kingship. This particular entity lasted barely 100 years but was surprisingly aggressive around this time; fortunately for Sri Lanka, it was not aggressive enough, and Krishna's forces were repulsed. Through all this fire and tempest, Mahinda even found time to repair and reendow various monasteries and nunneries, clarifying several aspects of religious law.

His death in 991 ushered in the final decade of not just the Lankan kings but of the entire Anuradhapura kingdom itself. Over most of the past 50 years, its kings had just about resisted the ever more urgent attacks coming from southern India, and many had done their best to keep the kingdom functioning. But it was not enough. Their attempts to strengthen the kingdom's defences proved insufficient, and the alliances they made in India were all on the wrong side. A devastation was about to arrive on the island – one that possibly no king could have resisted, still less these late Lambakannas, most of whom evidenced little sense of urgency about the future.

"What would become of me? They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is that there's anyone left alive!"

Alice
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

5

THE DEVASTATION

When Sena V took over his father's throne in 991 CE, his kingdom was running on borrowed time - and had barely ten more years of life to it. At this late stage, there was little if anything either he or his successor, his son Mahinda V, could have done to avoid their fate. The seeds of their doleful destiny had been sewn as far back as 6791 CE when their illustrious Lambakanna ancestor, Manavanna, had secured his throne with the aid of the Indian Pallava dynasty. The military assistance and subsequent alliance had won him a throne, but at the cost of enlisting Sri Lanka in whatever was going on in southern India, where five dynasties were fighting one another for dominance.

Sometime around 800 CE, Mahinda II replaced the old Pallava friendship pact with one with their enemies, the Pandyans, a choice that seemed sensible at the time but was to prove his dynasty's undoing. It was to prove the wrong choice in every way, for just waiting in the wings was a third dynasty ready to emerge from the gloom of anonymity as the ultimate warrior. In about 847 CE, Vijayalaya, a Chola warlord of otherwise unremarkable obscurity, emerged out of the chaos caused by the Pandyan and Pallava wars and seized the great city of Thanjavur. It was the start of a celebrated and pugnacious dynasty. He would go on to inflict many defeats on the two older kingdoms and, bit by bit, his successors rolled up the whole of southern India.

Around 897 CE, the Pallava kingdom began its slow fall to the Chola kings, beginning with Aditya I. By 915 CE Parantaka I, had captured its capital Madurai. The Pandyan king fled into exile in Sri Lanka, and the Chola took over the most of his lands. The Chola kingdom itself suffered a series of reversals until, in 958 CE, King Parantaka II recovered most of his lost lands and annexed large sections of the Pandyan kingdom. Most of the remaining Pandyan lands were captured soon after by his son, Uttama.

By the mid-980s, the Chola dynasty, under Rajaraja I, had become the only show in town. Ancient inscriptions, known as the Larger Leiden plates, relate how Rajaraja "conquered the Pandya, Tulu, Kerala, Simhalendra and Satyashraya ; destroyed ships at Kandalur-Salai , captured Vengi, Gangapadi, Nulambapadi, Tadigaipadi, Kudamalainadu, Kollam, Kalingam, and removed the splendour of the Pandyas."

Rajaraja, known not without cause as "the Great," reigned from 985 to 1014 and internationalised his kingdom. From Goa to Andhra Pradesh, much of India was under him and his son, Rajendra I; the Indian Ocean Trading Zone, from the western Arabian Sea to Vietnam, was transformed into a Chola lake, with the kings dominating, influencing, or directly ruling much of everything in between – including Sri Lanka.

At the heart of the Chola's expansion lay a wholly reimagined view of naval power. Star charts, wind and monsoon patterns were calculated to improve navigation and mapping, and a spy network was set up among merchants and other mariners to deliver intelligence to Chola military planners. Boat-building technology was improved and different woods identified for different parts of their boats – teak for hull strength, bamboo for the flexible sections, and ironwood for parts most exposed to salt. Their new ships could carry up to 200 soldiers in multi-decks over 200 feet long and furnished with specialised ramming heads and compartmentalised storage areas. Smaller, faster ships were developed to outflank the enemy; others to serve as more effective scout ships, and still others to provide support and and munitions. A Crescent Formation was developed to devastate the enemy, using the navy as if it were a single, vast, curved simitar. The Chola adapted Byzantine fire, creating their own recipes using coconut oil, sulphur, and tree resins, and adapted catapults, fire arrows, and other projective devices to hurl flames far and wide. Sailors were specially trained in ship-to-ship combat drills, including siege techniques to break coastal forts. Given such attention to detail it was hardly surprising, therefore, that when either Rajaraja I or Rajendra set their mind to achieve something, it happened.

When Mahinda IV died in 991 CE after a long 16 years trying to restore the rule of law in his kingdom, whilst simultaneously seeing off at least two Indian invasions, one of them a Chola enterprise, his successor was his 12-year-old son, Sena V.

This was no time for the office junior, however royal he was, to be in charge, and inevitably, pandemonium broke out almost at once. Advised rather poorly by his mother, he had the brother of his main general executed, prompting a full-scale rebellion, with the aggrieved general calling up a large band of Tamil mercenaries who set about looting the

kingdom.

Peace emerged only when the hapless king accepted his general's ongoing counsel. The emasculated young king turned his mind to more pleasurable distractions. As the Culavamsa puts it – “but while now the Ruler of Lanka had his abode there his low class favourites who obtained no leave from their teacher to drink sura, praised in his presence the advantages of drinking intoxicating liquors and induced the Ruler to drink. After taking intoxicating drinks, he was like a wild beast gone mad. As he could no longer digest food, the Ruler had to surrender the dearly-won place and died in the tenth year of his reign, still youthful in years.”

Ever eager to point out the moral of any story, the Chronicle went on to observe, “When they see from this that the yielding to evil friends leads to destruction, let those who seek their highest good here or hereafter, avoid such evil friends as a snake full of deadly poison.” “Things, Howard Jones wrote in his hit song in 1985, “can only get better.” But this was not the experience of Sena’s successor and brother, Mahinda V, who was to live out the horror of Murphy's alternative law for his whole reign: “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong."

It little helped that Mahinda inherited a threadbare realm in 982 CE. “Splendid Anuradhapura,” wrote the Culavamsa sorrowfully, “was full of strangers”, and mercenaries washed up by the disasters of the previous reign. The state's coffers were bare, its peasants recalcitrant, and the new king himself not up to the task.

Within the first paragraph of its description of his reign, the Culavamsa pulls no punches, saying of its new overlord, “he wandered from the path of statecraft and was of very weak character; the peasants did not deliver him his share of the produce.” Soon enough, he had “entirely lost his fortune and was unable to satisfy his troops by giving them their pay.”

The new kings' rule effectively ended in 993 CE with the first sacking of Anuradhapura, though its formal end dragged on a little longer. But in these roughly 10 years of rule before the curtains began to fall, calamity piled upon catastrophe, misadventure upon misfortune, and farce upon fiasco. At its heart lay not just a weak and incompetent central government but also a country awash with mutinous mercenary Tamil soldiers.

The kingdom was bankrupt. The heavy taxes Mahinda levied backfired, prompting even more revolts. As the Culavamsa records, “All the Keralas who got no pay planted themselves one with another at the door of the royal palace, determined on force, bow in hand, armed with swords and other weapons, with the cry 'So long as there is no pay he shall not eat.” But the King duped them. Taking with him all his movable goods, he escaped by an underground passage and betook himself in haste to Rohana.”

And just as everything was imploding, “a horse-dealer who had come hither from the opposite coast, told the Chola King on his return about the conditions in Lanka.” Rajaraja I wasted no time, assembling his army and navy and landing “speedily in Lanka” in 993 and capturing Anuradhapura, which was "utterly destroyed in every way by the Chola army.” The Thiruvalangadu Copper Plates, engraved in Tamil Nadu twenty years later, put it more eloquently: "Rama built with the aid of monkeys, a causeway across the sea, and then with great difficulties defeated the King of Lanka by means of sharp-edged arrows. But Rama was excelled by this king whose powerful army crossed the ocean by ships and burnt up the kingdom of Lanka."

Another source writes how the invaders “broke open the relic chambers... and carried away the eye-jewels of the stone images.” “Like bloodsucking yakkhas they took all the treasures of Lanka for themselves,” lamented the Culavamsa. In just a few months, Anduraupura, the city that had governed a kingdom for almost 1500 years, was raised, going "from hero to zero." Palaces, offices, houses, warehouses, shops - all were burned. Temples, nunneries and monasteries were looted, and the precious irrigation infrastructures that supported the city itself were broken.

The Cholas wrote the Culavamsa “seized the Mahesi, the jewels, the diadem that he had inherited, the whole of the royal ornaments, the priceless diamond bracelet, a gift of the gods, the unbreakable sword and the relic of the torn strip of cloth.” That so great a capital as this should die so completely and in so short a time is as shocking now as it would have been then. As the jungle reclaimed it and the country moved on, it took 800 to 900 years more before its ruins were recovered and, wherever possible, restored. As Mad Max said many centuries later, "One day cock-of-the-walk, next a feather

duster, " though Hector Salamanca put it more kindly in Breaking Bad: "What a reputation to leave behind."

For some years, the accounts of just how many differ hugely, Mahindra ruled with little effectiveness over a shrunken state in Ruhuna, but Rajaraja was very far from done, and he hunted down the deposed King with all the determination of one who has a final solution in mind. The Chronicle relates how "the Ruler himself ...fled in fear to the jungle, (and was) captured alive, with the pretence of making a treaty." By 1017 at least, the defeated king was deported to India, where he died in captivity in 1029 CE. "Thus," opined the Culavamsa, "fortune's goods if they were gained by one smitten with indolence, are not abiding. Therefore, should the prudent man, who strives after his salvation, ever display ceaseless endeavour."

By now, Rajaraja had been succeeded by his son, Rajendra, and archaeological evidence, including inscriptions and coins found across Sri Lanka, indicates that under the new king, the country was governed, garrisoned, and taxed as a Chola province, overseen by viceroys known as "Ilamandalam Udayar". Rajendra assembled a new army to subjugate the south and capture Mahindra's young son, who was still at large, sending "high officials with a large force to seize him. They brought with them warriors a hundred thousand less five thousand, and they ransacked the whole province of Rohana in every direction. A court official called Kitti, and a minister named Buddha, well-versed in the ways of war, resolved to destroy the Chola army completely. At a place called Palu-thagiri, they took up fortified positions, carried on war for six months and killed a great number of Damilas. The Colas who had survived the slaughter in this fight, seized with fear, fled and took up their abode as before in Polonnaruwa."

This second invasion of the island had been a most mixed success. Some more land was taken, and a lot more plunder, but resistance had not been crushed. An uneasy stalemate now gripped the defeated island, with the Chola occupying all but the southern sections and ruling from Polonnaruwa, and the south held by the young prince, well protected by his subjects. It is thought that the prince was Kassapa, sometimes known as Kassapa VI, or Vikramabahu. And from Ruhuna, he launched a series of attacks against the Cholas, all ultimately unsuccessful. Ruhuna itself

would descend into royal chaos as competing members of what was left of the royal family jostled with one another for control. But out of all this, eventually would come a new king, Vijayabahu I, to roll back the Chola conquest.

Although the shadows of the Sinhala kingdom lingered down south, regrouping for a return, in truth, it would take 900 more years before the island was once again able to present itself as a full unitary state. Between 1017 and the mid 1500s, a series of splinter Sinhala kingdoms would establish themselves in places such as Dambadeniya, Kurunegala, Gampola, Kotte, Sitawaka, Jaffna, and most brilliantly, Polonnaruwa. But just for the briefest of moments did any of them ever come close to having the authority of a writ that ran across the entire island. Only with independence in 1948 did Sri Lanka regain what it had lost in 993 CE, when Rajaraja destroyed such a great kingdom. There on February 4, 1948, in Independence Square, the Union Jack was lowered before Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, sent to represent King George VI and the new lion flag of Ceylon was raised for the first time by Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake, its design based on the royal standard of the last King of Kandy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born in Colombo and, with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director across departments including sales, art, and marketing, and at HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and a set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

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