



THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 11

THE GUARDIANS

Sri Lanka & The Golden Makeover

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



Published By The Ceylon Press 2024
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THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

"'Your hair wants cutting,' said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech."

Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865.

ONE

Grandest Of Guards

In 1929, as Wall Street crashed and the roaring twenties came to an abrupt end, archaeologists digging in faraway Trincomalee uncovered the remains of a once-lofty temple, built a stone's throw from the Indian Ocean, sometime after 307 CE.

Beneath earth, trees, and jungle, stretching out to the shores of a great lake, the Velgam Vehera's many scattered ruins were brought back to sight for the first time in centuries: brick stupas, stone inscriptions, balustrades, buildings, moon stones – and mura gals.

These mura gals – or guard stones – are especially moving, standing in silent upright pose, guardians of the flights of steps that had led a multitude of forgotten people out of the everyday and into the sacred temple itself.

The steps they protect have worn down to just a few flights, the moonstone they encompass is almost entirely rubbed away; the temple beyond is now just an outline of ancient bricks, and the guard stones themselves are plain, almost stumpy, but still doing their ageless job as sentinels of the site.

Similar guard stones stand in many other parts of the island, easy to see if you know what you are looking for, silent guardians of the state within.

For to be a guardian is no little thing.

Guardian is an emotive word in Sri Lanka.

It can be found incorporated by health and education providers, insurance companies, the army, the priesthood, the home guard, air force, a news website, hotel and even a wedding business. But

long ago it was also the meaning given to the Lambakarnas, the dynasty that succeeded the founding Vijayan dynasty.

Originating possibly in India, it is likely that the Lambakarnas claimed descent from Sumitta - a prince who formed part of the escort that had brought the Bodhi-tree from India in 250 CE. From this botanical pilgrimage, they would go on to become one of the island's great barons, alongside other such families as Moriyān, Taracchas and Balibhojak.

Their power derived from their position as hereditary guardians or secretaries to the king.

They took a prominent part in religious ceremonies. But there was more to them than merely carrying coronation parasols and flags. They were connected to the military, to weapon manufacture and, as writers, must have been involved in much of the critical administration of the kingdom.

They managed the transition from one of several aristocratic families to ruling family with what, at first, appeared to be consummate ease. After the ruinous excesses of the last Vijayan kings, this new replacement dynasty seemed to grip the one fundamental axiom of kingship: govern well, live long. They were to rule all or much of the island (depending on the period) over two distinct periods. The first of these was to last for 369 years through the reigns of 26 monarchs, from 67 CE to 436 CE.

The image features a vibrant yellow background. A horizontal strip of white, torn paper is cut across the middle, creating a jagged, irregular edge. The word "TWO" is printed in a dark purple, sans-serif font on the white paper. The letters are evenly spaced and centered horizontally.

TWO

Death Of The Doppel -ganger

For a terrible period of time, amounting to just over half the length of the Vijayans, the Lambakarna monarchs twice faced utter ruin.

The first time ruin stared them in the face, they managed to draw back from the regicide and power implosions that rocked them to regain their savoir faire. But the second outbreak propelled them inexorably to their destruction, leaving the state weak, distracted, and unable to fend off an invasion of the island from the Pandyan dynasty of South India, the fourth such invasion for Tamil India that Sri Lanka suffered.

Just under half the Lambakarna monarchs were to die at the hands of their successors, victims to a predilection for assassination that ran like a malign monomeric thread through their DNA. Even so, the nation they left behind was bigger, richer, more complex, developed and built out than it had been on its inheritance by them back in 67 CE. Stupas, monasteries, reservoirs, canals, temples, and dwellings filled out the land.

The mores of society progressed. Agriculture flourished and technical advances from construction through to medicine bestowed its benefits on the kingdom. In particular the advances they made in water technology to build dramatically larger reservoirs, enabled the state to exponentially increase its agriculture and, through that, raise state revenues to support increased urbanisation and further infrastructure capital developments.

Despite its palace coups, the state was strong enough to weather repeated religious schisms, as well as succession crises;

and – ultimately – its sixteen-year occupation by Tamil kings, enabling the country to bounce back, albeit this time under yet another new dynasty.

Overcaution, on behalf of the last (albeit fraudulent) Vijayan king, Subharaja, propelled the new Lambakarna dynasty and its first king to the throne. The soothsayers had been busy whispering appalling forecasts into his ear, foretelling of his certain destiny with death at the hands of someone called Vasabha.

Herod-like, the troubled monarch ordered the execution of anyone of that name – not quite on the scale of the massacre of the innocents as in Bethlehem in 2 BCE – but certainly in a similarly bloodthirsty league. Had Subharaja not acted as he did, it is quite possible that he would not have created a persecution complex in one particular Vasabha, now bent on excising the source of his danger.

Subharaja had come into the throne by impersonating the then (and, as it turned out, last) Vijayan king, Yassalalaka Tissa, so convincingly it seems that he successfully managed to have him killed, taking the throne for himself. The story, coming to us via the Mahavaṃsa Chronicle, is too bizarre to wreck with close questioning. But true or not, Subharaja was no Vijayan, despite his pretence of belonging to the ruling dynasty. His grip on power would have been modest at best.

Just a few decades earlier the Lambakarna family had flexed their considerable familial power and plunged the country into a civil war that saw at least one legitimate ruler vanquished. Now they were ready to do it all over again, unimpressed as any halfway decent aristocrat might be by the pretensions of an imposter king. As the wretched bodies of perfectly innocent men called Vasabha piled up across the island, the one the soothsayer actually had in mind managed to evade capture, betrayal, and execution.

THREE €€

Welcome, The Cavalry

Prince Vasabha was the kind of Lambakarnan that the dynasty could have well done with a few more of as it migrated from aristocratic family to ruling family

Rather like the cavalry in old American Westerns, the new king arrived in the nick of time. The state, if not quite worn out, was stumbling on with the political equivalent of one leg, two broken hips and a congenital heart disease.

It was badly in need of a talented head State Doctor and a spell in the I.C.U.

Recruiting an army, Vasabha wasted little time in putting it to proper use. By 67 CE King Subharaja was dead and the Vijayan dynasty deposited at the sorrowful gates of the historical cul de sac into which they would disappear.

A new dynasty was in town and ready to reform, repair and realign the realm. Having taken one prediction to heart and with such apparent rewards, the new king took the next one just as seriously.

He would die, the soothsayers now warned, within twelve years. Given that his reign lasted an astonishing 44 years (a feat both credible and unusual), today's modern pollsters can take comfort from the long history of erroneous prophecies (Brexit, "Dewey Defeats Truman," or more locally the 2015 presidential election that saw out Mahindra Rajapaksa).

For soothsayers and astrologers have ever had, and still do have, an honoured place on the island. Here, it is not just what

you do that matters. When and where you do it is just as important. A standard, well-entrenched discipline, astrology is still widely used to ascertain the most auspicious time for marriages, housebuilding, elections, company start-ups, naming ceremonies and many religious rituals.

The well-regarded Sri Lanka Foundation adult education centre is among many to offer certified courses in the subject, and you don't have to look far online or down most town streets, ministerial offices, or state buildings to come across one happy to chart your course.

So it was with utter seriousness that Vasabha processed the future his astrologers had cast for him. The bleak future they had mapped out turbo charged the new king marking him just the kind of man Benjamin Franklin might have had in mind when he said: "you may delay, but time will not."

Almost immediately the new king started a major programme of building works - not only of the obligatory monasteries and stupas which he constructed in a feverish haste to appease his maker, but of massive infrastructure works too.

Eleven reservoirs, such as those at Mahavila Chchiya and Nochchipotana, some with a circumference of two miles, were built. Twelve canals were dug to distribute their water. Rivers were dammed, and crops raised in new places with greater

certainty than ever before. With plentiful water and the restitution of agriculture, the building blocks on which any centralized power rested were back in place, better than ever before. The state could prosper.

Island-wide inscriptions testify to the power of the resurgent Kingdom stretching once again to Jaffa in the north, Situlpawwa and Tissamaharama in the south, Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the east and Kurunegala in the centre.

FOUR

Health Of The Nation

The great kingdom of Anuradhapura, brought to a state of civil war and near destitution by the previous Vijayan dynasty, was once again serene and strong.

The kingdom has recovered. It was now a fully functioning almost island-wide entity, once more capable of planning for the future and not just mere survival. Truly had Vasabha earned his place as one of the country's greatest kings, the equal of the best of the Vijayans, Vijaya, Pandu Kabhaya, Devanampiya Tissa, and Dutugemunu.

For decades after his death in 111 CE his shadow loomed across his kingdom as it basked in the success and rewards of good governance, surviving with little effect the disastrous but brief reign of his successor and son, Vankanasika Tissa.

Although we have no dates for the new king's age, Vankana Sika Tissa would have been no youngster on assuming his throne, given how long his father's reign had been. It was his great misfortune to time his reign with that of Karikala the, the greatest of the early Chola emperors in Tamil India. Having taken most of south India under his control Karikala sighted next upon Sri Lanka.

A military genius, Karikala was ever bound to win in any war, and his brief and surgical strike across the seas dealt Sri Lanka a bitter, albeit, fleeting, defeat - and left it much poorer in manpower.

The impetus for this particular Chola invasion appears to have been recruitment - for Karikala for busy building the famous

Kaveri Dam that would later provide a major part of southern India with the water necessary for the growing quantities of millet and maize on which his kingdom depended. Dams need builders and Karikala, needing a lot of them, took away twelve thousand Sinhalese men to work as slaves on his new dam.

There is no evidence that the defeated Vankana Sika Tissa died anything but a natural death two years after taking the throne in 113 CE. But his convenient departure made way for his son Gajabahu I to become king, a monarch who had the winning ways of his grandfather, Vasabha. This third Lambakarnan king was to rule for twenty two years, His governance remembered for its predictable religious sensibility – and its military might, the two not often going hand in hand.

Naturally, he built monasteries (in Matuvihara and Rumika) and a stupa (Abhayuttara). More remarkably, he also co-opted the Hindu goddess Pattini to Sri Lanka. Several of her temples remain on the island, and she is still worshipped, the Buddhist patron goddess of fertility and health, an iconic ancient link that evokes deep and pacific links between the island's two main religions that are often overlooked. She is even one of just five figures honoured in the annual Kandy Perahera, the country's supreme Buddhist festival – which some historians date to around the reign of King Gajabahu himself.

The king also managed to find her sacred anklet, said still to be hidden in the Hanguran Ketha Temple near Nuwara Aylia. This move which did not stop him also liberating the alms bowl of Buddha from India to Sri Lanka, a vessel with a history and provenance now every bit as complex as that of the Holy Grail.



FIVE

General -issimo

But it is Gajabahu's military capabilities that are most honoured today, not least in the Sri Lanka Army's infantry regiment, The Gajaba Regiment, or the country's Navy with its ship the SLNS Gajabahu.

For Gajabahu did that rarest of things: he took the fight with the Cholas, to the Cholas, leading an army to southern India to liberate the twelve thousand Sinhalese prisoners seized in his father's reign. In this he would have been greatly motivated by his witnessing of the humiliation done to his father by Karikala's invasion.

But Gajabahu was not all war, revenge and plunder. Ancient sources also mention other visits to Tamil kings, this time more peaceful. Trade too seems to have flourished.

Excavations at the ancient (now partially underwater) port of Godavaya in the far south have unearthed his regulations regarding custom tolls – as well as a collection of seventy-five thousand Roman coins.

Almost little is known of his personal life, and nothing to explain why he was succeeded in 135 CE by his father or son-in-law, Mahallaka Naga. Said to be the wrong side of late middle age at the time of his ascension, Mahallaka Naga, the new king still managed to live on until 141 CE before handing things with the sort of blameless succession choreography that more modern leaders from Africa to America might have learnt much from.

Little is known about his son, Bhatika Tissa's relatively long twenty-four-year reign but if, as Thomas Carlyle noted, "silence

is golden," the kingdom's golden years continued; and the monarch, though obscure, must have a much-deserved place amongst the dynasty's more successful rulers.

The reliable historical record is also mute on the next ruler too - Kanittha Tissa, a brother to the late king and another son of Mahallaka Naga.

Kanittha Tissa's chalked up a rule four years longer than that of his brother, governing from his brother's death in 165 CE to his own in 193 CE. "No news is good news," noted a later English king renowned for being "the 'wisest fool in Christendom."

And so one might assume of this indistinct reign. Certainly, in the years that followed, the reign would have looked – along with four or five of the previous ones, as the lush salad days of the Lambakarnas.

After one hundred and twenty-six years so stable and propitious as to suggest they might never end, the Lambakarnas settled down to adopt that great pastime of the late Vijayan kings – regicide.

The preoccupation would test the very stability of the kingdom they had so assiduously built.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he 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 was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and 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, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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