

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

WICKED MONACHS

AN UNMASKING OF SRI LANKA'S MOST
INIQUITOUS KINGS & QUEENS



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FOR
BEATA
SAINT & ROYAL SCION

“What would become of me? They’re dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is, that there’s any one left alive!”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871



INTRODUCTION

The awful thing about wickedness is just how interesting it is. Kind and benevolent rulers; admirable warrior kings; even the fumbling but kindly nice ones who build hospitals and live blameless lives – they all pale into guilt-wrenching insignificance when set before a list saturated by the sinful, iniquitous, and depraved.

And in this respect, Sri Lanka is spoilt for choice, simply by virtue of its statistics.

Around 200 kings, with the odd queen, ruled over the island from its first recorded beginnings in 543 BCE to its last king, packed off into exile by the invading British in 1815. From island wide kingdoms to ones circumscribed by covetous foreign occupiers, the 2358 years of royal rule the country enjoyed was a big dipper experience. It was just as Longfellow had once said of a little girl: “when she was good, she was very, very good/ But when she was bad, she was horrid.”

The country’s monarchs averaged little over 11 years a reign, but with massive variances. Most lapped up a rule of just a few years; sometimes only a few hours. A happy few enjoyed reigns that must have seemed an eternity to their fortitudinous subjects.

But if the ancient chronicles are to be believed, almost half of them died well ahead of their divinely allocated time – at the hands of their own successors, often, sons, sometimes bothers, uncles or even wives or occasionally an invading Indian emperor or edgy Tamil warlord.

No known studies have been done to precisely identify which county can claim to be the most regicidally minded, but in any future list only a fool would put money on Sri Lanka not scoring somewhere around the top 5.

From this long bloody start, regicide took a modest back seat during the rule of the Dutch and the British.

But things picked up after independence in 1948. Assassination, often but not always fostered by civil war, promoted the killing of a sitting president, a prime minister, and leading presidential candidate, Vijaya Kumaratunga, whilst another almost killed his own wife, the then president, Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1999. It was but one of many other fortunately failed attempts at regicide that the independent republic had to face, a trait that reduced, at times, its own leaders to accusing one another of hatching yet more malodourously mortal plots.

But selecting just 6 of the country's most egregious baddies – barely 7% of the total of potential scoundrels - is as difficult as selecting which chocolate to take from an Anton Berg's Heart Box. The box has an impossibly delicious mix of pralines, marzipan, nougat, soft caramel, coconut, sea salt, orange, Chocolate Liqueur, Nut Truffle, hazelnut, cherry, and apricot. To make it to this list a Sri Lankan monarch had to be very bad indeed, a real and indisputable villain.

ONE

VIJAYA

The list begins, quite neatly, with the county's first recorded king. Embodying a prescient creation myth, which, like all many of their type, mix horror and achievement in as much equal measure as going into labour, Prince Vijaya fits the bill perfectly.

As Romulus and Remus had earlier demonstrated in faraway Rome, being a founding father often necessitated random acts of abomination and cruelty. And so it was with Prince Vijaya. Even his father heartily disapproved of him.

Coming from a royal Indian family said to have been descended from lions, psychologists might argue that the prince never had a chance. Violence was in his nature. But the Mahavamsa, the great ancient Chronicle of Sri Lanka that is rarely modest in praising anything remotely proto nationalistic, pulls no punches when it comes to its paterfamilias. Given its mission ("compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious,") the Mahavamsa had little other choice but to call a spade a spade.

"Vijaya," it begins, as it meant to go on, "was of evil conduct and his followers were even (like himself), and many intolerable deeds of violence were done by them. Angered by this the people told the matter to the king; the king, speaking persuasively to them, severely blamed his son. But all fell out again as before, the second and yet the third time; and the angered people said to the king: 'Kill thy son.'"

For the king, this helpful request enabled him kill two birds with a single stone. He chose to rid himself of not just his own son, but of most of his kingdom's rogues, whilst demonstrating, like the consummate politician he was, blameless clemency. The Mahavamsa records how "then did the king cause Vijaya and his followers,

seven hundred men, to be shaven over half the head and put them on a ship and sent them forth upon the sea, and their wives and children also."

The problem was exported. The prince sailed away from India and "landed in Lanka, in the region called Tambapanni on the day that the Tathagata lay down between the two twinlike sala-trees to pass into nibbana."

This time reference ("Tathagata") to Lord Buddha notwithstanding, the renegade prince wasted little time in smiting most of whom he first came across. His ruthlessness and expedient mindset can be seen at work in his marriage of Kuveni, a tribal princess, who was herself no stranger to brutality.

Piecing together what actually happened on his arrival is all but impossible but from the extravagantly violent tales told in the Mahavamsa it is likely that the vagabond prince found no empty island – but rather one already well stocked with people who had ordered themselves in tribes, perhaps even miniature kingdoms. To carve out his own domain necessitated fighting and in this a marital alliance with a local princess who could help him in the fight was invaluable.,

In piecing together the ghostly DNA of Sri Lanka's pre Vijayan native kingdoms, historians have had to turn to local folklore, Indian epic poems like the Ramayana and the Mahavamsa itself, but the picture they present is a blurred and fantastical image.

There were the Ramayana, a half human tribe founded by the ten headed demon King, Ravana, whose followers have gone down in history as being a terrifying lot given to cannibalism. A further tribe, the serpent-like Naga, may exist only in myth, despite

references to Lord Buddha arriving amount them to settle disputes. The Nittaewo, dark skinned, tiny, and understandably defensive, are a possible third tribal strand, their last members possibly smoked to death.

On marginally surer ground are the Yaksha, described by the Dipavaṃsa, the oldest of the island's three ancient chronicles and which, with support from the later Mahavaṃsa, could possibly have given rise to the Vedda. Archaeogeneticists believe that the Vedda were descendants of the original Mesolithic settlers who migrated from India in prehistoric times 40,000 years ago. Scattered communities still exist today, an ever more ghostly presence on the island, their bloodlines dissipated by intermarriage. They worship a range of ancient folk deities as well as such mainstream Hindu gods as Murugan. Ancestor worship and the cult of the dead marks out many of their still just-living practices.

This was Kuveni's tribe, and they seemed to live in scattered communities of kingdoms in various parts of the island. Overcoming her first instinct to kill him, Kuveni instead married him and on their wedding, day helped hatch a plot to kill her own clansmen. They married in a wave of blood. If this was a most Lady MacBeth-like way to ensure freedom and foreclose on reprisals, it was no less monstrous of Vijaya who more than fulfilled his homicidal role in eliminating all nearby native chieftains. The Mahavaṃsa describes how "he listened to her and did even (as she said) he slew all the yakkhas, and when he had fought victoriously, he himself put on the garments of the yakkha-king and bestowed the other raiment on one and another of his followers."

Credited though he is with creating the first Singhalese state, Vijaya is likely to have been but one of several Indians warlords who washed up on Sri Lankan shores,

fought and to some extent enslaved the local tribes in order to set up kindships for themselves. This certainly was what Vijaya did, for having slain his new in-laws on his marriage day, he would have gone on with this ethnic cleansing until he had was able to consolidate his new kindship.

Villainy of course does not stop with mere bloodshed, however great. With practiced and cold blooded expediency, Vijaya then sacked his wife, abandoned his children, and sent off to India for a more compliant and aristocratic partner.

Discarded, and unable to return to the family she had helped destroy, Kuveni is said to have climbed to the top of Yakdessagala mountain, cursed her disloyal husband, and plunged to death. Or was chased there by relatives furious by her earlier attempts with Vijaya to annihilate them and forced off the rocks.

Needless to say, the Mahavaṃsa has a rather different take on matters, recoding how "the envoys of the Pandu king delivered up to the prince Vijaya the gifts and the (maidens) with the king's daughter at their head. When Vijaya had offered hospitality and bestowed honours on the envoys, he bestowed the maidens, according to their rank, upon his ministers and retainers.

According to custom the ministers in full assembly consecrated Vijaya king and appointed a great festival. Then king Vijaya consecrated the daughter of the Pandu king with solemn ceremony as his queen; he bestowed wealth on his ministers, and every year he sent to his wife's father a shell-pearl worth twice a hundred thousand (pieces of money). When he had forsaken his former evil way of life, Vijaya, the lord of men, ruling over all Lanka in peace and righteousness reigned, as is known, in the city of Tambapanni, thirty-eight years.

You don't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs may have been Vijaya's line of self-defence, but his murderous and duplicitous actions had given his nascent kingdom some of the behavioural traits that were to be picked up enthusiastically by many of his equally nefarious descendants.

Of physical evidence for any of this there is none – or perhaps nearly none. Although the tropical climate is ruthlessly focused on ceaseless decluttering, the Sri Lankan countryside, its jungles, mountains, valleys; the dry scrub of the Wannu and the cloud forest of its mountains, nevertheless seems to hoard, and from time to time, liberate an inexhaustible treasury of lost sepulchres and temples.

Astonishingly, it is better than a one-in-two bet that the tomb of Sri Lanka's first king, Vijaya, still exists. It is said to be located on Medagama Hill in Paduwasnuwara, halfway between Kurunegala and Puttalam. Certainly, the unmistakable shape of a very ancient stupa can be made out. And astonishingly too, ashes found in its heart during conservation work were tested by the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and found to be at least 2,500 to 2,600 years old, placing them well within touching distance of the first king.

Across the entire island a lonesome scrap of haunting folklore offers a hint as to the final tomb of Queen Kuveni. There is nothing to verify it except the curious behaviour of the local people. Visitors to the village are welcomed to its little temple, the Maligatenna Raja Maha Viharaya, but not permitted to walk to the top of the little hill above it, where the queen's crypt is said to lie. Permits have to be applied for; and these are only ever issued on Poya days; and most typically, not even then.

TWO

ANULA

Reluctantly, one has to skip the many top-drawer choices before arriving at the country's second most horrifying ruler, this one a queen, the consort of King Choura Naga – Anula.

It had taken almost 500 long and achievement-laden years to get to these last few blood drenched decades of Vijayan rule but Choura Naga managed the transition with depressing ease. In its new king the Vijayan dynasty had found the leader best able to steer his illustrious dynasty onto the final road to oblivion. Its last few decades were rich in plot lines that would make most horror movies look tame. He, and his short-lived successors, travelled these years with unforgettable horror – most of them fated to be murdered by their successors in an outpouring of serial regicide that plunged the country into civil war; and ultimately forced a complete change of national leadership.

Yet it all started so well. Choura Naga, the son of King Valagamba, took the throne in 62 BCE on the death of his stepbrother. The kingdom, rescued from its third Tamil invasion by Valagamba in 89 BCE, had enjoyed almost 30 years of peace and nation rebuilding when the new king and his new wife enjoyed their marriage's poruwa ceremony, witnessing the Ashtaka recite his religious chants at precisely the pre-ordained auspicious time.

As events were to later prove, the Ashtaka was to have his work cut out for him over the next few years, being in such demand as to become a nationwide celebrity in his own right. For Anula would turn out to be one of the island's more colourful characters; the kind of person Anne Tyler had in mind in "Back When We Were Grownups," writing "once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person."

What little is known of King Choura Naga is that he managed to get himself poisoned by Anula in 50 BCE, an act of realpolitik in which his wife quite probably played on her husband's deep unpopularity with the traditional Theravada Buddhist monks who dominated the country. This was not a school of Buddhism that won Choura Naga's devotion - indeed he even went so far as to destroy eighteen of their temples, earning the eternal disapprobation of The Mahavamsa who recorded the poisoning with great censure: "the evildoer died and was reborn in the Lokantarika-hell;" adding, for good measure that the slain king was also "a fool."

The political support Anula's coup enjoyed is lost to all but the most pernicious speculation, and she filled the vacancy she had created by placing Choura Naga's young nephew, Kuda Thissa on the throne. But not for long. Anula was ever a lady short of patience. Tiring of her ward, she poisoned him in 47 BCE and installed her lover, a palace guard, as Siva I.

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

Long term love was not to be the hapless Siva's destiny. He too was poisoned, and the queen installed a new lover, Vatuka, to the throne in 46 BCE. This was something of a promotion for the Tamil who had, till then, been living the blameless life of a carpenter. By now Anula was well into her stride. The following year the carpenter was replaced in similar fashion by Darubhatika Tissa, a wood carrier - who also failed to measure up.

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

this point Anula must have reached the logical conclusion: if you want something done well, do it yourself. Busy women, after all, don't have time for excuses, only solutions. As Dolly Parton said: "Find out who you are and do it on purpose,"

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

After just four months her group-breaking reign ended at the hands of her brother-in-law, Kutakanna Tissa, who, having sensibly become a Buddhist monk during Anula's reign, remained alive and so able to rescue the monarchy. He did so by burning the queen alive in her own palace in 42 BCE, bringing down the curtains on a royal career that eclipsed that of the entire Borgia clan put together.

By any standards, this killing of so many kings by another monarch was a world record few have ever bettered; and secures for Anula an abiding place in the most exacting registers of wickedness.

THREE

YASSALALAKA
TISSA

Barely 100 years later it is time to encounter our third candidate king.

So little is actually known about Yassalalaka Tissa, King of Anuradhapura that he almost fails to make the cut. And yet three key qualifications mark him, two of which are so beautifully distinctive as to ensure his remembrance for as long as anyone ever bothers to remember the island's ancient kings.

His path to power was so traditionally iniquitous that has become an almost essential distinction for any candidate for this guide: he murdered his predecessor. Simply by virtue of his ascension, Yassalalaka Tissa makes the grade, though the ancient sources helpfully validate this by calling him "a vicious ruler." But by virtue of his placement in the line of the founding Vijayan kings, his inclusion here offers an irresistible and matchless neatness to the account. For he was to be the last true Vijayan ruler. His own murder, in 60 CE, just 8 years after seizing the throne, brought to an end the royal dynasty that, more than any other, set up the country to be what it was. And what an ending it was, its preposterous characteristics being the third main reason to include in this guide.

Yassalalaka Tissa own reign suffered from the fact that his dynasty had never really recovered from the effects of having overcome the island's third invasion by Tamil warlords between 103 to 89 BCE. This was to so weaken the kingdom as to fatally undermine its confidence and capability. It all started with yet another grubby and bloody power struggle that saw one brother kill another to grab the throne before passing it on – briefly – to yet another bother, Khallata Naga, who was himself to be despatched by a fourth, Valagamba, in 103 BCE. It was a damned succession. Barely had Valagamba digested the celebratory when

all the hounds of hell slipped their leads and the kingdom's preeminent port, Mahatittha (now Mantota, opposite Mannar) fell to invaders.

The third Tamil invasion of Sri Lanka was on. Valagamba fled, lucky to be alive and in a 14-year tableau reminiscent of Agatha Christie's novel "Five Little Pigs" the once grand Anuradhapura Kingdom was then manhandled to atrophy. Two of the Dravidians returned to India, leaving one of the remaining five, Pulahatta, to rule from 104-101 BCE. At this point, history struggles to keep up.

Pulahatta was killed by Bahiya, another of the five remaining Dravidians and head of the army, who was in turn murdered in 99 BCE by Panayamara, the third Dravidian who had been unwisely promoted to run the army. Proving those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, Panayamara was assassinated in 92 BCE by his general, the fourth Dravidian, Pilayamara. But by now Valagamba, ever the comeback king, began his return, his guerrilla tactics toppling Pilayamara who had lasted all of seven months on the throne; and then defeating the last of the Pandyan chiefs, Dathika. Valagamba's return to power should have seen in a long lasting and confident restart for the dynasty – but too much blood had been split, and regicide had been so normalized as to undermine nearly every succeeding monarch with its malign and cancerous weight.

Two periods over the next 130 years in particular were to be its undoing, the first being the chaos unleashed by the ambitions of Queen Anura herself who murdered 7 kings before being murdered in her turn. Just 5 kings later chaos once again took hold, when a civil war, promoted by one too many serial regicides, caught up with a king called Kanirajanu Tissa who was to be

despatched in 33 CE by his successor, Chulabhaya in time honoured fashion. Dead within 2 years, Chulabhaya's sister, Sivali took the throne for 4 months before – but by now a proper civil war had struck up, with all its attendant disasters, including leaving the kingdom itself utterly ruleless for periods of time.

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

Little about this period of Sri Lankan history is certain, except that from around 35 CE an uncensored civil war preoccupied the entire country, leaving it without any plausible governance. For a time Ilanaga seemed to be ahead of the pack. But he then seems to have scored a perfect own-goal when he demoted the entire Lambakarna clan.

This abrupt change in their caste, in a country held increasingly rigid by ideas of caste, galvanised them into full scale rebellion. The king – if king he really was – fell and fled into the hill country, returning 3 years later at the head of a borrowed Chola army to take back his throne in 38 CE. Ilanaga's reign lasted another 7 years, before his son Chandra Mukha Siva succeeded in 44 CE – only to be murdered by his brother, and our third candidate in this guide, Yassalalaka Thissa in 52 CE.

The stage was now set for one of the most eccentric periods of island governance. With the ascension of the regicidal Yassalalaka Thissa, the last chorus of the Vijayan throne sounded, in Frank Sinatra style: "and now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain."

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

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

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

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

FOUR

JETTHA TISSA I

Some 200 years after all this dayglow-mad tale, we encounter our 4th candidate; villainous for sure but oddly sweet too – though not so sweet as to rule himself out from his rightful place in this guide. By the time Jettha Tissa I came to the throne, the Lambakannas, the dynasty that replaced the Vijayans, were already 60% through their rule; though they were to regain power 245 years later and rule for a second term, this time for almost 300 years until the greatest Tamil invasion the island was to know eradicated their offspring from all known records forever.

But that was all still to come. For now the first set of Lambakanna kings seemed to be approaching a rare and wonderful chink of regental quietude and plenty. Until that is Jettha Tissa I took over.

What extenuating circumstances there were to explain his nature could be said to be found in his fathering, for his father, Gotabhaya, himself a near certain candidate for this guide, had come to the throne himself having murdered at least one if not two previous kings. In 254 CE Gotabhaya grabbed the throne, ruling it with the proverbial rod of iron. A man of deeply conservative religious beliefs, he was unimpressed by the Vajrayana movement, a form of tantric Buddhism that was making slim but noticeable appearances into his kingdom. The movement was closely aligned with Mahayana Buddhism and seen by many as incompatible with the Theravada Buddhism that had been practiced on the island since the 3rd century BCE. The king did all he could to thwart it, even banishing sixty monks for such beliefs.

But what he kept out with one door slammed shut, he inadvertently let in with another. For he entrusted his son, Jettha Tissa's education to an Indian monk named Sanghamitta, a closet follower of Vaitulya Buddhism.

The Vaitulya doctrinal strand was even more radical than the Vajrayana doctrine that Gotabhaya was so busy trying to eradicate.

Like a time bomb, the impact of this private religious education on his successor, was timed to go off the moment this alarming and archaic old king died.

His death, in 267 CE, left behind a most divided country. Several ministers, blithely (and, as it turned out, suicidally) bold, refused to participate in his funeral rites.

For it was at this point that Jetta Tissa make his monstrous mark which the Mahavaṃsa faithfully records with an eye for the kind of gory detail more beloved of sensational newspapers:

“After his father’s death,” it begins, “Jettha Tissa became king. To punish the hostile ministers who would not go in procession with him, at the performing of the king’s funeral rites, the king himself proceeded forth, and placing his younger brother at the head and then the body following close behind, and then the ministers whilst he himself was at the end (of the procession), he, when his younger brother and the body were gone forth, had the gate closed immediately behind them, and he commanded that the treasonous ministers be slain and (their bodies) impaled on stakes round about his father’s pyre.”

This pitiless habit of creating a circle of staked heads was a useful iconic pageant of power that helped the new regime whip people into place, but it has haunted the island through the centuries, its most recent appearance being during the brutal JVP uprising in 1971 and 1987 when anxious neighbours, calling on nearby villages, might find such similar circles of horror.

Under Jetta Tissa, as under his father, it was tough love that the country received; and his subsequent decade long rule was not an easy ride for those around him.

Indeed, states The Mahavamsa, "he came by the surname: the Cruel." It then elaborates with dismay the steps he took to move patronage and resource from the orbit of Theravāda Buddhism to Vaitulya Buddhism.

But mixed in with such stern rule and an eagerness for sudden acts of random capital punishment, was also a certain amount of largesse to the religious community including building a large water tank for a monastery, the Arama Pacinatissapabbata and tailoring 6 sets of robes for 30,000 monks.

The Mahavaṃsa, with a surprising and somewhat unusual tone of balance ends its coverage of his grim reign stating that "thus, reflecting that sovereignty, being the source of manifold works of merit, is at the same time the source of many an injustice, a man of pious heart will never enjoy it as if it were sweet food mixed with poison."

FIVE

KASYAPA

Jetta Tissa's nine Lambakanna successors were to romp their way through reigns which, the odd happy ending notwithstanding, failed to reverse an ever weakening realm. When the next invasion came, by 6 Dravidian chiefs, the kingdom fell compliantly into their hands. It was 436 CE and though Sri Lanka's new rulers were Buddhist Tamils and not Hindu ones, they were still essentially good time boys out for as long as it might last - and all the easy plunder they could muster.

It took 16 long and violent years to finally eject them, an achievement only made possible by the advent of a new homespun dynasty, the Moriyas, under a new warlord king, Dhatusena, a ruler who was to be remembered as one of Sri Lanka's greatest kings. But not even his considerable achievements could protect him from his own son, Kasyapa, the fifth and most glamorous member of the elite villains included in this guide.

Being the son of a non-royal concubine, Kasyapa had no place in the succession - that right going instead to his royal brother, Moggallana. But Kasyapa played family politics with a cardsharp's skills.

Cleverly, he was able to leverage an old family rift created when his father had his sister killed for failing to protect her own daughter from being abused by her husband, Migara. Whatever else this act could be called, it was also unwise - for Migara was also the head of the army. Never scorn a soldier. Willingly enlisted in the planned coup d'état, the army sided with Kasyapa, and king Dhatusena found himself deposed in 473 CE.

For Moggallana this was a major setback. Penurious exile rather than years of milk and honey (or Kittel) were now to be his fate. Even so, it was a fate far better than that awaiting his father.

Had things ended with mere deposition or even a quiet touch of regicide we may never have heard of Kashyapa. He would just have been yet another one of the island's numerous coup d'état kings. But with Oedipean instincts, Kashyapa went further. Much further. He began by entombing his father alive in his palace walls. For so distinguished a king as Dhatusena, to be reduced to mere bricks and mortar was a shocking way to end a reign. And, to escape the widespread disapprobation this would have created, Kashyapa abandoned his capital of Anduraupura in much the same way as Tiberius had abandoned Rome for Capri; and headed for Sigiriya.

Here, for a time at least, he ducked those biblical warnings that declared that "he that covereth his sins shall not prosper." Even so, as an otherwise obscure American wildflower enthusiast later noted, "the wages of sin are the hardest debts on earth to pay, and they are always collected at inconvenient times and unexpected places." It took 22 years before Kashyapa's debt was called in, during which time he turned Sigiriya into one of Asisa's most remarkable pleasure palaces; the venue for a lifestyle that made living one long spectacular party.

A capital for just one reign, Sigiriya was a cross between the Tivoli, Akhenaten's Amarna, and the Brighton Pavilion. It enjoyed every last innovation and refinement available – and there were many. It set new standards for urban planning, the royal bastion surrounded by an elaborately laid out outer city, encircled by geometric circles of water, terraced, and boulder gardens, with ponds, pavilions, fountains and cut pools. Double moats and triple ramparts, and defendable gateways guarded it, and the massive sentinel sculpture of a 45 foot high crouching lion marking out its main entrance. The most advanced

water technology in the world powered its fountains, lakes, wells, streams, and waterfalls. Artists whose frescos equalled those of the later and faraway Leonardo da Vinci painted its perfumed inhabitants.

Nothing was denied it – nothing until the Moggallana denied it everything. In joy is sorrow - and Kashyapa, king, party giver, gourmand, and libertine, knew that his moment of doom was bound to come sooner rather than later. Gazing across the plains from his high fortress walls in Sigiriya, he would have been presciently aware that his brother would eventually arrive to stop all the fun.

And so he did. Commanding a specially recruited mercenary army from nearby India, Moggallana had come to take back his rightful throne. Kashyapa would have watched his sibling nemesis gather on the plains below him, his implacable army spilling out across the water gardens and pleasure terraces of his Alhambra-like palace.

The day was to end with the death of Kashyapa and the extinction all that Sigiriya stood for - one of Asisa's most remarkable pleasure palaces; the venue for a lifestyle that made living one long spectacular party. The victorious brother returned the seat of government back to the old capital, Anduraupura, like some brow beaten and repentant deserter; ensuring that power was once again exercised with appropriate and demure propriety.

Immortalized as the patricide king, Kashyapa emerges as a rather likable monster, the sort that Mary Wollstonecraft had in mind when she wrote that "no man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks."

SIX

KALINGA
MAGHA

The next 720 years are lavishly populated with errant kings of one sort or another, their iniquitous errantry usually little more complicated than a touch of regicide, which is perhaps why it takes quite so long before we get to this guide's 6th exultant member - Kalinga Magha, one of the last of the island's most prominent Tamil invaders.

In a sense Kalinga Magha stands as a devilish ambassador for all 8 notable pre-colonial invaders suffered by the island. Although one or two others outdid him in their impact, Kalinga Magha appeared to make up for this with the psychotic and enthusiastic style he brought to his task.

Plunder, land, murder, and all on the widest possible scale – this was what got him up in the morning.

Most of the others were merely after money: Sena and Guttika, the cunning Tamil horse traders who stole the kingdom in 237 BCE for 22 years; the almost a dozen invading Pandyan Dravidian chiefs, the first 5 capturing the state in 103 BCE for 14 years; the next 6 in 429 CE for 26 years.

One even loved the land he conquered: Elara, the mighty and even respected Chola strongman who ruled for an astonishing 44 years. Two merely saw it as an appropriate annexure to their already vast empire: the Chola emperor, Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra I who annihilated Anduraupura for 77 years from 993 CE.

And the last barely counts, for Parakrama Pandyan II, the Pandyan warlord who first captured Polonnaruwa, ruled it for just 3 years under he himself was killed by Kalinga Magha in 1215 CE – and even he, the chronicles observed did so “without transgressing the political precepts of Manu”.

Under Parakrama Pandyan II, life in Polonnaruwa went on largely unchanged. The city, having been turned into the new capital by Vijayabahu, the king who had finally expelled Rajendra I and the last Cholas in 1070 CE, had enjoyed a vast building programme by this new line of Sinhalese kings.

The site was metamorphosed by immense buildings of great beauty supported by an agrarian economy made possible by the hydraulic engineering marvels created around the expansive water tanks built to feed crops.

The Kingdom was no pale echo of Anuradhapura, being, at times, at least as powerful, creative, and influential - but its future was fatally undone by a depressing run of quarrelsome monarchs and it fell with depressing ease when "there landed a man who held to a false creed, whose heart rejoiced in bad statesmanship:"Kalinga Magha.

Arriving in 2015, he was "a great scorching fire," whose "heart rejoiced in bad statesmanship ... an unjust king sprung from the Kalihga line, "who "put out the Monarch's eyes and plundered all his treasures, pearls, jewels and so forth".

The chronicles eagerly enumerate his sins. "His great warriors oppressed the people, boasting cruelly everywhere ... they tore from the people their garments, their ornaments and the like, corrupted the good morals of the family which had been observed for ages, cut off hands and feet and the like (of the people), destroyed many houses and tied up cows, oxen and other (cattle) which they made their own property.

After they had put fetters on the wealthy people and had tortured them and taken away all their possessions, they made poor people of them.

They wrecked the image houses, destroyed many cetiyas, ravaged the viharas and maltreated the lay brethren.

They flogged the children, tormented the five (groups of the) comrades of the Order, made the people carry burdens and forced them to do heavy labour.

Many books known and famous they tore from their cord and strewed them hither and thither.

The beautiful, vast, proud cetiyas like the Katanavali and others which embodied as it were, the glory of former pious kings, they destroyed by overthrowing them and allowing alas! many of the bodily relics, their souls as it were, to disappear.

The Monarch forced the people to adopt a false faith, and he brought great confusion into the four sharply divided castes.

Villages and fields, houses and gardens, slaves, cattle, buffaloes and whatever else belonged to the Sihalas he had delivered up to the Kerajas.

The viharas, the 77 pariveijas and many sanctuaries he made over to one or other of his warriors as dwelling. The treasures which belonged to the Buddha and were the property of the holy Order he seized and thus committed a number of sins in order to go to hell.

In this fashion committing deeds of violence, the Ruler Magba held sway in Lanka for twenty-one years."

A massive migration followed of Sinhalese people to the south and west of Sri Lanka, and into the mountainous interior, as they attempted to escape.

Kalinga Magha earns his place here not simply by nature of the terrible destruction he carried out but because he drove the final nail into the idea of the unitary state.

With a couple of ephemeral interludes, the island would never again be governed as an independent whole until 1948 when it gained its independence from the British.

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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.

ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques; its healthy menus fusing street food with fine dining.

Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

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It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press whose books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

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