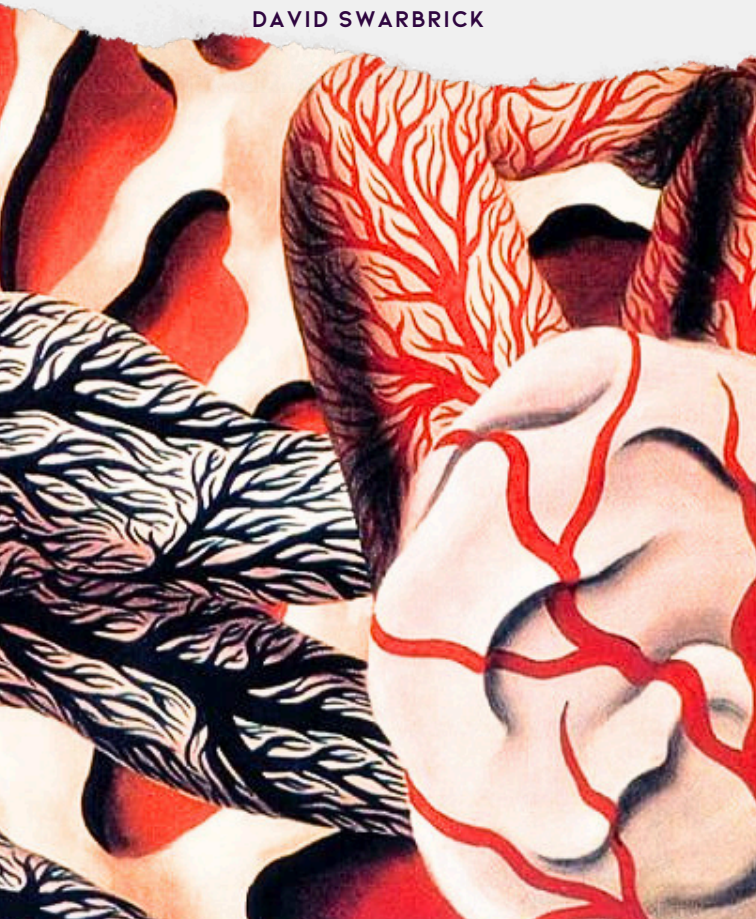
The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 25

THE BLOOD-RED ROAD TO POLONNARUWA

SRI LANKA'S POLONNARUWA KINGS II

DAVID SWARBRICK



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"Which way you ought to go depends on where you want to get to..."

ALICE
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

ONE

The Long, Long Road Ahead

A time traveller, rocketing backwards a thousand years from today, would alight on a most unhappy sight if he landed in Sri Lanka, circa 1039 CE, a date whose huge importance to Sri Lanka's future will become apparent.

True, the island was no longer reeling from repeated Chola invasions from India. But it was instead groaning mutinously under more or less total occupation. Hell had arrived, and what a change in circumstances it brought.

Sri Lanka's social and cultural identity, once long, long ago a subset of India's, had, since the arrival of Prince Vijaya over 1500 years earlier in 543 BCE, taken a road all of its own.

It was a road that had led to a separate language, a different religion, a legal system and government unique to itself; literature, architecture and engineering that were all its own – everything in fact that indicated with unmistakable, prized clarity that this was a very different country to anything encountered north of the Palk Straits.

Until 993 CE the road lay without argument to Anuradhapura. But no longer. The conquering Chola dynasty changed all that, and the direction of future travel was now far to the east – towards Polonnaruwa

The road to Polonnaruwa lay through a myriad of unremembered guerrilla scraps, across battlefields long since disappeared; past fortresses that have dissolved back into the earth that made them; through decades of unrecalled retreats and advances; past deaths and small violent victories, and the red rich soil that is so distinctive of much of Sri Lanka; and looks as if countless armies have bled their lives into it and moved on, forgotten.

It set off, a long and winding road if ever there was one, from the savannah of Ruhuna – now present-day Yala, past the southern highlands and the wastes of the southwest seaboard before turning east again and heading toward Polonnaruwa, travelled as it went through the almost invisible reigns of nine rebel kings and the still more - almost invisible, almost evaporated - bloodline of the Anuradhapura kings that had retreated to the southern principality of Ruhuna when the Chola came.

Some parts of Sri Lankan history are so poorly documented, so confusing and obscure, as to be practically

invisible; other parts, like the period between the fall of Anuradhapura and the inception of Polonnaruwa is even more confounding, remembered, if at all, like a dream a friend has recounted from one he heard reported from much earlier times.

Certainly, it constitutes a road, in the sense that it has a beginning and an end. But it is one that defies the definition of any road map or atlas.

As America's greatest poet of the 20th century famously put it – "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference."

And what a difference it did make. Within the island fortress that was Sri Lanka, a world evolved like nowhere else – then, or now.

TWO

The First Circle of Hell

With the founding of the city of Anuradhapura in 377 BCE, the nascent kingdom gained a capital that would grow into one of Asia's most glittering urban centres; its stupas dwarfed only by one of the three pyramids in Egypt, its palaces and temples, monasteries and public spaces soaring in stone and brick above the plush treescape and served by utilities, principally water, the management of which bettered anything anywhere else in the world.

All this came to a horrific and abrupt end in 993 CE, 1,536 years after its foundation, when the Sinhalese kingdom collapsed with brutal speed against the forces of the invading armies of the epic Chola king Rajaraja the Great, supported – more by a malignant default than forward planning - by a ragged army of rebellious Tamil mercenaries who had turned on their erstwhile paymaster, Mahindra V, the last legitimate ruler of Anuradhapura, for failing to have paid them their army stipends.

The invaders, the great chronicles of Sri Lanka record, "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 for themselves."

The Cholas, the chroniclers go on to say, "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."

The whole of Anuradhapura was left uninhabitable.

In truth, much of the kingdom it governed had long since collapsed. Although far from ever being up to the task of defending his kingdom, Mahinda V had, in any case, inherited a realm that was already living high on borrowed time.; On his accession to "splendid Anuradhapura," the Culavamsa wrote the city "was full of strangers" – i.e. mercenaries, who murderously intervened, first this way and then that in the poisonous currents of palace politics that dominated late Lambakanna rule.

The state's coffers were bare, its peasants recalcitrant and the new king in free fall from the start. "He wandered," the Culavamsa states, "from the path of statecraft and was of very weak character; the peasants did not deliver him his share of the

produce."

Mahindra fled to the southern sanctuary of the principality of Ruhana as Rajaraja the Great "burnt up the kingdom of Lanka," according to the famous Thiruvalangadu Copper Plates.

But Rajaraja set aside a more thorough conquest of the island. He was busy enough with innumerable other wars - all inspired by his attempt to turn his South Indian kingdom into an Indian Ocean empire. And so, in Sri Lanka, he focused less on total coast-to-coast control than on plunder and establishing a series of permanent Chola military forts and Hindu temples.

Polonnaruwa was selected as the new Chola capital – closer to the supply ports the victorious king used on the eastern seaboard of Sri Lanka, embedded in the fertile and well-watered lands of the Mahaweli River to sustain the stronghold and better positioned to deal with the continued Sinhalese guerrilla attacks that came from Ruhuna.

And there things might have rested – if only kings were excused the mortal failings of the rest of mankind. For Rajaraja died in 1014 CE.

THREE

The Second Circle of Hell

Proving that things can only ever get worse, the more prescient Sinhalese survivors would come to regret his death as it brought a yet more aggressive king to the throne – his son Rajendra Chola I.

The son set out to finish what his father had left undone.

Like a bad dream that reruns the following night, Sri Lanka was invaded all over again.

What little was left of Anuradhapura was annihilated; the southern principality of Ruhana was invaded, and Mahindra, his wife and daughter were taken as prisoners to India, where they would later die in miserable exile, having first handed over what was left of the crowns and jewels to the Chola.

The entire island was formally redefined as a Chola province. As Tomson Highway, a First Nation Canadian opera writer, put it, "he who defines, controls."

Polonnaruwa was redefined as the Chola capital and renamed Janana Thaman Galam.

Ever orderly – and the Cholas were notorious for seeing to the finer points of most things, be they the design of warships or the classification codes given to imported elephants - the rest of the country was restructured into a new Chola province named Mummudi-chola-mandalam. This was then subdivided into smaller provinces – Mandalams, which were in turn broken down into districts – Nadus.

The king sent many of his finest generals and military units from India to reinforce his armies on the island and establish permanent garrisons. The Chola muscle settled down to enforce draconian new taxation, modelled on what the dynasty used back in India to extract the best cuts of revenue from landowners, merchants, artisans, and builders. Each and every Sri Lankan port was closely managed to reinforce their grip on controlling and taxing the lucrative Indian Ocean trade routes. The largesse enjoyed for centuries by Buddhist institutions evaporated overnight, and the money instead rerouted into Hindu Saivite temples

Yet the Chola king was unable to finish the task properly.

It is ever the conundrum of swashbuckling rulers to be putting out a fire in one place only to see another ignite somewhere else. And Rajendra

Chola I's focus on nailing Sri Lanka was continually interrupted by the pressing needs of his many other conquests – made and still to come, across India especially in the Deccan and Bengal as well as across other parts of SE Asia.

Added to this, the rump of what was left of Sinhalese resistance was awfully hard to eradicate. The spaghetti-like territory of Ruhuna, with its mountains and jungle, was a natural hideaway for rebels, while the region's poverty made it of marginal interest to fully annex. But worst of all was the stubborn, innate, determined, bloody-minded resistance of what was left of the Sinhalese population. This was to prove the bridge too far.

FOUR

Rebel Princes

The king's failure to finish things off neatly would eventually cost the Chola their entire conquest.

But not for some time. For around 4 decades, in fact. As the Chola got on with ruling most of the island from Polonnaruwa, a succession of argumentative rebel kings got on with the task of fighting one another and – from time to time – the Chola too. And they did this from distant Ruhana, that southern principality that had proved at best mildly obedient and more often wholly mutinous to its old Anuradhapura overlords. Its reputation and character was now finally to be of use to its old master, for here was fostered the Sinhalese future.

Mahindra, exiled to India, had been succeeded by his son, Kassapa VI, in 1029, and the new king set up a reasonably effective guerrilla army in Ruhana, growing its capability through raids and invasions. But just as his military strength approached full-attack capability, with a good-to-go battle plan at the ready, the king died of an unspecified illness in 1040.

Given the lack of direct successors, dying was a woeful failing on Kassapa's part.

His chief general, a man named Kitti, seized power but lasted no more than 8 days before another general, Mahalana - Kitti, deposed him.

The new king, the third in as many months, did not disappoint. He was a fighting man, and fight he did.

In the tragically short time the gods allocated to him, Mahalana – Kitti busied himself leading innumerable anti-Chola raids. None of them seemed to achieve anything, and it was unsurprising that, after losing a final one in the second year of his reign, he decided to kill himself rather than fall into Chola hands. As his old headmaster might have written, "A" for effort; "E" for success.

Once again, the remote principality was left rudderless.

The king's son, Vikkama Pandu, next took over but, clearly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task before him, spent most of his time hiding out in Kalatittha in Western Ruhuna – about as far from Chola reach as it was possible to get.

But now Sinhalese hopes for defeating the Chola had become so desperate in finding any credible local Sinhalese leadership that many had resorted to

giving their loyalty to the Pandyan kings of Tamil Nadu, the ancestral enemies of the Chola on the old and reliable basis that my enemy's enemy is my new best friend.

The chronicles are vague about what happened to the invisible Vikkama Pandu, unable to agree even upon the length of his so-called rule.

The shadowy king was succeeded, or perhaps murdered, by his successor, Jagatipala, who, it is thought, arrived like an extinguint warrior from India, albeit one valued entirely for his brash utilitarian qualities rather than his regal legitimacy.

Certainly, he had no relationship whatsoever with either the old Sinhalese kings of Anuradhapura – or probably the Sinhalese themselves. But more useful than any bloodline was his pleasing military reputation. He looked CV-perfect to lead the resistance in the absence of any more local candidate.

So fight he did – though for the shortest of times – dying in battle a few years into his reign.

He was succeeded by an entirely new and also wholly unrelated Pandyan, Parakrama Pandu.

Parakrama Pandu was himself to be soon killed fighting the Chola – and the death of both these two Indian princes exemplified just how completely Sri Lanka had been reduced to a south Indian battleground in which the old dynasties that had fought one another for centuries on the Indian mainland had now extended their deadly disagreements to Sri Lanka too.

FIVE

Towards Journey's End

The first glimmer of any new hope came with Parakrama Pandu's successor, Loka.

Although Loka's origins remain a mystery, the Culavamsa Chronicle notes approvingly that he was "a trustworthy, determined man capable of breaking down the arrogance of the Cholas." Loka also seems to have protected local Buddhist traditions as much as he fought against the Cholas.

Fighter though he was - and a good one at that, who chalked up some successes against pushing back on Chola rule - he was, however, fatally betrayed by the members of the almost extinct last line of Anuradhapura kings; and in particular, by a chieftain called Buddharaja.

Buddharaja had appointed himself protector of Prince Kitti, the recognised legitimate descendant of the doomed last real Anuradhapura king, Mahindra. Quite how he had ever managed to survive all this time in the anarchy that was Ruhuna is little short of miraculous.

Their combined forces defeated Loka in a battle near modern-day Negumbpo, but they failed to take the throne, which passed instead to Loka's chief general, a man who would rule as Kassapa VII.

In retrospect, their failure served them well, for the new king took on the arduous task of fighting the Chola all by himself, expending all his precious energies on weakening the occupiers but leaving little left to protect himself against his own side.

And by now the Chola were an empire facing ever greater demands on its resources. Even as it sought to grow still further in India, it was equally busy putting down an ever greater series of revolts against its rule in both its more recent territorial acquisitions and its own heartland. They became progressively more parsimonious about committing large numbers of fresh troops to defend their military bases in Sri Lanka, leaving the task increasingly up to the troops already stationed there.

All of this helped Kassapa VII enormously. He extended the reach of Ruhuna and Sinhalese influence further north into what had been safe Chola territory, but not for long – dying in battle against his own side, Buddharaja and Prince Kitti, around 1055 – the 9th so-called Sinhalese king since Mahindra V had put up a first, hopelessly enfeebled resistance

to the Cholas.

It has been a long and terribly drawn-out fight. But finally the stage was now set for the great comeback.

For in Prince Kitti - born in 1039, a date of huge importance to few else in the world but Sri Lanka - the Sinhalese were finally ready to reclaim what was left of the old Anuradhapura kingdom.

Kitti – or Vijayabahu I as he was later named – was the 10th and last rebel king; and more importantly, the first new king of Polonnaruwa, re-establishing magnificently around him the lost stands of the first Sinhalese kingdom.

There remained a little bit more blood to spill on the final stretch of the road to Polonnaruwa, but it was a splash in the pan for the new king who travelled towards his larger destiny with untroubled confidence, using elephants, as you might expect from a future Polonnaruwa king, as the springboard of his military strategy – his deadly shock troops, his irresistible mobile siege engines; his unequalled elevated combat and command platform. It was no longer a question of whether, but rather when the old Anuradhapura kingdom would seize back the lost Sinhalese state for itself.

vast, poorly preserved, and poorly presented ruins of Polonnaruwa.

But not so elephants. They can be treasured at first sight, even if it takes considerable detective work to understand their contribution to Sri Lanka's last great ancient kingdom, Polonnaruwa, and the 19 kings and queens who ruled from here.

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.

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 more accessible. The Press' books, companions, blogs, and guides are freely available at ceylonpress.com as is its show, The Sri Lanka Podcast.

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