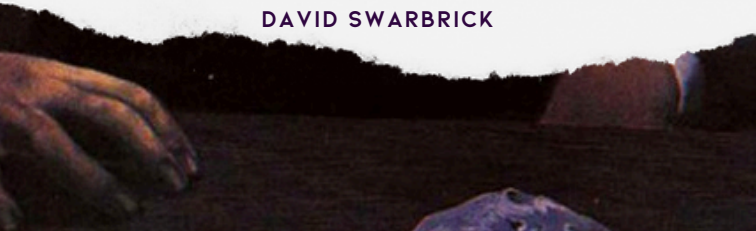


The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 26

THE ONCE & ONLY KING

SRI LANKA'S POLONNARUWA KINGS III

DAVID SWARBRICK



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"I don't like the look of it at all," said the King: "However, it may kiss my hand, if it likes."

THE KING
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

ONE

The Perfect Candidate

Vijayabahu, the new Sri Lankan king, swept into his borrowed capital, the hailed and heroic guest of honour at a party hosted for himself.

True, he was a little late – 77 years in fact – but he was there; he had made it - and that meant everything to the occupied and warring country that Sri Lanka had become in the past seven decades.

Recounting the very moment when Polonnaruwa fell, the Cuḷavamsa Chronicle describes how "the great heroes, the great fighters, the great warriors of the Great King, the mighty ones with great pride, Ravideva, Cala and the others scaled the walls, broke furiously into the town and at once exterminated all the Damilas – that is, the Chola - root and branch."

It was a victory worth celebrating, and the chronicle goes on to say, "after King Vijayabahu had thus achieved the victory, he, the discerning one, had the drums of his dominion beaten in the town."

By seizing the capital that the Chola invaders had set up in conquered Sri Lanka, Vijayabahu had brought off what at least 9 previous kings and princes before him had tried to do – but failed.

He had pressed the reset button for the once-defeated Sinhalese state. More fighting lay ahead – but it was a fight that the king was easily up to.

At the time of capturing his future capital, the new king was no royal junior, still less an old and tired ruler with an eye on the afterlife. He was instead just 21 years old. Were he living in Sri Lanka today, he would only just have made the full legal adult milestone that would permit him to buy alcohol. But Vijayabahu had started everything early, an accomplished hunter and archer in his childhood; a military leader in his teens; a ruthless political tactician long before 20; and a talented propagandist. Long before he captured Polonnaruwa, he was the consummate war leader, who knew his way around battlefields, sieges, and the shifting political alliances that help create and maintain armies.

And he was the ultimate unity candidate in a country that had been plagued by on-off civil wars between two competing noble clans for centuries.

After the fall of the island's great dynasty, its founding Vijayans in 66 CED, the Lambakanna and the Moriyan families had vied with one

another for the throne. As far back as 455 CE, the Moriyans first seized the throne from the ruling Lambakanna, losing it again in 531 CE, only to grab it back in 551 CE.

Dynastic ping-pong ricocheted through the whole of the 7th century, and although the Lambakannas held their throne more securely for the next 300 years, the Moriyans still lurked on the sidelines, ready to take advantage whenever it offered itself. In the final run-up to the Chola occupation of the island in 993 CE, the Lambakannas lost the plot altogether, governing with little effect over a rump part of their territory and threatened on all sides by mercenary armies and Tamil invaders.

All through these periods of bitter division and bloodshed, the different power blocks within Sri Lanka's Buddhist establishment were no less divided. The ruling classes, the nobility, with their vast lands and revenues; the often semi-autonomous rulers of those parts of the island that lay in greatest distance from Anuradhapura; the ever-growing and competing bands of mercenaries; even the merchants- all divided within themselves as the two sometimes-ruling clans, the mercenaries and the island-trotting Tamil kings, got on with the business of exterminating one another.

But in Vijayabahu the country found the one and probably only man who brought both bloodlines equally to bear within one very grand and entitled body.

He was the best possible heir - from almost all sides - to the Anduraupuran kingdom, his flawless DNA a direct biological link to the past even as it cast him confidently forward to create a new dynasty of island kings.

Certainly he met opposition – that was ever a given for rulers of Sri Lanka – but his heritage did more than much else to minimise the impact of that opposition. All through the island's many human hierarchies, in religion, business, the aristocracy, the people who counted and those who didn't, he united the old divides. He was pretty much the only show in town. It was either him, or an imported occupying Tamil king, Chola, Pandyan or something worse or in between.

TWO

From Mowgli to Warrior

Transcending all other advantages was Vijayabahu's own most laudable characteristic. For Vijayabahu was good – very good, at being in charge.

This kind of leadership was surprisingly – depressingly - unusual.

Despite the embarrassment of kings the country had enjoyed throughout its history – at least 120 to the point at which Vijayabahu took over – Sri Lanka had not been especially blessed in its monarchs.

Barely ten per cent of the total had been in any way great, and only a handful had been reasonably effective.

Much of the rest ranged from pallidly mediocre to chariot-crash disasters, too often unable to escape the poisonous pull of palace politics and the urge to either commit or resist regicide. Survival was the constant ghost behind most royal reigns. And what little space and resources it did not occupy were often frittered away on a fixation on religious affairs. The security of the kingdom, its economy, and its wider stability too often came second or even third.

It is more than likely that, given the horrors of the past, any strong and successful candidate would have succeeded to some extent or other, regardless of any particularly pressing niceties – but in their new king the country gained a ruler with more than mere qualities and skills.

Certainly, Vijayabahu's ruthlessness, military experience, his familiarity with all the island's power blocks, his bloodline, his relative youth- all this set him apart from most previous kings. But what really gave him rocket power was his unshakeable resolution to rebuild and rule Anuradhapura Mark 2. He had the determination and focus to make it happen. And despite many problems, some of his own making, he largely succeeded.

His own goals included a series of marriage policies that weakened his dynasty's future, and a mindset that sometimes made enemies where he might have made partners. All were dwarfed by his inherited problems – for the ones he faced were huge - even after winning back the crown.

The country had been decimated by decades of Chola rule and plunder. Its civil administration and much of the management of critical resources, especially water, had fragmented. The economy that so depended on all

this, as did the country's entire stability, was very weak. The whole of the north central region had fallen into terminal decline with the destruction of Anuradhapura.

Mercenaries still ran amock in many parts of the land, and sizable numbers of Chola warlords and administrators remained glued to the place, unwilling to be swept up and out. Across the island's fecund paddy and forest, its over-mighty aristocrats retained an inbuilt resistance to Vijayabahu's centralising instincts. The religious glue, the Buddhist sangha, that so helped to bind the nation together had been deeply compromised by the Chola occupation. For everyone everywhere, mere survival was the priority - not progress.

Despite many setbacks, that even included at one point losing control of Polonnaruwa all over again, Vijayabahu knew exactly what he wanted to achieve as a king and he stuck at it – for over 5 decades, a blessedly long rule that allowed his reforms and innovations to properly bed in.

His was a life journey that fell untidily, if conveniently, into 4 parts.

As Prince Keerthi, he lived his Mowgli years, hiding in the impenetrable jungle and mountains of Ruhana with his parents, two younger brothers and a sister.

He changed his name to Vijayabahu and morphed into a more messianic, ruthless figure in his adolescence – his Robespierre period, if you like, inspired by the prophecies of an astrologer who predicted a future of conquest and island-wide rule for the youngster.

This evolved smoothly into the long Che Guevara years running an ever more successful guerrilla war against the Chola before he finally crossed the threshold and reached his Louis XIV years – the 5 decades of national rebuilding and dynasty making.

To commemorate this, he changed his name again – to Siri Sangha Bo Sinhaladheeshvara Chakravarthi. And grand and imperial though the name change undoubtedly was, the epithet he earned by the time of his death said it all more clearly, his people knowing him as both Vijayabahu the Great and Mahalu Vijayabahu –"Vijayabahu the Elder".

THREE

The Arm Of Victory

Through his father, Prince Moggallana, Vijayabahu gained direct bloodlines to both the main Anuradhapura Moriyan kings such as Dhatusena and Moggallana I; as well as a generous splash of competing Lambakanna blood that reached all the way back to 518 CE and King Silakala, famous for having brought a hair relic of Lord Buddha to the island.

Through his mother, Princess Lokita, he irrefutably consolidated his Lankbranaka lineage through his direct descendant, King Manavamma, the warrior king who ruled Sri Lanka for over 3 decades from 684 CE.

But the blueness of his blood did little to help the exiled royals live anything other than a life of secrecy and survival as they hid from Chola war parties, often existing off roots and wild yams.

In this, the fugitive family was greatly blessed by the protection it enjoyed from one of Ruhana's principal chiefs – Lord Budharaja. We know this from the remarkable discovery of the Panakaduwa Copper Plate Grant, unearthed in 1948 by a paddy farmer preparing his field for sowing. The plate records a royal thank-you letter like no other.

In it, King Vijayabahu decrees a series of extraordinary hereditary privileges and immunities as a reward for such supreme loyalty to Lord Budharaja and his descendants. Unusually for royal texts, this one is strikingly emotional, the king writing, "At the time we were remaining concealed in the mountainous wilderness... Lord Budharaja of Sitnaru-bim, Constable of Ruhuna, with the aid of his retinue, protected the entire royal family... he brought us up in our tender age..."

For Lord Budharaja did more than protect the destitute royals – he mentored the young Prince Keerthi, teaching him the winning arts of war: not just how best to fight, but who, when and where.

By the time he was fifteen, the young prince was actively involved in leading Sinhalese resistance – not just to the Chola, but to rivals on his own side.

Since the capture back in 1017 of the last king of Anuradhapura, Mahinda V, from his hideaway in Ruhuna, the southern principality had mutinously and stubbornly resisted any real attempt by the Chola to occupy its intractable territories. From its Byzantine mountains and forests

a succession of Sinhalese warlords had assumed the role of King in exile, or more realistically, prince of Ruhuna, until eventually even this gave way to Indian Tamil Pandyan overlords, enemies of the Chola, who took over the local resistance on the basis that my enemies' enemy is my friend.

Much of their time was spent fighting one another as innumerable now unrecorded local chiefs seized power in the south, splintering it into ever smaller spheres.

One of the very last of these unfortunate local princes was a local military commander called Loka, a "trustworthy capable man" according to the Culavamsa Chronicle – but, in the imperious view of Prince Keerthi, about as entitled to rule as a farm labourer.

The young prince, backed by his mentor, forced the luckless ruler to defend his rear rather than attack the Chola and, around 1054, decisively beat him at the Battle of Remuna. Vijayabahu failed to consolidate the victory, and the throne passed to another pretender, a man who took the title of Kassapa VII, though he lasted but a year. By 1055, he too was dead, and Prince Keerthi, just 16 years old, was now the sole Prince of Ruhana and the new king in exile of the occupied Anduraupura kingdom.

It was time for a name change – to Vijayabahu, whose literal meaning, "the arm of victory," gave off the sort of mood music best suited to aspiring guerrilla leaders.

For ten years the jungle Che Guevara honed his guerrilla credentials, leading devastating raids on the Chola from such remote fortresses as Wakirigala and Paluta Pabata, whilst assiduously suppressing any other Sinhalese pretenders on his turf and ejecting any new Pandyan Tamil eager for a piece of the action too.

The Chronicles gloss over this hugely complicated period of island history, merely noting that "having reached the age of seventeen years, the Prince the glory of whose great fame had spread on every side, who was extraordinarily skilled in the use of the many expedients such as kindness and the like had freed the whole of Ruhana from the briers of the foe."

Ruhana was cleared of Chola; most serious local Sinhalese resistance had been crushed, and the arm of victory was now ready to fall upon the Chola strongholds.

His first attempt – a two-pronged attack on Polonnaruwa and what was left of Anuradhapura in 1066 – failed. Although Vijayabahu captured Polonnaruwa, the Chola king, Virarajendra, rushed over reinforcements and, with the help of a couple of traitorous Sinhalese chiefs, won the city back.

Defeated, Vijayabahu set about improving his army, logistics, and local alliances until, in 1069, a much better moment to strike arose.

For in not so far away India, the sexagenarian Chola king, Virarajendra was in the last year of his life, and facing an ever larger rebellion in his home territories. His death ushered in a deadly succession crisis. Vijayabahu spotted an enemy utterly preoccupied, one unable to offer their Sri Lankan garrisons any further support – and he struck a second time.

This time the guerrilla king organised a three-pronged attack. One army advanced from the west to capture the ruins of Anuradhapura and, more importantly, the strategic port of Mahatittha near present-day Mannar, severing any possible Chola support from India.

A second army advanced from the east to capture Sakamam and secure the eastern seaboard, whilst a third moved under Vijayabahu's own command to Polonnaruwa. There the three rebel armies met for a 7-month siege of "great strenuousness," "a terrifying fight from bastions and towers," the chronicles record. And so the city fell.

"The hero," the chronicles note, "the discerning one, who had utterly destroyed the best of the proud Colas, had placed the whole of Rajarattha on a sure foundation."

It was time for Vijayabahu to change his name once more, this time to something of a mouthful: "Siri Sangha Bo Sinhaladheeshvara Chakravarthi". Translated more simply, it meant "The Righteous and Fortunate Sovereign, Supreme Emperor and Lord of the Sinhala Kingdom."

He was 31 years old.

FOUR

Supreme

For old times' sake, and to acknowledge his ancient legitimacy, Vijayabahu arranged to be crowned king formally in Anuradhapura – in a specially built place amidst the ruins, constructed, the Chronicles state, of simple material gathered from the wreckage, a clear statement of the impoverished state of the country.

The coronation, coming a few years after his capture of Polonnaruwa, was delayed, as the victorious king had to spend several years quelling internal regional rebellions provoked by overmighty local chiefs.

And although crowned he was sometime around 1073, he nevertheless made Polonnaruwa his capital. After a savage seven-month siege, there was much in the city and its hinterland that needed repair- but as the administrative hub of the Chola state on the island, it was already good-to-go, well connected and resourced. The critical water infrastructure that supported it was intact. It was close to Ruhana, making it easier to keep an eye on any mutinous cravings; and it controlled access to both the north and the eastern seaboard with its maritime trade ports. And being so far inland, it was much easier to defend than Anuradhapura.

Polonnaruwa then was more a military fortress than a capacious city, and it was not until the reign of Vijayabahu's grandson, King Parakramabahu I, that the city mushroomed into the elaborate capital remembered in its sprawling ruins today. But the bones on which the entire place rested were reset, repaired, and restored by Vijayabahu

He placed key family members in important government positions such as the governorship of Ruhana and the army, and he moved fast to shore up his power through marriage. This did not entirely cauterise Ruhana as the epicentre of local rebellion, and it remained often on the brink of an uprising, kept more or less in place by the many garrisons and defence infrastructure the king constructed along the Mahaweli River crossings into his heartland - the Rajarata.

He married twice, leaving behind a complex network of family alliances that would later haunt his dynasty. But both his marriages - at least initially - cemented his authority: the first to Lilavati, the daughter of a previous king of Ruhana, an important Indian prince killed by the Chola; and later to Tilokasundari, the daughter of a powerful Indian Kalinga king and long-time Chola enemy, with whom he

had his only son and heir. He married two daughters to his two brothers; and another to his nephew, so blending a set of Kalinga, Pandyan, and Sinhalese bloodlines best able to resist the Chola and – he hoped, vainly as it turned out, to neutralise internal power rivalries

He restored the civil administration that governed the state's ability to control its resources, especially water, and put in place a new system of national taxation. He also totally reformed the coinage and was the first Sri Lankan king to strike coins bearing his own name. The old debased regional or Chola coins were replaced by the "Massa," a gold, silver and copper set of coins whose template would last for centuries. They depicted the monarch holding flowers in one hand and a lamp in the other; and on the reverse, the king seated holding a conch shell – the classic symbol of purity, sovereignty, and divine protection.

FIVE

Brick by Brick

Perhaps mindful of the later axiom, "What I build, I am," Vijayabahu launched the most ambitious building programme the island had seen for many hundreds of years. His most stunning building was the Atadage in Polonnaruwa, constructed inside the Sacred Quadrangle to house the Sacred Tooth Relic and the Bowl Relic of the Buddha.

A Coronation palace was erected in Anuradhapura, and an entirely new royal palace was built in Polonnaruwa, with associated administrative offices and courts. Roads were repaired and resting houses – ambalamas – refurbished, especially those leading to the sacred mountain, Sri Pada.

Water tanks and reservoirs that had been destroyed or silted up during the Chola era were mended; canals restored and extended, and the country's water infrastructure returned to productivity- and with it the nation's capacity to produce rice.

Resettlement programmes were launched to return farmers to abandoned lands, and land grants were made to widows to ensure families most affected by the Chola wars were able to sustain themselves and contribute back to a revived national economy.

Given how instrumental the national religion of Buddhism was to royal authority, it was highly injurious to a nation set about being rebuilt that the religious hierarchy Vijayabahu inherited was so depleted that fewer than five fully ordained Theravada monks remained on the island to conduct higher ordination ceremonies.

To restart religious communities, Vijayabahu turned to King Anawrahta of Burma for help, welcoming a brigade of Burmese Buddhist monks into the kingdom to restart ordinations and teach the scriptures. Five large dormitories were built for Buddhist monks on the site of his parents' funeral pyre. A large number of shrines and relic houses across the land, especially in Ruhuna, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa, were restored. Scores of damaged temples across the Rajarata were rebuilt, and countless cave temples and monasteries returned to life.

Despite these achievements, the onset of what became known as the Velakkara Revolt in 10834, 14 years into his reign, shows how difficult it was to establish royal authority.

The Velakkaras were an elite band of

Tamil mercenaries the Chola put in place to administer and police the state. Vijayabahu retained their services to ensure the continuity of government, and for a time this worked. What upset the whole thing was – of course – a burst of south Indian realpolitik. With the sort of cunning disruptive panache so ably demonstrated today by the likes of President Putin today, the Chola took pains to insult and harass a diplomatic delegation sent to them by Vijayabahu.

The king responded by declaring war and ordering his Velakkara mercenaries to sail to India to take up the fight. Naturally, they refused, unwilling to slaughter their own kinsmen. The mutiny swiftly escalated, and the mercenaries killed Vijayabahu's generals, and guards, and kidnapped members of his family, burning down parts of Polonnaruwa, especially the royal palace, to make clear their injured feelings.

The king fled to a stronghold in the southern highlands but returned with an irresistible army to crush the rebellion. Several thousand mercenaries were executed, and the ringleaders were burnt. A remarkably well-preserved stone slab still to be found next to the Atadage at Polonnaruwa records their surrender, in which they swear a sacred oath to protect those fundamental relics such as the Hair and bowl of Lord Buddha, so central to royal authority.

Vijayabahu was to go on to rule for another 26 years, completing a monumental, long reign – one of the longest of any island king, its prodigious length and constructive productivity gifting the country the stability it needed to recover from decades of Chola rule and the many more decades beforehand of national decline under the Lambakanna. He died in 1010 CE in his early 70s of nothing more awful than natural causes. "This Ruler of men," records the Culavamsa, "had thus for five and fifty years rolled the wheel of dominion without its wavering, and had served the Order as also the people sore vexed by fear of the wicked Damilas, he ascended to the heavenly world to behold the rich reward that had sprung from his meritorious works."

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.

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