

The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 21

WALKING ON AIR

SRI LANKA'S SECOND LAMBAKANNA KINGS III

DAVID SWARBRICK



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

THE GRYPHON
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN
WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865



ONE

The New Age

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

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

for most other people, pass as a full and busy life.

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

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

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

Like his predecessors, the new king was clear about his preferred support for the country's traditional Theravada Buddhist orders, and they in turn were careful to give the king all the authority due to one described as the protector of the Dhamma – those fundamental teachings of Lord Bhudda, from the Four Noble Truths to the Noble Eightfold Path, and everything that may have lain in-between that this particular conservative branch of Buddhism deemed relevant. Most notably, he commissioned a multi-storied hall in Anuradhapura within which the grander monks could study Theravada doctrines in greater comfort - and the decrees that have survived are strictly and, for the establishment at the time, reassuringly Theravadin in their

in their language. But his religious patronage was even more widespread. Significant new temples and monasteries were built or enlarged in Vaparani, Managgabodhi, Hatthikucchi, Punapitthi, and Mahaparivena. A large refectory was built for the iconic Abhayagiri Viharaya, and the entrance to the stately Ruwanwelisaya stupa was repaired.

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

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



TWO

Playing Safe

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

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

As with all Manavamma's successors, Aggabodhi VII was the continuity candidate. With little evidence of any departures from form or policy, the grand old kingdom show carried on. And grand it was for in him the country had a king who was not only the son of a previous king, but also

the husband of the previous king's daughter. There could be no doubting his royalty.

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

The Culavamsa also has him down as a king who received the laws, saying: "To the Order and to the laity he showed favour according to merit....By legal acts, he carefully reformed the Order of the Conqueror (Buddha) and, judging according to justice, he rooted out unjust judges." It was perhaps in response to this that he became known by the affectionate diminutive "Kuda Akbo".

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

He was, however, less adroit in his death, for he passed to the next world unexpectedly (but not unnaturally) - and in Polonnaruwa. It was perhaps a blessing that his own son, who had been appointed Uparaja, had recently died, for it offered his nephew, Mahinda, the son of the previous King, the opportunity to become the

legitimate heir himself, and not be a rebel in search of a kingdom. Mahindra duly took over as Mahinda II in 787 CE, reigning for 20 years until 807 CE. But securing all this created the most enormous clamour and tumult – the scale of which left an ominous reminder of troubled times in the long-distant past, and of still more troubled times over successive reigns. Winning the family politics that now ensured was his first and greatest challenge as he faced off against an operatic troupe of cousins, aunts and others every bit as jealous and dramatic as Carmen, Tosca, Antonio Salieri or Lady Macbeth.



THREE

Family Dissent

Racing to Anuradhapura from Mannar to secure the capital and army, he had to pause to put down a rebellion of tax protesters in the northern province. He next headed for Polonnaruwa with the intention of marrying the late king's widow, a union of dubious benefit. The window's initial reply to this unlooked-for romantic proposal was to poison him. When this failed, a siege commenced, and Mahinda – the victor – bound her in chains before marrying her all the same, "as he thought, she could neither be set free nor slain. It turned out to be an unexpectedly good decision and the Culavamsa went onto note, "she became with child and brought forth a splendid son who bore on him the signs of (former) merit. After that, she was very dear to the King, who granted his son the dignity of uparaja with the revenues."

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

irresistible combat."

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

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

India.

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

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

perhaps only surviving son, who took the throne as Dappula II in 807 CE.



FOUR

Filicide

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

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

The filicide that baptised his reign in blood notwithstanding, he seems to have been mindful of his (complaint) subjects' needs, and Culavamsa lists how "to those among the bhikkhus who were engaged in the hardest studies, he presented bronze alms

bowls, and he left undone nothing of that which one calls a meritorious work. To widowed women of good families, he gave ornaments, and when they wanted food, he handed it to them at night. To the cattle he gave young corn, to the crows and other birds rice, and to the children grain with honey and syrup." Eccentric though it sounds to make bird feeding a national policy, it probably had the sensible purpose of protecting crops and paddy at key times. "Thus the King with his attendants performed meritorious works, and after enjoying the earth, he had to leave it after five years."

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

He was succeeded in turn by his two brothers, the first of which, Aggabodhi VIII, was to rule for almost 12 years from 816 to 827 CE.

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

He seems to have been a textbook Mommy's boy. The Culavamsa devoted many plush stanzas to his filial fondness, which speak eloquently for themselves. "The King," it says, "found pleasure in the serving of his mother day and night. He went to wait on her already early in the morning, rubbed her head with oil, perfumed the parts that were moist with sweat, cleaned her nails, and bathed her carefully. He clad her himself in a new garment, pleasant to the touch, and the cast-off raiment he took and cleaned it himself. With the water therefrom, he sprinkled his own head together with the diadem and worshipped her perfectly with fragrant flowers as a cetiya. After making

obeisance before her three times, and walking with right side facing round her, and giving her attendants raiment and the like to their heart's content, he offered her delicious food with his own hand, partook himself of what she left, and strewed thereof on his head. To her attendants he gave the best food such as was meant for the king, and when he had put in order her chamber, fragrant with sweet odours, he carefully prepared there with his own hand her couch, washed her feet, rubbed her gently with fragrant oil, sat by her rubbing her limbs and sought to make her sleep. Then with right side facing, he walked round her bed, did reverence three times in the right way, ordered slaves or servants as guard and without turning his back on her, went out. At a spot where she could no longer see him, he halted and did reverence three times again. Then, happy with his action and ever thinking of her, he went home. As long as she lived, he served her in this way."

The king even had his mother sell him to a monastery and then buy him back to ensure his continuing freedom. Meanwhile, as he dallied in almost late Bourbon style, the war across the Palk Straits was hotting up, with the Colas and Pallavas now seriously

engaged in what would soon become the endgame for determining the next Indian Ocean superpower. How much of this troubled him? We do not know, nor is there any evidence, of how the Anuradhapuran kingdom positioned itself to best manage whatever the outcome was.

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



FIVE

Catastrophe

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

But it was not to be. When Aggabodhi IX’s younger brother took the throne in 846 CE as Sena I, his first act was to send an undercover assassin to the Pandyan court to terminate the troublesome Mahinda. Job done, Sena set about doing what Sri Lankan kings were all too often wont to do, and he is recorded as building, repairing, or enlarging at least 20 monasteries and temples from Ritigala to Polonnaruwa, as well as

endowing many more. Given that his was a 20-year reign, it's arguable that he ought to have done a lot more. But his entire government was overshadowed – emasculated even – by the shattering invasion by the very Pandiyans with whom his cousin had earlier sought an elusive safety.

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

Decades of good living and poor investments in defence left Sena’s kingdom so ill-prepared for the assault that its defeat was guaranteed. “The Island army’s leaders,” writes the Culavamsa, “were absent, were

without zeal; it scattered in fight and fled in all directions. The great army of the Pandu King broke in at the same moment, crushing in onset the people, like the hosts of Mara. When the King heard of the dispersion of his army, he took all his valuable property, left the town and turned towards Malaya." Sena's younger brother and heir apparent committed suicide, and another brother, Kassapa, was slain during the fighting. Anuradhapura and the surrounding territory were captured, and the city was sacked. Dolefully, the Culavamsa recoded how "the Pandu King took away all valuables in the treasure house of the King and plundered what there was to plunder in the vihara and town. In the Ratanapada, the golden image of the Master Buddha the two jewels which had been set as eyes in the stone image of the Prince of Sages, likewise the gold plates on the cetiya in the Thuparama, and the golden images here and there in the viharas — all these he took and made the Island of Lanka deprived of her valuables leaving the splendid town in a state as if it had been plundered by yakkhas."

Sena had little option but to sue for peace – or lose his crown altogether. It was a most unequal negotiation.

Sena "agreed to everything, bestowed favours on the ambassadors to their hearts' content, presented them with a couple of elephants as well as with all his jewels. When the Pandu King saw all this, he was highly pleased, handed over the capital to the messengers on the same day, evacuated the town, and betook himself at once to the seaport. There he embarked and returned to his country."

Barely had the Pandians left when the hapless Sena faced rebellion in the southern province of Ruhana, where his nephew had been disposed of in his inheritance of the subkingdom. Sena was able to put him back in power and consolidate matters with a set of complicated marriages, but it was hardly his finest hour. When he died in 866 CE after a 20-year rule, it was clear that only a miracle could now help the kingdom avoid going up in smoke altogether.

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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