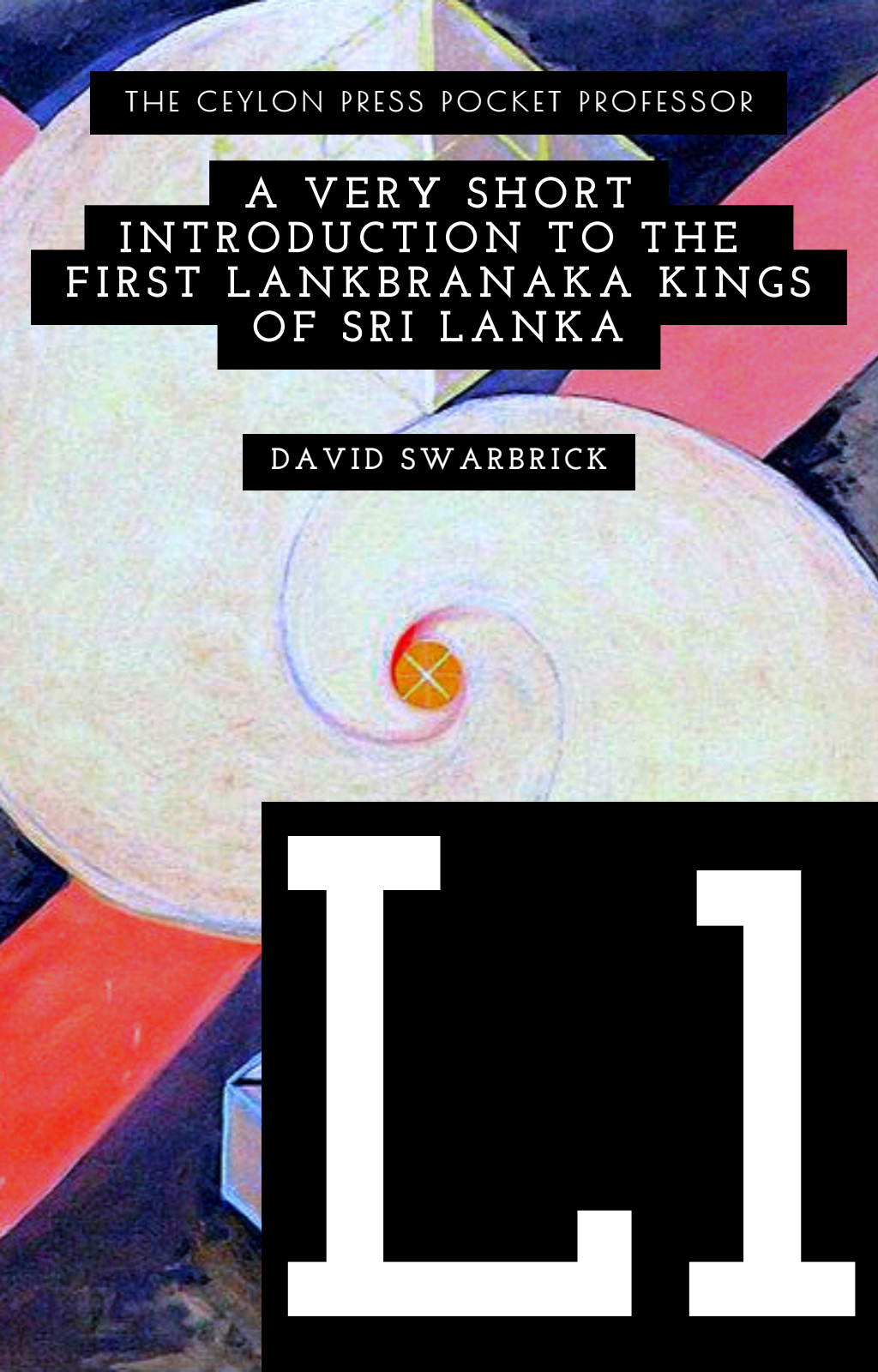
THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR
A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST LANKBRANAKA KINGS OF SRI LANKA
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H2O

"Everybody has won, and all must have prizes."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

Far into the north of Sri Lanka, forty kilometres from Anuradhapura to the south, and fifty more to the western seaboard, lie the ruins of a shrivelled reservoir - Kuda Vilach Chiya. The tank is close to some of the country's most iconic and mythical sites, including the landing place of Prince Vijay, the nation's paterfamilias, the palace of his forsaken native queen, and the country's first recorded Singhala kingdom.

Kuda Vilach Chiya sits on the eastern edge of what is now Wilpattu National Park. Reaching the spot is no easy matter, since it lies within a deep, entangled jungle, for which special permission must be granted to gain access. Even after that, it still requires a tractor to get you any closer to the site, followed by a lengthy walk. For countless centuries, this has been leopard country.

Wilpattu's vast 130,000-hectare wilderness is one of the island's best-kept wildlife secrets, so well off the tourist trail as to exponentially nurture its hundreds of rare species of fauna and flora - along with many endemic species: the Toque and Purple-faced Leaf Monkeys, Golden Palm Cat, Mouse Deer, Dwarf Toads, Hour-Glass Tree and Wood Frogs, Ceylon Jungle Fowl and Ceylon Grey Hornbill. Even the ultra-rare Sloth bear can be seen here, attracted by the sweet golden fruit of the Palu Tree.

But despite all these exceptional features, it is for its water that Wilpattu matters most. Its name is more literally translated as the "land of

of Villu," "villu" meaning "lakes." The whole area is pockmarked with shallow rainwater lakes. But the lakes are eclipsed by Kuda Vilach Chiya, a much more deliberate water feature that is hard to make much sense of at first.

Today, it amounts to little more than a long, two- to three-kilometre embankment overgrown with trees and grasses, breached in many places by migrating elephants. It is all that remains of the extraordinary man-made lake that was constructed here sometime after 67 BCE by the first Lambakanna king, Vasabha.

Hardier survivors from that time are two masterpieces of ancient aqueducts, the construction of which enabled Sri Lanka's builders to construct astonishingly vast water reservoirs. These, in turn, would propel the 500-year-old kingdom into the political stratosphere.

The constructions – Bisokotuwas – allowed water to exit a reservoir without placing excessive pressure on the dam embankment, thereby preventing it from collapsing. As a result, the size of the reservoir could scale to unprecedented levels, water in unimaginably enormous quantities could be collected to extend agriculture, support ever larger and more urban populations, and produce crops whose surplus would rapidly and exponentially enrich the young state.

The Bisokotuwas at Kuda Vilach Chiya are precision-made structures; the stone slabs used

on the inner face fit so perfectly together that there is no room for even the smallest weed to grow. Rising above it, the sluice tower itself can still be seen, part of the same remarkable lost laboratory of water.

The same Lambakanna king, Vasabha, is also credited with the construction of the Mahavilach Chiya Wewa, a tank barely five kilometres from Kuda Vilach Chiya, with a storage capacity of 2,400 acres, which is still a key part of modern Sri Lanka's water infrastructure.

Quite why two such large tanks were built so close to one another is a mystery. But their very existence, and that of the Bisokotuwas that made them possible, is the point that matters most. The area around Kuda Vilach Chiya, though remote even by Sri Lankan standards, bears the impact of multiple significant historical events. Not for nothing was it chosen for its capacious reservoirs. It was once a place of some importance. Ten thousand years earlier, and thirty kilometres north, are hypnotic Neolithic cave paintings at Tantirimale.

Two hundred or so years earlier, the local temple, Thanthirimale Rajamaha Viharaya, marked the spot where the sacred Bo tree rested as it travelled to Anuradhapura from India under the protection of the Indian Emperor Ashoka's daughter, Sangamitta.

Some historians even believe that the site was once home to the lost kingdom of Panduvasdewu

Nuwara, the early Vijayan realm that most immediately predated Anuradhapura itself. A monastery lies on the same site, its excavated gardens littered with stone containers carved to hold gems, and the statues of gods and lions, ruined when the country's last unitary kingdom fell to invaders in 1215 CE. And in the nearby jungle, ancient monastic caves crouch, decorated with a script that predated Buddhism itself – Brahmi.

All around it stretch the flat and softly undulating lands of the country's massive Dry Zone. Much of Sri Lanka is very dry - as if the land itself had been bled white and hung out to dry. It is not perennially wet, as in Bangladesh. This is especially true of the Rajarata, the land most immediately around Anuradhapura - stretching from Jaffna and Trincomalee to Puttalam and Kandy - that lay, like Kuda Vilachchiya itself, solidly within the king's control.

To achieve anything more than a rudimentary agricultural existence, year-round water was required, and plenty of it. Water, after all, permitted greater areas to be used for growing crops and higher yield densities. It meant food surplus, profit, trade - and with it the capacity to develop an urban and industrial capability, underwritten by technical advances from construction and weaponry to horticulture, and transport. It meant that the state could better develop the organisational and professional skills essential to its success – commerce,

industry, engineering, labour, planning, law, medicine, food storage, and finance.

Water management and irrigation, water storage and collection, water distribution – all this was what made the Anuradhapuran Kingdom possible in the first place. A defendable island state it may have been, and a centralised Buddhist one at that, but without water it could go nowhere, do nothing, be nothing. This focus on water technology was not a new preoccupation introduced by the first Lambakarnas in 67 BCE. Still, they, more than any other dynasty, ensured the rapid development of the resources and technologies that provided their domain with year-round water.

The scattered Vedda and other pre-Sinhalese populations of the island had mastered the construction of small tanks before the fifth century BCE, and, with it, limited forms of agricultural production. This was the start of what is now known as the Tank Cascade system. Rainwater was collected in shallow ponds, and crude distribution methods were used to dispense it. This quickly developed into the construction of low embankments across valleys to dam small rivers or rivulets, which would deposit their water into a series of downstream tanks and, ultimately, paddy fields. Large seasonal rivers were next targeted with dams and distribution channels. Soon enough, a profoundly detailed understanding of how to refine and improve the technical requirements to

maximise water availability developed. Inceptor zones were created between the tank and the paddy fields.

Studies have shown that 77 types of trees and plants, such as arjun, butter, mango, and cashew trees, with well-developed root systems, were typically used to help absorb salts and heavy metals from the water before it reached the paddy.

Tree belts were planted well above the water tanks to stop wind, waves, and evaporation. Sedges, grasses, and special shrubs were planted to purify water run-off. Extensive catchment forests were planted to raise the groundwater table and regularise water supply to the tanks during the dry season. And in the nearby upper catchment areas, small dams and miniature tanks were constructed to deliberately make the land marshy and capture silt that would otherwise run into the tanks.

Then, within barely a hundred years of running a kingdom, the Vijayans, the country's first royal dynasty, set about building huge tanks or reservoirs, two of the earliest still in use today – the Gamini Vapi (now known as the Karam Bewa Wewa) and the Abhaya Vapi (known now as Basawak Kaluma Reservoir) with its colossal four hundred and twenty-nine acres of water storage. Anicut dams were invented to regularise the water supply.

By the time Vasabha, the first Lambakarna king

came to power in 67 BCE, the state's technical and organisational ability to construct truly massive and complex water infrastructure was maturing most agreeably. Vasabha himself is credited with building eleven massive reservoirs and lengthy canals to transport water over very long distances, making later ones possible. One of them is the Yoda Ela, an eighty-seven-kilometre canal that takes excess water from the one hundred and twenty-three million cubic metre Kala Wewa reservoir south of Aurandurapura to the Tissa Wewa Reservoir that supplies water to the city of Anuradhapura itself. Its construction was a remarkable feat of ancient engineering, using gravity to propel water along its course by creating a gradient of 10 centimetres per kilometre.

The king also built underground canals and water pipes to feed the ponds of Ranmasu Uyana Gardens in Anuradhapura. This innovation found its most significant expression in the Water Gardens of Sigiriya, created by the ill-fated King Kashyapa to carry water from the Sigiri Wewa Reservoir. Under the Lambakanna, the Bisokotuwa sluice controls and accompanying surge tanks, which the kingdom's inventive engineers perfected, made possible the damming of whole perennially wet rivers.

This technology enabled the state to create still vaster reservoirs than had previously been imaginable. Like the steam engine or spinning jenny that fired the Industrial Revolution nearly two thousand years later in the West, the

improvements made then in Bisokotuwa technology, though seemingly modest to uninformed observers, powered a profound series of changes that were to revolutionise Sri Lanka. The young Lambakanna kingdom would grow - indeed walk - on water.

2

THE WARDENS

"If you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

Governing the country for over five hundred years, the Lambakarnas used water to transform the moderately successful kingdom they had seized into an unapologetically dominant state that, for prolonged periods, controlled the entire island. It also maintained a flourishing, confident international presence in South Asia, within the Indian Ocean trading zone. This critical trading hub, which Fa-Hien, a Chinese visitor to the island during the dynasty's rule, noted, acted like a magnet for merchants who 'flocked in large numbers till it became a great nation." It was to set the measure for the future.

Sri Lanka may rank only 120th in the world by land area, but Colombo Port is today the planet's 25th-busiest port. Water, and its management, lie at the bottom of all this. "It is possible," wrote a Mr Bailey, Assistant Government Agent of the District of Badulla in 1885, "that in no other part of the world are there to be found within the same space, the remains of so many works of irrigation, which are at the same time of such great antiquity and of such vast magnitude as in Ceylon. Probably no other country can exhibit works so numerous and at the same time so ancient and extensive, within the same limited area, as in this Island."

So robust was the water infrastructure that today, in the dry zone alone, ten thousand ancient tanks are still in productive use – and these represent just a third of the total estimated to have been built. A 2018 study of ancient

grants associated with water infrastructure found that almost half were linked to individual or family ownership. The Lambakarna state might be encouraging water resource construction and even building mega projects, but most ownership was local—only 28% of the grants enriched royal or elite groups.

Unsurprisingly, the management and upkeep of the systems were also highly localised, and warnings were posted to prevent misuse. "The water flowing here from the Kolob canal," reads one pillar inscription of the tenth century CE, "shall not be hindered; may those who transgress the regulations laid down here and commit unlawful acts become crows and dogs".

For hundreds of years, the massive technology and infrastructure that had been created slowly decayed. The final obliteration of the Anuradhapuran Kingdom in 993 and 1029 CE, the destruction of its successor state in Polonnaruwa in 1215 CE, and the nearly three hundred wilderness years that lasted till the arrival of the first colonists saw the administration and maintenance of the water infrastructure languish, especially in the Dry Zone.

The Portuguese and Dutch did little to improve the situation, and the British, arriving in 1792, did much, with the mandatory dismantling of forced labour, only to make the problem worse. For one and a half thousand years, water had been the heartbeat of the country, and nothing

except Buddhism itself could compete with it for the national focus it accrued.

And, as the nineteenth century slid into the twentieth, water returned once again as a main item on the country's priorities - but this time for its ability to generate power as much as for the gifts it bestowed on horticulture. Today, forty-two per cent of the country's electricity comes from hydropower – a figure way beyond that of most other countries. Unusually for an island state, its focus on water was inwards, not outwards.

Sri Lanka did not, like Britain, construct a grand navy to conquer far and wide, invest in large merchant fleets to trade across the Indian Ocean, or even build a substantial fishing fleet to harvest its seas. Boats – like much of the outside world itself - were never much of an island preoccupation. Most of what it really wanted from beyond its shores came to it like a willing Amazon delivery van, courtesy of merchants eager to trade anything for Sri Lankan spics, gold, elephants, pearls, and sapphires.

This unusual stimulus left its people free to focus on all that was most immediately around them, enriched and made possible by water, a Nirvana H2O, tantric in the good times, and a comfort in the bad. Water and water technology, like Buddhism, or the country's island status, was – and remains – one of the unique characteristics that make Sri Lanka Sri

Lankan; that has shaped its history and development; that determines its future and makes what you see from your passing car or train, or, better still, plane so spellbindingly distinctive.

Often it seems, history hits you like an unyielding celebrity, all dressed up, very loud and awfully important. Even though, for the most part, it is much more like a recluse, willing to surrender but the barest of hints as to its very existence.

And though history pretends that everything about it is big – its rulers, events, structures, trends – it is actually not much more than the total of what are ultimately utterly personal stories and events that have been remembered; and in some small way, passed on so they are not wholly forgotten.

But even here, what survives is so eroded that history comes down to us as bare lists of rulers, or marks on coins, in the linguistic geography of a place or name, in written records that accidentally reference the families who operate slice gates or wash the clothes of priests. Why people did what they did, how they felt, still less who they were: much of this can only ever be guessed at – even though this is where the most magnetic and momentous part of any story really resides.

So, in trying to fathom the long-lost depths of Sri Lanka's second royal dynasty – the

Lambakannas - the few surviving scraps of hard evidence need to be combined with a spoonful of human empathy and conjecture if their tale is ever to make sense. Their adroit use of water technology to superpower their kingdom merely shows that they were as bright and well-organised as the best of the kings of the previous Vijayan dynasty.

Oddly enough, to understand more, it helps to see things from the perspective of the world back in 1929, not 67 CE when the first Lambakanna king came to power.

Back in 1929, two significant events occurred. The first was the collapse of Wall Street in faraway America. Its corrosive and ultimately violent social and economic shockwaves radiated across the entire world, and nothing and no one was left feeling safe, protected or secure. The second event played out in Trincomalee, where archaeologists unearthed the remains of a once-lofty temple, built a stone's throw from the Indian Ocean, sometime after 307 CE.

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

These mura gals – or guard stones – are especially moving, standing in silent upright

pose, guardians of the flights of steps that had led a multitude of forgotten people out of the everyday and into the sacred temple itself. The steps they protect have worn down to just a few flights, the moonstone they encompass is almost entirely rubbed away; the temple beyond is now just an outline of ancient bricks, and the guard stones themselves are plain, almost stumpy, but still doing their ageless job as sentinels of the site. Similar guard stones stand in many other parts of the island, easy to see if you know what to look for, silent guardians of the state within. For to be a guardian is no little thing.

Guardian is an emotive word in Sri Lanka. It can be found incorporated into the work of health and education providers, insurance companies, the army, the priesthood, the home guard, the air force, a news website, a hotel, and even a wedding business. But long ago, it also had the meaning of the Lambakarnas, the dynasty that succeeded the founding Vijayan dynasty.

The Lambakarnas were guardians of the state. And it is in decoding and deconstructing their very name that you can best understand the relevance and purpose of this new royal dynasty and see it in its own terms - from afar: in time and place.

Possibly originating in India, the Lambakarnas likely claimed descent from Sumitta, a prince who formed part of the escort that brought the Bodhi tree from India in 250 CE. From this botanical pilgrimage, they would go on to

become one of the island's great barons, alongside other such families as Moriyan, Taracchas and Balibhojak.

Their power derived from their position as hereditary guardians or secretaries to the king. They took a prominent part in religious ceremonies. But there was more to them than merely carrying coronation parasols and flags. They were connected to the military, to weapon manufacture and, as writers, must have been involved in much of the critical administration of the kingdom.

Generation after generation of Lambakarnas were raised with the unshakable belief that their family had a purpose that went far beyond the confines of kinship. They were bound by duty, custom and history to protect the very state itself. But they found, eventually, that to do this, they had to become the state itself – to rid it of its useless kings and take things over.

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

Under them, new stupas, monasteries, reservoirs, canals, temples, and dwellings filled out the land. The mores of society progressed. Agriculture flourished, and technical advances, from construction to medicine, bestowed benefits on the kingdom. In particular, the advances they made in water technology to build larger reservoirs dramatically enabled the state to increase agricultural production exponentially and, through that, raise state revenues to support increased urbanisation and further infrastructure capital development.

But as Gladstone's friend, Lord Acton remarked: Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And absolute power indeed corrupted the Lankbranaka. Carried along on a gathering tide of hubris and indolent self-confidence, they morphed from being guardian kings to sun kings who flew, like Icarus himself, so close to the sun that their wings were burned up – and they fell to earth, victims, who had unwisely taken to believing their own press releases.

As the raw hunger for power replaced their desire actually to govern, just under half the Lambakarna monarchs were to die at the hands of their successors, victims to a predilection for assassination that ran like a malign monomeric thread through their DNA.

The first time they faced ruin, they managed to draw back from the regicide and power implosions that rocked them, thereby regaining

their savoir-faire. But the second outbreak propelled them inexorably toward their destruction, leaving the state weak, distracted, and unable to fend off an invasion of the island by the Pandyan dynasty of South India, the fourth such invasion of Tamil India that Sri Lanka suffered.

And yet it had all started so well as they first set about to rescue their cripped country from the excesses of the last Vijayan kings. Overcaution, on behalf of the last (albeit fraudulent) Vijayan king, Subharaja, propelled the Lambakarna dynasty and its first king to the throne. The soothsayers had been busy whispering appalling forecasts into his ear, foretelling his inevitable destiny with death at the hands of someone called Vasabha.

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

Subharaja had come to the throne by impersonating the then (and, as it turned out, last) Vijayan king, Yassalalaka Tissa, so convincingly that he seems to have had him killed and taken the throne for himself. The story, coming to us via the Mahavaṃsa

Chronicle, is too bizarre to be wrecked by close questioning. But true or not, Subharaja was no Vijayan, despite his pretence of belonging to the ruling dynasty. His grip on power would have been modest at best.

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

Prince Vasabha was the kind of Lambakarnan that the dynasty could well have done with a few more of, as it migrated from an aristocratic family to a ruling family. Rather like the cavalry in old American Westerns, the new king arrived in the nick of time. The state, if not quite worn out, was stumbling on with the political equivalent of one leg, two broken hips and a congenital heart disease. It was badly in need of a talented head State Doctor and a spell in the I.C.U.

Recruiting an army, Vasabha wasted little time in putting it to proper use. By 67 CE, King Subharaja was dead, and the Vijayan dynasty was deposited at the sorrowful gates of the

historical cul-de-sac into which they would disappear. A new dynasty was in town and ready to reform, repair and realign the realm. Having taken one prediction to heart and with such apparent rewards, the new king took the next one just as seriously. He would die, the soothsayers now warned, within twelve years.

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

For soothsayers and astrologers have ever had, and still do have, an honoured place on the island. Here, it is not just what you do that matters. When and where you do it is just as important. A well-entrenched discipline, astrology is still widely used to determine the most auspicious time for marriages, housebuilding, elections, company start-ups, naming ceremonies, and many religious rituals.

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

So it was with utter seriousness that Vasabha processed the future his astrologers had cast for him. The bleak future they had mapped out

turbocharged the new king, marking him just the kind of man Benjamin Franklin might have had in mind when he said, "You may delay, but time will not."

Almost immediately, the new king started a major programme of building works - not only of the obligatory monasteries and stupas which he constructed in a feverish haste to appease his maker, but of massive infrastructure works too. Eleven reservoirs, such as those at Mahavila Chchiya and Nochchipotana, some with a circumference of two miles, were built. Twelve canals were dug to distribute their water. Rivers were dammed, and crops were raised in new places with greater certainty than ever before.

With plentiful water and the restoration of agriculture, the building blocks on which any centralised power rested were back in place, better than ever before. The state could prosper. Island-wide inscriptions testify to the power of the resurgent Kingdom, stretching once again to Jaffna in the north, Situlpawwa and Tissamaharama in the south, Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the east, and Kurunegala in the centre. The great kingdom of Anuradhapura, brought to civil war and near destitution by the previous Vijayan dynasty, was once again serene and strong.

The kingdom has recovered. It was now a fully functioning, almost island-wide entity, once more capable of planning for the future rather than mere survival. Vasabha had earned his

place as one of the country's most fabulous kings, the equal of the best of the Vijayans: Vijaya, Pandu Kabhaya, Devanampiya Tissa, and Dutugemunu.

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

3

THE TROUBLED HEART OF KINGSHIP

"Alice came to a fork in the road. 'Which road do I take?' she asked. 'Where do you want to go?' responded the Cheshire Cat. 'I don't know,' Alice answered. 'Then,' said the Cat, 'it doesn't matter."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

Although we have no dates for the new king's age, Vankana Sika Tissa would have been no youngster on assuming his throne, given how long his father's reign had been. It was his great misfortune to reign during the time of Karikala, the greatest of the early Chola emperors in Tamil India. Having taken most of South India under his control, Karikala next set his sights on Sri Lanka. A military genius, Karikala was ever bound to win in any war, and his brief and surgical strike across the seas dealt Sri Lanka a bitter, albeit fleeting, defeat - and left it much poorer in manpower.

The impetus for this particular Chola invasion appears to have been recruitment for Karikala, who was busy building the famous Kaveri Dam, which would later provide much of southern India with the water necessary for the growing quantities of millet and maize on which his kingdom depended. Dams need builders, and Karikala, needing many, took away 12,000 Sinhalese men to work as slaves on his new dam.

There is no evidence that the defeated Vankana Sika Tissa died of anything other than a natural cause two years after taking the throne in 113 CE. But his convenient departure paved the way for his son, Gajabahu I, to become king, a monarch who had his grandfather Vasabha's winning ways. This third Lambakarnan king was to rule for twenty-two years,

His governance is remembered for its

predictable religious sensibility – and its military might, the two not often going hand in hand. Naturally, he built monasteries (in Matuvihara and Rumika) and a stupa (Abhayuttara). More remarkably, he also co-opted the Hindu goddess Pattini to Sri Lanka. Several of her temples remain on the island, and she is still worshipped as the Buddhist patron goddess of fertility and health. This iconic ancient link evokes deep and pacific ties between the island's two main religions, often overlooked.

She is even one of just five figures honoured in the annual Kandy Perahera, the country's supreme Buddhist festival, which some historians date to around the reign of King Gajabahu himself. The king also managed to find her sacred anklet, which is still said to be hidden in the Hanguran Ketha Temple near Nuwara Eliya. This move, which did not stop him, also liberated the alms bowl of Buddha from India to Sri Lanka, a vessel with a history and provenance now every bit as complex as that of the Holy Grail.

But it is Gajabahu's military capabilities that are most honoured today, not least in the Sri Lanka Army's infantry regiment, The Gajaba Regiment, and in the country's Navy, with its ship, the SLNS Gajabahu. For Gajabahu did that rarest of things: he took the fight with the Cholas to the Cholas, leading an army to southern India to liberate the twelve thousand Sinhalese prisoners seized in his father's reign.

In this, he would have been greatly motivated by his witnessing of the humiliation done to his father by Karikala's invasion.

But Gajabahu was not all war, revenge and plunder. Ancient sources also mention other visits to Tamil kings, this time more peaceful. Trade, too, seems to have flourished. Excavations at the ancient (now partially underwater) port of Godavaya in the far south have unearthed his regulations on customs tolls – as well as a collection of 75,000 Roman coins.

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

Little is known about his son, Bhatika Tissa's relatively long twenty-four-year reign, but if, as Thomas Carlyle noted, "silence is golden," the kingdom's golden years continued; and the monarch, though obscure, must have a much-deserved place amongst the dynasty's more successful rulers. The reliable historical record is also mute on the next ruler, Kanittha Tissa, a brother to the late king and another son of Mahallaka Naga.

Kanittha Tissa ruled four years longer than his brother, from his brother's death in 165 CE to his own in 193 CE. "No news is good news," noted a later English king renowned for being "the wisest fool in Christendom." And so one might assume of this indistinct reign. Indeed, in the years that followed, the reign would have looked, along with four or five of the previous ones, as the lush salad days of the Lambakarnas.

After one hundred and twenty-six years so stable and propitious as to suggest they might never end, the Lambakarnas settled down to adopt that great pastime of the late Vijayan kings – regicide. The preoccupation would test the very stability of the kingdom they had so assiduously built.

Two periods of state-sponsored homicidal self-indulgence were now to grip the kingdom. The first killings broke out in 195 CE, and the second in 248 CE. Both were leavened by brief moments of stability that, with seconds to spare, prevented the country from collapsing altogether and gave it a modest but life-affirming breathing space.

Such pirouetting on political tightropes was hardly a novelty. The Vijayans, the previous dynasty, had indulged in much the same – fuelling at least four periods of regicide covering several decades and prompting at least two civil wars over six hundred plus years of dynastic reign.

In response, the Lambakannas added two more, bringing the total number of regicide bacchanalia to at least six since Prince Vijaya first set foot on the island back in 543 BCE. It is doubtful whether any other contemporary kingdom on the planet showed such record-breaking prowess. Few, if any, that came later would have dynasties that possessed such a complete set of dark skills as to trump this dubious achievement. This particular lethal phase was, in retrospect, modest by the standards of what was to follow. But this is not to detract from its disruptive consequences, nor its mystery.

Over two years, three kings were to occupy the throne in a succession swifter even than a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers foxtrot. On Kanittha Tissa's death in 193 CE, his son, Cula Naga, assumed power, only to be assassinated by his brother Kuda Naga in 195 CE. Kuda Naga was then dispatched to the uncertain fields of reincarnation when his own brother-in-law, Siri Naga I, had him killed in 195 CE.

The only hint to help explain what might have promoted all this, mere family politics aside, is a famine mentioned in The Mahavamsa: "so small a quantity of food were the people reduced in that famine," it notes, referring to the brief reign of Kuda Naga, when, it said, "the king maintained without interruption a great almsgiving". Famine is no friend of political stability, and if it was the cause behind Cula Naga's murder, the latter food banks set

set up by his brother Kuda Naga were insufficient to calm the situation.

There is no corroborating archaeological evidence to help us understand this dismal, murky period of national madness - though such evidence exists for other periods. Stone inscriptions, for example, carry an unusually high degree of importance in Sri Lanka, where the climate quickly destroys any organic material used to record events. And, unlike other sources, they have better weathered the repeated theft and destruction carried out on the country by its many occupiers - be they Tamil or European. But of the four thousand stone inscriptions discovered in Sri Lanka, only one and a half thousand have been adequately recorded and preserved. Written in Sinhala, Tamil, Brahmi, Pali, and even Chinese, Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, they most typically record donations made to temples, the rules governing the maintenance of religious places, the establishment of tanks, and how local officials should administer water resources.

But so far, none of them has been of any help in understanding this particular period of Sri Lankan history. This may change as many more inscriptions indubitably await discovery. In 2023, for example, the most significant stone inscription ever found on the island was uncovered in Polonnaruwa, measuring 45 feet long and 18 feet high. But none found and deciphered so far helps us with this period as the second century CE slipped, blood-drenched,

into the third.

Buildings tell the story of the times, but no buildings, or even repairs of any significance, can be dated to this precise period. Coins also help validate the historical record, and some of the island's coins date back to the third century BCE. Their symbols, dates, the metal they are made of, the craftsmanship, and the place where they were found – all tell their own stories, but very few date from this very early period of Sri Lankan history.

And those that do exist suffer from poor cataloguing and storage - and a great deal of theft, including a record heist involving over one thousand silver punch-marked coins dating back two thousand years held in the custody of the Archaeology Department; and of which now only sixteen coins remain.

Pottery is also an essential voice in the historical record. Many shards of marked pottery have been excavated, most engraved with but two or three characters. But the joined-up study of ceramic inscriptions is a journey that academics have yet to undertake in its entirety, even though the earliest example of such artefacts in South Asia was found in Sri Lanka, on a pottery shard from Anuradhapura dating to the fourth century BCE. Nor is there anything in the country's surviving Ola Leaf books to help contextualise this period. These books were written on the leaves of Palmyrah Palms that had been carefully processed - like paper. It is

thought that over 75,000 such books exist, written in Sinhalese, but most date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and although some record earlier texts, nothing of consequence records this period of history.

In fact, only four Ola Leaf books from a much earlier period have survived, dating back just over five hundred years, and the most important of them are kept in the National Museum of Colombo, the University of Peradeniya, the British National Museum, and the Paris National Museum. Here was an unfinished whodunnit in which the author had time to chuck in plenty of bodies but ran out of time to add the clues.

Not even the combined forces of Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey and Hercule Poirot could explain the who and why of these brutal Lambakanna years. Conjecture, built on the flimsiest of evidence, is therefore all we have for this time. But one conclusion is inescapable – that after so long a period of steady rule, one hundred and twenty-six years, during which the kingdom had been painstakingly rebuilt after decades of Vijayan regicidal induced disintegration, it must have dealt a shocking correction and reminder to the country: how easily are the good times squandered.

However, by 195 CE, with Kuda Naga murdered and his brother-in-law, Siri Naga I, on the throne, a fifty-year salvage space opened out for the realm, the game of thrones having been temporarily closed down. Family politics took a

backseat to good governance. For Siri Naga, however bleak the past few years had been for the kingdom, it was now time for some healing.

The king, as religiously minded as the best, earmarked a massive chunk of state revenue for religion, starting with predictable piety, in this area. Reigning for 20 years, he found time and resources to make good some of Anuradhapura's most celebrated sacred buildings - the great stupa of Ruwanweliseya, said to house more of Lord Buddha's relics than anywhere else in the world; a fine new set of stone steps leading to the sacred Bo tree itself – and the famous Brazen Palace.

This particular building is a sort of architectural weathervane – one whose condition reflects the state's condition. The Brazen Place - "brazen" coming from brass or copper roof tiles - had been initially constructed by King Dutugemunu, one of the island's greatest rulers and was to become one of the kingdom's most magnificent buildings.

Architects had been commissioned to draw up no-limit plans for an opulent palace-monastery, two hundred feet long, rising nine stories, each story punctured by a hundred windows. Observers spoke of the entire edifice containing a thousand rooms – an obvious exaggeration, but one that was not really required. For the building was, by any standards, a masterpiece.

Inside the vast structure, golden pillars held up

the roof of a special throne hall, its centrepiece an ivory throne centred between the titanic images of a golden sun, a moon and stars picked out in silver and pearls. The gilded roof glinted so fiercely in the sunlight that it could be seen from miles away. No expense was spared in the Brazen Palace's furnishings either. Even the basins for washing hands and feet at its entrance were said to be of gold.

Each floor of the building was given over to monks in varying stages of sanctification as they travelled the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. Naturally, the lowest floor, the Buddhist equivalent of Perfumes & Make Up in a Department Store, was reserved for those who had yet to achieve anything. If not quite the habitat of the hoi polloi, it was not that far off either.

The second floor, however, was allocated for those who had mastered the Tripitaka – three texts in the Buddhist Pali Canon, primarily concerned with doctrinal requirements and monastic rules. It was only on reaching the third floor of this extraordinary structure that you could encounter monks who had made a real step change, for these had attained Sotapatti, the first stage of sanctification – an achievement made possible by having trounced indecision, obsession with individuality, and rituals. The fourth floor was populated by monks who had contributed to this achievement by making serious inroads into eradicating all tendencies towards ill-will. And, more importantly, any

thoughts of sensuality, of the sort so memorably (and temptingly) recorded centuries later in "Song of Myself:"

"Walt Whitman am I, a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan, the son,

Turbulent, fleshy and sensual, eating, drinking and breeding;

No sentimentalist — no stander above men and women, or apart from them;

No more modest than immodest..."

Overcoming this most challenging of tests automatically promoted the monks to a Buddhist state called Sotapatti, one that was clearly far beyond the reach of Walt Whitman. On the fifth floor lived the Anagamin monks – those who were now seeking to overcome pride, restlessness, ignorance, fine things, and immaterial cravings to become an arhat. And above them all, in the upper stories of this temple of gold, lived the Arahats themselves. This lofty station, the goal of all practising Buddhists, was reserved for those who have finally achieved Nirvana. Not for them the irksome and interminable cycle of rebirth

Despite the building burning down around 137 BCE, it was faithfully rebuilt in all its brilliance by King Saddha Tissa, Dutugemunu's brother. Further repairs were carried out 120 years later, and a pavilion decorated with gemstones was

added. But by the time of King Siri Naga I, sometime after 195 CE, the repairs carried out on this and other buildings in Anuradhapura were noticeably more modest in their goals. Buildings such as this one were made good but reduced in size and scope, perhaps for easier maintenance, or maybe because there was simply insufficient money to keep them as they had been first envisioned.

It was, in its own grey and mildly dispiriting way, a metaphor for its time. Moments of opulence, grand buildings and glittering moments still lay ahead for the kingdom as other dynasties came to rule, but a note of caution had also now crept in; a sense that the good times had to be rationed.

Today, you need a rich imagination and a keen sense of history to imagine how the Brazen Palace would have looked – even in Siri Naga I's time. Destroyed eight hundred years later, in the tenth century, by Tamil invaders, it is today reduced to one thousand six hundred granite columns set in forty rows – all that survives of its once-colossal walls. As Shelley might have said had he added Sri Lanka to his well-documented French, Swiss, German, Dutch and Irish holidays: "nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare," stretch yet more ruins, scrub, and jungle.

Natural deaths were typically rarer than winged elephants singing like angels, but Siri Naga, notwithstanding his own murderous and

regicidal past, was blessed to die gently. Neither swords nor poison expedited Siri Naga I's smooth journey to the afterlife, or perhaps a reincarnated lesser life form, when he died in 215 CE. And equally smoothly, his son Voharika Tissa inherited the throne. Whilst the Mahavamsa has nothing but praise for Siri Naga, it surpasses itself with superlatives and examples of piety and good governance when describing his son's reign.

Under him, money rained down like a monsoon on religion. A set of new temples was built; older ones were restored. Monies were given to monasteries, and new religious festivals were set up. A strong proponent of nonviolence, the new king enacted several reforms to promote it.

Erring on the side of conservative Buddhism, he also attempted to suppress new Mahayana variants that threatened to erode the Theravada Buddhism that had dominated the island since its introduction in 2 BCE during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa. The Mahavamsa is especially mindful that this most pious of kings was also one for "keeping heretics in check by his minister Kapila, he made the true doctrine to shine forth in glory."

Blindsided by his overwhelming spiritual preoccupations, it was little wonder then that he found his throne snatched away from him by his brother, Abhaya Naga, 22 years into his reign. This time, it seems, it was the uncensored excesses of dysfunctional family life that brought

about the return of the game of thrones. Prompted by the adulterous affair he was having with the queen, his brother's wife, Abhaya Naga, recruited a Tamil mercenary army and assassinated his brother in 237 CE.

The Mahavamsa records the last tempestuous days of Siri Naga's doomed reign: "Abhaya Naga took many Damilas with him and marched from there against the city to do battle with his brother. On hearing this, the king took flight and, with his consort, mounted a horse, coming to Malaya. The younger brother pursued him, and when he had slain the king in Malaya, he returned with the queen and reigned eight years in the capital as king."

The following 17 years were to see the dynasty plunged a second time into homicidal politics. Remarkably, the new fratricidal king was to die naturally in 245 CE, an achievement of sorts. Word of Abhaya Naga's death was rushed to the Ruhuna redoubt, that place in the far south of the island forever just-so-slightly out of Anuradhapuran control. Here, a second somewhat confusingly named Siri Naga, Ahaya Naga's embittered nephew, son of the slain Siri Naga I, had been holding out since his father's murder in 237 CE.

Claiming his rightful inheritance, the new king hastened to Anuradhapura to take the throne as King Siri Naga II. Sadly, he was to enjoy just 3 years of kingship. His death in 247 CE was also apparently natural, and he was succeeded by

his son, Vijaya Kumara.

And this is where the real trouble began. Within a year, the young king was murdered in 248 CE. As if inspired by the gory and convoluted fable for which there is no redeeming ending, a plot was hatched by three distant relatives from the Lambakarna clan. Little is known of its details – but one can guess at them by seeing how it played out. One by one, the coup leaders took their turn as king.

First up was Sangha Tissa, whose reign ended with predictable abruptness five years later in 252 CE. The second plotter took his turn, reigning as King Siri Sangha Bodhi I from 252 to 254. Despite his earlier handiwork, the Mahavamsa takes a gentle, forgiving tone toward him, his devotion to Buddhism so absolute that he refused to execute criminals. Facing a rebellion by the third plotter, Gathabhaya, he voluntarily abdicated and retired to the forest to live as an ascetic after a reign of just three years in 253 CE.

And in the end, both grisly, contradictory, and anatomically impressive, he then decapitated himself to enable a poor peasant to collect the bounty on his head, bringing to an end nearly sixty years of royal knockabout. It was time for a new king and a new resolve if the kingdom was ever to survive.

4

TOUGH LOVE, RARE LUCK

"Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

It is unnecessary to employ the mind-reading capabilities of Descartes or The Amazing Kreskin to discern how Sri Lanka might have reacted to Gotabhaya taking the throne in 253 CE. After decades of Lambakarna kings, many eagerly pious, ruling with unremitting incompetence, Gotabhaya was nothing less than a shock.

After all, he had been one of the very same three plotters who drove the kingdom into yet another civil war just years earlier, apparently as unaccountable to good governance as any of the many earlier Lambakarna kings who ruled as if they were celestially charged to gambol their through reigns like ancient Ves dancers, leaving lakes of regicidal blood in the wake of their inopportune administration.

It was as if some brooding, macho junior army officer had upended his own army, bending generals, kings and sleek courtiers to the austere new realities of a victorious coup, in the style of Jerry Rawlings or Gamal Abdel Nasser. Comparing notes with either of them would have given Gotabhaya all the validation he required. Not that he was the sort to seek approval.

Competent dictators have their moment in the sun, too, and the time was more than ripe for the arrival of Gotabhaya. His very name is still used in the country to suggest authority, command, and control. Army bases, naval ships, even an ex-president who strove with little success to aspire to his reputation – all bear the

name of this stern Lambakarna king. What he lacked in charm, charity, and religious tolerance, Gotabhaya made up for with the sort of firm government that took the fizz out of regicide.

And so, around 253 or 254 CE, Gotabhaya seized the throne and, for fourteen years, ruled Sri Lanka with the proverbial rod of iron. A deeply conservative religious man, he was unimpressed by the Vajrayana movement, a form of tantric Buddhism making a slim but noticeable appearance in his kingdom.

The movement was closely aligned with Mahayana Buddhism and was seen by many as incompatible with the Theravada Buddhism practised 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 sons' 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 a deeply divided

country behind. Several ministers, blithely (and, as it turned out, suicidally) bold, refused to participate in his funeral rites. His son and heir, Jetta Tissa I, a chip off the monstrous old block, had dozens of them rounded up, staking their impaled heads in a mournful circle around the old king's body, a pitiless and iconic pageant of power that 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.

Even so, there is a time when a country needs tough love, or even just tough everything, and Gotabhaya's son sought, with creditable success, to assiduously out-tough his terrifying old father. This display of strong-armed governance under yet another king was probably what was most needed to help keep at bay the lurking regicidal and anarchic tendencies inherent in the dynasty.

Jetta Tissa's decade-long rule is unlikely to have been an easy ride for those around him. Indeed, as the Mahavamsa Chronicle states, "he came by the surname: the Cruel". It then, with dismay, elaborates on the steps he took to shift patronage and resources from the orbit of Theravāda Buddhism to Vaitulya Buddhism.

From the perspective of the majority Theravada Buddhists, life managed to take a further turn for the worse when Mahasen, the king's brother,

took the throne in 277 CE, a succession notable for being natural. Like his brother, Mahasen had been educated by the radical monk Sanghamitta.

A twenty-seven-year reign lay ahead of the new king, who got off to a good start, commissioning what would include sixteen massive reservoirs (the largest covering an area of nearly twenty square kilometres) and two big irrigation canals. But this did little to assuage the resentment his pro-Mahayana religious policies sparked, prompting a wave of further insurrections opposing his stance against Theravada Buddhism.

Undeterred, Mahasen set about building what would become the country's largest stupa, the Jethavanaramaya, which, until the construction of the Eiffel Tower, was the second-tallest building in the world. To help, he ordered the plundering of the Mahavihara, the most incredible Theravada Buddhist monastery in the land. Monks who opposed his Mahayana policies were pressured by various means, including attempts at starvation.

Soon enough, the trickle of angry, anguished and adamant monks fleeing to the safety of Ruhuna in the south became a flood. Ominously, they were also joined by Meghavann Abaya, the king's chief minister, who had broodingly raised an army in their defence. With surprising wisdom, the king drew back from the confrontation, saving his throne, making peace

with the disgruntled Theravada Buddhists, and so enabling himself to enjoy a natural death in 303 CE.

Mahasen's late compromise notwithstanding, it is notable that right across these 50 years of three uncompromisingly hardheaded kings, the vice-like hold with which they gripped their realm was rarely seriously imperilled. Despite the unusually high level of religious dissent they inspired, they commanded with apparent ease, shunting the unruly immoderations of family politics into the darkest of corners.

But even a run of dictators-kings has its own sell-by date, and this one came to an end when Mahasen's son, Siri Meghavanna, inherited the throne and opted to super-change the hints of religious appeasement and kinder governance that had marked the fraying ends of his father's choleric reign. Under him, vast sums of state revenue were set aside to repair any damage to Theravada Buddhism. The old religion's buildings were restored, its stupas and temples renovated and once more publicly cherished.

It is a truism universally acknowledged that good things rarely come to good people. Still, in the case of King Siri Meghavanna, the aphorism rings as hollow as an elephant's trunk in the jungle - for it was during his therapeutic reign that the greatest of all relics was to fall into his hands. "Just," as the late great Tommy Cooper might have said, "like that."

Few relics ever stand the real test of time. Most end up marooned, outpaced by the culture they once represented or the geography or religion that created them: the Holy Right Hand of King Stephen of Hungary; the wailing wall of occupied Jerusalem, the sandal of Muhammad in Istanbul's Pavilion of the Holy Mantle; John the Baptist's head in Rome's San Sylvestro. None can really compare to the Tooth Relic in Sri Lanka, now housed in Kandy's Temple of the Tooth.

Relics derived from the body of the Lord Buddha are scattered across Asia, most of them in Sri Lanka, which counts amongst its treasures the Lord Buddha's forehead, right collarbone, and vertebrae in places such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Mahiyanganaya, and Trincomalee.

His hair commands the most significant number of addresses, with single stands of it claimed to be housed in temples in Ambalantota, Mawathagama, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Senanayakarama, Colombo, Kandy, Nelligala, Hambantota, and Kalamatiya, plus at least a dozen other stupas and temples dotted around the coast and now so weathered as to be indistinct from the very landscape they sit within.

But for insurmountably Baroque reasons, his tooth relic is the most revered. Unlike most other world relics, the Tooth Relic is as relevant to its society today as it was two thousand years ago.

It has become, almost unwittingly, the ultimate symbol of the island's statehood, one that nearly supersedes the religion it encompasses, sought after for its aesthetics, by ambitious atheists, agnostics, politicians, visiting dignitaries, and, of course, much of the country's current population.

The Tooth Relic arrived like a refugee in need of protection. Plucked hundreds of years earlier by an enterprising Arhant during the cremation of Lord Buddha, it became synonymous with royal authority and sanctity in faraway Orissa, in the Indian kingdom of Kalinga, where it eventually found its way.

But only for a while. Its safety threatened by an interminable war between Indian states, it was sent by then the king, Guhaseeva, to Sri Lanka, hidden, it is said, in the elaborate hairstyle of his daughter, Princess Hemamala. The princess, along with her new husband, Danta, arrived at the port of Lankapatuna, now marked by a temple, the Lankapatuna Samudragiri Viharaya, which commands the entrance to the vast Ullackalie Lagoon south of Trincomalee.

The following day, this most Agatha Christie of ancient-world couples, the Tommy and Tuppence of their day, made their way – still in disguise as Indian brahmins- to Anuradhapura and presented the relic to King Sri Meghavanna, who enshrined it in the Isurumuniya Temple. Their moment of bravado and celebrity over, the couple sadly vanish from history, retiring, it is

hoped, on the lavish pension of a grateful state, with regular emoluments of crushed pearls in arrack and kiribath garnished with leaf of gold.

Despite a later, very short (1283 CE) return journey to India, the tooth relic remained on the island, moving from time to time. From Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa, Dambadeniya to Gampola, Kotte to Kandy, to evade wars and capture, and to better validate the sometimes wafer-thin authority of its rulers.

Nothing could better endorse Siri Meghavanna's rule than this unforeseen bit of good fortune, and its propitious tentacles spreading out beyond his own reign. When he died in 332 CE, the calm times continued under his brother, Jetta Tissa II, who ruled until 341 AD.

5

END GAME

"The hurrier I go,
the behinder I get."

Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

Jetta Tissa II was followed in good order by his own son, Buddhadasa, in 341 AD, and another twenty-eight-year reign beckoned. The Mahavamsa has nothing but praise for this king, characterised as a "Mind of Virtue and an Ocean of Gems."

Unusually, the new king preferred medicine to wars, stupas, temples, monasteries and plotting, and his reign was noted for the exceptional medical care he extended to his subjects. He wrote a medical handbook, the "Sarartha Sangraha," built hospitals, appointed Medical Officers, and established infirmaries and asylums for the benefit of the blind and the lame. Stories abound of his role as doctor to various ailing subjects he encountered. He even took care of animals, including, it is said, a snake with a stomach-ache. Perhaps his interest in medicine can also help explain the eighty sons that the Mahavamsa credits him with creating, each one, the chronicle approvingly states, named after a disciple of the Buddha. Two were to reign after he died in 370 CE.

When, in 2019, Admiral William McRaven, Osama bin Laden's nemesis, informed a group of Texan students that "you have to be at your strongest when you feel at your weakest," it was a dictum he had, from a Sri Lankan perspective, got entirely round the wrong way. For, as often with the island's ancient kings, it was when they were at their strongest that they turned out to be at their weakest. Buddhadasa's death in 370 CE left his son, Upatissa I, what seemed to be the

most secure of thrones to sit upon. His reign appeared to mirror the long Indian summer of late Lambakarna rule, brought in so improbably by the austere plotter, Gotabhaya.

Everything worked. Water flowed, temples were respected, public infrastructure was cared for, and the fecund land bestowed its many mesmerising gifts for all to enjoy. In short, the kingdom functioned.

Or so it seemed. Little did those last glittering and unbothered Lambakarnas know what we can see from our later and more advantageous viewpoint: that the bar at the kingdom's Last Chance Saloon was closing down. Permanently. Little is known about Upatissa I's reign except for two things. It lasted a long time – forty-two years. And it was to end in disaster, its terminus foretelling the dynasty's implosion just a few decades later.

That Upatissa's reign should end in 412 CE with his murder may have surprised the king, who by then was so far into his reign as to imagine it might go on for as long as monkeys eat bananas. His shock at discovering the essential untruth of this would have been amplified had he known that his unscheduled dénouement would be delivered by a monk, his own brother, Mahanama, who, according to the chronicles, was busy cuckolding him with the queen.

Wrong on so many counts, it was also a twist of family politics beloved of almost every earlier

period of national regicide, and its impact on the state was no less dreadful. Although Mahanama, the new king, was to enjoy dying a most undeserved natural death in 434 CE, the manner of his ascension legitimised regicide once again. And in a rare moment of historical serendipity, the existence and surprisingly exemplary civic behaviour of this very king is captured most unusually in a random contemporary chronicle of the time.

So few are such contemporaneous observations that they can almost be counted on the teeth of chickens. Still, it was during Mahanama's self-imposed reign that a wandering Chinese Buddhist monk, Faxian, dropped in on the island for several years, his ancient records surviving the boisterous vicissitudes of Chinese history to give us a glimpse of the king attending the burial of a revered Arhat.

"When he drew near his end, the king came to examine into the point; and having assembled the monks according to rule, asked whether the bhikshu had attained to the full degree of Wisdom. They answered affirmatively, saying that he was an arhat. The king, accordingly, when he died, buried him after the fashion of an arhat, as the regular rules prescribed. Four or five li east from the vihara, there was reared a great pile of firewood, which might be more than thirty cubits square, and the same in height.

Near the top were laid sandal, aloe, and other

kinds of fragrant wood. On the four sides of the pile, they made steps by which to ascend it. With clean white hair-cloth, almost like silk, they wrapped the body round and round. They made a large carriage-frame, in form like our funeral car, but without the dragons and fishes.

At the time of the cremation, the king and the people, in multitudes from all quarters, collected together and presented offerings of flowers and incense. While they were following the car to the burial ground, the king himself presented flowers and incense. When this was finished, the car was lifted on the pile, all over which oil of sweet basil was poured, and then a light was applied."

But, with hindsight, the cremated arhat was luckier dead than alive. In the words of John Lennon, peace had been given a chance. It was now time for blood-letting. Regicidal palace politics, no doubt infected by hearty doses of romantic, monetary, religious, caste, ethnic, and personal squabbles, set alight a new ad-lib national anthem that would challenge any modern-day soap opera scriptwriter.

Mahanama's death brought to the throne his (possibly illegitimate) half-Tamil son, Soththisena, for a blink-and-you-miss-it moment of splendour. The luckless king lasted less than a day before succumbing to a draft of poison administered by his half-sister, Sanga. Sanga, the daughter of King Mahanama's Singhala queen, clearly had strong views about caste and

and legitimacy, which she enforced with a deft and, as it turned out, a most transient impact.

Although Sanga was to replace her brother with her own husband, Chattagahaka Jantu, the new king lasted barely a year, disappearing at unnatural speed in 434 CE. In fact, they all disappeared at this time. Chattagahaka Jantu's chief minister, Mittasena, replaced his boss with a more compliant distant relative in 435 CE, and, preoccupied with religious devotions, was wholly unprepared for the fourth Tamil invasion of the realm in 436 CE.

That the state was so unable to defend itself was no great surprise. For the past few decades, family politics would have pushed good governance into the back seat. The eye, as Ford Frick, the famous basketball player, might have observed, was firmly off the ball.

The regime fell with minimal resistance. It was a shocking and sudden end. For 369 years, the dynasty had ruled, its two periods of firm and effective guardianship tragically balanced by two other periods of regicidal insanity and power vacuums. They had lasted barely half as long as the previous dynasty, the Vijayans. The state had prospered, matured, and advanced – but was ultimately put at risk by the dynasty's unfavourable ratio of ineffective to effective kings.

It could be argued that the invasion that finally toppled them could have come at almost any

time, pushing them to the sidelines of history much sooner than it did. Indeed, by 436 CE, the nation's defences were laid wide open and wholly incapable of resisting the relentless march of South India's Pandyan dynasty. Across the Palk Straits in Southern India, several dynasties vied for power, their internecine warfare persuading even the great emperor Ashoka to limit his mighty empire from intruding too far into the troublesome boundaries of their states.

On three occasions before the abrupt end of King Mittasena's rule, Indian strongmen had taken an overexuberant interest in Sri Lanka, beginning with the opportunistic horse traders, Sena and Guttika, who interrupted Vijayan rule to rule the Anuradhapuran Kingdom in 237 BC. The Vijayan King Asela saw off the horse traders in 215 BC, who had been dispatched by a second Tamil invader, King Elara, in 205. This time, expelling the invaders took longer – but it was achieved by a later Vijayan, King Dutugemunu, in 161 BC. His grandson, King Walagamba, fared less well, losing his throne to seven invading Dravidians in 104 BCE before regaining it in 89 BC. And there matters rested for five hundred and twenty-two years until the next lot arrived.

As the increasingly weak rule of the Lambakarna dynasty over Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura Kingdom descended into a series of gritty palace coups, the Pandians took matters into their own hands and, with ease, invaded the

time, pushing them to the sidelines of history much sooner than it did. Indeed, by 436 CE, the nation's defences were laid wide open and wholly incapable of resisting the relentless march of South India's Pandyan dynasty. Across the Palk Straits in Southern India, several dynasties vied for power, their internecine warfare persuading even the great emperor Ashoka to limit his mighty empire from intruding too far into the troublesome boundaries of their states.

On three occasions before the abrupt end of King Mittasena's rule, Indian strongmen had taken an overexuberant interest in Sri Lanka, beginning with the opportunistic horse traders, Sena and Guttika, who interrupted Vijayan rule to rule the Anuradhapuran Kingdom in 237 BC. The Vijayan King Asela saw off the horse traders in 215 BC, who had been dispatched by a second Tamil invader, King Elara, in 205. This time, expelling the invaders took longer – but it was achieved by a later Vijayan, King Dutugemunu, in 161 BC. His grandson, King Walagamba, fared less well, losing his throne to seven invading Dravidians in 104 BCE before regaining it in 89 BC. And there matters rested for five hundred and twenty-two years until the next lot arrived.

As the increasingly weak rule of the Lambakarna dynasty over Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura Kingdom descended into a series of gritty palace coups, the Pandians took matters into their own hands and, with ease, invaded the island and took

over the kingdom. The last Lambakarna king, Mittasena, was slain in battle in 436 CE, and a Tamil king, Pandu, succeeded him. Quite what this meant or how far his rule extended is hard to estimate. It is unlikely that the new king's edict reached much beyond the north and north-central parts of the country.

Pandu was succeeded by his son Parindu in 441 CE and, in less than one suspiciously short year, by another son, Khudda Parinda, the third Pandiyan king. Thereafter, the family lineage is hard to trace, but the revolving door of kingship is not. By 447 CE, Khudda Parinda was dead, and a fourth Pandiyan took the throne – Tiritara, albeit only for two months; his reign ended with his death in skirmishes with rebels from Ruhuna, led by an emerging Sri Lankan king-in-waiting, Dhatusena, of the Moriyan Dynasty.

The fifth Pandiyan king, Dathiya, was a little luckier. By 450 CE, he too had been killed by Dhatusena in the war that now engulfed the island, and up stepped the last and sixth of the luckless invaders - Pithiya. Hs rule also ended at the point of Dhatusena's sword, in 452 CE. Several years of barely documented anarchy followed before the country could turn to the task of recovering from the Pandiyan merry-go-round.

History often presents its students with the prospect of exciting and woeful adjudications. The winner takes all. Looking at King Mittasena's murder in 436 CE, it is easy to

suppose that this was the drama to end all dramas: the end of a reign, the end of a dynasty; the end of Singhala independence. What a disaster! Expect, as Lewis Hamilton might have observed, it's all too easy to be a drama queen: "I went blonde," he once said with a breathless lack of perspective, "which killed my hair. It was a disaster."

Indeed, 436 CE was a setback for King Mittasena. But at the time of his death, the country had already enjoyed almost a thousand years of recorded history. His death and its consequences, dramatic though they were, were all the same, steamrollered out of sight by almost a thousand more years of Singhala kingdoms still to come. As the defeated king breathed his last on a forgotten and nameless battlefield far to the northeast, the once-great Jin dynasty, which had unified China at about the same time, was also to fragment into scores of small, quarrelsome kingdoms that would take centuries to sort out.

That was much more sensational. Far to the west, an even more absolute disaster was unfolding as the Roman Empire withdrew from Britain, the first in a series of contractions that left the pax Romana little more than a memory just four hundred years later. A once great empire has come and gone. And yet to the south, the Singhala kingdom would rise and fall, fall and rise like a magic clock almost – if not quite - destined to beat out the hours until unrecordable time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. 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 possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board directorfor sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation 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, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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