



A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE

SRI LANKA'S WICKED MONARCHS

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FOR
BEATA
SAINT & ROYAL SCION

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

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871



ABOUT
WICKEDNESS

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

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

Around 200 kings, with the odd queen, ruled over the island from its first recorded beginnings in 543 BCE to its last king, packed off into exile by the invading British in 1815.

From island-wide kingdoms to ones circumscribed by covetous foreign occupiers, the 2358 years of royal rule the country enjoyed were a big dipper experience. It was just as Longfellow had once said of a little girl: “when she was good, she was very, very good/ But when she was bad, she was horrid.”

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

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

No known studies have been done to precisely identify which country can claim to be the most religiously minded. Still, in any future list, only a fool would bet

against Sri Lanka not scoring somewhere in the top 5.

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

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

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

ONE

VIJAYA

The list begins, quite neatly, with the county's first recorded king. Embodying a prescient creation myth, which, like many of its type, mixes horror and achievement in equal measure, Prince Vijaya fits the bill perfectly.

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

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

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

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

them on a ship and sent them forth upon the sea, and their wives and children also.”

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

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

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

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

There was the Ramayana, a half-human tribe founded by the ten-headed demon King, Ravana, whose followers have gone down in history as a terrifying lot, given to cannibalism. A further tribe, the serpent-like Naga, may exist only in myth, despite references to Lord Buddha arriving among them to settle disputes. The Nittaewo,

dark-skinned, tiny, and understandably defensive, are a possible third tribal strand, their last members possibly smoked to death.

On marginally surer ground are the Yaksha, described in the *Dipavaṃsa*, the oldest of the island's three ancient chronicles, which, with support from the later *Mahavaṃsa*, could have given rise to the Vedda.

Archaeogeneticists believe that the Vedda were descendants of the original Mesolithic settlers who migrated from India 40,000 years ago. Scattered communities still exist today, an ever more ghostly presence on the island, their bloodlines dissipated by intermarriage. They worship a range of ancient folk deities as well as such mainstream Hindu gods as Murugan. Ancestor worship and the cult of the dead mark out many of their still-just-living practices.

This was Kuveni's tribe, and they seemed to live in scattered communities of kingdoms in various parts of the island. Overcoming her first instinct to kill him, Kuveni instead married him and, on their wedding day, helped hatch a plot to kill her own clansmen.

They married in a wave of blood. If this was a most Lady Macbeth-like way to ensure freedom and foreclose on reprisals, it was no less monstrous of Vijaya, who more than fulfilled his homicidal role in eliminating all nearby native chieftains. The *Mahavaṃsa* describes how "he listened to her and did even (as she said) he slew all the yakkhas, and when he had fought victoriously, he himself put on the garments of the yakkha-king and bestowed the other raiment on one and another of his followers."

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

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

Villainy, of course, does not stop with mere bloodshed, however great it may be. With practised and cold-blooded expediency, Vijaya then sacked his wife, abandoned his children, and sent off to India in search of a more compliant and aristocratic partner.

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

Needless to say, the Mahavaṃsa has a rather different take on matters, recording how “the envoys of the Pandu king delivered up to the prince Vijaya the gifts and the (maidens) with the king’s daughter at their head. When Vijaya had offered hospitality and bestowed honours on the envoys, he bestowed the maidens upon his ministers and retainers, according to their rank. According to custom, the ministers in full assembly consecrated Vijaya king and appointed a great festival. Then King Vijaya consecrated the daughter of the Pandu king with solemn ceremony as his queen; he bestowed wealth on his ministers, and every year he sent to his wife’s father a shell-pearl worth twice a hundred thousand (pieces of money). When he had forsaken his former evil way of life, Vijaya, the lord of men, ruling over all Lanka in peace and righteousness, reigned, as is known, in the city of Tambapanni for thirty-eight years.

“ You don’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs” may have been Vijaya’s line of self-defence. Still,

his murderous and duplicitous actions had given his nascent kingdom behavioural traits that many of his equally nefarious descendants would enthusiastically adopt.

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

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

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

TWO

ANULA

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

It had taken almost 500 long and achievement-laden years to reach these last few blood-drenched decades of Vijayan rule, but Choura Naga managed the transition with depressing ease. In its new king, the Vijayan dynasty had found the leader best able to steer it onto the final road to oblivion.

Its last few decades were rich in plot lines that would make most horror movies look tame. He and his short-lived successors travelled these years with unforgettable horror – most of them fated to be murdered by their successors in an outpouring of serial regicide that plunged the country into civil war and ultimately forced a complete change of national leadership.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her last throw of the love dice was Niliya, a palace priest whom she installed as king in 44 BCE before feeding him something he ought not to have eaten. At this point, Anula must have reached the logical conclusion: if you want something done well, do it

yourself. Busy women, after all, don't have time for excuses, only solutions. As Dolly Parton said, "Find out who you are and do it on purpose."

And so, from 43 to 42 BCE, Anula ruled in her own name, Asia's first female head of state, beating President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga by 2,036 years. It was not a success.

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

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

THREE

YASSALALAKA
TISSA

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

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

His path to power was so traditionally iniquitous that it has become an almost essential distinction for any candidate for this guide: he murdered his predecessor.

Simply by virtue of his ascension, Yassalalaka Tissa makes the grade, though the ancient sources helpfully validate this by calling him "a vicious ruler." But by virtue of his placement in the line of the founding Vijayan kings, his inclusion here offers an irresistible and matchless neatness to the account, for he was to be the last true Vijayan ruler.

His own murder, in 60 CE, just 8 years after seizing the throne, brought to an end the royal dynasty that, more than any other, set up the country to be what it was. And what an ending it was, its preposterous characteristics being the third main reason to include in this guide.

Yassalalaka Tissa's own reign suffered because his dynasty had never fully recovered from the effects of having overcome the island's third invasion by Tamil warlords between 103 and 89 BCE. This was to so weaken the kingdom as to fatally undermine its confidence and capability.

It all started with yet another grubby and bloody power struggle that saw one brother kill another to grab the throne before passing it on – briefly – to yet another brother, Khallata Naga, who was himself to be

despatched by a fourth, Valagamba, in 103 BCE. It was a damned succession. Barely had Valagamba digested the celebrations when all the hounds of hell slipped their leads and the kingdom's preeminent port, Mahatittha (now Mantota, opposite Mannar), fell to the invaders.

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

Pulahatta was killed by Bahiya, another of the five remaining Dravidians and the head of the army, who was, in turn, murdered in 99 BCE by Panayamara, the third Dravidian who had been unwisely promoted to run the army. Proving those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, Panayamara was assassinated in 92 BCE by his general, the fourth Dravidian, Pilayamara.

But by now Valagamba, ever the comeback king, had begun his return, his guerrilla tactics toppling Pilayamara, who had lasted all of seven months on the throne, and then defeating the last of the Pandyan chiefs, Dathika. Valagamba's return to power should have seen a long-lasting and confident restart for the dynasty – but too much blood had been shed, and regicide had become so normalised as to undermine nearly every succeeding monarch with its malign and cancerous weight.

Two periods over the next 130 years in particular were to be its undoing, the first being the chaos unleashed by the ambitions of Queen Annua herself, who murdered 7 kings before being murdered in her turn.

Just 5 kings later, chaos once again took hold when a civil war, promoted by one too many serial regicides, caught up with a king called Kanirajanu Tissa, who was to be dispatched in 33 CE by his successor, Chulabhaya, in time-honoured fashion.

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

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

Little about this period of Sri Lankan history is certain, except that from around 35 CE, an uncensored civil war preoccupied the entire country, leaving it without any plausible governance.

For a time, Ilanaga seemed to be ahead of the pack. But he then seems to have scored a perfect own-goal when he demoted the entire Lambakarna clan. This abrupt change in their caste, in a country increasingly rigid in its caste system, galvanised them into full-scale rebellion.

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

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

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

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

Thus, as he was wont to do from time to time.

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

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

FOUR

JETTHA TISSA I

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

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

What extenuating circumstances there were to explain his nature could be said to be found in his fathering, for his father, Gotabhaya, himself a near-certain candidate for this guide, had come to the throne himself, having murdered at least one, if not two, previous kings. In 254 CE, Gotabhaya grabbed the throne, ruling it with the proverbial rod of iron.

A man of deeply conservative religious beliefs, he was unimpressed by the Vajrayana movement, a form of tantric Buddhism that was making slim but noticeable appearances 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 son, Jettha Tissa's education to an Indian monk named

Sanghamitta, a closet follower of Vaitulya Buddhism. The Vaitulya doctrinal strand was even more radical than the Vajrayana doctrine that Gotabhaya was so busy trying to eradicate. Like a time bomb, the impact of this private religious education on his successor was timed to go off the moment this alarming and archaic old king died.

His death in 267 CE left a most divided country behind.

Several ministers, blithely (and, as it turned out, suicidally) bold, refused to participate in his funeral rites. For it was at this point that Jetta Tissa made his monstrous mark, which the Mahavaṃsa faithfully records with an eye for the kind of gory detail more beloved of sensational newspapers:

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

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

Under Jetta Tissa, as under his father, it was tough love the country received, and his subsequent decade-long

rule was not an easy ride for those around him. Indeed, as the Mahavamsa 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.

But mixed in with such stern rule and an eagerness for sudden acts of random capital punishment was also a certain amount of largesse to the religious community, including building a large water tank for the monastery, Arama Pacinatissapabbata, and tailoring 6 sets of robes for 30,000 monks. The Mahavaṃsa, with a surprising and somewhat unusual tone of balance, ends its coverage of his grim reign, stating that “thus, reflecting that sovereignty, being the source of manifold works of merit, is at the same time the source of many an injustice, a man of pious heart will never enjoy it as if it were sweet food mixed with poison.”

FIVE

KASYAPA

Jetta Tissa's nine Lambakanna successors were to romp their way through reigns which, the odd happy ending notwithstanding, failed to reverse an ever-weakening realm. When the next invasion came, by 6 Dravidian chiefs, the kingdom fell compliantly into their hands.

It was 436 CE, and though Sri Lanka's new rulers were Buddhist Tamils and not Hindu ones, they were still essentially good time boys out for as long as it might last - and all the easy plunder they could muster.

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

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

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

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

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

Here, for a time at least, he ducked those biblical warnings that declared that "he that covereth his sins shall not prosper." Even so, as an otherwise obscure American wildflower enthusiast later noted, "the wages of sin are the hardest debts on earth to pay, and they are always collected at inconvenient times and unexpected places."

It took 22 years before Kashyapa's debt was called in, during which time he turned Sigiriya into one of Asisa's most remarkable pleasure palaces; the venue for a lifestyle that made living one long spectacular party.

A capital for just one reign, Sigiriya was a cross between the Tivoli, Akhenaten's Amarna, and the Brighton Pavilion. It enjoyed every last innovation and refinement available — and there were many.

It set new standards for urban planning: the royal bastion, surrounded by an elaborately laid-out outer city, encircled by geometric water circles, terraced and boulder gardens, with ponds, pavilions, fountains, and cut pools. Double moats and triple ramparts, and defensible gateways guarded it, and the massive sentinel

sculpture of a 45-foot-high crouching lion marked its main entrance. The world's most advanced water technology powered its fountains, lakes, wells, streams, and waterfalls. Artists whose frescoes equalled those of the later and faraway Leonardo da Vinci painted their perfumed inhabitants.

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

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

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

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

SIX

KALINGA
MAGHA

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

In a sense, Kalinga Magha stands as a devilish ambassador for all 8 notable pre-colonial invaders who suffered on the island. Although one or two others outdid him in their impact, Kalinga Magha appeared to make up for this with the psychotic and enthusiastic style he brought to his task. Plunder, land, murder, and all on the widest possible scale – this was what got him up in the morning.

Most of the others were merely after money: Sena and Guttika, the cunning Tamil horse traders who stole the kingdom in 237 BCE for 22 years; almost a dozen invading Pandyan Dravidian chiefs, the first 5 capturing the state in 103 BCE for 14 years; the next 6 in 429 CE for 26 years. One even loved the land he conquered: Elara, the mighty and even respected Chola strongman who ruled for an astonishing 44 years. Two merely saw it as an appropriate annexure to their already vast empire: the Chola emperor, Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra I, who annihilated Anduraupura for 77 years from 993 CE.

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

Under Parakrama Pandyan II, life in Polonnaruwa largely remained unchanged. The city, having been made the

the new capital by Vijayabahu, the king who had finally expelled Rajendra I and the last Cholas in 1070 CE, had enjoyed a vast building programme under this new line of Sinhalese kings. The site was transformed by immense, beautiful buildings, supported by an agrarian economy made possible by the hydraulic engineering marvels surrounding expansive water tanks that fed crops.

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

Arriving in 1215, he was "a great scorching fire," whose "heart rejoiced in bad statesmanship ... an unjust king sprung from the Kalinga line, "who "put out the Monarch's eyes and plundered all his treasures, pearls, jewels and so forth".

The chronicles eagerly enumerate his sins.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Monarch forced the people to adopt a false faith, and he brought great confusion into the four sharply divided castes. Villages and fields, houses and gardens, slaves, cattle, buffaloes and whatever else belonged to the Sihalas he had delivered up to the Kerajas. The viharas, the 77 pariveijas, and many sanctuaries he gave over to one or another of his warriors as dwellings. The treasures that belonged to the Buddha and were the property of the holy Order, he seized, thereby committing several sins and going to hell.

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

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

Kalinga Magha earns his place here not simply by the terrible destruction he wrought, but because he drove the final nail into the idea of the unitary state. With a couple of ephemeral interludes, the island would never again be governed as an independent whole until 1948, when it gained its independence from the British.

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 director for 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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