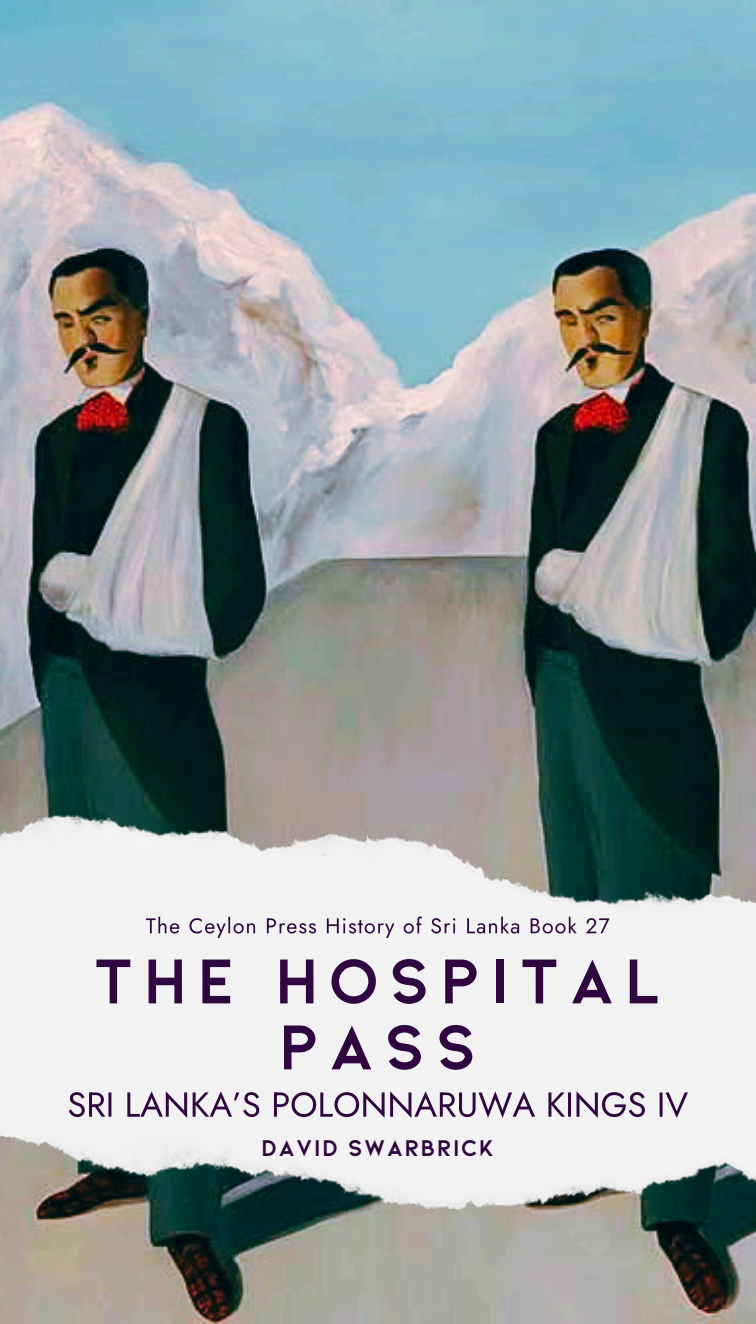


The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 27

THE HOSPITAL PASS

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DAVID SWARBRICK

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Published By The Ceylon Press
2026

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THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY
The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

"And no scheme of ours can raise any sort of smile."

THE CHESHIRE CAT
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

ONE

The Botched Succession

Well over half Sri Lanka's kings had died before their natural time, poisoned, stabbed, starved or burnt to death by their successors. So when the great king Vijayabahu breathed his last in the plush royal suite of his new capital in Polonnaruwa, ascending, as The Culavamsa put it "to the heavenly world to behold the rich reward that had sprung from his meritorious works," a long and golden period of unruffled prosperity should have been his to bequeath.

He had ruled for 5 decades, remaking a new kingdom from the ruins of Anuradhapura, restoring the economy, agriculture, commerce, and the religious orders, and building a great new capital at Polonnaruwa, the former hub of the occupying Chola invaders.

In the crudest and simplest of terms, the nation had money once more. The years of surplus had returned. Rice was blooming; water was flowing; trade was bustling; the courts, monasteries, temples, farms, guilds and professions - all were back at work and had been for a long time. The country – wrecked and destitute just 5 decades earlier was back in the black and had – once more – assets to confer.

But nothing is ever that simple.

As the OED informs all fervent etymologists, by 1980 the phrase "hospital pass" had burst from its tame sporting meaning to embrace any number of toxic or doomed projects, unwinnable political roles and predictable near-disasters. Certainly, and in retrospect, it surely also applied to the inheritance that Vijayabahu left to his family, his country and the brother, son and grandson who most immediately followed after him

For what Vijayabahu really bequeathed to his successors, in addition to a fully functioning kingdom, was a hospital pass of a succession, and a family line beset with inbuilt tensions and rivalries that would place the future in continual jeopardy. Over the reigns of the next 3 kings for 43 years, the Pax Lanka that could have been was more a Pax Infirma; and the country held its breath, fearing an almost always imminent return to chaos.

On the face of it though, three kings in 43 years was no bad average innings – 14 years a piece. But the on-the-ground reality told a less equitable story. And the more you delve into each of the three reigns,

the clearer the picture becomes: one of poisonous family politics played out across Sri Lanka, with a little help from South India. That the country did not tip back into a civil war of the sort that had characterised late Lambakanna rule was more by luck than judgement.

The instability all stemmed from the doubtful marriage alliances that the late king Vijayabahu had organised. Whilst he was alive, they worked; the rivalries were held in check by dint of the old king's great personal authority. But his death changed all that. When "the cat's away, the mice will play." And his death, as surely as anything ever could, put the cat well away.

For play the mice did – from the very moment the old king died.

TWO

One Crown Prince Too Many

Royal succession in Sri Lanka was never just a father-to-son affair. Since ancient times, and right through to the medieval period, a more flexible system was followed, and often the throne passed to a brother before or instead of a son.

Often, this was because the oldest son was too young to handle the tribulations of kingship. A battle-tested, politically savvy adult was preferred; and if not preferred, one often managed to jump the queue with little fuss.

This was frequently built into specific succession planning: formally, a younger brother or even brother-in-law made a sub–king– the honour naturally dubbing them to be next in line.

So on first sight, when Vijayabahu's brother, Jayabahu, became king after him, it seemed quite normal. The prince, who had hidden in the southern jungles with Vijayabahu in childhood to evade Chola capture, had been one of the king's key lieutenants, ruling the province of Ruhuna on his brother's behalf for many years.

He was to be promoted to the rank of Uparaja (sub-king or heir apparent) when his older brother Vīrabahu died; becoming, as he did so under the customs of medieval Sinhalese law, the legitimate next-in-line to the throne.

But none of this took account of Vijayabahu's own only son, Vikramabahu, who at the time of his father's death was no frolicking teenager, but a mature and skilled soldier in his own right. The customs of succession may have been more or less in line with tradition, but they utterly failed to take account of the usual sense of entitlement and expectation that any only son is likely to have.

For Vikramabahu was just that – an only son. He had sisters, and no doubt a small platoon of illegitimate brothers, but he alone was the sole legitimate son.

His father had married twice, and much of the family's future problems stemmed from his otherwise innocuous first marriage to a Ruhuna princess, Lilavati, whose South Indian father had been one of the various imported princes that had taken over the fight against the Chola occupation.

Only one child was produced from this marriage – Yasodhara,

a blameless matron of pious rectitude whose two daughters would reshape all medieval views on the capabilities of women in South Asia. Between them, they would violently transform the entire future of the new dynasty their grandfather had sought to create.

One of these women, Lilavati, would later cause much Sturm und Drang in the story of the Polonnaruwa kings. She was to marry her cousin, the greatest of all island kings, Parakramabahu I, and eventually rule the island in her own right three times, her name even appearing on coins as "Sri Raja Lilavati."

But the sheer guts and personal authority it must have taken to do this pale beside the characteristics demonstrated by her sister Sugala – known as the Warrior Queen and a byword in the ancient chronicles for her fierceness and resilience. Pitched somewhere between Boudicca, Joan of Arc and Cleopatra, she was to throw the aspiring new dynasty off course by the continual war she later fought against her own brother-in-law, Parakramabahu I – who was also Vijayabahu's grandson through Mitta.

Mitta, Vijayabahu's only sister had married a Pandyan prince, and one of her children would marry one of Vijayabahu's own daughters from his second marriage. Confused?

Few family trees are as complicated as Vijayabahu's, with descendants weaving back and forth like an ill-tempered meandering river in spate, marrying, fighting, and arguing with one another through the long, venomous, tempestuous decades of the Polonnaruwa kingdom.

But with only one daughter from his first marriage, Vijayabahu did what all very responsible kings do to secure the succession with a male heir: he married a second time.

His second wife, Tiloka Sundari, a Pandyan princess with impeccable diplomatic value in the wars against the Chola, had him five daughters - Subhadda, Sumitra, Lokanatha, Ratanavali, and Rupavati, two of whom would marry their own uncles – Vijayabahu's brothers, Virabahu -for long the Yuvaraja or crown prince until his untimely death; and Jayabahu, the Governor of Rohana.

When Jayabahu was promoted to become the Yuvaraja , his governorship of Ruhana was passed to Vijayabahu's only son, Vikramabahu, who was also confusingly entitled as

as “mapa,” or sub-king. And this is where what is just plain confusing becomes befogging incomprehensible. For the differences between a sub-king, or mapa, and a Yuvaraja, or crown prince, would need a high-resolution electron microscope to distinguish. Both implied a full right of succession

The Mapa traditionally had specific governing responsibilities for the south – Ruhana. When the royal court was in session, the Mapa would sit in a clearly designated place immediately to the right of the king, regardless of whether there was a Yuvaraja or crown prince. This already complex situation was made still more intractable by the fact that both the king's brother and son had been rulers of Ruhana too.

THREE

Worse Than Any Fiction

If ever there was a string to pull, to unravel the entire cloth, it was this most discombobulated of situations. When Vijayabahu died, he may well have intended his son to take over. With no real evidence to provide a smoking gun, any guess is possible.

What actually happened was that Vikramabahu was far from Polonnaruwa when his father died and so, with the help of his sister Mitta and their manoeuvring factions within the royal court, it was the king's brother Jayabahu who was in Polonnaruwa at the time and the Yuvaraja to boot, who grabbed the crown.

It was all a terrible mess; the late king's abdication of clarity on this matter was a self-inflicted wound that said more about his desire to balance political factions in his court than his willingness to take the hardest of decisions for the future – and so risk turbulence during his own lifetime.

Instead, Vijayabahu passed the whole mess down the line, kicking the problem into the long grass to come. Others could deal with it.

A novelist, writing up this intense uncle-nephew drama as a would-be bestselling thriller, might cast Jayabahu as the gnarled old war leader, the one who had been there at the very beginning, at the great king's side, living off jungle jams as the fugitive royal family hid from the marauding Chola back in the day before the new kingdom ever was. Later, he was always there too, ready to defend his brother, the king, his most loyal lieutenant, smashing any rebels that threatened the throne and, with his marriage to his own niece, closer than close in the very heart of the family. Where, of course, the only son and heir, Vikramabahu, also resided, younger perhaps but no less a warrior, no less a loyal defender of his father's crown.

It was Catch-22, Hobson's Choice, every which way caught between a rock and a hard place. But as is always the case, the truth is even more marvellous than this fiction.

For the likely truth of the matter is that Jayabahu was little more than a puppet king, manipulated by his sister Mitta and a crafty cabal of monks into taking control in his nephew's absence.

As the Culavamsa puts it "thereupon Mitta, the younger sister of the King, her three sons, the highest

dignitaries and the ascetics dwelling in the district met together and without sending news of the Monarch's death to Vikkamabahu dwelling in Rohana, they took counsel together and when they had become of one mind they bestowed the consecration as king of Lanka on the Yuvaraja Jayabahu."

But they went one devious manoeuvre further. The Cabal appointed one of Mitta's sons, Manab Harapa as the new crown prince. Jayabahu was at best a stopgap.

Raiding the treasury, harnessing the war elephants, and assembling a great army, the cabal marched south to seize Vikkamabahu. And so, just 5 decades after the last island-wide war had been terminated, a new one broke out.

The plotters, however, were far out of their league and totally underestimated Vikramabahu's military genius. Despite having fewer soldiers, Vikramabahu defeated his aunt and uncle in a string of battles all across the southeast and barely one year later had captured Polonnaruwa itself.

His uncle fled south and found refuge in Dakkhina desa, protected by another of Mitta's sons, Kitti Sri Megha. For the next several decades, the country split into three semi-independent principalities, with Vikramabahu ruling the northern Rajarata kingdom from Polonnaruwa and Mitt's sons, Mana Bharana, Kitti Sri Megha, and Srivall Abha ruling the south and southeast.

Vikramabahu was to rule his rump state for 21 years, his time spent fighting a series of defensive wars and skirmishes, not just with his uncle and cousins in the south, but also facing the great indignity of having to repel an unexpected invasion from the Maldives by its tenacious ruler, Veeradeva, who was eventually killed in a swamp - but not before inflicting some shattering defeats on the beleaguered Polonnaruwa king.

Beleaguered - and unconsecrated, for Vikramabahu never actually got round to enjoying a formal coronation. Forced to maintain a large standing army against his enemies, the king taxed, taxed and taxed all over again his subjects. With so much of the treasury spent on military stipends, little if any public works were ever done in his reign; the evidence of new temples, palaces, tanks and engineering works being wholly absent. It can't have made him

popular at all; and he must have resorted to draconian action merely to keep his subjects in place throughout it all.

His grievances against the scheming monks who had sought to do him out of his inheritance inspired him to turn on the entire clergy. The Culavamsa notes with horror how he stole the gold and jewels from the temples to fund his armies, confiscated their lands and converted temples into barracks for a strong of hired Indian mercenaries.

Predictably shocked, the monks spirited to Ruhana the most prized relics that underwrote any royal authority – the sacred tooth relic and alms bowl of Lord Buddha. Bereft of popularity and without even the symbols of political legitimacy at his lonely side, it is a wonder that Vikramabahu managed to die a natural death. But die he did, in his own royal bed, passing his shrunken kingdom onto his own son, Gajabahu II in 1131 CE.

FOUR

No Holds Barred

The new king's very youth was a cause of insult to his quarrelsome relatives – who by now had been reduced to two especially angry uncles: Kitti Sri Megha, who ruled in the western and south-central part of the island – Dakkhinadesa - and Srivall Aabha, who ruled Ruhuna.

An interminable civil war followed, but little of consequence happened until both uncles had been succeeded by sons - Parakrama Bahu in Dakkhinadesa and Manab Haraṇa in Ruhuna.

Then the gloves really came off. Parakrama Bahu captured Polonnaruwa, driving Gajabahu south to seek protection from Manab Haraṇa. But help soon turned to attempted regicide as the Rohana king decided on the more rewarding strategy of trying to poison and stab his cousin Gajabahu in order to take Polonnaruwa for himself.

The emaciated monarch appealed to his earlier enemy, his cousin Parakrama Bahu, for help and the two made a pact whose terms can still be read in a rock inscription at the Sangamuwa Temple near Kurunegala. In it, the kings swore never to fight one another again; to make each other's enemies their enemy and to nominate one another as heir, so ensuring that whoever survived longest would get the lot.

Gajabahu was to reign for a total of 22 years but, left so ragged by the early onslaught of so many life-threatening stresses, he understandably spent most of his time seeking solace with the gods.

In truth, the peace treaty he had made was more a capitulation than a meeting of equals.

The records indicate that while Gajabahu endorsed a few Buddhist establishments in his time, his heart was ever more Hindu than Buddhist. For the rest of his reign, he lived in semi-retirement in Kantalai, just inland from modern-day Trincomalee, endowing Hindu temples, popularising the worship of the Hindu goddess Pattini, funding Hindu dance rituals and festivals, and burying the great Hindu Koneswaram Temple, that still overlooks the Bay of Bengal from its cliffs at Trincomalee, with land grants.

His death in 1153, one wonderfully and entirely natural as his father's had been before him, brought to an end the shattering, botched hospital pass of an inheritance that the great king Vijayabahu had so toxically left

to his subjects. The time of the Pax Infirma was ended. And with the accession of Parākramabāhu to the throne, the island was set for the glittering, controversial, undoubtedly magnificent reign of Sri Lanka's most glamorous king.

And yet – and yet – what a terrible waste it had all been. Sri Lanka had utterly failed to build on its recent hard-won achievements.

Were the great nation-building monarch, Vijayabahu, founder of the Polonnaruwa kings, restorer of the old Anuradhapura Kingdom, ever to bother to bestir himself from his grand grave and look out across the years that followed his death, one hopes he might have the self-discipline to at least slap himself hard on the wrists for the unnecessary waste his botched succession plans had created – the sheer squandering of 5 decades of assiduous national investment that almost – but not quite – imploded.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born in Colombo and, with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director across departments including sales, art, and marketing, and at HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and a set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers.

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