The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 11

THE GUARDIANS

SRI LANKA'S FIRST LAMBAKANNA KINGS II

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"No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise."

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

ONE

STANDING GUARD

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 they were as bright and well-organised as the best 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 mura gals.

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.

TWO

TO THE RESCUE

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.

THREE

A HAPPY START

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 departed 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 as 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.

Truly, had Vasabha 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 the disastrous but brief reign of his successor and son, Vankanasika Tissa, with little effect.

FOUR

THE SALAD DAYS

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 set his sights on Sri Lanka next.

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 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 a lot of them, took away twelve thousand 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 (at Matuvihara and Rumika) and a stupa (at 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, an iconic ancient link that 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 involved liberating 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 inflicted on 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 explains why he was succeeded in 135 CE by his father or 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 of 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.

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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