

THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION TO THE
REGICIDAL MORIYAN KINGS
OF SRI LANKA

DAVID SWARBRICK

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TO MISHA

My least
rigidallly- inclined
freind.

"If you're gonna
make it to the top,
get a grip on this
rock, and get a grip
on yourself."

The Cheshire Cat
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll 1865

1

THE RESILIENT LION

To Tanzania goes the mane. Sri Lanka excepted, the land boasts more lions than any other country (over 15,000 at the last count). Admittedly, Sri Lanka's capacious pride of lions is a depiction rather than a collection of living, breathing, roaring specimens – but right across the island, lions dominate the scene with a flamboyance that had much to teach the muted heraldic beasts on such other national flags as Spain or Paraguay.

Fluttering with pride across a million or more flagpoles from banks to private houses, government buildings to temples, lions have also given their name to any number of other things - from Lion tea to Lion lager, from Mount Lavinia's Lion Pub to Galagedera Royal Lion Hotel, from soaps, cars, jewellers, insurance sales forces and even pop groups down south in Henakaduwa. Statues of the beast also found their way into early temples, palaces, and monasteries - unfloutable sentinels of the great buildings of the state. But quite how lions got here is a matter of simmering altercation amongst vexillologists. Some point the finger at Prince Vijaya, others at King Dutugemunu, and still others at King Nissanka Malla. But whatever the truth of the matter, there is more to the lion than

just flags or brand names.

That lions should assume so central a role is a victory of sorts for *Panthera Leo Sinhaleyus*, a subspecies of the lion unique to Sri Lanka, which became extinct in 37,000 BCE – about the same time as the island's famous Stone Age Balangoda Man walked his own last steps. Its discovery only came to light in 1936, when the archaeologist P.E.P. Deraniyagala uncovered two fossilised teeth in Kuruwita, near Ratnapura. With the passion of a forensic detective, the archaeologist studied his modest clutch of exhumed teeth. One was so damaged as to be of little use in identifying anything, but the other, a left molar, presented such a distinctive structure as to not just twin it with lions but also set it apart from all known lion species. The discovery was later validated by a further breakthrough in 1962, when a complete right-limb middle phalanx of the same species was found. From these fragile artefacts, a lost subspecies was uncovered, its size indicating that the beast was a lion much larger than the present Indian lion. Back in 37,000 BCE, Sri Lanka was a very different place from what it would become, an island of open grasslands – a habitat perfect for lions, and big ones at that.

But over time, as the monsoon rain fuelled the proliferation of trees, its habitat became ever more restricted and at some point, the creature just died out.

Today, the Sri Lankan lion's paramount historical descendant sits at the feet of what islanders call the eighth wonder of the ancient world - Sigiriya Rock. This massive lump of granite - a hardened, much-reduced magma plug - is all that is left of an extinct volcano. Lost in forests, inhabited by hermit monks between the third century BCE and the first century CE, it was exposed by colossal landslides and then selected by the Moriyana King Kashyapa I (or his father) as the location of a new fortress capital in 477 CE.

Guarding the staircase to an ancient fortress, six hundred feet above, are the two immense animal paws, rediscovered during excavations in 1898, all that remains of a crouching sphinx-like lion that guarded the palace entrance. Built with bricks and limestone, the lion's full height was 45 feet. The rest of the creature lies in dust around the site, but even so, it gave its name to the place: "Sigiriya," the Sinhala for "Lion's Rock."

Gazing at it, the most irresistible connection is, of course, to the legendary Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses II, recalled by Shelley in his poem Ozymandias:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless
legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them,
on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies,
whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold
command,
Tell that its sculptor well those
passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these
lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the
heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words
appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of
Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and
despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the
decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless
and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far
away."

Sigiriya, like the palace of the King of Kings, is as much a ruin as the

lion paws that yet defend it. Each mitten is a sorrowful remnant exemplifying the accepted and formidable face of authority and statehood.

From King Pandu Kabhaya founding Anuradhapura around 437 BCE, thereby marking the tangible beginnings of the Sri Lankan island state, to the inheritance enjoyed by the first Moriyana king, Datusena, in 463 CE, 900 years of solid national building had been achieved. Over those many centuries, an entire kingdom and culture had been consolidated, and an ancient state had thrived. Under, first, the Vijayan, and then the Lankabranaka, dynasties, a one-state government came to dominate the entire island, its grand writ running through countless villages from north to south, east to west, by means of the intricate bureaucratic, legal, and administrative structures that ordered its religion, water resources, taxation, and trade. At every stage, this sophisticated ordering of society was reinforced by caste demarcations that arose at least as early as 543 BCE with the arrival of the founding father, Prince Vijaya. With him came a variety of castes, most notably the Govigama – the landowners. A complex and hereditary feudal system soon

developed from this, its voluminous obligations derived from work ordered by the king – the Rajakariya - for an astonishingly comprehensive set of occupations from toddy tapping to coconut growing, hair cutting to fishing. The state's managed bureaucracy had hierarchies so finely tuned that they even trickled down to village officials tasked with managing sluice gates and tanks. The arrival of Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE fortified and compounded these meticulous arrangements.

That the state was strong – able to endure even the suicidal excesses of some of its kings, to shrug off occasional invasions, civil wars, and droughts – was in large part due to the enduring capabilities of the social order that underwrote the kingdom. This institutionalised aptitude allowed the nation to function when even, at times, the government itself did not. Even - all too often - when the island's very social order was manifestly unfair and destructive, it remained a firm and formative force.

"Sure," cried John Steinbeck's tenant farmer,

"but it's our land...We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours."

Sri Lanka's lion - most memorably exemplified by that built by the early Moriyans at Sigiriya - is an apt symbol of this decisive national trait, one so critical that it helps explain another key reason for what makes Sri Lanka Sri Lanka: not just Buddhism, nor its early radical water technology, or even its singular island status - but its ability to, as Winston Churchill put it, "keep bugging on." For the lion, grand and majestic though it is, is first and foremost resistant. Nothing defeats it.

Never before the Moriyans had taken the throne had bugging on been such an imperative national trait. As the twenty-five monarchs of this third dynasty vacillated through their (usually brief) reigns, the state's rulers became increasingly dependent on mercenaries to maintain control. The dynasty's third king, Moggallana, made this something of a sine qua non when he overthrew his half-brother, King Kashyapa, with the help of mercenaries. He was not the first Anduraupuran king to do this: Ilanaga in 33 CE and Abhayanaga in 231 CE had done much the same. But in the Moriyans' rule, mercenaries became a fixture, tipping power struggles one way and then another on many occasions before the dynasty was annihilated.

The mercenaries' royal employers - especially King Dathopatisa I and King Aggabodhi I - wooed their testosterone confederates with special privileges and kept them close - and did little to stop them from plundering what they were there to defend whenever they wished. Emboldened, they burnt the palaces and temples of two of the last kings, Dathopatisa and Kassapa II, and in the end appointed Haththadatha as their own puppet ruler, the last of the Moriyans' kings. Many other dynasties were to follow the Moriyans, crowning new kings who owed their thrones in ever-greater measure to this equatorial version of the Praetorian Guard as they drifted ever further from the glory days of the early Anduraupuran kingdom.

The island itself and the kingdom that dominated it were to be wasted by the great invasion of 993 CE that destroyed the Anduraupuran kingdom. And though an attempt was made to recreate it at Polonnaruwa, further Tamil invasions swept it aside. The Anduraupuran kings became gypsies in their own land, setting up peripatetic kingdoms in Yapallawa, Kurunegala, Kotte, Dambadeniya, Gampola, Sitawaka and finally Kandy, before giving way to three sets of colonists from Portugal,

Holland, and the UK fixed more on controlling trade routes and revenue rather than enriching the island's inherent religions, languages, laws, and customs.

Much of this eroded the resilience and order of what remained from the earlier kings' time. As King George V's brother, the Duke of Gloucester, sat on the dais at the majestic Assembly Hall at Independence Square in 1948 to open the country's first independent parliament, he bestowed on Sri Lanka a silent and jumbled inheritance of layers of competing hierarchies and laws, few of which were effectively policed and most of which were focused on things antipathical to the country's real interests.

From 1948 onwards, government after government, movement after movement, tried to rebalance the scales, but the difficulties they faced were immense. Liberalism, nationalism, socialism, Leninism, federalism, capitalism, resurgent religiosity, industrialisation, nationalisation, privatisation: over eight decades, there was barely an "ism" or "ideology" that was not tried out for size, sometimes effectively, more disastrously. Nothing quite fitted to fill the void left long ago in centres

of power by invasions and colonisation.

Through almost 8 decades of modern independence, a hellish civil war, banditry, failed coup d'états, uprisings, pogroms, the acute politicisation of the civil service, politicians whose venality could win global Oscars, national bankruptcy, and even a tsunami - none of this has ultimately been able to stop the island from bugging on, regardless. More than a little bruised, perhaps, battered certainly, but still stubbornly and splendidly there. Through it all, the island held the inheritance of a way of life, bestowed on it from its earliest times, which enabled it to survive all this disorder.

"We are not makers of history," noted Martin Luther King. "We are made by history." And in this regard, Sri Lanka's resilient social structure, celebrated by its lion emblem, is a factor worth noting – especially at this point in the country's history, as the Moriyans began a 236-year rule of such hooligan intemperance as to put the island's elastic hardiness to the test. For this most regicidal of regicidal dynasties was to prove that they, not the country, were ultimately to be consigned to history. The country was to bounce right back with

such suppleness and stamina as to
leap more or less intact from even
faraway distant Then to here-and-now,
Now.



"Actually, I am
right on time."

The Cheshire Cat
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll 1865

2

SAVIOUR

That so disappointing a dynasty was about to take office was in no way apparent at its beginnings. Indeed, the very opposite political calculation was what most wise onlookers might have offered for the early 450s saw Sri Lanka in turmoil – but with the cavalry just around the corner. The grand Kingdom of Anuradhapura had fallen to Pandian Tamils. The venerated old ruling Lankabranaka dynasty had obliterated itself with one palace coup too far. Only with some certainty did the smaller principality of Ruhuna hold out in the far south, forever the redoubt of Sinhala Buddhism. And it was from here that a new royal line emerged to take back the Anuradhapura Kingdom – under the leadership of Dhatusena, from a family called Moriya.

The origins of this dynasty are at best obscure. Indian Buddhist texts describe them as an Ashokan caste responsible for the royal peacocks – one linked to the Shakyas, the tribe to which Buddha himself belonged. If so, then they travelled a long way to get to the island they would come to rule – for the Shakyas date back to the north Indian iron age, rulers of an oligarchic state based somewhere in Northern India or Nepal.

Shakya princes are known to have

accompanied the sapling of the Sri Maha Bodhi to Sri Lanka in 288 BCE, and so it is possible that the Moriya clan arrived in Sri Lanka in this way. They even intermarried with the Lambakarnas, for the Culavamsa, one of the ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka, states that Dhatusena was royal, but one whose ancestors had fled Anuradhapura around 155 AD. His bloodline may even have been enlivened by a more recent link to King Mahanama, whose death in Anuradhapura in 432 CE ushered in the last fractional moments of Lambakarna rule before the Tamil Pandians swept aside the dynasty. It was a fatal mingling of clan blood that would, in time, come to dominate Moriyana rule as the two dynasties fought each other for power like cats in a bag.

Dhatusena was clearly the kind of patriot for whom enough was enough. He wasted little time in making a name for himself with the Pandyan kings as the sort of rebel who was better off dead. Pandyan searches for him failed when, with the help of an obliging Buddhist uncle, he himself became a monk to better his cover – a cover he soon broke by organising guerrilla raids on the Pandyan kings from Ruhuna.

The raids emboldened him to formally claim the throne of Anuradhapura - even though it resisted his physical control. But with every successive Yala and Maha season, his military incursions cut ever deeper into the territory of his northern interlopers - and with ever greater gravity, as the bodies of two slain Pandian kings, Tiritara and Ditiya, testify in 456 CE. His successes owed themselves in part to the military talents of his Machiavellian general and son-in-law, Migara - a man who would take for himself in the years to come, the title of kingmaker. By 459 CE, the last Pandian king, Peetiya, had been killed, and it must have been with some considerable joy that Dhatusena rode into Anuradhapura to have himself crowned as king.

Dhatusena settled down immediately to doing what all strong kings were wont to do. He built. Perhaps his most memorable commission was the Avukana Buddha, making a gesture of blessing. This statue, soaring fourteen metres in height, goes almost unnoticed today, lost in the jungle many miles north of Dambulla. Lost too is the name of its sculpturer - but the way in which his delicate pleated clothing clings with astonishing realism to his body indicates that the artist was familiar with two key

regional art movements - the naturalistic Hellenistic Gandhara school, and the more sensuous Amaravati school.

Pious to a fault, Dhatusena also had some twenty other temples created. But his religious patronage was, for a kingdom almost wholly dominated by the more austere form of Buddhism - Theravada - unusually multifaceted. Indeed, under Dhatusena and his son Kashyapa, the island was to settle down for a brief but almost unrivalled moment of iridescent liberalism.

Theravists - with their greater focus on the original teachings of Lord Buddha - regarded other versions of the religion, notably Mahayana, Vajrayana, and a related faction that formed around the Abhayagiri Monastery, as borderline heretical. Even so, the new king gave them patronage in the form of gifts, relics, and building commissions. His open-mindedness must have sparked a serious scandal among Theravadans, especially when, having rebuilt a monastery at the iconic site of Mihintale, he gave it not to Theravadans, nor even to Mahayana Buddhists, but to the Dhammaruchika sect, an offshoot of the Abhayagiri. The monastery - the Kaludiya Pokuna - is worth a visit, tucked into rocks

with a vast 200-long pond whose now-utterly-peaceful nature belies the uproar that would have attended its inauguration. But the forward-looking king went much further, commissioning new shrines and decorated statues that were almost antithetical to Theravada Buddhism, even right next to the branches of the sacred Bodhi tree itself in Anuradhapura. Some of the king's newly commissioned embellishments cleverly implied a more absolute and direct linkage to the crown itself. One statue was of the Maitreya bodhisattva, believed to be the future Buddha destined to return to earth to preach the law anew to a people that had forgotten it - a fitting symbol of his own new rule. Around this statue was set the royal regalia itself, protected by a royal bodyguard.

More practically, Dhatusena set about rebuilding the kingdom's crumbling infrastructure. He encouraged, cajoled, and persuaded many of the people displaced by the Pandyan invasion to return to repopulate the abandoned regions in Anuradhapura from their refuge in Ruhuna. And he secured his kingdom's food supply, repairing water infrastructure and buildings, and constructing at least twenty-six new tanks, half of them so vast and robustly made that they are

still in working order today. A good example is the Maeliya Wewa tank, just north of Kurunegala. One of a series of smaller cascade tanks, it still provides harvested rainwater to 202 farmers across 155 acres.

Another tank, near Mannar, was described by Sir James Emerson Tennent in 1860 as a "stupendous work," and so it is - with an embankment of seven kilometres and a capacity today of carrying thirty-nine million cubic metres of water within its 4550-hectare bowl. But perhaps the greatest of all his works was the double reservoir complex, Kala Wewa and Balalu Wewa, close to the Avukana Buddha statue. Together, these tanks store 123 million cubic meters of water; their central slice feeds into an eighty-seven-kilometre canal that descends in perfect meters to deliver its water to Anuradhapura, whilst feeding thousands of acres of paddy land on its way.

Under the firm hand of the new government, trade resumed with feverish intensity. It had much to put right - decades of neglect, isolation, devaluation, and the sort of lawlessness most detested by gainfully employed merchants. This king started from the top. At least one embassy is known to have been dispatched

by Dhatusena to China, the trading powerhouse of Asia; undoubtedly, others were sent elsewhere. The king's contemporary, Cosmas Indicopleustes, the merchant monk who sailed to India from Egypt, wrote of Sri Lanka at the time: "from the whole of India, Persia and Ethiopia, the island, acting as an intermediary, welcomes many ships and likewise despatches them....it gets the proceeds of each of the afore mentioned markets and passes them onto the people of the interior and at the same time exports its own native products to each of these markets."

With trade came a quickening wave of new ideas, languages, customs, and people – not least Jews, Indians, Arabs, and European merchants. Cosmos writes of a Christian church in Anduraupura whose deacon had been ordained in Persia. For traditional Theravada Buddhist monks, it would have been a deeply unsettling time. And – as ever with the onslaught of new ideas and alternative religious options – the politics of the kingdom would have soon become coloured by all this choice and the flourishing of numerous new power bases. Opportunistic and deceitful to a fault, General Migara himself is thought to have used these new forces to his own advantage and may even have

believed in many of the alternative religious doctrines that were gaining prominence.

To the already many Buddhist sects in Anduraupura were added new ones, even ones that brazenly used Manichaeism images and iconography that conflated Jesus Christ with Lord Buddha. Manichaeism, a third-century CE Persian creed that liked to group all prophets from Jesus Christ and the Buddha to Zoroaster into a composite set of teachings, was for a time the Jazz of the ancient world, enveloping its supporters with an irresistible belief beat. Their followers were known to have survived in Anduraupura itself until at least the 10th century CE.

If only Dhatusena had been as successful with his family life as he was restoring and running his kingdom, for in this area, the bold king became badly unstuck. In an earlier and interesting Ptolemaic coupling, his daughter had married his sister's son, Migara, who had been put in charge of his armies. The two women did not get on, and the king, with unfilial brutality, had his sister killed.

Incensed and bent on revenge, Migara teamed up with the king's

illegitimate son, Kasyapa, helping him to organise a rebellion against the king. With a home base clearly less strong than he thought, Dhatusena was overthrown in 477 and, in an act of patricide that eclipses Oedipus, was murdered by being entombed alive. Other sources more kindly point to death by burning. Others still add in the spiteful flourish of Migara parading the bound Dhatusena through the streets before depositing him in the afterlife. Either way, the king was dead, his illegitimate son was on the throne as Kasyapa I, and his legitimate son, Moggallana, fled to South India.

With Dhatusena's sensational slaying, the new dynasty launched a two-century rule tinged with a tendency toward regicide that was to blight it throughout its years in power. The obsession bequeathed to their ever-shakier kingdom a mindset that would defeat even the most obsessively positive writers of such self-confidence classics as *The Power of Positive Thinking*, or *Who Moved My Cheese?* Like an insidious magnet, it drew Sri Lanka into a spiralling black hole and set in motion the fatal trend of mistaking politics for good government. Rather than adroitly manage the processes and institutions that met the kingdom's needs and

institutions that met the kingdom's needs and used its resources most wisely, the Moriyans, inspired innately by this first and most momentous act of regicide, used almost every passing family quarrel as an opportunity to land the top job.

Assassinated though he was, Dhatusena remains the dynasty's most eminent ruler, and most certainly one of the country's greatest kings, packing into his government years of rare achievement and liberalism. His was one of the longest reigns the dynasty was to enjoy. Had just four or five of his successors been anything like him, the Moriyans might have lasted a lot longer and achieved some lasting security for their realm. But it was not to be. Murder follows murder, and his illegitimate son was later to face an equally abrupt end in his turn.

"When I used to
read fairy tales, I
fancied that kind of
thing never
happened, and now
here I am in the
middle of one!"

Alice
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

3

FAIRYLAND

Given such flawed beginnings, it is surprising that Kashyapa, father-killer that he was, enjoyed a reign that lasted as long as it did – from 473 to 495 CE. Having completed the bizarre brickwork that turned his father into a building by walling him up, Kashyapa's reaction to the patricide that had left him reviled by subjects and priests alike was not dissimilar to that of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, who forsook his capital for a palace of pleasure he built on Capri. Similar – but not equal, for the new seat of government he built at Sigiriya was in every way grander, more beautiful, and more advanced than was Tiberius' Villa Jovis.

The move was no mere residential relocation. It was not just a new palace that Kashyapa built, but a new seat of government. In this, he acted far more like Akhenaten, the heretical Egyptian pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty, who moved his capital from Thebes to the purpose-built city of Akhenaten – or Amarna. The pharaoh was to die with suspicious normality, and his son, Tutankhamun, wasted little time in swiftly moving the capital back to Thebes, a pattern that was to haunt both Kashyapa and his sibling successor, Moggallana.

Hints of the long-lost forces that impelled and inspired such actions are now almost entirely lost. Although Kashyapa gained his crown by the simple expedient of murdering his father, Dhatusena, it is more than likely that he was largely put up to it by his brother-in-law, the General Migara. Migara had been instrumental in placing Dhatusena on the throne decades earlier but had fallen out badly with his father-in-law when the king murdered the general's wife, who, as was the way with things then, was also the king's sister. Sri Lankan politics, then, as now, is rarely straightforward, but this moment of homespun realpolitik set such new standards for utter complexity that they are still to be bettered today.

Undoubtedly, these family squabbles would have fed off all that was going on in the kingdom at the time. And there was a lot else going on. Under Dhatusena, Anduraupura had been turned on its head, the once inward-looking city now humming with foreigners, most of whom had come to either trade or convert. Arabs, Jews, Europeans, and Indians are just some of the groups known to have taken exuberant root in the city, as it opened itself up once more to the bountiful trade and money brought

to Sri Lanka by the Maritime Silk Road – that vast maritime network of the ancient world that linked East Africa, Arabia, India, and China to Europe. The kingdom was enjoying a moment of money-spinning madness, with riches pouring into the land as never before, transforming life much as the railroads did in 19th-century America. With trade came new forms of religion – Christianity, for example, and – much more threateningly – alternative schools of Buddhism that Sri Lanka's overwhelmingly and all-powerful Theravada Buddhists saw as blatantly heretical. Conversions this way or that, as well as making and spending money, were the new order of play.

General Migara is thought to have leveraged these nascent forces to empower himself - but his alliance with Kashyapa came under pressure. The new king did not see himself as the leader of a Liberation revolution, however much he tolerated it for its money-making powers.

Kashyapa's preference was for crafting a much more traditional and politically useful personal reputation – as a Buddhist God-king. An intriguing hint of this artful propaganda was discovered in a contemporary rock inscription in the monastery of

Thimbiriwewa. The inscription noted a donation given “in the tenth year of the raising of the umbrella of dominion by the Great King Kashyapa, the Lord of Alaka.” Alaka is a reference to the God Kuvera, the legendary ruler of mythical Lanka. Traditional Buddhists were familiar with this blending of god with king, a fusion that did much to legitimise government. If kings were gods, or as good as, what right did any subject, might or meagre, have to obstruct them? It was not in Kashyapa's interests to do anything to imperil the traditional way in which his people regard kingship. Indeed, he is known to come very actively to the assistance of Theravada Buddhists when General Migara sought to emasculate them by favouring rival Buddhist schools whose attitudes to kingship were perhaps a little looser.

But Kashyapa's predilection for the expediences of traditional religion was not always returned by grateful monks, many of whom, thinking it unsuitable for a king to have killed his own father, viewed him as well beyond the pale. One monastery is even known to have refused his offer of donations, branding him a father-killer. With his old capital, Anduraupura, a seething pit of viperous power politics, and religion

itself too often an uncertain alley, what better plan than to start anew at Sigiriya. Of money, there was no shortage, so building a better future elsewhere was well within his powers. But did he?

Kashyapa's reign lasted little more than 20 years, and it is a mathematical impossibility that in so short a time, so celebrated a place as Sigiriya could ever have been started, let alone finished. Indeed, it is unlikely that the previous king, Dhatusena, even established the city fortress. Modern historians are instead converging on the view that the site was begun much earlier, in 341 CE, by the Lambakanna king, Buddhadasa, a ruler so beloved that the Mahavamsa Chronicle has him down as a "Mind of Virtue and an Ocean of Gems".

Archaeologists have discovered building periods in and around the site that point to earlier dates, though they have also noted how, over the Kashyapa years, the plans become monumentally more ambitious. Until more research is done, hunches, probabilities, and guesswork are the ephemeral friends of choice for concluding that Kashyapa, in moving to Sigiriya, relocated to an existing site and then set about radically

improving it, not unlike Louis XIV at Versailles.

But such caveats aside, Kashyapa's Sigiriya was nevertheless one of the greatest wonders of Ancient Asia. It set imposing new standards for urban planning, the royal bastion surrounded by an elaborately laid out outer city, with a final circle of three types of gardens around it: water, terraced, and boulder gardens - 3 km in length and nearly 1 km in width, flanking its famous rock citadel. Ponds, pavilions, fountains and cut pools made up the water gardens. More naturalistic gardens were created around massive boulders, mimicking an artless park with long, winding pathways to saunter down. Brick staircases and limestone steps led up to more formal terraced gardens.

Across it all stretched double moats and triple ramparts, defensible gateways, and steps in perfect geometric symmetry, locking all the elements of the fortress city together with mathematical precision and elegance and pierced by the massive sentinel sculpture of a crouching lion. The beast guards the staircase to the ancient palace six hundred feet above, though all that remains now are the two animal paws,

rediscovered in excavations in 1898. Built with bricks and limestone, the lion's full height was 45 feet.

The whole site was fuelled by a remarkable hydraulic irrigation system - the child of the most advanced water technology in the then-known world. Rock-cut horizontal and vertical drains, underground terracotta pipes, tanks, ponds, interconnected conduits, cisterns, moats, and waterways channelled surface water to stop erosion and tapped other water sources to deliver water to the huge ornamental gardens, the city and palace - and harness it to help cool the microclimate of the royal residences.

The consequences of the state's remarkable achievements in water technology had given rise to similar attainments in many, many other quarters - all of which came to bear down with gilded benevolence on Sigiriya. Architecture, agriculture, medicine, science, engineering, warfare - and the bureaucracy required to mediate, enlist, and empower it all, to name but some. Or literature, painting, dance, drama, law, language, religion, mathematics, philosophy, to name others.

Riding like a big wave surfer on Silk

Road money, Kasyapa's brief imperium was Sri Lanka's matchless miracle moment - beautiful, brief, bloody, and almost impossible today to reimagine. Yet a little of its dazzling beauty can still be seen more clearly in its decoration. Its many palaces and buildings have all fallen, and with them have gone the refined, complex paintings and decorations that enhanced them. But hints of what had remained lie across two rock walls.

One wall - the 'Mirror Wall' was so highly polished as to reflect what faced it. "Wet with cool dew drops," wrote one bedazzled tourist of the ancient world on the mirror wall itself, "fragrant with perfume from the flowers, came the gentle breeze, jasmine and water lily, dance in the spring sunshine." But another rock wall was turned into a vast art gallery, plastered and painted white, and it is said to be covered with over five hundred frescos, easily the equal of anything later created in Italy by Leonardo da Vinci. Few if any secular paintings from ancient Sri Lanka survive - but these. Their existence, so many hundreds of years on, despite monsoon rain and plunderers, is a wonder all in its own right.

Twenty-one frescos remain, made from

paints whose vibrant pigments came from plants and minerals: iron oxide reds, chalk and lime whites, ochre yellows, charcoal blacks. The king was said to have a harem of over 500 women, and these images appear to be of them, large paintings made directly onto the rock, hovering appropriately above the heads of any passing and transitory people. The women's eyes are decorated with makeup, their bodies adorned with jewels; their clothes are diaphanous and almost wantonly luxurious. Lotuses fill their hands, and trays of other flowers and fruits are seen, presented to them. And in one, a consort or concubine can be seen looking on in silent debate over which particular frangipani flower to select for her hair: a frangipani princess now over 1,500 years old, all that is left of this inimitably cultured king.

Secluded in his pleasure palace, Kashyapa's attention was far from the serious politics of the old capital at Anuradhapura, where his much disgruntled army chief, General Migara, had forged a new alliance with Moggallana, the legitimate sibling Kashyapa had sidelined. Sitting atop his citadel, with its unhindered 360-degree view across the countryside, Kashyapa enjoyed the perfect eyrie from which to spot

an attack – and attack there came. Moggallana, Migara and a mercenary army gathered on the plains below. The curtain call had come. Kashyapa died, having wisely chosen to drive a sword through his own body rather than be captured alive.

It was an end not just for this king, but for Sigiriya too. It sank into a desolate retreat, first becoming a prison and execution ground for important losers, and later a place of refuge for a handful of monks. It became so overgrown with jungle over the passing centuries that its rediscovery in 1831 by Major Jonathan Forbes of the 78th (Highlanders) Regiment of Foot was the sensation of the year. Forbes was no ordinary officer. His book, *Eleven Years in Ceylon* published in 1840, is regarded as a masterpiece and he himself was so obsessed rumours of Sigiriya that he dedicated himself to detection, writing later: "From the spot where we halted, I could distinguish massive stone walls appearing through the trees near the base of the rock, and now felt convinced that this was the very place I was anxious to discover."

Bloodshed was to see and see out the king's reign, but perhaps Sigiriya was able to give him a little of the peace

peace he must have craved – to enter that state of mind so well captured by his namesake Kashyapa, the revered Vedic sage who said:

“Undisturbed am I, undisturbed is my soul,
undisturbed mine eye, undisturbed mine ear,
undisturbed is mine in-breathing,
undisturbed mine out-breathing,
undisturbed my diffusive breath,
undisturbed the whole of me.”

"I'm older than you,
and must know
better."

Alice
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

4

SUPERPOWER POLITICS

As Moggallana returned to his capital in Anuradhapura and seemed, on the face of it, to be restoring life to whatever had passed for normal before his brother Kassapa had murdered their father, it might have been hoped that national life would steady. But steadiness was not what lay ahead for either Sri Lanka or the rest of the Moriyana kings still to come. By the end of Moggallana's reign, it would look as if an infernal inheritance had instead settled across the land.

For Moggallana's route to power lay through the implacable and rough power politics of the Indian Ocean Trading Zone. It was not just the turncoat General Migara who had propelled him to power, but a mercenary army, the clutches of which would enfold the entire kingdom to a greater or lesser extent until the very end of the Moriyana dynasty itself.

The old story told of these times is of a Tamil mercenary army coming to Moggallana's aid and then departing again, job done. But remarkable research by a new generation of historians, most notably Ranjan Mendis, has shown that this is far from the truth.

The real story begins in Persia, 3800

kilometres away - and with the ambitions of the Persian king of kings, Khosrow I ("the Immortal Soul"), to expand his empire in all directions and drive a cleaver through the Byzantine Roman end of the Maritime Silk Road trading empire, which the Emperors of Constantinople managed through their Ethiopian and Yemeni allies. Shutting off the Romans from any meaningful access to India and Sri Lanka via the Red Sea would hand Khosrow the world's most lucrative commercial monopoly.

It was superpower politics, an ancient world version of it, just as life-changing as that witnessed today between America, Russia, China, and India. Khosrow's first step was to capture Yemen, which had earlier fallen to the Ethiopians on the request of the Constantinople Emperor Justinian to, as Procopius of Caesarea put it, " sever Persians' maritime links with India." But securing the Maritime Indian Ocean trading route even further east than Yemen was an irresistible cherry in Persian ambitions. It would place it well beyond the reach of the Roman emperors once and for all.

Plots were hatched. Messages were passed to Moggallana, who was then in long-term exile somewhere in South

India, with the help of General Migara, a clandestine network of Persian Christian merchants living in Anuradhapura. By letter, and possibly even by his presence before the Persian king, Moggallana wove his way into the plan to ensure Sri Lanka became a safe house for Persian trade. He, as the new ruler, would be its guarantor – a Trojan horse as much as a replacement king.

A fleet of Persian ships carrying an elite Savaran cavalry contingent sailed to Sri Lanka, perhaps even under the direct command of Moggallana himself. They may have even taken with them the terrible new weapon used by the Persians just a few years earlier against Constantinople – petroleum and naphtha. They landed somewhere on the western seaboard of the island – possibly Chilaw- before marching inland to Kurunegala, so smartly circumnavigating both Anuradhapura and Sigiriya and catching both power centres off balance. Mistaking to the last that the presence of General Migara by his side meant that he was covered, Kashyapa opted for suicide rather than capture when the general flipped his forces.

Writing a few centuries later, the historian Al-Tabari notes of the

moment: “the king sent one of his commanders with a numerous army against Serendib, the land of precious stones, in the land of India. The commander attacked the king, killed him, and seized control of it, sending back from here to Kisa abundant wealth and many jewels.” Clearly, the Persians wasted no time in ransacking the sensational riches of Sigiriya. Later Persian commentators record that the flow of bounty never really ceased. It continued for years to come and, in addition to items such as horses, jewels, and natural resources, elephants, teak, and pearl divers. It was less the gifts of one grateful king to another, and more tribute paid by a vassal to his master.

Unlike Kashyapa, who referred to himself as Maharaja or Great King, the inscriptions so far discovered for his brother Moggallana, and even Moggallana’s heir, merely refer to them as Rajas. Raja is most certainly a title used by lesser kings – kings beholden to other kings, not least Persian kings of kings. Studies of ancient texts by Professor Paranavitana suggest that the Anuradhapuran monks welcomed him as an imperial representative of the Persian king, not as a Sri Lankan king in his own right. Little good it did them, for the new king sided with the

new money and the newer version of religion in the old city and did nothing to stop his merchants from unleashing so unremittingly barbaric a bout of bloodshed against often quite blameless people that the new king gained another title: "Rakshasa" – monster.

Persian imports flooded into the country – there is even evidence of Persian wine jars found in small villages near Dambulla, not known then, or now, for its predilection for fine wines. Excavations dating back to these times have revealed an abundance of Persian coinage and a Persian Nestorian cross, whilst testifying to the presence of scores of Persian ships docking in Sri Lankan ports. But of Roman artefacts found in plenty before this time, archaeologists today have unearthed nothing dating to this transformative period before the country pivoted towards Persia.

Moggallana is also known to have invested in a new navy to patrol the sea coasts, possibly tasked with deterring Roman ships, including those sent by Roman allies. Sri Lankan embassies sent to the Chinese emperor, representative at the time of Dhatusena and Kasyapa, abruptly ended and recommenced only in the 7th century as the Moriyan dynasty

neared its end, a time that coincided with the collapse of the Persian empire itself when the king of kings fell to the Arab Caliphate in 654 CE.

Little is known of how Moggallana's reign went following the coup that brought him to power. He is presented in history books on the island today as a strong, capable, and respected king who busied himself with monastery and temple improvements – and not as a Persian vassal. His monster status is also conveniently overlooked. The reality must have been much more complicated and nuanced. Keeping the Persian paymasters happy would have been a most consuming task – ensuring they reaped the commercial rewards that brought them to him in the first place, and keeping them in check as best he could, despite their random attacks on his subjects. No less all-consuming would have been simply maintaining the balance of power in Anuradhapura among competing versions of Buddhism, insurgent Christians, Theravada Buddhists, and merchants merely out to make lots of money.

Moggallana would certainly have welcomed a wonderful piece of serendipity when the Keshava Dhatu, the Hair Relic of Lord Buddha, found its

way into his kingdom, brought there by a monk he had befriended whilst in exile in India – Silakala Ambasamanera, a Lambakarna ally. The relic was given the grandest of all receptions, carried in a great procession and enshrined in a crystal box placed in a specially built temple. Silakala was said to have been appointed its guardian, a task he took so seriously that he forsook his monkish status and became the king's sword-bearer (Asiggahasilakala) instead. This career change would haunt the Moriyana kings, for Silakala Ambasamanera proved so adept at warfare that he would later seize the throne for himself.

Moggallana was succeeded in 515 CE by his son Kumara Dhatusena. It was a shockingly aimable succession. The new king described himself in the only inscription ever discovered as but a Raja, not a Maharaja, a modest title that implied he, too, was as much a vassal of the Persian king of kings as his father had been before him.

The new king appeared to be cast in a more traditional Buddhist form. Inspired by the ravages of religious dissent or perhaps eager to press a more conservative view of the faith on his subjects, he convened a scholarly cabal of monks to review all the

sacred Buddhist scriptures to weed out what were judged to be suspicious alterations and additions. The new king lasted just nine years, dying in 524, his death the unexpected literary sensation of the ancient world. For it seems the king's best friend was a poet called Kalidasa. Murdered by a tricky courtesan, Kalidasa was in the process of making his way to heaven on the flames of his funeral pyre when the grieving king flung himself onto the very same timbers, clearly feeling a loss that may have been more than merely literary. This led to a rush of five queens doing the same, the pyre consuming seven bodies in all, each one later remembered by a separate tomb on top of which was planted a Bodhi tree –the "Hath Bodhis" that the Dutch later felled for timber to construct somewhat inappropriate homes for themselves.

Look to this day," the poet Kalidasa had written sometime before his murder, with a prescience that incorporated not just himself but the kings and all his wives:

"for it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of
your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,

The splendour of achievement
Are but experiences of time."

Kumara Dhatusena's death in 524 CE left behind the appearance of a stable state with a succession from father to son, astonishingly ordinary compared to what had gone before. But the crown and its government had been hollowed out, and the islands' independence compromised. The religious and intellectual turmoil that preceded his ascension would not have ceased; indeed, the presence of mercenaries and the continental arrival of Persian ships may even have sharpened it. The plentiful supply of money flowing into the kingdom from the Indian Ocean trading routes would have added to the constant state of instability, offering future kingmakers, let alone would-be kings, the manifest and irresistible rewards of seizing power. The path for the Moriyana dynasty was set, and as the decades progressed, regicide became the order of the day under future kings.

Through at least 7 bouts of regicide, well over half the kings of the dynasty were to be murdered by the other half. It was an inheritance that Sri Lanka had tasted a bit before with previous royal dynasties, but never on such a scale. For historians of the

more fatalist schools who believe a country is often set in a predetermined course, its destiny directed more by its past than its future, then the Moriyans can be given every piece of greedy credit for each disaster that the island was to encounter, from Tamil and colonial invasions to modern political inclinations and debacles. Perdition – some say - had become programmed in.

"The Duchess! The
Duchess! Oh my
dear paws! Oh my
fur and whiskers!
She'll get me
executed, as sure as
ferrets are ferrets!"

White Rabbit
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865

5

CLAN COMBAT

For almost a third of the 236 years during which the Moriyān kings ruled over Sri Lanka, stability of a kind had been enjoyed. Sure, it had come at the cost of patricide, familicide, and the kowtowing to a global superpower – but 4 kings over a near 70-year period, averaging between them about 18 years apiece, was consistency of a kind. What followed, however, was a sort of royal trench warfare in which around 20 successive kings chalked up an average reign of little more than 8 years apiece, with many falling far, far short of even that. Even to name the period as one of Moriyān hegemony is a rag-tag of a claim for many of the years that followed Kumara Dhatusena's death in 524 CE, the Moriyān dynasty says itself fighting for power with the previous royal dynasty that they thought they had succeeded – the Lambakanna. Inter-marriage made things yet more complicated, and trying to nail down any part of this period by bloodline alone is a task as thankless as guarding an empty room - and almost as pointless. But whoever was king, the wonder of this period is that they collectively managed to hang on for as long as they did, for their patent capabilities evidenced lives lived well beyond their real expiration dates.

New money, old suspicions, religious strife, Persian mercenaries, joined in time by Tamil ones and the grim genie of regicide, now well out of the bottle – all conspired to make the next 167 years look like a battlefield over which no one could claim victory. The years that lay ahead divided into some 4 phases. The first, rapid and remorseless, lasted just 3 years, from 524 to 526 CE, and saw all 3 kings who reigned during that time murdered. A corrective time of stillness came to replace this moment of national trauma. For over 80 years, from 526 to 614 CE, 7 kings reigned, only two of whom were murdered. A killing carousel followed this for 598 to 640 CE, over 42 years, 5 kings reigned, four of whom were murdered, and one of whom won and lost his crown three times before he was murdered. The last phase was a chaotic coda. Over its 41-year stretch 5 kings were to rule as the country plunged further into civil war, a war which claimed the final king as its last murder trophy.

As the corpse of the king Kumara Dhatusena smouldered on its poetic bonfire, a fate the grieving king himself had brought on when he flung himself onto the funeral pyre of his great friend, the poet Kalidasa, he may have falsely hoped that, in the

poet's words.

"Yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
And today, well-lived, makes
Yesterday, a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow is a vision of
hope.
Look well therefore to this day;
Such is the salutation to the ever-new
dawn!

But it was no new dawn that saw in his successors' reign. The immolated king was succeeded by his son Kittisena in 424, whose nine-month reign ended with brutal brevity when his uncle wielded the knife and took the throne as Siva II. Silva was not a lucky name – the previous Silva, a lover of Queen Anula, had managed only one year before being poisoned, and this second Silva fared no better, being killed by Upatissa II, the brother-in-law of the late king Moggallana. Siva didn't even manage to last a month, his uncertain path to Nirvana happening just 25 days into his reign in 525 CE.

Upatissa too was an unlucky name: the first Upatissa had reigned for only a year back in 505 BCE, and this second one lasted just twenty-two months until 526 CE. Although Upatissa had Moriyana blood, it is

thought that he had yet more Lambakarna blood flowing through his veins, and the remnants of this last dynasty may well have supported his grab for power, which the Moriyans had succeeded in. Whatever the truth of the matter, Upatissa was not the horse to back. Described in the ancient chronicles as "old and blind," he had little energy to devote to his new job. From the beginning, he seemed fully occupied trying to appease a rival nobleman, Silakala Ambosamanera. Silakala was the self-same ex-monk who had brought the Kesha Dhatu Hair Relic of Lord Buddha to King Moggallana. Despite his Lambakarna blood, Moggallana had promoted him to become his sword bearer.

Upatissa even gave his daughter in marriage to his rival in the hope of keeping the peace, but the gesture failed. Silakala fled south, raised an army and marched back to Anuradhapura. The city lay under the protection of Upatissa's own son, Giri Kasyapa. Still, the young prince, realising that the forces surrounding him were unstoppable, fled at night, taking with him his elderly parents and the royal regalia. But in this, he failed too and took his own life before being captured, his death apparently soon followed by his father's, though

whether from shock or assassination is impossible now to tell.

After a surplus of bloodshed, an incipient civil war, evidently and always only just slightly below the surface, the shattered nation would have pulled Silakala Ambasamanera's 13-year reign deep into their weary hearts in 526 CE. Having managed the career move from monk to warrior earlier with such success, Silakala proved himself something of a shoo-in for king.

He delegated much to his sons, pushing the two oldest out of the capital and far from its many attendant temptations, with one, Dathappabhuti, sent to administer the south, and the oldest, Moggallana, sent off to manage the east of the country.

Secure in his capital, Silakala Ambasamanera busied himself, irritating his monks – or at least some of them. For this king, unlike the last few, was more inclined towards Mahayana Buddhism, a preference that did not go down well with the majority Theravada Buddhist establishment.

Matters came to a head when a young merchant arrived unexpectedly at

court, carrying with him the Lotus Sutra, a document held in the highest esteem by Mahayana Buddhists. Its two main teachings were seen as borderline blasphemous by the Theravadans, for they stated that all Buddhist practices offer ways of reaching Buddhahood, and that the Lord Buddha himself did not pass into final Nirvana but was still alive and actively teaching. The king, said one monk, witheringly, had so little understanding of real doctrine that he was like a "firefly who thinks it is the sun." Nevertheless, the firefly arranged for the sutra to be housed in Jetavanaramaya itself, with an annual festival held to honour it.

The king's deft hand at government got weaker as he got older. He found himself facing so great a rebellion in the southern province of Ruhuna that he lost control of the region altogether to a Moriyana nobleman called Mahanaga, a man who would, in another twist between the Lambakanna and Moriyana clans, in time become king himself.

Despite these later cheerless clouds, the king still managed to die a natural death in 531 CE. After a brief skirmish among his sons, Upatissa, Dathappabhuti, and Moggallana, he was succeeded by Dathappabhuti –

– but not for long. Dathappabhuti had eased his way to the succession by killing his brother Upatissa, but he also fatally neglected to kill his older brother, Moggallana.

Inevitably, Moggallana assembled an army and headed off to war. The ancient chronicles say that the two brothers decided on the unusual practice of single combat to determine who would win the day. During the ensuing duel, Dathappabhuti's elephant was wounded, and the six-month king, seeing that his time was up, put himself to the sword. The war of the three brothers was over, and once again the country settled into a period of stability – for Moggallana II was to rule for 20 years, from 531 to 551 CE.

Although the new king soon gave up on the possibility of winning back Ruhuna, he concentrated his efforts on taking good care of what he actually possessed. The consequences of this decision have since led to his gaining a reputation as one of the country's best kings. Unlike his father, he did not bait his monks as a pastime. He was regarded as a model Buddhist ruler, erring on the side of the Theravadans, generous with his religious offerings, and eager to ensure that the main texts of the

Buddhist canon were properly written out without egregious interpolations.

Even more usefully, he was a builder of resources. Under his direction, the Padaviya Tank was created, which was to become the largest of the ancient tanks in the land, a later British Governor calling it a "most gigantic" and "remarkable work" whose design, incorporating natural rocky outcrops, brought together all the engineering genius of Anuradhapuran water engineering. He is also credited with building the 4,408-acre Nachchaduwa Tank, which supercharged farming across the floodplains of the Malvatu-Oya east of Anuradhapura.

A man who had much to teach the later European Renaissance kings, Moggallana was something of a poet, too, his works earning him the title Dalimugalan, or Poet Moggallana, though his verses have sadly not survived. But, as ever, even with the best of monarchs, his Achilles' heel was his family. And the last years of his reign were, apparently, marked by the sudden suspicious dying of various close relatives, as his wife, a lady of poisonous determination (and whose name has escaped the ancient chronicles), made sure that no one was left to stand in the way of her

son, Kithsirimegha, succeeding to the throne. Despite her chemical expertise, it appears she spared her husband, and the king died naturally in 551 CE, a feat rarely achieved by any of his successors.

Moggallana was succeeded by his Kithsirimegha, a prince whose path to power, the ancient chronicles said, had been greatly smoothed by his determined mother. Quite how long the king reigned is a matter of acrimonious academic debate, though the available options are capacious, ranging from under a month to 19 years.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the reign was not a successful one. It became a byword for institutionalised corruption, with the king's mother, it seems, the one who pulled all the strings from behind her son's ever less proficient throne. Bribery led to lawlessness and then to open rebellions. Taxation failed, and sometime around 569 CE, depending on which date for the ending of the king's reign you wish to select, Mahanaga, the Moriyān nobleman who had seized the southern state of Rhuahna during the reign of Silakala Ambasamanera, rode up to Anuradhapura with his army, killed the king and took over. Job done. The

Moriyaans were back where they believed they belonged.

Little, if anything, is known about what the new king actually did during his reign. Coming to power in his old age, Mahanaga was to reign for just three years, but they seemed to have been peaceful ones – ones wisely occupied by the doing of great deeds, the king of merit, that might give him the best possible chance of reaching Nivana. He delegated some of the work to his nephew, Aggabodhi, whose job it was to keep the south safely in royal hands, and when he died – naturally - in 571 CE, Aggabodhi came to the throne without so much as a tremor. The new king was to be the first of 9 Aggabodhis, 4 of them Moriyaan – not none so commendable as he.

Reigning for a colossal 34 years, the new king, however, was the last king since Silakala Ambasamanera to enjoy the luxury of a more-than-decent reign. He was a man who seemed to understand power. There is some evidence in his recategorization of royal titles that Persian influence had begun to decline as the distant Persian state itself faced its own backdoor troubles, forced to face a resurgent Byzantine threat which – combined with several other local

irritants – was to cause the collapse of the empire altogether by 637 CE. Feeling perhaps a freer hand in matters of power than his predecessors, Aggabodhi granted his eventual successor the title of Yuvaraja, a title common in India for the crown prince of a maharaja, and, on his marriage to his daughter Datha, promoted him still further to Mahadipada.

He took confident charge of religious disputes and the Culmavasha Chronicle, that most monastic of accounts, has only complimentary things to say of him, despite his preference for the Mahavihara tradition of Buddhism, nothing that his aspiration was the attainment of the highest enlightenment. The new king was generous with his religious patronage, building and repairing temples, awarding land grants, and taking the lead in settling disputes between the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri orders. His long rule also stimulated the country's poets to get back to work, and at least twelve are noted in the various accounts that speak of this being the great age of Singhala poetry. Sadly, the works of most, if not all, of them - including Demi, Bebiri, Kithsiri, Anuruth, Dalagoth, Dalasala, Dalabiso, Puravadu, Sakdamala, Asakdamala,

and Suriyabahu - have yet to be included in any credible anthology.

Aggabodhi also funded multiple water projects – the most significant of which was the Minipe Dam. This massive hydro-engineering feat compelled the vast Mahaweli River itself to rise a level, thereby feeding a monumental new canal that carried water all the way to Polonnaruwa. His death in 604 CE was followed by the kind epilogue of his nephew's succession to Aggabodhi II, who ruled for ten years as a treasured continuity king. The great building projects continued with the construction of yet more massive dams, improved canal systems, and new reservoirs in places such as Kantale, Giritale, Elahera, and Hattota. The calm, ordered, authoritarian, and respectful form of government that his uncle had created continued throughout the rule of this second Aggabodhi. But it was the dynasty's last great moment. With his death around 614 CE, the age of the 2 Aggabodhis ended, and with it the critical space they had added to that created earlier by Silakala, Mahanaga and Moggallana. The trauma brake was over, and the disorderly gates of hell creaked open once more.

With the death of Aggabodhi II, the

knives of regicide were sharpened anew, ready for a bout of king slaying like no other. Over a period of almost 30 years, five kings, most of them with tenuous links to either the Moriyān or Lambakanna clans, would come to rule – and all but one of them got themselves murdered. The see-saw of succession, as noble power bases saw off one another, erupted throughout the period, creating the sense of an almost eternal civil war.

First up with Sangha Tissa II, Aggabodhi II's sword bearer, who may or may not have been related to Aggabodhi's wife. With such poor biological credentials, the new king was immediately faced by a rebellion in the southern state of Ruhuna, fronted by Moggallāna, an angry ex-General. The disgruntled warrior led an army to Mahagallakā near Kurunegala, then on to Kadalihava, defeating royal forces at both places. The two armies met again at Pacinatissapabbata, where the king was betrayed by his own commander-in-chief. Fleeing the battlefield, the king and his supporters were captured and taken to execution at Sigiriya.

Sangha Tissa II had barely lasted a year, but Moggallāna III's 6-year stint was no real improvement. He took immediate pains to soothe the

religious establishment, repairing temples and granting donations to many monasteries, but he never really outgrew his violent tendencies. Suspicious to the end, he had his own general, Datha, executed for suspected treason – triggering his own special Groundhog Day moment. For Datha's son, Silameghavanna, thought to be a Lambakannan, fled south to Rohana, mobilised an army and killed Moggallāna III in battle in 614 CE.

Longevity, however, was not to be a gift the new king was to enjoy, for his reign lasted barely 10 years – a decade of Sturm und Drang as he unwisely took it upon himself to sort out the rising tide of religious differences between various Buddhist sects and purify the various orders by expelling and further punishing any monk he deemed corrupt or insolent. Needless to say, this did not go down well with the various sections of the Buddhist Sangha, who, in a rare moment of unity, objected especially strongly to the king's demand that they observe the Uposatha rites together.

These rites had the age-old purpose of cleansing impure minds through meditation. Still, there was little meditative quality to their response, and they forcefully turned the king

down, who immediately reacted with a barrage of insults. With understandable smugness, the ancient Culavamsa chronicle noted that shortly afterwards, Silameghavanna fell ill, the illness a karmic consequence of his disrespect for the Buddhist Sanga. The king was to die, naturally at least, but all the same, an example to anyone who was so unwise as to unite all the Buddhist orders against him.

His son succeeded him as Aggabodhi III, and rarely was there a monarch so ill-fated as this, with civil war dogging his every move with the tenacity of a terrier with bubonic plague. Barely had he taken his seat on the Lambakanna throne in 626 CE, when he faced a rebellious army led by Jettha Tissa, the son of the recently murdered Moriyana king Sangha Tissa II. Although Jettha Tissa's father and brother had been executed at Sigiriya following their defeat at Pacinatissapabbata, Jettha Tissa himself had managed to get away and, for many years, hid in the no-go lands of the Sri Lankan uplands. Jettha Tissa managed to unseat Aggabodhi, driving him into exile in India – but only for a year.

Aggabodhi soon returned – at the head of a band of Tamil mercenaries

and as the tide of the ensuing battle turned against Jettha Tissa III in 629 CE, the upstart killed himself whilst still in battle mounted on his elephant – his death earning him a place as a great tragic Romantic figure of this latest phase of the Lambakanna-Moriya civil war.

For the next 12 years, Aggabodhi III clung on to an ever more frail peace. But by 641 CE, it all broke down again. Finding that his own brother Mana had cuckolded him, he put the sibling to death. Given that Mana was also the commander-in-chief of the armies, this was a rather reckless move. Divisions ripped out across the land, leaving it divided, just in time to see a new invasion, this time from a general called Dathopa Tissa, a relation of Jettha Tissa III, who had arrived from India at the head of a large band of new Tamil mercenaries.

Losing out in battle yet again, Aggabodhi III fled back to India, and for the next ten years or so, it was almost impossible to guess which of the two was in power, if indeed either it really was. Aggabodhi III returned from India with fresh troops, and a murderous ping-pong war continued between himself and Dathopa Tissa I. Sri Lanka was a land awash with mercenaries.

Anuradhapura changed hands multiple times. Relic chambers were broken open to pay the armies, and monasteries and temples were looted. Even though so, it is said that the gold umbrella for the Ruwanwelisaya itself was melted down. Anything and everything that had value was appropriated or stolen as civil war engulfed the land. Aggabodhi III eventually retreated to Ruhuna, dying there in 644 CE, leaving Dathopa Tissa I to carry on until he too was killed in battle in 650 CE by Kassapa II, Aggabodhi III's brother.

Kassapa II's succession after decades of civil war allowed the country a moment of recovery, and for the next 41 years, it looked as if life had returned to normal. But, as Thomas Fuller noted in 1650, "it is always darkest just before the Day dawneth". And the day that was eventfully to dawn, though 4 decades away, was to end once and for all the Moriyana-Lambakanna conflict, with the ascent of the Lambakanna dynasty, aided by Tamil mercenaries. Although this was yet to come, Tamil mercenaries were now a fixed point in the land - always ominously but reliably on hand to ensure that royal succession and even day-to-day government could not progress without reference to their own complex short-term interests.

Kassapa II was to reign for just 10 years until 659 CE, but he packed a great deal of good into his short term. He repaired the fortress in the north to fend off any further Tamil invasions better. Irrigation systems, dams, and tanks were repaired, and agriculture was rebooted. Even some of the many ruined temples and monasteries were restored. It was all very far from all that was needed to put things right - but at least it went in the right direction. And the king was to die an unusually ordinary death, though passing on a cursed succession, which gave his nephew, not his son, Manavanna, the throne, as Dappula I.

With the bypassed son fled to India, Dappula I attempted to consolidate his power base, but facing a sudden Tamil mercenary insurgency led by Hatthadatha (who would himself later become a king), fled south to set up his own safer kingdom in Rohana. And there he stayed, the island now effectively divided into two warring states - Ruhuna and Anuradhapura.

As Anuradhapura itself fell into the ever-changing hands of mercenaries, Dappula I managed a most natural death in 664 CE and was succeeded by his brother, Dathopa Tissa II, who ruled until his own natural death in 673. He was succeeded by his

brother, Aggabodhi IV, in 673. Little is known of what was happening up north in Anuradhapura at the time, and when Aggabodhi IV died in 689 or 691 CE, Ruhana itself fell into the hands of warring Tamil mercenaries, one of whom, Poththakutta, placed Hatthadatha on the throne. But only for a year. For by now the powerful Lambakanna clan had found itself a far more formidable champion, in the form of Manavanna, a son of Kassapa II. Coming from India with his own band of mercenaries, the new king put an end once and for all to the Moriyān–Lankabranaka conflict, thereby terminating any future trace of Morian rule.

The dynasty had ruled the land on and off for 236 years. Under it, the country had soared to unequalled heights of artistic excellence as evidenced at Sigiriya. Under them, great poets and remarkable engineers had made extraordinary contributions to the state. Wealth had flooded the nation. New ideas and philosophies had flourished. Some of their kings had even demonstrated a knack for governing that few others would later equal. And yet – overall – their rule had been, in the last analysis, disastrous.

“Murder,” remarked Stephen King, “is

like potato chips: you can't stop with just one.” Nor could the Moriyāns. Patricide and regicide characterised their leadership, a government made worse by the internecine warfare between the Moriyān and Lambakanna clans, which plunged the country into repeated civil wars, aided and extended by foreign powers from Persia and mercenaries from India. “So long, farewell, auf Wiedersehen, goodbye / I leave and heave a sigh and say goodbye / Goodbye!” Despite a promising start, liberating the country from the Pandyan invaders, the Moriyāns had demonstrated at almost every opportunity how little they knew about kingship. Few of their much put-upon subjects would have looked back on the times with fondness. It was time for the island to press once more a major reset button and get back to the serious business of government.

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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