

The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 24

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"For your garden is a kingdom, and your beauty is its queen."

ALICE
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

An Eternal Remembrance

In a remote part of the island, known for its wild elephants, and out of what seemed like insurmountable devastation, Sri Lanka's last great ancient capital, Polonnaruwa, took root.

It presided over a looking-glass kingdom, one that its kings most carefully constructed, a realm of reflected, remembered confidence, built in conscious memory to replicate the past glories of Anuradhapura, the great city from which several dynasties of earlier ancient kings had ruled more or less the entire island for almost 1,500 years.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly," wrote Saul of Tarsus almost a thousand years before the Polonnaruwa kings ever arrived, " but then face to face." And face to face what these kings sought as they gazed into a mirror for inspiration. Certainly everything that had been and was lost when Anuradhapura was destroyed – but more so.

In their 160-year rule, the Polonnaruwa kings strove to do more than merely copy the past; they aimed to improve on it, too. Yet they did so so quickly and with such emphasis that, in the very act of creation, they exhausted their young kingdom and fatally undermined its capacity to endure.

Like a firework, Polonnaruwa burnt with a fast, fierce, short light, and though its 160 years never came anywhere close to Anuradhapura's 1,500, it nevertheless, and most unexpectedly, equalled and in some ways outstripped the brilliance of what had been destroyed when the Indian Chola kings had razed the old Singhala kingdom to the ground.

It was the same as Anuradhapura – but different – smaller, sharper, more ambitious, more concentrated; and, most tellingly – in, for example, its buildings and even its kings - a now utterly unmistakable coming together of the two different cultural and religious traditions that had come to characterise the island – the Hindu culture of the Tamil south of India, translated into Sri Lanka; and the Sinhalese Buddhist culture, largely Theravadan with its austere and holistic whole-view vision of how to live life.

It is remarkable that it managed this despite the colossal influence of the past, the titanic golden shadow of the butchered city of Anuradhapura, which cast its shape, mores, capabilities, and standards across the

newly risen kingdom of Polonnaruwa.

Elephants are one of Sri Lanka's exceptional characteristics, setting it apart not just within South Asia or all of Asia, but worldwide, one of the few critical things that mark it as utterly unique. And "elephants," as Plutarch and Saki said, "never forget."

If anyone knows only one thing about the character of elephants, it is surely this. They remember. Memories may be, as Oscar Wilde had it, the diary we carry with us, but they are also, most doggedly, a way to unlock the future. So it seems little less than right that such a city as Polonnaruwa should flower in that one place on the island most famous for something so iconically Sri Lankan: elephants.

Fate, rather than coincidence, must have led to the city being created beside the very place where the island's greatest elephant gatherings occurred, as they had for thousands of years, and still do. Both the animals and the kings are inextricably entwined; both have added some of the magic ingredients that make Sri Lanka Sri Lankan.

Here, in the island's north-eastern dry zone, now given over to national parks and animal sanctuaries, hundreds, once thousands, of elephants make a special journey every year between July and November. This is when the water recedes from the lakes and reservoirs and green grass grows on the flats.

One of the greatest lakes is the Sea of King Parakrama, named for the most remarkable of all the Polonnaruwa kings; its water capacity is well in excess of 140 million cubic meters. For the elephants, these months are a time for feasting, bathing, mating, and socialising, all in huge groups overseen by solitary great bull elephants from vantage points on lake islands. And as they gather, it is as if they have also come together to protect and remember a lost world.

An Elephant Like No Other

Sri Lankan elephants are, as you might expect, unlike any other elephants anywhere.

Compared with the other major elephant species, the African elephant, the Sri Lankan variant is smaller, with softer, darker skin; an arched, not concave, back; and a twin rather than a single domed forehead, as if they have two brains. Because they live more in forests, they have smaller ears and rely less on them to regulate body heat.

Sri Lanka's elephant, Elephas maximus maximus, as scholars fondly call it, is Asia's largest elephant subspecies. They stand out in any beauty competition with the other elephant species that originate from Asia – from India, Sumatra and Borneo, not just because they are larger, but because they are also much darker, though they set off this colour with an unrivalled degree of pinkish-white pigmentation spots around their face and trunks – inimitable beauty spots.

Whilst it is clear that they evolved from the Indian elephant - Elephas maximus indicus - by sheer dint of having lived here on an island uninterrupted by the evolutionary influences of the mainland, protected by the country's island status, they have grown to be so far apart from their mother species as to now be a fully and separately classified subspecies.

They have grown larger simply by consuming more or less of the same highly nutritious diet for thousands of years. Sri Lanka's diverse lowland dry zones fed by plentiful monsoon rains, its wet tropical forests, and abundant seasonal vegetation have given them a most unending feast.

From this, special genetic traits have developed that give Sri Lankan elephants greater height and larger skeletons, though no scientist has yet explained what drove the genetic divergence behind their darker skin and freckled, depigmented patches.

Standing as they do at the very top of the food chain, the endemic exceptionalism that they embody is actually commonplace for all island wildlife, still less its human life.

The almost 8,000 plant and vertebrate species that now exist on the island have evolved so far from their original, usually Indian–derived, source species that sceptical scientists regard them as separate species or subspecies. Of nearly 5,000 plant species, almost one-fifth are endemic.

And of the animals, the 2,400 vertebrates that live on the island, almost half are endemic. No one has yet managed to come up with any reliable figures for the invertebrates, the butterflies, moths, spiders, snails, crickets, and other insects, so numerous they are.

For any elephant anywhere, Sri Lanka is the epicentre. With an elephant density well over one hundred elephants per thousand square kilometres, the island is, by a vast measure, Asia's most important country for elephants. Worldwide, only 8 African countries rival it.

The Kings Who Cherished Elephants

From its beginnings, people here have cherished and documented the animal, especially in Polonnaruwa.

Records of them go back far into prehistory. In 1897, H.C.P. Bell, the first Commissioner of the Archaeological Survey in Ceylon, uncovered a series of prehistoric rock paintings in caves around the city that appear to depict elephants made with white ash that date back thousands of years.

And in an arc around the site are scattered a multitude of other primordial caves with prehistoric elephant paintings that date back to 6000 BCE, when the Ice Age was laying a still colder grip over much of the rest of the world. The most notable one, found in Wettambugala, contains almost 300 primitive paintings.And across its rock canvas of 60 metres, the very first Sri Lankans can also be seen - surrounded by scores of wild elephants.

What the Stone Age Sri Lankans lived alongside, the great Indian epic, the 7th century BCE Ramayana, also described, the ogre Trijata recalling her dream: "Rama, born in Raghu's dynasty, was seen by me in my dream mounted on a magnificent, mountain-like great elephant possessing four tusks, wandering alongside Lakshmana."

The ancient passage seems to describe not today's elephants but one of their earliest ancestors, the Gomphotheres, a now-extinct, four-tusked relative. Although no fossil of this species has yet been uncovered here, those of three other now-extinct ancestors have been – the massive straight-tusked Palaeoloxodon namadicus sinhaleyus – discovered by Dr P.E.P. Deraniyagala in 1936 through the unearthing of a molar tooth; the marginally different Elephas hysudricus of the ice age Pleistocene era; and the smaller, high-skulled Elephas maximus sinhaleyus.

The superiority of Sri Lankan elephants to their Indian counterparts was noted as early as 300 BCE, when Onesicritus, one of Alexander the Great’s sailors, wrote that “Taprobane's elephants are larger and more bellicose than those of India..." Many ancient world writers – such as Megasthenes, Aelian and Cosmos – were to confirm this

For the Polonnaruwa kings, the abundant elephants around them were no more or less important than they were for many other kings, before or after. Yet they left behind in their

their ruined capital one of the greatest artefacts of early medieval Lanka that showed that they, perhaps more than most, really cherished these beasts.

The 12th-century artefact, known as King Nissanka Malla's Seat, still lies where it was first placed in Polonnaruwa. Nissanka Malla, who ruled Polonnaruwa from 1187 to 1196 CE, is one of the kingdom's three greatest kings, bringing order amid rampant chaos.

His stone seat, also known as the Lion Throne, sits in the King's Audience Hall. It stands within 48 ornate stone pillars, the ultimate destination for subjects crossing the moonstone, passing the mura galas, and climbing the stone steps for their audience, with a massive, solid, stone-carved lion inscribed at its base with the words "Throne of the King". Each of the stone pillars around it is carved with the specific title of the minister permitted to sit in that exact spot.

And it was from this seat the king would watch the Gaja Keliya – the last word in royal entertainment. Popular since ancient times, these staged elephant fights would feature two trained, massive bull tuskers. They were driven into the arena to clash head-to-head in a terrifying display of power and aggression, overseen by Gajanayake Nilames – a specialised team of royal elephant handlers. The king, an elephantophile if ever there was, also commissioned a remarkable 9-metre stone book, the Gal Potha, which depicts the Goddess Lakshmi holding a lotus flower. At the same time, two carved elephants stand on either side, pouring water over her.

He, perhaps more than any of the other 19 Polonnaruwa kings and queens, is especially responsible for the multitude of elephant statues and carvings that dominate the entire city. Their artistry far exceeds anything produced before in ancient Anuradhapura.

Polonnaruwa's ancient sculptors carved their elephants with exceptional anatomical accuracy, with poses, movements, and expressions that differed distinctly from one another. In one, the sculptor's brilliant inventiveness is especially evident in the carving of an elephant with five legs, the extra one designed to create the illusion of realistic movement when viewed from different angles. The naturalistic style they favoured stood in stark contrast to the formal,

stylised and more ritualistic practices of earlier artists.

The Audience Hall, built by the kingdom's greatest king, Parakramabahu, features a continuous frieze of elephants on its foundation platform, running, walking, playing, or turning their heads. The base of the Royal Palace itself bristles with rows of heavily tusked elephants. Moonstones, decorated with bands of elephants, lie scattered across the entire city.

But perhaps the most stunning sculpture of all was the Rock Elephant, the Gal Aliya. Carved directly from the granite bedrock along the left bank of the Mahaweli River, it stood facing upstream, half-submerged, looking exactly like a live elephant wading through water. It was documented in 1897 by H.C.P. Bell, but has now been entirely lost – blasted by dynamite and destroyed by treasure hunters in the 1960s.

FOUR

Kingdom Come, Kingdom Go

Spreading from a central core of 300 acres to a wider urban footprint of almost 2,500 hectares, the ancient city of Polonnaruwa, with its palaces, stupas, temples, relic houses, terraces, staircases, monasteries, balustrades, and other buildings, is remarkable for its architectural fusion of Indian and Sinhalese Buddhist styles. Dravidian and ornate baroque elements mix with the austere, minimalist lines of Theravada Buddhist architecture, with its singular focus on proportionality and symbolic geometry.

The kingdom the kings built from this new capital stretched across much of the island, as Anuradhapura's had, though royal influence waxed and waned over time. At its core was the Rajarata, the King's Country, a heartland encompassing the North Central Province and surrounding river basins. The southwestern /central Principality of Maya fell under their control, though the southern and southeastern principality of Ruhuna remained alternately compliant or rebellious. Under its greatest kings, Polonnaruwa's military and commercial influence even stretched into South India and Burma.

From 1055 to 1215, across 21 reigns, its 19 kings and queens presided over a government that started well before swallowing what amounted to a poison pill – one that would lead swiftly and inexorably to the kingdom's total collapse.

For its first 132 years, until 1187, the kingdom exuded confident authority, largely through the efforts of two especially powerful kings. After the disasters and excesses that brought down the old Anuradhapura kingdom, this was a remarkable achievement. And under these new Vijayabahu kings, the island enjoyed strong, consistent government for almost 80% of the time the kings ruled from Polonnaruwa.

When this ruling family finally lost credibility, a related, albeit more Indian, family spectacularly rescued the kingdom from chaos: the Kalinga.

But by accepting these grand new immigrants as their new kings, Polonnaruwa planted the seeds of its later destruction.

Before long, the Kalinga and the Vijayabahu were at each other's throats, triggering a deadly civil war that ran for the next 18 years from 1197, interweaving with its palace politics an ever-increasing Tamil influence until, eventually, in 1215,

one particularly ruthless offspring of the Kalinga clan, Kalinga Magha, put an end to the kingdom once and for all, triggering so great an invasion as to fracture the island entirely.

FIVE

Elephants Are Quite Enough

In her 1972 whodunnit, "Elephants Can Remember," Agatha Christie wrote that "Elephants are quite enough." And so they were for almost all Sri Lankan's rulers.

For thousands of years, its kings used them as shock troops in their armies, with the principal generals riding on their backs.

They stood centre stage at any important Buddhist pageant or ritual, as they still do today.

They were even used for judicial killings. As late as 1851, Henry Sirr, a British lawyer who served as Deputy Queen's Advocate for the Southern Circuit of Ceylon, remembered how the Kandyan kings used elephants "as executioners of criminals, by training them to crush the victim's limbs, and by placing one of its legs on the man's body, tears off the limbs."

They were also the heavy machinery for landowners seeking to clear land, move timber and transport heavy loads.

And most of all, they were much loved by the exchequer. The Sri Lankan elephant was the most prized species across Asia, a premium export, the fighter jet, tank, and mobile rocket launcher of its day – cared for by a caste of skilled trainers. These experts, especially the Kuruwe people from Kegalle, trained all the country's mahouts, and the small-scale brass elephant models, complete with movable joints used for lessons, can still be seen today.

Elephants were a royal monopoly.

Right through to the last of the Kandyan kings, elephants enjoyed complete protection by royal decree, the death penalty being given to anyone who captured, killed or maimed one without the king's authority.

But when the first Europeans arrived, the monopoly began to fray. "The Ceylon elephant was superior," noted one Portuguese soldier, "traders were prepared to pay twice or even up to four times for them, compared to elephants from other countries." In 1514, the Portuguese even sent one to bribe the Pope to secure better trade routes, and the rediscovered remains of Annone, as he was called, were unearthed in 1969 beneath the Vatican Palace.

Both the Portuguese and the Dutch saw elephant trading as the cherry on the money cake as they busied

themselves exporting cinnamon from Sri Lanka.They vastly expanded the mass use of kraals to round up wild elephants for sale. Both colonists maintained a dedicated Elephant Unit to capture and market the beast, and over 100 years of Dutch rule, an estimated 11,250 elephants were exported.

But by 1832 the profits were gone, and the British authorities abolished state-sponsored elephant operations. Designating the animal a threat to agriculture, elephant hunting became instead so great a private sport that by the time of Queen Victoria's death it is thought that over 10,000 animals had been killed. From an all-time low of some 4,000 elephants left alive in the wild by 1969, numbers have climbed to around 7,500 in 2024.

But despite losing their status as an export driver and, to a lesser extent, as a military machine, they have not lost the deep place they hold in Sri Lanka's cultural, spiritual, and identity.

More importantly, they remain a keystone species, vital for the health of the island's entire ecosystems.

As a tourist magnet, they bring staggering economic value to Sri Lanka: economists place a lifetime value of over $12 million per animal from their contribution to wildlife tourism.

As much as the country's island status, its masterful creation of water technology and management of rice production, its Buddhism, and the sheer resilience of its character, its unique breed of elephants is every bit as much one of Sri Lanka's pivotal attributes, as much a maker of its identity as an icon of what remains special today.

Elephants, far more than the ancient city of Polonnaruwa they seem to protect, draw crowds eager to experience the island. As the country steadily grows its international visitors, over 40% come determined to see an elephant in the wild, a staggeringly high figure compared to 10% of foreign tourists who bother to visit Polonnaruwa, or even Anuradhapura, which bears similarly infinitesimally small figures,

Certainly the island's elephants are an easier national facet to grasp. They are Sri Lanka.

Imagination, preparation, patience, all are needed, to a great extent, by anyone who treks out to explore the

vast, poorly preserved, and poorly presented ruins of Polonnaruwa.

But not so elephants. They can be treasured at first sight, even if it takes considerable detective work to understand their contribution to Sri Lanka's last great ancient kingdom, Polonnaruwa, and the 19 kings and queens who ruled from here.

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.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, blogs, and guides are freely available at ceylonpress.com as is its show, The Sri Lanka Podcast.

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