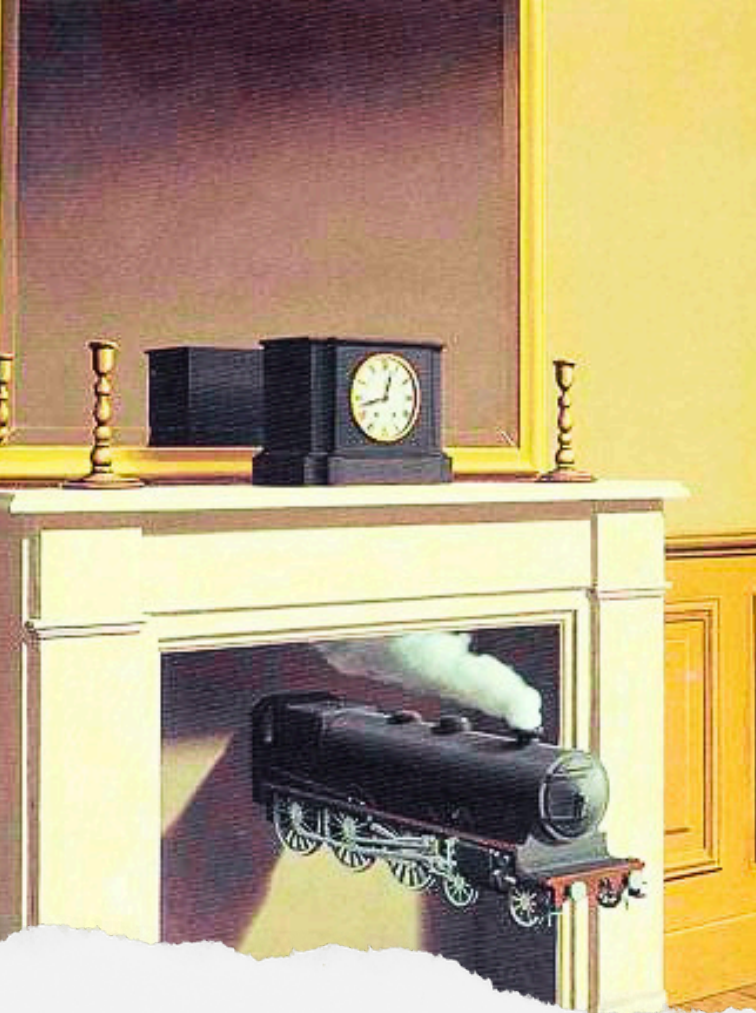




The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 22

THE LONG GOODBYE

SRI LANKA'S SECOND LAMBAKANNA KINGS IV

DAVID SWARBRICK

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"Somehow you
strayed and
lost your way,
and now
there'll be no
time to play, no
time for joy, no
time for friends
— not even time
to make
amends."

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



ONE

Warrior

That catastrophe did not immediately envelop the kingdom was due in part to the next king, Sena II, and his adept handling of the deadly new South Asian realpolitik that had drawn Sri Lanka into its magnetic field. From his accession in 866 CE, the Anduraupuran kingdom had barely 125 years left to live. Were it not for the phenomenal capabilities of Sena himself, who did much to arrest the decline of the previous decades, his 12 successors are unlikely to have had the opportunity to reign at all.

The Pandyan capture of Anduraupura under Sena I was no accident. The easy-going dominance of the Pallavas, which had protected the island since that dynasty had helped Manavamma gain his throne in 691 CE, was all but over. In their place was a steelier freeholder, one given to absolute conquest. Clinging on to what they had was all the Pallava kingdom could now do. In the four-sometimes-five-cornered fight across southern India between the Pallavas, Cheras, Pandyans, Chalukyas and the Cholas, it was the Cholas who were to emerge as the new superpower. Around 848 CE, they captured Tanjore and then focused on driving Pandyan and Pallava kings into ever-tighter corners. The Cholas were to eventually extend their boundaries from a kingdom to an

empire of such political, military, and economic dynamism that the whole of Southern India, the Maldives, large parts of eastern India, Malaysia, and Indonesia fell under their influence. But the fight was messy, and at any given time, a different power seemed preeminent. In this stately spaghetti soup, today's allies were tomorrow's enemies - in the blink of an eye. Keeping one step ahead of this was the greatest challenge the Anduraupuran kings would now face.

Depending on which chronometric school you follow, Sena II's reign began in 866 or 853 CE and ended in 901 or 887 CE. Either way, he ruled for a colossal length - over 30 years or almost a third of the entire time it took these late and last Lambakanna kings to trek to their final fateful nemesis.

Although he inherited a defeated and shattered kingdom, he began his reign with several handy advantages. He was royal, the nephew of Sena I. He had few, if any, rivals, all of Sena's brothers having died during the earlier Pandyan invasion. He had the army on his side, being the king's general in chief. And he had a powerful local regional base of his own, coming as he did from the Ruhana side of the family, with a

wife, Samgha, who was the eldest daughter of the late ruler of Rohana. The family politics that had eroded the effectiveness of previous kings lay dormant throughout his entire reign.

By any reckoning, he was a busy king, the sort of ruler who would multitask in his sleep. Repairing the trashed irrigation systems in his kingdom, especially in the dry zone, was an immediate priority if economic strength was to be restored, famines avoided, and taxes made available for payment. Many tanks, canals, and catchment areas were mended, including two of pivotal importance: the Sorabora Wewa – the Sea of Bintenna, a huge tank in Mahiyangana - and the Minipe Ela irrigation system, which included a massive canal that diverted the Mahaweli River to carry water from the wet zone towards the dry zone and nourish a vast area of the dry zone. The state's bureaucracy was replenished with new hires, and, as two stone inscriptions made clear – the Mihintale plinth inscription and the Mamaduwa Wewa slab inscription - the small specifics that properly regulated a functioning state were put right – in this case, the prohibition of stealing fish from reservoirs and the collection of tax in gold from merchants.

He did his dutiful best, putting things right with the Theravada religious establishment. Many temples and monasteries were repaired. The gorgeous Brazen Palace – the Lohamahaprasada – was restored. A sacred golden Buddha image—looted during the Pandyan assault— was returned to the eminent Abhayagiri Monastery, and a hospital was built for the Mihintale Monastery. Lapsed Buddhist festivals were revived, including what is one that remains the country's paramount festival for the sacred Tooth Relic. And, in a move guaranteed to delight the orthodoxy, he stationed coastal guards in his ports to clamp down on heretical monks entering the land.

Most importantly, he repaired the county's defence, which had been so neglected that it enabled the Pandyan invasion during the reign of Sena I. The Culavamsa notes that “he made the Island hard to subdue by the foe and made it increase in wealth like the land of the Uttarakurus. Living beings on the Island who in the time of the former king had been in distress, felt themselves delivered in that they came to peace as from heat into the shade of clouds.”

But perhaps, most remarkably, and in what was probably a first for Sri

Lankan kings at any time, he intervened militarily and effectively in the political struggles within the ascendant Pandyan state. The Culavamsa records that "at that time there arrived a son (thought to be Varaguna) of the Pandu King who, ill-treated by the king, had made the resolve to gain the kingship for himself. When the King saw him, he rejoiced greatly, treated him as was meet, betook Himself then to the seaport Mahatittha and while he sojourned there, collected a great force as well as all the appliances of war completely, like to a war-equipped army of the gods."

The king went to war, after first making an alliance with the Pallava king Nrupatunga I. The plan was for a joint pincer operation against Srimara Srivallabha, the Pandyan king. A fleet crowded with soldiers crossed the Palk Strait, landing on the Pandyan coastline and marched inland to besiege the Pandyans at their capital of Madurai. The Pandyans were in no fit state to fight, having recently suffered a series of withering attacks by the Pallavas. Madurai was taken and sacked, and Srimara Srivallabha himself was killed in the action, leaving the throne open for a more Sri Lankan-friendly ruler - Varaguna. Sena concluded what

amounted to a long-term friendship pact with the new king, a change of alliance that would come back to haunt his successors.

Among the plunder brought back to the island was much of what Srimara Srivallabha himself had stolen earlier, including the revered golden Buddha image, purloined from the Ratanapasada. High-ranking hostages were patriated to Anduraupura and Sena returned in triumph and "restored all valuable property in the Island as it was heretofore, without partiality, and the golden images he set up in the places where they belonged," concluded the Culavamsa happily. Or did he? Near contemporaneous Pandyan sources – such as the Sinnamanur Plates – argue quite the opposite – that the invasion was repulsed. But the Culavamsa account is corroborated by a further stone inscription- the Iluppakaniya pillar inscription – that records Sena II as the Madhura-dunu, the "Conqueror of Madhura.

What is certain is that Sri Lanka had gone to war, and although the fight may have been a terrible reversal of fortune for the Pandyans, in an obdurate way, Sri Lanka's victory was also something of a prophetic

disaster. Its new alliance with the Pandyan kingdom committed the country irrevocably to the hell of South Indian politics. As the Pallava, Pandyan, and Chola busied themselves trying to annihilate one another, there was no longer any get-out for Sri Lanka. Whether it liked it or not, it too was now part of the battle – and in time it would find itself locked grimly to the side of the eventual loser.

The great king spent the rest of his years kingdom-building and ensuring a good name for himself in the afterlife. The Culavamsa observes how he “dispensed raiment, umbrellas, shoes which had come to himself, further rice for wayfaring bhikkhus and baths with cheer. After the mighty Prince had thus carried out all kinds of works of inferior merit, he passed away in the thirty-third year of the King’s reign in accordance with his doing.”



TWO

Business As
(Almost) Usual

Sena was succeeded by his nephew, Udaya I, who reigned for about 10 years (the dates are, as often in this period, casually opaque), from 901 CE. The new king paid due respect to the Buddhist establishment and is recorded as having built an alms house, a religious college, and several image houses. Given the island's new exposure to South Indian politics, he is also recorded as having improved Anuradhapura's ramparts and moats and invested in the infantry, in the form of elephants and horses. But apart from a minor rebellion of baroque complexity in the north, which he put down with ease, little really troubled the kingdom, and the Culavamsa is effusive in the praise it gives him for his many acts of charity, concluding that "having thus performed these and other meritorious works which lead to Heaven, he entered after reigning eleven years, into the company of the gods. The gold that he had spent in these eleven years was estimated at thirteen hundred thousand kahapapas."

A branch of kingly Kassapas followed him: his nephew Kassapa IV from 912 to 929, and Kassapa V from 929 to 939 CE. The first of these, Kassapa IV, after the usual disbursements to religious orders, set about reorganising his provinces, bringing

Rohana and Malaya more directly under the central government's control. There is no evidence of internal dissent at the time, so perhaps it was merely a shrewd pre-emptive move. Strengthening the home base was all the wiser, given that Kassapa IV proved unable to resist the pull of South Indian politics. His Pandyan allies, faring the worst against the Cholas, persuaded him to send an army to help out in 917 CE. It was not a success. The accounts are mixed but include hearsay about Chola attacks that resulted in heavy Singhalese losses, the outbreak of a pestilence that crippled the army and very strained supply chains. The army retreated to avoid any terminal defeat.

The Culavamsa describes the foray in the kindest of terms, saying, "while thus the Sovereign of Lanka held sway in justice, the Pandu King was vanquished in battle by the Cola King. To gain military aid, he sent numerous gifts. The King, the Ruler of Lanka, took counsel with his officials, equipped military forces, appointed his Sakkasenapati as leader of the troops and betook himself to Mahatittha. Standing at the edge of the coast, he spoke of the triumph of former kings and, having thus aroused their enthusiasm, he made his troops

embark. With his army, the Sakkasenapati thereupon safely crossed the sea and reached the Pandu country. When the Pandu King saw the troops and him, he spoke full of cheer: "I will join all Jambudipa under one umbrella". The King took the two armies, but as he could not vanquish the King of the Cola line, he gave up the fight and retired. The Sakkasena-pati set forth once more, with the purpose of fighting further, made a halt, and died of the upasagga plague to the undoing of the Pandu. When the Ruler of Lanka heard that the troops were also perishing of the same disease, out of pity, he had the army brought back."

His son, Kassapa V, took over the throne in 929 CE for a further ten years, the succession a done deal as the old king, noted the cheery chronicle, "in the tenth year of his reign entered happily into Heaven." It was a busy and productive decade. Hospitals and dispensaries were built in Anuradhapura. A code of fines was introduced for errant monks. Several new monasteries and temples were constructed, such as the Sangsen monastery, and, in a move that must have delighted the Theravadan establishment, a ban was placed on royal officials from entering certain important religious educational

centres, meditation halls, and nunneries, or from felling the trees adjacent to them. The army was improved too, a specialised attack unit established called "The Red Army" on account of its distinctive dress, and there are faint reports, impossible to verify, of some further ineffectual interventions in South Indian politics.



THREE

Interlude

A pair of kings, both called Dappula, followed next - the first, Dappula IV in 939, the son of Kassapa V. Despite there being no evidence of the succession being disputed, still less of foul play, the new king had the shortest of lives. The Culavamsa states rather gnomically, "and then the King who in the town maintained the pious ways of former kings, unable on account of former deeds to enjoy this kingdom for a longer time, fell in the seventh month of his reign into the jaws of death."

Luckily, his brother was available and took the throne in 940 CE as Dappula V for a 12-year innings. Barely had this latest Dappula sat down than the viperous call of South Indian politics tested his mettle. A deposed Pandyan king, albeit one bristling with treasure and the royal regalia, pitched up in Anuradhapura in need of protection and backing, in full retreat for the Cholas under Parantaka I - now pretty much the only superpower in town.

A series of torturous intrigues then followed among the two kings, the Anuradhapura political elites, and, no doubt, many others, over what to do. The king, who favoured intervention, was finally talked out of it, leaving his princely refuge, regalia free and languishing alone on the Malabar

coast. The very minimal evidence of the usual donations to religious orders and reforms in the administration, army, and clergy is all tellingly absent throughout his reign, suggesting that the king was wholly preoccupied with negotiating a safe road through the Pandyan-Chola conflicts. Dappula V's death in 952 marked the moment when Sri Lankan politics entered utter turmoil.

The reign of the new king, Uday II, his brother, began badly in 952 CE with a revolt in the subjugated province of Rohana by his nephew, which had to be quashed by his son, Prince Mahinda.

With affairs in southern India ominously quiet, the king spent his 4-year reign making minor improvements to his realm – and enjoying himself. The Culavamsa was quick to censor him as "slothful and a friend of spirituous drinks to the undoing of his subjects." Even so, he managed to find time to repair the Mayetti Tank, and the evidence of 18 surviving inscriptions documents his charity to monasteries, hospitals, and villages. Rather generously, this included gilding the roof of the Thuparamaya, one of the oldest stupas on the island, showing, to some degree, that the money still flowed from the state's coffers.

But he was to be interrupted in all this by the demand of the new Chola king for the return of the royal regalia that the last Pandyan king had left behind in Anuradhapura. The blank refusal he met with provoked "the mighty Cola to equip an army and sent it forth to fetch them by force." Sri Lanka had been invaded – again. This time, however, the Chola were routed – "they turned and betook themselves through fear from here to their own country," to which Uday took the fight, and "laid waste the border land of the Cola King and forced him with threats to restore all that he had carried away from here as booty.

A dark purple background with a horizontal strip of white paper torn across the middle. The word "FOUR" is written in a thin, purple, sans-serif font on the white strip.

FOUR

Becalmed

The spat was won, Udaya II died obligingly, and the throne passed to his brother, Sena III, around 955 CE. The Culavamsa heartily approved of this new king. "The King was wise," it wrote, "an excellent poet, learned, impartial towards friend and foe, ever full of pity and goodwill." With little evidence, little is known about what happened over his 9-year reign. The Cholas, in temporary decline over the Palk Straits, were in no state to cause trouble, and perhaps that is exactly what happened over this time – nothing of note.

His successor, Udaya III, succeeded in 964 CE, an interesting addition to the rolls of kingship, as he seems to have been, at best, a very distant Lambakanna relative, but, more importantly, a "great friend" of Sena III. The lack of any known challenge to his accession perhaps indicates a state in which the central government was in control, to the detriment of family politics. Almost nothing is known about his reign – possibly a good sign – and on his death in 972 CE, he was succeeded by Sena IV, a relative of a previous king – the chronicles argue about exactly which one. Even less is known about what this new king got up to – except that he died 3 years later, in 975 CE, and was replaced by his brother, Mihindu

IV. Certainly, the old king had left behind a kingdom that had succumbed to lawlessness, though it is unlikely that this was simply the result of the past 3 years. For several decades, the kingdom appeared to be drifting, with little thought given to anything beyond making modest repairs and religious donations.

Over the next 16 years, Mahinda IV seems to have done his best to avert the decline. Stone inscriptions found in various places in Sri Lanka suggest that he recodified the laws on criminal offences, prioritising capital punishment, beatings, and increased fines. He also had to resist two attacks from India – one predictably coming from the resurgent Cholas who, under the command of Parantaka II, invaded the island, only to find themselves invaded back by a surprisingly resistant Mahinda. A stalemate treaty was concluded, and Mihindu next had to deal with a second, surprising attack by the Indian Rashtrakuta king Krishna III. The Rashtrakuta dynasty, a Deccan-based kingship. This particular entity lasted barely 100 years but was surprisingly aggressive around this time; fortunately for Sri Lanka, it was not aggressive enough, and Krishna's forces were repulsed. Through all this fire and tempest, Mahinda even found

time to repair and reendow various monasteries and nunneries, clarifying several aspects of religious law.

His death in 991 ushered in the final decade of not just the Lankan kings but of the entire Anuradhapura kingdom itself. Over most of the past 50 years, its kings had just about resisted the ever more urgent attacks coming from southern India, and many had done their best to keep the kingdom functioning. But it was not enough. Their attempts to strengthen the kingdom's defences proved insufficient, and the alliances they made in India were all on the wrong side. A devastation was about to arrive on the island – one that possibly no king could have resisted, still less these late Lambakannas, most of whom evidenced little sense of urgency about the future.

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.

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