The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 9

THE TAINTED CROWN

SRI LANKA'S FOUNDING VIJAYAN KINGS VI

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"Well, that was the silliest tea party I ever went to! I am never going back there again!"

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865

ONE

SETTING OFF FOR OBLIVION

It took a hundred and twenty-eight years for the last Vijayan kings to travel the final road to oblivion, years that made the mafia tales of the Prohibition era or a Shakespearean tragedy appear tame.

But travel them they did — and with unforgettable horror — all eighteen monarchs, of whom at least two-thirds were murdered by their successors, plunging the country into yet another civil war.

It all started with Mahakuli Mahatissa's heir, a succession which, on the face of it, seemed to go to plan.

His stepbrother, Choura Naga, the son of King Valagamba, took the throne in 62 BCE and married Anula.

The kingdom, rescued from its third Tamil invasion by Valagamba in 89 BCE, had enjoyed almost thirty years of peace, and maybe even some nation-rebuilding by the time Choura Naga and his new wife celebrated their marriage's poruwa ceremony, witnessing the Ashtaka recite his religious chants at precisely the preordained auspicious time.

As events were to prove later, the Ashtaka was to have his work cut out for him over the next few years, being in such demand that he became a nationwide celebrity in his own right. For Anula would turn out to be one of the island's more colourful characters; the kind of person Anne Tyler had in mind in "Back When We Were Grownups," writing "once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person."

What little is known of King Choura Naga is that he managed to get himself poisoned by Anula in 50 BCE, an act of realpolitik in which his wife quite probably played on her husband's deep unpopularity with the traditional Theravada Buddhist monks who dominated the country.

This was not a school of Buddhism that won Choura Naga's devotion - indeed he even went so far as to destroy eighteen of their temples, earning the eternal disapprobation of The Mahavaṃsa who recorded the poisoning with great satisfaction: "the evildoer died and was reborn in the Lokantarika-hell."

The political support Anula's coup enjoyed is lost to all but the most pernicious speculation. Still, she filled the vacancy she had created by placing Choura Naga's young nephew, Kuda Thissa, on the throne. But not for long.

Anula was ever a lady short of patience. Tiring of her ward, she poisoned him in 47 BCE and installed her lover, a palace guard, as Siva I. It was the start of the Love Period in ancient Sri Lankan history, every bit as deadly as a cobra bite.

Long-term love was not to be the hapless Siva's destiny. He, too, was poisoned, and the queen installed a new lover, Vatuka, on the throne in 46 BCE. This was something of a promotion for the Tamil who had, till then, been living the blameless life of a carpenter.

By now, Anula was well into her stride. The following year, the carpenter was replaced by Darubhatika Tissa, a wood carrier, who also failed to measure up.

Her last throw of the love dice was Niliya, a palace priest whom she installed as king in 44 BCE before feeding him something he ought not to have eaten. At this point, Anula must have reached the logical conclusion: if you want something done well, do it yourself. Busy women, after all, don't have time for excuses, only solutions.

TWO

PIOUS RULER OF THE EARTH

And so, from 43 to 42 BCE, Anula ruled in her own name, Asia's first female head of state, beating President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga by two thousand and thirty-six years. It was not a success.

After just four months, her group-breaking reign ended at the hands of her brother-in-law, Kutakanna Tissa, who, having sensibly become a Buddhist monk during Anula's reign, remained alive and so able to rescue the monarchy.

He did so by burning the queen alive in her own palace in 42 BCE, bringing down the curtains on a royal career that eclipsed that of the entire Borgia clan put together.

As the queen's palace burned to ash, a commendably clockwork form of royal leadership took the place of palace coups. For sixty-three halcyon years, son succeeded father or brother, brother, for three generations, giving the kingdom a modicum of time to recover, repair, and heal.

For eighteen blissfully uneventful years, Kutakanna Tissa ruled with monkish devotion, adding to the many religious buildings in Anuradhapura, including, with filial devotion that contrasted strongly with the previous regime, the Dantageha Nunnery for his mother, who had become a nun.

He built a new palace and park for himself and, remarkably, also made time to restore and extend the kingdom's basic infrastructure. New walls, "seven cubits high", and moats were built around Anuradhapura; two large reservoirs were established – Ambadugga and Bhayolippala.

Not the merest whiff of homicide hangs over Kutakanna Tissa's death, and he was succeeded by his son, Bhathika Abhaya, in 20 BCE.

The new king was to go down in history as one of the most religiously devoted monarchs the island had seen, no easy task given the stiff competition from those of his predecessors who had chosen virtue over assassinations.

Religious buildings were made even more magnificent, to the point of being replastered with a unique building mortar that included a variety of sweet-smelling plants and pearls.

New religious festivals and ceremonies were added to an already groaning ecclesiastical calendar and, for this most olfactory of monarchs, even the temple floors were ordered to be strewed with "honeycombs, with

perfumes, with vases (filled with flowers), and with essences, with auri-pigment (prepared) as unguent and minium; with lotus-flowers arrayed in minium that lay ankle-deep".

Needless to say, the death of this "pious ruler of the earth" was a matter of deep regret to The Mahavamsa. Most unusually, his beatific statue still stands - opposite the Ruwanweli Stupa, built by the ancestor to whom he owed so much – Dutugemunu.

THREE

CIVIL WAR

The King was succeeded by his younger brother Mahadatika Mahanaga in 9 CE, a king almost as pious, famed for his enthusiastic temple-building and land donations to monasteries.

As with many, if not all, of the Vijayan kings, his wife was Tamil, and both their sons were destined to become kings. But with them, the family reputation for dynastic devotion was to break down, giving way to something more in the spirit of Cain and Abel.

In waving a sorrowful farewell to his reign in 21 CE, The Mahavamsa obliquely notes a world soon to be forever shattered: “thus men of good understanding, who have conquered pride and indolence, and have freed themselves from the attachment to lust, when they have attained to great power, without working harm to the people, delighting in deeds of merit, rejoicing in faith, do many and various pious works.”

Amandagamani Abhaya succeeded his father, Mahadatika, with exemplary order and propriety.

A man almost as pious as his father, he continued the royal tradition of gilding the religious lily. He made a name for himself amongst vegetarians by banning all animal slaughter.

It was, with hindsight, inevitable that a man so totally out of touch with normal life, still less the practical needs of his nation, should end up being killed by his own brother just nine years into his reign.

Kanirajanu Tissa wielded the family knife, killing his sibling in 30 CE, his regicidal impulses heralding the dynasty’s final moments — ones that not even the most sensational or improbable soap operas could ever hope to emulate.

Proving right the adage that one’s crimes eventually catch up with you, Kanirajanu Tissa’s reign was terminated after just 3 suspiciously turbulent years, when, in 33 CE, Chulabhaya, son of the assassinated Amandagamani Abhaya, became king. It is unlikely that Kanirajanu breathed his last with anything approaching a natural death.

But Chulabhaya was to last no longer, dead in 35 CE, by which time it was clear that civil war and dynastic squabbling were the only songs in the country’s repertoire.

For four bleak months, his sister Sivali took the throne. Still, the ascension of Sri Lanka’s second female head of state probably did more to hasten, rather than slow down, the Vijayan dynasty’s final tryst with oblivion.

What she lacked in the blood thirstiness that had so marked out Anula, the country's first female ruler, she did not seem able to make up for with any counterbalancing authority.

Perhaps it was too late for all that. For decades now, the kingdom's rulers had demonstrated a greater interest in seizing the throne or investing in the otherworldly than in ruling it wisely or attending to its more practical needs.

Sivali bobs up and down in the months succeeding her ascension, vying for control of the state in what looks like a three-cornered struggle between herself, her nephew Ilanaga and the Lambakarnas. For by now, the Vijayan dynasty had not only to contend with itself but also with the much-put-upon and exasperated nobility, especially the Lambakarna family.

Little about this period of Sri Lankan history is certain, except that from around 35 CE to 38 CE, an uncensored civil war preoccupied the entire country, leaving it without any plausible governance.

For a time, Ilanaga seemed to be ahead of the pack. But he then seems to have scored a perfect own-goal when he demoted the entire Lambakarna clan. This abrupt change in their caste, in a country increasingly rigid in its caste system, galvanised them into full-scale rebellion.

The king – if king he really was – fell and fled into the hill country, returning 3 years later at the head of a borrowed Chola army to take back his throne in 38 CE.

The Lambakarna Clan were put back in their place, though it was to prove but a temporary place at best. Ilanaga's reign lasted another 7 years before his son Chandra Mukha Siva succeeded in 44 CE.

FOUR

THE LOOKALIKE

Despite the chaos of this period of Sri Lankan history, and not without a little irony, it is astonishing to record how one of these last Vijayan kings – probably Ilanaga or his son Chandra Mukha Siva - still managed to find time to send an embassy to Rome.

Pliny the Elder records the event which occurred at some point in the reign of the luckless Emperor Claudius (41 – 54 CE). And at almost the same time, a reciprocal one seems to have occurred in Sri Lanka with the (probably) accidental arrival of a Roman named Annius Plocamus.

Evidence of links between the two kingdoms can be found in both countries. Archaeologists working near the Via Cassia north of Rome identified an 8-year-old mummy from the second half of the 2nd century CE, which they called Grottarossa. Amongst her artefacts was a necklace of 13 sapphires from Sri Lanka.

And dating a few decades before this, there is unmistakable evidence of Roman influences at the Abhayagiri Vihara monastery site in Anuradhapura.

Here, nestling amongst the sculptured carvings of elephants and bulls are to be found winged cupids and gryphons – and the acanthus leaves common on almost all Greek and Roman art.

Back in Rome, as the Emperor Claudius was getting ready to be murdered by his wife, Agrippina, ushering in the calamitous reign of Nero, back in Sri Lanka, King Ilanaga's son and successor, Chandra Mukha Siva, was facing the same fate in 52 CE – albeit at the hands of his own brother Yassalalaka Thissa in 52 CE.

The stage was now set for one of the most eccentric periods of island governance.

With the ascension of the regicidal Yassalalaka Thissa, the last chorus of the Vijayan throne sounded, in Frank Sinatra style: "and now the end is near, and so I face the final curtain."

With a story too bathetic to be encumbered by any inconvenient disbelief, the Mahavamsa recounts the bizarre end of this once-great dynasty in 60 CE.

"Now, a son of Datta, the gate-watchman, named Subha, who was himself a gate-watchman, bore a close likeness to the king. And this palace-guard Subha did the king Yasalalaka, in jest, bedeck with the royal ornaments and place upon the throne

and binding the guard's turban about his own head, and taking himself his place, staff in band, at the gate, he made merry over the ministers as they paid homage to Subha sitting on the throne. Thus was he wont to do, from time to time.

Now, one day, the guard cried out to the king, who was laughing: `Why does this guard laugh in my presence?' And Subha, the guard, ordered to slay the king, and he himself reigned here six years under the name Subha Raja."

Despatched by his own lookalike, Yassalalaka Thissa, the last Vijayan king died, one hopes, seeing the unexpectedly funny side of assassination. King Subha's own reign lasted 6 years, when, whetted by a 3-year rule back in 35 CE, the Lambakarna clan took royal matters back into their own hands and put the ex-palace guard to death.

A new Lambakarna king, Vasabha, was now to take the throne.

FIVE

DEATH OF A DYNASTY

After 609 years, the Vijayan dynasty had come to an inglorious end.

Despite a rich choice of murderous would-be rulers, kings such as Vijaya, Pandukabhaya, Mutasiva, Devanampiya Tissa, and Dutugemunu had been able to establish the confidence, culture, and mindset of an entire nation, giving it the ballast and energy necessary to propel itself forward for centuries to come.

With a writ running at times across the entire island, they transformed a series of unremarkable warring statelets and villages into a nation.

They left a legacy of literature, architecture, religion, and infrastructure that no other dynasty surpassed.

Looking out at water rippling still over the great tanks they built with cutting-edge engineering; sitting in the shade of the magnificent palaces and courts constructed at Anuradhapura, reading inscriptions that point to the bounty of trade routes extending from the island to places as far away as Rome; in the ancient chants of Buddhist priests, the coinage, delicate statutory, frescos and books that survive to this day: in taking all of this in, you take as said an early nation every bit as impressive as any in the ancient world — and way ahead of most.

Its laws regulated a dynamic state, and its armies and weapons defended it with rigour that proved effective. Even as they disappeared from history, the achievements of the Vijayans lay before it in the indispensable foundations of an entire island-nation state.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board directorfor sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation that had gone feral in the jungle. Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers. It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

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Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques, and its healthy menus fuse street food with fine dining. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

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As a reader of this book, you naturally qualify for special treatment should your holiday ever bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

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