



The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 23

THE DEVASTATION

SRI LANKA'S SECOND LAMBAKANNA KINGS V

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Published By The Ceylon Press
2026

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THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

"What would
become of me?
They're
dreadfully fond
of beheading
people here;
the great
wonder is that
there's anyone
left alive!"

ALICE
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN
WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL 1865



ONE

Borrowed Time

When Sena V took over his father's throne in 991 CE, his kingdom was running on borrowed time - and had barely ten more years of life to it. At this late stage, there was little if anything either he or his successor, his son Mahinda V, could have done to avoid their fate. The seeds of their doleful destiny had been sewn as far back as 6791 CE when their illustrious Lambakanna ancestor, Manavanna, had secured his throne with the aid of the Indian Pallava dynasty. The military assistance and subsequent alliance had won him a throne, but at the cost of enlisting Sri Lanka in whatever was going on in southern India, where five dynasties were fighting one another for dominance.

Sometime around 800 CE, Mahinda II replaced the old Pallava friendship pact with one with their enemies, the Pandyan, a choice that seemed sensible at the time but was to prove his dynasty's undoing. It was to prove the wrong choice in every way, for just waiting in the wings was a third dynasty ready to emerge from the gloom of anonymity as the ultimate warrior. In about 847 CE, Vijayalaya, a Chola warlord of otherwise unremarkable obscurity, emerged out of the chaos caused by the Pandyan and Pallava wars and

seized the great city of Thanjavur. It was the start of a celebrated and pugnacious dynasty. He would go on to inflict many defeats on the two older kingdoms and, bit by bit, his successors rolled up the whole of southern India.

Around 897 CE, the Pallava kingdom began its slow fall to the Chola kings, beginning with Aditya I. By 915 CE Parantaka I, had captured its capital Madurai. The Pandyan king fled into exile in Sri Lanka, and the Chola took over the most of his lands. The Chola kingdom itself suffered a series of reversals until, in 958 CE, King Parantaka II recovered most of his lost lands and annexed large sections of the Pandyan kingdom. Most of the remaining Pandyan lands were captured soon after by his son, Uttama.

By the mid-980s, the Chola dynasty, under Rajaraja I, had become the only show in town. Ancient inscriptions, known as the Larger Leiden plates, relate how Rajaraja "conquered the Pandya, Tulu, Kerala, Simhalendra and Satyashraya ; destroyed ships at Kandalur-Salai , captured Vengi, Gangapadi, Nulambapadi, Tadigaipadi, Kudamalainadu, Kollam, Kalingam, and removed the splendour of the Pandyas."

Rajaraja, known not without cause as "the Great," reigned from 985 to 1014 and internationalised his kingdom. From Goa to Andhra Pradesh, much of India was under him and his son, Rajendra I; the Indian Ocean Trading Zone, from the western Arabian Sea to Vietnam, was transformed into a Chola lake, with the kings dominating, influencing, or directly ruling much of everything in between – including Sri Lanka.



TWO

An End in Sight

At the heart of the Chola's expansion lay a wholly reimagined view of naval power. Star charts, wind and monsoon patterns were calculated to improve navigation and mapping, and a spy network was set up among merchants and other mariners to deliver intelligence to Chola military planners. Boat-building technology was improved and different woods identified for different parts of their boats – teak for hull strength, bamboo for the flexible sections, and ironwood for parts most exposed to salt.

Their new ships could carry up to 200 soldiers in multi-decks over 200 feet long and furnished with specialised ramming heads and compartmentalised storage areas. Smaller, faster ships were developed to outflank the enemy; others to serve as more effective scout ships, and still others to provide support and munitions. A Crescent Formation was developed to devastate the enemy, using the navy as if it were a single, vast, curved simitar.

The Chola adapted Byzantine fire, creating their own recipes using coconut oil, sulphur, and tree resins, and adapted catapults, fire arrows, and other projective devices to hurl flames far and wide. Sailors were

specially trained in ship-to-ship combat drills, including siege techniques to break coastal forts. Given such attention to detail it was hardly surprising, therefore, that when either Rajaraja I or Rajendra set their mind to achieve something, it happened.

When Mahinda IV died in 991 CE after a long 16 years trying to restore the rule of law in his kingdom, whilst simultaneously seeing off at least two Indian invasions, one of them a Chola enterprise, his successor was his 12-year-old son, Sena V. This was no time for the office junior, however royal he was, to be in charge, and inevitably, pandemonium broke out almost at once. Advised rather poorly by his mother, he had the brother of his main general executed, prompting a full-scale rebellion, with the aggrieved general calling up a large band of Tamil mercenaries who set about looting the kingdom.

Peace emerged only when the hapless king accepted his general's ongoing counsel. The emasculated young king turned his mind to more pleasurable distractions. As the Culavamsa puts it – “but while now the Ruler of Lanka had his abode there his low class favourites who obtained no leave from their teacher to drink sura, praised in

his presence the advantages of drinking intoxicating liquors and induced the Ruler to drink. After taking intoxicating drinks, he was like a wild beast gone mad. As he could no longer digest food, the Ruler had to surrender the dearly-won place and died in the tenth year of his reign, still youthful in years."

Ever eager to point out the moral of any story, the Chronicle went on to observe, "When they see from this that the yielding to evil friends leads to destruction, let those who seek their highest good here or hereafter, avoid such evil friends as a snake full of deadly poison." "Things, Howard Jones wrote in his hit song in 1985, "can only get better." But this was not the experience of Sena's successor and brother, Mahinda V, who was to live out the horror of Murphy's alternative law for his whole reign: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong."



THREE

The Fall

It little helped that Mahinda inherited a threadbare realm in 982 CE.

"Splendid Anuradhapura," wrote the Culavamsa sorrowfully, "was full of strangers", and mercenaries washed up by the disasters of the previous reign. The state's coffers were bare, its peasants recalcitrant, and the new king himself not up to the task. Within the first paragraph of its description of his reign, the Culavamsa pulls no punches, saying of its new overlord, "he wandered from the path of statecraft and was of very weak character; the peasants did not deliver him his share of the produce." Soon enough, he had "entirely lost his fortune and was unable to satisfy his troops by giving them their pay."

The new kings' rule effectively ended in 993 CE with the first sacking of Anuradhapura, though its formal end dragged on a little longer. But in these roughly 10 years of rule before the curtains began to fall, calamity piled upon catastrophe, misadventure upon misfortune, and farce upon fiasco. At its heart lay not just a weak and incompetent central government but also a country awash with mutinous mercenary Tamil soldiers.

The kingdom was bankrupt. The heavy taxes Mahinda levied

backfired, prompting even more revolts. As the Culavamsa records, "All the Keralas who got no pay planted themselves one with another at the door of the royal palace, determined on force, bow in hand, armed with swords and other weapons, with the cry 'So long as there is no pay he shall not eat.'" But the King duped them. Taking with him all his movable goods, he escaped by an underground passage and betook himself in haste to Rohana."

And just as everything was imploding, "a horse-dealer who had come hither from the opposite coast, told the Chola King on his return about the conditions in Lanka."

Rajaraja I wasted no time, assembling his army and navy and landing "speedily in Lanka" in 993 and capturing Anuradhapura, which was "utterly destroyed in every way by the Chola army." The Thiruvallangadu Copper Plates, engraved in Tamil Nadu twenty years later, put it more eloquently: "Rama built with the aid of monkeys, a causeway across the sea, and then with great difficulties defeated the King of Lanka by means of sharp-edged arrows. But Rama was excelled by this king whose powerful army crossed the ocean by ships and burnt up the kingdom of Lanka."

Another source writes how the invaders "broke open the relic chambers... and carried away the eye-jewels of the stone images." "Like bloodsucking yakkhas they took all the treasures of Lanka for themselves," lamented the Culavamsa. In just a few months, Anduraupura, the city that had governed a kingdom for almost 1500 years, was raised, going "from hero to zero." Palaces, offices, houses, warehouses, shops - all were burned. Temples, nunneries and monasteries were looted, and the precious irrigation infrastructures that supported the city itself were broken.

The Cholas wrote the Culavamsa "seized the Mahesi, the jewels, the diadem that he had inherited, the whole of the royal ornaments, the priceless diamond bracelet, a gift of the gods, the unbreakable sword and the relic of the torn strip of cloth." That so great a capital as this should die so completely and in so short a time is as shocking now as it would have been then. As the jungle reclaimed it and the country moved on, it took 800 to 900 years more before its ruins were recovered and, wherever possible, restored. As Mad Max said many centuries later, "One day cock-of-the-walk, next a feather duster, " though Hector Salamanca put it more kindly in Breaking Bad:

"What a reputation to leave behind."

For some years, the accounts of just how many differ hugely, Mahindra ruled with little effectiveness over a shrunken state in Ruhuna, but Rajaraja was very far from done, and he hunted down the deposed King with all the determination of one who has a final solution in mind. The Chronicle relates how "the Ruler himself ... fled in fear to the jungle, (and was) captured alive, with the pretence of making a treaty." By 1017 at least, the defeated king was deported to India, where he died in captivity in 1029 CE. "Thus," opined the Culavamsa, "fortune's goods if they were gained by one smitten with indolence, are not abiding. Therefore, should the prudent man, who strives after his salvation, ever display ceaseless endeavour."



FOUR

The Aftermath

By now, Rajaraja had been succeeded by his son, Rajendra, and archaeological evidence, including inscriptions and coins found across Sri Lanka, indicates that under the new king, the country was governed, garrisoned, and taxed as a Chola province, overseen by viceroys known as "Ilamandalam Udayar". Rajendra assembled a new army to subjugate the south and capture Mahindra's young son, who was still at large, sending "high officials with a large force to seize him. They brought with them warriors a hundred thousand less five thousand, and they ransacked the whole province of Rohana in every direction. A court official called Kittu, and a minister named Buddha, well-versed in the ways of war, resolved to destroy the Chola army completely. At a place called Palu-thagiri, they took up fortified positions, carried on war for six months and killed a great number of Damilas. The Cholas who had survived the slaughter in this fight, seized with fear, fled and took up their abode as before in Polonnaruwa."

This second invasion of the island had been a most mixed success. Some more land was taken, and a lot more plunder, but resistance had not been crushed. An uneasy stalemate now gripped the defeated island, with the

Chola occupying all but the southern sections and ruling from Polonnaruwa, and the south held by the young prince, well protected by his subjects. It is thought that the prince was Kassapa, sometimes known as Kassapa VI, or Vikramabahu. And from Ruhuna, he launched a series of attacks against the Cholas, all ultimately unsuccessful. Ruhuna itself would descend into royal chaos as competing members of what was left of the royal family jostled with one another for control. But out of all this, eventually would come a new king, Vijayabahu I, to roll back the Chola conquest.

Although the shadows of the Sinhala kingdom lingered down south, regrouping for a return, in truth, it would take 900 more years before the island was once again able to present itself as a full unitary state. Between 1017 and the mid 1500s, a series of splinter Sinhala kingdoms would establish themselves in places such as Dambadeniya, Kurunegala, Gampola, Kotte, Sitawaka, Jaffna, and most brilliantly, Polonnaruwa. But just for the briefest of moments did any of them ever come close to having the authority of a writ that ran across the entire island. Only with independence in 1948 did Sri Lanka regain what it had lost in 993 CE, when Rajaraja

destroyed such a great kingdom.
There on February 4, 1948, in
Independence Square, the Union Jack
was lowered before Prince Henry,
Duke of Gloucester, sent to represent
King George VI and the new lion flag
of Ceylon was raised for the first time
by Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake,
its design based on the royal standard
of the last King of Kandy.

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, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

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