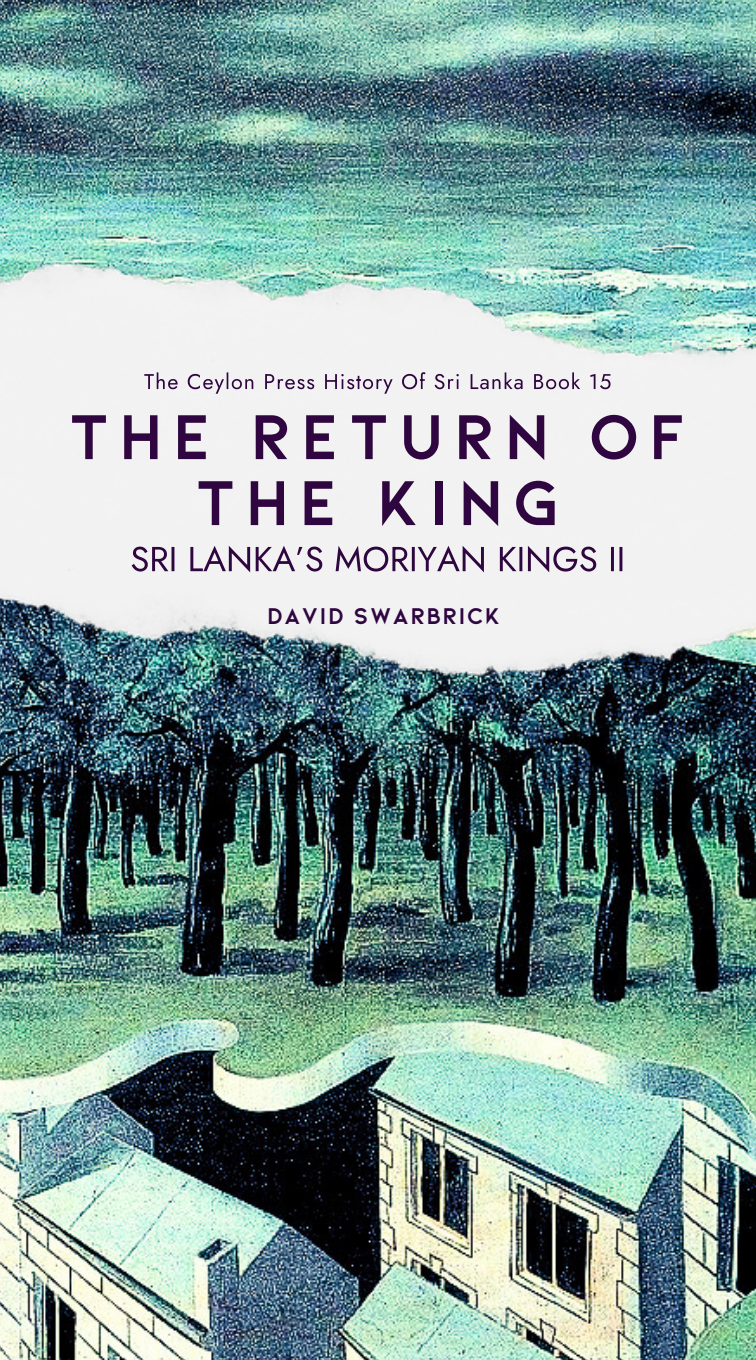




The Ceylon Press History Of Sri Lanka Book 15

THE RETURN OF THE KING

SRI LANKA'S MORIYAN KINGS II

DAVID SWARBRICK

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SRI LANKA'S MORIYAN
KINGS II



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"Actually, I am
right on time."

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



ONE

THE LIBERATOR

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 Datiya, 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.

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

TWO

RADICAL CHIC

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.



THREE

THE CHATTERING
CLASSES

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.



FOUR

Family Palavers

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 used its resources most wisely, the Moriyans kings, 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.

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 srilankapodcast.com.

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