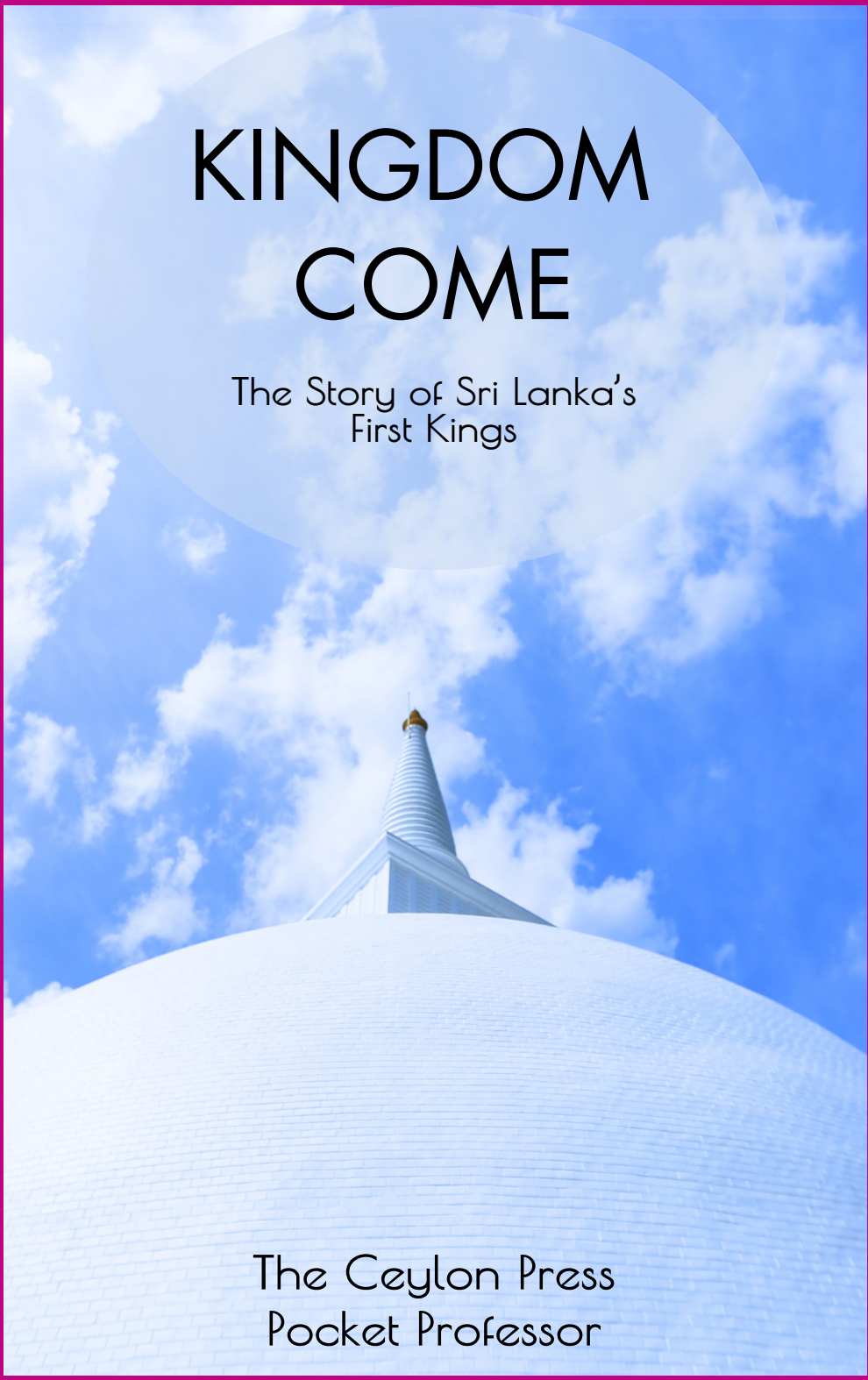
KINGDOM COME

The Story of Sri Lanka's First Kings



The Ceylon Press
Pocket Professor

CONTENTS

1
THE TIME OF KINGS

2
ROUGH WEATHER

3
THE KINGDOM MAKER

4
THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

5
LINE OF ATTACK

6
THE JUST KING

7
RISE AND FALL

8
MUSICAL CHAIRS

9
DEADLY LOVE

10
THE FINAL CURTAIN

1

THE TIME OF KINGS

543 BCE – 505 BCE

“All I say is, kings is kings, and you got to make allowances.”

Mark Twain

The country's first recorded king was to found a dynasty that would last 600 years – though its first 100 years were anything but plain sailing. Expelled from either Bengal or Gujarat (scholars argue, as scholars do) by his father, Prince Vijaya, the founding father of an eponymous royal family, arrived on the island in 543 BCE, his landing kicking off the start of recorded Singhala history.

Prince Vijaya's existence is known about only though The Dīpavaṃsa (complied around the 3rd – 4th centuries CE) and the famous Mahāvaṃsa Chronicle. Indeed much of all we know about Vijayan rule, comes down to us courtesy of these works. The Mahāvaṃsa (The Great Chronicle), is epic poem written by a Buddhist monk (with later additions) in the ancient Pali script. It begins with Prince Vijaya's arrival and ends in 302 CE – but was written many hundreds of years after the events it describes, in the 5th century CE.

A sequel to The Mahāvaṃsa was later added: the Lesser Chronicle, or The Culavamsa, which covered events to 1825, making the pair the world's oldest, longest historical chronicle.Historians debate the factual accuracy of the works, and many scholars believe that the date of 543 BCE itself is something of a contradiction, being synthetically fixed to coincide with the date of Lords Buddha's own death.

Although verified archaeological, still less documentary evidence for Prince Vijaya remains tantalizingly absent, this has not stopped him taking centre stage as the nation's paterfamilias. The many conflicting stories surrounding his arrival, his fights with man-eating wives, flying horses, skirmishes with indigenous tribes, protection under Buddha and willingness

to swap his local wife Kuveni for a more glamorous and aristocratic Indian princess, are part of the country's cherished creation myths. And, in the case of wife selection, Vijayan's modus operandi set in train a royal habit that persisted to the end of the last kingdom in Kandy, over 2,000 years later – for selecting a wife amongst the dynasties of South India was forever considered a smart move; and did much to foster the continued interaction between rival kingdoms.

Even so, the slimmest of ancient – almost folklore – hints marks his landing on Sri Lanka's shores – at Kudirmalai Point in Witpattu National Park. Here are to be found the remains of an ancient temple dedicated to a horse and overlooked by a massive horse statue made of brick, stone and coral, its rear leg now all that remains. Inland from here are a further set of ruins – mere pillars standing or fallen in the jungle and known locally as Kuveni's Palace.

Kuveni was said to be the queen of the Yaksha, a local tribe, often considered to be just mythical, with demon like powers that co-existed with the Naga, another local tribe, one that was linked to the worship of snakes. The young prince was to found the Kingdom of Tambapaṇṇī – the island's the first Sinhalese kingdom, situated in the north east around Mannar and Puttalam.

Although the Mahāvaṃsa Chronicle portrays Prince Vijaya as the first and only Indian colonist to arrive in early Sri Lanka, it is more than likely that he was but one (albeit the most successful one) of a number of immigrants. He and his successors colonised the island from the north and west, moving inland along the banks of the Malvata Oya. Other settlers undoubtedly

arrived on the east coast and followed the Mahaweli River inland. Still others would have landed in the south, following other rivers inland to make settlements that would eventually coalesce into the (often semi) independent kingdom of Ruhana.

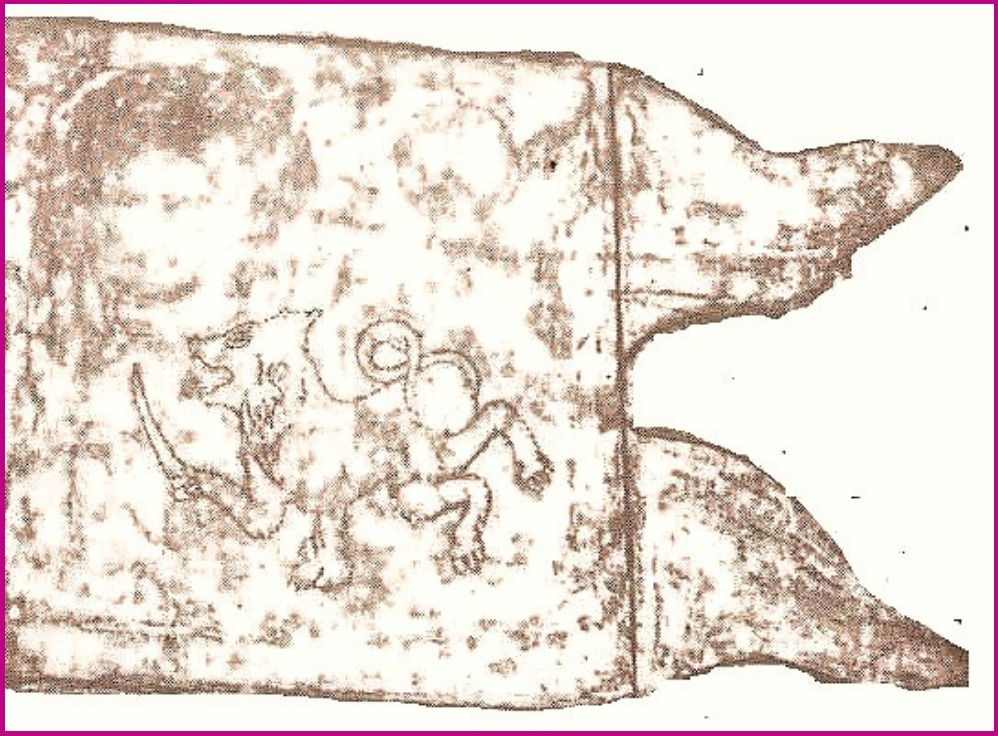
Of course, Prince Vijaya did not step into a vacuum – though what was here can still only really be guessed at.Pre-existing communities, possibly even bantam kingdoms, probably preoccupied themselves with interminable wars.The records list at least 4 different clans: Rakkhaka, Yakkha, Naga and Deva. But history is, of course, written by the victors and the Vijayan dynasty was a victor like few others.

The Vijayan progress would have forced the preexisting tribes to retreat inland – and accept a new status bestowed on them by these migrants from the subcontinent, who brought with them a steely view on caste.All Sinhalese castes derive in some form or another from here. The Brahman sat at the very top, with the Ksatriyas just below. This would have also included the Govigama (from govi – literally "housekeeper"); Kavikara (dancers); Durava (low country, and possibly ex Naga); Vahumpura; Navandanna (artisans); Batgama (labourers); Badahala (potters); Radava (dhobis) and Pali (dhobis for lower castes); Berava (drummers and folk priests); Oli and Nakati (astrologers); Panikki (barbers); Hannali (tailors); Hommara (leather workers); Hunna (lime burners); Yamannu (iron workers); Panna (elephants and horses); Kinnara (possibly ex Vedda); Vaggai (from S India) – and the lowest caste of all – the Rodi (untouchable). Centuries later many of these castes generated still more castes such as Hinna (dhobi); Gahala (executioners); Salagama, to which were added late migrants such as Damala Gattara (Tamil captives) and Karava (restricted to coasts parts).

To survive, all new settlers would have had to quickly master the one force central to make a viable settlement: water. Ensuring its plentiful supply in all these dry and semi dry zone areas was critical; and the early settlers focused on it almost immediately, cutting irrigation channels from its rivers to feed tanks and reservoirs, so crops, livestock and people could safely multiply.

This preoccupation established a premise for success that runs through the country's history, from the time of kings into the present day – and such initiatives as the Mahaweli Water Security Investment Program, whose canals and tunnels move water from the Mahaweli River Basin to tank systems and storage reservoirs in North Central, Northern, and North Western Provinces.

2



ROUGH WEATHER

505 BCE – 437 BCE

“No matter how rough the sea, I refuse to sink.”

Unknown

Prince Vijaya's greatest achievement, apart from surviving, was less what he did than what he left behind – a dynasty that ran (ignoring regnal interruptions) for over 600 years, putting it comfortably ahead of Mings and Moguls, Valois, French Bourbons, German Hohenzollerns, Tudors, Stuarts, and Aztecs.

The very earliest foundation stories of the Sinhala nation start with him, covering 47 monarchs (including, that is, more than a handful of extraneous royal interlopers), from Vijaya to the unrelated rogue, Subharaja, ruling 3 ever larger kingdoms – Tambapanni, Upatissa Nuwara and Anuradhapura, facing off three major Tamil invasions, until in the end, they toppled themselves.

But just as the Vijayan dynasty started, it almost came to a premature end for Prince Vijaya died in 505 BCE, after a 38-year reign, leaving no credible son to inherit the throne.

Fortunately, one of his followers – possibly his chief minister, Upatissa – had founded a petite kingdom of his own close by – Upatissa Nuwara. And he appears to have loyally stepped into the breach when Prince Vijaya died, ruling for a year until Panduvasdeva, Vijaya's nephew arrived from India to assume the throne.

With Panduvasdeva arrival, the time of kings was robustly on its way, albeit at first, little different from the many kingdoms that vied with one another across Tamil Nadu and into India.

Ruling for 30 years (504 – 474 BCE), Panduvasdeva was just what the nascent dynasty needed to entrench itself, his greatest achievements being to rule for decades and produce

heirs, albeit ones fixated on familicide. Whether his many sons all came from the same wife or not is unknown, for the harem was to be a key institution of the royal court, and a magnet for intrigue and politics until the last king of the last kingdom breathed his last.

Panduvasdeva moved his capital to the fortress of Vijithapura, close to what would later become its great capital, Anuradhapura.

Today, he is chiefly remembered for the chaos that later enveloped the country as his 10 sons battled against the morbid predictions of a court soothsayer who predicted that they would all be killed by their nephew, Pandu Kabhaya, son of their only sister, Princess Citta.

Abhaya, Panduvasdeva's eldest son took the throne from his father in 474 BCE. It seems possible that he was smart enough to know that, as king, he had been promoted beyond his level of competence. He ruled with eroding confidence until being dethroned by his brother, Tissa in 454 BCE.

Abhaya's ousting was merely the most public expression of the rising sibling civil wars that had overtaken the country as Panduvasdeva's sons vied for prominence.

Spared his life, Abhaya retreated into a wise obscurity, sensibly declining his nephew's later offer to retake the crown, settling instead for the far less pressured job of running Anuradhapura.

Tissa, Abhaya's immediate replacement, was of a haunted man.Chief amongst his brothers, he was eager to head off the

sinister predictions of the court soothsayer. But it was not to be. His rule was characterised by an ultimately unsuccessful balancing act: feuding with his bothers (many of whom died in the troubles) whilst keeping at bay his nephew Pandu Kabhaya.

As civil war rocked the new nation, Tissa's repeated attempts to find and slay his nephew, Pandu Kabhaya, were all foiled and his reign (454 BCE – 437 BCE) came to a predictable end when Pandu Kabhaya killed him in battle.

3

THE KINGDOM MAKER

437 BCE – 367 BCE

"It was the nearest thing to heaven."

An Affair to Remember

Barely 100 years into their first royal dynasty, Sri Lanka had the great good fortune to encounter Pandu Kabhaya's – one of its greatest kings. Inheriting, at best, a kinglet, he passed onto his successors a fully functioning kingdom that for over 200 years became a byword for opulence, sophistication, and progress.

Pandu Kabhaya's (improbably long) 70 year reign (437 to 367 BCE) would have come as a blessed relief to family and subjects alike after so much dynastic squabbling. Had he failed, it is likely little more would ever have been heard of this fledgling dynasty.

Credited with a smart intelligence that helped him see off repeated pre-ascension assassination attempts, the king set in train the real beginnings of the Anuradhapura Kingdom when he moved his capital to the site and, in Louis XIV-style, began building.

By then the site ofAnuradhapura was already some 200 years old and covered over 20 acres. Pandukabhaya took it to still greater heights.

His rule harnessed the country's expertise in all areas of human endeavour – from farming and engineering to administration and construction, in order to build a capital, and through it, dominate the entire island.Documented remains of a great survey he conducted to assess his kingdom show some 700 villages spreading out across the island from the city of Anuradhapura across land described as raja Ratna – the King's country. This domination was to take time; and for several centuries the kingdom co-existed with other smaller realms to the east and south before it was able to asset its pre-eminence.

From the start Pandu Kabhaya's rule respected his Vedda allies, the Yakkhas, Cittaraja and Kalavela, clans of the island's earliest original inhabitants. The Mahāvaṃsa records his beneficial diligence:

"He settled the Yakkha Kalavela on the east side of the city, the Yakkha Cittaraja at the lower end of the Abhayatank...and on festival-days he sat with Cittaraja beside him on a seat of equal height, and having gods and men to dance before him, the king took his pleasure, in joyous and merry wise.

He laid out also four suburbs as well as the Abhaya-tank, the common cemetery, the place of execution, and the chapel of the Queens of the West, the banyan-tree of Vessavana and the Palmyra-palm of the Demon of Maladies, the ground set apart for the Yonas and the house of the Great Sacrifice; all these he laid out near the west gate.

He set 500 candalas to the work of cleaning the town, 200 candalas to the work of cleaning the sewers, 150 candalas he employed to bear the dead and as many candalas to be watchers in the cemetery. For these he built a village north-west of the cemetery and they continually carried out their duty as it was appointed.

Toward the north-east of the candala-village he made the cemetery, called the Lower Cemetery, for the candala folk. North of this cemetery, between (it and) the Pasana-mountain, the line of huts for the huntsmen were built thenceforth.

Northward from thence, as far as the Gamani-tank, a hermitage was made for many ascetics; eastward of that same

cemetery the ruler built a house for the nigantha Jotiya. In that same region dwelt the nigantha named Giri and many ascetics of various heretical sects. And there the lord of the land built also a chapel for the nigantha Kumbhanda. Toward the west from thence and eastward of the street of the huntsmen lived five hundred families of heretical beliefs.

On the further side of Jotiya's house and on this side of the Gamani tank he likewise built a monastery for wandering mendicant monks, and a dwelling for the ajivakas and a residence for the brahmans, and in this place and that he built a lying-in shelter and a hall for those recovering from sickness.

Ten years after his consecration did Pandu Kabhaya the ruler of Lanka establish the village-boundaries over the whole of the island of Lanka."

As the ancient Athenians were putting the finishing touches to the Acropolis and the nascent Roman Republic issuing its first laws, the palaces and structures of Anuradhapura rose up through the jungle, a tropical Versailles founded on land that betrayed evidence of human occupation going back to at least 10th century BCE – roughly the same time when Solomon became king of Israel.

Anuradhapura was to become one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities – and for 1,500 years was the capital of the island state.

As the Dark Ages fell across the West and society there returned to wattle and daub, the kingdom's engineering, and architectural talents, nurtured over centuries, endowed

Anuradhapura with an almost inexhaustible tally of spectacular new temples, pools, stupas, gardens, palaces, and dwellings. Nor did he appear to neglect the utilitarian, building hospitals, cemeteries, sewers and, in a marvellous feat of ancient engineering, constructing bisokotuwas to regulate the outflow of water from tanks and sluices to secure them against destruction in the annual floods

Trade thrived exponentially; and there are even intriguing hints, documented by The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, of a small group of Greek merchants living in the royal city itself.

Credited with ending the guerrilla warfare that marked the resistance of the original island dwellers against the Vijayans, Pandu Kabhaya's reign not only brought stability but bequeathed future constancy to the island, as his own son, Mutasiva, came to the throne in 367 BCE for a reign (to 307 BCE) that was almost as golden. Sometimes, not often, a country gets lucky, and with this father-son duet, Sri Lanka undoubtedly did.

4

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

307 BCE – 267 BCE

“When a defining moment comes along, you define the moment, or the moment defines you.”

Kevin Costner

A modest mystery immediately greets the hard pressed historian on encountering the death of Sri Lanka's first and possibly greatest king, Pandu Kabhaya.His impossibly long reign – some 70 years (– and that following an extended youth tormenting and eventually killing his uncle) – defies all reasonable expectation of life expectancy at the time.

Some scholars, fretting at the impossible arithmetic athleticism of the great king, helpfully suggest an extra king at this point – a shadowy name emerges from antique mists: Ganatissa, said to be a son of Pandu Kabhaya. Or was he a grandson? Or just a royal blind alley?

It is a mystery that is never likely to be cleared up, but if Ganatissa was an invisible king, Mutasiva, said to have been Pandu Kabhaya' son, emits at least the glimmer of glorious light. His existence is not in question.

His reign was long, and he is said to have enlarged Anuradhapura creating Mahamevnāwa, an enormous park noted for its flowering trees and fruits. And mindful of his dynastic obligations, Mutasiva also produced 9 sons, 5 of whom would rule after him.

Certainly, something went very right during the reigns of Pandukabhaya, (?Ganatissa) and Mutasiva for during this period, civil war, that had rocked the reigns of Panduvasdeva's sons, draws not even the merest whisper in the chronicles. This period of calm government would have enabled the state to become increasingly centralised, and in so doing, embedded Vijayan rule and the ascendency of the Anuradhapura Kingdom across the island. Mutasiva's peaceful death, in 307 BCE, made clear that the Vijayans were there to stay.

It turned out that this was the best of all possible times to take stock of the kingdom, and lift its game.

And it was fortunate that when Sri Lanka's paramount defining moment occurred, it had a king talented enough to make best sense of it, though in the decades after his death, all was nearly lost by feeble heirs and violent invaders.

Devanampiya Tissa, old King Mutasiva's second son, is described by The Mahavaṃsa as being "foremost among all his brothers in virtue and intelligence".

To get anywhere close to this remarkable king (307 – 267 BCE) you should take yourself off to a mountain in Mihintale, 16 kilometres east of Anuradhapura.There stands a modest, much weathered, armless stone statute of Devanampiya Tissa, just over six feet high, gazing out across the grand ruins and remains of the religious citadel. I

t marks the very spot where Sri Lanka became Buddhist. Gaze into the stoney eyes of the king – for, unlike so much other statutory, this one, argue the scholars, actually dates from very close to the death of this Buddhist welcoming monarch.

Like the Vijayans, Buddhism also came from India – and it has naturalised so completely across the island that it is impossible grasp any aspect of the country's past or present, without first comprehending the centrality of this, its main religion.It arrived through a series of intimate stories in which faith follows friendship – for King Devanampiya Tissa had struck up a pen-pal relationship with the celebrated Indian Buddhist emperor, Ashoka.

Gifts followed letters, and a missionary followed the gifts when Ashoka despatched his own son, Mahinda, to Sri Lanka. The young missionary prince was to live on the island for 48 years, out-living Devanampiya Tissa, and dying, aged 80 after a lifetime spent promoting Buddhism, the beneficiary of a state funeral at which his relics were interred in a stupa in Mihintale.

For it was at Mihintale that Mahinda first met Devanampiya Tissa. The king, it was said, was out hunting. Expecting a stag, the ruler instead found himself a missionary. A testing exchange on the nature of things followed, and then a sutra was preached. The rest, as they say, is history.

The conversions began, and the country's history took the most definitive turn in its long journey, becoming – and remaining to this day – a Buddhist country first and foremost, with all that this entailed.

So great were the number of conversions that the king especially built the Maha Vihare (The Great Monastery) in the pleasure gardens of Anuradhapura to house the growing number of Buddhist monks; and for centuries afterwards, the building was to become the centre of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The evidence for all this comes, of course, from The Mahāvaṃsa Chronicle. But it is very likely that Buddhism penetrated the island much earlier. Even so, it took the backing of a king to ensure that the religion became so dominant so fast. And as it did so, it accrued some of the many rituals and ceremonies of the pre Buddhist cults, especially those associated with agriculture and demons. It also helped spread a common language and script, and with it, the power of the

centre for the king was also the formal guardian of the Sanga – the religious organization. Clearly, Mahinda, the young missionary had painted a compelling picture of his new island home in his letters home for he was soon joined by his sister, the nun, Sanghamitta. She brought with her a golden vase in which grew a sapling of Bodhi-Tree taken from the very one under which Buddha himself is said to have attained enlightenment.

Accompanied by a number of other nuns, Sanghamitta landed in the north of the island and was met by King Devanampiya Tissa himself. The party were ceremonially escorted to Anuradhapura along a road softened with white sand. The Bodhi sapling was planted in the Mahameghavana Grove in Anuradhapura, where it still grows. Saṅghamitta later ordained Queen Anula and the women of the court in Buddhism and stayed on in the island, promoting the religion. She died in 203 BCE aged 79, her death prompting national mourning. A stupa was erected over her cremation site in front of the Bodhi-Tree in Anuradhapura.

The king himself built a monastery and temple caves at Mihintale, a site that over successive years grew and grew. Indeed temple caves rapidly became the architectural hit of the time with ordinary people funding a stone mason to do all the necessary work. Between the third century BCE and the first century CE nearly 3,000 such caves were recorded. Other notable buildings followed: monasteries, palaces, the 550 acre Tissa Wewa water tank, still in use today; and the Thuparamaya of Anuradhapura, the county's first stupa – which enshrined the right collarbone of Lord Buddha and whose remains today stretch out over 3 ½ acres. Mutasiva's death after a 40 year reign brought to an end an almost 200 years of Vijayan peace and prosperity.

5

LINE OF ATTACK

367 BCE – 205 BCE

“What goes up must come down”

Isaac Newton

The death of Sri Lanka's visionary king, Devanampiya Tissa, ushered in a period of unnerving calm. All seemed fine with the state – and yet something, somewhere, was going fatally wrong, leaving it wide open to invasion.

If there was a serious shortcoming in the reign of Devanampiya Tissa, it was his apparent lack of children; and in the 30 years that followed two of his brothers and possibly even an uncle took up the royal reins, with little obvious beneficial effect – as far as the country was concerned.

First up was Uththiya, one of old king Mutasiva's many sons. His ten year rule from 267 BCE to 257 BCE is a marvel of obscurity.

He was succeeded by his brother, Mahasiwa, whose own ten year rule, from 257 BCE – 247 BCE, goes almost as unremembered – apart from the fact that he built the Nagarangana Monastery.

By the time Mahasiwa's uncle, Surathissa, took the throne in 247 BCE, things were clearly going most seriously wrong, and the young country would have been wise to take to heart the words of the Egyptian writer, Suzy Kassem: "Never follow a follower who is following someone who has fallen. Its why the whole world is falling apart."

For by now the kingdom itself was falling apart. It had become so ineptly run and poorly defended as to lay itself wide open to invasion – the first recoded invasion of the country from South India.

Three kings, and three decades on from the kingdom's apparent apogee, the governance of the country had clearly eroded –

and badly. The systems, protections, administration, and defences put in by the last two or three great kings had broken down, the reason a matter on which speculation could rest until the return of the dodo itself. Why did it all go so very wrong? No one knows. But the state no long had its eye on the ball.

Clearly Devanampiya Tissa's heirs had in very short supply the ten perfections that make the life of Buddha aspirants positive: morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, forbearance, truthfulness, resolution, kindness, equanimity, and liberality.

The invasion came in the ignominious form of couple of Tamil horse traders, Sena and Guttik.

Spotting the ultimate commercial opportunity (a kingdom) in the weak rule of King Surathissa, the traders met little resistance in conquering Anuradhapura and slaughtering the ineffectual Surathissa. They were to rule it for 22 years, the first of a succession of Tamil invaders.

It was a humiliating end to the golden years of the Vijayan dynasty. And yet, like the immortal jellyfish, Turritopsis dohrnii, dead, in this case, did not mean dead – for the fight had not quite left the Vijayans.

Out there in the wilderness lay Asela, another son of old King Mutasiva. After Surathissa was killed, Asela took refuge far south in the Kingdom of Ruhuna – a sub kingdom that had been established by Mahanaga, another son of King Mutasiva.

Descending on the horse trader kings with much shattered dignity to put right, Asela killed them in battle.

After decades of poor rule followed by a pair of asset stripping Indian merchants, there was much that King Asela had to put right.

But the task proved too much for him and his own rule was brought to an abrupt end 10 years later in 205 BCE when he himself was killed in battle by Ellara, an invading Tamil Chola.

That he should meet such an end, after so much trouble to restore his family's right to reign, seems almost unfair – but as Nicholas Sparks gloomily observed ""life, I've learned, is never fair. If people teach anything in school, that should be it."

Ellara was to rule the Anuradhapuran Kingdom for 44 years, smashing the awesome edifice of Vijayan rule that had already given the island so much of its lasting cultural identity.

6

THE JUST KING

205 BCE – 161 BCE

“The sword of justice has no scabbard.”

Antione De Riveral

Invaders are rarely liked and often forgotten. But the 44 year reign of the Tamil king, Ellalan, merits much more than a modest footnote in the island's story. Unlike almost all other conquerors before or since, Ellalan cherished his kingdom as much as any man might his own home. He came to rule – not rape and pillage.

In the northern Tamil city of Jaffa stands a curious white clock tower, with Italianate windows, Roman pillars, and a little minaret. Built by subscription to honour the 1875 visit of Prince of Wales, it was damaged in the civil war and repaired, partly with the help of a later Prince of Wales, Charles, in 2002. Before it, as if leading a charge, is a golden elephant, ridden by a golden king – Elara, or in Tamil, Ellalan.

Ellalan (205 BCE – 161 BCE) is a strange figure, his Tamilness eliciting not even a scintilla of condemnation in The Mahāvaṃsa, which notes instead "a Damila of noble descent, named Elara, who came hither from the Cola-country to seize on the kingdom, ruled when he had overpowered king Asela, forty-four years, with even justice toward friend and foe, on occasions of disputes at law.,"

The ancient text then goes onto illuminate Ellalan's many acts of justice and generosity. Just, to the point of terrifying, he even executed his own son for transgressing the law. Virtuous though he was, Ellalan was, all the same, a footnote for the Vijayans were not yet finished with their rule.

The main line of succession had been destroyed, but a cadet branch existed in the southern Kingdom of Ruhuna, a Vijayan redoubt ruled over by the descendants of King Devanampiya Tissa's brother, Mahanaga.

The Kingdom of Ruhuna had never really been part of the Anuradhapura domain. Indeed, since at least the reign of King Surathissa the Anuradhapura Kingdom itself had begun to fracture, The Mahāvamsa pointing out the presence of 32 semi-independent Tamil states coexisting alongside King Ellalan's Anuradhapura.

Ruhana at this time was fortunate enough to be ruled by the Vijayan King, Kavantissa, who pursued a focused and implacable strategy of soaking up the little would-be challenging kingships the boarded his land.

By the time of his death he had created a powerful southern state, one that was perfectly poised to help the family regain control of Anuradhapura itself.

The death of King Kavantissa let loose a predictable sibling spat, carried out by his two sons, Dutugemunu and Tissa. In a series of trials involving elephants, the kidnapping of the dowager queen, and set-piece battles, Dutugemunu emerged victorious.

His victory in his home kingdom was to have a profound impact on the island as a whole for it was in his reign that the Vijayans were to finally assert their dominance across the entire island.

A notable adherent of Walt Disney's modus operandi ("Around here, however, we don't look backwards for very long"), Dutugemunu, throne secure, set off for the north with an army of chariots, monks, horses, a lucky spear, his favourite elephant (Kandula) and, states The Mahāvamsa, Ten Giant Warriors (Nandhimitra, Suranimala, Mahasena, Theraputtabhya,

Gotaimbara, Bharana, Vasabha, Khanjadeva, Velusamanna, and Phussadeva). Composed, as was normal of four units – elephants, horses, chariots, and infantry – the army was spectacularly successful.

Having learnt much from his sagacious father, Dutugemunu began by first mopping up the splintered Tamil statelets in the north. The campaigns reached their climax outside the walls of Anuradhapura.

The old king Ellalan, mounted on his elephant Mahäpabbata, faced his younger rival, mounted on his elephant, Kandula. Did he tremble when he heard Dutugemunu call out 'none shall kill Ellalan but myself'?

We can but guess. The ancient texts report that the deadly combat was honourable but decisive, a spear thrust finally ending Ellalan's life in 161 BCE. The records state that ''the water in the tank there was dyed red with the blood of the slain'. And perhaps in acknowledgment of Ellalan's fine reputation, the king had his victim cremated properly and a stupa constructed over the pyre.

"Even to this day," comments The Mahāvaṃsa, "the princes of Lanka, when they draw near to this place, are wont to silence their music'.

7

RISE AND FALL

161 BCE – 103 BCE

“There is a great deal of ruin in a nation.”

Adam Smith

For a glorious, albeit extended moment, it seems as if the Vijayan good times had returned. Dutugemunu's nature, clear from his early childhood, was naturally geared to dominate, take control, and direct. Not for nothing does island history remember him as “the great”.

Certainly, his victory in 161 BCE left him ruling nearly the whole of the island – more territory by far than even that of the great king, Pandu Kabhaya.

And as if to confirm the return of Vijayan order, the construction of more buildings commenced. Anuradhapura expanded exponentially, its infrastructure, utilities, water resources so upgraded as to ensure that it would flourish for centuries to come, the longest surviving capital city of the Indian sub-continent.

Still more spectacular was the building of many of its most celebrated structures. A large monastery, the Maricavatti, was erected, together with a nine-story chapter house for monks, with a bright copper-tiled roof; and most famous of all, what is today called the Ruwanweliseya, the Great Stupa which housed Buddha’s begging bowl.

The building programme was not restricted to the capital alone – 89 other temples are said to have been constructed, along with hospitals and smaller tanks. Trade opened up with the west, the ports busy with merchants from Arabia, Persia and possibly even Rome.

But back at the palace, events were going less smoothly. Dutugemunu's heir, Saliya, having fallen for a girl from one of

the lowest castes, was disinherited. The ailing king, dying before his eye-catching Stupa was finished, ensured the throne passed instead to his own brother, Saddha Tissa in 137 BCE.

For the next 33 years it seemed as if life had got back to normal, or to whatever passed for normal amidst the seemingly indestructible building and gardens of Anuradhapura.

King Saddha Tissa busied himself building the obligatory new monastery and, more usefully, a tremendous water tank, the Duratissa Reservoir which held 336 million cubic feet of water.

But as the late British prime minister Harold Macmillan remarked on the unpredictability of politics, the sudden appearance of "events, dear boy, events," was to unseat everything.

Saddha Tissa's death, 18 years later in 119 BCE, set off a power struggle, with his son, Thulatthana, taking the throne – though not for long. It also fired the gun to start the dynasty's race towards its next great disaster, just 15 years later.

Thulatthana coronation was a crowing too soon. He was not, in all probability, the next legitimate heir, that honour going to his older brother, Lanja Tissa. But Lanja Tissa was busy far south of Anuradhapura, in Ruhuna, and so not on site to determine the right order of succession.

Inevitably, war broke out – albeit briefly. Thulatthana was defeated and killed and for the rest of 119 BCE to 109 BCE, Lanja Tissa ruled the kingdom, with, no doubt, much justified satisfaction.

His death, ten years later, brough his brother, another son of

King Saddha Tissa to the throne, Khallata Naga.

Khallata Naga's inheritance was much impoverished by the events of the past years. Something was broken within the kingdom – some abiding sense of order and law.

The palace coup and murder around king Thulatthana had shunted the state back to how it was in 205 BCE, when the luckless king Asela was killed, having been unable to repair the damage reaped on the kingdom by his more careless rulers.

And just now, it was all to depressingly similar. Dynastic self-harm had normalized treason, regicide, and rebellion. The state was unstable. And ungovernable.

Inevitably therefore, Khallata Naga found himself busy quelling rebellions – but to no avail. Killed by his own chief general in 103 BCE, another messy power struggle broke out before Valagamba – yet another son of King Saddha Tissa – took the throne in 103 BCE by killing the general and – in an act of reckless trust – adopted the general's son and marrying his wife.

8

MUSICAL CHAIRS

103 BCE – 77 BCE

“And then there were none”

Agatha Christie

With the murder of Khallata Naga, the Anuradhapuran Kingdom made the leap to regularizing regicide as if it was no more unusual than brushing one's teeth.

Valagamba – the rightful heir and son of King Saddha Tissa – had first to defeat and kill Kammaharattaka, Khallata Naga's nemesis, before he himself could take what he clearly saw as his rightful place at the head of things.

This he seems to have achieved with reasonable briskness, for by 103 BCE he was king. And obviously one who felt uncommonly safe –one of his first acts was to adopt the general's son and marry his wife.

But decades of royal misrule had set in train a reaping of deadly consequences. Barely had the celebratory kiribath had time to be digested than all the hounds of hell slipped their leads.

A rebellion broke out in Rohana.A devastating drought began – a less than positive development in a land where the king was considered to have the power to cause rain. The kingdom's preeminent port, Māhatittha (now Mantota, opposite Mannar) fell to Dravidian Tamil invaders.

And at a battle at Kolambalaka, the hapless King Valagamba himself was defeated, racing from the battlefield in a chariot lightened by the (accidental?) exit of his wife, Queen Somadevi.

In a 14 year tableau reminiscent of Agatha Christie's novel "Five Little Pigs" the grand Anuradhapura Kingdom was then

manhandled to atrophy. Two of the Dravidians returned to India, leaving one of the remaining five, Pulahatta, to rule from 104–101 BCE, with history struggling to keep up.

Pulahatta was killed by Bahiya, another of the five remaining Dravidians and head of the army, who was in turn murdered in 99 BCE by Panayamara, the third Dravidian who had been unwisely promoted to run the army.

Proving those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, Panayamara was assassinated in 92 BCE by his general, the fourth Dravidian, Pilayamara. Seven months was all Pilayamara managed to last – before dying in skirmishes with rebels and passing the throne to the last Dravidian and army commander, Dathika who ruled until his defeat in battle in 89 BCE.

Despite losing his throne back in 103 BCE, the deposed king Valagamba had evaded capture, his many escapes and hiding places illuminating the map of Sri Lanka like a Catch-Me-If-You-Can treasure hunt.

His most famous hideaway was probably the Gunadaha Rajamaha Viharaya in Galagedera, just where the flat plains of the Anuradhapura Kingdom rise into the mountains that enfold the centre of the island, and with them, protection and cover. From that time to the final routing of the invaders in 89 BCE, Valagamba carried out a guerrilla war that, month by month, won ascendency.

Eventually grappling his way back to power in 89 BCE, Valagamba retook his crown through a series of small, successful incremental skirmishes – although, given the

murderous incompetence of his Dravidian interlopers, it may have been like pushing on an open door.

Valagamba's long and determined campaign to win back the throne he had earlier enjoyed just for a few months marks him out as one of the country's pluckiest rulers. His defeat and killing of the upstart Dathika in 89 BCE, gavehim 12 years of real rule, and put the dynasty back at the centre of the state.

Valagamba set to work building a monastery, stupa and more memorably converting the Dambulla caves in which he hid during his wilderness years, into the famous Rock Temple that exists today.

Less adroitly, Valagamba managed to drive a wedge between the monks, his favouritism of one sect for another, setting in motion the island's first Buddhist schism.

Despite this, it was under Valagamba's patronage that 30 miles north of Kandy 500 monks gathered at the Aluvihare Rock Temple to write down the precepts of Buddhism.

It was to be momentous moment. Until then Buddha's teachings had been passed on orally – but repeated Chola invasions from India left the monks fearful that his teachings would be lost. The challenge they had set themselves was immense. Firstly, they had to recite the doctrines. That would have taken several years. Then they had to agree on an acceptable version of the teachings before transcription. That must have taken even longer. Finally came the lengthy work of transcribing them, using ola leaves from talipot palms.

The Pāli Canon became the standard scripture of Theravada

Buddhism's, written in the now extinct Pāli language, an ancient Indian language, thought to be the language spoken by Buddha and used in Sri Lanka until the fifth century AD. Scholars argue (as they do) about how much of the work can be attributed to one person or to Buddha himself – but believers are largely free of such elaborate debates.

The Cannon lays out in clear and unambiguous terms the doctrines, and rules of conduct Buddhists should follow. It is made up of three parts:

1.The Vinaya concerns itself mainly with the rules for monks and nuns.

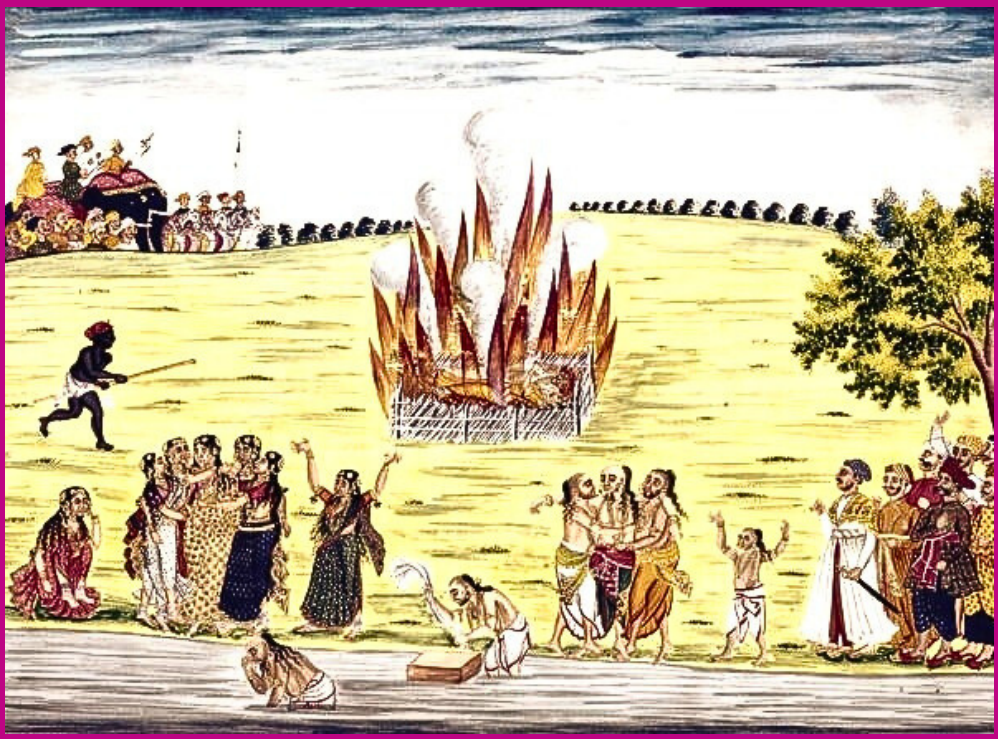
2.The Sutta Pitaka is the Cannon's practical heart, comprising around 10,000 teachings and poems of Buddha and his close companions that focus on the typical challenges of life.

3.The Abhidhamma Piṭaka is where the higher teachings sit – the ones most focused around Enlightenment.

Running to some 80,000 pages, the Pali Canon is roughly the size of a dozen Bibles. The cave temple in which it was created still exists, with numerous caverns and old inscriptions to view, despite parts of it having being destroyed in the 19 CE Matale Rebellion.

The monks were probably still hard at work on The Pāli Canon when Valagamba died in 77 BCE, bringing his adopted son, Mahakuli Mahatissa to power.

9



DEADLY LOVE

77 BCE – 21 CE

“Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.”

Back When We Were Grownups,
Anne Tyler

It took over barely 40 years for the penultimate Vijayan kings to lay out the full and 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.

History hints that the Valagamba's succession may not have been entirely orderly; if so, then Valagamba's earlier trust in adopting Mahakuli Mahatissa, the son of his slain and traitorous enemy, can be read as a suicidal move.

But however he came to the throne, Mahakuli Mahatissa stayed the course, though whether he did anything constructive remains a niggling historical curiosity. What is known however, is that what came next proved right the Calvin and Hobbes' astute observation: "It's never so bad that it can't get any worse."

On the face of it, Mahakuli Mahatissa's succession seemed to go to plan. His stepbrother, Choura Naga, the son of King Valagamba took the throne in 62 BCE and married Anula.

Anula would turn out to be one of the island's more colourful characters. What little is known of poor King Choura Naga is that he managed to get himself poisoned by Anula in 50 BCE.

The widowed queen placed his little step 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.

Clearly the problems they faced in their relationship were beyond mere counselling for Siva was despatched in the same

tried and tested method, and the queen installed a new lover, Vatuka, to 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 in similar fashion by Darubhatika Tissa, a wood carrier – who also failed to measure up.

Her last throw of the love dice was Niliya, a palace priest who 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.

And so, from 43 to 42 BCE she ruled in her own name, Asia's first female head of state, beating President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga by two thousand and thirty six years.

Anula's own 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 fragmented to ash, clockwork royal leadership took the place of palace coups.

Could it be that after all this turmoil, the kingdom was given time to recover, repair and heal?

For eighteen blissfully uneventful Kutakanna Tissa ruled with monkish devotion.

He was succeeded by his son, Bhathika Abhaya in 20 BCE.

The peaceful passing on of power seemed a welcome new trend set to continue when King Bhathika Abhaya was himself succeeded by his younger brother Mahadatika Mahanaga in 9 CE.

And then, yet again, in 21 CE when king Mahadatika Mahanaga was succeeded by his son, Amandagamani Abhaya.

But, as Woody Allen noted, "if you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans."

10

THE FINAL CURTAIN

21 CE – 66 CE

“By blood a king, in heart a clown.”

Alfred Lord Tennyson

King Amandagamani Abhaya ascent to the throne in 21 CE was both fair and orderly. Even so, the dynastic DNA had long before morphed into a penchant for regicide, and in 30 CE this fatal habit was to reappear, heralding the dynasty's final moments – ones that not even the most sensational or improbable soap operas could ever hope to emulate.

There was little if any warning. It all just happened, a wave that gathered force, violence, and incredulity, the nearer it drew. Kanirajanu Tissa, King Amandagamani Abhaya's brother waited just 9 years before wielding the family knife, killing his sibling in 30 CE, and seizing the throne for himself.

Proving right the old adage that one's crimes eventually catch up with you, Kanirajanu Tissa's own reign was terminated after just 3 suspiciously short years and turbulent when in 33 CE, Chulabhaya, son of the assassinated Amandagamani Abhaya became king. He is down in the records as having died naturally, though this might credibly require a reworking of the word's definition.

Chulabhaya's managed to last little longer, but pragmatists now sensibly took to counting reigns in multiples of months, not years. Three years later, in 35 CE Chulabhaya too was dead and his sister Sivali took the throne in 35 CE.

The ascension of Sri Lanka's second female head of state, Queen Sivali, in 35 CE probably did more to hasten, rather than slow down, the Vijayan dynasty's final tryst with oblivion.What she lacked in the blood thirsty and ruthless qualities that had so marked out Anula, the country's first female ruler, she did not seem able to make up for with any resolute authority.

Perhaps it was already too late for all that. For decades now the kingdom's rulers had demonstrated a greater interest in seizing the throne than ever ruling it with wisdom or strength.

Sivali's rule laid bare the incipient civil war that had been raging through the palace corridors earlier.The only difference this time was that the dynasty suddenly found itself with another dynasty one to deal with, the Lambakarna – and not just itself, exhausting enough as that was.

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.

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

For a time Ilanaga seemed to be ahead of the pack. But he then seems to have scoured a perfect own-goal when he demoted the entire Lambakarna clan for failing to attend to him in what he regarded as a right and proper fashion. This abrupt change in their caste, in country held increasingly rigid by ideas of caste, galvanised them into full scale rebellion. The king – if king he really was – fell and fled into 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.

Inevitably, perhaps, Chandra Mukha Siva got himself murdered by his own brother Yassalalaka Thissa in 52 CE – so setting the stage for one of 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 Mahavaṃsa 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 hand and put the ex-palace guard to death.

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

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 bequeathed it with a legacy of literature, architecture, religion, and infrastructure that no other dynasty bettered.

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

DISCOVER MORE

A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret. The Ceylon Press aims to make its complicated story more accessible.

Its history can be read in A History of Sri Lanka, or listened to as a podcast. The Companion to Sri Lanka makes visible more of the whole – from its arts to its history. The digital Museum of Sri Lanka aims to unite the island's artefacts – scattered around the world into a single exhibition. Its downloadable Books – the I Spy, Pocket Professor and Tiny Guide series – cover subjects from religion, belief, history, travel, nature, culture, to the arts, language, people, and place. Its podcast, Poetry from the Jungle presents the work of 80 poets to reset the literary canon. And in case it all gets too serious, it offers the off-grid Jungle Diaries blog, or as a Podcast. All these works are now in progress, added to weekly and available free on theceylonpress.com.