



GUARDIANS OF THE GATE

The Story of Sri Lanka's
Lost Dynasty

The Ceylon Press
Pocket Professor

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THE GUARDIANS

67 CE

“We did not choose to be the guardians of the gate, but there is no one else.”

Lyndon B. Johnson

In 1929, as Wall Street crashed and the roaring twenties came to an abrupt end, archaeologists digging in faraway Trincomalee uncovered the remains of a once-lofty temple, built a stone's throw from the Indian Ocean, sometime after 307 CE.

Beneath earth, trees, and jungle, stretching out to the shores of a great lake, the Velgam Vehera's many scattered ruins were brought back to sight for the first time in centuries: brick stupas, stone inscriptions, balustrades, buildings, moon stones – and mura gals.

These mura gals – or guard stones – are especially moving, standing in silent upright pose, guardians of the flights of steps that had led a multitude of forgotten people out of the everyday and into the sacred temple itself.

The steps they protect have worn down to just a few flights, the moonstone they encompass is almost entirely rubbed away; the temple beyond is now just an outline of ancient bricks, and the guard stones themselves are plain, almost stumpy, but still doing their ageless job as sentinels of the site.

Similar guard stones stand in many other parts of the island, easy to see if you know what you are looking for, silent guardians of the state within. For to be a guardian is no little thing.

Guardian is an emotive word in Sri Lanka. It can be found incorporated by health and education providers, insurance companies, the army, the priesthood, the home guard, air force, a news website, hotel and even a wedding business. But long

ago it was also the meaning given to the Lambakarnas, the dynasty that succeeded the founding Vijayans.

Originating possibly in India, it is likely that the Lambakarnas claimed descent from Sumitta – a prince who formed part of the escort that had brought the Bodhi-tree from India in 250 CE. From this botanical pilgrimage, they would go on to become one of the island's great barons, alongside other such families as Moriyans, Taracchas and Balibhojaks.

Their own power derived from their position as hereditary guardians or secretaries to the king. They took a prominent part in religious ceremonies. But there was more to them than merely carrying coronation parasols and flags. They were connected to the military, to weapon manufacture and, as writers, must have been involved in much of the important administration of the kingdom.

They managed the transition from one of several aristocratic families to ruling family with what at first appeared to be consummate ease. After the ruinous excesses of the last Vijayans, the new dynasty seemed to grip the one fundamental axiom of kingship: govern well, live long.

They were to rule all or much of the island (depending on the period) over two distinct periods. The first of these was to last for 369 years through the reigns of 26 monarchs, from 67 CE to 436 CE.

This period, just over half the length of the Vijayans, saw them twice facing utter ruin. The first time this happened they managed to draw back from the regicide and power implosions

that rocked them to regain their savoir faire. But the second outbreak propelled them inexorably to their destruction, leaving the state weak, distracted, and unable to fend off an invasion of the island from the Pandyan dynasty of South India.

Just under half the Lambakarna monarchs were to die at the hands of their successors, victims to a predilection for assassination that ran like a malign monomeric thread through their DNA.

Even so, the nation they left behind was bigger, richer, more complex, developed and built out that it had been on its inheritance by them back in 67 CE. Stupas, monasteries, reservoirs, canals, temples, and dwellings filled out the land. The mores of society progressed. Agriculture flourished and technical advances from construction through to medicine bestowed its benefits on the kingdom.

It was strong enough to weather repeated religious schisms, as well as succession crises; and – ultimately – its 16 year occupation by Tamil kings to enable the country to bounce back, albeit this time under yet another new dynasty.

2



YEARS OF PLENTY

67 CE – 193 CE

"Go buy us pizza. With extra cheese, Richie Rich."

Maggie Stiefvater

Overcaution, on behalf of the last (albeit fraudulent) Vijayan king, propelled the new Lambakarnan dynasty and its first king to the throne.

The soothsayers had been busy whispering appalling forecasts into the ear of Subharaja, the reigning Anuradhapuran king, foretelling of his certain destiny with death at the hands of someone called Vasabha.

Herod-like, the troubled monarch ordered the execution of anyone of that name – not quite on the scale of the massacre of the innocents as in Bethlehem in 2 BCE – but certainly in a similarly bloodthirsty league. Had Subharaja not acted as he did, it is quite possible that he would not have created a persecution complex in one particular Vasabha, now bent on excising the source of his danger.

Subharaja had come into the throne by impersonating the then king, Yassalalaka Tissa, so convincingly it seems that he successfully managed to kill him, and carry on ruling. The story, coming to us via the famous *Mahāvamsa Chronicle*, is too bizarre to wreck with close questioning.

But true or not, Subharaja was no Vijayan despite his pretence to belonging to the ruling dynasty and his grip on power would have been modest at best.

Just a few decades earlier the Lambakarna family had exerted their considerable familial power and plunged the country into a civil war that saw at least one legitimate ruler vanquished.

They were ready to do it all over again, unimpressed as any half

way decent aristocrat might be by the pretensions of an imposter king.

Needless to say as the wretched bodies of perfectly innocent men called Vasabha piled up across the island, the one the soothsayer actually had in mind managed to evade capture, betrayal, and execution.

Prince Vasabha was the kind of Lambakarnan that the dynasty could have well done with a few more of as it migrated from aristocratic family to ruling family. Rather like the Calvary in old American Westerns, the new king arrived in the nick of time. The state, if not quite worn out, was stumbling on with the political equivalent of one leg, two broken hips and a congenital heart disease.

Recruiting an army, Vasabha wasted little time in putting it to proper use. By 67 CE King Subharaja was dead and the Vijayan dynasty deposited at the sorrowful gates of the historical cul de sac into which they would disappear.

Having taken one prediction to heart and with such apparent rewards, the new king took the next one just as seriously. He would die, the soothsayers now warned, within 12 years. Given that his reign lasted an astonishing 44 years (a feat both credible and unusual), modern pollsters who also went awry can take comfort from the long history of erroneous prophecies (Brexit, "Dewey Defeats Truman," or more locally the 2015 presidential election that saw out Mahindra Rajapaksa).

But the effect of their severe projections turbo charged the new king marking him just the kind of man Benjamin Franklin might

have had in mind when he said: "you may delay, but time will not."

Almost immediately the new king started a major programme of building works - not only of the obligatory monasteries and stupas which he constructed in a feverish haste to appease his maker, but of massive infrastructure works too.

Eleven reservoirs, such as those at Mahavilachchiya and Nochchipotana, some with a circumference of two miles, were built. Twelve canals were dug to distribute their water. Rivers were dammed, and crops raised in new places with greater certainty than ever before. With plentiful water and the restitution of agriculture, the building blocks on which any centralized power rested were back in place, better than ever before. The state could prosper.

Island-wide inscriptions testify to the power of the resurgent Kingdom stretching once again to Jaffa in the north, Situlpawwa and Tissamaharama in the south, Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the east and Kurunegala in the centre.

The great kingdom of Anuradhapura, brought to a state of civil war and near destitution by the previous Vijayan dynasty, was once again serene and strong, a fully functioning island-wide entity, once more capable of planning for the future and not just mere survival.

Truly had Vasabha earned his place as one of the country's greatest kings, the equal of best of the Vijayans, Vijaya, Pandu Kabhaya, Devanampiya Tissa, and Dutugemunu.

For decades after his death in 111 CE his shadow loomed across

his kingdom as it basked in the success and rewards of good governance, surviving with little effect the disastrous but brief reign of his successor and son, Vankanasika Tissa.

Although we have no dates for the new king's age, Vankanasika Tissa would have been no youngster on assuming his throne, given how long his father's reign had been.

It was his great misfortune to time his reign with that of Karikala the, the greatest of the early Chola emperors in Tamil India. Having taken most of south India under his control Karikala sighted next upon Sri Lanka.

A military genius, Karikala was ever bound to win in any war, and his brief and surgical strike across the seas dealt Sri Lanka a bitter, albeit, fleeting, defeat - and left it much poorer in manpower.

The impetus for this particular Chola invasion appears to have been recruitment - for Karikala for busy building the famous Kaveri Dam that would later provide a major part of southern India with the water necessary for the growing quantities of millet and maize on which his kingdom depended.

Dams need builders and Karikala, needing a lot of them, took away 12,000 Sinhalese men to work as slaves on his new dam.

There is no evidence that the defeated Vankanasika Tissa died anything but a natural death two years after taking the throne in 113 CE. But his convenient departure made way for his son Gajabahu I to become king, a monarch who had the winning ways of his grandfather, Vasabha.

This third Lambakarnan king was to rule for 22 years. His governance remembered for its predictable religious sensibility – and its military might, the two not often going hand in hand.

He built monasteries (in Matuvihara and Rumika) and a stupa (Abhayuttara). More remarkably, he also co-opted the Hindu goddess Pattini to Sri Lanka. Several of her temples remain on the island, and she is still worshipped, the Buddhist patron goddess of fertility and health, an iconic ancient link that evokes deep and pacific links between the island's two main religions that are often overlooked. She is even one of just five figures honoured in the annual Kandy Perehera, the country's supreme Buddhist festival – which some historians date to around the reign of King Gajabahu himself.

The king also managed to find her sacred anklet, said still to be hidden in the Hanguranketha Temple near Nuwara Aylia. This move which did not stop him also liberating the alms bowl of Buddha from India to Sri Lanka, a vessel with a history and provenance now every bit as complex as that of the Holy Grail.

But it is his military capabilities that are most honoured today, not least in the Sri Lanka Army's infantry regiment, The Gajaba Regiment, or the country's Navy with its ship the SLNS Gajabahu.

For Gajabahu did that rarest of things: he took the fight with the Cholas, to the Cholas, leading an army to southern India to liberate the 12,000 thousand Sinhalese prisoners seized in his father's reign.

Ancient sources also mention other visits to Tamil kings, this time more peaceful. Trade too seems to have flourished.

Excavations at the ancient (now partially underwater) port of Godavaya in the far south have unearthed his regulations regarding custom tolls – as well as a collection of seventy five thousand Roman coins.

Almost little is known of his personal life, and nothing to explain why he was succeeded in 135 CE by his father or son-in-law, Mahallaka Naga.

Said to be the wrong side of late middle age at the time of his ascension, Mahallaka Naga, the new king still managed to live on until 141 CE before handing things with the sort of blameless succession choreography that more modern leaders like Mugabe or Trump might have learnt much from.

Little is known about his son, Bhatika Tissa's relatively long 24 year reign but if, as Thomas Carlyle noted, "silence is golden," the kingdom's golden years continued; and the monarch, though obscure, must have a much deserved place amongst the dynasty's more successful rulers.

The reliable historical record is also mute on the next ruler too – Kanittha Tissa, a brother to the late king and another son of Mahallaka Naga.

Kanittha Tissa's chalked up a rule 4 years longer than that of his brother, governing from his brother's death in 165 CE to his own in 193 CE.

“No news is good news,” noted a later English king renowned for being “the ‘wisest fool in Christendom.”

And so one might assume of this indistinct reign. Certainly, in the years that followed, the reign would have looked - along with 4 of the 5 previous ones, as the lush salad days of the Lambakarnas.

3



OVERKILL

193 - 253 CE

“Where's Papa going
with that axe?”

Charlotte's Web

After 126 years so stable and propitious as to suggest they might never end, the Lambakarnas settled down to that great pastime of the late Vijayan kings – regicide. The preoccupation would test the very stability of the kingdom they has so assiduously built.

On Kanittha Tissa's death in 193 CE, his son, Cula Naga assumed power, only to be assassinated by his bother Kuda Naga in 195 CE. Nothing is known about the murder, but it unlikely to have been carried out for the greater good of the kingdom. Kuda Naga must have earned the sort of censure that helped despatch him to the uncertain fields of reincarnation when his own brother-in-law, Siri Naga I had him killed that same year.

It seemed as if the Regicide Game has fizzled out. Certainly for the next 41 years family politics took a backseat to good governance.

The new king, Siri Naga I, reigning for 20 years, even found time and resource to make good some of Anuradhapura's most famous buildings – the great stupa of Ruwanweliseya, said to house more of Lord Budda's relics than anywhere else in the world; the famous Brazen Palace with a roof of bronze tiles, the tallest structure on the island, and a fine new set of stone steps leading to the sacred Bo tree itself. When Siri Naga died in 215 CE his son Voharika Tissa took the throne.

What little the historical records have to tell us about the new king are glowing. A strong proponent of non-violence, he enacted several reforms to promote the practice. Erring on the side of conservative Buddhism, he also attempted to supresses new variants of Mahayana Buddhism which were threatening to

eat away at the Theravada Buddhism that had dominated the island since its introduction in 2 BCE during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa.

In spite of (or perhaps, because of) the nature of such a king, he found his throne snatched away from him by his brother, Abhaya Naga, 22 years into his reign.

The regicide fizzle was back. Rumoured to be fuelled by the adulterous affair he was having with the queen, Abhaya Naga recruited a Tamil mercenary army and assassinated his brother in 237 CE.

The next 17 years were to see the dynasty plunged a second time into homicidal politics – though, remarkably the new fratricidal king was to die naturally, in 245 CE, an achievement of sorts.

Word of Abhaya Naga's death was rushed to the Ruhuna redoubt, that place in the far south of the island forever just-so-slightly out of Anuradhapuran control. Here, Siri Naga, Ahaya Naga embittered nephew, son of the slain Voharika Tissa, had been holding out since his father's murder.

Claiming his rightful inheritance the new king hastened back to Anuradhapura to take to the throne as King Siri Naga II. Sadly, he was to enjoy just 3 years of kingship. His death, in 247 CE was also, apparently natural, and he was succeeded by his own son, Vijaya Kumara.

And this is where the real trouble began. Within a year the young king was dead, murdered by three Lambakarna relatives in 248 AD.

Like the deadly tale behind a bloodthirsty Jacobean tragedy, a plot was hatched by three distant relatives from the Lambakarna clan. Little is known of its details – but one can guess at them by seeing how it played out.

One by one the coup leaders took their turn to be king.

First up was Sangha Tissa, whose reign ended with predictable abruptness five years later in 252 CE. The second plotter took his turn, reigning as King Siri Sangha Bodhi I from 252 to 254.

Despite his earlier handiwork, The Mahāvamsa takes a gentle and forgiving tone to him, his devotion to Buddhism so absolute that he refused to execute criminals. Facing a rebellion by the third plotter, Gathabhaya, he voluntarily abdicated and retired to the forest to live as an ascetic after a reign of just three years in 253 CE. And in an end both grisly, contradictory, and anatomically impressive, he then decapitated himself to enable a poor peasant to collect the bounty on his head, bringing to an end nearly sixty years of royal knockabout.

The third plotter, Gotabhaya, was made of much sterner stuff. What he lacked in charm, charity, and religious tolerance, he made up for with the sort of firm government that took the fizz out of regicide.

4



BACK TO THE FUTURE

254 – 370 CE

“Peace and love,
peace and love!”

Ringo Starr

Gotabhaya, the third of the three Lambakarna family plotters, seized the kingdom in 253 or 254 CE. For 14 years he ruled it with the proverbial rod of iron.

A man of deeply conservative religious beliefs, he was unimpressed by the Vajrayana movement, a form of tantric Buddhism that was making slim but noticeable appearances into his kingdom. The movement was closely aligned with Mahayana Buddhism and seen by many as incompatible with the Theravāda Buddhism that had been practiced on the island since the 3 BCE.

The king did all he could to thwart it, even banishing 60 monks for such beliefs.

But what he kept out with one door slammed shut, he inadvertently let in with another. For he entrusted his sons' education to an Indian monk named Sanghamitta, a follower of Vaitulya Buddhism. This doctrinal strand was even more radical than the Vajrayana doctrine he was so busy trying to eradicate. Like a time bomb, the impact of this private religious education on his successor, was timed to go off the moment Gotabhaya died.

His death, in 267 CE, left behind a divided country. Several ministers refused to participate in his funeral rites and his son and heir, Jetta Tissa I, a chip off the monstrous old block, had sixty of them rounded up, staking their impaled heads in a mournful circle around the old king's body.

This display of strong-armed governance under yet another king was probably precisely what was needed to help keep at bay

the lurking regicidal tendencies inherent in the dynasty. Jetta Tissa's decade long rule is unlike to have been an easy ride for those around him. Indeed, states the Mahavamsa Chronicle "he came by the surname: the Cruel" It then elaborates with evident dismay the steps he took to move patronage and resource from the orbit of Theravāda Buddhism to Vaitulya Buddhism.

From the perspective of the majority Theravāda Buddhists, life got still worse when Mahasen, the king's brother, took the throne in 277 CE, a succession notable for being natural. Like his brother, Mahasen had been educated by the radical monk Sanghamitta

A twenty seven year reign lay ahead of the new king, who got off to a good start commissioning what would include sixteen massive reservoirs (the largest covering an area of nearly twenty square kilometres) and two big irrigation canals. But this did little to defray the resentment his pro-Mahayana religious policies caused, which prompted a rash of insurrections opposing his own opposition to Theravada Buddhism.

Mahasen set about building what would become the country's largest stupa, the Jethavanaramaya - which was, until the construction of the Eiffel Tower, the 2nd tallest building in the world. To help, he ordered the plundering of the Mahavihara, the greatest Theravada Buddhist monastery in the land. Monks that resisted his Mahayana policies were pressured by many means, including attempted starvation.

Soon enough the trickle of monks fleeing to the safety of Ruhuna in the south became a flood. Ominously they were also joined by Meghavannabaya, the king's chief minister, who

raised an army in their defence. With surprising wisdom, the king drew back from the confrontation, saving his throne, making peace with the disgruntled Theravada Buddhists, and enabling him to settle down to enjoy a long and apparently properly reign. This came to a natural end in 303 CE.

His son Sirimeghavanna continued the policies of appeasement, going out of his way to make good any damage done to Theravada Buddhism, building, or repairing stupas and temples.

He was also to benefit from the unexpected arrival into his Kingdom of the sacred relic of the tooth of the Buddha was brought to Sri Lanka when a series of wars broke out in India. It was enshrined in the Isurumuniya Temple in Anuradhapura.

The calming waters of his reign may have ended with his death in 332 CE, but they continued into the reign of his brother, Jetta Tissa II who ruled till 341 AD. Jetta Tissa II was followed in good order by his own son, Buddhadasa in 341 AD; and another twenty eight-year reign beckoned.

The Mahāvamsa has nothing but praise for this king, characterized as a "Mind of Virtue and an Ocean of Gems." Unusually though, the new king preferred medicine to wars, stupas, temples, monasteries and plotting, and his reign was noted for the exceptional medical care he extended to his subjects.

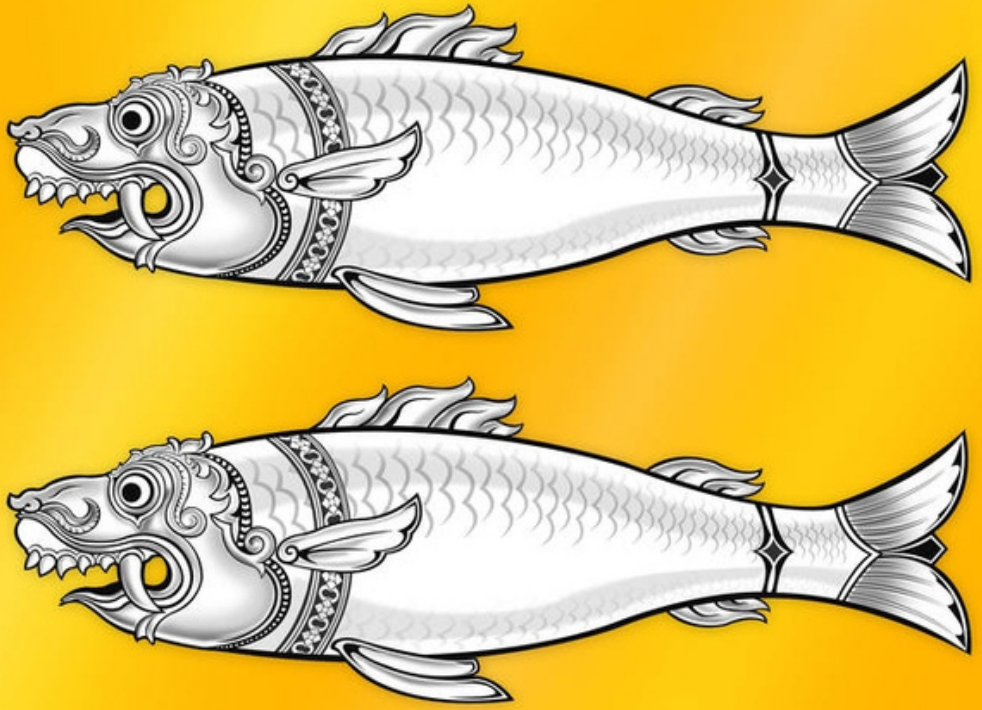
He wrote a medical handbook, the "Sarartha Sangraha," built hospitals appointed Medical Officers, and established infirmaries and asylums for the benefit of the blind, and the lame.

Stories abound of his role as doctor to various ailing subjects who he came across. He even took care of animals, including, it is said, a snake with a stomach ache.

Perhaps his interest in medicine can also help explain the eighty sons The Mahāvamsa credits him with creating, each one, the chronicle approvingly states, named after a disciple of Buddha. Two were to reign after his death in 370 CE.

For 116 years the Lambakarna dynasty, recovering from its subversive bout of regicide, had settled down to govern well, fostering a prosperous and growing state. They had, in the words of John Lennon, given peace a chance. It was, alas, now time again for blood-letting.

5



A DYNASTY DESTROYED

370- 455 CE

“The exclamation mark (!), known informally as a bang or a shriek, is used at the end of a sentence or a short phrase which expresses very strong feeling.”

University of Sussex
Guide to Punctuation

Buddhadasa' death in 370 CE left his son, Upatissa I, a most secure throne to sit upon. Little is known about his reign except two things. It lasted a long time – 42 years. And it was to end in disaster, its terminus foretelling the implosion of the dynasty itself in just a few decades time.

That his reign should end in 412 CE with his murder would have surprised Upatissa. His shock would have been amplified had he known that it would be delivered by a monk – his own bother, Mahanama who, according to the chronicles, was busy cuckolding him with the queen. Although the new king was to enjoy dying a natural death in 434 CE, the manor of his ascension legitimised regicide once again.

His death brought to the throne his (possibly illegitimate) son Soththisena, whose one-day rule ended with a draft of poison administered by his queen, Sanga. His stepsister, Chattagahaka Jantu caught the faltering crown – but lasted only until 435 CE. Regicidal palace politics was once again singing a song that would challenge any modern-day soap opera scriptwriter.

The Queen's chief minister decided to replace her with a more compliant distant relative in 435 CE, Mittasena, who preoccupied by religious devotions was wholly unprepared for the fourth Tamil invasion of the realm in 436 CE.

That the state was so unable to defend itself was no great surprise. For the past few extreme decades family politics would have pushed good governance into a back seat. The eye, as Ford Frick, the famous basketball player might have observed, was firmly off the ball.

The regime fell with minimal resistance. It was a shocking and

sudden end. For 369 years the dynasty had ruled, its two periods of firm and effective guardianship tragically balanced by two other periods of regicidal insanity and power vacuums.

They had lasted barely half as long as the previous dynasty, the Vijayans. The state had prospered, matured, advanced – but was ultimately put at risk by the dynasty's unfavourable ratio of dud kings to effective ones.

It could be argued that the invasion that finally toppled them could have come at almost any time, pushing them to the sidelines of history much sooner than it did. Certainly by 436 CE the nation's defences were laid wide open and wholly incapable of resisting the relentless march of South India's Pandyan dynasty.

Across the Palk Straights in Southern India, several dynasties vied with one another for power, their internecine warfare persuading even the great emperor Ashoka to limit his own mighty empire from intruding too far into the troublesome boundaries of their states.

On three occasions before the abrupt end of king Mittasena's rule, Indian strongmen had taken an overexuberant interest in Sri Lanka, beginning with the opportunistic horse traders, Sena and Guttika who interrupted Vijayan rule to rule the Anuradhapuram Kingdom in 237 BC.

The horse traders were seen off by the Vijayan King Asela in 215 BC, who was himself despatched by a second Tamil invader, King Elara in 205. This time expelling the invaders took longer – but it was achieved by a later Vijayan, King Dutugemunu, in 161 BC.

His grandson, King Walagamba, fared less well, losing his throne to seven invading Dravidians in 104 BCE before regaining it in 89 BC. And there matters rested for five hundred and twenty two years until the next lot arrived.

As the increasingly weak rule of the Lambakarna dynasty over Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura Kingdom descended into a series of gritty palace coups, the Pandians took matters into their own hands and, with ease, invaded the island and took over the kingdom.

The last Lambakarna king, Mittasena was slain in battle in 436 CE and a Tamil king, Pandu, took over his rule.

Quite what this meant or how far his rule extended is hard to estimate. It is unlikely that the new king's edict reached much beyond the north and north central parts of the country.

Pandu was succeeded by his son Parindu in 441 CE and in less than one suspiciously short year, by another son, Khudda Parinda, the third Pandiyan king.

Thereafter the family lineage is hard to trace, but not so the revolving door of kingship.

By 447 CE Khudda Parinda was dead, and a fourth Pandiyan took the throne – Tiritarā, albeit only for two months, his reign ending with his death in skirmishes with rebels from Ruhuna, led by an emerging Sri Lankan king-in-waiting, Dhatusena, of the Moriyan Dynasty.

The fifth Pandiyan king, Dathiya, was little luckier.

By 450 CE he too had been killed by Dhatusena in the war that now engulfed the island. And up stepped the last and sixth of the luckless invaders - Pithiya. His rule also ended at the point of Dhatusena's sword, in 452 CE.

Several years of barely documented anarchy followed before the country was able to turn to the task of recovering from the Pandiyan merry-go-round.



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.