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History of Sri Lanka 12

# A MURDER OF KINGS

*Sri Lanka & The Time of Ruin*

DAVID SWARBRICK

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BOOK 12

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press


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"We are all victims in-waiting."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865.

# ONE

# Rumours of Disaster

Two periods of state-sponsored homicidal self-indulgence were now to grip the kingdom.

The first killings broke out in 195 CE; and the second in 248 CE. Both were leavened by brief moments of stability that managed, with seconds to spare, to prevent the country from collapsing altogether; and give it a modest but life affirming breathing space.

Such pirouetting on political tightropes was hardly a novelty. The Vijayans, the previous dynasty, had indulged in much the same – fuelling at least four periods of regicide covering several decades and prompting at least two civil wars over six hundred plus years of dynastic reign.

To this now the Lambakannas added these two more, bringing the total number of regicide bacchanalia to at least six since Prince Vijaya had first stepped foot on the island back in 543 BCE. It is doubtful whether any other contemporary kingdom on the planet showed such record-breaking prowess. Few, if any, that came later would have dynasties that possessed such a full set of dark skills as to trump this dubious achievement.

This particular lethal phase was, in retrospect, modest by the standards of what was to follow. But this is not to detract from its disruptive consequences, nor its mystery. Over a two-year period three kings were to occupy the throne in a succession swifter even than a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers foxtrot. On Kanittha Tissa's death in 193 CE, his son, Cula

Naga assumed power, only to be assassinated by his brother Kuda Naga in 195 CE. Kuda Naga was then despatched to the uncertain fields of reincarnation when his own brother-in-law, Siri Naga I had him killed in 195 CE.

The only hint to help explain what might have promoted all this, mere family politics aside, is a famine mentioned in The Mahavamsa: "so small a quantity of food were the people reduced in that famine," it notes, referring to the brief reign of Kuda Naga, when, it said "the king maintained without interruption a great almsgiving".

Famine is no friend of political stability and if it was the cause behind Cula Naga's murder, the later food banks set up by his brother Kuda Naga were insufficient to calm the situation.

# TWO

# Lost Clues

There is nothing in terms of corroborating archaeological evidence to help us understand this dismal and murky period of national madness - though such evidence, for other periods, does exist.

Stone inscriptions, for example, carry an unusually high degree of importance in Sri Lanka where the climate is preconditioned to quickly destroy any organic material used to record events.

And, unlike other sources, they have better weathered the repeated theft and destruction carried out on the country by its many occupiers - be they Tamil or European.

But of the four thousand stone inscriptions discovered in Sri Lanka, only one and a half thousand have been properly recorded and preserved. Written in Sinhala, Tamil, Brahmi, Pali – and even Chinese, Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, they most typically record donations made to temples, the rules around the maintenance of religious places, the establishment of tanks and how local officials should administer water resources. But so far none of them are of any help in understanding this particular period of Sri Lankan history.

This may change as many more inscriptions indubitably await discovery. In 2023 for example, the largest stone inscription ever found on the island was uncovered in Polonnaruwa, measuring forty-five feet in length and eighteen feet in height.

But none found and deciphered so far helps us with this period as the second century CE slipped, blood drenched, into the third.

Buildings tell the story of the times; but no buildings or even repairs of any significance can be dated to this precise period.

Coins also help validate the historical record; and some of the island's coins date back to the third century BCE. Their symbols, dates, the metal they are made from, the craftsmanship and place where they were found – all tell their own stories but very few date from this very early period of Sri Lankan history.

And those that do exist suffer from poor cataloguing and storage - and a great deal of theft, including a record heist involving over one thousand silver punch marked coins dating back two thousand years held in the custody of the Archaeology Department; and of which now only sixteen coins remain.

Pottery is also an important voice in the historical record.

Many shards of marked pottery have been excavated, most engraved with but two or three characters.

But the joined-up study of ceramic inscriptions is a journey that has yet to be fully undertaken by academics – despite the fact that the first and earliest example of such artefacts in the whole of South Asia was found in Sri Lanka on a pottery shard dating back to the fourth century BCE in Anuradhapura.

Nor is there anything in the country's surviving Ola Leaf books to help contextualize this period. These books were written on the leaves of Palmyrah Palms that had been carefully processed - like paper.

It is thought that over seventy-five thousand such books exist, written in Sinhalese – but most date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and although some record former texts, nothing of consequence records this period of history.

In fact, only four Ola Leaf books from a much earlier period have survived, dating back just over five hundred years; and the most important of them are kept in the National Museum of Colombo, Peradeniya University, the British National Museum, and the Paris National Museum.

# THREE

# Picking Up The Pieces

Here was an unfinished whodunnit in which the author had time to chuck in plenty of bodies but ran out of time to add the clues.

Not even the combined forces of Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey and Hercule Poirot would be able to explain the who and why of these brutal Lambakanna years. Conjecture, built on the flimsiest of evidence, is therefore all we have for this time. But one conclusion is inescapable – that after so long a period of steady rule – one hundred and twenty-six years – during which the kingdom had been painstakingly rebuilt after decades of Vijayan regicidal induced disintegration, it must have dealt a shocking correction and reminder to the country: how easily are the good times squandered.

However, by 195 CE, with Kuda Naga murdered and his brother-in-law, Siri Naga I on the throne, a fifty-year salvage space opened out for the realm, the game of thrones having been temporarily closed down. Family politics took a backseat to good governance. For Siri Naga, however bleak the past few years had been for the kingdom, it was now time for some kind of healing.

The king, as religiously minded as the best, ear marked a huge chunk of state revenge for religion, starting with predictable piety, with this area. Reigning for 20 years, he found time and resource to make good some of Anuradhapura's most celebrated sacred buildings - the great stupa of Ruwanweliseya, said to house more of Lord Budda's relics than anywhere

else in the world; a fine new set of stone steps leading to the sacred Bo tree itself – and the famous Brazen Palace. This particular building is a sort of architectural weathervane – one whose condition reflects the condition of the state itself.

The Brazen Place - "brazen" coming from brass or copper roof tiles - had originally been constructed by King Dutugemunu, one of the island's greatest rulers and was to become one of the kingdom's most magnificent buildings. Architects had been commissioned to draw up no-limit plans for an opulent palace monastery, two hundred feet long, rising up nine stories and a further two hundred feet, each story punctured by a hundred windows.

Observers spoke of the entire edifice containing a thousand rooms – an obvious exaggeration, but one that was not really required. For the building was, by any standards anywhere in the ancient world, a masterpiece.

Inside the vast structure golden pillars held up the roof of a special throne hall, its centrepiece an ivory throne centred between the titanic images of a golden sun; and a moon and stars picked out in silver and pearls. The gilded roof glinted so fiercely in the sunlight that it could be seen from miles away. No expense was spared in the Brazen Palace's furnishings either. Even the water basins positioned for the washing of feet and hands at its entrance were said to be of gold.

# FOUR

# The Soulful Rooms

Each floor of the building was given over for the use of monks in varying stages of sanctification as they travelled the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment.

Naturally, the lowest floor, the Buddhist equivalent of Perfumes & Make Up in a Department Store, was reserved for those who had yet to achieve anything. If not quite the habitat of the hoi polloi, it was not that far off either. The second floor, however, was allocated for those who had mastered the Tripitaka – three texts in the Buddhist Pali Canon, mostly concerned with doctrinal requirements and monastic rules.

It was only on reaching the third floor of this extraordinary structure that you could encounter monks who had made a real step change, for these ones had attained Sotapatti, the first stage of sanctification – an achievement made possible by having trounced indecision and an obsession with individuality, and rituals.

The fourth floor was populated by monks who had added to this achievement by making serious inroads to eradicate all tendencies towards ill-will. And, more importantly, any thoughts of sensuality, of the sort so memorably (and temptingly) recorded centuries later in "Song of Myself:"

"Walt Whitman am I, a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy and sensual, eating, drinking and breeding;
No sentimentalist — no stander above men and women, or apart from them;
No more modest than immodest..."

Overcoming this most challenging of tests automatically promoted the monks to a condition called Sotapatti in Buddhism, one that was clearly far from the reach of Walt Whitman.

On the fifth floor lived the Anagamin monks – those who were now seeking to overcome pride, restlessness, ignorance, fine things, and immaterial cravings in order to become an arhat. And above them all, in the upper stories of this temple of gold, lived the Arahats themselves. This lofty station, the goal of all practicing Buddhists, was reserved for those who have finally achieved Nirvana. Not for them the irksome and interminable cycle of rebirth

Despite the building burning down in around 137 BCE, it was faithfully rebuilt in all its brilliance by King Saddha Tissa, Dutugemunu's brother. Further repairs were carried out a hundred and twenty years later and a pavilion decorated with gemstones was added. But by the time of King Siri Naga I, sometime after 195 CE, the repairs carried out on this and other buildings in Anuradhapura were noticeably more modest in their goals.

Buildings such as this one, were made good, but reduced in size and scope, the easier for maintaining perhaps – or maybe because there was just insufficient money to keep them as they had been first envisioned. It was, in its own grey and mildly dispiriting way, a metaphor for its

time. Moments of opulence, grand building and glittering moments still lay ahead for the kingdom as other dynasties came to rule; but a note of caution had also now crept in; a sense that the good times had to be rationed.

Today you need a rich imagination and a keen sense of history to imagine how the Brazen Palace would have looked – even in Siri Naga I's time.

Destroyed eight hundred years later in the tenth century by Tamil invaders, it is today reduced to one thousand six hundred granite columns set in forty rows – all that survives of its once colossal walls.

As Shelley might have said had he added Sri Lanka to his well-documented French, Swiss, German, Dutch and Irish holidays: "nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare," stretch yet more ruins, scrub, and jungle.

# FIVE

# Bled Dry

Natural deaths were typically rarer than winged elephants singing like angels, but Siri Naga, notwithstanding his own murderous and regicidal past, was blessed to die gently.

Neither swords nor poison expedited Siri Naga I's smooth journey to the afterlife, or perhaps a reincarnated lesser life form, when he died in 215 CE. And equally smoothly, his son Voharika Tissa inherited the throne.

Whilst the Mahavamsa has nothing but praise for Siri Naga, it surpasses itself with superlatives and examples of piety and good governance when describing his son's reign. Under him, money rained down monsoon-like on religion. A set of new temples were built; older ones were restored. Monies were given to monasteries and new religious festivals set up.

A strong proponent of non-violence, the new king enacted several reforms to promote the practice. Erring on the side of conservative Buddhism, he also attempted to suppress 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.

The Mahavamsa is especially mindful that this most pious of kings was also one for "keeping heretics in check by his minister Kapila, he made the true doctrine to shine forth in glory."

Blindsided by his overwhelming spiritual preoccupations, it was little wonder then that he found his throne snatched away from him by his brother, Abhaya Naga, 22 years into his reign.

This time it seems that it was the uncensored excesses of dysfunctional family life that brought about a return of the game of thrones. Prompted by the adulterous affair he was having with the queen, his brother's wife, Abhaya Naga recruited a Tamil mercenary army and assassinated his brother in 237 CE.

The Mahavamsa records the last tempestuous days of Siri Naga's doomed reign: "Abhaya Naga took many Damilas with him and marched from there against the city to do battle with his brother. On news of this the king took flight, and, with his consort, mounting a horse he came to Malaya. The younger brother pursued him, and when he had slain the king in Malaya, he returned with the queen and reigned eight years in the capital as king."

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, a second somewhat confusingly named Siri Naga, Ahaya Naga embittered nephew, son of the slain Siri Naga I, had been holding out since his father's murder in 237 CE.

Claiming his rightful inheritance the new king hastened 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 murdered – in 248 CE.

As if inspired by the sort of gory and convoluted fable for which there is no redeeming ending, 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 Mahavamsa 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.

It was time for a new king, and a new resolve if the kingdom was ever to survive.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, 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 was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

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