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History of Sri Lanka 7

CONQUERED

Sri Lanka & The Time of Sorrows

DAVID SWARBRICK

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BOOK 7

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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“That’s the
reason they’re
called lessons,”
the Gryphon
remarked:
“because they
lessen from day
to day.”

The Gryphon
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865.



ONE

Stubbornly Stupid

Good advice is often nearer to hand than even the most foolish leader can imagine. Or be minded to seek.

One hundred and fifty years earlier, and six thousand six hundred and one kilometres away, Thucydides, whose work, *The Peloponnesian War*, set such standards for history as to anticipate every conceivable future military and political ploy, had the perfect solution in mind to fend off the catastrophe that befall Sri Lanka on the death of their visionary king, Devanampiya Tissa in 267 BCE – or 207 BCE, depending on whether you accept the tempered chronology of such scholars as the impossibly talented Wilhelm Geiger.

That such advice could have been given or received is not as far-fetched as it first seems. The *Mahavamsa* refers to visits by what they call 'yona' to Sri Lanka in the fourth to third centuries BCE, "yona' being the word the Persians used for their arch enemy, the Greeks.

Other chroniclers note how Pandu Kabhaya established a special quarter of his dazzling new city, Anuradhapura, for foreign merchants, including, it is suspected, the Yona Greeks, sometime after 437 BCE.

Just across the Palk Straits, in India's current Bihar province, Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the Maurya court around 290 BCE, was busy mixing with, amongst others, those very same Anuradhapuran Greeks come to badger and barter with the Mauryas. Historian as he was himself, he was also the sort of bookish man who may have had a few spare

scrolls of Thucydides' main works to lend to the governing literati of the time, including the Sri Lankan kings and their associates.

But if there ever had been a loaning of scrolls, it seems that Devanampiya Tissa's successors failed to read them. Certainly, they missed Thucydides' most famous thoughts about the three "gravest failings;" namely "want of sense, of courage, or of vigilance".

For it was the want of all three, especially the last of these attributes, which was to tip the Vijayan kingdom not once but twice into such long and shocking periods of surrender that for well over half the intervening century it was a kingdom under occupation; its great city of Anuradhapura recast with a Tamil polish; and its plaintiff kings killed or exiled.

Back in 267 BCE, as Devanampiya Tissa moved into what all would have hoped to have been Pari-Nirvana (the post nirvana state of total release), this was far from what anyone would have thought even remotely possible.

The great kingdom was utterly solid, surely?
Unbreakable. Resilient. Or was it?

For glum historians inclined to search for the deepest runes and trumpet them loudly, Devanampiya Tissa's death was actually the start of a bleak three-hundred-year promenade that would lead to the dynasty's inevitable

collapse, a journey that would also fatally embed the country with an ongoing appetite for incipient disaster, regardless as to which dynasty, president, or occupying invader was calling the shots.

Over this sorrowful period, through the reigns of almost 30 kings, Sri Lanka was to enjoy just three short periods of peace; interspersed with three Tamil invasions and occupations; several decades of continuous regicide; and a concluding civil war in which the Vijayans turned their spears dhunnas (bows), muguras (clubs), adayatiyas (javelins), kaduwas (swords) and kunthas (spears) upon one another until there was no credible heir left standing, merely an preposterous and fleeting lookalike monarch, until he too was murdered by a group of nobles for whom enough was quite enough.



TWO

The False Peace

No-one saw the turmoil
that lay ahead.

That such chaos should await did not seem even wildly probable as Devanampiya Tissa's brother, Uththiya, succeeded to the throne. He was to be followed by two more brothers, Mahasiwa, and Surathissa, all three of them, according to The Mahavamsa, ever on the side of neatness, to rule for respectably lengthy periods of ten years a piece. Whether they died in their beds or were murdered by their successors over this thirty-year period is a guessing game for clowns. The Mahavamsa maintains a prim muzzle on the matter.

Certainly, the period was suspiciously uneventful; unnervingly calm even. All seemed fine with the state – and yet something, somewhere, was going fatally wrong. "What goes up," said Isaac Newton, "must come down." At best it is probable that nothing happened, merely a governing indolence that spread like rising damp or unseen termites.

Perhaps all three brothers were so distracted by the promise of enlightenment as they got to grips with the new religion their brother had introduced, that they forgot about all other aspects of good governance. Of vigilance, there was none; and over time the kingdom's defences, and its ability to dominate and control its own destiny became fatally compromised. As events were to later show.

For Uttiya, his role must at times have seemed more chief mourner than king as first one and then another all-consuming

state funerals took place, the like of which the country had never seen, First to go was Mahinda, prince, monk, missionary, and saint, "the light of Lanka," who had first brought Buddhism to the island from India. Dying aged eighty in 205 BCE, he was considered to have become an Arhat, one who, having gained insight into the true nature of existence, had been most happily liberated from the troublesome cycle of rebirth. Uttiya assiduously collected the evangelist's relics and busied himself constructing stupas over them, laying him to rest, with a single hair of Lord Buddha, in Mihintale's stunning Ambasthala Stupa, surrounded by two tall rows of slender stone pillars caved with lions, birds and dwarfs.

Hardly had he or the country recovered from this devastating, step changing bereavement than a second struck just two years later when Sangamitta, Mahinda's sister, bearer of the bo-tree, princess, nun, and saint, died just a year short of eighty. Once again King Uttiya busied himself with stupa building, erecting the Sangamiththa Stupa over her ashes in Anuradhapura, his own reign drawing to a shattered finish just a few years later.

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, whose location is now the subject of modest arguments. The king,

noted The Mahavamsa approvingly, was especially careful to protect "the pious".

He was said to have been very close to one of Mahinda's principal followers, Thera Bhaddasara, a relationship which may further indicate how preoccupied was the crown on matters spiritual rather than temporal.

By the time Mahasiwa's brother (or possibly 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. It's 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 recorded invasion of the country from South India.

Three kings, and three decades on from the kingdom's apogee, the governance of the country had eroded badly. The systems, protections, administration, and defences put in by the last three great kings had broken down under the following three. All The Mahavamsa has to say about this doomed monarch is that he was "zealously mindful of meritorious works," though a preoccupation with forts, weapons, the latest foreign intelligence, armies and ships patrolling the Palk Straits would have been a lot more useful.



THREE

The First Invasion

The invasion came in the ignominious form of a couple of Tamil horse "freighters," 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.

With a ruthlessness that would have put Cornelius Vanderbilt to shame ("What do I care about law? Ain't I got the power?"), they were to rule it for 22 years, the first of a succession of Tamil invaders.

Twenty-two years in the course of a dynasty's six hundred yearlong ascendance is no more troubling than celery in heat; but this first Tamil invasion, simply by virtue of it ever happening, presented the state then, as now, with a symbolic significance that was impossible to overlook.

It played right into the rowdy heart of Tamil vs Singhala political mythology.

Like football, the weather or when the next bus might arrive, discussions on this subject are fated never to be concluded.

Many, but by no means all, agree that, although the Vijayans themselves originated from northern rather than southern India, Sri Lanka was, from the outset, profoundly shaped by the norms of Tamil society and culture; in language, script, literature, pottery, architecture, and urban planning - to name by a few attributes. Tamil states within Sri Lanka,

albeit subsidiary, co-existed with the Anuradhapura crown for long periods of time. Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu were different and the same. Even so, the gradual rise of a more distinct island culture, made later reflections on this invasion, as with other ones, appear more shocking than it probably was; and the differences between conquered and conquering were more marginal than they were to seem later, seen from the platform of a discernibly different Sinhala culture.

But although this humiliating first invasion presented King Surathissa with his reincarnation moment, it was not to put an end to the Vijayans, the lucky dynasty. Like the immortal jellyfish, *Turritopsis dohrnii*, dead, in this case, did not mean dead.

The fight had not quite left them. 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.”



FOUR

The Second Invasion

Unlike the first, the second invasion and subsequent occupation of Sri Lanka was an outcome no-one could miss, right across South Asia

Ellara was to rule the Anuradhapuram Kingdom for 44 years, smashing, with greater impact than his horse treading predecessors, the awesome edifice of Vijayan rule that had already given the island so much of its new cultural identity.

A good way to get up close and personal; with this unusual conqueror is to visit the northern Tamil city of Jaffa where 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 – Ellara, or in Tamil, Ellalan. Invaders are rarely liked and often forgotten. But Ellalan's forty-four-year reign 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, pulling back from an early bout of temple destruction; and possibly even converting to Buddhism, as the horse-traders were rumoured to have done earlier, motivated, like the ex-

Protestant Henri IV later, by the view that
“(Catholic) Paris is worth a mass.”

That he was not a total outsider is also indicated by some of the men he included in his conquering army who included Singhalese administrators such as Nandi and commanders whose names have come down to us as Deegejanthu, Gemunu and Isuru.

“The sword of justice has no scabbard,” said Antione De Rival. And so it was with Ellalan. He is a strange figure, his Tamilness eliciting not even a scintilla of condemnation in The Mahavaṃsa, 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 on to 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 still 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 Mahavaṃsa pointing out the presence of thirty-two semi-independent Tamil states coexisting alongside King Ellalan's Anuradhapura.

FIVE

Prince, Rebel, Hero

Far south of Anuradhapura, the often faithful, usually semi-detached and forever remote kingdom of Ruhuna was incubating the fightback.

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 that 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 whole island 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 Mahavaṃsa, Ten Giant Warriors (Nandimitra, 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 Mahāvamsa, "the princes of Lanka, when they draw near to this place, are wont to silence their music".

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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