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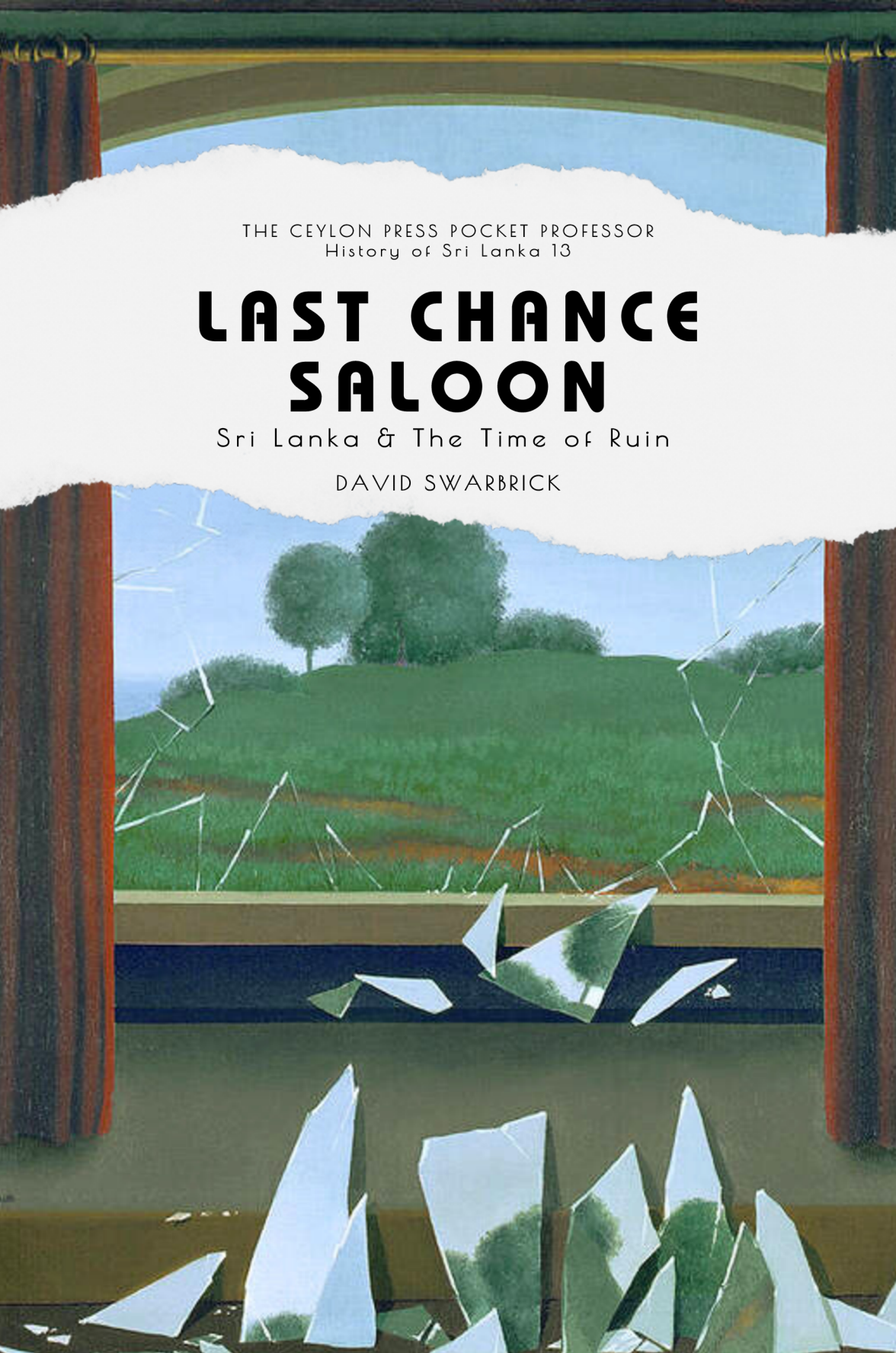
History of Sri Lanka 13

LAST CHANCE SALOON

Sri Lanka & The Time of Ruin

DAVID SWARBRICK



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"How fine you look when dressed in rage. Your enemies are fortunate your condition is not permanent. You're lucky, too. Red eyes suit so few."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll. 1865.

ONE

Tough Love

It is unnecessary to employ the mind reading capabilities of Descartes or The Amazing Kreskin to discern how Sri Lanka might have reacted to Gotabhaya taking the throne in 253 CE.

After decades of Lambakarna kings, many eagerly pious, ruling with unremitting incompetence, Gotabhaya was nothing less than a shock. After all, he had been one of the very same three plotters who drove the kingdom into yet another civil war just years earlier, apparently as unaccountable to good governance as any of the many earlier Lambakarna kings who ruled as if they were celestially charged to gambol their through reigns like ancient Ves dancers, leaving lakes of regicidal blood in the wake of their inopportune administration.

It was as if some brooding and machismo junior army officer had upended his own army, bending generals, kings and sleek courtiers to the austere new realities of a victorious coup in the style of Jerry Rawlings, or Gamal Abdel Nasser. Comparing notes with either of them would have given Gotabhaya all the validation he required. Not that he was the sort to seek approval.

Competent dictators have their moment in the sun too; and the time was more than ripe for the arrival of Gotabhaya.

His very name is still used in the country to suggest authority, command, control. Army bases, naval ships, even an ex-president who strove with little success to aspire to his reputation – all bear the name of this stern Lambakarna king.

What he lacked in charm, charity, and tolerance, Gotabhaya made up for with the sort of firm government that took the fizz out of regicide.

And so, in around 253 or 254 CE, Gotabhaya grabbed the throne and for fourteen years ruled Sri Lanka 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 Theravada Buddhism that had been practiced on the island since the 3rd century BCE. The king did all he could to thwart it, even banishing sixty 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 closet follower of Vaitulya Buddhism.

The Vaitulya doctrinal strand was even more radical than the Vajrayana doctrine that Gotabhaya 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 this alarming and archaic old king died.

His death, in 267 CE, left behind a most divided country. Several ministers, blithefully (and, as it turned out, suicidally) bold, refused to participate in his funeral rites.

His son and heir, Jetta Tissa I, a chip off the monstrous old block, had dozens of them rounded up, staking their impaled heads in a mournful circle around the old king's body.

This pitiless and iconic pageant of power has haunted the island through the centuries, its most recent appearance being during the brutal JVP uprising in 1971 and 1987 when anxious neighbours calling on nearby villages might find such similar circles of horror.

Even so there is a time when a country needs tough love; or even just tough everything, and Gotabhaya's son sought, with creditable success, to assiduously out-tough his terrifying old father.

This display of strong-armed governance under yet another king was probably what was most needed to help keep at bay the lurking regicidal and anarchic 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 dismay the steps he took to move patronage and resource from the orbit of Theravāda Buddhism to Vaitulya Buddhism.

TWO

Quelling the Babble

From the perspective of the majority Theravada Buddhists, life manged to take a further turn for the 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 wave of further insurrections opposing his own opposition to Theravada Buddhism.

Undeterred, Mahasen set about building what would become the country's largest stupa, the Jethavanaramaya – which was, until the construction of the Eiffel Tower, the second 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 angry, anguished and adamant monks fleeing to the safely of Ruhuna in the south became a flood. Ominously they were also joined by Meghavann Abaya, the king's chief minister, who had broodingly 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

so enabling himself to enjoy a natural death in 303 CE. Mahasen's late compromise notwithstanding, it is notable that right across this 50-year period of three uncompromisingly hardheaded kings, the vice like hold with which they gripped their realm was rarely seriously imperilled. Despite the unusually high amount of religious dissent they inspired, they commanded with apparent ease, shunting into the darkest of corners the unruly immoderations of family politics.

But even a run of dictators-kings has its own sell by date and this one came to an end when Mahasen's son, Siri Meghavanna inherited the throne and opted to super change the hints of religious appeasement and kinder governance that had marked the fraying ends of his father's choleric reign.

Under him huge amounts of state revenue were set aside to make good any damage done to Theravada Buddhism.The old religion's building were repaired, its stupas and temples renovated and once more publicly cherished.

It is a truism universally acknowledged that good things rarely come to good people but in the case of King Siri Meghavanna, the aphorism rings as hollow as an elephant's trunk in the jungle - for it was during his therapeutic reign that the greatest of all relics was to fall into his hands. "Just," as the late great Tommy Cooper might have said, "like that."

Few relics ever stand the real test of time.

Most end up marooned, outpaced by the culture they once represented or the geography or religion that created them: the Holy Right Hand of King Stephen of Hungry; the wailing wall of occupied Jerusalem, the sandal of Muhammad in Istanbul's Pavilion of the Holy Mantle; John the Baptist's head in Rome's San Sylvestro. None can really compare to the Tooth Relic, now housed in Kandy's Temple of the Tooth.

Relics derived from the body of Lord Buddha are scattered across Asia, most of them in Sri Lanka, which counts amongst its treasures Lord Buddha's forehead, right collar bone, and vertebrae in such places as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Mahiyanganaya and Trincomalee.

His hair commands the greatest number of addresses with single stands of it claimed to be housed in such places as Girihadu Seya in Ambalantota; the Makulana Raja Maha Vihara in Mawathagama; Seruwawila Mangala Maha Seya in the Eastern Province; the Mahiyangana Maha Seya; Badulla's Muthiyangana Vihara stupa.

Most famously, it is said to be housed in the Jetavanarama Stupa of Anuradhapura. It is also claimed by the granite stupa at Senanayakarama, near Chilaw; the Gangarama temple in Colombo; Kandy's Yatihalagala temple, and also in the nearby Shakya Sinha Maha Seya in Nelligala;

Hambantota's Gotapabbatha Raja Maha Vihara, and the Girikandaraya Chetiya in nearby Kalamatiya; plus at least a dozen other stupas and temples dotted around the coast and now so weathered as be indistinct from the very landscape they sit within.

But for insurmountably Baroque reasons it is his tooth relic that is the most revered.

Unlike most other world relics the Tooth Relic is as relevant to its society today as it was two thousand years earlier.

It has become, almost unwittingly, the ultimate symbol of the island's statehood, one that almost supersedes the religion it encompasses, as sought after by aesthetics, ambitious atheists, agnostics, politicians, visiting dignitaries and of course much of the country's current population.

THREE

A Little Bit Of Lucky

The Tooth Relic arrived like a refugee in need of protection.

Plucked hundreds of years earlier by an enterprising Arhant during the cremation of Lord Buddha, it became synonymous with royal authority and sanctity in faraway Orissa in the Indian kingdom of Kalinga, where it was to eventually end up.

But only for a while. Its safety threatened by an interminable war between Indian states, it was sent by then then king, Guhaseeva, to Sri Lanka, hidden it is said, in the elaborate hair style of his daughter, Princess Hemamala.

The princess, along with her new husband, Danta, arrived at the port of Lankapatuna, now marked by a temple , the Lankapatuna Samudragiri Viharaya, commanding the entrance to the vast Ullackalie Lagoon south of Trincomalee. The following day, this most Agatha Christie of ancient world couples, the Tommy and Tuppence of their day, made their way – still in disguise as Indian brahmins, to Anuradhapura; and presented the relic to King Sri Meghavanna, who enshrined it in Isurumuniya Temple.

Their moment of bravado and celebrity over, the couple sadly vanish from history, retiring, it is hoped on the lavish pension of a grateful state , with regular emoluments of crushed pearls in arrack and kiribath garnished with leaf of gold. Despite a later and very short (1283 CE) return journey to India the tooth relic stayed on the island, moving from time

from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa; Dambadeniya to Gampola; Kotte to Kandy, to evade wars, capture, and better validate the sometimes-wafer-thin authority of its rulers.

Nothing could better endorse , Siri Meghavanna's rule than this unforeseen bit of good fortune, and its propitious tentacles spreading out beyond his own reign.When he died in 332 CE, the calm times 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 Mahavamsa has nothing but praise for this king, characterized as a "Mind of Virtue and an Ocean of Gems." Unusually, 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 Mahavamsa 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.

When, in 2019, Admiral William McRaven, Osama bin Laden's nemesis, informed a group of Texan students that "you have to be at your strongest when you feel at your weakest," it was an dictate he had, from a Sri Lankan perspective, got entirely round the wrong way. For, as often with the island's ancient kings, it was when they were at their strongest that they turned out to be at their weakest.

Buddhadasa' death in 370 CE left his son, Upatissa I, what seemed to be the most secure of thrones to sit upon.

His reign appeared to mirror the long Indian summer of late Lambakarna rule, brought in so improbably by the austere plotter, Gotabhaya.

Everything worked. Water flowed, temples were respected, public infrastructure cared for; and the fecund land threw off its many mesmerising gifts for all to enjoy. In short the kingdom functioned.

Or so it seemed. Little did those last glittering and unbothered Lambakarnas know what we can see from our later and more advantageous viewpoint: that the bar at the kingdom's Last Chance Saloon was closing down. Permanently.

FOUR

The Disappearing Dynasty

Little is known about Upatissa I reign except two things. It lasted a long time – forty-two years. And it was to end in disaster, its terminus foretelling the implosion of the dynasty itself just a few decades later.

That Upatissa's reign should end in 412 CE with his murder may have surprised the king who by then was so far into his reign as to image it might go for as long as monkeys ate bananas.

His shock at discovering the essential untruth of this would have been amplified had he known that his unscheduled dénouement would be delivered by a monk – his own bother, Mahanama who, according to the chronicles, was busy cuckolding him with the queen.

Wrong on so many counts, it was also a twist of family politics beloved of almost every earlier period of national regicide; and its impact now was no less dreadful for the state.

For although Mahanama, the new king, was to enjoy dying a most underserved natural death in 434 CE, the manor of his ascension legitimised regicide once again.

And in a rare moment of historical serendipity, the existence and surprisingly exemplary civic behaviour of this very king is captured most unusually in a random contemporary chronicle of the time. So few are such contemporaneous observations that they can almost be counted on the teeth of chickens.

But it was during Mahanama's self-enforced reign that a wandering Chinese Buddhist monk, Faxian, dropped into the island for several years, his antique records

surviving through the boisterous vicissitudes of Chinese history to give us a glimpse of the king attending the burial of a revered Arhat.

“When he drew near his end, the king came to examine into the point; and having assembled the monks according to rule, asked whether the bhikshu had attained to the full degree of Wisdom.

They answered in the affirmative, saying that he was an arhat. The king, accordingly, when he died, buried him after the fashion of an arhat, as the regular rules prescribed.

Four or five li east from the vihara there was reared a great pile of firewood, which might be more than thirty cubits square, and the same in height. Near the top were laid sandal, aloe, and other kinds of fragrant wood.

On the four sides of the pile they made steps by which to ascend it. With clean white hair-cloth, almost like silk, they wrapped the body round and round. They made a large carriage-frame, in form like our funeral car, but without the dragons and fishes.

At the time of the cremation, the king and the people, in multitudes from all quarters, collected together, and presented offerings of flowers and incense. While they were following the car to the burial ground, the king himself presented flowers and incense.

When this was finished, the car was lifted on the pile, all over which oil of sweet basil was poured, and then a light was applied." But, with hindsight, the cremated arhat was luckier dead than alive. In the words of John Lennon, peace had been given a chance. It was now time for blood-letting. Regicidal palace politics, no doubt infected by hearty dosages of romantic, monetary, religious, caste, ethnic and personal squabbles set alight a new ad lib national anthem that would challenge any modern-day soap opera scriptwriter.

Mahanama's death brought to the throne his (possibly illegitimate) half Tamil son, Soththisena for a blink-and-you-miss-it moment of splendour. The luckless king lasted less than a day before succumbing to a draft of poison administered by his half-sister, Sanga. Sanga, the daughter of King Mahanama's Singhala queen, clearly had strong views about caste, and legitimacy - which she enforced with a deft and, as it turned out, a most transient impact. For although Sanga was to replace her brother with her own husband, Chattagahaka Jantu, the new king was to last barely a year, disappearing with unnatural speed in 434 CE.

In fact they all disappeared at this time. Chattagahaka Jantu's chief minister replaced his boss with a more compliant distant relative in 435 CE, Mittasena, who, preoccupied by religious devotions was unprepared for the fourth Tamil invasion of the realm in 436 CE.

FIVE

On Being Blonde

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 deficient 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 side-lines 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 Anuradhapuran 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 – Tiritara, 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. Hs 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.

History often presents its students with the prospect of exciting and woeful adjudications. The winner takes all.

Looking at King Mittasena's murder in 436 CE, it is easy to suppose that this was the drama to end all dramas: end of a reign, end of a dynasty; end of Singhala independence.

What a disaster! Expect, as Lewis Hamilton might have observed, it's all too easy to be a drama queen: "I went blonde," he once said with a breathless lack of perspective, "which killed my hair. It was a disaster."

Certainly 436 CE was a bit of a setback for King Mittasena. But at the time of his death, the country had already enjoyed almost a thousand years of recorded history. His death and its consequences, dramatic through they were, were all the same steamrollered out of sight by almost a thousand more years of Singhala kingdoms still to come.

As the defeated king breathed his last on a forgotten and nameless battlefield, far to the north east the once great Jin dynasty that had unified China around the same time was also to fragment into scores of mini and quarrelsome kingdoms that would take centuries to ever sort out. That was much more sensational.

Far to the west a even more absolute disaster was unfolding as the Roman Empire withdrew from Britian, the first in a series of shrinkages that left the pax Romana little but a memory just four hundred years later. A once great empire come and gone.

And yet to the south, the Singhala kingdom would rise and fall, fall and rise like a magic clock almost – if not quite - destined to beat out the hours until unrecordable time.

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.

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