

MY TRIBUTE TO KINGS

This book, '**Lanka: the Land of Kings**' is my tribute to the kings of this island kingdom, the Pearl of the Indian Ocean. It had an unbroken line of kings beginning from the earliest times to 1815, when the last of the kings of the island, *Sri Vikrama Raja Sinha*, was taken captive by the British and was deported to South India to die in exile.

In the vast body of Sinhala folklore is a poem attributed to the last king who was considered a '*Sinhala*' king, even though he was of South Indian origin. According to this poem, the king, while on the English boat sailing towards India, takes a last look at the island, his 'mother Lanka' and bids her farewell.

<i>Vikum sihala parapura sihi tibena tu</i>	<i>ru</i>
<i>Utum ra:ja le: tika mage tibena tu</i>	<i>ru</i>
<i>Netin kandulu noharimi divi tibena tu</i>	<i>ru</i>
<i>Itin a:yubo:van lak mavuni ga</i>	<i>ru</i>

“As long as I remember the heroic Sinhala people
As long as my noble royal blood runs true
I will not shed tears as long as I live
Farewell and live long, Mother Lanka!”

The king, in the view of the Buddhists, was no ordinary mortal. He was god on earth. As a god, he looked after his people as a mother would look after her children. He strived hard to become the ideal Buddhist king, the Righteous (*dhammika*) King. Every morning, Buddhists begin the day by saying in Pali, the language of Buddhism, the following stanza:

De:vo: vassatu ka:le:na
Sassa sampatti he:tuca
Pi:to: bhavatu lo:ko:ca
Ra:ja: bhavatu dhammiko:

May gods give rain in due season
May the crops be bountiful
May the people be joyous
May the king be righteous.

Before the advent of the Portuguese, the first of the European powers to come to the island, all the Sinhalese kings were Buddhist. There were a few Hindu kings among those who had come from South India. Some kings who were of Indian origin, learned the Sinhala language and Buddhism, under Buddhist monks, in order to win the hearts of the Sinhalese people.

The kings produced in this island a culture that was symbolized by the two icons, the tank (*vaevu*) and the stupa (*da:ḡaba*). These two icons symbolized the two basic policies of the king: the tank symbolized his economic policy and the stupa his religious policy. The cultural heritage of Sri Lanka is the result of the harmonious blend of these two policies.

The book is in two parts: Book One is 'About Kings': how they came into power, their ideals, their possessions, their ceremonies, their councils, their patronage and so on. Book Two presents 'The Kings': thirty-five of our most outstanding kings and queens, what they did and why they did so. This lineage is presented in chronological order.

It is hoped that this excursion into the past, into the life and times of kings of an island kingdom, will shed some light on the current issues that confront modern Sri Lanka in her path towards political and ethnic harmony. May Sri Lanka become a land where all Sri Lankans, of whatever colour or creed, can live in peace, prosperity and dignity.

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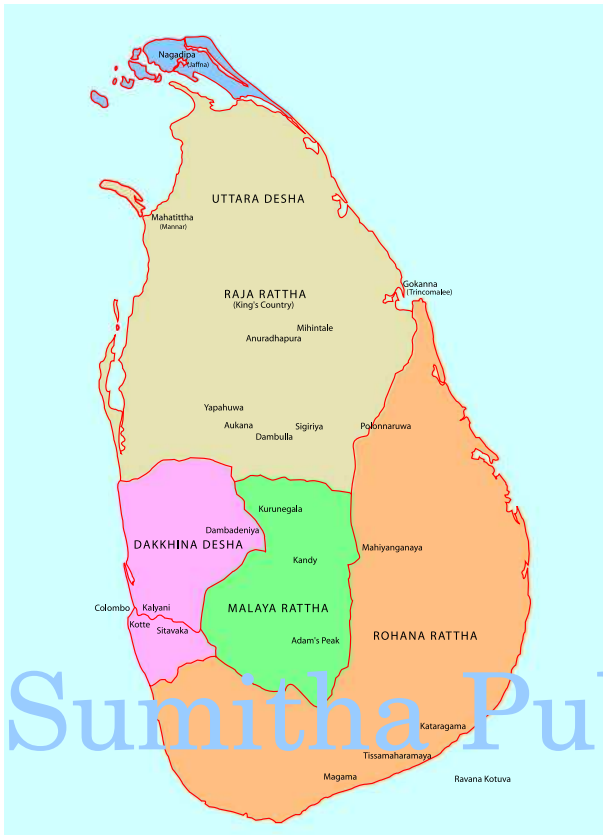
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BOOK ONE

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ABOUT KINGS



Ancient Lanka

1

THE ISLAND KINGDOM THAT WAS

Sri Lanka, the pearl of the Indian Ocean, is a little island off the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. Today it is known as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, with a President as its head. It came to be known as ‘Ceylon’ when it became a crown colony of the British Empire. In 1948 it gained independence and in 1972 it became a Republic.

From time immemorial, it was a kingdom and it had many kings and queens who brought fame and glory to this island. It remained a kingdom until 1815 when the famous 'Kandyan Convention' was signed between the chiefs of the Kandyan kingdom and the British Governor, Robert Brownrigg, thus bringing the island kingdom to an end.

Who was the first king of this island kingdom? Opinions differ. Most historians think that the first king was *Vijaya*, (the Victorious). This view is based on myths and legends narrated in the two main chronicles of the island, the *Di:pavansa* (The Island Chronicle) and the *Maha:vansa* (The Great Chronicle). These chronicles are epics composed in Pali verses.

Others are of the view that there were kings before *Vijaya*. The celebrated Indian epic, *Rama:yana*, which narrates the story of the great Indian king, *Ra:ma:*, records that his wife, *Si:ta:*, was abducted by *Ra:vana*, the king of Lanka. If 'Lanka' of the *Ra:ma:yana* episode can be identified as this island, then the islanders can boast of a royal line as old as that of India.

In the episode that records the arrival of *Vijaya* from India, the *Maha:vansa* says that he met, on the beach, a pretty damsel named *Kuvanna*: "who sat there at the foot of a tree spinning," (Ch. VII, verse 11). She befriended with *Vijaya* and said "I will bestow kingship on my lord" (verse 31). This implies that she hailed from a royal family of the island.

From time to time, the island kingdom was under the control of different kinds of kings, local and foreign. They belonged to dynasties of differing sizes. Their reigns lasted for different periods of time. Their fame spread to different parts of the world both in the East and the West. This book is about Lanka, the island kingdom that was, and her kings and queens, as makers of a great civilization.



Taprobana
the first map of the island by Ptolemy

2

THUS WAS THIS KINGDOM KNOWN

Sri Lanka was known until recently as ‘Ceylon’. For almost a century and a half, it was a colony of the British Empire. In 1948 she gained independence, and in 1972, she became a Republic, changing her name to *Sri Lanka*. It means ‘the Island of Splendour’. The origins of this name can be traced back to *Lanka* of the Indian epic *Rama: yana*.

One of the earliest names of this kingdom was *Tamba-panni* in Pali, *Ta:mra-parni* in Sanskrit and *Tammænna:* in Sinhala. It means, literally, copper-coloured palms. It is said that when *Vijaya* and his followers landed on the north-western beach of the island and rested there for a while, they found their palms (*panni*) copper-coloured (*tamba*).

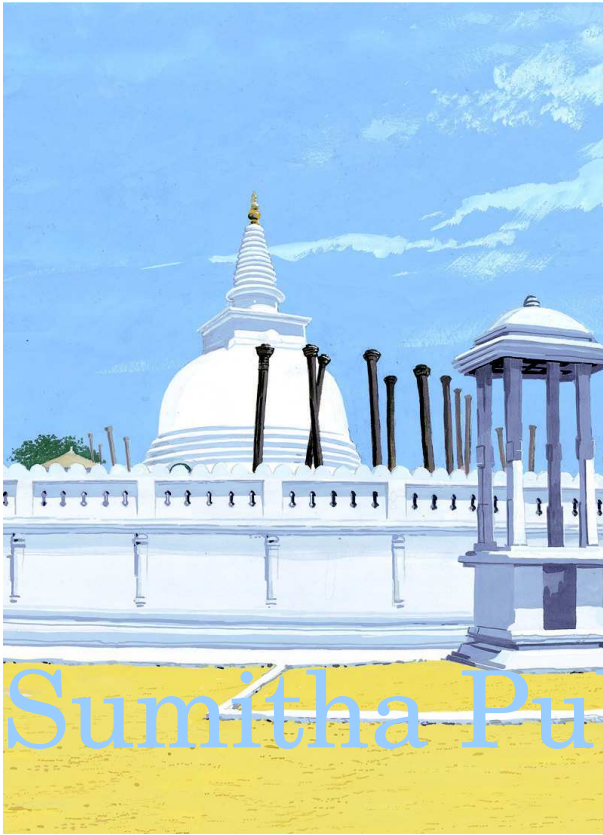
For this reason they called this place *Tamba-panni*. Later, the whole island came to be called *Tamba-panni*. Romans and Greeks who visited the island changed *Tamba-panni* into 'Taprobane'. Ptolemy, the Greek, who drew the first map of the island, in the first century AD, named it 'Taprobana'.

The name 'Ceylon', was the one that became popular under the British. Other European countries spelt this name as 'Ceylan', 'Ceylao' and 'Zeilan'. This name was taken to Europe by Arab traders who frequented the island from ancient times and by the Portuguese and the Dutch who controlled the western sea belt since 1505.

The origins of 'Ceylon' is usually traced back to the Sanskrit name *Sinhala Dvi:pa*. It means the island (*dv:ipa*) of the Sinhalese (*sinhala*) race. Sometimes it was shortened to 'Sinhale'. This island was once divided into three (*tun* in Sinhala or *tri* in Sanskrit) main divisions, and thus it was also called '*Tun Sinhale*' or '*Tri Sinhala*'

Located as it is, close to the Silk Route from the East to the West, merchants of many nationalities came to the island for trade in precious stones, spices and elephants. Arab merchants gave the name *Seren-dip* after the Sanskrit name '*Svarna-dvi:pa*' (Golden Island). 'Palai-simundu' and 'Salike' are other names used in Greek and Roman writings.

Pali chronicles mention that this island was known in the time of the three previous Buddhas of the present age, *O:ja-di:pa*, *Vara-di:pa* and *Manda-di:pa*.



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Thuparama
the oldest stupa
in Anuradhapura

3

RAJA RATTHA **THE KING'S COUNTRY**

Anura:dha-pura, which remained the capital of the island kingdom for more than one thousand five hundred years was also the capital city of the *Ra:ja Rattha*, (*Raja Rata* in Sinhala) the King's Country. Some of the main centers of political and religious power in this province were *Anura:dhapura*, *Polonnaruva*, *Si:giriya*, *Dambadeniya* and *Mihintale*.

From *Anura:dha-pura*, (City of *Anura:dha*) the capital was shifted to *Pulatthi-pura* or *Pulatthi-nagara* by King *Sena I*. The *Co:las*, an Indian dynasty, named it *Jana-na:tha-pura*. The Sinhala king, *Vijaya-ba:hu*, who regained control from the *Co:las* named it *Vijaya-ra:ja-pura*. For a short while, the Rock Fortress, *Si:giri*, remained its capital.

For the joy of the pious, kings built hundreds of stupas in the King's Country. *Missaka Pabbata*, (present *Mihintale*) the mountain where King *De:va:nampiya Tissa* met Sage *Mahinda*, is only a few miles away from *Anura:dha-pura*. This mountain which is also called '*Cetiya Giri*' (Mountain of Stupas) may be called 'the cradle of the Sinhala Buddhist Civilization'.

The King's Country was divided into four smaller kingdoms: *Uttara-de:sha* (the northern division), *Dakkhina-de:sha* (the southern division) *Pa:cina-de:sha* (the eastern division) and *Paccima-de:sha* (the western division). These cover the Dry Zone of the island which gets rainfall only for three months of the year. It was also called *Pihiti Rata* in Sinhala.

Kings built hundreds of tanks, large and small, in this area to store water for agricultural purposes. In the cities, tanks were built to enhance their aesthetic beauty. This area was so full of tanks that the Sinhalese folk began to call it '*væv bændi ra:jje*' (kingdom of tanks). These tanks rank among the finest works of hydraulic technology in the world.

"The native genius of the Sinhalese people" writes Prof. Arasaratnam, "worked to develop and fashion almost to perfection the technique of water storage...The irrigation works constitute one of the greatest legacies of ancient Sinhalese civilization." (Arasaratnam p.63) Spread across the length and breadth of the king's country are natural caves which were the earliest settlements of Buddhist monks.

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