

PRAYING

WITH KINGS

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO 5 FORGOTTEN PLACES OF ANCIENT LANKA
NEAR THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

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DAVID SWARBRICK & The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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FOR XENIA PARTY ANIMAL

"The whole world is filled with things that are just waiting for someone to come along and find them, and that's just what a turnupstuffer does."

PIPPI LONGSTOCKING BY ASTRID LINDGREN 1945 ONWARDS.



Thirty miles north of Kandy marks the start of an extraordinary 5 temple circuit tour to places long lost to modern travellers.

The circuit starts at the Vilbawa Rajamaha temple, which legend connects to Kuveni, the wife of the island's first king, Vijaya. But Kuveni was not simply a wife – nor even a weaver of cloth, a mother, lover, or queen. Shew was also a demon, a metamorphoser, an outcast, an avenging fury, suicide, traitor, murderess, ghost, and mistress of deception. A descendant of gods, she is also a goddess to the country's still living aboriginal peoples.

Kuveni, and her husband Vijaya, were the pinup lovers of their generation, the Bonnie and Clyde of 543 BCE. Only theirs was a more unorthodox passion - more akin to Dido and Aneas, with the queen immolating herself. But whilst it is hard to find a corner of Sri Lanka that is not branded "Vijaya," in besotted memory of the country's founding paterfamilias, it is much harder to find similarly smitten organisations who bear the name "Kuveni."

Coming from a nation fond of boasting the modern world's first female head of state, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960, this seems a monumental omission. But delve a little further and it becomes exactingly clear why Kuveni is the queen the country is too alarmed by to properly acknowledge.

Kuveni was to confound and challenge all ancient ideas of womanhood; and go on challenging them to this day. Her story starts as she sits trapped at in her modest palace, a pawn in her father's political armoury.

She is, naturally, no ordinary princess.

Descending from King Ravana, the ten-headed evil demon king who fatally kidnapped the wife of the Supreme Being – her bloodline offers up a clue, if ever one was needed, to a family proclivity for prolific violence, chaos, and injustice. But in Vijaya she spots a way to escape the prison of her family.

Vijay, a shaved head fugitive with a penchant for what The Mahavamsa calls "evil conduct and ... intolerable deeds," was exiled by his father and arrived in Sri Lanka, a man in need of friends. Friends, land, food: in fact, at the time he arrived on Sri Lanka's shore, he was a man in need of pretty much everything. And in Kuvani he found just about everything.

Overcoming some immediate disagreements in which she almost eats him and imprisons his entire band of feckless followers, she performed a faultless volte-face, gives them food and clothing and, according to the ancient Mahavamsa Chronicle, beaming with broad indulgence, if Chronicles can be said to beam, "assumed the lovely form of a sixteen-year-old maiden."

Although marriage was what Vijaya and Kuveni agreed on, so too did they execute a plan to annihilate her Yakka tribe. But much good any of this did her. In using Vijaya, she was, in turn, to be even more devastatingly used by him. Soon after inaugurating his new kingdom at Tambapanni, and fathering two children, Vijaya abandoned her, sending to India for a more respectable princess, one who was drawing-room perfect, and banishing his native wife to the wilderness.

Rejected by both husband and the people she came from and had betrayed and killed, Kuveni climbed or was forced to the top of a mountain and hurled down, cursing her disloyal husband as she died.

Her husband was to die without heirs. His successor was struck down by a (presumably related) disease, and his entire children made demented by bloodshed, civil war, and familicide

Across the entire island a lonesome scrap of haunting folklore offers a hint as to the final tomb of Queen Kuveni. There is nothing to verify it except the curious behaviour of the local people. Visitors to the village are welcomed to its little temple, the Maligatenna Raja Maha Viharaya, but not permitted to walk to the top of the little hill above it, where the queen's crypt is said to lie.

Astonishingly, it is better than a one-in-two bet that Prince Vijaya's tomb also exists. It is said to be located on Medagama Hill in Paduwasnuwara, halfway between Kurunegala and Puttalam. Certainly, the unmissable shape of a very ancient stupa can be made out. And astonishingly too, ashes found in its heart during conservation work were tested by the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and found to be at least 2,500 – 2,600 years old, placing them well within touching distance of his death in 505 BCE.

TWO THE KING'S SILVER TEMPLE

About 15 miles on from here is the Ridi Viharaya. Although substantially restored in the 18th century by the Kandyan king, Kirti Sri Rajasinghe, the temple dates back to the 2nd century BCE – roughly the same time as the text of the Rosetta stone was chiselled into a basalt slab in distant pharaonic Egypt.

To better understand the supreme importance of this ancient temple, take a look at pictures of the oldest of the island's 3 greatest stupas, the Ruwanweliseya, built between 161 to 137 BCE by King Dutugamunu.

The first steps in its construction are told in extraordinary detail by the Mahavamsa Chronicle. "King Dutugamunu had the workers dig a 7 cubit deep excavation. He had soldiers brought in round stones and had them crushed with hammers. Crushed stones were placed at the bottom of the excavation and compacted using elephants. The Elephants had their feet bound with leather to protect their feet. Fine clay was brought in from a nearby river. This clay was known as butter clay since it was very fine. King Dutugamunu ordered to spread butter clay on top of crushed stones. After placement of the butter clay layer, the King ordered to bring bricks. Bricks were placed on top of the butter clay layer. On top of bricks, mesh of iron was placed. Mountain crystals were placed on top of iron bars. Another layer of stones was placed on top of mountain crystals. On top of

stones, 8" thick copper plate was placed.
Copper plate was sprayed Arsenic and Sesame
oil. On top of the copper plate, seven inch
thick silver plate was placed."

And that was just the beginning. The king was to die before the stupa was completed and the Mahavamsa tells the story of the dying monarch being caried on a palanquin to see the works. Standing for centuries, and now much restored, its fabled relic chamber has yet resisted all attempts at excavation. Within it is said to be a vessel filled with Lord Buddha's artifacts, placed atop a seat of diamonds, encased in a golden container adorned with gems, and set inside a room decorated with murals and a sliver replica of the Bo Tree.

The Mahavamsa Chronicle notes its sovereign importance: "The relic-chamber shall not shake even by an earthquake; flowers that were offered on that day shall not wither till the end of Buddha Gotama's Dispensation; the lamps that were kindled shall not be extinguished; the clay that was mixed with perfume and sandalwood shall not dry; even a single scratch shall not appear within the relic-chamber; stains shall not appear in any of the golden goods that were offered."

The money for all this construction came from silver ore that was mined from beneath the Ridi Viharaya, the ore itself a serendipitous

discovery by monks and merchants. On an island famed for gemstones that seem to pour from its rivers, silver deposits are so rare as to be almost non-existent. This one, able to finance so great an undertaking as Ruwanweliseya, would have turbo charged the local economy for a period, a more modest version of the California Gold Rush which helped build California. Or the one in ancient Athens, where the discovery of silver in Laurium funded a navy which in turn turned Athens into a superpower. That the ore was used to build a temple in Sri Lanka is a telling comment on the very different priorities encountered here.

In thanks for this, the king built Ridi Viharaya over the mine. Seen today, it comprises 25 caves, inhabited by (naturally) unseen Arhat monks, the entrance to the entire complex marked by a rock and stupa which is thought to be the location of the original temple and the place where the king once stood to be correctly dressed before beginning his devotions. Also visible is a Polonnaruwa era temple decorated with Kandyan paintings and carvings of dancers in a distinctly Hindu style; a pavilion for drummers; the main temple within the original cave from which the silver was extracted and now filled with ancient statues and tiled in Dutch porcelain Bible tiles; and the Uda Viharaya, or the upper temple, dating to the Kandyan era, and decorated with mythological animals.

THE FOREST MONKS

Twenty miles, and over 500 years, on from here is the Arankele Forest Monastery established by one of the island's greatest kings, Dhatusena. Weith him a new dynasty had come to power in the land, seizing the state bank from a band of invading Pandyan Tamils in 459 CE and rebuilding its crumbling infrastructure. The new king encouraged, cajoled, and persuaded many of the people displaced by the Pandiyan invasion to return to repopulate the abandoned regions in Anuradhapura from their refuge in Ruhuna. And he secured his kingdom's food supply, repairing water infrastructure and buildings at least twenty-six new tanks, half of them so vast and robustly made that they are still in working order today. A good example is the Maeliya Wewa tank, just north of Kurunegala.

One of a series of smaller cascade tanks, it still provides harvested rainwater to 202 farmers, across 155 acres. Another, near Mannar, was described by Sir James Emerson Tennent in 1860 as a "stupendous work," and so it is — with an embankment of seven kilometres and a capacity today of carrying thirty-nine million cubic metres of water within its 4550 hectares bowl. But perhaps the greatest of all his works was double reservoir complex, Kala Wewa and Balalu Wewa close to the Avukana Buddha statue. Together these tanks store 123 million cubic meters of water, their central slice feedings into a eighty-seven-kilometre canal

that descends in perfect milometers to deliver its water to Anuradhapura, whilst feeding thousands of acres of paddy land on its way.

Sadly, he was less capable in navigating the minefield of family politics and inspired his son Kasyapa to commit an act of patricide that made him every bit the equal of Oedipus. Having killed the great king Kasyapa was to go onto the create one of Aisa's most sensational pleasure places at Sigiriya.

But Sigiriya and all it stood for was a universe or two away from Dhatusena's forest monastery at Arankele. As secretive a place today as it was then, Arankele was the home for forest monks, subscribers to a distinctive tradition within Buddhism that emphasizes a simpler and more hermit like existence than other monastic chapters. Even so, the site, at its heyday, housed over 1,000 forest monks. The remains of the buildings that they used still lie scattered between vast hardwood trees: a hospital, stone walls, moats, medical wards, mediation halls, paths, herb grinders, baths – and of courses scores of caves in which the solitary monks lived.

FOUR IN REMEMBRANCE OF KINGS

A further short drive, this time heading back south, takes you to the Maraluwawa Rajamaha Viharaya, built by prince Pussadeva, the nephew of King Dhatusena, and remarkable for the copper plates it houses. These were loving copied by the Kandyan kings from the disintegrating originals that described that this was the place where the prince listened to the

preaching of the island's last great saint or Arhath, Mahadeva Thero.

A further short drive on from here takes you to the last temple, this one at Nathagane, which dates back to the 2nd century BCE and was a hundred years later to provide a welcome hideaway for the remarkable king Valagamba, known by some as the boomerang king for his amazing ability to bounce back from even the most disastrous encounters.

Valagamba's older three brothers had been kings before him, but the last of the trio, Khallata Naga, managed to get himself murdered by his army chief, who did his best to marginalise and even kill Valagamba. He failed. Valagamba won the ensuing fight, killed the murderous general and took over the throne by 103 BCE.

But within months, the new king was defeated by the armies of 5 Pandyan Tamil chiefs. Deposed a second time, the king evaded capture, and his many escapes and hiding places were to illuminate the map of Sri Lanka like a Catch-Me-If-You-Can treasure hunt, this cave temple in Nathagane and the one in Galagedera itself being among his most famous safe houses.

Eventually grappling his way back to power in 89 BCE, Valagamba retook his crown through a series of small, successful incremental skirmishes - although, given the murderous incompetence of his Dravidian interlopers, it may have been like pushing on an open door. His second reign was to last for over a dozen years, and it was under his patronage that the Pali Canon, the largest and oldest compendium of Buddhist practices was commissioned, putting into robust written form the teachings that had until that moment been passed on just orally.

This commission was caried out in the Aluvihare Rock Temple, itself barely 30 miles drive from The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel. Eighty times larger than the Bible, the Pali Canon reveals much more than the importance of Buddhism itself. It embodies the island's enduring attachment to rules, regulations, and laws. The country's legal system today is a mixture of Roman-Dutch law, English law, Kandian law, Thesavalamai and Muslim law. Overwriting all this is its constitution. But overwriting even this is what is most commonly accepted as correct; and that is largely dictated by the mores of Buddhism itself, its paramount religion.

Under his patronage 500 monks assembled in Aluvihare to begin the task. It was to be momentous moment for the challenge they had set themselves was immense. Firstly, they had to recite the doctrines. That would have taken many years. Then they had to agree on an acceptable version of the teachings before transcription. That must have taken even longer. Finally came the lengthy work of transcribing them, using ola leaves from talipot palms. The resulting Pali Canon became the standard scripture of Theravada Buddhism's. It was written in the now extinct Pali language, an ancient Indian language, thought to be the language spoken by Buddha and used in Sri Lanka until the fifth century CE. Scholars argue (as they do) about how much of the work can be attributed to one person or to Buddha himself - but believers are largely free of such elaborate debates.

The Cannon lays out in clear and unambiguous terms the doctrines, and rules of conduct that Buddhists should follow. It is made up of three parts. The first, the Vinaya concerns itself mainly with the rules for monks and nuns. The second, the Sutta Pitaka is the Cannon's practical heart, comprising around 10,000 teachings and poems of Buddha and his close companions that focus on the typical challenges of life. The last, the Abhidhamma Pitaka is where the higher teachings sit – the ones most focused around Enlightenment.

The monks were probably still hard at work on The Pali Canon when Valagamba died in 77 BCE, bringing his adopted son, Mahakuli Mahatissa to power. But under his patronage copies were despatched across the kingdom and to other Buddhist countries. Aluvihare Rock Temple still exists, its caves dotted with ancient inscriptions, but its great library was burned down during the Matale Rebellion in 1848.

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Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at www.flametreeestate.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

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Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:

generalmanager@flametreeestate.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various 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.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art decobuildings 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 teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.

