

Romances of a Romantic Island

Posted on

The ancient history of Lanka, inevitably mixed with myth, includes compelling stories of romance within the monarchy from its very inception; besides, there is a more contemporary example concerning another kind of ruler, a British Governor.

Words Richard Boyle

Illustrations Sujith Heenatigala

To discover these love stories one needs to turn to the *Mahavamsa* ("The Great Chronicle"), a history of the kings of Lanka. The chronicle begins around 540 BC and recounts that ships carrying a banished prince from a kingdom in north-east India with 700 followers sailed to Lanka, inhabited at that time by a tribe called the *Yakkas*, imbued with supernatural abilities.

Vijaya and Kuveni



The prince's name was Vijaya. On arrival his followers encounter Kuveni, the queen of the *Yakkas*, who dispatches them into a gorge. Vijaya threatens her to release them, which she does, and then assumes the form of a "sixteen-year-old maiden", seduces the prince, promises to make him king, but warns that the *Yakkas* must be defeated or else she will be in mortal danger.

With Kuveni's aid Vijaya achieves this objective and becomes the first king of Lanka and the legendary founder of the Sinhalese, the 'lion race': he came from *Sinhapura*, named after his father, deemed to be a lion. Kuveni bore him two children, but happiness was to end because Vijaya needed to legitimise his rule by marrying a Hindu Indian princess of high rank, a *kshastriya*, and ordered his queen to depart, but to leave the children.

After pleading with Vijaya to no avail, Kuveni leaves, defiantly taking the children, and heads for a lingering *Yakka* community hoping for help. For safety, she leaves the children in the forest, a wise precaution as she is, as she warned Vijaya years

earlier, rejected by her kin.

Unmada Chitra and Prince Digagamini



The *Mahavamsa* informs us that Vijaya's nephew, King Panduvasdeva (504 BC – 474 BC), Lanka's second king, had a daughter who was so beautiful she drove men to distraction, named Unmada Chitra. After her father's death she was imprisoned in an *ektemge* (circular tower), to keep her distanced from prospective suitors as it was prophesied if she bore a son he would kill her brothers and take the throne.

A glimpse of the princess by Prince Digagamini was sufficient for him to build a secret ladder so he could visit her at night. Which he did, and they fell in love, but inevitably she became pregnant. The brothers swore they would kill the baby if it was a boy, as indeed it turned out to be, but Unmada Chitra's attendant managed to swap him for a baby girl and he became the first genuine Lankan king, Pandukabhaya (474 BC – 367 BC), and the founder of the astounding Anuradhapura Kingdom.

Travel tip: visit the ruins at Panduvasnuwara, which include the remains of the *ektemge* surrounded by a circular moat.

Viharamahadevi and King Kavantissa



During the 2nd Century BC, the southern Ruhunu Kingdom was ruled by Kavantissa, who, according to the *Mahavamsa*, was short and dark-skinned and, according to modern historians, a master of diplomacy who unified the South. Another minor king was Kelanitissa who ruled Kelaniya. He had fewer virtues, having boiled a monk alive in oil, and the gods in a rage had made the sea suddenly flood the land.

Astrologers declared that if a princess was sacrificed to the sea the flooding would stop, so the king's daughter, Viharamahadevi, was set adrift in a small boat. The waves immediately ceased and she floated southwards to land at Kirinda in Ruhunu. She was brought before King Kavantissa who was so inspired by her story that he resolved to marry the brave princess. They were the parents of perhaps the

greatest king of all, Dutugemunu (161 BC – 137 BC), and Viharamahadevi is considered a national heroine.

Travel tip: Pottuvil along the East Coast is also believed to be the landing place of Viharamahadevi. The Muhudu Maha Viharaya marks this spot while the nearby Magul Maha Viharaya is where the royal wedding took place.

Prince Saliya and Asokamala



Dutugemunu had a son, Prince Saliya. The *Mahavamsa* relates that while walking through a grove of sacred Asoka trees he heard a song, delightfully sung by a beautiful girl plucking Asoka flowers, hence her name Asokamala. Saliya fell in love with her but was cautioned that as she was of low caste, he could not claim the throne should he marry her, which of course he did, shunning royalty. Incidentally the *Mahavamsa* states that Saliya and Asokamala were married in a previous life.

Travel tip: visit the masterpiece of a romantic carving at Anuradhapura known as the “Isurumuniya Lovers”, generally considered to represent Saliya and Asokamala.

Sir Thomas Maitland and Lavinia



The last example of a story of romance in a romantic Island leaps forward two millennia, out of the monarchical era of the *Mahavamsa* and into the colonial era. Sir Thomas Maitland (1805-1811), the second British Governor of Ceylon, built a house on a seaside promontory at Galkissa south of Colombo. Legend has it that Maitland became entranced by a half-Portuguese half-Sinhalese dancer, Lovina Aponsuwa, who resided nearby. Soon the local dance troupe to which she belonged gave frequent performances for Maitland.

They became lovers and in early 1806 he named his residence “Mount Lavinia House” and the location became known by the British as “Mount Lavinia”. An underground passage was dug from a disused well near Lovina’s house in the village to the cellars of the residence so that their scandalous romance remained clandestine. But there was a heartbreaking end to the relationship, for in 1810

Maitland fell ill and returned to England, and they never met again.

This paradisiacal Island has many romantic tales to tell and has inspired the courageous spirit of its people.