

THE SUBHA YASA AFFAIR (A TALL STORY IN THE MAHAVAMSA)

Among the numerous legends and anecdotes which intersperse the *Mahavamsa*'s narrative of Sri Lanka's colourful history, is one which tells of how the royal succession passed from Yasalalakatissa (last king of the first dynasty) to Subha, a mere gate-keeper, through the practical joke with which the king was wont to amuse himself, but which, I am sure, no serious historian would be prepared to accept as anything but a yarn used to cover a less remarkable happening—or indeed sheer ignorance of how the transition came about.

Even so—and notwithstanding the episode's dramatic possibilities—our *Mahavamsa* version is brevity and terseness itself, devoting no more than a mere twelve lines to it.

- 35.51 Dovārikassa Dattassa putto dovāriko sayam
rañño sadisarūpena ahosi Subhanāmavā
52 Subham balattham tam rāja rājabhūsāya bhūsiya
nisīdāpiya pallanke hāsatham yasalālako
53 sisacolaṃ balatthassa sasīse paṭimuñciya
yatthim gahetvā hatthena dvāramūle tthito sayam
54 vandantesu amaccesu nisinnam āsanamhi tam
rājā hasati; evam so kurute antarantarā.
55 Balattho ekadivasam rājānam hasamānakam
sayam balattho kasmā me sammukhā hasati? ti so
56 mārāpayivā rājānam balattho so Subho idha
rajjam kāresi chabbassam Subharājā ti vissuto

Geiger translates:

Now a son of Datta, the gate-watchman, named Subha, who was himself a gate-watchman, bore a close likeness to the king. And this palace-guard Subha did the king Yasalalaka, in jest, bedeck with the royal ornaments and place upon the throne and binding the guard's turban about his own head, and taking himself his place, staff in hand, at the gate, he made merry over the ministers as they paid homage to (Subha) sitting on the throne. Thus was he won't to do, from time to time.

Now one day the guard cried out to the king, who was laughing: "Why does this guard laugh in my presence?" And Subha the guard ordered to slay the king, and he himself reigned here six years under the name Subharaja.¹

It is not known whether Subha married Yasa's queen as usurpers sometimes did in an effort to legitimise their position. Instead, physical evidence of the rule of Subharaja is referred to thereafter by the *Mahavamsa*, also that he was succeeded by Vasabha, a Lambakanna, about whom too the chronicle has an anecdote whose basic motif is found in other mythologies, i.e. of a prophesy that the ruler would suffer death at the hands of one just born bearing such and such a name or characteristic, as a result of which all such are put to death; that the hero escapes in some remarkable way and lives to fulfil the prophesy.

The *Dipavamsa* (xxxii 46-47) knew of the two kings, and Subha as having been a gate-keeper, but withholds whatever story its author must then surely have known by way of explanation of how this gate-keeper came to be the successor of his royal highness; that is, if our *Mahavamsa*'s little drama was a later accretion.

Neither of the chronicles nor the rare inscriptional evidence recorded in *Epigraphica Zelenica*² prove helpful as to the identity of this Subha except to show that he was really called Saba (Sabha), with C.W. Nicholas and Paravitana³ attributing this discrepancy of name as possibly due to an old clerical error (surely, then, in the chronicles) The *Tika* not only accepts the name Subha but justifies it with the explanation that he had been given it as a *gunanama* because he had resembled the king in complexion and appearance.⁴ How clever!

Recent historians do not seem to know what to make of the story—they either ignore it altogether or accept merely the upshot of it, which is that Subha, who succeeded Yasalalaka Tissa to the throne in Sri Lanka, had at one time been a gate-keeper of the palace. Emerson Tennent⁵ makes no reference to the affair in his wide-ranging study of the island, its history being of no great concern to him. Likewise, the shortness of his *A Short History of Ceylon* is excuse enough for H.W. Codrington⁶ to bypass reference to it with no more than the observation that by Lambakanna was meant "having ears with long lobes". G.C. Mendis,⁷ dating Subha to 120-126 A.D. merely states that he had seized the throne from the Moriya ruler, Yasalalaka Tissa, but again, not how nor whether he was himself a Lambakanna, when adding, "Thereafter the Lambakannas kept the throne to themselves for more than two centuries". Horace Perera and M. Ratnasabhapathy,⁸ dating the usurpation by Subha to the usual 60 A.D., refer to Subha as a palace-guard, an interloper to whose rule the Lambakannas, who held important posts in the administration and the army, were not going to submit. E.F.C. Ludowyk⁹ refers to the incident in his listing of the more striking of the rulers of the Sinhala kingdom, which includes Subha, but does so guardedly as

¹ *The Mahavamsa or The Great Chronicle* Colombo (1850) *ad loc.*

² vol.II p.166.

³ *A Concise History of Ceylon* Colombo (1961) p.76.

⁴ *ad loc.*

⁵ *Ceylon: An Account of the Island, Physical, Historical and Topographical*, London (1860).

⁶ *A Short History of Ceylon*, London (1926) p.26.

⁷ *The Early History of Ceylon*, Calcutta (1940) p.31.

⁸ *Ceylon and Indian History*, Colombo (1954) p.175.

⁹ *The Story of Ceylon*, London (1962) p.73.

“supposed to have been the palace guard who seized power because the king whom he resembled in features once too often played the practical joke of changing places with him”. K. M. de Silva¹⁰ merely observes that the right of succession to the throne of Sri Lanka appears to have been with the two powerful clans, the Lambakannas and Moriyas, not disclosing what he thought of our Subha, much less how this man came to power. The expectation raised by W.I. Siriweera¹¹ when, despite his cursory interest in the early history, he dealt at some length with the mythistorical treatment of Vijaya and Pandukabhaya, comes to nothing when he fails even to advert to our Subha-Yasa affair. The only new information we have from such sources comes from H. Parker with his *Village Tales of Ceylon*.¹² Yet even here it is not on what could have influenced our story but rather the influence it itself has had on the ending of a folk-tale he had encountered in the North-western Province—a tale he calls ‘The Three Questions’, together with its variant ‘The Four Difficult Questions’. On the other hand, he deems the Subha-Yasa affair itself to be no less than a “historical fact”, citing it off Turnour’s translation of the *Mahavamsa*.

Taking the *Mahavamsa* story as belonging with the tradition, what it says is that no one else than the king and the gate-keeper suspected the exchange of roles—notwithstanding that everyone knew they both looked so alike that one could, *mutatis mutandis*, be mistaken for the other—in fact, as we saw the *Tika* explain, “Subha” being a conferred *gunanama* due to this very resemblance. Had Subha’s associates known of the royal gimmick, it would have fallen flat, and, besides, passing from mouth to mouth, could hardly have been repeated—as we are told it was. On the other hand, if any of the king’s retinue had known of it, Subha could not have carried out the usurpation, as he is believed to have done—for they would have had their suspicions and brought about dire consequences for himself. The exchange of roles had to be secret between the two of them, king and gate-keeper, if it was to be a success in which the king—if not the gate-keeper also—found much glee; that is, until it dawned on the gate-keeper that he could use it to his advantage if he had the wit and courage.

Paranavitana¹³ attempts a farfetched explanation of this now popularly called Subha-Yasa story by reaching back to the time of Devanampiya Tissa, when the king was said to have played the role of door-keeper during the festivities connected with the arrival of the branch of the Sacred Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka, temporarily investing sovereignty with the heads of sixteen families sent to protect it. Such temporary investments of privileges and paraphernalia of royalty, he finds from J.G. Frazer, were not unknown in antiquity in some parts of the world and surmises that Yasalalaka Tissa lost his life during some such ritualistic performance when the mock king (here Subha) happened to be one who had supporters to back him as the permanent occupant of the throne. For lack of anything

¹⁰ *A History of Sri Lanka*, Delhi (1981) p.18. He mentions as significant the right of the Lambakannas and Moriyas to the throne of Sri Lanka.

¹¹ *The History of Sri Lanka from the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century*, Colombo (2002) p.41 The seizure of the throne by Sena and Guttika, Dravidian entrepreneurs engaged in horse-trading is mentioned with no qualms.

¹² London (1910) vol.I. See no. 18, p.138 f and 141 f.

¹³ *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon* bk II ch.iv. p.177-178 Paranavitana himself repeats the story of Subha and Yasalalaka with ‘as is said’ and ‘we are told’, making evident his own disbelief of the *Mahavamsa* version.

better, Ananda Guruge¹⁴ repeats Paranavitana's conjecture, even though it accounts for no more than the king assuming a lowly role, and that too, to sixteen others, leaving out the pivotal characteristic of the plot, which is of the king bringing disaster upon himself by a stunt of his own—not to mention the remarkable likeness which won our gatekeeper his *gunanama*!

Subha was neither the first nor the last of such underlings as usurped kingship in history. To my knowledge the earliest was Sargon, the Akkadian cup-bearer of the king of Kish, who in 2370 B.C. emerged from an obscure origin to become the founder of a dynasty and an empire. There is Eye, who took over the throne of Egypt following the death of Tutankhamen by marrying Ankhesapamen, his wife, after murdering the son sent by the Hittite king in response to her request for one of them to be her husband, writing that she was not prepared to marry a person who was her servant. There is also the signal instance with which I will deal somewhat more fully hereafter, of Gyges, the Lydian, bodyguard, or as some versions have it, shepherd of King Candaules, who brought to an end the rule of the Heraclids, replacing it with that of the Mermnadae. Nor is the accession of our gate-keeper, Subha, the first or only instance in Sri Lanka itself, remembering Sena and Guttika, sons of the horse-freighter, who wrested sovereignty from King Suratissa c177 B.C.¹⁵

Even so, the irony with which this little anecdote is fraught appears to have been so impressive that it has left the people with a pithy expression for an undeserved's unforeseen elevation in position as being "doratupālaya raja vuna vage", i.e., "like the door-keeper becoming king". As Simon Navagaththegama points out in the foreword to his play *Subha saha Yasa*, no ordinary man could have become king in that antiquity simply because he killed the reigning monarch. All these instances presume the popularity of the usurper, not infrequently the unpopularity of the reigning monarch. Most of these usurpers were men of great military ability, as they proved in due course, rather than blatant adventurers who were favoured by circumstances, as is often suggested by the anecdotes of their gaining power. Subha may not have been an ordinary gate-keeper but head of the king's security service, just as was Gyges, while Sargon, like them, was no ordinary wine-waiter but the king's own trusted attendant.¹⁶ "Unless Subha was a man of influence, acceptable to the people", says Guruge, "he could not have reigned six years". It is even likely that he was a Lambakanna, thus having the backing of his clan and, as against Vasabha, initiating Lambakanna rule.¹⁷

¹⁴ ed. *Mahavamsa: The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka* Colombo (1982) p.1005 n.37. See also p.1006 n.46.

¹⁵ *Mahavamsa* xxi. 10-11 These were Damilas who then ruled together, and for twenty two years and justly. But we are clearly told that they seized power by armed might.

¹⁶ The post Subha held was perhaps the same as was held by Siva (see *Mahavamsa* xxxiv. 18), whom Queen Anula married and then murdered. Compare the status of such posts with that of the Duganna Rala and Diyawadana Nilame, for instance. Sena and Guttika may have started as horse-traders but soon acquired the wealth and influence to raise the huge army they mustered in India to invade Suratissa's kingdom.

¹⁷ On Subha as a Lambakanna, see the full discussion in Guruge's *Prolegomena*. By Subha's time the Lambakanna had rehabilitated themselves. Also under him Vasabha's uncle, a Lambakanna, held the post of army commander. See Guruge p.1006 n.43.

My interest here is not however in the historicity of these last-mentioned personalities, Gyges and Subha. It is rather in the dramas in which their respective accessions to sovereignty have been couched, which relishes in seeing them for the lowly underlings suggested by their designations. For, notwithstanding the great distance separating the lands in which their respective literatures had their origin, the Greek presence in India following Alexander could — and certainly did, as the evidence goes — result in the dissemination of motifs from Greek story and history in our part of the world. And one such could be that of Gyges as the inspiration for our tall story of how a gate-keeper succeeded in becoming king.

The Greeks appear to have had at least two versions in antiquity of how Gyges came to be king of Lydia, both of which agree that he was a lowly employee whom a fantastic experience had put in a position to kill the king and become king himself.

To take the second one first—it is narrated by Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*.¹⁸ According to what he says he had heard, Gyges, the ancestor of the wealthy Lydian, Croesus, was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia. One day, during a great storm, an earthquake briefly opened up a chasm in the earth where he was grazing his sheep. Gyges went down into this and saw in it many astonishing things, and among them a horse of bronze with doors. Inside this horse was a large corpse—and on its finger a gold ring. Taking nothing else, Gyges put this on his own finger and came up from the chasm, which thereupon closed up. Thereafter, when at a meeting of the king's shepherds he happened to be meddling with his ring and twisted its bezel towards the inside of his hand, he found he had become invisible to his companions, and when he turned it back to the outside, that he was visible again. "Having made this discovery", Glaucon continues, "he managed to get himself included in a party that was to go to the palace to report to the king, and when he arrived, seduced the queen and with her help attacked and murdered the king and seized the throne."

Interestingly enough, the older version comes to us from Herodotus, the historian whose work it is becoming increasingly likely was popular in some form or other in North-west India as to suggest motifs for three or four jatakas¹⁹ — even if there may not have existed that Sanskrit translation Parānavitana found mention of in his now questionable interlinear writing.²⁰

¹⁸ 59b-360a Glaucon, Plato's step-brother narrates this in argument that, had men the facility to go invisible as Gyges had by his ring, none, who now feared or were ashamed of wrongdoing before the public, would desist from such.

¹⁹ see my "Herodotus in the Jatakas", *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* vol. viii (1982) p. 40-65. Notable are the *Nacca* (No. 32) and the *Ucchanga* (No. 67). See also the *Macch-uddana* (No. 288) which suggests the adventure of Arion, and the *Manicora* (No. 194) which reminds us of what Herodotus says happened to Aesop in Delphi.

²⁰ Refer the text (unpublished) of the paper read by him on 31st October, 1964 entitled "An Account of Alexander the Great and Greek Culture in A Universal History Written in the Reign of Mahāsena"—if not elsewhere also. I quote for what it may be worth (pp17-18): "Of the Yavana books mentioned by name in the *Rajavamsa* is the Compendium of History of Haradatta Pandita (Herodotus), which was written by him after his return to his own country from travels in various lands. It has been stated in the *Rajavamsa* that Haradatta Pandita came to the part of Supparaka also, remained there for a time, and returned to his own country. But it has been stated by the Byzantine (Ruma) merchant Alaksandara who had come to Suvarnapura, stayed there and returned

Herodotus' story of Gyges appears in the earliest pages of his *Histories*²¹ where he tells of how the rule in Lydia passed from the Heraclids to the Mermnadae (as it passed from the prevailing Moriya dynasty to the Lambakanna with our Subha) with the shepherd's seizure of the throne, together with the succession up to the fabulous Croesus whom the Persians under Cyrus defeated. Since the historian's version is highly dramatized, I will give here a brief prosaic paraphrase of it.

It appears that King Candaules, the last of the Heraclid dynasty, fell madly in love with his wife's beauty, so much so that he desired another to know the nature of his overwhelming experience. So he arranged for his bodyguard and confidante, Gyges, to hide behind the door of his bedroom and see her undressed when she was getting into bed with him. Aghast at this suggestion, yet unable to refuse the king, Gyges did as he was asked. But when afterwards he slipped out of the room from behind her, the queen saw him with the corner of her eye. Despite the shame she felt at what she suspected her husband had arranged, she remain silent. Next morning, however, she sent for Gyges and ordered him either to kill the king, seize the throne and take her as his wife, or himself die on the spot. Seeing the dilemma he was in, Gyges consented to kill the king—with the queen now hiding him behind the bedroom door! "Thus it was," says the historian, "that Gyges usurped the throne and married the queen."

The later version, the Platonic, gives us to understand that at it was Gyges who took the initiative to kill the king and that it was he who co-opted the queen's assistance, seducing her. We are not told how the ring figured in the assassination itself, seeing that as the king's shepherd, he was able to approach him even otherwise, nor why the queen consented to be a party to the king's death and then marry a mere shepherd in his stead.

In all this the role of the ring pales into insignificance; perhaps it may, if at all, only have served to make Gyges invisible at the killing.²²

(to his own country), that there is no evidence whatever to prove that Haradatta Pandita had come and stayed at any place in Jambudvipa and returned (to his own land). The Compendium of History by Haradatta Pandita (Herodotus) is the foremost among history books. Historical accounts relating to Jambudvipa narrated by Haradatta Pandita are very few. But the historical accounts of the Parasika kingdom, a land which is a neighbour of Jambudvipa, have been related (there) in an excellent manner, and in detail. The account of the establishment of the Parasika Empire has not been narrated in detail by any (historian) except Haradatta Pandita. The book of Haradatta Pandita is written to narrate historical events but there are (to be found in it) stories which are also connected with morality. So it has been stated in the *Pp* and in the *Rajavamsa*. It has been stated in the *Rajavamsa* that the book of Haradatta Pandita had been translated into the Samskrta language. But it has not been stated that the translation of the book of Haradatta Pandita into the Samskrta language has been (actually) seen by the author of the *Rajavamsa*, or by anyone else. Even the name of the book of Haradatta Pandita has not been found in the *Spv* or in the *Mv*. Had the book of Haradatta Pandita been translated into the Samskrta language, it is reasonable (to assume) that its name (even) would be cited in the *Spv* or in the *MV*. Therefore is it reasonable to conclude that the book of Haradatta Pandita has not been translated into the Samskrata language. Haradatta Pandita was possessed of the previous preparation necessary to (*upanisraya sampatti*) to become a Buddhist had be [sic] been born in Jambudvipa.

²¹ bk. i. 8-12.

²² It may be this that makes Tzetzes twice alleged (*Chil.* i. 162 f; vii 195 f.) that the queen was the owner of the magic ring and that it was she who gave it to Gyges for the assassination of the king.

Thus it would seem that the later version given us by Plato was not unaware of the older, with the episode of the ring necessarily gaining prominence at the expense of Candaules' fateful whim and the constraint that was placed upon a reluctant Gyges by a queen whose modesty had been outraged.

As D.L. Page says "It is obvious that this ambitious adventurer, who can make himself invisible is not the Gyges who has to be bullied into hiding behind doors, distilled almost into gelly with the fear of the act".²³

To the historian Xanthus²⁴ thus late in the 5th century is ascribed a third and altogether different story which says that Gyges was sent to fetch the king's bride, a lady named Toudo. On the way home with her, he fell in love with her himself, but in vain. The princess complained to the bridegroom, the king, who swore to execute Gyges the next day. So during the night Gyges, warned by an amorous maidservant, murdered the king (and then surely seized the throne and married the princess). Stories of princesses sent from one country to another to be a (or the) bride of a king or prince are not uncommon in antiquity, one such claiming to have been impregnated Danae-like by a god, when protected in a stone tower on the Silk Route by a soldier delegated for the job. The truth of the matter may however have been, as with our *Mahavamsa* story of Yasalalaka and Subha, of a more prosaic nature. Plutarch simply says that Gyges led a rebellion against King Candaules, who was killed in action against Gyges and his ally, Arselis of Mylasa.²⁵

A fragment of sixteen lines of a Greek tragedy published in the summer of 1950 by Lobal from a second century A.D. (or early third) papyrus discovered at Oxyrrhynchus in Egypt and belonging, as he thinks (and Page agrees), to a play which may even antedate Herodotus,²⁶ shows that the anecdote as given by the historian was quite popular independently of him—and that possibly his own dramatic version owed something to it. So that he was not necessarily the only Greek source for it for all the numerous later writers who adverted to it. What the lines extant give is part of the narrative by the queen to the Chorus or someone else, of her side of the story.

The Queen of Lydia: When I saw clearly, not by guess, that at it was Gyges, I was afraid of a plot for murder in the palace; for such are the wages of a monarch's state. But when I saw that Candaules was still awake, I knew what had been done and what man had done it. Yet as if ignorant, despite the turmoil in my heart, I bridled in silence my dishonour's cry, to be unheard. My night was endless for want of sleep, as in my bed to and fro I twined in anxious thought. And when the brilliant star that brings the dawn arose, forerunner of the first

There is no knowing what his own source was, but it seems an attempt at compromising the ring's role in the *Republic* version with the drama of the Herodotus version.

²³ *A New Chapter in the History of Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge (1991) p.18. My thanks to my colleague Varunadatta Edirisinghe for drawing my attention to this book.

²⁴ Nicholaus of Damascus 90 f 47. Whether the source was really Xanthus is not quite certain.

²⁵ Aetius *Gr.* Page thinks that "in his context this reads like a local aetiological variant outside the mainstream of tradition". Surely this must be the account of how Gyges came to succeed Candaules.

²⁶ *Proceedings of the British Academy* vol. xxv (1950) p.1-12 with plate.

gleam of day, I roused Candaules from bed and sent him to deliver law to his people. Persuasion's tale was ready on my lips, the one that forbids a king, the guardian of his people, to sleep the whole night through. And summoners (have gone to call) Gyges to my presence. . .

This Gyges-Candaules story and our own Subha-Yasa, both of which (as mentioned) involve a dynastic change which most likely resulted from an armed revolt, may appear superficially different in their romantic presentation, yet basically they display common elements that may suggest, if not emulation, certainly inspiration between one and the other. In each case,

- a) it was the respective king himself who envisaged the stunt which caused the downfall of himself, and along with himself, the dynasty;
- b) that he conceived of it to gratify a whim of his own;
- c) that it involved his underling, whom he himself had substituted in his own privileged position;
- d) that the dramatic irony of Yasa doing as much is matched by Candaules doing a similar substitution;
- e) that because and in consequence of this, that underling was able to turn tables on him and become king himself;
- f) that this brought about a dynastic change in the royalty of the land, (the Mermnadae for the Heraclids in Lydia, the Lambakannas for the Moriyas in Sri Lanka).

Both versions of the Gyges story were popular in Greece for a long time. Plato's was recommended for learning by heart in schools in the second century A.D. Herodotus' was chosen by Dionysius of Halicarnessus to illustrate the importance of composition in style; by Libanius as a model for an academic summary; by Nicolaus as a subject for literary criticism at school—so that it could easily have spread to, and thereafter among the Indo-Greeks.

However, if anyone expects the oriental authors of either the jatakas, dramas and the like of India or the chronicles of Sri Lanka, who adopted motifs from exotic story to betray in their own adaptations obvious evidence of the original versions, he does less than justice to their literary genius. Inversion, conversion, localization, intermixture of motifs or details, character-substitution and such other consummate changes render many adaptations unidentifiable in respect of their original inspiration, at best leaving the reader with no more than a nagging sense of familiarity. We have found this to be the case with the jatakas, stories of the existing and lost Katha literature of India, not to mention the dramas of Kalidasa, Bhasa and others.

This is as it should be—and the same would have been true with the literature of Greece, had the Indians sojourned in Greece for as long as, and in the way the Greeks had sojourned in North-western India. In the circumstances, it is no surprise to find some of these appearing in the literature of Sri Lanka as well, most evident among them being that of the island's very foundation myth (the Vijaya-Kuveni legend), the story of Ummada Citta (our Danae in her impregnable tower), the Inundation of Kelaniya and the

Andromeda-like sacrifice to the offended sea-deities of a virgin princess—the Vihara Devi story.

While these make probable that Herodotus' Gyges-Candaules story could have inspired the *Mahavamsa* story of Subha and Yasa, the incidents themselves have little in common to make anything like a more positive assertion. So that, having made my submission, I leave it to mythologists and historians of greater scholarship than mine to judge for themselves whether there is any degree of plausibility in my contention in the light of the extant evidence.

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