

FIVE ROYAL SUICIDES

Between c. 496 and 641 A.D., a period of less than a century and a half, no less than four Sri Lankan kings and princes committed suicide on the field of battle, doing so in a manner that should have raised more speculation among historians and scholars over the years than it has in fact done. Two centuries later the fashion seems not to have passed off, for a fifth joins them, with his soldiers following suit.

The first of these, it will be recalled, was Kassapa of Sigiri (478-496 A.D.), the son of Dhatusena, who murdered his father by having him plastered to a niche in a wall. Eighteen years of Kassapa's rule had elapsed, during which, among other things, he had fortified the aforementioned rock outcropping and built upon it a fine palace like unto Alakamanda, when his step-brother Moggallana came from India with twelve faithful friends and amassed a huge force against him. When the two hosts fell upon each other, there ensued a mighty battle, at some point in which Kassapa, seeing a great swamp in front of him, wheeled his elephant around to seek another path. Thereupon his troops thought their commander was fleeing and broke up in disorder. Then, says the *Culavamsa* (39.27-28), when the enemy cried "We see their backs"

the King, having cut off his head with his knife,
threw it into the air, and put the knife back into
its sheath.

*Raja chetva nikaranena so
Sisan ukkhipiyakasan churikan kosiyan khipi.*

L. C. Wijesinha¹ says there is no reason to doubt that Kassapa committed suicide in the battlefield but finds it absurd if one takes it that it was his head that Kassapa threw into the air and not his knife. Wilhelm Geiger,² agreeing with Wijesinha's translation to the effect that it was his knife, not his head that Kassapa tossed into the air, suggests he did so to call his brother's attention to his own suicide. It is highly unlikely that, if by *sisan cetva* is meant "having decapitated himself," he would have been so frivolous with it as to toss his head into the air. On the other hand, throwing the knife up and catching it deftly before sheathing it, if indeed he could have done even that, adds something of the debonair to his defiance.

¹ Transl. *The Mahavamsa* Part II Colombo (1889). Reprint New Delhi & Madras (1996) Note A in p.6.

² Transl. *Culavamsa* Part I, Colombo (1953) p.46.

The next to take his own life in the field of battle was also a Kassapa, this time the son of King Upatissa. This Upatissa was the husband of Moggalana's sister and ruled briefly, from 522 to 524 A.D., going blind at some time during these years and under constant threat from Silakala, his rebellious son-in-law. To his aid came the heroic Kassapa mounted on his favourite elephant, defeating Silakala seven or eight times, on one occasion, driving his elephant to the summit of a mountain in pursuit of the enemy and winning for himself the epithet Giri (hence Girikassapa).

In the last of these battles, which went on for seven days, however, the king's troops weakened and were forced to retreat, and when Kassapa, taking his blind father and his mother, was retreating to Malaya, the guides lost their way, his troops were surrounded by Silakala and a ferocious battle ensued, in the course of which Kassapa lost his comrades and his favourite elephant was forced to give up the fight. Thereupon Kassapa, says the *Culavamsa* (41.24-25),

Having entrusted the elephant to his elephant-driver, cut off his head, wiped the blood off from his sword and after putting it back in its scabbard, rested his hands on the elephant's head and stretched himself out (in death).

*Hattharohassa datvana chinditva sisam attano
Puncitva lohitan hatva kosiyan asiputtakan
Hatthi-kumbhe ubo hatthi thapetvana avatthari.*

Upon hearing of this King Upatissa also, we are told, died—perhaps a massive heart-attack brought on by news of Kassapa's death.

Here again, as Wijesinha³ points out, the text can give an absurd idea, viz. that what Kassapa entrusted to the elephant-driver was his severed head. However, for the grammar and strictly accurate rendering of what he in fact would have done (i.e. entrusted the *elephant*) Wijesinha says there is the need to supply as an ellipsis the word *hatthin* between *hattharohassa* and *datavana*.

To move on – this same Silakala became king thereafter and ruled for thirteen years, and when he too died (c. 537 A.D.), the second of his three sons, Dathapabhuti, seized the throne, killing his younger brother, Upatissa.

When Moggallana, the eldest of the princes and rightful heir to the throne, learnt of this, he vowed to make Dathapabhuti's reign "a heady draught" and led a strong army against him, taking up position on the Rahera mountain. Dathapabhuti, for his part, pitched camp on the adjoining mountain, Karinda.

³ *loc. cit.* p.7.

At this juncture, however, Moggallana sent Dathapabhuti a message inviting him to a single combat on elephants so as to avert a division of the kingdom and spare the population, who had always been dutiful to both of them. Dathapabhuti accepted the challenge and, armed with the five weapons, mounted his elephant and prepared at once for battle, as the *Culavamsa* author puts it, "like Mara against the sage" i.e. the Buddha. Moggallana also mounted his elephant and confronted his adversary. Then both went for each other, man to man, elephant to elephant.

What took place thereafter is described in the chronicle (*Cul.* 41.49-53) as follows:⁴

The huge elephants rammed each other. A crash was heard at their onslaught like the roar of thunder and sparks like lightning flew at the striking of their tusks. The blood-stained elephants were as evening clouds. Wounded by Moggallana's elephant the King's elephant began to give way. When the King saw that, he made as if to cut his head. But Moggallana greeting him with reverence, besought him: "Forbear to do that !" Despite the request, he persisted in his defiance and cut his neck.

*Raja arabhi tan disva chinditun sisam attano
Moggallano'tha vandanto yaci m'evan hari iti
Yacamane pi so manan manento chindi kandharan.*

The fourth of this series of suicides on the battlefield is that of Jetthatissa III, who defeated and dethroned Aggabodhi III (626-641 A.D.). Dethroned, the latter fled to India and returned five years later with a Damila army to recover his kingdom. The battle took place at Kalavapi. Here Jetthatissa mounted his armoured elephant, but seeing his troops fall back, instructed the high dignitary, who rode the elephant with him, to request his queen to take to a religious life and transfer the merit she acquired thereby to him, then started striking down the Damilas, as many as came within his reach. But then, when his strength was failing, he saw a Damila called Veluppa coming at him. Thereupon, says the *Culavamsa* (44.111-113):

He drew out a knife which he carried carefully in his betel-purse,
and cut his head, and having laid it on the back of the elephant, he

⁴ Transl. from Geiger *op.cit.* p.56—except that, with apologies, I have read *sisam* of the attempted action as "head" instead of "throat", as he, following Wijesinha's interpretation, has rendered it.

returned the knife to its sheath.

*Tambulaltha viyan hatthe rakkhanto churikan tada
Tato nikkaranin samma gahetva sisam attano
Chetva hatthimihi appetva churikan kosiyan khipi.*

The matter does not end here. That high dignitary then left the battlefield, thinking only about the way his king cut his head. Then together with the queen he renounced the world and mastered the Abhidhamma and its commentary. But one day when he had just finished delivering a sermon and the queen, who was present in the audience, asked him to show her how the king had died (*Cul. 44.116*)

He seated himself in front of her, cut his head, stuck his knife in its sheath and exclaimed, "This is how his majesty died."

*Nisajja purato tassā chindita sisam attano
Khipitvā churikam āha devo mato iti.*

The last of these dramatic suicides on the battlefield is that of Mahinda, one of the younger brothers of King Sena I, who had been appointed yuvaraja by him. When the Pandu king brought a great force from India against Sena, which was joined by Damilas from the island who dwelt scattered here and there, and the king's army was crushed, Mahinda mounted his elephant to join in the fray. But then, seeing the army in flight, he is said to have exclaimed (*Cul.50. 22-23*)

"Alone it is not possible for me to kill all these; but death at the hands of these base people is nowise beautiful. Therefore is death by my own hand to be preferred" and saying this he cut off his head even as he sat upon his elephant. And many of his followers seeing this cut their heads.

*Tasma varan me mayanan may ev'eti cintiya
Hatthikkhandha-gato yeva chindi so sisam attano
Tan disva bahavo sise tatha chindinsu sevaka.*

Wijesinha,⁵ commenting on the death of Kassapa I (as we saw) said that there could be no dispute whatever that he committed suicide but found the

⁵ *loc. cit.* p.6.

manner in which he did so, "at least the throwing by him of his head into the air *after* it had been cut off, and sheathing the knife subsequently" clearly absurd. The only way of avoiding this ridiculous supposition is, he suggests, to construe the passage in the way he has translated it, i.e.

The king having raised his head towards the sky (i.e. raised his head up) cut it (the neck) with a knife, and put the knife into the sheath.

What Jetthatissa did, having cut his head, also irks Wijesinha, for the obvious understanding is that it was his head that he placed on the elephant—and this, as in the instances of the two Kassapas, is aided and abetted by the notion that those who committed these suicides, in fact, severed their heads from their bodies, and that the gruesome things they did with these heads thereafter (including the jugglery with their weapons) were done by their truncated bodies! The demonstration given by Jetthatissa's high official to the queen of how His Majesty died is unfortunately of little help either way, seeing that he had no elephant with him, even if he wanted to dramatise for her the incident in its entirety.

It is important for Wijesinha's emendations to the translations regarding the manner of these suicides, that the heads were never severed from the bodies when the text says *sisan chindi*, only that it was a cutting of throats, *kandharan chindi*. For this he thinks he had evidence in the Pali on the death of Dathapabhuti.⁶ For here it says that the king proceeded to "cut his head" (*sisan chinditun*) when Moggallana appealed to him, but what he did do in carrying out the action was that he "cut his neck" (*kandharan chindi*). Accordingly, in all our other instances also, cutting the head would, he contends, mean no more than cutting the neck.

Geiger,⁷ for his part, accepts Wijesinha's contention and translates all the said passages accordingly, little realizing that the one does not necessarily deny the other—cutting the head is after all done by cutting the neck!

Wijesinha is not unaware of objections to his constructions of the three passages, especially by (he says) the learned editors of the *Mahavamsa* in their rendering of the Sinhalese version. He is himself more or less apologetic when making them, asserting⁸

Granting this for the sake of argument, I think it is better to put even a forced construction on an obscure passage, and elicit sense out of it,

⁶ *loc. cit.* p.8.

⁷ *loc. cit.*

⁸ *loc. cit.* p.8.

wherever it is practicable, than to translate it in such a manner as to obtain what might rightly be called incredible nonsense.

There is a lot of such "incredible nonsense", as Wijesinha calls it, intermixed in the epic tradition and mythohistorical style of presentation of events and personalities in the island's chronicles, which are intended to evoke, among other feelings, those of admiration and even amazement in the hearer, and should be accepted as such where the manuscript tradition does not give evidence of corruption. I need only to point to the fantastic claims made in the *Mahavamsa* regarding Dutugemunu's ten great warriors, and the numerous obtrusions of the divine and the miraculous in what is purportedly historical—this quality of poetic surrealism persisting through the *maha kavya* tradition into much later centuries, as exemplified in the imaginative conception of the *Kav Silumina's* battle scene.

What better evidence is there of the receptivity of audiences in antiquity to such feats of suicides as of cutting off their heads and doing things with them, which would then question the need to emend the reading of our texts, to be found than when another monarch of about the same times, the pious Sirisanghabodhi (c.307-309) is imagined in later tradition to have done no less. For where the *Mahavamsa* (xxxvi.96), when it tells of how he rewarded the man who treated him to food and water by an offer of his head, simply says that he lay down and died (intending the man himself to cut it off and take it away)

*Na icchi so tatha katum, tassatthāya mahīpati
Nisimmo yeva amari, so sisam tassa adiya*

and in a subsequent reference in the *Culavamsa* (85.73) the place where the king did so is merely described noncommittally as "where King Sirisanghabodhi gave his head away unto the beggar", later texts such as the Pali *Hatthavanagalla Vihara Vamsa*, the Sinhala *Elu Atthanagalu Vamsa* and the *Perakumba Sirita*⁹ make the king sever his head himself (using the only article he possessed, his water-strainer) and place it in the outstretched hands of the man. Later when there was need of proof that it was indeed the pious king's head, lo and behold! it not only rose into the air but addressed King Gothabhaya in unfaltering language.¹⁰

⁹ The Pali work, attributed to Anomadassi, is dated to the Dambadeniya period (c.13th century), the others to the 14th and 15 centuries. I here express my gratitude to Prof. P.B. Meegaskumbura of the Department of Sinhala, University of Peradeniya, for supplying me this information and much else.

¹⁰ George Turnour *The Mahavamsa Part I* with notes and emendations by L.C. Wijesinha, Colombo (1889). Reprint New Delhi and Madras (1996) p. 147 translates the relevant lines

Despite his objections to what the former suicides did with their heads, Wijesinha protests but makes no effort to translate otherwise what they did with their suicide weapons i.e. Kassapa's swinging it in the air for all to see, that other Kassapa wiping the blood off the blade, Jetthatissa reclining on his elephant, all of them doing these thing with their necks lethally slit, before putting their respective weapons back in their receptacles. On the other hand consideration of this seeming ritual with the knife/sword may have counted with him when he took this sort of suicide to have been some kind of act of chivalry.¹¹

W.A. Jayawardana and L.S. Perera, authors of the relevant periods of Sri Lankan history for *The University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*,¹² however, far from observing an act of chivalry in these suicides on the field of battle, seem totally unexcited about them. This is notwithstanding the fact that Senerat Paranavitana had, in his treatment of the Dutugemunu-Elara combat, introduced a Ksatriya code, with no evidence of such, both to the challenge to single combat and the acceptance thereof by the adversaries,¹³ as well as, afterwards, to the honourable burial accorded by Dutugemunu to the rival monarch.¹⁴

The fact that such suicides were not to be seen before and go out of fashion in aftertimes may lend some credibility to Wijesinha's supposition. On the other hand, it could be conjectured that these kings and princes had actually been killed in their respective battles and that the chronicle is no more than attempting, for one reason or another, to salve what dignity it could for them by suggesting that they died by their own hands rather than those of the enemy.

of Pali in the *Mahavamsa* to the effect that when "the peasant declined accepting the present, the monarch, for the purpose of benefiting that individual, bequeathing his head to him by detaching it from his shoulder expired without rising from the spot on which he had taken his meal". Obviously he is here reading back what he found in the later tradition when he says the king detached his own head. Wijesinha merely brackets these words as in excess of the text but makes no comment.

¹¹ *loc. cit.* p.6 : "It would appear that the commission of suicide by kings and princes in despair after defeat, or at the prospect of defeat, in the field of battle, was common at this period, and that it was generally regarded as an act of chivalry".

¹² Ed. H.C. Ray vol. I, pt.I Colombo (1959).

¹³ *UCHC* P.160. "Elara had almost entered his capital when Dutthagamani overtook him and challenged him to single combat. The Tamil king accepted the challenge, for according to the Ksatriya code, there was nothing so dishonourable as not to fight when challenged in battle by an opponent of equal rank".

¹⁴ *UCHC* p.161. "The struggle had been conducted in its final phases, in strict accordance with the rules of the ancient Ksatriya code, and in conformity with that code Dutthagamani treated his fallen foe. 'All enmity must cease with death' was one of the injunctions of that code."

For lack of evidence of such a likelihood, the proper thing is to accept, as Wijesinha does of Kassapa's death (though not the manner of it), that when the *Culavamsa* says he committed suicide, he did just that—and likewise the others.

What is infuriating about them then is why, having come to a battlefield to fight, being unscathed and having as many as their traditional five weapons in hand, they did not put up a fight to the death as did Elara (whose forces, too, it will be remembered, had already been vanquished), or in the alternative, fight and run away so as to live to fight another day, as did Dutugemunu and surely other kings in the island's history.

There was apparently nothing like the loss of face that made *hara-kiri* obligatory in the Japanese shogun tradition among the kings of Sri Lanka who were forced to resort to flight. Dutugemunu, fighting his brother Tissa in their first battle (at Culanganiyapitthi; *Cul.xxiv.19-20*), is the significant example while in the second battle (*Cul.xxiv.36-40*) his brother did the same, taking to his heels when the elephant Kandula swept him off his back. Sanghatissa did likewise, actually dismounting from his elephant, while here, in the battle in which Sena I's yuvaraja Mahinda committed suicide, his other brother, the adipada Kassapa, declares quite rightly (*Cul.50.29-31*):

What would it avail if I alone (by my death) were to fulfil the wish of the foe?
Meanwhile I shall, if I remain in life, be able to fulfil my own wish

and breaks fearlessly through the great army of the Pandu king (like Rameses II at the battle of Kadesh) and escapes to Kondivata. Nor was suicide the only alternative to victory among the Pandus either; for when the monarch in the reign of Sena I was caught unprepared for battle and wounded by a spear, he did not cut his throat in style but leaving Madhura, the town he was defending, made a speedy get-away (*Cul.51.37-38*).

This alternative was evidently not available to the kings and princes of our concern here—the choice for them appears to have been either death in battle or becoming prisoner of the enemy, and the reason for this, as it appears to me, was largely their preference of elephant over horse as their mount. All of them, as would have been seen, rode elephants—not the quickest way of making a break for safety—and in two instances at least the animals were not in the best of condition for this either.

It will be remembered that the debacle which brought disaster to Kassapa I involved his elephant; nothing however was wrong with the animal. On the other hand Prince Kassapa's royal elephant is said to have succumbed (*sahayesu mahagaje*) and would have been in no condition to carry him away to safety; so he handed him over to the driver and killed himself. It was something similar with

Dathapabhuti's elephant; he was bloodied in the combat and giving ground under assault from Moggallana's animal. If Jetthatissa and Mahinda as well did not attempt flight, it must have been from a realization that the elephant, unlike the horse, was hardly the mount in such an eventuality. In contrast to the latter, who therefore had to take his own life in the middle of the fighting, is his brother Kassapa. For, riding a horse, not an elephant, he is said to have broken through the ranks of the enemy, as the *Culavamsa* (50.27-28) admiringly says, "even as a supanna when it catches a snake breaks through her watery abode". He forced the whole army to retreat and remained himself unscathed, while in the fervid activity of battle "his one horse looked as if it were a line of steeds".

This same agility of the horse had already been remarked of the Sindhu which acknowledged the hero Velusumana alone as the man worthy of riding him (*Mhv.* xxiii.71-75). And when Velusumana mounted him and made him gallop in a circle, "the animal appeared even as one single horse around the whole circle, while he sat on the back of the courser, seeming to be a chain of men"

The capacity of horse as against the elephant to get his rider to safety upon defeat is best evidenced in the island's history in the first battle of the brothers, Dutugemunu and Tissa, with Tissa riding Kandula and Dutugemunu the mare, Dighathunika. For, defeated, when Dutugemunu took to flight with Tissa in pursuit, the former gained such a lead over the latter that the *Mahavamsa* author imagines that the bhikkhus had magically interposed a mountain between them! Thus, Dutugemunu, instead of being constrained to commit suicide on the field of battle like Dathapabhuti (with, possibly, Tissa Moggallana-like pleading with him not to do so) lived to face his brother in a second encounter.

If the first battle of the brothers amply demonstrated the relative speed of horse and elephant, so this second (*Cul.*xxiv.33-36) displayed the greater agility as well of the former. For when the brothers met on the battlefield, Dutugemunu once again on the mare Dighathunika and Tissa riding Kandula, Dutugemunu ran rings round the elephant, then finding no opening in the armour to get in a warning shot at his brother, made the mare (here obviously with a bit of exaggeration) leap clear over the elephant, in the course of which he despatched an arrow from mid-air! Thereafter, had Dutugemunu not transferred from horse to elephant, the fleeing Tissa would hardly have succeeded in outrunning him to find refuge among the bhikkhus as he did. Elephants can run as fast as a man, but even so, only over a limited distance—as our Pandu king was to learn to his grief when the Sinhala troops caught up with him and his consort at the place to which their elephant had got them.

Numismatic evidence of the greater manoeuvrability of the horse as a mount in battle as against the elephant comes to us from the type of those famous decadrachms of Alexander, which show an alarmed Porus and his companion upon

their elephant being attacked from the rear by a lance-wielding Alexander upon a prancing Bucephalus.¹⁵

It is understandable that kings and chieftains used an elephant—invariably a tusker—for regal and ceremonial occasions. This was the so-called *mangalahatthi*. Himself clad in the regalia of office and seated atop an equally grandly caparisoned pachyderm, man and beast together presented a spectacle that never failed to evoke the awe and admiration of the general populace. As the old Indian saying went:

Majestic is the elephant whom a monarch rides;
 Splendid the monarch who rides an elephant
 Neither outdoes the other in grandeur;
 For elephants are coequal unto kings.

Hannibal, blind in one eye, was known to have ridden an elephant—the only one to survive his crossing of the Alps.¹⁶ Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus toured the province of Southern Gaul riding upon an elephant (121 B.C.),¹⁷ and it is even possible that the great Julius Caesar (though he himself makes no mention of it) rode a huge elephant when he forced a passage from the Britons in the year 54 B.C.¹⁸ In war, however, this advantage seem to have been outweighed by the disadvantages. Elephants, unlike horses, were themselves engines of war—though, when bereft of control and in pain from wounds, they could prove a *genus anceps*, as the Romans called them, or *koinoi polemioi*, as the Greeks, being as disastrous to one's own forces as to the enemy. Likewise, they provided commanders a point of vantage from which to survey the battle and direct operations—but here again, at the risk of making such commanders sitting targets for the slings, spears and arrows of the enemy. Lastly, once they were immobilized by soldiery expert in fighting them, or in the eventuality of defeat, they were, as we saw, not the best of mounts to find oneself astride. No one (as far as is known) has ever yet in such a crisis cried, "An elephant, an elephant, my kingdom for an elephant!"

¹⁵ For this coin, see B.V. Head *A Guide to the Principal Coins of the Greeks* London (1959) plate 27 no.4 and C. Seltman *Greek Coins* 2nd ed. London (1955) p.36 plate 18b. Two of these coins are in the British Museum and one in New York.

¹⁶ See Juvenal *Sat.* x. 157-158:

*O qualis facies et quale digna tabella
 Cum Gaetula ducem portaret bellua luscum.*

¹⁷ Suetonius *Nero* 2.

¹⁸ Polyaeus viii.3.5. He was writing two centuries later, but C.E. Stevens (*History Today* [Sept. 1959] p. 626 f) is for accepting it as true. If this is so, this is perhaps the first elephant to set foot on British soil.

It must then have been with good reason that some of the greatest of warrior kings, like Alexander of Macedon and Sri Lanka's own Rajasingha II, preferred to fight on horseback, the former upon that spirited animal after which he named the city of Bucephala upon the Hydaspes (326 B.C.).

It is true that Dutugemunu campaigned in battle after battle upon the elephant Kandula. But fortunately for him, he was always victorious and never found himself in the plight of his adversary Elara—or for that matter, our famous suicides. When he did face defeat, as he did fighting his brother Tissa, it was (as we saw) no elephant Kandula but the mare Dighathunika who got him out of danger.

For all that, Sri Lanka's kings and commanders continued to ride their *mangalahatthi* to battle through much of her history, notable among them being such as Manavamma (*Cul.*47.22), Mahinda II (*Cul.*48.105-107) and Gajabahu (*Cul.*66.126-127). We hear of distinguished families being trained in elephant-riding in the time of Parakramabahu (*Cul.* 69.22) as in the days of Dutugemunu and his brother (*Mhv.*xxiv.1). By this time, if not soon afterwards, the elephant contingent ceased to be part of the regular army, due mostly—as Codrington and Hocart¹⁹ think, with Geiger agreeing²⁰—to the thickly wooded nature of the terrain in which the fighting took place. If they still had a role to play in siege operations—and we hear of a number of them marshalled by Rajasingha II for the siege of Colombo in 1558—the increasing use of firearms and artillery was soon to render their employment in the field of battle no formidable threat to the enemy. The long history of the elephant at war had effectively come to an end.²¹

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¹⁹ H.W. Codrington and A.M. Hocart *A Short of Ceylon London* (1926) vol.I.pt.1, p.69.

²⁰ *The Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times* Wiesbaden (1960) p.155.

²¹ Refer P. Armandi *Histoire Militaire des Elephants depuis les temps les plus reculés jusq'a l'introduction des armes a feu* Paris (1843).