

## FRONTIER FORTRESS TO ROYAL CITY: THE RISE OF JAYAWARDHANAPURA KOTTE

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The history of the kingdom of Kotte during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has been the subject of several research works.<sup>1</sup> In these accounts there are many references to the city of Jayawardhanapura Kotte and its role as the capital up to its abandonment in 1565. The early history of the city, however, is as yet, insufficiently investigated. This article is a preliminary attempt to shed some light on the origins and growth of the city and on some historical controversies surrounding those times.

Jayawardhanapura Kotte was originally founded in the mid-fourteenth century as a frontier fort of the kingdom of Gampola. This was a time when the fortunes of the Sinhalese rulers had reached their lowest ebb since the Coḷa invasions of the eleventh century. By the early fourteenth century, the Sinhalese rulers had lost control of the northern plains which had served as their main economic base during the heyday of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms. A complex set of forces including continued incursions from the north had forced them to shift their capital successively from Polonnaruwa to Yapahuwa, Dambadeniya and Kurunegala. By the 1340s, Bhuvanekabāhu IV (1341-1351) had further shifted his capital to Gampola or Gangasiripura, a small settlement on the upper reaches of the Mahaveli Ganga.<sup>2</sup>

The kingdom of Gampola, however, was a weak one. The location of its capital in the mountainous core of the island gave its rulers a limited degree of security but the region around the capital was thinly populated and had few resources. The kings of Gampola claimed sovereignty over the whole island but their direct control seems to have been limited to a small area while they exercised varying degrees of control over the south-eastern and south-western plains of Sri Lanka. In fact, the main sources of revenue and power in Sri Lanka in the mid-fourteenth century appear to have been the south-west lowlands, the population of which area had been considerably augmented by migration in the previous century. Indeed, the location of the king away from this prosperous part of the kingdom seems to have given an opportunity for local chieftains to attempt establish autonomus principalities there.

Among the scanty evidence on the political situation of the period are the comments of the famous traveller, Ibn Batuta, who visited Sri Lanka in 1344. Ibn Batuta visited Adam's Peak and on his way to this pilgrim centre from Chilaw (Bander Salawat) on the western coast, he claims to have visited Kunakar which he states was the seat of power of the chief king of the island. There is some dispute among historians as to the location of this power-centre. Senerat Paranavitana seems to have concluded that this reference was to the power centre which the Alagakkonāra family established in south-west Sri Lanka. The Alagakkonāras or Alakeśvaras, as they were also called, were originally a trading family from Vancipura, usually identified as Kuruvur in Kerala. By the fourteenth century they had established themselves at Rayigama and had contracted marriage alliances with distinguished Sinhalese families. By the time Ibn Batuta arrived in Sri Lanka, the first

prominent member of the Alakeśvara family, Nissanka Alakeśvara had become king's counsellor (*Mantriśvara*). Paranavitana speculates that Ibn Batuta's comment that just before his visit "the grandees of the kingdom raised a rebellion against him and they blinded him and installed his son as king while the blind man is still there"<sup>3</sup> refers to Nissanka Alakeśvara<sup>4</sup>. This theory is based on the assumption that the king named by Ibn Batuta as Al-kunar of Kunakar refers to Alagakkonāra (Alakeśvara) and that the description of his capital could refer to Ratnapura (though Alakeśvara power was known to be centred at Rayigama).

More recently, historian P. A. T. Gunasinghe has advanced the hypothesis that 'Kunakar' really referred to the city of Kurunegala and that Ibn Batuta must have encountered a descendent of the old kings of Kurunegala who was still ruling there in 1344.<sup>5</sup> In either case, the picture is one that depicts the existence of a powerful kingdom claiming independence from the ruler at Gampola and located either on the western or the north-western sea board of Sri Lanka. Gunasinghe adduces further evidence of the weakness of the kingdom of Gampola in the mid-fourteenth century by highlighting that Jalasti of Colombo and Kwaja Jahan of Beruwala seem to have been autonomous rulers of these ports and their environs<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, Gunasinghe's picture of the kingdom of Gampola confined to the capital and its neighbourhood seems to exaggerate the weakness of that kingdom. It is known that during the latter part of the reign of king Bhuvanekabāhu IV (1341-1351) of Gampola, his brother Parākramabāhu V (1344-1359) reigned as co-ruler from a separate capital at Dedigama. The existence of co-rulers does not necessarily mean the fragmentation of the kingdom. Indeed, as the history of the later kingdom of Kotte illustrates, co-rulers were often used to enable members of the royal family to rule outlying provinces to try keep these provinces loyal to the reigning monarch. Although this device did enable ambitious princes or co-rulers to establish bases of power from which they could direct attacks on the ruling monarch, on occasion, family loyalty proved to be strong enough to maintain the cohesion of the kingdom<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the rule of Parākramabāhu V at Dedigama in the late 1340s merely illustrates that the authority of the Gampola kingdom did still extend some way into the low country. When Bhuvanekabāhu IV died in 1351, Parākramabāhu V moved to Gampola to rule the kingdom from there.

In fact, the same device seems to have been used when Vikramabāhu, (later Vikramabāhu III 1356-1374), nephew of Bhuvanekabāhu IV, was set up at Peradeniya as the ruler of the area encompassing Peradeniya and Kandy. This time, however, the arrangement did not work satisfactorily, for evidence indicates that by 1354 Vikramabāhu had used the resources of his area, first to fight his uncle Bhuvanekabāhu IV and later to drive Parākramabāhu V from Gampola and establish himself as the most powerful ruler in the kingdom. Even after this occurred, however, Vikramabāhu III did not become sole ruler of the highlands because the Hapugastāna Inscription of 1359/60 seems to indicate that Parākramabāhu V was still ruling in the Matale area, probably as co-ruler of Vikramabāhu III<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, in the mid-fourteenth century the highland areas were under the decentralised rule of the kings of Gampola whose authority could well have extended to some parts of the south-west lowlands. If the interpretations of Ibn Batuta's evidence discussed above can be accepted there seems to have been a rival centre of power in the western and/or north-western region while the inscription at Magulmahavihāra in south east Sri Lanka seems to indicate the existence of another autonomous principality ruled by two brother kings, both called Parākramabāhu in the Hambantota-Amparai area.<sup>9</sup>

This was the political setting in which the fortress of Kotte was built, but before we turn to the establishment of Kotte it is necessary to survey briefly the rise of the northern kingdom under the Cinkaiariyan kings<sup>10</sup> and the story of its southward expansion. With the decline of the Sinhalese kingdom in the thirteenth century, the foundations of a largely Tamil Hindu state had been laid in the north. This state was centred on the Jaffna peninsula but by the early fourteenth century its power extended well into the northern plains as many Vanni chieftains owed allegiance to the Cinkaiariyan rulers.

In view of the paucity of evidence for this period, the travel account of Ibn Batuta appears to be invaluable in estimating the territorial extent of the northern kingdom. Ibn Batuta records that on his way from the Maldives to Sri Lanka, the ship on which he travelled was forced off course by winds and forced to put to 'Battala' which he identifies as the capital of the Cinkaiariyan king. A great deal hinges on the identification of Battala. Mahdi Husain, in his edition of Ibn Batuta's travels identified Battala with Puttalam<sup>11</sup> Parānavitana, secure in his knowledge that Jaffna (Nallur) was the capital of the northern kingdom asserted that Ibn Batuta must have landed in Jaffna. His contention was that Jaffna was called *Yāpāpattanama* in Sinhalese that the word *pattanama* could easily become *paṭṭalama*. He also argues that Manar-Mandali, the frontier settlement which Ibn Batuta passed on his way from the northern capital to Adam's Peak could only refer to Mannar<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, Ibn Batuta's own account seems to indicate that he spent only three days journey by land from the northern ruler's capital to the south and that the last day's journey was from Chilaw (Bander Salawat) to the southern ruler's domain. Writing about his return journey he distinctly states that Battala was three days journey by foot from Colombo. His account of Battala also refers to wooden buildings and towers and his description of the Cinkaiariyan king indicates that the king was in the process of evaluating his revenue from pearls<sup>13</sup>. Thus, Battala could well be Puttalam or a port near it at which the northern king was temporarily resident to supervise the lucrative pearl fishery. Gunasinghe also argues that this must have been the case<sup>14</sup>. If this is accepted, the Jaffna kingdom by 1344 had come to occupy the coast up to the frontier town of Mundel a little to the north of Chilaw.

The northern kingdom seems to have been growing in power at this time. In the 350s it invaded the south. We know very little about the causes of this invasion. Parānavitana suggests that it was perhaps an expedition in response to an appeal made by Vikramabāhu III for assistance against his kinsman, Parākramabāhu V. Gunasinghe suggests that the motive might well have been the desire to seize the customs revenue and the agricultural dues of the fertile areas of the southern and central parts of the island<sup>15</sup>. We really do not have direct evidence for either conclusion though the latter seems more likely than the former.

However, there is some evidence relating to the outcome of the expedition. An inscription of Vikramabāhu III at Medawala records an agreement between the Gampola ruler and another chieftain, generally presumed to be the Cinkaiariyan ruler. The inscription records that according to an agreement dated 28 November 1359 Vikramabāhu agreed to hand over customs posts (*maḍigaya*) in five highland areas of his kingdom to nominees of the chieftain.<sup>16</sup> Evidence in the *Rājāvaliya* seems to indicate that revenue from both the lowland and the highland areas of the kingdom of Vikramabāhu III were collected by the Cinkaiariyan ruler<sup>17</sup>. The southern ruler had clearly suffered a severe defeat. Northern tax collectors were active not only in the highland areas of Sinduruwana, Balavita, Matala, Dumbara and Sagama tun-raṭa but in the ports of Chilaw, Negombo, Wattala and Colombo<sup>18</sup>.

Some historians, basing their conclusion on the fact that Vikramabāhu III gives himself the full title of a consecrated sovereign ruler in the Medawala inscription have argued that the northern ruler must have agreed to the preservation of the "full independence and sovereignty" of the Gampola kingdom. The reference to the northern ruler simply as chieftain (*perumalun vahanse*) is also cited in favour of this argument<sup>19</sup>. The use of titles, however, is not conclusive evidence of real independence. The facts seem to show that in reality the Sinhalese ruler of Gampola was clearly in a subordinate position and that the *de facto* authority of the northern ruler – to say the least – had penetrated upto the environs of Colombo and into parts of the highlands<sup>20</sup>.

It seems clear that the establishment of a fort at Kotte was an essential part of the campaign of rebellion against this subordinate position. The founder of the fort was Nissanka Alakeśvara (Alagakkonāra) who had risen by this time to a high position in the Gampola Court and had married the sister of Parākramabāhu V<sup>21</sup>. We know that Nissanka Alakeśvara lived at Peradeniya when Vikramabāhu III ruled there and he might well have been entrusted the defence of the frontier by the king after he moved his seat to Gampola. Alakeśvara's first objective seems to have been the establishment of a defensive bulwark which could withstand the attack of the northern forces that was certain to follow any gesture of defiance. For this purpose he chose a piece of land a few miles south of the Kelani river. This area, just over two and a half kilometres at its widest point from east to west was protected by marshes to the north, west and east. In the south, a narrow corridor of land provided access to the southwest plains. Nissanka Alakeśvara built walls to enclose the area. The land access was protected by a strong rampart and a double line of moats. Food and supplies sufficient to withstand a long siege were collected within the walls. The fort was named Jayawardhanapura Kotte (the fort of the ever-victorious city)<sup>22</sup>.

The approximate date of the founding of Kotte has been inferred by historian P. A. T. Gunasinghe from the evidence available relating to later events. The *Alakeśvara Yuddhaya* reports that Alakeśvara chased away the northern tax collectors after the fort was built. The *Nikāya Sangrahaya* places the war against the north before the cleansing of the Buddhist order, which latter can be dated to 1368 AD. Therefore, Gunasinghe has plausibly argued that the work of fortifying Kotte must have been undertaken between 1360 and 1368 and in any case before 1373, the date of the Niyangampāya *sannasa* which records the victory of Alakeśvara over the northern forces<sup>23</sup>.

For many years after its founding Kotte remained a frontier fort. Evidence from the late fourteenth century indicates that the residence and centre of power of the Alakeśvara family was Rayigama, about a dozen miles to the south of Kotte and indeed, the campaign pattern that followed the expulsion of the tax collectors seems to indicate that Rayigama had already become the seat of Alakeśvara power by at least by the early 1370s.

The northern response to the actions of Nissanka Alakeśvara was a massive invasion of the south <sup>24</sup>. One army, reinforced by south Indian mercenaries was transported by sea southwards along the coast while another marched across the northern plains to Matale. The sea borne forces landed at Panadura thus completely outflanking Nissanka Alakeśvara's defensive post at Kotte. However, the commander of the northern forces seems to have adopted a cautious strategy. Leaving a force at Gorakana, near Panadura to defend his fleet he moved his army to Dematagoda to deal with the forces at Kotte instead of boldly pushing on to Rayigama. This mistake cost him the campaign for Nissanka Alakeśvara seeing his opportunity, marched out of Kotte and defeated the divided invasion force by separate attacks on Dematagoda and Gorakana. The fleet at Panadura was destroyed and Nissanka Alakeśvara returned to Rayigama in triumph. Similar misfortune met the other invading force in the province of Matale, north of Kandy. It was defeated in a surprise night attack by the forces of the hill country.

The struggle between the rulers of Jaffna and Gampola probably did not end with this campaign. There could well have been other efforts by the northern ruler to re-establish dominance over the south. However, the forces of Alakeśvara appear to have gained the upper hand and re-established the dominance of the Sinhala kings over much of north-western and north-central Sri Lanka.

Historians Pathmanathan and Gunasinghe both conclude that the original strong attack by the Cinkaiariyan ruler referred to in the *Nikāya Sangrahaya* and occurring between 1368 and 1373 was followed by a major second invasion which is described in the *Rājāvaliya* and its source, the *Alakeśvara Yuddhaya*. Apart from some discrepancies in the place names given in the two accounts, the major reason given by both historians for reaching this conclusion appears to be that while the invasion referred to in the *Nikāya Sangrahaya* was clearly in the reign of Vikramabāhu III (1356–1374) that described in the *Rājāvaliya* states that Bhuvanekabāhu V (1374–1408) was king. However, as Gunasinghe himself admits the chronology in this part of the *Rājāvaliya* is somewhat confused, the story of the expulsion of tax collectors in that source seems really to refer to events of the early 1370s.<sup>25</sup> Therefore it is more likely that all three sources refer to the same campaign.

In the years that followed, the fortunes of the founder of Kotte rose to great heights. According to Gunasinghe, the new king Bhuvanekabāhu V, was really the son of Nissanka Alakeśvara. Real power, however, by now resided in the hands of the famous father who had been *prabhūrāja* or chief minister since 1360, who was now termed Lord of Lanka (*Lankādīśvara*) and described in epithets higher than those applied to his son, the king. After the death of the great minister, his nephew, Vīra Alakeśvara, appears to have held power until he was overthrown in 1391 by his own brother Vīrabāhu Āpāna after an open battle at Rayigama. Vīrabāhu himself seems to have been elevated to the position of co-ruler in 1394 <sup>26</sup>.

During this whole period Kotte remained a military fort. The principal centres of political power were Gampola where the king ruled and Rayigama where the Alakeśvaras held sway – nominally as the king's chief ministers, but in reality as autonomous rulers. However, during this period a settlement was slowly growing around Kotte fort. Kotte was well located. It was connected by a waterway to the Kelani river, a major commercial route at the time. It was within eight kilometres of Colombo port and within reasonable distance of Rayigama. Thus, in time, the settlement of Kotte began to be of a size comparable to that of Rayigama or Gampola.

The transition of Kotte from frontier city to royal capital could well have occurred at the end of the fourteenth century. The Cinkaiariyan kings of Jaffna had not abandoned their ambitions to regain their dominance over the south. They sent expeditionary forces from time to time to probe the defences of the Gampola kingdom. In 1391 came a major onslaught by a force aided by considerable reinforcements from the Vijayanagara Empire. This attack was beaten back by Vīrabāhu Āpāna. However, historian G. P. V. Somaratne basing his conclusions on some ola leaf records concludes that soon after this, king Buhvanekabāhu left Gampola and moved to Kotte where he lived till his death<sup>27</sup>. If this is correct Kotte had already become a royal city before the end of the fourteenth century.

However, one has to guard against overrating the importance of this development. For most of his reign Buhvanekabāhu V appears to have been king in little more than name. In the early part of his reign he was overshadowed by the great Nissanka Alakeśvara who gained the post of chief minister (*prabhūrāja*) of the kingdom and ruled at least the low country as he wished. His power was so great that the post of *prabhūrāja* became hereditary in the Alakeśvara family and the king seems to have had no say as to who gained this position. That was decided by internal struggles among the Alakeśvaras. In fact, the Alakeśvaras residing at Rayigama were coming increasingly close to gaining the symbol as well as the reality of power. Vīrabāhu Āpāna, *prabhūrāja* (1394–circa 1399) had apparently married the king's sister and was recognised as the heir-apparent or *yuvaraja*. He failed to become king only because he did not outlive Buhvanekabāhu V. On Vīrabāhu Āpāna's death his son Vijaya Āpāna and Tunayasa ruled for short periods as *prabhūrājas* (1399–1400). Both of them resided at Rayigama. Thus, the residence of Buhvanekabāhu V at Kotte meant only that the titular ruler lived in that city. The real centre of political power was at Rayigama.

Buhvanekabāhu's lack of power was clearly seen in 1400 when Vīra Alakeśvara, brother of Vīrabāhu Āpāna decided to make a bid for power. Vīra Alakeśvara had been ousted as *prabhūrāja* in 1391. He apparently fled from the kingdom and bided his time. In 1399 he obtained assistance from Vijayanagara and invaded the lowlands. The local forces were defeated and Buhvanekabāhu had to accept Vīra Alakeśvara as *prabhūrāja* for the rest of his reign. On the death of Buhvanekabāhu V (circa 1406–8) Vīra Alakeśvara ascended the throne and ruled till 1411<sup>28</sup>.

If Vīra Alakeśvara had shifted his residence from Rayigama to Kotte on ascending the throne in 1406/8, the city would have become the centre of political power as well as the residence of a titular monarch for the first time. Historian Somaratna seems inclined to believe that this was indeed the case<sup>29</sup>. There are several reasons to conclude that Vīra

Alakeśvara might well have done so. After all, Kotte had perhaps become a royal city in the last days of Bhuvanekabāhu V. With the defeat of the northern forces Kotte was no longer a frontier post but a city situated in the centre of the prosperous south-western lowlands. It was more defensible than Rayigama. It seems clear that the Temple of the Tooth was located in Kotte at least prior to 1414. On the other hand, there is no direct evidence that Vīra Alakeśvara moved to Kotte. The Alakeśvaras had been *de facto* rulers of the kingdom from their power centre at Rayigama and Vīra Alakeśvara might well have remained there. There is insufficient evidence to reach a conclusion either way.

In any case Vīra Alakeśvara's reign was brief. In 1411 he was captured by a Chinese expeditionary force and taken as prisoner to China<sup>30</sup>. The Chinese expedition that seized Vīra Alakeśvara was one of the great maritime expeditions sent out by the Ming Emperor Yung-lo under the command of admiral Cheng-Ho. Cheng-Ho had made two previous visits to Sri Lanka. During the first visit he had made offerings to the Temple of the Tooth. During the second visit he is known to have distributed gifts to local chieftains and set up an inscription at Galle. These activities seem to have incensed Vīra Alakeśvara. Vīra Alakeśvara's own attitude to Buddhism and the *sangha* appears to have been less than enthusiastic. His brother and rival, Vīrabāhu Āpāna had been well known as a patron of Buddhism. Vīra Alakeśvara enjoyed no such reputation. On the contrary, the evidence is that at least some sections of the *sangha* gave refuge and aid to his opponents. In any case Vīra Alakeśvara seems to have interpreted Cheng-Ho's interest in Buddhism as a threat to his power. He might well have suspected that Cheng-Ho's powerful fleets with thousands of soldiers could well serve as an invading force. Vīra Alakeśvara had enemies at home. He himself had come to power with the aid of a force of foreign troops. It is not surprising that he viewed Cheng-Ho's actions in making gifts to local chiefs with deep suspicion.

Cheng-Ho perhaps sensed Vīra Alakeśvara's hostility on his first two visits in 1405/6 and 1409. However, it was on the third visit that the clash became an open one. Vīra Alakeśvara deployed his forces to defend the coast but Cheng-Ho's earlier contacts bore fruit. He had intelligence of Alakeśvara's troop deployments and using this knowledge, landed a picked force of 2000 men which raided the royal residence and captured Vīra Alakeśvara, his family and several members of his court. Cheng-Ho returned to China with the captives in July 1411.

The capture of Vīra Alakeśvara and his family seems to have thrown politics in the south-west into considerable confusion. The evidence for the next few years is thin. However, it seems clear that a prince called Parākramabāhu ((later Parākramabāhu VI of Kotte) who belonged to a faction opposed to Vīra Alakeśvara seized Rayigama and ruled from that city for three years.

Evidence from Sinhalese literature can be used to argue that his claims were not unchallenged and that some regarded another prince also called Parākramabāhu and with the title of Āpāna as the legitimate heir of Vīra Alakeśvara. Certainly, the courtiers of Vīra Alakeśvara who were taken captive to China and requested to nominate a new king for themselves unanimously put forward the name of Parākramabāhu Āpāna<sup>31</sup>. Historian K. M. M. Werake who has made a detailed study of Chinese sources pertaining to this period con-

cludes that, contrary to suggestions by other historians, Parākramabāhu Āpāna was not among the captives taken to China and that he probably had established a centre of power in southwest Sri Lanka from about April 1411 to early 1414. He suggests, in fact, that this centre might well have been Kotte while his rival and successor Parākramabāhu VI (actually the seventh king of that name) ruled at Rayigama<sup>32</sup>. This could well have been the case. Thus, the early years of the second decade of the fifteenth century saw the beginning of a new era in which Kotte was the capital city and power centre of a growing kingdom.

If we review the evidence relating to the evolution of Kotte from frontier fort to royal city, it is clear that it probably became the residence of a king when Bhuvanekabāhu V moved into the city in the last years of the fourteenth century. Bhuvanekabāhu apparently lived there till his death in 1406/8 but he was merely a puppet ruler. Real power was in the hands of Vīra Alakeśvara who ruled from Rayigama. When Vīra Alakeśvara finally became king (1406/8) he might well have moved to Kotte but we have no evidence of this. Nor do we really know whether his successor Parākramabāhu Āpāna ruled from Kotte, though it is possible that he did so. However, with the death of Parākramabāhu Āpāna when his rival Parākramabāhu VI ascended the throne, there is definite evidence that Kotte became both the capital and the royal residence. Thus if not in 1406/8 or in 1411 at least in 1414, Kotte became the centre of power in southwest Sri Lanka.

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