

The Sigiri Graffiti - their Sources of Inspiration

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Sigiriya is one of the best known places in Sri Lanka both to the people of the country and to the foreigners, and there is hardly any of the 4,00,000 annual tourists to the island who does not pay it a visit. Much also has been written about it by historians, archaeologists, local and foreign travellers and visitors in general, and that in more than one language. The walls of the citadel edged by the wide moat, the picturesque path that runs alongside ponds and water-ways, the rock-hewn stair-way (that first zig-zags between high boulders and then along-side rock-seats, caves and platforms to hang for a while in the sky on the side of the dizzy crag and then clings to the near vertical rock-face right up to the summit), the frescoes and the mirror-wall beside, the royal palace on the terraced summit, and the breath-taking scenery that meets the eye there-from on all sides have enraptured visitors of 1,500 years ago much as their remains allure the many thousands that are drawn to it during the present times.

What Sigiriya may have looked like during the days of its glory can only be imagined; and in Sri Lanka where artists, sculptors and architects spent their lives adorning mainly the shrines of the Buddha and the temples of their deities, Sigiriya exemplifies an exceptional instance of the vast devotion and energy of such indigenous artistes of all sorts who, devoid of any religious aspirations what-so-ever, contributed their mite to transform a gigantic rock and its surroundings into a thing of lasting beauty.

But, was everything that was evident during Sigiriya's hey-day the work of eighteen years ascribed to the reign of King Kāśyapa (473-91)?¹ Or, was Sigiriya ever the capital city of Sri Lanka?

The Mahāvamsa composed by a member of the *saṅgha* who were not well disposed towards Kāśyapa (who is reported to have killed his father, King Dhātusēna: 455-73) refers to him as betaking through fear (*bhito*) to Sihagiri

1. Bell (1898, 8) opines that there have been two phases of building activity, and Deraniyagala (1973, 71), four series of paintings.

(i.e., Sigiriya) which was 'difficult of ascent to human beings' (*durārohaṃ manussehi*). The king, it is said, cleared the land round about, surrounded it with a wall and built a stair-case in the form of a lion; he also built a fine palace 'worthy to behold, like another Ālakamandā, and dwelt there like Kuvera, (*dassaneyyaṃ manoharaṃ rājagharaṃ katvā dutiyālakamandañca kuvareva vasi: Mhv. 39. 25*). Kuvēra, after all, is the Lord of 'Wealth as known in Indian mythology, and is supposed to reside in a city of untold celestial splendour - Ālakamandā. Kāśyapa, then was Kuvēra, and his city was the Ālakamandā on earth. The author monk, likely owing to the displeasure that he and other members of the Order evinced towards the royal patricide (whom he calls *pāpako narapālako*, 'wicked or sinful ruler of men'), makes no conscious attempt to describe the royal city. Nevertheless, in the few words quoted above he is eloquent enough!

But, it may be re-iterated, was all this grandeur brought to a completion during a period of time as short as 18 years, and that by a monarch who resided on the rock in fear, as the chronicle makes one understand? The sheer verticality of the rock, the enormous quantity of building material that required transportation to the summit and to points over the path leading to it and the extent of the works themselves make that possibility rather remote.

Sigiriya's hey-day may, therefore, be considered as the culmination of the continued ingenuity of local artiste-craftsmen of several centuries who devoted their skill to beautify this rock and its surroundings for a particular purpose, and it is likely that Kāśyapa, of all the monarchs, paid special attention to make it a pleasure after his own heart and patronised it with greater zeal than any other.

As a geographical feature the Sigiriya rock is literally outstanding. It rises vertically from a plain of approximately 600 feet or 180 m. to a height of 1,193 feet or 358 m. above mean sea level (Paranavitana. 1956. i), and its spacious plateau-like summit commands a view of over twenty miles around.

In lands of the world which have cradled cultures whose history is traceable to an era when formal religion was unknown, such physical features by their awe-inspiring presence which dominated the country-side, and their height which seemed to reach 'the land of the gods' appeared to be in consonance with the spiritual aspirations of human communities, and received their reverence. Some of them were accepted as 'Holy Mountains' and were worshipped as divinities themselves, or as abodes of one or many of them. They often became centers of solar worship where picturesque rites imbued, in many instances, with an erotic and saturnalian character were practised.

Such physical features ranging from Fuji Yama (12,388 ft. or 3776 m.) of Japan to the Sūrya-bhan hillocks of India are known to several cultures of the world (ERE. 5. 7-8, 8. 863, 865, 867, Winick, 1958, s.v. 'Worship, Sun', Frankfurt, 1948, 25, 66, 150-51, 153-54, Ch. 13 fn. 27).

Sigiriya, with its imposing appearance and size, could not have been ignored by the ancient people of Sri Lanka without being made use of for purposes of such worship, and its location in relation to the centers of population of the times makes its acceptance as such all the more possible. And once a start was made during the pre-Buddhist era the associated practices are certain to have continued even into the era of formal religion - a feature not uncommon to other cultures as well.

That Sigiriya was a well-known Sri Lankan site of the early Christian era - or even of the pre-Christian times - is evidenced by the discovery of over 1,600 Roman coins pertaining to a period of well over 500 years before Kāśyapa, from excavations 'all over Sigiriya..... on the summit, terraces and the city below' (Still, 1907, 175, Codrington, 1924, 32). There seems to have been some strong reason why these foreigners (with all this money) visited this site, though located quite a distance away from the capital city, Anurādhapura, and which was neither a port nor a trading station. There was something that allured them: it may have been to worship a deity whom they honoured in common with the people of the land, or it may have been a purpose such as pleasure; or it may have been a combination of both of these and other aims, as may be understood by an investigation of what remains today of Sigiriya's former glory.

If Sigiriya may be accepted as a pre-Kāśyapa site, it may not be wrong to imagine that this king, in his own time, put into effect a scheme of new construction and development during the course of which, among other things, the frescoes would have been executed and the mirror-wall constructed. Subsequently visitors had more things to see, and a surface medium on which they could express their feelings of ecstasy on experiencing the sights on and from the rock. Through the latter, which have come down to us in the form of the verses of the graffiti, one may obtain valuable information on several aspects of contemporary life in Sri Lanka together with source material for the study of the linguistic situation of the times. Also available in them is subject matter which is of immense value in understanding the type of popular activities that seem to have taken place at the site itself.

It would be prudent here to raise an initial doubt as to whether all the verses of the graffiti which refer to damsels (by the use of such expressions as *katun*, 'women', *digāsiyan*, 'long-eyed ones', *ranvanun*, 'golden ones', *li*, 'damsel', *aganan*, 'women', etc.) are addressed to those represented on the frescoes.

'As poets should', says Parānavitana (1934. 317), 'the writers of these verses address the paintings as if they were women of flesh and blood'. But, may it be remarked, there is no particular need to regard them so ('as if') in every instance of reference. Whatever Sīgiriya was during the course of its long history—a temple of the gods, a fortress, a pleasure resort, a city comparable to the celestial Ālakamandā, etc., what reason is there to doubt the presence of the members of the fair sex (in flesh and blood) over the site as devotees, participants, residents, etc., as the case may be? And a poetically inclined visitor would have been enamoured not only by the figures represented on the frescoes, but also by the real ones whom he would have certainly seen around him - to a considerable, if not a greater, degree by the latter.

Certain verses that refer to the ladies do make mention of those on the frescoes directly. One refers to the figure of a lovely woman excellently drawn by the artist: *sonda se kat beyand-hi me äta situvar liyavayi* (Parānavitana, 1956, No. 559)², another refers to one with flowers in her hand, also so drawn (588), and yet another, to pictures of golden-coloured ones painted and left on the mountain: *äta tabay beyandahi ranvan pīlibib atni* (666). Secondly, there are many verses the meaning of which may imply that the ladies referred to are none but those drawn on the frescoes:

- i. verses which refer to the ladies on the wall, *bita*, or rock-wall, *girl*, *bita* (489, 499, 667)
- ii. verses which refer to ladies who are dumb, *mukā*, or who stay without speaking, *no bāna* (515, 527, 542, 554-55, 557, 568, etc.)
- iii. verses which refer to ladies whose heart is hard, *tad la*, or even as hard as stone, *sit gala tad* (10, 353, 432, 521, 552, 557, etc.)
- iv. verses which refer to ladies mourning at the death of the king - their lord or their lover (18-9, 33, 47, 61, 68, 81, 143, 326-65, 432-50, 564, etc.)³
- v. verses which refer to the ladies on the mountain side, *beyad*, *beyadu* *beyan*, *beyand*, or *beyanda* (65, 486, 497, 503, 544, 546, 548, etc.)
- vi. a philosophic verse which refers to bodily impermanence (as known in Buddhism) and to 'beings here having none of this', *me hindiyeve nāttayun* (549) - evidently, the representations of maidens in the frescoes that (to the poet) are not impermanent.

2. The bracketed figures henceforth refer to the verses in this work.

3. The king is Kāśyapa who committed suicide in battle rather than be killed at the hands of his enemies, at the base of the rock (*Mhv.* 39. 27). These verses are accepted as support to the theory that the ladies represented in the frescoes are members of his harem (see *infra* pg. 77).

In addition to these verses the references of which may not be contested, there are others which allude to maidens whose presence seems to be rather in flesh and blood than as motionless paintings on a rock-face; and further their presence on the summit of the rock (rather than on its side) is clearly indicated:

- i. 'Having come to this rock we looked at the long-eyed ones who remained on the summit of the rock, *digäs giri hisä hindi*' (476)
- ii. 'I came back, having seen on the summit of Sihagiri, *mata sihagiri*, a damsel whose pride has been shattered' (510)
- iii. 'The despondency of these (women) is because they stood incessantly on the top of the rock, *siñiyen giri hisä niband mun*' (478)
- iv. 'When I look at the damsels who stand on the summit of the Sihagiri rock, *sihagiri gala mata*, I obtained pleasure' (437)
- v. 'The long-eyed ones stand in the sky on the summit of the rock, *gal matambure*, (514)'

There is also one verse (438) which makes reference to the golden-coloured ones 'who stood on this mountain-side' (and not on the summit) and who were endowed with speech, *bas äti*, and unto whom the eyes of the poet 'ran of their own accord', and Parnavitana ventures to note that the 'reference is probably to some ladies in real life who had come to see Sihigiri and were seen by the writer of this stanza' (note 4).

Incidentally too, a poet, Salabudu by name, saw at Sihigiri five-hundred damsels who, in their splendour, were like unto the crest-jewels of the king (560). It is generally conceived by many (inspite of the positive reference to *pansiyak agnan*, 'five-hundred damsels'), that the figure refers not to the number of (live) damsels that may have been observed on the rock but to the number of fresco representations (of damsels) on it as prevalent at the time, viz., the ninth century. But there is no particular reason for such an assumption, although Parnavitana himself is positive about it;⁴ and there is no particular reason either for them to be regarded as paintings and not as maidens in real life, in the availability of other factors.

In addition to these, there are also a few suggestive of actual physical movement on the part of these women who, therefore, may not be regarded as those represented on the frescoes. Here are a few examples:

bäli ranvan tana bamā, 'the golden-coloured one looked turning round her breasts' (121)

4. 'This phrase refers, no doubt, to the figures of women painted on the rock face of Sihigiri': fn. 9

pokar patin mal atni gat bālu tana namā, mānel van gāhāni, 'the lily coloured damsel who has taken in her hand flowers together with the leaves of the lotus and who looked turning her breasts' (303)
topa gamana hasa kata meni, 'your gait is like that of a swan lady' (332)
gamana kalakirli - tunuvan lasov tāvli - muyunin koṭ asvāsli - tomo hal beyand kat li, 'the loving woman who in her walk-shows agitation of mind and whose lean face exhibits grief and burning of heart herself left the mountain-side having rained down tears from her eyes' (340)
ata mal dāmi tomō, 'she herself put flowers in her hand' (343)
tana la udvaṭu tanana, 'tender breasts upturned and heaving' (467)
baṇay ā visi mala keli, 'the flowers thrown down by her speaks of dalliance' (350).

In the physical presence of these ladies there seems to have prevailed an air of jollity and gay abandon on the Sigiriya rock which has been well experienced by the composers of the verses. Some ascended it 'sporting and with happiness', *kelimin yehen*, and looked at a fair damsel with flowers in her rosy hand, on the summit (218). One visitor celebrated festivities which gave form to his thoughts, *ma sit repe dun magul keḷemi* (286), and another, having ascended the mountain-side played music accompanied with singing, *gāyumni..... vāyime* (289). One poet played music to his 'flower-like ones' (526).

This air of festivity was associated with the company of those of the opposite sex, in varying degrees. One visitor obtained pleasure merely by looking at the maidens, *tosa katun balata ladimi* (435). As another poet sang, ladies came to him without waiting for him to go to them (506). Yet another poet came across a lady who had adorned herself well in order to meet her paramour (518), and there were other damsels who had ascended the rock for the purpose of engaging in amorous sports (213).

And the rock was not the only rendezvous for those thus inclined, for the wooded area around also appears to have afforded them safe sanctuary. Says one poet: 'Having come to the forest (*vana*), falling down again and again, everyone who drank from the abundance that is in you, began to smile incessantly, having had his burden of cares swept away' (477); and another notes with evident sarcasm: 'I know for what purpose that damsel remained in the vicinity of the forest (*ran asara*) from that time' (63). These certainly are not women drawn by an artist on the rock-wall!

And, of all the visitors to Sigiriya, Vijura Day of Satamuṇa and Sirinā Aba of Vilatere-bō appear to have expressed the sentiments of sincere lovers in their poetic composition: 'Did not the beloved one weep out of affection? So thinking I looked at her even though having offended'. 'Be not irate towards me in your look; ah! the cuckoo cried out in the sky' (464).

All this supplies positive evidence in support of a view that the rock of Sigiriya and its immediate environs once formed a joyful rendezvous for males and females seeking mutual youthful company.

But it was not always that the expected trysts took place as anticipated; on rare occasions visitors went their separate ways in frustration (504, 582).

The meeting between the sexes at Sigiriya, as it appears, has not been limited to that of these young lovers only. There seems to have been yet another level at which ladies made purposeful attempts to attract visiting males into their company. Some cast their eyes in the direction of the visitors, others beckoned them by raising their rosy hands and yet others sweetened their speech with resplendent smiles, *pāhābar sinā vajan* (505, 533, 449). Some symbolised their willingness by taking flowers in their rosy hands (461) or wearing clusters of red water-lilies, *ratu upula* (667), or wearing blue robes with the borders embroidered with blood-red *jappaka* flowers (566), and a few more made signals with their garlands, *maldamin san*, some of them even inclining them in the direction of the visitors, *maldama lamu kele ma dasa* (212, 475). Yet others, likely the more experienced, adopted more captivating techniques: one golden-coloured lady had her cloth loosened at the waist, *hina pili lihilas katak* (351), one loosened her robes and uttered moans, *uḍ-hur*, at the side of a male (222), and yet another had her robes down, *salu gilihina* (462).

There is no room to doubt that this behaviour did not take the males by surprise, for they too appear to have visited the environs of Sigiriya intent on enjoying the company of these amorous females. One asks his companions pointing out a female with her robe loosened, 'Is she our mistress?', *apa himabuyun ho* (351), and another exhorts a lily-eyed one, 'Tie not your hair with crests, nor your breasts with bands' (285).

That the visitors to Sigiriya and its environs of around a thousand years ago were attracted thereto not only by the frescoes is sufficiently evidenced by the above verses of the graffiti. Although it has been generally accepted for the last few decades that have elapsed since they were discovered and some of them interpreted by Paranavitana for the first time (1934. 317-), that the verses have been inspired by seeing the frescoes (at times regarded as 500 in number: see *supra* pg. 5), the learned archaeologist himself indicated a few exceptions which, he thought, were inspired by the living presence of ladies. In addition to No. 438, No. 464 (both cited above) too may be taken as an example, for in note 11 (of the latter) Paranavitana avers: "The second half of the stanza is written as if it is directly addressed to the lady, while the first

half describes the attitude of the lover who has wronged his mistress'.⁵ The intentions of at least a few of the visitors has not been artistic appreciation: it was less than that, and more 'earthly'. It appears to have been sensual gratification rather than, or in addition to, aesthetic appreciation!

This evidence, coupled with the physical attributes of the Sigiriya rock - both natural and artificial - lead to a possible conclusion that, during the times referred to, it was a venue for the periodical performance of mountain sports conforming to the tradition of the Giragga Samajja of India. It is even probable that the transformation of Mihintalē into a center of Buddhist worship and its acceptance as the venue of the Giribhanda Pūjā - a religious festival - the importance of Sigiriya rose as the venue of the ritualistic festival which had a fertility significance and which catered, therefore, for the satisfaction of more earthly requirements.⁶

This possibility is heightened by the contents of a ninth century verse (of the graffiti itself: 64) wherein the women present on the rock are asked to wave their hands, *aganini at salav*, because the composer, being one who has seen the tender moon of *bag- nava bag lasand*, should not be rejected.

It is interesting to note here what Parānavitana has to say as regards the contents of this verse. He considers this as 'an allusion to some ancient custom the significance of which is obscure today', and avers that 'the writer of this article evidently wants to gain the favour of the women' exhorting 'that a man who has seen the tender moon in the month of Bag is not to be rejected' and conjectures that 'in the ninth century some special significance of a saturnalian nature was attached to this observance' (note 6).

The contention that Sigiriya was the venue of a saturnalian mountain festival during at least a few centuries of Sri Lanka's history gains further support through this pronouncement of Parānavitana. And, further, did not

5. Consideration is worth being paid to the following too:

No. 35 Note 6: 'This verse appears to be an apology addressed to the ladies in the painting for intruding upon them'.

No. 320 Note 17: 'The first and third lines of the verse are put in the mouth of a visitor to Sigiri, and express the yearnings with regard to the women in the paintings. The second and the fourth lines are written as if they are spoken by one of the women.....'

The phrases 'in the painting', and 'in the paintings', are interpolations by Parānavitana. Nothing prevents these ladies to be regarded as live ones. A portion of No. 19, viz., *veṇa atni gat ho ranavan li*, is rendered as 'the golden coloured damsel.....has taken a lute in her hand', and a portion of No. 201, viz., *de atahi ho dala.....ranavanuna* is rendered as 'golden coloured one in both hands of whom are *aśōka* buds'.

Parānavitana proceeds to say that 'There are no figures answering to these descriptions among the existing paintings': SG. cciv. 678.

What prevents these 'golden coloured ones' too to be regarded as women in flesh and blood.?

6. See V. Vitharana, 1985, *Giribhanda Pūjā in Rōhana* 1.

Paranavitana himself (1972, 34-41) refer to the park at the foot of the rock as *pramadāvana* (lit. 'women park') translating it as the 'Pleasure Garden of the King's Harem'? Significant also is the pronouncement by Deraniyagala (1973, 73) with reference to Sīgiriya that 'there was some feminine element in the religious ritual of those days'.

A clue as regards the periodicity of this ritualistic festival may also be gained from the above verse. *Bag* or *bak* is the month of March-April when even today the national New Year festival of the Sinhala people is held. It is, in the main, a solar festival (Vitharana, 1976, Ch. IV) which terminates in a simple lunar rite - that of espying the first new moon that appears on a subsequent evening and of enjoying a simple feast on the following day. It is possible that this rite was held with far greater significance during the period under consideration; and it is likely (as suggested by the contents of the verse) that the main festival on the rock was held subsequent to this lunar ceremony which may have given a start to the series of associated rites. Whether this was the precursor of the New Year festival of the present day may be a question that may long vex a cultural historian.

As such Sīgiriya would have been an extremely popular social venue during the festival season of *bak* for many centuries of the Anurādhapura period of Sri Lanka's history. Evidence so far available is not helpful in determining the period of its inception, and one may only surmise that it was contemporaneous with the mountain sports at Mihintalē before they were transformed into the Giribhanda Pūjā of the later times, and that it gained a wider patronage subsequently. Literary evidence to its performance, however, is available in the graffiti composed only during later centuries; and this evidence, though admittedly not direct and positive, possesses a high degree inferential value.

Throughout these centuries many visitors, both local and foreign (inclusive of those that possessed the pre-Christian Roman coins: see *supra* pg. 67) would have ascended the dizzy height of Sīgiriya to experience the joy of seeing the frescoes and the scenery around, some to enjoy the company of their lovers and paramours and those poetically inspired to inscribe the verses on the mirror wall. Each, it may be said, obtained the pleasure after his own heart.

Writing to the *Dinamina* (3rd April 1982), the Sinhala daily journal, a learned correspondent, Disanayaka⁵ expresses the opinion that the festival held on Sīgiriya was a phallic one celebrated in honour of Śiva. It is pertinent here to assess the reasons which he attributes in order to arrive at this conclusion:

5. D.P.D.K. (or *do., pi. de. ko.*) Disanayaka

- i. *sīhimiyā balani vī* (286: late 8th or early 9th c.) means 'All this came to pass through the might of Lord Śiva' and not, as Parānavitana says, '.....the might of His Majesty the Lion'
- ii. the maidens in the frescoes are carrying flowers on their fingers depicting the *puṣpāñjalī numaskāra*, (lit. 'flower-finger offering') as performed in honour of Śiva.

No. 1 here, indeed, is challenging. If the *sī* in *sīhimiyā* is definitely the abbreviated form of *Śiva* (the god), it can revolutionise many things (including the very name Sīgiriya, which would then mean 'Śiva rock' and not 'Lion rock' as attributed to it so far).

The form *sīhimiyā* (with the honorific suffix *-an* added) occurs in two more stanzas of the graffiti, viz., nos. 45 and 576 (8th-9th centuries). In the first the composer declares that he saw 'His Lordship the Lion' and that he has no desire of seeing the golden-coloured one on the cliff. Parānavitana also confesses that the term used in referring to the figure of the lion is exactly the same as that which would have been used in referring to a person of high standing (45 fn. 6). In the second, the composer declares, according to Parānavitana, that 'when His Lordship the Lion is seen by me, he (the lion) does not become remembered' or, on the alternative, when the lion is seen 'one loses his senses through fright' (576 fn. 4).

It appears that in both these instances the reference is appropriate to a lion, the God Śiva (i.e., if *si* means Śiva) or to any 'person of high standing'. There seems to be no particular reason, so far as the expression is concerned, to make a preference. But these are a few factors which stand against the interpretation of *si* as Śiva:

- (i) if the rock was, at any time of Sri Lanka's history, a center of Śaivite worship, there would have been on it creations in art and sculpture, at least a few remains of which would have been evident during the present times. Not one such speciality has been found in and around the site
- (ii) Śiva is 'Mahā Dēva' - the Great God, and if ever this was a shrine in his honour, at least a very few of the hundreds of versifiers who left their mark on the mirror wall would have made positive and eulogistic references to him in their compositions, whereas only three references of a non-conclusive nature may be picked up from among them

(iii) one would also expect a reference to such a shrine (if there was one at Sīgiriya) in the *Mahāvamsa* too, where even two minor (Buddhist) *vihāras* - *Dāthākondaṇa* and *Daḷha* of the Dammaruci and Sāgali sects are referred to (39. 41)

and (iv) the worship of Śiva was not a popular cult among the Sinhala people of this era, although it may have been so during the pre-Buddhist period of Sri Lanka's history (Vitharana, 1976, 54).

But it has to be confessed that a -v- occurring medially or terminally in a Sinhala word may get elided, rendering the lengthening of a preceding vowel (cf. *mava* > *mā*, 'mother', *vāva* > *vā*, 'reservoir', *ruva* > *rū*, 'form', *kova* > *kō*, 'anger', etc.), so that *siva* > *sī*, although this specific form cannot be exemplified with reference to Sinhala literary usage.⁷

As for *puṣpāñjalī namaskāra* (which Disanayaka poses as indicative of Śiva worship), it is evident in other mural scenes in Sri Lanka which are not associated with the worship of this deity. Those at Tivaṅka Piḷimagē at Polonnaruva for instance, depict the *dēvārādhana* scene in which gods of the Tusita heaven supplicate the *bōdhisatva* - the aspirant Buddha, to be born in the world of humans, and here are seen several instances of this hand-pose (Godakumbura, 1982, 32, 5a, 33. 5b, 36. 7a, Dhanapala, 32). This pose, therefore, cannot be regarded as positive proof of Śiva worship anywhere.

Coming back to the rock itself, the *Mahāvamsa* does not say that Kāśyapa made it his (and therefore, the country's) capital: it only says that he 'abided there like Kuvēra' (*kuvero'va vasi*). There can, of course, be no doubt about the fact that he fortified his abode as a king was wont to, specially in the face of the contingencies of the times

Further, from what is evident in the chronicle, the king does not seem to have spent his days in fear of his brother, as imagined by the author (39,2). He did what another king in Sri Lanka (reigning for nearly two decades) would have done: he restored the *Issarasamanārāma* at Anurādhapura and granted it villages for sustenance, built another *vihāra* in the Niyyanti garden and supplied it with the means of support, kept the *upōsatha* and cultivated *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*, practised the *dhutaṅgas* and had books copied, made images, built alms-halls, etc. in great numbers, and planted gardens at the gates of the city (Anurādhapura) and mango groves in various parts of the island at *yōjana* intervals (38, 9-19). If these activities have been recorded in the *Mahāvamsa* the author of which was not well disposed to him,

7. This God has been referred to as Śiva (*Suḷu Pūjāvāliya*, 35) or Siva (*Buduḡuṇa Alaṅkāraya*, 162) or by an appropriate epithet (*Ruvanmal Nighaṅṭuva*, 752).

one may surmise that he (the king) would have done at least a little more; and the very constructions on the Sīgiriya rock do not reflect that the country was dis-organised and economically poor, or that its king was passing his days in fear. Thus, from what the *Mahāvamsa* does and does not say about the king in this chapter, and from what is materially evident as the remains of his achievements today, he emerges not as an introvert and phobic, but as a heroic leader of his people, a promoter of the country's economic welfare and military strength, a patron of religion and literature and, in particular, a connoisseur of the arts and a lover of the 'good things in life' - a combination of character traits the type of which is rarely equalled by a monarch of this country or any other.

As for Sīgiriya, it strikes one as a site with a long history of cultural contact with the people of the island, and hence it is not impossible that it has served their needs in various ways at various periods of time. It was an abode of Buddhist recluses during the pre-Christian era (as pointed out by Longhurst on the basis of several contemporary *brāhmī* inscriptions available at the site); and later, monks of the Dhammaruci and Sāgali sects abided there.⁸ On one flank of it was a military strong-hold probably dating from the early centuries of the Anurādhapura period, and Kāśyapa would have reinforced it as never before (and even never after). But whether the monarch built or improved upon the battlements and the moat (which incidentally enclose the *pramadāvana* on three sides) solely for military reasons or as an essential features of the Ālakamandā - the city of classical grandeur that he built, may be a question that might never be answered conclusively. But for many centuries, likely before and possibly during and after the reign of this monarch (latter half of the 5th century A.D.), and certainly during the period when the graffiti on the mirror wall came to be written (6th-12th centuries) the famous rock, together with the park at its foot, appears to have been a venue for 'mountain sports' (with all the implications of the term) with which several tall eminences of the world appear to have been associated.

In the background of the above considerations, one finds it convenient to proceed to a theory as regards the identity of the 'Ladies of Sīgiriya' - the damsels represented on the frescoes. Speculation in this direction is traceable to the very period when some of the verses of the graffiti were inscribed: several poets considered them as members of Kāśyapa's harem either sorrowing about his death, or were about to leave in his absence (47, 147, etc.: 8th century). Several scholars of repute of the recent era spanning a period of over half a

8. See Wilfred M. Gunasekera: 'Abode of Bhikkhus or Domain of God King' in the *Daily News*, 24th & 31st August 1982, where these aspects of history are outlined.

century have ventured to identify them in various ways, each inspired by his own intellectual and emotional experience of the multifaceted 'personality' of the Lion Rock that looms large both in the history and the landscape of Sri Lanka.

To H. C. P. Bell (1897, 48, 117) these ladies were members of Kāśyapa's court on their way to the Pidurāgala Vihāra (located in the vicinity), flowers in hand. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1908, 178) saw them as *apsarās* (heavenly maidens) floating on clouds. V.A. Smith (1911, 109-11) considered them to be noble ladies and their maids on their way to a *vihāra* to make offerings. To E. B. Havell (1926, 175) the frescoes appeared as the representation of a dream of a royal lady's visit to the Tusita heaven: Benjamin Rowland (1938, 85) thought that the total representation was a 'celestial parade of opulent females advancing singly and in pairs ... bearing floral offerings.' Paranavitana (1947, 264-) opined that the blue-coloured damsels symbolised clouds, (*mēghalatā*) and the golden-coloured damsels, lightning (*vijju latā*) - so represented to make the rock resemble the Mount Kailāśa on which the fabulous city Ālakamandā is supposed to be located. Nanda Deva Wijesekera (1959, 18 48) agrees with the poets of old in identifying them as the queens of Kāśyapa mourning the loss of their heroic lord. And Martin Wickramasinghe, as recorded by Dhanapala (10), regarded them as ladies engaged in water-sports.

Of all these learned theories, there is only one that brings the frescoes into a relationship with the equally important creation that exists hard by physically, and which possibly has a thematic association with them, viz., the verses of the graffiti. It is only a very few of the versifiers themselves, along with Wijesekera, who have recognized the theme of separation of the ladies from their lord, and the latter has based his speculation as regards the identity of the ladies, thereon. The other theories are completely devoid of a fresco-graffiti relationship which, however, appears to be too strong to be thus ignored.

If Sigiriya was, at some period of Sri Lanka's history, a venue for mountain sports an outstanding item of which was the pleasurable meeting of the sexes (as indicated above), it is difficult to dissociate at least some of the features evident on the rock from the activities connected with such an important event. As such, the representation of ladies in the frescoes here, whose beauty has been sung by several poets of old, deserves to be identified with these pleasurable pursuits. Of them, the majority are very attractive damsels in the prime of their youth (with full-blown breasts - *pin piyovuru* - which find particular mention in the verses), and a few there are that belong to a more mature age group - one even bordering the physical requirements of a *baṭi tana*, 'one with drooping breasts' (71).

There are those whose skin-colour is light, and hence worthy of being referred to as *ranvana* (20), *ranvanun* (249), *helilabi* (119), *helilambu* (30), *helilalabi* (166), *helili* (350), *helilabi* (180), *helillabu* (626), *helilambi* (52) and *helilambu* (218) and comparable to a *väṭkoḷa mala* (flower of *uffa Acutangula*: 334) in juxta-position with those of darker complexion, figuratively regarded as blue: *nilvana* (680), *nil upule pähä* ('one with the colour of the blue lotus': 250), *mahanel vana* (318), and comparable to a *nil kaṭroḷa mala* (flower of *Clitoria Ternatea*: 334).

Every-one is long eyed, *digäs* (60), or deer-eyed, *miyuläs* (266).

There are, in the frescoes, those with flowers in their hair, and more particularly, with flowers in their out-stretched hands, and of these flowers, *mahanel* or the lily and the *sapu* (*Michelia campaka*), which find frequent mention in the verses, are easily recognizable.

There are also youthful golden-coloured ones with their hands, with or without flowers in them, in beckoning postures.

Thus, what is seen in the frescoes appears to be representations in visual art of what the poets expressed in literary art.

One outstanding character of these maidens is that they are mutually different - and that, not only in colour, as referred to. Some are slim whilst others are not, and some appear taller than the rest (even though only the upper part of their body is represented); and no one has the same facial appearance as any other. Each possesses an accumulation of features of the physique that renders her different from any other; and each is thus invested with an identity as rarely seen in the art of the island until the recent era. The Sigiriya maidens, it may be said, cannot be taken as impersonal representatives of ideal feminine beauty.

Benjamin Rowland (1938, 85-86) recognizes in these feminine figures features that he considers 'typical of Sri Lanka today heavy-lidded eyes, sharp aquiline noses and full lips', and notes the freedom shown by the artists at a period when the arts were tending to become more and more frozen in 'the rigid canons of beauty' (Ibid. 84).

It does not appear far-fetched now to bring in a relationship between these 'ladies of Sigiriya' and the role that actual females seem to have played on the rock during the times under consideration. They are representative of what the artists really saw at Sigiriya: the members of the fair sex that came to the rock and its immediate environs to meet their lovers and enjoy the bliss of companionship (*siyov siri*, as the eighth century friar Sirinā referred to it: 130), particularly on days of festivity.

One further conclusion, important from the point of view of an art historian, appears to be possible if, in fact, these figures are the representations of actual women. Under the circumstances (described above) an artist could have selected his own loved one or paramour as his model; or, a lover could have got his friend, an artist, to have his beloved so represented; or an artist himself could have selected his model from amongst the ladies that visited the rock.

If so, the frescoes at Sigiriya may be regarded as the earliest portrait paintings of Sri Lanka that rank among the early works of the genre in the history of world art.

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