



HISTORY OF SIGIRIYA – A CAPITAL CITY OF ANCIENT SRI LANKA

Dr. Senarath Dissanayaka, Ph.D., MSc.

Abstract

Sigiriya was the administrative centre of Sri Lanka in the mid-Anuradhapura period from 477 AD to 495 AD. Kashyapa, the son of a secondary wife, put his father King Datusena to death at the instigation of an evil general, after the father denied that he possessed any treasure. Kashyapa fled to Sigiriya in fear of Prince Mugalan and reigned there like the god Kuvera in a palace constructed on the rock. Sigiriya consisted of the all features of a defensive fortress.

Angered by Kashyapa's patricide, Prince Mugalan, the heir to the throne and the son of the chief queen, lacked sufficient military power and fled to India in the hope of obtaining aid for a future war. After gathering an army Prince Mugalan returned to the island and Kashyapa came to face him. Kashyapa's army fled misinterpreting his action of turning the elephant to avoid a puddle of mud. Kashyapa committed suicide by slicing his own neck with the sword. Mugalan assumed the throne after the funeral rites of his brother. He donated the temples in the vicinity of Sigiriya and also a temple he constructed at Sigiriya to the monks of Mahavihara, Jethavana and Abhayagiriya in Anuradhapura. Sigiriya became a settlement long before Kashyapa's arrival there. At the time first Buddhist monasteries were being constructed in the island between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD, Sigiriya had been a residence for monks. From that time to the Kashyapa period, no historical evidence exists regarding Sigiriya. The predominant era of human settlement in Sigiriya is the Kashyapa period. Features of a well-planned city are to be seen at Sigiriya. The city could be divided in to six main parts. The rock and the palace on top of it are in the centre. The Sigiri murals and graffiti are part of the rock itself. The inner city is located outside the rock and connected to it. A rampart could be observed around the inner city. Outside the inner city and towards the west from the rock the royal pleasure garden is situated. The outer city is on the opposite side, i.e. in the east. Moats and walls encompass the whole city. The Sigiri tank is located in the south-west from the rock. An older settlement layer is found under the construction of the Kashayapa period. It seems equal to Kashyapa period to a great extent. The considerable contents of charcoal in this soil layer show that the settlement which would have existed at the time Kashyapa arrived in Sigiriya, had been subjected to a fire of unclear origin.

Key words

Sigiriya, King Kashyapa, royal pleasure garden, inner city

INTRODUCTION

Sigiriya, situated near the northern boundary of the Central Province in Sri Lanka, belongs to the wet-dry intermediate zone. Anuradhapura was the capital of the island for nearly 1400 years and during that time, the capital was transferred to Sigiriya for a brief period of 18 years from 477 AD to 495 AD.

Kashyapa assassinated his father King Datusena as a result of a conspiracy. Thereafter, Kashyapa became the only monarch to rule the country from Sigiriya. Kashyapa was a son of King Datusena and the legitimate heir was his brother Prince Mugalan.

The chronicles offer scant assistance in the study of King Kashyapa or Sigiriya. He is mentioned only briefly in Mahavamsa; the reason being his sin of patricide.

Sigiriya became a human settlement with the monks residing there in 3rd century BC. The subsequent reign of Kashyapa was the significant era of constructions at Sigiriya. This paper considers the background that influenced the origin of a city in Sigiriya and the conditions during the Kashyapa period.

Historical Background

The unique position Sigiriya occupies in Sri Lankan history is undisputed among the scholars. It is clear that it was due to its geographical location that Sigiriya was selected for the establishment of the first Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka, a ruling centre in or before 5th century AD, the conversion back to a monastery and an attraction to the local tourists.

1. Monastery Period

The 38 caves located on the rocky area in the western slope of the principal rock of Sigiriya mainly facilitated the origin of the monastery (See ASCAR 1911-12:106). There are 34 caves with carved drip ledges in the area out of which had been donated to Buddhist monks according to pre-Brahmi cave inscriptions (3rd -1st century BC) (Paranavitana 1970:70). Also, in one cave there is a Later Brahmi inscription (1st-2nd century AD) (Paranavitana 1970:95). It could be concluded from this that in 3rd or 2nd century BC a monastery originated based on Sigiriya caves at the time Buddhism established in Sri Lanka, and that it survived up to at least 2-3 centuries after the 1st century AD. No description could be identified in historical sources about this first Buddhist monastery or the history of Sigiriya prior to the establishment of the monastery. The stone inscriptions found in the caves too do not contain any information that would facilitate the building a contemporary history of Sigiriya.

2. Pre-Kashyapa Period

The plot of land extending from the west of Sigiriya rock to the inner wall was identified by Dr. Senerat Paranavitana with evidence as the royal garden during the reign of Kashyapa (ASCAR 1949:15-19). Dr. Paranavitana conducted excavation from 1949 to 1955 at selected sites in Sigiriya garden and extended excavations have been undertaken by the Central Cultural Fund at the garden since 1982. Although these excavations were organised to find parts of the garden during Kashyapa period as a whole, 5 separate sites, at a distance from each other, in the garden were excavated to unearth archaeological evidences prior to the reign of Kashyapa.

Another period of human settlement or cultural period was discovered from the 5 excavation pits excavated below the level of the part of Kashyapa era garden.

This settlement layer underneath the constructions of Kashyapa period consisted of many cultural remains. Clay Vessels very similar to those of Kashyapa period and Roman coins, iron implements, beads and undefined brick constructions from that period are discovered from the near pre-Kashyapa period. These were found best preserved from 2 excavations in the micro water garden of the Sigiriya garden. In addition, from a pit at place named Ambagaspitiya, an excavation upon the South Summer Palace mound and a dig on the side of post-Kashyapa period monastery near the eastern end revealed contemporary evidence. An undated Roman coin from the pre-Kashyapa soil layer upon the South Summer Palace mound, is considered to be between 455 AD and the beginning of the 5th century AD while another Roman coin found from Ambagaspitiya excavation is dated as belonging to the period between middle 4th century AD and beginning of the 5th century AD (Bandaranayake 1984: 79 and Table 15 & cat. No 82/430, 82/437 coins). This important evidence indicates that there had not been a significant gap in time between the pre-Kashyapa and the Kashyapa period (477-495 AD). However, in the micro water garden area the pre-Kashyapa settlement layer is located at a level 2 metres below the layer containing Kashyapa remains. It is found at a considerable depth from Kashyapa period remains on the Summer Palace and at other areas quite near the Kashyapa period level. The reason for this phenomenon is not difficult to arrive at. At the time Kashyapa established himself at Sigiriya, these pre-Kashyapa settlement layer and structures upon it would have been visible on the surface. The architectural and especially irrigational needs of Kashyapa's garden projects required an area with terraces at different levels, and filling the ground with soil brought from outside would have fulfilled that requirement. Filling made the surface that existed prior to the commencement of the garden project become lower than the level of the filled parts. As a result, the progressively rising terraces could be observed as one goes from the western end, where the inner wall of the garden is situated, towards the east.

The attention is paid mostly to the fact that a layer of wood ash and charcoal from burnt timber is found in the 6th layer of the micro water garden where pre-Kashyapa remains are found, the 6th layer upon the South Summer Palace and the other sites where these remains are discovered. From a number of excavations placed apart from each other, it is revealed that this layer of ash is spread over the entire water garden, which is at least 12 acres in extent. Until a firm conclusion could be reached after further investigations, It is not difficult to form a rough picture about the mainly wood based constructions of the pre-Kashyapa period and its tragic

and probably unexpected end. At the moment, the best conclusion that could be arrived at is that the wooden architectural creations of the pre-Kashyapa period were destroyed in fire as a result of an invasion by Kashyapa or some other unclear reason.

3. Kashyapa Period

The decisive factor for the unique position Sigiriya now occupies in the country could be attributed to its selection by King Kashyapa (477-495 AD) as the centre of his rule. All the spectacular and imposing constructions still existing at Sigiriya belong to his period. The closest reason for Kashyapa's arrival at Sigiriya is attributable to its geological situation based on a large boulder.

For the attention and understanding of the reader, the following description of Kashyapa and the reasons for his arrival at Sigiriya is set out adapted from the account given in the only extant source, Mahavamsa:

King Dhatusena had two sons: a son named Kashyapa born of a queen of unequal rank and a son named Mugalan from a queen of an equal rank. He also had a daughter of eye-catching beauty. Dhatusena appointed his nephew as the general of his army and gave the daughter in marriage to him. The general thrashed his blameless wife on her thighs with a walking stick. The king, angered upon seeing the blood stained garments of his daughter, had the general's mother stripped naked and set on fire. The general who hated the king from that moment onwards, enticed the Prince Kashyapa against his father to take the throne, and after rousing the populace captured the King alive. Thereafter, Prince Kashyapa, who possessed evil friends, killed his father's supporters and became the king. Prince Mugalan, although willing to fight against King Kashyapa, lacked an army and fled to India in search of men. The general desirous of further tormenting King Dhatusena who was already oppressed by the ruin of the kingdom, the loss of the son and the incarceration in prison, told Kashyapa "Lord king, your father protects treasure of the royal clan". When the father denied it, the general informed Kashyapa "Lord King, he keeps the treasure for Prince Mugalan". King Kashyapa, moved to anger, sent messengers to the father saying "tell the places where the treasure is located". King Dhatusena, thinking that this is a ploy to kill him, was silent. Being informed of this, King Kashyapa, angered again, re-sent messengers to the father. King Dhatusena thinking that it is better to die after meeting his friend the monk and bathing from Kalawewa told the messengers "If I am sent to Kalawewa, the places of the treasure could be known". The messengers informed King Kashyapa, and he, happy in greed for treasure, sent a carriage and messengers. King Dhatusena after eating the food given by his friend the monk and, being consoled by his preaching, bathed in Kalawewa and informed the royal messengers "this is my treasure". They took King Dhatusena to the city and informed King Kashyapa of his father's words. The wrathful King Kashyapa, thinking "he, while living, protects treasures for Prince Mugalan", ordered his father's death. The general whose vengeance was fulfilled had King stripped naked and killed by being plastered with clay to a wall (Mahavamsa, ch.38, vv. 80-111).

Thereafter, King Kashyapa attempted to have Prince Mugalan killed but, after failing to do so, fled in fear to Sigiriya. He had the surroundings of the inaccessible rock cleared, and a wall

built. According to Mahawamsa, because the Staircases were built there in the shape of lions, it was henceforth known as Sigiri. The king had a resplendent palace like a second Alakamanda built and resided there like the great King Vesamuni. The chronicle then describes the religious works commissioned by the king feeling remorse for the patricide committed by him, as an attempt to escape from the retribution for the sin. However, it is further mentioned that the monks, fearing vilification by the public, were unwilling to accept the grants made by the patricidal king to Mahavihara (Mahavamsa, ch.39. vv.1-13)

The king had a Vihara on a donated garden and granted it and the Northern Garden to Dharmaruchika monks residing in Abhayagiri.

After 18 years had passed, Prince Mugalan came from India with armies to battle with King Kashyapa. Kashyapa with his army arrived to face Mugalan's army and the battle commenced. Kashyapa turned the elephant he was riding to avoid a mud hole ahead of him, and his army, misinterpreting the action as "our lord is fleeing", broke away. Kashyapa sliced his neck with own sword and re-sheathed it. Mugalan, in respect for that action, cremated Kashyapa's body and returned to Anuradhapura, the former capital, to rule. Thereafter, King Mugalan, working towards the benefit of the monks, donated a Vihara known as Sigiri Dalaha and two other Viharas at Sigiriya to Abhayagiri and Jatavana Viharas. Also the King converted the Sigiri rock in to a Vihara and granted it to Mahanama Thero residing at Diksanda Senevi Pirivena (Mahavamsa, 39, ch.20-28, vv 40-43).

The statement that Kashyapa resided at Sigiriya after constructing an resplendent palace there, is ample evidence of Sigiriya being converted to King Kashyapa's permanent residence. Also, it could be inferred by the mention that Kashyapa came to Sigiriya in fear of his brother Mugalan that he considered Sigiriya more suitable for his self-preservation than the capital Anuradhapura. However, the view of some, Sigiriya was not such an important site for defence (Paranavitana 1959:132; Liyanagamage 1987:441 ; Silva 2005:224-225).

One could argue that it was not necessary for Kashyapa to leave his rock fortress after 18 years of reign to face his opponent Mugalan, if Sigiriya had been constructed in a manner sufficiently suitable for military purposes. However, a study of the use of fortresses reveals that a fortress is established and its defences bolstered for the purposes of defence against an unexpected attack and also for shelter in the event of a defeat. It was suggested during the wars waged against Gajabahu of Polonnaruwa by Parakramabahu to flee and seek shelter in the defensive fortresses of Parakramapura (Panduwasnuwara) and Kelaniya at times the army became weak. A fortress was selected as the last resort in a battle because the ancients considered being confined in a fortress as a risk. There is sufficient evidence in history that those besieged inside a fortress could be weakened by measures such as a blockade of food stuff, the account of King Vedeha mentioned in Umandawa being a good example. Even the society of the time would have considered the cowering inside a fortress as unfitting for a king who was courageous enough to re-sheath his sword after slicing his own neck with it- an act which generated appreciation from even his opponent Prince Mugalan.

Professor Amaradasa Liyanagamage and Dr. Raja de Silva consider that Sigiriya would not have being the permanent residence of King Kashyapa, based on the premise that it was not of great defensive significance and other factors. Taking in to account the theory that Sigiriya lacked sufficient a geo-physical background and especially an irrigation network to exist entirely as a human settlement, Liyanagamage states that Kashyapa, while reigning at Anuradhapura, would have used Sigiriya for mere entertainment (Liyanagamage 1987:444). However, there no indication contained in the chronicle to support this view, and also, it is quite clear that Kashyapa made Sigiriya his residence and fought against Mugalan at some distance from Anuradhapura (Mahavamsa, 39 ch 4-5, vv 22-28). The evidence from Sigiriya graffiti too is important here. 5 graffiti mention the palace and one of them indicates that the palace upon Sigiriya rock was dilapidated by the 9th century AD (Paranavitana 1956, Vol I, cciv & Vol. II, nos. 156, 376, 637, 165, 71). These make it clear that the tourists visiting Sigiriya close to the Kashyapa period firmly believed the building on the rock to be the king's palace. Also, if Sigiriya was a mere centre for entertainment visited occasionally by the king, there was no reason for the special defensive measures taken such as the construction of an inner wall and an inner moat surrounding the Sigiri city and beyond those an outer wall and an outer moat. If the royal pleasure gardens such as Anuradhapura Ranmasu Garden and Polonnaruwa Deepa Uyana used for the entertainment by Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kings are taken as examples, it should be emphasized that those gardens do not contain defensive measures even approaching close to Sigiriya in any manner. Raja de Silva, disputing Paranavitana's view that Kashyapa reigned in Sigiriya imitating Kuvera in Alakamanda (Paranavitana 1959 ; 132), states that Paranavitana's theory built on the premise that Kashyapa resided like a god king in the palace upon Sigiri rock becomes baseless due to the reason that there is no evidence of such a palace existing on the rock (Silva 2005 : 226).

Dr. Raja de Silva takes the lack features such as landing slabs laid near the door of the building on top of the rock, door frames, doors, stone window frames, stone pillars and stones used to support pillars and the lack of cross walls in the buildings as evidence for a palace not constructed upon the rock. A specially feature of architectural remains at Sigiriya is foundations, pillars, doors and windows of the building being constructed of wood unlike the granite used in most of the buildings of Anuradhapura era. Granite has not been used for even a single building on the entire area surrounded by moat on the Sigiri rock. Only for the bottom of the ponds and water ditches of certain buildings limestone slabs are used. However, considering the evidence from a number of platforms in the royal pleasure garden situated on the flat land towards west of the rock, it is not difficult to have an idea about the design of Sigiri buildings. The foundations have been constructed only with bricks. Limestone has been used only to pave the bottom of ponds and ditches as aforesaid and for the steps of the staircases. However, there are many well carved and polished granite creations inside the city of Sigiriya. Out of these, the royal audience hall and the granite seat and low walls of the adjacent seating cave, the granite seat on top of the rock and the two ponds carved in to the rock are prominent. This makes it clear that the Sigiri architect had not been unaware of how to work with granite, but as a habit had not used granite for the buildings. As H.C.P. Bell and Professor Senaka Bandaranayake point out upper parts of the buildings at Sigiriya were constructed of wood. Further evidence to support this will be discussed later in this paper. From

these, it could easily be concluded that the upper parts of the buildings constructed upon the top of the rock were created from wood.

Another argument to support Raja de Silva's view that the building on top of the rock was not a palace is the fact that the granite seat known as the throne is located about 30 metres away from building called the palace. Since, Senaka Bandaranayake identifies the extent of ground with the granite seat as the Gardem of the palace, the seat could not be considered a throne inside the palace. As many literary sources mention that stone seats were situated for the king to sit while being entertained by dances, plays and songs (Dissanayake 2013 : 59-61) and living evidence for which could be found in Anuradhapura Ran Masu Uyana and Polonnaruwa Deepa Uyana, the seat on top of the rock too should be considered a royal seat in the courtyard. The mention in Mahavamsa that King Kashyapa had a resplendent palace resembling Alakamanda built and resided there like the great king Wesamuni is subjected to the special attention of ParNAVITANA. He described at length the Sigiriya rock, palace on top, murals and Sigiri Wewa to fit in to Kashyapa's imitation of Kuvera . It is very significant that the legend of Kashyapa's Kuvera imitation is confirmed by the Timbiri Wewa inscription belonging to Kashyapa period. In it the words "kasabala alakapaya maharaja" which is equal to "the great king Kashyapa, the lord of Alaka" could be observed (ParNAVITANA 1961).

Although the concept that the king is a god in human shape had originated due to the influence of Hinduism (Ariyapala 1956 :19), in most instances it had been established in Sri Lanka society too. Also, this prevalent almost as an universal concept. A similar concept existed in relation to certain Asian monarchs who were contemporaries of Kashyapa. In Harrison's words "Punan country was at the pinnacle of his power at the end of the 5th century. As the shrines were established on top of mountains according to the Indonesian tradition, the kings too acquired divine status as kings of the mountain (Pnom, Punam). Khmers and rulers of central Java assumed names such as kings of the mountain and Shailendra (mountain king) respectively" (Harrison 1965 :23-24). Although in rocky terrain like Dambadeniya, Yapawwa and Kurunegala royal residences similar to Sigiriya were created taking in to consideration the convenience of defence, ParNAVITANA says (ParNAVITANA, 1961 :734)" that the concept of the king being a god residing on a mountain had certain influence there. He also brings to our attention the verse in Paravi Sandeshaya (ibid., I, II 734). That the concept of imitation of Kuvera by the king lasted at least up to the 13th century could be surmised by the meaning of the name of the ruler Alagakkonara. The tamil meaning of Alagakkonara is "Alaka Ishvara". Also, as it is obvious from the Sagama inscription that this ruler held the title Alakadhipathi (Mudiyanse, P. 8 & 125), the partiality the subsequent kings had shown for the Kuvera imitation of Kashyapa is made clear.

Parallel to the brief description of the construction of Sigiriya, the chronicles mentions only a single vihara as constructed by Kashyapa. It is stated that the king, who had a vihara built in the donated garden near Sigiri rock, named that vihara in his name and in the names of his two daughters like Isurumuni Vihara in Anuradhapura. This shows that the vihara too was named Bo Upulvan Kasubgiri Vehera. It is stated that this vihara and the northern garden were donated to Dharmaruchika monks (Mahavamsa, ch. 39, vv. 15-16). Mahavamsa Attakatha mentions that this Uyana was named Niyyanthi Vanaya. Since the vihara was near Sigiri Rock

and the northern garden is mentioned, it should definitely be the present Pidurangala Vihara situated in the north of Sigiriya. Bell as well as Paranavitana accept that Pidurangala Vihara belongs to the Kashyapa period (ASCAR 1899 : 12; ASCAR 1951 :111). Also, Paranavitana mentions that the Pidurangala dagoba has been constructed on the site King Kashyapa was cremated thus: “ Our pit was dug through the plaster of the original stupa and under the base of sealed chamber and to a depth of another 4 feet 6 inches. There a soil yellow in colour used to fill the maluwa was found. After it was dug for another 2 feet and 6 inches the natural soil was encountered. Here, there were pieces of charcoal scattered everywhere. The burnt earth too was there. It shows that this too had been built upon a cremating ground like Anuradhapura Dakkina Stupa. The bricks used for the original bricks are as large as the bricks found among the ruins in Promoda Vanaya (Promoda Gerden) in the west of Sigiri rock. Accordingly, it could be said that the foundation of the original stupa was laid at the same time as the establishment of Sigiriya. This is conclusion is confirmed by the Roman coin found there. The one cremated there would have been a great personage of the Sigiri period. Therefore, all evidence point to the fact that Pidurangala Stupa has been built on the site Sigiri Kashyapa was cremated” (Paranavitana 1972 :139)

The account in the Mahavamsa too hints that King Mugalan had Kashyapa’s body cremated at Sigiriya and not at Anuradhapura which he re-established as the capital, or any other place, as it is mentioned that all the equipment was brought to Anuradhapura after the cremation of Kashyapa (Mahavamsa. Ch. 39, v.28. Here, the movable treasure that belonged to King Kashyapa at Sigiriya would be meant by the term ‘all the equipment’. This would show that Mugalan first travelled to Sigiriya after the demise of his brother, before journeying to Anuradhapura. It could also be conjectured that the battle between the armies of Kashyapa and Mugalan occurred at a site close to Sigiriya.

Although the ancient name of the Pidurangala Vihara was Boupulvan Kasubgiri Vehera, a stone inscription which contradicts it has been discovered from a building near Pidurangala Dagoba. The name of the vihara in the inscription is Sigiri Dalha. This shows that Boupulvan Kasubgiri Vehera would also have been known as Sigiri Dalha Vihara. It is very significant that this inscription confirms the statement in Mahavamsa that, after the demise of Kashyapa, the vihara named Sigiri Dalha was donated by Mugalan to the residents of Abhayagiri.

Bibliography

- The Mahavamsa, Translate by Geiger, Colombo, 1950, The Ceylon Government
- Ariyapala. M.B., 1956, Medieval Sinhalese Society, Colombo.
- Bandaranayake, Senake, 1984, First Archaeological Excavation and Research Report,
Sigiriya Project, Colombo : Central Cultural Fund.
- Dissanayaka, Senarath, 2013, Magnificent Sigiriya. Kurunegala
- Harrison, Brian 1966, South-East Asia: a Short History, 3rd edition, Macmillan & Co
- Mudiyanse, N. 1963, The Art and Architecture of the Gampola Period, Colombo.
- Liyanagamage, 1989, Sigiriya Kalakotuvakdha Suba Nikethanayakdha, Vimansa (In Sinhala),
Colombo
- Paranavitna, S., 1956, Sigiri Graffiti, Vol. I, II, Oxford.
- 1959, History of Ceylon, Volume I, part I, University of Ceylon.
- 1961, *The Significance of the Paintings of Sigiri 382-387*, Artbus Asiae, Vol. 24, Nos. 3-4
- 1970, Inscription of Ceylon, Vol I, Colombo: Department of Archaeology.
- 1972, Puravidya Pariyeshana (In Sinhala), Lake House
- Silva, Raja de., 2005, Digging Into The Past, Ratmalana
- ASCAR = Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Annual Reports for 1899, 1911 - 1912, 1949, 1951

Personal Biography: Dr. Senarath Dissanayaka, Ph.D., MSc.

Former Director General of Archaeology, Former President of the Council of Archaeologists of Sri Lanka, Former President of the Ceylon Branch of the International Committee on Archaeological monuments, and sites. Senior Lecturer Department of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya.