

High Life in a High Rise

Posted on

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If you zoomed in suddenly upon Sigiriya the Lion Rock (Sinha-Giriya) rising starkly into the sky you would imagine it was a mirage in stone. What strikes you most-its frescoes, its history, or its marvels in engineering? Personally, what appeals to me is that it was Sri Lanka's first high-rise building, complete with every creature comfort. This massive rock was the hide-out of God-King Kassapa who built a palace on the top. Greedy for power, he killed his ageing father by walling him in. But he reckoned without his enraged brother Moggallana who collected a band of faithful soldiers to drive him out. Leaving nothing to chance, Kassapa fled up and away into this rocky bastion that disappeared into the clouds. Only the ruins of this fortress remain. I am reminded irresistibly of the lines in the Dhammapada.

“Neither in the sky nor in the midst of sea Nor by entering some fissure in the rocks Nowhere can be found that place upon the earth Wherein one may abide nor be overcome by Death (verse 128)”

But this fortress in the sky is only one theory. The other more recent one, is that Sigiriya was built to elevate the King Kassapa, both literally and metaphorically, to the ancient status of God-King. And one must concede he could not have chosen a better way or place to enhance his image.

Not only was he marooned on virtually unsealable heights, monarch of all he surveyed. He was also a pleasure-loving sybarite who surrounded himself with every luxury and creature comfort, complete with landscaping and art, that any modern tycoon would envy.

Within the protective walls circled by two giant moats filled with lotus flowers, were extensive pleasure gardens and fountains, grand pavilions and graceful living quarters, cunningly tucked into massive boulders, strewn by a giant hand, on terrace after terrace, leading you upwards to a formidable rock canvas. Originally more than 500 paintings of cloud-maidens enticed the timorous visitor from the

'ground' floor. Now alas only twenty-two remain, and even these have suffered at the hands of a worse vandal than Time, who daubed them with green paint.



The Lion's Paws - on the North face of Sigiriya and the flight of steps leading upwards to the top of the rock. (Suresh de Silva).



The Water Gardens - planned out by clever landscape gardeners of the 5th century A.D. (Suresh de Silva).



A visitor scales the sheer rock face protected by an iron railing



A drawing of a gold ear ornament used by the maidens of Sigiriya -5th Century A.D. Discovered in recent excavations.



The Rock Cut Throne -where the King was entertained by the dancing girls of his harem.



One of the seventeen ponds on the rock fortress. (Suresh de Silva).



The ruins of King Kasyapa's royal chamber.

Fortunately the green paint was chemically removed, without damaging the original pigments. An Italian expert arrived within days and produced a suitable solvent. Only a thin film of green remains over the paintings, and a few green dots in the

crevices, as witness to the rape of the rock maidens. The ladies look as beguiling as before – some proud, some thoughtful – no wonder they inspired visitors to poetry!

One of the greatest difficulties faced by the archaeologists entrusted with the restoration of Sigiriya has been the work on the moats. Massive stones strewn at random have been replaced in their old positions to rebuild a 12 foot retaining wall.

These moats had no defensive purpose though there was a modest degree of protection. There is an inner rampart wall, (of which only the ruins remain) broad enough for guards to patrol. There is also a narrow entrance, for pedestrians only by which the King would come, seated in a two-wheeled ornamental carriage, pulled by attendants. But the northern and southern gateways were wider, and the gap through the rampart was much greater. Through these came food supplies, and vehicles drawn by horses, carrying in all the necessities of this community in the clouds, and carrying out its garbage for disposal.

Kassapa in his little kingdom was obsessed with the need to keep cool, and he had many expert engineers to carry it out. The four water gardens of which one is restored, obviously provided them with endless pleasure and entertainment. Water games have been a vital part of Sri Lanka culture, as many folk songs testify.

These beautiful water gardens, complete with pavilions and changing rooms, were once again completely surrounded by water, and an eight foot wall, to ensure privacy, and a romantic atmosphere perhaps as well as keep out voyeurs (peeping toms, to you).

What else is new? Fountains! Can you imagine fountains playing in the fifth century! Why not? The method • simple. During the monsoon, water was collected and allowed to flow downhill. This creates pressure. and forces the water up in spouts. Can you imagine the king and his court, surrounded by artistes and beautiful maidens, all on display, to impress a foreign visitor perhaps. Even today these fountains can be made to rise to a height of two feet. This has been called a mini hydro-power system. Do you suppose they even had coloured lights, dazzling like an iridescent rainbow?

I mentioned foreigners. Among them were Romans who had trade contacts with Sri Lanka. This is proved by many Roman coins found in the water gardens. Do you suppose they too sang “Three coins in a fountain” hoping to return -the present day pop song in reverse?

The Romans were masters of fountains too. But more intriguing than fountains were the cunning system to allow water to flow in channels, rather like human veins. This was a natural method adopted by Sri Lankans.

Women's needs received special attention, especially luxuries for their toilet. What does a woman need even now? A large bath -plenty of hot and cold water, and perfumed "unguents" (that is the classical word, not mine) to pamper their bodies – and many hand maidens. They had another luxury that is in short supply now -TIME. They obviously spent hours soaking -just luxuriating in these surroundings, in private. There is an Octagonal Pond in the Reservoir Garden. At the back of the massive boulder there is a climbing ladder of grooves, on the left side, reaching I mentioned foreigners. Among them were Romans who had trade contacts with Sri Lanka. This is proved by many Roman coins found in the water gardens.

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There is even a gorgeous boulder garden, unparalleled in any spot on earth. It is a garden of over a hundred giant boulders grouped in twenty-three caves, all beautifully cool places to rest in, read manuscripts on ola leaves and to pray. Some of the caves have inscriptions over them, dating back to the second century BC. Showing that they were formerly inhabited by monks. King Kassapa invited them to take up residence some distance away in Pidurangala, a neighbouring hill. What Kassapa used the caves for is not quite certain, but in one cave a broken statue of the Buddha in limestone was discovered during excavation. So this is obviously an image house. There was also a Bodhi Tree shrine in the Boulder Garden, placed there after Kassapa's time, provided with even a toilet for the caretaker of the shrine.

In spite of all the ‘mod cons’ the king got bored with being stuck up on a mountain. From about June to September, during the dry season, he descended, and lived in a pavilion with his entourage. This pavilion too was surrounded by water, as excavations revealed, as workmen restored the retaining wall of the octagonal moat. On this mound there appear to be three or four tiered terraces, on top of which still stands a building with post-holes in the stone for wooden columns. What a sight this Palace must have been, in elaborately carved wood, now long since destroyed by termites! One discovers another puzzle here. In exact relation to the central road through the gardens leading to the rock, there is another Palace on the other side. This could have been even bigger, and it too had a surrounding moat. Why two Palaces for the King? Did he prefer the Queen and her attendants to stay in the other Palace, so that he could entertain the ladies of the harem undisturbed?

To talk of Sigiriya and not mention the ‘Cloud Maidens’ is like Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. I have deliberately desisted as there was such a full description about them in this magazine, only recently. But they continue to interest me, even as they must have done the many sightseers who wended their way up ever since Kassapa’s time.

Climbing past the frescoes and the Mirror Wall, on which visitors ‘doodled’ their reactions to the Fresco Belles, you come to the uppermost terrace below the summit. Look up and along the rock face you will see a row of grooves, all that is left of a gently ascending brick path, once used by the King and his Court.

But from that point there is a sheer vertical drop. Puzzled, you scratch your head wondering how they ever climbed to the top.

The answer is in the twin lions paws below. Remember, Sigiriya means Lion Rock. Kassapa’s architects had the ingenious idea of bridging the immense gap with a huge lion, its head directly in line with the grooved pathway, reached from a stairway concealed within.

Nowadays you climb steps part of the way, then hang on to an iron railing fixed in the rock face, while you inch your way along the footholds beckoning you upwards. Don’t worry, no one has ever missed his footing. But it is advisable on a windy day to wear fitting clothes, not a billowing saree as I was unlucky enough to do!

When you reach the top you will feel like royalty. Surveying the ruins of the God-King’s Palace, his massive throne, the royal reception rooms and the royal bathing

pool where King Kassapa cavorted with his beauties.

His ablutions over Kassapa would come out and give audience to foreign traders from Rome and South India. Kassapa had to be tactful as he bargained, for he did not wish to antagonise, or draw attention to his huge wealth, for fear of coming into open conflict with South Indian kingdoms, which had dominated the trade with the Roman Empire and the Far East. Where did he keep his great wealth? nobody knows. But the jewellery of his time, as the recently discovered ear-ring shows, must have been exquisite. King Kassapa's reign was a rare mixture of Art, Engineering and Business Acumen.

The ruins of King 'Kasyapa's royal chamber. (Suresh de Silva).

*Is it not to delight loves devotees that these nymphs have been painted here?
I have come to you, O long-eyed ones, As the gentle breeze to the moonlight.
Having heard of you, I came to see. I spoke but you said nothing. It was because
your word had been given, Your honours plighted. Are they frightened The ladies
with the golden skins That they stand so silent? This long-eyed girl Says nothing But
a flower flaunts in her hand. Seeing you posturing on the mountain My heart
delighted when it saw That flowers were in your hand.*