Sigiriya Fortress of Beauty

Posted on

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Aerial view of Sigiriya rock. with the ruins of the palace. Photo: Fred R Malvenna

Of all the memorable sights Sri Lanka has to offer the culture enthusiast, none is perhaps quite so haunting as the rock fortress of Sigiriya meaning ‘Lion Rock’ – a 500 foot monolith, rising magnificently out of the dry central plain. Touched with tragedy at its origin, Sigiriya which stirs one’s fantasy has been compared by writers to a massive sacrificial altar, fashioned by fearsome gods. To the renowned science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, who has made Sri • Lanka his home, this

strange and magnificent monument suggests a mysterious platform, and in one of his novels it becomes the base of a space elevator leading up into the stars. King Dhatusena who reigned in Anuradhapura in the 5th century A.D. had two sons Mogallana by his queen, and Kasyapa by a concubine. Kasyapa in his ambition for power and possessions demanded his legacy from the father. The industrious· king whose greatest achievement for his people was the building of the great tank Kalawewa took his rapacious son to the reservoir and showed him his life's work, saying these were his wealth.

The enraged prince killed his father by entombing him alive to the bund of the reservoir. The patricide Kasyapa in his guilt, built himself a hideout at Sigiriya atop the massive rock. In this fortress where he reigned for 18 years he carved out some of our finest feats of architecture and construction engineering in addition to converting the fortress in the sky to a veritable treasure trove of art and uncanny palace of pleasure. There was the moat which ran around the rock, the ramparts which fortified gateways. The circular wall which retains its shine to this day, the steep and widening stairs, the splendid palace, and the best known of all – the frescoes of enigmatic maidens believed to be the ladies of the court or celestial goddesses. Before long, Mogallana the heir to the throne returned in pursuit of the patricide Kasyapa with an army raised in South India. In the face of defeat Kasyapa chose to end his life in the shadow of the massive rock. Steep stone stairs that lead the visitor more and more into this suggestive and mysterious world of Kasyapa directs him to a brick gallery where protected by an overhang is a smooth surface called the "Mirror Wall", closer inspection of which reveals a mass of delicately inscribed "Kurutu Gee" or graffiti left by visitors over the years.

A protective iron bridge from the mirror wall area leads the visitor to an ancient flight of stone steps which in turn directs one to a broad terrace, dominated by two enormous Lion's paws. Flanked by the paws are a flight of steps leading through the cavernous mouth of the Lion's. This climb to the palace is steep and demanding and not recommended to the faint hearted. Once on the summit the visitor is intrigued by what remains of the beautiful pleasure palace and the park which is no doubt the outcome of the cultural and artistic renaissance of the Gupta period in Indian history. While the well known Ajanta frescoes were being painted on the cave walls, and Kalidasa was writing his Sanskrit poems in India, King Kasyapa perhaps was designing his Super Palace in the clouds, an achievement of construction that is also a work of art. Though garden architecture has generally been considered a phenomenon of the recent past, studies on the gardens with its rocky artistic

creations such as fountains, cascades, shallow ponds, bathing pools, ponds for fish, cooling troughs and promenades have brought to light some salient elements of this discipline from a more distant past. These ruins are but a few of the wide variety of aesthetically appealing uses of flowing water found on the site.

The UNESCO – Sri Lanka project on the “Cultural Triangle” inaugurated in 1980 is harnessing academic skills and trained personnel to preserve the ruins of the cultural triangle viz -Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Sigiriya, Dambulla which form part of Sri Lanka’s historical core while giving supreme expression to its religious values. Although a massive rock fortress like Sigiriya was built to last and withstand the assault of time, the combined action of climate, fauna and flora has taken its toll and rain and wind have insidiously eroded the stone and brick walls of the palace. The excavations conducted under the work plan launched by UNESCO have brought to light a portion of a drainage system, a limestone floor, a brick base of a large wall, two stairs with a doorway, ambng a host of other monuments of special cultural significance such as oil lamps, water sprinkers and incense burners made of fine clay. This project has also succeeded in discovering more stanzas of Graffiti which date from the 7th to Detail of a fresco at Sigiriya Photo : S.Ramasamy the 13th century.

The lovely forms of the attractive frescoed ladies described are by Dr. Senerath Paranawithane the eminent Sri lankan archaeologist as the “cloud damsels” and “lightning princesses” carrying flowers amongst the clouds which must have swirled around the great palace of the Yaksha King Kuvera whose incarnation their sponsor King Kasyapa believed himself to be. The Poet visitors responsible for the Graffiti seemed to have believed that these cloud damsels were beauties of King Kasyapa’s court or simply lovely fair and dark skinned women drawn as ornaments. One anonymous verse says of these lovelies –
“Ladies like you make men pour out their hearts” and another more imaginatively – “You have repulsed a king and taken the hard rock as your lover”. These ladies are constantly associated with sprays of flowers, lotuses and blossoms introduced partly as clues to passionate physical demands but also as conventional signs denoting willingness to surrender. Out of the original 500 paintings however only twenty one have survived while in a rock shelter at its foot a few other feminine forms, have been detected their legs neither cut off by clouds nor skirts but swathed in dhotis, tissue like in their softness.

Their bodies’ radiance
Like the moon

Wanders in the cool wind
Does it pull them?
Alas, it keeps them where they are Sweet girl,
Standing on the mountain,
Your teeth are like jewels,
Lighting the lotus of your eyes,
Talk to me gently of your heart Ladies like you,
Make men pour out their hearts,
And you also,
Have thrilled the body,
Making its hair
stiffen with desire, On their breasts are golden chains,
And still they beckon,
Seeing these lovely ladies,
I want no other life, Dry as a flower,
That has fallen on a rock
Are the hearts of those beauties,
Whose golden skins,
Have caught my mind The girl with golden skin,
Enticed the mind and eyes,
Her lovely breasts,
Caused me to recall,
Swans drunk with nectar Who is not happy when he sees,
Those rosy palms, rounded shoulders,
Gold necklaces, copper-hued lips,
And long, long eyes? When you come to mind, the heart aches,
The blood boils and I cry aloud,
Your waist makes me bound to you in my heart .



Detail of a fresco at Sigiriya Photo : S.Ramasamy



Heavenly maidens on the rock face. Photo : Fred R Malvenna



The feminine form captivated the unknown artists of Sigiriya Photo: Fred R.Malvenna