SIGIRIYA

THE PARTY THAT LASTED 22 YEARS

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
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FOR

SAM

PARTY ANIMAL, GURU,
GENTLE GRAMMARIAN

“I am not crazy; my reality is just different from yours.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871

ONE

THE PARTY PALACE

Now regarded as little more than ruins atop a rock that offers a magnificent view, Sigiriya is undoubtedly one of ancient Asia's Seven Great Wonders; albeit one that wears its wonders with clandestine dignity.

Its moment of destruction coincides most neatly with the date most historians give for the ending of the ancient world itself – 500 CE, for just 5 years beforehand that the ancient world itself had come crashing to a bloody end around the base of this 1000-foot mountain in central Sri Lanka in 495 CE.

With it ended one of the most notorious parties the world had yet enjoyed, one that, at 22 years, totally out lasted even Cleopatra's Feast. The party was Gatsbyesque in its exuberant excess. More opulent than the Rothschild's surrealist ball of 1972; more majestic than the Shah of Iran's 2,500-year dynastic celebrations the year before, this party, like the ancient world itself, raced to its corporeal end with all the aplomb of the last serving of the last martini on board the Titanic.

Of course, 500 CE is little more than a marker, a slender signal, a humble and iconic rounded-up figure that has been invented by historians eager to bring closure to the world of the Romans and Greeks, the Pharaohs, Assyrians, Hittie, Persians, or Han. But the date has stuck. Thereafter follows the medieval age, the early

modern age. And the later early modern age; even the later modern age, and our own post-modern age, an age shorn of parties, or glamour, decadent or otherwise.

Sri Lanka's 22-year end-of-history party followed exactly the dates of the reign of one of its most outrageous kings, an equatorial Nero with mesmeric hints, like the best of expensive wines, of other things - Vlad the Impaler; Nebuchadnezzar, Louis XIV. In joy, as Mark Twain observed, is sorrow - and Kashyapa, king, party giver, gourmand, and libertine, knew that his moment of doom was due to come sooner rather than later.

Gazing across the plains from his high fortress walls in Sigiriya, he would have been presciently aware that his brother would eventually arrive to stop all the fun. And so he did. Commanding a specially recruited mercenary army from nearby India, Moggallana had come to take back what he considered his by right – the throne.

The legitimate son of Dhatusena, one of the country's greatest kings, as his heir, Moggallana would have looked forward to a reign of plenty after this father had chased the occupying Dravidian Tamils from the kingdom, and rebuilt the country, tank by tank, temple by temple. It was years of milk and honey (or Kittel) he had in mind – not penurious exile.

But it was not to be. His half-brother, Kashyapa played family politics with a cardsharp's skills. He out manoeuvred his brother, and, with the help of the head of army, deposed his father, Dhatusena. Had things ended there we may never have heard of Kashyapa. He would just have been yet another one of the island's numerous coup d'état kings.But with Oedipean or Macbethian instincts, Kashyapa went further. Much further. He began by entombing his father alive in his palace walls. For so distinguished a king, to be reduced to mere bricks and mortar was a shocking way to end a reign.

And, to escape the widespread disapprobation this would have created, Kashyapa abandoned his capital of Anuradhapura in much the same way as Tiberius had abandoned Rome for Capri; and headed for Sigiriya. Its like, anywhere in Aisia, was probably not seen again until the Kangxi Emperor built the Gardens of Perfect Brightness in the Old Summer Palace, outside Peking some twelve hundred years later, in 1707. A capital for just one reign, Sigiriya was a cross between the Tivoli, Akhenaten's Amarna, and the Brighton Pavilion. It enjoyed every last innovation and refinement available – and there were many.

TWO

HEAVEN'S WALLS

The fortress itself sits atop a massive lump of granite - a hardened, much reduced magma plug – all that is left of an extinct volcano. Lost in forests, inhabited by hermits monks between the third century BCE and the first century CE, it was exposed by colossal landslides and then selected by Kashyapa as the location of a new fortress capital in 477 CE.

Much of it is hard to identify today but, in its day, it set new standards for urban planning, the royal bastion surrounded by an elaborately laid out outer city, with a final circle of three types of gardens around it: water, terraced, and boulder gardens - 3 km in length and nearly 1 km in width, flanking its famous rock citadel.

Ponds, pavilions, fountains and cut pools made up the water gardens. More naturalistic gardens were created around massive boulders that mimicked an artless park with long winding pathways to saunter down. Brick staircases and limestone steps led up to more formal terraced gardens.

Across it all stretch double moats and triple ramparts, defendable gateways, and steps in perfect geometric symmetry, locking all the elements of the fortress city together with mathematic precision and elegance and pierced by the massive sentinel sculpture of a crouching lion. The beast guards the staircase to the ancient palace six hundred feet above though

all that remains now are the two animal paws, rediscovered in excavations in 1898. Built with bricks and limestone, the lion's full height was 45 feet. The rest of the creature lies in dust around the site, but even so, it gave its name to the place, "Sigiriya" being the Singhala for "Lion's Rock." It is as if the walls of heaven itself defend it.

THREE

THE SECRET INGREDIENT

When Kashyapa died, having wisely chosen to drive a sword through his own body rather than be captured alive, the city sank into a desolate retreat for a handful of monks getting so overgrown by jungle through the passing centuries that its rediscovery in 1831 by Major Jonathan Forbes of the 78th (Highlanders) Regiment of Foot was the sensation of the year. Forbes was no ordinary officer. His book, Eleven Years in Ceylon published in 1840, is regarded as a masterpiece and he himself was so obsessed rumours of Sigiriya that he dedicated himself to detection, writing later: "From the spot where we halted, I could distinguish massive stone walls appearing through the trees near the base of the rock, and now felt convinced that this was the very place I was anxious to discover."

Decades after the publication of Forbes' book, the full and real glory that underwrote Sigiriya was gradually discovered. Central to it all was its reliance on the most advanced water technology in the world to power its fountains, lakes, wells, streams, and waterfalls. Rock-cut horizontal and vertical drains, underground terracotta pipes, tanks, ponds, interconnected conduits, cisterns, moats, and waterways channelled surface water to stop erosion and tapped other water sources to deliver water to the huge ornamental gardens, the city and palace - and harness it to help cool the microclimate of the royal residences.

Exhibited here in Sigiriya are all the greatest advances the country made in developing technology and practices to empower the water that powered the state itself. Climbing to the top will not reveal them; indeed most of it is still lost underground or in forest. But it is there – traces of it, obvious to the trained eye.

"There will," stated Stephen King deferentially, "be water if God wills it." But as any ancient Sri Lankan would have told him, this is only half the truth of the matter. Water, uncollected, undistributed, unpurified, is all but useless however much the good Lord has allowed. For water was what the island most needed - for despite abundant monsoons, the water, uncollected, soon vanishes. Harnessing this critical resource began just 39 years after the arrival of Prince Vijaya, the founding father of the Singhala nation, when its third – and still modest – king, Panduvasdeva, created the first notable man-made reservoir on the island:Panda Wewa.

Unlike most other ancient reservoirs, not least the great pharaonic ones, this one was not created by simply filling a natural hollow with water – but by forming a dam to hold the water in and regulate its distribution. To get to this point, the industrial and engineering expertise possessed by the kingdom would have had to have been considerable. A capability to make bricks and cut stones would have been

been essential; and the understanding of how then to use these things to create a sluice to regulate the flow of water to the city and the paddy lands. Construction, engineering, hydrology, mathematics, agriculture, project management: all would have had to fuse with seamless genius.

Spanning one and a half miles at a height of 24 feet, the dam is cunningly part-made by utilising the natural rock to reduce the amount of stones and bricks required to hold back what was, for the time, a colossal amount of water - 416 million cubic feet within an area of 1,360 acres. Its slopes were protected by stones to minimize erosion, and the overall structure was sufficiently robust to withstand and release the immense quantities of water that gathered during monsoon times; its ability to absorb pressure cleverly maximised by the design of an unusual twisting embankment that skirted low ground.

FOUR

SUPER CHARGED

All these technologies were put into practice in the many reservoirs that later kings created, but it was the creation of bisokotuwas - cutting edge sluices - that the great leap forward was made, every bit as game changing as the invention of steam engines and cotton gins that triggered the Industrial Revolution in the west. The design and position of the new sluices that were modified and perfected by the kingdom's hydrogeological engineers were far in advance of anything anywhere else in the world; and ensured that water could exit a reservoir without putting so much pressure on the dam embankment that it would collapse. But at scale – for this was the breakthrough.

The new sluice designs green lit the possible size of reservoirs, allowing them to scale up to unprecedented levels; and water of unimaginably large quantities could be collected to extend agriculture, support ever larger and more urban populations and produce crops whose surplus would rapidly and exponentially enrich the state.

The water technology was further refined by many other refinements that maximized water availability - inceptor zones, for example, created between the tank and the paddy fields by planting *77* types of trees and plants whose well-developed root systems would absorb the salts and heavy metals from the water before it reached the paddy.

Tree belts were planted well above the water tank to stop wind, waves, and evaporation. Sedges, grasses, and special shrubs were planted to purify water run-off. Large catchment forests were planted to improve the groundwater table and regularise the supply of water to the tanks in the dry season. And in the nearby upper catchment areas small dams and miniature tanks were constructed to deliberately make the land marshy and capture silt that would otherwise run into the tanks.

Lengthy canals were built to transport water over very long distances, using natural gravity to propel the water along its course by creating a gradient of 10 centimetres per kilometre. “It is possible,” wrote a Mr Bailey, Assistant Government Agent of the District of Badulla in 1885, “that in no other part of the world are there to be found within the same space, the remains of so many works of irrigation, which are at the same time of such great antiquity and of such vast magnitude as in Ceylon. Probably no other country can exhibit works so numerous and at the same time so ancient and extensive, within the same limited area, as in this Island.”

FIVE

THE REAL MYSTERY

In harnessing centuries of water technology simply in order to propel the pleasure gardens of a royal palace, Sigiriya revels the extraordinary sophistication of Kashyapa's short lived and rarified realm in the most covert and subtle of ways. Its creation relied upon every single accomplishment of the Anuradhapura state.

The consequences of the state's remarkable achievements in water technology had given rise to similar attainments in many, many other quarters.Architecture, agriculture, medicine, science, engineering, warfare – and the bureaucracy required to mediate, enlist and empower it all, to name but some. Or literature, painting, dance drama, law, language, religion, mathematics, philosophy, to name others. The Anuradhapura kingdom was a fully-fledged island imperium that encompassed, for much of its time, the entire boundaries of its island. And all of it would have been necessary to focus on the creation of Sigiriya.

Extraordinary though this ephemeral capital is, still more incredible is the short amount of time it took to create it, turning, in just a few years, a rocky outcrop into a palace fortress, part Versailles, part Alcatraz. No convenient armies of slave labour were helpfully on hand to facilitate any of this. Everything that was made and managed was done so by custom and assent.

But exactly what happened – and how – is, like so much of Sri Lankan history, something of a blank. Indeed, bringing together the multiple strands of the island's stories, is like following a man with no shadow, who diaries, long lost, are remembered in fragments quoted by others with agendas of their own, their own accounts written down long ago, and surviving only in part themselves, with whole chapters missing; pages, sentences, words themselves smudged and mislaid.

Popular AI generated panoramic recreations of Sigiriya show the capital in breathtaking glory, their models based in part on archaeology and in part in imagination. Banners fly, fountains flow, tribute and revenue pour in. Courtiers and monks bustle about with great industry and purpose, elaborately clothed. Ordinary people go productively about their own business in markets and homes. Out in the surrounding fields rice and other crops grow. The ports are busy, the roads well-travelled. Soldiers are on hand to keep the peace; and in a high and airy chamber the king himself is seen gazing down at his enchanted creation.

The meaty kernel of truth that lies at the heart of this AI generated model is all the more puzzling given the sheer antipathy much of the country must have felt for Kashyapa, given his blood soaked family history and the patricide that underwrote his authority.

In abandoning Anuradhapura, the great old capital, for this new one, it is a mystery and a marvel how Kashyapa ever managed to enlist the resource and licence to build Sigiriya at all. It was in Anuradhapura that the state's bureaucracy was to be found and with it most of its expertise and power, each part of which would have been overseen by the very men whose opinion he had scandalised and repelled. He might have been able to buy the support of some; but no king was ever able to buy the support of a whole country for more than a few years.

So exactly how Kashyapa ever managed to refocus or recreate these vital attributes in the making of his new capital is one of the greatest mysteries of Sri Lanka. Certainly, he came to power because of the treachery of his father's army chief; and when he lost power he did so because he was himself betrayed by the very same army chief.In between it is likely that he had this most critical of all resources on his side to help remake a kingdom.

But that is in no way enough to explain how we was then able to go on and build so glittering a capital is so short a time. Or how it ran it. How did he collect revenue from this new seat of power? How was he able to enforce his authority from here? How did he pay his army? From where did he find his engineers, and architects, artists, and administrators, still less

his courtiers and his concubines? How did he transport the resources he needed or even enlist sufficient spiritual support from the clergy to enable his reign to last its 22 years at all?

Almost 500 years of colonialism and over 30 years of modern civil war have starved Sri Lankan history of the much of the academic investigations that are central to the creation of any clear and reliable historical narrative.

Unlike either ancient Rome or ancient Greece, there are few surviving contemporaneous accounts of what actually happened at any one time. Marvelous though such ancient chronicles as the Dipavaṃsa and the Mahavaṃsa – and the later Cuḷavamsa – are, they are primely histories told through the prism of religion, written by monks with a very particular perspective and reliant on accounts that were themselves equally subjective.

It would be all but impossible to navigate any part of pre-colonial Sri Lankan History without these great chronicles, but it is equally difficult to ferret out from them the facts, plain and simple; still less to corroborate them with secondary evidence. The tropical climate, invasion and occupation has destroyed much of the historical record and what remains, in coins or inscriptions, and in the still largely buried archaeological remains that exist, has still to be properly examined, argued over, assessed

and agreed upon. And all that without the tempting and attendant pressures of nationalism and religion that bear upon the study of history in Sri Lanka. It is a task still very much in the making, and what truths and stories it will ever reveal are impossible to predict.

SIX

GHOSTS OF GREAT BEAUTY

But however Sigiriya came about, its almost ground zero ruins and remains suggest some of the very many glories made possible by the harnessing of such technologies as water.

Water many have underwritten this most secretive of ancient wonders, but a little of its dazzling beauty can still be more obviously seen – in its decoration. Its many palaces and buildings have all fallen, and with them has gone the refined and complex paintings and decorations that enhanced them. But hints of what had remained lie across two rock walls.

One wall – the 'Mirror Wall,' was so highly polished as to reflect back what faced it. "Wet with cool dew drops," wrote one bedazzled tourist of the ancient world on the mirror wall itself, "fragrant with perfume from the flowers, came the gentle breeze jasmine and water lily, dance in the spring sunshine."

But another rock wall was turned into a vast art gallery, plastered, and painted white and, it is said, covered with over five hundred frescos, easily the equal of anything later created in Italy by Leonardo de Vinci.

Few if any secular paintings from ancient Sri Lanka survive – but these. Their existence, so many hundreds of years on, despite monsoon rain and plunderers, is a wonder all in its own right.

Twenty one frescos still remain, made from paints whose vibrant pigments came from plants and minerals: iron oxide reds, chalk and lime whites, ochre yellows, charcoal blacks. The king was said to have a harem of over 500 women and these images appear to be of them, large paintings made directly onto the rock, hovering appropriately above the heads of any passing and transitory people.

The eyes of the women are decorated with makeup, their bodies are adorned with jewels, their clothes are diaphanous and almost wantonly luxurious. Lotuses fill their hands, and trays of other flowers and fruits are seen, presented to them. And in one, a consort or concubine, a precursor to Mona Lisa herself, can be seen looking on in silent debate over which particular frangipani flower to select for her hair: a frangipani princess now over 1,500 year old, and quite easily the last and most beautiful wonder of ancient Lanka.

Twenty-two years after arriving, Kashyapa was to watch his sibling nemesis gather on the plains below him, his army spilling out across the water gardens and pleasure terraces of his Alhambra-like palace.

The day was to end with the death of Kashyapa and the extinction all that Sigiriya stood for - one of Asia's most remarkable pleasure palaces; the venue for a lifestyle that made living one long spectacular

spectacular party. The victorious brother returned the seat of government back to the old capital, Anuradhapura, like some brow beaten and repentant deserter; ensuring that power was once again exercised with appropriate and demure propriety.

Even so, the world that ended in that sibling fight fought just five years before the official end of the ancient world, would have felt more like a bump than an earthquake to the Anuradhapura kingdom's subjects for the kingdom had almost five hundred years more life ahead of it until - fatally – it faced the annihilating invasion that was to destroy it in 993 CE when India's Chola emperor, Rajaraja the Great, crossed over Adam's Bridge. But long before this moment – indeed almost at the very point at which Sigiriya itself fell - many of the island's greatest monuments had already been built; its most important technical, religious, cultural; and artistic advances and inventions had already been made.

In many senses, Sri Lanka, by the time of the fall of Sigiriya, was pretty much done and dusted. Until the Portuguese arrived in 1505, much of what was to follow was something of an anticlimax. Immortalized as the patricide king, Kashyapa emerges as a rather likable monster, the sort that Mary Wollstonecraft had in mind when she wrote that "no man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for

happiness, the good he seeks."

Gazing today at his ruined and magical world from the adjacent Pidurangula Rock, a nearby rocky outcrop that overlooks Sigiriya, and knowing all this back history, it is impossible to ignore that most irresistible of connection between Kashyapa and the legendary Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses II, recalled by Shelley in his poem Ozymandias:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.