

BUDDHIST AFFILIATION AT SIGIRIYA

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According to the Brahmi inscriptions on the western side of Sigiriya, it is obvious that there was a population of monks at the foot of the rock as early as first or second century BC. But Sigiriya came to be better known during the reign of the parricide king Kassapa who shifted his capital from Anuradhapura to Sigiriya. Moggallana I, the successor, having regained the throne once again shifted his capital to Anuradhapura and the palace on the rock of Sigiriya was converted into a monastery and offered to the Buddhist monks. The Buddhist order itself had no great love for the place; for it is not mentioned afterwards as having had anything to do with religion though the chronicle states that the Pabbatavihara built by Moggallana was granted to Mahanama thero. Although it is not possible to say precisely how long these later monasteries continued to exist in Sigiriya, there is no doubt that these monasteries continued to function even during subsequent periods, since one inscription from Abhayagiriya most probably belonging to the tenth century AD mentions Sihagiri maha sā. This is further substantiated by the fact that the recent excavations at Sigiriya have also revealed a series of developments extending from the third and second centuries BC to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD at the site. Besides, periodic extensions of drip-ledges and deepening of rock shelters, successive layers of plaster and paintings and at least five or six re-constructions of the walled extensions and the internal partitions indicate that Sigiriya had been used even in later times.

In addition to the paintings on the main rock, a number of caves at the foot of the rock also contained paintings. Some of these caves carry several layers of paintings on the canopies and it is quite possible that the bottom layers of paintings on these are contemporary with the time when religious recluses first made their abode in the caves. The ceiling paintings at the Cobra-hood cave at Sigiriya proves that the cave was used as a Buddhist shrine and the Asana cave also contains painted fragment of a scene of which one panel depicts a worshipping scene. These figures in the cave strongly suggest that an image of the Buddha was placed on the existing throne.

It seems that their fragmentary nature and unusually dramatic location have led to the Sigiriya paintings being interpreted in a number of ways. It is also evident that these expressions of various interpretations are mainly due to the lack of information. Accordingly, considerable speculation has helped to advance a few major theories in the attempt to find a solution. Of these, the most popular one that prevails at present is that these paintings depict some apsaras. It is not only the simplest but also the most logical and acceptable interpretation, especially since they are shown among and half hidden by clouds in the sky. It is believed that they depict some goddesses from Tusita heaven and it signifies Buddhist ideology to a great extent. It is thus obvious that except for a short reign of Kassapa who created secular buildings there, the Buddhist religious nature, would have been predominant in the Sigiriya area for a very long period. All these facts silently reveal a very close Buddhist affiliation at the site.