

114 F LB

**SRI LANKA'S CONTRIBUTION TO ASIAN GARDEN HISTORY: THE
ROYAL GARDENS AT SIGIRIYA AND ANURADHAPURA**

By

Senake Bandaranayake

Sri Lanka is perhaps the only country in South Asia where we still have substantial archaeological remains of formally-laid out royal and monastic gardens dating from a period before 1000 AC. They belong to a tradition of garden architecture and planning that is well-documented from the late 1st millennium BC onwards.

The royal and monastic gardens of the Early and Middle Historical Period (3rd century B.C. to 13th century A.C.) are referred to in the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka from as early as the 3rd century B.C. The chronicles themselves, of course, were written between the 3rd and 5th century AC from earlier written and oral sources. Whatever the actual history of Sri Lankan gardening may be, the Sri Lankan Buddhists inherited and developed two concepts of the early Indian tradition, which have a direct bearing on the art of site selection and landscaping. The first of these is the concept of the urban or suburban park or grove in which kings, nobles and merchants as well as ascetics and religious teachers, took refuge from the heat and dust of towns and cities. Indian Buddhist literature has many references to such parks and gardens. The other concept was the distant forest grove or mountain or cave retreat, which ascetics and sages frequented in order to concentrate on religious or philosophical pursuits.

The Sri Lankan chronicles echo Buddhist canonical literature in referring to royal and suburban parks and woods donated by the first Buddhist kings as sites for the early monasteries (Mahavamsa XV, 1-25). This is confirmed by the archaeological evidence which shows the city of Anuradhapura ringed around by well-planned monastic complexes in which parkland, trees and water clearly played an important role (Silva, 1972; Bandaranayake, 1974: 33 ff.).

The alternative monastery type to the park or grove monastery (or 'arama') was what Basnayake has called the 'giri' or mountain monastery (Basnayake, 1983; see also Bandaranayake, 1974: 33, 46, 47). Here, a rocky mountain peak or slope was selected and caves or rock shelters fashioned from the sides of massive boulders.

Hundreds of such sites with inscriptions dating from about the 3rd century B.C. to the 1st century A.C., including Sigiriya itself, appear in the Sri lankan archaeological record.

A third concept of water festivals and water sports from both popular and royal contexts, and probably pre-Buddhist in origin, are also featured in the early texts. In the Later Historical Period from the 13th century onwards, the description of royal water sports, often combined with erotics, become a standard feature of 'epic' and courtly poetry. Royal parks and gardens have also been described in detail in relatively late works such as the *Kotte Vittipota* and folk poems such as the *Mala Raja Uru Danaya*, which has an extensive description "of the plants and shrubs grown in a Royal garden" (Peiris 1978: 120-121).

At the same time, the combination of architecture and garden space; of buildings, trees, pathways, water and open areas; the fusion of symmetrical and asymmetrical elements; the use of varying levels and of axial and radial planning are all inherent aspects of the Sri Lankan architectural tradition, in both religious and secular contexts.

As far as secular gardens are concerned, at least two well-preserved examples exist of what we might call 'pure' garden complexes. By this is meant a garden which has an autonomous or semi-autonomous existence, independent of a building complex, or which is a clearly demarcated part of a larger architectural whole or even a situation where substantial buildings exist but form an integral through subordinate element in the garden layout. Two clear examples of this type are the royal gardens at Sigiriya, which are a distinct part of the royal and urban complex at this site, and the Royal Goldfish Park below the bund of the Tisavava at Anuradhapura. A rare example of a monastic garden which may also be included in this category is the miniature-lake-and-island garden of the Kaludiyapokuna monastery at Mihintale.

Elsewhere, several monastic gardens exist where the garden forms an integral part of the architectural layout -- a setting and a surround for the monastic buildings. One of the most striking examples of this can be seen in the southwest quadrant of the Abhayagirivihara at Anuradhapura (see Bandaranayake 1974: 55). Secular gardens in this second category and from a slightly later period than the Sigiriya,