THE SETTLEMENT ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SIGIRIYA-DAMBULLA REGION

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THE SETTLEMENT ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SIGIRIYA-DAMBULLA REGION

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Aerial view of Mupagala, Sigiriya and Pidurangala
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Preface

This book is a collection of preliminary field reports and research papers arising from the first season of operations of a research and training program in the Settlement Archaeology of a selected micro-region in central Sri Lanka. The program began in July 1988. Fieldwork was completed in seven weeks. Analysis, report writing, cartography and editing continued into 1989. A second season commenced in August 1989.

The Settlement Archaeology Research and Training Project (SARCP)

The project is designed to extend over a period of three to five years. Conceived, organized and co-ordinated by the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR), it is carried out with the assistance of the Swedish Central Board of National Antiquities, the Riksantikvarieombetet (RAA), and is made possible by a generous grant from the Swedish Research Development Agency – SAREC. It is essentially a collaborative program, involving a number of different agencies, including the PGIAR, the RAA, the Central Cultural Fund (CCF), the Cultural Triangle Program, the Archaeological Department of the Government of Sri Lanka, the Department of National Museums and various department of the Universities of Colombo, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, Sri Jayawardenepura and the Institute of Fundamental Studies, Kandy.

History of the project

The project had its origin in discussions, between Dr. Carl-Gustaf Thornstrom of SAREC, Dr. Gustav Trotzig and Dr. David Damell of RAA and the present writer, in Sweden in 1984. The formulation of the basic research design took place between 1986 and 1987. Discussions and field visits took place during the visits of Dr. Damell to Sri Lanka in November 1986, and Dr. Thornstrom between 1985 and 1987. An important field visit took place in February and March 1988, when the present writer and Mats Mogren of RAA examined the field locations and held a roundtable discussion with Dr. Thornstrom and a PGIAR Project Steering Committee. This culminated in the signing of the agreement between PGIAR and SAREC on 26 February 1988, on the basis of a previous, formal agreement between SAREC and the Department of External Resources, Ministry of Planning, on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka.

Preliminary work

Preliminary work on the project, familiarization with the survey area and the commencement of the mapping program began as early as January 1988, with the help of Dr. S. Epitawatte (Department of Geography, University of Sri Jayawardenepura). A preliminary ethnological survey was carried out by Mr. Tissakumara (Department of Sinhala, University of Colombo) in July and August 1988. Several discussions and consultations were held with Dr. Roland Silva (Director-General CCF and Director-General of Archaeology), Prof. H. T. Basnayake (Department of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya) and Prof. Mangala Ilangasingha (Department of History, University of Kelaniya), in their capacities as Directors of the Cultural Triangle Projects at Sigiriya and Dambulla. Dr. Sudharshan Seneviratne of the University of Peradeniya, and Prof. Chandra Wikramagamage and Dr. S. B. Hettiarachchi of the University of Sri Jayawardenepura, were consulted with regard to aspects of the history, archaeology and ethnology of the Sigiriya-Dambulla area and the detailed research strategy. Prof. Basnayake was able to visit Sweden in Spring 1988 and to have further discussions and to visit archaeological sites and institutions in Sweden, at the invitation of the Swedish Central Board of National Antiquities.

Cultural Triangle excavations

Since 1982, excavations and other archaeological investigations have been carried out at Sigiriya and Dambulla under the Cultural Triangle Projects directed by the present author. This work is still in progress. Research excavations were also begun at the nearby sites of Pidurangala and Ibbankatuvu as part of a collaboration program between the CCF-Cultural Triangle, the PGIAR and the Kommission fur Aligemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie (KAVA) of the German Archaeological Institute. While these excavation programs are not directly part of the present project, they interface with it and involve many members of the present project team.

Team formation

Preliminary work in Sri Lanka and Sweden on the formation of the team, selection and purchase of equipment, transportation and support structure ar-
rangements, etc. were carried out in the period before 1 August 1988. A cartographic unit was established in the PGIAR some months earlier and began intensive work in August.

Management Committee

The Board of Management of the PGIAR appointed a representative Management Committee for the project which incorporated the Steering Committee proposed at the meeting between representatives of the PGIAR, SAREC and RRA in February 1988. This committee overlooks the broad operations and management of the project. The Management Committee had its first meeting in August. The members of the Management Committee are listed elsewhere.

Project objectives

The principal objective of the first season's operations was a preliminary surface investigation of the ancient settlement network within the Sigiriya-Dambulla area, which covers parts of the administrative districts of Matale, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and which, in earlier times, formed the ancient Sigiri bim, 'the Sigiriya territory'. The archaeological landscape of this region is one that largely dates from the Early and Middle Historical Period (EMHP: circa 3rd century BC to 13th century AC) but the project has also opened up important perspectives in the prehistory and protohistory of the area. At the same time, it is paying considerable attention to the Later Historical Period (LHP: circa 13th to 19th century), and the contemporary history, economy, environment and ethnology of the region.

New perspectives

While Sri Lankan archaeological, epigraphical and historical studies have provided us with an extensive knowledge of the EMHP, they have largely been confined to the study of monumental complexes, royal and official inscriptions and political and religious history – mostly relating to the apex or superstructure of the historical society. Similarly, excavations were almost invariably limited to the study of monumental remains and more recently to stratigraphic investigations of sites associated with such remains. These same concerns also determine most explorations and surveys. The present project, therefore, can be seen as an attempt at developing a research strategy to investigate the entire premodern social network and man-environment nexus of the study area, with special emphasis on the identification and analysis of ancient habitational sites and their inter-relations. This also involves the examination of the localized irrigation system, of production and market centres, monastic sites of various types, and the main politic-urban and monastic centre at Sigiriya, all of which form part of a complex regional system with many diachronic variations.

Development of national research capabilities

A second and related objective was to develop such research orientations and technical and methodological skills among a younger generation of Sri Lankan archaeologists, so that the project would result, not only in an original and pioneering contribution to knowledge, in an important and relatively neglected area of archaeological research, but would also contribute to the internalization of new investigative techniques, and the development of national research capabilities.

Other objectives

Other operational objectives included the development of a cartographic unit, which could provide informational back-up to the project by preparing a series of maps and chart displays, an album of maps and plans, and a collection of topographic and aerial-photograph material. This would also ensure the capability of preparing the publication drawings for the project reports. Preliminary investigations and discussions were also held regarding an ethno-archaeological survey of the target area, which would examine the traditional and particularly the 'modern-transitional' socio-economic and socio-cultural system, as well as the documentation of traditional material culture with specific reference to agricultural production and processing tools and techniques.

Progress and achievements

The most significant achievements of this first season were the clear identification of the research objectives on the ground, the evolution of relevant and operationally-effective investigative techniques, and the smooth formation of an effective and multi-functional field team. It was possible at least midway during the season to see that the project was not only viable and feasible, but that it also had considerable research and training potential. More than one-third of the
total target area and more than half the area that is
to be actually covered by the study, was investigated
by a combination of field-walking, sampling, surveying
and inquiry techniques. The results obtained from
seven weeks of fieldwork, between 24 August and 11
October, far exceeded expectations. The analysis of
data, the writing of reports and research papers, the
preparation of maps and the editing of the publication
took place through 1988 and 1989. This work
was overlapped by the second season of operations in
late 1989 and took place during the very difficult condi-
tions that prevailed in the country in the latter part
of 1988 and through 1989. The present publication,
the product of this preliminary effort, cannot but be
satisfying to all those connected with this enterprise.
It is a modest contribution to a relatively new area of
research in Sri Lankan archaeology.

Teamwork

An archaeological project of this nature is only pos-
sible through teamwork. A significant feature of this
publication is that this team effort is reflected in the
reports and research papers which it contains. Many
of the reports have been written by a number of
young team members, whose research product will al-
most certainly increase both quantitatively and qual-
itatively as the project develops. An important aspect
of the project is that the entire field operation was
carried out by this group of young Sri Lankan ar-
chaeologists, all of them below the age of 30. Their
academic level, abilities, initiative and commitment
were well proven during the fieldwork season, which
provided them with valuable experience and training
in new techniques and research orientations. Field di-
rection and training were principally handled by the
Swedish consultants.

Collaboration

Another important aspect of this project, going
beyond its purely archaeological significance, is the
experience it has offered in showing that modes of
creative research collaboration are possible between
scientists of developed and developing nations in
which there is a genuine transfer of knowledge and
expertise without a loss of academic and scientific re-
sources on the part of the Third World country and
with mutual academic benefit and satisfaction to all
parties engaged in the project. I believe that the first
season's activities under this program have estab-
lished a relationship of a new type, not just between
individuals, but between scientific groups and institu-
tional structures belonging to the two countries in-
volved. The development and completion of this pro-
ject can be expected to provide not only an orginal
and useful contribution to knowledge but also to
exemplify, within its limited scope, new trends in in-
ternational relationships between scientific com-
unities.

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As Director of this project, I would like to thank not
only all members of the large team of Sri Lankan ar-
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library and, last but not least, the staff of the PGIAR
itself, have all helped to make this project and this
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The PGIAR is also deeply appreciative of the
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tended to the Institute in the formation and develop-
ment of what is in many ways a pioneering venture in
Sri Lankan archaeology and archaeological education,
and to the inauguration of a new type of research col-
laboration between Sri Lanka and Sweden.

Senake Bandaranayake
Colombo
24 March 1990