



**SĪGIRIYA :**  
**MILITARY FORTRESS OR PLEASURE RESORT ?**  
**A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE\***

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Anurādhapura and Poḷonnaruva were the pre-eminent centres of power in the ancient Sinhalese civilization of Rājaraṣa, spanning a period of over one thousand five hundred years. Of this long period too, Poḷonnaruva remained the capital city only in the last one hundred and fifty years prior to the decline and collapse of that civilization around the middle of the thirteenth century. In this chronological context, on political and economic considerations, the eighteen-year tenure of Kassapa I (477-495) as ruler at Sigiriya fades into insignificance, despite the city's exquisite beauty and panoramic grandeur. No ruler prior to Kassapa had founded his capital at Sigiriya and it was abandoned after his death when his successors reverted back to the city of Anurādhapura.

While Anurādhapura occupied a central position in the northern plain, located as it was on the banks of the Malvatu Oya, giving it convenient access to the principal port of Mahātittha, Poḷonnaruva had important strategic advantages in its commanding position close to the riverine frontier formed by the Mahavāli, which separated the ancient province of Rohana from Rājaraṣa. Besides, Poḷonnaruva was located in the centre of a major irrigation zone with massive agricultural production. Conversely, Sigiriya, situated some sixty miles to the south-east of Anurādhapura, close to the southern periphery of the northern plain, and substantially removed from the major irrigation systems, lacked the political, strategic and economic advantages which determined the emergence of Anurādhapura and Poḷonnaruva as capitals of the Sinhalese Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Though not particularly significant, it may be noted that from Sigiriya, it was possible to exercise some control over one access route from Rājaraṣa to the central hill-country which passed through Daṁbulla and Nālanda.

Not only did Sigiriya lack the specific advantages associated with the ancient capitals of Rājaraṣa, but also it suffered from positive geographical disadvantages. The Sigiriya rock rises steeply to a height of some 600 feet from the surrounding plain located at an average elevation of 600-700 feet above the sea

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1. 'The Capital of Ceylon during the Ninth and Tenth Centuries', S. Paranavitana, *Ceylon Journal of Science, Section G. (-CJSO)*, Vol. II, pp.141-147; *Anurādhapura Yugaya*, ed. A. Liyanagamage and Ranaweeera Gunawardhana, second edition, Kelaniya, 1965, pp. 40-44.