

# Ancient Royal Palaces in Sri Lanka

Malinga Amarasinghe

TH 049

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## Abstract

Although the history of royal palaces in Sri Lanka dates as far back as the protohistoric period, there is little evidence left of such palaces as tradition would have it, the foreign elite who migrated to Sri Lanka with the advent of Vijaya in the 6th century BC seem to have constructed the first royal buildings in this country. According to historical sources such as like the *Mahavamsa* the first royal buildings were constructed during the reign of King Pandukhabaya (circa 4th century BC) one of the most important kings of the Vijayan dynasty. But these sources are mainly legends which lack conclusive evidence or primary sources. The first fairly reliable literary information regarding a royal place is the *Mahavamsa* reference to the palace of King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC) built in the 3rd century BC.

Even though there is very little information about the palaces occupied by more than one hundred and ninety kings who reigned during the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruva and subsequent historical periods in Sri Lanka, it is fortunate that the material remains of at least one palace representing each of these periods is still in existence.

A significant feature in the design and layout of royal palaces in Sri Lanka is their incorporation within urban centres or cities. The foundations of urban design in Sri Lanka were first laid in the establishment of small urban settlements by the native or migrant elite of the pre-Christian era. The rulers and elite of the early central places were had titles such as *gramani*, *paramaka*, *mapurumuka* which presumably indicated various levels of leadership. It was only somewhat later that some of these individuals were addressed as *raja* or king. This stage seems to have evolved only after the unification of several small settlements under one ruler.

A special feature of urban design was the central position given to the royal palace complex. Other elements of the urban landscape were invariably constructed around this centre of power. For example the ancient city of Anuradhapura was constructed around the royal palace complex which was in turn surrounded by concentric circles of monastic complexes and villages with irrigation tanks. From this it is clear that some consideration was given to the

needs of the population at large in choosing the site or location for a palace complex.

Apart from the above consideration the architectural theories on expounded in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* were utilized in the design and construction of royal palaces. For example a clear demarcation between an inner and outer city was established in Sri Lankan palaces in keeping with Kautilya's theories on security.

It is clear that the architectural theories on expounded by Kautilya in the *Arthashastra* have been followed in the construction of palaces in the past. For example it is clear that these buildings were constructed in keeping with an architectural tradition which was mainly concerned with security. This aspect was not confined to the construction of the palace alone, but was a major concern in the construction of many other external constructions attached to the main palace as well.

In building their palaces the ancient kings seem to have taken several important factors into consideration of which the most prominent was their desire for security, aesthetic effect and other individual needs and requirements.

Almost all the kings in the world, at least to a certain extent, had their personal security in mind when they constructed their palaces. That the kings of Sri Lanka were no exception becomes clear when one looks at the manner in which they have fortified their palaces like castles or fortresses. While the Chronicles state that a large number of fortresses and castles were built, it does not seem likely that each of these castles contained a palace. However, the palaces built within large fortresses were invariably large, permanent structures.

The finest example of a fortress constructed as a palace is the Sigiriya royal complex built by King Kasyapa I (473 - 491 AD). The ramparts, moats and walls found in Sigiriya give a clear idea of the essential features of a fortified urban centre as mentioned in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Fortresses such as Yapahuva and Dambadeniya are also important in this regard. Although the above mentioned palaces were constructed upon rocks, fortified palaces were also built on stretches of flat land. Studies of such ruined palaces indicate that

traditionally they were fortified with a rampart or a moat.

Some kings built their palace within fortresses built in secure natural locations, giving rise to a traditional classification *giri durga*, *vana durga*, and *panka durga*. Sri Lankan palaces good examples to show that the ancient Indian architectural concepts had been followed in this country.

When considering the history of Sri Lanka, adequate evidence is available to clarify the story of palace construction and also the effects of history on the construction of such palaces. A comparison between fortified palaces and the emergence of ordinary palaces helps to understand the contemporary historical process which gave rise to these structures.

Thus even among the few palaces constructed within a small country, there can be variations or differences in architectural features. In classifying these ruined palaces, three major groups can be identified according to their prominent characteristics.

Large size places built systematically fall into the first category. These palaces were built with the protective aesthetic expressive and symbolic aspects as basic concerns. Sigiriya, which is an example of one of the oldest palaces in Sri Lanka, is a fine representative of the above category of palace.

The creativity and quality of construction revealed by such palaces which incorporated both aesthetic and security aspects, make them the qualitative equal of some of the oldest palaces in the world. An important aspect of these unique palaces is their systematic and planned construction.

Another special feature of ancient palaces such as Sigiriya was the incorporation of the natural landscape in laying out gardens for the kings' daily use. The pools, terraces, courtyards, pavilions, caves and summer palaces surrounded by moats must be mentioned in support of this view.

A good example of the luxurious lifestyle of Sri Lankan kings can be seen in the Ranmasu Uyana pleasure garden at Anuradhapura. Here, pavilions, ponds and various other royal buildings mirror the highest standards of worldly life enjoyed by the ancient kings of Sri Lanka. Even though it is not part of the royal palace complex, the Ranmasu Uyana is a good example of a royal pleasure garden.

The palace called Vijayotpaya built by King Parakramabahu I (1153-

1186 AD) of Polonnaruva is a construction which is as magnificent as Sigiriya. Though not built on a rock like Sigiriya, it is clear that this palace too was fortified with security arrangements. Though only a few traces of the majesty of that construction remain today, chronicles like the *Culavamsa* state that it was fully equipped with gardens and other constructions in the past. Two summer palaces probably belonging to the Vijayotpaya can be seen even today in the middle of the Parakrama Samudra in Polonnaruva.

Unlike Sigiriya and the palace in Polonnaruva, there are several simpler palaces in Sri Lanka. The same kind of features and influences mentioned above can be seen in these palaces as well. The palace of King Nissankamalla (1187-1196 AD) built in Polonnaruva in the 12th century and the palace of King Parakramabahu I (1153-1186 AD) in Panduvasnuvara are examples of the simpler type of palace.

Palaces built by kings for temporary use can be considered as belonging to a third category. King Vijayabahu I (1055-1110 AD) who ruled in Polonnaruva, built a palace in Anuradhapura to celebrate his royal consecration. Some kings were known to have built palaces to meet emergency situations which arose during their reigns. For example King Rajasinha II built a palace in Hanguranketa after having fled the capital city of Kandy in the face of a court rebellion. Apart from the above type of palace there is evidence for the construction by some kings of small palaces generally known as travelling palaces. The evidence for this type of palace however, is entirely confined to literary sources.

In defining a palace it is clear that most of the characteristics described above are common to almost all palaces, they do show some variations in form and type. Differences in design and layout are important variations which also provide insights into the establishment and maintenance of palaces. The technology, raw materials and craftsmanship involved in palace construction are other features which can be used to establish the existence of different types of palaces.

When considering the plan or layout of a palace complex, several distinct parts or sections of a palace can be identified. The main building constructed solely for the king's use can be referred to as the king's palace or

pavilion. Other buildings constructed around this central core have been identified as storerooms, bedrooms, halls, lavatories, fire places, pavilions and ponds. The buildings located closest to the kings palace are those associated with his private life, which were utilized on a daily basis such as bed chambers, halls, lavatories, bathrooms and pleasure pavilions. However, it is difficult to identify the function of other parts of extant palaces due to shortcomings in excavation and conservation techniques in the early years of archaeology in Sri Lanka.

Though the general layout of palaces in Sri Lanka are similar, changes were introduced in the design on certain occasions according to the terrain on which they were built. For example the layouts of the palace complexes of Sigiriya and Yapahuva differ from palaces like Vijayotpaya and the Vijayaba palace, Anuradhapura, due to the nature of their sites or locations. However, the layout of most other palaces are similar to a great extent. The main construction of a palace complex, the royal pavilion or kings palace, subsidiary buildings, the *Sabha Mandapaya* (audience chamber), royal ponds, gardens etc. are common to every palace in Sri Lanka.

One of the most important among these buildings was the shrine of the Tooth Relic, which was valued as highly as the kingship itself. The close association between the king and the tooth Relic was reflected in ancient palace complexes in the proximity of the tooth relic shrine to the kings palace. Possession of the tooth relic was the ultimate symbol of the kings status and majesty. The shrine of the Tooth Relic which was referred to as a palace, was built like the royal palace with several special features.

The ground plan of the palace where the king lived reflects an important aspect of palace construction distinct from other subsidiary buildings in a royal complex. The royal pavilion was built specifically to symbolize the majesty, greatness and creative ability of the monarch.

The extant remains of palace structures are sufficient to give some idea of their condition in the past. A good example of this is the ability to identify changes that have taken place in the design and construction of palaces over time. In relation to the above, the layout, extent, technology and the craftsmanship of the Vijayotpaya built by Parakramabahu I in Polonnaruva is

completely different from the palace built in the same city by King Nissankamalla. These differences however, cannot be attributed either to changes in construction techniques or to the building of the palace during a period of decline but to the fact that this palace was hastily built.

Among the palaces in Sri Lanka belonging to the Anuradhapura period Sigiriya occupies a prominent place. The Vijayaba palace belongs to the early Polonnaru period but its layout is more similar to palaces built subsequently during the late Polonnaruva period. For example the layout of the Vijayotpaya and the summer palaces, in Parakrama Samudraya are the same as that of the Vijayaba palace. However, the palace at Panduvasnuvara the only other extant palace of the Polonnaruva period is different in layout to the above named palaces. This palace probably differed both quantitatively and qualitatively from other palaces of the period because it was built in keeping with the particular requirements of the king who commissioned its construction.

The Polonnaruva Vijayotpaya which is similar to the Vijayaba palace in Anuradhapura is superior to the latter both in terms of creativity of design and scale. According to the chronicles this was a thousand roomed multi storied building. The extant ruins confirm this description to some extent. The store houses, watch houses, bathing houses, halls, pavilions etc which belonged to this palace complex as mentioned in the *Culavamsa* are not found in other palaces which were constructed following this layout. This may be because these buildings were not really required for practical use in these palaces, unlike at the Vijayotpaya. However, the ground plan of the summer palaces built on the Topavava was the same, even though their function was quite different from that of the Vijayotpaya. Summer palaces had been used by ancient kings for recreational purposes.

The palace of King Nissankamalla in Polonnaruva is built on a different plan and consists only of a royal palace. According to the accounts of the chronicles this palace was hurriedly constructed within a short period of time. And the fact that it was probably not sufficient even for the king's requirements comes as no surprise as most royal activities were carried out in the old palace.

After a long break in the archaeological record we come to the only

surviving palace of a later period which is the palace at Kandy built during the 16th century. Although the basic features of this palace are similar to the older palaces, considerable changes have been made to the original appearance of the building as a result of repairs and alterations effected from time to time.

No other ruins have been found in Sri Lanka which can be identified as palaces according to their ground plans. However, the palaces at Yapahuva and Dambadeniya were identified as palaces only with the help of related ruins and legends associated with the sites.

In considering aspects of palace construction, it is clear that Sri Lankan palaces have differed both in terms of layout and technology. This difference is the result of a combination of different historical periods and requirements of individual kings. Many kings of Sri Lanka ascended the throne in situations of conflict and war and were therefore compelled to finish constructing their palaces within a short space of time. Given the general circumstances of their accession only a few powerful rulers could afford to engage in strong and systematically planned palace construction.

However, it is strange that the ruins of only a one solitary palace belonging to the nearly one hundred and thirty kings who ruled during the Anuradhapura period (3rd century BC - 9th century AD) has yet been identified. Given the high level of technology deployed in the construction of other buildings during this period there is no reason to believe that the palaces built were in any way of inferior quality or badly constructed. What becomes clear however, is that palaces of this period were most probably built of a perishable material such as wood.

Another reason for the lack of palace ruins from the Anuradhapura period may be their greater susceptibility to destruction as the main targets in battles and conflicts. The above view is lent credence by certain historical accounts in the Chronicles.

The data obtained from existing ruins makes it clear that, at least to a certain extent palaces which were built of bricks and timber were unique constructions in ancient Sri Lanka. The Vijayotpaya of King Parakramabahu I of Polonnaruva is an example of this type of palace. In addition there are signs that the Vijayotpaya was destroyed by fire.



It is only in comparison to other contemporary constructions that it becomes possible to get some idea of even the basic architectural features of palaces in Sri Lanka. Many believe that the palaces built in the ancient past were built of wood. It is also clear that private and secular buildings were constructed mainly of wood and probably to very high standards of technology and craftsmanship. A good example of the extensive use of wood is the existence in almost all the extant royal palaces of post holes which were meant to hold wooden columns.

Thus, as far as the architecture of palaces in Sri Lanka is concerned there is quantitatively little material evidence available in comparison to royal palaces in other countries. Nevertheless whatever, information remains can be looked at from many angles and presented as part of a unique story of the majesty of Sri Lankan royalty.