

ART. II.—*On the Ruins of Sîgiri in Ceylon.* By T. H. BLAKESLEY, Esq., Public Works Department, Ceylon.

[Read on April 19, 1875.]

THE fortified rock of Sîgiri is situated in the centre of Ceylon, in the Central Province, at its northern extremity, close to the boundaries of the Eastern and the now North Central Province. This part of the island has long been in a very poor condition for want of water, and is but scantily inhabited; the cultivation of paddy has been abandoned for some years as hopeless, and the jungle on the site of the city which once surrounded the base of the magnificent rock is very dense and uninviting. The rock, too, lies some distance from the high road to Trincomalee, and can be approached only by a jungle path, so that the few visitors who pass through the village are as a rule glad to hurry on to the more attractive ruins of Pollanarrûa, or to the Elephant forests which lie to the east.

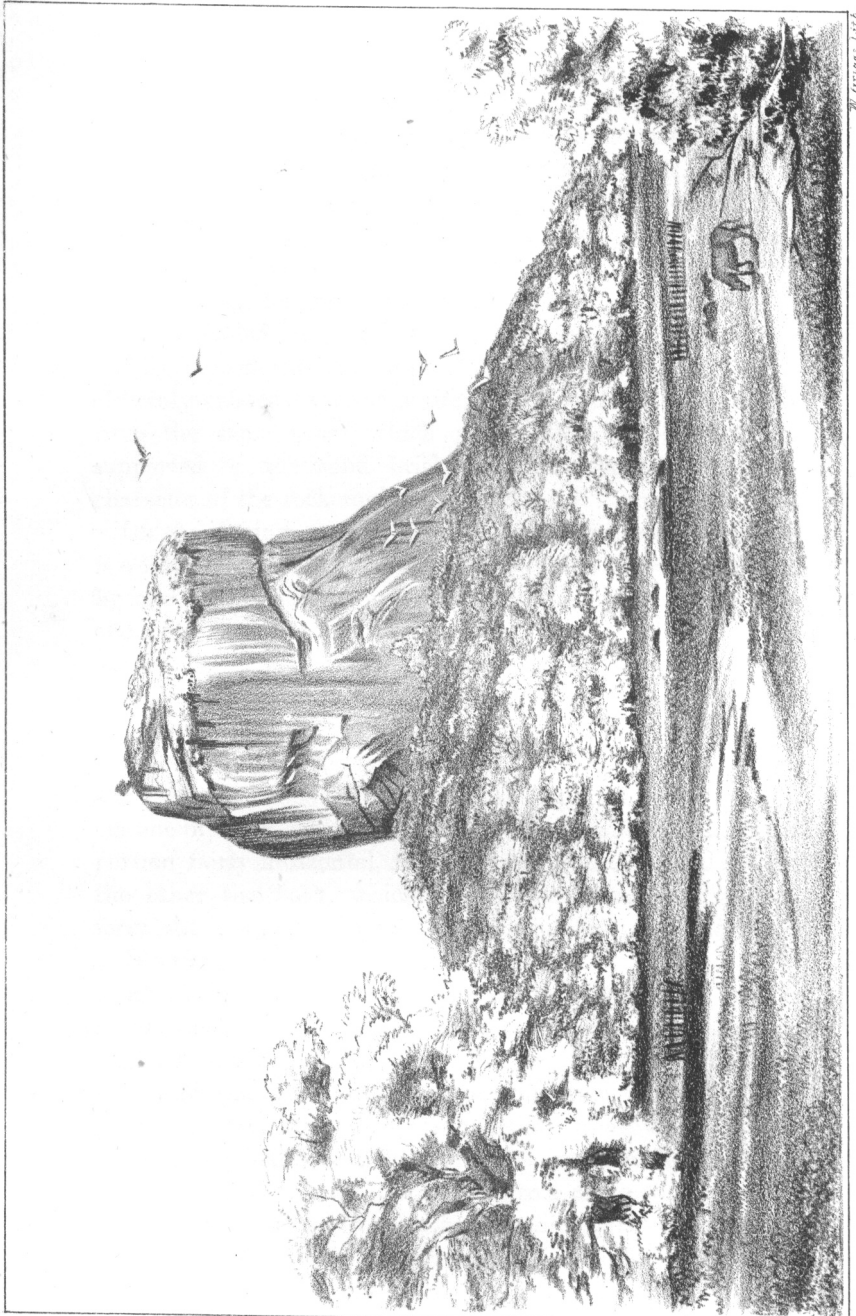
The rock for which this place is now chiefly noted is a huge oval mass of gneiss, rising to a height of more than 500 feet above the plain in which it stands. For about half its height it is masked by a pile of debris covered with forest; and the upper portion is, without the help of ladders, entirely inaccessible, from its overhanging its base nearly the whole way round.

Around the western face of the rock runs a gallery, at the level where the rock has the smallest diameter, so that while it stands upon that portion which projects below, it is at the same time protected by the part which overhangs it. The outer side of this gallery is formed by a brick wall tapering to the top, at which there is a well-preserved moulding. Ledges have been formed in the rock to receive the wall, and at a certain height transverse blocks of marble are laid across

from the wall to the rock, so as to form a floor, which shows signs of having once exhibited a brilliant polish. The wall, too, has a covering of plaster, which still retains a high polish. The gallery is by no means entire throughout its whole length, but it once connected two strongholds situated on ledges to the north and south of the rock. These may have been artificially raised, and, at all events, they have been adapted and strengthened with walls of stone. From the gallery upwards, it seems probable that the face of the rock was once covered with paintings on plaster, though this has in most part been swept away where it was exposed to the action of the weather.

Some portions of the rock face which presented softer material than others have been scooped into caves, and in these the frescoes still remain, though they are now inaccessible, and can be looked at only from a distance with the help of a glass. The colour of these still existing paintings is very fresh, and the style of art is far higher than that of the ordinary temple-painting in Ceylon. The subjects do not seem much varied. Groups of two women, or one alone, are repeated again and again. The upper portions only of the figures are given, and these are richly ornamented with jewels and drapery. The excellence of the drawing of the limbs leads one to speculate on the races of people to whom the faces belong. Some of the latter are lighter than others, and appear to be of the Mongolian type. It is well known that much intercourse existed in former times between the Chinese and the Sinhalese. The Buddhist symbol of the lotus-flower plays a great part in these paintings. The stucco on which they are painted has a backing of paddy-husks visible at the present time. Perhaps it was found useful in causing the plaster to adhere to the rock surface.

Captain Woodward, R.E., who is acquainted with Sîgiri, considers it the most perfect specimen of Kandyan defence at present known. At the north-western point of the rock the gallery takes the form of a flight of stone steps, on account of the platform at the northern side (on which a



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palace is said to have stood) being at a higher level than the gallery at the western side. These stairs are supported by a mass of brickwork standing on the talus, and not, as in the case of the gallery on the west, on the rock itself, which at this part is more perpendicular. At a point just at the bottom of the steps Captain Woodward thinks the gallery was supported on beams, either of wood or of stone, morticed into the rock, for which the holes are still to be seen; but I think it doubtful whether these holes with their beams may not have been used to support a roof to the gallery which certainly existed over the stairs, and is wanted in this part from the same cause which necessitated the steps being supported by the solid brickwork, viz. the non-reentrant character of the rock surface.

On the sloping ground to the west of the site of the palace is a large piece of rock weighing 850 tons, supported partly by one end of itself, and partly by slender stone columns about two feet high; for the ends of these columns notches are cut both in the rock below and in the superincumbent mass. I have been unable to meet with a satisfactory suggestion as to the use of this structure.

To the west of the large rock is a great fragment which has probably fallen from above, and split into two pieces. On one of these, which has the face which adjoined the other portion fairly horizontal, is carved the great throne, and on the other the bath, which two objects, with the gallery, form the complete list of curiosities to be generally seen at SĪgiri.

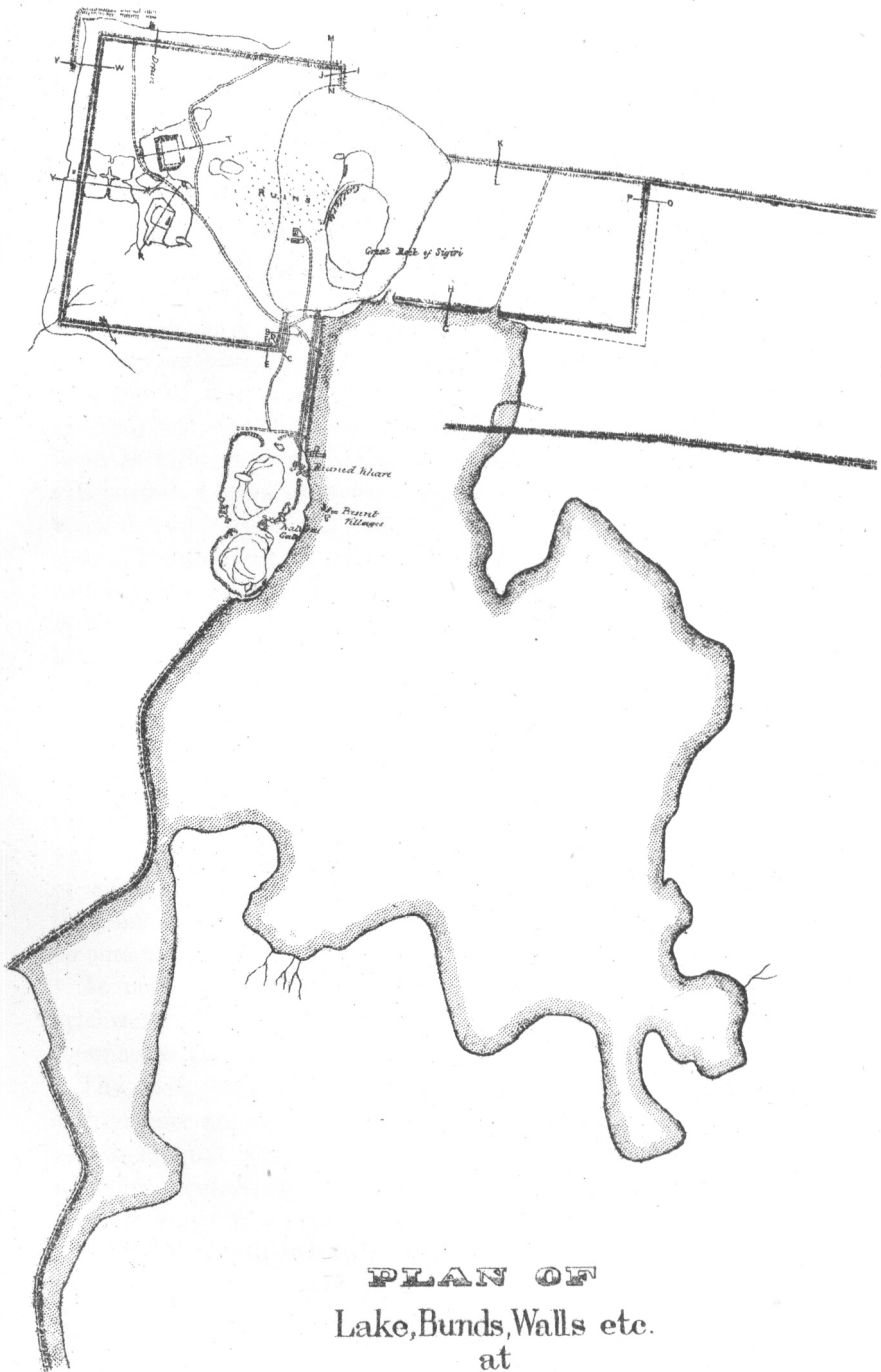
At SĪgiri, as at many other places in this part of the island, there are the remains of an artificial lake. The embankment which formed it started from the base of the large rock, and ran southward, for four hundred yards, until it abutted against the rock of Māpa-gala. Southwards of this again it extended, with one interval at a small portion of high ground, as shown in the plan, to a distance beyond the furthest point shown in the plan of more than two miles and a half. It may have extended even beyond this distance, but it was found at this point to be so degraded as scarcely

to be traceable. Most of this embankment defined a channel by which water was diverted into the lake, which, as a large expanse of water, parts company with the embankment about half a mile south of Mâpa-gala. Indeed it appears probable that the original lake or tank stopped at this point, and that the channel was added afterwards, on account of the very small area which naturally drains into the more northern lake.

The water-line shown in the drawing is according to a scheme lately under the consideration of the Ceylon Government for the restoration of the tank; the old lake, when full, was probably somewhat larger in area, and stood at a higher level than has lately been proposed.

To the east and west of the rock are rectangular areas enclosed within fortified embankments of earthwork, which, together with the rock itself, make up a space of nearly 300 acres, forming a "kraton," and constituting the site of the ancient city. They were defended by moats, revetted with stone, perhaps on every side, though on the north side of the easternmost portion there are no other signs left of them than a slight depression of the ground. The whole area dips gradually downwards from east to west, while the north and south lines correspond fairly with the contour lines of the country; so that moats running in this direction (N. & S.) were probably entire throughout their whole extent, while those running east and west would have to be made in sections, with divisions corresponding to the locks of a river. There are indeed signs of such an arrangement on the north side of the city.

As in the case of the southern extremity of the lake the natives showed themselves capable of constructing a long embankment to divert water into a direction which it would not naturally have taken, so at the east side of the city they adopted the same contrivance for supplying the moats, the continuation of the north boundary of the eastern area being intended for this purpose. South of this there will be seen on the plan a detached embankment. This no doubt was once continued either to Sigiri Rock or to Mâpa-gala, and either formed a moat on the south side of the rock before



PLAN OF  
 Lake, Bunds, Walls etc.  
 at  
 SIGIRI NUWARA, CEYLON

the great tank was completely carried out, or was used to hold up a supply of water in the moats on the east and south sides, when the water from the rest of the lake might be drawn off for agricultural purposes.

Inside the western area of the town are the remains of two mounds surrounded by moats, and scarped with large stones. These may have been religious erections, and it was certainly not extraordinary to have water in the front at least of the Ceylon Dâgobas. But it seems more consistent with the existence of the strong stone walls with which they were strengthened, and with the history of the place, to consider them as military strongholds. There will be noticed also in this portion a large reservoir of water, once crossed by causeways in two directions. One of these causeways running east and west seems to have formed a portion of a high road running from the royal residence to the city gate and bridge in the western wall, the remains of the stone piles of the bridge being still visible in the moat. The remains of an abutment exist also in the southern wall. In most of these remains there is a vast deal of rough stonework, many of the large earthwork walls being faced with stone, especially below the water-line of the moats. A drain composed of flat stones, kept from contact by the interposition of others, was discovered under the northern wall, and a curious piece of capping bund necessary for the preservation of water in the west moat on account of the contour of the ground will be observed at the north-west corner.

At many places in the western area are to be found brickwork foundations and loose bricks. These are not common on the east of the rock.

The rock Mâpa-gala (Mahâ-pâya-gala = great precipice rock) forms an outlying fortress; it consists of two huge masses of rock surrounded by a wall of Cyclopiian construction, containing about 16 acres of ground, and was perhaps on one side protected by the lake as well.

A Dâgoba is situated about a mile from Sîgiri towards the west; it is in a very thick forest, and has water on one side of it. It is scarcely to be distinguished from a natural mound,

except by the fact that there are no natural mounds in the neighbourhood which are not of solid rock.

The notices of SĪgiri in the chronicles of Ceylon are very few and meagre. I have been able to hear of them in only three chronicles, viz. the Mahâwansa, the Râjâ-ratnâkara, and the Râja-valiya. Sir Emerson Tennent's work on Ceylon contains all that can be derived from the first, and for my information from the last two sources I am indebted to Mr. John Dickson, of the Ceylon Civil Service.

The earliest of these notices refers to King Mahalauti, who was the son of King Kudatipa. The latter was poisoned by his wife the "infamous Anula," who seized the power, and appears to havē used it in such a way as to render it most expedient for the young Prince Mahalauti to enter the priesthood in disguise, as he seems to have done. On coming of age, B.C. 41, he threw off the sacerdotal robe, and contrived to gain the kingdom, after which he built the Mahâpâya at SĪgiri, and also a Mahâwihâra entirely of stone, and a uposatha Mâlakaya at the same place. He reigned 22 years.

His son Bâtiya (B.C. 19) established at SĪgiri an almshouse for thousands of the priesthood.

His son Mahâ-Daliya (A.D. 9) induced the inhabitants of Lankâ (Ceylon) to grow flowers, and caused the SĪgiri-wihâra and the Ruwanweli Dâgoba to be buried in flowers. Of this king it is stated in another chronicle that he built the Ambuwa Dâgoba at SĪgiri, and worshipped (at) the Kolongâdi (?) SĪgiriya Dâgoba.

From this time until that of Kasyapa the parricide, history is silent on the subject of SĪgiriya. The story of this king's crimes and reign are given in some detail in Sir E. Tennent's work. Briefly, in A.D. 477 he captured his father, the King Dhâtusena, and built him into a wall, so that this monarch "united himself with Sakya, the ruler of Devos." King Kasyapa made SĪgiri the capital of his kingdom, and surrounded it with a wall. He built three residences there, accessible by steps, and ornamented some parts of the rock with paintings of lions, from which the name SĪgiri has



been said to be derived. He reigned eighteen years, and endeavoured to "derive merit" by the performance of numerous acts of charity, which he hoped would compensate for his crime; to no purpose, however, were his vows and his virtues, though "non-procrastination" was among the most eminent of the latter; for, conquered and put to death by his brother, he was hurled into the Avichya Hell, there to remain for eight kalpas.

From the 7th to the 11th century the north of Ceylon was overrun by Malabars, and the city of Pollanarrûa, which began, from this cause probably, to be important under Siri Sangabo II., A.D. 648, became the capital under Kudâ-Akbo, A.D. 769. Doubtless the fortress of Sîgiri, from its position, played an important part in these wars.

The brave King Parâkrama Bâhu, sole King of Lankâ in 1155, restored many cities, including Sîgiri and Anurâdhapura; but he seems to have been especially ambitious of "deriving merit" by means of his works of irrigation, if it be true that 1470 tanks for this purpose were constructed by him, and 2355 repaired, besides 534 water-courses constructed, and 3621 repaired. He would appear to have practised "non-procrastination" through a long reign of 33 years.

Such is the history of this place.

If the authorities quoted above may be relied upon, there is no difficulty in identifying the (wall round) Mâpa-gala with the Mahâpâya built by Mahâlauti (B.C. 41—19). The proximity of the rock of Sîgiri, which certainly is by nature a stronger fortress than the Mâpa-gala, leads one to suppose that it also must have been used as a fortress at the time, though perhaps it was thought to need no artificial improvement. The stones used in the Mâpa-gala wall are far larger than those of the walls beneath the great rock of Sîgiri, though more rudely put together. The existence of this wall on the east side of Mâpa-gala is a reason for supposing that no lake extended so far north as that in Mahalauti's time, so that this wall may be considered the oldest work about the place. There is nothing to identify the Dâgoba mentioned as existing about a mile to the east of

SĪgiri with either the Ambuwa or the Kolongādi Dāgoba mentioned above in connexion with King Mahā Daliya (A.D. 9). It may be one of these two.

All the work around the great rock of SĪgiri must be attributed to Kasyapa the paricide (A.D. 477), or to Parākrama Bāhu, the restorer of the city (A.D. 1155). SĪgiri was Kasyapa's capital and refuge, and we know he put a rampart round it, and ornamented his palace with paintings, though those on the rock now are not of lions. Moreover, there are no remains of the religious buildings of earlier kings, recognizable as such, at SĪgiri. This name may have included the large and almost inaccessible rock of Piduragala, lying about three-quarters of a mile to the north of SĪgiri rock. Though Piduragala would form a very fine fortress, it is artificially defended in no way whatever, but, on the other hand, bears traces of having been long a religious spot. There exists a wihāra in use now at the fort, and there are the remains of more than one old temple on various parts of it. On the east side especially, and near the top, is a large recumbent figure of Buddha, forty feet long, made of bricks.

As Kasyapa built the city walls of SĪgiri, so he must in part have constructed the lake in order to supply his moats. The long catchwater embankment, however, I attribute to Parākrama Bāhu. In the first place, as it was used for directing running water rather than for holding up still water, it would be comparatively useless for military purposes after the lake was once full, for the natural drainage into the lake would suffice for all purposes other than agricultural, and it cannot be supposed that Kasyapa, whose chief business was to support a tottering throne, would pay much attention to the requirements of cultivators. Secondly, both the long outlying embankment and the peculiar bend in the main bund half a mile south of Māpa-gala, suggest that the lake did not originally possess the shape it acquired in later years. Thirdly, the direction in which the long catchwater embankment runs seems to indicate an ambitious attempt to connect the lake with what was known as the

“Sea of Parâkrama,” which lay in an easterly direction, and was a large piece of water formed by the union of three large lakes by means of channels of this sort. Fourthly, the embankment seems necessary for agricultural purposes, and Parâkrama’s reign was eminently characterized by the pursuits and acts of peace.

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NOTE A.

With regard to the Chinese character of the paintings on the rock, it is curious to notice, in the connexion between China and Ceylon in the fifth century, that of Kasyapa, during which there were no less than five embassies from Ceylon to China, that in the year 456 A.D. there went on the last of them five priests, one of whom was Nantê, the celebrated sculptor. It is possible that this Sinhalese Phidias may have caught an inspiration in the celestial land, and profited by it on his return. Even if the present paintings be of the time of Parâkrama Bâhu, we ought not to be surprised at finding traces of the expert Chinese in their execution; for we know that swords and musical instruments at least were imported from China into Ceylon, and that Chinese soldiers took service under the Ceylon monarchs within eighty years of the death of Parâkrama Bâhu.

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NOTE B.

Though “non-procrastination” is inculcated by Buddhist priests of the present day, and was also in bygone times, as a virtue, Kasyapa’s non-procrastination must be looked upon in the light rather of a necessity. It was an inability, rather than an unwillingness to postpone, which caused him to construct the great works which were to screen him from death and Mogallâna.