

“SIGIRIYA IN THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE CONTEXT” – BY DR. NILAN COORAY



Although, there are articles published at international level and despite some attempts at finding international parallels and correspondence with ‘garden types’ at Sigiriya, many international publications on built landscapes suggest that Sigiriya is still almost unknown in the global landscape architectural design context. There is hardly any serious study so far to compare Sigiriya with other international gardens (and traditions) in terms of landscape design point of view. Therefore the present lecture attempts to position Sigiriya in the global landscape design context through the comparison of landscape design of Sigiriya with those of other international landscape traditions, particularly with those of the West European landscape tradition comprising the Italian Renaissance villas (15th-16th century), French baroque gardens (17th century) and landscape gardens of the English revival (18th century).

The comparison suggests that the perspectival effects developed during the renaissance in Europe are also found at the 5th century Sigiriya and it demonstrates that its designers were conscious about perspective as a design tool. As far as mirror symmetry is concerned, the play between symmetry and the site condition is also an important theme at Sigiriya and the Italian renaissance villas such as Villa Lante at Bagnaia and Villa d’Este at Tivoli. But parallelisms exist clearly between Sigiriya and French baroque gardens such as Vaux-le-Vicomte, where a compositional balance of the irregular sites is achieved through mirror symmetry. Sigiriya’s north-south and east-west bilateral axial formation not only arrange and order various enclosures and material elements, but give rise to a centralized hierarchic composition. Although the centralized hierarchic composition is not preferred by the architects of the early Italian renaissance villas, the Palladian villas such as Villa Rotonda and Villa Emo in Veneto, the bilateral axial formation that intersects at the center of the ‘house’, shows that such principles begins to appear during the concluding phase of the Italian renaissance of Europe.

The comparison between Sigiriya and French baroque gardens shows some parallelisms in the treatment of the axis in their spatial structure. At French baroque gardens, such as Vaux-le-Vicomte and Versailles, the axis assumes the centerline of the three dimensional space, extending all the way up to the horizon. This spatial axis is used as the scenographic route along which illusionary space is created by means of a central perspective structure. It is the axis of movement to provide visual interplay of various elements to highlight illusionary aspects for the total length of

the axis. At Sigiriya also east-west axis as the centerline of the three dimensional space is active, but only within part of the scheme.

Since the compositional principles developed at the landscape gardens of the English revival reflects a move away from the formal geometric layout with the fragmented rational and formal elements held together by the contours of the natural morphology, the symmetry disappears among the physical and geographical line of forces of the natural landscape, which is a 'decomposition' of the formal model of axial symmetry, this is somewhat similar to the compositional principles of the clusters of boulders of the hilly terrain at Sigiriya, where the symmetry gives way to the asymmetry and the use of the technique of free design, in which the elements are also held by the contours of the natural morphology of the hilly terrain.

Therefore, as far as use of design instruments and the design aspects are concerned, the landscape design of Sigiriya rank closely with that of the West European landscape design tradition. It also shows that many compositional rules / principles, design instruments / tools and techniques that were developed at Italian renaissance villas (15th – 16th centuries) of the Western landscape tradition, existed during the 5th century Sri Lanka, as displayed by the landscape design of Sigiriya. The parallelisms between the landscape design of Sigiriya and those of the West European tradition also underline the fact that some of the design innovations of the West European landscape tradition from 15th to 18th century were already in existence at the 5th century landscape design of Sigiriya. Such similarities between the Sri Lankan and West European landscape designs are not necessarily due to influence or interchange, but are certainly due to the common humanness of the designers, irrespective of their socio-cultural, technical and geographic/ topographic contexts.

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