Chapter three

Chronology, location and historicity of the sites of the Buddhist mural paintings of
peninsular India and Sri Lanka

Origin of the Buddhist wall painting tradition:

It was mentioned at the beginning of the first chapter that art expression is
considered the essence of human life.¹ According to ancient Indian literature, divine origin
is envisaged for this art. Consequently, Visvakarma, the son of Prabhasa² is termed
Silpaprajapati, foremost among the artists and the master of a thousand arts.³ Of these
various artistic works, painting was one of the most important fields and the Citralakshana,
an ancient document, the chronology of which is uncertain⁴ recounts a long legend of the
origin of the paintings ascribing it to Nagnajit.⁵ A different legend is told, however, in the

² According to the Visnupurana Prabhasa is a son born to Dharmadeva of his wife Prabhata. He is considered
to be one of the astavasas and his wife was the sister of Brahaspati, a widely travelled virtuous woman of
renowned chastity and great yogic attainments. See Vettam Mani, Puranic encyclopaedia, Motilal
³ Mahabharata, by Vyasa, Gita Press edition, Gorakhpur, 1, 66, 28-31, 1, 213, 15-18; Ramayana, ed. M.M.S.
Kuppuswami Sastri, Madras, 1931, 4, 51, 10-12; Nyayakusumanjali by Udayana with the commentary of
⁴ Nevertheless, some critics believed that Nagnajit must be much older than the 5th-6th centuries AD. See
p.viii. However, the text of Citralakshanam credited to have been written by Nagnajit, one of the earliest
expounders of the ancient Indian vastuvidya. But, it is not found in its original Sanskrit text or any Indian
manuscript and only its Tibetan Tanjur version of the medieval period is remains. See DN Shukla,
Vastusstra Hindu canons of iconography and painting, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi,
Although the Citralakshana of Nagnajit was not a Buddhist origin manuscript, later it came in to Buddhist
hands in Tibet. Ibid, Introduction pp.18-19. Hence, it is believed that this is the only Buddhist source, which
contains the earliest and authentic text of Indian art. See Asoka Chatterjee Sastri, The Citralakshana: An old
Panjab Oriental (Sanskrit) Series, XI, Lahore, 1926, p.79.
Visnudharmottarapurana of the seventh century AD. According to it, two mythical sages, twin manifestations of Vishnu, whose names were Nara (man) and Narayana were the pioneers of the field. Thus, the art of painting is attributed to Vishnu thereby clearly indicating its divine origin. Nevertheless, despite these literary references, which are often contradictory to one another the absence of any actual creations of earliest art makes it indeed impossible to say with absolute certainty what its fundamental character was. Similarly difficult to identify is the source of inspiration i.e. whether it was religious and hieratic or secular in its origin. But, according to the description given in the Visnudharmottarapurana, it is certain that as Sumeru is the chief of the mountains; as Garuda is the chief of those born out of eggs; as the king is the chief of men; even so in this world is the practice of painting, the chief of all arts. Although this reflects Brahmanical ideals, it clearly indicates that the painting tradition was foremost among other artistic activities during the ancient period. Besides these, in early Sanskrit literature, there are several references to the secular aspect of the art, with the further information that it was in wall painting that the ancient artists largely excelled.

As in the case of the views of the Brahmanical canon, it is noteworthy that the Buddhist tradition also held the view that "there is nothing finer in the world than the art of painting."\textsuperscript{11} This establishes the fact that Buddhism not only encouraged but was also appreciative of the painting tradition to a large extent. Hence, it is generally believed that with the advent of Buddhism, a new idea was introduced into painting and religious subjects became the main theme of the artists of the time.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, comparatively few references are available in Buddhist texts relating to this ancient Buddhist tradition of painting. In this context, it is significant that the word "\textit{cittakamma}" or pictorial art is referred to in Buddhist literature only rarely. Interesting passages occur particularly in the \textit{Samyutta Nikaya} and the \textit{Attasalini}, in this regard.\textsuperscript{13} The answer to the question "How does the mind (\textit{citta}) produce its diverse effects" is provided with a play on the words \textit{citta}, (mind) and \textit{citta}, (painting) both thought and art. The answer is "Just as the painter by his imagination (\textit{cintetva}) creates the appearance of many forms and colours in a picture (\textit{citta})." It is to be noted at this point that Coomaraswamy has pointed out that the early translation of the text of \textit{Attasalini} missed the point and confused the issue to a large extent. Thus, the use of the word "artistic" is indefinite and does not bring out the parallel between the general consciousness and the special functioning of aesthetic

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Attasalini}, ed. E. Mular, Pali Text Society, London, 1897, p.64; "\textit{Lokasmim hi chittakammato uttarim annam chittam nama natti}"
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Attasalini}, ed. E. Muler, Pali Text Society, London, 1897, p.64; English tr. Mrs. Rhys Davids, pp.85-86. The question is "Brethren, have you ever seen a masterpiece of painting?" The reply is "Yes lord." Then Buddha says that "Brethren that masterpiece of art is designed by the mind. Indeed, brethren, the mind is even more artistic than that masterpiece." \textit{Samyuttanikaya}, ed. Leon Feer, tr. Mrs. Rhys Davids, Pali Text Society, Loudon, Vol.III, p.151 of text and p.128 of English translation.
institution. Hence, he suggested that the translation of the answer to the question as stated in the Attasalini should be corrected as follows: “By the process of depicting (cittakarana), there is no kind of decorative art (cittakamma) in the world more various and pictorial (cittatara) than painting (citta). And therein is there anything so multifarious (aticitta) as the kind of painting called caran? A mental concept (cittasma) rises (uppaṭijāti) in the (mind of the) painters (cittakaranam) of such a work that such and such forms (rupani) should be made (katabbani) in such and such ways.” In accordance with this mental concept (cittasanna), by drawing (lekha), colouring (ranjana), adding highlights (ujjotana) and shading (vattana) etc duly performed, the finished painting (cittakiriya) arises (uppaṭijanti).

As in the case of the passages of Attasalini quoted above, it is evident that almost all the references in the Buddhist texts relating to paintings are in the sense of idiomatic phrases rather than mentioning or appreciating actual existing painting traditions. Hence although it is not necessary to focus attention on such references, it must be emphasised here that in addition to the extant murals, this idiomatic usage also clearly indicates a highly utilised stage of paintings of the Buddhist tradition during such an early period. Thus, according to a legend, narrated in the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya, Buddhist painting tradition appears to have been in use during the time of the Buddha himself. This legend states that faced with the task of announcing to king Ajatasatru that the Buddha had passed away and fearing a violent reaction, Mahakassapa thero came up with a novel way of gently breaking the news. He instructed the minister Varshakara to have a painted scroll

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15 Ibid, pp.208-212.
prepared with depiction of the four great miracles of the Buddha's life i.e. the birth, enlightenment, first sermon and the great decease.\textsuperscript{17}

Besides this, another statement in the \textit{Cullavagga} of the \textit{Vinaya Pitaka} is also important. It states that the Buddhist monks who then lived in rock caves were permitted to plaster the walls of their dwelling caves and to embellish them with paintings by the Buddha.\textsuperscript{18} It is obvious that in these instances, they were only permitted to execute the paintings of flowers and creepers but were prohibited from drawing the figures of human beings since they were not pleasure seeking persons.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, it is interesting to

\textsuperscript{16} For further details please refer to A.K. Coomaraswamy, "An early passage on Indian painting," \textit{Figures of speech or figures of thought}, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981, pp.208-212.

\textsuperscript{17} Please refer to Gregory Schopen, "On avoiding ghosts and social censure: Nonastic funeral in the Mulavaravstavin \textit{Vinaya}," \textit{Journal of Indian philosophy}, Vol.XX, 1992, pp.1-39. In fact, though the chronology of this legend is uncertain (Vidyā Dehejia, \textit{Discourse in early Buddhist art: Visual narratives of India}, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1997, p.7.) it is evident that the representation of Buddha in the human form is not found on the pre-christian era monuments of ancient India, such as those at Bodh Gaya, Sanchi, Bharhut Amaravati and cave nos. 9 and 10 of Ajanta. Instead, we find the Bodhi tree, wheel, chaṭra, paduka etc on or behind the altar clearly designated in the inscriptions as 'Bhagavato' meaning Buddha and worshiped as such. Thus, it is obvious that in elaborate scenes from the life story of the Buddha too, he is represented only through symbols (Bhaskar Chattopadhyaya, \textit{Coins and icons}, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, 1977, p.230) though later on, the figure of the Buddha takes its places upon their throne. AK Coomaraswamy, \textit{History of Indian and Indonesian art}, New York, 1965, p.45. It is interesting that in this transition period particularly at Amaravati and other cognate sites in the Andhara region one finds the Buddha represented in human form along with his representations in terms of well-known symbols.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p.212. Nevertheless, this indicates the paintings suited for the non-professional also. It has been used the term \textit{Pattibhanachitta} for such paintings. It signifies creations of aesthetic imagination.
note that the rule has not strictly been followed by the later Buddhists as evidenced by the
murals of Ajanta and elsewhere of the two countries. Apart from these kinds of references
mentioned in the Buddhist canonical texts, the same texts also incorporate data relating to
some of the techniques of paintings of the early period, which have been discussed in the
fifth chapter in detail.20

It is however, evident that these descriptions basically belong to the Buddhist
painting tradition of the early period of India. In fact, as Percy Brown has also pointed out,
since India was the birthplace of Buddhism it may be assumed that it was also the
birthplace of the Buddhist school of painting.21 Due to non-availability of the relevant
evidence although it is difficult to speak with any precision as to the beginnings of Indian
painting, it is certain that at least in the second or first century BC Buddhist painting
tradition was a fairly developed art as represented by some of the murals of cave nos 9 and
10 at Ajanta.22 Most probably, the ‘knowledge’ of Buddhist painting tradition of India
along with the Vinaya rules would have been introduced to Sri Lanka with the adoption and
spread of Buddhism though precise information is not available.23 Nevertheless, it is
evident that the extant paintings of the island belong to a much later period. Hence, it is
necessary to focus attention, at least briefly, on available information on Buddhist mural

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20 For instance, there are references available regarding the binding medium such as gum used for plasters of
the walls given in the Vinaya Pitaka (The Vinaya Pitakam, ed. H Oldeanber, Williams and Norgate, 1880,
Vol.II, pp. 4, 151; See also Rhys Davids and H. Oldeanber, Sacred Books of the East, Oxford, London, 1885,
Vol.XX, p.170.) and the descriptions of some ingredients, which were used for the mixing of clay are
mentioned in the Dhammapadattakatha (Commentary on Dhammapada) that was compiled in the fifth
century AD. (Dhammapadattakata, ed. HC Norman, Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1912, p.219; E.W.
22 The chronology of murals of Ajanta has been discussed in detail in the later part of the chapter, under the
subtitle of Ajanta caves.
23 Interestingly enough though there are not enough evidence some scholars have concluded, “It is no
exaggeration to say that the history of painting in Sri Lanka is the story of the spread of Buddhism in the
paintings in Sri Lankan literature to understand the actual period of commencement of the
Buddhist mural painting tradition of the island.

For this, a reference in the Mahavamsa referring to an incident dated to king
Duttagamini’s period somewhere in the second century BC is significant. It has been
mentioned that several important scenes of Buddha’s life were beautifully painted on the
inner walls of the relic chamber of the Mahatupa or the Ruvanvalisaya in Anuradhapura.
According to the description the paintings executed there included seven weeks spent by
the Buddha after his enlightenment, to his attainment of parinirvana; the Vessantara
Jataka; and the realm of the Tusita heaven etc. During the sixth century AD, when the
author of the Mahavamsa thus described the relic chamber of the Mahatupa of the second
century BC, he seems to have followed some of the ancient descriptions particularly
mentioned in the Porana Sihalattakatha Mahavamsa. According to the accounts given in
the Vamsattappakasini, the commentary of the Mahavamsa, further details of the
paintings of the relic chamber of the Mahatupa can be obtained by reading
Cetiyavamsattakatha, which is now lost. Although the accuracy of the reference has not
yet been confirmed by archaeological evidence, it is noteworthy that the archaeologists

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24 Mahavamsa, ed. W. Geiger, Pali Text Society, London, 1912, chap. 30; 78-89vv. The precise themes are
the prayer of Brahma to preach the Doctrine; setting in motion the wheel of Dhamma; admission of Yasa into
the Buddhist order; pabbajja of the Baddavaggiyas; subduing the Jatilas; the visit of king Bimbisara; entry
into Rajagaha; accepting the Vehuvana temple; the eighty disciples; Journey to Kapilavastu; miracle of the
jewelled path; pabbajja of Nanda and Rahul; acceptance of Jetavana; miracle at the foot of the mango tree;
the preaching in the heaven in the gods; miracle of the descend of the gods; assembly with the questioning
of the Thera; Mahasamaya suttanta; subjugation of elephant Nalagiri; subduing of Yakkha Alavaka of robber
Angulimala; of Naga king Apalata; meeting with Rajagaha Brahmins; the giving up of life; accepting of the
dish of pork; two gold coloured garments; drinking of the pure water; parinibbana; lamentation of gods and
men; the revering of the feet by the Thera; the burning of the body; quenching of the fire; the funeral rites and
the distribution of relics of Drona and the Jataka stories.

25 EW Adikaram, Early history of Buddhism in Ceylon, Gunasena, Colombo, Second impression, 1953, p.64.

have found some remnants of paintings in the other relic chambers of Mahiyanganaya, Mihintale and Dadigama stupas of the subsequent periods of the island, which will be discussed later in detail. All these indications, however, reveal that the aim of some of the Buddhist mural paintings during the ancient period was quite different to what it is today, since after the closure of the relic chambers and the construction of the stupas on it no one was able to see those paintings.

Another important statement in relation to the Buddhist mural paintings of the island appears in the Visuddhimagga said to have been compiled by Buddhaghosa therī during the fifth century A.D.\(^{27}\) According to the description given there, somewhere in the second century BC, a certain monk named Cittagutta lived in the cave named Kurandaka that had been embellished by attractive paintings. The story says that the concentration on meditation by the monk was so exemplary that he lived there for sixty years without seeing the paintings of the canopy of the cave.\(^{28}\) Interestingly enough some scholars have identified this particular Kurandaka cave with the present Kambagala cave situated close to Ambalantota in the southern province where the painting remnants can still be seen.\(^{29}\)

The ancient Buddhist paintings of Sri Lanka have been referred to not only in these indigenous literary sources, but also in some of the foreign traveller’s accounts for instance in Fahien’s record of his journey. In his record, there is an account of an exposition of the Tooth relic at Abhayagiriya temple in Anuradhapura and on the same


occasion a number of canvas paintings of the Jataka stories are said to have been displayed on either side of the route leading to the temple. As Fahien therpo actually did come to Sri Lanka and consequently gained first hand information, these facts appear comparatively reliable. Hence, though the reference is not directly to the ancient Buddhist mural painting tradition of the island, this allusion is important since it is obviously a description of an itinerant painting tradition, which we do not have any surviving examples of.

In addition to all these literary references are the Buddhist wall paintings now present at the sites of Ajanta and Bagh in India and Hindagala, Vessagiriya, Mihintale, Gonagolla, Mahiyanganaya and Tivamka shrine etc in Sri Lanka. It is obvious that though the history of Buddhist mural painting tradition of both countries goes as far back as the commencement of Buddhism somewhere in the sixth century BC, or the official introduction of the Buddhism into Sri Lanka sometime in the 3rd century BC, the extant Buddhist paintings of India and Sri Lanka date only to the second century BC onwards which will be discussed later site by site in detail.

According to both these literary and extant murals, it is obvious that the Buddhist temples and monasteries of ancient India and Sri Lanka, when they were inhabited must have been extraordinarily beautiful by means of paintings, in addition to carvings and sculptures etc. When considering the utility of these religious arts, it must not be forgotten that these artistic creations were not placed upon monuments because they needed to be there for the value of the monument. In addition, it must not be supposed that the object of these paintings was to provide entertainment for or to gratify the aesthetic needs of the

peoples, monks or the places where there were executed.\(^1\) It must also not be confused
that if sometimes, specially relating to some of the Jataka stories, the subjects seem to be
out of keeping with the ascetic life of a monastery, it is only because the Bodhisattva
before attaining Buddhahood is said to have experienced life in every phase before he
obtained salvation, the perfect experience. As a result, though incidentally the paintings
depict an intimate revelation of Indian or Sri Lankan life of the period, it would be a
mistake to suppose that the painters intentionally recorded current events as
history.\(^2\) Similarly, it must also not be concluded that these were for reading by monks,
pilgrims or patrons as incorrectly suggested by some scholars\(^3\) since it is evident that the
walls thus painted were the sort of picture books, which contain doctrinal and religious
teachings used for instructing the lay worshipers as well as the novices of the Buddhist
order in the events of the Buddha’s many existences.

It has been suggested by some scholars that at least Ajanta was an academic centre
and its monks or the students tried to concentrate on different doctrines of Buddhism.\(^4\) It is
certain that most of the scriptures had been written by this time (around fifth century AD)
and also the deep knowledge of monks about these scriptures is reflected in Ajanta
inscriptions. In fact, they bear perfect harmony with the Buddhist sacred texts and the
Buddhist philosophy, which, is beautifully interwoven in the eulogies composed in

\(^{2}\) See KR Van Kooij and Van Der Veen, *Function and meaning in Buddhist art*, Munshiram Manoharlal
Publishers, New Delhi, 1996.
\(^{3}\) EB Havell, *The art heritage of India comprising Indian sculpture and painting and ideals of Indian art*, DB
Taraporevala sons, Bombay, 1964, p.69.
\(^{4}\) Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in early Buddhist art: Visual narratives of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal
classical Sanskrit. In addition, it is conspicuous that an analysis of the inscriptions at Ajanta reveals that out of thirty-one donors mentioned, twenty are monks, an aspect which will be discussed in the seventh chapter in detail. Thus, a comparatively large number of monks among the donors and the different categories within these positively suggest that Ajanta was not only a flourishing Buddhist establishment but also a centre of monastic education.35 This is further substantiated by the fact that at Ajanta, at least four of the caves are preaching halls, the others all being larger living caves, so that in the end there was accommodation for 600 or 700 monks as estimated by Basham.36 Hence, most probably these murals were also drawn for the fulfilment of the requirement of students at the centre, in addition to the edification of its’ lay worshipers.

Thus, when considering the purpose of executing these Buddhist mural paintings of both countries, it is clear that the objective was to earn merit and the main aim was to visualise the ideals of the Buddhist creed and to illustrate by pictorial parables some of the beautiful sentiments of the Buddhist religion. Since originally these were designed to appeal to the higher feelings of the spectator, sustained by their supreme charm the littleness of the viewer’s own personality vanishes and he becomes exalted and absorbed.37 In other words, the paintings have been used for instilling faith and ardour; four good deeds and conduct; and avoidance of misdeeds and wickedness in the minds of both monastic and lay worshipers. In fact, painting was a lively medium through which such an exemplary life could be taught to the sinner and the sacred knowledge revived in the

memory of the saint. It was also primarily an attempt to present the spirit rather than the form of religion a story rather than an idea.\textsuperscript{38}

**Chronology and location of the Buddhist mural paintings:**

No doubt chronology is of primary importance in any study of historical manifestation. Although the ancient Buddhist mural paintings survive at several places in India and Sri Lanka as discussed in the first chapter, the problem of dating these remains a very difficult task, since there is not adequate evidence to establish their exact chronology. Hence, it is significant that some scholars have attempted to give chronological data based on stylistic considerations of the paintings at some of the sites of both countries. But, any attempt at working out a chronology based on the stylistic form of the relevant paintings would be questionable since one particular style of a period would be popular even in a subsequent period. The paintings of Kalaniya and Gotami temples of Sri Lanka, which belong to the first part of the twentieth century, can be cited as good examples in this respect. Of these, in the new extension of the Kelaniya temple, Solias Mendis has drawn a series of painting panels of Sri Lankan history drawing his inspiration primarily from Ajanta, Sigiriya and Polonnaruva.\textsuperscript{39} The same has been followed by the painter George Keyt when he executed the paintings at Gotami temple of Colombo.\textsuperscript{40} In addition, many modern Indian painters have also again romantically represented the glory of Ajanta cave paintings, in its grandeur and its dynamic forms. Certainly, it is generally believed that


\textsuperscript{40} In the Gotami temple at Borella one can see Buddhist paintings of buxom female figures reminiscent of Sigiriya, with an erotic flavour due to European influence. Nandadeva Wijesekara, “Buddhist paintings through the ages,” *Selected writings*, Tisara Press, Dehivala, 1983, p.283.
these cave paintings have crossed all barriers of time. Hence, it would be erroneous to conclude that these later paintings belong to the Ajanta, Sigiri or Polonnaruva periods based on their stylistic features alone.

Accordingly, it is perhaps not feasible to include in this study paintings at sites like Kudagala, Kandalama and Kotiyagala of Sri Lanka where the chronology is uncertain and the details of paintings cannot be obtained due to their deterioration. Similarly, attention will not be focused in this study at the sites where Buddhist paintings were available in ancient times but are now decayed as in the case of Bhaja Kanheri, Karle, Nasik, Junnar, Bedsa or Aurangabad of India and Situlpavwa of Sri Lanka. The relevant details of the rest of the sites are presented below in the chronological order of the painting of the two countries separately. The chronology of these murals is as follows:

45 The painting remnants of these caves have been discussed in the first chapter.
46 See Ramesh Shankar Gupta and BD Mahajan, *Ajanta Ellora and Aurangabad caves*, DB Taraporevala sons, Bombay, 1962. The caves of Aurangabad in three groups are in a range of hills, two miles north of the town of Aurangabad. In the first group of the caves there are five excavations and they were numbered 1-5. The second group, six furlongs to the east of the first, comprises four caves of nos. 6-9. A mile further east is the third group—a few plain unfinished cells, the religious affiliation of which is unknown. Unfortunately, no any historical descriptions are available relating to their patronage and chronology. However, it is believed that the caves of the first and the second groups, with the exception of the chaitya-griha cave no.4, are not separated from one another by any long interval. In fact, these caves are famous for their superb sculptures and the big carved stone like dance-scene in cave no 7. The architectural and sculptural feature, combined with the introduction of female deities, suggest a date not much earlier than the sixth and not much later than the seventh century AD. Debala Mitra, *Buddhist monuments*, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1971, p.178. But Codrington believes that these were excavated circa 500 AD. See K de B Codrington, “Ancient sites near Ellora Deccan,” *The Indian Antiquary*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple and others, Vol.IX, 1930, (reprinted Swati publication, Delhi, 1986), p.11. In addition, for a collection of opinions of various scholars on the chronology and the other special characteristics of the site please refer to Dulari Qureshi, *Art and vision of Aurangabad caves*, Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1998, introduction, pp.1-9; It is believe that the site belongs to the Tantric tradition and remains of paintings date probably from the end of the seventh century AD. See Carmel Berksom, *The caves at Aurangabad: Early Buddhist Tantric art in India*, Mapin Publishing ltd, Ahmedabad, 1986; Philip S Rawson, *Indian painting*, Pierre Tisue, Editeur, Paris, 1961, p.51.
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<th>Site</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>INDIA</strong></td>
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<td>Ajanta</td>
<td>2nd century BC and 5th–7th centuries AD</td>
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<td>Bagh</td>
<td>6th–7th centuries AD</td>
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<td>Ellora</td>
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<td>Karambagala</td>
<td>2nd century BC?</td>
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<td>Sigiriya</td>
<td>6th–7th centuries AD</td>
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<td>Vessagiriya</td>
<td>6th–8th centuries AD?</td>
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<td>Hindagala</td>
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<td>Gonagolla</td>
<td>8th century AD?</td>
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<td>Pulligoda</td>
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<td>Dambulla</td>
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<td>Anuradhapura</td>
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<td>Mihintale</td>
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<td>Mahiyanganaya</td>
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<td>Dadigama</td>
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<td>Tivanka image house</td>
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<td>Maravidiya</td>
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**Sites in India:**

**Ajanta caves:**

The caves of Ajanta are located in the Western Ghats, in the Indhyadri or Ajanta range of hills, on the northern fringe of the Maharashtra state, in the district of Aurangabad. The caves extend for a distance of about 600 yards from east to west round the concave wall of amygdaloid trap, which hems in the stream on its north or left side. The caves, thirty-one in all were excavated in this face of an almost perpendicular scarp of rock, about 250 feet high, sweeping round in a curve and forming the north or outer side of a wild and lonely glen. No doubt these caves of Ajanta occupy an important place in the art history of India, since it is one of the extant sites of such grandeur which combines painting, sculpture
and architecture and extends in time from the early Hinayana stage through the Mahayana phase roughly from second century BC to at least sixth or seventh centuries AD.

Besides the inscriptions of the caves of Ajanta, the reference made by Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang who stayed in India for fifteen years (621 – 645 AD) in the first half of the seventh century AD is the earliest reference to the caves. Although it is believed that he did not visit the place, he has given some interesting details of the site. As he has described, "this monastery had been built by A-che-lo of west India... The walls of this temple had depicted on them the incident of Buddha’s career as Bodhisattva, including the circumstances of his attaining bodhi and the omens attending his final passing away, all great and small were here delineated. Outside the gate of the monastery on either side north and south was a stone elephant." It is interesting to note at this point that an inscription in cave no 26 of Ajanta mentions that a monk Achala (A-che-lo of Yuan Chwang?) had a rock cave made at Ajanta, perhaps cave no 26 itself. In addition, the elephants flanking the gates seem to refer to rock-cut elephants, which might have flanked the entrance to cave no 26, like that to cave no 16, where two elephants are still extant. This shows that even though the prolific activity at the site had come to a close by the end of the sixth century AD as

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49 James Burgess, Notes on the Buddha rock temples of Ajanta, their paintings and sculptures and on the paintings of the Bagh caves, Archaeological Survey of Western India, No. IX, Bombay, 1879, p.1.
discussed below, the caves of Ajanta continued to be popular in the Buddhist world even later on. This speculation is further confirmed by the fact that a fragmentary Rastrakuta record of uncertain purpose, which belongs to eighth-ninth centuries AD, is inscribed on the right wall of the landing to the left of the court of cave no 26.53

However, after centuries of neglect, the caves of Ajanta were discovered in the first part of the 19th century, the earliest recorded visitors being some officers of the Madras Army who saw the paintings of these caves in 1819.54 One inscription inscribed in cave no 10, which mentions the same year, clearly proves this fact. The inscription which was inscribed with a sharp object, appears on the axial face of the 13th pillar on the right hand side of cave no 10, written across the chest of a standing Buddha figure, at a point seven and half feet from the floor. This inscription reads John Smith 28th cavalry/28th April 1819.

It is evident that all the subsequent writers who have treated the subject of Ajanta have adopted James Fergusson's numbering of the caves during the latter part of the nineteenth century.55 It must nevertheless be remembered that the caves are numbered not chronologically but as a matter of convenience, starting with the one at the outermost

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54 J Fergusson and J Burgess, The cave temples of India, Oriental Books Corporation, Delhi, (reprinted) 1969, (first published 1880) pp.280-281; Walter Spink has also been explained to Ghosh that he has noticed the name of a British officer with a date 1819 engraved in cave no 10. As Ghosh described, evidently the officer was in the party of the first recorded visitors to the caves. The inscription appears above man-height, indicating that the floor of the cave had been covered with debris at the time of his discovery. A Ghosh, “Introduction,” Ajanta murals: An album of eighty-five reproductions in colour, ed. A Ghosh, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1967, p.2; MK Dhavalikar, “New inscriptions from Ajanta,” Ars Orientalis, Vol.VII, 1968, pp.147-153; Ajanta: A cultural study, University of Poona, 1973, p.1; See also. Guide to Ajanta frescoes, Archaeological Department, Hyderabad, 1949, p.1.
extremity from the entrance to the site at the east.\textsuperscript{36} Certainly, there is no evidence to know in what order the caves were excavated and how long it took to excavate them. It is however evident that many of the caves of Ajanta were completed, but at least half were still underway, when probably political factors\textsuperscript{57} or some other unrecorded reasons brought work at the site to a sudden halt. For instance, among the last group, at least three caves are unfinished, nos. 22, 23 and 24 and may consequently be later than cave no 1, which is certainly the last completely finished temple at Ajanta.\textsuperscript{58} For this reason, some scholars suggest that the artists of a given era, dependent in the main upon natural light, logically might have moved, it would seem from cave to cave with the sun and back again the next day. Accordingly, it is believed that this might in part account for the unfinished state of some of the caves at Ajanta.\textsuperscript{59}

The caves of Ajanta, including the unfinished ones, are thirty-one in number of which five caves (nos. 9, 10, 19, 26, and 29) are caitya-grhas and the rest viharas. Of these, the earlier caves comprise of two caitya-grhas (cave nos 9 and 10) and four monasteries (cave nos 8, 12, 13 and 15) dating from the second-first centuries BC.\textsuperscript{60} The monasteries of this initial stage are small and consist of an astylar closed hall flanked on three sides by

\textsuperscript{36} Roy C Craven, \textit{A concise history of Indian art}, Themes and Hudson, London, 1976, p.122.
\textsuperscript{41} Debala Mitra, \textit{Buddhist monuments}, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1971, p.175.
narrow cells, the latter, with rock-cut beds, serving as dormitories.\(^{61}\) Besides, cave no.6 is a double storeyed temple and is the only one of its kind at the site as the rest have only one storey. It is however evident that the walls, ceilings and pillars of nearly all of these caves of the two phases were once adorned with paintings. But, since their abandonment, the caves have been tenanted only by bats, by the dangerous little poison-bees and insects that nest there and by wandering mendicants with their smoky fires, all playing their part in the work of destruction. In addition, owing to moisture, the depredation of birds and to the vandalism\(^ {62}\) of the art collector, the murals near the floor and the ceiling have been totally destroyed; those which survive are in the middle of the walls or on few of the ceilings.\(^ {63}\) Consequently, some of the caves of Ajanta do not contain paintings today though all these were originally painted. For instance, cave nos. 6, 12, 15, 21 and 26 were once painted all over, but nothing substantial has survived.

It is evident that even in the 1870s paintings to a greater or lesser extent remained in sixteen caves, nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22 and 26 according to the description given by James Burgess. Of these, the most important fragments were then to be seen in nine caves, nos. 1, 2, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 19 and 21, those in cave 17 being the most extensive.\(^ {64}\) But, the remains are now found in thirteen caves only, the fragments that are of special interest occurring in cave nos 1, 2, 9, 10, 16 and 17. The situation seems to

\(^{61}\) Ibid, p.175.
\(^{62}\) It is evident that since the rediscovery of the caves of Ajanta various visitors have scratched their names on the murals. Besides, it is interesting to note that in the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the then curator at the site, Narayan Ekanath, cut a number of significant details out of the pictures and sold them to visitors. See J Burgess, Notes on the Buddha rock temples of Ajanta, their paintings and sculptures, Archaeological Survey of Western India, No.IX, Bombay, 1879, p.57.
\(^{64}\) James Burgess, Notes on the Buddha rock temples of Ajanta, their paintings and sculptures Archaeological Survey of Western India, No.IX, Bombay, 1879.
have been the same at the beginning of the twentieth century according to descriptions
given by Lady Herringham.  

For the chronology of these caves and their murals, an inscription, on the front to
the right of the great window in cave no 10 may be considered, which records the gift of the
façade by one Vasatiputa Katahadi. The palaeography of the inscription indicates the
beginning of the second century BC as the date of the cave. In addition, two more
donative records one painted and the other engraved, of the same period, exist inside the
cave on the left wall. Of these, unfortunately only a few letters now remain of the painted
inscription. These, however, show that the painted record is also to be dated to an earlier
period, probably about the middle of the second century BC mainly based on its
palaeography. Accordingly, the painting on which this inscription is found seems to be
coeval with the inscription and therefore it is reasonable to believe that these belonged to
the second century BC. It is generally accepted that the architectural evidence also
corroborates this.

56 H Lüders, “A list of Brahmi inscriptions: Appendix to Epigraphia Indica and record of the archaeological
57 Debala Mitra, Ajanta, Archaeological Survey of India, 1996, p.43. Nevertheless, it is interesting, without
using any reliable primary sources some scholars have believed that these marvellous temples and
monasteries date probably from a little before the reign of the great Buddhist emperor of Asoka (272-231
BC). See Mukul Chandra Dey, My pilgrimage to Ajanta and Bagh, Gian Publishing House, Delhi, (reprinted)
1986, p.49.
reproductions of the Ajanta frescoes based on photography, ed. G Yazdani, Swati Publications, Delhi,
Vol.III, 1942, p.88; History of the Deccan, ed. G Yazdani and others, Oxford University Press, Great Britain,
also the first chapter of this thesis.
Due to all these reasons many scholars have accepted this second century BC date for the earliest paintings of Ajanta murals. But, it is noteworthy that one of the engraved inscriptions of the second century BC, earlier completely covered by a thick coat of mud plaster was revealed after the peeling off of the plaster. It shows that when the cave was first finished it was devoid of paintings, since this inscription records only the gifts of the wall. In addition, if it was then intended to be adorned with paintings there was no need to smooth the wall surface too. Therefore, it appears that the cave that was finished in the second century BC was embellished with paintings sometime in the later period instead of painted shortly in the wake of its excavation at least in the first century BC though some
others have concluded that the oldest caves of Ajanta were painted during the first century AD\(^2\); i.e. after two or three centuries of their initial excavations. However, it is significant that substantial fragments of the older paintings, superimposed at some places by later ones, can also be seen on the right wall of cave no 10. It is believed that on the ground of palaeographic evidence or technical developments of the murals these later ones may be assigned to the 4\(^{th}\) century AD.\(^73\)

Most of the scholars believe that cave no 9 was excavated a century later than the digging out of cave no 10 at Ajanta i.e. in 1\(^{st}\) century BC.\(^74\) It is also suggested that the earliest fragmentary paintings surviving in cave no 9 belong to the same century,\(^75\) though

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some others have believed that these belong to the 1st, 2nd or 3rd century AD. However, after stagnation of a few centuries, the excavation at the site was revived on a more ambitious scale and it continued till the end of the sixth century AD. The most vigorous and prolific phase of this movement coincided with the second half of the fifth and the first half of the sixth centuries AD, during the supremacy of the Vakatakas, a dynasty matrimoniaally connected with the Guptas. No doubt that the development of these Vakataka caves took place during the reign of king Harisena and his successor, according to the inscriptions at the site, though it is supposed that the work that was done immediately after Harisena’s death was of very short duration.

As Spink recently suggested, the Vakataka dynasty collapsed in c 483 AD. Accordingly, he has calculated 460-478 AD as the period of Harisena’s reign and argued that other writers are erroneous in their contention that such extraordinary achievements must have taken many decades, if not centuries to produce. Instead, he suggests that a brief intensive period of fervent activity corresponding primarily to the relatively short span of Harisena’s reign accounted for the production of all the later caves. Based on this belief,

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78 Debala Mitra, Buddhist monuments, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1971, p. 176. It is believed that for nearly two hundred years c 300-500 AD the modern regions of central India and the northern Deccan were under the hegemony of the Vakatakas. Krishna Mohan Shrimali, Agrarian structure in central India and the northern Deccan: A study in Vakataka inscriptions, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, Delhi, 1987, p. 115.
Spink assumes that in about 468 AD work stopped on them completely after a few rushed weeks or months in which the images in three of the caves (nos 11, 7 and lower 6) were readied for worship. Then, later on, in about 475 AD, work began on all of them, but in a very distinctly later mode. Thus, it is evident that Spink places all the Vakataka caves of Ajanta within a time bracket of 23 years from 460 to 483, divided into two phases of Harisena (460-478) and of his successors (478-483). This short chronology accommodates within itself, cave no 16 of Varahadeva, cave nos 17, 18, 19 and 20 of the Rishika chief Upendra and cave no 26 of Buddhist monk Budhabhadra besides the other caves e.g. 8, 7, 11 and lower 6. All this work relates to Harisena’s reign and the last phase of the work is attributed to the successors of Harisena since this period (from 478 to 483 AD) marks a decline at Ajanta.

Apart from Spink’s chronology, the generally accepted viewpoint is that Harisena ruled from circa 475 to 500 AD. According to some scholars this may also not be quite

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correct and he may have come to the throne even a little earlier and had a long reign till circa 505 AD. Consequently, the chronology given by Spink was critically examined and rejected by Karl Khandalavala who suggests the under-mentioned chronology based on inscriptive, literary and stylistic evidence of the caves, though Dhavalikar has wrongly or irrespectively concluded in the subsequent year that although Spink's chronology has not yet met with general approval, there does not appear to be any valid argument against it and it appears that his chronology will be finally accepted.

Khandalavala argues that: 1. Work on cave no 1 commenced circa 525 AD and was completed circa 540 probably during the reign of the grandson of Harisena, possibly from the funds of the monastic order. 2. Work on cave no 2 started circa 530 AD and was completed in 545 AD during the reign of the grandson of Harisena from the funds of the monastic orders. 3. The excavation work at cave no 16 started from circa 482 AD and was completed in circa 497 AD during the reign of Harisena under the patronage of Varahadeva. 4. The work of cave nos 17-20 started circa 490 AD and was completed circa 505 AD during the reign of the same king under the patronage of the feudatory ruler Upendra of Rishika. 5. The excavation work of cave no 26 started circa 508 AD and was finished circa 523 AD during the reign of Asmaka, Usurper under the patronage of the Buddhist monk Budhabhadra.

86 It is to be noted that Khandalavala has presented this chronology only considering the recent numbering of the caves, instead of taking into consideration their historicity or chronological order.
Thus, when attention is focused on the historicity of the site, it should be borne in mind that the situation of the caves in the Ajanta ravine has no bearing on the chronology of the caves. Hence, when dating these caves diverse factors may have determined the situation of a particular cave. But, it should not be forgotten, even Spink has admitted that such dates also cannot be considered to be absolute and a few years’ margin of error must be allowed. In terms of the overall temporal sequence, which he proposes, they are intended to show the relative position, within the whole development of the site, of the event to which they refer. Consequently, it has been impossible for scholars to ignore Spink’s often gripping vision of Ajanta’s past, even if many disagree with some or most of its features. For instance, it should be noted that there were not hundreds of artisans working at Ajanta as Spink imagines asserting his short chronology. According to Khandalavala, it is evident that such was never the mode of work in ancient India. Even if there were more artisans working at Ajanta than the number that worked on Balasri’s cave at Nasik, nevertheless, it is well nigh impossible to believe that any of the large and elaborate Mahayana caves at Ajanta could ever have been completed in less than fifteen years despite royal or ministerial patronage.

In addition, the chronology of Spink has also contended that the presence in the murals of cave nos 1 and 2 of several Jataka stories in which ideal kingship figures, is an

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89 Ibid, p.127.
indication that these two caves were the royal donation of Harisena. But surely if this could be regarded as even a plausible viewpoint, which in fact it is not, then all the more reason for it being imperative to engrave an inscription in these caves stating that the donor of cave nos 1 and 2 was the great king Harisena himself or at least his follower as in the case of the cave nos 16 and 17. Besides, it is noteworthy that the selection of Jataka stories to be painted in each of the caves at Ajanta no doubt depended largely on the inclinations of the principal monks of the monastic order for whose benefit a particular cave dwelling was excavated as discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Thus the hieratic character of several paintings in cave nos 1 and 2 also go to indicate the interest of the monastic orders, for whom cave nos 1 and 2 were excavated, in the more formal iconographic aspects of Mahayana Buddhism.

Thus it is evident that unlike other scholars Spink and Khandalavala have discussed the problem of chronology of the caves at Ajanta in detail though some problematic or debatable issues are present in their interpretations. Though the exact and actual dates of the excavations of the caves of Ajanta are thus controversial, it is clear that there is not much of a time gap even between these two chronologies of Spink and Khandalavala since it is evident that both scholars have argued that the caves of Ajanta were completed during

93 It is to be noted that some scholars have interpreted the dates of Cave nos. 1 and 2 circa 626-728 AD. Please refer to Percy Brown, Indian painting, YMCA Publishing House, 1927, p.30; Mulk Raj Anand and RP Bharadwaj, Ajanta, Marg Publications, Bombay, 1971, p.11. See also Mulk Raj Anand, Album of Indian paintings, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1973, p.14.
95 But it is to be noted that when selecting these themes for the murals the inclinations of donors and painters were also influenced to some extent as discussed in the seventh chapter in detail.
the last phase of the fifth and the first phase of the sixth centuries AD. However, the presence of a new circle of artists, as a result of a pressing demand for more workers, seems most likely if we accept the hypothesis, thus advanced by Spink that the caves of the Mahayana period were hewn out within a period of not more than fifty years. But, this view, as far as it concerns the paintings, is obviously conjectural because of the lack of relevant data and the anonymity of the artists, which will be discussed later in detail. 98

Accordingly, it is evident that there is a diversity of opinion among scholars regarding the chronology of the caves of Ajanta and that very little of this is based on any reliable primary source. Consequently, some have concluded that the caves of Ajanta were excavated during the time of the Guptas (320-500) and the Chalukyas (AD 550 to 777), 99 while others have argued that most of the caves of Ajanta belong to the period of the seventh century AD. 100 But, it is evident that except for a few caves like nos. 8, 9, 10 and 12 belonging to an early period, almost all other caves of Ajanta belong to the Vakataka period. Of these, cave nos. 16 and 17 were undoubtedly excavated during the reign of Harisena according to the inscriptions in the veranda of the caves. Of these, cave no 16 was

97 Certainly others have not been discussed this chronological problem in detail. For instance Williams and Stern divides the total activity at Ajanta within a sequence of four periods but suggests no dates. See JIG Williams, The art of the Gupta India, Princeton, 1983, pp.181-186.
donated by Varahadeva, a minister of Harisena around 475-500 AD\textsuperscript{101} and cave no 17 by a prince whose name is now lost but who is assumed to have been a feudatory of the Vakatakas.\textsuperscript{102}

In this context, it is to be noted that although some have wrongly concluded that there is not a painting, not a piece of sculpture, not a cave or a cell, or a cistern, nor a single donative inscription there which was produced after 480 AD,\textsuperscript{103} in fact even after 550 AD, when Vakataka sovereignty came to an end, the monastery of Ajanta was obviously inhabited. For instance, it is evident that it was still famous in the seventh century AD for the Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang, even though he never visited Ajanta, refers to it in glowing terms as mentioned above, basing himself no doubt on the accounts he had obtained from his contemporaries. Certainly, such a reference, without mentioning that it had been abandoned, would be unlikely if it had become deserted by the time of his

\textsuperscript{101}But, it is to be noted that the two inscriptions of Varahadeva at Ajanta are undated. Of the two, one has issued to record the dedication of a cave dwelling decorated with pillars, picture galleries, sculptures etc to the Buddhist sangha. The donation was for the religious merit of donor’s parents. The second inscription has issued to record the excavation of the Vihara cave no 17 and the gandhakuti of cave no 19 at the site. The inscription is basically a eulogy of Harisena’s predecessors as well as that of two ministers, Hastibhoja and his son Varahadeva. It also gives an elaborate description of the cave no 16 Krishna Mohan Shrimali, Agrarian structure in central India and the northern Deccan: A study in Vakataka inscriptions, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, Delhi, 1987, p.115.


In addition, it is significant that the latest fragmentary inscription at Ajanta is found on the back wall of the shrine between cave nos 26 and 27, the purpose of which is uncertain and which belongs to the period of the Rashtrakutas of the eighth or ninth century AD. Although some have concluded that this may perhaps indicate that by then the caves of Ajanta had been deserted by the Buddhists this evidence also proves that the establishment, continued its existence possibly till the ninth century AD when the Rashtrakutas were the lords of the land.

In contrast, when considering the chronology of murals at the site, it must not be forgotten that they are not necessarily of exactly the same age as the caves that they adorn. In fact, as in the case of the chronology of some of the caves, although it is not possible to give the exact date when these caves were first adorned with paintings, it is generally accepted that the earliest murals go back to the second century BC while the latest is assigned to the sixth or seventh century AD. At the same time, though the precise evidence is not available, one can also surmise that both sculpture and painting of Ajanta at least continued into the early eighth century AD as evidenced by the epigraphical records at the site. Apart from this epigraphical evidence, it is obvious that most of the critics support their respective views through a discussion of the technique, the method of

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107 Debala Mitra, Buddhist monuments, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1971, p.175
representation and the presence of foreign elements i.e. Iranians particularly for the seventh century date, as discussed in the sixth chapter in detail. But all these discussions clearly indicate that studies on Ajanta have not yet reached a consensus in regard to chronology. Consequently, in recent years three major seminars or panels at conferences (1988, 1989 and 1990 respectively) have been devoted to Ajanta studies where the focus has again been a study of the chronology. But, ultimately, it is obvious that the chronology of Ajanta has not been clearly resolved yet or as Weiner pointed out, an absolute chronology of the site would be impossible. However, according to all these descriptions, it is clear that at least from the second century BC to sixth or seventh century AD for at least eight or nine centuries, perhaps even more, the caves of Ajanta were inhabited and decorated.

It is conspicuous that the caves are dark inside and one wonders how they were painted. In fact, even today the frescoes are for the most part in dimly lit halls and have to be seen by the aid of powerful lamps. Hence it has often been asked as to what means were employed to enable work to be done in these dim recesses. In this context, whether torches and oil lamps helped to draw the paintings is in fact uncertain. But, it is fairly clear that some system of reflectors must have been used for it is simple to throw a flood of sunlight

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on the walls by means of properly placed reflectors made of white cloth.\footnote{Karl Khandalavala, \textit{Indian sculpture and painting: An introductory study}, DB Taraporevala sons, Bombay, (n. d), p.53; \textit{History of world art}, ed. Everard M Upjohn and others, Oxford University Press, New York, 1949, p.421.} In addition, some suggest that the interior of the horseshoe hill was a lake and that the sunlight thus reflected, flooded the caves during part of the day.\footnote{Dinkar Kowshik, \textit{Age and image: A short survey of Indian art}, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1963, p.30.}

\textbf{Bagh caves:}

The caves of Bagh are situated along the southern slopes of the Vindhya hills in the Malwa region of Madya Pradesh. As in the case of the caves of Ajanta, the credit for the rediscovery of the caves of Bagh also goes to a soldier. Lieutenant Dangerfield of the Bombay military establishment described them for the first time in 1818.\footnote{Lieutenant Dangerfield, \textit{Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay}, Vol.II, pp.206-214.} At Bagh, the principal group of caves contains eight excavations\footnote{VA Smith, \textit{A history of fine arts in India and Ceylon}, DB Taraporevala sons & co, Bombay, (reprinted) 1969, p.98. But, according to Krishna Chaitanya there are nine caves are at the site. \textit{A history of Indian painting: The mural tradition}, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1976, p.42.} and the most important are cave nos. 2, 3 and 4. Of these, particularly cave no 4, known as Rang Mahal contains some remnants of paintings.\footnote{RS Wauchope, \textit{Buddhist cave temples of India}, The Calcutta General Printing co, Calcutta, 1933, p.85.} But, unlike the caves of Ajanta, there is no evidence of any inscription at the site and no historical descriptions are available today. Hence, as in the case of Ajanta, the chronology of the caves of Bagh has also been variously estimated by scholars. Of these, based on the accounts given in a copper plate of Subandhu discovered in the debris of cave no. 2 at Bagh, Mirashi believes that they should be dated to about the end of the fourth century AD at the latest.\footnote{VV Mirashi, "The age of the Bagh caves," \textit{The Indian historical quarterly}, Vol.XXI, No.2, June 1945, pp.79-85. According to Mirashi's account it is clear that even 1940s the paintings of Bagh caves has been irreparably damaged. p.79.}
Some other scholars have also believed that possibly some of the Bagh murals may go back to the middle of the fourth century AD. But, Ferguson and Burgess dated them between 350 to 500 AD and in another place of the same book, they were attributed to the period 450-500 AD while Spink estimates the period of florescence at Bagh to have occurred between 470 and 480. Meanwhile, some other scholars like Rowland and Coomaraswamy have suggested that the Bagh paintings may be assigned to the early sixth century AD and Smiths’ opinion is also the same, since he thinks that they were not earlier than the late works of Ajanta. In this assumption, Smith has ascribed them to the period from sometime in the sixth to the first half of the seventh century AD. Garde also expressed the same view but based it on a legible letter of a painted inscription at the site. He suggested that on palaeographic grounds, the script (letter ‘ka’) is datable to the sixth or seventh centuries AD and the architecture, sculpture, and paintings of the caves also confirm that this is roughly the age of the site. The opinion of other scholars like Havell, Khandalavala and Shanti Swarup is also the same and they have believed that the paintings may probably belong to the sixth and the seventh centuries AD.

123 Ibid, p. 366. Dinkar Kowshik also believes that the paintings of Bagh caves belong to the fifth century AD.
Thus, it is evident that the paintings of Bagh caves are taken by competent authorities to be contemporaneous with the paintings of the latter part of Ajanta. But, it must not also be forgotten that some scholars have expressed the view that there is reason to believe that all the work is not of one period. Similarly, there is a notion that most of the Bagh paintings seem to have been left unfinished by the original artists themselves, though the reason for that is somewhat obscure.

Unfortunately, the crumbling of the rock and absolute neglect in the first part of the last century, combined with the effects of the smoke from vagrants’ fires, have left hardly anything of the compositions which once covered thousands of square feet. In addition, the paintings have been very badly damaged by the seepage of rainwater over the centuries. As a result some of the paintings described by Dr Impey in 1850s do not seem to have survived even to the 1920s. Of these, the best-preserved portion of the paintings is found on the outer surface of the front wall of cave nos. 4 and 5 and along the upper half of the inner wall. The extant paintings are in a state far from perfect. Hence, the

129 EB Havell, *The art heritage of India comprising Indian sculpture and painting and ideals of Indian art*, DB Taraporevala sons, Bombay, 1964, p.74; “Notes on the paintings," *The Bagh caves in the Gwalior State*, Delhi Prakashan, Delhi, 1927, p.73; Shanti Swarup, *5000 years of arts and crafts in India and Pakistan: A survey of sculpture, architecture, painting, dance, music handicrafts and ritual decorations from the earliest times to the present day*, DB Taraporevala sons, Bombay, 1968, p.135.
133 Ibid, pp.543-573. The paper had read 28 December 1854.
paintings of the Bagh caves survive today mainly in the copies preserved in the Gwalior and Bhopal museums.\(^{136}\)

**Ellora caves:**

The caves of Ellora\(^{137}\) lie on the edge of the Deccan among the outlying spurs of the Western Ghats about sixty miles south of Ajanta, in the district of Aurangabad of Maharashtra State. It is evident that these caves take their name from the village, which stands about a mile west of the scarp in which they are excavated.\(^{138}\) This runs north and south between two hills, the distance between them being about two miles. Unlike the Sri Lankan painting sites and Ajanta, the thirty-four caves at Ellora are dedicated to the three main religions of the Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains.\(^{139}\) Of these, there are twelve Buddhist, seventeen Brahmanical and five Jain caves, which contain some remnants of paintings belonging to each religious group.\(^{140}\) The Buddhist caves are located at the southern end of the scarp and consist mostly of Viharas and have only one caitya. It is noteworthy that unlike Ajanta and other Buddhist painting sites, these Viharas sometimes have several

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\(^{137}\) Lokesh Chandra believes that the ward Ellora is derived from Elapura, Velura, and Ilvalapura. Velura can be connected with Veluvana, the park near Rajagraha donated to lord Sakyamuni by Bimbisara. “Ellora as Sunyata and Rupam,” *Ellora caves: Sculpture and architecture*, Collected papers of the University Grant Commission, National Seminar, ed. Ratan Parmoo and others, Books and Books, New Delhi, 1988, p.134.


storeys. For instance, cave nos. 11 and 12 at the site are remarkable and consist of two and three storeys respectively.

These Buddhist caves at Ellora, which are the earliest (550-700 AD) of the group, were recorded as being painted, but unfortunately nothing survives except few indistinguishable traces of painting on the ceilings and walls of the inner shrine, particularly in cave no 12, the designs of which are of a set type, representing floral and creeper patterns, geometric devices, including the key-pattern in several forms, jewellery designs and wood work motifs, all of which can be seen in their original form. Besides, the Jain caves, particularly no 32, known as Indra Sabha, has preserved its mural, which portrays flying figures. But the most important murals are to be found on the ceiling and inner surface of the architrave of the Kailasa cave, Siva’s mountain abode, a monumental sanctuary of the Hindus. It is obvious that the colours of all these paintings at Ellora are dull and insipid, perhaps owing to deterioration caused by weather conditions, since the caves of Ellora are more exposed to the sun and the rain.

In contrast, when considering the historicity of the site, early descriptions of Ellora’s Buddhist caves are scarce, the earliest external record dating from the ninth century AD, i.e. the travelogue of Al-Masudi. As in the case of Bagh, although there are

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143 Certainly, what remains of paintings at Ellora is not even one-thousandth part of what once existed. Exposure to sun, wind, rain and human vandalism have permanently destroyed the major part of the murals at the site. See PV Ranade, Ellora paintings, Parimal Prakashan, Aurangabad, 1980, p.49.
145 It is generally believed that these earliest Brahmanical caves are early seventh century AD and the Jain caves are eighth century AD. K de B Codrington, “Ancient sites near Ellora Deccan,” The Indian Antiquary, ed. Richard Carnac Temple and others, Vol.LIX, 1930, (reprinted Swati publication, Delhi, 1986), p.11.
no inscriptions at Ellora to help date the Buddhist caves, Leese believes that there is reason to accept that these caves belong to the period of Kalacuri rule in the sixth century AD according to a Traikutaka inscription.\textsuperscript{147} Spink also believes that the works at Ellora started about 550 AD or even slightly before\textsuperscript{148} and he further concludes by demonstrating that the Buddhist phase was preceded by a Brahmanical period during the late sixth century, encompassing the creation of cave nos 27, 29, 21, 28, 19, 26, 20, 17 and 14.\textsuperscript{149} These dates are quite consistent with the views of Barrett and Gray.\textsuperscript{150}

Based on the views expressed by early scholars like J Fergusson, J Burgess, P Brown, RS Gupta, BD Mahajan and AK Coomaraswamy, the Buddhist caves of Ellora have been classified quite differently chronologically by Malandra as follows: Cave nos. 1 through 5 were grouped in the early stage from 450 AD to 650 AD; Cave no 10 was often seen as a mid-way point, with a date around 650 AD; and cave nos. 6 through 12 were ascribed to the mid-seventh and early eighth centuries AD. Similarly, cave nos. 2 and 8 were also sometimes ascribed dates in the late seventh or early eighth centuries AD. But some other scholars have attributed these Buddhist caves to even the mid-eighth century

AD. According to another point of view, it is believed that monks and laymen who lived under the Chalukya and Rastrakuta dynasties cut out all these caves between the sixth and ninth centuries AD. However, early accounts connected with Ellora suggest that this place was deserted after Rashtrakuta patronage ended in the 10th century AD. Nevertheless, it is particularly to be noted that since there is nothing remaining of the Buddhist paintings on the walls in the caves at the site these dates are primarily associated with the chronology of the excavations of caves and not with the paintings. But, it is generally believed that the chronology of very badly damaged painting remnants on the canopies belong to widely separate chronological groups, one belonging to the early Christian era and the other to the sixth and seventh centuries AD.

155 It is worth to note that Ellora did have a Tantric tradition instead of Hinayana or Mahayana tradition. See Lokesh Chandra, “Ellora as Sunyata and Rupam,” Ellora caves: Sculpture and architecture, Collected papers of the University Grant Commission, National Seminar, ed. Ratan Parimoo and others, Books and Books, New Delhi, 1988, p.134. In cave nos. 11 and 12, dating to the seventh-eight centuries, there are seven novenarian (navatmaka) mandalas. Ibid, p.134.
156 Buddhist Shrines in India, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956, p.75
Sites in Sri Lanka:

Karambagala:

It was mentioned in the first chapter that there is a belief that the earliest extant paintings of Sri Lanka were found at Karambagala, near Situlpavwa in the southern province of the island.\(^{157}\) According to the description given in the *Mahavamsa*, king Kavantissa had built this temple somewhere in the second century BC.\(^{158}\) During the time of compilation of the Buddhist commentaries, Cittalapabbata and Cittalakuta were the names by which Situlpavwa became famous. In the *Culavamsa*, it is mentioned that Situlpavwa was in a ruined state during the reign of King Datopatissa II (650-658 AD).\(^{159}\)

Besides these few indications, relating to the historicity of the site, the chronology of the paintings of Karambagala cannot be traced from the primary sources. In the *Visuddhimagga* written by Buddhaghosha Thero during the first part of the fifth century AD, there is an indication about the time of the execution of this piece of painting.\(^{160}\) Based on that reference, some have identified this place as the “Kurandaka cave” mentioned therein.\(^{161}\) If this uncertain identification is in fact correct, the paintings of Karambagala should have been executed at least during a time before the fifth century AD. But, according to the opinion of some critics, these are older by two or three

\(^{157}\) See also DB Dhanapala and Mahanama Dissanayake, *The story of Sinhalese paintings*, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1958, pp.2-3.


centuries and some have regarded them even as belonging to the second century BC. Few other scholars like Wijesekara, Pandya, Dhanapala, Dissanayake, Pant and Gunasinghe have also accorded approval to that date.  

Though it is possible that the wall painting tradition had existed during such an ancient period in the island, the survival of those remnants in the country is certainly doubtful. Also, unlike Ajanta no precise chronology is available. In this context it is noteworthy that the eminent art critic Paranavitana is of the opinion that there is no wall painting in Sri Lanka older than the period of king Mahasena of the fifth century AD. If not, no paintings are available in any part of the island older than the Sigiriy murals of the same period. Recent archaeologists have also accepted this view and concluded that the Karambagala painting is probably coeval with or somewhat later than Sigiriy and of a similar character as the paintings at Gonagolla and Vessagiriya, which belong to a similar period. But, it is noteworthy that some other statements made by them contradict this view since it is asserted that the tradition of painting of the island started from the second century BC. However, this discussion should also take into account that though the

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166 Ibid, p. 175. Nicholas also holds the same view. See CW Nicholas and S Paranavitana, A concise history of Ceylon, Ceylon University Press, Colombo, 1961, p. 182.
paintings of Sigiriya, are the earliest datable paintings of Sri Lanka, they are the product of a mature tradition around the fifth century AD, which was undoubtedly preceded by several centuries of development.

**Sigiriya:**

It was stated above that the earliest datable wall paintings of Sri Lanka are at Sigiriya situated in Inamaluva Korale of the district of Matale in the central province, also known as “Sihapabbata” and “Sihagiri” during ancient times. As pointed out by Hocart and Paranavitana the Brahmi inscriptions found in the caves of the western side of the rock belong to a period as early as the second century BC that establishes Sigiriya’s antiquity. According to the information given in those inscriptions, it is clear that there was a population of monks at the foot of the rock as early as first or second century BC. But, in the present state of our knowledge, no historical or archaeological data relating to Sigiriya exists from the first second centuries BC to the late fifth century which would have been helpful to understand the gradual development of the preKassapa period of the site. Recent archaeological excavations carried out at Sigiriya also appear to indicate that there is not only a gap between the early and the later monastic phases, i.e. preKassapa and postKassapa periods which will be discussed later, but also that the monks of the early phase seem to have abandoned Sigiriya for reasons unknown—either religious or

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demographic changes or due to the disturbances which occurred in the subsequent period.\(^{173}\) Thus, it is certain that Sigiriya came to be better known during the reign of parricide king Kassapa (473-491 AD) who shifted his capital from Anuradhapura to Sigiriya.\(^{174}\) The Chronicle indicates that the purpose of the shift was the desire by Kassapa to build at Sigiriya another Alakamanda and to dwell there like the god Kuvera.\(^{175}\) Many features to be noticed at the site today, which only serve an aesthetic purpose, but are superfluous from the engineering or defence point of view, must have been undertaken at a tremendous cost. In addition to these secular aspects of the site, it is significant that the Chronicle further relates that Kassapa, after gaining power, though he lived on in fear of the other world and of Moggallana, observed the eight rules and meditated much and kept vows and had books written and made many images and dining halls for priests and such like things.\(^{176}\) According to these detailed accounts given in the Chronicles, it is clear that Kassapa did his best to lead a virtuous life and gain the goodwill of the Buddhist monks also. The Mahavihara fraternity, however, would have nothing to do with Kassapa, and went to the length of refusing to accept the gift of the enlarged and improved monastery of Isurumuniya, so that the king had to force it on them by dedicating it to the Buddha image; then the priest received it, saying that “it has become the property of our Master.”\(^{177}\) The reason for this attitude that we can gather from the Chronicle is the disapproval of the crime of patricide through which Kassapa gained the throne. Patricide, no doubt, is one of

\(^{173}\) HT Basnayake, Sigiriya in history and archaeology, Seminar on Sigiriya 15th October 1983, Organised by the Central Cultural Fund and the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, mimeograph, p.3.


\(^{176}\) Ibid, chap 39; 18-19v.
the five great sins and the sangha could not but show its horror of such an act in all possible ways. It is stated that in the same manner that in the Niyyanti park at Sigiriya itself, king Kassapa built the Bodhi-Uppalavanna temples, named after his daughters and presented them to the Dhammaruchi sect together with a park to the north of it.

It is believed that Moggallana I (491-508), the successor, having regained the throne after Kassapa’s death once again shifted his palace to the former royal and monastic city of Anuradhapura, as he had no inclination to continue and preserve the works of Kassapa who had so grievously wronged him and his father. Consequently, as described in the Culavamsa, during the reigning period of Moggallana I the palace on the summit of the rock was converted into a monastery named Dalha and Dathakondanna temples and offered to the Buddhist monks who were adherents of the Dammaruchi and Sagali sects. The Buddhist Order itself had no great love for the place, for it is not mentioned afterwards as having had anything to do with religion though the same chronicle states that the Pabbatavihara built by Moggallana was granted to the priest Mahanama of the Dighasanda temple, who is said to be the uncle of the king.

Thus, it is interesting to note that the last phase of Kassapa’s reign marks the beginning of another phase of Sigiriya’s history, full of activities of quite a different nature. During this period, the political and military atmosphere seems to have almost

177 Ibid, chap 39; 10-13vv.
completely disappeared, instead the religiosity of the place seems to have been maintained. This clearly signifies that during the post Kassapan period of Sigiriya (6th and 7th century AD), it was once again converted into a religious establishment. Although it is not possible to say precisely how long these post-Kassapan monasteries continued to exist in Sigiriya,\textsuperscript{182} no doubt that monasteries built by Kassapa and Moggallana continued to function even during subsequent periods. For instance, one inscription from Abhayagiriya most probably belonging to the tenth century AD mentions ‘Sihagirimaha sa’ and confirms this fact.\textsuperscript{183} Too broken and weathered to permit of much of the contents being read, this stone inscription has yielded the name of the royal granter, ‘Siri sangbo,’ who from the form of the Sinhalese characters, should be Sena II, so that the existence of a Buddhist temple at Sigiriya as late as the beginning of the tenth century AD is assured.\textsuperscript{184} In addition, to the west of Sigiriya, an image made of brick has been found at the place called Pidurangala and a second brick statue of Buddha which is supposed to have been built during the tenth century AD\textsuperscript{185} are other factors that support the view that even after the period of king Kassapa this place continued in use. All these facts reveal that there were monasteries in Sigiriya during the ancient period belonging not only to the Dhammaruchi and Sagalika sects, but also to the Mahavihara and Abhayagiri faction.\textsuperscript{186}

Besides these religious affiliations of the site, it is conspicuous that during the post Kassapa period, precisely during the reign of Sangatissa II (611 AD) the king, his son and minister were victimised at Sigiriya as a result of an assassination perpetrated by

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\textsuperscript{182} HT Basnayake, \textit{Sigiriya in history and archaeology}, Seminar on Sigiriya 15\textsuperscript{th} October 1983, Organised by the Central Cultural Fund and the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, mimeograph, p.6.
\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Epigraphia Zeylanica}, Vol.I, No.8, p.213 ff.
\textsuperscript{184} HCP Bell, “Interim report on the operations of the archaeological survey at Sigiriya, 1897,” \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)}, Vol.XV, No.48, 1897, p.100.
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Moggallana III. Similarly, Silameghavanna (617-626) had killed Moggallana III at Sigiriya. Undoubtedly, these references indicate that the site of Sigiriya served in turn as a fortress and monastery according to the changing times. Besides all these factors, by about the seventh or eighth century AD, it appears that Sigiriya was not only a centre of religious and political activities thus discussed above, but also a place for pleasure seekers i.e. visitors to the rock and the paintings therein. This change is clearly indicated by the graffiti on the mirror wall of Sigiriya, which will be discussed later.

Apart from this nature or the historicity of the site, when considering the paintings extant there, it is apparent that in the Chronicles, quite apart from the chronology of the murals any mention about Sigiriya itself is comparatively rare. As a result, the problem of chronology of these paintings cannot be easily resolved. But, according to the information given in the verses of the mirror wall of Sigiriya and the description given in the Culavamsa regarding Kassapa’s reign one can roughly estimate that these paintings

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188 Ibid, chap 44; 6-61vv.
190 According to the story given in the Culavamsa, king Datusena who ascended the throne of the island in the fifth century AD had two sons, one named Moggallana, born of the anointed queen and the other, Kassapa by a consort of lesser rank. The commander in chief of the Army of Datusena plotted with Kassapa to bring about Datusena’s downfall. They undermined the loyalty of the people towards their sovereign, seized power, and kept the king a prisoner. The rightful prince Moggallana escaped to India. The Commander in chief having persuaded Kassapa that Datusena had concealed his treasures for the benefit of the exiled prince, received orders to have the king put to death. Datusena thus ended his days by being welled up in a room. Kassapa though he was firmly established on the throne, lived in fear of the day of reckoning: the return of Moggallana with military aid from India. He therefore wished to build for himself a stronghold where he could hold out against adversaries in time of danger and found Sigiriya to be a suitable place for this purpose. He collected treasures and kept them well-protected and set guards in different places. Then he built there a fine palace, worthy to behold, like another Alakamada and dwelt there alike Kuvera. Culavamsa, tr. W. Geiger, Pali Text Society, Oxford University Press, London, Vol.1, 1925, p.43.
belonged to the fifth century AD. Brown, Wijesekara and many other scholars have also accepted this chronology.

Nevertheless, according to the description given above it is clear that apart from Kassapa’s large-scale interference, many activities had been undertaken at the site during both the pre and post Kassapa periods. In addition, it is questionable if the ruins at Sigiriya had been completed during Kassapa’s seventeen year reign judging, from the speed of construction, labour and contemporary technological knowledge etc. In fact, it is impossible, when one surveys the ruins of Sigiriya, to believe that they can all have been the work of seventeen years, the duration of Kassapa’s reign. This is further substantiated by the fact that the recent excavations at Sigiriya have also revealed a series of developments extending from the third and second centuries BC to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD at the site. In addition, it is significant that periodic extensions of drip-ledges and deepening of rock shelters, successive layers of plaster and paintings and at least five or six re-constructions of the walled extensions and the internal

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195 Senaka Bandaranayake, Sigiriya project: First archaeological excavation and research report (January-September, 1982), Colombo, 1984, pp. 6, 48-65. One of the most important finds from Sigiriya is a collection of 1667 coins all but 12 of which are Roman coins. These coins, very worn obviously from long use, reveal to us the interesting information that Roman coins were much in use in the country about the 5th century AD. WB Marcus Fernando, Sigiriya, Archaeological Department, Colombo, 1967, p.17.
partitions\textsuperscript{196} all indicate that Sigiriya had been used even in later times. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that at least a part of the paintings at the site had been executed during a period after Kassapa's regime. According to all these reasons Longhurst's opinion is quite acceptable that the Sigiriya paintings are of the seventh century AD.\textsuperscript{197} It is to be noted that Paranavitana also changed his earlier opinion mentioned above that they belonged to the fifth century AD and arrived at the conclusion that these were the products of the seventh century AD, particularly on the basis of information available in the graffiti of the mirror wall at Sigiriya.\textsuperscript{198} Hence, it is necessary to focus attention on the ancient graffiti at the site, which will be helpful to sort the chronology of the paintings at least to a certain extent.

Around 685 graffiti are located some forty-two feet below the extant paintings, on a wall\textsuperscript{199} that flanks the main path leading to the summit. These graffiti undoubtedly reveal that the site was sometimes thronged with visitors\textsuperscript{200} and consequently, the graffiti contains numerous names of the authors of the verses and their places of residence in various parts of the island. It is obvious then that various people from different walks of

\textsuperscript{198} See S Paranavitana, \textit{Sigiri Graffiti}, Government Press, Colombo, (reprinted) 1983, introduction. The paintings of Sigiriya have preoccupied visitors to the place over many centuries. After the abandonment of the royal palace and after establishment of a monastery in the boulder gardens of Sigiriya to the western side of the rock, this place became a pilgrimage site for the visitors. The visitors composed poems addressed a majority to the women of the paintings and inscribed these poems on the well-polished surface of the mirror wall as it is called today. These are known as the Sigiri Graffiti and dating from about the sixth to the thirteenth century AD.
\textsuperscript{199} It is very interesting to note that some of these inscriptions refer to this gallery as the mirror wall, a name still suggested today by the polished plaster surface.
life wrote these poems, as is evident from epithets such as king, other administrators, army officer, teacher, clerk, physician, merchant etc. But, it is generally difficult to differentiate the content of the verses on the basis of the identity of the authors. For example, a large group, including at least thirty-five visitors, were Buddhist clerics-novices, ordained monks and elders. Likewise a certain number of verses not authored by monks reveal other worldly and in some cases, specifically Buddhist sentiments. In fact, in a society where on the one hand, Buddhist ideals were widespread and on the other, monks were encouraged to have a wide intellectual horizon, it is not surprising that the monastic voice in the graffiti is not radically differentiated from that of the laity.

It is noteworthy that some of the poets however, have directed their thoughts towards the natural phenomena, the sight of Sigiriya, the difficult ascent, the mirror wall and the courtly buildings on the summit of the rock etc. It is important to note that at least a few poets have not forgotten to turn their minds to the historicity of the place and the magnificent conception of Kassapa too. One such poet says that the king having created this by the excellence of his fortune kept this for you and departed. Another says that a

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201 For instance, graffiti no 667 is written by Sirisangbo Uda (Udaya I (797-801), no. 504 is written by a chief consort queen Sagal of king Sena II (853-887 AD), no.88 is written by a nun from Hunagirivehera. See S Paranavitana, Sigiri Graffiti, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Oxford University Press, London, 1956.
king dwelt according to his pleasure on the mountain-side so inaccessible as this sky; while another says the king departed, having tastefully painted and left on the path the pictures of the lovely fair damsels, for the sake of diverse persons. One poet lauds the glory of the Sigiriya king, which was widespread in the world. Besides these few verses, it is evident that the main theme of the vast majority of poems is the paintings or more particularly the women represented therein as the subject of these murals. This is evident from the fact that at least 97 percent graffiti are specifically concerned about the paintings.

All these graffiti at the site can be dated from 6th to 11th centuries AD and express spontaneously generated feelings. Of these, those that belong to a period from 6th to 7th century AD on palaeographical grounds are very rare and in common with the other Sinhalese stone inscriptions of this period are written in an erratic script difficult of decipherment. Interestingly enough, Sanskrit verses belonging to a rather early period are also extant here. Besides, those belonging to the 8th and 9th centuries AD consist of stanzas, some being even rhymed. But, those belonging to a later period up to 11th century AD are few and not of any particular interest. Thus, although some of the graffiti may be dated, on palaeographical grounds to a period as early as the sixth century AD, yet these older graffiti do not seem to allude to the murals. In fact, the actual references to the figures depicted on the rock do occur in the graffiti, which may be more definitely dated to a period between the 6th and 7th centuries AD.

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206 Ibid, no.179.
207 Ibid, no.206.
208 Ibid, no.205. The poem reads:  
Si raju yassasi - tu bu mululova patsiri  
Nipupul atun asiri - bahumo Sihigiri.
not earlier than 800 AD. Based on this fact, it can be accepted that between the lower limit of 600 AD and the upper limit of 800 AD stretches a period of two centuries within which the paintings could have been executed. Even in this period very little information is available, but evidence is not completely lacking to effect a possible reduction in this date.

Besides its chronology, when considering the location of the paintings at the site, it is apparent that on the main rock which is about 1182 feet in height, a plaster was made in a cavity some 42 feet above the floor of the gallery, protecting it from the natural elements of the sun’s rays, rain and winds and the paintings have been executed as single and double rows of female figures. It is noteworthy that for the protection of these paintings, a drip-line was cut about 100 feet above the floor of the gallery wall. But, unlike some of the other painting sites in the island the place where the paintings are located can by no means be described as caves and there was no access to it in ancient days. Hence, a winding staircase, recently installed, gives access to this cavity- the ‘fresco pocket’ as it is usually called. It is thus evident that with regard to their location as well as their subject matter which will be discussed in the sixth chapter in detail, the Sigiriya paintings belong to an unique class made by themselves and are not paralleled by any other pictorial remains in India or Sri Lanka, during the ancient period. In other words, while paintings at other

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212 The painting in the cavity some 42 feet above the floor of the gallery. In ancient days there was no means of access to the place where these paintings are now preserved. See S Paranavitana, Sigiri Graffiti, Government Press, Colombo, (reprinted) 1983, Introduction, p.v. Hence, a winding staircase has been installed in 1930s give access to the cavity of the ‘fresco pocket.’ See Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Reports, 1930-31, p.9.
sites of the two countries are executed on the walls of caves or buildings or on similar grounds, those at Sigiriya are drawn on the vertical western face of an almost unscalable rock, above the surrounding ground\textsuperscript{214} (Plate I).

Besides this dramatic location, a special feature is the painting of the lower parts as if covered by the clouds in order to exhibit only the upper part of the female figures. Interestingly enough the graffiti generally ascribed to the period of ninth and tenth centuries AD refer to five hundred such golden coloured ladies on the rock face.\textsuperscript{215} This number may not be exact, but there is general acceptance that in ancient days there were considerably more than hundred female figures, very much like those still to be seen. Accordingly, this evidence certainly helps us to conclude that the figures in the cavity are but a small fraction of a large number of similar figures that adorned the western face of the rock. Only those in the cavity have escaped the ravages of time, as they were adequately sheltered from the elements.\textsuperscript{216} In this assumption, it is to be noted that the drip-ledges and prepared rock surface, as also patches of lime plaster and pigments still adhering to the rock here and there indicate that the paintings continued along the north face too, on either side of the lion staircase. Accordingly, the painting area seems to have extended to the northeastern corner of the rock, covering thereby an area nearly 140 metres long and 40 metres high.\textsuperscript{217} Hence, as Still concluded in the first decade of the last

\textsuperscript{214} S Paranavitana, "The significance of the paintings of Sigiri," \textit{Artibus Asiae}, Vol.XXIV, Ascona, Switzerland, p.382.
century, the whole face of the hill appears to have been a gigantic picture gallery during ancient days.\textsuperscript{218}

But, at present there are only about twenty-two of them remaining, including a fragmentary figure\textsuperscript{219} and another incomplete figure has also been found in ‘fresco pocket B’ at the site.\textsuperscript{220} Nevertheless, it is to be noted that these paintings of female figures at Sigiriya have not been confined to one place alone. They have been painted at about six places on the rock very close to each other and there are traces to show that plaster has been used around them probably an indication of the affiliation of each other. In this connection, it is stated in the Annual Reports of the Department of Archaeology that at the time of the first discovery of these paintings at the end of the nineteenth century AD, they were painted at least in the ‘fresco pockets’ marked A, B, D and E 5, 17, 1 and a piece of painting respectively.\textsuperscript{221}

In addition to the paintings in these pockets of the main rock, it is significant that a number of caves at the foot of the rock in the area that formed the boulder gardens also contained paintings. Of these, the large boulder and the smaller rocks at Sigiriya were dressed with a sharp drip-ledge, cut above the area that the painters intended to plaster and sketch. The smaller rocks were converted into rooms for living and in these instances it was the ceiling and the interior walls that were painted. The site of Sigiriya was, therefore, both

\textsuperscript{218} John Still, \textit{Ancient capitals of Ceylon}, Colombo, 1907, p.43.
\textsuperscript{219} S. Paranavitana, “Arts and crafts,” \textit{Anuradhapura era}, ed. Amaradasa Liyanagamage and Ranaweera Gunawardana, Vidyalankara University Press, Kelaniya, 1961, p.175. Nevertheless Wijesekara wrongly interpreted that at least 29 paintings have been discovered at the site. See Nandadeva Wijesekara, \textit{Ancient paintings and sculpture of Ceylon}, Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo, 1962, p.10.
\textsuperscript{221} Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report, 1896. Of these, eighteen figures are clearly discernible i.e. twelve relatively well preserved, four partly preserved and two partly damaged due to vandalism and the rest of the figures are extremely fragmentary nature.
an open and sheltered display of fine paintings of the ancient period. Interestingly enough nearly thirty such rock shelters, located among the boulders which cluster round the rock of Sigiriya have been found. It is noteworthy that some of these have early rock inscriptions, which bear testimony to their early occupation and some of these caves carry several layers of paintings on the canopies. It is quite possible that the bottom layers of paintings on these are contemporary with the time when religious recluse first made their abode in the caves.

However, significant fragments of paintings can still be seen at least in five of these, while many of the others contain some traces of plaster and pigments indicating an extensive complex of painted caves. Among these, the most important painting remnants still survive in the three caves of Asana (cave no.1), Deraniyagala (no.7) and Cobrahood (no.9). Of these, in cave no.1 there are traces of few layers of plasters, which indicate at least three or four phases of activity. Although the chronology of these layers is uncertain, graffiti superimposed upon some of these dates them to the twelfth or thirteenth century AD. It is remarkable that in cave no 7, there are traces of several female figures carrying flowers and moving amidst clouds, very similar to the ladies painted on the main rock mentioned above. Several subsequent layers of paintings can also be seen in this cave and Deraniyagala has successfully identified four or five such

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225 Ibid, p.33.
superimposed layers. Meanwhile, the Cobrahood cave contains some early donative Brahmi inscriptions and the most extraordinary murals are the remains of paintings on the ceiling. These combine geometrical shapes and motifs with a free and complex rendering of characteristic volute.

Accordingly, it is obvious that the paintings in the boulder garden area of Sigirya though vestigial in character provide very important evidence for the continuation of the 'Sigirya tradition' at least over a few centuries. Recent archaeological excavations have also shown several post-fifth century phases of occupation in the rock shelters in this area, continuing until as late as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD. This situation is paralleled by the above-mentioned layers of plasters and paintings that provide evidence of several successive phases of activity. In this context, it is obvious that at least four phases of activities of the caves can be identified. Specifically: 1. Painting of the caves of Asana, Deraniyagala and Cobrahood, which belong to fifth and sixth centuries AD. 2. Re-paintings of Deraniyagala cave and some paintings of the boulder archway. 3. Some line drawings in cave no 1 and lime wash in Deraniyagala cave. 4. The uppermost layer of paintings of cave no 1, which belong to a period much later than any of the previous phases. They constitute a rather impoverished expression of the Sigirya tradition perhaps belonging to the last phase of occupation in the area during the middle historical period, possibly dating from a time between the 10th and the 13th century AD.

229 Senaka Bandaranayake, The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka, Lake House Bookshop, Colombo, 1986, pp.33-34. For the almost similar identification of another scholar please refer to Albert Dharmasiri, “The painters and the paintings of the school of Sigiri,” Seminar paper on Sigirya seminar 15th October 1983. He proposes at least three phases of paintings available at Sigirya i.e. Phase I: the paintings of the
In contrast, when comparing important similarities and dissimilarities of the murals
of these caves to the paintings upon the main rock, the similarities of the plasters and the
materials employed, including the pigments except in rare cases are conspicuous.
Similarly, the faces are also mostly in three-quarter view. The pyramidal coiffeur with
petal-like decorations and disc-like earrings; the series of forearm bracelets; the necklaces
and the fan like free end of the waist sash; the exaggerated breasts and the position of the
arms with the left usually crossing the body and the hands holding flowers and forming
mudras; the linear shading as well as flat wash and modelling with the aid of colour are
common to both. Besides, the major differences between these murals of the caves and the
main rock are: the use of bright cobalt blue and purplish grey pigments; the more skilful
use of colour in modelling; the emphasis on modelling and comparative reduction of the
heavy outline; the presence of the lower parts of the body; the strong action displayed by
some of the paintings with legs; the closer grouping of the figures; some figures being
shown with the body in full front view; and the somewhat smaller size of the figures etc. 230

**Vessagiriy**:

The ancient Buddhist monastery of Vessagiriy in Anuradhapura on the eastern
side of the road to Kurunagala is known by the popular name of Isurumuniya. 231 It is
generally believed that the site was founded by king Devanampiyatissa (247- 207 BC) at

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the place where 500 disciples under the prince Arita dwelt after their conversion by Mahinda thero. However, there are numerous ancient ruined buildings on and around two large rock outcrops aligned roughly north south which also shelter several caves with donative inscriptions dated to the second century BC in Brahmi characters. It is recorded that king Vasabha (67-11 AD) built the Uposata hall and Voharika Tissa (209-231 AD) built a wall at the site. In addition, it was mentioned above that during the fifth century AD king Kassapa I of Sigiriya enlarged the temple, endowed it and re-named, after his two daughters and himself, as Bodhi Uppalavanna Kasabagiri temple. This is confirmed by inscriptions of the sixth and seventh centuries AD in situ in which the temple is referred to as Boya Opulavana Kasabagiri temple. Hereafter, the chronicle also refers to the temple as Kassapagiri temple. However, as in the case of other painting sites, this was also in the thick jungle when the archaeological department acquired it in 1900.

It is obvious that there are several caves at Vessagiriya. Of these, on the rock wall of cave no 9 may yet be seen, though very greatly weathered, the outline of a female figure measuring 1X1 painted in yellow with dashes of red here and there and a touch of green. The figure is seated, resting on her left palm with the right leg crossed horizontally. The

233 Edward Muller, Ancient inscriptions in Ceylon, Asian Educational Series, New Delhi, 1984, p.33.
lady has her left leg raised and knee bent and is emphasising an animated discourse by the
half outstretched left arm and hand with open palm. Besides, a smaller figure- a prince
with jewelled headdress, armlets etc is just distinguishable on the worn plaster of cave no
10. This figure measures 2 feet by 1 feet 6 inch and is coloured in red and yellow.238 Although the precise evidence of the chronology of these murals are not
available, since the modern graffiti or the recent visitors' scribbling was found on these
paintings, at the beginning of the 1970s, these were cleaned off and a fixative of paraloid
dissolved in action was applied. During this restoration work another preceding layer of
painting was also discovered.239

Hindagala:

Hindagala is also an important ancient painting site situated about six miles to the
south west of Kandy of the central province.240 Thus, the location of Hindagala monastery
itself is significant since almost all the other painting sites are located in and around
Anuradhapura or Polonnaruva where the ancient capitals were located. Although the post
Brahmi inscriptions found there confirms the historicity of the place, unfortunately no
other historical evidence is available.241 Of these, the older epigraph datable to the sixth
century AD refers to the construction of a Bodhi tree shrine and the other inscription on
the terrace, datable to the seventh century AD on palaeographical evidence, is

241 S Paranavitana, "The Hindagala rock inscriptions," University of Ceylon Review, Ceylon University
But, it is evident that these two inscriptions at the site do not refer to the paintings therein by any means. Subsequently, the Hindagala temple is said to have been included in the list of restorations done by queen Henakanda, the wife of king Bhuvanekabahu IV of Gampola kingdom during the 14th century AD. This seems an important place where it is believed that the Tooth relic was kept for one day for protection while being taken in procession from Pusulpitiya to Kandy during the British colonial period. This incident establishes the fact that Hindagala had remained an important temple even at the time of British occupation of the island.

It is generally believed that the main theme of the paintings of the site was Indra's visit to Buddha in the Indasala cave as discussed in the sixth chapter in detail. Based on this belief, Paranavitana thinks that it is not impossible that the name Hindagala is derived from the word Inda-sala. If so, it may be presumed that the cave, in ancient times, was named after a sacred place in India celebrated in Buddhist legend and that the name of the cave was extended in application to the village. Some other critics also believe that in course of the time the word Indasala could easily become Indagala or Hindagala in the mouth of the peasant.

The ancient paintings of Hindagla executed in plaster cover a large area of the rock that is above the roof of the modern temple. Although it is certain that these paintings belong to an ancient period, yet their chronology has so far not been precisely fixed. For instance, according to scholars like Rowland and Paranavitana, Hindagala paintings also

242 Ibid, pp.1-5.
belong to the Sigiriya era and Joseph believes that they belong to the post Gupta period or to a period between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. Marshall and Foucher also believe that a period very close to the seventh century AD would be a more appropriate date for the painting. Although recent scholars like Bandaranayake have also accepted the date, Wijesekara states that they belong to a period close to the eight-century AD or may be assigned to 800-900 AD. But, according to the view expressed by Coomaraswamy, Hindagala paintings belong to a more recent period precisely, twelfth to fourteenth century AD. Nevertheless, when the costumes and ornaments displayed in these paintings and the analytical investigations of the lines and the colours used are taken into consideration, they display a lesser evolution than Sigiriya. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that they have been executed in a period closer to the seventh century AD.

But, it is obvious that for a very long period, the only protection the paintings had from the flow of rainwater was an ancient drip-ledge cut high up on the sloping rock surface above the paintings. Consequently, it was reported that by the last decade of the nineteenth century, only twelve of the paintings of the site were extant on account of

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249 He stated that it has features that are not seen in the Sigiriya paintings and only very partially in the fragmentary compositions of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva periods. Senaka Bandaranayake, The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka, Lake House Bookshop, Colombo, 1986, p.39.

250 Nandadeva Wijesekara, Early Sinhalese painting, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959, plates, 26 and 27.

251 Ibid, p.106.


253 Ananda Coomaraswamy, Introduction to Indian art, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishing House, Delhi, (reprinted) 1966, p.69. This has been accepted by some later scholars also. See Rowland Silva and others, Cultural treasures of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1973, (no page numbers) See. Painting section.
exposure to the elements,\textsuperscript{254} though it is evident that even until the year 1918 these paintings were well protected.\textsuperscript{255} But unfortunately on the 30\textsuperscript{th} January 1965, there was a fire in the long grass on the adjacent hillside close to the roof of the veranda of the temple, which had been covered with cadjans prior to conservation work by the archaeological department. The roofing caught fire and heat and soot from the conflagration caused flaking of the rock surface near by and the deposition of a blanket of carbon on the rock above the roof and the paintings higher up.\textsuperscript{256} As a result we know these murals today only from the facsimile copy in the National Museum of Colombo and from the early photographs of the paintings as in the case of the murals of Bagh caves of India.

\textbf{Gonagolla:}

Unlike other painting sites of the island, a painting found on an outer surface of a cave at Gonagolla, Kotmale colony, Kohombane, in the valley of Galoya in the Ampare district is supposed to date from the ancient period.\textsuperscript{257} Although some parts of the painting are now decayed any analytical investigation into the historicity of Sri Lankan paintings must take this site into consideration. It is to be noted that due to non-availability of direct evidence for working out the chronology of the site, Paranavitana thinks that the painting belongs to a time between the Sigiriya and the Polonnaruva periods.\textsuperscript{258} Kiribamune also

\textsuperscript{254} AC Lawrie, A gazetteer of the Central province of Ceylon, Government Printing Press, Colombo, 1890, p.350.
\textsuperscript{258} DB Dhanapala and Mahanama Dissanayake, The story of Sinhalese paintings, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1958, p.3.
believes that this assumption is correct since costumes and ornaments portrayed there depict an ancient style. Though the chronology of Paranavitana was thus based on the rock inscription found in the vicinity, Dhanapala dates the painting to the third century AD according to the inscriptions found therein. Quite differently, Bandaranayake suggests that they belong to the period from fifth century to seven century AD.

Besides, scholars like Wijesekara who hold a completely different view argue that the paintings of Gonagolla are indicative of the style of the Polonnaruva period and could belong to a period closer to the fourteenth century AD. Nevertheless, it is evident that the paintings contain traditional features hitherto not found anywhere in Sri Lanka and could belong to a period more ancient than the Polonnaruva period since in style, they have some similarity to the paintings in the Pulligoda cave of Dimbulagala. Taking into consideration all these facts, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Gonagolla paintings had been finalised in a period around eighth-century AD though the precise evidence is not available.

**Pulligoda cave – Dimbulagala:**

Some parts of wall paintings belonging to the ancient period have been found at Dimbulagala near Polonnaruva in the Tamankaduva area of the north central province. Geographically, Dimbulagala is a small mountain in the southern valley of the river

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259 Personal communication.
263 SP Charls, “Painting, sculpture and carvings,” Mahavali vamsaya, ed. TBM Abayasinghe and others, State Printing Corporation, Colombo, 1985, p.484.
Mahavali near ancient Mahagantota or Kaccakatitta. In the ancient period, this mountain had been known as the Dumarakkata Pabbata or Udumbaragiri, or alternatively as Gunners Quoin. Although the foundation of the temple is not recorded, the numerous inscriptions in many of the caves on its slopes establish its origin late in the third or early in the second century BC. Consequently, ruins at the site date between 300 BC and 1200 AD. It is evident that a number of pious and erudite Buddhist monks dwelling there won international fame. Among them, in the twelfth century AD, Dimbulagala Mahakassapa thero played a leading role in the propagation of Buddhism in the South East Asian region.

In addition, king Parakkramabahu I (1153-1186) carried out a purge of the religious order with the help of Mahathera Kassapa of Udumbaragiri (Dimbulagala). However, ancient paintings survive in a cave at Pulligoda Galkanda situated about one kilometre to the south of Dimbulagala. This cave contains faint traces of a king and five male figures, with high headdresses, in an attitude of adoration (Plate III). Many scholars date these paintings to the seventh and eighth centuries AD though they constitute a stage of stylistic evolution somewhat less than midway between Sigiriya and

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the paintings of the Polonnaruva epoch. Yet, according to the opinion of Wijesekara they have been finalised somewhere in the twelfth century AD. Nonetheless, de Silva gave technical reasons why the paintings of Pulligoda have similarities to those of the early or middle Anuradhapura period and concluded that they are closer to the seventh century AD than twelfth century AD date.

**Dambulla:**

The antiquity of Dambulla has obviously been proved by the presence of Brahmi inscriptions that belong to a pre-Christian era. These numerous Brahmi inscriptions are found at the foothill of the rock and mostly towards the south and west. These inscriptions, which number more than thirty, range between the 3rd century BC and the second century AD. But, since the Mahavamsa has mentioned this place in association with the reign of Vattagamini Abhaya who was helped by the monks of the monasteries during the time of his dethronement, as a result of the Tamil invasion, the construction of the cave temple has also been popularly attributed to this period. Although the subsequent history of the site is not available it is evident that King Vijayabahu I (1058-1114) restored the place and king Nissankamalla (1187-1196) rebuilt the temple and established the

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monastery. Thus, according to the literary and epigraphical sources, the prolific activities at the cave shrines appear to have taken place during the eleventh and twelfth century AD, when Polonnaruwa was the capital of the island.

There are five main Buddhist shrines at the site and the whole surface of the rock ceilings and the walls of the oldest four caves are completely covered with paintings of the Kandyan tradition that belong to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries AD.\textsuperscript{276} The fifth cave was completely restored in the early years of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{277} But, the ancient painting is believed to be on the roof immediately above the entrance to the central cave\textsuperscript{278} and consists of decorative designs. Ravindra Pandya wrongly dated these paintings of Dambulla caves to the first century BC and further concluded that the murals of the caves are similar to those of Ajanta.\textsuperscript{279} Although they are in a very fragmentary nature, these strongly remind one of their close affinity to Sigiriya ceiling ornamentation and are believed to date to the eighth century AD.\textsuperscript{280} Commaraswamy believed that though these patterns are old, they may belong to a much later period.\textsuperscript{281}

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\textsuperscript{274} Mahavamsa, ed. W. Geiger, Pali Text Society, London, 1912, chap. 33; 71 v.
\textsuperscript{275} Epigraphia Zeylanica, Vol. I, p.121.
\textsuperscript{276} M. Somathilake, A historical study of mural paintings in Buddhist temples during the 18th and 19th centuries of Sri Lanka, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Peradeniya, 1996.
\textsuperscript{280} Nandadeva Wijesekara, Early Sinhalese painting, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1964, pp.7, 22. Nandalal Bose in a private discussion with Wijesekara suggested that the possibility of dating some to a period of one or two centuries after Sigiriya. Ibid, p.22.
\textsuperscript{281} Coomaraswamy, History of Indian and Indonesian Art, London, 1927, p.163.
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Vestibules (Vahalkadas) of Anuradhapura:

The stupa as the principal ritual monument of the ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition is of relevance to this study as a few remnants of paintings survive in association with such stupas of the island. It is particularly to be mentioned here that this tradition is not to be found among the painting sites of India and no such painting has been found at famous sites like Sanchi, Barhut, Amaravati etc where the principal monuments were the stupas. Thus, although this is an important sort of painting of the early tradition unfortunately, protected over the centuries by being buried in earth, debris and vegetation, their exposure by early excavators has often led to their destruction. But fortunately, the remains of painted decorations can still be seen at the dagobas of Ruvanvalisaya, Mirisavatiya, Abhayagiriya and Jetavanaramaya all in Anurhadhapura. Of these, the creepers and figures of dwarf were found at the bottom of the vestibules of the Abhayagiriya stupa. In the same manner series of panels of paintings had been portrayed at other places where not only the colours but also the styles are still faintly discernible. The floral designs painted on a stone slab of the eastern vestibule of Jetavanarama dagoba are very good examples in this respect.

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283 Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report, Government Publications, Colombo, 1894, p.3. The Abhayagiriya temple which is also known as Uttara, Abhanttara, Abhayatura, Abagiri and Bagirivehera etc was founded in 89 BC by king Vattagamini Abhaya who demolished a Nighantha shrine as mention in the ancient literary sources. CW Nicholas, “Historical topography of ancient and medieval Ceylon,” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch), (New Series) Vol.VI, Special number, 1963, p.142.
284 S Paranavitana, “Civilisation of the period: Religion, literature and art,” University of Ceylon History of Ceylon, ed. HC Ray, Ceylon University Press, Colombo, Vol.I, pt. I, 1959, p.409. The recent archaeological excavations at the site also revealed some remnants of paintings on these vestibules. It is to be noted that the Jetavana temple, also called Deanaaka or Dea vihara in Sinhalese inscriptions and literature was founded by Mahasena (275-30 AD) in the Jotivana Park on territory within the precincts of the Mahavihara. The king built it for the Mahathera of Dakkhina temple. The Jetavanarama monks were of the Sagaliya sect, which first established itself at Dakkhina temple in the year 253 AD. CW Nicholas, “Historical topography of ancient
Thus, it is evident that the brick superstructures of these frontispieces were embellished with painted decorations as shown by the discoveries at Mirisavatiya dagoba; and it is possible that the Ruvanvali dagoba as well as all the other dagobas at Anuradhapura, were, originally, profusely adorned with paintings, presenting innumerable subjects for the contemplation of devotees. Of such paintings, the four decorative designs discovered from a vestibule situated to the east of Ruvanvalisaya are significant. It is evident that the whole surface of these structures was covered with an exceedingly thin coating of fine lime and decorated with paintings in distemper. Indistinct traces of painting remain upon the face of the stonework in several places; but upon a portion of the eastern frontispiece it is sufficiently perfect to indicate the style of ornamentation adopted, though even here, it is very much defaced and some portions are entirely obliterated. On the other portions of the stonework of this frontispiece and upon that on the south side of the dagoba, are the remains of paintings very similar to those described above, but all so much defaced that an intelligible description of them is impossible. However, it is evident that the utmost variety of design has been everywhere the aim of the artist, no two patterns or subjects being precisely alike.

It is believed that the probability is that they were executed by artists who were better able to draw foliage and flowers than human figures, i.e. just before the last overthrow of the dagoba therefore not earlier than the fourteenth century AD. But there can

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be little doubt that the general arrangement of patterns and subjects originally adopted was followed in the several restorations, which were undertaken from time to time.\textsuperscript{288} Although Bandaranayaka accepted the above chronology,\textsuperscript{289} Smith believes that they may belong to any period between the sixth and the eighth centuries AD.\textsuperscript{290} But it should not be forgotten that since evidently various devotees renovated these dagobas from time to time, not only the precise chronology of the paintings but also the chronology of the stupas themselves is difficult.

\textbf{The relic chamber of Mihintale stupa:}

It was mentioned above that the dagoba was a ritual monument of ancient Sri Lanka. As a result, unlike in India, some remnants of paintings have been found even in the inner relic chambers of certain ancient stupas of the island. One of the best examples of this is a part of a painting, which has been found in a stupa at Mihintale situated about eight miles to the east of Anuradhapura, probably belonging to the post Anuradhapura period. In fact, Mihintalaya, the history of which undoubtedly runs as far back as the reign of king Devanampiyatissa of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century BC, is a very ancient place of worship.\textsuperscript{291} During ancient times, this place was known as Missakapabbata, Ambastalaya or Mihintalaya and it is evident that during the time of compilation of the Buddhist commentaries, it had also

\textsuperscript{288} Ibid, p.41.
\textsuperscript{289} Senaka Bandaranayake, The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka, Lake House Bookshop, Colombo, 1986, p.73.
\textsuperscript{290} VA Smith, History of fine arts in India and Ceylon, Clarendon Press, London, 1930, p.112.
\textsuperscript{291} Edward Muller, Ancient inscriptions in Ceylon, Asian Educational Series, New Delhi, 1984, pp.33-34.
been known as Cetiyagiriya, and Sagiriya. Mihintalaya may have been known by these names probably because of a large number of dagobas erected there.

Of these, in the excavation of a dagoba situated to the left of the main flight of steps and east of the Kantaka cetiya, paintings were found on the inner surface of the plastered brickwork walls of the upper and lower relic chambers, both of which had been ransacked by treasure hunters. Unfortunately, in the years during which the chamber was exposed to the elements after the rifling of the stupa, the sides had fallen and of the numerous life-size, painted figures, which adorned the walls of the chamber, only the portions below the knee in the upper relic chamber were now left for examination. Providentially, remains of twenty-eight such portions of figures are clearly recognisable. In this respect, the lower relic vault is in a better state of preservation and the paintings of this chamber depict divine beings among clouds, the lower parts of their bodies being cut off (Plate IV).

It is to be noted at this point that in the chronicles, it is stated that when the dagobas were constructed wall paintings were executed in the relic chambers which fact is firmly established and confirmed by these findings. In addition, these paintings are of interest in that they show that the figures in the Sigiriya paintings had been cut below the waist by the clouds on purpose and not, as some early scholars try to maintain, due to the unevenness of

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294 S Paranavitana, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report, Government Publication Colombo, 1951, pp. 23-24. As with all relic chambers, this was one of the several-usually three compartments, located one above the other in the Centre of a solid mass of brick masonry, which form the dome of the dagoba.
the rock surface as discussed in the sixth chapter in detail. Similarly, against a possible contention that what we see in the chamber is all that the artists intended to complete and that the paintings are impressionistic sketches, is the presence of a vertical line dividing each scene into two, a line which must have been drawn by the artist as an aid to a balanced grouping of the figures\textsuperscript{297} (Plate IV). However, it is evident that these are intentionally unfinished perhaps for reasons of economy or time, but were obviously considered adequate for the ritual functions that they performed.\textsuperscript{298}

It is generally believed that the date of these paintings of the relic vault of Mihintale dagoba must be the same as that of the original foundation of the stupa, for there is no evidence that it had been rebuilt subsequently. In this context, it is reasonable to assume that the \textit{yupa} pillar is also of the same date as the chamber of the stupa and on one facet of the \textit{yupa} can be seen the Sinhalese letter '\textit{Pe},' perhaps the abbreviation of the word \textit{pere} 'east' incised as a masons' mark. The form of this letter is that which was in vogue in the eighth century AD. This may, therefore, be taken as evidence that the stupa and the paintings found therein belong to that period.\textsuperscript{299} Many scholars have also accepted this chronology as the actual dates of the murals\textsuperscript{300} and at present, they have been placed for exhibition in the museums of Archaeology at Anuradhapura and Mihintale.

\textsuperscript{300} For instance, see D.B. Dhanapala, \textit{Buddhist paintings from shrines and temples in Ceylon}, Collins, London, 1964, p.17.
The relic chamber of Mahiyanganaya stupa:

As in the case of the murals of Mihintalaya stupa, fragments of some wall paintings supposed to belong to the ancient period have been found in the relic chamber of Mahiyangana Dagoba.\textsuperscript{301} This stupa is situated on the right bank of the river Mahavali just at the place where the river joins the Laggala stream which is about 10 miles to the north in Bintanna area of Uva province. Today this area is known as Alutnuwara. According to the Chronicles, the traditional belief is that the Buddha visited the site in the ninth year of his enlightenment to subdue the Yakkhas, though historians have disputed this.\textsuperscript{302} It is also believed that the site of the present Dagoba marks the spot where the Buddha is said to have preached his first sermon on the island. It is further said that on that particular occasion god Saman received the sacred hair relic from the Buddha's head and it had been deposited in the stupa at the site.\textsuperscript{303} In addition, it is stated that the relic chamber of the stupa contains the collarbone of Buddha, which was rescued from the funeral pyre.\textsuperscript{304} Thus, it is evident that though the history of the Mahiyangana dagoba dates as far back as the 6\textsuperscript{th} century BC, the date of the legendary Mahiyangana stupa continues to be debated. But, it is undeniable that the site was an important religious centre during the ancient period.\textsuperscript{305}

It is recorded that in 1950 the archaeological department began conservation at the site and found the relic chambers of the dagoba. The repository was closed with three

\textsuperscript{304} \textit{Ibid}, chap. 1; 37-39vv.
\textsuperscript{305} For the historicity of the site of Mahiyanganaya from ancient times upto modern period please refer to Maureen Senaviratna, \textit{Some Mahavamsa places or history happened here}, Lake House Investments, Colombo, 1974, pp.127-150.
large stone slabs surviving as the lid. It was a square vault 4X4 feet with paintings on the inner surface of its walls. Most of them had peeled off and fallen to the floor of the vault. Pieces of plaster containing paintings were carefully removed and restored\textsuperscript{306} (Plates V and VI). In fact, this is the first instance when paintings were found in a relic chamber of an ancient dagoba. It was mentioned above that this discovery substantiated the claim made in the \textit{Mahavamsa} that in the second century BC paintings were drawn in the relic chamber of the Mahatupa. Such paintings can be of importance as recording an interesting aspect of the practice of Buddhism in ancient Sri Lanka and certainly they give a special meaning to Buddhist worship since the paintings virtually amount to a recreation of the life of the Buddha.\textsuperscript{307} However, according to both these paintings found at relic chambers of Mihintale and Mahiyanganaya stupas, it is obvious that the aspirations of some of the Buddhist mural paintings of the ancient period of Sri Lanka had been somewhat different to what it is today, since after the closure of the relic chamber and the construction of the stupa on it, no one would be able to have a look at these paintings (Plate VII). It is interesting, thus in spite of the fact that these paintings were not meant to be viewed, the artist has given much attention to the delineation of form and to effective colouring\textsuperscript{308} (Plates V, VI and VIII).

When considering the chronology of the relic chamber of the Mahiyangana stupa, which contains these paintings, it may be mentioned that in the \textit{Tupavamsa} this stupa is referred to as having undergone renovations at the hands of Sarabu Thero, prince

Chulabhaya, and king Dutugamunu (161-131 BC). In addition, since this place is an important site to the Buddhists, many devout kings made donations and renovations at the place from earliest time to at least the fifteenth century AD. Therefore, even from the literary sources it is difficult to know precisely the chronology of the paintings in the relic chamber of the dagoba at the site. But, among the antiquities found in the relic vault of the dagoba, there was a silver coin belonging to the period of Rajendra Cola (1014-1144) and there was no object belonging to a date later than the reign of Vijayabahu I (1058-1114 AD). Hence, based on these findings, it can be surmised that this relic vault belonged to the eleventh century AD. It is evident that scholars like Ward, Dhanapala and Wijesekara also accept the date proposed by Paranavitana, though de Silva believes that these murals belong to the period between the sixth and the eighth centuries AD. Quite differently, Bandaranayake is of the opinion that these belong to the period between the ninth and tenth centuries AD. But, it should not be forgotten that there is an ambiguity regarding the dating of these murals. In support of the proposition that the paintings were older than the latest in date of the objects found in the relic chamber, Paranavitana drew attention to a repair on the painted plaster which was done in a different material and was not coloured. For this

reason, he suggested that the damage to the paintings was repaired at a later time. Accordingly, it is probable that the relic chamber itself and the paintings may belong to an earlier unrecorded restoration during the late Anuradhapura period perhaps during the reign of Vijayabahu I. Supporting this conclusion is the statement in the Culavamsa that the Mahiyangana temple was restored by Vijayabahu I. It is to be noted at this point that the relic chamber and its paintings did not suffer much in the interval and that those who rebuilt the stupa repaired such damage as it had sustained and closed it after making their own deposits. However, as in the case of the relic chamber paintings of Mihintale stupa, at present, these murals are also kept for exhibition at the museum of the department of archaeology at Anuradhapura.

Sutigara cetiya, Dadigama:

The Sutigara cetiya is situated in Dadigama, Kegalla District of the province of Sabaragamuva. As in the case of Hindagala, this is also an important site since almost all the other painting sites are located in and around the two ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva. Although there is evidence that the historicity of the place dates to the second century AD, the history of the subsequent period of the site is not available. But, Culavamsa states that king Parakkramabahu I (1153-1186) built Sutigara dagoba on the
site of Punkagama where the king was born\textsuperscript{320} and this has been correctly identified as the present Dadigama Village.\textsuperscript{321} Accordingly, it is clear that the dagoba had been erected during the twelfth century AD.

When attention is focussed on the paintings at the site, it is to be noted that as excavations were carried out from the summit of the dagoba downwards, several relic chambers were discovered. At the level of the third ledge, the second relic chamber surrounded by a suite of another eight relic chambers was discovered. On some of the walls of these chambers, there were some outlines of a more finished and deliberate status of paintings.\textsuperscript{322} Faint traces of these paintings survive in outline drawings in red ochre, which colour seems to have been uniformly used except in one instance. The drawings were varied, there being human, animal, vegetable motifs. In the southeastern chamber was the figure of a monk holding an open lotus in one hand and a tray of flowers in the other. In the other chambers bejewelled females have been delineated, some with ornate head dress. The paintings, which were very fragmentary, occupied only the upper section of the wall surface running, as it were, along a band. One surface of the northwestern chamber was solely occupied by the representation of a large three-hooded cobra in coarser line work; it was in white.\textsuperscript{323} But, unfortunately all these were so fragile that they faded away shortly

after the chamber was opened. Consequently, details cannot be obtained in this regard today.

Northern (Tivamka) temple of Polonnaruva:

Of the Sri Lankan sites, where wall paintings of the ancient period remain, the northern temple occupies an important position since the greatest number of wall paintings not only those of the Polonnaruva period but also those of the whole island are kept preserved. It is apparent that the Culavamsa carries historical accounts of the Tivamka image house, which belongs to the Jetavanaramaya, incorrectly called either Demalamahasaya or Veluvanarama temple, by the writers of the 19th century as well as at the beginning of the 20th century. According to these accounts given in the Culavamsa, king Parakramabahu I (1155-1186 AD) built an image house for a Tivamka statue. In fact, this shrine is called the ‘Tivamka image house’ after the erection of a large ‘tribanga’ Buddha statue, which is the chief object of the shrine even today. Culavamsa further states that the image house contained groups of figures of lion, the Kinnara and the swan. Fortunately, some of these figures can still be seen at the site. It is also recorded in the

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Culavamsa that this temple at the beginning comprised of several storeys and the ruins of the granite pillars planted there supported the upper storey and also a part of the flight of steps, leading towards the upper floor, still to be seen by the side. As this identification is in conformity with the accounts in the Culavamsa, there is no doubt that this monument, which is called the Tivamka image house is the same sanctum attributed to king Parakramabahu I.

However, it was reported that the roof of the Tivamka image house had collapsed during the latter part of the 19th century and in 1885-86, Burrows did some excavations to uncover the building. Consequently, he discovered two large panels of paintings in fair preservation. But, he was unable to remove all the debris that had piled up. Besides, though the tunnelling by Burrows revealed the paintings, unfortunately it exposed them greatly to the natural elements. Subsequently, the wall paintings of the northern temple caught the eye of Bell, the first archaeological commissioner of the island and these were then in a protected state to a considerable extent. Afterwards, it was reported that when Longhurst was serving as the archaeological commissioner, he implemented temporary measures to safeguard the Tivamka image house and its paintings. He built a roof of plaited cadjans leaves over the building and applied bee’s wax on the paintings. During these preservation works he discovered that the walls on which these painting had been done, contained two layers of plaster belonging to two distinct stages. Similarly, when the

331 HCP Bell, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Reports, 1909, p.7.
superimposed plaster was removed at a place Hocart also discovered some paintings belonging to an earlier period on the original plaster.\footnote{Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report, Government Publication, Colombo, 1920, pp.1-7.}

A statement recorded in the \textit{Culavamsa} is very important at this stage, since it states that during the rein of king Parakramabahu I this image house was replete with plastering in white and contained floral designs with the figures of gods.\footnote{\textit{Culavamsa}, tr. W Geiger, Pali Text Society, Oxford University Press, London, 1925, Chap. 78; 39-40vv.} As in the case of the animal figures mentioned above these figures of gods and Brahmas also can still be seen at the Tivamka shrine. But, it is to be noted that even though the walls contain paintings today dealing with Jataka stories and the events of the life story of the Buddha, the \textit{Culavamsa} does not mention them at all. Similarly, the early designs in flowers and leaves mentioned in the \textit{Culavamsa} are also not to be seen among the remaining paintings. Hence, it cannot definitely be said that all the paintings now found at the Tivamka shrine were got done by king Parakramabahu I. Particularly, whether the painting series of Jataka stories and the events of the life story of the Buddha can be ascribed to him is extremely doubtful.\footnote{Nanda Wickramasinghe, "Mural paintings: 800-1200 AD," \textit{Archaeological department centenary (1890-1990) commemorative series}, Volume five - Painting, ed. Nandadeva Wijesekara, State Printing Corporation, Colombo, 1990, p.53.}

On the other hand, both those layers of plasters containing the paintings at the shrine cannot in any way belong to the reigning period of king Parakramabahu I alone. Although the lower or the original layer of plaster containing paintings can certainly be considered to have belonged to Parakramabahu’s period, the upper or the second layer of plaster containing paintings must have belonged to a period when the original paintings were decaying. In other words, although the Tivamka image house was constructed and
originally painted during the reign of king Parakkramabahu I, the murals may have been renovated on a plaster of the walls that had been applied during a subsequent period; most probably in the latter part of the Polonnaruva period or somewhere in the thirteenth century AD. It is to be noted at this point that at the beginning of the 13th century AD, the invader Kalinga Magha caused much damage to the buildings and other property at the capital of Polonnaruva. He occupied and ruled there for 22 years from 1215 AD to 1236 AD. Subsequently, the country was liberated by king Parakramabahu II (1236-1270 AD) and he constructed or repaired the buildings destroyed at Polonnaruva by the invaders. Hence, it is possible to argue that the Tivamka image house was also one of such reconstructed buildings at Polonnaruva. It is also probable that on that occasion another layer of fine lime mixed plaster was applied on the original layer of plaster containing early paintings and fresh paintings done on it. Thus it is evident that all the paintings in the Tivamka image house do not necessarily belong to the twelfth century AD alone and some of them may belong to the next century, effected by Parakkramabahu II (1236-1270 AD), in his venture.

335 Nevertheless, Bell has incorrectly identified these paintings as those belonging to the period of King Vijayabahu I (1055-1110). It is obvious that this date is even prior to the erection of the Tivamka shrine. See HCP Bell, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report, 1909, p.7.
to again bring upon Polonnaruva ancient prosperity after a period of neglected and wilful
damage. 338

Accordingly, it can be reasonably suspected that these paintings belong to the
periods of both these kings. 339 Certainly, this chronological difference is evident even in the
two different styles of paintings as represented in the inner and the outer chambers of the
building 340 as discussed in the next chapter in detail. But, unfortunately in recent times, they
have been so much damaged that they cannot even be easily identified. The main cause for
this was their unprotected state from the natural elements for a very long period and this
was further accelerated by the fact that no genuine steps were taken to conserve them until
the 1940s and 1960s. 341

The Galviharaya:

Although minute in comparison with the paintings of the Tivamka image house,
there are remnants of wall paintings belonging to this period at the Galviharaya too, which
is also known as Uttararamaya. 342 It can be surmised that this shrine was thus called the
‘Uttararamaya’ because it was situated to the north of the ancient city of Polonnaruwa. It is

338 S Paranavitana, “Paintings and architecture of the Polonnaruva period,” Polonnaruva period, Special
339 CE Godakumbura, Murals at Tivamka pilimage, Archaeological Department, Colombo, 1969, p.14;
340 Senaka Bandaranayake, The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka, Lake House Bookshop, Colombo,
1986, p.81. He has given three distinctive phases of paintings: i.e. 1. The late classical style of the shrine and
Antarala, dating possibly from the last decade or so of the 12th century AD. 2. The sub classic style and 3. A
post-classic style in the panel from the south wall of the entrance. The last two phases probably date from the
restoration of the late 13th century AD, Ibid, p.87.
341 Mohomed Khan Bahadur Sana Ulla, Report on the treatment of the Sigiriya frescos and suggestions for
the preservation of paintings in the various shrines and old monuments in Ceylon, Ceylon Sessional Paper,
No. XXI, Colombo, 1943; I. Maranzi, Preservation of mural paintings (February – May, 1972), UNESCO
stated in the *Culavamsa* that king Parakkramabahu I (1153-1186 AD) employed skilled artisans, dug the rock and constructed the three caves of Vijjadara, Nisinnapatimaga, and Nipannapatimaga at the site. Thus, since the temple belongs to the twelfth century AD, it can be believed that the paintings of the site also belong to the same period.

A majority of these remaining paintings of the shrine are on two columns about 6X1 foot on plaster found at both the ends of the interior wall of this image house. Although they were in a good state at the time when Bell discovered them, in the first part of the last century during the recent period they do not seem to have been so well protected. Among the well-preserved pieces, a figure of a bearded old man, with a sage looking countenance and holding a flower, probably represents a denizen of the Brahma world. Besides these, there is some insignia of plasters, which help to conclude that the entire wall surface inside the cave was once covered with figures of gods and men as attendants of the Buddha seated on the Vajrasana, carved out of the rock, which must also have been painted originally.

**The Lamkatilaka:**

The Lamkatilaka temple at Polonnaruva is also a place where remnants of paintings of the twelfth century AD are found. King Parakkramabahu I built this image house during the twelfth century AD. As in the case of the Tivamka image house, the temple has been

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343 Ibid, Chap.78; 73v.
been misnamed as Jetavanaramaya\textsuperscript{347} by early writers but is supposed to house the biggest Buddha image in the island.\textsuperscript{348} Although a large number of paintings once existed at the site, these have by now decayed. It is recorded that during the period when they were well protected the walls and the canopies had been ornamented and decorated with creepers and other designs.\textsuperscript{349} Of these, a figure of \textit{narilata} (a mythical climbing plant comprising of half woman and half creeper) painted on the canopy may still be discerned. It is evident that the top of the arch at the temple was also ornamented with paintings but only a very small portion of these remains today. Similarly, in the walls made of bricks there are a number of holes where painting remnants can still be seen and they are said to be older than the above-mentioned paintings of the building.\textsuperscript{350} In addition, some remains of paints found within and outside the temple are an indication that there were paintings both inside and outside the building at the beginning.

**Potgulvehera of Polonnaruva:**

Another building erected by Parakkramabahu I was the Potgul viharaya, where the king was accustomed to sit and listen to the reading of the Jataka stories.\textsuperscript{351} This building consisted of a circular cell, originally painted. It has been accepted that these wall paintings belong to the twelfth century AD and were executed only on the inner walls of the

temple. But, these are in a state of disrepair and cannot be used for analytical purposes by any means.

**Maravidiya of Dimbulagala:**

On the summit of the Dimbulagala rock there is a row of caves known as Maravidiya. Of these, cave nos. 1 and 2 are in a better state of preservation than the rest and had contained paintings. It is evident that a white coating covered the entire wall and there are traces that suggest that there had been paintings covering the whole wall, but now only the external lines drawn with black colour remain. It is evident that there are Brahmi inscriptions in both caves and this establishes the fact that the caves dated back to a period before the 7th century AD. This established that undoubtedly the history of the place goes as far back as many centuries before the Polonnaruva period.

In the second cave, there is an inscription done by Sundaramahadevi, the queen of Wickramabahu (1111-1132) of the Polonnaruva period too. The inscription says that she improved the road between the two caves of Sandamahalena and Hirumahalena and that she got sculptures and dagobas done in those caves. Hence Paranavitana believes that she undertook the paintings of the caves too though there is nothing mentioned in the inscriptions. Instead, Bandaranayake dated them as belonging to the period between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries AD, while others suggest that though the Polonnaruva style is discernible, they are about fifty years older than that period or style.

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Nevertheless, de Silva believes that they belong to the early Anuradhapura period to a time closer to the fifth century AD, based on their technical aspects.\textsuperscript{356}

It is evident from this survey that painting is not to be seen merely as an architectural embellishment, but formed an integral part of the Buddhist religious tradition. This is particularly true of Sri Lanka where paintings have been found in relic chambers within stupas. Since these relic chambers were buried inside the stupas, the paintings were not meant to be viewed. Though in several cases the chronology is debated, most of these ancient Buddhist murals of the two countries are fairly contemporaneous. It had been a common assumption among art critics to suggest that the murals of Sri Lanka of the ancient period are very closely related to, if not directly derived from, those of peninsular India. The above survey makes it quite clear that this is far from being the case and the Sri Lankan murals form an independent tradition to a large extent. This will be examined in the next chapter in detail particularly in the context of the styles of the two traditions.