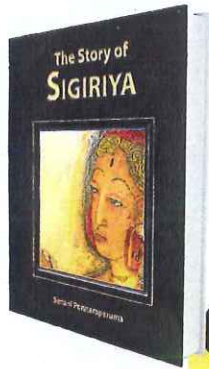


UNEARTHING THE SECRETS OF SIGIRIYA

Senani Ponnampereuma

Launches his book



Australian IT professional and author of Sri Lankan descent Senani Ponnampereuma realised a long held ambition with the publication of his book 'The Story of Sigiriya'. The author's fascination with Sigiriya stemmed from a visit he made to the archeological site as a young lad. His migration to Australia where he has lived for several decades working as an eminent IT professional did not diminish his passion for unearthing the secrets of Sigiriya. During a family visit to the historic monolith a chance remark by his son set the course for Senani to realise his dream of writing about Sigiriya.

By Tina Edward Gunawardhana

What is it about Sigiriya that has fascinated you to write a book on it?

The story of Sigiriya is akin to a Shakespearean tragedy. Here is a story full of passion, palace intrigue, deceit, triumph and tragedy which spurred a ruler, named Kasyapa, nearly 1600 years ago, to focus the energies of his kingdom in creating an enduring masterpiece - an exquisite jewel in the wilderness. It was a story that begged to be told.

What were your first impressions of Sigiriya when you visited it in 1967 while a teenager?

Sigiriya, in 1967, was a rather forlorn place. The only accommodation there at the time was the dilapidated government-run 'rest house', which still stands today. In close proximity to the rock were a few stalls selling "Thambili" and warm bottles of Orange Barley. A group of lean and hungry-looking local guides, dressed in starched white shirts and trousers, milled about the entrance ready to pounce on any intrepid traveller who ventured by.

We were the only visitors that day. My sisters and I enjoyed our time there, running up and down the steep stairways and the Mirror Wall passageway. Except for a solitary bricklayer repairing crumbling masonry on the summit, we had the entire site to ourselves! On that first visit I marveled at what I saw. Over the ensuing years I frequently wondered about this place and the people who built it.

How long did you spend researching this book?

Over six years. I started collecting information on Sigiriya in 2006 when I brought my family on a cultural tour of our homeland. By the time we started the tour I had amassed a loose-leaf booklet of nearly 120 pages. While touring Sigiriya, I mused to my son that there was so much misinformation about the place that I should write a book about Sigiriya. In exasperation he dared me to do just that. Having always harboured a secret ambition to be an author, I enthusiastically took up the challenge. I researched extensively,

searching repositories around the world, analysing satellite images and making frequent visits to the site to unravel its secrets. The book also reveals the real purpose of the barely visible structures on the eastern side of the complex.

What is the legacy you wish to leave through your book?

I think this book presents the facts in a truthful and unbiased manner and leads the reader on an enthralling journey through history. By making history interesting I hope to engage a new audience in appreciating the rich history of Sri Lanka.

Is writing books the antidote to working as an IT professional?

Being a senior IT professional was indeed stressful, and on reflection writing, doing something I love, was indeed fulfilling and relaxing. I should also add that, coming from a family with a lineage in science, together with the disciplines of IT, compelled me to undertake extensive research and rigorous validation.

Do you have your own ideology on the Apsaras of Sigiriya?

As detailed in my book, Apsaras are not wildly depicted in Sri Lankan art. When depicted, they are usually shown in a very stylized form as young maidens in flight or dancing. The ladies of the frescoes are static, reflective and each is unique. A number of the ladies, are far from attractive. The most telling indication of the true nature of these females is the three-ringed tattoo around their necks. This leads me to conclude that the frescoes were a large portrait gallery of the ladies of the royal court and the king's harem.

What is the next literary project you are working on?

I have been busy on the story of Anuradhapura. Written in the same style as the current book it too is highly researched, with over 200 references. The new book has many surprises and interpretations of events which will debunk some long held views of the history of Sri Lanka.