

A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : The Golden Rock Temple of Dambulla
Location : District of Matale
State party : Sri Lanka
Date : 31 October 1989

B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That this cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of Criteria I and VI.

C) ICOMOS OBSERVATIONS

The World Heritage Bureau requested of ICOMOS in June 1991 a more thorough evaluation of Dambulla, to include a comparative study of the site and others similar to it in its geo-cultural area, re-examination of the criteria under which the site was proposed and examination of the philosophy of preservation. The ICOMOS study has resulted in the new justification which follows.

D) JUSTIFICATION**I. Historical Background**

The rock of Dambulla is the centre of a Buddhist cave-temple complex established in the 3rd century B.C. and occupied continuously to this day. Its location has marked a transportation node between the Eastern and Western Dry Zones and between the Dry Zones and the central mountains throughout the history of Sri Lanka. The cave-temple complex is established on an inselberg or erosional remnant of importance in the study of the island's geological history. The 25 hectare site proposed for inscription also includes evidence of human occupation going back to the prehistoric period, including the recently excavated megalithic cemetery at Ibbankatuwa.

The site has been in continuous use for over 22 centuries, when it was occupied by a Buddhist monastic establishment, following the arrival of Buddhism on the island. Remains of 80 rock shelter residences established at that time on the site have been identified. Likely in the 1st century B.C., the uppermost group of shelters on Dambulla's South face were transformed into shrines. These transformations continued and were intensified between the 5th and 13th centuries: cave-temples were extended into the sheltering rock, and brickwalls constructed to screen the caves. By the end of the 12th century, with the introduction by King Nissanka Malla of sculpture to the caves on the upper terrace, echoing the rock carving that had preceded it, the caves assumed their present general forms and layout.

The next major phase of development took place in the 18th century when following a long-standing tradition, the upper terrace was restored and refurbished. All of the painted surfaces within the caves were painted or overpainted in a style characteristic of the Kandy school of the late 18th century. At that time, the modest Buddhist figures in the caves were repainted, maintaining original details and iconography; the fronting screen walls were rebuilt and roofed to form an outer veranda. Throughout the 19th century, following the loss of royal patronage in 1815, periodic repainting of sculptures and deteriorating surfaces continued. In 1915, thanks to the efforts of a local donor, cave n°5 was entirely repainted. And in the 1930's, the veranda was rebuilt incorporating a mixture of European and Asian detailing, and the complex's entrance porch was reconstructed in a conjunctural 18th c. style.

2. Significance and Authenticity

Dambulla is an extraordinary and unique complex. It is the second largest cave-temple complex in South and Southeastern Asia, after Ajanta in India, and its 18th c. rock paintings are among the best preserved in the entire region. The extent of the painted surfaces in the five caves exceeds 21,000 square feet; 157 statues of various sizes are also present.

A Sri Lankan expression of a Southern Asia temple concept, Dambulla is without doubt the largest and best preserved in the country. Uniquely among comparable sites in India such as Ajanta, Elephanta, Ellore and Karla (which are natural caves), it is largely an excavated complex - no comparable examples exist. One of the spaces, cave n°2, is undoubtedly one of the single most dramatic and artistically important spaces in all of Asia.

As well, the 25 hectare cultural landscape proposed for inscription bears witness in its richly layered composite nature to the use of the entire site for close to four millennia. The larger site incorporates a set of individual units reflecting all phases of site development from the

megalithic period to the present day, including a monastic chapter house, bo-tree temple, dagoba, and the earliest known village revealed by archaeological research in Sri Lanka. Those are located within a site of considerable natural beauty and power.

- **Criterion I.** The monastic ensemble of Dambulla is an outstanding example of the religious art and expression of Sri Lanka and South and Southeast Asia. The excavated shrine-caves, their painted surfaces and statuary are unique in scale and degree of preservation. The monastery includes significant masterpieces of 18th c. art, in the Sri Lankan school of Kandy.

- **Criterion VI.** Dambulla is an important shrine in the Buddhist religion in Sri Lanka.

3. Protection and Preservation

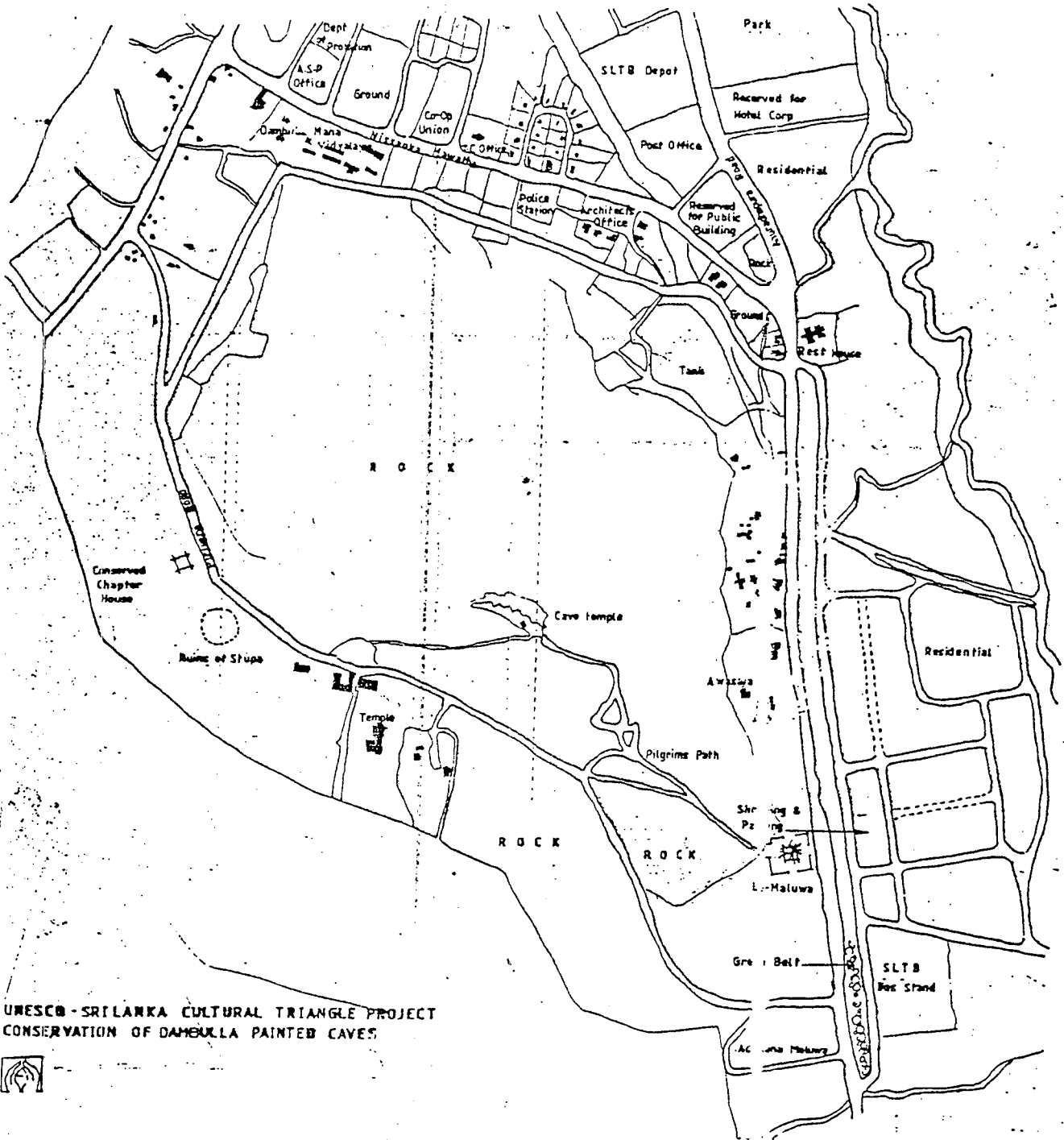
As a component within UNESCO's Cultural Triangle project, the site has been carefully studied and managed for over 10 years. Excellent protective legislation and master plans ensure that undesired development is kept at bay.

Particular care has been taken in developing approaches to conservation which are in tune with the site's qualities, and the capacities of available conservators. One of the site's distinguishing characteristics is the regular renewal of decorated surfaces over time; conservation measures devoted to stripping back layers of later painting on wall surfaces or sculpture to reveal earlier images, would be ignoring the worth of the ongoing tradition which has regularly ensured complete repainting of surfaces.

As well, the physical nature of the cave setting, with its latent moisture and migrating salts problems, has prompted much of the painting "repair" which has taken place. Equally, limited tests, during conservation efforts, suggest that little earlier work survives, most later over-painting having prompted re-instatement of new base surfaces and obliteration of the old.

The approach to technical conservation is an extraordinary blend of the traditional and the scientific. The Jeevan Naide family, charged with care of the wall paintings since early in the 18th C are still employed, working with ola leaf manuscripts which provide a clear idea of the complex layout and associated painting techniques. As well, ICCROM has sent technical missions to the site in 1990 and 1991, and working with local apprentices and the Jeevan Naide family, brought science and tradition together in treatment of the site.

ICOMOS, November 1991



UNESCO - SRILANKA CULTURAL TRIANGLE PROJECT
 CONSERVATION OF DAMBULLA PAINTED CAVES

Dambulla : plan du site / plan of the site