Photograph - Mihintale- Natural rock arch. Close to this is what is called the Bed of Mahindo; but it is in such a position that it could not be photographed. The natural rock has been levelled, and the bed is simply a portion of the surface, 7 feet long by 3 feet wide, surrounded by a raised fillet with tassel corners. The place was probably used by Mahinda for the purposes of repose and meditation.

Object: Photograph
Place of origin: Sri Lanka (photographed)
Date: 1870s (photographed)
Artist/Maker: Lawton, Joseph (photographer)
Materials and Techniques: Albumen print
Museum number: 82723
Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description
In the accompanying label to this photograph, Lawton wrote, ‘This rock formation was close to what is called the Bed of Mahinda: but it is in such a position that it could not be photographed. The natural rock has been levelled, and the bed is simply a portion of the surface. The place was probably used by Mahinda for the purposes of repose and mediation’.

Joseph Lawton (died 1872), a British commercial photographer, was active in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) between 1866 and 1872. Though he was initially employed by the firm HC Bryde, by the mid 1860s he had established his own studio in Kandy. Lawton was commissioned by the Archaeological Committee to photograph the main archaeological sites in Sri Lanka. He created a unique series of aesthetically powerful images of Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya.

Official photographic surveys conducted by Lawton and others documented the architecture and facilitated antiquarian scholarship. However, as a commercial photographer, Lawton made sure that his photographs were not merely documentary. His images were taken to appeal to tourists and overseas buyers seeking picturesque views of ancient ruins overgrown with creepers and gnarled trees.

Descriptive line
Photograph of the natural rock arch at Mihintale, Sri Lanka, by Joseph Lawton, albumen print, 1870-1

Physical description
Large rock formation, with a large centrally placed rock resting precariously between two cliff edges. Two male figures appear in a crevice of the cliff edge on the left; one standing and one seated.

Dimensions
Width: 218 mm photographic print, Height: 268 mm photographic print, Width: 266 mm mount, Height: 328 mm mount

Museum number
82723

Object history note
This photograph was one of a set purchased by the museum from Lawton and Co. in 1882. See Photograph Register 81259-86096, Modern Volume, 13.
The register entry is dated to 24.4.82, and the cost is noted as £16.43.4

The photograph was initially part of the photographic collection held in the National Art Library. The markings on the mount are an indication of the history of the object, its movement through the museum and the way in which it is categorised.

The mount is white. On the right hand side is a label which reads: A.in.MIHintale. A label printed with title is pasted underneath the photograph. The title is handwritten on the bottom left hand corner of the mount. The museum number is written in the bottom right hand corner.

Historical significance: This is referred to as Mahinda’s bed because of its resemblance to a stone ‘couch’. A natural rock formation similar to and nearby this arch is often visited for its views to the north across the tanks and forested plains. Mahinda, born in the 3rd century BC and son of the Emperor Asoka, was the Buddhist monk who brought Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka.
Only eleven miles east of Anuradhapura, Mihintale is one of the first homes of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and features some of the country’s most sacred Buddhist sites. It was in Mihintale that King Devanampiya Tissa received the Emperor Asoka’s son Mahinda, a Buddhist monk from India, who converted him and 40,000 followers to Buddhism in 243 BC. Popularly referred to as Mahinda’s Hill, Mihintale is revered as the place where the meeting between the monk and king took place. Many Buddhists make a pilgrimage to the site during June, the month of ‘Poson’ or the full moon. Large steps, surviving from ancient building programmes, were constructed to climb Mihintale and King Devanampiyatissa constructed a Buddhist vihara (a refuge monastery for wandering monks) and sixty-eight caves for them to reside in. With the exception of June, Mihintale is now a quiet town which is primarily a junction and a stop on the way to Anuradhapura.

Historical context note

This is one of a series of photographs taken by Lawton of the archaeological sites of Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya (1870-71). This series was commissioned by the Archaeological Committee (set up by the Governor of Ceylon in 1868) and became his signature work. Photographic surveys, conducted by Lawton and competitors such as the more prolific commercial firm WLH Skeen and Co., coincided with antiquarian scholarship that emerged as a result of the deforestation necessary to lay roadways, railways and plantations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This process was propelled by an expansion of both the export and tourist economies. A colleague of Lawton’s proposed that his involvement in the physical labour of clearing the archaeological sites that he photographed contributed to his death. After Lawton’s death, many prints were produced by the firm for the tourist market, however, the original negatives were sold to a variety of different clients and are now considered to be lost.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O147055/mihintale-natural-rock-arch-close-photograph-lawton-joseph/