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**Narratives of Faith: Buddhism and  
Colonial Archaeology in Monsoon Asia**

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## Narratives of Faith: Buddhism and Colonial Archaeology in Monsoon Asia

Himanshu Prabha Ray

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### INTRODUCTION

In his study of Borobudur published in 1935, Paul Mus emphasised the role of architecture as a material representation of the religious doctrines of Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Writing more than five decades later in 1987, Schopen argued that if the history of religions, which was text-bound, had instead been an archaeology of religions “it would have been preoccupied *not* with what small, literate almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalised subgroups wrote, but rather, with what religious people of all segments of a given community actually did and how they lived.”<sup>2</sup> Schopen goes on to state that of course this did not happen and even in cases when archaeology was taken into account, for example in Paul Mus’ study of Borobudur, inscriptions were not considered. The issue then is: how does religious architecture reflect religious history? How are sacred spaces to be identified and defined in the archaeological record? Are these spaces to be seen in terms of distinct religious identities, such as Hindu and Buddhist, or does the archaeological record present a plurality of affiliations, which were in turn reified as a result of the archaeological projects of the colonial powers, be it the British in India or the French in Indochina? Can religious architecture inform us about the history of religions, especially since many of these religious landscapes were irretrievably altered as a result of colonial intervention?

This preliminary paper is an attempt at providing an outline for a history of archaeology in South and Southeast Asia in the colonial period and the extent to which this new development defined Buddhism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with long-term implications for an understanding of religious interaction across the Bay of Bengal. The spotlight here is on the ‘discovery’ of Buddhism by the West and attempts by the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, Alexander Cunningham to unearth sites associated with the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Mus, *Barabudur: sketch of a history of Buddhism based on archaeological criticism of the texts*, translated from the French by Alexander W. Macdonald, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1998 (first published in 1935).

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Schopen, *Burial Ad Sanctos and the physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions*, *Religion*, 17, 1987: 193.

life of the historical Buddha, though the focus here is on one specific complex, viz. Bodhgaya in eastern India and its place in the Buddhist world. The objective is to locate the social history of the monument within the larger context of creation of religious identities and establishment of sanitised Hindu and Buddhist spaces in the colonial period. It is essentially research in progress and is intended to open out themes and debates on much-neglected aspects of plurality of Asian religions as well as trans-local and trans-national religious travel in pre-colonial Asia and the extent to which this became implicated in the politics of European Empires.<sup>3</sup>

## EUROPEAN DISCOVERY OF BUDDHISM

In the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries as European missionaries travelled to Asia, they discovered a new religion that they labelled *bauddhamatham* or Buddha's point of view. When missions travelled to Tibet and Siam, the resulting accounts exposed Europe to the writings of Buddhism. For example, in 1687-88, Simon de La Loubère published *Descriptions du royaume de Siam* containing translations of Buddhist texts in what he called *balie* or *baly* (Pali). By 1860 the large collections of Buddhist manuscripts and texts available in Oriental libraries and institutions of the West ensured that the religion became "a textual object, defined, classified and interpreted through its own textuality".<sup>4</sup> The term 'Buddhism' seems to have arisen around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was marked by attempts to define 'authentic Buddhism' defined as being the teachings of the historical Buddha who lived and preached in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.<sup>5</sup> There was a significant increase in the editing and publishing of many Pali works from 1877 onwards, especially after T. W. Rhys Davids established the Pali Text Society in 1881.<sup>6</sup> This increased interest in Buddhism meant that by 1907 there were adequate number of persons, either as Buddhists or as students of Buddhism to form a Buddhist Society in Great Britain and Ireland. The appeal of Buddhism also lay in

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<sup>3</sup> This paper forms a part of a larger project titled *Archaeology and Empire in Asia* commissioned by Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988: 12-3.

<sup>5</sup> Historians date the life of the Buddha from [circa 563 BC](#) to [483 BC](#), though some scholars have recently suggested dates around 410 or 400 BC for his death, but there is little consensus on the latter view. L. S. Cousins, The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 6.1, 1996: 57-63.

<sup>6</sup> Rhys Davids taught Pali and Buddhist literature at University College, London and was instrumental in the setting up of the School of Oriental Studies. He was also the first to hold the chair in comparative religion at the University of Manchester (1904-1915).

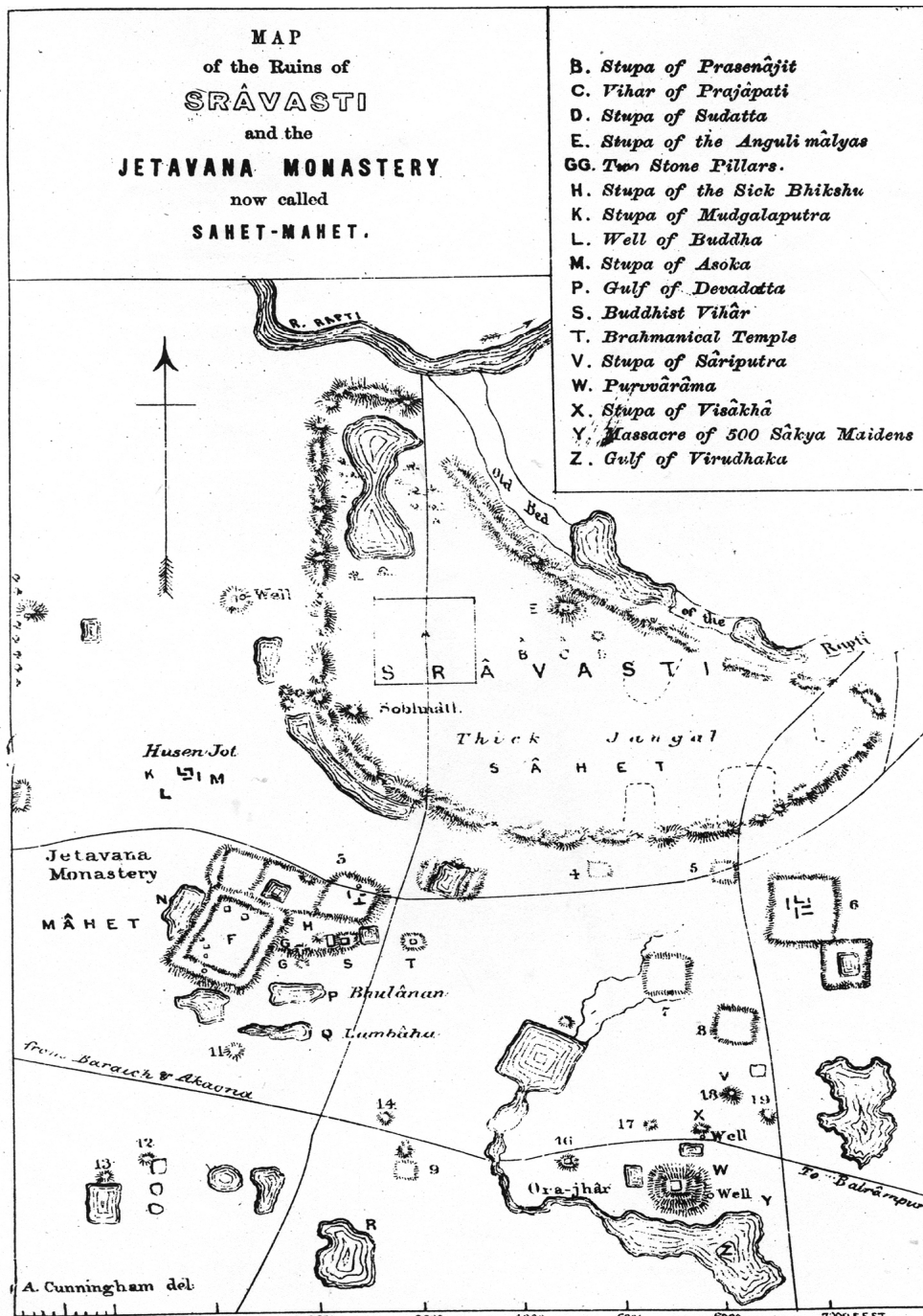
the perception that the Buddha had been an opponent of Hinduism, and the vast majority of Victorians easily comprehended this antagonism. The image of the Buddha as a social reformer who led a crusade against Hinduism not only looms large in Victorian writings, but through Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893) these ideas found their archaeological manifestation and continue to be repeated to the present.

Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893), the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India brought Buddhism to the forefront in India and established its study as a legitimate branch of scholarship in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is significant that many of Cunningham's formulations, such as his identification of places associated with the life of the Buddha, description of Buddha as a social reformer, the prominent role of the Mauryan ruler Asoka in spreading the faith and the degenerate nature of Buddhism after the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD continue to be repeated in secondary writings. In addition to the emphasis on Buddhism, this research also shifted the focus from textual accounts as a basis for the writing of history to the study of inscriptions, coins and archaeology.

In his 1871 publication titled *The Ancient Geography of India*, Cunningham divided the geography of the country into three periods, i.e. the Brahmanical period, which covered the extension of the Aryan race over north India to the rise of Buddhism; the Buddhist period during which Buddhism was the dominant religion of India, and which he claimed to have lasted until the conquest of Mahmud of Ghazni; and finally the Muhammadan or modern period. What is, however, intriguing is that Cunningham based his conclusions solely on surveys conducted in north India. By his own admission while his travels had been extensive and covered areas from Peshawar and Multan to Rangoon and Prome and from Ladakh and Kashmir to the banks of the Narmada, he had seen nothing further south than the celebrated Buddhist caves of Elephanta and Kanheri in western India.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A. Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India: Buddhist Period*, London, 1871: viii



Cunningham’s primary objective nevertheless was to identify and locate sacred sites associated with the life of the Buddha. For example, the position of Sravasti, the site of Jetavana vihara where the Buddha is said to have resided had long puzzled scholars, partly because Chinese pilgrims made contradictory statements. Cunningham compared the descriptions by the Chinese pilgrims with that given in the *Puranas* and the ‘Buddhist books from Ceylon’. The distances given matched the location of the ruined city of Saheth-Maheth

on the south bank of the Rapti. Cunningham visited the site and close to the south gate of the city, identified the celebrated monastery of Jetavana purchased by Prasenajit's minister Sudatta as mentioned in the Sri Lanka Chronicles, the *Mahavamsa*. This identification was further substantiated by the find of a colossal statue of Buddha with an inscription containing the name of Sravasti itself. The image was the gift of the Sarvastivadin teachers of the Kosamba hall' and was dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Cunningham suggested that the decline of Sravasti must have taken place during the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequent excavations at Sravasti date the religious architecture at the site from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, while Maheth was the city site dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In addition to Buddhist monasteries, a prominent landmark was the Sobhanatha temple believed to be the birth-place of the Jain tirthankara Sambhavanatha and a large number of *Ramayana* panels were also found at one of the mounds.<sup>9</sup> Xuanzang refers to Sravasti in a state of decay, but the discovery of Buddhist images like those of Lokanatha, Simhanada Lokesvara, Tara and Jambhala, some with inscriptions, proves that activities continued until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Thus it is evident that the Buddhist monastic structures at Sravasti date to several centuries after the Buddha and were by no means contemporary to Him. These results thus question the foundation of Cunningham's Buddhist geography.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

In many ways, the histories of archaeological development in South and Southeast Asia overlapped, both through the personnel involved and also because large parts of island Southeast were under British rule. In the context of Java, the name of Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781 – 1826) stands out, first as a Malay translator to the Government of India and later in 1811 as the Lieutenant Governor of Java, who was soon promoted to Governor of Bencoolen (in Sumatra) and who continued his work until 1824 when Java was ceded to the Dutch. Raffles' *The History of Java* first published in 1817 remained the standard work until the end of the century and included a chapter on the antiquities and monuments of the region. Colin Mackenzie (1753-1821) was appointed Chief Engineer to the British expedition against

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<sup>8</sup> *Archaeological Survey of India, Four Reports for 1862-63-64-65*, New Delhi: ASI, 1871, volume I: 330-348.

<sup>9</sup> ASI-AR 1907-8, p. 81; 1910-1, p.1. K. K. Sinha, *Excavations at Sravasti*, Varanasi, 1967; M. Venkataramayya, *Sravasti*, Delhi, 1956.

Java in 1811 and his collection of Javanese and European manuscripts proved invaluable in Raffles' endeavour. In 1812, Mackenzie visited the temple complex of Prambanan in central Java, surveyed the area and sketched the ruins. His notes and drawings were published in the seventh volume of the *Transactions of the Batavian Society*. In addition, Mackenzie travelled extensively on Java collecting manuscripts from a diverse range of sources:

Some were saved from the wreck of the Sultan's library at the storm of the Craten [kraton] of Djocjacarta, by permission of the prize agents and the concurrence indeed of all the military present – others were purchased and collected on the tour through that island: some were presented by Dutch colonists and regents, and others are transcripts by Javanese writers employed by Colonel Mackenzie to copy them from the originals in the hands of the regents, and with their permission.<sup>10</sup>

Colin Mackenzie is also known for the site plans and detailed drawings of sculptures that he made, as Surveyor General of India of the Buddhist site of Amaravati in south-eastern India. In 1817, Mackenzie removed several stones from the site and some of these later found their way to the British Museum. One aspect of Mackenzie's work was the official topographical survey and compilation of detailed maps and he was supplied with a staff for this. At the same time, Mackenzie was involved in the collection of historical, literary and cultural material for which he built his own team of specially trained helpers and brahmana assistants.

In a span of 43 years, five major contributions were made to the study of the Southeast Asian past. These included William Marsden's *History of Sumatra* (1783), Michael Symes' *Journal of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava* (1795), Thomas Stamford Raffles' *History of Java* (1817), John Crawfurd's *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820) and John Anderson's *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra* published in 1826. It is no coincidence that this period corresponds with the expansion of British control, starting with the occupation of Penang in the Straits of Malacca by Captain Francis Light in 1786 and ending with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, which limited the British sphere of influence to the 'Straits Settlements' of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. A common concern of all the authors was to publicise

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<sup>10</sup> Donald E. Weatherbee, Raffles' Sources for Traditional Javanese Historiography and the Mackenzie Collections, *Indonesia*, Volume 26, October 1978: 63-93, p. 65.



information about the environment of Britain's newly-acquired territories and to add to scientific writings on recent 'rediscovery' based on first-hand knowledge.<sup>11</sup> It is significant that the academic discourse was often implicated in theories of race, which were firmly entrenched in Europe at this time.<sup>12</sup>

The racial theory of Indian civilization was constructed by narrativizing the encounter of polar opposites of Victorian racial thoughts, the fair-skinned civilized Aryan and the dark-skinned savage, and by finding evidence for their encounter in the Vedic texts. It was the work of Sanskritists, and British Sanskritists were at the forefront in its construction.<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with the search for 'origins,' Marsden made a distinction between the cosmopolitan Malays on the coast and the 'original' Sumatrans of the 'inland' country. As a linguist Marsden believed that one of the most important remnants of 'original Sumatra' was its language, which had long existed in the archipelago and which he called it the "Great Polynesian language". He even suggested in an article in *Archaeologia*, in agreement with William Jones, that "the parent of them all has been the Sanskrit."<sup>14</sup> Traits from Europe's past and Southeast Asia's present were seen as being fundamentally the same because they belonged to the same stage of development through which all peoples had to pass.

In order to re-establish the ancient link between Sumatrans and Europeans, the Sumatrans had to retain, and Europeans had to rediscover, their 'original' culture.... Modern Western men, from their high point in the scale of civilisations, can revisit the purity of their origins by preserving the museum that is present-day Sumatra.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Catherine Quilty, *Textual Empires: A Reading of Early British Histories of Southeast Asia*, Monash Asia Institute, Clayton, 1998: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, California: University of California Press, 1997; Thomas R. Trautmann, *Constructing the Racial Theory of Indian Civilization*, Johannes Bronkhorst and Madhav M. Deshpande edited, *Aryan and Non-Aryan in South Asia*, Cambridge: Harvard University, 1999: 277-294.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, California: University of California Press, 1997: 206.

<sup>14</sup> W. Marsden, *Miscellaneous Works of William Marsden*, J.L. Cox and Son, London, 1834: 11.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Catherine Quilty, *Textual Empires: A Reading of Early British Histories of Southeast Asia*, Monash Asia Institute, Clayton, 1998: 58-60.

Like Marsden, Raffles too believed in an original ‘Polynesian language’ common to all the islands, but saw ‘foreign traders’ as being the most important factor in the progress of a people. The Dutch, by their trade monopolies which restricted foreign trade, had ‘interfered with, checked [and] changed in its character’ the natural development of the Javanese.<sup>16</sup> Raffles believed that the English were the best rulers of Java because by freeing up trade they would allow the Javanese to return to their ‘natural’ course of development and also retain their ancient glory – a theme that he returns to in his second volume, as he painstakingly documented the ancient temples of Java.

The French and the British continued to be engaged in the geo-politics of control of cultural knowledge in South and Southeast Asia, but more ominous were attempts at creating reified Hindu and Buddhist spaces in the archaeology of Asia. In the early 1900s Curzon ordered a number of photographs of Angkor Wat from Saigon, while Louis Finot, the first Director of EFEO stressed the need to catch up with the progress made by the British. “Such scholastic ambitions correlated with nostalgia for France’s eighteenth century loss of its Indian empire to Britain, as reflected in popular French depictions of Cambodia and its monuments as ‘France’s’ India”.<sup>17</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Khmers were Theravada Buddhists, but revered Angkor as a symbol of their religion or *sāsanā*, which was devoid of the denominational divide between Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

The presence of Buddhist statues and the practice of Buddhist worship at Angkor presented unwelcome challenges to colonial desires to compartmentalise Cambodia both vertically, through time and horizontally, through the categorisation of religion. On site, the Hindu framing of Cambodia encouraged Angkor’s new guardians not only to relocate members of the Cambodian monkhood or sangha, but also to remove Buddhist statues that had been erected in positions of central prominence and sacred significance during the temple’s centuries-long conversion to a site of Buddhist worship. During the following decade, colonial attempts to re-Indianise Angkor would see the

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<sup>16</sup> T.S. Raffles, *History of Java*, 1817, I: 192.

<sup>17</sup> Penny Edwards, Relocating the interlocutor: Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) and the itinerancy of knowledge in British Burma, *South East Asia Research*, volume 12, number 3, 2004: 277-335, p. 290.

<sup>18</sup> Penny Edwards, Taj Angkor: Enshrining L’Inde in le Cambodge, Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Lee (ed.), *France and “Indochina”: Cultural Representations*, Lexington Books, Oxford, 2005: 13-28.

quarantining of scores of such Buddhist icons in a designated space, which became known as Mille Bouddha (thousand Buddha) gallery. Those monks, who had been the chief curators of the temple complex long before the EFEO was founded, were also cleared off the land in 1909 as their presence in front of the temple was considered an eyesore.<sup>19</sup>

In a strange ironic twist, French writings on the archaeology of Southeast Asia were taken up by Greater India polemicists in their nationalist fervour as they wrote of cultural conquest. Many of the influential thinkers of the Greater India Society, such as P.C. Bagchi (1898-1956) and Kalidas Nag (1891-1966) had studied in Paris with celebrated Indologists Sylvain Lévi (1863-1935) and Jean Przyluski (1885-1944). Not only did the Director of the EFEO George Coedès praise the attempts at rediscovery of the Indian heritage of colonization, but these interactions between Indian and French scholars of Further India and Greater India continued well into the 1950s.<sup>20</sup>

Siam or modern Thailand stands out in the context of the study of heritage management in Southeast Asia, since the country escaped colonisation, instead acquiring the status of a buffer between the competing English and the French powers. The Thai monarch king Chulalongkorn (reign 1868-1910) is credited with the establishment of the Antiquarian Society in 1907 with the objective of preserving Siam's historical record in both textual and monumental form. The title of the provincial governor of Ayutthaya as 'preserver of antiquities' reflects his responsibility of the ancient site near the royal summer palaces at Bang Pa-in. King Vajrivudh (reign 1910-1925) undertook a visit to Sukhothai and lamented the ruinous state of the monuments. It was during his rule that the Fine Arts Department and the Archaeological Service were established.<sup>21</sup> After relinquishing charge as Interior Minister, the king's uncle, Prince Damrong took charge of the Wachirayan Library and collected chronicles from all parts of the country and deposited them in Bangkok, thus enhancing its position as the cultural capital of the country.

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<sup>19</sup> Penny Edwards, *Taj Angkor: Enshrining L'Inde in le Cambodge*, Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Lee (ed.), *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations*, Lexington Books, Oxford, 2005: 17.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Bayly, *French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina*, *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 34, No. 3, July 2000: 602.

<sup>21</sup> Maurizio Pellegi, *Royal Antiquarianism, European Orientalism and the Production of Archaeological Knowledge in Modern Siam*, Goh Beng Lan, Srilata Ravi and Mario Rutten (ed.), *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia*, International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2004: 133-161.

On 15<sup>th</sup> January 1872, King Chulalongkorn of Siam arrived in Calcutta as a guest of the British who had almost reached the frontiers of the Siamese kingdom after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1826, which gave them control over lower Burma. In Calcutta, the king and his entourage visited the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Indian Museum, which had several images from Java and other regions of Southeast Asia on display. During the king's forty-seven day visit he travelled across the north to Delhi and Bombay, including a brief visit on 20-21 February to Sarnath near Varanasi, the site of the Buddha's first sermon. It is significant that on his return to Siam, the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath served as a prototype for at least two stupas at Bangkok, viz. Wat Somanass and Wat Kanmatuyarama.<sup>22</sup>

The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act introduced by Lord Curzon in 1904 in India brought conservation to the forefront, but it also brought colonial legislation into conflict with traditional practices of restoration of religious structures. Although Curzon agreed that restoration could be quite as senseless as vandalism, yet for him it was necessary under certain circumstances, especially since in India skilled traditional craftsmen were available to undertake the work. It is significant that around the time that Curzon was involved with legislation for conservation in India, Auguste Barth (1834-1916) Indologist and epigrapher who played a decisive role in drawing up the foundation charter of EFEO in Southeast Asia set out his programme in a letter to EFEO's first director Louis Finot. His instructions were terse:

We will no longer see fragments taken off into residences or sent to the Musée Guimet, losing their value as a consequence. Indochina will keep its riches. And as for your own collections, in the case of original material, you will only collect pieces which would otherwise be destroyed. They will not be obtained by pillaging or destroying monuments. Not only will you not demolish them, you will preserve and conserve them. But you will not restore, as that is usually the worst form of vandalism. The old-new Temple of Bodh Gaya must not have its counterpart in Cambodia.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> S. Sahai, *India in 1872: As Seen by the Siamese*, Delhi: BR Publishing Corporation, 2002: 226. *Journey to India in 1872 of King Chulalongkorn*, Bangkok: River Books, 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Clémentin-Ojha and Pierre-Yves Manguin, *A Century in Asia: The History of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient 1898-2006*, Didier Millet, Singapore, 2007: 20.

## THE MAKING OF A BUDDHIST IDENTITY

It is suggested that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a complete transformation of Indian religions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. This involved, on the one hand, a fundamental conceptual shift towards religious identity among the English-educated Indian intellectuals, and on the other, a process whereby these developments motivated religious leaders to create a community identity and political discourse based on religion. Archaeology, notions of the past based on modern European ideas and the new institutions of education and learning in South Asia were critical to the emergence of the new discourses on religion.<sup>24</sup>

Crucial to this discussion on the emergence and consolidation of a Buddhist identity are developments in Sri Lanka in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where Buddhist monks took on an active role to counter the propagation of Christianity by missionaries and the political monk took shape. In 1862, Buddhist monks and the literati of the country founded the Society for the Propagation of Buddhism and this received a further boost with the arrival of the American Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, Madame Blavatsky and other theosophists in Sri Lanka on 17 May 1880 to establish a local branch of the Theosophical Society. The modern revival of Buddhism owes much to the publication in 1881 of Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism* based on English and French readings of Buddhist sources, thereby reflecting a Western view of Buddhism. Olcott's protégé Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) further consolidated this line of thinking. His aim was to mobilise the Sinhala community against the British regime and to do this it was necessary to reify Buddhist history.<sup>25</sup> This revival not only impacted religious identities in Sri Lanka but also had a bearing on the Mahabodhi Society reclaiming sites associated with Buddhism in India, such as that of Bodh Gaya.<sup>26</sup> Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* published in 1891 had a tremendous impact on Dharmapala who wrote:

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<sup>24</sup> Torkel Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002: 1-9.

<sup>25</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism, Nationhood and Cultural Identity: A Question of Fundamentals*, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (ed.), *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995: 231-256.

<sup>26</sup> Torkel Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002: chapter 4.

The idea of *restoring the Buddhist Jerusalem* into Buddhist hands originated with Sir Edwin Arnold after having visited the sacred spot in 1886. It was he who gave me the impulse to visit the shrine, and since 1891 I have done all I could to make the Buddhists of all lands interested in the scheme of restoration.

Thus clearly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the manipulation of religious markers for political advantage was gaining ground and conservation work carried out at Buddhist monuments provided yet another means to the government for exercising control over religious sites. From 1876 to 1884, the Bengal government spent two lakhs of rupees on restoration of the Mahabodhi temple and as a result concluded that since the structure owed its present existence to the British, the colonial state had a right to control it.<sup>27</sup>

Bodhgaya was informed by, and in significant ways actually *created* by, the opinions of a select group of Orientalists who were engaged in a prolonged and diffuse anti-Hindu polemic. And one particularly significant component of this discourse was an attack on the syncretic tendencies of the Hindus, the purported – or imputed – tendency of Hinduism simply to swallow whatever was in its path, including the image of the Buddha.<sup>28</sup>

Dharmapala was meanwhile getting impatient regarding control of Bodhgaya and in 1895 he set to work soliciting donations for purchase of the site from the mahant. When the latter refused to sell, Dharmapala attempted to install a bronze image of the Buddha at Bodhgaya on February 25, 1895. The mahant and his followers were, however, able to successfully foil this attempt. Outraged, Dharmapala pressed criminal charges against the mahant. After three years of legal wranglings, the court concluded “they went to enshrine an image in a place where they had no right to enshrine it” and as such the Hindus were justified in removing it. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the scenario changed. Dharmapala died in 1933 and in 1935, the journal of the Mahabodhi society appealed for Hindu-Buddhist cooperation, a suggestion that had also been made earlier by Burmese delegates in 1925 to the Indian National Congress. Finally after Independence, on May 28, 1953 a ceremony held at Bodhgaya marked the formal

<sup>27</sup> Indian Archaeology 1899-1905: 219. N. Lahiri, *Bodh Gaya: an ancient Buddhist Shrine and its Modern History (1891-1904)*, Timothy Insoll (ed.), *Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religion*, Oxford: BAR International Series 755, 1999: 33-43.

<sup>28</sup> Jacob N. Kinnard, *When is the Buddha not the Buddha?* *Journal of the American Academy of Religions*, 66/4, Winter 1998: 817-839, p. 818.

transfer of the shrine to the Mahabodhi Temple Management Committee comprising of nine members, four Buddhists and five Hindus.<sup>29</sup>

## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE STUDY OF RELIGION

It is unfortunate that in the post-Independence period in India, with the shift from the writing of political history to socio-economic history, religion came to be studied generally in relation to modes of production in Indian history. Historians associated Buddhism and Jainism with the growth of trade resulting from the development of an agrarian surplus around the middle of the first millennium BC. This was followed by a decline of trade, rise of feudal tendencies in Indian society and the decay of towns from 300 AD onwards.<sup>30</sup> Buddhism is said to have declined and the post-4<sup>th</sup> century period is seen as marking a transitional phase between the sacrificial Vedic religion and the emergence of Puranic worship characterised by the migration of brahmanas from the towns and the development of *tīrthas* or sacred spots.<sup>31</sup> It is suggested that at numerous feudal centres temples were constructed in permanent material such as stone for the first time in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>32</sup> Though not all historians accept the feudalism model and the fragmentation of society that it suggests, yet the migration of brahmanas and acculturation of tribal communities has generally been supported. Chattopadhyaya, for example, explains this movement with the

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<sup>29</sup> Jacob N. Kinnard, When the Buddha Sued Visnu, John Clifford Holt, Jacon N. Kinnard, Jonathan S. Walters edited, *Constituting Communities: Theravada Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2003: 85-106.

<sup>30</sup> "De-urbanisation was therefore a feature of the first or classic phase of feudalism marked by a subject peasantry and a dominant class of landlords in conditions of languishing trade and predominantly agrarian economy. It inaugurated an era of closed economy in which the needs of landed intermediaries were met locally without the effective intervention of traders whose functions were reduced to the minimum" (R. S. Sharma, *Urban Decay in India*, New Delhi, 1987: 184).

<sup>31</sup> R. N. Nandi, *Social Roots of Religion in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1986.

<sup>32</sup> "Several temples were built outside the main Gupta - Vakataka domain, e.g. in Gujarat, Bengal, Assam and Punjab. Building of temples away from the main centres and land grants to brahmanas in uncleared territories led to dissemination of knowledge of agriculture, calendar and technology and boosted agrarian expansion. It accelerated the Sanskritisation process in tribal areas and remote villages. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* appeared for the first time in temple art at Nachna, Deogadh, Gaddhwa, Paunar and other sites", (D. Desai, "Social Dimensions of Art in Early India", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Gorakhpur, 1989-90: 31).

formation of regional and sub-regional kingdoms and their requirement for legitimisation.<sup>33</sup> In effect then historians have explained the origins of the temple in terms of the requirements of the local political elite or landed intermediaries for legitimisation of their newly-emerging status in a period of urban decay, decline of trade and agrarian expansion. There is unanimity also in the association with migrations of brahmanas and their role as priests in consolidating the new cults, frequently described as of Puranic affiliation.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the conventional accounts of linear development from Buddhist caitya to Hindu temple, archaeological data establishes that both the Buddhist caitya and the Hindu temple were contemporaneous in 3<sup>rd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC and shared sacred space with a diverse range of domestic, local and regional cults.<sup>35</sup> Nor was religious identity of a single centre restricted to one or the other religion. Instead, multiple affiliation was the norm rather than the exception, amply exemplified by the caves at Ellora. The earliest cave excavation at the site began in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century and was dedicated to Siva, followed by Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina caves over the next several centuries.<sup>36</sup> Another example of this is the sacred landscape of Bodhi Gaya, which was venerated both by the Buddhists and the Hindus.

A second realisation evident from the archaeological record is the close association between religious architecture, both Buddhist and Hindu, and the community. An early Buddhist monastic site that provides evidence for embankments and tanks associated with agriculture is that of Sanchi located on Sanchi hill, an outcrop of Vindhyan sandstone in central India 6 kilometres from the ancient town of Vidisha.<sup>37</sup> The earliest monument at the site is an inscribed stone pillar of Asoka dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and an apsidal shrine, while it is

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<sup>33</sup> "The rapid growth in the number and networks of temple centres, whose origins certainly date to pre-Gupta times, become understandable when we begin to appreciate how closely they were linked, as were gifts and land grants to Brahmins (brahmadeyas and agraharas) with the formation of subregional and regional kingdoms and their legitimisation, consolidation of their resource bases, and the forging of linkages for social integration across communities." (B. D. Chattopadhyaya, "Historiography, History and Religious Centers" Vishakha N. Desai and Darielle Mason edited, *Gods, Guardians and Lovers*, New York, 1993: 42).

<sup>34</sup> Vijay Nath, *Puranas and Acculturation – A Historico-Anthropological Perspective*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Archaeology of Sacred Space: an Introduction*, Himanshu Prabha Ray and Carla Sinopoli (ed.), *Archaeology as History in Early South Asia*, Indian Council for Historical Research and Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> G. H. Malandra, *The Mandala at Ellora/ Ellora in the Mandala*, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 19,2, 1996: 181-208.

<sup>37</sup> Shaw, "Ancient Irrigation Works in the Sanchi Area: an archaeological and hydrological investigation," *South Asian Studies*, volume 17, 2001: 55-68.



the imposing Stupa No. 1 that occupies the central point on the hill. The entire region is studded with nearly 50 stupas, monasteries and temples, whose construction continued well into the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE and also include the four monastic sites of Sonari, Satdhara, Andher and Morel-Khhurd. While the focus in this paper is on the Buddhist structures at Sanchi, it needs to be stressed that Sanchi hill forms part of a continuous chain of 27 hills consisting of 700 painted rock shelters littered with prehistoric and historical sites.

Thus the archaeological record highlights shared spaces, but what is relevant to this discussion is the transformation of these shared spaces in the colonial period and the contestation and control sought over them as religious identities came to be redefined and reconstructed in South Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. An appropriate example of this process may be understood by tracing the history of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodh Gaya located on the Phalgu River, a tributary of the Ganga, 182 kilometres south of Patna, the capital of Bihar. The objective is to comprehend the multi-layered narratives of religious architecture and the extent to which these changed over time.

## CREATING MAHABODHI AND GAYA

Today the area within one kilometre of the Mahabodhi temple is dotted with several monasteries, including the Indosan Nipponji Japanese Temple, which houses a Buddha image, at least three Tibetan monasteries, and a number of houses of worship maintained by Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, Chinese, Vietnamese and Nepalese monks. A Thai monastery called *Wat Thai Buddha-Gaya*, which was constructed by the Thai Government at the invitation of the Government of India to celebrate the Buddha-Jayanti, was completed in 1966.<sup>38</sup> These monasteries are primarily centres of worship, learning and meditation for both monks and lay people. This oasis of religious peace lies in Jehanabad district in central Bihar, a stronghold of Marxist-Leninist extremists, and where venturing out after dark is dangerous. The obstacles of land and sea travel have, however, been overcome by several Southeast Asian governments to make the journey to Bodh Gaya and other sites of pilgrimage safer for their citizens. Thai Airways operates chartered flights from Bangkok to Varanasi and Gaya, 6 kilometres from Bodh Gaya.

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<sup>38</sup> National Archives of India, New Delhi: File no. 40 (2) BC (B)/56, Ministry of External Affairs (BC Section): Proposal for getting a plot for the proposed Thai temple.

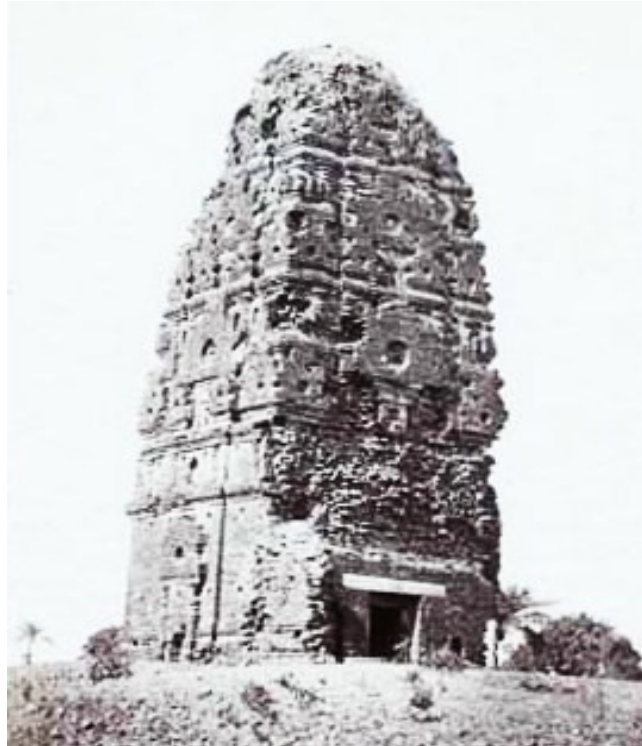
One of the central issues relates to the Mahabodhi temple and the historicity of the temple, which is today a World Heritage site. The UNESCO charter describes it as the earliest construction in the subcontinent and hence of great historical value. How valid is this definition? The Buddha is stated to have lived in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, whereas the earliest archaeological evidence at Bodh Gaya dates to the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE Mauryan ruler Asoka. In addition to questions of identification of sites associated with the life of the Buddha visited by Asoka and marked by pillars, there are certainly some sites, such as that of Sanchi, which had little association with the Master. Indeed considering that Sarnath, the site of the first sermon, is almost 240 kilometres from Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment, these issues of identification of places associated with the Buddha's life need careful scrutiny.<sup>39</sup>

More than its historicity, the Mahabodhi temple and the structures in its vicinity present a living record of additions and reconstructions – a practice frowned upon given the stress in archaeology on 'origins' and 'conservation' rather than the religious practice of 'restoration'. These structures include a polished stone throne of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE date, stone railings that were added first in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE as a result of donations by three women – Kurangi, Sirima and Nagadevi, the first named being the sister-in-law of the ruler Agnimitra. After the reconstruction of the temple around the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, a second railing was added in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, while a gateway was constructed somewhat later in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and there are several inscriptions recording gifts of images. Two other edifices are important: a plastered walkway at the supposed spot where the Buddha walked after attaining Enlightenment; and a tank that a brahmana had excavated at the site, as described by the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang.<sup>40</sup>

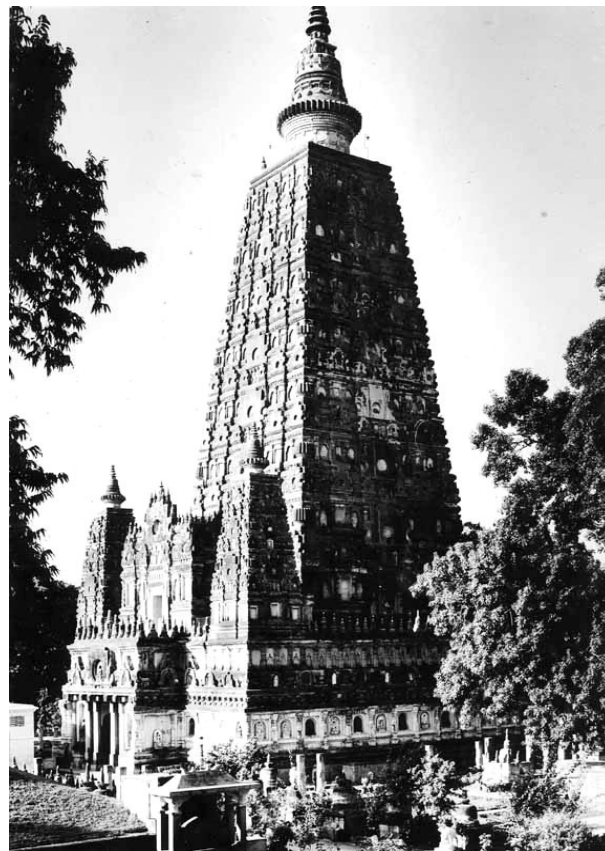
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<sup>39</sup> A detailed account of this occurs in the Mahavagga of the *Vinaya Pitaka*, an account that is argued by Bareau and others to be a later addition indicating the new authority of the Sangha (Karetzky 1995: 127-148).

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Mahabodhi or the Great Buddhist Temple Under the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya*, London, 1892.



**The Mahabodhi temple as 'discovered'**



**The Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya at present**

There is no doubt that Bodh Gaya has been revered as a sacred site and centre of pilgrimage from at least the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE onwards, but it is the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained Enlightenment that has been the centre of piety. The VIII Rock Edict of the Mauryan ruler Asoka at Girnar in Gujarat records that ten years after his coronation in around 259-8 BCE, Asoka went to the *sambodhi* or visited the Bodhi tree as a part of his travels aimed at propagating the Dhamma. A platform to the east of the tree has been dated to the Mauryan period and was perhaps used for placing offerings to the tree. The temple, it is suggested is secondary to the tree.<sup>41</sup> As depicted on the railing of the Buddhist stupa at Bharhut in central India dated to second-first century BCE and recorded in an inscription from the site, the temple was an open structure enclosing the tree and the platform.<sup>42</sup> It is evident that the present structure is the result of restoration over several centuries including the transformation of the tree shrine into the present temple, rectangular in plan and with a tower topped by an *amalaka*.<sup>43</sup> A representation of a temple with a tower on a terracotta plaque excavated from Kumrahar near Patna and dated to 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE on the basis of the Kharosthi inscription is often cited as the prototype for the Mahabodhi temple.<sup>44</sup> The issue then is: when did the tree lose its centrality to the temple? When was the temple constructed and by whom? Huntington argues that “the present temple is largely a 19<sup>th</sup> century British Archaeological Survey of India reconstruction based on what is generally believed to be an approximately fifth-century structure.”<sup>45</sup> The beginnings of the rediscovery and conservation of sites associated with the life of the Buddha date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when this became Alexander Cunningham’s primary mission.

In his search for sites associated with the Buddha, Alexander Cunningham relied on accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang who travelled to India in the fifth and seventh centuries CE respectively. Thus he argued that the extant brick temple at Bodh Gaya corresponded with the description given by Xuanzang and was certainly present at the time

<sup>41</sup> John C. Huntington, *Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Orientations*, volume 16, 11, November 1985: 60.

<sup>42</sup> H. Lueders, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* II, part II, Bharhut Inscriptions, Ootacamund, 1963: 95.

<sup>43</sup> Prudence M. Myer, *The Great Temple at Bodh Gaya*, *Art Bulletin*, 40, 1958. Geri H. Malandra, *The Mahabodhi Temple*, Janice Leoshko edited, *Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment*, Marg Publications, Bombay, 1988: 9-28.

<sup>44</sup> B.N. Mukherjee, *Inscribed Mahabodhi temple Plaque from Kumrahar*, *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, NS, volume 14, 1985-85: 43-6.

<sup>45</sup> John C. Huntington, *Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Orientations*, volume 16, 11, November 1985: 61.

that the Chinese pilgrim visited the site, but Faxian makes no mention of it. Faxian refers to the tree where the Buddha attained Enlightenment and to three monasteries that had been constructed at the place “in all of which there are monks residing”.<sup>46</sup> Xuanzang, on the other hand, refers to a small vihara built by Asoka between 259 and 241 BCE that pre-dated the temple and refers to the construction of the temple by a Brahman “in compliance with the instructions of the god Mahadeva conveyed to him in a dream” and the placement of the image of the ascetic Buddha inside it.<sup>47</sup> An inscription dated 948 CE however ascribes the building of the temple to the illustrious Amara Deva, one of the members of the court of king Vikramaditya “in compliance with the command of Buddha himself, conveyed to him in a vision.”<sup>48</sup>

From all the facts, which I have brought forward, such as the non-existence of any temple in AD 400, the recorded erection of a large one by Amara Deva about AD 500 and the exact agreement in size as well as in material and ornamentation between the existing temple and that described by Hwen Thsang between AD 629 and 642, I feel satisfied that the present lofty temple is the identical one that was built by the celebrated Amara Sinha about AD 500.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of Cunningham’s assertion, his interpretation of the Mahabodhi complex was at variance with the Chinese text and description of the pilgrim and this is also an issue that several of his contemporaries indicted him for.<sup>50</sup> A second point that Cunningham did not take into account was the audience of Xuanzang’s writings. It is suggested that the Chinese pilgrim’s narrative of his pilgrimage to India was written specifically for the eyes of the Chinese emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty (618-907) and hence Xuanzang highlighted aspects that would satisfy the curiosity of the emperor and also indicate his personal contacts and knowledge of foreign political leaders. Peiyi Wu argues that Xuanzang’s narrative

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<sup>46</sup> James Legge, translated and annotated, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1998 (reprint): 87-90, chapter XXXI.

<sup>47</sup> *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report* volume I, 1871: 6.

<sup>48</sup> *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report* volume I, 1871: 7.

<sup>49</sup> *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report* volume I, 1871: 7-8.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang’s Travels in India* (AD 629-645), Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1996 (reprint – originally published in 1904-5): 117.

includes “almost everything except his pilgrimage.”<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless Xuanzang’s writings seem to have had the desired effect at the royal court and official Chinese sources record the arrival in China of an embassy from the ruler of Kanauj in central India in 641 CE and credit Xuanzang with initiating contacts between the Chinese empire and king Harsha of Kanauj.<sup>52</sup>

Two years later Chinese sources record the visit of another high-level mission from the Tang court to Kanauj (which arrived there in 644 CE) where they attended a Buddhist ceremony organised by the king and also, in 645, visited the Mahabodhi monastery at Bodhgaya and placed an inscription under the Bodhi tree. The mission also included an artist Song Fazhi who made a painting of the Boddhisattva Maitreya under the Bodhi tree that he later used as a blueprint for a sculpture at the Jing’ai monastery in Luoyang.<sup>53</sup> This was followed by a fourth mission under the Tang dynasty led by Wang Xuance, which carried a robe for presentation to the head of the Mahabodhi monastery on behalf of emperor Gaozong. The mission also included a Sogdian monk and was well received. A grand reception was held for the Chinese and in addition they were showered with gifts, including pearls, ivory, relics of the Buddha and impressions of the Buddha.<sup>54</sup> Wang Xuance also seems to have paid four thousand bolts of silk to purchase a small parietal bone of the Buddha from Kapisha in north-western India. As indicated by exchange of letters between Xuanzang and monks Jnanaprabha and Prajnadeva of the Mahabodhi monastery, communication continued between the Buddhist monks. Thus contrary to Cunningham’s assertion, it was the tree and the monastery that were objects of veneration of Chinese missions in 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

What is nevertheless certain is the unbroken record of visits by pilgrims to the site, starting with 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE patronage by the monk Bodhirakshita from Sri Lanka to the setting up of a monastery in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE for Sri Lankan monks. Pilgrimage continued from China and in 1021 AD the monk Yunshu worshipped at the site. In addition to the accounts of Chinese monks, five stone tablets with 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century Chinese inscriptions were found at Bodhgaya and two of the names that have been identified include those of Chi-I and Ho-yun,

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<sup>51</sup> Peiyi Wu, An Ambivalent Pilgrim to T’ai Shan in the seventeenth century, Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yü edited, *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992: 65-88, p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> Tansen Sen, In Search of Longevity and Good Karma, *Journal of World History*, volume 12, no. 1, 2001: 1-28, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Sen, In Search of Longevity and Good Karma: 9.

<sup>54</sup> Sen, In Search of Longevity and Good Karma: 20.

the former in the company of some other priests.<sup>55</sup> It is significant that Chinese visitors to Bodhgaya included not just monks, but also members of the naval fleets sent by the third emperor of the Ming dynasty Yongle (1403-1424) to more than twenty countries in Southeast Asia, as well as to Bengal and the Malabar coast and Aden, popularly known as the voyages of Zheng He. Accounts of these voyages are available in the *Mingshi* (History of the Ming Dynasty), which is considered the most elaborate and complete history of the Ming dynasty.<sup>56</sup> It is based on the *Ming Shi-lu*, each of the *shi-lu* comprising an account of one emperor's reign compiled after that emperor's death on the basis of a number of sources created during the reign.<sup>57</sup> What is relevant for this paper is the description of visits undertaken to Bengal, *Zhao-na-pu-er* or Jaunpur in 1412 located to the west of Bengal and to Dili or Delhi. The accounts also mention that Hou Xian, the lesser eunuch, stopped at *Jin-gang bao zuo*, the Vajrasana at Bodhgaya on his way to or from Jaunpur and offered gifts to the elders there.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, NS xiii: 552-572.

<sup>56</sup> Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1993: 7.

<sup>57</sup> Geoff Wade, tr. [Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu, an open access resource](#), Asia Research Institute and the Singapore E-Press, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations: A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1993: 78. (I am grateful to Geoff Wade for this reference).



**Chinese inscription at Bodhgaya (courtesy Huntington archives)**

In addition to the Chinese, the Burmese sent two missions in 1035 and 1086 CE to renovate and repair the temple. Burmese inscriptions from this period also record a history of the temple at Bodhgaya, crediting the Mauryan ruler Asoka with its construction. The great Tibetan translator Rinchen Sangpo (958-1051) placed offerings at the gate of Bodhgaya followed by the Tibetan monk Dharmasvamin in 1234 CE. The latter refers to Muslim invasions as a result of which monks had temporarily left the temple, though there were still several important places to visit, such as the Tara shrine, a tooth relic and foot prints of the Buddha.

What is fascinating is that from the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Mahabodhi temple became a model that was emulated at several other centres and there are at least four re-creations in Burma and Thailand. The earliest was built at Pagan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century followed by Schwegugyi in Pegu dating to 1460-1470, Wat Chet Yot in Chiangmai (1455-1470) and the fourth one at around



the same time in Chiengrai.<sup>59</sup> The two replica temples in Peking were consecrated in 1473 and 1748 respectively.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the last temple to be built on the basis of the models was the Mahabodhi complex at Bogh Gaya itself. The British engineer J. D. Beglar undertook this restoration work in 1881 and used two stone models for reference.



**10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century stone model of Mahabodhi temple**

In addition to replicas, twenty stone models of the temple made between the early thirteenth and the late fifteenth century AD provide a crucial link in the fascinating record of the British discovery and restoration of the Mahabodhi temple. These stone models, averaging about twenty centimetres in height and carved in dark grey schist are widely dispersed from eastern India to Nepal, Tibet, Arakan and Myanmar and represent not just the Mahabodhi temple but the entire complex including the rectangular outer wall and a representation of the bodhi tree positioned on the west terrace.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Robert L. Brown, Bodhgaya and Southeast Asia, Janice Leoshko edited, *Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment*, Marg Publications, Bombay, 1988: 101-124, p. 108.

<sup>60</sup> John Guy, The Mahabodhi temple: pilgrim souvenirs of Buddhist India, *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXIII, no. 1059, June, 1991: 356-367.

<sup>61</sup> John Guy, The Mahabodhi Temple: 356-67.

It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which the models served as direct prototypes for these (re-created temples), or the extent to which those responsible for designing them relied on first-hand information gathered by missions sent to Bodhgaya itself. A major reason for their construction, which spans the early thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, must have been the desire to create surrogate temples to allow veneration to continue after access to Bodhgaya itself had been so severely curtailed by Muslim control of eastern India.<sup>62</sup>

At this point it would be useful to digress and to discuss that archaeological data from neighbouring Gaya on the Phalgu river 6 kilometres from Bodh Gaya, which is sacred to Hindus for the performance of ancestral rituals. References to Gaya occur in the *Mahabharata* and by the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE it had attained great sanctity as recorded in the *Visnumriti*. The *Vayu Purana* dated to 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century CE lists 324 holy sites around Gaya related to ancestral rites and also contains an elaborate mythology of Gaya recorded in the *Gaya Mahatmya*. The location of these holy sites mark out the Gaya ksetra or the mesocosmos around the Visnupad temple covering a radius of 8 kilometres and including the Mahabodhi tree in the south, which is to be worshipped on the fourth day of the rituals.<sup>63</sup> Despite these references, building activity at the site dates to only the mid-eleventh century when the ruler of Gaya established a temple of Vishnu (Gadadhara) and other religious shrines. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Queen Ahilya Bai Holkar of Indore built the Visnupad temple complex at Gaya enshrining the footprints of Visnu. There is nevertheless inscriptional evidence from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards of donations and of a continuous tradition of pilgrimage at least during the 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

How then is the interface between Bodhgaya and Gaya to be described? Is it to be viewed as a Hindu takeover of a Buddhist shrine as perceived by Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), a pioneer in the revival of Buddhism in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lanka, and continued in the writings of Indian historians of the post-Independence period writing within a socio-economic

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<sup>62</sup> John Guy, *The Mahabodhi Temple*: 365.

<sup>63</sup> Rana P.B. Singh, John McKim Malville, Anne L. Marshall, *Sacredscape and Manescape: A Study of Gaya, India*, <http://www.colorado.edu/Coferences/pilgrimage/papers/Singh-3.html> (date of access: 3rd August 2007).

framework<sup>64</sup> or a Buddhist appropriation of Hindu sacred space, since Gaya finds mention in the Epics? How is the presence of Hindu images at a Buddhist temple complex to be explained? The best known examples of these include a relief dated 807 CE depicting Surya, Lakulisa and Visnu. Its inscription indicates dedication of a *caumukha* Mahadeva icon within the boundaries of the temple complex for the benefit of the *snatakas* who were the inhabitants of the Mahabodhi.<sup>65</sup> There are several other Saiva images found at the Mahabodhi temple complex that survive, while others are worshipped as heroes given the Vaisnava identity of the present temples at Gaya.<sup>66</sup> Today the Visnupad temple forms the centre of ancestral rituals, though this was not the case earlier, when the modest Gayasiras shrine located just below the Visnupad was venerated as the most important on the route.<sup>67</sup> Thus it is evident that Bodh Gaya and Gaya have much in common and to reduce this dynamic relationship to one of contestation would be to fall into the trap of understanding religions only through socio-economic reality by explaining the establishment of temples and religious shrines solely as a means of legitimisation. In the search for origins and chronology, this perspective precludes the social history of religious architecture or the constant changes that any religious structure underwent as a ‘living’ monument in Asia.

## RELICS AND REDISTRIBUTION OF MERIT

Another concept that has undergone change over the last 200-300 years is the worship of relics. Nineteenth century scholarship marginalised the worship of relics in Buddhism and argued that this resulted from a popularisation of the religion and decline of the original teachings of the Buddha. Writing in 1900 on ‘Buddhism’ in the *North American Review*, Rhys Davids lamented the adaptation of Buddhism to the needs of the empire by the Mauryan ruler Asoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and termed it as “the beginning of the end.”<sup>68</sup> He however appreciated the efforts being made in Sri Lanka to recover the authentic Buddhist textual tradition. In contrast, recent scholarship asserts that the *Mahaparinibbana sutta* indicates that the “authoritative Theravada tradition both affirmed the value of relic veneration and at the

<sup>64</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004: 281.

<sup>65</sup> B. M. Barua, *Gaya and Buddha Gaya*, Calcutta, 1934: 231.

<sup>66</sup> Frederick M. Asher, *Gaya: Monuments of the Pilgrimage Town*, Janice Leoshko edited, *Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment*, Marg Publications, Bombay, 1988: 74-88.

<sup>67</sup> Claude Jacques, *Gaya Mahatmya*, Pondicherry, 1962. Monier-Williams, *Shraddha Ceremonies at Gaya, The Indian Antiquary*, V, 1876: 200-204.

<sup>68</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism, North American Review*, 171, 1900: 522-524.

same time cautioned that it should not be the primary preoccupation of members of the sangha.”<sup>69</sup> It is also accepted that worship of the relics has played a key role in the spread of Buddhism across Asia and these relics have served to forge a distinctive Buddhist geography articulated through pilgrimage routes.

Early Buddhism was by no means solely a religion of renouncers and ascetics,<sup>70</sup> but had a large lay following termed *upasaka* and *upasika* in inscriptions. The interaction between the clergy and the laity translated into several practices such as worship of the relics and pilgrimage.<sup>71</sup> After the Buddha’s death, according to the Mahāparinibbana sutta, his ashes were divided into eight parts and distributed to the eight kings in whose kingdoms he had lived and stupas were constructed over these (Mahāparinibbana sutta, *Dighanikaya* 16, 6: 23-8). Asoka subsequently opened seven of these and redistributed their contents over a much larger expanse of the subcontinent, thereby adding to the creation of the sacred geography. This is substantiated by archaeological finds of relic caskets with a host of small objects.<sup>72</sup>

The Buddhist deeds of Asoka, particularly his veneration of the relics, became popular in China in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE when a number of hagiographic accounts were rendered into Chinese. At least ten texts relating the story of Asoka were circulating in China at this time. However, all but one have since been lost. The only extant version, *Ayu wang zhuan* (*Aśokarājavadāna* T.2042) is attributed to a Parthian monk.<sup>73</sup> John Strong has pointed out that the Chinese versions are translations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century legend of Asoka found in the *Divyāvadāna*.<sup>74</sup> Faxian not only narrates Asoka’s Buddhist deeds in his travelogue *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan*, but also gives detailed accounts of the veneration of Buddha images in Khotan,

<sup>69</sup> David Germano and Kevin Trainor edited, *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004: 10.

<sup>70</sup> Compare for example Wink’s assertion that “the Buddha preached nothing but a soteriology and showed little interest in communal religion, in the religion of man in society...” (A. Wink, *Al-Hind, The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999: 337).

<sup>71</sup> Three types of relics are indicated in early Buddhist tradition, viz. corporeal relics (bones, teeth, hair, nail-clippings etc. of the Buddha), relics of use (Buddha’s staff, robe, begging bowl) and relics of commemoration (images, copper plates with the Buddhist creed). The relics were “thought to retain – to be infused with, impregnated with – the qualities that animated and defined the living Buddha” (Schopen 1997: 160).

<sup>72</sup> M. Willis, (ed.) *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India*, The British Museum, London, 2000.

<sup>73</sup> Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 2 volumes, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1972: volume 2: 423, footnote 162.

<sup>74</sup> John S. Strong, *The Legend of king Asoka*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983: 16.

his spittoon, alms bowl and tooth relics in Kucha (both in central Asia), his parietal bone and other relics in Uddiyana, his alms bowl in Purushapura or modern Peshawar (both in north India) and his tooth relic in Sri Lanka. Moreover one of the texts that Faxian translated was the *Mahaparinibbana sutta*, a text that has a long account of funeral preparations for the Buddha's body and veneration of relics, as well as visits to places associated with the Buddha.<sup>75</sup>

In China, relic worship unfolded through at least four stages. In the first stage (3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) relic worship and the legends of king Asoka were intimately linked and were employed to establish the presence of the Buddha and to legitimise the spread of Buddhist doctrine to China. In this stage, relics and canonical texts were brought to China by Indian and other monks. From the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries the veneration of relics by the Chinese established the presence of the Buddha in China. With the presence of the Buddha fully asserted, in the 7<sup>th</sup> to mid-8<sup>th</sup> centuries, relic worship in China assumed a momentum of its own and these were now revered not so much for legitimisation, but for their therapeutic and merit-bestowing values. The fourth stage of relic veneration from the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> to late 9<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in the inclusion of relics in esoteric rites and rituals ranging from protecting the state to curing illnesses. The esoteric texts even professed that in the absence of remains of the Buddha, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate or even clean sand and bamboo or wood shaped like relics could be substituted.<sup>76</sup> Nor was this veneration of relics restricted to China. In the Tibetan Tantric tradition a concern with relics emerged from 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards and is “closely tied with Buddha-nature theory inscribed within an elaborate and architectonic philosophical synthesis.”<sup>77</sup>

From this discussion on the importance of relics and relic worship in the history of Buddhism, we move on to trace the archaeological discoveries of relics and their distribution from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In 1851, Alexander Cunningham and Captain F.C. Maisey opened Stupa 3 at Sanchi by sinking a vertical shaft through the centre of the stupa where he found

<sup>75</sup> Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations 600-1400*, Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2003: 60.

<sup>76</sup> Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations 600-1400*, Association for Asian Studies and University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2003: 74-5.

<sup>77</sup> David Germano, Living relics of the Buddha(s) in Tibet, David Germano and Kevin Trainor (ed.), *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004: 51-91, p. 53.

an inner chamber with two sandstone boxes, which contained small steatite relic caskets. Inscriptions on the lids of the caskets identified the remains as those of Buddha's disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana. Cunningham transported the caskets containing relics to London without any questions being asked and discarded the stone boxes in which the caskets had been placed. The stone boxes were subsequently located during the excavations conducted by John Marshall, but the relics along with the caskets seem to have been lost.<sup>78</sup> Nor were these the only reliquaries that Cunningham found, other important ones being from Stupa 2 at Sonari. It would seem that several of these were lost when the ship *Indus*, which was transporting these treasures to England, sank.

It is significant that Buddhist texts record that the relics of the Buddha's two principal disciples were enshrined at Sravasti (Sariputta) and those of Moggallana at Veluvana near Rajagriha. John Marshall theorised that the relics of the two Buddhist monks had been shifted to Sanchi when additions were made to the monastic structures.<sup>79</sup> About 10 kilometres west of Sanchi, Cunningham and Maisey opened Stupa 2 at Satdhara where they discovered another pair of relic caskets containing small pieces of bone. Inscriptions on the lid clearly identified the relics as those of Sariputta and Moggallana.<sup>80</sup> While Cunningham went on to become the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, Maisey was posted to Burma during the Second Anglo-Burmese War. On his return to England in 1866, he made drawings of the inscribed reliquaries from Stupa 2 at Satdhara (nos. IM 216-1921 and IM 217-1921) and loaned the relics and the caskets to the Victoria and Albert Museum along with other antiquities that he had collected from Burma. Subsequently the museum bought these objects from his heirs in 1921.<sup>81</sup> Thus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhist relics were transported outside the country without any qualms about hurting religious sentiments of the people. However this was to change soon thereafter and archaeological objects were caught

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<sup>78</sup> John Marshall, *The Monuments of Sanchi, ASI-AR 1913-14*, Superintendent, Government Printing, Calcutta, 1917: 12.

<sup>79</sup> John Marshall, Where the Restored Relics of Buddha's Chief Disciples Originally rested: the stupa of Sariputta and Mahamogallana, *Illustrated London News*, January 29, 1949: 142.

<sup>80</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *The Bhilsa Topes*, Indological Book House, Varanasi, reprint, 1966: 191-3.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Daulton, Sariputta and Moggallana in the Golden Land: The Relics of the Buddha's Chief Disciples at the Kaba Aye Pagoda, *The Journal of Burma Studies*, volume 4, 1999: 101-127, p. 109.

in the changing nature of religious identities in South Asia and the political turmoil which the subcontinent experienced.<sup>82</sup>

In March 1939, the Trustees of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Burma lodged a strong protest to the British Government regarding the exhibition of relics in a museum, instead of their being enshrined and worshipped in a pagoda. Similar protests were lodged by other organisations in India and on February 24, 1947 representatives of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Government transferred the custody of the relics to Daya Hewavitarne, a representative of the Mahabodhi Society and the Government of India. The relics then travelled through several countries, including Sri Lanka and Burma and were finally enshrined at Sanchi in November 1952.<sup>83</sup>

Records in the National Archives of Delhi provide interesting details of the discovery and subsequent distribution of relics. The case of those from the mound of Piprahwa Kot in Basti district close to the Nepal border is particularly significant. The mound was located within Mr. W.E. Peppe's estate and when he came to know that this was a stupa, he sunk a shaft down and came across a stone chest of large dimensions in which were three steatite urns and a crystal bowl and two stucco slabs. In the crystal bowl there were a number of small gems and a few stamped pieces of gold leaf. The most important relics were the charred bones and ashes, about a handful. On one of these urns there was an inscription in Pali indicating that the relics were those of the Buddha himself.

At this point the story of the find gets more complex, as a Buddhist high priest, Jinavaravansa, cousin of the king of Siam had come on a pilgrimage to visit this stupa, the recently discovered Asoka pillars, the Lumbini garden and the site of Kapilavastu. He sent a letter dated 9 April 1898 to Mr. Peppe, enclosing a memorandum on the Buddha relics stating that the ashes of the Buddha should be made over to him for presentation to the king of Siam as the head of the orthodox Buddhist community of the present day and the sole reigning Buddhist monarch.<sup>84</sup> While debating the fate of the relics, Dr. W. Hoey, Officiating

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<sup>82</sup> Torkel Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Willis (ed.), *Buddhist Reliquaries*, The British Museum, London, 2000: 81, footnote 6.

<sup>84</sup> National Archives of India, 1899 Foreign Department, External A Pros. April 1899, nos. 92-117: Presentation to the king of Siam of certain Buddhist relics discovered near Piprahwa in the Basti district. Visit of Phya Sukhum to India to receive the relics.

Commissioner, Gorakhpur Division wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Government of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh:

It is a matter of common knowledge that the Buddhists are not satisfied because the Bodh Gaya temple is in the possession of the Hindus. The attitude of the Government of Bengal in this matter is necessarily one of neutrality. At the same time the connection of the British government with Buddhist countries renders it desirable that if an incidental opportunity to evince its consideration for Buddhists should arise, advantage should be taken of it to manifest its goodwill. Viewing the Government of India in this case as the British Government I consider its relations with Siam, a country bordering on Burma, would justify the gift for which the application has been made. At the same time I believe that the coveted relic should be forwarded through this Government to the Government of India and transmitted by His Excellency the Governor-General to the king of Siam.<sup>85</sup>

The Chief Secretary, V. A. Smith, suggested in his reply, that while the relics may be of interest to the Buddhist world, the accessories e.g. the stone coffer, the crystal vase and the small finds were of importance for the Europeans and that the two classes of objects required different treatment. While the former could be gifted to the king of Siam, the appropriate place for the latter was the museum, such as the Imperial Museum, Calcutta. It was hence decided that the relics would be handed to a representative of the king of Siam, who in turn would distribute the relics to communities from Burma to be displayed at Rangoon and Mandalay and at Anuradhapura, Kandy and Colombo in Ceylon. In keeping with this agreement, the Royal Commissioner of Ligor Circle Phya Sukhum arrived with his Secretary on Tuesday 14 February 1899 at Gorakhpur and proceeded to Piprahwa. On 16 February the relics were brought from the Royal Treasury and handed over with great ceremony. The relics were then placed in gold plated pagodas which Phya Sukhum had brought with him and that same evening he left Gorakhpur for Calcutta.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> National Archives of India, 1899 Foreign Department, External A Pros. April 1899, nos. 92-117: Presentation to the king of Siam of certain Buddhist relics discovered near Piprahwa in the Basti district. Visit of Phya Sukhum to India to receive the relics: No. 94, no. 4366 – VII-32 dated 13<sup>th</sup> April 1898.

<sup>86</sup> National Archives of India, Foreign Department, External A Pros. April 1899, nos. 92-117: Presentation to the king of Siam of certain Buddhist relics discovered near Piprahwa in the Basti district. Visit of Phya Sukhum to India to receive the relics: no. 115.



The address by Dr. Hoey on this occasion is revealing:

On this occasion we cannot but recall the gathering of rival kings who were prepared to fight at Kusinara for the cremated body of the great preacher of peace among the many episodes of whose life none stand out more beautiful than his interventions between brother tribes and kingly neighbours to prevent bloodshed: nor can we forget the events that led to the extinction of Buddhism in the Indian land where it was first propagated. One of many instances, which may be cited in the history of the world in which the power of kings was used to push or crush a religious system. Reflecting on these bygone days we are entitled to congratulate ourselves that we live in an age of toleration and of wide sympathy with the faiths which others profess. As a practical illustration of this sympathy the present memorable occasion loses none of its significance.<sup>87</sup>

Relics of bone were also discovered during archaeological excavations of a stupa built in [Peshawar](#), Pakistan by the Kushan ruler Kanishka in the second century CE. In 1909, three pieces of bone (approx 1½ in. or 3.8 cm long) were found in a crystal reliquary in a bronze casket bearing an effigy of Kanishka and an inscription recording his gift. They were removed to Mandalay in Myanmar by the Earl of Minto, Viceroy and Governor General of India, in 1910, for safekeeping. Initially these relics were originally kept in a stupa in Mandalay. The outcome in this case was very different from that of Piprahwa and was complicated by a Petition from Sayed Amir Badshah and Sayed Ahmed Shah, owners of land from which the Buddhist relics were found, stating that that the Buddhists be asked to pay for the remains and that the owners of the land be given half the price for their share of the remains. H.H. Risley of the Legislative department decreed that it would be desirable for the Collector to declare the treasure to be ownerless since “Buddhist bones belong to nobody and have no value” and should go through the form of acquiring it under the Treasure Trove Act

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<sup>87</sup> National Archives of India Home Department Public A, April 1899 Pros Nos. 3 to 20: Visit to India of HE Phya Sukhum, envoy of the king of Siam.

VI of 1878. The intrinsic value of the casket could be ascertained for making payment to the owners, if need be.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> National Archives of India Home Department, Archaeology and Epigraphy A: Proceedings December 1909, nos. 13-16: Petition from Sayed Amir Badshah and Sayed Ahmed Shah, owners of land from which Buddhist relics were recently found at Peshawar claiming a share of the relics.

A different set of rules were applied to the relics found at Taxila and in this case Sir John Marshall, Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, was allowed to visit Ceylon in January 1917 in order to present the Buddhist relics to the Buddhists of that island.<sup>89</sup> But perhaps the most embarrassing outcome was that of relics discovered in 1900 at Bhattiprolu in Andhra and kept in the Madras Museum. Sir Arthur Havelock, Governor of Madras, offered them to the King of Siam who accepted the offer. Subsequently J.P. Hewett, the Secretary to the Government of India withdrew the offer and decided that relics of historical or archaeological value should be preserved in India and that such relics should not be parted with in future.<sup>90</sup>

### THE MAHAVAMSA AND RELIGIOUS HISTORIES

So far we have discussed the archaeology of Buddhist sites in South and Southeast Asia and excavations conducted by colonial officers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this final section it would be useful to consider traditional histories of Buddhism and the extent to which the world-view of Buddhists was incorporated into an understanding of the past. How was information contained in these religious histories or traditional histories to be reconciled with the search for a ‘scientific’ understanding of the past based on archaeological data? The writing of religious history, especially that of Buddhism, in several parts of Southeast Asia, relied on the *Mahavamsa*, the Sri Lankan Chronicle as a model. This model was particularly important in ancient Siam and Burma and continued to be followed until the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The *Mahavamsa*, the earliest Pali Chronicle of Sri Lanka, dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE, traces the history of the island from the advent of Vijaya in 483 BCE to the present. Its authorship is attributed to a Buddhist monk Mahanama who wrote under the patronage of a Sri Lankan king. The Buddha himself is claimed within this text to have travelled to the island and the Chronicle presents detailed accounts of the three visits. Asoka’s concept of Dharmavijaya is restated in the Chronicle leading to a symbiosis between the king and the Sangha. There are references to the Sri Lankan king Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BCE) being re-consecrated by envoys of Asoka thus marking an integration of the concepts of the universal monarch (*cakkavattil cakravartin*) and the great man (*mahapurisa*,

<sup>89</sup> National Archives of India Government of India Finance Department Pay and Allowances for Proceedings February 1917 nos. 84-5: Tour of visitation by Sir John Marshall, DG to Ceylon to present the Buddhist relics in person to Buddhists of that island.

<sup>90</sup> National Archives of India, Foreign Department, External B Proceedings March 1901 No. 97: Disposal of a relic of Buddha, which was offered to the king of Siam and accepted.

the Buddha himself). This is an ideal that is known to have been emulated by several rulers in Sri Lanka, the most prominent being Dutthagamini (101-77 BCE). In Burma and elsewhere, Asoka's example was constantly invoked by kings and the Khmer ruler Jayavarman VII (1181-1215) saw himself as the living Buddha.<sup>91</sup> In the Chronicles, the emphasis is on the purification of the Sangha by Asoka and the despatch of Buddhist missionaries not only to different parts of the subcontinent, but also to Suvarnabhumi and, most of all, to Sri Lanka.

The framework of the *Mahāvamsa* with an emphasis on royal support for preserving the Buddha's teachings and lineal succession of the Sangha was adopted and adapted in several regions of Southeast Asia. The *tamnān* or the history of Buddhism tradition was a major genre of writing in Thailand from before the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and it included several different classifications, such as histories of Buddha images, relics and institutions.

In general terms, *Buddha tamnān* texts share a similar content. They treat in varying detail the Buddha's wanderings in northern Thailand, his encounter with different ethnic and occupational groups – Lawa, Burmese, farmers, artisans, and so on – their conversion to the path of the *tathāgata*, the establishment of particular historical and religious sites or the prediction of their future appearance and a passing on of a legacy of Buddha's relics, images and footprints to ensure the success of Buddha's religion.<sup>92</sup>

It is significant that the Bangkok court produced its own version of the *Mahāvamsa* Chronicle in 1789, during the reign of Rama I (1782-1809), the founding king of the Chakri or Bangkok dynasty. Until 1932, when absolute monarchy was abolished in Thailand, Siamese history centred around the court and kings, princes, nobles and high-ranking monks, and expressed “an especially intense interest in the past at the very moment when internal reform, pressures from the Western powers, and reactions to Western ideas brought the past into question and thus sharpened historical consciousness.”<sup>93</sup> Thus Chapter I of the Thai Chronicles starts with

<sup>91</sup> R.F. Gombrich, Asoka - the Great Upasaka, A. Seneviratne, ed., *King Asoka and Buddhism: Historical and Literary Studies*, Kandy: Buddhist publication Society, 1994: 6.

<sup>92</sup> Donald K. Swearer, Signs of the Buddha in Northern Thai Chronicles, David Germano and Kevin Trainor (ed.), *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004: 145-162, p. 151.

<sup>93</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2006: 55.

the life of the Buddha and notes the first three Councils, concluding with the reign of Asoka. The next Chapter continues the narration with the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and ends with material from the *Jinakalamali*.<sup>94</sup> It is only in Chapters VII and VIII that the history of Ayutthaya is taken up, though here also, as Coedès notes, there is little that is original,<sup>95</sup> a view countered by Reynolds.<sup>96</sup> In Thailand, at least four representatives of religious historical writing are known: the *Jinakalamali* (1516/17 CE); the *Mulasasana* (the main body of which is dated 1420s CE); the *Camadevivamsa* (mid-15<sup>th</sup> century CE); and the *Ratnabimbavamsa* (possibly 1429 CE).<sup>97</sup> “The 1789 Chronicle was a history for an occasion, and the author found the Buddhist historiographical tradition appropriate and necessary for his urgent concerns. The fusion of this trans-cultural tradition with an indigenous Southeast Asian historical continuum was so natural as to make a distinction between the two indiscernible.”<sup>98</sup>

The influence of the *Mahāvamsa* was by no means limited to Thailand, and figures prominently in the traditional histories of Burma as well. As in the case of Thailand, the Burmese monastic establishment underwent reform and reorganisation as a result of intervention by King Bodawphaya who ruled for 37 years from 1782 to 1819. He appointed a committee of scholars including monks, brahmanas and ministers “to write a chronicle of Burmese kings”<sup>99</sup> and also commissioned copies of all available inscriptions, some of which he made true copies or authorised versions of the originals. In other cases, he made revised versions, thereby altering the meaning and in some cases also the contents. The oldest extant Burmese Chronicle dates to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was written by the poet Samantapasadika Silavamsa in three parts. The first part dealt with the kings of Buddhist India and Ceylon, the second part with the conquest of Ceylon, as described in the *Mahāvamsa* and the third part with Burmese history. The Buddha is noted in the text as having visited Burma and

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<sup>94</sup> Reynolds, *Seditious Histories*: 148.

<sup>95</sup> G. Coedès, Une recension palie des annals d’Ayuthia, *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, volume 14, number 3, 1914: 3.

<sup>96</sup> Reynolds, *Seditious Histories*: 149-60.

<sup>97</sup> Reynolds, *Seditious Histories*: 146.

<sup>98</sup> Reynolds, *Seditious Histories*: 160.

<sup>99</sup> Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce translated, *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma*, Humphrey Milford & Oxford University Press, London – New York, 1923: ix.

introduced Buddhism to the country.<sup>100</sup> It is unfortunate that in the search for a scientific understanding of the ‘historical’ Buddha and the pristine form of uncorrupted Buddhism, traditional histories have been marginalised in the writing of history. How are the somewhat loose and overlapping cultural boundaries evident in these writings to be understood? What then is the relationship between the histories of ideas, as reflected in religious histories, and that of archaeology with its emphasis on material culture and fixed chronologies?

## IN CONCLUSION – MONSOON ASIA IN WORLD HISTORY

In the final analysis we return to the issue articulated at the beginning of this paper: the need to come to terms with religious identities that were shaped during colonial rule in South and Southeast Asia and the evolutionary archaeology that developed in the colonial context. It is crucial that this relationship between the development of archaeology and the political unit or state in which it functioned be understood before archaeological data is drawn into the reconstruction of national histories.<sup>101</sup> Tartakov has effectively shown the extent to which early beginnings impinged on subsequent reflections in the context of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Durga temple at Aihole in Karnataka. A British artillery officer Biggs first photographed the Durga temple in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The temple’s apsidal form led James Fergusson to suggest that it was a Buddhist structure subsequently appropriated for the worship of Siva and by the 1860s the temple featured ‘as an inglorious, structural version of a Buddhist caitya hall, appropriated by Brahmanical Hindus and buried under rubble at a site of the ancient Chalukya dynasty’.<sup>102</sup> As a result of subsequent investigation and research not only on the plan of the temple, but also its rich imagery, it is now evident that the Durga temple is but one (albeit the largest and most lavishly constructed monument and dating to around 725-730 CE) of nearly one hundred and fifty temples built across 450 square kilometres of the Deccan in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

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<sup>100</sup> Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce translated, *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma*, Humphrey Milford & Oxford University Press, London – New York, 1923: xiii.

<sup>101</sup> Philip L. Kohl, Nationalism and Archaeology: On the Constructions of Nations and the Reconstructions of the Remote Past, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27, 1998: 223-46.

<sup>102</sup> Gary M. Tartakov, *The Durga Temple at Aihole: A Historiographical Study*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997. Also Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 2002.

Nor is this relationship limited to the construction of religious identities in South Asia. In the context of the archaeology of Vietnam, for example, it is argued that the distinctive understanding of race, culture and polity brought to the colony by French scientists radically altered the thoughts and actions of the Vietnamese as well as the Europeans and the results continued to be felt both within and outside the French Empire.<sup>103</sup> It is significant that many of the conclusions reached in the colonial period were internalised and repeated by local historians and archaeologists.

The same holds for members of the Greater India Society in Calcutta, who are often seen as pushing for a new form of nationalism, when “the issue of territoriality acquired a new edge as Indian art history spilled over its national boundaries to tell the story of the spread of Indian art and religion across China, Japan and Southeast Asia.” This Guha-Thakurta proposes served as “a major sop to national pride” and reinforced the idea of India as the source of Asian art,<sup>104</sup> in what can perhaps be best described as a simplistic explanation for a complex process relating to the creation of a colonial and post-colonial discourse. It is interesting that though members of the Greater India Society wrote about Indian cultural expansion to Southeast Asia, as well as India’s role in universal history, they contributed little to the study of Buddhism having accepted perhaps Cunningham’s hypothesis regarding the decline of Buddhism in India after the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

At this point Rajendralal Mitra’s (1823/4-1891) contributions need to be brought into the discussion, especially his critical approach to the conservation work of the Burmese at Bodhgaya. Mitra distinguished himself on account of his knowledge of Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu and Hindi and edited several Sanskrit texts. Much has been written about Mitra’s project to write history based on India’s ancient architecture and sculpture and his claim that the Hindu temple qualified as an elevated art form and his subsequent differences with Fergusson on the Greek legacy in Indian stone sculpture, which led the latter to write a book in 1884 titled *Archaeology in India, with special reference to the Works of Babu Rajendralal Mitra*. This has been seen as colonial insecurity against a Western-educated native scholar in the context of the politics of the Ilbert Bill of 1883, which

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<sup>103</sup> Susan Bayly, French Anthropology and Durkheimians in Colonial Indo-China, *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 3, July 2000: 581-622. Haydon L. Cherry, Social Communication and Colonial Archaeology in Vietnam, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 6, 2, December 2004: 111-126.

<sup>104</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004: 187.

threatened to subject the British in India to the jurisdiction of native judges.<sup>105</sup> It should also be stressed that notwithstanding Fergusson's diatribe, the colonial state, in this case the Government of Bengal continued to support Mitra's work. In 1877, the Secretary, Government of Bengal wrote to Mitra stating that in the wake of conservation work done by the Burmese, Mitra should visit Bodh Gaya "to inspect the work and the remains collected and to give advice as to their value and to their disposition and whether there are any that should go to the Asiatic Society; and generally to advise the Government in regard to the manner in which the operations of the Burmese excavators should be controlled". Needless to say, Mitra's unqualified support of the rules of conservation as laid down by the Archaeological Survey of India brought him into conflict with Burmese norms of restoration.

Ideas about religious and ethnic identities often draw from prevailing notions of the past and it is here that the present and the past are inextricably linked not only to individual destinies, but more significantly to the larger meta-narratives of the nation states or, as in recent years, the globalising world. Wolters argued that the purpose of history could well be an enhancement of self-awareness and a better understanding of the present.<sup>106</sup> At the same time early history has been important to the newly emerging states of South and Southeast Asia and the achievements of the past in terms of "the age of the state, the longevity of settlement sites, and the inventiveness of early bronze or ceramic technologies have been of vital importance to contemporary national communities, an importance that is translated into issues for today's scholars."<sup>107</sup>

With the advent of World History, there is an increasing consensus that Asia constituted an advanced and dynamic region of the world in the period between the beginning of the Common Era and the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>108</sup> How is this dynamism to be understood? Do we need a different set of tools to write the history of Asia in the pre-modern period or should we be content with adapting models known from national histories, viz. Neolithic advances in prehistoric agriculture, the emergence of the first major polities, the classic empires, trading

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<sup>105</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004: 108-111.

<sup>106</sup> O. W. Wolters, Southeast Asia as a Southeast Asian Field of Study, *Indonesia*, 58, October 1994: 1-17.

<sup>107</sup> Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2006: 5.

<sup>108</sup> Craig A. Lockard, Integrating Southeast Asia into the Framework of World History: the period before 1500, *The History Teacher*, volume 29, no. 1, November 1995: 7-35.



networks and nation building.<sup>109</sup> The attempt in this paper has been to move beyond the paradigm of the nation state while researching the history of Asia, especially of the earlier periods, since in that period these frontiers had little meaning. It is crucial to address the ‘coloniality of power’ and the rigid hierarchies imposed between different knowledge systems in the colonial period and the extent to which they remain unquestioned and continue to be reproduced in post-colonial writings. “Our question would then be: Do we live in a world where the old epistemological hierarchies made rigid by modern colonialism have disappeared, or on the contrary, are we witnessing a postmodern reorganization of coloniality?”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Craig A. Lockard, Integrating Southeast Asia into the Framework of World History: the period before 1500, *The History Teacher*, volume 29, no. 1, November 1995: 8: “In considering the importance of Southeast Asia in premodern history, I have identified several sites, states or patterns that played prominent roles prior to the sixteenth century: Ban Chiang (the major prehistorical site); Funan (the first major Southeast Asian polity); the great Cambodian empire of Angkor; the classical Burman kingdom of Pagan; the sinization, florescence and nation-building of Vietnam; the great maritime empire and trading center based at Melaka; the process of “Indianization” and the role of Southeast Asia in Asian maritime commerce. Any text purporting to offer an adequate understanding of the region’s contribution to World history should at least mention most of these.”

<sup>110</sup> Santiago Castro Gómez, The Missing Chapter of Empire: Post-modern Reorganization of Coloniality and post-Fordist Capitalism, *Cultural Studies*, volume 21, numbers 2-3, March-May 2007: 428.

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