Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus
A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Part V

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Kuśinagara

In his seventy-ninth year, Sākyamuni began his last journey to the north. He travelled from Rājagaha through the towns Ambalaṭṭhiṅkā, Nālandā, Pāṭaligāma (Pāṭaliputra of the Mauryan period, c. 321-185 BC, and modern Patna), from where he crossed, by miraculous power, the Ganges River, which was then in spate. North of the river, he then travelled to the villages of Koṭighāma and Nādiṅka and finally to Vaiśāli where he stayed at the Ambapāḷi grove. In each of these places, he met with local monks, offered teachings to them and received meals at the hands of the local laity. Subsequently, he moved to nearby Beluva where he resided for the rainy season, during which he was taken ill. It is at Beluva that he delivered his famous ‘be lamps unto yourselves’ sermon. In answer to Ananda’s request for instructions concerning the order in the event of Sākyamuni’s death, the Buddha said:

...O Ānanda, [I] am now grown old, and full of years, my journey is drawing to its close, I have reached the sum of my days, I am turning eighty years of age...It is only, Ānanda, when the Tathāgata, ceasing to attend to any outward thing, or to experience any sensation, becomes plunged in that devout meditation of heart/mind which is concerned with no material object—it is only then that the body of the Tathāgata is at ease.


With these words, the Buddha set the stage for both his upcoming death and the doctrinal diversity that is now what we know as Buddhism. By designating no heir apparent for the leadership of the community (sangha), Sākyamuni opened the way for many leaders, and thus for schism and dispute, but more importantly, for vigorous growth and development, so much that the essential teachings of the Buddha could ultimately reach more than half of the population of the world.

According to the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, Sākyamuni remained in the Vaiśāli/Beluva area for three months. He then resumed his journey north and west towards either Śrāvasti or Kapilavastu. The party travelled to Bhandagāma, Bhoga-nagara and on to Pāvā, where they spent the night in the mango grove of Cunda, a metal-worker. Cunda invited the Buddha and his followers for a meal the next day. Sākyamuni accepted and Cunda spent the night preparing a feast that included dried boar meat. On arriving at the time of the feast, the Buddha said, ‘As to the dried boar’s flesh you have made ready, serve me with it; and as to the other food, the sweet rice and cakes, serve the brethren with it’ (Ibid., p. 71). Immediately after eating the flesh, Sākyamuni fell violently ill but shortly thereafter insisted that the brethren begin their journey to Kuśinagara.

Reaching in several stages the vicinity of Kuśinagara, they proceeded to the sāla grove of the Mallas known as the Upavattana of Kuśinagara where the Buddha asked that Ananda spread a couch for him with its head towards the north between two sāla trees, ‘and the Blessed One laid himself down on his right side, with one leg resting on the other.’ (Ibid., p. 86) After meeting the Mallas of Kuśinagara and offering some final instructions to the brethren, Sākyamuni Buddha died.

When the Blessed One died, the venerable Ananda, at the moment of his passing away, uttered this stanz: ‘Then was there terror! Then stood the hair on end! When he endowed with every grace—The supreme Buddha—died!’

When the Blessed One died, of the brethren who were not yet free from the passions, some stretched out their arms and wept, and some fell headlong on the ground, rolling to and fro in anguish at the thought: ‘Too soon has the Blessed One died! Too soon has the Happy One passed away from existence! Too soon has the Light gone out in the World!’

But those brethren who were free from the passions (the Arhats) bore their grief collected and composed at the thought: ‘Impermanent are all component things! How is it possible that [they should not be dissolved]?’

(Ibid., pp. 118-19)

Who among his followers could have conceived of such a time when the Buddha would no longer be with them? At once the symbol of great mourning and of the ultimate release, the stūpa of the Mallas at Kuśinagara along with the stūpa of the cremation at Rāmahārī, about one kilometre to the east, mark both the death of the great teacher and the final realization of the release that his teachings promised. Technically, death of the corporeal body per se is insignificant to the Buddhists. Life and death are part of an endless cycle of existence that progresses from the infinite past and stretches on into the infinite future. ‘As many lives as the grains of sand on the banks of one hundred million nyūris of kōris of Ganges Rivers’ are expected for every sentient being. But
the death of the Buddha was very different; because of his realizations and the attainment of enlightenment, he was no longer subject to transmigration through endless births and deaths. His lives of suffering (duḥkha) had come to the final end.

Those who had not attained their own release from desire would see the death as a great and tragic loss. Others, whose attainment was more completely accomplished would realize that this was the demonstration of the Buddhist promise to them — the demonstration of the release that came from joining the ‘Aryan Kingdom’ (see Part III*) and following the way of the Buddha (Buddhamārga) to its logical conclusion. For those who had attained their own release (the Arhats), everything was as it should be and there was no remorse or joy — only the need to minister to others less fortunate than themselves in terms of their attainment.

The modern town of Kasia in eastern Uttar Pradesh is the site of ancient Kuśinagara, the location of the Great Decease (Mahāparinirvāṇa) of Śākyamuni Buddha. It is reachable only by bus or automobile from Gorakhpur. Unfortunately, although it appears on maps to be a convenient route, one should not attempt to travel National Highway 28 between Kasia and northern Bihar. The road east from Kasia may be the worst stretch of national highway in India, and, even at its best, is very unpleasant and more than a little dangerous to travel. (If, for some reason one feels the need to travel it, a jeep or a Land Rover is advised, allowing plenty of time — about twelve hours between Kasia and Patna! — and one should be sure to check locally to see if the road is passable.)

Just to the southwest of the modern town of Kasia, the remains of a large monastery have been partially uncovered. At present, it contains the modern Temple of the Nirvāṇa and, at the date of this author’s recent visit, a restoration in progress on the Kuśinagara stūpa (Fig. 1). At the time of its excavation in the 1876-77 season, the main feature at the monastery was the large stūpa and an unusual temple foundation containing the fractured remnants of a huge reclining image (6.1 metres long) of Śākyamuni, which had been much repaired with plaster. Upon excavation, the base or plinth of the Buddha image was found to contain much of the rest of the image, and the excavator, A.C.L. Carleyle

*Part I (Orientations, November 1985, pp. 46-61) discusses Aśoka’s archetypal pilgrimage, Lumbini and Kapilavatthu, and Bodhagārī and its environs; Part II (February 1986, pp. 28-43), the Rṣipatana Mrgadāvā (Vārāṇasī and Sārnāth); Part III (March 1986, pp. 32-46), Śrāvasti and the Jetavana Monastery, and Sānkalpa; and Part IV (July 1986, pp. 28-40), Vaishali and Rājaṇgṛha.
(Fig. 2) *Parinirvāṇa* image inside the Nirvāṇa Temple  
5th century  
Kuśinagara

(Fig. 3) Detail of Figure 2

(Fig. 4) Detail of Figure 2
(Fig. 5) Image of Figure 2 without covering

(Fig. 6) Parinirvāṇa image
Ajanta, Cave 26, end 5th century
Mathurā school and was imported to the site at the time of its installation.

In comparison with other images of the Parinirvāṇa, whether at Dunhuang in Gansu province, China, or in Sri Lanka, where the two sub-types of this image convention are very common, the sense of this being the actual spot of the Parinirvāṇa overwhelms any historical or archaeological concerns that one might have. To the best of human knowledge, it is at this very spot that the great teacher ended his many mortal existences and re-integrated, much as a drop of water re-unites with the oceans of the world, into the fulfilled state of undifferentiated potential (nirvāṇa). To be present in the temple, even though one’s thoughts are punctuated by groups of visiting school children and chatting tourists with little or no Buddhist interests, is still to experience and receive dārśana (see Part 1 of the great event.

Early representations of the Parinirvāṇa at such places as Bodhgaya, Bhārhat and Sāñci (in spite of Foucher’s opinion about certain reliefs at the Sāñcī site) are lacking. This is probably because the stūpas at these sites were the symbol par excellence of the Parinirvāṇa. Not only does the stūpa symbolize the ultimate attainment, but, as Lewis R. Lancaster has pointed out, in virtually all early stūpas, the Buddha himself was physically present in the casket of relics. This accounts for the depiction of numerous scenes of stūpa worship at all of the early sites. Apparently, the existence of a stūpa at Kusinagara was enough for the devotees, for there are no records to even suggest if there was any kind of early sculptural commemoration at the site.

As just one example of the many representations of the Parinirvāṇa, the spectacular image (Fig. 6) found in Cave 26 at Ajañtā is both a prime example and demonstration of the already fully developed tradition. Carved in the left side wall of the ambulatory and blocked in by pillars, the placement of the image forces the viewer into close proximity, and an almost confrontational experience, with the image. Subhadra, the Buddha’s last convert, who had not developed enough faith to be overly concerned, sits with his back to the viewer in quiet contemplation of an event he does not fully comprehend, while grieving mourners surround the image. The other figures are not readily identifiable although Ananda, Anuruddha and Upāsana appear by name in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra narrative of the events. It is with surrogates of the Kusinagara images such as the one at Ajañtā, that the faithful throughout the Buddhist world have been able to experience both the deep sense of loss and the promise of the ultimate salvation represented by the Mahāparinirvāṇa, the last of the Mahāpratītiḥārya (Great Miracles) of Śākyamuni Buddha.

[Just prior to the Buddha’s death, Ananda asked, ‘What are we to do, Lord, with the remains of the Tathāgata?’]

‘Hinder not yourselves [the monks], Ananda, by honouring the remains of the Tathāgata. Be zealous, I beseech you, Ananda, in your own behalf! Devote yourselves to your own good! Be earnest, be zealous, be intent on your own good! There are wise men, Ananda, among the nobles, among the Brāhmans, among the heads of houses, who are firm believers in the Tathāgata; and they will do honour to the remains of the Tathāgata.’ (Ibid., p. 91)

With these words, in a virtually universally overlooked passage, the Buddha made the act of devotion to his remains not an aspect of monastic activities but one placed in the realm of the lay devotees. The implications of this passage for Buddhist faith (śraddhā) practices and for the history of art connected with them cannot be over-estimated. This notification from a primary canonical source states unequivocally that the cult of relics and, by obvious extension, the stūpas housing them, are the provenance of the lay devotees and that the monks should not concern themselves with the relics. This means that all of the great stūpas, especially the early ones, must be studied primarily in the light of lay devotional practices and as the loci of lay faith. This limits both the necessary approaches and even the body of canonical and commentarial literature that applies to them. Moreover, it opens the door for interpretations of their iconography as related to lay concerns and it raises the important question as to when the stūpa became part of the technical vocabulary of the saṅgha. Clearly, it did and has remained so to the present. Like virtually everything else in Buddhism, the stūpa has several layers of meaning and they are for each to interpret
(Fig. 7) Cremation stūpa
Rāmabhār

(Fig. 8) War of the relics
Sāñci, Stūpa I, south torana, north face,
lower architrave, 25 BC-AD 25
(Fig. 9) Caskets with relics of Sākyamuni recovered from the Śākyan stūpa at Piprahwa. National Museum, New Delhi

(Fig. 10) Sāñcī, Stūpa I, from the northwest
The Division of the Relics and the Eight Mahāstūpas

After the cremation, the Mallas of Kuśinagara held a ceremony around the bones of the Buddha that had survived the fire and for seven days, they did pūja to the bones with music, dance, song and with garlands and perfumes.

Upon hearing that the Buddha had died and been cremated, Ajātāsatu of Magadha demanded a portion of the relics over which he wished to build a stūpa. The Licchavis of Vaiśali also sent a messenger asking for relics, as did the Sākyas of Kapilavastu, Bulis of Alakappa, the Kolliyas of Rāmagāma, the Brāhmans of Veṭhadīpa and the Mallas of Pāvā. The Mallas of Kuśinagara refused to meet these demands, pointing out that the Buddha had died within their realm and insisting that all the relics should remain with them.

At this point, there seems to have been a wise Brāhmaṇ, Droṇa (literally ‘Measure’), who, in order to avert an impending war over the relics, proposed a fair division. In contrast to the textual tradition, sculptural representations from Sāñcī (Fig. 8) seem to suggest that there may have been an actual war. Whatever the case, the relics were divided and set up in stūpas by each of the contending groups. Of these original eight mahāstūpas, the Vaiśali and Rājagaha (see Part IV, Figs 8 and 24, respectively), Kuśinagara and Kapilavastu ones are known. Relics from the Kapilavastu stūpa at modern Piprahwa (see the ‘Kapilavastu Revisited’ section below) were contained in several caskets (Fig. 9), one of which carried an inscription stating that they were the relics of the Buddha (see below, ‘The Inscription on the Piprahwa Reliquary’). The Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra also tells of the Mroriyas of Pippalavana arriving too late to claim any relics but being given embers from the cremation fire over which they built a stūpa and that Droṇa was given the vessel with which he divided the remains to build a stūpa over. Thus, there would seem to have been two additional stūpas with legitimate claim to very early existence.

Although the exact locations of four of the mahāstūpas and the two secondary stūpas are unknown, there is nothing to suggest that such places as Śrāvasti, Lumbini, Sārṇāth or Sāñcīya are in any way connected with the clans and tribal groups that received portions of the relics. Thus, the Aṣṭamahācāitya (Eight Great Sacred Locations, or pīṭhas, i.e. the pilgrimage sites) and the locations of the eight mahāstūpas only partially coincide and it is to be expected that further archaeological investigations may well discover the locations of the ‘lost’ four mahāstūpas in due time.

Aśoka’s Division of the Relics

Then King Aśoka, intending to distribute far and wide the bodily relics of the Blessed One, went together with a fourfold army to the droṇa [not Droṇa the Brāhmaṇ, but droṇa, a measure of volume meaning a stūpa with a measure of the relics] stūpa that Ajātāsatu had built. He broke it open, took out all the relics, and putting back a portion of them, set up a new stūpa. He did the same with the second droṇa stūpa and so on up to the seventh one, removing the relics from each of them and then setting up new stūpas as tokens of his devotion. Then he proceeded to Rāmagāma. There the nāgas [cobra deities] took him down to the nāga palace and told him: ‘We here pay homage to our droṇa stūpa.’ Aśoka, therefore, let them keep their relics intact, and the nāga king himself escorted him back up from the palace...

Then Aśoka had eighty-four thousand boxes made of gold, silver, cat’s eye and crystal and in them were placed the relics. Also, eighty-four thousand urns and eighty-four thousand inscription plates were prepared. All of this was given to the yakṣas [male nature deities, guardians of treasure] for distribution in the [eighty-four thousand] dharma-rājikās [stūpas] he ordered built throughout the earth as far as the surrounding ocean, in the small, great, and middle-sized towns... (J.S. Strong, The Legend of King Aśoka, 1983, pp. 219-20.)
Seven of the eight mahāstūpas thus became the source of the relics that the Mauryan emperor Asoka (c. 270-220 BC) redistributed throughout his empire at locations such as Sāncī and many others, totalling 84,000 according to both the Asokāvadāna and Faxian (the Chinese monk who went on pilgrimage to India from 399 to 414). Thus, not only could the faithful visit the sites of the great events of the Buddha, but it was also possible to visit the locations of his actual remains. While one must not take the number 84,000 literally, there is evidence that a major redistribution of relics did take place during the Mauryan period under the direction of Asoka himself.

The fact that we do not know of many more potential Asokan stūpas may be due to a practice of leaving local governors or deputys of the king to their own resources as to how they would build the stūpas in their provinces. Depending on their own faith or lack of faith in Buddhism, their relative resources and the degree to which Asoka actually controlled the area (his empire was simply too vast not to have had some serious dissen sion and, at best, loosely allied territories), they would probably have built stūpas of extremely varied quality and relative permanence. Accordingly, only where direct imperial patronage occurred (for example, at Sāncī) or where a truly devoted minister or administrator governed in Asoka's name may we expect the possibility of stūpas surviving. In other cases, chance alone would dictate our expectations. Lack of local concern coupled with the early tradition that the stūpa would have been only a mound of earth has probably led to the loss of virtually all except for a very few of the stūpas from the Asokan redistribution.

With the distribution of the relics to surrogate sites, the pilgrimage to the remains at the mahāstūpas became less important, and it only stands to reason that the stūpas containing the relics of the Buddha would then have become the centre of localized pilgrimages and that surrogate images of the Eight Great Caityas would also have been added to their iconography. Because devotion to the relics was specifically enjoined from the monks, the whole idea of pilgrimage, the concept of surrogates and the redistribution of the relics were non-canonical and were aspects of lay devotionalism.

While the redistribution of the relics of Sākyamuni was ostensibly an act of faith and of proselytization of the faith, it was also probably steeped in talmudic concerns for the well being of the Mauryan empire. Asoka was, in effect, establishing the ideal Buddhist kingdom, protected by relics of the most recent Buddha (it is known from inscriptions that Asoka also knew of and enlarged the stūpas of at least two of the predecessors of Sākyamuni). By doing so, he made available the relics and the living tradition of Buddhism from Afghanistan to Nepal and Bengal in the north and as far as Sri Lanka in the south. This undoubtedly encouraged the egalitarian ideals of the nascent Mahāyāna, even though the Mahāyānist sects were in disfavour with Asoka, and helped to begin the process of establishing the promise of universal Buddhahood. Thus, although there is clear evidence that Asoka supported the schools of Buddhism that were to become known as the Theravādin tradition to the detriment and exclusion of the schools that were to become the Mahāyāna tradition, he set the stage for the rapid expansion of lay interest in Buddhism and the ultimate growth of the Mahāyāna tradition.

Since the eight mahāstūpas reflect a lay concern and a 'proto-Mahāyāna' sentiment, it is very probable that the early stūpas, which have always been understood by Buddhologists and art historians alike as axiomatically 'Hinayāna', should be re-evaluated with their fundamental assumption that the monuments are at least 'proto-Mahāyāna' and, more probably, strictly Mahāyāna. This would be a major revision in the basic understanding of the monuments and of Buddhist art of the early period. Given the passage restricting the monks from relic worship and leaving it to the laity, it seems an inevitable conclusion that must be taken into account when discussing the early monuments.

Remarkably, one of Asoka's monuments has survived almost intact. The Great Stūpa at Sāncī (Stūpa I; Fig. 10), was first built during Asoka's time and, although much damaged during the reign of Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (r. c. 185-151 BC), it was restored and enlarged during later Suṅga (c. 185-73 BC) times. It had four large gates (torāṇas) added during the early Sātavāhana period (c. 25 BC-AD 25), and has survived, with only minor additions, since that time. Thus, it is the closest approximation we have of what one of the Asokan stūpas looked like and is generally believed to reflect the appearance of the early stūpas in general. This assumption is confirmed by comparison with the 'Asokan' stūpas at Patan in Nepal, the stūpa of Kāsyapa Buddha at Swayambhūnāth also in Nepal, the remnant of the Bhūhrīt stūpa and the Amarāvati stūpa, all of which, in their earliest forms, date from the Mauryan period or shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, all of the comparative stūpas are much less 'pure' or are destroyed and known only from internal sculptural representations. Thus, Sāncī, with its low profile, southern orientation, simple upper fence enclosure (harmika) atop the dome (ananda), simple tower of three canopies (chattras or bhūmis) and massive stone enclosing fence (vedikā), preserve for the modern visitor the feeling and actual physical environment of a pre-Christian era stūpa. It is as close as one can get to the sense and mood of the early monuments.

The legacy of the pilgrimage route tradition is very clear both from the texts and from the actual monuments. The pilgrimage sites of the Āstamahāprāthihārya (Eight Great Illusions) at the Eight Great Sacred Locations provided a basis for a reaffirmation of faith in the Buddhist way. Either by visiting the sites or by seeing and acknowledging the surrogates of the sites at such places as Sāncī one could experience the life and deeds of Sākyamuni directly in the sense of obtaining darśana. Coupled with the fact that the eight great stūpas provide direct physical contact with the Buddha's persona, there was a powerful impetus giving strength to the lay devotional side of the religion. Given monumental impetus by Asoka's own pilgrimage, marking of the pilgrimage sites and redistribution of the relics, the cults of the caityas and of the relics undoubtedly provided much of the early devotional basis for lay Buddhism.

Kapilavastu Revisited

In Part I of this series, it was noted that there was debate over the location of ancient Kapilavastu, the capital of the Śākyas. However, based on
the discovery by the Royal Nepalese Department of Archaeology of seals mentioning the stūpas of Suddhodana and of Māyādevi at Tilurakot, it appeared that the problem of Kapilavastu probably had been resolved. Yet even as the first four parts of this series of articles were being published, new evidence on the location of ancient Kapilavastu was emerging. During the 1970s, excavations were carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India at the adjacent sites of Piprakwa, Ganwaria and Salagarh mound in the Basti District of Uttar Pradesh (Fig. 11). In his 1986 book, Discovery of Kapilavastu, the excavator, K.M. Srivastava, reports finding sealings at Piprakwa bearing inscriptions in the first- or second-century AD Brāhmī script reading Om Devaputravihare Kapilavastusa Bhikṣu Sanghāsa, [belonging to the] Mendicant community [of the] Devaputraviha [at] Kapilavastu’, and another type reading Mahākapilavastu Bhikṣu Sanghāsa, ‘belonging to the] Mendicant community of Great Kapilavastu’. There were twenty-two of the first type and thirteen of the second type (of which only eight are legible). Since so many of the seals were found at the site, it is unlikely that they represent chance finds of stray objects that had been made at another site and were brought to Piprakwa. Accordingly, one has to agree that Piprakwa is probably Kapilavastu, at least so far as believed in the first or second century AD, and that the Pipraha relics may well be the Sākyan relics.

How this debate about which site was Kapilavastu came about and the implications that it has for the study of the sites is very significant in terms of the 'epistemology' (essentially how we know what we think we know) of the sites. The identification of both Tilurakot and Pipraha as Kapilavastu was, until the discovery of the sealings, based primarily on the evidence of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang. The only other evidence of any value is an inscription on a casket (Fig. 9) contained in the Piprakwa stūpa. While, to some authors, the casket inscription supports the identification of Piprakwa as Kapilavastu, the reading of the inscription has been highly problematic and there has been legitimate question as to whether the relics contained in it are those of Sākyamuni or, far less probably, those of one of his relatives among the Sākyas. Accordingly, in terms of the historiography of the problem, the inscription may be discounted (for my reading of the inscription see below).

Faxian gives the location of Kapilavastu in this way:

'Leaving the city of Śrāvasti, and going twelve yojanas [a stage of a journey or a day's travel, usually said to be about 12.5-14.5 kilometres] to the southeast, we arrive at a town called Napīka (unidentified)... the birthplace of Krakuchanda Buddha [one of Sākyamuni's predecessors]... Going north from this place less than a yojana we arrive at a town where Kanakamuni Buddha [another of Sākyamuni's predecessors] was born... From this spot going eastward less than a yojana we arrive at the city of Kāwei-lo-wei (Kapilavastu)... [There follows a description of the city and environs including the Arrow Well which he places thirty li to the southeast. Fifty li to the east of the city is the royal garden, called Lumbini. (Beal, Travels of Fa-hian and Sung-yun,... pp. 84-89.)

The location of Kapilavastu may be summarized from Xuanzang's account in this way:

[From Śrāvasti] going southeast about 500 li [thought to have been somewhat less than 300 metres during Xuanzang's time] we come to Kapilavastu. The country is about 4,000 li in circuit and in it there are about ten desolate and ruined cities. The capital [Kapilavastu] is overthrown and in ruins. Its circuit cannot be accurately measured but the royal precinct within the city measures fourteen or fifteen li in circumference... [There follows a long account of the city and its environs.] Outside of the south gate of the city is the place where the prince [Siddhārtha] competed in athletic sports. Thirty li south from the south gate is a place called Arrow Well where the prince's arrow fell to earth and created a fountain. To the northeast of the Arrow Well some eighty or ninety li is Lumbini. (Based on Beal, Buddhist Records of the Western World, vol. II, pp. 13-25)
First, it must be recognized that the directions in these travellers' accounts are not compass directions by any means but a very general reference to the direction travelled. However, even today the back roads of India follow in a general way the old village roads of past centuries (northeastern Uttar Pradesh and northern Bihar flood virtually every rainy season to the present day and river flooding has usually changed the exact routes). Therefore, it must be assumed that both Faxian and Xuanzang travelled from Śrāvasti more or less following the course of the modern Rāpī River east from Śrāvasti towards modern Bānsi or Naugarh. That being the case, there is a remarkable correspondence between the distance from Śrāvasti to near the Kapilavastu site. Taking a mean value of 13.5 kilometres for a yojana, the distance converts to around 520 li for Faxian's journey, for all practical purposes, the same as the generalized 500 li of Xuanzang.

This would have led them to approximately the same general area, but the descriptions are not accurate enough to be of much value in determining the exact location of Kapilavastu. However, if we work backwards from the fixed point of Lumbini, we discover that the pilgrims would seem to have been describing two different sites. Faxian's site for Lumbini is significantly closer to Lumbini than that of Xuanzang. Simply enough, this discrepancy led scholars in an acrimonious debate over the actual location of Kapilavastu.

The situation is further complicated by the problem that shortly after the death of Śākyamuni, as reported by Xuanzang, Kapilavastu was apparently razed to the ground, with most of the members of the Śākya clan massacred in a war with King Virūḍhaka of Kosala. While the historical validity of this tradition is, at best, vague, if it is true, it could account for the loss of even local knowledge as to the exact location of the Kapilavastu site at a very early date. As far as is known, there was little, if any, emphasis on the pilgrimage route until the great pilgrimage of Aśoka and, given the presumed destruction of the city, it is possible that the site lay unattended and even forgotten from about 450 BC to about 250 BC.

Archaeologically, it is important to realize that although virtually all of the sites of the pilgrimage route produce Aśokan remains at them, except for the stūpas of the Buddha's relics at Vaśali, not one of them has definitely identifiable traces of Śākyamuni Buddha or his followers at the sites that date prior to the Mauryan period. Even the relics at Piprawa are in identical style caskets, one of which has an inscription on it in Mauryan letters; in other words, even they were apparently reburied in new caskets in the middle of the third century BC.

Ultimately, one has to insist that, except for Rājagṛha, none of the sites associated with Śākyamuni are established by direct contemporaneous archaeological evidence but are mostly known by what this author shall term 'Mauryan validation'. Because of the earliness of the tradition of the four major pitās, those of the Birth, the Enlightenment, the First Sermon and the Parinirvāna as described in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra (see Part I), one simply assumes that these sites were continuously known from the time of the Buddha and that our probability of knowing where these events occurred is very high. The secondary sites, those of the Great Illusion, the Descent, the Taming of Nālāgiri and the Gift of the Monkey, would all seem to be of a 'later' tradition, although there is archaeological evidence that these sites were considered to be very important by no later than the end of the second century BC. Therefore, one must assume that these places were identified by that time. Included
among the early representations at Bhārhat is the visit of the white elephant to Māyādevi (Fig. 12), a kind of announcement of the birth of the future Buddha in which the Buddha-to-be descends from Trāyastriṃśa heaven and enters the womb of his mother while she dreams of a white elephant. As this event is invariably associated with the Śākyamuni palace at Kapilavastu, it may be assumed that there was also a second-century BC tradition of the location of that site as well. What happened in the interim, between the lifetime of Śākyamuni and the beginning of the archaeological record, is unknown.

Thus, the reasonably thorough excavations under K. M. Srivastava have done two things towards establishing the Piprahwa/Ganwaria site as Kapilavastu. First, they have established that the site was known as Kapilavastu some five to six hundred years after the death of Śākyamuni and, secondly, they have established that the site had continuous occupation from the eighth century BC to about AD 500, demonstrating at least the capability of it having been the Kapilavastu site.

Regrettably, the Tilurakot site has not been excavated to the full extent possible; only glimpses of Maurya period bricks are visible at the site, yet they occur on a mound at an elevation of about three metres above the surrounding fields. This would indicate that there was the possibility of many levels below the Mauryan bricks but, of course, no details are known. As in the case of the Jetavanārāma near Śrāvasti, the Tilurakot site needs further excavation. There appears to be a tendency for the excavators to clear the site down to where they get a set of attractive (usually Gupta period) foundations. However, following the example of many Mayan sites in Guatemala and the Yucatán, where archaeologists have literally had to sacrifice a major temple to discover what lay beneath, so it will have to be with early Buddhist archaeology. Sophisticated modern archaeological techniques can find traces of wooden buildings that would have been missed only a few decades earlier. While the sealings at Piprahwa are excellent evidence of what was de facto historical opinion in about the second century AD, only excavation to virgin soil at both sites will finally resolve the issue.

At first reading, the weight of the evidence would seem to support the long discredited conclusion, reached years ago by Vincent A. Smith, that, so far as the two Chinese pilgrims were concerned, there were two Kapilavastus and that Faxian had indeed visited Piprahwa and Xuanzang had visited Tilurakot. One may note that it would not have been the first time that a pilgrim to a holy land was told something that he wanted to hear rather than what the truth of the situation might be. But it seems that another solution is more probable. Tilurakot and Piprahwa are very close to each other. Indeed, as distances are calculated in India, they are virtually neighbours. Piprahwa is about half way between Tilurakot and Lumbini, approximately fifteen kilometres from each. Tilurakot was obviously a town in the Śākyan territory during the fifth century BC. Therefore, this author suggests that, while Piprahwa is indeed Kapilavastu, simply, for reasons as yet unknown, the stūpas of Sudoddhana and Māyādevi are in Tilurakot, perhaps at the site of a Śākyan family shrine.

The Inscription on the Piprahwa Reliquary

Much has been written about the inscription on the relic casket from Piprahwa, excavated in 1898 by W. C. Peppé. In this author's opinion, it reads: 'iyam salilanidhanā budhava bhagavate/Śākyamunin suttahhitam:/ sabhaginikanam saputadālamam'. This libation offering [i.e. the casket] containing relic of the Śākyan [clan’s] Lord Buddha. [Given by] the Sukiti brothers, sisters, sons and wives. The inscription is in Mauryan period characters, which are virtually identical in type to those of the famous Mauryan epigraphs on the pillars and rock edicts, and there can be no doubt that the inscription dates from that era. The inscription does not say that these relics belonged to the Śākyan clan nor does it state that the Sukiti family (or Sukiti himself if the name is read to mean an individual) belongs to the Śākyas as some others have argued. Thus, in spite of early opinions to the contrary, it does not identify the site of Piprahwa as relating to the Śākyas; however, it does identify the relics as being those of Śākyamuni Buddha.

Suggested Further Reading

Archaeology and History of the Pilgrimage Sites

n.b. For a more complete bibliography on Indian art in general and on many aspects of the sites, see Susan L. Huntington with John C. Huntington, The Art of Ancient India, Weatherhill, Tokyo, 1985, pp. 659-713.

Benimadhab Barua, Gayā and Buddha-gaya, 2 vols, Calcutta, 1931 and 1934. For an understanding of the entire Gayā complex of holy sites and how the Bodhgaya temple relates to its context; available only in libraries.


A. Führer, Monograph on Buddha Śākyamuni’s Birth-place in the Nepalese Tarar, Monographs of the Archaeological Survey of Northern India, vol. VI, Allahabad, 1897. Problematic in several aspects but still a useful account of the area with a fascinating description of the Asokan pillar at the stūpa of Konakamuni Buddha. Apparently not reprinted; available only in libraries.


Chakradhar Mahapatra, The Real Birth Place of Buddha, Cuttack (Orissa), 1977. An alternate review of the whole narrative of the life of the Buddha and the location of Kapilavastu in particular. While it is of little scholarly value, if the reader has a fairly thorough knowledge of the archaeology of the pilgrimage route, it is fun to read and useful for many citations to the literature.


description of the entire area with many additional sites to be visited by the more intrepid visitor.


Amulyachandra Sen, Rajagriha and Nālandā, Calcutta, 1964. A very valuable guide to Rajgir; unfortunately only available in the used book market.

K.M. Srivastava, Discovery of Kapilavastu, New Delhi, 1986. Outrageously priced (Rs. 900 or about US$85), but very cheaply produced with dreadful plates, this book is a routine publication of archaeological finds presenting the most up-to-date material on the Kapilavastu controversy. Except for the intense polemics of the author’s arguments about the identification of the site, it is mostly a technical archaeological report of interest to specialists.

Buddha’s Relics from Kapilavastu, Delhi, 1986. Some information on the excavations and a personal narrative of the author’s visit to Sri Lanka accompanying the relics from Kapilavastu to an exhibition there.


Text Sources for the Events in the Life of the Buddha

As there is no definitive life of the Buddha Śākyamuni, the present reader is faced with the rather monumental task of finding the various episodes scattered through several major works in the Buddhist canon. The following partial list of citations is only intended to supplement the references in the series of articles and to provide a basis to start one’s own reading.

Residence in Tuṣita


Birth and Early Life

Māyā’s Dream


Mahāvastu, vol. 2, pp. 4-10 (elephant story, p. 8).


Birth at Lumbini

Buddhakaccharī, p. 5.


Latitavastira, pp. 76-77.


Nidāna-Katha, p. 54.

Seven Strides


Bathing of the Infant Buddha-to-be

Buddhakaccharī, p. 5, 7.

Latitavastira, pp. 78, 85.


Entering the Shrine of the Goddess Abhayā

Buddhakaccharī, p. 22-23.

The Visit to Asita


Youth


Worsing of Yāsodhāra

Mahāvastu, vol. 2, pp. 70-74 (tournament: throws dead elephant killed by Devadatta, fighting and boxing, archery with seven palm trees and drum target).

Great Departure

Buddhakaccharī, pp. 59-61.

Divyāvadāna, p. 391.

Latitavastira, pp. 185-196.

Mayāndive-sutta, I.B. Horner, trans., in The Collection of The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-nikāya), vol. 2, London, 1957, pp. 181-92. The three palaces noted in this Pāli text might be seen as confirming the three palaces, each with a different wife, of the Buddha in tradition (see Rockhill, listed below).


Six Year’s Fast and the Visit to Sujata’s Place

Buddhakaccharī, pp. 132-35.

Divyāvadāna, p. 292.

Latitavastira, pp. 217-231.

Mahāvastu, vol. 2, pp. 120-26, 191-97 (prediction), 281.

Nidāna-Katha, pp. 180-87.

Enlightenment

(Kusa Grass from Svasitaka Yāvasakhi and the Praise of Kālika Nāgara)

Buddhakaccharī, pp. 145-56.

Divyāvadāna, p. 292-93.

Latitavastira, pp. 231-32, 241-44.


Nidāna-Katha, p. 188.

Māra’s Dream


Buddhakaccharī, pp. 137-47.

Divyāvadāna, p. 393.

Latitavastira, pp. 257-86.


Nidāna-Katha, pp. 190-97.

Post Enlightenment Meditations


Decision to teach and the trip from Uruvilvā to Vārānasi


First Sermon


Buddhakaccharī, pp. 171-89.


Divyāvadāna, p. 393.

Latitavastira, pp. 341-68.


Nidāna-Katha, pp. 207-8.

The Śrāvasti Cycle


Nidāna-Katha, p. 200.

The Sāṅkṣeya Descent

Dhammapadadhakahāthā, vol. 3, pp. 52-56.

Divyāvadāna, pp. 394, 401.

The Gift of the Monkey


The Taming of Nālāgiri


The Parinirvāṇa

Divyāvadāna, p. 394.


Secondary Compilations of Interest

W. Woodville Rockhill, trans., The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order; Derived from Tibetan Works..., London, 1907. The life of the Buddha in this work is derived from the Tibetan Vinaya and is a legitimate early version now lost in other cultures.


n.b. There are many other ‘lives of the Buddha’ but, to this author’s knowledge, almost all are heavily abridged (sometimes so severely as to limit the narrative usefulness), are frequently strongly romanticized and are often from a single sectarian point of view. Furthermore, very few have the far-reaching technical validity of the two given above.

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