

II. Papers

Archaeology and religious landscapes in India: a case study

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Religious and archaeological understandings of topography are usually understood in terms of different spheres of knowledge; where they intersect, it is when one becomes the object of analysis for another. But each is a way of making meaning in the landscape, of relating past and present through identify events with features of this landscape. Each is therefore a cultural activity and product. This is no more clear than when religion and archaeology build upon the work of each other.

The modern town of Rajgir in the eastern state of Bihar has a population of roughly 10,000. But although it is now just a provincial centre, Rajagriha was for centuries one of the largest cities in the Gangetic valley. It was the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, one of the most important of India's major states, of the mid-first millennium B.C. It is mentioned frequently in a number of ancient Hindu texts, including the two epics (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) and the *Puranas*. The founders of two other religions, Mahavira and the Buddha, also spent much of their careers here. Eventually Magadha came to dominate the rest of the Gangetic valley, and to form the nucleus of the Mauryan Empire, though by this time, Rajagriha had been eclipsed by Pataliputra (modern Patna) to the north. But Rajagriha continued to be an important centre, important enough for the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka to place one of his pillars here, though no trace of it remains. Modern interpretations of the site divide it into two parts, Old and New Rajgir, with the old city located in a valley surrounded by the Rajgir Hills.

Its past has made it a pilgrimage site for nearly all India's religions – in particular, Hindus, who consider its hot springs there sacred; Jains, whose temples dot the hilltops; and Buddhists (largely from East Asia), who come to visit places mentioned in their scriptures. It is Buddhist conceptions of Rajgir that are most prominent in archaeological work.

The first phase of this topography is to be found in the Buddhist Canon, dating to the later first millennium B.C. – which, according to the Canon itself, was first compiled on the outskirts of the city. The city is mentioned in one of three ways. The first is when a place-name is directly referred to e.g. when a figure such as King Bimbisara donated the Venuvana garden to the Buddhist Order. The second is when the place is given as part of the framing narrative for the particular teaching, and is thus incidental. The third is when the Buddha recites what seems to be a standard topographical list when he is about to leave the city for the last time.

For authors and readers (or hearers) of these texts, therefore, the city was a set of place-names connected with the Buddha and his teachings; an identification was made between event and place. There was little interest here in building a precise description of the city or relating these places to each other geographically. It is unsurprising also that this Buddhist topography excludes that of other groups. When one looks at those place-names woven into Mahavira's biography in the Jain sutras one finds almost no overlap between the two. For instance, the most important place in Rajgir as far as Mahavira and his disciples were concerned was the park and shrine of Gunashila; yet it is never mentioned in the Buddhist texts.

The first half of the first millennium A.D. saw the development of lively interchanges between China and India, both cultural and economic. The spread of Buddhism to China led to a large number of Chinese monks travelling to the region of Rajagriha, and from perhaps the fifth century the nearby university of Nalanda gained an international reputation. Of the accounts written of these journeys, easily the most detailed are the *Foguoji* of Faxian (c. 337–442) (Giles 1923) and the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji* of Xuanzang (c. 596–664) (Li Ronxi), (the latter supplemented by his disciple Huili's biography). Both came to India to collect materials for translation as well as to visit the sacred sites.

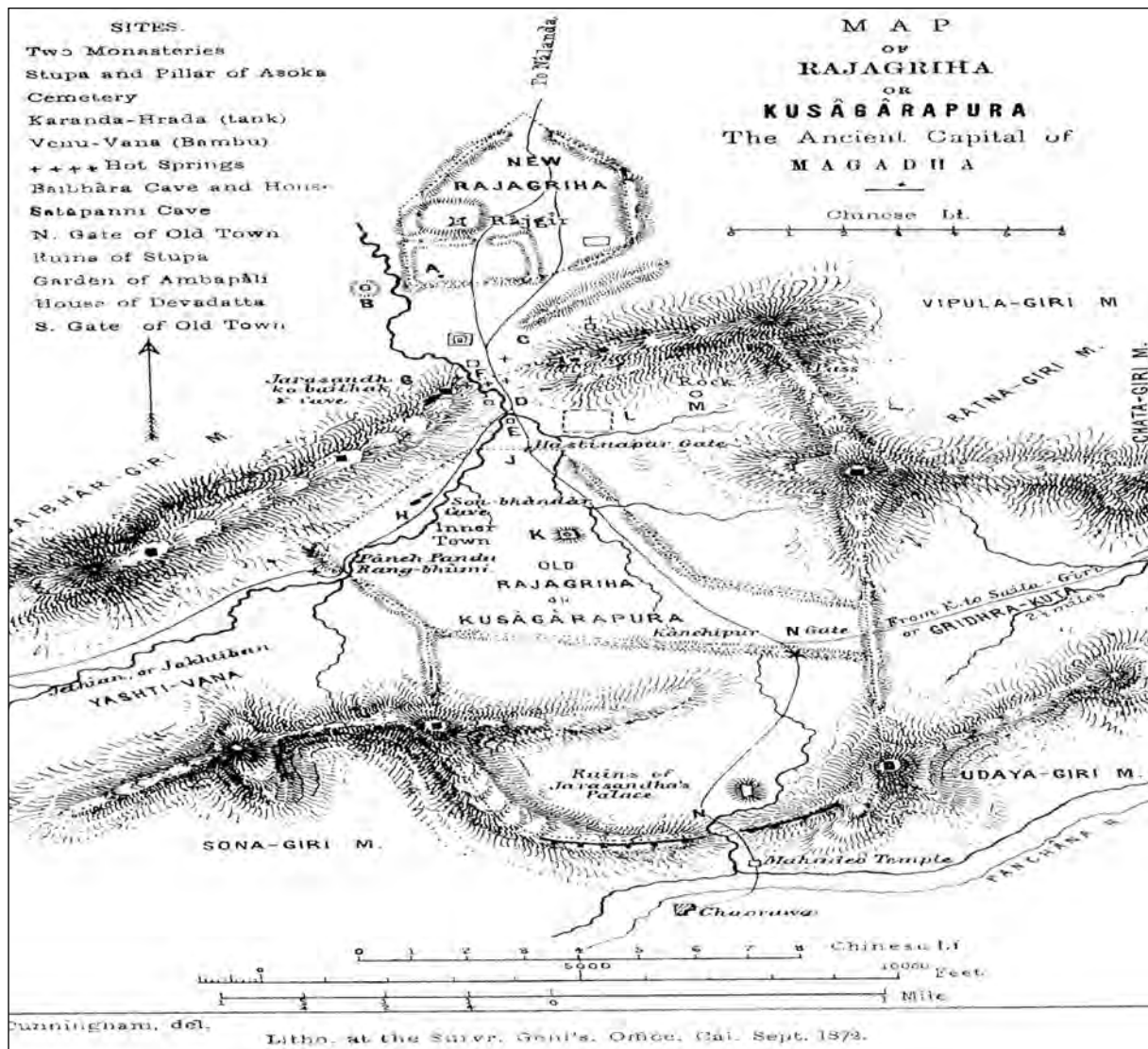
Virtually all places listed were Buddhist, or connected with Buddhism in some way. These very Buddhist antiquarians seem not to have explored other aspects of the city's past, including most of the ruins of Old Rajgir. Neither monk shows any sign of having ventured deep into the valley; Faxian merely mentions the old city to be a waste. Xuanzang does refer to Old Rajagriha, but did not explore it. What the monks were recording (and this seems to be overlooked by much of the discussion on them) was Buddhist sacred geography. The landscape was monumentalised with commemorative stupas (a hemispherical Buddhist structure containing sacred relics) connecting geography with the events of Buddha's life. Non-Buddhist material was elided from their accounts, including brahmanical and Jain understandings of the site.

With the decline of Buddhism, the topography it engendered faded too. When the surveyor Francis Buchanan visited the town in 1812, Puranic myth dominated locals' understanding of their surroundings. The key figure was Jarasandha, who had ruled the city during the Epic period and had been overthrown by the god Krishna and his allies the Pandava brothers. Jain temples occupied the hilltops and the mountains now formed a sacred pilgrimage route. Buddhist remains had often been converted to the use of Hindus or Jain structures. Outside the valley, a fortification next to the modern town site was attributed to the fifteenth-century ruler Sher Shah.

It was to be archaeology that recreated Buddhism at Rajgir.¹ Its most significant modern interpreter was Alexander Cunningham, the founder of the Archaeological Survey of India. The core of his archaeological career was the identification of the places mentioned by the two Chinese pilgrims. Their work had become available in the 1840s and 1850s through French translations; and they were quickly seen as India's version of Pausanias. Cunningham visited Rajagriha for the first time in 1861–2 and again in 1872 (cf. Cunningham 1871, 1873). But it was in 1843 that he first announced his programme of utilising the Chinese records to locate Buddhism's most significant sites – including Rajagriha. So it is clear that nearly 20 years before his first visit to Rajgir he had prefigured it as Buddhist. This is shown again in 1848 when he published his proposal for systematic archaeological investigation in India. Most of the proposal is spent justifying the study of Buddhist remains. Hindu ruins are mentioned once, the Puranas are dismissed as useless and Islam is referred to only as the force that destroyed Buddhism (1848, pp. 535–536). When he arrived at Rajgir his energies were spent on the identification of as many Buddhist structures as he could.

That a single religion no longer present in India could play such a part in a site's interpretation can be explained by reference to the position of Buddhism in Victorian consciousness, a position that had largely been created by the 1850s. One finds most aspects of it illustrated in some of Cunningham's early work, particularly the *Bhilsa Topes* (1854). Buddha, he argued, was a social critic, attacking caste and the 'menaces of the most powerful

¹ For a general account, cf. Allen 2002. For a biography of Cunningham, cf. Imam 1966.



Map 1. Cunningham's map of Rajgir, 1873.

and arrogant priesthood in the world' i.e. the brahmanas (p. 51). Buddhism was a religion that preached an ethical system, and was opposed to empty ritualism. Its rational, pacifist nature was the very opposite of Islam, which appealed to the passions and to satisfaction of desire, and whose history was a particularly bloodthirsty one:

The sanguinary career of the Islamite was lighted by the lurid flames of burning cities; the peaceful progress of the Buddha was illuminated by the cheerful faces of the sick in monastic hospitals, and by the happy smiles of travellers reposing in the Dharmshalas by the roadside. (p. 54)

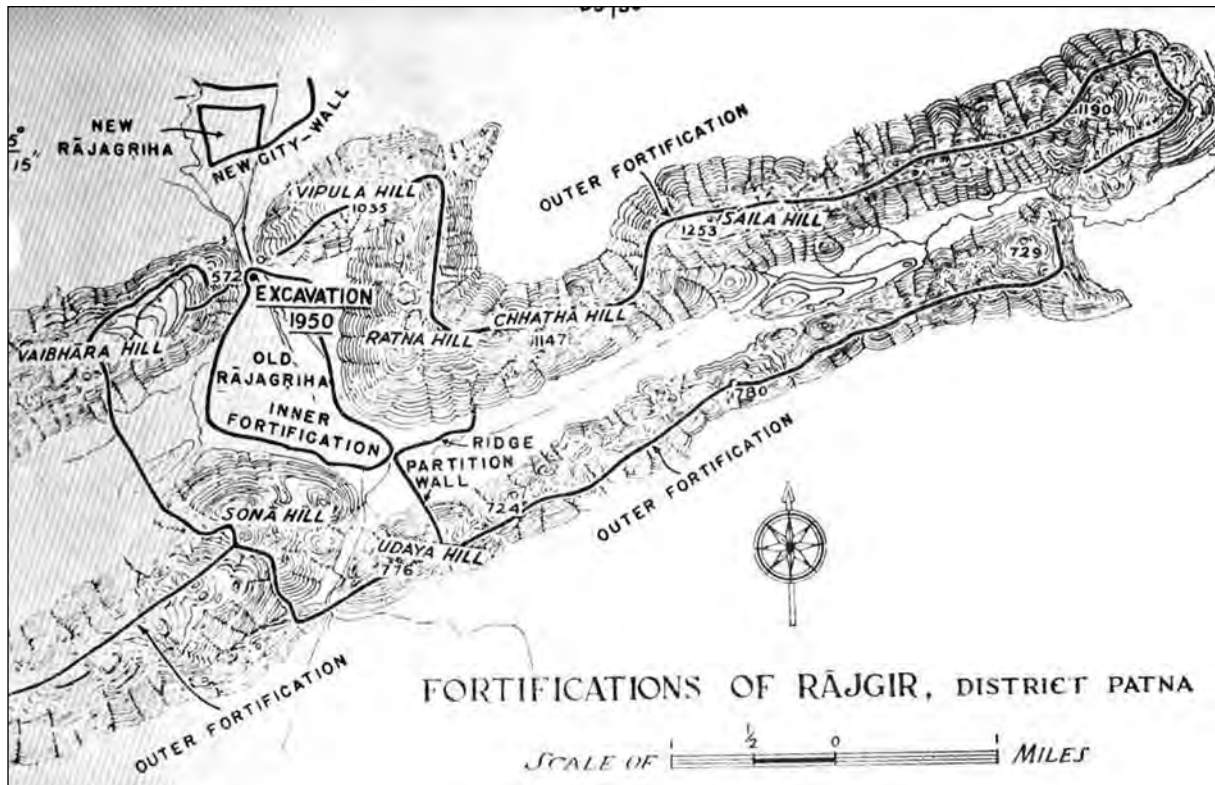
And Buddhism was an important part of the history of India, at least as old as Hinduism, and at one time the country's dominant faith, until ritualism and monkish indolence and lack of zeal brought about its downfall (pp. vii-viii, 2-3) – a very Protestant assumption. His views are strikingly typical of characterisations of Buddhism being made at that time, and his statements can be regarded as a précis of the dominant paradigm. Although the *Bhilsa Topes* is an early work, and aimed at a general audience it points to one context in which Cunningham's project was conceived.

But Cunningham's work does not merely reflect tenets of contemporary Buddhist scholarship; it must also be related to wider currents in Britain's approach to India's past. Since the mid-eighteenth century, a number of scholars, of whom Sir William Jones was the most famous, began to develop the idea of an India that had more or less declined from a golden age. That golden age they defined as the period in which the Vedic texts, which were just being discovered and translated, were composed. If India were to progress, it needed to do so by rediscovering this past and learning from Europe through the medium of its own languages. A counter-movement, developing from the late eighteenth century and represented in the nineteenth by James Mill and Thomas Babington Macaulay, rejected this view of the past. Instead, India had never had a past which could be valued and had been held back in particular by the brahmana priesthood. Progress (which included the spread of Christianity) could only be made through separating the country from its past and an Anglicisation of its language and society. The two approaches, labelled Orientalism and Anglicism by Kopf (1969), were in conflict in the early part of the nineteenth century, but Anglicism had won the day well before the Indian Mutiny of 1858 undermined Orientalism even further. Strangely, accounts of this debate have tended both to underplay the role of archaeology and the place of Buddhist studies in this debate. In Cunningham's early writings one sees a position distinct from either.

Cunningham had come from an antiquarian and Romantic background. His father was Allan Cunningham, who collected folk songs of the Highlands and who was an associate of Sir Walter Scott (who was responsible for gaining Alexander his Indian commission). Once in India, Cunningham came under the wing of the Orientalist James Prinsep, who helped develop his antiquarian interest in the Indian past. But by this time the Anglicist camp was strong; and Cunningham's position represents a blending of the two. India did have a golden age, but it was a Buddhist one, that era in which Buddhism had been the dominant faith. But that religion had fallen and India was now in the grip of Hinduism and Islam. Archaeology, however, had a role to play in the recovery of this Buddhist past, and therefore in India's future. For, in a letter on the discovery of Sankissa in 1843, he refers to the presence of Buddhism as a vitiation of the belief that India could never change – it could show that the aims of philanthropy and of Christian mission could eventually triumph there (1843, pp. 248–249). Given a sense of the relationship between past and present inherited from his father and his father's circle; and his sense of Buddhism and archaeology as a means of interpreting India's future, his focus is unsurprising.

Cunningham's work has largely structured the terms of debate ever since. One of Cunningham's successors at the head of the Archaeological Survey was John Marshall, who in the 1905–6 season carried out a preliminary survey at Rajgir (1908). A large portion of Marshall's report was spent debating some of the identifications proposed by Cunningham. V.H. Jackson, whose work represents the most thorough of the early surveys in 'Old Rajagriha' warned against the danger of attributing everything to one period (1917, p. 266) – but proceeded to do exactly that in the interpretation of his finds. A form of archaeological mythologizing – or perhaps an archaeological romanticism – resulted in him naming 'Bimbisara's Jail' (p. 269). And in case Jarasandha's displacement was in doubt, when an old road was uncovered in the 1930s, the cart ruts became 'Bimbisara's Chariot Tracks'.

This archaeological topography bears many similarities to the earlier Buddhist topographies. Each is a way of making meaning in the landscape, of relating past and present through identifying events with features of this landscape. Each is anchored in the biography of the Buddha, presenting the remains in terms of the mid-first millennium B.C. And each represents a particular relation of text to topography, with the second dependent for its



Map 2. Rajgir Site, taken from Kuraishi and Ghosh 1958.

meaning on the first. This close relation should not be so surprising. Archaeology is after all a cultural activity, and part of its role is the investing of features in the land with a meaning derived from the past.

This activity has resulted in archaeology re-investing Indian landscapes with religious meanings that have been appropriated by international Buddhist groups. These meanings are now legitimated through the authority of a Western science as well as the religious tradition itself. And it provides the interpretive grid through which tourists and pilgrims view the site. The various identifications, made with more or less justification, have been incorporated in a site guide, the fifth and latest edition of which was published in 1958 (Kuraishi and Ghosh 1958). The guide may be considered something of an 'official list', and is certainly an influential source for visitors. If they do not read it, the signs dotted around the valley for tourists carry similar information. Each structure's meaning is anchored both by the *Guide* and by the signage. Their effect has been not only an erasure of indeterminacy, but (for the Buddhists) a concretization of religious truths.

Because of its place in the pilgrimage circuit this topography is of more than local importance. Rajgir's own prominence and its proximity to Bodhgaya have meant it has felt the effects of integration into international Buddhist communities. New elements of the religion have been constructed, including Buddhist temples in the town and the Japanese Shanti Stupa, which sits atop Gridhakuta (site of the preaching of the Lotus Sutra) and dominates the valley. The legitimacy of the archaeological discourse has become tied to religious practice and the latter's effect on the local economy; and these in turn have affected local perceptions of the site. The fortification meant to have been built by Sher Shah has become 'Ajatashatru's Fort' (Ajatashatru being a king contemporary with the Buddha). Old Rajgir had been called Hamsapurnagar by the brahmins in the early nineteenth century, but by Cunningham's time

the name had been lost (1924, p. 531). And on modern maps, the plain between the hills and the modern town has been marked as 'Benu Ban' (Venuvana).

The rediscovery of Indian Buddhism is one of archaeology's greatest achievements of the nineteenth century, and Cunningham was a crucial figure in this. But to see his and others' work as only a rediscovery is to sever archaeology from its political and social context. This revived Buddhist topography of Rajgir does have some relationship to that represented in the texts of Xuanzang and Faxian. But that relationship is not the sum of its meaning. It is still an artefact created from the claims of archaeology to privileged access to the past; to the Western framework out of which Indian archaeology evolved; and to its relationship with political authority.

The archaeological consequences of this have been:

1. a conceptualisation of the site in terms of its religious features,
2. the marginalisation of other religious topographies,
3. a 'flattening' of the site such that its significance is perceived in terms of Buddha's residence there. This last is especially noteworthy given that nearly every datable feature at Rajgir dates to well after the period of the Buddha.

Despite appearances then, archaeology has not so much analysed religious understandings as been an active player in shaping them. And it is a role that it continues to play in the shaping of modern Indian identity.

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