

The Buddhist landscapes of Rajgir, northern India

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Archaeology is widely seen as a science or a form of history, but it is also an expression of older cultural processes. Religion and folklore create meaning in landscape by identifying it with past people and events. Now the histories provided by archaeology serve the same function. This is illustrated by the role archaeology has played in interpreting the history of the ancient city of Rajgir.

Recent tensions in India between Hindus and Muslims have centred on the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid mosque. Located in Ayodhya, a city in northern India sacred to the god-hero Rama, controversy has raged there over whether a temple dedicated to him was demolished in the past to make way for the mosque. The mosque was in turn demolished in 1992 and attempts by interested parties to build a new temple continue. Archaeologists have been called in to act as independent arbiters, to supply the scientific facts that will allow the real history of the mosque to become incontestably clear. But whatever the outcome, archaeology will not be a referee standing outside the

contest. Its results will be part of the process by which different meanings emerge. That this will not be the first time this has happened can be illustrated by the history of archaeological work at Rajgir in north-eastern India.¹

The site of Rajgir

The modern town of Rajgir in the state of Bihar (Fig. 1) is now just a provincial centre, but ancient Rajagrha was once one of the largest cities in the Ganges Valley and the capital of the kingdom of Magadha. It is mentioned frequently in ancient texts – Hindu, Buddhist and Jain – and the founders of both Buddhism and Jainism (Buddha and Mahavira) spent much of their careers here. In the last quarter of the fourth



Figure 1 Bihar state, showing the location of Rajgir and other places mentioned in the text.

century BC, Magadha became the Mauryan empire, which at its height extended over nearly all of modern South Asia; but by then the capital had moved north to Pataliputra (modern Patna, Fig. 1).

Modern interpretations of the site divide it into old and new parts. The old capital is identified with ruins in a valley surrounded by the Rajgir hills (Fig. 2). The modern town just outside the valley is adjacent to ancient ramparts that postdate the Buddha and they are considered to represent a relocation of the city at some point in the mid-first millennium BC.

Rajgir's past has made it a pilgrimage site for nearly all India's religions – in

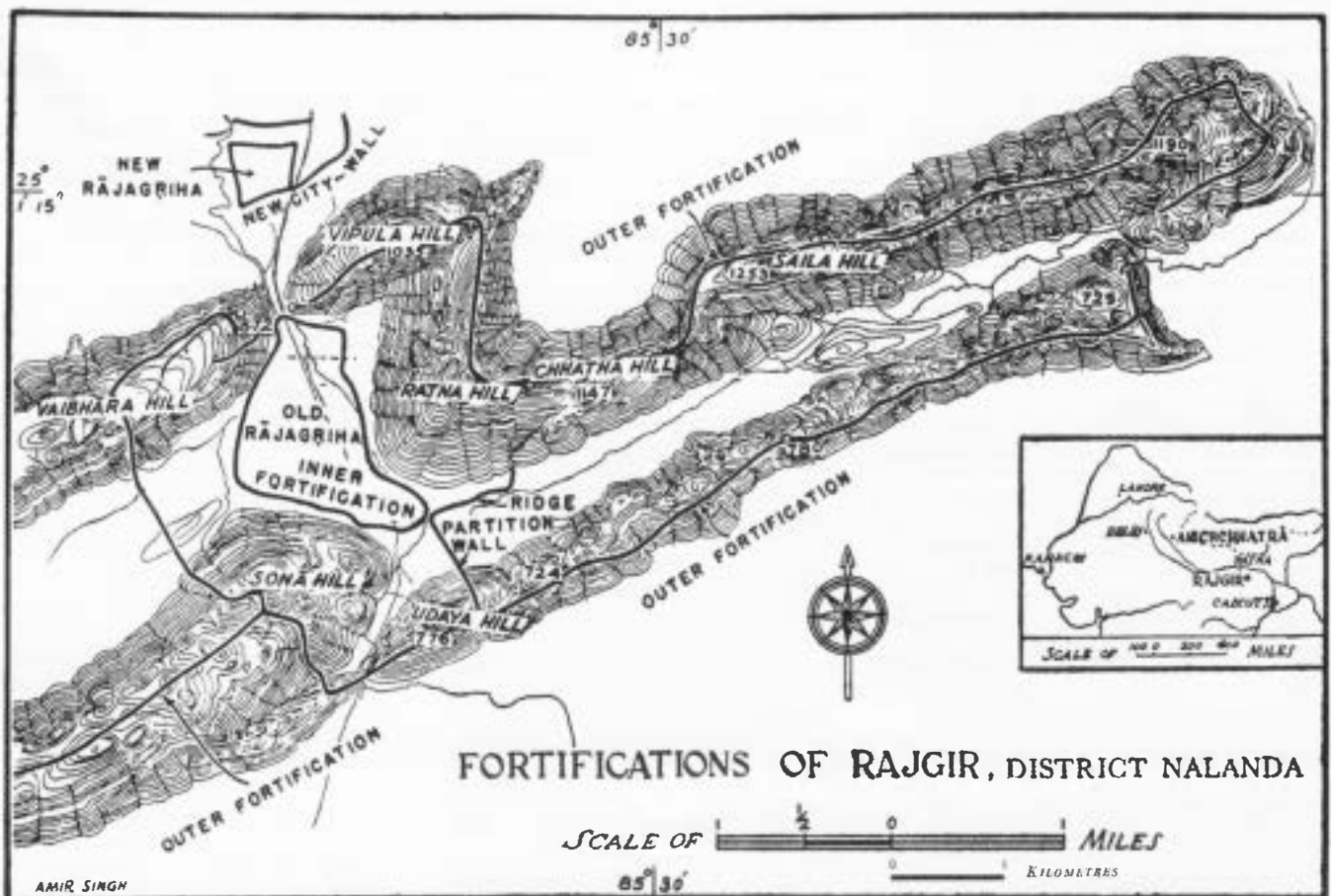


Figure 2 Sketch map of Old and New Rajgir, from the guide to Rajgir published in 1958 by the Archaeological Survey of India (from M. Kureishi & A. Ghosh, *Rajgir* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1958).

particular for Hindus, who consider its hot springs sacred, Jains, whose temples dot the hilltops, and Buddhists (mainly from eastern Asia), who come to visit places mentioned in their scriptures. It is Buddhist conceptions of Rajgir that have been, and remain, most prominent in archaeological work.

Buddhist texts and Chinese monks

The first phase of Rajgir's Buddhist topography is to be found in the Buddhist Canon (records of the Buddha's teaching), dating to the later first millennium BC, which, according to the Canon itself, was first compiled on the outskirts of Rajgir. The city is mentioned in three ways. The first is when a place name is directly referred to, for example when a figure such as King Bimbisara (a contemporary of the Buddha) 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 as he leaves the city for the last time.

Therefore, for authors and readers of (or listeners to) these texts, 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 religious groups. When one looks at the place names in the Jain texts, little overlap is apparent between the two.

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

Almost all the 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, and, although Xuanzang does refer to "Old Rajagrha", he did not explore it. That the monks were recording Buddhist sacred geography has been overlooked in much of the discussion. The landscape

was monumentalized with commemorative stupas (hemispherical Buddhist structures that contain sacred relics) that connected geography with the events of the Buddha's life. Non-Buddhist material was elided from their accounts, including Hindu and Jain understandings of the site.

With the end of Buddhism, the sacred topography it engendered faded too. When Scot Francis Buchanan visited the town in 1812, while surveying for the East India Company, Hindu myth dominated local peoples' understanding of their surroundings. The key figure was King Jarasandha, a local ruler prominent in the Hindu religious epic *The Mahabharata* (in which he is overthrown by the god Krishna and his allies). Various points in the landscape, including ruins, were identified with where he had walked, with his gardens, or with where he had been defeated. Jain temples occupied the hilltops and the hills now became part of a sacred pilgrimage route. Buddhist images and structural remains had often been re-used by Hindus and Jains. Outside the valley, the fortification next to the modern town was attributed to the sixteenth-century ruler Sher Shah.

Alexander Cunningham

It was to be archaeology that recreated Buddhism at Rajgir. Its most significant modern interpreter was Alexander Cunningham (1814–1893, Fig. 3), the founder of the Archaeological Survey of India.² The core of his archaeological career was the identification of the places mentioned by the two Chinese monks. Their works had become available to the British in the 1840s and 1850s through French translations, and they were quickly seen as India's

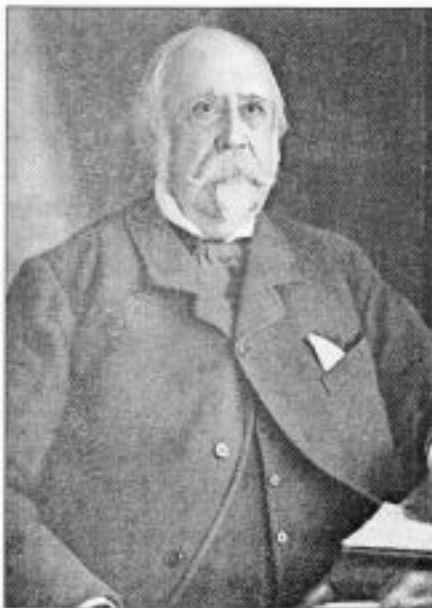


Figure 3 Sir Alexander Cunningham (from the frontispiece to *Cunningham's Ancient Geography of India*, S. M. Sastri (ed.), Calcutta: Chatterjee, 1924).

version of the work of the Greek author Pausanias.³ Cunningham visited Rajgir for the first time in 1861–62 and again in 1872.⁴ But he had prefigured it as specifically Buddhist from at least 1843, when he first announced his programme for utilizing the Chinese records to locate Buddhism's most significant sites, including Rajagrha.⁵ In 1848 he published his proposal for systematic archaeological investigation in India, most of which is devoted to a justification of the study of Buddhism remains. Hindu ruins are mentioned once, its texts are dismissed as useless, and Islam is referred to only as the force that destroyed Buddhism.⁶ When he arrived at Rajgir, he therefore spent his energies identifying as many Buddhist structures as he could.

That a single religion no longer present in India could play such an important part in the interpretation of a site can be explained by reference to the position of Buddhism in Victorian consciousness, a position that had largely been created by the 1850s. Most aspects of it are illustrated in some of Cunningham's early work, particularly in his account of the stupas at Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh, the *Bhilsa topes*.⁷ In this work he argued that Buddha had been a social critic, who attacked the Hindu caste system and the "menaces of the most powerful and arrogant priesthood in the world" (i.e. the brahmins).⁸ 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".⁹

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 – a very Protestant assumption. Cunningham's views are strikingly typical of characterizations of Buddhism being made at that time, and his statements can be regarded as a précis of the dominant nineteenth-century paradigm. Although the *Bhilsa topes* is an early work aimed at a general audience, it points to the context in which his 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, several scholars, of whom Sir William Jones (1746–94) was the most famous, developed the concept of an India that had more or less declined from a



Figure 4 “Bimbisara’s jail”; the structure is almost certainly the remains of a Buddhist monastery of the first millennium AD.

golden age. They defined this golden age as the period in which Hinduism’s Vedic texts, which were just being discovered and translated, were composed. If India was 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 commentators on the condition of India (most notably James Mill and Thomas Babington Macaulay) rejected this view of Indian history. Instead, India had never had a past that could be valued and it had been held back in particular by the brahman priesthood. Progress (which included the spread of Christianity) could be made only through separating the country from its past and by Anglicizing its language and society. The two camps were in conflict in the early part of the nineteenth century, but the modernizers won the day, well before the Indian Mutiny of 1857 hardened British opinion even further. Strangely, accounts of this debate have tended to underplay both the role of archaeology and the place of Buddhist studies in it. In Cunningham’s early writings, one sees a position distinct from both.

Alexander Cunningham had come from an antiquarian and Romantic background. His father was Allan Cunningham, who collected folk songs of the Scottish Highlands and who was an associate of Sir Walter Scott (the man responsible for gaining Alexander his India commission). Once in India, Cunningham came under the wing of James Prinsep (1799–1840), the leader of the local antiquarian community there, who helped develop his interest in the Indian past. But the modernizing camp was already strong, and Cunningham’s position represents a blending of the two. He believed that India had indeed enjoyed a golden age, but a Buddhist one, the era in which Buddhism had been the dominant faith. That religion had fallen and India was now in the grip of Hinduism and

Islam. However, archaeology had a role to play in the recovery of this Buddhist past, and therefore in India’s future. In his programmatic article of 1843,⁵ 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. 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 archaeological work has largely structured the terms of debate ever since. One of his successors at the head of the Archaeological Survey of India was John Marshall, who in 1905–1906 carried out a preliminary survey at Rajgir. Much of Marshall’s report¹⁰ was spent debating some of the identifications proposed by Cunningham. V. H. Jackson, whose work constitutes the most thorough of the early surveys in Old Rajagriha (see Fig. 2),¹¹ warned against the danger of attributing everything to one period, but proceeded to do exactly that in the interpretation of his finds. A form of archaeological mythologizing – or perhaps an archaeological romanticism – resulted in his calling “Bimbisara’s jail” what was in fact a small monastic ruin, where the king had supposedly been imprisoned by his son Ajatashatru (Fig. 4). And in case King Jarasandha’s displacement was in doubt, when an old road was uncovered in the 1930s, the cart ruts became “Bimbisara’s chariot tracks” (Fig. 5), a form of naming not unlike the way in which Jarasandha’s biography was linked to the landscape.

A new Buddhist landscape

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 BC. And each represents a particular relationship of text to topography, with the second dependent for its meaning on the first. This close relationship should not be 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 process has resulted in archaeology re-investing Indian landscapes with religious meanings that have been appropriated by international Buddhist groups – meanings that are now legitimated through the authority of Western science, as well as the religious tradition itself, and provide 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 (see caption to Fig. 2). The guide may be considered to be something of an official list, and is certainly an influential source for visitors. And it does not matter if they do not read it because 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 to erase uncertainty, but (for the Buddhists) to concrete religious truths.

Because of the topography’s place in the pilgrimage circuit of Rajgir, it is of more than local importance. Rajgir’s own prominence, and its proximity to Bodhgaya (see Fig. 1), where the Buddha achieved Enlightenment, have meant it has felt the effects of integration into international Buddhist communities. New religious features have been constructed, including Buddhist temples in the town and the Japanese Shanti stupa, which sits on top of Mount Gridhakuta (the mountain on which the Buddha preached the Lotus



Figure 5 “Bimbisara’s chariot tracks”; the ruts were cut in slate by ancient traffic using the old road south out of the valley, but they have been associated with the Magadhan king Bimbisara, who was converted by the Buddha.

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. Sher Shah's fort (so-called, the building of which was a subject of a local folktale) has become Ajatashatru's fort. Old Rajgir had been called Hamsapur-nagar (City of the Goose) by the brahmins in the early nineteenth century, but by Cunningham's time the name had been lost. And on modern maps, the plain between the hills and the modern town has been marked as Benu Ban – named after Venuvana, the first monastery of the Buddhist Order (Fig. 6).¹²

Conclusion

The rediscovery of Indian Buddhism is one of archaeology's greatest achievements in the nineteenth century, and Cunningham was a crucial figure in bringing this about. But to see his and others' work as only a rediscovery is to sever archaeology from its political and social context. The 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 threefold:

- a conceptualization of the site in terms of its religious features, rather than its urban features or significance as an early Gangetic capital.
- the marginalization of other religious topographies.
- a restriction of the site's significance to the period of the Buddha's residence there.

The last point is especially noteworthy, given that nearly every datable feature at Rajgir dates to well after the Buddha's life.

Despite appearances then, archaeology has not merely analyzed religious understandings, it has been an active player in shaping them. And, as the case of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodha shows, it continues to play a role in the construction of modern Indian identity.

Notes

1. A previous version of this article was published as R. Harding, "The construction of Buddhist topography at Rajgir", *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 13, 1–5, 2003.
2. C. Allen, *The Buddha and the sahibs: the men who discovered India's lost religion* (London: John Murray, 2002) and A. Imam, *Sir Alexander Cunningham and the beginnings of Indian archaeology* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1966).
3. Pausanias was a Greek traveller and geographer of the second century AD, who is best known for his *Description of Greece*,



Figure 6 The new Buddhist temple on the site of Venuvana, built with the help of Japanese funding; Rajgir has again become an important focus for pilgrimage. The temple's location is based on the identification of the site by the archaeologist John Marshall in 1905–1906.

in which he described the topography of cities and their surroundings, emphasizing particularly their historical and religious remains.

4. A. Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India reports*, vol. I (Simla: Government of India, 1871) and vol. III (Calcutta: Government of India, 1873).
5. A. Cunningham, "An account of the discovery of the Buddhist city of Samkissa", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7, 240–49, 1843.
6. A. Cunningham, "Proposed archaeological investigation", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 17, 535–6, 1848.
7. Tope is an alternative term for stupa.
8. A. Cunningham, *The Bhilsa topes* (London: Smith, Elder 1854); quotation on p. 54.
9. Quotation on p. 54 of Cunningham 1854 (n. 8 above).
10. J. Marshall, P. D. Ram, T. Bloch, "Rajagrha and its remains", *Archaeological Survey of India annual report 1905–06*, 86–106, 1909.
11. V. H. Jackson, "Notes on Old Rajagriha", *Archaeological Survey of India annual report 1913–14*, 265–71, 1917.
12. Venuvana, one of the most famous of fearful Buddhist monasteries, is mentioned several times by the Chinese monks Faxian and Xuanzang; but it was completely lost to local memory until restored by archaeology. The present identification more or less follows that by John Marshall in the 1909 article referred to above (n. 10, pp. 93–7).