

ARE THESE THE BUDDHA BONES?

By Chan Khoon San

After our Pilgrimage in 2002, we visited the Indian Museum in Delhi and saw the bone fragments found by the English planter W.C. Peppe in 1898 when he excavated the Piprahwa stupa in Basti District, Uttar Pradesh, India. Some of the excavated bone pieces were displayed in a miniature golden pavilion donated by the Government of Thailand. We were filled with immense joy at the sight such ‘sacred objects’, worshiping them with great enthusiasm. I took several photos of the bone fragments for remembrance. (See Plate 1)

When we returned home, I took a second look at the bone fragments in my photos. That was when I began to have doubts about their authenticity. According to Thupavamsa, [1] the Buddha Gotama’s relics were scattered and may be divided into three sizes. The small relic has the size of a mustard seed, the great relic the size of a rice grain and the very great relic the size of a sprouted seed. But the bone relics that I saw were mega-size and looked suspicious. In 2004, when we visited Mulagandhakuti Vihara in Sarnath, we were shown a Buddha bone relic of 2nd century AD discovered in 1913 by British archaeologist Sir John Marshall at the Dhammarajika Stupa in Taxila, Pakistan. The size and condition of this Buddha relic matched the description in Thupavamsa. This reinforced my doubts about the authenticity of the bones of Piprahwa stupa.

In May 2013, the National Geographic screened a documentary about the Piprahwa stupa entitled “The Bones of the Buddha”, claiming that the area at Piprahwa stupa is the site of the Sakyan capital Kapilavastu, and that the bones found were the bones of the Buddha. This article is written to refute the claims in the National Geographic documentary presented by British author Charles Allen.

TRANSLATING THE PIPRAHWA CASKET INSCRIPTION

In January 1898, W. C. Peppe, [2] manager of the Birdpur Estate in Basti District, Uttar Pradesh, India announced the discovery of some soapstone caskets and jewellery inside a stupa near Piprahwa. An inscription on one of caskets reads:

Sukiti-bhatinam sa-bhaginikanam sa-puta-dalanam iyam salila-nidhane Budhasa bhagavate sakiyanam.

According to Debala Mitra [3], this is variously translated as follows:

1. “This shrine for the **relics of the Buddha**, the August One, is that of the Sakyas, the brethren of the Distinguished One, in association with their sisters and with their sons and wives.” According to this translation, the relics are those of the Buddha himself.
2. “Of the brethren of the Well-famed One, together with little sisters, together with children and wives, this (is) a deposit of **relics of kinsmen of Buddha**, the Blessed One.” This translation means the relics are those of Buddha’s kinsmen and their sisters, wives and children (who were killed by Vidudabha). The words in brackets were added in by Debala Mitra.

Probably because of the furore over the historic find, most people were inclined to accept the first translation that the bone relics were the Buddha's, accorded to the Sakyas of Kapilavastu.

In 1899 the bones were ceremonially presented by the (British) Government of India to the King of Siam, who in turn donated portions of them to Burma and Sri Lanka.

In 1906, British epigraphist J. F. Fleet [4] provided a second translation that raised doubts about the authenticity of the bones. As they had been given away, the matter was considered closed.

The controversy would have been forgotten, but the Indian Government seemed keen in promoting Pipahwa as the ancient capital of Kapilavastu perhaps to attract more tourists. So when Indian archaeologist S.M. Srivastava re-excavated the Piprahwa stupa in 1971-73 and claimed to have discovered the original relic stupa of the Sakyas containing more bones of the Buddha, it opened up a Pandora box.

DATING OF THE PIPRAHWA CASKET FOUND BY W. C. PEPPE

In evaluating any data, one must not be influenced by any bias. In the case of the Piprahwa discovery, there are several allegations [5] that Peppe, who excavated the stupa might have colluded with Dr. Fuhrer, a known forger of Buddhist relics, and faked the casket inscriptions. These allegations will not be considered in our evaluation of the data.

Initially the inscribed Piprahwa casket was thought to be from Sakyan and pre-Asokan times when found by Peppe in 1898 but its characters have since been shown to be typically Asokan. Today it is dated not earlier than the 3rd century BC.

As King Asoka had distributed the Buddha's relics all over his empire, it is impossible for the Sakyas who dedicated the offerings in the stupa to come up with such a large quantity of the Buddha's bones unless they are not the Buddha's bones at all!

ON THE BONE FRAGMENTS FOUND BY W. C. PEPPE

Writing of the Piprahwa finds in 1904, Dr Theodor Bloch [6], Head of the Eastern Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India, declared that *“one may be permitted to maintain some doubts in regard to the theory that the stupa contained the relic share of the Buddha received by the Sakyas. The bones found at that place, which have been presented to the King of Siam, and which I saw in Calcutta, according to my opinion were not human bones at all!”*

Bloch was then Superintendent of the Archaeological Dept. of Indian Museum, Calcutta, and would have relied not only on his archaeological expertise before making this extraordinary allegation, but also that of his zoological colleagues at the Museum. It appeared that Peppe himself had retained a tooth from the alleged Piprahwa finds. This tooth was taken by the author, Charles Allen [7] in 2004 to the Natural History Museum in London, where palaeontologists declared it to be molar tooth of a pig!

Where exactly were the bone fragments located when found? Peppe himself said that all the caskets contained jewellery and quantities of bones in good preservation (Peppe later declared that they ‘might have been picked up a few days ago’, something strange for bones cremated 2500 years ago). Smith [8] and Fuhrer who had visited Peppe to examine finds stated that these ‘sacred fragments’ had been enshrined in a decayed wooden vessel which was also found within the stone coffer.

Since the bones were finally handed to the Thais together with the decayed wooden vessel, this probably confirms the wooden vessel as their original location. This raises further awkward questions about their real identity. According to Phelps [5], since portions of these items are now enshrined in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka and Japan, this raises the appalling spectre that for over a century, the Buddhist world may have been venerating the remains of some ancient pig!

NEW DATA FROM 1971-73 EXCAVATIONS AT PIPRAHWA

In 1971-73 Indian archaeologist, K.M. Srivastava [9] commenced further excavations at Piprahwa and claimed to have discovered a ‘primary mud stupa’ below the one excavated by Peppe. This supposedly yielded yet more soapstone vessels (none of which bore inscriptions) containing bones. According to him, the ‘indiscriminate destruction’ caused by Peppe’s excavation meant that the bone relics found in 1898 could not reliably be shown to be those of the Buddha, and the inscription on the 1898 casket somehow ‘pointed’ to the bones, that were found lower down, were thus the real relics of the Buddha. While excavating in the monastic ruins nearby, he also claimed to have discovered clay seals bearing the words in Brahmi script as follows: “*Om devaputra vihare kapilvastu bhikshu mahasanghasa*” and “*Om devaputra vihare kapilvastu bhikshu sanghasa*”

According to Basanta Bidari [10] the title ‘*Devaputra*’ refers to the Kushan king Kanishka who built the biggest vihara at Piprahwa and renovated the main stupa. These inscriptions dating from 1-2nd century AD, clearly indicate that Piprahwa was a monastic site belonging to the Sangha of Kapilavastu and not the Kapilavastu, where the Sakyan royal family lived.

Srivastava’s findings were reviewed by eminent archaeologist and historian, Herbert Härtel [11] who dismissed his claims and commented that “To declare that the bones in one of the reliquaries in the lower chambers are those of Buddha is not provable, and therefore not tenable.” Based on the sizes of burnt bricks in the relic chambers excavated by Srivastava (See Plate 2), Härtel confirmed that they belonged to 2nd century BC not the Buddha’s time. So the claims made by K.M. Srivastava that Piprahwa is Kapilavastu is baseless!

There is now overwhelming evidence in support of Tilaurakot in Nepal as the ancient capital of the Sakyas [12]. This site is surrounded by towns and villages with ancient monuments within a radius of 8-10 miles such as Taulihwa, Niglihawa, Sagrahawa, Gotihawa, Araurakot, Kudan, etc. Based on the records of the Chinese pilgrims, the Gotihawa Asokan pillar, inscription of Niglihawa Asokan pillar, the thick walled fortress with moat in Tilaurakot, seals, numerous sites and antiquities discovered around Tilaurakot, most likely the ancient capital of Kapilavastu has to be located in close vicinity of Tilaurakot. .

One very interesting point in the Chinese pilgrims' accounts is that they mentioned the nirvana stupas of Kakusandha and Konagama Buddhas and Ramagama stupa of Gotama Buddha but no mention of the nirvana stupa of Gotama Buddha at or near Kapilavastu. Despite intensive search over the past century, to-date no one has found the nirvana stupa of the Sakyas of Kapilavastu.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Dating of Piprahwa casket to 2nd century BC proves that the bones found in Piprahwa stupa were not from Buddha's time and unlikely to be Buddha's bones because King Asoka had taken the relics in 3rd century BC and distributed them all over his empire.
2. Eminent archaeologist, Theodor Bloch, who saw the purported bone relics in Calcutta back in 1898, declared that they were not human bones at all. Peppe took a tooth relic from the find, which turned out to be that of a pig!
3. In 1971-73 Srivastava re-excavated Piprahwa stupa and claimed to have found the original mud stupa and more bones believed to be those of the Buddha. According to eminent archaeologist-historian Herbert Hartel, Srivastava's claims are not provable or tenable.
4. Based on the sizes of burnt bricks in the relic chambers excavated by Peppe and Srivastava, Hartel confirmed that they belonged to the 2nd century BC, not the Buddha's time.
5. Secondly, relic stupas from the Buddha's time were built of mud as shown in original relic stupa at Vaishali. (See Plate 3) So the claims made by K.M. Srivastava that Piprahwa stupa is the stupa erected over the Sakyan's share of the Buddha's ashes is unsubstantiated.
6. From all the available evidence, we can conclude that the bones found in Piprahwa stupa are not the Buddha's bones and that Piprahwa is not the Sakyan capital of Kapilavastu.

REMARKS

There is a valuable lesson to be learnt from this expose; and that is, as rational Buddhists we should not be too attracted to Buddha relics to the point that we become gullible and easily taken in by claims of new discovery of more Buddha relics, which may actually turn out to be fakes. The Buddha taught in Kesaputta Sutta [13] that one should not simply accept anything without proper investigation.

Corporeal relics (*sarira-dhatu*) of the Buddha are just his ashes. They are devoid of any special power and serve mainly to remind us of our Master. The adoration of purported Buddha relics, whether genuine or fake, will not help us in understanding the Dhamma. On the contrary, it may lead to more attachment that will cause disappointment when the relic is lost or exposed as a fake.

So the Omniscient Buddha advised that his relics should be enshrined inside a relic stupa. At the sight of the stupa, one will think of the Buddha, not the relics. "At the thought: 'This is the stupa

of the Bhagava, Arahant, Samma-sambuddha!’ the hearts of many people will be calmed and made happy; so calmed and with their minds established in faith, they at the breaking up of the body will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness.” (*Mahaparinibbana Sutta, V, 28-31*) [14]

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PLATE 1: Two photos taken in 2002 of the bone fragments from the Piprahwa stupa displayed at the Indian National Museum in New Delhi. According to Thupavamsa, the Buddha Gotama's relics were scattered and may be divided into three sizes. The small relic has the size of a mustard seed, the great relic the size of a rice grain and the very great relic the size of a sprouted seed. The bone relics shown in these photos are mega-size and look suspicious.



PLATE 2: Photo from K.M. Srivastava's report showing the Piprahwa soapstone casket and dish in brick relic chamber that he discovered in 1971. Based on the sizes of burnt bricks in the relic chambers, archaeologists confirm that they belonged to 2nd century BC not the Buddha's time.

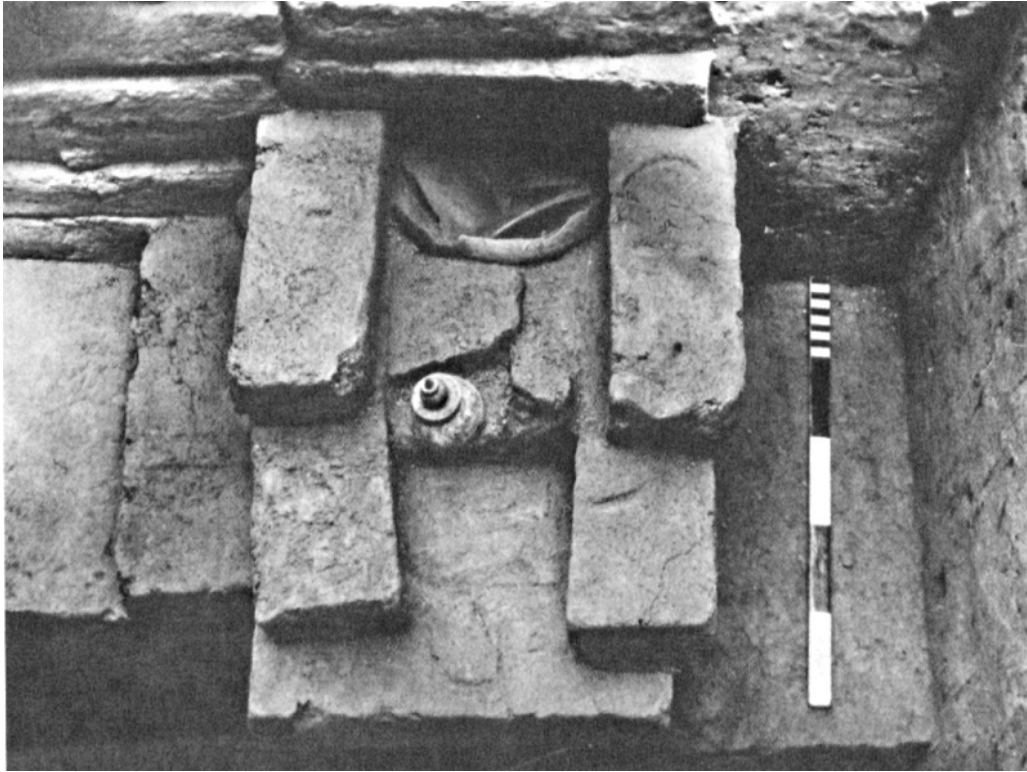


PLATE 3: Photo of the original relic stupa of the Licchavis of Vaishali, which was made of mud. The outer brick structures surrounding it were added in later when the stupa was enlarged.

