



*H. Jinavaravansa.*

### **Prince Prisdang Jinavaravansa - A former Siamese ambassador turned Buddhist monk influences the fate of the Piprahwa relics.**

One of the most overlooked aspects of the Piprahwa discovery is the visit of a Siamese monk at Birdpur House after the discovery. Prince Prisdang Chumsai was educated at King's College in London and had been singled out by Prime Minister William Gladstone for special commendation at his graduation. Prisdang subsequently operated as Siam's ambassador to twelve different European countries and was also credited for initiating the draft for the first Siamese Constitution in 1885. His insistence that a European style constitutional monarchy was the way forward for Siam was not appreciated by his cousin, King Chulalongkorn, and he was swiftly recalled and moved into the new Post and Telegraph Dept.

In 1896 Prisdang left Siam and decided to become a monk, he was ordained as the Ven. P.C. Jinavaravansa by the Ven. Sri Subhuti at the Waskaduwe Vihara in Ceylon (Subhuti was a respected Pali scholar who had assisted Alexander Cunningham, the director general of the Architectural Survey of India with his excavations at Sanchi and Bharut). At the time of the Piprahwa discovery Jinavaravansa was touring Buddhist sites in Northern India, as soon as heard about the find he made his way to Birdpur house. Letter No. 8 puts his arrival there as no later than February 1<sup>st</sup> 1898.

In a letter written to, W. C. Peppé, he lays out a persuasive argument for the donation of the relics to the world's only Buddhist monarch, the King of Siam. This letter was written to Peppé while the Prince Priest was staying as a guest in his home, one can assume that it was written for Peppé to pass on to the relevant authorities, which is indeed what happened.

In the letter, he urges Peppé to 'obtain the consent of government to hand over the whole of the relics to the King of Siam' and notes that the purpose of his touring the Buddhist sites of India was to return to Ceylon with a relic. If the relics were to be given to the King before he returned home, 'the Buddhist community of Ceylon would be satisfied with me, for they will feel certain of receiving their legitimate share in due time'.

The rest of his argument is presented as a series of points in a memorandum:

*Memorandum on Buddha's Relics.*

I.—No relics of Buddha authenticated by a direct inscription, such as those of the recent discovery by Mr. Peppé of Birdpur Estate, had ever been found before in modern time.

These relics are therefore as rare as they are unique, and would be regarded by all Buddhists as the most sacred and holy objects of devotion, and may be said to be the "materialized" religion of Buddha in the world.

II.—It would therefore be an act of inconsiderate discourtesy and wrong to place these objects of veneration to the Buddhists anywhere, and in any custody of any people, than in the most sacred shrines of the Buddhists and in their rightful custody.

III.—It is therefore suggested that the whole of these relics of Buddha (the bones and ashes) be sealed up in a bottle, so that they may be seen without being tampered with, and certified as the identical and the whole of the relics found, and conveyed to the King of Siam through a suitable channel. The King of Siam is suggested as the proper person to have the custody and the right to distribute them at his discretion for the following legitimate reasons :—

- (1) that he is the sole and only remaining Buddhist Sovereign in the world to whom the Buddhists must look for patronage and protection of Buddhism and its order of priesthood, and in whom they can unanimously recognise as the proper authority of which they must respect;
- (2) that he is the recognised Buddhist King all the world over, and all the high Buddhist Priests of Ceylon of every sect, a country from which the recognised orthodox Buddhism of the southern school spread to

other countries, recognise him as the patron and head of the southern ecclesiastical authority, so that on his visit to the Island last year, on his way to Europe, they welcomed him as such without a dissent, and petitioned him in their addresses to extend his patronage in a more direct manner to the Buddhist community of Ceylon, to the extent of asking him to send good and learned priests from Siam to re-organize and establish the order of priesthood, and unite them with the sacred order of the brotherhood of Siam, an order which had been reformed and re-organized by the late King of Siam ;

(3) the order of the Buddhist priesthood of Siam, which had been reformed and re-organized by the late King of that country, is now the only order recognised by the Buddhists as the most strict and pure that has continued in unbroken succession from the time Buddhism was introduced into the country, which cannot be said to be the case of any other country, and it is the only order now in existence that is subject to ecclesiastical law and authority.

IV.—Any attempt at satisfying all claims, legitimate and pretending, by any European would never meet with the pretension that will be put forward by all the various sectaries of different countries, and when the relics get into the hands of those not recognised by the highest authority, they would lose the value which they ought to have, and if the King of Siam was to receive a share of them as any other claimant, he would scarcely appreciate the gift.

V.—No good and fruitful result whatever could accrue from dividing and distributing these relics among the claimants, and such a policy would have no end and aim for the cause of Buddhism and no legitimate advantage could be gained thereby.

VI.—It is therefore suggested that the sanction of the Government of India should be obtained to hand the relics over to the King of Siam, in consideration of the peculiar position which he holds among the Buddhists, and the circumstances of the case above enumerated, for the due distribution to those who have legitimate claim for them, and to make him responsible for their safe custody and due distribution without delay.

By this arrangement the rightful person will be put under the obligation to the rightful owner, and the legitimate claimants to the rightful authority to distribute them.

VII.—In order that the historical value and the interest in this discovery of the relics may be enhanced, and the King may fully appreciate the courtesy thus extended to him, and in order that he may be induced to take a more active interest in the useful works of exploration and conservation of ancient monuments of the Buddhistic period, these relics should be accompanied, as they originally were, by one piece of the stucco remains found imbedded in the stupa, which are undoubtedly the remains of some sacred portion of a seat or floor that has been preserved as such, and three pieces of each of the various ornaments or offerings which have been found with them in large numbers, a few of which can very well be spared for such legitimate purposes, with such photographs and drawings as will give him an idea of the importance of the discovery and awaken an interest in him.

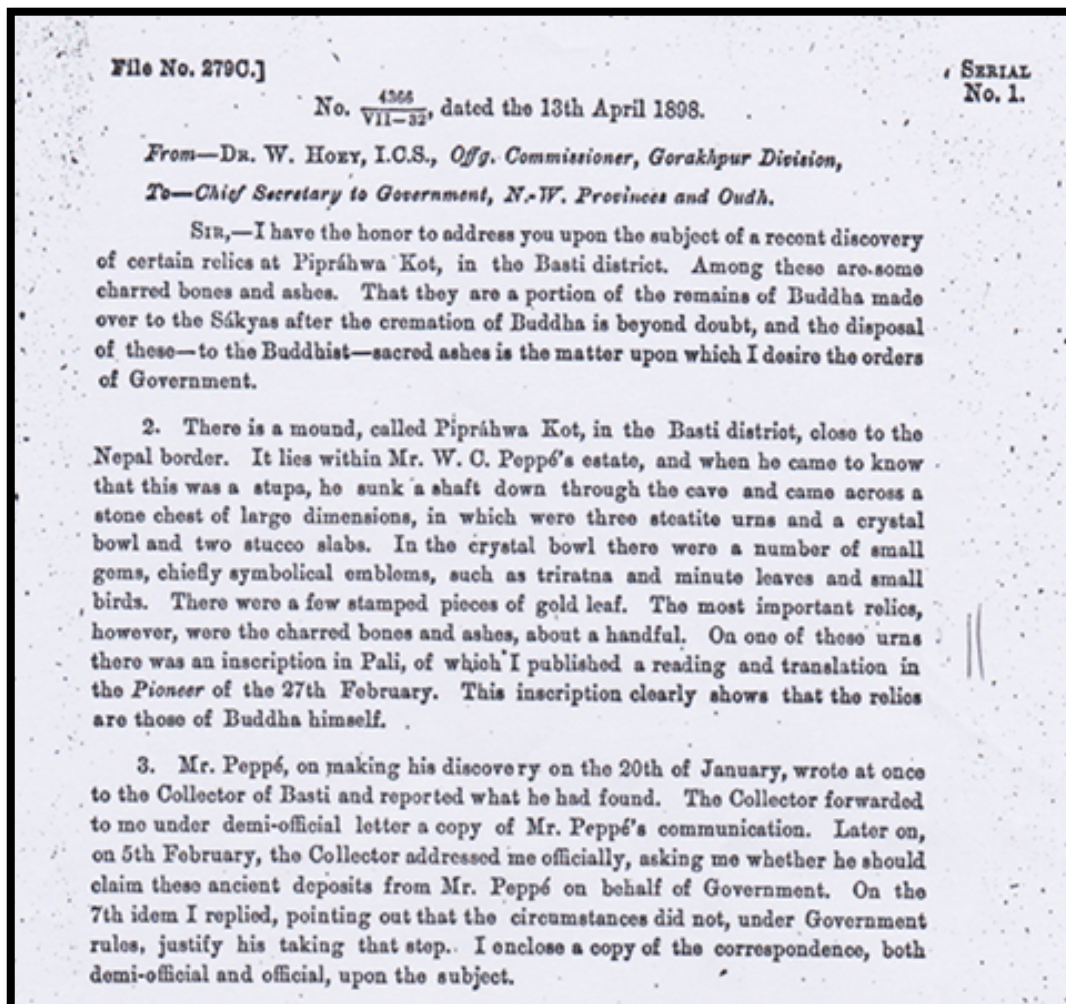
BIRDPUR ESTATE:  
The 9th April 1898.

P. C. JINAVARAYANSA,

On the same day that he wrote the letter above, the Prince Priest also replied to Vincent Smith thanking him for the letter of introduction to Dr. W. Hoey, the Commissioner of Gorakhpur Division. Hoey was also a respected Indologist and had visited the Piprahwa site on February 27<sup>th</sup>. He had offered an early translation of the inscription. (See 'History of the Translation' in Analysis)

The Prince Priest's arguments clearly made an impression on Hoey. Donating the relic portion of the find to the King of Siam made sense for the British. To the dismay of Buddhists, Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, had remained a Hindu temple following its discovery by the British. Furthermore, any civil servant could see that a gesture of goodwill towards Siam would be in British interests. Despite being courted by France, Russia and Britain, Siam had so far managed to remain neutral.

Hoey promptly wrote to his superiors to make them aware of the situation. He included the letter and memorandum (written only four days previously) that the Prince Priest wrote to Peppé while staying with him.



4. I am glad to say that the confidence which I placed in Mr. Peppé's judgment and intentions has not been misplaced. All the objects which he found have been carefully set up, and an account of them with illustrations is about to be published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society. It is, I understand, Mr. Peppé's intention to present all objects, save the corporeal relics, to the Indian Museum, and that is, in my opinion, the proper place in which to bestow these objects of national interest.

5. A Buddhist high priest, Jinavaravansa, cousin of the King of Siam, has come on a pilgrimage to visit this stupa, the recently discovered Asoka pillars, the Lumbini garden, and the site of Kapilavastu. He has addressed Mr. Peppé in a letter, dated the 9th instant, enclosing a memorandum on Buddha's relics (of which I enclose copies), from which you will see that he applies to have these ashes of Buddha made over to him for presentation to the King of Siam as the head of the orthodox Buddhist community of the present day. There is no doubt that all Buddhists must regard with feelings of veneration, if not of worship, the verified ashes of the founder of their faith, and Mr. Peppé has shown his prudence in placing this matter in the hands of Government.

6. There is, I believe, no doubt from the credentials with which he came furnished that Jinavaravansa is really the cousin of the King of Siam, but I am not prepared to recommend that the gift should be made to him. It is a matter of common knowledge that Buddhists are not satisfied because the Buddh-Gya temple is in the possession of Hindus. The attitude of the Government of Bengal

in this matter is necessarily one of neutrality. At the same time the connection of the British Government with Buddhist countries renders it desirable that if an incidental opportunity to evince its consideration for Buddhists should arise, advantage should be taken of it to manifest its good will. Viewing the Government of India in this case as the British Government, I consider its relations with Siam, a country bordering on Burma, would justify the gift for which application has been made. At the same time I believe that the coveted relics should be forwarded through this Government to the Government of India and transmitted by His Excellency the Governor-General to the King of Siam, and I propose that this course be taken. If this does not commend itself to the judgment of His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor, and he approves of the gift to the high priest Jinavaravansa, I shall make the remains over to that gentleman and inform the Local Government of the fact.

Hoey's letter also recommends that the Prince Priest's course of action should be adopted but that he should be cut out of the proceedings. The Prince Priest had hoped to be the one presenting the relics to the King and probably hoped that it would help restore relations with his cousin, King Chulalongkorn.

The following month, Vincent Smith sent a letter to the Secretary to the Government of India making similar recommendations to Hoey's. He adds that, if the government decides not to give the relics to Siam, then the Buddhist countries of Burma or Ceylon should be considered as recipients. Ultimately both scenarios were achieved: the relics were donated to Siam with the understanding that they would be distributed to other nations specifically Burma and Ceylon.

NO. 741 OF 1898. La

FROM  
THE CHIEF SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT,  
N.-W. PROVINCES AND OUDH,

TO  
THE SECRETARY TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA,  
HOME DEPARTMENT.

*Dated Naini Tal, the 18th May 1898.*

SIR,

I HAVE the honor, by direction of the Lieutenant-Governor and Chief Commissioner, to submit copies of the correspondence relating to an exceptionally interesting discovery of Buddhist relics at Piprahwa, in the Basti district of these Provinces.

2. The village of Piprahwa is situated on the Nepal frontier, in the Birdpur grant, a large property owned by the Peppé and Gibbon families. Mr. William Claxton Peppé and his brother are the managing proprietors.

A well preserved *stupa* close to Piprahwa was opened by Mr. William Peppé in January last. Almost in the centre of the building and close to the ground level that gentleman found a huge stone coffer, containing the relics described in the correspondence. Mr. Peppé has generously placed all the objects discovered at the disposal of Government, subject to the retention by him, on behalf of the proprietors of the estate, of a reasonable number of duplicates of the smaller objects.

3. The special interest of the discovery lies in the fact that the relics, namely, fragments of bone and ashes, in honor of which the *stupa* was erected, appear to be those of Gautama Buddha Sakyamuni himself, and may be the actual share of the relics taken by the Sakyas of Kapilavastu at the time of the cremation of Gautama Buddha.

The inscription, in very ancient characters, certainly not later than B.C. 300, proves that the builders of the *stupa* believed the relics to be those of Gautama Buddha himself. The relics may therefore be accepted as genuine and authentic.

4. The Lieutenant-Governor is of opinion that when this remarkable discovery becomes generally known, and the inscription has been authoritatively published and translated, intense interest will be aroused in the Buddhist world, and all Buddhist countries will desire to share in relics of such exceptional sanctity. A full account of the discovery, illustrated by plans, sections, and drawings, has been sent to the Royal Asiatic Society, and should appear in the Journal of that Society during the current year.

The enclosed letters from the Revd. P. C. Jinavaravansa (formerly Prince Prisdang of Siam) and from Mr. W. Subhuti Thero, High

Priest of Ceylon, prove that the discovery, although as yet imperfectly published, has already excited a lively interest in Buddhist countries.

5. The disposal of the objects of interest to European scholars has been provided for by this Government in the enclosed orders to the Commissioner of Gorakhpur.

6. The Lieutenant-Governor is of opinion that the disposal of the actual relics, consisting of bones and ashes (with which the fragments of lime plaster and decayed wooden vessels may be associated), can be more conveniently decided by the Government of India.

Pending such decision the relics (as above defined) have been deposited under seal in the Government Treasury at Basti.

7. Mr. Jinavaravansa, who describes himself as the "Rev. P. C. Jinavaravansa, Buddhist Monk," has applied that the relics may be made over to him for presentation to His Majesty the King of Siam, who, as the only existing Buddhist monarch, might be entrusted with the distribution of the relics.

The Lieutenant-Governor has not felt himself justified in granting this request.

Mr. Jinavaravansa was introduced to the authorities of these Provinces by Surgeon-Major Waddell, and is a pupil of Mr. W. Subhuti Thero, High Priest of Ceylon. He states that he is a second cousin of His Majesty the King of Siam, and that his secular name was Prince Prisdang. He further states that he was trained as an Engineer in England, and for a time represented his country at the Court of St. James. He has recently renounced all worldly dignities, and now wears the garb and adopts the mode of life of a Buddhist monk. As a monk he states that it is impossible for him to represent in any official way His Majesty the King of Siam. He has for some time past been engaged in a pilgrimage to Kapilavastu and other sacred Buddhist sites.

8. The Lieutenant-Governor is of opinion that relics of such exceptional sanctity should not be despatched to their destination as an ordinary parcel. If the Government of India decides to entrust them to His Majesty the King of Siam for distribution, the Lieutenant-Governor would suggest that His Majesty be asked to send a deputation to receive them with due ceremonial.

If they are not offered to His Majesty the King of Siam, I am directed to suggest that they might be given to the Thathanabaing, the head of the Buddhist hierarchy in Burma. The British colony of Ceylon also has claims deserving of consideration.

I have the honor to be,

SIR,

Your most obedient servant,

V. A. SMITH,

Smith also suggests eliminating the Prince Priest from the proceedings. A few weeks later, a letter from the Prince Priest to W. C. Peppé finds him still waiting to hear an outcome.

Gaya  
27 June 1898

*My dear Mr. Peppé,*

*I was very glad indeed to receive your kind letter of the 15th inst., which had been following me about till today while I was away on my tour of Rajgir etc, which had been kindly arranged for me by the magistrate of Gaya and the zamindars of the different places on the route.*

*I have been wondering sometime past why you had not replied to my letter, but I supposed that you have been very busy as I have seen that you always are, and I settle down to wait patiently.*

*I suppose by this time you have received the decision of the Government. regarding the disposal of the relics?*

*If you will direct your letter to the care of the magistrate of Gaya, it will always reach me safely.*

*Hoping you are all well and with very kind regards.*

*Yours very truly*

*P.C. Jinawarawansa*

In the following letter, the Prince Priest has learned that the outcome is to exclude him from the rewards he had hoped to reap from his endeavours. He expresses his disappointment but remains characteristically chipper.

Bankipore  
6th Aug. 1898

*My dear Mr. Peppé*

*I received your letter of the 29<sup>th</sup> ult. two days ago, and I am very much obliged to you for the replies to my memo.*

*I deplore the loss of opportunity of counting the number of bone relics, now that they are going out of your possession, but as these relics will now be offered to the King of Siam, I am satisfied with the result of my mission, and can now leave India with satisfaction at any time. I remain so long in India on account of these relics in order to hear the decision of the Govt. To me it matters not in the least who takes the relics to Siam, so long as the King is recognised as having claim to them as the head of the Buddhist religion, and I am only sorry that you were not selected, as I had hoped that you would be, to take the relics to Siam, but that the Siamese Govt. is to send a deputation to receive them. I don't know if you have been informed of this, but if not, this must be treated as confidential.*

*I know that you are entitled to retain a number of duplicates of the ornamental offerings for your private use, and as they are very numerous, I would ask you to let me have one of the Buddhist crosses which is quite unknown in Siam, as a specimen, and one or two of the different kinds of flowers, which are the characteristic of them as also one trident, for exchange with anything you may consider equivalent and like to have, either from Siam or Ceylon, and I hope you will let me have them if you could possibly spare them as souvenirs of my visit to your home.*

*You can write still write to me care of the Collector of Gaya as I shall soon be going there.*



*Hoping soon to hear from you.  
Yours very truly  
P.C. Jinawarawansa*

The Prince Priest's final letter to Peppé is to ask about an album of Siamese stamps he has sent as a gift.

*Buddha Gaya  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. 1898*

*My dear Mr. Peppé  
About a fortnight ago I sent you an album of a complete collection of Siamese postage & revenue stamps which contains all the stamps are [sic] are in Siam even in the present day except one [sic] one "alt" stamp which has since been introduced. Several of these are not issued and are therefore very rare. I hope you have received it all right.  
Yours very truly  
P.C. Jinawarawansa*

The above correspondence shows that the initiative to donate the relics to Siam began with a Buddhist monk. His idea was so appealing to the British that it also became an issue of colonial politics and he was omitted from the very proceedings he had lobbied so hard to push through.

After returning to an austere life in Ceylon, the Ven. P. C. Jinavaravansa became the abbot of Dipaduttamarama Vihara in Colombo. He set about restoring the dilapidated temple and also founded two schools that provided, for the first time, non-sectarian education for young Ceylonese Buddhists. The principle share of the relics from Piprahwa were placed in the Golden Mount Temple in Bangkok but some were also enshrined by the Prince Priest in the Ratna Chetiya at Dipaduttamarama.

When King Chulalongkorn died in 1910 the Ven. Prince Priest returned to Siam for the his cremation, but was forbidden to remain a monk by the new monarch and accordingly returned to secular life as Prince Prisdang Chumsai, dying in 1935.

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