

# AN APPRAISAL OF IDENTIFICATION OF SOME IMPORTANT HISTORICAL SITES OF ANCIENT INDIA BY SIR ALEXANDER CUNNINGHAM

Dr. Suneet Silas

Associate Professor, Department of History, St. John's College, Agra

## Abstract

The present research attempts to amalgamate information regarding the exploration and discovery of various ancient Indian sites of historical significance, by Sir Alexander Cunningham. Hailed as the pioneer of archaeological explorations in India, the survey and excavations undertaken by Cunningham and his Survey reports constitute the backbone of the Archaeological Survey of India, serving as a concrete framework for future research and study. The paper aims to not only consider some of the most significant identification of historical sites by Sir Cunningham, but also aims to offer an analysis of the same, and a comparison with other contemporary records of the time. The paper further presents the modern-day significance and acceptance of these discoveries, thereby adding to the rich repository of information on the same.

**Keywords:** heritage, discoveries, theories, scholars

## I) Introduction

The task of proper identification of historical sites is of a basic importance for the commencement of archaeological explorations. This fact had the full attention of Sir Alexander Cunningham when he initiated his pioneering researches in unearthing and documenting India's lost heritage. During his Archaeological tours, firstly as Archaeological Surveyor to the government of India, and then as Director General of the Archeological Survey of India Cunningham proposed the identification of several ancient Indian sites of historical importance. Most of these identifications were found to be correct, while others were erroneous, in the light of modern researches.

## II) An insight into the various identifications by Sir Alexander Cunningham

**Aornos (site of Alexander's last siege, now in modern Pakistan):** In his attempts to identify the 'Aornos of Alexander' Cunningham opted for Ranigat fort, sixteen miles north of Ohind, dismissing the proposition of the Mahaban hill as the correct site, as stated by General Abbott. Cunningham also rejected the hypothesis of General Court and the celebrated missionary Mr. Lowenthal, who fixed the site at the castle of Raja Hodi, opposite Attock.(1) However, modern researches attested the correctness of Abbott's identification, mentioned as Shah Kote on Mount Mahaban, situated on the western bank of Indus, about 70 miles to the north east of Peshawar.(2) N. L. Dey further pointed out that it was perhaps a corruption of *Varana* of

Panini.(3) A town called Baran was recorded by R. K. Bhandarkar on the western bank of the Indus opposite Attock.(4)

**Sagala (city in ancient India, predecessor of modern Sialkot):** The identification of Alexander's Sangala by Cunningham with the *Sakala* proposed by the native authors and Hwen Thsang, (5) was also invalidated. (6) According to the findings of B. C. Law, the town was located somewhere in the Gurdaspur district, near Fathgarh. (7) It was the main center of the Cathean tribe, the leading people among the free confederate tribes at the time of Alexander's invasion. (8)

**Taxila (city in ancient India, now in Punjab, Pakistan):** Cunningham's identification of the remains of the ancient city of Taxila with the villages *Shahdheri*, *Sirkap*, *Sir-Sukh* and *Kacchakot*, (9) was accepted. (10) To authenticate his conclusions, Cunningham attempted to reconcile the 'erroneous distance' of 60 Roman miles (55 English) between Taxila and Pushkalavati, given by Pliny, to 73 ½ miles or within half a mile of the actual distance (74 miles) between the two places. (11)

**Manikyala (Rawalpindi district, now in Punjab, Pakistan):** Cunningham's location of Manikyala at manikpura, (12) in the Rawalpindi district of Punjab, 14 miles to the south of Rawalpindi, where Lord Buddha gave his body to feed seven starving tiger-cubs was also accepted. (13) In his identification of General Court's tope at the site as the spot of 'body offering', Cunningham utilized the evidence in the 'bright redness of the soil' and the inscription extracted from the larger tope which twice mentioned the *hutta-murti*, or 'body oblation'. (14)

**Sankasya (Farrukhabad district, Uttar Pradesh):** The identification of the ancient town of *Kapitha* or *Sankasya* with Sankisa or Sankasya (the site of the Asokan Elephant pillar) (15) by Cunningham aided by the evidence collected from Hwen Thsang description, located forty miles south east of Atranji and fifty miles north-west of Kanauj was found to be correct. (16) Here, Cunningham presumed that the temple of *Bisari Devi* occupied the site of the 'three staircases' in Buddhist mythology. (17)

**Kosambi:** In the case of the popular and important town of ancient Kosambi identified with Kosam village (18) on the river Yamuna, 30 miles south west of Allahabad (Prayagaraj) by Cunningham was also found to be correct. (19) Faced with the paucity of 'direct evidence' to show that the city of Kosambi was situated on the river Yamuna, Cunningham utilized the 'curious legend of *Bakkula*', as a 'missing link' in the chain of evidence. (20) In order to explain the discrepancy in distances estimated between Allahabad and Kosambi in the Life and the Travels of Hwen Thsang (50 li in the former and 500 li in the latter) Cunningham depends upon the possibility of the conversion by the pilgrim of the Indian yojana into Chinese li at the rate of 40 li per yojana, or of 10 li per kos. Thus writing 150 li, the equivalent of 15 kos, the actual travelling distance of foot passengers across the fields from Kosam to the fort of Allahabad, on the reckoning of the Kosam people. (21)

**Sravasti:** Cunningham's identification of the famous city of Sravasti,(22) with the twin mounds of *Saheth-Maheth* lying between Akaona and Balrampur, the borders of Gonda and Bahraich districts of Oudh in Uttar Pradesh was found to be correct. (23) This location was mainly based upon the evidence about Fa Hian's

Shewei or Sewet in Kosala, and upon Hwen Thsang's and other Ceylonese Buddhist texts that Sravasti was to the north of Saket or Ajudhya (Ayodhya), or in the district of Gonda or Kosala, from four of the Brahmanical puranas.<sup>24</sup> Vincent Smith emphasized the indisputability of Sravasti's occurrence in Kosala (modern Oudh).<sup>(25)</sup> Dr. Vogel clearly listed the identification of Saheth representing Jetavana and Maheth as the city of Sravasti on the basis of vast excavations conducted along with Pandit Daya Ram Sahni during 1908. <sup>(26)</sup>

Sir John Marshall attested to this identification mentioning the successive discoveries made at the sites, which could be looked upon as factual evidences in ascertaining the above identification. <sup>(27)</sup>

**Kapilavastu:** Cunningham opted for the town of *Nagarkhas* (on the eastern bank of the Chando Tal near a large stream named Kohana, a tributary of the Rapti, and in the northern division of erstwhile Oudh beyond the Ghagra river) to represent Kapilavastu, the town of Buddha's birth and Moksoh as the site of the Lumbini garden. <sup>(28)</sup> Among the several theories advocated over the issue, Dr. Rhys David's identification of the town with *Tilaura kot* supported by P. C. Mukherji who explored the region were confirmed by the later findings. <sup>(29)</sup> Lumbini-vana was identified with Rummindei, ten miles to the east of Kapilavastu and two miles north of Bhagbanpur, and about a mile to the north of Paderia. <sup>(30)</sup>

**Kusinagara:** Cunningham's identification of the town of Kusinagara, the site of Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, with Kasia, a village 35 miles in the east of Gorakhpur district, first proposed by Wilson, <sup>(31)</sup> was accepted by modern scholars, against several theories postulated by various other scholars.<sup>(32)</sup> Cunningham rectified the erroneous distance of 12 yojanas or 84 miles, estimated by Fa Hian to 5 yojanas, between Kusinagara and the site of the Charcoal stupa, on the strength of the other recorded distances between Banaras and Vaishali. <sup>(33)</sup> This identification was further strengthened with the discovery of a copper plate, bearing the inscription: '*Parinirvana caitya-tamara-patta*' or the copper plate of *Parinirvanacaiya*, in the stupa behind the Nirvana temple near Kasia. <sup>(34)</sup>

**Vaishali:** The site of the ancient town of Vaishali was correctly identified by Cunningham with the ruins near *Basarh* or *Basar*, <sup>(35)</sup> which were vividly described later by T. Bloch in his 'Excavations at Basarh' <sup>(36)</sup> who verified the authenticity of Cunningham's identification. He also corrected the error committed by Cunningham in spelling *Basarh* or *Besarh*, which resulted from wrong transcription being partly influenced by the name given in Gladwin's *Ain-i-Akbari* and partly by the similarity of the first syllable in the beginning of the *Pali* form '*Vesali*'. <sup>(37)</sup> The location of Vaishali at *Basar* was also supported by Vincent Smith, who took *Basar* and the neighboring village of *Bakhira*, in Muzzafarpur district, situated 'about twenty seven miles a little west of north of Patna' to correspond to ancient Vaishali. <sup>(38)</sup> Professor Bevan referred to '*Licchavis of Vaisali (Basarh in the Hajipur sub-division of Muzzafarpur)*', while discussing the relations of the dynasties in northern and central India contemporaneous with the kings of Magadha. <sup>(39)</sup>

### III) Conclusion

It is thus clear that despite the errors committed at times in his deductions regarding identification of several important sites of ancient India, Cunningham pursued his archaeological explorations conducting

excavations with great tenacity and vigor. The facilities were meagre with paucity of funds, difficult times and conventional methods yet he went on undeterred by these odds and accomplished a task of vast magnitude. His labors led to the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India as early as 1871 with the documentation of the findings in the form of twenty- three voluminous reports, which, as remarked by Curzon, are but a noble mine of information in which one has to delve to discover various facets of India's glorious heritage and constitute a backbone of the ASI today. His works served as building blocks for the later day research and findings, which is still continuing today, with the successful preservation and conservation of the country's heritage.

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