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# CONTENTS

## I. ARTICLES

1. A Study of the Mādhyamika Method of Refutation,  
Especially of its Affinity to that of *Kathāvatthu*,  
by *Shohei Ichimura* 7
2. Prajñāpāramitā and the Buddhahood of the Non-Sentient  
World: The San-Lun Assimilation of Buddha-Nature  
and Middle Path Doctrine, by *Aaron K. Koseki* 16
3. A Clue to the Authorship of the *Awakening of Faith*:  
“Śikṣānanda’s” Redaction to the Word “Nien,”  
by *Whalen W. Lai* 34
4. The Abhidharmika Notion of *Vijñāna*  
and its Soteriological Significance, by *Braj M. Sinha* 54
5. Some Comments on Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo* and  
Professor Wayman’s *Calming the Mind and Discerning the  
Real*, by *Geshe Sopa* 68  
Alex Wayman Replies to Geshe Sopa 93  
Geshe Sopa Replies to Alex Wayman 98

## II. SHORT PAPERS

1. Archaeological Excavations at Piprāhwā and Ganwaria  
and the Identification of Kapilavastu, by *K. M. Srivastava* 103
2. Notes on the Textcritical Editing of the  
*Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā*, by *Frances Wilson* 111

### III. BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

1. Śāntideva: Mystique bouddhiste des VIIe et VIIIe siècles,  
*by Amalia Pezzali* 115
2. On Knowing Reality: The Tattvārtha Chapter of Asaṅga's  
*Bodhisattvabhūmi*, *by Janice Dean Willis* 117
3. Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in  
Mahāyāna Tradition, *by Diana Y. Paul* 120
4. Wittgenstein and Buddhism, *by Chris Gudmunsen*. 122

### IV. NOTES AND NEWS

1. A Report on the 2nd Conference of the IABS 127
  2. Report on *A Critical Dictionary of Pāli* 130
- Contributors 132

# Archaeological Excavations at Piprāhwā and Ganwaria and the Identification of Kapilavastu

by K.M. Srivastava

There has been a long-standing controversy regarding the location of Kapilavastu,<sup>1</sup> the capital of the Śākya State. As a result of our recent archaeological excavations at Piprāhwā and Ganwaria<sup>2</sup> in the Basti District of Uttar Pradesh, in India, we feel now encouraged to identify the site of Kapilavastu. These sites are about twenty-three kilometres north of Naugarh, a tehsil headquarter and a railway station on the Gorakhpur-Gondo loop line on the Northeastern Railway, and they are nine kilometres north of Birdpur, which falls on the road to Lumbini from Naugarh.

The first indication that Piprāhwā could be the site of the ancient Kapilavastu was provided by W.C. Peppe<sup>3</sup> in 1897-98 when eighteen feet below the summit of a *stupa* he came across a huge sandstone box which contained, amongst other objects, five caskets. An inscription on the lid of a steatite casket furnished a clue to the identification of Kapilavastu by its reference to the Buddha and his community, the Śākya.<sup>4</sup> The following is the text of the inscription:

*Sukiti bhatinaṃ sa-puta-dalanāṃ iyaṃ salila-nidhane Budhasa  
bhagavate sakiyānaṃ.*

Although the text has been edited and translated variously, the reference to the enshrinement of the relics of the Buddha by the Śākya undoubtedly confirms the statement of the Buddhist text *Mahāparinibbānasuttānta* that the Śākya of Kapilavastu were one amongst the eight claimants to a portion of the relics of the Buddha after he was cremated at Kushinagar and that they ceremoniously constructed a *stupa* over the relics.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that according to the Chinese traveller Fa-hsien,<sup>6</sup> Lumbini should be nine miles east of Kapilavastu, which corresponds very well with the distance of Lumbini from the site of Piprāhwā. But this was not found to be in conformity with the later account of Hsuan Tsang,<sup>7</sup> and some scholars therefore made other suggestions. Among them, Führer (1897)<sup>8</sup> and P.C. Mukherji (1899)<sup>9</sup> thought of Tilaurakot, in the district of Taulihawa, in Nepal, as the site of Kapilavastu. It may be noted, however, that the difference between the routes and distances recorded by Fa-hsien and Hsuan Tsang, as supposed by scholars, are very confounded and indeed sometimes contradictory. Some scholars tried to reconcile the evidence of the two diverse accounts by proposing the existence of two Kapilavastus, one at Piprāhwā and the other at Tilaurakot.<sup>10</sup>

In 1962, Mrs. D. Mitra of the Archaeological Survey of India led an expedition of exploration and excavation in the Nepalese *tarai*. During the course of her work, she excavated at Kodan and Tilaurakot, but could not find any evidence identifying Tilaurakot with Kapilavastu. In the absence of any evidence, she remarked, "In case Nyagrodharma (not Nyagrodhika town) represents Piprāhwā, which is not unlikely, the remains of Kapilavastu are to be sought in the mounds immediately around Piprāhwā, and not at the distant site of Tilaurakot." She further stated, "in fact, the inscription on the reliquary found within the main *stupa* at Piprāhwā coupled with Piprāhwā's correspondence with Fa-hsien's bearing and distance of Kapilavastu in relation to Lumbini raises a strong presumption for Piprāhwā and its surrounding villages like Ganwaria being the ancient site of Kapilavastu."<sup>11</sup> But some scholars, however, continued to refer to Tilaurakot as Kapilavastu. The district of Taulihawa, in Nepal, has even been renamed Kapilavastu in one-inch-to-a-mile survey sheet map No. 63 M/2 of Nepal.

In 1971, when the present author was posted in Patna, we started a program of archaeological excavation at the site of Piprāhwā with a view to continuing the search for Kapilavastu. In view of the considerable lapse of time between the death of the Buddha in 483 B.C. and the Piprāhwā inscription, which may not be earlier than the third century, B.C., the author felt that the relic caskets found by Peppe in 1897-98 were not the original ones solemnised by the Śākyas immediately after the death of Buddha. This provided grounds for expecting earlier and original caskets in the *stupa*. Sylvain Lévi was of the opinion that the inscription merely recalled a more ancient consecration

and was engraved on the occasion of the reconstruction of the *stupa*.<sup>12</sup>

Proceeding with the hypothesis that earlier and original relics were still below in the *stupa*, a small trench was sunk in its north-eastern quadrant, which revealed interesting features. An outline of the shaft bored by Peppe could be easily observed. At a depth of six metres from the extant top of the *stupa*, two burnt brick chambers came to light. These chambers, separated from one another by 65 cms. of yellowish compact clay mixed with *kankar*, were at a much lower level than the spot where the stone box containing the inscribed casket had been found by Peppe. There was a mud deposit, about six centimetres thick, between the last course of the burnt brick *stupa* and the chambers. The two chambers were identical in shape, measuring 82 x 80 x 37 cms.

The specific purpose of the brick chambers, to keep the sacred objects, was apparent enough from the nature of their construction. A soapstone casket and a red ware dish placed close to each other were observed in the northern chamber after the top three courses of brick had been removed (Plate I). This dish was covered by another dish of the same type, which had broken into three pieces. Both the soapstone casket and the dish were found to be carefully packed with the help of bricks and brickbats. The casket contained fragments of charred bone. The contents of the dish could not be distinguished, because it was badly smashed and filled with earth. That there were no bone fragments in it, is, however, certain. The positions of the casket and dishes were different in the southern brick chamber. Two dishes, of the same type and size as in the northern chamber, were placed side by side just below the topmost course of the brick. Both dishes were reduced to fragments. When two further courses of brick were removed, another soapstone casket, bigger in size, came to light. The lid of the casket was found broken. On removal of the earth, which had filled up the casket, charred bones were found inside.

Since the relic caskets were found in deposits contemporaneous with the Northern Black Polished Ware, they could be dated to the fifth-fourth centuries B.C., and thus earlier than the inscribed relic casket discovered by Peppe at a higher level, and also distinguished stratigraphically. The possibility that the *stupa* at Piprahwā could be the same as that constructed by the Śākyas at Kapilavastu over their share of relics received at Kushinagar increased. The excavation was, therefore, resumed in 1973. Greater attention was paid during that year to the eastern monastery, which was partly exposed in the first two years. When the cells and the verandah on the northern side of the monastery

were being exposed, some inscribed terracotta sealings were found. About forty of them have so far been collected, from a depth ranging between 1.05 and 1.75 metres. The sealings were not found in a hoard, but occurred at different levels and spots. Generally round in shape, some of the sealings were oval as well. The legend on the sealings can be classified into three groups. One of them reads "*Om Devaputra Vihare Kapilavastu Bhikkhusamghasa.*" The sealings in the second series have been read as "*Maha Kapilavastu Bhikshusamghasa*" (Plate II). The sealings in the third group carry the names of monks. One of them has been read as *Sarandasasa*. The letters on the sealings are in Brahmi characters of the first-second centuries A.D. In 1974, a pot-lid carrying the same inscription as on the first group of sealings was also found, in the eastern monastery.

The terracotta sealings and, above all, the pot-lid with the legend *Kapilavastu*, found during the excavations at Piprahwā, seem to us to have settled the long-standing controversy regarding the precise location of Kapilavastu. They also establish that the monastery was meant for the order of monks at Kapilavastu. Further, the word *Devaputra* indicates that the monastery was probably built by the Kushan kings. That the *stupa* at Piprahwā was built in its initial stages by the Śākyas of Kapilavastu over the corporeal relics of the Buddha should also be taken as settled now. It was reconstructed twice, first during the third century B.C. and the second addition, a square base with niches, appears to have been made during the period of Kushan kings. The caskets found in the brick chambers were those placed by the Śākyas; the rich and varied objects, along with five caskets contained in the massive coffer, were placed in the third century B.C.; and the one casket found by Peppe at a depth of ten feet was the donation of the Kushan kings.

With the location of the Śākyan *stupa* and the monasteries of Kapilavastu the task of the identification of the site as that of ancient Kapilavastu seemed easy. After a limited exploration in the vicinity, excavation was undertaken at an adjoining mound, in Ganwaria, a kilometre to the southwest. The site is at least 200 (EW) x 250 (NS) metres in extent, having a maximum occupational deposit of seven metres. During the excavation, two massive burnt brick structural complexes, with impressive projected entrances to the east, were exposed. Of the two, the larger one, on the western fringe of the mound, is about thirty metres square. It has twenty-five rooms with a gallery at each of the four corners. In the last phase, the number of rooms had been raised to

twenty-six with the help of a partition wall. The gallery at the corners was in alignment with the cardinal directions. In all, there were five phases in the complex. The two rooms on either side of the entrance were the most spacious. Generally, the flooring was made of brick concrete mixed with lime, though in phase III pieces of burnt brick were also used. A ring well of structural phase I, having a diameter of 85 cms., was observed in the gallery on the northwestern corner. With an open courtyard about twenty-five metres square in the centre, the rooms and galleries were constructed all around it. The width of the outer wall was more than two metres and that of the inner one 1.70 metres, on the top. The cross walls were more than a metre thick.

The larger structural complex embodied certain extraordinary architectural features. Complete bricks were used only in the facing of the walls and the core was filled up with brickbats. The bricks used in the facing in the last two phases were rubbed and then set in order to present a beautiful appearance and to provide more strength to the structure. Two projecting bastion-like structures were constructed to give a majestic appearance to the entrance. As an additional attraction, three corners in each bastion were provided at the western end. In order to restrict entry, at a later stage, two walls, facing each other and projecting from the bastions, were raised at the easternmost fringe of the entrance. In front of the two walls there was a pavement made of brickbats with complete bricks used in the facing. The opening of the second entrance, however, continued to be 2.35 metres.

But for a few additional features, the smaller structural complex, about thirty metres to the northeast, was, on the whole, similar to the larger one. It was about twenty-six metres square and had twenty-one rooms restricted to three phases. A small room in the northeast corner, meant either for lavatory or bath, was a new feature in this complex. To maintain privacy, access to the room was provided through another small room opening onto the central courtyard. Though the number of rooms in the smaller complex was less, the entrance was wider, measuring 3.15 metres. In the earlier stages, the entrance was towards the east. Later on, it was sealed with the help of a curtain wall, and a narrow entrance, 1.20 metres wide, was provided towards the northern side. Unlike in the larger complex, the corner rooms on the southeast and northwest were the biggest, and square in shape. The entrances to the structural complexes at Ganwaria are not towards the *stupa*, as they were in the cases of all the monasteries at Piprāhwā.

On the basis of pottery and antiquities yielded by the excavation,

the earliest occupation at the site can be dated to about the eighth century B.C. Amongst the principal ceramic industries, mention may be made of grey ware, red ware vases associated with the Painted Grey Ware in the western part of Northern India, black polished ware and beautiful specimens of Northern Black Polished Ware in plenty. The site was occupied till about the fourth century A.D.

The entire occupational deposit could be divided into four Periods. Period I was represented by dishes having a red rim and grey bottom, red ware vases, beautifully polished red ware dishes and bowls occasionally painted in black and black polished ware. The deluxe Northern Black Polished Ware characterized Period II. Period III is post N.B.P. belonging to Śunga times. Period IV was characteristically Kushan.

The proximity of these structures to the ancient site of Piprāwhā, where the sealings with the name of *Kapilavastu* were found, their impressive size and constructional features and the large quantity of antiquities found within them, leave little doubt that the structures formed the residential complex of the chief of the capital town, *Kapilavastu*, i.e., the Śākya King *Suddhodhana* and his predecessors.

## NOTES

1. C. Lassen, *Indische Altertumskunde* (Leipzig 1858), vol. III, p. 201; A. Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India* (reprinted, Varanasi 1963) p. 349; A.C.L. Carlleyle, in Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India Reports* (reprinted, Varanasi 1972), vol. XII, p. 87; A. Führer, "Antiquities of the Buddha's birthplace in the Nepalese Terai," *Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series* (reprinted Varanasi 1972), vol. XXVI, p. 44; P.C. Mukherji and V.A. Smith, *Antiquities of Kapilavastu, Tarai of Nepal, 1899*, *Archaeological Survey of India* (reprinted Varanasi 1969) p. 50; T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (London 1903) p. 18; W. Vost, "Identifications in the region of Kapilavastu," *JRAS*, 1905, p. 553; Debala Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta 1972) p. 253.

2. *Indian Archaeology, a Review*, 1971-72, 1972-73; K.M. Srivastava, "A Note on the Recent Excavations at Piprāwhā, District Basti (U-P)," *Purātattva: Bulletin of the Indian Archeological Society*, 6 (1972-73) p. 51; "Buddha's Lost Town of Kapilavastu Identified," *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal*, vol. XV, pt. 1 (March 1977), also, *Kapilavastu in Basti District of U.P.* (Nagpur 1978).

3. "Piprāwhā Stupa containing relics of Buddha," *JRAS*, 1898, p. 573.

4. G. Bühler, *JRAS*, 1898, p. 387; T.W. Rhys Davids, *JRAS*, 1898, p. 588; J.F. Fleet, *JRAS*, 1905, p. 679, 1906, p. 150; D.C. Sircar, ed., *Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilisation* (2nd ed.) vol. I (University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1965), p. 81.

5. *Mahāparibbāna sutta*, ed. by Childers, in *JRAS*, 1876, p. 258.

6. Fa-hsien, *A Record of the Buddhist Countries*, tr. Li Yung-hsi (Peking, 1957), p. 51.

7. T. Watters, *On Yuan Chuang's travels in India* (London, 1904-05), vol. II, p.

- 8. Führer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 9. P.C. Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- 10. V.A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 10; T.W. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 11, 18 f.n.1; but *contra* W. Hoey, *JRAS*, 1905, p. 454, W. Vost, *op. cit.*, p. 553.
- 11. *Buddhist Monuments*, p. 253.
- 12. *Indian Antiquary*, 36 (1907), p. 120.

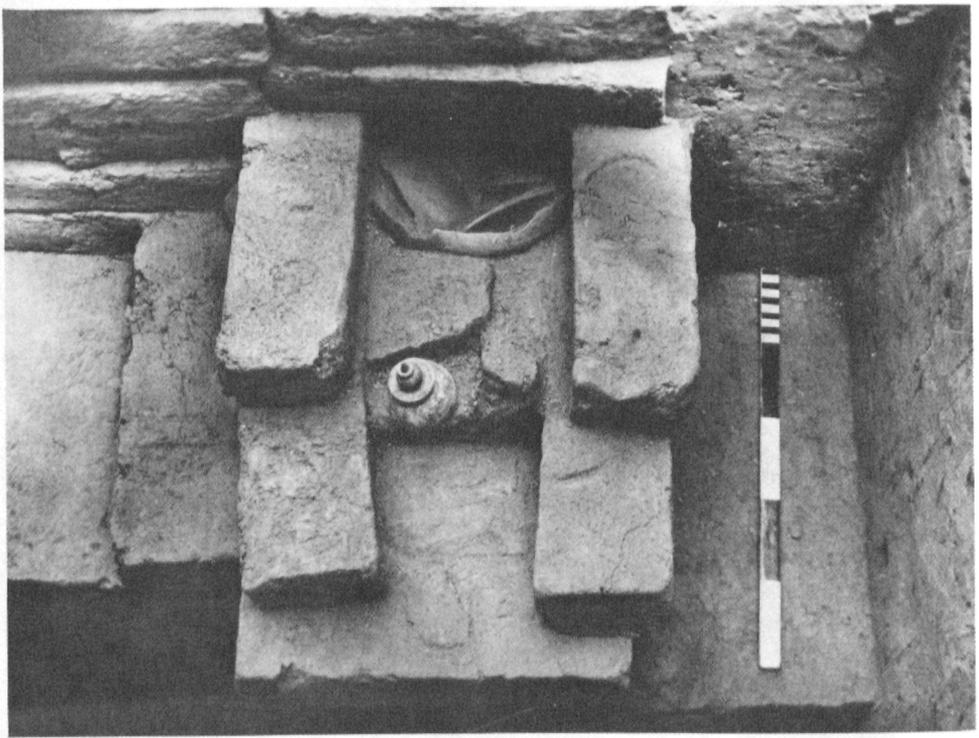


Plate I. Piprahwa. Soapstone casket and dish in the northern chamber.

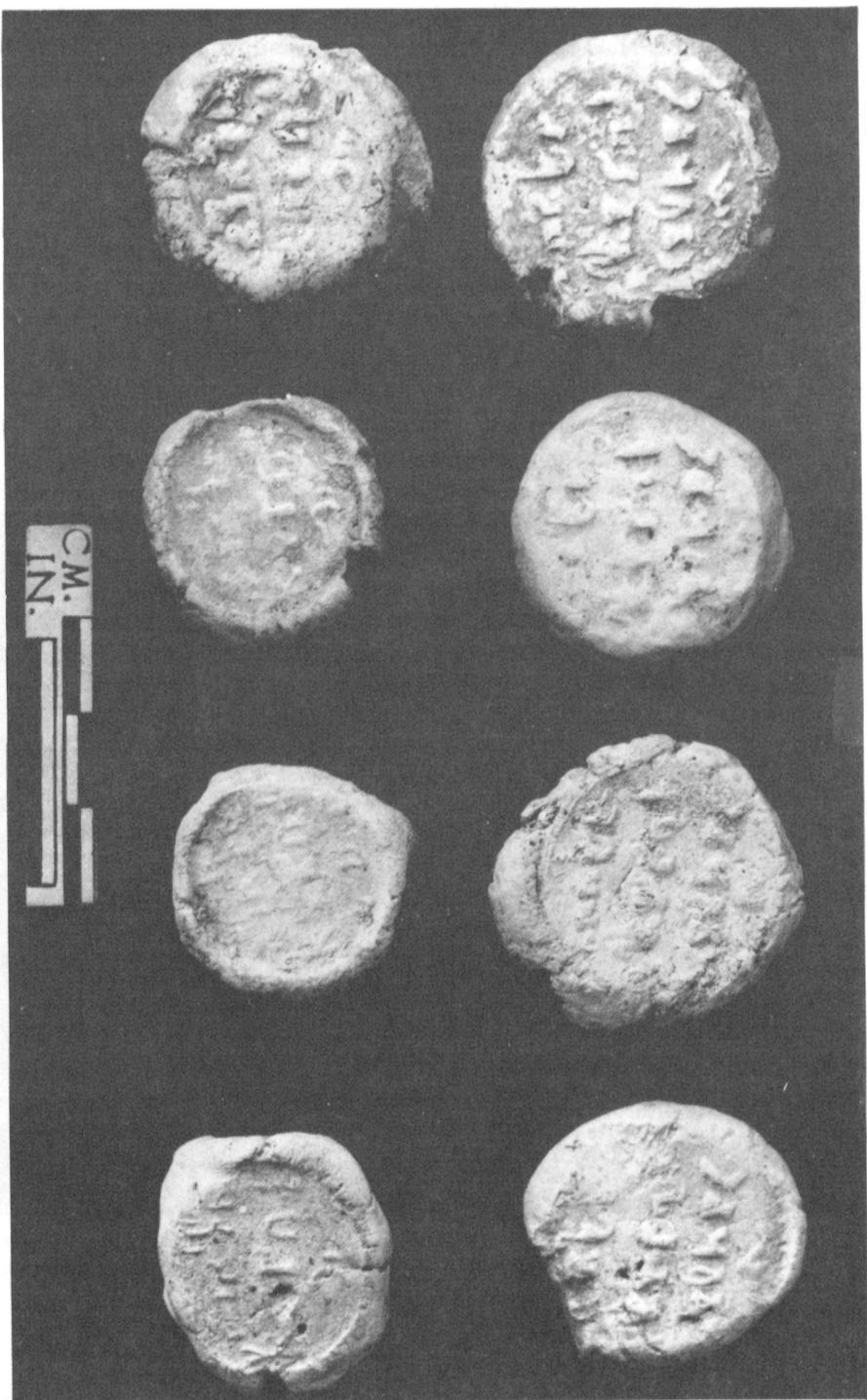


Plate II. Piprahwa. Sealings with the legend *Kapilavastu*.