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THE SITE OF SRAVASTI.

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AT the conclusion of a paper¹ dealing with the possible identity of the site of Kasiā with Veṭhadīpa, I expressed the hope that a continuation of my explorations on that site would lead to a final solution of the topographical problem. Owing to unforeseen circumstances, this hope has not been fulfilled. Last winter's excavations, however, have had the result of settling another question no less important for the ancient geography of India—that of the position of Śrāvastī.

It will be remembered that Cunningham² located this ancient city at Sahēt-Mahēt, an extensive site on the borders of the Bahraich and Gonda districts of the United Provinces, and on the right bank of an ancient bed of the Rāptī. Sahēt-Mahēt consists of two distinct sites. The larger one, known as Mahēt and covering an area of more than 400 acres, he identified with the city proper; Sahēt, the smaller site, which covers 32 acres and is situated at

¹ J.R.A.S., 1907, pp. 1049–53.

² A.S.R., vol. i, pp. 330–48, and xi, pp. 78–100.

a distance of a quarter of a mile south-west of Mahēt, he concluded to represent the famous Jetavana. This double identification, based on topographical evidence, was confirmed by the discovery of a colossal Bodhisattva image in a shrine at Sahēt. An inscription on its base records that this Bodhisattva, together with a parasol and post (*chāṭtram daṇḍaś ca*), was set up by Friar Bala "at Śrāvastī in the Kosambakuṭī at the Lord's walking-place" (*Bhagavato caṃkame*).¹

Notwithstanding the evidence afforded by this inscription, Mr. V. A. Smith undertook, in two papers published in this *Journal*,² to disprove the accepted identification, and claimed to have discovered the true site of Śrāvastī near the village of Bālāpur in Nepal, not far from the place where the Rāptī issues from the hills. His conclusions were based on a careful study of the itineraries of the Chinese pilgrims, who apparently reached Kapilavastu from Śrāvastī by travelling in a south-easterly direction, whereas the supposed site of the former place in the Nepal Tarai lies almost due east from Sahēt-Mahēt. The colossal Bodhisattva, Mr. Smith assumed, had been brought down the river from the true Śrāvastī to the spot where Cunningham found it. This assumption received some support from the fact that the Bodhisattva, which once must have stood in the open, sheltered by a stone parasol, had come to light in a small shrine of an evidently late date.

In the course of last winter's explorations, it was present in my mind that a discovery of the stone parasol, under which the image was once placed, would go far to settle the question in favour of Cunningham. Nothing, however, was found at Sahēt in the way of sculptures but a few

¹ Bloch, J.A.S.B., vol. lxvii (1898), pt. i, pp. 274-90, and *Ep. Ind.*, vol. viii, pp. 179-82.

² J.R.A.S., 1898, pp. 520-31, and 1900, pp. 1-24.

Buddha and Bodhisattva statuettes, partly inscribed with the Buddhist creed. These finds at any rate proved that the site of Sahēt was an important place of pilgrimage even in the expiring days of Indian Buddhism. It is significant that some of these images are made of the blue schist of Gayā, and others of the red sandstone of Mathurā.

When, on my return from Sahēt-Mahēt, I inspected the Lucknow Museum, Babu R. D. Banerji drew my attention to an inscribed fragment of red sandstone, which was standing in a corner of the epigraphical section. Most of the inscription was completely obliterated, but at the beginning of the last line but one the word *Śāvas[t]iye* was plainly legible. On examining it more closely, we came to the conclusion that this stone can be nothing but a fragment of the sought-for parasol post. The inscription, as far as traceable, was found to be identical with that on the Bodhisattva statue. It was certainly somewhat disconcerting to find the main object of one's excavation already in a museum. The point now to decide was who set it there? The state of the museum records renders it difficult to answer this question with certainty. Here I wish only to mention that, in all probability, the inscribed fragment was found in the course of excavations carried on at Sahēt-Mahēt by Dr. Hoey in 1884-5, though, strange to say, it is not referred to in that gentleman's report.¹ It is hoped that Dr. Bloch will ere long publish a detailed account of this inscription.

Fortunately, we are no longer dependent on the uncertain testimony of this inscription. Pandit Daya Ram Sahni, who was my partner in last winter's excavation and continued the work for a fortnight after my departure, had the good luck of discovering a copperplate inscription which once for all settles the topographical question. It

¹ J.A.S.B., vol. lxi (1892), pt. i, Extra No.

was found in a cell of the large monastery which occupied the south-west corner of the mound and had been partially excavated by Dr. Hoey. The plate measures 18 by 14 inches, and is very well preserved owing to its having been protected by an earthenware case. It records the grant of six villages to "the Community of Buddhist friars, of which Buddhahattāraka is the chief and foremost, residing in the great Convent of Holy Jetavana." The donor is Govindacandra of Kanauj, who dates it from Benares in the year 1186, Āshāḍha full-moon, Monday.¹ The document shows not only that Sahēt has been rightly identified with the Jetavana, but also that as late as the twelfth century there existed here an important Buddhist establishment which enjoyed the royal favour of the king of Kanauj. As Pandit Daya Ram will shortly edit the Sahēt copper-plate grant in the *Epigraphia Indica*, it is unnecessary to go here into further detail.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that our explorations have thus vindicated one of Cunningham's brilliant identifications, which lately had been thrown into doubt. Too much has it become the fashion to lay stress on the inaccuracies of which that pioneer of Indian archæology has been guilty, without considering the redeeming factor of his truly wonderful insight into questions of ancient geography. The identification of Śrāvastī and the Jetavana is a matter, not only of academical interest, but of vital importance to the millions of Buddhists who regard the favourite abode of their Lord as one of the most hallowed spots on the face of the earth.

Our recent discovery has, moreover, a distinct bearing on questions of ancient topography in general. It shows that the final word in nearly every instance has to come from prolonged researches made on the spot. The itineraries of the Chinese pilgrims alone are insufficient guides; nay,

¹ [23rd June, A.D. 1130.—ED.]

they are often liable to lead us astray. Above all, their accuracy, though marvellous if measured after the Oriental standard, should not be over-estimated. It should never be lost sight of that they had not the means of accurately fixing the distances and bearings of their routes. The former they must have estimated from the time spent in covering them, the latter from the position of the sun. M. Barth¹ gives a true valuation of their accounts when describing them as “de véritables itinéraires, avec des indications de distance et d’orientation, indications sans doute tout approximatives, souvent peu concordantes, parfois manifestement inexactes et toujours difficiles à interpréter sur le terrain, mais qui déterminent du moins la région où doivent se faire les recherches.”²

¹ *Journal des Savants*, Février, 1897, p. 65.

² [Attention may be invited to an article by Professor Terrien de Lacouperie, entitled “The Shifted Cardinal Points: from Elam to Early China,” published in the *Babylonian and Oriental Record*, vol. ii, pp. 25–31. Further examination in that line might perhaps throw a light on the point that the bearings given by Fa-hian and Hiuen-tsiang seem so often to be erroneous.—ED.]