

Deur Kothar

The Oldest Evidence of Buddhism



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Deur Kothar: The Earliest Evidence of Buddhism

We take it as granted that the Buddha was a real person, that he did the things that are said of him, and that he taught the Dhamma that we are familiar with. Further, almost all historians accept that the Buddha was a real person. However, there is no actual contemporary or near contemporary material evidence of the Buddha's existence. The same is true for Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius and most other ancient founders of religions.

But recently archaeological discoveries made in India have pushed back evidence for Buddhism, and therefore for the Buddha himself, to perhaps only nine or ten generations after his time, perhaps even an earlier than the evidence provided by King Asoka's inscriptions. This evidence has come from a so far little-known and remote site in the northern part of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh in a location called Deur Kothar. This place sits on the top of a high, steep-sided plateau which must have been on or near the famous Dakkhinapatha, the main route from the Middle Land, i.e. the Ganges valley where the Buddha's life and mission unfolded, to the Dakkhina, i.e. the South, what is now called the Deccan. This road passed in the north, the famous stupa of Barhut and the even more famous stupa of Sanchi in central India. It was one of the main routes monks took as they spread Buddhism throughout India. Deur Kothar was discovered in 1982 and the first excavations were done there in 1999-2000.

Excavations done at Deur Kothar have unearthed four brick stupas dating from the time of King Asoka and some thirty others made mainly of stone. Also found are numerous foundations of early monasteries, ancient pathways, water cisterns and some fifty caves and rock overhangs, some of which show evidence of being lived in, almost certainly by monks. On the walls of one of these caves is a much-faded painting of a stupa and a tree surrounded by a railing, almost certainly meant to be the Bodhi Tree that the Buddha was sitting under when he was Enlightened. Excavation of the monasteries has revealed coins, beautifully made bangles, small clay sculptures, and various copper objects. Also found has been iron and copper slag suggesting that metallurgy may have taken place in some of these monasteries, perhaps at a later date for making small images.

Digging around some of the stupas revealed stone railings with simple decorations such as stupas, wheels and other recognisable Buddhist symbols. However, these decorations are simple and even crude, suggesting that the artists were not just working with a new medium, i.e. stone instead of wood, but also that they were not copying earlier conventional prototypes. This points to these decorations being early, perhaps even before the time of King Asoka. If this is right it may mean that material evidence of Buddhism and therefore of the Buddha, is as little as 150 or 120 years after him.

Near one of the stupas two other objects of great interest were also found. One of these, a beautifully made stone umbrella, must have once been raised above one of the stupas. The second of these was a large stone pillar, highly polished like those erected by Asoka but not made from the Chunar sandstone that all the king's pillars were made from. This pillar has been broken onto nearly sixty pieces. Even more important, the pillar has an inscription on it although because of its fragmentary state, it is difficult to read. The Buddha is mentioned in the first line. The gist of the rest is that an unnamed *upasaka* erected the pillar in honour of the Buddha, and that a teacher (*acariya*) named Dhammadeva and his three disciples, Uttamitra, Bhadra and Upasaka all of who resided in the monastery, helped with this project. The evidence still needs to be examined more thoroughly and by other epigraphists, but initial evidence suggests that the script of this inscription may be older than those of King Asoka.

The shattered pillar has caused archaeologists to speculate why and by whom it was broken up so thoroughly. One theory is that it was done by Pushpamaita Sunga, the strongly anti-Buddhist king who overthrew the pro-Buddhist Mauryan dynasty in 187 BCE and who legend says launched a persecution of Buddhism.

All these discoveries are of enormous importance to the history of India and of Buddhism in particular, and have aroused great excitement amongst Indian archaeologists and historians. When ordinary people hear of important and exciting archaeological discoveries they think of dazzling treasure, of Indiana Jones kind of objects. Nothing could be further from the truth of the discoveries at Deur Kothar. The location is dry and rugged, the structures are impressive to the eye, and the objects uncovered do not glitter or shine. In fact, everything about Deur Kothar would be underwhelming to the average untrained person. But to the trained eye they might well fill big and frustrating gaps in the early history of Buddhism.