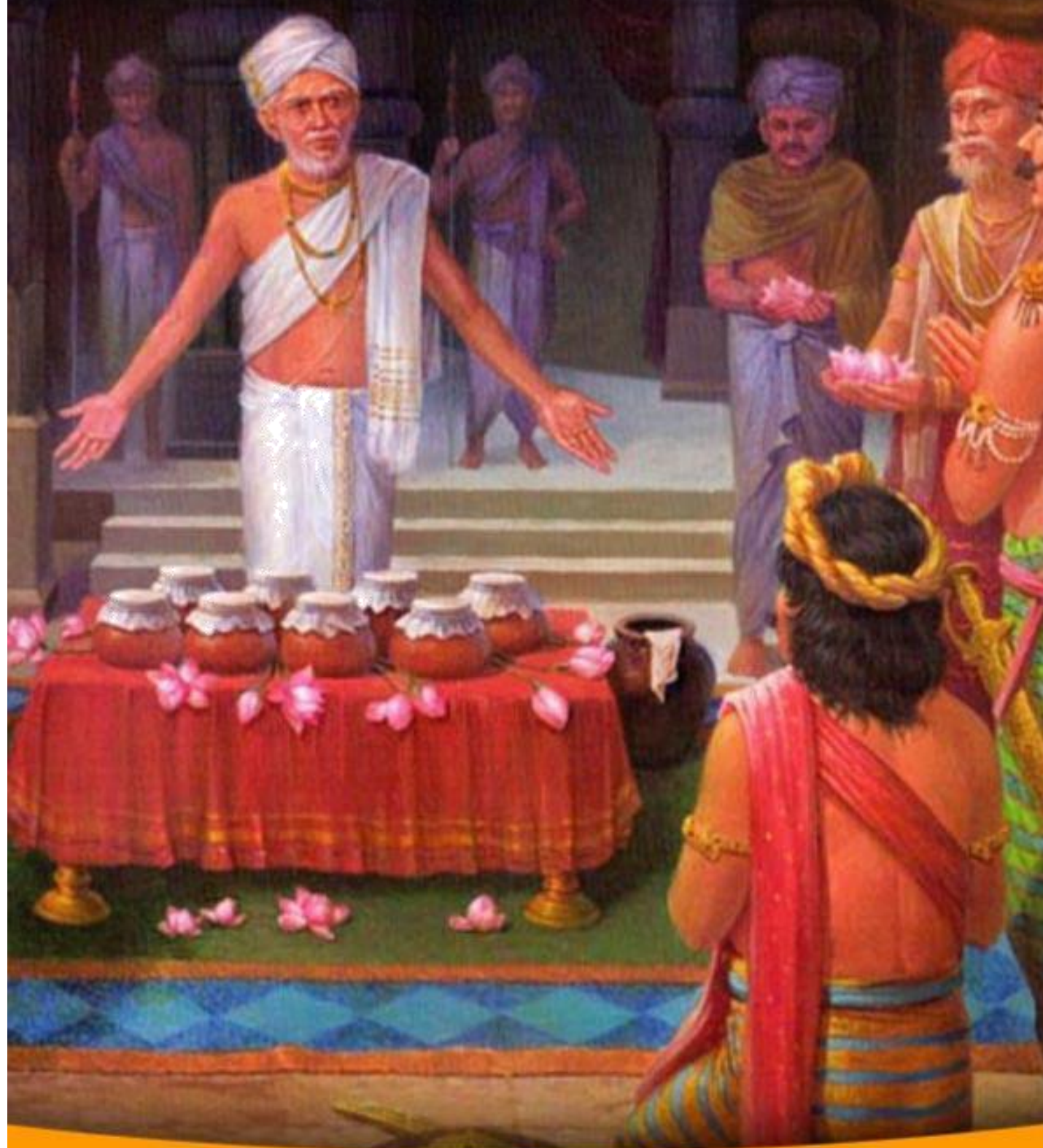


Searching for Dona's Stupa



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

Searching for Dona's Stupa



Although the Dhamma is one its expressions are many and nowhere is this better illustrated than in that most characteristics of Buddhist monuments the stupas. Some stupas are bulbous and squat while others are slim and spire-like. Some are small and delicate while others are truly gigantic. It is hard to believe that all these stupas evolved from ten prototypes which were probably little more than earthen mounds. Eight of these first stupas enshrined the Buddha's ashes, one the vessel in which his ashes had been collected in and from which they were measured out, and one the charcoal of the pyre that had consumed his body. According to the Mahaparinibhana Sutta this situation came about thus. As word spread that the Buddha had died representatives from several kingdoms and clans began arriving in Kusinara to claim the mortal remains. The Sakyans wanted some because, as their representative announced: "The Tathagata was the greatest of our clan." The envoy from King Ajatasattu said that his master was entitled to the relics because he was from the warrior caste and so was the Buddha. This was a spurious argument but Ajatasattu was the strongest and most belligerent monarch of the time so his demand has to be taken seriously. The Mallas of Kusinara, perhaps arguing from the standpoint of possession being nine tenths of the law, said: "The Tathagata attained Nirvana within the precincts of our town

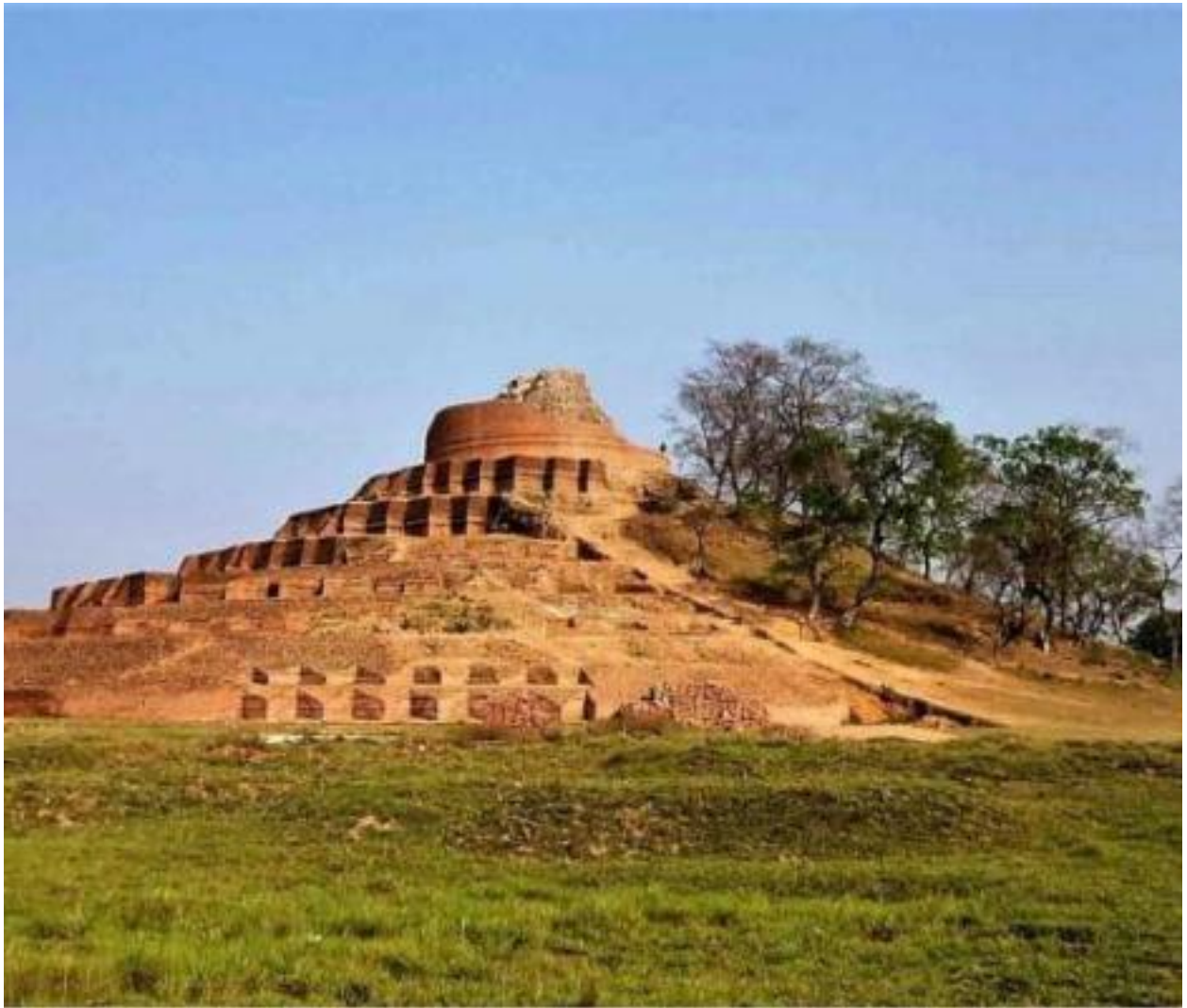
and we will not give up his bones.” In all, eight claimants were involved in this rather unseemly dispute.

It so happened that a respected brahman named Dona was staying in Kusinara at that time. This was probably not his real name but one by which he later came to be known. The Pali word dona was the name of a particular type of cup or vessel and also a unit of measure. Dona apparently had the trust of all concerned and so it was agreed that he should divide the relics according to how he thought fair. As a reward for his services he was given the vessel in which the relics had been held and from which he had measured them out. He received it with gratitude and announced that he would enshrine it in a stupa.

The division having been made to everyone’s satisfaction, an envoy from the Moriyas of Pippalivana turned up and demanded a portion. To accommodate this late-comer would have required taking back from everyone some of the relics and apparently no one was prepared to part with even a little of what they had just been given. One can almost imagine each envoy clutching their share more tightly and saying: “They came late so tough luck for them!” Although the Mahaparinibbana Sutta is not quite clear on this point, it seems that Dona came to the rescue once again, suggesting that the Moriyas be given the ashes from the funeral pyre. This was done and thus the first ten Buddhist stupas came to be built to enshrine the relics, the measuring vessel and the charcoal from the pyre.

In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta Dona is portrayed as a skilled peace maker. Some later literature represents him as something of a trickster. According to the Sumangalavilasani, not content with receiving the measuring vessel, he stole some of the Buddha's ashes as well. While dividing out the relics he waited until no one was watching and then slipped the Buddha's right eye tooth into his turban. In another legend he is said to have surreptitiously smeared the inside of the measuring vessel with honey and kept for himself the relics that stuck to it.

Archaeologists have identified four of the first Buddhist stupas, those at Rajagaha, Kusinara, Kapilavatthu and Vesali. The Ramagama stupa has been tentatively identified with a mound in Nepal east of Lumbini. Allakappa where the Bullis built their stupa may be at Anvala Kopa where there is a huge mound just outside the village. The two sites await verification by archaeologists. The location of the stupa of the Moriyas of Pippalivanna and that built on Vetha Island are not known. This last stupa may have been on one of the many islands in the Ganges and was long ago washed away by the river's constantly changing course. And what of Dona stupa? It was certainly a popular destination with pilgrims in ancient times. It is mentioned in the Divyavadana, written in about the 2nd century CE, and in several other works. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang went there in the 7th century CE and wrote that although the stupa was in ruins it still sometimes emitted a brilliant light. But does Dona's stupa still exist and if so where could it be? These are questions that have interested me for some time.



The stupa at Kesariya

Dona the brahmin makes three appearances in the Pali Tipitaka. Kusinara, where he divided out the relics is a little beyond what was the eastern border of Kosala. The two other references to him are in the Anguttara Nikaya. The location of the first of these (A.III, 223) is not given. The second records that Dona and the Buddha met while the two were travelling between Ukkattha and Setavya, (A.II,36). We know that Ukkattha was in the north of Kosala (D.II,361). Setavya's location is unknown but we read of someone leaving Savatthi and then passing

through Setavya while on their way to Rajagaha (Sn.1012) which suggests that it was somewhere in the east or more likely, the south-east of Kosala.

Xuanzang's account of his visit narrows things down even further. After leaving Dona's stupa he says he travelled between 140 and 150 li to north-east, crossed a river and arrived in Vesali, again suggesting that it was in the south-east of Kosala. So all references to Dona place him in a triangle of territory defined by the Gandak (the river that he must have crossed to get to Vesali) on one side, the Ganges on the other and an imaginary line drawn between the modern towns of Gorakapur and Varanasi. In early 2001 I went to India to see if I could find Dona's stupa.

I got out my well-used Indian Geographical survey maps of Bihar and began looking in the area I thought it might be. Going through the maps section by section I eventually spotted a small village in Siwan District named Don. Now as Hindi tends to drop the last vowel in words the changes that the ancient name of this village was Dona are very good. Vesali is about 20 miles away, quite close to Xuanzang's estimation, although not to the north-east as he says, but to the east. But whether or not there were ruins in or near the village and if so whether they were Buddhist, I did not know. There was only one way to find out. We hired a vehicle in Bodh Gaya and set out before dawn. When we got to Patna we went to a hotel to have lunch and while waiting for the food to arrive I picked up a newspaper that was lying on the table. On the front page was a report mentioning that a landlord's private

army had just massacred ten people and to prevent further trouble the state government had declared a curfew and called in the Rapid Action Force. The report went to say that this was all happening in Siwan District, the very place we were headed for. It looked like we were going to have to contend with more than just bad roads. As it so happens Siwan and its surroundings were probably safer than normal, there were armed paramilitaries everywhere. Our car bumped along dusty pot-holed roads for miles until eventually we got to Don. The village consisted of a single main street with humble shacks on either side. But there was no mound that could be a stupa anywhere in sight. Almost immediately curious villagers gathered around us and through the driver I asked them if there was a mound or any ruins in the area. They all agreed that there was not. Always hospital to strangers, someone bought us a cup of tea and having finished we drove to the end of the street to turn around and return to Patna. But there, right behind the last few shops, was a huge grassy mound with a small Hanuman temple on the top of it. We parked the car and got out to have a closer look. The ground was strewn with pieces of broken brick indicating that the mound was not a natural hill or that it was made of earth. Soon I found small shards of shiny black pottery. This type of pottery, called Northern Black Polished Ware, was only made between the 6th and the 2nd centuries BC and its presence proved that the site dated from around the Buddha's time. Curious villagers gathered around us. They told us that within living memory the core of the stupa had been very

high but it had since collapsed and the bricks had been used to build the temple now on the top of the stupa.

I asked the villagers if there were any ancient sculpture in the area, and they all pointed behind the mound. With them leading the way we went over and sure enough there was a beautiful statue of the Mahayana bodhisattva Tara, delicately carved out of black stone. I estimate it dated from about the 9th or 10th century. Later we did a short puja at the side of the stupa and then had another cup of tea at the house of the local school teacher, once again with the locals crowding around watching. Without proper archaeological examination it is impossible to say if the mound in Don is in fact Dona's stupa but I think the chances are very good. Its location and name, the physical evidence such as the pre-Christian pottery and the Buddhist statue, all point to it.

I had read that another stupa had recently been discovered in a town called Kesariya and as it was only about 60 kilometres away I wanted to go and have a look at it. So after spending the night in Siwan we rose early and headed off. During the Buddha's time a semi-independent clan of people called the Kalamas lived on the northern edge of Viji and their chief town was called Kesaputta. The town's importance was due to its close proximity to the main crossing point on the wide and sandy Gandak River. One of the Buddha's early teachers, Alara Kalama, probably came from Kesaputta. It was during a visit to the town that the Buddha taught his most celebrated discourse, the Kalama Sutta. According to later legend when the Buddha left Vesali on

his last journey to Kusinara crowds of Vajjians followed him unable to bear the thought of never seeing their beloved teacher again. Several times he asked them to return to their homes but still they continued following him. When he got to Kesaputta the Buddha turned to the crowd and one final time urged them to let him to go on without them. Reluctantly they agreed and one by one they turned to leave. Out of compassion for them and as a token of his memory the Buddha gave the Vajjians his bowl which was subsequently enshrined in Vesali. In later centuries a stupa was built at Kesaputta to commemorate this incident and perhaps also to mark the place where the Kalama Sutta had been taught. The town where the ruins of this monument is located is now called Kesariya.

After several hours of taking wrong turns and stopping to ask directions we finally got the first glimpse of the great stupa looming above the trees. The work of excavating it was still in progress and there were piles of earth and bricks everywhere. Being Sunday all the workers were gone but the watcher took me around and showed me everything. The stupa consists of five huge terraces, the first one round, the second polygonal, the third one cross-shaped, etc. In the sides of the terraces are alcoves, each enshrining a life sized Buddha statue. I measured the stupa and found it to be 1400 feet in circumference, and estimated it to be about 51 feet high. It may have originally been about 70 feet high. Even in its ruined state it is an extremely impressive sight. Excavations

are not yet finished and so no report of the discoveries at Kesariya have been published so far.

I had brought a book to read during the trip and by chance it happened to have the Kalama Sutta in it, so after looking around we sat in the shade of a nearby tree and read those profound words of the Buddha in the actual place where he had spoken them so long ago.