

Pseudo-discoveries at Lumbini

In the December 2013 issue of the archaeological journal *Antiquity* there appears an article by several authors, headed by Prof. Robin Coningham of Durham University. Its appearance has been successfully managed to secure international publicity. The article was embargoed until a specified hour, which was timed immediately to succeed an announcement to the press in the USA.

The article claims a sensational discovery. The press release is entitled *Archaeological Discoveries Confirm Early Date of Buddha's Life*, and its first paragraph summarises the claim in these words: "Archaeologists working in Nepal have uncovered evidence of a structure at the birthplace of the Buddha dating to the sixth century B.C. This is the first archaeological material linking the life of the Buddha — and thus the first flowering of Buddhism — to a specific century." On the BBC website the announcement reads: "'Earliest shrine' uncovered at Buddha's birthplace". Thus at each stage the alleged discovery becomes simpler and more definite. Notice also the word "confirm" in the title of the press release. If we go back to the article we find the same process: as hypothesis, or rather, guess, builds upon guess, possible slides into probable and finally emerges unembellished as firm claim.

Before building up his claim, Coningham presents what he holds to be the current state of opinion about the date of the Buddha's death, so let us too look at the received chronology, as he presents it, before examining the revealed Buddhist structure. In the press release he is quoted as saying that "Some scholars have maintained that the Buddha was born in the third century BC". I am not aware of any such scholars, but I suppose we must allow that he may have been misquoted and had no chance to correct the release. In his own article (p.1105) he gives a selection of dates which have been proposed (over a very long period), and this is shoddy work. He writes that there is a Nepali and Sri Lankan tradition dating the Buddha's death to 623 BC, and "a long 'southern Buddhist' chronology of 544/3 BC". This is garbled. The Sri Lankan tradition is the same as the long southern Buddhist

chronology. I have never heard of a Nepali tradition of 623 BC and it looks as if this is in fact a dating of the Buddha's *birth*, which would match the 544/3 date for his death. Incidentally, throughout the article Coningham calls the Buddha's death, the *parinirvana*, the "*paranirvana*", which shows how remote is his acquaintance with this subject matter. To cap this muddle, he later (p.1121) says that the late Heinz Bechert favoured a date of around 480 BC, which is untrue: Bechert favoured a fourth century date.

There are nearly two pages of bibliography, including many articles by Coningham, but the scholars who are nowadays most widely considered authoritative in this area are absent. A particularly important omission is the article by von Hinüber and Skilling, "Two Buddhist inscriptions from Deorkothar", published in the March 2013 *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2012*. Why is this especially relevant? The article concerns two inscriptions about acts performed by monks who recorded that they could trace their pupillary lineages **back to the Buddha himself**, listing all the intermediate names. While this evidence (which I discuss in my editorial for the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, vol. 5) does not enable us to date the Buddha with precision, it is certainly not compatible with a date for his death in the sixth century BC, while being perfectly compatible with the general consensus which now dates that event somewhere around 400 BC.

The evidence concerning the alleged structure and its date is presented in great detail over several pages and cannot be adequately summarised, but certainly one can point out some major defects. Again I begin with dating. On p.1112 is a table of radiocarbon datings, and on p.113 a table of datings by optically stimulated luminescence (OSL). These are the most precise evidence for dating the finds in Coningham's dig. From the first table we learn that what he calls the "earlier cultural layer" is dated between 788 and 522 BC; the dating of the samples which he calls "posthole fill" come from a very similar period. The latest dates from the OSL concern "early land surface" and are dated to 545 plus or minus 235. This span of 470 years is of course

wide enough to include every date for the Buddha's death under possible consideration. If I understand the material correctly these datings in any case concern earth samples; their relationship to hypothetical structures is very unclear.

Coningham and his team have found traces of structures underneath the structure now visible, which is generally ascribed to Asoka in the third century BC. Digging down, they have found brick structures, probably in two levels, and beneath (and therefore before) those bricks there may well have been a wooden structure. That the earliest Buddhist monuments known to us have characteristics which suggest that they imitate features of wooden structures has long been widely known and accepted. Coningham has not actually found a wooden structure, but has foundholes which may show where there were wooden posts, which have probably rotted away.

In nothing that has been unearthed is there a single trace to suggest anything to do with Buddhism. Yes, these things are under a Buddhist shrine of the third century BC, but it is on that fact alone that Coningham builds his vast hypothetical evidence. So far as I can discover, his other starting point is a nondescript flattish rock, called a "conglomerate block", illustrated in fig.5. This was found by some Japanese excavators in 2001; they termed it a "marker stone" and proposed that it signified where the Buddha was born (p.1107). Though this evidently rests on no more than a pleasing fantasy, Coningham seems to accept it as a fact. Later in the article, when he has decided that the earliest shrine was built round a tree, he tells us that "tree shrines are generally held to have been a well-established and ancient form of ritual focus in South Asia" (p.1116). Following the Jungian speculations of the late John Irwin, he goes on to tell us that the tree was an "archetypal image of the separation and unity of the universe", which "simultaneously pegged the primordial mound to the cosmic ocean" (p.1117). Unfortunately, no serious scholar nowadays accepts Irwin's baroque vision of an ancient world, and particularly an Indian world, dotted with *axes mundi*. Nor is there any evidence that this idea ever entered Buddhism.

Coningham wants this site originally to have been a building enclosing a Bodhi tree. He says they have dug up some tree roots, which is hardly surprising, given that for many centuries the site was overrun by jungle. On the other hand, if there was a Bodhi tree there originally, it would seem surprising if Asoka ignored it and put down a pillar – as a substitute, or reinforcement, of the *axis mundi*? As we learn from the evidence that Coningham cites about Bodhi tree shrines, the trees live a very long time, and when they die the pious Buddhists make sure to plant another in their stead.

At this point I feel I should desist from flogging a dead horse. The entire story presented to us in the headlines is a fantasy, and I feel sad that the only time when my subject makes the news it is because of self-serving hype, more worthy of a politician than of an academic.

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