

A Profile Of Archaeology-11

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However, the greatest assemblage of Buddhist remains in Bangladesh today is to be found in Mainamati. This romantic name, associated with a number of local legends and ballads now signifies an isolated range of low hills of almost fairy-tale beauty, about five miles to the west of Comilla town, which dominates the vast level plain of the fertile lower Meghna basin. It extends for about 11 miles north-south from the Mainamati village on the Gumti river to Chandi Mura near the Lalmai railway station. During the Second World War, an extensive centre of Buddhist culture was discovered here on the flat tops and slopes of these hills. In the first hurried survey 18 sites were recognized and protected, but not before many of them had been heavily damaged by the military contractors and local brick-hunters. In our more regular subsequent survey (between 1955 and 1957), a larger number of these ruins came to light. Of the 50 odd sites discovered so far, four have since been either completely or partially excavated, and we have just started excavation on the fifth. The excavated sites are: Salban Vihara, a monastery near the Mainamati Museum; Kutila Mura, a group of large stupas; Charpatra Mura, a small temple; Mainamati's Palace mound, a partially exposed ancient settlement, probably a fortified palace; and Ananda Vihara, a magnificent monastic establishment, the largest in Mainamati, where excavation is continuing. Prominent among the unexcavated sites are: Bairagi Mura, Bhojaraja Vihara, Rupban Kanya Vihara, Itakhola mound, Rupban Mura, Kotbari mound, Pacca Mura and Chandi Mura.

The Mainamati excavations are the first of their kind in South-East Bengal, and the results already obtained are extraordinarily interesting and valuable. In the size and magnitude of the exposed monuments, in the variety and richness of the recovered objects, and in the significance of the information they have supplied, these excavations certainly rank among the foremost in eastern India; and when considered together with the many unexcavated sites in the neighbourhood, they may bear comparison with those Nalanda and Taxila.

SALBAN VIHARA

A Salban Vihara the excavation has exposed a large, Paharpur-type establishment and a wealth of material objects datable from the 7th to 12th centuries A.D. Formally arranged in four wings round a central shrine this 250 feet square monastery contains a total of 115 cells. Its single entrance is set in grand, 74 feet wide, projected front facade in the middle of the north side.

All the wall of the monastery are massive, the back wall being most massive—16½ feet thick. This feature, together with the forbidding character of the gateway and the ready look of the outer wall must have given it the appearance of a citadel. The reason for evolving an architecture of this type may be found in the increasing wealth of the establishments and insecurity of the

time.

Deep diggings have revealed four repair and rebuilding phases in the monastery, the earliest corresponding to Period III of the site (8th cent. A.D.) being the most prosperous and flourishing. Two interesting features observed inside the cells; fireplaces and ornamental brick pedestals, were not provided in the original plan. They appear from the second phase onward. Though there was a community kitchen in the establishment, many of the resident monks preferred to cook their meals individually inside their cells, and the pedestals served the purpose of their private worship. These features may suggest that the establishment was meant primarily for lay students, and not for ordained monks only.

The monastery was built by Sri-Bhavadeva, the fourth ruler of the Deva dynasty, sometime in the end of the 7th or the beginning of the 8th century A.D.

THE CENTRAL SHRINE

The central shrine at Salban Bihara is actually not one but several structures built successively in different periods and on different plans. They provide interesting evidence of the gradual transformation of the traditional Buddhist architecture of its merging into that of the Hindu temple.

The earlier two period remains are hidden below the cruciform shrine of Period III which was built with the monastery as a single complex. It is an exceedingly interesting piece of architecture resembling, in ground plan, a Greek Cross 170 feet long, with chapels built in the projecting arms. Its basement walls are embellished with a string course of delightfully sculptured terracotta plaques set within parallel bands of ornamental bricks. This shrine, bearing a striking resemblance with that of Paharpur, represents a fully developed and finished example of the seventh-eighth century Buddhist architecture of Bengal. Since the Mainamati monuments are unquestionably earlier in date, it is reasonable to think that they supplied for not only the monuments at Kalasna (778 A.D.) in central Java and Pagan (1090 A.D.) in Burma. But also those at Paharpur, Vikramasila and similar other monuments of eastern India.

The next two periods witnessed an interesting transformation in the plan of the shrine the cruciform shape being replaced by an oblong one. Now fully open, spacious and functional, it is a far cry from the traditional solid stupa, and is much nearer to a Hindu temple, though still lacking the decorative elements of the latter.

KUTILA MURA

At Kutila Mura, diggings have revealed the layout of three principal stupas on the hill-top with a commanding view of the countryside, and a number of subsidiary stupas, all enclosed by a massive boundary wall. Excavation work here is still incomplete and much remains to be cleared yet including an attached monastery.

In form and style the Kutila Mura monuments are different: they represent the traditional, while Salban Vihara and others an evolved style. The three main stupas here probably represent the three jewels of Buddhism. The foundation of the middle stupa was laid in the form of a Dharmacakra formed by eight box-chambers with a central shaft, where innumerable terracotta and clay votive stupas and sealings were enshrined. With these relics were found a class of fine Buddhist sculpture in soft grey shale not known from any other site.

Kutila Mura monuments date from the Khadga times (7th cent. A.D.), and their terminal date of 13th cent. A.D. is suggested by the discovery of a gold coin of al-Mustassim billah (1242-1258 A.D.), the last Abbasid Caliph, in an

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Kutila Mura group of stupas, (the historic 'Tri-ratna shrine') at Mainamati, district Comilla, Bangladesh.