

A brief history of the translation of the Piprahwa inscription

Pali was a newly discovered language at the time of the Piprahwa discovery and the inscription attracted many scholars. The challenge in interpreting a language that was new to all lay in finding uses of less familiar words in other contexts to reach a definition. To make it harder, the hand copies of the inscription were not always accurate. Peppé's original copy had one minor omission but, when he passed it over to his assistant (E. D. Judson) for more copies, other errors were made. Ambitious Pali scholars approached their translations with a passion that led to competition and grandstanding, often when they were working from different texts.

Vincent Smith offered the first translation from the copy of the inscription sent to him by Peppé immediately after the find.

This [is] the relic receptacle of the Blessed Buddha [a proper name?] sister son

After Peppé made a more accurate rubbing of the inscription and sent a copy, Smith proceeded with his translation:

*This (is) in the relic receptacle (of the) Buddha (blessed)
Of the Sakyas of the brothers (noble) of the sisters' people
With the sons [-] portion (votive offering)*

*This is the offering made of the noble brotherhood of the Sakyas, with
their sons' sons & sisters' sons*

Führer received the same initial copy as Smith and did not provide a translation but wrote to Peppé that:

*From a cursory glance at it, I can safely say that your shrine contains real
relics of Lord Buddha, as the reading "Bhudasa Bhagavaton" is quite clear.*

Dr. William Hoey's visited the site a few weeks later. His translation was printed in the *Pioneer* newspaper 27 February 1898 and was the first version to be made public:

*The relic deposit of Lord Buddha is the share (i.e. the share allotted at the
division of his ashes after cremation to) his renowned Sakya brethren, his
own sister's children and his own son.*

Führer mentions to Peppé in a letter (See letter 14 of W. C. Peppé letters) that:

*Dr Hoey's translation of the inscription is certainly incorrect and does not
convey the right sense.*

The High Priest, Subuthi, had assisted Sir Alexander Cunningham and gained respect as Ceylon's leading Pali scholar. He weighed in with:

*This treasure of bone-relics of the deified Buddha is of the renown
brothers, also of sisters, together with sons, of the Sakya race.*

Which evoked this response from Vincent Smith:

This translation is defective in omitting to translate the word 'dalanam'. "wives". The concluding compound ... may be translated either "with sons and wives" or, as I prefer, "with sons' wives"

Führer forwarded the inscription to the highly esteemed Professor of Indian Philology and Archaeology, Georg Bühler, in Austria. Harry Falk writes that:

Bühler replied on February 21 to both Führer and Peppé with a reading which has the *sakiyanam* right, but the crucial words are still read as *budhasa bhagavata*, the latter restored to *bhagavata[sa]*. The same day he wrote to Rhys Davids in London, telling him about the find and asks Rhys Davids to look for a Sukīrti in Pali literature. Bühler begs Rhys Davids to be absolutely silent about all of this, obviously believing that he is the only person in possession of a copy of this exciting inscription. While still waiting for the photographs from Führer, Bühler received a copy of a lecture on the Piprahwa stūpa, the casket and its inscription which A. Barth had delivered in Paris on March 11, 1898 at the academy.

Still, Bühler's translation was consistent in agreeing with the other translations that the inscription referred to the remains of the Buddha.

This relic shrine of the divine Buddha (is the donation) of the Sakya Sukiti-brothers, associated with their sisters, sons and wives.

In subsequent years, another scholar tried to make his mark. John Fleet had taken over from T. W. Rhys Davids as Honorary Secretary at the Royal Asiatic Society and was able to publish three articles on the Piprahwa vase. In 1905 he published a translation that was more or less in line with those of his predecessors.

Of the brethren of the Well-famed One, together with children and wives this receptacle of relics of Buddha, the Blessed One of the Sakyas.

Harking back to rumors that the remains were of slaughtered Sakya warriors, Silvain Lévi came up with a version that suggested that the inscription referred to the Buddha's family rather than the Buddha himself:

Here are the relics of the Sakyas, blessed brothers of the saint Buddha, with their sisters, their sons and their wives.

Fleet then issued a paper which started by embracing Lévi's theory:

SOME remarks made in the journal des Savants, 1905. 540ff., by our valued friend and collaborator M. Sylvain Lévi, have given me a clue which enables me to now carry to a final result that which I have to say about the inscription on the steatite or soap-stone Piprawa relic-vase,-- the oldest known Indian record. He has drawn attention to a statement by

Hiuen Tsiang (see page 166 below), overlooked by me, which has led me to weigh the wording of the inscription in such a manner that no doubt whatsoever remains as to the real meaning of it, and as to the circumstances connected with it.

Also, through the kindness of Mr. Hoey, I have before me a very excellent plaster cast of the inscribed part of the vase, which shows the whole inscription quite plainly. The engraving is so very thin and shallow that it is doubtful whether a satisfactory facsimile can be produced; at any rate until a much better light is available than can be obtained at this time of the year. But I can say this much: that the whole record was engraved on the original in the most complete manner; that every stroke of it is distinctly legible in the cast; and that not the slightest doubt attends any part of the decipherment of it.

He went on to revise his position and proposed that the relics are 'not of Buddha himself... but of his kinsmen, with their wives and children and their unmarried sisters'. There was strong retaliation from French Orientalists Auguste Barth and Emile Senart who rejected the idea that the word *Sukirti* was a reference to the Buddha as 'possessed of good fame' or 'the Well famed One' and not a proper name as Bühler had claimed. Fleet admitted defeat, declaring that 'I now abandon my opinion that there is any reference to Buddha in the word in question' and Barth's translation remained widely accepted by academics of the day:

The receptacle of relics of the blessed Buddha of the Sakyas (is the pious gift) of the brothers of Sukirti, jointly with their sisters, with their sons and their wives.

The essence of this translation has not been challenged since then. However, Fleet's academic authority within Great Britain lent some lasting weight to his alternative translation. Vincent Smith warned of Fleet's translation that:

'The knowledge of the most ancient Prakrit is not yet sufficiently advanced to warrant a final solution of the linguistic problem presented by the inscription'

Even W. C. Peppé, who was neither an expert on such matters nor particularly invested in the contents of his excavation, seemed to accept Fleet's version. After all, the man had written extensively on the subject and was Honorary Secretary at the Royal Asiatic Society.

A 1931 issue of *Buddhism in England* published a letter of correction it had received from a German reader who points out that they failed to list Piprahwa as one of the original stupas erected over the ashes of the Buddha. In the following issue the editor writes that he 'was under the impression that the idea that the Piprahwa relics are those of the Buddha is now generally discredited' and admits that he had assumed

Fleet's translation was widely accepted although he is not sure exactly why. He goes on to ask for 'the opinions of our readers on the matter, and also any information as to the present views of experts'.

While Fleet's version was an anomaly, it may have been enough to dampen enthusiasm for further academic study in Great Britain. This (along with Western Buddhism's focus on the philosophical aspects of Buddhism) may also explain why the jewels from the Piprahwa find that were donated to the Buddhist Society in London lay unnoticed in a drawer until 2003.

Over a hundred years after Barth published his translation, German scholar and epigraphist, Harry Falk, spent time with the reliquary in the Indian Museum in Kolkata and translated the inscription to mean:

This enshrinement (nidhāna) of the corporal remnants (śarīra) of the Buddha [1: of the Śākya], the lord, (is to the credit) of the [2: Śākya] brothers of the 'highly famous', together with their sisters, with their sons and wives.

Where earlier translations had debated the word *Sukirti* as being either a proper name or a reference to the Buddha as 'possessed of good fame' or 'the Well famed One', Falk focuses on the word *nidhane*. Rather than it simply meaning container or reliquary box, Falk finds evidence to read it as meaning the whole stupa construction installed by the Sakyas for the relics of the Buddha.