

1. Letter from Vincent Smith, ICS, in Gorakhpur to W. C. Peppé in Birdpore

Smith explains who Aśoka is with dates and gives an account of Xuanzang's visit to Lumbini and the broken Aśokan column he saw there, quoting from Beal and Julien.

3.11.97

Gorakhpur

My dear Peppé

Your letter just received.

Asoka of the Ceylonese books, who calls himself Piyadasi in his inscriptions was Emperor of India, with his capital at Patna (Pâtaliputra) from about B.C. 259-222. He visited the traditional birthplace of Gautama Buddha in the 21st year of his reign - in B.C. 239, which within a year or two is the date of the Padaria pillar, and no doubt also of the Niglîva one.

The date of Buddha's death is uncertain but was most probably B.C. 477 - the tradition about his birthplace was therefore tolerably fresh in Asoka's time. Huien Tsang's travels lasted from 629 to 645 A. D. He visited the frontier somewhere between 630 and 642 A.D. "The bathing temple of the Sâkyas" (ie, Buddha's family) is the pond in the south end of the mound. There were 8 stûpas close to it - evidently all in the same mound. "By the side of these stûpas, and not far from them there is a great stone pillar, on the top of which is the figure of a horse, which was built by Asoka Raja. Afterwards by the contrivance of a wicked dragon, it was broken off in the middle, and fell on the ground. By the die of it is a little river which flows to the S. E. The people of the place call it the River of Oil". (ie, Tilâr Nadi).

The above is Beals' translation. Julien renders the passage about the pillars - "foundroyée par un méchant dragon. Cette colonne gît à terre, brisée par le milieou." This suggests a lightning strike. Anyhow in the 7th century the pillar lay prostrate, and somebody set it up later - very likely one of the mediaeval Pâla kings of Bihar who were Buddhist up to A.D. 1100.

I think if I have time I shall write an article explaining popularly the interest of the recent discoveries.

Yours sincerely
V. C. Smith