

Concerning: the Piprahwa reliquary casket and the jewels found with it

There has been an unnecessary dispute about the authenticity of the reliquary caskets found by W. C. Peppe while excavating the stupa on his premises in the Indian Terai in 1897. This dispute seems to be confined to the British Isles. In other countries, no serious scholar, after studying the inscription on the casket, has ever doubted that it is a genuine text written in about the 2nd century BC in a language very few people understood and in a script very few people could read at that time. I inspected the original casket in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, in December 2012 and was looking for signs of an insecure hand, copying letters from some source onto the casket. I could not find any trace of a hand slowly copying. Instead, the writing was done by some experienced clerk who was well-accustomed with Brahmi script and the local language of the time.

The authenticity of the casket was questioned because a German priest, Dr. Alois Anton Fuhrer, had undeservedly entered the Archaeological Survey and was cursorily acquainted with the excavations at Piprahwa. Dr. Fuhrer also "edited" the Vasishta-dharmashastra, a text on ancient Indian law. I have been preparing a new edition of this same text since the early 90s, including the old, but also making use of a series of newly found manuscripts. I can tell from what Fuhrer says and prints in his "edition", that he was not a competent Sanskritist. In fact, what he published was just the master copy prepared by Poona pundits from manuscripts to serve as a base for Georg Buhler's translation. Fuhrer wasn't even able to detect printing mistakes or grammatical atrocities in what he published. It is absolutely inconceivable that he, with his little knowledge of ancient Indian languages and scripts, would have been able to compose the text which is found on the reliquary.

The coffer is large enough to hold treasures of all sorts and it seems most likely that the reliquary which was originally placed inside, was accompanied by all sorts of personal ornaments. This habit is well attested to in stupa finds in Gandhara, where we even have depictions of devotees throwing flowers made from gold foil into the sacred fire which is used at the inauguration of the stupa. The remnants of these fires are then buried together with the reliquary. Gold-foil ear-ornaments, finger rings and other personal jewelry is regularly found with the reliquaries.

Unfortunately, today we have little means to decide which of the jewels come from the original installation at Lumbini and which were added when the coffer was buried inside the Piprahwa stupa when it was, for the first, covered by a brick construction. In any case the jewels should contain genuine Mauryan pieces and possibly some from Shunga times.

The reliquary was found in a stone coffer. While inspecting it, it became apparent that it is absolutely unique, regarding its size (1 x 1 x 1.5 yards), stone (from the Ganges area), and its quality. Found just 15 km away from Lumbini, it most likely is what king Asoka in 250 BC deposited and called "a *stone vigadabhica*". Scholars still struggle over the etymology of *vigadabhica*, since the term is unique. It is likely that the coffer in the stupa at Piprahwa may have been transported from Lumbini, to shelter it from attacks from non-Buddhist sectarians and those opposed to favours done by Asoka for the Buddhist order. The stupa most likely was built some decades after Asoka, but its "decorative" contents apart from the reliquaries could well date back to this extraordinary king as does the coffer which contained them.