

What happened at Piprahwa: a chronology of events relating to the excavation in January 1898 of the Piprahwa Stupa in Basti District, North-Western Provinces and Oude (Uttar Pradesh), India, and the associated ‘Piprahwa Inscription’, based on newly available correspondence.

Charles Allen

Background

Writing in the pages of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in January 2012, Dr Michael Willis, Curator of early South Asian and Himalayan collections at the British Museum and author of *Buddhist Reliquaries from Ancient India* (London 2000), declared the Piprahwa inscription to be ‘in all likelihood a forgery made by A. A. Führer’ⁱ. Exactly a century earlier the same scholarly journal had carried a very similar expression of concern from the Pali scholar Prof. Heinrich Lüders, raising for the first time in public doubts that had hitherto circulated largely in privateⁱⁱ.

Both Willis and Lüders had the same culprit in mind: Dr. Anton Alois Führer, who in September 1898 had resigned from his post as Curator of Lucknow Museum and Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of the North-Western Provinces and Oude (NWP&O), after being charged with ‘falsification of his correspondence with several Governments’, but with further charges of plagiarism, forgery and corruption hanging over himⁱⁱⁱ. The scandal had been effectively hushed up by the Government of India and Dr. Führer’s last official publication^{iv} had been withdrawn and suppressed. However, Prof. Lüders’ article showed how Dr. Führer had invented a number of inscriptions supposedly found by him at Ramnagar in Rohilkhand 1891-2, in some instances basing them on genuine inscriptions logged in *Epigraphia Indica*. More critically, Prof. Lüders also drew attention to some Brahmi characters inscribed on the back of a Jain statue from Mathura in the Lucknow Museum, done so crudely as to cause Lüders to declare that ‘I am not sure whether the pages of the *Epigraphia Indica* are really the proper pages for such a joke . . . I cannot help declaring this inscription to be a forgery. The decision of the question who is responsible for it I leave to the readers of this paper’. Since Dr. Führer had excavated the statue at Mathura in 1891-2 and in his report had drawn

attention to the remarkably early date it carried, there remained little doubt as to who the culprit was.^v

As Michael Willis's statement demonstrates, Dr. Führer's exposure as known forger of archaeological records continues to this day to provide ammunition to those^{vi} who question the authenticity of a far more famous museum exhibit with which Dr. Führer was associated: a steatite reliquary vase in the Indian Museum in Kolkata, recovered from a stupa excavated at Piprahwa village in January 1898 by a local landowner, William Claxton Peppé, manager and co-proprietor of the Birdpore Estate in the Basti District of Gorakhpur Division in what was then the NWP&O, today Uttar Pradesh.

The lid of the reliquary in question carries an inscription in Brahmi characters: the so-called 'Piprahwa inscription', potentially among the earliest inscriptions of the Maurya or Shunga eras yet recovered but still viewed with suspicion by epigraphists because of its associations with Dr Führer. In recent years such concerns have been given further weight by the researches of the independent scholar T. A. Phelps^{vii} and Dr Andrew Huxley^{viii} of the Law School at SOAS. In the process of uncovering a great deal of hitherto overlooked material relating to the activities of Dr. Führer in India and Burma, Phelps and Huxley both concluded that Führer had contrived to tinker with or add to the artefacts recovered at Piprahwa in January 1898, and that he might even have been a co-conspirator in an archaeological conspiracy far outclassing the notorious Piltdown Jaw scandal, perhaps involving senior members of the Indian Civil Service.

At an informal conference convened at Harewood House, Yorkshire, on 9 July 2006 to discuss these and other issues relating to the Piprahwa excavation, both T. A. Phelps and Andrew Huxley presented papers, as yet unpublished^{ix}. So, too, did Neil Peppé, a grandson of the original Piprahwa excavator, who also put on display a number of family documents, the existence of which had hitherto been unknown. Among these 'Peppé Papers' were a series of letters exchanged between W. C. Peppé and the two major protagonists of the Piprahwa drama: Dr. Führer, who in his capacity as Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of the NWP&O conducted a number of archaeological surveys and excavations in the Nepal *tarai* country adjacent to the Indian border; and the antiquarian Vincent Smith, ICS, who at the time of the excavation of the Piprahwa stupa was serving in the divisional headquarters at Gorakhpur in the capacity of District Judge^x.

The Peppé Papers have since been donated to the Royal Asiatic Society by Neil Peppé and are accessible to scholars in the Society's Library. The purpose of this article is

to publish the Peppé correspondence relating to the Piprahwa stupa excavation, together with a commentary restricted to inferences drawn from the contents of these letters alone.

The Piprahwa Excavation

In March 1895 and again in November-March 1896-97 Dr. Führer carried out surveys and excavations at a number of sites in the Nepal *tarai* abutting the Indian border due north of Gorakhpur Division in British India. In the course of this work Asokan pillars with Brahmi inscriptions were uncovered at Nigliva *sagar* and at Padariya, the latter identifying the site as the Lumbini Garden, birthplace of Buddha Sakyamuni. These discoveries encouraged Dr. Führer to return in mid-December 1897 to conduct an extensive excavation at Sagarwa, a site beside the River Banganga which he believed to be the ancient Kapilavastu of the Sakyas^{xi}.

Sagarwa lies about 11 miles north of the Nepal-India border and about 17 miles north of Birdpore, then the headquarters of Birdpore Estate and the home of its proprietor W. C. Peppé. Five and a half miles north of Birdpore and less than one mile from the Nepal border is Piprahwa *kot*, in Peppé's time the largest of a number of artificial mounds on his estate. In January 1897, his curiosity aroused by the discoveries just north of the border, Peppé supervised the digging of a trench across the Piprahwa mound and found it to cover a solid brick structure. He then stopped work and informed Vincent Smith in Gorakhpur. In October 1897 Smith came to Birdpore to inspect the excavation, declared it to be an Ashokan stupa and instructed Peppé on how to proceed.

The first two letters in the Peppé collection relate to this period. Both are dated 23 November 1897 and were sent to Peppé by Smith from Gorakhpur. One is personal and congratulates Peppé on the birth of his son. In it the writer explains that he has written 'about the pillars' on a second sheet so that Peppé can forward a copy to Mr. Gibbon, his brother-in-law and junior partner on the Birdpore Estate. This second letter was evidently written in reply to a letter (no longer extant) from Peppé asking for information on Asoka and his pillars, a subject on which Smith later published a book^{xii}:

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 side 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 Beal's^{xiii} translation. Julien^{xiv} renders the passage about the pillars – "foudroyée par un méchant dragon. Cette colonne gît à terre, brisée par le milieu." 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

It can be inferred from these remarks that W. C. Peppé, a civil engineer by training, had scant knowledge of early Buddhist history or of Brahmi Prakrit.

According to Peppé's own account, set down in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in July 1898^{xv}, he resumed excavation on the Piprahwa stupa soon after Christmas 1897. After digging through 18 feet of 'solid brickwork set in clay' his workmen uncovered a large stone coffer which Peppé calculated to weigh 1,537 pounds (See *Fig. 1* below). Although broken in four places, the coffer lid had remained in position, so preserving the contents. In the earliest preserved account — a letter sent on 20 January

to the Joint Magistrate and Officiating Collector of Basti District, Pandit Rama Shankar Misra — these contents are listed as ‘two stone vases, one stone lota, one stone box, one crystal bowl: all contained boxes, stones of various kinds, gold leaf and ornaments’ (See *Fig. 2*)^{xvi}.



Fig. 1. The stone coffer *in situ* at the base of the Piprahwa stupa with its lid removed. Beside it is the trolley on which the coffer was placed for removal. (Courtesy of Neil Peppé, Esq.).



Fig. 2. The five reliquaries from the Piprahwa stone coffer. The inscription is inscribed on the lid of the smaller of the two round steatite vases (Courtesy of Neil Peppé, Esq.).

According to the pencilled draft of a deposition later submitted to Pandit Misra at his request, W. C. Peppé opened the stone coffer in the presence of four eye-witnesses. These appear to have been W. C. Peppé's cousin Allen Peppé, manager of the Chota Nagpur Raj, E. W. A. Judson, assistant to Mr. Bridgeman, manager of the neighbouring Newra Estate, and another cousin, Francesco Tosco Peppé, and his wife Mrs. Delia Peppé, visiting from Ranchi. In that same draft deposition Peppé certified that all the relic material from the coffer, together with the crumbling wood containers in which they were found, were placed in two jars, afterwards handed over to Pandit Misra at Basti:

I hereby certify that these two jars contain all the bones and wood & dust that were found in the different urns and lying loose in the coffer excavated by me in the stupa at Piprawah on the B. E. B D N W P [Birdpore Estate, Basti District, North-Western Provinces]. . . These bones wood dust etc have been kept in these jars under our mutual [?] care & they have not been tampered with in any way. No one has been allowed to see them except in my presence & I have every confidence in saying they are exactly as they were unearthed by me.^{xvii}

The third letter in chronological order is from Vincent Smith at Gorakhpur. Dated 19 January 1898 but continued on 20 January, it is an enthusiastic response to a letter from Peppé (no longer extant) most probably written on 18 January^{xviii}:

My dear Peppé

Your discoveries at Piprahwah are very interesting. I send you a volume of the new Archaeol. Survey Reports which gives an account of similar finds in the Madras Presy [Presidency]^{xix}. The great size of your stone chest is remarkable, and I believe the relics were very highly esteemed ones. I suppose there is no trace of an inscription.

I hope you will write a detailed account of your explorations accompanied by plans, sections and elevations. I shall have much pleasure in communicating it to either the Royal Asiatic Society in London or the Bengal Asiatic Society in Calcutta, whichever you prefer. Drawings and photographs of its principal objects found would be of much interest and might be combined or [illegible] together in one or two plates.

Under the Treasure Trove Act you should communicate the find officially to the Collector – Govt possesses a right of presumption to such finds. Possibly you may feel inclined to present the finds either to the Indian Museum Calcutta or the Lucknow Govt Museum.

It is desirable to have a survey of the whole site including the parts excavated and those unexcavated. If you choose to add surveys of the other sites seen, they will be of interest.

From its slope I believe the stupa to be of early date – anterior to the early Christian era – roughly speaking not less than 2000 years old.

The enclosure on the east is evidently a small monastery. You may find in it stone stools (*chanki*) and odds and ends. It might be completely excavated with advantage and surveyed. Note dimensions of bricks, and all measurements in detail.

The letter continues on a second sheet, dated 20 January:

So much I wrote in the morning.

I have been in court and looked over my case list. It is impossible for me to go out at once. We are going to the Eclipse by special train on the 22nd and I have Sessions on the 24th, 25th and possibly the 26th. (By the bye do you know about the Special train on the 22nd – start at 7.30 – return from Ekmen [?] at 14.30 – due in Gorkhpur at 19.15. Carlnam [?] gives lunch at Ekmen. Let Walker know if you are

coming – fare Rs 11-14). The earliest I could start is the night of the 26th reaching your place at say 9 am on the 27th after sleeping at Uskar [Uskar Bazaar]. Or I think I should prefer to go out by the morning train of the 27th (which is a holiday) Thursday, that would leave Friday and Saturday, and I could return on Sunday.

My wife thanks you for your kind invitation, and unless anything happens to prevent her will be glad to come with me. We are sorry to hear that Mrs Peppé is indisposed and hope she is quite recovered.

You may of course desire to make your trip earlier if so don't wait for me. If you want me to come these are the only ones I can manage.

Remember me to George.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

V C Smith

From this letter it is possible to surmise: firstly, that Smith was not involved in the opening of the stone coffer; secondly, that his professional duties made it impossible for him to proceed to Birdpore to see the coffer and its contents before 27 January. As to Smith's advice that Peppé should report his find to the local Collector, it will be noted that Peppé had already done so by the time he received Smith's letter. On receipt of this information Pandit Misra on 26 January reported the find to the acting Commissioner at Gorakhpur, Dr. William Hoey, ICS, a recognised antiquarian and Sanskritist^{xx}.

The fourth letter in sequence is the first from Dr. A. A. Führer. It is dated 19 January and headed 'Camp Kapilavastu' – the name Führer had given to his excavation site at Sagarwa:

Dear Mr Peppé,

I am exceedingly obliged to you for your very kind letter of yesterday's date, and take this early opportunity of congratulating you most heartily to your great success in excavating part of Piprawa kot. Kindly see carefully whether the stone chest or any of the other stone bowls found do not contain inscriptions, anything may give a clue for the date of that stupa.

I should be delighted to accept your kind invitation to come and see the excavation, but I cannot leave the excavations here, not even for a day, as the coolies, 200 at present on the work, would do a great deal of damage to the buildings now being unearthed, if not properly supervised.

I shall, however, be glad to come on about the 15th February, when the Nepalese

Government will close the work for the season here, but if you like I shall be glad to continue the excavations from about the 10th March, and make a determined survey of the buildings unearthed and careful drawings of the relic caskets unearthed and their contents.

If you approve of it, kindly discontinue the work of excavating until I can superintend it, as the coolies might disturb the original plan of the buildings, if not properly looked after. I need hardly say that I will make no use of your private information and keep the whole matter to myself.

If you wish to send me a few lines, kindly address c/o P. O. Shohrutganj, Basti District.

Believe me

Yours sincerely

A. Führer

P.C. Kindly excuse bad handwriting, as I am suffering from writer's cramp.

This letter allows a number of inferences to be drawn: firstly, that W. C. Peppé almost certainly wrote both to Smith and to Führer on the same day, 18 January, to inform them of his discoveries, which suggests that the stone coffer was most probably opened on that same date or a day earlier; secondly, that Peppé had not at this stage seen any inscription; thirdly, that Führer, like Smith, was prevented by work commitments from inspecting the Piprahwa excavation and artefacts for some days. That Smith and Führer should both have asked Peppé to look for an inscription was an entirely appropriate response, given that both knew that many Buddhist reliquary caskets recovered by Sir Alexander Cunningham at Sanchi and elsewhere bore inscriptions.

It is also reasonable to surmise that Smith's and Führer's replies, dated 19-20 January and 19 January, could not have been received by Peppé in Birdpore before 20 January.

On 19 January — and thus *before* receiving Smith's and Führer's letters asking him to look for an inscription — Peppé found just such an inscription on the lid of the smaller of the two steatite vases. The evidence for this lies in the dating of a note signed by Peppé (See *Fig. 3*).

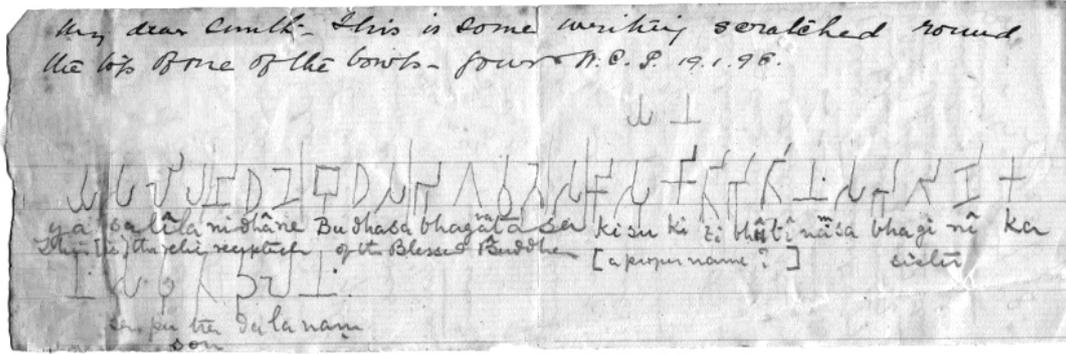


Fig. 3. The scrap of paper from W. C. Peppé to Vincent Smith with his hand-drawn copy of the Piprahwa inscription and Smith's first attempt at a translation (courtesy of Neil Peppé, Esq.).

Written in ink on one side of a narrow strip of paper torn along the bottom edge, this note reads:

My dear Smith – This is some writing scratched round the top of one of the bowls
– yours W. C. P. 19.1.98.

Below this five lines have been ruled in pencil, along which Brahmi characters have been drawn along two lines. Under these, also written in pencil, but in Vincent Smith's hand, a transliteration and partial translation have been added:

Y salila nidhane Budhasa bhagatasa ke su ke ti bha ti nam sa bhagi ni ka
This [is] the relic receptacle of the Blessed Buddha [a proper name?] sister
nam sap u tra da la nam
son

Written in pen on the back of this note is Vincent Smith's response, dated 23 January 1898:

The relics appear to be those of the Buddha himself – (ie believed to be his) as the beginning of its inscription proves. *Salila* = Sanskrit *sarīram* “body”, the regular word for “relics”.

I cannot at present make out the sense of the remainder – probably some of the letters are erroneously copied.

The character and languages are those of the third century B. C., and are substantially the same as on the Rummindei pillar [at Lumbini]. An accurate copy

can be taken by wetting country (badânu) paper, and patting it in with a clothes brush, so as to take a cast, which can be made clear by pencilling in the lines when dry – or by a rubbing.

VCS 23.1.98.

Smith accompanied this note with a letter, also dated 23 January 1898:

My dear Peppé

Your find turns out to be of even greater interest than we thought as the bones were believed by their depositor to be those of Buddha himself. This explains the unusual size of the chest and the large number of precious articles accompanying the deposit. The characters may be as early as B. C. 300.

The exact dates of Buddha's birth and death are still disputed but you may take his floruit as B. C. 500. Rhys Davids tried a later date but that won't wash^{xxi}.

Asoka (Piyadasi) emperor of India – floruit about 270 BC. Exact dates have [] [] yet to be fixed, but we know approximately with certainty.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

V. C. Smith

We saw the eclipse well.

It is clear from Peppé's pencilled rendering of the inscription that he omitted some of the finer points, such as the triangle of three dots at the start of the first word and the further dot at the end, so that Smith read it as *ya* rather than *iyam*. This is precisely the sort of misreading a person ignorant of Brahmi script would make. It will also be noted that Smith failed to make any sense of the second half of the inscription, in part because he missed the key word *sakīyanam* ('of the Sakya')^{xxii}, having failed to realise that the two genitive characters *ya nam* set down by themselves above the first line in Peppé's rendering were not random scratches but had been set there deliberately — presumably added by the original inscriber after being accidentally omitted from the main line. This is hardly the sort of error a forger would make (see *Fig 4*).



Fig. 4. Part of the inscription cut into the cover of the smaller of the two steatite reliquary vases. The inscriber evidently ran out of space and had to add two letters above the line. (Detail, Asia and Africa Collection, British Library).

However, it still has to be asked how Peppé could have missed the inscription when the contents of the stone coffer were first revealed on or about 18 January. Unfortunately, we know nothing of the conditions under which the stone coffer was opened and its contents taken to Birdpore House, although a photograph of the coffer *in situ* but without its lid (*Fig. 1*) suggests that its contents were removed while the coffer was still *in situ*, presumably because it was too heavy to be removed without risk to them. It is reasonable to assume that Peppé's first letters to Smith and Führer were written before he had had time to examine the reliquaries and offerings in detail on the following day—and here it is worth commenting on the quite remarkable scale of those offerings, amounting to some 1,200 individual items^{xxiii}. The steatite vase bearing the inscription was itself not particularly large, Peppé describing it as '6 inches high and four inches in diameter'^{xxiv}.

The next letter in chronological order in the Peppé Papers demonstrates that as well as making a copy of the inscription for Vincent Smith W. C. Peppé also made other copies, two of which he sent to Dr. Führer at Sagarwa. Führer responded from his camp on 24 January:

Dear Mr. Peppé,

I am exceedingly obliged to you for so kindly sending me a plan of your excavations, a photograph of the relic caskets and the copies of the inscription on

the lid of one of the bowls. 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. This is indeed a great find, and you have done a great service to ancient history by unearthing it. The place is still within the environs of Kapilavastu, at least within the country of the Sâkyas.

I shall be glad to follow out the plan of the buildings, when coming on the 15th inst, and if [] [] [] for exploring also the other mounds in the neighbourhood and the ancient road to Kapilavastu, you mention.

I shall be glad to see you and Mr. V. Smith, if you can arrange [] []. But you will have a very trying ride, as the distance from here to Birdpur is certainly 18 or 20 miles if not more. Kindly let me know [] [] [], when you intend to come, as it is very difficult to get provisions here and I [] horribly [] anything.

As soon as I can make out the whole inscription, I shall let you know.

Yours sincerely

A. Führer

Although some passages of Dr. Führer’s letter have yet to be deciphered it is quite clear that he agreed to meet Smith and Peppé at his camp in Nepal. That meeting took place on Friday 28 January^{xxv}, following Smith’s arrival at Birdpore on the morning of Thursday 27 January, and as arranged in his letter of 20 January. Smith’s subsequent report of this visit makes no mention of Piprahwa, being entirely taken up with Dr. Führer’s activities^{xxvi}.

Dr. Führer’s next letter from his Camp at Sagarwa is dated 3 February:

Dear Mr. Peppé,

Please accept my [] thanks for your kind letter of today and that nice [] shirt Mrs Peppé so very kindly sent me. I hope to be at Piprawakot on the 22nd February, as Captain Bir Jung [Nepalese liaison officer] says he cannot stay any longer here, although we have spent only about 800/- out of the 2000/- sanctioned by the Nepal Durbar. At present I have commenced excavating a very old lion temple which existed at the [] at the home of Buddha Gautama and as the foundations are just being exposed I am afraid to leave the coolies here alone. I shall therefore be much obliged if you could kindly instruct your men to uncover the monastery which existed near the [] stupa. When coming to Piprawakot, I shall try to find whether a railing ran round the stupa.

I have written to Government for sanction to use the 3000/- still available in our Budget. Thus I hope I shall be able to let you have payment for your coolies.

In one of those small square stupas, you saw to the south-east of the lake, I found a very fine bronze urn, with relics; the urn is of the same shape as those found in ancient Greek cities. I am reluctant to give you at present a complete translation of the inscription on the shrine relic casket, as I cannot yet make out the meaning of the last word of it. I shall, however, [] supply you soon with it.

Would you please tell Prince [?] Jinawarawansa^{xxvii} [?] from Bunri [?] to come to Sagrawah, where my camp is, as soon as he has finished your work. I told the [] last [] to come to Rummindei in the beginning of February, and he may have gone there already, or be ready to go there.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

A. Führer

Dr. Führer had sent one of Peppé's copies of the Piprahwa inscription on to his old mentor Professor Georg Bühler at the University of Vienna and was at this time waiting to receive his translation^{xxviii}. His next and last letter from Sagarwa was dated 23 February 1898:

Dear Mr. Peppé,

Please accept my sincerest thanks for so kindly sending me my wife's letter and a paper . We have only just today finished our work, and I am going tomorrow to Lori Kudan near Taulihon [Taulihawa], where there had [] another Asoka pillar. I hope to arrive at Piprawakot on Friday evening [ie 26 February] at about six o'clock, and shall be glad to see you on Saturday morning, in order to see what is to be done next season, as I fear it will be almost impossible for me to commence the work this season, as I have to go to Khajnapore [?] in Bundelkhand on some urgent work. Of course, my draftsman will prepare drawings of the places [] [] by you and also to do photos of all the relic caskets, and their contents, if you will so kindly permit it.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely

A. Führer

Also among the Peppé Papers are two notes, both undated. The first appears to be a second and more careful copy of the Piprahwa inscription made by W. C. Peppé, presumably in response to Smith's letter of 19 January (see *Fig. 5*).

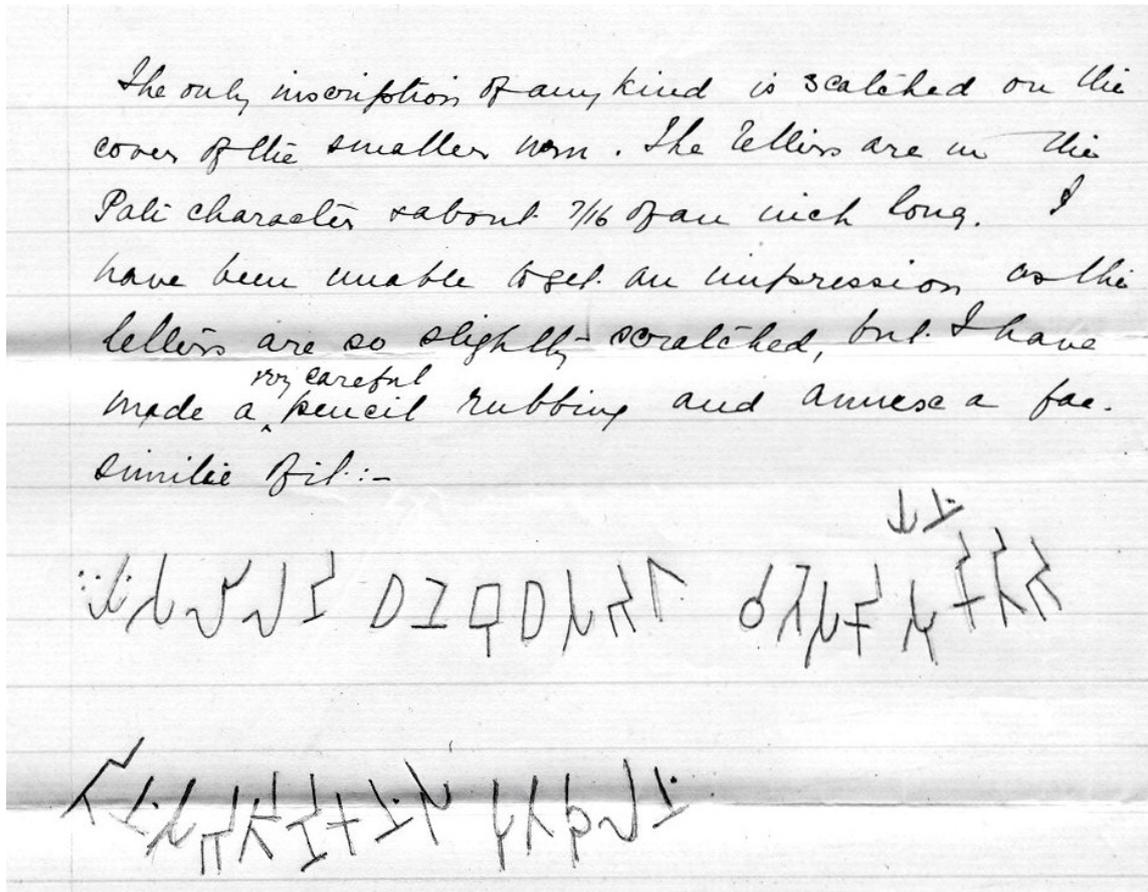


Fig. 5. Although undated, this note appears to represent a second and improved copy of the Piprahwa inscription made by W. C. Peppé. (Courtesy of Neil Peppé)

Peppé's note reads:

The only inscription of any kind is scratched on the cover of the smaller urn. The letters are in the Pali character & about $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch long. I have been unable to get an impression as the letters are so slightly scratched, but I have made a very careful rubbing and annexed a facsimile [sic] of it:-

What appears to be Smith's response in the form of a second transliteration and translation is also undated, the transliteration set down in ink and then the translations in pencil:

Yam salilanidhane Budhassa Bhagarato

This (is) in the relic receptacle (of the) Buddha (blessed)

Sakiyanam sukittibhatinam subhginikanam

Of the Sakyas of the brothers (noble) of the sisters' people

soputta [m] dalanam.

With the sons [-] portion (votive offering)

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

Below this are two lines in W. C. Peppé's handwriting, written in ink:

This is the only paper I have here; the whole of the file is in G.pore
[Gorakhpur] – I will send them from there to you

WCP

The Peppé papers contain two further letters from Vincent Smith sent from Gorakhpur, dated 3 March and 28 March 1898, and two further letters from Dr. A. A. Führer writing from Lucknow Museum, dated 31 March and 1 April 1898. However, these and other letters from various correspondents^{xxix} have no bearing on this article, the purpose of which is to demonstrate that on the basis of the information provided by these letters it would have been physically impossible either for Smith or for Führer, whether acting alone or in collusion, to have interfered with the Piprahwa finds before the inscription became known.

Conclusion

The names of Dr. Anton Alois Führer, William Claxton Peppé, Vincent Smith, and Dr. William Hoey have all been put forward as potential archaeological fraudsters, either acting alone or in joint conspiracy. However, the Peppé Papers demonstrate that:

1. Peppé wrote to both Smith and Führer most probably on 18 January giving notice of his finds, but without reference to any inscription;
2. Führer replied on 19 January and Smith on 19-20 January, both asking Peppé to look for an inscription;
3. on 19 January, *before* receiving their replies, Peppé found the inscription and

wrote to both men enclosing hand-drawn copies;

4. Smith replied on 23 January and Führer on 24 January. Both had translated enough of the text to grasp the inscription's significance;
5. both Smith and Führer explain in their letters that their work prevented them from visiting Piprahwa immediately. Throughout this period Smith was at Gorakhpur and Führer at his camp at Sagarwa in Nepal;
6. Smith's first glimpse of the Piprahwa coffer and its contents was on the morning of 27 January. On the following day he and Peppé then met with Führer at Sagarwa in Nepal;
7. In Führer's letter of 23 February he states that he did not plan to visit the Piprahwa excavation before 26 February. The exact date of his visit to Birdpore is not known, but his letters indicate that Führer did not see the contents of the stone coffer until at least five weeks after the discovery of the reliquary inscription.

From the above correspondence it is clear that neither Führer nor Smith could have interfered with the Piprahwa excavation or with the relic urns before the inscription became public knowledge. There is no written evidence of Dr. Hoey's involvement in the Piprahwa excavation prior to his receipt of Pandit Mishra's written notification of 26 January, a week after Peppé wrote to notify Smith and Führer of the inscription's existence. By contrast, the excavator of the Piprahwa stupa, W. C. Peppé, had every opportunity to fake an inscription—but lacked the necessary expertise to do so.

By providing a clear chronology of events the letters contained in the Peppé Papers go some way towards lifting the pall of suspicion that hangs over the Piprahwa inscription. Ultimately, its validity as a genuine and potentially early Brahmi text of the Mauryan period rests in the hands of the epigraphists, who may now feel able to approach it with greater confidence than before.

My thanks to Neil Peppé for allowing me unlimited access to his family papers and photographs, to Mrs. Sheila Hoey Middleton and Ven. S. Dhammika for their invaluable advice in the writing of this paper and to Kathy Lazenbatt, Librarian at the Royal Asiatic Society, for her unstinting assistance.

Endnotes

-
- ⁱ M. Willis in reviewing H. Falk, *Asokan Sites and Artefacts. A Source-book with Bibliography*, *JRAS*, 3rd series, Vol. XXII, Part 1, 2012, p. 188.
- ⁱⁱ H. Lüders, 'On Some Brahmi Inscriptions in the Lucknow Museum', *JRAS*, 1912, pp. 157-79. The exact circumstances leading up to Dr Führer's dismissal are uncertain but they involved a series of charges and complaints that came to a head in August-September 1898. Vincent A. Smith gives some account of them on pp. 3-4 of his Introduction to P. C. Mukerji, *Report on a Tour of Exploration of the Antiquities of the Tarai, Nepal*, 1899. Further references are found in 'Exploration of the Birthplace of Buddha in the Nepal Tarai', *Govt. North-Western Provinces and Oude, PWD Proceedings for August 1899*, File No. 49 Misc., 1899 (BL P/5588), *Imperial Archaeological Survey Report XXVI (ASI of Northern India Vol. VI)*, Enclosure I, 1899 and, more recently, M. Willis, 'Dhar, Bhoka and Sarasvati: from Indology to Policital Mythology and Back', Appendix, *JRAS*, 3rd series, Vol. XXII, Part 1, 2012, pp. 149-153. They are also touched on in Charles Allen, *The Buddha and the Sahibs*, 2002, pp. 270-278, and in A. Huxley, *A Fraudulent Scholar in Burma: Rev. Dr. Anton Führer*, paper read at SOAS 26 Jan. 2006.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Vincent Smith went to Lucknow in September 1898 'by order of Government, to enquire into Dr. Führer's proceedings, and convict him of systematic falsification of his correspondence with several Governments'. In the course of his meeting Smith challenged Führer about his claims to have found an inscribed pre-Ashokan casket: 'I charged Dr. Führer to his face with that forgery, and he did not attempt to deny it'. Dr. Führer appears to have resigned immediately after the visit. Smith's account is to be found in 'Exploration of the Birthplace of Buddha in the Nepal Tarai', *Govt. North-Western Provinces and Oude, PWD Proceedings for August 1899*, File No. 49 Misc., 1899, Note 60. 'Note on the exploration of Kapilavastu, by V. A. Smith, Esq., ICS, dated 3rd January 1898 [sic: 1899]'
- ^{iv} A. A. Führer, 'Antiquities of Buddha Sakyamuni's Birth-Place in the Nepalese Tarai', *Imperial Archaeological Survey Report XXVI (ASI of Northern India Vol. VI)*, 1898.
- ^v 'One inscription especially, dated Samvat 299, and inscribed on the base of a life-size statue of Arhat Mahāvura . . . indicates that the dates of the Kushan kings of Mathura must be interpreted otherwise than is usually done'. Quoted by Vincent A. Smith, together with a footnote expressing puzzlement, on p.4 *The Jain Stupas and Other Antiquities of Mathura, Muttra Antiquities, North-Western Provinces and Oude*, Vol V, Archaeological Survey of India, Vol. XX, 1901.
- ^{vi} An early example of doubts expressed can be seen in changes to the text of Vincent Smith's *The Early History of India* (1904), the first edition of which carried a full-page reproduction of the Piprahwa vase with the inscription chalked in. The third and subsequent editions retained the illustration but the text on p. 17 was changed to read: 'The oldest northern document was supposed at one time to be the dedication of the relics of Buddha at Piprāwā, which was believed to date from about 450 B. C., but a more recent criticism has thrown doubt upon that theory.' A linked footnote referred

the reader to ‘Barth., *J. des Savants*, Oct. 1906’ and ‘*Ind. Ant.*, 1907, pp. 117-24’.

vii T. A. Phelps, *Lumbini On Trial: the Untold Story*, www.lumkap.org.uk, 2001.

viii Huxley, *Ibid.*

ix T. A. Phelps, *The Piprahwa Deceptions*; A. Huxley, *George Bühler’s Death and its Implications for Piprahwa*.

x Vincent Smith was perhaps best known at this time for his *The Settlement Officer’s Manual for the North-Western Provinces*, 1881, but had published a number of monographs on local archaeology including *Coinage of the Early or Gupta Dynasty*, 1889, and *The Remains near Kasia in the Gorakhpur District*, 1896.

xi Dr Führer’s Annual Reports are to be found in the *Progress Reports of the Epigraphical & Architectural Branches of the North-Western Provinces and Oude*, 1892-1903.

xii Vincent Smith, *Asoka: the Buddhist Emperor of India*, 1901.

xiii Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World by Hiuen Tsiang*, 1884.

xiv Stanislas Julien, *Voyages du Pelerin Hiouen-tsang*, 1853.

xv W. C. Peppé, ‘The Piprahwa Stūpa, containing relics of Buddha, by William Claxton Peppé, Esq, communicated with a note by Vincent A. Smith, ICS, MRAS’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, July 1898, pp. 573-579.

xvi W. C. Peppé in a note to Pandit Misra dated 20 January 1898. Part of the letter is quoted in T. A. Phelps, *The Piprahwa Problem*.

xvii This draft certificate is among the Peppé papers, written on the back of part of a note from Pandit Misra dated 21 February 1898 requesting ‘a very early reply of the same’.

xviii Birdpore is about 70 miles by road from Gorakhpur, a two-day journey by horse and trap. However, there is also a branch railway line running from Gorakhpur to Balrampur with a station at Uska Bazaar 14 miles south of Birdpore, allowing messages from Birdpore to be received in Gorakhpur within 24 hours.

xix The reference is to Alexander Rea, *South Indian Buddhist Antiquities, Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series*, Vol. XV, 1894. Rea’s excavation of a damaged stupa in Battiprolu in the Madras Presidency in 1892 had recovered large quantities of gold-leaf ornaments resembling those found at Piprahwa as well as other similarities. An important inscription relating to a receptacle containing ‘relics of the Buddha’ was also found which Prof. G. Bühler commented upon in *JRAS*, July 1892, pp. 602-609. However, that inscription was not reproduced in Rea’s *South Indian Buddhist Antiquities* and could not have provided a model for W. C. Peppé or any other forger.

xx Dr. Hoey was an established authority on Buddhist archaeology, having excavated the site of Sravasti in 1884-5 under the orders of the provincial government. He had taken an active interest in local antiquities ever since being posted to the Gorakhpur District in 1892. He was at this time the acting Commissioner of Gorakhpur Division.

xxi T. W. Rhys Davids was at this time Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society. In his *Buddhism*, 1886, he had postulated that ‘the Buddha died within a few years of 412 B. C.’.

^{xxii} The first person to make a correct transliteration of the Brahmi text appears to have been Dr. William Hoey, whose translation was published in the *Pioneer* newspaper on 27 February 1898.

^{xxiii} Vincent Smith provided a breakdown of the items in a letter to T. W. Rhys Davids, subsequently published in *JRAS*, October 1898, pp. 868-870. W. C. Peppé's own lists in the Peppé papers show that he retained a considerable number of items considered to be 'duplicates'.

^{xxiv} W. C. Peppé, *Ibid.*

^{xxv} In V. A. Smith's 'Introduction to P. C. Mukherji, *Report on a Tour of Exploration of the Antiquities in the Tarai, Nepal*, 1899, p. 3, he states that he visited Dr Führer's camp on 27 January. However, in V. A. Smith's 'Note on the exploration of Kapilavastu' reprinted in *Govt. North-Western Provinces and Oude, PWD Proceedings for August 1899*, File No. 49 Misc., 1899, Note 60, he states: 'I paid a brief visit, accompanied by Mr. W. C. Peppé, to the western end of the ruins on 28 January 1898, and found Dr. Führer in the act of extracting five caskets from the base of one of the seventeen square stupas which he excavated'.

^{xxvi} V. A. Smith, *Ibid.*

^{xxvii} The Ven. P. C. Jinavaravansa, popularly known as the Prince Priest, was born in 1851 as Prince Prisdang Chumsai, grandson of King Rama III of Siam. An engineering graduate of King's College, he served as Siam's ambassador and treaty negotiator to a number of countries between 1880 and 1886, including writing the draft to Siam's first Constitution in 1885. In 1886 he was recalled to Siam and appointed Director-General of his country's new Post and Telegraph Dept. but resigned after a number of 'vicious' allegations were made against him. He went (or was sent) into exile and in 1896 was ordained as monk at the Waskaduwe Vihara in Ceylon, after which he commenced an extended pilgrimage to India. He presented a portrait of himself in meditational pose to W. C. Peppé dated 5 April 1898, which suggests that he was in Birdpore on that date. He subsequently petitioned Dr Hoey, Acting Collector of Gorakhpur, that the Piprahwa Buddha relics should be handed over to King Chulalongkorn of Siam as head of the Buddhist religion. After long deliberation the Government of India decided that the relics should be donated to Siam, where most were enshrined in the Golden Mount in Bangkok. After living an austere life in Ceylon the Ven. P. C. Jinavaravansa became the abbot of Dipaduttamarama Vihara in Colombo, restoring that foundation and setting up schools for Buddhists. Some jewel relics from Piprahwa were also enshrined by him in the Ratna Chetiya at Dipaduttamarama, the building of which he began in 1908. With the death of King Chulalongkorn in 1910 the Ven. P. C. Jinavaravansa returned to Siam for the late king's cremation, but was forbidden to remain a monk by the new monarch and accordingly returned to secular life as Prince Prisdang Chumsai, dying in 1935.

^{xxviii} Prof. G. Bühler's translation was contained in a letter published as 'Preliminary Note on a Recently Discovered Sakya Inscription', *JRAS*, April 1898 pp. 387-9. He sent this reading to W. C. Peppé in a letter dated 21 February 1898, although the original is not among the extant Peppé letters.

^{xxix} See Appendix. *The William Claxton Peppé Correspondence: A Preliminary Handlist*, Royal Asiatic Society Library.

