

## Review Article

# Role of Alexander Cunningham in the Discovery of Buddhist Monasteries

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## I N F O

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## A B S T R A C T

Sir Alexander Cunningham, the pioneering archaeologist and founder of the Archaeological Survey of India, made significant contributions to the discovery and documentation of Buddhist monasteries and related sites across India. His work was crucial in identifying and preserving numerous sites of Buddhist heritage, including Stupas, Viharas (monasteries), and inscriptions. This article examines Cunningham's contributions to the rediscovery of Buddhist monasteries, exploring his methods, significant findings, and the enduring impact of his work on the study of Buddhism and archaeology.

**Keywords:** Alexander Cunningham, Buddhist Monasteries, Archaeological Survey of India, Buddhist Heritage, Indian Archaeology, Buddhist Sites, Cultural Preservation

## Introduction

Buddhism, once a dominant religion in India, left behind a rich architectural and cultural legacy. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of this heritage had fallen into shadows. Alexander Cunningham's efforts in rediscovering and documenting Buddhist sites revitalised interest in Buddhism's historical significance. His meticulous investigations brought to light several monasteries and stupas, providing critical insights into the monastic life, architecture, and spread of Buddhism in ancient India.<sup>1</sup>

Major General Sir Alexander Cunningham's contribution to geography was significant, as he was a British army engineer who later took an interest in identifying the major cities mentioned in ancient Indian texts. He did this by piecing together clues found in classical Greek and Roman histories and the travelogues of travellers to India such as Xuanzang and Faxian. Cunningham was able to identify places such as Aurnos, Ahicchatra, Barayat, Kosambi, Nalanda, Padmavati,

Sangala, Sankisa, Sravasti, Srijana, Takshashila and Vaishali. Unlike his contemporaries, Cunningham would regularly confirm his findings through field surveys, a pioneering approach in the field of geography.<sup>2</sup>

Those days, Babu Jagat Singh, the Diwan of Kashinresh Chet Singh, was getting the market of Jagatganj built in his name. There was a circle of ruins near a mound at a place called Sarnath, two and a half kos outside Banaras. At that place, he got some pillars demolished and got bricks lifted for the Kamtha. During this time, his workers found a box of green marble. In this box, there was another box, in which some bones and some pearls were lying. The Diwan respectfully immersed the bones in the Ganga and handed over the box to Duncan, an English officer there. The religious labourers also did not touch the other things.<sup>3</sup>

When this matter was discussed in the city, the attention of the people of Kashi was drawn towards this place. There were some pillars, a stupa and a square building

here. Hindus did not show any special curiosity about this place, but the Jains of Banaras approached the English officers. Sarnath is the birthplace of the eleventh Jain Tirthankar, Shreyansnath. So, a dispute started between the Digambaras and Shvetambaras there. Both claimed that the big stupa here was built by them. They wanted an Englishman to open this structure and end their dispute. The dispute continued for many years.<sup>4</sup>

Alexander Cunningham did this work again. In January 1835 AD, he was a lieutenant of the Bengal army of the East India Company. But at the same time, he had also been recruited for archaeological research due to the influence of James Prinsep.<sup>5</sup> A complete novice, but very passionate. He climbed up the hundred foot- high stupa by erecting scaffolding. He brought stone breakers from Chunar of Mirzapur and started the excavation. He found an inscription five feet deep from the top of the stupa. The shape of the letters written on it was as if crooked sticks were lying there. Cunningham understood that it was Brahmi. His mentor Prinsep was engaged in decoding this script in those days. A copy of the inscription was sent to Calcutta. Prinsep read it and found that the inscription had a Dharani called 'Ye Dharma Hetu' - a mantra of the Buddhists. At that time, Cunningham could not do much except to prove that this was a Buddhist site and was at least a thousand years old. Meanwhile, he had to go to Calcutta and then to Kashmir to perform his army duty. The search for the ruins was again abandoned.<sup>6</sup>

A few years later Cunningham found some newly printed books. These included French and English translations of the travelogues of two Chinese monks, Fa-Hien and Hieun Tsang. These two monks had come to India in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, respectively. From these translations Cunningham came to know that Sarnath was not an ordinary Buddhist site. Buddha had given his first sermon at Migday, where the Dhamekh stupa stands. Kaundinya's 'Virajam Vitamalam Dhammacakkhu' was revealed there. Cunningham's eyes were also opened. The way was found. He decided that just as the great Pliny had walked the path of Alexander the Great, he would follow the footsteps of these monks. To find those stupas, viharas and chaityas, which are now deserted?<sup>7</sup>

When he was in Central India in 1851, he discovered a total of twenty-seven (27) big and small Stupas around Bhilsa (Vidisha). Here in a small stupa in Sanchi, he found two caskets. These contained the remains of the bones of two chief disciples of Tathagata Gautam. Dhammasenapati Gauravarni Sariputta and Riddhiman Neelvarni Mahamoggal. Apart from these, the Stupas also contained memories of other monks. In the book 'The Bhilsa Tops', he wrote about the findings here by linking them with Buddhist literature. This was the first big authentic text, which tried to find history from Buddhist literature.<sup>8</sup>

## Objectives

- To explore the contributions of Alexander Cunningham in rediscovering Buddhist monasteries in India.
- To analyze the methodologies employed by Cunningham in his archaeological investigations.
- To assess the significance of Cunningham's discoveries in understanding Buddhist history and culture.
- To examine the influence of Cunningham's work on the preservation of Buddhist heritage.

## Methodology

This article is based on secondary data collection from both print and online journals and relevant sources. This brief study is exploratory and informative in nature.

## Discussion

### Cunningham's Entry into Buddhist Archaeology

Cunningham's interest with Buddhist sites began during his early service in British India. Influenced by the writings of James Prinsep and accounts of Chinese pilgrims like Faxian and Xuanzang, he recognised the potential of archaeological surveys to uncover India's Buddhist past.

### Methodologies and Surveys

Cunningham employed a systematic approach to identify Buddhist monasteries. He carefully studied ancient texts and pilgrim accounts, correlating them with geographical landmarks. His reliance on inscriptions and architectural analysis allowed him to authenticate sites and reconstruct their historical contexts.

### Major Discoveries

Some of Cunningham's most notable contributions to Buddhist archaeology include:

- **Sanchi:** Cunningham extensively documented the Sanchi Stupa and its surrounding monasteries, highlighting the architectural and artistic brilliance of Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods.
- **Bodh Gaya:** He played a key role in preserving the Mahabodhi Temple, one of Buddhism's holiest sites.
- **Taxila:** His surveys in the north-western regions unearthed a wealth of Buddhist monasteries and Stupas, including those at Taxila, providing a glimpse into the spread of Buddhism along trade routes.
- **Bharhut:** Cunningham documented the Stupa and its intricate railings adorned with carvings depicting Jataka tales and inscriptions.

### Impact on Buddhist Studies

Cunningham's discoveries illuminated the extent and diversity of Buddhist monasticism in ancient India. His work provided a foundation for subsequent studies on the social, economic, and spiritual dimensions of Buddhist

monastic life. Additionally, his detailed reports and maps preserved knowledge of these sites for future generations, fostering global interest in Buddhist archaeology.

## **Conclusion**

Alexander Cunningham's rediscovery of Buddhist monasteries represents a keystone in the study of India's Buddhist heritage. His innovative methodologies, detailed documentation, and steady dedication brought to light the architectural and cultural treasures of ancient Buddhism. Today, his work continues to influence archaeological practices and deepen our understanding of Buddhism's historical and cultural legacy. By re-establishing the historical significance of Buddhist monasteries, Cunningham not only enriched the field of archaeology but also ensured the preservation of an invaluable part of India's cultural heritage for future exploration and appreciation.

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