

# **THE ANCIENT UNIVERSITY OF NALANDA (PART-2)**

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# Excavations (उत्खनन)

Alexander Cunningham first visited Nalanda in 1861 as Archaeological Surveyor for the Government of India. He undertook field surveys for four seasons between 1862 and 1865, making detailed observations and measurements.

Cunningham has been criticized for using unsystematic methods for identifying places, lacking careful procedures for conducting explorations, making crude and unscientific speculations, and being obsessed with finding

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places mentioned in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims. Despite these shortcomings, Cunningham's obsession yielded a number of major breakthroughs and correlations in the historical geography of ancient India. Furthermore, his "approach to historical geography involved contextualizing historical sites in relation to their physical landscape and ancient routes." Cunningham maintained meticulous records of the spatial and topographical details of the sites he explored.

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His documentation of archaeological sites—including mapping buildings, mounds, water bodies, and settlements almost to scale in relation to the surrounding topography—is unmatched for its time. *Chakrabarti* has remarked, “One cannot help feeling that [Cunningham’s] work did for Indian archaeology what the great Trigonometrical Survey achieved for the Indian landmass.”

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Cunningham's initial investigations were published in 1871, along with a diagram entitled **“Sketch of the ruins of Nalanda Mahavihara”** showing the spatial distribution of villages, tanks, and such archaeological features as mounds, Stupa, walls, statues, and monasteries.

ASI has conducted excavations in several phases, the earliest in 1863 and the most recent in 1983. These excavations exposed a total of sixteen large structures; a row of four temples or Chaityas on the west (numbered 3, 12, 13, 14); a row of eight west facing monasteries or Viharas (1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) parallel to the temples;

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two smaller, north-facing monasteries (numbered 1A and 1B); an east-facing temple (2), situated behind monasteries 7 and 8; and, farther east, Sarai temple. Another monastery (12) existed north of monastery 11, but only the floor plan was discovered during excavations.

The excavation of the site began in 1863 with the mound containing ruins of what later was called temple 12 (“F” in Cunningham’s sketch). This first location was selected by Cunningham on the strength of measurements and observations that convinced him the

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mound with “a great hollow in the centre” contained ruins of a temple. *Buchanan*, too, had earlier singled out this mound from several “heaps” and “conical heaps,” noting that it “has been opened for materials, and seems to have contained only a very small square cavity.” Buchanan’s accompanying sketch described this mound as “heap opened,” which might have influenced Cunningham’s initial choice.

The actual excavation of temple 12 was conducted by Captain Marshall, and was followed in 1871 by the excavation of temple 2. Nalanda became a protected site under the Indian Monument Act VII of 1904, and.

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explorations and excavations resumed in 1915 after a four-decade interval. The period from 1915 to 1938 witnessed excavations that uncovered the largest spatial expanse of Nalanda's hidden treasures: temple 3, monasteries 1, 4, 1A, 1B. Subsequently there were long pauses in activity, and only two additional structures, temple 14 and Sarai temple, were excavated before large-scale excavations ceased, in 1983 the spatial arrangement of structures at Nalanda indicates that the sequence of locations chosen for excavation spread from one mound to the neighbouring one, starting from the first location chosen by Cunningham.

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In 1812 Buchanan approached Nalanda from the north and observed that the ruins commenced near Dighi Pokhar (the tank east of the village Begumpur). Even in 1907 there were visible ruins at Begumpur: “Bargaon [Baragaon] and the neighbouring village of Begumpur to the west of Dighi Pokhar contain masses of ruins which have never been properly explored, and there seems little doubt that a detailed and systematic exploration of the whole area would be rich in valuable results.” It is curious that Cunningham’s 1871 sketch did not record any ruins in Begumpur other than the fort built by the eighteenth-century military adventurer Kamgar Khan, but it did identify several other mounds that lie to the south and west of the current ASI boundry, so there was awareness in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that archaeological remains

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were spread over a large area. The excavation and subsequent conservation and preservation, however, are limited to land that ASI has been able to acquire. Given the painstaking nature it is perhaps unsurprising that only a small portion of the area with archaeological potential has been uncovered. The unprotected area outside the ASI boundary has been exposed to the growing demands of human habitation and agriculture, and the potential of Begumpur appears to have been forgotten. In addition to physical remains, historical eyewitness accounts also suggest that Nalanda's spread was greater than our present understanding .

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If Nalanda had sustained anywhere near the 10,000 residents mentioned by Hieun Tsang (or even the 3,000 residents recorded by Itsing, another Chinese traveler, who stayed at Nalanda between 671 A.D. and 693 A.D.) solely within the currently excavated extent, the monasteries would have had to have been multi storied—pre modern skyscrapers— which is unlikely. Granting the possibility that the number of residents is somewhat exaggerated, it is nevertheless clear that even the seventh-century extent of the complex must have been substantially larger than the currently

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excavated area, not to mention any additions that could have been made during the nearly five centuries that Nalanda remained functional after these Chinese travellers visited.

The inability to corroborate the excavated remains with facts mentioned in accounts, and the vast quantity and spread of antiquity in the region, has led investigators to believe that the site was much larger than the currently exposed archaeological remains.

(To be continued)