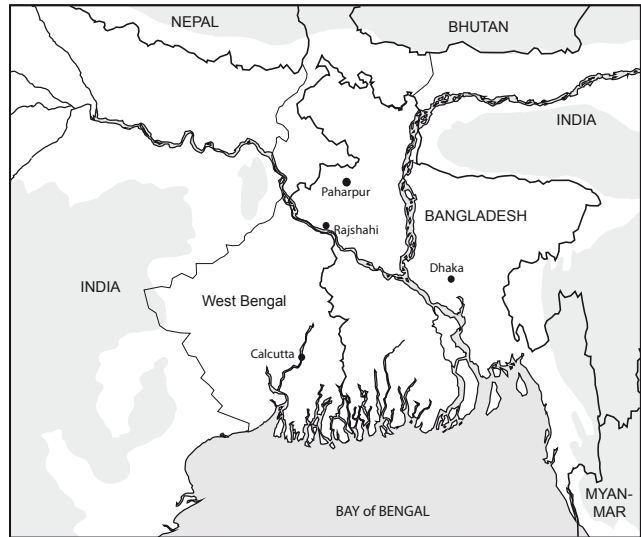


# NEW RESEARCH ON PAHARPUR BUDDHIST MONASTERY (NORTH BENGAL)

Jean-Yves Breuil and Sandrine Gill

Since its first exposure and excavation campaigns in the 30s, the Buddhist site of Paharpur in north Bengal (*Figure 1*) has been subject to tremendous changes. The aim of our paper is to present new data on the Paharpur site and its environment in the context of recent research on Bengal archaeology, and, more precisely, in connection with our participation in recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) missions to Paharpur (Breuil/Gill 2002–2004).

First noticed by Buchanan Hamilton in the beginning of the nineteenth century, and later explored by Alexander Cunningham in 1879–80, the site of Paharpur underwent a series of excavations and conservation campaigns from 1923–1934. The results of the excavations were published by K.N. Dikshit in a monograph for the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) (Dikshit 1938). The site was identified with the ancient Somapura *vihāra* established in north Bengal at the end of



*Figure 1: Paharpur in Bengal*

the eighth or the beginning of the ninth century AD by Dharmapāla. It is one of the biggest single-unit Buddhist monasteries in South Asia (281 x 280 m), organised around a square courtyard with an entrance from the north (*Figure 2*). In its centre, the imposing brick shrine is a conspicuous height of over 21 metres, and it is decorated with friezes of stone sculptures and terracotta plaques. The temple is characterised by a cruciform plan with projecting angles between its arms, and three receding terraces accessed by a flight of steps on the north side. Four shrines spring out at cardinal points on the second terrace. Above the second terrace, the construction of the temple, centred by a blind *cella*, is more enigmatic. The interpretation of the superstructure is merely speculative.

Apart from the central temple and its 177-cell monastery, the Paharpur site is characterised by a number of votive and functional structures inside and outside the monastic compound (Gill 2007). Less than 300 m to the East, the temple of Tārā, known as Satyabir Bhita, is the second most impressive complex of the site. Today, new data allows both a wider and more precise look at certain aspects of the site. Firstly, the excavations of the last 20 years bring new clues as to the cult practices and the ancient periods of the site. Secondly, the recent securing of 1700 photographs from the 1920s–30s – most of them unpublished – provides new information about the iconography and the layout of the site. Lastly, the recent archaeological discoveries in the region allow Paharpur to be considered in a broader context as part of a network of sites in the area.

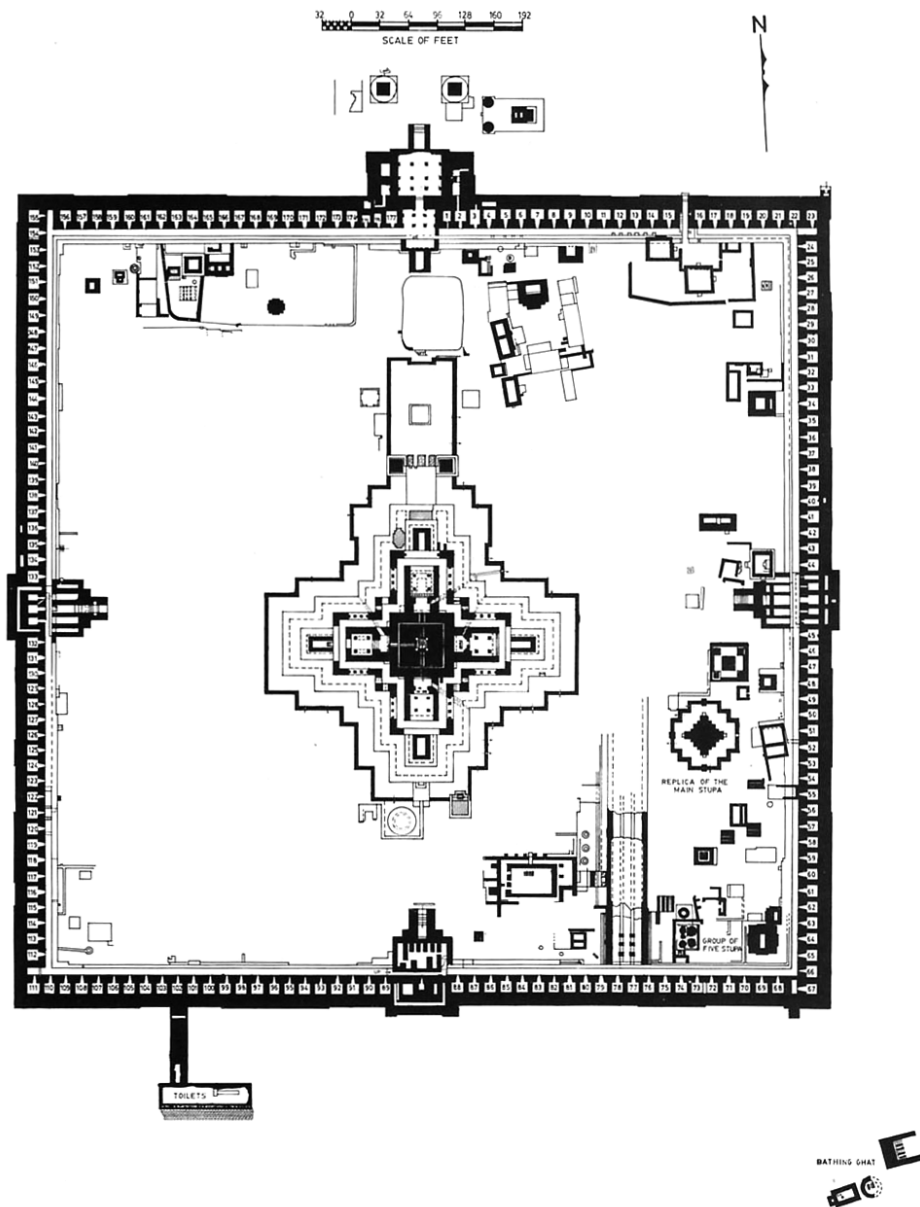


Figure 2: Plan of Paharpur monastery (after Dikshit 1938, plate 1)

### RECENT EXCAVATIONS

From 1981–1990, the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh conducted small-scale excavations in two phases, and dug deep trenches in different parts of the site of Paharpur. The objective of the first phase was to establish the relationship between the once occupied levels of the cells of the monastery and the structural remains exposed by Dikshit: the central shrine and a number of subsidiary structures inside and outside the monastic courtyard. In the second phase, the objective was to remove the debris from the courtyard with a view to establishing the drainage system in and around the monastery. Some results were included in the most recent site guide on Paharpur published by the Department of Archaeology in 2004. According to the authors, Shafiqul Alam and Musharraf Hussein, the excavation revealed two

major points. Firstly, an earlier level of the monastery with larger cells was exposed, which implies a total of four construction levels for the monastery. Secondly, structures that predate this first level of monastery and the first level of the central temple were discovered. A small trench excavated close to the central temple shows an earlier wall of two metres width, which is cut by the foundation of the temple (*Figure 3*).

These results, which have yet to be comprehensively documented, change the accepted schema of the history of Paharpur. The site is believed to have been founded by the Pāla emperor Dharmapāla (c. 770–810 AD) on the basis of sealing specimens found from the ‘community of monks from the great *vihāra* of Dharmapāla at Somapura’ (Dikhsit 1938, 19–20). However, the earliest epigraphic evidence found from the site is a copper plate dated from the late fifth century (159 Gupta Era or 489 AD), found during the course of the excavation of the site in 1927 (*Epigraphia Indica* XIX, 59 ff). It records the purchase of fallow land by a private individual on which to build a *vihāra* for Jain monks, but does not explicitly mention the name ‘Somapura’. This may indicate that the plate was not directly related to the monument of Paharpur, a hypothesis confirmed by the fact that the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, who travelled in Bengal in the first part of seventh century AD, did not mention any Buddhist complex in the Paharpur region. In this context, the recent excavations indicate the early date of the site, a period before the founding of the monastery by Dharmapala. However, with the lack of precise data and documentation available, it is difficult to ascertain to which era (the Gupta period or the beginning of the Pāla period) these structures belong, and to determine whether they are religious or secular in nature.

Among the other major results from the recent excavations, the discovery in 1982 of a colossal, incomplete, bronze Buddha (*Figure 4*) in a cell from the north-eastern section of the monastery (no 37) is important for the understanding of the cult practised at Somapura *vihāra*. The excavators in the 20s and 30s did not find statues in the central shrine, nor in the cells of the monastery where numerous pedestals suggested their presence. Thus, this Buddha statue, now preserved in Paharpur Museum, is the only major



*Figure 3: 1980s excavation trench made in the pradakṣiṇapatha, showing brick structure earlier than central temple's foundation wall (Breuil/Gill 2004)*



*Figure 4: Bronze Buddha found in 1982 (Paharpur museum)*

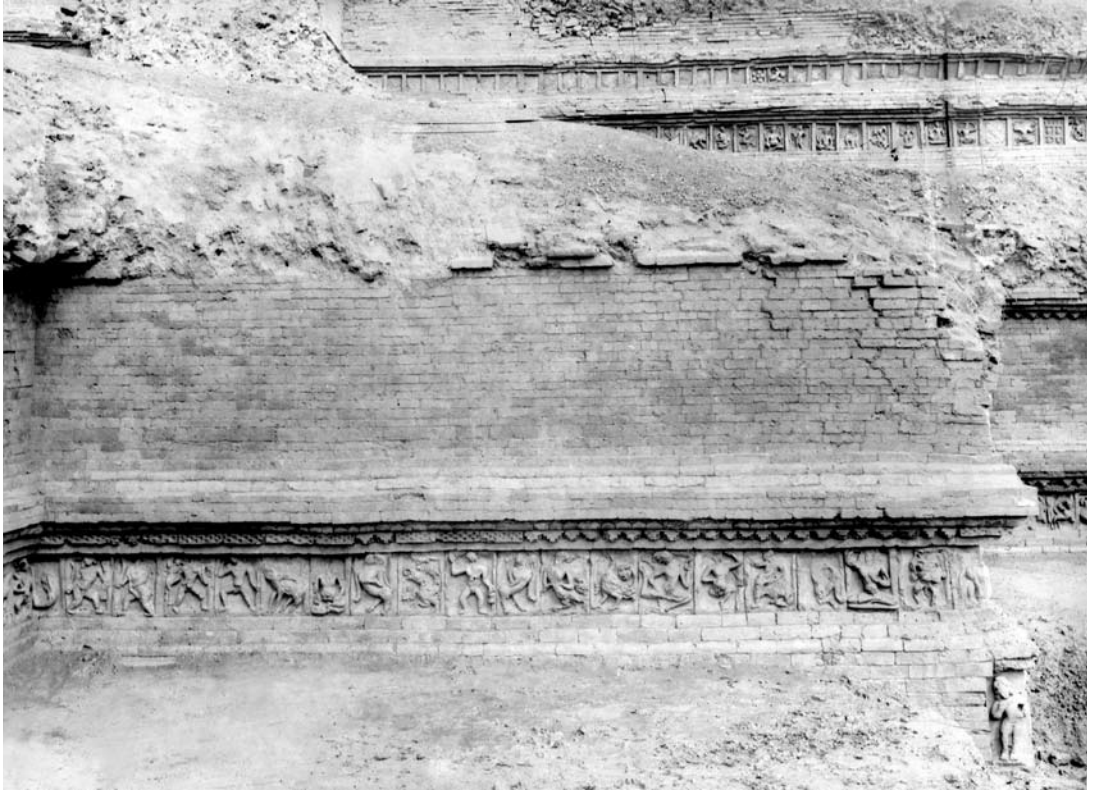


Figure 5: 1930s excavation. Central temple, south-western side at ground level: stone sculpture in the corner and terracotta plaques. In the background is a double row of terracotta plaques on the first terrace. (ASI - Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Dhaka)

cult image discovered so far at Paharpur. Preserved from head to waist and severely damaged by fire, this statue, which measures 1.27 m, was found in the debris beneath the floor of the second major rebuilding period of the monastery. This could indicate that the sculpture, probably initially enshrined in the central temple, was buried with the intention of being saved from some great crisis threatening the monastery: an inscription from Nalanda refers to the invasion of troops from Vangala or East Bengal, and the destruction of the monastery by fire, an event which may have taken place in the mid-eleventh century (*Epigraphia Indica* XXI, 97–101).

This bronze statue is a rare find in East Bengal: until the recent discoveries in 1995 (Bhattacharya 1996) and 2002 of two monumental bronze Buddhist statues in Mainamati, the only known monumental Buddhist bronze image from the area was an 84 cm tall statue of Manjuśrī from Mahasthangarh, dated to the Gupta period (Shamsul Alam 1985).

#### STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

Some other aspects of the art and architecture of Paharpur are being reassessed in a new light after the re-discovery of the collection of photographic plates from the 1920s–30s. These plates date from the time of the discovery and excavation of Paharpur by the ASI, Eastern Circle, and are now with the Department of Archaeology at Dhaka. A digitalisation and documentation program of the plates was undertaken from 2002–2005 by the French Archaeological Mission at Mahasthan (Breuil/Gill 2005). The information saved on the photographs is of inestimable value in the context of recent significant changes to the appearance of the site.

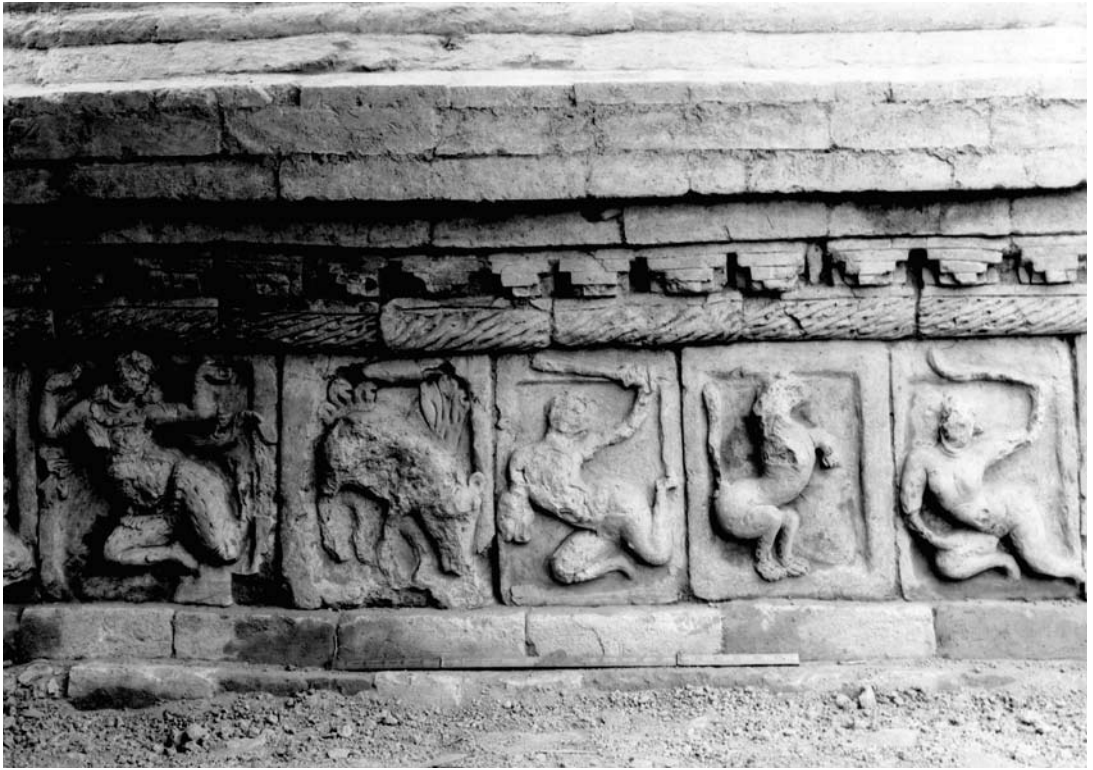




Figure 6: 1930s excavation. Central temple, south-eastern side, angle no. 4, facing south. An upside down motif (ASI - Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Dhaka)

The iconography of the terracotta plaques at Paharpur is one of the main questions concerning the site, and the fairly exhaustive early photographic documentation remains the only evidence of the appearance of the monument and its iconography at the time of its discovery (Figure 5). Only about 500 of the 2000 terracotta plaques found on the monument are still *in situ*. In order for them to be chemically treated, terracotta plaques were taken from the ground level somewhat carelessly by the Department of Archaeology from 2000–2002. Unfortunately, during the course of this, many plaques were damaged and temporarily stored in unsuitable conditions. With the best intentions of the restorers, they were replaced by poor imitations modelled by local artisans that were far from the original art of Paharpur. As a result, the iconographic schema of the terracotta plaques on the monument is now impossible to read.

When Dikshit came upon the monument, he was not convinced of the existence of any iconographic programme because some of the plaques were found upside down or crooked, and obviously not in their original location (Figure 6). In short, many terracotta plaques bore the evidence of extensive repairs and old conservation projects carried out on the monument. Moreover, the rare images of Buddhist and Hindu deities did not seem to be placed in any significant position. However, a careful look at the photographs from the 1920s–30s show some traces of an initial programme. The sequences of plaques show, indeed, plenty of examples of plastic compositions based on repetition of the same motif, or else on alternation or opposition, creating rhythm and movement, and reinforcing narrative sequences. For example, on a portion of frieze from the south eastern corner (Figure 7),



*Figure 7: 1930s excavation. Central temple, south-eastern side, angle no3, facing east. A hunting scene? (ASI - Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Dhaka)*

one can notice two almost identical warriors, and a third figure striking a similar pose on the left, alternating with wild animals, a boar and a lion. The group could be interpreted as a hunting scene in a forest. Quite often identical motifs are repeated, creating rhythm and movement: the juxtaposition of two almost identical male figures in walking posture reinforces the action (*Figure 8*). There are many more examples of such compositions, and also other varieties of composition. It is thus difficult to believe, as assumed by Dikshit, that all terracotta plaques were initially placed on the monument without any order and intention.

Another point of speculation is the location of the representations of deities, which do not seem to follow any logic. Regarding the Buddhist deities, Dikshit only noted the Buddha located near the centre of the eastern face of the monument at ground level. It appears that there are several other Buddhas placed on the eastern sides of the south-eastern corners of the monument (*Figure 9*). The repetition of the Buddha motif on the eastern faces of monument, and their absence on other sides, is significant in the Buddhist context. In contrast, Brahmanical deities are not confined to a specific face of the monument, but clearly grouped in some parts: for example, Brāhma, Śiva, Viṣṇu and two representations of Gaṇeśa are on the same portion of frieze on the first terrace, south-west side, angle no 2, facing south.

Thus, in spite of the disturbed condition of the iconographic layout, there is still evidence of the original decorative scheme of the temple, which will have to be carefully examined in a general context. A complete inventory of the terracotta plaques in their current situation is being prepared by the Department of Archaeology. When completed, this inventory, combined with the old photographs, will be very helpful for the reconstruction of the spatial organisation of the terracotta plaques.

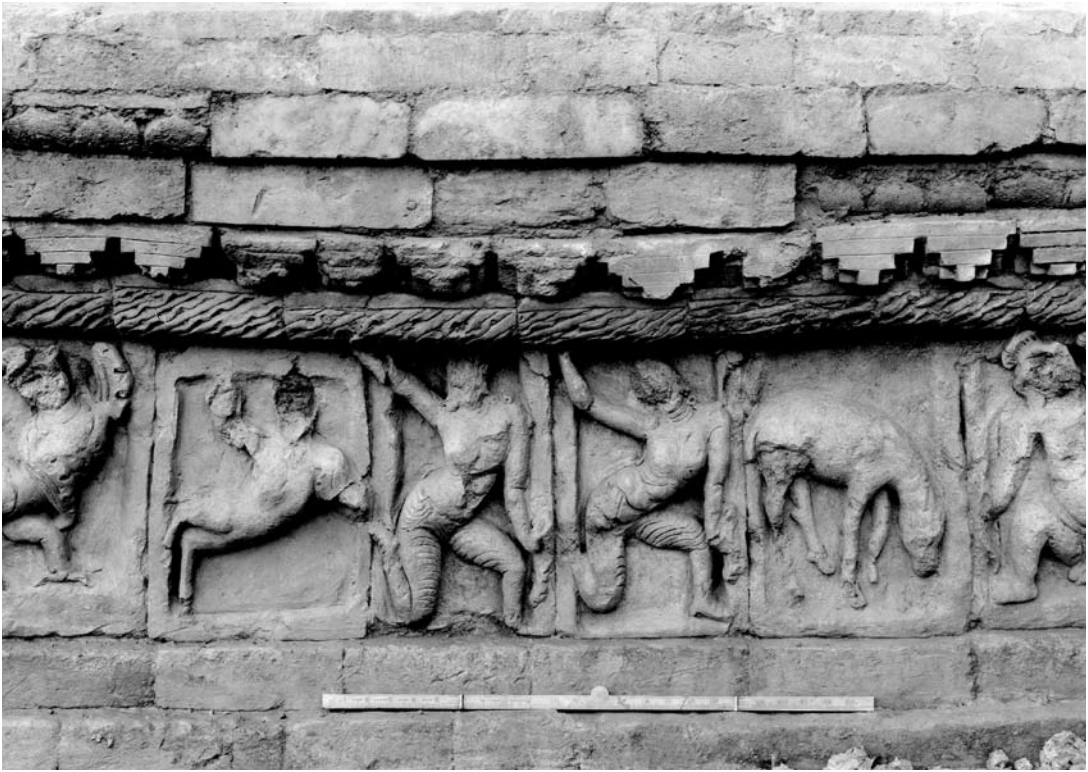


Figure 8: 1930s excavation. Central temple, south-eastern side, angle no. 3, facing east. Two almost identical male figures in walking postures. (ASI - Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Dhaka)

## LAYOUT OF THE SITE

The old photographs also remind us of the dense and complicated layout of the site, which is not limited to just a big monastery and a temple. Today, we have an oversimplified picture of the site, and many structures indicated on Dikshit's plan are buried, have disappeared, or have been restored, at times in an approximate way. On the plan made by Dikshit (Figure 2), a whole section of the south-eastern part of the monastery is devoted to the daily affairs of the monks. It is made up of a kitchen and a refectory, consisting of a long hall exposed to a length of 36 m, with an elaborate drainage system oriented on a south-north axis towards a point inside the courtyard, and a number of wells associated with these structures. There is also an area outside the monastery, to the south west, on which is an open bathing platform accessed by a narrow gangway. It was probably used for the monks' ablutions. About 48 m to the south-east of the monastery, a brick-laid *ghāt* (Figure 10) bears traces of sand which could indicate the existence of an old bed of a river. This elaborate structure, which had huge stone blocks laid in the brick-work at its head, is barely recognised in the current organisation of the site.

Further east, about 270 m from the monastery, stands a temple dedicated to Tārā. In the current layout of the site, this major Buddhist votive complex, subsequently known as Satyabir Bhita after the legend of a Muslim saint (Dikshit 1938, 80), appears quite disconnected from the main monastery, separated from it by modern buildings (a guest house and the museum). The structural remains consist of an oblong temple (24 x 14.4 m) facing south, surrounded by 132 votive *stūpas*, and an enclosure wall of trapezoid shape (Figure 11). The temple has a main sanctum and a pillared hall surrounded by an ambulatory path. The numerous *stūpas* concentrated around the temple are either individual or grouped on a common platform, and they display a variety of plans, dimensions and decorations. One of





*Basement south-east side, angle n°3, facing east*



*Basement south-east side, angle n°2, facing east*



*Basement east side*

*Figure 9: 1930s excavation. Central temple. Buddhas on the eastern sides. (ASI - Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Dhaka)*

them was discovered along with several thousand miniature votive *stūpas* with seal relics, whose offering must have been considered a means of attaining religious merit for the devotee. Similar miniature *stūpas* have been found at Nalanda, Sarnath and Mirpurkhas. Although no main cult image has been recovered, an epigraphic record of a monk from Nalanda (*Epigraphia Indica* XXI, 97–101) dating from the first half of the twelfth century clearly mentions the construction of a temple for Tārā at Somapura. The temple is identified as such based on the discovery of 50 circular terracotta plaques, each bearing a figure of an eight-handed goddess and inscribed with a Buddhist creed. These plaques were found in the courtyard, to the south and south west of the main temple. The Tārā temple points to the fact that the organisation of the Buddhist cult at Somapura was probably much more complex than generally admitted, and that there was perhaps some dissidence among the monks at some period of the occupation of the site.

## SITES IN THE ENVIRONMENT OF PAHARPUR

Finally, recent archaeological explorations, combined with ancient reports and documents, give a better idea of the environment in which the ancient Somapura *vihāra* existed. In an area of 20 km around Paharpur, at least two Buddhist sites were probably connected with the Somapura *vihāra*: they are locally known as Halud *vihāra* and Jagdal *vihāra*.

Halud *vihāra*, located about 15 km to the south of Paharpur, was first noticed by the ASI in 1930-31, and then partially excavated in 1984 and 1993 by the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh. A brief report was published in 2001 (Miah/Musa 2001). The site is close to a market-place which occupies a portion of the ancient settlement, notably a medium-sized monastery partly destroyed by modern constructions. To the west of this monastery, the ruins of a temple-complex have been exposed (*Figure 12*). Oriented towards the east, this temple shows two or three





Figure 10: 1930s excavation. A ghat south east of the monastery (after Dikshit 1938, plate XXIII) (ASI - Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Dhaka)

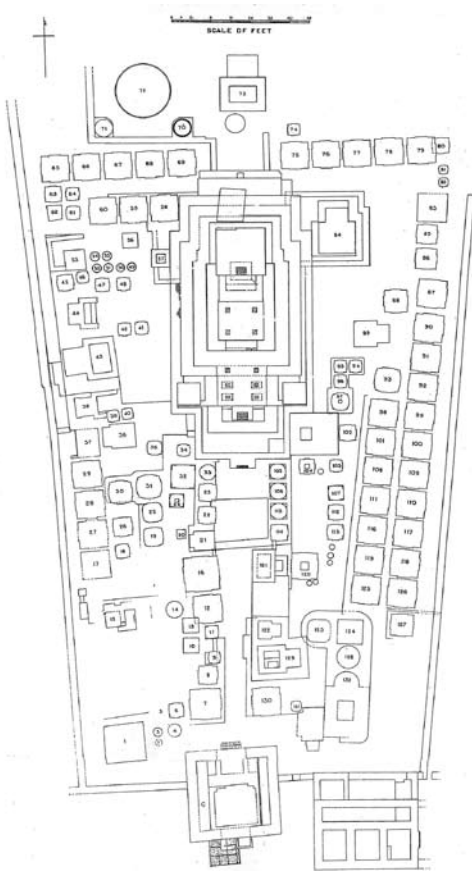


Figure 11: Plan of Tarā temple (Satyabir Bhita) (after Dikshit 1938, plate LXVI)

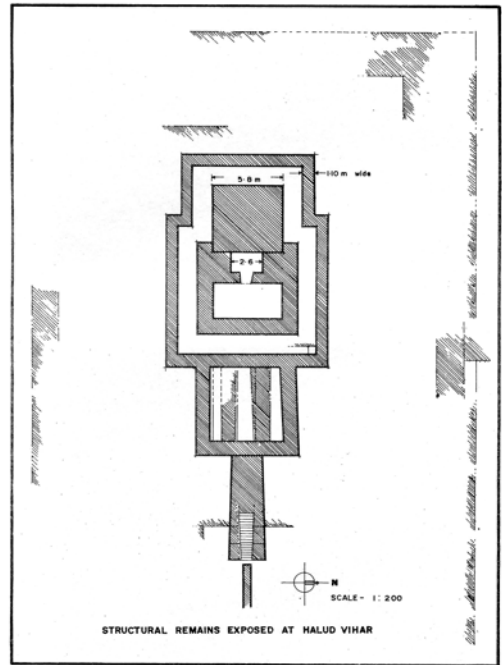


Figure 12: Halud Vihara : map of the temple complex (after Miab/Musa, 2000)



*Figure 13: Jagaddal Vihara : the monastery's cells, the western wing (Breuil/Gill 2002)*



*Figure 14: Jagaddal Vihara : stone pillars and pedestals scattered in eastern part of the monastery (Breuil/Gill 2002)*

periods of construction. On the west side, stands a square solid structure (5.8 x 5.8 m) which was probably the base of a *stūpa* whose superstructure has since disappeared. It was preceded by two cellas; a smaller one, which was probably used to place the icon for worship, and a bigger one, which was probably a *maṇḍapa*. Above the *stūpa* and the cellas, a circumambulatory passage is enclosed by a wall. Set apart from the monastery and the temple, to the east of the market place, is a large ancient water tank associated with the site. Further beyond, some isolated mounds are left undisturbed here and there. A small cruciform Buddhist shrine has also been identified in front of the house of a local farmer. A number of antiquities have been discovered in the area at different times: stone and metal Pala-style images, terracotta plaques similar to those at Paharpur and ornamental bricks. Halud *vihāra* is predominantly a Buddhist site, unfortunately much disturbed by brick hunters. Structural remains of the last period have been entirely removed. However, preliminary studies seem to indicate that Halud *vihāra* is contemporary with Paharpur.

About 20 km to the north-west of Paharpur, close to the Indian border, the Jagaddala village accommodates a number of mounds and reservoirs. Declared protected by the ASI at the beginning of the last century, the site was partially excavated during three seasons between 1996 and 2000. No report and no plan of the site have been published as yet. In the main mound, a traditional monastery with cells organised around a square courtyard was exposed (*Figure 13*). The compartment occupying the central part of the western wing is the biggest of all. It projects beyond the back wall to accommodate a solid platform in its centre and a niche in each wall, except on the east side where there is evidence of a pillared antechamber. The circular compartments at each corner of the monastery are a notable feature of the site. The monastery architecture is also characterised by an extensive use of stone and brick, combined. Stone pillars, pedestals and sculptures of Buddhist deities (Hevajra-śakti, Dhyani Buddha, *apsarās*, *dvarapālas*, and Tārā) are scattered in different parts of the monastery or used as doorsteps (*Figure 14*). The style of the sculptures and an inscription in Devanagari script on one of the pillars dates it between the tenth to twelfth centuries AD. The publication of a plan of the monastery and a report of the excavation is expected to allow for the serious study of this site in the context of the wider environment of Paharpur.

Apart from these two sites close to Paharpur, we should not forget the presence of other Buddhist sites in the same region, for instance Vasu Bihar and Bihar, monasteries that are only 40 km from Mahasthagarh, and Jagjivanpur, a recently discovered Pāla monastery in West Bengal. A field study of the old routes between the *vihāras*, combined with a comparison of the archaeological and epigraphical records they harbour, would be very useful as a means of beginning to try and redefine the function of Paharpur in the regional network of Buddhist sites.

In conclusion, the image generally presented of Paharpur is simplistic, and this misinterpretation has been encouraged by recent conservation work. The accepted picture does not represent the historical truth, and, as we have seen, the site may be more ancient than is commonly believed. Moreover, the layout of the site is quite complex; there is a great density of structures inside the monastic compound, there is evidence that an iconographic programme was being followed, and the cult practices seem varied. Finally, Paharpur clearly has to be considered in light of its broader historical context, particularly in the regional framework of the Buddhist sites of the Pāla period.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhattacharya, G (1996) 'The magnificent bronze image of Vajrasatva from Mainamati, Bangladesh', *Journal of Bengal Art* 1, pp 137–148
- Breuil, J-Y and Gill, S (2005) 'Paharpur in the 20s–30s: a Pala period Buddhist shrine and monastery documented by a collection of photographic plates', *Proceedings of the Seventeenth International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists (7–11 July 2003, Bonn)*, 479 – 489
- Breuil, J-Y and Gill, S (2004), 'Origin and aims of the seminar', 'Photographic coverage at the time of Dikshit: a methodological approach' in Md Shafiqul Alam (ed), *Proceedings of the International Seminar on Elaboration of an Archaeological Research Strategy for Paharpur World Heritage Site and its Environment (Bangladesh) 20–25 March, 2004*, Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and UNESCO Dhaka, 3–9, 14–21
- Breuil, J-Y and Gill, S (October 2004) *Preparatory meeting for organising a Training Workshop on the Conservation and Management of Terracotta Plaques of Paharpur World Heritage Site (27 Septembre – 3 October 2004, France-UNESCO Convention, World Heritage Centre, UNESCO*, 34 pp. + 4 pl.
- Breuil, J-Y and Gill, S (June 2004) *Report on the International Seminar on Elaboration of an Archaeological Research Strategy for Paharpur World Heritage Site and its Environment (Bangladesh)*, France-UNESCO Convention, World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, 71 pp. + 10 pl.
- Breuil, J-Y and Gill, S (May 2003) *World Heritage site of Paharpur Buddhist Monastery. Nomination dossier of the site of Mahasthangarh : Monitoring report*, World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, 53 pp. + 15 pl.
- Breuil, J-Y and Gill, S (November 2002) *Technical report : World Heritage site of Paharpur Buddhist Monastery. Nomination dossier of the site of Mahasthangarh*, World Heritage Centre, UNESCO, 50 pp. + 21 pl.
- Dikshit, KN (1938) *Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal*, Memoirs of the ASI n°55, Delhi
- Gill, S. (2007) 'Spatial organisation of Paharpur Buddhist Establishment', in Himanshu P. Ray ed., *Sacred Landscapes in Asia. Shared Traditions, Multiple Histories*, India International Centre, Manohar Delhi, 169-197
- Hossein, M and Alam, S (2004) *Paharpur, The World Cultural Heritage*, Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka
- Miah, AH and Musa, A (2001) *A Preliminary Report on Excavations at Halud Vihara, Noagaon*, Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka
- Shamsul Alam. AKM (1985) *Sculptural Art of Bangladesh, Pre-Muslim Period*, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Dhaka