

Archaeological discoveries confirm early date of Buddha's life

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Archaeologists Robin Coningham (left) and Kosh Prasad Acharya direct excavations within the Maya Devi Temple, uncovering a series of ancient temples contemporary with the Buddha. Thai monks meditate. Credit: Ira Block/National Geographic

Archaeologists working in Nepal have uncovered evidence of a structure at the birthplace of the Buddha dating to the sixth century B.C. This is the first archaeological material linking the life of the Buddha—and thus the first flowering of Buddhism—to a specific century.

Pioneering excavations within the sacred Maya Devi Temple at Lumbini, Nepal, a UNESCO World Heritage site long identified as the birthplace of the Buddha, uncovered the remains of a previously unknown sixth-century B.C. timber structure under a series of brick temples. Laid out on the same design as those above it, the timber structure contains an open space in the center that links to the nativity story of the Buddha himself.

Until now, the earliest archaeological evidence of Buddhist structures at Lumbini dated no earlier than the third century B.C., the time of the patronage of the Emperor Asoka, who promoted

the spread of Buddhism from present-day Afghanistan to Bangladesh.

"Very little is known about the life of the Buddha, except through textual sources and oral tradition," said archaeologist Professor Robin Coningham of Durham University, U.K., who co-led the investigation. Some scholars, he said, have maintained that the Buddha was born in the third century B.C. "We thought 'why not go back to archaeology to try to answer some of the questions about his birth?' Now, for the first time, we have an archaeological sequence at Lumbini that shows a building there as early as the sixth century B.C."

Early Buddhism revealed

The international team of archaeologists, led by Coningham and Kosh Prasad Acharya of the Pashupati Area Development Trust in Nepal, say the discovery contributes to a greater understanding of the early development of Buddhism as well as the spiritual importance of Lumbini. Their peer-reviewed findings are reported in the December 2013 issue of the international journal *Antiquity*. The research is partly supported by the National Geographic Society.

To determine the dates of the timber shrine and a previously unknown early brick structure above it, fragments of charcoal and grains of sand were tested using a combination of radiocarbon and optically stimulated luminescence techniques. Geoarchaeological research also confirmed the presence of ancient tree roots within the temple's central void.

"UNESCO is very proud to be associated with this important discovery at one of the most holy places for one of the world's oldest religions," said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, who urged "more archaeological research, intensified conservation work and strengthened site

management" to ensure Lumbini's protection.

"These discoveries are very important to better understand the birthplace of the Buddha," said Ram Kumar Shrestha, Nepal's minister of culture, tourism and civil aviation. "The government of Nepal will spare no effort to preserve this significant site."

Buddhist tradition records that Queen Maya Devi, the mother of the Buddha, gave birth to him while holding on to the branch of a tree within the Lumbini Garden, midway between the kingdoms of her husband and parents. Coningham and his colleagues postulate that the open space in the center of the most ancient, timber shrine may have accommodated a tree. Brick temples built later above the timber shrine also were arranged around the central space, which was unroofed.

Four main Buddhist sites

Lumbini is one of the key sites associated with the life of the Buddha; others are Bodh Gaya, where he became a Buddha or enlightened one; Sarnath, where he first preached; and Kusinagara, where he passed away. At his passing at the age of 80, the Buddha is recorded as having recommended that all Buddhists visit "Lumbini." The shrine was still popular in the middle of the first millennium A.D. and was recorded by Chinese pilgrims as having a shrine beside a tree.

The Maya Devi Temple at Lumbini remains a living shrine; the archaeologists worked alongside meditating monks, nuns and pilgrims.

In the scientific paper in *Antiquity*, the authors write: "The sequence (of archaeological remains) at Lumbini is a microcosm for the development of Buddhism from a localized cult to a global religion."

Lost and overgrown in the jungles of Nepal in the medieval period, ancient Lumbini was rediscovered in 1896 and identified as the birthplace of the Buddha on account of the presence of a third-century B.C. sandstone pillar. The pillar, which still stands, bears an inscription documenting a visit by Emperor Asoka to the site of the Buddha's birth as well as the site's name—Lumbini.

Despite the rediscovery of the key Buddhist sites, their earliest levels were buried deep or destroyed by later construction, leaving evidence of the very earliest stages of Buddhism inaccessible to archaeological investigation, until now.

Half a billion people around the world are Buddhists, and many hundreds of thousands make a pilgrimage to Lumbini each year. The archaeological investigation there was funded by the government of Japan in partnership with the government of Nepal, under a UNESCO project aimed at strengthening the conservation and management of Lumbini. Along with the National Geographic Society, the research also was supported by Durham University and Stirling University.

Coningham and Acharya were joined on the *Antiquity* paper by coauthors K.M. Strickland, C.E. Davis, M.J. Manuel, I. A. Simpson, K. Gilliland, J. Tremblay, T.C. Kinnaird and D.C.W. Sanderson.

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