

Ramagrama Excavation

—Sukra Sagar Shrestha

After the death of Gautama Buddha in Kusinagar, he was cremated there and his relics were divided into eight parts and were taken away by different eight principalities including Kusinagar, they were:

1. Magadh
2. Vaisali
3. Kapilvastu
4. Allakappa
5. Koliyanagara
6. Vathadipa
7. Pava
8. Kusinagar

Since Koliyanagara also received one part of relics the old king, it is said, of that nagar built the stupa containing the relics in Ramagrama.

After building the stupas containing the relics of Buddha, these sites became the centre of pilgrimage and devotion. When Asoka was converted into Buddhism after the Kalinga war he made pilgrimages to different sites related to Buddha and his life. Besides the Pilgrimage he thought to open all the stupas containing the relics of Buddha and distribute them in 84,000 parts and rebuilt a stupa on each of them as well. Thus he opened seven of the original

eight stupas but when he arrived in Ramagrama to open the eighth he found that the stupa was being guarded by the serpent king. On the persuasion of the king, Asoka did not dare to open the stupa.

Later on the stupa was visited by both the Chinese pilgrims Fahien and Hiuen Tsiang and after that went into obscurity for more than a millennium. The site remained a great mystery to the archaeologists since long time. Many scholars guessed many sites to be Ramagrama. Cunningham and Carlylle tried much to fix the site but could not come to the nearer point.

After the discovery of Lumbini Pillar in 1896, the Chapter on Ramagrama was reopened and many archaeologists tried to locate the site on the calculation of the distance and direction given by the Chinese pilgrims. The old theories on the location of Ramagrama was discarded. Thus T. Watters an authority on Chinese source of Buddhist records and the writer of "On Yuan Chwang's travels in India" wrote on the location of Ramagrama -

"It is unnecessary now to notice the opinions of General Cunningham and Mr. Carlyle as to the modern representative of Rama of our Pilgrims. Further researches in Nepal Terai may lead to the discovery of some trustworthy indication as to the site of the old city: (Watters - 1973: 20)

The stupa of Ramagrama was searched by the scholars then in Nepal Terai on the east of Lumbini and around the distal location written by the Chinese travellers.

First archaeologist who happened to come and see the Stupa was Dr. Hoey a century ago but recorded only about the height of the stupa to be of fifty feet and did not come back again and wrote nothing more about the stupa.

After Dr. Hoey the prominent archaeologist from India P. C. Mukherjee did not actually arrive in the site but wrote merely on Ramagrama that "the investigation might followed up in Eastern Terai, an effort being made especially to fix the site of Ramagrama which is probably north of the Gorakhpur district. "He was investigating that time specially to locate the Kapilvastu in the west.

P. C. Mukherjee was followed by S. B. Deo who also merely recorded a huge stupa mound in Deoria Village more than thirty feet in height and seventy feet in diameter. He was there in 1964.

In 1974 an archaeologist Mr. Babukrishna Rijal from Department of Archaeology (DOA) visited the site and boldly decided the stupa to be no other than Dhatu stupa of Ramagrama. His decision was also made on the basis of calculation of the distance and

direction given by the Chinese pilgrims . In his words:

If we count the distance of location and other local bearings as described by the famous Chinese travellers the stupa situated on the bank of Jharahi river can not be any thing but the Dhatu stupa of lord Buddha raised by the Koliens in Ramagrama. However to prove any my hypothesis I certainly have to wait the spade of the excavator. At present I am certain to think that the postulation of Ramagrama stupa on the bank of river Jharahi is very logical thought it has not become irrevocable. (Rijal : 1978: 56)

Since the postulation of Mr. Rijal is presented above, let us also see what the pilgrims did write on Ramagrama. The first pilgrim Fahien wrote:

East from Buddha's birthplace, and at a distance of five yojanas, there is a kingdom called Rama. The king of this country, having obtained one portion of the relics of Buddha's body, returned with it and built over it a tope, named the Rama tope. By the side of it there was a pool, and in the pool a dragon, which constantly kept watch over (the tope) , and presented offerings at it day and night. When king Asoka came forth into the world, he wished to destroy the eight topes (over the relics) , and to build (instead of them) 84,000 topes. After he had thrown down the seven (others), he wished next to destroy this tope. But then the dragon showed itself, took the king into its palace: and when he had seen all the things provided for offerings, it said to him, 'If you are able with your offerings to exceed

these, you can destroy the tope, and take it all away. I will not contend with you.' The king, however, knew that such appliances for offerings were not to be had anywhere in the world, and thereupon returned (without carrying out his purpose).

(Afterwards), the ground all about became overgrown with vegetation, and there was nobody to sprinkle and sweep (about the tope); but a herd of elephants came regularly, which brought water with their trunks to water the ground, and various kinds of flowers and incense, which they presented at the tope. (Once) there came from one of the kingdoms a devotee to worship at the tope. When he encountered the elephants he was greatly alarmed, and screened himself among the trees but when he saw them go through with the offerings in the most proper manner, the thought filled him with great sadness - that there should be no monastery here, (the inmates of which) might serve the tope, but the elephants have to do the watering and sweeping. Forth with he gave up the great prohibitions (by which he was bound), and resumed the status of a Sramanera. With his own hands he cleared away the grass and trees, put the place in good order, and made it pure and clean. By the power of his exhortations, he prevailed on the king of the country to form a resident for monks and when that was done, he became head of the monastery. At the present day there are monks residing in it. This event is of recent occurrence, but in all the succession

from that time till now, there has always been a Sramanera head of the establishment. (Legge-1993: 70)

Second pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang recorded about the same place as:

From this, going through a wild forest about 500 li east, we come to the country of Rama (Ramagrama). This country has but few houses or inhabitants. To the east of the old city is a brick Stupa about 100 feet high. After the Nirvana of Tathagata the old king of this country, having obtained a share of the relics [Sariras] returned home and built this stupa. It constantly emits rays of glory.

By the side of it is a Naga tank. The Naga frequently changes his appearance into that of a man, and as such encircles the tower in the practice of religion (i.e. turning religiously with his right hand towards the tower). Wild elephants, with flowers held in their trunks, constantly come to offer their religious offerings.

Close by the side of this stupa is a Sangharama of which a Sramanera is the subdirector [Karmadana]. The tradition is this:- There was formerly a Bhikshu who had induced some fellow-disciples to travel afield to pay reverence (to the sacred spots). Then they saw the wild elephants, carrying flowers in their trunks, lay them down before this tower. And again they saw them dig up the herbage with their tusks, and in their trunks bring water for sprinkling; the company seeing this were astonished and affected with emotion.

There was one Bhikshu in the company who resolved to give up the great rules of moral obligation, and remain there on the spot to render his religious offerings (at the shrine). Speaking to the others, he said: "The wild elephants, beast born as they are, know how to reverence this sacred tower; they gather flowers, and sprinkle water, and sweep Ramagrama! How then can we, belonging to the human race and devotees of Buddha, behold this desert spot and not render our religious assistance!"

So taking leave of his companions he remained there. He constructed a dwelling - place, cleared the land, and planted flowers, and cultivated fruits: he let not a moment pass in idleness, either during winter or summer.

The people of the neighboring countries., hearing of him, all contributed of their wealth and valuables to construct

therewith a Sangharama, and they besought this priest to take the direction of the establishment as steward. From this time through successive generations things have been managed according to this old plan. (Beal-1973: 96)

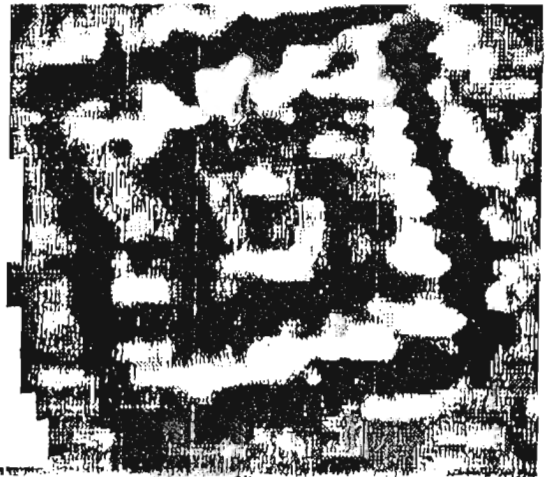
With all these bearings and postulations HMG/ Nepal also accepted the idea to be correct and declared the site to be Protected Monument and brought under Lumbini Development Trust. After more than two decades, it was in 1997 that the geo-physical survey around Ramagrama stupa was conducted by the Bradford University of United Kingdom in collaboration with the DOA and the financial support from UNESCO World Heritage Committee. The result showed some monastic complex in a field believed by the people to be an unlucky field, This field is located only four meters away on northwest direction from the stupa mound.

The monastic complex as recorded by geo-physical survey in fluxgate gradiometer HP (r-4) - 9.9nt and Earth Resistance (12.25 Ohms) is shown in following plan .

Earth Resistance (12..25 Ohms)



Fluxgate Gradiometer (HP (r=4) -9.. nT)



A year after the result of geo-physical survey disclosed, the DOA decided to open the monastic complex and thus in 1999 January conducted an excavation. (see drawings and pictures)

Since the excavation in Ramagram was done for the first time, it was to plan accordingly for future excavation also. Keeping this view in mind and the physical feature of the site the main stupa was encased into a square of 50 x 50 mt. and all other grid of 50 mt. squares are planned. The main grid has been marked with four bench marks already. All other grids of 50x50 mt. will be laid down and the grids will be further divided into 25 x 25 mt. each into four again and they are numbered ABCD in clockwise. Then the trenches of individual ABCD will further be marked with 25 trenches of 4x4 mt. with 1 mt. balk in between. These trenches are numbered as ABCDE and A1A, A1B, A1C, A1D, A1E, and so on. (drawing no.1)

Now for reference the biggest trench of 50x50 will be numbered numerically 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on. Second trench of 25x25 mt. with ABCD and third with 4x4 mt. will be numbered as A B C D E, A1A, A1B, A1C, A1D, A1E and A2A, A2B, A2C, A2D, A2E and so on till A4A, A4B, A4C, A4D, A4E, in reverse direction. Our trenches this year fall on A to A3A. The trenches opened are thus A, A1B, A2A, A2B, A2C. (drawing no.2)

Following the diagram above, a trial excavation was conducted and it was reconfirmed that the picture shown in the survey is a monastic complex. The monastic complex is only four meters away from the stupa plinth.

Therefore the excavator believes that he has hit the monastery which was described by Fa-hien and

Hiuen Tsiang. Total of five trenches were opened and enough data of a monastery was recovered. The following findings are recorded.

The monastic complex measures 13.5x13.5 mt. having 2.40 mt. wide rooms and the courtyard of 4.80 mt. square. The size of the wall is 115 cm. to 125 cm. thick and brick sizes are of 6x19x30 cm., and 6x23x36 cm. Surprisingly no evidence of roof tiles are recovered showing the roofs to be covered by organic materials most probably the thatch. (drawing no.2)

Being a Sramanera monastery the complex is comparatively a smaller one and it tallies with the description of Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsiang, who saw there only few monks living.

Of the special finds, a stone used by the monks as needle sharpener and few decorative bricks are collected. (Plate I no. 4)

No special antiquities are encountered except a small copper or bronze rod. The monastic complex is merely four metres away from the stupa which is divided by a roughly paved road with brick bats.

There are even older deposits below the foundation of the monastery from which came out the fire places, the black and red ware with greyware potsherds as well. (Plate III, no.2) The excavation continues. There was successive floods after the abandonment of the monastery.

The fall of the bricks from the stupa is recorded after the abandonment of the monastery and before the major flood activity occurred. A huge layer of flood deposit is seen in all the trenches. When did the flood occurred is still a question mark. It may be dated later on. (Plate III, no. 1)

Since this is only the start of the excavation. We hope that the further cutting of the trenches will give additional evidences of contemporary culture which we believe would go beyond 5/6 th century. B.C.

These are just the preliminary result of the first trial trench. Further detailed excavation is planned for the year to come. The complete monastic complex will be exposed after it is archaeologically renovated.

With this the writer feels that we are able to add one more plus point in identification of Ramagrama stupa. Additional evidences will come out in further excavations in years to come.

The site is located in 83°41'05" E and 27°29'55" N on the height of 107 m from Msl. It lies on south east of the Head quarter of Nawalparasi district at a distance of 5.3 Km.

(I am thankful to Mr. Krishna Bahadur K.C. of L.D.T. and Purna Bahadur Shrestha, Pravin Shrestha and Balkrishna Subedi for their untiring cooperation during the field work of Excavation)

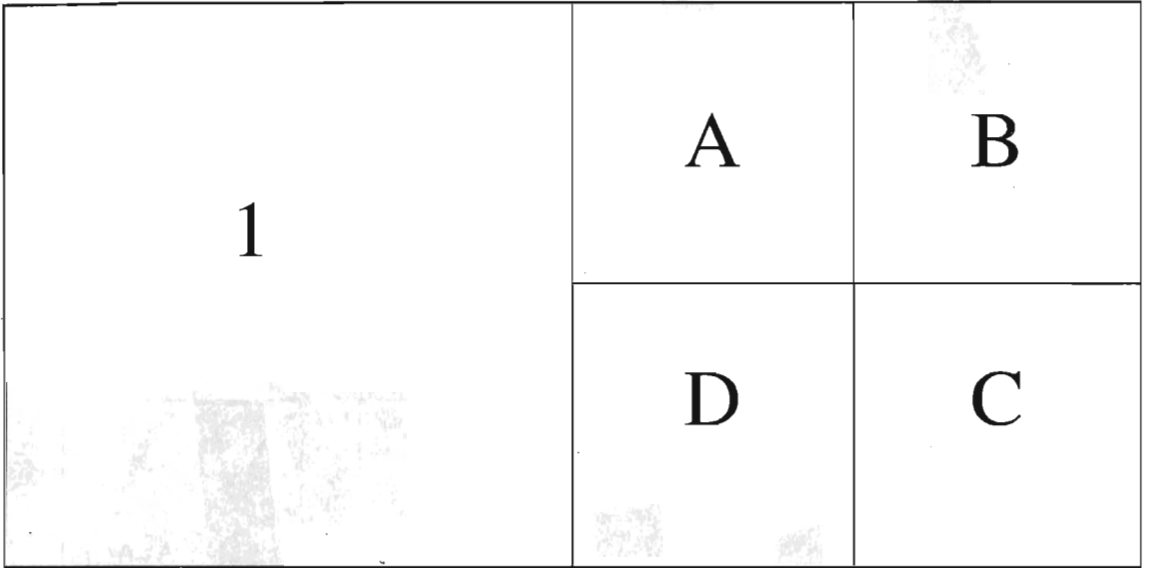
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TRENCH PLAN

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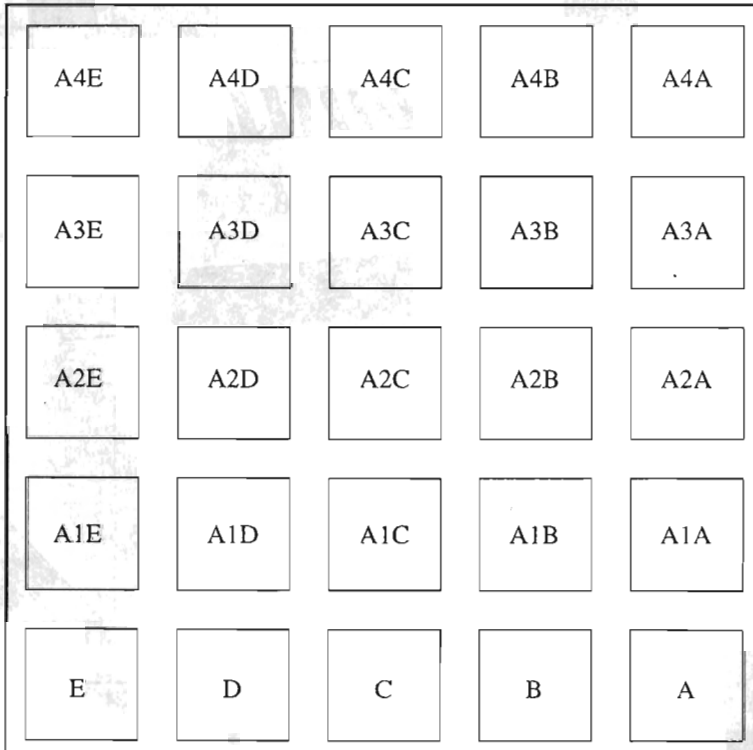
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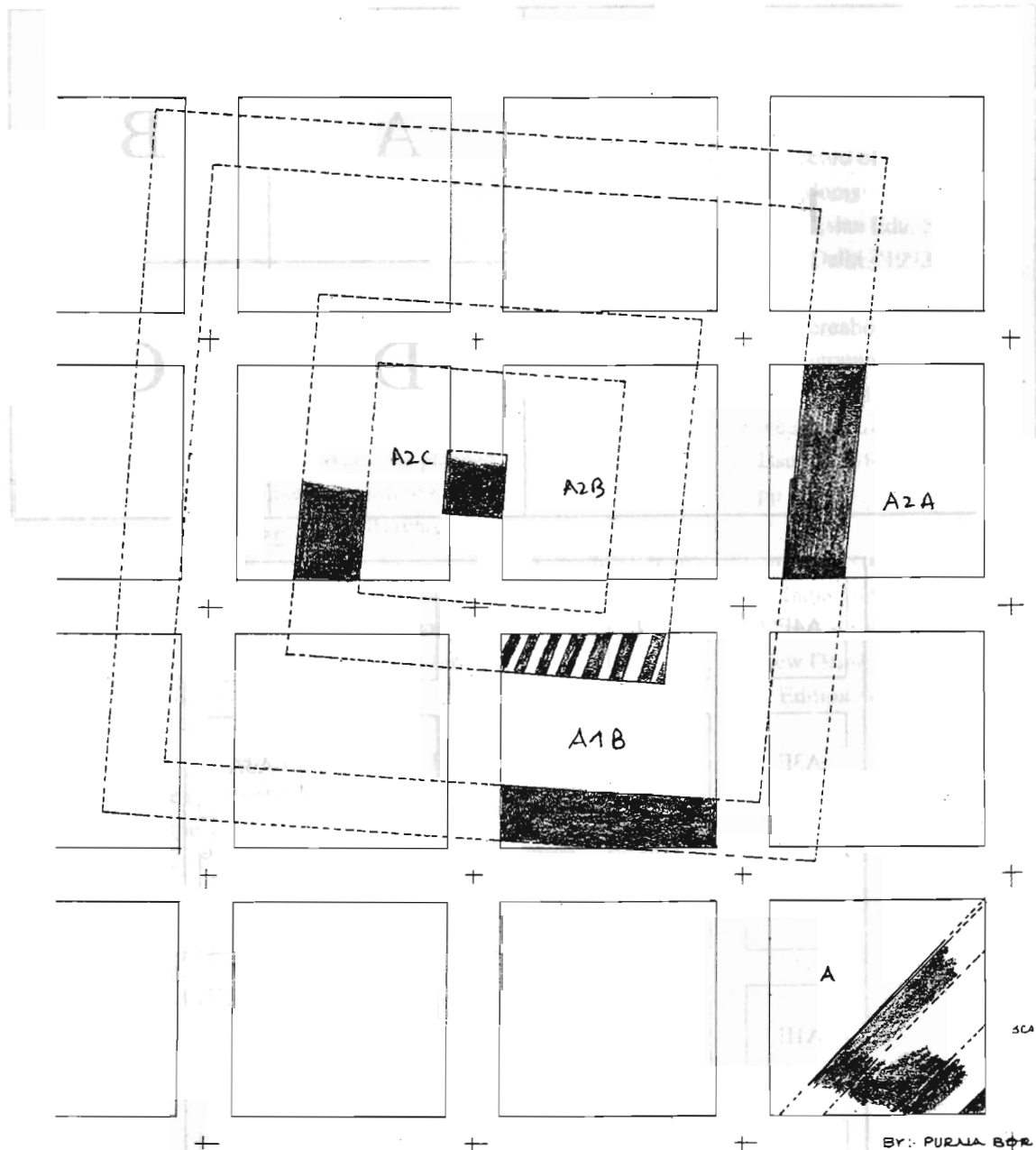
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RAMAGRAMA MONASTIC COMPLEX EXCAVATION 1999

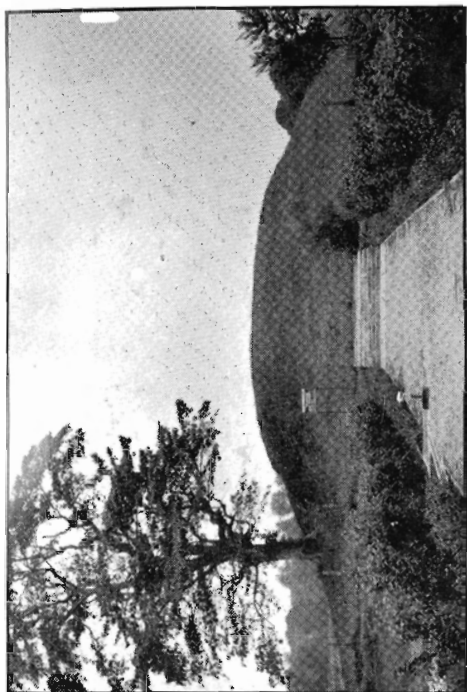


 Exposed walls

 Ghost wall

 Stupa plinth

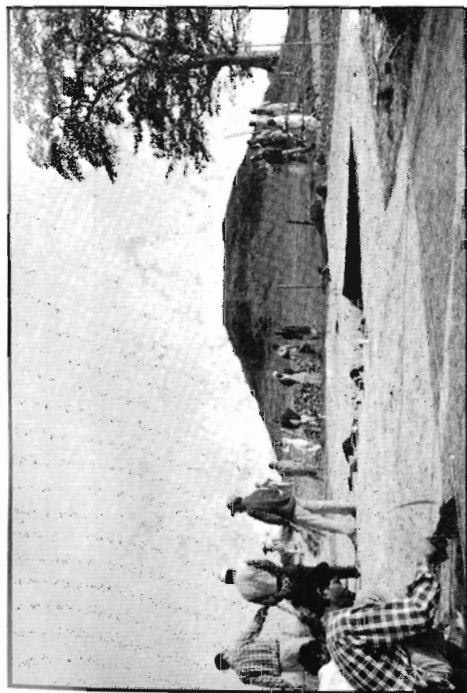
  Projected walls, Not yet exposed.



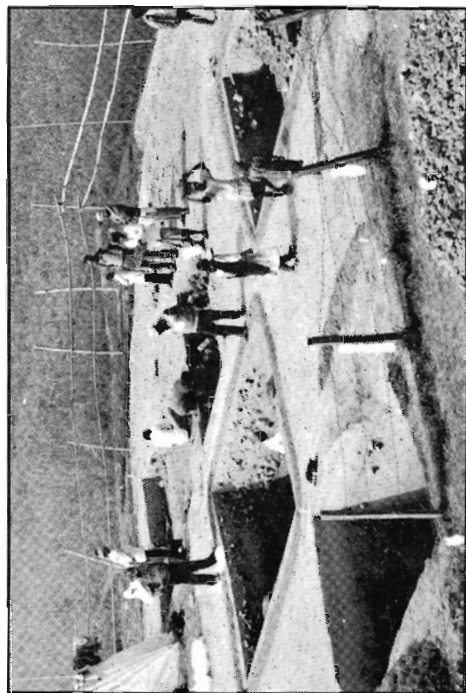
2. The stupa from south



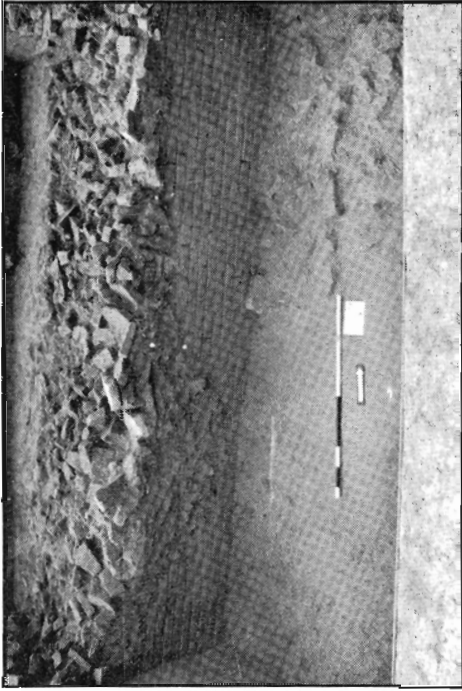
4. Archaeologist at the work



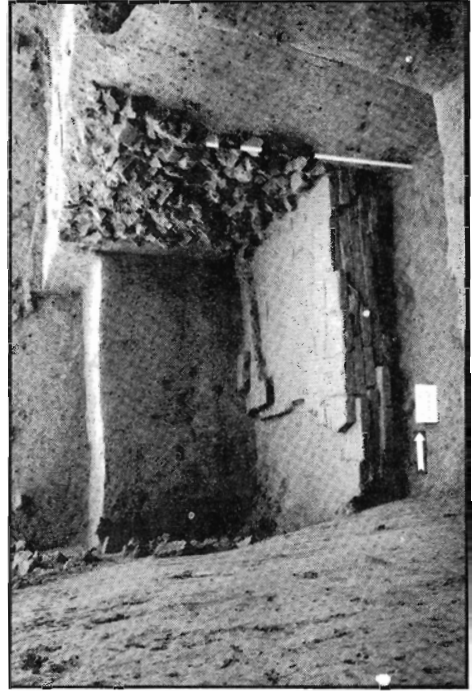
1. Excavation site and Ramagrama stupa



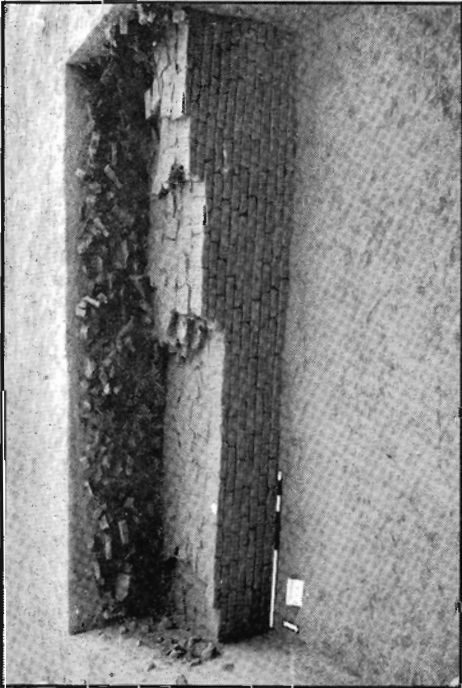
3. Over view of the trenches from top of stupa



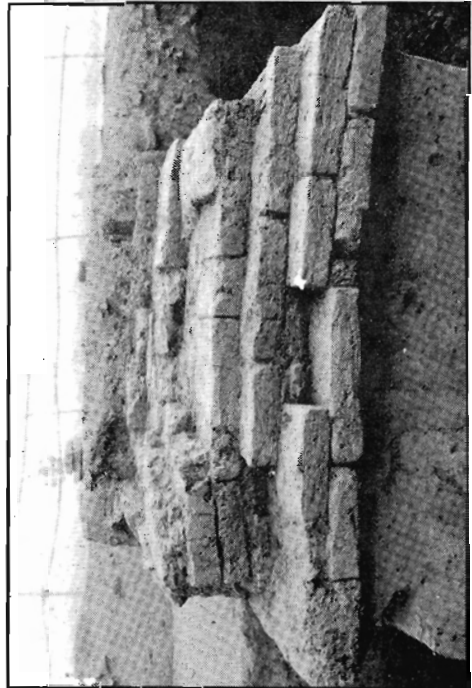
2. A wall structure of the monastery (east side)



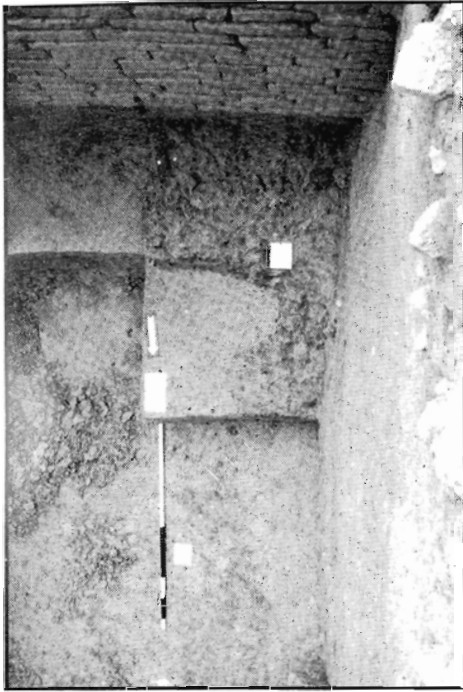
4. Original wall left after brick robbing (west side)



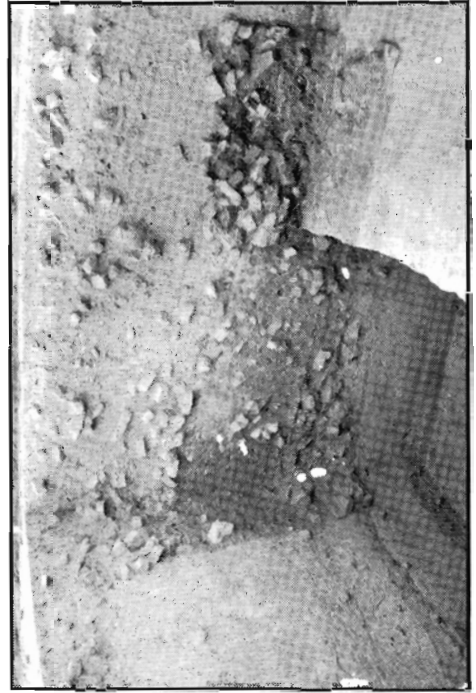
1. A wall structure of the monastery (south side)



3. Central structure in the courtyard (view from south)



2. Fire place inside the monastic room



4. Remains of a ghost wall



1. Outer plinth remains of main stupa (north west side)



3. Men at work in Excavation



2. A decorative brick (probably from main stupa)



4. A stone used by monks as needle sharpener



1. A piece of decorative brick (probably from the main stupa)



3. Potteries in situ