

# Ancient monuments in Bangladesh

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Faltering footsteps of pre-historic man towards gradual advancement of higher technology to control his environment in which he lived, is virtually an unknown story in Bangladesh. Although stray stone-age artifacts and about half a dozen Neolithic fossil axes, found in excavation at Mainamati in Comilla, significantly indicate the existence of pre-historic man here — like the border regions of West Bengal and Assam where more determined survey has revealed large number of sites of their habitation, — but the picture in Bangladesh is extremely nebulous.

In early historic period, however, we are on a comparatively more firm ground. It formed part of the extensive Mauryan empire, in 3rd Century B.C., — then known as 'Pundra Varadhan Bhukti', — comprising entire triangular delta from the snow-capped Himalaya in north to the Bay of Bengal in the south. On east, it bordered on the highland regions of Assam and Burmah and on West, extended upto the confines of Magadha in south Bihar. From 3rd century B.C. to the end of 12th century A.D. northern and western part of Bengal was successively ruled by the Mauryans, the Guptas, the Palas and the Sena rulers, till the latter's rule was terminated by the muslim invaders in 1201 A.D. However, the southern and eastern Bengal was ruled independently since 8th century A.D. by the powerful Sena and the Chandra rulers of 'Samatata' Kingdom, — a low moist country on the trans-Meghna region, comprising roughly, the modern districts of Comilla, Noakhali and part of Chittagong. The great Pala empire in the north

lasted for about four hundred years from 8th to 11th centuries, during which period, unprecedented artistic and architectural activities flourished in Bengal with the establishment of a long spell of peace and prosperity in the country. Pala rulers were Buddhist, as also the contemporary Deva and Chandra Rulers of Samatata in south. Under their patronage Buddhist institutions flourished rapidly in the country. Everywhere within their empire prosperous monasteries, stupas and temples sprang up. Remains of a number of these monasteries (Viharas) and Stupas have been excavated and exposed in recent years, — both in the north as well as in the south, from which it is possible to study the mature phase of development of the art and architecture of the period.

Excavations in last 50 years have revealed a large number of ancient monuments of the early historic period on account of which may very briefly be noticed here.

**MAHASTAN.** The extensive remains of Mahasthangraha, occupying the western bank of Karatoya in Bogra district, represents the earliest city-site in Bangladesh, identified with ancient 'Pundranagara' of the Maurya, Gupta and Pala epigraphic records. It was an important provincial capital city of these rulers from 3rd century BC to 12th century AD. The city ruins cover a fortified, irregular oblong enclosure, about 5000 feet long and 4500 feet across, with an average elevation of 15 feet from the surrounding ground. Excava-

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tion has unfolded thickly built and rebuilt dwellings, houses, Hindu and Buddhist temples and the great defence wall, at various points of the citadel. Locally known as 'Khodai Pather Mound', 'King Paramurama's Place', 'Mankalin Kunda', 'Bairagir Bhita', 'Govinda Bhita' etc. Apart from the structural remains, a large collection of antiquities of different periods were discovered in excavation such as: the Punch-marked and cast copper coins, a distinctive glossy black pottery of the Mauryan period known as NBP, terracotta figurines and plaques of the Sunga, Gupta and Pala periods various metal and stone objects of daily use and other miscellaneous minor objects of art. Likewise, excavation on a number of ancient mounds among a thickly dotted ruins of the city's extensive suburb, — covering an area of about 5 miles radius — has exposed many temples and monastery remains. Among these the honeycombed podium of 'Lakhindere Medh' at Gokul and the monasteries and shrines at Vasu-Bihar are noteworthy.

But the most outstanding Buddhist establishment, discovered in regular excavation, is the gigantic Temple and Monastery at Paharpur in Rajshahi district, identified from inscription, as the famous 'Samapuri Vihara' of the grand Pala emperor, Dharmapala (770-810 A.D.). It is the largest single Vihara in the sub-continent. Nearly square in ground plan, measuring 922' x 919', this grand monastery with 177 living cells for monks, arranged in regular rows of the four arms, minor chapel and a multitude of other ancillary buildings within its extensive premises — is dominated by a lofty pyramidal cruciform

temple in the centre of the enclosure. Its imposing architecture profoundly influenced the subsequent temple architecture of south East Asia, especially Burmah and Java, the basement wall of the great terraced temple is adorned, curiously, with 63 Brahmanical stone images, above which runs — in lower two traces — rows of terracotta plaques still 2000' in situ depicting the folk-art of the period. This strikingly rich plastic art portrays all conceivable subjects which people the minds of the simple rural artists: human and animal motifs, floral and geometric devices, divine and semi-divine beings and often grotesque composite figures.

**MAINAMATI.** On the Lalmai — Mainamati hills in Comilla, exploration has revealed over 50 ancient sites dotting the low hill range — mostly representing Buddhist architectural remains of the 9th to 12th century AD. Regular excavation at a number of sites, locally known as "Salban Vinara", "Kotilla Mura", "Ananda Rajar Bari", "Charpatra Mura", and "Mainamati Ranir Bari" mound has — apart from exposing Buddhist monasteries, shrines and Stupa remains — also yielded a rich collection of stone and bronze image of various Buddhist Gods and Goddesses, coins, Royal Copper Plate Grants, terracotta Plaques, Jewellery, pots and pens and other miscellaneous objects of daily use which reflect the cultural attainment of the period. The excavation has also shed a flood of light on the hitherto unknown history of "Samatata" and their rulers. A complete genealogy of the Deva and Chandra rulers have been reconstructed from a dozen of their Royal Copper Plate Grants and coins.

At Kotilla Mura site 3 stupas have been exposed in a row,