

Mainamati excavations : the finds

The Mainamati excavations have yielded an exceptionally rich harvest of valuable antiquities including 11 lengthy copper-plate grants, shorter image-inscriptions, over 400 gold and silver coins, innumerable terracotta and backed clay seals and sealings, more than a dozen Neolithic stone axes and chisels, an extraordinarily large and valuable collection of sculptural pieces in stone, bronze and terracotta. M. HARUNUR RASHID, in this third instalment of his article, writes on the epigraphical records, Neolithic tools and other sculptural finds of the Mainamati excavations.

Excavations at Salban Vihara have exposed a number of subsidiary buildings including a community dining establishment, an oblong, a pillared and a square shrine with exquisitely moulded plinths, two chapels and a number of votive stupas inside the monastery, and an interesting shrine with a massive cella, columned terrace and colonnades outside.

The latter monument differs from both the cruciform and oblong types and seems to represent an individual style not hitherto observed, probably indicating a further stage in the process of transformation of the Buddhist stupa a Hindu temple.

Kutilla Mura Stupas: Kutilla Mura, the second excavated site, is situated in the northern part of the ridge. Its ancient remains, the most monumental in Mainamati, occupy the highest mound in the area. Two seasons' diggings here have revealed the layout of three principal stupas on the hill-top which dominate the site with a commanding view of the countryside, and a number of subsidiary stupas, votive shrines and chaitya halls built around them, all enclosed by a massive boundary wall. Excavation work here is still incomplete and much remains to be cleared yet including an attached monastery.

In form and style, the Kutilla Mura monuments differ basically from those of Salban Vihara and other sites. They represent the traditional, while Salban Vihara and others, an evolved style. The three main stupas here standing in a row apparently represent the three jewels (Tri ratna) of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma and Samgha. The foundation of the middle stupa was laid in the form of a Dharma-cakra, its hub being represented by a deep shaft, and the spokes were formed by eight box-chambers where innumerable tiny terracotta and clay votive stupas and sealings were enshrined. Associated with these relics were found large pieces of a class of fine Buddhist sculpture in soft grey shale not known from any other site. The foundation shafts of other stupas also contained similar

relics of tiny votive stupas and sealings.

The Kutilla Mura monuments fall into three main periods, the earliest dating from the Khadga times (7th century A.D.) or even earlier. The terminal date of the site is suggested by an interesting find, a gold coin of the last Abbasid Caliph, al-Mustassim billah (1242-1258 A.D.), recovered from the debris of an upper level of the site.

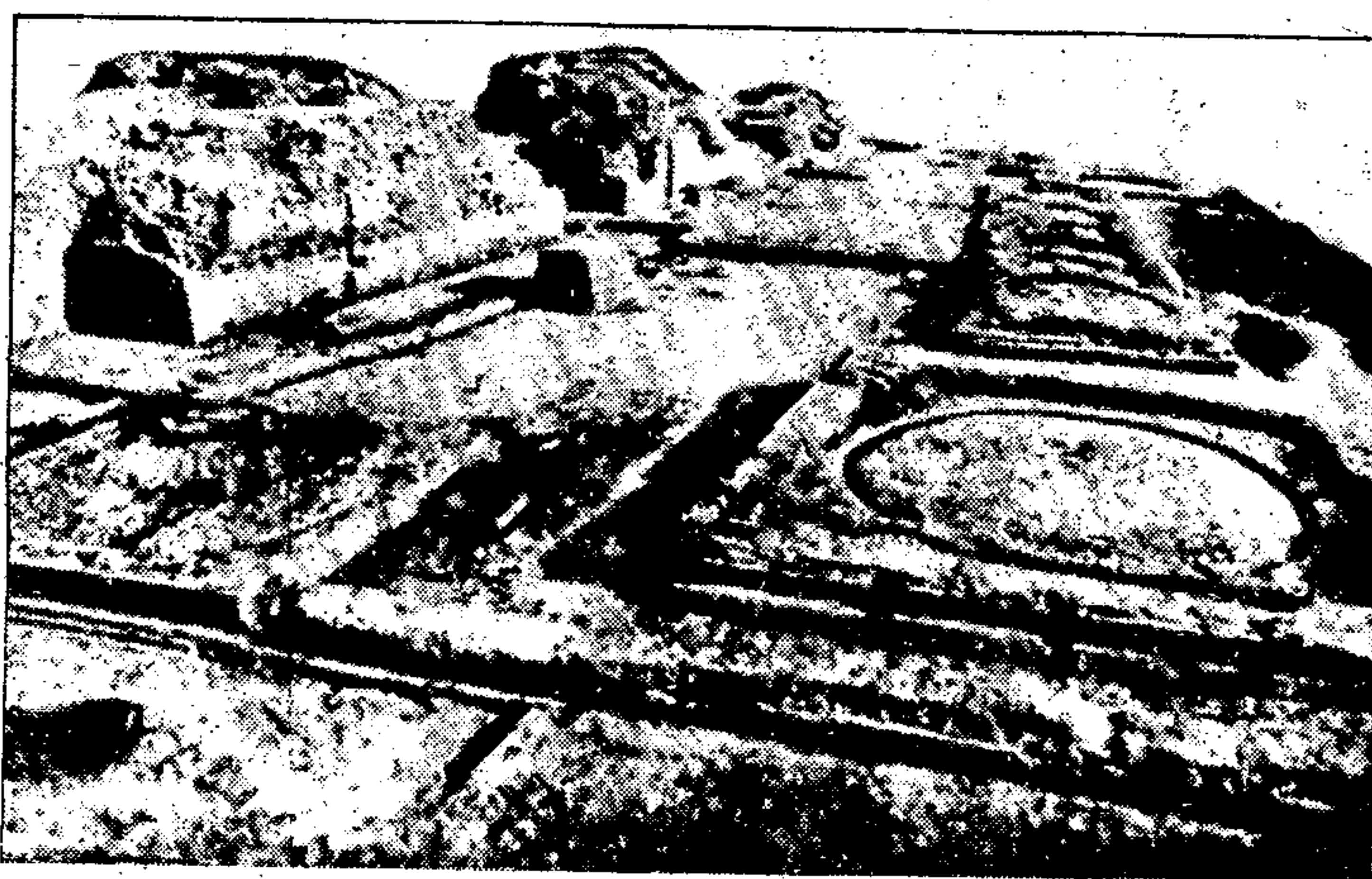
No fewer than five epigraphical records discovered in this very area refer to a certain 'Ratna-traya' (three-jewels) establishment in the vicinity of Devaparvata, the Samatata capital, which was undoubtedly located on or near the Mainamati ridge. On the basis of our present knowledge, we may reasonably suggest the identification of that establishment with the Kutilla Mura monuments.

Charpatra Mura: Charpatra Mura, the third excavated site, is situated near Kutilla Mura in

the northern part of the Mainamati ridge. Here, in a short season of a rescue operation during military construction work, the remains of an interesting small shrine, 105 feet by 55 feet, were uncovered. It has two distinct parts, an open pillared hall in the front and a cella at the back. The exterior of the latter was given a variegated effect by a combination of symmetrical projections and offsets at lateral and vertical planes. In this monument a few important objects were discovered: a brass pot and four copper-plate grants, three issued by the last two Chandra kings (11th century), and the fourth by Sri-Viradharadeva, a local Hindu ruler of 12th-13th century A.D. belonging probably to the Later-Deva dynasty of eastern Bengal.

The plates mention a 'Ladaha Madhava' (Visnu) temple. On the basis of our investigations and the available evidence, this temple may now fairly be identified with the excavated shrine at Charpatra Mura. It was apparently built by Chandra king Sri-Ladahachandra-deva (c. 1000-1020 A.D.) in the beginning of the 11th century A.D. Two of the land-grants were issued by him in favour of that temple.

Mainamati's Palace Mound: The ruins of what is popularly called Queen Mainamati's palace, the most extensive in the area, lie sprawling over a large undulating mound situated at the northernmost end of the Mainamati ridge. Excavation was discontinued here after the limited initial stage. In view of the present stringency of our financial grants, there is no prospect of resuming the work soon. This is unfortunate, specially because there are indications that, if systematically excavated, this extensive settlement-site may reveal clues to the location and identification of Devaparvata, the Samatata capital during the Rata and Early-Deva times.



The three main stupas at Kutilla Mura and the basements of a row of votive stupas at their back.

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destroyed to build a military parade ground there, and we have just recovered a fine stone-plaque inscription also from the same area.

The excavation at Ananda Vihara is still in its initial stages, but the results already obtained indicate that the site may reveal interesting information regarding not only the Early-Deva but also the earlier Khadga and Rata periods, the remains of which are at present hidden below later structures at Salban Vihara and other site. More significantly, as our discoveries and field observations suggest, the present investigations may lead to the solution of many of our unresolved archaeological problems. But the digging operations are seriously hampered by acute paucity of funds. The very limited scale in which the work is being carried out at present is distressingly out of all proportions to the size and magnitude of the site.

The work done so far has revealed the outlines of a large, 650 feet square monastery of the same type as exposed at Salban Vihara. It has similar rows of monastic cells neatly arranged in four wings round a shrine standing majestically in the centre of a wide, open courtyard. The single entrance of the monastery in the centre of the north wing, like that of Salban Vihara, is set in a massive front facade with gaurd rooms on the flanks projecting outwards. This establishment is considerably larger and more elaborate than that of Salban Vihara. Its outer wall is equally massive but less monotonous, due partly to the simple but pleasing decorations of a series of offsets and mouldings running round its entire outer face, and partly to the ornamentation of the plinths and cornices with carved and moulded bricks. The verandah wall is also embellished with projecting mouldings. Deep diggings both inside and outside a few cells have revealed thick accumulation of cultural debris associated with a succession of repair and rebuilding phases indicating a long period of intensive occupation at the site. The building remains, particularly in the lower levels, are well constructed with better materials and excellently preserved. The establishment appears to have a very large number of subsidiary buildings which are yet to be uncovered, and much work remains to be done yet.

The Finds: The Mainamati excavations have yielded an exceptionally rich harvest of valuable antiquities including 11 lengthy copper-plate grants, shorter image-inscriptions, over 400 gold and silver coins, innumerable terracotta and backed-clay seals and sealings, more than a dozen Neolithic stone axes and chisels, an extraordinarily large and valuable collection of sculptural pieces in stone, bronze and terracotta, semi-precious stone and terracotta beads, gold, silver and bronze ornaments, architectural pieces and decorative terracottas, metal and earthenware pots, pans, vases and utensils, oil lamps and a variety of other materials of everyday use, all housed now in the local museum. The majority of these objects come from Salban Vihara, the most thoroughly and systematically excavated site near the museum. The collection from the other sites where the operations are either incomplete or still continuing is smaller, but by no means less important or interesting. Together, they contribute significantly to our knowledge of ancient Vanga-Samatata, covering a period of about seven hundred years from the sixth to thirteenth centuries A.D. The primary significance of this collection lies in the fact that it represents the only available stratified material from South-East Bengal providing, for the first time, a dependable archaeological basis for the reconstruction of the history and chronology of this region. In our limited space here, it is impossible to deal with this vast material even in a summary fashion. We will, therefore, touch upon the most important objects only. Among these objects, however, three particular records: the epigraphical records, Neolithic tools and sculptural finds are of outstanding interest and deserve a special mention.

MORE TO FOLLOW

(7th-8th cent. A.D.). N.K. Bhat-tasali identified it with the buried remains of Chandi Mura, a medium-sized isolated mound at the southern end of the ridge, on insufficient grounds and on no archaeological basis at all.

Ananda Vihara: Largest among the Mainamati monuments with a concentration of stupas and monasteries all around, Ananda Vihara was evidently the centre of the local Buddhist establishments and the focus of the last great Buddhist university of the sub-continent which developed here from the 7th century onward. This giant establishment together with an old water tank, the largest in the area, was presumably built by Sri-Ananda-deva, the third, and the greatest ruler of the Early-Deva dynasty, whose name they still bear, sometime in the last quarter of the 7th century A.D. The remains of this large building complex including a magnificent central shrine and a number of subsidiary structures, were damaged beyond repair by the military contractors and brick-hunters during the Second World War and disturbed further by the builders of the Cantonment a decade or so later. The site has indeed been so thoroughly and systematically stripped that its later phases are now almost entirely gone. Most ruthlessly plundered was the central shrine which had rich decorations of ornamental and moulded bricks and terracotta plaques running round the basement. A hoard of 63 silver coins, a copper-plate inscription (the 'Calcutta plate of Bhavadaya') and innumerable terracotta plaques and bronze images were removed from here. Except a few of these antiquities now lying in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, there is no trace of the rest. Incidentally, another copper-plate inscription was recently discovered at Rupban Kanya Mura, the adjacent site, partly

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