

BONES of the BUDDHA

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In Northern India in 1898, British landowner, Willie Peppe, set his workers digging on a mysterious hill with no idea what they may find. What they discovered led to a real life Indiana Jones tale, brimming with deception, priceless treasure, intrepid adventurers, and international politics. Just 20 feet below ground, Peppe and his workers made an amazing discovery: a huge stone coffer containing five reliquary jars, over 1,000 separate jewels, and some ash and bone. Most remarkable of all, they found an inscription on one of the jars that appeared to say it contained the remains of the Buddha himself, who died 2,500 years ago. This discovery seemed to be the most extraordinary find in Indian archaeology. However, doubt and scandal have hung over this amazing find for more than 100 years because one of those involved in the dig, German archaeologist Dr. Anton Fuhrer, was revealed to be the greatest archaeological hoaxer of the age.

Fuhrer had sold forged Buddha relics to a credulous Burmese monk, he had falsified reports, and worst of all, he had faked ancient Indian inscriptions. Anxious to quash the scandal, India's British Government brushed the whole remarkable find under the carpet, giving the ashes and bones away to the King of Siam, thus carrying favor with a strategic ally in the region. But rumors of Fuhrer's involvement have dogged the find ever since. Had he added objects to the coffer, or colluded with Mr. Peppe or other officials? Most serious of all, had he faked the all-important inscription?

Renowned historian Charles Allen sets out to solve this extraordinary mystery once and for all. At Calcutta's Indian Museum, Allen meets the world's foremost expert on ancient Indian inscriptions, Professor Harry Falk, and they examine the vital inscription. Falk believes that the find is genuine, but another mystery emerges. The pot and the inscription cannot be from the time of the Buddha, but must have been made at least 150 years later. How can these mutually contradictory facts be reconciled? To find out, Allen boards an Indian train and goes in search of the story of the man who became the Buddha. He visits Bodghaya, the "navel of the world" for 600 million Buddhists worldwide, and Kushinagar, where the Buddha was cremated and his remains split into eight portions. Could the most precious portion of all, that buried by his own clan, the Sakyas, be buried at Piprahwa? If so, who buried it there? When did they bury it, and why?

In search of answers, Allen heads to one of the country's most remarkable architectural sites, Sanchi. With its four 25-foot-high carved gateways and massive stupa, it is one of the wonders of the world. The man who built it, Emperor Ashoka, converted India to Buddhism, and transformed the nation with a huge Buddhist commemorative monument building program. He used India's first ever script, Brahmi—the same script as was used for the vital inscription—to disseminate his new message on extraordinary rock and pillar edicts that have survived over 2,000 years. But was Ashoka responsible for the extraordinary tomb at Piprahwa? Evidence from a later dig at the site in the 1970s provides vital clues, and leads to an extraordinary conclusion.

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CREDITS

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