



BONES OF THE BUDDHA

Do the jewels, bones and ashes found in an Indian tomb in 1898 mark the final resting place of the Buddha himself? Or was it all an elaborate hoax?

When a Colonial estate manager, Willie Peppe, set his workers digging at a mysterious hill at Piprahwa, in Northern India, in 1898, he had no idea what they'd discover. Weeks of digging revealed a huge brick dome. When they dug down, they made the most extraordinary discovery in Indian archaeology. 20 feet below the surface was a vast stone coffer – the lid alone weighing a quarter of a ton. When they heaved off the lid, they found 5 soapstone jars, and over 1000 separate jewels, along with intricately made gold and silver objects. What no one noticed at the time were the fragments of bone and ash mixed in with it all. *Their* origins were to prove even more incredible. Because when an inscription in tiny unknown letters around the neck of one of the jars was translated by experts, it revealed that the remains were those of the *Buddha himself*, buried by his own 'clan', the Sakyas. Or were they? Doubt and scandal have hung over this amazing find for over 100 years. One of those involved in the dig, German archaeologist Dr. Anton Fuhrer, was revealed to be the greatest archaeological hoaxer of the age. He had sold bogus Buddha relics to a credulous Burmese monk; he had falsified reports; 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 currying favour with a strategic ally in the region. But rumours of Fuhrer's involvement have dogged the find ever since. Had he added objects to the coffer; had he colluded with Mr Peppe, even with other officials too? Most serious of all, had he faked the all-important inscription?

Renowned historian, Charles Allen, author of 25 books on India, sets out to solve this extraordinary mystery once and for all. He visits the site of the epic discovery in Northern India, and also the crumbling ruins of Birdpore House, where the Peppe's once lived. He meets Neil Peppe (grandson of Willie Peppe who made the find). Neil is still in possession of some of the remarkable jewels. At Calcutta's Indian Museum, Charles Allen meets the world's foremost expert on ancient Indian inscriptions, Professor Harry Falk of Berlin. And they examine the vital inscription. Falk's verdict? It is genuine. But another mystery now 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, Charles Allen boards an Indian train, and goes in search of the story of the real flesh and blood 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 8 portions. Could the most precious portion of all, that buried by his own 'clan', the Sakyas, be buried at Piprawa? If so, who buried it there, when and why? In search of answers, Charles Allen heads to the heart of India, and 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', says Allen. The man who built, Emperor Ashoka, converted India to Buddhism, and transformed the nation with a huge stupa building programme. He used India's first ever script, Brahmi – the same script as is used for the vital inscription - to disseminate his new message on extraordinary rock and pillar edicts that have survived over 2000 years. But was Asoka responsible for the extraordinary tomb at Piprahwa? Evidence from a later dig at the site in the 1970's provides vital clues, and leads to an extraordinary conclusion. In all likelihood, this amazing find *does* mark the final resting of the Buddha – a discovery of huge importance for the world's 600 million Buddhists.