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978-1-108-05645-8 - The Ancient Geography of India: The Buddhist Period, Including the Campaigns of Alexander, and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang

Alexander Cunningham

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The Ancient Geography of India

'Ancient geography' refers here to India's Buddhist period up to the seventh century CE, during which time Buddhism was the subcontinent's dominant religion. First published in 1871, this detailed study covering this period was written by Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814–93), who served as an officer in the East India Company and then went on to found and direct the Archaeological Survey of India. He had become an expert on the country's ancient geography owing to his experience as a surveyor. In this work he draws on material ranging from the campaigns of Alexander the Great to the travels of the seventh-century Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, who recorded much about India's geographical, political, religious and cultural landscape. Although this book was published as Part I, a subsequent volume on the Muslim period was never completed.

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The Ancient Geography of India

*The Buddhist Period,
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and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang*

ALEXANDER CUNNINGHAM



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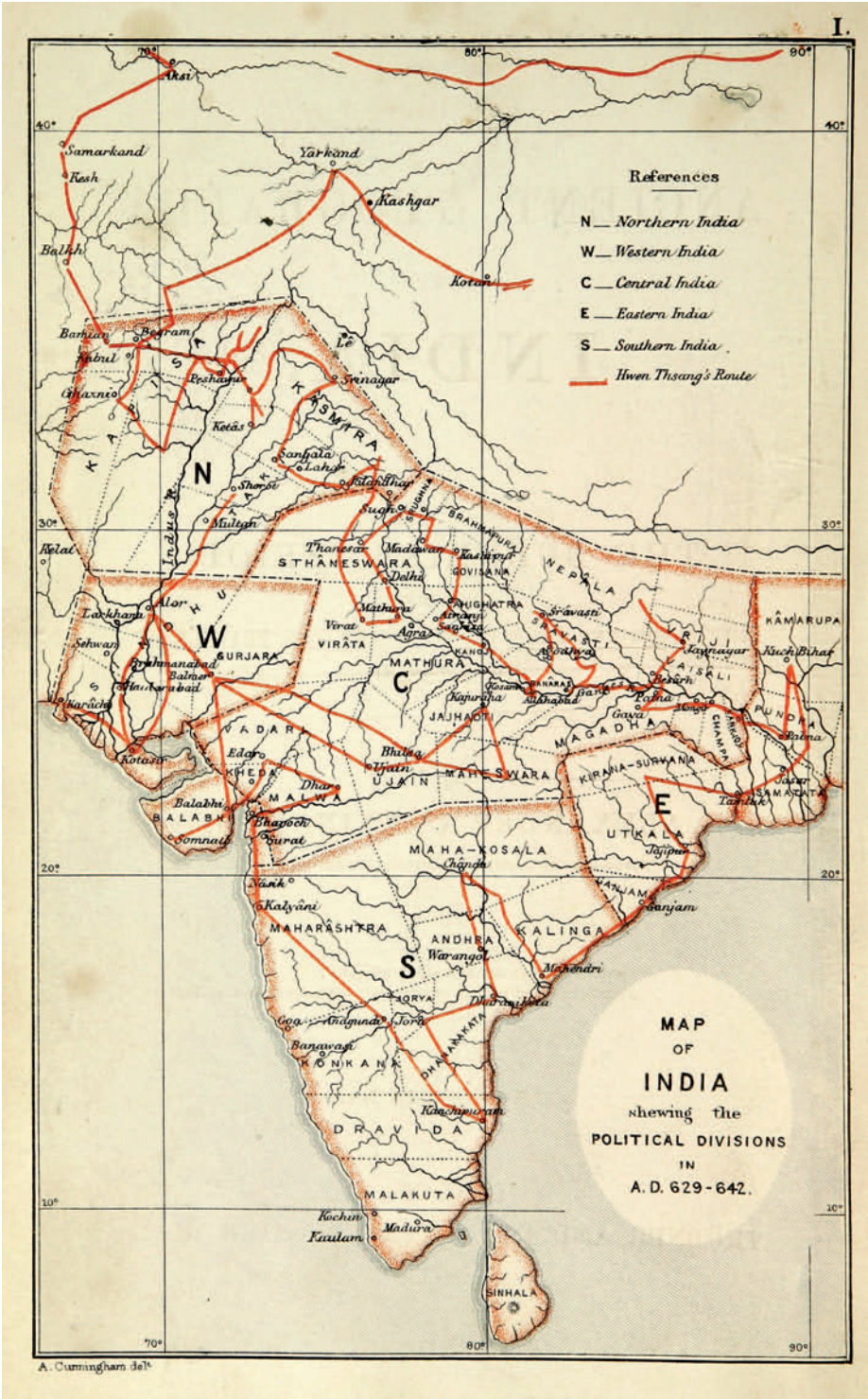
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ANCIENT GEOGRAPHY
OF
INDIA.

I.
THE BUDDHIST PERIOD,
INCLUDING
THE CAMPAIGNS OF ALEXANDER, AND THE TRAVELS OF
HWEN-THSANG.

BY
ALEXANDER CUNNINGHAM,
MAJOR-GENERAL, ROYAL ENGINEERS (BENGAL RETIRED).

~~~~~  
"Verum et terrena demonstratio intelligatur,  
Alexandri Magni vestigis insistamus."—*Phnu Hist. Nat* vi. 17.  
~~~~~

WITH THIRTEEN MAPS.

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TO
MAJOR-GENERAL
SIR H. C. RAWLINSON, K.C.B.
ETC. ETC.,
WHO HAS HIMSELF DONE SO MUCH
TO THROW LIGHT ON
THE ANCIENT GEOGRAPHY OF ASIA,
THIS ATTEMPT
TO ELUCIDATE A PARTICULAR PORTION OF THE SUBJECT
IS DEDICATED
BY HIS FRIEND,
THE AUTHOR.

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PREFACE.

THE Geography of India may be conveniently divided into a few distinct sections, each broadly named after the prevailing religious and political character of the period which it embraces, as the *Brahmanical*, the *Buddhist*, and the *Muhammadian*.

The *Brahmanical* period would trace the gradual extension of the Aryan race over Northern India, from their first occupation of the Panjâb to the rise of Buddhism, and would comprise the whole of the Pre-historic, or earliest section of their history, during which time the religion of the Vedas was the prevailing belief of the country.

The *Buddhist* period, or *Ancient* Geography of India, would embrace the rise, extension, and decline of the Buddhist faith, from the era of Buddha, to the conquests of Mahmud of Ghazni, during the greater part of which time Buddhism was the dominant religion of the country.

The *Muhammadian* period, or *Modern* Geography of India, would embrace the rise and extension of the Muhammadan power, from the time of Mahmud of Ghazni to the battle of Plassey, or about 750 years, during which time the Musalmâns were the paramount sovereigns of India.

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The illustration of the Vedic period has already been made the subject of a separate work by M. Vivien de Saint-Martin, whose valuable essay* on this early section of Indian Geography shows how much interesting information may be elicited from the Hymns of the Vedas, by an able and careful investigator.

The second, or Ancient period, has been partially illustrated by H. H. Wilson, in his ‘*Ariana Antiqua*,’ and by Professor Lassen, in his ‘*Pentapotamia Indica*.’ These works, however, refer only to North-west India; but the Geography of the whole country has been ably discussed by Professor Lassen, in his large work on Ancient India,† and still more fully by M. de Saint-Martin, in two special essays,—the one on the Geography of India, as derived from Greek and Latin sources, and the other in an Appendix to M. Julien’s translation of the Life and Travels of the Chinese pilgrim Hwen Thsang.‡ His researches have been conducted with so much care and success that few places have escaped identification. But so keen is his critical sagacity, that in some cases where the imperfection of our maps rendered actual identification quite impossible, he has indicated the true positions within a few miles.

For the illustration of the third, or Modern period, ample materials exist in the numerous histories of the Muhammadan States of India. No attempt, so far as I am aware, has yet been made to mark the limits of the several independent kingdoms that were established

* ‘*Étude sur la Géographie et les populations primitives du Nord-Ouest de l’Inde, d’après les Hymnes Védiques*.’ Paris, 1859.

† ‘*Indische Alterthumskunde*.’ 4 vols. Bonn.

‡ *Étude sur la Géographie Grecque et Latine de l’Inde*, 1858. M. Julien’s ‘*Hiouen Thsang*,’ vol. iii. p. 251; “*Mémoire Analytique*,” etc.

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in the fifteenth century, during the troubles which followed the invasion of Timur. The history of this period is very confused, owing to the want of a special map, showing the boundaries of the different Muhammadan kingdoms of Delhi, Jonpur, Bengal, Malwa, Gujarât, Sindh, Multân, and Kulbarga, as well as the different Hindu States, such as Gwalior and others, which became independent about the same time.

I have selected the Buddhist period, or Ancient Geography of India, as the subject of the present inquiry, as I believe that the peculiarly favourable opportunities of local investigation which I enjoyed during a long career in India, will enable me to determine with absolute certainty the sites of many of the most important places in India.

My chief guides for the period which I have undertaken to illustrate, are the campaigns of Alexander in the fourth century before Christ, and the travels of the Chinese pilgrim, Hwen Thsang, in the seventh century after Christ. The pilgrimage of this Chinese priest forms an epoch of as much interest and importance for the Ancient History and Geography of India, as the expedition of Alexander the Great. The actual campaigns of the Macedonian conqueror were confined to the valley of the Indus and its tributaries; but the information collected by himself and his companions, and by the subsequent embassies and expeditions of the Seleukide kings of Syria, embraced the whole valley of the Ganges on the north, the eastern and western coasts of the peninsula, and some scattered notices of the interior of the country. This information was considerably extended by the systematic inquiries of Ptolemy, whose account is the more valu-

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able, as it belongs to a period just midway* between the date of Alexander and that of Hwen Thsang, at which time the greater part of North-west India had been subjected by the Indo-Scythians.

With Ptolemy, we lose the last of our great classical authorities; and, until lately, we were left almost entirely to our own judgment in connecting and arranging the various geographical fragments that lie buried in ancient inscriptions, or half hidden in the vague obscurity of the Purânas. But the fortunate discovery of the travels of several Chinese pilgrims in the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries of the Christian era, has thrown such a flood of light upon this hitherto dark period, that we are now able to see our way clearly to the general arrangement of most of the scattered fragments of the Ancient Geography of India.

The Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hian was a Buddhist priest, who travelled through India from the banks of the Upper Indus to the mouth of the Ganges, between the years 399 and 413 A.D. Unfortunately his journal is very concise, and is chiefly taken up with the description of the sacred spots and objects of his religion, but as he usually gives the bearings and distances of the chief places in his route, his short notices are very valuable. The travels of the second Chinese pilgrim, Sung-Yun, belong to the year 502 A.D., but as they were confined to the Kabul valley and North-west Panjâb, they are of much less importance, more

* Campaign of Alexander, B.C. 330, and Ptolemy's 'Geography,' A.D. 150, or 480 years later. Beginning of Hwen Thsang's travels in India, A.D. 630, or just 480 years after Ptolemy.

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especially as his journal is particularly meagre in geographical notices.*

The third Chinese pilgrim, Hwen Thsang, was also a Buddhist priest, who spent nearly fifteen years of his life in India in studying the famous books of his religion, and in visiting all the holy places of Buddhism. For the translation of his travels we are wholly indebted to M. Stanislas Julien, who with unwearied resolution devoted his great abilities for no less than twenty years to the acquirement of the Sanskrit and Chinese languages for this special purpose.† The period of Hwen Thsang's travels extended from A.D. 629 to 645. During that time he visited most of the great cities throughout the country, from Kabul and Kashmir to the mouths of the Ganges and Indus, and from Nepâl to Kâncipura near Madras. The pilgrim entered Kabul from the north-west, viâ Bamian, about the end of May, A.D. 630, and after many wanderings and several long halts, crossed the Indus at Ohind in April of the following year. He spent several months in Taxila for the purpose of visiting the holy places of Buddhism, and then proceeded to Kashmir, where he stayed for two whole years to study some of the more learned works of his religion. On his journey eastward he visited the ruins of *Sangala*, so famous in the history of Alexander, and after a stay of fourteen months in *Chinapati*, and of four months in *Jâlandhara*, for the further study of his religion he crossed the Satej in the autumn of A.D. 635. From thence his onward course was more devious, as several times he

* The travels of both of these pilgrims have been most carefully and ably translated by the Rev. S. Beal.

† Max Müller's 'Buddhism and Buddhist Pilgrims,' p. 30.

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retraced his steps to visit places which had been left behind in his direct easterly route. Thus, after having reached Mathura he returned to the north-west, a distance of 200 miles to *Thānesar*, from whence he resumed his easterly route viâ *Srughna* on the Jumna, and *Gangadwāra* on the Ganges to *Ahichhatra*, the capital of Northern *Panchāla*, or Rohilkhand. He next recrossed the Ganges to visit the celebrated cities of *Sankisa*, *Kanoj*, and *Kosāmbi* in the Doāb, and then turning northward into Oudh he paid his devotions at the holy places of *Ayodhya* and *Srāvasti*. From thence he resumed his easterly route to visit the scenes of Buddha's birth and death at *Kapilavastu* and *Kusinagara*; and then once more returned to the westward to the holy city of *Banāras*, where Buddha first began to teach his religion. Again resuming his easterly route he visited the famous city of *Vaisāli* in Tirhūt, from whence he made an excursion to Nepāl, and then retracing his steps to Vaisāli he crossed the Ganges to the ancient city of *Pātaliputra*, or Palibothra. From thence he proceeded to pay his devotions at the numerous holy places around Gaya, from the sacred fig-tree at *Bodh Gaya*, under which Buddha sat for five years in mental abstraction, to the craggy hill of *Giriyek*, where Buddha explained his religious views to the god Indra. He next visited the ancient cities of *Kusāgarapura* and *Rajagriha*, the early capitals of Magadha, and the great monastery of *Nālanda*, the most famous seat of Buddhist learning throughout India, where he halted for fifteen months to study the Sanskrit language. Towards the end of A.D. 638 he resumed his easterly route, following the course of the Ganges to *Modagivi* and *Champa*, and then crossing the

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river to the north he visited *Paundra Varddhana*, or Pubna, and *Kāmarūpa*, or Assam.

Having now reached the most easterly district of India he turned towards the south, and passing through *Samatata*, or Jessore, and *Tāmralipti*, or Tamluk, he reached *Odra*, or Orissa, early in A.D. 639. Continuing his southerly route he visited *Ganjam* and *Kalinga*, and then turning to the north-west he reached *Kosala*, or Berar, in the very heart of the peninsula. Then re-suming his southerly course he passed through *Andhra*, or Telingāna to *Dhanakakata*, or Amaravati on the Kistna river, where he spent many months in the study of Buddhist literature. Leaving this place early in A.D. 640 he pursued his southerly course to *Kānchipura*, or Conjeveram, the capital of *Dravida*, where his further progress in that direction was stopped by the intelligence that Ceylon was then in a very troubled state consequent on the recent death of the king. This statement is specially valuable for the purpose of verifying the dates of the pilgrim's arrival at different places, which I have calculated according to the actual distances travelled and the stated duration of his halts.* Now the troubled state of Ceylon followed immediately after the death of Raja *Buna-Mugalān*, who was defeated and killed in A.D. 639; and it is only reasonable to infer that the Ceylonese monks, whom the pilgrim met at Kānchipura, must have left their country at once, and have reached that place early in A.D. 640, which accords exactly with my calculation of the traveller's movements.

From Drāvida Hwen Thsang turned his steps to the north, and passing through *Konkana* and *Ma-*

* See Appendix A for the Chronology of Hwen Thsang's Travels.

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hārāśhtra arrived at *Bhāroch* on the Narbada, from whence, after visiting Ujain and Balabhi and several smaller states, he reached Sindh and Multān towards the end of A.D. 641. He then suddenly returned to *Magadha*, to the great monasteries of *Nālanda* and *Tiladhaka*, where he remained for two months for the solution of some religious doubts by a famous Buddhist teacher named Prajnabhadrā. He next paid a second visit to *Kāmṛūp*, or Assam, where he halted for a month. Early in A.D. 643 he was once more at *Pāṭaliputra*, where he joined the camp of the great king Harsha Varddhana, or Silāditya, the paramount sovereign of northern India, who was then attended by eighteen tributary princes, for the purpose of adding dignity to the solemn performance of the rites of the Quinquennial Assembly. The pilgrim marched in the train of this great king from *Pāṭaliputra* through *Prayāga* and *Kosāmbi* to *Kanoj*. He gives a minute description of the religious festivals that were held at these places, which is specially interesting for the light which it throws on the public performance of the Buddhist religion at that particular period. At Kanoj he took leave of Harsha Varddhana, and resumed his route to the north-west in company with Raja *Udhīṭa* of Jālandhara, at whose capital he halted for one month. In this part of his journey his progress was necessarily slow, as he had collected many statues and a large number of religious books, which he carried with him on baggage elephants.* Fifty of his manuscripts were lost on crossing over the Indus at *Utakhanda*, or Ohind. The pilgrim himself forded the river on an elephant, a feat which can only

* M. Julien's 'Hiouen Thsang,' i. 262, 263.

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be performed during the months of December, January and February, before the stream begins to rise from the melted snows. According to my calculations, he crossed the Indus towards the end of A.D. 643. At *Utakhanda* he halted for fifty days to obtain fresh copies of the manuscripts which had been lost in the Indus, and then proceeded to Lamghân in company with the King of Kapisa. As one month was occupied in this journey, he could not have reached Lamghâm until the middle of March, A.D. 644, or about three months before the usual period, when the passes of the Hindu Kush become practicable. This fact is sufficient to account for his sudden journey of fifteen days to the south to the district of *Falana*, or Banu, from whence he reached *Kapisa* viâ Kâbul and Ghazni about the beginning of July. Here he again halted to take part in a religious assembly, so that he could not have left Kapisa until about the middle of July A.D. 644, or just fourteen years after his first entry into India from Bamian. From Kapisa he passed up the Panjshir valley and over the Khâwak Pass to Anderâb, where he must have arrived about the end of July. It was still early for the easy crossing of this snowy pass, and the pilgrim accordingly notices the frozen streams and beds of ice which he encountered on his passage over the mountain. Towards the end of the year he passed through Kâshgâr, Yârkand, and Kotan, and at last, in the spring of A.D. 645, he arrived in safety in the western capital of China.

This rapid survey of Hwen Thsang's route is sufficient to show the great extent and completeness of his Indian travels, which, as far as I am aware, have

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never been surpassed. Buchanan Hamilton's survey of the country was much more minute, but it was limited to the lower provinces of the Ganges in northern India and to the district of Mysore in southern India. Jacquemont's travels were much less restricted; but as that sagacious Frenchman's observations were chiefly confined to geology and botany and other scientific subjects, his journeyings in India have added but little to our knowledge of its geography. My own travels also have been very extensive throughout the length and breadth of northern India, from Peshawar and Multan near the Indus, to Rangoon and Prome on the Irawadi, and from Kashmir and Ladâk to the mouth of the Indus and the banks of the Narbada. Of southern India I have seen nothing, and of western India I have seen only Bombay, with the celebrated caves of Elephanta and Kanhari. But during a long service of more than thirty years in India, its early history and geography have formed the chief study of my leisure hours; while for the last four years of my residence these subjects were my sole occupation, as I was then employed by the Government of India as Archæological Surveyor, to examine and report upon the antiquities of the country. The favourable opportunity which I thus enjoyed for studying its geography was used to the best of my ability; and although much still remains to be discovered I am glad to be able to say that my researches were signally successful in fixing the sites of many of the most famous cities of ancient India. As all of these will be described in the following account, I will notice here only a few of the more prominent of my discoveries, for the purpose of

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showing that I have not undertaken the present work without much previous preparation.

1. *Aornos*, the famous rock fort captured by Alexander the Great.

2. *Taxila*, the capital of the north-western Panjab.

3. *Sangala*, the hill fortress in the central Panjab, captured by Alexander.

4. *Srughna*, a famous city on the Jumna.

5. *Ahichhatra*, the capital of northern Pâncâlâ.

6. *Bairât*, the capital of Matsya, to the south of Delhi.

7. *Sankisa*, near Kanoj, famous as the place of Buddha's descent from heaven.

8. *Srāvasti*, on the Rapti, famous for Buddha's preaching.

9. *Kosāmbi*, on the Jumna, near Allahabad.

10. *Padmavati*, of the poet Bhavabhuti.

11. *Vaisālî*, to the north of Patna.

12. *Nālanda*, the most famous Buddhist monastery in all India.

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