

## *Samgha at Sarnath*

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Riṣipattana, Mrigadāya (Mrigadāva) or deer forest in the vicinity of ancient city of Kāśī was selected by Lord Buddha as the spot for turning the wheel of Law in motion and thenceforth the place became famous as Saddharmacakra or Saddharmacakrapravarttanamahāvihāra. Buddha also resided there for some time and the particular spot in Saddharmacakra became famous as Mūlagandhakuṭī. Two very significant inscriptions recovered during excavations by Sir John Marshall in 1906-07 and 1907-08, one<sup>1</sup> belonging to Kalachuri King Karṇadeva dated in the year 1058 CE found to the west of Dhamekh *Stūpa* and the other<sup>2</sup> of Gahaḍavāla queen Kumāradevī, wife of King Govinda Chandra of the early twelfth century CE found to the north of Dhamekh *Stūpa*, provided epigraphical evidence of creative activities of art and architecture in the eleventh and twelfth century CE which is attested by contemporary material remains of archaeological value at the site.

Hiüen-tsang mentions the existence of about 30 sanghārāmas with 3000 priests in Varanasi who studied the little vehicle according to Sammitīya or Sammatīya school (ching-liang-pu). Similarly in Sarnath (Lu-ye or stag desert) there were fifteen hundred priests in the convent who studied the little vehicle according to the Sammatīya school.<sup>3</sup> By mentioning *vihāra*, the Chinese traveller means the main shrine and describes its architecture and artistic wealth. He also mentions about the enclosure of the convent, besides various monuments, shrines, *stūpas* and places connected with legends.

The place where Buddha resided in Sarnath after delivering the first sermon was known as Mūlagandhakuṭī which is mentioned in various seals, sealings and inscriptions found during excavations as 'Saddharmacakre Mūlagandhakuṭyāṁ, or Mūlagandhakuṭī in the convent called Saddharmacakra or Dharmacakra. It seems that in the convent Dharmacakra there were various residential quarters constructed in different times for the monks as *vihāras*. These *vihāras* or monasteries exposed during excavations range from Kuṣāṇa period to the twelfth century CE.

J. Ph. Vogel, while writing on the one line inscription engraved on the Aśokan pillar in the early Gupta period, has suggested the earlier evidence of Sammitīya school occupying the samgha at Sarnath. The inscription is as follows - "Ā[chā] ryyanaṁ

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Sa[mmi]tiyānam parigraha vātsīputikānām" i.e. "Homage of the masters of the Sammitīya (?) sect (and) of the Vātsīputrika school." Vogel elaborates "This epigraph is of interest as it shows that the Vātsīputrikas were a branch of the Sammitīya school. The Sarvāstivādins (A.S.R. for 1906-07, pp. 96-97), whose name is met with on the railing in the southern chapel of the Main Shrine, must have flourished side by side with the Sammitīyas at Sarnath in the early Gupta period. In the time of Hiüen-tsang, the great convent at Sarnath was entirely in the possession of the Sammitīya sect."<sup>4</sup> Thus, there can be not doubt that the monasteries at Sarnath were occupied by monks following Sarvāstivāda and Sammitīya sects of Buddhism. Later, followers of Mahāyāna offered some gifts in the convent as is proved in the inscription of Kalachuri King Karṇadeva, datable to 1058 CE<sup>5</sup>.

During excavations in Sarnath for nearly 100 years from 1835 onwards, in all eight monasteries (fig. 1) were located, out of which six are exposed to view at present, one is covered and remains of one are almost lost. Monastery I has usually been identified with Dharmacakrajina-vihāra, a gift of Kumāradevī, queen of Govinda Candra. A detailed discussion over the identification of Monastery I and the one exposed during 1835-36, the remains of which are almost lost, would follow.

Monastery II belongs to the early Gupta period and is located on the north-west of the Main Shrine with traces of nine cells and evidence of a row of chambers on the sides. Monastery III, datable to the late Kuṣāṇa period, occupies a very low level with its exposed cells in the south side having a pillared verandah in front. It was probably a double storied building. Northern and eastern cells of the Monastery IV were exposed towards north-east of the Main Shrine with the verandah-pillars inter-columned into a wall. The monastery seems to be datable to the early Gupta period.

Towards south of the Main Shrine are located Monasteries V and VII which were perhaps destroyed by fire. Monastery V, excavated by Major Kittoe, has an open courtyard, 15.25 m square with a series of cells, 2.60 m × 2.45 m on the four sides and a well in the court. The monastery seems to have remained in use from Gupta period till at least ninth century CE.

Built upon a structure of Gupta period towards west of the Dhamekh *Stūpa* were found the remains of a monastery which were thought to be a hospital on account of a number of pestles and mortars found there and which dates back to eighth or ninth century CE.

With disappeared cells of an open courtyard, 9.15 m square, surrounded by a running verandah, stands the Monastery VII of the medieval period.

All these monasteries were constructed with brick masonry and stone members including architectural ones and decorated pillars formed part of the most of them. Identification of the monastery, exposed by Cunningham in 1835 along with description of Monastery I are discussed below.

### ***Dharmacakrajina-vihāra of Kumāradevī***

Of Particular interest is the inscription of Kumāradevī (fig. 2) written in 26 verses in Nāgarī characters and mentioning renovation of Dharmacakrajina-vihāra with creation of *navakhaṇḍa maṇḍala* dedicated to Vasudhārā as part of the vihāra. Although John Marshall, Daya Ram Sahni and J.Ph.Vogel remained silent about the identification of Kumāradevī's monastery, V.S.Agrawala in his guide book of Sarnath (1956) frankly stated that Monastery I at Sarnath located in the northern area is the Dharmacakrajina Vihāra, the imposing gift of Kumāradevī. Monastery I at Sarnath, where according to him all the halls and apartments of the monks have disappeared, measure 232 m in length from east to west with two eastern courtyards with gates and structures having neatly chiselled brickwork, decorated with elegant mouldings on both the faces. This so called monastery is constructed over the remains of earlier monasteries II, III and IV belonging to the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods. Interestingly, the location of monastery I is quite away from the find spot of the inscription of Kumāradevī.

It is generally believed that the northern area of the site represented Buddhist monastic establishment and the southern area the religious worshipping one (*stūpa* area) divided by a massive wall. It does not appear to be very convincing since the monasteries are found in both north and south of the Mūlagandhakuṭī (main shrine) as *stūpas*, votive *stūpas*, *caityas* and such other shrines appearing all around the main shrine which was approached from east and towards west. There was a stream which was connected with river Varana which terminated in the *pushkariṇī* (lake) in the north at some distance and therefore the residential area could develop only in north and south of the main hub, which itself symbolized the turning of the wheel of Law with the Mauryan creations of Dharmājika *stūpa* in south, apsidal *chaitya* in west and circular/apsidal shrine in north at almost equidistance from the main shrine in the centre. From the axis they along with the four lions on Aśokan capital and four animals

of the *chatushpāda-paṅkti*, separated by wheel, pointing to the four directions and four subsidiary directions, suggest the cardinal points and in the case of the great holy place of the *Dharmacakrapravarttana* location of other important structures in the cardinal directions becomes meaningful as they symbolize the points which cause the Wheel of Law rotate.

The Mauryan creations around the main shrine at cardinal directions with equidistance from the central shrine and the shape of the structure of the central shrine, perhaps led Kumāradevī believe that in its existing shape in the twelfth century it was a creation of emperor Aśoka and that she rebuilt the same even more wonderfully - "*punarayañcakre tatopyadbhutaṁ*" (line 26).

The massive wall dividing the two areas was definitely a late addition much after the Gupta period as is evidenced by the monastery IV of Gupta period which lies below it. Thus the purpose of construction of this massive wall seems to be quite different of which the clue may be found in the material recovered from the north of the massive wall. As such, out of 25 Brāhmanical sculptures described in the catalogue of Sarnath Museum<sup>6</sup> 13 comes from the area of Monastery I or its courtyards and rest of them are either stray finds in other areas without proper context or belong to Mughal period when Sarnath had already lost its Buddhist association or their find spots are not known. Similarly out of 6 Jaina images<sup>7</sup> two come from the area of Monastery I and others' find spots are not mentioned while one was found east of stupa No. 22. The colossal figure of Śiva in relief, believed to be unfinished and measuring nearly 4 m in height also comes from the second courtyard of the so called Monastery I. The finds of such Brāhmanical and Jaina sculptures in the northern area may point towards utilization of that area for shrines of other religions or even to a workshop for manufacture of stone sculptures in the two courtyards of some hitherto unknown shrine connected with a subterranean passage to its west and generally identified as Dharmacakrajinavihāra of Kumāradevī which appears to be a construction of the eleventh century CE and not of the twelfth century CE on stylistic grounds of its architecture as also believed by its excavator John Marshall and Sten Konow.<sup>8</sup>

The new identification of Kumāradevī monastery is proposed under such circumstances based on a few significant considerations about the structures about 80m north-west of Dhamekh stūpa and to the south of Monastery IV on a raised ground towards about 20 m south of the massive wall where Alexander Cunningham had exposed a monastery in 1835-36<sup>9</sup> and published the plan drawing (fig. 3-4) of the

two parts of the monastery, first having a pillared courtyard in the centre surrounded by an open verandah which gave access to ranges of five small rooms or cells on all sides. It was supposed to have been a 68 feet square chapel monastery with entrance from south and as suggested by its 4½ feet thick outer walls three or four stories in height. Close to its west was exposed the second part, a building being 34 feet square with a small porch on each of the four side. The edifice had 3 feet thick walls and was divided into three parts from east to west and the central part was further subdivided into three parts making the entire structure including the four porches into a building consisting of nine segments. Interestingly, the inscription of Kumāradevī also mentions nine parts of the building - *nava khaṇḍa maṇḍala mahīhāraḥ* which was in the shape of *maṇḍala* and in Tāntric Buddhism, the shape of *maṇḍala* or enclosed yantra as depicted in paintings and relief looks quite similar to the shape of the building illustrated in the plan drawings by Cuningham. *Maṇḍala* is a mystic circle in Buddhist pantheon having main deity in the centre surrounded by minor deities and geometric diagrams representing the appropriate place for the deities which can be transcribed into a building form. In this context, it becomes quite significant that the representation of *Vairochana maṇḍala* in Alchi and other places contain Dharmacakra flanked by two antelopes on either side, depicted over the gateways outside the four projections of the inner square of building in the cardinal directions. This symbol represents the event of turning of the wheel of law in motion by Buddha at the deer park of Sarnath. Vairochana, one of the five Tathāgatas, himself represents the attitude of Buddha at Sarnath as he is always depicted in the *bodhyangī mudrā*. The *Vairochana maṇḍala*, in its inner circle or inner square, always has nine segments-Vairochana in the centre flanked by Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Amoghasiddhi and Ratnasambhava along with their four consorts - Māmakī, Pāṇḍarā, Locanā and Tārā. Thus the nine segments of shrines, stūpas and even Aśokas lion capital of Sarnath represent the same event of the life of Buddha, depicted in paintings as *maṇḍalas* of Vairocana. Interestingly, the square shrine having nine segments (fig. 5), exposed to the west of Aśokan pillar at Sarnath by Marshall below which later during excavations in 1914-15, the Mauryan apsidal shrine was exposed, represents the same.

Cunningham had noticed that the plaster was still adhering to the inner walls of the verandahs at the time of excavation during 1835-36, "with borders of painted flowers, quite fresh and vivid."<sup>10</sup> Such description tallies with the mention in Kumāradevī's inscription where the building is described as accomplished with the

highest skill in the applying of wonderful arts and looking handsome with the figures of gods - *yam dṛiṣṭvā pravicitra - śilparacanācāturyyasīmāśrayaṁ gīrvaṇaiḥ sudriṣaṅcha*. Kumaradevi's inscription on the stone slab was discovered near this building excavated by Cunningham, quite far away from the Monastery I.

The nine segments of *Vairochana Maṇḍala* as painted in the eleventh-twelfth century C.E. at Alchi in its Du-Khang and general style of *maṇḍalas* suggest a similarity in plan with the shrine exposed by Cunningham at Sarnath. Interestingly, Vairocana having four heads and in *dharmacakrapravarttana* or *bodhyangī mudrā* represents the Buddha preaching his first sermon at Sarnath and nine segments of his *maṇḍala* having 3 inner circles within 2 squares and four projections on cardinal directions with two antelopes facing a Dharmacakara connects the entire episode of Sarnath with this *maṇḍala*. Vairochana has been regarded as first among the Pañcha-Tathāgatas or the so called Dhyānī Buddhas in the *Guhyyasamāja* datable to *circa* 300 CE and it seems possible that even in the Maurya period during Aśoka's reign he could have been conceptualized as per Tibetan belief that Mahāyāna emerged after the first Buddhist council itself and was codified during the reign of Kaṇiṣka in the fourth council. This inference is based on my understanding of Aśoka's lion capital of Sarnath in which I propose the symbolic representation of *Vairochana maṇḍala* itself. The originally built *cakra* representing Dhamma, four heads of lions representing Vairochana or preaching Buddha (later conceptualized in Simhanāda Lokeśvara) and four animals on abacus as Dhyānī Buddhas with their śaktis represented by wheels and 24 spokes representing 16 Tathāgatas and 8 offering goddesses of the *maṇḍala*.

On the basis of above evidence it is proposed that Kumāradevī's Dharmacakrajinavihāra should be identified with the twin buildings excavated by Cunningham in 1835-36 which disappeared soon afterwards as reported by Cunningham himself in his report on Sarnath for the year 1861-62 where he states that "Luckily I had prepared plans of the buildings while the excavation was going on, for nothing whatever now remains of all my excavation, every stone and every brick having been removed long ago."<sup>11</sup> Archaeologists after Cunningham could not see the buildings and once the so called monastery I was exposed in 1906-08, it was identified as Kumāradevī's monastery by later scholars in spite of the fact that excavator Marshall and Sten Konow considered the style of the stone and brick carvings of monastery I to be of the eleventh century CE. Kumaradevī's inscription which dedicates the monastic shrine to Vasudhārā was found nearer to the building

exposed by Cunningham in 1835-36 and from the same area the famous twelfth century sculpture of Jambhala and Vasudhārā was also found which might have been installed in her monastery which further provides evidence for the present identification. Interestingly, three remarkable sculptures<sup>12</sup> of Vasudhārā datable to about the twelfth century C.E., two seated and one standing, have been found from the area east of main shrine and north of Dhamekh *stūpa* which also suggest the location of Kumāradevī's monastery in that area and indicate to the validity of the present identification.

### ***Notes and References***

1. J.H.Marshall and Sten Konow, 'Sarnath', *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report 1906-07*. Reprinted New Delhi 2002, pp.100-101.
2. J.H.Marshall and Sten Konow, 'Excavation at Sarnath', *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report 1907-08*. Reprinted New Delhi 2002, pp.76-79; Sten Konow 'Sarnath Inscription of Kumaradevi' *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. IX (1907-08) No. 51, pp. 319-328 with plate.
3. Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki, Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Reprinted Delhi, 1969, Book VII, pp. 44-45.
4. Daya Ram Sahni, *Catalogue of the Museum of Archaeology at Sarnath*, Introduction by J.Ph. Vogel, Calcutta, 1914, pp. 30-31.
5. Daya Ram Sahni, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-168.
6. *Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report 1906-07*. pp.100-101.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 164.
8. "As regards the date of the building, a certain criterion that we have to go upon is the style of the stone and brick carvings, which proclaim it to be approximately of the eleventh century A.D.", J.H.Marshall and Sten Konow, *op.cit.* 1906-07, p. 84.
9. Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India, Four reports made during the year 1862-63-64-65*. Vol. I, Reprinted New Delhi - 2000, pp. 103-130, pls. XXXI-XXXIII.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
12. Daya Ram Sahni, *op.cit.*, pp. 147-148. Find spot of one sculpture of Vasudhārā B (f) 20 is not certain but there is no doubt about B (f) 19 and B (f) 22.

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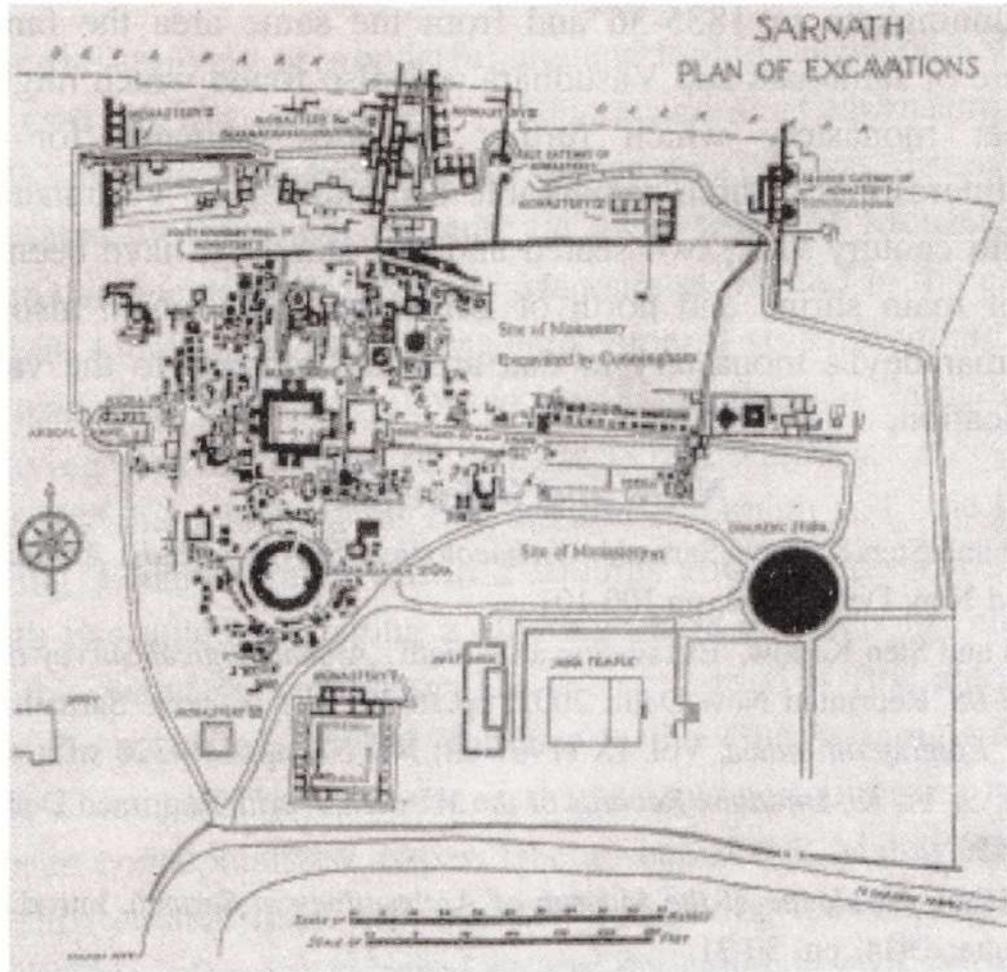


Fig. 1

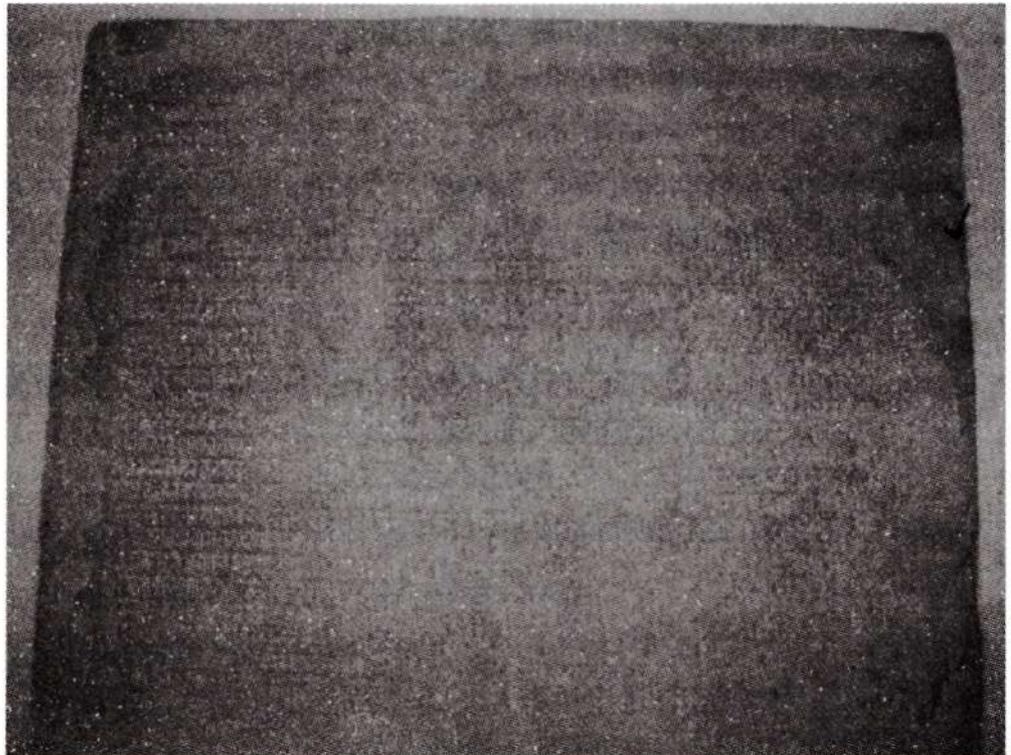


Fig. 2

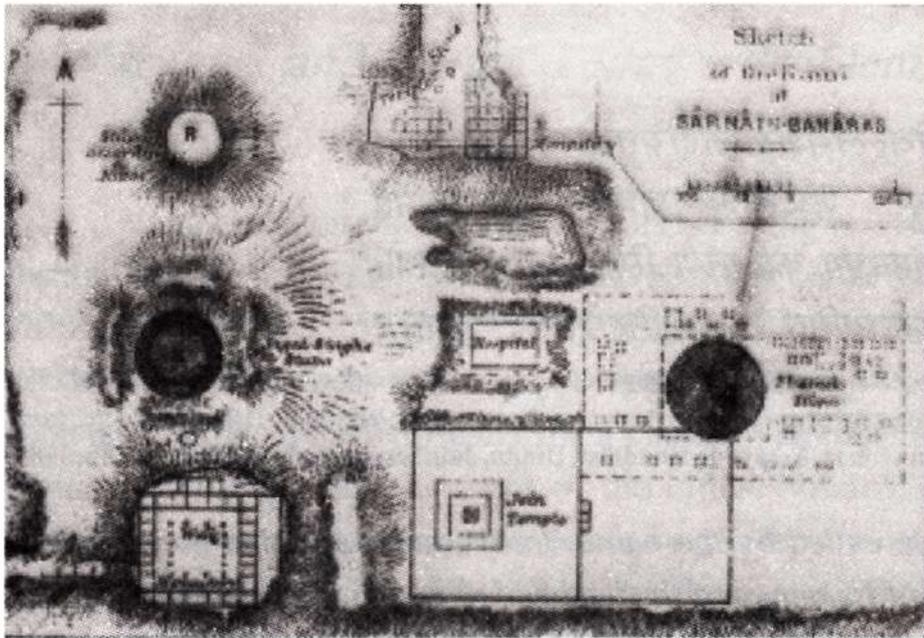


Fig. 3

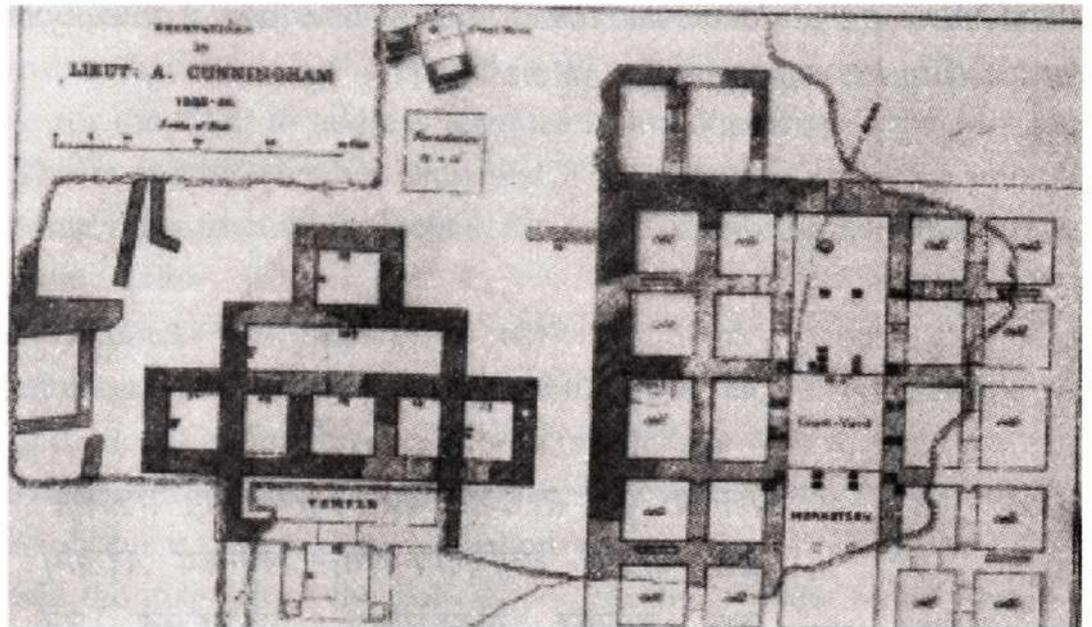


Fig. 4

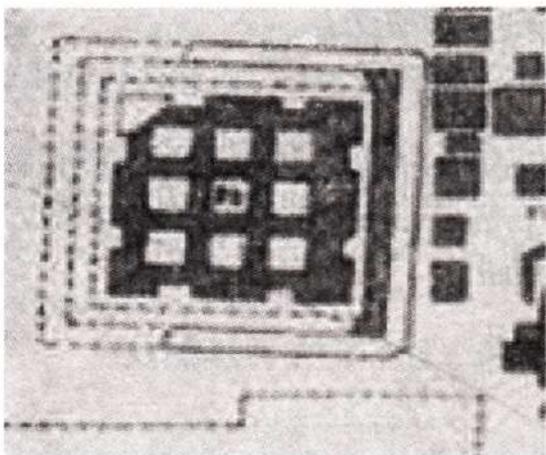


Fig. 5