

HIS6E01-PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

MODULE-1 ALEXA NDER CUNNINGHAM 1814- 1893

Prepared by
Priyanka.E.K
Dept of History
Little Flower College
Guruvayoor

- ◉ British army officer and archaeologist
- ◉ served as the first director of the Indian Archaeological Survey.
- ◉ He came to Calcutta in 1833
- ◉ Early in his career he met James Prinsep, a British numismatist and Indian scholar, who ignited his interest in Indian history and coins.
- ◉ In 1837 Cunningham excavated at Sārnāth, outside Vārānasi (Benares), one of the most sacred Buddhist shrines, and carefully prepared drawings of the sculptures.
- ◉ In 1850 he excavated Sānchi, site of some of the oldest surviving buildings in India.
- ◉ In addition to a study of the temple architecture of Kāshmir(1848) and a work on Ladākḥ (1854), he published *The Bhilsa Topes* (1854), the first serious attempt to trace Buddhist history through its architectural remains.

- ◉ In the army, he had quite a varied set of assignments. He served as bodyguard to Lord Auckland, governor-general (1836-40).
- ◉ In 1840, he became executive engineer to the Nawab of Oudh and was responsible for the construction of a highway from Lucknow to Kanpur.
- ◉ He was on military duty in Central India and later executive engineer in the Gwalior state (1844-45).
- ◉ During the First Anglo-Sikh War (1846), he was in Punjab on military duty and was responsible for the annexation of the Kullu and Kangra Valley.
- ◉ He was also responsible for demarcation of boundary between Ladakh and Tibet and also between Bikaner and Bahawalpur states.
- ◉ After the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49), he came back to Gwalior as executive engineer.

- ◉ Then followed a series of transfers to distant places: Multan (1853), Burma (1856) and the North-West Frontier Province (1858), where he served as chief engineer.
- ◉ After he was promoted to the rank of major-general in 1861, he retired from the army and a new and important phase in his life commenced, for which he is remembered and has earned the gratitude of Indians for revealing their past.
- ◉ However, he did not wait to indulge in his exciting hobby. “From his arrival in India in 1831, Cunningham devoted every minute he could ' spare from his military duties to the study of the material remains of' ancient India, until, in 1862; the Indian Government established the post of Archaeological Surveyor, to which he was appointed”.
- ◉ While he was serving as a bodyguard to the governor-general, he found time to come to Varanasi, where his preceptor, James Prinsep, had earlier lived for ten years and had done some excavations, especially of temples turned into mosques.

- ◉ However, Cunningham's area of excavation was Sarnath, about six miles from Banaras. The mystery about the ruins of Sarnath had excited the curiosity of many scholars of Indian history, especially because both Fa Hian and Huan Tsang had described a great monastery and a huge pillar (stupa) at Sarnath, where the great Buddha delivered his first sermon to his five followers & others
- ◉ In 1835, found about a hundred statues and bass reliefs, all of which worth preserving were sent to the Museum of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta”.
- ◉ Cunningham studied in detail the great stupa, called Dhamek (presumably built by Asoka), at Sarnath and even got prepared a scaffold 110 ft. high and went up all the way to study the details of the uppermost end of the stupa.
- ◉ He wrote a detailed report of his findings in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Vol. xxxii), which remains the most detailed description to this day.

- ◉ After Sarnath, he excavated Buddhist mounds at Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh and at other places. He published the reports of these excavations in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, London (1850) and later published them in a book, *Bhilsa Topes or Buddhist Monuments of Central India* (1854).
- ◉ He deciphered the inscriptions on the pillars and railings of the Buddhist ruins and gave their English renderings in the book. During his mission to Ladakh and Tibet in the 1840s, while in military service, he wrote a book on Ladakh which is still useful.
- ◉ He published *The Ancient Geography of India* (1871), the first collection of the edicts of the 3rd-century-BC Indian emperor Aśoka, and *The Stûpa of Bharhut* (1879).
- ◉ Cunningham made a great deal of contribution in the field of Indian numismatics also and had written several articles on the subject since 1834, in the Journal of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, Royal Asiatic Society, London and in the Journal of the Numismatic Society, London.
- ◉ Over the years he gathered a large collection of Indian coins, the choicest of which were purchased by the British Museum.

- ◉ As a result of his study in Indian numismatics, Cunningham declared that coins were in use in India even before the invasion of Alexander (326 BC) and that there was no import of coins from Greece
- ◉ In 1846, Cunningham sent a proposal to the Asiatic Society, Calcutta and later submitted a petition (1860) to Lord Canning, governor-general, for the establishment of a department for a systematic exploration of historical relics spread over a vast area of the country and their proper preservation.
- ◉ Due to his efforts, the Archaeological Survey of India was set up in 1861 with Cunningham as its head (surveyor general.)
- ◉ For the first time, he visited historical sites in Punjab as well as the river basin in northern India between Jamuna and Narbada. The findings of these explorations (1861-65) were published in two volumes under the title '*The Ancient Geography of India*' (London, 1871). In this work, Cunningham had identified all the historical places of India on the basis of Alexander's invasion and the Chinese travellers down to the seventh century AD.

- ◉ In 1866, Cunningham had to return to England as the Archaeology Department had closed down due to paucity of funds.
- ◉ In 1870, the department was revived by Lord Mayo, governor general, and Cunningham was called back and put in charge of the department.
- ◉ He worked in the department as surveyor general for another fifteen years, 1871-85, During this period, he travelled from Taxila in the North-West Frontier Province to Gaur Pandua in Bengal in search of historical sites and recorded his findings meticulously. Findings of these visits were published in twenty four volumes as the *Archaeological Survey of India Reports*
- ◉ Of these, Cunningham wrote the first thirteen volumes on the basis of his own visits. The remaining eleven volumes were prepared by his assistants under his guidance.
- ◉ In the thirteen volumes of his own reports, Cunningham had dealt with five hundred historical sites and also gives a description of the coins of various periods.
- ◉ An index for all the volumes was prepared by V.A. Smith under the title General Index to Cunningham's Archaeological Survey Reports (1887).

- ◉ It was Cunningham who, during his tours of the Harappa region (1872-73), came across some rare kind of seals, and he gave some indication about Harappa in his report of 1875 as being a very ancient site and the likely storehouse of rich antiquities.
- ◉ This must have provided a hint to his eminent successors, John Marshall and Robert Mortimer Wheeler and others, who were able to discover the Indus Valley Civilization during the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century.
- ◉ In 1877, Cunningham collected and compiled all the Asoka's edicts and published them, with photographs, in his *Corpus Inscriptionum Indiacarum* (Calcutta, 1877).
- ◉ In 1879, he brought out his work *The Stupa of Barhut* (London, 1879).
- ◉ In 1883, was published his important work *The Book of Indian Eras* (Calcutta).
- ◉ In 1892, he published his great work *Mahabodhi* or the Great Buddhist Temple; Under the Bodhi Tree at Gaya (London. It was this work of Cunningham through which the modern world learnt about the glories of Buddha Gaya, Sarnath, Sanchi, Sraasti and Kausambi.

- ◉ In 1885, Cunningham retired from the Archaeological Survey of India and returned to England.
- ◉ Out of seventy-nine years of his life Cunningham spent fifty in India, most of the time trying to unravel the hidden secrets of India's past.
- ◉ He donated a large number of historical relics and some old coins he had collected during his stay in India to the Indian Museum, which included city gate pillars and railings of Barhut and Sanchi.
- ◉ After retirement, he paid much attention to numismatics as he had carried with him a large collection of old Indian coins to England. He is considered an eminent authority on numismatics. This collection is now in the British Museum.
- ◉ He was knighted in 1867.
- ◉ He died in South Kensington on 28 November 1893.
- ◉ Though he made no startling discoveries, and though his technique was, by modern standards, crude and primitive, there is no doubt that after Sir William Jones, Indology owes more to General Sir Alexander Cunningham than to any other worker in the field."