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Paharpur in the 20s–30s: A Pala Period Buddhist Shrine and Monastery Documented by a Collection of Photographic Plates.

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Pāhārpur in the 20s–30s: a Pāla Period Buddhist Shrine and Monastery Documented by a Collection of Photographic Plates[*]

In the perspective of safeguarding a cultural heritage in danger, more than 3000 photographic plates from Archaeological Survey of India – Eastern Circle – dating from the 20s and 30s were digitalised in early 2002 by the French team of the Archaeological Mission at Māhasthāngarh (Bangladesh)[1], with the collaboration of the French Embassy in Bangladesh. These plates, property of the Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh, had been kept in rather rudimentary conditions and were suffering from decomposition of the silver chloride and bromide, becoming clearer or opaque to a point where it was difficult to read the negative.

After digitalization, these plates are being corrected through a digital process and included in a data base with all necessary information for scholars.

It happened that the majority of these photographic plates were devoted to the discovery and excavation of the site of Pāhārpur, mainly by K. N. Dikshit, at the end of the 20s, early 30s (fig. 1)[2].

This major Buddhist landmark from the Pāla period, the ancient "Somapura" was founded by Dharmapāla at the end of the 8th century. At the centre of this huge monastery, with its traditional square plan and 177 monks' cells, is a cruciform shaped shrine, incomplete but still standing and 22 m high. The architectural features of this monument, which is considered one of the prototypes for south-east Asian architecture, together with its collection of about 3000 terracotta plaques displayed in friezes on different terraces of the shrine, led to the inscription of Pāhārpur on the World Heritage list in 1984.

Since the site was suffering from different types of problems (bad drainage in the courtyard, infiltration of water threatening the walls and terracotta plaques of the central shrine, growth of lichen, theft and vandalism), it underwent several campaigns of restoration, the most recent one being the most disastrous in terms of loss of authenticity of the archaeological monument[3].

In this particular context, the re-discovery of the photographic documentation on Pāhārpur from the 20s and 30s, becomes even more informative.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COLLECTION IN GENERAL

The importance of this collection of photographs of Pāhārpur lies in their exceptional number, 1767 for a single site, which represents half the collection of the Eastern Circle. By comparison, Māhasthāngarh, the major historical site from North Bengal, is covered by only 377 photographs. Probably very few sites in the world excavated in the 20s and 30s have been so widely documented.

Moreover, among the 1767 photographs from Pāhārpur, only 275, (i. e. less than 16%) are included in K. N. Dikshit's monograph and they are of small size.

On the contrary, the large plates provide a very good definition, which is even increased by the digitalization. The zoom effect is possible through the use of photo software, which the traditional medium does not allow (fig. 2).
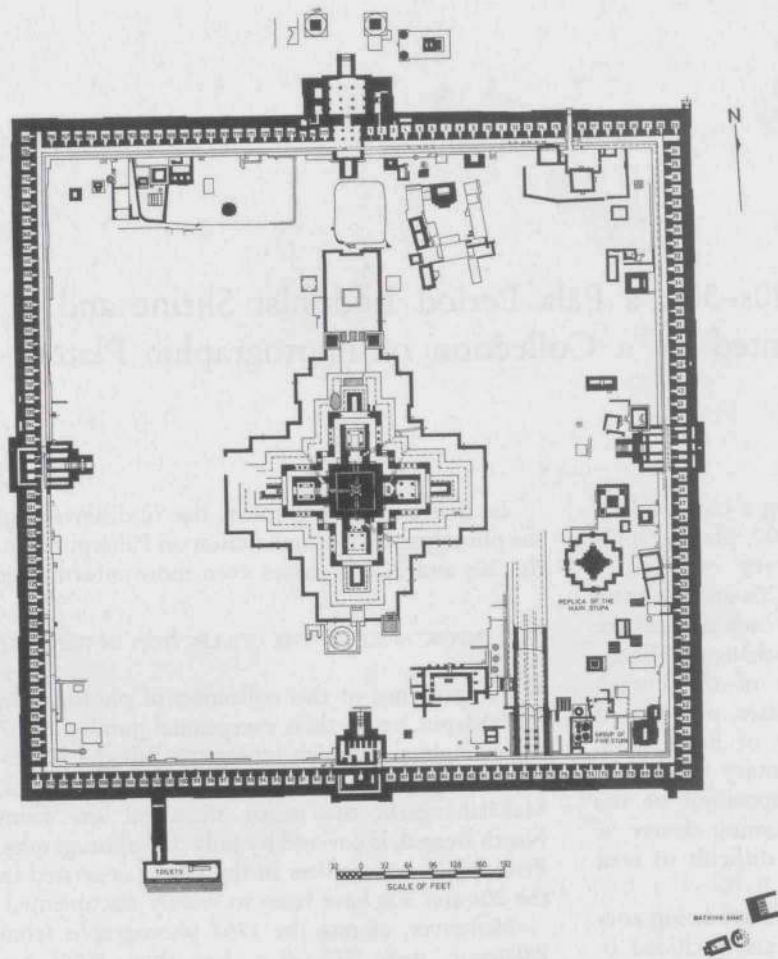
Fig. 1. Plan of Pāhārpur Monastery (from "An album of archaeological relics in Bangladesh", Dpt. of Archaeology, p. 15).

The methodology of photographic coverage of Pāhārpur is quite remarkable for the epoch, showing Pāhārpur's main shrine, its monastery, and the adjacent temple of Tārā, known as Satyabir Bhiṭā. The subjects are mainly structural remains, terracotta plaques and stone sculptures, a few miscellaneous objects and unfortunately a small proportion of ceramics (12 plates) for a living site which must have seen intense day-to-day activity.

The central monument has been photographed almost systematically before and after restoration (fig. 3). For the pre-restoration phase, it starts from a general view before proceeding to closer views of each face of the monument, a group of terracotta plaques and finally a detailed view of individual terracotta plaques. This zoom effect is a very efficient way of presenting the general archaeological context and the architectural position of each and every element.

Even more interesting is the comparison with the post-restoration photographic coverage which is also quite systematic. This double photographic view (before and after restoration) of a same subject is not so usual. It shows the preoccupation of the excavator and restorer to provide the scholar with a documentation in the rough and subse-

quently to accept that his restorer's work be judged. The photographs are also indicative of the care that has been taken to distinguish the ancient parts of the monument from the restored parts.

The number of views, their systematic coverage, their precision, allows the contemporary scholar to go beyond the use of photography as a simple "illustration", and start a real architectural, iconographic and stratigraphic study of the site. In fact, the Dikshit report, the only one which provides data from the excavation, remains quite succinct for such an important and complex site, with only 30 pages on the main temple and its monastery. Some technical aspects such as the ancient drainage system, nature and use of building materials could have been more detailed considering the number of views.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS COLLECTION IN THE CURRENT STATE OF PĀHĀRPUR.

In the current state of Pāhārpur, 70 years after its discovery, 70 years after exposure and a massive restoration campaign the five last years, this collection of plates provides an inestimable documentation for three main reasons:

Fig. 2. Zoom effect on Pāhārpur's main shrine, east side (1930s – Archaeological Survey of India – Dpt. of Archaeology, Dhaka).
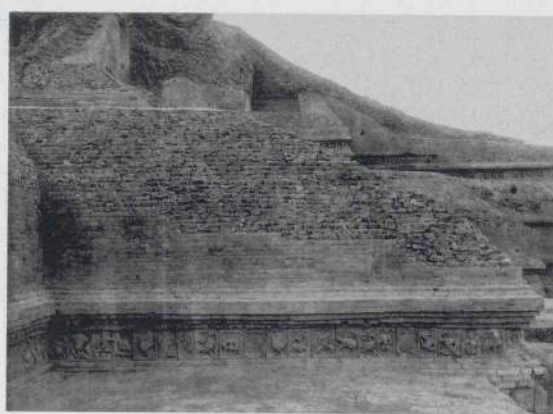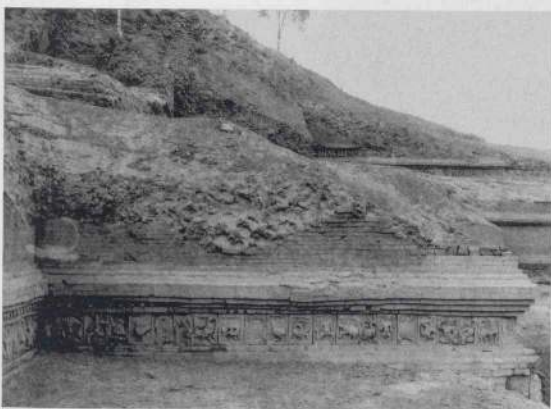
Fig. 3. Pāhārpur's main temple; south-east side, ground level. Before and after restoration (1930s – ASI-DoA, Dhaka).

- This collection of plates provides an interesting documentation on the way monuments were restored in the 30s.
- It also allows a look back to the time of the excavation, which is quite rare: the discourse and choice of the excavators can be refined, improved or contradicted.

- But above all, the photographs of the 20s and 30s are extremely important because they are the only remaining testimony of parts of the site and monument which are no longer visible, either buried or completely destroyed by the recent restoration.

Fig. 4. Pāhārpur's main temple in 2002 (south side), after recent restoration (Breuil/Gill).

Fig. 5. Pāhārpur's main temple, south-east side. The basement with stone sculptures, today buried (1930s – ASI-DoA, Dhaka).

Today we are faced with a site that has been completely distorted, historical meaning of which has been lost, particularly as a result of the aggressive restoration of the recent years. This restoration has destroyed an archaeological site and reconstructed a modern ruin (fig. 4). Only the general shape has been preserved, but any understanding of the site and its history is impossible for the visitor, even for the researcher.

The case of the buried base of the central monument is a good example of the utility of the documentation provided by the plates (fig. 5). The long frieze of terracotta plaques which are seen at the basement were originally 1.50 m above ground level of the *pradakṣiṇapatha*. Thus they were located at human height, above a series of stone

sculptures. This can be seen from different photographs from the 30s. The stone sculptures, reused from ancient Gupta period Hindu temples, were located at angles or at regular intervals along the face of the basement walls. At some places, the difference with the actual situation is particularly striking. According to ancient photographs, on the south face of the monument was located a small reservoir *(kuṇḍa)*[4] between two stone sculptures which clearly indicate the level of the original circulation path (fig. 6). The actual aspect of the ground level has completely erased this information; except for a small projection, the

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[4]   Dikshit 1938, pl. XI c.

Fig. 6. Pāhārpur's main temple, south side: a. 1930s (ASI-DoA, Dhaka). – b. October, 2002 (Breuil/ Gill).
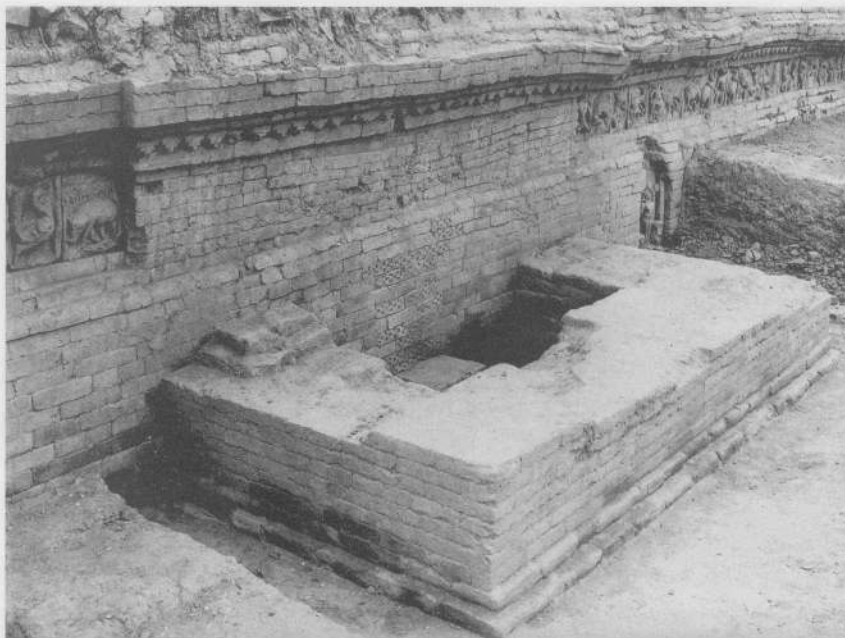
a

b

surface is almost flat without any indication of the buried *kuṇḍa*. In the same manner, another photograph from the 30s (fig. 7) tells us a complex history of the monument of which the actual appearance of the monument bears no trace: the presence of an opening and stairs which lead to the upper levels of the temple, which, in a second phase of occupation had been filled by bricks. The standardisation of the restoration has erased the archaeological history of this part of the monument by reconstructing a single occupation level wall. The choice to bury the base with the original

ground level and to build a new wall without consideration to its own story misleads the perception of the 21st century visitor. This misconception is made even worse by the very recent work: nowadays, it is the circumambulation wall (artificially raised), rather than the *pradakṣiṇapatha* which is intended to be a pathway for the visitors (fig. 8).

Another example of the reinterpretation of an ancient monument is provided by the comparison of two photographs of the same southern hall of the upper level of the monument (fig. 9). On the

Fig. 7. Pāhārpur's main temple, southeast side: a. 1930s (ASI-DoA, Dhaka). View showing blocked passage. – b. October, 2002 (Breuil/Gill). The same face after recent restoration.
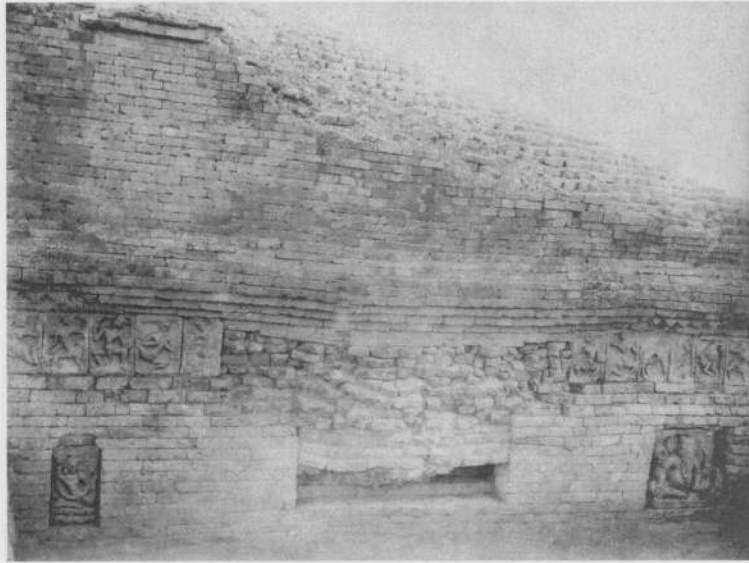
Fig. 8. Pāhārpur's main temple in 2002, after recent restoration (southeast side). The *pradakṣiṇapatha's* boundary wall used as a pathway for visitors (Breuil/Gill).

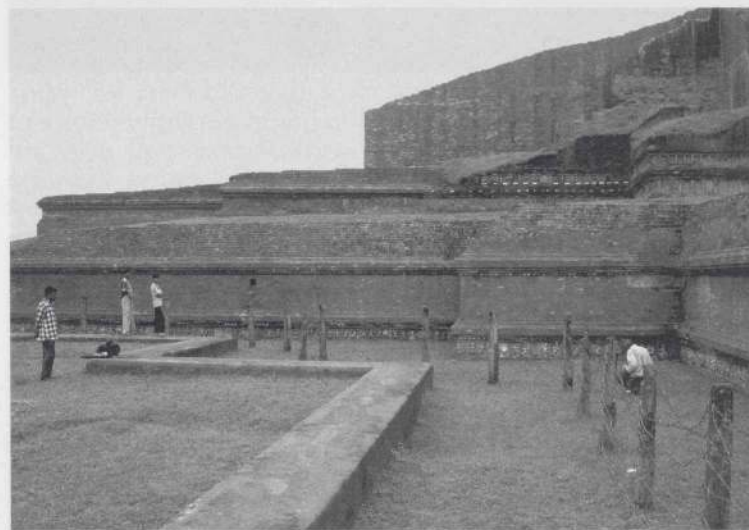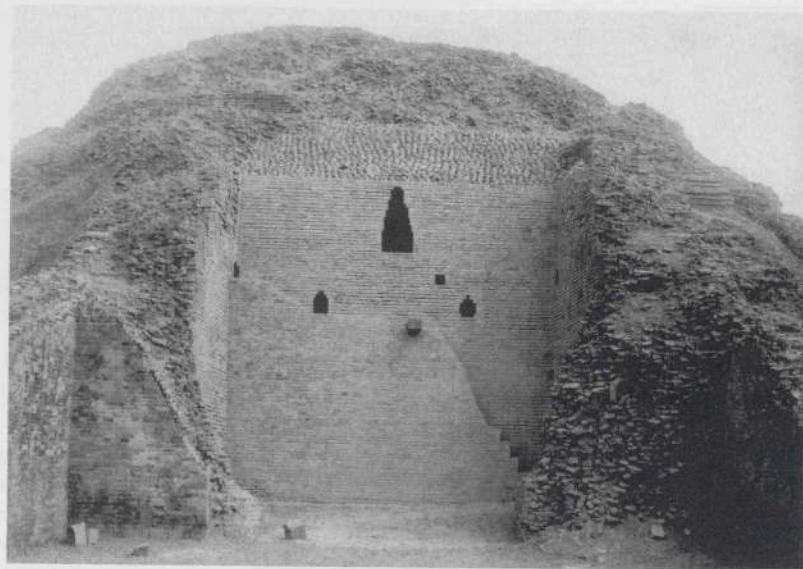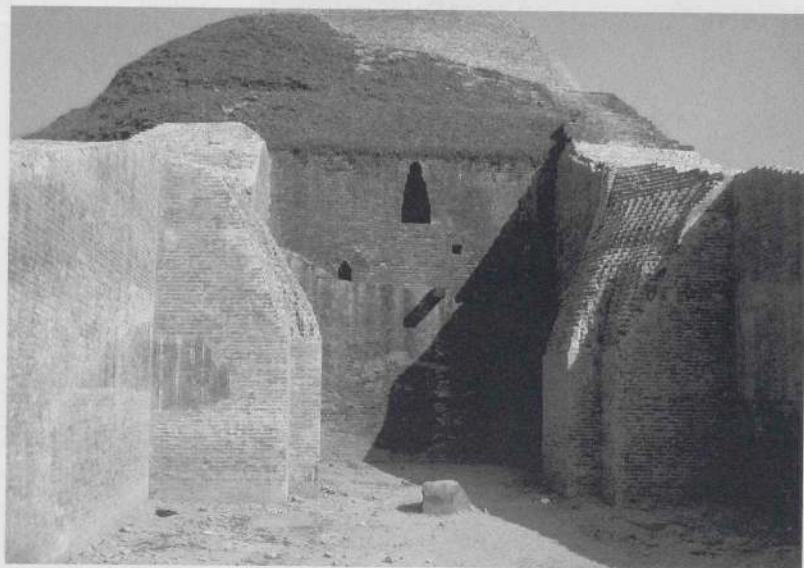*Fig. 9.* Pāhārpur's main temple. First terrace, southern antichamber: a. 1930s (ASI-DoA, Dhaka). – b. October, 2002 (Breuil/Gill). The same face after recent restoration.

a

b

photograph of the 30s, the walls restored at the time of Dikshit are clearly distinct from the original ones. In 2002, the height of the lateral walls has been increased, almost to the double, without reason. What is worse, all traces of the ancient history of the monument have disappeared and the only wall left by the recent restoration is the one built in the 30s.

The ancient photographs appear to be very useful to identify the original position of terracotta plaques and trace the transformation of the monument. Today, only a little more than 500 original terracotta plaques are still on the monument. About 900 plaques have been removed in course of the recent restoration and most of the remaining ones have been lying for years in Pāhārpur Museum store rooms without any serious inventory record. Since November 2002 a complete illustrat-

ed inventory of all terracotta plaques from Pāhārpur (*in situ* and in store rooms) was started. Among the first plaques included in this inventory is the one with the lion peeping into a well[5], a tale from *Pañcatantra*[6] (fig. 10). The discovery of the plaque with the lion on a photograph from the 30s indicated its original location, at the present ground level of the central monument, south-east angle. At that time, the plaque with the lion, in excellent condition, was integrated in a frieze and belonged to a well defined context. It happened

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[5]   Dikshit 1938, 63–64, pl. LII (d).

[6]   *Pañcatantra. no. 6 of first Tantra:* the lion Madonmatta, who was decoyed by a hare into a well, where the lion mistook its own reflection for another beast and in trying to fight with it perished by drowning.

Fig. 10. Lion peeping into a well. Plaque stored at Pāhārpur Museum (Breuil/Gill/DoA).

that the same portion of the monument has been entirely rebuilt in course of recent restoration, with new bricks and imitations of terracotta plaques, which are actually eye copies modelled by a local artisan between 2000 and 2002. All original plaques, many of them suffering from environmental and human damage, have been removed for chemical treatment and replaced by such imitations which only loosely copy the original ones. Unfortunately many mistakes have occurred in the restoration (fig. 11): in place of the lion peeping into a well (kept in one of the Pāhārpur museum store rooms), has been placed a composite figure which was originally on the left. This shifting towards right has happened for another plaque with a bird and two other plaques have exchanged positions. Another plaque with a lion has been mistakenly placed in this part of the frieze.

The transformation between the original layout of bricks and the present reconstruction is also visible in some parts. For example the bricks decorated with check motives on the upper row on the left are no longer present in the contemporary reconstruction of the monument.

For the terracotta plaques, all mistakes in the layout of the frieze are disastrous for scholars trying to understand the original iconographic programme, if any. How to justify the original position of the plaque with the lion peeping into the well if in the original location it has been replaced with another plaque?

a   b

Fig. 12. Pāhārpur terracotta plaque, a lion. State of conservation: a. 1930s (ASI-DoA, Dhaka). – b. October, 2002 (Breuil/Gill/DoA).

30s								
man fighting	bird	gandharva	bird	-------	bird	human-bird	**lion with well**	lion-face
man fighting	bird	gandharva	-------	bird	**lion**	bird	human-bird	lion-face
2002								

Fig. 11. Pāhārpur main temple, ground level, south-east side. Above: portion of the original terracotta plaques frieze (1930s, ASI-DoA, Dhaka). Below: the same portion "restored" (Oct 2002, Breuil/Gill).

Individual photographs of a few plaques in the 30s also have the advantage of measuring the state of conservation 70 years later. For this plaque depicting a lion, there seems to have been absolutely no change. In another case (fig. 12), the face of a lion kept in one of Pāhārpur's store rooms has been severely damaged: the photograph of the 30s, published by Dikshit[7], remains the only testimony of its original features.

Other important structural elements from the central monument are comprehensible only through photographs from the 30s. The monumental staircase on the north of the central mound, leading to the upper terraces, bears little evidence of its original function. In the northern part of the monastery, we notice that the boundary wall of the central shrine includes a square monument in the axis of the entrance. From the northern gate to the shrine, the visitor is faced with a series of structures, mainly a pond reflecting the central shrine and a monumental entrance hall (fig. 13). Today this complex organisation has disappeared and the only structure in this empty space is the guard's hut. It is impossible for the visitor who enters the monastery from the east to imagine this original monumental entrance to the north. The actual state is however not definitive: most probably all structures are buried and a new excavation and conservation programme could bring back the original meaning of this entrance.

This could also be the case of the bathing *ghāt*[8], which is no longer visible. This structure, at a distance of 160' (48 m) to the south-east of the Pāhārpur establishment outer wall was brought to light by D. R. Bhandarkar[9] and probably associat-

[7] Dikshit 1938, pl. XLVII (a).
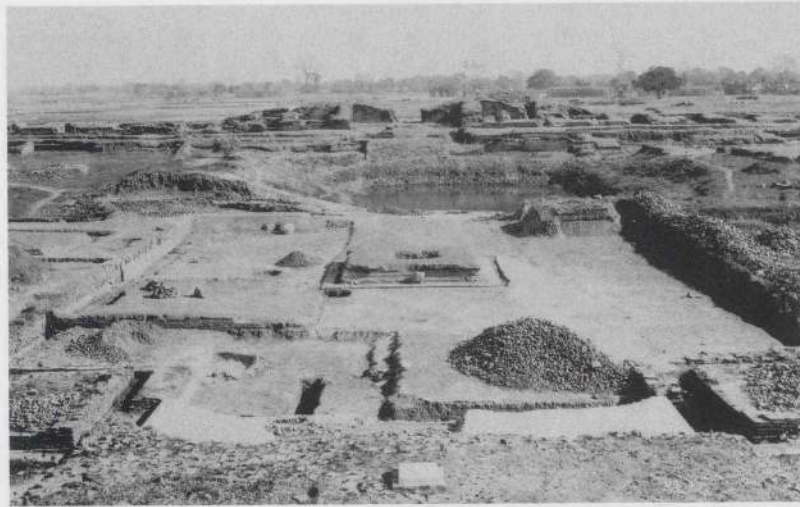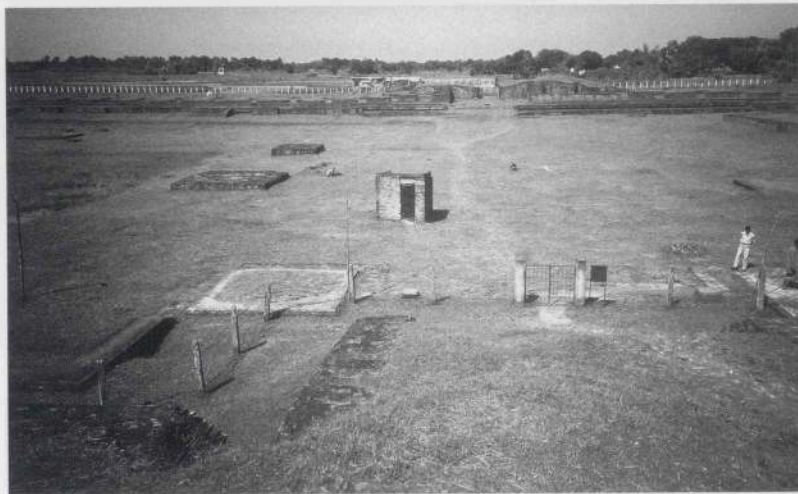[8] Dikshit 1938, 26, pl. XXII (d).
[9] A. S. R., 1922–23, 116.

a

b

ed with the local legend of Sandhyāvatī, daughter of a king named Mahidalan and mother of Satyapir.

However some structures have definitively disappeared, such as the circular based *stupa* unearthed outside the main entrance of the monastery to the north[10].

Other series of photographs provide a corpus of data that is extremely rich for the research scholar because they create some information. For example, the original drainage system, once quite elaborated, is no longer visible. Old photographs (fig. 14) show drains installed in the central monument, which drained water towards stone gargoyles set up in the lower part of the monument. Water used to fall on brick floors and was then conveyed through the circumambulation path to the boundary wall provided with channels to empty water.

This drainage system is not specific to the central shrine. In the monastery, small drains were provided to evacuate ablution water of the shrines located in the centre of three of the wings of the monastery. In the refectory area (south-eastern part of the courtyard) a long drain, traced to a length of over 45 m, used to carry water from the monastery wall inside the compound.

A lot of work is still required to replace these photographs and understand the complete organisation of the drainage system. Today, in spite of the efforts and important resources, drainage remains a major problem for the conservation of the site.

The huge circular ditch excavated around the central monument during recent restoration – considerations of aesthetics and ease of access aside – preserves a very high level of water which implies that the sculptures at the basement of the monument are under water.

[10] Dikshit 1938, 18, pl. XXV (c).

Fig. 14. Pāhārpur original drainage system (1930s, ASI – DoA, Dhaka): a. Stone gargoyle head. – b. Brick drain.
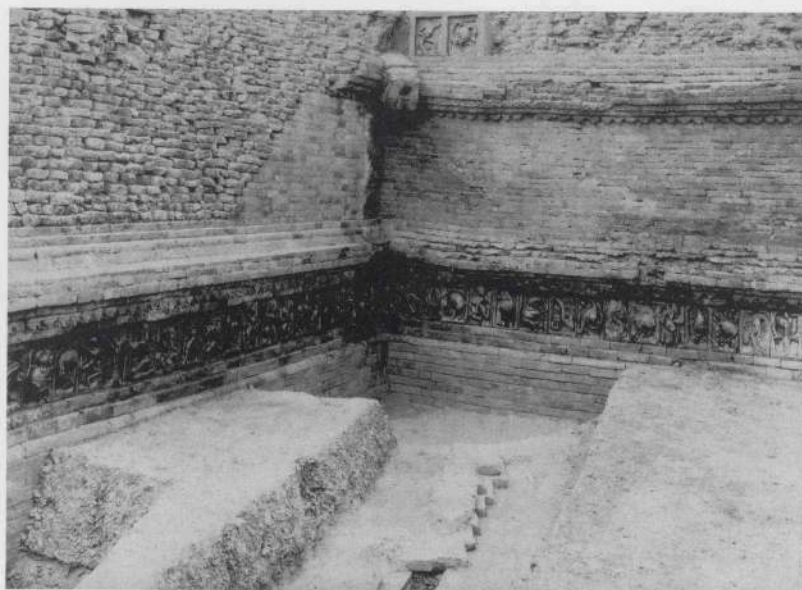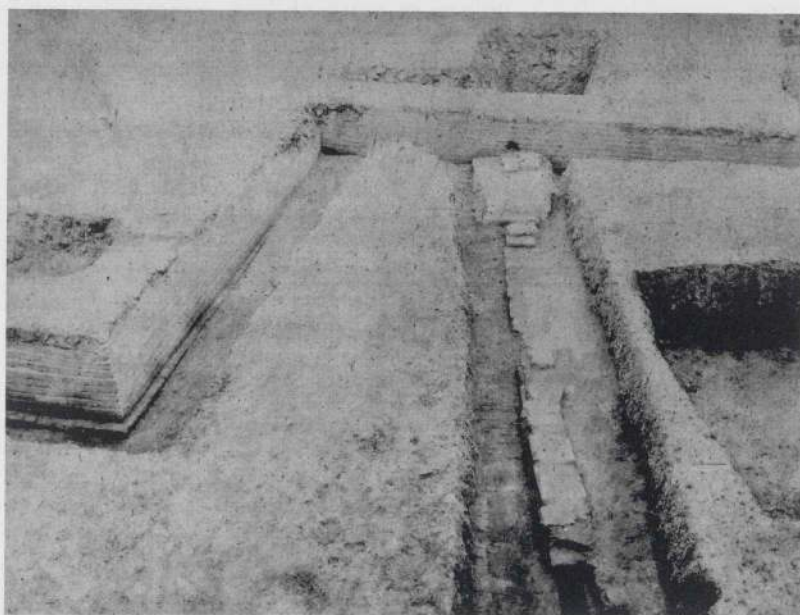
In this article, only a sample of the photographs of Pāhārpur in the 30s has been presented. A number of these supply more classical information about an excavation, most of them unpublished. They show the precise find spot of this or that object, and remain, in most of the cases, the only testimony of the construction process and decoration of structures that have been lost forever. In that sense, these photographs deserve to be considered as a precious cultural heritage to be preserved.