

THE JOURNAL
OF
THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

STUDIES IN HONOUR OF
SIR MORTIMER WHEELER

JOURNAL
OF THE
ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

OF GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND



PUBLISHED BY THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY OF
GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND, WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED
THE SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL ARCHÆOLOGY

56 QUEEN ANNE STREET LONDON W1M 9LA

PRINTED BY STEPHEN AUSTIN AND SONS, LTD., ORIENTAL AND GENERAL PRINTERS, HERTFORD, HERTS.

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Frontispiece

To Sir Mortimer Wheeler.

My dear Rik,

This volume of studies dedicated to you and your scholarship by your colleagues, friends, and admirers, in the name of the Royal Asiatic Society, was intended to appear to mark that occasion which people heard of with disbelief, your eightieth birthday. (That disbelief I revert to later.) Circumstances quite outside the control of the Society—one despatch to the printer, unfortunately sent unregistered, seems never to have reached him—have inordinately delayed its appearance. Among the articles and other pieces thus lost was my original introductory letter, which was probably better than this one; but in recomposing it at least I come with the added benefit of having done some recent work on the makers of Indian archæology.

I met you first in the Deccan College, Poona, at a tea-party given by our good friend Sankalia some fourteen or fifteen years ago; but I had seen you before that. Not on The Box, where at the price of becoming a Television Personality you were really doing such a marvellous job of taking archæology to the man in the street; but on one of my visits to Delhi at the tail end of the War, or maybe just after, when as a pompous young Captain I was gawping with as then uninstructed enthusiasm at the Muslim monuments which have since become the great love of my life. A strong smell of pipe tobacco preceded the appearance round a corner of an authoritative and energetic figure whom I so immediately diagnosed as a General in civilian clothes that I saluted instinctively; but an A.S.I custodian to whom I had been chatting identified you more accurately as the *dījī sāhib*. For it was as the D.G., the Director General of Archæology, that you came to India. And it was as the D.G. that you gave Indian Archæology a new birth; or rather, Indian Archæology found itself in you, and came to acquire a precision and a discipline it had not known before. Those qualities are still there—even if we must now talk rather of the Archæology of South Asia; for Pakistan also knew your hand, before as well as after Partition. May I give a couple of examples? In 1964, when I was staying with Abdul Waheed Khan, the Director of Archæology in Andhra Pradesh, he took me out for a week to his dig at Yeleshwaram; the excavation was, he assured me with pride, “conducted on Wheelerian lines”. We arrived in the dark, but the headlamps of the jeep lit up a scene of precision, with an orderly array of tents, stores, pottery-grid, and so on, even to what my ex-military mind recognized as a guard-room, from which a bell announced the hours. The staff were then relaxing, but (I have not dared to tell you this before) Waheed indicated my form in the shadows—since my shining dome was decently covered a large moustache was probably the predominant feature visible—and said to those around him, “Sir Martimer is here”. I have never seen men jump to it with such alacrity! The morning light confirmed those first impressions of order and precision, not only in the crispness of the lines of the trenches but also in such details as the quiet discipline of the pay-parade. Wheelerian lines, indeed. Again, late last year, when we had the pleasure of looking at our friend Thapar’s slides of Kalibangan, you as Chairman of that lecture were delighted to point out that the excavation was everything it should be, a model of precision and discipline. Thapar’s new excavations, at the Purānā Qil’a in Delhi, further perpetuate

another of your ideals by showing the significant strata clearly labelled, in English and Hindi, for the information of the visitor.

If I seem to be addressing you as one of the South Asian archaeologists I am not so much seeking to glorify that community as pointing out where your interests lie as far as this Society is concerned. This is not the place to dilate on your achievements in, say, Verulamium or Maiden Castle; suffice it to point out that you were already a “complete” archaeologist of international stature before India claimed you, and that this vast experience was India’s gain. (India has a genius for the assimilation of influences from outside, so that they become transmuted into part of an Indian system even though continuing to be identifiable as their original selves; so, I say again, India claimed you as one of her own, and what Waheed called the “Wheelerian lines” may now be drawn in Hindi or Urdu or Marathi or Telegu.) Your enormous contributions to the world of Indian archaeology are too numerous to list in detail here; but I must recall that within a few weeks of your arrival you had established an Excavation Branch in the Archaeological Survey of India, for as you said, “the excavation of a site, like the ordering of a battle, must be thought out and co-ordinated . . .” (perhaps my recognition of that General in civvies wasn’t very far off the mark). You reorganized the Survey, giving the Circles approximately equal strengths, centralized Conservation, insisted on the appointment to the Survey of a regular pre-historian, happily reversed a previous adviser’s recommendation that most of the Departmental Museums be closed down, and established that excellent and (in its earlier days at least) regular publication *Ancient India*. You set up a fine training school, whose early pupils, having learnt their lessons well, are now in the highest positions in South Asian archaeology. And all this activity was really incidental to your main purpose: to dig. You dug, purposefully, constructively, instructively, in a number of widely scattered sites, throwing a blaze of light on the hitherto imperfectly interpreted Indus Valley sites by your great excavations at Harappā, showing us the Northern Black Polished ware in its true significance, and giving us the key to the whole of south Indian archaeological chronology by your work at Arikameḍu, among many other works of excavation and supervision of excavations. Then, when you moved on to help the young nation of Pakistan, came your work at Charsadda. And after that work—in which I remember that at least one book was included—you “retired”, as you were to do on many occasions later.

You retired, characteristically, to a most active job, as Secretary of the British Academy. This period saw the creation of those projects so dear to your heart, more British Schools and Institutes oversea; happily, some of the Directors of those Institutes were young archaeologists under your tutelage at Charsadda. This Society, too, has much cause to be grateful to you as Secretary of the Academy for the interest you were able to exercise on its behalf. You were frequently to be seen in the Society’s rooms, for you gave us your services as a Member of Council, then as a Vice-President, and later as a by no means passive Honorary Vice-President.

Characteristically again, when the British Academy thought that you were old enough to retire once more, you soon found yourself actively engaged. You have always championed publicity for our subject, the need for us to communicate the results of our work to a wider audience, the obligation on us not to lose the common touch. How better could you put

these principles into practice than by leading cultural tours around those sites and monuments you love? And by this activity you have been drawn back again to Asia, on behalf of a world-famous travel agency, at the head of ranks of tourists whose joy it is to swan around India and Ceylon, to say nothing of the Isles of Greece. (When, persuaded by you, I was myself leading one of those tours I met with an instance of that disbelief I mentioned in the first paragraph: I was told in India a tale of a complaint that had been made to you by an elderly lady. "Oh, Sir Mortimer," she is reported to have said, "you shouldn't work us so vurry hard. I'm *seventy-three*, you know". What you replied to that, in 1968, is unfortunately not recorded.) As one of the Society's poets, who had the good sense to crib the first line from Milton, puts it:

To Agra and Lahore of Great Mogul
He leads the wondering tourists in their scores,
Striding before them; an expectant lull
Falls as he turns to speak. He semaphores
A circle with his arms, depicts a scene
Of kings and sages dead two thousand years,
Until his audience feel they too have been
Partakers of the rite. Anon he steers
His charges through a prehistoric maze,
Interpreting the cryptic and complex
In simple words. His rapt admirers gaze
Up at his towering form; and Rik their necks.

For in India you are again the *cakravartin*: a ruler the wheels of whose chariot roll everywhere without obstruction, an emperor, a sovereign of the world. Literally, a *wheel-turner*; but who can doubt that the simple meaning of this word is really a *Wheeler*?

We are enormously in your debt, for the scholarship and the inspiration which you have given us. The contributions which follow represent some of the gratitude the Society wishes to express. I say *some*, because I hope that further articles of that missing lot may yet be reclaimed (I feel keenly about this, for a modest piece of my own was among them. Now this introduction must stand as my only contribution, except for the smug little glow of pride I permit myself to feel for having been the first to suggest this Volume—which, I need hardly add, was unanimously acclaimed when I suggested it to the Council).

May I therefore, my dear Rik, ask you, in the name of the Society, to accept this Volume as a token of our admiration, our thanks, our esteem, and our affection.

Yours in constant gratitude,

John Burton-Page
Vice-President

14th March 1972

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