

"Long before it's in the papers"

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Find said to confirm time of Buddha's life

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Courtesy of the National Geographic Society
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Archaeologists say they have dug up evidence of a sixth-century-B.C. structure at the Buddha's birthplace—the first archaeological material linking his life to a specific century.

Digs at the Maya Devi Temple at Lumbini, Nepal, a UNESCO World Heritage site long identified as Buddha's birthplace, revealed remains of a previously unknown sixth-century B.C. wooden structure under later brick temples, the researchers said.



Robin Coningham (left) and Kosh Prasad Acharya direct excavations within the Maya Devi Temple, uncovering a series of ancient temples contemporar with the Buddha. In the background, Thai monks meditate. (Credit: Ira Block/National Geographic)

The earlier structure seems to be a shrine tied the birth story of the Buddha, who tradition holds was born by a tree, they added. The structure follows the same design as those above it, they explained, with a central open space that may have accommodated a sacred tree.

Previously, they said, the earliest archaeological evidence of Buddhist structures at Lumbini dated no earlier than the third century B.C. That had led some scholars to suggest he was born then.

“Very little is known about the life of the Buddha, except through textual sources and oral tradition,” said archaeologist Robin Coningham of Durham University, U.K., who co-led the investigat-

ion. “Now, for the first time, we have an archaeological sequence at Lumbini that shows a building there as early as the sixth century B.C.”

The archaeologists, led by Coningham and Kosh Prasad Acharya of the Pashupati Area Development Trust in Nepal, say the finding adds to our understanding of Buddhism’s early development and of Lumbini’s spiritual importance. They report their findings in the December issue of the journal *Antiquity*.

To find out the dates of the wooden shrine and a previously unknown early brick structure above it, scientists tested fragments of charcoal and sand grains using a combination of techniques. Research also confirmed ancient tree roots in the temple’s central void. “The government of Nepal will spare no effort to preserve this significant site,” said Ram Kumar Shrestha, Nepal’s minister of culture, tourism and civil aviation.

Buddhist tradition records that Queen Maya Devi, the Buddha’s mother, gave birth to him while holding on to a tree branch in the Lumbini Garden, midway between the kingdoms of her husband and parents. Coningham and his colleagues propose that the space in the center of the wooden shrine may have accommodated a tree. Brick temples built later above the timber shrine also were arranged around the central space, which was unroofed.

Lumbini is one of the key sites tied to the Buddha’s life; others are Bodh Gaya, where he became a Buddha or “enlightened one”; Sarnath, where he first preached; and Kusinagara, where he died at age 80. He is recorded as having recommended then that all Buddhists visit “Lumbini.” The shrine was still popular in the middle of the first millennium A.D. and was recorded by Chinese pilgrims as having a shrine beside a tree.

The Maya Devi Temple at Lumbini remains a living shrine; the archaeologists worked alongside meditating monks, nuns and pilgrims.

“The sequence [of remains] at Lumbini is a microcosm for the development of Buddhism from a localized cult to a global religion,” the authors of the *Antiquity* paper wrote. Lost and overgrown in the jungle in medieval times, ancient Lumbini was rediscovered in 1896. It was identified as the Buddha’s birthplace thanks to a third-century B.C. pillar with an inscription mentioning a visit by Emperor Asoka to the site of the Buddha’s birth as well as the site’s name. Asoka promoted Buddhism’s spread from present-day Afghanistan to Bangladesh.

Half a billion people around the world are Buddhists, and many hundreds of thousands make a pilgrimage to Lumbini each year.