



Heliodorus was a Greek ambassador to India in the second century B.C. Few details are known about the diplomatic relations between the Greeks and the Indians in those days, and still less is known about Heliodorus. But that the column he erected at Besnagar in central India about 113 B.C, is considered one of the most important archaeological finds on the Indian subcontinent.

It is known that Heliodorus was sent to the court of King Bhagabhadra by Antiakalidas, the Greek king of Taxila. The kingdom of Taxila was part of the Bactrian region in northwest India, conquered by Alexander the Great in 325 B.C. By the time of Antialkidas, the area under Greek rule included what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan and Punjab.

The column erected by Heliodorus first came to notice in 1877, during an archaeological survey by General Cunningham. The inscription, however, went unnoticed, because of the pillar's thick coating of red lead paste. It had been the custom of pilgrims who had worshipped there to smear the column with vermilion paste. The column, Cunningham deduced from its shape, was from the period of the Imperial Guptas (A.D. 300-550). Thirty-two years later, however, when the inscription was brought to light, it became clear that the monument was several centuries older.

In January 1901, a Mr. Lake discerned what he thought was some lettering on the lower part of the column, and removal of some vermilion paste proved him right. Dr. J.H. Marshall, who was accompanied by Mr. Lake, described the discovery in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1909. Cunningham, Marshall explained, had been mistaken about the age of the column and "could little have dreamt of the value of the record which he just missed discovering." A glance at the few letters exposed was all that was needed to show that the column was many centuries earlier than the Gupta era. This was, indeed, a surprise to me, but a far greater one was in store, when the opening lines of the inscription came to be read."



HISTORY OF THE PILLAR.

THIS COLUMN IS LOCALLY CALLED KHAMB BĀBĀ AND IS WORSHIPPED ESPECIALLY BY FISHERMEN. IT BEARS TWO INSCRIPTIONS IN BRĀHMĪ CHARACTERS AND PRĀKRIT LANGUAGE. ONE OF THESE INSCRIPTIONS RECORDS THAT THE COLUMN WAS SET UP AS A GARUDA PILLAR IN HONOR OF GOD VĀSUDEVA (VISHNU) BY HELIODOROS A GREEK INHABITANT OF TAXILA WHO HAD COME TO THE COURT OF BHĀGABHADRA KING OF CENTRAL INDIA AS AN AMBASSADOR FROM ANTIALCIDAS AN INDO-BACTRIAN KING OF THE PUNJAB. HELIODOROS HAD EVIDENTLY ADOPTED HINDUISM AS HE HAS STYLED HIMSELF A BHĀGAVATA i.e. A FOLLOWER OF THE VAISHNAVA SECT. THE APPROXIMATE DATE OF THE COLUMN IS 150 BEFORE CHRIST.

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