



Ruins

Guest post by Steven Darian

If you really want to understand another culture, you must immerse yourself in it, especially if that other culture existed long, long ago. You must feel yourself into the life, even if it is from a thousand years ago.

Here are a few places I've been to and have tried to feel my way into the soul of: Nalanda (a great Buddhist center of learning in India); the fabled city of Gaur, where the Ganges River joins the Brahmaputra, on its journey down to Calcutta. And the famous clay soldiers of Xi'an. I've called the piece RUINS.

The Road to Nalanda

Nalanda was a great Buddhist university on the Ganges River that was said to have had 10,000 students (some came from as far away as Korea), and a giant library as big as the great library at Alexandria.

The Tibetan monk Dharmaswamin traveled to Nalanda in 1235, just as the recently converted warriors from Central Asia, the Turuskha, as people called them at the time, were invading India and destroying everything before them in the name of god. Dharmaswamin recalled how he hid in an abandoned monastery with his teacher, while the Turushka cavalry prowled the ruins: torching everything and searching for heretics. Others fled. He stayed on for six months; serving his teacher, studying by candlelight in the crumbling basement of those once-throbbing halls where great philosophers had in times past discoursed on all the knowledge of the world.

Today, the road to Nalanda is a lunar landscape of buffaloes and flooded paddy fields, high-breasted palms, and banana trees. A black baby goat dips its hoofs gingerly into a lotus pool. Banyan trees swirl skyward. Old, half-naked men, with graying beards and emberless eyes, settle themselves inexorably downward.

A stone lectern waits, still in place, for the bell to sound, and the eager devotees to fill the hall once more to hear the teachings. The roofs are long since gone, and spider plants insinuate themselves *outrageously* among the ancient bricks...while sunlight drips down, down...into the darkness; echoing the message of the Buddha: "Anicca, anicca. All...is *impermanence*."



A ruined temple at Nalanda

The City of Gaur

Freeing yourself from the endlessness of the waters, you escape to another time. You are a citizen of Gaur—in its day, one of the great cities of the world. The capital of a hundred kings, and filled with elegant refinements; the emperor's palace, we have been told, was more beautiful than the Grand Seignor's Seraglio at Constantinople.

Now but a relic, Gaur, in its time, lay at the bend of the great Ganges River of India, at a point where the river joins the lordly Brahmaputra rushing down from Tibet; the two together then flow past Calcutta and into the sea.

People Have Spoken of Such Things Before

It had occurred several times in earlier centuries, caused by the sandy soil of the delta that offered no firm bed: The Ganges had forsaken its channel and taken another course further from the city, a mile or so away. On such occasions—left without drinking water or proper sanitation—the capital was moved elsewhere. It had not happened for a long while, and people had come to dismiss the possibility.

Gradually, it began to be noticed: water became less abundant. The aqueducts leading from the Ganges were starting to run shallow. They had been extended less than two years before, but the river moved further away, and finally it was necessary to bring water by cart and wagon. Sanitation was another problem in a city of this size. Previously refuse was simply gathered by public collectors and thrown into the Ganges. But it now became harder, with the river that much further away and the great amount of waste that was produced. There were not enough carts for the job, and citizens began to burn their own trash.

Not long after that, several people were reported to have died somewhere in the city, of a curious disease. But no one was seriously alarmed. Still, more and more talk was heard of how things were deteriorating. The fickleness of the river created unanticipated problems: Until recently, all kinds of merchandise—food, tools, furniture, clothing—could be shipped from any part of northern India, down the Ganges and delivered directly to the city. Now, it had to be carried two or three miles from the point where the river turned away from us. Another outbreak of the disease occurred, and they began to whisper of plague.

Old people told stories they had heard—of the time when Ganga had forsaken its course, and of the disasters that followed. We were alarmed but not panicked, although some families decided to leave, solely for these reasons. Still, God wills, we thought, and strengthened our resolve to remain.

But the plague deepened, and people started dying by the tens; then by the hundreds. We wearied of burying the dead, and it was decided to collect the bodies and throw them in the river. But this seemed only to heighten the contagion. Despite this, we rallied as best we could. Then one day it glided through the gates of the palace, and the Emperor himself... was carried off!

Word of our misfortune spread. Merchants no longer came to Gaur or sent their goods. People began to flee. Lovely brick villas were abandoned. How luxurious it would be to live in one, many of us thought. But what delight could one take, with death peering over a marble sill? People succumbed by the thousands. We were afraid to touch them but watched from our windows in grim fascination as they were nibbled away by the dogs. All who were able streamed from the city, by foot, by cart, by horse; leaving behind in our eagerness, clothing and furniture, memories and mementoes: all the things that had given meaning to our lives.



The main gate of Gaur

Xi'an

Xi'an was the first capital of China. It was the easternmost point of the Silk Road. And home to the brutal and brilliant Ch'in emperor, who first hammered an unwieldy people into a single nation. He created laws and paper money, and all those heterogeneous things that were needed for a modern state. He was also the first book burner, since books recorded great deeds performed before his time. Which, of course, was quite impossible.

To the wider world, he is known as the man who assembled a collection of 8,000 clay soldiers, horses, and war chariots, to guard his tomb and accompany him in his journey thru the underworld. Their unearthing, in 1974, was the greatest archaeological discovery of the 20th century.

Along with such companions, an emperor would, at his death, give orders to have members of his court buried alive with him, a practice that, as might be imagined, inspired them to do all they could to enhance his longevity.

The Concubine's Tale

Still, one becomes resigned to the inevitable. It is the strangest of feelings: The air grows thinner...consigned to a sealed chamber...waiting to die. It is an exquisite time...a unique time...time without motion. Not like any other passing of time. It is not like other breathless times, such as your first sunset. Or your first glimpse of the moon skating on a lotus pond. Or your first discovery of fireflies making love.

I have been sealed up, along with the Emperor's retinue—several hundred in all. When the mandate of Heaven is fulfilled, and these chambers have been... exhumed, long ages hence, they will peer into the darkness, and say of us all: "Were they really once alive? These bones?" Not knowing how we lived, or why we lived. What we dreamed, or what things we called out...in the last moments... before the scent of lilac turned to quicksilver and the stench of rotting lemons.

And all of this...from a custom. A *conceit*. A belief...that we could accompany the Emperor to another world. And still wait upon him there. Pour his libations, soothe his swollen body. Bring him provender on silver trays. Spectral deeds...to assuage his now spectral being.

There are few of us remaining, from the hundreds: a chamberlain, a footman, a barber; the royal accountant, who, with fitting irony, has continued his reckoning, taking inventory of all that has been sealed in beneath this giant mound of earth and stone: worked leather boots and silken gowns, jade bowls and cups, adornments of every sort for the ladies of the court, and for the concubines—of which I am one.

The tapers burn low. Who could imagine I would end my days praying to a candle, for my sustenance. Which to choose? Should I extinguish it? And survive longer, but in darkness? Or let it burn, and watch my dying shadow clawing up the wall? Which would be a more exotic sepulcher for dreaming... for dreaming...for dreaming...for dreaming...for dreaming

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The city walls still stand today: so broad you can drive two Land Rovers—side by side—around the rim. The concubines have come and gone, and come and go. The clay soldiers maintain their endless vigil—gazing at the past and at the future, with blind moons for eyes; their horses tethered to chariots that will carry the Emperor...out of the abyss of time.



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Note

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