

A NOTE ON PLAQUES DEPICTING RHINOCEROS FROM CHANDRAKETUGARH, WEST BENGAL

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The site of Chandraketugarh (locally known as Berachampa, lat 23°41' N and long 88°42' E), an early historical site in West Bengal, is situated within the Deganga Police Station in 24 Parganas (North). The present site lies about 37 km north-east of Kolkata, which is easily approachable by the Barasat - Taki Road. The ancient city of Chandraketugarh yielded plentiful of antiquarian remains in the past. The ancient city comprises some adjoining villages like Jhikra, Singerati, Shanpukur, Hadipur, Ghorapota, Dhanpota, Chuprijhara, Gajitala, etc. covering an area of about seven miles long and one and half a mile wide. The city was encompassed by a mud-built rampart, traces of which are still visible in some areas. The true importance of the site was first assessed by one local resident named Tarak Nath Ghosh as early in 1907, who drew the attention of the Archaeological Survey of India, Eastern Circle, Kolkata. Subsequently, the Government of India gave protection to a few mounds under the provisions of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act as early as 1920. The site has been excavated by the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Calcutta University, Kolkata for ten successive seasons from 1956-57 to 1965-66 with occasional breaks. The excavation has proved beyond doubt that the site was in occupation at least from the Mauryan to the late medieval period. Besides recovering representative archaeological materials belonging to different periods, prolific archaeological objects like terracotta human and animal figurines, diagnostic ceramics, seals and sealings, terracotta thin plaques produced out of single mould, punch marked and cast copper and silver coins have been collected from the site. The site was a flourishing urban centre having wide contacts with contemporary sites of importance. It is interesting to note that till recently antiquarian remains are still available from this site.

The most remarkable discovery that deserves special mention is two thin plaques made out of single mould that depict rhinoceros. The plaques in question have been assigned stratigraphically to period IV, coeval with the Kushan period, which is chronologically ascribable to c. 100-300 A.D. The animal depicted in the plaques have single horn, having usual physical features like heavy skin folds, resembling armour like plates and studded with tubercles on shoulder, thighs and buttock. The realistic representation of the animal with minute details leave no room for doubt that the clay modellers of Chandraketugarh were quite familiar with this animal. The most distinguishing feature of this animal here is the existence of single horn in the region on the nose.

The one-horned rhinoceros variety (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) was once extremely common and widespread throughout the Indo-gangetic plains and its neighbouring countries. By the end of the 17th Century, this particular variety possibly disappeared from the plains and subsequently concentrated in some pockets. At present, the animal is confined in some parts of North Bengal, Assam and Nepal, locally known as *Gondar* (Bengali), *Gor* (Assamese) and *Gainda* (Hindi and Nepali) respectively. The variety inhabits in low humid marshy grasslands and as such the centre of concentration lies in the Himalayan Terai (Chitawan - Rapli Valley) in Eastern Nepal, northern parts of West Bengal (particularly in Jalpaiguri District), Brahmaputra valley of Assam (North Kamrup, Nougaoan, Sibsagar and Darang districts). The best specimen of this group as known to us has been reported from the Swamps of Sunderban in Bengal in 1870. Due to large scale poaching for the rhino horn for medicinal use on the misinformation and belief

as well as for leather for making shield and armour are the primary reasons of gradual extinction of this animal. With the passing of time, large scale deforestation, habitat destruction for growing urbanisation, intrusion into their grazing grounds by large herds of cattle and domestic buffaloes have been the other reasons for gradual decline in numbers of this animal. At present, this has become virtually an endangered species.

It is quite likely that the single-horned rhinoceros might have flourished in the semi-marshy humid lands of Chandraketurgarh and its adjoining areas in the early historical time. The areas once formed parts of greater Sunderban region. The artists working through clay medium were quite familiar with this animal. This may be the plausible reason for the faithful depiction of the animal in clay plaques during the period under review. It may be pointed out here that the clay modellers of Chandraketurgarh showed equal expertise in representing other animals too which were possibly used as toys by children.

Notes and References

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Terracota Plaque Depicting Rhinoceros, Chandraketugarh, 24-Parganas (N)