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Indor Khera Revisited: Excavating a Site in the Upper Ganga Plains

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the early occupational history of the site of Indor Khera in the Upper Ganga Plains, based on excavations conducted in 2006 and 2007. In 2007, one of the test trenches excavated in 2006 was reopened and a more extensive area (approximately 15 x 15 m) was excavated. The intention is to focus on the results from a single trench that have provided us with a tentative which has chronology for the early history of the site and which has also opened several questions for discussion. The issue of the use of the term 'Early Historic' is also discussed.

Introduction

The site of Indor Khera (28° 14'57" N, 78° 12'48" E) is located in Tehsil Debai[1], District Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh on the right bank of the eastern branch of the Chhoiya Nadi, also called Nim Nadi. Indor Khera lies between the rivers Kali Nadi and the Ganga (Fig 1). The village of Indor is located 0.5 km off the Aligarh-Anupshahr road and is about 10 km east of the Ganga River. Three test trenches were opened at Indor Khera in 2006. In 2007, one of the test trenches was reopened and a more extensive area (approximately 15 x 15 m) was excavated. However, this is not a report of the work of the two seasons. Rather than presenting the data in the form of preliminary findings from the seasons' work, the intention is to focus on the results from a single trench that have provided us with a tentative chronology for the early history of the site and have also opened several questions for discussion.

Why did we choose Indor Khera?

In the Upper Ganga plains, after Atranjikhera and Jakhera, hardly any sites have been excavated on a sustained basis in the last decade, in contrast to work conducted in the Middle Ganga plains. Moreover, even with these two sites, we know little about the 1st millennium CE, as the post-Northern Black Polished Ware levels from Atranjikhera remain unpublished and Jakhera was deserted after the Northern Black Polished Ware occupation. It is this period, significant in the history of ancient urbanism, which in many ways dictated the initiation of this project. A number of sites were explored and out of these, Indor Khera to us appeared suitable as it was a small site (about 12 ha) with a number of small mounds, ranging from around 0.1- 0.6 ha, with heights of 1-2 m. Some of these small mounds lay on the other side of the river Chhoiya, but all the mounds were to the north and west of Indor Khera. These mounds lay in a radius of about 500-600 m from the edge of the Indor Khera mound. There was thus a potential to explore the relationship between the main mound and subsidiary mounds. A relatively small site like Indor Khera allowed investigation by a small team such as ours with limited resources and infrastructure.

Initially, the project was conceptualized as a survey of a site in its landscape, with the intention of undertaking intensive field walking in a 2 x 2 km area around the mound (Menon *et al.* 2005). In this first stage, undertaken in two phases in December 2004 and in May-June 2005, the area around the mound was surveyed, but as regards the mound itself, there were two problems. Firstly, nearly half the mound was occupied by the village and was thus unavailable for survey. Secondly, while the other half does not have houses, it is however being used for animal enclosures and for storing cow dung cakes and husk. Thus, the actual mound itself could not be surveyed. While this survey provided us with information on activities taking place outside the walled area, for understanding different activities and architecture within the walled area, excavation was necessary.

The present day village is located on top of the mound, which measures 285 m (north-south) x 428 m (east-west). The maximum height of the mound is now 17 m. As mentioned in our earlier article (Menon *et al.* 2005), A.C.L. Carlleyle (1879: 56) had first investigated the site in 1874-75. He had then mentioned that the village occupied an area of 152 x 152 m in the east-north-eastern side of the mound. Today the village extends over the entire eastern,

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1. Till 2005, the modern village of Indor was under the tehsil of Anupshahr. As a result of the creation of new tehsils and districts in Uttar Pradesh, Indor has now been put under Tehsil Debai.

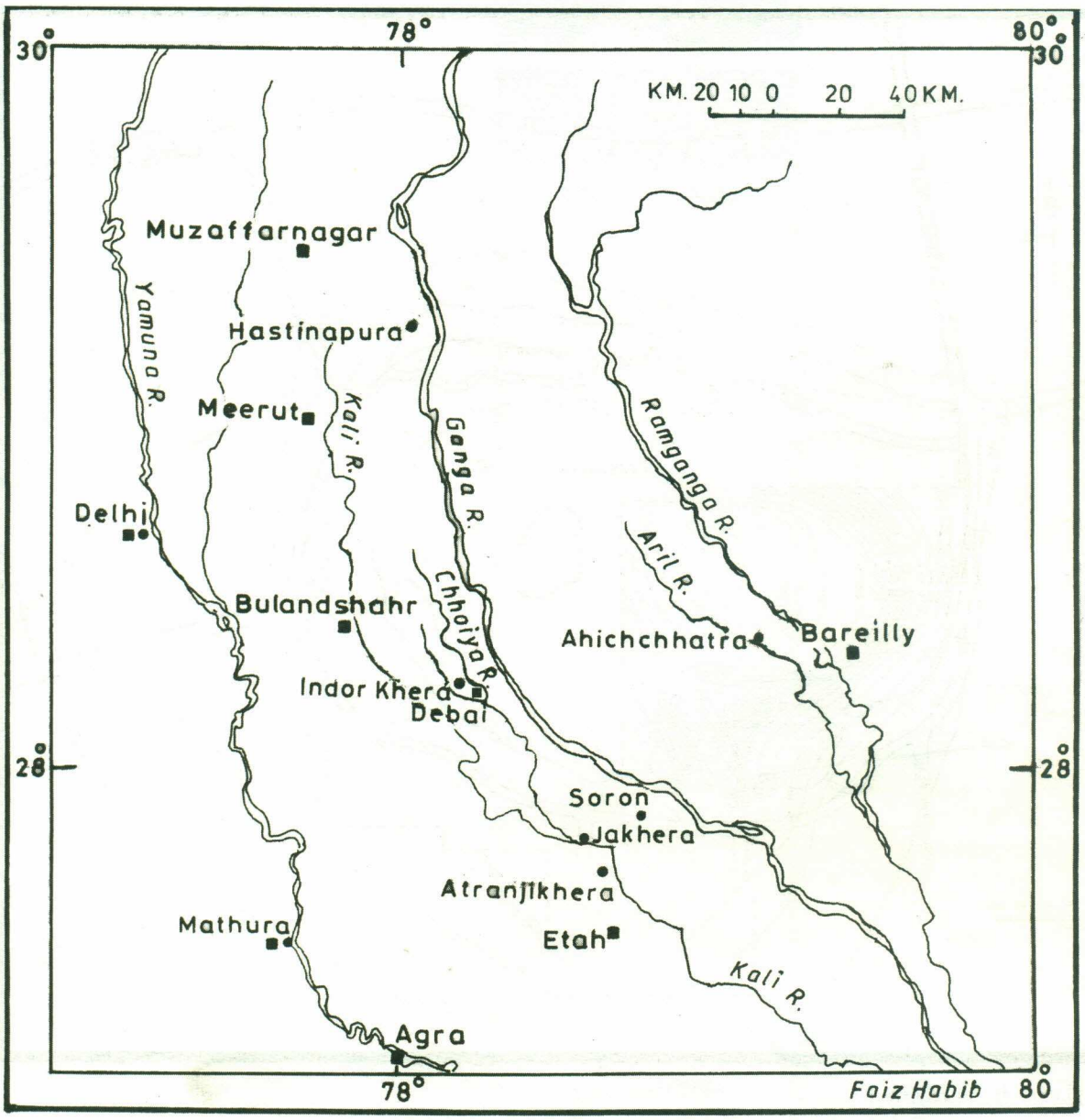

Fig.1: Map of archaeological sites showing location of Indor Khera

northwestern and southeastern portions of the mound and the adjacent area (Fig. 2). The extension of habitation at the base of the mound has led to the clearing and exposing of fortification walls particularly in the northern, eastern and southern parts of the mound. The fortification walls (Fig. 3), made of baked bricks, with dimensions ranging from 38-43 x 22-23 x 5.5-6 cm, comprised an inner and an outer wall, with cross-walls. Carlleyle (1879: 56-57) conjectured that there were four gateways, suggested on the basis of deep hollows or ravines cutting through the mound in the western, north-northeastern, southern and eastern portions. However, he was doubtful about the last as there was no evidence in the form of a depression. There are clear gullies in the west, north and south (Fig 2), which are even now used as pathways through the mound. As far as the possible eastern gateway is concerned, during Carlleyle's time itself this area was occupied by the village which may have removed all traces of it.

Preliminary soundings were made in May-June 2006 by opening two 4 x 4 m trenches (A1 and A2) at about the 196 m contour line on the southern edge of the mound (Fig. 2). Another trench, A3, initially had a cutting area of 4 x 2 m, which was reopened in May-June 2007 when it was also extended into a 4 x 4 m trench. A3 was about 100 m east of A1 and A2 and was at a lower level (193 m contour line) than the other two trenches. While A1 and A2 were excavated up to 2 m and 1.5 m, respectively, A3 was dug till 4.26 m in 2006 and up to natural soil, in the northwest quadrant, at 5.86 m in 2007.

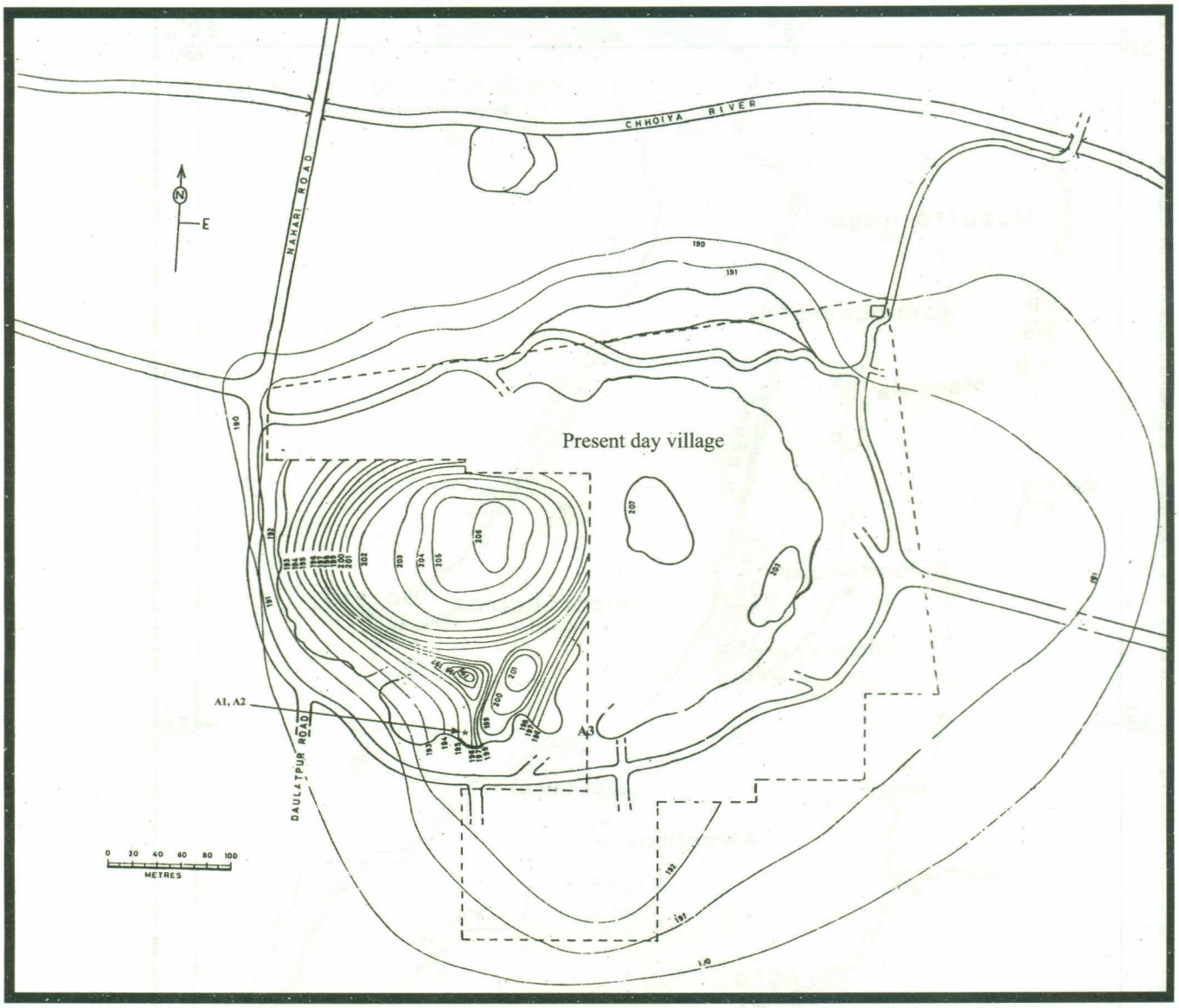

Fig.2: Contour plan of Indor Khera

The information from A3 also enabled us to plan further research at the site, which required horizontal excavation. For this purpose we chose the northwestern area of Indor Khera where there was a flat exposed ridge halfway down the slope of the mound (at about the 193 m contour line). The deliberate cutting away of the mound by local villagers created this ridge. From the ridge there was a clear vertical section ranging from 3-4 m till the next higher portion of the mound. Except for the deliberate plantation of a few trees and two '*bitiyas*' (a structure composed entirely by the heaping of cow dung cakes and plastering the whole with wet cow dung), the area was free for excavation. The preliminary findings of the excavations in this area will be discussed elsewhere.

The trench (A3) was laid at about the 193 m contour line. The spot was chosen for two reasons: the remains of the fortification in the southern part of the mound going up to the height of about 194 m, as well as the likelihood of a gully in this vicinity (now a brick-laid path) being an ancient gateway. A3 is just off this path and about 10-15 m within the line of the fortification. The area where A3 was laid out was a clearing where buffaloes were penned. The owner was kind enough to move his animals to another spot for the duration of the excavation.

While A3 was largely dug in arbitrary units of 5-10 cm, recognized features were excavated separately. The deposits were dry sieved using a mesh size of 2 x 2 mm. Once the lower levels (about 3 m) were reached, the soil became clayey making dry sieving difficult; the deposit then had to be hand sorted. All archaeological material was kept, including pottery, artefacts, bones, and macro-botanical remains like seeds. Wet flotation was also done

of soil samples for micro-botanical remains. Charcoal samples were collected from different depths and kept for dating. While some of the charcoal samples have been sent for radiocarbon dating to Birbal Sahni Institute for Palaeobotany, others have been retained for AMS dating.

As mentioned earlier, first the northern quadrants of A3 were opened giving a cutting area of 4 x 2 m. At a depth of 2 m, a 1 m wide step was left unexcavated in the northeastern quadrant. This was to facilitate access to the lower levels. At a depth of 3 m, another 1 m wide step was left intact, leaving only the northwestern quadrant (2 x 2 m) as the excavated portion. This was dug up to 4.26 m in 2006. In 2007, the trench was reopened, and we reached the natural soil at 5.86 m in the northwestern quadrant. To confirm the latter, the quadrant was further excavated down till 6.20 m. At the same time, the trench was extended to include the southern quadrants, giving a cutting area of 4 x 4 m. In the southern quadrants, we stopped at the level of the first step reached in the northern quadrants.

Stratigraphically, we identified 28 layers in the northwestern quadrant of A3 (Fig. 4). The layers were deliberately not marked out on the section with a knife and sections were drawn in consultation with all the excavators. On the basis of archaeological finds, layers 11-28 (3.11 – 5.86 m) belonged to Period I; layers 3 to 10 to Period II (0.70 – 3.11 m); and layers 1 and 2 to Period III (surface to 0.70 m). This periodization has been worked out on the basis of stratigraphy as well as changes in material culture, including pottery. For the purpose of this article, we are still retaining conventional ceramic categories, in terms of particular diagnostic wares, such as Black Slipped Ware, Painted Grey Ware, and Northern Black Polished Ware. While these have been found useful as chronological markers, it has often meant that the associated wares have been largely neglected. Adequate attention has also not been paid to the kind of information that can be ascertained regarding the changes taking place over time in relation to the production and use of pottery. The tabulation and codification of the pottery of Indor Khera is under progress and will be published separately.

Period I

The deposits associated with Period I are compact, clayey and dark brown in colour. In layer 27, were found *in situ* two mandibles and a tooth near an oval-shaped feature of baked clay and ash. Nearby were also found 5 pieces possibly of a single bangle of copper. Layer 26 is a yellow compact layer about 4 cm thick and was possibly a floor. Associated with this floor were two *ghata* shaped beads and terracotta bangle pieces. Layer 23 represents a burnt deposit. Layer 18, represented by a 4 cm thick yellow compact deposit, was also possibly a floor. There was a large pit or silo, going down 1.20 m with a width of 1.10 m

Fig.3: Fortification walls of Indor Khera

and a mouth of 0.35 m, sealed by a yellow compact layer 16. Black Slipped Ware, Fine Grey Ware, Painted Grey Ware, Black-and-Red Ware and Red Ware were found from these levels. As Painted Grey Ware dates are well established, we can date this period between 1000 and 700/ 600 BCE. Charcoal samples from Period I levels of Indor Khera were collected and will be given for analysis.

Period II

Period II begins with the black layer 10 into which Feature 6, 10 cm thick, was built of yellow compact clay. Feature 5, 20 cm thick, as seen from the section (Fig. 4) had collapsed in the western portion. This feature was composed of brick gravel and small potsherds. About 10 cm above Feature 5 is Feature 4 which along with Feature 3 was contemporary to layer 4. Feature 4, 8 cm thick, was also composed of brick gravel and potsherds, with a bedding of brickbats and brick nodules. Feature 3, about 15 cm thick, comprised of lime laid over a bed of tiny brick chips and brickbats. The base underneath Feature 3 was comprised of brick chips, brick nodules and brickbats. Feature 3 was oriented in a southwest-northeast direction (according to magnetic north). At the level of Feature 3

Table 1: Quantification and description of finds in Period I

Material	Object	Description	Count
Terracotta	Bead	Red	
		Ghata shaped	2
		Arecanut shaped	1
		Pear shaped	1
		Convex	1
	Bangle piece	Black	
		Triangular section, with design of impressed lines on both sides of central ridge	10
		Red	
		Triangular section, no design	6
		Triangular section, with design of impressed lines on both sides of central ridge	17
		Round section, no design	7
		Round section, with design of impressed lines on both sides of central ridge	2
		Round-triangular section, design of faint incised lines	1
	Marble Disc	Black	4
		Black	
		Design of incised lines on both edges	1
		Red	
		Design of incised lines on edge	2
		Without design	1
	Potsherd disc	Red	7
	Wheel	Red	
		Without hub or spokes	3
		Grey	
		Hubbed, no spokes	1
	Gamesman	Red	1
	Figurine	Red	
		Part of an elephant's trunk	1
	Ring	Red	1
	Unidentified		11
Clay	Miniature vessel	Unbaked	1
Bone	Point		3
Copper	Bangle piece		5 (probably part of 1 bangle)
	Unidentified		2
Iron	Unidentified		5
Silver	Sheet	1.2 cm square	1
Glass	Bead	Blue	1
	Chips	Green	
	Unidentified	Green	1
	Misshapen piece		1
Stone Carnelian	Bead	Spherical	1
Shell	Bead	Barrel disc	1
		Cylindrical	1
Mica	Fragments		

was Feature 1 in the northwestern quadrant. The floor of Feature 1 was outlined by a circular line of brickbats. The feature, going down 1.25 m from layer 2 which seals it, was composed of alternating layers of ashy white, grey, brown and blackish deposits. Quantities of slag were found within the feature. There is a possibility that Feature 1 may initially have been constructed as a fire installation. Feature 2, 8 cm thick, with a bed of brickbats is mostly damaged but was made of rammed potsherds in clay. The decreasing widths of Features 2, 3 and 4 as seen from Fig. 4 probably indicate a change in direction as compared with Feature 5. As Feature 5 is visible in the entire west-facing section, it can be assumed that the width of this feature would have been at its minimum 4 m. Our interpretation is that Feature 6 was an unpaved road which was subsequently followed by Features 5, 4, 3, and 2 which were paved roads. These successive roads in Period II were probably originating from a gateway perhaps at the gully near A3. Between Features 3 and 4, in the southwestern quadrant were found a collapse of several large bricks with two partly intact (34 x 22 x 6.5 cm), along with large bones, burnt bones and 37 beads (34 orange, disc, glass; 1 blue, micro, glass; 1 shell; 1 red stone, rectangular), all possibly part of a single necklace.

Period II is characterized by Northern Black Polished Ware. Two terracotta sealings (see the upper two in Fig. 5) were found. Neither was inscribed but both have symbols on the basis of which they have been identified as belonging to the Mauryan period by Prof. Pushpa Prasad, an epigraphist formerly at the Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University.

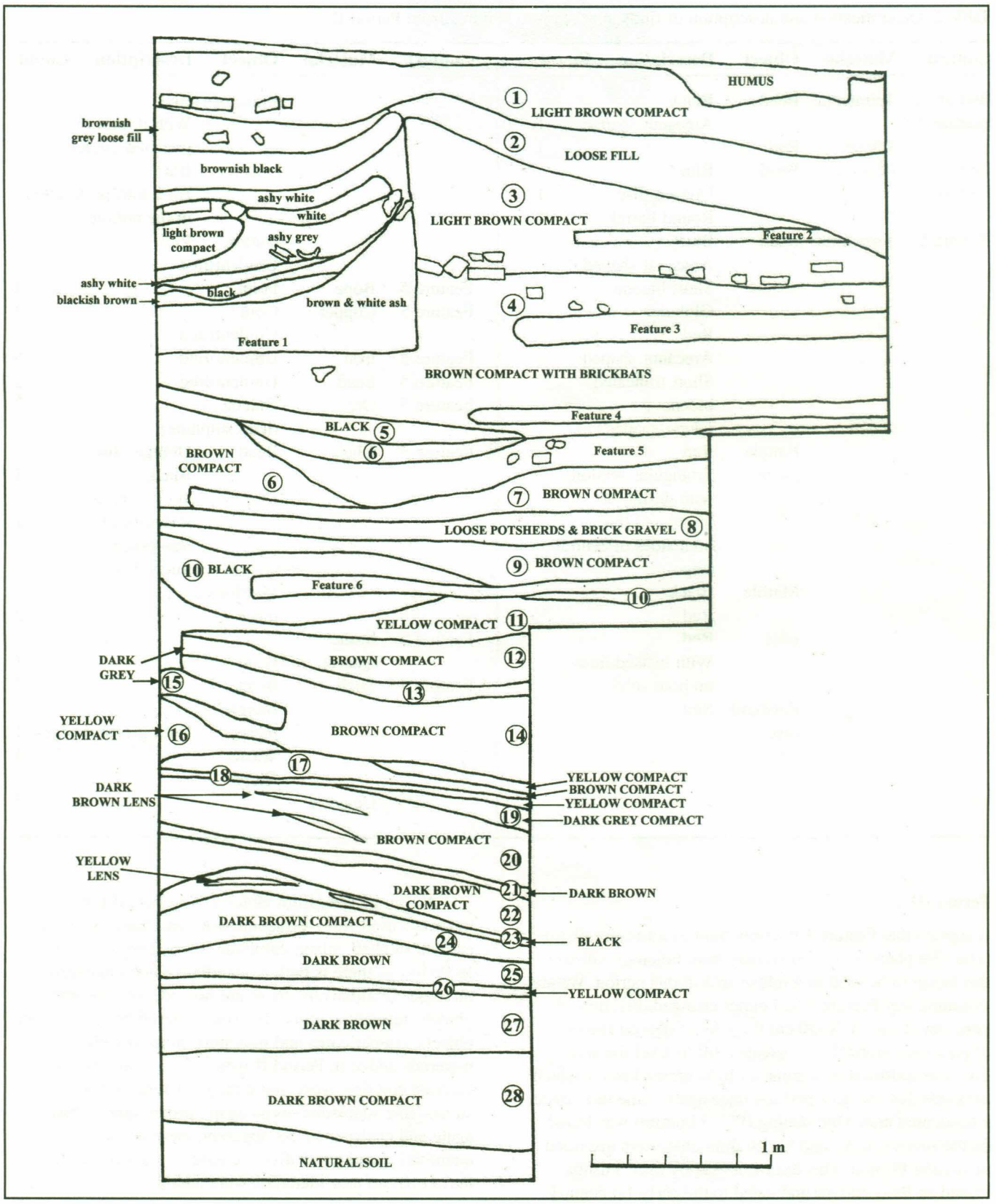

Fig. 4: Stratigraphy of trench A3

Table 2: Quantification and description of finds in relation to features from Period II

Context	Material	Object	Description	Count
Bed of Feature 2	Terracotta	Bead	Black	
			Arecanut shaped	1
	Wheel	Red		1
Bed of Feature 2	Glass	Bead	Blue	
			Uneven disc	1
			Round barrel	1
Feature 5	Terracotta	Bead	Black	
			Arecanut shaped	
			Short bicone	
			Globular	
			Red	
			Arecanut shaped	
			Short truncated bicone	
			Ghata shaped	
		Bangle piece	Red	
			Triangular section, with design of impressed lines on both sides of central ridge	
		Marble	Black	
			Red	
		Disc	Red	
			With incised lines on both sides	
		Potsherd disc	Red	
		Figurine	Red	
			With design of punched circlets	
			Black	
			Bird with perforation in the bottom	
		Button	Red	
		Unidentified		
Feature 5	Bone	Point		2
Feature 5	Copper	Coin?		3
		Unidentified		7
Feature 5	Iron	Unidentified		5
Feature 5	Lead	Unidentified		2
Feature 5	Ore	Galena (lead sulphide)		2
Feature 5	Glass	Bead	Orange, disc	3
			Black	1
			White-green, micro-bead	1
			Sea-green, micro-bead	1
		Misshapen piece		2
Feature 5	Stone			
	Quartz	Bead		1
Feature 5	Shell	Bead		3
		Bangle piece	With grooved edges	1
		Waster Chips		1
	Cowries			2

Period III

It appears that Feature 1 possibly built as a fire installation (kiln /fire place) in Period II, may have fallen into disuse and began to be used as a refuse area in this period. We are assuming that Feature 2 had either changed direction or gone out of use. A 20-50 cm thick loose deposit (layer 2) of potsherds probably represents a fill to level the area. This was followed by a compact light brown layer 1 which indicates that this area perhaps once again came into use as a residential area. One sealing (Fig. 5 bottom) was found on the surface of A3 and has Brahmi characters inscribed in circular fashion. This has been read by Prof. Pushpa Prasad as *Bhagvatasya* and dated to the early 1st century A.D. These layers can perhaps be dated from 200 B.C. - 100 A.D. as indicated by the ceramic assemblage, which is marked by Red Wares, an absence of NBPW, and the inscribed sealing.

As can be seen from tables 1-5, in Period I, basic materials used were terracotta, iron, and bone, with some amount of shell, silver, carnelian, glass, copper and mica. In Period II, there is both a quantitative and qualitative increase. Qualitatively, there are now identifiable iron objects, terracotta animal figurines, carved bone and ivory objects, copper coins and miniature stone vessels. New materials added in Period II were schist, lead (and its ore, galena), cowries, ivory and a range of semi-precious stones, like soapstone, moss agate, jasper, quartz, black agate and chalcedony. As apparent, there is also a quantitative and qualitative increase in glass beads. In Period III, no new materials were added.

The apparent quantitative increase in finds in Period II has to be treated with caution. The volume of earth excavated for the three periods in Trench A3 was 11.0, 26.8 and 11.2 m^3, respectively. Far more earth was

Table 3: Quantification and description of finds in Period II

Material	Object	Description	Count
Terracotta	Bead	Black	
		Arecanut shaped	6
		Pear-shaped	1
		Misshapen	1
		Red	
		Ghata shaped	1
		Red	
		Without design	1
		Black	5
		Red	2
	Disc	Red	
		Without design	2
	Potsherd disc	Red	6
	Figurine	Red	
		Seated lion	1
		Red	1
		Red	1
	Sealing	Red	2
	Unidentified		10
Bone	Comb		2
	Point		1
	Ring		1
	Unidentified		1
Copper	Coin?		8
	Ring		1
	Rod		1
	Lumps		8
	Unidentified		7
Iron	Nail		1
	Rod		1
	Unidentified		3
Glass	Bead	Blue, truncated barrel	3
		Amber, truncated barrel	1
		Orange, disc	39
		Blue, micro	25
		Green, micro	18
		Black, micro	8
		White, micro	1
		Green, long convex bicone	1
		Black, short tubular	2
		Blue, collared	1
		Green, tubular	1
		Black	1
		Blue, fragments	
	Misshapen piece	Black	8
	Chips	Blue and grey	
Stone	Bead	Red, rectangular	1
		Garnet, misshapen	1
		Black, short barrel	1
Schist	Chip		1
Soapstone	Rim sherd		1
Carnelian	Bead	Long barrel	1
		Short truncated convex bicone	1
		Faceted	1
Moss agate	Bead	Rectangular	1
Jasper	Bead	Faceted	1
Quartz	Bead	Tablet shaped	1
Black agate	Bead	Barrel	1
		Globular	1
Chalcedony	Chip		1
Shell	Bead	Disc	6
		Short barrel	5
		Triangular	1
		Irregular	1
	Bangle piece		1
	Cowrie		34
Ivory	Decorative object	Carved with flower and pot design with tiny holes on margin for fixing	1

excavated for Period II as compared to the preceding and succeeding periods. This quantitative increase in Period II is the evidence from a single trench. It would be interesting to see whether it holds in other areas in subsequent excavations.

The excavations of the test trench A3 have proved useful in providing us with an early occupational history for the site, one that was not known so far from Carlleyle's investigations. This would obviously hold for a limited area in the southern part of the mound. The hypothesis about a possible entrance to the fortification in the southern part was confirmed by the evidence of successive roads near the gully still bifurcating the southern part of the mound. From the trench, also recovered were wasters and chips of stone (schist and chalcedony), and shell, misshapen pieces of glass, lumps of copper, an antler piece, a lump of galena, and slag that still has to be identified, all testifying to possible craft activities. The

Fig.5: Terracotta sealings from trench A3

evidence of craft working from a small test trench indicated the potential of the site. Contexts of craft production for the 1st millennium B.C./A.D. are all too rare in the archaeological work done so far. Thus, further work at this site was planned to investigate the spatial distribution of craft and other activities both within and outside houses.

Postscript

One issue that has been troubling us of late is the term 'Early Historic' (see Menon 2008), so commonly used by archaeologists and that includes us as well. As we began formulating our research problems, it became apparent that not only is there no consensus but, in fact, there exists a lack of clarity in what 'Early Historic' means in archaeological terms and the way it has been used by archaeologists[2].

As we understand, there are two major problems involved with the use of the term 'Early Historic' by archaeologists. First, can one use the term 'Early Historic' for the entire subcontinent when there are clearly differences across space and time? The beginning of the 'Early Historic' has varied from Erdosy's (1988, 1995) dates of 1500 B.C. for the Punjab and 1000 B.C. for the Ganga Valley, to Dhavalikar's (1999: 161-63) dates for different parts of the subcontinent: 600 BCE for the Ganga Valley, 400 B.C. for Western India and 200 B.C. for South India. The terminal dates also find little concurrence. Erdosy (1988, 1995) dates this in the Ganga Valley to 300 A.D., while Dhavalikar puts it at 600 A.D. in the Ganga Valley and in Western and Southern India, 300 A.D.[3] On the other hand, Ghosh (1989) and Smith (2006) have a single time-span for the subcontinent as a whole, but their dates vary from the 6th century BCE to the 6th century A.D. and from 3rd century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., respectively.

Second, in terms of material culture, the Harappan, for example, is clearly identifiable but how would we recognize the 'Early Historic' and is it even possible to do so? Given the spatial and temporal variations, can the 'Early Historic' be considered as a single, homogenous entity? Perhaps a certain assumption has been made in conflating the 'Early Historic' with urbanism, the beginning of writing or even dynasties, as those from the Mauryans onwards[4]. It may perhaps be more useful for archaeologists to discard a term like 'Early Historic' altogether and instead work out changes in material culture, over time, which in turn could reflect transitions and transformations of socioeconomic structures in the 1st millennium B.C.

In the same vein, it is time we reflected on the usefulness in India of persisting with a kind of 'Historical Archaeology' where the prime focus of archaeology has been on confirming the information from texts. Often, one finds that for periods for which written records exist, archaeological evidence tends to be subordinated to the textual. However, while texts provide us with certain kinds of information, archaeology provides us with very different insights. For example, let us take the case of urbanism. Chattopadhyaya (2003) in a perceptive article discusses how texts may inform us on the ideal city, on its hierarchic use of space, as a point of convergence, and the attitudes to, and meanings of urban life. On the other hand, archaeology can tell us about domestic activities, scales of production and the appurtenances of daily life. Unlike the texts which largely provide abstracted images, the advantage of archaeology lies in its ability to provide us with a narrative of the lived experience. However, for this, research questions have to be refined and more sophisticated methodologies adopted in archaeology.

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2. Chattopadhyaya (2008) has recently delineated some of the problems that concern the use of the term "Early Historical' in Indian archaeology.

3. For some other archaeologists such as Tewari (1997-98; Tewari *et al.* 1999-2000), the first half of the 1st millennium A.D., the post-Northern Black Polished Ware period, has generally been designated either as "Early Historic" or as Sunga, Kusana and Gupta periods. However, changes observed in material cultures are not likely to coincide with dynastic change.

4. One exception is Erdosy who has used the term 'Early Historic' for a period from when the earliest texts are known.

Table 4: Quantification and description of finds in relation to Feature 1

Context	Material	Object	Description	Count
Feature 1	Terracotta	Bead	Black	
			Arecanut	8
			shaped	1
			Spherical	
			Red	
			Arecanut	
			shaped	4
		Marble	Black	1
			Red	2
		Potsherd disc	Red	1
		Games man	Red	2
		Figurine	Black	
			Broken. Hind portion of animal figurine with incised dots	1
		Button	Red	1
		Unidentified		3
Feature 1	Clay	Disc	Unbaked. With central perforation and tiny perforations around the rim1	
Feature 1	Bone	Pendant		1
		Antler piece		1
Feature 1	Copper	Bangle piece		1
Feature 1	Iron	Axe head		1
		Knife		1
		Unidentified		4
Feature 1	Glass	Misshapen piece		1
Feature 1	Stone			
	Schist	Knob of lid		1
	Schist	Unidentified		1
	Sandstone	Pestle		2

Table 5: Quantification and description of finds in Period III

Context	Object	Description	Count
Terracotta	Bead	Black	
		Arecanut-shaped	9
		Pear-shaped	1
		Spherical	2
		Red	
		Arecanut-shaped	2
	Marble	Black	3
	Potsherd disc	Red	2
	Gamesman	Black	2
		Red	1
	Reel	Red	1
	Pendant	Black	2
	Lid of vessel	Red	1
	Unidentified	Red	4
Clay	Unidentified	Perforated	1
Iron	Hook		1
	Unidentified		6
Glass	Bead	Transparent, pendant	1
		Black, misshapen	1
	Misshapen piece		3
Stone	Chalcedony?	Pebble + chip	2
	Schist	Unidentified	3

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