

# HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF INDIA

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND HISTORIANS

*Editors*

AMITA RAY : SAMIR MUKHERJEE



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TERRACOTTA FIGURINES OF THE KUSHĀNA PERIOD  
IN THE GANGETIC VALLEY : A STUDY BASED ON  
STRATIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE FROM EXCAVATIONS

SAMIR KUMAR MUKHERJEE

THE Kushāna Period witnessed a marked increase in the production of terracotta figurines both in volume and variety as evidenced by their widespread finds in India and beyond her present political borderlands in west Pakistan, Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia. A large number of terracotta figurines discovered in course of systematic excavations since the mid-forties of this century at many sites in the vast expanse of the Gangetic Valley forms an important chapter towards the study of this art expression through the medium of clay. This pivotal region, both fertile and popular from a remote past, passed through many vicissitudes of history. A large portion of this region was under the domination of the Kushāna rulers during the early centuries of the Christian era which witnessed considerable growth and prosperity.

The present study of the terracotta figurines is primarily based on excavated materials which have been recovered from stratified contexts by way of modern scientific method of excavations. The stratas have been ascribed to a definite and precise chronological horizon on the basis of datable associated objects.

The sites excavated so far are mainly urban centres or prosperous villages in the contemporary socio-economic setup. In many cases, traces of continuous occupation prior to the Kushāna rule as well as anterior to it, have been noted. Further, the occupation at the sites extends over a long period of time.

A brief and precise description of the important finds at the

Kushāṇa levels in the Gangetic Valley may be enumerated here. The survey of the excavated sites where new methodology and strategy were first experimented as early as during mid-forties, begins with Ahichhatra, district Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. The "stratum IV", falling within our present scope of study yielded votive tank being ritualistic in character, dwarf and grotesque figures (*Vāmanaka*, *Gaṇas*) and Viṣṇu, the latter precisely in "stratum IV-b" (circa A.D. 200-300).<sup>1</sup> The site of Hastinapura, district. Meerut, Uttar Pradesh on the Upper Ganga basin produced votive tank, as well as sculpturesque torso of the Bodhisattava Maitreya in terracotta from level IV assignable to the Kushāṇa Period.<sup>2</sup> Some notable and prospective sites in and around Mathura, viz., Katra, Dhulkot, Kankali Tila, Ambarish Tila, Geeta Enclave, Govindanagar were excavated from 1973-77, resulting in providing valuable data on the flourishing and continuous occupation of the area.<sup>3</sup> Period IV, ascribable to the Śaka-Kushāṇa levels in particular, yielded terracottas "varied and quite large in number."<sup>4</sup> The figurines that deserve special mention in this context include *Yakṣinīs* with charming dress and attitude having striking resemblances with stones parallels, *Yakṣas*, *Gaja-Lakṣmī*, *Gaṅgā* riding on makara, mother and child variety (*Mātrikā*), *Gaṇas* or *Vāmankas*, votive tank and alien figures, viz., warrior carrying large and heavy shield and long axe (*paraśu*), wearing a long-belted cloak or coat, detached heads, wearing helmet with protuberant knob or fillet.<sup>5</sup> The site of Sonk (Mathura) excavated between 1966-74 threw more light on the domain of the Kushāṇa Period art expression in terracottas. The levels in question, according to the excavator, "yielded an abundance figurines of various divinities, predominantly those of Kubera and Durgā in her *Mahiṣāsuramardini* form."<sup>6</sup> The finds in the Śaka-Kushāṇa level at Purāṇa Quila, Delhi consist of votive tank, human head wearing a decorated cap, *Yakṣa* and a plaque exhibiting three elephant riders.<sup>7</sup> The remarkable find during the period under review at Atranjikhera, district Etawah, Uttar Pradesh, is "a head of an Iranian nobleman".<sup>8</sup> The site of Kausambi, district Allahabad, excavated over a considerable period of time since the fifties, yielded quite a good number of terracotta figurines assignable to this period. The notable finds include votive tanks, figures of *Hāritī*, *Naigameṣa* and a favourable number of human heads, some of which betray alien physiognomy and expression.<sup>9</sup>

Considerable parts of Period II and III at the site of Hulaskhera, district Lucknow, coincide with the Kushāṇa Period rule.<sup>10</sup> Important finds that concern us here are restricted to *Naigmeṣa* figures only. Phase B of Period II at Moradhwaj, district Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, assignable to the Kushāṇa times, yielded moulded figure of the Buddha seated in *Jñānamudrā*, the Bodhisattvas and a plaque depicting Kṛṣṇa slaying the demon Kesin.<sup>11</sup> At the site of Ayodhya, district Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, cult figurines, occasionally of massive proportions and of the so-called exotic types come from the occupations of the first-second centuries A.D.<sup>12</sup> The notable finds at Sringaverapura, district Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, consist of serpent figure, *Hārītī* or *Shasti* and *Kubera*.<sup>13</sup> The Kushāṇa levels at Ganwaria and Solargarh, district Basti, Uttar Pradesh adjoining to the famous site of Piprahwa gave out quite a good number of remarkable figurines which include heads of the Buddha, the Buddha seated on a lotus throne in *dhyānamudrā*, warrior and drummer types, mother and child variety, ornamented females with elaborate coiffures and decorated anklets in their feet and three-eyed Śiva, wearing heavy *kuṇḍalas* in the ear.<sup>14</sup> Human figures revealing typical non-Indian ethnic features characteristics of the Kushāṇa Period and female figures shown seated on a stool bedecked with ornaments are the important finds from Kheradih, district Ballia, Uttar Pradesh.<sup>15</sup> The famous site of Rajghat, district Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, where excavations extended over a long period of time, provided us with some data of the period under review. Period III here which concerns us, yielded *Naigameṣa*, hand-made mother goddess, votive tank and human-heads betraying alien physiognomy and expression which are characteristic of the time.<sup>16</sup> The finds in Period III at Mason, district Gazipur, Uttar Pradesh (circa first-third centuries A.D.) almost repeat the similar finds from Rajghat which include human heads having typical Kushāṇa style, plaques showing couple in an amorous pose and votive tank.<sup>17</sup> The site of Buxar, district Shahabad, Uttar Pradesh, provided us with human figures having typical Kushāṇa head-dresses and head-bands.<sup>18</sup> In the stratas ascribable to the Kushāṇa Period at Vaishali, Bihar, *Naigameṣa* and *Nāga* figures dominate.<sup>19</sup> Almost the same picture is repeated in the Kushāṇa levels at Kumrahar and Pataliputra, district Patna.<sup>20</sup> At the site of Chirand, district Saran, Bihar the levels

ascrivable to the Kushāṇa Period produced figures of *Naigameṣa*, *Saptamatkās*, votive tanks with usual drummers and an amulet in terracotta depicting *Sūrya*, riding on a four-horse drawn chariot, flanked on either side by two female attendants.<sup>21</sup> The Period III at the site of Sonepur, district Gaya, which coincides with our area of study gave out a female figurine under a foliage.<sup>22</sup> The site of Tamluk (ancient Tamralipta), district Midnapur, West Bengal, yielded a few interesting terracottas having strong Kushāṇa influence.<sup>23</sup> The Period III at Chandraketugarh, district North 24-Parganas, West Bengal datable to the first-third centuries A.D. gave out female figures having elaborate coiffures and drapery, erotic plaques and a variety of other objects.<sup>24</sup> At the recently excavated site at Mangalkot, district Burdwan, the flourishing Kushāṇa level yielded quite a good number of terracotta figurines which include the lower part of a female figure wearing transparent folded sari, torso of a soldier with a dagger in his waist having prominent hilt, a *Naigameṣa* figure, mother and child variety, a plaque showing a caprisoned horse in motion, etc. Further two detached male heads, hollow inside, found in the Kushāṇa level point out that the artists equally showed competence in handling large-sized terracottas also, a feature already common with the Kushāṇa Period artists noted at many sites. One of the heads having round and plump face with a demonic look is interesting. The other head can be easily identified as a *Nāga* figure from its prominent decorative snake-hood<sup>25</sup>

The above survey brings forth that the period under review yielded quite a good number of terracotta figurines both in variety and volume. Still we are handicapped by a few limitations towards formulating a comprehensive and detailed picture of this particular period within this region. Firstly, due to limited area excavation by way of vertical probing at some sites adequate information is indeed lacking. Excepting a few sites like Kausambi, Ahichhatra and Sonk (Mathura), which were excavated on a larger scale, most of the sites were excavated with the intention of solving some specific problems. Secondly, in most cases, detail and exhaustive reports are yet to be published. So we have to depend on concised reports published so far. Thirdly, the materials recovered from excavations by various institutions are generally inaccessible for study due to various reasons. In

spite of these limitations, the survey undertaken brings forth an authentic and dependable picture of the terracotta art that flourished in the Gangetic Valley in the early three centuries of the Christian era.

To sum up, the following points deserve our attention. Since the terracotta objects are found from a region both widely and continuously inhabited over a longer period of time and at the same time within a specified chronological horizon, it is quite likely that the objects present before us the definite expression and ability of a particular identifiable community bound by space and time.

Secondly, the survey based strictly on stratigraphic criteria offers adequate scope and opportunity to assess the date as well as the provenance of a large number of terracotta figurines recovered either from the surface or from the unstratified levels.

Thirdly, the majority of the sites excavated so far are either urban centres or large prosperous villages in the contemporary socio-economic view. So the variety of terracotta objects produced out of cheap medium available in plenty in the vast alluvial plains may, therefore, be taken to reflect the prevailing beliefs, rituals and tastes of average people of the contemporary society.

Fourthly, the size of the majority of terracotta figurines recovered from the doab in the early centuries of the Christian era are relatively small which in a way signifies the continuity of the earlier tradition. Terracotta figures of larger sizes, though appeared in this period, are comparatively small in number. Further, it is not clear whether the brick structures, both secular and religious, were embellished with terracotta plaques during the Kushāṇa Period as was done during the Gupta Period. It is well-known to us that the brick-built temples adorned with terracotta sculpture and reliefs became increasingly popular during the Gupta Period.

Fifthly, the artists during the period under review produced terracotta figurines both by hand and mould and sometimes both these techniques were employed for the production of one particular object. Hand-modelled specimens exhibit a perfect mastery in rendering expressions of the human faces. Moreover, evidence is available to show how beautifully the artists worked on the finished objects by way of incisions and notches. One may note in this context that the entire repertoire of the terracotta art during the Kushāṇa

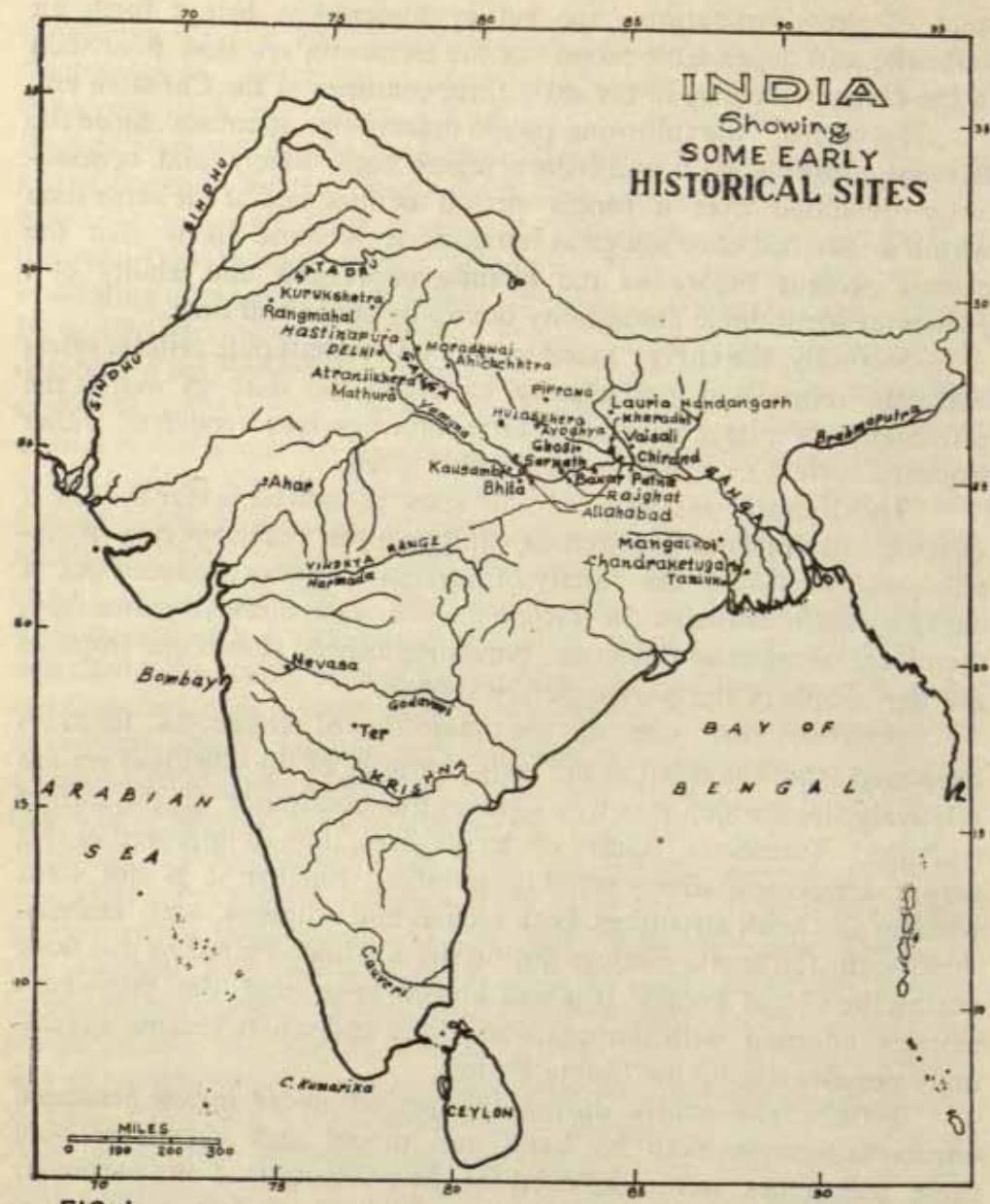


FIG. I

Period reveals that both a refined and sophisticated art as well as distinct tradition of folk art continued side by side. One distinguishing feature in the manufacture of terracottas in this period is the introduction of double mould. This technique, in all probabilities, was due to Roman inspiration. It is very likely that due to trade contacts with the Roman world, this idea gained momentum in India. Investigation further reveals that the Kushāṇa artists did not pay adequate attention in selection, processing or fashioning of clay compared to the artists of the succeeding Gupta Period. Presence of air holes, grit and admixture of rice-husk were common in the ingredients required for making terracottas in this period.

Sixthly, the period further yielded a number of terracottas painted with a variety of pigments of which red colour is most common. It is assumed that *hirmaji* (a kind of red clay) and *geru* (red ochre) were used to produce red colour. Other pigments used include *rāmraj* (yellow ochre), verdigris (a greenish blue poisonous compound) etc. In exceptional cases, coating of silver or gold obtained from silver or gold dust have been applied on terracottas. Only a few examples of these varieties survive now.

Seventhly, the period witnessed the emergence of new pantheons belonging to different sects and their embodiment primarily in stone as well as in terracotta in abundance. We have during this period iconic representation of *Dūrgā* as *Mahiṣāsuramardini*, *Siva*, *Vishṇu*, *Surya*, *Mātrikās*, etc. Some of the folk divinities (*Lokadevata*), already in existence from the earlier period of time, continued unabated during the Kushāṇa Period. These include *Yakṣhas*, *Yakṣhini*s, *Nāga*, *Nāgini*, *Kubera*, *Naigameṣa* and *Naigameyi*.

Eighthly, representation of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva figures in terracotta appeared for the first time during the Kushāṇa Period rather in a restricted manner. The region under study being the cradle of Buddhism, it is expected that like its stone counterparts terracotta medium should have been in wide use. The picture, however, takes a different shape from circa the eighth century A.D. when more Buddhist sites grew up yielding different varieties of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva figures as well as Buddhist gods and goddesses.

Ninthly, it is during this period in particular that we come across

with profuse terracotta figurines exhibiting alien and outlandish types. Innumerable terracotta heads with features of foreign ethnic types have been found at many far-flung areas within the valley and beyond. The major sites include Ahicchatra, Kausambi, Hastinapur, Rajghat, Mason, Mathura, Ganwaria, Sravasti, Kheradih, Kumrahar, Pataliputra, Vaisali, Buxar, Tamluk, Chandraketugarh, etc. Alien physiognomy, head-dresses, costumes, decorations, etc. etc., no doubt, suggest influx of foreigners. It is quite likely that the foreigners used to visit some of these sites as merchants or officials or pilgrims or just visitors. The alien faces and features attracted the notice of the humble modellers who spontaneously represented them to satisfy the demand of the contemporary society. Some of these human figures may have been attempted at portraiture where emphasis on individualism of faces and traits is prominent. It is true that it is during this period that one comes across a powerful intensity in facial expression.<sup>26</sup>

Tenthly, the distribution pattern and trends of the terracotta finds tend to show that the figurines betraying alien and outlandish types moved from the west to the east. In other words, it may be concluded reasonably that along with the migrations of alien types from the west and central Asia and subsequent intermingling of foreigners with the existing population, the terracotta motifs and designs also migrated in similar direction and ultimately got absorbed to a great extent.

Lastly, all of us are aware of the fact that some of the terracottas served as play-things of children and a substantial number of these objects were intended to educate the child.<sup>27</sup> Ancient literature confirms the archaeological evidence by frequently mentioning terracotta toys of wide variety. The *Charakasamhitā* describes a variety of terracotta dolls named after words denoting various family members such as 'daughter', 'son', 'sister', 'brother', 'aunt', 'uncle' and others. All too often scholars identify female figurines of early India indiscriminately as mother goddess. Some are so urbanely stylish that one wonders if they were not meant to be dolls. The elegant representations of some of the noble ladies may well be dolls depicting aunt.<sup>28</sup>

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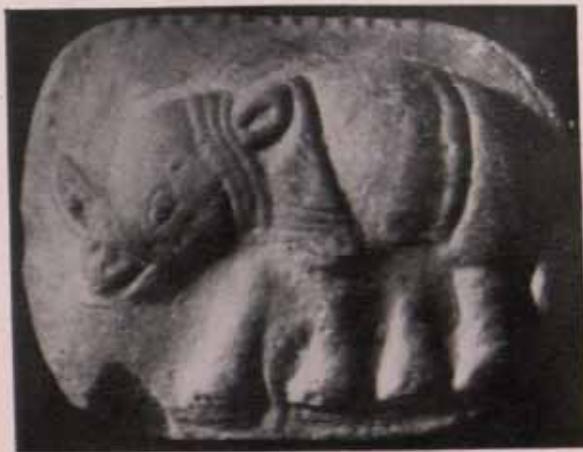
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