

Contexting Sindhol: A Hilltop Gupta Period Settlement in the District Subarnapur, Odisha, India

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Received : 19 June 2023 • **Revised :** 16 July 2023 • **Accepted :** 23 July 2023 • **Published :** 29 December 2023

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Behera, P.K. 2023. Contexting Sindhol: A Hilltop Gupta Period settlement in the District Subarnapur, Odisha, India. *Journal of Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Studies*, 1: 2, pp. 81-93.

Abstract: The present paper tries to shed light on the recently discovered Gupta period settlements at the village Sindhol, situated on the left bank of the river Mahanadi in the district of Subarnapur, Odisha. Significantly, the present site spreads over a three-kilometre area with evidence of structural remains starting from the hilltop to the bank of the river Mahanadi, which lies in the ancient *Mahakantara* region of *Dakshina Kosala*. In the absence of numismatic, epigraphic and other related evidence, the present paper tries to understand the context of Sindhol based on available brick structural remains recovered in and around the present village.

Keywords: *Sindhol, Brick structures, Brick robbery, Mahakantara, Asurgarh, and Trade route.*

Introduction

In the eastern part of India, Early Historic settlements are widely distributed and scattered across the country in varied geo-environmental settings. The vast mineral resources of the highland areas; the alluvial tracts of the Gangetic and the Mahanadi deltas which favoured agricultural intensification and expansion; the long coastline that accommodated maritime trade; as well as contemporary socio-cultural forces; must have played catalytic roles in the emergence of several urban centres in this part of the sub-continent. Chandraketurgarh, Tamluk, Mangalkot, Bangarh, etc., in West Bengal, and Sisupalgarh, Jaugarh, Radhanagar, Manikpatana, Kharligarh, Narla Asurgarh, Manamunda, Taraporegarh, Badmal Asurgarh, Budhigarh, Jamsaragarh, etc., in Odisha (Ghosh, 1989; Behera, 1994; Allchin, 1995; Ray, 1995; Smith, 2005; Ray and Salles, 1996; Sengupta and Panja, 2002; Yule, et al., 2005, etc.), are but a few of the many notable Early Historic urban centres of this region frequently referred to in the literature. The present paper highlights the Gupta period urban settlements of western Odisha, a part

of the *Mahakantara* region, with special reference to the site of Sindhol, a hilltop structural settlement, located very close to the left bank of the river Mahanadi, in the District Subarnapur.

A Brief Review of Previous Investigation

Archaeological investigations conducted during the last few decades in various parts of Odisha have brought to light several Early Historic settlements, some of which are fortified (Lal, 1949; Das, 1990; Basa and Mohanty, 2000; Yule, 2006; Patra, 2007, etc.). From the available literature, it appears that by the 5th-4th century AD, there was a proliferation of urban centres of various dimensions and styles in Odisha (Fig.1). These have been reported from three environmental zones: the hilly terrain of the Eastern Ghats and Chhottanagpur Plateau; the coastal plains comprising the alluvial stretch of the Mahanadi delta and the Rusikulya river system; and the littoral areas. Thus, the region of Odisha included distinct environments to which the Early Historic settlers adapted. The distribution pattern of these settlements appears to suggest that, in addition to the latter two environmental zones, highlands were also preferred; obviously due to the availability of rich and varied mineral resources and a wide spectrum of subsistence-related forest products. Our survey in the Middle Mahanadi Valley region of Odisha, which stretches from the Hirakud Dam Reservoir to roughly the Tikarparah gorge (Singh 1971: 754-775)) alone identified thirty-four Early Historic sites associated with black-and-red ware pottery and other exotic/non-exotic artefacts. Most of these also contain Iron Age deposits suggesting cultural continuity in the region (Behera, 2002-2003). However, compared to other regions of India where extensive structural remains belonging to the Gupta period have been unearthed through systematic excavations, no such effort has yet been undertaken in Odisha. This blurs our perception of the pattern of Gupta settlements in the state. Now the question of the location of *Mahakantara* is mentioned in line nineteen of the Allahabad pillar inscription (Gupta, P. 2013: 8), which says King Samudragupta invaded this country and subjugated the reigning ruler Vyaghraraja. While scholars widely differ in

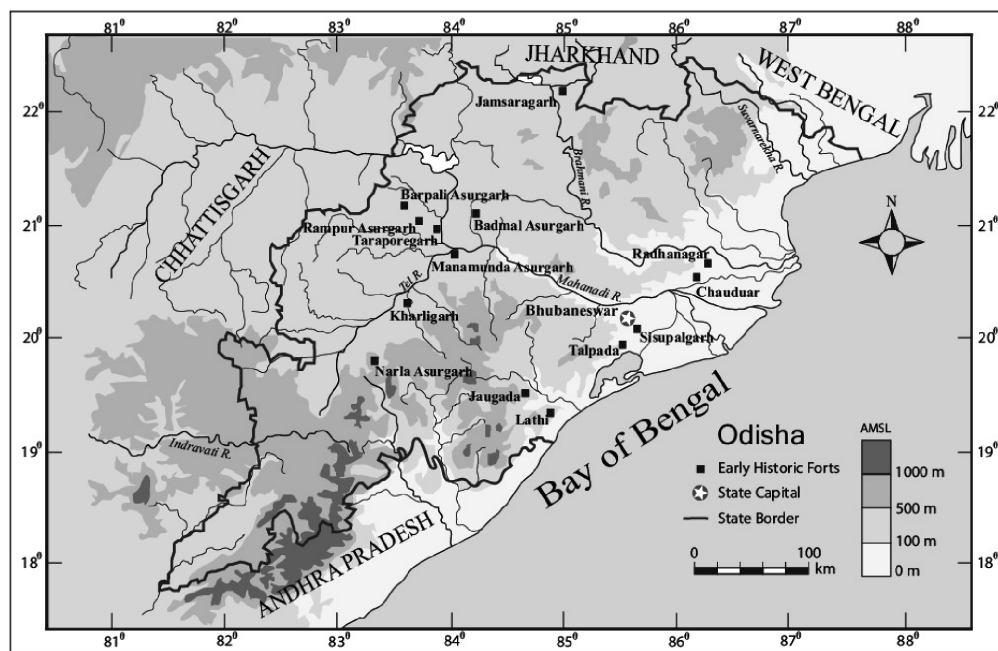


Fig. 1: Map showing the distribution of Early Historic forts in Odisha, in which maximum concentration can be seen in the western part

their opinion about its exact location (Pandey Sharma, L.D. 1947: 176), N.K. Sahu of Sambalpur University ascertained based on his excavations carried out inside the fort in 1973 at Narla Asurgarh (Lat. 20° 04' 40" N; Long. 83° 21' 16" E), located in the district Kalahandi of Odisha, that the massive rectangular shaped fort was under the possession of king *Vyaghraraja* whom Samudragupta defeated during his southern Indian campaign (Behera, S.C. 1982:7). The two trial trenches laid by Sahu inside the fort yielded two phases of structural remains, *i.e.*, Mauryan and post-Mauryan (Gupta) periods. The size of bricks used in the structures varies widely, like 44×29×7 cm, 43×27×7 cm, 38×20×7 cm and 27×21×7 cm. The excavations yielded a large variety of artefacts which included a hoard of 539 pieces of silver punch-marked coins, of which 69 belonged to the pre-Mauryan, 272 to the Mauryan and the remaining 198 coins to the post-Mauryan or Gupta period. According to Sahu these coins were minted at the site and were in circulation as late as 5th century A.D. Besides coins, other antiquities included numerous iron objects, beads of precious and semi-precious stones, glass bangles, etc. As per Terasingha copper-plate inscription found near the Asurgarh fort, King Vyaghraraja was succeeded by the next important king, Maharaja Tushtikara who held sway over the Asurgarh fort for some time and by about 5th-6th century A.D. the site was deserted. Unfortunately, except for a brief note of seven pages and a few artefacts now stored in the N.K. Sahu Museum of the Post-Graduate Department of History, Sambalpur University, we do not have any other details on this important excavation.

Similarly, in the year 1981 another extensive rectangular-shaped fortified site, at Manamunda (Lat. 20° 49' 59.90" N; Long. 83° 56' 0.63" E), located very close to the present district headquarters of Subarnapur and situated on the right bank of the river Mahanadi was taken up for excavation by the Department of History, Sambalpur University in collaboration with the Deccan College, Pune. It was an extensive fort, measuring about 1.5 x 0.5 kilometres area, with a fortification wall on four sides (Behera 1982: 16-22). During this early phase of excavations, two trenches were taken which yielded extensive brick structures and numerous other antiquities, like potteries of different fabrics and types, iron objects, beads of precious and semi-precious stones, faunal remains, etc. Subsequently in 1989-90 the site was again subjected to excavations by the Department of History, Sambalpur University, under the supervision of C.R. Mishra and S. Pradhan (IAR 1989-90: 80-86, IAR, 1991-92: 86). This year's excavation also yielded extensive structural remains, soak pits, terracotta ring wells, a variety of ceramic wares, beads of precious and semi-precious stones, copper bangles, a large number of iron objects, besides a few silver punch-marked coins. Here the size of the bricks used in different structures varies widely, like 35×26×8 cm, 32×23×5 cm, 30×25×9 cm, and 26×20×5 cm. Based on cultural findings and other indicators, the excavators have broadly assigned two phases of cultural periods, *i.e.* from 400 B.C. to 100 A.D. (Period-I) and from 100 A.D. to 300 A.D. (Period-II). Like the Narla Asurgarh site, here except for a brief descriptive report that appeared in the *Indian Archaeology 1989-90: A Review*, the details of the excavation were never published. However, a few decorated pottery fragments and two bricks can be found displayed in the N.K. Sahu Museum of the Department of History. Ironically, except for some parts of the southern rampart wall, the entire fortification area has already been washed away by recurrent floods in the Mahanadi and its tributary the Tel. Had the site and its cultural remains been systematically documented and analyzed for posterity, it would have greatly benefited the future generation of young archaeologists in understanding the processual aspects of urbanization in this part of the greater *Mahakantara*. Unfortunately, none of the proper archaeological methods and techniques have been followed by the excavators while excavating this very important multi-period (From the Iron Age through the Mauryan to the Gupta Period) fortified settlement.

Another important fortified Early Historic site in the area is Taraporegarh (Lat. 21° 11' 38.01" N and Long. 83° 33' 31.67" E), situated on the right bank of the Mahanadi nearly two kilometres east of the town of Binika/Binka, in the district Subarnapur. Significantly four copperplate inscriptions ascribed to the Somavamsi ruler Mahashivagupta Jayati-I of 9th-10th century CE and issued from *Binitapura* have been reported from this area. In terms of historical geography, the place name *Binitapura* has been identified by some historians with the modern town of Binika (Mishra 1933: 68-69). Situated on the right bank of Mahanadi, the site is almost circular in plan, enclosed on all sides with a massive earth rampart which rises to a height of about four meters from the surrounding plains (Fig.2). The debris of the rampart suggests that it was made out of clay and rubbles dug out from outside the periphery of the site. The fortification wall measuring about 20 m in width at the base and rounded at the top, is encircled on all sides by a 60 m wide moat, which is now converted into agricultural fields by the present villagers. The fort covers an area of about four hectares (200 m x 180 m). While the north-western, western and south-western prominences of the wall are to some extent better preserved, other parts including the inner area have already been destroyed by natural and anthropogenic agencies. Recurrent floods in the Mahanadi have severely eroded the eastern parts of the site. Flood water regularly enters the fortified area on the eastern side. Significantly the site of Taraporegarh represents the easternmost extension of circular fort, which has a wide distribution in the eastern part of Chhattisgarh region. A Government *Panthanivas* (Rest House) was constructed during 1996-97 towards the north-eastern part of the fort, which caused severe damage to almost 200 sq. meter area. Subsequently, during the last few years, a large-scale building construction work is underway for a public stadium, which covers a substantial part of the habitation area inside the fort. This has seriously impaired the preservation of the site giving very little scope for future archaeological investigations. Despite local protests, a nearly two-meter-thick habitation deposit inside the fort was bulldozed and levelled plain. Towards the north-western part of the settlement, a huge pit was dug by the workers of the construction project. Later the exposed section (Section-II: Fig.3) of this ditch was thoroughly scrapped to record the different cultural levels represented at the site.

About 80 m outside the southern wall of the Taraporegarh fort lies another mound of moderate height (about 3-5 m from the surrounding plains). The mound measures about 205 m in length and 140 m in width. While a substantial part of this mound lying towards the east has already been washed away by the floods in Mahanadi, the western part is under active cultivation. The eroded sections exposed in different areas of the western part of the mound yielded different ware types and antiquities. An exposed section (Section-I: Fig.4), located towards the southern part of the mound was scrapped to determine the underlying culture sequence.

The scrapping was carried onto the natural soil. The clearing of the section revealed 195 cm thick deposit divisible into 10 layers, identified based on colour and composition of soil sediment, besides cultural material (Fig. 4). Habitational remains viz., pottery fragments etc., were recovered from Layers 1 to 7, while Layers 8, 9 and 10 were found to be sterile. A burnt and rammed floor of about 10-15 cm thickness occurred in the upper level of Layer 5. The floor is made of charred cereal grains, represented by carbonized grains of rice (domesticated coarse type, belonging to *Oryza sativa* Linn; (*pers. comm.* With Prof. M. D. Kajale of Deccan College) and potsherds. Large quantities of potteries, mostly in rolled condition from the upper deposits and sparse faunal as well as floral remains were recovered from different stratigraphic levels. Soil sediments sampled from different levels were put to floatation method for complete recovery of depth-wise vegetational

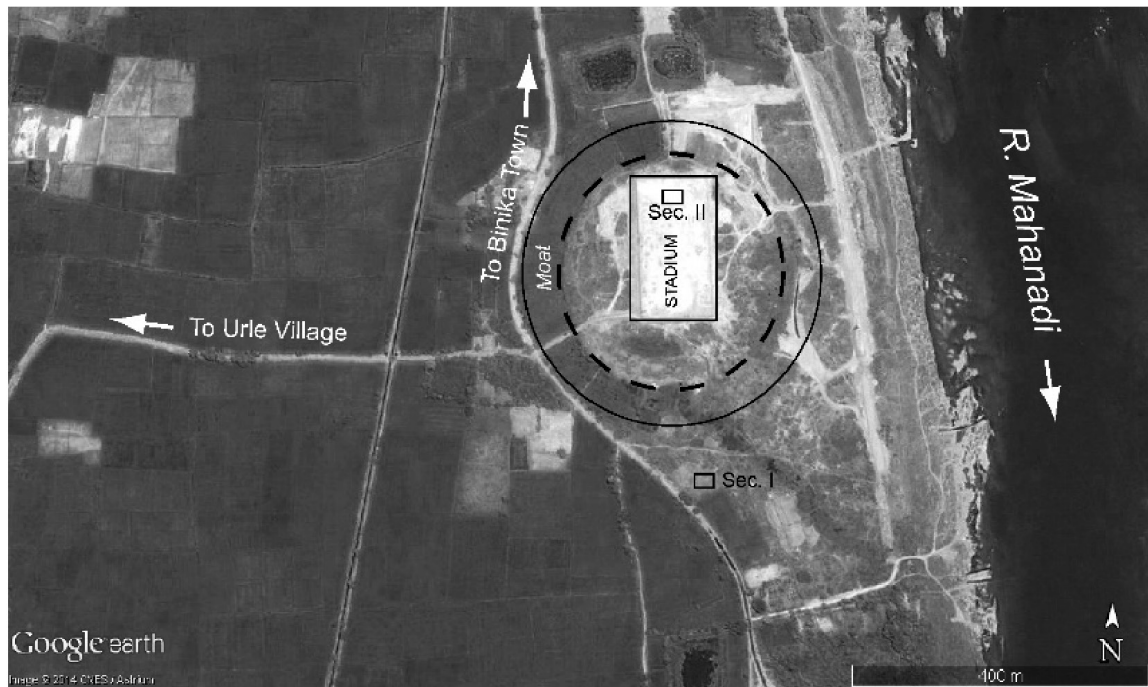


Fig.2: Showing the position of the circular fort of Taraporegarh and the location of scrapped sections.

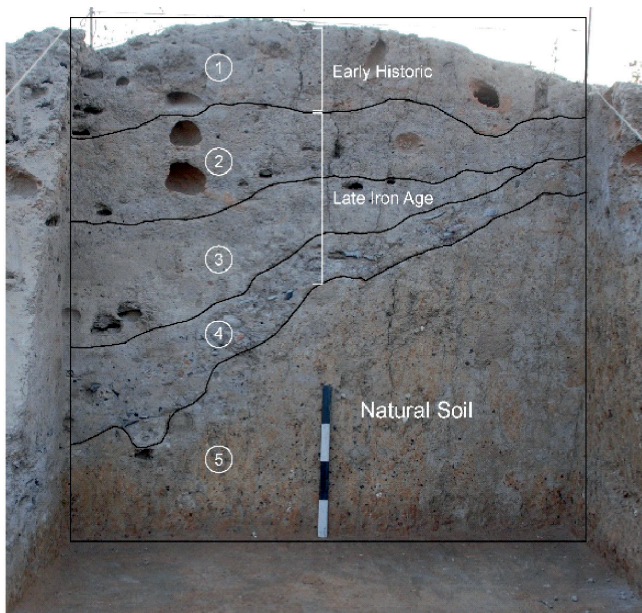


Fig.3: Showing culture sequence in the scrapped section taken outside the circular fort.

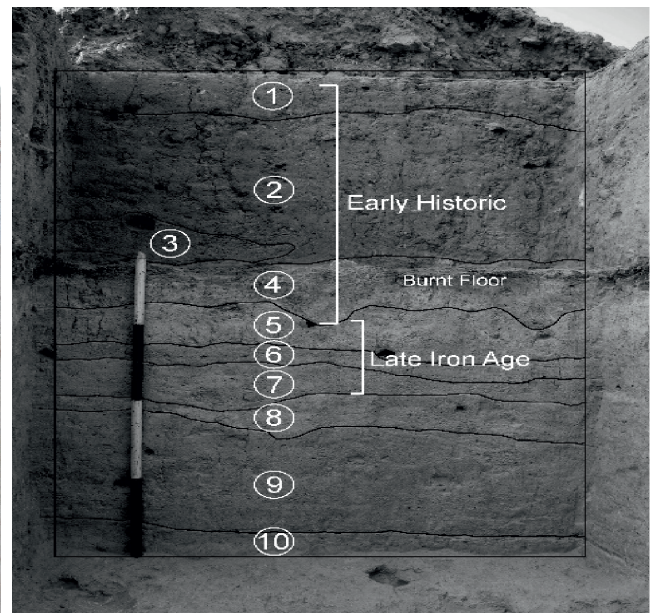


Fig.4: Showing culture sequence in the scrapped section taken inside the fort.

remains. The section scrapping which was carried out outside the fort (Section-I: Fig.3) revealed a 140 m thick habitation deposit divisible into four distinct layers overlying the natural soil, composed of yellowish red-coloured sandy-silty-clay. The excavation yielded a huge quantity of potteries of different ware types and faunal remains, most of which were in charred condition. The fauna recovered included medium-sized cattle (*Bos indicus*), sheep/goat (*Ovis/ Capra*), horse (*Equus caballus*), pig (*Sus scrofa*), molluscan shells (gastropods and lamellibranches), etc. (Behera, Hussain and Badam 2015: 178-196). While levelling the ground inside

the fort for constructing the stadium scores of iron objects of different types, ceramics, brick structures and a complete terracotta/brick-lined ring well were brought to light. The size of the bricks used in the structural remains varies from 30×20×7 cm to 25×18×5 cm.

Besides the above, recent excavations carried out at Kharligarh (Lat. 20° 27' 37" N; Long. 83° 33' 38" E; Pradhan 2003: 51-61) and Budhigarh (Lat. 20° 18' 29" N; Long. 83° 32' 09" E; Mishra 2016: 21-28) forts located in the Tel river system also yielded extensive brick structures and other antiquities belonging to the Gupta period. The most well-preserved and intact Early Historic fort is Jamsaragarh (Lat. 22° 16' 25.5" N; Long. 84° 54' 28.6" E), located in the Jhirpani area of Rourkela town in the district Sundargarh, and situated on the left bank of the river South Koel, a tributary of the river Brahmani. This site was first studied by the first author while conducting a prehistoric investigation in the upper Brahmani river valley in 1985. Subsequently, it was mapped and documented in the year 2002 (Yule *et al* 2005: 307-318). Here huge structural remains of the Gupta period are exposed towards the river bank (Fig. 5). However no detailed work has yet been initiated at Jamsaragarh. Similarly, Gupta period structural remains have also been recorded at Deundi (Lat. 19° 44' 47.68" N; Long. 82° 50' 56.58" E; Hussain and Joshi 2014: 259-262) and Nehna (Lat. 20° 15' 17" N; Long. 82° 46' 17" E; Mishra, B. 2011) in the Nuaparha district, Deuli (Lat. 20° 49' 09.99" N; Long. 83° 54' 16.20" E; Hussain *et al* 2017: 59-63) and Sirpur (Lat. 20° 15' 16" N; Long. 83° 38' 68" E; Mishra, B. 2011) in the Kalahandi district, all located in the Tel river system. However, no systematic work has yet been done at these sites.



Fig. 5: Showing structural remains at Jamsaragarh.

The lozenge-shaped site of Badmal Asurgarh Fort was excavated by the first author in 2000 and represented by two cultural phases, Iron Age and Early Historic. While no brick structures were noticed the site during the later phase turned into a very large precious and semi-precious stone bead manufacturing centre (Behera and Chattopadhyay 124-134). Our investigation could not register any Gupta period occupation at the site.

Recently, brick structures of the Gupta period have been brought to light in the Badbazar and Durgapali areas of Sambalpur town (Lat. $21^{\circ} 48' 86''$ N; Long. $83^{\circ} 93' 40''$ E; Fig. 6) and also at Huma (Lat. $21^{\circ} 16' 51.42''$ N; Long. $83^{\circ} 54' 44.53''$ E), a temple complex of fourteenth century CE, which lies some 25 kilometres south of Sambalpur and located by the side of the left bank of the river Mahanadi.



Fig. 6: Structural remains of the Gupta period recently found in the *Badbazar* and *Durgapali* area in Sambalpur town.

The above brief accounts reveal that this part of the *Mahakantara* during the reign period of the Guptas was studied with urban settlements. It seems there was a discernible route at least from Jamsaragarh in the north to Deundi in the south (Fig. 7).

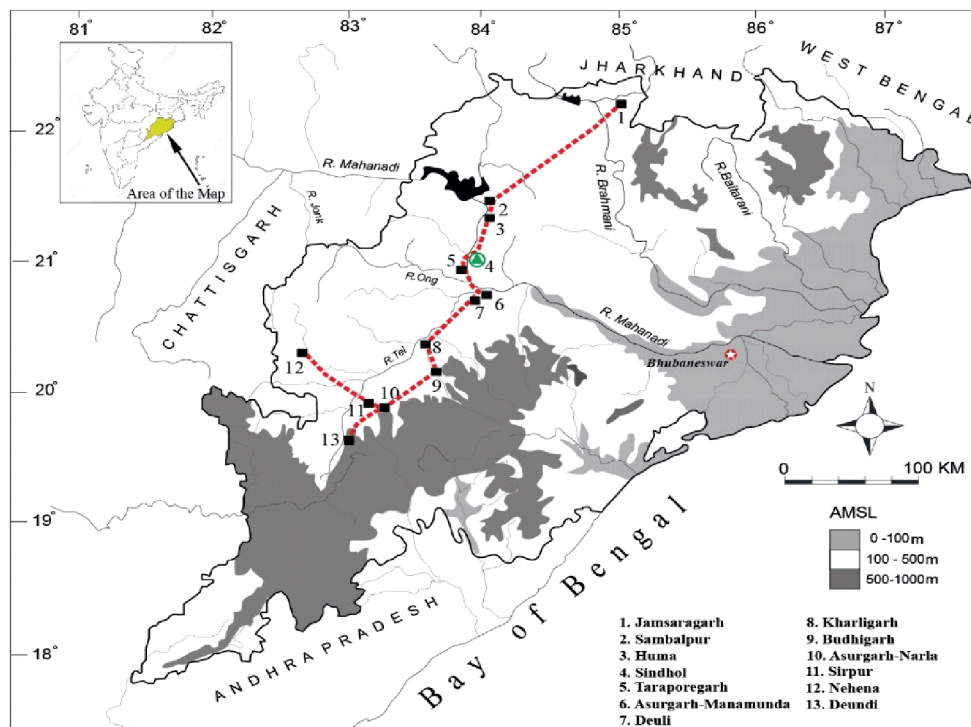


Fig. 7: Showing Gupta period structural settlements in the western part of Odisha.

The Hill-Top Site of Sindhol

Sindhol (Lat. 21° 03' 34" N; Long. 83° 52' 17" E) is a very small town located about 45 kilometres south of the district headquarters of Sambalpur and about 29 kilometres north of the district headquarters of Subarnapur as crow flies. The site (Fig.8) was located by the first author while passing through the State Highway-15 and noticed some tile thatched houses on the foothill slope of a hillock of about 183m to 193m above mean sea level height, where the walls were constructed by using modern bricks alongside large-sized bricks (Fig. 9). When we asked the wonder of the house about the source of the large-sized bricks, he led us to the nearby top of the hillock where we found extensive remains of brickbats and a couple of house structural remains in which large-sized bricks ($38 \times 20 \times 8$ cm and $35 \times 21 \times 7$ cm) have been used (Fig. 10). Our further investigation revealed that there are at least three different localities, where ruins of brick structures have been found, among which two are found on the top of the hillocks and the third one at the foothill along the State Highway-15 connecting Sambalpur and Subarnapur. Not only on the hill top but brick structures have also been found inside an office building on just other side of the road (Fig. 11). Stray bricks have also been found here and there between the foothill and the left bank of the Mahanadi.

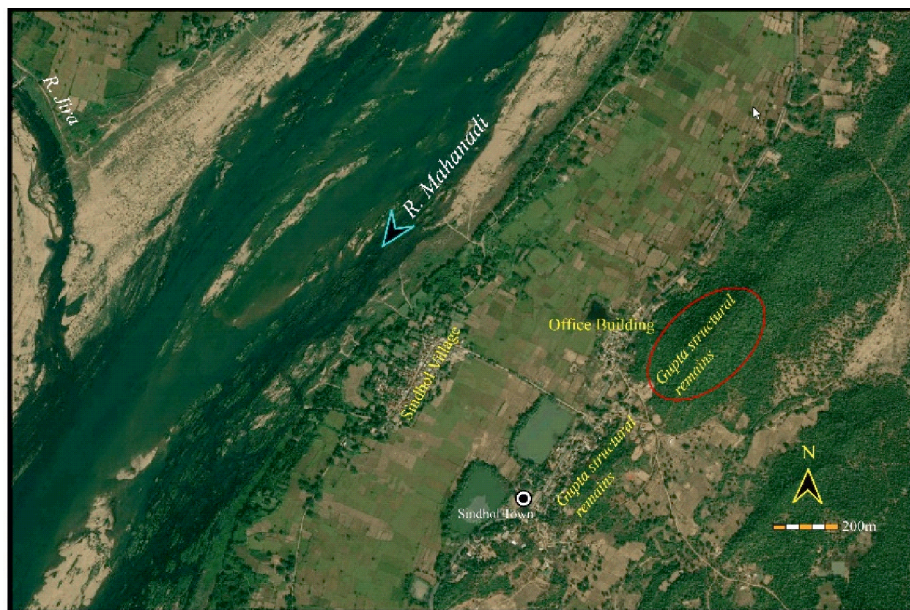


Fig. 8: Map of Sindhol showing locations of Gupta period structural remains.



Fig. 9: Showing a tile-thatched house (A) the wall of which is constructed by using modern and Gupta period bricks (B)

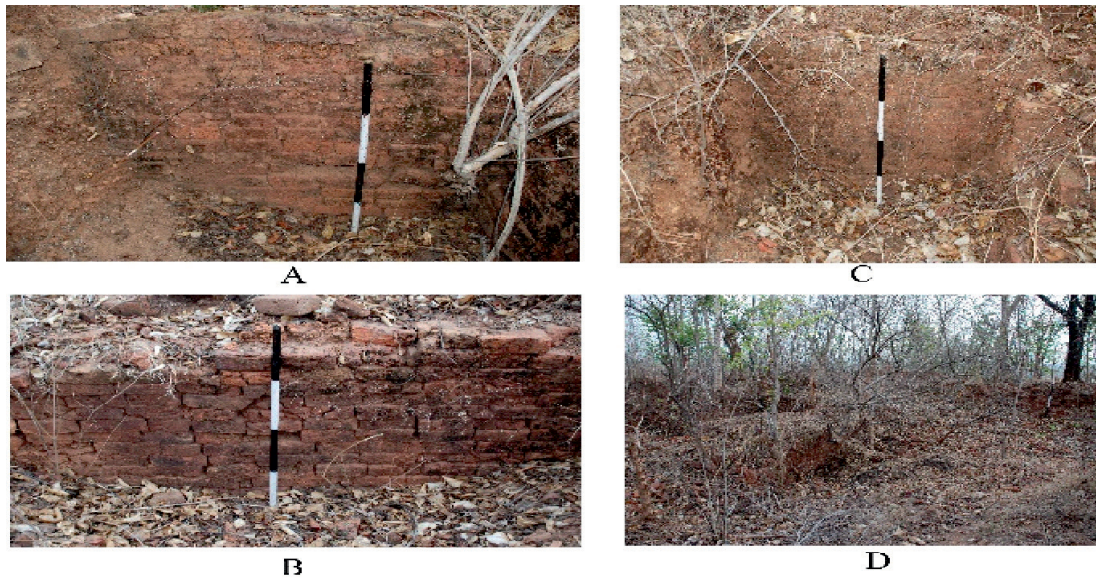


Fig. 10: Showing house structures on the top of the hillock (A,B & C) and extensive brickbat scatters and exposed structural remains (D)

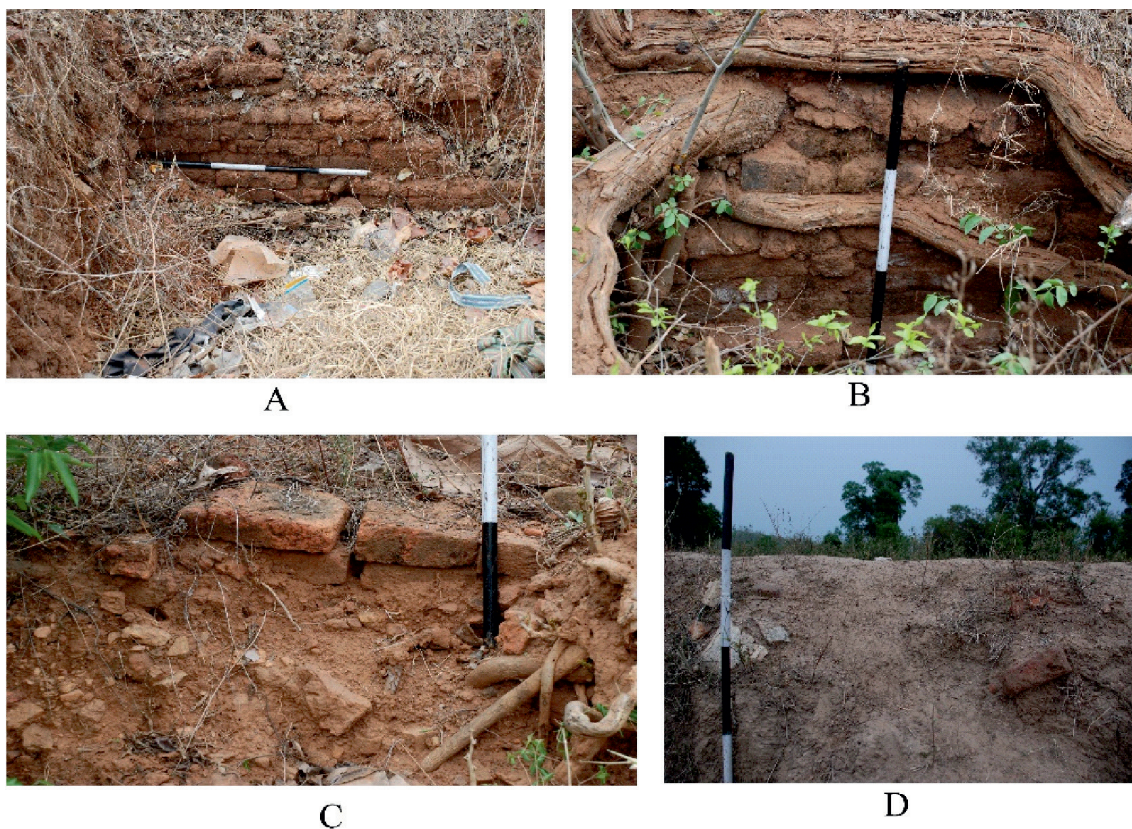


Fig. 11: Showing brick structures exposed on the other side of the road near an office building (A-C) and on the left bank of the river Mahanadi (D).

Besides structural remains the site has also revealed a large number of ceramic assemblages which were found scattered on the river bank of the Mahanadi. The dominant pottery types are red ware and red slipped ware whereas a few specimens of an inferior variety of black and red ware were also found from the site. The representative pottery shapes are vases, bowls, and dishes (Fig.12 & 13).

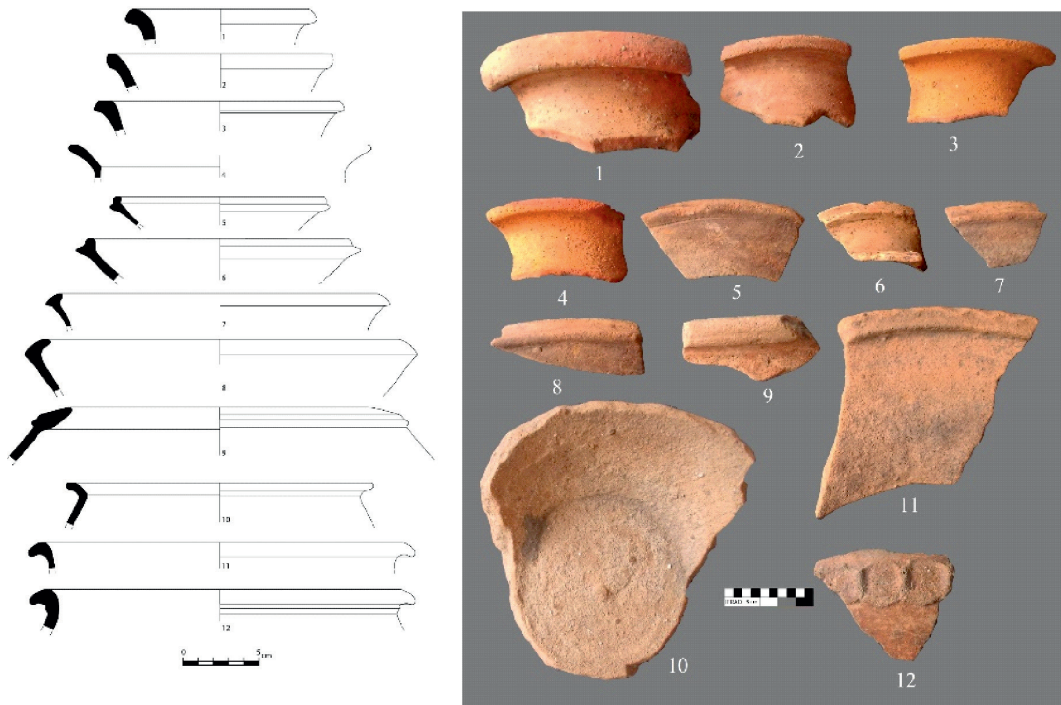


Fig. 12: 1-4 Red Slipped Ware Fig. 13: Representative shapes in plain Red Ware 5-12 Plain Red Ware

Near the office building a huge rectangular-shaped dressed stone block of khondalite was found, which bears chiselling marks on one of the sides (Fig. 14). The function of this stone block could not be determined because it was displaced from its original context. Inside the village under a tree was found a heavily weathered bust of an image, made out of granite rock, (Fig. 15), which appears to represent lord Vishnu or goddess Durga as shown in headgear. In this image, female breast like impression is also seen (?), yet the image seems near to Vishnu as identified. Certainly, this image belonged to the Gupta period (Personal communication with Prof. Durganandan Tiwari, B.H.U.). However, due to mutilation and heavy weathering, no features or attributes are visible.



Fig. 14: Dressed rectangular-shaped stone block of khondalite found near the office building.



Fig. 15: A heavily weathered bust of an image, probably of Vishnu found inside the village of Sindhol.

Concluding Remarks

Despite preliminary, our investigation at Sindhol reveals that it might be a very large city complex, spreading from the hilltop to the bank of the Mahanadi, measuring about three square kilometres of area. Despite recurrent brick robbery by the present-day villagers, the huge structural remains still survived at the top of the hillock probably represent a fort, though no clear fortification wall could be noticed due to frequent anthropogenic interference. The bricks found at Sindhol bear close resemblance with little variation with those found at major Early Historic sites like Nehna in Nuapara district; Deuli, and Manamunda in Boudh district; Deundi, Budhigarh and Narla-Asurgarh in Kalahandi district, Taraporegarh in Subarnapur district and Jamsaragarh in Sundargarh district. Future intensive investigation at this site complex from multidisciplinary perspectives may shed welcome light on the real nature, dimension and role of Sindhol in this part of the *Mahakantara* region. Whether or not the site of Narla Asurgarh of Kalahandi district represents the centre of *Mahakantara*, as suggested by N.K. Sahu, the site of Sindhol is unique in many respects.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the Archaeological Survey of India for providing permission to investigate Sindhol. We are also thankful to the authorities of Sambalpur University for providing funds to carry out this exploration.

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