

Interrogating Early India

EVOLVING PERSPECTIVES

EDITORS

Rajat Sanyal & Sharmila Saha



PAIOLCK

INTERROGATING EARLY INDIA

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7

Excavation at Lalpahari (Lakhisarai, Bihar) in 2018–2019

Anil Kumar, Eshan Harit and Tanmoy Mondal

THE LAKHISARAI REGION OF THE LARGER SOUTH BIHAR plains has been of prime archaeological significance ever since the region started appearing in the antiquarian reports from the mid-nineteenth century. The early medieval archaeology and epigraphy of the area has been subjected to generations of research. The area has been identified with the early medieval administrative division called Kṛmilā/Krimilā (Sircar 1983). The archaeology of the region has also been explored in recent researches (Kumar 2011).

In compliance with repeated recommendations of historians and archaeologists for proper systematic excavation of the region, the hill-top site of Lalpahari was selected for excavation under the joint venture of the Government of Bihar and the Department of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology, Visva-Bharati, Santinikentan. The first year of excavation revealed the existence of the Buddhist monastic complex with its architectural coordinates and material evidences. The second year of excavation, which is the subject of the present essay,

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was undertaken in order to expose the structural complex and comprehensively understand the stratigraphic correlates of the site.

The second season of excavation on Lalpahari commenced on 25th of January 2019. The excavation continued till 15th of May 2019. In this period, a total of twenty-three trenches were excavated. A total of three trenches were completely excavated, and the remaining trenches were partially cleared. The purpose of continuing the excavation in the second season was to further expose the buried *vihāra* and to understand its architectural features. The method of laying out, excavating, and recording can be broadly referred as the Wheeler-Kenyon method. In the first season, the highest point on the site was recorded at 79.35 m AMSL, and that point was taken as N00. From this point all the trenches were laid out accordingly. This process has been continued into the second season of excavation.

The central concern of the second season was to excavate the outer portion of the mound to understand the comprehensive architectural design of the site. The endeavour was successful and the site structure and planning was visible by the end of the second season. This paper will briefly summarize the architectural and the artefactual finds from the exposures in the second season. It will also attempt to understand the historicity of the given structure and locate it both within the realms of the sacred and the profane.

This paper will attempt to deal with excavation in each cordial direction separately. Hence, the discussion will begin from the eastern part of the mound shifting to the northern then to the western and finally the southern part of the mound. As in the second season of excavation emphasis was provided to understand the boundaries of the structure, most of the discussion will be regarding the same. However, some important excavation in the interior will also be discussed separately. This article will conclude by referring to a few hypotheses that can be asserted from the design of the structure at this early stage.

The first trench to be excavated in the second season was N30E40 (Fig. 7.1). This is located on the north-eastern corner of



FIGURE 7.1: General view of trench N30E40

the mound. N30E40 is structurally located between the eastern part of the main entrance and the north-eastern corner bastion. On excavating, a small brick bastion was unearthed mostly from the fourth quadrant of this trench. The front wall of this fortified structure, which stretched on both sides of the bastion, has mostly perished. The base of the wall probably lies buried beneath the main trench baulk. The debris in this trench predominantly consisted of battered bricks and lime plaster. The virgin layer was found in this trench at a depth of about three metres. A further analysis of this data along with the help of computer aided design can help in estimating the height of the wall. Approximately 25 complete bricks were found. Their approximate dimension was 35 cm × 28 cm × 8 cm. Many of these bricks had floral designs and other patterns on them. The sizes and designs of the bricks were premeditated and engraved before burning. This goes on to show the expertise and the precision applied in the construction of this structure.

Architectural fragments carved on granite stone were also discovered in this trench. These included a ventilator like stone

object with floral design and a broken stone sculpture. The stone object was scattered all around the south-east corner of the trench when found and was later pieced together by the excavators. The object had twelve square gaps probably for light and air to pass, which leads one to believe that it was a ventilator.

Another important stone object found during the excavation was a broken piece of a sculpture. The upper portion of this sculpture is broken. The lower part depicts a female playing a percussion instrument. On her right is a male who sports a braided beard and is depicted dancing. This can be a depiction of great joy and festivity. The purpose of this object was definitely ornamental and probably had aesthetic value. This sculpture probably had bi-sided representation. The features on the obverse side had faded. One can only observe a human physiology probably of a male along with a garland with beads around his neck.

Another trench excavated in the north eastern part of the mound was N40E40. The first quadrant of this trench was excavated in the first season. In the first season, only part of a circular bastion was excavated. Hence, in the second season the fourth quadrant of this trench was laid out and systematically excavated. This was the first corner bastion to be completely excavated (Fig. 7.2). By the end of this season when all the bastions were at least partially excavated few important discoveries were made. The corner bastions with a diameter of approximately 3.75 m were located in the four corners of the structure. They are significant as they are larger than other bastions and have a stone base. The smaller bastions, eight in number, are all completely made of bricks.

On completion of the excavation in the north-eastern corner of the mound, northern part was taken up. N40E30, a trench located in the northern part of the site was excavated in the first season. This trench was located above the structure's north eastern corner bastion and the smaller brick bastion at about 6m distance on the northern side. The outer wall ran between the two structures. A gargoyle was found protruding from the outer wall (Fig. 7.3). The inlet of this drain was found in the corner of verandah area in trench N30E20.



FIGURE 7.2: Corner bastion with stone base



FIGURE 7.3: Gargoyle projecting from wall

In the second season, trenches N40E20, N40E10, N50E10, N50E20, N40, N40W10 and N50W10 were excavated in the northern part of the mound. These trenches contained the outer portion of the northern part of the structure and were sequentially excavated. The third quadrant of the outer wall had portions of the brick bastion found earlier in N40E30. From the corner of this bastion the outer wall ran westward into the first quadrant of the trench. This wall was also ornamented. Portion of a broken ventilator and a broken sculpture representing a female figure were found. These probably were part of the upper portion of the wall. The outer wall continued into the first quadrant where it took an L-shape extending the structure further north.

This area probably had a cell which had not survived. The outer wall extended to trenches N50E20 and N50E10 from the above quadrant. It finally merged back in the structure depicted in N40E10. The structure in the second quadrant of N40E10 is identical to the one in N40E20. The probable debris of the interconnected cell has been located here too. To understand the true nature of this area, further study is required. The outer wall then runs westward into the first quadrant of N40E10.

The excavation progressed westward into trench N40. This trench has seen multiple anthropogenic activities in the last few decades. The outer wall located in first quadrant of N40E10 continued in the second quadrant of N40. In this quadrant the second small brick bastion on the north side was located. Half of this bastion has completely weathered away leaving only a semi-circular structure (Fig. 7.4). The finds of great amount of brick debris confirmed this fact. In the following quadrant (first) the outer wall was located which ran west from the small brick bastion. This wall was also highly ornamented. Architectural fragments were located in this region. It is interesting to note that contrary to earlier instances in trenches like N30E40 (described above), the fragments of this portion of the wall are made of polished black stone. These fragments have floral designs on them. A broken sculpture of a female was also located in this region. These were all part of the wall which finally goes on to merge in the north-western corner bastion in trenches N40W10



FIGURE 7.4: Broken brick bastion at N40E10

and N50W10. The bastion covered the region of the third and the fourth quadrants of N50W10 and first and second quadrants of N40W10. This bastion is relatively well preserved especially the portion which can be referred as the sentry post inside the bastion. The path from the cell and the floor of the post is also preserved, however the inner wall of the structure has collapsed.

In the northern part of the mound which has been discussed till now, the structures on the outer portion has mostly been discussed. However, excavations were also conducted in the inner parts of the structure which often formed the third and the fourth quadrants of the above mentioned trenches. All these quadrants had cell structures in them. A symmetrical plan can be observed. The cells are of the same size and are located side by side along the east west axis in the northern part of the mound (Fig. 7.5). The different floor levels in all the cells were lime plastered. Only one of the cell's floors has survived along with the lime plastered platform. In others, the floor was probably destroyed over the years. The design of the cells is fixed. A passage leads into the cell from the corridor. The cell has lime plastered floor and a



FIGURE 7.5: Cell in trench N40E20

platform made of lime and sometimes coloured. The second passage in the cell leads to a higher platform which is connected to a drain (Fig. 7.6). This platform was probably some sort of washing area attached to each cell. The drains that come out of each cell had mostly collapsed except for a few instances where they survived the ravages of time.

The western part of the site and the mound were also excavated in this season. The wall ran from north to south with two small brick bastions in trenches N30W10 and N10W10. Trench N30W10 was not excavated due to modern cemented structures above it. In the mid section of the western area of the mound, a square structure protrudes about 10 meters further west. This is a square protrusion found in all the four directions of the structure. A drawing of the structure excavated so far can better elucidate this aspect.

In the trench N20W10 the main sanctum structure of the site was located. This is probably designed as a *maṇḍala* where the presiding deity resided. However, the lotus seat and the presiding deity have not been found during the excavation. The



FIGURE 7.6: Drain exposed in trench N40W10

hypothesis of this area being a *maṇḍala* can be furthered on certain other grounds. The main sanctum area is on a higher platform than the rest of the site. A stone platform forms the base of the *maṇḍala*. This platform is square and approximately 7.5 m × 7.5 m in dimension. In this area an underground cell is also located, which was used for meditative purposes. In the second quadrant of this trench the ornamental entrance into the *maṇḍala* from the eastern side was located. The entrance area was also probably built of stone, which have collapsed and can be found scattered in the nearby trenches. The entrance was probably two meters in height. A circumambulatory path runs around the main sanctum region. The path on the southern side of the *maṇḍala* has been excavated. This lime plastered floor runs along the southern axis of the trench for 3.70 m. The path is approximately two-meter broad.

Excavation was also conducted in further east of this sanctum area in trench N20. In the three quadrants of this trench which were exposed, the first and the fourth quadrants have a lime plastered floor. This was the corridor area which had passage

entering the sanctum area. In N20, huge dressed stone boulders were scattered all along the trench. These probably were part of the structure in the sanctum area that has collapsed. In the baulk of one of the quadrants, a broken sculpture was recovered (Fig. 7.7). The raw material of the sculpture was black stone. The region between the knee and the ankle of the sculpture was found. On probing the site, a broken pedestal was also found lying in the modern temple area. This broken lower part of the sculpture did fit the pedestal.

The sculpture represents a human figure wearing thirteen human heads as garland. Snakes are coiled around his ankle like



FIGURE 7.7: Stone image of Mahākāla

anklets. It is standing on another human figure on a lotus pedestal. The figure may be identified with Mahākāla, a Buddhist Protector deity of the Hevajra *maṇḍala*. The presence of Mahākāla near the entrance of the sanctum area once again hints at the structure designed like a Buddhist *maṇḍala*. Further, it was reported by the locals that the lintel representing Avlokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī was also found in the fourth quadrant of N20. It was argued earlier that trench N20W10 had a stone entrance which has now collapsed. These objects were probably decorative sculptures near the entrance to the sanctum area. However, despite all these findings the *maṇḍala* hypothesis can't be argued with certainty without further work.

Another important find in the western portion of the site came from trench W10. It is a votive tablet, which was found during the sieving process from the trench N10W10. This find was from the outer portion of the structure, and the material was probably discarded. This can be confirmed by the finds of great amount of potsherds and equally high numbers of iron nail clamps and other iron implements from this region. It can be suggested that this portion of the structure was probably the dumping area. The votive tablet has a representation of a sage sitting beneath a tree. He seems to be touching the ground with his right hand. It seems that this is a representation of Buddha in the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. The face and other physical features of the deity have disappeared. The object on which this image is carved generates curiosity. From the looks of it, it seems that the object is wood.

In the southern part of the site, excavation was conducted in along the outer wall portion. Trenches E20, E10, N00 and W10 were excavated in this process. In synchronism with the plan of the site, two small brick bastions and the south-western corner bastion were located during the excavation process. The southern side of the structure also had a square protrusion in the middle portion similar to the other three sides. The southern side also had cells all along the east-west axis and was excavated in the first season. The courtyard on southern side of the structure might be excavated in following seasons.

Finally, the last set of excavation in the second season was conducted in trenches N10E20, N20E20 and N30E20. These trenches cover the area above the courtyard of the structure. In the first season itself the main entrance, outer walls (partially), cells and the lime plastered corridor along the eastern axis of the structure was cleared out. Hence, the area further west, which was referred as the courtyard was to be explored. The lime-plastered corridor followed into mud plastered platform. This area had multiple stone pillars made of stone all along this axis. This area was an open space leading into the courtyard. In modern times in parts of north India this space is referred as verandah. There was probably a wooden roof above the verandah which has now disappeared. Finds of multiple iron nails can affirm this notion. However, it can't be confirmed till the completion of excavation on the site. Two other important finds in the verandah area are also worth mentioning. The first major find in the verandah was a black stone sculpture of a deity. The male deity is seated on a lotus with an animal in his left hand. This is a representation of Jambhala, the Buddhist deity of wealth and prosperity (Fig. 7.8). From the location of the find it seems that he was located around the entrance of the structure facing the door. The sculpture was probably located on the lintel of the draw-in area of the structure. It was probably auspicious to have a deity on the entrance of the structure. The second is a drain, opening at the base of the verandah. This water inlet is probably connected to the gargyle referred to earlier. The water would have collected in the courtyard on rainy days and hence a proper outlet was designed in the structure.

Thus, in terms of monastic architecture, the *vihāra* seems to be composed of a central courtyard surrounded by a verandah that is followed by a row of cells on all sides. The most interesting ingredients of the brick architecture are (a) the massive bastions that supported the outer wall of the monastery, at the four corners as well as at the medial centres of all the sides, (b) the extensive use of a number of pigments in plastering the floors of the cells and in several cases the platforms that possibly represent platforms of miniature shrines, (c) a massive stone gargyle, which is well-connected with the structural elements through



FIGURE 7.8: Fragment of stone image of Jambhala

a network of drains across the *vihāra*, (d) a number of votive inscribed votive tablets, including one extremely rare specimen in wood, possibly the first of its kind from any monastic site of eastern India, (e) a number of challenging sculptural material in stone and (f) materials of everyday life as well as those reflecting an essentially esoteric ritualistic climate in which this monastic space had its genesis. Further excavation revealing more details of the material culture of the site, particularly an expected discovery of the monastic sealing. Will certainly throw more welcome light on the structural and functional facets of this monastic site.

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