

Besnagar and Bhom: Two Paradigms of Ancient Canal Structures

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Abstract:

Vidisha (विदिशा, formerly known as Bhelsa and known as Besnagar in ancient times) is a city in central Madhya Pradesh, India. It is located 62.5 km northeast of the state capital, Bhopal. The name "Vidisha" is derived from the nearby river "Bais", mentioned in the Puranas. The district was created as Bhilsa District in 1904 by joining the tehsils of Vidisha (also known as Bhilsa) and Basoda (but not Basoda State) which were then part of Gwalior state. After India's independence in 1947, the former princely state of Gwalior became part of Madhya Bharat state, which was formed in 1948. Vidishā was the administrative headquarters of Bhelsa, or Bhilsa, during the Medieval period. It was renamed Vidisha in 1956. Vidisha is also amongst the 112 Aspirational District in the Aspirational District Programme launched by NITI Aayog in 2018. According to Census 2011 information the location code or village code of Bhom village is 553332. Bhom village is located in Uran tehsil of Raigarh district in Maharashtra, India. It is situated 21km away from sub-district headquarter Uran (tehsildar office) and 45km away from district headquarter Alibag. As per 2009 stats, Chirner is the gram panchayat of Bhom village. The total geographical area of village is 74 hectares. Bhom has a total population of 475 peoples, out of which male population is 249 while female population is 226. Literacy rate of bhom village is 71.37% out of which 82.33% males and 59.29% females are literate. There are about 127 houses in bhom village.

Keywords: besnagar, bhom, village, ancient, canal, paradigms, structures, population, geographical, state.

Introduction

The ruins of Besnagar were inspected by Alexander Cunningham in 1874–1875. Remains of a large defensive wall were found on the western side of the city. Ancient Buddhist railings were also found just outside of the city, which had probably adorned a stupa. Numerous coins were found, including nine coins of the Western Satraps. The Heliodorus Pillar is a stone column, which was constructed in about 150 BCE. This stone column was erected by the Greek ambassador of the Indo-Greek King Antialcidas, who came to the court of Bhagabhadra, a possible Sunga king. Dedicated to Lord Vāsudeva, this column was constructed in front of the temple of Vāsudeva. The pillar is situated about four kilometers away from the city on Vidisha-Ganj Basoda SH-14, located on the northern bank of the Vais River. It is a 20 feet and 7 inches tall stone pillar, commonly called Kham Baba. The script used in the inscription is Brahmi but the language is Prakrit, recording that Heliodorus erected the pillar as a Garuda Stambha to pay homage to Lord Vasudeva, [1,2] who was later integrated as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu. Besnagar was known as Bhelsa during the medieval period. It became famous for the temple of Sun god Bhillasvanin. It was ruled by the Later Gupta king Devagupta and Rashtrakuta king Krishna III. The name is first noted in an inscription of 878 AD by a merchant Hatiaka of Paravada community. The 12th century Tri-shashthi-shalaka-purusha-charitra mentions an image of Bhillasvamin at Vidisa, along with a copy of Jivant Swami buried in the sand. Minhajuddin's Tabaqat-i-Nusiri states that the temple was destroyed by Iltutmish in A. D. 1233–34. In 1293, Alauddin Khalji of the Delhi

Sultanate sacked the city as a general of Sultan Jalaluddin. The attack was illustrative of Vidisha's importance in the medieval era. In 1532 Bhilsa was sacked by Bahadur Shah of Gujarat Sultanate. It then passed on to the Malwa Sultans, the Mughals and the Scindias.[3,4]

According to Census 2011 information the location code or village code of Bhom village is 565197. Bhom village is located in Chiplun tehsil of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra, India. It is situated 18km away from sub-district headquarter Chiplun (tehsildar office) and 110km away from district headquarter Ratnagiri. As per 2009 stats, Bhom village is also a gram panchayat. The total geographical area of village is 818.67 hectares. Bhom has a total population of 1,623 peoples, out of which male population is 768 while female population is 855. Literacy rate of bhom village is 77.08% out of which 85.29% males and 69.71% females are literate. There are about 424 houses in bhom village. Pincode of bhom village locality is 415628.

The Heliodorus pillar is a stone column that was erected around 113 BCE in central India in Besnagar (near Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh). The pillar was called the Garuda-standard by Heliodorus, referring to the deity Garuda. [5,6]



The Heliodorus pillar in Besnagar

The pillar is commonly named after Heliodorus, who was an ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialcidas from Taxila, and was sent to the Indian ruler Bhagabhadra. A dedication written in Brahmi script was inscribed on the pillar, venerating Vāsudeva, the Deva deva the "God of Gods" and the Supreme Deity. The pillar also glorifies the Indian ruler as "Bhagabhadra the savior". The pillar is a stambha which symbolizes joining earth, space and heaven, and is thought to connote the "cosmic axis" and express the cosmic totality of the Deity. The Heliodorus pillar site is located near the confluence of two rivers, about 60 kilometres (37 mi) northeast from Bhopal, 11 kilometres (6.8 mi) from the Buddhist stupa of Sanchi, and 4 kilometres (2.5 mi) from the Hindu Udayagiri site.[7,8]The pillar was discovered by Alexander Cunningham in 1877. Two major archaeological excavations in the 20th-century have revealed the pillar to be a part of an ancient Vāsudeva temple site. Aside from religious scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, the epigraphical inscriptions on the Heliodorus pillar and the Hathibada Ghosundi Inscriptions contain some of the earliest known writings of Vāsudeva-Krishna devotion and early Vaishnavism and are considered the first archeological evidence of its existence. The pillar is also one of the earliest surviving records of a foreign convert into Vaishnavism. Alternatively, making dedications to foreign gods was only a logical practice for the Greeks, intended to appropriate their local power. This cannot be regarded as a "conversion" to Hinduism.[9,10]

Discussion

The pillar was first discovered by Alexander Cunningham in 1877 near the ancient city of Besnagar in neighbourhood of Vidisha in central India. Besnagar was founded near the confluence of Betwa River and Halali River (formerly, Bais River and the basis for "Bes"-nagar). The fertile region was historically important because it was on the trade route between the northern Gangetic valley, the Deccan and the South Indian kingdoms of the subcontinent. The Besnagar site is at the northeastern periphery of the confluence, and close to Sanchi and Udayagiri, both ancient and of significance to Buddhism and Hinduism. When Cunningham first saw it, the pillar was thickly encrusted with ritually applied red paste (vermillion). This encrusted pillar was the object of worship and ritual animal sacrifice. Next to the red-colored pillar was a high soil mound, and on top of the mound a priest had built his home and surrounded it with a compound wall. The locals at the time called the pillar the Khamba Baba or Kham Baba.[11,12]

Cunningham, an avid British archaeologist credited with many discoveries of ancient sites on the subcontinent, saw no inscription due to the thick crust surrounding the pillar. He nevertheless sensed its historical significance from the shape and the visible features such as the crowning emblem, carved fan, rosettes, the faceted symmetry merging into a round section. He also guessed there may be an inscription below the crust, and reported the pillar as, "the most curious and novel" of all his discoveries. Near the standing Besnagar pillar, Cunningham found the remains of a fan-palm pinnacle, which he thought originally belonged to the pillar. Assuming that this broken part was part of the standing pillar, he sketched a composite version. The fan-palm design is otherwise known to be associated to the cult of Samkarsana-Balarama, another one of the Vrishni heroes. A short distance away, Cunningham found a second pillar capital on the ground with an emblem in the form of a makara (mythical elephant-crocodile-fish composite). He assumed, based on the shape of the bell, which he considered "of true Ashokan proportions", that this broken part was part of a lost pillar of the Ashokan period. Further, about a kilometer away, Cunningham found a third pillar capital of similar style, with an emblem in the form of a kalpadruma (wishing tree). Cunningham assumed this discovery too was related to the Besnagar pillar in some way. The kalpa tree design is otherwise known to be associated to the cult of Sri Lakshmi. Later research showed that the fan palm pinnacle could not fit, and the discovery of the inscription on the pillar suggested that a Garuda emblem was crowning the structure. Between 1909 and early 1910, nearly 30-years after the pillar's discovery, a small Indian and British archaeological team led by H H Lake revisited the site. After the thick red crust was cleaned out, they found Brahmi script inscriptions.[13,14] John Marshall reported the discovered inscriptions, and to everyone's surprise, the longer inscription related to a Greek ambassador named Heliodorus of 2nd-century BCE and the deity Vāsudeva. An additional smaller inscription on the pillar listed human virtues, later identified to be from a verse of the Mahabharata. The pillar and the unusual inscriptions attracted two larger archaeological excavations. The first was completed between 1913 and 1915, under Bhandarkar, but left incomplete because the priest blocked efforts citing rights to his home and compound walls his ancestors had built over the mound. The second excavation was completed between 1963 and 1965, under Khare, who had convinced the locals to move their religious practice to a location near a tree close by and relocating the priest's family. The archaeologists for the second excavation had full access to the Besnagar pillar site.

The 1913–15 excavations, though partial, revealed that the modern era Besnagar site had experienced numerous floods that had deposited silt over the last 2,000 years. The partial dig uncovered an extensive rectangular, square and other substructure and many brick foundations aligned to the cardinal axes. More ruined parts, plates and capitals were also found. The relative alignments suggested that the Besnagar pillar was likely a part of a more extensive ancient site. The

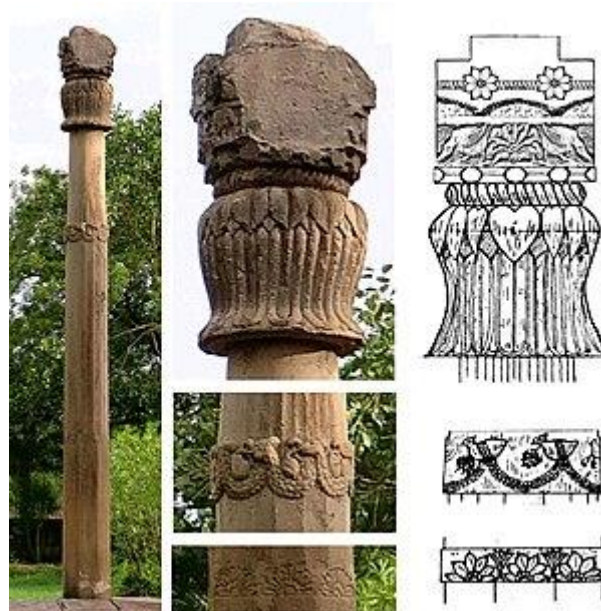
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1963–65 excavations revealed that the mound under the demolished later era priest home, contained the brick foundation for a sanctum (garbhagriha) and pillared halls (mandalas) of an elliptical temple. Further excavations below the foundation revealed a different foundation of likely a more ancient temple. These ancient temple foundation, layout and structures were similar to those discovered at Chittorgarh (Rajasthan). A more comprehensive excavation underneath the pillar and around the pillar led to the discovery that the pillar itself was much deeper, had a metal-stone interface, features Cunningham's early report had missed, and that secondary foundations were added over time to match the new ground level after major floods. Further, many more structures and items were discovered at the site. The archaeologists discovered that the Heliodorus pillar itself was one of eight pillars, all aligned along the north-south axis. These discoveries confirmed that the Besnagar Heliodorus pillar was a part of a more extensive ancient temple site.[15,16]

Results

The 1913 excavation revealed that a significant part of the Heliodorus pillar is below the platform. It sits on top of the remains of a more ancient pillar probably damaged by floods. Over time, silt from various floods have deposited and a raised platform was added at some point. The pillar shaft has a base support of two placement stones held with a layer of stone-metal. Above this was an untrimmed stone portion of the pillar. Above the untrimmed section is a trimmed octagonal cross-section. The original ground level was about 4.5 centimeter above the junction of the untrimmed and trimmed section. Above the length with octagonal facet is the section of the pillar with sixteen facets. Above the sixteenths section is the thirty-two faceted section, beyond which is the short round pillar section all the way to the top where sat the crowning emblem (now missing). The pillar is about 17.7 feet above a square platform (12 feet side), and the platform itself is about 3 feet high above the ground. The currently visible portion of the pillar's octagonal section is about 4 feet 10 inches high. The sixteenths section is fully visible and is 6 feet 2 inches high. The thirty-twos is also fully visible and is about 11.5 inches high, while the round section is 2 feet and 2 inches high. The bell capital is about 1 feet 6 inches deep and 1 feet 8 inches wide. The abacus is a 1 feet 7 inch sided ornate square. The ornamental bands on the pillar are at the junctions of the octagon-sixteenths and sixteenths-thirty-seconds sections. The lower ornamental band consists of half-rosettes, while the upper ornamental band is a festoon with birds (swag with flowers, leaves and hanging vines).[17,18]



Early scholars mistook it as geese (or swan), but a closer examination revealed that they are regular pigeon-like birds, not geese (nor swan). The upper festoon is about 6.5 inches long. According to Donald Stadtner, the capitals found at the Heliodorus pillar site are similar, yet different in ways from the Sunga capitals found at Sanchi. The Sanchi discoveries lack the clockwise birds, the makara and the band found in Besnagar. They have elephants and lions, which are absent in Besnagar. According to Julia Shaw, the elephants and lions motif is typically found with Buddhist art of this period. The two styles have differences yet informed the other, states Shaw. The Heliodorus pillar is neither tapered nor polished like the ancient Ashokan pillars found in India. It is also about half the diameter of Ashoka pillars. The Brahmi inscriptions are found on the octagonal surface just below the lower ornamental band of half-rosettes.

The 1963–65 excavations suggest that the site had an elliptical shrine – possibly 4th to 3rd-century BCE – with a brick foundation and likely a wooden superstructure. This was destroyed by a flood around 200 BCE. New soil was then added and the ground level raised to build a new second temple to Vāsudeva, with a wooden pillar (Garuda dhvaja) in front of the east-facing elliptical shrine. This too was destroyed by floods sometime in the 2nd-century BCE. In late 2nd-century BCE, after some ground preparation, yet another Vāsudeva temple was rebuilt, this time with eight stone pillars aligned in the north-south cardinal axis. Only one of these eight pillars have survived: the Heliodorus pillar.[19,20]

In 1910, an archaeological team led by H H Lake revisited the Heliodorus pillar site and nearby mounds. They found the Brahmi inscriptions on the pillar, and noticed several mistakes in the early Cunningham report. They also found many other broken wall pieces, pillar sections and broken statues in different mounds along the river, within a kilometer from the pillar. Lake speculated these to be variously related to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Near the Heliodorus pillar site, his team discovered Sapta-Matrikas (seven mothers of the Shaktism tradition of Hinduism), dating to the 5th-6th century CE. These discoveries suggest that Besnagar was probably an important ancient temples and pilgrimage site. The 1963–65 excavations revealed that the Heliodorus pillar was a part of an ancient temple site. The archaeologists found an ancient elliptical foundation, extensive floor and plinth produced from burnt bricks. Further, the foundations for all the major components of a Hindu temple – garbhagriha (sanctum), pradakshinapatha (circumambulation passage), antarala (antechamber next to sanctum) and mandapa (gathering hall) – were found. These sections had a thick support base for their walls. These core temple remains cover an area of 30 x 30 m with 2.40 m. The sections had post-holes, which likely contained the wooden pillars for the temple superstructure above. In the soil were iron nails that likely held together the wooden pillars.[21]



Initial excavations



Elliptic plan of the Temple

Excavation of the huge Temple of Vāsudeva next to the Heliodorus pillar

According to Khare, the superstructure of the temple was likely made of wood, mud and other perishable materials. The sub-surface structure discovered was nearly identical to the ancient temple complex discovered in Nagari (Chittorgarh, Rajasthan) – about 500 kilometers to the west of Vidisha, and the Nagari temple too has been dated to the second half of the 1st-millennium BCE. The archaeological discoveries about Vāsudeva Krishna at the Mathura site – about 500 kilometers to the north, states Khare, confirm that Garuda, Makara found at this site, palm-leaf motifs were related to early Vaishnavism. The Heliodorus pillar was a part of an ancient Vaishnava temple. According to Susan Mishra and Himanshu Ray, the Heliodorus pillar Besnagar site (2nd century BCE) and the Nagari site (1st century BCE) are perhaps the "earliest Hindu temples" that archaeologists have discovered.[22]



Location of the Heliodorus pillar in relation to Besnagar, Vidisha, Sanchi and the Udayagiri Caves.

The Heliodorus pillar, being dated rather precisely to the period of the reign of Antialkidas (approximately 115-80 BCE), is an essential marker of the evolution of Indian art during the Sunga period. It is, following the Pillars of Ashoka, the next pillar to be associated clearly with a datable inscription. The motifs on the pillar are key in dating some of the architectural elements of the nearby Buddhist complex of Sanchi. For example, the reliefs of Stupa No.2 in Sanchi are dated to the last quarter of the 2nd century BCE due to their similarity with architectural motifs on the Heliodorus pillar as well as similarities of the paleography of the inscriptions. A remaining fragment of the Garuda capital is located at the Gujari Mahal Museum in Gwalior[23]

Conclusions

Vāsudeva refers to "Krishna, son of Vasudeva", "Vāsudeva" in the lengthened form being a vṛddhi-derivative of the short form Vasudeva, a type of formation very common in Sanskrit signifying "of, belonging to, descended from". The cult of Vāsudeva may have evolved from the worship of a historical figure belonging to the Vrishni clan in the region of Mathura. He is also known as a member of the five "Vrishni heroes". According to Upinder Singh "Vāsudeva-Krishna was the Indian God bearing the closest resemblance to the Greek God Herakles". He was also depicted on

the coinage of Agathocles of Bactria circa 190-180 BCE, which shows that he was already widely considered as a deity by that time, and probably as early as the 4th century according to literary evidence. In the Heliodorus pillar, Vāsudeva-Krishna was worshipped as the "God of Gods", the Supreme Deity. At one point Vāsudeva-Krishna came to be associated to the God Narayana-Vishnu. Epigraphically, this association is confirmed by the Hathibada Ghosundi Inscriptions of the 1st century BCE. It is thought that "by the beginning of the Christian era, the cult of Vasudeva, Vishnu and Narayana amalgamated". As a third step, Vāsudeva-Krishna was incorporated into the Chaturvyūha concept of successive emanations of the God Vishnu. By the 2nd century CE, the "avatara concept was in its infancy", and the depiction of Vishnu with his four emanations (the Chaturvyūha) starts to become visible in art at the end of the Kushan period.[24]



The deity to whom the Heliodorus pillar was dedicated: Vāsudeva

Based on Heliodorus pillar evidence it has been suggested that Heliodorus is one of the earliest Westerners on record to convert to Vaishnavism whose evidence has survived. But some scholars, most notably A. L. Basham and Thomas Hopkins, are of the opinion that Heliodorus was not the earliest Greek to convert to Bhagavata Krishnaism. Hopkins, chairman of the department of religious studies at Franklin and Marshall College, has said, "Heliodorus was presumably not the earliest Greek who was converted to Vaishnava devotional practices although he might have been the one to erect a column that is still extant. Certainly there were numerous others including the king who sent him as an ambassador." Professor Kunja Govinda Goswami of Calcutta University concludes that Heliodorus "was well acquainted with the texts dealing with the Bhagavata religion." Alternatively, the dedication made by Heliodorus to Vāsudeva as supreme deity may simply have been a diplomatic gesture. This may also have been an instance of a typically Greek religious practice: according to Harry Falk, it was a logical and normal practice for Greeks to make dedications to foreign gods, as they were just interested in appropriating their power, and this natural Greek behaviour cannot be construed as a "conversion to Hinduism".[24]

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