

A glimpse of Archaeological Studies in Nepal

- Riddhi Pradhan

Nepal is a land-locked country with an area of about 141,000 sq. kms. situated in the middle belt of the Himalayan between East Longitude 80°15'0"-88°15'0" and North Latitude 26°20'0"-30°10'0". Upon this land about 15 million people dwell. On its North is Tibetan region of the Peoples Republic of China and on the other three sides is India. Physiographically, Nepal can be divided into three broad regions such as Tarai, hills and the mountains.

So far as the written history of the Kathmandu Valley is concerned it does not exist prior to 5th century A. D.; whatever is written before this period is all conjectural. The first historical record of this valley starts from the Changu Narayan inscription of Manadeva (Lichhavi Dynasty) dated 464 A. D. The discovery of early stone sculptures, Kushan coins and silver punch marked coins in the valley indicate the existence of some Pre-Lichhavi dynasty. Geneological and literary evidences also support to the above statement.

Because of the very location of Nepal, its archaeology and history compared with its neighbours is quite young.

It was in 1893 A. D. that an Asoka pillar was accidentally sighted and reported by Major Jaskaran Singh of Indian Army. In 1896 A.D., A. Fuhrer explored and discovered the Lumbini pillar inscription at Lumbini.

In 1899 P. C. Mukerjee of India did the first scientific excavation at Lumbini and Tilaurakot. He identified the fortified mound at Tilaurakot in Taulihawa district, with ancient Kapilvastu—the capital of famous Shakya clan. The discovery of P. C. Mukerjee was tempting enough to encourage further archaeological exploration in the Tarai of Nepal.

Keeping in view of the need and importance of archaeology, His Majesty's Government of Nepal established the Department of Archaeology in 1953. Its main aim is to extend its activities in the field of excavation, exploration, documentation and preservation of the archaeologically and historically important monuments, objects, sites, etc. In 1956, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Department of Archaeology published the first "Ancient Monuments Preservation Act 1956" in the official gazette.

Departmental activities since its establishment

It was in 1961 the Department, for the first time in collaboration with Archaeological Survey of India, undertook the pre-historic survey of Kathmandu Valley.

In the year 1962 the first excavation at Tilaurakot was undertaken by the Department of Archaeology in collaboration with Archaeological survey of India.

In 1964, the Department undertook explorations to the south-east of Lumbini and to those areas done by P. C. Mukerjee and D. Mitra of India. The exploration helped to locate the sites of Paisia and Banjarahi on the bank of the Dano river. The excavation here proved that there was cultural contacts between early Banjarahi and Hastinapur of India earlier than the middle of the first millennium B. C. The ceramic similarities between the above said sites proved to this. It brought again to light the existence of Painted Grey ware in the Tarai of Nepal.

In 1965, the Department, for the first time did excavation in the Kathmandu valley in a limited area. The main purpose of the excavation was to trace out the cultures of different periods of the valley, and to correlate them with the culture of the Tarai of Nepal.

Two sites were selected for this purpose, i. e. Hadigaon and Lajimpat in Kathmandu.

The excavation at Hadigaon yielded some ceramics of the Lichhavi period which helped to create a provisional ceramics for the valley. These are typologically similar to the Gupta and post-Gupta periods at

Achichhatra in India. The coins discovered from the site prove that the earliest occupation of this site was occupied by the early Lichhavi and pre-Mallas. But there is no evidence of the occurrence of the Grey ware and N. B. P. in the Valley.

Excavation at Lazimpat exposed temple structure of medieval period. The excavation at Dhumbrahi near Hadigaon in 1965-66 proved the site a Lichhavi period.

Excavation at Tilaurakot

A continuous excavation and conservation is going on at Tilaurakot and Lumbini respectively. The main objective of the excavation at Tilaurakot was to identify it as Kapilvastu, the capital city of the Shakya people on the basis of its finding, the accounts of Chinese travellers, Fahien and Huien-Tsang, Buddhist literatures and previous works done for this site.

P. C. Mukerjee is the first person who identified Tilaurakot as Kapilvastu. It is he who had discovered the eastern gate, western stupa, defence wall existed in the site.

The excavation carried out on the site by the Department of Archaeology since 1966 brought to light the majestic western gateway complex, roads of different periods, moat, some structures, twin stupas, three phases of cultural sequences.

In relation with the preservation of the site, the site was fenced with barbed wire. The following exposed structures were conserved-

1. Eastern Gate
2. Western Gate
3. Defence walls
4. Exposed portions of some structures
5. Twin stupa
6. Some of the civil houses found in the central area.

Some important pottery and antiquities of Tilaurakot

Its Pottery

The study of the antiquities and pottery of the Tilaurakot site proved that it had three phases of cultural sequences, the Painted Grey ware and Northern Black Polished (NBP) ware period (C. 800-300 B. C.), the Sunga period (200-100 B. C.) and the Kushan period (100-200 A. D.).

The pot sherds of Painted Grey ware and Northern Black Polished ware (NBP) and its associated pottery are very fine, well levigated and metallic in sound.

The Sunga pottery are all red to buff-red wares mostly having thick red slip. The quality of clay and the firing process are very fine. Kushan has ill-fired red pottery, of course, fabric having silt or mica on the surface.

Terracotta figurines

The terracotta figurines excavated from the site also can be divided into three different schools of art. They are as follows:-

Mauryan period

The terracotta figurines were made mostly by hand, the decorations of suitable clay bands were made separately and added over the body. The figurines have big eyes, prominent nose, less ornaments and very expressive face.

Sunga period

The figurines of Sunga period were all moulded, have elaborate ornaments with large varieties of hair dressing. These figurines do not have finish or decorations on the back

side. Some have holes on the top, may be for hanging purposes. They had red slip. The figurines represent mostly mother and child, some figurines are feeding parrot, others are standing pairs etc.

Kushan period

Kushan period was famous for stone art. Hence, the demand of terracotta art decreased considerably. They are all hand-made, made of clay mixed with husk and ill-fired, and less in weight, the eyes, nose, mouth are made with incised lines or dotted lines. The ornaments are heavy, have fan-like head gears. They are crude and have no delicacy or expression on the emotion in their faces.

In the same way the technique of making terracotta animal figurines is different from period to period. The size of these figurines show that they are used as children toys.

Coins, Seals and Sealings

A number of silver Punch marked coins (600 B. C.) are found during the excavation. A hoard of copper coins over 2200 pieces dating from first century B. C. to second century A. D. were found from different layers. Some seals bear inscriptions such as "Dabilasa", some with letters "Nesame" and some tokens with legend "sa-ka-na-sa".

Other important objects

A large number of bangles, beads, antimony rods of precious and semi-precious stones, terracotta, bone, ivory, glass and shells are found.

From the foregoing studies, the Buddhist annals, the accounts of Chinese travellers, the identification of the ancient sites, associated with Kapilvastu is now represented by Tilaurakot.

A site museum at Tilaurakot has already been constructed and necessary arrangements for the display of the excavated antiquities is being made.

Lumbini

The ancient site of Lumbini is nearly 29 kms. west of modern township of Bhairahawa in the Rupandehi district of western Nepal.

Chinese pilgrims Fahien and Huiensang narrate that Lumbini is situated on the bank of Telar river. The site has an Asokan pillar, a bathing tank, a Buddha nativity sculpture and some stupas. Besides the religious monuments, there is also another site which bears the ruins of ancient Lumbini Village, mentioned in the Asokan pillar inscription.

All the monuments narrated by the Chinese pilgrims have been located at Lumbini. The Asokan pillar clearly speaks about the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha at the place near Lumbini grama. Since its establishment, the Department of Archaeology is undertaking its activities in the field of excavation as well as the conservation of the excavated areas.

The structures dedicated to the memory of the Lord Buddha from the earliest time upto the medieval period are scattered at Lumbini and its surrounding area of 16,081 sq. yards (10,500 sq.m.). For the preservation of the site, it has been protected and fenced.

To avoid further damage to the site, the Department, since 1975, aim to preserve the already exposed structures rather than to excavate new one. Hence, excavation at Lumbini is mainly carried out to complete the preservation activities. To date the

preservation works on the following structures have been completed-

1. Votive Stupas
2. A group of 16 stupas
3. 5 Stupas in a row around the Mayadevi temple
4. Main structures around Mayadevi Temple
5. Drainage work to prevent the site from water-logging.

The antiquities so far discovered from Lumbini are Grey ware pieces, NBP (Northern Black Polished ware) dated to C. 600-300 B. C., small fragment of stone horse which originally surmounted the Asokan Pillar as mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims, Sunga period coins, Kushan, Gupta and Pala figurines of Bodhisvatas, Buddha, etc. At present, the Lumbini Development Project sponsored by His Majesty's Government of Nepal and the U. N. O. according to its Master Plan is carrying out the developmental activities including excavation and preservation of Lumbini and Tilaurakot.

Palaeontological and Pre-historic Exploration

The recent discovery of a tooth of the first possible ancestor of man has geologically and palaeontologically proved that the antiquity of Nepal goes back to the pre-historic period. It was discovered in December 1980 near Butwal, the Tinau river, in the western tarai of Nepal by Nepal-U.S.A. Scientific Expedition. This upper left molar of Ramapithecus was dated approximately 11 million years old on the basis of palaeo-magnetic dating method. This hominid finding is the oldest in Asia and the second oldest in the world.

A few scientific explorations for the

pre-historic remains at the Gardaki river valley and the Kathmandu Valley by the Department of Archaeology have brought to light some palaeolithic tools at Danda, stone tools at Kot-Tandi (Nawalparasi district) and a few palaeolithic implements in Kathmandu on the bed of the Dhobi Khola river. Some fossils of vertebrates in rock and scattered Neolithic tools from the Dang valley were also discovered.

This marks a fresh milestone in archaeological research in the country, but the major work has yet to be undertaken.

Conservation of the Monuments and Palaces

The Kathmandu Valley is famous for its own medieval art and architecture. It is mentioned by the western scholars that there are as many temples as houses and as many idols as its people. They are scattered all over the Valley. But due to the time factor, natural calamity, and human vandalism the conditions of most of these monuments are deteriorating. The Department and the Guthi (Trust) Corporation are undertaking restoration and repair works of the monuments each year on a limited scale due to the budget constraint.

Since 1973-74, the Bhaktapur Development Project, His Majesty's Government of Nepal in collaboration with Federal Republic of Germany, is undertaking the renovation work at Bhaktapur.

Since 1975, the Master Plan for the conservation of cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley is underway, sponsored

by His Majesty's Government of Nepal and UNESCO. Under this plan the Department is carrying, at present, restoration work of the monuments and palaces such as Hanuman Dhoka Palace at Kathmandu, Gokarneswara temple at Gokarna, Brahma-yani temple at Panauti, Narayan temple at Banepa and Patan Durbar at Lalitpur. Besides these activities, the Department is undertaking renovation work of palaces of Gorkha and Nuwakot. According to the Master Plan, the iconographical survey has also been undertaken since 1982.

Conclusion

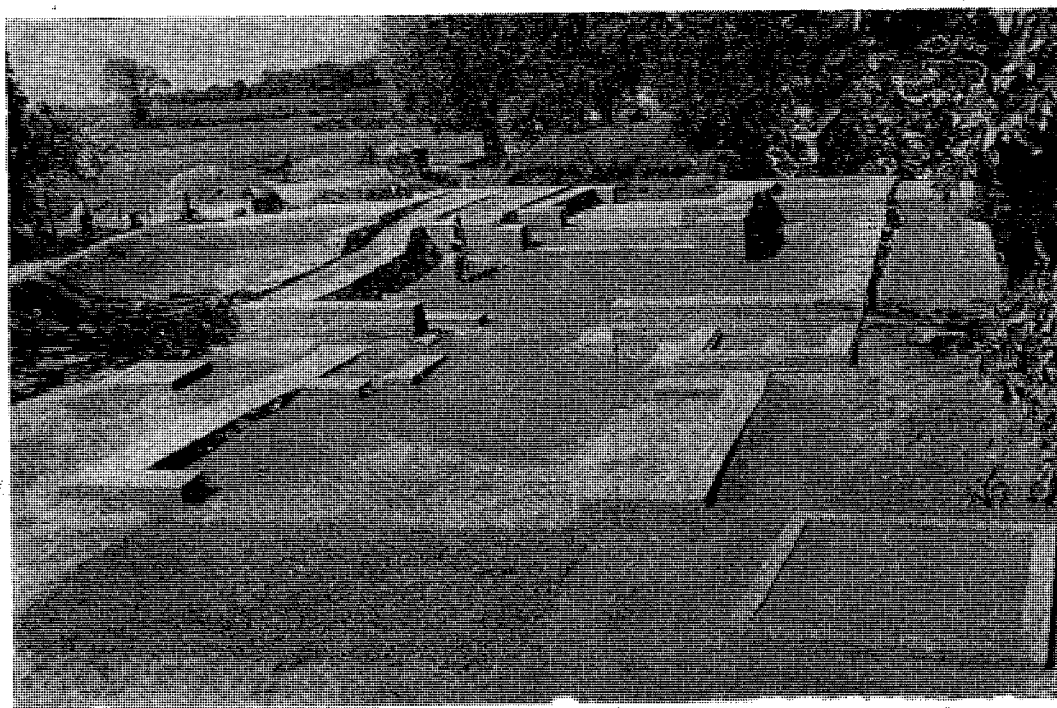
Nepal, in archaeological view point, is in initial stage. Archaeologically, its pre-historic and ancient historic evidences up till now discovered are very limited. Most of the pre-historic evidences are found outside the Kathmandu Valley. Same is the case with the ancient history. The concrete ancient historical evidences are confined to Tilaurakot and Lumbini areas (Lumbini Zone) and all those available evidences are associated with Pre-Buddha and Buddha.

Kathmandu Valley preserved ancient and medieval historical evidences. The recently established Department of Archaeology takes care of all the archaeologically and historically important monuments in the country.

But systematic research is required as there is no record what-so-ever to continue and bridge the different periods such as stone ages, ancient historic and even the historic period.

Selected Bibliography

- Deo, S. B. Arch. Investigations in Nepal Tarai, Kath, Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal 1964.
- HMG/Nepal Tilaurokot: The Ancient City of Kapilvastu Note on the Subject, Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal.
- Mitra, Debala "Excavation at Tilaurokot and Kodan & Exploration in the Nepalese Tarai", Kath; Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal 1971.
- Mishra, T. N. "Tilaurokot Excavation" 2023-2039 V. S., Ancient Nepal, Journal of Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal. Nos. 41-42 Aug.-Nov. 1977.
- Mukerjee, P. C. "Antiquities of Kapilvastu" Delhi-Varanasi; Indological Book House, 1969 (Reprint).
- Mishra, T. N. "The prominent Archaeological sites in Nepal-the Himalayan Kingdom" (1982). HMG/Ministry of Communications, Dept. of Information 1982.
- Banerjee, N. R. "Discovery of the remains of Pre-historic man in Nepal". Ancient Nepal; Journal of the Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal No. 6.
- Banerjee, N. R. and Sharma, Janak Lal "Neolithic Tools from Nepal and Sikkim", Ancient Nepal, Journal of the Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal No. 9.
- Rijal, B. K. "Archaeological remains of Kapilvastu Lumbini, Devdaha"; Educational Enterprises Pvt. Ltd., Kath. 1979.
- " " "Excavation, Exploration & other Archaeological Activities in Tilaurokot", 1972-73 Ancient Nepal, Journal of Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal No. 22. Jan. 1973.
- " " "Excavation & other Archaeological, Activities in Tilansakot (Ancient Klp) 1973-74", Ancient Nepal, Journal of Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal No. 26 Jan. 1974.
- " " Archaeological Activities in Lumbini 1976-1977, Ancient Nepal 30-39.
- Sharma, Janak Lal "Neolithic Tools from Nepal", Ancient Nepal, Journal of the Dept. of Arch., HMG/Nepal No. 75.
- Shetenko, Dr. "The outcomes of Scientific Mission to Nepal in Brief", Ancient Nepal. No. 43-45.
- अमात्य, साफल्य नेपाजमा पुस्तक, साज्ञा प्रकाशन २०३६
शर्मा, जनकलाल हाम्रो समाज-एक अध्ययन, साज्ञा प्रकाशन २०३६



*Western Gate-way Complex
Tilaurakot*



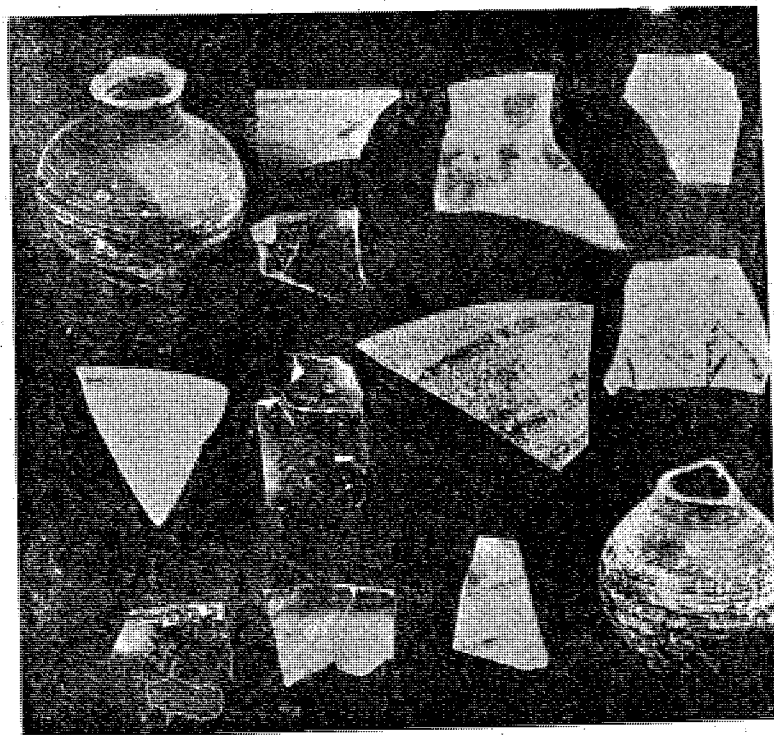
Terracotta figurine (Mauryan period)
Tilaurakot



Terracotta figurine (Sunga period)
Tilaurakot



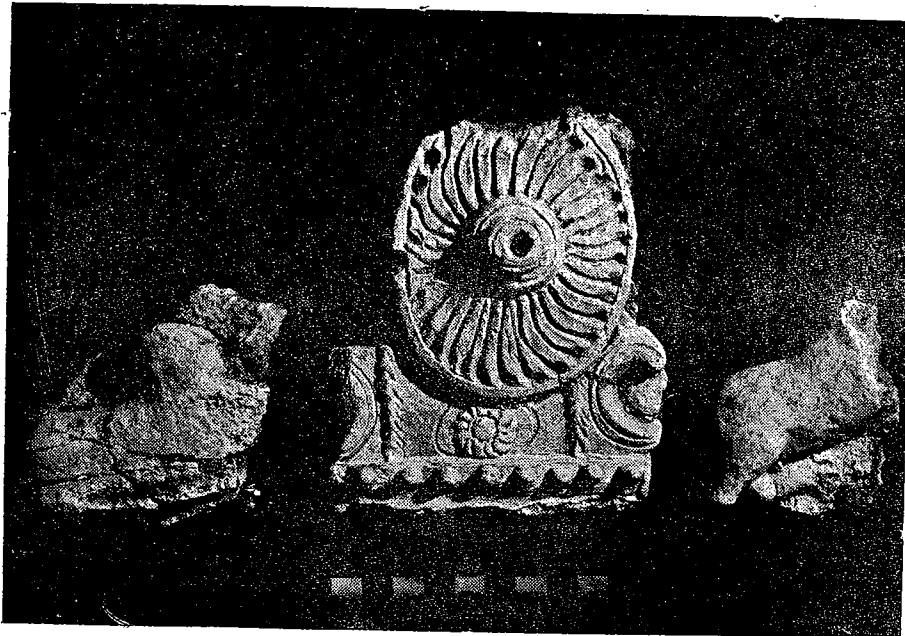
Terracotta figurines (Kushan period)
Tilaurakot



NBP and Painted Grey ware pottery (Tilaurakot)



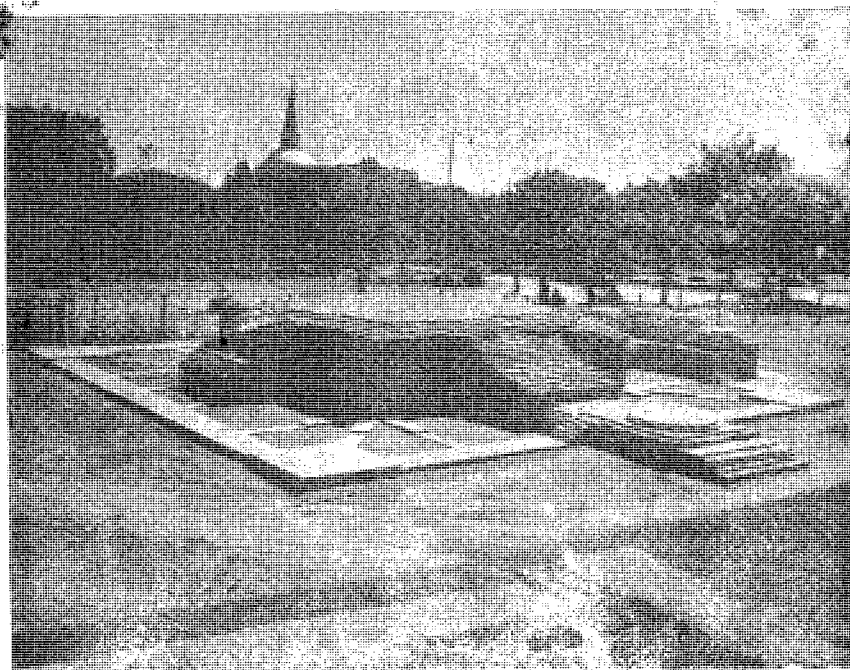
A seal with inscription sa ka na sa



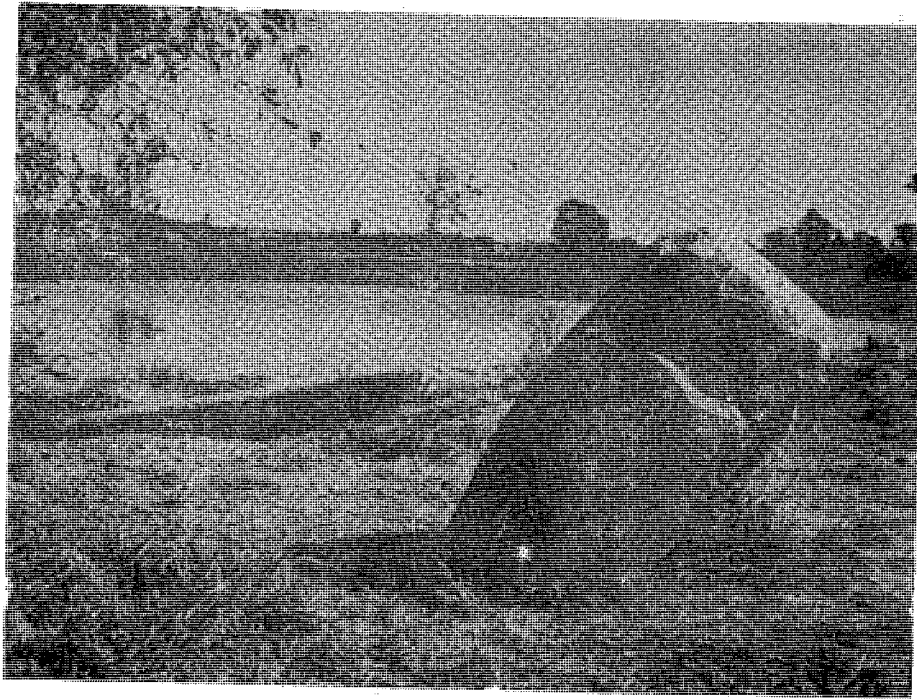
Terracotta - wheel (Lumbini)



Conservation work going on the votive Stupas at Lumbini



*A Stupa to the Eastern side of Mayadevi Temple
Lumbini*



Asokan Pillar (Niglihawa)