Understanding the Ancient Heritage of Kṛmilā : An Early Medieval Viṣaya under Śrīnagara Bhukti

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Abstract

The Munger inscription of King Devapala, a ruler under the Pala dynasty of Bengal and Bihar, appraised that in the early medieval period, the southern part of the present Bihar region was known as Śrīnagara Bhukti. Farther more this Bhukti was also divided into three Viṣayas, namely, Rājagriha Viṣaya, Gayā Viṣaya and Kṛimilā Viṣaya. Present research attempts to understand the ancient heritage of the Kṛimilā region through archaeological evidence from a holistic perspective. Those who worked earlier on the archaeology of Kṛimilā, concentrated on inscriptions, sculptures and the studies were of isolated sites. The present work is intended to study the cultural heritage of the Kṛimilā region by analyzing earlier recorded sites with help of independent fieldwork in the Kiul river valley. An effort has also been made to systematically record the archaeological remains scattered in this area.

Keywords: *Settlement, Habitation, Sculpture, Early Medieval, Kṛimilā, Archaeology*

Introduction

The Munger inscription of King Devapāla, inscribed in his 33rd year of his reign, was discovered in the Munger district of Bihar in 1780. It was first published in 1788, and was edited and published subsequently in 1892, 1913 and 1925-26. The deciphering of the inscription has brought a new idea of the Pāla administration in early medieval times in eastern India. According to this inscription, the present south Bihar region was known as Śrīnagara Bhukti in the early medieval period. Further, the inscription also addressed that Śrīnagara Bhukti was divided into three Viṣaya. These were Rājagriha, Gayā and Kṛimilā Viṣayas (Map.1). It is certain that Rājagriha and Gayā Viṣayas were the present Rajgir and Gaya respectively but identification of Kṛimilā Viṣaya was difficult for the scholars. After a long time in 1950, the mystery was solved when D.C. Sircar visited three villages in south Bihar of present Lakhisarai district, namely, Rajaona, Chowki and Balgudar (also pronounced as *Valgudar*). During his visit, he discovered three such inscriptions with the mention of the word Kṛimilā Viṣaya. Based on these inscriptions, he identified that the village Balgudar was the headquarter of the Kṛimilā Viṣaya (Chhabra and Sircar 1985:137–45). The references to Kṛimilā Viṣaya also were found in some other inscriptions. The earliest epigraphic record

about this belongs to Gupta period. Besides these, two Nālanda seals of Samudragupta are significant in this respect (Sastri 1942:53–54). These inscriptions mentioned the word Kṛimilā and designated it as a Viṣaya. It has also mentioned a village known as Kavala, under this Viṣaya. The reference to Kṛimilā Viṣaya has also been recorded in the Bihar inscription (Choudhary 1958:22). The Naulagarh image inscription, reported from the Begusarai district, Bihar, was issued in the 24th year of reign of Pala king Vigrahapgla, has mentioned Kṛimilā Viṣaya (Sahai 1983:96). All these recorded inscriptional sources address the historical importance of this Viṣaya. Therefore, in the present research, an attempt is made to understand the ancient heritage of the early medieval Kṛimilā region. Specific importance is given to the different aspects of human settlement, like the geographical context, connectivity and cultural assimilation, etc.

Geomorphology

The research area belongs to the Lakhisarai district of Bihar. The district has a diverse geographical landscape. Based on these diversities, the district is divided into three major geomorphic units:

1. Rocky upland of Surjagarha block
2. Older alluvia or marginal alluvial plain
3. Younger alluvia in the northern part of the district

The present research area is located on part of the Older Alluvium. Alluvium was deposited by the Rivers Ganga and Kiul. The thickness of this deposition is limited; hence it is also known as a marginal alluvial plain. The thickness of this alluvium deposit near the Ashok Dham temple at Rajaona-Chowki village is about 123m but has reduced considerably in the south eastern parts up to 15-20m (Anon n.d.:11). However, small hillocks like Lalpahari, Kalapahari, Bichhewye etc., are present in a scattered manner in the alluvial plain.

Critique of the Previous Works

This region has been a point of attraction for many archaeologists, historians and antiquarians for a long time. Earlier were Buchanan; Beglar, who surveyed the whole area in 1871–72; Cunningham. Who explored the area first in 1871 and later in 1879–80; and later were D.C. Sirkar, B.K. Jamuar, Frederick M. Asher, S. Huntington, D.K. Chakrabarty, Anil Kumar, R. K. Chattopadhaya and others. Many recent scholars are also working in this region to uncover the far-flung history of the region. Scholars either concentrated on the study of sculpture, architecture and iconographic importance of this area; or on the nature of the settlements, i.e., urban or rural. On several occasions, scholars have visited only one site and given only a description of that particular site. Although, the previous works on this area have brought into light the importance of some archaeological sites in this area, like Valgudar (Balgudar),

Rajaona, Chowki, Jainagar etc. Very recently, archaeological excavation is conducted in two major sites of this region, Lalpahari and Uren. The excavation report of these two sites certainly would enrich the history of this region in future. Previous research shows that the Krimilā region, which is broadly on the lower Kiul flood plain, has a number of archaeological sites, many of which have multi chronological character.It is a difficult task for the historians to make a statement over the physiographic boundary of an ancient administrative centre, specifically in a plain landscape like the lower Ganga valley. In case of Kṛimilā, no literary evidence has been found that can address the boundary of Kṛimilā Viṣaya. However, based on inscriptions and other archaeological evidences, it has been argued that Kṛimilā Viṣaya was located in the lower Kiul basin; the exact boundary is yet to be fixed.

Study Area

The Kṛimilā region had great importance as a geopolitical unit in the ancient past, specifically in the post-Gupta period. Ancient literature had profusely mentioned this region and there are epigraphic evidences, but there is no such evidence regarding the area or boundary of this Viṣaya. This lacuna only is fulfilled through an analytical study of the existing archaeological remains in this area. In this research, focus is given on Lakhisarai town and its adjoining areas (Map 2). The shape of the study area is triangular and bounded by the left bank of the River Kiul and the right bank of the River Harohar.

Study of Archaeological Sites: Explorations in Lower Kiul Basin

Lakhisarai and its adjoining region are singularly important in understanding the gradual progress of human history in the Ganga valley region. This region is located at the confluence of three rivers, Ganga, Haruhar and Kiul, which has made the area adequately fertile and helped to bring its status high on the scale of civilization for a long time. The present study has highlighted some significant sites in this area. Among these, a few are newly reported as a result of the survey of the researcher (Table No.1).

Rajaona and Chowki

The villages Rajaona and Chowki, is also spelled by scholars as Rajauna and Chawki. These are two modern villages in the Lakhisarai district, which are now incorporated within the Lakhisarai municipality. It is 4.5 km south of Luckeesarai station. These villages are located on an archaeological mound which belonged to an era of Gupta to medieval period. Earlier scholars mostly have mentioned these two villages as two different archaeological sites. As per personal observation of the researcher these are massive mounds of an ancient settlement over which these two modern villages exist. The site is located around 4km away from the river Kiul and almost the same distance from river Harohar. The landscape in the surrounding area of the site is almost plain. The site is located on land elevated by 2/3 meters from its surrounding area. On the other hand, literary evidence indicates that the remains of human

settlements in these villages have a much earlier origin. According to Cunningham, Rajaona is not other than the 'Lo-in-ni-lo' of Xuanzang's account. Once, when Xuanzang visited this place, he saw a Buddhist monastery and a Stupa erected by Asoka in the third century BCE. However, the remains on the surface of this mound are associated with the Post Gupta period.

A large number of sculptural and architectural pieces are scattered in different parts of the villages (plate 1 & 2). Besides these, there is a modern Shiva temple, Ashok Dham, on the western side of this village. In the museum of this temple, more than 150 sculptures and architectural fragments are exhibited. The researcher has personally visited this museum. Most of these artefacts have been reported from these two villages, especially at the time of the construction of the temple.

Rahugarh

On the western side of Rajaoun-Chowki, there is another habitational mound (plate 3) of Post Gupta or the early medieval period. It is similar to the Rajaona-Cwoki settlement. It belongs to a part of the massive Rajaona-Chowki habitation situated on the same landscape. There is a massive structural deposition on the western side of this mound, where brick robbers were active for a long time. Like the Rajaona-Chowki, the local people have collected many architectural and sculptural fragments from this mound during their agricultural activity. People believe that many antique objects are hidden in this mound. However, coarse red ware, grey ware, black ware, etc., are reported from the surface of the mound. All these are similar in fabric and style to the Rajaona-Chowki mound.

Gangta

Gangta is a small village 3km on the west of Rajaona-Chowki. Architectural and sculptural fragments of the early medieval period have also been reported in a secondary context from this village (plate 4). This village has no habitational deposition or archaeological mound. Age of the present settlement of this village goes back to about 150 years ago. On the eastern side of this village is a huge pond known as 'Bahan-Bigha Talab'. This pond is much older, probably related to the Rajaona-Chowki and Rahugarh mound. This area once acted as the periphery catchment area of the Rajaona-Chowki and Rahugarh habitation. There is a Shiva temple on the western side of the pond. Local people have gathered many architectural and sculptural fragments from the Rahugarh mound.

Balgudar

The village Balgudar is another well-known archaeological site of the early medieval period, located one kilometer north of the Rajaona-Chowki settlement. The site is on the south bank of the river Harohar, a tributary of the Kiul River. It is a massive settlement of the early medieval period. A structural mound, probably ruins of a monastery, still exists in the south

of this settlement (plate 5). From this mound a large number of architectural and sculptural fragments were collected. All these sculptures either are associated with the Brahmanical or Buddhist religion. These are kept at different places of the village, such as, Balgudar-Shiva temple, Balgudar Kalisthan, near the river bank and few of these are kept in the private houses of the village.

Lakhisarai English

This site is located at a walkable distance of about 2.5 km east of the Rajaona-Chowki settlement. The expansion of Lakhisarai Township has occupied the entire mound of this site. It is not easy to trace the archaeological mound in the present circumstances. Architectural and sculptural fragment of this site is kept in three places. These are Bisahori Sthan, Shri Lakhsmi Narayan Mandir and Pipar-per-tala (plate 6). All these sculptures are associated with either Brahamanical or Buddhist pantheon. The iconographic style and features of the sculptures of this site are similar to the Rajaona-Chowki settlement.

Sabikpur

It is located 5 km north of Rajaona-Chowki on the right bank of Harohar River. The village has an undulating surface very close to the Harohar flood zone. Architectural and sculptural fragments have also been found in a secondary context from this village. The local villagers argue that they have got all these architectural and sculptural fragments beneath a tree, which was probably once a temple complex. However, no archaeological mound in or around this village has been reported. It seems that due to some religious importance, villagers had collected and gathered these sculptural fragments from the surrounding area. Anyhow the site is destroyed. However, based on style and features, these sculptural fragments are close to Balgudar, Rajaona-Chowki and Lakhisarai English.

Damodarpur

Damodarpur, under Sabikpur Panchayet had yielded archaeological remains. This village is situated on the right bank of river Harohar, around 6 km north of Rajaona-Chowki village. This village has an undulating surface due to its location in the very active flood zone of the Harohar River. Architectural fragment and the sculptural fragment of the early medieval period were reported from Shiva temple and the Damodarpur-Musahar area (plate 7). No archaeological mound or any sign of ancient habitation is traced in this village. The village people collected all the sculptural fragments and used them for religious purposes.

Neri

This village is located 4 km southwest of Rajaona-Chowki. It has a habitation deposit belonging to the early medieval period (plate 8). Unfortunately, the site is badly disturbed as an electric

powerhouse is built on the top of this mound and a pond is dug on the northern side of the mound. At the southeastern corner of this mound from the surface, black ware, red ware and black slipped ware are reported.

Jainagar

A well-known archaeological site Jayanagar is located on the southeastern corner and about 6km from Rajaona-Chowki. This area is presently an integrated part of the Lakhisarai municipality. The site is situated between two small hillocks, known as Kalipahari on the north and Lalipahari on the south. The river Kiul flows just on the eastern side of this mound. It is a habitation mound of the early medieval period, but unfortunately, most of the area of this mound is occupied by the modern settlement. Local people believed that this area was known as 'Hatbari'. Buchanan first visited this place, followed by Beglar, Cunningham, and many Indian scholars who have worked on this site. Cunningham mentioned this mound as the mound of an ancient market. On the southern side, on the Lalipahari hillock, there is an archaeological mound. Recently, Visva-Bharati University and Bihar Heritage Development Society excavated a Buddhist monastery. However, Jainagar has a very significant role in early medieval history. The existence of large mounds and epigraphically records found in this area address this fact.

Hasanpur

Hasanpur is on the southern side of Jainagar, just beyond the Lalpahari hillock. The site possesses an extensive habitation deposit of the early medieval period and is very close to the river Kiul. A channel of river Kiul has passed from south to north direction in the middle of this mound and created a natural section of this mound. Approximately one-meter layer of cultural deposition is prominent in the river sections. The deposit shows ceramics of red ware, red slipped ware, and grey ware. Close to this mound, there is a Shiva temple. Many architectural and sculptural fragments are kept by the local people in this temple (plate 9). All these sculptures belong to the 10th to 11th century CE.

Hasanpur Dira

On the east of Hasanpur mound, just on the opposite side of the old river bed of Kiul, there is a mound of the early medieval period, locally known as Hasanpur Dira. The villagers informed that, around 100 years back, people of Hasanpur village lived on this mound. After that, the villagers migrated to the present Hasanpur village. The size of this mound is decreasing rapidly due to the action of the river. In section of the river, potshard are visible. Hence, it is challenging to assume presently how large the settlement was. The rest of the mound can certainly vanish within a few years. However, on the surface of the existing mound, the evidence of coarse red ware, red slipped ware, and black ware ceramic are found.

Kali Pahari

There is another habitation mound 500 meters northeast of Kalipahari. The area is known as Kalipahari and belongs to the Lakhisarai municipality. Because of modern construction, this mound is disturbed largely. On the other hand, a modern road has passes through the middle of the mound and divided the mound into two parts, northern and southern. From this mound, various types of red ware ceramic have are reported.

Pathla

It is s a village located around 10 km south of Rajaona-Chowki. Many sculptural fragments of the early medieval period from this village are reported in a secondary context. The villagers collected the sculptures from nearby villages and preserved them in a Shiva temple.

Bilouri

This village is located around 11 km south of Rajaona-Chowki settlement and 7 km west of Jainagar settlement. It has a habitation mound of the early medieval period. The mound area is locally known as 'kachhahari' as they believe that King used to give his judgment from this place in the early days. Sculptural and architectural fragments (plate 10) associated with this mound are collected from three different areas of the village, i.e., Suphal Brahamin ka Sthan, Paschim Tola Shiv Mandir and Kalisthan.

Jhulana-Biharaora

These are two adjacent villages of Damodarpur Gram Panchayet, located 9.8 km south of Rajaona-Chowki. These villages are located on an archaeological mound of the early medieval period. The people of this area have occupied a portion of this mound by constructing houses. The rest of the site is made agricultural fields. Sculptural and architectural fragments (plate 11) are reported from four different areas of the villages, such as Shiva temple near the pond, Shiva Temple near the road, Garbhua Sthan and Dibal Baba Ka Sthan.

Aure

The village Aure comes under Ramgarh Chowk block. It has another occupied habitation site of the early medieval period in this area. This village is located 13 km south of Rajaona-Chowki by road. The modern village that exists on this mound is around 200 years old. According to the villagers, once this area was known as 'Dhatri-Sthal', but due to a large number of 'Aura' trees, a type of wild plant, the village became well-known later as Aure. However, a large number of architectural and sculptural fragments have been reported from Shri Ram Mandir and the nearby area of this village (plate 12). All the sculptures of this site are associated with Buddhism and could be dated 9th to 11th century.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the present research, an extensive exploration has been conducted to understand the ancient heritage of this region (Map 3 and 4). This area belongs to the lower basin of the river Kiul and has a very fertile plain landscape. A significant part of the south Bihar plain and some parts of Jharkhand were connected with the trading route of the river Ganga through this area. From a political point of view, this area also has great importance for its strategic location. This area has been considered as an administrative unit from the Gupta period onwards. We have a reference to this area in the Gupta inscription. In this regard, two Nalanda seals of Samudragupta are significant, where we find the mention of this Kṛimilā -Viṣaya (Hirananda Sastri 1942:53–54).

This exploration has revealed a cluster of archaeological sites in this area. A large number of sculptures and architectural fragments are reported from these sites, undoubtedly the postmark of the ancient heritage of the area. The significant sites of this area are Rajaona-Chowki, Balgudar and Jainagar. The ancient name of Balgudar and Rajaona-Chowki was Kṛimilā (Chhabra and Sircar 1985:137–45). Therefore, it appears that a part of Kṛimilā (Balgudar) was situated on the bank of the river Harohar, and another portion of the Kṛimilā (Rajaona-Chowki) was situated in between the river Kṛimilā (Hardy 1899:354) and Harohar. It is also interesting that the present Jainagar area, under the Lakhisarai municipality, was known as Champa (Chowdhury 1967:280) in ancient times. Both of these places had great significance in the early medieval period. Kṛimilā was the Headquarter of the early medieval Viṣaya. At the same time, there was a Buddhist monastery in Champa. Inscriptions reported from this place indicating that the monastery had enough dominance in the locality and society.

Jainagar Image inscription is as follows:

"May there be success. On the 3rd day of C*aitra* in the 35th year of the feet of *Palapāla*, the illustrious lord of *Guda*, here at the illustrious city of *Champā*, the (goddess) *Bhaṭṭārikā Purṇyeś Varī)* is installed by *Ūtakva*. Whatever merit is here let it go to the communities of *Siddhas* and the congression of *Śramaṇas* as well as to the relatives (of *Ūtakva*) who are bound by the fetters of (worldly existence)." (Chowdhury 1967:280).

A Large number of finest sculptures have been reported from this locality through the various explorations by the scholars, indicating the significance of this part.

From Kṛimilā area, on the other hand, a large number of sculptures and architectural parts, both Hindu and Buddhist pantheon are reported. Once, Xuanzang, the famous Chinese pilgrim of the 7th century, visited this area. He had seen a Buddhist monastery and an Ashokan Stupa here(Cunningham 1873:153). The present survey has recognized that the number of

sculptures associated with Buddhism is less than the Hindu pantheon, and most of these sculptures have been reported from the eastern side of the site. The Balgudar also has Hindu and Buddhist pantheon sculptures, yet limited sculptures are Buddhist here. On the other hand, in Lakhisarai English, large numbers of sculptures are associated with Buddhism. In Bilouri, all the sculptural fragments are related to Hindusim. On the other hand, in Aure, all the sculptures are related to Buddhism. In the case of Jhulana-Bhiruara, except for two or three fragmented pieces rest are related to Hinduism. Therefore, undoubtedly both Hindu and Buddhist communities used to live together in this area, which was the distinct heritage of the Kṛimilā Viṣaya.

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SL.NO	ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE	COORDINATES	TIME PERIOD	REMARK
1	RAJAONA-CHAWKI	Lat. 25° 11' 41'' N Long. 86° 04' 15.64''	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Cunningham E1873:151–56
2	RAHUGARH	Lat. 25° 11' 27.49'' N Long. 86° 04' 46'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Beglar 1878:116–17
3	GANGTA	Lat. 25° 11' 9.87'' N Long. 86° 03' 49.96'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Mondal 2020:19–30
4	BALGUDAR	Lat. ° 12' 20'' N Long. 86° 04' 43'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Beglar 1878:117
5	LAKHISARAI ENGLISH	Lat. 25° 11' 31.23'' Long. 86° 06' 2.84'' E	NEARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
6	SABIKPUR	Lat. 25° 11' 36.44'' N Long. 86° 04' 36.29'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
7	DAMODAROUR	Lat. 25° 14' 0.24'' N Long. 86° 04' 27.34'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
8	NERI	Lat. 25° 10' 0.21'' N Long. 86° 03' 28.88'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Kumar 2011:23–50
9	JAINAGAR	Lat. 25° 9' 11.32'' N Long. 86° 05' 46.98'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Cunningham 1873:159–60
10	HASANPUR	Lat. 25° 08' 47.76'' N Long. 86° 06' 14.36'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Kumar 2011:23–50
11	HASANPUR DIRA	Lat. 25° 8' 45.65'' N Long. 86° 06' 19.55'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
12	KALIPAHARI	Lat. 25° 9' 7.44'' N Long. 86° 06' 17.09'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Cunningham 1873:160
13	PATHLA	Lat. 25° 8' 56'' N Long. 86° 04' 58'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
14	BILOURI	Lat. 25° 8' 6.12'' N E Long. 86° 03' 27.96''	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
15	JHULANA-BHIRAURA	Lat. 25° 7' 31.12'' N Long. 86° 04' 58.95'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported
16	AURE	Lat. 25° 7' 18.62'' N Long. 86° 02' 56.32'' E	EARLY MEDIEVAL	Newly Reported



Plate 1: Horizontal view of the archaeological mound from the northern side at the village Chowki

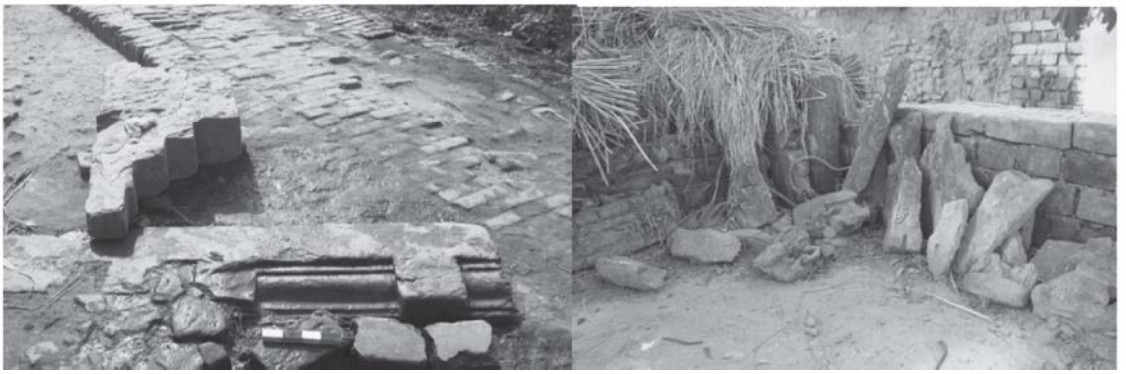


Plate 2: Architectural and sculptural fragments scattered at Rajaona and Chowki

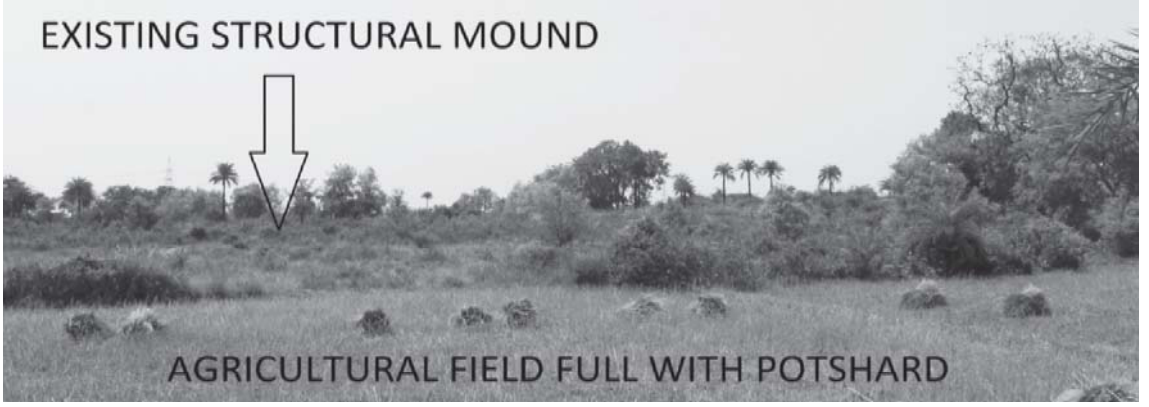


Plate 3: Archaeological mound at Rahugarh



Plate 4: Sculpture from left side: Mother with child (partly broken in the upper part), Pedestal of Surya image, Buddha (head is broken) at Gangta. Scale: 20 cm.



Plate 5: Balgudar mound (Left); Dancing Shiva on the pedestal of sculpture at Balgudar (Right)

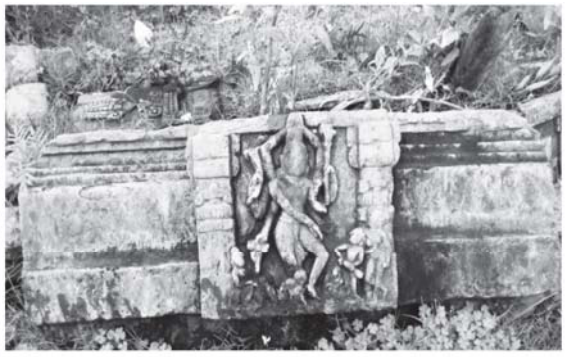


Plate 5: Balgudar mound (Left); Dancing Shiva on the pedestal of sculpture at Balgudar (Right)

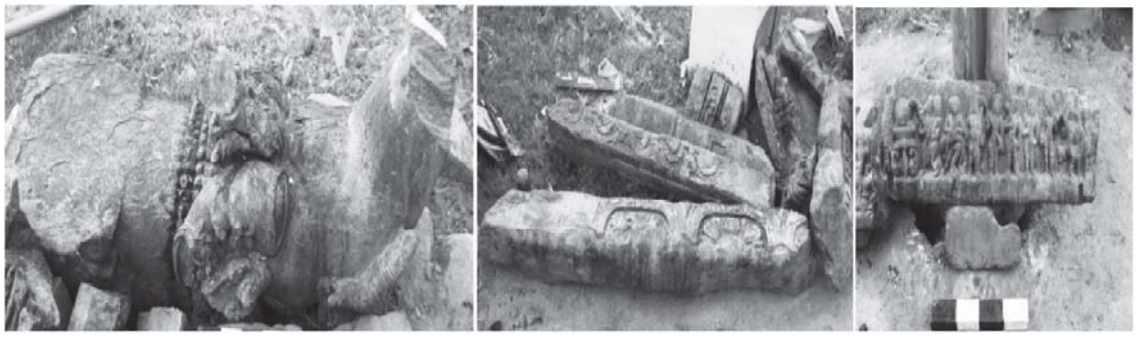


Plate 6: Gargoyle (Left), Architectural fragments (Middle), Dasavatar panel (Right) at Lakhisarai English.(Scale: 20 cm.)

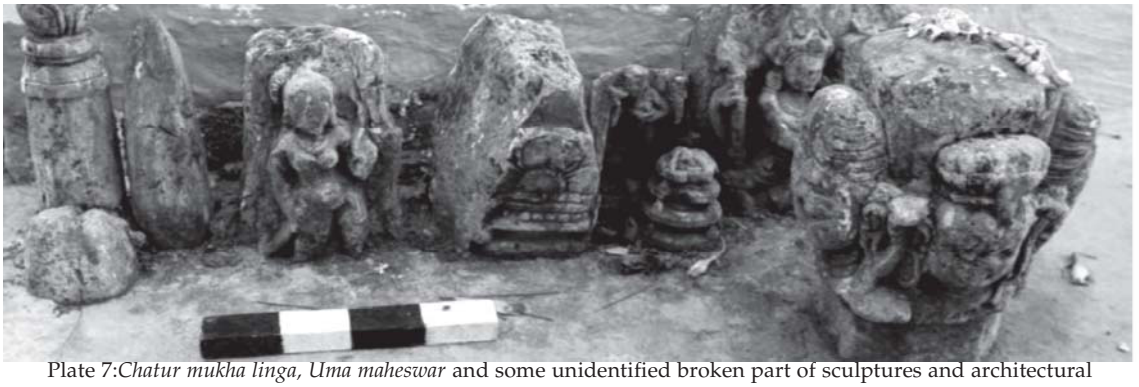


Plate 7:*Chatur mukha linga, Uma maheswar* and some unidentified broken part of sculptures and architectural fragments at Damodarpur. (Scale: 20 cm)

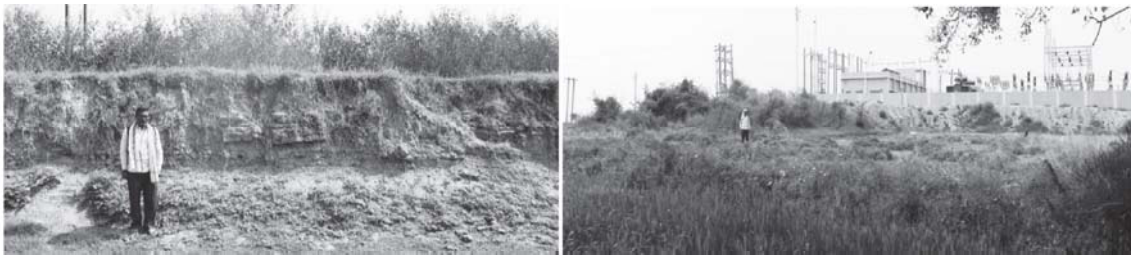


Plate 8: Exposed brick wall in eastern side (Left), Existing mound from the eastern side (Right) at Neri



Plate 9: Sculptural fragments near the mound (Left), Huge stone slabs on the mound (Right) at Hasanpur



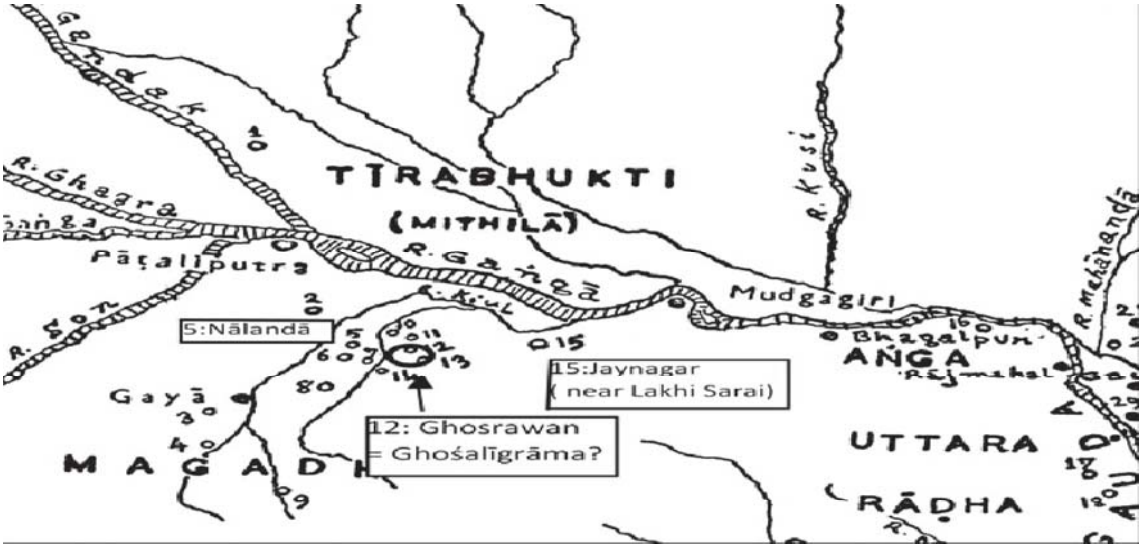
Plate 10 : Face of Vishnu, Shiva ling and some architectural fragments. (Scale: 20 cm.) at Bilouri



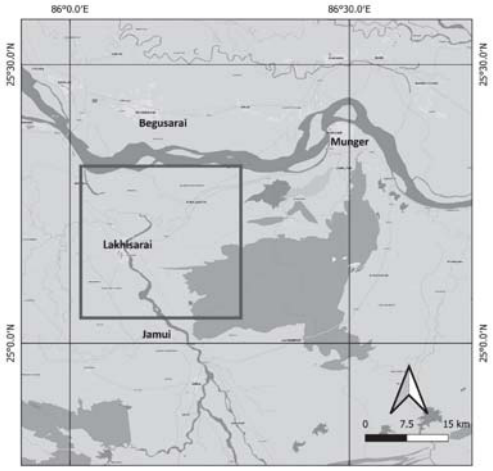
Plate 11: An early medieval Gargoyle attached with a modern Shiva temple (Left), Heap of sculptures and architectures (Right) at Jhulana-Biharaora.



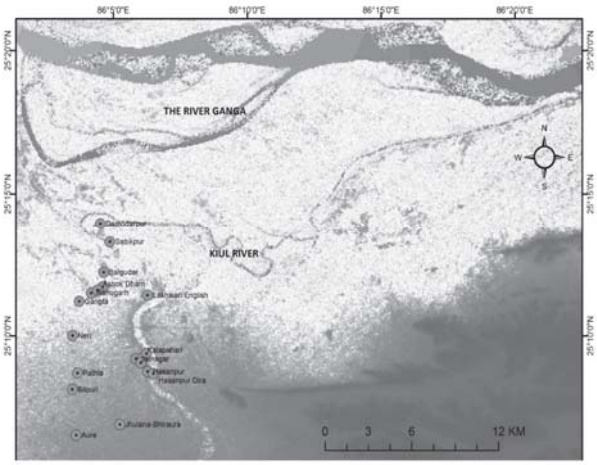
Plate 12: Singhanad with broken head (Left); Unidentified Buddhist male figure (Right) at Aure.(Scale: 20 cm)



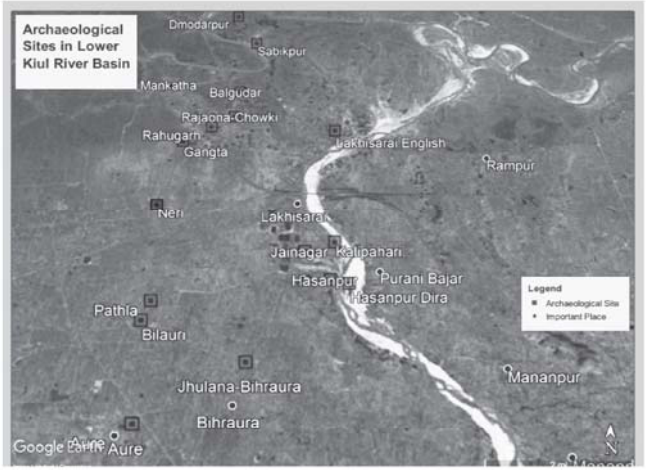
Map 1: After, Chowddhury (1967), 'Dynastic History of Bengal'. Here in this Map Jaynagar (Jainagar) and its surrounding area have been identified as *K[imilg*, yet the actual geographical boundary is unknown.



Map 2: Study Area (study area has been marked in red colour in the middle)



Map 3: The river Ganga and it's tributary, river Kiul
Location of archaeological Sites in Red colour



Map 4: Representing the Close view of the Archaeological Sites in Google Earth

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