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Excavation at Mansar, Distt. Nagpur, Maharashtra—1997-2000

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Under the aegis of Bodhisatva Nagajuna Smarak Sanstha Va Anusandhan Kendra, Nagpur, excavations at Mansar (Lat 2°24'N Long 79°17'E) located 40 kms north-east of Nagpur, have been carried out for the last three field seasons (1997-2000).

Mansar attracted the notice of archaeologists from 1928. Amongst the early references there is an article by TA Wellsted entitled 'Notes on the Vakatakas of the Central Provinces and Berar and their country, 4th to 8th century A.D. in the *Journal of the Bombay Asiatic society* in 1935 mentioning the remains of Asvamedha and other antiquities found during mining operations. He also mentions of Buddhist monastery near Mansar. The site was protected as a site of national importance in 1935.

Work Done So Far

The site earlier excavated by the University of Nagpur and found some very impressive brick structures in the flat area of the site now named MNS-1. A few years back, Archaeological Survey of India found the remains of some ancient structures in an area which is now called MNS-2'. These excavations have revealed the presence of a brick temple complex built up in three phases. Structural remains from the complex include live size clay human and animal figures. The present excavations

have been carried out in the mound locally known as Hidimba Tekdi has been named as MNS-3

Exploration

The exploration carried out (by us) in the area have yielded stone tools right from Early Stone Age to Late Stone Age. The Early Stone Age tools (Pl. 1) which have been shaped out of quartzitic sandstone and crystalline quartz, found in the seams of granitic deposit comprise of hand-axes, cleavers, choppers, scrapers etc., mostly belong to Late Acheulian period. The Middle Stone Age tool kit comprising of smaller hand-axes, points, cleavers, scrapers etc., are mostly on quartzitic material. Majority of the tools of these periods are digging and cutting tools, pointing to the fact that the Early Man at Mansar was predominantly dependent on vegetarian food rather than on hunting. The Late Stone Age tools both geometric and non-geometric ones, have been shaped out of crystalline material such as quartz, chert, chalcedony and agate. These comprise of triangles, points, trapeze, lunates, burins etc. In the hillocks few rock shelters and caves have been noticed which were probably used by the Early Man of Mansar.

Along the bank of the present Mansar lake few megalithic cairn circle have also been noticed. Probing

*Indian Archaeology 1994-95 A Review, p. 56.

done by Dr. S.N. Rajguru in May 2000, showed that prior to the formation of the Mansar lake (ancient Mansarovar) a stream flowed from east to west.

Period -I, Circa 200 BC to 250 AD

Digging in the eastern peripheral and the central areas of MNS-3 gave the evidence that the early settlers of the area of the historical period decided to build a *Stupa* following the natural contour of the hill. The early *stupa* also found in the central area was having extant four to five courses of bricks measuring 48x25x8 cm in size. This earliest *stupa* (*stupa-1*) was having a dia of 8 m. Not much could be said about its superstructure as its three sides were superimposed with massive later structures which could not be removed. This *stupa* was later enlarged by using bricks of the size 42x22x7 cm (*stupa-2*) Pl. 2. It was increased by making brick boxes filled with earth and small boulders, a technique of building *stupa* also found at Pauni. The present available height thus achieved was

the central area of the *stupa* boxes. The approximate dia of the *stupa* is 14 m.

It has a brick *pradakshiina path* around it and a rectangular projection is also available in the eastern side. The *stupa* has been given support on the eastern side with a stone-rubble revetment having 8 to 9 courses of boulders. A fragment of a soap-stone relic-casket along with a lid fragment has also been recovered from the peripheral area of his *stupa*. On the north-eastern side there is another brick-structure which has been badly damaged.

Another *stupa* (*Stupa-3*) roughly roundish in shapes of undressed boulders having a dia. of 11 m with an extant height of 2.70 m. has 7-8 courses of undressed stones. It has a *Pradakshina path* of 1 m wide which has been built right over the northern wall of the last box of the *stupa-2*. This *stupa* came into disuse along with *stupa-2*.

On the north-eastern side of the central area an oval *Chaitya* built in two phases having a pedestal on the northern side and an entrance on the western side was exposed. It is 8 m long in the north-south and 5.50 m wide in east-west.

After an accumulation of 1.25 m deposit, at the end

of the Satvahana period and beginning of the *Vakataka* period two sacrificial altars, one in the shape of a *syennachiti* and the other a *Kurma Chiti*, made of bricks have been exposed. The *syennachiti* which is in the north was made after smashing the cross-walls of the earlier *stupa* which has gone out of the use by that time making the ground levelled.

In the *syennachitis*, figure of a Purusa made of lime has been found sacrificed with his head smashed (Pl. 3). The head of the figure is oriented towards west, whereas the legs are put towards east. A *vedi* in the chest portion with a hole for fixing a *yasti* over it was made and an earthen lamp was found kept nearby. Two pots have also been kept near the knee region of the figure which lies on his right side with an iron snake kept near his left toe, looking towards the human figure.

The entrance to the *syennachiti* and *Kurmachiti*, is 2.90 m in width with three flight of steps. The lower two lying in the centre of 0.80 m in width. The entrance has two side arms. While exposing the entrance it was noticed that it was blocked at a later period with a brick wall, which later on collapsed, all at a time, due to a sudden jerk apparently caused by tectonic movement that might have occurred, as per this evidence, after the performance of *Purusamedha Yajna* and before the construction of the top most *stupa* i.e. some time between 4th and 6th century A.D. All the bricks have fallen in brick-on-edge position with mortar in between remaining intact. The eastern outer wall of the two *chitis*, exposed also display same triangular method of construction technique as has been witnessed in constructing the inner side of the *Chitis*.

Adjoining the *Kurma-chitis* in the southern side there is a stone-staircase comprising of eight steps leading towards a small *havanā kund*, a lime kiln and a square shrine made of bricks which apparently appears to have been a Saiva shrine as there is a hole for outlet of water. Stratigraphically, it appears that the sacrifice was made at the end of the Satvahana period and beginning of *Vakataka* period. A whitish layer seals the sacrificial alters and other associated structures.

Period-II (Circa 250 to 500 A.D.)

During this period, on top of the mound, a magnificent temple with plinth of dressed sand stone blocks and

super structure of bricks was built by the Vakatakas. This temple with two phases of construction has yielded many fragmentary sculptures having impressive head dress and bedecked with jewellery. These are in the best traditions of the Vakataka art.

The temple facing east consists of a large *mandapa* and a *garbhha-griha*. In the centre of the western wall of the sanctum sanctorum there is a brick platform. Major part of the temple complex is concealed under the walls of the later *stupa*. The side entrance in the north is 0.90 m in width and comprises of five courses of dressed rough grained whitish sand-stone. North-south width of the temple is 12.60 m. In order to strengthen the northern and southern slopes of the hillock massive pitching walls were raised to an extent of 60 m on each side, using huge boulders. Due to this pitching the temple complex would have looked like a fortress.

This temple appears to have been built either by Pravarasena I (275-335 A.D.) or by his son Rudrasena I (335-355 A.D.) as Mansar was the Devalasthanam of the Vakatakas, which has been proved by further evidences described later. Incidentally the rose coloured, fine grained sand stone sculpture of a sitting deity, now housed in the National Museum, New Delhi and identified as Siva-waman by late Dr. C.Sivrammurthy, was recovered in 1970 near the south-western end of this temple. This statue was probably installed in the main temple by Pravarasena II (420-455 A.D.) who declared the Devalasthanam of Mansar as Pravarapur in honour of his illustrious great grandfather Pravarasena I and the temple as that of Pravareswara. Probably while carving this image Pravarasena II wanted to elevate his great grandfather to the status of god, hence named the temple as Pravareswarasya. This was observed and commented upon by the well-known archaeologists Shri Krishna Deva.

On the eastern side, in the central line of the structures, an impressive staircase has been exposed for approaching structures built in different periods keeping its length and height increased through the centuries (Pl. 4). The staircase also shows the evidence of the use of temple material in the stage of its renovation and enlargement during the time of the last *stupa*. This period has yielded a copper coin of Vishnukundin Dynasty and belongs to King Mahendra Varman of 5th century A.D.

Further dig on the north-western, south-western and western slopes of the site MNS-3 revealed a sizable temple complex belonging to Eastern Vakatakas. It is quite evident that the Siva shrines exposed so far, belong to two phases. Taking advantage of the massive retaining walls built of dressed and undressed stone blocks and of bricks measuring 46x27x7 cm were apparently raised to make a flat platform on the top of the hill for the construction of a temple and later a *stupa*. Around the temple in the first phase the shrines were mostly constructed on the northern side where two natural caves exist. One of the cave was also converted into a shrine by laying bricks on the floor and plastering it with lime plaster and then applying over it red-ochre paint, while the other cave was used as a meditating chamber by constructing concave brick walled approach. The shrines were built over fluted bases with sharp angles making octagons. Over these octagons simple rectangular shrines were raised, each having a niche facing north for the deity and having an approach from either the east or the west. Right from the bottom of the octagonal base a straight staircase led up to the outer side of the shrines and later on to the cave shrine. The foot of this staircase had a brick built semicircular *Chandrasila*, where as two narrow staircase lead to the cave shrine apparently to maintain one way flow of devotees. In order to close the roof of these staircases, triangles and inverted triangles have been used in the construction. The walls and the steps were well plastered with lime plaster, also using lime concrete for strengthening the surface of the steps. Red sand-stone sculptured pieces mostly belonging to Saiva cult have been recovered from these shrines.

On the western and southern side a row of Siva shrines built of bricks were exposed. These shrines built in three terraces are approached by flight of steps. So far three rows of flight of steps have been exposed. Out of total 16 shrines exposed six have Siva lingas, one each resting over a square brick pedestal having a *pranala* on the northern side whereas in some only pedestals are present. The pedestals have been made out of chiseled bricks. None of the Sivalinga is associated with any stone circular *Yoni-pitha*. However most interestingly one of the shrine itself has been built in the form of a *Yoni-pitha* with the *linga* kept in the centre of the shrine over a brick pedestal. (Pl V and VI)

Vertically all the shrines have been built in the form of 'lotus buds' by adopting the triangles and inverted tri-

angles (equilateral). Method for raising petals that ultimately close into a pointed end making the close roof of the *Sikhara* has been adopted. The evidence clearly show that the whole complex was plastered with lime mortar. At the base of these shrines, on the southern corner of one of the steps a burnt wooden *Yupa* was found, apparently for offering sacrifices to the deities. The triangles, particularly on the outer side of the *Jangha* portion of the first row of shrines, make a human face. Almost each shrine has an approach either from the east or west, with some having a small '*mandapa*' and a small semicircular or triangular '*kund*' for water storage near the steps. In one of the shrines the linga has been kept over a square brick pedestal just below the natural rock inclined.

On the south-eastern corner at the base of the steps two square *havan kund*s, with brick linings were exposed in front of the Siva shrines. The larger *havan kund* is having two rows of brick linings, outer 3.0x3.00 m while the inner one 1.35x1.35m. The outer lining have two *pranalikas* on each side having a width of 0.20 m. Thickness of the lining walls is 0.85 m. The inner square is built around a outcrop of rock. Just in front of the *havan-kund*s to the north, a shrine has been constructed to house a 'Swayambhu' diety-which is a huge natural rock.

On the southern side to the east of the *havan kund*s, a man made cave, by the side of the huge natural granitic outcrop was dug and its side walls were lined with bricks to a depth of 1.5 m in corbelled arch fashion to close the top. On the western side of this cave brick steps were laid to go down the cave.

A large number of fragmentary sculptures and architectural members of temples, mostly of red sand-stone, have been recovered from the debris sealing these shrines. The sculpture display superb craftsmanship in delineation of the facial, physical features as well as the decorations.

The sculptures mostly Saivite images, particularly belonging to Tantric cult, are well delineated. Sculptures of Siva-Parvati, Uma-Maheswar, Ganas, Lajjagauri, a *Khinara* (Pl. 7), Lakshmi with an attendant (Pl. 8) and structural fragments are noteworthy. A good number of inscriptions on structural fragments in typical Eastern Vakataka style box headed Brahmi have been recovered.

An earlier inscription datable to 2nd century B.C. has also been recovered. The inscriptions are mostly prayer hymns in Sanskrit. A number of iron objects were also recovered. Base of an earthen jar having eleven holes on fine slipped red ware was found from one of the shrines.

The most noteworthy find is the factory site of clay sealing on the north-eastern corner, just at the base of the northern row of shrines. The baked clay sealing bear the legend in box-headed *Brahmi* character, reading '*Pravareswarasya*', (fig 1) referring obviously to '*Pravareswara deva Kulsthanat*' referred to in the well

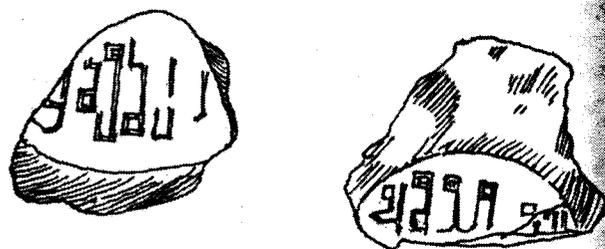


Fig. 1. Age copy of the inscribed sealing.

known copper plate inscription from Pandhurna. The main shrine was obviously the devakul temple, the dynastic temple of the Vakatakas renovated by Pravaresena II (420-450 A.D.) in memory of his great grandfather Pravarsena I. Incidentally the Pandhurna copper plate mentions its issuance from Pravareshwara Devakulsthanat or Pravareshwara temple which has now been unearthed at Mansar (ancient Pravarapur). The additions in IInd phase were carried out probably by Prithvisena II, who was a known devout Saivite.

Apart from a number of sealing that bear the legend '*Pravareshwarasya*' and '*Shri Jaivirdhi*', some sealings depict elephant, the animal that appears to have been of great importance to the 'Eastern Vakatakas'.

The 'lotus bud' pattern of shrines discovered at Mansar display superb example of *Vastukala* and construction of shrines without any regular *Sikhara* or tiered (*Peedha*) roof, as the ends of top petals joined and made the simple *Sikharas* of the shrines.

Further on the western side, on the foot of the Siva shrines, a huge hall measuring 9.60 x 9.60 m with attached verandah, 8.0 x 1.60 m and a corridor on the southern side leading to the main entrance of the cave shrine, was exposed. While constructing these structures of bricks, the huge granitic outcrop on the north-eastern side was not disturbed. The southern and eastern walls had two projections and were decorated with mouldings in the entire length.

To the north of the *Purshamedha*, at a higher level, abutting the northern wall of the boxes of the earlier *Stupa*, a stone *Stupa* built of semi-dressed stones was exposed. It has a diameter of 13.0 m and is enclosed by a 1.10 m wide *pradakshinapath* of bricks measuring 42x22x7cm in size. The inner side of the *Stupa* has been strengthened by providing two stone walls, running in east-west direction. On the eastern side *stupa* elevation is available to a height of 2.10 m having six courses of semi-dressed stones.

To the east of the grand steps and amphitheatre, on a levelled surface a *vihar*, made of bricks was exposed upto twelve courses. It comprises of atleast nine rooms measuring 2.20 x 2.20 m each, on the north, south and east, which have been created by partitioning an earlier 12.50 x 12.50 m hall. In between the two rows of rooms, 8.00 m long east-west and 2.30 m wide, north-south, open space leads to a 7.00 m long east-west, and 2.10 wide, north-south, prayer hall. Bricks, used in the construction of this

vihara are 30 x 22 x 7 cm in size.

A silver coin of western Kshatrapa king showing Swami Rudrasena III's bust on the obverse and on the reverse a *chaitya* with inscriptions reading Maha Kshtrapasa Swami Rudradaman Putasa Raja Maha Kshtrapa Swami Rudrasena 21 Saka (348-378 A.D.) was recovered from the surface.

Period III (Circa 500 to 700 A.D.)

During this period after the Vakataka activities ceased, particularly keeping in view the commanding position of the hill, the Buddhist's finally built a *Stupa* - 4 (Pl. 9) having 24 brick built boxes with a central box filled with rubble and stones. It is having a diameter of 18 m and steps on the eastern side. This large *stupa* was built at the top and remained in existence till the end of 7th century AD. This *stupa* was also associated with an oval *chaitya* on the south eastern side which was built over an earlier *chaitya*.

While exposing the boulder foundation of the upper most *Stupa*, on the south-eastern corner, at the depth of 1.00 m below surface, fragments of an earthen relic casket is made of micaceous clay with an additional coating of mica on the outer surface. A copper coin of Bahmani king of 14th century has also been found from the top layer.