

The Buried Past of

Delhi

B. K. Thapar

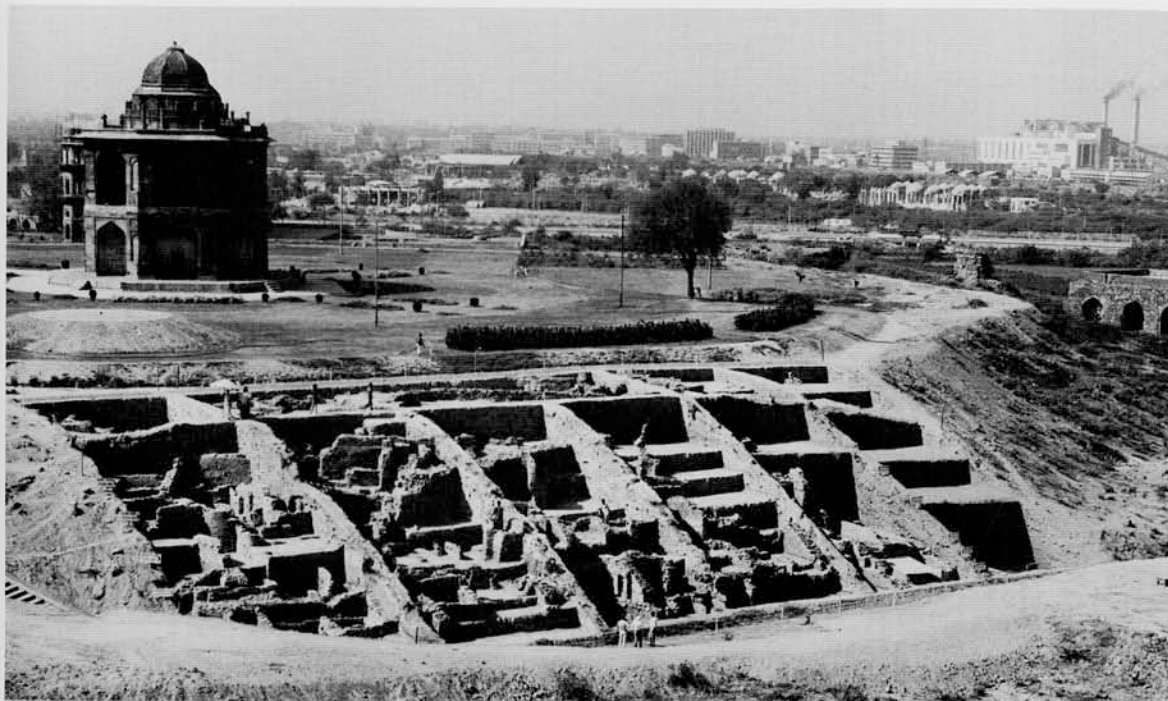
According to popular belief there have been eight imperial cities of Delhi of which New Delhi, or Raisina as it is called by the less sophisticated, is the most recent. New Delhi, planned in the twenties of the present century by Edwin Lutyens, is the last in this series of eight cities. Qila Rai Pithora or Lai Kat, built in the twelfth century by the Rajput ruler Prithiraj Chauhan, was the first. This tradition of eight cities, each in a different location, is based on the standing monuments alone. It does not take into consideration the pre-medieval occupations of Delhi which are attested to by abundant archaeological remains and literary references.

Five years ago an Asokan edict was discovered on one of the rugged outcrops near Kalkaji temple which overlooks the flood-plain of the Yamuna. Since this edict was addressed to a group of Mauryan people for their moral benefit, it was reasonable to expect to find a Mauryan settlement in the neighboring area. Nearby there is a ten to twelve meter high mound which dominates the landscape on all sides. Built on top of this mound is Sher Shah Sur's and Humayun's Purana Qila of the sixteenth century. According to tradition, this was the citadel of the sixth imperial city. The age of this mound and the specific periods of occupation it represented had not yet been systematically investigated. Traditionally, however, it was identified with the site of the ancient Indraprastha, associated with the Pandaves in the *Mahabharata*. Buddhist texts (the *Buddhavaṃśā*) mention that Indraprastha con-

tained the sacred relics of Buddha in the form of a knife and a needle case; one would expect these to be enshrined in a *stupa*. For the archaeologist, therefore, the mound of Purana Qila held great promise for the reconstruction of Delhi's historic past.

In 1955, preliminary investigation in the lower levels of the mound of Purana Qila had revealed the presence of the distinctive Painted Grey Ware which had already been found at other alleged *Mahabharata* sites, including Hastinapura. Contemporaneity with the latter site was therefore clearly indicated, and it could be assumed that the earliest settlement at the site of Purana Qila might have begun around 1000 B.C. The test trench had also revealed structures of the Sunga and Kushan periods (*circa* second century B.C. to third century A.D.). The total evidence, however, was of a restricted kind, as one might expect from a sample sounding.

In December 1969, excavations were resumed on the mound of Purana Qila with two principal objectives: (1) To obtain the complete sequence of occupation at the site backwards from the top level which dates from the Humayun period, and (2) to lay bare sizable portions of the settlement of each period. To realize these aims a thirty-meter square area along the northern flanks of the passage leading to the Water Gate about fifty meters south of Sher Shah's famous library was taken up for excavation. This large area permitted excavation in a stepped manner whereby the structures of each succeeding period could be



1
General view showing the layout of the excavated area. In the left mid-distance is the library building from the stairway of which Humayun is reported to have fallen to his death. In the background are the modern buildings of New Delhi.

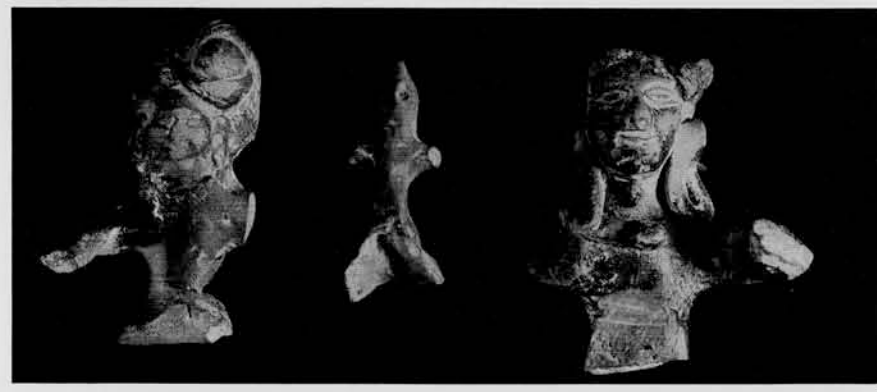
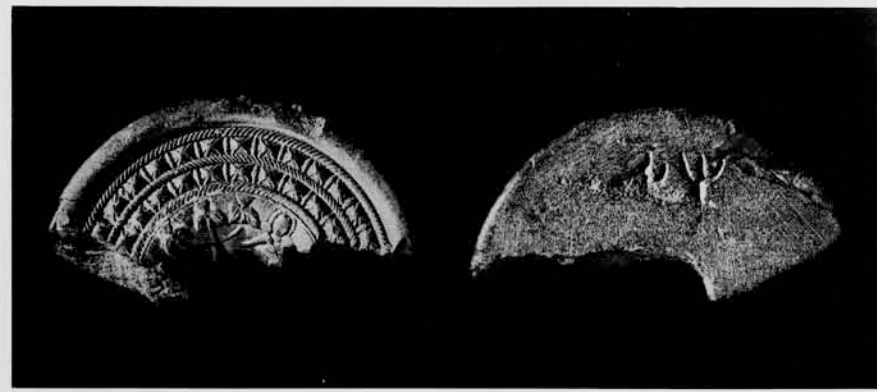
preserved for view by visitors. The already standing monuments of the sixteenth century, silhouetted against the sky, and the modern city of New Delhi in the background provide a dramatic setting for the exposed excavations.

As a result of the first two seasons of field work, remains of several successive settlements existing on the site prior to the construction of the citadel in the sixteenth century have been exposed. Of these, the earliest so far reached belonged to the Mauryan period (*circa* third century B.C.). The remains of pre-Mauryan settlements, including the regular cultural horizon of the Painted Grey Ware, were not found in the area under excavation. Stray sherds of Painted Grey Ware, including some used as game counters, were however found in the Mauryan levels, indicating that a settlement of Painted Grey Ware people lay nearby. From the Mauryan levels upwards, the sequence of occupation was found to run through the Sunga, Saka-Kushana, Gupta, Post-Gupta, Rajput, and Delhi Sultanate periods to the Early Mughal period. This periodization is based on the political history of Delhi. The excavation has been particularly fruitful in providing material from the Post-Gupta, Rajput and Delhi Sultanate periods of which our previous knowledge was sadly deficient.

Even this new evidence needs to be supplemented by further work. The following is a résumé of the main finds of each period of occupation, beginning with the Mauryan. Unfortunately, the stepped style of excavation did not permit the recovery of complete house plans for each period of occupation. Therefore, the architectural evidence will be found to be rather sketchy.

Mauryan Period (*circa* third century B.C.). The distinguishing pottery was the Northern Black Polished Ware, a godsend to archaeologists in India because it is readily recognizable and datable. One of the dish fragments of this ware was found to be stamped with the figure of an elephant. Other pottery associated with the Northern Black Polished Ware resembles that found in Hastinapura III. Among other finds from this Mauryan period level, special mention may be made of punch-marked coins, a fragment of a delicately carved stone ring showing what is probably a mother goddess, and typical grey terracotta human and animal figurines, including a horse and rider with armor. Inscribed terracotta seals were also found.

The structural remains of the period are represented by house walls built of either mud bricks or wattle and daub reinforced with wooden



posts. There are also drains built of both rectangular and wedge-shaped baked bricks, and a series of ovens and terracotta ring wells. The existence of the baked brick drains indicates the urban character of the settlement. In one of the houses there was evidence of considerable burning.

Sunga Period (*circa* second-first century B.C.). The deluxe ware of the preceding period, that is the Northern Black Polished Ware, remained in use during this period. The utility household pottery, however, showed certain changes in vase forms and the addition of lids. Among the deluxe wares, the most noteworthy find was a small, spouted, anthropomorphic vase. Comparable pottery comes from the lower levels of Hastina-

- 1 Carved stone ring with a representation probably of the Mother Goddess. Mauryan Period.
- 2 Terracotta figurines of the Mauryan Period.
- 3 Terracotta horse and rider with armor. Mauryan Period.
- 4 Baked brick drain of the Mauryan Period. The presence of the drain indicates the urban character of the site.
- 5 Ovens of the Mauryan Period.
- 6 Terracotta figurines of the Sunga Period.
- 7 The entrance of a Sunga Period house.

- 8 Structure with a stairway. Kushana Period.



pura IV. The most characteristic finds from this Sunga period level, however, are the terracotta plaques depicting demons and gods, among them a female playing a flute. Small finds include uninscribed, cast coins from the Mathura dynasty, terracotta animal figurines, beads and bone points. A seal and several sealings, all distinctive of Sunga, were also found.

The houses of the period were built of roughly hewn blocks of quartzite or of mud bricks over stone foundations. A few patches of plaster still preserved in place indicate that the house walls were originally plastered. The floors were made of tamped earth with the occasional use of mud bricks in special areas. In one of the houses there was also evidence of a doorway about ninety centimeters wide. It is curious that the size of the mud bricks of this period is nearly identical to that of one of the baked bricks of the Mauryan. In future excavations of Mauryan period sites the excavator might watch for the occurrence of mud bricks of this size.

Saka-Kushana Period (*circa* first-third century A.D.). The ceramic industry was uninspired, marked only by a few distinctive forms such as sprinklers, bottle-shaped vases, lids, basins and votive tanks. A more characteristic feature of the pottery was, however, the stamped decoration. The most noteworthy finds were coins of the Kushanas and Yaudheyas, terracotta figurines, including a medallion which shows three elephants with riders, and a fragment of an ivory handle.

The structural remains of the period are extremely impressive, evidence of an affluent settlement of fully urban character. The houses were built of baked bricks and the use of mud bricks was very much restricted. The full significance of the excavated structures, particularly the



one with a staircase, cannot be appraised at present, but it must be noted that they belong to a most impressive complex.

On the basis of the range of finds and the size of the bricks, this period seems to correspond with Hastinapura IV.

Gupta Period (circa fourth-sixth century A.D.). The pottery shows innovation in surface treatment; both painted and molded pottery came into use. While some of the forms of the preceding period continued, new forms were also added. Among the finds, perhaps the most interesting is the gold-plated coin with an archer on the obverse and the legend *Sri Vikrama* on the reverse. The coin could belong to any of the later rulers of the main line of the imperial Guptas. Equally important are the inscribed sealings, finely made terracotta human figurines, and a damaged phallic symbol of Mathura sandstone.

The buildings were almost shoddy, being built of old, reused and often broken bricks which had been pilfered from the buildings of the preceding period. The most important architectural remains were those of an oblong structure which had had numerous subsequent additions, including an apsidal ended veranda, partition walls and steps. Unfortunately, the complete plan of

this structure has not been recovered. An inscribed sealing and the gold-plated coin mentioned above were found in one of the levels of this building. As a general observation, it is only fair to add that the excavated structures belie the level of achievement in plastic art normally associated with the Gupta period.

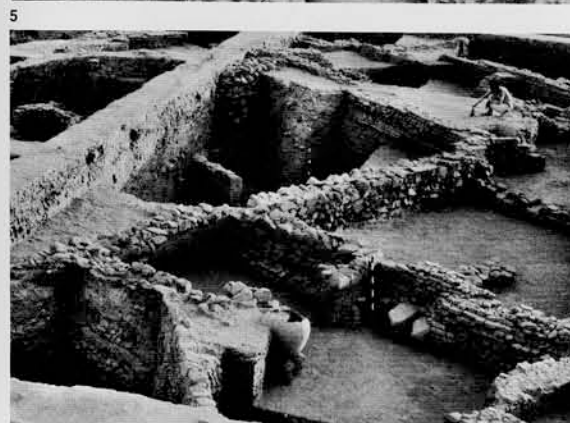
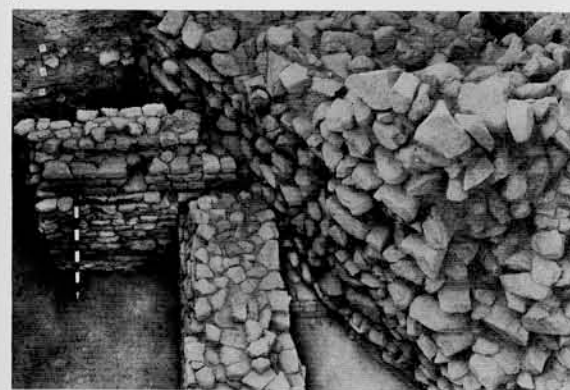
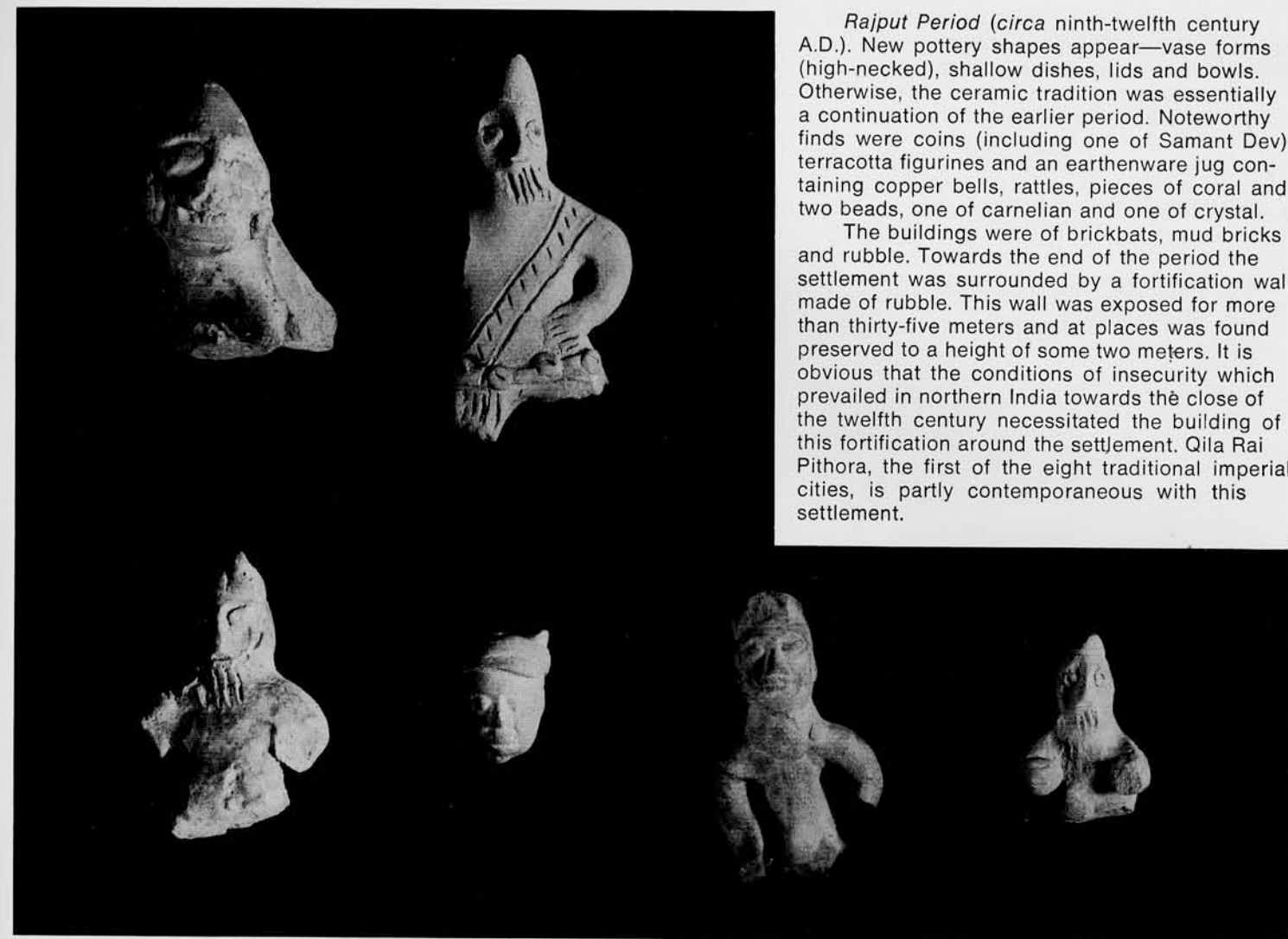
Post-Gupta Period (circa seventh-eighth century A.D.). This period falls in between the Gupta and Rajput periods and is labelled as such for want of any appropriate dynastic name. The pottery was essentially unimpressive, being a continuation of the earlier tradition, but without molded forms. Its fabric became progressively coarser. One of the decorated sherds has a *pranala*-type spout. Other finds include terracotta figurines, beads and a fine but damaged stone sculpture.

The buildings were of either baked or mud bricks. The former were essentially brickbats and the latter were essentially brickbats stolen from the houses of earlier periods.



Rajput Period (circa ninth-twelfth century A.D.). New pottery shapes appear—vase forms (high-necked), shallow dishes, lids and bowls. Otherwise, the ceramic tradition was essentially a continuation of the earlier period. Noteworthy finds were coins (including one of Samant Dev), terracotta figurines and an earthenware jug containing copper bells, rattles, pieces of coral and two beads, one of carnelian and one of crystal.

The buildings were of brickbats, mud bricks and rubble. Towards the end of the period the settlement was surrounded by a fortification wall made of rubble. This wall was exposed for more than thirty-five meters and at places was found preserved to a height of some two meters. It is obvious that the conditions of insecurity which prevailed in northern India towards the close of the twelfth century necessitated the building of this fortification around the settlement. Qila Rai Pithora, the first of the eight traditional imperial cities, is partly contemporaneous with this settlement.



1 Gold-plated coin of the Gupta Period.

2 Structure with an apsidal-ended veranda. Gupta Period.

3 Terracotta figurines. Rajput Period.

4 The fortification wall of the Rajput Period.

5 General view of the excavated structures of the Delhi Sultanate Period.

Delhi Sultanate Period (circa thirteenth-early sixteenth century A.D.). The most distinctive pottery of this period is a glazed ware of which two varieties were found. One is made of a sandy, friable fabric and has floral designs in blue or brown on a white background. The other is of a normal pottery fabric and bears designs in polychrome on a green or brown background. The former is found widely in contemporary sites in Afghanistan and Central Asia and is loosely termed Timurid pottery. The latter appears to be of local manufacture. The other pottery associated with this period shows certain individualistic shapes in vases and lids, that which is decorated being painted in black, occasionally combined with white, or having incised or stamped designs. There was widespread use of mica dusting. Important finds include coins of Balban and Mahmud Shah Tughluq and terracotta animal and human figurines.

The buildings were of brickbats or rubble, but were insufficiently preserved to allow recovery of a house plan. During this period, which corresponds to Hastinapura V, the second through the fifth imperial cities were located at other sites in Delhi. Therefore, the settlement on the mound of Purana Qila was a very modest one.

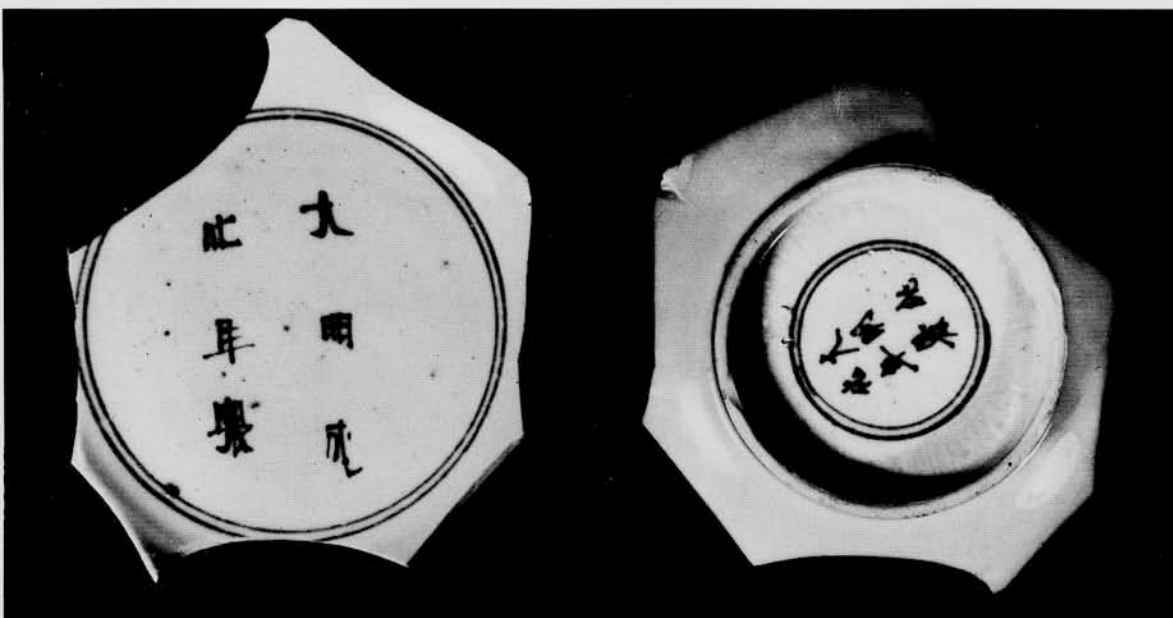
Early Mughal Period (A.D. 1530-1556). The remains of this period are confined to a huge refuse pit into which discarded or broken household objects, including personal ornaments and coins, seem to have been thrown. In this pit there were found beautifully decorated Grey Ware jars of eggshell-thin fabric, fragments of Chinese celadon and Chinese porcelain in addition to dish fragments of glazed ware like that from the Delhi Sultanate period. One of the bowls of Chinese porcelain bore an inscription in Chinese: "Made in the great Ming Dynasty of the Cheng Hua era" and a date corresponding to A.D. 1465-87. Another carried an inscription narrating a fairy tale in verse. The porcelain was possibly a treasured

possession, for quite a few of the bowls bear evidence of their being anciently joined by means of iron rivets. Other objects from the same pit included glass wine bottles with pointed bases, a lone example of a gold earring set with emerald and pearls, and a coin of Adil Shah Sur. These remains represent the occupation of the site by Humayun and Sher Shah Sur—according to tradition, the sixth imperial city.

The excavations at Purana Qila, although modest in scope, have done much to elucidate the historical setting of New Delhi. It is hoped that this brief survey of these excavations will give the reader some impression of the rich treasures of India which await the archaeologist's spade. •

1 Base fragment of a Chinese porcelain bowl bearing the same Chinese inscription on interior and exterior. Early Mughal Period.

2 Fragment of a Chinese porcelain bowl with an inscription narrating a fairy tale. Early Mughal Period.



B. K. Thapar is the Director for Explorations in the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, and is currently a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. He was educated at Lahore where he received his M.A., and took advanced studies in West Asian Archaeology at Heidelberg. He has been associated with many major excavations carried out in India since 1944, including a long-term project of considerable importance at Kalibangan, Rajasthan, and the work at Purana Qila which is the subject of this report.

Credits

All photographs, copyright Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India.