The Buried Past of Delhi

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According to popular belief there have been eight imperial cities of Delhi of which New Delhi, or Reasina 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 Lajpat, built in the twelfth century by the Rajput ruler Prithiraj Cauhan, 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 Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Buddhist texts (the Buddhavainśa) mention that Indraprastha contained 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 investigations 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 stopped 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. Shards 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 Sultaneate 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 Sultaneate 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 classic fragments of this ware was found to be stenciled with the figure of an elephant. Other pottery associated with the Northern Black Polished Ware rosenbrock 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 figures, 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 wares 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 vases 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 Hastinapura IV. The most characteristic finds from this Sunga period level, however, are the terracotta plaques depicting deities 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.
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 anchor 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 illfered 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 reflect 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 unpainted, being a continuation of the earlier tradition, but without molded forms. Its fabric became progressively coarser. One of the decorated sherds has a pendants-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, 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 cane and one of crystal. The buildings were of brickkats, 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. Oila Rai Pithor, the first of the eight traditional imperial cities, is partly contemporaneous with this settlement.

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 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 stampoed 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 brickkats or rubble, but were insufficiently preserved to allow recovery of a house plan. During this period, which corresponds to Haarmanapura 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. 1485-87. 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 actively 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.

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Credits
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