Archaeology in India

By A. GHOSH

Official archaeology in India is now over a century old: in December 1961 the Archaeolog-
cal Survey of India, a Government department and the chief antiquarian organization in
the country, celebrated its centenary. One of the functions in the celebration was an Interna-
tional Conference on Ancient Archaeology: the first of its kind, which was attended by a large number of
archaeologists from different countries and evoked great interest.

But antiquarian studies in the country began even earlier than 1861; promoted by a few Brit-
ish administrators, they go back to the second half of the eighteenth century. Though anti-
quarian pursuits were then inevitably mixed up with the study of languages, religions, and tra-
ditions and were imbued with a sense of romance, one does come across even in the early decades
of the nineteenth century stray attempts at object-
ive descriptions of ancient remains. And a great stride was taken in 1837, when a mint-
officer, James Prinsep, a scholar of remarkable insight and inquisitiveness, deciphered the early
script of India and thus laid Indian epigraphy and palaeography, and incidentally history too,
on a firm basis.

When, therefore, in 1861, an army engineer, Alexander Cunningham, pleaded for the estab-
lishment of an Archaeological Survey of India and succeeded in his attempt, the time was ma-
ture for systematic explorations. For the next twenty-four years Cunningham, who himself
headed the Survey, together with his assistants, visited and re-visited sites and monuments, re-
united which had been carried out excavations at some places. The itineraries of the early
Chinese pilgrims were Cunningham's chief guide: following them he was able to identify many an
ancient site, for which he had a remarkable intu-
tion. At the same time, this imparted to his work
a bias for historical archaeology, particularly for
Buddhist remains. It may be said that Buddhist
archaeology (if such a term is permissible) did
the same thing in India that Classical archaeology
did in Europe at the early stages. Again, as in

Europe of those times, the approach to archae-
ology was chiefly from the museum point of view
—the collection of museum-worthy objects.

This will explain Cunningham's attitude and
aptitude. The pioneering work on the megaliths of South India by Meadows Taylor in the fifties
of the century and the first discovery of megaliths by LeMesurier in 1860 and of palaeoliths by
Bruce Foote in 1863 were not regarded by Cunningham as worthy of notice. What is more, his
own discovery of characteristic Harappan an-
tiquities at Harappa itself in 1873 was left un-
pursued, with the result that the now-famous Harappan culture had to wait for half a century
more for its rediscovery.

But the great amateur, roaming within the
circumscribed field of his interest, laid a solid
foundation for Indian archaeology. After his re-
tirement in 1885 official apathy became dominant and a serious setback followed.

The turn of the century brought in a new era,
which saw the resurrection of the Archaeological
Survey of India: this time the preservation of
monuments was definitely one of its functions. From 1902, when the transformation took place,
to date, the framework of the Survey has re-
mained virtually unaltered, but with large-scale
adjustments to the constitutional changes and
substantial expansions to meet the growing
requirements.

Preservation of monuments will be left out of
the scope of this article. In the field of explora-
tion, the policy of concentrating on Buddhist
sites remained largely unaltered during the first
twenty years of the regime of John Marshall, who had become the Director General of the re-
constituted Survey in 1902. Of the ancient city-sites that were excavated during the period,
mention may be made of Taxila in the northwest,
the association of which with Alexander lent it
a peculiar charm; Patna-pur in the vicinity of
modern Patna, a pro-Christian capital of the
central Gangetic region, supposed to have lain
on an Achaemenian model; and Bhitā further up the
Gangetic Valley, which was believed to be an
early commercial township. Each excavation was a unit by itself; there was no attempt at exposing
and building up archaeological cultures—not to
speak of essential historical sequences.

The outlook largely changed in the early
twenties, when excavations at Harappa in Punjab
(examined but bypassed by Cunningham) and at
Mohenjo-daro in Sind opened up a vista.

For here were two well-planned cities, with
similar relics, going back to the Bronze Age—
more precisely, on the basis of certain finds in
Iraq, to the second half of the third millennium
B.C. The current ideas on the origins of civiliza-
tion in India had to be quickly re-oriented to the
challenge of the discovery of this culture (vari-
ously named "Indus civilization", "Harappa
civilization," or "Harappa culture"), which
evoked great interest in India and abroad. Sys-
tematical excavations followed in Sind and
Baluchistan revealed not only a chain of sites of
this culture but of earlier and later ones. Com-
mensurable steps were thus taken to hunt out the
extent, antecedence, and disappearance of the
culture, but the technique of excavation at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro and other sites under
Marshall's hand of late has been criticized, not without justification.

The discovery of the Harappan culture dra-
matically added a brilliant chapter to Indian
archaeology and attracted wide attention. At
home, outside the circle of practising archaeol-
ogists, much that is fanciful has been written, and
continues to be written, about its origins, chron-
ology and affiliations—encouraged by the re-
grettable non-decipherment of the Indus script.

To the archaeologist that the discovery posed varied
problems, the chief of which was the enormous
 hiatus between the end of this culture and the
beginnings of the historical period. Then again:
what were the origins of this culture? Did the Vedic Aryans, till now unidentified archaeologi-
cally, meet it and have a hand in its destruction?
What were the cultures of other parts of India
before, during, and after its lifetime? Which of
its elements, if any, survived in the later cultures
and through which mechanism? Or was it merely
an unrelated region at the threshold of Indian
civilization? Persistent efforts have been going
on towards the solution of these problems, but
while progress has been achieved it cannot be
claimed that a final answer to any of them is as
yet forthcoming. Besides the problems connected
with the Harappa culture, many new ones relat-
ing to Indus civilization and to the Harappan mili-
nary and administrative history, have now come to the fore, owing to the extensive
work in progress all over the country by many
an organization (in addition to the Archaeologi-
cal Survey) whose coming to the field is, and
large, a post-Independence development.

In 1944 Dr. R. E. (now Sir) Mortimer Wheeler took up the reins of the Archaeological
Survey of India, and with him were introduced a new outlook on archaeology and the observance
of stratigraphy in the field. Wheeler re-excavated Harappa and brought to light an extensive fort-
ification around what might have formed the
siaced—which changed the sociological concept of
the Harappan culture—and a Harappan cem-
etary with extended burials, as distinct from the
programme is no longer possible: the direct attacks are now from and towards many quarters and not merely from a spatial and temporal periphery. The results have been correspondingly accelerated many times more than would have been possible with a cautious approach. The apparent effect of the results may seem to be an unorganized mass of knowledge, “an untidy heap,” to quote Wheeler. But a broad picture has emerged within a remarkably short time. In a vast country with a varied past it would be futile to think of any uniformity in the cultural pattern, to expect every particle of the heap necessarily to conform to an anticipated picture. Below is given a brief survey of the forest, with blank patches here and there, that is the early archaeology of India today: to take into account the trees, sometimes non-conformist in character, that constitute the forest cannot be the function of this short article.

The earlier neglect of Stone Age archaeology has now been amply compensated. An enormous number of sites of the Early Stone Age have been located and their stratigraphy studied. The broad regional and typological division of the tools—the unifacial of the north and the bifacial of the south—has been confirmed, but there is no final evidence as yet on their relative chronology. Nor is there any definite correlation between the glacial and pluvial epochs of the north and south. Associated human remains are still lacking.

The Middle Stone Age, which seemingly followed after a hiatus of unknown duration, is represented by small flake-tools of fine-grained minerals. With its apparent focus in central India, it had a wide distribution.

The Late Stone Age is characterized by micro-liths of non-geometric shapes. They have been found in a limited number of widely separated places in varied geological horizons. While the data are admittedly scanty, their derivation from the preceding Age is not ruled out.

The evidence of a purely neolithic phase is paltry and is confined to the south and extreme north—Kashmir. In the first region, except that the folk were cattle-breeders, there is hardly any knowledge of their economy. In Kashmir the neolithic people were pit-dwellers and used bone tools in addition. The available Carbon-14 dates indicate late third and early second millennium B.C. dates for the southern and northern cultures.

Polished stone axes are widely found in a chalcolithic context in central India, the Deccan, and the South, with the addition of microliths, mainly consisting of parallel-sided blades produced by the “crested ridge guiding technique.” Of the many chalcolithic sites that have been excavated, at least two, Navdatoli and Nevasa, respectively in the Narmada and Godavari valleys, are noteworthy. While all the sites have a general family resemblance, the differences are not negligible, so that a homogeneous culture need not be assumed. The ceramics include black-painted red ware varying in types and painted designs from place to place and often associated with black-and-red ware, sometimes painted in white. While the polished stone axe—element of the culture may have found its way from the south, the pottery-painting tradition seems to have travelled in the reverse direction. Carbon-14 dates would place the beginnings of Navdatoli to the early 17th and its end to the 13th century B.C.

The important settlement at Ahir in southeast Rajasthan, with white-painted black-and-red ware as its dominant ceramic industry, has been dated to about 1800 B.C. on the same basis.

The type-sites of the Harappa culture now lie in Pakistan, but on the Indian side many sites have been located and some excavated. It is now known that the extent of the culture was much greater than had previously been suspected: on the west the culture had definitely crossed the Yamuna and perhaps also the Ganges; on the south it had travelled to Gujarat and even down to the Tapti estuary. Side by side, it is no longer justifiable to emphasize the unchanging character of the culture (which, according to some, lent it an “uncanny” aspect), for regional variations are now not lacking. At Kalibangan in north Rajasthan a full-blooded Harappan settlement has been found overlaying the remains of an earlier culture,
Hoards of copper implements and other objects have been discovered from time to time in north India without any recorded archaeological context and have been variously ascribed to the Harappan refugees, the Aryans, or the indigenous peoples of India. In view of the proved expansion of the Harappan culture in the Gangetic valley, it now seems possible that the hoards represent the relics of the late Harappans, particularly as one of the specialized forms in the hoards, namely, a flat anthropomorphic figure, is found at Lothal as well.

At Rupar, on the upper Sutlej, the Harappan remains are overlain, after a break, by deposits of the Harappan culture in the Gangetic valley, which is one of the occurrences where the Harappan culture is considered to have been overlain by the early culture of the early Median period. At Rupar, on the upper Sutlej, the Harappan remains are overlain, after a break, by deposits of the Harappan culture in the Gangetic valley, which is one of the occurrences where the Harappan culture is considered to have been overlain by the early culture of the early Median period. At Rupar, on the upper Sutlej, the Harappan remains are overlain, after a break, by deposits of the Harappan culture in the Gangetic valley, which is one of the occurrences where the Harappan culture is considered to have been overlain by the early culture of the early Median period. At Rupar, on the upper Sutlej, the Harappan remains are overlain, after a break, by deposits of the Harappan culture in the Gangetic valley, which is one of the occurrences where the Harappan culture is considered to have been overlain by the early culture of the early Median period.

SUGGESTED READING

A. GHOSH took his Master of Arts degree in History at Allahabad in 1931. In 1937, he entered the service of the Archaeological Survey of India, and in 1953 was appointed Director General of Archaeology in India, a position which he still holds. He is Vice-President of the Royal Indian, Pakistan and Ceylon Society, London; a Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries, London, and the German Archaeological Institute, Berlin-Dahlem; a member of the Council of the International Congress of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences, the International Committee for the Study of Palaeolithic, the International Committee on Monuments, Artistic, and Historical Sites and Archæological Excavations, UNESCO, the International Committee of Museums, UNESCO, and served as the editor of numerous monographs and articles on Indian archaeology and ancient Indian history.