

## Wedlock Between Archaeology and Literature Has Resolved Many A Deadlock

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**I**n the vast panorama of ancient Indian history there are many gaps which need to be filled up and disputed events which have to be placed in the right perspective. Experience shows that in tackling these issues neither a study of literature alone nor archaeological excavation by itself can deliver the goods. What is needed is a meaningful synthesis of the data put forward by these two disciplines. I now present to you two topics from our past history which have been highly debated over centuries and how a piecing together of the archaeological data and inputs from literature have helped in resolving the issues. These are: (1) **Aryan Invasion Theory**; and (2) **Historicity of the Mahābhārata**.

I will begin by taking up the long-drawn debate on the Aryan issue. It has all along been held that there was an 'Aryan Invasion' of India, which destroyed the existing Harappan (also called the Indus or Indus-Sarasvatī) Civilization. Let us first have a look at how this theory originated.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a German Indologist, Max Muller, dated the Vedas to 1200 BCE. Accepting that the *Sūtra* literature existed around 600 BCE and assigning 200 years to each of the preceding stages, namely those of the *Āraṇyakas*, *Brāhmaṇas* and *Vedas*, he arrived at the magic figure of 1200 BCE. At this adhocism there were severe objections from his contemporary scholars, like Goldstucker, Whitney and Wilson. Unable to hold his ground, Max Muller finally surrendered by stating (*Physical Religion*, 1890): "Whether the Vedic hymns were composed in 1000 or 1500 or 2000 or 3000 BC, no power on earth will ever determine." However, in spite of such a candid confession by Max Muller himself, it is a great pity that some scholars in India and abroad even today continue to cling to 1200 BCE and dare not cross this *Lakṣamaṇa Rekhā!*

In 1920s the Harappan Civilization was discovered and dated to 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE on the basis of its contacts with West Asian civilizations. Since the Vedas had already been dated, be it wrongly, to 1200 BCE, the Harappan Civilization was declared to be Non-Vedic. And since the only other major language-group in India was the Dravidian, it was readily assumed that the Harappans were a Dravidian-speaking people.

In 1946 Mortimer Wheeler (later knighted) discovered a fort at Harappa; and since the Aryan god Indra is mentioned in the *R̥gveda* as *purandara*, i.e. 'destroyer of forts', he lost no time in declaring that 'Aryan Invaders destroyed Harappan Civilization' (*Ancient India*, No.3, 1947).

In the excavations at Mohenjo-daro some human skeletons had been found. In support of his 'Invasion' theory, Wheeler stated that these were the people who had been massacred by the invaders (*ibid.*). However, since the skeletons had been found at different stratigraphic levels and could not, therefore, be related to a single event, much less to an invasion, Wheeler's theory was *prima facie* wrong. A distinguished American archaeologist, Professor Dales (1964) has rightly dubbed it as a 'mythical massacre'.

Indeed, there is no evidence whatsoever of an invasion at any of the hundreds of Harappan sites. On the other hand, there is ample evidence of continuity of habitation, though marked by gradual cultural devolution.

A detailed study of human skeletal remains from various sites by Hemphill and his colleagues has established that 'no new people at all entered India between 4500 and 800 BCE' (in *Harappa Excavations*, 1991).

Thus, if there is no evidence of warfare or of entry of an alien people and their material culture, where is the case for any 'invasion', much less by Aryans?

### **Were the Harappans Dravidian-speaking people?**

According to the 'Aryan Invasion' thesis, the invading Aryans drove away the supposed Dravidian-speaking Harappans to South India. If there was any truth in this assumption, one would find settlements of Harappan refugees in South India, but there is not even a single Harappan or even Harappa-related settlement in any of the Dravidian-speaking States, be it Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka or Kerala!

Further, it is seen that even when new people occupy a land, the names of at least some places and rivers given by earlier people do continue. For example, in USA names of rivers like Missouri and Mississippi or of places like Chicago and Massachusetts given by earlier inhabitants do continue even after the European occupation. But there is no Dravidian river/place-name in the entire area once occupied by the Harappans, viz. from the Indus to upper reaches of the Yamuna.

All told, therefore, there is no evidence whatsoever for holding that the Harappans were a Dravidian-speaking people.

## Ghost of Aryan Invasion persists

The ghost of 'Invasion' has re-appeared in a new *avatāra*, namely that of 'Immigration'. Says Romila Thapar (1989-91:259-60): "If invasion is discarded then the mechanism of migration and occasional contacts come into sharper focus. These migrations appear to have been of pastoral cattle breeders who are prominent in the *Avesta* and *Rigveda*." Faithfully following her, R.S. Sharma (1999:77): adds: "The pastoralists who moved to the Indian borderland came from Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex or BMAC, which saw the genesis of the culture of the *Rigveda*."

Contrary to what has been stated by Thapar and Sharma, the BMAC is not a pastoral culture, but a highly developed urban one. The settlements were marked not only by well planned houses but also by distinctive public buildings like temples, e.g. those at Dashly-3 and Toglok-21 (Fig.1). Then there were Citadel complexes like that at Gonur (Fig.2). The antiquities found at BMAC sites also speak volumes for the high caliber of this civilization. For example, from Bactria there come a silver ceremonial axe with gold lamina (Fig.3) and the figure of feline, made on chlorite and covered with gold leaf and inlay of semi-precious stones (Fig.4). Given such elaborate public buildings and highly ornate antiquities, wouldn't it be ridiculous to label the BMAC as the product of nomads?

But much more important is the fact that no BMAC element, whether seals or axes or sculptures or pot-forms, or even the style of architecture ever reached east of the Indus, which was the area occupied by the Vedic Aryans as evidenced by the famous *Nadi-stuti* hymn (*Rgveda* 10.75.5-6). This would be clear from the distribution-map that follows (Fig.5).

Hence there is no question of the BMAC people having at all entered the Vedic region.

## If the Vedic people were neither 'Invaders' nor 'Immigrants', were they 'Indigenous'?

In order to answer this question, we will have first to settle the date of the *Rgveda*, since, as mentioned at the very outset, the entire mess has been created by the wrong dating of the Vedas to 1200 BCE.

In this context, the history of the Sarasvatī river plays a very vital role. In the *Rgveda* it has been referred to as a mighty river, originating in the Himalayas and flowing all the way down to the ocean (*giribhya āsamudrāt*, *Rgveda* 7.95.2). But by the time of the *Pañcaviñśa Brāhmaṇa* (XXV.10.16) it had dried up.

Against this literary background, let us see what archaeology and other sciences have to say in the matter.

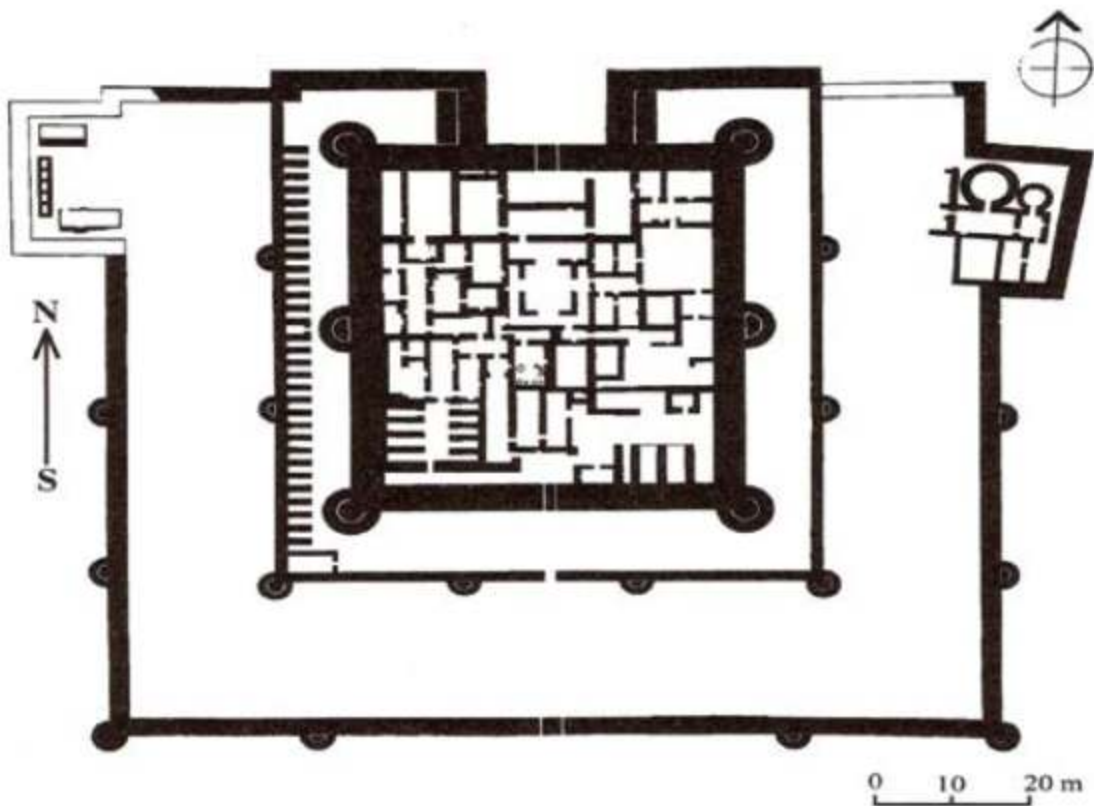
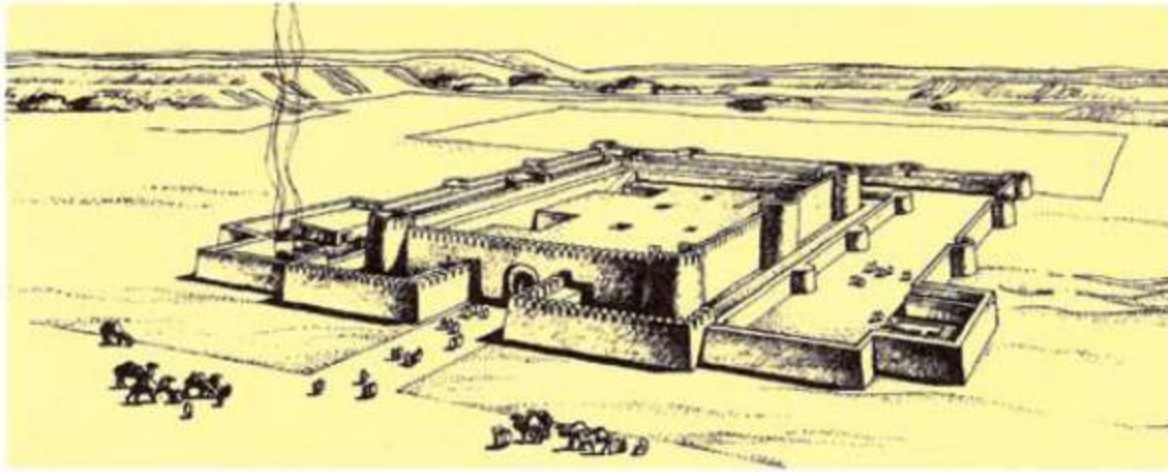


Fig.1 : Temple at Toglok-21, Margiana

Along the bank of the Sarasvati (now called the Ghaggar) is located Kalibangan, a site of the Harappan Civilization. It had to be abandoned while it was still in a mature stage, owing to the drying up of the adjacent river (Raikes 1968). According to the radiocarbon dates, this abandonment took place around 2000 BCE (Lal 1997:245-46). Since, as already stated, during the Ṛgvedic times the Sarasvati was a mighty flowing river, the *R̥gveda* has got to be earlier than 2000 BCE. How much earlier is anybody's guess; but at least a 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE horizon is indicated.

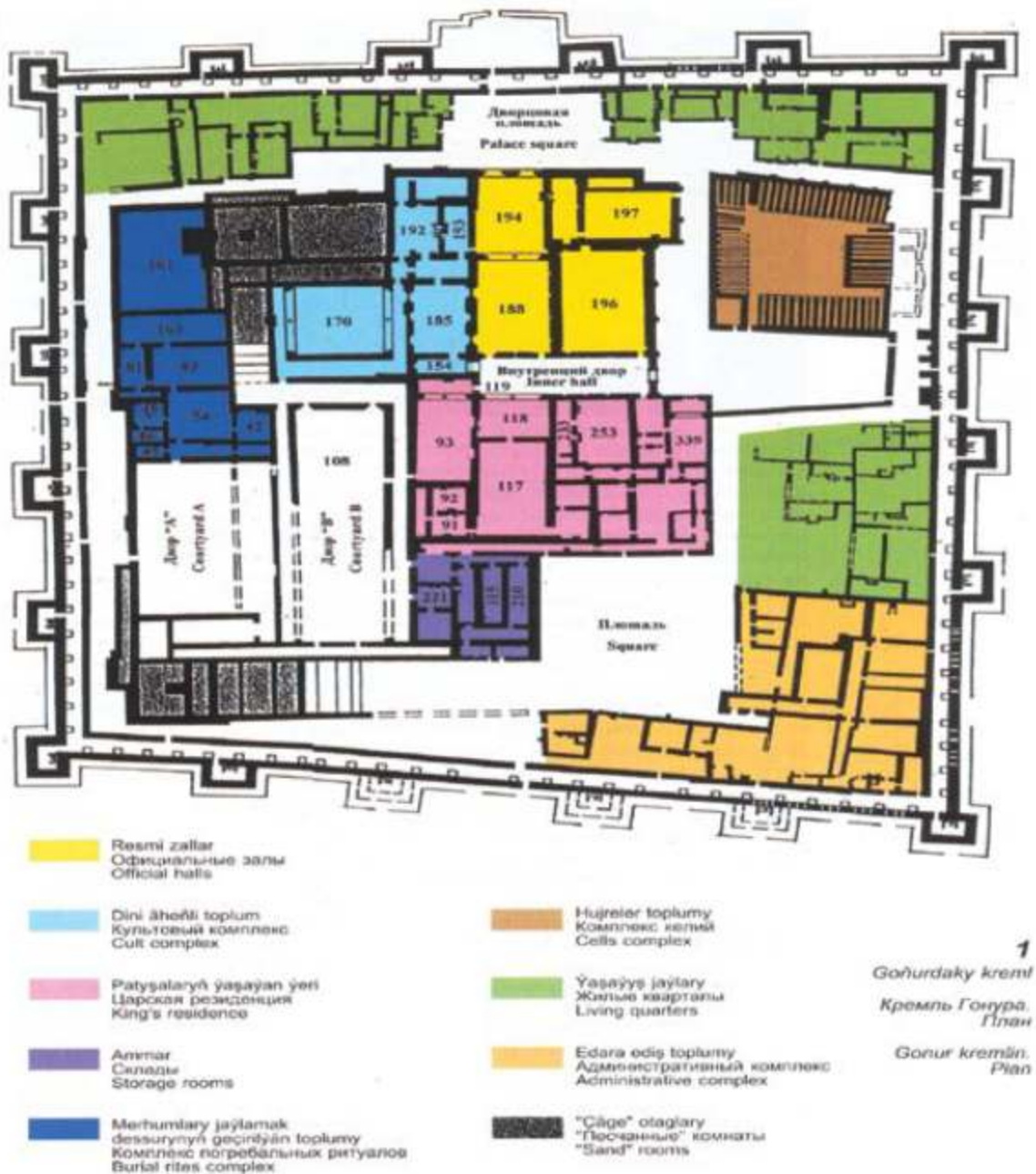


Fig.2 : Citadel at Gonur, Margiana

*R̥gveda* X.75.5-6 very clearly defines the area occupied by *R̥gvedic* people, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. It was from the upper reaches of the Yamuna-Ganga on the east to the Indus and its western tributaries on the west.

*Imam me Gaṅge Yamune Sarasvatī Śutudri stotam sacatā Paruṣṇyā /  
Asiknyā Marudṛidhe Vitastayā Ārjikiye śṛiṇuḥya-Suṣomayā // 5 //  
Tṛṣṭāmayā prathamam yātave sajuh Susartvā Rasayā Śvetyā tyā /  
Tvam Sindho Kubhayā Gomatīm Krumovā Mehativā saratham yābhiritvase // 6 //*

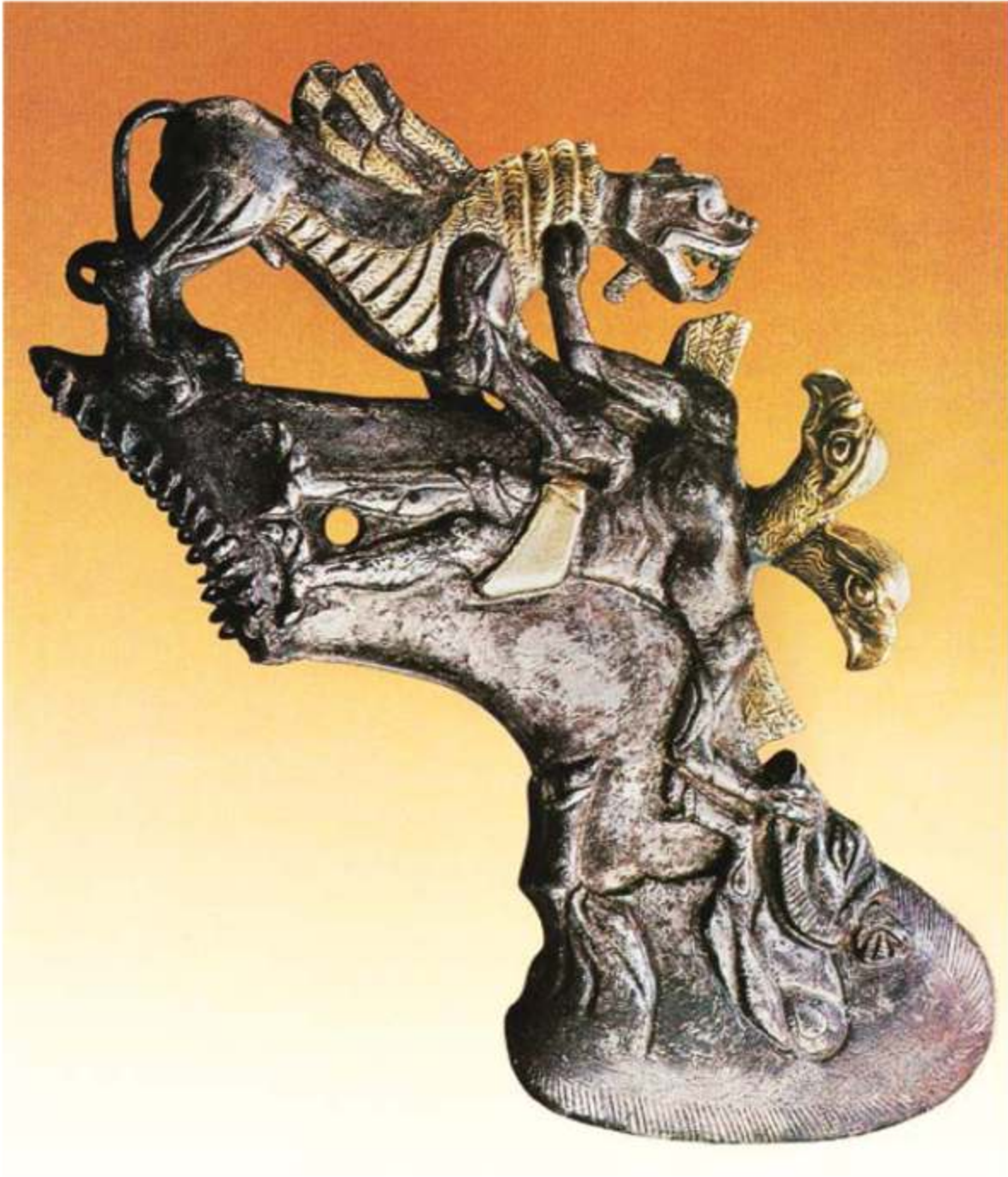


Fig.3 : Silver ceremonial axe, with parts covered with gold lamina, Bactria

Now, if a simple question is posed, viz. archaeologically, which culture occupied this very area during the Ṛgvedic times, i.e. in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, the inescapable answer shall have to be: 'The Harappan Civilization'.

Thus, it is very clear that the Vedas and the Harappan Civilization are but two faces of the same coin (Cf. the map, Fig.6).



Fig.4 : A feline, made of chlorite, covered with gold leaf and inlaid with semi-precious stones, Bactria

### **The Outcome**

The C-14 dates of Bhirrana, a site further up in the Sarasvatī valley, show that the ancestry of the Indus-Sarasvatī Civilization goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE. This fact clearly establishes that this Civilization was indigenous.

Hence the authors of this civilization, namely the Ṛgvedic people, too were the sons of the soil. They were neither 'Invaders' nor 'Immigrants'.

In this context, what is no less important is to realize that it has been possible to achieve this result only by putting side by side the evidence of literature and archaeology.

### **Now to the Historicity of the *Mahābhārata***

There are two extremely divergent views about the historicity of the *Mahābhārata*. To the faithful, everything mentioned in the text is true to the very letter. To some others, it is a mere figment of imagination. Let us look for the reasons for such confusion.



Fig.5 : A map showing that BMAC objects never entered India

First, if Kṛṣṇa was a historical figure, he is unlikely to have been later than Buddha who lived in 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. On the other hand, parts of the *Mahābhārata* text may be as late as the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, since these refer not only to the Greeks and Romans but also to the Huns. Thus, there is a yawning gap of over a thousand years between the actual event and the final form of the text! Secondly, the *Mahābhārata* consisted initially of only 8,800 verses, called the *Jayā*. Then it grew to 24,000 verses, known as the *Bhārata*. As available to us now, the *Mahābhārata* comprises over 100,000 verses. In such a mess, it is next to impossible to determine the original.

As an archaeologist, I thought that the best way to ascertain the truth would be to explore and excavate sites associated with the *Mahābhārata* story and find out what these have to say in the matter. In this context, a very important point to note is that all the *Mahābhārata* sites, luckily, continue to bear the same names even today as they did in antiquity, e.g. Hastināpura, Mathurā, Kurukṣetra, etc.

Way back in 1951-52, I conducted excavations at the key site of Hastināpura, the capital of the Kauravas, located on the right bank of the Ganga, in Meerut District, Uttar Pradesh (Lal 1954 and 1955).

A trench laid right across the mound (Fig.7) revealed successive habitation deposits, of which the one yielding the Painted Grey Ware (Figs.8 and 9) is of great significance in the present context. At this point, it also needs to be emphasized that it is the Painted Grey Ware which is the lowest common denominator at all the sites associated with the *Mahābhārata* story - a fact which binds them together (Fig.10). Further, on the basis of the C-14 method of dating the PGW culture is assignable to 1200-800 BCE.



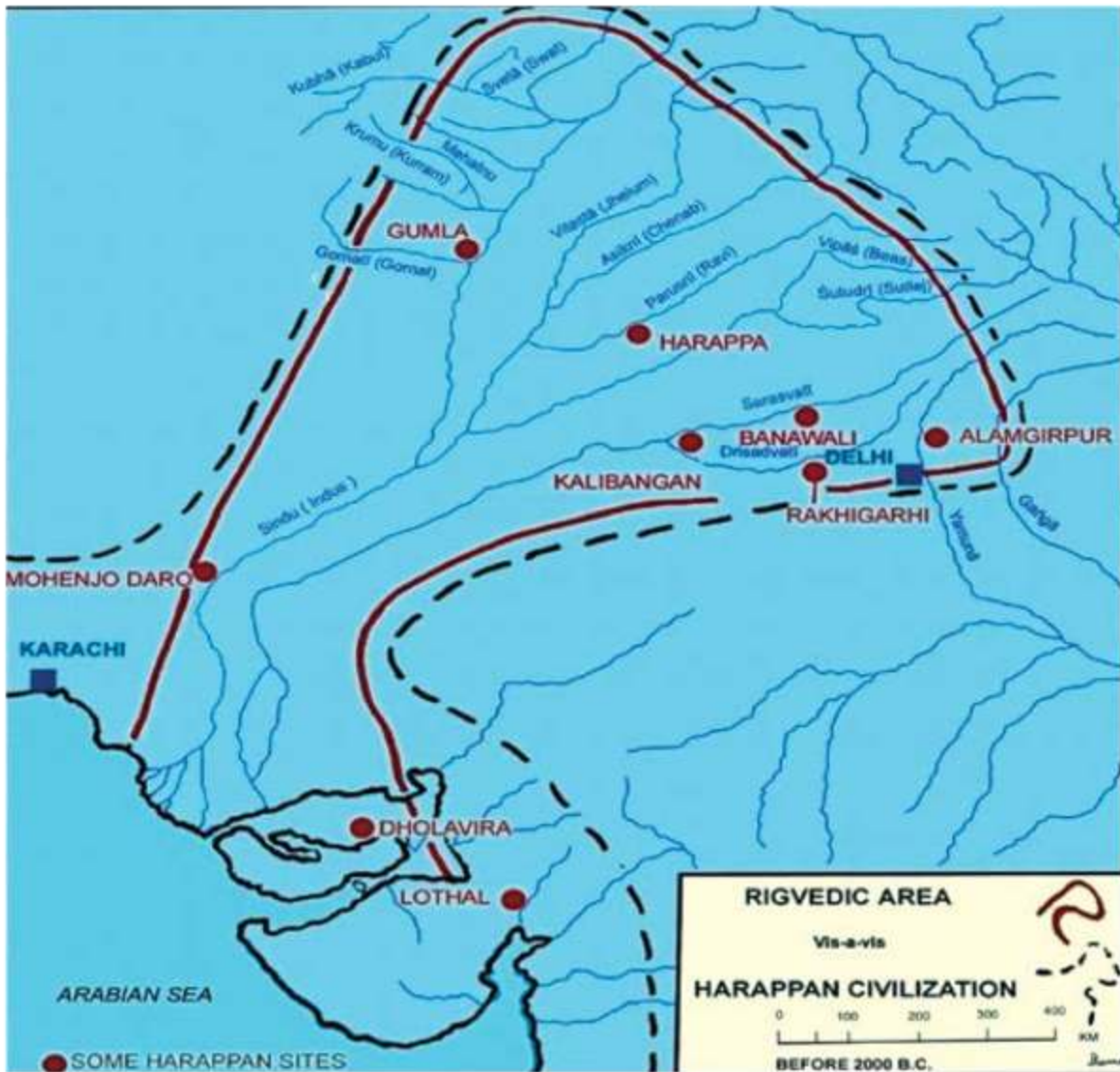


Fig.6 : Map showing a correlation between the R̥gvedic area and the spread of the Harappan Civilization in the 3rd millennium BCE



Fig.7 : A view of the ancient mound at Hastināpura



Fig.8 : A dish of Painted Grey Ware

The excavation at Hastināpura brought to light a feature which is of far-reaching significance. A major part of the Painted Grey Ware settlement over here was destroyed by a heavy flood in the adjacent Gaṅgā river. Erosion scars left by the flood, and deposits of sand and clay lying at the toe of the mound were duly identified (Figs.11 and 12). Further, in the bore-holes dug in the river bed some of the washed down material was encountered at a depth of nearly 15 meters.

Now comes the interplay between archaeology and literature. The devastation of Hastināpura by a flood in the Gaṅgā, as revealed by archaeology, finds a mention in the *Vāyu Purāṇa*. The relevant part of the text runs as follows:

*Gaṅgāyapahrte tasmin nagare Nāgasāhavaye  
Tyaktvā Nicakṣur nagaram Kauśāmbiyām sa nivatsyati*

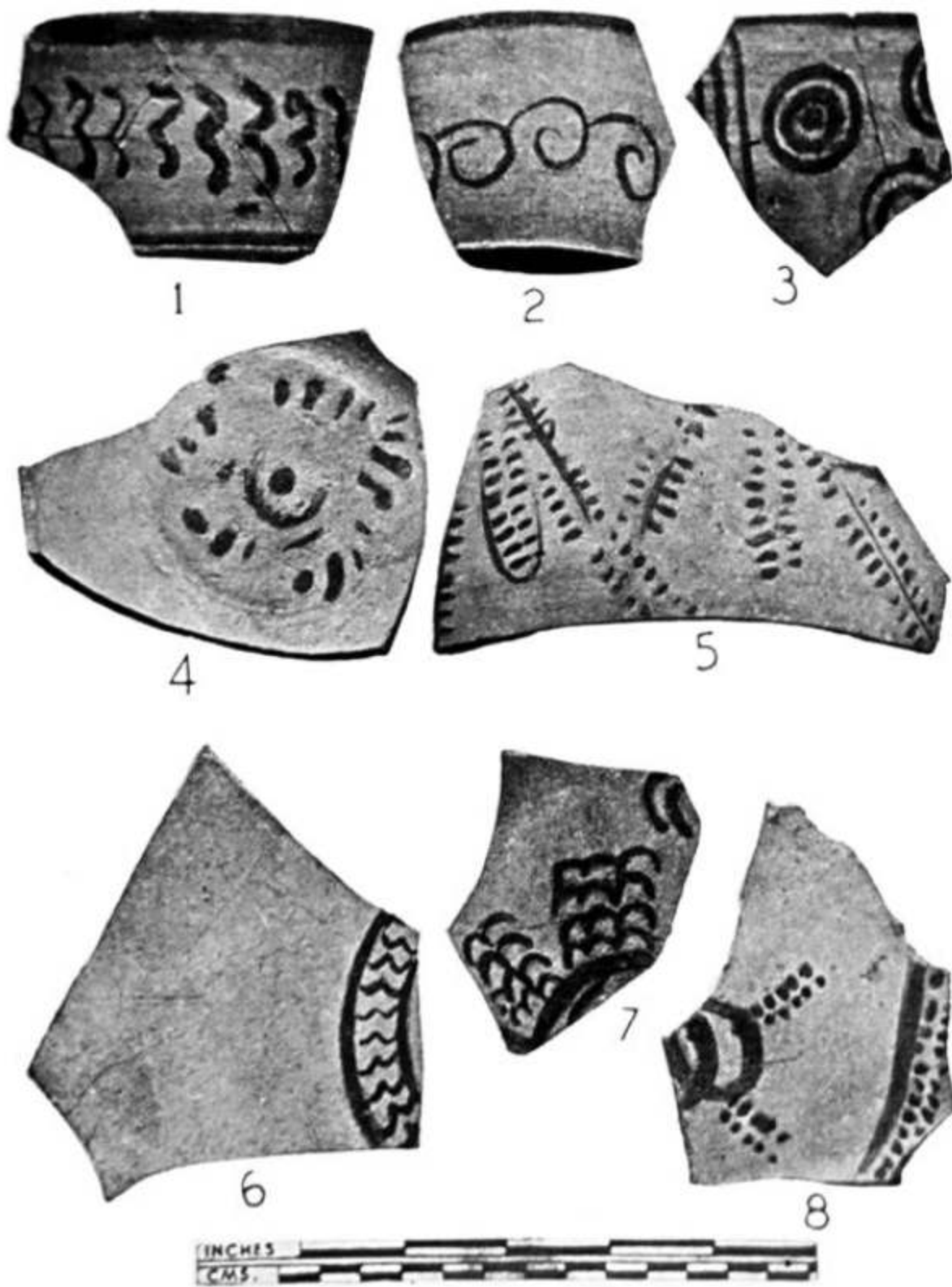


Fig.9 : A variety of painted designs on the PGW

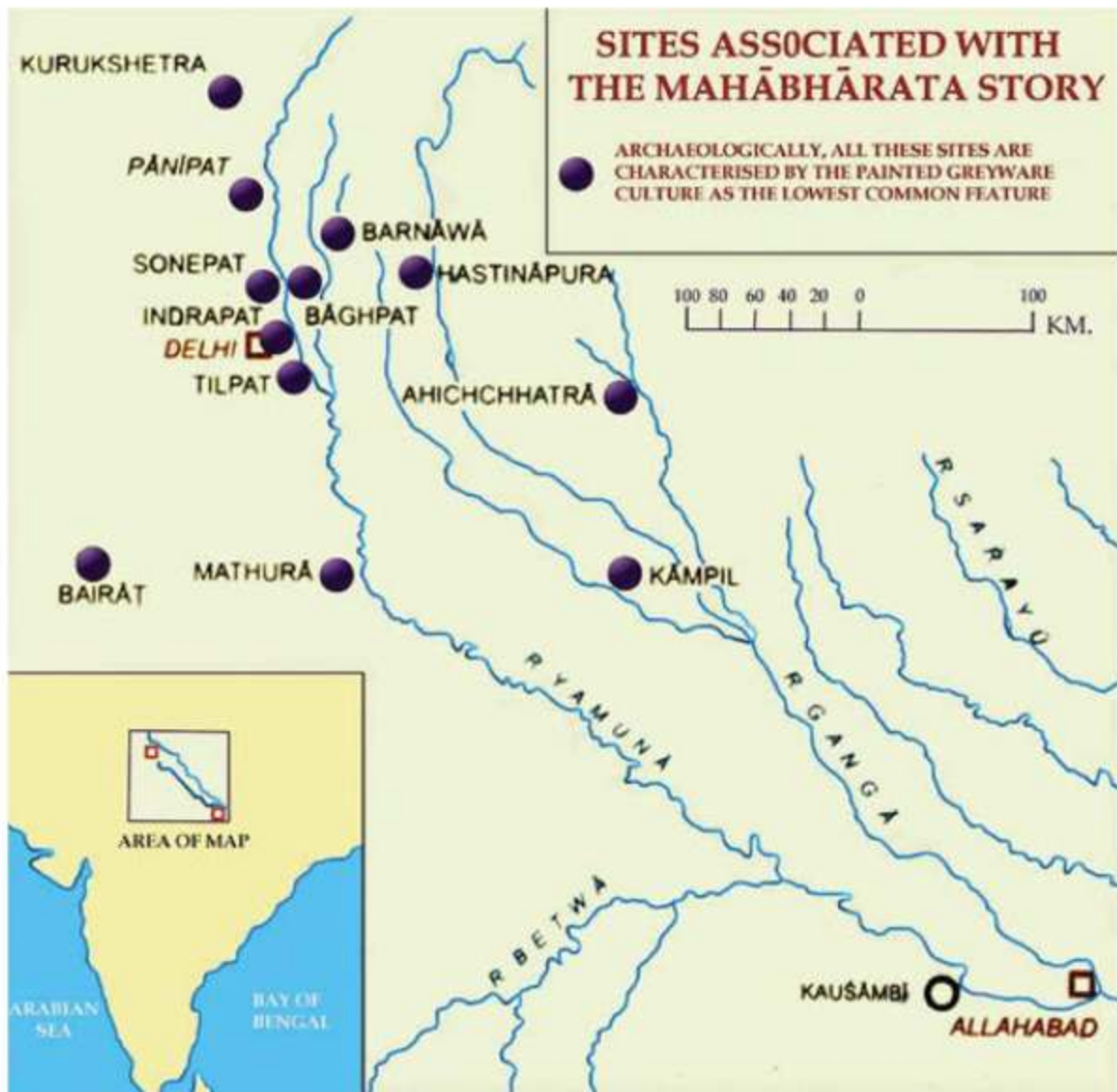


Fig.10 : Sites associated with the Mahābhārata story

i.e. 'When the city of Nāgasāhavya (Hastināpura) is carried away by the Ganga, Nicaṅṣu (the then ruler) will abandon it and dwell in Kauśāmbī.'

In turn, the assertion of the *Vāyu Purāṇa* that the capital was shifted from Hastināpura to Kauśāmbī has been confirmed by archaeology. In the lowest levels of Kauśāmbī has been found a late variety of the Painted Grey Ware (Fig.13), such as occurred at Hastināpura prior to the occurrence of the flood. All this evidence ties up a relationship between the end of the PGW settlement at Hastināpura and the beginning of Kauśāmbī.



Fig.11 : Hastinapura: A heavy flood in the Ganga washed away a considerable part of the settlement. The man points to the erosion scar left by the flood

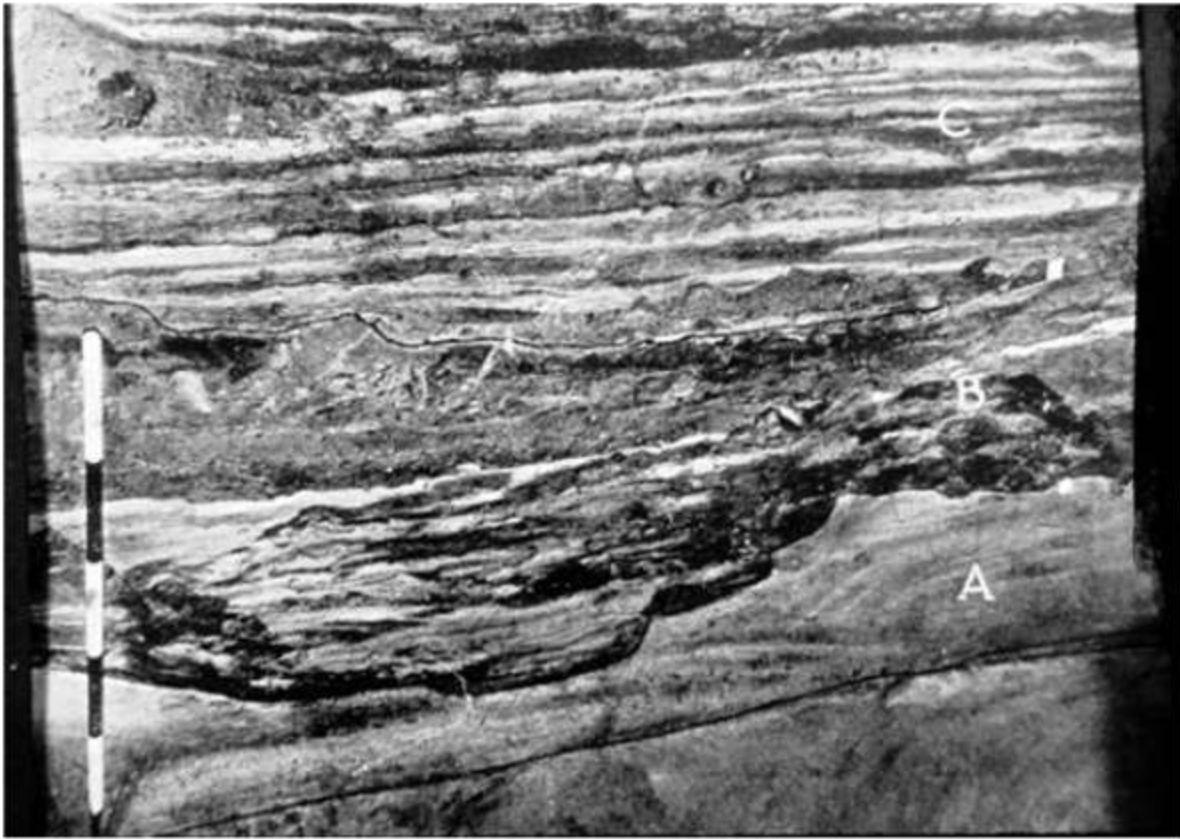


Fig.12 : A close-up of sand and clay deposits left by the flood



Fig.13 : Potsherds of (late) Painted Grey Ware found in the earliest levels of Kauṣāmbī

## An Appeal

Varanasi, fortunately, happens to be a seat of Sanskrit learning. It has produced many eminent scholars and now has a full-fledged Sanskrit University.

Likewise, it has a reputed Department of Archaeology at the Banaras Hindu University, which has nurtured many distinguished archaeologists.

May I very humbly appeal to these Sanskritists and archaeologists to get into an intellectual wedlock to resolve many other pending deadlocks of ancient Indian history?

## Endnotes

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10. R.E.M. Wheeler, 1947, Harappa 1946: The Defences and Cemetery R37, *Ancient India*, 3:58-130.