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Discovery of Structural Stupa at Bhon District Buldana, Maharashtra

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The recent excavation at Bhon situated on the right bank of river Purna in Buldana district of Maharashtra, has emerged as one of the largest early Historical settlements in the middle Purna basin. A structure, exclusively built of burnt bricks, with an intact brick platform all along circular in pattern at lower level, unearthed at the site has been identified as the stupa structure. The diameter of the stupa including *pradakshina patha* is 14 m. The bricks of various shapes used in construction of dome and *pradakshina patha* display an outstanding architectural skill of the builders. Chronologically the Stupa of Bhon can be assigned to c. 3rd century B.C. on the basis of C^{14} dates obtained on charcoal from the stupa and its striking resemblance with the stupa of Navdatoli and Kasravad in Madhya Pradesh in terms of the plan of the structure, brick size and pattern of incised symbols on the bricks.

Introduction

So far total 26 archaeological sites have been excavated in the Vidarbha region ranging in time from Chalcolithic to Vakataka period; of which 20 sites lies in Wainganga valley, 3 in Wardha valley, 2 in Painganga valley and one in Purna valley which belongs to Chalcolithic period. This underlines the fact that the western region known as Varhad comprising the Purna basin and Amaravati plateau remains neglected, which lies west of Wardha river forming a natural line of division of Vidarbha. The Purna basin lies in between Ajanta ranges in southwest and Gavilgarh hills of Satpura ranges in north. It is one of the deepest alluvial basins spread over an area of about 200 km^2. The river Purna emerges in Betul plateau and travels through Amaravati, Akola and Buldana districts of Maharashtra and merges in the Tapi river near Changdeo in Jalgaon Distirct. This archaeologically rich but less attentive region has emerged with one of the largest and key early historical settlement at Bhon with recently discovered structural stupa. The structural stupas are usually made up of bricks and stones either on the plains or on top of a hillock in successive stages, whereas rock-cut stupas are chiseled out from a monolithic stone and usually found in caves. The significant point in early Stupa

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architecture was that they were all built on low base and had low hemispherical dome in which the ratio of diameter to the height is relatively less (Pant 1976).

So far structural stupa sites in Maharashtra is concerned, only six stupa sites comprising Pauni, Mansar, Ter, Sopara, Adam and Bhon are located in different parts of Maharashtra (Fig. 1). The recent discovery of structural stupa at Bhon has emerged as earliest one in Maharashtra state.

Structure of Stupa

In ancient India the Stupa usually was composed of the base, the dome (*anda*) which rest on the base and *harmika* fitted with shaft. Later on *vedika* was added. The space between the *vedika* and the *stupa* was left for circumambulation. In the early Asokan time stupas were mainly consisted of the above and during Asokan time the course of reorientation and enlargement of the existing stupas with more architectural additions were made. The story of *stupa* architecture and its development is to be traced from the pre-Buddhist period. Inscriptional evidences suggest that Piprahwa is the earliest stupa of mud existed probably during circa 400 B.C. (Mitra 1971).

The stupas in general, had in the beginning only one circumambulatory path and was based on low plinth and was without terrace. There was no flight of steps (Pant 1976). Usually Buddhist sees the Stupa as a representation of the Budhha and his enlightenment. Stupas are normally erected over the remains of Budhha, and usually contain a relic chamber in which a vessel – the reliquary is found that holds the bone relic. There are stupas which do not hold any sacred objects inside. These are commemorative stupas which are erected at places which are associated with Budhha's life or that of his renowned disciples (Bapat, 1997). In spite of diversity in shapes of stupas, the basic structural pattern remains same.

Drum (*Medhi*): a base of the stupa proper. Sometime forms a platform for *pradkshina* patha.

Dome (*Anda*): This gives shape to stupa. It's a greater part or heap up of mound hemispherical in shape

Umbrella (*Chatravali*): The shaft of Umbrella is known as *yasti* which rests on a base called *hermika.*

In the beginning the stupa did not posses anything but the dome built on a very low plinth. The second stage of evolution comes with the addition of *hermikas* followed by the addition of *vedika* which also suggest that the stupa at this stage became an object of cult as the *hermika* signified the honorific position of the structure.

According to Longhurst (1936) 'the earliest stupas were low circular brick mounds resembling outline their humble prototype of the pre-Buddhist period. Earliest known Buddhist stupa has been found at Piprahwa belonging to circa 400 BC. It seems that at a later date the stupa was encased with bricks and then delineation of structural components of the stupa was clearly made. Originally it was only in the form of earthen mound.

Strucutral Stupas in Maharashtra and nearby

So far Maharashtra is concerned the structural stupa complex at Pauni is well known with two different architectural layouts (Deo and Joshi 1972). Mansar is another stupa site of brick constructed structure from the same region (Joshi and Sharma 2005). Adam has also yielded a mud stupa dated to 1st century AD (Nath 1989-90). Apart from these three stupa sites concentrated in Vidarbha region, two more sites have yielded structural stupas and they are Ter (IAR 1968-69) in Osmanabad district of Marathwada region in central Maharashtra and Sopara (Indraji 1882) in west coast, the Konkan region of Maharashtra. These stupa sites belong to late Satavahana period (1-2nd century AD).

All these structural stupas are constructed in bricks except Adam, which is made up of mud. With the addition of recently discovered Stupa from Bhon, the earliest date of Buddhist Stupa in Maharashtra may goes back to 3rd century BC as per ^{14}C dates from Bhon followed by Pauni, Mansar, Ter, Sopara, and Adam (Fig.1) respectively with chronological ascending order.

Pauni (20° 48' N; 79° 39'E) is located on the right bank of the river Wainganga in Bhandara district of Maharashtra and it is excavated by the Nagpur University and the Archaeological Survey of India in 1969-70. It is one of the largest stupa in diameter revealed 3 stages of construction of which 2 were of building and third one of repairs and renovations. The original stupa of earlier period was of 38 m in diameter and enlarged to 41 m mostly in post Mauryan period i.e Shunga- Satavahana. This unique monument simple in nature, unassociated with any sculpture, gateways, or *pradakshina patha*, spoiled in course of time with flood (Deo and Joshi 1972, Deo 1974).

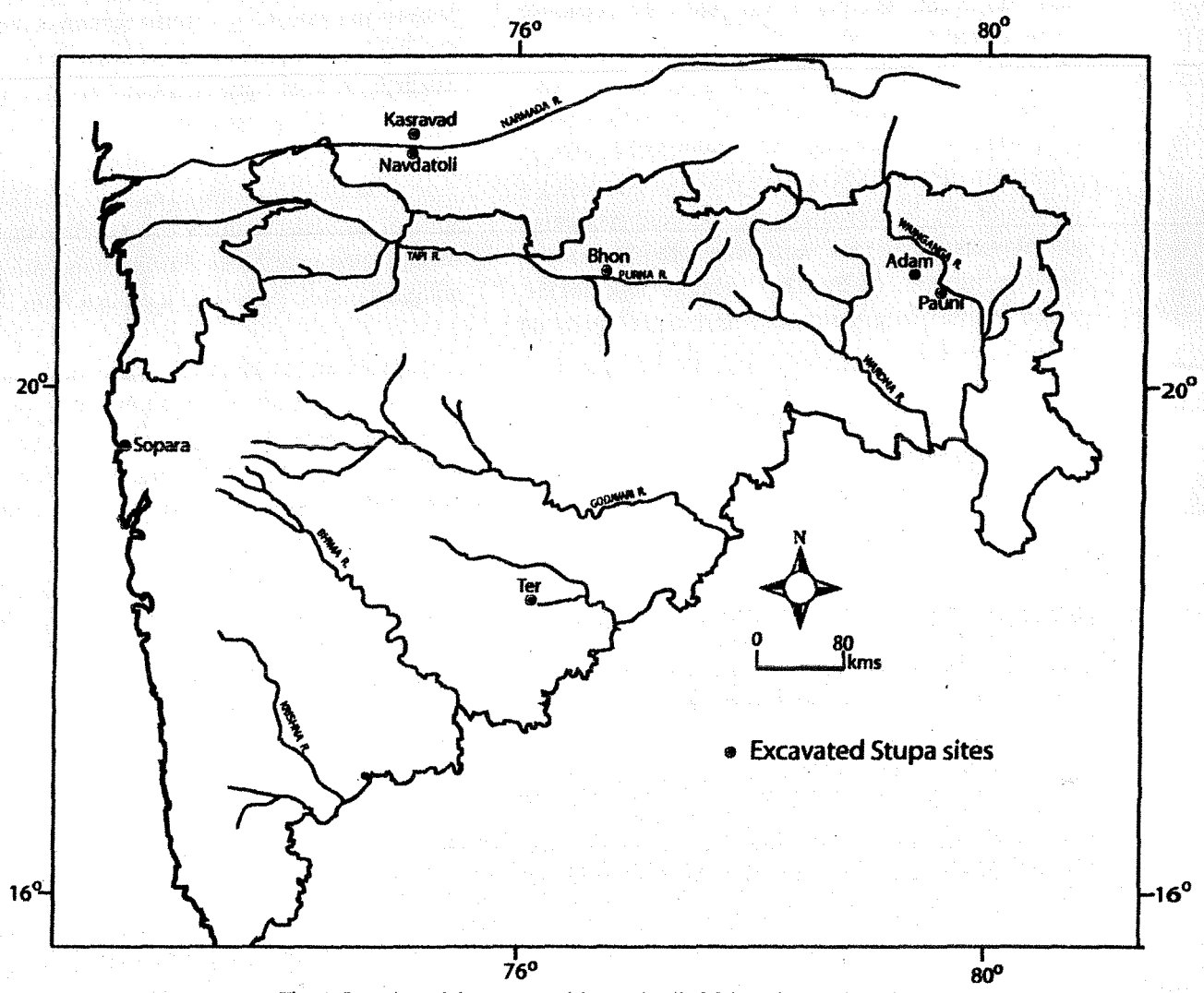

Fig. 1: Location of the excavated Stupa sites in Maharashtra and nearby.

Mansar Stupa (21° 24'N; 79° 17'E) was discovered at Hidimba tekadi of Mansar in Ramtek taluka of Nagpur district, Maharashtra at the depth of 3.9 m over the bedrock having 8 m diameter. The size of brick is 46 x 22 x 7 cm. The fallen debris in a specific manner is an evidence of the destruction of stupa due to earthquake. Immediately another stupa was built using box technique with 34 courses of brick. The base and knob of a lime stone relic casket were recovered from the area of stupa. On the basis of construction they were dated to the late Maurya and the early Sunga period. (Joshi and Sharma 2005).

Sopara (19° 25'N; 72° 47'E) is one of the earliest excavated structural stupa in Maharashtra (Indraji, 1882) with rich findings in stone chamber possessing 4 caskets of copper, silver, crystal and gold containing gold flowers, bits of potsherds (believed to be pieces of the begging bowl of Buddha), semiprecious stones, green glass, little gold leaf and silver coin of Gautamiputra Yajna Satakarni (c.174-203 AD). It is presumed that the coin belonged to the original construction while the bronzes and gold plaque with the figure of Buddha and possibly the copper casket were deposited in about the 8th - 9th century AD when the stupa probably underwent repairs or reconstruction (Mitra 1971).

Ter (ancient Tagar) (18° 19'N; 76° 12' E):This is located in Osmanabad district and excavated by the Director of Archives and Museums, Maharashtra State in 1967– 68 and found the base of large brick stupa, 26 m in diameter and resembling a *chakra* on plan with *pradakshina patha.* The stupa can be dated to the first half of the second century AD on the basis of an inscription recording the names of masons and a coin of Pulumavi. So far the recovery of antiquities are concerned Ter seems to be one of the richest site yielding variety of antiquities ranging from terracotta and kaoline figurines, Roman clay bullae, beads of various shapes in carnelian, agate, lapiz lazuli and shell (IAR 1968-69).

Adam (21°00' N; 79°28' E) is located in Kuhi taluka of Nagpur district and marked with remains of a circular mud Stupa. The stupa consisted of *medhi* (radius 17.3 m) and *anda* (radius 10.3 m) with basal remains of *hermika* (3.5 m). Ringstone for supporting yasti of a chhatravali was found and did not yield the expected relic casket. After the basal clay, the earth of habitational deposit, *murum*, rubble, stone chips, sand etc. were heaped up without any specific pattern of dumping. On the basis of inscribed and uninscribed cast coins assigned to later Satavahana rulers, it is dated to 1st century AD (Nath 1989-90).

Navdatoli /Maheshwar (22° 11' N; 75° 36' E) In spite of its out of Maharashtra location, this has been incorporated here because of its stupa site which has got great resemblance with the stupa from Bhon.

The site of Navdatoli is situated on the left bank of river Narmada in Madhya Pradesh. The structural brick stupa was located on a circular mud platform measuring 26 m outer rim. The circumambulatory passage (*pradkshina patha*) is 1.7 m below the height of the mound. A number of bricks (50 x 28 x 8 cm) of the drum portion have single Brahmi letters of the Asokan type suggesting age of 3rd century BC. One NBP sherd was found below the mud platform which helped to date the stupa to 3rd century BC together with the brick sizes and incised Brahmi letters on brick. The Stupa at Kasravad located about 6 km. SE of Navdatoli also belongs to the same period (Sankalia *et al.* 1958).

Bhon

The site of Bhon (20° 55'N; 76° 39'E) is situated 30 km north of Shegaon on the right bank of the river Purna in Sangrampur taluka of Buldana district, Maharashtra (Fig.1). The modern Bhon village is situated in the meandering loop on the right bank of the

river Purna. A major part of the ancient habitation deposit is occupied by present village. The habitation deposit also appears extended to the west and south of the village. Several ring and brick wells as well as remnants of brick structure are observed in the village area. The trenches were laid in the area to the west of the village, presently under cultivation (Fig. 2). The ground relief and depression has formed the natural boundaries for habitational mounds dividing them into mound I to VII. The structural remain of stupa is found at mound VI which is located about half a km further west of the mound I near a acute meandering arm, is a part of modern flood plain now under cultivation.

Last three-four seasons' excavation have brought to light an urban trading centre of pre-Satavahana period and striking discovery of structural Stupa remains with other relevant antiquities (Deotare 2006, Deotare 2007). More than 50 coins were found at the site in the course of excavations and explorations of which except three, all are uninscribed. The one of the inscribed coin has the legend SADAVAHANA collected from the upper horizon of Gothan is ascribable to early Satavahana type on the basis of its paleography. The finding of degenerated form of NBP (Northern Black Polished Ware) confirms that the site belongs to the period prior to the beginning of Christian era. The RPW (Red Polished Ware) has also been recovered at the site which appears to co-exist with NBP. The striking similarity is observed in decorated panels from Bharhut displaying ornaments of Shunga period (Cunningham, 1879) and the decorated terracotta beads, spacers and *tri-ratna* pendants recovered from the site of Bhon (Pl. 1). The size of rectangular bricks is also very well comparable with that of reported from Navdatoli and Kasravad in Madhya Pradesh, implies that the site has witnessed flourishing period from c. 3rd century B.C. to c. 1st century B.C.

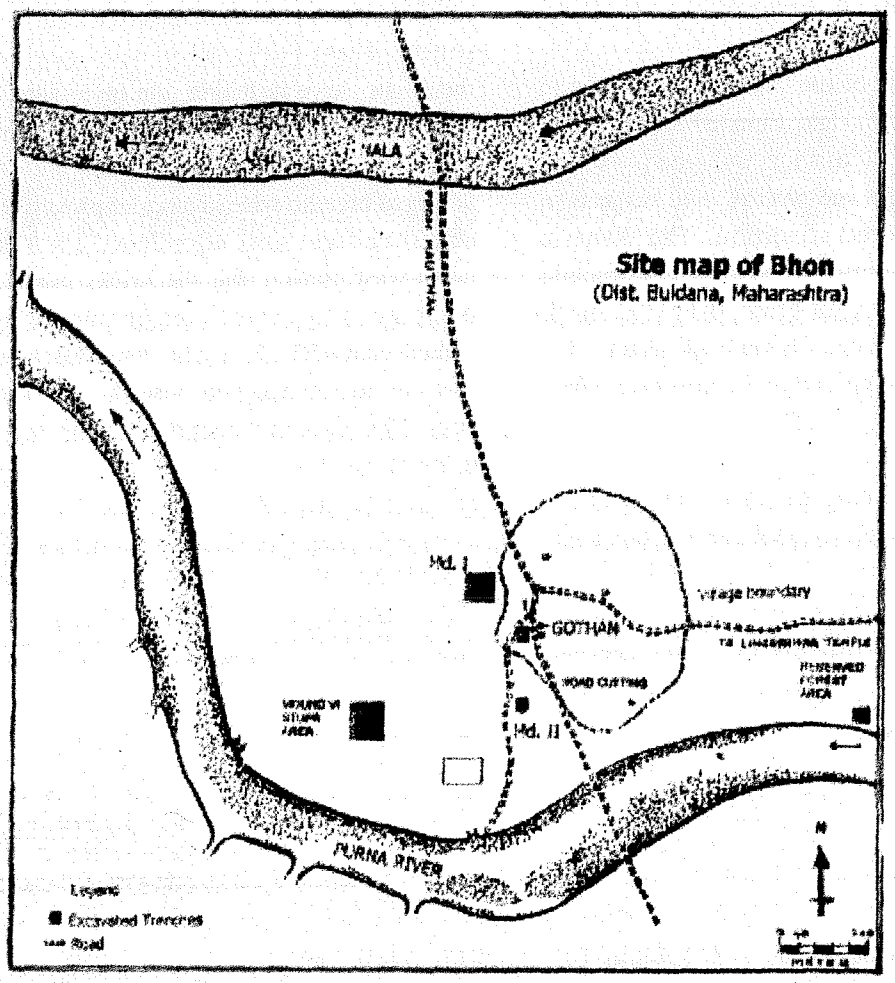

Fig. 2: Site map of Bhon showing excavated area.

The Stupa at Bhon

Initially in a trial trench of 2 m x 2 m, structural remains of stupa were partly exposed in the form of well fired bricks arranged in criss-cross/semi-circular pattern in excavation

season of 2002-03. Due to semi-circular brick pattern it was initially thought that it could be either a part of fortification wall or a watch tower (Pl. 2). Subsequently in 2004-05 the trenches were expanded to trace out the extent of the structural remains and complete circular feature of stupa was brought to light. In later stage four trenches measuring 2 m x 2 m were laid down in the four directions of the structure. A well prepared brick platform was encountered in all four trenches arranged in circumambulatory form (Pl. 3). In 2005-06 the above trenches were expanded and the entire platform in the north-west and south-east quadrant of the stupa was exposed giving an idea of the complete structure comprising dome, drum and *pradakshina patha* (Pl. 4).

The overall diameter of the stupa remains is 14 m including *pradkshina patha* and drum (a base of dome). Since the area is under cultivation, only the portion of the drum of 1.8 m height and *pradakshina patha* is in relatively well preserved condition. The dome is completely missing. The bricks used in the construction were made locally as it is clear from the brick manufacturing locality found on the bank of the river near Lingeshwar temple around half a kilometer away to the east of the site.

In the course of excavation the fallen debris of bricks was encountered after removing the silt of around half a meter thickness from the peripheral portion of the dome. The debris contained the broken and complete bricks. Some of them evidently made for specific purpose as these are wedge shaped and one of the broad side of it has slanting angle ranging from 23° - 84°, if arranged one above another will form the shape of a dome. This fallen debris of bricks appears to be resting on the deposit formed of compact silt of average half meter thickness containing brick bats and some percentage of lime. Although it is not in uniform thickness all around, on the basis of its compactness and heterogenous nature seems to be deposited intentionally for some purpose. The small grade gravel of about 30 cm thickness is observed resting on the *pradakshina patha* and underlying the above described compact silt deposit. The gravel is devoid of cross bedding feature and containing unabraded cultural material like pieces of bricks, tiles and pottery indicating lack of transport of the material due to river activity. Two well preserved coins were also recovered from the gravel.

Pradakshina patha

The *pradakshina patha* is around 1.75 m in breadth formed of five rows of bricks of which the bricks in first innermost row are arranged lengthwise in circular pattern. These bricks are of very specific sizes, with the slight curve in length, the inner side measures 49 cm, the external 51 cm and breadth 26 cm and thickness 8 cm. The bricks in next two rows are wedge shaped arranged breadth wise in circular pattern. The bricks of almost uniform sizes 40 x 26 x 22 x 8 cm appear in north-west portion, but the bricks used in south-east portion are vary in sizes, and, the most commonly used one measures 52 x 28 x 24 x 8 cm. The bricks of fourth row are arranged length wise but are not of uniform sizes. The particular attention also appears to be paid in the preparation of bricks of the last row. These differ in size and shape from the bricks encountered at the site. Measuring 54 x 30 x 26 x 8 cm, these are fashioned with slight outcurve and slanting edge towards external end of the bricks (Pl. 5). Each brick of this row is fashioned with incised symbol made with finger tip when the bricks were wet. The symbol in both portion, north-west and south-east part of *Pradakshina patha,* are different and intervened with *brahmi* _ depicted on some of these bricks. The common symbol observed in south-east portion is triangle resting on half circle with three projecting lines inside (Pl. 6) and the symbol identical to present devnagari 'ल' appears in north-west part. Palaeographically, these symbols have not been reported so far from any Early Historical site of the region. Similarly symbolic representation of a single

brahmi letters of Asokan type on the bricks has been reported from the stupa sites of Navadatoli and Kasrwad in Madhya Pradesh (Sankalia et al. 1955).

Drum (*medhi*)

Inside the innermost row of *pradakshina patha*, another row of bricks of same size and arrangement has been observed with two more courses, the lower course is made up of mud mortar and upper one is of burnt brick. This row has been raised by 16 cm in height which is prominently preserved in south west quadrant and this portion has been identified as a basal part of a drum (*medhi*).

The base of the dome measures 10 m in diameter. The bricks and mortar prepared of lime, brick bats and small grade gravel has been used as construction material and black clayey material as binding medium. The every two courses of burnt bricks are intervened with a layer of mud mortar of the same thickness of a burnt brick.

Dome (*anda*)

Specific brick types having a slanted edge at one elongated side have been recovered in significant numbers at 60 cm depth in the form of scattered brick pieces as if fallen from top or dome or dumped all along the periphery of the stupa. These angled bricks ranging from 23° to 84° seem to be used for the construction of dome and the height of the dome may likely to be around 5 m from the drum platform. The overall morphological feature of the stupa can be reconstructed on the basis of recovery of angled bricks, 2 m height of drum platform, and 10 m diameter of the stupa (excluding 4 m *pradkshina patha*). The total height of the stupa from the base would have been around 7 m consisting of, from bottom upwards, a *pradkashina patha* at the base followed by the drum or *medhi, anda* and *yasti*. There is a possibility of hemispherical dome of brickwork with a terraced drum at the base. So far we could not get evidence for *chhatravali* but it may most probably made up of wooden panel as found at most of the stupa sites in India. The post-holes at specific distances on the outermost row of *pradkshina patha* point toward a wooden railing around the Stupa.

A small trench of 1 x 1 m was taken at the centre of the stupa with a view to ascertain casket if any. Twelve courses of bricks arranged lengthwise and breadth wise in alternate pattern were found having 10 cm diameter hole exactly at the centre most probably seems to be for *yashti* (Pl. 7). Besides, a few pot sherds, a bone point and lot of charcoal have been recovered at the bottommost level without any casket. The charcoal recovered at the bottom was dated to 2180±90 years BP by the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany, Lucknow.

The pit (approximately 0.5 x 0.5 m) which was filled with brick pieces further down to the virgin soil is observed to the immediate south of the exposed above central pit of intact structure for *yashti*. The destruction approximately in the middle of the stupa, filled with broken brick pieces negates the possibility of destruction by natural process and can be associated with human activity. It is, in fact, difficult to arrive at any conclusion for such destruction and the period of it. However, since the pit is approximately in the middle of the stupa, one may be tempted to associate it with an attempt of removing the relic casket, if any, from the stupa structure.

Special features of the stupa at Bhon

Specific brick shapes are being used in several parts of the stupa structure displayed outstanding architectural skill of the builders. It seems as if the entire plan of the structure was ready and the bricks used in the construction of stupa were manufactured as per requirement.

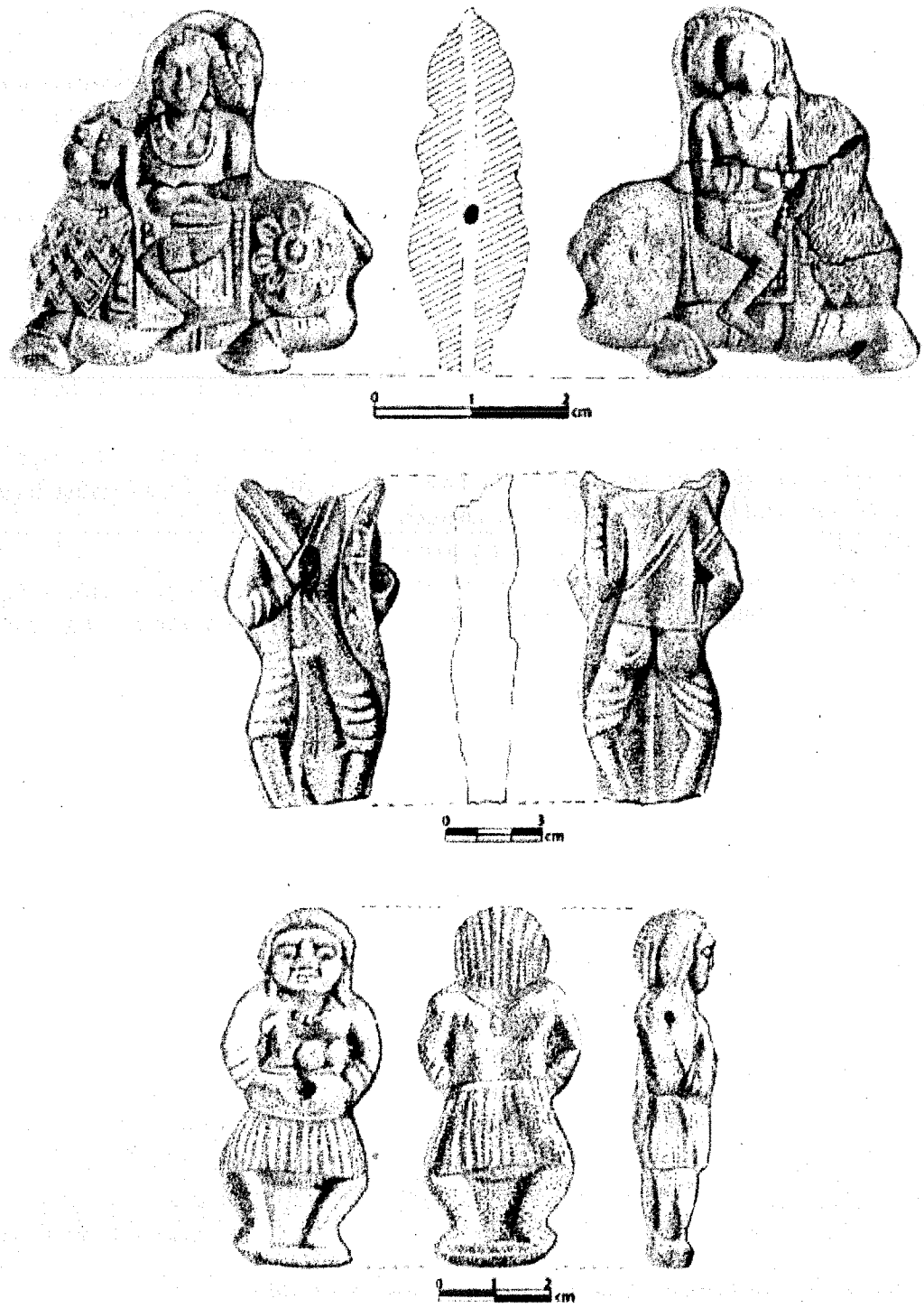

Fig. 3: Terracotta human figurines from Bhon.

Chronologically the structural stupa at Bhon is of 3rd century BC likely to be the earliest one in Maharashtra and structurally and technically very well comparable with the stupas from Kasravad and Navadatoli in Madhya Pradesh in respect of the construction technique, brick size, unidentified symbols on the bricks of stupas etc. So far structural stupas from Maharashtra is concerned, they are within the range of 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD dated exclusively on the basis of recovery of contemporary material remains like NBPW, coins, inscriptions etc. while stupa at Bhon has been dated on the basis of ^{14}C dates on charcoal as well as the recovery of un-inscribed copper coins and NBPW.

Several stone objects from Bhon has been recovered during the course of excavations, most notable are two dumbel shaped muller of basalt with typical Mauryan polish and one legged quern engraved with auspicious symbols like *swastika, nandipada* (taurine) and a pair of *mina* (fish) (Pl. 8). Similar type of legged quern having engraved symbols have also been recovered at Nasik dated 2nd century BC (Sankalia and Deo 1955) and Adam belonging to Mauryan period (Nath 1989-90). Thus the above stone objects from Bhon can undoubtedly be placed in the pre Satavahana period.

So far as the recovery of total number of terracotta objects are concerned Bhon seems to be a major manufacturing center with prominent recovery of varied TC objects. These terracotta objects comprises of human figurine of warriors, composite figure, beads of various shape and sizes and most prominent are variety of pendants and amulets, made up of fine clay and well fired. The composite figure consists of a body of a lion in seating position having upper portion of female body and male rider. There are three human figurines of warriors in broken condition but very fine features are visible indicating high quality craftsmanship. Similarly a standing human figure holding animal (probably deer) in his hand with fine details of his face as well as cloth pointing towards *yaksha* (Fig.3).

Another terracotta objects found at Bhon in sizable quantity are *Tri-ratna* (taurine) or three jewels which are highly worshipped by Buddhist as it is believed to represents the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. They are in different sizes, plain as well as decorative, both forms are quite common (Pl. 9). The nearby area was also exposed in order to locate any feature related to stupa. A brick wall was found with one unusually long brick of 70 cm length and white burning patches indicating lime-manufacturing area, probably used for plastering purpose.

The recovery of a rich series of antiquities, huge extent, different activity areas such as tile manufacturing, brick manufacturing, pottery and terracotta bead manufacturing etc and a large size structural remains such as stupa indicate that this site is one of the largest pre-Satavahana sites in Maharashtra as well as important regional center, trading town situated in the Purna basin on the ancient trade route of *Dakshinapatha.*

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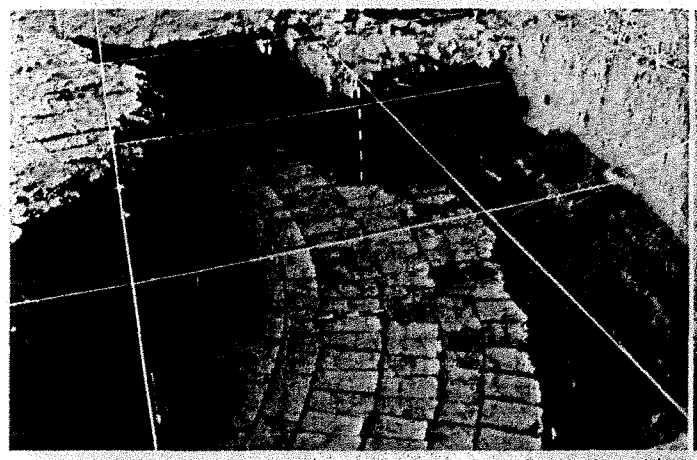
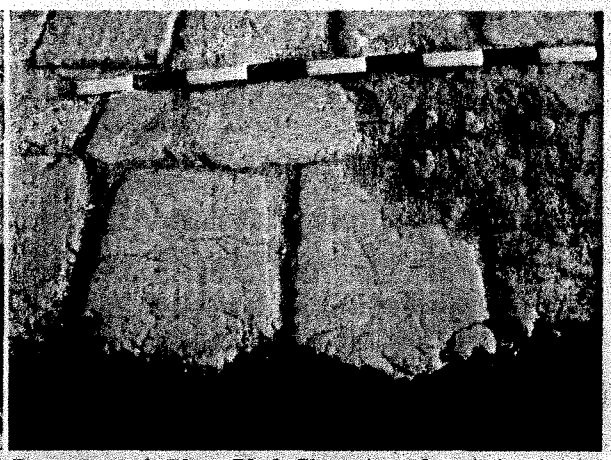


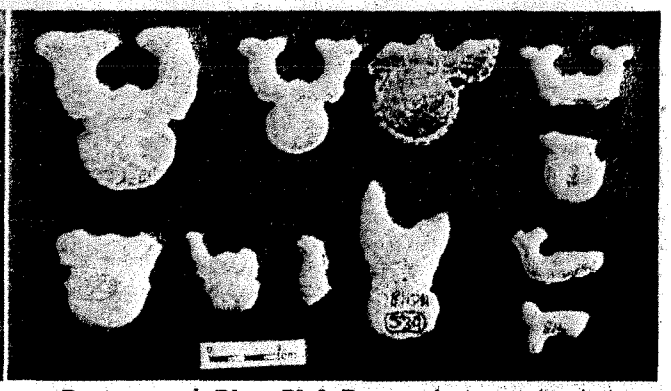
Deotare, *et al.,* **Bhon, Pl. 5:** Exposed *pradkshina patha* in NW quadrant of the stupa



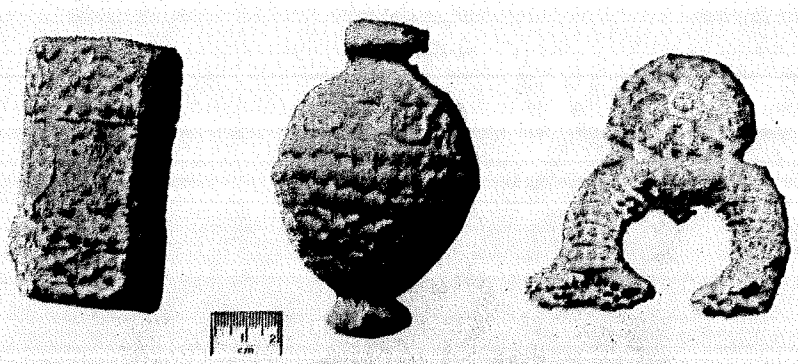
Deotare, *et al.,* **Bhon, Pl. 6:** Close view of symbol on brick

Deotare, *et al.,* **Bhon, Pl. 7:** Close view of aligned brick structure in central portion of the stupa with a hole for *yashti*

Deotare, *et al.,* **Bhon, Pl. 8:** Legged quern with engraved auspicious symbols

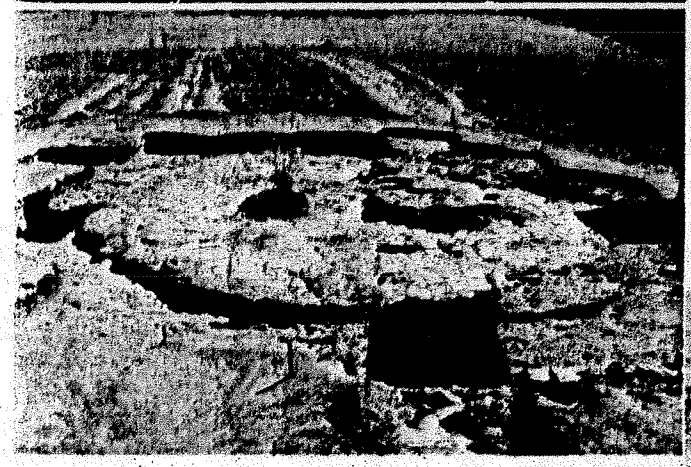


Deotare, *et al.,* **Bhon, Pl. 9:** Decorated *tri-ratna* (taurine)

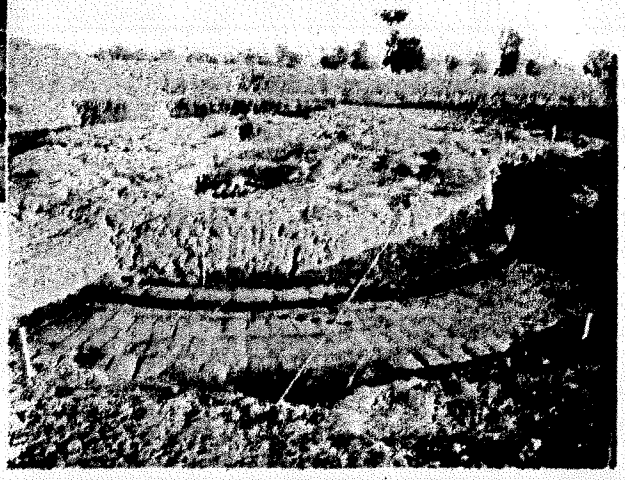


Deotare, *et al.,* Bhon, Pl. 1: Decorated terracotta bead, pendants, similar to Bharhut

Deotare, *et al.,* Bhon, Pl. 2: A part of exposed stupa (2003), earlier identified as a part of fortification wall



Deotare, *et al.,* Bhon, Pl. 3: Outline of the stupa exposed during 2005



Deotare, *et al.,* Bhon, Pl. 4: Completely exposed stupa