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New Brahmi Inscriptions from Maukalan, Panchmukhi, Ahraura, and Lekhahia Pahar in Chandauli, Sonbhadra and Mirzapur Districts, Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: Visual symbolic material has been reported from the Eastern Vindhya for a long time (Cockburn 1883, Ghosh 1932, Kenoyer et al. 2015). Much of this is rock art (Pratap and Kumar 2009, Pratap 2016, 2024). This article discusses finds of unreported early Brahmi and early Nagari inscriptions of the early medieval period. These were discovered during rock art-related fieldwork from July 2021 onwards. This extends our earlier findings of unreported inscriptions in Southern Uttar Pradesh (Pratap and Singh, 2020). In this paper, we discuss a boulder inscription in Maukalan Village, in South Chandauli, and a stele inscription stored in the Maukalan Village Museum, established by the Directorate of Archaeology, Uttar Pradesh. We also discuss this little-known village as an early centre for sculpting, mentioning a Vaikuntha Vishnu statue and an early medieval temple. It is likely this ancient Gond village of Maukalan, existed as a centre for the manufacture of idols, the writing of inscriptions, and other types of stone craft, under the patronage of the nearby fort called Vijaigarh. We also discuss some graffiti at Ahraura (Mirzapur) next to Ashoka's Minor Rock Edict-I (the Ahraura Version), and two painted inscriptions inside caves at Panchmukhi, in Sonbhadra District, and at Lekhahia Pahar, in Mirzapur. Decipherments and analyses are in a cultural-historical framework. The inscriptions are donative issued by lay people, or itinerant pilgrims and ascetics, while on religious pilgrimage. The spread of Buddhist culture was significant in our study area, due to its proximity to Rajagriha, Sarnath and Kaushambi, Kashi and Mathura.

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Introduction

Inscriptions from the early historical to the early medieval period are well-known in Mirzapur and Sonbhadra districts (Ghosh 1932, Krishnamurthy and Tiwary 2016, Pratap and Singh 2020, Singh and Singh 2008, Tewari and Singh 2002). A probable explanation for their occurrence might be that the region is affluent in pink, whitish and red sandstones, but also close to the Ganga plains where the second urbanisation took place. Historians have also shown that the Brahmi script was formally taught and learnt in Buddhist centres and this is archaeologically attested (Parshad and Kumar, 2014). The Eastern Vindhyan region also straddles the chief route from Rajagriha and Bodh Gaya to Kashi, Sarnath, Prayaag and Mathura. The resource-rich Vindhyan hinterlands played a significant role in Ganga Valley's human cultural development from prehistory to history. While the more prominent inscriptions are in the plains in and around Mirzapur, Varanasi, and Sarnath, our explorations reveal that many occur in rural, forested, and hilly areas of the Vindhya and Kaimur ranges falling in these districts. They are usually in villages in the proximity of historical forts and fortresses but some occur deeper in the forests in the same rock shelters occupied in prehistory. Occasionally, inscriptions are found in mining sites for inscription blanks and were written to test the suitability of the stone (Pratap and Singh 2020).

Painted pilgrim inscriptions were reported earlier too (Ghosh 1932, Tewari and Singh, 2002, Krishnamurthy and Tiwary, 2016) and may be unique to these districts. Early historic to medieval religious pilgrimage was usual in the Vindhyas and caves used in prehistory were also used by pilgrims regularly. The Vijaigarh hill contains a total of 34 inscriptions, all painted on the sides or roofs, in rock art style, near and around the western entrance of the Fort (Ghosh 1931, 19). Ghosh mentions his decipherment of a whole cluster on the hill at Vijaigarh. Two of them read as "*Indradattah Guhidattah*" and their age as from the 5th to the 8th centuries CE. Others near it, Ghosh reads as "*girihaumachandra*", and "*savatavid*" both dateable to the 8th century CE. In another group, three inscriptions were read by him as: "*Raṇavarma-chandra*" "*girihaumachandra*" and "*savatha*" all dated to the 5th century CE. This trove at the Vijaigarh Hill in Southern Chandauli was located by Ghosh (1931, 19). An engraved donative inscription in Proto-Nagari, dateable to the 10th century CE, also exists near the Kachahri entrance of the Vijaigarh fort and was previously published by us (Pratap and Singh, 2020). It is possible the Maukalan Village temples and shrines were important in themselves, and so also those within the fort, mentioned in this article. Since Kashi, Sarnath, Kaushambi, Prayaag, and Mathura can be reached from here only through the Robertsganj-Ahraura road, shrines in Chandauli provided an important resting place en route to the larger pilgrimage centres.

In analogy with South India, for carved inscriptions, such as at Panchmukhi and Devdari Waterfalls (Pratap and Singh 2020) it also appears inscription writers, composers and carvers may have usually been a part of early temple establishments (Ramaswamy, 1991, 2004). However, for the Vindhyan context and its great array of symbolic material culture like rock art, terracotta, stele and sculptures we prefer the notion advanced by Leroi-Gourhan that the craftsmen conversant in making images, idols, and inscriptions were in all probability, the same, and belonged to the same *milieu technique* (Audouze, 2002, 15).

1. Painted Inscription at Panchmukhi Hill, Churk, Sonbhadra

Whereas the Panchmukhi Hill, in Churk Tehsil, near Robertsganj, has been known for its rock art, since the mid-19th century (Cockburn, 1883), its inscriptions are less well-known. Three lines of a donative carved inscription, in the Shankha script, were located previously and published (Pratap and Singh, 2020). The modern Panchmukhi temple was built next to an early medieval Shiva temple of



Figure 1: Google Earth View of the sandstone ridge where a painted inscription exists in a rock shelter

which sculptural pieces are still scattered at the site. This new inscription, reading as “*Tachchaka*”, which is probably the name of the inscriber, written in painted characters of the Shankha script, occurs well-inside the painted rock shelter II (PCM-II our classification).

It may be noted an image of this early medieval temple was also drawn within it (Fig. 2a-d). Old sculptures from this temple are curated at the site. Several other rock shelters may be noted in the foreground to the right. There are many more painted ones with extensive design and pattern imagery as well as rhinoceros which existed but became extinct during the terminal Pleistocene period. Drawings of a wide variety of themes ranging from children’s doodles, male and female figures, designs and patterns, and wild and domesticated animals including deer, and wild cattle, suggest this hill was inhabited since later prehistory. The building of temples during early history points to the later colonization by historical period populations from the Ganges Valley expanding due to overpopulation there.



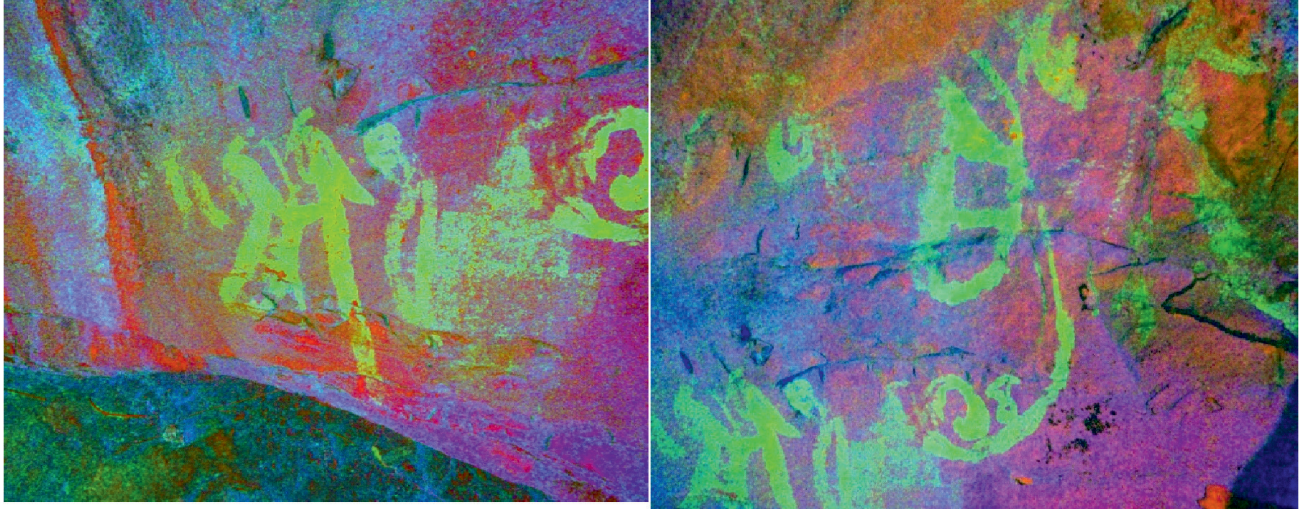


Figure 2a, b, c and d The painted inscription inside rock shelter II of Panchmukhi Temple promontory in Churk, Sonbhadra. Translation by T.S. Ravishankar. Photo and DStretch: Ajay Pratap

This inscription is written in red ochreous paint, the script is Brahmi and its characters are a combination of Siddhamatrika and Shell characters, roughly assignable to 7th CE.

2. Inscriptions, Statues, and Memorial Stones at Maukalan, South Chandauli

Maukalan is a Gond ancestral village, as the epithet *kalan* suggests, located in the southern Chandauli district, in the foothills of the Vijaigarh Fort, on the Vindhyan plateau, with forests, hills, and minor streams in its precincts (Fig. 3). There is a heavy density of sculptural material here, connected with the early medieval fort. Such material also suggests that the settlement here is of great antiquity since Mauryan Brahmi inscriptions have been found at Ahraura and the ancient Buddhist and trade route from Rajagriha to Varanasi through Ahraura (Chakrabarti 1988, Chakrabarti, Tewari and Singh, 2003). Ashoka's first minor rock edict MRE-I, is located on the Bhandari Devi Hill at Ahraura, with one new unreported graffiti inscription near it, which is here reported. Vijaigarh Fort, although a few kilometres from Robertsganj, is therefore along this route. At Maukalan, in addition, full statues of Vishnu, Buddha, and Mahavira, as well as those of Shiva and Durga, are located in and around an early medieval temple.



Figure 3: Google Earth Image showing Vijaigarh Fort and Mau Kalan Village locality, where boulder inscriptions, inscribed hero-stones, and inscriptions on sculptures are stored in the Village Museum

The village museum, at Maukalan, is stocked with stele, sculptures, and carved elements belonging to various folk, Buddhist, Jaina, and Hindu deities. There are also carved pieces of religious architecture that were previously installed within the Vijaigarh Fort and were brought to the museum. There is also a historical period Durga temple in active use. There are a few *mukhalingas* as well as numerous plain Shivalingas all around.

2a. Vaikuntha Vishnu's Statue at Maukalan Village Road Junction

The statue of Vishnu, (sixth/seventh century) with his hand placed on the heads of his Āyudhapuruṣas (possibly Cakrapuruṣa and Gadādevī, though badly defaced) is claimed by locals to be that of King Ashoka (Figs 4a and b). It was discovered locally near the Vijaigarh Fort and was installed in a constructed shed at the base of a hill, on which some sculptures of the Buddha, occur inside a small shrine. The hilly route to the shrine is located next to the shed with Vishnu's statue, in the Maukalan Village. The style of the Vishnu image, and that of the temple, suggest themselves to be of the Gupta period. It appears that in ancient times Gond craftsmen of this village engraved inscriptions and sculpted steles and idols (on sandstone) on order of the rulers of the Vijaigarh Fort.



Figure 4a and b: The statue of Lord Vishnu recovered from the neighbourhood of the Vijaigarh Fort where it was originally installed. It is now installed as a temporary crossroad shrine at the Maukalan Village, South Chandauli District. Photos: Ajay Pratap

2b. Maukalan Relief Sculptures and Boulder Inscription





Figure 5 a, b, c and d: Early Nagari inscription on a boulder at Maukalan Village. Translation by T.S. Ravishankar. Photos and DStretch: Ajay Pratap

It is on a sandstone boulder in a stream beside one of the localities of this village. Three deities are also found carved onto the rock face (Fig 5a and b). It is written in Early Nāgārī characters of the 8th CE and the Sanskrit language (Figs 5c, d and e). It appears like a hero stone. A certain individual by the name of Śri on[K]aragaṇa attained fame. This inscription reads as

- (1) “Śri on[K]aragaṇa
- (2) Sya Kīrttiḥ”

2c. Stele Inscription, Maukalan Museum, Chandauli

The above worn-out 15th-century CE Nagari inscription’s tentative text (in Fig. 6c and d) commemorates the death of a person. All figures (in Fig 6a,b,c and d) represent the same stele and its inscription. The raised hand stands for the commemoration of a Sati, with other motifs being the Sun, Moon, hands, and a Shivalinga. The relief sculpture shows a man and woman facing each other. These human figures have an iconographic resemblance with the other sati-stone on a sandstone stele at the entrance gate of the Vijaigarh fort (reported earlier in Pratap and Singh, 2020). Although the one in the fort is much smaller in size, better carved, and polished, and dated to the 17th century CE (Pratap and Singh, 2020), such iconographic similarities, although 200 years apart, suggest the carving tradition to be local since motifs and styles of carving are found virtually repeated.

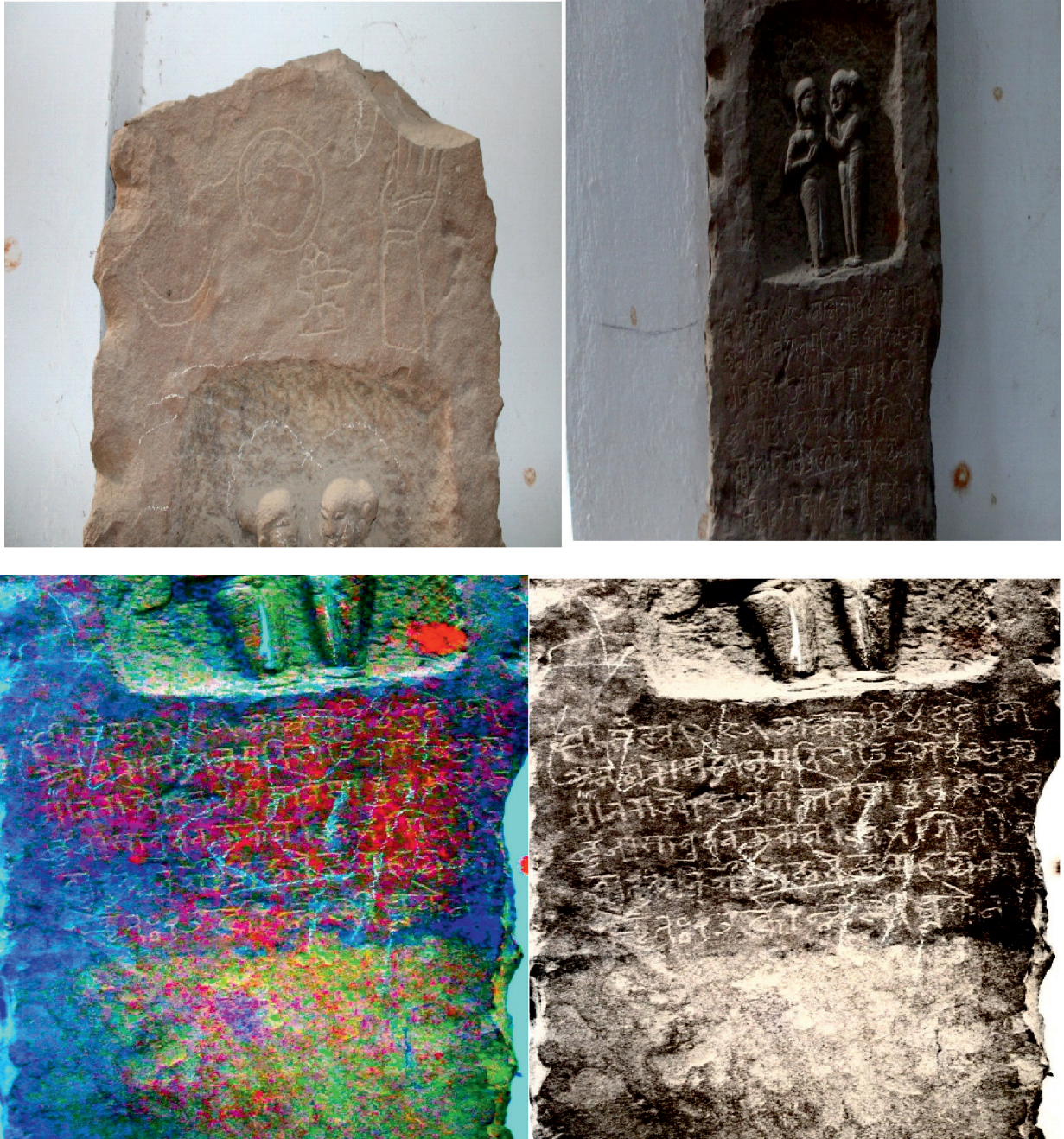


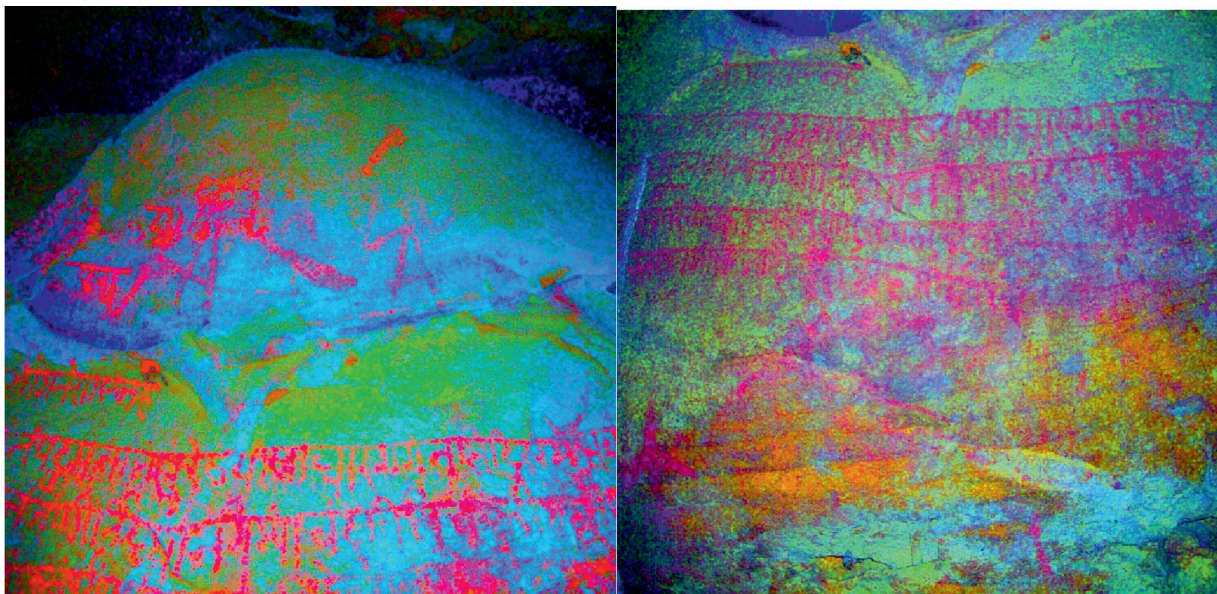
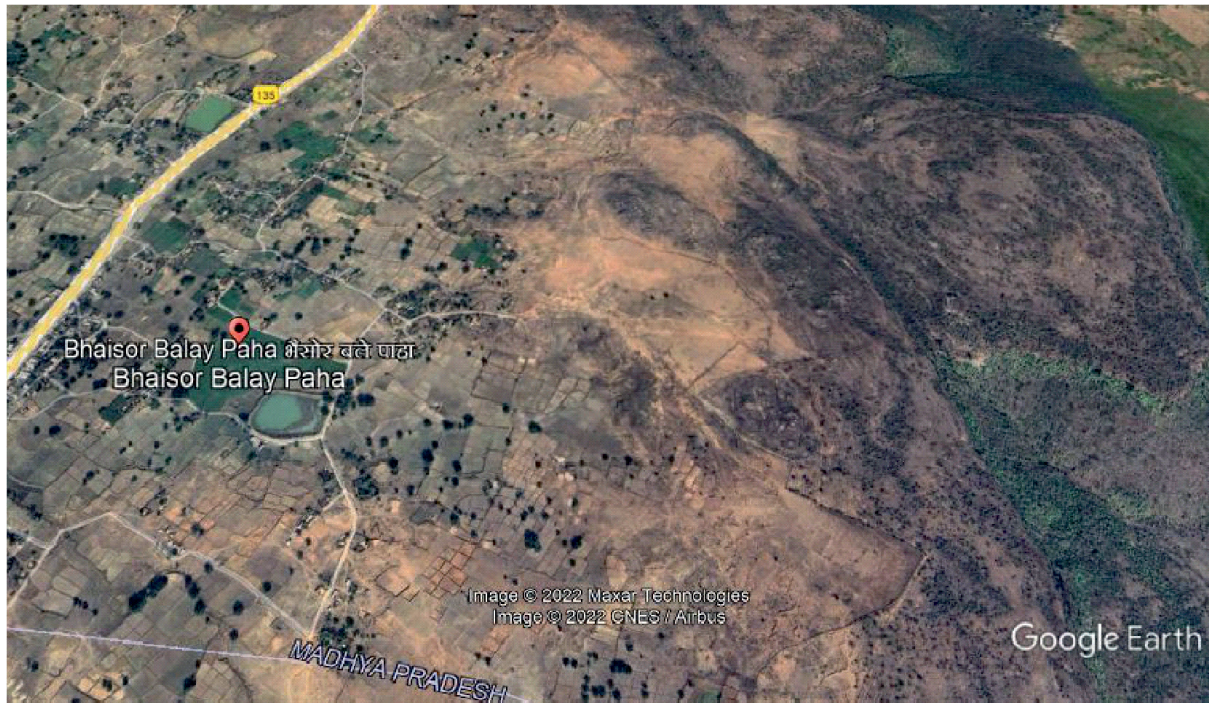
Figure 6 a, b, c and d: A Sati-stone stele commemorates the death of a lady. Translation by T.S. Ravishankar.
Photos and D Stretch: Ajay Pratap

The text of this inscription reads as: -

- (1) *Śrī Samvat 1479 Māghasudi 4 Buddhe/ Ma-*
- (2) *a nagare/ mahānṛipatiŚrī Kuhamada “---”*
- (3) *mānarājyeSuvarnnajana bhuvana “- -”*
- (4) *naSādhu [Vamada]kenasabhaginīna*
- (5) *DatakajijiUkasēnamahayaka*
- (6) *mṛitah/ UtkirṇṇaSidhukēna*

The record is worn out. The scratching on the record has defaced some of the letters. It is written in Sanskrit mixed with the local dialect. The record is dated in Vikrama 1479 (1421 CE), Magha su 4, Wednesday. The name of the king is not clear. Interestingly the name of the place is mentioned as *Ma a nagare* (which can be identified with Maukalan). Records the death of the sister (whose name is not clear) of *Sādhu [Vamadaka]*. The inscription also mentions the names of *Datakaji* and *Ukasēnamahayaka* and says it was engraved by a person named *Sidhuka*.

3. Lekhahia Rock Shelter Inscription, Balay Pahar, Bhainsor, Lalganj, Mirzapur



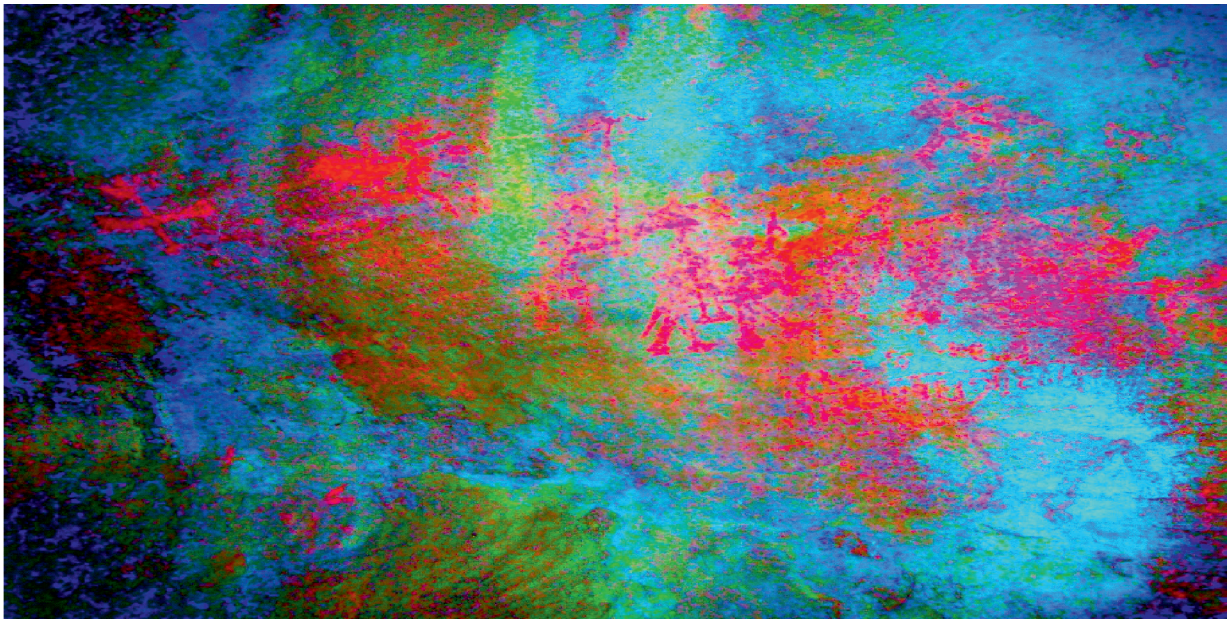


Figure 7 a, b, c and d: Google Earth Image showing the location of the Lekhahia Pahar rock art site with an inscription inside. Various views of a badly faded painted 10th-century CE pilgrim's inscription inside a densely painted cave at Lekhahia Pahar, Bhainsor, Laganj, Mirzapur. Figure 7d is a medieval rock art depiction of a king's entourage. For details of rock art inside this shelter LKHPH 1-5, see Pratap (2016, 86).

This shelter has been known and investigated since 1967. When first located and excavated, it revealed hundreds of rock art images and human remains dated to the Mesolithic around 8000 BCE (Misra and Pal, 2003). But this inscription, as some medieval rock art scenery in it, proves it remained in use until the 16th century. This excavated shelter has paintings of armed soldiers marching in organized columns with local people carrying water and supplies. Four other chambers in this cluster have mesolithic to medieval rock art and villagers from nearby pastoral villages corral their goats in this shelter overnight even now.

The decipherment of Lekhahia rock shelter inscription reads as: -

Śrī Ganeshāya nama[h]

Śrī madhe hesajhayam namah

(1) ...*namah mutra...surēshar svadhār garga nāma di..*

(2) ...*rāya śrī..gāna dhyāna ramya charachir...*

(3) *Su vara ...sankar..kar purin sūtradhāra...*

(4) *Kara...māghau vadi ashtami dane Sōme*

The inscription is crudely written in a running hand and lacks clarity. It is in Nagari characters and corrupt Sanskrit language. The object of the inscription is not clear. It probably refers to the construction of a temple (dedicated to Lord Shiva). The mention of singing (in praise of the lord) and meditation are quite interesting. It seems to mention a *sūtradhāra* in this context who may be the painter hailing from someplace (name not clear). The date is recorded in words. The beginning portion is not clear. The further date portion is Magha, dark fortnight, 8th Monday.

4. Ahraura Graffiti, near Ashoka's MRE-I, at the Bhandari Devi Hill, Mirzapur



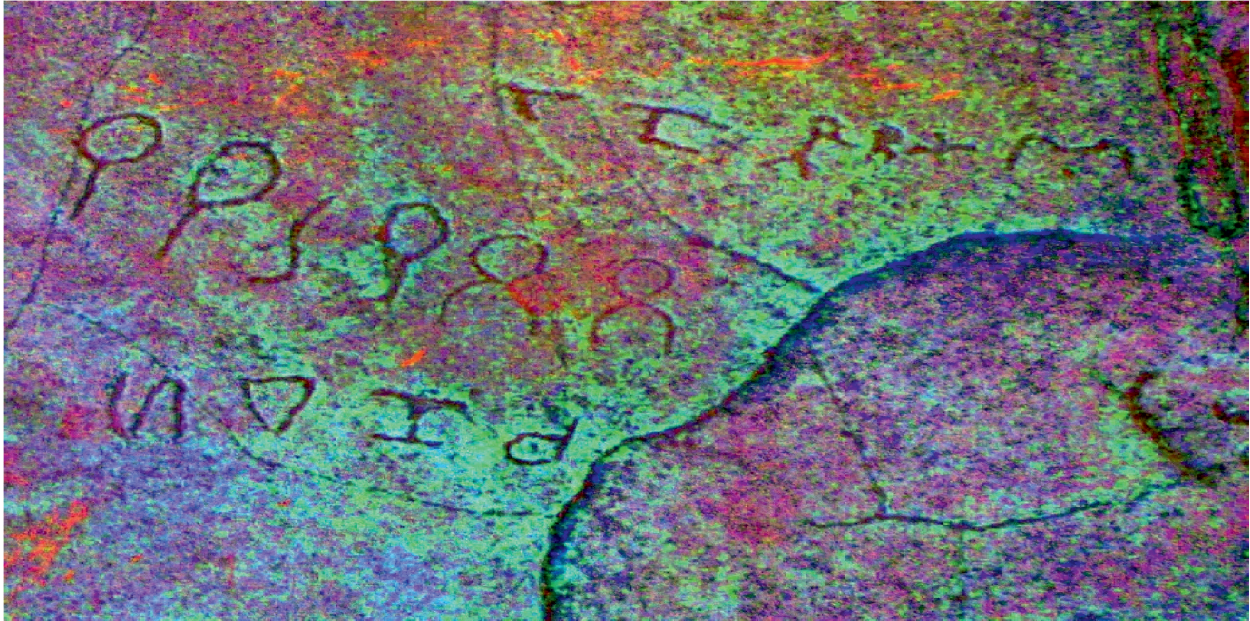


Fig 8a and b: Bhandari Devi Hillock and three lines of Brahmi Graffiti five meters away from Ahraura Minor Rock Edict I of Ashoka. Translation by T.S. Ravishankar. Photo: and DStretch Ajay Pratap

The first two lines, in Figs. 8a and b, have some symbolic representation. Again, the third line has a symbol followed by three Brahmi letters, engraved in 3rd BCE characters, which read: “*Yenacha*”, in the Prakrit language. Probably the name of a person, who might have been responsible for carving symbols. Unfortunately, the right side of the stone has peeled off, probably resulting in damage to some letters. This inscription or graffiti is located five meters away from the MRE-I of Ashoka at Bhandari Devi Hill, Ahraura.

Discussion

Forests and hills seem to be a necessary contextual setting for early symbolism. Since such ecological niches were occupied by hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, and agro-pastoralists throughout prehistory the evidence of their symbolic activity is spatially extensive. The Eastern Vindhyan ranges have therefore yielded prehistoric to historic and medieval period source material. We also surveyed a hill near Bhandari Devi known as the Magan Deewana Hill which shows evidence of cyclopean fortification walls, and 100 x 50 meter water tank excavated from sheer rock. It was hypothetically for the use of an early historical period military garrison (Singh and Singh, 2008). If this is an early Mauryan outpost, it might be contemporaneous to the fortification and walls at Rajgir, built to safeguard trade interests. This ancient trade route from Ahraura to Rajagriha, Malwa, and Kaushambi, existed the time of the Buddha himself (Chakrabarti, Tewari and Singh 2003). The evidence of the mining of Mauryan pillars at a quarry in Chunar (Jayaswal, 2012) would suggest the Magan Deewana fort was an early Mauryan Guard post for trade and pilgrimage.

In the early medieval period Fort dwelling rajas who were feudatories to the Gurjara-Pratihara, the Rashtrakutas, the Palas and Senas, and to the Kingdom of Kannauj, were responsible for building forts and for the proliferation of inscriptions but also for patronizing art and architecture of the times. During the early medieval period, roughly 600-1200 CE, the infeudation of native farmers to a new class of landlords was gained through conquest and the building of half a dozen forts in the area. Prominent forts like Vijaigarh, Naugarh, Sakteshgarh, Chunar, Latifshah, Aghori and several others, built in the hilly country, usually on the top of tors and ridges became centres of administration from

which rents were levied and revenues paid to overlords. There is sufficient inscriptional evidence that provides the historical context of the Vindhyas and nearby areas through 600 years of the tripartite struggle (Misra, 1959). However, those reported here are inscriptions of a different kind belonging to local populations and pilgrims. The development of sculpting, engraving, and ornate stoneworking among indigenous craftsmen was to meet the demand for such symbolic products.

Conclusion

Inscriptions and other material culture form an essential part of primary sources for the writing of histories of lesser-known areas (Dasgupta 2014, Rajan, 2008, 40-78). But Indian scripts emerged after the discovery of iron, second urbanization, and the founding of the first kingdoms, city-states, monarchies, oligarchies and republics. The inscriptions of Maukalan village and Vijaigarh Fort, located in the Gangetic hinterlands, date roughly from the 7th to the 17th centuries, when the forts of this region were active and functioned as medieval political, social, and economic systems. Although Vijaigarh, for example, changed hands between the Kols, Balands, Chandela, Sher Shah, the Banaras Royal Family, and the British (Ghosh, 1932), it was serviced by a peasantry of farmers, pastoralists, and skilled craftsmen. Fuhrer (1891, 251-262) mentions the Rajbhar, an indigenous community of the area, as expert fort builders. The Gonds are mentioned by Archer (1947) as skilled in iconic arts. Archer (1947: 17) notes, “Within this region, each village has a form of stone or wooden sculpture. In places, stone and wooden images stand side by side. In others, wood alone is found, while in some the sole medium is stone. The latter marks the Sasaram, Dehri and Rohtas...while the wooden figures flourish in Palamau district and in southern Sasaram. Each figure is normally made for Kishnaut Ahirs, whose primary occupation is the tending of cows and buffalos and its subject is their cattle-god, Bir Kuar. The stone sculpture is made by *Gonrs* (colloquial for Gonds, emphasis mine), a sub-caste of stone-cutters, while the images in wood are carved by *Barhis* (emphasis mine), the caste of carpenters.” However, travelling pilgrims writing inside caves, and local patrons raising temples and issuing inscriptions, suggest a long-term mixing of Ganga Valley populations and the local ethnic groups.

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