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**SHORT REPORT**

# Report of the Archaeological Survey of Chamak and its Surroundings, District Amaravati, Maharashtra

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This report presents the results of a short programme of fieldwork targeted towards the investigation of the archaeological and geographical setting of the Chamak copperplate charter. This inscription, unearthed in the modern village of Chamak in 1868, records the grant of land to a group of Brahmins living in the village of 'Charmaka'. These have long been assumed to be the same place, but the archaeological contexts of the find spot of the charter had never been explored. Preliminary surveys in and around Chamak have revealed a considerable amount of archaeological material, which is presented here.

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**Keywords:** archaeology; inscription; survey; Vakatakas; Vidarbha

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## Introduction

In February 2015, archaeological surveys were carried out in and around the village of Chamak, District Amravati, Maharashtra. Chamak is located 6 km southwest of the modern town of Achalpurat 21.20869°N 77.47192°E (see **Fig. 1**), and at an elevation of 351 m above seal level. It is known as the find spot of the Chamak Plates of Pravarasena II. These were discovered while ploughing a field near the modern settlement in 1868 (Fleet, 1888: 235). The inscription on the plates records the donation of the village of Charmaka to "one thousand" Brahmanas of various sects and schools by king Pravarasena II at the request of a local ruler, Kondaraja (Fleet, 1888: 236; Mirashi, 1963: 22–27). Together with a number of other copper plates found in the region (cf. Mirashi, 1963; Shastri, 2002), the Chamak copper plates remain one of the main sources for historical information about the Vakatakas and Vidarbha during the late early historic period (c. third to seventh century CE).

Since their discovery, and due to the similarity of their names, it has been supposed that the village "Charmaka" mentioned in the inscription is the same as the modern village of Chamak. However, the wider archaeological contexts of the copper plates have not been explored. The aim of this exploration was to investigate the archaeological and geographical setting of the Chamak charter. This constituted the first stage in a wider programme of research targeted towards the investigation of the archaeological realities of the Vakatakas (Hawkes and Abbas, 2016 In Press).

## Methods

Due to the absence of previous archaeological exploration in the area, preliminary reconnaissance was carried out using an informant-based survey. Despite being unsystematic, this approach fixed the most apparent archaeological features in the landscape.

Once located, archaeological sites were fieldwalked to identify areas of archaeological activity, including natural and structural features, scatters or surface material, and exposed sections preserving archaeological material in situ. Standard recording methods were used to record the main geographical and archaeological features of these sites. All locations and areas were recorded and mapped using a hand-held GPS device. Archaeological features and spot finds were measured (where necessary), and documented by written description and photographic record. The approximate extent of surface scatters was recorded, together with preliminary observations on the range of artefacts and their approximate surface density at both central and peripheral areas of the scatters. Where exposed sections were encountered, an attempt was also made to record the visible stratigraphic sequence and collect pottery samples without recourse to excavation. These samples were collected in order to identify and date the main phases of activity at these locations.

## Results

This survey resulted in the discovery of a number of archaeological sites in the villages of Chamak and Chachondi (located 2 km to the south). These findings are listed here.

## Chamak

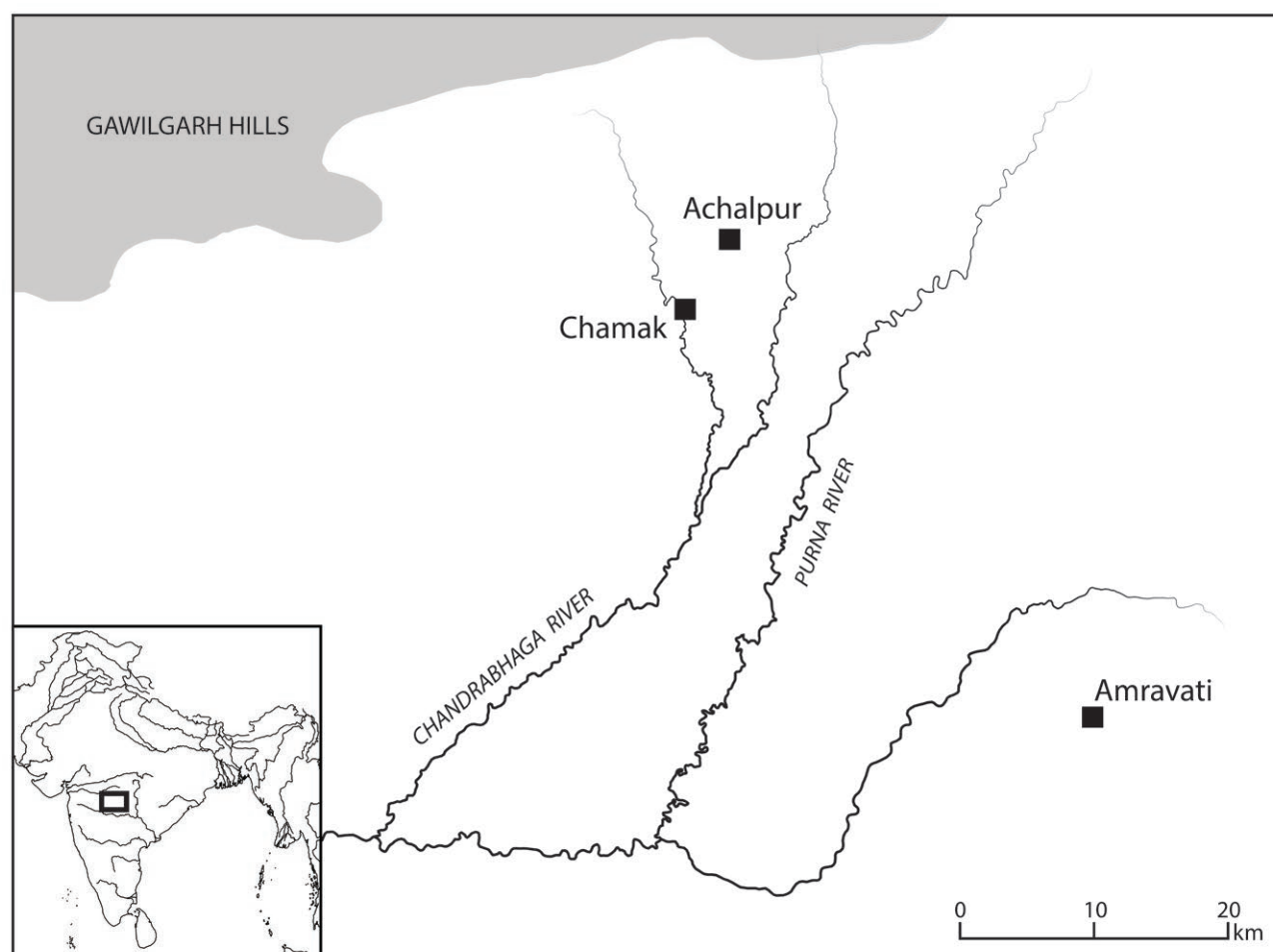
The approximate location of the original find spot of the Chamak copper plate inscriptions was identified on the basis of local knowledge. The area is still devoted to agriculture. However, fieldwalking of this area did not result in the discovery of any archaeological material.

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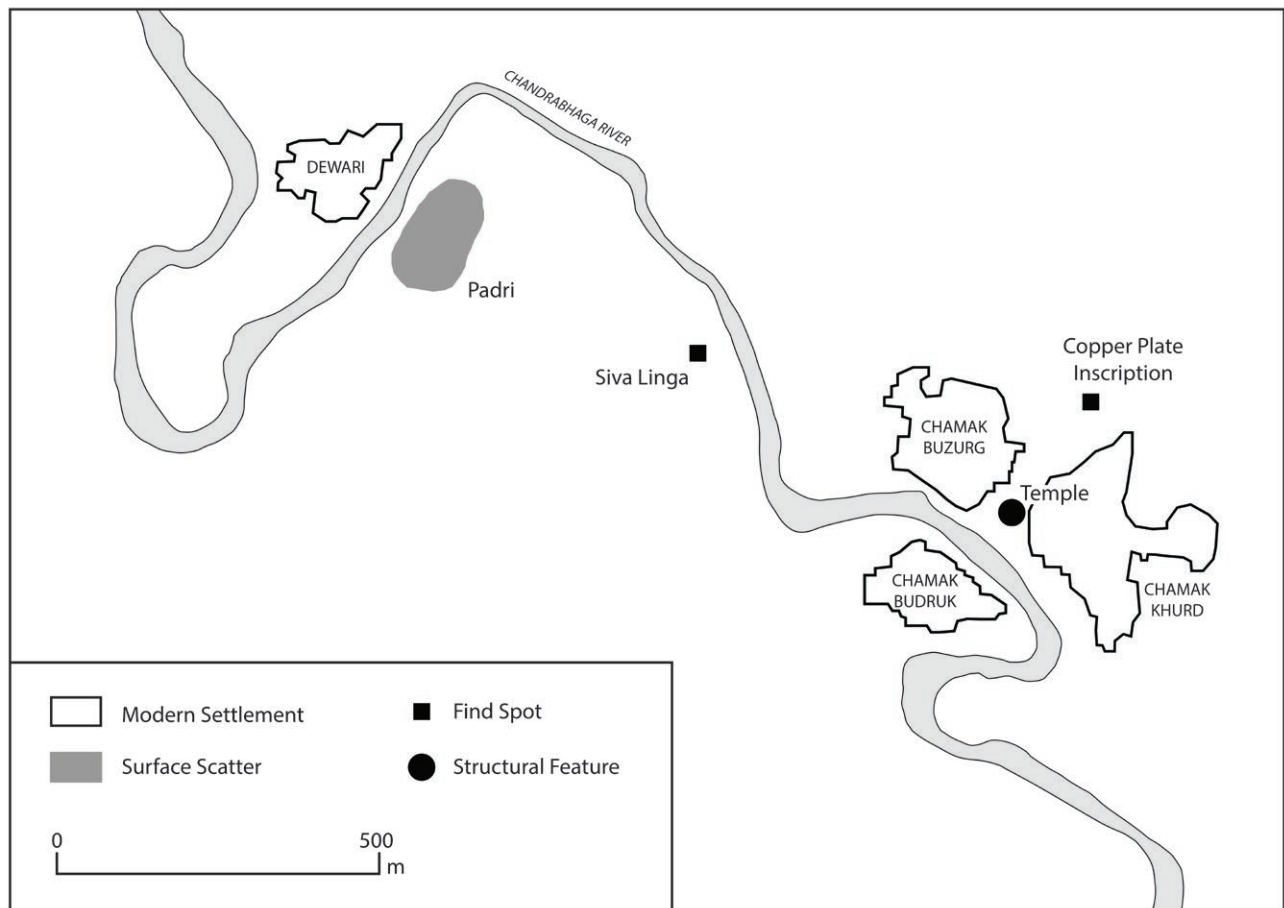
**Figure 1:** Location map.

Elsewhere in the village, the remains of a brick structure were noted beside the area of modern settlement known as Survada, near the banks of the Chandrabhaga River (see **Fig. 2**). This feature was characterised as a small but prominent mound, measuring approximately 15 m by 15 m and 2 m high. Brick fragments were observed partially exposed on the surface of the mound, enabling its identification as a brick-built structure. On top of the mound is a modest brick temple belonging to about the nineteenth century. It was not possible to ascertain the dimensions of bricks exposed on the surface of the mound, but they appear to have measured approximately 25 cm wide and 5 cm thick. Based on the dimensions of the mound and brick remains, the feature was interpreted as the possible remains of an earlier temple structure. It was not possible to date the structure beyond a general tentative assignment to the mid to late first millennium CE. Also at Survada, under a tree, is a small statue of Durga. This was reported to have been found in the river nearby, and can be dated on stylistic grounds to the tenth or eleventh century. Additionally there is a sati-pillar, probably of the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

In the village of Chamak Khurd there are two modern temples containing images of Ganesh, Nandi and a Shiva Linga. These can all be assigned to the eleventh century on stylistic grounds. The oldest houses, built in a traditional style, date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries according to residents.

Outside the village, in a field known locally as Nagartekri, the base of a stone Shiva Linga dating to the eleventh or twelfth century CE was found installed in a modern shrine. Local villagers testify to this having been unearthed during agricultural activity in the near vicinity.

At another location, an extensive scatter of surface remains was noted approximately 1 km to the northwest near the bank of the Chandrabhaga River, opposite village Dewari. Known locally as Padri (PDR01), the majority of this area is covered by a mixed fruit plantation. This obscured surface visibility making it difficult to ascertain the maximum extent of the surface scatter. Despite this, surface remains were visible across an area measuring 170 m North-South by 140 m East-West across the plantation, and extending for another 70 m into agricultural fields to the North. Within the plantation area, artefacts including pottery sherds, brick (measuring 6 cm thick) and terracotta fragments were evident in the disturbed soil surrounding newly planted trees. In surrounding agricultural fields, these same materials were easily visible in the ploughed soil. Preliminary on-site identification of the pottery revealed a small number of sherds of fine black slipped wares, with common forms including shallow bowls with incurved rims, indicative of vessels dating to the later centuries BCE and early centuries CE, as well as coarse red micaceous wares. More common were sherds of thickly slipped buff and black wares with distinctive early



**Figure 2:** Map showing the position of archaeological localities in and around the village of Chamak.

and late medieval profiles. For further details of the pottery sherds identified on the surface of this and other sites, see Appendix 1. Together, these remains suggest a continuous settlement of this locality from at least the early centuries CE to the mid-second millennium CE. A coin hoard, consisting of a mixture of gold and silver coins, was found at Padri during the planting of trees and reported in the local press (*Desha Unnate*, January 2014). The hoard has not been available for study, but ‘mixed hoards’ comprising both gold and silver coins are generally medieval in date—a chronological horizon that is confirmed by the late medieval pottery sherds found on the site.

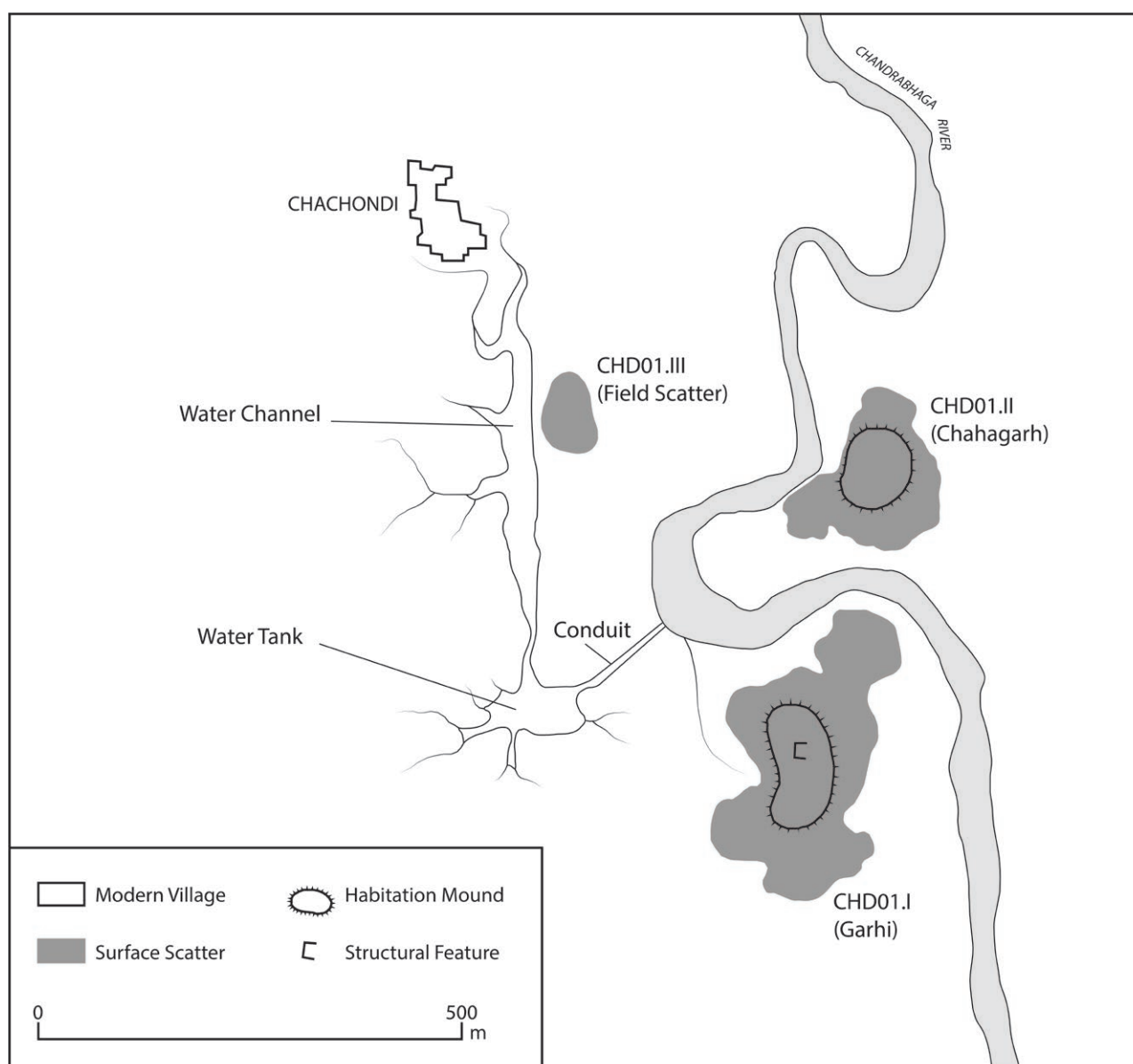
### **Chachondi**

At the village of Chachondi, 2 km to the South of Chamak, exploration revealed four distinct areas of archaeological activity (**Fig. 3**). All localities were found in close proximity to each other. They are confined to the southwest of the modern village settlement and near the banks of the Chandrabhaga River, which exhibits a pronounced meander in this area.

Immediately to the southwest of the modern village, evidence of an ancient water system was noted. Here, a wide channel, approximately 30 m wide and 5 m deep, fed by seasonal streams from surrounding fields and runs directly South in a straight line for approximately 500 m. Though blocked by a modern dam, the channel would originally have terminated in a natural basin, 120 m across, that may

have functioned as a water tank. The straightness of the course of the channel suggests that it and the water tank may have been augmented by human action, either as some sort of a defensive feature, or as a means of harnessing seasonal surface waters more efficiently. The extent of such augmentation remains speculative. Yet, the influence of human action is confirmed by the existence of an additional channel that runs 140 m from the northeast corner of the tank to the main river to the East, providing an overflow conduit. That the conduit is purposefully cut is indicated by the steep vertical section of the channel, and the fact that it runs against the natural flow of water in both the channel and river. The remains of a low stone built wall across the mouth of the conduit, which may have served to maintain the level of water in the basin tank, further support this suggestion. It is not possible to date this water system on the basis of this stone-built feature or its general topography. However, it is likely associated with the other archaeological sites in the immediate vicinity.

At 21.18975°N 77.46871°E, 240 m southwest of the modern village settlement, a scatter of surface material was noted in a recently ploughed field (labelled CHD01.III). The field lies on an area of raised land between the water channel (noted above) and the Chandrabhaga River to the East. Surface remains extended over a wide area approximately 120 m North to South, by 80 m East to West. Despite the excellent surface visibility, the density



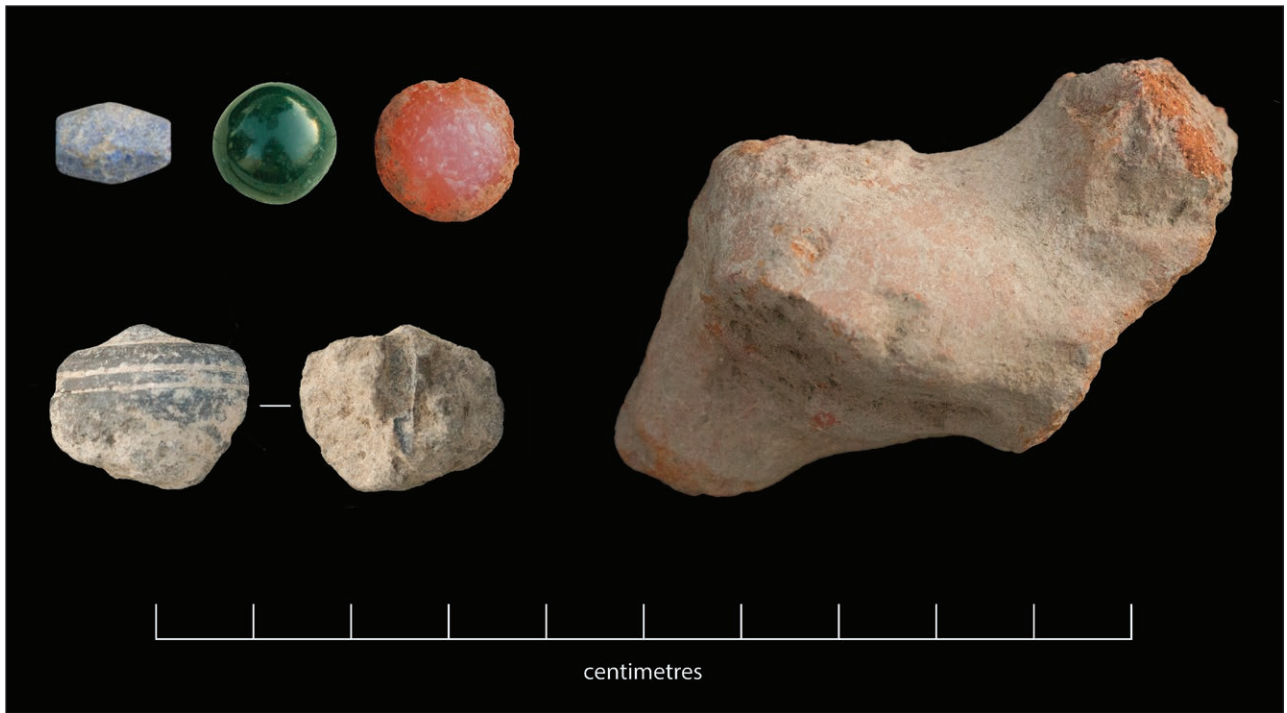
**Figure 3:** Map showing the position of archaeological localities in and around the village of Chachondi.

of artefacts was very low (less than 2 sherds per square metre). At the northern extent of area, additional pottery was noted in the spoil heap of a recently excavated well. Preliminary on-site identification of the pottery revealed sherds dating to the late Iron Age or early historic period (fine black slipped wares and red burnished wares), grey wares dating to the early medieval period, and modern pottery (Appendix 1). Local villagers testified to the fact that this field has only recently started to be used as agricultural land, meaning that modern ploughing will have had a minimal impact on archaeological deposits. This, together with the small size of the area, and low frequency of surface remains suggest that there was a low intensity of occupation in this location.

At 21.18568°N 77.47178°E, another area of archaeological activity (CHD01.I) was identified on an elevated area of land 150m East of the water tank, and 150m South and West of the Chandrabhaga River meander. Known locally as 'Garhi', the area is characterised by a pronounced habitation mound approximately 150m North-South by

90m East-West. The surface of the northern half of the mound is obscured by an early modern fortification wall built from soils dug directly from the mound itself, and is heavily disturbed by modern digging activity with villagers using the soils from this mound for building purposes in the modern village. The remainder of the mound lies in agricultural land. Artefacts are visible across the entire surface of the mound at a high density (30–50 artefacts per square metre), and extend over a much wider area (380 × 230 m). The density of surface material was noted to diminish only as the natural topography of the surrounding area dropped to the West, North and East. A wide variety of artefacts were noted. They include: pottery, numerous semi-precious stone beads (agate, carnelian and lapis lazuli), glass beads and bangles, brick fragments, terracotta beads and figurines, and iron slag (**Fig. 4**). A single coin dating to the sixteenth century was also found on the surface to the north of the mound (now preserved at the Indian Institute of Research in Numismatic Studies, Nasik). Preliminary on site analysis of the surface pottery





**Figure 4:** Examples of small finds from the surface scatter at CHD01.I, including (clockwise from top left): lapis, agate and carnelian beads, terracotta figurine, and terracotta bead.



**Figure 5:** Examples of shell artefacts from the surface scatter at CHD01.II.

resulted in the identification of material dating from the late early historic period (micaceous red wares similar to those found in excavated contexts dating to the Vakataka period at other sites), the early medieval period (thickly slipped buff ware vessels with angular rims, grooved necks

and carinated shoulders), and late medieval period (sherds of blue and white porcelain dating to the seventeenth century) (Appendix 1). The range of material and density of surface remains suggests relatively intense occupation in this location for at least one thousand years.



**Figure 6:** Exposed Section at CHD01.II.

On the opposite bank of the river, at 21.18937°N 77.47264°E, another distinct settlement mound (CHD01.II), known locally as Chahagarh, was noted on an elevated area surrounded on three sides by the meander of the river. The mound itself measures approximately 100 m x 100 m. High frequencies of surface remains were visible across an even wider area, approximately 250 m by 250 m. Artefacts included pottery, animal bone, and shell (both conch bangle fragments and cowries) (**Fig. 5**). The mound was also found to be heavily disturbed. The upper 3 m of archaeological deposits of the southwestern half of the mound have recently been dug away by a local farmer to level the field. This has resulted in a 50 m long section running northwest to southeast across the top of the mound (**Fig. 6**). The central 5 m portion of the section at highest point of mound was cleaned and recorded before the rest of the habitation layers were dug away by the farmer. The stratigraphy is relatively complex, and is characterised by a series of intercutting pits, postholes and charred layers, indicating intense long-term settlement. Where possible, charcoal samples and pottery fragments were collected to assist in the dating of archaeological deposits. The analysis of this material is not yet complete. Yet, preliminary analyses suggest that the upper (exposed) layers of site all relate to the late first millennium BCE (Hawkes, et al., 2016 In Press), with black slipped wares and fine black and red wares similar to those found in excavated Iron Age contexts at Kaundinyapur (Mishra, et al., 2016) predominating throughout the sequence. It is clear that archaeological deposits extend below the exposed levels, indicating that the site a deeper antiquity.

The evidence provided by these areas of archaeological activity indicates the existence of a major settlement from at least the mid first millennium BCE to the early modern period, with the main areas of occupation having moved between locations over time. At least two distinct areas of Iron Age settlement are evident on both sides of the Chandrabhaga River. Until these are dated more conclusively it is unclear whether they are contemporary and represent a habitation with two distinct foci of activity, or have different chronologies and represent the movement of

habitation from one location to the other. Evidence for the early centuries CE is scant. But by the mid-first millennium CE, the core area of settlement appears to have moved to the area known as Garhi, which then continued to have been occupied until at least the seventeenth century CE. The existence of artefacts that must have been transported to both sites (shell bangles, cowrie shells, and semi-precious stone beads) suggests that the settlement was a centre of consumption, if not production, and clearly linked to wider regional networks of communication and exchange. The water channel and tank were undoubtedly associated with the settlement on the western bank of the river. Yet, it is unclear during which phase of occupation they were augmented and incorporated into the built environment.

## Discussion

Exploration of the Chamak area revealed a number of sites. It is clear that the Chamak copper plates are not isolated finds, and must now be considered in the context of a much wider archaeological landscape. The possible temple structure and settlement site at Chamak may have been related to the donated village and Brahmanical communities mentioned in the inscription. The remains at Chachondi indicate the existence of a much larger settlement. This was by no means a large urban centre of the scale of other contemporary urban centres elsewhere in Vidarbhasuch as Adam (Nath, 1992), Kaundinyapur (Dikshit, 1968; Mishra, et al., 2016; Smith, 2001), Mahurjhari (Deo, 1973; Mohanty, 2003) and Pauni (Deo and Joshi, 1972; Nath, 1998). Yet, it was certainly a large settlement with intense occupation and home to a variety of activities. Given its links with wider networks of communication and exchange, it may have been a local centre in the immediate area, and home to some sort of administrative and political authority.

All of the settlement sites discovered during this season of exploration have significant potential for future work, and are worthy of further investigation. In the first instance, additional surveys involving geophysical prospection and systematic collections of surface material at all sites would result in a more complete picture

of the main areas of sub-surface activity. This would then inform the design of future excavation strategies, and could be complemented by more systematic methods of landscape survey to locate other sites in the immediate area that may not be found by informant-based survey.

### Supplementary Files

The supplementary file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary File 1: Appendix1.** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/aa.115.s1>

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### Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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