



THE REMAINS OF THE VISHNU TEMPLE AND OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

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Abstract

This research paper explores the historical significance of the ancient city of Besnagar, located in Madhya Pradesh, India. Through archaeological excavations conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India, valuable artifacts and structures have been unearthed, shedding light on the city's prominence during the Mauryan and Shunga periods. Besnagar, believed to be a distorted form of Vaishya Nagar, was likely a prominent center of Vaishnavism in ancient times. Situated between the Betwa and Bes rivers, the city was protected by a nearly one-kilometer-long defensive wall on the Udayagiri Road. Outside the city walls, a large reservoir made of massive stones stored water from both rivers, contributing to the city's development. The study aims to shed light on the historical context, architectural features, and religious significance of the Vishnu Temple and other archaeological remains from the site.

Keywords: Besnagar, Archaeological excavations, Vaishnavism, Shunga, Vishnu Temple

Introduction

In Madhya Pradesh, there is a small village called Besnagar located on the Vidisha-Udayagiri road, approximately 3 kilometres west of Vidisha. Based on the available artifacts, it seems that it was a significant city in ancient times. Besnagar (23° 30' North, 77° 50' East) appears to be the distorted form of Vaishya Nagar. This region must have been a prominent centre of Vaishnavism, and it experienced significant development during the Mauryan and Shunga periods. According to Cunningham, this city was situated in the middle of Betwa and Bes rivers and their confluence, and on the fourth side, it was protected by a nearly one-kilometre-long



defensive wall on the Udayagiri Road. Outside the wall, there was a large reservoir made of massive stones, which used to hold water from both rivers. The facts about this place have come to light through archaeological excavations conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India at various times, which confirm the existence of ancient structures. The excavations have also revealed remains indicating that this city was destroyed multiple times by fire and floods. After the 11th-12th century, people started residing in separate towns and villages, which eventually became the present-day Vidisha. While traveling on the Udayagiri Road, one can see the remains of ancient mounds between Betwa and Bes rivers (Photographs 1, 2). The Shunga period sculptures from the Besnagar region are displayed not only in the Vidisha Museum but also in the Gwalior and Kolkata Museums, featuring prominent figures such as Yakshas, birds, palm trees, pinnacle stones, and wish-fulfilling trees.

Kham Baba (Heliodors Sthambh)

This place named Khambaba, is located at a distance of six kilometres from Vidisha-Basoda road. One can reach here after crossing the bridge of Betwa and Bes rivers from Vidisha.

Kham Baba, a place named so, is located 6 kilometres away from the Vidisha-Basoda road. To reach here, one can cross the bridges of Betwa and Bes rivers after coming from Vidisha. Kham Baba is situated atop an ancient mound. The place is famous for a pillar located on a platform, known as Kham Baba. The pillar is worshipped by the Bhoi community, who also pray for their desires to be fulfilled. A fair is also held here every year. The pillar has an interesting history. Archaeologist Cunninghams first provided information about this pillar. According to him, it could belong to the Gupta period. At that time, the pillar was adorned with a lot of vermilion. Later, Sir John Marshall removed the vermilion from the pillar, revealing new facts. Inscriptions in Brahmi script were found on the pillar, which brought a new perspective to the history of Vidisha. The inscriptions revealed that Heliodorus, a Greek ambassador of the Yavana king Antialkidas of Taxila, came to the court of Shunga dynasty ruler Bhagabhadra in Vidisha. Impressed by the virtues of Vaishnav (Bhagavat) religion in this region, he accepted the Bhagavat Dharma. In that context, he had a Vishnu temple constructed and installed the Garuda flag. That Garuda flag is the Kham Baba pillar. Based on the deciphered inscriptions on the pillar, archaeologists had a problem regarding the location of the Vishnu temple. Dr.

Bhandarkar conducted excavations around the pillar but was unsuccessful. After the tireless efforts of the Indian Archaeological Survey, Shri Maheshwari Dayal Khare discovered the remains of that temple between 1963 and 1965. Based on the epigraphic evidence, the temple's time was determined to be 150 BCE or the second century BCE. It should now be recognized as one of the oldest temples in India.

(Note: The translation may not capture the poetic or literary nuances of the original text.)

Inscription on the pillar:

First Inscription:

1. (De) v (a) Devasa va (sude) vasa Garuda dhvaje ayam
2. Karite i (a) Hiliyodoreṇa bhaga
3. Vatena diyasa putreṇa takkhasilākēna
4. Yona desena (aa) gatena mahārājas
5. Atilikiṭasa up () tā sakāsa ranyī
6. (Kā) sī pu(tra) sa (bha)gabhadrasa trātāras
7. Vatena ch (tu) dasena rājēna vadhāmānasa

Second Inscription:

1. Trini amṛta padāni (ia) (s) anuthitāni
2. Neyanti (swanga) dma chāma aprabhāva

Based on the above inscriptions, archaeologists speculated that there should be remnants of Lord Vishnu's temple in the nearby area. Keeping this fact in mind, excavations were initiated in the BSN-3 area of Besnagar. The details of the excavation are as follows-

Excavation Site: BSN-3

This excavated BSN-3 site is located approximately 100 meters away from the Vidisha-Ashok Nagar Road on the banks of the Besandī. This site, famous by the name of Kham Baba, is also known as the Heliodors pillar. It was first brought to light by Alexander, and at different times, research was conducted here, reading the inscriptions on the pillar. In 1913-14, Mr. Bhandarkar made extensive efforts to determine the actual location of the Vishnu temple described in the pillar but was unsuccessful. In 1963-64, Mr. M.D. Khare of the Indian Archaeological Survey



conducted excavations here, and fortunately, he discovered the remains of the mentioned Vishnu temple. This addition opened a new chapter in the field of architectural art, and this temple became the most prominent among India's ancient temples. (Photograph Number 5)

Mr. M.D. Khare conducted excavation work here between 1963-66. At that time, there was a high mound near the pillar where the priest of Kham Baba resided. Khare estimated that there might be a possibility of the actual location of the temple beneath the mound. Therefore, after compensating the priest and removing his residence, the walls of the house, clay pots, and several undiscovered stones were found, indicating the presence of these ancient remains. As a result, a 33 x 33-meter stone enclosure was excavated, with walls that were 2.40 meters wide at the top and inclined outward due to the presence of the mound.

In the second phase of excavation, a levelled area was created inside the enclosure, and several trenches were dug. After removing the upper layers and clearing the debris, yellow and black soil was found, and a floor made by crushing and mixing fragments of bricks was observed. It was estimated that there should have been a structure or some kind of dwelling at a depth of one meter during the excavation. After removing this floor, another floor or platform was found, extending up to a depth of 2.75 meters from the upper surface. This platform was constructed by grinding and mixing pieces of bricks and adding gravel and stones. Lime plaster was also found on it, indicating that it may have been adorned with stone carvings, the remnants of which were found. On top of that floor, some irregular and unidentified stones were observed in the northern direction, and the plastered floor was seen extending beyond the enclosure. After cleaning the floor, a specific pattern measuring 22 centimetres in width and 20 centimetres in depth started to emerge. Therefore, through detailed examination, it became apparent that there might have been a wooden structure here, and the outline of the foundation started to become clear. It was now certain that this is where the remains of the Garuda pillar mentioned in the inscription of Lord Vishnu's temple should be found. Its construction would have taken place in the third century BCE, and it was destroyed by the floods of the Besandi River.

The respected individual has written about this temple as follows: The circular-shaped sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) of the temple had dimensions of 8.10 x 3.00 meters, and its circumambulatory path was 2.5 meters wide. Its outer wall was also circular in shape. There



was a gap between the rectangular assembly hall (sabha mandap) that adjoined the eastern side of the circular sanctum sanctorum. The assembly hall was 7 meters long and 4.85 meters wide, with a doorway on the eastern side. Near the foundation and in the middle of the wooden pillars, holes were found, but their dimensions for inserting iron pegs cannot be estimated; only the marks of the holes have been found. Several pits (pits) where iron tools and wooden chisels were used for fitting or fixing were discovered (Image number 6). In ancient times, whether made of wood or stone, such chisels were used for directly erecting pillars. Examples of this type are found in Sanchi Temple number 18. In addition, fragments of lime, mortar, and contemporary brick, along with copper coins and pieces of terracotta (NBP), have been found on the plaster of the elevated Vishnu Temple.

In addition to the damaged black stone pedestals on the northern side of the Vishnu Temple, bronze seals and iron nails have been found, and it is also speculated that this temple was damaged by the floods during the Maurya period and later. There might have been Buddhist stupas nearby, as their vedika pillars have been excavated. Additionally, seven pillars similar to heliodorus columns might have also existed in a row. Such remains have been found here as well (Image number 7).

To understand the reality of the pillars, an excavation was conducted using regional methods in all directions, under which eight inscribed pillars were found. Several remains were lost due to the construction and forts on the upper surfaces (levels). Materials from the 19th-20th century were found, along with a coin dated Hijri 1296 belonging to the Bhopal Nawab.

From the excavation, it was also known that in the first century CE, there was a flood again, which caused the contemporary Vishnu temple with its pillars to collapse. However, it is likely that the described eight pillars remained in their place. This temple may have been rebuilt and continued to be in use until the 3rd-4th century CE, with the hereditary priests also continuing to build their houses there. However, there is no information available about when all these pillars, except for the Heliodorus pillar, were destroyed after the 5th century CE. Fragments of the pillars were found here continuously. A few years ago, fragments of two pillar tops were obtained from here.

Based on the remains obtained from the Kham Baba area, you have created an imaginative depiction, and according to my opinion, the shape of the temple could be similar to the vedika

pillar of Sanchi Stupa No. 3, dating back to the 2nd century BCE. Similarly, the Vishnu temple could also have such a similarity with its nearby pillar, which would have a Garuda flag with similar symbolism. The only difference is that in the depiction, the pillar top represents an elephant and a lion, while the Garuda flag would have a Garuda bird (Image number 8). As Mr. Khare believed, it is possible that there were other pillars near the Garuda pillar of the temple whose fragmentary tops were found. Along with this, from the previous excavation conducted by Bhandarkar, fragments of several vedika pillars were found around the temple.

Possibly, these vedika pillars would have been surrounded by Garuda pillars and other pillars, as was the common practice during the Shunga period. The shapes of the vedika pillars of Sanchi Stupa No. 2 are such that there are vedika pillars around them.

Therefore, this temple obtained through the excavations in Besnagar emerges as one of the oldest temples in India. The Archaeological Survey of India conducted excavations in the Besnagar region from 1975 to 1977, during which a large platform similar to a temple was found. It had pillars and underground drains as well. It is likely that there was an ancient temple here as well. However, this work is still incomplete. (Image numbers 9, 10)

**Information about the remains of the Vishnu Temple and other significant details:
Photographs:**



The Betwa River and the surrounding mounds.



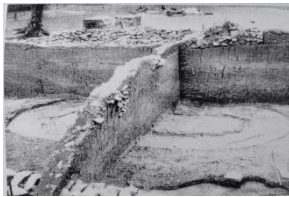
Mounds located on the banks of the river.



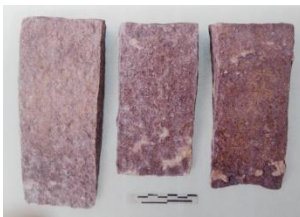
3. Heliodorous pillar. (Source: Indian Archaeological Survey)



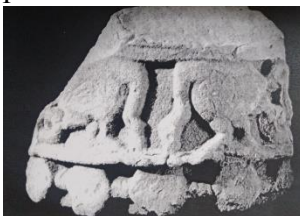
4. Excavation of the Heliopolis pillar. (Source: Indian Archaeological Survey)






5. Layout of the ancient temple.



6. Fragments of iron placed in the lower part of the wooden pillar.



7. Top of the pillar.

8.  Stupa No. 3, Sanchi, depiction of a temple on the railing pillar, 2nd century BCE.
9.  Large platform of the temple obtained from the Besnagar excavation, possibly from the Gupta period.
10.  Sub surface drainage canal.



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