
A Glimpse into the Archaeological Antiquity of Vrindavan

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Abstract: Vrindavan town near Mathura is one of the most sacred places in India and can be considered the epicenter of bhakti cult. In spite of its fame, not much is known about the archaeological antiquity of the town and generally it is believed that the town became a prominent centre of Krishna bhakti only during the medieval period and that too after the arrival of Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Besides the Krishna cult, two shrines of deep antiquity and high reverence are Katyayani temple (a saktipitha) and Gopesvara temple (a Saiva shrine) but unfortunately no ancient remains are available at these shrines due to modern constructions. During the sixteenth century, seven of the important shrines (saptadevalaya) came into existence but at least two of these – Madanmohan and Govindadev were already centers of high reverence and only big temple structures were provided to these two already existing shrines. This paper emphasizes the importance of Vrindavan as one of the most prominent Hindu centers much before the arrival of Vallabha and Chaitanya by analyzing all the archaeological findings from the town.

Keywords: Vrindavan, Sculptures, Madanmohan Temple, Archaeological Mound, Bodhisattva, Buddha, Vishnu

Introduction

Vrindavan, situated 8 km north of Mathura and about 130 km south of Delhi along the River Yamuna is one of the most sacred towns in India. Generally, in archaeological terms Vrindavan forms part of Mathura region (or the Braj) and is not separately dealt with. In spite of the fact that various Puranas including *Harivamsa*, *Vishnu*, *Matsya*, *Srimadbhagavata*, *Varaha* etc. refer to Vrindavana while mentioning the episodes of the life of child Krishna and at present, the town is considered even more sacred than Mathura, a holistic study of the nature of Vrindavan as an archaeological settlement has somehow not been given due importance. Vrindavana of the Puranas appears to be a quite wider area of sacred grove or forest lying between the River Yamuna and the Govardhana hill. It is difficult to confirm the existence of a town like settlement as the modern day Vrindavan in those days. The view of some scholars that the original Vrindavana was situated at Parsauli near Govardhan does not make much sense since there must have been some prevailing tradition for considering the modern settlement

of Vrindavan as the ancient Vrindavana during the medieval times and the archaeological data also confirms it. The Yamuna River is also flowing along Mathura and Vrindavan for at least past 3000-4000 years as PGW settlements on both banks of Yamuna attest to. There is no supporting evidence either at Parsauli or Govardhan to prove their contention of being ancient Vrindavan.

It is possible that during the ancient times too, the importance of Mathura and Vrindavan lied together as in modern days. The whole landscape between Mathura and Vrindavan is full of archaeological sites, some of which are religious sites of Buddhist affiliation like the Kankor Tila near Birla Mandir and possibly the Ganesh Tila whereas Chamunda Tila, Gokarneshwar Tila, Jaisinghpura locality, Radhapuram site situated in front of PMV Polytechnic, Ahilyaganj and Akrur sites might have had some sort of Buddhist association but were not limited to it (Gupta 2013). Out of these only Jaisinghpura locality was a regular habitation mound. Ahilyaganj mound was an ASI protected site but is completely non-existent now. From locals it was known that many Buddhist sculptures were found during destruction of that site and were smuggled out. Tehra is a village also situated between Mathura and Vrindavan but slightly off the road and it was a regular village settlement of early centuries of the Common Era.



Figure 1: Location Map of Ancient Vrindavan

Vrindavan in Archaeological Perspective

Vrindavan seems to be an important town settlement even during the ancient period as the presence of various high mounds in the city indicates. Some of the important mounds in the city are (Figure 1):

- **Hathibaba ka Tila:** This mound of about 10 m height lies in front of Phogla Ashram/ Shorawala Bhawan, Ramanreti and is about 6 acres in area.

- **Gurudwara Tila:** This mound of about 8 m height lies in front of Vrindavan Railway Station in Bhangipara locality and is about 3 acres in area.
- **Goma Tila:** This mound of about 15 m height is situated at and around the site of Govindadevaji Temple and is about 8 acres in area.
- **Dwadash Aditya Tila:** This mound of about 12 m height is situated at the site of Madan Mohan Temple and is about 2 acres in area.



Figure 2: Relief showing stupa worship from Vrindavan
(M.M. No. 10.130)



Figure 3: Railing
Pillar, Vrindavan

Besides, the above four mounds of confirm archaeological antiquity, there are some other mounds also mentioned by Upadhyay (1988: 33-38) which may or may not be of archaeological importance. These are: (i) Govindakunda Tila situated to the left of Govinda Kunda which was till 1980's 10 m in height and spread in an area of about 2 acres, but is non-existent now, (ii) Ahirpara Tila situated around the Banke Bihari Temple about 8 m in height and 3 acres in area, fully occupied now, (iii) Vidyapith Tila situated adjacent to Vidyapith in Bhangipara locality having a height of 6 m and an area of about 1 acre also non-existent now, (iv) a mound situated on Gurukul road which was about 7 m high and 2 acres in area till 1980's but non-existent now, (v) a mound situated in the vicinity of T.B. Sanatorium which was as high as 10 m and 2 acres in area in the past but non-existent now, (vi) Gop Tila situated at the Gopinathji ka ghera area is about 3 m in height and spread in an area of about 2 acres and is fully occupied by modern settlements, and (vii) the mound lying underneath the Jugalkishore Temple which may be related to an earlier temple structure.

As per my observation, the Goma Tila underneath the Govindadevaji Temple is the main ancient settlement of the old town of Vrindavan and possibly Yamuna flowed close to it in those days. Kushan period sculptures of two *Salabhanjikas* were found from this site. The area of the mound is quite extensive and comparable to many other

ancient settlements of Braj region datable to PGW period in antiquity. Since the area is densely occupied, it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature.

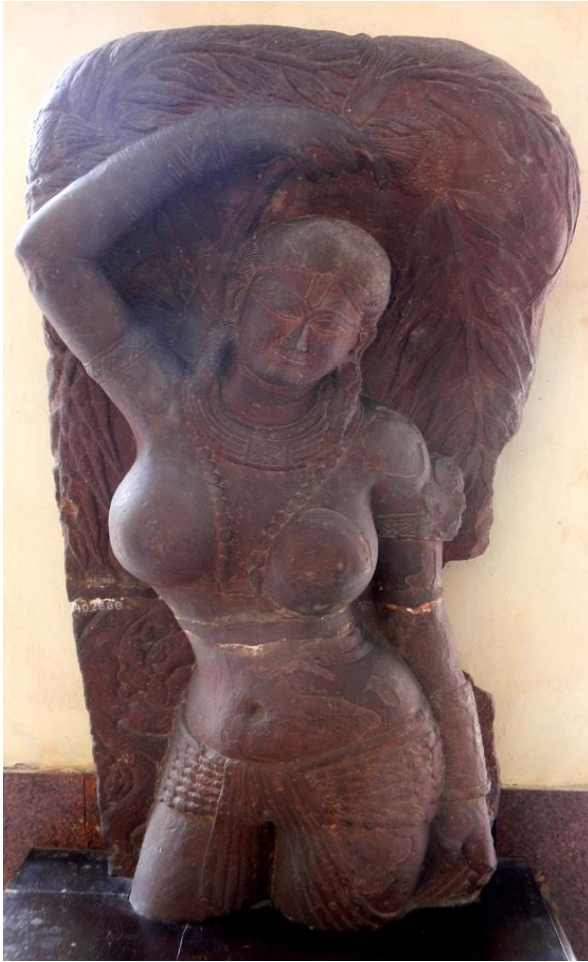


Figure 4: Salabhanjika from Vrindavan
(M.M. No. 40.2887)

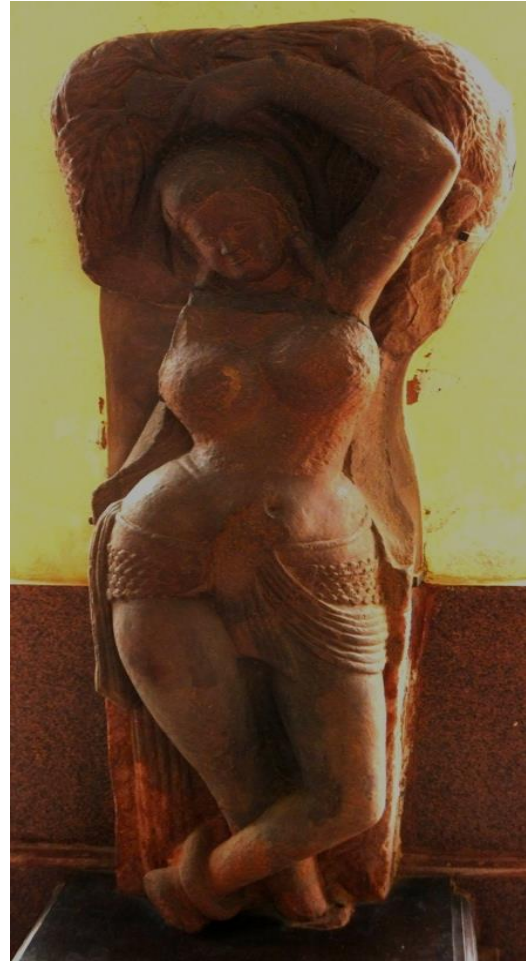


Figure 5: Salabhanjika from Vrindavan
(M.M. No. 40.2888)



Figure 6: Lower part of the Buddha image from Vrindavan (M.M. No. 74.26)



Figure 7: Sri-Lakshmi image (Mathura Museum No. D 17), photo courtesy AIIS



Figure 8: Vishnu, Mathura Museum No. D35



Figure 9: Brahma, M.M. No. 48.3376



Figure 10: M.M. No. 48.3377



Figure 11: Bodhisattva, M.M. No. 48.3378



Figure 12: Latticed window,
M.M. No. 48.3379



Figure 13: Broken door jamb,
photo courtesy AIIS



Figure 14: Exposed ancient structure at Madan Mohan Temple, Vrindavan
(photograph of 1979 courtesy ASI)



Figure 15: Exposed ancient structure at Madan Mohan Temple, Vrindavan
(photograph of 1979 courtesy ASI)



Figure 16: Inscribed brick from Madan Mohan temple



Figure 17: Inscribed brick from study Area



Figure 18a: Railing pillar, front view



Figure 18b: Railing pillar, back view



Figure 19: Vishnu Figure Carved on Temple Frieze



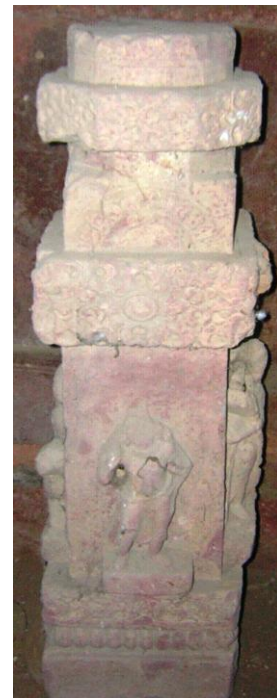
a



b



c



d

Figure 20a, b, c, and d: Temple Pillars

The other most important ancient mound is the mound underneath the Madan Mohanji temple which seems to be structural mound. The two other important mounds

of Hathibaba Tila and Gurudwara Tila are quite disturbed but datable to at least the Kushan period. Terracottas of late medieval/ British period are observed at both these mounds as is clear from the photographs of Upadhyay (1988: Figs. 1-2) attesting to the continuity of these two mounds till recent times. At the site of the mound at the Gurukul road and Ahirpara Tila deposit found in association with late medieval/ British period terracottas was observed but at all such similar sites in Mathura city and its vicinity Kushan period or earlier deposit was traced in the lower levels and the habitation or structural activity at these sites was only limited to the Kushan period and during the late medieval period, these probably acted as centers of terracotta manufacture. This indicates that most of the above mentioned mounds might be datable to the Kushan period in antiquity, if not earlier.

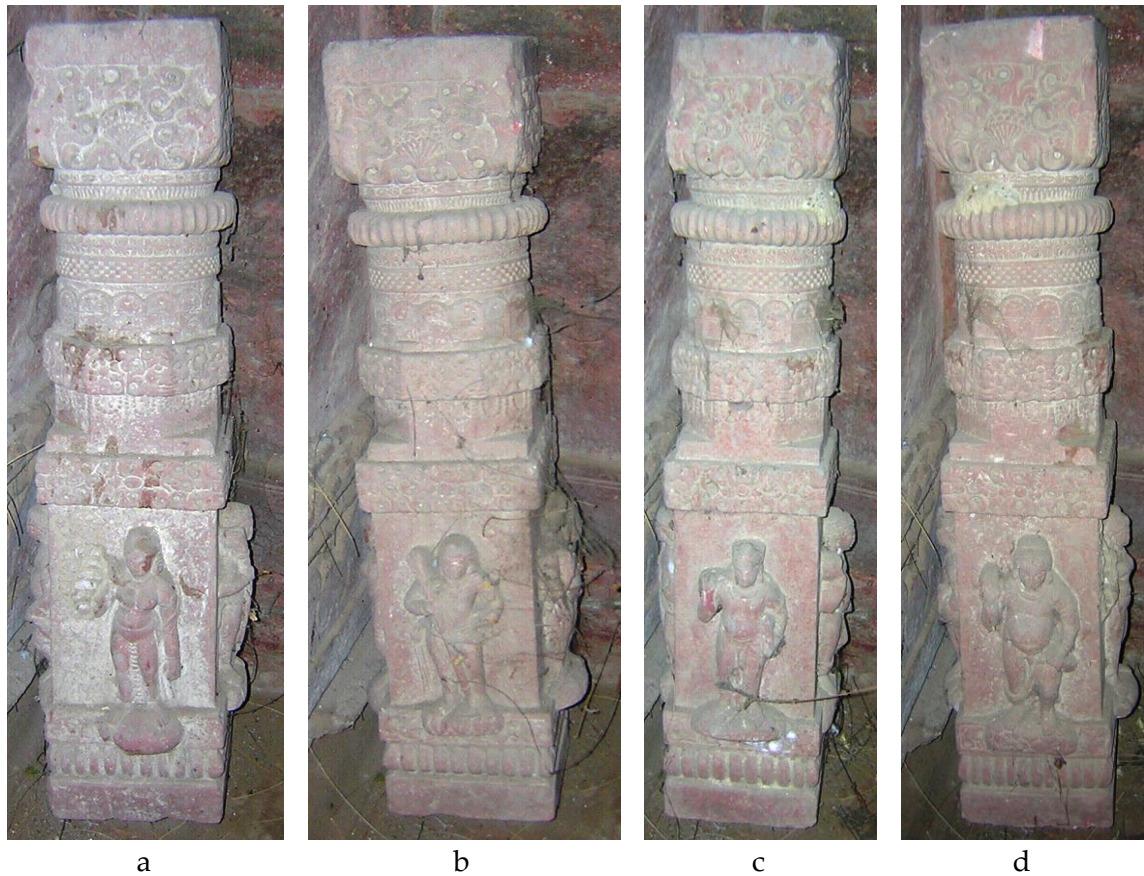


Figure 21a, b, c, and d: Temple Pillars

Sculptural Findings from Vrindavan

Various sculptural findings as analyzed from the records of the Government Museum, Mathura and its catalogues are as follows:

1. Fragmentary relief showing the worship of a decorated cylindrical stupa (with a *vedika*, *harmika* and *chhatravali*) by flying winged Gandharvas (M.M. No. 10.130, Figure 2) belonging to the Sunga period. This relief may be considered the earliest sculptural finding from Vrindavan.

2. Railing pillar (M.M. No. 10.119, Figure 3) belonging to early Kushan period which depicts a lady standing over a couchant dwarf in an act of plucking flowers from a tree (*asoka-dohada*).
3. *Salabhanjika* images (Nos. 40.2887 and 40.2888, Figures 4-5) belonging to early Kushan period showing maidens standing under a *sala* or *asoka* tree. Both of them have their faces retouched by someone in quite recent times (may be late medieval period) to make them look like the figures belonging to Vaishnava tradition.
4. Lower part of an inscribed Bodhisattva image (M.M. No. 74.26, Figure 6) seated in *padmasana* with folds of the drapery falling on the pedestal which is carved with three lions two in profile and the middle one enface. Soles of the feet of the deity are carved with *triratna* and wheel marks and traces of auspicious motifs are seen on the toes also. Two third part of the legs is bare and it can be guessed that the left hand was resting on the left knee. R.C. Sharma has dated it to Kanishka's reign but has wrongly mentioned its Acc. No. 74.20 instead of 74.26. The inscription as deciphered by K.K. Thapalyal and Sharma (Sharma 1984: 181) reads:
 - a. *sindhuka putrasya sresthasya hastikasya sa putro sevakah bodhisattva (prati) shthapaya (ti) sava budha pujaye .*
 - b. *sarva satvanam hitartha mata pitranam pujaye atra cha bodhisattva....*
 - c. *senakenah dama putra cha.*
5. Sri-Lakshmi image belonging to late Kushan period (M.M. No. D 17, ht. 8.5 inches, Figure 7) represents the two-handed goddess with her right hand raised to the shoulder and holding a long lotus stalk in her left hand. On both sides of her head two elephants are shown lustrating the goddess.
6. Statuette representing Siva and Parvati seated on Nandi (M.M. No. D 14, ht. 7.25 inches). Siva is four-armed and holds in one of his right arms a *trisula* and in one of his left arms a *naga*. Parvati holds in her left hand a mirror; her right arm is laid round Siva's neck. To the right side is shown a squatting figure of Ganesa and to the right Skanda holding a *pasa*.
7. Figurine (M.M. No. D18, ht. 5 inches), rudely carved, of a male person sitting to front and holding both hands before his breast.
8. Figurine (M.M. No. D19, ht. 5 inches) of a woman seated to front and holding a child in her left arm in all probability represents a *matrika*.
9. Sculpture in black sandstone representing Vishnu between two female attendants, each standing on a conventional lotus (M.M. No. D35, ht. 2'4.5", Figure 8). The god wears a high *kirita*, a *kaustubha mani* attached to an elaborate necklace, a *yajnopavita*, an elaborate girdle and a *vaijyantimala*. The god is four-armed and holds his usual emblems: *gada*, *padms* in his right hands and *chakra* and *sankha* in his left hands. Of the two female attendants, that to the right of the central figure

raises her right hand and holds the stalk of a *padma* in her left. The other plays the *vina*. Based on the attributes, these female attendants may be identified as Goddess Sri-Lakshmi and Sarasvati respectively. In front of the lotus-flower on which Vishnu stands are three figurines: Garuda between two kneeling devotees, apparently male and female, who carry vases of offerings. The Garuda is defaced; for the rest the sculpture is in excellent preservation. This sculpture seems to be an early export from Pala kingdom to Vrindavan when the popular bhakti cult was yet to develop at Vrindavan. It confirms the stature which Vrindavan enjoyed even before its rise as a great Krishna *bhakti* centre.

10. Bust of Brahma (M.M. No. 48.3376, Figure 9) carved out in spotted red sandstone. The God is tricephalic with central face being bearded and having *jatajuta*. Hands and lower portions are missing. The sculpture may belong to the Kushan period and is one of the rare findings from the region.
11. Broken sculpture in red sandstone (M.M. No. 48.3377, Figure 10) showing a figure seated cross-legged in a peculiar manner, possibly over a rock surface. The size of the body is corpulent, so must be representing a Yaksha or a deity inspired by Yaksha's iconography like God Agni. All the limbs and features of the figure are missing except for a tenon to fix it somewhere. The sculpture may belong to the Kushan period.
12. Headless image of a male attendant (M.M. No. 48.3378, Figure 11) carrying an object of offering like a turban in his left hand and a flower in his right hand. Similar sculptures carved on railing pillars now housed in Mathura Museum are identified as Bodhisattva carrying flower. So, this broken figure may also qualify as a Bodhisattva belonging to the Kushan period.
13. A latticed window (M.M. No. 48.3379, Figure 12) with a lady figure in the center. There are four rows of square shaped openings in the lattice. Seven lion faces are carved in a row on top. The central lady figure is shown with a background of a tree and creeper's decoration on either side. The right hand of the lady is kept on something very peculiar, but unfortunately difficult to identify. The latticed window may belong to the temple structure of post-Gupta period.
14. A broken door-jamb (Figure 13) with a number of female and male attendants. The one interesting one is that of a cow-headed minor deity (or Gomukha Yaksha) who holds a pot in his right hand.
15. White marble statuette of Balarama (M.M. No. D36) which belongs to the nineteenth century only.

Madanmohan Temple Site/ Dvadasa Aditya Tila

At the Madan Mohan Temple (belonging to sixteenth century) site, during the decade of 1970's some ancient structure along the river front (Yamuna) was exposed (Figures

14-15). This area (Kalidah) is related to the episode of subduing of Naga Kaliya by child Krishna and the mound is locally known as Dwadash Aditya Tila, also indicating its solar connection. In the ancient structure, various bricks measuring 52 x 26 x 8 cm, 39 x 29 x 7 cm, 42 x 28 x 7 cm, 36 x 26 x 6 cm etc. have been used. The larger brick size of 52 cm length correspond to Mauryan brick size and is comparable to various Mauryan bricks found at Saheth-Maheth, Sonkh etc. whereas the 42-36 cm length bricks are comparable to the bricks of Sunga, Kushan and Gupta periods. Besides, a number of reused bricks (broken), smaller Post-Gupta bricks are also visible at various spots in the upper portion of the structure. *Lakhori* bricks can be observed in the upper part of this brick structure as well. Various bricks used in this structure confirm the point that the structural edifice at the site dates back to as early as Mauryan period and continued during the succeeding periods of Sunga, Kushan, Gupta, Post-Gupta and medieval periods before the Madan Mohan Temple was constructed atop the mound in the sixteenth century. Since no regular habitation deposit is observed at or near this site, it is quite probable that it served as a religious edifice and this point was confirmed by the finding of few inscribed bricks in the structure. The two bricks on their face (Figures 16-17) contained similar inscriptions mentioning “*Thāna Bhāgavatena Nanātaken Kā(ritam)*” (Mishra 1983: 19-21). This inscription is in Brahmi characters of second-third century BCE and the use of word “*Bhagavatena*” indicates that this religious edifice was dedicated to Bhagavatas (Vrishnis). These bricks were removed from the structural edifice by the ASI officials at some point of time and kept at a secluded place inside the structure of the Madan Mohan temple. Important repercussions of this discovery are: firstly that the town of Vrindavan dates back to at least as early as third-second century BCE for its religious importance, secondly the most famous of modern Bhagavata sites was a Bhagavata spot during that early time as well, thirdly this structural evidence would be the earliest evidence of such an ancient religious structure (Brahmanical) in whole of north India. The same site has continued to be an important religious place since then as the finding of various temple remains of Gupta, Post-Gupta period suggests. The important findings from this site are as follows:

Railing pillar (Figures 18a & b; Gupta 2015: 297-301): It is a broken railing pillar of about 2.5' length. It actually appears more like a temple doorjamb than a railing and is comparable to few pillars in the Mathura Museum in decorative style. It is decorated with *makara* design, leaves and creepers. In the lower part an attendant or a Bodhisattva is carved in standing pose holding *pushpaguchchha* in his hands whereas in the now surviving upper part possibly a Bodhisattva image (quite similar to the Buddha image) is carved which has its right hand in *abhaya mudra* but the angle of the palm is slightly in profile rather than frontal. The slightly wavy hair is tied in a topknot (*ushnisa*) but it is different from any Buddha headgear belonging to this period and observed till now. A *urna* is visible on the forehead in between the eyebrows. Folds of the upper garment are visible on his left shoulder. His dhoti is draped in such a way that one-third of his legs are uncovered. The *ekansika sanghati* is worn in such a way that one of the folds runs across the chest (very much like a *yajnopavita*). He is adorned

with wristlets and a broad *ekavali*. He is also provided with a round halo with a scalloped border. The overall treatment of this figure is so unique that it is slightly difficult to identify its exact nature but since it appears to be a pre-stage when the iconography of Buddhist deities evolved a set pattern, it might be one of the earliest examples of seated Buddhist figures in Mathura art, datable to pre-Kushan period (may be even last decades of 1st century BCE). On the reverse side of this pillar, *chaitya* shrines divide the pillar into three parts. In the lower part only a shrine is visible while above it a male figure is shown standing wearing *ekansika sanghati* (similar to Bodhisattva figures). His left hand is placed near its waist probably holding some object whereas it is difficult to judge the posture of his right hand. Not many details are identifiable in this figure since the surface is quite corroded. In the upper panel, a Bodhisattva is shown standing possibly holding a water-pot in his left hand whereas his right hand is in *abhaya mudra* with slightly angular position. He is wearing a dhoti, a thick fold of which is arranged over his left hand. He is adorned with a broad *ekavali*. A round halo with scalloped border indicates his divine status. His slightly wavy *jata* like hair is tied in a top bun. The overall treatment of the figure indicates it to be Maitreya Buddha and again confirms its pre-Kushan date. Unfortunately, in recent years the railing pillar has got broken into two pieces and much corroded due to negligence of local staff.



Figure 22: Lower Part of a Figure



Figure 23: Inscribed Brick



Figure 24: Inscribed Brick



Figure 25: Inscribed Brick



Figure 26: Inscribed Brick



Figure 27: Inscribed Brick



Figure 28: Inscribed Brick

Figure 29: Molded
Decorative BrickFigure 30: Molded
Decorative BrickFigure 31: Molded
Decorative Brick

Vishnu carved on a temple frieze (Figure 19): A four-armed image of Vishnu is carved on a temple frieze. He is shown seated in *maharajalilasana*. In his upper left hand he holds a *chakra*, the upper right hand holds a *gada* which is kept downwards whereas his natural left hand is possibly holding a conch and the natural right hand raised to shoulder is broken. He is wearing a beaded necklace and a decorated *katisutra*. A *vanamala* is also adorning him. He is bedecked with beautiful ear ornaments and a bejeweled *kirita mukuta*. Based on stylistic features the image may belong to late Gupta period.

Temple pillars (Figures 20a-d & 21a-d): Two temple pillars of about late Gupta period were also found in diggings at the Madan Mohan temple. The two pillars have different decorative carvings in different registers. But in the lowest register, both the pillars have eight different figures, one of them seems to be Skanda with spear and two are identifiable as horse riders.

Lower part of a figure (Figure 22): Lower base of a sculpture in which only feet portion is left. The pedestal confirms that the figure might have been an independent image standing in *samapadasthanaka mudra*.

Besides the above-mentioned findings, few inscribed bricks (Figures 23-28) possibly of the Mauryan period, moulded decorative bricks possibly also of the Mauryan period

(Figures 29-31) and other architectural fragments of medieval period (Figure 32-33) were also found from the site.



Figure 32: Architectural Fragment of Medieval Period



Figure 33: Architectural Fragment of Medieval Period



Figure 34: Broken torso from Sunrakh



Figure 35: Devi from Akrur Tila

Adjoining Vrindavan, there are following other important archaeological sites:

Sunrakh

Sunrakh is an archaeological site of considerable dimension having ancient mound occupied by the modern village situated about 1 mile distant from Madan Mohan temple. The site dates back to the early centuries of the Common Era with possibility of even earlier horizons. A broken torso (Figure 34) was found by me at a shrine in the village which unfortunately is now stolen from there. The headless bust of a standing male was quite damaged and seems to be belonging to early Kushan period. The left hand of the deity was kept near his waist holding a sword. His right hand was completely missing but it might have been in *abhaya mudra* as was the norm with Kushan images. Possibly a dagger was tied with his *katisura* which was distinctly visible in this image along with the thick folds of drapery tied at the waist. He was shown wearing a thick necklace like many other Vaisṇava images of the Kushan period. Heavy armlets were visible in the broken left hand of the deity. The *uttariya* which the deity was shown wearing, appeared to be of indigenous nature and was definitely different from the drapery worn by the Kushan royal images. As sword was a feature well associated with Vira cult like that of Malhar image and the Kondamottu

relief, there is a strong possibility of this image representing a Vrishni Vira. The total height of the image would have been almost equal to the height of the Mora torsos (possibly Vrishni Viras). The finding of this image nearby the Bhagavata temple at Dwadash Aditya Tila in Vrindavan again confirms the presence of Vrishni cult in ancient times in Vrindavan.

Akrur

Akrur is a small hamlet situated on the outskirts of Vrindavan along River Yamuna in between Mathura and Vrindavan. Name of the village is derived from Akrura, the Vrishni hero. It is believed that at this place Samkarshana/Balarama and Vasudeva-Krishna had given him the *darsanas* of their *chaturbhuja rupa* when Akrura was taking them to Mathura from Vraja. Since Akrura is the great ancestor of Varshneya caste, Varshneya people consider this place to be their holy place. There is mound known as Bhatrol Bihari which is an isolated mound and appears like a *thupa*. The importance of this site is not only in terms of legends and literary references but archaeological too. In the early decades of twentieth century, a female statue was found from the site which is now housed in the Mathura Museum (M.M. No. F 6, Figure 35). This statue represents a standing lady with her right hand in *abhaya mudra* (*vyavritta*) and the left holding the sashes of her drapery. There is also a possibility that she might have held some pot in her left hand. The treatment of her lower portion is very much like that of Ekanamsa sculptures and also like that of Mora female deity. The height of the figure is comparatively smaller (about 2 feet only). On overall stylistic grounds the image belongs to about early decades of first century CE.

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