

A Study of Ceramics from Bewan, District Sikar, Rajasthan

Vinay Kumar Gupta and Pawan Kumar Saraswat

Jaipur Circle, Archaeological Survey of India, 70 /140, Sector 7, Patel Marg, Nansarovar, Jaipur 302020

E-mail: archaeologist1@gmail.com

Abstract

The Jaipur Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India undertook excavations at the archaeological mound at Bewan. This mound, located almost midway between Ganeshwar and Jodhpura, holds considerable archaeological significance. Excavations at the site have yielded cultural evidence spanning multiple periods, beginning with the OCP-Ganeshwar period, followed by the BRW-PGW period, and extending through the early historical period up to medieval times. The present paper offers a concise overview of the excavations, emphasising the site's stratigraphy and chronology and assessing its implications for established interpretations concerning the OCP in the Doab and Sikar regions.

Introduction

The ancient mound of Bewan (Fig. 1), archaeologically designated as BWN, or Bewan-ki-Dhani (27°47' N; 75°59' E; 327.90 m AMSL), is located near Patan town in the Neem-ka-Thana Tehsil of Rajasthan's Sikar District. The village of Bewan is locally referred to as Gujaro-ki-Dhani. Nearby prominent sites include Ganeshwar (located 21 km to the southwest), Jodhpura (25 km to the southeast) and the prehistoric rock art site of Sohanpura (approximately 7 km north) of Bewan. The Bewan mound is located on the left bank of the Kansavati River, which flows approximately 450 m southeast of the mound. However, historical changes in water levels have significantly reduced the river's flow over time. The mound exhibits an undulating landscape, has undergone substantial modification due to the local agricultural and construction activities, resulting in significant alterations to its original topography (Fig. 2). The southeastern segment of the mound, which was encroached upon by modern settlement, maintains a higher elevation compared to other sections.

Stratigraphy

A total of 7 trenches were excavated. Of these, 3 (YN8, YD1, and YM9) were excavated down to the natural soil. Trench YD1/Q4 was positioned near the centre of the mound, while trenches YM9/Q2 and YN8/Q1 were located closer to the mound's periphery. The deepest trench, YD1/Q4, contained a maximum of 31 stratigraphic layers, with cultural deposits spanning from the medieval period at the uppermost levels to the OCP/Ganeshwar period at the base, reaching a total depth of 12.70 m.

OCP/Ganeshwar Ceramics

In trench YM9/Q2, L-21 and L-31 deposits exhibited an average thickness of approximately 140 cm and were characterised by their compact nature, clinker presence, and distinct yellow-brown colour. The density of OCP sherds within the deposit was recorded at 0.406 kg/m³. The deposit was largely undisturbed; however, in trench YD1, minor disturbances resulted in the occurrence of a few Black-and-Red Ware (BRW) and Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sherds within the OCP context.

Among the recovered OCP sherds, rim portions were notably scarce, with most sherds being small, having blunt edges, and coated with soil. The pottery was predominantly brick-orange in colour, composed of medium-coarse fabric, and displayed slightly ill-fired surfaces. Micaceous elements were also present. Additionally, handmade sherds were observed within the assemblage.

In terms of shape, the OCP included small pots, bowls, jars, and basins (Fig. 3). Most of these shapes displayed recurved features. Decorative elements on the sherds featured incised criss-cross patterns, appliques, and notched designs. However, no charred or burnished sherds were observed within the deposit.

The Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) assemblage at Bewan has a well-established typological and technological identity that establishes it within wider ceramic traditions and is also marked by certain regional variations. The pottery is dominated by wheel-made types, with rims being externally flared or folded and then thickened-morphs that are typical of the established morphological range of the OCP horizon. These are commonly paired with abruptly defined shoulders and intermittent surface finishing, such as burnishing or red slip. There are frequent decorative motifs, such as incised lines and punctate impressions, which are comparable to those found at Atranjikhhera, where the OCP tradition is better represented in the lower levels (Fig. 4) (Gaur 1983). The Atranjikhhera assemblage,

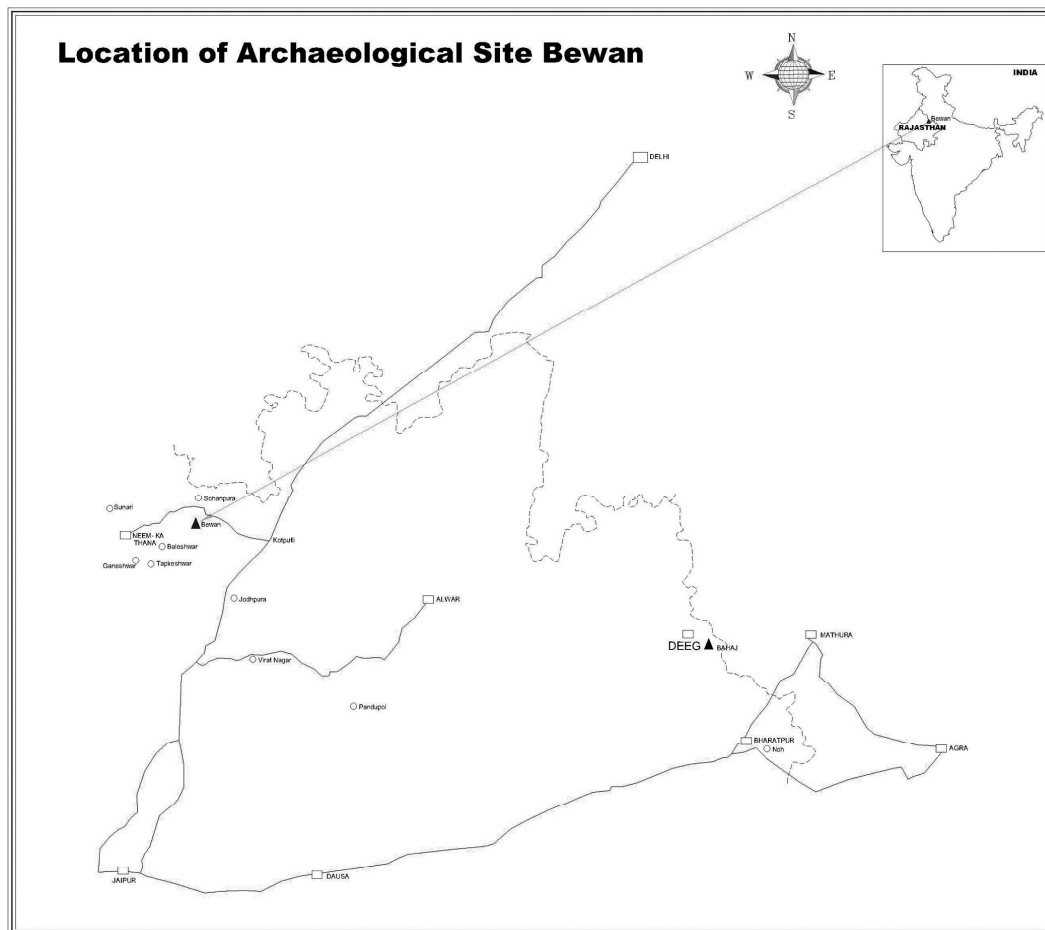


Fig. 1: Location of Bewan



Fig. 2: An aerial view of the Bewan mound

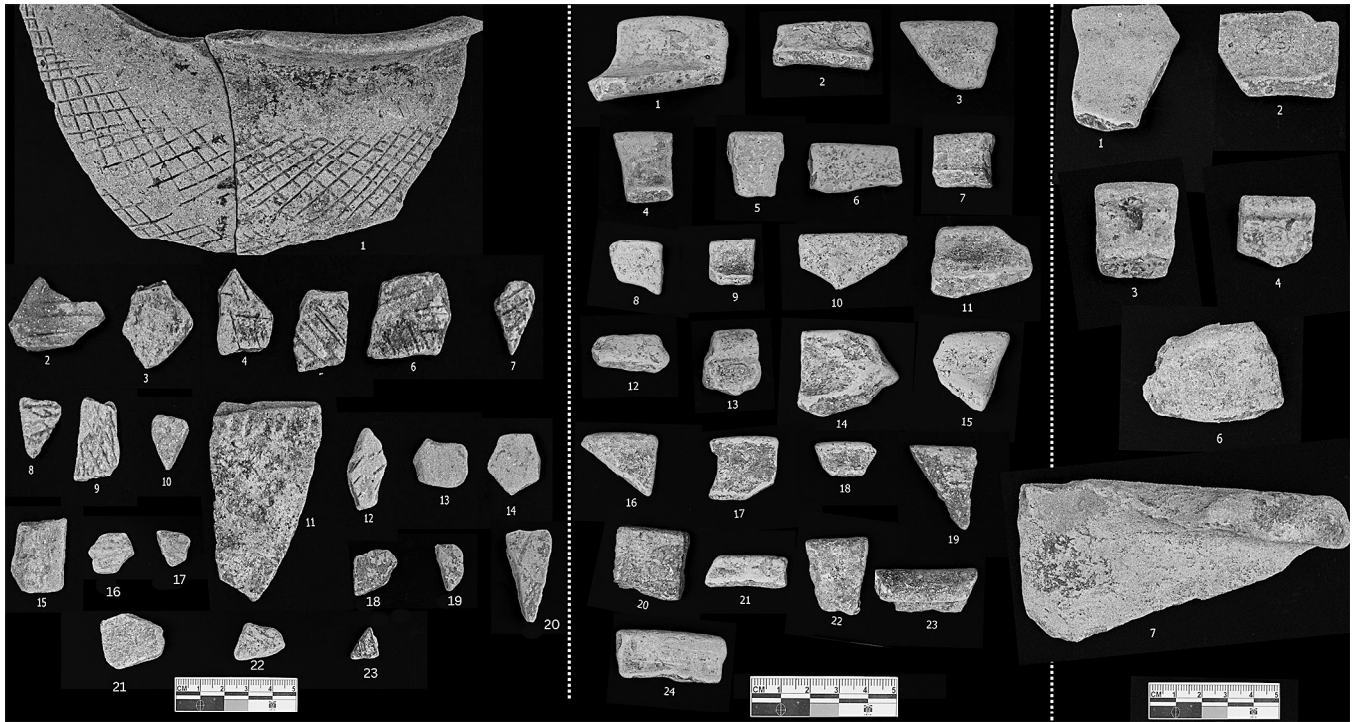


Fig. 3: Sherds and rim fragments of OCP with incised lines, notches and appliques

Bewan	Ganeshwar	Atranjikhhera

Fig. 4: Comparison of OCP from Bewan, Ganeshwar (Prasad and Singh 2021) and Atranjikhhera (Gaur 1983)

while identical in rim shape and fabric, is characterised by marginally finer workmanship, which may suggest a more advanced ceramic industry in the region. At Ganeshwar–Jodhpura, however, pottery shares some of the rim forms but is largely handmade and coarser-grained, commonly tempered with mica (Prasad and Singh 2022; Prasad and Deshpande 2024). These variations indicate a more conservative technological style at Ganeshwar, which is likely an expression of local tradition within the general OCP cultural context. The repetition of dominant rim forms and decorative methods across these geographically remote sites indicates standard ceramic conventions, but local adaptations are still apparent. Here, Bewan plays a crucial role, being part of a widely spread cultural network and adding distinctive elements to the emergent material culture of the Ganga-Yamuna doab and surrounding areas.

BRW/PGW

The deposit was identified in trenches YN8/Q1 (L-15, 16, 17, 18), YD1 (L-30), and YM9 (L-19, 20). It exhibited an average thickness of approximately 125 cm and was characterised by its semi-compact to compact nature, with a predominantly pale brown colouration. Within this deposit, the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) had a recorded density of 0.133 kg/m³, Black-and-Red Ware (BRW) a density of 1.168 kg/m³, and Grey Ware a density of 2.762 kg/m³.

BRW was encountered throughout the upper layers of the PGW deposit, and it extended into the lower levels where its frequency increased. Rim fragments were notably absent within this context. BRW sherds commonly

featured a red slip on the outer surface and a black slip on the inner surface. Additionally, two sherds with a red slip-on Painted Grey Ware were identified (Fig. 5, section C). BRW was found in both varieties: the fine and deluxe forms (Fig. 5, section A), closely resembling PGW in terms of quality, and a coarser variant of BRW, which appears red on the exterior and black on the interior due to specific firing techniques (Fig. 5, section B). This coarse variety is particularly linked to the late phase of the PGW cultural horizon. Most of the shapes of this ware were also different from those obtained from the other sites of the Chalcolithic assemblage yielding the Black-and-Red ware.

The pottery assemblage was further supplemented by Grey Ware, observed in both fine and coarse fabrics. Black Slipped Ware was also identified (Fig. 6), characterised by its thin section and shapes similar to PGW, primarily bowls and dishes. The smooth, evenly applied slip suggests a refined manufacturing technique. Other associated red wares, mostly handmade, were composed of coarse fabrics and were ill-fired. Some of these sherds exhibited cord-impressed surfaces, while others showed evidence of a mica wash. These red wares were largely identified as storage jars.

The PGW was distinguished by its thin, fine fabric, which was well-fired and contained micaceous elements (Figs. 7-9). Its shapes were primarily limited to bowls and dishes with incurved and convex profiles. Decorative elements included black-painted motifs, predominantly concentric circles, and several sherds featured painted rims. Notably, a few sherds displayed painted designs on both surfaces, while one sherd was found with a stamped base.

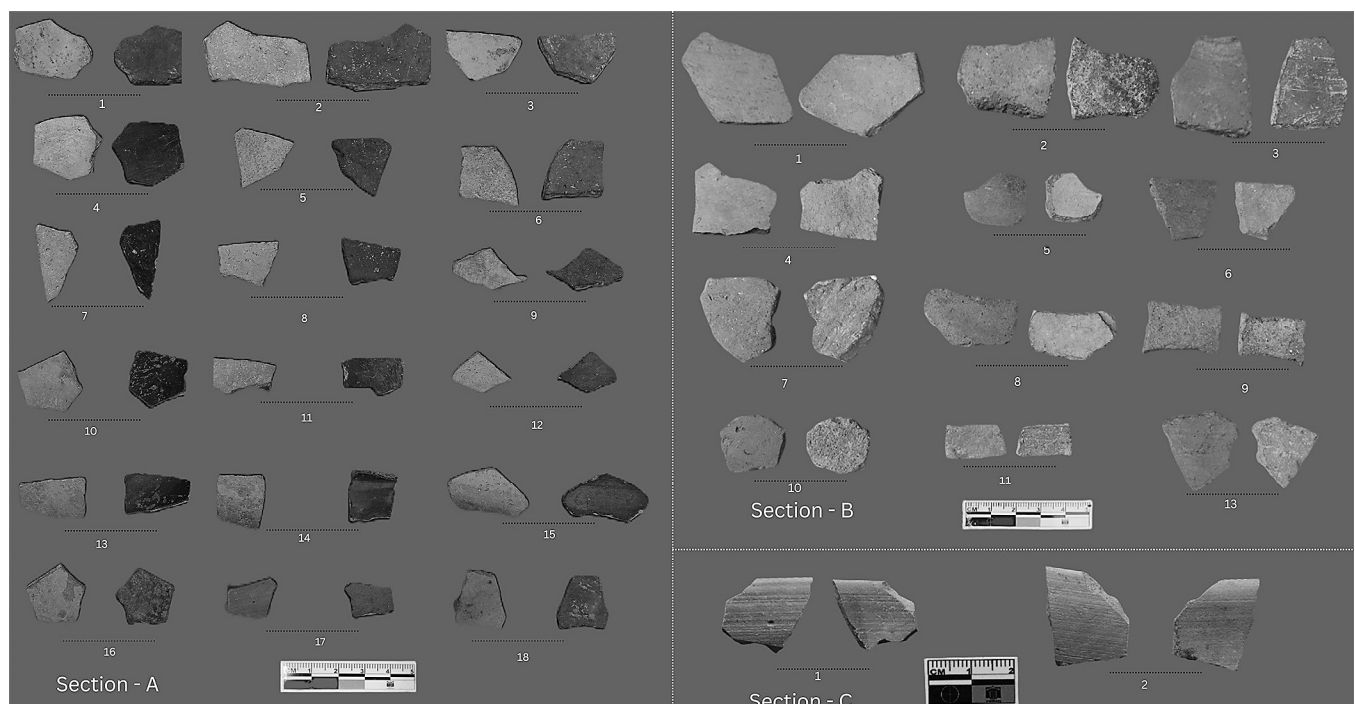


Fig. 5: BRW with fine and coarse fabric red (outer) and black (inner)

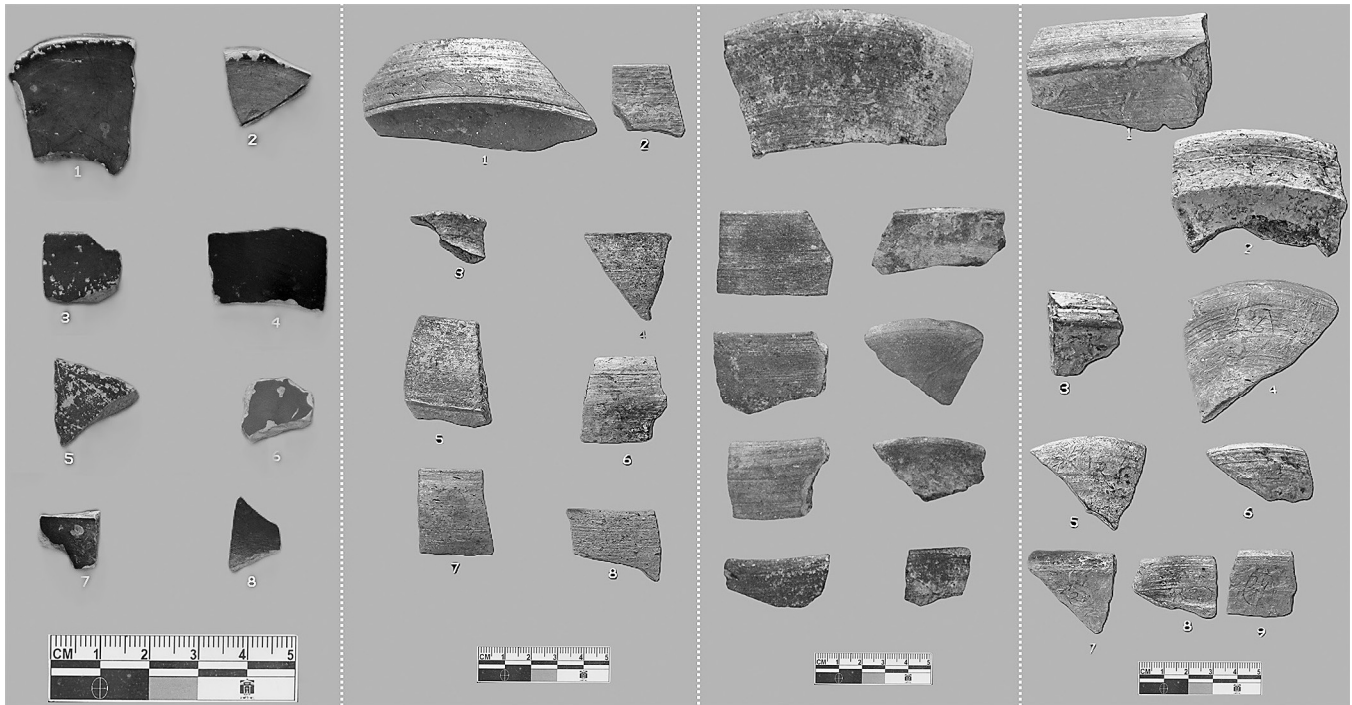


Fig. 6: Black Slipped and Grey Ware bowls

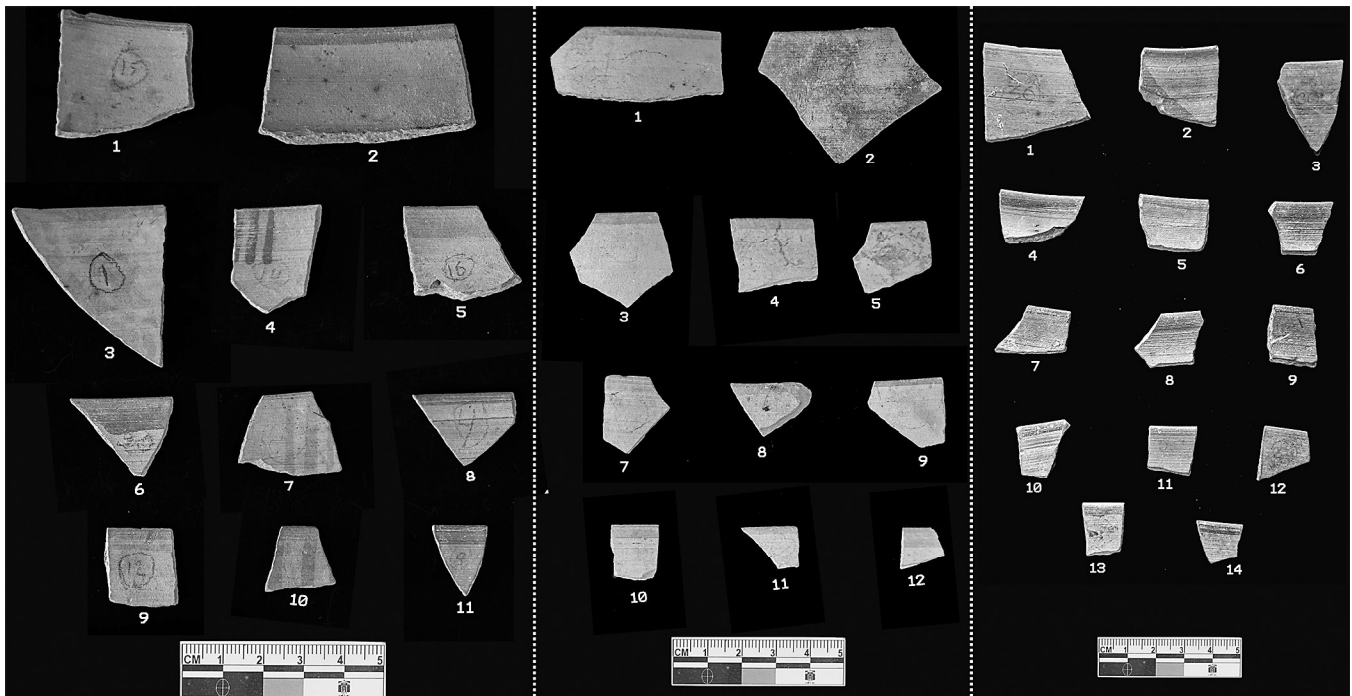


Fig. 7: Rim fragments of PGW with paintings on inner and outer side

The ceramic assemblage from the PGW levels at Bewan presents a clearly defined typological character, in conformity with the wider Painted Grey Ware horizon but indicative of subtle local tendencies. The prevailing forms

– chiefly bowls and shallow dishes – are characterised by externally thickened and sharply everted rims, with well-controlled curvature and uniformity in size and profile. The observations seen along the stratigraphic sequence,

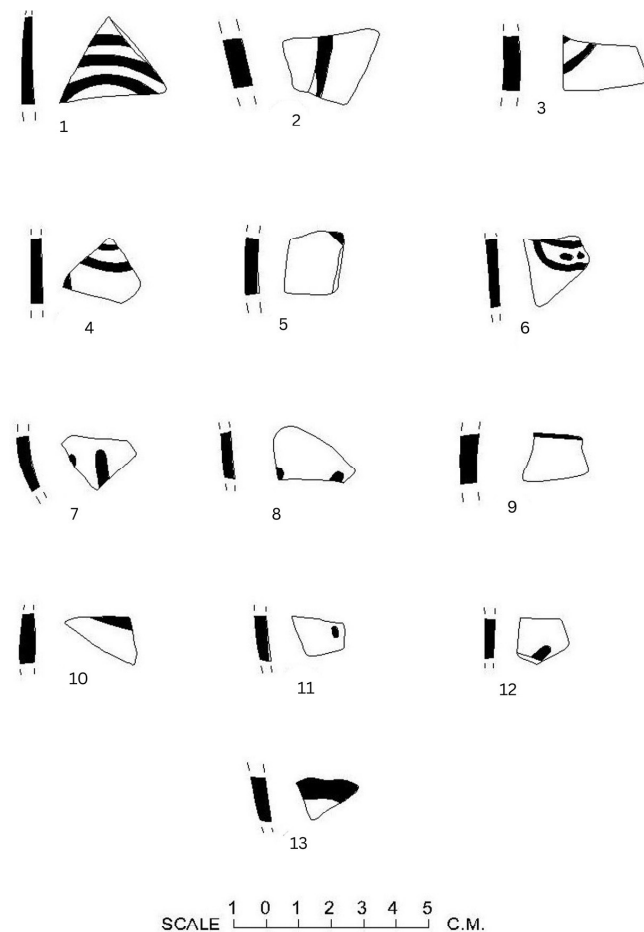


Fig. 8: Painted Grey Ware sherds

from the heavier and stronger profiles in the lower levels, to the finer, more standardised varieties in the upper levels, suggested developments in ceramic technology. The painting was done in black pigment over a carefully prepared grey slip, with motifs comprising horizontal bands, concentric circles, linear groupings, and intermittent curvilinear patterns. These motifs are executed using controlled brushwork, usually in exact alignment with rim or shoulder areas, implying both stylistic intention and conformity with prevailing stylistic norms. The firing was seemingly well-controlled, leaving a fine grey core and a hard, smooth surface – typical of the mature PGW ceramic tradition.

At Barnoli-ki-Dhai (Dt. Mathura), stratigraphic evidence from the earliest PGW-bearing levels reveals a small assemblage of sherds that reflect residual characteristics of the preceding Black-and-Red Ware (BRW) tradition (Gupta 2024). While the fabric and typology conform broadly to PGW standards, certain features – such as the surface treatment, firing technique, and traces of the distinctive BRW slip – indicate a continuity of ceramic tradition (Gupta 2024). A comparable

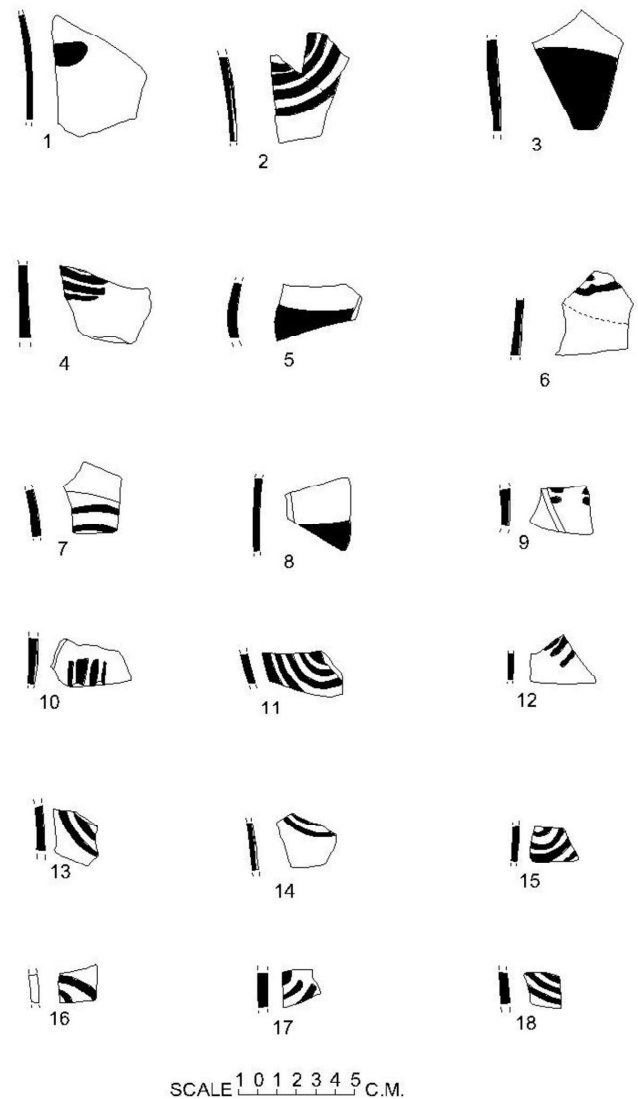


Fig. 9: Painted Grey Ware sherds

phenomenon was observed at Bewan, where early PGW contexts yielded sherds that retain similar elements associated with BRW, particularly in the application of slip and surface finish. These ceramic overlaps suggest not a sharp cultural rupture but rather a gradual and regionally nuanced transformation from BRW to PGW. The presence of such intermediary forms is significant in establishing the evolutionary link between these two ware traditions, reflecting technological adaptation and the persistence of older ceramic practices during the emergence of the PGW cultural phase. Significant among these is a small number of sherds from the lower PGW levels that have characteristics typical of the earlier Black-and-Red Ware (BRW) tradition, including dual-toned slip and faint red-core fabric, which indicate a residual technological continuity. Such transitional examples can be interpreted

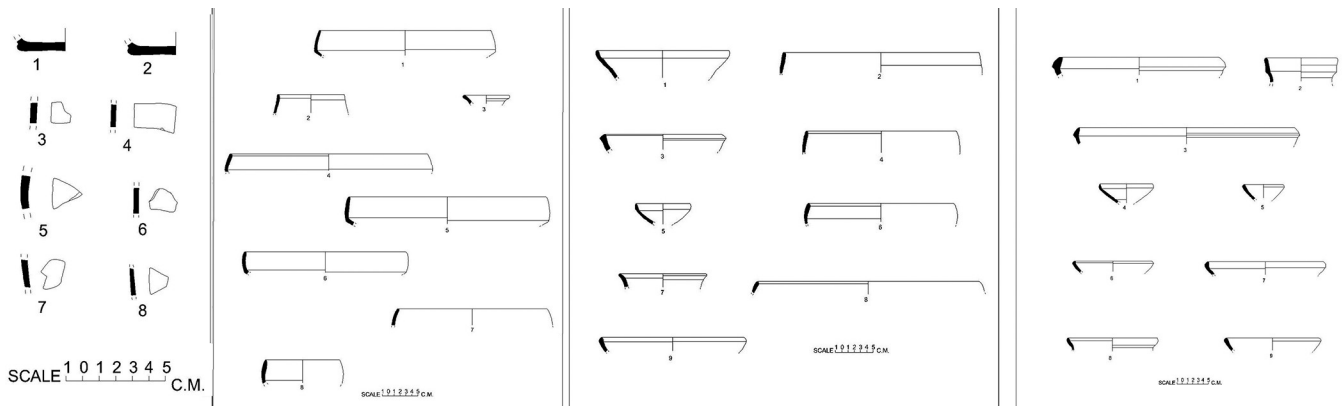


Fig.10: Northern Black Polished, Grey and Red ware fragments

as proof of a gradual change rather than an abrupt cultural break and thus favour the hypothesis of the localised evolutionary development of PGW out of earlier ceramic traditions.

NBPW

The Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) was identified in Trenches YN8/Q1 (L-13, 14), YD1/Q4 (L-28, 29), and YM9/Q2 (L-17, 18). This deposit had an average thickness of approximately 40 cm and exhibited a semi-compact nature. At the site, NBPW was observed between the Mauryan/pre-Mauryan and PGW deposits. However, it did not form a distinct stratigraphic layer and was represented by only a limited number of sherds.

The NBPW sherds (Fig. 10) recovered from Bewan are characterised by a very fine fabric with thin sections. They appear in black and grey colour, with the majority of the sections showing a grey core. The manufacturing process suggests that the grey ware was initially treated with a red slip before undergoing the distinctive high-polished finish typical of NBPW.

In association with NBPW, Grey Ware was also identified. This ware is often distinguished by a micaceous wash, imparting a slight shimmer to its surface. Additionally, Black Ware was present; however, it lacked a slip treatment, and its black colouration appears to have resulted from specific firing conditions. The associated Red Ware assemblage primarily comprised basins and storage jars.

Mauryan Period Ceramics

The recovered pottery assemblage from the Mauryan levels of Bewan has a varied and typologically important corpus, predominantly done in coarse- to fine-textured brick-red fabric. Notable among these forms is a sharply carinated, upturned, collar-rimmed, funnel-shaped bowl having a flat base with its surface vertically ridged at intervals. Such a pot resonates in the Mauryan context at Sonkh (Hartel 1993) and Ahichchhatra (Ghosh and Panigrahi

1946), where the same treatment of rim articulation and surface decoration has been recorded, indicating a common ceramic language in the middle Ganga plain during the Mauryan era.

Globular jars form another prevalent type, represented by examples having narrow necks and rectangular or everted rims, made in coarse ware and clearly meant for storage or utilitarian household functions. A variant with a short-beaked funnel neck in medium coarse fabric finds parallels at Ahichchhatra (Ghosh and Panigrahi 1946), where similar profiles occur in association with household assemblages. A banded and grooved rim type with termination in an everted lip also occurs in this instance, while highlighting the continuity in morphological handling of jar rims within sites. An occurrence of pyriform jars having recurved necks as well as dainty banded collar rims – produced in medium fine ware – supports evidence of a higher class of domestic ware, possibly for liquids or semi-solid contents.

Cooking vessels feature a lenticular shape with a short-beaked rim and sharply carinated neck, made of unoxidised brick-red ware typical of hearth-side ceramics. This finds close parallel with analogous forms excavated from the Mauryan strata at Sonkh (Hartel 1993), where such shapes have been interpreted as pertaining to boiling or simmering activities. A substantial carinated dish or pan, with a vertical wall and prominent beaked rim, probably served communal or mass cooking functions, whereas a bell-shaped artefact – presumably a goblet – exhibits a corrugated cylindrical neck and a beaded rim, indicative of ritual or elite consumption practice. This specific shape boasts a strong comparative example in high-status assemblages at Sonkh.

Sunga Period Ceramics

The Sunga phase deposit at the site is identified in Layers 8 and 9 of Trench YN8/Q1, Layer 25 of Trench YD1/Q1, and Layers 13 and 14 of Trench YM9/Q2. The deposit exhibits an average thickness of approximately 35 cm

and is characterised by semi-compact soil, light grey and yellowish in colour. The pottery assemblage from this phase is relatively sparse, with a limited number of potsherds recovered. The identified pottery shapes include globular jars made of medium-fine fabric, well-fired, and produced on a fast wheel. Funnel-necked vessels are also observed. Rim treatments primarily include banded and beaded rims, often decorated with continuous groove and ridge patterns.

Kushan Period Ceramics

The pottery corpus of the Kushan level at Bewan is a unique and stratigraphically reliable cultural horizon, characterised by the domination of Rangmahal tradition-type painted red ware. Excavated from a well-defined archaeological horizon related to structural remains and cultural waste typical of the Kushan era, this ceramic assemblage is extremely useful in gaining an understanding of the material culture, regional exchange networks, and technological traditions of the period.

Stratigraphically, the level produced pottery in conjunction with dense habitation waste, such as hearths and floor levels, attests to *in-situ* occupation. The pottery is mainly composed of brick-red medium-to fine-fabric pots, well wheel-made and frequently surface-treated with black-painted designs. The most common motifs are parallel horizontal band stripes, placed on the trunk and shoulder regions of globular jars and bowls, as in existing Rangmahal stylistic traditions. Certain sherds show additional painted motifs, including petal-in-circle designs, semi-circular looped bands, ladder patterns, and 'V'-shaped compositions within oblique-lined frames, implying both decorative elaboration and potential symbolic significance.

The Kushan period exhibits a high level of fineness in ceramic ornamentation and typological variation. The types range from funnel-shaped bowls, pyriform jars with banded or grooved rims, and corrugated collar-neck jars to bowl lids with knobbed edges or flanges, all indicating standardised methods of production characteristic of the Kushan ceramic horizon within the Gangetic plains. The occurrence of appliqué decoration, including twisted cord-like ribs, and micaceous slip on some of the jars also indicates a level of status differentiation or functional hierarchy in the use of the vessels. Fabric diversity – from thin-walled, fine tableware to coarse storage jars with organic inclusions – indicates a variety of domestic, ceremonial, and perhaps trade-related uses. The overall character of this Kushan stratum pottery from Bewan corresponds with similar assemblages from sites such as Sonkh (Hartel 1993), Rangmahal and Pilibangan (Rydh 1959).

Gupta Period Ceramics

The stamped ware pottery assemblage from the site offers a rich and diverse repertoire, mainly belonging to the Kushan period, with some intrusive elements that could be assigned to the Medieval and Gupta levels. The pots, mostly in red ware, reveal uniform application of stamped ornamentation on the shoulder and neck area, frequently combined with grooved or ridged ones. The texture is medium to very coarse and contains frequent occurrences of husk and mica, suggesting that the locally available raw material was used and firing control varied.

One of the most frequent recurring motifs is the *nandipada*, concentric circles with dots or *mandalas*, diamonds, half-circular garlands, and rosettes with petaloid motifs. They commonly occurred between horizontal grooves or in bands, indicating that there existed a standardised decoration scheme. The frequent repetition of these motifs on more than one level, especially between 440 cm and 480 cm, fits well with known patterns of ceramic production during the Kushan cultural stage in the upper Ganga plains.

The availability of poorly stamped and poorly fired samples, together with samples of finer quality, indicates a two-stage mode of production – perhaps household-level pottery production alongside more factory-scale workshops. It also indicates differentiation in use, with some of the pots clearly used for storage or everyday domestic purposes and others being imbued with symbolic or ritual meanings.

A few of the illustrations from the highest levels, including the grey ware stamped with a star-like design at 160 cm, propose survival or adaptation of the older decorative traditions into subsequent cultural contexts, though with variation in ceramic fabric and form. Similarly, a few Gupta-period stamped sherds illustrate continuity of form but with minimal variation in the execution of design, which proposes an adaptive aesthetic with retention of certain traditional motifs.

Considered collectively, the stamped ware shows a continuity of symbolic language, technological practice, and local ceramic expression during an important cultural period. These materials not only tell us about craft practices and decoration preferences but also communicate wider cultural identities, administrative influences, and socio-economic structures of the early historic northern Indian landscape.

Conclusion

The excavations at Bewan provide a culture sequence from the OCP period with a continuous material culture up to the Medieval period. The ceramic sequence uncovered at Bewan provides crucial insight into the cultural transitions across the early historic landscape of northwestern India. The Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) assemblage is marked by medium to coarse fabrics, incised decoration,

and both handmade and wheel-made forms. However, the OCP sherds were scanty yet sufficient to draw the conclusion that it closely resembles sites like Ganeshwar and Atranjikhhera and presents a common culture similar to the OCP culture of the Gangetic doab. OCP culture is succeeded by the BRW/PGW culture with a higher density of the BRW at the lowest strata. PGW assemblage comprises associated wares, which include Black Slipped Ware, black polished ware, grey ware, and associated red ware, along with the Painted Grey Ware.

PGW culture is succeeded by the continuous habitation of the pre-Mauryan, Mauryan, Sunga, Kushan, and Gupta periods with variations in the ceramic assemblage. The pottery assemblage of Bewan provides a unique opportunity to understand various pottery typologies from varying periods in a much less disturbed manner in comparison to the other proto/early/historical sites from where such cultural material is available.

Acknowledgements

The first author is grateful to the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India for granting him permission to excavate the archaeological mound Bewan. He is grateful to his team of Jaipur Circle officials and staff who in one way or another helped in the work, particularly Sarva Shri Sanjeev Barala, K. L. Saini and Ravindra Jangid. He also acknowledges the help of the research students who were part of the excavation, particularly Sarva Shri Tarun Puri (Goswami), Anand Kumar, Manoj Meena, Satyaprakash Kumawat, and Ms. Sangita Saini, to name a few.

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