



VII.11. Rajagriha

Rajgir (ancient Rajagriha) is situated about 100 km to the south-east of Patna in the Nalanda district of Bihar State. The town of Bihar-Sharif (District Headquarters) is situated about 21 km north-east, the famous site of Nalanda Mahavihara about 12 km north and the sacred sites of Gaya and Bodh Gaya about 80 km to the south-west of Rajgir. In this sacred landscape about 22 km north-west of Rajgir is the sacred site of Pavapuri, believed to be the place of great demise of the twenty-fourth Tirthankara Mahavira by the Jaina followers. The *Mahaparinibbanasutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* mentions Rajagriha among six great cities (*mahanagaras*) of the time of Buddha (possibly of mid-eastern India only) which also include Champa, Sravasti, Saketa, Kausambi and Kasi. Since it was the capital of Magadha during the time of *mahajanapadas* when its power was on a constant rise, especially under the kings Bimbisara and Ajatasatru, Rajagriha can be considered as one of the most important cities of India of sixth - fifth century BC. After the death of the Buddha, the First Buddhist Council was held at Saptaparni Cave in Rajagriha under the chairmanship of Mahakassapa during the kingship of Ajatasatru. After the shifting of Magadhan capital to Pataliputra (though, Sisunaga once again transferred it to Rajagriha for a brief period), its political fortunes would have definitely dwindled but its stature as an important city and sacred place continued during the succeeding centuries up to post-Gupta period. The *Ramayana* (Adikanda 1, 32.7-8) mentions it by the name of Vasumatipura after Vasu, fourth in the line from Brahma. The

Mahabharata (*Sabbaparva*, 21) mentions Rajgir in some detail during the episode of killing of Jarasandha, the mighty ruler of Magadha (Girivraja). The magnificence of the city and the defensive character of the five hills around it are described in this section of the epic. The following three *slokas* talk about its magnificence as a city and the five hills surrounding it just like part of its defence.

According to the *Pabbajja Sutta* and *Jataka Atthakatha* (Upadhyay 1961: 94), before attainment of the Great Enlightenment by the Buddha, King Bimbisara had once gone to meet him at Pandava Parvata in Rajagriha. It clearly indicates that there was some kind of pre-existing tradition of the *Mahabharata* story at Rajgir during the time of the Buddha as the name of the hill was linked with the Pandavas. Besides, the five names of the hills mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, are Pandava, Vipula, Varahaka, Chaityaka and Matanga (Law 1938: 30). The *Isigili Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* provides the following names—Vaibhara, Pandava, Vepulla, Gijjhakuta and Isigili (III: 68, cited by Law 1938: 3). The Jaina literature and inscriptions, however, provide a little changed set of names for these hills, Vaibhara, Vipula, Ratna, Udaya and Sona (Law 1938: 3) which still remain in place. In ancient times, the other popular names of Rajgir were Barhadrathapura (in *Santiparva* II, 24.44 of the *Mahabharata*, possibly after Brihadratha, the father of Jarasandha), Girivraja, Kusagrapura (possibly after Kusagra, son of Brihadratha whereas according to Hiuen-Tsang it means the city of superior Kusa grass) along with the pure form Rajagriha (Law 1938). *Manjusrimulakalpa* (XIII), a Buddhist text and *Vividhatirthakalpa* (*Vaibharagirikalpa* V: 4) of Jinaprabhasuri, a Jaina text composed during the fourteenth century also mentions Rajagriha as Kusagrapura.



Fig. 1. Jarasandh ki baithak.

Buddhaghosha (*Saratthapakasini*, Book 1: 303 and *Samantapasadika*, Book 3: 614 as cited by Upadhyay 1961: 177) had mentioned Rajagriha as being divided into two parts: *antonagara* (inner city) and *babirnagara* (outer city). Buddhaghosha in *Sumangalavilasini* further adds that the city was named as Rajagriha since it was the city and place of great kings like Mandhata and Mahagovinda in the past. *Dhammapada atthakatha* mentions the fortification of Rajagriha where even the king was not allowed to enter the city after a certain time. *Sumangalavilasini* (Upadhyay 1961: 178) further mentions about 32 *mahadvaras* (large gates) and 64 *kshudradvaras* (small gates). It is interesting to note that only two ancient sacred areas in the subcontinent are mentioned as Vraja (Mathura region, especially mentioned in *Harivamsa* and other Puranas) and Girivraja¹ which means Vraja area in the hills in and around Rajgir, and just like the Vraja region, this Girivraja is also full of sacred spots and archaeological vestiges related with the three most prominent ancient sects Brahmanism, Jainism and Buddhism. Rajgir as an ancient site was not only important for its political or religious reasons but in fact it was a very important trade centre. Rajgir played a crucial role in the long distance trade and supply of various raw materials obtained

from Chhota Nagpur plateau. There are some important early historical sites in Kodarma and Hazaribagh districts of Jharkhand in the raw material supply zone. Rajgir (Giriyak) played a very important role on the Takshasila-Mathura-Kausambi-Varanasi-Vaishali/ Pataliputra to Tamralipti/ Kalinga region sites trade route alignments via Gaya area (Chakrabarti 2001).

There are plenty of references related with frequent visits and stays of the Buddha at Rajagriha during his life time. The sacredness of a cave on the Griddhakuta hill can well be understood by the fact that it might be the only surviving structure (naturally intact) where the Enlightened One had passed some important days of his life. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya*, II 1903: 116-117), the Buddha also praises the city of Rajagriha with reference to its main features.

The presiding deity of the town, the Goddess Jara is one of the popular *matrikas* who was worshipped during the Kushan period and is considered related to Hariti and *matrika* cult in India (Maheshwari 2009). She is even mentioned in the *Mahabharata* (*Sabhaparva* 16.38) as a *Yakshini* of Rajagriha who was fond of eating flesh and blood. Jara was responsible for joining two dead halves of the child of King Brihadratha and making it alive. The child was known as Jarasandha for this particular reason and became a very powerful king who even created terror for the Vrishnis of Mathura being led by Vasudeva-Krishna. *Vinayapitaka* of the Sarvastivada version translated in AD 404 by Kumarajiva and Punyatratna calls Hariti as 'Huanshi' meaning 'joy'. As a *yakshini*, she was the protectress of Rajagriha but turned into an ogress due to events occurred in her previous life when she was the wife of a herdsman. Ultimately, the Buddha made her see the light of reason. This same goddess is related with the

concept of Goddess Ahoi who is widely worshipped by womenfolk throughout north India especially on the day of Ahoi Ashtami. The Jainas recognize Hariti as Bahuputrika, queen of Manibhadra, another important deity of Rajagriha known as Manibhadra Yaksha or Mani Naga. According to the *Samyutta Nikaya* (I), Yaksha Manibhadra was worshipped at a shrine in Magadha, called Manimalaka-chetiya (Law 1938: 33). There is still a temple of Jara Devi at the north-west corner of Old Rajagriha which has been constructed on a grand scale in comparatively recent times.

Interestingly, the Jainas also believe that the twentieth Tirthankara Muni Suvrata was born at Rajagriha. Jainas too claim Bimbisara and Ajatasatru (known in their texts respectively as Srenika and Kunika) as votaries of their faith (Ghosh 1958: 6). According to *Kalpa-sutra*, the twenty-fourth Tirthankara Mahavira is believed to have spent fourteen *varshavasas* at Rajagriha and nearby Nalanda (Law 1938: 38). The early Buddhist records refer to six influential heterodoxical ideologues (Kassapa, Makkhali Ghosala, Kachchayana, Ajit Kesakambali, Sanjay Belatthiputa and Nigantha Nathaputta) who had their own separate groups of followers and had a strong presence in Rajagriha (Law 1938: 37).

OLD RAJAGRIHA

OUTER AND INNER FORTIFICATION

The city within the valleys was protected by the girdle of hills, generally considered to be five in number as mentioned above. A huge fortification wall known as 'Cyclopean Wall' having similarity in its construction with those of some Greek and Persian ancient walls made of undressed stone masonry runs all around the Old Rajagriha with a number of bastions, watch towers and ramps. It is surely one of the architectural marvels of ancient India and would

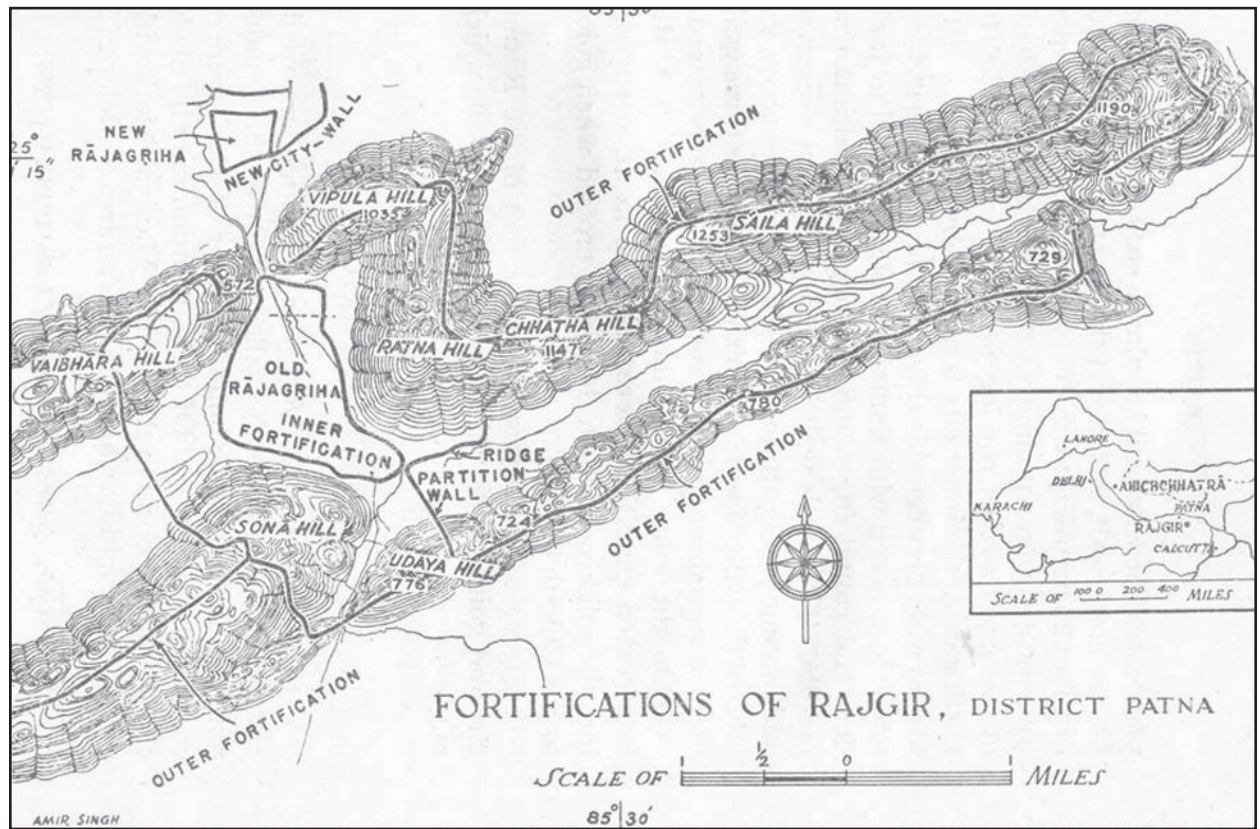


Fig. 2. Site-plan of Rajgir.

have required a large number of work force working under some central command, possibly in the pre-*mahajanapada* period (some uncertain date prior to sixth century BC). The overall distance that this system of walls covers is a whopping 48 km which is more than the length of 150 *li* or 40 km mentioned by Hiuen-Tsang (Jha 2011: 23). The walls are structured with massive undressed stone blocks normally ranging somewhere between 1 and 1.5 m, but several of them exceed this range. The maximum extant height of the walls is about 3.65 m (near Banganga defile); otherwise the normal height is 2.10 - 2.50 m. Sometimes, the walls go pretty low in elevation appearing like the paving of a road. The thickness of the walls is quite uneven but hovers generally around 5.20 m (Jha

2011: 25). There is an inner fortification wall as well in the Old Rajagriha which has a circuit of about 8 km. The actual significance of these two fortifications and the area inside is still not clear and requires a lot of archaeological work.

NEW RAJAGRIHA

This city is situated just by the side of Rajgir Bus Stand and Railway Station. Fa-Hian credits its establishment to Ajatasatru whereas Hiuen-Tsang ascribes it to Bimbisara. The modern town of Rajgir is situated in a part of the site of New Rajagriha which was protected by massive wall of earth, resembling an irregular pentagon in shape, with a circuit of nearly 5 km (Ghosh 1958: 9). On the south, towards the hills, a portion of the fortified area was cut off to form a citadel.

The wall of citadel rampart is about 4.57 to 5.50 m thick and stands to a height of 3.35 m at places. On the outside the wall was strengthened with semi-circular bastions built at irregular intervals.

PLACES OF IMPORTANCE

MANIYAR MATH

It is one of the most interesting religious monuments of not only Rajgir but the entire country, situated roughly in the centre of inner fortification of the Old Rajagriha. The *Mahabharata* (V. 21. 9-11) mentions Arbuda, Sakravapi, Svastika and Mani Naga as important serpent divinities of Girivraja and grand houses of two Great Nagas—Svastika and Mani Naga—at Girivraja. Mani Naga in particular showered his blessings on the city and its people. The name Maniyar Math appears to be a continuity of the name of the shrine of Mani Naga. The shrine has a very long history of alterations and renovations. In 1861-62, Cunningham (*ASR 1861-62*) took up some small excavation at the shrine and found three sculptures belonging to the three faiths—Brahmana, Buddhist and Jaina. In 1905-06, Bloch (*ASI-AR 1905-06*) further excavated the mound, digging a trench from the east. He demolished the late eighteenth century Jaina shrine on the top and exposed a massive brick structure of cylindrical shape which can still be observed at the site. All around the cylindrical structure in the niches on outside were eight beautiful stucco sculptures of various Brahmanical deities including Nagas belonging to the Gupta period. The earliest phase of structural activity at the site, which came to light in the ASI excavations of 1936-37 dates back to third century BC and even prior to that (Jha 2011: 51). A number of terracottas and pottery objects related with Naga cult were found in various excavations at the site. The most important find from Maniyar Math is the Naga sculpture

representing two male Naga deities. The inscription below mentions the name of one of the Naga deities as Mani Naga in Kushan Brahmi script, the other figure might have been that of Naga Svastika. The most interesting feature of this sculpture is that it was made at Mathura in the white spotted red sandstone and was donated by a personage of Mathura at Maniyar Math. It is indicative of the important trade and religious links between these two important centres dating back to Kushan period. The significant role played by Mathura as the greatest cultural centre of ancient India is somewhat known but a lot of research needs to be done in the case of Rajagriha.

AJATASATRU STUPA

To the west of New Rajagriha, on the other side of stream Saraswati, is a large mound which marks the site of a *stupa*, that of Ajatasatru according to Fa-Hian and of Asoka according to Hiuen-Tsang (Ghosh 1958: 11). In the excavations by T. Bloch (*ASI-AR 1905-06*) a number of structural remains belonging to a *stupa* and dating back to the Mauryan period were found. On further inquiry it might have turned out to be an earlier structure if it actually belonged to Ajatasatru. Various other *stupa* remains and Buddhist objects were also found at the site and the surrounding area. Near this *stupa*, Hiuen-Tsang had seen a pillar of 15.24 m height surmounted by an elephant (Beal 1906: 165). Hiuen-Tsang mentioned seeing the Ajatasatru Stupa to the east of Venuvana which Ghosh has tried to identify with a mound to the left of modern road going to Old Rajagriha from New Rajagriha (Ghosh 1958: 14).

KARANDA-KANIVAPA

This is an ancient tank in the vicinity of Satdhara hot springs which was mentioned as Karanda

tank by the Chinese pilgrims (Ghosh 1958: 2-13). In the excavations by Bloch (*ASI-AR* 1905-06) in the surrounding area of this Venuvana were found many structural remains including those of *stupas*.

PIPPALA STONE HOUSE

On the eastern slope of Vaibhara hill, a stone structure locally known as 'Jarasandha-ki-baithak' is considered the site of Pippala Cave which some Pali texts describe as the residence of Mahakassapa. Till as late as 1895, there was a long natural cave with a fallen roof behind the present stone structure (Ghosh 1958: 16).

SAPTAPARNI CAVE

This is the place where the First Buddhist Council was held under the presidency of Mahakassapa. On the Vaibhara hill, near the Adinatha Temple are six caves, four of which in good state of preservation which are generally identified as Saptaparni Cave(s). According to John Marshall, Saptaparni is represented by a hall and not caves and he identified it with a stone structure on the Vaibhara hill (*ASI-AR* 1905-06: 100).

JAINA AND MAHADEVA TEMPLES

These are two important ancient temples on the Vaibhara hill. A number of inscriptional and sculptural evidences are available from these temples which date these temples to at least early medieval period. There is possibility of their earlier antiquity as well.

BALARAMA TEMPLE

Near the entrance (north gate) of Old Rajagriha, there was an ancient stone and brick structure, from top of which a mutilated Balarama image

(1.2 m tall) was found (Ghosh 1958: 39); the whereabouts of this image are not known. It is quite interesting to note that Samkarsana/Balarama has such an important association with Naga cult that no other deity enjoys this association and so he must have been a popular deity in Old Rajagriha. The links of Rajagriha with Mathura further enhance such a possibility as Balarama was one of the most popular of Brahmanical gods at Mathura during the Kushan period and according to epic and puranic accounts *Balarama was born in Vraja region*.

SONBHANDAR CAVES

There are two caves hewn out of unfavourable rock in the southern scarp of the Vaibhara hill. These caves (one fallen off) provide certain sculptural and inscriptional evidence associating them with Jaina and Brahmanical religions. S.K. Saraswati and S.P. Gupta dated these caves to Mauryan and pre-Mauryan periods. According to Saraswati (1960: 503) the architectural features of the cave betray an earlier date as they resemble those of the Mauryan cave of Barabar and Nagarjuni (just 32 km away from Rajgir) whereas Gupta (1980: 201-2) on the basis of imperfect polish of Sonbhandara caves considered them to be a stage earlier than Barabar. However, one inscription from the cave speaks of the excavation of the cave by a Jaina Acharya which belongs to third-fourth century AD only. It seems that the inscription talks about some kind of additional excavations made in the already existing cave.

BIMBISARA JAIL

To the south of Maniyar Math near the inner fortification wall of Old Rajagriha is an area of about 60 m square, enclosed by a stone wall with circular bastions at four corners. The

structure is identified with the jail where Ajatasatru had kept imprisoned his father Bimbisara.

GRIDDHAKUTA

It is one of most sacred areas for Buddhists. Here is situated the famous Griddhakuta Cave which was favourite of the Buddha as well as Jivaka's Amravana and Mardakukshi monastery. The site of Jivaka's mango-garden was excavated and elliptical buildings, possibly of monastic nature, of early date were found (Ghosh 1958: 31). The area is replete with various Buddhist remains.

Besides, there are some other areas like Jarasandha-ka-akhara, Ranabhumi which are associated with the life of Jarasandha in popular memory. Jethian Valley was an important area mentioned in Pali literature but is now forested. In the south-west of Old Rajagriha near the outer fortification, there are a large number of inscriptions in 'shell' characters and at several places ruts of ancient cart or chariot wheels which have cut deep into the rocky soil. There are some other important places related with the lives of Jarasandha, the Buddha and other important personalities in popular memory. Sitavana and Tapodarama are two frequently mentioned popular places of the Buddhists in Rajagriha.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF RAJGIR

Almost since the inception of archaeological investigations in the country, Rajgir has attracted a number of scholars. Majority of these were towards locating various spots associated with the life of the Buddha mentioned in the Buddhist literature as well as mentioned in the accounts of two Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hian and Hiuen-Tsang. The first major work started with A. Cunningham (*ASI-AR*, 1, 3 and 8) and was



Fig. 3. Cyclopiian wall.

followed by John Marshall (*ASI-AR* 1905-06) and V.H. Jackson (*ASI-AR* 1913-14). They tried to identify various spots as per their thinking which might or might not be accurate. Some other scholars who worked on Rajgir sites are D.N. Sen (1918 and 1924), R.C. Majumdar (1949), B.C. Law (1938), M.H. Kuraishi (1939), A. Ghosh (1953 and 1958), Raghbir Singh (1961, 62) and P.K. Mishra and S.C. Saran for the recent excavations of the ASI conducted at Giriya and Juafardih respectively.

Rajgir as an archaeological site dates back to prehistoric times. Lower palaeolithic tools including hand-axes, scrapers and flakes were found in explorations along Banganga *nullab* (*IAR* 1967-68: 8-9). Neolithic tools comprising of shouldered celts and bone arrowheads were found from Saraswati stream and city's drains (*IAR* 1963-64: 86). Excavation of some area close to the eastern wall and in the north-east corner of the inner city showed evidence of some pre-N.B.P.W. or pre-Buddhist deposit. In addition, the black-and-red ware pottery, generally assigned to Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultural contexts, were observed by S.K. Jha at a short distance inside the Banganga defile on the basis of clues provided by Harding and D.K. Chakrabarti (Jha 2011: 5). In the excavations



Fig. 4. Griddhakuta hill.

conducted by the ASI (2007-08) at Ghorakatora mound on river Panchana, Goriyak, supposedly the most important trading area of Rajgir as suggested by Chakrabarti (2001) were found in Period I (1.4 m thick deposit) some Neolithic-Chalcolithic implements including polished stone celts and bone points along with black-and-red ware, black slipped ware and red ware pottery. Even A. Ghosh in 1950 during his scraping of a part of the 6 m high section cut by a stream at the foot of the Vaibhara hill on the outskirts of inner defences of Old Rajagriha had found above the natural conglomerate two deposits of riverine clay with occasional shapeless dull-red sherds (Ghosh 1989: 364 and Ghosh 1950: 66 ff). Generally, such rolled shapeless red ware pottery is observed at many Gangetic plain sites and is known as Ochre Coloured Pottery. There is a need of further work at this or such related spot in Rajgir.

In the partial excavation carried out by the ASI in 1905-06 at New Rajagriha (*ASI-AR* 1905-06: 9), remains of secular buildings came to light in three levels, the lowest being 2.5 m below the surface. The walls of the middle level were only 38 to 40 cm thick. The highest level

consisted of brick platforms, low walls and a drain. In one of the dwelling houses was found a granary made of earthen rings and close to it an ancient well built of wedge-shaped bricks. Among the important antiquities recovered were two clay tablets of c. second - first century BC from a cell in the lowest level, one square copper punch-marked coin, six copper cast coins, a Gupta clay seal, few terracotta seals and fragmentary sculptural fragments belonging to Buddhism and some medieval coins belonging to Islamic rulers. In his 1950 scraping at New Rajagriha, A. Ghosh found the real occupation of the site starting with the appearance of N.B.P.W. and associated black and grey wares (Ghosh 1989: 364). The earlier phase of N.B.P.W. also revealed a previously unknown type of burials. Ghosh roughly dated this phase to about fifth century BC which may require a revision keeping in mind the new N.B.P.W. dates from the area.

In 1961-62 and 1962-63, R. Singh of ASI undertook renewed excavations in New Rajagriha (*IAR* 1961-62: 7 and *IAR* 1962-63: 5), when a 66 x 5 m trench was laid across the southern defences near the south-west bastions. Carried down to a depth of 18 m below the extant top of the defences, the excavation revealed three periods with sub-divisions in the latter two. The lowest was considered non-occupational with the finding of rare shapeless red ware sherds just like Ghosh had found them in 1950 scraping. Its top however had stone foundations and ashy deposits, with the N.B.P.W. and associated red ware, some pieces with black-painted linear designs, terracotta human figurines, a hoard of 14 punch-marked coins and fragments of steatite amulet. The mud rampart of Period II A rests over a deposit of burnt material which caused the destruction of



Fig. 5. Chariot marks.

Period I. In Period II B a brick fortification was raised on the extant top of the mud rampart. The C-14 dates of samples from the pre-rampart deposit are 265 ± 105 and 260 ± 105 BC (Ghosh 1989: 364).

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In recent excavations at the site of Juafardih lying in-between Rajgir and Nalanda, three cultural periods have come to light (Saran et al. 2008: 59-73). The earliest cultural phase (Period I) is represented by pre-NBPW cultural assemblage comprising of Chalcolithic black-and-red ware, black slipped ware, red slipped and plain red ware pottery. The excavators have dated this phase to Chalcolithic period keeping in mind the similarity in pottery assemblage with that of other Chalcolithic sites in Bihar including Sonpur (Period I), Taradih (Period II), Chirand (Period II), Oriup (Period I) and Chechar (Period I). Because of sub-soil, water excavation could not be conducted below the layers 13 and 14 belonging to Period I at the site. The only radiocarbon date from layer 13 of this period has provided a date of 1354 BC. The Period II (layers 12 to 3) at the site belongs to NBPW cultural phase with pottery of earlier period continuing. Two P.G.W. sherds along with a number of fine grey ware sherds were also found from this period having a total deposit of 10.6 m. Four radiocarbon dates from this Period II are 1259 BC (layer 8), 1562 BC (layer 7), 1002 BC (layer 6), 857 BC (layer 8). Thus some of the earliest dates of NBPW are coming from this area of Magadha. The Period III (layers 1 and 2) at the site belongs to Sunga, Kushan, Gupta and post-Gupta periods.

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