RĀJGIR 1950

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In this article the Deputy Director General for Exploration describes the results of a small excavation at Rājgir, one of the outstanding pre-Christian capitals of India. Apart from the pottery-types, the discovery of a hitherto unknown type of post-cremation burial revealed in the operation is noteworthy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

GIRIVRAJA or Rājagriha,¹ the capital of ancient Magadha (south Bihar), is at present represented by the vast ruins inside and outside an extensive valley (25°.2' N.; 85°.26' E.) situated about 60 miles to the south-east of Patna, the present capital of Bihar. The valley is surrounded on all sides by hills which form the northern extremity of the Barābar range and bear traditional names, differently enumerated in different ancient texts. They provide an excellent natural fortification for the valley they surround (fig. 1), and this must have been the major factor responsible for its selection as the capital-site of Magadha.

At a very early stage in the life of the city the natural defences were substantially reinforced by a fortification consisting of a high rubble-wall running at the top of all the hills, with a circuit of about 25 miles, and the natural gaps between the hills were utilized as gates in the fortification. Inside the valley were other defensive walls built in different periods, the chief of which was the inner defensive wall (pl. XXVII), generally built of heaped-up earth with a rough rubble-core and enclosing a pentagonal area with a perimeter of 5 miles.²

¹ The other and less popular names of the city were Vasumati, Bārhadrathapura ('the city of Bṛihadratha', an early legendary king) and Kuṣāgrapura. Girivraja means 'the enclosure of hills' and is a most appropriate name for the hill-girt valley; Rājagriha means 'the abode of the kings', i.e. the capital, the present name, Rājgir, being derived from it.
² For a brief history and general description of the ruins, see M. H. Kuraishi and A. Ghosh, A Guide to Rājgir, 3rd ed. (Delhi, 1951).
The traditional history of the place can be traced from the times of the Mahābhārata down to a few centuries before Christ. It will suffice to say here that according to Buddhist literature the Magadhan kings ruling from Rājgir at the time of Buddha (sixth-seventh centuries B.C.) were Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru, with whom Buddha had frequent contacts and the latter of whom is credited with having built himself a new fort outside the valley, its remains, with a circuit of 3 miles, being visible outside its northern gate.

The tremendous archaeological potentiality of Rājgir, one of the key-sites of ancient India, has all along been realized, and many have been the previous explorations at the site. Most of them have, however, been mainly or exclusively concerned with the identification of the ruins with sites associated in Buddhist literature and the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims, with the life of Buddha. Even when the objective has been more limitedly archaeological, no systematic recording of the stratification and pottery-types is available, with the result that Rājgir has remained practically unlinked with the present-day developments in Indian archaeology. It has, however, figured prominently in the list of sites yielding the Northern Black Polished (N.B.P.) ware, which is practically the sole available factor connecting it with the other pre-Christian sites in northern India and only emphasizes the necessity of a large-scale excavation of the site on sound and systematic lines.

During my visit to Rājgir in February 1950 I noticed that a peripheral part of the anciently-occupied valley along the northern part of the western wall of the inner defences (above, p. 66) had been cut away by the adjacent rivulet known as the Sarasvati, which separated the valley from the Vaibhava, the hill enclosing it on its north-west, and the 20 ft. high section thus revealed (pl. XXVIII) showed, at its lower depth, a large number of N.B.P. sherds. As next to nothing was known about the stratigraphic position of the N.B.P. ware at Rājgir, I decided to scrape a part of the cutting with a view to obtaining a fresh section in which the strata yielding the ware could be properly located. For this purpose it was necessary to take back the cutting by about 3 ft. from the irregular edge left by the river along a length of 9½ ft. (pl. XXX). As I was unprepared, any excavation on a large scale was out of the question. The incidental results, which are published here, should not be taken as an index of what should be expected all over the vast site, but will,
I fancy, give an elementary idea of the chronological length of the occupation of the city, with reservations for a wide variation on either side.

In this work I had the collaboration of my colleague Mr. Krishna Deva, Superintendent, Department of Archaeology, Central Circle, Patna, who had accompanied me to Rājgir. The section of the excavation was drawn by Mr. Raghbir Singh, Senior Draftsman of the Department. The photographs of the site were taken by Mr. N. N. Bose, Photographer of the Central Circle, and that of the small finds by Mr. S. G. Tiwari, Photographer-Instructor of the Department. For the classification of the pottery I am grateful to Mr. B. M. Dhruva, attached to the Department as a scholar of the Saurashtra Government.

2. STRATIFICATION (PL. XXIX)

In spite of the limited scope of the work, the stratification, as revealed, was interesting. Above the natural conglomerate were two layers (23 and 22) of brownish compact clay, evidently riverine deposits, with occasional shapeless sherds, which were overlain by a thick bed of pebbles (21), no doubt also deposited by the river in one of its floods during a very
early phase of the occupation of the site, and containing rare sherds 'rolled' by water-action. The deposit was capped by a layer (20) of burnt earth with charcoal pieces.

Real occupation at the spot began with layer 19, which, significantly enough, synchronized with the appearance of the N.B.P. ware. The earlier phase of this period revealed a previously unknown type of post-cremation burials, of which ten (five being seen in the section, pl. XXIX) were traced and showed the following characteristics (pls. XXXI-XXXII).

For the purpose of interring a few bits of charred bones mixed with ashes left after the cremation of the dead, evidently on the bank of the adjacent river, pits with elliptical bottoms and with short funnels still below were dug into the soil. The funnels were filled with clay (in two cases, burial-pits 8 and 9, stone-blocks were also placed), and the sides of the pits were lined with coatings of clay. The 'jars' thus improvised were then filled with bone-bits and ashes collected from the cremations. Only in one case (burial-pit 9, fig. 2) was a thin slab of clay used for sealing the pit, the slab again being covered by a thin deposit of red gravel. Another pit (10) was found to have been left unlined with clay, though it contained material similar to the lined ones.

The upper layers (up to 12) of the period producing the N.B.P. ware do not call for any special remark.

The next period (layers 11 to 6), marked by the disappearance of the N.B.P. and associated wares, showed two road-surfaces concreted with hard clay with sherds (layers 8 and 7A) and a thick filling of brick-bats and sherds (layer 7) capped by compact gravel (layer 6), to provide for a third road-surface.

The last period (layers 5A to 1) did not yield any noteworthy features.

3. CHRONOLOGY

As has been said above, there was hardly any occupation at the spot before the advent of the N.B.P. ware, though it is evident that nearby there had been earlier occupations, sherds wherefrom were washed and got deposited in the pebble and pre-pebble strata. There is no means of ascertaining the date of these occupations, as the sherds are too fragmentary to be affiliated to any known industry.

The origin of the N.B.P. ware has been tentatively ascribed to the fifth century B.C. It is unlikely that future research will bring this dating forward: on the contrary, the possibility lies in the other direction, just as recent explorations have resulted in the expansion of its geographical horizon.

Even assuming, on the basis of the prevalent dating, that the N.B.P. ware first came into being in the fifth century B.C. occupation in Rājgir must have begun earlier, as is indicated by the presence of pottery in the layers earlier than those producing the ware.

1 It is interesting to note that this part of the river-bank is still the cremation-ground of Rājgir.
2 See above, p. 68, footnote 5.
3 The very nomenclature of the ware suggests its having been restricted to northern India, but it has recently been found as far south-west as Nāsik (20° N.; 73° 47' E.) and as far south-east as Siyaghar near Bhuvaneswar, Orissa (20° 15' N.; 85° 50' E.) [Ancient India, no. 5 (1949), p. 79]. This emphasizes the necessity of reviewing the geographical distribution of the ware. The current excavation at Kausambi near Allahabad and the proposed excavation at Hastinapura are likely to yield more accurate data for fixing the chronological limits of the pottery than have been hitherto available.
A, burial-pit no. 4; B, section thereof (see page 70)
There is no evidence that the N.B.P. ware persisted anywhere in India after the second century B.C. The top-layers yielding this ware may therefore belong to that century, and the next period, in which the ware is absent, should be regarded as dating from the first century B.C. Reliable material at present available for the comparative study of the pottery-types of this latter period is limited, being virtually confined to Ahichchhatra, though a mass of new material will soon be available by the excavation at Kausãmbi near Allahabad by the University of Allahabad and the contemplated Departmental excavation at Hastinápara, District Meerut, U.P. The date proposed is, however, confirmed by the similarity of pottery-type 28 (fig. 5, p. 76) to the Ahichchhatra type 23,2 where it is found in Stratum VI, dated to 100 B.C.

The next period may be ascribed to the first one or two centuries A.D., which follows not only from the dating of the preceding period but from the resemblance of pottery-type 30 (fig. 5, p. 76) with Ahichchhatra type 29, of Stratum IV (A.D. 100 and later). But for its slightly-pointed base, pottery-type 17 (fig. 5) is also similar to type 37 of Ahichchhatra, where it has been regarded as the hall-mark of Stratum IV.

The proposed chronology of the periods is therefore as follows:
Period I: earlier than the fifth century B.C.
Period II: fifth century B.C. (or earlier) to second century B.C.
Period III: first century B.C.
Period IV: first century A.D.

4. THE POTTERY

The pottery found in the excavation is wheel-made and is almost totally unpainted (see, however, p. 77 below). The period of the currency of the N.B.P. ware (Period II) marks a definite phase in the ceramic industry of the site, for along with this pottery emerges a large amount of associated pottery, thus indicating the advent of a new culture.

A. PERIOD I

The pottery of this period consists only of a few sherds which do not give any idea of the prevalent shapes. They are of a crude and coarse red ware with a dull wash of terracotta colour, though a black slip on the outer face is not rare. One sherd has a chocolate slip on the burnished underside and a black slip on the exterior.

B. PERIOD II

Period II is characterized by the presence of the N.B.P. ware, with which is associated black and black-and-red pottery, usually dishes and bowls of the same shapes as are common in the N.B.P. ware itself. The persistent co-existence of the N.B.P. and black wares in the same shapes is a notable feature and indicates their common origin and purpose, the only difference being that the black ware was not treated with the coating that was responsible for the gloss in the N.B.P. ware. At the same time, there are a few specimens of

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2 Ibid., fig. 2, p. 44.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
similar shapes in grey ware, which, however, is different in fabric from the Painted Grey Ware found in the lowest levels of Ahichchhatrā1 and recently discovered on many other sites in northern India2 and represents a decadent phase thereof.

The N.B.P. ware itself is found here in the same colours as have already been noticed, but some sherds have a dull to bright yellowish hue.

The period can be divided into three phases, A, B, and C, on the basis of the quality and quantity of the N.B.P. and associated black and black-and-red wares. Phase A (layer 19) is marked by the complete absence of red ware and contains only N.B.P. and black wares of thin to medium section. Though no definite shapes can be made out in either ware, the indications are that they were only dishes and bowls.

In Phase B (layers 18 to 16), the N.B.P. specimens are generally not too thin, and, towards the end of this phase, show a tendency of becoming thicker. There are occasional pieces of dishes black inside and red outside, as if produced by inverted firing. In the upper strata constituting the phase the black ware tends to lose its polish, a few sherds assuming a dark-grey colour, and red pottery of the same types as are found in the N.B.P. and black wares makes its appearance.

Phase C (layer 15 to 12) is characterized by a gradual degeneration and the ultimate disappearance of the N.B.P. ware. There is a simultaneous deterioration in the quality of black ware, which, towards the end of the phase, becomes dull in colour and is devoid of any polish. Layers 13 and 12 have a preponderant element of thick jars and troughs in dull-red colour.

C. Period III

Except a very few intrusive sherds of the N.B.P., black and grey wares, Period III (layers 11 to 6) represents an exclusively red-ware industry, but no break in culture is indicated, as a few types of the preceding period persist. There is a large percentage of very thick jars and troughs of a coarse sandy fabric.

D. Period IV

This period, consisting of layers 5A to 1, is linked with the previous one by the presence, in its lower levels, of thick jars, which, however, grow thinner in the upper ones, and of bowls of a bright terracotta colour which form a notable feature of this period.

E. The pottery-types

(i) Types in N.B.P. ware, i-iii (fig. 3)

The types represented in the N.B.P. ware are extremely limited and consist only of dishes and bowls with limited rim-forms.

Type i is a dish with a sharpened incurved rim and a presumably flat base. It is common in Period II, the illustrated specimen, of lustrous yellow hue, being from layer 18. Type i-a is similar to type i, but is of a larger size and has a convex base. This type also is common in Period II, though the illustrated specimen comes from Period III, where its find is adventitious.

1 Ancient India, no. 1 (1946), pp. 58-59.
Type ii is a bowl with a sharpened vertical rim and a sagger base, of fine to medium fabric, being common in the N.B.P. ware strata. The illustrated specimen is from layer 18.

Type iii is a dish with a blunted vertical rim and a flat base, of fine to medium fabric, and is also common in Period II, the illustrated specimen being from layer 16.

(i) Other types, 1-34 (figs. 4 and 5)

Type 1 represents the rim and neck of a large-sized jar. The beaded rim is perched obliquely on a sharply carinated inner neck. Coarse fabric with dull-red slip. A rare type from Period II.

Type 2 is the upper portion of a medium-sized jar with a featureless splayed-out rim on a carinated inner neck. Coarse to medium fabric with dull-red slip. Common in Period II.

Type 3 is the upper portion of a large jar with a splayed-out pointed rim on a sharply carinated inner neck. Coarse fabric with dull-red slip. Very common in Periods II, III and IV. The illustrated specimen is from Period II.

Type 4 is the upper portion of a small vessel with a splayed-out rim on a sharply carinated inner neck. The rim has prominent corrugations on its outer surface. Medium fabric with whitish core and greyish black slip. A unique type from Period II.

Type 5 is the rim of a large vessel slightly thickened internally and externally at the top. Coarse gritty fabric with drab colour. The type is plentiful in Periods III and IV, the illustrated specimen being from the latter.

Type 6 is the upper portion of a large jar with a rim thickened in the middle but more pointed at the top and perched on a neck with an inner carination. Coarse fabric with dull-red slip. A rare specimen from Period III.

Type 7 is a shallow dish with an incurved rim and a presumably flattish base. Fine fabric with dark-grey core and black slip. The type is associated with the corresponding types in N.B.P. ware and is common in Period II.

Type 8 is the upper portion of a large jar with the rim thin at the top, set on a neck with a prominent inner carination. There are a few irregular scratches on the inner rim. Medium fabric with red slip. The type is a rare one occurring in Period III.

Type 9 is a large shallow basin having a rim with an inconspicuous outer collar and a body with shallow corrugations. Medium fabric with brownish slip. A rare type from Period II.
Type 10 is a dish with an incurved rim and a presumably convex base. Fine fabric with a burnished surface and grey slip. A common specimen from Period II.

Type 11 is a dish with a fairly vertical sharpened rim and a presumably convex base. The body has a sharp groove below the neck. Fine fabric with a polished surface and black slip. A rare specimen in Period II.

Type 12 is a dish with a thickened vertical rim and a presumably convex base. Medium fabric with dark-red slip on both surfaces. A common type in Period II.

Type 13 is a dish with a sharpened vertical rim and a sagger base. Medium fabric with dull-red wash. A rare specimen from Period IV, where it is out of context, as the type is connected with shapes occurring in Period II.

Type 14 is a dish with a slightly incurved and beaded rim sharpened at the top. There is a groove between the rim and the body. Fine fabric with external and internal red slip and a smooth surface. A rare specimen from Period II.

Type 15 is a dish with an incurved beaded rim. Fine fabric with a smooth red-slipped surface with patches of chocolate-coloured slip inside. A rare specimen from Period II.

Type 16 is the upper part of a jar with a flaring beaked rim. Coarse micaceous surface with red slip. A rare specimen from Period IV. Type 16a is a variety of the same with a sharper concave neck.

Type 17 is a jar with an externally chamfered rim, an ovoid body and an inconspicuously pointed base. The specimens of the type are roughly potted in medium fabric with red slip on both surfaces. A common type in Period IV.

Type 18 is the upper part of a jar with an externally obliquely-cut rim and a vertical high neck. Coarse fabric with black core and drab exterior. Common in Periods III and IV, the illustrated specimen being from the former. Type 18a is a variant of the same, also common in Periods III and IV.

Type 19 is similar to type 18 but has a thinner and more concave neck with a groove on the externally chamfered rim. It is common in Period IV.

Type 20 is a jar with a flaring featureless rim, a concave neck and a globular body. Fine fabric with partly black core, red slip inside and un-uniform black slip outside. A unique specimen from Period II.

Type 21 is similar to type 17 but has a vertical rim. Roughly potted in medium fabric, with red slip on both surfaces. Common in Period IV.

Type 22 is a small vessel with a featureless flaring rim, a concave neck and a spout on the body. Medium fabric with red internal and external slip. A unique unstratified find.

Type 23 is a deep bowl with a featureless vertical rim and an externally corrugated body. Fine fabric with grey core and bright grey slip on the burnished inner and outer surfaces. A unique specimen from Period II.

Type 24 is a bowl with a slightly inturned featureless rim and a slight constriction above the flat base. Medium fabric with a grey surface and core. A rare specimen from Period II.

Type 25 is a small lid with a flat splayed-out rim and a flattish base. Coarse fabric with red slip. A unique unstratified specimen.

Type 26 is a bowl with a slightly inturned featureless rim and an inconspicuous carination separating the rim and the body. Coarsely potted in medium fabric with a black surface and core. The type is plentiful in Period II.

Type 27 is a small bowl with a vertical featureless rim and an inconspicuous carina- tion below it. Fine fabric with grey core and grey slip on the exterior. A rare specimen from Period II.
Type 28 is a bowl with a vertical to slightly incurved sharpened rim and a flat base. Medium fabric with dull-red slip on both surfaces. The type is abundant in Period III.

Type 29 is a bowl with a splayed-out rim separated from the body by an inner carination and with a concave base. The rim is wheel-made but the body is hand-made. Traces of luting between the two parts are visible. Fine fabric with red internal and external slip. A rare specimen from Period II.

Type 30 is somewhat similar to type 28 but the rim is vertical to inturned. Medium fabric with bright red slip on both surfaces. The type is abundant in Period IV and forms a link between that Period and Period III, where specimens of a larger size are available.

Type 31 is a bowl with a featureless vertical rim separated from the vertical body by a fairly conspicuous flange, possibly to receive a lid. Medium fabric with dull-red slip. A unique specimen from Period III.

Type 32 is a bowl with a featureless splayed-out rim and a sagger base. Medium fabric and drab colour. A rare specimen from Period II.

Type 33 is a small deep bowl thickened between the rim and the body and with a sagger base. Medium fabric and drab colour. A rare specimen from Period II.

Type 34 is a deep bowl presumably with a sagger base and with an inset rim on a flange, which, like type 31, was probably intended for receiving a lid. A common type in Period II.

(iii) Painted and decorated sherds, I-VI (fig. 5)

No. I is a sherd of medium fabric and grey core with red slip. It is painted with three lines in grey colour on the exterior. Period IV.

No. II is a sherd, presumably the base of a dish, with grey core and red slip and is incised with three concentric circles. A unique specimen from Period IV, where it may be out of context.

No. III is the fragment of a small jar with a very narrow neck and bulbous body in fine fabric, the core partly red and partly grey. The inner surface is grey. The outer surface, which has red slip, is painted with irregular lines in chocolate trickling down to red. Period II.

Fig. 6. Painted and decorated sherds, I-VI.
No. IV is a sherd of fine fabric with grey core and red slip on both surfaces. It is externally painted with two lines in black. Period III.

No. V is the fragment of a small jar of fine fabric with a polished and black-slipped outer surface, which is painted with two yellow lines. Period II.

No. VI is the fragment of a bowl with a thickened rim thinner at the top. Medium fabric with dull-red slip. Internally painted with a horizontal band at the rim and oblique lines below in black. Period II.

5. Other Small Finds (PL. XXXIII)

Due to the limited extent of the operation, the small finds were very few in number. Mention may, however, be made of the following:

1. Head of a terracotta animal-figurine. Eyes indicated by a deep incision and ears by pellets of clay. Unstratified.
2. Headless terracotta animal-figurine. Row of circular punches all over the body. Period II.
3. Torso of a female figurine with drapery clinging to the body. An indistinct object, probably a vessel, held in the hanging left arm; right arm slightly bent. Seems to be wearing heavy ear-ornaments. Period IV.
5 and 6. Two of the six terracotta beads found together in layer 5. Period IV.