

JEAN-FRANÇOIS SALLES (ed.):

Mahasthan II, Fouilles du Rempart Est, Études Archéologiques.

(Archaeologies of the Indian Ocean 10.) 438 pp. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015. ISBN 978 2 503 55240 8.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X18000654

This volume presents the welcome and much anticipated results of archaeological excavations at the site of Mahasthan (Mahasthanagarh), in northern Bangladesh. The significance of this site cannot be underestimated – it is one of the earliest archaeological sites in Bangladesh, and is critical to our understanding of the development of urbanism in South Asia. Following its identification by Alexander Cunningham in 1879, the site has been subject to various excavations (in particular, those directed by P.C. Sen in 1929, and Nazimuddin Ahmed between 1961 and 1968). Yet despite this, relatively little was known. It was on this basis that in 1993 a Bangladeshi–French archaeological mission began, and carried out annual excavations until 1999, and again from 2001 to 2011 under the directorship of Jean-François Salles. This report represents the second of three planned volumes (the first having been published in 2007), and must be read and appreciated as such. It presents a series of specialist reports on the bulk of the excavated material found during the 1993–99 seasons, which focused on the eastern rampart of the fortified city. It will be supplemented by a third volume covering the 2001–11 excavations, together with the results of more recent excavations directed by Vincent Lefèvre.

Chapter 1 is ostensibly an introduction to the report, introducing the scope of the volume and the specialist reports that lie within. Yet, more than that it also expands on the scope of earlier and interim reports to give valuable insight into the environmental context of the site, and provides a useful discussion of its occupation history with reference to both archaeological remains and wider textual sources. Thus introduced, the following chapters comprise specialist reports on various categories of artefacts, organized by material type. In the first section, are two reports on the terracotta artefacts (moulded forms as well as figurines and models). Each report is presented meticulously, with a detailed categorization of the different clays used, discussion of manufacturing methods, typologies of forms and their seriation over time.

This is followed by a short report on the worked stone remains from the site, including: small statuary, ring stones, seals, weights and sculptures. This material is reported in equal detail, and this is followed by a welcome reprint of two articles that focus on particular sculptural fragments (Surya figurines, and the other on a particularly interesting double-headed Buddha figurine), which had been published previously in an edited volume with limited circulation in India. This, in turn, is followed by a short note on the additional coins that had been found since the publication of the far more extensive coin study in the first volume of the report.

The next substantive section is a detailed report on the pottery from the site. As with any account of material from ongoing excavations, such a study can never be truly “complete”; and this report makes no such claims. It is, in fact, quite explicit about its scope – being a study of the ceramics from the eastern wall sector of the site that builds on earlier categorizations of main ceramic types, and is pending the publication of the detailed study of ceramics from more recent excavations and wider synthesis undertaken by Coline Lefrancq. Yet, modesty aside, this report presents a thorough, rigorous and detailed study of the contexts in which ceramic remains appear, followed by a detailed breakdown of the forms, fabric, surface treatment, decoration and discussion of both fine and common wares. It is appended by

another reprinted article, this time on Rouletted ware found at Mahasthan and elsewhere in Bengal, which serves as an excellent and insightful summary of the state of research on this ware and discussion of its production and distribution in the context of Bengal and the northeast.

The pottery report is followed by four short sections on the small terracotta finds (marbles, tokens, beads, and so on), worked stone, metalwork, and jewellery from the site, all of which are limited simply by virtue of the small quantities of material found at the site. The next chapter presents the results of LA-ICP-MS analyses of the glass beads from Mahasthan and their comparison with those from other sites in Bengal, and elsewhere in North and South India; which enables the author to identify the materials used to make these beads and their broad production zones. This establishes the importance of new glass groups, and leads to an interesting discussion of the production, trade and distribution of glass beads; and signposts some interesting avenues for future research on maritime and inland trading pathways.

Following this is a chapter that presents results of an archaeomagnetometry study of bricks from the site, which formed part of a dissertation associated with the project; and a useful synthesis and modelling of the results of radiocarbon dating samples from the site. The archaeomagnetometry results are sadly limited due to an absence of pre-established parameters and controls for this part of the world. Nevertheless, it represents a promising study; and the presentation of the radiocarbon dating offers a welcome dose of scientific rigour often lacking from similar reports. This is followed by a technical chapter on the development of the fortifications, and their relation to the river to the north of the site.

The final chapter presents the preliminary results of a single season of excavation at Bhasu Vihara, a well-known Buddhist site located 6 km from Mahasthan that formed an important element of the urban hinterland. Excavations here uncovered extensive structural remains some distance from known monastic structures, indicating the existence of a much larger Buddhist complex – findings that have clear implications for our understanding of the site of Bhasu Vihara, and the hinterland of Mahasthan. This chapter does appear somewhat out of place given the nature of the detailed artefact-oriented reports that precede it. Yet, such is the importance of the site and so clear its relevance to the wider understanding of the site of Mahasthan that it is equally relevant here.

This volume is a collection of detailed, rigorous and thorough specialist reports. At times these can seem a little disjointed, but less so when read in conjunction with the first volume of the excavation report, which provides the necessary site context. It is refreshing to read such a volume when the current academic climate is so heavily biased towards research articles at the expense of vital reporting. That is not to say that considerable research has not gone into the various constituent chapters – of course it has. But their real value lies in the fact that they present the results of many years of excavation to a high level of detail. It is this archaeological data that underpins research, and the reports contained in this volume constitute a valuable resource for all archaeologists interested in the late first millennium BCE and first millennium CE in this and other regions of South Asia.

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