

Fig. 1 – Sites referred to in western Orissa.

# Western Orissa (November - December 2000): Preliminary Report of a Survey

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## Introduction

Archaeological research during the 1980s in Orissa revealed on the one hand great potential for new knowledge, on the other, neglect relative to other parts of India. Even into the 1980s few usable publications existed for the archaeology of the region between coastal Orissa and the Vidarbha region toward Nagpur.<sup>1</sup> More particularly, numerous, haphazard, and repetitively published site lists provide little real information, and all of western Orissa as well as the Chhattisgarh region (some 220,000 km<sup>2</sup>) remain archaeologically terra incognita. This includes the area known in antiquity as Dakṣiṇa Kosala as well as the adjacent land in northern Andhra Pradesh, that is all of eastern Central India. For prehistoric and protohistoric artefactual parallels in this area one must turn toward the western part of India, where vastly more research has taken place.

The main category of lower peninsular iron age India, including so-called megalithic sites, seems little represented in Orissa.<sup>2</sup> The term “megalithic” is frequently misused in India and elsewhere to designate any rustic structure constructed of stones, and in practice includes diverse undated monuments. While the classic south Indian iron age manifests in itself Orissa in large part in terms of pottery, this is far less the case with its characteristic burial structures. In absolute years, this age is represented by rare “chalcolithic” sites such as the latest (IIB) phase of coastal Golabai (Dist. Khurda) and Kameswaripali (Dist. Sonapur). But in western Orissa, the remains as yet provide little basis for a chronology. Moreover, the absolute chronology is far less certain than the relative one, so that the temporal overlap between chalcolithic and iron age, for example, remains unstruc-

tured. Classic archaeological manifestations of early historic India, such as Northern Black Polished Ware (NBP) are regrettably lacking in the area. The interface of the so-called iron age and early historic periods in western Orissa forms the basis of our inquiry (Fig. 1).

## State of Research

Two geographic areas must be highlighted at the outset: First, western Orissa contains a broad spectrum of monuments dating into the medieval period which only recently have become known. Not unexpectedly, in neighbouring Chhattisgarh, a new study reveals a concentration of iron age tomb structures immediately adjacent to our working area.<sup>3</sup> Our colleagues in the interior of Orissa, B. Misra and P. Mohanty, have culled only surface finds from there and chronology rests solely on external comparisons. This holds also for the continued efforts of J.P. Singh Deo (*yuvvaraja* of Khariar) and his antiquarian-interested colleagues, who in fact do obtain interesting strayfinds. But archaeologists often overestimate the range of their method in interpreting such surface and other stray finds, for lack of good excavated ones. The authors strive to rise above a merely antiquarian amateurism, limited in its historical range, and put the archaeology on a sounder footing.

A good step ahead for the archaeology of Orissa is a new anthology, recently published by K.K. Basa and P. Mohanty, which contains several substantial articles which bring the archaeology of Orissa further than one essentially of local interest. In particular, one new contribution on the archaeology of Baudh (interior Orissa) district contains hitherto unknown sites of different periods

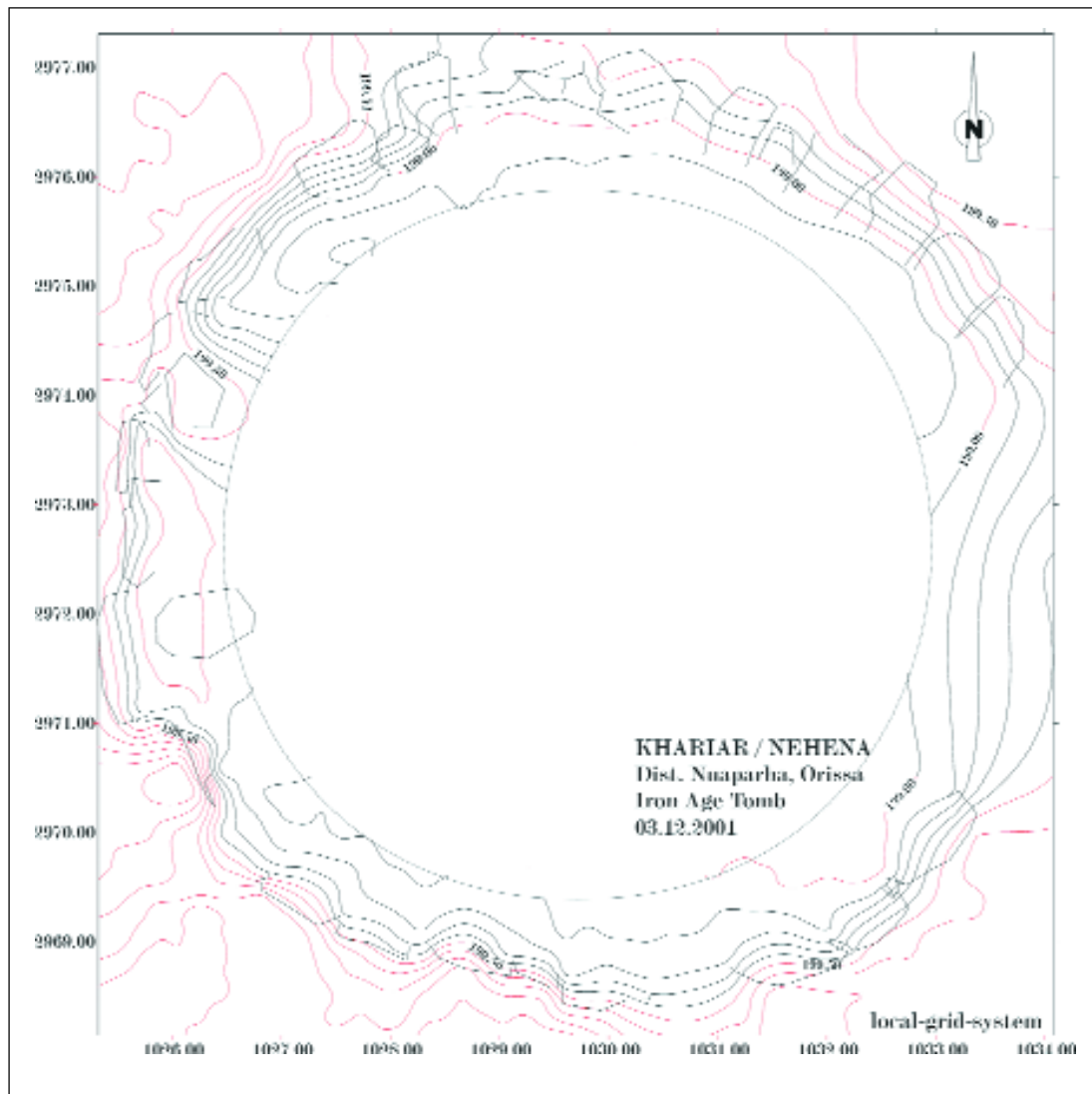


Fig. 2 – Profile and plan of an iron age tomb in Khariar/Sandohel.

and is relevant to our work.<sup>4</sup> It also updates our knowledge of the pottery of the region.

Coastal Orissa shows some progress in dating the protohistoric pottery, although till now their publication does little more than highlight attractive finds. South of Lake Chilka recently some sites yielded fragments of early historic fine black and red ware. While the coastal variety is coarse, that of the interior is fine<sup>5</sup> – which provides a hint of a new picture of the iron age and early historic periods other than the present one.

Since the archaeology of Orissa rests principally on surface finds and those excavated without documentation, it supports only the most superficial archaeological interpretation. Site plans are neither published, or are published in such a way that they are of little use regard-

ing the size, date, or importance of a given place. Often one experiences unreflected adherence to obsolete chronological notions and regional patriotic beliefs, such as N.K. Sahu’s interpretation of Narla/Asurgarh as an Aṭavi stronghold against Aśoka and 600 years later the fort of Vyāghrarāja.<sup>6</sup>

### Research Goal

The central topic of the Indian-Kiel work group is to elucidate the polycentric nature of sub regional and hegemonial identity in historic Orissa. In this context the widespread modern centric perception of interior Orissa as peripheral, as opposed to the coastal area, is challenged.

### Sites Surveyed in 2000

We concentrated our research resources in the field on eight sites which illuminate the late proto- and early historic culture of western Orissa, but registered other (Table 1). In addition, we surveyed for unknown sites. The following sites commanded our attention:

1- *Khariar/Sandohel* (Dist. Nuaparha 20°15'01"N; 82°47'03"E)<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 2)

In 1998 students from Khariar college excavated a site which in the late 1980s was identified as an iron age "megalithic" grave.<sup>8</sup> Without documenting the site, they destroyed it. The finds said to come from here are a mixture of iron age pottery and iron finds, the provenance of

which is uncertain. They are stored in a cardboard box in the college. The grave circle nearly 7 m in outside diameter.

2- *Manmunda/Karmapadar* (Dist. Boudh 20°49'44"N; 83°58'10"E)<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 3)

Close to each other lie mounds, possibly a destroyed dolmen, and several stone circles of uncertain date. Karmapadar (Karumpadar) lies on the south bank of the Tel/Mahanadi and east of present-day Sonepur. Visible remains spread over 3 or 4 ha. The surface finds are largely chalcolithic and iron age sherds. Of special interest are fragments of a four-legged vessel with its form-parallels from chalcolithic and iron age sites in Central and South India.

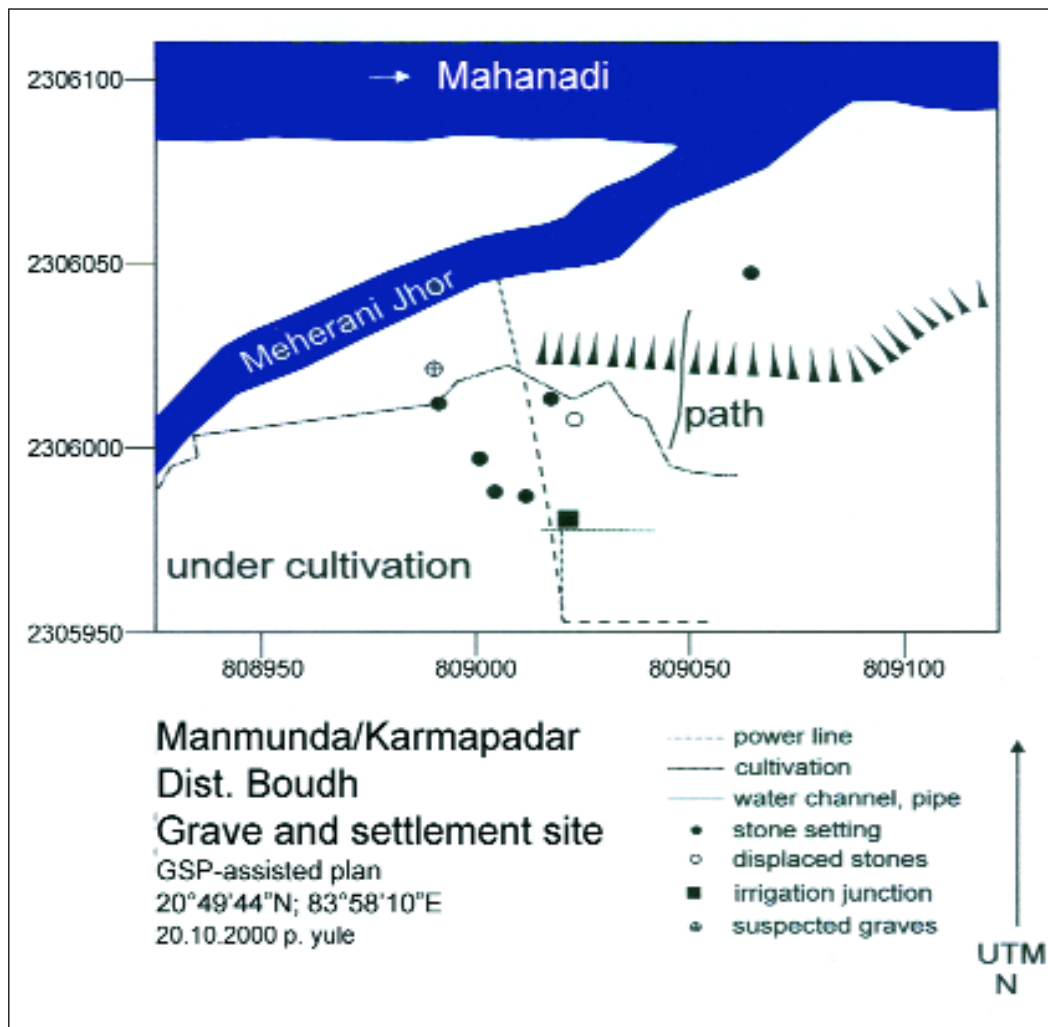


Fig. 3 – Plan Manmunda/Karmapadar.

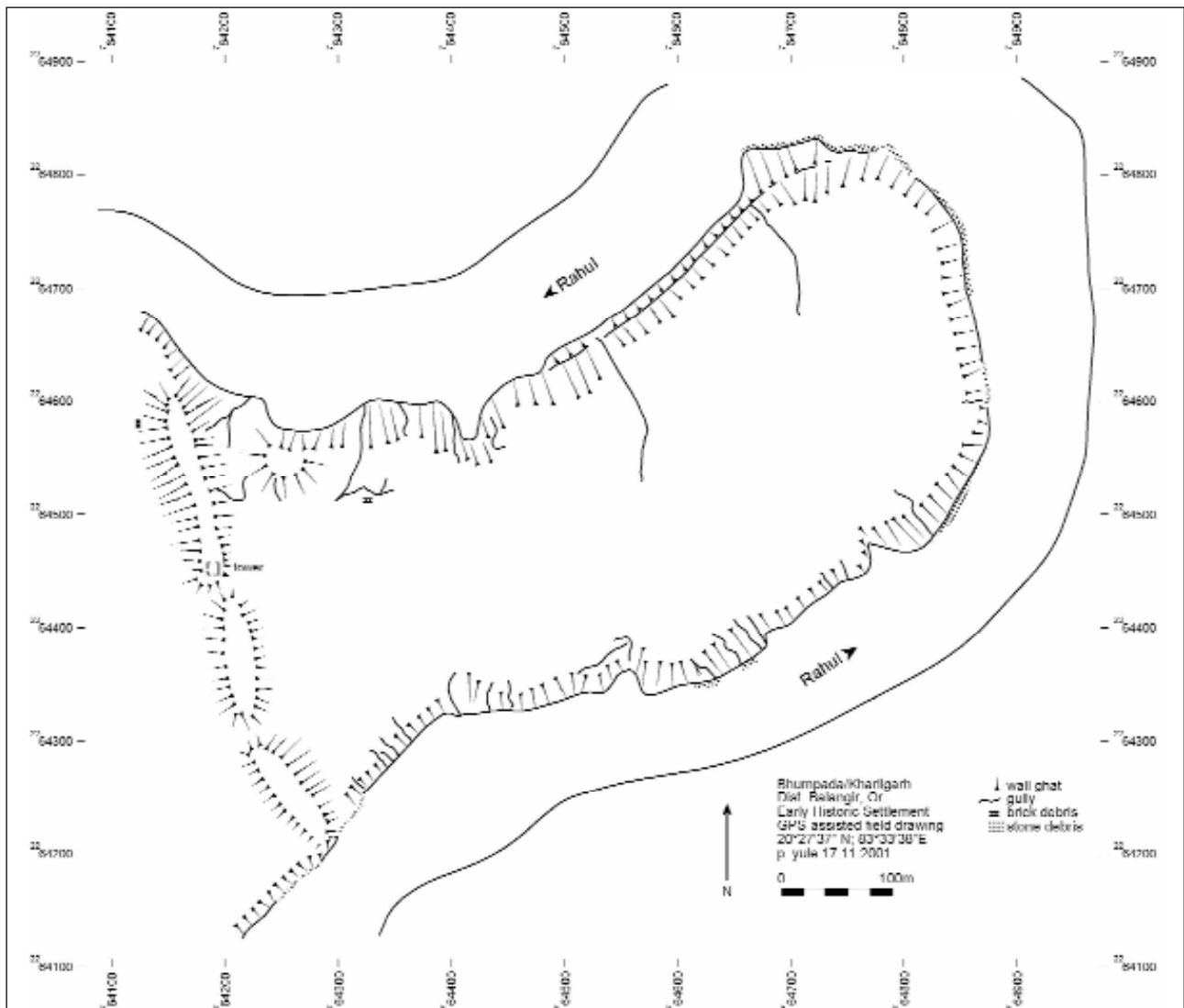


Fig. 4 – Plan of Bhumpada/Kharligarh and profile of the rampart.

3- *Bhumpada/Kharligarh (Dist. Balangir 20°27'37"N; 83°33'38"E)*<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 4)

One of the key sites for our line of inquiry is the early historic Kharligarh at the confluence of the Rahul and the Tel, owing to its large size (17 ha *intra muros*). Lying above the steep banks of the Rahul, it is easy to defend and, owing to its position at the confluence of the two rivers, is strategically important as well. For trade, this river settlement is favourably located, offering the pre-requisites for an urban settlement. Possible fortifying of the river bank exists. Architectural ruins are visible on the surface, especially baked bricks and dressed stone.

4- *Manmunda/Asurgarh (Dist. Baudh 20°50'00"N; 83°56'02"E)*<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 5)

This badly eroded settlement appeared to others and initially to us as having potential for excavation, owing to the chronologically diverse and qualitatively good surface finds. It offers a broad spectrum from the neolithic/chalcolithic to at least the early medieval period – thus spanning more than 2000 years. Possibly only the south wall still exists, the other three evidently having been eroded by the Tel. This explains the lack of structures in the unpublished excavations at this site. Colleagues from Sambalpur University have conducted several seasons of

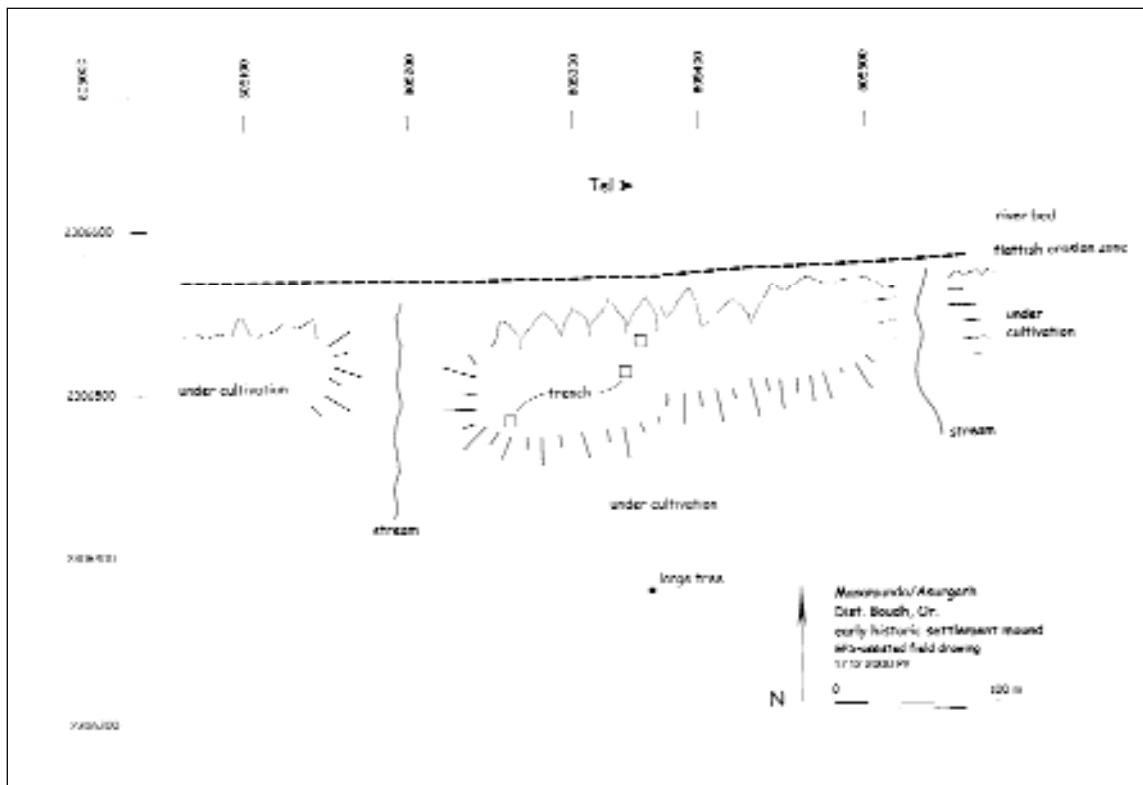


Fig. 5 – Plan Manmunda/Asurgarh.

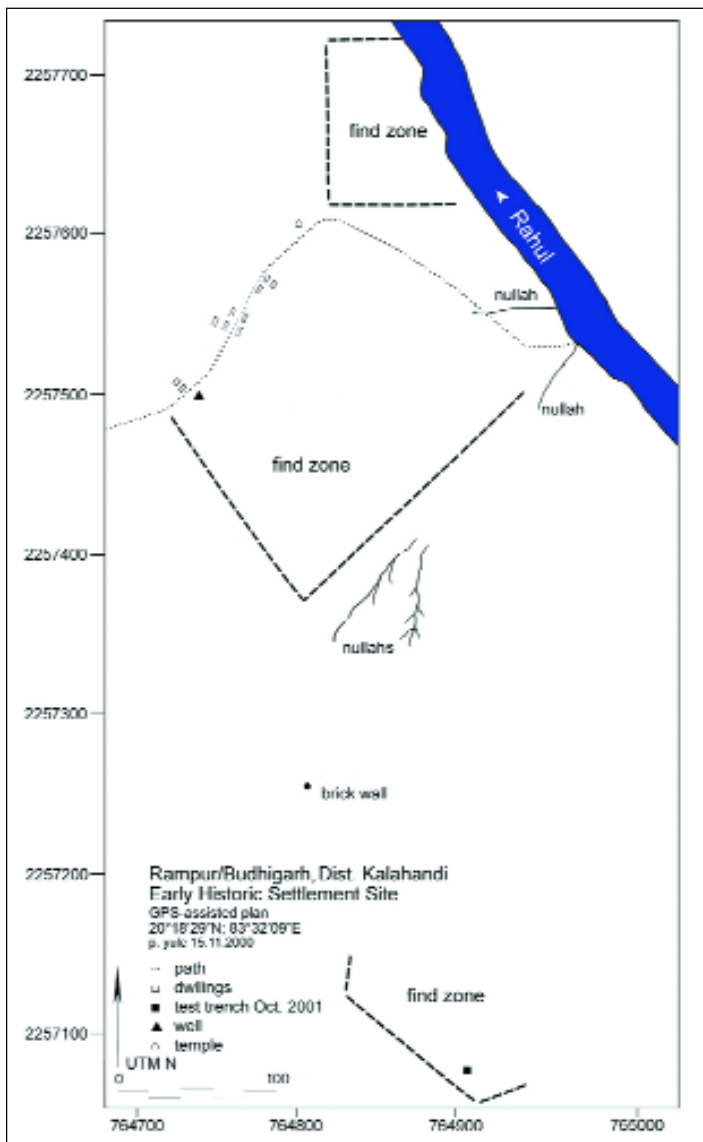


Fig. 6 – Plan Ramapur/Budhigarh.

excavation here. This site proved smaller than originally reported: 340 m long instead of 1200 m, perhaps partly due to the effects of erosion, or a different manner of designating the anthropogenic remains. Handmade pottery shows post-firing painted decoration. Knobbed ware indicates the early historic presence of Buddhist monks who made and used such vessels.

5- Ramapur/Budhigarh (Dist. Kalahandi 20°18'29"N; 83°32'09"E)<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 6)

Over 3 ha in size, this site attracted the attention of B. Misra and P. Mohanty, owing to a scatter of iron age and early historic pottery sherds. Building remains are understandably difficult to confirm without excavation.

Notable is that at this site *for the first time in Orissa*, Northern Black Polished Ware is confirmed (Fig. 7), thus correcting an old error which has been uncritically repeated in the archaeological literature.<sup>13</sup> This excellently made pottery *nota bene* derives from the so-called western Orissa “periphery”, and not from the coastal strip. Again, imported knobbed ware, bearing owner’s marks indicates the presence of early historic Buddhist monks (as also at Manmunda/Asurgarh). Other luxury goods are in evidence: for instance, fragments of an ivory comb, seals fashioned from jasper, one bearing the symbol of the “tree in railing” motive of Mauryan and Post-Mauryan punch marked coins), another jasper seal with

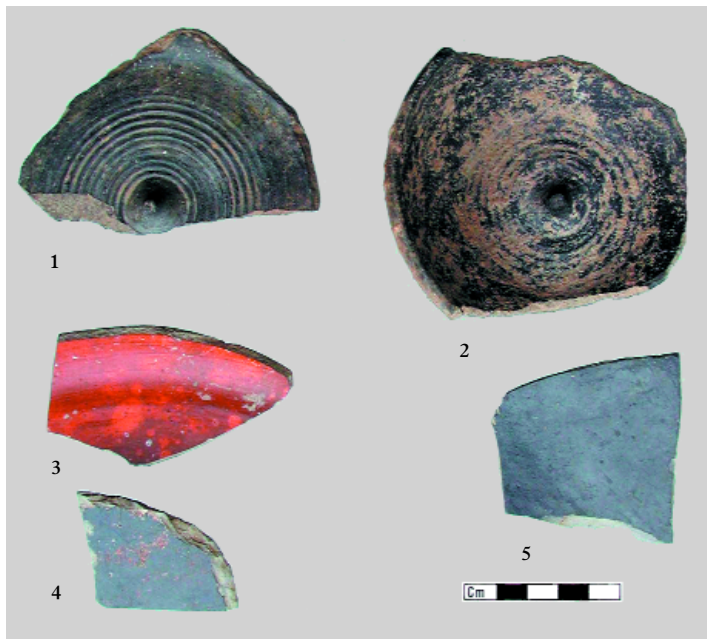


Fig. 7 – Knobbed Ware (1-2) and Northern Black Polished Ware in different colours (3-5) said to come from Rampur/Budhigarh.

a problematic inscription, a jasper earring, a double shell mould for casting either metal beads or rivets. Aside from this, numerous beads fashioned of semiprecious stones derive from this site, as also especially from Narla/Asurgarh which we shall turn to now.

6- *Narla/Asurgarh* (Dist. *Kalahandi* 19°54'32"N; 83°21'02"E)<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 8-9)

30 km north-east of Bhawanipatna, near Narla, a rectangular fortification, measuring 500 × 400 m with an entrance on each side, encloses early historic settlement remains, now under protection by the ASI. The ramparts measure 11 m in height, and up to 50 m in width. While this site has been known from some time (Fig. 8), neither epigraphic nor literary sources have yielded its ancient name. Its appearance has been obscured by grotesquely distorted maps. N.K. Sahu's suggestion that it in fact is the fort of the Vyāghra rāja king Mahākāntāra, mentioned in the Allahabad inscription of Samudragupta) cannot be verified. Nor can his assumption be confirmed that it is the Aṭavi stronghold (that of the forest dwellers) that the Kalingan army, which Aśoka throunced, were recruited from this area and that after battle they retreated here.

In 1958 a hoard of 539 pre-Mauryan, Mauryan, and Post-Mauryan silver punch marked coins are said to have come to light here accidentally. Excavation (Sambalpur University) followed in 1973. The pottery thereof is not recorded stratigraphically, and therefore eludes strati-

graphic analysis. Aside from the pottery, to judge from the quantity and quality of the finds, an active bead industry is in evidence.

7- *Lokapada hoard of 300 punch marked coins* Dist. *Balangir* (20°49'40"N; 83°36'42"E)<sup>15</sup>

From the banks of the Suktel, the police confiscated the bulk of the c. 800 coins around 1990. But about 1/3 of them are said to have been melted down on their discovery. This hoard have not been studied, but at least a part of them are certainly Mauryan in date.

8- *Junagarh/Bhairapadia* (Dist. *Kalahandi* 19°52'11"N; 82°56'05"E)

The isolated presumed "megalithic" tomb lies in a copse near the town of Bhairapadia. Small finds are not visible on the surface. Nonetheless this is one of the clearest examples of an early megalithic circle in the western part of Orissa. Since we began studying the distribution, the evidence regarding the iron age in the area has mounted (see *supra*). Till now one could only assume that stone enclosures and similar relicts were "megalithic" iron age graves and not the recent megalithic practices of Ghond and other tribals. The publication of megalithic stone alignments in nearby Chhattisgarh strengthens the reasonable assumption that megalithic structures also were present in neighbouring Orissa.

## Discussion

The rarity of iron age megalithic graves in Orissa's back country may well be due to the ubiquitous destruction of such structures (as demonstrable at Karkabhat in Chhattisgarh and at many other Indian megalithic sites)<sup>16</sup> and/or to the weak state of research. To complicate matters, to this day so-called menhirs and stone circles still are erected, reused, and worshipped. We can do little more than acknowledge their existence without being able to establish their age. A main goal is to investigate iron age burial practices, optimally in a cemetery in order to define this temporal horizon locally. The correlation of settlement and burial finds with each other would also serve to put the chronology on a firmer footing.

A second project-emphasis is to investigate the early historic fort horizon, incipient urbanisation, and state

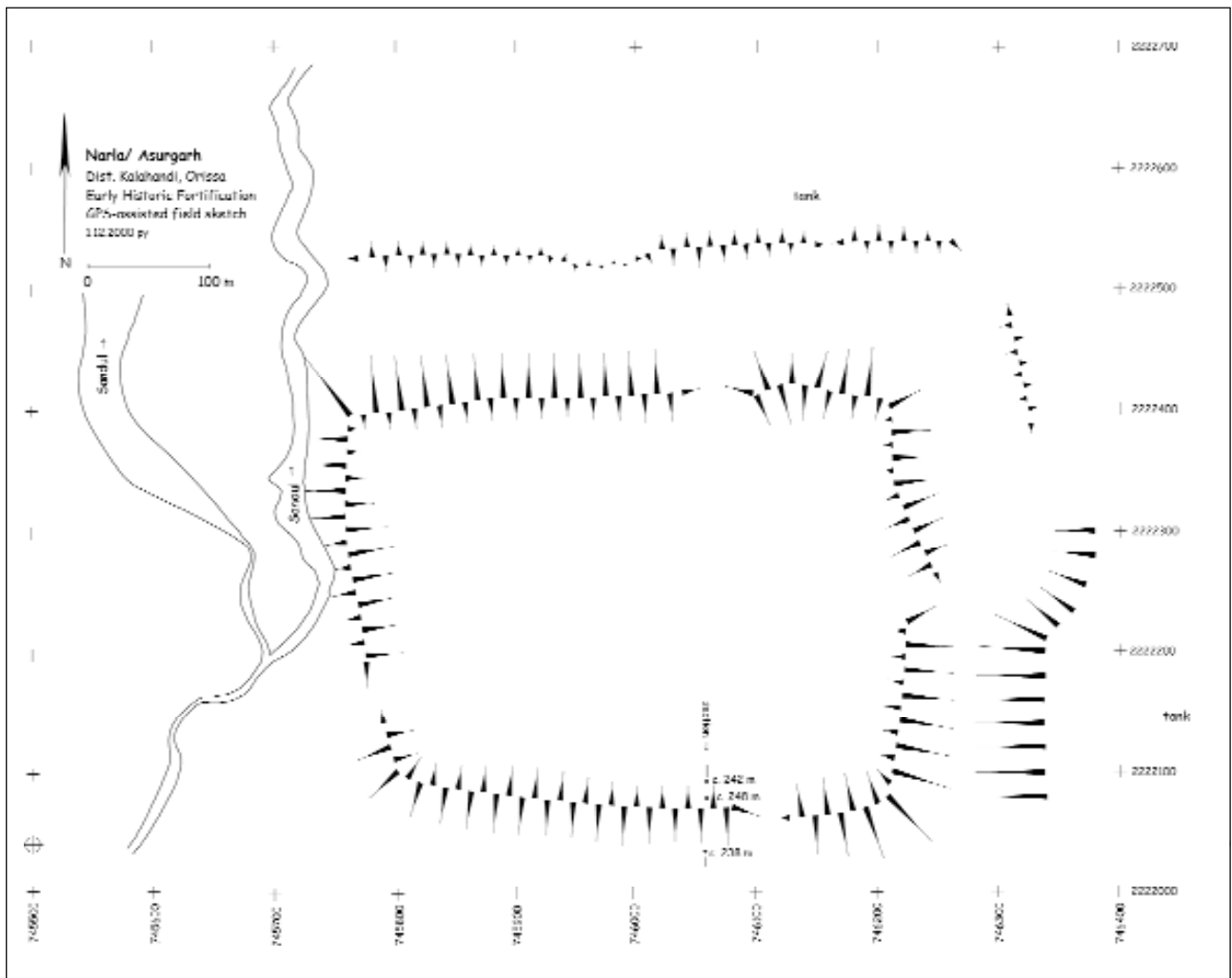


Fig. 8 – Plan of Narla/Asurgarh.

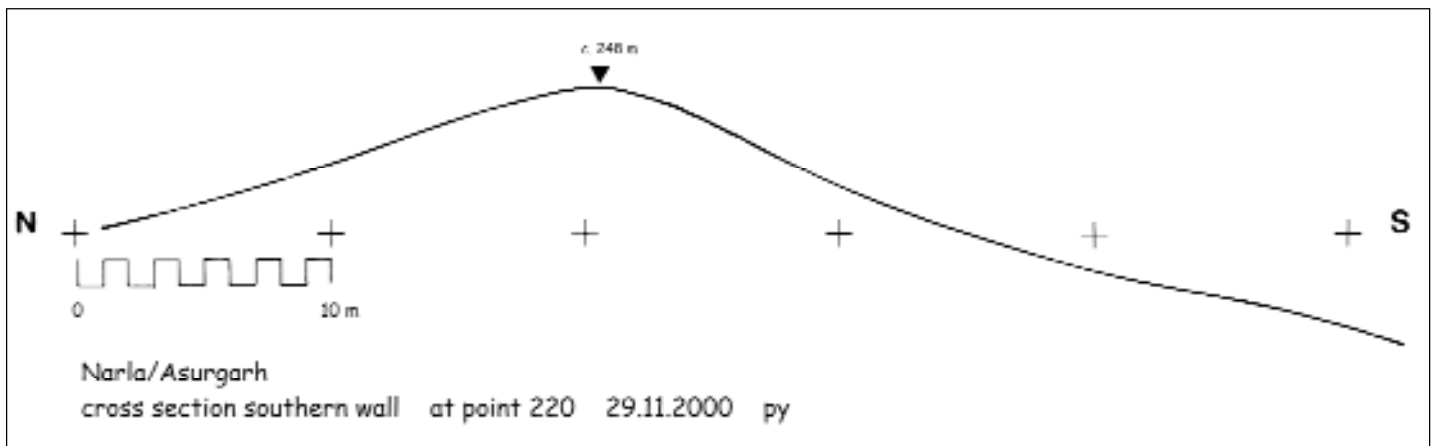


Fig. 9 – Plan and profile Narla/Asurgarh.



site/periods	type of site	dist./map ref	north	east coords.	selected sources
Bhawanipatna/Sagada	sto	Kalahandi	19°48'23"	83°07'02"	P. Mohanty/B. Misra unpublished
nd		65 m/1			
Bhuampada/Kharligarh	fs	Balangir	20°27'37"	83°33'38"	R. Mohapatra 1986 221-2
eh		64 p/11			
Dadpur/Rupangudi	sto	Kalahandi	19°59'15"	83°14'18"	B. Misra/P. Mohanty 1998 345
rec?		65 m/1			
Hikuri/Kalipat	sto?	Sonapur	20°52'18"	83°54'17"	Brandtner notes
rec		64 p/13/se			
Ichapur/Jamugadapadar	nd	Kalahandi	19°56'25"	83°12'45"	P. Mohanty/B. Misra unpublished
mes ehi rec		65 m/1			
Junagarh/Bhairapadia	gr	Kalahandi	19°52'11"	82°56'05"	B. Misra/P. Mohanty 1999 345
protoh		65 i/13			
Khajuripali/Baradanga	sto	Sonapur	20°53'14"	83°53'27"	survey
rec?		64 p/13			
Khariar/Nehena	set	Nuaparha	20°15'17"	82°46'17"	M. Brandtner notes
eh		64 o/15			
Khariar/Sandohel	gr	Nuaparha	20°15'01"	82°47'03"	J.P. Singh Deo 2000 421
protoh		64 l/13			
Kumarsingha/Asurgarh	set gr?	Sonapur	20°50'35"	84°05'19"	P.C. Rath 1947 387-9
chal ehi protoh		73 a/1			
Manamunda/Asurgarh	fs	Baudh	20°50'00"	83°56'02"	S. Behera 1982 16-22; P. Mohanty/B. Tripathy 1998 90
eh		64 p/13/se			
Manamunda/Karmapadar (kpd1)	gr?	Baudh	20°49'44"	83°58'10"	S. Pradhan 1988 18-9
protoh ehi		64 p/13/se			
Manamunda/Karmapadar (kpd2)	gr?	Baudh	not found		P.K. Chhotroy unpubl. notes
protoh		64 p/13/se			
Narla/Asurgarh	fs	Kalahandi	19°54'32"	83°21'02"	P. Mohanty/P.P. Joglekar/B. Misra 1999 90
eh		65 m/5			
Narla/Bhimkela	set	Kalahandi	20°05'55"	83°21'22"	P. Mohanty/B. Misra unpublished
mes chal ehi		64 p/8			
Puramunda/Budikon	gr	Baudh	20°04'45"	83°20'56"	S. Pradhan 1988 17
protoh		64 p/8			
Ramapur/Budhigarh	set gr nd	Kalahandi	20°18'29"	83°32'09"	P. Mohanty/P.P. Joglekar/B. Misra 1999 121-2
chal-ehi		64 p/11			
Sonapur/Dauli	set	Sonapur	20°49'11"	83°54'17"	survey
eh		64 o/13			
<b>periods</b>	<b>type of site</b>				
mes	mesolithic	fs	fortified settlement		
chal	chalcolithic	gr	graves		
protoh	protohistoric	nd	not determinable		
eia early iron age	set	settlement			
eh early historic	sto	misc. stone settings			
recsubrecent/recent					
nd not datable					

Table 1 – Sites studied in 2000 in western Orissa.

formation along the Tel/Mahanadi. From the Mauryan Period, that is 4th-3rd centuries BC, several sites reveal finds that show contact with the Ganges area as well as with Orissa's coastal region. Over time, gradually the latter are acculturated, taking on properties of the Gangetic sites. This holds for settlements along the Tel and its back country. Such sites include those just discussed: Budhigarh, Kharligarh, Narla/Asurgarh as well as others which we surveyed. The contexts and their

finds show characteristic signs of urbanisation. These include a large settlement area, elaborate fortifications, baked brick architecture, coinage, seals with script, imported luxury ware and with it, evidence for trade, not to forget indication of Buddhist enclaves which at this time are related to urban and mercantile settlements.

In addition to the large settlements, small ones exist in river ghats, revealed by erosion. Herewith the first elements of a settlement hierarchy come to fruition which

we hope to complement as time and methods allow. The finds and contexts within the area selected for investigation bear witness to an intensive and early indigenous process of urbanisation which in these dimensions is not present on the coast. Today Orissa's back country is considered to be the *poorest* and most backward in all of India. In light of the present-day economic wealth of coastal Orissa, this interior urbanisation surprises one at first. But consider that in the early Sanskrit literature (for example Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*) the economic importance and in particular the richness of the mineral resources of eastern Central India repeatedly are mentioned. Moreover, the infrastructural situation is fostered by the fact that this area was linked by important routes to the rest of ancient India. In this respect the coast is less fortunate. Thus seen, interior Orissa's early prosperity in fact is not at all surprising.

In light of these preliminary findings, one may also review the question regarding Aśoka's motives and military options, since his conquests are limited to the coast and he left the Aṭavi land untroubled. A question occasionally raised is whether he was preoccupied with the control of sea routes and the protection of the port of Tāmraliptī in the Ganges delta from competitors to the South? In any case, in Orissa's back country Mauryan influence there may have been, but Mauryan presence is

yet a different matter. In other words, "Secondary state formation" could not have taken place here at this time. Military action in the interior would have overtaxed Aśoka's resources.

Gupta influence seems equally as marginal. Samudragupta (c. 335-375 AD), the second Guptan ruler, marched through western Orissa on his great campaign to the South around 360 or 370 AD and conquered several rulers whose names he has left us. These are not mere petty chieftains, but rather princes who already used the legitimatizing power of northern Sanskrit culture: Mahendra from Kosala, Vyāghrarāja from Mahākāntāra, and Maṇḍarāja from Kurāḷa. Although the attribution of the rulers named in the Allahabad inscription to the sites which we are dealing with would be premature, one can rest assured that the fortified proto-urban sites mentioned here, with their early relations with North India, link with the military opponents of Samudragupta.

The interface of the prehistoric village megalithic culture with early historic urban culture, which includes the transition from tribal to early state structures, the continuities and discontinuities in the economic-social development, as well as the cultural orientation of the time between 1000 BC and 500 AD are the subject of our efforts.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Recent substantive work dealing with the archaeology of Orissa: P. Yule/A. Hauptmann/M. Hughes 1989 [1992], 193-275; M. Brandtner 1994 and 2000; K. Basa/P. Mohanty 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. B.K. Thapar 1985, map on 105.

<sup>3</sup> A.K. Sharma 2000.

<sup>4</sup> B. Tripathy 2000, 392-417.

<sup>5</sup> Pottery from Nehena (in the interior): M. Brandtner 1994, 110, 111 fig. 8a-e.

<sup>6</sup> N.K. Sahu 1982, 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> The post "selective availability" readings which are cited at the beginning of each of the sites listed below use the map datum "wgs 84".

<sup>8</sup> M. Brandtner 1994, 103 Fig. 8.1b; J.P. Singh Deo 2000, 421.

<sup>9</sup> S. Pradhan 1987-88, 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> Anon. [S.K. Mukherji] *IndArchRev.* 1968-69 [1971] 68 no. 41; R. Mohapatra 1986, 221-2.

<sup>11</sup> Anon. [S.K. Mukherji], *IndArchRev.* 1968-69 [1971] 68 no. 42; S. Behera 1982, 16-22; P. Mohanty/B. Tripathy 1998, 90.

<sup>12</sup> P. Mohanty/P.P. Joglekar/B. Misra 1999, 121-2.

<sup>13</sup> For example, B.K. Thapar 1985, 122 map. This war is commonly confused with Black Slipped Ware.

<sup>14</sup> P.C. Rath 1947, 387-389; S. Rajaguru 1950, 243-259; D. Mitra in: A. Ghosh 2 1989, 25; P. Mohanty/P.P. Joglekar/B. Misra 1999, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, S.N. Agrawal in Tarbha (Dist. Sonpur). Brandtner photographed some of these coins.

<sup>16</sup> A.K. Sharma 2000, fig. 18.

*Acknowledgements:* We should like to thank H. Kulke for initiating the Orissa research project, for sponsoring our work, and the DFG for funding it. In Orissa our special thanks go to K.K. Basa and B.K. Rath for their support in Bhubaneshwar. This note is written up essentially as the brief talk upon which it is based, and thus cannot solve the archaeological problems which it registers. If not otherwise noted, P. Yule is credited with the text-figures. Martin Brandtner became ill, and Paul Yule wrote up the text from the expedition papers.

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