



EXCAVATIONS
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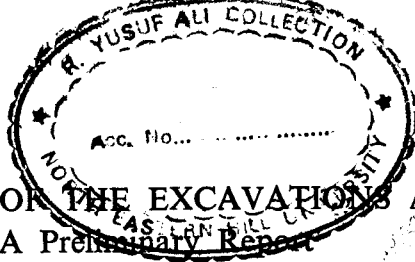
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SOME RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS AT SONKH
A Preliminary Report

BY

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For eight years in succession, from 1966 to 1974, the mound of Sonkh near Mathurā has been the site of an increasingly interesting excavation in every winter and spring. Assisted by 150-180 skilful Indian workers a team of German archaeologists, under the leadership of the author, exposed level upon level of archaeologically significant habitations. The work started under an agreement with the Government of India and was sponsored by two German foundations, viz. the German Research Society (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and the Prussian Cultural Trust (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz). The team consisted of the excavation leader, two architects and one ceramic designer, photographer and excavation technician each. With the help of scholarships made available by the German Academic Exchange Service, the experts were joined every winter by one or two German students of Indian art and archaeology.

In India the undertaking had received support from many sides. The assistance rendered by official bodies — especially the curator and staff of the Mathurā Museum and the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India — was greatly appreciated by the excavators. In a most selfless way, the members of the Cultural Department of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in New Delhi made the excavation a part of their own work.

The preliminary report is divided into two parts. Firstly, it gives information about the diggings at the main mound of Sonkh and secondly, it deals with the results of the excavation work on an additional site, a "mud island" situated in the fields outside the proper area of the mound. As the material obtained from the excavation is not yet completely interpreted, the conclusions drawn may not be taken as final in all cases.

I

THE EXCAVATION AT THE MAIN MOUND OF SONKH

1. The Site

As one of the most important cultural centres of ancient India Mathurā had indeed earned the attention of the archaeologists since a long time. The only question for us was which of those numerous sites should be selected for our purpose. Since our main interest was aimed at finding architectural structures and other remains belonging to the earliest history of Mathurā — when it was looked upon as *sarveṣām daivatīrthāṇām māthuram paranam mahat* — it seemed advisable to look for some more undisturbed mounds than those in the city itself. And among all the possible places, the vast artificial plateau within the fields of Sonkh, some eight miles south of the holy Govardhan, attracted our attention most (fig. 1). In his "Mathura: A District Memoir" (3rd Ed. 1883, vol. II, p. 383), F.S. Growse remarks: "This (Sonkh) lies immediately under the Khera or site of the old fort, of which some crumbling walls and bastions still remain. It was built by a Jāt named Hati Singh, of the time of Suraj Mall of Bharatpur, or Jawahir Singh; but the Khera itself must be many hundreds of years older." Growse's opinion was corroborated by surface finds of Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa terracotta pieces, fragments of Kuṣāṇa sculptures and older potsherds. Thus, it was of high interest to verify the archaeological importance of the Sonkh mound and to obtain details about its historical sequences.

The mound mentioned by Growse consists of a plateau which originally was of the size of at least 200,000 sqm, but is now diminished to a large extent. However, about 75,000 sqm of the old mound still exist surrounded by fields; the town of Sonkh itself is partly built on the extensions of the mound. On this plane rises an elevation measuring 100 x 90 m, which was built over in younger times with fortifications and corner towers and has the appearance of a citadel.

A most extensive survey of this area was undertaken in order to facilitate systematic digging operations. The site (fig. 2) was divided into 100 m and 20 m squares.

2. The Digging Procedure

In the winter of 1966/67, we laid a trench of 36 x 5 m in the northern

cannot have belonged to the temple described in the following chapter of this paper.

As mentioned before, only a small selection of objects from Sonkh could be discussed here. They were by no means the most attractive pieces; the intention was rather to show that it is not the artistic quality alone which decides the importance of an archaeological find.

II

EXCAVATION OF APSIDAL TEMPLE NO. 2

During the digging on the large plateau of the hill of Sonkh we came, as already reported, upon a succession of eight Kuṣāṇa levels with the remnants of houses, streets and places which were grouped around a central brick-built temple. This apsidal temple—we may call it temple No. 1—is comparatively small, but was often renovated, reconstructed and enlarged. Apparently, the walls were only plastered and not artistically decorated. It, therefore, appeared all the more astonishing that in the filling debris of the upper Kuṣāṇa levels, i.e. from Huvīṣka to Vāsudeva I, fragments of Kuṣāṇa stone-reliefs and stone-railings were found again and again. As it cannot be assumed that this filling debris and these fragments were brought here from very far, there must have existed some temples with stone railings in the near neighbourhood of the mound. In the course of time the originally larger area of the hill on the eastern, western and northern sides had been ploughed by the peasants. In the south, the widespread site of Sonkh extends on the spurs of the ancient mound. In the north, the area was bounded by a river. Could the temples have stood along its banks? This question would have remained unanswered, had there not been a small area of the old elevated ground left in the midst of the fields. An old stone-sculpture had once been accidentally found at this place, which the local people began to worship. A small building constructed around this sculpture made the ground a temple site. In this way, the surrounding area of about 2,500 sqm remained untouched within the fields. The sculpture is today worshipped as Cāmardevī, i.e. Camuṇḍā, by the women of the neighbouring villages.

The temple island, as we may call it, is situated 400 m northwards to the main field of excavation, quite close to the modern canal (see fig. 2, square 6 III-V/Cb-d.) In the spring of 1971, we laid a trial-trench on the southern