
A Comprehensive Picture of Delhi's Archaeology Through Excavations at Purana Qila

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Abstract: *The Purana Qila, also known as the Old Fort, situated in New Delhi, holds significant historical and archaeological importance as the possible location of the ancient city of Indraprastha, mentioned in the Mahabharata. Previous excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India revealed a rich cultural sequence spanning from the Mauryan to the Mughal Period without interruption. Recent excavations aimed to establish the earliest habitation levels and understand the stratigraphy of the site. The most notable finding is the Pre-Mauryan Period deposit, including Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sherds dating back to 540 BCE, indicating the potential association with the Mahabharata period. The excavation uncovered structures, pottery, and antiquities representing various historical periods, including the Mauryan, Sunga, Kushan, Gupta, Post-Gupta, Rajput, Sultanate, and Mughal Periods. The stratigraphic analysis revealed the continuity of human habitation, with the natural soil yet to be reached, suggesting the need for further excavations to fully comprehend the site's historical significance.*

Keywords: Purana Qila, Archaeological Survey of India, Excavations, Stratigraphy, Mauryan Period, Antiquities, Painted Grey Ware

Introduction

Purana Qila or Old Fort (28° 38' N; 77° 12' E) is situated on Mathura Road, New Delhi, about 2 km north of Humayun's Tomb, 17 km northeast of Indira Gandhi International Airport, 5 km east of New Delhi Railway Station, and presently falls within the Defence Colony tehsil of Delhi. Formerly, it was situated on the western bank of the river Yamuna, which now flows about one km to its east. Popularly known as Pandavon-ka-Qila, it stands on an archaeological mound measuring approximately 710 m in length from north to south, 350 m from east to west, and 2 km in perimeter. It has been identified as the ancient city of Indraprastha, mentioned in the literary work 'Mahabharata'. The mound has an average minimum height of about 11 m. The standing ramparts and other buildings were built by Sher Shah Suri (1538-1545 CE) after demolishing and re-modeling Dinpanah, a city founded here by Humayun, the sixth city of Delhi, around 1533 CE after his return from Persia. Humayun resided here until his death in 1556 CE and is believed to have constructed and repaired some portions of this old fort.

Previous Work

The Archaeological Survey of India conducted excavations twice in the past: trial trenching in 1954-55 (IAR 1954-55), and full-fledged excavations during 1969-73 (IAR 1969-70; 1970-71; 1971-72; 1972-73). The latter revealed evidence of various cultures from the Mauryan Period to the Mughal Period without any breaks. Significant antiquities included terracotta beads and toys from the Mauryan Period, a terracotta Yakshi figurine from the Sunga Period, a terracotta votive tank and copper coins from the Kushan Period, seals and coins from the Gupta Period, different types of beads made from coral, crystal, and carnelian, as well as a small sandstone Vishnu image from the Rajput Period. Additionally, there were glazed plates and coins from the Sultanate period, Chinese porcelain with Chinese inscriptions, glass wine bottles, and a gold earring from the Mughal Period, among others.



Figure 1: Aerial view of the excavated area towards the slope, Purana Qila

Recent Excavations

Fresh excavations at Purana Qila were conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India under the direction of Dr. Vasant Kumar Swarnkar during the field seasons of 2013-2014 and 2017-2018. The most recent excavations were undertaken during the field season of 2022-2023 (Figures 1-4). The objectives of the initial seasons, besides providing field training to the trainees of the Institute of Archaeology, were as follows:



Figure 2: General View of Excavated Remains, Purana Qila

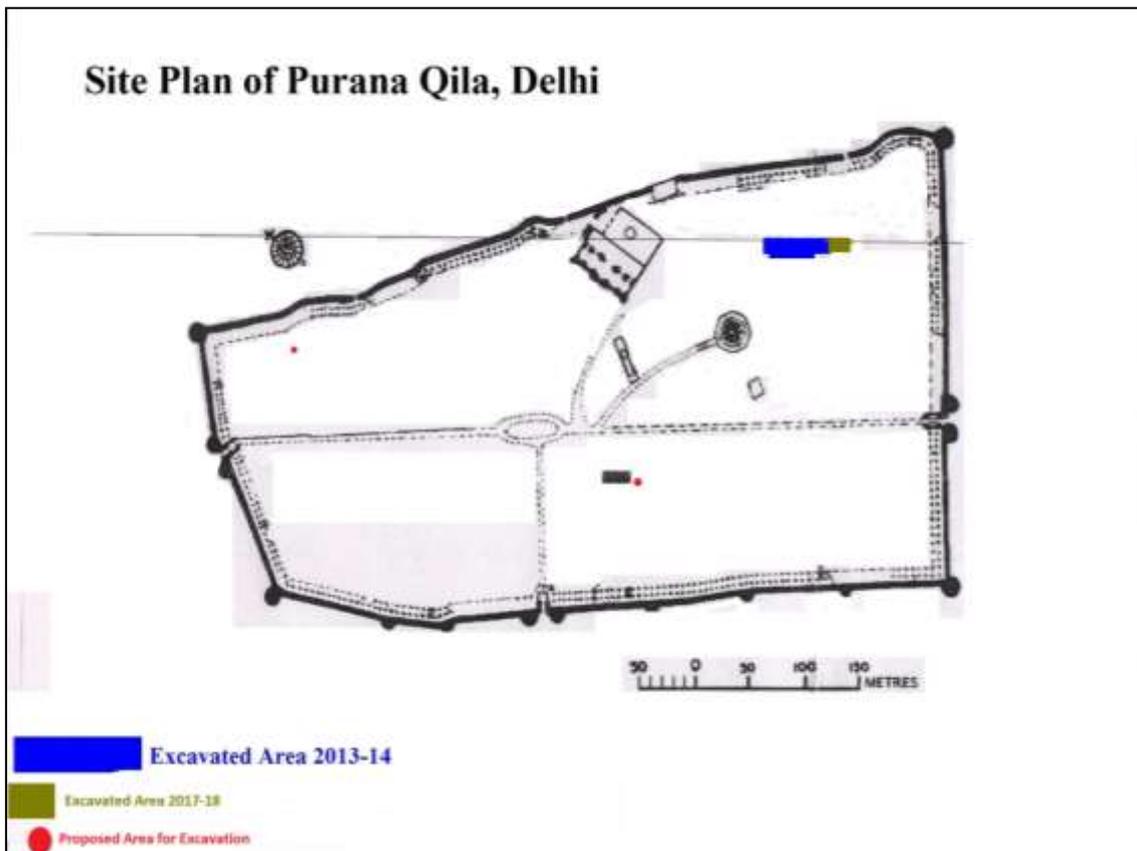


Figure 3: Plan of the archaeological mound

1. To collect fresh samples for the purpose of absolute and relative dating from all cultural levels.
2. To establish the earliest habitation levels and reach the natural soil, thereby establishing the chronology of the site conclusively.
3. To establish the Painted Grey Ware cultural levels in a stratigraphical context.
4. To expose structures of various cultural levels and preserve them in the form of an Open-Air Museum for educational purposes.

The excavation, to date, has revealed a nine-fold cultural sequence, spanning from evidence indicating a Pre-Mauryan habitation level to the Mughal Period, without any breaks. Traces of conservation works carried out during the British era are also evident. The chronological time periods identified from the excavations are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Cultural Chronology of Purana Qila

Sl. No.	Period	Chronology
1	Pre-Mauryan Period	540 BCE – 323 BCE
2	Mauryan Period	323 BCE – 200 BCE
3	Sunga Period	200 BCE – Up to the beginning of Common Era
4	Kushan Period	Beginning of the Common Era – 200 CE
5	Gupta Period	200 CE – 400 CE
6	Post Gupta Period	400 CE – 600 CE
7	Rajput Period	600 CE - 1200 CE
8	Sultanate Period	1200 CE – 1500 CE
9	Mughal Period	1600 CE – 1800 CE

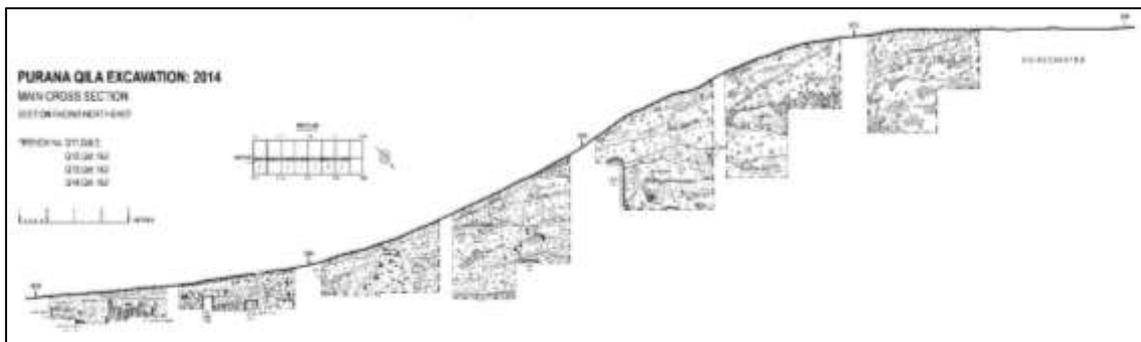


Figure 4: Section drawing of the excavated trenches

Excavations (Figures 1-4) have revealed extensions of habitations from lower levels, namely Kushan, Sunga, and Maurya, in a wider area. Sampling of a few charred grains identified as wheat and lentils has also been found from Rajput, Gupta, and Kushan levels. A specific area near the Shri Mata Kunti Devi temple was excavated to attain a comprehensive picture of the cultural deposit of the site, as it is situated at almost the highest point and near the center of the archaeological mound. Excavations at the topmost layer in this area have exposed a walled structure built of rubble stone and

brick-bats with mud mortar of the most recent period, possibly by the populace who settled there after partition.

The site of Purana Qila in the heart of the city of Delhi has been identified as the ancient city of Indraprastha by Padma Vibhushan Prof. B.B. Lal while he was pursuing the Mahabharata and Ramayana Project and conducting a series of excavations at sites identified through these two great literary works. Literary and inscriptional evidence has time and again provided evidence towards the identification of the site of Purana Qila with Indraprastha. It is therefore pertinent to mention the correlation with the findings of Prof. B.B. Lal and the ancient city of Indraprastha. Now, it has been mentioned earlier that the objectives of this excavation have been to unearth evidence of the Painted Grey Ware culture in a stratified deposit and to establish evidence of the earliest habitation levels at the site so that the comprehensive cultural history of Purana Qila can be established.

The question arises as to what leads to the association of the PGW culture with the Mahabharata, as is always been talked about by scholars. It is important to understand here that Prof. B.B. Lal had found evidence of PGW sherds from the archaeological site of Hastinapur, identified as an ancient city from the great literature Mahabharata, below which was the evidence of flooding and eventual desertion of the site. This led Prof. Lal to identify PGW culture with the period of Mahabharata, as this was the lowest cultural level at the site. Now, coming back to the site of Purana Qila, it is to mention that the sherds of PGW have been excavated from fresh layers below the levels of the Mauryan period, below which evidence of probable water submergence is seen. Soil samples have been sent to the laboratory to understand the period of this layer and the extent of the river Yamuna in those times. Organic samples examined at the Beta Analytic Lab., Florida have given dates as early as 540 BCE, which is identified as the Pre-Mauryan level at the site.

It is essential to note that this excavation has yielded a significant deposit beneath the Mauryan Period, which has yielded a fragmented bowl and sherds of PGW in the controlled pit excavation that was undertaken to check for traces of cultural habitation beneath Mauryan deposits. Natural soil has not yet been reached at the site, hence making it uncertain as to who the earliest inhabitants of the historical mound of Indraprastha were. It is also pertinent to mention at this juncture that the excavations at contemporary sites like Hastinapur have not only revealed evidence of water submergence but also deposits of Painted Grey Ware sherds from the lowest cultural levels, besides remnants of Black on Red Ware potteries and Ochre-Colored Potteries.

Stratigraphy

On the slope area (about 7.50m slope), yellowish loose soil and bands of ash are visible in gradient and an uneven manner, comprising mixed material of various periods (bricks of 1948CE, fragments of china clay pottery of 1955CE, etc.), most probably belonging to the people who resettled in Purana Qila after the partition in 1947CE and

further resettled in the late sixties. A photograph from the Marshall Album of 1914CE shows a scene of village Babarpur, which was situated inside Purana Qila, later shifted. Beneath this, a light greyish loose earth mixed with debris of lime floor plasters was found deposited on slopes, consisting mainly of Mughal period material. The layer below this seals the structures of the Sultanate Period. Below these layers are successive structures of the Rajput, Post-Gupta, Gupta, Kushan, Sunga, and Mauryan Periods in the adjoining excavated areas. A ring well and drain made of terracotta tiles were excavated as below as on the Mauryan period levels, whereas a substantial house complex of the Kushana period was an important find at the site. Diagnostic potteries such as fine red ware of the painted, incised, and stamped varieties from all levels have been found associated with the structural levels of different time periods. Below the Pre-Mauryan levels was found a significant silt deposit, probably the evidence of water submergence, the soil texture of which consists of yellowish clay. This layer is preceded by various alternative and subsequent pale yellow and grayish soil layers comprising PGW bowl fragments and sherds, infrequent antiquarian remains, etc.

The maximum depth unearthed in recent years of excavations of habitational deposits towards the slope area of the mound is almost 14m. Through cylindrical boring, it has been understood that the cultural deposit, i.e., evidence of human habitation, is continuing till approximately 16-17m. Therefore, it is stated that the natural soil has not yet been reached. Period-wise descriptions of structures, pottery, and antiquities are given in the following paragraphs.



Figure 5: Sherds of PGW (Painted Grey Ware) – Pre-Mauryan levels

of Black-Slipped Ware, etc. Red ware potteries include Ahichchhatra 10A type, collared rim vase, short-rimmed carinated handi, incurved-rim bowl, convex-sided bowl, cord-impressed pottery, etc. Among the antiquities, terracotta sealings with symbols akin to the punch-marked coins, such as hills, moon, and arches, etc., have been unearthed, besides diagnostic grey-colored terracotta figurines of elephant riders decorated with stamped designs, specifically the stamped eyes and stamps on the body, etc., which are indicative of the Mauryan Period. Other significant finds include ghat-shaped terracotta beads; terracotta ram with prominent curved horn; terracotta disc; tiles; wheel; sling balls; gamesmen; ear-studs, bone points (Figure 9), etc.



Figure 7: Terracotta Ring Well



Figure 8: Northern Black Polished Ware Sherds



Figure 9: Bone Points

Period III: Sunga Period

The Sunga period structures are characterized by mud-bricks as well as rubble stones. Besides, a few burnt patches have also been noticed in this period, sometimes in association with these structures and sometimes isolated. The pottery assemblage comprises red ware pot sherds, consisting of fragments of collared rim basins, incurved rim bowls, externally thickened rim storage jar, variant of Ahichchhatra 10A-type, grooved-shoulder vase, externally grooved rim vase, lid, deep ink pot typed lid, etc. A few pieces of grey ware and Black slipped ware have also been in use in this period. Important antiquities of this period are copper coins; terracotta sealings; areca-nut-shaped terracotta beads and ghat-shaped bead; terracotta plaques of a single mold with

both male and female figurines; stone weight; bone points, terracotta disc; wheel; sling ball; gamesmen; copper and iron objects (Figures 10-11); terracotta animal figures (Figure 12); semi-precious stone beads and shell beads.



Figure 10: Copper Objects from Various Periods



Figure 11: Iron Objects from Various Periods



Figure 12: Terracotta Animal figurines from Various Periods

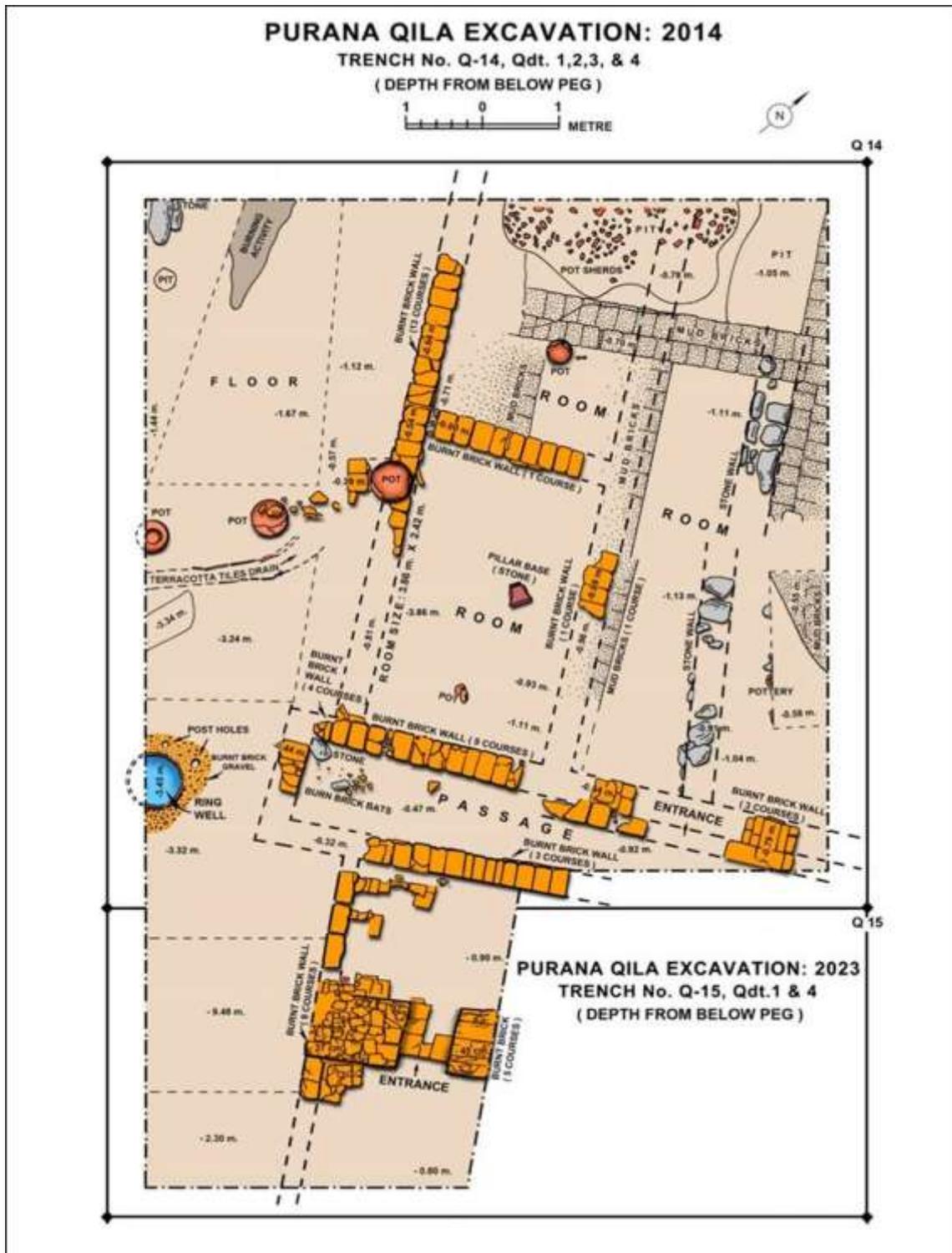


Figure 13: Drawing of House Complex, Kushana Period

Period IV: Kushan Period

A house complex of the Kushan period was unearthed in this phase, consisting of three or more rooms (Figure 13). The walls are constructed of burnt bricks, which are in the majority, besides the usage of mud bricks of the same dimensions as the burnt bricks.

The latter has been seen to be used for a partition wall and for laying out the floor of the house. In all the three phases, brick sizes are seen to vary in dimensions, ranging from 39x27x6cm to 37x22x5.5cm and 33x22x5cm (Figures 14-15). Burnt-bricks are used for the construction of walls, either header-wise or stretcher-wise arrangement of bricks. A particular case of one row of header and another row of stretcher has been unearthed. A lane, laid of fragments of potteries, mixed with earth, belonging to both Sunga and Kushan Periods, was excavated, running east-west in direction. The pottery assemblage consists majorly of the red ware variety, represented by evidence of sprinklers; very rarely, the ink-pot type lid; large to small-sized incurved rim bowls with a carinated exterior; small to medium-sized vases decorated with an embossed triratna symbol; externally grooved rim vase; red wares displaying painted black bands, though sometimes devoid of them; miniature pots; etc. Interestingly, stone ware vessels have also been excavated from this level, comprising a few pots made out of soapstone such as a fragmentary lid, small carinated pot, and small lid, etc. These pots were possibly used for storing valuables or toiletry items. The antiquities from this period comprise a significant quantity of copper coins; ivory seal (Figure 16), terracotta sealings; areca-nut-shaped beads; stone weights; terracotta square tablets; terracotta scrubber (skin rubber); bone points; terracotta disc; wheel; sling balls; animal figures; gamesmen; iron and copper objects; beads of semi-precious stones; glass beads; shell beads; gold foi (Figure 17)l; and terracotta ear-stud. It would be apt to mention about a seal that has a legend inscribed in Sanskrit "*Bhu ka ra ka*", that may imply that the seal may have belonged to the owner of a land of cultivation, or the owner of the produce of the land under cultivation, or of a person tilling the land, etc., wherein "*Bhu*" implies "land" and "*ka ra ka*" implies a worker of the land (Figure 16).



Figure 14: Brick Structure - Kushan Period



Figure 15: Remains of House - Kushan Period



Figure 16: Ivory Seal, Kushan Period



Figure 17: (a) Foil, Gold, Kushan Period; (b) Dagger handle, Ivory; (c) and (d) Textile and Pottery Stamps, Gupta Period; (e) Spindle Whorls/ Reels

Period V: Gupta Period

Gupta period is characterized by the use of burnt bricks for the construction of structures and brick-jelly floors. These brick-jelly floors, a diagnostic representation of the Gupta Period structural art, have been exposed at two places below the Post-Gupta structures, both belonging to the phase II of the Gupta Period. Belonging to the phase I of Gupta Period in the same place, a wall made of brick-bats has also been traced. The pottery assemblage includes red ware types (Figure 18), with pottery variety including

sharp-edged rim bowls with a somewhat footed base, a molded bowl, tortoiseshell impressed pottery, red slipped vases, storage jars, and the continuation of the usage of very few Kushan potteries like sprinklers and incurved bowls, etc. Some other types are also seen to continue with certain deviations in shapes. Soapstone wares also continue in this period and include an interesting find of a ledged pot and a grooved rim pot, both small in dimensions.



Figure 18: Red Ware Pottery - Gupta and Post Gupta Period

The artifacts from Gupta period encompass a noteworthy quantity of terracotta sealings, for example, a seal inscribed with the legend “*Brahmavarta*” in Sanskrit. Terracotta stamps (Figure 17), both for textiles and potteries; terracotta discs; terracotta and copper wheels; terracotta sling balls; terracotta gamesmen; dices of terracotta (Figure 19); human, animal, and bird figurines of terracotta; bone points and needles; terracotta medallion of Gaja Lakshmi (Figure 20), beads of semi-precious stones; glass beads; lion-shaped faience pendant/beads; shell beads, terracotta ear-stud, a small square terracotta container (?) with religious symbols on four sides, etc. are further essential antiquarian finds.



Figure 19: Gaja Lakshmi



Figure 20: Terracotta Dice

Period VI: Post-Gupta Period

Structural representation of the phase I of Post-Gupta Period is characterized by the following: a wall running north-south, measuring 2.04x0.40x0.10meter made of brick-bats, associated find of seven dabbers (one inscribed), and, barrel-shaped bead, sprinkles, etc. The inscription on this inscribed terracotta dabber reads in Brahmi script as *Shri (Jh)* on the right end and seems *va (o), va (o), ka (d) (sa,l)*. It could be *Vivekasa (foosdl)*. This wall may have belonged to a potter’s house, as can be understood by the antiquarian finds, associated with the structural remnants. Another wall of dimensions 3.50x0.40m made of brick-bats, traced in the direction of east-west, has been found datable to the phase II of Post-Gupta Period. Potteries of this period include a fragment of sprinklers with a prominently flanged rim below the elongated conical aperture and a spout, sharp-edged rim bowls, horizontally splayed-out rim vases, chequer-patterned impressed pottery, mica-dust slip on a pot with a bonbon design, etc. The antiquarian remains encompass terracotta dabbers, one of which is inscribed in Brahmi script; terracotta long barrel bead with a grooved line along the length; terracotta wheels, terracotta sling balls; terracotta gamesmen; copper objects; semi-precious stone beads; and, terracotta female figurines, etc.



Figure 21: Vaikuntha Vishnu, Terracotta - Rajput period

Period VII: Rajput Period

Structural remnants comprise a stone wall of semi-dressed stones of dimensions 4.40mx1.40mx1m of phase III of the Rajput Period. The unusual width of the wall indicates a possible fortification wall with a guard cell of the Rajput period. The guard cell has two broad post-holes, probably for supporting a superstructure. Near this structure, a skeleton of a goat was exposed in a pit sealed by the layers of the Rajput period. Three successive random rubble masonry walls of phases I, II, and, III of Rajput Period have been exposed towards the slope. In the direction of east to these walls, a huge dump was unearthed, wherein, an enormous quantity of the representative pottery i.e. varyingly sized knife-edged bowls, dishes, handi, vases etc., were exposed. Knife-edged bowls with tapering sides in various dimensions, and, string cut wheel turned disc-bases in red ware, which are the chief representative pottery of this period, were excavated, with horizontally splayed out rimmed potteries, small sized dish, out turned rim vases, straight-necked lota, spouted vessels, nail-headed basins in red ware, and, Black-slipped ware, etc. An astounding stone image of standing Vishnu (of the Vaikuntha Vishnu *rūpa*) (Figure 21) is a unique find in terms of iconography, excavated from this period. Amongst antiquarian remains unearthed from this period are stone

weights; terracotta spoons/ ladles; terracotta sling balls; terracotta gamesmen; iron objects; silver ring (Figure 22) terracotta animal figurines; semi-precious stone beads, and, shell beads etc. A figurine of Ganesha from the transitional layers of the Rajput and Sultanate periods was also unearthed from the site (Figure 23).



Figure 22: Silver Ring



Figure 23: Ganesha Figurine

Period VIII: Sultanate Period

Structures of this period include three rubble stone walls of phase II of the Sultanate Period. A three-coursed wall was traced in the direction of east-west, turning towards south, at a right-angle, of dimensions 3.75x0.75m and 1.80x0.75m respectively, forming the corner of a room. Parallel to the latter, another wall was exposed, up to 5 courses, in another quadrant. Traces of lime floors at two places, also of phase II, have been unearthed. Below this is a stone rubble wall built with mud mortar, in the direction of north-south of phase I of this Period. Pottery assemblage is characterized by Glazed Ware, which has been seen to be in use from the beginning of the 13th century CE after the battle with the valiant Prithvi Raj Chauhan in 1192CE. Brownish to white sandy friable terracotta-core glazed ware are the typical pottery types characterizing the Sultanate period. These are of medium to fine fabric, both plain and decorated varieties, executed with geometrical and floral designs over the whitish or off-white surface in blue, black, green, colors, finally coated with a glazed slip, for sealing the painted surface of the pottery. Bowls and dishes have been found in the majority. Ring base of pots is significant finds of this period. Occasional pieces of elongated-bodied vase were found. Wares are seen with yellow, green, and blue slips, below the glazed coat. The glassware variety comprises a few thin fragments of light green glasses as well. Other potteries of this period include *chillums* in various sizes, with plain or decorated cup and perforation at the base. A smoke pipe at the lower end in red ware is associated with such *chillums*. Associated red ware vase, basin and Black slipped

basins and vase, etc., have also been excavated. Antiquities of this period comprise of stone weights, architectural members of stone, stone pestle; terracotta wheel; terracotta sling ball; iron and copper objects; terracotta human and animal figurines; terracotta beads, semi-precious stone beads; glass beads, shell beads and copper coins, etc.

Period IX: Mughal Period

The topmost deposits/ layers have yielded a few Mughal period materials, represented by the Porcelain Ware pottery of blue and white, found in modest quantities. Some pieces are featured of bluish-white and white surfaces. Two or three fragments of a pot consist of inscriptions. A few of these tiny pieces were collected near the late Sultanate period level structures. Glass Ware pottery types comprise base and neck fragments of the green glass bottles and other light green thin glass fragments. Thin grey ware chillums, huqqa of red ware, associated red ware vases, spouted vessels, decorated red ware vases, black-slipped pots, etc., were also excavated. Noteworthy antiquities of this period are other architectural members of stone; terracotta animal figurine; terracotta human figurine; small stone image of Ganesha, semi-precious stone beads; glass bead and copper coins. Besides these, an important finding of this year collected from the surface is a terracotta human head.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent excavations at Purana Qila have provided invaluable insights into the rich historical and cultural tapestry of the site. Spanning over multiple millennia, the stratigraphic layers unearthed reveal a continuous habitation from the Pre-Mauryan Period to the Mughal Period, showcasing the enduring significance of this location throughout history. The meticulous documentation of pottery assemblages, structural remains, and antiquities from each period offers a nuanced understanding of the socio-economic, architectural, and artistic facets of successive civilizations that once thrived here. Moreover, the discovery of Pre-Mauryan layers beneath the Mauryan Period highlights the potential for further excavation to unravel the earliest inhabitants of this ancient mound. The correlation between archaeological findings and literary references, particularly the identification of Purana Qila with the legendary city of Indraprastha, adds an intriguing dimension to the narrative, bridging the gap between myth and reality. As ongoing research continues to unfold the mysteries buried within its layers, Purana Qila stands as a testament to Delhi's enduring legacy, preserving its past for future generations to explore and appreciate.

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