
Excavations at Halebidu (2021), District Hassan, Karnataka

Shivakant Bajpai¹, R. N. Kumaran², M. Saranya³ and Sujana Stephen³

- ¹. Archaeological Survey of India, Jabalpur Circle, Jabalpur, Mandya Pradesh – 482 001, India (Email: bshiva.shiva@gmail.com)
- ². Archaeological Survey of India, 24, Tilak Marg, New Delhi – 110 001, India (Email: rnkumaran@gmail.com)
- ³. Archaeological Survey of India, Bangalore Circle, Kendriya Sadan, F – Wing, 5th Floor, Koramangala, Karnataka – 560 034, India (Email: kmsaranya29@gmail.com; sujana2010stephen@gmail.com)

Received: 08 July 2023; Revised: 11 October 2023; Accepted: 26 November 2023

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11.2 (2023-24): 386-398

Abstract: The 2021 excavations at Halebidu, a historic town in Karnataka's Hassan district, have unearthed significant archaeological remains of a Jaina basadi dating to the Hoysala period (12th century CE). Halebidu, formerly Dorasamudra, served as the capital of the Hoysala dynasty, renowned for its intricately carved Vesara-style temples. Conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India, the excavation focused on a mound near the Jain Basadi Complex, revealing the adhisthana (base) of a north-south-oriented stellate temple comprising a garbhagriha, antarala, and mukha mandapa. The structure, built primarily of soapstone, displayed sophisticated craftsmanship with mouldings, offsets, and drainage systems. The excavation also yielded ceramics, minor antiquities, and 60 sculptural fragments, including depictions of Jaina deities, yakshas, and royal preceptors. Noteworthy finds include a plumb bob, a rare masonry tool from the Hoysala period, and sculptures of bearded Jain preceptors, reflecting enduring religious traditions. Stratigraphic evidence and associated finds suggest that the Basadi was dismantled for reuse rather than destroyed by vandalism. This discovery enriches our understanding of Hoysala art, architecture, and Jain religious practices, linking the site to inscriptions and sculptures housed in the Halebidu Museum. The findings underscore the cultural and historical significance of Halebidu as a major center of Hoysala heritage.

Keywords: Halebidu, Hoysala, Jain Basadi, Vesara Style, Soapstone, Sculptures, Shantinatha

Introduction

Halebidu is a small town located in the Belur taluk of Hassan district, Karnataka. It is situated in a strategic place, at the junction of the Malnad region (hills of the Western Ghats) with the Maidan region (eastern plains). A group of hillocks surround this town rendering it with scenic beauty. The river Yagachi, a tributary of the Hemavati was

drawn through an artificial channel drawn from river Yagachi to Halebidu which runs nine km from Ranankatta to Mallikarjunapura and feeds more than four reservoirs viz., Mallikarjunapura, Devihalli, Pandithanhalli, Rajankere before reaching Halebidu.

Known as Dorasamudra in inscriptions, Halebidu was the chief capital of the Hoysalas (Krishna 1934; Collyer 1990; Kasdorf 2013), a major dynasty that ruled over the southern parts of Karnataka between 11th and 13th century CE and 'has left behind a cultural legacy that includes over 1500 temples built in a period of two hundred years (1100-1300), in the plains of the river Cauvery and its tributaries' (Settar 1992). The Hoysalas are known especially for their exquisitely carved temples of Saiva and Vaishnava sects in addition to austere Jaina Basadis. They developed a style of architecture unique to them, known as the Vesara type which is considered as an amalgamation of the Dravida and Nagara styles. Their religious monuments in soapstone are richly decorated with intricately designed sculptural art that personifies human creativity and ambition. Archaeological Survey of India, Bangalore Circle has initiated a small-scale excavation at the mound behind the Jain basadi complex which was a centrally protected monument in January 2021 and the results are discussed here.



Figure 1: General view of the Mound (Before Excavation)

Archaeological Setting

Halebidu and its surroundings are home to many Hoysala monuments that are counted among the best examples of Hoysala architecture and also to many temple

mounds. The excavations during the pre – and post – Independence era have revealed rich archaeological vestiges in the form of temple adhisthanas, a large number of loose sculptures and architectural members. One such mound (13°12'29.5"N; 75°59'41.0" E) situated behind the Jain Basadi Complex with scattered architectural members has been subjected to archaeological excavation. It measures about 30 m x 30 m and rises to a height of 1.5 m from the surrounding area (886 m above MSL). The primary objective of the excavation is to expose the buried remains in a systematic manner and to understand their chronology and its association with the Jaina basadis (Figure 1).



Figure 2: Section facing East

Stratigraphy

The present mound which is part of the private agricultural field has been considerably eroded and, in some places, stones were robbed for other activities. However, the highest point of the mound is near the *garbhagriha* area which is 1.5m high from the surroundings. The stratigraphy noticed in the trench C2 (Figure 2) which faces east reveals two layers.

Humus: The soil is light brown. The texture of the soil is coarse and hard to dig. It is composed of small gravels, kankars and big stones. The surface is covered with bushes and plants. It measures uniformly 0 m to 0.25m all over the trench.



Figure 3: General view of the Exposed Basadi



Figure 4: Close-up view of the adhisthana

Layer 1: - The soil is pale brown while the texture is coarse, compact and hard to dig. It is composed of small gravels and kankars and architectural members. The thickness of the layer measures from 0.26m to 0.79m.



Figure 5: Bricks



Figure 6: Coarse Red ware Potsherds



Figure 7: Red Slipped ware Potsherds

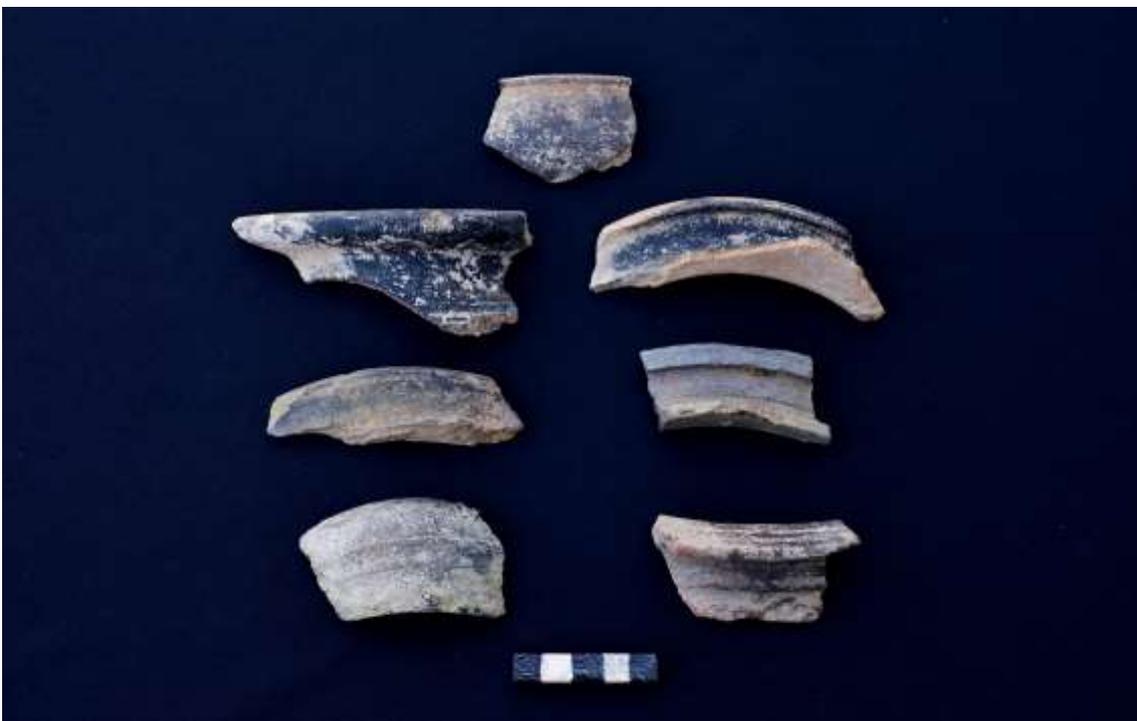


Figure 8: Black ware Potsherds

Layer 2: - The soil is pale white. The texture is soft, loose and easy to dig. However, due to the heavy concentration of fallen architectural members and loose sculptures, it makes it hard to expose the structures without removing the same. Though this layer looks like ashy deposits, no charcoal sample is retrieved. The thickness of this layer varies from 0.80m to 1.50m.



Figure 9: Spouts and lids



Figure 10: Corrugated Potsherds

Structural Remains

The excavation has exposed the remains of a basadi up to the *adhishtana* part (Figure 3) in existence. The *adhishtana* is composed of five usual mouldings including *upana*, *kapota*, *kanta-phalaka-kumuda*, *uttara*, *kudu* motif. This north-south orientated temple faces north and on plan it consists of *garbhagriha*, *antarala* and *mukha mandapa*. The plan in the region of the sanctum is stellate and is of an indented square in the region of

antarala and *mukha mandapa*. The temple measures 20.75m x 11.5m with the extant height being 1.30 m (Figure 4). The *garbhagriha* measure 3.5 m x 4.5m, the *antarala* measures 4.2m x 1m while the *mukha mandapa* measures 9.5m x 9.5m. A flight of six steps (three of them are missing) is provided in front of the *mandapa* which is devoid of any balustrade. The width of the steps is 1.32m x 0.25m x 0.07m. It is interesting to mention that a small rectangular stone was noticed in the centre of the entrance stone over the base stone which measures 0.82m x 0.25m x 0.07m.

On the exterior, the *adhishtana* displays many offsets throughout. The eastern wall of the sanctum was pierced to accommodate a rectangular stone channel that served as an outlet for the *abhishheka* water. The channel, which projected outwards up to a length of 0.85m x 0.42m was found broken in situ due to the fall of *shikhara* fragments over it. A thick, flat rectangular stone pedestal with a socket in the centre was found in front of the *mandapa*. It is likely that this pedestal once accommodated the inscription stone that is now kept in front of the Adinatha basadi. A circumambulatory pathway is noticed all around the temple in the form of a meter-wide well-rammed floor. On this rammed passage were found numerous broken and damaged parts of the fallen *shikhara* and other architectural members including the decorative sculptures and stray antiquities.

Building Materials

Evidence from the excavations has revealed green chlorite schist i.e. soapstone, invariably employed in the construction of the temple. However, bricks (Figure 5) and brickbats were noticed during excavations. These bricks measure 0.24m x 0.18m x 0.06m and another 0.24m x 0.16m x 0.04m where the ratio is 1:3:4 and 1:4:6. Further, it is pertinent to inform here, that small wedge stones measuring 0.18m x 0.15m x 0.06m, 0.20m x 0.15m x 0.05m and 0.20m x 0.10m x 0.05m fashioned in the shape of the bricks were also recovered which were employed in the wall for its stability. The exposed *adhisthana* (basement) of the temple revealed that it was raised with dry mortar and iron clamps were used to fix the stones.

Chronology

In the absence of either organic samples for absolute dating or dated inscriptions and coins from excavation, inferences on the chronology of the excavated structural remains and a votive inscription may only be drawn based on circumstantial evidence.

The *adhisthana* portions laid bare in the present excavation belong, in all probability, to a basadi, because it is barely a few meters away from the group of Jaina basadis. Besides, the sculptural fragments found in the excavations too hint to its association with Jainism. The Jaina basadis, viz. Parshwanatha, Adinatha and Shantinatha were constructed in the 12th century CE during the rule of Vishuvaradhana of the Hoysala dynasty as established from the dated inscriptions associated with them. In this light, the excavated remains too may be dated to the 12th century CE as they are of Hoysala origin.



Figure 11: Decorated sherds



Figure 12: Plumb bob of Soapstone

Further, as mentioned above, a three-letter inscription in old Kannada language and characters was noticed on the right side of the *adhithana*. It reads as 'Namah' of late Hoysala characters and was not inscribed during the construction of the basadi. On palaeographic grounds, this inscription can be dated to the 13th century CE (Dr. Nagarajappa, pers. Comm.). Hence, based on the architectural features of the excavated remains and inscriptions, this basadi may be safely dated around the 12th century CE.



Figure 13: Ritual Figure



Figure 14: Sculptures and architectural members



Figure 15: Traditional attire of Jain Religious Head, Shravanabelagola

Material Culture

Apart from the structures, the excavation has revealed rich archaeological vestiges in the form of ceramics, minor antiquities and several loose sculptures. The ceramics in the form of potsherds were noticed around the temple in the rammed pathway and associated with the fallen architectural members. The main ceramic types are coarse Red ware (Figure 6), plain Red ware, Red slipped ware (Figure 7), black ware (Figure 8), spouts and lids (Figure 9), corrugated ware (Figure 10) and decorated sherds (Figure 11). The minor antiquities recovered were plumb bob (Figure 11), polisher, toy cartwheel, arecanut shaped bead, hopscotches, lamps, Sling balls, footed querns, pounders, mullers, socket stones, door stoppers, ring stones, votive tank, ritual objects and ritual Figures (Figure 13) and 60 loose sculptures that once formed part of the *bhitti / shikhara* mainly constitutes God and Goddesses, yaksha and yakshis and seated royal preceptors of the Jaina pantheon (Figure 14).

Observations and Summary

The excavation of the mound has brought to light the remains of a basadi, whose *adhishtana* part has survived to date. The evidences show that this basadi was not damaged due to vandalism, but owes to the removal of the stones perhaps to reuse in some other temple or basadi. Interestingly, one of the inscriptions noticed on a pilaster of the outer wall of the same Parsavanatha basadi records an image of Shantinatha. It states that '*commencing from the north-east, within 15 cubits to the north-east, the image of*

god Santinatha, 6 cubits high, is (kept) underground and commends that some meritorious man could take it out, consecrate it and acquire the merit', indicating that one more basadi devoted to Shantinatha existed here. It is convincible that the basadi exposed now, once housed in its garbhagriha the image of Shantinatha where a huge Shanitnatha idol was found in fragments about 25 m away from the excavated area. This sculpture has been restored and is now displayed in the Halebidu Museum.

Apart from the above, some of the interesting and important items that deserve to be mentioned here are the plumb bob and the bearded man. During the excavation a plumb bob, one of the important masonry tools used in construction was recovered. It is of soapstone, medium size, drop shape with a hole on the top to suspend it from a string and measures 10cm (h) x 6.5cm (b). To date, no such thing has been recovered that belongs to the Hoysala period. This is the first time that a plumb bob of a Hoysala artisan has been found. Another is the bearded man, probably a Jain preceptor, for such sculptures, have been documented for the first time from this site.

In the present excavations, twelve such sculptures were found whereas during the clearance operation done in 2019, as many as four were recovered and they are now in the Halebidu museum. In these sculptures, the person is shown seated, under a single or triple umbrella (chchatra-traya or *mukkode*), in padmasana, both the palms of the hands rest on the lap while the right-hand shows inverse chin mudra. Behind his head, a prabhavali is shown. He wears a coiled turban, yajnopavita and has simple ornaments including armlets and bracelets, all of which have beaded designs. What is interesting is he is invariably shown with a trimmed beard (except in one sculpture) and in the majority of cases, he is flanked by male and female attendants and the whole composition is set within a latā tōraṇa (arched canopy) topped by kirtimukha, a style that is typical of Hoysala sculptures. In some images, a single squatting lion, a set of three lions or a lotus medallion is shown on the pedestal. Overall, the composition of the sculpture is akin to that of the depiction of Tirthankaras. It is interesting and worthy to mention that the bearded man and his turban are very much akin to the traditional attire of the traditional Jain Religious Head His Holiness Jagadguru Karmayogi Swastishri Charukeerthy Bhattaraka Swamiji, Shravanabelagola (Figure 15), which clearly shows that the tradition continues till date.

Acknowledgements

The authors are very much thankful to the Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi for granting permission to excavate the site. They also express their sincere thanks to Sh. Chandra Gowda for providing his land and permitting the team for the archaeological investigations. Specials thanks are due to S/s. Ranganath, Deputy Superintending Archaeological Engineer (now retired), Muruli Mohan, Surveyor, Grade – I, Basavaraj R.Mayachari, Photographer, Grade - I and other staff of Bangalore Circle, Bengaluru, Dr. A.V. Naganoor, Assistant Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Museum, Halebidu and their staff, Sh. Shriguru Bagi, Assistant Superintending Archaeologist, Tipu Sultan Museum, Srirangapatna, Sh. Kishore

Kumar Reddy, Senior Conservation Assistant, Sub circle (Hassan) and their staff of the Survey in one or the other ways for the successful completion of the excavation.

References

- Collyer, K. 1990. *The Hoysala artists: Their identity and styles*. Mysore: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums.
- Epigraphia Indica*. n.d. Archaeological Survey of India. New Delhi.
- Kasdorf, K. E. 2013. *Forming Dōrasamudra: Temples of the Hoysala capital in context* (Doctoral dissertation). Columbia University. New York.
- Krishna, M. H. (Ed.). 1934. *Halebid*. In *Archaeological Survey of Mysore: Annual report for the year 1930* (pp. 33–61). Bangalore: Government Press.
- Mysore Archaeological Reports*. n.d. Archaeological Survey of Mysore. Mysore.
- Settar, S. 1992. *The Hoysala temples* (2 vols.). Dharwad and Bangalore: Institute of Indian Art History, Karnatak University, and Kala Yatra Publications.