The ancient geography of Mathura: excavations and explorations

The urban city of Mathura is considered, as perhaps one of the living Indian cities of ancient origin and is closely associated with Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions throughout history. A notable aspect of traditional literary accounts is that all of them refer to Mathura’s position close to the river Yamuna, and hence the identification of the present Mathura, which stands on the west bank of the river, with the historical town is almost certain. Taking the cue from these sources, archaeologically the historic city—Mathura is defined within the parameters of the present day city. The ancient mounds enclosed within the boundaries of the present city of Mathura are taken to represent the well-known city of the ancient past. I have argued previously that the term ‘Mathura’ more fittingly connoted a region rather than a clearly defined city, and in this present chapter I attempt to move beyond the assumed fortified city of Mathura to bring to light the various other mounds/sites that are scattered all over the present day district and, which would have played an important role in the urban nexus of the so called Early Historic city of Mathura. These mounds have undergone a series of explorations and excavations by scholars, but later have been neglected when the ancient city of Mathura is defined and demarcated. A history of these explorations, the data thus collected, and the relationship of these mounds/sites with each other is hence imperative to study urban processes of ancient Mathura.

Geographically Mathura district is located between Lat 27 14 and 27 58 N and Long 77 17 and 78 12 E, and covers an approximate area of 3,800 sq km. The district lies in the basin of the river Yamuna, which traverses through the central part of the district from north to south dividing it into two parts, the eastern or the Trans-Yamuna tract and the western or the Cis-Yamuna tract. The Trans Yamuna tract comprises the tahsil of Mat and Sadabad and is a part of the Ganga Yamuna doab, abundantly irrigated from the rivers, and a canal and is carefully cultivated and the crops indicate the fertility of the soil. The Cis Yamuna tract comprises the tahsil of Chhata and Mathura. The vegetation here is rather dry and patchy with more potential for pastoralism. Historically then, one
can expect that most of the sites would commonly be located at the junction of different habitats, the integration of whose resources results in a viable economy.  

In the ancient period Mathura was a flourishing centre for multiple religious cults, Buddhist, Jaina as well as the regional religious sects like those of the Naga and Yakshas, all coexisting and sharing a common landscape. Later by the medieval period Mathura developed rapidly into the main centre of the Vaishnava sect of Krishna bhakti. Krishna who is revered and worshipped as an incarnation of Vishnu and is the tutelary divinity of Braj, is believed to have been born in the city of Mathura and to have passed his early life in the neighbourhood. There is hardly any place in the district, which is not associated with the Krishna legend and therefore is not sanctified. The region therefore has always been a major pilgrimage place for people of different sects, accessibility not being difficult as it is situated on a navigable river Yamuna. Commercially too Mathura has always been well connected by trade routes running from Tamralipti in Bengal to as far as north west India and then beyond to central Asia.  

The explorations at Mathura have been spread over a vast span of time, almost a century starting from the early 19th century to the last excavations conducted in 1977. Each of these ventures was guided with a different set of issues in the minds of the explorers, resulting in discrepancies in the way the artefacts were collected and recorded. To put it simply, different people were looking for different things at the site, so while the early 19th century explorers were keen on recovering valuable antiquities that would speak of the religious affiliation of the site in particular, and the region in general, the concerns in the second half of the 20th century scholars were to uncover the antiquity and stratigraphy of a mound and to mark out its distinct cultural phases in the long history of the region. Each of these approaches have certain drawbacks and the reports thus published suffer from some serious lacunae, which in turn make it difficult to address issues of urbanisation or other aspects of the cultural history of the region. Firstly, the fact that because there have been different phases and methodologies with which excavations at the mounds have been conducted, there has been an uneven and selective collection of artefacts, and all the data from the region therefore cannot be quantified.

uniformly, which is a major impediment if one wants to trace and compare the historical development of the various mounds.

The other major problem is that of periodisation. Because the data is collected over a large span of time, each set of explorers has used different methods to divide it into various time periods. The most common of them is to use dynastic markers as distinct phases to categorize it. This has been the practice from the earliest of excavations and in the very first catalogue of the Mathura Museum by Vogel, the time periods are divided into the Mauryan phase, followed by Sunga, Kushana, and so on, each period corresponding with the major political dynasties of ancient India. This practice has continued over time and even in the latest catalogue of the Mathura museum compiled by V.S. Agrawala, the same methodology of periodisation is used. Moreover, with regard to Mathura terracottas, M.K. Dhavalikar links up the chronology of the production of terracottas with dynastic succession. Therefore according to him the consolidation of the Mauryan Empire under a strongly unified rule ushered in a distinct cultural phase, which also resulted in the sudden spurt of artistic activity. The Kushana period likewise saw the blending of the Greco-Roman style with its main centre being Gandhara and Mathura. And the Gupta period, which is considered as the Golden Age by many scholars, the terracotta art travelled with political power and terracottas were as a result found over a large part of the sub-continent. But apart from dynastic succession, stylistic peculiarities and technique were other parameters used to classify terracotta figurines. As for the stone sculptures and architectural pieces, dynastic labels were the only method of periodisation.

There is a basic flaw in this methodology that has been overlooked by many scholars, first, that there are many overlaps in style and technique that may be difficult to attribute to a single period or a political dynasty. This is particularly true of the terracotta figurines that do not follow the clear-cut pattern of dynastic succession as mentioned by Dhavalikar. Secondly, because the sculptures are collected over a vast span of time by different scholars who have adopted different methods of periodisation, a common time frame is required if one wishes to study the entire data collectively. For example, when the second phase of excavations stared in Mathura in around the 1970’s, the purpose of

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which being to explore the antiquity of the site bring out a stratified cultural sequence. M.C. Joshi proposed a different chronological frame (the one as mentioned in the previous chapter). It becomes difficult to reconcile the different time periods when one takes the study of all the data collectively. For this purpose I have adopted HärTEL’s chronology, who in his excavation report of Sonkh, has classified terracottas and stone sculptures on the basis of stylistic peculiarities and the techniques employed in their production, as well as according to the stratigraphic position of the artefact at the site in the course of excavation. The political labels used by him do not indicate any direct connection between the rise and fall of political dynasties and the development of artistic activity. On the contrary, these labels are used as they carry implicit time frames and the data is thus classified into different phases marked by these time periods. The classification therefore is as follows:

- **Period I:** Pre 400 B.C.
- **Period II:** 400 – 200 B.C. – Cover a time span of earliest Mauryan times to the Late Sunga phase
- **Period III:** 200 – 100 B.C. – Close of the Sunga phase to the end of the Mitra dynasty of Mathura and the appearance of the Kshatrapas.
- **Period IV:** 100 B.C. – A.D.100 – Kshatrapa phase of Mathura
- **Period V:** A.D. 100 – A.D. 300 – Beginning to the end of the Kushana period
- **Period VI:** A.D.300 – A.D. 600 – Gupta period
- **Period VII:** 7th – 8th Centuries A.D. – Post Gupta period.\(^{111}\)

The preliminary explorations at Mathura began as early as the 1830’s, with the discovery of the so-called Silenius (a Bacchanalian group of stone sculpture) by Col. Stacy in 1836. However, systematic and regular explorations were undertaken by General Cunningham, who used the chronicles of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang as his guide in locating the Buddhist sites in Mathura. As Cunningham himself seems to have admitted, ‘the Elder Pliny, for the sake of clearness, follows the footsteps of Alexander the Great. For the similar reason I shall follow the footsteps of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-

The explorations yielded results and many fabulous Buddhist sculptures and life size images of Buddha were collected together with numerous stone railings and remains of possible monasteries. I discuss the sites explored in the region chronologically, the earliest ones been looked up by Cunningham first and then move on to other excavations.

Katra

The Katra or the market place situated in the Mathura city is an oblong enclosure like a sarai, 804 feet in length and 653 feet in breadth. In the midst of this square stands the Jami Masjid, on a large mound from 25 to 30 feet in height. There is no inscription on the building, but people generally ascribe it to the reign of Aurangzeb, who is said to have pulled down the great temple of Kesava Deva, or Keso Ray, that formerly stood on this high mound. The very first explorations at the Katra mound were done by General Cunningham, in his quest to unearth the Buddhist monastery of Upagupta mentioned by Xuanzang in his chronicles. Cunningham in the process observed that the mound had been successively occupied by Buddhist, Brahmans and Muslims.

The first Buddhist discovery was made at the site of the temple of Kesava Deva in 1853—a broken pillar of a Buddhist railing sculptures with the figure of Maya Devi standing under the Sal tree. At the site were recovered also capitals of two large pillars of an early date, along with the remains of an inscription dated to the Gupta period. In 1863 Cunningham discovered a peculiarly carved architrave of a Buddhist gateway, which was richly sculptured on both sides with depictions of buildings, figures and trees. He also discovered an inscribed standing image of Buddha obtained from clearing out of a well, at the northwest corner of the temple. The inscription can be dated to A.D. 359 and records the donation of the statue to the ‘Yasa Vihara’, which could be the name of the Buddhist establishment that existed at the site. The well has yielded fragments of many other possibly Buddhist sculptures as well, including another small figure of the Buddha with an imperfect inscription, the character of which Cunningham ascribes to the Gupta

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dynasty. All this evidence left no doubt in Cunningham’s mind that the mound of Kesava Ray was the site of Buddhist establishment of considerable size and wealth.\textsuperscript{114} The last series of explorations at Mathura in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century were conducted by Dr. A. Fuhrer-in three seasons, 1888–91 at Kankali Tila, and in February–March 1896, on the Katra site. His excavations seem to have been remarkably fruitful, as he claimed to have discovered no less than 737 sculptures, all of which were deposited in the Lucknow Museum. From Katra the collection consisted of ornamental plinths, stringcourses, doorjambs, and pilasters of the original temple of Kesavadeva, which was destroyed by Aurangzeb in 1661 A.D.\textsuperscript{115} Unfortunately of these excavations no other information is available, other than the brief notes contained in Fuhrer’s, \textit{The Monumen tal Antiquities and Inscriptions, in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh}\textsuperscript{116}.

After a gap of almost a century the site of Katra was excavated again, this time by the ASI in 1954–55, under the joint Supervision of M. Venkataramayya and Ballabh Saran. The exploratory survey at Mathura had revealed two rings of mud ramparts, one elliptical and the other quadrangular, the latter comprised within the first, signifying a citadel near the mound of Katra. The purpose and concerns of the excavations were to reveal the antiquity of the site and to provide a stratified chronological sequence. The presence of NBPW and PGW from the Katra mound provided additional incentives. The earliest date for the habitation at the mound, as revealed by the excavations, was found to be around 6\textsuperscript{th} century B.C. and the habitation of the site continued till about the late Gupta period, i.e. 6\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. Period I which was ascribed to 6\textsuperscript{th} century B.C. contained very simple ceramic types of plain grey and polished black wares, along with other finds like terracotta discs, balls, beads, and perforated pottery. The subsequent Period II was characterized by the use of NBPW and was sub divided further into three phases. Phase

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., pp. 237–238.
\textsuperscript{115} The exact dates of the Kesava Deva temple are not known but during the course of Cunningham’s explorations, he observed that the greater part of the foundations of the temple can be traced at the back of the masjid, which stands in its place in the present times. Judging from the dimensions of the plinth, Cunningham is of the opinion that the temple would have been one of the largest in India and could be one of the innumerable temples mentioned by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1017. Although this claim is precarious in nature, it is certain that this temple was still standing at the beginning of the reign of Aurangzeb. This is corroborated by the finds of two Nagari inscriptions form the site dated to A.D 1656 and 1663. The temple then possibly was pulled down by the Mughal emperor, as per popular belief in the region.
one yielded remains of bamboo and reed huts with scanty baked bricks and also the presence of three ring wells, and cultural finds like bone needles, carnelian amulets, beads, and figurines of ‘Mother Goddesses’. The middle sub period yielded remains like square copper coins, gadrooned and cylindrical terracotta beads, etched carnelian beads, copper antimony rods, grey terracotta figurines of Mother Goddesses with applied girdles, and animal figurines. The last sub-period was characterized by a vigorous building activity in baked bricks, three phases of coppersmith’s furnace and workshop, with several moulds, copper coins, and beads of shell glass and crystal. These were accompanied by terracotta female figurines that were believed to be serving some religious purpose. There were no house plan from the site during this time, but there are well laid out drains, walls and ring wells. The second period came to a close at around 22nd century B.C. The third period is notable for the variety of beads and copper coins belonging to the Kushanas. The subsequent Period IV shows a greater variety of terracotta figures, with figures of dwarfs and grotesques added to the repertoire. Period V ended around the 6th A.D. century as indicated by the terracotta coins and sealings of the early and late Gupta periods.117 These excavations proved the antiquity of the site, brought to light the trajectory of growth marking the site of Katra, and also tied in Cunningham’s claim of a Buddhist monastery present here in the ancient times probably around 4th–5th centuries A.D.

Jamalpur or Jail Mound

The other Buddhist site discovered by Cunningham was at the Jamalpur or Jail mound, which he believed to be the site of at least two monasteries, the Huvishka Vihara and the Kunda–Suka Vihara. In 1860 when the foundation was laid for the collector’s courthouse on the Jamalpur or also known as Jail mound, one and a quarter miles south east of Mathura City, this locality proved to be another Buddhist site. This site was an extensive mound on the Agra road at the entrance to the civil station. It was regarded as merely the remains of a series of brick kilns and had been further protected against exploration by

the fact that a small mosque was built on it. This for military purposes was blown down and afterwards when the refuse was removed, it was found that the mosque had been erected upon a destroyed temple, which was also not of any great antiquity.

The sculptural remains here contained statues of all sizes, bas reliefs, pillars, Buddhist railings, votive stupas, stone umbrellas, and many other objects peculiar to Buddhism, of a date as early as 1st century A.D., as revealed by the inscriptions. Here 30 bases of pillars were retrieved, half of which were inscribed with dedicatory inscriptions. These pillars probably belonged to a colonnade enclosing a courtyard of a Buddhist monastery, according to the inscription that was built in year 47 of Kanishka’s reign and in the reign of his son Huvishka. That this monastery still existed in the fifth century may be inferred from the inscription dated in the Gupta year 135 or 455 A.D., and from an inscribed standing Buddha image, both found on the same site.118

But apart from being a Buddhist site, the Jamalpur mound has been a centre to non-Buddhist cults as well. On the basis of a stone slab inscription brought to light by Growse in his district memoir, which records the donation of the slab by some Chandaka brothers to the sanctuary of the ‘Lord of Nagas, Dadhikarna’, Vogel argues that the particular site was selected for king Huvishka’s vihara because it was of old ‘place sacred to the divine lord of Nagas, Dadhikarna’. However there is nothing to prove that the sanctuary of the Nagas predated the Buddhist establishment, not to mention that the first line of the Naga inscription containing the date is damaged. But from a different inscription from the site, inscribed on a pillar base and recording that the object on which it was recorded, was a gift of some Devila who identifies himself to be ‘a servant of the shrine of Dadhikarna’, Vogel rightly postulated that not only the two religious cults, Buddhist and Naga, may have co-existed at the site but the Naga may have possessed his own shrine not far from Huvishka Vihara.119

Cunningham visited the Chaubara mounds in 1871, which lay just one and a half mile south west of the city of Mathura and recorded the antiquities found there in the course of his exploration. In 1869, while laying down a road cutting across the mounds, a small golden casket was retrieved. Cunningham then undertook a trial excavation of the mounds, which resulted in the discovery of a stupa of approximately 17 feet in diameter, encasing a relic casket, the contents of which were too damaged and could not be determined. The second mound at Chaubara, also one of the biggest, on excavation yielded a full sized capital of a large pillar, formed by four recumbent animals, two of them being winged lions and the others being winged bulls and human heads adorned with ram’s horns and ears, placed at four angles. Cunningham observed that such capitals were represented in small bas-reliefs not only at Mathura but also at Sanci and Gaya.

The third mound at Chaubara yielded a colossal head, 13 inches across the forehead, with cropped hair under a skullcap surmounted by a topknot. The ear lobes were long and pendulous and pierced with long holes and on the basis of these physical characteristics Cunningham assumed the statue to represent Buddha. On further diggings the rest of the broken parts of this colossal Buddha statue was unearthed, the size of which seemed to be twice the size of life. On the basis of his discoveries, Cunningham attributed the Chaubara mounds to be Buddhist in nature.¹²⁰

Subsequent to Cunningham, Growse visited the Chaubara mounds and the head of a colossal figure of a very Egyptian cast of features with a hole in the forehead meant for a precious stone as indicator of the urna. He also acquired the lower portion of a large seated Buddha image with an inscription dating it to Huvishka’s reign. Also several cross bars of Buddhist rails, a great number of small fragments of male and female figures, animals and grotesques, and decorative patterns have been found at the site.

Kankali Tila

Cunningham visited the Kankali Tila in 1871, and carried out excavations at the site. The site is situated half a mile to the south of Katra, between the Bharatpur and Dig gates of the city and has proved to be the most prolific of all sites around the district. A fragment of a carved Buddhist pillar is set up in a mean shed on the summit of the mound and now does the duty of goddess Kankali, to whom this mound is dedicated. The first discovery of sculptures was made a few years previous to Cunningham’s visit by men digging for bricks. Subsequently the mound was partly trenched by Mr. Hardinge and two colossal standing Buddha (?) images came to light. 121

Cunningham in his course of excavations noted that the mound was 400 feet in length from west to east, and nearly 300 feet in breadth, with a mean height of 10–12 feet above the fields. The eastern end was higher than the rest of the mound and has constantly been burrowed for bricks. The excavation yielded several colossal and life size statues, more or less mutilated. Many inscribed as well as uninscribed statues of Jaina tirthankaras were also recovered along with pillars and rails, along with brick walls and pavements. Cunningham conjectured therefore that this could be an important site for Jaina buildings during the rule of the Indo-Scythians, both before and after the Christian era. 122 The last archaeological exploration of the 19th century in Mathura was undertaken by Dr. Fuhrer at the sites of Kankali Tila and Katra. At the site of Kankali was discovered a brick stupa and two Jaina temples. Unfortunately no proper drawings of these monuments were made.

The next series of excavations at the Kankali Tila were carries out by the ASI in 1974-75 under the general supervision of B.K. Thapar, M.C. Joshi and C. Margabandhu. The main objective was to assess the nature of deposit at the ancient Jaina site of Kankali. At the site an impressive tank complex with a circular structure near its entrance, ascribable to the time period of 1st – 3rd centuries A.D. was exposed. The tank itself seems to have four phase of construction, the first part is represented by the lower part of the tank walls showing relatively worn out bricks. During the second phase certain structural

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PLATE III: Present Day Devi Temple at Kankali Tila.
PLATE IV: Baba thanas/ Devi thanas outside the temple at Kankali Tila.
repairs seem to have been undertaken, utilizing fragments of an inscription and carved stones of the earlier period, and perhaps a ramp was added. The subsequent two periods, the outer end of the ramp was extended and a circular base initially thought to be a stupa but, which subsequently was discovered to be a well of considerable depth, was sealed followed by some repair of shabby bricks. In the following seasons of excavations at the tank complex it was concluded that the outer walls of the tank, forming ancillary compartments was older than the tank proper. It seemed probable that the builders of the tank-complex originally wanted to construct a larger tank, but when they had raised walls on the north, south and west they abandoned the idea and built a central pool with oblong compartments on the side.

An outstanding find from this tank was an inscription of the fifth regnal year of Kanishka, which refers to a gift (probably of the tank) by a lady named Visakhamitra. A torso of a Jaina tirthankara with a fish shaped srivatsa mark and a fine Jina head were some interesting sculptures found within the tank, besides two stone plaques, one depicting Mahisasurmardini and the other Parvati in the post Gupta style. In the higher areas of Kankali Tila, were exposed large mud platforms with a central passage and remains of a few mud floors. Amongst the antiquities mention maybe made of a Jina torso, fragments of sculptures, suchis, and some damaged medieval sculptures and structural remains. A few Indo-Greek coins were also found.¹²³

**Bhuteshvar Mound**

In the space between Kankali Tila and the Katra mound, stands a temple dedicated to Shiva known as Bhuteshvar Mahadeva, which in its present form is a quadrangle of ordinary character with pyramidal tower and a cloister built by the Marathas towards the end of the eighteenth century. Cunningham in the course of his explorations discovered no less than five pillars of Buddhist railings originating from Bhuteshvar mounds, and placed in a small dharamshala near Balabhadra tank. Further, on the Bhuteshvar mound, in front of the entrance of the temple, Growse and Cunningham discovered another

¹²³ IAR, 1974–75, Department of Archaeology, Government of India, 1979, pp. 48–51.
PLATE V: Present day Bhuteshvar mound. The dilapidated board belongs to the A.S.1 marking the site.
specimen of a very large railing pillar, carved with a nearly life size image of a parasol bearer and a scene presumably relating to some jataka. 124

Balabhadra Kund

To the south of the Bhuteshvara temple is a tank known as Balabhadra Kund. On visiting the site Growse noted that in the enclosing walls of the tank were built some good specimens of the cross bars of the Buddhist railings. From an adjoining well was recovered a plain pillar measuring four feet seven inches in height and eleven inches in breadth, carved in front with merely two roses. The cross bars were eleven in number, four of the most perfect taken away by Cunningham and the rest were left in situ. Growse further notes that, built into the veranda of the native guesthouse or the chaupal were other five Buddhist pillars of elaborate designs, later removed to the museum. They are each four feet four inches in height and eleven inches in breadth, and were carved with female figures standing on a crouching monster. In the upper compartment, divided off by a Buddhist railing, are two demi-figures male and female in amorous poses. On one of the pillar the principal figure is shown gathering up her drapery, in another a woman painting her face, in the third holding a wine jar in one hand and a bunch of grapes in the other. All the women are devoid of drapery, and have a profusion of ornaments. There were also three bas-reliefs at the back of the pillars, one of which represents Maya Devi giving birth to Buddha. 125

Dhul Kot Mounds

Close at the back of the Balabhadra Kund and the Katra is a range of hills of considerable elevation, commonly called Dhul Kot—the name given to the accumulation of refuse that collects outside the city. Some of these are clearly of natural formation and perhaps indicate the old course of the Jumna and its tributaries. Others are the walls of the old

city, which in places are still of great height. They can be traced in a continuous line from the Rangesvar Mahadeva on the Kans ka Tila, outside the Holi Gate.

The ASI conducted excavations at the Dhulkot mounds in 1973–74, under the supervision of B.K. Thapar, M.C. Joshi and J.P. Srivastava, with the view to ascertain the actual character of the mounds. The present cutting across Dhulkot confirmed that it was originally built as a mud fortification around the ancient city of Mathura. Also it seems that the builders of ancient mud defence or fortification walls utilized the chain of natural mounds for its construction. Cutting across Dhulkot revealed two phases of fortification, the earlier belonging to 3rd century B.C. (Period I). Shards of plain Grey, NBPW and associated wares, terracotta figurines commonly associated with the Mauryan period, and copper punch marked coins of thin and squarish variety were some finds recovered from the core of the fortification wall. The second phase of mud fortification started in the Saka-Kushana phase (Period III) when the wall is not only revived but also enlarged. Other important antiquities of this mound are semi precious stone beads, fragments of terracotta bangles, toy cart wheels, and earthen mounds for casting terracotta heads, elephant riders, female and animal terracotta figurines including wheel turned bodies, and female figurines with elaborate headdresses.¹²⁶

**Manoharpur Mohalla**

At this mound in the city of Mathura, Cunningham reports to have found a group of ox headed female and male figures. Each of the nude female figures he explains, carried a dish in her lap on which a child was placed, both female figures were naked. The male figures are also represented in the same action. One of the larger figures grasps a male and a female child in his outstretched hands, while at the same time having a small child seated on his shoulders.¹²⁷ Although Cunningham could not conclusively identify these ox headed figures, there can be no doubt that they represented the Jaina deity Naigamesha.

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¹²⁶ IAR, 1973–74, Department of Archaeology, Government of India, 1979, pp. 31–32.
**Arjunpura Mohalla**

This mound in the Mathura city was also explored by Cunningham in 1882. At this mound he was able to recover many fragments of sculptures and numerous large bricks. The antiquity of the site was indicated by a Buddhist railing pillar with inscription in three lines in Brahmi characters of the Mauryan period.  

**Sitala Ghatil Kans Ka Kila**

Cunningham visited the site of the old fort now known as the Kans Ka Kila, located just outside of the south of the Holi gate of the city. In examining the site of the old fort on the bank of the Jumna above the Sitala Ghati he noticed a broken Jina figure, naked, with an Indo-Scythian inscription, dated in the year 57 both in words and figure. This was placed in the Mathura museum later by Growse.

**Saptarishi Tila**

The site is located on the right riverbank, south of the city of Mathura. Bhagvanlal Indraji visited this site in 1869, and made two important discoveries. The first was that of a life size female statue he discovered from the site, the remarkable point about this image being that both its style and material prove it to be a Gandhara sculpture. Apparently not far from the mound, which yielded this image, he discovered the famous lion capital with its eighteen Kharoshthi inscriptions, which throw considerable light on the history of Northern Kshatrap at Mathura.

**Jaisinghpura Mound**

Cunningham identifies the village of Jaisinghpura as being situated one mile to the north of the city and to the west of the road leading to Brindaban, where traces of buildings and

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129 Ibid., p.36.

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fragments of sculptures have been found. Here Growse records that several Buddhist sculptures were found at different times and were collected at the Chamunda Math.\textsuperscript{131} Pt. Radha Krishna, also carried out some trial excavations in 1910–11, but was not able to complete the examination of the mound. The sculptural remains found in the course of this excavation, included fragments of Buddha images of Kushana period and pieces of very elaborate haloes, belonging to the Gupta period, some lion figures, two Garudhas and a stone railing. A find of some interest is a clay tablet found from the site, which are common at Buddhist sites, but is a first example of its kind from Mathura, depicting a seated Buddha figure flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas. There is an inscription on the tablet, which appears to be in Brahmi of the Gupta period. This mound therefore, was supposed to be a site of a Buddhist sanctuary.\textsuperscript{132}

**Palikhera**

The small village of Palikhera lies on the high road to Sonkh, two and a half miles south west of Katra, and upwards of three miles to the west of the cantonment of Mathura. An important find was made just outside the village by Growse in 1873-4, it was a so called Bacchanalian group, similar to Col. Stacy’s Silenius. Also in the same mound Growse discovered three bell-shaped bases of large columns at 13 feet distance from one another, the fourth column presumably missing. In the clearing space between these were found some small figures of baked clay, glazed of a bluish colour, similar to the toys still sold in Hindu fairs, also a few small fragments of carved stone, and some corroded piece of metal bangles. Cunningham, on visiting the site feels that the four pillars must have supported a canopy over the enshrined sculpture of which the Bacchanalian group was only a part.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{132} Vogel, J.Ph., ‘Explorations at Mathura’, ASIAR, 1911–12, pp. 120–133.
Parkham

Parkham is an old village situated on a low mound close to the railway station between Agra and Mathura, about 14 miles from the Mathura City. Cunningham visited the site in 1882–83 and discovered the colossal Yaksha statue. He noted, ‘Parkham is simply mentioned by Growse, in his valuable account as a village of 678 inhabitants, where a fair is held in honour of Jakhaiya every Sunday in the month of Magh, but the site is remarkable for the possession of the oldest statue found in the entire district, belonging to the 3rd century B.C. The statue is that of a colossal Yaksha, 7 feet in height with an inscription in Ashokan characters’. 134

Mahawan

The small village of Mahawan is situated on the long high mound on the west side of the Agra road, 13 miles to the south of Mathura. Cunningham notes that the mound is covered with bricks, and fragments of stone, amongst which was found a fragment bearing the representation of a lower part of the flight of steps. On the third step from below a pair of feet still remain and on the bottom step is a kneeling figure with hands joined in adoration. Below the sculpture is an inscription in characters of the Indo-Scythian period. 135 Cunningham conjectures that the sculpture could be Buddhist in nature, but there is no conclusive evidence to prove that.

Mahaban

The town of Mahaban is some five or six miles from Mathura lower down the stream and on the opposite side of the Jumna. It stands a little inland from the region of Gokul, which is only a waterside suburb of the modern town. All the traditional sites associated with Krishna in the Puranas are shown in Mahaban, while Gokul temples are essentially

134 Ibid., pp. 39–41.
135 Ibid., p– 41.
PLATE VI: The small temple at the site of Parkham, where the Yaksha worship takes place every year. The image that is worshipped at the annual fair is housed at the residence of the village priest. Meanwhile the temple is occupied by fragments of a seemingly old sandstone statue.
modern in their associations—whatever celebrity they possess is derived from their having been found by the descendants of Vallabhacharya in the 16th century. 136

The initial recordings about Mahaban are made by Growse in his district memoir. Growse notes that the great part of the present town is occupied by a large hill, partly natural and partly artificial, where stood the old fort built in the medieval period. It is said that wherever the foundations are sunk within the precincts of the fort, many fragments of sculpture—presumably Buddhist—have been brought to light, but they have always been buried again or broken up as building material. Doubtless, Mahaban was a site of some of the Buddhist monasteries, which Faxian distinctly states, existed in his time on both sides of the river. And further whatever may be the exact Indian word concealed under the form Klisoboras, or Clisobora, given by Arrian and Pliny, it is possible that Mahaban was intended. 137

The most interesting building is a covered court called the Assi-khamba i.e. the eighty pillars. In its present form it was erected in the time of Aurangzeb to serve as a mosque, built out of older material, presumably remains of some older temple, and as it now stands it is divided by five rows of sixteen pillars each, some being plain while others being in profuse ornamentation. In the present times it is appropriated by the Hindus, and women come here for purification on the sixth day after childbirth—Chhatthi puja—whence the building is known as Chatti Palna, and is visited by enormous crowds for several days during the time of the anniversary of Krishna birth.

Cunningham visited the site of the Assi-Khamba at Mahaban and confirmed the details provided by Growse. 138

Mora

A small village in Sadar Tehsil, 7 miles west of Mathura City, lies halfway between Mathura and Govardhan. Cunningham visited the site in 1882–3 and noted that near the village is an old well with a large inscribed slab forming part of the terrace. The slab is eight feet in length by three and a half feet in breadth. The Pali inscription is nearly three

137 Growse F.S., Mathura: A District Memoir, pp. 251, 256.
PLATE VII: Assi Khamba Temple at Mahaban.
PLATE VIII: Assi Khamba Temple at Mahaban
feet long and, the inscription is one of the oldest that has yet been found in the district and dedicated to the worship of the cult of five Vrishni heroes.\textsuperscript{139} Vogel visited the site subsequent to the explorations by Cunningham, and found fragments of stone lying at the site of a round shrine, and as they were evidently of an earlier date, he conjectured a connection between these fragmentary sculptures and the images of the ‘images of the five heroes’ mentioned in the inscription. A further excavation was carried at the site under the supervision of Pt. Radha Krishna, but the explorations did not yield anything to elucidate the meaning of the so-called Well inscription or its connection with the fragmentary images.\textsuperscript{140}

\textbf{Anyor}

Cunningham visited the village of Anyor in the same season as Mora. The village stands at the southeastern foot of the Govardhan hill. Cunningham notes that the village in the present times is associated with Krishna bhakti and here at the site is celebrated the famous Giriraj-puja, or the adoration of the sacred hill. But the find of a large inscribed Buddha statue, donated to a certain vihara, as mentioned in the inscription confirms that the site had a Buddhist establishment to its name in the ancient past.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Kota}

Kota is a small village to the west of the Delhi road, 3 miles to the north of Mathura. Cunningham on his visit observed that the site possesses a reservoir for retaining water which has a masonry causeway or wall, 300 feet long and 3.5–4.5 feet thick built across an extensive hollow to the north east of the village. Cunningham obtained several small pillars that were built into this causeway. The pillars were only 2 feet 8 inches in height and were sculpted with male and female figures in various poses and attitudes. Cunningham provides a detailed description of these sculptures in his report. As for the religious affiliation of these pillars, he notes that all the figures depicted have no

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., pp. 48–49.

\textsuperscript{140} Vogel, J.Ph., ‘Explorations at Mathura’, ASIAR, 1911–12, pp. 120–34, pp. 126–27.

connection to the history of Buddha, these figures are either attendants or persons making offerings.\textsuperscript{142}

**Chaumuha**

Chaumuha is a small village in Tehsil Chhata, 12 miles North west of Mathura. The name of the village is such due to the discovery of the four-faced sculpture of God Brahma. In reality, Cunningham observes that, it was a capital of a Buddhist pillar with a lion at each corner, and a naked female in each of the four intervening spaces—the upper border being roughly carved with a Buddhist rail pattern.\textsuperscript{143} Although Growse has alternatively interpreted this sculpture to be a Jaina one, Cunningham is convinced that the sculpture must have been a capital of a Buddhist pillar, with the lions sitting on the abacus of the capital, which may have been crowned by a Dharma charka, similar to the examples from Sanci.

**Mat**

The village of Mat is situated about 9 miles north of the Mathura City, on the left bank of the river Jumna. About 3 quarters of a mile to the north east of the village, is a flat mound known as Tory Tila. On this mound fragments of statues were noticed by Pt. Radha Krishna, who examined the site in 1910–11. The excavation covered an area of 220 feet from east to west, and 130 feet north to south. Evidently, the site had been exploited by villagers for bricks, as the remains of the walls discovered were scanty and fragmentary. It was concluded, from the size of the walls excavated that they served the purpose of a plinth, but of the building that stood on this plinth there was no trace. However, on the basis of two inscriptions found at the site, there can be little doubt that this building was a temple (devakula), mentioned in the two inscriptions found at the site. The statue of king Kanishka with a lower half of a divine image and an inscribed pedestal were found a little to the south of the supposed temple. A torso of another statue of a Kushana king was

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., pp. 49–52.
found at a distance further to the south, and on the site of the temple the lower half of a colossal statue of a Kushana king seated on a throne was recovered.

To the west of the plinth there is a tank, from which some Naga images and sculptures are recovered on excavation.\textsuperscript{144}

**Ganesha**

Another site examined by Pt. Radha Krishna in the season of 1910–11 was that of Ganeshra, a village situated some three miles west of the Mathura City, to the north of the road to Govardhan. The site comprises three distinct mounds. Several ancient sculptures were known to have come from the site, including a life-size Bodhisattva statue obtained by Dr. Fuhrer and placed in the Lucknow museum.

A seated image, also of a Bodhisattva was found inside a well near the village by Pt. Radha Krishna and was acquired for the local museum. From an incomplete inscription from the site, it is clear that there was a donation made for the constitution of a stupa at the site. A stone parasol, which was found lying at the foot of the mound, perhaps once surmounted the stupa mentioned in the inscription. Also the same mound produced 24 inscribed bricks and brickbats that can be ascribed to the third or second century B.C.\textsuperscript{145}

**Ral Bhadar**

The village of Ral Bhadar is situated 8 miles north west of Mathura. An inscribed Naga-Nagi plaque was obtained from the site. Also a Buddha image, which was supposed to be donated by a female pupil of a nun, was recovered from the site.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{144} Vogel, J.Ph., *Explorations at Mathura*, ASIAR, 1911–12, pp. 120–133.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., pp. 128–130.
Naugava

The village of Naugava is located about 4.5 miles south west of the Mathura City, south of the Govardhan road. An inscribed seated Buddha image was recovered from the village.\textsuperscript{147}

Girdharpur Mounds

The village of Girdharpur is situated about 3 miles west-south-west of the Mathura City. Only a few sculptures seem to have been recovered from these mounds. There are some remains of building bearing inscriptions that can be dated to the early Kushana period, but the nature of the buildings is not known. Among the sculptures recovered from the site, the most striking is that of a Naga image standing between two warriors armed with spears.\textsuperscript{148}

Chhargaon

The village of Chhargaon is located 5 miles due south of Mathura. From this site in April 1908 Pt. Radha Krishna obtained a life-size Naga statue. The figure wears a dhoti and an upper garment, which is tied around the waist in a mode particular to the sculptures of the Kushana period. The fact that this is a Naga and can be dated to the Kushana period is further confirmed by the inscription that records a donation made to this lord of Nagas in the reign of the Kushana king Huvishka.\textsuperscript{149}

Khamini

The village of Khamini is located 6 miles west of Mathura, on the road to Govardhan. Here also a Naga image, similar to the one from Chhargaon, was recovered.\textsuperscript{150}

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Vogel, J.Ph., 'Naga Worship in Ancient Mathura', ASIAR, 1908–09, pp. 159–163.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., pp. 160–161.
Brindaban

A town in Tehsil Sadar, 9 miles north of Mathura. The town is in the present day celebrated as a prime centre of Vaishnava pilgrimage. There are four older temples built under the reign of Akbar. The site however has yielded Kushana period Bodhisattva sculptures, and also images of deities like Shiva, Parvati, Lakshmi, besides other miscellaneous stone sculptures.151

Gukharauli

The village of Gukharauli is located 17 miles to the south east of Mathura. A standing female statue with a dedicatory inscription was found from the site. The inscription seems to be Jaina in nature.152

Sonkh

A village in Sadar Tehsil, 16 miles south west of the Mathura City, possesses the remains of an old fort. It is the most systematically excavated sites and it is still preserved by the ASI. An important eight-year campaign on a large scale was undertaken from 1966–74 by the German Archaeological Mission, under the supervision of H. Härtel at the site of Sonkh. The habitation at the site starts as early as 400 B.C. and continues till the Mughal period, and later to the Jats. The details and finds of the excavations are published in a systematic catalogue by Härtel.153 It is noted that the main excavation area of Sonkh yielded not less than 101 fragments of stone sculpture, mostly belonging to the Kushana period. The bulk of them consist of small pieces of cross bars, pillars of stone railings, and copingstones. The terracotta figurines from the site are much larger in numbers and are spread out on a time frame of 400 B.C. – 5th – 6th centuries A.D. The most striking discovery at the site was that of two Apsidal Temples dedicated to the cult of the Nagas, ascribable to the Kushana period.

151 Ibid., pp. 241–250.
152 Janert, Klaus, Mathura Inscriptions.
PLATE IX: The mound of Sonkh visible from a distance.
**PLATE X:** Sonkh: The excavation site.
Maholi

The village of Maholi is situated about 2.5 miles to the south west of Mathura City. The old mound continues to the village of Palikhera, which is half a mile from Maholi. The finds from the village include the famous Bacchanalian group found mid-way between Maholi and Palikhera. A Bodhisattva image and a fragment of a parasol were also found near the image. On the pedestal of the image is an inscription, recording a donation made in the Kushana era of 78 A.D. It also records the existence of a monastic establishment at the site. But further excavations at the site overruled the evidence of a monastery. Instead working platforms to support heavy weights, and a litter of stone fragments like quarry wastes were found. It was thus concluded, that instead of a monastery, the place was a stone breaker’s yard, where statues, inscriptions, architectural pieces must have been brought to be broken up into suitable sized stones for building purposes.¹⁵⁴

In this long history of explorations and excavations at Mathura, one may be able identify distinct phases in which data was collected. The earlier 19th century explorations largely began as a part of an antiquarian interest in collecting fabulous sculptures from the region. The establishment of the Mathura Museum provided a further incentive to the early explorers to contribute to the museum collection. An additional factor that helped the explorations was the translation of ancient texts by Indologists in the 19th century. The aim was to identify the various places and religious spots mentioned in the ancient literature. Thus Cunningham starts by using the chronicles of Xuanzang as his guidebook to Mathura, trying to recreate the ancient Buddhist landscape as mentioned by the Chinese pilgrim. The texts also provided these scholars with clues to identify the varied sculptures they recovered, the iconographic details helping in naming them as definite deities mentioned in the religious texts.

Fertile though these explorations maybe, it is to be deplored that they were not carried on systematic lines. Nearly every mound in the region was explored, but hardly any, except Kankali Tila, was completely excavated. Excessive importance was attached to inscriptions, especially dated ones, and the architectural evidence was wholly

neglected. It could be possible that in the course of some excavations, architectural pieces could have been found in situ, but these were not taken into account by these early explorers. Dr. Fuhrer speaks of two Jaina temples discovered at Kankali Tila, but the general plan published by Vincent Smith does not show the position of these buildings. Similarly, from Cunningham’s account, it would appear that the railing pillars from Jamalpur, were standing in situ, but this fact is not accorded any importance from him. The number of sculptures from Mathura is outstanding, but no information is forthcoming regarding the buildings to which they belong, and in many cases the exact find spots of the sculptures is also not mentioned.  

The second phase of excavations at Mathura can be noted from the 1950’s onwards, when the ASI, excavated selected mounds in the Mathura City. The main aim of this expedition was to work out a chronological sequence of the region and use artefact assemblages including pottery types to study cultural sequences. The major sites in the city that were excavated, as mentioned earlier, were the Katra mound, Kankali Tila, Ambrish Tila, Bhuteshvar mound, mounds in the Water Works compound in the city and Dhulkot mounds. The work yielded habitational levels as early as 600 B.C. at some mounds, along with extensive use of mud and burnt bricks at all the mounds. Along with this, the excavation yielded antiquities like terracotta sculptures and objects, stone sculptures and architectural pieces, pottery of various kinds, semi-precious beads, coins etc.

There is no doubt that these excavations were more systematic and extensive than the mere surface explorations done earlier. A clear stratigraphic and chronological sequence was worked out for the region. The change in methodologies and use of scientific methods yielded results. The structural and cultural material was recorded in the context of its spatial and chronological contexts. However despite these improvements, the reports published suffer from serious lacunae. In most of the reports, exact find spots of objects are not recorded, instead all antiquities found from different mounds/sites are clubbed together. Also, the classifications of these finds are also inadequate—the records only mention the artefacts loosely as ‘cultural finds’ and do not bother to classify them into clear cut categories like terracotta objects, metal objects,

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stone sculptures etc. Nor do they tabulate them according to their numbers and the mounds/sites from which they are unearthed. The artefacts have also not been satisfactorily described, and one has to depend upon museum catalogues for the details of sculptures and images. This has been an impediment for my study as not all artefacts, find their way to the museums for display. The emphasis of the ASI reports is more on mapping the city of Mathura as per the guidelines provided by textual data, proving the antiquity of the site, and cultural finds, are not documented satisfactorily and furnish incomplete information to subsequent users.

As there are discrepancies in the way data has been collected and quantified over these two phases of explorations and excavations, one has to be careful in using it as well. In most cases, the sculptures are not dated according to stratigraphic positions but on the basis of their artistic styles that are assumed to belong to certain time period in history. For instance hand made terracotta figures are assumed to start from a time period of 600 — 400 B.C., after which they give way to moulded figures and exquisite stone sculptures, but this is not borne out by the actual data available, as hand modelling as a technique continues well into the Gupta period (A.D. 400). Therefore in a lot of cases, the time period of a sculpture is determined by the discretion of the scholar cataloguing that image. Also, due to the way in which excavations were carried out the, the chronology of most sculptures remain uncertain.

Our main concern however remains to review the data collected in context of the cultural processes that marked the region of Mathura during the Early Historic Period. The main source material available for the entire region, and which I would be utilizing in my work is a) the sculptural and architectural artefacts b) the inscriptions from all the mounds/sites of Mathura. Each set of this data speaks of certain religious, political, cultural, and urban processes that took place in the region. The stone sculptures, terracotta figurines as well as the inscriptions from a particular mounds are important in constructing the religious diversity of a particular mound/site and its importance as an important cult centre as well as a centre for artistic activity. The most obvious pattern that may be noted from the sculptural remains is that most of the mounds in Mathura have been multiple cult centres, yielding archaeological remains pertaining to Jaina, Buddhist,
and Brahmanical pantheons, as well as the Naga and Yaksha sculptures all at the same site.

The second trend that is evident is with regard to temporal changes in religious diversity (Table I). At most of the sites religious cult objects start occurring from as early as the 3rd - 4th centuries B.C., but the greatest diversity in the religious landscape can be seen in the pre-Kushana and Kushana period (100 B.C. – A.D. 100). At most of the mounds there is a profusion of sculptural and architectural material from this period onwards. The diversity in religious cults as represented by this material is striking during this time period. With regard to changes over a period of time, it is observed that certain cults like that of the Yakshas and Nagas developed much earlier than the Jaina or Buddhist ones. The Parkham Yaksha, dated to 3rd century B.C. and the evidence of the existence of the Naga shrine of Dadhikarna, at Jamalpur, which, as evident from the inscription, existed perhaps prior to the Kushana period, are two such examples.

The site of Palikhera can be taken as one of the examples that represent this religious diversity and the continuity of these cults into the later Gupta period. There is a profusion in the diversity of multi religious sculpture at the site in the Kushana period from the site, which includes images of Kubera and Hariti accompanied by other pot-bellied Yaksha figures, Brahmanical deities like Vishnu, Siva, Lakshmi, Mahisasuramardini, Surya and Kartikeya, along with Jaina tirthankara images, all of them forming a part of the diverse repertoire of religious imagery at the site. The Brahmanical images continue in the subsequent period along with Jaina images, together with the finds of a Naga-Nagi plaque, which is dated to the Gupta period.

Addressing the larger issue of the expanse of the urban settlement of Mathura, the most pertinent question would be as to how one can define the role of these various mounds in the urban landscape? The limits and boundaries of the ancient Mathura city has already been defined as being the one that is enclosed within the fortification walls (Map III) on the banks of Mathura, but the relationship of this so-called core city with the rest of the mounds/sites around it, is not explained. Do patterns of settlement hierarchies hold good for describing these sites, where they can be graded on the basis of their physical features like location, size, fortifications, and artefact assemblages, that may denote certain predominant economic activities at these mounds/sites and, which in turn
maybe helpful in classifying them as big cosmopolitan suburbs or manufacturing towns or just small food producing villages? What are the distinguishing features between the assumed core city of Mathura and these other mounds/sites around the district, on the basis of which the former has been distinctly demarcated? The remains of the fortification wall was a decisive factor in demarcating the city by archaeologists, and after having traced the extent of this fortification, all of the mounds/sites enclosed within this wall were seen to represent the ancient city. Therefore I feel the way in which the limits of the ancient city is traced is arbitrary, for all the other features that are associated with urbanism i.e. the sculptural activity, craft traditions, use of burnt bricks and ceramics like the NBPW, coinage and architectural and construction activity are present in some form or the other in all of the other mounds/sites discussed above.

The very first example that can be taken is that of Kankali Tila, which is placed by archaeologists as being outside the walled settlement and hence not a part of the ancient core city. However excavations were conducted by the ASI at the mound, only to reveal extensive construction activity at the site. The site is located only half a mile away from Katra, and has been an extremely prolific site in terms of sculptural and inscriptive remains along with a tank complex dated from the Kushana levels. Most of the sculptures are of Jaina tirthankaras and together with epigraphic evidence it can be concluded that there was an important Jaina establishment at Kankali ascribable to as early as 2nd century B.C. There also have been a couple of sculptures of Brahmanical deities dated to the Gupta period from the site, along with a few Indo-Greek coins. However this evidence is not sufficiently utilized in describing the importance of the site in the urban context of Mathura and all that is assumed of this data is that it indicated a 'more varied pattern of life and greater communication (of the ancient city) with the outside world'.

As M.C. Joshi puts it, 'In the immediate neighbourhood outside the walled city, probably tanks and wells were built for the use of travellers and general public as suggested by inscriptive data. This was further confirmed by an impressive brick-built complex exposed at the Jaina establishment of Kankali Tila.'

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Apart from Kankali, there are many other mounds/sites that have revealed construction activities or, have yielded enough architectural remains to safely assume that they were important religious establishments flourishing in the ancient past. The distribution of these establishments, their religious affiliations and the patronage provided to them, are issues I take up in the subsequent chapter, but as of now the other site that reveals a lot of construction activity is the site of Mat, where the remains of temple complex are known to have existed in the Kushana period. The site is located 9 miles north of the present day Mathura City, and excavations at the site have resulted in the finds of inscribed images of the Kushana kings, one of them being of Kanishka as per the inscription on the image. Along with this there are the remains of a tank complex that has yielded Naga images and sculptures. The excavations revealed the remains of a plinth as well, which with the help of two important inscriptions from the site can be concluded to be a part of a temple structure or a devakula, possibly enshrining the statues of the Kushana kings.

The second site after Mat that can be mentioned is that of Jamalpur, which seems to be an important Buddhist centre of Mathura and has yielded immense architectural and epigraphic data. The sculptural data from the site includes bas-reliefs, railing pillars, coping stones, stone umbrellas, votive stupas etc., and the inscriptions mention important Buddhist establishments at the site that continue to flourish as late as the Gupta period. The site again is only one and a quarter miles south west of the present day Mathura City, and the Buddhist establishments at the site must have attracted immense patronage from all sections of the society.

There are a lot many other mounds/sites that have yielded important cultural artefact assemblages to qualify as being part of the complex cultural milieu at Mathura, and it can be safely assumed that all these mounds/sites cannot be taken as mere peripheral sites around the main core fortified city of Mathura, but seem to have played an important role in the urban dynamics of the region. It is very difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between the core city and these mounds/sites that are interspersed throughout the district. Geographically, these are not very far separated from the assumed city of Mathura. All of them fall within a radius of 20–30 km, the farthest being Sonkh
that is 17 miles away. Vijaya Laxmi Singh, in her study on Mathura has attempted to distinguish a distribution pattern of the various mounds/sites in the district. She works on the assumption that the fortified settlement, located on the banks of the Yamuna was most important of all, and all the other sites can be studied with reference to and in relationship with this core city. Archaeologically, she states, that excavations have indicated development of township from a village around Ambrish Tila. This latter phase is represented by PGW ceramics, and in the later phases by Black Polished Pottery. Linear distances between the PGW sites in Mathura region suggest that both the spacing of and the relationship between the settlements were random. Urbanisation in Mathura, as suggested by the ASI excavations started with the commencement of the NBPW phase, ranging from 4th century B.C. – 2nd century B.C. She feels that of all the sites excavated, the main city of Mathura i.e. the fortified city was the most important, along with the sites of Noh and Sonkh, which are also scientifically excavated, and seem to be relatively important. In the Sunga-Kushana period, it may be observed that the settlement pattern becomes even more complex, not only regarding the relationship between settlements, but also to suggest the existence of certain new sites in the period. It is observed that Mathura City had links with important sites of its immediate neighbourhood. The sculptural evidence from sites like Bhuteshvar, Chaubara, Jamalpur and Kankali Tila suggest them probably being religious settlements. It is further stressed by the author that at least some of these settlements around the periphery of the city (italics mine) were monastic, and they were either visited by traders and artisans from the city area, or were themselves connected with trade and production.

She further plots the various mounds/sites in the district into three distinct semi circles according to their distances with the centre, which is identified as Katra, and the distances amongst the sites themselves. The first semi circle consists of sites in the Tehsil of Mathura and south of Chhata, like the sites of Kota, Bajna, Ganeshra, Girdharpur, Maholi, and Jamalpur each being approximately 4–5 kms from each other. The sites of Brindaban, Chhatrika, Sakna, Mora, Usphar, Trasi, and possibly Azampur form the second semicircle, distances between them and Katra varying between 7–10.5 kms. The

159 Ibid., p. 61–63.
distances between the sites are unequal. The third semicircle consists of the sites of Chaumuhua, Ral, Aring, Bhadar, Jinga Nagala, and Chargaon. Distances between these sites and Katra vary from 13–17 kms, and the distance spacing between the sites is uneven. The theory provided to explain such a distribution of sites is that the geometric spacing of the first circle of sites suggests a planned location and that these sites were chosen and developed for a specific purpose at optimum distance from the city of Mathura, or else these sites and sites at other circles emerged naturally to support Mathura—as Mathura was a complex religious centre and as the sects multiplied they would have settled around the city. There are archaeological evidences, such as sculptures etc., which suggest that most of the sites of the first circle were religious settlements originating in the Sunga period. In the Sunga and the Saka-Kushana period it may be observed, that trade and religion of Mathura were the most important factors in the location of settlements rather than topography and environment. However, the bottom line of her analysis still remains that the main city of Mathura was the one that was enclosed within the Dhulkot fortifications, adjacent to the river Yamuna, and in close proximity to this area are more than ninety sites where inscriptions and sculptures have been found.\textsuperscript{160}

It is very difficult to support the above theories regarding the origins and settlement pattern of the various mounds across the district of Mathura on a number of grounds. There are two basic flaws in such a hypothesis, firstly the fact that issues of chronology are totally overlooked. While tracing the settlement hierarchies and placing sites in relationship with each other, it is assumed that all the mounds/sites had similar cultural sequences that coincided with each other with respect to time periods. It is possible that different sites may have a different trajectory of rise, growth, and decline and therefore, clubbing the sites into one chronological sequence does not make sense. Vijaya Laxmi has traced the settlement hierarchy of the sites on the basis sculptures, terracottas, coins etc. and attributed this development from the Sunga and Saka-Kushana phase. However sites like Parkham have yielded sculptures from as early as the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century B.C., so how does then one explain its place in this settlement pattern? The same can also be said about terracotta figurines, which make their appearance at Mathura as

\textsuperscript{160} ibid., p–63.
early as 400 B.C. Therefore, the chronological framework that explains cultural sequences of the excavated mounds/sites of the Mathura city, perhaps may not be applicable to the rest of the mounds/sites around the district. One might be able to make certain derivations and generalizations regarding the social and cultural patterns of development from archaeological and epigraphic data, but issues of chronology have to be kept in mind and dealt with carefully. As she herself admits that further excavations are required at all the sites of the circles and detailed analysis of sects at all sites would be necessary to test this hypothesis.161

Secondly to assume that sites emerged in response to the growing needs of the main city, or that the core area of Mathura had any role to play in the settlement of sites around it is a little difficult to prove given the archaeological, sculptural and epigraphic data. None of the epigraphs from Mathura suggest that any of the sites emerged with the primary motive to support or provide for the needs of the city of Mathura, or that any of the donors identify themselves as belonging specifically to this core city of Mathura, making a donation at a peripheral site. The general allusion in the inscriptions is always to the region of Mathura, which perhaps can be defined in variable ways. I would discuss the sculptural and epigraphic evidence later in the subsequent chapter, but coming to the archaeological data, it is difficult to say that most of the sites around the assumed core city came up only in the Sunga or Saka-Kushana period. It is generally agreed by most scholars, undertaking the study of the archaeological material from Mathura, that the region offers a gapless cultural continuity. This is largely evident from all the sites that have been scientifically excavated, which would be the ones excavated by the ASI in the present day city and the site of Sonkh. Also Vijaya Laxmi’s compilation of the archaeological data has shown a lot many sites in the entire district of Mathura to have beginnings of settlement around Period I (600 B.C. – 400 B.C.). This period, according to chronological classification of cultural artefacts, is represented by the use of PGW and also in the later phases of occupation, by the Black Polished Ware. She observes that there are around eleven sites, mostly known from explorations, which can be dated to Period I on the basis of the PGW shards that have been located in the Mathura area and Sonkh. These are Ambrish Tila, Sanketban, Sakhitara, Aring, Chatta, Katra, Bhuteshvar, 161 Ibid., p–62.
Kankali Tila, Naujhil, Adinga, and Sonkh. Out of all these sites only a few like Kankali, Ambrish tila and Sonkh are excavated further to reveal a continuity of settlement, which carries on to the later periods. Horizontal excavation at these mounds could reveal earlier levels of habitation and would be helpful in tracing a cultural continuity at most of these sites.

Therefore classifying areas of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ in the larger district of Mathura, when scientific excavations are conducted at only a handful of mounds/sites, so as to reveal the actual working relationship between them, does not get one very far in understanding the urban processes at the Early Historic region of Mathura. Also working with a presumption about identifying a single urban core centre, surrounded by a descending gradation of peripheral sites, that largely came into existence to cater to the needs of this core and in turn benefited from trade and patronage provided by the former, is not borne out from the existing data from Mathura.

Clearly then the models used for the study of Early Historic urban centres seems to have become obsolete when reviewed in relation to the actual archaeological material available from these mounds/sites. Moving beyond the traditional and stereotypical definitions provided by historians and archaeologists in defining the urban city of Mathura, I proceed with the hypothesis that the term ‘Mathura’ referred more to a region than a centre, where processes of urbanisation could have taken place during the Early Historic period. This region comprised of these various mounds/sites that individually had their independent trajectory of growth and decline, at the same time collectively defined the social, political and cultural processes taking place in the region during the period under study. It becomes imperative to undertake a close scrutiny of the available material from all of these mounds, in order to offer some working hypothesis regarding the expanse of the region of Mathura in the Early Historic period, and the relationship between these scattered mounds/sites that may have contributed to the overall dynamics of the region. Issues of the multiplicity of cults and religious establishments at various mounds, the social and political patronage provided to these religious sanctuaries, the intense artistic activity in the region, the movement of people across the region at the various pilgrim sites, and the general economic processes that took place due to all of
these above factors, become more important aspects to analyse, than just classifying mounds/sites into stereo typical tags of 'core' and 'periphery'.