

Chapter 1

The Scope of the Project and Its Background

The study of Early Historic and Early Medieval India

The Early Historic to Early Medieval transition is a key formative period in India's history. This is particularly true in terms of the emerging economic and political role of temples, the nature of urbanism, the role of Brahmins and the emergence of Hindu kingship, but also in relation to broader debates about transformations in economy and society. In recent years, the study of this transitional period has itself undergone significant transformation amongst historians (e.g. Chattopadhyaya 1994; Kulke 1995b; Bakker 1997; Willis 2009; Bronkhorst 2011). At the same time it has been notable that – aside from the debate about late Early Historic urban decline (Sharma 1987) – the archaeological contribution to our understanding of the transition has been relatively thin. It was a keen awareness of this point, as well as a clear vision of the potential that archaeological evidence has to address many of the key issues that surround the transition, that drove the two directors of the present project (J. V. P. Rao and D. Kennet) to steer the Paithan excavation project in this direction when they jointly took it over in 1998. However, before going into the research aims and objectives that formed the underlying rationale of the present excavations, it may be useful to provide a short background to the study of the Early Historic/Early Medieval transition in order to set out the research context.

The traditional scholarly view of Indian history that had emerged by the early 20th century divided India's past into 'ancient', 'medieval' and 'modern' periods, effectively replicating the older scheme of 'Hindu', 'Islamic' and 'British' that had been developed by 19th century Orientalists. Within this 'ancient-medieval-modern' conceptualisation of history, the transition from ancient to Medieval was seen as marking the end of a glorious age of ancient empires and the beginning of a degenerative Medieval period during which the great Mauryan and Gupta empires fragmented into numerous regional kingdoms. These epochal changes were generally perceived as being accompanied by the

decline of philosophical traditions and the degeneration of classical, naturalistic art styles into more stylised, ornamental forms alongside the emergence of more populist forms of religious worship.

After independence and into the 1960s, a more analytical and critical approach to Indian history emerged, with a closer focus on economic and social issues, particularly amongst Marxist historians. This approach was based on the view that the ancient empires were highly centralized, that they incorporated numerous, large urban centres and were based around a highly monetized economy in which manufacture and trade were very significant. It was argued that these structures came to an end during or after the Gupta period, at which time manufacturing and the minting and circulation of coins dwindled whilst urban centres declined in size and wealth. These changes were accompanied by a proliferation of copper-plate inscriptions recording royal grants of land to temples and Brahmins, reflecting – it is argued – the decreasing significance of coinage. A number of scholars argued for the development of feudal economic and political structures in India at this time, partly on the basis that land grants were indicative of the decline of centralized political power that was also reflected in the emergence of smaller, localised Medieval kingdoms.

There is no doubt that the emphasis on the study of economic and social history was one of the most important innovations of this phase in Indian historiography. At the same time, the notion of a period of feudalism in Indian history continued to be widely debated through the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, however, much of the evidence on which this argument was based had been challenged by scholars such as D. C. Sircar (1974), B. D. Chattopadhyaya (1986) and J. S. Deyell (1990), and it is fair to say that the idea has now largely lost currency amongst scholars, at least as a formal concept. At the same time, other scholars began to question the level of centralization and cohesion of the Early Historic states such as the Mauryan empire, bringing into doubt the very starting point from which Early Medieval formations are supposed to have developed.

Emerging from this debate, the work of B. D. Chattopadhyaya was key to the formulation of a new way of seeing Early Medieval Indian society in the 1980s, challenging many of the views held by earlier scholars. Using epigraphic evidence, he drew attention to the development of new Medieval urban centres and to the level of social complexity in and around them (Chattopadhyaya 1986). Nonetheless, the Early Medieval towns he identified are seen as having been fundamentally different to their Early Historic predecessors. As Daud Ali has put it, ‘whereas the great cities of ancient India were linked “horizontally” in a “thin”, but geographically dispersed network of regular exchange, urban centres of post-Gupta India seem to have been more rooted in regional context and local exchange networks’ (Ali 2012, 9).

By the late 1980s, a new model of Early Medieval state formation, known as the ‘processural’ model, had become the dominant approach. It developed partly from the work of Chattopadhyaya and partly from multi-disciplinary research of historians and anthropologists such as A. Eschmann, H. Kulke and others (Eschmann *et al.* 1978; Kulke 1995b). This model, which focuses particularly on the spread of Medieval kingdoms into south and east India, poses a three-stage development of Early Medieval states, from isolated nuclear areas to the emergence of imperial kingdoms through a constant process of agrarian expansion and integration. It involves the deliberate horizontal spread of agrarian settlements into peripheral, forested areas incorporating hunter-gatherer groups and their cults into pan-Indian structures involving the settlement of Brahmins and the foundation of temples. Because this model does not assume the existence of highly centralized Early Historic imperial structures, Early Medieval society can be seen not as a fragmentation of earlier structures but rather the continued development of the same processes which had given rise to Early Historic states. That is to say that agrarian expansion, urban change, localisation and regional state formation can be seen as productive rather than regressive or fragmenting developments (Ali 2012: 10).

However, whilst Chattopadhyaya and Kulke’s processural model works well to explain the integration of newly cleared forested regions into Early Medieval states, it works much less well when we turn to regions which had been cultivated and urbanized since Early Historic times – the core agrarian areas – where the urbanized and sedentary economic and social structures were deeply embedded in traditions going back 800 years or more.

According to the processural model, it was core agrarian areas that formed the nuclear areas of future Medieval kingdoms. In such areas, the upper Godavari basin around Paithan being a good example, it is acknowledged that processes are likely to have been quite different to marginal, forested areas, but little is known of actual developments and practically no systematic investigation has been undertaken (Bakker 1992: 88–90; Kulke 1995b: 235). It is generally assumed, on the basis of general trends, that towns in these areas experienced something of a contraction in the Early Medieval period. But apart from occasional epigraphic evidence of land grants consisting of a field, a well or a disused orchard, there is almost no evidence available with which to assess the nature or depth of the transformations that took place at this time. This is clearly problematic. The danger is that the research agenda is driven almost entirely by the peripheral zones and attention is drawn away from what Bakker calls the ‘political, religious and economic fundament’, where many of the key social and political structures were being negotiated (Bakker 1992: 88–90).

From an archaeological perspective, there are numerous ways in which it might be possible to use excavation or survey evidence to redress this imbalance and investigate some of the developments that took place in the core agrarian areas. For example, the quantified results of systematic field surveys in the territories around Early Historic cities might be expected to record changes in the organization and intensity of rural settlement that reflect population levels and the scale of the agricultural economy. Alternatively, it might be possible to look at the plans of excavated Early Historic and Early Medieval towns to consider how their layouts reflect changing standards of municipal authority or levels of urban population and wealth. Published archaeobotanical or palaeofaunal sequences from excavated Early Historic/Early Medieval sites might be examined for quantitative changes that reflect changing agricultural strategies. In addition, studies of pottery sequences might be interrogated for quantified information on the changing nature of production and distribution systems. Unfortunately, at present, there is very little evidence of this nature available from Early Historic/Early Medieval sites in India, despite the large number of excavations that have taken place. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, whilst the archaeological excavation of Early Historic sites in India has been going on for over 100 years and has provided information on hundreds

of such sites, the archaeological investigation of Medieval sites is still very much in its infancy. Secondly, much of the considerable energy that has been devoted to excavating Early Historic sites has been concentrated on deep soundings of limited extent that are designed to elucidate the stratigraphic sequence of a small part of the site rather than investigating its spatial layout and development, and the sequences thus retrieved tend to have been pushed ‘cookie-cutter’ style into established chronological and typological frameworks (Chakrabarti 1997: 267–270; Neuss 2012). Thirdly, systematic field survey designed to elucidate rural settlement patterns is not widely enough practiced in India. Fourthly, quantified studies of archaeobotanical, palaeofaunal or ceramic sequences related to the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods are almost non-existent. Add to this the enduring problems of the archaeological chronology of the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods, and it starts to become clear why archaeology has had so little to contribute to the issues surrounding the Early Historic/Early Medieval transition. Until these problems are resolved there are many questions in relation to the transition that will remain obscure. As B. D. Chattopadhyaya himself has acknowledged, however, archaeology is the only discipline that can unravel the real story of developments during this time (Chattopadhyaya 1986: 22). Without it, the evidence for Early Medieval towns and their economy is overwhelmingly based on epigraphic evidence.

When the two directors of the present project took over the Paithan excavations in 1998, they were presented with two remarkably well-preserved Early Hindu brick temples (partially excavated in 1937) which were located in the midst of an extensive Early Historic and Early Medieval town of regional significance that was located in the middle of the Godavari valley – without doubt a core agrarian heartland. Early Hindu temples being, as has been mentioned above, a key component of the formation of Early Medieval kingdoms according to the processural model, it was immediately clear that this was a unique and important opportunity to apply a wide range of archaeological techniques to elucidating the changing nature of Early Historic and Early Medieval occupation at Paithan in relation to the construction and use of the temples.

On this basis, the following research questions were defined:¹

- When were the temples built and how did they develop architecturally?
- Does a quantified analysis of the archaeological sequence associated with the temples reveal information about the nature of the economy through the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods in the period before the temples’ foundation, during their use and after their abandonment?
- What was the nature of the agricultural economy? Can the archaeological record tell us anything about crop cultivation and the nature of landholding? Can it tell us anything about the relationship of the town to the surrounding agrarian hinterland and about how this relationship may have changed over time?
- Is it possible to gain any insights into the possible link between the temples and changes that occurred at the site at the time they were constructed and used?
- Is it possible to say anything about the nature and extent of occupation at the site during the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods?

At a more specific level, these questions led the project towards a detailed re-excavation and re-examination of the two temples, including their structure and what remained of the surrounding archaeological deposits. They also led to the establishment of a systematic programme of environmental sampling and a large-scale programme of flotation of archaeobotanical samples that was carried out alongside the excavation of stratigraphic soundings around the temples from which the sequence of samples was obtained. Given the relatively small scale of the project, the general strategy was to make full use of small quantities of good-quality information. Careful attention was therefore paid to systematic sampling strategies and quantified analysis of all aspects of the post-excavation study of pottery, finds and environmental evidence. In many of these methodologies, the project cuts new ground in Indian archaeology using procedures and techniques that have never or only rarely been applied to the archaeology of Early Historic and Early Medieval sites in the region.

The research questions set out above were broken down into the following three objectives:

- The excavation, recording and analysis of two early Hindu brick temples including a detailed

¹ Many of the ideas in this section derive from discussions and circulation of draft papers (particularly Ali 2002) in 2002 amongst the Vidisha Research Group organized by Michael Willis and con-

sisting, in addition, of Daud Ali, Hans Bakker, Dorian Fuller, Isabelle Onians, Julia Shaw and the present author.

analysis of the construction, phasing and layout of the temples through their period of use. Very few temples of this key formative period of Indian temple architecture have ever been excavated, recorded and analysed to the level of detail that was achieved at Paithan and it was therefore expected that an investigation of these structures was likely to provide important insights into the early development of temple architecture, our understanding of which has, to date, been based almost entirely on the evidence from standing monuments.

- The excavation and analysis of a deep, stratified sequence close to the Hindu temples that would allow the retrieval of a complete and systematic environmental and artefact sequence through the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods which could be linked to the early development of the site and the later construction and use of the temples.
- The excavation of a number of smaller trenches at different locations across the site with the intention of clarifying the nature and extent of occupation.

Background of the project

The first stage of the present project ran for two seasons (1996 and 1997) as a small-scale excavation and survey directed by P. N. Kamble, then Superintending Archaeologist of Aurangabad Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and J. Howell, then Research Fellow of the Society for South Asian Studies. In 1998 the project was reconfigured and the directorship passed to J. V. P. Rao and D. Kennet. A further two seasons of excavation took place in 1998 and 1999 under their direction. These were funded by a major research grant from the British Association for South Asian Studies (then the Society for South Asian Studies) and an excavation budget from the Archaeological Survey of India.

The aims of the first-stage project (1996–97) were a preliminary investigation of the site and the excavation of a stratigraphic sequence intended to clarify the chronology of the Early Historic to Early Medieval period. By the end of the 1997 season, the initial aims of the first stage had been achieved. In 1998 a second-stage research programme was developed and implemented on the basis that has been set out above.

Paithan's location, geography, climate and form

The town of Paithan is known from historical sources to have an ancient heritage dating back possibly as early as the Mauryan period and is believed to have been a locality of some importance from at least the Satavahana period. The town has been associated with several well-known religious personalities in its long past, and the Ek Nath *mandir* in the town is still today a regional pilgrimage destination of some significance.

The town lies on the left bank of the River Godavari about 50 km south of Aurangabad (19°27'45"N 75°22'55"E) (Figs 1.1 and 1.2). It is a *taluka* headquarters in the Aurangabad District of Maharashtra and is a bustling modern town. It is situated at a crossing of the river in the upper Godavari basin, in one of a number of eastward-running valleys that cut the great lava plateaus of the western Deccan into sections. These leave only the dramatic, flat-topped tablelands of lava that mark the watersheds between valleys as the highest points in an otherwise homogeneous, wide and open landscape.

At this point, the flat central part of the Godavari basin is almost 20 km wide. In the valley basin around Paithan the soils are deep, mature black cotton soils or regurs, which traditionally supported large areas of stable cultivation although they are difficult to irrigate as they become very heavy and sticky when wet.

The area has unreliable rainfall of around 600 mm annually. It lies in the rain shadow of the western Ghats outside the eastern limit of the zone where some rainfall regularly spills over from the Arabian Sea, but still some distance west of the Nagpur area where rainfall from the Bay of Bengal monsoons is still a regular factor.

Traditionally the area cultivated jowar, wheat, cotton, linseed and pulses and there was relatively little double-cropping. Modern irrigation infrastructure was put in place in the 1960s at the time of the construction of the dam and the creation of the Nath Sagar power and irrigation scheme immediately above the modern town, and this has profoundly changed the nature of local agriculture (Spate and Learmonth 1967: 103–105, 690–700).

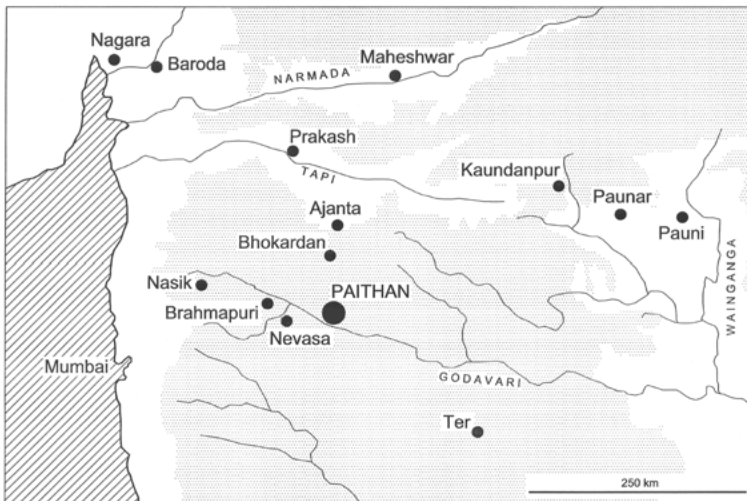


Fig. 1.1: Paithan and other Early Historic sites mentioned in the text.

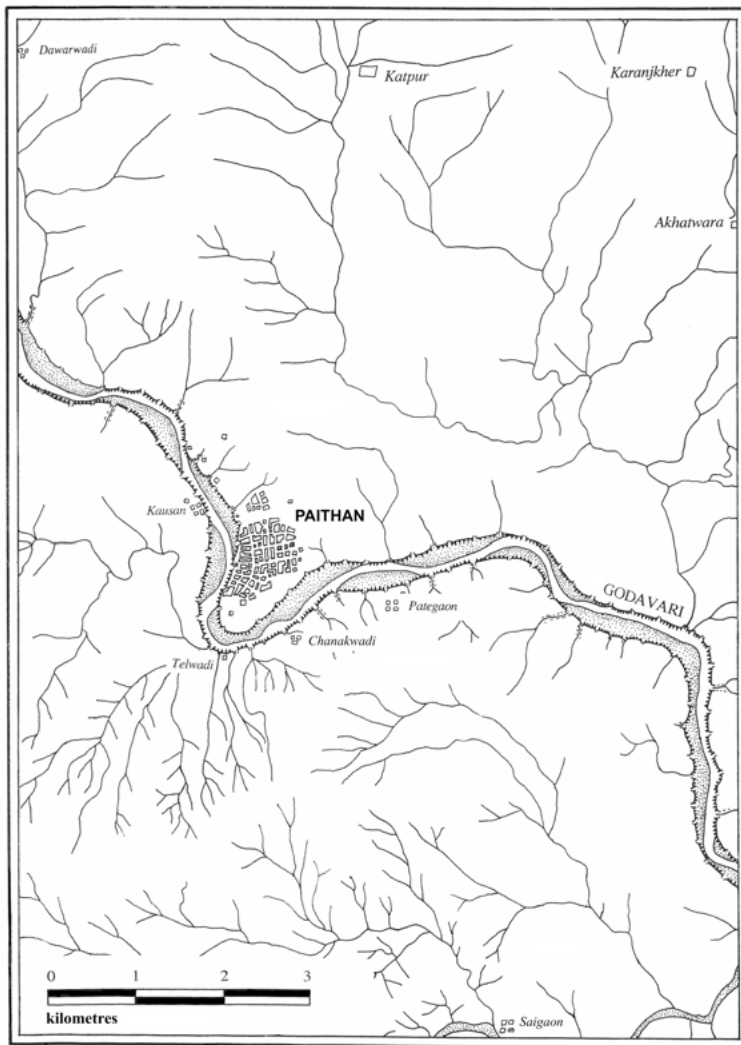


Fig. 1.2: Paithan and surrounding area.

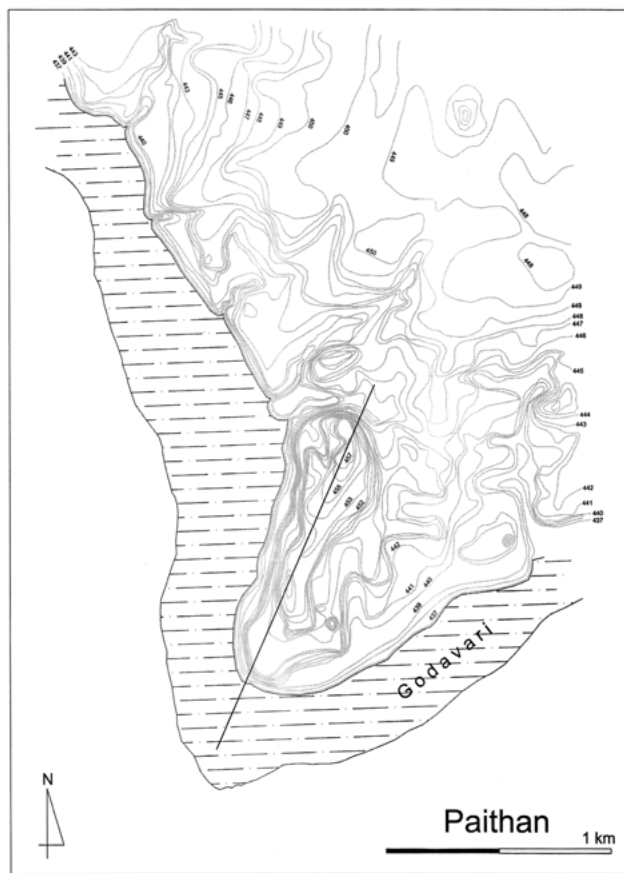


Fig. 1.3: Topographic map of Paithan with contours at 1-m intervals. The location of the section shown in Fig. 1.7 is also shown.

The core of the ancient site is a large mound lying immediately on the left bank of the Godavari. In this place the river makes a sharp turn towards the north-east after having run southwards for 2 km or so and the archaeological mound nestles tightly into the bend (Figs 1.2–1.6). The mound itself measures between 1.1 and 1.3 km from north to south and is about 390 m wide from east to west at its widest extent. At its highest point it stands about 15 m above the surrounding plain, although not all of this is formed of archaeological deposit (Fig. 1.7). On the west side, the river is eroding into the mound, leaving steep cliffs directly above the river banks. To the north, a very steep slope drops down from the top of the mound to a narrow 'V'-shaped gully between the main mound and a lower, smaller mounded area to the north. To the east the mound slopes steeply down to the level of the surrounding plain, whilst to the south, the mound gradually narrows and peters out about 250 m from the bend in the river, leaving a lower area of small mounds between itself and the river bank.

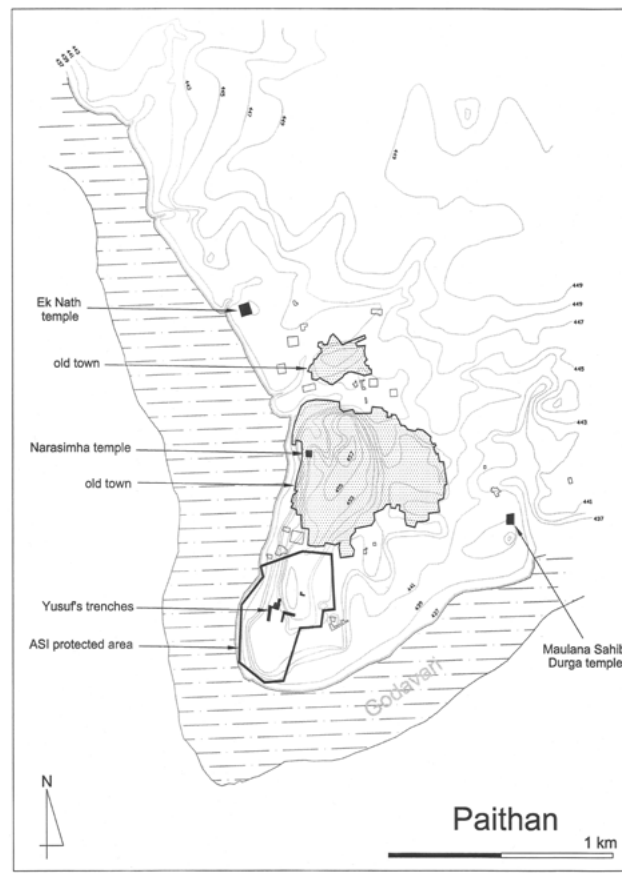


Fig. 1.4: Map of Paithan showing key landmarks, the ASI protected area and the location of the old town.

Most of the upper part of the mound is occupied by buildings – mostly housing – belonging to the older part of modern Paithan. The only exception is an archaeological reserve of about 9.3 hectares located at the extreme southern end of the mound which is supervised by the Archaeological Survey of India and which is where most of the present excavation trenches were located.

Technical matters

Excavation season dates

The first season of excavation at Paithan was inaugurated by Shri Balasahib Patil on 10 March 1996 and closed on 29 March 1996. The second season was carried out in February and March 1997. The third season began on 21 February 1998 and ended on 26 March 1998. The fourth season of excavations at Paithan took place between 15 January and 15 March 1999.



Fig. 1.5: Satellite image of Paithan (Google Earth).

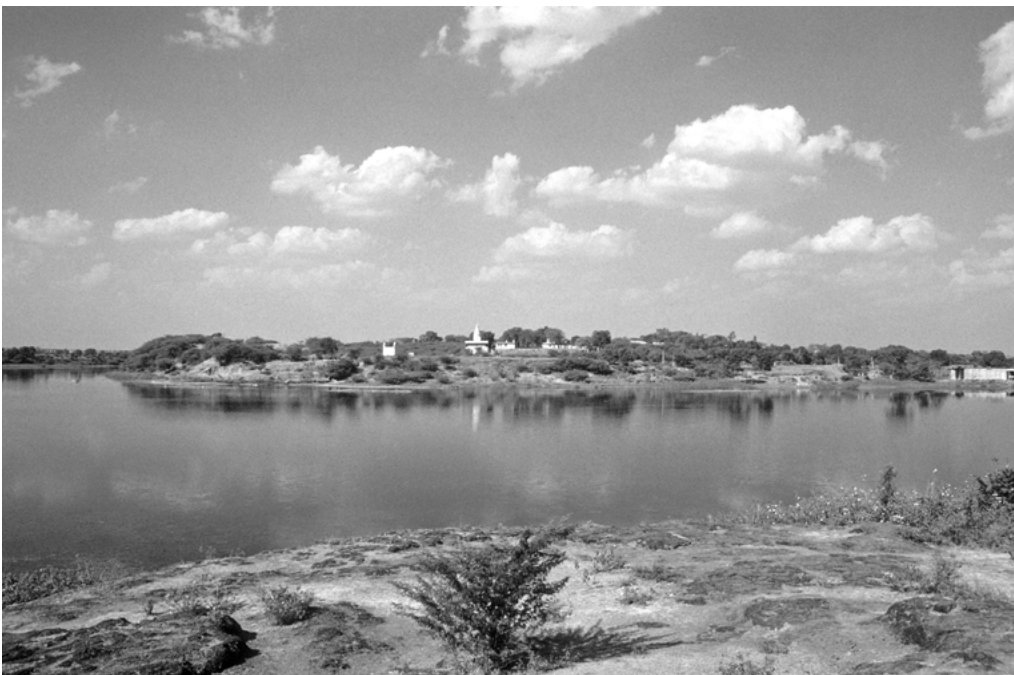


Fig. 1.6: A view of the ASI protected area at Paithan, looking north from the south bank of the Godavari.

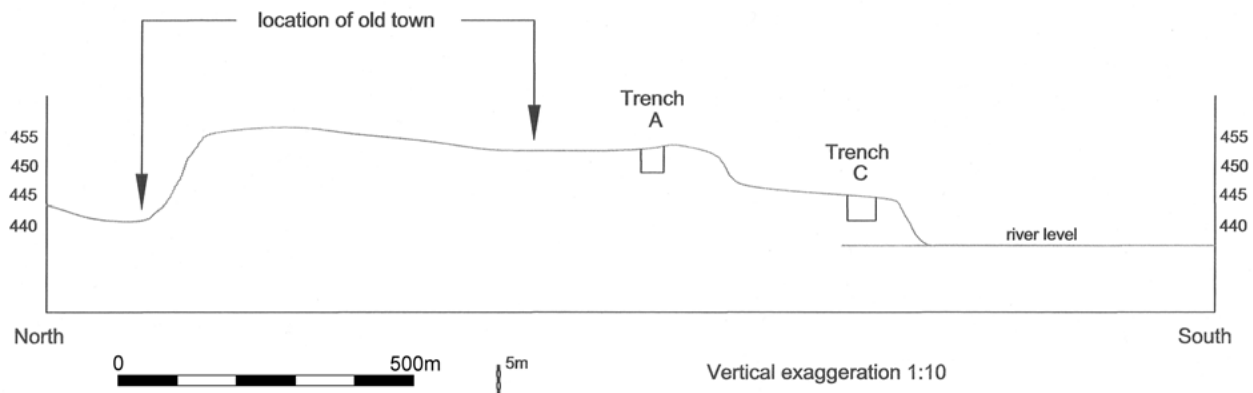


Fig. 1.7: Section through the ASI protected area and the main part of the old town.

Excavation strategy and recording system

Where appropriate, the excavation was conducted as an ‘area-excavation’ rather than as a grid of small square ‘box’ trenches separated by baulks. This was particularly useful in Trench A around the temples, where box-trenching would have obscured the architectural layout of the structures (see the discussion in Barker 1982: 44–52).

The excavations were recorded using single-context planning according to the method set out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (1994). Such practice is now standard in most countries and provides the only acceptable record of an archaeological excavation. Each context was planned on a separate sheet of tracing paper, photographed, described, levelled and given an individual context number against which all finds and other evidence were recorded. Phasing of the contexts took place only at the post-excavation stage based on an evaluation of the stratigraphic and pottery evidence (Chapter 6).

During excavation, all earth was sieved through a 5-mm mesh for artefact and bone collection. A flotation sample was taken from all excavated layers in selected trenches in order to make certain that a complete stratified archaeobotanical sequence was retrieved.

A large palaeobotanical sampling programme was organized during the excavations, and a ‘Siraf’-type flotation machine was run constantly through the 1999 season, producing what is now the largest palaeobotanical assemblage from any Early Historic site in India (Chapter 12). Together with the detailed faunal report (Chapter 13), this provides a unique insight into the development of the agricultural economy during the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods.

Site datum

An approximation of mean sea level (MSL) was taken from the one inch sheet 47M/7 (first edition, reprinted 1948) published by the Surveyor General of India in 1917. From this, a local datum was established at the site. It was not possible to check the accuracy of the measurement in relation to MSL, but all site measurements were taken from the same datum and their relative accuracy is expected to be within 1 cm.

Finds storage, interim reports, data storage

The bulk of the finds from the excavations are stored with the Goa Mini Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India, although those from the 1996 and 1997 seasons are stored with the Aurangabad Circle. Two unpublished interim reports were produced (Rao *et al.* 1998; Rao and Kennet 1999). Copies of these were lodged with the Archaeological Survey of India, the Society for South Asian Studies and the University of Durham main library.

Some aspects of the archaeological documentation that are not possible to publish here, for example data tables, Harris matrices, interim reports and images, will be lodged with the Archaeology Data Service at the University of York with the following reference: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5284/1017460> (Kennet 2012).