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Archaeological Excavations at Pipri, Nepalese Tarai

The site of Pipri lies a few km south of Tilaurakot, and less than 1 km NE of Gotihawa, a late Chalcolithic and an Ashokan site that the Italian Archaeological Mission to Nepal (IsIAO, Rome) has been excavating since 1994 (Verardi 1998, 2001; Verardi/Coccia in press). The Pipri Mound, which is 3 ha large, grew on an ancient river bank, naturally higher than the surrounding area. The minor risk of flooding during the rainy season made it fit for a settlement. The place was covered by a forest, which was cleared when the settlement was established. The uppermost part of the original soil was removed to obtain the early surface of use. The mound, presently cultivated with *dal*, is characterized by a continuous distribution of archaeological materials, mainly ceramics and brickbats, testifying to the size and richness of the ancient settlement, which was, most probably, devoid of fortifications. The main purpose of the excavations was to check and complete the sequence observed at Gotihawa, whose deposit is extremely disturbed, and obtain an overall view of the archaeological sequence of the territory west of Lumbini, the birthplace of Śākyamuni Buddha.

Pipri was briefly described thirty years ago by D. Mitra, who published a few finds collected from the surface. She suggested a chronology from the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD, which our excavation has confirmed in part (Mitra 1972, 208–10, pls. CXXIII, CXXIV).

The initial phase of the settlement is testified by such features as the ringwells, which are dated rather early in the literature, but which, in our opinion, are datable, in the middle Ganges valley, to about the mid-2nd century BC. They are associated with the NBPW (?) and a black-slipped ware very similar, but quite distinct from it, as has been shown by the analysis of the slips¹. The large majority of this ceramic is constituted by open shapes, similar to those of the NBPW. The stratigraphical sequence points to a continuity of occupation until about the 4th century AD, when the settlement was no longer existent, or much reduced in size. Heaps of wastes including a large amount of ceramics actually suggest that some form of occupation continued until perhaps the early medieval period.

The main trench, 15 × 5 m² (fig. 1) was dug on a level ground approximately at the centre of the mound (Squares MMh, MMm, MMr). We observed the existence of complex habitation sequences (fig. 2), marked by extensive, but not exclusive use of wooden and clay materials, and by frequent repairs of the inner and outer floors of the huts and of their walls. Only the northern half of the trench was dug down to natural soil, which revealed a man-made deposit about 2.6 m high. The sequence can be synthesized as follows.

The early traces of occupation are observable on a man-made soil 30 cm high covering the natural soil. As already said, two ringwells, and the two huts A and B, indicated by post-holes, mark the earliest occupation phase. Hut A, which has been reconstructed on the basis of post-holes, was circular in plan². The large post-hole 302/266 at the centre can be interpreted as the support of the roof. The levels of use of the hut could not be detected. They were probably removed during the later occupation phases.

We could observe ten superimposed rings of the ringwell 1 (SU 337), whose exploration was interrupted for safety reasons at the depth of c. 2.4 m. The rings have a diameter of about 60 cm, and are 14 to 16 cm high. During the last phase of use, a few drains dug into the soil (SU 227/226, 219/18, 217/16, 213/12) channelled the raining water into the well, which had no curb, at least at the end of this phase. Ringwell 2 (SU 340), in the eastern part of the trench, was explored only to the depth of about 80 cm. We could observe three terracotta rings, with a diameter of about 50 cm and a height of 18 to 20 cm. The find of a ring (PPR 377, SU 306) different in size from those in situ indicates that at least a third well had been dug in the area.

¹ Sherd analyses were carried out at the IRTEC (Istituto di ricerche tecnologiche per la ceramica), Faenza, and will be made known in the next future.

² Post-holes 274/273, 276/275, 278/277, 280/279, 282/281, 284/283, 286/285, 288/287, 290/289, 292/291.

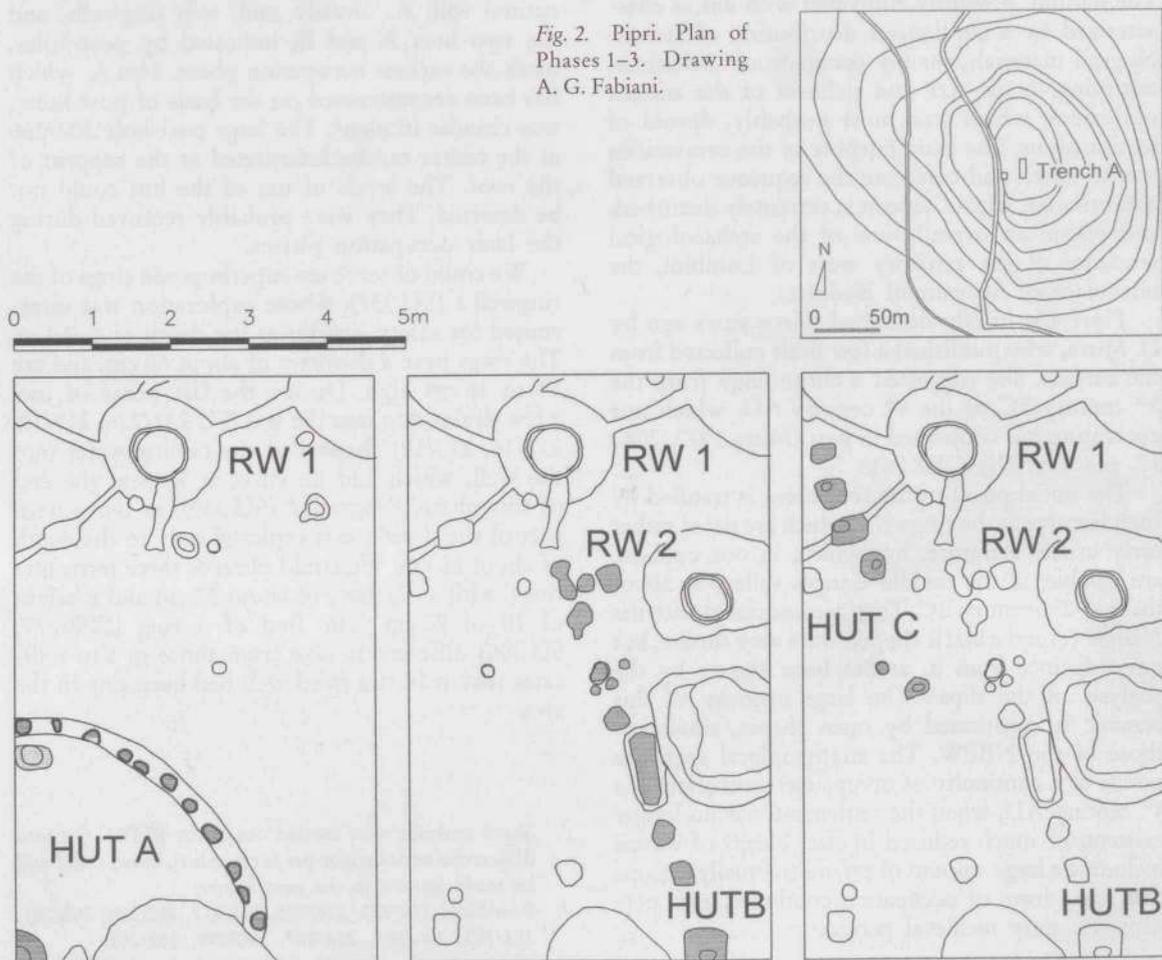


Fig. 1. Pipri. Main trench. Photo E. Cerchi.

The existence of several ringwells near each other in early historical sites is usual. These wells, dug for getting water from the water table, had a very short life. They filled up quickly because of the silt, and other wells were excavated nearby to make sure to be able to reach the water table. This is probably the reason why this technology, originally introduced from the Greek world³ was abandoned after a relatively short time. It had probably been adopted in the Ganges plain at the time of the Indo-Greek rule in NW India, but proved unfit for the local conditions. The Pipri ringwells were obliterated, probably at a short time distance one from another, around 100 BC.

³ These wells are very common in the entire Greek world since the archaic period, cf. for example the wells from Sibari in Southern Italy (Guzzo 1972, 41, figs. 31-32) and from Himera in Sicily (Allegro et al. 1976, 483, fig. 15; Camerata-Scovazzo/Vassallo 1984-87, II: 697-710, pl. CXXII, figs. 3-4). The "rings" from Sibari have a diameter of 90 cm, and are 51 cm high; those from Himera have a diameter of 80-90 cm and are 0.45-0.50 high. Because of their height, they resemble more closely the rings found at other Indian sites, as for instance at Pataliputra (Sinha/Narain 1970, pl. IV) and Nevasa (Sankalia et al. 1960, 60, fig. 35c).

Fig. 2. Pipri. Plan of Phases 1-3. Drawing A. G. Fabiani.



Two rows of post-holes mark the existence of Hut B and of its reconstruction. The hut was rectangular, and later than the ringwells, although we must note that the stratigraphic relations between the hut and ringwell 2 are lost, because the robbing (SU 153/306) of the well partly caused the removal of its remains.

Stylized human figurine PPR 144, apparently not later than the early 1st century BC, was found in the filling of the robber's trench of ringwell 1 and indicates that the site or its vicinity had been indeed frequented since the 2nd century BC. Even if no finds are directly associated with the wells and the early huts, plaque PPR 3 from SU 73, depicting a mother with child (fig. 3)⁴, also points to a 2nd century BC date for the beginning of the settlement, as do the archaic animal figurines decorated with stamped motifs, such as PPR 24 (fig. 4)⁵.

Phase 2 is characterized by Hut C1 (post-holes 211/210, 209/208, 207/206, 205/204). The hut had rectilinear walls oriented NW-SE and intersected one of the drains of ringwell 1 and Hut A. This is the earliest context yielding stratified materials related to craft activities, such as the tokens produced from potsherds. It is known, that the "pottery discs", as they are called in the literature, are found at sites from the Iron Age to the Gupta period, and later. A convincing interpretation has never been offered so far. On the basis of analogous finds in the ancient Mediterranean world, they may be considered as tokens aimed at recording simple economic operations (Marazzi 1995), and ethno-archaeological evidence seems to support this⁶.

Phase 3 is marked by the reconstruction of Hut C, which was rebuilt with a changed technique. The original plan was preserved, but instead of using wooden poles to shape and support the structure, mud walls (probably with a core of twigs) were directly laid on the ground. This change of technique is significant; it was again used to build Hut D, and is often still used today.

We observed several trampled floors in a sequence, and their examination has provided us with some valuable information. They were made by applying thin layers of a dense mixture composed of sterile soil and water, and the uppermost surface was often slightly burnt to become resistant to trampling. These levels of use were regularly cleaned, and perhaps also smoothed, as it also happens today. The presence of mats on the floors, or of heaps of rice husk used as pallets, is documented. Animals, in particular goats, were also taken into the huts. The presence of abundant organic residues, such as rice husks, animal excrements, and food remains in the space between the huts is also worth noting. These surfaces were exposed to rains, and a great amount of organic substances circulated on the outer floors, and percolated through the soil and the lower parts of the clay walls of the huts.



Fig. 3. PPR 3. Moulded plaque showing mother with child. Photo E. Monti.

This phase is characterized by the appearance of a ritual assemblage which includes animal figurines, votive tanks, terracotta balls⁷, and the like. The animal figurines, like bulls 24 and 110 (fig. 4), do not show stamped decorations anymore as they did before. The bulls' humps are obtained by applying a lump of clay to the main body of

⁴ This plaque was obtained from the same mould as that from Tilaurakot published by Mitra (1972, 101, 104, pl. XXX1). The two sites are a few kilometres one from another.

⁵ Inv. nos. PPR 24 (SU 80), 42, 65 (SU 59), 72 (SU 106), 45 (SU 96). Prakash (1985, 84) maintains that punching and stamping were among the main patterns newly introduced between 300 BC and AD 50; actually, there are examples at Sravasti from a lower level of Period II, ending c. 125 BC (Sinha 1967, 57, pl. XVII); examples from Kausambi come from Structural Period 1B, c. 250 BC (Sharma 1969, 71, pl. XLII B, 2), etc.

⁶ We have been notified (field control could not be made so far) that pottery tokens similar to the ancient ones are still in use to calculate piecework in some areas of the Tarai. We have been told that in a few brick factories, the kiln-owner puts the soil and water facilities at the disposal of the pieceworkers. During the day, the labourers bring the bricks to the owner as the work proceeds: a worker can carry 15 bricks per trip, and receives a token each time. At the end of the day, he gives the tokens back to the kiln-owner, and receives the daily wage in exchange. The pieceworkers are given middle-size tokens if they bring 50 bricks to the kiln with a donkey, and larger ones if they carry 200 bricks by cart. In illiterate societies like that of the Iron Age, or in societies which were illiterate at the level of the paid work also in later times, as was certainly the case at Pipri, this system was simple and inexpensive. In a community, which can be defined as proto-urban, the pottery tokens can be considered as belonging to a domain of semantic interface between the symbol and the scriptural sign. It is significant that at Pipri and elsewhere, the tokens were found inside the huts or on the outer floors.

⁷ Inv. nos. PPR 7, 13, 84 (SU 3), 163 (SU 67), etc. PPR 112 from SU 106 is decorated and probably belongs to a different class of objects.

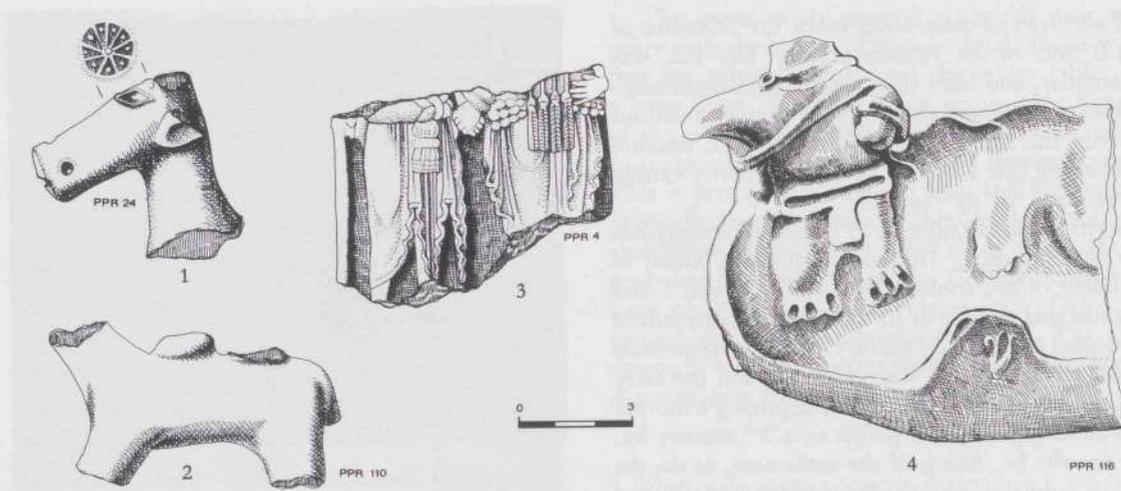


Fig. 4. PPR 24, 110 bull figurines, 4 *dampati* couple, 116 votive tank. Drawing E. Paparatti.

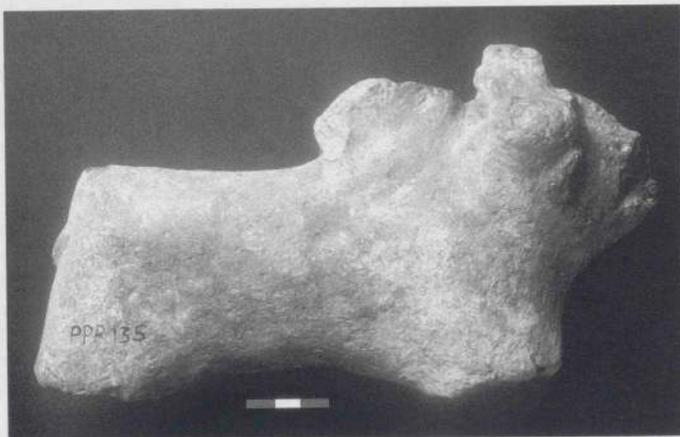


Fig. 6. PPR 135. Bull image. Photo E. Monti.

Fig. 5. PPR 53. Moulded male figure. Photo E. Monti.

the figurines. Lotus bud 106 is a fragment of a votive tank, which is not later than the mid-first century AD, as is shown by similar finds from Period 3 at Sonkh (Härtel 1993, 195, 198, figs. 6, 7) and elsewhere. Votive tanks like PPR 116 (SU 149, fig. 4) are usually attributed to the Kuṣāṇa period, and in fact the head of a "foreigner" (PPR 127, SU 156) from a slightly earlier layer, is also attributable to this phase both on typological and stratigraphic evidence.

Craft objects like *ghaṭa*-shaped spindle-whorls⁸, already known from an earlier age, also pertain to this context, and moulded plaque PPR 53 (SU 80; fig. 5), unusually depicting a nude young man, is also likely to belong to this phase, although it has

been found in later layer 80. It can be compared to a figurine from Kausambi dated to c. AD 50 (Sharma 1969, 57, pl. XXVIA).

Phase 4 corresponds to the time span defined by the layers marking the end of Hut C. Its destruction is documented by a thick layer of burnt plaster covering the whole northern sector of the excavated area. The destruction process began after the hut was abandoned, and was slow, contrary to what had happened to the earlier huts. Stratigraphically, this is the only real break in the history of the site – clearly, with reference to the

⁸ Inv. PPR 55 (SU 106), 58 (SU 104), 59 (SU 91), etc.

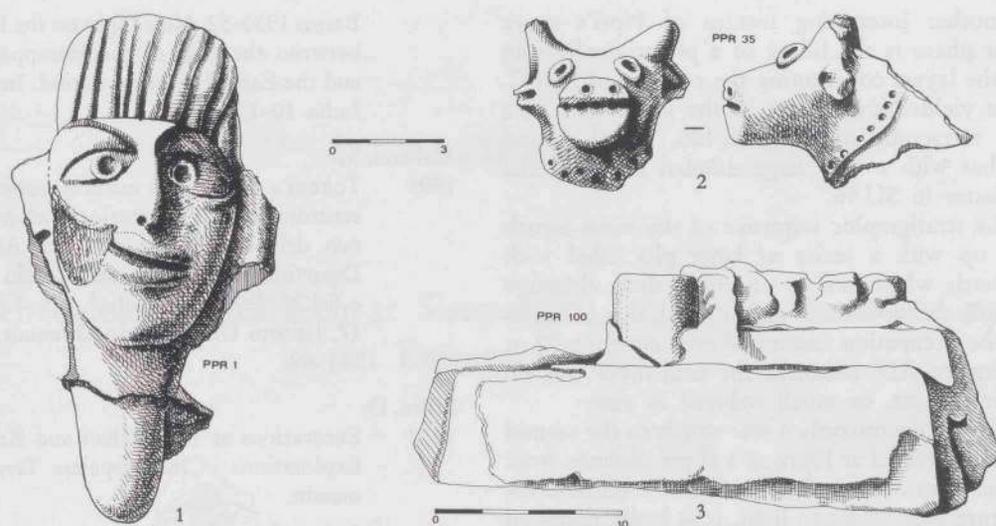


Fig. 7. PPR 1 Śiva (?)'s head, 35 bull figurine, 100 lower part of image. Drawing E. Papparatti.

excavated area, which is rather limited. The collapsed material was not removed, a thing which caused a significant rise of the walking level. The discovery of early objects in these layers, like PPR 4 (from SU 80), a *dampati* plaque typical of the post-Mauryan epoch until the 1st century BC (fig. 4), clearly shows that the process of abandonment affected the early part of the sequence. It was probably obtained from the same mould as a plaque from Tilaurakot published by Rijal (1979, no. 16).

A kiln of the pit type, still common in the region, also belongs to this phase. It has a diameter of about 2.5 m and is 0.8 m deep. The related layers contain finds datable to the 2nd-3rd century AD and later. An example is mask PPR 178, made after the distant prototype of a *gorgoneion*, and shaped on an inverted pot. It finds parallels at Khairadih, where it has been dated AD 100-300 (Jayaswal 1991, 3. 87).

Bull image PPR 135 (fig. 6) deserves some comment. Its measures (it is 21 cm long) are unusual, bull figurines being generally much smaller in size⁹. This may indicate the increasing importance of bull worship, which had already been, or was being integrated into Sivaism. The latter already was the most widespread religion at the level of the common people, as is shown by a few heads with tenons (PPR 1, SU 84; 5, SU 57; 32, SU 49), detached from the bodies into which they were inserted (fig. 7), and belonging to a type largely documented throughout the Ganges valley. They are usually dated to the 1st-3rd century AD, and may be interpreted as Śiva heads, as is shown by the hair arranged in a *jāta*, a typical feature of the god's iconography, and, in some cases, by a cirlet on the forehead. The widespread presence of Sivaite cults in a territory largely

controlled by Buddhist monasteries has to be noted and will deserve some comment on a future occasion.

At least for some time, Pipri had an economic potential which made the import or the manufacturing of good quality goods possible, as is shown by PPR 79 (SU 84), an unidentified object in polished black and white diorite, identified through the manufacture as an imported luxury good. PPR 117 bis (SU 91), a rock crystal bead, is another example.

The remains of walls of uncertain use, built with re-used wedge-shaped bricks, witness the existence of baked brick buildings in other, unexcavated parts of the site during this phase. These brick walls alternated with the wood and clay buildings.

Phase 5 corresponds to the life span of Hut D. Neither post-holes nor walls bounding the habitation were detected, but its existence has been hypothesized on the basis of a series of habitation levels about 60 cm below surface.

The materials characterizing this phase include objects from ritual assemblages as well as from craft assemblages. Bull figurines 35 (fig. 7) and 103 differ from those of the preceding phases. They have a flat muzzle, a hump at the edge of the neck, and a decoration made of incised dots. A radio-carbon date from a charcoal found in the hut - 650-960 BP - is puzzling, since these finds are not attributable to the medieval period.

⁹ From a typological point of view, the image finds a comparison in a bull figurine from Period IV at Hastinapura, which, however, is too expanded (2nd century BC - end of 3rd century AD) to be of any help. Cf. Lal (1954-55, 86; pl. 44, 21).

Another interesting feature of Pipri's more recent phase is the filling of a pit originally dug into the layers constituting the collapse of Hut C. It has yielded a fragment of the lower part of a large terracotta statue (PPR 100, fig. 7), found together with a very large number of fragments of plaster in SU 56.

The stratigraphic sequence of the main trench ends up with a series of large pits filled with potsherds which are of uncertain date, although certainly rather late. As already said, this indicates that the occupation continued even after the 3rd or 4th century AD, although the settlement was no longer present, or much reduced in size.

We will devote only a few words to the second trench excavated at Pipri, at a short distance from the main one. Here, the remains of a burnt brick structure have come to light. It is badly damaged and includes a later addition. The whole area is cut by robbers' trenches that reach the layers below the foundations of wall 54. These trenches have heavily affected the strata relating to the structures. Only one wall of the main room is relatively well preserved: it is 3.1 m long and 0.35 to 0.4 m thick. The walls are preserved to a height of 0.25 m, their foundations are 0.5 m deep. All bricks are rectangular and measure 21/22 cm × 16–21 cm × 3–4 cm. A structure without foundations, preserved only on one side on a length of 1.3 m, adjoins the main room.

No finds have come to light in this trench, with the exception of potsherds whose study is in progress.

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