

Geo-archaeological perspective of Maski - a megalithic-early historic settlement in North Karnataka, India

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Abstract

Maski (150 57' 30" N. Latitude and 760 39'15" E. Longitude) is a well-known settlement in North Karnataka. Excavation has given information for four cultures - chalcolithic, megalithic, early historic and medieval. The continuous occupation at Maski can be contextualized in relation to the geographical and geological landscape. The excavated megalithic and early historic settlements at Sannati, Maski, Hallur, Piklihal, Sanganakallu as well as a large number of explored sites are situated in North Maidan. It is a plateau covered with rich black cotton soil. The region is well endowed with economically viable rocks and minerals. It is noteworthy that many ancient iron and gold workings have been found. This is an indication that metal was being systematically explored and smelted and there is a possibility that Maski and the surrounding area was crucial in producing metal. The region is not only well provided in minerals but also has a strong agricultural base. There is a possibility that powers such as Mauryas which were centered in North ventured into Karnataka in their quest for metals and minerals. In this paper availability of natural resources and its impact on the establishment and sustenance of Maski and other nearby settlements has been explored.

Key Words : *geographical and geological landscape, ancient iron and gold workings, Asokan edict*

Karnataka is rich in tangible remains of human occupation beginning with the pre-historic period and continuing into the medieval age and later. The almost continuous occupation at Maski (Fig.1) is indicative of suitable environment and favourable local conditions. Archaeologically the immediate background of the early historic period in Karnataka including Maski is the megalithic culture phase which is richly represented over almost the whole of Karnataka. The study of megalithic culture is important for the analysis of the early historical period as many features typical of the megalithic phase continue into the early historic. The

megalithic phase and the early historic phase are frequently found overlapping or the latter succeeding the former as borne out by some of the important excavated sites such as Maski, Brahmagiri and Chandravalli. This is not to imply that the early historic culture in Karnataka evolved entirely and only out of the preceding megalithic phase, for it had certain distinguishing traits of its own such as the use of the Russet-coated Painted Ware, the construction of large brick structures, the making of sculptures, coins of pre-Satavahana and Satavahana period, script and inscriptions.

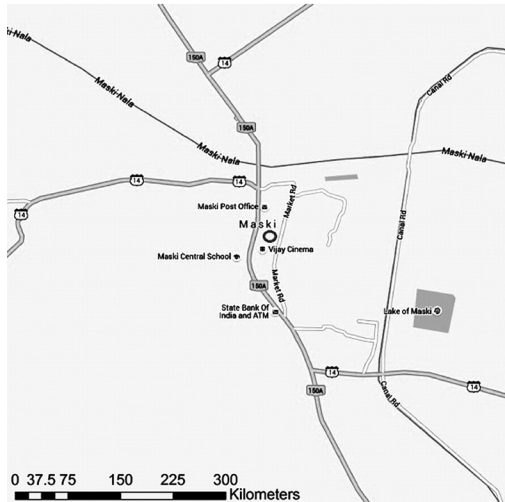


Fig.1 (Map – Courtesy, Author)

The Geographical and Geological Context

Karnataka can be broadly divided between open Maidan and forested Malnad. The Maidan consists in general of rolling plateau rising in the east (between Tumkur and Kolar) into disjointed granitic hills of irregular plan and elevation (Spate and A.T.A. Learmonth 1984, 702). The vast Maidan, so named after its relatively low and subdued relief, is divided into north and south, largely owing to cultural differentiations, the former is mostly drained by the Krishna and the latter by the Cauvery system. The settlements at Sannati, Maski as well as the large number of surrounding early historic sites are situated in North Maidan. It is a landscape of monotonous seemingly endless plateau covered with rich black cotton soil. The general elevation is about 600 mt. with broad flat bottomed valleys ranging upto 400 mt. Southern half of the area lies on

Peninsular gneiss with NNW-SSE belts of Dharwar schists. To the north of Dharwar and Peninsular gneisses, sedimentary rocks such as sandstone, limestone and mudstone of Cuddapah formations are found in a continuous line in the west and Kurnool formations in the east. The remaining area is capped with Deccan trap (Singh 1971, 817). The region is well endowed with economically viable rocks and minerals. These include granites, sandstone, shale, limestone, agate, opal, chalcedony, chert, laterite, haematite, limonite, gold, copper, quartz, crystal, quartzites, mica, ochre, soapstone, gneisses, dyke rocks, etc. It is noteworthy that many ancient workings have been found. Old iron workings have been noted at Somalingadhalli, near Machnur, near Mandargi, Chikhesrur and Hirehesrur. Perhaps the most prominent are the old gold workings which have been located in the Dharwar along the eastern margin of the belt from Mavinmatti to the north of Kardhalli, at “Makan-gavi” south of Mavinmatti and north east of Janapur. However, the best known ancient gold workings have been discovered at Hutti gold mines situated in the Maski band of Dharwar schist rocks. The region is not only well provided in minerals but also has a strong agricultural base. The level plains with fertile soils are highly suitable for agriculture. The climate is hot and dry with occasional droughts due to variable rainfall but the agricultural activity does not suffer because of the rivers such as Krishna, Bhima, Tungabhadra and their tributaries. These rivers must have facilitated transport and communication and in the process would have stimulated internal trade. They might have played an effective role

in the exchange of ideas. Incidentally, both Sannati and Maski are situated on the banks of river Bhima and close to Maskinullah (a tributary of Tungabhadra) respectively.

Archaeological site at Maski –

(Maski, 15°57'30"N Latitude and 76°39'15" e. Longitude) lies in Lingsugur Taluk of District Raichur. To the north of the village flows the Maskinullah, a tributary of the Turigabhadra. The ancient site is located to the west of the present village and is surrounded on three sides by gneissic outcrops rising about 400 ft above the plain. It was excavated between 1935-37 by the State Archaeological Department of the Hyderabad state. It was systematically excavated by BK. Thapar in 1954 (Thapar 1957). Four cuttings, labeled MSK-9 to MK-12 were laid out in different parts of the site. Only MSK-10 was complete and gave evidence of three successive occupational periods (numbered I to III from bottom upwards) with a break between the first two and with a sprinkling of the remains of the medieval period at the top levels. MSK-9 revealed that the area, after a regular occupation of Period I had been used as a burial ground in the next period. MSK-11 proved to be much disturbed by a late pit. In MSK-12, remains of the Medieval Period alone were met with. The excavation established a four-fold sequence--the chalcolithic, period 1, average height of 3ft. above the natural surface with a, distinct break in occupation at the end of the period; the megalithic, period 2, height of 5ft 6 in, in the uppermost foot of which there was an overlap with

the following period; the early historical, period III, extending to the surface, with a further height of nearly 2ft including the overlapped deposit; the medieval period, only represented in MSK-12, covered a height of 4 to 4 1/2 ft from the natural surface to the present ground level.

Megalithic

Archaeological assemblage from Maski--

Extensive vestiges of megalithic culture were found at Maski, district Raichur. At least five classes of burials were found. The burials on excavation yielded human remains and funerary goods. These included pottery, stone balls, stone axe, chert core, stones of indeterminate use, tanged arrowhead, iron knife blade, iron dagger, iron axes, iron lances, animal bones, etc. Excavation brought to light only post-holes with no evidence for any structure. The pottery from the burials consisted of black-and-red ware and red ware. Pottery from the habitational deposits comprised of black-and-red ware, all- black ware and red-slipped ware. The habitational deposits gave the evidence of fragmentary bangle, tanged arrowhead, chisel, ferrule, blade of a dagger, blade of a sickle, axe, nail, etc. Among the copper objects noted prominent was a fragmentary bangle. Two gold objects, one bead and a small indeterminate fragmentary leaf came to light. Ornaments comprised of beads, bangles, etc. Terracottas were collected. Remains of domestic Ass, Zebu or domestic humped Cattle of India and domestic Sheep were reported (Thapar 1957).



Fig. 2

Chronology –

In Karnataka iron objects first appear in the period of overlap between the neolithic and the megalithic periods. This overlap between the neolithic and megalithic cultures was found to be quite early at the site of Hallur. The beginning of iron-using culture at Hallur can be dated around 1100-1000 B.C. There is a possibility that iron might have been introduced a little earlier as the dates obtained are for layers 4 and 5 whereas iron is known to occur in two earlier layers i.e. 6 and 7. Thus, the introduction of iron might have been as early as 1200 B.C. at Hallur. This possibility can not be ruled out until otherwise established by firmer evidence (NagarajuS and B.K. GururajaRao , 324). It is difficult to fix the date for the end of this culture phase. There is stratigraphical continuity from early iron age phase right upto the beginning of the christian era (Hallur, Brahmagiri, Maski, Piklihal etc.), with the iron age traits continuing and overlapping with the early historic. However, it is difficult to say with certainty if all the sites with iron and black-and-red ware belong

to a period before 400 B.C. In most of the south Indian sites, Russet coated Kaolin Painted Ware overlaps and succeeds the iron age black-and-red ware. Russet coated Ware had been dated to the beginning centuries of the christian era on the basis of its association with Rouletted Ware, Roman and Satvahana coins, as witnessed primarily at Arikamedu and Chandravalli (Nagaraju S and B.K. GururajaRao , 326). Interestingly in the opinion of scholars like K.V.SoundaraRajan, Asoka or his regional governors who were charged with the duty of dispersing the royal mandate and desire, bestirred themselves under the sway of the iron using, megalith-building communities and it was seemingly these that were to be influenced by the royal edicts (SoundaraRajanK V 1983, 11). Thus the megalithic age in Karnataka can be assigned the time bracket of approximately 1100-1000 B.C. to 400-300 B.C.

Sustenance of archaeological settlements

Maski is located in North Maidan. In North Maidan megalithic settlements were situated on river banks as well as on terraces and foot hills. A large number of megalithic sites were found on the banks of the tributaries of river Krishna, notable among which are Tungabhadra, Maskinullah, Malaprabha and its tributaries Bennihalla and Jaulhalla. Hallur is on Tungabhadra while Maski is on Maskinullah. Along with certain excavated sites like Piklihal, Sanganakallu a large number of explored sites were found on the terraces and at the foot of sandstone and granite hills. It appears that man showed discrimination in the use of land i.e. burial sites were

generally located on unarable lands while the habitation sites were normally found in open fields (Nagaraju S and B.K. Gururaja Rao, 326). The identification of numerous sites with burial vaults is suggestive of big population. Some of the burial vaults at times had remains of more than one person. Moreover the building of these burials would have demanded an easy and abundant labour supply. The stones used in the construction of graves were both big and heavy and would have depended upon extensive labour for working, transporting and hoisting them. An important factor that seems to have supported the large population was the availability of resources. Though climatic conditions are hot, dry and the rainfall is not adequate, yet agriculture is an important activity in North Maidan primarily because of the easy availability of water for irrigation and fertile soils. Agriculture of the period seems to have benefitted not only from irrigation but also from the use of a wide range of iron tools and implements, particularly knives, axes, etc. As the iron tools were more durable and effective vis-a-vis stone, it became possible to work the soil faster and deeper. Furthermore, stone tools such as axes, pestles were probably used in agricultural activities. Agriculture was supplemented by hunting and domestication of animals. That hunting was practised during the period is indicated by large number of hunting scenes painted in the rock shelters at sites like Hire-Benkal. These paintings seem to hint at community hunting, carried on the horse back. Furthermore, the region witnessed the development of various industries, notable among which were stone dressing, metal working, pot making, bead

manufacture, bangle making, terracotta making and spinning. Considering the large number and type of megalithic monuments it appears that there must have been a fairly big category of workers who specialized in stone cutting and building. The discovery of iron tools, implements and weapons from various sites such as Maski, Hallur, Halingali and Piklihal that iron ore was being prospected and utilized. Ancient iron smelting has been identified at places like Kanivehalli, Kudligi, Kamalapura, Kallahalli, near Sri Kumaraswamy Temple near Deogiri on the Ramandurga plateau, near Jambunatha ridge, etc. in district Bellary (Gazetteer of India, Bellary District, 20). Districts Bijapur, Raichur and Bellary in North Maidan are known to be rich in iron ore deposits.

Gold objects such as a bead and a small indeterminate fragmentary leaf from Maski tend to suggest that gold was perhaps systematically explored and prospected by the megalithic folk. Numerous gold workings have been found at Hutti which constitutes the chief gold bearing belt of the Raichur Doab (Thapar 1957, 119). Indications of ancient workings for gold are noticed near Konganahosur and Chigateri in Harapanahallitaluk and near Ettinahatti in Sandurtaluk in Bellary district (Gazetteer of India, Bellary District, 22). There is evidence for many old workings of gold at places such as to the south of Mangalur, at Makan-gavi, to the south of Mavinmatti, to the north of Janapur, to the west of the road to Kardhalli from Naganur, on the eastern flank of Mangalur hill, etc. (Gazetteer of India, Gulbarga District, 21-22) . The unpierced terracotta discs could be gaming counters possibly

used in hop-scotch game by children, the pierced ones could be either spindle-whorls or toy cart-wheels. That exchange network of certain magnitude might have existed in the region is indicated by the fact that at Maski, otherwise rich in beads, no cores or unfinished beads were found, thus suggesting that there was no local industry at the site though some of the raw material used was within reach. Similarly, six lapis lazuli beads were discovered. This material is not available locally in India and must have been imported from outside. Important sources of lapis lazuli are in Afghanistan, near Baikal, Siberia and Chile (Thapar 1957, 104-105).

Early Historic Period

Archaeological assemblage from Maski—Excavation brought forth a rich variety of pottery which included Russet coated Painted Ware, red-slipped ware, black-and-red ware, grey ware, black ware and Rouletted Ware. A few brick bats of the dimensions of ? x 9x3 inches were noted. The stone objects found here were asymmetrical flakes, parallel-sided blades, cores, balls, mortar, disc and marble. Metal objects discovered included nail and blade of a dagger or knife, both made of iron as well as copper bangle and a copper broken bell. Ornaments discovered at Maski comprised of beads, bangles and rings. Terracottas included spools, discs, flesh rubbers and figurine of a bird, possibly a parrot. However, it is the torso of a standing female figure which is particularly noteworthy. Animal remains of the Indian domestic Buffalo and the domestic Sheep were recorded. An important discovery which brought Maski to limelight was that

of Asokan inscription. An ancient lead coin was found from the latest levels. Its date has not been ascertained (Thapar 1957). This culture has been dated from first century A.D. to third century A.D. (Murthy A.V.Narasimha 1987-88, 6).

Chronology -

Early historic period in Karnataka is normally placed between third century B.C. to third century A.D. This chronological framework however does not imply that early historic culture showed uniform patterns in terms of space and time. While at Vadgaon-Madhavapur it unfolded itself as early as third century B.C., at T. Narasipur its beginnings can be traced only to first century A.D. The early historic culture in Karnataka can be broadly divided in two phases - early and late. The early phase is from third century B.C. to first century A.D. The second phase is seen from first century A.D. to third century A.D. - coterminous with the pre-Satavahana and Satavahana period. Early historic culture seems to have flourished during the second phase. Excavations at Chandravalli, Brahmagiri, Maski, Piklihal, Vadgaon-Madhavapur and Sannati have demonstrated that early historic culture with its distinctive traits like permanent structures, Russet coated Kaolin Painted Ware, metal and stone objects, ornaments particularly beads, terracottas and sculptures, coins, inscriptions and script came to the fore in the period from first century A.D. to third century A.D. Excavation at Brahmagiri and Chandravalli in 1947 has given a chronological bracket which is since then frequently applied to date early historic cultures elsewhere. Satavahana coins occurring in association

with Roman denarii and the Rouletted Ware provided the main dating evidence for the early historic culture at Brahmagiri and Chandravalli. Both of them imparted a measure of chronological precision to a widely distributed ceramic, the Russet coated Painted Ware. By association this ware was assigned to about the middle of the first century to the third century A.D. Consequently at Maski, the beginning of period III i.e. the early historic which is marked by the appearance of the Russet coated Kaolin Painted Ware is placed in the middle of the first century A.D. The occupation was slender and might have continued till about the third century A.D. (Thapar 1957, 17). However, the Asokan inscription suggests an earlier date i.e. third century B.C. to second century B.C. for the beginning of the early historic period.

Sustenance of archaeological settlements

Maski seems to have been a major settlement of the period located in mineral rich zone. Thirteen gold workings have been found near Maski. It has been suggested that Maski itself may be the Suvarnagiri (“gold hill”) headquarters from which the Minor Rock Edicts of Asoka were issued. As there are a number of Asokan inscriptions in that general area such as those at Gavimath and Palakigundu, near Kopbal, the Suvarnagiri headquarters may have been at one of such places. The large number of Asokan inscriptions in this part and the attempt to establish a cultural impact, as revealed in the Minor Rock Edicts, were perhaps deliberate and could be related to the region’s high commercial and mining value (Begley, 301).

A notable feature of Maski which is common to the other major settlements of the period is well made and sophisticated ware, particularly the Russet coated kaolin Painted Ware. From the abundance of pottery found it appears that Maski must have been well populated. The discovery of Rouletted Ware is indicative of possible Roman contact. So far no brick structures have come to light but stray brick bats suggest that permanent structures might have been in existence. The ornaments recovered show a marked preference for shell which was probably obtained from the nearby tributary of the Tungabhadra. It is interesting that a large number of beads have been recorded but like Brahmagiri there is no evidence for local production. In such a situation beads might have been supplied by a nearby settlement which specialised in their production. For instance, Devargonal has given evidence of remains of furnaces for making beads. In fact, there is every possibility that many of the basic requirements were being fulfilled by the surrounding villages. Rich pottery, large number of ornaments and fine terracottas are suggestive that Maski was a thriving settlement of the period. It appears to have been an important administrative centre of the Mauryas which continued to flourish till the early centuries of the Christian era.

Conclusion

Karnataka since ancient period has enjoyed the benefit of multiple sources including fertile soils, adequate water for irrigation and conducive climatic conditions which has promoted agriculture and encouraged habitation. Further, the availability of metals and minerals made it favourable for

human occupation. Infact, Karnataka and particularly North Karnataka was extremely appealing and political powers such as Mauryas whose centre of power was in North India seem to have ventured into Karnataka in their quest for sources which were needed for their army and administration. Incidentally, the edict of Mauryan emperor Asoka was discovered at Maski. Maski is located in mineral rich zone. It would be appropriate to infer that the exploitation and utilization of resources beginning with the pre-historic and continuing into the historic have influenced the development of the area, leading to distinct patterns.

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