

Rakhigarhi: A Harappan Metropolis in the Sarasvati-Drishadvati Divide

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In the Harappan dynamics, Rakhigarhi (29° 16' N and 76° 10' E), in tehsil Narnaul, District Hissar, Haryana is next only to Dholavira in Kutch (Gujarat). The site can be approached from Delhi via Rohtak, Hansi and Jind. Jind, besides being the nearest railhead for the site on Delhi-Bhatinda section of the Northern Railway, provides the shortest road link through Gulkani or Narnaul. There is a regular Haryana Roadways bus service from Jind and Hansi to Rakhigarhi. Private conveyances are also available from Narnaul. The nearest guest house of the Irrigation department is at Rajthal.

Over the Harappan mounds are the thickly populated villages of Late Mediaeval times, namely Rakhikhas stretching east to occupy the larger area of the mound and the other contiguously situated Rakhi Shahpur covers less. These settlements have largely caused irreparable damage to the site, but due to the timely action of the Archaeological Survey of India, a fairly large and open area of the site could be saved and protected from further damage and encroachment. Three such mounds have been numbered as RGR 1 to RGR 3 while the largest and its eastern extremities are named RGR 4 and RGR 5 respectively.

Acharya Bhagwan Dev was the first to notice Harappan relics here. Subsequently Suraj Bhan confirmed its Harappan nature in 1963-64¹. Suraj Bhan revisited the site and ascertained that Rakhigarhi (obviously he

meant Rakhikhas) contained both Early or Pre-Harappan and Harappan culture horizons, Rakhi Shahpur only witnessed the Mature phase of Harappan². But in an appendix to his report on Mitathal³, he recorded, Rakhi Shahpur as Rakhigarhi and saw them as 'twin sites'. He missed completely the presence of the other three mounds noted above. In the early seventies, Silak Ram⁴ paid a visit to the site and reported, besides other Harappan antiquities, a seal, presently housed in the Gurukul Museum at Jhajjar (Haryana). He too noticed Early or Pre-Harappan and Harappan elements at the site. But in the early eighties a team of archaeologists from the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Haryana noticed late, Harappan elements here⁵ which was later got endorsed by Suraj Bhan⁶. Thus the chronological framework of the Harappan occupation at the site got enlarged. R.S. Bisht, observed earlier Pre-Harappan settlement in the north-western locality of Rakhi Shahpur revenue limit⁷. The corpus of Indus seals and inscriptions included three seals from Rakhigarhi, two of them are regular type of seals while the third is a clay lump bearing couple of seal impressions⁸. In recent years, two similar ones have been picked up, one of them, a fragmentary terracotta cylindrical seal, is quite significant. This has now been published⁹ but the other fragmentary terracotta sealing is yet to be published. Besides sealing, Bisht collected a large number of steatite beads and other miscellaneous items, all belonging to the Harappan culture. J.P. Joshi and his team noticed 137 Early Harappan and 109 Mature Harappan sites in the region¹⁰, with their main attention

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on Rakhigarhi¹¹. Incidentally, the Alkhins consider this site as second grade settlement based on the area of the site¹², whereas as per the calculation of the area marked on Topo sheet (No. 53 C/3), the site extends over 105 hectares and has established the primacy of this site area-wise. Apparently, the status of provincial capital assigned to the site by Suraj Bhan¹³ and Lal seems¹⁴ to be well found. Other excavated sites of the region like Mitathal, Siswal, and Banawali¹⁵ are subordinate settlements in the drainage system of ancient Sarasvati-Drishadvati rivers.

The site is in the drainage system of ancient Sarasvati-Drishadvati rivers. Fig. 1 The mean altitude varies from 219 m to 221 m in the surrounding plains extending over an area of 10 km radius. The alluvial plains in the neighborhood, with occasional patches of sands either exposed or occurring at shallow depths, show gentle slope from north-east to south-west. The nature of the soil is mostly alkaline and the ground water is brackish. The source of potable water lies mainly in the existing or old stream courses or near other water sources. For

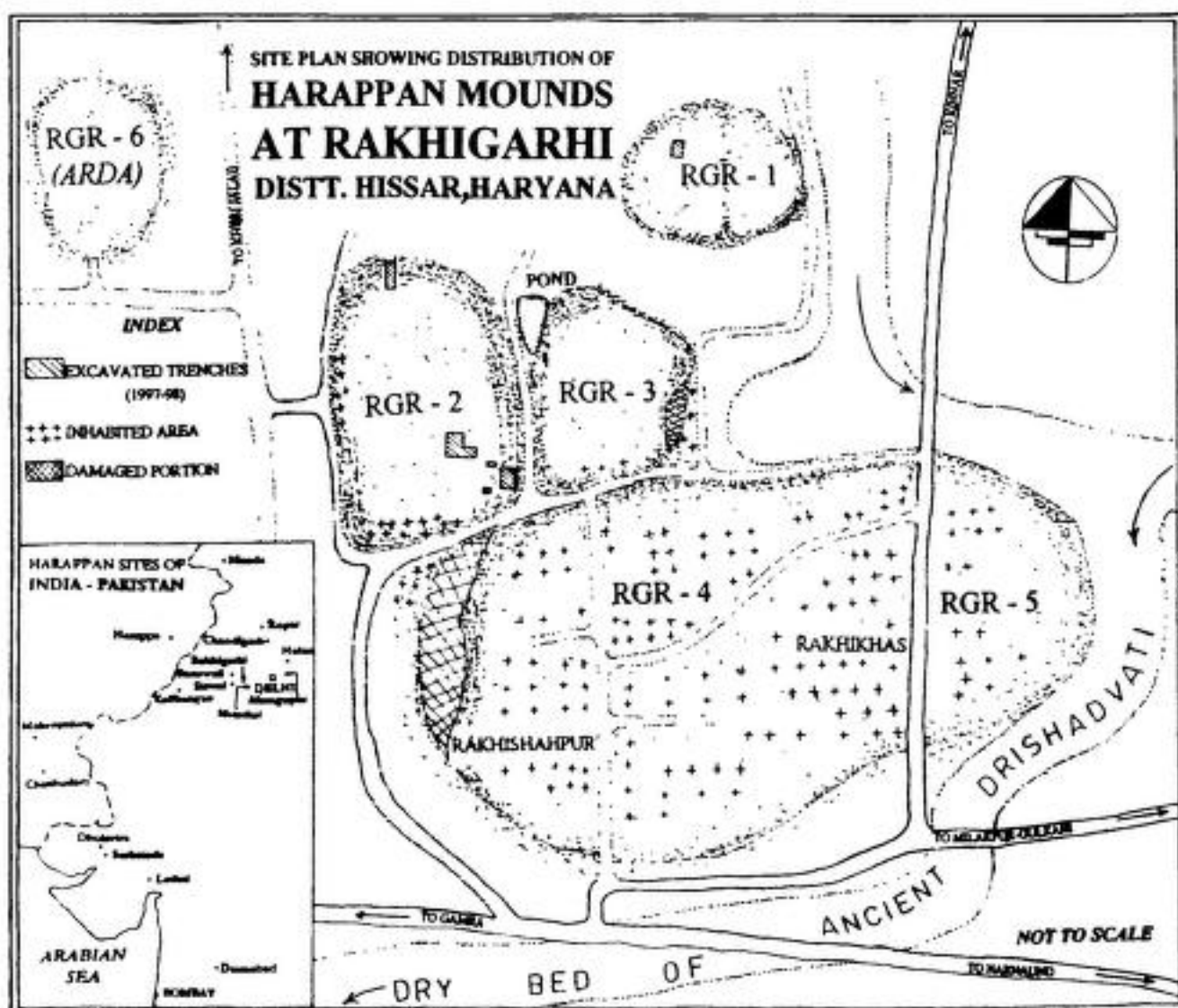


Fig.

potable water a few wells in the village can be seen located near the meandering channels of old streams. On the south-western corner of the mound lies a shallow depression or lake-like feature which was watered from both north-west and north-east side, perhaps creating an impression of a confluence in ancient times. Incidentally, on the southern periphery of RGR 4 and 5 lies an elongated watershed, stretching east-west. These channels, together with those located at intervals in the easterly villages of Gulkani and Milakpur are in alignment and possibly in ancient times a river was flowing along the southern periphery of RGR 4 & 5. As per the existing belief the site was located on the right bank of Drishadvati, we may associate this palaeo-channel with that perennial river of yore.

RGR1, stretching west to east is 6 m high from the surrounding plains and is on the northern extremities of RGR 3. It is ovalish in shape, showing overlapping feature of a twin mound, of which the western portion is higher than the eastern portion and latter merges gently with the surrounding plains towards the eastern side. The surface shows, scanty patches of a rather thin vegetal cover. Intervening barren patches were strewn with un-fired ware sherds, the western and southern slope of the mound were found scattered with *mushitikas* fragments along with terracotta cakes, than with pot sherds. The over all surface features gave an impression of a burial mound. Currently, the villagers use the slope of the mound for raising memorial structures, a couple of them can be seen even now.

RGR 2, larger than 1 and 3 figures on the topo sheet indicating a relative height of 14 m. It is nearly trapezoid in shape (Pl. 1). However its ridge, like eastern fringe gently rises from north to south, possibly indicating covering remnants concealed of a fortification wall. The southern and western fringes have been badly encroached upon by villagers of Rakhi Shahpur. The northern portion of the mound exhibits relatively better preserved features of a possible gateway and bastions. The north eastern corner shows a majestic bastion, strengthened externally by radiating spoke-like earthen buttresses, while the corresponding bastion on north-western side is of low profile, seen merging with other surface features. Between the two bastions lies the residue of screen-walls projecting in opposite directions, giving veiled appearance of skillfully conceived entrance. The artifacts reported from the surface include unfinished beads and burnt patches supporting existence of lapidary and other craft activity areas in RGR 2. Finished products like beads of all representative

materials, copper fragments, terracotta cakes and *mushitikas* etc. were collected. The excessive concentration of terracotta cakes including *mushitikas* at the site suggest intensive involvement of the people in their craft activity.

RGR 3, ovalish on plan rises to a height of 12 m from the surrounding plains. The parallel valley-like formation seen on the topo sheet between RGR 2 and RGR 3 have now been partially altered in recent times by raising an earthen barrier across the mound towards the northern slope with the result a pool had formed for sundry usage. As a matter of fact it is going to increase the moisture and create adverse effect on the cultural deposits of the adjoining mounds. Recently, it was desided and its refuse was dumped on either slopes of the mounds, thus affecting the original contour of the mounds. Further damage is caused by cutting more than knee-deep long trench across the northern periphery of the mound. There on the top exists a grave, under worship, of the late medieval times, maintained by the local Waki Board. They have further leased out a portion of the mound on the north-western slope and allowed ruthless leveling and scooping of cultural deposits for the construction of subterranean meditation chamber. Similarly, the entire eastern and southern slopes of the mound have been encroached upon by the villagers. Incidentally, in one of the central cuttings on the eastern fringe was noticed more than twenty courses of burnt bricks and equal number of courses in mud-bricks raised side by side, these in all probability could be two phases of construction in the fortification wall.

RGR 4 and 5, contiguously interlocked, are heavily encroached upon by the people of Rakhikhas and Rakhi Shahpur. Stretching east-west, the two together a maximum height of 17 m as with one unit is deceptively ovalish on plan and consists of a number of undations of varying sizes. Towards the south western portion of the mound an overhanging cliff like section provides glimpses of cultural deposit. A massive mud brick fortification wall with successive *mushitika* beddings, overlain by successive mud floors, occupies a major space in the said cutting. The *mushitika* bedding is reminiscent of what was noticed in the cuttings of a street at Kalibangan excavations. Next to this wall, was noticed a burnt brick drain.

The evidence of fortification wall from RGR 2, 3 and 4 corroborates Harappan phenomenon of encompassing of individual habitation-zones within an integrated network of town planning. Similarly, overwhelmingly rich

surface features together with volume and size of the mounds amidst vast arable plains suggest primarily agriculture based subsistence pattern since the days of first occupation at the site. The agricultural waste and vast grazing ground around the site must have given rise to animal husbandry. The agro-pastoral character of the site never got marginalised, other traits of subsistence remained subordinate.

In this backdrop, the excavations at Rakhigarhi was planned by the author in the year 1997-98. Since the excavation was restricted to fifteen trenches, the objectives too were confined to corroboration of sequence of cultures as known from the explorations, i.e. Early, Mature and Late Harappa, besides understanding a few of the surface features noted in case of RGR 1 and 2. The trenches on both these mounds have been laid separately in north-south orientation with a view to lay bare the site horizontally.

In case of RGR 1 the operation was restricted to six contiguous quadrants, i.e. four of G5 and two of G6, laid at the highest point of the mound. The complete sequence of culture could not be determined due to the presence of structures at various levels of the dig. However, in G6/1 the excavation was carried out to a depth of 4.70 m exposing the upper portion of habitation. There five successive phases of structural remains could be noticed, besides a north-south oriented lane of 1.50 m in width. The evidence of series of mud-brick structures did not help to reconstruct a complete house-plan in any one of the phases. However, these were oriented north-south and did not open in the lane. The mud-bricks used were of various sizes but the ratio remained 1:2:4. The brick masonry consisted of alternate layers of headers and stretchers with clay used as mortar. The structure of Phase-1 was in the form of a room (2.60 m x 1.80 m), within this room a built-in platform was noticed (65 cm x 30 cm) in the south-west corner while a *chulha* in the south-east corner, suggest its use as kitchen. It was sealed by layer 16. The other three phases of construction were noticed in succession. The mud-brick structure of Phase 2 showed ten courses in the south-eastern corner. Incidentally, the mud-brick structure (2.40 m) of Phase-3 had an entrance from east side (80 cm wide). In the western wall 3 courses and in southern wall 14 courses of mud-bricks were noticed. In Phase 4 mud-brick wall of eleven courses was noticed. The structures of Phase 5, sealed by layer 1, were not in alignment with the structures and lane of the preceding Phases 1 to 4. The structure, so far not completely exposed, is stretched east-west showing three cells in a

row, devoid of entrance, and an adjoining paved platform. These cells together with massive platform appears to be complimentary to each other and were possibly used for storage purpose and stacking goods. It is to be noted that soon after the desertion of this 'storehouse' complex, the locality was used as cemetery. Such a rare example is reported earlier at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan. The evidence of structural burials has some relevance in the present context as the burial No. 1,3 and 8 at RGR 1 are of a complementing type (Pl. 1). Burial No. 4 is in a pit cut identical to the structural ones, but laid in a wooden coffin. All these burials are primary inhumations, laid in an extended position in north-south orientation, head showing west ward tilt. In each case an oblong pit over a metre and half deep was dug in north-south direction. Further, a narrow depth within the pit was made towards the western half of the longer axis of the basal platform, leaving a ledge-like formation and then an oblong cavity of corresponding dimension was scooped out at the base.

This under cut portion formed the actual burial chamber where the dead body was laid and covered by brick work from the level of basal platform by laying header and stretcher courses of mud-bricks—on-edge resting against the overhanging mass of the pit. The dry mud-brick masonry used in the vault like structural burial chamber provided opportunity of reopening of the tomb. This feature was noticed in the burial No. 1,3,4 and 8. In case of burial number 1 and 3 the chambers were left partially open, leaving a few fallen bricks over the skeletal remains in the hollow chamber. In case of Burial No. 4 the courses of bricks were carefully removed but were never reset, otherwise the wooden coffin would have survived as a further testimony. Burial No. 8 was better preserved with all its architectural components. But roughly one-third portion of the obliquely laid bricks on edge along-with couple of supportive header-and-stretcher courses were removed but at the time of resetting a tell-tale mark was left by ignoring the flat courses on the edge and resetting of oblique bricks on edge at a correspondingly lower level. All these graves were bereft of grave goods; however, the skeletal remains were more or less better preserved, at times showing disarticulation of certain joints and shifting of bones under their own weight, besides, fracture due to collapse of bricks at the time of reopening.

At this stage of our knowledge any estimation about the funerary rites would be of a speculative nature. But, placement of head towards north with a tilt on west may denote some ritual practice adopted by a particular com-

munity. Burial No. 4 in coffin appears to be specially devised for an important person. Likewise construction of brick-laid vaulted burial chambers has the ramification of tomb rituals, either proclaiming life after death or denoting status of the deceased.

At RGR 2 a major part of excavation efforts were diverted towards exposing northern gateway and south-eastern extension of the fortification, besides recovering certain structural complexes in southern plain and its adjoining western slope, terminating into a wide rain gully. Excavations on the northern side of mound was located in the central depression with a view to locating structural components of gateway as observed in the course of study of surface features in this particular area. Coincidentally, the cuttings on the western arm of the entrance revealed a series of cells in north-south alignment, opening towards east. In support of their function as guard cells, a few typical copper and bone arrowheads were picked up from the floor levels of these cells.

The cuttings in the southern locations of RGR 2 highlight tentatively five Mature Harappan occupational levels. Trenches laid across the fortification remains to be verified; hence the present observations would be subject to correction. On plan the wall runs north-south showing narrow steps from east leading half-way to the wall top and there taking a turn to north and after negotiating the guard cells on either side the pathway turns west. Thickness of fortification wall of Phase 1 was 5 m; in Phase 2 burnt-brick buttress was added externally to the wall. In Phase 3 thickness of the wall was increased two times and steps were provided for entrance through climbing the wall top with a turn to the west. In Phase 4 full sized burnt-brick pavement was laid over the wall top with a turn to west. On either side of the brick pavement were noticed guard cells. Finally, in Phase 5 the height of the fortification wall was further raised by laying mud-brick courses over the burnt-brick pavement. Internally, a lane parallel to fortification walls remained undisturbed till the last occupation at the site.

On the corresponding south-western side of the mound revealed other habitational structures of significance. Structural remains of upper levels convey some idea of the poor state of preservation. However, whatever survived shows that there was a street running north-south bisecting the area at right angles, to which there were east-west running lanes joining from either sides. Mud-brick was extensively used in the construction, while burnt-brick with certain exceptions was used in

drains. Certain mud-brick structures bore mud plaster as preservative coating. Except a storehouse of granary and craftsman-arcade no other structural complex could be defined for want of complete plan. Certain structures were furnished with elements like pilasters, niches, hearths, fire altars, built-in benches, tiled floors, animal sacrifice pit etc.

Excavations on the south-westerly elevated plain have revealed certain better preserved structures of middle phases. However, the structures in the slope have suffered the onslaught of erosion. In trench R 21, facing street, an impressive pillared corridor was exposed partially with flanking rooms on either side. The pillar, squarish on plan measured 90 cm and on the corresponding western alignment was noticed evidence of pilaster, a rare architectural feature; its floor was rammed with mud brick-bats. It was adjacent to handicraft manufacturing - *cum*- marketing area. There in S21 were located four cells in a row facing the street north-south. In the back wall were noticed brick-lined hearths and their floors retained the evidence of anvil, besides debitage of columellae of *Xaniscus pyrum*. The evidence suggest intra-regional contacts, besides crafts specialization. A few more traits known to the Harappans of Rakhigarhi were burning shell for extracting lime, steatite and lapidary work besides preparing terracotta cakes and *mushitikas*. These *mushitikas* were prepared to keep them in cowdung cake fire pans as heat absorbent, thereafter it was reused either in floor bedding or raising levels. A circular potters' kiln was also located which was exclusively used for firing goblets, dishes and terracotta bangles.

A modest granary was located in the cuttings of S2 and T22. It consists of cells, in two segments, with a corridor in front showing built in bench and a guard cell. The accumulated dust and earth from these cells have yielded barley.

Drainage system noticed were of two types, viz public and private. Public drainage system was found from the lower-middle phase and was laid in the centre of a street. A T-shape plan was exposed in T23, besides, terracotta pipe used for drainage was also evidenced. Private drains, possibly connected to bath platforms, were observed from the upper most levels of Mature Harappa in X-25.

From the mid-level of S 22 a couple of structural units associated with religious or ritual purpose have come to light. A floor of tiny bricks-bats on northern side

revealed a single-coursed niche facing west. The niche was partitioned in the centre. Originally, the floors and niches were coated with mud plaster. It is quite significant to note that, a terracotta bull figurine was found on the floor abutting the western niche. Perhaps, the structure was a place of worship and the bull was a revered animal. Next to this structure was noticed a T-shaped fire altar with curved ends, the eastern projection may be taken as working end. Further north, in the same alignment, was exposed a brick-lined rectangular pit containing animal bones particularly of bovine family (Pl.2). The pit, oriented east-west, was located in the centre of a walled enclosure with opening towards west. It is conspicuous to note that a terracotta votive tank was found from the north-western corner of the pit. Such type of structural animal sacrifice pit has been reported from Kalibangan-1.

Almost from the same level of T23 was reported three circular fire altars arranged in a semicircular fashion, recalling those from at Banawali¹⁵. These were found inside the walled floor. (Pl.2) Fine brushing over the surface of altars revealed a few circular white patches of possibly burnt hard shell of fruits offered at the fire altar. Traces of mud-bricks at the base of altar suggest that they were specially made ones.

The pottery recovered from this excavation mainly falls in two groups viz. red ware and grey ware. Besides these, a few shreds of non-glazed reserve slipped ware, cut ware and cream slipped ware, have been also found. An extremely rare pottery among Harappan ceramic industry, Barbotino or Pimpled Ware, has also been recovered.

Among these ceramic wares, red ware predominates. This red ware can be divided into following categories :

- (i) Red slipped ware.
- (ii) Black painted red slipped ware
- (iii) Black painted ware

Important types in red ware included perforated jars, goblets, dish-on-stand vase, jar, ledged rim vessel, fluted vessel, ribbed vessel (*handi*) dish, basin, trough etc.(Pl.3)

The frequency of grey ware with or without black slip is very less as compared to the red ware, the percentage, of which is just 1.17 (of total diagnostic sherds). Though they are limited in shapes and number, yet they are present in almost every level. This ware does not bear

any painting. The main shapes in the grey ware are vases, dishes-on-stand, dishes, bowl and lid. Black slipped grey ware is also found in good numbers near by about 10% of the grey ware.

Non-glazed reserve slipped ware is found in a very limited number. It seems that it is the prototype of glazed reserve ware. Its technique of manufacture is almost the same. It had no real slip. Instead of applying double coat of slip, a thick black band is painted on surface with a wash and then on wet smoothed surface of thick black band is simply scrapped by toothed tool exposing the wash surface partly.

One of the distinctive types of pottery is cut ware which has geometrical (triangular, biconvex) cut design, which is cut by a pointed sharp instrument from exterior. The edge of cut is always slanting and there is comparatively smaller opening on the interior than the exterior.

So far decoration is concerned painted and incised decorated pottery has been found in near about 6% of total pottery assemblage (Pl.3). It is frequently found in upper level as well as middle level. In lower level its quantity is less. Paintings are usually found in horizontal or vertical panel mainly on red slipped surface. The important motifs are pipal leaf, palm leaf, triangle, loop, intersecting circles, linear designs, etc.. Besides this, a few sherds with bird (most probably peacock) and fish decoration are also found.

For incised decoration different methods have been used. Important methods are combing, impressing, usually found on the centre of dish or dish-on-stand.

The faunal evidence reported at the site provides reflexes on man-animal relationship, together with their associated food habits. Cattle bones outnumber other animal bones, including that of wild variety, which indicates existence of highly rich pastoral land in the neighbourhood. Among the cattle, domesticated buffaloes were preferred both for abundant milk and meat. Occurrence of rodent bones support the hypothesis of sedentary life style and food habit of the Harappan people at the site, besides storage of foodgrains. Lower percentage of wild animal bones suggest limited hunting activity and more reliability on plant food. The presence of fish bones not only suggest dietary but also fishing as one of subsistence trait; likewise occurrence of bird bones suggest that they formed part of their diet. Among the floral remains only charred wheat and barley could be identified so far.

Remaining samples are under study.

The limited excavation at the site has yielded a variety of objects. The cylindrical seal made of faience, incised with five Harappan signs of Mature phase on one side and an alligator on other, deserves special mention (Pl.). Besides the excavation has yielded two circular terracotta amulets of identical nature depicting an elephant to right and Harappan characters in the upper part, in relief. The cross-section is plano-convex (Pl.4). There are inscribed seals of faience and steatite besides an un-inscribed one coming from the lower mid level of Mature phase (Pl.4). Another important seal, upper portion broken depicts composite figure of man, bull, unicorn, elephant and tiger.

Among the terracotta figurines animals find preference over others. Representation of human figurines are few and far between. A preliminary study shows some kind of stylistic development in animal figurines reported from the lower middle phase to upper phase. In the upper levels bovine animals are treated more realistically than lower levels. Among the toy cart wheels both spoked

(*sara cakra*) and solid (*paridhi cakra*) varieties noticed were. The solid ones have hub in centre; a few of them are also painted

Other antiquities of importance are gold fillet and beads, silver, copper and shell bangles, etched and plain beads of siliceous material, steatite and faience beads, weights and measure, gamesman and game-board etc. (Pl.4)

To sum up, the present excavations at RGR 2 have brought to light certain important structures like pillared corridor with flanking cells, granary, places of performing rituals, shopping arcade in a close knitted area; these to identify the mound as 'citadel' mound, as some of these structural components have been reported from the 'citadel' area of other Harappan sites. Again the occurrence only of seals from the excavation at RGR 2 it as a of authority.

As the present excavations were of preliminary nature, more work is needed to finally confirm the results so far arrived at.

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