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Beyond culture history at Maski: Land use, settlement and social differences in Neolithic through Medieval South India

Peter G. Johansen [a,*], Andrew M. Bauer [b]

[a] Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada
[b] Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois, 109 Davenport Hall, 607 S. Mathews Ave. MC-148, Urbana, IL 61801, United States

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ABSTRACT

The multicomponent site of Maski in northern Karnataka has long held a central position in the culture-historic narratives of archaeologists and historians alike. Yet since B.K. Thapar's correlation of archaeological deposits at Maski with Wheeler's culture history sequence in the 1950s, archaeological research at Maski has been largely absent. Our research at Maski has sought to build upon this important chronological foundation, expanding our understanding of late prehistoric social life by asking questions and collecting data that explore the entanglements of settlement, social life, land use and craft production during the South Indian Iron Age and Early Historic Periods. To date we have completed three seasons of archaeological survey in a 64 km^2 area centered on the site of Maski and recoded 153 sites and numerous concentrations of "off-site" artifacts that are revealing temporally sensitive material patterning from which we can begin to address these objectives. Here we present preliminary patterns for Neolithic (3000–1200 BC), Iron Age (1200–300 BC), Early Historic (300 BC–AD 500), and Medieval (AD 500–1600) period materials in the region. The results of the survey so far have documented significant temporally sensitive changes in the size, location, and distribution of settlement, metal production activities, agro-pastoral land use, and mortuary interments that point towards historical developments in regional land-use and socio-political practices.

1. Introduction

The rocky hills and plain on the western outskirts of the town of Maski in the Raichur District of Karnataka have long gripped the attention of archaeologists and historians. From the earliest observations by geologists exploring mineral resources in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the extent, density, and diversity of ancient archaeological materials were apparent; a large multi-period settlement (Maski), a royal edict from the North Indian Mauryan emperor Asoka (r. 268–232 BC), and a variety of megalithic graves were only the beginning of what the Maski Archaeological Research Project (MARP) is now finding is a densely configured archaeological landscape. Mid-twentieth century excavations by Thapar (1957), which came in the wake of Wheeler's (1948) definition of South India's ware-based ceramic chronology, demonstrated the deep history of occupation at Maski, dating to at least Neolithic times (3000–1200 BC) and extending through the Iron Age (1200–300 BC), Early Historic (300 BC–AD 500) and Medieval periods (AD 500–1600).

The Maski Archaeological Research Project has completed three short seasons of archaeological survey in a 64 km^2 area centered on the site of Maski and the adjacent inselberg hill. To date we have recoded 153 archaeological sites and numerous concentrations of "off-site" artifacts that are revealing temporally sensitive material patterning from which we are learning a great deal about prehistoric and historic period land use and social life. Our interest in this region has its origins in a series of questions about the degree to which changes in settlement practices, land use, and craft production contributed to the emergence and maintenance of social distinctions and inequalities in prehistoric South India first evidenced during the Iron Age, questions we have pursued through more than a decade of research in the Tungabhadra River Corridor 100 km to the south with scholars from the Early Historic Landscapes of the Tungabhadra Corridor (EHLTC) research project (Morrison et al., in press; Sinopoli, 2009). Our investigations at Maski are concerned primarily with detailing how and why changes in settlement, agro-pastoral and metallurgical land-use practices are related to novel forms of social difference and nascent inequalities, first in the Iron Age, and again during the Early Historic Period when urban settlement forms and early state polities developed across South India. At the same time, this research is establishing ecological histories of the study region, unraveling the historical role of human land use in shaping the ecologies of its constituent environments (e.g., inselbergs, peneplain, fluvial terraces) (Bauer and Johansen, 2013; Johansen and Bauer, 2013). Here we present some of our more significant initial findings to date, as our project progresses.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 604 734 1357.
E-mail addresses: pjohanse@mail.ubc.ca (P.G. Johansen), bauera@illinois.edu (A.M. Bauer).

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2. Contextualizing MARP: previous research at Maski

Previous studies of the archaeological site of Maski and the adjacent granite inselberg to the west (the Durgada Gudda hill) were initially conducted by the geologists Robert Bruce Foote (1979) and Leonard Munn (1921, 1934a,b). These brief assessments identified the Durgada Gudda outcrop and the low-lying areas east of the hill as the location of significant prehistoric activity and settlement. However, it was the discovery in 1914 of a version of the Mauryan emperor Asoka's Minor Rock Edict I on the northwestern lower slope of the Durgada Gudda outcrop by geologist R. Beadon that piqued the interest of archaeologists and historians in the ancient settlement at Maski and it's adjacent "localities" (Krishna Sastry, 1915; Fleet, 1916).

The interest in Maski stoked by these late 19th and early 20th century discoveries led to two important mid-twentieth century research projects. The first of these was conducted by the Nizam of Hyderabad's Department of Archaeology[1] between 1935 and 1937. This fieldwork, which remains largely unpublished, entailed "exploration" (i.e., unsystematic surface survey) on and around the Durgada Gudda outcrop (Ahmad, 1938) as well as excavations at six locations (Yazdani, 1938). The exploration report lists seventeen "localities" of archaeological surface deposits west of the modern town of Maski, on and around the adjacent Durgada Gudda outcrop (Ahmad, 1938); most of these localities were not described in detail. Among these were a large reservoir on the Durgada Gudda outcrop's largest terrace, the cave associated with the Asokan edict, a large distribution of megalithic monuments to the southeast of the outcrop and a large and dense distribution of artifacts associated with a number of mounds east of the outcrop and west of the town of Maski (i.e., the large multi-component site of Maski). Yazdani's (1938) excavations were conducted in several locations, including the edict cave and the large Medieval settlement located between the Durgada Gudda outcrop and the Maski River known locally as Sulidabba, but most of his brief report details the findings from the ancient Maski town site east of the outcrop (Fig. 1). Cultural materials recovered from the excavations include human burials, carnelian and lapis lazuli beads, marine shell bangles, a variety of ceramics, concentrations of metal slag and two smelting furnaces (Yazdani, 1938).

This work was followed by further excavations at an Iron Age cemetery somewhere along the west side of the Durgada Gudda outcrop, although these excavations remain almost entirely unpublished and even the identity of the excavators is unclear (see Gordon and Gordon, 1943; Gordon, 1960). Further surface exploration was conducted by F.R. Allchin in 1951, who integrated Wheeler's (1948) recently developed ceramic ware chronology into his understanding of archaeological deposits on and around the Durgada Gudda outcrop. Allchin's work at Maski was reported in his Ph.D. dissertation (Allchin, 1954) but otherwise remains largely unpublished (but see Allchin and Allchin, 2012).

In 1954 B.K. Thapar's ASI excavations systematically documented further subsurface deposits at the ancient town site of Maski. Thapar (1957) excavated four large units, and successfully established a chronological framework for the site by linking stratified deposits of ceramics excavated from one, MSK-10, with the ware-based ceramic typology developed a few years earlier by Wheeler (1948) at Brahmagiri. This important study documented the deep chronology of the settlement at Maski, which extended from the South Indian Neolithic (3000–1200 BC) through the Medieval periods (AD 500–1600). It also determined that much of the habitation deposits were contemporary with the South Indian Iron Age (1200–300 BC) and the Early Historic period (300 BC–AD 500), linking habitation deposits to a time frame during which the inscription of the Asokan edict was made.

[1] The Raichur District of Karnataka was part of the Nizam of Hyderabad's princely state prior to Indian independence.

3. The MARP project goals and methods

The Maski Archaeological Research Project (MARP) was designed to build upon previous research efforts around Maski and collect new archaeological, geomorphological and paleoecological data to evaluate how a variety of social distinctions were created, contested, and reproduced during the Iron Age and Early Historic periods. The emergence of a range of social distinctions in the Iron Age appears to have been foundational to the development of the region's first integrated state-based polities during the Early Historic period. We are particularly interested in how changing settlement practices, metallurgical production and land use and agro-pastoral practices related to the creation and maintenance of social differences and inequalities in both periods, if at all.

To address these goals we have designed an archaeological survey to find and characterize patterned temporal changes in settlement and land-use sites across the study region. The study region is an 8 km by 8 km area, 64 km^2 in extent, centered on the Durgada Gudda hill and the adjacent ancient settlement of Maski (Fig. 1). We have divided the study area into 160 transect blocks measuring 1000 × 400 m. Each block is composed of eight 500 × 100 meter transects that are surveyed at 20 meter spacing intervals. In this configuration, the study area consists of 20 north–south survey 'columns,' each containing eight, 1 km survey blocks.

To date, the MARP has systematically surveyed 22.5% of the survey area, nearly half of our projected objective of a 50% sample. All concentrations of artifacts and features observed during the survey, including those already partially documented by previous researchers, have been assigned a sequential site number and recorded using a hand held GPS unit. Interpretations of site activities and date range of occupation were made upon the observation of temporally diagnostic artifact types, especially diagnostic ceramic wares and forms (e.g., Plain Gray Ware, Black-and-Red Ware, Russet Coated-Painted Ware, Burnished Gray Ware), and feature types where possible. For every recorded site a variety of variables related to its geomorphological setting, surface artifacts present, and constructed features were recorded. In addition to the recording of sites, we also systematically record off-site concentrations of archaeological materials, such as very low densities of ceramics, slag, and lithics.

During a brief initial field season in 2010 we judgmentally sampled the majority of the transect blocks that included the Durgada Gudda outcrop, and two others in the northwestern portion of the survey area near the modern village of Venkatapura. The goal of these judgmental samples was primarily to 'ground truth' previously recorded archaeological sites reported since the 1930s, for which little locational and chronological information was available. During the 2012 field season we began a program of systematic sampling by intensively surveying a column of unaligned transect blocks that traverse the project area from north to south and pass through the main outcrop (Fig. 1). The 2012 MARP survey project also included intensive topographic mapping of select sites and features. This work has allowed us to more precisely map the distributions of artifacts and features in order to understand the history of use activities, and abandonment at several sites. The 2014 season expanded the systematic survey to the western half of the study region covering approximately 11 km^2 of the survey area, encompassing a further 3.25 survey columns.

4. Results

Although the MARP's pedestrian survey is not complete, it has recorded 153 archaeological sites to date; among them are settlements, occupied rock shelters, iron smithing locales, individual megaliths, megalithic burial complexes, rock art sites, step wells, fortification walls, and artifact scatters (Johansen and Gopal, 2011; Bauer et al., 2012; Johansen et al., 2014). These results have produced a tremendous amount of new data that speak to our research goals, but have