

PREFACE

In an earlier mainly text-based contribution I have argued that Māndhātā island and its surroundings have been of considerable religious and historical importance which may probably be traced back to about the sixth century CE.¹ On the basis of historical records found at Māndhātā which refer explicitly or implicitly to the Paramāra dynasty we may safely infer that Māndhātā flourished between the tenth and the thirteenth century. In view of the fact that information about the place's history beyond these limits is extremely scarce, it is all the more striking that Māndhātā has till date retained its importance as a religious centre.

The period when Māndhātā flourished falls into the so-called 'early medieval' phase (ca. 600–1300) of South Asian historiography, which, as Jason HAWKES has recently conclusively argued, remains "ill-defined and poorly understood" and is "arguably the most poorly represented period archaeologically in the entire subcontinent".²

The Central Indian site of Oṃkāreśvar–Māndhātā is located in the East Nimar district of the state of Madhya Pradesh and represents an island in the river Narmadā.

In his Progress Report of the Archaeological Survey of Western India for the months May 1893 to April 1894, Henry Cousens, then Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey in Bombay, wrote:

Compared with the antiquarian remains in the Bombay Presidency, and Western India generally, those of the Central Provinces are few and poor. Even those of the Māndhātā and Mārkaṇḍā, which are generally looked upon as among the most interesting in the Central Provinces, are neither extensive nor of any extra merit architecturally. The valley of the Narmadā, from Burhānpur to Jabalpur, is perhaps the most scanty in this respect; but this is chiefly due to the fact that railway contractors, when constructing the G.I.P. line, found, in the many remains that then existed, material ready to hand for their bridges and culverts. (COUSENS 1894: 1).

1 NEUSS 2013: 144–145.

2 HAWKES 2014: 95 and 96.

This statement is one of the early professional documents that laments the loss of archaeological remains in the wake of large infrastructure projects in the Narmadā valley, a phenomenon which has acquired new significance with the construction of large dams on the Narmadā river.³ In the nineteenth century it has, for instance, caused the destruction by “the cruel hands of the vandals and the uninterested” of the famous historic city of Tripurī,⁴ one of very few early cultural centres that existed in the Narmadā valley at all. Apart from a few sculptural fragments, the remains of Tripurī were almost entirely lost to historical and archaeological research.

With all due respect and admiration that the eminent archaeologist Henry COUSENS deserves, it must be stated that his judgement about the remains at Māndhātā was misconceived. Given COUSENS’ merit, this error would of course be tolerable if only would it not have had such a lasting impact on the assessment of Māndhātā’s historical importance. In fact, COUSENS’ unfortunate judgement appears to have influenced the scale of research at Māndhātā till date. A note written by the then Vice-Roy of India, Lord George Nathaniel Curzon,⁵ in which he stated: “I visited this renowned and sacred island in the Nerbudda on October, 31st, 1902, and was equally disappointed with its beauties and its monuments [...]” turned out even more devastating, and ultimately limited the extent of expenditure on the remains at Māndhātā to a minimum.⁶

What has never been realized since COUSENS’ times is the fact that the historic remains at Māndhātā are much more extensive and coherent than the few brief archaeological notes suggest, that all exclusively focus on a few isolated monuments, which COUSENS had, in retrospect, selected rather arbitrarily. Such notes appeared between COUSENS’ first report of 1894 and SPOONER’s note about the end of the Archaeological Survey’s conservation work on those monuments in 1924.⁷ What has been lost till date is a broad view of the whole area which fundamentally represents a conglomeration of three extensive settlements with a thoroughly

3 NEUSS 2012b.

4 CHOUBEY 2006: 1.

5 Cited in MARSHALL 1909: 6–7.

6 This is corroborated by MARSHALL: “[...] it is on the note which he left behind him [...] that all subsequent measures have been based.” (*ibid.*: 6) In his note, Curzon had further stated: “The only building of any real character or distinction on the island is the Hindu Temple of Siddheśvara Mahādeva. [...] But it can never at anything except a wholly disproportionate cost be made into anything but a ruin.”

7 SPOONER 1924: 192.

structured fortified city in the centre that were built in the latter half of HAWKES' 'poorly-understood early medieval phase' in the art-historically scanty Narmadā valley.

The remains on Māndhātā island in fact represent the only preserved fortified city of the Paramāras of Dhāra presently known to us. Of course it was not an isolated outpost, but stood in correspondence with settlements on the north as well as the south bank of the Narmadā river which connected the place to the two principal cultural areas of North and South India of which the course of the Narmadā river represents the natural boundary.⁸ Although Māndhātā has yielded the second most number of inscriptions of the Paramāras found at a single place, its historical significance has never been adequately investigated.⁹ Frederick Eden PARGITER's repeated claim that Māndhātā held an important position in the cultural history of (Central) India,¹⁰ was apparently overshadowed by his identification of Māndhātā with the famous ancient city of Māhiṣmatī that was later supported by John Faithfull FLEET.¹¹ Already disputed in their times, this identification was later, conclusively as it seems, refuted on account of the excavations at Maheśvar.¹² This appears to have shifted Māndhātā completely out of the focus of historical research.

While remains of the mainland settlement on the south bank are partly preserved in the present village of Godarpurā, the remains of the corresponding settlement on the north bank around erstwhile Panthiā village, already severely disturbed in the early twentieth century, have irretrievably been destroyed almost in their entirety in the course of the construction of the Oṃkāreśvar Hydroelectric Project. It is here, that COUSENS' lament and CHOUBEY's bitter remark, cited above, have acquired new significance. Additionally, the remains which are still extant on Māndhātā island are under threat from local building activities despite the fact that many areas are under a nominal protection of either the

8 Thus the Narmadā is called "*centre of the earth – mahī-madhyam*" in the Devīpurāṇa (HAZRA 1963: 51).

9 NEUSS 2013: 140ff.

10 PARGITER 1904: viii–xiii, and 333–334, note †.

11 FLEET 1910 and PARGITER 1910.

12 The case, it seems, has been settled once and for all in favour of Maheśvar by Has-mukh Dhirajlal SANKALIA (SANKALIA & al. 1958: 1–15). In the course of his line of argument, he refers to all previous writers on the subject and the four different opinions which identified ancient Mahiṣmatī either with Maheśvar, Māndhātā, Maṇḍlā or Maisūr. One of the strongest arguments in favour of Maheśvar is the fact that of all the places proposed, only Maheśvar really seems to lie on the ancient route from Paithān to Ujjain.

Archaeological Survey of India (subsequently: ASI) or the Directorate of Archaeology, Archives and Museums (subsequently: DAAM), Bhopal.¹³ For instance, large areas near the Gaurīsomanātha temple have already been profoundly disturbed by the erection of large building complexes of private, pseudo-religious institutions. These activities represented, in fact, illegal encroachments on government land, and some of these structures have already been demolished again on government order.

In the following report I shall briefly, yet in some detail, describe the remains and monuments at Māndhātā. I hope to show that the number, extent and complexity of the remains, of which considerable and significant portions are still lying underground, urgently demand archaeological investigation. In my view, Māndhātā's significance for the history of Central India and especially the history of Central Indian art and architecture is comparable to that of the recently much celebrated site of Āśāpurī,¹⁴ now so aptly investigated by a high-profile team of experts at P.R.Ā.S.Ā.D.A, located at the Welsh School of Architecture¹⁵ and headed by Adam Hardy in collaboration with the World Monuments Fund.

I hope that this work may be received with interest. Admittedly, the descriptions could in many cases be more detailed and the treatment of the individual monuments and artefacts may in some cases appear somewhat arbitrary. The responsibility for all such shortcomings, as well as for errors and mistakes that one may find in this contribution lies, of course, entirely with me.

J.N.
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13 The DAAM has placed information boards at many places on Māndhātā island and at Godarpurā which declare the surrounding areas as protected ancient monuments and archaeological sites (“*yaḥ kṣetra prācīn smāraḥ tathā purātattvīya sthal [...] hai*”) under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958.

14 See HARDY 2015b.

15 See <http://www.prasada.org.uk>.

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