

‘CENTRAL PLACE’ ASPECTS IN ARCHAEOLOGY: A STUDY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE IN MAHASTHANGARH, BANGLADESH

MD. RIFAT-UR-RAHMAN

Lecturer, Department of Bangladesh Studies, Stamford University Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to understand the central place aspects of Mahasthangarh according to analyze the definition of central place theory based on political, economical and religious functions. Mahasthangarh is located in the Northern part of Bangladesh identified as Early Historic site in Bangladeshi context. Central place theory is basically a geographical theory that seeks to explain the number, size and location of human settlement in the urban system and it defines archaeological sites with a combination of political, economical and religious functions.

A large number of archaeological materials observed from Mahasthangarh that indicate the central place aspects. Theoretically the Central Place Theory was followed to understand the central place context of Mahasthangarh. As a result, the cultural materials, special features and historical information indicate that Mahasthangarh witnessed more than 1000 years human activities as central place with political, economical and religious functions in a long term perspective.

KEYWORDS: Archaeology, Mahasthangarh, Central Place

INTRODUCTION

The objective is to push the exploration of the concept of ‘central place’ and refine the use of the concept in the field of archaeology. I have chosen one archaeological site to examine the Central Place Theory. The selected site is Mahasthangarh, an Early Historic Site of Northern Bangladesh. I intend to examine the character of central place from political perspective through the cultural materials, special features and the historical sources of both sites. My goal is also to emphasize on central place theory to assume the possible context from archaeological perspective.

The central place theory pursues the evidence which is concerned to the centrality of a settlement. Central place provides the administrative, political, judicial, cultural, social, religious and economic functions. The aim of this paper is to focus on these factors through the archaeological materials and historical information of Mahasthangarh.

OBJECTIVE

The goal of this paper is to examine the character of central place from political, economical and religious perspective through the cultural materials, special features and the historical sources of both sites to assume the possible context from archaeological perspective:

- What is central place in the archaeological context?
- What type of functions play role to identify a central place in archaeological context?
- How the cultural materials, special features and historical sources indicate the function of a central place?

THEORY AND SOURCES

The term 'central place' was first pointed by American geographer Mark Jefferson in 1931. Meanwhile, two German economic geographers Walter Christaller and August Lösch provided some new discussions about central place (Jefferson 1931 cited in King 1985, pp. 13, 14). Eventually the term 'central place' was exposed as a theory introduced by Walter Christaller in 1933.

Christaller stated that centralistic order seems from nature itself and the attempt is to understand that nature of order in central place systems mentioned in his classic work *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland* (Christaller 1933 cited in Beavon 1977, p. 2; Schenk 2010, p. 11). Central place theory shows that the cities and towns are to be found in all parts of the world. But, all places are not identified as central place rather than only that place is called as central place which could be combined with politics, trade and religious aspects (King 1984, p. 9).

A large number of archaeological findings discovered from Mahasthangarh. The aim is to analyze the approach of central place theory in archaeological context by using archaeological materials that may help to create a possible function of central place concept on basis of Mahasthangarh.

MAHASTHANGARH: THE CONTACTS OF THE CENTRAL PLACE

Mahasthangarh is the earliest urban archaeological site so far discovered in Bangladesh dated back to at least 3rd century BC. The village Mahasthan in Bogra district of Bangladesh contains the remains of an ancient city which was known as *Pundranagara* in the territory of *Pundravardhana*.

This region was a part of *Pundravardhana*, one of the ancient *Janapada* of Bengal which has also been suggested as second urban developed region in Indian sub-continental context during the Early Historic period till Early Medieval period (Rahman 2000, pp. 7, 20).

The place Mahasthangarh was identified in 1879 by a British scholar Sir Alexander Cunningham who is known as the father of Indian archaeology. Sir Alexander Cunningham identified the monastery of Bhasu Bihar and the capital of *Pundravardhana* by following the statement of Hiuen Tsang.

In the late 19th century archaeological survey was carried out by Cunningham. On the other hand in 1931 an inscription was discovered from Mahasthangarh that also indicates Mahasthangarh as *Pundranagara*, the capital of *Pundravardhana* (Rahman 2000, p. 20).

This place was consisted of material culture, politics, trade, religion, philosophy and probably played a role as centre in the Northern Bangladesh region. Nevertheless the region has not yet received sufficient academic concentration to understand the social, political, economic organizations and religious aspects.

The main focus of my paper is to to analyze the definition of 'central place' where archaeologically have exotic and varied functions (Salles and Alam 2001, pp. 1, 4-7). The location of Mahasthangarh is surrounded to the east by the Brahmaputra and to the south by the Ganges River (Rahman 2000, p. 25, Jacqueminet, Allemand and Pedoja 2001, pp. 19, 25, 36).

The eastern rampart of Mahasthangarh showed evidence of destructions by river-flooding at different and undated periods (Alam and Salles 2001, pp 11-13).



Figure 1: Map of Bangladesh, Photo: First Interim Report 1993-1999

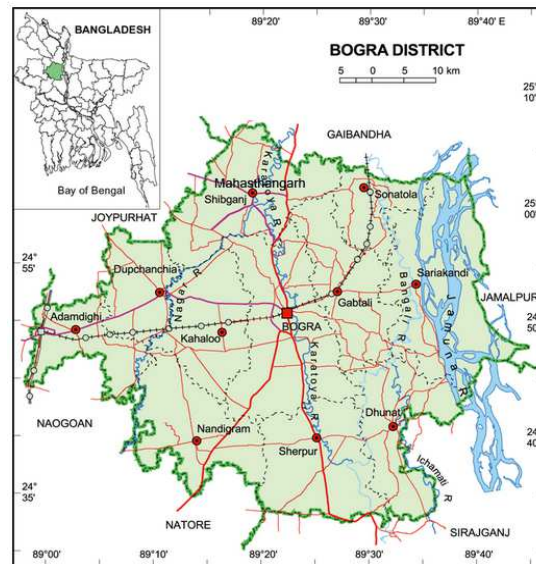


Figure 2: Location of Mahasthangarh, Photo: Banglapedia 2006

A joint venture Bangladesh-France excavation was started in February 1993 in Mahasthangarh and it was resumed every season for a couple of months under an agreement between the Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Federal Republic of France in 1992 which introduced new aspects to Mahasthangarh Archaeology. During 1993-1999 the joint venture team revealed the cultural remains of various nature and periods ranging from the last quarter of 4th century BC to 13/14th century AD. The most significant objects were few pieces of Black and Red Ware (BRW) discovered for the first time on the other side of Ganges. Other findings were ring stone, Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), silver punched-marked coins, copper cast coins, bronze mirror, bronze lamp, semi-precious stone beads, ornaments of gold, silver, iron and glass, and large number of terracotta objects. All these objects reflect the socio-cultural, political, economical as well as religious aspects of Mahasthangarh for the last two and a half millennia (Salles and Alam 2001, pp. 4-8). It is noteworthy that the Bangladesh-French team is still continuing archaeological activities at Mahasthangarh.

Bangladesh-French joint excavation team excavated 11 levels at Mahasthangarh during 1993 to 1999. Charcoal sample has also been collected for radiocarbon dating during the excavation according to identify the age of the sites. The study of charcoal from archaeological excavations can also give specific information of the site about environment and use of available resources. Yet compilation of extensive analysis from a multitude of sites and periods can also produce knowledge about long-term changes in vegetation, development of the cultural landscape and agrarian economy. Regarding to the opinion of Bangladesh-France joint excavation team, the substantial occupation was probably carried out between the middle of the 4th century BC and the beginning of the 2nd century BC. According to the report of the team, the radiocarbon date from level 5 is 2210 ± 40 BP, calibrated date: 366-162 BC (highest probability. = -345, 262, 229, 203 BC). From level 7 two charcoal samples were removed from the destruction layer and submitted to radiocarbon analysis. One single radiocarbon date is available and the result is $2100 \text{ BP} \pm 25$. The calibrated date indicates the period of 373 BC- 173 BC of Mahasthangarh (Bernard et al. 2001, pp. 74-114).

It is difficult to understand Mahasthangarh as a capital-city rather than the archaeological materials and historical information indicates some possible function of a centre. The planned fortified city, surrounded by a moat, large scale burnt brick structures, tiles, terracotta, an early Brahmi inscription, silver punch-marked coins indicate possible function to be called as central place on the basis of political power, trade and religious aspects of Mahasthangarh.

The finds from Mahasthangarh shows a large settlement with long term continuity. This information also helps to assume the traditional image of Mahasthangarh as 'capital or 'central place' in the context of intensive craft and trade activities. But the trade and crafts were not very consistent in archaeological context. Nevertheless the existence of aristocratic luxury indicates a centre of ancient Bangladesh refer to the dynastic history and the period of the 'capital-city'.



Figure 3: NBPW Pieces Found from Mahasthangarh, Photo: Banglapedia 2006



Figure 4: Glazed Pottery, Photo: Banglapedia 2007



Figure 5: Stone Beads, Photo: Banglapedia 2006



Figure 6: Glass Beads, Photo: Banglapedia 2006



Figure 7: Punch-Marked Coins, Photo: Banglapedia 2006

“These data match perfectly the traditional picture of Mahasthangarh or Pundranagara being the ‘capital-city’ of a realm extending all over the Ganges valley, exhibiting a brilliant and new culture within the context of intensive craftsmanship and trade activities” (Bernard et al. 2001, p. 135).



Figure 8: Mahasthangarh Brahmi Inscription, Photo: Banglapedia 2006

On the other hand the dating timeline also match to the usual picture of Mahasthangarh as being the 'central place' or the 'capital-city' according to the result of radiocarbon analysis. The cultural materials and historical information of Mahasthangarh strengthen the idea of central place as well.

Centrality of Mahasthangarh

In Bangladesh hundreds of small and large rivers are flown all over the country. The major occupation of the country is agriculture. It could be one reason to create human settlement from a long term perspective in that region. On the other hand a large number of historical sources with myth and legends are available to assume about the past context. And the academic practice of archaeology in Bangladesh was started from the shadow of History discipline.

British scholar Sir Alexander Cunningham identified Mahasthangarh in the late 19th century. Cunningham wrote,

“The place is so extensive, and in many parts (especially amongst the brick ruins) so thickly covered with jangal that is quite impossible to make any satisfactory exploration, save a great waste of both time and money” (Cunningham 1882, p. 104-117).

The Mahasthangarh stone inscription represents as authentic source to assume about the political aspects of Mahasthangarh (Rahman 2000, pp. 47, 48). The historical framework of Mahasthangarh was established through written sources. A number of exploration and excavation was carried out last couple of decades but very unfortunately most of the archaeological works on Mahasthangarh was unpublished. On the other hand there is no evidence mentioned in Indian and Bengali sources about Mahasthangarh rather Arabic and Persian inscription with epigraphic evidence indicate a site in North-Bengal (Alam & Salles 2001, p. 9).

“However, answering these historical questions is a major archaeological issues as it might help to understand why, and how, the city developed as a regional centre from at least the 4th/3rd century BC to the early 13th century AD” (Alam and Salles 2001, p. 10)

The river Karatoya flown beside Mahasthangarh is mentioned as a sacred river in *Mahabharata*. The records of *Mahabharata* also describe the Karatoya River as 'a sea' or 'an ocean'. The Mahasthangarh region is also reputed for cultivation as rich agricultural region. The Mahasthangarh stone inscription also known as *Mahasthangarh Brahmi Inscription* describes about distribution of grains during a period of food shortage. The sources generalize Mahasthangarh as capital city. Due to lack of enough archaeological materials it is difficult to summarize the place as capital city on basis of few written indication. But the role of river is certainly important to assume about agricultural exploitation, circulation and food exchanges in Mahasthangarh. And archaeological indication was found in the eastern rampart of Mahasthangarh expressed the destructions by river flooding in different periods.

“These are only some of the questions raised by our current exploration of Mahasthangarh, which once more demonstrates that archaeology cannot be understood without the help of historical records, and that history cannot be reconstructed without a comprehensive interpretation of the archaeological data” (Alam & Salles 2001, p. 14).

On the other hand as archaeological materials the *Northern Black Polished Ware* (NBPW), terracotta plaques, punch-marked coins indicate Mahasthangarh as an important centre on the route from Himalaya to the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously the archaeological materials indicate a trading network between Mahasthangarh and the Ganges valley.

The present environment of Mahasthangarh indicates physical settings with the development of human settlement, agriculture, urbanization, transport and trade.

A large number of archaeological materials of Mahasthangarh indicate that the materials either produced locally or imported from outside. The metal and stone objects might have been imported to the region as metal and stone are scarce in the area of Mahasthangarh. NBPW represents the place a close parallels with Ganges valley. The fine wares also indicate that the items were made locally. If the products made by locally then there should have been availability of suitable clays with other resources such as water and fuel as well as high skilled craftsmanship. The idea helps to assume that Mahasthangarh witnessed a long term perspective as an urban centre for more than thousand years.

Unambiguously the structural development and the wealthy cultural remains indicate Mahasthangarh as capital city. The fortification technique of the city wall was well mastered. The population rate of Mahasthangarh has also been increased. The settlement was probably dense as we see the contemporary scenario of Bangladesh is highly dense country in the world. Archaeologically the site has been abandoned, but peoples are still living beside the archaeological site of Mahasthangarh. The pressure of population has become a threat to protect the massive archaeological site. On the other hand government is also unaware to protect this site for further research.

But, it is very important to excavate the site in larger scale to understand the whole context from urban-based understanding with the central place aspects. It is still a puzzled issue to interpret about the abandonment of this massive site. The cultural materials might have been re-used several times in the later phase of Mahasthangarh. Economic un-stability could have been a reason to re-use the old materials at the place. On the other hand natural calamity such as flood could have been another reason for the abandonment of the site. Further research is required to understand the abandonment of Mahasthangarh as well as to analyze the central place context in a broader perspective.

Problem and Possibilities

Interpretation is a challenging phenomenon in archaeological perspective which has no ending. So, it is a big challenge for archaeologists to contextualize the central place theory in archaeological perspective. On the other hand Mahasthangarh was interpreted on the basis of historical sources though a large number of archaeological materials noticed from Mahasthangarh. But, it is highly recommended to excavate the site in a larger scale to understand the context of Mahasthangarh.

In Bangladeshi perspective the site Mahasthangarh is known as urbanized site through the cultural materials and the written sources. A large amount of cultural materials found from this site which could help to examine the central place aspects of Mahasthangarh. The cultural materials indicate the political power, trade and religious aspects of Mahasthangarh. The radiocarbon dating is also important evidence to assume about the timeline both of the site. Simultaneously proper archaeological investigation and activities could be more helpful to understand the scenario of Mahasthangarh.

'Archaeology' is a problematic discipline by itself. So, it is such a big challenge to examine the character of Mahasthangarh in central place context. Even though the cultural materials indicates that the place witnessed long term continuity as central place based on political power, trade and religious aspects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my honorable teacher Professor Khondkar Maodood Elahi, Pro-VC, Stamford University Bangladesh, Professor Sufi Mostafizur Rahman and Professor Ashit Baran Paul, Department of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University. I am also thankful to Professor Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti, Department of Archaeology, Cambridge University who encouraged me to focus my research on Mahasthangarh for my Masters dissertation. I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Professor Lars Larsson, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Lund University for his supervision during my study programme in Lund University. And finally I would like to dedicate my work to my dearest Tany Apu.

REFERENCES

1. Alam, S., and Alam, M., 2001, Ceramics from Mahasthan. In: S. Alam and J. F. Salles, ed 2001. *First Interim Report 1993-1999*. France-Bangladesh joint venture excavations at Mahasthangarh. Dhaka, pp. 342-426.
2. Beavon, O. S. K., 1977. *Central Place Theory*. A reinterpretation. Longman: New York.
3. Christaller, W., 1933. *Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland*. Jena: Fischer.
4. Cunningham, A., 1882. *Report from a tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879-1880. From Patna to Sunargang*. Archaeological Survey of India, Calcutta. Mahasthan, pp. 104-117.
5. Jacqueminet, C., Allemand. C., and Padoja, K., 2001. Paleo environment and present environment of Mahasthan, Bangladesh, In: S. Alam and J. F. Salles, ed. 2001. *First Interim Report 1993-1999*. France-Bangladesh joint venture excavations at Mahasthangarh. Dhaka, pp. 19-60.
6. Jefferson, M., 1931. Distribution of the world's city folks. *The Geographical Review* 21.
7. King, J. L., 1985. *Central place theory*. Scientific geography series, Vol: 1, ed. Thrall, I. G., Sage Publications.
8. Rahman, M. S. S. 2000. eds. E. Haque, *Archaeological Investigation in Bogra District (from early historic to early medieval period)*, The International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
9. Schenk, W. 2010. "Central Places" as a point of discussion from German geography in (pre)historical research, In: *Trade and Communication Networks of the First Millennium AD in the northern part of Central Europe*, 2010. Neue Studien zur Sachsen for schhung 1, pp. 11-13.