

# Beyond the Potter Wheel: A Timeless Travel of Dabber

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## Abstract

This study explores the role and importance of Hastinapur's terracotta dabbers, looking at their anthropological similarities and pottery-making implications. Essential tools for pottery-making, dabbers are crucial for supporting vessel walls while they are being shaped. By classifying excavated dabbers into discrete morphological groups, the study clarifies the typological differences between cultural periods. Furthermore, the practical use and historical relevance of dabbers in pottery manufacture are clarified by anthropological observations from modern pottery workplaces. The study also compares the sizes of wooden paddles and dabbers, offering insights into how they are functionally adapted. The study also reveals fascinating cultural customs related to dabbers, emphasising their religious and ceremonial importance. All things considered, this multidisciplinary approach provides insightful information about the development, use, and cultural significance of dabbers in the pottery-making tradition of Hastinapur.

**Keywords:** Dabber, Hastinapur, Excavation, Terracotta, Concave Profile, Anthropological observations, Pottery-making.

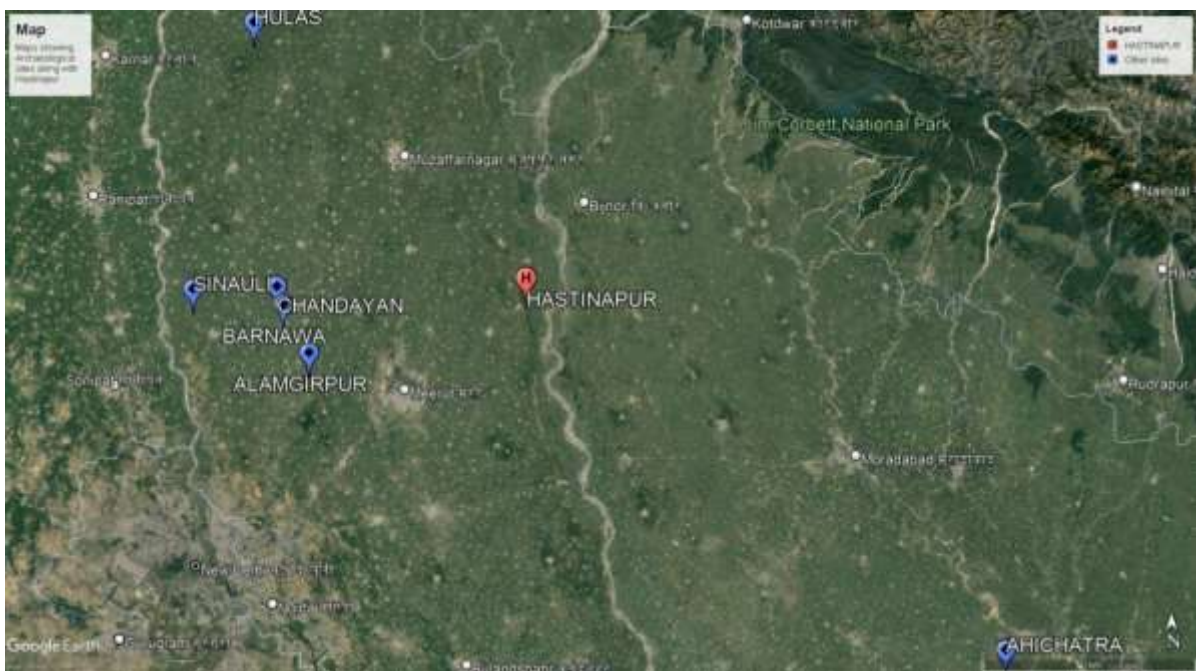
## Introduction:

Hastinapur archaeological site is located (Lat. 29° 09' 30.21" N, Long. 78° 00' 24.57" E; 234m MSL) in Mawana Tehsil, Meerut District, Uttar Pradesh. The excavation during the 2021-22 field season offered additional dimensions to Hastinapur's history and archaeology. Hastinapura means "The City of Elephants" in Sanskrit, which is Hasti (Elephant) Pura. The name Hastinapur appears in the Mahabharata, Puranas, Buddhist, and Jaina scriptures as the capital of the Kuru Kingdom. According to local history and the epic Mahabharata, King Hastin founded the city of Hastinapur. It is a sacred site for the Hindu and Jain pantheons. Three Jaina Tirthankars, namely Santinatha, Kunthunatha, and Arahnatha, attained enlightenment here. The existing archaeological site is also known as Raghunathji's mound and Ulta-khera. It rises around 18 metres above the surrounding plain and is located on the right side of the Budhi Ganga. The Ganga River currently flows approximately 5.5 kilometres east of the archaeological mound. The excavation during the 2021–22 field season gave Hastinapur's history and archaeology a new perspective. According to the results of the current dig, the settlement began at the PGW cultural level and

persisted uninterrupted until the mediaeval era. Additionally, it has been noted that the advancement and depth of material civilisation occurred between 600 BCE and 600 CE. The site's initial urbanisation occurs during this time. In this area of the hinterland, the settlement was among the first urban hubs. As evidenced by the discovery of imperial variety silver punch mark coins, Indo-Greek coins, and seals and sealings during excavation, the city's primary genesis and expansion were its potential as a landscape, surrounded by lush alluvial soil, and connected to historic trade routes. According to Ahichchhatra, Barnawa, and others, it was a significant settlement in the early historic period and one of the region's administrative and commercial hubs.

### Legends Associated with the Site:

Hastinapur is mentioned in Buddhist, Jaina, and Brahmanical texts. The Mahabharata claims that Hastinapur was named for the Paurava dynasty's ruler Hastin, who is also credited with its founding. It is very certain that the place's link with King Hastin led to the creation of the name Hastinapur, which is also supported by Jaina tradition. Ajamidha and Dvimidha are Hastin's two sons. Brihad-Vasu, Nila, and Riksha were born from the former. Nila and Brihad-Vasu established the kingdoms of north and south Panchalas, respectively, with capitals at Ahichchhatra and Kampilya (present-day Kampil), while Riksha remained in power at Hastinapura. When Drupada ruled the latter nation during the Mahabharata era, he wed his daughter to Pandu's sons. Here, Santinatha, Kunthunatha, and Arahnatha—three Jaina Tirthankars—attained enlightenment. Draupadi Ghat and Karan Ghat (a swimming site) are two locations on the Budhi-Ganga river. Although no visible construction remnants can be seen here, the locals adore these Ghats and treasure the memories of the Mahabharata characters.



### Previous archaeological investigation :

Following the excavation carried out by B.B. Lal of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1950–1952, the region gained notoriety for the first time. Seventy years have passed since then, and no new construction has been done on this Fig.1: Map of archaeological site Hastinapur location. Five occupational levels,

with a pause between each Period, were discovered during the first excavation in 1950–52: -Ochre Coloured Pottery Culture (pre-1200 B.C.), Painted Grey Ware Culture (c. 1100 to 800 B.C.), Northern Black Polished Ware Culture (c. early sixth to early third century B.C.), Sunga-Kushana Period (c. early second century B.C. to the end of third century A.D.), and Mediaeval Period (c. late eleventh to early fifteenth century A.D.) are the first, second, and third, respectively, periods. The Ochre Coloured Pottery Culture's cultural time period has been determined by this excavation. Antiquities like as punch-marked coins, terracotta figurines, ceramics, and a few iron objects—well, brick constructions of various sizes—are among the excavation's most significant discoveries.

### **Archaeological Excavation (2021-22) :**

Ulta-Khera and Raghunathji are two archaeological mounds where the current excavation is being conducted. The protected area contains four mounds, however the spade work has been completed in Ulta-khera (Lat. 29°09.547 N Long. 78°00.412 E MSL.219.5m), which is near the trench that was previously excavated in 1950–52. Its elevation over the surrounding plain is roughly 18 meters. The excavation work was done in the A4, XA5, A5, A6, and A7 trenches, as well as in trial pits 1 (the mound's northern end) and 2 (the eastern end of the previously excavated trench from 1950–52). Every trench, with the exception of Tr. A4, XA5, and A6, reached natural soil. The A5 trench (219.19m MSL to 210.28m MSL) has encountered a maximum depth of approximately 9m cultural deposit, whereas the A7 trench (215.86m MSL to 209.80m MSL) generated approximately 6m cultural deposit.

### **Excavation and Stratigraphy :**

The major excavation conducted within an area, covering 35m length x 15m width having north-south orientation. Trench A7 Qd. IV has been taken as index trench which yielded 10 cultural layers above the natural sand dune.

**Layers-** Maximum number of 10 to 11 layers has so far been exposed in Trench A5 and A7 including the virgin layer.

**Layer (1)** The layer is semi-compact in texture in hardness and composed of soil mixed with sand. It The layer yielded pottery and terracotta discs, rusted iron objects, stone polishers, pounder, pestle, grinding stone, terracotta dabber, terracotta sling ball, terracotta bead, hopscotch, brick pivot, dabber fragment, glass bangle fragment, stone bead, silver and copper coins etc.

**Layer (2)** The layer is semi-compact to compact in hardness and contains potsherds brickbats. The layer has yielded antiquities stone polisher, grinding stone, terracotta dabber, bone point, terracotta bead, copper, bone and iron finger rings, iron sickle, chisel, terracotta smoking pipe, broken animal figurines etc.

**Layer (3)** The layer is semi-compact to compact in hardness and the layer is found mixed with light yellowish brown patches and ash patches. It contains potsherds, animal bones and antiquities like broken, terracotta and stone discs, terracotta sling balls, skin rubber (scrubber), broken terracotta spinning instrument, iron arrowhead, ring, etc.

**Layer (4)** The layer is semi-compact in texture and uniform in nature and contains potsherds. The layer has yielded antiquities stone polisher, bone point, terracotta bead, copper antimony rod, perforator, bone and iron tools, iron sickle, terracotta seal and sealing, copper coins, broken animal figurines, terracotta female figurine etc.

**The layer (5)** The layer is semi-compact in texture and uniform in nature and contains potsherds, roof tiles and other artefacts.

**Layer (6)** The layer is semi- compact in texture and the texture of the grain size are very fine to fine and contains terracotta roof tiles, brick bats, brick, potsherds red ware of variant colour and few sherds of red slipped ware having black painting design of horizontal bands and leaf shaped decoration.

**Layer (7)** The layer is semi- compact in texture and grain size are very fine along with some red ware.

**Layer (8)** The layer is semi- compact in texture with fine grain. The ceramic assemblage of the layer is red ware of plain as well as decorative design, few red ware sherds have incised and mat impressed decoration.

**Layer (9)** The painted grey ware is a dominating ceramic within the assemblage, typological variation is more in the pottery assemblage of this layer which includes grey ware, black slipped ware, black polished ware, black and red ware, micaceous red ware, red ware with few specimens of ochre coloured red ware resembles with the characteristic of so called OCP found in this region.

**Layer (10)** The layer is semi- compact in texture with silt and traces of sand patches. The pottery assemblage of this layer consists of painted grey ware, micaceous red ware followed by few sherds of red ware.

**Layers (11)** have not yielded any cultural material and completely sand deposit. The auguring method has been used to know the thickness of sand deposit below layer 11; the deposit only revealed sand starting from 209.80m MSL and still continued below 200m MSL. The same method also applied in the northern slope of the mound at 207m MSL and has yielded similar type of deposit.

### **Cultural sequence :**

The physical environment of Hastinapur in the fertile plain of river Ganga attracted the attention of sedentary farming communities in *circa* 3000-3500 BP. The excavation revealed seven cultural periods of human settlement without any hiatus. The cultural sequence of the site divided into phases by studying the presence and absence of material remains retrieved from the excavation. The 9m to 10m meters habitational deposit divided into ;-

Period I: Painted Grey Ware Culture Period (Layer 10 and 9)

Period II: NBPW Culture Period (layer 8)

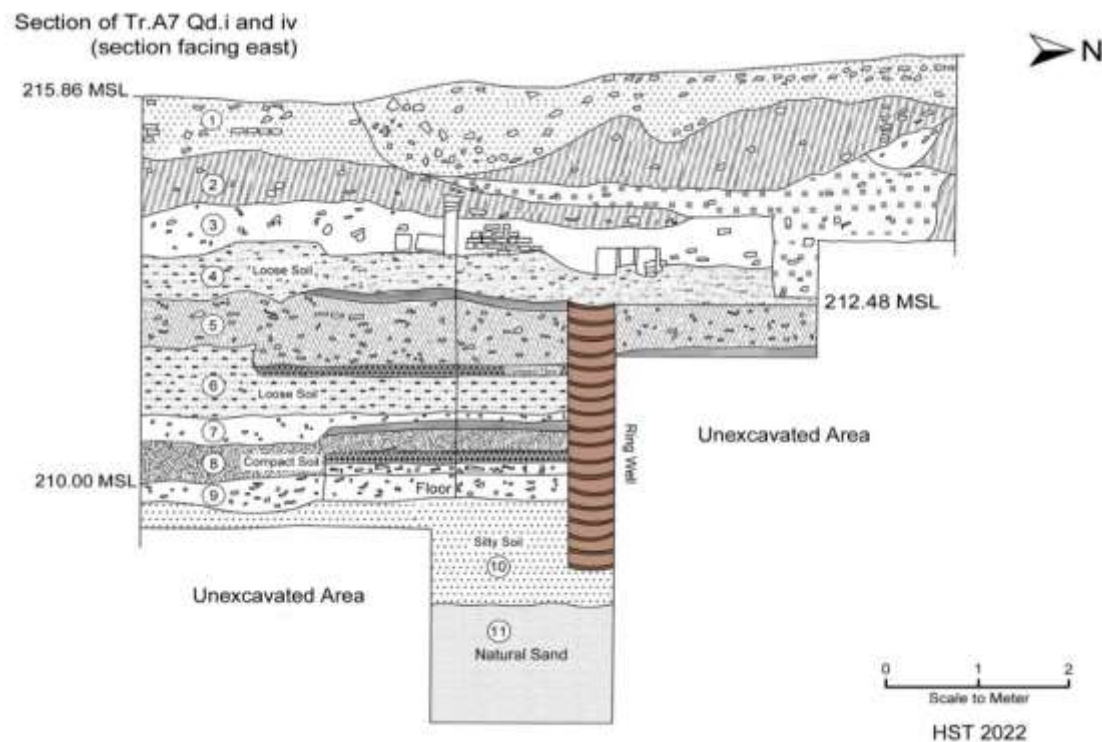
Period III: Mauryan Period (layer 7)

Period IV: Sunga-Kushana Period (layer 6-5)

Period V: Gupta Period (layer 4 and 3)

Period VI: Gurjara-Pratihara Period (layer 2)

Period VII: Late Rajput or Medieval Period (layer 1)



**Fig.2 : Stratigraphy of Hastinapur**

A potter's tool for shaping pots is called a dabber. Typically, a dabber's profile is concave tapering with a slightly convex base; occasionally, a blind hole is added to the top for improved grip. Over a dozen dabbers were found in the top four strata of the current excavation. The dabbers weigh between 68 gm to 1 kg. It is possible that some dabbers were marked with markers of personal identity, as seen by the engraved dabber used in pottery manufacturing. Equally significant is the fact that these artisanal dabbers are long-lasting and can have been handed down through the generations.

The diameter ranges from 5.1 cm to 12.3 cm, and the length ranges from 2.9 cm to 8.6 cm. A single Brahmi script *Shojha*-inscribed dabber was recovered from layer 3 of the excavated trench A5. A few locations from the early historic period, including Bhagwanpura, Thaneshwar, Agroha, Jognakhera, Mirzapur, Nacharkhera, Raja Karn ka Tila, Kasithal, Daulatpura, Theh Polar, and Sugh, have been reported inscribed dabbers.

The site is nearly oval in shape and covers around 40 acres of land. It has four mounds: three large mounds and one smaller mound that is lower than the other three. An open area with a brick-made well, known as Amrit Kupa (kupa-well) or Kunti Kupa, lies between these mounds. The water in the well is revered by the locals during every festival and wedding, making it a sacred well. Residents and those living nearby believe that bathing in its water can heal skin conditions and other illnesses.

Of the four mounds, the one near the main road is the largest, while the one next to it, which has a medieval-era rectangular brick structure at the top, is the tallest. The third mound is located in the southern part, where Raghunathji Ka Mahal is in a state of disrepair. The fourth mound, which is located in the Archaeological Survey of India's protected area and faces south-west, is the lowest in height compared to the other mounds and only contains remnants from the mediaeval era. All of these mounds have one thing in common: they are situated over sand dunes that range in height from 4 to 10 meters above the surrounding terrain.

With single to multi-cultural activity, the cultural deposit observed in the mounds ranged in height from less than half a meter to a maximum of 10 meters.

**Table on distribution of Dabber :**

S. No	Object	ACC	Layer	Depth	Length	Breadth	Weight	Remark
1.	Dabber	403	4	215.70 MSL	5.5 cm	5.9 cm	186 gm	Intact
2.	Dabber	1451	2	218.55 MSL	5 cm	6.6 cm	209 gm	Partially broken
3.	Dabber	350	3	216.58 MSL	5.7 cm	6.5 cm	220 gm	Inscribed
4.	Dabber	217	3	216 MSL	6.2 cm	7.1 cm	304 gm	Intact
5.	Dabber	715	3	214.06 cm	8.6 cm	12.3 cm	676 gm	Intact
6.	Dabber	372	4	216.15 MSL	6.8 cm	7.2 cm	248 gm	Partially broken
7.	Dabber	126	2	217.08 MSL	5.8 cm	6 cm	220 gm	Broken
8.	Dabber	136	1	216.01 MSL	2.9 cm	5.1 cm	68 gm	Broken
9.	Dabber	692	3	213.86 MSL	7 cm	8.2 cm	456 gm	Partially broken
10.	Dabber	1489	2	218.15 MSL	5.9 cm	6.0 cm	198 gm	Intact
11.	Dabber	1	1	218 MSL	7 cm	7.8 cm	382 gm	Partially broken
12.	Dabber	595	2	214.33 MSL	7.6 cm	11.3 cm	1000 gm	Decorated
13.	Dabber	1632	3	216.18 MSL	7.2 cm	8.4 cm	526 gm	Intact

**Description :**

1. The well baked terracotta dabber (ACC No 403) is small in size in concave profile with intruded neck and incurved head with hole on top and the base is invariably convex. It has a smooth surface and a few little chipping on surface. It measures 5.5 cm height in length, 186 gm in weight with a base dia of 5.9 cm and 4.7cm dia at the top, having a hole at the top measuring 1.7 cm in dia and 1.6 cm depth.



2. The well baked medium size terracotta dabber (ACC No 1451) has concave profile with invariably convex base and rough partially broken round handle and a hole in central area which measures 5.1cm in height, the base diameter 6.6 cm with 5.3 cm upper dia having a hole of 2.6cm in dia and 2.1cm in depth, with weight of 208 gm.



3. The well baked medium size terracotta dabber (ACC No 350) has concave profile with invariably convex base and smooth surface and round handle convex from the top, chipped from the surface. The surface is inscribed in two Brahmi letters in Prakrit language as 'sho' and 'jha'. Its measures 5.7cm in height with a base of 6.6 cm dia and 4.9cm dia in upper portion having a weight of 220gm.



4. The well baked medium size terracotta dabber (ACC No 217) has concave profile with invariably convex base with smooth surface and convex handle with flat from the top and chipped from the handle. Its measure 6.2 cm in height with base of 7.1cmdia and 5.5cm upper dia and the hole at the top is 1.3cm in dia and 1.8cm in depth having weight of 304 gm.



5. The ill fired big size half broken terracotta dabber (ACC No 715) has concave profile with invariably convex base with rough surface and convex handle with flat from the top, in the top a hole in central area. There is a horizontal appliqué rope pattern all around handle part. Its measures 8.6 cm in height with base diameter of 12.3 cm and upper 9.3 cm with a hole of 1.8 cm in dia and 2.1 cm in depth having 676 gm in weight.



6. The well baked small size terracotta dabber (ACC No 372) has concave profile with invariably convex base with rough surface and convex handle with convex top and chipped out from the handle and surface area. There is a triangular pinching circular design all around in the adjoining area of handle and body. Its measure 6.8cm in height with base diameter 7.2 cm and 4.9 cm upper diameter and having a hole at the top has 1.3 cm dia with a depth of 0.8 cm having weight of 248 gm.



7. The ill fired broken terracotta dabber (ACC No 126) handle rough in surface and chipped out from several areas also have convex top with flat surface. Its measure 5.9cm in height having 6.2cm top dia with a weight of 216 gm.



8. The broken medium size oxidized terracotta dabber (ACC No 136) from body having smooth surface. It has deep chipping mark on top surface. The exiting height of the dabber is 3 cm having 5.1cm top diameter with a weight of 68 gm.



9. The well baked medium size terracotta dabber (ACC No 692) has concave profile with invariably convex base with smooth surface and convex handle with flat from the top also chipped out from the

handle portion as well as from the body surface have a deep crack going though neck to handle, in the top there is a hole in the middle. In the handle portion series of 4 linier pinching marks design has been executed. Its measure 6.6cm in height having a base diameter of 8.2 cm and 7.6 cm upper diameter and the hole at the top is 1.9 cm in dia and 3 cm in depth having a weight of 304 gm.



10. The well baked small size terracotta dabber (ACC No 1489) has concave profile with invariably convex base with smooth surface and convex handle with flat from the top and partially broken from the handle having a hole at the top for better gripping. Its measure 5.9cm in height having a base diameter of 6cm and 4.7 cm the upper diameter and the hole at the top has 1.6 cm dia with 2.8 cm in depth having weight of 198 gm.



11. The well baked medium size terracotta dabber (ACC No 1) have concave profile with invariably convex base with partially smooth and rough surface and convex handle and chipped from the handle and some from body. Its measure 7cm in height with a base of 7.9cm dia with 5.9 cm upper dia, having weight of 382 gm.



12. The well fired big size terracotta dabber (ACC No 595) have concave profile with invariably convex base with smooth surface and convex handle with flat top with a hole in the center and also having a

liner incised circular line in the border. There is an appliqué rope design all around in the adjoining area of handle and body and having some deep chipping in the body and handle portion. Its measure 7.6cm in height with a base of 11.4cmdia and 10.2 cm at the upper part and the hole at the top has 1.9 cm in dia with 2.5 cm in depth. The dabber measures 1100 gm in weight.

13. The well baked medium size terracotta dabber (ACC No 1632) have concave profile with invariably convex base with slightly smooth and rough surface and having convex handle with flat top and light chipped from the body and in the top a hole in the middle. Its measure 7.4 cm in height with a base of 8.4cm dia and having 6.8 cm upper dia with a hole of 2.4 cm in dia and 3 cm in depth having 526 gm weight.

### **Living Tradition in Potters Community :**

A visit to the modern pottery workshop has been performed in order to gain a better knowledge of dabbers. To have a better knowledge of the dabber's usage and procedure, a thorough ethnographic study of the potters living there was conducted. The vase is let too dry in the sun for a day once the wheel-made pottery is finished. The unbaked pots are moulded with a wooden paddle and dabber once the clay is solid and leather-like. During the procedure, ash is applied on the vessel's external surface. A wooden paddle was used to apply a little amount of water to the vessel's wall, which was being sun-dried. They decided solely to do this procedure in the wee hours of the morning. The paddle and dabber are used to beat the sun-dried pottery until it expands and takes on its final shape. The potter was shown a conical-shaped dabber that had been discovered during the Hastinapur excavations.

Its passing down through the generations symbolises the persistence of technical knowledge and the apprenticeship process that allows new potters to inherit the abilities, duties, and cultural identity of their forebears. Beyond its practical use, the dabber transforms into a memory tool that connects modern craftspeople with traditional methods. These artefacts show how tools can take on symbolic meaning, connecting social and cultural worth with practical necessity. By representing tenacity, inheritance, and the continuation of craft identities across generations, the dabber serves as both a technological tool and a symbol of tradition.



**Fig.4: Modern day inscribed dabber**



**Fig.3: Dabber and other pottery tools of modern days**

### Conclusion

The study of dabbers from recent excavation at Hastinapur offers important insights into the technological regimes and cultural dimensions of ceramic production. The assemblage, of terracotta dabber demonstrates both continuity and innovation in tool morphology and application, underscoring the site's sustained role in pottery manufacture. Morphometric variability indicates functional adaptation to vessel size and form, while ethnographic comparisons with present-day potters establish enduring continuities in craft practice. The identification of inscribed dabbers from the site illustrates regional variation as well the living tradition of that particular dabber for tool design which is heirloom for the society. Taken together, the evidence enriches our understanding of artisanal knowledge systems, technological choice, and the socio-cultural significance of pottery production within the historical landscape of Hastinapur.

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