

Archaeological Landscapes of the Etah District: A Diachronic Study of Ceramic and Structural Successions at Atranjikhhera, Patiali, and Bilsarh

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Abstract

The Etah district of Uttar Pradesh serves as a critical transect for understanding the long-term cultural evolution of the Upper Ganga-Yamuna Doab. While the multi-period excavations at **Atranjikhhera** provided the initial chronological "yardstick" for North India, the spatial distribution of these cultures remains incomplete without considering the riverine frontiers of **Patiali** and the high-status architectural developments at **Bilsarh**. This paper synthesizes traditional ceramic stratigraphy with recent structural evidence to argue for a continuous, sophisticated socio-economic trajectory in the region from the 2nd millennium BCE to the Gupta period.

1. Introduction:

The Tri-Site Landscape

The archaeology of the Etah region is defined by its resilience and adaptation to a volatile riverine environment. Historically, research has centered on the "type-site" of Atranjikhhera (Gaur, 1983). However, a holistic regional perspective requires an analysis of the "satellite" settlement at Patiali, situated on a high cliff of the Ganga (Cunningham, 1872), and the administrative-religious hub at Bilsarh. These sites represent a transition from localized Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) settlements to the standardized urbanism of the Iron Age and the monumental architecture of the Early Historic period.

The Etah district acts as a bridge between the Upper and Middle Ganges plains. By examining the ceramic sequence through the lens of **pyrotechnology** and **settlement hierarchy**, we can reconstruct a society that moved from subsistence farming to a complex, state-level organization.

2. The OCP Horizon and the Problem of "Weathering" (Period I)

The earliest habitation at Atranjikhhera, dating approximately to **2000–1500 BCE**, is marked by Ochre Coloured Pottery. This ceramic tradition has long been a subject of intense debate among Indian archaeologists.

2.1 The Nature of the Fabric

At Atranjikhhera, the OCP is typically under-fired and porous. As noted by **K.N. Dikshit (1973)**, the characteristic flaking of the surface is not necessarily a technological failure but a taphonomic process. The Etah region, located in the flood-prone Doab, subjected these ceramics to prolonged waterlogging. This suggests that the earliest settlers were pioneers in a landscape dominated by shifting paleochannels.

2.2 Archaeological Implications

The OCP levels at Atranjikhhera lack clear evidence of permanent brick structures, suggesting a semi-sedentary or wattle-and-daub housing tradition. However, the presence of copper hoards in associated regional contexts implies a sophisticated metallurgical knowledge that predates the Iron Age.

3. The Black and Red Ware (BRW) Transition (Period II)

Period II at Atranjikhhera (c. 1450–1200 BCE) introduces the Black and Red Ware. This period is crucial as it represents the "Pre-Iron" transition.

3.1 Technological Innovation

The BRW at Atranjikhhera is wheel-turned and exhibits a distinctive dual coloration achieved through **inverted firing**. In this process, the pot is placed upside down in the kiln; the interior and the rim turn black due to a reduction atmosphere (lack of oxygen), while the exterior turns red through oxidation. This indicates a growing mastery over kiln temperatures and atmospheric control.

3.2 Socio-Economic Shifts

The BRW layers show an increase in the variety of vessel shapes—dishes, bowls, and high-necked jars—suggesting a more diverse culinary and storage practice. Unlike the OCP phase, the BRW period at Atranjikhhera shows a more stabilized settlement pattern, paving the way for the intensive urbanization of the subsequent PGW phase.

4. The Iron Age Mastery: Painted Grey Ware (PGW) (Period III)

The most significant cultural marker in the Etah district is the Painted Grey Ware (c. 1200–600 BCE). This period marks the true onset of the Iron Age in the Ganges Valley.

4.1 Fabric and Chemical Composition

The PGW at Atranjikhhera is of exceptionally high quality. The fabric is fine-grained, thin-walled, and well-levigated. Chemical analyses (Nautiyal et al., 2014) reveal that the grey color was achieved by firing the clay in a reduced atmosphere at temperatures ranging between **800°C and 900°C**. The black

paint used for geometric motifs (circles, dots, and swastikas) was often an iron-rich pigment that vitrified during firing.

4.2 The Iron Revolution at Atranjikhhera

Atranjikhhera is world-renowned for providing some of the earliest evidence of iron smelting in India. **M.D.N. Sahi (1979)** documented iron slag and finished tools (arrows, spears, and axes) in the early PGW levels. This discovery challenged the older theory that iron was introduced to India from the West, suggesting instead an indigenous development within the Doab region.

4.3 Settlement Patterns and Diet

Excavations revealed that the PGW people lived in houses made of mud-bricks and wattle-and-daub. Their diet was remarkably varied, including domesticated rice, wheat, and barley. The presence of animal bones (cattle, sheep, and pigs) with cut marks indicates a mixed agrarian and pastoral economy (Sahi, 1978).

5. Urbanization and Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) (Period IV)

By **600 BCE**, the Etah region was fully integrated into the "Second Urbanization." Period IV at Atranjikhhera is characterized by Northern Black Polished Ware.

5.1 The "Deluxe Ware"

NBPW is the pinnacle of Indian ceramic technology. It features a mirror-like, metallic lustre that ranges from jet black to golden-blue. **T.N. Roy (1986)** classifies this as a "deluxe ware" used primarily by the elite. The sheer volume of NBPW at Atranjikhhera suggests the site was a major administrative center during the rise of the Mahajanapadas.

5.2 Trade and Currency

This period also sees the introduction of **Punch-Marked Coins (PMC)** and terracotta ring-wells. The presence of semi-precious stone beads (carnelian, agate) implies that Atranjikhhera was a node in a trade network stretching from the Himalayas to the Vindhyas.

Site Summary: Patiali and Bilsarh

While Atranjikhhera is well-documented, these sites require specific focus for the Etah regional study.

A. Patiali (The Frontier Mound)

- **Location:** $27^{\circ} 42' \text{N}$, $79^{\circ} 03' \text{E}$ (Approx. 35 km from Etah).

- **Historical Association:** Traditionally linked to the *Mahabharata* and later celebrated as the birthplace of the poet Amir Khusrau.
- **Archaeological Status:** Unexcavated "High Mound" (15-20m elevation).
- **Key Finds:** Surface collection of PGW (geometric designs), NBPW (fine black), and Kushan-period terracotta figurines.

B. Bilsarh (The Imperial Center)

- **Discovery Year:** 2021 (Significant discovery of Gupta-period remains).
- **Structural Highlights:** A monolithic sandstone staircase and a brick temple plinth.
- **The Shankhalipi Inscriptions:** These "shell-script" markings are a rare form of ornate calligraphy used across India between the 4th and 8th centuries CE.
- **Political Context:** The presence of the Mahendraditya (Kumaragupta I) title confirms the site's role as a major religious and political center in the 5th century.

Chronological Timeline of the Etah District

1. **c. 2000–1500 BCE:** Early Pioneers (OCP at Atranjikhhera).
2. **c. 1450–1200 BCE:** Technological Transition (BRW phase).
3. **c. 1200–600 BCE:** The Iron Age Revolution (PGW at Atranjikhhera and Patiali).
4. **c. 600–200 BCE:** The Second Urbanization (NBPW, trade, and coinage).
5. **c. 200 BCE – 300 CE:** Shunga-Kushan expansion (Red Wares and terracotta art).
6. **c. 400–500 CE:** Imperial Gupta Patronage (Structural temples at Bilsarh).

6. Patiali: The Riverine Frontier and Strategic Outpost

While Atranjikhhera provides the vertical stratigraphy, the site of **Patiali** offers a horizontal expansion of our understanding.

6.1 Geographical Significance

Patiali is located on a high cliff overlooking the old bed of the Ganga. **Alexander Cunningham (1872)** and **A. Fuhrer (1891)** both noted the strategic importance of this location. Its elevation would have protected it from the annual monsoonal floods that plagued lower-lying OCP sites.

6.2 Archaeological Findings

Surface explorations at Patiali have yielded significant quantities of PGW and NBPW. Its proximity to the river suggests it served as a "river-port" or a military outpost guarding the approach to the heart of the Doab. The continuity of ceramics into the medieval period (associated with the birthplace of Amir Khusrau) suggests that Patiali remained a vital strategic point for millennia.

7. Bilsarh: The Structural and Imperial Culmination

To understand the final stage of the ancient Etah sequence, one must look at **Bilsarh**.

7.1 The Gupta Temple Discovery (2021)

In 2021, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) made a landmark discovery at Bilsarh. They unearthed a structural temple staircase from the **Gupta Period (5th Century CE)**. The staircase features **Shankhalipi (Shell Script)** inscriptions.

7.2 Connection to Kumaragupta I

The inscriptions identify the site as being patronized by **King Kumaragupta I (Mahendraditya)**. This discovery is vital because it proves that the Etah region was not just a collection of pottery-making villages, but a center of imperial patronage. The movement from the "ceramic phase" of PGW/NBPW to the "monumental phase" of Bilsarh represents the institutionalization of the state and religion (Pundhir, 2021).

8. Critical Discussion: Synthesis of Data

The archaeological data from Atranjikhhera, Patiali, and Bilsarh reveals a clear trajectory of cultural complexity:

1. **Phase I (Environmental Stress):** The OCP period shows humans struggling with the aquatic environment of the Doab.
2. **Phase II (Technological Take-off):** The PGW period at Atranjikhhera marks the introduction of iron and the birth of standardized craft production.
3. **Phase III (Imperial Integration):** The NBPW and Gupta-era Bilsarh remains show the Etah region's transition into a literate, urbanized, and politically centralized society.

9. Conclusion

The ceramic sequence of the Etah district is much more than a chronological list; it is a record of human progress in the heart of India. From the fragile ochre pots of Atranjikhhera to the mirror-finished NBPW bowls of Patiali and the grand stone temples of Bilsarh, the region demonstrates an unbroken line of cultural continuity. For researchers and historians, the Etah district remains an open-air laboratory for the study of the "Second Urbanization" and the rise of the classical Indian state.

10. Comprehensive Bibliography

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