

Was Ayodhya A Mythical City?

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Abstract

This paper explores the archaeological attempts to verify the historicity of the Mahabharata, an epic traditionally viewed with skepticism due to its extensive embellishments over time. Initial investigations focused on correlating material culture, specifically the Painted Grey Ware, with locations and events described in the epic, providing support for some historical basis. Additionally, the research extends to the Ramayana, attempting to locate and excavate the legendary sites mentioned in the epic, despite contemporary skepticism about their existence. Both projects highlight the challenges and implications of using archaeology to interpret literary texts, demonstrating the complexity of distinguishing historical fact from myth in ancient narratives.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Historicity, Painted Grey Ware Culture, Literary and Archaeological Correlation

It is common experience that the moment one chooses to tread on an unbeaten path or tries to open up an altogether new one through a dark jungle, one takes the calculated risk of exposing oneself to the likely dangers that beset such a venture. This is as much true in research-work as in real life, and archaeological research is no exception. Thus when in 1950 the present writer started off to find out if the historicity of the Mahabharata epic, which has been regarded by some as wholly true and by some others as a mere figment of the imagination, can at all be tested on the touchstone of archaeology, he knew full well the risk he was running. As is well known, this epic has got inflated eleven times, from the Jaya of 8,800 verses through the Bharata of 24,000 verses to the Mahabharata (the now-available form) of nearly 100,000 verses. Archaeological excavations and explorations of the sites associated with the Mahabharata story have, however, thrown up some pieces of evidence- such as the existence of the same type of material culture (viz. the Painted Grey Ware Culture) at all these sites, which binds them together broadly during the first quarter of the first millennium B.C.; the destruction of the PGW settlement at Hastinapura by a flood, which finds a reference in the literature; the continuance of the PGW in its evolved form at Kausambi, which again lends an indirect support to the literary evidence about the capital being shifted from Hastinapur to Kausambi after the flood debacle; and so on which suggest that the epic may not have altogether been a fiction, but in all probability had a kernel of truth which, of course got immensely magnified over a period of nearly one-and-a-half thousand years when it assumed its present shape (Lal, 1976). While many scholars have accepted the foregoing deductions (Gupta and Ramachandran, 1976), there still are a few who would like to have inscriptional or some other 'solid' evidence in support of it, though they themselves are aware of the fact that this period of our history writing was not in vogue. (Barring the Indus Civilization with which we are not concerned in the present context, archaeological evidence of writing is not available in the country prior to the 3rd-4th centuries B.C. Thus, we have to shift carefully to other kinds of evidence to see which way they point.)

Be that as it may. The writer has invited another trouble by trying to find out the archaeological potential of the sites associated with the Ramayana story. The Ramayana of Valmiki gives very clear references to sites like Ayodhya, which was the capital of Rama, Sringerapur, where he crossed the Ganga during his exile. Bharadvaja Asrama, where he sojourned for a while, and so on. Though the project is yielding useful results which are being processed for publication, it is rather amusing to note that doubts are being expressed even about some very fundamental things. For example, it is being made out that Ayodhya was a mythical city and, therefore, there is little sense in subjecting excavation to the site known today as Ayodhya (near Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh). In this context, I might draw attention to a paper by M.C. Joshi (1978), wherein he says:

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Both Sankalia and Lal appear to be absolutely sure about the identification of ancient Ayodhya with the modern town of the same name, but an early reference of this city gives a different picture. The original text is as under:

Ashtachakra navadvvara devanam purayodhya Tasyam hiranmayahkosah svargo loko
jyotishavritrah

Yo vai tam Brahmano veda amritenavritampurrim

Tasmai brahma cha Brahma cha ayuh kritim prajam daduh

Vibhrajamanam harinim yalasa samparivritam Puram Hiranmayim Brahma vivesaparajitam
(Taittiriya Aryanyaka, 1, 27) (Joshi, 1978)

“Ayodhya (impregnable), the city of gods, consists of eight circles (also cycles) and nine entrances; within it there is the golden treasure –dome the celestial world, ever illuminated with light (north pole). Whoever knows it as the Creator’s city ever surrounded with nectar will have long life, fame and offspring bestowed on him by Brahma (the sun), and Brahma (the moon). Into this city ever shining, moving, and pervaded with yalas (fame and luster), the creator has ended.”

Joshi quotes Shamasastri (1940), from which the following is an extract:

“Rama, the son of Dasaratha, the friend of Indra, is an incarnation of Vishnu, the sun-god. He lives in Ayodhya which is formed by the seven intercalary month-circles and becoming 19 years old, he leaves it at the behest of his father for the forest world of Dandaka and Lanka. He wanders there for 14 years. Reaching Lanka on or near the equator, he destroys the Rakshasa Ravana, their chief, and returns at the completion of 33 years to Ayodhya of the Devaloka. The same work is repeated in every cycle of 33 years. This is the original real Kalpa which the authors of the Puranas and the Siddhantas magnified into 43,20,000 years.

The world Zodia or Zodiac seems to be philologically akin to Ayodhya. Accordingly the story of the Ramayana appears to be a development of an early Zodiacal myth?" (Shamasastri, 1940, as cited in Joshi, 1978)

(Italics added by the author) Thereafter, Joshi adds his own comments as follows:

“One may accept or reject Shamasastri’s surmise, but it is certain that at the time the Taittiriya Aranyaka was composed, the memory of the Ayodhya of mortals was wholly forgotten, if it existed at all. Ayodhya, with nine portals, eight circular enclosures, and a surrounding pool of nectar, appears to be purely a mythical city which could be compared to some extent with the Samavasarana and Nandisvaradvipa (central part) of the Jaina mythology. Thus, it is probable that modern Ayodhya and its association with Rama is of a later origin” (Joshi, 1978).

Since Joshi does not insist that we accept Shamasastri’s view, he cannot resist commenting on the tendency to make all sorts of deductions in the name of philology, such as when Shamasastri says, “The word Zodia or Zodiac seems to be philologically akin to Ayodhya.” Indeed, it has been well said that sound philology is not always sound philology (Shamasastri, 1940).

In his comments, Joshi makes the following three propositions:

1. "When the Taittiriya Aranyaka was composed, the memory of Ayodhya of the mortals was wholly forgotten if it existed at all";
2. "Ayodhya appears to be purely a mythical city"; and
3. "Modern Ayodhya and its association with Rama is of a later origin."

By his first proposition, Joshi means to say that if there ever was on this terra firma a real city called Ayodhya, it must have existed very much before the time of the composition of the Taittiriya Aranyaka, as, according to him, by that time it had been forgotten. This statement by Joshi contradicts his third proposition, where he mentions that modern Ayodhya and its association with Rama are both of later origin, although Joshi has not specified what he means by 'later' (Joshi, 1978).

One might wonder how Joshi reconciles his view of Ayodhya in the historical materials, which suggest it ceased to exist long before the composition of the Taittiriya Aranyaka, yet emerged well after the same Aranyaka. Further, Joshi must address the question: "Who was this Rama, and why and when did he come to be associated with 'modern' Ayodhya?" (Joshi, 1978).

Despite the highly presumptive nature of the first and third propositions, this discussion primarily focuses on Joshi's second proposition, which claims that Ayodhya was "purely a mythical city." This necessitates a very close and critical study of the Sanskrit text itself. The verses quoted by Joshi from the Taittiriya Aranyaka, which contain the word 'Ayodhya,' also occur in the Atharvaveda, though their inter se arrangement is somewhat changed (Joshi, 1978).

The verses from the Atharvaveda (10.2.28-33) delve into metaphysical descriptions and ask profound questions about the origins and essence of existence:

"Urdhyo nu srishtastiryan nu srishtah sarva disah purusha a babhuvan puram yo brahmano veda yasyah purusha uchyate. Yo vai tam brahmano vedamritenavritam puram tasmai brahma cha Brahmascha chakshuh pranam prajam daduh. Na vai tam chakshurjahati na prano jarasah pura puram ya brahmano veda yasyah purusha uchyate. Ashtachakra navadvara devanam parayodhya tasyam hiranyayah kolah svargo jyotishavritah. Tasminhiranyaye kose tryare tripratishtite tasminyad yakshamatmatmanvat tadvai brahnavido-viduh. Prabhajamanam harinim yasasa samparivritam puram hiranyayim Brahma vivesaparajitam" (Atharvaveda, 10.2.28-33).

William Dwight Whitney's English translation of these verses is as follows:

28. Was he now created upward (urdhva)? (or) was he now created crosswise? Did man grow unto (a-bhu) all the quarters? He who knoweth the brahman's stronghold from which man is (so) called.

29. Whoever indeed knoweth that Brahman's stronghold covered with amrita-unto him both the Brahman and the Brahmans have given sight, breath, progeny.

30. His verily sight doth not desert, nor breath, before old age, who knoweth the brahman's stronghold (puri), from which man (purusha) is (so) called.

31. Eight-wheeled, nine-doored, is the impregnable stronghold of the gods; in that is a golden vessel, heaven-going (swarga) covered with light. (Italicizing of the word 'impregnable' by the present author.)

32. In that golden vessel, three-spoked, having three supports—what soul-possessing monster (yaksa) there is in it, that verily the knowers of the brahman know.

33. The brahman entered into the resplendent, yellow, golden, unconquered stronghold, that was all surrounded with glory" (Whitney, 1905).

These verses encapsulate a complex cosmology and eschatology, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of the universe in ancient Vedic texts.

It is important to note that Whitney has interpreted the word "Ayodhya" not as a proper noun—i.e., not as the name of a city—but rather as a compound word comprised of two parts: "a" + "yodhya." The prefix "a" typically conveys a negative meaning, while "yodhya" is derived from the root "yudh," together conveying the meaning "impregnable" (Whitney, year). This interpretation is clearly supported by the context in which the word appears. The section is entitled 'Brahmaprakasanam,' where over half the verses pose profound questions like "who created this or that?", while the remaining verses attempt to provide answers.

Within this context, the term "pur" refers to the body, and the "purusha" denotes what dwells within it. This usage aligns with how the terms "deha" (body) and "dehin" (one who embodies) are used in the Bhagavad-Gita (11.30), where it discusses the body as a vessel that houses the soul. The mantra highlights that the body (pur), where the purusha resides, is impregnable ("a + yodhya"), possessing eight chakras ("ashta-chakra") and nine doors ("nava-dvara"). The golden vessel ("hiranmayah kosah") covered with light ("jyotishavritah") mentioned in these texts is metaphorically describing the radiant light experienced by mystics during deep meditation. The eight chakras range from the muladhara at the base to the sahasrara at the crown of the head. The nine doors (nava-dvaras) of the human body, as described in the Bhagavad-Gita (V.13), include the two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, the mouth, the rectum, and the sex organ opening, emphasizing the body as a complex yet contained entity ("nava-dvare pure dehi naiva kurvan na karayan").

Furthermore, an examination of Vedic texts reveals that "Ayodhya" in the sense of an actual city or town appears only once across all the Vedas. This unique occurrence is documented in Vishva Bandhu's *Chaturveda-Vaiyakarana-padayachi* (1960, p. 97). While other cognate forms of "Ayodhya" are found in three other places within the Atharvaveda itself, no such forms appear in other Vedas, emphasizing its unique linguistic and conceptual placement in Vedic literature.

One instance of the word "Ayodhya" in the Atharvaveda reads:

“Achyutachyutsamado qamishtho mridho jeta pura-etayodhyah Indrena gupto vidhata nichikyaddhriddyotano dvishatam yahi sibha” (Atharvaveda, V.20,12).

Whitney translates this as: “Stirring the unstirred, often entering into contest conquering scorners, going in front. Unsubduable made safe by Indra, nothing counsels burning the hearts of our adversaries, go thou quickly” (Whitney, year). This Sukta pertains to the war-drum (dundubhih), where it is lauded for its thunderous roar akin to a lion, capable of overpowering foes. The use of "a + yodhya" here is translated by Whitney as "unsubduable," clearly showing that the term is used descriptively and not as a proper noun, indicating no relation to a town or city.

Furthermore, two cognate forms, "a + yodhyena" and "a + yodhyah," appear in Kanda 19 of the Atharvaveda. The relevant texts and their translations are as follows:

“Sankrandanenanimishena jishnunayodhyena duschyavanena dhrishnuna Tadindrena jayata tatsahadvam yudho nara isbuhastena vrishna” (Atharvaveda, XIX, 13, 3).

“With the roaring, unwinking, conquering, invincible, immovable, bold one—with Indra thus overpowering the fighters, O men, with the arrow-armed bull (vrishan).”

“Abhi gotrani sahasa gahamanoadaya ugrah satamanyurindah I Duschayavanah pritanashadayodhyoasmakam sena avatu pra yutsu II” (Atharvaveda, XIX, 13, 7).

“Plunging with power into cow-stalls, Indra, pitiless, formidable, of hundred-forty fury, immovable, overpowering fighters, invincible—let him favor our armies in the fight.”

These verses primarily serve as a prayer to Indra, seeking aid in overpowering enemies and winning wars. The word "a + yodhya" and its variations are consistently used in a descriptive capacity to denote "invincible" across these instances, not referring to any geographic location (Whitney, year).

Moreover, even in the commentary by Sayana on the Taittiriya Aranyaka, he confirms that "pur" refers to the body, and not a physical location, adding further evidence against the geographic interpretation of "Ayodhya" (Phadke & Apte, 1926).

In light of these discussions, it is evident that the term "Ayodhya," whether in its original or cognate forms, always conveys "invincible" and is not used as a proper noun. Thus, suggestions that Ayodhya, a non-mythical town situated on the bank of the Sarayu near Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh, is a mythical city are without basis. This opens the door for archaeological and historical investigations into the town to explore its antiquity and its potential connections to the historicity of the Ramayana, moving past unfounded claims of its mythical status.

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