

A Sealing of *Yogeśvara* from the Excavations at Nagardhan (2016-18), District Nagpur, Maharashtra

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Abstract

Extensive excavations were carried out at Nagardhan (Ramtek Taluka, Nagpur District, Maharashtra) jointly by the Nagpur Division of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Maharashtra State, and the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, Pune. The site has been well-known in the academic world due to its association with ancient Nandivardhana, the capital of the Vakataka branch with the same name. The excavations at the site of Nagardhan have yielded interesting coins and sealings that have contributed immensely to the understanding of the site. The present article examines one of the sigillographic findings from the second season (2016-17) and provides a detailed discussion on the sealing.

Introduction

Nagardhan (21°20'13.4"N; 79°18'56.3"E) is a village with a considerable population of around one hundred thousand in the Ramtek Taluka, Nagpur District, Maharashtra (Fig. 1). It is well-known in academic writings due to its association with the ancient Nandivardhana of the Vakatakas (Mirashi 1957; Bakker 1997; Shashtri 1997). It was Rao Bahadur Hiralal (1916) who brought attention to the fact that Nagardhan could be the ancient Nandivardhana. Later, the site was explored by Wellsted (1934) during his explorations at Mansar. However, Wellsted did not accept the identification of Nagardhan as being Nandivardhana.

Systematic excavations were carried out jointly by the Nagpur Division of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Maharashtra State, and the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, Pune, from 2015-16 to 2017-18. The excavations undertaken aimed to understand the nature of the settlement and assess its identification with Nandivardhana. The excavations also aimed to uncover the pre-Vakataka settlement remains, if any, at the site. The excavations conducted across nine different localities yielded noteworthy results. It revealed remains of public architecture, craftsmen's activity areas, a water management system, and domestic architecture as well as ritual spaces on the site during the Vakataka Period. Moreover, the site also yielded a rich cultural sequence

beginning with the early Iron Age and ending with the Medieval period. Apart from the structural remains, artefacts such as beads of semi-precious stones, ivory objects, images of deities, terracotta objects, coins, glass objects, shell objects, and iron and copper objects were also found (for details see Sontakke *et al.* 2016; Sontakke *et al.* 2020a, 2020b; Vaidya *et al.* 2023).

Besides the above findings, the site also evidenced a considerable repertoire of sigillographic data. Altogether seven sealings of pre-Vakataka and the Vakataka periods were recovered from the excavations. Amongst it was the significant finding of two sealings of the Vakataka Queen Prabhavatigupta (Dandekar *et al.* 2018; Dandekar *et al.* 2020). These sealings, a first of their kind, were crucial in associating the site with ancient Nandivardhana. Another important sealing found in the excavations is also discussed in the present paper.

Details of the Sealing (Table 1)

The excavations at the site were concentrated in nine different localities (Sontakke *et al.* 2020). The present sealing, that is of importance, was found in the second season (2016-17) in Locality 3 (Fig. 2) of the site. This rectangular terracotta sealing was found broken into two pieces. The sealing (Antiquity No. 3262) is red in colour and has some small mica particles present in it. It is medium-fired.

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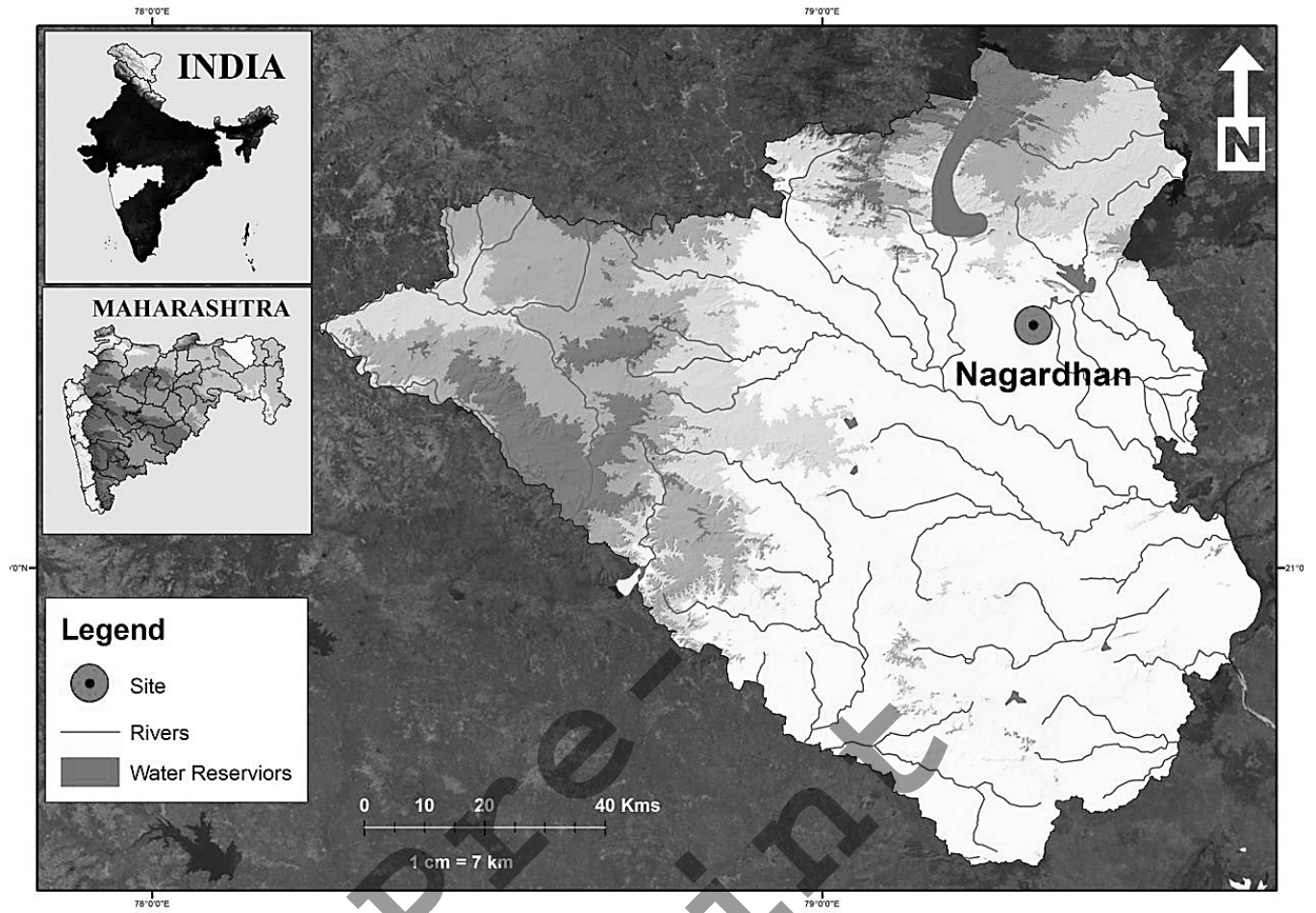


Fig. 1: Location of Nagardhan (Ramtek Taluka, Nagpur District, Maharashtra)



Fig. 2: Location of the findspot of the Sealing (Trench – M; Quadrant – 2, Locality – 3)

Table 1: Dimensions of the sealing

	Piece 1 (Left)	Piece 2 (Right)
Length (in mm)	29	25.72
Breadth (in mm)	17.83	18.14
Thickness (in mm)	10.70	11.27
Weight (in g)	4.0	5.1

Stratigraphic Context of the Sealing

As mentioned above, the sealing was found in Locality 3 in lot no. 25 (Quadrant 2; Depth: 174 cm). Lot no. 25 was dug to remove a pavement-like feature noticed in lots 10 to 13 of this trench. This feature was found in layers 4 and 5 of Locality 3, belonging to the Vakataka period. The sealing was found in the filling material below this feature, and can be placed in Layer 6, which is dated to c. 3rd century CE.

Decipherment of the Sealing

Though the sealing is broken into two, one can observe and reconstruct that the upper portion of the sealing had 5 letters in Brahmi (the third letter being cut off, but traces can be seen), and the lower portion has three symbols arranged horizontally below the legend (Fig. 3, *please see inside front cover*). All letters and symbols were placed within a rectangular border whose corners were slightly curved. The first letter from the left is ‘yo’ and the second, ‘ge’. The sealing is broken where the third letter was present, and only its traces are visible, rendering it illegible. The fourth letter can be read as ‘ra’ and the last as ‘sya’. Notwithstanding the absence of the third letter, this legend can be securely deciphered as ‘Yogeśvarasya’. The symbols below this legend are as follows. The first symbol from the left is a dotted circle with 10 dots. The second symbol looks like a curved staff, and the third symbol is a pot with a sprinkler and a spout. The rear of this sealing has striation marks (Fig. 4, *please see inside back cover*), which suggest that it was attached to some commodity or consignment. The striation marks suggest thread impressions in a horizontal direction. Thus, it might not have been fixed on a cloth or textile piece directly.

Palaeographic Features of the Sealing

Palaeographically, this sealing can be dated to around the late 3rd – early 4th centuries CE. The letters appear to be elongated. It is noteworthy that the diacritical marks for ‘e’ turn downwards, which becomes a regular practice in the later periods in southern Brahmi inscriptions. This can be seen in the first two letters. In the letter ‘Yo’, the mark going towards the right is horizontal, and the one going towards the left has slanted downwards. In the succeeding letter ‘ge’, the mark for ‘e’ has turned significantly downwards. This letter also has its right arm turning inwards, forming a sort of loop. The next letter is obliterated due to the breakage. However, some remnants of a triangular ‘va’ can be discerned at the bottom of the letter. The letter ‘ra’ has a triangular headmark, and has its

tail turned leftwards, forming a sort of loop. The conjunct ‘sya’, although it has no clear headmark, has tips to the letters that appear to be thick. The ‘ya’ in the conjunction is quite angular.

Sealings from the Indian Subcontinent with Similar Symbols and Readings

It is interesting to note that the sealings with a similar combination of symbols and epithets were reported from some archaeological sites. Several sealings bearing the titles *Yogeśvara* and *Yogeśvara-svāmī* were reported from Rajghat (Agrawala 1961: 408; Thaplyal 1972:142). Thaplyal, while discussing these sealings from Rajghat, describes symbols found on them: “...One sealing has a rosary, the crescent enclosing a dot, a long-necked water vessel and a *Trisūla-paraśu*. Another one has a rosary and a water vessel on the obverse and two *śaṅkhas* on a pedestal on the reverse. Others portray a rosary, a long-necked vessel and a serpent or a serpent with a trident on one side and a rosary on the other.” (Thaplyal 1972: 142).

V.S. Agrawala (1984: 8) has given a detailed description of this type of sealing. Three circular sealings were found that had the legend, ‘*Yogeśvara*’ in Gupta Brahmi script and had five symbols above the legend: a *Trisūla-kuṭhāra* (combined trident and battle-axe) in the centre, a crescent and rosary (*Akṣamālā*) on the proper right, an *Amṛta-ghaṭa* (long-necked spouted conical-bottomed nectar-flask) and a crooked staff (called *koṇa*) on the proper left. One oval sealing was found with the legend “*Yogeśvara*” in Gupta script, and above the legend had depictions of *Akṣamālā*, *Amṛtaghaṭa* and a crooked staff over a pedestal. Another oval sealing was found that had a depiction of a crooked staff (*koṇa*) on the left, a trident in the centre, and *Akṣamālā* on the right, and below the symbols, we have the legend, ‘*Yogeśvara*’ in Gupta script. A round sealing was also found that had a crescent and *Śrīvatsa* above and below the symbols, and had the legend “*Yogeśvara-svāmī*”.

A circular sealing was discussed by Handa (2011:112), which is said to have been found from the Khokhrakot mound at Rohtak. He discusses symbols as follows, “... it shows a staff slightly thickened in the upper portion, a vertical column which seems to have been made of pitchers placed one above the other, and had a dotted circle with a pellet in the centre in a row from left to right in the upper half of the sealing and a Brahmi legend in early Gupta characters reading ‘*Śrī Yogeśvaraḥ*’ ‘the illustrious Yogeśvara’.

There are instances where we get different legends but a similar combination of symbols on the sealing to that found at Nagardhan. For instance, a sealing at Rajghat has symbols such as a *Bhṛṅgāra* (vessel), rosary, crescent and *trisūla-paraśu* with the legend *Bhṛṅgeśvara* (Thaplyal 1972: 139). This particular sealing, was also discussed by Moti Chandra (1962: 97) and V.S. Agrawala (1984: 8).

Another sealing from Rajghat has a male figure standing on a pedestal, holding a rosary in the right hand and a long-necked flask in the left. The legend on the sealing can be read as, ‘*Śrī-Devadevasvāmī*’ (Thaplyal 1972: 154). However, a serpent device on the seal was also observed (Thaplyal 1972:154). V.S. Agrawala believes that this image is of a goddess who is holding an *Akṣamālā* in her right hand and a *Bhṛṅgāra* in her left, and the legend, “*Śrī-Devadeva-Svāmī*” is written in later Gupta Brahmi script (V.S. Agrawala 1984: 7). A fragmentary oval sealing from Rajghat discussed by P.K. Agrawala has a long-necked round-bottomed oval flask on a pedestal flanked by a crooked staff on the right while the symbol on the left is defaced. The partial retained and defaced legend below the symbols can be read as, “...vaṭukeśvarasvāmīṇaḥ” (P.K. Agrawala 1984: 24).

Another seal was published by Gupta (1994: 47-53). The images on it comprise a high-necked oblong pot with a spout, a curved stick, and a beaded rosary. The inscription reads, ‘*Brahmāṇasya*’ in the box-headed variety of Brahmi characters. The author believes that the seal must have come from the adjacent area of Western Odisha and dates the seal to the 5th century CE. Gupta (1994: 49) believes that the pot appearing in the “*Brahmāṇasya*” seal is a sprinkler; the curved stick is a *daṇḍa*, which is held by the *Brahmacārins* and *tapasvins*. He states that all three images appearing on the seal are ascetic in nature. He states that the kuṇḍī type of water pot (*Kamaṇḍalu*) is shown in a number of icons of Śiva, and the rosary (*akṣamālā* or *Rudrākṣamālā*) is a common attribute of Śiva. He further adds that the curved *daṇḍa*, kuṇḍī-type *Kamaṇḍalu* and beaded rosary are all seen depicted in Shaiva sculptures of the Vakataka period in Vidarbha. He concludes that the *Brahmāṇa* depicted, whose name appears on the seal, was a Shaivite and his faith was represented in a symbolic form on this seal (Gupta 1994: 50).

The data obtained from the sealings discussed above gives an insight that there are certain similarities with the present sealing under discussion. As regards the sealing from Nagardhan, in the light of the similarity in the combination of symbols and legends found on sealings from Rohtak and Rajghat, the legend ‘*Yogeśvarasya*’ found on the sealing from Nagardhan probably belongs to the same tradition and was probably related to Shaivism. This sealing is the first of its kind found hitherto in Vidarbha. It is noteworthy that the Vakatakas were followers of Shaivism (Mirashi 1963: xl). It is quite possible that they followed the prevalent dominant religion of the region. Both palaeographically and stratigraphically, the sealing dates to the late 3rd-early 4th century CE. This suggests that Shaivism was practised during the pre/early Vakataka times in Vidarbha. Further, it can be said that this trend was not in isolation. Striking similarities between the symbols present on various sealings across North India and the sealing under discussion suggest that Vidarbha, in

general, and Nagardhan, in particular, were part of a large network of the Shaivite centres across India. This postulate is further supported by the mention of ‘*Pravareśvara/Pravareśvaradevakula/Pravareśvarpādamūla*’ in the copper plates of Pravarasena II (Mirashi 1963; Dandekar *et al.* 2018).

According to Mirashi (1963: xl), the suffix *īśvara* essentially denotes a Shaivite affiliation. Putting all these facts together suggests that Shaivism was popular in Vidarbha during the pre/early Vakataka period. The presence of Mansar, an important Shaivite centre of worship (Sharma and Joshi 2015), in a way explains the presence of this sealing at Nagardhan, as Nagardhan is only 11 km away from Mansar. Another noteworthy point is the phrase ‘*yogeśvara*’ of the legend. It alludes to a probable existence of the Pashupata sect, as this sect was the earliest Shaivite yogic tradition in India.

Thus, this one sealing has opened up a new arena of research in the history of Shaivism in Central India, and the role of Nagardhan and its surroundings seems to play an important part. Moreover, the data findings from the excavations at Nagardhan, when published, will yield further insights into this.

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