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Pictures at the cite. Some researchers question the estimates of age and population. There is a question in my mind as to whether the age is closer to 2600 years than 7,000, ie whether centuries BC or millenia BC are meant.

Ancient city discovered in India
By Sandeep Sahu
Bhubaneswar

Indian archaeologists say they have found remains which point to the existence of a city about 7,000 years old in eastern India.

The remains have been discovered at Sisupalgarh near Bhubaneswar, capital of the eastern state of Orissa.

Researchers say the items found during the excavation point to a highly developed urban settlement.

The population of the city could have been in the region of 20,000 to 25,000, the archaeologists claim.

The excavations include 18 stone pillars, pottery, terracotta ornaments and bangles, finger rings, ear spools and pendants made of clay.

But some historians and archaeologists in Orissa have expressed reservations about the claim of the researchers – they say it is too early to say anything about the population or periodicity of the area.

'Significance'

RK Mohanty of the department of archaeology, Deccan College, Pune, who is one of the two researchers involved in the excavations.

"The significance of this ancient city becomes clear when one bears in mind the fact that the population of classical Athens was barely 10,000," he said.

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Mr Mohanty, along with Monica Smith of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, has been carrying out limited excavations at the site every year since 2005 with the permission of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

The latest round of excavations ended last Monday and the new discoveries have been covered with special plastic material and earth to preserve them before further digging is taken up in subsequent years.

The first excavations at the site were carried out by Prof BB Lal as far back as in 1948.

On the basis of the architectural pattern and artefacts discovered during the early excavations, Prof Lal concluded that this fort city flourished between 3rd century BC and 4th century AD.

On the basis of the new findings, Ms Smith and Mr Mohanty claim that the fortified city flourished from around 5th century BC and probably lasted well after the 4th century.

"We have employed geophysical survey, systematic surface collections and selected excavations in the 4.8km perimeter of the fortified area and studied individual houses and civic as well as domestic architecture to arrive at the figure of 25,000," said Ms Smith.

"If anything, it is a conservative estimate."

'Guesswork'

But some historians and archaeologists in Orissa have expressed reservations about the claim of the two researchers.

"At best, it is a guesswork. Without excavating the entire area of the fortified city, it is not possible to determine its population or periodicity," said BK Rath, former director of the state archaeology department.

"The actual area excavated so far is only a minuscule part of the city. How does one determine the size of the average family in a period about which very little historical literature or evidence is available?"

"Besides, the comparison with Athens is odious since it was not a fortified city like Sisupalgarh," he said.

Mr Rath, however, gives credit to Ms Smith and Mr Mohanty for having focussed attention on the problem of encroachment that is threatening to engulf a large part of the fortified city.

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The major portion of the land that constitutes the ancient city is in private possession making an archaeological study difficult.

Besides, several urban settlements have sprung up in the vicinity of the area in the last few years owing to its proximity to the city of Bhubaneswar.

With a view to preserving this important archaeological site for future research, the ASI is now contemplating asking the state government for control over the land.

Lost

"This way, we can prevent further encroachment and develop the site as a tourist attraction," said BR Mani, a senior ASI official.

There is also some concern about the preservation of the material which has been found during the excavation.

Well-known historian Karuna Sagar Behera voiced serious concern over the preservation of material unearthed from the site.

"Its is a shame that some gold coins and terracotta pottery found at the place during the first excavation in the late 1940s were subsequently lost," he said.

"Measures should be taken to ensure that all the material excavated are properly preserved for future research."

The project is being supported by the National Science Foundation of India, the National Geographic Society and the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, California.

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