7

# The Legend of the Iron Column

In the fourth and fifth centuries AD, kings such as Chandragupta I (319–35/36 AD), Samudragupta (335–70 AD), and Chandragupta II (375–413/14 AD) launched a series of successful military campaigns and established their political domination over a large part of the Indian subcontinent. The Gupta kings proclaimed their political power and imperial status *vis-a-vis* other, lesser, kings of their time through the use of grand titles such as *maharajadhiraja* (great king of kings), *parama-bhattaraka* (one supremely entitled to reverence) and *parameshvara* (great lord), setting new fashions in royal rhetoric.

The Gupta period is considered a 'golden age' by some historians because it was an age which saw the (re-)emergence of a large empire, and a remarkable level of cultural achievement. The term 'classical age' is also sometimes used to highlight the fact that in many spheres of art and literature, the Gupta period represents a high water-mark, setting for later ages standards that were emulated but never surpassed. Other historians have questioned the need of identifying the Gupta (or any other period in Indian history for that matter) as a 'golden age.' While acknowledging the cultural achievements of this period, it has been

suggested that the Gupta empire was not a cohesive structure but a loosely-knit decentralized empire, and that this period saw political, economic, and social developments that add up to what can be described as an Indian brand of feudalism. A decline in trade, urban centres, and coinage are other features of this alternative portrayal of the Gupta age.

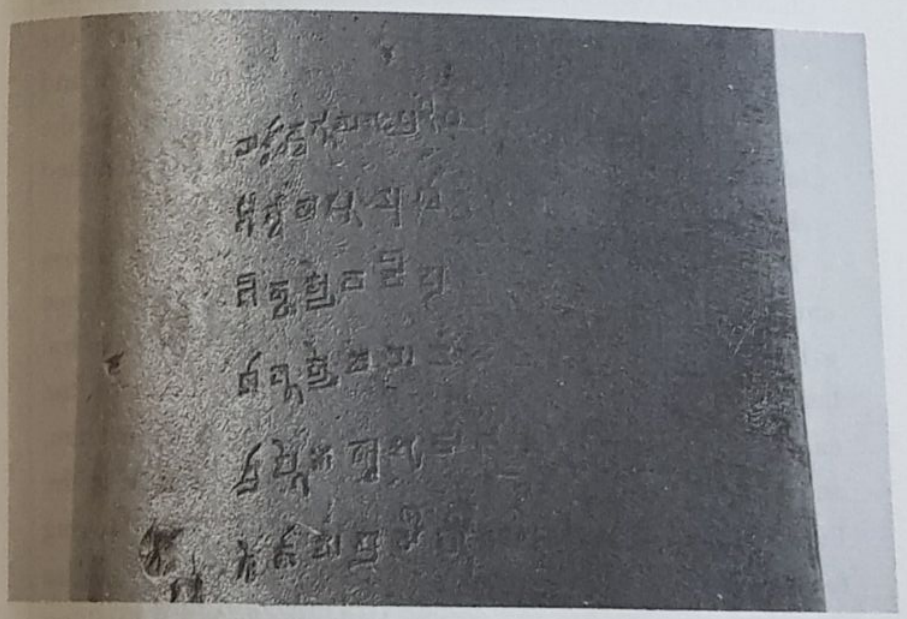
During the reigns of the later Gupta kings, the empire gradually declined, partly due to internal problems and weakening, in part due to competition from contemporary dynasties such as the Vakatakas who ruled over the western Deccan. Then, in the fifth century, a new political factor made its appearance as a branch of the Hunas gradually fanned out from their base in the Oxus valley towards Iran and India. Crossing the Hindu Kush mountains, they occupied Gandhara and from there, surged into the interior of India. One of their invasions was successfully repulsed by the Gupta king Skandagupta. But the progress of the Hunas was inexorable and later Gupta kings were not able to keep them at bay. Under their chiefs Toramana and his successor Mihirakula, the Hunas moved into Kashmir and the Punjab and thence into parts of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and western India. They became a spent force some time in the sixth century AD.

### *The iron pillar at Mehrauli*

The most striking monument of the Gupta period in Delhi is the inscribed iron pillar situated in the courtyard of the Jami Masjid (today known as the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque) in the Qutb complex. Once again, we see the ancient and medieval past rubbing shoulders. The inscription is inscribed on the west face of a 23 ft. 8 inches high iron column which tapers slightly from a diameter of sixteen inches at the base to twelve inches at the top. The column is surmounted by a capital in the form of an inverted



lotus (3' 6" high). A motif imbued with rich meaning in several ancient cultures, the lotus is a symbol of purity and fecundity. The pillar was probably originally crowned by a Vaishnava emblem, perhaps a *garuda* (the mythical eagle, the vehicle of the god Vishnu). The language of the six-line inscription is Sanskrit, the script Brahmi.



The inscription of king Chandra
Photograph: Aditya Arya

James Prinsep, the scholar who deciphered the Brahmi letters of the Ashokan inscriptions, also tried his hand at reading the inscription on the iron pillar. The script of the Mehrauli iron pillar inscription is a later form of the Brahmi of Ashokan times. Prinsep thought that the inscription referred to a king named Dhava, and

although he was later proved to be wrong on this point, he got a lot of other things right—the general tenor of the contents of the inscription as also its age, which on palaeographic grounds, he placed in the third or fourth century AD.[42] Cunningham preferred to read the name of the king in question as Bhava. He suggested that Bhava might have been a king who played a part in the downfall of the Gupta dynasty.

The king whose exploits the Mehrauli iron pillar speaks of was not in fact Dhava or Bhava but Chandra. The problem was that Chandra was such a common royal name in ancient India that historians were not sure *which* of the various Chandras the inscription was talking about (the inscription bears no date and gives no genealogy). Today, there is general agreement that the Chandra of the Mehrauli iron pillar inscription should be identified with the Gupta emperor Chandragupta II (375–413 AD).

The inscription describes a king named Chandra 'on whose arm fame was inscribed by the sword.' This king had a countenance as beauteous as the full moon (there is a pun on the word 'chandra' here). The inscription speaks of his beating back in battle the enemies from Vanga (Bengal) who united to advance against him, and his victory over the Vahlikas (who seem to have lived in the Punjab region) after crossing the Sindhu (Indus) river. Having fixed his mind with devotion on the god Vishnu, king Chandra set up this flag-staff of Vishnu on the Vishnupada hill.[43] Evoking powerful imagery, the inscription tells us that although the king was no more, his fame remained on the earth like the smouldering embers of a great forest fire that has died out. It seems likely that while the pillar was erected during the life-time of king Chandra,

[42] Palaeography is the study of the evolution of old scripts.

[43] For the Sanskrit text (and English translation) of the inscription, *see* John Faithul Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3, pp. 258–9.



the inscription was inscribed some time after his death.[44] This would account for its somewhat melancholy tone.

## Translation of the Mehrauli iron pillar inscription of Chandra

(Verse 1) On whose arm fame was inscribed by the sword, when in battle in the Vanga country, he repulsed with his breast the enemies who, joining together, had advanced against him; by whom, crossing the seven mouths of the Sindhu, the Vahlikas were conquered in battle; by the breeze of whose valour the southern ocean is still perfumed ...

(Verse 2) He, the lord of men, whose body, as though weary, has departed from this earth to another world (heaven) won by his deeds, but who remains on this earth in his fame; whose great glory, the result of his destruction of his enemies, does not yet leave this earth like the heat (from the smouldering embers) of a now quiet fire in a great forest ...

(Verse3) By that king, who acquired supreme sovereignty on earth for a very long time by his own prowess (and) who, having the name Chandra and a beauty of countenance resembling the full-moon, having fixed his mind with devotion on Vishnu, this lofty standard of the lord Vishnu was set up on the Vishnupada hill.

We do not know for sure where the iron pillar originally stood. Most historians believe that the iron pillar is not *in situ*. This is

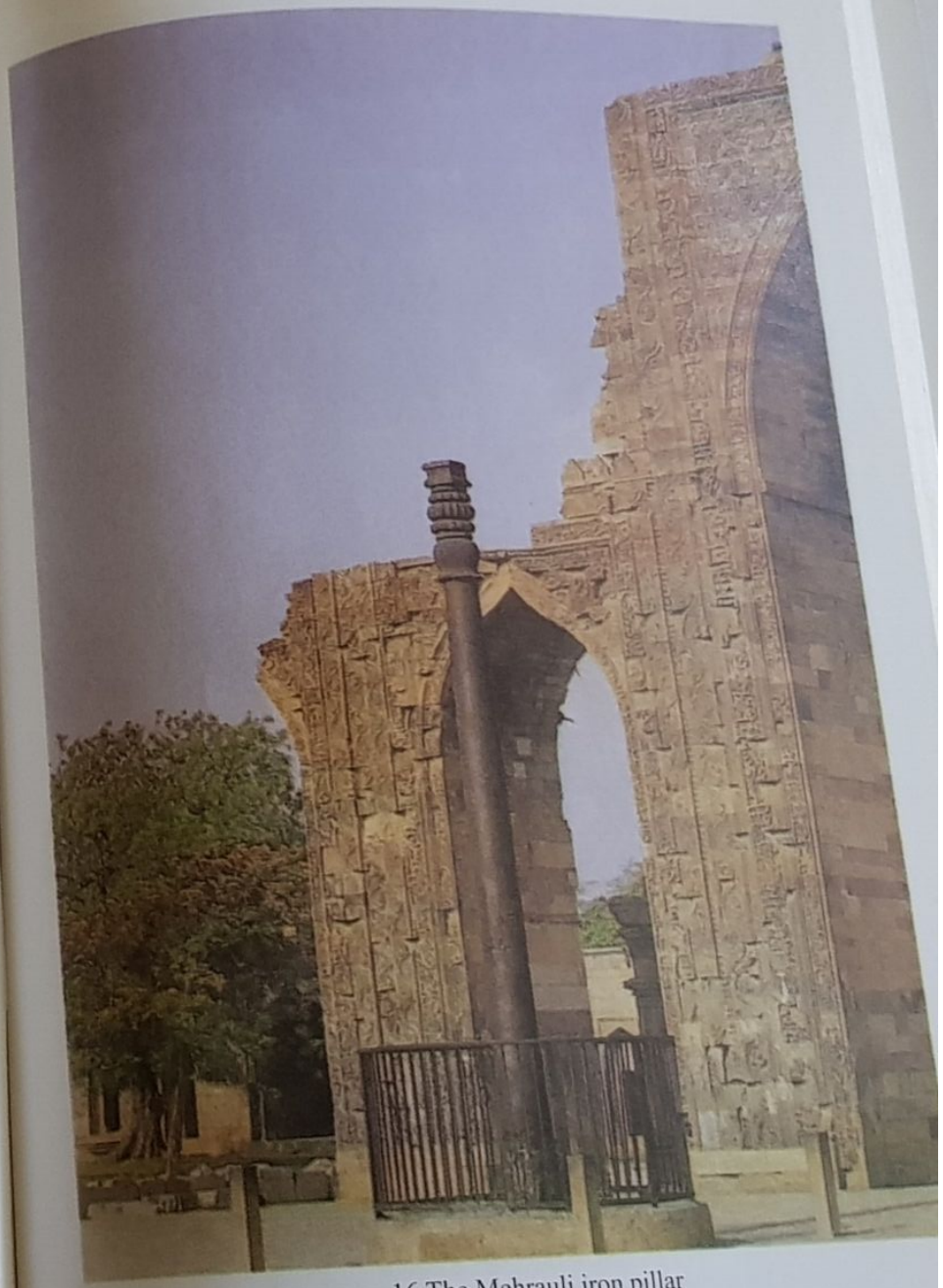
[44] While the inscription is considered a posthumous one by most scholars, there are some, such as D.R. Bhandarkar, who think otherwise. See the edition of *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3, revised by D.R. Bhandarkar and edited by B. Chhabra and G.S. Gai (New Delhi, 1981, p. 57).

because the inscription refers to the pillar being installed on a hill named Vishnupada and there is nothing quite resembling a hill at the present site.[45] On the other hand, the renowned epigraphist J.F. Fleet pointed out that the underground supports of the column include several small pieces of metal which seem to have been part of its original underpinnings, not the sorts of things that would have been brought along if the pillar had indeed been transported here from somewhere else. The counter-argument to this is the example of the Delhi–Topra pillar of Ashoka that was brought to Delhi from Topra, foundation stone and all. The possibility that the original location of the Mehrauli pillar was in or around Delhi, perhaps near or even *at* the present site cannot be ruled out, especially in view of the sculptural remains indicative of a large temple complex that have been unearthed in the excavations at Lal Kot nearby. We may note that the legend that connects Anangapala Tomara with the pillar talks of his digging up and then replanting the pillar, not moving it to some other location.[46]

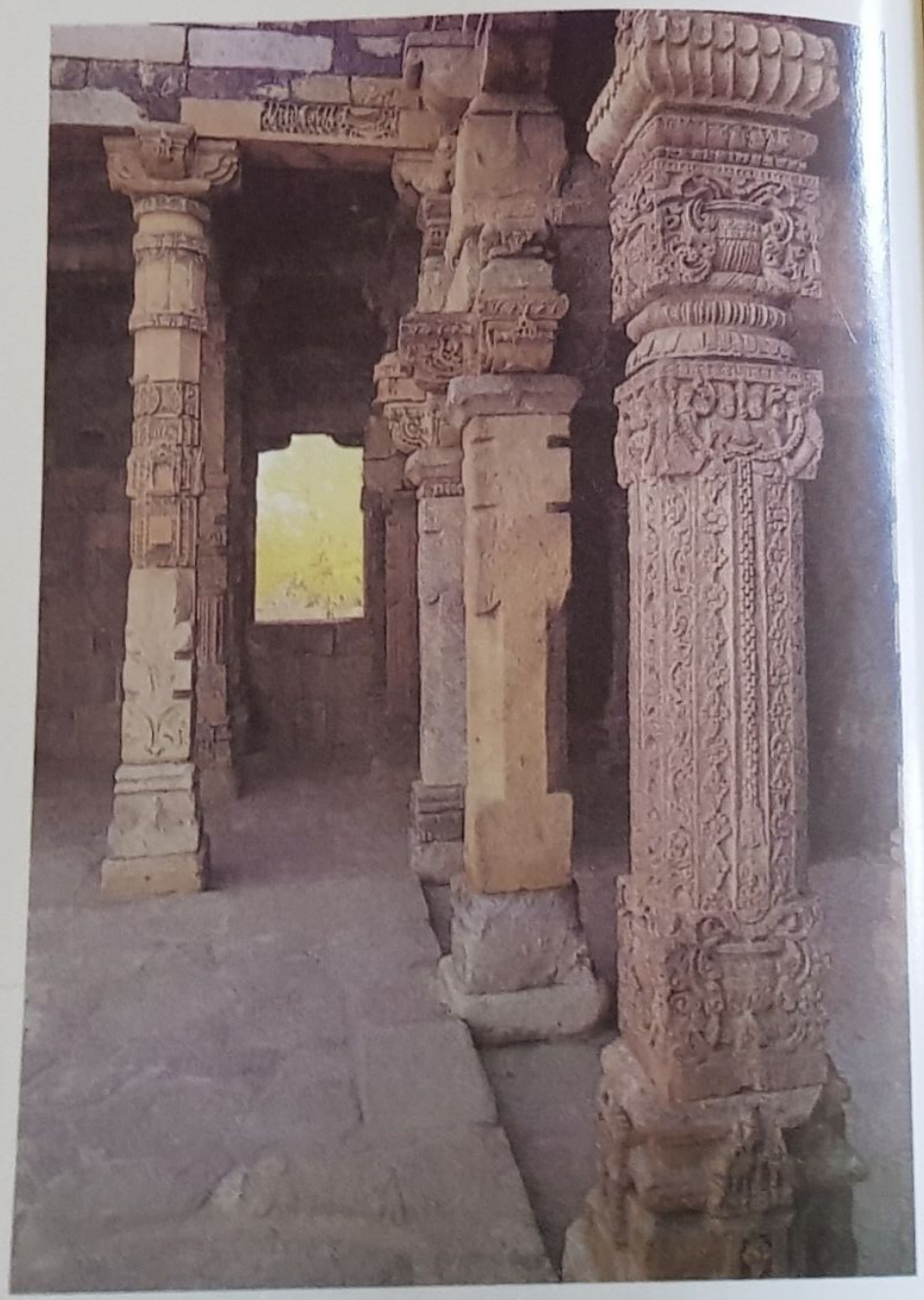
Just as in the case of the Delhi–Topra pillar of the Mauryan period, there is confusion in early modern notices about the material out of which the Mehrauli pillar was made. These notices are cited by Alexander Cunningham in his archaeological reports for the years 1862–3 and 1864–5. In 1805, the pillar was described by a European woman tourist in a tract entitled *Tour in the Upper Provinces* as 'the wonderful brazen pillar.' Bishop Heber described it as a 'black pillar of cast metal.' A Miss Emma Roberts (in a tract entitled *Views in India*) referred to it as 'a pillar of mixed metal.' Major-General Sir W.H. Sleeman (famed for his efforts to eradicate 'thuggee') refers to it in his *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian*

[45] According to D.R. Bhandarkar (*op. cit.*), Vishnupada was located in the Himalayas, close to the source of the Beas river.

[46] Details of this legend are given later in this chapter.



16 The Mehrauli iron pillar
Photograph: Aditya Arya



17 Pillars of the Qutb mosque
Photograph: Aditya Arya



*Official* as a small pillar of bronze or a metal that resembles bronze. Cunningham himself initially thought that the pillar was made of some sort of 'mixed metal' similar to bronze. However, an analysis he had made of a small piece from the lower part of the pillar showed it to be made of pure malleable iron of 7.66 specific gravity. Cunningham suggested that the idea that the pillar was made of bronze perhaps arose because of the yellowish appearance of the upper part of the shaft.

The most remarkable aspect of the Mehrauli iron pillar is that it has remained rust-free for so many centuries. Modern analysis has shown that it is made of very pure wrought iron with a high phosphorus and a low carbon, sulphur and manganese content. The composition does not, however, fully explain how the pillar has evaded rust for so many centuries.

The iron pillar also bears several other short inscriptions. There is an eleventh-century inscription which seems to refer to the Tomara king Anangapala establishing Delhi. An early eighteenth-century inscription refers to the Bundela kings of Chanderi. Two nineteenth-century inscriptions refer to a person named Raja Chhatra Sinha who claimed to be a descendent of the Chauhan king Rai Pithora. Two seventeenth-century Persian inscriptions give the names of certain individuals who may have visited the place.

### *The iron pillar in medieval legend*

At some point of time, we don't know exactly when, the Gupta iron pillar got tied up in local legend and folk-lore with the Rajput king Anangapala of the Tomara clan and with a story of how the city of Delhi got its name. Writing in the nineteenth century, Cunningham recorded what he described as a 'universal tradition' current in his time that the iron pillar had been erected by the

Rajput king Bilan Deo or Anangapala Tomara. A version of the legend is contained in Book III of the Rajasthani epic, the *Prithviraja Raso*, in an episode entitled *Killi-dhilli-katha*. The broad outline of the legend is as follows: A learned Brahmin told king Anangapala that the base of the pillar had been driven so deep into the ground that it rested on the hood of Vasuki, the king of serpents who supports the world from below. The pillar was immovable, and as long as the pillar stood, prophesied the Brahmin, so long would Anangapala's dominion last. Now, instead of being sensible and accepting this prophecy and leaving the pillar alone, Anangapala decided to check things out for himself. He ordered the pillar dug up. When the lowermost portion emerged from beneath the ground, it was covered with the blood of the serpent king Vasuki, whose head it had pierced. The king, realizing that he had made a terrible mistake, immediately ordered the pillar to be reinstalled. But every effort to fix the pillar firmly in the ground failed. The pillar remained loose (*dhili*) and, so the story concludes, in the looseness and shakiness of the pillar lies the origin of the name of the city of Delhi.

In another version of the legend, the prophecy is made not by some ordinary Brahmin but by the great sage Vyasa and it is a long nail or spike that pierces Vasuki's head. When restored, only nineteen fingers' length of the pillar goes into the ground. The sage tells the king that his dynasty would be unstable (*dhilli*) like the spike (*killi*) he had driven in, and that after nineteen generations, it would be supplanted by the Chauhans and then the Turks.[47]

There is a tradition that when Qutb-ud-din Aibak took over Delhi, he was told by helpful informants that Hindu rule would last as long as the iron pillar remained standing. We are told that

[47] These legends have been documented by Sir Alexander Cunningham in vol. 1 of his reports (those of the years 1862–5).



the conqueror displayed his confidence in himself and contempt for the prophecy by allowing the pillar to stand. The Jami Masjid was built close to the pillar, and the courtyard of that mosque encloses it.

The history of the iron pillar of Chandra thus spans many ages as it came to be entwined with pan-Indian and local legends of the early medieval period. In modern times, the pillar has come to be connected with a different kind of belief—that the person who stands with her back against it and manages to make the fingers of the two hands meet will have her wish come true. How serious this belief is, is of course a matter of conjecture. It is the kind of story that local tourist guides might have invented in order to liven things up for tourists. Regardless of its origins, it forms part of the modern folklore about Chandra's iron pillar. [48]

*Remains of the Gupta period at the Purana Qila and elsewhere*

From the exploits of kings and the legends that have grown around them, we turn to the more mundane details of the life of people living in Delhi and its neighbourhood roughly between the fourth and the sixth centuries AD. At the Purana Qila, levels belonging to the Gupta period revealed the remains of structures made of reused baked bricks of the earlier period. The notable finds included moulded pottery, including a lid bearing the motif of a *kinnara* (a creature half man, half horse), and a damaged terracotta female figurine. A terracotta seal bore the outline of a conch above and the legend 'Gopasya' (of or belonging to Gopa) below. Another seal read 'jitam bhagavata,' (victory to the *bhagavata*, i.e. the god Vasudeva Krishna), while a third bore the legend 'Sri traividya' in

[48] A recent visit to the Qutb revealed that the Archaeological Survey has erected an iron railing aroung the pillar. This has put a forcible end to the popular practice referred to here.

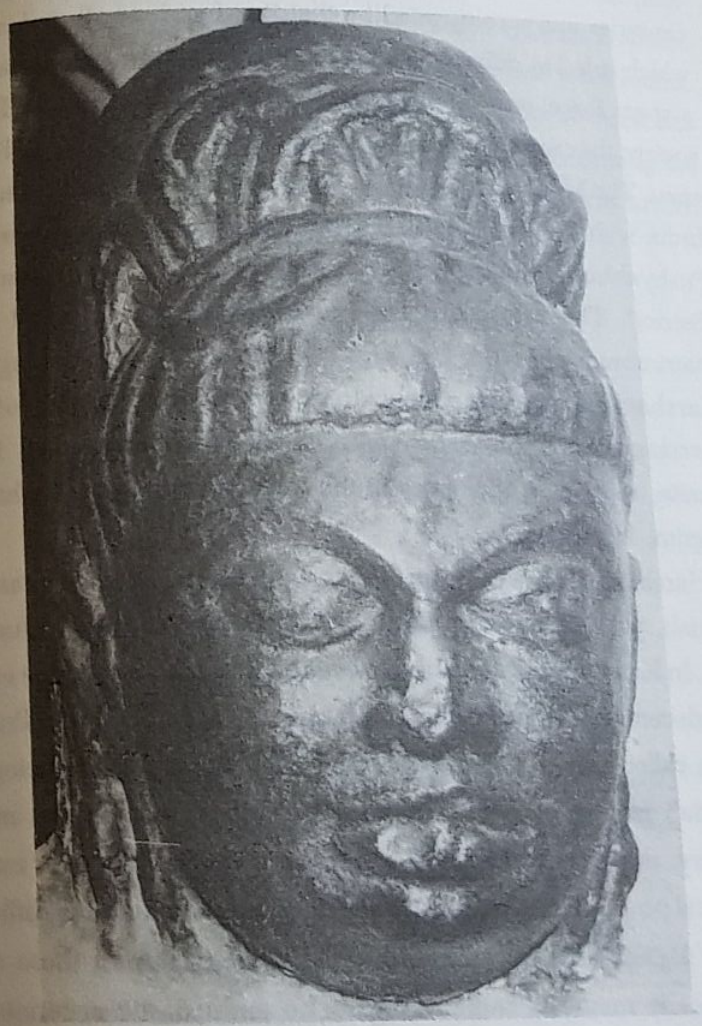
Brahmi letters of the Gupta period. The 1970–1 excavations unearthed a building of this period which had gone through three or four stages of construction. Initially, the structure was oblong in plan with a partition wall. Then, a verandah or a room with a rounded corner was added in front. Still later, the floor levels were raised, steps added, and two partition walls were constructed inside. A 60 cm. high brick pedestal with a stepped base was built against one of the walls beside the entrance. In the last phase, another verandah was built in front, the floor levels were raised even further, and more steps added. A sealing inscribed with Brahmi letters of the Gupta period and a gold-plated coin of the archer type with the legend 'Shri Vikrama' were found embedded in the debris of the last structural phase. Other antiquities found at Gupta-period levels included a few human figurines made of terracotta, a piece of carved shell bangle, a small damaged sandstone *mukha-linga*, and painted pots. There were also sealings with the legends 'Shri Makarasya' and 'Shri Aryyavama (?),' with what seems to be a fire altar above the writing, and another sealing with the legend 'Shri Gudhadasah' and a set of foot-prints below. The people whose names occur on the sealings may have been traders or officials, but we do not know this for sure.

The site of Mandoli also has occupational levels of the Gupta period. Here, fragments of red polished ware of various shapes were found. A terracotta sealing decorated with a conch at the top and bearing an inscription in Brahmi characters of the Gupta period was also discovered.

Isolated remains of pottery and sculpture found in various villages in and around Delhi bear further testimony to the period. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, such sculptural fragments often form a part of village shrines. One of the most beautiful pieces of sculpture which can on stylistic grounds be assigned to the Gupta



period is a black stone *mukhalinga* at Gothra Mohabbatabad, a village in the Faridabad district (located in the hills a few km. west of Pali). The *linga* is almost entirely covered with the carving of the face of Shiva, his eyes closed in an expression of serene meditation. The sculpture lies embedded in a whitewashed



Gothra Mohabbatabad *mukhalinga*
Photograph: N. Lahiri

concrete platform within a temple complex, just outside the cave in which, according to local tradition, the ancient seer Uddalaka performed his *tapasya*.

*The post-Gupta phase*

The decline of the Gupta empire in the late-fifth and early-sixth-centuries was accompanied by the rise of various other dynasties which ruled in different parts of north India. The Hunas became a spent force, and gradually came to be assimilated into Indian society; they were eventually accepted as one of the thirty-six Rajput clans. The Maukharis carved out a kingdom in northern and eastern India with their capital at Kanyakubja. To their west were the Pushyabhutis of Sthanishvar (modern Thaneswar in Ambala district). The Maukharis and Pushyabhutis were linked by a matrimonial alliance. The most famous Pushyabhuti king was Harshavardhana. Harshavardhana forms the subject of the *Harshacharita*, a biography composed by his court poet Bana Bhatta, and is also spoken of in the travel account of the Chinese pilgrim, Hsuan-tsang.

Harshavardhana's empire seems to have included eastern Punjab, parts of Uttar Pradesh, and also territories lying further east. In Kanauj, the Pushyabhutis eventually made way in the early-eighth-century for Yashovarman, a king immortalized in a Prakrit work called the *Gaudavaho* (literally, 'the slaying of the king of Gauda') written by his court poet Vakpati. Then, in the ninth century, the Pratihara Rajputs established themselves as a major political power in northern India, ruling from Kanauj. It is difficult to get a clear idea of the contours of the empires of these and other early medieval Indian kings. The enthusiastic accounts of court poets give a larger-than-life portrayal of the personalities and achievements of their patrons. The evidence suggests that the Delhi



region came consecutively under the rule of the Pushyabhutis, Yashovarman, and then the Pratiharas.

While we have a mass of detail about the various dynasties within whose domain the Delhi area came to be included, we know very little about the lives of ordinary people who lived here during the sixth to eighth centuries. Some structures of the post-Gupta period were revealed during the Purana Qila excavations. Several ovens, some resembling modern tandoors were found. Sherds of various types of red pottery, fragments of terracotta figurines, beads, and a damaged stone sculpture were among the other finds. Reused bricks (mud bricks as well as burnt bricks) and sagging walls tell their story of this phase.