

Shankhalipi script

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In news– Recently, Archeologists of **Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)** have found ‘Shankhalipi’ inscriptions on the stairs on an ancient temple dating back to the Gupta period in **Uttar Pradesh’s Etah district**.

Key findings-

- The ‘shankhalipi’ inscriptions were **deciphered by the archaeologists as saying, ‘Sri Mahendraditya’, the title of Kumaragupta I of the Gupta dynasty.**
- **Bilsarh, in Etah-Uttar Pradesh, where the remains were found** has been a protected site from the colonial times and is a known Gupta period settlement.
- **The Bilsarh site was declared ‘protected’ in 1928.**
- This year, the team discovered two **decorative pillars** close to one another, **with human figurines.**
- The discovery becomes significant since **only two other structural temples from the Gupta age have been found so far – Dashavatara Temple (Deogarh) and Bhitargaon Temple (Kanpur Dehat).**

About the Shankhalipi script-

- **Shankhalipi or “shell-script”** is a term used by scholars to describe **ornate spiral characters assumed to be Brahmi derivatives** that look like conch shells or shankhas.
- They are found in inscriptions across North-Central India and date to between the 4th and 8th centuries.
- **A similar inscription was found on the back of a stone horse sculpture** from that period that is at present in the State Museum at Lucknow.
- **Both Shankhalipi and Brahmi are stylised scripts used**

primarily for names and signatures.

- The inscriptions consist of a small number of characters, suggesting that the **shell inscriptions are names or auspicious symbols or a combination of the two.**
- Shankhalipi is found to be engraved on temple pillars, columns and rock surfaces.
- No such inscriptions with dates or numbers have been reported so far even as their chronology can be determined by the objects on which they are written.
- **The script was discovered in 1836 on a brass trident in Uttarakhand's Barahat by English scholar James Prinsep,** who was the founding editor of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- A year later, he came across two more similar scripts at Nagarjuna group of caves in the Barabar Hills near Gaya.
- Prominent sites with shell inscriptions include the **Mundeshwari Temple in Bihar, the Udayagiri Caves in Madhya Pradesh, Mansar in Maharashtra and some of the cave sites of Gujarat and Maharashtra.**
- The shell inscriptions are also reported in Indonesia's Java and Borneo.

Deciphering the shell script-

- Scholars have tried to decipher shell script but have not been successful.
- The first detailed study of shell inscriptions was undertaken by Professor Richard Salomon of the University of Washington.
- He said there are a sufficient number of shell characters to represent the syllables of the Sanskrit language, and tentatively assigned sounds to some of the characters.
- In recent years, historian B N Mukherjee proposed a system of decipherment based on a few key inscriptions, but his suggestions do not bear scrutiny.

Kumaragupta I of the Gupta dynasty-

- The **Guptas were the first to build structural temples**, distinctly different from the ancient rock-cut temples.
- Kumaragupta I was the son of Chandragupta II and grandson of the Great Samudragupta of Gupta dynasty.
- He built the world famous ancient **Nalanda University**.
- Among the Gupta kings, he issued the largest varieties of coins.