

Earliest Settlers of Kashmir

R. N. KAW

KASHMIR is a saucer-shaped vale with a length of 134 km. a breadth of 38 km. at its broadest point and a mean height of 1800 m. above sea level. It has a temperate climate and during winters the valley is covered with snow. Besides its magnificent woods, enchanting lakes, rivers and meadows and glorious snow clad mountains, it has a remarkable wealth of archaeological sites and monuments ranging from prehistoric times to the Moghul period.

The tradition says that Kashmir was once a lake known as Sati-Saras, the Lake of Sati. The lacustrine deposits locally known as karewas, which are dotted all over the valley, substantiate it. Neolithic man settled on these karewas.

De Terra and Paterson carried out the first exploration in Kashmir during the year 1935. They could not find any remains of the Paleolithic man but later on in 1969-70 Prof. Sankalia and a team of the Archaeological Survey of India discovered the first Paleolithic tool from Kashmir. In fact Prof. Sankalia claims that these are the earliest Paleolithic remains in the whole of Asia.

De Terra and Paterson first made the discovery of Burzahom during their expedition in 1935. They noticed menhirs at the site. A limited excavation near the menhirs was conducted by them which yielded some black polished ware with incised designs besides some bone and stone tools, the excavated remains were taken to be belonging to 'either a late or an early phase of the Indus Culture.

The Archaeological Survey of India under the directions of Shri T.N. Khazanchi undertook the systematic excavations at Burzahom from 1960 to 1971.



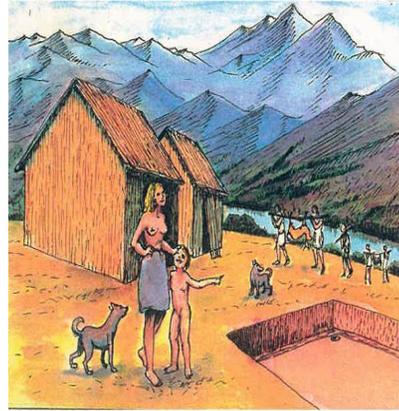
The site of Burzahom (34° 10' N. Lat., 73° 54' E. Long, in District Srinagar is situated 16 km. north-east of Srinagar by the shortest route via Nasim and 24 km. via famous Shalimar Gardens of Jahangir. The site is located on the ancient lake bed, locally called Karewa, and commands a panoramic view of the lush green fields of the valley and the shimmering waters of the Dal Lake which is hardly 2 km. away.

With forests abounding in the hills around and with the lakes and the swampy areas lying at a stone's throw, the area is ideal for fishing, fowling and hunting, which is exactly what the earliest settlers did about 4500 years back.

Burzahom in Kashmiri means the place of birch. That birch was available during Neolithic times is proved by burnt birch found during the excavations at Burzahom. The excavations have brought to light four cultural phases. Of these Periods I and II belong to the Neolithic, Period III to the megalithic and Period IV to the early historical period (Post-megalithic).

Period I

The main feature of earliest settlers (Period I) was dwelling pits cut below ground level into the natural soil, which is mostly loess. The pits are well-like structures. The pits were dug out with long stone Celts and traces of the cuts made are still visible. The pits are circular or oval in plan, narrow at the top and wide at the base. The diameter varied according to the needs of the people. The largest of these pits measures 2.74 m. at the top 4.57-m. at the base and 3.95 m. in depth.



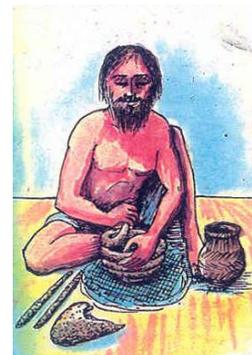
Thatch-roofed hut of neolithic period - Courtesy S.S.Saar

The presence of postholes on the periphery suggests a birch cover supported on wooden posts as protection against the inclemencies of weather. Though a few steps were provided in the deeper pits, these do not reach the bottom and probably would have narrowed down the living space and some other methods must have been used to reach the bottom. Descent into the smaller pits could be made directly from the ground level and as such no landing steps were provided. Presence of ash, charcoal and potsherds within these pits clearly indicate human occupation. From the evidence of stone hearths near the mouths of some of these pits, it can be inferred that the settlers led also an open-air life. Presence of shallow storage-pits, in close proximity also suggests that the pit dwellers used to shift to the ground level on sunny days or during summer months.

The dwelling pits were thus the devices made by early Neolithic man to fight the severe winters of Kashmir. Besides the circular pits, pit chambers that are rectangular or sometimes squarish have also been found. These are also below the ground level. The size of these square/rectangular chambers varies. The recorded evidence of size of one of the rectangular chamber is 6.40 x 7.00 m. These chambers were also cut into the ground level up to a depth of roughly one metre. Some of these pit chambers had depressions on all the four sides, deep post-holes on the Four Corners for the superstructure to cover the chambers perhaps with a sloping roof, storage pits and hearths in the centre. Some of the chambers had stone hearths while the others had clay hearths, which indicates human occupation.

Both circular dwelling pits and pit chambers were used for dwelling purposes. It is rather interesting that the pit chambers abound in the central portion of the mound and the dwelling circular pits are mostly on the periphery. It is quite likely that pit chambers were preferred since more members could be accommodated and could be more comfortable for residential purposes.

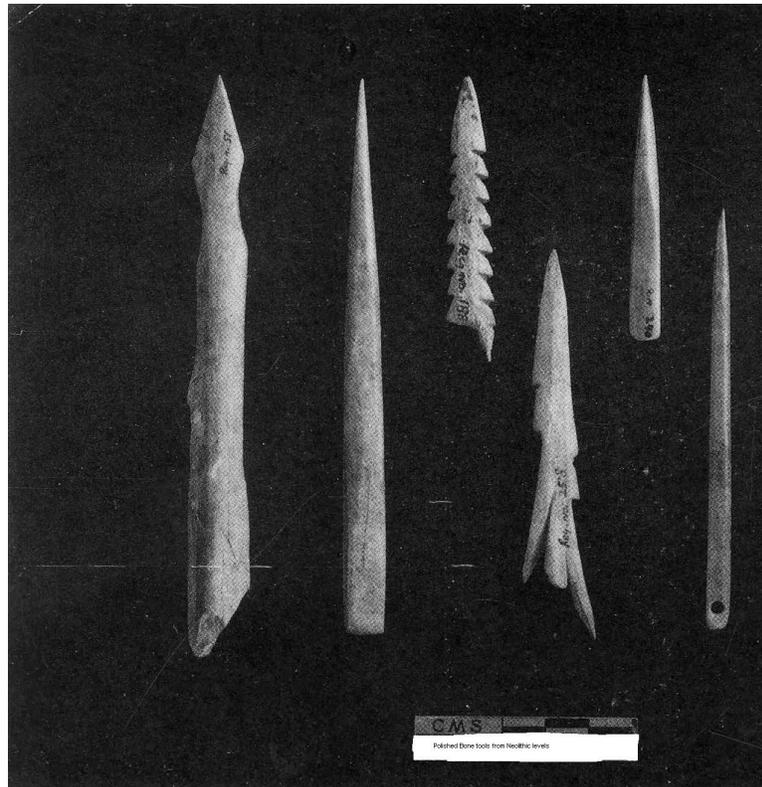
The earliest settlers at the site used hand made earthen pots. Many types then in use continue to be used in the villages of Kashmir even now. The pottery is mostly crude hand made ware, the colour being chiefly steel grey, shades of dull red, brown and buff. They are coarse in fabric and finish and are represented by bowls, vases and stem. Mat impressions are a recurrent feature on many types especially on pots having a flat base which indicates that they were made on mats. Wheel made pottery is however, absent in this period.



Making pottery with coil technique- Sketch courtesy S.S.Saar

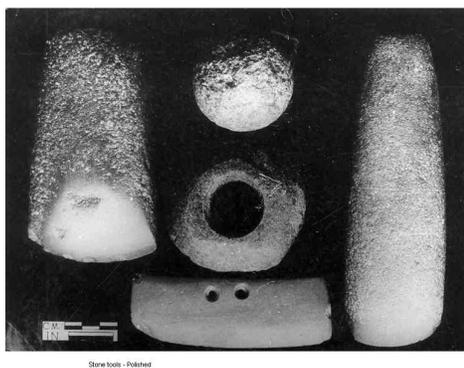
No evidence has come across during excavations regarding the disposal of the dead in Neolithic Period I. The total absence of any burials of this period may indicate that the people may have adopted some other practice for disposal of the dead.

Apart from the unique structural sequences, bone and stone tools are characteristic. Bone tools as an organized industry is most developed here. The types are prolific and the manufacturing techniques provide an interesting insight into the level of development.

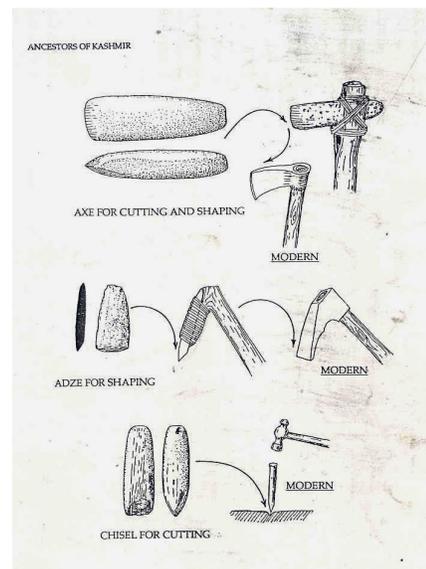


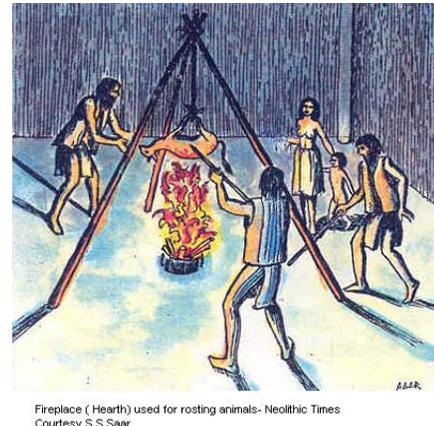
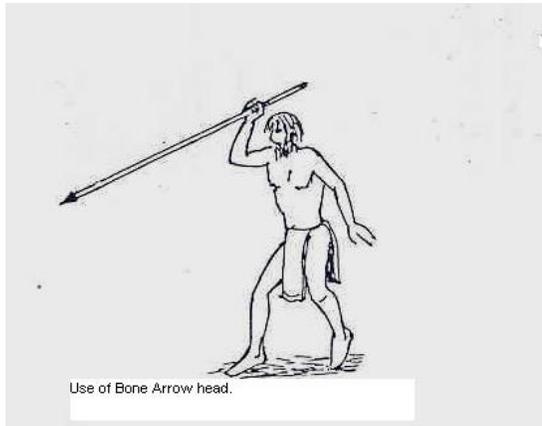
The main types are harpoons for fishing, needles with or without eyes and awls used probably for stitching skins, spear points, arrow-heads and daggers for hunting game, scrapers for treating skins. Tools have also been fashioned out of antler horns.

The main types in stone are axes, chisels, adzes, pounders, mace-heads, points and picks.



There is no positive evidence for cultivation of cereals but a stone quern has been found during excavations in one of the pit chambers.





Period II

In the next stage are structures in mud or mud bricks with regular floors made of rammed karewa soil. Extensive timber structures are also indicated from the numerous postholes found at the site. These extensive structures suggest some sort of a community living. The subterranean pits and chambers used in the earlier period were no longer used, some of these were filled up and plastered with mud and covered with a thin coat of red ochre to serve as a floor. The use of red-ochre during this period was noticed in a major portion of the site excavated. Superimposition of floors has also been noticed in this period. In one of the trenches, as many as forty-five well arranged post-holes were noticed. Covering an area of 3.96 m. x 1.21 m. Associated with another floor was a hearth and a oval pit with a mean diameter of 1.04 m. A few mud platforms were also found with partitions walls on them. A few copper arrowheads were, however, found in Period II which may have been due to commercial contacts.

Pottery is generally hand made. A burnished black ware of medium fabric made its appearance in this period. It included such shapes as the dish with a hollow stand, globular pot, jar, stem with triangular perforations and a funnel-shaped vase. A distinctive type in the black burnished ware was a high-necked jar with a flaring rim, globular body and flat base. On the lower part of the neck were incised oblique notches. The deluxe ware of the period is the black burnished ware. There were, however, a few painted pots, which may have been imported. Towards the close of the Neolithic levels a wheel made red ware pot containing 950 beads was found. The beads are one of agate and carnelian and show an excellent workmanship. A red ware wheel made painted pot with horned figure from the early levels of Period II has also been found

This period indicates peculiar burials, which were found mostly within the settlement. Human beings were buried in oval pits, mostly dug into the house floors or in the compounds with the inner side of the pits plastered with lime. A noteworthy feature of the human burials of this period was the use of red ochre on the bones. Four of the human skeletons found were buried in a crouching position.



The burials showed both primary and secondary interments, the former containing extended articulated skeletons and the latter only selected bones. Excepting in a few cases, no grave furniture was noticed. On the other hand whole animals or their bones were sometimes deposited with the human skeletal material. Evidence of trepanning showing seven finished and four unfinished circular wholes on the skull was present in one of the burials. The animals represented in the burials are dog, wolf and ibex. The most interesting amongst these was a burial showing skeletal remains belonging to five wild dogs and antler's horn. It appears that pet animals particularly dogs, were sacrificed and buried along with the human body .

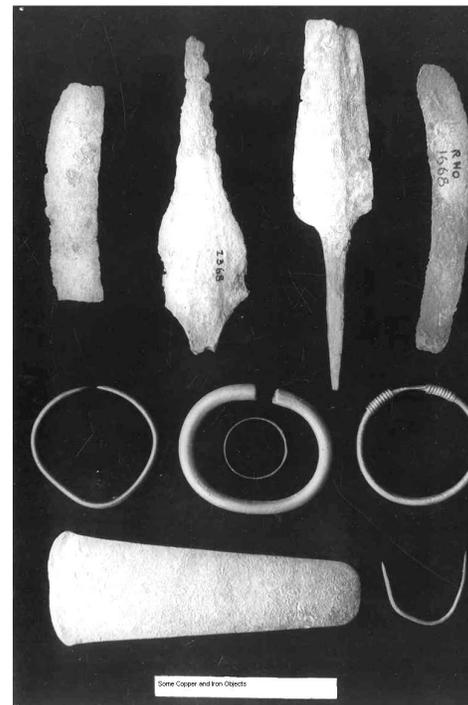
The objects both in stone and bone of this period are similar to those of the earlier one but are more in number and better finished. Interesting are the rectangular harvesters with a curved cutting edge and two or more holes on either side and double edged picks in stone and long sized needles with or without eye in bone. However, a unique composite tool has been found in this period. It is a borer on a long hollow bone like the cobbler's poker.

Period III

The Neolithic period is followed by megalithic culture associated with the erection of massive stones or menhirs, most probably commemorative. The material culture of the megalithic people is characterized by the use of a gritty red ware pottery. Bone and stone tools continue to be in use but the incidence is pretty less. The only marked difference is the use of wheel-made pottery. A few metallic objects have also been found. Besides, the menhirs, rubble structures have also been found.

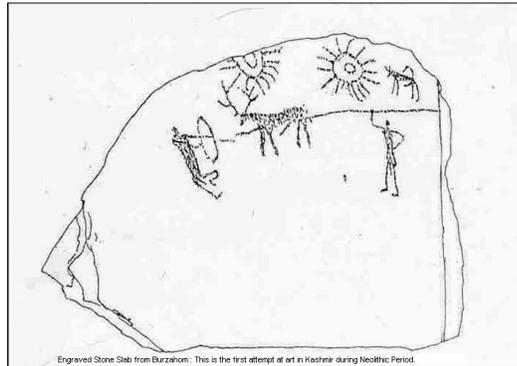
Period IV

The last activity at the site is early historical period and it can be dated a little earlier than the Buddhist site of Harwan ascribable to the 3rd-4th century A.D. Mud brick structures have been found. The pottery was predominantly a wheel made red ware. A few metallic objects have been found



Period IV

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Neolithic Art

The earliest attempt at art in the Neolithic period is evidenced in Period II by the discovery of an engraved stone slab found, fixed in a rectangular structure forming some sort of a tank. The engraved face was placed upside down, making it non-functional in the place in which it has been found. The stone slab (base width 70 cm.) is flat on both faces the engraved side being smooth compared to the un-engraved one. Towards the top it is partially damaged, as a result the uppermost part of the scene is slightly lost. The engraving depicts a hunting scene showing an antler being pierced from behind with a long spear by a hunter and an arrow being discharged by another hunter from the front. The topmost portion shows two suns and a dog. Showing two suns may probably have some symbolic value and perhaps may indicate hunting in daylight. If the presumption is correct then one sun may be depicting the rising sun and another the setting sun. Another stone slab showing an incomplete pattern has also been found from the same structure.

Chronology

Following are some of the select list of radiocarbon dates from the Neolithic levels of Burzahom based on half-life value of 5730 years.

- TF-15 1530 + 110 B.C.
- TF-129 1825 + 110 B.C.
- TF-13 1850 + 125 B.C.
- TF-14 2025 + 350 B.C.
- TF-127 2100 + 115 B.C.
- TF-123 2225 + 115 B.C.
- TF-128 2375 + 120 B.C.

Conclusions

The Neolithic culture of Kashmir Valley has its own distinctive traits not shared by its counterparts from elsewhere in India. Its wide range of bone and stone tools, dwelling pits, perforated knife or blade, burials of animals with human skeletons and purposeful burial of only animals mark it as something unique. Dwelling pits, application of red ochre on the dead, burials of animals with their masters perforated knives of stone or harvesters and the characteristic bone tools link the Neolithic of Kashmir with north China, Central Asia, some sites in Russia, as also in Afghanistan and Iran.



R.N. Kaw

Sh. R.N. Kaw retired as Chief Photographer from Archaeological Survey of India. He was associated in Excavations at Burzahom- Kashmir from 1963 to 1970. Due to his association in this excavation he wrote the article "Earliest Settlers of Kashmir" and it is also published in "Essays in Indian Proto History", edited by D.P. Agrawal and Dilip Chakraborty, and published in 1978.

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