



ANCIENT ASIA

Vol. 17, 2026, pp. 59-78
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URL: <https://ancient-asia-journal.com>
<https://doi.org/10.47509/AA.2026.v17i.04>

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Dantari Hill: A Place Marked by Time in the Vindhya of Kaimur Range

Dheeraj Sharma¹, Shubham Saurabh², Deepesh Singh¹,
Virag G. Sontakke³  and Sachin Kr. Tiwary^{3*} 

¹Research Fellow, Department of AIHC & Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.

E-mail: dheeraj@bhu.ac.in; deepesh@bhu.ac.in

²Research Fellow, Department of AHC & Archaeology, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Nalanda.

E-mail: shubhamsaurabh31@gmail.com

³Assistant Professor, Department of AIHC & Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India. E-mail: virag@bhu.ac.in; sachintiwary@bhu.ac.in

*Corresponding Authors: sachintiwary@bhu.ac.in & virag@bhu.ac.in

Abstract: Dantari Hill in the northeastern Vindhyas is an important site where many forms of archaeological evidence converge within a single landscape. This study documents and analyses megalithic structures, microliths, rock paintings, quarry pits, an inscription, and settlement areas to understand how people lived and used this region over time. A multi-method approach was applied, including megalithic documentation and GIS mapping; random and grid sampling for microliths; micro-documentation of rock art; inscriptional study; and cross-transect surveys for settlement areas. The results reveal 482 megaliths arranged in distinct clusters, microlith production areas, and those used as offerings to funerary rituals, 119 rock paintings depicting diverse scenes, an inscription linked to quarrying activity, and three settlement zones occupied for more than a thousand years. Taken together, this evidence shows that Dantari Hill was not just a burial ground but a connected cultural landscape where people lived, worked, created art, and performed rituals over many generations.

Keywords: Kaimur Range, Megaliths, Microliths, Rock paintings, Inscription, Settlement, Cultural landscape

Received: 12 December 2025

Revised: 28 February 2026

Accepted: 24 April 2026

Published : 25 May 2026

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sharma, D, Saurabh, S, Singh, D, Sontakke, VG & Tiwary SK (2026). Dantari Hill: A Place Marked by Time in the Vindhyas of Kaimur Range. *Ancient Asia*, 17: 1, pp. 59-78. <https://doi.org/10.47509/AA.2025.v17i01.04>

Introduction

The Vindhyan region is considered a significant archaeological landscape in South Asia. Its wider plateau, river valleys, hill ranges, and forested zones have collectively provided an ideal ecological

setting that supported continuous human occupation from prehistoric times (Chatterjee 2019; Pratap 2024; Bose *et al.* 2001; Misra *et al.* 2014; Tewari 1999; Sharma, Misra, Mandal, *et al.* 1980; Pant 1982; Jayaswal *et al.* 2016). The region has abundant natural resources such as stone, mineral deposits, fertile land, perennial rivers, diverse flora and fauna, and natural rock shelters, which were extensively utilised by humans in different cultural periods (Singh *et al.* 2016; Kaur *et al.* 2019; Sanyal *et al.* 1987; Jayaswal 1998). The Vindhya range, positioned between the Gangetic plain and the Deccan plateau, also functioned as a vital corridor for cultural mobility, interaction, and exchange (Chakrabarti 2006; Chakrabarti 2010; Singh 2009). Thus, the region is not defined by a single cultural phase but reflects a long and dynamic sequence of human engagements with its landscape.

Archaeological studies carried out in different parts of the region have yielded important insights into its cultural development (Sharma, Misra & Pal 1980; Pandey 2002; Misra 1989; Misra *et al.* 2001; Singh 2021; Pant 1982; Misra *et al.* 2002; Jayaswal 1983; Sontakke *et al.* 2025; Pandey 1990; Tewari 1999; Tewari 1997; Tewari 1990; Sontakke, Sharma, *et al.* 2024). However, a large portion of the Vindhyan landscape remains unexplored. Many archaeological sites are limited to mere reporting, and much work still remains to be studied in depth. By systematically documenting and studying such sites, the region can be understood from a new framework and with a broader regional perspective.

The recent archaeological exploration in the northeastern Vindhyan area led to the discovery of Dantari Hill, which contains archaeological remains such as megalithic structures, microliths, rock paintings, a late medieval inscription, and settlement areas, all of which provide valuable insights within the regional context. The aim of this study is to present a detailed examination of these cultural materials, assess the site's importance and continuity of occupation, and evaluate its resource exploitation and contribution to the cultural development of the region.

The Site: Dantari Hill

Dantari Hill (25.023764, 82.910298) is located in the southern expanse of Chunar tehsil, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India (Figure 1). The hill is approximately 50 km east of the Mirzapur district headquarters, 15 km south of Chunar, and 45 km south of Varanasi. Geographically, it lies south of the Ganga River within the northeastern extent of the Kaimur hill range, which forms part of the Vindhyan mountains. The site extends approximately 2.6 km from east to west and 1.7 km from north to south. It comprises hilly, barren terrain with diverse elevations ranging from 100 to 180 m AMSL. The hill is surrounded by several natural water channels, including the Pachabahani River to the south, Vishva Shanti Dari to the west, Pakadi Nala to the north, Chamarchua Nala flowing through the central-north, and the Jargo Dam to the east. The entire area is bordered by alluvial plains. This geographical setting provided favourable conditions for sustaining cultural activities within the region.

Methodology

The site contains diverse cultural remains, including megaliths, microliths, rock paintings, inscriptions, and settlement areas. Collectively, the study of these cultural materials cannot be addressed through a single methodology. Therefore, we adopted different methodological approaches for each category of cultural remains.

Megalithic Documentation

To document the megaliths, an initial on-site visual assessment was conducted to evaluate the distribution, condition, and landscape context of all extant megalithic structures. Following this, each structure was systematically recorded using the Megalithic Documentation Sheet, which included

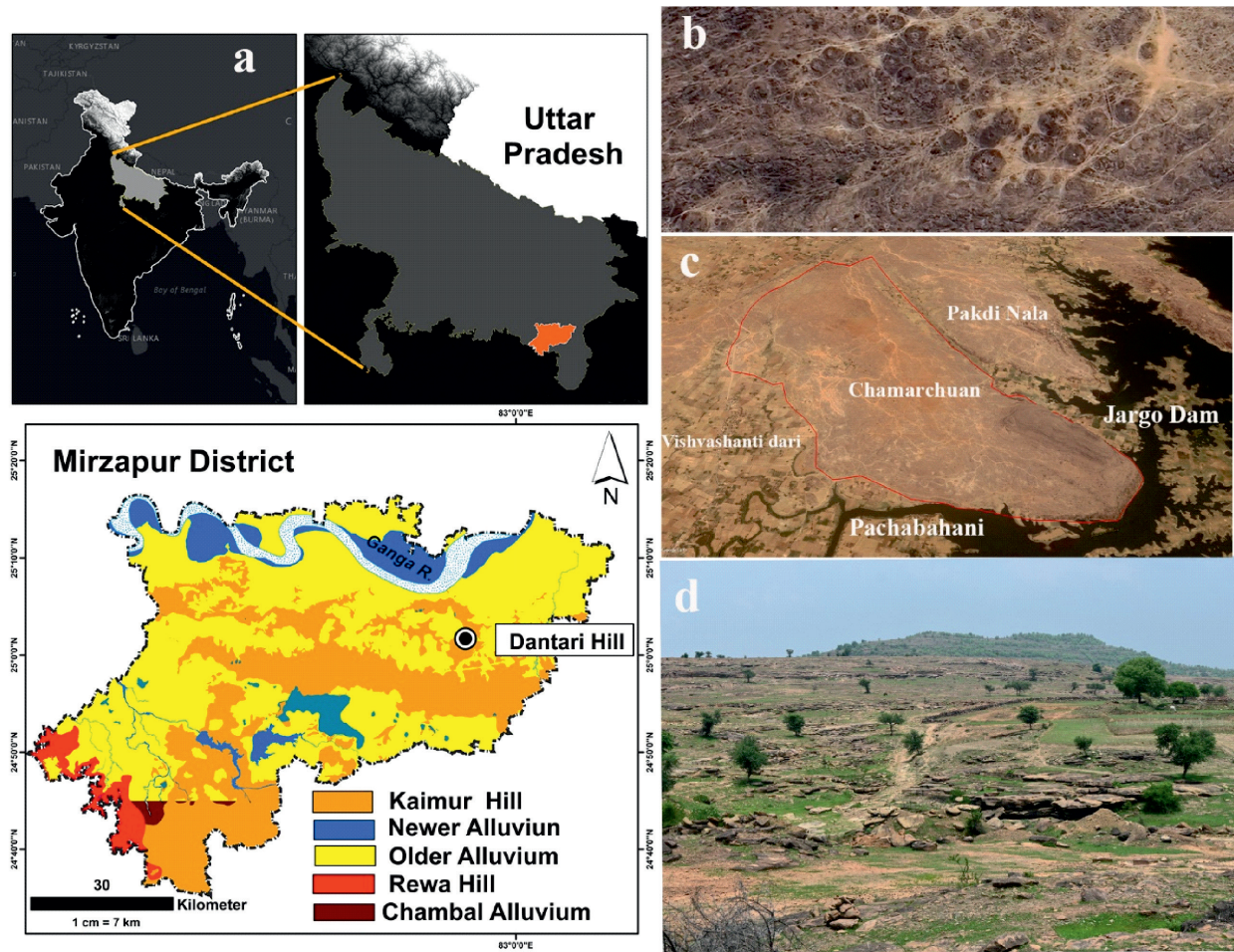


Figure 1: Location map of Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India. (a) Administrative and geographical position of Dantari Hill (b) satellite view of megalithic structures (c) satellite view of Dantari Hill (d) General landscape view of Dantari Hill

spatial, morphological, and contextual variables. Geographical coordinates were recorded using a handheld differential GPS with an accuracy of ± 3 m. These data established a spatial framework for mapping and further GIS-based analysis. Physical parameters of the megalithic structures, such as diameter, stone size, and deposits, were measured using field instruments, including a measuring tape, a theodolite, and a spirit level. Orientation was determined with a magnetic compass, and structural typologies were classified according to morphological criteria. After field data collection was completed, all information was analyzed in ArcGIS 10.8.2 to determine the clustering patterns, spatial distribution, and relationships of the megaliths within the surrounding cultural landscape.

Microlithic Collection: Random and Grid Sampling

Microliths were documented using two methods: random sampling and grid sampling. In the random method, artefacts found on the megalithic deposit were recorded in situ, along with contextual details and photographs, providing an overview of their distribution.

For a more detailed study, grid sampling was conducted in areas where microliths occurred in higher concentrations. A 10×10 m grid was laid out and divided into 1 m^2 blocks, creating 100 units. Each block was carefully examined, and all artefacts were documented. Photographs were taken from different angles to show the entire grid layout, along with close-up images of each block. Some selective

artefacts were collected from each block for further analysis. The artefacts were packed in individual bags, labelled according to their block number and grid location to maintain accurate provenience.

Micro documentation of Rock Paintings

Micro-documentation method was applied for recording the rock paintings. In this process, the morphological features of shelter such as length, height, depth, orientation and surface characteristics were recorded. The shelter was then divided into panels and clusters, and each was measured systematically. All visible paintings were documented by using the SHREE Documentation Sheet, which includes details such as the painting's location, context, size, height from the present ground level, colour, condition, style and orientation. Each painting was photographed properly. Surrounding landscape features were recorded to understand the environmental context. After completing field documentation, the recorded paintings were analysed using D-Stretch software to identify shapes more clearly and enhance faded images

The Inscription Documentation

The methodology adopted for this study involved systematic documentation, which included photographing the panels, preparing line drawings, taking measurements, and recording detailed descriptions of the inscription and its context. Along with documenting the inscription itself, notes were taken on the surrounding landscape and present-day land-use activities to understand the site's broader setting. In addition, literature was reviewed to interpret the inscription within its historical context and to compare it with similar epigraphic materials from the region. It is important to note that stumpage was not included in this documentation process.

Cross-Transect Method

To document habitation mounds, a cross-transect method was employed. In this process, the mound was divided into four quadrants, and a central datum point was taken at the midpoint of the mound. From this datum point, multiple assessment points were taken in each direction at intervals of 25 m. At each assessment point, cultural materials were collected from a 5 m radius. The recovered materials were packed in separate labelled bags. Subsequently, the spatial data were analysed using ArcGIS 10.8.2, while the physical data were examined in the laboratory.

Result

Megalithic

Megalithic structures are locally known as *Bhirihari* in this area. Field documentation, along with GIS-based methods, revealed several aspects of these megaliths, including their distribution, clustering, typology, construction, resource material, disturbance and Preservation Status.

Distribution and Clustering

Documentation reveals a total of 482 megalithic structures at Dantari Hill. Satellite imagery and GIS analysis show that the megaliths are arranged in five clusters (A–E) covering a wider area of the hill (Figure 2). Cluster-A is located on the right bank of the Vishva Shanti Dari toward the west of the hill and contains 6 megalithic structures. Cluster-B is located on the left bank of the Vishva Shanti Dari toward the northwest of the hill and contains 43 megalithic structures. Cluster-C is located on the left bank of the Vishva Shanti Dari and the Chamarchuan Nala toward the west of the hill, and contains 11

megalithic structures. Cluster-D is the largest cluster, located south of the hill on the left bank of the Pachabahani River, and contains 420 megalithic structures. Cluster-E is the smallest cluster, located separately to the north of the hill, and contains 2 megalithic structures.

The GIS elevation study indicates that most megaliths were built between 110 and 140 meters above sea level. There is a particularly strong concentration between 110 and 130 meters, suggesting that people preferred to construct megaliths on mid-elevation terraces. Out of the 482 recorded structures, more than three-quarters are found within this mid-elevation zone, which corresponds to the stable sandstone surfaces on the southern and western slopes of Dantari Hill. Cluster-D is the largest and most densely concentrated cluster. It has 209 monuments at 110–120 meters and 141 monuments at 120–130 meters. These elevations feature gently rolling terrain with moderate slopes, which is suitable for building. The smaller clusters (A, B, and C) show the same pattern, with most of their monuments also occurring between 110 and 130 meters. Cluster E, located in the northeast, has only two cairns, but they, too, fall within this elevation range.

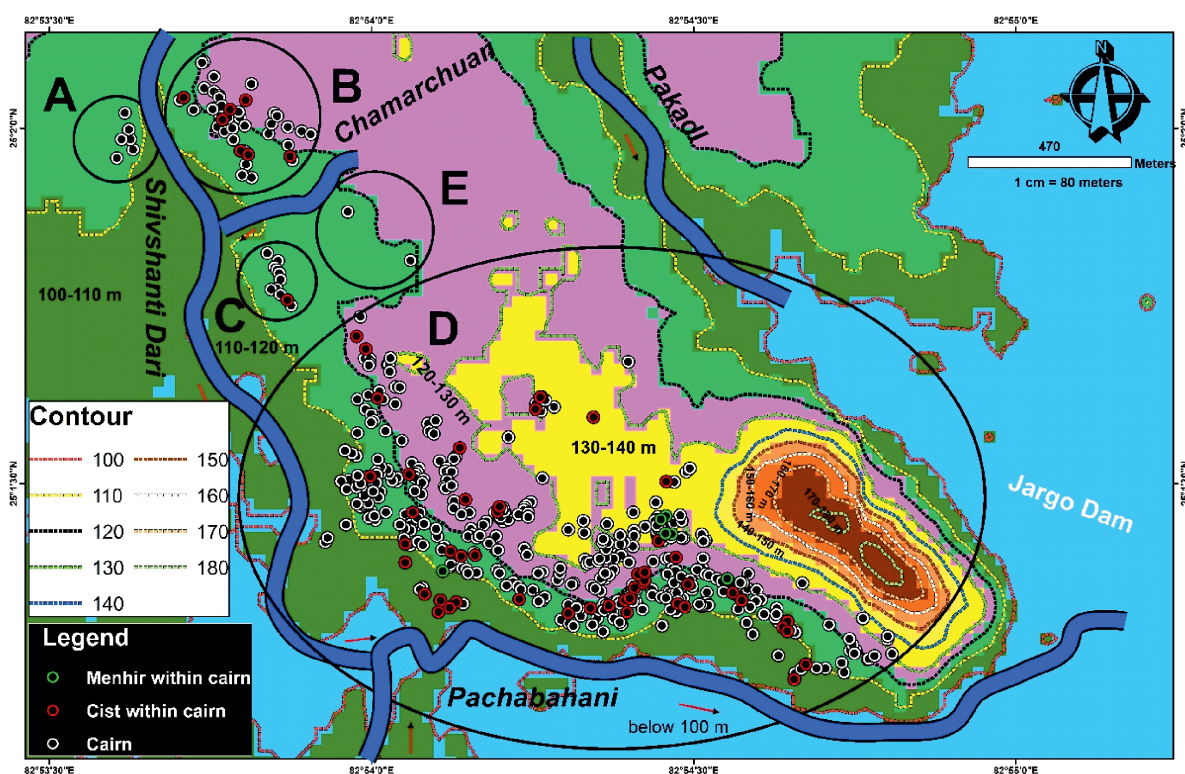


Figure 2: Distribution of megaliths in cluster (A-E) at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Typology and construction

Documentation reveals three principal types of megalithic structures: cairn, cist within cairn, and menhir within cairn (Figure 3). Each type displays its own architectural features but follows a broadly similar construction sequence involving ground preparation, chamber formation, and mound building.

Cairns ($n = 420$) are the most common structures at the site. They are usually circular or oval, measuring 2–20 m in diameter and 0.5–1.2 m in height. Cairns were made using loose, irregular sandstone blocks mixed with soil to create a firm mound. Construction began with leveling and compacting the burial floor. Then an inner wall of sandstone blocks was built in a brick-like pattern. After this, the pit was gradually filled with layers of soil and stone blocks to form a solid core. Larger stones were placed on the outer surface to shape the mound and provide strength.

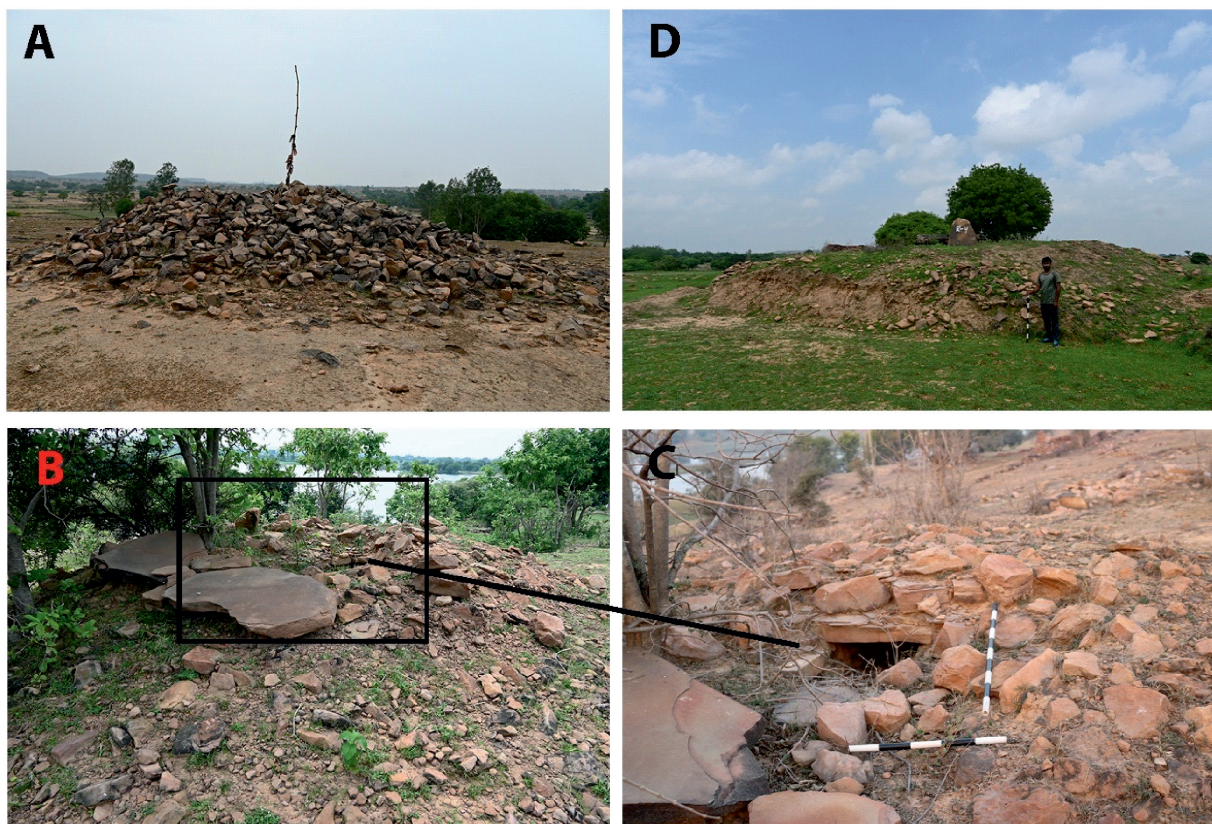


Figure 3: Typological Variation of megalithic structures at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India. (A) Cairn (B) Cist within cairn (C) Cist chamber of cist within cairn (D) Menhir within cairn

Cists within cairns ($n = 56$) are the second most common type. They are identified by a box-like chamber covered with large capstones and then enclosed within a cairn deposit. The chambers were made in three different ways. Some were created by stacking many flat sandstone pieces in a brick-like pattern. Others used three large upright orthostat slabs to form the sides and back, topped with a heavy capstone. A few examples were formed by digging into the natural soil to create a shallow pit-like chamber, which was then sealed with layers of stone and soil. In most cases, the chamber was placed midway inside the cairn deposit. After building the chamber, the cairn was completed with layers of soil and stone, enclosing it within the mound.

Menhirs within cairns ($n = 6$) are rare at the site. Here, a tall upright stone was placed at the centre of the cairn. These menhirs stand 1.2–2.8 m high and were set into a prepared socket filled with smaller stones to keep them stable. Once the menhir was fixed in place, the cairn was built around it with stone and soil.

Resource Material

The construction material for the megaliths at Dantari Hill came directly from the surrounding landscape. The hill is part of the Upper Vindhyan formation, an area rich in purplish, fine-grained sandstone, shale, and conglomerate. These rocks naturally split into flat pieces and are ideal for megalithic architecture. During fieldwork, more than twenty quarry pits were identified at the site, some ancient and some still active (Figure 4). This shows that stone cutting has been practiced here for a long time. Because these quarries lie very close to the megalithic clusters, it is clear that most of the stone used for the structures was taken from nearby outcrops rather than brought from far away.

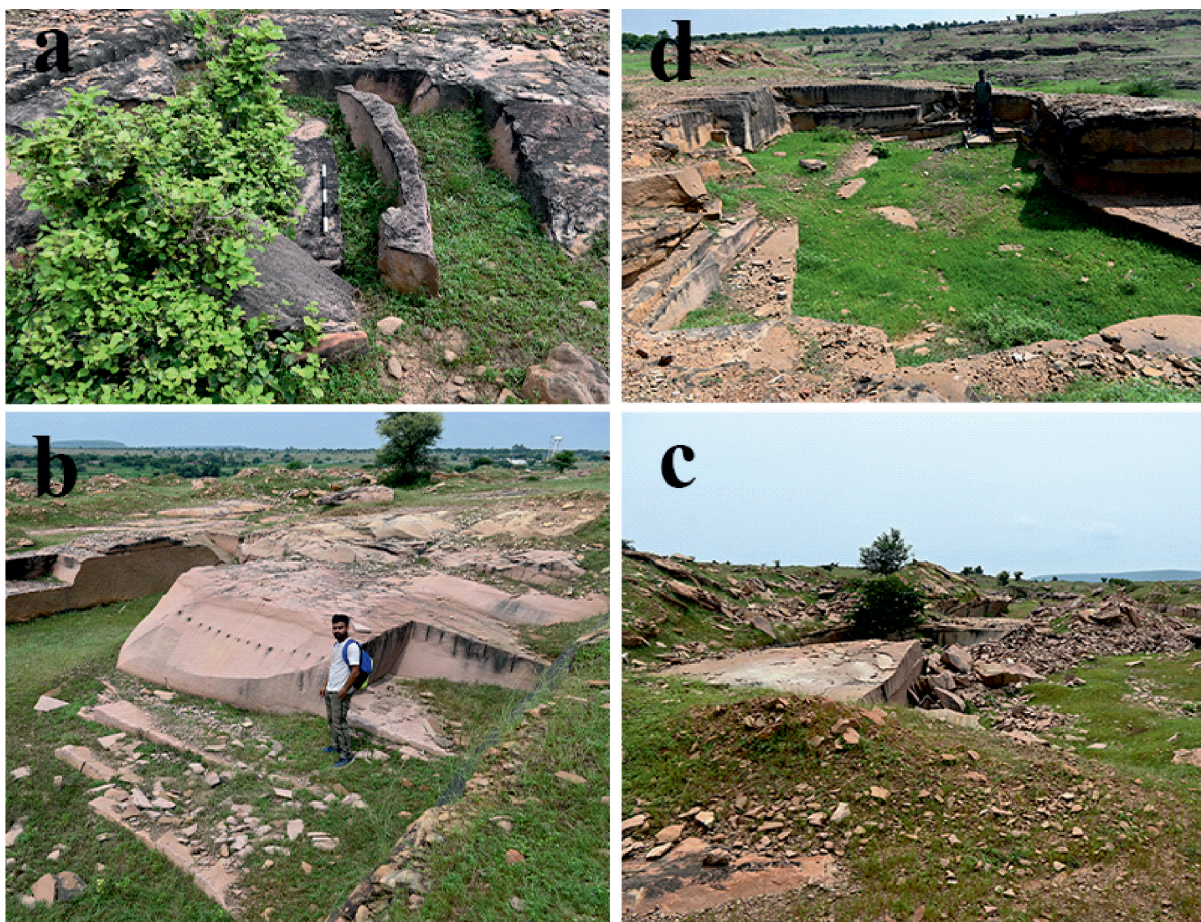


Figure 4: Stone quarry pits (a-d) at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India

Site Disturbance and Preservation Status

To understand the condition of the megalithic remains at Dantari Hill, each recorded structure was classified as intact, partially disturbed, or completely disturbed. Out of the 482 monuments, 123 are intact, 273 show partial damage, and 87 are fully disturbed. These numbers indicate that the site faces serious preservation challenges (Figure 5). The main cause of damage is long-term stone quarrying, which continues even today. Quarrying has not only removed many surface monuments but also altered the hill's natural shape and layers, resulting in the permanent loss of archaeological information.

Microlithic

Microliths form an important cultural component of the site, and their association with the megaliths enhances the overall significance of Dantari Hill. Their presence offers broader insights into the cultural practices, ritual behaviour, and technological activities of the community in this region.

Distribution and Clustering

Microlith remains are present in all megalithic clusters at the site, indicating that lithic activity was an important part of cultural practices. During the documentation of the megalithic structures, a total of 250 microlithic artefacts were collected from 23 megaliths (Table 1). Most of these artefacts were recovered from the outer periphery of the megaliths, while some came from disturbed deposits inside the structures (Figure 6). The random collected assemblage comprises complete blades ($n=42$), microblades ($n=73$), cores ($n=23$), flakes ($n=104$), debitage ($n=2$) and chips ($n=3$).



Figure 5: Disturbed megalithic structures at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district Uttar Pradesh, India

Table 1: Random collected microlithic artefacts at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India

<i>SRN</i>	<i>Megalith No.</i>	<i>Artefact Recovered</i>
1	A-1	14
2	A-6	29
3	B-5	2
4	B-7	3
5	B-8	22
6	B-9	8
7	B-11	2
8	B-12	6
9	B-22	5
10	B-29	36
11	B-30	75
12	C-6	16
13	C-10	7
14	D-21	1
15	D-39	1
16	D-41	2
17	D-70	10
18	D-75	1
19	D-125	1
20	D-155	5
21	D-167	1
22	D-377	1
23	E-385	2
Total	23	250



Figure 6: Random collected microlith artefacts from megalithic structures at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India.

In addition to the random collection, a trench layout was conducted in an area considered a potential microlithic zone for detailed study (Figure 7). This trench was located in the western part of



Figure 7: Trench-layout scene during the documentation of microliths with a systematic method at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh

the site, within Cluster D, the largest cluster of megaliths. The method revealed good result. From this layout, 605 artefacts were recovered, comprises complete blade, micro-blade, flakes, core, debitage and chips (Table 2). The high number of flakes, fragments, and debitage shows that this area was used for tools production (Figure 8).

A comparison between the random and grid collections artefacts shows that complete tools like blades and micro-blades are found around or inside the megaliths, while debitage and chips are found only in small numbers. In contrast, the trench layout yielded a large amount of debitage, chips, and broken pieces but fewer complete tools, indicating that this zone functioned mainly as a tool-production area. This pattern suggests that the trench layout area functioned as a tool-production zone, where raw material was worked, and the finished tools were offered to the dead during funerary rituals.

Table 2: Grid collected microlithic artefacts at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India

Block	NOA	Complete blade	Micro-blade	Core	Debitage	Flake	Chip
A	15	×	1	×	3	5	6
B	46	3	5	1	20	3	14
C	66	1	5	1	39	9	11
D	79	×	6	4	37	17	15
E	75	1	4	5	46	9	10
F	88	1	4	2	55	12	14
G	100	×	1	1	76	10	12
H	96	2	7	1	64	6	16
I	20	×	4	0	13	1	2
J	20	×	4	1	12	2	1
Total	605	8	41	16	365	74	101



Figure 8: Grid collected microlith artefacts at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India

Raw Material and Technology

The microlithic tools from Dantari Hill were primarily made of chert, a fine-grained siliceous stone ideal for producing sharp, regular blades. Smaller amounts of chalcedony, agate and quartz were also

used, but these are much less common in the collection (Figure 9). The strong preference for chert indicates that the toolmakers deliberately selected raw materials that enabled them to produce long, thin micro-blades with good control.

The technology used at Dantari is based on a well-developed microblade industry. The assemblage includes flakes, blades, micro-blades, cores, chips, and debitage, representing all steps of the tool-making process. Many cores show carefully prepared platforms and wedge-shaped or fluted forms, which helped in removing micro-blades in a regular and efficient manner. Several cores are fully exhausted, showing that the raw material was used carefully and repeatedly to get the maximum number of blades. Intact micro-blades have flat platforms and parallel scars, suggesting pressure flaking or indirect percussion, both of which allow precise blade removal. The large number of broken blades and debitage in the grid area indicates that part of Dantari Hill was used as a tool-production area, not only for funerary activities.

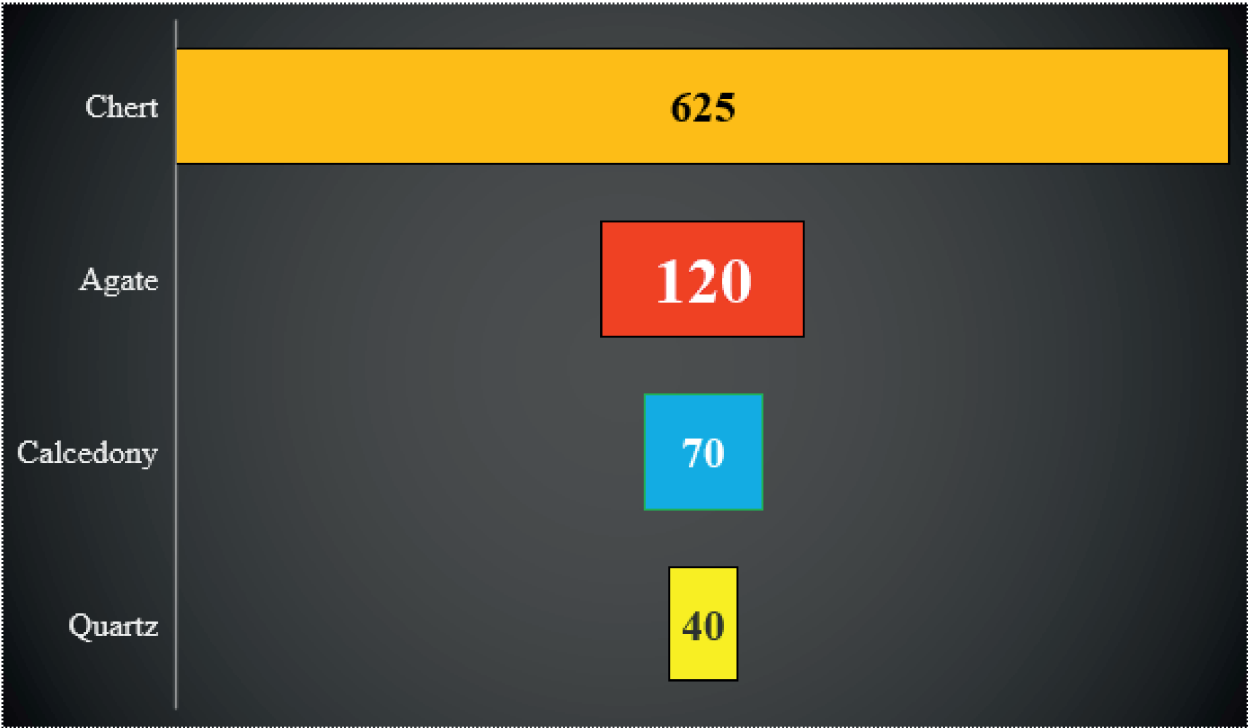


Figure 9: Raw material utilised in production of microliths at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Rock Art

Archaeological exploration identified a painted rock shelter on the eastern edge of Dantari Hill (Figure 10). The shelter measures about 25 m in length (north–south) and 5 m in depth, with a maximum height of 6.3 m above the surface. It faces east and southeast, giving wide visibility from the shelter. The panel documentation recorded a total of 119 individual depictions.

Panel Description and Distribution

The paintings in the shelter are distributed across five panels, each containing multiple clusters of paintings (Table 3). Panel A (68 × 50 cm) is located at the northern corner of the shelter. Its surface is rough, and only six paintings were documented here, arranged in three clusters. Panel B (381 × 107 cm) is the widest and most extensively used panel. It has a smooth surface and contains ten clusters, representing the highest number of paintings in the shelter. Panel C (40 × 32 cm) is the smallest panel

and lies in the shallowest part of the shelter. Despite its size, it contains several ritualistic depictions, including a megalithic burial depiction. Panel-D (177×100 cm), situated south of Panel-C, contains two clusters with a total of eight paintings. Panel-E is positioned above Panel-D at the maximum height of the shelter. Due to its high and the difficulty of reaching this area, it contains the fewest painted motifs.

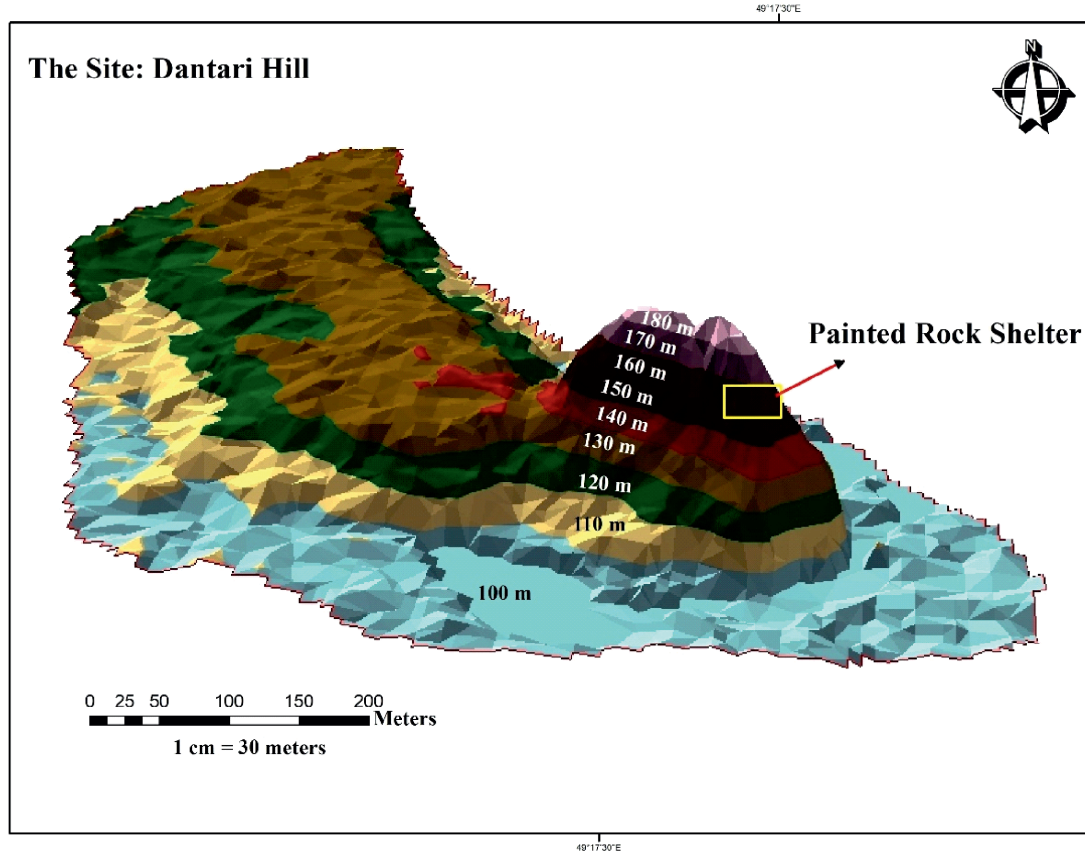


Figure 10: The position of painted rock shelter at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Table 3: Detail catalogue of painted rock shelter at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India

Sr. No.	Panel	No. of Cluster	Subject	No. of Execution
1	A	3	War, Faunal, Inscription	6
2	B	10	Geometric, Inscription, Faunal, Unidentified, Anthropogenic, Faunal, War, Nature, Delivery scene, Ritualistic scene	92
3	C	2	Anthropogenic, Faunal, Unidentified, Geometric scene, Ritualistic scene	9
4	D	2	War, Geometric scene	8
5	E	1	Anthropogenic, Geometric scene	4

Content and Colour

Micro-documentation revealed a variety of thematic depictions in the shelter (Figure 11). These themes generally relate to everyday life and the historical context of the period. The war theme is the most prominent and appears across Panels A to D. It includes scenes of galloping horse riders, warriors holding swords, human figures with bows and arrows, marching groups, and battles between two opposing sides.

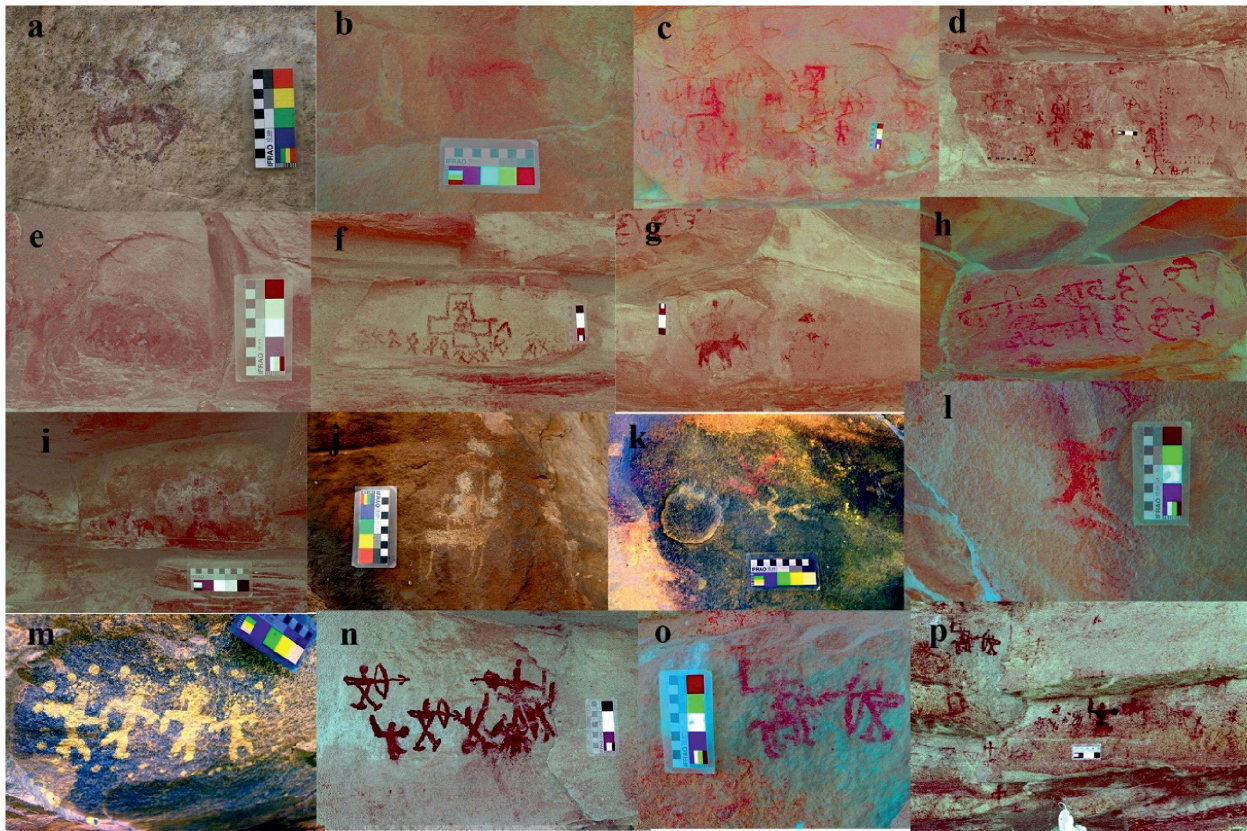


Figure 11: Diverse thematic depiction in painted rock shelter at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India
 (a) Horse rider (b) Faunal depiction (c-d) War scene (e) Anthropogenic scene (f) Ritual scene (g) domestication (h) Inscription (i) Anthropogenic scene (j) Royal scene (k) Anthropogenic scene (l) Dancing (m) Megalithic (n-p) War scene

The anthropogenic theme is the second most common, found in Panels B, C, and E. These depictions show humans engaged in various activities, including domestication, marching, riding animals, standing with objects, and childbirth. Ritualistic themes are among the most important depictions in the shelter and are located in areas with limited visibility. A key example appears in Panel C, where Cluster 3.2 depicts a megalithic burial. In this scene, four human figures lie down, holding each other's hands, surrounded by a circle of dots. Additionally, in Panel B, Cluster 2.5 depicts a ritual scene in which one human figure stands inside a hollow, cross-shaped structure while others stand in a row facing it. Five inscriptions in Devanagari script are also found in the shelter, likely added later. These inscriptions mention names such as *Sugreeva Laal Heero*, *Neelamee Heero*, *Rama Sakala*, *Soogreeva*, *Seeva Charana*, and *La Sutana*. Additionally, several other themes, such as nature, geometric patterns, and animal figures, are also depicted, though in smaller numbers.

The paintings in the shelter were made mainly using two colours: red and white. Due to long exposure to sunlight and water staining, these colours now appear in different shades such as dark ochre, light ochre, off-white, and light yellowish tones. Most of the paintings were executed in red, likely obtained from hematite, which is abundant at the site. White pigment appears in only a few paintings and may have been produced using lime.

Inscription

The field visit also documented an inscription at the site. It is located south of the hill, on the left bank of the Pachbahani River. The inscription is carved on a large sandstone boulder and occupies

an area of about 40×26 cm. The inscription is divided into two sections, each containing five lines (five on the left and five on the right). At the center, a carved fish symbol separates the two sections, and an arrow-shaped symbol is engraved on the left side of the panel (Figure 12a & b). This five-line inscription is written in Kaithi script. Due to the open environment and immersion in water, the script has been considerably eroded. Based on the preliminary reading, the names mentioned likely belong to individuals from the Hindu and Muslim Communities, with surnames such as Mahto, Ali, and *Mohammad*. However, based on paleography, the inscription dates to approximately the 19th CE.



Figure 12: The general view of Kaithi inscription found at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India.

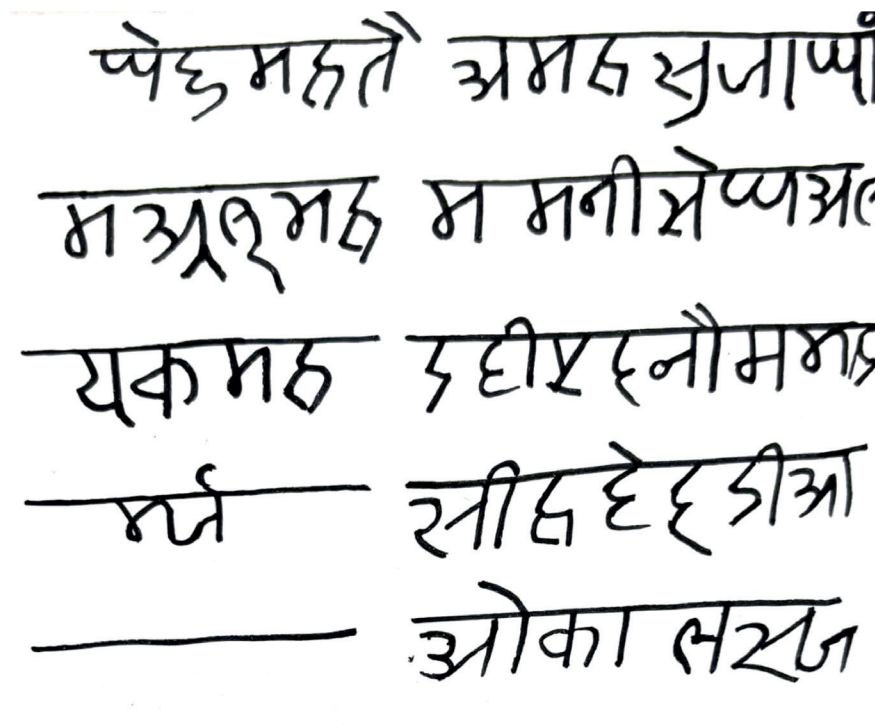


Figure 12b: The eye copy of the inscription found at Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Settlement

A systematic field survey around Dantari Hill identified three habitation sites: Baheri, Ban-Imilia, and Bahera (Figure 13). These sites provide important evidence of settlement activity from the Early Iron Age to the Historic period. All three are located within a 2 km radius of Dantari Hill and show strong cultural and material connections with the megalithic traditions of the Vindhyan region.

Baheri

Baheri is located on the right bank of the Pachbahani River, south of Dantari Hill, at an elevation of 97-101 m AMSL. The mound measures about 120×100 m and contains cultural materials, including thick red-ware bowls and pots. These finds suggest that Baheri served as an important habitation area closely connected to the mortuary activity at Dantari.

Ban-Imilia

Ban-Imilia, situated 2 km southeast of Dantari Hill, consists of a large mound (260×210 m; 95-103 m AMSL) that is now divided by a modern road. Surface finds include red ware, black-and-red ware, and black-slipped ware, with vessel forms such as vases, spouted pots, and storage jars. Artefacts like a stone celt, a terracotta figurine, and glass fragments were also recovered. The material indicates a long and continuous occupation from the Early Iron Age to the Historic period.

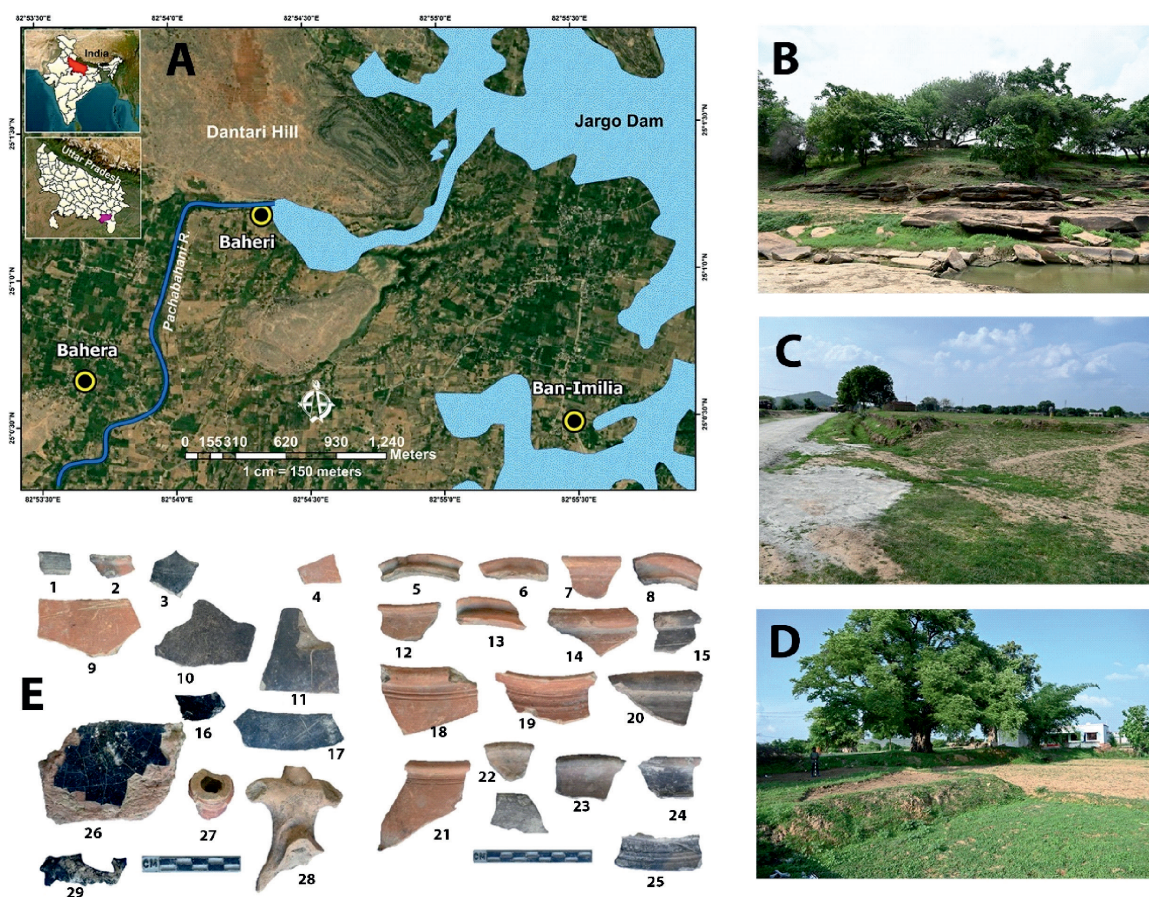


Figure 13: The figure shows the position of Habitation sites in the context of Dantari Hill, Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, India (A) Location of Baheri, Ban-Imilia, and Bahera (B) General view of Baheri (C) General view of Ban-Imilia (D) General view of Bahera (E) Material remains found from habitation sites

Bahera

Bahera, located 1 km south of Dantari Hill on the right bank of the Pachbahani River, measures approximately 110×120 m with an elevation of 106–110 m AMSL. Although the site is disturbed at the surface, ceramics such as black-and-red ware, red ware, and red-slipped ware indicate that Bahera was inhabited from the Megalithic period through the Early Historic and into the Kushana-Gupta phase.

Discussion

The evidence from Dantari Hill reveals it is a multi-cultural site, which was shaped by long-term human activity, ritual behaviour, technological practices and interaction with the environment. Geographical features such as hilly terrain, perennial water channels, stone resources, and alluvial soil collectively create a favorable ecological setting, making it a suitable place for settlement and cultural activities. The site has recorded 482 megalithic structures, indicating that the hill was used as a mortuary ground for a long time. The megalithic structures were found in clusters, constructed on mid-elevation terraces and gentle slopes. This pattern indicates that the locations chosen for constructing the megaliths were planned and purposeful, rather than random. The dense concentration of megaliths on mid-elevation terraces (110–130 m AMSL) shows that the builders preferred areas that offered a stable base, good visibility, and easy access. The gentle slopes of Dantari, where most of the megaliths are found, seem to have been chosen because of favourable geographical conditions and the need for less human effort (Sontakke *et al.* 2025; Sontakke, Tiwary, *et al.* 2024; Sharma, Saurabh, *et al.* 2026). Constructing megaliths on gentle slopes requires less effort than building on steeper slopes, which explains why the majority of megaliths were built in these areas. They are also usually located near water sources, showing that water was important in burial rituals. Similar traditions are still observed by tribal communities in nearby areas such as Doodhi (Sonbhadra), Adwa Valley (Rewa), and Shankargarh (Prayagraj). In these places, burials and memorial structures are still built near water sources, showing that water continues to hold symbolic importance in mortuary practices (Singh *et al.* 2025). All megaliths are built on the hill, and none are found in the alluvial plain. This suggests that people used the hilly, barren land for burials and kept the fertile alluvial land for farming.

Typological variations in megaliths reflect different burial practices within the region. Cairns are the most common and may represent normal community burials. The less common cists and menhirs may belong to people of higher status or to those in special roles. Ethnoarchaeological studies, such as among the Munda people in Jharkhand, show that different stone monuments can represent different kinds of deaths. This helps us understand that similar symbolic meanings may have existed at Dantari (Shekhar *et al.* 2014; Sharma, Saurabh, Singh, *et al.* 2025). The discovery of menhirs placed inside cairns at Dantari is important because earlier studies in the Vindhya did not record this type (Sontakke, Sharma, *et al.* 2024; Sontakke *et al.* 2025). Similar examples are found in Chhattisgarh (Sharma 2000), suggesting that communities in these regions may share ideas or cultural practices. Thus, the Dantari megaliths broaden our knowledge of Vindhyan burial traditions and show possible connections with neighbouring areas.

The presence of microliths at the site provides important insights into the cultural practices associated with the megalithic tradition. Complete microlithic tools recorded from the megalithic structures suggest that these artefacts were used as offerings during funerary rituals. The presence of chips, flakes, and other waste pieces also shows that microlith production occurred within the mortuary land itself. Microliths are widely reported from several sites in the surrounding region (Tewari 1997; Tewari 1999; Pant 1982; Sontakke *et al.* 2025; Sontakke *et al.* 2024), where they were

once used in day-to-day activities. Although metal tools gradually replaced stone implements during the Iron Age. The continued use of microliths in the mortuary context at Dantari shows that their symbolic value outlasted their practical function. Significantly, no microliths have been found at the habitation sites associated with Dantari, which suggests that these tools were reserved specifically for funerary practices. This continuity reflects the persistence of older cultural traditions and highlights the enduring ritual importance attached to these small stone tools.

The painted rock shelter adds another important dimension to our understanding. The rock shelter contains images of humans, animals, hunting scenes, war scenes, geometric symbols, and ritual activities. The variety of these paintings shows that people used the shelter for many centuries, from prehistoric times through later historical periods. One painting shows a megalithic depiction of human figures lying within a circular dotted design. This resembles the shape and idea of megalithic structures. Similar depictions are found at Ranigadar in Bihar and Chikrampur in Karnataka (Sundara 1987; Kumar 2015). This suggests that the rock shelter was connected to burial practices and may have served as a ritual site. The paintings might have been part of rituals, storytelling, or memorial activities. Other paintings, such as horse riders and warriors, show that the area was active during the early historic period as well (Tiwary *et al.* 2023; Sontakke *et al.* 2025; Sharma, Saurabh, Sontakke, *et al.* 2025).

The inscription also provided important insights into the region's activities. The names recorded in the inscription may be associated with workers engaged in stone quarrying at the site. This interpretation is supported by the presence of quarries and stone-cutting evidence near the inscription, where sandstone slabs have been cut directly from the riverbed. Geologically, Dantari Hill lies within a fine-grained purplish sandstone lithological zone known for high-quality stone suitable for construction (Kaur *et al.* 2019). Owing to this geological advantage, numerous ancient and modern quarry pits are present throughout the region, indicating the long-term and continued importance of these sandstone resources. Similar quarry-related inscriptions are reported from southern Chunar. At Badagaon, about 7 km from Dantari, over fifty label inscriptions have been found on quarry pits and on finished and unfinished sandstone pillars (Jayaswal 1998; Pant *et al.* 1990). These inscriptions, written in Brahmi, Kharoṣṭhi, Nagari, and Kaithī scripts, date from the 3rd century BCE to the early modern period (Jayaswal 1998). At Durgakhoh, Cunningham also recorded label inscriptions and suggested that quarry workers carved their names while resting near the work area (Cunningham 1885).

The settlement sites of Baheri, Ban-Imilia, and Bahera, located along the right bank of the Pachbahani river, form a vital part of the wider Dantari landscape. Material remains recovered from these sites suggest continuous occupation from the Early Iron Age through the Gupta period, covering over a thousand years of continuous habitation (Sontakke *et al.* 2025; Sharma, Saurabh, *et al.* 2026; Sharma, Sontakke, *et al.* 2026). Their proximity to the megaliths suggests that people lived in the plains while using the hill primarily for rituals and burials. This spatial organisation settlement on fertile plains and mortuary activities on the hill is consistent with practices observed in many other cultures. Together, the settlements provide insights into everyday life, while the megaliths, rock art, and inscription reveal ritual, symbolic, and economic dimensions of the community. Overall, the evidence from Dantari Hill presents a rich and interconnected cultural landscape, where daily life, ritual traditions, technological practices, and environmental choices came together to shape a complex and enduring human presence.

Conclusion

The detailed documentation and different methods used at Dantari Hill show that it is a long-occupied archaeological landscape in the northeastern Vindhyas. The presence of varied cultural materials such

as megalithic structures, microliths, rock paintings, quarry pits, an inscription, and nearby settlements is found together in one place. This combination gives us a fuller and more connected picture of the past. Each type of evidence supports the others. The large number of megalithic structures shows that funerary practices were an important part of the community's life. The microliths found in these structures and the complete blades used as offerings show that tool-making and offerings were closely connected to their megalithic traditions. The quarry pits show how people used the area's natural resources, while the choice of barren, hilly land for burials and the use of fertile alluvial land for other activities reflect planned land-use practices. The rock paintings add another layer, expressing their beliefs, symbols, and memories through art. Together, these remains show how people lived, worked, honoured their dead, and interacted with their environment in a connected and meaningful way. This close relationship between all cultural materials helps us understand that Dantari Hill was not just a burial place, but a complete cultural landscape that developed over many generations.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks to Archaeological Survey of India for granting survey Roomissin. The author sincerely thanks the people of Baheri village for their generous support and cooperation during field investigations at Dantari Hill. Special appreciation is given to the saints and members of the Kabir Ashram for their kind accommodation and logistical assistance throughout the research period. The author also expresses deep gratitude to Dr. Dhamm Ratna for his invaluable help and field assistance during the survey and documentation. Special thanks are due to Dr. S. Krishnamurthy and Mr. Preetam Kumar for their valuable contributions to deciphering the inscription.

Competing Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Funding Statement

This research was supported by the Trans-Disciplinary research project under IoE, No. 60608 (2023-25 & 2024-25) by Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), India.

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