



## Shankhalipi script of gupta era

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**(Mains GS 1 : Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.)**

### **Context:**

- Recently, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) discovered remains of an ancient temple dating back to the Gupta period (5th century) in a village in Uttar Pradesh's Etah district.
- The stairs of the temple had 'shankhalipi' inscriptions, which were deciphered by the archaeologists as saying, 'Sri Mahendraditya', the title of Kumaragupta I of the Gupta dynasty.

### **The archaeological findings:**

- The Bilsarh site was declared 'protected' in 1928 and every year, the ASI undertakes scrubbing work at the protected sites.
- This year, the team discovered "two decorative pillars close to one another, with human figurines.
- According to the superintending archaeologist of ASI's Agra circle, the excavation found the stairs."
- He says the inscription on the stairs possibly reads 'Sri Mahendraditya', which was the title of Kumaragupta I.
- As per the ASI, the stairs led to a structural temple built during the Gupta period.

### **Significance of discovery:**

- 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).
- In the 5th century, Kumaragupta I ruled for 40 years over north-central India.
- The Guptas were the first to build structural temples, distinctly different from the ancient rock-cut temples.

### **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.

### **Chronology and meaning:**

- 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.
- In fact, shell inscriptions are also reported in Indonesia’s Java and Borneo.

### **Deciphering the 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.

**Conclusion:**

- 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.