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# UNIT 1 HISTORICAL SOURCES<sup>1</sup>

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographies or *Charitas*
- 1.3 Inscriptions
- 1.4 Temples
- 1.5 Oral Tradition as Source
- 1.6 *Puranas*
- 1.7 Law Books
- 1.8 Poems, Songs and Other Literary Sources
- 1.9 Chinese Accounts
- 1.10 Commentaries
- 1.11 Chronicles or *Vamsavalis*
- 1.12 Islamic Sources
- 1.13 Archaeological Sources
- 1.14 Summary
- 1.15 Key Words
- 1.16 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 1.17 Suggested Readings

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- new forms of historical writing that become current in the early medieval period;
- meaning of *charitas* and *vamsavalis*;
- the inscriptions as source material and what were their main features in the early medieval period;
- Islamic sources which give information about the early Sultanate rule and
- archaeological sources and how limited archaeological work on the early medieval period has hampered historical investigation.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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As with the sources of ancient India, early medieval sources can also be divided into Literary and Archaeological. There are a few accounts by the Chinese pilgrims as well. This period is noteworthy because the beginning of the Islamic rule in northern India introduced historical writing in a big way. Thus we have a number of Islamic texts which can be used to reconstruct the early history of the Sultanate period.

This unit will be dealing with sources which can be used for the reconstruction of the history from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Many new genres of writing became common in this period such as *charitas*, *vamsavalis* and *prasastis*. Except for *Rajatarangini*, the majority of them cannot be labelled as historical writing. Despite this much can be gleaned from them which is of historical import. Presented below is a summary of all different types of source material and how they can be used to generate information that is historically important.

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## 1.2 BIOGRAPHIES OR *CARITAS*

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The post-Gupta historical writing is of three kinds: *charitas*, *prasastis* and *vamsavalis*. This kind of historical writing assumes ever greater significance because it was no longer embedded in ritual texts. *Charitas* were historical biographies. The term *charita* — literally “moving”, “doing”, “going” — refers to the activities of a person. They were written primarily as *kavyas* and are an important source for the reconstruction of history. The most noteworthy in this regard is Banabhatta’s *Harshacharita*. It is about Harshavardhana of Kannauj, his attempts to acquire sovereignty and his reign. *Charitas* relate to the activities of persons in authority. The new tradition of historical writing in the form of *charitas* according to Romila Thapar articulated historical consciousness as it concerns the actions of a particular person, indicates their cause and purpose and locates them in time and space. The subject of the *charita* is historically known and the element of fantasy, though present, is of a limited kind. *Charitas* however were not meant to be critical historical writing. They functioned more as literature. Nevertheless they are an important historical source.

The historical context in which biographies, official inscriptions and dynastic chronicles, or chronicles of regions were composed was different from the middle of the first millennium CE. A large number of polities were emerging on the political scene. The new courts needed worthy court poets who could compose their biographies which would legitimise the dynasty and publicize the activities of the kings. The courtly culture was also different from the pre-Gupta times. Historians believe that compared to the less formal, more openness of language and style of earlier courts the post seventh century courts were more hegemonic in nature. The centrality of the individual in the *charita* literature may have been due to the growth of bhakti sects where individual actions were the focus in the assessment of his/her life.

The biographical tradition became more common towards the end of the first millennium CE. The earlier biographies were treated as precedents. Biographies are important because they reflect the changes in historical situation. This was the

time when the *Puranas* were increasingly concerned with sectarian worship. The *Puranas* post mid-first millennium CE do not carry information on dynastic lists. The *charitas* and inscriptions fill this gap.

An important biography was *Ramacharita* which was written by Sandhyakaranandin in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. It focusses on the reign of Palas of eastern India particularly king Ramapala. It gives us information about the political events leading to the recovery of the region of Varendri, the heartland of Pala power from the Kaivartas by Ramapala. This text gives us an insight into what has been interpreted as the first peasant revolt in Indian history. The Kaivartas were the feudatories who revolted against the Palas. The text was composed in the reign of Madanapala, Ramapala's successor. It records not only the revolt but also the life history of Ramapala till his voluntary death. This *charita* is not about contemporary events but records something that happened during the days of Madanapala's predecessor Ramapala's reign. It recounts how Mahipala, the elder brother of Ramapala, suspecting his younger brothers of conspiracy against himself, imprisons them. His territory of Varendri is occupied by the Kaivartas who rise in revolt against him under the leadership of Divya and later Bhima. The defeated king flees and the throne is occupied by his younger brother Ramapala. This event challenges the law of primogeniture hence the need for a *charita* to justify his accession. This also fulfils the function of a biography where authority and legitimacy had to be emphasized and endorse royal ambition. In this case this is accomplished by showing the unworthiness of the elder brother. Though there is uncertainty regarding the revolt having been engineered by the lesser feudatories or the peasants, it nevertheless was an event which affords us a rare insight into the complicated process of the organization of the suppression of the revolt which is otherwise not forthcoming (Thapar, 2013). The Palas manage to successfully capture Varendri and this text legitimises their hold over it. It also provides us information about Ramapala's various campaigns against Gahadvalas of Varanasi, the eastern Gangas in Odisha, the Karnatas from the Deccan and the Colas of south India. Dharmapala is also eulogized as the king of Kanyakubja/Kannauj (which was the focus of struggle between the Palas, the Rashtrakutas and the Pratiharas in the late first millennium CE). Further stated is the fact that Dharmapala was accepted by Bhoja, Matsya, Madra, Kuru, Yadu, Yavana, Avanti, Gandhara, Kira and Pancala. These were the peoples of the past so the list is evoking earlier histories (Thapar, 2013).

*Caritas* like *Ramacharita* become crucial from a historical point of view as they encapsulate the changes in the king's relationship with his subordinates especially where the politics of opposition is made apparent (Thapar, 2013). The kings which in the *vamsanucharita* section of the *Puranas* were treated in a perfunctory fashion (due to the fact that many of the new emergent kings were patrons of non brahmanical sects) found space in the *caritas*.

A quasi-historical work is Padmagupta's *Navasahasankacharita* which tells the story of king Sindhuraja Navasahasanka of Malwa and his winning of the hand of a princess named Sashiprabha. Bilhana's work called *Vikramankadevacharita* is a eulogistic work about Vikramaditya VI, the Chalukya king of Kalyani. Hemchandra's *Kumarapalacharita* (in Sanskrit and Prakrit) tells the story of Kumarapala, king of Anahilawada, while illustrating the rules of grammar.

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### 1.3 INSCRIPTIONS

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Inscriptions in early India are of many kinds: royal edicts, votive inscriptions recording gifts, brief biographical statements, eulogies of rulers, records of particular events, legal documents pertaining to rights and obligations over land, and such like. As with all categories of historical data, they reflect historical change. The context of a text involves asking many questions, such as: Who is the author? What is the intention of the text? Who is the intended audience? How does the language reflect history? Where there is a change of language, what determines the choice? The same questions can be asked of inscriptions. Different types of historical sources have different kinds of audience as their focus. The inscriptions held special meaning for the royal court and the persons from other contemporary courts; officials concerned with the administration; religious sects who figure in the context of land grants; and the local community in the area of the grant. The inscriptions were engraved in public spaces such as temple walls, or else on copper plates. The copper plates became the property of a family, passed down from one generation to the next. The inscriptions were usually consulted by later authors and also picked up by the bards. The inscriptions were meant for public consumption and hence were open to the comments of the elite — the *samantas*, *sreshthins*, *kayasthas*, brahmanas etc.

Subsequent to the seventh century CE, many inscriptions become important because they give information about the chronological history of a dynasty along with some events. The inscriptions begin with a *prashasti* which gives historical information about the dynasty. It is in the form of a eulogy on the kings and their achievements. Initially it is of the king but soon included his dynasty. When *prasasti* records the change in the title of the king, then one can know that it marks a significant political moment. *Prashatis* give information regarding the religious affiliation of the king, updated version of dynastic history, important kings, ancestry and much more. The inscriptions tell us about the identity of the grantee, nature of the gift whether it was a gift of revenue from land or land itself; the extent of the area that was granted — it could be a small area or several villages; the religious affiliation of the grantee — it could be a Buddhist *matha* as was the case earlier or brahmanas. The inscriptions recording grants simply were not a new feature marking the new transformations that the economy was undergoing, but they record a shift from *yajna* to *dana* — from the sacrificial ritual to the gift — as methods of legitimating the donor as the patron and the donee as the legitimizer (Thapar, 2013). Now the wealth is not movable (as was in the first millennium BCE when the gift was of cows or gold) but immovable — land. With the practice of land grants, brahmanas become owners of landed wealth and hence powerful. The brahmana grantees settled on gifted land with the full support of royalty. They introduced brahmanical traditions and fostered the acceptance of kingship.

There was a distinct change in the economic structure of the kingdoms from the pre-Gupta to the post-Gupta times and a resultant change can be seen in the inscriptions which are an important source material for this period. From the sixth century CE they functioned more as official statements recording events which were deemed to be significant. Mostly these are grants of land to brahmanas, religious establishments, seminaries or even individuals. The official royal

inscriptions (*rajakiyam*) included categories such as *Sasanam* (instructions), *jayapatram* (legal decisions), *ajnapatram* (orders), and *prajnapanam* (proclamations). The instructions were meant for future kings as well which necessitated its keeping in the royal custody. Many inscriptions carried the royal seal for authentication purposes. The inscriptions gave the genealogy of the person issuing the statement, its purpose and a precise date.

The pre-Gupta inscriptions were in Prakrit but subsequently they were in Sanskrit. Sanskrit became the common language in the post-gupta period. While Prakrit was more inclusive in character and cut across caste and community identities, Sanskrit catered to upper-caste sensibilities. By the second millennium CE, regional languages started getting used in inscriptions. However the *prashasti* continued to be in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was widely used by administrators, selective religious sects, philosophers and literateurs.

The early medieval inscriptions carry useful information on subjects which have become central to the major debates concerning this period. Land grants, which became very prolific from the Gupta period onwards, are especially relevant for the reconstruction of the economy, society, status of craftsmen and crafts, crops, samantas, feudatories, kings and queens etc. Infact the debates on state formation in early medieval India, Third Urbanization, feudalism, status of women etc are alive due to inscriptions and the information that they carry. Subsequent to the Guptas, the *Puranas* ceased to carry dynastic information. In this regard, the inscription fill that void and add much to the history of dynasties.

Royal inscriptions which are common in this period record not only information related to governance but other aspects of life as well. A study of the inscriptions of this period tell us about a number of points. The pre-Gupta inscriptions were usually of the grant of revenue from the land in lieu of salaries. But later the grants of land came to be made in perpetuity and hence land itself came to be claimed by the grantee. The brahmana donees became very wealthy and powerful. They were mostly responsible for constructing inflated genealogies through their familiarity with the *vamsanucharita* of the *Puranas* and supervision of granted land as is clear from *Krisiparasara*, a manual in Sanskrit for wet rice cultivation. A substantial grant of land could form the nucleus of small kingdoms and principalities. One example is of Khoh copper plate inscription of the *maharaja* Hastin issued in 475 CE and later inscription of Samksobha of 529 CE. The grant consisted of eighteen forest kingdoms. He was thus well able to establish himself as a semi-autonomous ruler with his own feudatories. This is one example of how states and kingdoms encroached into forests and cleared them for cultivation (Thapar, 2013). They coerced the forest dwellers to become their peasants, or settled cultivators from elsewhere to labour on the land. The grantee thus acquired a source of revenue. Many grants were of land already under cultivation, or even a village, which was an immediate source of income for the grantee. These inscriptions have been used by modern scholars to suggest a new periodization of Indian history, differentiating the late first millennium CE from the earlier period. (Thapar, 2013)

Now let us discuss briefly inscriptions have been used to reconstruct the history of the an early medieval dynaty like the Candellas (Thapar, 2013). Candellas were

ruling from the ninth century to the thirteenth century CE in Central India. Their inscriptions help us to reconstruct the process of gradual state formation in the early medieval period. The Candellas emerged in a frontier area at the peripheries of Pratihara, Rashtrakuta and Pala kingdoms. They were initially the samantas of their neighbours the Pratiharas and the Kalachuri-Chedis. The inscriptions tell us about their confrontations with the Cahamanas/Cauhanas and the Gahadvalas to the north-west and fleetingly with Mahmud of Gazni. Through a study of the inscriptions one can discern the processes a newly emergent polity was going through before becoming a full fledged kingdom. We come to know about the early ancestry of Candella kings, their possible low status and how it was circumvented by adding laudatory genealogies, partly fictional and partly historical; the shaping of kingdom was done through political alliances, origin myths incorporating deities, sages and ancient histories and marriage alliances with Cahamana princess. All of these point to the adoption of measures in the shaping of the kingdom into a state. The inscriptions also tell us about the emergence of *kayasthas* as a powerful group. They record generous donations to various religious sects which are a statement of wealth, power and status of the respective kings.

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## 1.4 TEMPLES

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The post Gupta period saw a spurt in temple building. A large number of polities who were emerging on the political scene were attempting to incorporate the sacred space to legitimize their occupation of the throne. The Cholas built enormous temples with their massive enclosures along with gateways, *mandapas*, halls and water bodies. However people with lesser social status were also not left too far behind. For example the Sakta shrines like the Chausath Yogini temple at Khajuraho, dating to the ninth century CE probably catered to the needs of the people who were not part of the mainstream. Such large and small temples carried inscriptions on their walls from the post-Gupta period onwards. With the emergence of the temple, the new kings were looking to align their temporal power with the religious domain. The larger the temple, greater were the chances of its becoming famous. The more famous the temple, the greater would be the glory that was betowed on the king patronising it. Temples had greater longevity since they were built of superior material. The emergence of the temple on the sacred landscape also paralleled the evolution of the kingdom and symbolised the claim to independence and power. Very often temples emerged from modest origins which were usually a cult shrine associated with the origin of the royal family. Gradually it became an elaborate structure with multiple *mandapas*, pavilions, *gopurams*, towers etc.

Temples assume importance because sometimes they are the only way through which a settlement can be dated. They also provide information about architectural traditions, royal ideology, status, kings and their local dignitaries etc. This is so because it is in the inscriptions engraved on the temple walls that information is provided regarding the contexts in which the grant was made. Most settlements in the early medieval period grew around a temple. Thus temples emerged as a central foci in the day-to-day affairs of the settlement. One cannot ignore this source of religious, administrative and economic history if one wants to understand the processes in the early medieval period.

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## 1.5 ORAL TRADITION AS SOURCE

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The view of royalty is afforded by another perspective which forms a counterpart to the formal view. This is the bardic tradition. Scholars believe that it continues to this day though now it is fading out. This is represented by literature from the subaltern or the subordinate perspective. This is the view of those who occasionally may have participated in court activities but were essentially at a distance.

The samantas or local lords maintained bards who kept a record of their genealogies and property rights. The court scribe and the brahmana *rajguru* who authored the inscriptions and chronicles, which were regarded as the most impressive historical documents, provided one form of legitimacy. The bardic narrative formed the other. Families of the dominant castes were patrons of the *pandas*, priests-cum-genealogists, residing in places of pilgrimage — such as Pushkar, Hardwar, who were visited by members of these families on special occasions, such as a marriage, the birth of a son, or the death of an elder, or whenever a special rite had to be performed. The bardic narrative along with the inscriptions adds to the diversity in historical awareness (Thapar, 2013). The poems of the bards focused on local heroes. They are important because they reflect the perceptions of groups of a lower status. Here an instance may be given of an epic poem on the Cahamana Rajputs, the *Prithvirajarasau* of Chand Bardai. The epic in its present form is thought to be of the sixteenth or seventeenth century, although it refers back to events four centuries earlier. It tells us about the conflict of the Cahamanas with later Candella kings. What is noteworthy is that it differs from the official history of the Candellas as given in their inscriptions. The conflict not only becomes part of *Prithvirajarasau* but also other bardic compositions of the area, such as *Alha Raso* of Jagnaik Rao. Juxtaposing such narratives with official court documents often fill in the blanks in our knowledge and also provide a subaltern perspective.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. What is *Carita* literature? What is its significance in the reconstruction of the history of early medieval period? Illustrate with the help of examples.  
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2. Discuss the nature of inscriptions of the early medieval period. How is it an important source?  
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## 1.6 PURANAS

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*Purana* literally was “that which is ancient”. These texts are an important source

for the reconstruction of history of the early medieval period. They provide genealogical information about the various dynasties that were ruling in this period. They were composed in the first millennium CE. Each *Purana* revolved around a deity. Each consisted of the *panca-laksana* or “the five facets”. These were the descriptions of the *sarga* (primary creation), *prati-sarga* (secondary creation), *manvantara* (the time cycles), *vamsa* (succession, in this instance, largely of deities and sages), and the *vamsanucarita*. There are eighteen *Mahapuranas* and many *Upa Puranas* which are subsidiary texts, often focusing on lesser deities. Associated with these were texts on sacred topography and places of pilgrimage, such as the *Sthala-Puranas* and the *Mahatmyas*. Still later, the caste *Puranas* — as for example those of the Mallas, the Srimalas, and the Dharmaranyas are historically important. Of the non-brahmanical sects, the Jainas produced their own *Puranas*, presenting a different perspective from the brahmanical.

The *Upa Puranas* in particular provide information on popular beliefs, customs and festivals. They are useful to trace the interaction between the Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical ideas, values and practices which resulted in the emergence of distinct regional configurations (Singh, 2008).

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## 1.7 LAW BOOKS

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In the early medieval period a large number of important and influential *Dharmasastra* compilations, digests and commentaries came to be written. This points to the processes of formalisation of law and legal procedures which helped the state to regulate and arbitrate in the social life of its subjects (Singh, 2008). The compilations include the *Chaturvimshatimata*, which put together the teachings of 24 law givers. Jimutavahana wrote a work on procedural law called the *Vyavaharamatrika* and a digest of laws on inheritance called the *Dayabhaga*. Major commentaries include those of: Medatithi (9<sup>th</sup> century), Govindaraja (11/12<sup>th</sup> century), Kulluka (12<sup>th</sup> century) on the *Manusmriti*. Vijnaneshwara (11-12<sup>th</sup> century) and Apararka (12<sup>th</sup> century) wrote commentaries on the *Yajnavalkya Smriti*. Vijnaneshwara’s commentary, *Mitakshara*, became an authority on various aspects of Hindu law. Other important Dharmashastra works include Lakshmidhara’s *Kritya Kalpataru* (12<sup>th</sup> century) and Devanabhatta’s *Smritichandrika* (11/12<sup>th</sup> century).

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## 1.8 POEMS, SONGS AND OTHER LITERARY SOURCES

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The devotional songs of *Alvars* and *Nayanars* and the hagiographies of the saints were important Tamil texts. *Nandikkalambakam*, is a poem of 80 stanzas which gives a eulogistic account of the reign of the Pallava king Nandivarman III. The author is not known. Kannada works, many of which were associated with Jainism were composed under the royal patronage of the Rashtakutas, Hoysalas and Chalukyas.

A Sanskrit and Prakrit work called *Lekhapaddhati* gives useful historical information and contains models of various types of legal documents. It was composed in Gujarat and the author is not known. Another example is *Krishiparashara*, a text composed in Bengal dealing with agriculture. Jain folk tales called *dharma-kathas* of western India offer have merchants as protagonists.

They offer useful information on trade and traders. Mathematical texts like the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Ganitasarasangraha* of Mahaviracharya and the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Lilavati* of Bhaskaracharya offer incidental information on prices, weights and measures, wages and coins (Singh, 2008 )

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## 1.9 CHINESE ACCOUNTS

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Accounts of monks Xuanzang (c. 600-64 CE) and Yijing (635-713 CE) who visited India are important for reconstructing the history of Buddhist doctrines and practices in India.

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## 1.10 COMMENTARIES

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From the mid-first millennium CE many commentaries on the Canonical and non-Canonical texts, particularly of the Theravada *Sangha* came to be composed. The commentaries in turn were commented upon. Pali was the preferred language largely because it had a wider reach than Sanskrit and the original texts were in it. Besides Sanskrit was the language which the Mahayanists preferred and hence the Theravadins chose to distance themselves by following Pali. The best known scholarly output was of Buddhaghosa who came to Sri Lanka in fifth century CE. His *Visuddhimagga*, the *Samantapasadika* and the *Sumangalavilasini* are important as they constitute an authoritative perspective on the Theravada. Buddhadatta, a close contemporary of Buddhaghosa wrote *Madhuratha-vilasini* which was a commentary on the *Buddhavamsa*.

A well known commentary on Mahavamsa was a twelfth century work called *Vamsatthappakasini*. These various works and the compilation of *Culavamsa* as a sequel to *Mahavamsa* followed by many other additions later led to the construction of an authoritative history of the *sangha*. The thirteenth century saw the composition of the *Dathavamsa* and the *Thupavamsa*, which focussed on the history of objects and relics, such as the Tooth of the Buddha. Because of sectarian conflict there was a need to validate the Theravada. Besides these biographies of kings and royal succession as exemplified by *Rajaratnakara* and the *Rajavali* were also written. All of the above mentioned works deal with the history of sects and the literature gives information on the narratives of the patrons of the *Sangha* who were persons in power.

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## 1.11 CHRONICLES OR VAMSAVALIS

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Texts like *Rajatarangini* were examples of a chronicle of a state, region, or kingdom. It recorded various changes particularly of the point when the small kingdom got converted into a more powerful larger one. The records covered local events, but their form reflected the processes of change that were taking place in other regions as well (Thapar, 2013). The chronicle incorporates the history of a region from its beginnings to the present. Since the time of William Jones, it has been repeatedly said that there was only one text from early India that could be regarded as historical writing: the *Rajatarangini*, a history of Kashmir written by Kalhan in 1148. Kalhan describes it as a *kavya*.

Kashmir from the ninth to the twelfth century was a significant centre of scholarship

in grammar, aesthetics, and philosophy. This is attested to by Al-Biruni, the Central Asian scholar who spent time in India in the eleventh century. He thinks that the inroads of Mahmud of Ghazni led scholars to flee to Kashmir and Benaras. Kashmir was one of the important centres of Northern Buddhism, from where Buddhist monks and scholars went to Central Asia and China in the early centuries CE. The competition with the Saivas was fierce since, they saw the Buddhists as rivals for royal patronage.

Chronicles or *vamsavalis*, of which genre the *Rajatarangini* is are found in various parts of the subcontinent. *Vamsavalis* focus on the court or the temple or even, on occasion, the caste. In some places they are referred to by different names, such as *pidhiyavali* (the line of generations); *prabandha* and *raso* in Gujarat and Rajasthan; *burunjis* among the Ahoms of Assam; *Madala Panji* in Odisha.

*Rajatarangini* consists of eight books or *tarangas*, and is composed in verse. The first three *tarangas* deal with the history of the region till the 7th century CE, *tarangas* 4 to 6 carry the story forward till the 11th century, while the last two *tarangas* (which are also the longest) deal with the 12th century. Kalhana is described as the son of Canpaka, a minister at the court of the previous king. The king was deposed and killed in 1101. Canpaka was at the court for many years but may not have had an official position. The successor dynasty may not have continued the services of families who had served the previous king. What the court had experienced in the actions of recent kings was not attractive to a discerning scholar. Kalhana thus was familiar with court circles, even if not serving at the court himself. This distancing probably enabled him to make independent judgements on various rulers.

Kalhana was not writing to pamper any particular patron. His work is about the past of Kashmir, the kingdom where he lived and the court at which his father had served. He is also concerned with understanding the inexplicable behaviour of kings just prior to the current dynasty. Hence his criticism of the actions of kings who were his close contemporaries. His narrative is peppered with severe judgements on various groups who exploited Kashmir. Kalhana is aware of representing the past “as it was”, as *itihasa*. His narrative incorporates rulers such as Ashoka and Kanishka, and even Mihirakula. These persons figure in Mahayana Buddhist texts but not in the *Puranas*, barring Ashoka who is just a name in a list of kings. The text narrates the history of Kashmir and incorporates into the narration legends, chronology based on written records, and details of events closer to the author’s time. It is written in Sanskrit. He claims that he is correcting the chronology of his predecessors and giving a connected account of the past by partly filling in gaps and removing fictitious genealogies. Unlike many other chronicles, Kalhana takes care to mention the sources that he has consulted. The work shows a familiarity not only with the Epics and *Puranas*, but with more historically-oriented writing, such as the historical biographies written by Bana and more recently by Bilhana. The influence of the *Harshacharita* is noticeable. As sources for the *Rajatarangini* he consulted eleven works on the *rajakatha* (narrative of rulers). He read the *prabandha* or chronicle of Suvrata, a collation and summary of fragmentary chronicles. Other sources include the important local *Purana* called the *Nilamata Purana*, and Ksemendra’s *Nrpavali*, or list of kings. Various local inscriptions, especially the *sasanas* (orders) for establishing temples and

monasteries, which were generally grants of land and often included *prasastipattas* (the history of the dynasty in summary form), and coin legends were consulted, as were segments of the oral tradition preserved in popular legends and other historical narratives (Thapar, 2013).

Book Four begins with the Karkota dynasty, which was responsible for consolidating the kingdom of Kashmir in the seventh century. The origin of the Karkotas is linked to Naga Karkota, said to be a deity but also a kinsman of the ruling family. Since this was a dynasty of the seventh century CE, Chinese annals also provide incidental references to corroborate the text, the T'ang rulers being interested in northern India. They mention that the Karkota king Candrapida requested assistance against the Arabs in 713 CE, a time when the Arabs were attempting a conquest of Sindh. The chronology seems to tally. Northern India at this time experienced at its frontiers the proximity of the Chinese, the rise of Tibetan power, the presence of the Arabs, and the threat of Turkish rule in Afghanistan.

Another important chronicle was the *vamsavali* from Chamba. Chamba in the western Himalaya was a small hill state comprising the upper reaches of the Ravi river and touching the Chenab river. Apart from the succession of rulers and events, other significant processes of change are implicit in the *vamsavali*, such as the formation of the kingdom, the emergence of intermediaries, the transition to a caste society, and the coming of Puranic Hinduism (Thapar, 2013). The earlier focus of the text was the settlement at Brahmaur in the upper reaches of the Ravi. This area, though seemingly isolated, was connected by routes in various directions — to Kishtwar, Jammu, and Kangra with access to the plains of Kashmir and Punjab, and others via the Manimahesha lake and Trilokanath to Lahul and Kulu. Brahmaur came to be called Gaderan — the habitat of the Gaddi shepherds known to various parts of the western Himalaya. At the turn of the first millennium CE, when the state was established, the location of the capital moved down to a lower elevation on the plateau of Chamba. Referred to in the inscriptions as Campa or Campaka, the town of Chamba, after which the kingdom was named, was located on a fertile plateau above the junction of the Ravi and Saho rivers. The valleys branching off were generally held by *ranas*, intermediaries who were under the suzerainty of the king of Chamba. The Chamba *vamsavali* lists the succession of rulers of Chamba coming down to the seventeenth century, closing with the war between Chamba and Nurpur (to the south) in 1642. It may not be an exact chronicle, but it does record a historical process. Its authorship is unknown. The Chamba *vamsavali* can be seen as consisting of three sections. The first discusses origin myths and descent from the gods as claimed for royal lineages. The second has a rather garbled account of earlier rulers, borrowing from the kshatriya descent lists of the *Puranas*. The third section provides the evidence for the establishing of the kingdom and the dynasty/dynasties that ruled. Initially the more important kings are listed, but subsequently it mentions virtually all (Thapar, 2013).

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## 1.12 ISLAMIC SOURCES<sup>2</sup>

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The Ghurian conquest of north India towards the close of the twelfth century CE is an important event in Indian history. This is because an independent Sultanate,

<sup>2</sup> This section has been taken from MHI 03, Block 3, Unit 10

founded in its wake, opened India to foreign influences on the one hand and led to the unification of the country under a strong centre on the other. It also attracted emigrants from the neighbouring countries who represented different cultural traditions. One of the traditions introduced by them was that of history writing. The historical literature produced by them in Persian language is of vast magnitude. As a matter of fact, the study of history was considered by the Muslim elite as the third important source of knowledge after the religious scripture and the jurisprudence. With the coming of the Mughals in the 16th century the tradition of history writing achieved new heights.

The early writings in Persian on the history of Turks who came to India are traceable to 12<sup>th</sup> century. As far as Delhi Sultanate is concerned we have a continuity of available texts in Persian till the end of the Sultanate (1526). Many of the authors were attached to the court as officials while a few were independent scholars not associated with any official position. In general, the available histories put forward the official version of events, rather than a critical evaluation of the policies and events. It is rare that one comes across any critical reference to the reigning Sultan. Even the style is also generally eulogising or flattering to the Sultan under whose reign it is written. In most cases, the authors borrowed freely from the earlier works to trace the earlier period.

Apart from historical texts a number of other Persian works are available for the period. Abdu'r Razzaq's *Matla'us Sa'dain* (travelogue), Tutsi's *Siyasatnama* (administration & polity), Fakhr-i Mudabbir's *Adabu'l-Harb wa'as-Shuja'at* (warfare), are a few important ones. A few Arabic works are also available for the period. Ibn Battuta (*Rihla*) and Shihab-al Din al-Umari (*Masalik al-absar Mamalik al-Ansar*) have provided excellent travel accounts.

The pioneer in history-writing was Muhammad bin Mansur, also known as Fakhr-i Mudabbir. He migrated from Ghazna to Lahore during the later Ghaznavid period. In Lahore he compiled *Shajra-i-Ansab*, the book of genealogies of the Prophet of Islam, his companions and the Muslim rulers, including the ancestors of Sultan Muizuddin Muhammad bin Sam (commonly known as Sultan Shihabuddin Muhammad Ghuri). The compiler wanted to present it to the Sultan but the latter's assassination on his way from the Punjab to Ghazna in 1206, led him to append a separate portion as *Muqidimma* (Introduction) to it. This introduction narrates the life and military exploits of Qutbuddin Aibak since his appointment in India as Sipahsalar of Kuhram and Sunam in 1192 upto his accession to the throne in Lahore in 1206. This is the first history of the Ghurian conquest and the foundation of an independent Sultanate in India. It opens with the description of the noble qualities of Sultan Muizuddin Muhammad bin Sam. But the credit of the conquest made in India is given to Qutbuddin Aibak. The Sultan is not mentioned as victor even in the details of the expeditions led by him. However, the details furnished by Fakhr-i Mudabbir about the conciliatory policy followed by Qutbuddin Aibak towards the Hindu chiefs even before his accession to the throne are interesting. Aibak set an example that inspired his successors. All the chiefs who submitted to Aibak's authority were treated as friends. No doubt, Fakhr-i Mudabbir composed the work in the hope of getting reward by eulogising the reigning Sultan, nonetheless, the selection of historical material by him demonstrates the historical sense he possessed. Along with administrative reforms introduced by Aibak after

his accession to the throne in Lahore, he also provides details of rituals that had symbolic significance. For instance, he is the first historian who informs us about the ceremony of public allegiance paid to the new Sultan on his accession to the throne in Lahore. He states that on Qutbuddin Aibak's arrival from Delhi to Lahore in 1206, the entire population of Lahore came out to pay allegiance to him as their new Sultan. Equally important is the evidence about the administrative reforms introduced by Sultan Qutbuddin Aibak. He renewed land-grants made to the deserving persons and fixed maintenance-allowance to others. The collection by the officers of illegal wealth accrued through peasants or forced labour was abolished. The compiler also informs us that the state extracted one-fifth of the agricultural produce as land revenue. In short, it is the first history of the Ghurian conquest and Qutbuddin Aibak's reign compiled in India.

Another important work compiled by Mudbbir is the *Adabu'l-Harb wa'as-Shuja'at*, dedicated to Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish. It contains chapters on the duties of king, the functioning of state departments, war tactics, mode of warfare, war-horses, their treatment, etc. The compiler, in order to illustrate his point, has incorporated important events that occurred during the period. Most of them are related to historical events of the Ghaznavid period. The second important history of the Ghurian conquest and the Sultanate is *Tajul Ma'asir*. Its author, Hasan Nizami migrated from Nishapur to India in search of fortune. He took abode in Delhi, sometime before Aibak's accession to the throne. In Delhi, he set to compile the history of Qutbuddin Aibak's achievements after his accession to the throne in 1206. The motive behind writing was to gain royal patronage. He begins his narrative describing the vicissitude of time he went through in his hometown of Nishapur, his journey to Ghazna where he fell ill and then his migration to India. The preface is followed by the description of the second battle of Tarain (1192). No mention has been made of the first battle of Tarain in which Prithvi Raj Chauhan had defeated Sultan Muizuddin Mohammad bin Sam. However, from the year 1192 upto 1196 all the historical events are described in detail. Thereafter Hasan Nizami takes a long jump leaving off all the battles fought and conquests made by Qutbuddin Aibak till 1202 CE. Probably the disturbances that broke out as a result of Aibak's accidental death in 1210 disappointed the author who seems to have stopped writing. Later on, when Iltutmish succeeded in consolidating his rule, he again decided to resume his work. This time he commenced his narrative from the year 1203 because Iltutmish, whom the work was to be presented, had become an important general and was taking part in all the campaigns led by Qutbuddin Aibak. No mentions has been made by the compiler of Aibak's conquest of Badaun in 1197 and the occupation of Kanauj and Chandwar in 1198. It is, however, to be admitted that, in spite of all hyperbolic used in praise of Iltutmish, it is to the credit of the compiler that he was able to collect authentic information about every event that he describes in his work. Besides the gap, Hasan Nizami also fails to describe the friendly treatment meted out by Aibak to the local chiefs who submitted to his authority. His description is often very brief and at times merely symbolic. All the manuscript copies of *Tajul Ma'asir* available in India and abroad come to a close with the capture to Lahore by Iltutmish in 1217.

The compilation by Minhaj Siraj Juzjani of his *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* was epoch making in the history of history-writing. Minhaj Siraj Juzjani (hereafter mentioned as

Minhaj) was also an emigrant scholar from Khorasan. His approach to the history of Islam and Muslim rulers from the early Islamic period upto his own time, the year 1259 CE, seems to have been influenced by his professional training as a jurist and association with the rulers of Central Asia and India. He belonged to a family of scholars who were associated with the courts of the Ghurid Sultans of Firozkuh and Ghazna. He himself served under different Ghurid princes and nobles before his migration to India. In 1227, he came to India and joined the court of Nasiruddin Qubacha. He was appointed as the head of the Firuzi Madrassa (government college) in Uch, the Capital of Sultan Nasiruddin Qubacha. In 1228, he joined the service of Sultan Iltutmish after Qubacha's power had been destroyed and his territories of Sindh and Multan were annexed to the Delhi Sultanate. He served as *Qazi* (Judicial officer) of Gwalior under Iltutmish. Sultan Razia (1236-40) summoned him to Delhi and appointed him the head of Madrassa-i Nasiri in Delhi. Later on, he rose to the position of the Chief *Qazi* of the Sultanate during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud. It was during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud that he decided to write the history of Islam upto his own time. In an attempt to distinguish his work from those of Fakhr-i Mudabbir and Hasan Nizami, Minhaj adopted the *Tabaqat* System of history-writing. The first two writers had produced their works in unitary form, in which each reign was treated as a unit. In the *Tabaqat* form, each dynasty of rulers is presented in a separate *tabaqa* (i.e. section) and was brought to completion in 1259. The last five sections are very important from the point of view of history. In these we find valuable information about the rise and fall of the ruling dynasties of Central Asia, Persia, India and the Mongol activities under Chingis Khan. Undoubtedly, Minhaj is our earliest and best authority on the ruling house of Ghur. His account of the rulers of Ghur is characterised by objectivity in approach. Likewise, the section devoted to the history of the Khwarizm Shahi dynasty and rise of Mongol power under Chingis Khan and his immediate successors supply information, not available in the works of Ata Malik Juvaini and Rahiduddin Fazlullah who wrote under the patronage of the Mongol princes. Minhaj's purpose was to supply the curious readers of the Delhi Sultanate with authentic information about the victory of the Mongols over the Muslim rulers and the destruction of Muslim cities and towns. He drew on a number of sources, including the immigrants and merchants who had trade relations with the Mongol rulers. Moreover, before his migration to India, he had first hand experience of fighting against the Mongols in Khurasan. Therefore, the last *tabaqa* of the work is considered by modern scholars invaluable for its treatments of the rise of Mongol power and the dissolution of the Mongol Empire in 1259 after the death of Emperor Monge Qaan. The sections (*tabaqat*) twentieth and twenty-first devoted to India, describe the history of the Sultans from Aibak to Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah and careers of the leading nobles of Iltutmish respectively. In both the sections he displays his ability to convey critical information on issues. Conscious of his duty as a historian, he invented the method of 'conveying intimation' on camouflaging the critics of the reigning Sultan or his father either by giving hints in a subtle way or writing between the lines. As Sultan Iltutmish could not be criticised directly because his son, Nasiruddin Mahmud happened to be the reigning Sultan, Minhaj builds Iltutmish's criticism through highlighting the noble qualities of Iltutmish's rivals Sultan Ghayasuddin Iwaz Khalji of Bihar and Bengal or Sultan Nasiruddin Qubacha of Sindh and Multan. Likewise, he also hints at policy of getting rid of certain nobles. Praising Malik Saifuddin Aibak, he says that being a God-fearing Musalman, the

noble detested the work of seizing the assets from the children of the nobles killed or assassinated by the order of the Sultan. It is really Minhaj's sense of history that led Ziauddin Barani to pay him homage. Barani thought it presumptuous to write on the period covered in the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*.

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### 1.13 ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES<sup>3</sup>

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The archaeology of the early medieval period is still a less explored field. Most of the excavations and explorations have dealt with early historical sites. Whatever exploration and limited excavation done on this period have thrown up meagre remains and poor archaeological data. Coins are very few if not rare. Habitation remains in many sites have not been discovered. The layers belonging to the early medieval period either are sterile or show poor remains. This has led some scholars like R. S. Sharma to bolster their theory of urban decline and decay of towns and cities in the early medieval period.

It is true that many sites are reported to be bereft of material remains of this period like Atranjikhara and Kausambi or a disturbed archaeological record as at Hastinapur, Sringaverpura, and Ahicchatra with flimsy structures, few stone images, pottery and other material objects. In many cases like at Hastinapur and Sringaverpura the dates of these layers often merge with the post-1200 CE or the 'medieval' period and it is difficult to differentiate the earlier phases. At Hastinapur, situated in Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh, Period V is dated from the eleventh century CE and is characterised by structures of brick-bats including a brick wall and a room, alongwith pottery, iron objects, terracotta objects and three stone images. Sonkh in Mathura district, Uttar Pradesh also portrays a picture of destruction and decay with fragments of mostly unconnected walls. The newly built structures were of poor quality due to the frequent use of brick-bats and rubble instead of compact bricks. However stone plaques with Hindu deities have been recovered from the excavations. Lal Kot in Delhi has been divided into the Rajput period from the eleventh to the twelfth centuries CE and has yielded no major structures except rubble walls and mud and lime floors and pottery mostly red wares. However the subsequent phase called the early Sultanate from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries CE has yielded more structures and artefacts. At Purana Qila in Delhi, the post-Gupta period was marked mainly by structural remains in baked or mud-bricks showing three phases. The baked bricks used in the structures had mostly been robbed from houses of the earlier period. Amongst noteworthy objects, mention may be made of a few decorated potsherds, beads, and a fine but damaged stone sculpture. The associated pottery was mainly a red ware, in which the knife-edged bowl was a distinctive type. The subsequent period called the Rajput period (tenth to twelfth centuries CE) was also characterised by structures built of re-used bricks as also of mud-bricks. One of the house-walls showed alternate courses of baked and mud-bricks. Mud-floors with hearths were also encountered in some houses. The most impressive structure of the period, however, was a fortification-wall, belonging perhaps to the time of the Tomars. Built of rubble with a basal width of 1.5 m, it was exposed to a length of over 30m. The Rajput period was represented by five structural phases, one of them

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<sup>3</sup> This section is compiled from some selected paragraphs of MHI 10, Block 4

showing floors with ovens. The principal building-material was the same as in the preceding period, with the addition of rubble. Other significant finds of the period included copper coins, carnelian beads, terracotta objects, ornate moulded bricks and a small figure of Vishnu in stone. The associated pottery was mainly of red and black wares, occasionally decorated with simple painted, stamped or incised designs. Rajghat is a well known site situated in Varanasi, UP and excavations have revealed that the period 300-700 CE marked a great advance in settlement planning and architecture. This is revealed by the development of houses and town planning. Houses were of considerable size with room sizes ranging from  $7.08 \times 6.25$  to  $2.30 \times 1.30$  m. There were large structures close to the river which could not be classified as residential houses. One of the structures had large pillared halls. Underground structures the purpose of which is debatable have also been unearthed. There were wells and brick-built drains. The city had a regular layout divided by many roads and lanes. The town was well planned with elaborate drainage systems, large buildings both residential and 'public', industrial activity and religious structures. All this testified to a large urban centre which had earlier roots but stretched into the post-Gupta phase. This is also evident from the smaller excavations where Period V (700-1200 CE) has evidence of brick walls, two big buildings and many architectural fragments. Pallavamedu in Tamil Nadu has yielded archaeological evidence of the Pallavas. Three periods of occupation have been identified, Period I with pottery and other artefacts, Period II with mud floors, hearths and platforms and Period III with pottery and disturbed structural remains. Excavations have been conducted at many sites in Tamil Nadu associated with dynasties of this period like Pandyas (Korkai), Cholas (Kurumbanmedu and Palyarai) and Hoysalas (Kannanur) and mostly artefacts including pottery have been recovered but no structural remains except an irrigation system at Kannanur and a brick wall at Palayarai. Banavasi in North Kanara district, Karnataka, known for the Kadamba dynastic rule has also been the subject of an archaeological survey in recent times. From the seventh to the sixteenth centuries CE Shiva temples replace the stupas and there is indication of the expansion of the settlement from the presence of extensive pottery scatters, construction of reservoirs, a basalt stone manufacturing site and presence of iron slag indicating some production activity. The settlement seems to have shifted to a different zone than the earlier period due to the absence of later period ceramics in the area of the early historic settlement. At Aihole in Karnataka, the concentration has been on the study of the famous temple complex in this zone but recent survey work has shown that the early Chalukyan temples were a part of a larger settlement system with the discovery of pottery scatters, reservoirs, large architectural complex with a pillared hall and room blocks, stone quarries and mortars in the 1 sq. km area surrounding the temple complex. The pottery found was mostly jars as opposed to bowls which might indicate cooking and storage.

Despite poor remains and limited excavations, early medieval archaeology has given evidence which has been used to construct various theories such as those of urban decay, feudalism, Third Urbanization, emergence and continuation of urban settlements like Siyadoni in Uttar Pradesh, trade routes, traders, guilds, trade with Southeast Asia etc. Thus archaeological evidence in the form of house remains, floors, pits, bricks, brick bats, wells, temples, buildings, ovens etc, no matter how rich or poor the evidence may be, allow the historian/archaeologist to reconstruct

the history of any period. The early medieval period is no exception. The archaeology of this period has great potential and further work in this area can correct many assumptions and perceptions which have been arrived at due to limited excavations and explorations.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

1.) What do mean by the term ‘*Vamsavali*’? Discuss the significance of *Rajatarangini* as a historical source.

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2.) Write a note on Islamic sources of the early Medieval period.

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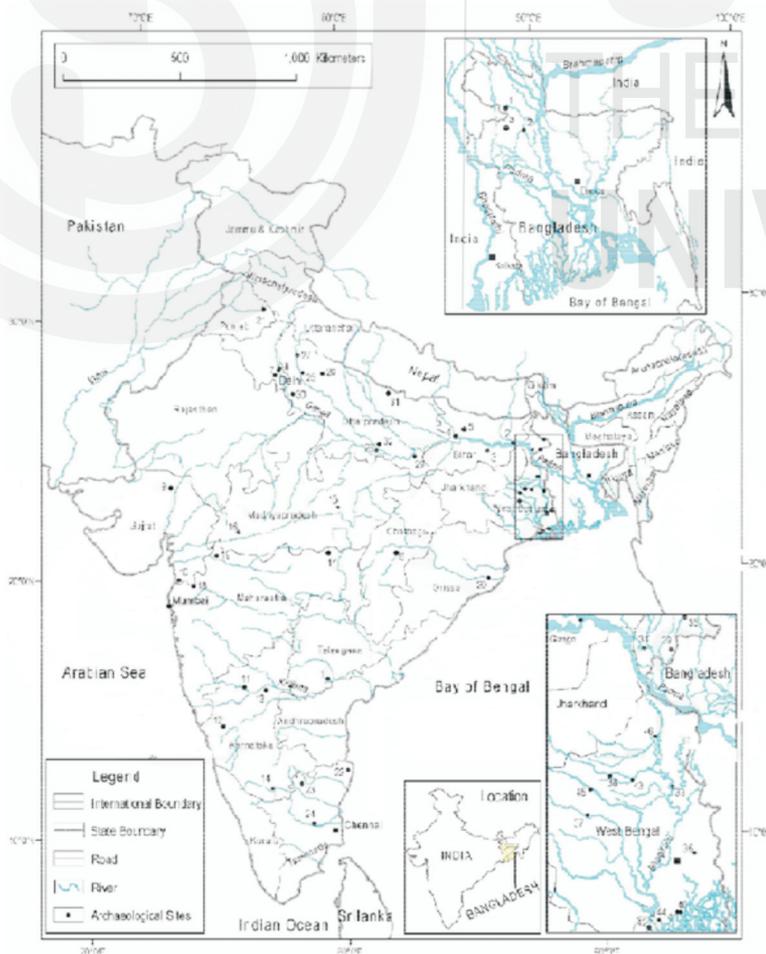
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3.) The archaeology of the early medieval period is still an unexplored field. Examine this statement in the light of excvations and explorations conducted at some sites.

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**Map 1: Archaeological Remains of the Post-Gupta Period [Map prepared by Sheena Panja]**  
 Source: MHI 10, Block IV

List of Sites: *India*: 1) Yelleswaram, 2) Antichak, 3) Chirand, 4) Krimila, 5) Vaisali, 6) Sirpur, 7) Lal Kot (Quila Rai Pithora), 8) Purana Quila, 9) Vadnagar, 10) Sanjam, 11) Aihole, 12) Banavasi-Gudnapur, 13) Maski, 14) Talakkad, 15) Tripuri, 16) Navdatoli, 17) Manser, 18) Nasik, 19) Prakash, 20) Sisupalgarh, 21) Ropar, 22) Kanchipuram, 23) Kaveripattanam, 24) Uraiyur, 25) Ahar, 26) Ahicchatra, 27) Hastinapur, 28) Kausambi, 29) Rajghat, 30) Sonkh, 31) Sravasti, 32) Sringaverapur, 33) Ballalधिpi, 34) Balupur, 35) Bangarh, 36) Chandraketugarh, 37) Dihar, 38) Goswamikhanda, 39) Jagjivanpur, 40) Jatar Deul, 41) Kankandighi, 42) Mandirtala, 43) Mangolkot, 44) Pakurtala, 45) Pokhanna, 46) Rajabadidanga

*Bangladesh*: 1) Birampur Complex, 2) Mahasthan, 3) Paharpur

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## 1.14 SUMMARY

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In this Unit you learnt about the different categories of sources which are available for the reconstruction of the history of the early medieval period. Certain new kinds of historical writing became current in this period such as *charitas*, *prashastis* and *vamsavalis*. You were made aware about the meaning of these terms and how they are significant as a historical source. This was the time when Muslim incursions in India led to the establishment of the Sultanate. A systematic form of historical writing emerged and we have a number of texts which throw light on the early Sultanate period. Lastly we discussed the archaeological sources and how limited excavations and explorations on the early medieval period have hampered our investigation on the processes that made this period different from the earlier one. We also did a small survey of the work done of the major sites of India and the kind of archaeological record that has been unearthed.

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## 1.15 KEY WORDS

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<i>Charita</i>	: historical biography
<i>Mahayana</i>	: literally ‘the greater vehicle’, a Buddhist school which worships the Buddha in an anthropomorphic form.
<i>Prashasti</i>	: eulogy
<i>Rajatarangini</i>	: a historical narrative describing the evolution of the kingdom of Kashmir,
<i>Theravada</i>	: a conservative branch of Buddhism which developed out of Hinayana Buddhism.
<i>Vamsavali</i>	: chronicle written by Kalhana. It is considered as the first true historical work of ancient India.

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## 1.16 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 1.2
- 2) See Section 1.3

- 1) See Section 1.11
- 2) See Section 1.12
- 3) See Section 1.13

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## **1.17 SUGGESTED READINGS**

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