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Excavations at the Palaeolithic Site of Attirampakkam, South India: Preliminary Findings¹

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India occupies a crucial place in the study of the Lower

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Palaeolithic, particularly in relation to questions of hominid dispersal across Asia and regional adaptations to a diversity of natural habitats (Petraglia 1998). This potential has often been overlooked, predominantly because of a paucity of published reports and a preconceived notion of the rarity of well-preserved sites that are fossiliferous and have potential for being dated. In this context, our ongoing excavations at Attirampakkam near Chennai (South India), which are aimed at investigating early hominid behaviour in a new ecological context in India and at providing an age for the Acheulian in this region, are significant.

This report focuses on preliminary results of the first season's excavations at a well-preserved multicultural Palaeolithic site, Attirampakkam (13° 13' 50" N lat., 79° 53' 20" E long., 37.75 m above sea level), in the Kortallayar River basin of South India. Investigated for more than a century, the site has been regarded as a type site for the Lower Palaeolithic Madras Handaxe Tradition. Discrepancies noted in the stratigraphic and cultural sequences proposed by previous scholars (Banerjee 1964–65, Foote 1866, Krishnaswami 1938) led to a re-examination of the archaeology of the Kortallayar River basin (Pappu 1996, 1999, 2001a, b), and Attirampakkam was subsequently selected as the first in a series of excavations to be conducted at several well-preserved Palaeolithic sites in the region. Preliminary excavations at this site in 1999 revealed an Acheulian occupation in and on the surface of a 4-m-thick deposit of laminated clay indicative of a palaeofloodplain situation. This constitutes a previously unreported ecological habitat for the Indian Palaeolithic. The discovery of fossil teeth at the site was of great significance considering the extreme paucity of faunal remains at Indian Lower Palaeolithic sites. Subsequent excavations in 2000 led to the discovery of an Acheulian living floor with cores, tools, and debitage in association with a set of animal footprints.

Despite more than a century of prehistoric archaeology in India, we know little about its Lower and Middle Palaeolithic in comparison with those of Africa or Eurasia. Although active research on the Indian Lower Palaeolithic spans more than three decades, few systematic long-term regional studies coupled with excavations of well-preserved sites have been initiated. Notable among these are multidisciplinary projects in various parts of India (Allchin, Goudie, and Hegde 1978, Corvinus 1983, Misra and Rajaguru 1989, Paddayya 1982, Paddayya and Petraglia 1995, Sharma and Clark 1983, Petraglia, Laporta, and Paddayya 1999), which have focused on the environmental history of sites in their regional contexts and on the interpretation of site functions. In recent years, efforts have been made to model site formation processes (Pappu 1999; Paddayya and Petraglia 1993, 1995) and to obtain dates for the Acheulian (Misra 1995). Excavations at open-air Lower Palaeolithic sites have yielded assemblages in a wide range of sedimentary contexts. Artefacts occur (1) at Chirki-on-Pravara in gravels and a cobble-rubble horizon (Corvinus 1983), (2) at Didwana 16 R in a stabilized sand dune (Misra 1995), (3) in the Hunsgi-Baichbal complex (Paddayya 1982; Pad-

