

ANTIQUITY OF KARACHI (SINDH)

(Read in Seminar on Karachi)

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Conventional historians adhere to the written records and consider any thing otherwise as guess work. Archaeology a well developed science digs out people and not things as is generally believed by historians and they ignore it most of the time. There are other parameters like environments, ecology and climates of the past and the possible human reaction to them but these need detailed scientific study in the various disciplines. In general the historians are not environmentalist or climatologist and the latter in-turn are not interested in history, which thus has remained conventional and only for the layman. Now a days history is categorised as social science and can be fully analysed with multi-disciplinary approach, rather than depending upon written works which are bound to have errors to the extent of writer's own beliefs and perception of the things and times.

Archaeologists have hit upon some sites like Orangi, Landhi, Allahdino Chakhundi etc., and professor Rauf of Karachi University had collected microlithic tools from scores of sites around Karachi, but these can not be considered city of Karachi itself. Karachi as we know was a city depending upon trade by import and exports of goods. It handled it through its port. The township has consisted of traders, labourers, boatmen and fishermen. The latter caught fish for the use in city as well as export after drying it. Based on the economy of the people, the history of Karachi is directly connected with that of its harbour.

The Karachi harbour is a good natural one and being protected by Manora Island, ships could easily anchor at Kemari or East Wharf to Native Jetty and West Wharf. Before Sir Charles Napier made it the capital of Sindh in 1847, it could easily handle a ship of 650 tonnes and having draught of 16 feet. How much income the harbour brought to the trading community has not been estimated but custom duty it brought to Talpurs has been estimated at Rs.100,000 per annum.

Karachi was considered essentially a fishing village in 1724. It had population of 13,000 in 1813 AD and rose to 15,000 in 1830 AD, as estimated by Pottinger and Brunel respectively. The population of Hyderabad in 1843 AD was estimated at 20,000 but that included high rank administrators, government officials (Amils) and soldiers. Excluding this population involved purely on government administrative jobs, the rest of population reduces to less than that of Karachi, which therefore on its own merit stood as the largest town, as well as the largest business centres in Sindh in 1843, owing to its harbour.

Sindh had another harbour, the Keti Bander at the mouth of the Indus but it did not flourish as the Indus used to bring 9.6% silt in its waters and on entering the sea it deposit this silt in front of its mouth and partially blocked the entry. The river therefore would cut another channel, block it in turn and so on. This made the river course specially at the delta unreliable for shipping. Sindhis had developed flat-bottom boats which plied on the Indus and would negotiate in deltaic sea waters without a problem except for monsoon windy season of July and August, but such boats would have limited load carrying capacity of usually not more than 50 tonnes in most cases. A large number of boats would therefore be required to carry out the river trade. Ain-i-Akbari mentions 40,000 such boats in Thatta Sarkar (southern Sindh below Sehwan) alone. These boats would in turn make shipping to distance lands impractical and uneconomical.

There are records available of the various harbours in the Mediterranean Sea dating back to 1000 BC. All European natural harbours were developed for shipping and international trade dating back to that period. Greeks controlled most of the sea trade of the Mediterranean and developed large ships of over 500 tonnes during that era. There are also records showing that Greeks controlled most of the sea trade of the Mediterranean and developed large ships of over 500 tonnes during that era. There are also records showing that Greeks controlled the Red and the Arabian Sea trade from 275 BC to 250 AD, when Persians entered into competition. There are no records of ships, their designs and draught playing in the Arabian Sea prior to 300 BC. On Alexander's death in 322 BC, his Empire was divided and his half brother Ptolemy established his own dynasty in Egypt with capital at Alexandria. The rulers were Greeks, and ruled were Egyptians. Ptolemy had to develop trade with the East by necessity and had to buy Indian elephants, the antiquity's war tanks from India and other trade had to follow. They renovated Pharaoh Niko's canal connecting the Nile with the Red Sea, and established a number of ports on the Red Sea during the next century namely; Berenice, Myos Hormes and Arsinoe or Suez all three built by Ptolemy-II between 285-274 BC, and Adulis built by Ptolemy-III (246-221 BC). These helped to develop trade with the east.

Soon the ships were on way Arabian sea. The ship designs were Greek and so were the mariners. The businessmen handling the job were also Greeks. Luckily for the Ptolemys there rose the Roman emperor in Europe controlling a large number of countries from Greece and Turkey to Spain and England. The riches started flowing in to Empire and Rome and Italy become the importer of all kinds of luxury goods from the known World. The Greek merchants, mariners and ships sailed from the Red Sea to the East. Since the ships were coasting and trade winds were not known, on reaching Aden they coasted along the Arabian Peninsula and at Bahrain crossed the Persian Gulf and then taking Makran coast came to vicinity of Karachi. These ships were unlike Sindhi flat bottom boats which had low draught, whereas Greek ships had more than 12 feet draught and could not enter the river Indus branches easily. It was therefore necessary that Greeks tranship goods on high seas or at a suitable port nearby.

The most important coastal harbour which was nearest to Eden was Barbarican on the Western Branch of the Indus. Barbarican had its unique position. It was not more than 25 kms

from the sea. The harbour was located just on the edge of the river as well as foot of a hill. On the other side of the channel was a small hill presently below the ground level. These two hills formed a gorge through which the river passed. Whenever any river passes through gorge it is trapped there for centuries to come. There was another gorge some 40 kms upstream of Barbarican between Makali hills and a later town of Samui. The two gorges combined trapped the Western branch of Indus through them for more than 1,700 years (at least 400 BC - 1250 AD). Alexander the Great surveyed this channel and is said to have built a port named as Alexander's Haven on this branch. Excavator of Bhanbhore, Dr. F.A. Khan considered it as Barbarican and suspects that it may be as Alexander's Haven. He lacked evidence, lamenting that the foundations of buildings go some 4 feet or more below the sea level and presently are submerged in the channel. The excavation to lower depth may have taken him down to 324 BC. the question is whether sea level has risen by four feet in the past 2,325 years? The evidence collected the World over shows no rise in sea level during the period. In case of Barbarican fact is other-wise, as the land has sunk. The Sindh coast including Barbarican (Banbhore or Debal) is in active seismic zone and periodical earth quick's which have risen the bottom of the Rann of Kutch have also sunk Barbarican. An earth quick recorded in 893 - 894 AD, had damaged a large part of Debal (Banbhore or Barbarican). Another earth quick at Sindhuri close to Rahim-ki-Bazar, sunk the whole settlement inside the Rann of Kutch by some 20 feet in 1819 AD. Thus sinking of land near Barbarican has made it difficult to ascertain its antiquity. This seismic zone extends from Nagar Parker to Karachi and Ormara along the coast and in a width of 30-50 miles.

Barbarican being close to the mouth of the river and some 40-50 kms from Kemari could easily depend upon the Karachi harbour for transhipment of Greek vessels which came from Egypt to Barbarican. Barbarican was well connected with the populated areas in the interior of Sindh. The businessmen of Barbarican would invariably have preferred to live in security provided by waters connected with hinter-lands. The harbourer at Karachi being isolated from populated areas probably was insecure. It therefore appears reasonable that small detachments would definitely protect the harbour and the ships of the Greeks and other nations and goods would be brought for transhipment from Banbhore in flat bottom boats. The existence of Barbarican therefore was ensured by Karachi harbour and vice-versa.

Some where around 1250 to 1300 AD, the Western Branch of the river Indus changed its course and major branch started flowing east of Samui near Thatta and Barbarican got disconnected with the Indus and its tributaries trade dwindled and new port Lahri Bander was established on the new branch. It was too far away from Karachi and transhipment may have been affected and reduced. Lahri Bander had changed its position numbers of times since that period and it got further and further from Karachi but yet Karachi is survived on its own merits.

Routes from Karachi.

- After decay of Barbarican and rise of Thatta around 1300 AD, a direct route was established from Karachi, via Landhi and Junghshahi to Thatta. This route was in service, until Karachi was connected to Kotri via Junghshahi. The old route is still jeepable.

- Another route to Thatta was via Gharo and Gujo.
- When main branch of the Indus shifted its course from Hala, Uderolal, Nassarpur, Matli, Badin, Koree Creek to West of Hyderabad in 1758, a route was established between Karachi and Kotri through the hills. Railway line constructed from Karachi to Kotri in 1858-1861 AD was along this alignment. The advantage of this route was that boats with bigger draught could ply from Kotri to north or south, but not from mouth of the Indus. This route also served the city of Hyderabad established in 1768 AD.
- There yet was another and most important route from Karachi to Bolan Pass, via Khadeji, Sari Singh, Truk, Dhamach, Thanu Bula Khan or Karachat, Pokran, Jhangara-Sehwan or Jhangara to Bubak, Dadu, Kadar, Khairpur Nathan Shah, Mehar, Nasirabad, Kamber, Ghari Khairo, Sibi or Kamber, Shikarpur to Sibi and Dhandhar usually via Gandhava.
- The last route has its antiquity going back to Mesolithic Era in Sindh at least 6,000-7,000 years back, when early man used it.

With these routes Karachi as harbour served Sindh as well as Afghanistan via Quetta-Kandhar and thence to Central Asia since at least 200 BC. When Ptolemy's ships started trade with Sindh.

From 200 BC - 60 AD, annual trade of Barbarican (Sindh) was 360 million sesters of gold as Pliny the Elder had lamented of drain by eastern trade. Since ships were coasting spices from South East Asia and South India were brought to Barbarican the port nearest to Ptolemy's Egypt. Silk and luxury items of China, were brought via Khotan to Peshawar or via Kabul to Peshawar and thence by river to Barbarican. Even goods of Northern India were brought up the Jumuna river and then by camels to Sutlej only 80 kms from the former river. Goods from the Punjab and Kashmir were brought down by boats to Barbarican.

The articles imported were linen, topaz, coral, storex, frankincense glass, gold and vine. The articles exported were; spices, aromatics, crocodiles, oysters, pearls, ivory, cinnamon, malabathrum oil, paper, gums, sugar, indigo, henna, skins of camel, crocodile and rhinoceros, cotton, sheesham wood, deodar, dry fruit, cereals and precious stones, gems, oyster pearls, etc. Discovery of trade winds around 60 AD, brought South India ports in direct contact with Eden and trade of Barbarican dwindled, but yet trade of Punjab, Kashmir, Afghanistan continued through Barbarican. Whenever Parthians and Sythians blocked silk route to Roman some of the China's trade articles passed through Sindh and thus Karachi acted as transshipment port until about 1300 AD. After this date it served the area discussed above directly by land routes.

Earlier references to Karaushti go back to 1236 AD. Admiral Sidi Ali Rais mentions it in 1554 AD. All this clearly shows the antiquity of Karachi to about 2300 years ago.