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New Light on the Maritime Archaeology of Porbandar, Saurashtra Coast, Gujarat

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1 4 Wadi Plot,
Porbandar

Introduction

Porbandar, famous as the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi, has attracted traders since the late Harappan period. Historical period settlements have been noticed at Srinagar, a site located close to Porbandar. Porbandar was also a very important port and centre for maritime activities during the Early Medieval period. It is centrally located between the two important Hindu religious centers of Dwarka and Somnath on the Saurashtra-Kathiawar coast. An onshore archaeological exploration was undertaken in and around Porbandar, in November 2003 in order to

locate remains of ancient maritime activities; in the form of anchors, ancient port installations, submerged habitational sites, etc.; similar to those found at Dwarka, Bet Dwarka and Somnath (Gaur *et al.* 2002, 2003).

Porbandar has been referred to as *Bardaxema*, by Ptolemy. Burgess identified this as Bardiya, situated close to Srinagar, a term reminiscence of the Greek name (McCrindle 1885). A copper plate dated to 989 A.D. (V.S. 1045) discovered from Ghumli, refers to Porbandar as *Paurvela Kula* and *Jeshthuka Desk* (Vora 1970: 30).

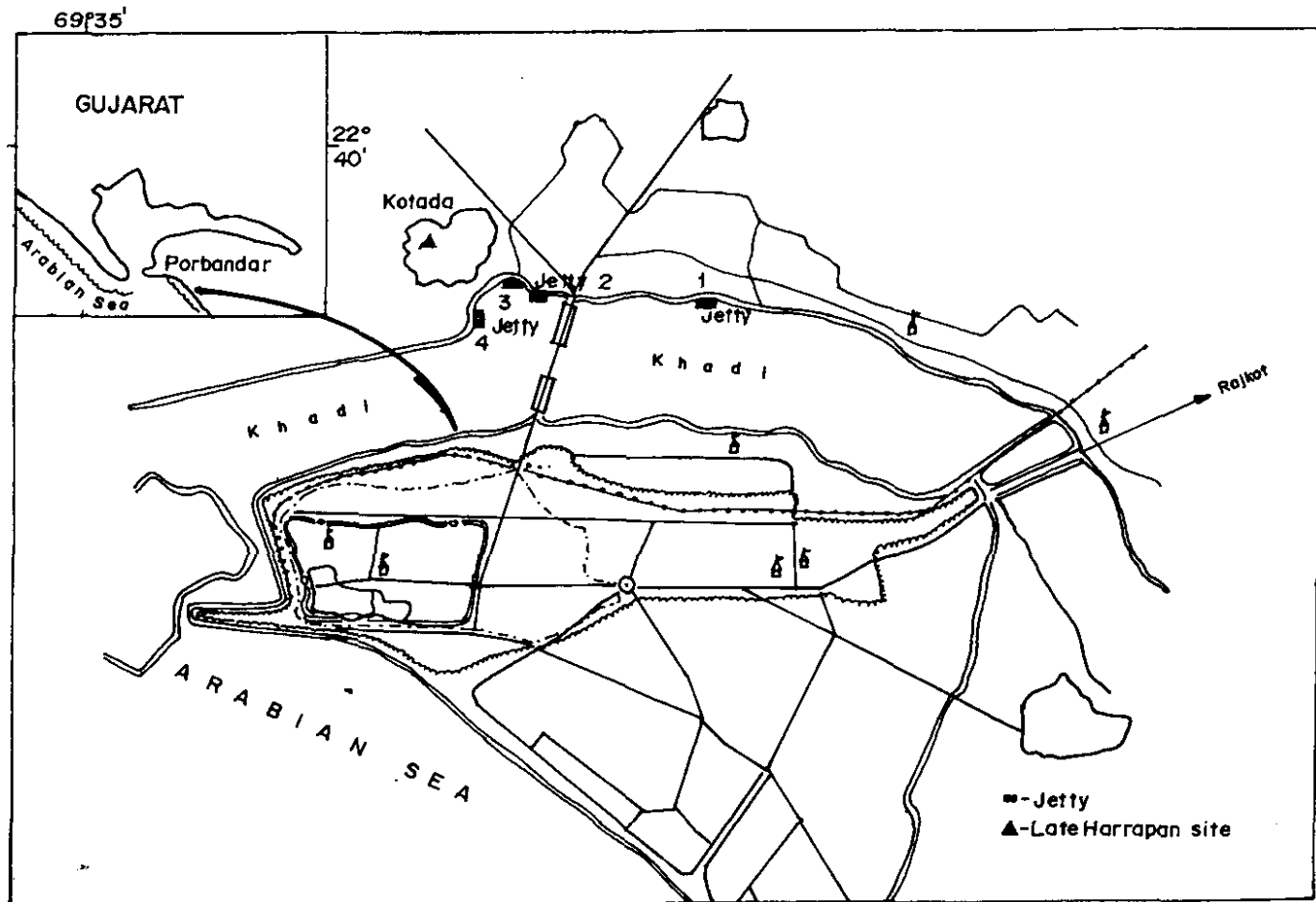


Fig. 1: Location of archaeological sites in Porbandar

Porbandar is also mentioned in Hindu scriptures as Sudamapuri, commemorating the friendship of Lord Krishna with his childhood friend Sudama (Thakkar 1966). The town has a temple dedicated to Sudama. The oldest site in the area is near the Dhingeswar Mahadev temple which is of a pre-Chalukyan period (Sampura 1968). Remains of the 8th century A.D. temple of Saptamatrika are noted near the present Porau Mata temple in Porbandar (Vora 1970: 47). During the historical period, Porbandar had trade relations with Sri Lanka, Java, Sumatra, the Gulf, and East African countries (Thakkar 1966).

Geologically, the Barda hills constitute the oldest formations north east of Porbandar, and are remnants of Deccan trap comprising mainly felsites and quartz-felsites (Basu 1978). Tertiary formations include the Gaj rocks occurring as thin lenticular patches overlying the traps and

laterites. Pleistocene deposits include the miliolite formations. A parallel succession of low-lying longitudinal coastal dunes occur between Porbandar and Kodinar, extending as far inland as 15-18 km (Merh 1995).

Results of Field Surveys

Onshore exploration around Porbandar resulted in the discovery of a Late Harappan site at Bhokhira, about 1 km from Porbandar. Other finds include four ancient jetties along the Porbandar creek (Fig. 1).

1. Late Harappan site (Kotada Bandar)

The site is located about 1 km west of Porbandar in agricultural land, and is locally known as Kotada Bandar or *Kachchhivada Sumra* ('people from Sind and Kachchh'). A 10th century A.D. Siva temple known as

Table 1: Pottery Types

No.	Type of ceramic	Treatment, Fabric and Firing
1	Small sized jar with slightly projected beaded rim	Treated with red wash, medium fabric and well fired
2	Small sized jar with an out-turned beaded rim and a short neck	Medium fabric and well fired
3	Miniature vessel with a beaded rim	Externally treated with pale colour wash, fine fabric and well fired
4	Small sized jar with a triangular rim and short neck	Treated with red wash, medium fabric and well fired
5	Medium sized dish with thickened rim with a blunt carination on the shoulder and a thick dark brown band on the exterior of the rim	Medium fabric and well fired
6	Medium sized bowl with a featureless sharpened rim, convex profile, treated with red slip	Fine fabric and well fired
7	Medium sized bowl with a featureless sharpened rim, straight profile, treated with red wash	Fine fabric and well fired
8	Medium sized dull Red ware bowl with a featureless rim, internally treated with slip (flaked off)	Medium fabric and well fired
9	Small sized bowl with a sharpened rim, straight profile, internally treated with slip (flaked off)	Medium fabric and well fired
10	Bowl with sharpened rim in red ware without any treatment, straight profile	Rough surface and well fired
11	Bowl with thickened rim in dull Red ware, and a straight profile	Rough surface, medium fabric and ill fired
12	Body part of a small sized bowl, treated with red slip	Thin section, fine fabric and well fired
13	Medium sized basin with a straight profile and grooved rim, -treated with red slip	Coarse fabric and ill fired
14	Pedestal base of a vessel without any wash	Well fired and fine fabric
15	Body part of a thick storage jar, treated with dark brown slip	Thick section, well fired and fine fabric

Koteshwar, is situated close to the site. Towards the creek, a raised alignment is noted, which is said to be an ancient jetty (*dhakka*). Potsherds are scattered over a hectare of land that is under cultivation. The total deposit may be less than a meter, as estimated from a section seen in a well located close to the site. The major ceramic shapes (Table 1; Fig. 2). include the rims of bowls, jars and a dish. They are made of fine well-levigated clay and are well fired. A sherd of a storage jar was also collected.

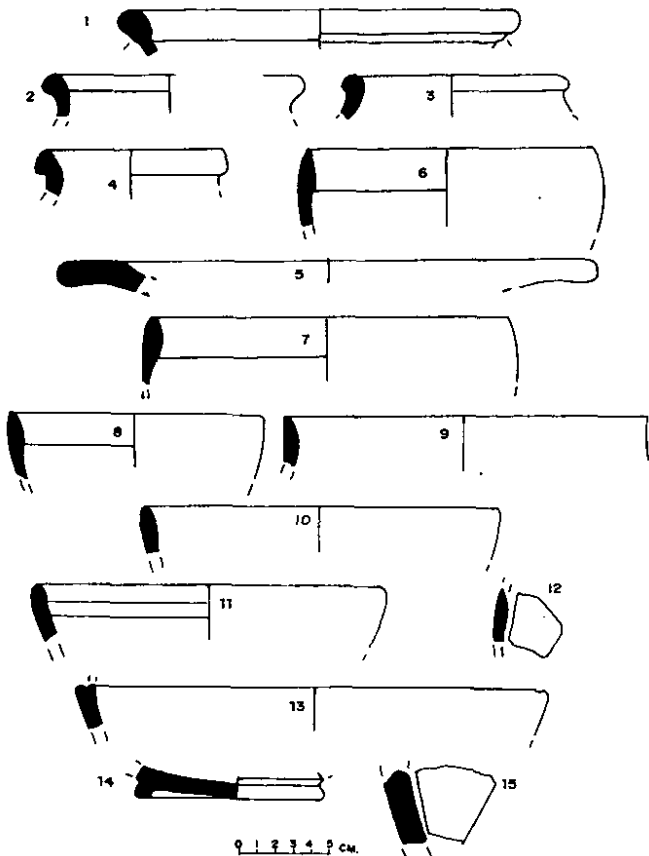


Fig. 2: Late Harappan pottery from Bhokhira, Porbandar



Fig. 3: Remains of an ancient jetty (No. 1) along the Porbandar Creek

2. Ancient jetties

Four ancient jetties locally known as *Juna Dhakka* were noticed in the creek over a stretch of about 3 km. The first jetty (located in the upper part of the creek) is situated near the present *Kanya Gurukula* and opposite the *Porav Mata* temple. The major portion of the jetty has been destroyed and the length of the remainder is about 10 m, with a visible height of 1.5 m; and is made of irregular large limestone blocks (Fig. 3). The jetty was constructed parallel to the creek. Local information suggests that this jetty was used for passengers; and small sail boats.

The second jetty is located about 200 m south of the present bridge between Bhokhira and Porbandar. The jetty is well preserved, but is partially covered under the present road. The visible portion of the jetty measures more than 50 m in length, and 3 courses are visible. The jetty is made of fine dressed and uniform limestone blocks (Fig. 4). It is constructed parallel to the creek. As per local information, this jetty was used for loading and unloading cargo; such as cotton and woolen cloth, wood, grains; etc. Boats, having a length of 10-15 m were used to reach this jetty. The third jetty is located about 100 m south of the previous one and is poorly preserved. A few irregular scattered limestone blocks are noticed during low tide.

The fourth jetty is located near the present cremation ground, along the creek. The major portion of the jetty is buried under a modern structure. As per local tradition, this jetty acted as a ramp to cross the creek and was used by bullock carts, remains of which were noticed (Fig. 5). This jetty was constructed perpendicular to the creek, and part of it extended a few metres into the water. The jetty is made of uniform and dressed limestone blocks.

Discussion and Conclusion

Explorations around Porbandar brought to light interesting findings about the maritime activities of the region. Although the Saurashtra coast has witnessed the rise of



Fig. 4: Ancient jetty (No. 2) along the Porbandar Creek



Fig. 5: Partially submerged jetty (No. 4) along the Porbandar Creek

several Harappan and historical period ports, no significant remains of ancient ports or habitation sites of the protohistoric period were recorded around Porbandar. The discovery of a late Harappan site at Porbandar has added a new dimension in the study of the Harappan domain in the Gujarat. The site is locally known as *Kotada Bandar*. *Bandar* means a port, and it is very likely that areas close to the creek, boats may have been berthed about 3500 years ago. The site would have been an important port during the late Harappan period. The pottery is very similar to Rangpur IIC (Rao 1963) and Bet Dwarka (Gaur and Sundaresh 2003). From the section it appears that the total habitation deposit is not more than 1 m; similar to late Harappan deposits at Bet Dwarka. The discovery is also significant as it suggests that the late Harappans continued to stay near coastal areas to exploit resources from the sea; this being their main economy. As per local information, an ancient jetty was situated near the site and about 500 m away from the creek. It is likely that during the Harappan period, the creek extended up to this point. On the basis of a comparative study, the late Harappan habitation at Bhokhira can be dated to between the 16th and the 14th century B.C.

Ancient jetties in the Bhokhira creek suggest that this was an important maritime trade center. This suggests that they were used as tidal jetties with entry of boats determined by the tide. These jetties are also indicative of the advancement in harbour architecture during the medieval period. However, to date them we need more data, and finds such as anchors and habitation sites. So far, no parallel structures have been discovered from coastal areas, although some remains of ancient jetties have been reported from the offshore area of Dwarka and Rupen Bandar (Gaur *et al.* 2003) in Okhamandal region. The tradition of construction of jetties and dockyards is as old as the Harappan period in Gujarat (Dhavalikar *et al.* 1996; Rao 1991) but they are presently located either at a higher

level or far hinterland. As per local information these jetties were in use till the late 19th century A.D.

While interviewing aged fishermen, we were informed that stone anchors were present in Porbandar. However, owing to reclamation of the land for construction of the new port, most of these ancient remains have been destroyed and buried under modern structures. A few local fishermen state that stone for anchors, came from the Barda hills comprising basalt.

Thus, in conclusion, onshore explorations in Porbandar brought to light, for the first time, the remains of a late Harappan settlement dating back to the 16th-14th century B.C., which is very similar to that at Bet Dwarka. This is another evidence to suggest that the Harappan legacy of maritime activity continued till the late Harappan period on the Saurashtra coast. The discovery of ancient jetties along the Porbandar creek signifies the importance of this site as an active centre of maritime activities in the past. These jetties were possibly built during the medieval period. The siltation of the creek and emergence of new ports are important causes for disuse for these jetties. The present exploration has opened up a new horizon for further offshore explorations in the Porbandar region.

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