

EXPLORATION OF AN ANCIENT PORT : ELEPHANTA ISLAND (BOMBAY)

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Introduction

The transoceanic trade of India goes back to the 3rd millennium BC. Among major ports of ancient India, Lothal, Dwarkam, Prabhasha, Sopara, Broach, Honnavar, Muzuris, Kaveripattinam, Nagapattinam, Kalingapatnam, Pithunda, Palur, Chilka lake, Konark, Balasore and Tamralipti contributed a lot for the brisk maritime trade of India.

Elephanta Island was also a port since 1st century BC upto the 16th century AD. The island is situated at 18° 58' N and 72° 58' E, about seven miles north-east to the Appolo Bandar, (Gateway of India) Bombay. It is densely forested. There are two hills separated by a deep ravine, in which are the celebrated caves of Mahesh Murti and other Hindu deities. The most convenient approach to the island from Gateway of India (Bombay) is by ferry boat, the landing place is known as Shetbandar jetty.

The name Elephanta, by which the island is now known, originated from the Portuguese who so designated the place after a colossal stone statue of an Elephant standing near the landing place. The statue was totally ransacked and in 1864 the statue was rebuilt from the stone pieces of the original statue and is now kept in the Victoria Gardens in Bombay (Imperial Gazetteer of India : 1908 Vol-XII).

The Elephanta, locally known as Gharapuri, comprises of three villages namely Rajbandar, Morabandar and Shetbandar which served as separate ports in different periods of history. From the Aihole inscription of Pulakesin II, it seems that a Maurya dynasty was ruling over the region around 7th century AD. Pulakesin II, the Chalukya ruler invaded the island and vanquished the Mauryas and reduced Puri after attacking it with hundreds of ships, (Epigraphic Indica, 1981 VI.). This Puri might have been the capital of the Mauryas. Probably Gharapuri is the present Elephanta island. After the Chalukyas the island went into the hands of the Rashtrakutas during the 8th cent., AD. Subsequently the Chalukyas of Kalyani (10th cent AD), the Yadavas, the Muslims, the Portuguese, the Marathas and the British had control over it (Sastri: 1934).

Rajbandar, the defunct port of the island, where the brick ruins of an ancient port-town can be seen in the valley, extends upto the hill on which cave no. 2 is located. The ancient jetty is known as Rajghat. A Buddhist sprawling ruin of brick-building suggests the Rajbandar was once a flourishing port.

Silver Kshtrapa and Roman coins belonging to the first to fourth centuries AD and small copper coins of Karshapanas period belonging to the first century BC to first century AD were found here. In 1973 (Rao: 1987), while quarrying the earth for building a mud bund, a brick structure was exposed after which excavations were carried out which revealed a 15 m long brick jetty cum wharf. The water mark on the wall suggests three distinct levels. The height of the wall was raised thrice-totally by 1.5 metre over a period of 700 years or less. Fragments of Roman amphoras and Red Polished ware were found in the upper and middle levels and copper coins recovered from the bottom and the earliest levels confirm that the structure was built in the 1st century BC and was in use upto the 7th cent. AD (Rao: 1987).

The present paper deals with the detailed description of the recent findings from Elephanta Island during the exploration carried out in November 1992. The findings includes coins, pottery and brick structure. An attempt has been made to decipher the coins based on paleographic features. The pottery and brick sizes have been compared with other neighbouring sites.

Methodology

Onshore and nearshore explorations were carried out from Rajbandar to Morabandar and to Shetbandar. Coins were collected from the local people residing on this island. A large number of pottery was collected in a rain gully at Shetbandar. Height of the section is about 2 to 3 m. About a metre below from the top a brick structure was noticed and about half metre below the structure, pottery were collected.

Results

The results of explorations at different sites on Elephanta island are described belows.

Morabandar

Morabandar is a small hamlet standing on the north-eastern side of the island which is only a reminiscence of the term Mauryas of Konkan (probably Morabandar means port of Mauryas). A number of circular and square copper coins were collected from Morabandar. On two lead coins three peaked hill on obverse and a wheel on the reverse are clearly visible. In one of the copper coins an inscription in Brahmi character reading Ya, is also visible.

At Morabandar, the section exactly opposite to the solar plant is hardly 5 m in height from the high water markline. Here pottery and coins of different dynasties were collected. Carnelian raw material was also noticed on the section as well as on the shore.

In the intertidal zone rolled pottery was found and while scraping the section pottery was collected which included bowl, dish, jar and plates of red ware.

While crossing over the hillock, between Morabandar and Shetbandar some brick and stone structures were visible on the surface. The brick structure, extends towards the sea and is more than 15 m in length. A stone pestle was found in the vicinity.

Rajbandar

Recently a new jetty has been constructed exactly opposite to Rajbandar. Recently the hillock was quarried and blasted for getting stone. The whole area is covered with stone chips making it

difficult to trace pottery and other antiquities at the present Rajbandar site. A carnelian bead was collected here. Rolled and unrolled pottery was noticed on the nearshore area and in the sections respectively. A few Chinese sherds were also collected from the same vicinity.

Rajbandar, where a brick wharf was excavated by Archaeological Survey of India, is datable to 1st century AD, which is now submerged under the water reservoir and a bund constructed across the reservoir to prevent the sea water.

It seems that probably Rajbandar was a harbour and Morabandar was the habitational area, because profuse quantity of coins and structural remains as well as pottery were noticed at Morabandar.

Shetbandar

During Portuguese regime this locality served as a port. Large size bricks are lying scattered in the intertidal zone and some potsherds of Red Polished Ware were collected here. On the way to Morabandar from Shetbandar, a rock-cut well 2.5 m in diameter is noticed. While exploring the onshore region of the area in a rain gully, a brick wall was noticed which is approximately 15 to 20 m in length and the brick size is 30 × 20 × 7 cm. The exposed brick wall is about 1 metre in height. Below the wall a thick deposit of pottery layer consisting of miniature bowls, spouts and jars were noticed. The potteries are thin in section, unpainted and ill fired. The pottery deposit is also of 1 metre. About one metre thick deposit of loose clay was also noticed between the wall and pottery layer.

Description of Coins :

During the exploration at Elephanta island about 24 coins were collected; among them 15 are of copper and remaining 9 are of lead. These coins are of different periods according to their paleographic features. These coins may be described as follows:

1. **Metal :** Copper, Obv. Legend: four Brahmi words are visible but only one is readable as Ya. Rev. Heavily encrusted. (Pl. 1)
2. **Metal :** Copper, Obv. Legend: 'Sri Krisnaraja' within dotted border, below the name depiction of an alter-like hollow symbol. Rev. Couchant Nandi facing left. (Pl. 2)
3. **Metal :** Copper, Obv. Legend: 'Sri Krisnaraja' within dotted border. Rev. Couchant Nandi facing left. (Pl. 3)
4. **Metal :** Lead, Obv. three peaks hill without any inscription, Rev. wheel with 10 spokes within dotted circle. (Pl. 4)

Discussion

Morabandar, Rajbandar and Shetbander served as ports during different periods. Morabandar was the earliest port during Satavahana period, Rajbandar served as a port during Roman period from about 1st-2nd century AD and Shetbandar served as a port during Portuguese period.

The earliest coins may be dated to 2nd century A.D. as in one coin Brahmi 'Ya' of the same period is visible (Pl. 1). This coin may be of Yajna Sri Satkarni of Satavahana dynasty. Other two copper coins are of 'Krishnaraja' a Kalchuri King (550-575 A.D.). The coins of Kalchuri dynasty

are found in abundance which reflect the importance of this island in sixth and seventh century A.D.

A large quantity of pottery from Morabandar and Rajbandar suggests that pottery was manufactured in the island itself. On the basis of pottery, date may be attributed to Pre-Gupta period. Further exploration may reveal post-Gupta period antiquities also.

The brick structures seen from the surface indicate the establishment of a large town in the early historical period. The author of Periplus of Erythrean Sea did not mention, because this port might be used only by the local habitants. Though earlier excavation suggests the contact with Roman world (Rao : 1987), the brick size of Shetbandar structure (30 × 20 × 7 cm) suggests the habitation during Gupta period. Some bricks collected from the intertidal zone of Shetbandar seems to be of Satavahana period.

The brick wall appears to be of Gupta period and the pottery may be the pre-Gupta period. Intensive exploration may reveal some more antiquities in this area which may help to date the wall, for which the vegetation has to be cleared in the first instant. Explorations in intetidal zone suggest the extension of township towards the sea, as a large number of bricks of early historical period have been noticed.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can ben said that Elephanta island served as a very prominent maritime trade centre of anciant India. The island also served as an important military centre as one of the inscriptions of Chalukya King Pulakesin II mentions about a naval battle fought here. The early history of Elephanta is overlooked because of the attractive caves situated over this island. But antiquities such as Satavahana and Kalchuri coins, Gupta period structures noticed during this exploration clearly suggest the habitation on this island from a couple of centuries before Christian era. It is also suggested that the structures and habitation of early period must have been destroyed by the sea as remains can be seen in intertidal zone. An offshore exploration can be conducted towards Morabandar and Rajbandar.

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Pottery Description

Red Ware

1. High-necked jar with a triangular rim, buffish interior and ochre wash in exterior. Medium fabric and well fired.
2. Jar with short concave neck, beaked-out rim, black section. Coarse fabric and ill fired.
3. High-necked jar with undercut beaded rim. Red slip on exterior. Fine fabric and well fired.
4. Storage jar with short neck and narrow mouth, externally grooved and broad banded rim. Coarse fabric and well fired.

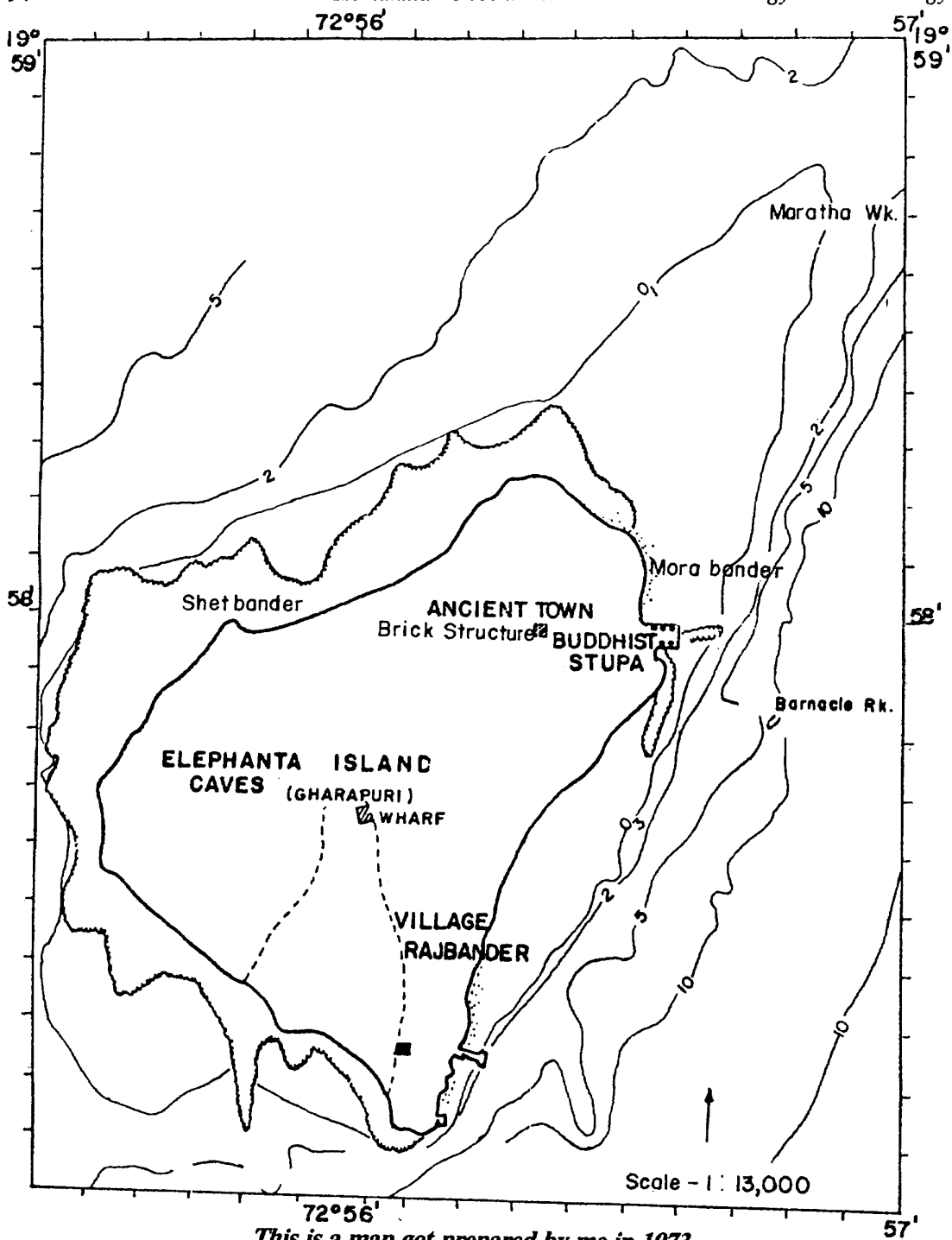
5. High-necked jar with triangular rim. Thick section, coarse fabric and well fired.
6. Jar with high concave neck and clubbed rim, black section, grooved exterior, Rough surface, medium fabric and well fired.
7. Jar with constricted neck and flaring rim, blackish exterior. Medium fabric and ill fired.
8. High-necked jar with out-turned rim and flattened at top. Medium fabric and well fired.
9. High-necked jar with outward projected rim. Flattened and grooved top. Red slip, medium fabric and well fired.
10. High-necked jar with out-turned rim and mildly grooved externally. Flattened at top, medium fabric and well fired.
11. Small jar with out-turned rim, top grooved, thin and black section. Rough surface, medium fabric and ill fired.
12. Small jar with a concave neck and banded rim. Medium fabric and well fired.
13. Featureless rim of a bowl with flaring sides and corrugated profile. Thin section, medium fabric and ill fired.
14. Bowl with concave sides somewhat flared. Corrugated profile and pedestal base. Thin section, medium fabric and ill fired.
15. Cylindrical spout of a jar with ringed mouth. Coarse fabric and ill fired.

Red Polished Ware

16. Jar with concave neck and flaring mouth. Rounded and internally bevelled rim. Fine fabric and well fired. Red slip washed away.
17. Ridged rim of a small jar. Thin section, fine fabric and well fired.

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Pottery from Elephanta Island (Bombay)

