Excavations at Shikarpur 2007-2008: A Costal Port and Craft Production Center of the Indus Civilization in Kutch, India

by Kuldeep K. Bhan and P. Ajithprasad

Introduction

In the past 20 years the study of the Indus Civilization or Harappan culture has made significant progress through the establishment of long term excavation programs at both large smaller sites. In addition, continued surveys of previously unrecorded regions have filled in many blank areas both within and adjacent to the Indus and Saraswati river basins. Excavations by Archaeological survey if India at sites such as Dholavira in Kutch (Bisht 2000, 200) and Rakhigarhi in Harayana (Nath 1998, 2001), have provided new information on two largest Indus sites in India. At the same time ongoing excavations at the site of Harappa, Pakistan (Meadow and Kenoyer 2005, 2008) have provided comparative materials and a robust series of radiocarbon dates that provide an overall chronological frame work for emergence, expansion and gradual transformation of this early urban societies.

While large sites provide an important framework for overall reference, the smaller settlements of Indus Civilization are where the details of regional traditions that make up the foundation of this civilization are to be found. Among the most important excavations undertaken by the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, which has been excavating in Gujarat and adjacent areas since 1953.

The most significant discoveries relating to the Indus civilization have been found at the sites such as Nageshwar (Hegde, Bhan *et. al.* 1990), Nagwada (Hegde, Sonawane *et. al*. 1988), Gola Dhoro (Bagasara) (Bhan, Sonawane *et. al*.2005; Sonawane, Ajithprasad *et. al.* 2003), all of which are located in along the southern coastal regions or near little Rann of Kutch. Other important sites include the sites of Kuntasi in northern Saurashtra (Dhavlikar, Raval and Chitalwala 1996) excavated by the Deccan College Pune, and the site of Juni Kuran in northern Kutch (Pramanik 2004), excavated by Archaeological Survey of India. Most recently, the excavations at the site Kanmer along the eastern edge of Kutch has provided a new view of the Harappan and late Harapppan occupations.

It is in the context of these previous discoveries in northern Saurashtra and Kutch that the site of Shikarpur was selected for immediate and long term study.

The primary research problem guiding the project concerns the extent to which the economic activities undertaken under taken by the residents of Shikarpur, small (approximately 3.4 hectares) settlement of Harappan civilization in Gujarat are either complementary with or redundant to those undertaken at near by site of Gola

Dhoro[1]These sites are nearest neighbors, located on the opposite shores of the narrowest point of the Gulf of Kutch, which is separates them by 20 kilometers. One of the basic questions we would like to ask is:

Where the economies of these sites (Gola Dhoro and Shikarpur) highly integrated? or where they largely independent of (and potentially competitive with) one another? Answering this basic question will significantly advance our understanding the economic organizations of the Harappan Civilization in one of the important regions.

Traditionally, it has been widely accepted that these Harappan Phase settlements in Gujarat were established as part of concerted colonization of the region undertaken in order to exploit natural resources such as marine shell and semiprecious stone which were not available in Indus Valley. This model implies that the economies of Harappan Phase settlements in Gujarat, such as Gola Dhoro and Shikarpur functioned as integral component of an economic system organized at regional level. If this were the case, we would expect that the economic activities undertaken by the residents of Shikarpur would be largely complementary to those undertaken at Gola Dhoro. On the other hand mixed material assemblages at these sites hints at their potential autochthonous origin and suggest that the residents of these sites may have been in competition with one another for the wealth generated through participation in interregional trade exchange networks. If this were the case, we expect that the economic activities undertaken by the residents of these nearest Harappan Phase neighbors would be redundant with respect to one another. The investigations of this issue will provide new information that will be crucial for evaluating these developing new models of the organizational dynamics of the Harappan Civilization in Gujarat.

Unfortunately, the site is being currently being encroachment upon by various development projects especially widening of highway and erecting windmills for power generation and therefore the site is in danger of completely being destroyed. The research and conservation program under taken by the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda will serve to preserve an endangered site, advance our knowledge about this ancient civilization, educate professional, general public and development officials regarding the importance of preserving our National Heritage and develop the center for domestic and international tourism. The project will include archaeological survey, excavation and conservation of the site and artifacts and simultaneously develop an interpretive center at the site.

We already have requested the Department of Archaeology, Government of Gujarat for decelerating this site as state protected monument, so that important site would not be lost due to modern developmental projects. We are quite hopeful that the site will be declared as a protected monument in coming months. Since the site is close to Highway no. 15 that connects Kuttch with Gujarat it can be developed into major tourist attraction. Harappan tradition gave rise to many crafts that are still practiced in Kuttch and Gujarat.

[1] Excavations at Gola Dhoro (Bagasra) -a small industrial Indus settlement on the Gulf of Kutch was undertaken by the Department and at present the material is being analyzed and interim report is ready to be sent to press. Please visit www.harappa.com for details.

The Shikarpur site has a potential to serve as a gateway for the domestic and international tourists wishing to visit rich array architectural, artistic and crafts traditions and one the largest Harappan city of Dholavira in Kuttch. We are also planning to develop this site as a model for mud brick conservation and preservation along with a state of art interpretive center and develop the landscape of the area with the traditional plants that were known to Harappans, creating ancient environment for visitors to see.

Excvations

The site of Shikarpur was undertaken for the excavations from 25 Dec 2007 to 25 February 2008 by a team of archeologists; Kuldeep K. Bhan and P. Ajithprasad along with postgraduate and undergraduate students of the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. The funds for carrying excavations were made available from the University funds, Archaeological Survey of India and the Department of Archaeology, Government of Gujarat. Additional support for conservation of the site and artifact was provided by the Indus Heritage Trust (India) and the Global Heritage fund (USA)

The site locally known as *Valmio Timbo* (23° 14' 15" N; 70° 40' 39" E) is located about 4.5 km south of the Shikarpur village at the edge of the narrow creek extending eastward from the Gulf of Kutch. The rectangular mound approximately measures 3.4 hectares covering the entire elevated top of a stabilized sand dune. The overall height of the mound is about 7.5 to 8.00m from the surrounding ground, which is about 8.00m MSL. Although the site was excavated earlier in 1987 to 1989 by the Gujarat State Archaeology Department, but neither the excavation were published and what ever little was published were patchy and inconclusive. Therefore the site was undertaken up for the re-excavation due its strategic location with a view of establishing the cultural sequence as well as the settlement features in terms of economic activities carried out at the site. Unfortunately, the site is encroached and disturbed by highway construction and development of windmills. Since the site is very close to Highway no 15 connecting rest of Gujarat to Kutch (Fig 1), the long term program of the Department is to preserve the site and develop as place for tourist attraction.

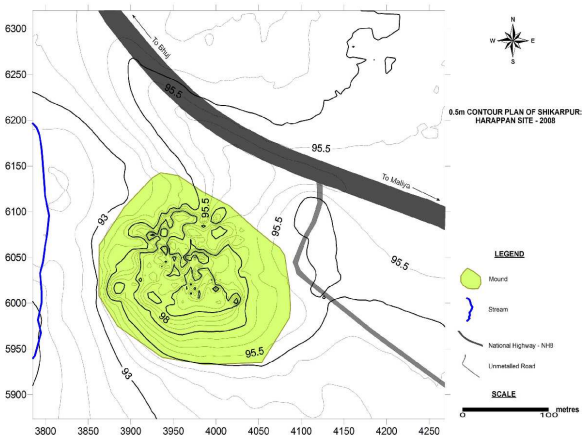

Fig 1 Contour Map of Shikarpur site

A through examination of the surface features indicated extensive narrow ridge-like feature running all around the site suggesting a thick protective wall around the settlement. The site also revealed Harappan artifacts, especially ceramics and triangular terracotta cakes, spread rather evenly on the surface. In addition to the classical Harappan pottery the surface assemblage included small amounts of regional pottery.

This season, nine trenches each measuring 5x5m. Among these six trenches were laid in the southern edge of the mound. They are aligned in a straight line extending from the southern fortification wall towards the center of the settlement in the north. The remaining three trenches are laid across a rain eroded gully in the western edge of the site.

The excavations revealed a total of 6.40m deposit showing three fold sequence in the Harappan Occupation at the site. The early phase – Phase – I entirely belonging to the classical Harappan represented by about 3.00m cultural deposit. Harappan occupation in this phase starts with structures built of mud-bricks of distinct Harappan style. In addition to the classical pottery, the ceramic assemblage also includes a few sherds of regional pottery types. One of the interesting potsherd recovered from the excavation has cloth impression on interior and exterior side that perhaps would lead us to identify it (Fig 2).

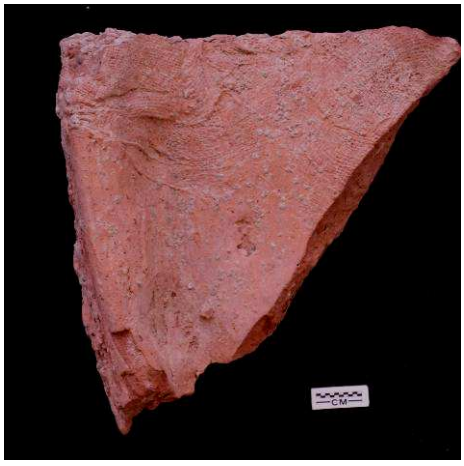

Fig 2: Potsherd with cloth impression

Other artifacts found in this phase are large chert blades and cores (Fig 3), several terracotta cart-frames of various varieties and wheels, terracotta bangles, terracotta bull and other animals and human like figurines. One of the interesting find of this period is a

Fig. 3: Chert Blades and Core

female figurine partially broken off below the knees and the chest above. Its modeling as well as graphic rendering of the female genital is remarkable and noteworthy (Fig 4), which is not often in the case of Harappan female terracotta figurines. Several stone

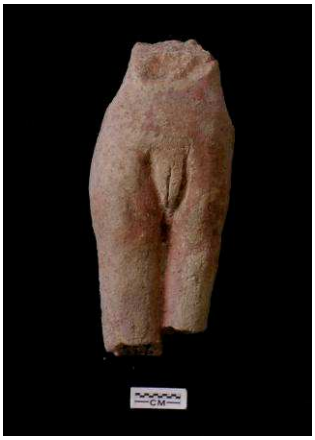

Fig 4: Female Terracotta Figurine.

beads and bead rougouts (Fig 5) along with 'ernestitie' drills heads were reported from the site. We have probably located working area of this craft and that area will be undertaken for excavations next season. Faience and steatite beads are relatively rare; so

Fig. 5: Stone bead and bead roughouts

are shell bangles and ladles. Among copper implements a large Celt is an interesting find. At least five terracotta sealings recovered from the site one of them with impression of square unicorn seal is quite remarkable (Fig 6). Another interesting artifact recovered from this phase is a steatite button seal having five concentric circles arranged around a central one forming central pattern. It has two small holes at the center perhaps to thread it and tie (Fig 7).

Fig 6: Terracotta Sealing

Fig. 7: Steatite Button Seal

This phase is followed by the Phase-II which is distinguished by preponderance of the regional pottery types. The total habitation of this phase around 1.40 to 1.60m. This shows extensive use of locally quarried stone for the construction of the structures.

The artifacts from this phase incorporate Harappan and local pottery types. Other artifacts like chert blades of Rohri type chert, shell bangles,stone beads, copper implements, terracotta bangles, beads, triangular cakes, craft frames and wheels continue as in the Phase – I.

The Phase – II at the top is followed by the deposit representing the last phase of the Harappan occupation. Habitation deposit of Phase – III is thin and patchy and is generally confined to the top 10 to 20cm. The deposit is marked by the Late Harappan Material. Very few artifacts except ceramics have been reported from this phase. This phase also sees complete absence of any craft activity. Structures belonging to this phase are also meager, except for the remains of flimsy, circular or apsidal stone structures. They seem to have been built using the stones from preceding phase.

In addition to this a portion of the fortification wall in the southern edge of the site that is entirely made of mud bricks. The history of the construction of this wall is not as yet clear as the excavation of the trench could not reach up to the bottom level of the wall. The excavated part of the wall is about 2.00high and has 15 vertical courses. The exposed part shows two stages of construction and massive repairs work carried out in the early stages of the Phase II.

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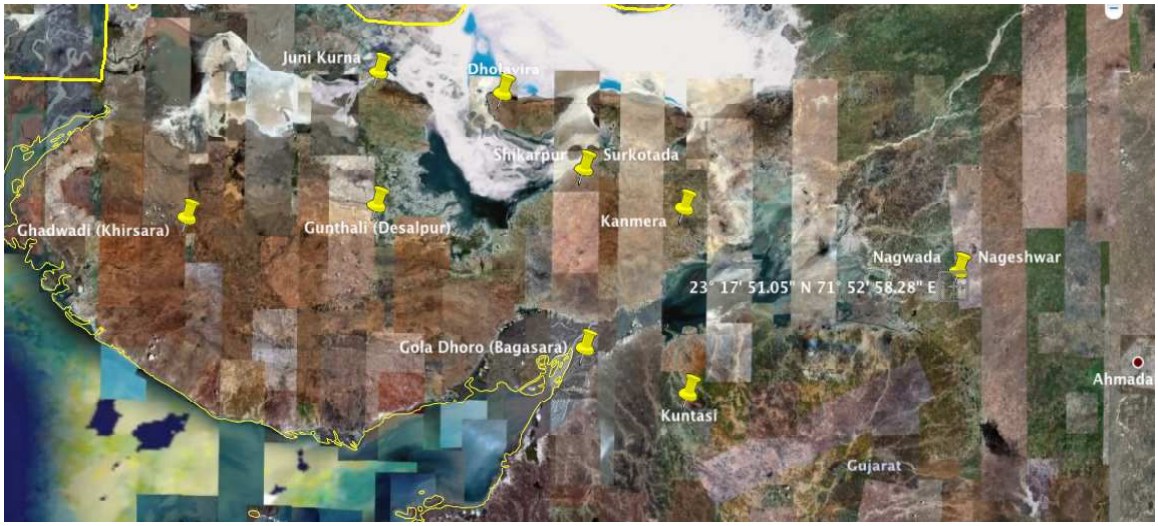

Here are coordinates of some of the important sites of Gujarat that have been mentioned in the text.

Gola Dhoro (Bagasara)	23° 2' 12.00 N 70° 31' 13.86" E
Kanmera	23° 30' 26.95" N 70° 52' 39.76" E
Nagwada	23° 17' 51.05" N 71° 52' 58. 28" E
Nageshwar	22° 24' 31. 25" N 69° 05' 25.45" E
Dholavira	23° 53' 19. 42" N 70° 12' 38. 69" E
Juni Kurna	23° 57' 12. 73" N 69° 45' 20.36" E
Gunthali (Desalpur)	23° 30' 22.60" N 69° 12' 02.89" E
Surkotada	23° 38' 08.86" N 70° 30' 38.46" E
Shikarpur	23° 14’ 15” N 70° 40’ 39” E
Kuntasi	22° 53' 16.69" N 70° 53' 47. 70" E
Ghadwadi (Khirsara)	23° 27' 17. 00" N 69° 03' 35. 99" E