

# THE SITE OF BANBHORE (SINDH – PAKISTAN): A JOINT PAKISTANI-FRENCH-ITALIAN PROJECT. CURRENT RESEARCH IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY (2010-2014)

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The site of Banbhore rises amidst swamps and mangroves at the mouth of the Indus deltaic region on the northern bank of the Gharo creek, midway on the route from Karachi to Thatta, and ca. 30 km from the present shoreline [Figs. 1, 2 (next page)]. It consists in a “citadel” encircled by bastions (47 circular towers and 8 rectangular bastions), overlooking an artificial lake of sweet water to the northeast of the wall, and a vast area of *extra moenia* ruins – likely harbor structures, still visible at low-tide, and other structures: probably urban quarters, suburbs and slums, warehouses, workshops, artificial barrages. There are widely spread scatters of shards, porcelains, beads, clay moulds, coins and other artefacts. A towered wall, questionably called the “Partition Wall” by previous scholars, runs through the whole citadel, approximately north-south, bending at middle length in the southeastern direction [Fig. 3]. Altogether, the citadel and the surrounding quarters cover a surface of ca. 65 hectares.

Even though its ruins have been target of more than one archaeological expedition since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the site poses many questions and only now

is being given proper attention. The archaeological value of Banbhore was first recognized by Henry Cousens, who visited it in 1929, and by Nani Gopal Majumdar, who dug some trenches in 1930 (Cousens 1929, pp. 80ff., Majumdar 1934, pp. 18ff.). In 1951, Leslie Alcock, at the time an officer in the Department of Archaeology of Pakistan, undertook preliminary excavations on the mound commonly called “the citadel.” Soon afterwards, Fazal Ahmad Khan started his campaign which brought to light important data. Professor Rafique Mughal added valuable new information, and as did Nabi Bux Khan Baloch and, in 1972, Muhammad Sharif.

The excavations carried out by the late Fazal Ahmad Khan (1958-1965) revealed important architectural and archaeological remains of a pre-Islamic and Islamic settlement (Khan 1969). The latter was represented by a Mosque, a Hindu Temple, houses, palaces, workshops and warehouses, market and “industrial” areas. Various kinds of objects such as Chinese porcelain and celadon, Indian artefacts, clay honey-combed moulds, coins, beads and glassware were found, witnessing the wealth and importance of Banbhore in the Islamic age. Skeletons left unburied inside the houses and on the streets were also found,

*Fig. 1. Banbhore seen from the east.  
All photographs by authors.*



Fig. 2. The eastern side of the fortified wall of the citadel.

which seems to point to a violent, dramatic end of the town around the 7<sup>th</sup> century AH/13<sup>th</sup> century CE. Under the Islamic town, two main cultural layers were uncovered: the upper one produced archaeological data connected with the Sasanian period. It also produced evidence of a Hindu temple and other cults, thus giving the image of a mercantile, cosmopolitan market and harbor-town. The layer below the Sasanian yielded a large collection of vessels, grey and red polished ware, as well as some Hindu-Parthian and Kushan coins. But no real structures were discovered, nor was the virgin soil reached due to heavy water infiltration. Thus, the information on the early stages of peopling and life of the site of Banbhore remained incomplete, representing a major challenge for future research. According to F. A. Khan, the lowest layer reached by his excavations corresponded to the origin of the settlement and could be dated to the Schytho-Parthian period, followed by a Hindu-Sasanian phase.

Unfortunately, all we have of Khan's campaign is a first map of the "citadel" and its encircling towered walls, a booklet (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1963) and a few articles in *Pakistan Archaeology* by the same scholar and his collaborators (Ashfaq 1969, Ghafur 1966, Khan 1964, Nasir 1969). The chronological layers of the site have been left unstudied and unpublished: excavation notes, stratigraphic sequences and drawings have disappeared; nobody seems to know where they are. Whether they have been dispersed or lost, it is impossible to date the finds (and the site) with accuracy. Some *lingas* and a great amount of ceramics, properly stored and classified in the storerooms adjoining the Site Museum of Banbhore, have never been analyzed. There has never been any precise indication of the trenches and layers where they were unearthed. Moreover, despite the wealth of unearthed inscriptions and coins, no place name has so far come to light that can be matched with other historical records to flesh out the site's long life and history.

Fig. 3. The so-called "Partition Wall" running across the citadel, seen from the north.



The importance of the site is undoubtedly linked to its strategic position and the surrounding environment. The imposing remains are a clear testimony to the major role it played in the course of centuries. In various periods of its life it would seem to have been a nerve-junction of the Indus system, the northern terminal of the monsoon routes, and the center of a prosperous trade of luxury goods between the Central Asian basin and the Iranian plateau, Arabia and the Indian Ocean all the way to China in the East and the major markets in the West. Its location along a branch of the Indus River – the Gharo channel – could provide excellent shelter for all convoys arriving there from North and South, loaded with precious merchandise to bargain, to sell and purchase. The favorable environment, if properly irrigated by means of human intervention, could provide agricultural resources which must have formed a formidable economic backbone of the city, providing passing caravans and convoys with fresh supplies too.



Various historical sources inform us about a harbor town at the mouth of the Indus delta which, due to its strategic position, played a central role since about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Scholars have identified it with the harbor of Barbarikon – named by the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* – and with the Sasanian and Islamic harbor-town called Deb/Debal/Daybul, first mentioned by the preacher Mani and by several later sources in Arabic and Persian, which provide a wealth of information. Even though such identifications are strongly debated and there is no general agreement among scholars, the location and the imposing structures of the fortified citadel on the Gharo channel make it appealing tentatively to link the site with those ancient towns.

Clearly there was a case to be made for renewed field work, in order to solve one of the major problems of the historical topography of the Indus deltaic region. Moreover, to give a name and a precise historic life to this impressive site might fill an important gap in our ability to answer the many queries arising from the intricacy of land and sea trade-routes and the international network of allegiances, trades and business over a period of at least fifteen centuries. New evidence and archaeological data are coming to light from excavations carried out in the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>1</sup> which seem to point to a major harbor located somewhere along the southern coastal region of the Indian subcontinent, an active and authoritative partner in the international trade network over a large span of time. This was the starting point of our project.

Between 1989 and 1995, the French Archaeological Mission to Sindh, under the direction of Dr. Monique Kervran and with the collaboration of Dr. Asma Ibrahim and Dr. Kaleemullah Lashari, resumed explorations in the Indus deltaic region. This led to the discovery of important sites, and to systematic excavations at Ratto Kot, Lahori Bandar and Sehwan Sharif (Kervran 1992, 1996 and 2005). At the same time, an Italian Archaeological and Historical Mission, under the direction of Prof. Dr. Valeria Piacentini Fiorani, was carrying out surveys in Southern Makran and Kharan, with the collaboration of another French archaeologist, Dr. Roland Besenval (Besenval and Sanlaville 1990; Piacentini Fiorani 2014). The result of this project was to highlight the role played by the so-called Green Belt in Southern Makran, as a hinge and land route between the Iranian plateau, the Central Asian steppes and the Indus system. The two Missions were working on the basis of a Licence granted by the Federal Government of Pakistan and under the sponsorship of their respective Ministries for Foreign Affairs. Both scholars found a natural partner in the other's experience and learning; at this

point, the two decided to join efforts, scholarship and the data so far obtained. The *incognita* of Barbarikon/ Deb/Daybul still stood as a challenge, a void to be filled from both the archaeological and historical point of view. The majestic site of Banbhore still defied all efforts. The Pakistani Devolution Law speeded up the formalization of the project with Pakistani scholars.

The aim of the following notes is to present the first stages in an ambitious project, the Archaeological and Historical Pakistani-French and Italian Joint Project at Banbhore (Sindh), which has been going on since 2011 on the basis of a Licence granted by the Government of Sindh, Pakistan (prot. So/ Secy/Antiquities/2010/2132), extended for three further years (License No. So/Secy/Antiquities/III-131/2013). The Pakistani partner operates under the direction of Drs. Lashari and Ibrahim (Museum of the State Bank of Pakistan); the French partner operates under the direction of Dr. Kervran (University of La Sorbonne and CNRS, Paris/France); the Italian partner operates under the direction of Prof. Piacentini Fiorani (CRiSSMA Centre – Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan/Italy). The ongoing archaeological activities use traditional methods supported by geomorphological and geophysical surveys and analyses, pottery-assemblages investigation in stratigraphic sequence and archaeometric non-destructive analyses in situ conducted by Prof. Mario Piacentini and Dr. Anna Candida Felici (LANDA Lab, Rome La Sapienza University). Historical “digging” in contemporary sources aims at providing new clues to the reading and understanding of the material evidence coming to light. All in all, the first steps demonstrate that the site is more complex than was thought before. A first systematic “joint report” is underway, and it will be published at the end of the forthcoming field-season (January-March 2015).

As indicated above, by reason of its strategic position along the main north-south and east-west sea and land routes, the site of Banbhore certainly was an important market and harbor town. With the exception of the fortifications and palatial-religious structures still visible, levels of early periods are buried deeply under those of middle-early Islamic, Sasanian and Scytho-Parthian occupation, which are to be still adequately explored. The preparatory work in 2010 included an accurate re-reading of the available literature and contemporary written sources. Then, the most pressing task was to create a new, updated scale-study and contour-lines map of the site, the indispensable tool to proceed to further investigation and excavations. Such a task was accomplished in the course of the 2011 and 2012 field-seasons through a topographic survey and a kite-photo campaign (Yves Ubelmann, Sophie Reynard, Alessandro Tilia)



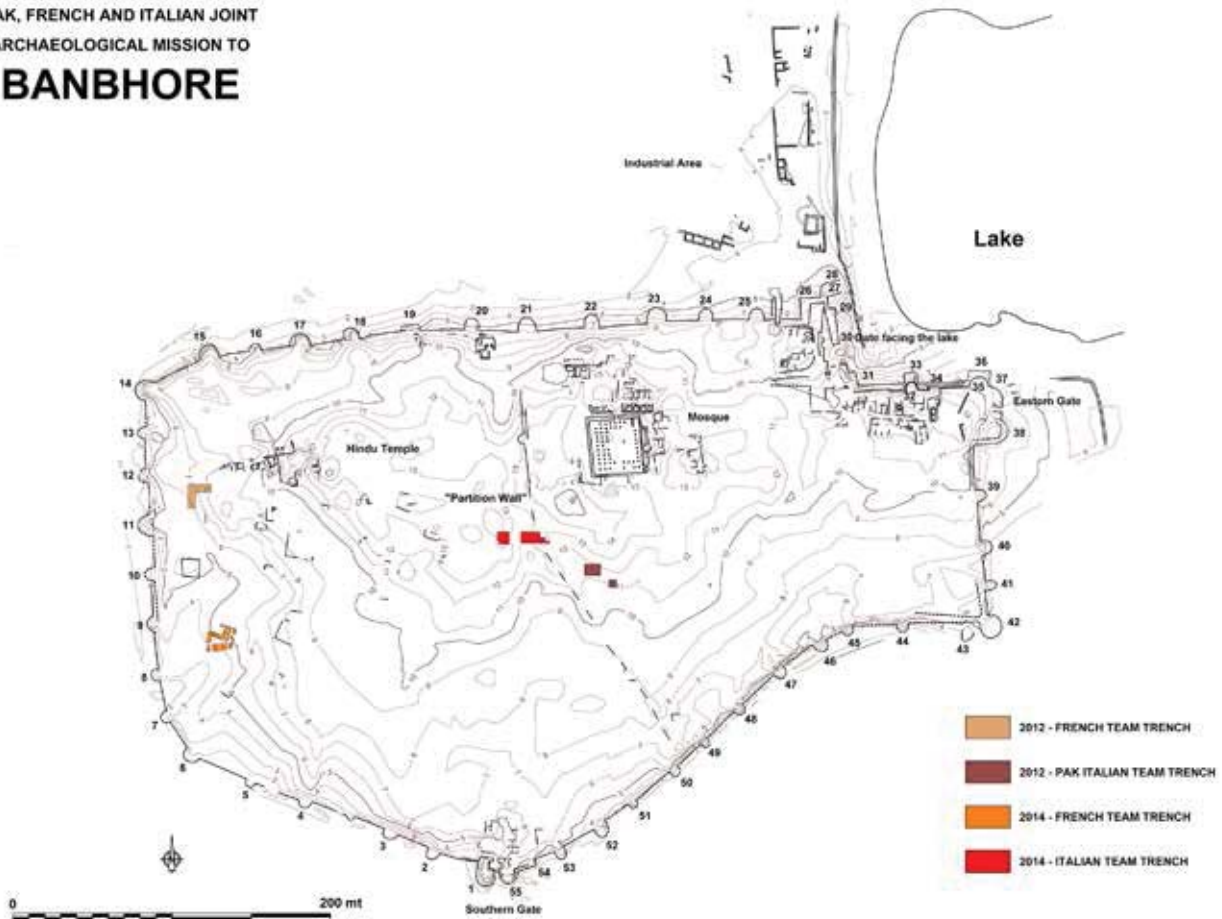
under the supervision of Monique Kervran. The citadel was carefully mapped within the whole circle of its bastioned walls, the resulting map to serve as a permanent basis for every further investigation of the site [Fig. 4]. Some *extra moenia* quarters were also mapped, such as the so called "Industrial quarter" to the north and northwest, the artificial lake and some urban areas to the northeast and east of the walls (A. Tilia, 2012 and 2013 campaigns). During these field-seasons, further investigation has been carried out on the complex walled enclosure – which clearly presents various phases of building, re-building, refurbishing and restoration – and the city-gates, plus smaller entrances and posterns. Structures and masonry are typical of the settlement periods given by F. A. Khan: Hindo-Parthian / Kushan, Sasanian, early Islamic and mediaeval Islamic. Posterns and at least two more city-gates have been identified and are under study (to the NE and to the NNW). The so-called Partition Wall presents structural features that are typical of the middle-Islamic period, as can be seen at Julfar / Ras al-Khayma: e.g., the lower part in semi-worked stones surmounted by mudbrick structures, likely archers' galleries and sentinels' posterns; regular

interval towers. With regard to this latter wall, a tower and adjoining quarters have been accurately excavated during the 2014 field-season by the Italian-Pakistani partners (Niccolò Manassero, Kaleemullah Lashari, Asma Ibrahim). Some questions have been answered (especially, its date, which is late), but many other questions remain. Considered within the urban plan of Banbhore, what does this later wall mean? Why was it built? Was it really made to separate the Muslim community settled inside the eastern portion of the citadel from the non-Muslim community settled in the western areas? Or was it rather built in order to re-shape the citadel at some time of its history, a last defense when waves of invasion from the northern and northwestern regions menaced the survival of the town and its activity? And did the western half of the citadel have a shorter life than the eastern one, as its lower elevation seems to suggest?

We were still confronted with the question: how ancient is the site? When was it initially settled? Are the Scytho-Parthian layers the most ancient ones or might we expect the site to have been peopled in previous epochs? Might Banbhore have been the site of Barbarikon, the harbor of Scythia reported by the *Periplus*? Might the citadel be the Daybul stormed

Fig. 4. The plan of Banbhore, updated at the last campaign (February 2014).

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after a long siege, in 711–712 CE, by Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Thaqafi, which marked the conquest of the Sindh region by the armies of Islam? May this famous Debal/Daybul be also identified with Deb, where the apostle Thomas landed and started to preach Christianity through India? When and why did its “Indianization” start? When and why did decline set in, leading to its death? And so on.

Thus, all in all, the preliminary goal was to “date” the site and get detailed and quantifiable archaeological evidence for its urban structure and the wide range of activities carried out there. At the same time, the shifting of the main course of the Indus River through the centuries, and the changes that occurred in the deltaic region, have posed other important questions with regard to the ancient location of the harbor and its access from the sea. Was the city built on the very edge of the Kohestan plateau, its substratum being tertiary rock of sedimentary origin (Kervran 1996), or was it built on consolidated sand-dunes?

The field work that is underway involves: (1) a geo-morphological survey and accurate studies and analyses of the environment surrounding the site (still ongoing); (2) the digging of a number of small trenches in different areas of the citadel, in order to collect archaeological evidence which could provide complementary data and a wide range of information.

In the first proper archaeological campaign, November–December 2012, the French team explored an area west of the Hindu Temple, by means of a large sounding and a deep trench. It also cut a small trench across one of the towers of the fortified wall to get clearer insight in its building-structures and chronology. Meanwhile, the Pakistani-Italian team

opened two soundings in the central area of the citadel, south of the Mosque. The French soundings reached the deepest layers before being hampered by heavy water infiltration. Notwithstanding, these brought to light artefacts of pre-Islamic age as far back as the Kushano-Sasanian period. The Pakistani-Italian team concentrated on palatial structures, craft workshops, and a refuse pit. Artefacts from the latter provided important evidence of ordinary life at Banbhore.

Niccolò Manassero joined the Italian team for the January–February 2014 campaign, when, once again, the Italian and the Pakistani teams have been working together. The researches focused on the very center of the site: here, two trenches were cut, across the “Partition Wall” and just west of it. The main aim was to provide new evidence with regard to the meaning and date of both the wall and the structures adjoining it [Fig. 5]. The French team, still working in the western part of the citadel, shifted southwards, investigating a rectangular structure that revealed a rich array of crafts involving glass, ivory and shells, and dating from the Islamic as well as the pre-Islamic eras [Fig. 6, next page].

Ceramic assemblages, carefully studied by Dr. Agnese Fusaro, have provided important data when read “in stratigraphic sequence,” documenting the “international” dimension of the site of Banbhore through the centuries, and providing clear evidence of the process of its “Indianisation.”<sup>2</sup> Archaeometric analysis of the recovered artifacts (glassware, ceramic vessel, little objects and beads, metals, coins, clay moulds etc.) has supported and complemented the investigations. For example, excavation uncovered a wealth of “copper coins” – small thin discs 10–20 mm in diameter, appearing as corroded copper, which, when analyzed, turned out to be made of a copper – lead – tin alloy. Small samples of pre-Islamic ceramics were taken to the Sapienza University of Rome for more complete analyses. It seemed that a few were imported, but preliminary results of the ongoing analysis now indicates that all are of local production (Soncin 2014).

The geomorphological and hydro-logic survey and sedimentological investigations and tests carried out during the 2014 season have advanced our knowledge of the changes in the Indus’ course and helped us achieve a better



Fig. 5. The 2014 Pakistani-Italian sounding.



Fig. 6. The 2014 French sounding.

understanding of the environment and the local natural habitat, the population's distribution and its development (Louvre University of Abu Dhabi, under the direction of Prof. Eric Fouache).

The re-examination of the written sources has provided a wealth of information referring to the late Sasanian and Islamic periods, data on military and political events taking place in Sindh, social and administrative institutions, commercial codes and economic activity, links and interlinks with the surrounding world (Piacentini Fiorani and Redaelli 2003; Piacentini Fiorani 2014).

As a whole, these field seasons have brought to light a considerable amount of new data. To a certain degree, they confirm Khan's statements on the main stages of life at Banbhore, at the same time that these first campaigns have offered better insight into some specific issues. The trenches have undoubtedly provided a clearer understanding of the organization of space and the combination of building materials, disposal and recycling of materials (either objects or construction materials) and the development of the fortification system which encased the city. Moreover, no less valuable data have been collected referring to domestic life and the context of the city, such as the religious communities within it, craftwork and shops, market activities, the production of goods both for local consumption and for export, and other goods imported for a re-distribution market.

These notes have only explored some of the complexities of the site of Banbhore. Annual preliminary reports have been written and deposited with the competent authorities in Pakistan. The joint teams are preparing to publish a thorough report of these five years of field-work, including excavations, surveys and observations of the still standing monuments, their study and analyses.

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every archaeological expedition encounters. Our deepest thanks to all the Pakistani, French and Italian collaborators, who are too numerous to list here, for their enthusiastic participation in the campaigns and contribution to the growth of knowledge on this hugely important site.

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## Notes

1. See for example the papers presented at the 2012, 2013 and 2014 *Seminar for Arabian Studies* held in London, and published in the *Proceedings/BAR International* – Oxford, UK.
  2. We should also keep in mind the strong economic and cultural links of Sindh with Central Asia; e.g., several early-Islamic shards from Banbhore strictly match those found at Ghazni. In this regard, see Fusaro 2014.
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