

The Grand Mosque of Banbhore: A Reappraisal

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The Banbhore site is located on the north bank of Gharo Creek some 65 kilometres east of Karachi. The Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan, conducted here large-scale excavations during 1958 through 1965 and unearthed extensive remains of various types of buildings and invaluable cultural material. The remains include a large fortified harbour town, an outer city with habitation as well as industrial areas and a large artificial lake. An imposing fortification wall strengthened with semicircular bastions at regular intervals and pierced with three gateways presents an impressive view of the ancient city (Pl. 1). The excavator, F.A. Khan, identified remains of a large structure located in the 'Central Sector' of the excavated area as a 'Grand Mosque' (Khan 1968: 9). Since it is claimed to be the earliest in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, this mosque merits a detailed critical examination and, as such, we have attempted here to reappraise its identification and determine possible functions it rendered at different phases of its construction in due course of time.

As Mumtaz Hasan has provided a brief account, earlier archaeologists like Alexander Cunningham, Henry Cousens, N.G. Majumdar and Leslie Alcock already knew the site quite for some time (Hasan 1968: Cunningham 1863: 250-54; Cousens 1928: 110-30; Alcock 1948-53: L-LII; Majumdar 1934: 19). On the basis of extensive structural remains and rich cultural material, the site is dated from the first century BC through the thirteenth century AD bracketing the Scytho-Parthian, Hindu-Buddhist and Muslim periods (Khan 1968: 9-10).

The masonry of the remains of the 'Grand Mosque' is finely dressed limestone laid in mud mortar. Roughly square in plan, the mosque measures externally 39 metres east to west and 37 metres north to south (Pl. 2). Except for the western side, all the outer walls are well preserved. While extending to the north, the eastern wall stops short of its presumed junction with the northern wall. A rectangular area here indicates that this place was excluded from the main structure. Three entrances—one each in the eastern, northern and western enclosure walls—provided access to the interior. Those on the east and north seem to have been large portals, while that on the west a narrow passage. A flight of three steps in each portal led to a porch, which in turn opened into a single step higher cloister. Decorated with a variety of sunflower and lotus flower patterns, many carved pieces of stone were found scattered near the doorways. A noticeable feature of all the doorways was the presence of Śiva *liṅga* (phallus), carved on the lowest step of the stairs.

A brick-paved open courtyard measuring 22x17 m occupies the centre of the mosque. Rising few centimetres above the pavement, a five feet long stone slab was found buried vertically in the floor. Divided into small rooms of average size 3x2 m, covered cloisters and corridors flank the courtyard on the north, south and east. A square lime-plastered platform with a small drain nearby existed at the northern cloister. A well-built large drain in the north-east corner drained out rainwater. Traces of some structural remains inside the south-eastern chamber probably represent the foundation of a minaret.

A three-aisle deep spacious prayer-hall occupied the entire western side. Stone bases on the floor suggest that thirty-three wooden pillars, arranged in three rows of eleven each, supported its roof. Some of them show carved ornamentation and a few of them even have sockets for holding the wooden pillars. Carved stones occasionally and randomly laid in the masonry indicate their probable reuse. A stone slab, distinct from the bases or yellowish limestone used in the masonry, was also found a little away from the *qibla* (prayer-direction, i.e., the west) wall inside the prayer-hall. Its use, however, is not clear. No *mehrab* (prayer-niche) could be traced in the *qibla* wall, found badly damaged.

The movable cultural material found here included, amongst others, fourteen specimens of Kufic inscription carved on dressed limestone slabs, many stone blocks carved with sunflower or lotus patterns in relief, a number of terracotta oil lamps and fragmentary ablution pots. Except for one used as the base of a pillar in the south-western corner of the prayer hall, all the remaining specimens of Kufic inscription were recovered from loose debris scattered over a wide area. All of them have been studied and deciphered. F.A. Khan did the first and Muhammad Abdul Ghafur did the second reading (Khan 1968: 9-10; Ghafur 1966: 65-90). All the specimens fall into two categories: the first one holding two specimens bears historical data, i.e., dates and names of governors and their agents, while the second having twelve specimens records only verses from the Holy Quran.

According to Khan, the earliest inscription mentions Amir Marwan ibn Muhammad as the ruler who ordered construction of the mosque, Ali ibn Musa his agent to accomplish the work and 109 AH (727-28 AD) the date of execution (Khan 1968: 16-17; Pl. 3). Basing on comparative epigraphic characteristics and contemporary philological connotations, Ghafur studied the inscription in more detail and changed most of the basic information. Referring to it as 'Inscription-I' and having it thoroughly scrutinised, he discovered one more line, consisting of a single word, at the bottom of the inscription. He also read the name of the ruler as Amir Harun ibn Muhammad, the name of his agent as Ali ibn Isa and the date as 239 AH (854 AD) instead of those given by Khan (Ghafur 1966: 76-77). As mentioned above, this inscription was used as the base of a wooden pillar of the late period floor-level in the prayer hall. Strangely, the inscription is completely silent regarding the function of the building. Ghafur's reading is considered authentic and the present author is fully satisfied with it.

Found for the first time in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, the second dated inscription is floriated Kufic, which also was initially read and published by Khan (Khan: 18-19; Pl. 4). Calling it 'Inscription-II', Ghafur restudied it and found no substantial difference rather confirming its given date, i.e., 294 AH (906 AD). Missing in the earlier reading, he, however, restored the name of the ruler as Amir Muhammad ibn Abdullah identifying him with Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Umar ibn Abdul Aziz Habbari (Ghafur: 81-82). This inscription clearly mentions the building as a mosque.

The ground plan of the exposed structure carries most of the features considered essential for a mosque, but a *mehrab* in the *qibla* wall. The excavator explains that *mehrab* was not yet introduced to mosques and we find nowhere any contemporary evidence. He, for example, mentions the great mosques of Kufa and Wasit in Iraq dated to 670 and 702 AH respectively without *mehrab* (Khan: 18-19).

As the discovery of the mosque was announced in March 1960, M. Abdullah Chaghatai, a renowned scholar of Muslim Architecture, visited the site on April 2, 1961. He did not agree with this identification (Chaghatai) on the following points that:

1. The structure has no *mehrab* in the western or the *qibla* wall and that the explanation offered for its absence is not tenable. According to him, the mosque at Kufa and Wasit, cited as examples of early mosques, did have *mehrab*s.
2. The structure appears as a terrace and must have been a Hindu temple, perhaps a Sun temple.
3. Some of the elements such as bases of pillars are carved with Hindu motifs and the layout also suggests typical arrangement of installing a deity in a Hindu temple.
4. The square ground plan as of this structure is a favourite plan of a Hindu temple.
5. The discovery of Kufic inscriptions from this structure only suggests its reuse as a mosque during later period.

Later S.M. Ashfaq studied the structure in depth (Ashfaq 1969: 182-208). He does not agree with Chaghatai and asserts that the structure, as identified by Khan, functioned as a mosque throughout its existence. He has rightly shown that the grand mosques in Kufa and Wasit did not have any *mehrab* in their original structure (Ashfaq: 209).

The local people believe that Banbhore represents the oldest seaport of Sindh. Some Sindhi scholars on the basis of philology have attempted to identify Banbhore with Daybul, the seaport which capitulated to the young Arab general Muhammad ibn Qasim in 712 AD (Baluch 1952: 49ff). Since limited to the records of the Arab historians and, also, having no archaeological data of the pre-Muslim occupation at Banbhore available to them, their attempts were not very convincing. After large scale excavations resulting in the discovery of pre-Muslim cultural relics and, particularly, the fourteen specimens of Kufic inscription, Ghafur has convincingly identified Banbhore with Daybul (Ghafur: 75-76). The identification is based on thorough evaluation of the Arab source material, critical study of geography of the region and new evidence brought to light by the recent archaeological excavations. We fully agree with Ghafur and endorse his conclusion.

All Arab historians record that at the time of the Arab invasion the city of Daybul had an imposing temple. Surmounted by a huge red flag, the grand temple dominated all other buildings in the city. Badly damaged during the war, the ruined temple lay in ruins for a long time. Al-Baladhuri, the most reliable Arab historian, states that the Abbasid caliph Mustasim Billah (218-228 AH/833-842 AD) appointed Anbisa ibn Ishaq al Dhabbi governor of Sindh. Undertaking extensive repairs of buildings in Daybul, the latter demolished the upper part of the ruined temple and converted its lower portion into a prison. The dressed stone pieces, obtained from the demolition of the upper part, were used in repair of other structures in the city (Al Baladhuri 1932: 186-87). When Caliph Wasiq Billah succeeded to the throne in 228-233 AH (842-847 AD), he let the governor of Sindh continue the works started at Daybul. After his death in 233 AH (847 AD) Al Mutawakkil became the caliph who ruled till 247 AH (861 AD). Replaced most of the governors appointed by his predecessor, Anbisa ibn Ishaq relinquished his post before the conversion of the temple was complete. The new caliph appointed Harun ibn Muhammad as governor of Sindh in the beginning of his reign. The new governor completed the remaining works commenced by his predecessor before he was murdered in a revolt in 240 AH/854 AD (Al Baladhuri: 186-87). His name has been recorded by Yaqubi as Harun ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Khalid al Marwazi (Yaqubi: 489).

A great confusion as to the nature of the 'imposing' temple at Daybul prevails. Some scholars thought it for a Buddhist stupa, but Ghafur analysing it in a great detail has convincingly established it a Śiva temple with a *sikhara* (spire or tower), crowning the shrine with red the flag on its pinnacle (Ghafur: 74). Although he has identified a mud-brick structure excavated at a short distance to its west as a Śiva temple, this cannot be the 'imposing' one built in stone-blocks. What happened to the imposing temple mentioned by the Arab historians? Has it not yet been unearthed and still lies buried in the un-excavated site or its identification has evaded the excavator for it was converted, during later period, to some other building such as mosque?

From the preceding discussion the following points regarding the identity of the famous temple at Daybul (Banbhore) emerge clearly that:

1. This temple built in stone was a Śiva temple and not a Buddhist stupa as suggested by some scholars.
2. Having been damaged during the war it lay abandoned for more than a century until the time of Caliph Mustasim when it was decided to convert it into a prison.
3. The work of extensive repairs at Daybul begun by Governor Anbisa ibn Ishaq al Dhabbi was continued and completed by his successor Harun ibn Muhammad.

4. The temple either still lies buried in the unexcavated area at the site or has been already excavated but not rightly identified.

Now, let us revert to the structure identified as the 'Grand Mosque'. The excavation revealed here four building phases, the topmost or the latest is dated to the 13th century AD. As discussed earlier, the mosque has all essential features except for a *mehrab* and a *minber* (pulpit). The *minber*, probably built in wood, could not therefore survive. But the absence of a *mehrab*, which had become an integral part of a mosque by this time, is not properly understood and did pose a problem, which Ashfaque has examined in detail. He points out that "the Qibla wall has the maximum thickness of 4 feet and 9 inches (1 metre and 44 centimetres) and tentatively the "mehrab" might have been provided simply by cutting the inner side of the Qibla wall. The inner side of this wall was, unfortunately, found badly damaged, and its disturbed masonry extended to an average depth of 1 foot 6 inches (45 centimetres) below the level of the last period floor" (Ashfaque: 190). We fully agree with Ashfaque and to support his line of argument we would like to cite example of an ancient mosque unearthed at Mansura, another Arab period site. The present author had the privilege of excavating this undisputedly early mosque of Pakistan. This mosque was also provided with a *mehrab*, cut into the masonry of its *qibla* wall, but could not be observed during the excavation because the inner side of the wall was badly damaged.

The third building phase or the second last occupation period belonged to the 3rd century AH (10th century AD). Discovered from here and dated to 294 AH (906 AD), the second Kufic inscription records the construction of a mosque by Amir Muhammad. The inscription bears Quranic verses exhorting the Muslims to build mosques and offer prayers. As mentioned earlier, Ghafur has identified Amir Muhammad with Prince Muhammad ibn Abdullah, the grandson of Umar ibn Abdul Aziz Habbari. A devastating earthquake hit Deybul in 280 AH (893 AD) and, as mentioned by some Arab historians, destroyed almost the entire city (Ibn-e-Juzi: 143; Allama Siyyoti; Ibn-e-Athir: 323). This building phase, perhaps, represents reconstruction of Daybul after destruction by the earthquake.

Very little evidence is available to help determine function of this structure during its second and first building phases. We, however, are reluctant to believe that it functioned as a mosque during this time due reasons as follow:

1. The earliest Kufic inscription from the mosque, i.e., 'Inscription-I' of Ghafur provides 239 AH (854 AD) the date of construction and Harun ibn Muhammad the name of the governor. As stated earlier, the caliph Mustasim Billah decided to convert the temple at Daybul into a prison and assigned the task to Anbisa ibn Ishaq al-Dhabbi. We also know that Anbisa ibn Ishaq could not finish the task before his departure from Sindh. The work was eventually completed by Harun ibn Muhammad during the reign of caliph al-Mutawakil.
2. The 'Inscription-I' does not mention the nature and function of the building where it was to be fixed. Most probably, it belonged to the structure where it was found during the excavation. This massive structure and the 'Grand Mosque' built in stone surely would have brought laurels to the governor. Why then he did not mention it? The prison would, however, not be much appreciated by the people and the governor might have purposely avoided a reference to it. In any case the absence of any reference to a mosque in the inscription causes serious doubts to its being a mosque at this juncture. In all probability the structure represents the building renovated by the said Harun ibn Muhammad.
3. Many decorative structural elements of Hindu origin have been found from various parts of the structure. These include stone slabs with beautifully worked decorations in relief depicting sunflower patterns and different kinds of lotus designs. Their presence in this structure has been interpreted to represent reuse of this material derived from some

important pre-Muslim buildings. To the best of our knowledge no important Hindu or Buddhist religious building built in stone, which could have yielded these elements for reuse, has been unearthed during the excavations. Where these elements could have then come from if these were not part of the structure itself?

4. As mentioned earlier large size Śiva *liṅgas* were found forming the lowest steps of the flight of stairs in all the doorways. These perhaps came from the building itself, which was most probably Śiva temple. These may have been laid there when the structure was converted into a mosque. Such use of *liṅga*-stones was common during the early Muslim rule.
5. As stated earlier Banbhore squarely identified as Daybul (Ghafur: 76), it seems quite likely that the structure may represent the ruined Śiva temple converted into a prison in mid 9th century AD.

On the basis of the above mentioned reasons, it is our considered opinion that during the second building phase the structure did not function as a mosque but rather served as a prison. Of course this phase, dated from 239 to 294 AH, was comparatively short-lived because the earthquake of 280 AH (893 AD) probably damaged the structure necessitating its thorough repairs. This is also guessed from the poor condition of the remains of this phase.

If the identification of the third period of occupation or the second building phase as prison is correct the natural conclusion would be that the first building phase represents the famous temple at Daybul. However, before reaching any conclusion we would also like to examine the stratigraphic evidence from deep diggings in and outside the structure.

There were eight deep trenches dug inside and outside the structure. In his detailed study of the 'Grand Mosque', Ashfaque thinks that the stratigraphic evidence supports identification of the structure as a mosque in all its building phases. He, however, does not believe in overemphasising stratigraphy and says, "bearing in mind at the same time that too minute an observation of each and every layer would amount to 'seeing the wood for the tree'". (Ashfaque: 199). True, it is not necessary to analyse each and every layer of all the eight deep trenches, but one cannot ignore evidence from important layers as well. The deepest trench, dug out in Square GXII/3, located eastern gate of the structure. In our opinion, the section (looking southward) of this trench showing 17 layers deposited against the eastern wall provides vital information (Pl. 5). Layers 1 to 14 have yielded material establishing Muslim occupation of the site. From layer 15 downward the pottery recovered is quite distinct and represents pre-Muslim occupation. Ashfaque interprets the relationship of these layers with the structure as "the foundations of the boundary wall of the mosque are sunk through the layers 15 and 15A, which are pre-Muslim accumulation layers [and] the foundation trench was dug nearly three feet deep from the then ground surface" (Ashfaque: 201). A close scrutiny of the section, however, shows that all these layers running right up to the wall have no traces whatsoever of any foundation trench cut through any of them. In other words these layers were accumulated against the structure already in existence. The stratigraphy, as such, does not support Ashfaque's interpretation and, on the contrary, shows that the structure indeed belonged to the pre-Muslim period. Moreover, these layers also show that the structure was not built in the last phase of pre-Muslim occupation, but about fifty years had already been passed, as indicated by the formation of two living levels/layers, before the Muslims occupied the site. Unfortunately, excavation of layers 16 and 17 in the trench did not reach to the foundation of the structure and therefore its actual depth, building phase and date cannot be ascertained. An interesting fact of the section is that its layer 9-b-composed of 'mixed debris including loose earth, white *kankar* [gravel] and potsherds, and small stones'æruns over the structure. This obviously means that the structure had existed earlier than this period and remained in disuse. Does it represent the period when the structure (the temple at Daybul) lay in ruins before the advent of Muslims as mentioned by Al Baladhuri (Al Baladhuri: 186) and confirmed by the stratigraphic evidence.

If the identification of Banbhore with Daybul is correct, which we believe is so, the first building phase of the structure under consideration represents the famous Hindu temple. As recorded by the Arab historians, the temple was destroyed during the war in 712 AD and lay in ruins for more than a century. The Abbasid Caliph Mustasim Billah decided to utilise the ruined structure and ordered Anbisa ibn Ishaq al Dhabi, then the governor of Sindh, to convert it into a prison. The job was completed by Harun ibn Muhammad in 239 AH (853 AD) in the reign of caliph Al Mutawakkil. The structure in the second building phase thus functioned as a prison. A strong earthquake in 280 AH/894 AD destroying almost the entire Daybul city necessitated thorough repairs to many buildings there. The third building phase seems to represent this period of reconstruction when, eventually, Prince Muhammad ibn Abdullah of the Habbarid Dynasty of Sindh converted the structure into a mosque in 294 AH (906 AD) that continued to function in the last building phase as well. In short, the structure in its last two phases used as a mosque is correct, but it can not be claimed for the two earlier phases. This mosque, which came into existence in tenth century AD, neither represents the one built by Muhammad ibn Qasim soon after settlement of the Muslims in Daybul nor it can be deemed the oldest mosque of the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

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GRAND MOSQUE, BANBHORE

SECTION SHOWING STRATIGRAPHY NEAR EASTERN GATE (GXII/3 (LOOKING SOUTH))

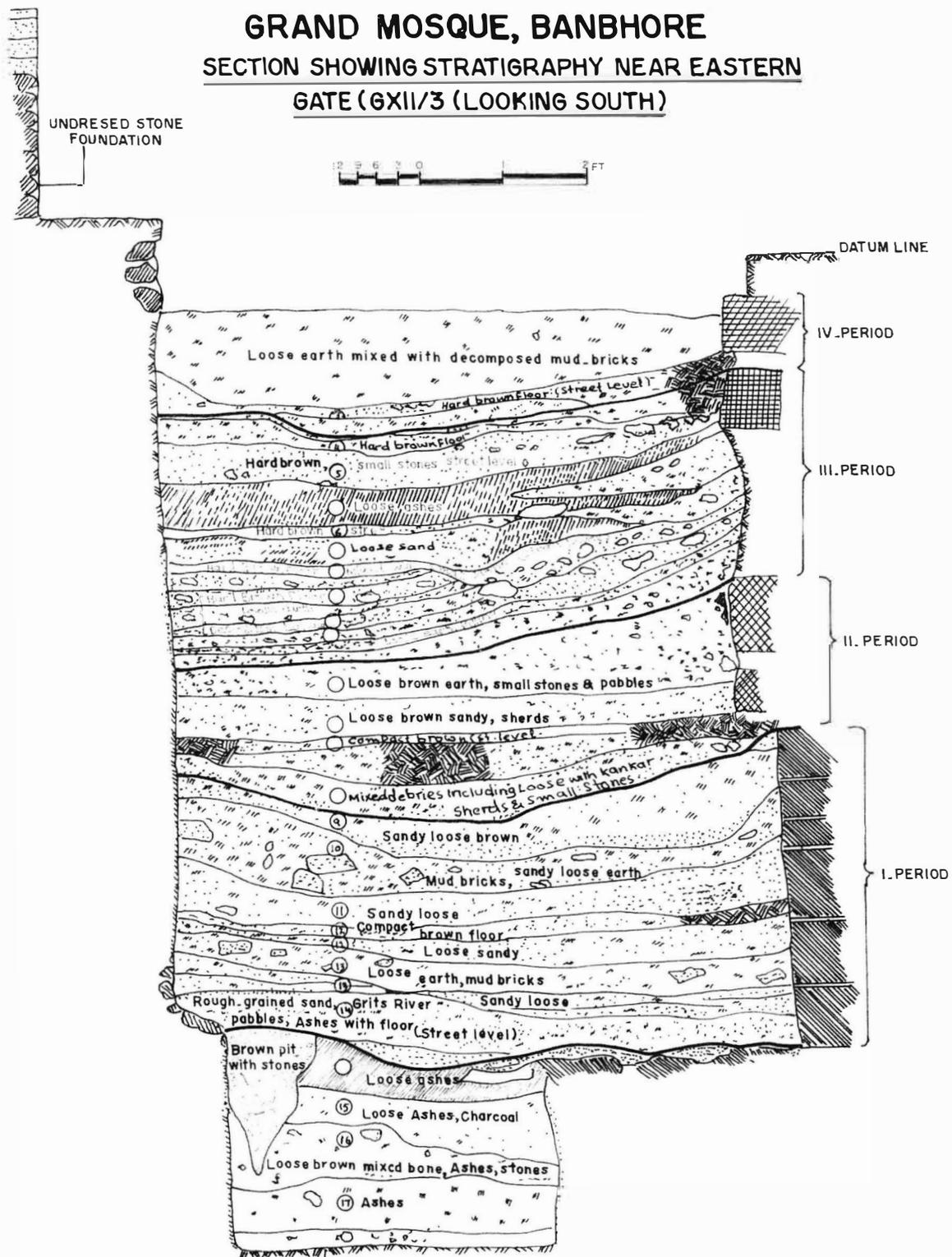


Fig. 1

After S.M. Ashfaque, Pakistan Archaeology (Number 6--1969)



Pl. 3: Kufic inscription dated 239 AH / 854 AD found from the mosque area.



Pl. 4: Floriated Kufic inscription dated 294 AH / 906 AD found from the mosque area.