

Biography of Banbhore Excavations: A Personal Narrative

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Abstract: The paper is intended to emphasize that success of an archaeological field project also depends upon active support of several persons involved directly or indirectly in the excavations. Some persons who are designated variously, provide essential support, which collectively contributes to the success of a project. It also records enthusiasm, devotion and optimism of all participants who worked at a desolate place, lacking basic amenities of living but remained focused on learning techniques of archaeological excavations with hope for success.

Keywords: Banbhore, Excavations, Archaeology, Training, Fortifications, Grand Mosque, Siva temple

Introduction

Between 1958 and 1964, the excavation camp at Banbhore was the beginning of archaeological career of several university graduates who were selected by the erstwhile Pakistan's Department of Archaeology and Museums for training. The training in field archaeology was well organised and the camp life highly disciplined, which left deep impression on the minds of participants. The writer recollects some memories of the camp life and learning experience. The narrative is unusual in archaeological reporting because it attempts to focus on several persons of various ranks associated with the diggings at Banbhore and establishment of a site museum.

Banbhore, a site identified with the famous port city of Debal, which was conquered by Mohammad bin Qasim in CE 711, is located about 40 miles east of Karachi on the road to Thatta (Figs. 1, 2). The excavations at Banbhore have quite a long history starting from the pre-Independence days when N. G. Majumdar visited the site in 1930 as part of his explorations in Sindh. He was Assistant Superintendent of Archaeology, an officer of high rank after the Superintendent and Director General of the Archaeological Survey of (British) India. He dug some trial trenches but soon abandoned the site because he did not find prehistoric remains at the high mound of Banbhore, which was very prominent in the

flat, barren and featureless plain of the deltaic region of southern Sindh. After Independence, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, then Advisor to the Government of Pakistan, appointed Leslie Alcock as Superintendent of Explorations, who tried to explore the site and dug deep into the pre-Islamic levels in early 1950. He left the site when he could not reach the lowest levels. He thought that settlement belonged mostly to the Islamic period. A long time ago, his pottery collections were seen by the author stored in cloth bags. It looked like a selected collection, sorted by categories such as grey wares, painted, plain and glazed wares. It is not known whether Alcock ever wrote a report on his digging at Banbhore.



Figure 1. View of the fortified city of Banbhore by Google. (modified after *Sindh Antiquities Journal* 2019, Vol. 5, Number 2, p.36).

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After the excavation in 1950, the site, already well known because of its association with the famous folk tale of Sassi and Punno, was taken up for systematic excavations. Dr N. B. Baloch, a great historian of Sindh and gifted with a deep understanding of the regional ethnology, traditions and contemporary culture, and another profound scholar, Pir Hisamudin Rashidi, who had produced scholarly books in Persian and Sindhi on the history, cultural heritage and the architecture of Sindh, persuaded Dr. Fazal Ahmad Khan to resume excavations at Banbhore. They were supported by Mr. Mumtaz Hasan, Secretary, Finance, Government of Pakistan, who assured his full support for the project. It was against

this background that Mumtaz Hasan struck the first spade at the northeastern part of the site on March 2, 1958, inaugurating the excavation with a plaque being fixed in the excavated remains (Fig. 9a). The first season of excavation was for the two months of March and April in 1958. The excavations were personally directed by Dr. F.A. Khan initially (Khan 1960, 1964, 1976) and his principal assistant, Harun-ur-Rashid, Field Officer in the Exploration Branch of the Department of Archaeology at that time.

The team also included Sadar Din and Khwaja Ghulam Sarwar, who had previously worked for the British Archaeological Survey of India and had opted for Pakistan and joining the

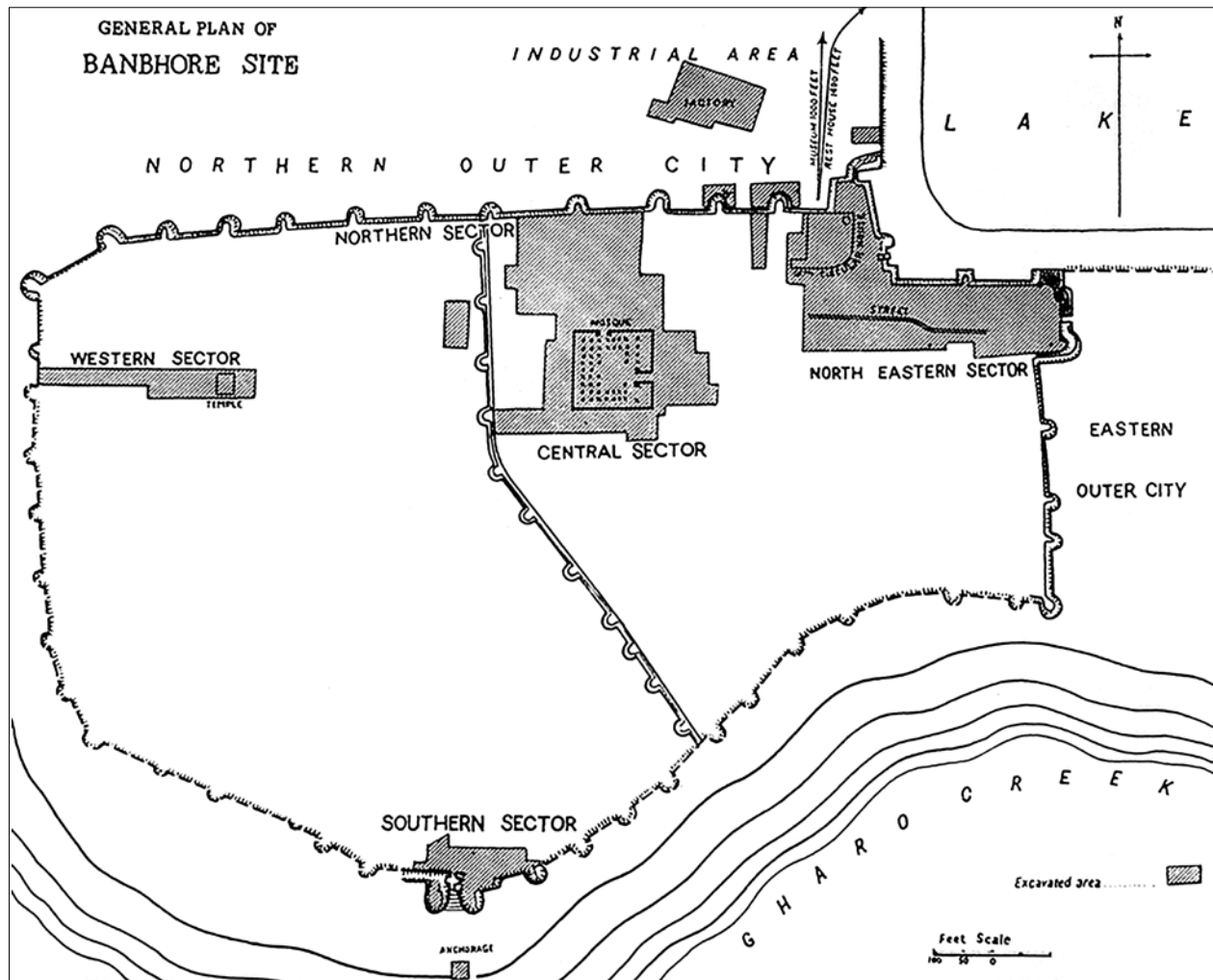


Figure 2. Excavated areas of Banbhore 1958-1965. The Grand Mosque is located in the centre of the city, anchorage in front of the southern gate and partially exposed commercial complex and temple area on the west. (after Khan 1976: p.8).

Archaeology Department there in 1947. Sardar Din came from Faisalabad, an illiterate person, tall and very intelligent with a rare gift of learning any language quickly. He had worked with Sir Mortimer Wheeler as Foreman and Supervisor in the excavations and had accompanied him on archaeological tours to various parts of India. He had also learnt Bengali so quickly that he could speak to the workmen in a week at the sites of Mainamati and Salban Vihara in Bangladesh (former East Pakistan). While working in Sindh, he spoke Sindhi fluently. He was gifted with the rare ability to control and organise any number of workmen at a site. At Banbhore, the outer fortification wall was entirely exposed by him with remarkable care. Because of thick debris lying over the wall, there was no stratigraphy to be recorded but pottery and small finds were carefully picked up by him and reported to the officer in charge for recording.

The second person was Ghulam Sarwar who worked at the site of Banbhore as Camp Supervisor. He had multiple duties of setting up and maintaining the camp consisting of tents of various sizes manufactured by the famous Rooldoo Mohammad Din Company of Lahore. The tents were pitched along the lake in a very systematic manner like an army camp according to the rank of occupants (Fig. 3). Starting from the largest tent of the Director near the site, tents of different sizes were spread in a curved line facing the lake. Two large tents of rectangular shape, about 30 by 15 feet each, called IP (Indian Pattern) were used for meetings and registration of artefacts and exhibition of selected antiquities. The largest tent, consisting of five rooms, was pitched for the Director of Archaeology. It also had a porch in front. A smaller version of similar kind had three rooms for the junior officer next to the director. The university graduates, who were recruited for training in archaeology and eventual appointment in the Department of Archaeology were accommodated in smaller tents, but large enough for two persons in each, with a small space at the back for keeping a water pitcher, a low wooden seat on loosely laid bricks, and a *lota* (spouted jug) for ablution. The smallest tents, called *Choldari*, were used for the supporting

staff, storage of implements and camp materials. Every evening, a hurricane lamp properly cleaned, filled with kerosene oil and lit, was placed by the lamp man in front of each tent. For larger tents special lamps called *Petromax* were provided in which air was pumped frequently to keep them brightly lit. The time to start and end the work was announced by ringing a school bell! When excavations at Banbhore were started in 1958, there was no habitation around except a few huts belonging to the workmen of the Dhabeji Salt Works, a company making salt from sea water. There was no drinkable water available near the site. The water of the lake at the foot of the site was also brackish. Iron drums were used to store drinking water fetched from Gharo, 6 miles away from the camp, from where also the food supplies were purchased.

Ghulam Sarwar was the only one to take care of almost everything – all kinds of camp needs, excavation implements, tools, kitchen articles, utensils, crockery, beds, tables, chairs and even expensive export quality blankets made in Harnai, Lawrancepur. It was his duty to transport all necessary tools, tents of different sizes and all associated paraphernalia to the site of excavations such as Banbhore or to any other site from the storage in underground chambers of Lahore fort, because sufficient storage space was not available in the offices at Karachi. The underground chambers were used for storage of arms and ammunitions as well as precious items



Figure 3. Excavation Camp at Banbhore 1960
(Courtesy: Mehmud Baig, Librarian).

and antiquities. Ghulam Sarwar had experience of working for Sir Mortimer Wheeler and other officers of the British Archaeological Survey of India. Sometimes he would share interesting stories about his work at other sites in India. He was a pleasant person, very hardworking and resourceful. He was loved and needed by everyone partly because he was in charge of the kitchen and managed to serve meals to the excavation team thrice a day on time including tea at the site exactly at 10:00 am and in the afternoon. Those people are gone, but the pleasant memories of their work ethos are still cherished and are dear to my heart. Ghulam Sarwar and Sadar Din were actually a continuation of the British Indian traditions of the Archaeological Survey.

Under a scheme of the central (now federal) government, graduates from various universities of Pakistan were recruited for training in archaeology and eventually, absorb them in the Department of Archaeology to work in the museums, explorations, conservation and other specialized branches. The basic entry qualification was Master's degree in History, Geography, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and other languages such as Pali or related disciplines. Under that scheme, two persons were inducted from Punjab University in 1957, namely, Ahmad Nabi Khan and Muhammad Ishtiaque Khan, both with M.A. degrees in Persian language. I, along with six other graduates, was inducted in the second batch in 1958. Tushar K. Barua and Muhammad Abdul Qadir were chosen from Dhaka University, while Taswir Hussain Hamidi and Saeed-ul Hassan, with a background of History and Geography respectively were selected from Karachi University. I was the only one selected from Punjab University with a background of History and Archaeology. Farzand Ali Durrani and Farid Khan with degrees in History came from Peshawar University. It made a very good group of graduates from various universities. Banbhore served as the very best site for training for many years. In the subsequent years, Muhammad Sharif with a degree in Geography from Punjab University and Niaz Rasool with a Master's degree in History were selected from Karachi University. The programme of recruiting young graduates from

educational institutions was virtually stopped in 1960. Instead, direct appointments were made to various positions of junior rank for on-job training and career development¹. Some of those who received initial training at Banbhore and reached high ranking positions in Archaeology were, Inyat-ur-Rehman, Mian Said Qamar, Ihsan-ul Haq Nadiem, Gulzar Mohammad Khan, Ranjit Kumar Sarma and Afzal Ahmad. Many of us worked for more than one season at Banbhore. Muhammad Ishtiaque Khan, Ahmad Nabi Khan, Niaz Rasool and I had the honour to be Director General of Archaeology². Farzand Ali Durrani became the Vice Chancellor of Peshawar University.

Participants in the excavations at Banbhore

1958

M.H. Rashid, M. Ishtiaque Khan and Ahmad Nabi Khan

1958-1959

M.H. Rashid, M.R. Mughal, M.A. Qadir, M. Ishtiaque Khan, Saeedul Hasan, T.H. Hamidi, T.K. Barua, Afzal Ahmad and Farzand Ali Durrani

1959-1960

M.H. Rashid, M.R. Mughal, Farid Khan, T.K. Barua, Inayat-ur Rehman and M.A. Qadir

1960-1961

M.R. Mughal, T.H. Hamidi, Farid Khan, Muhammad Sharif

1961-1962

M.R. Mughal, Niaz Rasool, T. K. Barua, Amzad Hussain, Gulzar Muhammad Khan, I.H. Nadiem

1962-1963

I.H. Nadiem, Gulzar Muhammad Khan

1963-1964

Gulzar Muhammad Khan

1964-1965

M.R. Mughal, Muhammad Sharif and Mian Said Qamar

A selected person for training was titled as 'archaeological scholar' with a monthly fixed stipend of Rs. 250. At the beginning of the three months of what was called a period to 'test' our interest in archaeology, each person was paid at the daily rate of Rs.5 because we were educated! It was double the amount of what an illiterate labourer got daily after affixing thumb impression on the payment Muster Rolls. Coming fresh from the universities, the so-called 'archaeological scholars' were a unique group of young, enthusiastic and cheerful persons, sharing stories, songs, experiences and jokes in the camp³.

The excavations were spread over eight seasons of work in the field, except for the two months of March and April in 1958, they usually started in September or November and continued until May the following year. The entire site was divided into a grid of hundred feet squares, each subdivided into 25 square trenches and numbered from left to right and north to south. Those were our basic and fixed reference points for the recording of antiquities and observations. The first area to be excavated was at the northeastern side of the site where remains of two building periods in the fortification wall were visible (Fig. 4). There was a large gateway at an angle, providing access to the lake through a number of steps made of sandstone. It was called the northeastern sector and became the principal area of horizontal and vertical excavation. It revealed a large number of buildings with stone foundations and mud bricks superstructures. Several building levels were exposed including a large building with curved outer wall called the 'semicircular mansion' with a large well inside. The buildings of later periods were retained and deep diggings were done only where space was available. Therefore, it is difficult for a casual visitor to comprehend completely the sequence of the various building levels unless explained by the excavator or site attendant. It was the area where the fortification wall had been built on the earlier foundations, with semicircular or square bastions. The structural plan of houses and streets was exposed in the northeastern sector, and deep diggings were done inside the northeastern gateway that opened towards the lake. The stratigraphy was very clear

and the discovery of dated coins of the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods helped to date the finds and associated structural levels (Nasir 1969). Ahmad Nabi Khan, Muhammad Ishtiaque Khan, Saeedul Hasan and Abdul Qadir worked in this area under the supervision of Harun-ur-Rashid, in charge of the site in the absence of Dr. Khan. He was a bright person with a good sense of humor and he wrote in beautiful English. He would check our daily diaries and give helpful hints on the margins of our field diaries, which were kept in the Explorations Branch as 'accountable' (precious) documents.

In the central part of the site where the Grand Mosque⁴ (Ashfaq 1969; Khan 2003) was discovered, I also worked for two seasons. The first deep digging was done in one large trench, reduced in size in the lower part. In 1959, the trench revealed the earliest occupation during the Scytho-Parthian period. Another large trench was laid across the defense wall between the northeastern and the central sectors to understand the various building periods of the fortification wall and the chronology of successive occupations on the inner side. It was supervised by Gulzar Muhammad Khan and Sadar Din. A diorama of the deep trench showing the sequence of cultures at Banbhore is exhibited in the museum (Fig. 5); it was prepared by Qamar-ud-din, a talented artist of the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi. In the central sector, the site of the Grand Mosque



Figure 4. Northeastern section of habitation area and fortifications with bastions (Photograph by M.R. Mughal).

was marked by a depression and a solitary tree; used to have 10 o'clock tea there and often wondered what kind of structure, if any, was lying underneath. It turned out to be the courtyard of the Grand Mosque (Fig. 6). This area was excavated by me and Muhammad Abdul Qadir and, later, by I. H. Nadiem and Niaz Rasool on the southern side. The main digging along the eastern street of the mosque was done by me; successive building periods were established there including ancient street levels. Its section has been published by S .M. Ashfaque (who never excavated at Banbhore)



Figure 5. Diorama of a deep trench representing cultural chronology displayed in Banbhore Museum (Photograph by Author)

and reproduced by M. I. Khan. The two dated inscriptions (Ghafur 1966) were discovered by Muhammad Abdul Qadir. As long as excavations remained in progress in the area, he worked bare footed as a mark of respect for the sanctity of the place. On the western side of the site, M. A. Qadir revealed remains of a Hindu temple with Shiva Lingam and Yoni, now on display in the Museum at Banbhore (Fig. 7). On the extreme southern side facing the Gharo Creek, an elaborate gateway overlooking an anchorage was exposed (Fig. 8). Farzand Ali Durrani and Farid Khan excavated and exposed a number of human skeletons, originally thought to be of people who fell in action. In fact, they were all Muslim burials of unknown date.

Accurate documentation of excavation is never complete without the willing support of technical staff documenting the excavations, the structural remains and countless ceramics and antiquities. Hasin-ud-Din Qureshi and Manzoor Ahmad Siddiqui, both Draughtsman worked at the site and office in Karachi. Hasan Shakir maintained excellent record of photographs during and after digging. The entire process of washing and marking the pottery was handled by Syed Shaukat Ali Zaidi.

A museum was built near the lake and close to the site. Its foundation was laid on 21 August



Figure 6. Ground plan of the Grand Mosque (Masjid-i-Jami) of Banbhore viewed from northeast (Photograph by Author)



Figure 7. Shiva Lingam and Yoni being excavated in the temple area west of the city. (After *Pakistan Archaeology* 1964: Pl. XVI B)



Figure 9a. Plaque recording inaugural of excavations at Banbhore on 2 March 1958 (Photograph by Author)



Figure 9b. Foundation stone of Museum at Banbhore laid on 21 August 1960. (Photograph by Author)



Figure 8. Gharo Creek of the Arabian Sea overlooking the southern gate and anchorage (Photograph by Author)

1960 by Mumtaz Hasan, then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Government of Pakistan (Fig. 9b). It was so designed as to utilise natural light in each showcase through a recessed glass window above the front (outer) side of each showcase. There was no electricity available at the site until 1965. The museum established at that time has been very attractive for the visitors since it displays the cultural sequence through time from the earliest Scytho-Parthian to the last Abbasid periods. Gulzar Muhammad Khan, my former classmate at Punjab University, Lahore, and then Custodian of the Banbhore site, and Mirza Mehmud Baig, Librarian of the Archaeology Department, with support from Qamar-ud-din, an artist and modeller in the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi, worked together very hard to create a beautiful museum with explanatory notes and individual labels. The natural light in each showcase was sufficient to illuminate the objects displayed therein without causing damage to the objects (Fig. 10). A visitors' pavilion was built by the National Bank of Pakistan near the site museum (Fig. 11). A guest house was built by the Department of Archaeology. The Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) built another rest house near the museum.

Gradually residential buildings for the officers and staff were built, with electricity connection,

at the site. In the early 1960s, it was a desolate place and gave constant feeling of remoteness since there was no means of transportation or communication to and from Banbhore. Standing on the high mound and excavating, we watched, at a distance of four miles, trains going to and from Karachi. On Fridays, which was a holiday for the excavators, we had to walk 6 miles from the camp to the nearest railway station, Dhabeji, to catch the 7:20 am train going to Karachi and we



Figure 10. Back side of Banbhore Museum showing glass windows to provide natural light to each showcase of the museum. A model of catapult (*manjaneeq*) supposed to have been used in attacking Debal is displayed outside the museum (Photograph by Author)



Figure 11. Visitors' house near Banbhore Museum (Photograph by Author)

then had to return by the evening train and walk to the camp or hitch hike on a truck of the Dhabeji Salt Factory. However, we all took everything cheerfully, and now we are remembering those days of excavation, learning the techniques of diggings, writing daily reports for submission to the Director or his deputy and enjoying the camp life which was very clean, quiet, beautiful and also windy at times.

Conclusion

In 1966, the excavations at Banbhore by the Archaeology Department were closed. For the study of antiquities and ceramics, the author stayed for five months in one of the sheds built for the storage of pottery. Based on the study of ceramics and antiquities coupled with evidence of coins, inscriptions and stratigraphy of deep trenches, the following chronology of Banbhore was proposed.

In the second decade of the current century, the provincial Directorate General of Antiquities and Archaeology virtually handed over the entire site to the foreigners for excavations. Some of their work is reported in *Sindh Antiquities Journal*, Volume 5, Number 2, 2019.

Notes

1. Discontinuation of formal training of the young adversely affected the quality and progress of field research and publications of the Federal Department of Archaeology in Pakistan. Attention was shifted to the universities teaching Archaeology,

Anthropology and Heritage for training in archaeological excavations, museology and scientific analyses of cultural data and publication of results, which came out with astonishing regularity. The contributions made by the universities of Hazara, Peshawar and Shah Abdul Latif in particular, have been very significant in advancing knowledge of the heritage of Pakistan. The new discoveries and research were published promptly in *Ancient Sindh* (Khairpur), *Ancient Pakistan* (Peshawar) and *Pakistan Heritage* (Hazara). To this list is added the journal of Directorate of Archaeology of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa titled *Frontier Archaeology*. Likewise, *Sindh Antiquities*, a biannual journal of Sindh Directorate General of Antiquities and Archaeology has started publishing new research on Sindh. However, Balochistan Province has yet to come up with a programme of research and publication although the subject of archaeology is taught at Baluchistan University.

On the Federal Government level, *Pakistan Archaeology*, an annual journal of the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums is being published regularly. An Institute of Archaeological Training and Research (PIATR) was created in 1988 at Lahore Fort where courses on specific subjects were offered from time to time but the subject of field archaeological research was not included in the training programme. The Institute building,

The Chronology of Banbhore (M.R. Mughal)

Period-V	<i>Abbasid (Late Islamic)</i>	751-1011 CE. Late 8th to 11th centuries CE and later until about 12th century
Period-IV	<i>Umayyad (Early Islamic)</i>	669/711-750 CE. First half of 8th century CE
Period-III	<i>Brahmanical and Buddhist</i>	641-712 CE. Brahman dynasty of 7th-8th centuries CE. 499-641 CE. Rai dynasty of 6th-7th centuries CE
Period-II	<i>Sasanian</i>	302-445 CE or later
Period-I	<i>Scytho-Parthian</i>	Circa first century BCE to 2nd century CE or later

however, still exists but its utilisation has yet to be done.

2. The participants of excavations at Banbhore who reached to the rank of Director General of Archaeology and Museums in Pakistan were:

Muhammad Ishtiaque Khan
1973 – 1986

Dr. Ahmad Nabi Khan
1986 – 1993

Dr. Mohammad Rafique Mughal
1993 – 1996

Niaz Rasool
1996 – 1998

3. We enjoyed Pushto songs of Farid Khan, in Bengali by T.K.Barua, poems by Taswir Hamidi and funny stories and jokes narrated by Farzand Ali Durani. If we wanted to hear Sindhi mystic poetry of Shah Abdul Latif, we called our favourite illiterate workman named Yaru Matkoo. Someone provided music with an iron pan turned upside down and an empty water pitcher. Yaru sang with passion and often went into ecstasy.
4. S.M. Ashfaque did not excavate at Banbhore. However, he extensively utilized the Field Reports of several excavators including data recorded by me on deep diggings in the eastern street of the mosque and proposed periodization (see Ashfaque 1969: 187, footnote 2).

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