# The Lost Cities of Sind

## (A Study of Some Aspects of Past Urbanization in Sind)

*Dr. QAZI SHAKIL AHMAD*

Notwithstanding the extreme dearth of information on the ancient and medieval cities of Sind, the fact remains that the lower Indus valley has in the past witnessed the growth and decline of a number of cities of considerable historical importance. To name a few, Mohenjodaro, Patala, Alor, Debal, Brahmanabad, Mansurah, Thatta, Nerunkot, Lahri Bunder and Sehwan were all sizeable and significant urban settlements of the region. These were not only important administrative centres but were key commercial and trade centres and were no less significant as transport nodes and as military posts. An examination of the still very incomplete historical record of these settlements reveals that they flourished for a while – for centuries and even millennium, before they became non-existent. Today they constitute the lost cities of Sind, a region that can justifiably boast of a glorious urban past. Incidentally, according to the 1981 census, Sind is the most urbanized province of Pakistan due mainly to the presence of the great metropolitan centre of Karachi. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse briefly the site characteristics of these agglomerations together with such other factors which were ultimately responsible for their decline and even disappearance from the scene. This analysis is bound to reveal sharp geographical bias, which is however intended and for which this writer owes no apology.

A number of writers on Sind including historians, geographers and Sindhologists have repeatedly referred to the vagaries of the mighty Indus, while discussing the growth and decline of various urban places. There is no doubt that the river to which Sind owes so much has also been in large measure responsible for the ruin and

destruction caused to different regions that constitute the Lower Indus Valley.

The region has in the past witnessed tremendous hydrographical changes, mainly related to changes in the course of the Indus and its various distributaries. It would probably be difficult to find another comparable deltaic region, where river changed its course so frequently and with such disastrous effects. The accompanying map (Fig. 1) effectively though briefly depicts the changes in the course of the Indus and its distributaries during the past 2300 years, since the advent of Greeks.[1]

A good number of settlements sited along the Indus and its distributaries were bound to be affected by these changes. Apart from these hydrographical changes, the regimen of the Indus has been characterized by its periodic floods which were far more frequent and destructive in the past than in the post-barrage period. Fortunately, the various barrages on the Indus and its tributaries in the Punjab now play a considerable part in regulating the increased volume of water in the river at the time of floods. The proximity of a river like the Indus with a characteristically changing course is always fraught with great risks to the life of settlements sited along it. A cursory glance over the past history of the Lower Indus Valley would reveal that many an important settlement sited along its bank were reduced to mere mounds of clay before the advancing tide of the Indus.

The changes in the course of the river together with the recurring periodic floods affected the continued existence of the settlements by adversely affecting their economic base, a factor that has eluded the attention of those who have in the past dealt with this issue. It needs hardly to be emphasised that irrespective of the functions that these settlements performed, namely, central place, break of-bulk or any specialized functions, they formed part of a pastoral-cum-subsistence economy, heavily dependent for their essential requirements, mainly foodstuff, on a relatively highly limited hinterland. In other words, any harm to the supporting hinterland seriously affected the growth of the settlements. This was the reason which led Lambrick to observe: "...until relatively modern times grazing continued to be the predominant occupation of the people

even in the Indus Valley. It was a sure means of livelihood while agriculture was always liable to disaster from the vagaries of the river".[2]

Over and above these hazards, and a few others such as earthquakes and changes in the regional climate, the destruction caused by the invaders from outside or even the local rulers need be duly emphasised while probing the past records of the lost cities of Sind. While Mohenjodaro and Debal suffered at the hands of barbarians and invaders from outside, the towns of Khudabad, once the capital of Sind, and Thatta, the capital of lower Sind, were sacked and burned by their own rulers.

Let us now turn to individual cities – lost cities of Sind, and investigate the circumstances that led to their ultimate destruction. Obviously, the first in the list is the renowned city of Mohenjodaro, which together with Harappa bears witness to the highly advanced Indus Valley culture. The city was the regional capital of the area comprising present-day Sind. But for the supply of essential foodstuff, its estimated population of over 30,000 persons spread over an area of nearly a square mile depended on a far more restricted hinterland. The city stood on the floodplain of the Indus. As a result it was time and again submerged by the river and had to be rebuilt. There were as many as nine phases of rebuilding in the city's history interrupted by disastrous river floods.[3] Yet, the city continued to flourish almost continuously through so long a period as a thousand years. Except for the menacing floods, the river probably behaved normally during all those years – a fact apparently hard to believe. Then, that zero hour struck with some ugly though not necessarily drastic change in the course of the river which spelt disaster for the region harbouring Mohenjodaro, by causing irreparable damage to its economic base. The final blow was dealt by the barbarians from the west, who succeeded in destroying whatever was left of the once well-integrated Indus civilization in Sind.

Then followed the millennium-long dark period of the history of Sind of which there is no worthwhile record, in any form, of its land and the people. The long spell of darkness, however, ended with the arrival of the Greeks around 326 B.C. The Greeks were

great city-builders, and in the course of Alexander's campaign they established scores of cities, rebuilt some of the decaying ones, while offered new life to others by widening their range of functions. Of particular interest in this connection are the towns of Patala and Sehwan, both situated along the Indus whose size when in flood simply fascinated the Greeks.

The town of Patala stood near the head of the Indus delta, some 15 miles north east of the present town of Tando Adam. It was an important military post and a port of considerable significance. However, no trace of this ancient port is now left as it had probably been swept away by changes in the course of the Indus.[4]

Unlike Patala and scores of other ancient towns which now lie in ruins, Sindho-mana or Sewistan (modern Sehwan), the oldest of the existing cities in Sind, has survived till today. The fact that it continues to exist has much to do with site characteristics of the town. Note its present location on an eminence, a few miles to the north of the Laki hills which terminate abruptly on the river Indus. Despite its proximity to the river the town has survived mainly due to the fact that in this part of its course the river rests against the protrusion of the Kohistan, and therefore, cannot western any more.

From the records left behind by the Greeks we learn of the location of Musicanus' capital which is generally identified with Alor. As it appears to me, Alor ranks next in importance to Mohenjodaro among the lost cities of Sind. Like Mohenjodaro it continued to flourish for a pretty long time, definitely for more than one and a half millennium, from the fourth century B.C. to the beginning of the 13th century A.D. For a long time it functioned as the capital of Greater Sind which extended from Kashmir in the north to the Arabian sea in the south. It continued as capital of Sind till the early part of Arab period. According to Chachnama it was a big town adorned with various kinds of royal buildings, villas, garden fountains, streams, meadows and trees situated on the bank of a river called the Mehran.[5] Its residents were mostly traders, artisans and peasants.

The fortified town of Alor, an acropolis, was situated on the

eastern edge of the low limestone ridge, some three miles southeast of the present town of Rohri. It is believed that the mainstream of the Indus above Alor ran to the northwest of Sukkur, but also sent off a branch to the left hand which ran through the Alor gap. These site characteristics provide the answer to the continued existence of the town for well over a millennium. Its location on the limestone cuesta provided the necessary protection against floods while the channel skirting the town to its north guaranteed the prosperity of its hinterland. Herein also lies the secret of the decline of the town. A change in the mainstream resulted in the disappearance of the channel which passed through the Alor gap, thus adversely affecting the economic base of the town which in its declining stage probably also suffered grievously at the hands of the invaders.

Next in importance to Alor is the town of Debal. It continued as the principal port of Sind for well over six centuries. At the time of the advent of the Arabs, Sind could justifiably boast of three prominent towns, namely, Alor in the north, Brahmanabad in the middle and Debal in the south. Debal's importance rested heavily on its being a port town. Al-Idrisi informs us that "this is a populous place and is inhabited only because it is a station for the vessels of Sind and other countries."[6] Muhammad Bin Qasim captured the town in 712 A.D. Thereafter Debal grew as the centre of Arab might. It continued to be a place of importance into the thirteenth century A.D.

Much controversy centres around the exact location of Debal. Both Pithawalla[7] and Baloch[8] are of the opinion that the town was located in the Gharo Creek. Baloch believes that Bhambore stands on the site of Debal. It seems fair to believe that Debal, a coastal town, was a little to the west of Baghar, a distributary of the Indus. Its ruin is ascribed to the severe treatment given it by Sultan Jalaluddin of Khiva in 1124 A.D. The town was sacked and a mosque built on the ruins of an idol-temple.

After the decline of Debal, its place was taken by another port town known as Lahari or Lahari Bandar which according to Ibn-Batutah was a beautiful place on the shores of the ocean, and near which the river of Sind falls into the sea.[9] This indicates that Lahari

Bunder was located on the Baghar distributary which, in those days carried the main volume of the Indus into the sea.

At the time Alor was the capital of Sind there existed in Middle Sind another fortress town called Bahmanabad, which was the seat of a governor. It is believed that the town was founded by Bahman Urdsher, king of Persia. Subsequently when Sind was being ruled by Hindu Brahmins, its name changed into Brahmanabad. The ruins of the town are located eastward of Jamrao canal, about 15 miles to the south of Sinjhoro town in the district of Sanghar. The town began to decline after the emergence of Mahfuza-Mansurah as the capital of Sind under the Arab rule.

As part of the process of consolidating their hold over the territory of Sind, the Arabs established the garrison town of Mahfuza, in the immediate vicinity of Brahmanabad. Some years later another town, Mansurah, was founded, presumably on the ruins of Brahmanabad. The town became the capital of Sind under the Arab rule. It continued to flourish for about five centuries until around 1250 A.D. or a little earlier, when Sind witnessed a major change in the course of the Indus higher up. The river deserted its course near Mansurah, affecting adversely the economic base of the capital city. Lambrick rightly remarks, "without irrigation from canals and water courses there could not be sufficient agriculture in the vicinity to support the population, and trade would decline with the loss of the convenient communications by water".[10]

Another major town which has ceased to exist is Nasarpur, also situated on the Indus, before it changed its course in 1758-59 A.D. The change was particularly remarkable as it affected the entire region of the lower Sind to a considerable extent. It was a consequence of this change that Ghulam Shah Kalhora established Hyderabad as the capital of Sind in preference to Nasarpur whose prosperity rapidly dwindled owing to the prevalent dry conditions.

Yet another leading city which has ceased to exist is Nerunkot upon whose ruins stands the city of Hyderabad. It was a fortress town and was captured by Muhammad Bin Qasim, soon after the fall of Debal. However in the absence of any record, written or other-

wise, it is not possible to surmise on the factors responsible for its decline.

This brief survey brings to light a number of interesting features of the lost cities of Sind. First of all, one learns of the diverse nature of these cities in terms of their functional attributes. In Mohenjodaro we have an example of a planned temple-cum-capital city. Alor, Nerunkot and Brahmanabad were fortress towns, Mahfuza, a garrison town, and Debal was a port city. Medieval Thatta was a leading educational centre.

Further, on the basis of their origin, we have cities ranging in age from proto-Dravidian (Prehistoric town) to the medieval (Arghuns & Kalhora) towns. Mohenjodaro was proto-Dravidian city, Brahmanabad had a Persian origin when it was named as Bahmanabad. Subsequently as a Hindu town, it came to be known as Brahmanabad. Alor had a Budhist origin, Patala and Sehwan got fresh life at the hands of the Greeks, Debal and Brahmanabad were Hindu cities while Mansurah, Thatta, Nasarpur and Khudabad originated as Muslim towns.

Furthermore, in terms of their site characteristics, Debal was a coastal town, Lahri Bunder, a river port, Mansurah, a meander city, and Alor and Nerunkot were acropolises. Mohenjodaro, Brahmanabad, Thatta, Khudabad and Nasarpur were all sited on the floodplain of the Indus or its distributaries.

The analysis of the site characteristics of the lost cities of Sind has revealed that the decline or ultimate destruction of these cities was mainly due to hydrographical changes, particularly changes in the course of the Indus. Often, change in the course of the river indirectly affected the continued existence of a settlement through its impact on the economic base of that settlement. This particular factor often proved disastrous not only for floodplain settlements but also acropolises. Other natural hazards like climatic changes or earthquakes were of little or minor importance. The destruction caused by enemy attacks and invasions at times no doubt assumed serious proportions leading to the desertion of the town by its residents or its total ruin.

**References**


1. See Maneck B. Pithawalla, *Settlements in the Lower Indus Basin (Sind)*, published by M. B. Pithawalla, Victoria Road, Karachi, 1939, pp. 351-375; Also see M. H. Panhwar, *Ground Water in Hyderabad and Khairpur Divisions*, Hyderabad, 1964, pp. 21-48.

2. H.T. Lambrick, *Sind: A General Introduction*, (Hyderabad, Sindhi Adabi Board), p. 195.

3. Stuart Piggot, *Prehistoric India*, Penguin Books, 1952, p. 139.

4. According to Haig, Patala had probably disappeared owing to changes in the course of the Indus before the middle of the first century A.D. See M.R. Haig, *The Indus Delta Country* (Karachi, Indus Publications, 1972), p. 30.

5. *Fatehnama* (Urdu translation of Chachnama) (Hyderabad, Sindhi Adabi Board, 1963), p. 18.

6. Sir H.M. Elliot, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, Vol. I, p. 77.

7. See Fig. 1.

8. *Fatehnama, op. cit.*, pp. 366-376.

9. H.T. Lambrick, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

10. *Ibid*, p. 181.

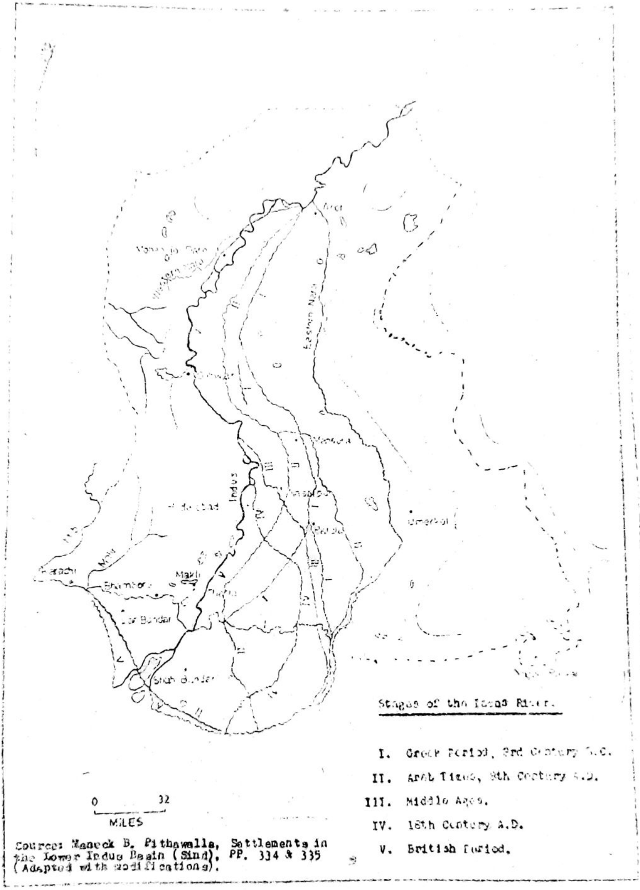



Fig. 1.-- Sind: Ancient Settlements, Old River Beds, and Changes in the Indus Delta.