

In Pursuit of the Parsis: The discovery and excavations at the Early Medieval *entrepôt* of Sanjan

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Abstract

As per the oral traditions of the Parsi community (a group of Zoroastrian refugees who fled Islamic persecution in Iran in the 7/8th century A.D.), their ancestors first made landfall on the Indian mainland at a place they named Sanjan. Sadly the Parsis have no written history of their flight and subsequent rehabilitation in India. Taking this into view th it was deemed imperative to archaeologically ascertain the location of the ancient site of Sanjan so as to determine the truth of its existence, date of establishment and subsequent date of desertion.

Keeping in mind the above problem excavations were carried out (after careful explorations) at the site of Sanjan, taluka Umargam, district Valsad, Gujarat in 2002, 2003 & 2004.

Excavations yielded an enormous wealth of unexpected and unprecedented data from the Early Medieval period. Sanjan was a port site on the Indian Ocean. Glass, ceramic and numismatic evidences from the Persian Gulf region and Indian sub-continent narrowed down the date from the 8th to the 14th centuries AD with the period between the 10th and 12th centuries being the heyday of the site. Ceramics from West Asia and China confirmed the positioning of the site on the trade routes of the Indian Ocean littoral. The structural remains of well-built permanent houses with organised drainage, spread over an area of 2 sq. km indicated a prosperous urban milieu.

The discovery of a Tower of Silence in the last season of excavations sealed the Zoroastrian affiliations at the site.

The data recovered thus indicate a hitherto unknown and unreported urban milieu in Southern Gujarat between the 8th and 14th centuries AD which was a part of the trade being carried out on the Indian Ocean littoral. Interestingly the dates coincide almost exactly with those for the landing and subsequent desertion of Sanjan as per the oral traditions in the Kisse-I-Sanjan, a quasi-historical Parsi poem.