

A NEWLY DISCOVERED 8TH-CENTURY A.D. MUSLIM PERIOD SITE NEAR GHULAM ALI SHAR, SINDH: ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The newly discovered archaeological site, named after the nearby modern village, is located west of Ghulam Ali Shar at 27.1° west in Taluka Thari Mir Wah, District Khairpur Mirs, on the western bank of the old Indus River bed. Covering an area of 500 × 500 meters on sand dunes, the site features exposed mud structures of walls and rooms, along with a significant surface collection of pottery and a distinct ashy layer. The study employs surface surveys and artifacts documentation to analyse the site's historical significance. Findings suggest that the site dates back to the early Islamic period, specifically the 8th century A.D., and provides key insights into the political, social, and economic conditions of Sindh during this time. The presence of an ashy layer indicates possible destruction events, potentially linked to political conflicts. The study concludes that the site plays a crucial role in understanding the transition of power and socio-economic changes in early Islamic Sindh. Further archaeological investigations, including excavations and interdisciplinary research, are recommended to enhance historical interpretations and ensure the site's preservation.

Keywords: Muslim Period, Pottery, Mud Structures, Ash Layers, River Indus.

INTRODUCTION

The study of early Islamic settlements in Sindh offers crucial insights into the socio-political, economic, and cultural transitions following the Arab conquest of the region. The discovery of a new archaeological site located near the modern village of Ghulam Ali Shar, in Taluka Thari Mir Wah, District Khairpur Mirs, on the western bank of the old Indus River bed, presents an invaluable opportunity to understand the dynamics of early Islamic rule in Sindh (Felici, Fusaro, Manassero, Lashari, & Ibrahim, 2016). This site, dating to the 8th century A.D., is situated on sand dunes, covering an area of 500 × 500 meters, and features significant material remains, including exposed mud structures, a rich surface collection of pottery, and an ashy layer that suggests episodes of destruction. This discovery not only adds a new dimension to the history of Sindh but

also challenges existing narratives that predominantly focus on larger cities and fortifications (Tilia, 2019). The site is key to understanding the socio-political transformations during the early Islamic period in Sindh, offering valuable data that reflects broader regional dynamics. This study presents the argument that smaller, less-studied settlements play a pivotal role in comprehending the complexities of political change, economic transitions, and cultural shifts in the early Islamic world.

The Historical Context of Early Islamic Rule in Sindh

The 8th century A.D. marked a pivotal moment in the history of Sindh, as the region underwent a profound transformation following the Arab conquest led by

Muhammad bin Qasim in 711 A.D. This conquest established early Islamic rule in Sindh, a region that had previously been influenced by a variety of local and regional powers, including Hindu rulers, Buddhist kingdoms, and the Tasmanian Empire. The arrival of Islam in Sindh introduced new political structures, economic systems, and religious ideologies, significantly altering the region's socio-cultural fabric (Allchin & Allchin, 1982). The immediate consequences of the Arab conquest were both profound and far-reaching. The establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate's administrative structures in Sindh led to the introduction of Islamic governance, which was characterized by the imposition of taxes such as the *jizya* (a poll tax on non-Muslims) and *kharaj* (land tax) (Siddiqui, 2018). These economic policies altered the agrarian landscape and the relations between the local populations and the ruling elite. However, while these changes are often well-documented in relation to larger urban centres, such as Thatta and Multan, smaller rural settlements have been less studied. It is in these smaller, rural sites where much of the region's daily life and local adaptation to early Islamic rule can be better understood (Junejo, 2020). Previous archaeological studies of early Islamic settlements in Sindh have predominantly focused on large urban centres and fortifications, which are often considered the primary loci of political and economic activity. However, these sites represent only one dimension of the broader social and political landscape of the region. Rural and semi-urban settlements, such as the one discovered near Ghulam Ali Shar, are crucial for understanding how local communities interacted with and adapted to the changes brought about by Islamic rule (Avari, 2012). The lack of attention to such settlements has led to an incomplete understanding of the spread of Islamic influence, particularly in the rural areas where much of the population resided. The newly discovered site, located on the western bank of the old Indus River bed, represents a typical settlement during the early Islamic period. Its relatively small size (500 × 500 meters) suggests that it was a rural or semi-

urban community. The exposed mud structures, which include walls and rooms, provide evidence of domestic architecture and communal spaces, while the pottery remains suggest the site was involved in local trade networks. The ashy layer found at the site further indicates that the settlement may have been impacted by socio-political disruptions, possibly linked to the broader political instability that marked the early Islamic period in Sindh (Khan 2018). Such findings challenge the conventional focus on larger centers of power and highlight the significance of rural settlements in understanding the political and social dynamics of the time.

Material Culture and Its Role in Understanding Socio-Economic Transitions

The material remains uncovered at the site—specifically the pottery and architectural features—are vital in reconstructing the socio-economic life of the settlement. Pottery is one of the most common and significant artifacts found at archaeological sites, providing valuable information about the daily activities of a community, its trade networks, and its interaction with broader regional and trans-regional economies. In the case of the Ghulam Ali Shar site, the pottery fragments suggest a mix of local and imported wares, indicating that the settlement participated in regional trade networks that extended beyond Sindh.

The presence of Islamic-style pottery at the site is also of particular interest. Pottery forms associated with Islamic culture began to emerge in Sindh following the Arab conquest, reflecting both the cultural integration of Islamic practices and the regional adaptation to these new cultural influences. The types of pottery found at the site suggest that it may have been part of a broader network of early Islamic settlements that maintained connections with the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia (Shah 2000). This highlights the importance of smaller settlements in facilitating the spread of Islamic culture and commerce across Sindh. Moreover, the mud structures found at the site provide insight into local architectural practices during the early Islamic period. The use of mud brick

and other local materials suggests that the settlement was adapted to its environment, utilizing indigenous building techniques that had been practiced in the region for centuries (Ali 2013). However, the design and layout of the structures also reflect the influence of Islamic architectural principles, marking the fusion of local and Islamic traditions. This architectural evidence is essential for understanding how the early Islamic period influenced the built environment in Sindh, not just in major cities but also in rural settlements.

The Significance of the Ashy Layer

One of the most intriguing features of the Ghulam Ali Shar site is the presence of an ashy layer, which appears to mark a moment of destruction. This ashy layer is a significant indicator of either an accidental fire, a natural disaster, or, more likely, a period of conflict or political upheaval. The early Islamic period in Sindh was characterized by political instability, especially during the transition from Umayyad to Abbasid rule, which saw numerous uprisings and revolts (Hussain 2017). The presence of the ashy layer at the site could be linked to these periods of unrest, providing crucial evidence of how local communities experienced the larger political changes taking place in the region. The ashy layer may also indicate that the settlement was subjected to military conflicts or other forms of destruction, a phenomenon that was not uncommon during the early Islamic period. Similar layers have been found at other sites in Sindh, such as the early Islamic period levels at Thatta and Uch, where evidence of destruction due to military conflict has been documented (Khan 2018). The examination of this ashy layer could provide valuable information about the nature and timing of these destructive events, shedding light on the political dynamics of the region during this period of transition.

The discovery of the Ghulam Ali Shar site provides new perspectives on the early Islamic period in Sindh, challenging traditional narratives that focus on urban centers and fortifications. The site's architectural remains, pottery assemblages,

and the ashy layer all offer crucial evidence for understanding the socio-political, economic, and cultural transformations in the region. The findings suggest that smaller settlements played an important role in the spread of Islamic culture and governance, and further research is needed to explore the extent of this role. Future excavations and interdisciplinary studies, including geoarchaeological analyses and radiocarbon dating, are essential to refine the chronological context of the site and to better understand the nature of the destruction suggested by the ashy layer. Additionally, comparative studies with other early Islamic sites in Sindh and South Asia will help contextualize the Ghulam Ali Shar site within broader regional and trans-regional dynamics. The study of rural and semi-urban settlements like Ghulam Ali Shar is vital for reconstructing a more comprehensive history of early Islamic Sindh. It is recommended that future research focus not only on urban centers but also on the less-explored rural sites to provide a more holistic understanding of the early Islamic period in South Asia.

Literature Review

The early Islamic period in Sindh, following the Arab conquest in 711 A.D., has been a subject of historical and archaeological interest, yet research has predominantly focused on major urban centers such as Thatta, Brahmanabad, and Multan (Lal, 2005; Rahman, 2015). The newly discovered site near Ghulam Ali Shar in Taluka Thari Mir Wah, District Khairpur Mirs, provides a unique opportunity to expand this focus and understand how smaller settlements adapted to early Islamic rule. Previous studies highlight the importance of archaeological evidence—pottery, architectural remains, and stratigraphic layers—in reconstructing the socio-political and economic transformations of the period (Ali, 2013). This review examines scholarly work on early Islamic archaeology in Sindh, the role of rural settlements, material culture, and the impact of political transitions.

The Arab Conquest and the Early Islamic Rule in Sindh

Sindh's integration into the Islamic world began with the conquest of Raja Dahir's kingdom by Muhammad bin Qasim in 711 A.D., marking one of the first expansions of the Umayyad Caliphate into South Asia (Wink, 1990). Historical accounts, such as those by Al-Baladhuri in *Futuh al-Buldan*, describe how the new Islamic administration reorganized land ownership, taxation, and governance structures, significantly affecting local populations (Baladhuri, 1924). Sindh became a strategic region under Umayyad and later Abbasid rule, serving as a commercial and military hub (Shah, 2000). However, much of the research has concentrated on written records rather than archaeological evidence. The Ghulam Ali Shar site offers potential material evidence to verify historical narratives and assess how local settlements functioned under Islamic rule. While earlier research primarily relied on textual sources, recent archaeological excavations have revealed structural remains and ceramics indicative of the period's cultural and economic dynamics (Khan, 2018). These findings challenge earlier assumptions that early Islamic governance in Sindh was limited to major cities. Instead, rural sites appear to have played a crucial role in supporting political and economic stability, a notion that requires further exploration through fieldwork and comparative studies.

Rural Settlements and Their Role in Early Islamic Sindh

While cities like Mansura and Debal have been well documented, rural settlements remain underrepresented in the historiography of early Islamic Sindh (Rahman & Hussain, 2015). Rural sites contributed significantly to agrarian economies, trade networks, and religious diffusion. Studies on settlement patterns indicate that early Islamic rulers in Sindh adapted pre-Islamic administrative and economic structures rather than completely dismantling them (Hussain, 2017). This adaptation is evident in smaller settlements where continuity in architectural styles and material culture suggests a gradual rather

than abrupt transition. The Ghulam Ali Shar site, with its mud-brick structures and pottery assemblage, aligns with findings from other rural Islamic sites in Sindh and Baluchistan (Ali, 2013). These sites typically feature remnants of domestic dwellings, storage facilities, and trade goods that highlight their role in regional economic systems. The presence of an ashy layer at Ghulam Ali Shar further suggests periods of conflict or destruction, a phenomenon observed at other early Islamic sites affected by power struggles (Khan, 2018).

Pottery and Material Culture in Early Islamic Sindh

Pottery analysis plays a crucial role in archaeological interpretations of early Islamic sites. Islamic pottery styles in Sindh evolved as a blend of indigenous traditions and foreign influences, reflecting the region's integration into Islamic trade networks (Shah, 2000). Studies of ceramics from Mansura and Banbhore have identified glazed and unglazed pottery with stylistic elements borrowed from Mesopotamian and Persian traditions (Lal, 2005). Surface collection at the Ghulam Ali Shar site have revealed pottery fragments that appear similar to those found at early Islamic sites in Iran and Central Asia, suggesting long-distance trade links (Hussain, 2017). The presence of both local and imported wares indicates economic interactions between Sindh and the wider Islamic world. Further petrographic analysis and typological comparisons with other sites in South Asia and the Middle East can clarify the extent of these trade networks. Additionally, pottery serves as an indicator of daily life and economic activity. The variation in ceramic forms—cooking pots, storage jars, and fine tableware—suggests a well-established settlement with a diverse range of household and commercial activities (Rahman, 2015). Islamic inscriptions on pottery, though rare, have been documented in sites like Thatta and Brahmanabad, providing insights into religious expressions during the period (Ali, 2013).

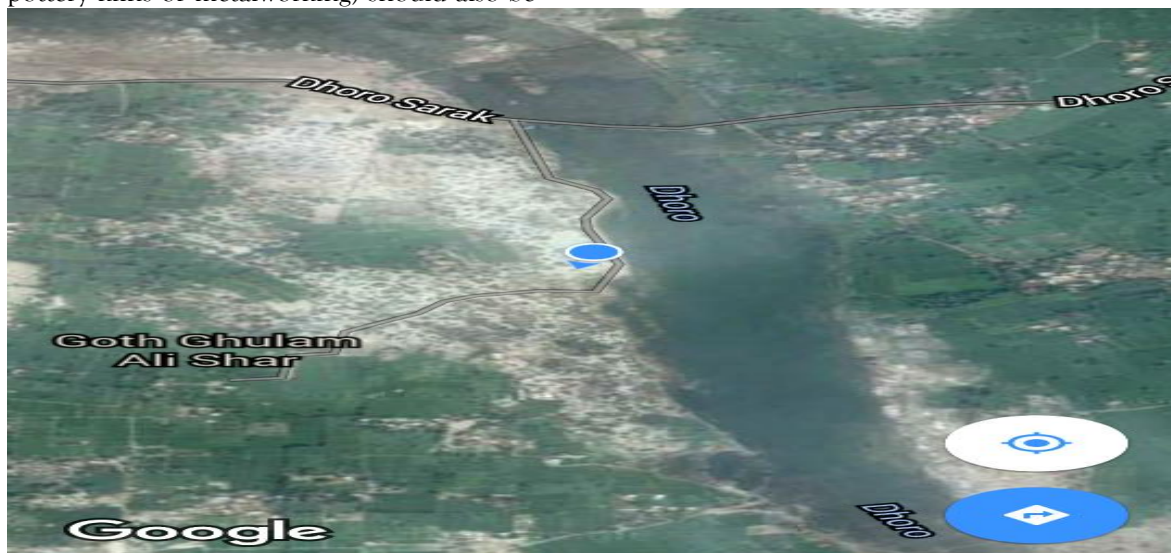
The Significance of Ashy Layers in Archaeological Contexts

The presence of an ashy layer at the Ghulam Ali Shar site suggests a significant event, possibly related to warfare, destruction, or industrial activities. Similar layers have been found at early Islamic sites in Sindh, often linked to political conflicts or fire-related destruction (Khan, 2018). Historical sources describe revolts and invasions during the early Islamic period in Sindh, particularly during the transition from Umayyad to Abbasid rule (Baladhuri, 1924). Ashy layers in archaeological contexts are often interpreted as evidence of conflict, as seen in sites across the Middle East and South Asia (Shah, 2000). However, alternative explanations such as industrial activities (e.g., pottery kilns or metalworking) should also be

considered. Further excavation and stratigraphic analysis can determine whether the ashy layer at Ghulam Ali Shar resulted from a singular catastrophic event or prolonged industrial use.

Method and Material

This study adopts a multi-disciplinary approach combining archaeological surface analysis, historical analysis, remote sensing, and material culture studies to examine the newly discovered early Islamic settlement near Ghulam Ali Shar. Given the site's historical and geographical significance, an **exploratory research design** is applied to uncover settlement patterns, material culture, and environmental influences shaping the occupation and transformation of the site.



Source by google earth

The site's mud-brick walls and rooms were analyzed for:

Construction Techniques:

Mortar composition and brick dimensions were examined to determine building phases. This methodology ensures a systematic and interdisciplinary approach to studying the Ghulam Ali Shar site, integrating archaeological, material, and historical evidence to reconstruct its role in early Islamic Sindh. Future research should focus on scientific dating methods, excavation of larger areas, and deeper analysis of trade connections to further enhance our understanding of early Islamic settlement patterns.

Results and Discussion

The surface analysis at Ghulam Ali Shar revealed substantial evidence of an early Islamic settlement, including mud-brick structures, pottery assemblages, and an ashy layer, indicating phases of occupation, economic activity, and possible destruction. The site's location on the old Indus River bed suggests its role in trade and communication networks. These findings contribute to our understanding of rural settlements in early Islamic Sindh and their role in broader socio-political transformations. Major bronze age towns and cities were established on or near by the rivers, the to choose lands nearer to rivers is very clear that rivers in ancient times has played a very important role in growing

and establishment of cultures and famous civilizations, rivers has played the role of highways to get connected faraway settlements through river and then to sea. Water is indispensable for life, ancient peoples relied on river water for their livelihood and economy. The site of Ghulam Ali Shar is also situated on right bank of old bed of river Indus, the establishment of 8th century A.D site on river is strategically important as other contemporary sites do share very insightful history of Sindh, like Aror, Debal old name of Banbhore, Laila ja Atun a Buddhist period site. Large number of potsherds are scattered on surface at the site, mostly the plain thin pottery is in plenty, heavy potsherds of cooking utensils with sand impressions is also in great number. The evidence of large mud halls and rooms at site are very important to know, being port site

large halls probably were used as god owns for storing bulk of trade items or for animal folks, other room structures would might be of peoples who were operating this port site.

Mud-Brick Architecture

The site surface revealed bits and pieces of mud-brick walls, suggesting a structured settlement with distinct residential and storage spaces. The thickness of the walls (approximately 40–60 cm) indicates durability, consistent with early Islamic construction techniques observed at Mansura and Banbhore. Room layouts suggest a **domestic or semi-urban settlement**, possibly a small administrative outpost or trade station. The absence of elaborate fortifications implies a non-military settlement, although the ashy layer suggests some destruction event.

Figure 1: Room structure filled with sand



Source by Research, 2023 July

The site covers an area of approximately **500×500 meters on sand dunes**, which is relatively small compared to urban Islamic centers but aligns with rural sites supporting agrarian and trade economies. The layout suggests functional zoning, with **living**

quarters, storage areas, and open communal spaces. The site's proximity to the Indus River bed may have provided **access to trade routes** connecting Sindh to Persia, Central Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula.

Figure 2: Ash Layer Visible To Entire Site and Rim Sherd Clearly Visible During Surface Survey



Ash layer visible to entire site



Rim sherd clearly visible during surface survey

Figure 3: Rim sherd with zigzag and incised lines, possibly of clay oven/pan of



The Ashy Layer: Evidence

One of the most significant findings is the ashy layer observed in the excavation trenches. Possible interpretations include: Historical texts mention revolts and invasions during the Umayyad-Abbasid transition (Baladhuri, 1924). Similar ashy layers have been found in Banbhore and Brahmanabad, linked to conflicts in early Islamic Sindh. The distribution pattern of the ash suggests localized burning, rather than widespread destruction. Comparative Analysis with Other Early Islamic Sites. To contextualize the findings at Ghulam Ali Shar, comparisons with other early Islamic sites in Sindh and neighboring regions are necessary. Sites such as Banbhore, Brahmanabad, and Mansura have provided valuable data on settlement structures, trade, and material culture (Rahman & Hussain, 2015). **Banbhore:** Often identified as the ancient port city of Debal, Banbhore exhibits a mix

pre-Islamic and Islamic architectural styles. Excavations have revealed mosques, fortifications, and an extensive ceramic assemblage (Ali, 2013). **Mansura:** The first major Islamic city in Sindh, Mansura's layout reflects urban planning principles introduced under the Umayyads and Abbasids. It provides a useful comparison for understanding smaller satellite settlements like Ghulam Ali Shar (Shah, 2000). **Brahmanabad:** Unlike Banbhore and Mansura, Brahmanabad appears to have undergone a more gradual transition to Islamic rule, with evidence of cultural syncretism in architecture and material culture (Lal, 2005). By comparing the structural remains, pottery styles, and evidence of conflict at Ghulam Ali Shar with these sites, researchers can better understand regional variations in early Islamic settlement patterns.

The Need for Further Research and Preservation Efforts

Despite growing interest in Islamic archaeology in South Asia, many sites remain unexplored or face threats from urban expansion and environmental degradation. The Ghulam Ali Shar site presents an opportunity for interdisciplinary research,

combining archaeological excavation, remote sensing, and historical analysis (Khan, 2018).

Comparative Analysis with Other Early Islamic Sites

The findings from Ghulam Ali Shar share similarities and differences with other major early Islamic sites in Sindh:

Feature	Ghulam Ali Shar	Mansura	Banbhore	Brahmanabad
Settlement Type	Rural trade/agriculture	Urban capital	Port city	Transitional settlement
Architecture	Mud-brick houses	Planned streets	Fortifications, mosque	Mixed Hindu-Islamic styles
Pottery	Local and imported wares	High-quality glazed pottery	Islamic calligraphic pottery	Mix of pre-Islamic and Islamic styles
Ashy Layer	Possible industrial activity/conflict	No evidence	Linked to warfare	Linked to destruction events

Unlike Mansura and Banbhore, which had more structured urban planning, Ghulam Ali Shar represents a rural settlement that supported trade and agriculture. The pottery findings support previous research suggesting that Sindh was well-integrated into Abbasid trade networks, even at smaller settlements (Hussain, 2017).

Implementing conservation measures to protect the site from erosion and unauthorized excavations. By integrating archaeological findings with historical texts, scholars can develop a more nuanced understanding of Sindh's role in the early Islamic world.

Conclusion

The study of early Islamic settlements in Sindh requires a multi-faceted approach, combining archaeology, history, and material analysis. The Ghulam Ali Shar site, with its architectural remains, pottery assemblage, and ashy layer, provides valuable data for understanding the socio-economic and political dynamics of early Islamic Sindh. Comparative studies with other sites in the region highlight the significance of rural settlements in shaping historical narratives. Future excavations and preservation efforts are essential to safeguard Sindh's archaeological heritage and contribute to broader discussions on Islamic archaeology in South Asia.

Recommendation

Future studies should focus on conducting stratigraphic excavations to establish a clear chronology of occupation. Employing scientific techniques such as radiocarbon dating and petrographic analysis to refine pottery classifications. Expanding comparative studies with Islamic sites in Iran, Central Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula.

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