

Integral study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue

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**Sind: a glimpse into the Aesthetic impulses and cultural expressions**

*By*

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The area extending from the Mediterranean to Sind in Pakistan, has been the cradle of an extraordinary development of cultural expressions and aesthetic impulses representing unity in diversity. During the last millennium, one can distinguish large cultural entities within this highly versatile region integrated by the spirit of Islam and cultural dialogue. The Ottoman traditions in the west, the Fertile crescent and Iran in the middle and South Asian sub-continent in the east present outstanding examples with their own distinctive features, clearly identifiable by early 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. but based on the key concept of a community of attitude and the uses of a traditional forms.

Limited in religious symbolic forms like “mihrab”, minaret and calligraphy as decoration, Muslims adapted functions and gave a new dimension to their architectural and ornamental tradition. From the very beginning, they developed a major art of trade and urbanization as well as an art of the palace and created techniques of secular beautification. It resulted in a striking succession of palaces and urban settlements from Alhambra to Fatehpur Sikri. It also gave an impetus to the development of techniques and designs of ceramics, textiles, metalwork, glassware, stone-carving etc.

The Muslim art in this region emerged from the selective fusion of Arab, Syrian, Persian, Turkish, Moghul and local traditions. The remains of an urban site exposed at Banbhore, situated about 40 miles north-east of Karachi, illustrates the earliest Arab influence dating back to the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. As evidence, a number of copper coins of the tenth Umayyad Caliph, Hisham bin Abdul Malik (A.D. 724 to 734) have been discovered. The upper levels have also yielded a type of pottery of Syrian origin belonging to the Umayyad period. This is unglazed white, thin textured and moulded in relief with Kufic inscriptions and floral-cum-geometric patterns. Glazed pottery vessels recovered from the same levels show Persian influence. Of special significance in this class of pottery are the heavy textured blue-

green glazed storage jars. The Persian influence appears even more predominant during the latter periods and a large number of glazed pottery-ware discovered from the upper levels that closely resemble Persian prototypes of the 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. Unglazed polychrome with cream, black and red colours is another type of pottery found from the lower layers. This has geometric designs with representation of birds and animals. Glass articles show a high quality of craftsmanship and display the technique of glass-making in vogue in Syria in the early Muslim period. The architectural style at Banbhore is simple and locally available stone has been generally used in the construction with rare resort to baked bricks.

Another outstanding example of an early Muslim settlement is the city site of Mansura excavated in lower Sindh. Founded by an Umayyad Governor and later developed and enlarged under the benevolent rule of 'Kabbaris', it represents inter-cultural movement with strong Arab influence.

In general terms, the techniques of Muslim architecture in the beginning were confined to primary forms, though delightful shapes and geometrical decorations were fervently employed. The decorative art was further embellished with script and arabesque ornamentation and inter-twined bands. These geometric, floral and calligraphic motifs were reproduced in endless combinations with taste and vigor.

A unique art form however, which developed in Sind and a part of Balochistan in the late period between 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, is represented by a large number of most elaborately carved tombs and graves in sandstone at different burial sites spread over an area of more than 120, 000 square kilometers. These are attributed to the local tribes converted to Islam. Though their new faith discouraged the use of human or animal figures in the decorative arts yet their strong pre-Islamic tradition dominated their approach in embellishing their tombs profusely with the figures of warriors, hunters, grooms, horses and camels besides the depiction of beautiful jewellery, weapons and other ornate designs carved in stone. These exquisite carvings on the tombs portray vividly the heroic personality of the buried, their customs and their wealth.

The architectural form of these tombs varies in the different areas of Sind and Balochistan, the most impressive being the rectangular pyramid-type attributed to the Burfats or Numriac. The site of Chaukhandi, about seventeen miles north of Karachi, is an outstanding example belonging to this group. Here we find hundreds of tombs beautifully carved in yellow sandstone with intricate geometric designs and images of warriors, horses,

arms, jewellery and other motifs. The tombs of men are generally capped with a stylized turban on an upstanding finial stone and those without turban belong to women. The other variants, plain chambered with flat tops are attributed to the Karmatis and Johkrias and found largely along the Makran coast and in lower Sind. These monuments represent a unique aspect of the long and rich cultural heritage of Sind and a remarkable contribution to the history of decorative arts.