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A History of Karachi

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Introduction

Karachi, perched on the edge of the Arabian Sea at Pakistan's southern frontier, embodies the remarkable trajectory of a city forged by geography, history, and human tenacity. As the nation's largest metropolis and economic powerhouse, Karachi's story is striking not only for its scale but also for the diversity of forces that have shaped it across millennia. This book seeks to trace the multifaceted evolution of Karachi, from its earliest days as a cluster of settlements and trading ports to its present standing as a global megacity.

Long before Karachi's name appeared in the annals of colonial administrators and world maps, the region was home to communities of hunter-gatherers whose tools and artifacts echo today among the Mulri Hills. These prehistoric roots set the stage for a continuous human presence that would later draw the attention of ancient geographers, traders, and conquerors. References in Greek literature to Barbarikon and Krokola whisper of Karachi's antiquity and its legacy as a gateway between the subcontinent and the wider world.

Over the centuries, waves of migration, conquest, and commerce have layered the city with influences as varied as the Arab armies of the 8th century and the Baluchi settlers of the 18th. The legendary Mai Kolachi and her humble fishing hamlet lent their name to the burgeoning settlement, which gradually became a vital port for regional trade, even as the politics of power ebbed and flowed across Sindh's landscape. It was the British, however, who would recognize Karachi's strategic significance, transforming it into a sprawling colonial outpost whose infrastructural foundations continue to define the cityscape.

Independence brought with it seismic demographic and political shifts. as Karachi emerged as the capital of newly-founded Pakistan, waves of migrants dramatically altered its population, culture, and urban fabric. The promise of economic opportunity, paired with the weight of new national responsibilities, drew millions to a city already wrestling with questions of identity, growth, and governance.

In telling Karachi's story, this book does not shy away from the complexity that colors its modern era. Urbanization's relentless pace, the interplay of dozens of ethnic groups, political turbulence, and the daily challenges of infrastructure and public services are explored not as isolated problems, but as integral facets of Karachi's living history. Extending far beyond a simple chronology, these chapters seek to illuminate the city's enduring capacity for reinvention, resilience, and adaptation, even in the face of formidable obstacles.

Ultimately, a history of Karachi is a history of transformations—of landscapes and livelihoods, communities and dreams. Through these pages, readers are invited to journey through the ancient, the colonial, the modern, and the contemporary, to discover how Karachi became not only the beating heart of Pakistan’s economy but also a crucible for its hopes, contradictions, and aspirations for the future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Roots: Karachi's Earliest Inhabitants

Before the first brick was laid, before the first sail was hoisted in its natural harbor, and long before it became a bustling port city, the land that would one day be called Karachi was a very different place. Stretching back through unimaginable gulfs of time, the story of human presence in this region begins not with grand civilizations or urban centers, but with small, mobile groups of hunter-gatherers navigating a landscape shaped by ancient geological forces and fluctuating climates.

To understand Karachi's deepest past, we must cast our gaze back tens of thousands of years, into the periods known to archaeologists as the Upper Paleolithic and the Mesolithic. These epochs, part of the larger Stone Age, represent crucial stages in human development, characterized by distinct technologies, subsistence strategies, and ways of life adapted to environments vastly different from the one we see today. The evidence for these early inhabitants lies not in monumental structures, but in the subtle, often overlooked, traces they left behind: stone tools.

For many years, the prehistoric landscape of Lower Sindh, the southern part of the province where Karachi is located, remained relatively unexplored compared to other regions of South Asia. However, pioneering work by archaeologists, notably Professor A. R. Khan in the 1970s, began to reveal the remarkable antiquity of human occupation in the area surrounding modern Karachi. His systematic surveys, particularly in a range of low-lying hills to the east of the city, uncovered a wealth of archaeological material that pushed back the known history of the region considerably.

These hills, known as the Mulri Hills, located near the sprawling campus of Karachi University, proved to be a treasure trove of prehistoric artifacts. Composed of limestone terraces and crisscrossed by ancient water channels and springs, the Mulri Hills offered resources and vantage points that would have been attractive to early human groups. It was here that evidence of both Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic settlements was found in significant concentrations.

The Upper Paleolithic period, broadly dating from around 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, saw the emergence of *Homo sapiens* as the sole human species and was marked by significant advancements in tool technology and cultural expression in many parts of the world. While evidence for this period in Lower Sindh is perhaps less abundant than the subsequent Mesolithic, finds from the Mulri Hills and other nearby locations like Rehri and Jhimpir suggest that these early modern humans were indeed present in the

Karachi region.

The tools from the Upper Paleolithic layers are often characterized by a move towards more refined techniques, producing longer, more standardized blades that could be used as blanks for a variety of tools. These might include points that tipped spears or other projectiles, scrapers for processing animal hides, and burins for working bone or antler, though organic materials rarely survive the ravages of time in this climate. The presence of such tools indicates a subsistence strategy focused on hunting terrestrial animals that would have roamed the plains and hills.

As the world transitioned from the last Ice Age into the warmer, more stable climate of the Holocene epoch, roughly 10,000 years ago, a new cultural phase emerged: the Mesolithic. This period, also known as the Middle Stone Age, saw significant environmental changes and corresponding adaptations in human lifeways. In Lower Sindh, the Mesolithic is particularly well-represented in the archaeological record, especially within the Mulri Hills.

The hallmark of the Mesolithic in this region, and indeed across much of South Asia, is the widespread use of microliths. These are small, geometrically shaped stone tools, often just a few centimeters in length, meticulously crafted from fine-grained stone like flint or chert. The Mulri Hills and other sites like those along the Khadeji, Mol, and Malir rivers have yielded impressive quantities of these tiny, sharp implements.

Microliths were not typically used individually but were designed to be hafted, or attached, to handles or shafts made of wood or bone. They served as components of composite tools, vastly increasing the efficiency and versatility of prehistoric technology. Imagine a wooden arrow shaft fitted with small, sharp microlithic points as a tip, or a bone handle embedded with a row of tiny, razor-sharp microliths to create a sickle-like tool for cutting grasses or harvesting wild grains.

The types of microliths found in the Karachi region are varied and include geometric forms such as lunates (crescent shapes), triangles, and trapezoids, alongside small blades and points, some with intentionally blunted or "backed" edges to facilitate hafting and handling. The sheer number and variety of these tools provide valuable insights into the daily lives and activities of the Mesolithic inhabitants.

The prevalence of microlithic tools strongly suggests that these were communities of hunter-gatherers who exploited a diverse range of resources available in their environment. The small, sharp points would have been ideal for hunting small to medium-sized game. The composite tools could have been used for processing these animals – cutting meat, scraping hides for clothing or shelter, and perhaps even working bone and wood for other tools and structures.

Beyond hunting, the Mesolithic toolkit indicates an increased reliance on gathering

plant resources. Tools resembling sickles or knives, made by inserting microliths into a handle, would have been effective for harvesting wild grasses, roots, and other edible plants. The presence of grinding stones at some sites, though perhaps less commonly reported for the earliest phases, would further support the processing of plant foods.

The environment of the Karachi region during the early Holocene, when the Mesolithic flourished, would have been more conducive to supporting such a lifestyle than the arid conditions often seen today. While still likely characterized by seasonal variations, there were significant freshwater sources available. The Mulri Hills themselves were noted for their springs, providing a reliable water supply.

The nearby river systems, including the Malir, Khadeji, Mol, and Lyari, though perhaps not flowing as consistently as major perennial rivers, would have been vital corridors for both water and resources. These river valleys and the surrounding plains would have supported vegetation and attracted wildlife, providing hunting grounds and foraging areas for the Mesolithic groups.

Furthermore, the proximity to the Arabian Sea coast would have offered additional resources. While direct evidence from the earliest periods is scarce due to sea-level changes over millennia, coastal areas and associated environments like mangrove swamps (which existed further inland in the past) could have been exploited for fish, shellfish, and other marine resources. The presence of marine shells at some Mesolithic sites in the broader coastal region supports this idea.

The archaeological evidence points to these prehistoric groups being mobile, moving across the landscape in accordance with the availability of resources. Their settlements were likely temporary encampments rather than permanent villages, strategically located near water sources and hunting or gathering grounds. The stone tools found represent the discarded or lost items from these transient occupations – the remnants of countless hours spent crafting tools, hunting, gathering, and surviving.

The raw material for their stone tools, primarily flint and chert, would have been sourced from outcrops in the surrounding areas. Regions like Ongar, Jhimpir, and Thano Bula Khan are known to have deposits of suitable stone, and prehistoric quarrying and workshop sites have been identified in the wider Sindh region, indicating that these early inhabitants had a sophisticated understanding of stone sources and flaking techniques.

The study of these prehistoric sites provides a window into a way of life that dominated the Karachi region for thousands of years – a life intimately connected with the natural world, dictated by the rhythms of the seasons and the movements of game. It was a life that required detailed knowledge of the landscape, the behavior of animals, and the properties of plants.

While much of the information about these earliest inhabitants comes from the stone tools they left behind, these artifacts speak volumes about their ingenuity, adaptability, and resilience. They were skilled craftspeople, capable of producing highly effective tools from seemingly simple materials. They were astute observers of their environment, able to locate and utilize the resources necessary for survival.

Unfortunately, the very areas that hold the keys to this deep past, particularly the Mulri Hills, have faced significant challenges from modern urban expansion. As Karachi has grown exponentially, many of the prehistoric sites discovered in the 1970s and beyond have been encroached upon and even destroyed by construction and development. This underscores the importance of the archaeological work that has been done, preserving what knowledge we have before these ancient traces are lost forever.

The collections of stone tools held in institutions, such as the Geography Department of Karachi University where Professor A. R. Khan's finds are preserved, are therefore invaluable. They represent the tangible link to the very first people who inhabited this land, the initial chapter in a history that spans millennia and leads, eventually, to the sprawling metropolis we know today.

Understanding these prehistoric roots is essential to appreciating the full sweep of Karachi's history. It reminds us that the land has been home to humans for an immense period, with diverse communities adapting to changing environments long before the arrival of later civilizations or colonial powers. These early hunter-gatherers, though their names and stories are lost to time, laid the groundwork for the continuous human presence in the region, a presence that would evolve and transform dramatically over subsequent ages.

The transition from these mobile foraging groups to more settled ways of life and the emergence of the ancient port cities that would later dot the coastline are the next parts of this unfolding narrative. But the memory, albeit silent and etched only in stone, of the Mulri Hills hunter-gatherers remains a fundamental starting point for any comprehensive history of Karachi.

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