

## Piram Island: Pirates Fort in the Gulf of Khambat

**T**raditionally, Piram Island has been considered as landmark point for the navigators in the Gulf of Khambat. Mention has been made that the island also served as haven for pirates. A coastal archaeological exploration was undertaken in order to understand the importance of this island for navigation in the Gulf. The remains of fortification such as doorjambs, dressed stone blocks, drainage and sculptures are scattered in the inter tidal zone. The archaeological findings suggest that Piram Island lacks a suitable anchorage around it. The island has been under control of the rulers of Gogha and a lighthouse was established on the southwestern corner of the island during the British period, which has been renovated and is being used.

The island of Piram is situated about 10 km on the southeast direction of Gogha on the west coast of the Gulf of Khambat (Fig.1). The island extends about 6 km in the NE-SW direction. Presently, the island is approached by boat plying from Gogha. The island has a lighthouse dating to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was rebuilt in the last quarter of the same century. Presently, Piram Island is thickly covered with forest and archaeological remains. The lighthouse has

been renovated and serves as an important landmark for navigation in the Gulf. A large portion of the island gets exposed during low tide due to high tidal range of the Gulf.

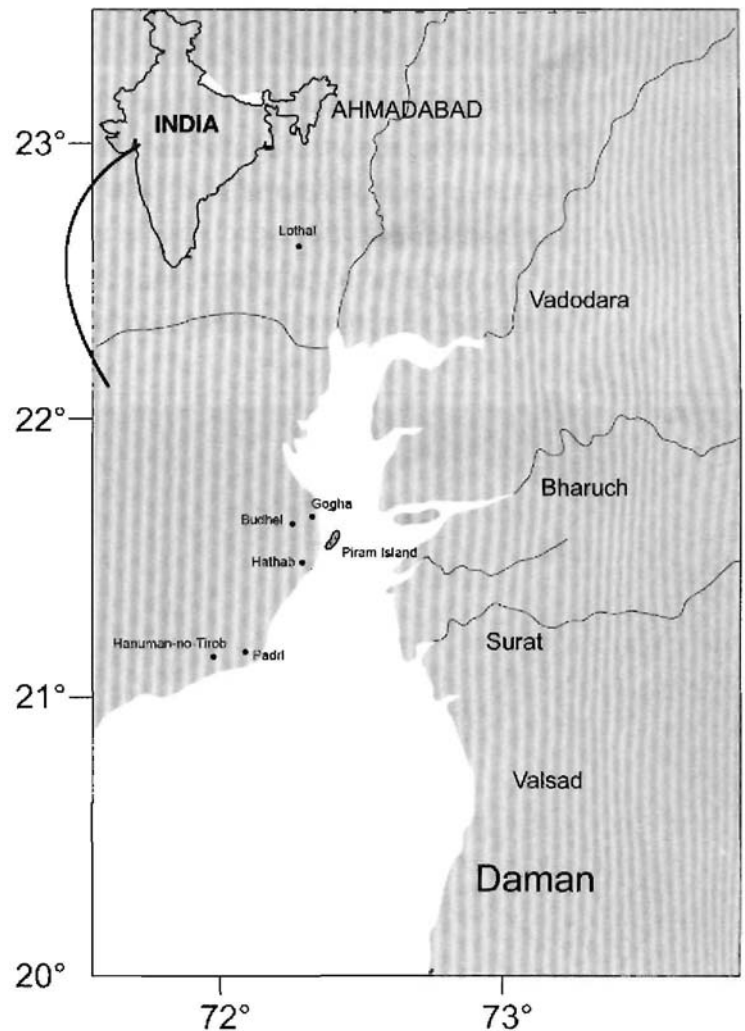


Fig. 1: Location of Piram Island on the west coast of Gulf of Khambat.





Fig. 2: Remains of walls in Cliff Section. Piram Island

The island is uninhabited except for a few personal who man the lighthouse. However, fishermen and occasionally a few tourists visit the island.

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (1st Century CE) has the following description of

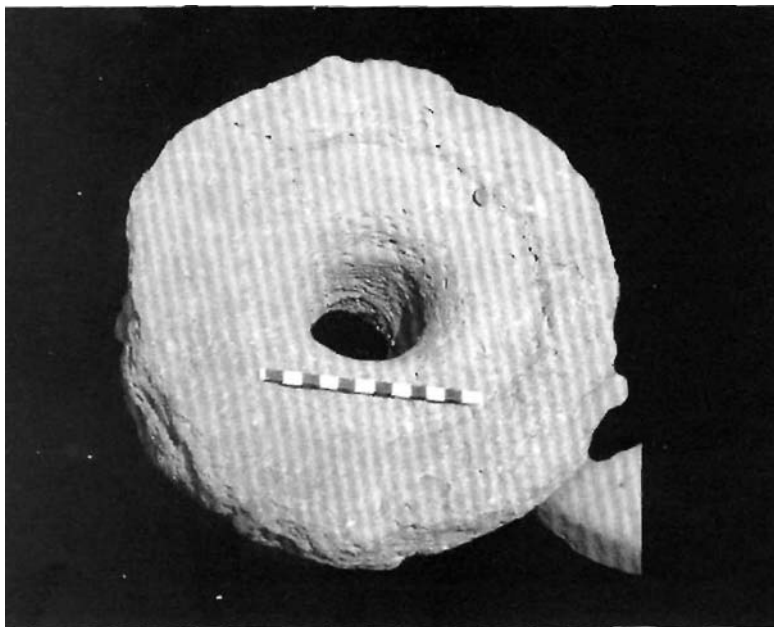


Fig. 3: Door jamb from Piram Island

the Gulf of Khambat and Piram Island, which is situated at the entrance of the Gulf (Schoff, 1912). "...there is another gulf exposed to the sea-waves, running up toward the north, at the mouth of which there is an island called *Baeones*; at its innermost part there is a great river called *Mais*. Those sailing to *Barygaza* pass across this gulf, which is three hundred stadia in width, leaving behind to their left the island just visible from their tops toward the east, straight to the very mouth of the river of *Barygaza*; and this river is called *Nammadus*" (Schoff 1992/95:).

*Baeones* has been identified with Piram Island (Schoff 1912/95). It is further mentioned in the text that to go up in the Gulf to approach the harbour of *Barygaza* the sailing direction should be on the right hand side of the island as the channel between mainland and the island get shallower and a few sand banks are exposed during low tide.

The Imperial Gazetteer of India (1908:149-51) gives an interesting description of the history of the Island. "Till the 14<sup>th</sup> century it would seem to have remained in the hands of Bariya Kolis. Then under their leader Mokharji, the Gohel Rajputs, who about a century and a half earlier migrated from Marwar to Gujarat, passed south from Ranpur near Dhandhuka and took Gogha and Piram. Strengthening himself in his island fortress, Mokharji became a great pirate chief; but his piracies were laid before Muhammad bin Tughlak, who was then in Gujarat quelling a revolt. Advancing in person he attacked Piram, slew Mokharji,



and took his fort. The island was then deserted, and an attempt to colonize and fortify it failed. The Hindu seamen of the Gulf of Cambay still cherish Mokharji's memory, seldom passing Piram without making him an offering."

Geologically, the island is dated between upper Miocene to Pliocene (Merh 1995). The basal conglomerate containing drifted mammalian bones and the mud-cracks in the clays, diagnostic of tidal flats, point to the deposition of Piram Beds in a tidal estuarine environment.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

Being situated close to the famous historical sites such as Hathab, Gopnath, Gogha and Vallabhi, the Island of Piram was bound to have great importance for maritime activities including piracy (Bell 1980). The island has served as a marker point for the navigation in the Gulf of Khambat. Recently an onshore and inter tidal zone exploration was undertaken along the coast of Gogha and Piram Island. A large number of stone anchors were found from the inter tidal zone of Gogha (Gaur 2007) along with Islamic glazed ware. The exploration around the island revealed that Piram was surrounded with a fort as large numbers of structures are exposed in cliff sections all along the coast. Perhaps these are the remains of the fort built by Mokharji in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century CE and used as safe shelter after pirating the ships passing through this area. The cliff sections yielded a large number of remains of walls and projections (Fig. 2). A large number of



Fig. 4: Fragment of sculpture Piram Island

stone artifacts were noticed in the inter tidal zone area. The largest among them are door jams (Fig. 3) numbering more than a dozen. They are circular in shape with a deep hole in the middle. These artifacts indicate that the fort had several gates all along the coast.



Fig. 5: Stone blocks used for fortification. Piram Island



Besides the remains of a fort, a few sculptures (Fig. 3) were also noticed on the western side of the island suggesting the remains of ancient temples in the island. The structures are made of small sized limestone blocks. In a few places large sized blocks were also used in the construction (Fig. 5) particularly for foundation of outer fortification.

Although this island is mentioned in early historic literature (particularly the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*) the archaeological exploration suggests that the island had a regular habitation for a short period between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. However, Piram Island was always considered an important strategic point and often rulers invaded this island. The navigation in the Gulf of Khambat has always been a great challenge to navigators because of the high tidal range (Indian Tide Table, 2008) and literary references suggest that the island was a marker point while navigating within the Gulf (Schoff 1912).

The remains of fortification around the island indicate that it was used for defense

purpose or used as safe hiding place as big boats or ships cannot be anchored close to the island, which reduces the chances of easy capturing of the island. Perhaps, this is the reason the island served as safe place for pirates for several centuries. The explorations did not reveal any stone anchor around the island as in the case of inter tidal zone of Gogha and Hathab where a large number of stone anchors have been found along with Islamic glazed ware. This indicates that the island does not have a good anchorage point and that the island never served as port or harbour but simply as marker point for the navigators in the Gulf and therefore became a haven for pirates.

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