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THE ORIGIN OF RUNNI-KOTE AND ITS HISTORY*

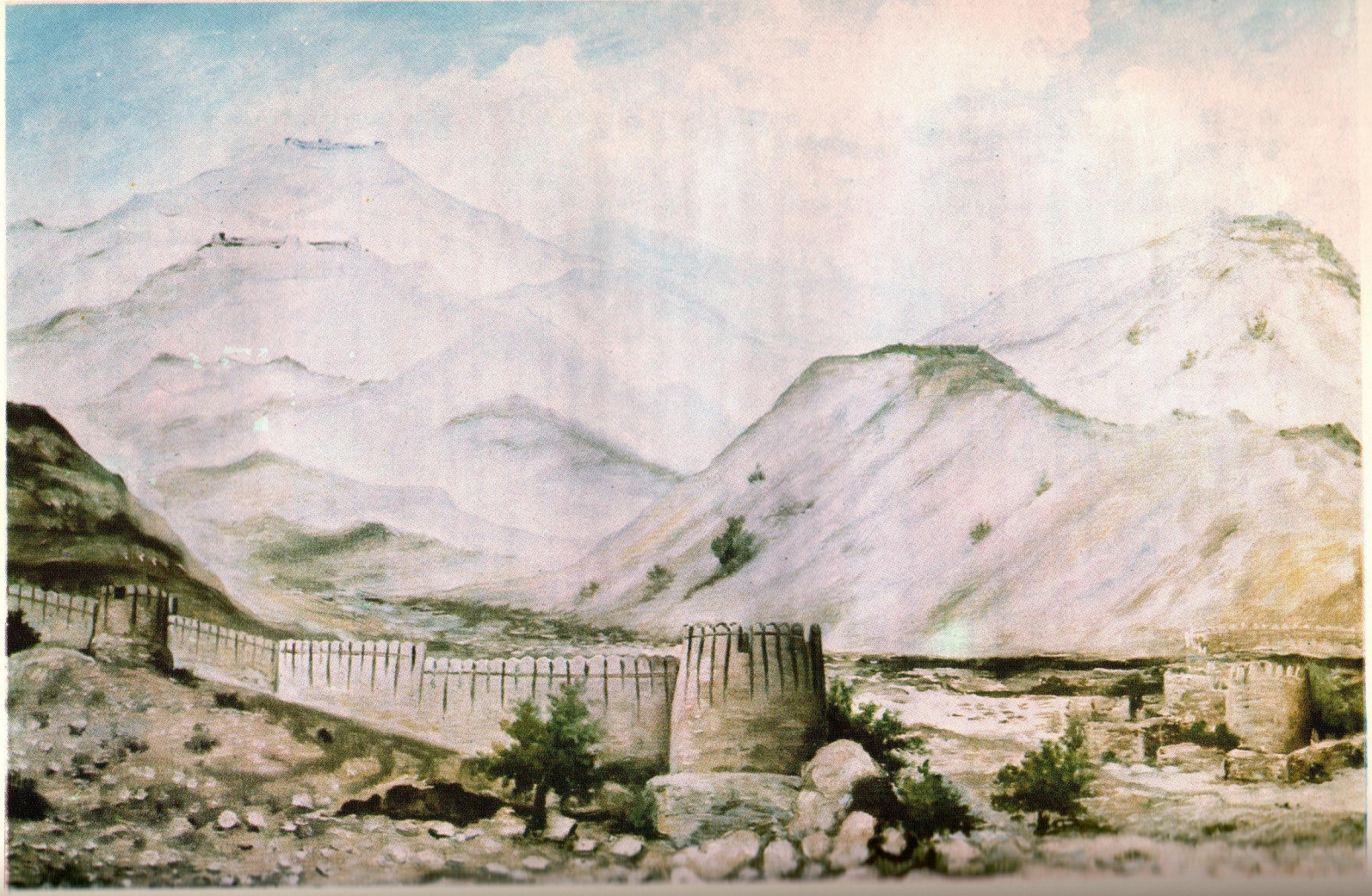
Some 20 years back, during the fiftees, I had opportunities to visit this great fort which led me to investigate its historical background and the circumstances of its foundation. The conclusions based on historical evidence and other available record were published in 1968.[1] Before I review the historical background, I would like to begin with a brief discussion of the origin of the popular name of this fort, viz. 'Runni-Kote'. 'Kote' obviously means a 'fort' but what is 'Runni'? This clarification is necessary because the fashion to speculate, instead of stating the facts, has for quite some time become popular with us since it is the easiest way to present 'original conclusions of far reaching consequences'! An example, par excellence, of such a speculation on record is about the origin of the name of 'Chaukhandi graves' around Karachi. It was claimed that these are the graves of an ancient tribe whose name was 'Chaukhandi'. It needed some knowledge of the Sindhi language and the Sindh tradition to understand that "Chaukhandi" means the 'four walls without any roof' within which the grave of a saint or any other important person in the graveyard is situated. On the analogy of speculation about 'Chaukhandi', someone had once argued that 'Rani-Kote' was built by a Greek or a Roman general whose name was 'Renon'. There was yet another good guess that the Fort was founded in the territory of an ancient tribe whose name was 'Ranni' and, hence the fort's name.

It is to be lamented that in the countries which have suffered colonial domination, and Pakistan is one of them, a sense of identity and independence of thought have not yet fully developed. There is a lurking tendency to this day, even in the field of scholarship, either to underrate what is 'local' or 'native', or to confirm its importance on the authority of a foreign source.

Origin of the Name

Both common sense and scientific approach require that the origin of an idea must be sought first in the society in which it has flourished,

* Runni-Kote is situated 18 miles south of Sann in Dadu district, Sind. This Paper was read in the Seminar held at the Fort and inaugurated by Lt. Gen. S. M. Abbasi, the Governor of Sind on 26 March. 1981.



and of a monument in the country in which it is located. The origin of the name 'Runni' is to be sought in Sindhi language to which it belongs. We find that it is not the word 'Runni' only, but there are a number of other words from the same root which have a common denominator of connotation signifying *a flow or course of water which is natural, but not man made.* These words fall into the following four categories:

(*i*) To the first category belong the two words *roonn* (رون) and *roonnī* (رونی) meaning a temporary flow of water, comparatively smallest in volume, from an opening underneath an embankment which is holding water—such as *banno* or *udd* in the field, or an embankment of a small water course or of a bigger canal or channel. Both *Roonn* and *Roonni* are the terms commonly used by farmers all over the country.

(*ii*) To the second category, belong the words *Runn* (رن) and *Runnī* (رنی), derived from the first category in their extended meaning. These two terms signify a bigger flow of water, and have been applied specifically to the courses of the non-perennial bigger hill torrents. Thus, we have Runn Paitiani, the course of the hill torrent which drains rain water from the catchment area below Jungshahi into the Gharo Creek. Then we have this *Runnī*, of the Runni Kote, which is a fairly large hill torrent, and takes rain waters from the catchment area of this part of the Khirthar range down into the Indus near the town of Sann.

(*iii*) In the third category are the two words *Reinn* (رین) and *Reinn-i* (رینی), which signify the course of a natural off-shoot channel of the river, of a perennial nature, which takes off a much bigger volume of water. Thus, in the long past, the Hakro river had its natural off-shoot of *Reinn-i* which took off somewhere in the southern tract of the present Rahimyar Khan district and the north-eastern part of the Sukkur district. The old bed of *Reinn-i* remains clearly marked through the Ubauro, Mirpur Mathelo and the Ghotki talukas of the Sukkur district. Beside this *Reinn-i* of the ancient Hakra, there was the middle deltaic *Reinn* branch of the Indus, which flowed through the southern part of the present Hyderabad district and, for more than three centuries (9th to middle of 12th A.H./16th to the middle of the 18th century) it had irrigated the whole of the Chachkān parganah[2] (S. E. of

the Tando Mohammad Khan taluka and the whole of the present Badin district) both before and during the Mughal period.

(*iv*) In the fourth category, fall the two terms *Runn* (رن) and *Raann* (ران) meaning the biggest course of water. Thus, we have *Bā-runn*, the biggest hill torrent which brings considerable volume of water from the Baluchistan plateau down into the Indus through the Kotri taluka of the Dadu district. Then we have *Mih-raan*, the time honoured name for the Indus with its biggest flow of water. Originally *Mahā-raan*, it was Persianised into *Mih-raan* during the political ascendency of the Sassanid Persia over Sind, from the 4th to the 6th century A.D.

Thus, the origin of the word *Runni*, within the whole range of this comparative terminology, signifying the flow or course of water, should make it clear beyond any doubt that *Runni* is not a foreign word or name, but is of Sindhian origin. Thus, 'Runni-Kote' would literally mean "The Fort on the Hill Torrent" or "The Hill Torrent Fort". This has been its *popular name* ever since the Fort was founded on this hill torrent, though the given name of the Fort was 'Ali-abad'. This takes us to its history which may now be briefly recounted.

The History

In Sindh, the Kalhora dynasty was supplanted by the Talpur Amirs with their victory in the battle of Halani in 1196/1782. The first important task the new rulers set for themselves was to safeguard the independence of Sind against external attacks which had weakened their predecessors. Two important steps were taken: to secure the borders of Sind by constructing a strategic defensive line of forts and fortresses and to build a stronghold deep into the interior of Sind to be able to take a final stand there against an invading enemy. The first phase of the construction plan was completed in 1204 A.H./1790, i.e. within a period of about 10 years, during which two fortresses on the sea front viz. Vikkur and Kotri (guarding the crossing to Kuchh), the two forts of Fatehgarh (or Nao Kote) and Islamgarh (Islamkote) and the fortress at Mithi on the southern front in the present Tharparkar district were completed. So far as the construction of a special stronghold was concerned, the Talpurs had learnt lesson from the mistake committed earlier by Mian Noor Mohammad Kalharo who had set his heart on the Fort of Umar-Kote as his last defence in case of an emergency. However, when Nadirshah overtook him there (on 29 Zulqa'dah 1152 A.H./1640 A.D.),

Mian Noor Mohammad had no alternative but to surrender because his rear was unsafe and he could not retreat into the territories of Kuchh and Marwar.

The planning and construction of the stronghold was entrusted to Nawwab Walimohammad Khan Laghari, an able military commander who also excelled in his knowledge of engineering. He chose this site (of Runni-Kote) which was also visited by the Amirs as it abounded in game and was an excellent place for hunting. The site had a natural hill ridge line all around it, on which the fortwall was conveniently raised. Water was available not only during the rainy season, but also from a spring in the bed of the Runni. Also there was the underground water which became available by digging wells. A sufficient supply of water could become available even in an exceptionally dry year.

The work on the construction of forts had started immediately after the Talpur Amirs had taken over in 1196/1782, and a number of forts and fortresses were completed as early as 1204 A. H./1790. Possibly, the preliminary survey, and the selection of this site, which was rich in game (the deer and the ibex) and was also visited by the Amirs, took place during this period. According to Mirza Qalich Beg,[3] Runni-Kote was constructed on the orders of the two senior rulers, Mir Karam Ali Khan and Mir Murad Ali Khan, *by about* 1812 A.D. which is equivalent to 1227 A.H. It was in this year that the elderly Mir Ghulam Ali Khan died and the next brother Mir Karam Ali Khan became the Seniormost Amir in his place. The approximate year given by Mirza Qalich Beg more or less coincides with 1228 A.H., the year of the Talpurs' attack and conquest of the Umar-Kote Fort which proved to be very vulnerable.[4] It would seem that after this event (1228 A.H.), construction work on Runni-Kote was seriously undertaken.

The planning and construction of the Fort is enthusiastically recorded by Mir Hasan Ali Khan (d. 1907) in his historical Sindhi Mathnavi, *Fatehnamo*. Says he:

> The well known Runni-Kote is a wonderful fort in the mountains, a monument left by my ancestors. The stone cutters worked with zeal like Farhad. It is all built in stone, with a number of ramparts on the fortwall which runs into many miles. Inside it was built a stronghold named 'Shergarh', and another citadel called 'Meeri' (the royal quarters). Its marvel is the hill torrent which has water in its section inside the fort, but not outside. On its entry into the fort

from the west and on its exit on the east, iron gates moulded out of hundreds of maunds of iron were erected (below the bridges over its bed), but the force of water bent them down. Because of the unsafe gates, the fort was not occupied on a permanent basis, though it could be used occasionally. According to the report, it cost rupees 17 lac to complete the construction.[5]

The conclusive evidence regarding the construction and completion of the fort is provided by the two compositions* of Ghulam Ali Mā'il (d. 1251 A. H.), a court poet of Mir Karam Ali Khan Talpur (6 Jamada-I 1227—6 Jamada-II 1244) whom he eulogises for the achievement. To sum up his references:

The First Composition

The fort was built on a high (ridge line of) mountain[1] with its circular foundation and vast environment[2]. It is an all stone construction, built on the stone.[3] It is a grand fort,[4] the like of which is neither in Rome nor Russia.[5] It is called Aliabad.[6] The construction work commenced in the year 1230 A. H.[7] (=1815 A. D.) Numerals in this paragraph refer to those in the following text:

۱- کردند طرح برسر کوهی فلک شکوه
۲- گردون بنا وسیع فضا
۳- سنگین بکوه آمد برسنگ این حصار
۴- عالی حصار
۵- بهر صفات محکمیش کی توان نمود
باشد به روم و روس کجا همچنین حصار
۶- بگرفته طرفه با 'علی آباد' اشتهار
۷- سال شروع این علی آباد نام حصن
بهر نشان نام شهان نکو شعار
فرمود بامراد چنین صبحدم خرد
"کرد از کرم، کرم علی آباد این حصار"

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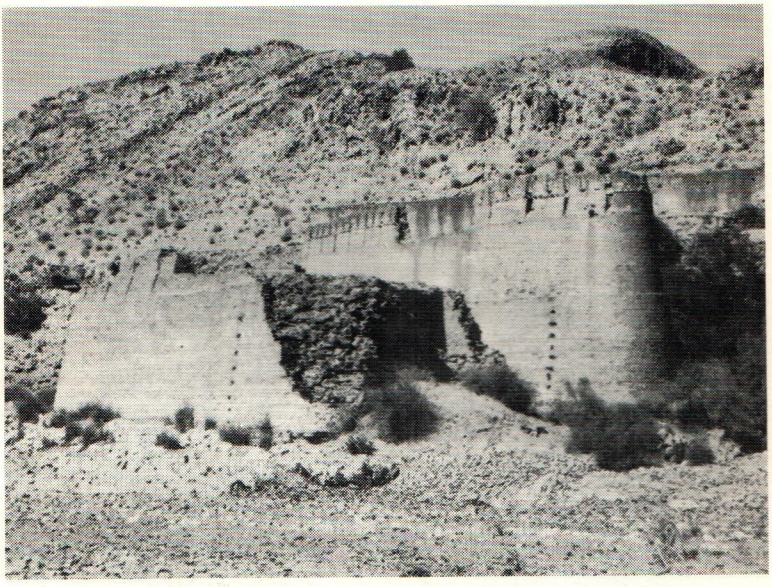
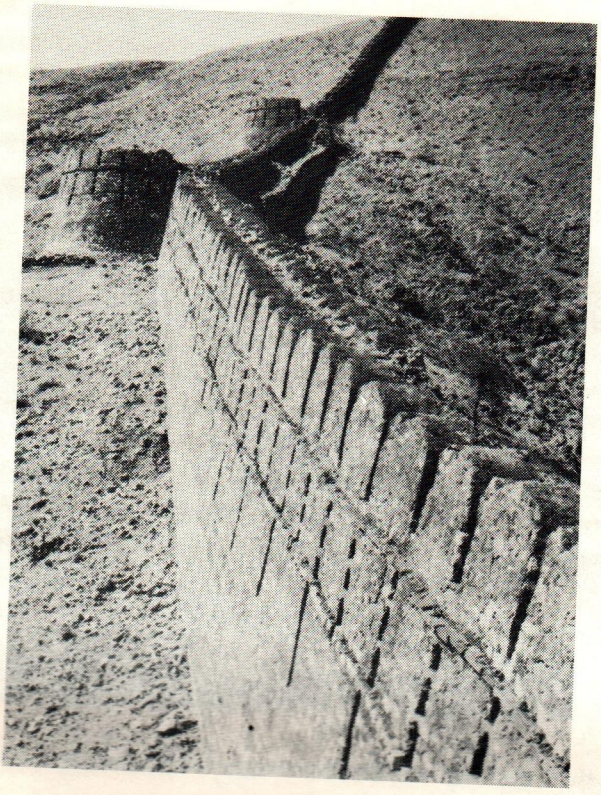
*The two compositions (*qit'āt*) are given in the manuscript copy of the poet's *bayāz* which is preserved in the Sindhi Adabi Board's Library, Jamshoro. These were also published (in defective text) by Husamuddin Rashidi in the Sindhi Adabi Board's Quarterly *Mehran*, March 1955, pp. 174-175.



Runni Kote: General View showing the fortification with bastion.



Runni Kote: Close up view of fortification.

The Second Composition

It is named Aliabad.[8] It is as high as sky, and as vast as earth.[9] It is perfect in construction, and towering in height.[10] Its year of completion is 1234 A. H. (=1819 A.D.).[11]

۸- علی آباد نام این حصن است

۹- آسمان رفعت و زمین وسعت

۱۰- باکمال متانت و رفعت

۱۱- گفت سال از ستایشش هاتف

"علی آباد به متین حصن است"

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Thus, it took 5 years, from 1230 to 1234 A. H. (1815-1819), to complete the fort.

The family records and the tradition of the Nawwabs of Tajpur,[6] the descendants of Nawwab Walimohammad Khan Leghari who had supervised the planning and construction of the Fort, also confirm this account of the construction of the fort. Only the gates with strong iron bars remained to be fixed underneath the bridges over the torrent bed, when Nawwab Walimohammad Khan was transferred to face Shah Shuja al-Mulk of Qandhar who had marched into Sind and occupied Shikarpur. Thereafter, these gates could not be satisfactorily fixed which made the fort vulnerable to attack, and even though canons were mounted on the ramparts of the two main gates, the fort was not rehabilitated as a stronghold during the remaining 25 years (1234-1259) of the Talpur rule.

Facts are sometimes stranger than fiction. When historical background for the founding of this huge fort is recounted, one almost begs for the question whether the Talpur Amirs of Sind had the vision and the resources to accomplish this stupendous task? With this question in mind, our good friend Col. A. Rashid, once the administrator of the Jinnah Medical Centre, Karachi, wrote an article suggesting foreign origin of this fort. The problem is that we have not yet fully appreciated the achievements of our own people under their own rulers prior to the British conquest. We have yet to read our history in its proper perspective, recognize the achievements of our own people, and give due importance to the statements of our own historians.

It is to be noted that the references in the two compositions of the contemporary poet Ghulam Ali Mā'il, the account of the Fort left by

Mir Hasan Ali Khan in his *Fatehnamo*, the family records and tradition of the direct descendants of Nawwab Walimohammad Khan Laghari, and the statement of Sindh's modern historian Mirza Qalich Beg are all unanimous on the founding of the Fort by the Talpur Amirs of Sind. Besides the written record, circumstantial evidence also amply confirms the founding of this Fort during the Talpur period. One simple fact to be noted is that the existence of this fort is neither mentioned by any of the earlier historians of Sind, nor by any of the historians and writers of the Kalhora period. Almost nothing escaped the keen eye and the inquiring mind of either Mir Muhammad Ma'sum among the earlier historians, or of the versatile genius Mir Alisher Qani' (d. 1203 A. H./1789) of the Kalhora period. In his *History of Sind*, Mir Ma'sum even did not miss to record some smaller 'wonders' of the Sibi district and its adjacent mountains. He knew Sind much better, and he could not have failed to mention this great 'wonder' that the Runni-Kote Fort is. Mir Ma'sum had actually seen more of the present Dadu district than any other area of Sind. He had accompanied Emperor Akbar's army led by Khan-i-Khanan (999/1000 A.H.—1590/1591 A. D.) on his conquest of Sind from Mirza Jani Beg Tarkhan.

As recorded by Mir Ma'sum himself, the royal army had halted and encamped at Sehwan, Unnarpur and Sann, and one whole monsoon season was actually spent at Sann.[7] Had this remarkable fort been there, it would not have escaped the attention of Khan-i-Khanan from purely military point of view, or of Mir Ma'sum from historical point of view.

A question for question's sake may also be raised whether the Talpur rulers had the resources to construct such a huge fort. Those who have studied the achievements of our people and their rulers, particularly so far as the construction of forts in any part of the country is concerned, will readily concede that this great fort is a living monument to the will and determination of our people and their rulers during the era of their independence before colonial domination. Not only this one fort was constructed, but a large number of other forts and fortresses were built during the Talpur period to safeguard the borders of Sind:

(*a*) Four fortresses were constructed on the sea front. These were Manhora near Karachi, Rato-Kote on the Gharo Creek (now under water), Vikkur (near Jati) and Kotri at the crossing of the creek to Kuchh (opposite Lakhpat).

(*b*) Forts and fortresses, 7 in number, were constructed to safeguard the southern border in the present Tharparkar district: these were Fatehgarh or Nao-Kote, the citadel of Diplo, the citadel of Singario, the citadel of Chelhar, the fortress of Mithi, the fort of Islamgarh or Islam-Kote, and the fortress of Nagarparkar.

(*c*) A number of forts and fortresses were constructed along the eastern border with Jodahpur and Jesalmer. Beginning from Mirpur Mathelo and ending in Nagarparker, this defence line had the following forts and fortresses:

1. Sutiyaro-Kote (in taluka Mirpur Mathelo).
2. Liyaro Kote (in Ubauro taluka) touching the boundary of the Rahimyar Khan district.
3. Fortress of Tanot (in Ubaoro taluka).
4. Fortress of Dangu (6 miles east of Ghotaharu).
5. Fort of Dingarh (16 miles north of Tanot).
6. Fortress of Gadhrro.
7. The stone fort of Shahgarh in Khuddi (25 miles east of Chhachhro).
8. Judey-jo-Kote (40 miles south of Shahgarh).
9. Fortress of Satti-Dera (on the present boundary lines between the Chhachhro and the Nagarparkar talukas).

Not only the Talpur Amirs of Sind during the period of their independence but also the Amirs of Bahawalpur had constructed a string of forts and fortresses beginning from Derawar and following a strategic line of defence along the old course of the Hakra river. Their far flung locations deep into the desert and their structure and military architecture are equally bewildering for the one who may judge this accomplishment by the standards and achievements of the Provincial P.W.D. departments during the colonial period.

There is no reason to justify the importance of Runni-Kote or any other monument, on the basis of antiquity or any mythical past for its existence. Monuments are not great only for their antiquity. Besides archaeological antiquity, their importance becomes more meaningful within the context of the known history of the people and the country to which they belong. Though this fort is comparatively younger in history, it is great in its design and execution. It deserves all attention because it is a remarkable landmark in our history in general, and in the military history of fortification in particular.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that the contemporary evidence

provided by the two chronograms composed by Ghulam Ali 'Mā'il' is conclusive to the effect that the construction work on this fort commenced in 1230 A. H. (1815 A. D.) and it was completed in 1234 A.H. (1819 A. D.). Equally reliable statements of Sindh's historians, Mir Hasan Ali Khan in his *Fatehnamo* and Mirza Qalich Beg in *Qadim Sindh*, and the family records and tradition of Nawwab Walimuhammad Khan unanimously confirm the fort having been founded during the Talpur period. The circumstantial evidence also fully supports this view. Firstly, all historical references to this Fort are either contemporary or subsequent to its foundation. There is no reference to its existence, either direct or indirect, in the annals of Sind history prior to its foundation during 1815-1819 A. D. Obviously there could be none since the fort did not exist earlier. Secondly, the policy of strengthening the defence of Sind vigorously pursued by the Talpur Amirs and their actual record of fort construction, leave no room for doubt that their government had both the will and the capacity to execute this policy successfully, beginning with the construction of more than 20 forts, fortresses and citadels along the borders and culminating in the completion of this great fort deep into the interior to be used as the last formidable stronghold against an invading enemy.

NOTES

1. In "*Kalam Faqir Nawwab Wali Mohammad Leghari,*" ed. N. A. Baloch and published by the Sindhi Adabi Board, Hyderabad Sind, 1968, pp. 82-85.

2. Confirm *Tarikh-i-Tahiri* (compiled by its author Sayyid Tahir Mohammad Nisyani of Thatta in 1030 A. H./1662), ed. N. A. Baloch and published by the Sindhi Adabi Board, 1384 A. H./1964 A. D., p. 77.

3. *Qadim Sindh* (in Sindhi), 1st ed., p. 59.

4. The fort of Umar-Kote with its entire jurisdiction had been given away by the last Kalhora ruler, Abdul Nabi, to the Raja of Jodahpur who had got Mir Bijar Khan Talpur murdered for him. Nawwab Walimohammad Khan was one of the leading commanders responsible for the storming of the Umarkote fort. As the fort stood on a sandy mound, deep trenches were easily dug underneath its foundations and parts of the fort-wall were brought down by explosive action.

5. Substance of a number of verses on the subject. The abridged version of *Fatehnamo*, published under the title *Sindh-jo-Shahnamo ya Kalhoran-ji Har* (Sindh Muslim Adabi Society, Hyderabad Sind, 1938, p. 92) gives only 15 verses.

6. The founding of the Fort being a remarkable event, it was embellished in the family tradition of Nawwab Walimohammad Khan. During my inquiries in the fiftees, it was confirmed by most eminent and well-informed members of the Nawwab family, viz. the late Nawwabs Gul Mohammad Khan, Shafi Mohammad Khan and Arz Mohammad Khan, all of whom were born in the second half of the last century and were thus nearer to the event of the founding of the fort by one hundred years.

7. *Tarikh-i-Sind*, Persian text ed. by Dr. U. M. Daudpota, Poona, 1938, p. 256.