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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Uteliya: Coincidence, Continuity, or Something Else?

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Not every journey is about finding something new; sometimes it is about noticing what has been there all along. Between the weathered walls and quiet lanes, past the lakes that catch the afternoon light, I found myself chasing a whisper of the past. This is not the story of what I uncovered, but of what I hoped to find, perhaps an echo carried in the breath of a village, resting gently atop its own untold history.

Introduction

> What would we discover in remaking these carvings with ancient tools, or in re-making houses in the way that is still practiced today in the village?

Lothal, near Saragwala village in Gujarat, is one of the Indus Valley Civilization's most significant sites, excavated by S. R. Rao from 1953 to 1964. Its name in Gujarati means 'mound of the dead.' Discoveries of sophisticated drainage, town planning, and a unique dockyard established it as a major Harappan settlement. This dockyard, a marvel of maritime architecture, is likely connected to the river Sabarmati and the Gulf of Khambhat, underscoring Lothal's importance as a trade hub.

Archaeological sites are often discovered on mounds formed by successive layers of settlement, usually near a water source. Intrigued by this, I used geospatial mapping and Google Earth to scan the villages around Lothal. A place named Uteliya, not more than 11 kilometers southwest of Lothal, caught my eye. It is situated near the Bhogavo river, has two lakes, and features a centuries-old heritage palace located at the highest point of the village mound. This combination of features; a mound, proximity to water, and closeness to a major Harappan site, this, a mound, proximity to water, and closeness to a major Harappan site, sparked my curiosity.

On The Road to Uteliya

I was excited by the possibility that Uteliya could be an unrecorded archaeological site. Basic research revealed that while no academic work had been done, travellers visiting Lothal had stayed in the Uteliya palace and blogged about it. The fact that a centuries-old palace stood on a mound so near Lothal was a compelling reason to explore.

My colleague and I set out for Uteliya. The journey itself was a lesson in the village's relative isolation. After a confusing start at a bustling bus depot where the Gujarati signboards were a challenge for me, a Maithili speaker from Jharkhand, we gave up on public transport and booked a cab. The hour-and-a-half drive took us through paddy fields, finally leading us down a concrete road to the village entrance. We had arrived.

Walking the Lanes of Uteliya: Between History & Coincidence

Uteliya is a small, quiet village. When we arrived in the late afternoon, most villagers were indoors, escaping the heat. A few elders sat outside, their curious gazes following us as we made our way toward the palace. The lanes were muddy, and we navigated them carefully. The village presented a blend of old and new. Ancient houses, made of burnt bricks and covered with mud, stood alongside modern constructions. Their doors were heavy wooden planks, studded with large nails. One of the most striking features was the sloping roofs with projecting wooden balconies, showcasing intricate railings, an example of local creativity.

Behind the main Uteliya Palace, we found a crumbling mud house said to be over a century old. Focussing on the palace structure itself, we spotted a symbol closely resembling the 'Swastika,' a motif found on seals from Harappan sites like Lothal, where it held ritualistic and religious significance.

While exploring the lanes around the palace, a particular wooden door drew our attention. Though aged, it was adorned with carvings of dots and circles, motifs strikingly similar to those found on Harappan seals. The resemblance was surprising, prompting us to wonder: was this a lingering artistic tradition passed down through millennia, or merely a coincidence? This pattern of wood-carvings and symbols appeared on shafts above doorways of other houses as well, not just in Uteliya but in other villages around Lothal. It makes you question if the craft was a coincidence or a legacy passed down through generations.

Looking at the carved doors and mud houses of Uteliya, I was struck in awe by the labor and imagination that had gone into their creation. Each balcony rail, each wooden shaft above a door, bears witness to hands shaping material into meaning. To comprehend such labor is not merely to consider what is left behind, but to inquire as to how it could have been produced, and what skill, tools, and decisions informed its production. Many of the things we learn about Harappan bead-making, for example, are picked up from learning about ancient drilling and polishing methods at Khambhat; experiments with ancient kilns have also demonstrated how potters would have controlled firing thousands of years ago, and reconstructions of coin-striking show how metals were treated in subsequent centuries.

Maybe, similarly, the work of craftsmen in Gujarat today, for example, the Dhingda artisans famous for woodwork and mud construction, may one day be examined to determine how skills and patterns have survived or changed over the years. Archaeologists tend to try such methods themselves by constructing, carving, firing, and several more to observe what they could tell us about the past. But it is all hypothesis in archaeology, subject to change as new understanding appears. This experimental archaeology is not attempting to discover definitive answers but to test possibilities through practice. In a site like Uteliya, where structures and signs reflect Harappan patterns, such testing may reveal new paths of thought. What would we discover in remaking these carvings with ancient tools, or in re-making houses in the way that is still practiced today in the village? Uteliya proposes that the past is not only buried underground, but also borne in techniques which can still be touched, tried, and tested.

Leaving with More to Wonder

Tired from our walk, we headed toward the village lake. The atmosphere was calm and quiet, a stark contrast to the city we had left behind. Village women were gathered at the water's edge, washing clothes with wooden bats, an age-old technique.

I tried to speak with them about the lake, but our conversation was brief. They were busy with their chores and spoke Gujarati, which limited our interaction. We sat by the water for a long while, the breeze carrying with it the questions that had brought me here. Was Uteliya a forgotten part of the Harappan civilization? Or was it simply a village where people lived their lives, unknowingly echoing ancient patterns?

Eventually, we navigated the labyrinth of small lanes and found our way out of the village. The trip ended without any material evidence to support my initial hypothesis. I left Uteliya with no seals, no pottery shards, no definitive proof, but only a collection of images and moments. The woodcarvings, the ancient mud houses, the palace standing for over 300 years, and the swastika symbol all stirred my thoughts. Evidence may have eluded me, but not the feeling of standing where others once stood, perhaps thousands of years ago.

The journey was never about finding easy answers, but about learning to see the questions more clearly. Uteliya's story remains unwritten, its truths still hidden beneath the soil. And maybe that's the real question: how many other Uteliyas lie quietly across our landscape, carrying their histories in silence, waiting for the earth to finally speak?

Keywords heritage
ethnoarchaeology

Country India

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. UTELIYA FROM GOOGLE EARTH IMAGERY

FIG 2. THE TERRAIN (MOUND-LIKE STRUCTURE) ON WHICH UTELIYA IS LOCATED. BY GOOGLE EARTH.

FIG 3. SIGNBOARD IN GUJARATI, STATING UTELIYA. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 4. A MUD HOUSE WITH A BROKEN WOODEN PROJECTING BALCONY. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 5. A MUD HOUSE WITH A RATHER WELL-BUILT WOODEN PROJECTED BALCONY. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 6. A BROKEN MUD HOUSE BEHIND THE UTELIYA PALACE. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 7. A SYMBOL OF ‘SWASTIKA’ AS FOUND IN HARAPPAN SEALS ON TOP OF THE UTELIYA PALACE STRUCTURE. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

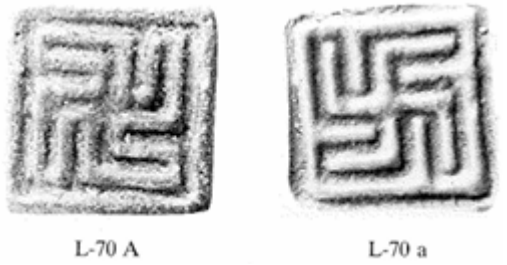

FIG 8. A SEAL AND SEALING DEPICTING THE ‘SWASTIKA’ SYMBOL

FIG 9. A DOOR OF THE UTELIYA PALACE. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

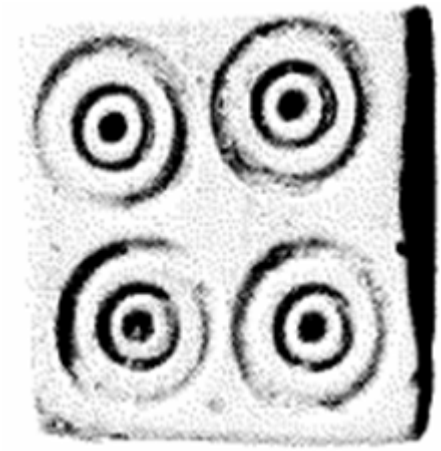

FIG 10. K-58 A

FIG 11. IMAGE SHOWING THE ENTRANCE OF A HOUSE IN UTELIYA. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 12. IMAGE SHOWING THE ZOOMED PICTURE OF THE WOODEN SHAFT OVER THE ENTRANCE DOOR. PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 13. H-854 C

FIG 14. H-843 B

FIG 15. UTELIYA KA TALAAB (LAKE OF UTELIYA). PHOTO BY ANSHIKA SINGH (2025)

FIG 16.

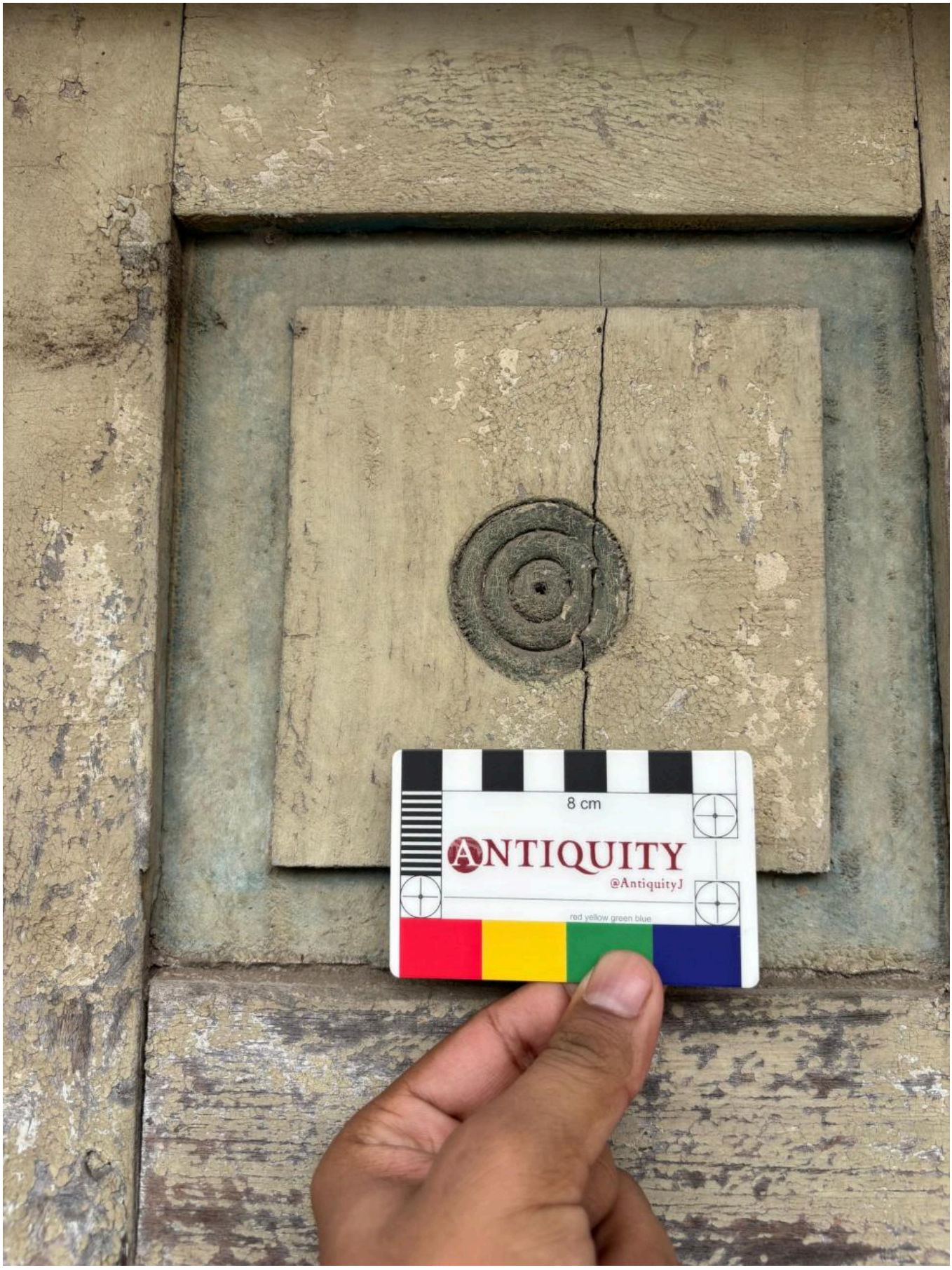

FIG 17.

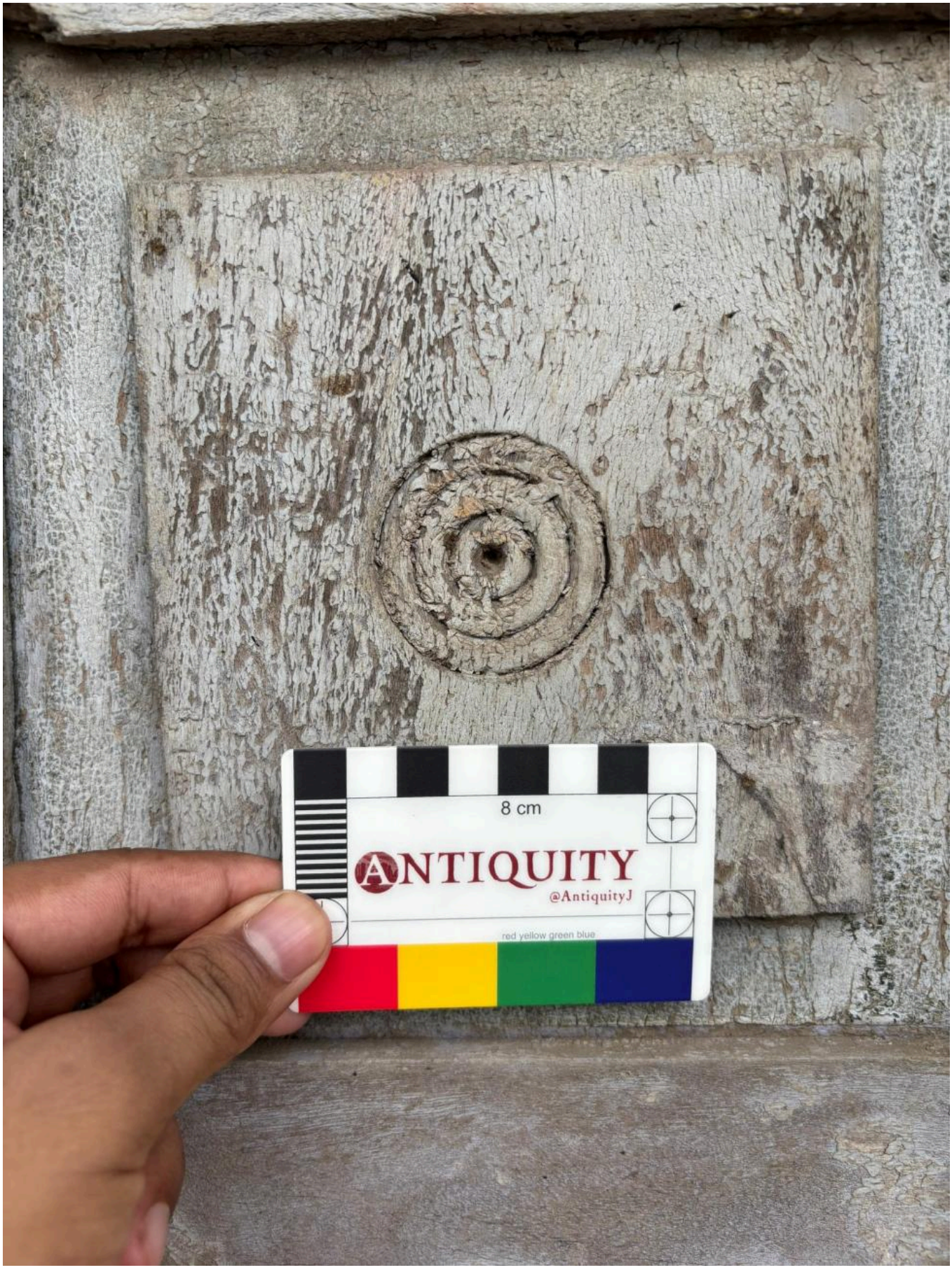

FIG 18.