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STONE SCULPTURES
FROM THE PROTOHISTORIC HELMAND CIVILIZATION,
AFGHANISTAN

In 1970-71 while based in Kabul, Afghanistan for our lower Helmand-Sistan archaeological project (Dales 1972 and 1977; Dales and Flam 1969), a prominent tribal leader and Deputy to Parliament from Sistan, showed us his personal collection of art objects. The collection, consisting of excellent examples of Parthian, Sassanian and Seleucid coins, seals, and gem stones as well as protohistoric bronze stamp seals, included to our surprise a small sculptured stone head (Pl. I, upper). The objects came, he said, from the environs of his village of Khwabgah, south of the provincial administrative town of Zaranj.

He most generously allowed us to photograph and draw the artifacts. Asked more specifically where the stone head was found, the gentleman stated that "his people" lived on both sides of the Afghan-Iran Sistan border, that some of them worked for the Italian expedition at Shahr-i Sokhta on the Iranian side and, as we already knew, some worked for us at Nad-i Ali on the Afghan side. The exact provenience then of the sculpture is uncertain but its general origin in the Sistan borderland region seems beyond doubt.

Our immediate reaction upon seeing the head, given the suspicious nature of the antiquities market in Afghanistan at the time, was that this was possibly a modern copy of the male head from Mundigak displayed in the Kabul Museum (Casal 1961). But the undoubted authenticity of the many other artifacts in the collection spoke for the genuineness of the head as well. And furthermore, the Mundigak head was hardly a prime item in the international art market as was, for example, Gandharan sculpture.

The Sistan head was carved from a creamy buff soft stone characterized by many round pits in the white veins that run through the stone matrix.

Its height is 9.4 centimeters, its width between the outer edges of the ears is 6.5 centimeters, and the break at the neck is 6.5 centimeters wide and 3.8 centimeters from the front to the back of the neck.

The dominant features of the sculpture are the huge ears with two shallow curved channels in each, the hair arranged neatly on top of the head with a prominent central crease, and the fillet that was fastened or tied so that its ends fall like two flat bands down the backside of the head. On each side of the fillet bands is a pronounced swelling suggesting that a considerable bulk of the hair fell at least to the nape of the neck and possibly to the shoulders or lower. On each side of the head, above the ears, is a hemispherical projection, like a small flap, projecting upwards from the fillet. Above the forehead is a triangular indentation representing either the frontal parting of the hair or more probably a decoration attached to the fillet.

The long thin face has an unusually high, flat forehead. The eyes appear to have been scratched in rather than carved and the pupils are shallow, rather carelessly dug-out depressions. The eyebrows are indicated by single thin arching scratched lines that join at the top of the nose. Beneath each eye is a shallow horizontal line that sets-off the cheek bone. The nose is slightly battered but very little of the tip appears to be missing. A sharply carved horizontal line separates the bottom of the nose from the mouth. The lips, especially when viewed from the side, are small and rather dainty in comparison with the other natural features of the head. They are tense, as if tightly closed, and the mouth opening is indicated by a sharply incised horizontal depression.

Comparison with the Mundigak head shows some remarkably close parallels (Pl. I). Casal's original publication of the head (1961: Plates XLIII-XLIV; pages 76 and 255) was unusually brief, considering the potential importance of the artifact, consisting of three photographs (the lighting and focus of which obscure some important details) and a few sentences of description. He described the stone as "calcaire blanc", and the maximum preserved height as about ten centimeters. He observed that the head shows "surtout par la coiffure, un apparemment certain avec la Vallée de l'Indus".

This suggestion of a relationship between the Mundigak and Mohenjo Daro sculptures received tacit acceptance from most other scholars but no detailed study of the possible relationships has been made. Recent books on the archeology of the region have treated the subject very summarily. For example, W. Fairervis (1975: 133) states only that "The head is distinguished by a hairband dropped in the back that is familiar in style to one known from Mohenjo Daro". The Allchins in their most recent book (1982: 134) offer the laconic and enigmatic statement that "This

piece has a certain relationship to the celebrated priest-king of Mohenjodaro even if the relationship is not a direct one».

In an article on the chronology of the Afghan-Indus region (1966: 273) I overstated the matter by claiming that the Mundigak sculpture represented "the most spectacular parallel between Mundigak and the Indus Valley". Sir Mortimer Wheeler was quick to take issue with this, and with Casal's original suggestion of stylistic connections, in stating that the head "seems to me to bear no significant resemblance to the Mohenjodaro sculptures" (1968: page 89, note 2).

Again in 1974 I had an opportunity to discuss the Mundigak head in an article surveying the early arts of Turkestan, Baluchistan, and the Indus Valley (Mellink and Filip: page 179, Plates 94a and b) in which were published two new photographs of the Mundigak head taken by me in the Kabul Museum. There I spoke in a more tempered tone about the Mundigak head. While saying that it is the "single-most spectacular artistic artifact" from Mundigak, and that it has certain iconographic details that point to Mohenjo Daro, "the question of possible influences is still unresolved".

Practical circumstances and events diverted our interests from the Mundigak and Sistan heads until the 1979 Berlin Conference on South Asian Archaeology. There a paper by C. Jarrige and M. Tosi on the natural resources of Mundigak (1981: 131-132, Fig. 5) included mention of the Mundigak head. It is described there as of "grey limestone" and preserved to a height of 9.5 centimeters. No mention is made of any possible connections with the Indus civilization but the authors do compare it with "a similar specimen, much smaller in size (3.5 cm. tall)" that was found in 1977 of the surface of a very small mound, Tepe Chah-i Torogh, located about 15 km south of Shahr-i Sokhta in Iranian Sistan. A very summary sketch of the front, rear, and right side of the head (*ibid.*, Fig. 5) shows that it is strikingly similar to both the Mundigak and the Afghan Sistan heads (our Pl. IIa).

The grey limestone with a characteristic granite-like appearance, is commonly used in Sistan according to Tosi (1968: Fig. 88) for the manufacture of vases, whorls, and small animal figurines but is present at Mundigak only with the sculptured head.

Stylistically, the Iranian Sistan example has the same type of hairdo and fillet as the other two heads except that the fillet ends are represented by only a single raised band at the back of the head. It also has the same style of large ears, but only in outline, and a small lipped horizontal mouth. The tiny size of the sculpture probably accounts for the lack of more specific details but overall the resemblance to the other two heads is unmistakable. Jarrige and Tosi state that the techniques and morphological

characters of the Mundigak and Iranian Sistan heads are «strikingly similar and leave little doubts that their close iconography results from chronological contemporaneity and stylistic convergence».

Given now the existence of three closely related sculptured heads from the southern Afghanistan–Sistan region, we are certainly no longer dealing with an anomaly in the Mundigak head. Rather we have indications of an artistic sculptural «tradition» within the Helmand civilization (Tosi 1977) stretching from Sistan to Mundigak. Tosi and his colleagues have described in detail questions relating to the natural locations of raw materials, their distributions within the Helmand civilization, and the other cultural and economic interactions within and without this region during the fourth and third millennia B. C. (Tosi 1979; Mariani 1981; Ciarla 1981; Bulgarelli 1981; Biscione 1981). The presence of a common sculptural tradition within the Helmand civilization is thus not unexpected and is now confirmed by the knowledge of these three male heads. Beyond the importance of their existence there is the problem of their dating. The Mundigak head was attributed by Casal, on circumstantial evidence, to his Period IV3 which he regarded as overlapping at least the early phase of the mature Indus civilization. The Iranian Sistan head is dated by the associated pottery to Period IV of Shahr-i Sokhta, which according to Biscione (1974: 142–144) makes it roughly contemporaneous with the Mundigak head. I, and others, had earlier maintained that Mundigak IV came to an end before the mature phase of the Indus civilization (Dales 1966 and 1973; Meadow 1973), but that view is apparently now incorrect. Jim Shaffer in his excellent study of the chronology of Afghanistan (1978) also had noted the break in settlement occupation in Southern Afghanistan, Sistan, and the Quetta Valley following Period IV at Mundigak. This hiatus in cultural development Shaffer stated (p. 112) “seems to be contemporary with the development of the Mature Harappan culture in the Indus Valley”. Subsequently, Shaffer has had the opportunity to review completely the relative chronologies of these regions for his contribution to the forthcoming revised edition of R. Ehrich’s *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology* (1966). He is now convinced, especially by the overwhelming dating evidence from the Italian scholar’s work at Shahr-i Sokhta, that Mundigak IV is at least partially contemporaneous with the Mature Indus civilization (personal communication).

The contemporaneity of Mundigak IV and the Mature Indus period, if only partial, makes comparisons between Mundigak and Mohenjo Daro at least plausible. But there has been a pitfall in comparing the sculptures in that attention is usually focused only on the so-called “priest-king” bust at Mohenjo Daro. One excuse for this is that the Mohenjo Daro sculptures have not been published in entirety and those few selected pieces

that have been published have not been adequately described. The six examples of human male sculpture published by Marshall (1931: Pls. XCVIII-XC) do not represent the entire collection from the site. On display in the Mohenjo Daro Museum are other pieces, such as one of coarse brown stone (Pl. I**b**) that is very different from the other published limestone examples.

Viewing all the examples together in the Museum conveys a strong impression of stylistic diversity. Thus when attempting to compare other sculpture with Mohenjo Daro, the examples other than the "priest-king" must be included.

Until such time as a complete study of all the Mohenjo Daro sculptures is made, only tentative observations can be offered. The iconographic and stylistic details common to the Afghanistan and one or another of the Mohenjo Daro sculptures are:

1. the fillet descending in two flat bands at the back of the head, and having possibly an ornamentation in front
2. the distinctive rendering of the ears
3. the taut, sharply incised horizontal mouth
4. the smaller than life size scale

Furthermore, Mohenjo Daro is the only Indus site to yield such sculpture (leaving aside the problematic miniature male torsos from Harappa). Three dimensional stone sculpture can hardly be an isolated occurrence in a culture. Familiarity with the peculiarities of working stone, as opposed to the more simple modelling of clay, and the development of metal and stone tools to accomplish the work, require considerable experimentation and cumulative experience. The sharing of such knowledge between two closely positioned cultural centers seems almost essential given the relative scarcity of stone sculptures in this region. Whether there was a common cultural or other need for such sculpture in both Mohenjo Daro and the Helmand civilization is another question that probably can never be answered.

In summary, the Mundigak head can no longer be dismissed as just an anomaly. The two similar heads from Sistan suggest a standardized sculptural tradition within the Helmand civilization. The question of relationships with the several different stylistic practices at Mohenjo Daro requires first the detailed study and publication of those examples.

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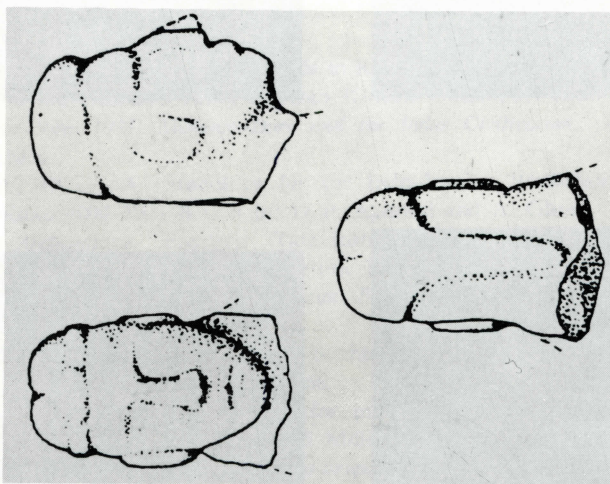
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Upper Row: Reportedly from Afghan Sistan - Lower Row: From Mundigak, Period IV,³.



b) Small coarse brown stone head in the Mohenjo Daro Museum.



a) Sketch of stone head from Iranian Sistan (from Jarrige and Tosi 1981).