The distribution and role of Harappan ‘headdress’ figurines and Harappan socio-political organisation.

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Abstract

This discussion paper summarises the known geographic distribution of the small anthropomorphic terracotta female figurines which were previously misleadingly often described as ‘Mother Goddesses’. It reviews published information on the distribution of these ‘headdress’ figurines, concluding that they are characteristic of a core Indus Valley Civilisation around the major Indus River urban centres of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, and are absent at the fringes and rare to absent in between. A review of published information on site distribution and possible roles attributed to these and other figurines concludes that rather than being fertility symbols or images of deities, their most likely use was as initiation figurines to socialise, train and educate children and young adults: a method of exercising power and social control by a ruling elite which was absent from the cities and towns. It is proposed that the socio-political structure for the Indus Valley Civilisation was similar to 1st millennium CE Saxon England: artisanal/mercantile cities from which the ruling and religious elites were absent, living at dispersed, smaller sites analogous to Saxon aristocratic estates and monasteries. Further work should be undertaken to find and identify such sites. Finally, the evidence suggests that the ruling classes were dominated by a powerful female (or female-gender) elite.

Introduction

The Indus Valley Civilisation existed approximately contemporaneously with the three other great riverine civilisations of the ‘ancient’ world: Mesopotamia along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, Egypt along the Nile, and Xia and Shang Dynasty China on the Yellow River. By its mature phase (2600-1900 BCE) it was by far the largest of these and covered an area of 1.3 million km$^2$ (Fig. 1) and possible as much as 3.1 million km$^2$, centred on the alluvial Indus and (the now dry) Ghaggar-Hakra-Saraswati River valley, with a wide-ranging trade network, both maritime to the Mesopotamian civilisations of the Persian Gulf and overland to Afghanistan in the west and Gujarat in the east, integrating this huge area (Coningham and Young 2015, p. 177-178, 211, fig. 6.27; Scarre and Fagan 2016, p. 135-145).

The mature phase Indus Civilisation (Fig. 1) comprised five significant sites: the two large cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa and three smaller cities, some 100 small towns and more than 1000 possible small village settlements (Coningham and Young 2015, p. 183-4, fig. 6.2, p. 200). Total population size was probably around 5 million (Gelderloos 2017, p. 93).
Kenoyer (2006, p. 31-33), Coningham and Young (2015, p. 182-183, 204, 238-9) and Scarre & Fagan (2016, p. 145-148) review the current state of knowledge about the mature phase Indus. Nothing is known about social, political or religious organisation and beliefs as the script remains undeciphered and there are no images commemorating rulers, leaders or priests, and no evidence of a military. While everything points to a common ideology and a shared set of norms and values, there are no identifiable temples or palaces, no monuments, no elite dwellings, no ‘royal’ graves; city dwellings are unpretentious ‘middle class’ standardised buildings. City dwellers appear to have been traders and artisans.

Recent research and re-analysis of previous work (Coningham and Young 2015, p. 235-7; Gelderoos 2017, p. 94, 135; Kenoyer 1997, p. 263: 2006, p. 31-32) has not led to any one model of socio-political-religious organisation, with various hypothetical alternatives proposed:

1. one single state,
2. multiple ‘domains’ or city states,
3. a decentralised egalitarian society,
4. a society run by changing assemblies of (possibly competing) inhabitants,
5. a stateless purely mercantile society.

This has led to recent proposals that the Indus does not fit models developed for the Near East and eastern Mediterranean, and therefore a new model and explanation for the Indus needs to be developed (Coningham & Young 2015:237; Shaffer in Wenke & Oszewski 2007:425).

**Indus figurines**

Indus terracotta figurines vary in size and appearance and have been found in different contexts and locations throughout the Indus region. A wide variety of zoomorphic, anthropomorphic,
composite and, to a lesser extent, male-form figurines \(^1\) have been commonly found (Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 491-519; Kenoyer 1998, p. 127-137) and figurines comprise the ‘most varied and numerous class of artistic subjects of the Indus Civilisation’ (Ardeleneanu-Jansen 2002, p. 205). While zoomorphic figurines dominate the Indus corpus (Insoll 2017, p. 4), the subject of this paper are the small (generally under 20cm high) anthropomorphic terracotta figurines of the female form in the past misleadingly described as ‘Mother Goddess’ fertility-deities (Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 510). The idea that they are a fertility deity or symbol (Kenoyer 1998, p. 132) or ‘Mother Goddess’ has been extensively challenged by Clark (2005; 2007a; 2007b, p. 533-44) and more generally discredited \(^2\). Ardeleneanu-Jansen (1992, p. 6) and Biagi (2004, p. 24) note that ‘headdress’ figurines are relatively rare, but of great interest because of the insights they provide. While the approach of focussing on only one type of figurine has its critics (Meskell 2017, p. 20-21), it has the merit of eliminating the distraction of overwhelming and often extraneous information and allows for substantive comparison, looking for a patterning, rather than narrow contextualisation (Lesure 2017, p. 37). Lesure (2011, p. 44, 208) notes that both contextualist and universalist principles can be applied together in a ‘holistic’ archaeology.

A good example of this type of figurine is the Nicholson Museum figure (Fig. 2) dated 2500-1750 BCE. It has a fan-shaped headdress style common from the late mature Harappan period, 2200-1900 BCE (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003, p. 391-2). There is a prominent pair of cups either side of the head. The headdress was probably originally painted black or smudged with burning oil smoke. There is a triple-strand choker with pendant beads and a triple-strand necklace with a disk-shaped pendant. Other than these adornments, the figure is naked. The figurine comprises only the head and upper torso.

Marshall (in Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 494) reports that these ‘headdress’ figurines are very different to those of adjacent contemporaneous civilisations in Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt and Afghanistan, and proposes that this implies a very different societal organisation and culture to those adjacent civilisations. Clark (2007b, p. 522, 537, 539-40) and Clark and Kenoyer (2017, p. 499) consider that this unique style of figurine most likely developed independently and contemporaneously in Mesopotamia, although During Caspers (1994, p. 186-190) suggests the 3-flower headdress style may have originated in ancient Sumer in southern Mesopotamia. This is supported by Suter’s observation (2007, p. 317, 331-32) that statues of powerful Mesopotamian ‘high priestesses’ of this same period also display unique and elaborate headdresses.

Of the 1000 or so identified Indus sites, only 97 have been excavated to any extent (Singh 2008, p. 137) and most excavation has occurred in the five cities. Of these, only Harappa and Mohenjo-daro have yielded significant numbers of ‘headdress’ figurines (Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 493, 511), i.e. the vast majority of figurines have been found from these two core sites of the Indus River alluvial plain (Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 511). Apart from these standing formal ‘headdress’ figurines, other female-form figurines from some sites engage in domestic or other activities and holding/breastfeeding children (see below).

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\(^1\) This is a general pattern: Hamilton (1996, p. 285) and Ucko (1962, p. 40), amongst others, note the widespread small number of male figurines worldwide.

\(^2\) While the widespread ‘Mother Goddess’ fertility-deity characterisation has been widely discredited (e.g. Meskell 2017, p. 21; Lesure 2011, p. 11-12, 158, 204-5; Lesure 2017, p. 37; Ucko 1962, p. 47), there remains the view that worship of the ‘Mother Goddess’ continued after the Indus Civilisation was supposedly subsumed by invading Aryan peoples, manifesting itself in popular worship of that deity in the Hindu religious pantheon (Gelderloos 2017, p. 117; Lesure 2011, p. 12).
These ‘headdress’ figurines appear to have originated from crudely-modeled 7th millennium BCE unbacked clay figurines found in the Neolithic settlement of Mehrgarh in Baluchistan (Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 36-7; Jarrige 1997, fig. 1). Lesure (2011, p. 20-21, fig. 6) notes a ‘halo’ of Neolithic and Chalcolithic female-form figurines around the Fertile Crescent which show common formats, traits and themes, of which Mehrgarh is at the eastern extremity. Similarities to the figurines from Iran and Turkmenistan are striking.

Biagi (2004, p. 24-5) refers to evidence of the almost continuous typological evolution from these oldest types through composite, seated figurines at around 4000 BCE which show stylised faces, jewellery and breasts to the ‘headdress’-type female-format figurines seen in Fig. 2. By around 3000 BCE, figurines in Bronze Age Mehrgarh (Ardeleneanu-Jansen 2002, p. 206-7) had evolved into delicately-modeled, coiffured, sitting female-form figures in fired terracotta (Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 39). Ardeleneanu-Jansen (2002, p. 206-7) also notes that just before the Harappan Indus culture appears in the 3rd millennium BCE, these figures change to a standing style with more diverse jewellery and headdress assemblages (Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 40; Jarrige 1997, fig. 2), and that this style and ceramic technology is then adopted by the Indus.

The following Table reviews finds from mature phase Indus sites at which significant excavations have been undertaken (e.g. Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 510-11). See Fig. 1 for locations.

| 1. Indus River alluvial plain | Figurines are generally complex with various adornments (flowers, jewellery, belts) and fan-shaped headdresses, usually standing or sitting; most with breasts, some with obvious genitalia. These are the classic ‘headdress’ figurines previously described as the ‘Mother Goddess’. | Clark 2005, figs. 2 and 4; Clark and Kenoyer 2017, figs. 22.4, 22.5; Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 114, 116; Kenoyer 1998, figs. 7.20, 7.23; Clark 2005; Clark 2007a. |
| Harappa | | |

Figure 2. Terracotta female figure from Harappa, Pakistan, 2500-1750 BC. Nicholson Museum University of Sydney. NM48.46. 8.0cm H x 5.6cm W x 3.5cm D.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mohenjo-daro</td>
<td>Very similar to, but more varied and diverse than Harappa, with a variety of coiffures and forms; slim standing figures and pot-bellied matrons and tall, shapely nursing mothers.</td>
<td>Ardeleneanu-Jansen 2002, p. 207-11, figs. 1-3; Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 118; Kenoyer 1998, fig. 7.14.</td>
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<td>Chanhu-daro</td>
<td>Mckay reports that figurines were similar to the ‘Mother Goddess’ figures from Harappa, with differences attributed by Clark and Kenoyer to chronology. But During Caspers reports they were somewhat different.</td>
<td>Mckay 1936, p. 89; 1938, p. 475; Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 510; During Caspers 1994, p. 186.</td>
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<td>2. Western Indus Valley periphery</td>
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<td>Nausharo</td>
<td>While there are similarities with the above sites, Nausharo (which is in the same area as Mehrgarh on the edge of the Baluchistan highlands) figurines are quite different in appearance, more naturalistic with slim waists, heavy breasts, genitalia, ‘natural’ hairstyles and turbans.</td>
<td>Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 42, 115; Jarrige 1997 figs. 3-11; Kenoyer 1998, figs. 7.21, 7.22.</td>
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<td>Banawali</td>
<td>Only a handful of figurines have been found at this site close to Rakhigarhi, and these are quite different from any others: a cylindrical-body female with poorly-defined features, short legs with arms or headdress loops covering its face.</td>
<td>Bisht 1982, p. 119, plate 10.20; Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 117.</td>
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<td>Bagasara and Shikarpur</td>
<td>Only two (possibly 3) partial figurines have been found at these two nearby sites, one</td>
<td>Bhan and Ajithprasad 2008, p. 5 and fig. 4; 2009, p. 5 and fig. 6.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Eastern plains</td>
<td>Male one female; both show simple, round modelling, remains of a bright red slip with graphic modelling of the genitalia in the female.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gujarat and Dholavira</td>
<td>Few female figurines, surprising given the extent of excavations in this region, and these are quite simple and different to those from Harappa.</td>
<td>Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 511; Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 116.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Coastal eastern plain</td>
<td>Excavations in this Harappan port town yielded few female figurines, and these are completely different to others: crude, unornamented representations of the naked body, covered with a light chocolate slip not seen from any other site.</td>
<td>Rao 1985, p. 477-78, fig. 98.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuntasi</td>
<td>Only one female figurine with a simple, unadorned star-shaped body quite different to the Harappan style has been found from this substantial Indus Civilisation emporium town.</td>
<td>Dhavilkar et al. 1996, p. 246, figs. 7.44 item 9 and 7.45 item 9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rojdi</td>
<td>No female figurines found.</td>
<td>Possehl and Raval 1989, p. 158.</td>
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What is clear from the published material is that finds of ‘headdress’-type and other terracotta female-format figurines are quite rare over the length and breadth of the Indus Civilisation: the total is in the 100s not 1000s, although many thousands of other types of terracotta figurines have been found. ‘Headdress’ female-format figurines are found almost exclusively in the core Indus areas of Harappa in the north, at Mohenjo-daro and at Chanhu-daro in the south. A different style (see Table) of female-form figurines is found in the Mehrgarh and Nausharo areas west of the Indus River at the edge of the Baluchistan highlands. Other areas of the Indus Civilisation to the east (from the upper reaches of the Ghaggar-Hakra-Saraswati River valley down to the sea) do not appear to have much affinity with the core as far as female-format (or, indeed anthropomorphic) figurines are concerned; any commonality may be attributed to the same subject matter (the human body) and the same material (clay).
**Discussion**

Given the rarity of ‘headdress’ figurines in areas outside of the core Indus Valley, it’s reasonable to conclude that they did not play much of a societal role in the eastern Indus area. This assumes that the paucity of finds is not due to limited excavation, however these sites in the eastern areas have been well investigated. This discussion therefore concentrates on the society of the core Indus region.

These ‘headdress’ figurines have exclusively been found broken and deposited in waste middens, domestic rubbish pits and house floors with none found in any primary-use context (Biagi 2004, p. 24; Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 500; Insoll 2017, p. 6), implying that they were widely available, used ephemerally, possibly used or re-used as toys then discarded after use (Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 500; Insoll 2017, p. 5) i.e. ‘discarded at the end of their social lives’ (Clark 2003, p. 309). Deliberate fragmentation of figurines at the end of their ‘life’ is considered significant in a wide range of Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures: in ancient Mesopotamia, Europe, the Aegean, North America and Mesoamerica (Insoll 2017, p. 10) primarily or exclusively in secondary contexts such as middens (Meskell 2017, p. 22; Ucko 1962, p. 41). Voigt (2007, p. 167) argues that 6th millennium Anatolian figurines were deliberately broken, that is ‘killed’, as part of the disposal process.

Marcus (in Hamilton 1996, p. 286-91) reports that virtually all broken figurines in early Oaxaca, Mexico around the 1st millennium BCE were found in household middens. Using information from early Spanish Colonial documents, she concludes that female-form figurines were used by women in inclusive household rituals (vs exclusive male-gender or single-group public rituals). Explanations for the removal from active use include the concept of figurine agency, where fragmentation is metaphorically used to release their ‘force’ or ‘energy’ where the figurine may have functioned as a surrogate used to ‘enchain’ people with powerful persons, places or spirits (Insoll 2017, p. 10).

Indus ‘headdress’ figurines have never been found in any burial context (see above and Biagi 2004, p. 24; Clark 2003, p. 309). Despite suggestions such as Mckay (1936, p. 89) that they were likely kept in wall-niche ‘shrines to the great ‘Mother Goddess’ in every house and associated with votive offerings, there has not been any published evidence supporting such a use. Insoll (2017, p. 5-7) argues that figurines in general were part of ‘much wider material worlds’ and of a ‘broader world of representation’: they may have a ritual role in some contexts while in others function varied and changed over time; some were also used as toys. Lesure’s (2011, p. 30-31, 62) ‘window on society’ concept of depictions of a range of people may also be relevant since both ‘working women’ (see below) and ‘headdress’ figurines have been found together (Kenoyer 1998, p. 135 and fig. 7.23).

The fact that none have been found in any primary use context obviously creates a significant interpretative problem (e.g. Lesure 2011, p. 28).

Further, the lack of readable Indus text leads to ambiguity of interpretation (Hamilton 1996, p. 281; Suter 2007, p. 317) and allows only conjecture as to the role played by these figurines (Clark 2003, p. 308). Clark and Kenoyer (2017, p. 513-15) review a range of possibilities, many of which are discussed later in this paper.

Difficulty in interpreting figurines can be a problem even where a readable text is available. Nakamura and Yoshizawa (1997) report a synthesised study of ‘Astarte’ figurines found in 1st millennium BCE Levant, Syria and southern Mesopotamia. Although made from moulds (not handmade as the Indus ‘headdress’ figurines), ‘Astarte’ figurines are female-form, naked or clothed, of similar size (10-15 cm height) to Indus ‘headdress’ figurines and exhibit complex and individual headdresses/hairstyles and jewellery and necklaces (Nakamura and Yoshizawa 1997, p. 74-82). They are found discarded in middens etc and without the presence of any religious or cult objects; most are broken in a particular way (Nakamura and Yoshizawa 1997, p. 82-84). Textual evidence
initially pointed towards a ‘fertility goddess’ interpretation, however as this is at odds with the contextual evidence their role remains unclear (Nakamura and Yoshizawa 1997, p. 84).

The ‘construction of histories’ in early urban societies was essential to define and maintain the social structures required for long-term survival of towns and villages in early societies (Hodder and Meskell 2011, p. 250-51, 253), they argue that contrary to prior assessments, there is little evidence that rituals related to ‘female fertility’ figurines were involved, instead arguing for the dominance of phallocentric or zoocentric figurines in these processes (at least in some parts of the Anatolian Neolithic). Ozdogan (in Hodder and Meskell 2011, p. 256) argues that this is inconsistent with earlier interpretations and it is now necessary to reconsider all previous assumptions and explanations regarding figurines.

During Caspers (1989, p. 232-35) and Clark (2003, p. 320; 2007b, p. 525) have suggested a shamanistic/magic dimension. But magic can be difficult to distinguish from the everyday and in any case any such division may be irrelevant.

Nakamura (2008) discusses the role of figurines in early 1st millennium BCE Mesopotamian magic. She proposes that magic ‘moves alongside in tandem’ to ‘a rational mode of knowing’, ‘grounds the possibility of a distinct socio-religious worldview’ (Nakamura 2008, p. 22-3); a magical work produces meaning both from the context of its production but also produces a material intervention in the world. The copy (the figurine) assumes the power of the original (the person or supernatural being represented) and is ‘made real in the material fabric of the world’ (Nakamura 2008, p. 28). The communal process of making (transforming) captures the force of the original in the primordial clay, a ‘human mastery’ of the original through simulacra production, subsequent play and fantasy (Nakamura 2008, p. 30-34). A deliberate blurring of the supernatural and human spheres has been proposed by Suter (2007, p. 326) in contemporaneous Mesopotamia.

Insoll (2017, p. 13-14) reports a general absence of magical interpretations for figurines, while suggesting that while pejorative in the current western context, it is conceivable that figurines had a magical role. However, as also argued by Nakamura (2008, see above) and Meskell (2017, p. 19), there is no reason to believe that there was any strict division between the everyday and the magical, and for the purposes of the present discussion there is no need to make any such distinction and probably it’s not one that the Indus peoples would have made.

There is some evidence (see Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 514 for a review) other types of figurines, but not these female-form ones, may play a role in Indus magic, ritual and cultural mythology. The only examples of Indus female-form images related to cultic ritual or magic are very rare two-dimensional images incised on a few steatite seals of Indus origin: these appear to show a female deity or priestess with a Mesopotamian-style horned headdress surrounded by animals or trees (Biagi 2004, p. 25). I suggest that their rarity, style and format bear little relevance to the present discussion.

To summarise, as Clarke (2007b, p. 536-37) points out, with no temples or ritualistic buildings and considering the above discussion, Indus society’s world view would have been complex, without a single dominant deity and the figurines do not represent deities or serve cultic or magical functions.

This raises the question of what role did these figurines play, what were they used for, and most importantly what did they mean to their makers? I.e. their relation to hierarchy and social identity of people of different age and gender (Lesure 2011, p. 60).

They may have been simply images (possibly ‘portraits’, see below) of people who lived in the Indus (Kenoyer 1998, p. 131) as there is evidence that they were hand-modelled in the likeness of individuals and created in the presence of the user or an audience, as a shared social activity (Clark 2009, p. 232, 255-56). Therefore, procurement and crafting would have been an ideological and
process-focussed activity rather than a practical or functional one (Clark 2007b, p. 110-115, 181, 523-24; 2009, p. 255-56; Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 512). ‘Portraits’ do not need to be likenesses in the modern western artistic sense, as Marcus (cited in Hamilton 1996, p. 288) explains, the variety of unique headdresses in 1st millennium Oaxaca female-form figurines may have been used to indicate identities.

Worldwide, figurines have been ‘mass manufactured’, produced from moulds, assembled from pre-made components, or individually created; referencing issues of creativity and uniqueness (Insoll 2017, p. 11). These Indus figurines were individually created from two halves joined vertically from head to foot with the breasts made as part of the same halves before adornments were added (Biagi 2004, p. 24). Clark and Kenoyer (2017, p. 512) suggest these figurines re-enacted the birth or creation of human beings from clay. Meskell (2017, p. 23) argues that figurine-making was almost always a public, social, communal process involving many individuals; figurines should not be interpreted as a ‘finished and contained’ product.

A more nuanced and fluid gender-identity and sexuality than current western standards is indicated by the lack of erotization in Indus figurines (the breasts generally lack nipples, female genitalia are very rare), cross-dressing, androgyny and hybrid male/female/animal figurines indicate a complex interaction of sex with other ‘axes of difference’. These aspects all indicate an important symbolic role in social/sexual identity and with worldly engagement (Clark 2003, p. 319-23; 2007b, p. 525-28) and therefore a possible ‘educational’ or ‘socialisation’ role for children as models for adult roles in society (Voigt 2007, p. 168). Similar didactic, socialisation and gender-formation roles have been ascribed to figurines in Africa, Iran and the Arctic where dolls are used for play but also to teach children about adult activities (Insoll 2017, p. 8).

Gelderloos (2017, footnote 186 p. 143-4) argues that patriarchal societies require binary gender differentiation (male/female) as a prerequisite, as do matriarchal ones, while the antithesis is a complementary gendered society, as proposed above for the Indus, where men and women have equal access to power and where gender is mutable. Mutable (often age-related) gender (that is several cultural genders as distinct from binary biological sex) has been identified in some societies but continues to be subject to interpretation and context (Lesure 2011, p. 27-28).

Figurines can be literal ‘power objects’, both in contemporary and prehistoric contexts and used for the construction and legitimisation of power as in the Mayan civilisation, playing a central role in politics as in prehistoric Sardinia, and in North America by their structuring, production, curation and use (Insoll 2017, p. 9-10).

These figurines may therefore be images of powerful women in Indus society (Clark 2007a, p. 237), suggesting that women may have had important social or ritual positions, their images playing an important role in legitimising political power (Kenoyer 1998, p. 133). Kenoyer (1998, p. 134) further suggests that a pattern of matri-local burial (related women buried in the same grave, men buried with his wife’s ancestors not his own) shows the powerful position of women, as does the preponderance of female figurines vs male (Kenoyer 1998, p. 134). Suter (2007, p. 319-21) notes that in contemporaneous Mesopotamia women (often described as ‘high priestesses’) held powerful positions in Sumerian, Akkadian and Isin/Larsa societies between 2900 and 1800 BCE, their power comparable to that of kings.

Kenoyer (1998, p. 134-5 and fig. 7.20) points to the importance of female coiffure as indicated by the huge size, ornamentation and range of styles of the headdresses of the figurines. Suter (2007, p. 338-39) notes that in contemporaneous Mesopotamia unique and elaborate headdresses were a key identifying insignia of powerful (‘high priestess’) women which unambiguously distinguished them from ‘goddesses’. I suggest that the huge headdresses and jewellery adornments, large
hoards of which have been excavated at these sites (Kenoyer 1998, p. 135), may be indicators of the power and wealth of those individual women depicted in formal standing position, since figurines of women nursing infants, seated or doing farming or domestic tasks do not appear to have elaborate headdresses or much adornment (e.g. figs. 7.14 and 7.22 in Kenoyer 1998; figs. 22.4 and 22.5 in Clark and Kenoyer 2017) and are generally smaller in size (Kenoyer 1998, p. 135 and fig. 7.23). I suggest that both the ‘headdress’ and the ‘working woman’ figurines may have been used to socialise and educate children and young adults as to their respective roles in Indus society.

Concluding from the above context, I propose that the ‘headdress’ figurines are initiation figurines which conform to Ucko’s five ‘initiation figure’ criteria (1962, p. 47-48): (1) use of clay, (2) technical achievement, (3) habituation debris/rubbage provenance, (4) non-conformist representation and (5) lack of any signs of divinity.

They identify powerful (and possibly wealthy) women and/or female-gender elites. Like many figurines, they lack feet, cannot stand or sit and so are designed to be handled and circulated (Meskell 2017, p. 24). Viewing while being held in the hand is a characteristic of initiation figurines, as opposed to cult figurines which tend to be larger, so they can be displayed in situ (Voigt 2007, p. 165). As is the context in the Indus, the finds of initiation figurines in East Africa and Anatolia are rarely associated with dwellings (Voigt 2007, p. 167).

Initiation figurines are used to mark transitions and as a means of instilling values and proper behaviour and may also be used as toys with their own narrative (Voigt 2007, p. 156-7). Figurines ‘embody lives’ and can be sources of ideals against which an individual’s own performance can be measured, embodying understanding, social concerns and practices, flooding communities with specific images and whose ‘continued presence must have been formative in developing notions of embodiment and being’ (Meskell 2107, p. 25-6). They are small, so of use in intimate, inclusive, domestic settings (Lesure 2011, p. 62); they circulate, enabling immediate, intense and familiar connection to a range of social, cultural and material preoccupations (Meskell 2017, p. 28). Bailey (in Hamilton 1996, p. 295) concludes that SE European figurines of the 5th millennium BCE were authoritative and actively engaged and influenced human reality, especially relationships between individuals. They were narrative and functioned to make people understand, interpreting the relationships between people and the world; and they were a major mechanism of social manipulation and control. Haarland and Haarland (in Hamilton 1996, p. 295-300) conclude that female-form figurines played a major role in maintaining trust between people living together in complex urban environments.

The above argument fits well with Miller’s view (cited in Coningham and Young 2015, p. 237) that ‘the uniformity of the Indus material culture was a direct reflection and result of the particular controlling ideology where extreme normative order was valued and combined control over the world’. Vidale (cited in Coningham and Young 2015, p. 237-8) suggests that ‘inter-site economic and social patterning of the labour force employed in craft production’ was commonplace within Indus cities. The use of initiation figurines and rituals surrounding these would have been an effective tool for developing and retaining such social patterning.

This system of social control is evident only in the core areas of the Indus, declining to the east, possibly due to remoteness from the core and/or the influence of western Indian cultures found further to the east. An example is Lothal, where the few found figurines were crude and of a completely different style; Lothal was a trading post on the border of the Indus and contemporaneous western Indian hunter-gatherers which were outside of the prehistoric

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1 Indus jewellery may have been traded as far as the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (Kenoyer 1997, p. 270), an indication of its value.
worldwide cluster of figurine-making civilisations (Coningham and Young 2015, p. 221; Lesure 2011, p. 18-19, fig. 4).

As discussed above, Indus cities and towns were characterised by a lack of palaces and temples and no evidence of a ruling or priest elite, which suggests that its rulers did not inhabit the cities or towns, these being purely mercantile in nature, but lived elsewhere. This is a similar situation to that in Saxon England (Dark 1994). Rissman (cited in Coningham and Young 2015, p. 237) argues that by concealing accumulated wealth, differential wealth and status were deliberately masked to support an ideology based on apparent equality: a form of ideological manipulation. Fairservis and Schaffer & Lichtenstein (cited in Coningham and Young 2015, p. 238) suggest that (possibly because of veneration for zebu cattle) wealth and prestige (and presumably power) was based on pastoralism and the size of cattle herds beyond city walls, a situation remarkably similar to Saxon England. However, an alternative argument proposed by Coningham and Young (2015, p. 239) and Gelderloos (2017, p. 93-4) is that authority lay with the control of trade and craft production and thus no ruling elite or religious organisation were necessary (urban or extra-urban) and control was exerted only by the inhabitants of the cities and towns.

Conclusions

The Indus is notable for the complete absence of any evidence of a ruling or priestly elite. An political elite was therefore either entirely absent, or absent from the archaeological record of excavated sites. The five major urban sites, and many other smaller ones, have all been excavated to a significant extent which leads to the conclusion that if there was an elite, it was not present in urban landscapes, and ruled in absentia.

It is proposed that the sociality of creation and subsequent use of ‘headdress’ initiation figurines was a method of exerting power and social control, at a distance, over the general population by this unknown ruling or priestly elite. These figurines were effectively used as ‘stand ins’ for powerful individuals or groups.

If the elites did not live in the cities and other urban areas, then their residences must have been extra-urban. A good model of such a socio-political organisation and settlement pattern is provided by Saxon England where the elites lived in dispersed aristocratic estates and monasteries and the populations of cities and towns were artisans and merchants.

I suggest also that the ruling elite may have had a predominantly female composition: the strongly ‘female-looking’ format of the figurines leads to the conclusion that this elite was either female or female-gender, or that particular format was used as a propaganda device.

Clearly substantial work would be required to locate and identify extra-urban aristocratic or religious sites but if this were undertaken and such sites located then that would solve one of the great enigmas of Indus society. The archaeological record at such sites may also provide evidence regarding the function of the ‘headdress’ figurines.

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References


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