SEALS AND SCULPTURE OF THE INDUS CITIES

An exhibition being held in New York and Madison, Wisconsin, in 1998 on the representational art of the Indus Valley reveals a highly developed artistic tradition with many different styles and techniques of production.

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer

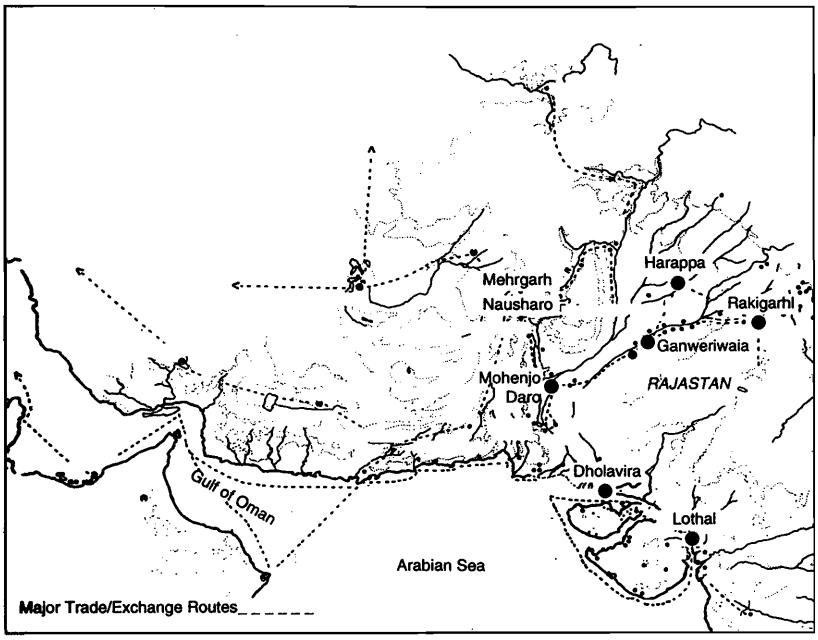


Fig 1. Major sites of the Indus Valley civilisation

The Indus Valley civilisation of Pakistan and north-western India is one of the great urban societies that was contemporaneous with the early Sumerian and Egyptian civilisations. Excavations in the 1920s and 30s at sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in Pakistan (Fig 1) uncovered the remains of well-planned cities that had major streets orientated in the cardinal directions, with brick-lined wells for drinking water and brick drains for the removal of sewage and waste water (Fig 2). Most of the buildings in these cities were made of baked brick, along with some mud brick structures, and the city walls were made almost entirely of mud brick.

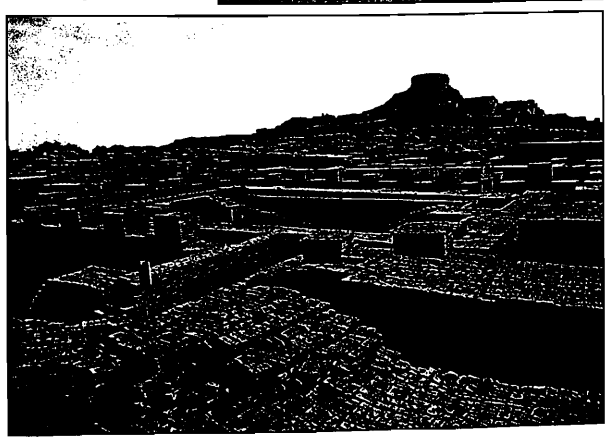
Recent excavations at the site of Harappa (Fig 3), Mehrgarh, Nausharo, and other Indus settlements are providing more detailed understanding of the origin and character of the Indus Valley civilisation (Kenoyer 1998). The earliest Neolithic settlements of the Indus region have been discovered at the site of Mehrgarh, Pakistan and date to around 7000 BC Later Chalcolithic village cultures have been found throughout the Indus Valley and date from 5500 to around 2800 BC. Early Indus settlements that may represent the initial phase of urban expansion date from around 2800 to 2600 BC and at the site of Harappa there is evidence for the emergence of an Early Indus writing system.

The major urban phase of the Indus Valley civilisation dates from around 2600 to 1900 BC. By this time, specialised craft technologies had been developed to produce exquisite objects as symbols of status and wealth as well as for use in rituals. Extensive trade networks were maintained to obtain necessary raw materials from resource areas adjacent to the Indus valley and also for the trade of finished goods to more distant regions such as Central Asia and Mesopotamia. A system of writing was developed by élites of the Indus cities but so far no bilingual inscriptions have been discovered and because the writing system cannot be related to any later known language, it has remained undeciphered (Parpola 1994). Consequently, archaeological excavations are the only source of information on the Indus cities and these finds must be interpreted through comparisons with contemporaneous cultures in Mesopotamia, Iran and Central Asia, or with later South Asian traditions.

Rising high above the plain, the massive mud-brick walls and impressive brick gateways of cities such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were

Fig 3 (right). The author and his team of local workers at the 8-metre deep excavations of the pre-urban levels at Harappa, 1996.

Fig 2 (below). The great bath at Mohenjo-daro, with the later Buddhist period stupa in the background.



monumental symbols of the power of the ancient Indus rulers and traders. Unlike Mesopotamia or Egypt, the Indus élites did not erect stone sculptures to glorify their power, and depictions of warfare or conquered enemies are strikingly absent in representational art. Most of the art and symbolic objects were relatively small and in many cases even made in miniature. The élites of the Indus cities can be distinguished by their use of carved stone seals having animal motifs and writing. They also wore ornaments, such as bangles and necklaces made of precious metals, rare materials, high fired stoneware or glazed faience. These symbols of wealth and power were what set the rulers apart from the common people, and they also reflect the many different social and economic levels that were controlled by the rulers.

The scale of Indus art suggests that much of it was not meant for public display and distant viewing, but rather for the private enjoyment and appreciation of the élites or common people for whom it was being produced. For example, the average person on the street may have seen the stone seal being carried by a trader or élite, but very few would have had the opportunity to scrutinise the detailed carving of the animal motifs or the precise angular carving of the script. The impressions made by such seals on clay were rarely made with enough care to reveal the delicate nuances of the dewlap on the magnificent humped zebu bull or the detailed decorations on the ritual offering stand placed in front of the animal motifs on the seal. As with the seals the carved stone sculptures and modelled figurines of bronze and faience may have been intended for élite customers, while figurines of terracotta, probably made for domestic rituals or even as toys, would have been equally accessible to both the commoners and the élites.

A closer look at the representational art of carved stone seals, stone sculpture and modelled figurines of terracotta, bronze and faience can provide a more intimate perspective on Indus people and their aesthetic sensibilities.

INDUS SEALS AND SEALINGS

The primary source for Indus writing comes from seals or impressions of seals made in terracotta or glazed faience. Other prescribed objects include inscribed steatite tablets, pottery, and various personal ornaments and tools.

The most common form of seal used in the Indus cities is square with a perforated knob or boss on the back. This type of seal first appears around 2600 BC, but it is not certain if they were used for the entire duration of the cities, as a new form of long rectangular seal begins to appear around 2200 to 2000 BC. The square seals usually have an animal motif in the lower register and a line of script above the animal. A ritual offering stand or a feeding trough is usually depicted in front of specific types of animals, but occasionally the animal is presented without this additional object (Fig 4). Such square seals with animal motifs were apparently used for a variety of economic and ritual or symbolic purposes. Seal impressions have been found on bullae used to secure rope or binding materials on bundles of goods. Clay sealings from pottery vessels that held various types of raw materials have also been found.

The second major seal type is rectangular and has a convex back that is perforated through the body of the seal rather than through a knob. These rectangular seals have no animal motif and are carved with a single line of large and deeply incised script. Recent excavations at Harappa have shown that the long rectangular seals begin to be used during the later phases of the Indus cities, possibly in conjunction with the square seals.

Another type of seal, generally referred to as a button seal, is decorated with various geometric motifs, but no script. These button seals have a small perforated knob on the back. Even though they do not have script, these seals were sometimes impressed onto clay bullae attached to bundles of goods, possible for symbolic or ritual purposes.

Very few seal impressions have been preserved at Indus sites as compared to the large number of sealings from Mesopotamia. This difference has led some scholars to propose that seals were not generally used for sealing, but were primarily symbolic in nature. However, when the archaeological context of Mesopotamia and Indus clay sealings are examined, it is clear that both are found primarily in burned buildings, since unfired clay would quickly crumble when exposed to the elements. Since very few burned buildings have been discovered in the Indus Valley it is not surprising that very few preserved sealings have been found. In fact, the largest single collection of Indus sealings comes from a burned building or storehouse at the site of Lothal.

Fig 4.
The humped bull is a relatively rare motif on square intaglio seals, but they are generally quite large and carved with great detail. At the top of this steatite seal is a line of Indus script, but no ritual offering stand is depicted. The curved edge of the seal is unique and it may have been designed by a seal carver to accommodate stamping on the concave neck of large storage jars. This seal has not been fully fired or hardened and may represent an unfinished object. Square intaglio seal. Unfired tan steatite. 3.75 x 3.9 cm. Mohenjo-daro, B 588. Islamabad Museum, 50.236.

Fig 5.
Steatite square seal depicting a nude male deity with three faces, seated in yogic position on a throne, wearing bangles on both arms and an elaborate head-dress. The figure wears bangles on both arms and the feet of the throne are carved with the hoof of a bovine as on the bull and unicorn seals. Unfired? tan steatite. 2.65 x 2.7 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 12050. Islamabad Museum, NMP 50.296.

The distinctive square seals of the Indus cities are usually made from various qualities and varieties of soft stone, generally referred to as soapstone or steatite. The original colour of the stone ranges from grey or tan to white, but it is always intentionally whitened and hardened through

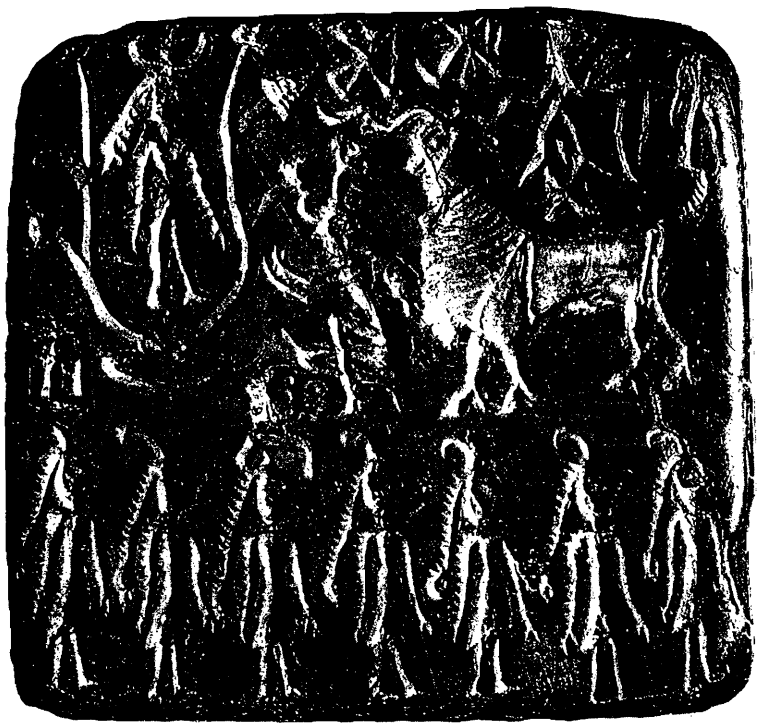


Fig 6.
Steatite narrative seal depicting a deity with horned head-dress and bangles on both arms, standing in a pipal tree. This scene may represent a special ritual sacrifice to a deity with seven figures in procession. Fired tan steatite with traces of glaze. 4.06 x 3.95 cm. Mohenjo-daro DK 6847. Islamabad Museum, NMP 50.295.

Figs 7a and 7b.
Moulded terracotta tablet with impressions on both faces. The obverse has an impression from a unicorn seal with script and the reverse depicts a deity standing under a pipal leaf arch with thirteen pipal leaves. Terracotta. 2.0 x 1.89 cm. Harappa, Lot 5719-02. Harappa Museum, H95-2485.

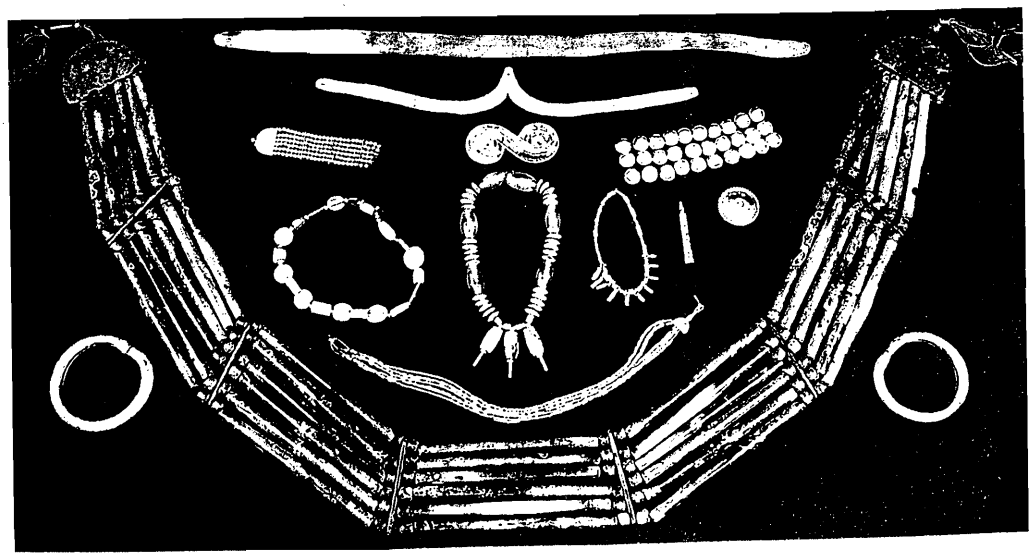
Fig 8 (below).
Carnelian and copper/bronze necklace or belt found with a hoard of gold and silver jewellery from Mohenjo-daro. In this photo the gold jewellery also includes pieces from hoards found at Harappa. Carnelian and copper/bronze belt is from Mohenjo-daro Museum, MM 1435

the application of an alkaline solution of calcium carbonate in combination with high temperature firing. The exact recipe of this solution is not known, but the seals may have been soaked in this solution before being heated to temperatures of over 1000°C for more than an hour. This process results in a hard whitened surface, approximately 6 on the Mohs scale. Microscopic examination of the surface does not reveal any overlying glaze, but the hardened surface which often flakes off after weathering is usually polished and highly reflective, leading some observers to identify it incorrectly as an applied glaze. On some seals the hardened surface has been worn off by repeated stamping in wet clay or other forms of use. Other seals were left unfired or only slightly fired after being carved.

Not all seals were used for economic purposes and some of the large seals depict deities (Fig 5) or have complex narrative scenes (Fig 6). No sealings of these seals have been found but some terracotta tablets with moulded depictions of deities or narratives have been discovered (Figs 7a, 7b). A closer examination of selected seals from the major sites of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa will illustrate the artistic and symbolic importance of these exquisite objects.

JEWELLERY

Numerous male and female terracotta figurines found at Indus sites generally depict a wide variety of ornaments. These ornaments include necklaces, bangles, ankle bracelets, head-bands, and elaborate head-dresses for the women. Similar types of ornaments made of gold, silver, and semi-precious stones have been found in the rare hoards of jewellery recovered from Indus sites. These hoards were never buried with the dead but have been discovered under the floors or in the walls of build-



ings. Such hoards may have belonged to goldsmiths or élites who hid their wealth before leaving on a journey and never returned to claim it. Most Indus period burials have only shell bangles and a few beads along with pottery, and it is possible that most ornaments were passed on from one generation to the next rather than being buried with the dead.

One of the most exquisite ornaments unique to the Indus cities are carnelian and bronze belts or necklaces (Fig 8). Such belts are depicted on terracotta figurines. Long carnelian beads made in the Indus Valley were traded to Mesopotamia and have been recovered from royal burials at Ur as well as from Susa, in ancient Elam (Iran).

STONE SCULPTURE

Stone sculpture is quite rare at most sites of the Indus valley, but a collection of seated male sculptures and some seated ram figures have been recovered from Mohenjo-daro. Contrary to general references, these sculptures probably do not represent the rulers of the Indus valley, but may have been commemorative statues of clan leaders or ancestral figures from a single community living in this large city. All of the sculptures are broken (Fig 12) and were found scattered in the streets or abandoned houses. While some of the sculptures may have been vandalised, others may have been damaged in the collapse of a building or through natural weathering. They date to the final phase of the Indus occupation, probably around 2000 to 1900 BC.

Some of the sculptures are carved with extreme detail and careful modelling while others appear to be unfinished. All of the more complete sculptures have the same seated posture with a cloak thrown over one shoulder and hands rested on the knees. Most of the images depict a bearded male with upper lip shaved, but one broken sculpture may possibly represent a female. The hair is finely groomed, either combed and braided, and is generally tied in a bun on the back of the head (Fig 9). A fillet or head-band usually holds the bun in place and at least two of the sculptures probably had some form of head-dress attached to the top or back of the head (Fig 10, Fig 5). The eyes were probably inlaid and on one sculpture a piece of shell inlay was found intact (Fig 10). Most of the figures have a garment draped over the left shoulder and in the most famous sculpture of the so-called 'priest king' (Fig 11) the cloak was decorated with carved designs filled with red pigment.

The partly kneeling position can be contrasted to the yogic pose depicted on many of the seals (Fig 5) and the formal standing posture (Figs 6, 7), both of which appear to be associated with deities. While some scholars associate these sculptures with Central Asian iconographic traditions, a more appropriate comparison is with the three stone heads found in the Helmand basin in Baluchistan. These stone heads are contemporaneous with the Mohenjo-daro sculptures and it is quite likely that they derive from a common sculptural tradition. On the other hand they may reflect limited interaction between a community of powerful merchants or landowners living at Mohenjo-daro and a group living in the Helmand basin. Such relationships would not be surprising because of the long history of movement between the highlands and the Indus plain.

Fig 9.
Sandstone broken male head, probably from a seated sculpture. H: 13.5 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK-B 1057. Mohenjo-daro Museum, MM 431.

Fig 10.
Limestone seated male sculpture with shell inlay in one eye. The upper lip is shaved and a short, combed beard covers the lower jaw. H: 33.5 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK(i) 419. Mohenjo-daro Museum, MM 432.

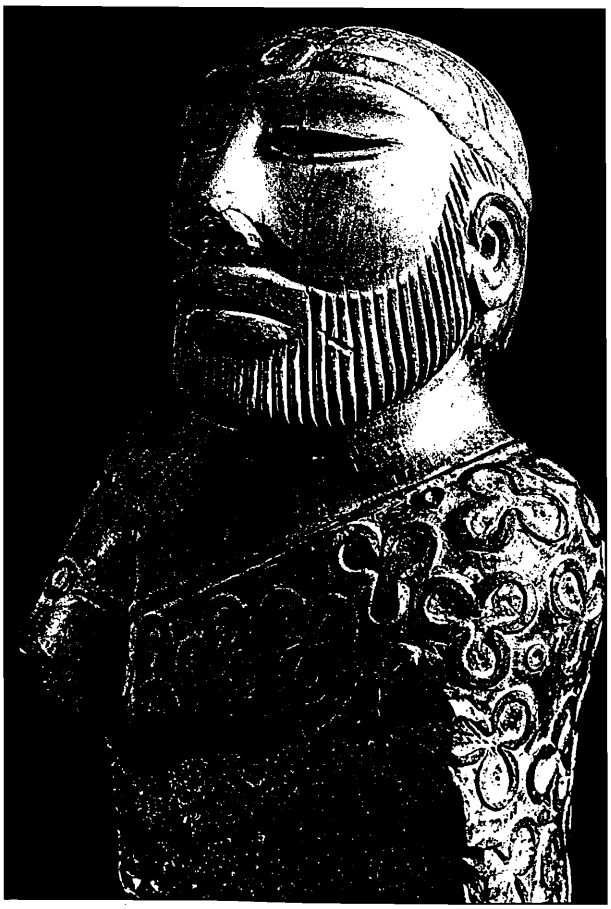


Fig 11.
The famous steatite 'priest-king' sculpture from Mohenjo-daro. The flat back of the head may have supported a separately carved bun as is traditional on the other seated figures, or it could have held a more elaborate horn and plumed head-dress. Low-fired white steatite. H: 17.5 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 1909. National Museum, Karachi, 50.852.

Figure 12.
Limestone seated male figure with head missing. The hair style can be partially reconstructed by a wide swath of hair and a braided lock of hair or ribbon hanging along the right side of the back. H: 28 cm. Mohenjo-daro, L 950. Islamabad Museum.

MODELLED FIGURINES

In contrast to the rare stone sculptures, modelled figurines of humans, animals and fantastic combinations of the two are quite common at most Indus sites. Terracotta figurines are by far the most numerous and because of their fragility they are usually broken. Since none of these figurines have ever been found in situ, it is thought that they were used in domestic rituals or used as toys until they were broken and eventually discarded along with other forms of trash. Common subjects are female figurines with elaborate head-dresses or a mother suckling an infant. Male figurines are often depicted with beards and turban-like head-dresses that included wide spread horns. Such head-dresses are similar to the depictions seen on seals (Fig 5) and therefore the figurines may represent deities (Figs 19, 20).

The terracotta figures are usually hand-made with appliqué ornaments and features, but in the case of some bull figurines, the head was sometimes moulded and attached to a hand-built body (Figs 14, 15). Large animal figurines are often hollow to facilitate drying and firing, and one unique hollow figurine of a ram may have been used as a container (Fig 17). Terracotta was also used to make small amuletic masks or finger puppets (Fig 13). Such objects may have been worn as protective amulets or used in narrative performances.

Faience figurines were usually made in miniature using moulds and then touched up with delicate carving. The most common depictions are of monkeys in various poses (Fig 18), the striped palm squirrel eating a nut, a seated ram, and various types of birds. Many of these tiny objects have holes in the base for attaching to a pin or perforations for use as a bead or pendant.

Free standing bronze figurines of both animals and humans were also made by Indus artists, and again these were made in miniature. The most famous figure of a woman wearing bangles on her left arm has often been referred to as the 'dancing girl', but since most of the burials at Harappa had shell bangles on their left arm, we can assume that this was a common ornament style of Indus ladies. More important is the fact that the figure holds a small bowl in her right hand, possibly a form of offering. This subject is repeated in another figurine that has a more rigid and formal posture (Fig 16). Additional fragments of such figurines have been found at Mohenjo-daro and one such fragment is of a beautifully modelled foot wearing an ankle bracelet. This type of modelling suggests the use of the lost-wax casting, a process that does not leave any mould, since each object is individually cast and the mould is broken to release the object.

Fig 13.
Terracotta miniature mask of a horned deity with human face and bared teeth of a tiger. H: 5.24 cm. Harappa. Harappa Museum, H93-2093.

Fig 14.
Terracotta mould for making bull-figurine head which could then be attached to the hand-formed body (see fig 15, below). H: 4.4 cm. L: 3.7 cm. Mohenjo-daro, MD 1634. Department of Archaeology, Karachi.

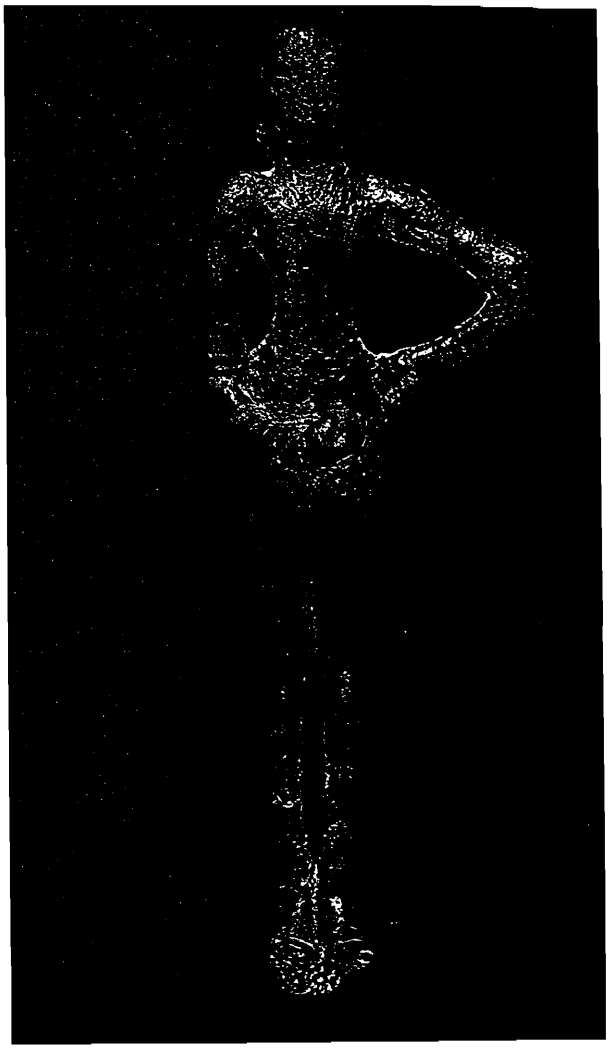


Fig 16.
Copper/bronze standing bronze female figurine with bangles on her left arm and a few bangles indicated above the right elbow. H: 13.2 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 12728. National Museum, Karachi, NMP 50.883. (Illustrated actual size)

Fig 17 (below).
This hollow terracotta seated ram figurine with a hole at the centre of the back may have been used for ritual purposes to hold offerings or as a small lamp. H: 9.3 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 9404. National Museum, Karachi, NMP 50.771.

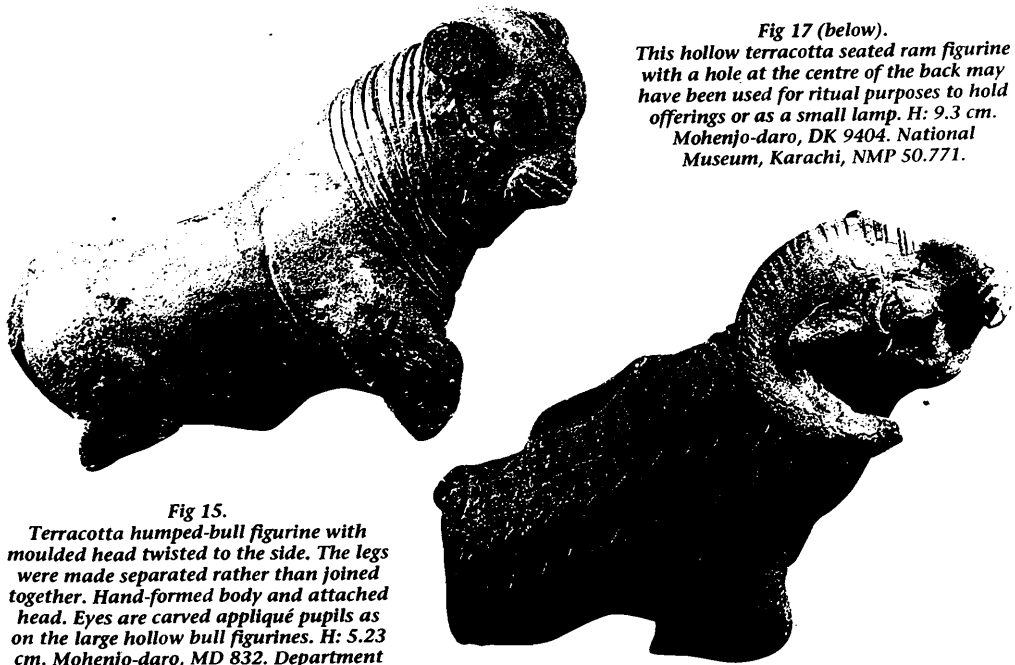


Fig 15.
Terracotta humped-bull figurine with moulded head twisted to the side. The legs were made separated rather than joined together. Hand-formed body and attached head. Eyes are carved appliqué pupils as on the large hollow bull figurines. H: 5.23 cm. Mohenjo-daro, MD 832. Department of Archaeology, Karachi.

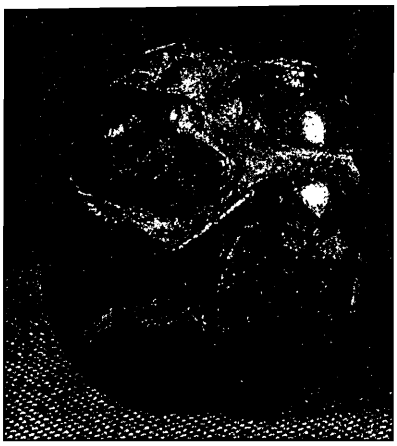


Fig 18
Yellow-brown glazed faience triple monkey figurine amulet showing three monkeys in tight embrace with amused expressions on their faces. H: 1.6 cm. Mohenjo-daro, HR 1053. National Museum, Karachi, NMP 50.870.

Fig 19
Terracotta male figurine or deity with goatlike beard and wearing a horned head-dress that is broken. H: 9.3 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 7508. National Museum, Kararchi, NMP 50.551.

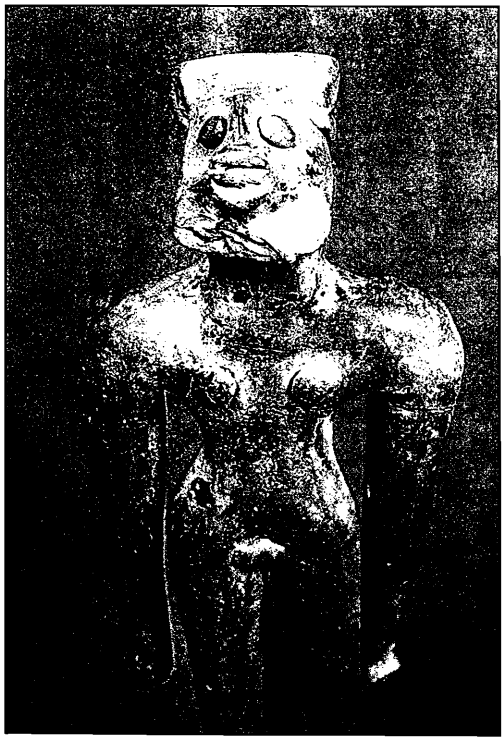


Fig 20
Terracotta male figurine or deity with wide, spreading beard and a broken head-dress that may have had two curving horns. H: 14.5 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 3509. National Museum, Karachi, 50.546.

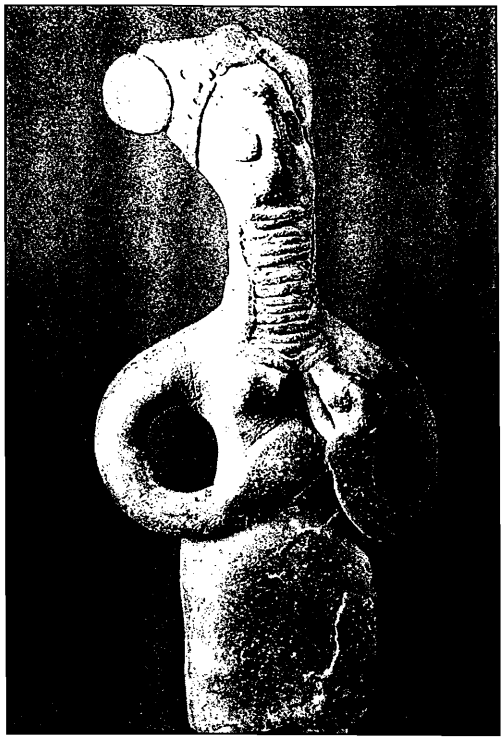


Fig 21.
Terracotta female figurine holding an infant to her left breast. H: 10.7 cm. Mohenjo-daro, DK 8688. National Museum, Karachi, NMP 50.524.

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Jonathan Mark Kenoyer *is Associate Professor of Anthropology and works in the Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Madison. He also has a Ph.D. in South Asian Archaeology from the University of California, Berkeley. Mark Kenoyer has conducted research on the Indus Valley civilisation in Pakistan and India for over 20 years and is currently co-director of the Harappa Archaeological Research Project with Dr Richard H. Meadow of Harvard University.*

He is also guest curator for the exhibition 'Great Cities, Small Treasures: The ancient world of the Indus Valley', which is being held at the Asia Society, New York (11 February to 3 May 1998, moving to the Elvehjem Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin (September to November 1998), and then to the Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, CA (to be confirmed, February-April 1999).

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