Walking with the Unicorn

Social Organization and Material Culture in Ancient South Asia

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer
Felicitation Volume

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The intervention of the Italian archaeologists of IsMEO – Tucci’s IsMEO – in the archaeology of the Indus Civilization under the direction of the late Maurizio Tosi took place in the early 1980s at Mohenjo-daro, Sindh (Pakistan), within the framework of an intensive and fruitful collaboration with Michael Jansen, Günther Urban and a wide group of German colleagues from the prestigious Rheinisch-Westfaelische Technische Hochschule of Aachen, mainly specialists in topographic recording and architectural analysis.

After a century from its discovery, Mohenjo-daro is still considered, rightly or wrongly, the city-symbol of this enigmatic civilization, and the joint Italian-German project, which followed a holistic but strictly non-destructive approach, represents a crucial moment for its historical understanding and socio-cultural fostering, as well as for the structural conservation of the exposed areas (Jansen and Urban 1984, 1987; Leonardi, Balista and Vidale 1988).

It is in this pivotal archaeological reality, and in a moment of deep revision and fast evolution of archaeological methodologies, that the Italian archaeologists and geo-archaeologists working with IsMEO met Jonathan Mark Kenoyer and begun a long season of common fieldwork and scientific exchange (Figure 1). At Mohenjo-daro, the effort was not only to understand the erosion and transformation in time of the buried ruins, but also to record the distribution of the craft workshops and their dumps in the core of the ancient city; here, Kenoyer’s contribution on the marine shell industries was crucial (Kenoyer 1984, 1985).

Figure 1. Massimo Vidale, Alexandra Ardeleanu-Jansen and Jonathan Mark Kenoyer at Mohenjo-daro during the IsMEO–Aachen University Mission in 1983 (courtesy J. M. Kenoyer and IsMEO–Aachen University Mission).
After Mohenjo-daro, the collaboration of Italian scholars linked to IsMEO/IsIAO, in particular Massimo Vidale, with Mark Kenoyer and his colleagues from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and various South Asian institutions continued in the ethnoarchaeological study of the agate beads factory of Khambhat in Gujarat (India), and in the excavation projects at Harappa in Punjab (Pakistan) (for examples, see Kenoyer and Vidale 1992; Kenoyer, Vidale and Bhan 1991, 1994; Vidale, Kenoyer and Bhan 1993) (Figure 2). This fruitful research partnership led to the understanding of several enigmatic aspects of the Indus material culture and technologies, and produced a large number of seminal publications, including papers and monographs often published by IsMEO/IsIAO (for examples, see Kenoyer and Meadow 2000; Meadow and Kenoyer 2000; Miller and Vidale 2000; Vidale 2000).

More recently, when ISMEO had already been refounded, this collaboration landed on the opposite shores of the Arabian Sea in the Sultanate of Oman, where Mark Kenoyer is now working with Dennys Frenez to decode the complex nature of the earliest Indo-Arabian connections in the Early Bronze Age, revealing an unexpected, deep penetration of Indus traders in the Omani hinterland (Frenez et al. 2016; Méry et al. 2017) (Figure 3).

The re-established ISMEO – Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente, founded in Rome in November 2012 and now very close to become a Foundation under the Italian Law and with the support of the Ministries of Education and Cultural Heritage, aims at being considered the direct heir – also through its denomination – of the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO), founded in 1933 by Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Tucci.
This sense of continuity is further strengthened by the presence within the refounded ISMEO of many members who were also part of the now dissolved Institute, whose studies and research focus on that greater ‘Indian’ world, which – since its prehistoric roots to the present – has always been at the centre of Tucci’s IsMEO, in all its religious, geographical, political and cultural forms.

This is the main reason why the amount and quality of the scientific information that over the past thirty years sprang from Kenoyer’s collaboration with ISMEO’s researchers can be said impressive. It is indeed a great pleasure for all ISMEO associates to have contributed to the publication of this relevant Felicitation Volume, sign of a long-lasting friendship but also a promise for future initiatives and new joint research to come in a region of the world central to both ancient and modern history not less than Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East.

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Can archaeology be an historical and scientific field of study? According to some ‘culturalist’ viewpoints, the answer would be a curt no. Those views see human cultures as having fenced perimeters of meanings that are highly structured according to specific codes and to a large extent inaccessible to other contemporary systems of thought and values. Within such an ideological framework, growing distance in space and time worsens this intrinsic lack of understanding, thereby hindering the construction of a reliable science of the past. Under such a viewpoint, western anthropologists are thought incapable of gaining insights into Asiatic or ‘third-world’ traditional cultural systems and even less capable of deciphering the buried material records of societies that were extinguished millennia ago, their complex semantic and ideological constructions consigned to oblivion along with them. Moreover, some would argue that any claim of writing or re-writing the past of a different culture using western historical narratives and perspectives is arrogant, colonial or even openly racist.

Isn’t archaeology, as a whole, a fictional exercise for well-to-do intellectuals who artfully mask the building up of new relationships of power and domination? In rejecting such culturalist positions, we believe that – although archaeology may divide certain types of scholars – it may also bring people together for the sake of sharing knowledge. Accordingly, the recovery and rehabilitation of an archaeological heritage can provide spaces for joint intercultural ventures and create new contexts to promote mutual understanding.

Over the past forty years, Mark Kenoyer – Sikander as he is commonly called at Harappa and in different parts of Pakistan and India – has been a leading contributor and role model for sharing the past with those in the present. In a world where the search for more and increasingly narrow cultural ‘identities’ accompanies an escalation of nationalisms and bitter conflicts, seeking out variability and expressions of hybridization represent added value.
The scientific career of Mark has, and still does, provide that value and has extended extraordinary benefits to many scholars and especially to those who have contributed to the present volume.

Mark was born in Assam to a family of Christian missionaries and he grew up playing with the Naga children in a complex linguistic knot, being part of two completely different and traditionally clashing worlds. As time passed, he instinctively came to combine a rational and modern approach to knowledge and science with an extreme sensibility for the cognitive and emotional landscapes of South Asia. His deeply hybridized cultural background, language skills and refined awareness of the variegated communities of the Subcontinent allowed him to instinctively move with ease across India and Pakistan, accessing knowledge hidden in plain sight even to the most experienced anthropologists and sharing that knowledge with people from all walks of life. In the process, Mark inspired scholars and non-scholars alike and fostered a sense of pride in the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the Subcontinent, both past and present.

At Harappa, Sikander creatively and successfully hosted and trained scholars of various countries, cultures, creeds, ages and experience – including both male and female students – still a sensitive issue in contemporary South Asia and elsewhere. He continually involved students and scholars in his ethnoarchaeological and archaeological projects and provided research opportunities for them to follow their own lines of enquiry. Thanks to him, many have gained access to communities, contexts and opportunities that would have been otherwise difficult or impossible to obtain. In carrying out his own research he has always shared crucial information with all of us even though, admittedly, sometimes it seemed that his ideas and observations had always to be the best and the only true ones! Jokes aside, it has never been easy to contest his arguments and quite often it turned out that he was just right!

Many subtle interpretations now commonly accepted as granted in the study of the Indus Civilization are the results of Mark’s original insights. His revealing studies of the seashell industries of contemporary South Asia and of the carnelian bead makers of Khambhat have led many students and colleagues to include ethnoarchaeology and experimental archaeology in their research agendas. His excavations at Harappa – where for the first time in Indus archaeology he combined the high resolution of micro-stratigraphy with the advantages of large-scale exposures – have provided important new insights into the loci, context and nature of craft and other small scale and even mundane activities at an urban site. These approaches, in combination with his extensive use of instrumental analyses and technological studies to define the cultural attribution of decontextualized artifacts have contributed to shed formidable light on the nature and the evolution of Bronze Age urbanism in the Subcontinent and beyond, from Oman to Afghanistan, from Japan to the Mediterranean.

We have tried to convey all these implications in the cover and title of this volume – Walking with the Unicorn – itself a rare, beautiful and hybrid creature, but also quite probably a powerful and highly visible symbol of social interaction – Mark, in fact, is very proud of having found near the citadel at Mohenjo-daro the earliest three-dimensional terracotta figurine of such a fantastic animal! The Indus Civilization – Mark’s favorite subject – is the focus of many articles collected in this volume published to celebrate his 65th birthday. Other papers illustrate how Mark’s ideas and research have affected the archaeology of a broader area of the Middle and South Asian worlds. All contributions are dedicated to our friend, colleague and mentor in acknowledgment of a debt that will not easily be repaid and as a sign of a deep and lasting respect and affection.
The research interests of Professor Jonathan Mark Kenoyer – PhD, University of California, Berkeley – include the archaeology of early urbanism and state level societies, ancient technology, ornaments, textiles, pottery, lithics and metallurgy. He also is involved in ethnoarchaeology, experimental archaeology, and uses a wide range of archaeometric techniques and quantitative methods. His geographic areas of interest include South Asia (particularly India and Pakistan, as well as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka), West Asia (Oman, UAE, Egypt), the Mediterranean (Greece and Italy), East Asia (China, Japan and Korea) and Southeast Asia.

Professor Kenoyer has been excavating and carrying out research on the Indus Civilization since 1975 and has excavated at the site of Harappa, Pakistan since 1986. He has also worked at sites and on ethnoarchaeological projects in India, Pakistan, and more recently in China and the Sultanate of Oman. He has a special interest in ancient technologies and crafts, socio-economic and political organization, religion and ideology. These interests have led him to study a broad range of cultural periods in South Asia as well as other regions of the world. As part of his research on ancient bead technologies, he has undertaken studies of collections throughout the world, with a special focus on West Asia, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2011, a recipient of the prestigious National Science Foundation-President’s Young Investigator Award recipient, and a Fulbright Fellow. His publications include monographs on the Indus civilization as well as numerous articles, a grade school book on ancient South Asia and even a coloring book on the Indus cities for children. His work is featured on the website www.harappa.com and www.imagesofasia.com.

He was Guest Curator with the Asia Society for the exhibition on the Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization, which toured the U.S. in 1998-99. He was a special consultant for the Art of the First Cities. The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2002.
Professor Kenoyer has also won numerous teaching awards, has mentored many students in the USA, Pakistan, India, and elsewhere. He continues to train students throughout the world and participate in public outreach concerning the cultural heritage of the areas in which he works.

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