



Research Paper

## Harappan headdress figurines: some notes

MITA SARKAR (DAS)  
INDIRA GANDHI CENTRE, VISVA-BHARATI  
REASERCH ASSOCIATE (ANTHROPOLOGY)

**ABSTRACT:** *This 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.*

*Received 05 Apr., 2024; Revised 14 Apr., 2024; Accepted 16 Apr., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.*

*Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)*

### I. 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<sup>2</sup> and possible as much as 3.1 million km<sup>2</sup>, 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. The mature phase Indus Civilisation 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).

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;

### II. 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<sup>1</sup> 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' 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.

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

\*Corresponding Author: MITA SARKAR (DAS)

developed indigenously and independently of contemporaneous civilisations, 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.

These 'headdress' figurines appear to have originated from crudely-modelled 7th millennium BCE unbaked clay figurines found in the Neolithic settlement of Mehargarh in Baluchistan (Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 36-7; Jarrige 1997. Lesure (2011, p. 20-21,) notes a 'halo' of Neolithic and Chalcolithic female-form figurines around the Fertile Crescent which show common formats, traits and themes, of which Mehargarh is at the eastern extremity. Similarities to the figurines from Iran and Turkmenistan are striking.

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).

1. <u>Indus River alluvial plain</u>		
Harappa	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.
Mohenjo-daro	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.	Ardeleneanu-Jansen 2002, p. 207-11, figs. 1-3; Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 118; Kenoyer 1998, fig. 7.14.
Chanhu-daro	Mckay reports that figurines were similar to the 'Mother Goddess' figures from Harappa, with differences attributed by Clark and Kenoyer to chronology.	Mckay 1936, p. 89; 1938, p. 475; Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 510; During Caspers 1994, p. 186
2. <u>Western Indus Valley periphery</u>		
Nausharo	While there are similarities with the above sites, Nausharo (which is in the same area as Mehargarh 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	Indasu bunmelten 2000, p. 42, 115, Jarrige 1997 figs. 3-11; Kenoyer 1998, figs. 7.21, 7.22.
3. <u>Upper eastern Ghaggar Hakra-Saraswati River.</u>		
Banawali	Only a handful of figurines have been found at this site close to Rakhigarhi, a cylindrical-body female with poorly-defined features, short legs with arms or headdress loops covering its face.	Bisht 1982, p. 119, plate 10.20; Indasu bunmelten 2000, p. 117.
Bagasara and Shikarpur	Only two (possibly 3) partial figurines have been found at these two nearby sites.	Bhan and Ajithprasad 2008, p. 5 and fig. 4; 2009, p. 5 and
4. <u>Eastern plains</u>		
Gujarat and Dholavira	Few female figurines these are quite simple and different to those from Harappa.	Clark and Kenoyer 2017, p. 511; Indasu bunmeiten 2000, p. 116.
Lothal	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.	Rao 1985, p. 477-78, fig. 98.
Kuntasi	Only one female figurine with a simple, unadorned star-shaped body quite different to 9. the Harappan style has been found from this substantial Indus Civilisation emporium town.	Dhavilkar et al. 1996, p. 246, figs. 7.44 item 9 and 7.45 item 9.

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 Chanhudaro 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-form (or, indeed anthropomorphic) figurines are concerned; any commonality may be attributed to the same subject matter (the human body) and the same material (clay).

### **III. 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 1 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.

Indus 'headdress' figurines have never been found in any burial context. 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.

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.

### **Bibliography:**

- [1]. Blagi, P 2004, 'Women in Ancient Sindh. Bronze Age Figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization', *Sindh Watch Quarterly* Spring/Summer 2004, pp. 24-25.
- [2]. Clark SR 2003, 'Representing the Indus body: sex, gender, sexuality, and the anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Harappa', *Asian Perspectives*, vol. 42(2), pp. 304-28.
- [3]. Clark SR 2005, 'The elusive "mother goddess": a critical approach to the interpretation of Harappan terracotta figurines', in C Jarrige and V Lefevre (eds.), *South Asian Archaeology 2001, Vol 1 (Prehistory)*, APDF - Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Paris, pp. 61-77.
- [4]. Clark SR 2007a, 'Bodies of evidence: the case against the "Harappan" mother goddess', in C Renfrew and I Morley (eds.), *Image and Imagination: A Global Prehistory of Figurative Representation*, McDonald Institute, Cambridge, pp. 227-39.
- [5]. Clark, SR 2007b, 'The Social Lives of Figurines: Decontextualizing the Third Millennium BC Terracotta Figurines from Harappa (Pakistan)', PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, Boston.
- [6]. Clark, SR 2009, 'Material matters: representation and materiality of the Harappan body', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol. 16, pp. 231-61.
- [7]. Clark, SR and Kenoyer, JM 2017, 'South Asia - Indus Civilization', in T Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 493-519.
- [8]. Coningham, R and Young, R 2015, *The Archaeology of South Asia: from the Indus to Asoka, c.6500 BCE-200 CE*, Cambridge University Press.
- [9]. Kenoyer, JM 1997, 'Trade and technology of the Indus Valley: new insights from Harappa, Pakistan', *World Archaeology* 29(2), pp. 262-280.
- [10]. Kenoyer, JM 1998, 'People and Professions', in JM Kenoyer (ed.), *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, pp. 127-137.
- [11]. Kenoyer, JM 2006, 'Cultures and societies of the Indus tradition', in R Thapar (ed.), *The Making of the Aryan*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, pp. 21-49.

- [12]. Mackay, E 1936, 'Excavations at Chanhu-daro by the American School of Indic and Iranian Studies and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Season 1935-36', *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, vol. 34, no. 205, pp. 83-92.
- [13]. Scarre, C and Fagan, BM 2016, *Ancient Civilizations*, Fourth Edition, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.
- [14]. Singh, U 2008, *A History of Ancient and Early medieval India: from the Stone Age to the 12th century*, Pearson Education, New Delhi.