

CRAFT TRADITIONS OF THE INDUS CIVILIZATION AND THEIR LEGACY IN MODERN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Specialized technologies and the organization of craft production in the urban centre of Harappan and other Indus settlements provided the foundation for later craft traditions in Pakistan. Recent studies have shown that the systematic analysis of the Indus craft traditions can provide a unique insight into the social and economic organization of this society. These studies also demonstrate more clearly what the Indus Tradition has contributed to modern technologies still being practiced in Pakistan.

Introduction

When the ancient inhabitants of the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra regions began to settle down and practice farming and animal husbandry, it was necessary for them to develop new tools and technologies. While some of these technologies had roots in earlier Palaeolithic adaptations, other crafts such as ceramics, metallurgy, faience, and agate bead manufacture reflect the creative and intellectual abilities of the ancient inhabitants of the greater Indus region. Many of the technologies developed by these early agriculturalists and pastoralists were needed to produce ritual objects and ornaments as well as for making functional tools relating to subsistence or defence. Together these technologies provided the foundation for even more complex technologies that were needed to support and maintain urban society.

The earliest urban society in South Asia is represented in the small networks of cities and towns that developed during the Kot Dijian phase of the Regionalization Era (3300-2600 B.C.) (Mughal, 1990; Shaffer, 1991). The period of major expansion and urban integration is seen during the subsequent Harappan phase of the Integration Era (2600-1900 B.C.) (Kenoyer, 1991).

During the Kot Dijian and subsequent Harappan phase specialized crafts appear to have played an important though varying role in the economic, political and ritual aspects of society. Ever since the first excavations at Mohenjodaro, craft activities has been central to all discussions of the structure and organization of this ancient city and the civilization that it represents.

Earliest Studies of Indus Crafts

The earliest studies of craft traditions of the Indus Civilization were carried out by the first excavators of the major cities of Harappa, Mohenjodaro and Chanhudaro. Of these studies, perhaps the most important were those made by E.J.H. Mackay who assisted Sir John Marshall in the excavations at Mohenjodaro (Mackay, 1938; Marshall, 1931) and then went on to excavate Chanhudaro (Mackay, 1943).

Mackay developed a rigorous study of traditional crafts in order to better interpret the archaeological materials that he was excavating. Today, we may refer to this as an ethnoarchaeological approach. With the assistance of his informants, he made careful observations of the ways in which traditional crafts were practiced to determine what types of patterns would be observable on the archaeological materials. Using these various observations he was able to make quite reliable interpretations of the objects discovered at Mohenjodaro and Chanhudaro. Of the wide range of traditional crafts that he observed, he published special accounts of carnelian etching or bleaching processes at Sehwan Sharif (Mackay, 1937) and pottery manufacture in Sindh (Mackay, 1930).

Even though Mackay did not publish detailed accounts of his many studies it is quite clear from his writings that when he looked at the Indus region, he did so in a systematic manner that included careful observation and analysis. Unfortunately, many of his contemporaries and successors did not follow his example. Instead of making careful technological studies, we see many examples of simple analogies being drawn between modern and ancient crafts (Vats, 1940; Wheeler, 1968). The result has been a confusing picture of the archaeological record of crafts and an even more confusing range of interpretations regarding the craft traditions of the Indus Civilization.

Recent studies at Harappa, Mohenjodaro and other sites are beginning to clear up some of the confusions regarding the organization of specific crafts as well as the role that these crafts played in the overall economy of the Indus cities.

Crafts Specialization

The term craft specialization has been used in many different ways, but it is important to understand that this term refers to an adaptive process rather than to a state of being (Kenoyer, Vidale and Bhan, 1991). In other words, specialized crafts are not a new feature that appears at some point in the evolutionary history of a culture. Rather, they are present in all societies where skilled individuals are needed to produce objects for use by others. With the rise of large settlements, early urban centres and eventually state level society, craft specialization involved

the production of goods by part-time or full-time specialists for redistribution to local and extra-local consumers.

Craft Traditions of the Indus Cities

Cities such as Harappa and Mohenjodaro, in addition to their political and ritual functions, appear to have become centres for trade and production. In the workshops that were distributed at the edges or in the core of these cities, we see the development of distinctive styles of utilitarian and ornamental or symbolic objects. The most common objects preserved in the archaeological record are pottery, beads, bangles and various metal tools and ornaments. However, we must remember that the production of perishable items such as fabrics, leather, woodwork and basketry undoubtedly played an important role in these cities, much as they do in the urban centres of modern Pakistan.

In our studies of the various types of finished objects, it is apparent that some objects were made exclusively for the larger urban centres such as Harappa and Mohenjodaro. For example, hollowed shell libation vessels, stoneware bangles and faience vessels are found at only the major urban centres. Other objects, such as the black on red painted pottery and steatite seals are spread throughout the entire region of the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra plains, as well as in the adjacent regions of Baluchistan, Afghanistan, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

While there is a general similarity in artifact styles throughout the greater Indus region, detailed studies of specific types reveal the presence of important local variations (Dales and Kenoyer, 1986; Kenoyer, 1984; Pande, 1984). Certain sites may also have become primary manufacturing centres for items related to socio-economic or ritual status (Dales and Kenoyer, 1977; Jarrige, 1981; Kenoyer, 1989; Rissman, 1989; Vidale, 1989; Vidale and Bondioli, 1986; Wright, 1989).

Recent studies have shown that some crafts, such as seal manufacture (Rissman, 1989), stoneware bangle production (Halim and Vidale, 1984) and carnelian bead making (Vidale, 1989), may have been segregated to control production of status items. On the other hand, some crafts such as metal working or pottery making may have been segregated for more basic reasons related to access to materials and labour. Similarly, the standardization of items such as weights or seals may be attributed to centralized control, while other objects, such as pottery and ornaments, may have been standardized by mechanisms that reflect a shared ideology and aesthetic. For example, kin-related learning processes or the spread of kin-related artisans to different settlements can result in high standardization (Kenoyer, 1989).

In order to understand the different roles of specialized crafts it is important to distinguish at least four categories of crafts practiced at Harappan sites;

- 1) those processing local materials using simple technologies — wood-working, terracotta production, house-building, etc.;
- 2) those processing non-local materials using simple technologies — chipped stone, ground and pecked stone;
- 3) those processing local materials using more complex technologies — stoneware bangle manufacture, elaborate painted and specialized ceramics, inlaid woodwork, etc.; and
- 4) those processing non-local materials using more complex technologies — agate bead manufacture, seal production, copper/bronze metal working, precious metal working, shell working, faience manufacture, etc. (Kenoyer, 1991).

In general, the first two show more regional variation, while the last two appear more standardized.

The organization of craft production was probably varied, and included small and large scale kin related production and more centrally controlled production of high-status items (painted pottery and stoneware bangles) for local or long-distance trade (Wright, 1989).

During the Harappan phase, some technologies reached very high levels of expertise, especially the manufacture of long carnelian beads (Kenoyer, 1986), steatite seals (Rissman, 1989), stoneware bangles (Halim and Vidale, 1984), compact frit or faience (McCarthy and Vandiver, 1990) and bronze objects (Agrawal, 1971). This ability to create new substances out of more mundane raw materials was highly developed and there is evidence for the trade of Indus objects as far as Mesopotamia and possibly Egypt.

Numerous Indus seals, beads and shell objects are known from Mesopotamia, and the Mesopotamian texts refer to the important trade with Melluha, which has been convincingly identified as the Indus Valley (Parpola, Parpola et al., 1977; Potts, 1990; Weisgerber, 1984). On the other hand, there is little evidence for Mesopotamian goods in the Indus cities. Identifications of Mesopotamian-derived objects or styles at Harappan sites (During-Caspers, 1982; During-Caspers, 1984) are controversial; most of the exotic items, specifically cylinder seals, could have been made locally or derived from intermediate regions such as northeastern Iran (Joshi and Parpola, 1987, pp. xiv-xv). It is not unlikely that some goods and raw materials were coming from Mesopotamia, but they were either reprocessed or were perishable items that do not leave any permanent record for archaeologists.

The general patterns of craft production and trade that are documented at Mohenjodaro and other Indus cities indicate the presence of different organizational structures. Some crafts were apparently structured on the basis of kin networks and were decentralized in terms of state control. Others may have involved long-distance kin networks and alliances that could be decentralized in terms of direct political control, but required some centralized support to maintain long-distance trade relations. Crafts that were difficult to control directly may have been less important for state economy, while easily controlled crafts could have been important for state economy.

Modern Craft Traditions

Many of the traditional crafts in Pakistan retain some of the characteristic features of the earlier Indus crafts. Some of these features are due to the fact that the same basic raw materials are still available and that the most efficient techniques of manufacture remain unchanged.

For example, pottery manufacture, specifically the production of unglazed terracotta, involves basically the same technology as that used by the Indus artisans. Because of the fact that clay and fuel is available throughout the alluvial plain, this craft is carried out in every village and town. Much of the marketing of the ceramics is carried out on the basis of reciprocal exchange between the potters and the agriculturalists, making it difficult to monitor the income or profit of the potters. While the state may tax the sale of pottery in major markets or when it is shipped from one region to the other, generally speaking, pottery manufacture and distribution continues to be structured on the basis of kin networks and is decentralized in terms of state control.

Faience manufacture is no longer practiced today as it was in the past, but the same basic technology has been incorporated into the production of glazes that are used on ceramic vessels or on decorative tiles. Glazed ceramics and tile making require different skills and raw materials than terracotta pottery making, and the final products are generally more valuable. At the present time, and even historically, glazed ceramics and tiles have been produced in only a few specialized workshops, for example Hala and Multan. The knowledge of glaze manufacture and the careful control of firing temperatures has traditionally been kept secret, with different workshops specializing in specific colours and techniques (Rye and Evans, 1976). Historically, glazed ceramic production was patronized by the elites and indirectly controlled by the state (Wulff, 1966).

Many other craft traditions of the Indus Civilization continue to be practiced in the bazaars of Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi. Copper-Bronze metal working, gold working, agate bead making and steatite amulet manufacture. Although the

finished objects being produced today are very different from those made in the Indus cities, many of the raw materials and techniques have remained unchanged. It is important to recognize that these crafts do not represent a stagnation in technology or science, but rather an optimum method of production using local materials and fuels. The simple terracotta water jar that was developed by the peoples of Indus region provides freshly cool water without the need for refrigeration. These crafts represent a cultural heritage that has not been destroyed by the vagaries of history.

As archaeologists and historians we need to carefully examine the factors that have contributed to the preservation of specific technologies and the continuities in craft organization. The ongoing research at Harappa and other Indus cities should continue to focus on the organization of ancient crafts to reveal the important contributions of this ancient culture to the modern society of Pakistan.



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