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Materializing Harappan identities: Unity and diversity in the borderlands of the Indus Civilization



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ABSTRACT

The widespread distribution of Harappan material culture throughout a vast expanse of northwestern South Asia is a defining characteristic of the Indus Civilization (2600–1900 BC). The social dynamics responsible for this material pattern, however, are not fully understood. While top-down perspectives on interregional interaction explain some aspects of the material record in the Indian state of Gujarat, they do not explain the material diversity that we observe at Indus settlements in Gujarat. Here, we undertake a bottom-up exploration of Harappan material culture at two small, recently excavated Indus settlements in Gujarat. Our findings show that although the residents of both sites participated in the interregional economy and publically displayed a common Harappan identity, there is evidence for considerable variation in the domestic practices characteristic of each site. We interpret these to suggest that the residents of these sites were integrated into the wider Indus Civilization by way of inclusionary ideologies that served to unify socially diverse borderland communities. These findings and interpretations regarding the role of material culture in the mediation of local social dynamics in the Indus borderlands contribute to a more complete understanding of South Asia's first urban society while offering methodological and theoretical perspectives that further the exploration of these issues in early complex societies more generally.

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Introduction

Nearly a century of archaeological research in the context of the Indus Civilization (2600–1900 BC) has led to the generation of increasingly detailed and sophisticated synthetic treatments of South Asia's first experiment with urban society (Agrawal, 2007; Kenoyer, 1998; Lal, 1997; Possehl, 2002; Wright, 2010). Nevertheless, critical features of the Indus Civilization remain incompletely understood, hindering its contribution to more general discussions of early complex societies (e.g., Trigger, 2003). A defining characteristic of the Indus Civilization, for example, is the distribution of a relatively homogenous corpus of distinctive material culture throughout regions of India and Pakistan that were more or less materially distinct during earlier periods. While this material pattern is clear, the social dynamics that produced it are not. In the case of the Indian state of Gujarat, one such region outside of the

alluvial heartland that came to be materially incorporated into the wider Indus Civilization, this material pattern has been taken as evidence for the colonization of the region by communities hailing from the distant Indus cities (Bisht, 1989; Chakrabarti, 1999; Dhavalikar, 1994; Possehl, 1992). We argue that although top-down perspectives on interregional interaction such as these may explain some aspects of the material record, they do not explain the material diversity that we observe at Indus settlements in the region. Here, we seek to augment these perspectives through an explicitly bottom-up analytical perspective on the integration of local communities into the wider Indus Civilization. Using data generated from recent and ongoing excavations at the Indus settlements of Bagasra² and Shikarpur, we adopt a technological approach to the study of material culture that explores the ways in which objects were involved with the materialization of social identities at these neighboring settlements. Focusing on items of personal adornment and domestic practice, our analyses demonstrate that

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² The archaeological site referred to here as Bagasra, the name of the nearest modern village, is also known as Gola Dhoro, the local name of the mound. Initially referred to in the literature as Bagasra (Sonawane et al., 2003), it has been referred to in subsequent publications as Gola Dhoro (Bhan et al., 2004, 2005; Chase, 2010). Here, we maintain convention and refer to it as Bagasra.

displays of material unity at these sites masked considerable underlying social diversity. These findings and interpretations regarding the role of material culture in the mediation of local social dynamics in the Indus borderlands contribute to a more complete understanding of South Asia's first urban society while offering methodological and theoretical perspectives that further the exploration of these issues in early complex societies more generally.

Harappan Gujarat: life in the borderlands

The developmental trajectory of the Indus Civilization in Gujarat stands in striking contrast to that known from the alluvial plains of the Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra river systems, where Harappa and Mohenjodaro developed into urban centers around 2600 BC (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002; Wright, 2010). Excavations in the alluvium at sites such as Harappa clearly indicate the gradual development of Harappan material culture from local antecedents (Kenoyer, 2008; Meadow and Kenoyer, 2005). Harappan material culture in the geographically distinct region of Gujarat, however appears abruptly shortly after 2600 BC at the roughly 50 ha city of Dholavira (Bisht, 2000) as well as at series of much smaller, mostly coastal settlements situated along waterborne travel corridors (Fig. 1). Although typically less than ten hectares in area, residential space at settlements such as Surkotada (Joshi, 1990), Kanmer (Kharakwal et al., 2012), Bagasra (Sonawane et al., 2003), and Shikarpur (Bhan and Ajithprasad, 2008, 2009), the latter two sites under consideration here, was generally enclosed in square walled enclosures of monumental proportions. The residents of these walled settlements used a full repertoire of Harappan material culture as known from sites in Sindh and the Punjab and were often involved in the manufacture Harappan-style ornaments from locally available raw materials. Many of these ornaments, such as the shell bangles produced by the residents of Bagasra and Shikarpur, were among the most economically and ideologically important Indus ornaments found at settlements large and small throughout the Indus Civilization, demonstrating their residents' regular participation in interregional networks of trade and exchange. These sites are typically referred to in the literature of Indus archaeology in Gujarat as Classical Harappan settlements distinguishing them from contemporaneous settlements where typically Harappan material culture is largely absent and distinctively local ceramic forms predominate. These include the larger settlements of Rojdi (Possehl and Raval, 1989), Kuntasi (Dhavalikar et al., 1996), and Jaidak (Ajithprasad, 2008), as well as hundreds of mostly inland sites known from survey (e.g., Bhan, 1986; Possehl, 1980). Generally interpreted as a rural component of the Indus Civilization in Gujarat (Bhan, 1994; Sonawane, 2005), sites of this nature are often referred to as Sorath Harappan settlements (Possehl, 1992). As described below for Bagasra and Shikarpur, however, ceramics characteristic of these latter settlements are common at walled settlements where they generally appear alongside classically Harappan ceramics, challenging a simple dichotomy of site types and complicating social interpretation and archaeological practice (e.g., survey methods, chronological development, etc.) in the region (Rajesh and Patel, 2006).

This pattern has been interpreted as representing a colonization of the region by immigrant Harappans hailing from the distant Indus cities (Bisht, 1989; Chakrabarti, 1999; Dhavalikar, 1994; Possehl, 1992). While this model has its origins in culture-historical ontologies of migration and diffusion characteristic of Indian archaeology at the time of their discovery (Johansen, 2003), the reasonably discrete distribution of Harappan material culture at well-planned and monumentally constructed settlements located along trade routes nevertheless superficially fits many examples of colonial expansion. This interpretation has been developed by

means of often implicit analogies with historical colonial episodes in which colonies are established in less materially sophisticated peripheral regions as a means to exploit locally available raw materials for the benefit of centrally-administered organizations based in politically and technologically sophisticated urban centers. Dhavalikar (1994), for example, in his synthetic treatment of the Indus Civilization has explicitly invoked Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory in his analysis of Harappan Gujarat. Portraying the integration of Gujarat as an example of "cultural imperialism," this interpretation is supported through comparisons to a variety of historically known European colonial contexts ranging from British and Dutch colonialisms in 17th century India to Belgian colonialism in 19th century Africa. As discussed below, this top-down, macro-scale interpretive framework does not help us interpret the material variability that we observe at Bagasra and Shikarpur, forcing us to take into serious consideration long-standing theoretical critiques of its theoretical foundation.

Critiques of world-systems theory as applied by Dhavalikar to explain the distribution of Harappan material culture in Gujarat have led to a reappraisal of its expectations and explanatory power. The most consistent critiques of world-systems models in archaeology have related to the nature of the power relationships linking colonists and local peoples (Gosden, 2004: 7–23). Specifically, it is argued that premodern transport and military technologies generally precluded the degree of political and economic domination of peripheral regions as was so often the case the historical colonialisms upon which world-systems theory was initially derived (Kohl, 1987; Schneider, 1977; Schortman and Urban, 1998; Stein, 1999). It follows that the rote application of world-systems theories to ancient episodes of interregional interaction often writes structures of the more recent past onto prehistory thereby precluding the construction of novel interpretations of past social dynamics (Dietler, 1998). Further, it is argued that the presumption of core-dominance encapsulated in world-systems theory minimize the agency of the residents of so-called peripheries to affect local trajectories of social change (Stein, 2002). Indeed, numerous case studies have highlighted episodes of intense interregional integration over the last 5000 years that do not, in fact, fit the model of classical world-systems theory (Dietler, 2010; Dominguez, 2002; Jennings, 2011; Stein, 1999; Van Dommelen, 2005). Finally, archaeological studies of European colonial encounters have clearly demonstrated the limitations of world-systems models for predicting the specific economic and social relations in particular settings (Lightfoot, 2005; Lycett, 2005; Silliman, 2001; Wynne-Jones, 2010). Attempts to modify the assumptions of world-systems theory in order to account for such varied historical situations (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 2000; Hall, 2000; Kardulias and Hall, 2008; Peregrine, 2000), however, have left it as little more than "shorthand for 'interregional interaction system'" (Stein, 1999: 25).

In this theoretical landscape, top-down analytical perspectives such as have been applied to the Indus Civilization in Gujarat are of little interpretive value for understanding material variation of the type presented here. Rather, consideration of the dynamics of interregional interaction in complex societies cross-culturally (e.g., contributions to Lydon and Rizvi, 2010; Lyons and Papadopoulos, 2002; Stein, 2005) leads to an expectation of material diversity in borderland regions such as Gujarat where residents of various backgrounds and interests negotiated novel social identities in the context of ever-changing social, economic, and political networks. Specifically, we argue that only bottom-up empirical research geographically situated in the borderland settings where social identities were materialized through daily practice and interaction (Lightfoot and Martinez, 1995; Naum, 2010; Parker, 2006) will lead to more complete understandings of the social dynamics of complex societies such as the Indus Civilization.

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