



BREAKING GROUND AT MEHRGARH: LIFE BEFORE THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

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Abstract:

This paper traces the Neolithic civilization unearthed at Mehrgarh, located in the Karachi Plain of Balochistan in Pakistan. Since its discovery by eminent French archaeologist Jean-François Jarrige in 1974, this site has offered important clues to life prior to the Indus Valley Civilization. Here, we make a note of the archaeological significance of the site and the lifestyle and technology of the Mehrgarh peoples through periods I to VIII.

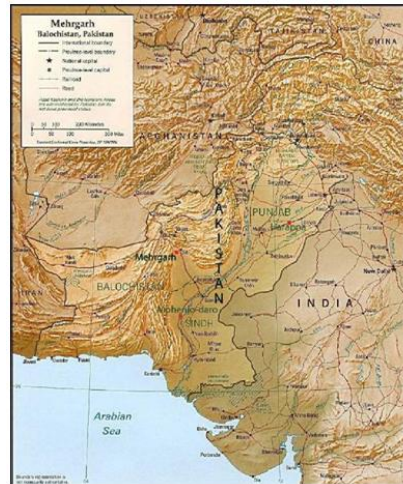
KEY WORDS:

Indus valley Civilization , Neolithic civilization , lifestyle and technology .



INTRODUCTION-

Until 40 years ago, the epitome of ancient civilization was the Indus Valley. Our knowledge of the ancients was restricted to the sites of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, which seemed oddly advanced, when viewed in isolation. But great headways have been made since, changing our understanding and perspectives of the cultures in the Indian subcontinent. One of the major discoveries in this sphere was the Neolithic site of Mehrgarh in 1974, which provided important links to life before and leading up to the sophisticated culture of the Indus Valley. This archaeologically-rich site yielded the first evidences of agriculture, cattle domestication, and the crafts and thereby civilization in the true sense.



Discovery and excavation: The proto-historic site of Mehrgarh (variously spelt as Mehrgahr, Merhgarh or Merhgahr), was discovered in 1974, as mentioned above, by French archaeologist couple, Jean-François Jarrige and Catherine Jarrige. Jean-François Jarrige is an eminent archaeologist and Sindhologist and is presently the Musée Guimet in Paris.



Jean-François Jarrige

The French Archaeological Mission, in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology of Pakistan undertook the mammoth project of excavating the Neolithic finds of Mehrgarh between the years 1975-2000. The wide archaeological area in question - about 300 hectares - lay near the modern Mehrgarh village in Balochistan at the foot of the Bolan Pass. The Bolan Pass was an important route of communication between the Iranian Plateau, Central Asia and the Indus Valley. These excavations have been carried out on about six major mounds and upto 32,0001 artifacts have been reportedly been collected over the large span of 25 years. This huge number of artifacts is due to successive settlements who lived in that area over the centuries. Each of these settlements are marked by the different layers and mounds found at the site.



The Brahui Range seen from the site of Mehrgarh. © C. Jarrige

Jarriage and his team excavated the site in two main phases:

1.1974-1986: One of the most significant finds of this phase was during the third season of fieldwork between 1976-77, when sector MR3 was excavated. Between 1985 and 1996, the excavations were stopped, as the French Archaeological Mission turned its attention to the excavation of Nausharo near Mehrgarh.

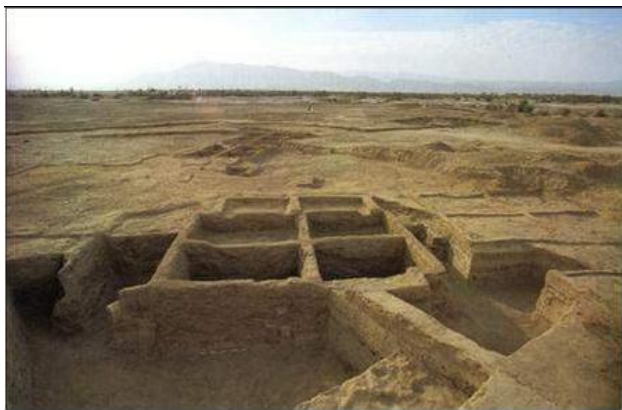
2.1997- 2000: Excavations were resumed again in 1997, whence important discoveries about the internal stratigraphy of the Neolithic aceramic sequence². Says Catherine Jarrige of the Centre for Archaeological Research Indus Baluchistan at the Musée Guimet in Paris: "...the Kachi plain and in the Bolan basin (are) situated at the Bolan peak pass, one of the main routes connecting southern Afghanistan, eastern Iran, the Balochistan hills and the Indus River valley.

1 History of civilizations of Central Asia by Vadim Mikhailovich Masson.

2 'Mehrgarh Neolithic' paper presented by Jean-François Jarrige in the International Seminar on the 'First Farmers in Global Perspective', Lucknow, India, 18-20 January, 2006

This area of rolling hills is thus located on the western edge of the Indus valley, where, around 2500 BCE, a large urban civilization emerged at the same time as those of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Egypt. For the first time in the Indian Subcontinent, a continuous sequence of dwelling-sites has been established from 7000 BCE to 500 BCE, (as a result of the) explorations in Pirak from 1968 to 1974; in Mehrgarh from 1975 to 1985; and of Nausharo from 1985 to 1996."

Lifestyle and technology: These remarkable findings at Mehrgarh and surrounding areas have established it firmly as the precursor to the Indus Valley Civilization, and the research around it has been groundbreaking. As Ahmad Hasan Dani, professor emeritus of archaeology at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, has rightly said, "Discoveries at Mehrgarh changed the entire concept of the Indus civilization."



Mud Brick houses in Mehrgarh

Through stages I to VIII, one sees a steady and obvious upward curve in the lifestyle and technology of the people of Mehrgarh. People in the early phase lived in rudimentary houses fashioned from mud bricks; cultivated crops like barley, einkorn and emmer wheat, jujubes and dates; probably had some basic storage

systems for grains; domesticated sheep, goat and cattle; and used bitumen-lined baskets for everyday chores. This is the aceramic phase, when the art of baking clay had still not been discovered. Even stone tools were scarcely used in this period³. The later periods offer evidence of the inhabitants of Mehrgarh having perfected not just the art of ceramics

and pottery, but also several other arts and crafts like metallurgy, bead making, tanning, and flint knapping⁴. Stages of occupation: The site of Mehrgarh is divided into eight periods, in a descending order of antiquity, whereby Period I denotes the oldest and Period VIII the latest. The salient features of these periods are as under:

3 The Oxford Companion to Indian Archaeology by Dilip K. Chakrabarti, 2006, pg 108, Oxford University Press

4 "Mehrgarh." Oxford Companion to Archaeology, Possehl, Gregory L., edited by Brian Fagan, 1996, Oxford University Press



Period I: 7000 BCE–5500 BCE

Period I of Mehrgarh was decidedly a Neolithic aceramic phase, and resemble the Kili Gul Muhammad site (KGM I), also in Balochistan, Pakistan. Though primitive in terms of tools and pottery, this was the phase where the semi-nomadic man first started agricultural practices. Evidence of wheat and barley farming have been found, in addition to those of cattle rearing. Interestingly though, the lapidary industry seemed fairly well developed as evidenced by ornaments made of sea shell, limestone, turquoise, and lapis lazuli. Simple figurines of women and animals were also found. Speaking of comparatively fine skills in a fairly primitive society, evidence of proto-dentistry in early Mehrgarh has also been served lately!

A clay figurine of a woman

In burial practices, one sees females being buried with some ornaments and young goats, while some males were buried with bladelets and other kinds of microliths.



Periods II & III: 5500 BCE–4800 BCE & 4800 BCE–3500 BCE

Period II is located at the site MR 4, and is subdivided into II A , II B and II C, while Period III is at MR 2. By the second and third Periods of Mehrgarh, ceramic technology had been discovered and largely used. Fine specimens of painted pottery have been excavated, along with detailed terracotta figures and glazed beads. The first terracotta seals also belong to this period. This connects well to the evidence of considerable

Jewellery from glazed beads and trinkets

Manufacturing activity in these periods:- Common technology included copper drills, updraft kilns, large pit kilns and copper melting crucibles. Wheel turned pottery and red ware pottery are hallmarks, especially of Period II A. This pottery is comparable to KGM

III, Togau A, Hissar 1B & IC, Sialk III and Namazga II, characterised by geometric designs of dot tip motifs, rosettes, hatched or plain triangles, butterfly patterns, chequer board patterns. Period III is chalcolithic, marked by advances in the use of copper.

Burial practices involved burying ornaments with female bodies and an otherwise reducing number of grave goods. Red ochre was found on some of the bones, suggesting that the grave may have been painted on the inside before the body was laid in.

Periods IV, V, VI & VII: 3500 to 3250 BCE, 3250 to 3000 BCE, Circa 3000 BCE, & 2600 - 2000 BCE The site containing Periods IV to VII is designated as MR1. Broadly speaking, these periods are marked by sophisticated ceramic activity, marked architectural development, and increased use of stone tools. With the decline of concentrated Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement patterns, the focus seems to have shifted smaller and more compact habitations. Period VII is thought to be contemporaneous with the middle Indus Valley Civilization and around this time, the people of Mehrgarh seemed to have abandoned this site and moved to the nearby site of Naushuro.

Individual families with systematically built rectangular houses, grain storage jars and hearths became the norm. An apparent use of irrigation helped cultivate spheorococum variety of wheat, and this, alongwith more domestication of animals, led to a diversification in diet.



Painted polychrome pottery from Mehrgarh

The pottery from this phase is most notable for its craftsmanship and artistry. There are instances of Faiz Muhammad Grey Ware, KGM Ware, Kechi Beg Ware, Togau B & C Pottery, Black on Red Ware and Quetta Ware across the time periods. Fish and Pipal leaf motifs were common as were geometrical patterns. This pottery is widely spread in the Mehrgarh region at sites like Lal Shah, Kiyani Damb, Hamada I, Hampada II, Khanwah. Period VII saw a prolific production of terracotta figurines, sometimes also referred to as Zhob figurines. These figurines - sometimes women holding children - may have been considered goddesses and consequently, a faint picture of the Mother cult may emerge.

A graveyard for young children is also among the noteworthy finds from this period. Aged between 2-3 years, these bodies were found oriented in an East - West direction in flexed positions in small mud brick boxes.



Period VIII: Circa 1900 BC

This last period of Mehrgarh is found at the Sibri cemetery, which is located at a distance of 8km from the village of Mehrgarh. This phase marks an important connection to the nearby location of Naushuro and some other cultures in Balochistan and the Bactro-Margiana region of Central Asia, with its similar geometric seals and pottery⁵.

This establishes firmly Mehrgarh's

connection with the Indus valley civilization, and thereby affixing an important piece to the historical puzzle of our ancestry.

CONCLUSION:

With its groundbreaking findings, Mehrgarh has proved to be one of the most important archaeological projects of our times. With an unbroken chain of successive archaeological Periods, the site has yielded thousands of artifacts, remains of houses, graves and grave goods, cultural relics, and clues to patterns of agriculture and animal husbandry. The site offers a comprehensive view of the Neolithic world that paved way for the greatness that is the Indus Valley Civilization.

Much work remains to be done at Mehrgarh. The preliminary results of the first six campaigns none the less demonstrate that the theoretical models used to interpret the prehistory of southern Asia must be completely reappraised. This rich site provides an archaeological record with a long sequence of occupations. The sequence reveals a process of continuing elaboration that affected cereal cultivation, animal husbandry, crafts, architecture and even ideology. Step by step one can see the stage being set for the development of the complex cultural patterns that became manifest in the great cities of the Indus civilization in the middle of the third millennium B.C⁶

As detailed research about crop and climate patterns continue, we hope that more and more clues fall into place, and paint a vivid image of the colorful lives led by our ancestors in Mehrgarh.

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⁵ Sibri and the South Cemetery of Mehrgarh: third millenium connections between the northern Kachi Plain (Pakistan) and Central Asia by Marielle Santoni, South Asian Archaeology 1981, Proceedings of Sixth International Conference of the Association of South Asian Archaeologists, in Western Europe.

⁶ The Antecedents of civilization in the Indus valley: by jean-Francois Jarrige and Richard .H.Meadow. 1980 Scientific American, INC