

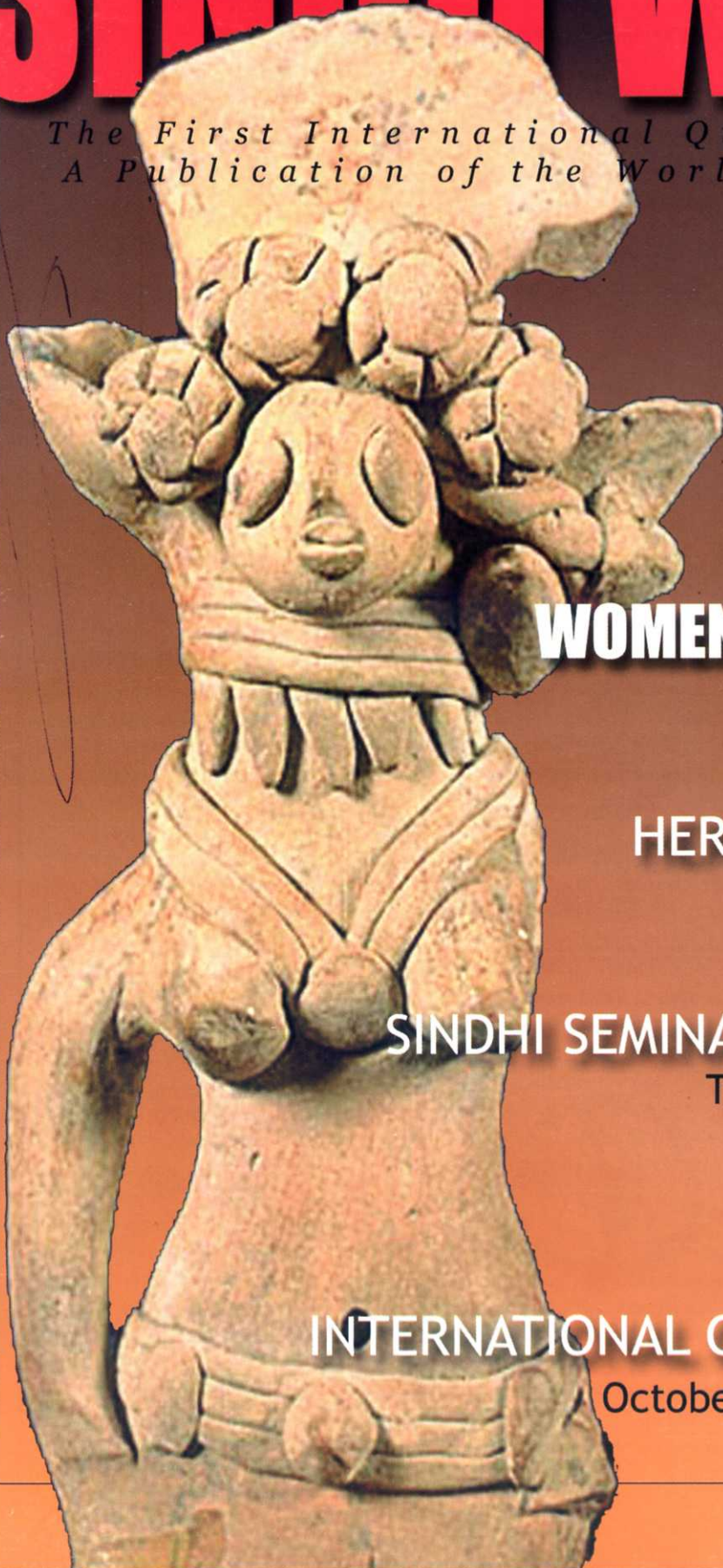
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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE UPDATE

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SINDHI CULTURE, COMMUNITY AND COMMENTARY

WOMEN IN ANCIENT SINDH

Bronze Age Figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization

*Text and photos by Paolo Biagi
Department of Sciences of Antiquity and the Near East
Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy*

It is during the Bronze Age Indus Civilization, which developed throughout the entire third millennium before Christ, that a community in the Indus Valley - almost completely devoid of religion-like beliefs, violence, and war-like activities - adopted new ideogram writing. Even though they have never been fully translated, mainly because of the absence of bilingual inscriptions, the writings' symbols were often incised on different types of steatite and copper seals or stamped below the rim of different types of ceramic vessels and containers, which were sometimes traded across the Arabic Sea as far as the coast of Oman, the ancient Magan, and the southern shores of the Persian Gulf. If we take into consideration some of the most interesting finds of this civilization, we notice that an important role was played by the ceramic human representations, many of which consist of female figurines, although male and animal specimens were also common. Nevertheless, the female images are of much greater interest because they provide us with unique information regarding hairstyles, ornaments, and clothing tendencies, which would have otherwise been unknown, because they are entirely absent from the accepted archaeological records of this era and area yielded by conventional excavations.

All of the found Indus Valley female figurines are in standing positions. Interestingly, they have never been resurrected from the few graveyards investi-



*Third millennium B.C. figurine
from Mehrgarh (Balochistan)*

gated in the Valley; instead, they have only been found in fragments, or burnt, inside rubbish structures or heaps of refuse, thus indicating their temporary use in ancient times. Their manufacturing was unique and complex: Each specimen was made of two vertical halves, from head to foot, which were later conjoined. Their arms are often absent or very schematized, and, whenever portrayed, the breasts - the symbolic representation of femininity in this context - are not added appendages, but rather constructed from the same clay used to shape the body. Many of them show numerous and rich ornaments, which consist of different types of necklaces and pendants, while others are represented with a series of

neck-rings. The most typical figurines are dressed in a sort of mini-dress and turban, of which there appear to be several types, and, according to some authors, might indicate the ethnic group or tribe to which they belonged.

According to the most recent discoveries, the figurines' origin is local, although, prior to a few years ago, it was believed they were derived from Near Eastern prototypes. The excavations carried out at Mehrgarh, in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, assign a date to the earliest clay female figurines discovered as the seventh millennium before Christ, when the first Neolithic settlement was established in the region, along the right terrace of the Bolan River.

The impressive stratigraphic sequence brought to light at Mehrgarh by the French Expedition led by Jean-François Jarrige has shown that clay female figurines made their appearance during the Neolithic occupation phase and continued to be produced up until the end of the Bronze Age. The detailed analysis of hundreds of samples has revealed their almost continuous typological evolution. The oldest types are represented by simple specimens made of unbaked clay, very schematically modeled, often in a seated position, sometimes painted with red ochre. Around 4000 BC, composite statuettes began to be manufactured in the form of seated representations, with a stylized face and cylindrical neck, orna-

mented with rolled stripes around it, representing the jewelry, and breasts consisting of two modeled balls of clay applied to the trunk. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the third millennium, hairstyles have been represented as elaborate and varied, according to the different images; while during the following period, which is contemporary with the maximum apex of the Indus Civilization, new standing types, sometimes holding a child, with applied oval eyes with a small hole in their centre, and nipples depicted by two small buttons of clay, made their appearance. Many of the types which recur from 4000 BC onwards recall fertility representations, and are called "mother goddesses" by some authors, as they show broad hips, abundant bosoms, a round body and short, stubby legs, suggesting pregnancy, and motherhood.

Two very important female bronze statuettes were discovered during the excavations carried out during the first half of the last century at Mohenjo-daro in the Indus Valley. They represent two young, thin, aboriginal women, naked apart from a few adornments consisting of necklaces and sets of bangles which almost completely cover the left arm of the first figurine. Together, they are called "Dancing Girls." The first is undoubtedly portrayed in the act of dancing, with her legs slightly bent, and her right hand resting on her hip. The artist rendered the hairstyle of both statuettes with great care: the hair is gathered at the back into a loose bun, reminiscent in fact of a contemporary Sindhi fashion.

A third type of female image is incised on some rare steatite seals. This is one of a very few number of cases which might indicate the practice of cult rites, found to be extremely rare in the Indus Civilization. There is little doubt that the figure of a deity is incised on some seals, seated in a yogic position on a small throne, with her knees stretched outwards and her hands resting on the knees, wearing a buffalo-

horned head-dress. She is always surrounded by numerous animals, among which are tigers, rhinoceroses, water buffalos and sometimes imaginative creatures such as unicorns. On other seals she is standing between two branches of an Acacia tree, possibly representing a forest. This unusual female image, commonly called the "Lady of the Beasts," is considered to be a goddess by most experts.

Other sacred scenes in which female representations occur are those of the consecration of the Priestesses, incised on rare seals, on which a row of stylized female images lie just below a "Lady of the Beasts" in a standing position surrounded by an imaginative trees.

The Australian archaeologist Gordon V. Childe was the first to point out that urbanism reflected an increasing rate of complexity within the society of the Bronze Age. He was also the first to suggest that the distribution of the urban cities of the Old World was closely related to the most important waterways of antiquity, namely the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Indus. Nevertheless, although it was along the course of these three great rivers that the complex Bronze Age societies de-

veloped, the only region where the archaeological discoveries have revealed the presence of important metropolitan sites is the Indus Valley and its neighboring regions. It is here that the idea of the city took shape and developed, as the remains of many organized urban settlements demonstrate. This evidence contrasts with what is known from Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley, where impressive funerary monuments, temples, and royal tombs filled with grave-goods of extraordinary beauty almost exclusively indicate the progressive complexity of the social structure. It is no surprise then that such figurines as discussed here were found in the archaeological sites of modern Sindh.

Although little is known of the true role women played in the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, some observations can be put forward from the analysis of clay figurines of women found at the famous site of Mehrgarh. There is little doubt that many of them represent fertility images, as suggested by characteristics depicted in the statuettes. The hairstyles, ornaments and dressing clearly indicate the important prominence assigned to women at that time in what appeared to be a nearly egalitarian society. Additionally, the bronze "Dancing Girls" statuettes suggest specific, public activities played by women at that time. Of extreme interest is also the occurrence of specific naturalistic goddesses and their priestesses, which suggest that the Indus people worshipped a goddess whose domain was the forest.

Though these findings leave historians with large gaps of knowledge of the role of women in ancient Sindhi society, the inspired curiosity, based on the evidence offered that undoubtedly points to the unquestionable importance of women within the evolved Bronze Age Indus Valley society of the third millennium, can only lead to further investigations into this important subject. ■



Fourth millennium B.C. figurine from Mehrgarh (Balochistan)