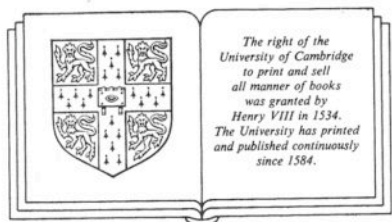

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8. Sibri and the South Cemetery of Mehrgarh: third millennium connections between the northern Kachi Plain (Pakistan) and Central Asia

MARIELLE SANTONI

Recent discoveries in northern Afghanistan, Central Asia, and eastern Iran have revealed that cultural interactions between these regions existed in the past to an extent which would hardly have been suspected a few years ago. Now, with the discovery of the South Cemetery at Mehrgarh (near Dadhar in the north Kachi Plain of Pakistani Baluchistan) and the nearby site of Sibri, we know that the Greater Indus Valley was also part of this vast interaction zone. Excavations overseen by the author during the 1979, 1980 and 1981 seasons at the South Cemetery (Mehrgarh Period VIII) have provided evidence for close cultural relations between the Murgabo–Bactrian area and the Kachi Plain. Excavations overseen by J.-F. Jarrige and the author during the 1981 season at Sibri have revealed the actual occupation of the Kachi Plain by peoples with a material culture related to that of Central Asia, a fact which helps to account for ‘foreign’ or ‘non-Baluchistan’ cultural features previously noted at Pirak and other sites of the second millennium BC (Jarrige *et al.*, 1979).

Mehrgarh VIII, South Cemetery

At Mehrgarh, four types of funerary remains can be recognised: graves (rectangular structures containing one or more skeletons with funerary material); cenotaphs (rectangular structures containing only funerary materials); isolated deposits of materials (either in a rectangular-shaped pit or just lying on the natural soil); and large jars placed upside down (generally associated with one or two small pots).

In sector MRT are found only the first type, inhumations, represented by a cemetery. Eight graves, each about 2 × 3 m in size, have been excavated and most of these were much disturbed. They are oriented to the west and the contracted skeletons face either south or north. In one case, an adult and a child were buried together. The funerary material consists of bronze vessels (Fig. 8.1D), toilet objects or jewelry, small limestone or mother-of-pearl ornaments, and pottery. The pottery is made of a fine, wheel-turned ware, the most frequent forms being the tumbler, pedestalled bowl, and goblet, but there are

also some forms of globular jars and carinated jars. These ceramic forms and types of bronze objects are well known from Bactria, Margiana, and southern Turkmenia (Askarov, 1977; Sarianidi, 1977).

In a separate area about 200 m west of the graveyard are represented the three other types of funerary deposits, all of which are probably related to rites of cremation, since burnt surfaces were found everywhere. Six cenotaphs, all of a like size (3 × 2 × 0.5/0.75 m), have been excavated. They were semi-subterranean, being dug into burnt areas, covered with bricks and, like the graves, oriented east–west. Two of the cenotaphs were empty while the other four were filled with funerary materials, sometimes much disturbed. Association of cenotaphs and tombs as well as the east–west orientation of the structures and of the skeletons are features in common with the Murgabo–Bactrian area (Masimov, 1979; Sarianidi, 1981).

Cenotaph 1 contained eight pots, one stone sceptre, six bronze objects, a very small gold pendant set with turquoise and lapis-lazuli, one pentagonal flat stone, and twelve lunates.

In Cenotaph 2 were seven pots, one bronze cosmetic bottle with its pin (Fig. 8.1A), and nine lunates.

Cenotaph 5 included sherds from about 14 (mostly incomplete) pots including a perforated jar, one lunate, and one stamp-seal of black steatite bearing the representation of a snake (Fig. 8.1B). Some distance outside this cenotaph were found two button-seals of white stone.

Cenotaph 6 contained 24 pots (17 inside, 4 lodged in a small window in the west wall, one on the east wall, and 2 outside); four lunates; some beads of cornelian, agate, lapis-lazuli, black steatite, and calcite; and one fritte vase with traces of green glaze. This last object is reminiscent of the so-called ‘kidney-shaped’ vases from Bactria (Sarianidi, 1977: Plate III, 5 and Fig. 63). The one from Mehrgarh, however, clearly depicts the head and horns of a caprine (Fig. 8.2C).

Among and alongside these cenotaphs were found deposits of the third type sometimes including large isolated vases, sometimes two or three pots, sometimes pottery associated with bronze objects and, in one case,

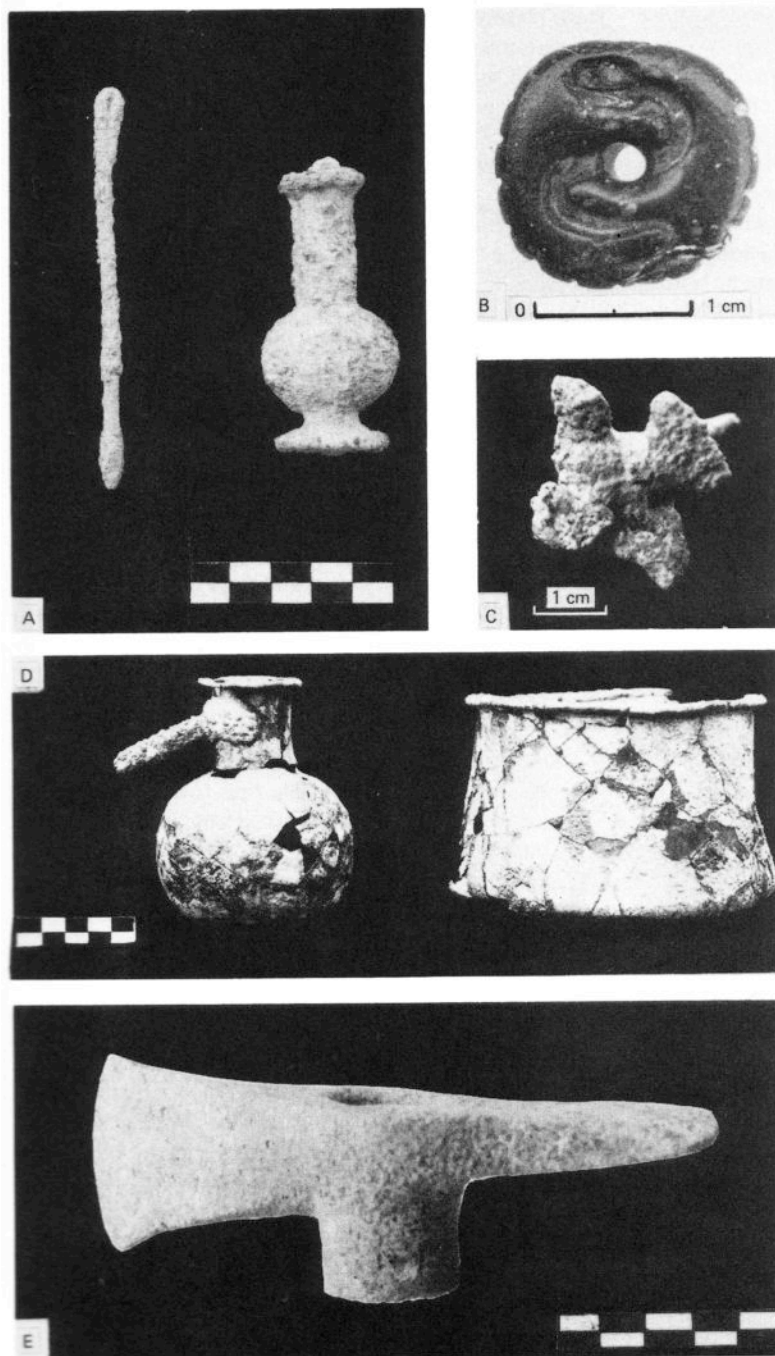


Fig. 8.1. A. Copper/bronze cosmetic bottle and its pin from Cenotaph 2; B. Stone button-seal from Cenotaph 5; C. Copper/bronze bird-headed pin from Cenotaph 1; D. Copper/bronze vessels from Grave 1; E. Copper/bronze shaft-hole axe-adze from Sibri.

also with beads of various semi-precious stones and a terracotta rattle with multiple flower-like impressions. Also found in the area of the cenotaphs were deposits of the fourth type represented by large jars of coarse, sherd-tempered ware, some with a basket impression on the base. These jars lie upside down and sometimes cover a small goblet or are associated with small pots.

The bronze objects found in the cenotaph area include ear-rings and bangles, pins (double spiral-headed, bird-headed (Fig. 8.1C), and button-headed), cosmetic bottles (Fig. 8.1A), and toilet objects (mirror, scissors(?), blades or spatulae). These are all types known from Bactria and Margiana (Askarov, 1977: Plates XXVI–XXVIII, XXXVII, XLI; Sarianidi, 1977). As for stone objects, the presence of lunates in the cenotaphs seems to be a con-

stant feature of that type of funerary deposit. In addition, exceptional finds such as the stone sceptre, the button seal with snake, and the 'kidney-shaped' fritte vase provide clear evidence for relations with Bactria, Margiana (Sapally, Dashly), and South Turkmenia (Altyn) (Askarov, 1977: Plate XLV, 28; Masson, 1981: Plate XXVIII).

The forms of pottery found in and around the cenotaphs include (Fig. 8.3: 1–13):

- pedestalled bowls slightly different from those found in the graves. These are carinated with a straight or (rarely) curved rim (no. 3) and come in both large and small sizes with some exceptional forms such as one with a flat Harappan-like rim and another with a ringed pedestal (no. 2). They are usually painted or slipped in red or red-brown;

- carinated bowls of large size and small bowls, carinated and not (no. 4). These are also usually painted red;

- small bowls with carinated rims (no. 6);

- truncated pots or tumblers of different sizes with their rims carinated or in the shape of a broken line (no. 8);

- plates (no. 7);

- pedestalled goblets (no. 1) more or less similar to those from the graves and red-painted;

- small goblets with straight rims (no. 10);

- small globular open-mouthed pots (no. 5);

- barrel-shaped pots;

- globular jars with small everted rim (no. 13) or neck and carinated moulded base;

- globular high-necked pots (no. 9);

- wide, open carinated jars (no. 11) sometimes incised

- perforated jars (no. 12).

The pedestalled bowl (Fig. 8.3, no. 3) is reminiscent of similar forms from Djarkutan (Askarov, 1977: Plate LII); the other pot forms are related to those from Dashly and Sapally, although the perforated jar is in the Harappan style. This and other Harappan elements together with material similar to that found in the latest phase of the settlement at Mehrgarh (Period VIIC), including basketware, suggests that the funerary area is contemporary, at least in part, with the Harappan civilisation.

Sibri

South-west of Mehrgarh and close to the Harappan-period mound of Nowsharo, the deflated surface of the site of Sibri extends over an area of at least one hectare. It is scored by run-off channels and is partly covered with sand-dunes. The archaeological deposit is no more than

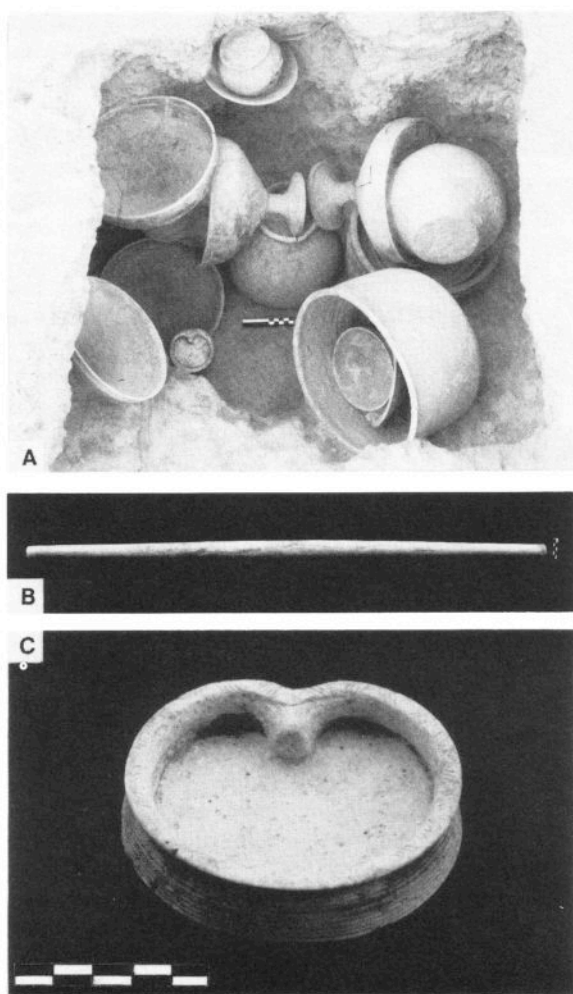


Fig. 8.2. A. View of Cenotaph 6 (western part); B. Stone sceptre from Cenotaph 1; C. Fritte vase from Cenotaph 6.

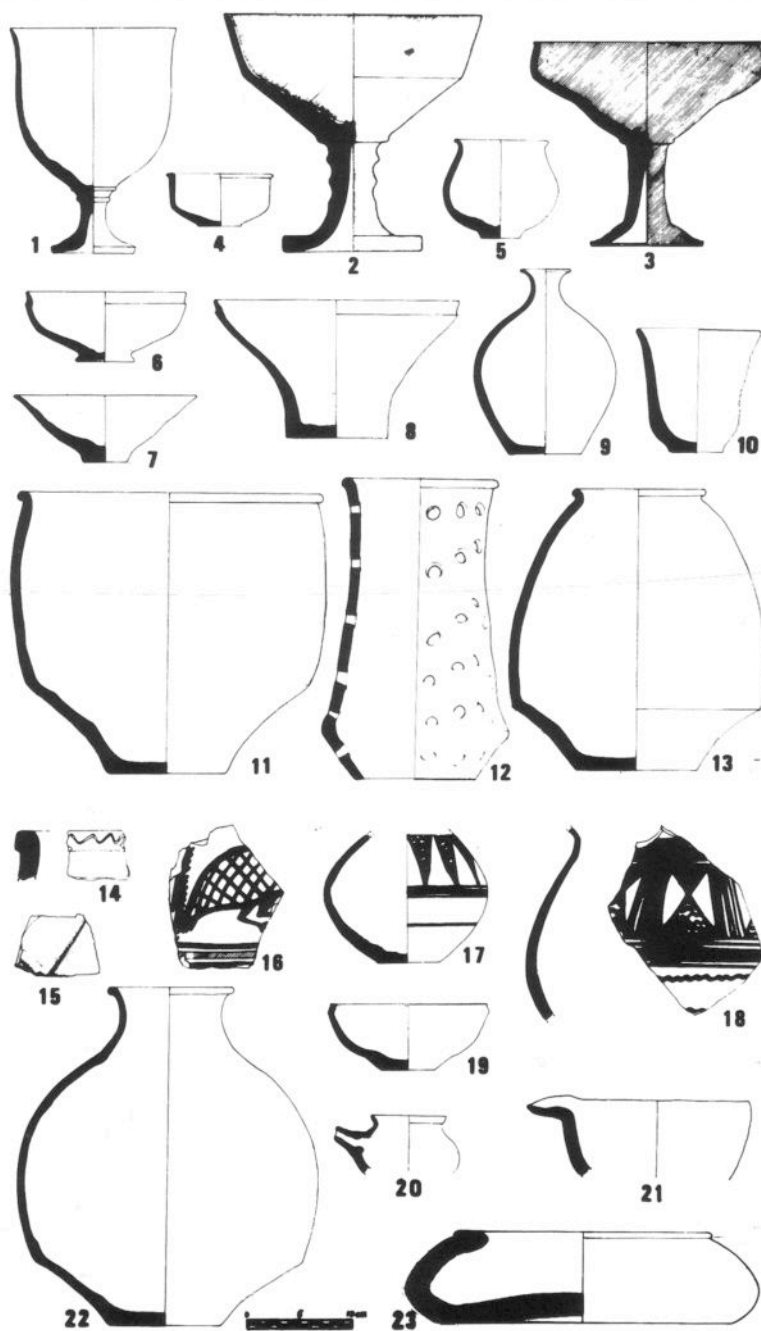


Fig. 8.3. 1 to 13: pottery from the cenotaphs of Mehrgarh; 14 to 23: pottery from Sibri.

1 m to 1.5 m deep and some of the remains, especially fireplaces, are evident on the surface. In 1980–1, an area of about 1200 square metres was excavated in three locations. Remains uncovered include a few skeletons with or without associated materials, some architectural remains, deposits of sherds, and some hearths and ovens.

The skeletons uncovered were four in number; three were badly damaged, of which one was associated with a white stone bowl. The fourth skeleton, that of a child, was buried in a jar bearing string impressions. The top of the head appeared just in the neck of the jar which was broken (perhaps intentionally) with the bottom missing. The skeleton was contracted, faced north, and was associated with a nose ring.

Two layers of architectural remains were found at Sibri. The upper layer, although badly damaged by erosion, nonetheless revealed traces of walls with broken jars, pots, and figurines all resting on a layer of charcoal. This material was particularly visible in the area 'SE'.

The second layer contained better-preserved remains. Again in area SE was excavated a wall with a niche whose inner surfaces were burnt. Associated with this niche was a deposit of potsherds (from at least ten pots) and some small objects (mother-of-pearl, bones). In trench 'SW', a low wall (running north–south) with a single buttress was associated with a hearth and a large amount of occupational debris (mostly bones). Also found was a platform built on a carefully laid foundation of gravel. Against this platform and partly covered by it were two shelved ovens. Many other fireplaces were uncovered as well, one of which may have been used for firing pottery since oven-baked sherds were found inside. Some distance east of the site was discovered a vented furnace probably used for metallurgy since slag was found in and around it. All of these elements provide evidence for significant craft activities at the site.

As far as the pottery from Sibri is concerned (Fig. 8.3: 14–23), there are two main types. The first is a hand-made, sherd-tempered coarse ware (20–35 per cent) represented by big storage jars, basins with large squared rims (no. 14), bowls, open-mouthed pots either with or without beak (no. 21), small bowls, and miniature pots. The second main type is a wheel-turned ceramic which can be tempered either with vegetal matter alone (over 40 per cent) or with both vegetal matter and pieces of sherds (20–30 per cent). The latter is heavier and stronger than the vegetal-tempered kind. Forms include large storage jars, middle-sized jars (no. 22) with high or low necks, bowls with carinated rims (no. 19) or carinated walls, spouted bowls and pots (no. 20), truncated pots, and flat vases (no. 23).

A few of the pots were painted (less than 1 per cent) in

a fugitive brown colour on the light plain ware. The designs are mostly geometrical (nos. 17, 18) but also include representation of stylised flowers and birds (no. 16, similar to specimens found on the surface of Tapi IX in the Lower Murghab region of South Turkmenia, according to I.S. Masimov, personal communication). There seems to be some similarities between this painted ware and sherds from Mehrgarh VIIC. Two other types of decoration are also represented in very small numbers. These include an appliqué cordon in the form of a broken line (no. 15) and incised broken or wavy lines (no. 14).

The stone finds from Sibri include a number of pieces from stone vases (alabaster, chlorite). These are mostly from small vases, one with an incised rim, another with a beak. Grinding stones, pestles, and polishing stones were found in large numbers together with hammerstones and sling-balls. A small stone column, found on the surface, provides additional evidence for relations with the Murgabo-Bactrian area as well as with Altyn Tepe, Hissar, Shahdad, and sites in Seistan (Masson, 1981: Plate XXVIII; Schmidt, 1937: Plate LXI; Hakemi, 1972; Dales, 1972).

A number of terracotta objects was recovered from Sibri including pawns, small wheels, spindle-whorls, rattles (Fig. 8.4C), and sling-balls. Two crucible fragments were also collected, as were a large number of discs made from potsherds. One of the rattles, with circular impressions on it, looks very much like a specimen from Mehrgarh and one from Shahdad (Hakemi, 1972: Plate XXIIA). Another example (Fig. 8.4C) bears incised signs which could represent numbers.

Perhaps the most interesting finds from Sibri are the seals, which are of two types. The principal kind is the compartmented seal made of bronze or of stone. Three of these are triangle-shaped. A terracotta cake bears several imprints of a square-shaped seal with cruciform decoration.

The second type of seal is represented by a single piece. It is a black steatite cylinder with a pierced boss on top, engravings of a zebu facing what is probably a lion around the cylinder, and an engraved scorpion on the base (Fig. 8.4A). This cylinder seal was found associated with two beads in black steatite and, with them, may have formed part of a necklace. This piece is very similar to a few cylinder seals found in Margiana from the surface of the Taip sites (Masimov, 1981). One seal from Margiana bears a representation of a zebu.

Not far from the place from which the seal came was found a bronze shaft-hole axe-adze (Fig. 8.1E) of a type also well-known in the Murgabo-Bactrian area as well as at Mohenjo-daro. Other bronze objects include a few pins.

Found at Sibri in great numbers were terracotta figurines, all made in a sherd-tempered ware. The principal type is a violin-shaped female with eyes and breasts applied to the body together with hairdresses in some cases (Fig. 8.4B). Some of the figurines also bear necklaces and ornaments represented by small incised holes but, in most cases, only the indications of sex are represented by the appliqué breasts and by small incised points marking the pubic area and the armpits. This violin-shaped type of figurine is quite original although it somewhat resembles a few from the Murgab delta (Kelleli Oasis, Masimov, 1979: Fig. 7). The form has also been found in later contexts at Pirak and at Navdatoli in

India (Jarrige *et al.*, 1979: Fig. 89; Sankalia *et al.*, 1971: Fig. 119). A second form of figurine, in style more similar to those known from South Turkmenia, is represented by a seated callipygian figure (Masson and Sarianidi, 1972; Plates 26–28), while a third type is a flat standing figurine with small, appliqué breasts. In contrast to the large number of human figurines, very few animal figurines were found. These include humped bulls (three) and some other animals which are more difficult to identify.

The final types of objects found at Sibri are those of bone and flint. Four pins of bone include two which are apparently made of ivory and have ball-shaped heads. The approximately 200 flint pieces are mostly debitage. Among the worked tools are three laurel-shaped arrow heads (one with a stem), three lunates comparable to specimens found in the cenotaphs of Mehrgarh, a few retouched blades, and one sickle element.

Faunal remains from Sibri include bones of cattle, sheep, goat, pig, and wild equid in proportions much like those of the last settlement at Mehrgarh (see Meadow, this volume). A circular heap of charred seeds (*c.* 75 cm in diameter and *c.* 20 cm thick) included principally six-rowed barley (L. Costantini, personal communication).

In sum, while the occupation at Sibri may have extended over a large area, it was apparently of relatively short duration with only two levels of architecture revealed and a depth of deposit of no more than 1.5 m. It is interesting that sites of the same period in Margiana have a similar depth of deposit (*c.* 1.5–2 m: Masimov, 1979). Given the presence of a full range of occupational debris, however, including architectural remains, pyrotechnical installations, and plant and animal remains similar to those from Mehrgarh VIIC, it seems unlikely that Sibri represents a mere temporary camping place for 'semi-nomadic Central Asian invaders'. Instead, some sort of settled population is indicated, carrying out ceramic and metallurgical activities together with agriculture and animal husbandry.

Chronological considerations

In order to gain further understanding of the phenomena represented by the South Cemetery at Mehrgarh and by Sibri, it is necessary to note what was happening in the region as a whole during this period. The mound at Mehrgarh was occupied until *c.* 2500–2400 BC (Period VII: Jarrige and Lechevallier, 1979). The end of the occupation there (Period VIIC) can be related on the basis of ceramics to the late Quetta tradition (Damb Sadaat III – bracket ware: Fairervis, 1956), to Amri IIB (Casal, 1964), and to the transitional levels of Kot Diji (Khan, 1965; Mughal, 1970). Furthermore, there are some simi-

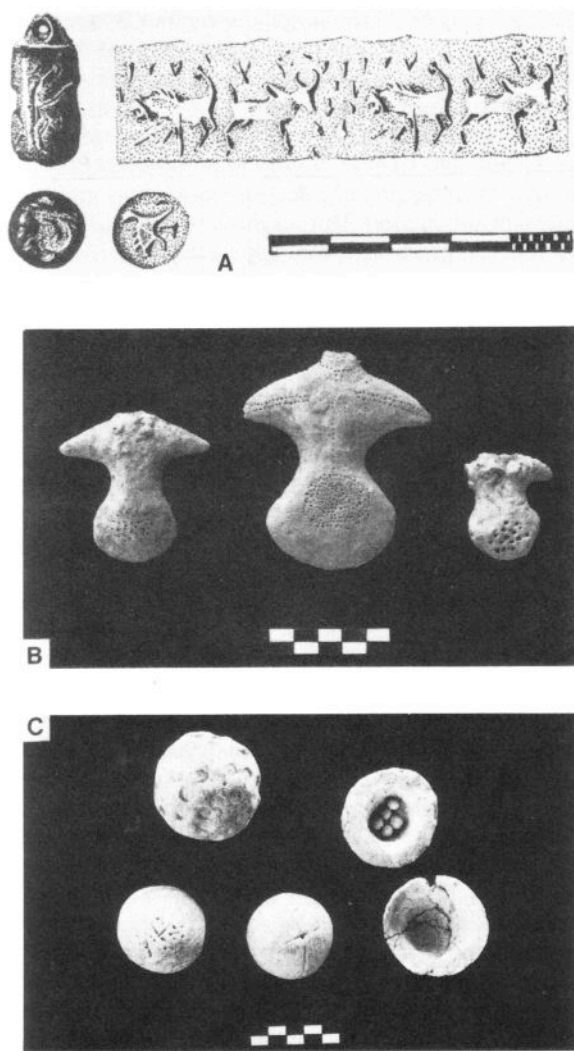


Fig. 8.4. From Sibri: A. Stone cylinder seal; B. Terracotta violin-shaped figurines; C. Terracotta rattles.

lar elements in the Kulli/Harappa phase at Nindowari and from the surface of the Harappan site of Nowsharo (located about 5 kilometres south-west of Mehrgarh). The Mehrgarh VIIC ceramics thus show connections with materials from the mid third millennium in the Indus Valley itself as well as continuity with later Harappan-period sites in Baluchistan. It is important for relative dating that some of these same elements are also present in the cemetery at Mehrgarh and at Sibri.

While there may be a certain continuity observable between Mehrgarh VIIC and Harappan-period sites, there is also a considerable body of material from late third-millennium sites in both Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan which does not belong to either the local Baluchistan or Harappan cultural traditions. This material, including particular kinds of pottery and associated copper/bronze objects, has been recovered from Nindowari (last phase), Kulli Damb and Mehi (Kulli context: Stein, 1931: 154–63), Khurab (in association with Bampur V/VI pottery: Stein, 1937; de Cardi, 1970), and Shahdad (Hakemi, 1972). It is this very material which dominates the assemblages from the South Cemetery at Mehrgarh and which has a strong Murgabo-Bactrian character. Similar material together with Harappan pottery has been found on the surface of Damboli, a site located close to Sibri. Harappan-like pottery has also been recovered from both the South Cemetery of Mehrgarh and from Sibri. All of these lines of evidence suggest at least partial contemporaneity in the Kachi Plain between the Central-Asian-like and Harappan-like materials, some continuity with Mehrgarh Period VIIC, and, therefore, a date of the second half of the third millennium and very beginning of the second millennium BC.

Discussion

Although there are some similarities in material culture between Mehrgarh VIIC and the South Cemetery and Sibri, major differences are evident as well. These are particularly marked in the technologies of metallurgy and ceramic manufacture but are also evident in the character of the small finds.

So far as we know at the moment, the quality and quantity of bronze/copper artefacts is much greater in the South Cemetery and at Sibri than it is in earlier third-millennium deposits in the region. This difference, of course, may only be apparent, due to the absence of earlier excavated contexts which are appropriate to the finding of such materials (i.e. graves and cenotaphs). It seems significant, however, that the vases, toilet objects, cosmetic bottle, headed pins, rings, daggers(?), and shaft-

hole axe-adze all find ready parallels in objects from Bactria and Margiana (especially from Sapally Tepe: Askarov, 1977; Sarianidi, 1977), from central Baluchistan (Kulli sites: Stein, 1931), from Shahdad (Hakemi, 1972), and even from Harappan sites in the Indus Valley. Furthermore, the discovery by us of a vented furnace with slag at Sibri can be joined to the reports by George Dales (1972) of vast industrial areas in the Gardan Reg region of Afghan Seistan to support a claim for extensive metallurgical activity during this part of the third millennium. The pottery from Gardan Reg includes spouted bowls, incised and ribbed pottery, and string-impressed pottery which, together with accompanying stone vases, correspond to like materials found at Sibri. The development of an 'international metallurgy' throughout Western and Central Asia is one of the important features of the third millennium and seems to have accompanied cultural transformations in many cases.

Together with the florescence in metallurgy came mass production and standardisation in pottery manufacture along with something of a decrease in quantity and originality of production. During the first half of the third millennium, much care was apparently devoted to the fabrication of the pottery. A multiplicity of forms were produced in great quantities, many of these being of fine fabric and decorated with varied motifs. In contrast, at Sibri the quantity of pottery seems reduced (as it is at the later site of Pirak, as well) and painted decoration almost disappears (less than 1 per cent at Sibri and only plain red-brown paint at Mehrgarh). New manufacturing techniques, however, seem to have been introduced. At both Mehrgarh and Sibri, small pots often have string-cut bases; vases are fashioned in two parts, the wheel-turned upper parts joined later to moulded bases; the bodies of large jars were held together with string; and vegetal matter sometimes combined with sherds was used for temper, perhaps to permit a lower firing temperature. A similar technology is widely represented in the South Turkmenia and Murgabo-Bactrian areas as well as on Harappan sites and is a sign of the development of mass production.

In addition to the finer, wheel-turned wares was developed a coarse, ground-sherd tempered, hand-made pottery. Pots of this ware, sometimes with basket impressions in their bases, are represented at Mehrgarh by large jars and at Sibri by up to 35 per cent of the sherds. Hand-made coarse ware is also present in similar proportions in the Murgabo-Bactrian area where it is known as 'cooking ware' (Masimov, 1979; Sarianidi, 1981). It may, in fact, be possible to define something of a duality in pottery production. One class of wares, like those from the cenotaphs and graves at Mehrgarh, seems

to have been mass-produced of a fine, sand-tempered fabric in a variety of sophisticated shapes. A second class of pottery, like that from Sibri, is coarser in quality and perhaps was made by non-specialists in more strictly utilitarian shapes. Furthermore, as a general phenomenon, the disappearance of decoration and the appearance of significant quantities of coarser 'hand-made' wares is also known from late third-millennium levels at such sites as Tepe Yahya (Periods IVB/A) and Shahr-i Sokhta (Period IV) in eastern Iran (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Tosi, 1973) as well as from Central Asia. Geometrical decoration is to reappear again in the second millennium both in Central Asia (Yaz cultures) and in the Kachi Plain (Pirakl), but, at the same time, wheel-turned ceramics become even less common, dropping to 30 per cent at some sites (Jarrige *et al.*, 1979).

Turning from general manufacturing technique and surface decoration to form, the funerary pottery of the South Cemetery at Mehrgarh is comprised of shapes generally like those found in Central Asia, the pedestalled vases, carinated jars, and truncated pots being particularly characteristic of sites like Dashly and Sapally (Askarov, 1977; Sarianidi, 1977). The common pottery of Sibri is also in shapes similar to those from Central Asia. In particular, the spouted forms can be paralleled there, as well as at Tepe Hissar in north-eastern Iran and at Navdatoli in Central India (Askarov, 1977; Schmidt, 1937; Sankalia *et al.*, 1971). In contrast, while there are a number of technological and a few stylistic similarities between this and Harappan pottery (most notably, the perforated jar), the overall cultural assemblages seem to have remained distinct, each coming to be spread over very wide and overlapping areas with, for instance, a distinctly Harappan complex of materials being found as far north as Shortugai on the Amu Darya (Francfort and Pottier, 1978).

As noted previously, a strong 'Central Asian' character is also evident in the terracotta and stone objects found at the South Cemetery of Mehrgarh and at Sibri. Stone sceptres have been recovered from deposits in the Murgabo-Bactrian area as well as from Altyn Tepe and Shahdad. Compartmented seals are well known from Central Asia and Seistan, cylinder seals from Tapi, button-seals with snake from Sapally Tepe, and kidney-shaped vases from Bactria. Violin-shaped figurines have been found in the Lower Murgab area and from the chalcolithic cultures of India. Chlorite vases and alabaster spouted vases and columns reveal both a Central Asiatic and Iranian character while counters, rattles, and sherd discs may be more characteristic of local or Iranian plateau traditions. Thus the Kachi assemblage helps us to account for those few similarities, noted by Sankalia,

between the chalcolithic cultures of the Deccan and the third/second millennium cultures of the Iranian plateau and Central Asia. It also helps explain the origin of many aspects of the local cultures of the second millennium (e.g. at Pirak) which had previously been noted as having a mixture of Baluchistan and Central Asian traditions (Jarrige *et al.*, 1979).

In conclusion, the South Cemetery of Mehrgarh and the settlement site of Sibri fill the chronological and cultural gap which, until now, had existed in our understanding of pre- and protohistory in the Kachi Plain. In addition, this material demonstrates the presence of a strong, Central-Asian related element on the margins of the Indus Valley at the same time that the Harappan civilisation flourished to the east. Future work concerned with this time period in the north Kachi Plain and throughout Baluchistan must now focus on defining the internal dynamics of the late third and early second millennium in the region and on clarifying the relations between peoples of that area and of the Indus Valley.

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