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IN THE SHADOW OF THE ANCESTORS

The Prehistoric Foundations of The Early Arabian Civilization in Oman

Window 7.3
Indian pottery in Oman
By Sophie Méry.

Contacts with the Indus civilization are confirmed by a wide range of objects from the second part of the 3rd millennium BC, including ivory combs, metal objects, seals, beads, and weights. However, the most abundant item by far is pottery, with the black slipped jars (fig. 207) providing the broadest picture as they represent the most frequent type of Indus pottery recovered in the United Arab Emirates and in the Sultanate of Oman, both at coastal sites and in the interior. Black slipped jars are found at all settlements dating to the second part of the 3rd millennium BC. They were transported to Oman from about 2500 BC, during the mature phase of the Indus civilization. More precise dating based on a typology of black slipped jar rims is not yet available.

Most of the sites where these jars occur are not located along the coast but inland, sometimes quite far from major communication routes, and in some cases in very isolated areas. We surmise that they might initially have been delivered to a few specific places, from which they were then redistributed to other sites as part of a local trade network. Archaeological finds made in the Ja'alan region provide a good example of such a distribution of both jars and contents. The proportion of such jars in the pottery assemblage is actually much higher at Ra's Al-Hadd HD-1 than at Ra's Al-Jinz RJ-2, although the latter is only 10 km away. This is probably due to the fact that Ra's Al-Hadd was, in contrast to Ra's Al-Jinz, a natural harbour and favourable anchorage. The coastal site of Khor Bani Bu Ali SWY-3, located some 50 km to the south, was part of the same regional exchange network, but the very small amount of black slipped jar fragments found at that settlement seems to confirm the hypothesis that trade with the Indian subcontinent was largely oriented towards Ra's Al-Hadd. This of course does not contradict the possibility that the jars' contents may have been transferred into different containers, whether pottery or otherwise, and reached Khor Bani Bu Ali in this way. Similarly, after their contents were emptied, the jars may have been put to an alternative use.

What is the exact provenance of these jars? Two potential areas for their production were suggested by archaeometical studies along the Ravi river (Harappa) and the Indus river (Mohenjo-Daro).

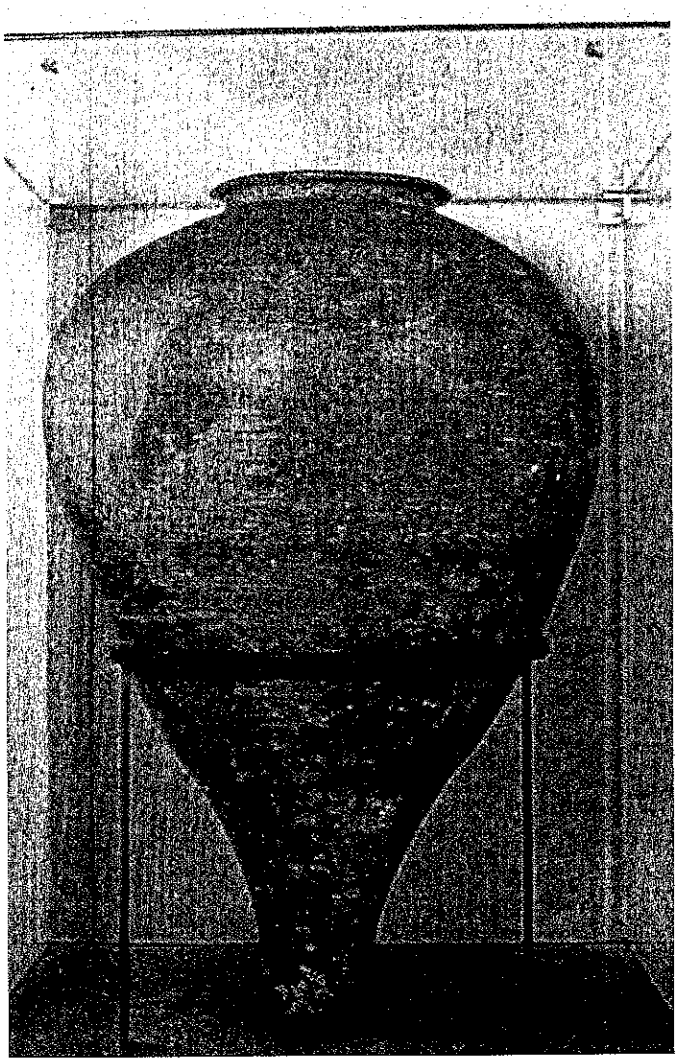

Figure 207 - National Museum, New Delhi: an onion-shaped jar from Harappa, a most common large transport vessel in the Indus Civilization, of the same type as the inscribed one found at RJ-2. They made very resistant, waterproof containers, designed to fit the sharp curvilinear profile of the hull of boats, as were Roman amphorae (courtesy of the National Museum, New Delhi).

Differentiation among samples from both sites was possible because alluvial deposits differ in these contrasting contexts, and this is reflected in the composition of the fabric (fig. 207). None of the analysed black slipped jars from the Gulf region came from the Ravi river production zone but from the Indus river area, as was also the case with the jars we analysed from Nausharo and Miri Qalat in Baluchistan and Makran.

The jars and their contents were first intended for the internal Indus market, and we are probably far from understanding the complexity of their production system within the Indus world. The chemical composition of some jar samples suggests that there were probably more production zones within the Indus world than the two areas we were able to define (fig. 208), but these have yet to be geographically determined. The production of black slipped jars was linked both to the Harappan domestic market and to the external market, i.e. the Gulf, including Bahrain. The vessels were certainly made to order, regarding their aspect and volume, to meet the requirements of transport and trade of their contents. While they are difficult to handle, their shape renders stacking and shipment by river or sea relatively easy; and they were possibly protected during transport, perhaps with straw or mats, because their thin walls and bases are quite fragile.

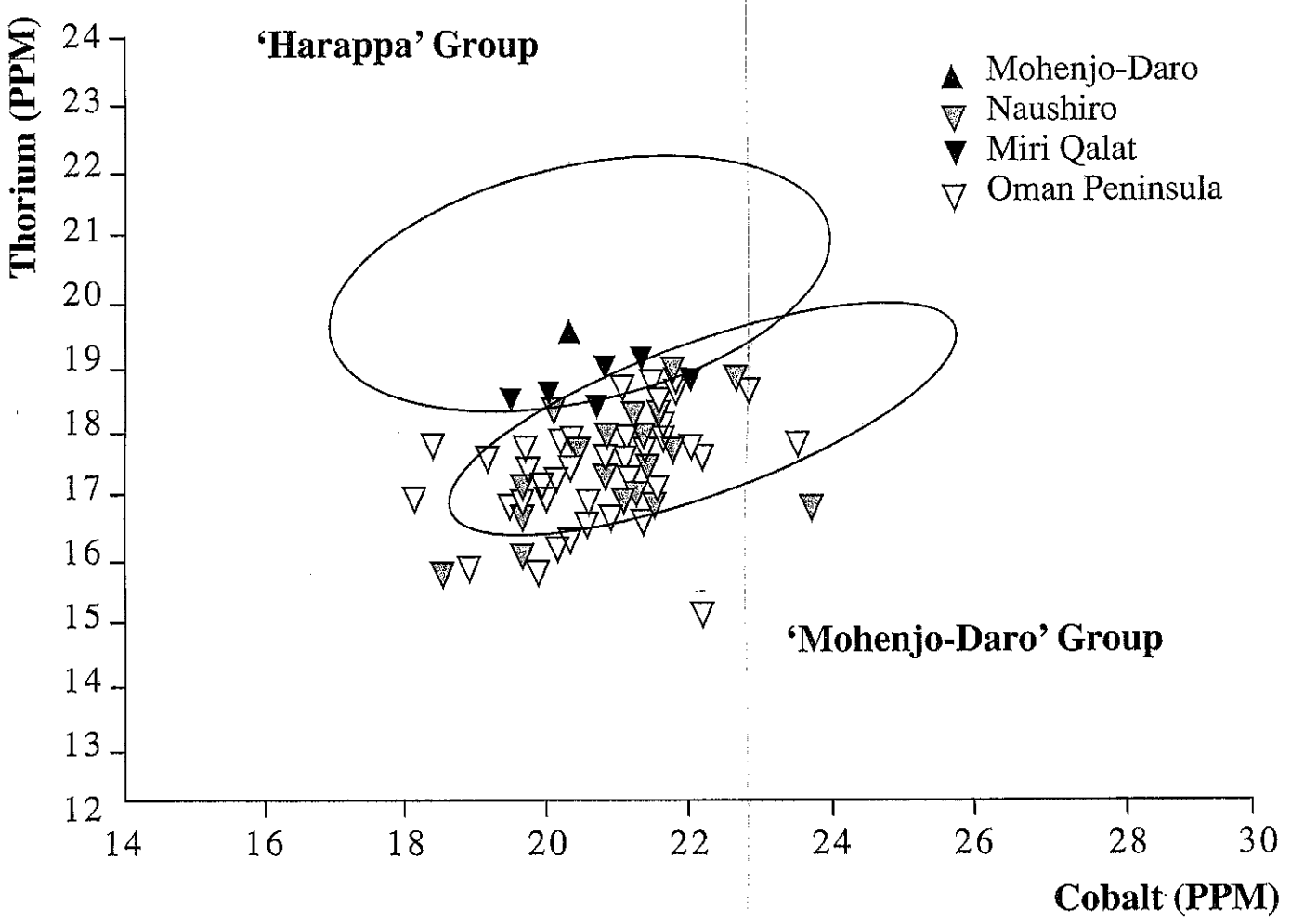

Figure 208:
Chemical analysis of Indus pottery has shown that most of the Indus vessels came from Mohenjo-Daro or the Indus Valley potters' workshops, but not from Harappa and the Ravi valley (diagram by Sophie Méry and Jim Blackman).

The fact that black slipped jars were produced in a specific region, the Indus basin, and were clearly intended for long distance trade, indicates that they were designed for the transportation of specific goods. Pickled vegetables or fruit, clarified butter, wine, honey, or even indigo - a tentative list of such Indus products which could have been transported has been proposed by J.M. Kenoyer, which contrasts P. Gouin's suggestion of a specialised trade in dairy produce. However, results from laboratory tests of organic remains have so far proved disappointing. These vessels are characterised by a dense paste and a waterproof slip, making them less than ideal for this type of analysis.

In the Oman Peninsula, there are other assemblages of classical Indus pottery types which are also strictly associated with settlements. Pedestalled dishes and perforated vessels are the most common (fig. 193), but few other types are found. Many, although representative of only a small part of the diversity of the Indus assemblage, were found in the Ra's Al-Jinz/Ra's Al-Hadd area, especially at the site of HD-1. On the Gulf coast, the diversity of Indus pottery types is also apparent at Umm An-Nar. But in the interior of the peninsula, generally only one or two types are identified along with the black slipped jars. These are usually the perforated vessels and pedestalled dishes. Pedestalled dishes were also found at Hili 8, Bat and Al-Moyassar-1. Some had been imported from the Indus valley (but not from the Ravi production zone), but others were local copies, as demonstrated by laboratory analysis.

A few other Indus types are almost exclusively associated with funerary contexts of the last centuries of the 3rd millennium BC. These include small painted bottles and various miniature pots, which are the best-represented Indus pottery types in the Oman Peninsula after the black slipped jars. Bottles (fig. 182) were first identified as possible imports because of their characteristic decoration, and laboratory analysis confirms this impression, despite the fact that macroscopically the ware is non-micaceous. Chemically, the Indus bottles discovered in the Umm An-Nar graves fall into the Mohenjo-Daro composition group (fig. 208), thus confirming a pattern of exchange mainly oriented towards the southern part of the Indus basin. An important series of complete pots were found at Hili North Tomb A and in the funerary pit-grave of Hili N. Due to their frequent presence in Oman, and to the absence of similar pottery shapes in Pakistan and India, we surmise that they were principally intended for export. As such, they would not be unique among Indus world products, as evidenced, for instance, by some types of carnelian beads. Today, research is not so much concerned with recognizing imported products as with better defining the manner of diffusion of certain techniques, particularly in the region covering Makran, Baluchistan, and the Indus valley.

Thus, comparison with material from the Indus valley is particularly interesting. A time-lag in mastering the shaping or throwing of pottery on the wheel is obvious at the end of the 3rd millennium between the potters of the Indus and those of the Oman Peninsula. Certain pieces from the Indus valley which were found in the Umm An-Nar tombs of the end of the period are evidence of a particularly accomplished mastery and even technical virtuosity. ❑