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AN HARAPPAN OUTPOST ON THE AMU DARYA:
SHORTUGHAI. WHY WAS IT THERE?

Introduction

The site of Shortughai was discovered in 1975 by the French archaeological team investigating the Greek city of Ai Khanoum¹. The site is 21 kilometers northeast of the confluence of the Kokcha River and the Amu Darya in the eastern area of ancient Bactria. It was excavated for four consecutive seasons (1976-79) by the French team, under the guidance of Field Director Henri-Paul Francfort, and has been fully published². From the first published report³ it was clear that there was Mature Harappan settlement there, located far from the plains of the Indus Valley. As it turns out the city of Harappa is the closest Mature Harappan site. However, there are places that are closer that played a role in the culture history of the Indus Civilization. The following settlements and distances will give

¹ This paper was originally read at the Annual Meeting of the Anthropological Association, 22 November 1991.

² H.-P. FRANCFORT, *Fouilles de Shortughai: Recherches sur l'Asie Centrale Protohistorique*, 2 Vols. Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1989.

³ B. LYONNET, "Decouverte de sites l'age du bronze dans le N.E. de l'Afghanistan: leurs rapports avec la civilisation de l'Indus", in *Annali* 37 (1977), pp. 19-35.

an impression of how far Shortughai is from the larger Indus world (Figure 1):

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| Mohenjo-daro | 1100 kilometers |
| Nausharo | 890 kilometers |
| Harappa | 780 kilometers |
| Mundigak | 690 kilometers |
| Rehman Dheri | 600 kilometers |
| Sari Khola | 500 kilometers |

These are approximations or, "as the crow flies", distances which cannot be converted easily into true land travel distances. I doubt that the order would be changed but the travel distances certainly would go up.

The excavated remains were on two mounds, but there are eight or ten other Bronze Age *dheris* in close proximity to those that were actually dug. They yielded a fourfold sequence and a series of radiocarbon dates, given in Table 1.

Table 1

| Period/Lab No. | 5568 Half-life bp | CALIB 3 Calibration |
|--------------------|---------------------|--|
| Period IV, NY-421 | Bishkent Culture | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2120 (1880, 1831, 1829) 1674 |
| | 3535 \pm 165 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2322 (1880, 1831, 1829) 1446 |
| MC-1730 | 3640 \pm 95 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2136 (2011, 2009, 1977) 1883 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2281 (2011, 2009, 1977) 1742 |
| Period III, NY-428 | Post-urban Harappan | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2912 (2871, 2801, 2775, 2706) 2579 |
| | 4190 \pm 125 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 3086 (2871, 2801, 2775, 2706) 2459 |
| MC-1729 | 3620 \pm 105 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2133 (1957) 1783 |
| NY-424 | 3180 \pm 335 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2281 (1957) 1686 |
| | | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 1874 (1429) 996 |
| NY-422 | 3050 \pm 250 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2289 (1429) 601 |
| | | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 1527 (1306) 921 |
| NY-427 | 3710 \pm 100 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 1885 (1306) 777 |
| | | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2273 (2128, 2080, 2045) 1943 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2453 (2128, 2080, 2045) 1780 |

| | | |
|------------|---------------------|--|
| Period II, | Post-urban Harappan | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 3341 (3025, 2980, 2929) 2880 |
| NY-429 | 4395 \pm 160 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 3507 (3025, 2980, 2929) 2584 |
| MC-2445 | 3890 \pm 80 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2466 (2397, 2379, 2348) 2203 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2573 (2397, 2379, 2348) 2058 |
| MC-1728 | 3975 \pm 90 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2580 (2467) 2342 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2861 (2467) 2198 |
| Period I, | Mature Harappan | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2030 (1892) 1749 |
| MC-1727 | 3570 \pm 95 bp | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2180 (1892) 1676 |
| MC-2447 | 3725 \pm 80 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2271 (2133, 2073, 2050) 1978 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2395 (2133, 2073, 2050) 1888 |
| MC-2446 | 3890 \pm 80 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2466 (2397, 2379, 2348) 2203 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2573 (2397, 2379, 2348) 2058 |
| MC-1726 | 3875 \pm 95 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2466 (2390, 2389, 2333) 2148 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2580 (2390, 2389, 2333) 2036 |
| NY-430 | 4075 \pm 95 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2866 (2584) 2468 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2887 (2584) 2341 |
| NY-425 | 4040 \pm 100 bp | 1 ϵ cal B.C. 2856 (2568, 2519, 2504) 2459 |
| | | 2 ϵ cal B.C. 2882 (2568, 2519, 2504) 2284 |

The sequence at Shortughai can be characterized as a "progression". The settlement begins as a *pucca* Mature Harappan site with the artifactual suite we would expect from sites in Sindh or the Punjab, and with some Bactrian elements. Periods II through IV see a transformation of this assemblage with gradually increasing, local "Bactrian" elements: ceramics, stone tools.

Period I: Mature Harappan

Period I was founded on virgin soil and was found only on Mound A, not all of which was settled in earliest times. Harappan painted black and red wares, with peacocks, intersecting circles and other Mature Harappan motifs are also found. Other Mature Harappan ceramic characteristics are present as well: string impressed sherds, dishes with thumb nail impressions and triangular terracotta cakes. Objects of faience and steatite along with etched carnelian beads occur and were associated with one square stamp seal with a unicorn motif and Indus script.

There is a quantity of *lapis lazuli*, chips and other objects associated with at least one drill, and flint tools. Other minerals include turquoise, agate, carnelian and steatite. Unfinished carnelian beads indicate their manufacture on the site. Sea shells (*Turbinella pyrum*) in the form of finished bangles indicate other long-range contacts.

Crucibles with traces of copper inside demonstrate metal working at the site, possibly even smelting. A few copper artifacts were also recovered along with those of gold and lead.

Period II: Late Mature Harappan

There is continuity between Periods I and II, but statistically the Mature Harappan traits are diminished, especially in the ceramics. It is not clear just how this period relates to the chronology of the Indus Civilization to the south, but the excavators suggest that it is probably late within the Mature Harappan. Significantly, evidence for the working of *lapis lazuli* stops and does not reappear after Period I. Copper working continued, however.

There is growth of the settlement with the occupation of both mounds A and B. In conformity with Period I there is also mud brick construction of houses.

Period III: Post-urban Harappan Phase

Period III sees the introduction of local eastern Bactrian ceramics, with only a few Harappan ceramic traits continuing: cord impressed jars, terracotta scoops. Pise, not mud brick, was used for house construction. Both mounds continued to be occupied.

Stratigraphically, Period III is younger than Period II, and it seems prudent to place it in the second millennium, although this is not clearly supported by the radiocarbon dates.

Period IV: Bishkent Period

The final period of Shortughai has been called the Bishkent Period, and is almost totally eastern Bactrian in character, with little of the Harappan world remaining. An historically deep stone tool industry, from the Hissar Culture of Tajikistan, is in evidence and

burials conforming to the Bishkent and Mollali cultures are also present. The settlement is smaller, and found only on Mound B, but the architecture is poorly preserved.

There is little from the radiocarbon dates that suggests this phase of occupation at Shortughai is later than Period III, but this is supported stratigraphically.

The Culture historical context for Shortughai Periods I and II

As early as c. 2400 B.C., there is evidence that the communities of Central Asia, the eastern region of the entire Iranian Plateau and the Indus Valley entered a period of intensified cultural interaction. This was preceded by a period of slow growth in this direction, as documented by the shared ceramics of Mundigak IV, Damb Sadaat II and Shahr-i Sokhta II, with areas to the north. The mechanisms that maintained this interaction were undoubtedly numerous and complex, probably shifting in type and intensity over time and by region.

Mechanisms Ia: Pastoral nomadism

It is increasingly clear that the annual migrations of pastoral nomads is likely to have brought peoples from Central Asia into the Indus area and conversely, to have sent such peoples from the Indus into the Iranian Plateau, into the Afghan plains and valleys as far as the grasslands of Central Asia. Some of the movement would have been short-term and more local. Other travel could have been a relatively long distance. The possibility also exists that goal oriented strategies were used as well, moving herds and people over long distances and time periods, involving weeks of travel.

Mechanisms Ib: Exchange systems

One of the driving mechanisms of the movement of pastorally adapted people in this region can be seen in terms of the usefulness of exchange systems, the movement of products, subsistence items

and artifacts, some even "elite" in nature⁴. The perspective presented there takes the following as a given:

A material transaction is usually a momentary episode in a continuous social relation. The social relation exerts governance: the flow of goods is constrained by, is a part of, a status etiquette. «One cannot treat Nuer economic relations by themselves, for they always form a part of direct social relations of a general kind», Evans-Pritchard writes: «...there is always between them a general social relationship of one kind or another, and their economic relations, if such they may be called, must conform to this general pattern of behavior»⁵.

It is this organic, undifferentiated nature of some economic behavior which appears to be revealed by the Iranian data. Some of these economic arrangements must have been integrated within more general social relationships. In this sense we are dealing with systems of exchange⁶.

Mechanisms IIa: Small scale trading

Set within the cultural ecology of pastoralism and exchange in these overlapping, interacting regions, were commercially minded groups, possibly families, who made it their business to move products, both subsistence and non-subsistence, from place to place. Some of these groups were involved in small-scale movement between adjacent settlements or valleys, and they could not have been immune from an involvement in exchange and even some of their own "pastoral nomadism". Nor would it be correct or helpful to see them as being isolated from other useful activities such as monitoring social relations, delivering news, spreading gossip, or arranging marriages, just as groups involved in pastoral nomadism (Ia) and exchange systems (Ib) would have been.

The differentiation among these groups is that on the one hand we are dealing with peoples whose movement is primarily ecological and non-commercial (that is non-market), as opposed to

⁴ They are discussed in G. L. POSSEHL, *Kulli: An Exploration of Ancient Civilization in South Asia*, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 1986, pp. 75-88

⁵ M. SAHLINS, *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago, Aldine, 1972, pp. 186-87.

⁶ *Ibid.*

other peoples who are involved in that part of an economic system seen as commercial.

Mechanisms IIb: Large scale commerce

Probably most speculative of all is in proposing that there were groups involved in long distance, goal directed, massive commerce undertaken within the context of markets and profit. But, it fits this proposed scheme in a logical way, and if such groups did not emerge during all of the periods under consideration here, they may have been present from time to time.

Some Further Thought on These Mechanisms

Shaffer⁷ has also suggested that these commodity networks are to be thought of in terms of exchange systems. He relies on a study of a New Guinea network undertaken by Thomas Harding⁸ to develop a sense of the principles on which these networks relied.

Using Harding's concept of "important wealth" which "...forms the currency of important social ritual..."⁹. Shaffer concludes that "...objects of long distance trade are involved in establishing status, and the creation of obligations"¹⁰. Exchange networks give individuals and communities access to goods which are frequently unusual and endowed with a special ascribed value. Those who control their distribution are able, in this way, to create and maintain a following, ensuring their position in society. The actual exchange of such important wealth frequently takes place as part or the predictable cycle of ritual or ceremonial life, and since these events are generally public there is little room for doubt in the minds of the participants as to the structure of their own social world. The

⁷ J.G. SHAFFER, *Prehistoric Baluchistan: A Systematic Approach*, PhD Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, 1972; J. G. SHAFFER, *Prehistoric Baluchistan: With Excavation Report on Said Qala Tepe*, Delhi, B. R. Publishing Corporation, 195 pp., 1978.

⁸ Th. G. HARDING, *Voyagers of the Vitaz Strait*, American Ethnological Society Monograph 44 (1967).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

¹⁰ J.G. SHAFFER, *Prehistoric Baluchistan: With Excavation Report on Said Qala Tepe...*, p. 143.

symbolic value derived from the periodic or day-to-day display of such materials is a further reminder of the relative order among men. Thus, exchange systems play an important role in validation of status and rank, and if the ethnographic record is an adequate reference, this takes place in societies which are even minimally differentiated. In these systems, profit and loss are measured not just in terms of material products but against a more generalized social backdrop. Such systems are also characterized by subjective attitudes toward exchange because every transaction carries with it not only the economic component but is itself a statement about the social position of the participants. Inappropriate social context may therefore thwart transactions even though favorable conditions of supply and demand are present.

The archaeological documentation of these exchange systems, and the movement of people carrying products within the context of their subsistence activities, is available at the lowest level in the inter-site distribution of a host of products from pottery (Quetta Ware), carved "steatite," metal, beads and other goods. Some patterns emerge as well. Several of the excavated sites in eastern Iran during the second and third millennium appear to have specialized in the control of a relatively small number of commodities: chlorite at Tepe Yahya; lapis and turquoise at Shahr-i Sokhta; copper at Tall-i Iblis. This "specialization" in one or two commodities is complemented by the presence of other products, but these occur at frequencies significantly lower than the "special" commodity. The overlap between "special" product and complementary commodity suggests that these sites, and doubtless many others still unexcavated, were integrated into a network or networks that can be characterized by the idea of complementary reciprocity implied by exchange.

Archaeology in the subcontinent is having some success documenting early pastoral nomads. The most successful of these efforts was done at Bagor, a site in Rajasthan. It is a camp site that sits on the surface of a large, fossilized sand dune. It has sheep and/or goat bones in an aceramic Period I that dates to 5200-4000

B.C.¹¹. Bagor documents the beginnings of food production in a trans-Indus environment as well as the pastoral nomadic aspect of the times. Rajasthan is dotted with other sites like Bagor, and as time goes on more will be learned of them.

The symbiosis between the mountains of Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier with the Greater Indus Region can be modeled on the seasonal migration of peoples down from the mountains in the fall, returning in the spring. Direct evidence for camps in Baluchistan exists at Anjira, in Period I¹². A good example of a lowland site where pastoral nomads may have camped during the winter is at Gumla I, where the first occupation was by people who did not use pottery¹³, but microlithic and ground stone food processing tools were in use¹⁴. Hearths, or "community ovens" were also found, but there is no architecture, not even ephemeral floors or post holes. The hills of Baluchistan are filled with small ephemeral sites dating to the Bronze Age and so is the eastern desert fringe of the Indus Valley and Punjab. The finds from Bagor, Anjira and Gumla are the best examples of places that document the pulse of pastoral movement in antiquity.

There is another approach to the inferences I am making. If not by systems of exchange and commerce, and the movement of pastoral peoples, so well documented ethnographically, how can the apparent inter-site distribution of artifacts be accounted for? After all, these systems have been suggested only in their broadest outlines. No one says that the exchange systems were like *potlatch* or *kula*, or that the nomads were ancient Brahuis, Baluchis or Tadjiks. Given what we know of this world region, its history, ecology and evidence from the archaeological record, the

¹¹ V.N. MISRA, "Bagor: a Late Mesolithic settlement in north-west India", in *World Archaeology* 5/1 (1973), pp. 92-100.

¹² BEATRICE DE CARDI, "Excavation and reconnaissance in Kalat, West Pakistan: the prehistoric sequence in the Surab region", in *Pakistan Archaeology* 2 (1965), pp. 86-182 (in part. pp. 100-101).

¹³ A.H. DANI, "Excavations in the Gomal valley", in *Ancient Pakistan* 5 (1970-71), pp. 39, 41-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-6.

alternatives to the broadly conceived mechanisms outlined here do not seem to emerge.

Shortughai Periods I and II: Why was it on the Amu Darya

The appearance of a Mature Harappan settlement so far from "home" has been the subject of some speculation in the literature. The team that excavated the site seems to feel that the attraction for the Harappans was the *lapis lazuli*, shown by the evidence for the material and its working in Period I context. Maurizio Tosi concurs with this judgment. It is a reasonable observation but it certainly cannot be used to explain the presence of the settlement in the later three periods. Jim Shaffer has suggested that the Bactrian camel was an attractive commodity in these times and that Shortughai could have been an ancient trading post where the Harappans procured these animals¹⁵. It is an interesting thought.

Some Context for Understanding Shortughai

The discovery of the Sibri Cemetery and Quetta Treasury testify that the prehistoric interaction between the Indus Valley and Central Asia was not casual, or an occasional happenstance. This is backstopped by the fact that the Quetta Ware ceramic complex, including the corpus of human figurines associated with it, is a culturally deep, fundamental set of shared items of daily life, that occur at a high statistical frequency. Occasional artifacts, and quantities of ceramics of this complex are also found in Mehrgarh VII and Mundigak IV. The occurrence of Dashli ceramics and the copper mirrors, one with a human figure as the handle at Mehi¹⁶ and a marble column of Hissar IIIC type from Kulli¹⁷ places these sites within the bounds of this interaction along with a reported, but not

¹⁵ J.G. SHAFFER, "One hump or two: the impact of the camel on Harappan society", in G. GNOLI and L. LANCIOTTI, (eds.), *Orientalia Josephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*, Roma, Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Serie Orientale, Roma 3, 56/2 (1987), pp. 1315-28.

¹⁶ G.L. POSSEHL, *op. cit.*, Fig. 10, Mehi III.6.2, 3 and Mehi III.6.13, Fig. 20, Mehi II.1.2a, Mehi III.6.5).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Pl. 2, Kulli I.X.I.

published, cemetery in southeastern Iran¹⁸. Other artifacts from the Mature Harappan levels of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro demonstrate that these cities were playing some role in the system.

Material of the kind seen in the Sibri Cemetery has been found in Altyn Depe (Namazga V), where it is associated with seals, die and gaming paraphernalia of the Harappan Civilization. It also occurs in quantity at Sapalli Depe in Central Asia and the Dashli Complex of Northern Afghanistan. This material is well known and has been discussed in other places¹⁹. What it tells us about Shortughai is that this settlement is set within a geographical and historical context that was humming with interaction between the Indus and Central Asia. Although this settlement was a long way from the nearest "Harappan" settlement, it was set within an environment that was not necessarily so foreign.

The growth of the "Dilmun trade", which linked the Harappan Civilization to the Gulf and Mesopotamia, overlaps in time with this eastern interaction and it was on a scale that equaled, if not exceeded, its density. The prosperity portrayed in the Royal Graves of Ur is testimony to this, but so are the recently identified Harappan artifacts scattered through the Gulf²⁰.

There has been a sense that there is a link in this scheme that crosses northern Iran, incorporating Tepe Hissar, Sialk and other sites into a relationship with Mesopotamia, and certainly Elam. This

¹⁸ K. LAMBERG-KARLOVSKY, personal communication.

¹⁹ M. SANTONI, "Sibri and the south cemetery of Mehrgarh: 3rd millennium connections between the northern Kachi Plain (Pakistan) and Central Asia", in B. ALLCHIN (ed.), *South Asian Archaeology*, 1981, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 52-60; R. BISCIONE, L. BONDIOLI, "Sapallitepa", in GIANCARLO LIGABUE and SANDRO SALVATORI, (eds.), *Bactria: An Ancient Oasis Civilization from the Sands of Afghanistan*, Roma, Erizzo and the Centre Studi Ricerche Ligabue, Venice, 1988, pp. 67-9; H.-P. FRANCFORT, "The late periods of Shortughai and the problem of the Bishkent Culture/Middle and Late Bronze Age in Bactria", in H. HARTI, (ed.), *South Asian Archaeology*, 1979, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1981, pp. 191-202.

²⁰ Ch. EDENS, "Indus-Arabian interaction during the Bronze Age: a review of the evidence", in G.L. POSSEHL, (ed.), *Harappan Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*, 2nd ed. Delhi, Oxford, IBH and the American Institute of Indian Studies, 1992, pp. 336-63; G. L. POSSEHL, in press.

precursor to the Silk Road makes perfect sense and completes the scheme, in a logical way. I see this northern side as being much weaker than either the Indus-Bactria or the Dilmun trade, but this may be my own bias in the interpretation.

There is a general proposal, the result of a series of informal discussions, that this period of interconnectedness be called the "Middle Asian Interaction Sphere". It is a good term and concept. The Middle Asian Interaction Sphere comes into being from time to time, most prominently at the turn of the common era, when the Romans, Partho-Sassanians, Kushans and Han Chinese reinvigorated the routes pioneered in the third millennium B.C. The Abassid Period in Iran might be seen as another time of invigoration for this set of relationships.

Shortughai, some tentative conclusions

It can be seen that Shortughai was not an isolated settlement, nor can it be separated from an intense, broad set of relationships that were part of the Harappan Civilization's external relations. While the desire to participate in the *lapis* trade by moving closer to the source, or the attractiveness of Bactrian camels may have played a role in the day-to-day goings on at this place, I believe we have to look to a broader context to understand the *raison d'être* of the settlement. This conviction comes in part from Owen Lattimore who made the following point:

There is a danger in assuming that trade in the times in which (the archaeologist) deals can be defined in the same way as trade after the rise of machine industry, capitalism and modern banking. It was often a form of tribute, in part an exchange of luxuries rather than necessities, among ruling princes and great nobles and in part, in the transport and sale of grain from agricultural regions to pastoral nomads, it contributed to symbiosis, in times of peace, between two kinds of society²¹.

His statement suggests a social, not economic, context for Shortughai that is necessary to understand its role in interregional

²¹ "Inner Asian Frontiers of China", in *American Geographic Society Research Papers*, 21 (1951), p. xlii.

affairs. It can be seen as a symbol of the Harappans on the borders of their "allies", or "friends" to the north. It was a positive gesture, it contributed to the general atmosphere of good will; it brought different kinds of people into peaceful daily contact. It was a communications node for elites, or in Lattimore's words for the "ruling princes and great nobles" of these regions. It might even be thought of as a prototype of an embassy. Other things were probably involved as well, including the crass forms of commerce and trade that have already been suggested. The settlement could not be better understood if these forms of activity were ignored than it could be if the social dimensions were emphasized to their exclusion. Shortughai was undoubtedly a settlement enmeshed in social, economic and political complexities all of which contributed to its vitality. To think of it as either a simple trading post, on the Hudson's Bay model, or a manufacturing center for products of *lapis lazuli*, would seriously distort its reality and the reality of the vitality of the Middle Asian Interaction Sphere.



Figure 1