

Prehistoric Pottery Treasures from Baluchistan

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Today, the Indus Valley Culture is one of Pakistan's main cultural assets. Mohenjo Daro is a registered Unesco World Heritage Monument, whose silhouette with the Buddhist stupa resting on prehistoric remains decorates a postage stamp and has become the hallmark of this civilization.

In the early 1920s, excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro brought to light large cities with monumental burnt-brick architecture and a highly sophisticated material culture, marked by a particular cultural style and writing system. This discovery pushed back Pakistan's history by 2000 years and added another great civilization to the 3rd millennium BCE cultural landscape of the Ancient World, at eye

level with the early city-states of Sumer and Agade. From the very beginning, one of the most intriguing aspects was the question, how this fully-fledged civilization with a complex economy, administrative and social structure, highly developed yet strikingly different from the Mesopotamian polities, came into being – was it an 'import' from its westerly neighbours or an indigenous development?

Soon, attention was extended to Baluchistan and the Indo-Iranian borderlands. Sir J. Marshall, then Director of the Archaeological Survey of India, has to be credited for initiating the search for the roots of this civilization, when excavations at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa were still on-



Fig. 2.1
Pottery vessels from
Makran

< Pottery from the late 4th and early 3rd millennium BCE



Fig. 2.2
Landscape in
southern Baluchistan

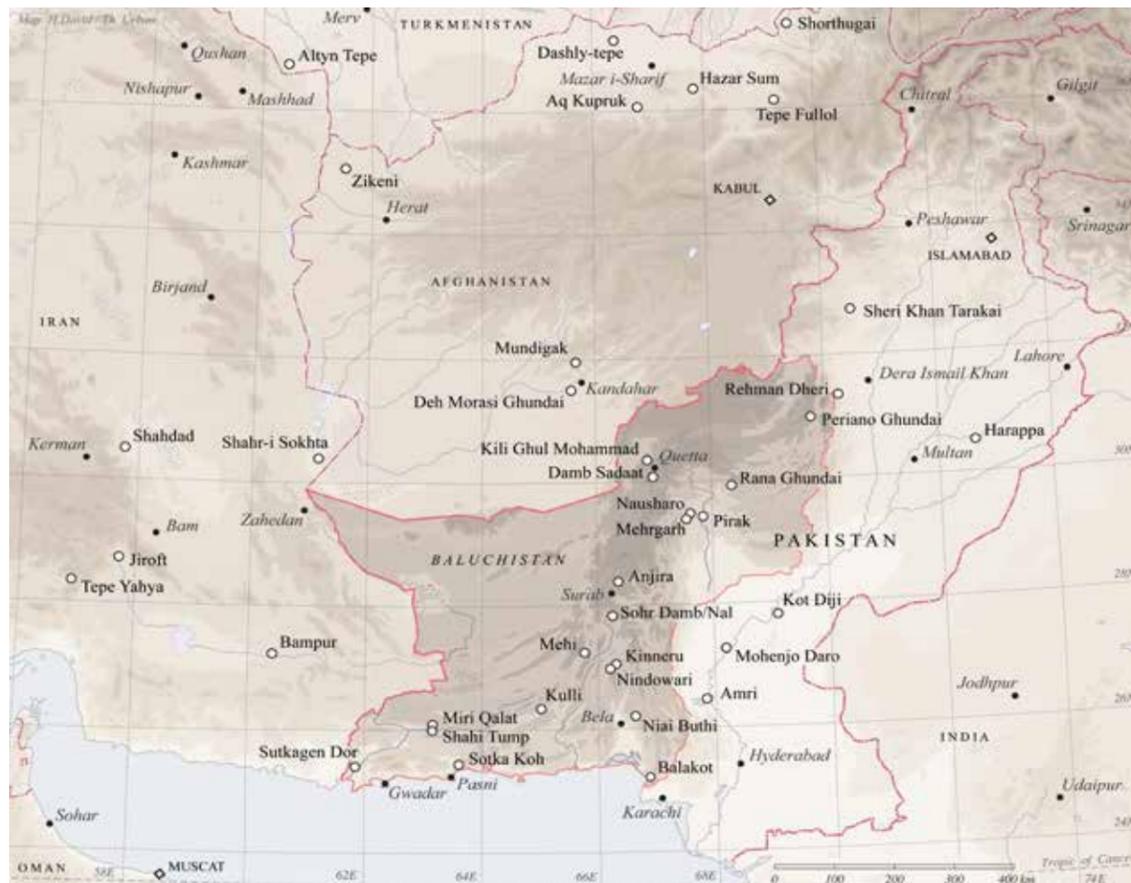


Fig. 2.3
Map of Pakistan
with important
archaeological sites

going. It was under his authority that surveys were conducted in areas which were not to be entered again for a long time. Subsequent explorations and excavations, carried out under difficult conditions

in the early 20th century and post-partition times, left no doubts that this vast and now mostly deserted and dry region was a key area on its long path to civilization.

The discovery of Mehrgarh in the 1970s and three decades of work in the Kacchi Plain at the Bolan, once again pushed back human history by more than 4000 years, to a time when mobile hunters and food gatherers settled down and began to domesticate plants and animals.

This important step in the history of mankind, also known as the 'Neolithic Revolution', marks the beginning of a village farming tradition that ultimately prepared the grounds for the formation of the Indus Valley Civilization. From the 5th to the mid-3rd millennium, settlements grew larger in size and structurally as well as socially more complex, reaching a peak around 3000 BCE. Multiple sources of food were exploited through an optimised use of the natural environment. Well-furnished houses and considerable wealth buried in tombs reveal the high standards of technology and crafts. The distribution of exotic goods such as marine shells, semi-precious stones (lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian) and metals (gold, silver, copper, tin) on trade routes connecting Sistan, Baluchistan, and the Indus Valley reveals the ancient trails used by pastoralists, peddlers and traders. They moved on foot over long distances in a difficult terrain, carrying along not only precious materials and utilitarian items (wool, cotton, tools, leather and even fragile pottery), but also technological know-how, decorative styles and ideas.

A similar development took place in the Indus Valley during the 4th millennium BCE, and there, in the open plains with plenty of water, the towns developed that would become the cities of the Indus Valley Culture.

Over the past 100 years archaeological research has clearly shown that the transition to a fully urban civilization, whose material culture with clearly recognisable markers spread over an enormously large region, was not a sudden event but a gradual process. Its beginnings in Baluchistan can be traced back to the late 8th millennium BCE. Various aspects of this multi-faceted development are outlined in the subsequent chapters of this book, in which a collection of more than 800 prehistoric objects from Baluchistan, confiscated by the custom authorities in the port of Karachi, is presented.

A Legacy Lost and Retrieved

Since the early days of research some 100 years ago, Baluchistan's cultural heritage has been known for its high quality craftsmanship and beauty. Intricate geometric patterns on clay vessels, highlighted in different colours, betray an intense aesthetic sense, hybrid creatures and magical creatures provide a glimpse into a world of phantasy and imagination. Unfortunately, this



Figs. 2.4a; b
Beaker,
late 4th and early
3rd mill. BCE,
before and after
cleaning



Figs. 2.5a; b
Canister pot,
late 4th and early
3rd mill. BCE,
before and after
cleaning

appeal has created an economic value, reflected in the sheer amount of vessels from illegal excavations in Baluchistan on the art market.

The outstanding collection of 804 ceramic vessels and 15 stone objects retrieved by the Pakistani customs in the port of Karachi, and saved by the government from disappearing on the international art market, provides a faint idea of what is buried in the soils of Baluchistan – and what must already have been lost. Their provenance is mostly central and southern Baluchistan, with dates ranging from c. 3500 to 400 BCE. Among all these prehistoric objects, there was a single moulded jug from the 11th/12th century CE.

Well preserved and richly ornamented, they portray the crafts and the fabulous world of ancient peoples – a treasury illustrating a truly amazing cultural legacy. When, however, illegally excavated, the objects are reduced to their aesthetic appeal, rated by contemporary taste, which determines their economic value. Deprived of their original context, they are 'silent' and can no longer inform us about how they were manufactured and used thousands of years ago. Even worse: the looted sites are permanently destroyed.

When trying to assemble the puzzle of ancient cultural landscapes, reliable information from controlled excavations, where the objects are recorded within their primary spatial, functional and environmental contexts, is required. This evidence tells, how the people lived and died, tells about their houses and burials, ornaments and aesthetic styles, health and diet, arts and crafts.

About 100 vessels from this collection are presented in a special exhibition at the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi, to celebrate the remarkable recovery of an almost lost treasure trove. The confiscation of these objects, and of innumerable others, by governmental agencies and their restitution to the appropriate national institutions sends a clear signal: this heritage needs to be protected and safeguarded by governments and the international community, and made accessible to the public as a forgotten legacy of a great past.

The Collection

In 2010, during one of our stays in Karachi, where we documented finds from our excavations in Sohr Damb/Nal in the Exploration Branch of the Department of Antiquities and Museums, we noticed huge crates in the courtyard of the National Museum of Pakistan. Having been told their story, we asked permission from the former Director General, Dr. F. D. Kakkar, to have a look at the objects. When the museum team opened a few of the 64 boxes, we were truly stunned to see scores of complete vessels, still encrusted with soil, but no doubt impressive. Their origin and date as well as their importance were obvious at first sight.

Although until 2012 priority had to be given to the documentation of the excavated objects from Sohr Damb/Nal, partly moved to Karachi, as we could not return to our mission house after 2007 due to increasing instability in the region, the recording of the museum objects continued. From 2013 to 2015, however, we were given the opportunity for a full documentation and conservation program, thanks to funds provided by the Cultural Preservation Program of the German Federal Foreign Office. Upon completion, 804 ceramic vessels and 15 stone objects were recorded with standardised descriptions transferred to a database, sketches were made of the painted designs, to-scale drawings and photographs of the vessels. Hundreds of drawings of motifs and shapes were later vectorised in Berlin. Conservation treatment was carried out on 318 pots in order to remove the encrusted mud and salt layers, to bring back the original shine of the colours, to remove remains of mending done by the 'excavators', and to restore broken objects. In addition, a proper storage system adapted to the limited space available was developed.

The enormous number of complete vessels, unusual for excavations, where – unless burials are excavated – rather thousands and thousands of potsherds are dealt with, provided a unique opportunity to add many new shapes, motives and technological features to the known repertoire and thus to considerably extend the existing catalogues.



Figs. 2.6; 7
Storing the vessels

About this Book

This book is not an exhibition catalogue, but it presents almost all objects in the collection, with the exception of some 40 badly preserved or indistinct vessels. Nevertheless, it is not intended for specialists only, but also addressed to the general reader. Therefore, introductory chapters with more general contents precede the catalogues. Although, some parts are more detailed than others, we hope that every reader will find something to suit his/her individual interests, though this aim is difficult to meet.

The catalogue was not compiled to provide a thorough scientific study; it is rather conceived as a basis for further research. It is structured according to chronological and typological criteria, but overlaps and diversions occur, as well as uncertainties. We are well aware that geographic and chronological attributions are sometimes ambiguous. The descriptions are based on recordings made by E. Cortesi, and to a minor extent, by U. Franke. The texts were edited and supplemented by the authors of the respective chapters. Bibliographic references to comparable objects focus on selected works. To facilitate reading we have used common forms of personal or geographic names, preferably based on the original Urdu spelling.

Comparison with already excavated collections, predominantly from central and southwestern Baluchistan, facilitated the objects' attribution and dating. This incredibly rich and stylistically outstanding cultural heritage of prehistoric Baluchistan opens a fascinating, though narrow, window into its past – for those travelling through the barren landscape of Baluchistan today, this view may be truly amazing.

The idea to organise an exhibition to present a selection of these objects to the general public and thereby to celebrate the confiscation of the collection could be realised through the combined efforts of the involved government offices and the support of the Cultural Preservation Program of the German Federal Foreign Office, the German Consul General in Karachi, the Cultural Department of the Sindh Government, and the directors of the National Museum of Pakistan and their staff.¹

¹ The numerous institutions and people who made the realisation of this idea possible are credited in the acknowledgements.