

Book Reviews

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The Archaeology of South Asia From the Indus to Asoka, c. 6500 BCE–200 CE

By Robin Coningham and Ruth Young

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The Indian subcontinent has a wealth of archaeological resources from the Paleolithic to the present, encompassing the entire range of human social diversity from simple hunter-gatherer societies to extensive ancient empires. In this volume, the authors update an earlier compendium of research (F.R. Allchin's *Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia*, published in 1995 and also containing significant contributions by Coningham). Works such as these illustrate both the rewards and challenges of making an entire region intelligible to a general audience. In South Asia in particular, there have now been at least two centuries of research on archaeological sites, finds and inscriptions that provide a promising resource that must nonetheless be parsed through regional terminologies and chronologies. Against what could otherwise be an overwhelming quantity of data, the authors have helpfully structured their book

through the lens of urbanism as a way to address the formation and structure of two of the subcontinent's best-known time periods: the Bronze-Age Indus culture of the third millennium BCE and the Early Historic Indo-Gangetic culture that arose in the mid-first millennium BCE. Throughout the book, special and welcomed attention is given to two regions where Coningham has done extensive interdisciplinary work: Nepal with its stark topographic changes (from the Gangetic plains to the Himalayas) and Sri Lanka (as an island biogeographic phenomenon). Those two countries do not have any Indus period remains, but were extensively networked in Early Historic times and also each played a seminal role in the emergence and expansion of Buddhism. Although the authors' proposal of continuity between the Indus and the Early Historic period is likely to be controversial, the attempt does illustrate the strong impacts of regional environments in structuring population dynamics.

Chapter One provides the authors' overall stance on historical and anthropological concepts such as urbanization and craft specialization. Chapter Two situates the Indian subcontinent within the theoretical rubrics of the study of social complexity worldwide, offering definitions of phenomena such as caste along with a description of South Asia's major language families, ethnic groups and religious traditions. The authors also engage with topics of current global interest such as the role of climate change in structuring sociopolitical dynamics, noting that "While climate is undoubtedly of great importance to human activity, the impact of human agency should never be underestimated" (page 52). Their perspective is an essential one in the modern day, given the increasing use of the term 'Anthropocene' to describe human impacts and environmental mutualisms that stretch back to prehistory; a sense of human agency is also essential to the later chapters in which they discuss variability within the development of cultural traditions in different regions.

Chapter Three provides a history of archaeological scholarship and the ways in which the story of the ancient past has been told through various nationalist and colonialist lenses. Readers of this chapter might want to balance their understanding of British influences on archaeological studies with other recent volumes that highlight the long tradition of historical and archaeological inquiry from the subcontinent (such as Virchand

Dharamsey's biography of Bhagwanlal Indraji [2012] or the many works on the history of Indian archaeology by D.K. Chakrabarti). Chapter Four addresses early food-producing cultures starting c.6500 BCE, in which the authors emphasize that there is not a uniform "Neolithic", but numerous regional expressions of early farming culture; the chapter emphasizes the northwestern subcontinent and the site of Mehrgarh as a precursor to eventual Bronze Age urbanism. As in other chapters, the archaeological discussion is richly illustrated with photographs, maps and text boxes that enable the reader to appreciate the diverse topographic and natural regimes in which ancient people collected and cultivated the resources around them.

Chapter Five examines the long cultural trajectories of the earliest food-producing peoples from 5000–2600 BCE, again with a special attention to the northwestern subcontinent where the Indus urban tradition would eventually take hold. Importantly, the authors do clarify that there were many parts of the subcontinent that were completely unaffected by the development of the Indus Civilization, which dominated only the regions of what is today Pakistan and northwestern India (page 141). This chapter, like others, indicates the way that the book engages with two parallel themes that are sometimes awkwardly juxtaposed: a linear narrative of cultural development that serves as a primer on South Asian archaeology and an intellectual project that interrogates the relationship between human-environmental dynamics and the development of urban cultures over time. Chapter Six focuses fully on the major sites of the Indus Civilization (2600–1900 BCE) across the gradient of small to large settlements, with a comparative perspective that makes reference to other global complex societies. The authors make the case that the Indus phenomenon was not a homogenous culture entity as has traditionally been assumed, providing an interpretation of regional variation that fits well with their analysis of earlier cultural traditions, such as settled farming life that also varied across the diverse spaces of the subcontinent. The authors emphasize the many challenges of research, including the fact that Indus archaeological manifestations cover a physical area ten times larger than Mesopotamia (page 178) but in which there has been far less fieldwork in part due to modern geopolitical configurations. Chapter Seven continues the book's focus on the Indus, but from the perspec-

tive of the loss of urbanism after 1900 BCE, with a particular emphasis on regional surveys and dispersed settlement patterns as evidence of population disaggregation. In keeping with the book's thread of the historicity of scholarship, there is a long discussion of prior explanations for Indus "collapse" along with more updated assessments proposing that multiple environmental and social changes probably worked in concert.

In Chapter Eight, the authors are certainly justified in arguing that there were "numerous progressively complex communities" after the eclipse of the Indus Civilization. However, their proposal that the "Early Historic tradition" started in 1900 BCE (thus identifying a direct and unbroken succession with the Indus culture) causes a bit of interpretive strain given that urbanism did not actually re-occur in the subcontinent until about the eighth century BCE and that the earliest decipherable writing (for example, what normatively constitutes 'history'), did not appear until around the fourth century BCE (as the authors themselves affirm later in the volume). Even by the most generous estimates, then, there is still an interval of a thousand years between the end of the Indus Civilization and the beginnings of the Early Historic period. It would not have diminished the authors' thorough discussion of phenomena such as the Gandharan Grave Culture, the Ochre Coloured Pottery phase and the intensive agricultural settlements of the Malwa and Jorwe phases to identify them as strong regional manifestations in which people responded to the subcontinent's many different environmental parameters after the Indus cultural period (a strategy that also would have bolstered the authors' earlier premise that there has always been regional differentiation within the subcontinent). Indeed, the authors' adherence to a multiregional perspective leads the reader to puzzle over the title of Chapter Nine as "The Re-Emergence of Regional Differentiation", given that such differentiation is a consistent and constructive explanation of South Asian human activities throughout the work.

Chapter 10 focuses on the "Early Historic world" and its cultural sphere encompassing the entire Indian subcontinent starting in the mid-first millennium BCE. Trade contacts, ritual traditions and even pottery styles indicate the extent to which sites had contact with one another across the vast and diverse South Asian landscape, supported by the intensification of rice agriculture and iron technology. Region-by-region

details of excavated sites provide ample evidence of shared traditions of construction, coinage and ornamentation, with some regional patterns clearly evident such as the greater presence of walled settlements in the north and the greater number of megalithic structures in the south. A crescendo of political organization is reached in Chapter 11 with a discussion of the Mauryan dynasty and in particular the Emperor Asoka, who according to textual sources engaged in territorial warfare to bring together large portions of the subcontinent under a single rule. The presence of historical sources illustrates what we are surely missing from the Indus period, which lacks decipherable records and has no monumental sculptures or elaborate tombs to suggest the presence of distinct rulers. With Asoka, we enter the realm of familiarity relative to comparable cases of state-formation and urban monumentality, although Coningham and Young again generally emphasize the contributions of Western scholars.

Having come full circle, the authors' conclusions (Chapter 12) reference their introduction with an argument for both continuity and regional diversity over time. They also shed light on the relationship of ancient history to modern political identities, and the way in which the Asokan period in particular has become a focal point for Indian national unity. Yet Asoka's Mauryan polity was a relatively short-lived one, and the authors' emphasis of regionalism once again proves true as a means of describing the vibrant political configurations of the post-Asoka period. Leaving aside the somewhat awkward forays into comparative theory that too often reference other parts of the world and that rely almost exclusively on Euro-American traditions of scholarship, the reader has much to gain from the volume and its clear presentation and encyclopedic inclusion of so many sites, cultural phenomena and prior explanatory perspectives about the archaeology of the Indian subcontinent.

References

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