

The Middle Asian Interaction Sphere

TRADE AND CONTACT IN THE 3RD MILLENNIUM BC

BY GREGORY L. POSSEHL

IN THE EARLY 1920s Sir John Marshall's investigations of the ancient cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (now located in Pakistan) resulted in the discovery of the Indus civilization (2500–1900 BC). This was an astounding event for the Indian subcontinent, effectively pushing the history of ancient India back

to the 3rd millennium BC, long before the arrival of Alexander the Great in 326 BC.



Marshall's discovery also brought about important insights into the interaction and trade between distant lands stretching from Mesopotamia to the Persian Gulf, the Iranian Plateau, and Central Asia. This part of the world can be called "Middle Asia"—the region between the Indus River and the Mediterranean Sea bounded on the north by Central Asia and



These objects document long-distance contact in the MAIS: (a) an impression of an Indus "unicorn" seal thought to come from Tell Umma; (b) an Indus "unicorn" seal from Mohenjo-daro; (c) one of the seals published by Gadd (now on display in the British Museum) showing an Indus script and animal device on a Persian Gulf-style seal; and (d) the Indus elephant seal from Gonur Depe (compiled from images supplied by Maurizio Tosi, Gregory L. Possehl, and Viktor Sarianidi).

on the south by the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. During his excavations, Marshall recovered materials from across this region at both Early Bronze Age cities.

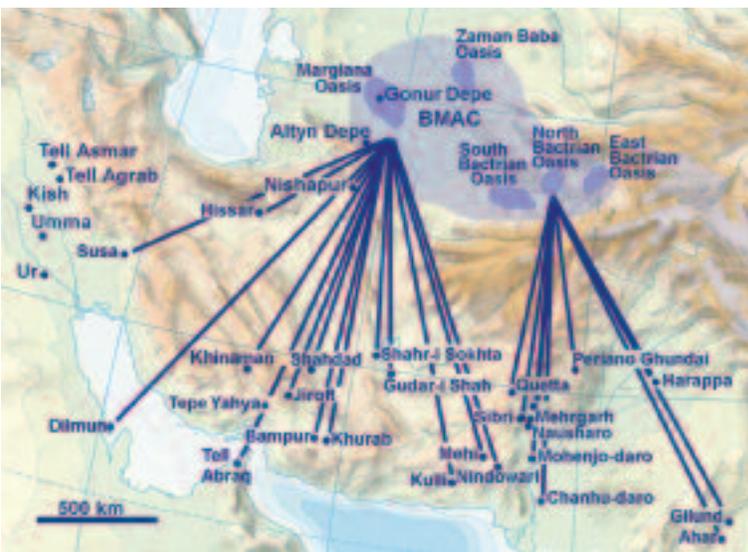
Similarly, during the 1920s and 30s, the full richness of the Mesopotamian and Elamite civilizations was coming to light at such sites as Tell Asmar, Tell Agrab, Kish, Susa, and especially the Royal Tombs at Ur. These excavations in Mesopotamia also revealed materials such as seals, beads, and pottery from the Indus civilization. In fact, the famous cloak of beads from Queen Puabi's Tomb at Ur is probably made up largely of Indian beads, particularly those of carnelian. Clearly, these distant peoples were contemporaries and known to one another—but how?

In the 1930s the British Assyriologist C. J. Gadd began to look at this interaction. In a famous paper entitled



Beads from Queen Puabi's Tomb at Ur adorned her cloak.

from India but from sites in the Persian Gulf—an area whose Bronze Age archaeology was virtually unknown at the time.



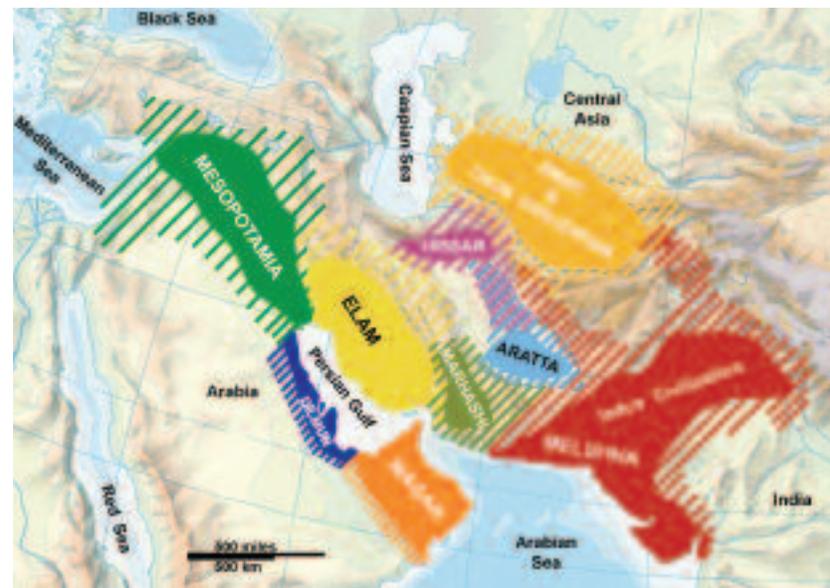
Sites across Middle Asia have revealed BMAC, or BMAC-like, artifacts (adapted from figure 10.8 in Fredrik T. Hiebert. *Origins of the Bronze Age Oasis Civilization in Central Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1994).

During the 1930s, archaeologists also identified Indian materials alongside Mesopotamian artifacts on the Iranian Plateau at sites such as Hissar, where they found Indian-etched carnelian beads. This suggested that interesting things were going on in this vast region during the Bronze Age. But World War II brought archaeological fieldwork in the greater Near East and South Asia to a virtual halt, and the finds were still too thin on the ground for it all to be pieced together.

After the war, A. Leo Oppenheim's article, "Seafaring Merchants of Ur," brought attention to the substantial 3rd millennium BC maritime activities in the Persian Gulf and beyond. According to ancient cuneiform texts Mesopotamian

venture capitalist merchants obtained exotic products such as copper, other metals, wood, pearls, and even animals via maritime commerce. Mesopotamian religious cults and the burgeoning population of elite citizens consumed these items as objects of ostentatious display.

The texts that Oppenheim reviewed contained many references to three lands beyond the "Lower Sea" or Persian Gulf—Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha. When these lands appear together in cuneiform literature they apparently are always in this order, or the reverse, strongly suggesting a spatial sequencing, as in a boast by Sargon the Great (2334–2279 BC) inform-



The MAIS encompassed numerous cultural regions (inspired by a map by Maurizio Tosi).

ing us that ships from Meluhha, Magan, and Dilmun docked in the harbor of his capital of Akkad.

Dilmun was both a Persian Gulf trading center—today's island nation of Bahrain and the nearby shore of Saudi Arabia—and a place of considerable cultural significance to the Mesopotamians—the purported entrance to their Underworld. Magan, to the east of Dilmun, was a land of copper, today home to the Sultanate of Oman and probably some or all of the United Arab Emirates. Even farther east, was the Indus civilization of the subcontinent—Meluhha—now in Pakistan and northwest India. Cuneiform documents also inform us that some people in Mesopotamia called themselves "Son of Meluhha," and there are references to Meluhhan villages and granaries. We even have the personal cylinder seal of Shu-ilishu, a translator of the Meluhhan language (*Expedition* 48(1):42-43).

Around the same time that this trade and interaction was being identified along Middle Asia's southern shores, Soviet



archaeologists began excavating on Middle Asia's northern periphery at the southern edge of Central Asia. In the 1960s an interesting set of observations emerged from these excavations. First, beginning in the 4th millennium BC, the people of southern Central Asia shared a pottery style called "Quetta Ware" with the people of Baluchistan far to the south. Along with female figurines and occasional compartmented seals, this style of pottery persisted until the early centuries of the 2nd millennium BC, suggesting long-term interaction north and south.

Second, at Altyn Depe in Turkmenistan, the Soviets found two provincial-style Indus seals, along with much ivory (presumably from elephants), which was also apparently from India. Their discoveries were all found in correct chronological sequence dating to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC, indicating that Altyn Depe was contemporary with the Indus cities. Furthermore, this also provided evidence for Middle Asian interaction stretching north to the Oxus civilization which, in a second phase beginning at about 2200 BC, occupied inland river delta oases such as Margiana. We now refer to the material culture of this second phase in Central Asia as the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex, or BMAC.

During the 1980s, excavations in Margiana by the Russian archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi at the city of Gonur Depe, uncovered the plan of a complex, well-defended settlement, with rich graves and the entire range of BMAC artifacts. He also found one very fine Indus stamp seal with an elephant. Judging by its style, this seal was probably made in the Indus region and brought or traded to Gonur. The site also has a great deal of ivory, and some artifacts have an Indus "look" to them, especially the gaming sticks or dice. Further evidence for trade or interaction between Margiana and Middle Asia can be seen in all the BMAC material found throughout the Greater

Indus Valley, the Iranian Plateau, and even at sites on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf.

Since the 1960s excavations on the Iranian Plateau at such places as Tepe Yahya, Shahr-i Sokhta, Shahdad, and Jiroft have also added to the corpus of finds linking the Indus civilization with the BMAC and Mesopotamia. For example, the burial of a BMAC personage at Quetta and the French excavations at Sibri, a BMAC settlement, indicate that BMAC peoples traveled in the Greater Indus Valley and even took up residence there. Further evidence has been identified by sifting through the reports and materials from old excavations from such places as Bampur, Khurab, Khinaman, and Nishapur in Iran, and Kulli and Mehi in Pakistani Baluchistan. Now, more easily recognized, we see that each of these sites produced BMAC materials that were missed when originally published.

By the end of the 20th century it had become quite apparent that this entire region had witnessed a period of new economic and political configurations during the 3rd millennium BC. To better understand this important phenomenon in world history and to bring it all together as a single dynamic, in 2002 I coined the term "Middle Asian Interaction Sphere" or MAIS in my book, *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*. Interaction spheres have a long and distinguished history in archaeology since the concept has been useful in dealing with the sorts of long-distance interactions that the peoples of Middle Asia seem to have enjoyed. But no two interaction spheres are the same; nor are they unchanging over protracted periods of time. Archaeologists therefore continue to document the shifting dynamics of this important set of international relationships, leading the way in systematically investigating and furthering our understanding of the MAIS. 🏠

GREGORY L. POSSEHL is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and the Curator-in-Charge of the Museum's Asian Section.

For Further Reading

- Gadd, C. J. "Seals of Ancient Indian Style Found at Ur." *Proceedings of the British Academy* 18 (1932):191-210.
- Oppenheim, A. Leo. "Seafaring Merchants of Ur." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 74 (1954):6-17.
- Possehl, Gregory L. "Meluhha." In *The Indian Ocean in Antiquity*, edited by Julian Reade, pp. 133-208. London: Kegan Paul International in association with the British Museum, 1996.
- Possehl, Gregory L. *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2002.
- Sarianidi, Viktor I. *Marguş: Ancient Oriental Kingdom in the Old Delta of the Murghab River*. Ashgabat, Turkmenistan: Türkmen döwlethabarlary, 2002.



The site of Gonur Depe looks like a citadel from the air.