

SYMBOLS IN CLAY: POTTERY AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE INDUS CIVILIZATION

Dr. Manik Mustafa Shar

University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Assistant Professor, Archaeology, Pakistan

manik.shar@usindh.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Manik Mustafa Shar

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20485009>

Received	Accepted	Published
24 March 2026	03 May 2026	20 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Indigenous ceramic practices in Indus Civilization reflects advance artistic and advanced technological sophistication of early civilization. Beyond its utilitarian purpose, pottery of Indus worked as stronger source of cultural expression. Defining social identity, artistic sensibilities, scared imagery & skilled craftsmanship. The paper focuses visual representation and symbolic iconographic motifs depicted on pottery of Indus civilization, with special focus on different decorative imagery including Bull, Pipal leaf, floral, fish & geometric patterns found from major Indus period sites. This research highlights how these motifs articulate the concepts linked to fertility, economy, nature, faith system & everyday existence within Indus urban context. Geometric pattern define sophisticated sense of symmetry and mathematical accuracy. While botanical and animal designs reflect close human-natural environmental relationship. The research identifies pottery as evidence skilled craftsmanship and a structured production system in Indus civilization. Furthermore this study highlight the fabric and technological perspectives of Indus ceramics, comprising clay selection, minerals, tempering materials, slip application, colouring & kiln firing methods Most frequent available pottery is red ware painted with black designs and patterns, other variety include buff ware, buff slip, buff color, buff wash, chocolate color & grey ceramics. The secret behind the quality and durability of Indus pottery lies in careful clay selection, preparation of clay and maintaining kiln temperature by Indus potters. This research suggests that Indus pottery was more than utilitarian ware but also a source of visual language of artistic innovation, skilled craftsmanship and cultural identity in one of the south Asia's early urban civilization.

Keywords: Indus Civilization, Pottery Designs, Clay Composition, Symbolism, Ancient Craftsmanship, Cultural Expression.

INTRODUCTION

Present day Pakistan and northwestern regions during 2600 -1900BC were popular for developed and flourished era of Indus Civilization, recognized with most sophisticated ancient urban Civilization contemporary of Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilization. Indus civilization has world's first urban planning, well recognized and standardized weight system, mathematically based

accurate measurements system, wonderful craftsmanship (Kenoyer 1998). Most notable discoveries within Mohen jo Daro, Harappa, Kot Diji, Chanhu Daro, Dholavira, Amri, Butth Jo Daro and other sites is pottery remains, which has greatly helped to understand the technological, social, economic and symbolic identity of Indus Civilization.

Pottery objects weren't merely used for household usage, Indus ceramics defined the artistic canvases illustrated the ideas, human environmental relation, cultural, technological and religious identity. Indus pottery contained various designs, patterns, engraved, incised, geometric, floral, animal and other designs occupied significant space within Indus craftsmanship, which refers deeper cultural association of Indus peoples. Ample archaeological findings suggests that Indus potter has great mastery and specialization in pottery making, were much expert in clay selection, preparation, expert in operating potter wheel, enough able in maintaining kiln temperature, making color pigments and large scale production methods. Uniform designs throughout entire Indus civilization is evidence of organized technological consistency in craftsmanship. The large scale availability of red slip with black paint designs refers one of the strongest characteristics of Indus pottery culture (Possehl 2002).

This paper focuses the analysis of Indus pottery to know the way of Indus artisan's artistic and cultural expression. Examining the symbols, designs, motives and expertise in making mass pottery production, color & composition, social interpretations linked with pottery traditions. Going through archaeological records and interpretations paper suggest that pottery didn't merely served as practical purpose but shapes the artistic aesthetic, iconographic representation of Indus civilization

Research Methodology: This paper follows the analytical and qualitative research methods established on purely archaeological data, excavation reports, visit of randomly selected museums located in Sindh to analyze the collections, and secondary source of data collection has also been followed, literary material related to Indus ceramic production, paper adopts interpretative, descriptive methods to examine the artistic and technological features of Indus pottery found from major Indus sites. Archaeological data obtained from Mohen jo Daro, Kot Diji, Harappa, Chanhudaro, Banawali, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Buth jo Daro has been brought in consideration to build pottery's typological and

decorative pattern understanding. The work of great archaeologists including Stuart Piggott, Ernest Mackay, Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Mortimer Wheeler and famous Pakistani archaeologists has been reviewed carefully. Similarities and variations in Indus pottery designs, motives, in relation with environmental, social conditions, coloring & firing techniques in bronze age has been over viewed, most preferably the pottery of mature and early Indus period has been put under consideration for accomplishing this research paper.

Literature Review: In 1920s after the excavations of Mohen jo Daro and Harappa, pottery of Indus has been remain the center of archaeological and scholarly research. Archaeologists and ceramic experts has recognized the Indus pottery as an important source of material culture in rewriting the history of Indus civilization.

Sir John Marshall (1931) Compiled his Mohen jo Daro excavation reports in 1931, described the aesthetic sophistication of Indus pottery mentioned its geometric and natural motives and designs, John Marshall said that similarities in Indus pottery throughout the Indus represented culturally integrated civilization.

Mortimer Wheeler (1968) Found pottery as source of urban structural & technological perfection, he focused on wheel made pottery found from Indus and compared Indus ceramics with Mesopotamian pottery traditions.

Gregory Possehl (2002) outlined Indus pottery within pattern of urbanism, craft standardization and trade. Possehl was of opinion that ceramics were the integral part of local interaction and cultural connection throughout Indus settlements.

Jonathan Mark Kenoyer (1998) Presented one of comprehensive assessment of Indus craft production. He emphasized that pottery manufacturer relied within specialized craftsmen within organized production centers. Kenoyer stressed over the iconographic significance of painted designs especially of floral and animal designs and forms.

Ernest Mackay (1938) during his excavation at Chanhudaro an important archaeological site famous for manufacturing center for semi-precious stones, along with bead manufacturing areas he

also recorded the pottery making and kiln areas which shows mass pottery production with sophisticated expertise.

F.A Khan (1965), Rafique Mughal (1990) and A.H Dani (1968) admirably contributed for understanding regional pottery tradition in Punjab and Sindh, their work proved the continuity of pottery traditions from pre Indus to mature Indus.

Rao (2010) archaeometric research made in recent past has emphasized on clay composition, mineral content and kiln temperature, these findings shows that Indus potters carefully choose alluvial clay and mixed with shell, organic materials and sand for durability and heat resistance.

Butt et al., (2024) argued that painted Indus ceramic showed sophisticated craftsmanship and communicative symbolism within Indus urban settlements.

Wang et al., (2024) scientific investigations made on early Indus painted ceramics shows coordinated manufacturing methods and advanced pottery making.

Cork (2023) Indus pottery just didn't served domestic purposes but as a form of a physical culture wrapped in social and semiotic practices.

Lowenstein (2024) latest computerized & mechanical methods and techniques are in progress for digitalizing symbols and inscriptions found on Indus pottery.

Geometric patterns on Indus Pottery: Geometric designs add one usual aesthetic element for pottery of Indus, motifs include zigzag lines, intersecting lines, circles, parallel lines, triangle, loop design, spiral, chevrons, grid, crosshatching & wavy patterns. The availability of geometric designs shows technical symmetry, rhythm. Indus potters had shown commendable control in making repetitive designs around the pot's surface. Mathematical accuracy in such patterns meet Indus standardization and Indus urbanism. After deeper watch over geometric patterns it's clear that geometric designs carry spatial iconic meaning behind surface decoration, zigzag lines are interlinked with tidal water movements, circles and intersecting lines reflect cosmic similarities or natural cycle, expertise in astronomy in Indus has been consolidated through the discovery of ringtones, such interpretations may be further consolidated after decipherment of Indus script.

For making geometric designs, requires advance technical expertise with slow brush execution, these designs were applied on red slip with black designs and motives, color contrast between red and black pigments is eye catching. Regional artistic and technological similarities and continuity throughout the Indus, similar pattern are witnessed through Mohen jo Daro, Kalibangan, Kot Diji reflecting shared artistic cultural traditions.



Fig N0-01-02, Bowels with geometric designs. Source: Harappa.com

Zoomorphic Motifs.

Zoomorphic iconographic designs has unique place in Indus art and craft traditions. Most frequent image on Indus pottery, seals and figurine & on other cultural material is of Bull. In Indus imagery of humped bull is in abundance, humped bull is symbolised for strength, agricultural prosperity, productivity and fertility. As long as cattle proved vital role in agrarian communities, bull remained prominent in agrarian economy. Most of scholars of opinion that bull had ritual and religious high place in Indus society. on Indus pottery the representation of bull has been depicted in masculine imagery with stretched horn, muscular physique with solid

posture. Peculiar artistic emphasis demonstrate animal anatomy.

Along with bull imagery the pottery also consist the designs of fishes, birds, peacocks, deer, goat, fish design is also one of the frequent imagery found on Indus pottery, fish design might be interpreting fertility, rivers, water, sustenance, birds iconography might had environmental & spiritual representation within Indus religious context, prominently peacock images. Natural imagery of Indus pottery reflects the close relation of Indus peoples with their surrounding natural environment, also signify the importance of flora and fauna within Indus civilization.



Fig No. 03-04 Bull imagery on Indus seal & pottery, Source: Pinterest & Harappa.com

Floral & Pipal leaf design

Iconic botanical imagery ever found in Indus artist Pipal leaf motif, Pipal leaf is most frequently sketched on pottery and engraved on seals, Pipal tree and its leaves has scared definition in many south Asian religions, particularly in Buddhism and Hinduism, Pipal leaf motif in Indus represent the fertility, continuity, sacredness & life. In Indus context frequent Pipal imagery elaborate socio religious interpretations and significance.

Floral designs on Indus pottery further strengthened the attachment of Indus peoples with their nature and environment, floral imagery on pottery is combined with geometric patterns. Botanical iconography also represent the environmental awareness and organized and principled agrarian wisdom. Indus civilization mostly relied on water of Indus River, which fetched water for agriculture, riverine trade & vegetation which can be termed to fertility & prosperity.



Fig No.04-05, Pipal & floral designs on Indus Pottery, Source: Harappa.com

Natural iconography

In Indus pottery design & decoration floral motifs appeared as second major decorating category. Many Indus period sites contain pottery of various floral designs including vines, lotus, leaves & several types of flowers.

Presence of natural scenery on Indus pottery and seals reveals close contact inbetween peoples of

Indus and their rivers, ecology, environment, animals, birds which shaped the ecological and cultural conducive living pattern. Drawing natural imagery deeply connect with nature and their careful imagery application is not just merely a part of their professional requirement but of artistic and ideological importance.



Fig No. 06-07, Natural Imagery on Indus Pottery, Source: Springer Nature Link & Pinterest

Colors and Pigments in Indus Pottery

Prominent pottery tradition of Indus was red slip with black painting, the eye catching scheme of red & black colour developed pottery identity of Indus ceramics. Red colour was obtained through iron rich clay fired with proper oxidizing technique in

kiln to acquire desired colour & from red hematite stones. Black colour was prepared with minerals, like manganese or carbon compounds. Colour pigments were applied before sending pots to kiln, along with red slip or red ware Indus pottery included other ceramic variety, including grey

ware, buff ware, dark red or chocolate colour pottery & black slip. Change in colour was due to mineral content in clay, firing techniques.

Colouring & designing of Indus ceramic is matchless with professional quality finishing makes Indus potter pioneers of ceramics.



Fig No.08, Colour pigments probably used for pottery decoration, Source; Google.com

Pottery medium of social networking

Pottery of Indus had been the source of interconnectedness in trade done locally and abroad, availability of Indus pottery within Indus and geographically distanced regions shows cultural & trade interaction. It is further consolidated through the availability of Indus pottery found at Oman, Mesopotamia & Persian Gulf, ceramics might have played symbolic and commercial role. Trade helped in circulating technical knowledge, clay preparation, baking techniques while roaming distant regions, presence of standardised pottery reflects socio-economic ties between great civilizations.

Pottery as Ritual and Funerary

Pottery held a significant role in ritual and funerary traditions of Indus civilization, grave goods found at cemetery areas of major Indus sites refers symbolic relation with belief in afterlife, death or ritual offerings. Ceremonial pottery included dish on stand, miniature pots and painted vessels were being used, ritual- scared symbols including imagery of animal and Pipal leaf were preferably depicted for ritual purposes. Pottery part of religious rituals signify its function beyond the domestic purpose.



Fig No. 07-08, Indus Burial Pottery, Source: Harappa.com & Sindhishaan.com

Discussion

The analysis made of Indus ceramics shows that pottery played significant role for cultural interaction within Indus society. Ornamental patterns such as Pipal leaf, fish, geometric, floral, bull and other animal designs rooted through culture, environmental experiences, iconic representation & creative art. Uniform pottery production throughout the Indus shows well-structured consistent pattern of technology and production. Indus craftsmen had sophisticated advance skills for selecting clay, clay preparation, coloring, dealing potter wheel & maintain temperature at kilns.

Pottery proved as strong source of cultural integration, trade, economy, social identity & rituals among Indus urban population. Pottery objects worked as utilitarian objects, artistic craftsmanship & iconographic material. The iconographic interpretation of ceramics motifs was much difficult due to un deciphered Indus script, however, repeated motifs reflect common cultural significance and unified artistic practices. The availability of cultural material emphasis the significance of craft specialization in upholding urban system. Overall Indus ceramics reflects an exceptional combination of functionality, artistic expression, symbolic meaning and technological advancement.

Conclusion

Indus ceramic traditions offer deep understanding into first South Asian urban civilization, through their pottery making, Indus craftsmen showed artistic values, environmental vigilance, semiotic concepts and advanced craftsmanship. The symbolic designs featured on pottery comprising Pipal leaf design, bull, fish, floral iconography and geometric patterns make symbolic imagery through which collective values and cultural identity were conveyed. These designs and patterns interpret cognitive and artistic refinement of Indus society.

Crafting techniques of pottery making further illustrate & enhance deepen understanding of clay composition, mixing mineral and materials, color preparation, potter wheel production, kiln & firing maintenance. The durability and quality of Indus pottery is result of organized craftsmanship

Indus ceramics served economic, domestic, ritualistic semiotic role in city life. Indus ceramics integrated communities stretched within Indus and abroad through shared cultural traditions. Conclusively, Indus ceramics shouldn't be deemed just cultural material but as a strong medium of cultural articulation demonstrating innovatively, expertise, ideational worldview of early civilization.

REFERENCES.

- Dani, A. H. (1968). *The archaeology of Pakistan*. Karachi: Department of Archaeology.
- Kenoyer, J. M. (1998). *Ancient cities of the Indus Valley civilization*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Mackay, E. J. H. (1938). *Further excavations at Mohenjo-daro*. Delhi: Government of India Press.
- Marshall, J. (1931). *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus civilization (Vols. I-III)*. London: Arthur Probsthain.
- Mughal, M. R. (1990). *The decline of the Indus Civilization and the late Harappan period in the Indus Valley*. *Lahore Museum Bulletin*, 3(1), 1-24.
- Piggot, S. (1950). *Prehistoric India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Possehl, G. L. (2002). *The Indus civilization: A contemporary perspective*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Rao, S. R. (2010). *The rise of civilization in India and Pakistan*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Wheeler, M. (1968). *The Indus civilization (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, R. P. (2010). *The ancient Indus: Urbanism, economy, and society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vidale, M. (2000). *The archaeology of Indus crafts: Indus craftspeople and why we study them*. Rome: IsIAO.
- Meadow, R. H. (1991). *Harappa excavations and Harappan civilization*. *World Archaeology*, 23(2), 181-194.

- Shaffer, J. G. (1992). The Indus Valley, Baluchistan, and Helmand traditions. In R. Ehrich (Ed.), *Chronologies in Old World archaeology* (pp. 441-464). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Coningham, R., & Young, R. (2015). *The archaeology of South Asia: From the Indus to Asoka, c.6500 BCE-200 CE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, F. A. (1965). *Kot Diji excavations*. Karachi: Department of Archaeology.
- Lal, B. B. (1997). *The earliest civilization of South Asia*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.
- Dhavalikar, M. K. (1995). *Cultural imperialism: Indus civilization in western India*. New Delhi: Books and Books.
- Agrawal, D. P. (1982). *The archaeology of India*. London: Curzon Press.
- Allchin, B., & Allchin, F. R. (1982). *The rise of civilization in India and Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kenoyer, J. M., & Meadow, R. H. (2016). Excavations at Harappa and new perspectives on the Indus Civilization. *Pakistan Archaeology*, 52, 1-20.
- Butt, A., Rahman, G. U., & Tabbasum, P. (2024). Uncovering ceramic craft of Indus tradition: Analysis of flanged vessels from the Salt Range Musa Khel. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 151-165. [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024\(5-III\)15](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2024(5-III)15)
- Jamison, G., Uesugi, A., & Yamaguchi, Y. (2023). Unicorns and seals: New multivariate approaches to exploring patterned stylistic variation in the Indus Civilization. *Archaeological Research in Asia*, 36, 100486. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ara.2023.100486>
- Mukhopadhyay, B. A. (2023). Semantic scope of Indus inscriptions comprising taxation, trade and craft licensing. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10, 972. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02320-7>
- Sengupta, S. (2023). Fish symbolism in Indus Valley epigraphy and protohistoric accounts. *Studia Orientalia Electronica*, 11(1), 86-102.
- Wang, X., et al. (2024). Manufacturing technique analysis of Early Harappan painted pottery from the Jhang Bahatar Site, Pakistan. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, 53, 104369.