



Journal of Archaeological Studies in India

Vol. 4, No. 1, 2025, pp. 49-60
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URL: <http://arfjournals.com/jasi>

<https://doi.org/10.47509/JASI.2025.v04i01.04>

Derivative Archaeology: Archaeological theory, Praxis, and us as Agency

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Abstract: Archaeology as a domain is maturing in different regions at different pace with diverse challenges in production of knowledge. Our interpretation, conditioned by our individual positions play a pivotal role in this process. During my recent fieldwork in Gujarat, India, as we visited excavated sites (many reburied), several occasions presented cases for propensity.

The first is, how we continue to evolve as humans and as archaeologists. The seemingly regular practices of discarding the redundant excavated material, marking the artifacts with provenance information and restorations of excavated structures appear intriguing and perplexing. The decades old excavation/exploration reports pose a challenge of reading those in a 'historical' framework. One of the sites hosts and protects a location occupied by the lead excavator during excavation seasons. The presentiment of a site acquiring veneration in the midst of a profane context is irresistible and introspecting the causes for this transformation becomes imperative.

The other predisposition is about how the site continues to be a function of society around it throughout the time. For the site, the processes of excavation, discard, and back-filling themselves seem to remodel it. It continues to be 'used' and also 'misused' from an academic and heritage management perspectives. However, both use and misuse cases are in response to need or incomprehension of respective times. The excavated sites thus present themselves as derivatives of previous academic exercises and societal functions. We, as laypeople and as archaeologists, thus continue to experience the *deja-vu* every time we analyse the site.

Keywords: Derivative, Interpretation, Contexts, Tendency

Received : 28 April 2025

Revised : 24 May 2025

Accepted : 10 June 2025

Published : 30 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Pallavee Gokhale 2025. Derivative Archaeology: Archaeological theory, Praxis, and us as Agency. *Journal of Archaeological Studies in India*, 4: 1, pp. 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JASI.2025.v04i01.04>

Introduction

Archaeology, as an academic domain, is new compared to other social science disciplines. Since the inception of processual and post-processual concepts of studying this subject, there has been a

continuous conflict of whether to recognise it as a scientific subject or that of humanities and social sciences stream. Despite no consensus and in-turn creating more space for theoretical debates too, the wealth of academic publishing is growing everyday. Besides the theoretical debate, there are various other challenges such as ethics, public access to sites and artefacts, reasons to dig, and finances to protect the excavated remains. Different geographies continue to have region-specific challenges such as political agenda, indigenous rights, environmental uncertainties, academic community, and finally societal pressures and interests. Thus, archaeology as a domain is maturing in different regions at different pace with diverse challenges in production of knowledge.

In this convoluted scene, this academic faculty allows us to study 'us' at multiple spatio-temporal cross-sections, commonly known as cultural periods. We often segregate these 'periods', a slice of intangible time, by applying absolute or relative dating techniques on the excavated material. It thus manifests a slice of time and human action caught in that timeframe. On the contrary, 'we', studying this past, are also bound by our own spatio-temporal contexts manifested in the forms of evolving theories and methods, university departments, governments, and socio-political environments. These contexts afford different sets of conditions such as problem definitions, technologies, expertise, scholars and solutions. The solutions are often translated as academic publications and thus contribute to knowledge production. It is thus evident that our interpretation, conditioned by our individual positions play a crucial role in this epistemological exercise.

During my fieldwork in Gujarat, India in Feb 2022, many of the previously excavated sites presented themselves as cases of meta-archaeology. These provided a window for analysing 'our way' of looking at these sites and cultures, how our perspectives shape our understanding, how our interventions continue to form/deform the site, and how the idea of context keeps expanding. We thus get an opportunity to simultaneously reflect on us and the site. This article is an effort to reflect on us, as humans and as an archaeological academic community, through our own actions at sites in our collective academic past. The exercise inadvertently accounts for our interactions with the site. Us and site appear completely inseparable in the entire passage of time.

As we struggle to theorise this subject since the middle of last century, it is prudent to acknowledge experiences and constraints in the field, and translate those as we improve the theory around it. From the theorising point of view, singular experiences could be subjective but collective experiences deserve academic attention. The déjà vu feeling that we get at multiple occasions is not because we try to be academic but rather exactly opposite. We simply act as an agency, with our own vantage points, for studying ourselves across space and time. These different experiences present themselves as derivations of archaeological theory, praxis, and us as agency. "... modern archaeological theory is personal... Like psychology, it is about our own past..." (Bentley and Maschner, 2008, p. 2).

The article is split into subsections as seen below but all those continue to interlink with each other.

The Reuse Tendency

As already emphasised, the site is an inseparable entity, equally from habitants and archaeologists. Hillier (2014, p. 20) explains this as 'This is because space and spatial relations are so fundamental to our ability to cognise the world around us,... they form part of the ideas we think with, rather than those we think of.' Thus, we continue to evolve in the given spaces, first as humans and then as archaeologists. While explaining how this space transforms into a social construct, Baur et al explain that 'Over time, local practices and knowledge are solidified via the physical (especially: built) environment.' (Baur et al., 2014, p. 16). 'Site' is a primary stage and also an act in archaeology. From an archaeologist's point

of view, it should be ‘used’ for studying it. However, the line between ‘use’ and ‘misuse’ of the site is often blurred. That blurriness from the remote past manifests as an ‘act of archaeological investigation’. However, in the experiential present, it often gets translated as destruction of the site. At Mohenjodaro, the hallmark site of Harappan civilisation in South Asia, as the excavations progressed during 1930s, stacks of bricks were identified during excavation. It was hypothesised and substantiated with certain more evidence such as mud mortar, that the constructions in subsequent periods had probably reused bricks from abandoned structures from earlier cultural periods (Mackay, 1938). Coincidentally, we experience a materially identical event at Harappa but much before the site was acknowledged for any archaeological significance.

Cunningham had visited Harappa at least twice during the 1850s (Possehl, 1996, p. 6) but during the 1872-73 visit, he reported removal of bricks from the south face of the southern mound. (1975, p.106). He in fact tries to gauge the size and extent of the mound based on the ‘fact’ that ‘... *they have more than sufficed to furnish brick ballast for about 100 miles of the Lahore and Multan Railway.*’ (1975, p.107). Though he conducted a small excavation, published a site plan, and also published a seal after this visit, he does not seem to be objecting to this ‘brick removal’. Despite several visits by different scholars during following years, there doesn’t seem to be any action taken against this movement of ‘bricks’. Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni observed continuous brick robbing till 1916-1917 (Possehl, 1996, p. 6).

What is interesting is that the Multan-Lahore track of the then Punjab Railway was completed and opened for operations by 1861. Official correspondence regarding this railway line was included in the publication of 1857. This is when the survey of the line and planning was in progress. As the author documents survey findings and plans for the railway line, he mentions that using limestone from the Doab (area between Satluj and Ravi) for the ballast of railways would ‘... render its use too costly...’ (Andrews, 1857, p. 16). He plans to substitute it with ‘... hard burnt bricks broken to size ...’ (p. 16). Also, his survey mentions ‘Between Mooltan and Lahore, a distance of 240 miles, the country is a dead level, hard and waste. ... There are no engineering difficulties whatever to be met with anywhere between Lahore and Mooltan.’ (p. 30) In the same context, he also assures that if need be, there are many brick manufacturing facilities in the area. Now, even before the railways came into picture, Burnes, in his travels during 1831-1833, had visited Harappa. He also observes removal of bricks and being reused ‘... *to build a small place of the old name hard by.*’ (1834, p. 137).

Figure 1 shows brick stacks discovered at DK-G(S) mound in Mohenjodaro (1.a), Multan-Lahore railway-line (1.c – shown in green), and Multan-Lahore railway-line in the context of archaeological mound at Harappa (1.b and 1.d).

A few decades after the construction of the railway, the same incident is reported by Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahani in around 1917. He describes these ruins as being used as ‘*quarry for building materials*’ (Sahani, 1917, p. 7). However, now, he expresses an urge to save this by approaching the government and save these ruins under the provisions of Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904.

These incidents, apparently separated by time, persuade us to contextualise those differently. The stacks of bricks from Mohenjodaro tend to fall within the realms of archaeological excavations, material culture, and Harappan civilisation discourse. The events at Harappa formulate into a colonial history of discovery of Harappa. What transcends through these events spanning decades, is a peculiar human tendency. After a century of formation of Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, acknowledgement of Harappan culture as one of the ancient civilization, active explorations and excavation in the post-partition period, and despite the discovery of numerous Harappan culture site in India, we continue

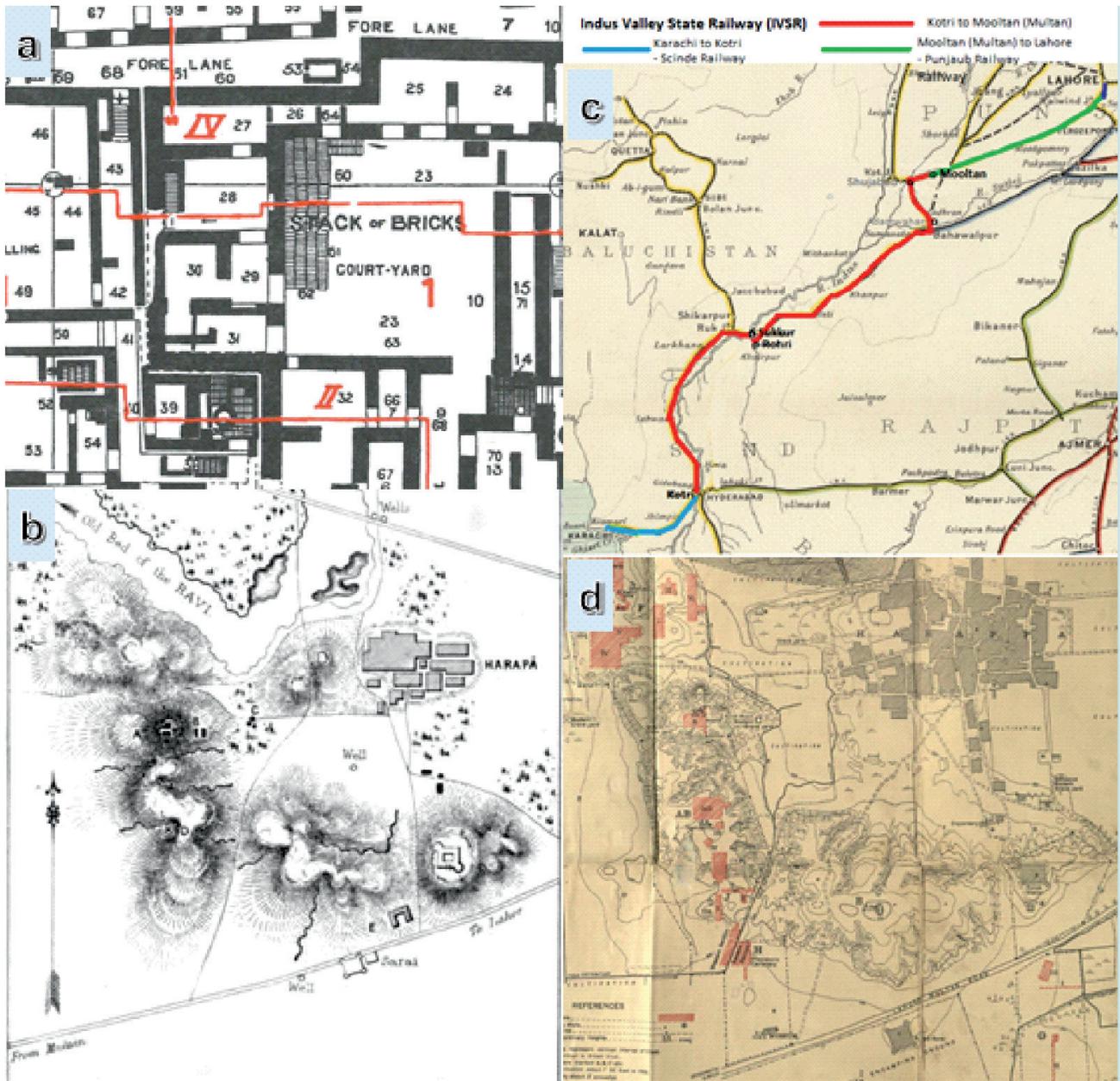


Figure 1: Mohenjo-daro and Harappa – the use and misuse of bricks

to observe the same predisposition towards the sites. Dholavira, the World Heritage site, is the most prominent Harappan site located in Gujarat. Unlike other prominent Harappan culture sites built in bricks, this one is built in masonry stone. The stone is locally available. As informed by the local site guide (who earlier worked on the site as labour during 12 seasons of excavation), during the devastating earthquake of Bhuj 2001, in the desperate need to rebuild the houses, the locals took away the stones from the eastern tank and reused those for the repairs. In another situation at the same site, there is a location identified as a quarry site. It is hypothesised that the fortification and structures at the mound of Dholavira were built by sourcing the stone from this quarry site. This quarry is thus a site of an academic interest for multiple reasons. However, the same site is used even today for sourcing the stone for the local needs.

These incidents, separated by space and time, provide a window to the timeless human behavioural aspect. Most of these material reuse cases are in response to need, desperation or incomprehension

of respective times, the times as we perceive it today - archaeological, historical, and modern. Subsequently, based on our positions and vantage points we continue to label these as use or misuse of site or the characteristic of site.

The Discard Culture

As I visit these long-excavated sites, these present themselves with nuances besides their archaeological significance. The field implementation of the archaeological 'praxis' creates its own theme. These sites, being subjected to exploration and excavation, acquire a 'layer of academics' in its stratigraphic sequence. The marks left by earlier scholars become so evident that it becomes an 'aspect' of study as we revisit these sites. The sites of Shikarpur, Gola Dhoro (Bagasara), Khirsara, Kotada Bhadli have been excavated during the later half of 20th century. These are important sites of Harappan material culture, located in Gujarat, India. The recent visit to these sites, especially the excavated localities, created a derivative experience of archaeology. While taking a round of the excavated mounds at Gola Dhoro (Bagasara) and Shikarpur (Fig. 2c), we could easily identify the ceramic disposal localities in different directions. Those were left on the surface of the ground. This was most probably a discard when the excavation seasons closed and all 'important' material was taken away to the labs or departments. There is probably a field methodology good-practice point here. However, a careful look at the piles of potsherds provide an indication of the site 'user's', i.e. excavator's choices for discard, not necessarily selection. The selection can only be understood through academic publication. This is exactly what we experience as archaeologists when we encounter the site for the first time. Our selection of material for archaeological study is almost constantly from 'whatever is left behind' or was 'not significant' to the 'users' from the past. It's rare when we excavate artefacts with burials which have been 'kept' purposely. At the site of Khirasara, we could see discarded ceramics with readable detailed identification numbers written with ink (Fig 2a). The farmers who own this small farm confidently took us to a small patch right in the middle of the tilled farm and showed these pottery pieces (Fig. 2b). The latest excavation season got over in 2013. We were thus looking at the 'record' almost after a decade, which did not make its way into the publications but was a foundation for the same. Whether to treat this as an in-situ recovery (of excavation practice!) or consider it as secondary or tertiary provenance is a separate topic of debate. Secondly, in the above case, while I see these sites more as an explorer rather than as an archaeologist, these piles of 'academically' discarded ceramics themselves become constituents of the site.

From a slightly different yet relevant perspective, the phenomenon of finding of these 'written' artefacts can be seen as a shrunken version of discovery of seal-like inscribed artefacts. Our inability to discern those is a result of our separateness in time and context. On the other hand, the mentioned ceramic sherds being nearer or almost contiguous to author's context, these remain as legible, non-historic, and non-archaeological finds and thus devoid of any academic attention. However, as the society moves away in time and context, it is likely that they become an 'archaeological record' in the coming centuries.

An extrapolation of this phenomenon was experienced at Dholavira. A huge pile of excavated soil from the trenches and water tanks has practically created a small new mound near SW side of the main citadel and structure called granaries. One can practically climb on this 'mound' (Fig. 2d). There is no documentation of this huge pile either in the excavation report or the map displayed at the site museum. It was shared by a site guide who happened to be one of the labours of 12 seasons of excavation at this site. This was probably witnessing the site-formation processes. That small mound manifests the often-inexplicable reasons of archaeological site formation. It's simultaneous relevance

and irrelevance to the site demonstrates the derivative aspect of archaeology. As we map this to our routine archaeological methodologies for studying site formation processes, this was a C-transform separated by time but probably totally undetectable from standard stratigraphic analysis. It underlines the already known fact that a site is a function of society around it. Just that the site operates differently for different societies separated by time or even within the same timeframe.



Figure 2: The discards and their future

The cost of Intervention

Some of these sites which render significant architectural remains, get extended attention, budgets, and protection for the upkeep and appropriate conservation. In most of the cases, the site eventually gets converted into a tourist attraction with heritage, cultural, or historical value. One such prominent example is a site of Lothal in Gujarat. Hypothesised as a trading port during Harappan culture, this is also UNESCO's World Heritage site. As we visit Lothal today, many of the structures, especially, the features identified as dockyard and granary are seen repaired and reconstructed (not conserved) from the state in which those were excavated in the 1960s. The case of dockyard is interesting since it is now almost a commonly accepted theory and not just a hypothesis or speculation anymore. Though there are contradictory academic opinions, those haven't made significant progress to counter this theory. As per the theory, the dockyard was used to build and repair the ships or at times to actually dock the ships coming from sea. There are studies about past climate and sea-level changes which also help corroborate these themes. What is perplexing is that the present-day dock-like structure is repaired and built in brick from all four sides with only a small opening in the southern wall which was found during excavation. For accepting and visualising the theory of dockyard, the presently available conserved structure does not have an opening from where the boats would have entered or left. It appears like a properly constructed water tank with a sloping base. The site, thus, is not demonstrating what it is interpreted as. Our intervention to conserve and protect the site as probably altered the form

and function leading to different use and interpretation. This intervention, a result of modern academic exercise, is inexplicable.

Site as Subsistence

As we look at the excavations of all these sites, small or big, one distinct aspect which almost always gets lost in the academic discourse is the human effort that goes into the excavation and its related activities. In large scale excavations, the digging hands are those of the local communities. Mackay notes 600 labour at the site of Mohenjo Daro in 1930s (Mackay, 1938, p. xii). He also gives a rough demographic distribution and their prominent characteristics. Figure 3a shows workers from the Mohenjo-daro excavations seasons conducted by Sir. Mortimer Wheeler.¹ The Vadnagar excavation presently running in the state of Gujarat has employed ~500 labour (Fig. 3b).



Figure 3: The first makers of the site

From a post-processual perspective, with Hodder's ideas in mind, we are essentially having possibilities of those many perspectives of looking at the material. The site acts as a source of Subsistence for this huge set of people and supports them to run their household. At the site of Dholavira, out of around 600 labours,² some continued their households at the Khadir island only, deep in the Greater Rann of Kutch with very limited livelihood opportunities and remote in every sense from rest of the India.

Profane or Pious

We met one of such past labour who is now a government recognised tour guide at this world heritage site. His background creates an entirely new perspective of looking at the site for us but his own association with the site is also a blend of need, duty, and pride with varying proportions across time. His devotion towards the site and gratitude towards its creator-excavator is evident. As we started our round to the mound, he first took us to the modern, newly built small house-like structure right next to the museum. This was the location of a temporary camp where the excavator lived during the excavation seasons. For hundreds of labourers like him, the excavator could provide a daily wage through the excavation project. This is probably the best example of how a completely profane context acquires veneration through time! The causes for such transformation are totally material rather than magical or mythical. Based on our own present experiences of transformation of places or people into religious or ideological symbols, it is possible that the house may become a part of the overall site itself in coming centuries.

Excavation report as a ‘historical document’

With the passage of time, as the sites get explored, excavated, documented, conserved, and finally presented as tourist attractions, introspecting into their ‘making’ creates a backdrop for our appreciation - as archaeologists and also as humans. In a country like India where archaeology as a domain took birth under British rule, the backdrop already has a colonial shade to it. As we study the long-excavated sites today, the documentation of the sites and excavation reports themselves are historical documents in the present day context. Cunningham’s conclusion about Harappan seals being ‘... foreign to India.’ (1875, p. 108) or Mackay’s reasoning for subdivision of rooms in Mohenjo Daro (1938, p. 42) are indicative of their perspectives towards the colonies and their methods of interpretation. In Cunningham’s case, his rejection of the idea of seals being native to India was based on his ideas of India’s past. Since he couldn’t find similar letters in any Indian script and the accompanying bull on the seal didn’t have a hump, he reached the conclusion of dissociation. In Mackay’s case, based on his observation of marriage practices in the early 20th century, he assumed backward continuity of this tradition to support his theory. As we consume these publications as academic writings, it must be noted that these are also a product of their times. These underline the conditioned and contextual inevitability of academic writing in the given space and time.

When History Divides Archaeology!

In Indian context, as already mentioned elsewhere in this article, there has been a stronghold of colonial ideas in the foundational years of archaeology. However, it did not get limited to the conceptualisation, institutionalisation, or methodologies. The historical events of partition practically, literally, and tangibly divided Indian Archaeology. As the major sites like Harappa and Mohenjo Daro landed in Pakistan, it almost created a void of Harappan culture sites in India. There was no choice but to accept this fact. Needless to mention that it gave an impulse for explorations and discovery of numerous Harappan culture sites within the post-partition Indian borders. However, the excavated material, being portable, could be divided amongst the newly formed nations. For example, the entire collection of seal-like inscribed artefacts was divided between India and Pakistan (Fig 4).

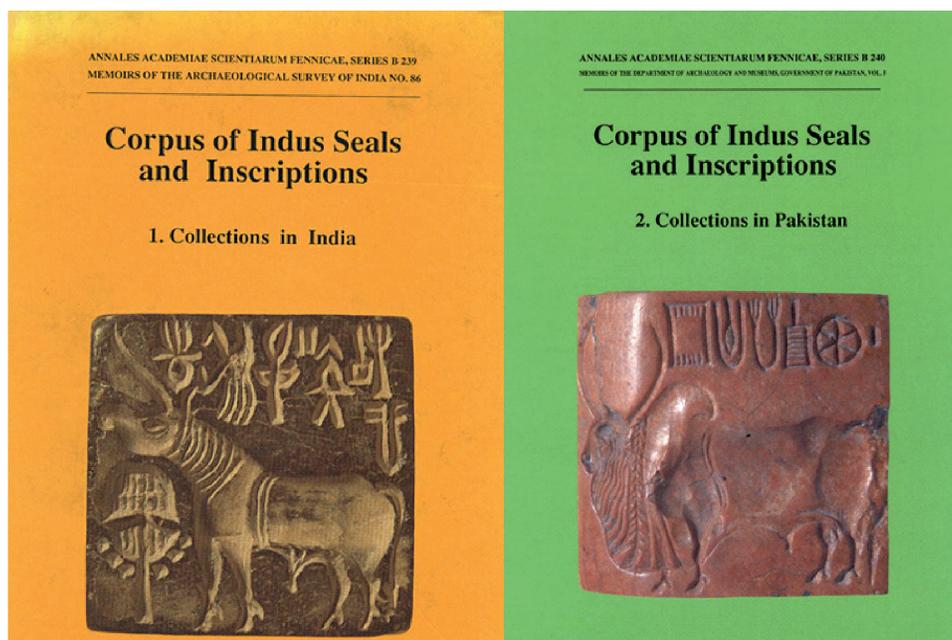


Figure 4: Volumes I and II of Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions

Lahiri describes the fate of these artefacts that unfolded in a political drama around the time of independence and partition in 1947 (Lahiri, 2012). The artefacts were divided amongst India and Pakistan without any specific logic. The division was a total compromise to the integrity of the collection and their collective value in terms of archaeological wealth. Due to intangible cultural value of these artefacts and their appropriation to India's developed past, the artefacts got further distributed to multiple collections in different states and museums within both the countries. Except for a few on display at museums, almost all are kept in government safe storage facilities. It poses new questions such as (i) whether the context is lost at the secondary or tertiary stage of artefacts' existence, and (ii) whether the loss of integrity and limited access defy further studies of these objects. Having said that, the politics in the following decades has unfolded into such an environment that to have even random collections of these artefacts on either side has turned out to be a boon. Though it does not compensate for the access to the entire collection, it allows at least partial 'experience' of the artefacts.

Needs, Digs, and Narratives

The process of 'making' of a site can be thought of as a product of the contemporary narratives that we need and are part of. We can identify causal links through close analysis of socio-political environments and the excavations taken up during those periods. In the 1920s, the excavation of Mohenjo-daro was a large-scale colonial project to learn about the past of the land which the English were ruling. Since their learned officers were getting trained in this newly emerging field called 'archaeology' in other parts of the world, it was a logical step to implement those skills in a culturally and materially rich country like India. Their systematisation and institutionalisation of archaeology created a formal environment for carrying out explorations and extensive excavation in different parts of the country. The recovery of script like signs, skeletons, and some remains speculating at purposeful destruction helped them solidify the theories of Aryan invasion. It essentially supported the contemporary working theory that superiority of foreigners and inferiority of natives was a continuous phenomenon in this country. It solidified their justification of ruling the Indian subcontinent for civilising it.

The excavation of Dholavira which started in 1980s, had its roots in the post-independence and post-partition impulse of locating traces of Harappan culture in Indian side. Since the biggest sites of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa landed in Pakistan, the glory of the past could not be shared by new India. There was a huge impetus for exploration and excavation of prehistoric and historic sites in India. Dholavira was discovered by J. P. Joshi in 1968. The long 12 seasons excavations were carried out during 1989-2005. Today, it is the most excavated and preserved site of Harappan civilization in India along with other notable sites such as Lothal and Surkotada. The recently received tag of World Heritage Site is an unequivocal acceptance by the modern world and India about its significance to the nation and humanity at large.

Now, though Dholavira has been a site of pride, it is not the largest of the known expanses of the Harappan civilisation. Mohenjo-daro has been the one till recent years. However, since more than a decade, the site of Rakhigarhi has acquired a lot of attention from scholars with the possibility of claiming the label of the largest ever Harappan site. Despite large scale excavations until 2000, newer excavations and extensive surveys with modern technologies have been happening since 2010. Though the motives of these new efforts have been academic, the possibility of discovering the largest Harappan site and thus proposing the most powerful centre of this civilisation in India has been a larger interest. Academia has been quite vocal about this possibility.³ Knowing the extent of the site has been an academic interest but whether 'our site' is larger than 'their site', especially a country separated from us by partition and having stretched relationships since then, shows a competitive urge. Since its

now an accepted fact by the leading academic community, it also nurtures the past urbanisation and development narrative emphasising its centre in India and not in Pakistan.

With Vadnagar excavations in Gujarat, India since 2006, we see an entirely different facet of archaeology. The excavations began due to the historical significance of this site across multiple cultural periods. The excavations corroborated the continuous settlement over two millennia. However, despite this purpose being solved a few years ago, large scale excavations continue at the site. As we discussed the scale of this excavation, it was brought to our knowledge that the aim is to convert the site into an experiential museum. It has been a relatively known phenomenon in the European or Western world but fairly new in India. If this is the case, then the site must undergo a sizable amount of excavation which makes it worthy for people across the globe to come, visit, experience, and appreciate 2000 years of occupation. Needless to say that the sanctioned budget is one of the highest for this site. This can be thought of as a purpose-driven project, i.e. bringing archaeology into mainstream tourism. Though many archaeological sites, some mentioned elsewhere in the article, have become tourist attractions at a later point in time, those events have been a result or a byproduct of the academic project. It had never been the primary objective of the excavation itself. On a side note, the present-day political connection of this site can also be a contributor to this 'vision' about the 'future' of the site. Establishment of historicity through academic excavation is also being adorned with a permanent exhibition of excavated remains. The permanent display helps emphasise and solidify the antiquity and thus transcends the authenticity of the site for the coming years.

Local yet global!

Finally, as we contextualise ourselves as students of this material past, what is imperative is our approach and interpretations are simultaneously local and global. However, it is also seen that these approaches become more vocal and evident outside the formal academic framework. Though these may not get captured within the realms of academic writing and interpretations, those are natural reactions of people experiencing similar context in the modern world. In her doctoral work on 'gaming objects' identified in Mohenjo-daro, Rogersdotter (2011) elaborates on the theoretical framework, significance of play in social life and unequal distribution of artefacts on the mound. While this topic became a topic of casual discussion with my sister, mother of a toddler, her immediate response was - 'If you find these many at a particular location - it has to be a creche... How were the babies being taken care of otherwise?'. What is important here is that because of her own immediate context, i.e. a 'mother of a toddler', a system of creche was perceived as a common sensical necessity by her. As we continue to hypothesise many material cultures of the world as urban or civilised, there are very limited social systems which we account for. Moreover, those are the systems which generally help us build global and grand narratives. The most common systems and narratives found in Harappan archaeological discourse are trade, religion, administration, and economy. However, most of the times only a small percentage of the society is involved in these specialised systems. Majority of the society i.e. 'common people' are involved in many different livelihoods, often perceived as mundane activities. These seemingly ordinary local phenomena also need systems in an urban society. Contextualising ourselves as the users of those systems is a significantly important approach.

Summary

The experiences and incidents, collated in multiple archaeological yet not necessarily academic contexts, culminate into our persistent challenges as archaeologists. It is of utmost importance to

acknowledge that we are bound by our own systemic contexts. The systems are not just our academic upbringing, socio-political background, or ideologies but constitute innate differences amongst us as human beings in specific space-time combinations, layered by age, gender, and household and social responsibilities. These contexts continuously play a role as we think and study 'archaeology'. As the site continues to pass through different social contexts, the site never stops forming! Thus studying the 'formation process' is a point in time exercise. There is no doubt about its significance but 'process' never stops after we discover, explore, and excavate the site. We equally contribute to this very phenomenon that we study. As the sites become objects of academic pursuit, these automatically transform into subjects of Narratives. Finally, what we also see through an academic lens, at times, may distance us from the experiences of everyday common life. Despite the urge to contextualise our material past in the grand global narratives, we must pay attention to the local instincts and our inherent tendencies as human beings.

To conclude, the themes discussed in this article create a derivative experience of sites and ourselves. Archaeology as an academic pursuit becomes an ever-evolving topic. The examples discussed here also underline the hurdles in theorising this subject.

Acknowledgements

The fieldwork in Gujarat where most of these experiences were documented was part of my Ph.D. work. I am thankful to IISER Pune and Twenty Twenty Interior Design Software India Pvt. Ltd for the financial assistance during this visit. I thank Prabodh Shirwalkar from Deccan College for valuable inputs for selecting the sites. I am grateful to Mrudula Mane for arranging travel and stays, including one at her own house and accompanying me for the entire duration. I thank Utopia Holidays and our kind driver Salim bhai for their cooperation. I also thank ASI for their assistance in arranging the stay at Dholavira. Ravjibhai Solanki and Jaimal Makwana, our site guides at Dholavira, were extremely kind and helpful. The knowledge and experiences which they shared are not to be found in published form.

Notes

1. <https://www.harappa.com/slide/mohenjo-daro-1950-excavation-team-sir-mortimer-wheeler-93b>
2. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/heritage/story/19930831-recent-excavations-at-dholavira-help-reconstruct-rise-and-fall-of-indus-valley-civilisation-811468-1993-08-30>
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