



Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

16 | 2017
Varia

The Social Lives of Figurines: Recontextualizing the Third-Millennium-BC Terracotta Figurines from Harappa

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Publisher
ACoSt

Electronic version

URL: <http://acost.revues.org/1009>
ISSN: 2431-8574

Printed version

Date of publication: 29 April 2017

Electronic reference

Sharri Clark, « The Social Lives of Figurines: Recontextualizing the Third-Millennium-BC Terracotta Figurines from Harappa », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 16 | 2017, Online since 01 June 2017, connection on 08 June 2017. URL : <http://acost.revues.org/1009>

This text was automatically generated on 8 June 2017.



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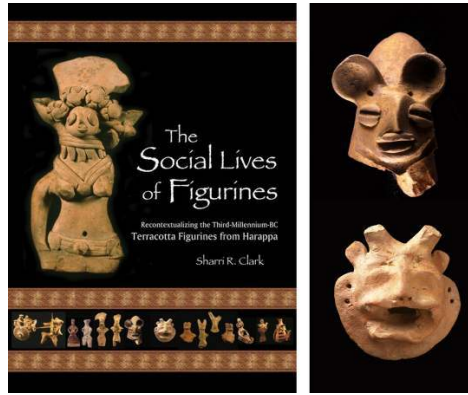
The Social Lives of Figurines: Recontextualizing the Third- Millennium-BC Terracotta Figurines from Harappa

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REFERENCES

Sharri Clark, *The Social Lives of Figurines: Recontextualizing the Third-Millennium-BC Terracotta Figurines from Harappa* 362 pages, 789 color illustrations, 10 line illustrations, 3 maps, 13 tables, CD ROM. *Papers of the Peabody Museum* 86. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 2017

- 1 After more than eighty years of international research on the Bronze Age Indus civilization (ca. 2600–1900 B.C.E), this geographically extensive ancient society remains deeply enigmatic. With no known monumental art or deciphered texts, the largest category of representational art recovered from many Indus sites is terracotta figurines. In this detailed research, archaeologist Sharri R. Clark examines and recontextualizes a rich and diverse corpus of hundreds of figurines from the urban site of Harappa (ca. 3300–1700 B.C.E) to reveal new information about Indus ideology and society.
- 2 The figurines are one of the richest sources of information regarding Indus ideology and society. Unfortunately, the figurines often have been considered selectively without evaluating their archaeological or socio-cultural contexts, resulting in biased interpretations that ignore the richness and diversity of the figurine corpus.
- 3 The hand-modeled figurines – including anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, fantastic creatures such as unicorns, and special forms with wheels or movable parts – served as a medium of communication and exchange that reflects underlying structures of Indus society and cultural change. The author focuses on the figurines as artifacts whose “social lives” can be at least partially reconstructed through systematic analysis of stylistic and technological attributes and spatial and temporal contexts.
- 4 This research adds significantly to our understanding of Harappa figurines and dispels some long-standing misconceptions. This research provides the first (provisional) chronological typology for an entire corpus of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and special forms figurines from any Indus site. In addition, it provides insights into Indus society, including an interpretation of ancient Indus concepts of sex and gender based on a large corpus of figurines that indicates a dynamic and probably fluid view of sex, gender, and sexuality. The research suggests that there was a rich religious ideology that probably focused on transformation and sympathetic magic and possibly even shamanism, rather than on a single Mother Goddess, a long-standing myth. Manufacturing choices, including modeling from vertical halves and targeting bone pigments, rather than readily available mineral pigments, also suggest ideological significance. Finally, this study also focuses on the large variety of figurines rather than selected, more complete, and often female, figurines, and provides insights into the Indus “veneer” and changes in material culture over time.
- 5 Comparisons with ethnographic data, historic texts, and contemporaneous ancient societies enrich and inform the groundbreaking interpretations. Lavishly illustrated, the volume contains appendices, including the first chronological typology of Indus figurines, on disk.



ABSTRACTS

This book is a critical examination of representations of the body in the Indus civilization, focusing on the anthropomorphic terracotta figurines from Harappa and using more flexible notions of sex, gender, and sexuality to explore Indus conceptions of sexual difference as it relates to other aspects of social difference and identity.

INDEX

Keywords: Harappa, Indus Valley, Harappa figurines, Indus civilizations, Indus ideology, Indus society

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