

Ancient Trade between the Indus Region and the Near East

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Blog

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Ancient trade relations gave way to interesting religious mixing, as people traversed across long stretches of land masses or water bodies — taking with them their religious beliefs and world views. The intermixing, in turn, left material imprints or signatures that are of relevance to archaeologists and historians of our contemporary times — interested in tracing movement of people and their convictions. This essay explores ancient trade linkages that existed between: a) the Indus cities — that flourished during the second half of the third millennium BCE — and the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) in Central Asia, which included parts of present-day Turkmenistan, northern Afghanistan, northeastern Iran, southern Uzbekistan, and western Tajikistan and b) Mesopotamia (parts of present-day Iraq, Kuwait, Türkiye, and Syria) and the Indus sites. The focus of deliberative endeavor will be on a particular motif — Mistress/Master of Animals/Lord of Animals — discovered on antique seals.

Mistress/Master of Animals or Lord of Animals

The motif in ancient art — usually depicting a human between and grasping two confronted animals (e.g., serpents, tigers, goats, or rams) — is variously interpreted as either divine or semi-divine in nature or as a powerful ruler. The central (human) figure could be discerned as grasping both animals with closed grips or may appear to be simply standing without making any physical contact (Dubhrós 2018^[1]). There are also differences between the gender of the central figure: in certain cases, the central figure appears to be clearly male or female. In other cases, it may not be possible to distinguish the genders. This is why many theorists refer to this configuration as the Mistress of Animals. The motif or the configuration has — thus far — been on pieces of vase, seals, and seal impressions. Intriguingly, the motif is prevalent in cultures that have shared trade connections — the Indus Valley Civilization, the BMAC or the Oxus civilization (c. 2250–1500 BC), and Mesopotamia.

While it may be cumbersome to attribute specific dates to the excavated material remains — bearing the motif — it is significant to note that the motif appears to be pervasive and may serve as a precursor to religious beliefs that, in turn, became localized. By tracing these regional differences, which are syncretic in nature, I propose that ancient syncretism may have played a pivotal role in the emergence of religious practices when doctrinal religions or the major religions of the world were not in existence. The other

closely associated hypothesis is that visual imagery may have provided an important vehicle for the expression of such beliefs in the absence of a well-developed, full-fledged system of text. To the extent that visual iconography was shared across the trading regions, it is also plausible to argue that the shared iconography may have constrained the expression of local beliefs — ultimately giving way to cults with overlapping practices and ideologies. This is evidenced by the crocodile cult of the Indus region and related iconography (as detailed in the section below) and concomitant depictions of crocodiles on the seals of BMAC (Winkelman 2020^[ii]). Shared iconography across the regions hints at the possibility that the crocodile was venerated in a similar manner (refer, van Buren 1946^[iii]).

[i] Dubhrós, Jeremy, 2018. “Cultural Translation and the Iconography of the Master and Mistress of the Animals.” PhD diss., University of Texas at Arlington.

[ii] Winkelman, Sylvia. 2020. “BMAC glyptics: Typology, context, function, and background.” In *The World of the Oxus Civilization*, edited by Bertille Lyonnet, and Nadezhda Dubova, 215-292. London: Routledge.

[iii] van Buren, E. D. 1946. “The dragon in ancient Mesopotamia.” *Orientalia*15: 1-45.

Mistress/Master of Animals (henceforth, MoA)

The first reported instances of MoA depictions are enmeshed with Assyro—Babylonian carving, deriving from Mesopotamia. For instance, a dark orange-pink Neo-Assyrian seal (BM 89145) — dating back to 720BC-700BC — at The British Museum is quite potent in this regard. Herein, both the central human figure and the flanking animals appear with wings — a stylistic feature that may be localized to this particular region in the light of the material evidence discovered from the BMAC region (see Figure 1). In all likelihood, the motif of wings — which found its way on variously—shaped seals — was integrated with a different motif, in this case, the MoA. As the motif evolved, especially along trade networks, it appears to be the case that the wings gradually disappeared — as parts of both the main figure and the flanking animals. This evolution may have specifically occurred in regions beyond the BMAC and Mesopotamia. In line with this hypothesis, seals discovered from the Indus regions bear the MoA motifs that are — simultaneously — characterized by the absence of wings. For instance, seals have been discovered that depict a crocodile motif (most likely a crocodile deity; Ganesan 2016^[i]; Parpola 2011^[ii]) paired with four prominent flanking animals. Veneration of regional animals and (semi-aquatic or aquatic) creatures like the crocodile, preserved to this day in parts of Gujarat (western India), was integrally linked to the idea of maintaining natural order and equilibrium for the sake of survival (see Khetrpal and Nanda 2021^[iii]) This is why some theorists are inclined to interpret such imagery as a kind of visual prayer, wherein, the centrally—etched figures could be deciphered as guardians of the natural order (Azize 2002^[iv]). Their historical role as revered guardians, thus, validates their use in antiquities.

Figure 1: A Schematic Sketch of the Master/Mistress of Animals (MoA).

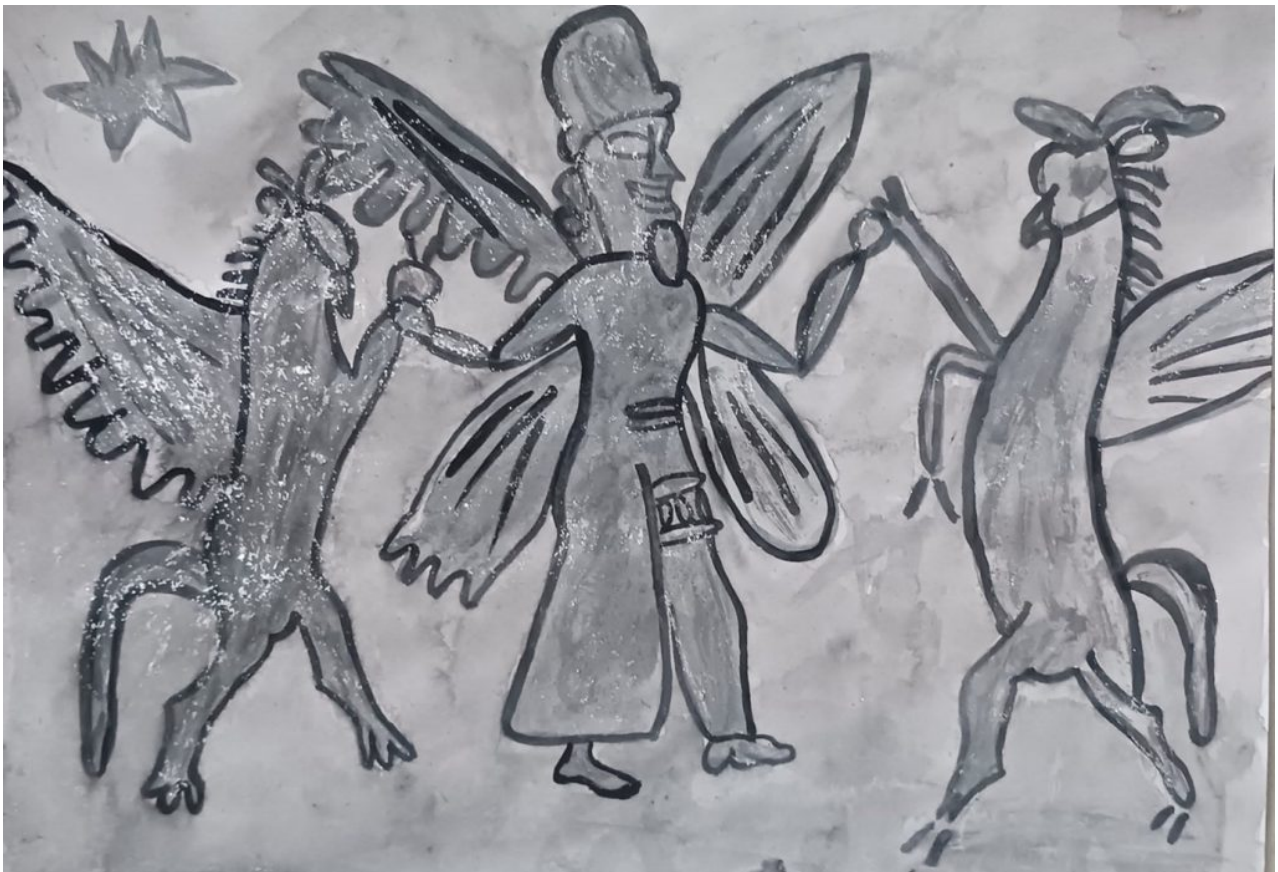
[i] *Sanskrit Conference Proceedings*, Bangkok, 1-13. https://telibrary.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/IVC_Religion_in_IronAge_TamilNadu_by_NGanesan_2016_16th_WSC.pdf (accessed 14-07-2024).

[ii] Parpola, Asko. 2011. "Crocodile in the Indus Civilization and later South Asian traditions." In *Linguistics, Archaeology and the Human Past: Occasional Paper 12*, edited by T. Osada, and H. Endo, 1-58. Reprinted in *Current Studies on the Indus Civilization*, volume IX. India: New Delhi.

[iii] Khetrpal, Neha, and Samah Nanda. 2021. "Emerging Harsh and Controlling Images of 'God' in Covid-19." In *Religious Matters*. University of Utrecht, The Netherlands. <https://religiousmatters.nl/emerging-harsh-and-controlling-images-of-god-in-covid-19/> (accessed 15-07-2024).

[iv] Azize, Joseph. 2002. "Wrestling as a symbol for maintaining the order of nature in ancient Mesopotamia." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 2 (1): 1–26.

Figure 1: A Schematic Sketch of the Master/Mistress of Animals (MoA).



Credits: Author's daughter, Aanika Vaish.

This line of thought is consistent with the variations of MoA iconography. It entails a variety of depictions like divine or semi-divine beings or even warrior kings as the Master or the Mistress (Dubhrós 2018). If this interpretation is correct, then it is possible to expect other regional creatures and even birds to be depicted as central figures, as a part of MoA motifs — in the cases of veneration. In support of this interpretation, there are

other instances of seal art — wherein — the main figure is an eagle with stretched wings, flanked by goats. One such Mesopotamian seal is hosted by the Princeton University's Library's manuscript division. This seal dates back to c. 2500 BC (Gordon 1951^[i]). Correspondingly, the representations of eagles are also spotted on pottery and cut stones from Babylonia. Herein, the eagle has been identified with the sun or sun worship from as early as the 3rd millennium BC (deSouza 1960^[ii]; Wittkower 1939^[iii]).

Implications of Evolved MoN Motifs

The MoN motifs are intertwined with the development of (religious) beliefs — or beliefs that gradually became integrated with “Hinduism” but shared affinities with the religious traditions of other regions. These similarities can be gleaned from the associations between the semantic connotations of MoN and localized deities. For example, the Harappan Goddess of war and her association with the tiger — who may have evolved into Goddess Durga, as worshipped in the contemporary times (Chakravarty 1971^[iv]; Parpola 2020^[v]; Parpola 2023^[vi]). In a parallel manner, region-specific Great Goddesses, similar to Durga, have been worshipped across a vast spread of locations — interconnected by trade. These Goddesses, moreover, have shared iconographic features not only with each other but also with the Harappan Goddess or Durga. Two specimens include a 14th-century BC cylinder seal from Mitanni — an Indo-Iranian empire in north Mesopotamia — that depicts a deity standing on a lion or the Babylonian deity, Nana, riding on a lion (Chakravarty 1971). The difference, though, relates to the animal depicted — lions beyond the Indus regions (Aruz 1999^[vii]; Chakravarty 1971). Apart from these associations, there is anecdotal evidence for co-mingling of deities as well. For example, a vivid manifestation of Goddess in Bactria appears to be a syncretic fusion of Anahita (the ancient Persian goddess of fertility), Ardoksho (the Iranian goddess of wealth), and Nana (an ancient Eastern Iranian goddess) (Scott 1998^[viii]). Or, the depiction of Nana with four arms in Central Asia — reflective of Indian influence (Scott 1998).

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