

Excavations at Shikarpur, Gujarat 2008 - 2009

The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, the M. S. University of Baroda continued excavations at Shikarpur in the second field season in 2008-09. In continuation to the last year excavations, the main objective in the current season was to unravel the beginning of the fortification wall and its main configuration. It was also planned to expose the layout of Classical Harappan structures belonging to the Phase-I through selective soundings within the fortified area.

Fortification wall

The lay out of trenches for 2008 -2009 excavation in the southern side of the site was planned to extend 2007 -2008 years work further and trace construction features of the southern fortification wall that was partially exposed in the last season. The excavations on both the inner and outer side of the fortification revealed about 6.30m high multi-colored brick wall running east-west in the south. A small portion of the inner face of this wall was excavated in the last season. Deep sounding just outside the wall in the trench Ep3 revealed that the construction of the wall had started from the very beginning of Harappan occupation at the site as the basal part of the wall was found resting on the natural sediments (fig.1). The extant top of this tapering wall is about 9.00m thick, while at the base the thickness could easily be more than 12.00m. Although we have not cut a cross-section of the wall, it is obvious from the habitation strata on both sides of the wall that it was built at least in three stages in order to increase the overall height. The lower part of the wall in the beginning stage was covered with a thick whitish clay plaster on the exterior and probably on the interior too. It also had a small rampart-like support at the base which certainly was built later, but in the first stage itself. The rampart was built of dark colored mud-bricks that were popularly used in the early stages of wall construction. It appears the inner and outer faces of the wall were periodically repaired; in some occasions even expanded making the wall progressively thicker in each stage. This is evident from the difference in the types of bricks in the central core and the inner and outer faces of the wall. The core of the wall about 4.50m to 5.00m was built of different shades of dark grey and light cream colored mud-bricks. Both outer and inner

margins of the wall at the same time are built of yellowish brown bricks whose consistency and composition varied considerably from the brick used in the core.

The excavation was later extended across the site to the north to trace the fortification in the north. Just as the southern wall, the northern wall too was built of multi-colored mud-bricks showing varying composition and consistency. The thickness of the wall in this part also was expanded periodically. This is evident from the presence of a thick white plaster running within the wall parallel to its edge. This prominent line is about 2.00m inside from the extant external/outer edge of the wall. The over all thickness of the wall in the north, where much of the top has been eroded away, is a little above 10.00m. The fortification wall in the south and the north are 99.55m apart. The distance between the east and the west walls has also been estimated to be close to 95m. Therefore, the overall fortified area may measure close to one hectare.

The site has a large basin like morphology with the buried fortification wall prominently raising up and forming a sort of boundary all around. The relatively flat, low lying area at the centre is about 3.50m below the datum. Excavations in a large, 10x10m, area at this point revealed that this part of the settlement was used as an open space surrounded by structures, probably right from the beginning of Harappan occupation at the site and it remained so through out. The open space was periodically silted and filled with water borne sediments deposited from all sides due to monsoonal erosion. The space however was used temporarily for various activities related to both craft and domestic production, whenever it was suitable to do so. Bordering the open space in the north and in the south were structures of different Phases built of both mud-bricks and rubble stones. The eastern and the western margins are demarcated by gently raising slops. The actual margins of this open space will be estimated after expanding the excavations further in all direction in the next season.

Stratigraphy

Deep soundings in one of the trenches in the central open space and the trench Em13 in the north and Fp3 in the south ascertained the stratigraphic sequence proposed in the last

excavation. In the Em13 trench we however come across evidence of first habitation directly over the natural sediments. It appears the first habitation came up here after leveling the top of the sand-dune by reworking the sand and yellowish gravel and preparing a living floor. The floor has an open hearth and a large pot partially buried adjacent to the hearth. The rather flat base of this pot is found buried into the natural sediments. This floor and the mud-brick structure and brick paved floor that followed immediately above it, constituting about 40cm thick deposits, incorporated much more 'Anarta' pottery than the subsequent layers (fig.2). Even then, the predominant ceramic type in this early level is the Classical Harappan pottery, which included all the characteristic vessels and painted decorations (Fig.3). Several sherds of the Harappan black slipped jars, perforated jars, basins, 'S'-shaped jars and dish-on-stand and reserved slip ware are part of this assemblage. Remains of at least two series of mud-brick structures are found in the subsequent strata in the trenches Em13 and El16. These structures not only follow the general plan and layout of the preceding structures but also are found associated with hearths and buried storage pots. Besides, the two terracotta inscribed sealings recovered in this season at the site are associated with the above structures (fig.4).

Structures belonging to the Phase-II showing the presence of 'Sorath' Harappan are found in the last three layers, that is, in the layers 3, 2 and 1 as well as in the pits associated with these layers. The remains of rubble stone structures found in the upper layers in this trench are all constructed in the terminal stages of the Classical Harappan occupation in the Phase I, as they are not associated with the 'Sorath' Harappan relics. These structures were in use during the Phase II too. A 2.00m long platform-like structure found in the third layer of the trench El16 belong this phase. The platform, prepared by paving flat stone slabs, appears to be part of a large stone structure of the Phase II.

The Trench En15, about 5.00m south of the central open space, also has mud-brick structures of Phase-I followed by rubble stone structure belonging to the last stages of Phase I and to the beginning of Phase II, which was partially destroyed by later pits. This

structure was in use during the second Phase of the habitation too with very little repair and reworking. The later deposits incorporated the 'Sorath' Harappan ceramics along with the Classical Harappan. A 16cm long thick copper stake/chisel with a square cross section and gently bevelled and blunt point as well as a small and very shallow pan-like copper vessel were recovered from this structure. Besides, on the southern side of this structure there is another rubble wall running very close and parallel to it, suggesting this could be part of a drainage channel adhering to the structure.

Antiquities

The most interesting of the antiquities unearthed in the excavation are two terracotta sealings with impressions of inscribed Harappan seals (fig.4). One of the sealings bears impression of a unicorn-like animal with three heads (fig 4d): one turned back as if it is looking backward; the second, held up and looking ahead and the third is slightly bend down as if it is looking down. While the lowered down third head is that of a bull having two horns, the other two are in the usual unicorn style with a single horn. Several sets of impressions of thump nail-like crescentic marks are found all around the stamped impression. Although the purpose and significance of these sorts of crescent marks are not known they are not uncommon on terracotta sealings and are reported from several Harappan sites. The back side of this sealing has impression of the object it sealed in the form of a shallow depression bearing textile (?) mark.

The second sealing is relatively small and actually bears impressions from three consecutive stamping of three different inscribed Harappan seals (fig.4c). The stamping is done in such a manner that the inscribed upper part in all the three seals is clear and legible while the lower part of the seal bearing the animal motif was obliterated due to overlapping impressions. At the back it bears a very deep impression of the thread and the knot.

Another interesting object unearthed in the excavation is a terracotta tablet with engraved Harappan inscription from the trench Fk13 (fig.4a). The engraving is done exactly in the

same manner as that of the usual steatite intaglio seals using a sharp tool. The tablet measures 30x30x7mm and bears an inscription of four or five characters in two lines and some unidentifiable motif or a Harappan character at the left bottom. The back of this tablet/seal is flat and does not have the usual projected pierced boss. This belongs to the beginning of Phase II occupation at the site.

Several long chert blades made from the Rohri chert originating from Sindh, ornamental beads of semiprecious stones, steatite and terracotta; bangles of shell and terracotta; copper chisels, knives, arrowheads, bangles and rings (fig.5); and terracotta toy cart frames and animal figurines are the other important antiquities recovered from the site in the excavation. A human torso in terracotta found in the excavation is noteworthy for its simple round modelling (Fig.6). Made of moderately refined clay it is reasonably well baked and has a bright red slip that has partially peeled off from the surface at many places. The two arms, the head and the part below the navel are broken off in this figurine.

Besides, the excavations in this season have benefited from the GPR survey and photogrammetric recording carried out as a training programme by a team of Japanese archaeologists lead by Professor Takao Uno and Dr. Hirofumi Teramura of the Indus Project, the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN), Kyoto, Japan.

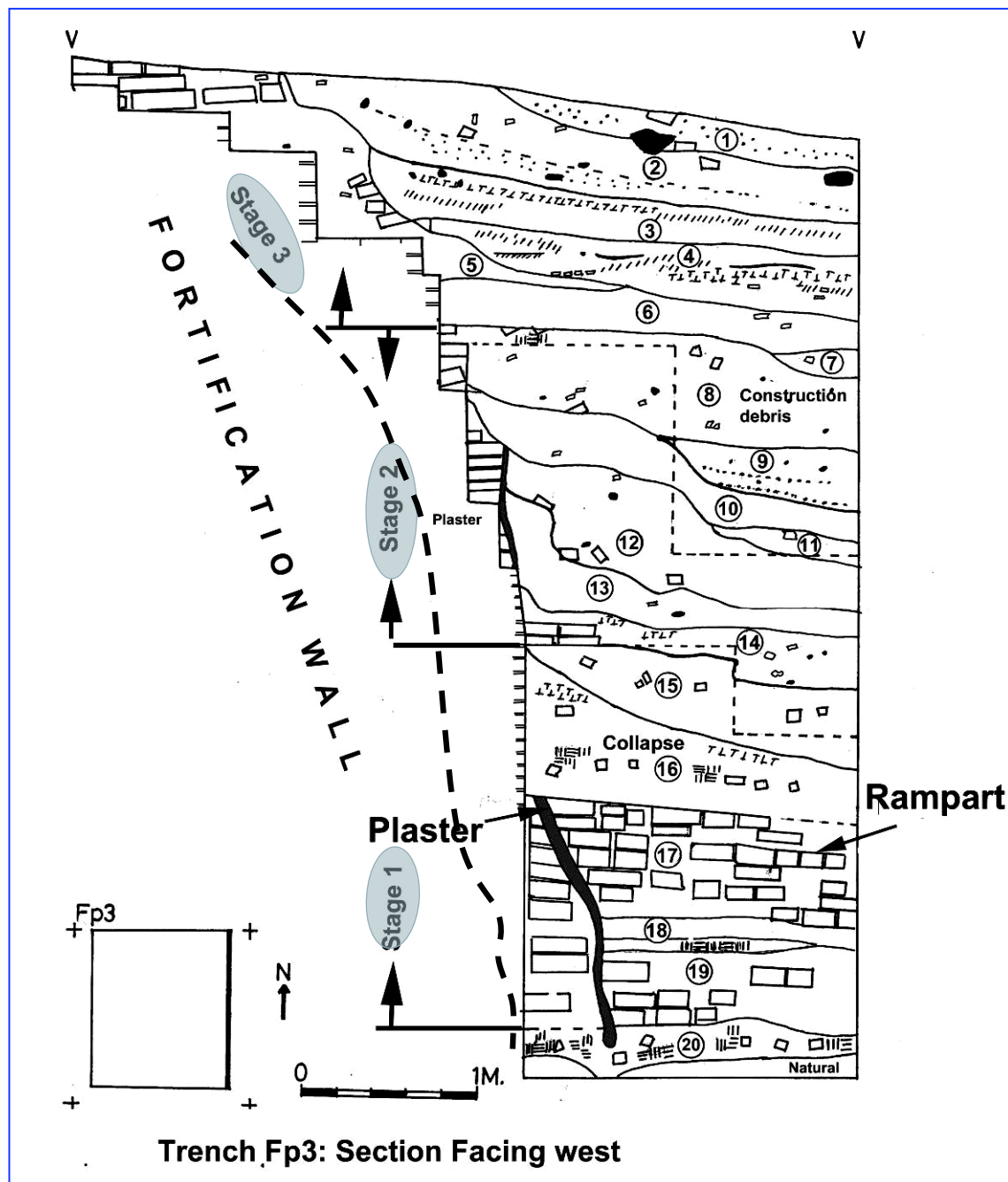


Fig. 1. Shikarpur 2009: The outer face of the southern fortification wall and the strata lying against it. It shows three successive stages of wall construction.



Fig.2. Shikarpur 2009 Local Pottery with white painted decorations, Phase-I



Fig.3 Shikarpur 2009: Classical Harappan pottery Incised patterns Phase I and II



Fig. 4. Shikarpur 2009: Terracotta inscribed square tablet and terracotta sealings with inscribed seal impressions



Fig. 5. Shikarpur 2009: Copper implements, Phase I&II



Fig. 6. Shikarpur 2009: Male torso (broken), terracotta.