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C. Jarrige

## Human Figurines from the Neolithic Levels at Mehrgarh (Balochistan, Pakistan)

Figurines, in particular human, are a major element of the material culture of Mehrgarh, from the first Neolithic occupation, where they precede the emergence of pottery, till the final period of Nausharo (c. 1900 BC).

The ancient levels of Neolithic Mehrgarh represent a transitional phase between an economy of hunter-gatherers and a real agricultural economy. Cereals, in particular barley, show still poorly domesticated characters while hunting activities provide 90% of the meat.

In the archaeological zone situated in the northern part of the 300 ha large archaeological complex of Mehrgarh, excavations were undertaken from 1977 to 1985. But in 1996, after completing 11 seasons of excavations at the neighbouring site of Nausharo (end of 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> mill. BC) (Jarrige, J.-F. 1996), it was decided to resume work at Mehrgarh. Contrary to what had been undertaken in the 70's and 80's in different areas of the site corresponding to periods I to VIII (Jarrige et al. 1995), the new program of excavation was concentrated on the levels of period I of the Neolithic area MR 3 within a 4 years program. It was completed in March 2000.

This helped establish a stratigraphical link between the different trenches excavated since the beginning and fix the sequence of the Neolithic occupation throughout the site, which consists of 3 periods: I, IIA and IIB (fig. 1).

Concerning the dates, we have still to rely on estimations. As already stated (Jarrige, J.-F. 2000; Jarrige/Jarrige/Quivron, in press), <sup>14</sup>C datings of charcoals, due to some contamination, have shown sometimes little coherence with the stratigraphy and what we know of the archaeological context. We can, however, trust datations to the 8<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Jarrige, J.-F. 2004) for the bottom and to c. 6000 BC for the top of our period I, while period II A and B covers the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium.

We can now distinguish:

- an aceramic Neolithic, Mehrgarh period I, with 9 levels of occupation and as many levels of

cemeteries. Levels 1 and 2 have only been reached in trench MR 3 South, where the 9 levels of building and cemeteries of period I are visible, covered by a layer of erosion and followed by period IIA levels (fig. 2). The plan of period I shows the extent of the excavation in the northern part of the site and the deep trench in MR 3 South.

Extensive excavation in MR 3 North has yielded several superimposed buildings from levels 3 to 9 (fig. 3). They are built with unbaked clay bricks measuring 60 × 12 cm and bearing finger impressions designed for a better adhesion of the mortar. Levels of cemeteries intermingle with the building episodes in many areas, being dug in the deserted and eroded remains of former occupation levels.

- In period II, a first phase (IIA) displays a cluster of large compartmented mudbrick storage facilities, associated with a vegetal-tempered coarse ware manufactured according to the technique of sequential slab construction (Jarrige, J.-F. 1998). On the plan (fig. 1), these buildings of period II appear at the periphery of period I levels; this is due to the erosion of the mound whose upper part was shaved, thus displaying more ancient levels in its centre; its eastern part was subsequently destroyed by the expansion of the bed of the Bolan river.

A second phase, IIB, also with compartmented buildings, sees the emergence of a fine ware (Jarrige, J.-F. 1998).

Within this sequence, the Neolithic human figurines from Mehrgarh are so far the most ancient assemblage known in the whole Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. The corpus of period I has been considerably increased with the new program of excavations. They now amount to about 100 items, some almost complete, others fragmentary, throughout the Neolithic, 76 in period I, 17 in period IIA and 4 in period IIB. They appear as early as level 1 in period I, where they can all be replaced now within the sequence of the 9 levels of occupation.

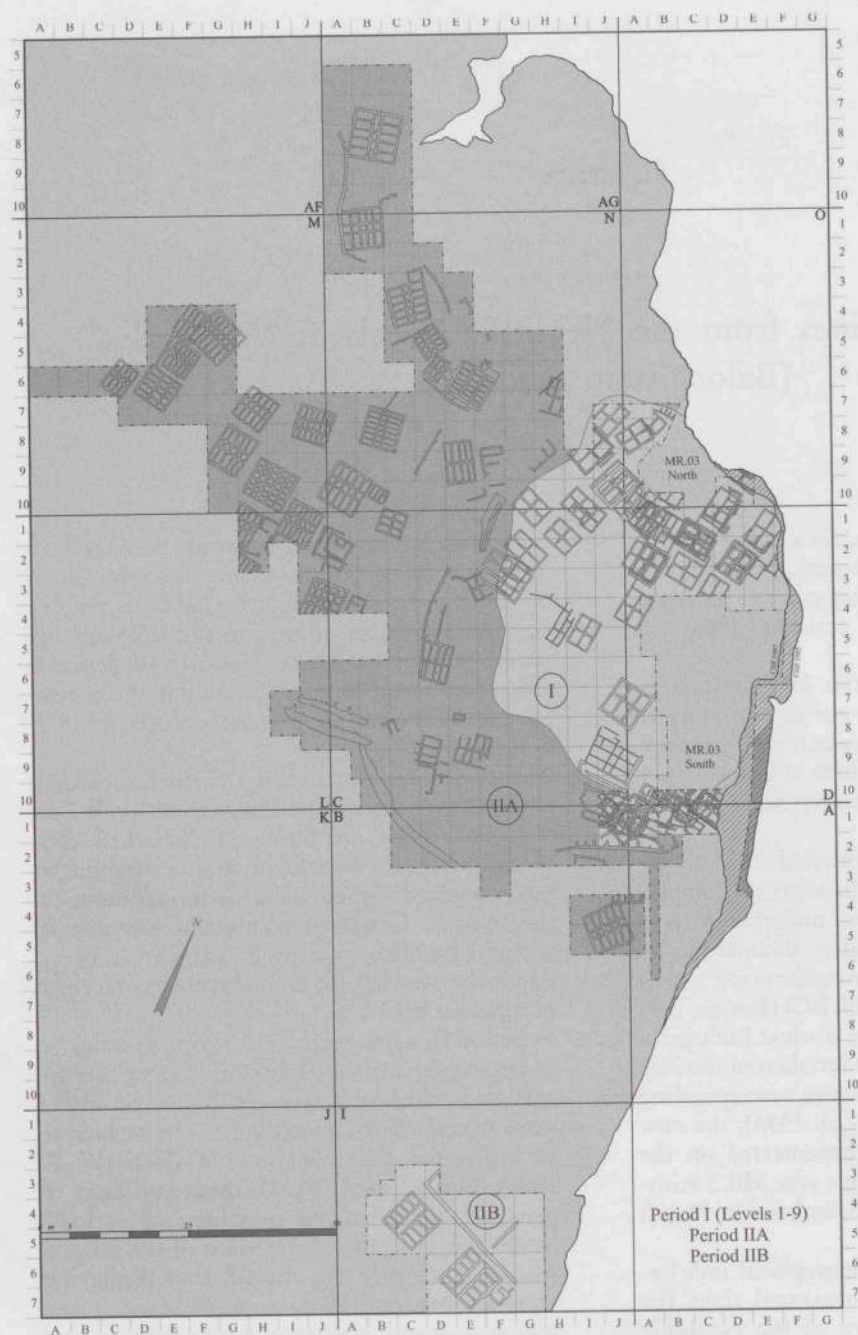


Fig. 1. Plan of the Neolithic area of Mehrgarh (sector MR 3), showing the extent of the excavations in periods I, IIA and IIB.

In period I, they are far more numerous than the animal figurines which are absent from levels 1 to 5 and account for 10 to 20% in levels 6 to 8, with none recorded in level 9. The proportion increases in period II with 29% animal figurines in period IIA and 43% in period IIB, all in clay. There is a striking difference in the Chalcolithic period III where only one human figurine was found, with a proportion of 92% animal figurines, all in terracotta (fig. 4).

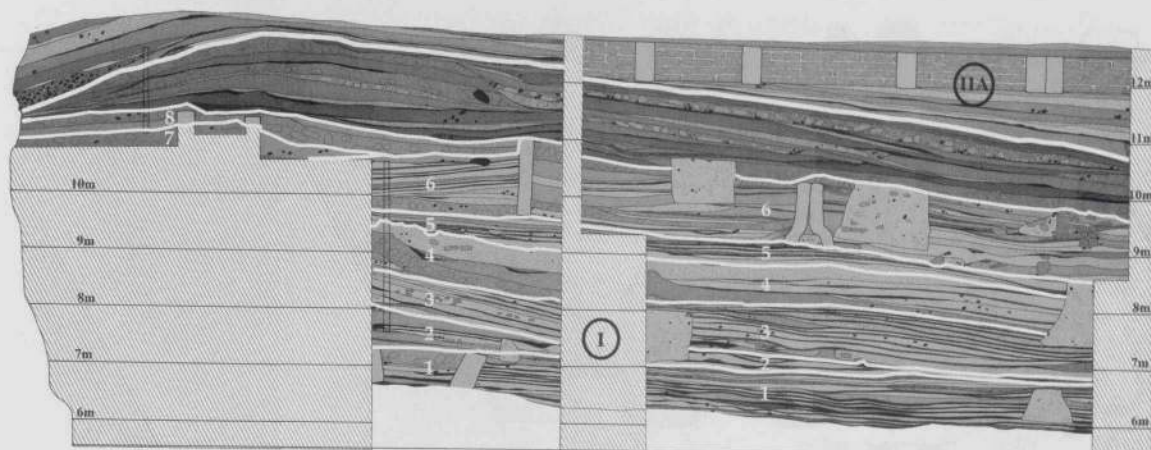
The oldest human representation at Mehrgarh is a tiny silhouette featuring a head, arms and legs, cut out of a curved piece of mother of pearl (fig. 5, 1). Unique and atypical, it was found in trench MR 3 S,

along the western wall of a building of level 1, associated with a limestone pendant. Most of them, however, are in unbaked clay.

Two main groups emerge at first sight: the standing (or straight) figurines and the sitting (or flexed) figurines, a classification too simple to be set up as a general rule.

#### THE STANDING FIGURINES (fig. 5)

Standing (or straight) clay figurines account for 16 items, either with a rounded base or with a flat base, almost all in period I. They are often covered with red ochre, or at least bearing traces. In period I,



MR 03 South  
Southern Section

Fig. 2. Section of trench MR 3 South, showing the 9 levels of building and cemeteries of period I, covered by a layer of erosion followed by levels of period IIA.



Fig. 3. View of the excavation in the Northern part of MR 3 (MR 3 North).

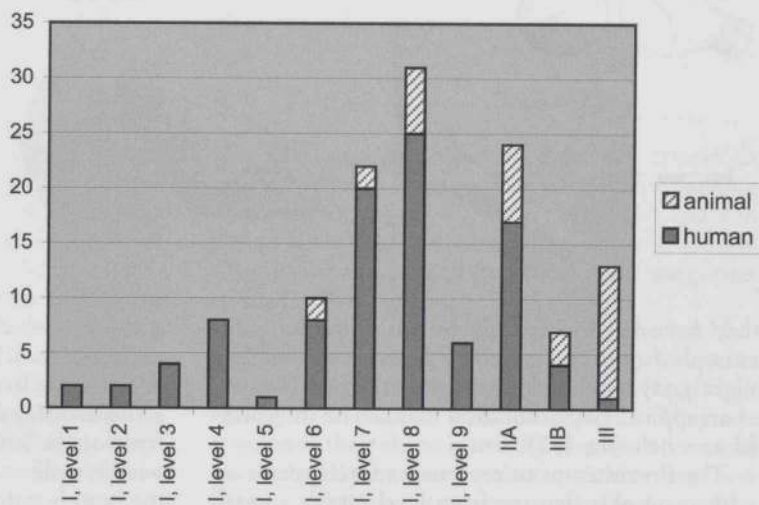


Fig. 4. Relative proportions of human and animal figurines from period I, level 1 to period III.

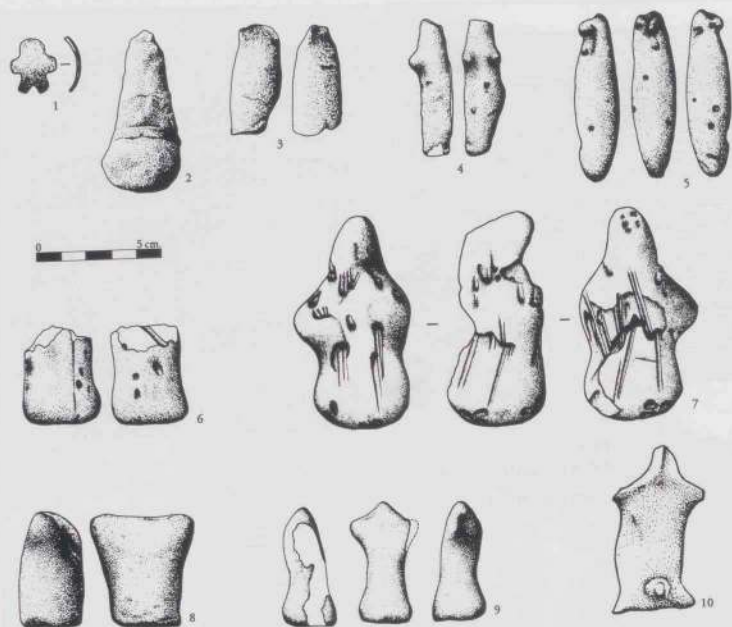


Fig. 5. Standing figurines from period I and IIB: (1) and (2): level I,1; (3): level I,2; (4): level I,4; (5): level I,8; (6): level I,3; (7): level I,7; (8): level I,3; (9): level I,4; (10): period IIB.

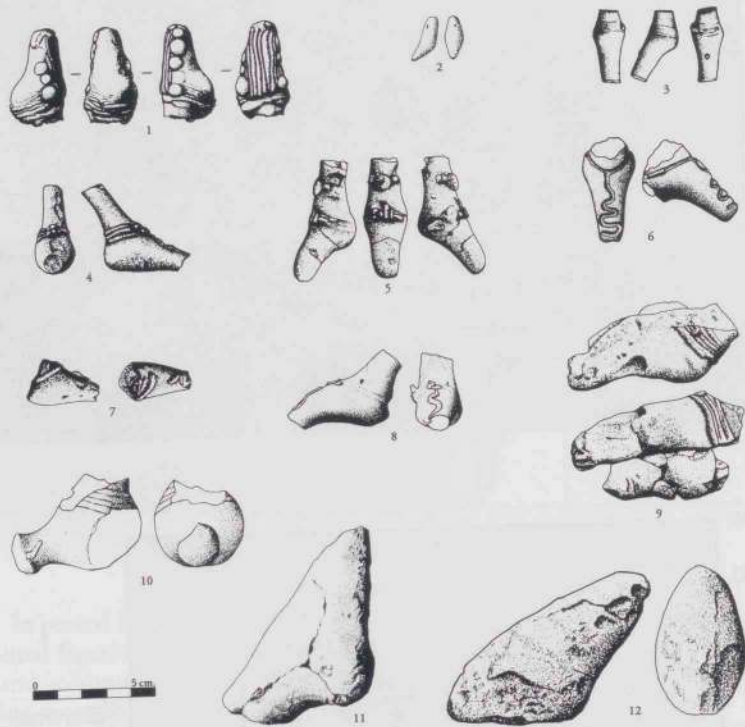


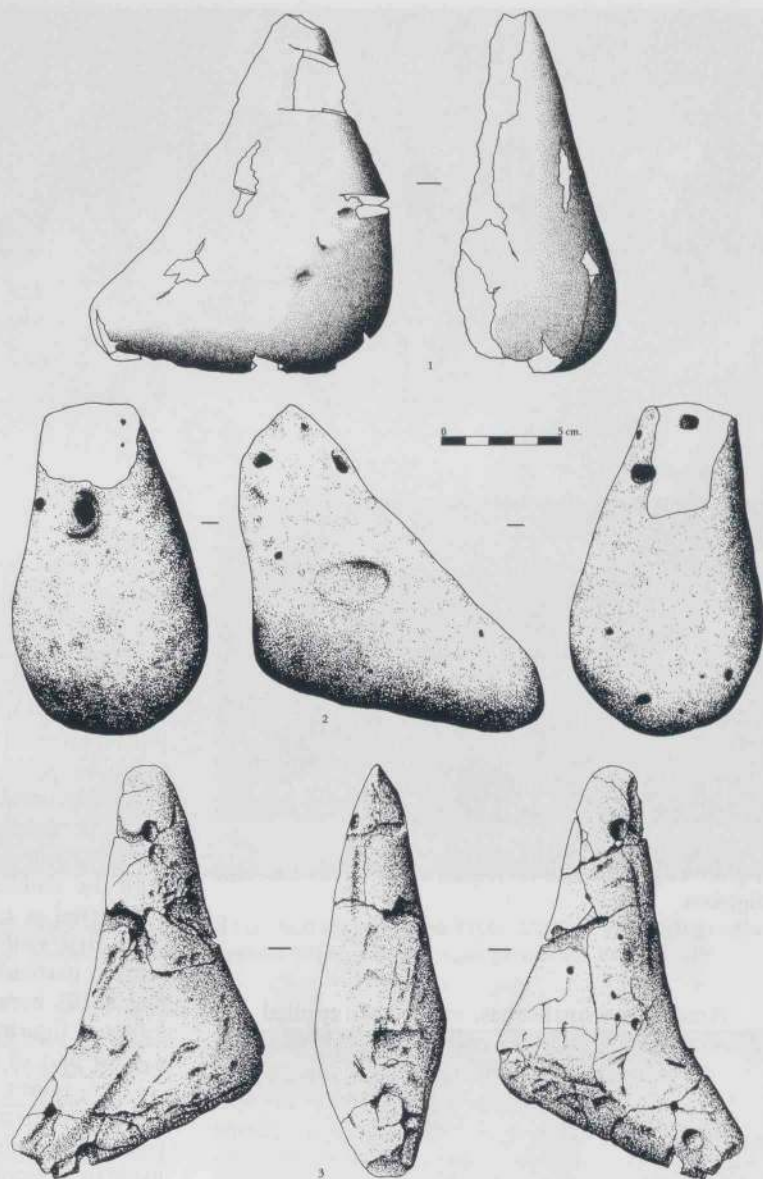
Fig. 6. Small and medium sitting figurines from period I: (1): level I,7; (2): level I,6; (3): level I,4; (4): level I,7; (5): level I,8; (6): level I,7; (7): level I,8; (8): level I,8; (9): level I,8; (10): level I,9; (11): level I,3; (12): level I,7.

they have been found in levels 1 through 8. An example from level 1, a cone with a rounded but slightly asymmetrical base, shows the first instance of an applied clay decoration that can be interpreted as a belt (fig. 5, 2).

The first attempt to represent a face appears on a fragment of a figurine from level 2 with a pinch

at the top, which is probably meant to stand for the nose (fig. 5, 3). The head is also clearly represented in a figurine from level 8 with a rounded base, with a shaped nose and a slit of eye (fig. 5, 5). Another figurine, in level 4, has definite feminine features with its realistic breasts and a rounded base (fig. 5, 4); the head is unfortunately broken. Physical features

Fig. 7. Large sitting figurines from period I: (1) and (2): level I,8; (3): level I,C9.



— either breasts or stumps of arms brought towards the front — are also present in a figurine from level 7 (fig. 5, 7), with a pointed face and a rounded base; this figurine is not in clay but in a poorly baked terracotta, as is a similar fragment with a flat base from level 3 (fig. 5, 6). Both show clear marks of piercing with weeds throughout the body.

Other plain straight figurines, one with a flat triangular base, have stylised stumps of arms (fig. 5, 8–9), with either a flat top or, in most cases a very small pinch for the head. There is one example of a very schematic standing figurine in period IIA; but in period IIB, an interesting item, bearing obvious male characters, is more realistic (fig. 5, 10).

#### THE SITTING FIGURINES (figs. 6–8)

The first sitting (or flexed) figurines appear in period I, level 3. They account for 74 items, among which 56 are in period I, 16 in period IIA and 2 in period IIB. They are also often ochre-coloured. They have been divided into three main categories: small, medium and big.

In period I, the smallest item, from level I,6, measures 2 cm (fig. 6, 2), the largest one, from cemetery 9, 17 cm (fig. 7, 3). Most of the large ones belong to the upper levels of period I. They are schematic, their shape is usually bi-conical, one end for the head, the other for the feet, with a large and flexed central part representing the hips.

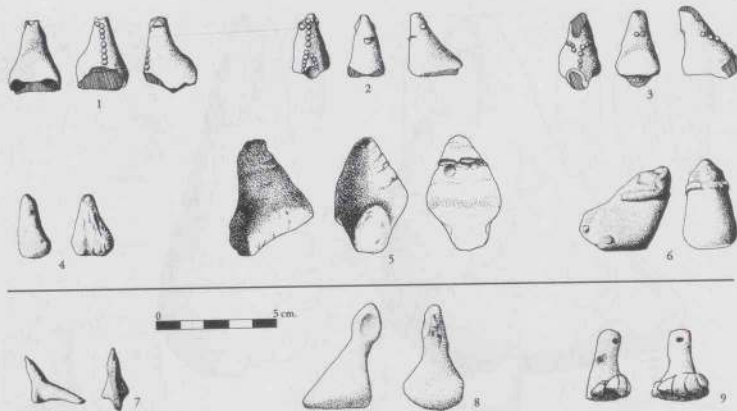


Fig. 8. Sitting figurines from period IIA (1 to 6) and IIB (7 to 9).

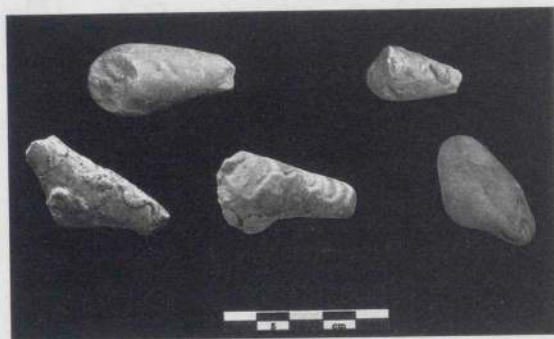


Fig. 9. Representations of creeping snakes on clay and stone figurines.

Among the small ones, many bear applied elements. These are mostly coils, which are meant to represent ornaments, most of the time a belt (fig. 6, 3, 4), but sometimes a necklace as well (fig. 6, 5). There is also one instance of a figurine with applied straight hair adorned with small circular pellets that wears a belt on a protruding belly (fig. 6, 1); its base is unfortunately broken, thus showing no evidence of flexion. In a few cases, a coil originates from the tip of the legs and evokes a snake creeping up the body (fig. 6, 6-8; 9).

Medium sized sitting figurines in level I also show applied belts or necklaces (fig. 6, 9, 10). Traces of a creeping snake are also visible on two fragmentary items. But most of the large ones are bare, without any application (fig. 7, 1-3).

In period II (fig. 8), 15 items out of 18 belong to the smaller type. During period IIA, the sitting type is present in continuity with period I (fig. 8, 1-6). Most of the figurines are small or medium with applied ornaments. Three of them from the same provenance, covered with red ochre, show applied pellets around the neck and on the breast (fig. 8, 1-3).

In period IIB, changes seem to occur. A very small figurine has been finely shaped, highlighting

the curve and the width of the hips (fig. 8, 7). Details as a pinched face, an outlined partition between the legs, or a belt made of large applied pellets are visible on sitting figurines (fig. 8, 8-9).

Altogether, in periods I and II, out of 97, 31 figurines with applied elements are, except two, of the sitting type. The first exception concerns the figurine from level 1 with a rounded base; this base, in fact, presents a tiny protuberance, which seems to prefigure the later sitting type. The second one is a head from level 9, which can belong to either type, sitting or standing. Thus, we can assume that there is so far no reliable association of the applied elements with the standing type; consequently, they can be considered as a character linked to the sitting type.

A first visible distinction appears in period II, with in particular a so far unique standing figurine (fig. 5, 10), between - standing - male and - sitting - female figurines, which will be noticeable during a great part of the sequence.

This is not yet the case in period III, which, along with beautifully shaped terracotta bull figurines, has yielded only one shapeless, although made in terracotta, human figurine, probably standing. But from period IV onwards, this sexual (?) morphological (?) distinction is going to be the rule and is substantiated by the stylistic evolution of the figurines, where the female attitude is a development from the sitting type (fig. 10), while the males show stiff arms and legs (Jarrige, C. 1988, 1991).

#### THE FUNCTION OF THE FIGURINES AND THEIR IDEOLOGICAL STATUS

Along with those clay figurines occur pebbles selected for their shapes and almost unaltered, but which reproduce the shapes of both groups, the standing and sitting examples. They all belong to period levels 7 and 8. On one of them, shaped as a sitting figurine, a red colour coil reminds us of the applied snake seen on some of the small clay figurines (fig. 9, bottom right).

The snake is an important element, which assigns a "chthonian" status to these figurines. This

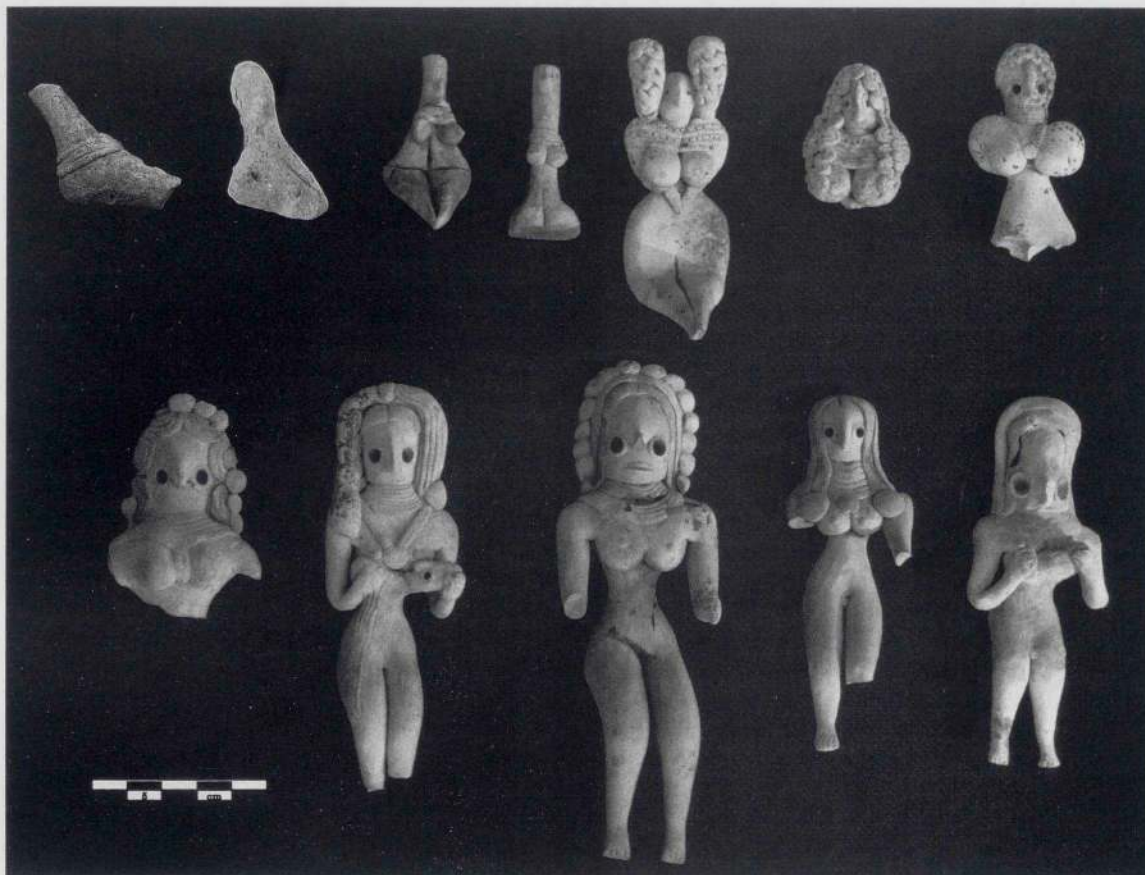


Fig. 10. The stylistic evolution of the sitting figurines from period I (c. 7000 BC) to period VII (c. 2700 BC). From left to right: – first row: period I, period IIB, period IV, period V, period VI, period VIIA; – second row: period VII B.

association with human representations is widespread during the Neolithic in a very large geographical area, from Central or even Western Europe to Central Asia and has drawn a controversy over the kind of value it carries (Gimbutas 1974).

Few figurines have been found in what could be primary contexts. Most of them, except one, and in this case it is not the exception that confirms the rule, have been discarded and were even found in trash or secondary fillings of the ruins. Even if they appear to belong to a floor level, they are associated with other artefacts without any obvious or even meaningful significance.

Only one, and not the least, was found in a precise and meaningful context. It was lying in a grave of cemetery 9, grave no. 258, of the classical type with a wall closing the funerary chamber, and which contained the remains of a  $\pm 30$  years old woman, adorned with ornaments consisting of a necklace made of 74 shell (*dentalium*) beads and one turquoise, and of a belt made with shell beads, including a *cardium*. She was holding the figurine close to her face in her clasped hands. It is of the sitting type, large, covered with red ochre and pinched at the top of the head (fig. 7, 3; 11).



Fig. 11. The figurine found in grave 258. It is of the sitting type, large, covered with red ochre and perforated by many holes.



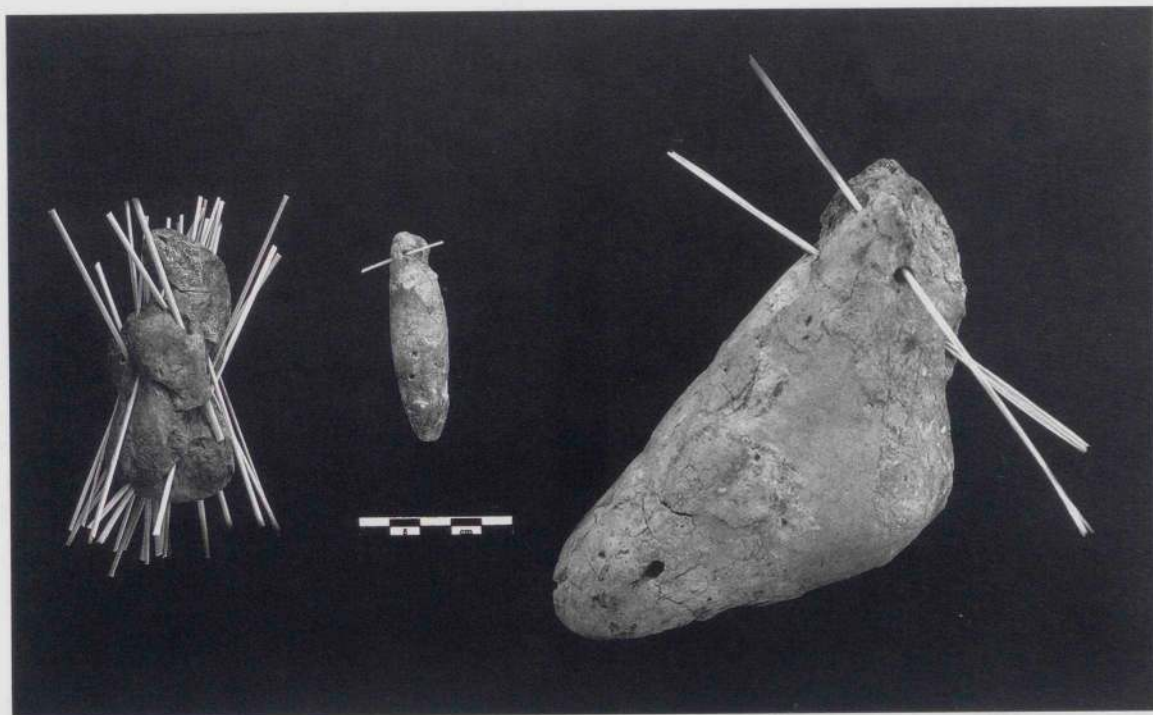


Fig. 12. Clay figurines with holes made by thin vegetals which cut through the figurines several times when the clay was still soft and left their imprint. Reconstitution with modern twigs.

In the ancient Middle East, figurines often had a magical rather than divine purpose. At Mehrgarh, a new element has shed a dim light on the function of some of them. During the cleaning process of a figurine from level 7 with a rounded base, a few holes appeared on the surface. When it was found that the clay had been hardened by fire (rather than being specifically “fired”), the cleaning process thus being less delicate and hazardous, it became obvious that the holes were running through the figurines and had been made by thin vegetals that had left their imprint in the clay (fig. 5, 7). Small twigs cut straight through the figurine several times, going to and fro when the clay was still soft (fig. 12, left). Another fragment of a figurine with a flat base from level 3 had the same characteristics (fig. 5, 6).

Looking back at the other clay figurines, more delicate to clean, we could notice that this practice was widespread from level 3 to 9 among the plain figurines (fig. 12), some of them of the standing type, the majority being medium and large sitting figurines. The figurine found in grave 258 fits in the picture; it is also perforated by many holes (fig. 7, 3). This brings a additional interest to its location and to the role which the woman who was holding it in her hands was playing in the society.

I have not found so far many other examples of piercing in the archaeological literature, except for a much later period (early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium) at Togolok in Turkmenistan, where two figurines found in a pot had been stabbed with small flints (Sarianidi 2002, 293).

Whatever elements we have give no evidence of a cult of any kind, but suggest a temporary function linked with religious rituals and sympathetic magic. The symbolic meaning of the snake may indicate a desire to control the hidden forces of nature; and for the holes pierced through the clay, they could either represent an attempt for a magical treatment of pain, be it moral, psychological, or physical – or a way to harm someone through an image.

#### EVOLUTION AND PARALLELS

The Neolithic figurines of Mehrgarh are of a special importance. They represent the early stage of a tradition of human figurines, which throughout the Chalcolithic periods of the Kachi/Bolan area were produced by thousands. Keeping into account the revised dating of the early Neolithic of Mehrgarh, probably into the 8<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, the early figurines have to be studied within the general context of the process of neolithisation throughout a vast geographical area extending from Western Asia to the western border of the Indus valley. The association of human figurines usually assumed to be female with bulls is often considered as emblematical of the process of neolithisation. There is no need to discuss again in this paper the hypothesis of Jacques Cauvin that the association of female and bull figurines represent the setting of an ideological system which has been instrumental in the process of emergence of the farming economy (Cauvin 1997). In the case of Mehrgarh, we can just see that the

animal figurines are limited to a small number of fragments and only a few can be identified as bulls. This is worth pointing out since the domestication of *bos indicus* is one of the main features of the process of neolithisation at Mehrgarh, becoming the predominant element of the pastoralist activity by the end of period I (Meadow 1984).

In some of our earlier contributions, we have discussed the important question of assessing whether the process of neolithisation in the Kachi/Bolan area was a local phenomenon, or whether it has to be understood in a much wider context (Jarrige, J.-F. 2004). Let us just say that the Neolithic of Mehrgarh has some obvious local features but shows also similarities, which cannot be a mere chance, with some other neolithic settlements from the Zagros foothills to the Indus valley.

Even further west, some figurines display features which indicate that some of the figurines from Mehrgarh could be linked to an important Neolithic substratum. For instance, a 8<sup>th</sup> millennium limestone figurine with incisions from Mureybet III in Syria (Cauvin 1972), is rather close with its plain shape and general look to the first clay figurine from Mehrgarh with its belt (fig. 5, 2).

But, an important contribution of the Mehrgarh excavation has been to provide us with a sufficient number of figurines to allow their classification into rather well defined categories to which we can relate more or less isolated items from other limited excavations. This classification into different types with their specific features indicates that the figurines have to be understood as elements of an ideological system functioning according to some rules, as we have tried to show in defining the different types from period I to period IIA. The occurrence of several figurines bearing marks of piercing with weeds throughout the body allows us to assess that some items must have been linked with specific practices, distinguishing them from other figurines such as those with various applications, including snakes.

Comparable items in clay are found at Zaghe in Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium (Negahban 1984) and (in stone) at Djeitun in 6<sup>th</sup> millennium Southern Turkmenistan (Masson/Sarianidi 1972). Offsprings of the early substratum can be found as well in Turkmenia at Yalangach (4<sup>th</sup> mill. BC) (Masson/Sarianidi 1972; catalogue *Avant les Scythes* 1979), at Kara-Tepe (*ibid.*), where figurines, in particular, display applied coiled snakes in the Namazga III period, at Geoksyur and – closer to Mehrgarh – in the Gomal area of Pakistan (Dani 1971), and at Sarazm in Tadjikistan, all around 3000 BC.

At Mehrgarh and Nausharo, the figurines from the chalcolithic periods, in particular Mehrgarh

periods VI, VII and Nausharo period I, show an evolution towards a greater naturalism and a diversification of attributes, implying a codification of the female and male figurines evolving through time according to an ideological system, probably very different from what we can guess from the Neolithic period (Jarrige, C. 1988, 1997). But it is rather striking to notice that sites contemporary with Mehrgarh period VII (c. 3000–2600 BC), such as Mundigak, periods III and IV (Casal 1961) and Shahr-i Sokhta, periods II and III (Tosi 1968, 1969, 1983), have yielded figurines very close stylistically with the much older prototypes from neolithic Mehrgarh. Such figurines belong to types still close to the codification that we have established for the Neolithic period of Mehrgarh. In those levels, however, those figurines whose Neolithic origin is still clearly visible are found along with other figurines of the Mehrgarh VIIB type, which are obvious imports of this cultural complex.

The “pawn” figurines mentioned in a previous paper in this conference, published in the SAA 1995 volume (Jarrige, C. 1997) can now be linked to a prototype from period I level 4 at Mehrgarh, standing on a flat base with stumps of arms (fig. 5, 9) whose characters are to be common to a wide range of figurines all over Western and Central Asia. With a stout body, almost no head and two stumps of arms, this type is going to be widespread in time and space, at Jarmo (Broman Morales 1983) and Tello, and also at Susa, Tepe Yahya, Mundigak, Shahr-i Sokhta, Tell-i Bakun, Altyn tepe, Tappeh Hissar, and many other sites (Jarrige, C. 1997).

These few examples show that, from the beginning of the sequence at Mehrgarh, period I, level 1, until c. 2500 BC, prior to the emergence of the Indus civilization, the early figurines of Mehrgarh have parallels in the vast geographical zone which extends from Central Asia to the Zagros, and whose ramifications will reach even further during the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium (Jarrige, C. 1997). We miss most of their symbolism, possibly linked to an ideology of fecundity and fertility, most likely preceding the emergence of food production, but already suggesting the idea of a control of the environment through the shaping of a human being, or at least a living being.

These symbols circulate through the same exchange networks as raw materials, technology and funerary practices, and reveal the links, the contacts and the exchanges which occur between the different regions bounded by the Zagros flanks, Baluchistan and the Indus, the Kara Kum desert, and the Makran coast.

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