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The "Priest King" from Moenjo-daro: An Iconographic Assessment

Since the discovery in the 1920s of the Indus Civilization, the most famous of all finds from the Indus Valley sites is the much discussed "Priest King" from Moenjo-daro (Pls. I-IV). This steatite statuette (Dk 1909-50.852) in the round was found in Room I, Block 2 Section B of the Dk Area at Moenjo-daro\(^1\) at a depth of 1.37 metres and is thus supposed to be of a late date, which the late Sir Mortimer Wheeler found consistent with the exaggerated stylization\(^2\). One may, however, keep an open mind for the possibility that the Indus Civilization consisted of more than one ethnic component, each being responsible for certain cultural expressions and either being contemporaneous or being more widely spaced over the long span of existence of this enigmatic culture and therefore only partly overlapping each other. The "exaggerated stylization" of the "Priest King" may be one example of this hypothesis and there may well exist no connection between the high level in the old excavations, the supposedly consequential late 3rd (or even early 2nd) millennium B.C. date and the style and mode of execution.

The "Priest King" statuette shows the head and shoulders of a male, found jaggedly broken off about the waist. It is now mounted and its present height is 17.7 cms. The face is full and disproportionate to the size of the skull, with a sub-normally shallow forehead, and a long straight nose, broken away at the tip. The eyes are narrowed and, when found, one was inlaid with shell. Straight eyebrows contribute to the rather remote air, though one might consider that the addition of inlay to the eyes might well convert this to perhaps a sense of calculating watchfulness. Although

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the face bears a stylized, trimmed beard, the upper lip is shaven, and the lips themselves are broad and closed. The hair is also presented in a conventionalized manner. It is parted in the centre, exposes the ears, and reaches the nape of the neck. The hair is confined at the front with a narrow fillet which is decorated over the centre of the forehead with a ring; the fillet is brought together on the occiput and shown falling to the shoulder blades over the clothing. A cloak covers the left shoulder, leaving the right bare, and showing a bracelet on the upper right arm, decorated with a similar ring to that worn on the fillet. The neck is short and thick, and the shoulders squared and disproportionately narrow. What is left of the body shows no physical details except that the right, bare, upper arm is posed a little anterior to the chest wall.

The six large sculptured heads, presently known from Moenjo-daro 3 (considered entirely apart from the figurines) have the ears rendered in two distinct categories. The majority are quite rudimentary, consisting of an encircled concavity with a more or less central hole. This type strongly suggests the possibility that some decorative element was worn over, or in, the ears.

Two heads differ conspicuously in this respect, and one of these is the "Priest King". The ears, in this case, are carved in a double kidney shape with a hole situated behind the calix of the inner kidney. The manner of depiction is markedly similar to, for instance, a flat, ornamental plaque from Moenjo-daro, made of whitish steatite and of roughly fan-shaped outline, measuring ca. 4.8 × 3.8 cms. with a thickness of ca. 0.7 cms 4. It bears an intaglio design which may originally have formed the setting for incrustation. It consists of two kidney shapes lying one within the other, with the calices compatibly placed and directed towards the flattened aspect. A similar case is a pendant from Harappa, made of gold sheet, beaten out from behind to form three kidney shapes lying within each other with their calices in an upward position. The pendant has two gold suspension hooks on the underside 5. Another instance is a copper or bronze cast pendant from the DK Area in Moenjo-daro 6 with two small suspension holes at the top and also in the shape of three concentric kidneys with their calices compatibly situated and directed towards

the suspension holes. Finally I should like to mention a honey-coloured steatite amulet or pectoral from Moenjo-daro 7, of a roughly circular shape, measuring $6.8 \times 6.3$ cms. with a thickness of $1.5$ cms. and bearing a beautifully executed representation of a unicorn with deep insets for inlay. One of these insets on the centre of the torso is a kidney lying with the calix directed towards the underbelly. A design enclosing the animal appears to contain a double kidney configuration.

Returning to the "Priest King" it can be said, that care had been taken in the carving, and this fact, together with the suggested magico-religious value of the kidney, suggests that the ears in this case were left completely visible. This supposition is underlined by a further curious feature. Behind and below each ear a fairly deep narrow hole has been drilled upwards into the head under the hair (Pl. IV a–b). Sir Mortimer Wheeler suggested that these may have been intended to hold a metal necklace, but I would be inclined to question this for two reasons. The first is the matter of direction, as a necklace of any weight would pull free quite easily from the location of the holes. The second reason concerns another unique speciality of the "Priest King". After the head had been fashioned and the hair and fillet indicated, an oblique slice was removed from the crown of the head above the encircling ribbon (Pls. III a–b). The resulting flat circular patch is left unadorned, and I should like to suggest that the necessity for this was the placement of some type of headdress, or ornament, which was then secured in position with metal hooks into the holes previously mentioned. If this is so, it is possible that the headdress was removable, and perhaps interchangeable, because the holes for the hooks are quite worn. Of course, it is not possible to speculate on the form of the regalia except to venture the opinion that it need not, necessarily, have been constructed flimsily, as the holes would be capable of supporting a substantial metal or stone construction and of fairly high dimensions. Metal supports may well have been used whatever the style of the headdress or ornament and again it would be interesting to have an analysis report on the possible contaminants remaining around the holes.

The female figurines in the Indus excavations are famed for the intricacy and flamboyance of their headdresses, but there are also a few male figurines from which one may gather some impression of male dress. However, one should approach any suggestion of comparative headgear for the "Priest King" with the utmost reserve.

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7 Mackay, 1938, vol. I, p. 546; vol. II, pl. CXL, no. 59. This amulet was discovered at a level of 2.28 m. below the surface in the DK Area at Moenjo-daro (8036) in Block 9, House VII, Room 21.
The male figurines in question, are unfortunately somewhat broken, but it is possible to discern certain details which suggest a cone-like headdress, swathed with a band around the head, and the broken stump of some feature worn about the ears. Yet another striking headdress appears on three seals from Moenjo-daro 8 showing a 3-faced divinity, postulated as proto-Śiva by Marshall. The headdress here is horned and there is a tall central detail.

Some of the other larger sculptures from Moenjo-daro show the hair gathered in different varieties of a bun. The possibility of this kind of adornment for the "Priest King" seems unlikely, as the hair is clearly indicated as cut short at the nape of the neck. For the time being at least it is clear that any attempt at the reconstruction of a precise embellishment for the head of the statuette rests in the realm of hypothesis.

It may be of singular pertinence for further research to note that in the Middle and Near East, e.g. in Iran and Mesopotamia, towards the close of the 3rd millennium and during the course of the 2nd millennium B.C. we occasionally encounter the practice of equipping certain statues with separately fashioned wigs made either of precious metals or of valuable stone which were then secured and held in position by means of bitumen or by other devices such as pegs and metal rods or pins. Detailed references to this subject can be found in Agnes Spycket, La Statuaire du Proche-Orient Ancien, Handbuch der Orientalistik, VII 1, Brill, 1981, pp. 176, 208 fn. 124, 210, 212, 251, 265, 296, 309, 389, and fn. 148.

Another point of importance is the fact that it cannot be established with certainty whether the removal of the crown of the head of the Moenjo-daro statuette was performed immediately after its manufacture, which should, therefore, point to this feature as an original aspect of the "Priest King", causing us to consider the presence of a headdress which formed an integral and inseparable ingredient of the entire adornment of this figure. Or we need consider the possibility of a reshaping and a restoration of the head at a later date after this statuette had been violated causing severe damage to the head and also possibly to the now missing portion of the lower body. One reason for this mutilation could have been that when the previous veneration of this statuette had diminished or even vanished as the religious concepts and values it once represented had undergone a drastic change, violation of previous symbols of veneration took place making no exception for the "Priest King". The later reshaping and restoration of the head, which might still fall within the time of the Indus Civilization, could then have been responsible for its present appear-

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8 Wheeler, 1968, p. 105 and fn. 2.
ance which was then complemented by a now missing loose, fitting piece or even an ornament. The latter could, for instance, be a circular disc or a flattened conical segment making up for the original shape of the head and made from a fairly heavy material, either precious or otherwise, which needed firm securing. This would have caused the drilling of the two holes behind the ears of the “Priest King” to take metal supports.

It would not be difficult to visualize the “Priest King” as a seated figure, comparable with other examples of sculpture from Moenjo-daro. One is a seated male, fashioned of alabaster with rather ill-defined modelling. The left knee is raised, and grasped by the left hand 9. The second statue is of a squatting male with the right knee raised and the hands resting on the knees 10. In both these cases the positioning of the upper arm resembles that of the “Priest King”. Although defaced, the second statue bears several other resemblances. The face was bearded and the eyes formerly inlaid; there was disproportion between the face and skull measurements and a fillet was tied at the back of the head with the ends hanging down. Another limestone head also from Moenjo-daro 11 has similarities in that the wavy hair is held in a bun by means of a fillet, the eyes were originally inlaid, the beard is dressed, and the upper lip shaven.

The cloak worn by the “Priest King” is carved in relief with trefoils which still bear traces of red paint or paste. Near to the border of the robe at the back is an eye-motif shape, and close to the ends of the head fillet, as they lie over the cloak, are two single circular insets. Another of the latter occur on the garment in proximity to the place where it passes under the right arm. The kidney design, however, is absent from the cloak, although as explained, it is present in the striking carving of the ear structure. The same tiny ‘prick-holes’ are present inside the motifs on other Indus ornaments, e.g. beads.

The fact that the trefoil, kidney shape, and eye motif are present on the one piece of sculpture argues that these devices had a good deal in common. Since the trefoil motif occurs in Mesopotamia, again in Egypt in connection with the Mother Goddess Hathor, and in Crete on bull or cow headed rhytons, it seems likely that this represents a common religious symbolism which is usually explained as having a possible astral connotation 12. However, another possibility which has not yet been properly assessed is that it may be a fertility symbol.

12 E. C. L. During Caspers, “Some Motifs as Evidence for Maritime Contact
Although when one considers the field of these patterns in general, it is obvious that some of the devices were inserted as fill motifs, I would venture to put forward the theory that they were carefully chosen fill motifs, used so that there was no possible detraction from the religio-magical intention of the pattern as a whole. In other words, as previously indicated, it seems logical to hazard the opinion that each device standing alone has a special connotation, and that the power of significance is increased when each is taken in relationship with another, or, finally, all portrayed together. It would appear that what can still be regarded as a ‘horror vacui’, was, in fact, made up of notable components, each with its own token part to play in the general configuration. One strange point is that the natural extension of these patterns into the quatrefoil and the cinquefoil is not apparent in the Indus artistry.

Frontal view of a steatite statuette from Moenjo-daro called the "Priest King". Present ht. 17.7 cms. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy of the Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

a) Close up view of left side of the head of the "Priest King" from Moenjo-daro, showing the hole under the kidney-shaped ear. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy of the Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.

b) Close up view of right side of the head of the "Priest King" from Moenjo-daro, showing the hole under the kidney-shaped ear. Photo J.C.M.H. Moloney. Courtesy of the Dept. of Archaeology of Pakistan.