

Steatite Civilization: An overview of Harappan talc acquisition and trade networks

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Steatite – a rock composed primarily of the mineral talc – was undoubtedly a material of tremendous importance to the Harappans of the Indus Civilization (ca. 2600-1900 BC). This soft, easily carved stone was not only used for the mass-production of common items, most notably the ubiquitous white steatite bead, but also for the closely controlled creation of objects with significant political and/or economic value such as stamp seals and inscribed tablets. Steatite artifacts of one kind or another have been reported from practically every Indus Civilization site. It has been observed that the aforementioned beads are so common that their presence alone could almost be considered a marker of a settlement's "Harappan" character. The renowned scholar Horace Beck even went as far as to characterize Indus society as a "steatite civilization."

In a study originally published in 2008, nearly 150 fragments of raw talc manufacturing debris from the Indus city of Harappa were compared, using instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA), to geologic samples collected from over three dozen deposits of this stone located across Pakistan and India. Although the results indicated that craftspeople at the site utilized steatite acquired from sources in multiple regions of northwestern South Asia, deposits the Hazara area of northern Pakistan were found to be by far the most heavily utilized.

A decade has passed and, in that time, the scope of this steatite source provenience study has been significantly expanded. Talc manufacturing debris has now been analyzed from several other Indus cities (Mohenjo-daro, Dholavira and Rakhigarhi) as well as from many smaller Harappan and/or Early Harappan settlements. The geologic database has been bolstered with the samples from additional sources. Steatite artifacts from contemporaneous sites in Oman – a region in which there is a well-documented Harappan presence – have also been analyzed. Most recently, a large-scale study of finished, heat-treated steatite objects (beads and seals) has been initiated. All of this new data, which will be summarized in this paper, has enabled the development of a picture of Harappan talc acquisition and trade networks that is simultaneously more intricate and wide-ranging.

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