

Unveiling the Enigma: Analysis of a Rare Bone Object Recovered from the PGW Level in Excavation at Kaserwa Khera District Palwal, Haryana (2022-23)

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of a rare bone object recovered at the recent excavation held at the site of Kaserwa Khera in the Palwal District of Haryana. As indicated by the title, the investigation will center on a distinctive bone object, distinguished for its uniqueness and rarity, retrieved from the level associated with the painted grey ware culture. The research will encompass a deep examination, comparative analysis, and an ethnographic study, aiming to raise additional insights into this specific object. Such an approach promises to unveil valuable information regarding its utilization and the cultural practices prevalent during that period.

Keywords: Bone object, Painted Grey Ware Culture, encircled points, Harappan culture, Mother Goddesses, local deity, Sitala-devi, Palwal District.

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Introduction

The archaeological site of Kaserwa Khera is situated in the village of Manpur, Hathin tehsil, Palwal district, Haryana, at coordinates (Lat. 28°00'04.4"N, long. 77°17'38.0"E). The first season of the excavation was carried out in 2022-2023 while the second season was carried out in 2023-2024 both by the Excavation Branch II of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) under the supervision of the Superintendent Archaeologist Dr. Gunjan Srivastava. During the first season, excavation spanned across five locations, covering 17 trenches and 39 quadrants. Excavation commenced at an MSL of 199.73m, reaching 182.60m. The site presents a cultural sequence spanning from the PGW period, the Kushana (early Historic) period, and the early medieval period.

The bone object under discussion in this paper was recovered from the earliest level of the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture. Alongside the object, associated materials unearthed included potteries and potsherds of Painted Grey Ware, Grey Ware, Red Ware, Black Slipped Ware, miniature pots, Bone Fragments, Bone Points, burnt slags, TC Ghat-shaped beads, and Iron Slags. This assemblage not only provides valuable insights into the material culture and practices of the period but also underscores the significance of the bone figurine within the PGW culture.

The object is an exquisite piece, showcasing exceptional artisanal craftsmanship, clearly evident in its impeccable finishing. When we talk particularly about the design of the object then, a noteworthy design adorns it in the form of an encircled point, a motif found across various sites spanning different cultures, including the Painted Grey Ware (PGW), Neolithic, Harappan, Mauryan, and Shunga periods in the Indian context, as well as in foreign contexts. This motif holds profound implications for our understanding of cultural exchange and continuity, which will be explored in detail within this paper.

Also, after conducting an ethnographic study of the bone object, it became apparent that the object closely resembles numerous regional and local deities still revered today. This paper aims to bring more and more knowledge about the bone figure and will try to reveal the secrets behind it.

Description of the Bone Object

Unearthed during the excavation of Kaserwa Khera, the bone object stands as a captivating artifact that offers a glimpse into the rich archaeological history of the site. Crafted with precision and significance, this object represents a tangible connection to ancient beliefs and practices.

The object is adorned with small circles, within each of which a dot is meticulously placed, accompanied by linear designs on one side. Let's designate the side with linear designs as the front, and the other side as the back, to prevent any potential confusion. The upper portion of the object takes the form of an inverted triangle, with a slightly curvilinear top end, seamlessly connecting to the lower triangular part. A rectangular shape unites the upper and lower sections of the figurine, maintaining its monolithic nature. Although the bottom part of the figurine is slightly damaged, we can still discern its remaining missing portion.

The dimensions of the figurine are as follows: it is 4.5mm thick, with a top length of 2.1cm, a bottom length of 1.75cm, and a total height of 2.9cm (Fig.01).

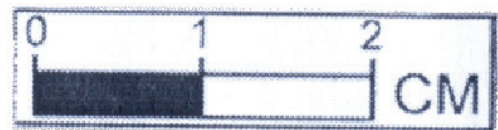
Front side- On the front side, a total number of six encircled points are arranged. Three encircled points are positioned above, forming an inverted triangle, while two are placed in the rectangular section facing each other.

Additionally, one encircled point is centrally positioned within the triangle at the bottom. Furthermore, in the rectangular section, a cross is marked with linear lines extending to the corners of the triangular part. At the lowest part, another line serves as a border for the base of the figurine.

Back side- On the back side of the figurine, two encircled points are strategically positioned. One is located at the center of the inverted triangle, while the other is placed between the rectangular sections. Both of them are arranged one below the other symmetrically.

Both at the front and the back the encircled points are made in such a way that they perfectly match each other.

Numerous theories abound regarding the significance of this bone object. Among them, the most interesting feature is the encircled dots adorning this artifact which stand out as a renowned motif,



deeply rooted in Harappan culture. Scholars often liken these dots to fish eyes, drawing parallels between the dot's resemblance to a fish's pupil and the outer circle's semblance to an eye.

This motif, prevalent in figurines, primarily serves to symbolize eyes, reflecting an intricate understanding of symbolism and artistic expression within the ancient Harappan civilization.

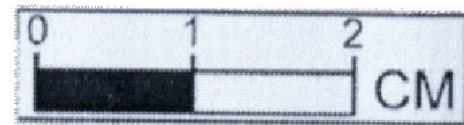
Bone figurine as Eye/Mother Goddesses

A correlation of this figurine has been drawn with a female figurine, possibly that of a mother goddess. If we direct our attention to the encircled points, they are arranged in a manner resembling the features of a human body. Examining the frontal aspect of the figurine, the upper two encircled points resemble eyes, while the one below them could be identified as the nose. The two encircled points in the rectangular section resemble breasts, and the final encircled point resembles the navel. Almost similar figurines are recovered from different archaeological sites and M K Dhavalikar mentions in his article 'Eye Goddesses in India and Their West Asian Parallels' that the small sculptures are adorned with patterns of "dot-in-circle" and straight lines all over. Upon closer examination, these decorations suggest that the figurines may represent simplified and artistic depictions of a deity with human-like features (Dhavalikar, 1965). With an ethnographic study, we can find evidence that similar figurines are worshiped either as mother goddesses or local deities.

Kandi Mata is one such mother goddess who is worshiped in almost every part of the nation, especially in rural areas, she is venerated as a goddess associated with smallpox. The depictions of her in northern and eastern India are particularly intriguing in the context of the current investigation. In Punjab, her temples are commonly constructed by the Banias, the merchant community, as a gesture of gratitude. The circular marks that appear around the neck during a specific type of smallpox attack are personified as *Kandi Mata*, the deity believed to be the mother of swellings (Crooke, 1926). The circular marks seen on *Kandi Mata* resemble the encircled dot of the bone figurine of Kaserua Khera.

The *Sanjhi* festival is observed from the Poornima (full moon) to Amavasya (new moon) at the onset of the Ashwin month. This celebration is particularly prominent in Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Gujarat. The ancient practice of creating *Sanjhi*, crafted from cow dung and flowers, originally carried out by Vaishnava temples in the 15th and 16th centuries, continues to be upheld in rural areas. The representation of *Sanjhi* typically takes the form of an inverted triangle and a triangle. Comparing this figurine to contemporary *Sanjhi* figurines reveals intriguing similarities.

In Eastern India, some of the Hindu Goddesses are worshiped even today whose features bear a resemblance to the bone figurine of Kaserua Khera. One such deity is *Sitala Devi*, also known as *Sitala Mata*, it is a Hindu goddess associated with diseases, healing, and protection. The history of *Sitala Devi* is rooted in Hindu mythology. She is often mentioned in various Puranas, particularly the Skanda Purana, where her legends and worship practices are detailed. *Sitala Devi* is considered a form



of Devi, the divine mother, and is especially worshipped during the Sitala Saptami festival, dedicated to her. Her worship involves rituals to seek protection from diseases, particularly smallpox and other illnesses related to epidemics (Kinsley, 1988). In Uttar Pradesh, the representation of the deity is typically sculpted in cow dung, often taking the form of a triangle resembling the face, jowar grains are intricately embedded to symbolize pustules (Dhavalikar, 1965).

The concept of the evil eye, the *Nazar Battu*, holds significant cultural importance in India. Embedded in diverse communities and belief systems, the term "Nazar" refers to the malevolent gaze, and "Battu" signifies an amulet or talisman. This symbolic bead, often adorned with an eye motif, is believed to shield against the harmful effects of the evil eye, particularly on vulnerable individuals like infants. This cultural practice is deeply rooted in Indian traditions, reflecting a broader belief in the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of protection against negative energies. The Nazar Battu is commonly displayed in homes, and vehicles, and worn as jewelry, showcasing its omnipresence in daily life.

Ethnographic studies and cultural anthropology work explore the cultural practices related to the evil eye bead in different regions of India, showcasing its significance (Tiwari, 2018). This evil eye bead too resembles the encircled dot of the bone figurine.

Comparative analysis

The "dot-in-circle" motif is a repeated design found in Harappan artifacts and appears on different mediums, such as seals, pottery, and figurines. In bone figurines, this motif is especially significant. It usually consists of a central dot encircled by a round or oval outline. Though straightforward in appearance, this design is evocative and has prompted various interpretations of its symbolic meaning.

The same figurine has not been discovered at any other site so far. However, we have uncovered objects made of both bone and ivory that bear a similar symbol of an encircled point. These items were retrieved during excavations at Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh) dating back to 800-500 B.C. Additionally, an ivory object with a comparable symbol of the encircled point was found at Mohenjodaro. When we look at the famous priest-king or the bearded man we can see him wearing an ornament consisting of the encircled point on his head. and a fragment of a similar figurine from the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) level of Alamgirpur (Uttar Pradesh) dating back to 1100-800 B.C also exhibited this distinctive feature (IAR 1958-59). In the excavation at Nagda, District Ujjain almost similar finding has been recovered (IAR 1955-56).

Material and Craftsmanship

Why did they choose bone to make this special figurine? Well, using bone was a smart choice. Bones from domesticated animals and wildlife were skilfully repurposed, showcasing the craftsmanship of these ancient cultures. Certain animal bones hold symbolic significance in religious and ceremonial settings, highlighting the diverse roles that bone artifacts play in cultural contexts. (Allchin, 1995). Bones were strong and easy to find, so they might have become a great canvas for the artisans of the past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the excavation at Kaserua Khera in Haryana has unearthed a bone figurine from the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) level, presenting a captivating artifact-rich in cultural and historical

significance. This paper has undertaken a comprehensive analysis, comparative study, and ethnographic exploration to shed light on the uniqueness and rarity of this figurine.

The bone figurine, meticulously crafted with precision, showcases a distinctive arrangement of encircled points and linear designs. While its purpose remains enigmatic, a correlation has been drawn between the figurine and the representation of Mother Goddesses or protective deities. The encircled points on the figurine resemble features of a human body, potentially signifying eyes, nose, breasts, and navel. This symbolic arrangement aligns with the concept of the evil eye bead, prevalent in contemporary Indian culture as a protective talisman against negative energies.

Comparative analysis reveals that similar symbols of encircled points on bone and ivory objects have been discovered in Ujjain, Mohenjodaro, and Alamgirpur, spanning different periods. The recurring motif suggests a cultural or symbolic connection prevalent across regions and eras. The *Sanjhi* festival's inverted triangle and triangle representations, akin to the figurine, showcase intriguing parallels, emphasizing the endurance of ancient traditions in contemporary practices.

Harappan bone figurines featuring the dot-in-circle motif offer insight into the symbolic realm of one of the earliest urban civilizations. Although the precise meaning of this motif is still subject to interpretation, its frequent appearance on enduring and significant objects indicates that it was highly valued. Whether it served as a symbol of protection, identity, or cosmological belief, the dot-in-circle motif reflects the rich cultural heritage of the Harappan civilization, enduring through the ages as a testament to their artistic and symbolic creativity.

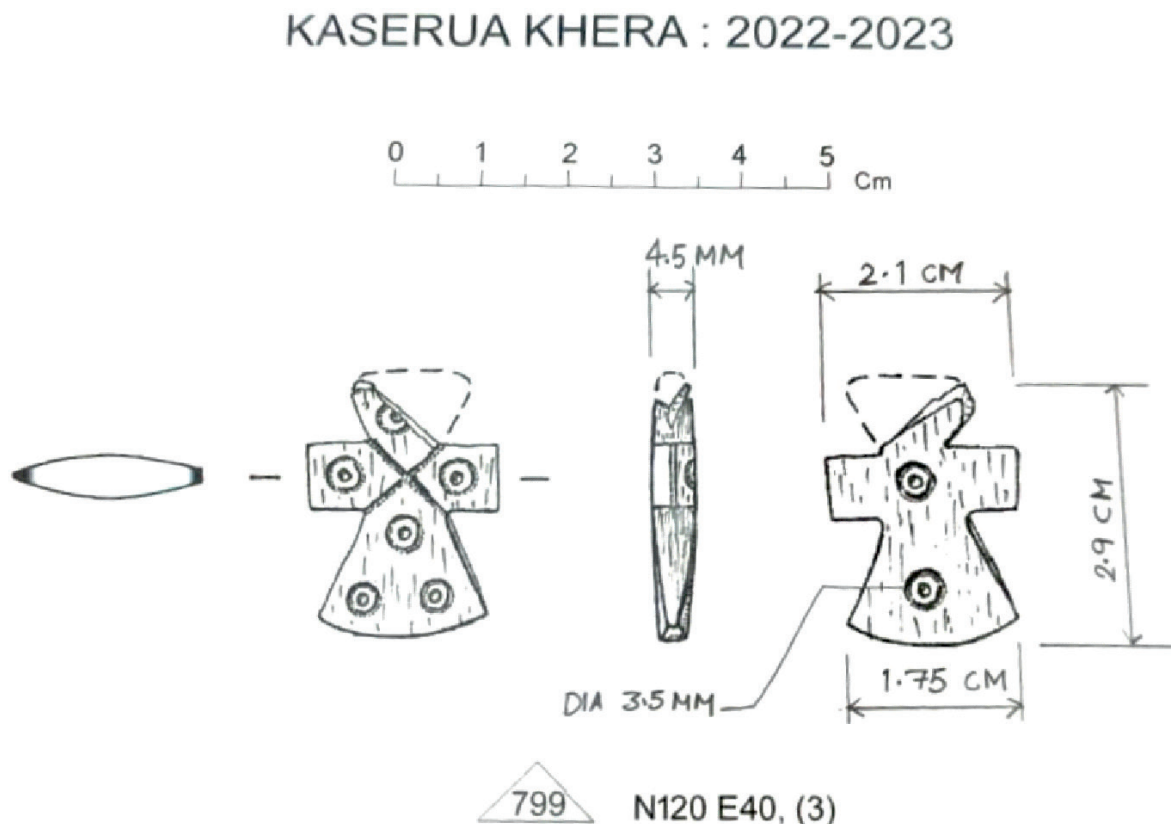


Figure 1: Diagram along with its dimensions.

In Eastern India, the bone figurine finds resonance in the worship of Hindu Goddesses, particularly Sitala Devi. The parallels between the figurines and representations of Sitala Devi, including the use of cow dung sculptures, further emphasize the enduring cultural significance embedded in these artifacts.

The material choice of bone for crafting this figurine reflects the ingenuity of ancient artisans. Bones, readily available from domesticated animals and wildlife, provided a strong and accessible canvas for artistic expression. This choice aligns with the broader cultural significance of bone artifacts in religious and ceremonial contexts.

The bone figurine from Kaserua Khera serves as a tangible link to ancient beliefs and practices, inviting further exploration into the intricacies of cultural symbolism. While many questions remain unanswered, this analysis contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the past, showcasing the interplay between material culture, symbolism, and enduring traditions. The enigma surrounding the bone figurine beckons future research and exploration, promising continued revelations about the rich archaeological tapestry of Kaserua Khera and its connection to broader cultural contexts.

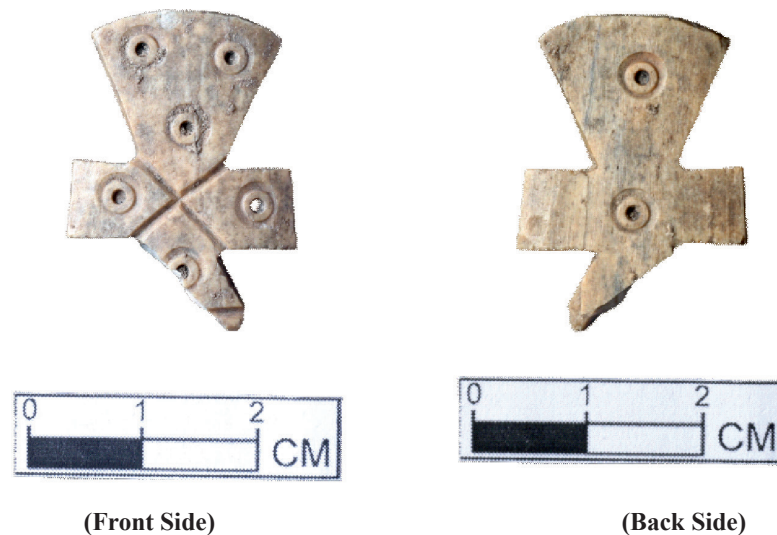


Figure 2: Front and the back side

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