

RELATIONS OF NEOLITHIC KASHMIR WITH SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MATERIAL CULTURE FROM NEW SITES IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

During a recent survey of North-West Kashmir six Neolithic sites were found. The artefacts found in Baramulla District of Kashmir Valley when analysed were as varied and distinctive as had earlier been found at many other Neolithic sites like Burzahom, Gufkral and Kanispora in Kashmir. The analysis of material culture suggests affinities and parallels beyond Kashmir, with relative comparators in northern Pakistan (Swat) and Central Asia. The interpretation of material culture reveal that there may have been some common factors at work in Kashmir, northern Pakistan, South and Central Asia leading to a similar set of tools and other material culture in similar or contrasting settings. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore whether the Neolithic material culture indicate similarities and interactions between Kashmir through Baramulla District with northern Pakistan and Central Asia.

Keywords

Neolithic Material Culture, Northern Neolithic Complex, Baramulla District, Swat, Pakistan, Burzahom, Gufkral, China, Pottery, North Asian Complex, Ritual Artefacts, Cultural Complex, Trans-Himalayan Path, Dwelling Pits.

Analysis of Material Culture

Pottery

Majority of the material culture from the six Neolithic sites consists of pottery that can be grouped in four types i.e. Coarse Ware, Fine Ware, Burnished Ware and Gritty Ware. These four wares are considered to be the diagnostic wares of the Neolithic period in Kashmir.¹ Among the four wares, coarse ware (also known as rippled rim ware) is noted in shades of black and gray with both pedestal and ring bases with decorations of wavy lines or dots running over the surfaces. Fine ware (sometimes called combed gray ware due to striations on its surface), has been found in two shades of gray and buff. Its design hallmark is the mat or basket impression that has been found on the base of the majority of examples. Burnished ware also comes in two shades of black and steel gray with carved triangular designs on the stem and rim area of the pots and with pedestal and flat bases. Gritty ware comes in shades of buff and red and there are many examples with pedestal bases, and without any design.

These four pottery types were found not only from the excavations

at Burzahom, Gufkral and Kanispora but also from many other places in Kashmir during later explorations to gauge the distribution of the Neolithic material culture in Kashmir.² The description of these types of pottery by Saar (1992) and Pant (1981) and their subsequent analysis by Bandey,³ provided the relative date range of each type in Kashmir. They found that coarse gray and fine gray wares appear around 2500-2000 BC and 2000-1700 BC respectively, while burnished ware appears around 2000-1700 BC, and gritty red or buff ware from 1700-1000 BC, thus, suggesting a general time bracket of 3000-1000 BC for the Neolithic culture in Kashmir.

Among the shapes coarse gray ware comes in the form of basins, bowls and spherical cooking pots with rippled rims and pedestal or flat bases. Fine gray ware has been noted in the form of bowls, jars and spherical bodied pots with out-turned collars with rippled rims. Burnished gray or buff ware took the form of high necked jars with flaring rims, globular bodies and flat bases, bowls with or without stand, dish-on-stand, spherical pots and vases and miniature pots. Gritty red or buff ware has been recorded in the form of bowls with pedestal bases and small miniature pots. These forms correspond to those reported in the four pottery types at Burzahom, Gufkral and Kanispora.

Stone Tools

Among the stone tools a harvester, a shouldered celt, grounded celts, pounders, mace heads, a muller and sling balls were found. These tools are largely made from Panjal trap, a volcanic type of rock commonly found in Kashmir, specimens of which are also reported from both Burzahom and Gufkral.⁴

Wattle and Daub

Mud plaster pieces of wattle and daub, with reed impressions, were also found at three of the six sites. Earlier, wattle and daub pieces were found at Burzahom and Gufkral, suggesting their use for plastering wall surfaces⁵ of the habitations for the settlement purposes during the Neolithic period. The wattle and daub pieces from the Baramulla sites were part of the Neolithic assemblage suggesting construction of similar habitations of timber with reinforcement by twigs and reeds and plastered on both sides with mud.

Terracotta

A sole specimen of a terracotta bobbin was found at a site in the present systematic transect survey. Nothing similar has been reported from Burzahom and Gufkral, though spindle whorls were reported there. However, similar type of bobbins were found during excavations at Aligrama (Swat, Pakistan) dating from 2000 BC to the 4th century BC.⁶ Furthermore, a single specimen of unknown terracotta object resembling an oyster shell was found at a site with no comparators in Kashmir or elsewhere.

Schist

A schist disk with a central perforation was collected from one site. Such schist disks are not reported from the excavated Kashmir Neolithic sites. Mention may be made that schist was one of the prime material in the north-west for the sculpture in the early years of our era and is not reported from Kashmir.

Regional Similarities Observed

The material culture of Neolithic Kashmir has been compared with such finds that have been found around in the vicinity of South and Central Asia. Stacul⁷ and Lahiri⁸ mention that the black burnished ware, fine gray ware and gritty red or buff ware from the Swat region of Pakistan from period III (1950-1920 cal. BC) and period IV (1730-1690 to 1500 cal. BC), are similar to types found at Burzahom. The mat impressions or basket impressions on pot bases of burnished and fine ware pottery and plastic decoration on gray ware from Swat are also worth noting.⁹ These similarities are conspicuous among comparable pottery types at Burzahom in Kashmir¹⁰ and now observed among the pottery assemblages from the new sites in Baramulla district.¹¹ The evidence of mat impressed pottery is also reported from Taxila (Sarai-Khola, mid-fourth millennium BC) and Baluchistan (Kili Gul Mohammed) both in Pakistan¹², the central plains in China (Yangshao and Longshan cultures) and Mongolia (Gobi culture) in Inner Asia.¹³ Such similarities made scholars to assume a generic type of relationship in the material culture of Kashmir with those located outside and even suggesting that Kashmir Neolithic was part of an 'Inner Asian' or 'Northern Neolithic' complex alongwith sites located in Swat in the northern Pakistan.¹⁴ There is also uniformity among the shapes such as oval jars, bowls and dishes on stand that were commonly found in Swat, Burzahom, Gufkral,¹⁵ and the new sites located in Baramulla of Kashmir Valley.

While analysing the stone tools of Burzahom, Khazanchi suggested that they are typologically different from those found in the plains and southern Neolithic sites in India.¹⁶ What was suggested is that a few of these tools have parallels in Swat, and Sarai Khola in Pakistan, such as celts, sling balls and harvesters.¹⁷ Rectangular and oval harvesters at Burzahom and Gufkral¹⁸ were also reported from Swat and Northern China, and are distinguished by holes in the middle. Kashmir and Chinese harvesters have two holes for the haft while Stacul¹⁹ mentions Swat harvesters are single holed. At one of our new sites in Baramulla a single holed harvester has been collected which reinforces the view which Stacul held that such harvesters present strong evidence of a homogeneous cultural complex, which he said was probably linked together by contacts and infiltration of people through Trans-Himalayan paths.²⁰ Besides these, there are other similarities with the Swat material, such as the presence of schist disks with a central perforation found at the new site located in Baramulla. Such specimens were not found at Burzahom, Gufkral or Kanispora while Stacul reported similar schist disks with central holes from Loebanr III (c. 1650 cal. BC),²¹ and schist slabs from Aligrama (c. 1710-1690 cal. BC).²² Stacul was not able to understand their real function but described them as "ritual" artefacts. Law interpreted similar schist disks from a Harappan site in Pakistan as flat disks or palettes, as probably a by-product of some finished items.²³

From the excavated sites of Burzahom, Gufkral, and Kanispora conical shaped dug out pits narrow at the top and broad at the bottom were reported which the excavators called "dwelling pits" though there is a new interpretation given to dwelling pit phenomenon.²⁴ These were earlier thought to be used in

place of houses which subsequently were said to have been actually used for storage of articles only.²⁵ Similar pits were also found at one of the new sites as well as at many other places outside Kashmir including Swat at Aligrama, Bir-kot-ghundai, Kalako-deray, and Loebnar III, which Stacul describes as having strong similarities with that of Burzahom, in terms of both material and structures. At all the Kashmir excavated sites, square or rectangular timber houses, the dwellings of early inhabitants, were strengthened with wattle and daub, the pieces of which were found at the new sites in Baramulla which Stacul also found at Aligrama and Loebnar²⁶ giving to believe that people in Kashmir and Swat were in contact with each other.²⁷

Extant Similarities in Material Culture

Neolithic sites in Baramulla represent a material culture which is similar not only to Kashmir Neolithic but beyond Kashmir in Pakistan, China and Central Asia. It is likely that similarities between the Baramulla sites and other Neolithic sites in the wider region are due to a range of factors including movement, migration, contact, trade etc.²⁸ It is observed that the material culture at new sites is similar to those of the known sites of Neolithic Kashmir and adjoining sub-regions, summarised as under:

- Pottery types (design and decoration).
- Mat or basket impressions on burnished and fine ware pot bases and graffiti on the burnished ware pottery.
- Stone tools of various types (mostly ground or polished) were mostly made from trap and basalt rock types.
- Wattle and daub constructions found at three sites.

The variations are nevertheless found in the following material culture:

- Single holed harvester even though similar in shape show analogy with Swat types.
- Shouldered celt not reported so far from Kashmir Neolithic sites is similar to those earlier reported from China.
- Schist disks are first time reported from the new sites in Baramulla with analogy to similar material from Swat sites.
- Terracotta bobbin is reported from a new site in Baramulla with similarities in Swat, Pakistan.

Findings

The material culture at the six new sites in Baramulla does match with the extant similarities found at Burzahom, Gufkral and Kansipora (Kashmir), Swat (Pakistan) and in Central Asia, supporting the idea that Kashmir Neolithic people were in contact with the outsiders. The homologous material found in Pakistan, China and Kashmir suggests that people were connected through Baramulla that historically also joined these areas through Grand Silk Route and was also placed geographically in the centre of this region.²⁹ Baramulla's strategic location on the Jhelum Valley trade route is probably an indication of movement of people through the Himalayan-Hindu Kush-Pamirs complex which might have played an important role in the development of a distinctive

cultural complex within Kashmir, Pakistan, China and Central Asia.³⁰ Therefore, the new data does not seem to contest those similarities previously developed about Kashmir and Swat, and in fact, Baramulla evidence fits into such extent similarities with the observations made by Fairservis,³¹ that homogenous cultural correlations represents expression of a widespread North Asian complex.

To conclude, the material culture from the new sites belong to that of Neolithic culture of Kashmir that may have started in the late fourth millennium BC and continued to the end of second millennium or still in the first millennium BC. The new evidence supports the ideas that Kashmir Neolithic culture had developed contacts with many regions in South, West and Central Asia, precisely with cultures in China, Pakistan, Mongolia and so forth, be it with Yangshao and Longshan in China, Swat in Pakistan or Gobi in Mongolia. The shouldered celt of China was hardly found outside the plains of China with exception in the Brahmaputra valley sites in India but its presence in Baramulla (Kashmir) widens the scope of the new studies to understand the nature of contacts in antiquity. The geographic position of Baramulla at the crossroads of communication networks was important, allowing it to act as a niche between the northern regions of Pakistan and Central Asia on the north western side to connect people across the mountains.



Rounded Celts



Pounders



A Mace Head



A Stone Muller



A Sling Ball



A Single Holed Rectangular Harvester



A Shouldered Celt



Wattle and Daub Plaster Pieces with Reed Brush Impression



A Terracotta Bobbin



Unknown Terracotta Object Resembling an Oyster Shell



Schist Disks

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