



Serving Vessels and Social Archaeology: Interpreting Pedestaled Ceramics of the Indus Civilization

Dr. Tooba Shafaq Rajput

Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur Mir's, Sindh Pakistan, tooba.shafaqrajput@yahoo.com / tooba.shafaqrajput@salu.edu.pk

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Abstract

After first discovery of Indus Civilization in 1829 by Charles Mason British Officers an attentive notice initiated. The reports and results from Harappa excavation confirmed after Mohenjo-Daro excavation. Consequently, the existence of a huge civilization was agreed throughout the globe having its contemporariness with Mesopotamia and Egypt was attested. The absence of deciphered textual records, paintings on the walls of large palaces and tombs and other type of definite remains have resulted ambiguity in numerous basic concepts about the Indus Civilization. The slow and bit-by-bit discovered data interpretive comprehension provides the clarity of the cultural issues. Till now, the social organization of 2600–1900 BCE phase remains partially understood. Thus, the present paper examines the ceramics and a distinctive category of pedestaled vessels such as Dish-on-Stand (DoS), Bowl-on-Stand (BoS), and Cup-on-Stand (CoS). are further explored for grasping the patterns of social behavior, food practices, and symbolic display within Indus society. Sketching on archaeological evidence from multi-tiered settlement pattern across the Indus domain. Pedestaled vessels are interpreted not merely as utilitarian containers but as serving devices associated with presentation of personal and communal feasting, and possibly ritualized practices. Within the framework of social archaeology, this study argues that pedestaled ceramic vessels functioned as material mediators of social relations, reflecting norms of community integration, and symbolic communication in the Indus world. The discussion surrounds the make utility and availability of food vessels, the types and kinds of serving utensils with focus on the make as simple verses complex procedures; frequent and infrequent use; ritual and regular use and their physical appearance expressing the status division in given society. The significance of present work is fabricated in new direction of perceiving the results about social stratification through feast furniture of the Indus Civilization.

Keywords: Indus Population, Settlement Hierarchy, Pedestaled Vessel, Food-Ways, Social Archaeology, Indus Valley

Introduction

Indus civilization advanced to have the intensified cities during the 2600BCE to 1900BCE. In the total spatial distribution over a million square kilometers a total of three to five million people lived in numerous small and large cities, towns, villages and campsites. All the settlements including six mega metropolises were interlaced through interaction networks. The living patterns were hierarchical, the cities had intensive activities with high degree of cultural diversity. Living at one place; various groups maintained their identity and socio-commercial

status. It was the Urban Phase 2600-1900 BCE in Indus valley when people enjoying a huge food varieties consisting of meat fish fruits, honey and breads and vegetables. They ate cooked food in ghee/oils and was flavored with spices (Pokharia *et al* 2011, Pokharia 2011, 2008, Channarayapatna 2018, Chase 2005, 2012, 2014, Chase *et al* 2020, 2014, Belcher 2019, 2011; Bates *et al* 2021, 2021, Black and Morrison 2021, Abhayan 2016, Fuller 2019, Biagetti *et al* 2022, Bogaard 2021). After cooking, the food was served with precise pattern at any explicit location. Jonathan Mark Kenoyer (1998) has seen similarity of cooking utensils of the urban phase 2600-1900 BCE to the traditional vessels used in contemporary times. Pedestaled vessels are a distinctive artifact class in the Indus tradition (especially at Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Dholavira). The pedestaled “Serving vessels” immediately connects ceramics to (i) Food practices, (ii) Feasting and hospitality, (iii) Household organization, (iv) Status display, (v) Ritual consumption and (vi) Public vs private life. These features align perfectly with **social archaeology**, which reconstructs behavior from material culture. Pedestaled vessels are socially meaningful objects. They are not purely utilitarian as their form suggests (a) Advancement in display or presentation, (b) Stability for large bowls, (c) Possible ritual or ceremonial use and (d) Association with serving rather than storage or cooking. This opens rich interpretive questions, discussions, signals theoretical awareness about “Social archaeology”. Ceramics, as one of the most abundant artifact classes, offer particularly valuable insights into daily activities, technological traditions, and patterns of consumption (Rice, 1987). Within the Indus ceramic repertoire, pedestaled vessels constitute a distinctive object and have infrequently been examined systematically as indicators of social behavior. Among those distinctive ceramic vessels, such as, Dish-on-Stand (DoS), Bowl-on-Stand (BoS), and Cup-on-Stand (CoS) appear frequently in domestic and possibly ritual contexts and may reflect patterns of food consumption, ceremonial activities, or social display. The practices of food preparation, presentation, and consumption are deeply embedded in social relations, identity formation, and ritual performance (Dietler & Hayden, 2001). By examining vessel types, spatial distribution, manufacturing characteristics, and archaeological contexts, the research seeks to highlight patterns of symbolic display. Through a social archaeological framework, the article argues that such vessels functioned not simply as utilitarian containers but as active mediators of social relations, contributing to the maintenance of organization and shared identity across a vast urban network. Scholars such as Jonathan Mark Kenoyer and Gregory L. Possehl have noted that standardized ceramic forms were widely distributed across Indus urban centers. However, the social meaning of certain vessel forms especially pedestal vessels remains insufficiently explored. These vessels may have functioned not only as serving containers but also as symbols of status, ritual practice, or communal feasting.

Research Problem is that although pedestal vessels such as Dish-on-Stand and Bowl-on-Stand are common in Indus ceramic assemblages, their **social function and symbolic meaning** are not clearly understood. Archaeologists debate whether these vessels were used for (i) ritual offerings (ii) elite dining practices (iii) communal feasting (iv) specialized food presentation. This research investigates whether these vessels can be interpreted as **markers of social differentiation** within Indus urban society.

Literature Review

About Indus social organization and everyday life, early interpretations proposed a centralized state governed by elites, drawing parallels with Mesopotamia and Egypt (Wheeler, 1968). More recently, Kenoyer (1998) argues that Indus urbanism reflects complex social coordination

supported by craft specialization and long-distance trade rather than monumental expressions of royal power. Similarly, Wright (2010) emphasizes the role of households and community-level organization in structuring economic and social life. These perspectives highlight the importance of examining everyday material culture and hence the ceramics as indicators of social practice are preferred to analyze further. Ceramic analysis has long been central to archaeological interpretation because pottery reflects technological choices, functional requirements, and cultural traditions (Rice, 1987). In the Indus context, pottery assemblages demonstrate remarkable standardization in form and decoration across a vast geographic area, suggesting shared norms of production and use (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002). Beyond typology, archaeologists increasingly view ceramics as evidence of social practice. Vessel forms associated with cooking, storage, or serving correspond to different stages of foodways, which are themselves culturally structured activities (Twiss, 2012). Ceramic vessels provide crucial insights into technological practices, subsistence patterns, trade networks, and social organization. In particular, pedestal vessels such as Dish-on-Stand (DoS), Bowl-on-Stand (BoS), and Cup-on-Stand (CoS) have attracted attention for their distinctive form and possible social or ritual significance. The pioneering work of John Marshall documented a wide range of ceramic forms Mohenjo-daro, including bowls, jars, goblets, perforated vessels, and pedestal dishes (Marshall, 1931). The presence of pedestal vessels in these assemblages suggested that some ceramic forms served specialized functions within Indus society. Subsequent excavations and analyses refined the typological classification of Indus ceramics. Ernest J. H. Mackay provided a detailed catalog of ceramic forms from Mohenjo-daro, identifying pedestal vessels as an important component of the urban ceramic assemblage (Mackay, 1938). Mackay observed that dishes mounted on hollow stands were frequently found in domestic contexts but also appeared in areas interpreted as ritual or public spaces. This distribution raised the possibility that pedestal vessels were associated with ceremonial activities or communal consumption practices. Later scholarship expanded the study of Indus ceramics, Gregory L. Possehl emphasized that the widespread distribution of standardized pottery forms across hundreds of Indus sites indicates a highly integrated cultural system (Possehl, 2002). According to Possehl, ceramic production in the Indus Civilization reflects a combination of local traditions and shared technological practices, suggesting both regional diversity and cultural cohesion. Within this framework, pedestal vessels may have functioned as culturally meaningful objects whose use was understood across the Indus cultural sphere.

Research by Jonathan Mark Kenoyer further highlights the technological sophistication of Indus ceramic production. Kenoyer notes that most Indus pottery was manufactured on the fast wheel using well-levigated clay and fired in controlled kiln environments (Kenoyer, 1998). Such technological standardization suggests the presence of specialized potters and organized production systems within urban and rural communities. Pedestal vessels such as Dish-on-Stand forms are particularly notable for their carefully balanced proportions and elevated platforms, which may have enhanced the visual presentation of food or offerings during social gatherings.

The relationship between ceramics and social organization has also been explored in broader theoretical discussions of Indus society. Rita P. Wright argues that material culture provides

important evidence for understanding economic and social differentiation within Indus settlements (Wright, 2010). While the Indus Civilization is often characterized as relatively egalitarian compared to contemporaneous civilizations such as Mesopotamia or Egypt, variations in artifact distribution and architectural scale suggest the existence of subtle social distinctions. In this context, certain ceramic forms including pedestal vessels may have served as markers of social identity, ritual practice, or communal feasting. Another important dimension of Indus ceramic research concerns the distribution of pottery across different settlement types. Settlement surveys conducted across the Indus region have documented a hierarchical system of cities, towns, villages, and temporary camps. These surveys indicate that the Indus cultural sphere encompassed more than a thousand settlements distributed across a vast geographic area. The comparative analysis of ceramic assemblages from different settlement types provides an opportunity to examine patterns of production, exchange, and consumption. If pedestal vessels were associated with particular social practices or status-related activities, their frequency and stylistic variation may differ across the settlement hierarchy. Recent archaeological approaches increasingly emphasize the integration of ceramic typology with regional settlement studies. By comparing ceramic assemblages from major urban centers with those from smaller settlements, researchers can investigate how material culture reflects social and economic organization across the Indus world. Such comparative studies suggest that ceramics were not only functional household items but also components of broader cultural practices involving food preparation, ritual activity, and social interaction. Despite extensive research on Indus ceramics, the specific social significance of pedestal vessels remains insufficiently explored. Most previous studies have focused primarily on typological classification or technological analysis rather than on social interpretation. As a result, there is still considerable scope for investigating how vessels such as Dish-on-Stand (DoS), Bowl-on-Stand (BoS), and Cup-on-Stand (CoS) may relate to patterns of social differentiation, settlement hierarchy, and ceremonial consumption. A systematic comparison of pedestal vessels across multiple settlement types may therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between material culture and social organization in the Indus Civilization.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for the paper combines ceramic analysis, contextual archaeology, and social interpretation. The approach is primarily qualitative, supported by selective quantitative assessment where data permitted. The typological and morphological analysis of pedestaled vessels is carried according to shape, proportions, and structural characteristics. Distinctions are made between major subtypes; include (i) shallow dish-on-stand (ii) deep bowl-on-stand, (iii) goblet-like pedestal forms and (iv) composite constructions with separately attached bases. This morphological variation is analyzed to understand functional differences and capacity related to serving and presentation. The technological analysis holds manufacturing techniques are assessed through examination of, Wheel-throwing marks, Joining methods between bowl and pedestal, Surface finishing and Firing conditions. Standardization across sites is evaluated as an indicator of shared technological traditions and possibly centralized or coordinated production systems. Contextual Analysis is necessary for the spatial distribution of pedestaled vessels within sites is examined to determine patterns of use. Particular attention is given to their occurrence in Domestic rooms and courtyards, Storage areas, Public or communal spaces, Ritual installations and Burials or special deposits. Contextual associations with hearths, grinding stones, storage jars, or serving equipment are used to reconstruct stages of food preparation and consumption. Comparative Settlement Analysis shows distribution patterns are compared across settlement types, from major urban centers to smaller towns, villages and camp sites. This analysis seeks to

determine whether pedestaled vessels were commonly accessible household items concentrated in specific social contexts, associated with elite or communal activities and standardized across the Indus domain. Such comparisons contribute to debates on social differentiation and cultural integration. Functional Interpretation Functional assessment draws on form and function relationships, ethnoarchaeological parallels, and experimental insights from ceramic studies. Elevated forms are evaluated for their suitability for serving prepared food, displaying offerings, facilitating communal access, preventing contamination from ground surfaces and enhancing visibility during gatherings. Use-wear patterns, burning marks, and repair evidence provide additional clues to repeated handling and use-life. Social Archaeological Framework Interpretation is guided by social archaeology, which views artifacts as active participants in social processes rather than passive reflections of them. Pedestaled vessels are examined as material mediators of Commensality (shared eating practices), Hospitality and exchange, Ritual performance, Social signaling and identity and Community integration. This perspective allows the study to move beyond functional description toward reconstruction of social dynamics. Synthesis and Interpretation Findings from typological, technological, and contextual analyses are integrated to produce a holistic interpretation of the social roles of pedestaled serving vessels. The synthesis addresses broader questions concerning Everyday life in Indus households, Mechanisms of social cohesion. The relationship between material culture and social organization and Non-monumental expressions of complexity

Settlement Hierarchy and Population Distribution

The Indus Civilization constituted very complex cultural system having four tiered settlement pattern.

The Tier1: Holds major cities include, Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi, Ganweriwala and Lakhanjo-Daro. Estimated population in each city was not less than 30,000–40,000 each. These cities contained, administrative centers, craft production areas, large residential neighborhoods and much more.

Tier 2: Regional Towns, Examples include Nauhatto, Chanhudaro, Rehman Dheri, Gola Dhoro Allahdino and many others. The Population can be idealized as 5,000 to 20,000 in each town. These settlements likely served as regional trade and local administrative centers, caravan sari.

Tier 3: Villages were scattered all over Indus land near to cities, towns and in the peripheral zone where the population from 500–1000 can be suggested. These settlements were primarily agricultural communities supporting larger urban centers and providing several other benefits to the communities of Indus valley.

Tier 4: Temporary Camps, Archaeological surveys have identified pastoral camps and seasonal settlements, especially in desert and coastal regions. Population: small, temporary groups. These sites represent mobile pastoral or trade-related activities.

Dietary Patterns and Utensils in Ancient Civilizations

The Egyptian societies in past were divided into priest class, elite class and poor class, each had different opportunities. The common food patterns of ancient Egyptians relied heavily on emmer wheat and barley, which provided them bread and beer. It was complemented by legumes (fava beans, lentils), vegetables (onions, garlic), and fruits (figs, dates) (Thompson et al., 2005). Isotope studies (Thompson, Richards, Shortland, & Zakrzewski, 2005) mainly indicated plant-based diet, with freshwater fish rather than meat as the primary protein source. Meat and fowl were generally luxuries consumed by the elite, and was not part of the average diet for common people. Culinary utensils found through excavations include wooden kitchen models from tombs, such as those of Khnumn-nakht (Dynasty 11–12, ca. 2055–1773 BCE), which depict functional

kitchen spaces for baking, brewing, and butchering, confirming that bread ovens and beer-making areas were integral to domestic life (Ikram, 2003; Roth, 1992). Ceramic utensils were used for the cooking across all classes, with mudbrick dome bread ovens and clay pots used over fire pits, whereas copper cookware was rare and typically reserved for the wealthy (Baines & Malek, 2000). Elite households also possessed stone vessels carved from both hard and soft stone. Hard stone versions were luxury items, often produced with rotary tools and served both ceremonial and practical functions (Heldal et al., 2016; Bevan, 2007). Mesopotamian societies displayed a well-defined class system, reflected in their food consumption and culinary practices. Common diets were based on barley, alongside wheat, legumes, dates, figs, and onions. Bread, beer, roasted grains, and oils including linseed oil formed the central components of daily nutrition (Cohen & Westbrook, 2000; Van de Mierop, 2015). Animal protein came from sheep, goats, and cattle, utilized for both meat and dairy. Administrative cuneiform texts indicate organized rationing systems, suggesting structured food distribution across social strata (Roth, 1997). Culinary utensils included beveled-rim clay bowls, mass-produced during the Late Chalcolithic to Uruk periods, likely used for uniform servings or rations (Goulder, 2010; Jones, 1996). Additionally, stone vessels, often crafted from chlorite, were traded widely and probable used to store oils or other precious liquids (Moorey, 1994). In the Indus Civilization, recent research indicates that common dietary patterns centered on wheat, barley, pulses (chickpeas, mung beans), oilseeds, with regional inclusion of millets and rice, supplemented by fruits, vegetables, and spices (Possehl, 2002). Excavations at Nausharo revealed globular clay cooking vessels with low centers of gravity for stability and ledge-shouldered pots with flaring rims, used throughout households (Méry et al., 2007). Pottery workshops employed flint blades on potter's wheels, and traces of copper suggest technical sophistication in ceramic production. Additionally, a hammered copper-alloy bowl discovered at Chanhudaro (Jhukar period) reflects both external influences and the use of metal utensils, likely restricted to higher-status individuals (Santoni & Jarrige, 1984). Early Indus cooking relied on durable clay earthenware suitable for boiling and stewing, supporting everyday culinary activity (Kenoyer, 1998).

Civilization	Staples & Diet Components	Common Utensils & Technology
Egypt	Bread & beer (wheat/barley), legumes, vegetables, fish; elite meat	Clay pots, mudbrick ovens, wooden kitchen models, luxury stone vessels
Mesopotamia	Barley, wheat, legumes, fruits; livestock dairy/meat	Beveled-rim clay bowls, stone chlorite vessels
Indus	Wheat, barley, pulses, oilseeds, meat, rare dairy, laddoos	Clay cooking pots (globular, ledged), pottery wheels, occasional copper bowls

Table showing the food and possible utensils in ancient civilizations.



Figure 1: Egyptian elite is served food on a table almost similar to the DoS of Indus civilization

Comparative Perspective on Pedestal Vessels in Ancient Civilizations

The research suggests that the Pedestal vessels have been widely associated with social differentiation and ritual practices in several early complex societies. In the Indus Valley Civilization, Dish-on-Stand (DoS), Bowl-on-Stand (BoS), and Cup-on-Stand (CoS) were distributed in top two tiers of settlements hierarchy, from urban centers and towns. It was absent in rural villages and temporary camps (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002, Rajput 2024). These vessels are hypothesized to reflect ceremonial use, prestige consumption, or markers of social rank within the settlement hierarchy. In Ancient Egypt, elevated bowls and offering tables appeared mainly in tombs, temples, and elite households, serving both ritual and symbolic purposes, and were often crafted from faience, stone, or gilded materials (Shaw, 2000; Midant-Reynes, 2000). Similarly, in Mesopotamia, goblets and pedestal dishes were produced by specialized craftsmen and primarily used in palaces and temples, indicating elite consumption and ritual display (Pollock, 1999; Oates, 2001). Comparative analysis reveals that across these civilizations, pedestal vessels functioned as both ceremonial objects and markers of social differentiation, yet the Indus Civilization is distinctive in exhibiting these vessels across a broader settlement hierarchy, suggesting different expressions of social ranking than in Egypt or Mesopotamia. Such parallels support the hypothesis that pedestal vessels in the Indus Civilization facilitated ritualized social practices and hierarchical differentiation.

Vessel Forms attesting the social situations in the Indus Civilization

In the simple connotation, the objects which are not commonly found from settlements, show the social pattern(s). For instance, the food eating objects manufactured with complicated technology and heavily decorated attest the social situation. In this paper, the pedestal objects like Dish-on-Stand (DoS), Bowl-on-Stand (BoS) and Cup-on-Stand (CoS) are put forth for discussion.

Dish-on-Stand (Offering Stand)

DoS is a ceramic object contain three parts as circular base, elevated shaft, shallow and circular plate on top. They appear to be deliberately shaped for specific class and /or ceremonial offering or ritual use (Dales and Kenoyer 1986 Wright 1991). Archaeological records from Harappa's Cemetery H associated with 1900 BCE of Late Harappan phase, document the presence of dish-on-stand vessels, sometimes featuring a central hole, found in association with flexed burials (Possehl, 2002; Kenoyer, 1998). These vessels, often accompanied by other pottery objects, are interpreted as having a ritual function (Shaffer, 1992; Allchin & Allchin, 1982). Classical

ceramic typology identifies dish-on-stand vessels as a distinct type, typically decorated with black motifs over a red slip, burnished surfaces, and carefully crafted forms, emphasizing their special status within Harappan society (Kenoyer, 1998; Wright, 2010). Together, these findings suggest that such vessels played a significant role in ritual and social practices continuity within the Late Harappan cultural milieu.

Bowl-on-Stand/ Cup-on-Stand

Bowl-on-stand forms are recorded in earlier Harappan phases. For instance, the Ravi Phase, hand-built painted bowl-on-stand specimens laid the groundwork for increasingly complex pedestal vessels seen in later Kot Diji and Mature Harappan contexts (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002). As the ceramic tradition matured through the Kot Diji into the Mature Harappan phase, these pedestal forms were manufactured with greater elegance and consistency, reflecting both functional and symbolic roles in Harappan society (Law, 2014). Cup forms, including spouted and handled types, fall under the broader category of tableware, and their stand variants likely fit into similar use-patterns, such as serving and pouring (Kenoyer, 1998). The Harappan archaeological record includes spouted cups and handled cups, which share the elevated, utilitarian logic of pedestaled dishes, although direct “cup-on-stand” examples are rare (Possehl, 2002; Law, 2014). The cups and bowls are entirely wide-open; their body profile is higher in slightly curvilinear. The designed depth of object further determines and differentiates among the prevailing classes as cup or a bowl. To establish the definition that any object or the vessel wide-open with deeper body profile with high/straight wall and rims would serve as bowl and any object smaller in size having similar profile would be a cup.

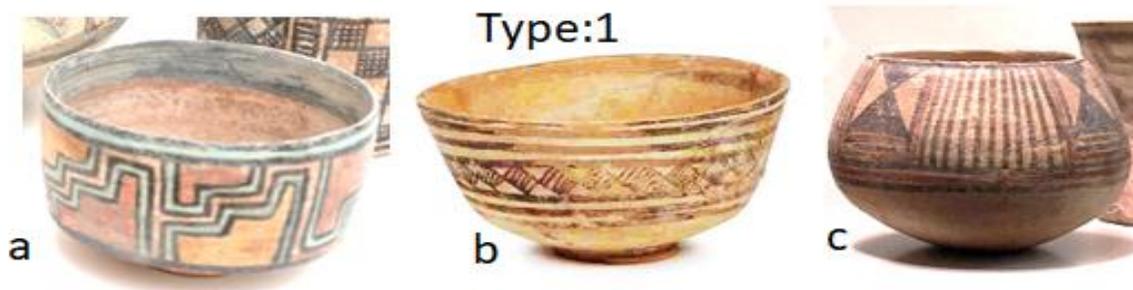


Figure 2: Bowls for liquid use

The cups and bowls are commonly found from majority of the Indus period settlements. There are several types of cups when classified deeply or scientifically as defined above. Although the use of bowl and cup is same but the typological difference based on their shape, size and make would classify them into different class of object. This is very unfortunate that the cultural objects are sold through web sources rather than exhibited in any museum for public.



Figure 3: Bowls placed on the webpage <https://vatican.com/3/Other-Indus-Valley> for sale.



Figure4: Bowls and Bowls-on-Stand from archaeological context

Pointed Base Shape

This category of goblets are common within cities and towns of Indus valley and are found in both plain and painted shapes. However, there is manufacturing variation which possibly suggests the different groups of experts belonging to different regions. According of first classification. The variation is attested in their decoration and total make of body shape or features. For example, the decorative elements contain flora fauna and geographical abstract shapes created within the area enclosed by parallel bands near the rim and at the central portion of body. The number of parallel stripes varies. The use of faunal and floral shapes also varies. The manufacturing element also shows the variation like the height and thickness of stand.



Figure5: Pedestal cups/glasses from archaeological context

Pedestaled Goblets

Some plain vessels rough in make having incised lines or grooves on exterior body for decoration and small stand as a base for hand grip or holding in hand. These small pots are popularly known as ‘goblet’. These pointed base goblets are manufactured on a potter’s wheel rapidly. No any care for quality is maintained.



Figure6: Simple goblets for water/liquid consumption

These goblets are mainly documented in the large cities and towns within Indus valley for single time usage and then throw away, just like the disposable cups today. Archaeological discoveries show that some of these disposable drinking goblets contained the graffiti marks or potters mark, seal impression on the shoulder body, or base which suggest the identification of any specific owners, producer or specific rituals.

Dish-on-Stand

Dish-on-Stand (DoS) is a tall object with circular and open base concave pedestal in section and varied top plate. Some upper parts are like bowl with lips extended outwards. In reality it is a terracotta table for various purposes including food and fruit serving. Each city /urban settlement has a good variety of terracotta DoS/table, for example, Kalibangan and Lakhnjo-Daro (Chakrabarti 1999:185, Mallah 2017).



Figure 7: Various Dish-on-Stand along with other vessels

Dish-on-Stand

The Dish-on-Stand (DoS) holds a significant category of terracotta artifact in the Indus Valley Civilization, typically consisting of a circular pedestal 8–15 cm in height supporting a concave or flat upper plate 12–20 cm in diameter, with some examples featuring outwardly flaring rims resembling miniature bowls (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002). Excavations at Kalibangan have yielded over 35 DoS specimens, displaying notable variation not only in pedestal height (8–14 cm) and top plate diameter (12–18 cm) but also in decorative motifs (Chakrabarti 1999:185). Upper plates exhibit a wide array of designs, including concentric circles, incised geometric patterns, dotted motifs, and linear hatching, indicating both aesthetic innovation and potentially symbolic meaning within domestic and ritual contexts (Law, 2014). The Harappa has 52 documented DoS artifacts, with a slightly broader range of heights (7–15 cm) and a higher frequency of bowl-like tops with extended rims, suggesting a more elaborate domestic or ceremonial use pattern (Kenoyer, 1998). Mohenjo-Daro presents a slightly more standardized set of 41 specimens, averaging 10–12 cm in pedestal height and 14–16 cm in plate diameter, though decoration ranges from simple incisions to concentric motifs, indicating regional stylistic conventions. Across these urban centers, the combination of morphological diversity and decorative variety reflects a sophisticated material culture in which DoS forms functioned simultaneously as utilitarian objects and as markers of social, aesthetic, and ritual identity (Kenoyer, 1998; Possehl, 2002; Law, 2014, Chakrabarti 1999:185). In the recent excavation at Lakhnjo-Daro several broken pieces have been recorded having a huge variety of upper plate decorations like incised and painted pattern also provide the similarity in make and usage at other urban settlements of Indus Valley (Mallah2017).



Figure8: Various Bowl-on-Stand



Figure9: A variety of Dish-on-Stand

Functional Analysis of Vessels

Some of the pots require very intensive work for example Dish-on-Stand (DoS). It is produced into three parts (a) base (b) central pole/stand and (c) upper plate.

As the particular example of DoS; a partially broken upper plate of dish-on-stand was found from Lakhanjo-Daro. The center of the plate contains crescent/ nail mark decoration and the traces of red slip now vanished. The several rows have been created in circular shape; three incised lines are given around the crescent mark design. The traces of black band round the rim indicate that it was embellished with black band. It seems that entire upper side and the lower part of the rim of plate was slipped with red color. The detachment part of stand was also broken.

Similarly, a broken base of Dish-on-Stand along with the broken stand part was found from Lakhanjo-Daro having exterior of base slipped with red color and rim contains black color bands. It has been the routine decorating behavior almost for all DoS for which the upper plate was only decorated differently.

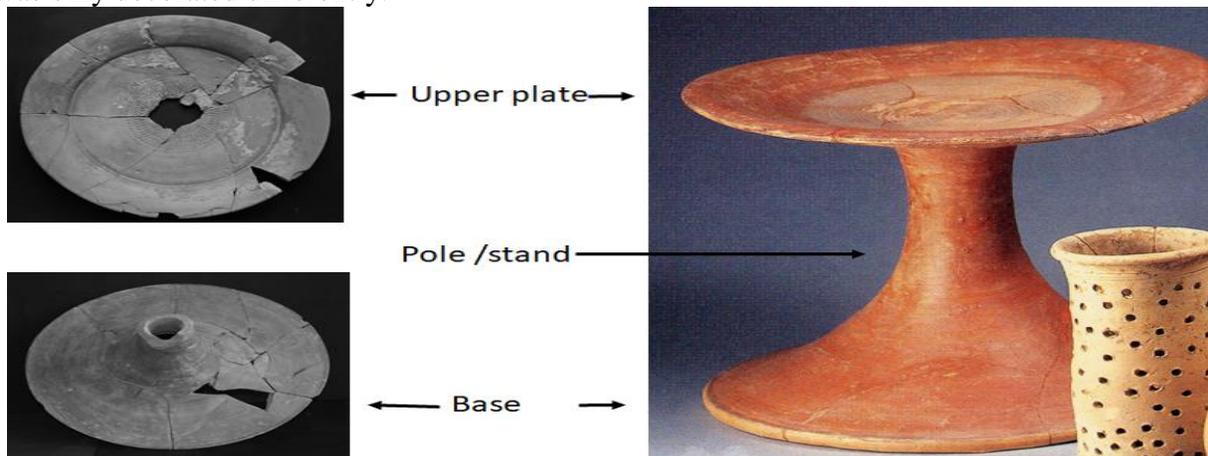


Figure 10: Dish-on-Stand and its parts. The perforated pot in right corner.

At least three type of use is generalized as frequent use in which vessels are frequently used. Like cooking pots, plates and bowls, cups and glasses and some of the storage jars may have been used frequently. Secondly, vessels have infrequent use like Dish-on-Stand (DoS) and perforated pots, are totally absent from smaller village sites and campsites hence suggesting infrequent use. Lastly, **ritual use** of vessels is seen in cemeteries. These cemeteries depict the providence of grave goods which illustrate gender and social status. Generally, the women have bangles and high status person is added with variety and number of goods associated with food and personal decoration.

Behavioral Analysis of Feast Furniture

The Behavioral archaeology now a days is considered for the study of the formation process and reconstruction of the past activities (LaMotta and Schiffer 2001:14). The “people-object interaction” can be totally general and/or totally specific in activities from the make to use and to dispose (LaMotta and Schiffer 2001:20). This understanding interpret the behavior of people (Tite 2008). In this endeavor, the technological preference will interpret the economic, social, political and ideological and environmental context of production which is classified into three types of behavior as (A) Utensils and technical behavior (B) Utensils and commercial behavior and (C) Utensil and social-religious behavior.

Utensils and Technical behavior

The analysis of utensils for technical behavior is generally based on the morphological examination of manufacture of any desired object. The shape, size, interior and exterior surface treatment and decoration on both sides of each utensils associated with technical behavior and involve a sequence of operation *chaine operatoire* to finalize the object. All stages from obtaining raw material till use and discard has huge importance where several micro processes and several tool types and labor or activities are involved. For example, it is traditionally observed that several objects are made through two processes as (a) On the wheel and (b) Off the wheel.

The ceramic production is full time job and organization of production the labor, the craft skill, the technology, equipment, permanent facilities and, the pattern of distribution (Tite2008). In South Asian context of pottery making workshops involved the full family for full time (Kenoyer 1998:153).

Decoration

Indus civilization has outstandingly decorated ceramics utilized for daily and ritual life. The number of pigments like white, green and yellow have been utilized by Indus potter to create polychrome paintings prior to the Indus cities (Kenoyer 1998:153). The pots are decorated with simple and complex designs which can be produced on the wheel as well as off the wheel. Parallel and zigzag bands either painted or incised are prepared on the wheel or through rotating device moving fast or moving very slowly as desired to the painter potter. The polychrome paintings on the large jars containing intensive manufacturing and paintings process are made off of the wheel.

Firing Process

Archaeologically, updraft kilns are documented from Harappa (Kenoyer)and Lakhanjo-Daro (Mallah 2013, 2017). The pots are also cooked into open air as well.

Archaeological research shows that in Indus valley the open air, single chamber, (i.e. oven and pit) and double chamber updraft kiln were in used for cooking pottery. These firing structures have been reported from Mehrgarh, Nausharo, Lal Shah of Kachi plains in Baluchistan; Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro and Lakhanjo-Daro of Indus system (Mallah 2013).

Both Archaeological and Ethnoarchaeological documentation and research has shown that

- ❖ The large storage jars without painted designs were to keep water or grain.

- ❖ The elaborately painted pots/vessels may have been wedding gifts or used for ritual purposes. Smaller drinking vessels with flat bases may have been used in the home for drinking water, milk, buttermilk *Lassi*, fruit, juice and alcoholic beverages
- ❖ Shallow bowls contained cooked food or bread /chapatti
- ❖ The larger plates used for eating
- ❖ The Dish-on-stand (DoS) bowl –on-stand (BoS) were used for serving cooked food and /or fruit to the high status persona(s) or for ritual offerings.
- ❖ Perforated cylindrical jar having wrapped in cloth was used as strainer for the preparation of fermented beverages.
- ❖ The pointed base goblets were very commonly made and were used for water, milk, buttermilk *Lassi*, fruit juice and liquor.
- ❖ Cooking pots were made in different sizes from miniature toys to extremely large vessels that have been used for cooking community feasts. Such vessels were painted with red or black-slipped rim with one or two ridges. The other properties of Indus cooking pot is strong outward projecting rim for handling on heat of hearth.
- ❖ The metallic like copper and bronze objects for instance plate found from Mohenjo-Daro and cooking pot found from Harappa were used by wealthy and powerful elite class of both cities (Kenoyer 1998:156).

tensils and Commercial Behavior

The urban phase of Indus civilization has large population living within at least seven mega cities, hundreds of towns and thousands of villages. The division of labor or works is visible through various industrial activities including the pot making which is fulltime job with intensive labor. The ceramic analysis has shown that large pots and jars are manufactured into stages and took considerable time for instance the dish-on-stand or table was prepared into three parts (a) base (b) stand and (c) upper plate. All parts are then put together. How it was cooked is not known yet but the updraft kiln is very suitable for cooking such type objects or the single vessel was cooked in an open air kiln. .



Figure 11: Dish-on-Stand from Chanhu-Daro, Mohenjo-Daro 2600-1900BCE

The exchange system of Indus valley is not retrieved yet, hence, the reliance on ethnoarchaeology is utilized. A traditional potter has two systems as (i) sale of objects and (ii) distribution or sharing the pots with other artisans and farmers. The artisan would provide him/her their objects and farmer a fixed share from the crop i.e. grains and other things. Because of the market consumption a renowned potter has used the identification (*graffiti*) marks. This social behavior is earlier than the blossom of cities and Indus script. A Kot Dijan phase many inscribed potsherd are discovered from Harappa provided multiple usages (a) storage of smaller

goods in the vessel (b) indicating the owner/producer of the vessel and (c) symbol represents a deity or spirit means that the vessels were used for ritual or religious purpose (www.Hrappa.com).

Utensil for Social-religious Behavior

The ceramics from the cemeteries of Harappa and Mehrgarh suggesting some type of afterlife religious faith. The burials are found from number of settlements Harappa Sibri (Santoni 1981), and Rakhigarhi (Shinde et al 2018; www.Harappa.com), The painted pots with intensive decoration take longer to paint the designs illustrating social and ritual symbolism. On the contrary, less decorated pots reflect the economic, social and ritual status (Kenoyer 1998:153).

Elite Status Items in ancient world were made from metal, stone, marine shell and ceramic were used for feast. Some items are totally status item and are beyond the affording of common public.

Common Item made from ceramics and stone material used as feast vessel made through simple technology and intensity may be placed at low levels of the social stratification. Such type of common objects are found from all types of settlement including the camp sites which are at the bottom tier in settlement hierarchy.

It is summarized here that with other supporting attributes – the feast furniture authentically explained the stratified social system of Indus Societies. There were definite classed with allocated status in social context. The clan leader from cultivated lands had lower acceptance than the city merchants owning several seals. The pottery making Kumbhar had lower status as compare to seal maker and so on.

Data Discussion and Interpretations

Analysis of pedestaled ceramic vessels across major Indus settlements reveals consistent morphological features alongside contextual variability that reflects diverse patterns of use. At large urban centers such as Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, and Dholavira, pedestaled bowls and dishes occur in substantial quantities within habitation deposits, particularly in domestic courtyards, room floors, and refuse contexts. Their widespread presence indicates that these vessels were not rare ceremonial objects but formed part of routine household assemblages (Kenoyer, 1998; Wright, 2010).

However, variability in size, finishing quality, fabric and decorations suggests differential functions. Larger and more carefully finished examples are often associated with spacious architectural units or areas interpreted as communal or high-status residences, while smaller, coarser specimens occur more broadly. This pattern implies that pedestaled vessels participated in both everyday serving activities and more formalized social occasions.

The elevated design of these vessels enhances visibility and accessibility, supporting their interpretation as serving or presentation devices rather than storage containers. In crowded domestic settings typical of Indus urban neighborhoods, elevation would facilitate distribution of food among multiple participants while minimizing contamination from ground surfaces. Such practical advantages likely intersected with symbolic considerations of display and hospitality.

Spatial distribution also indicates occasional presence in areas interpreted as public or semi-public spaces, including street side platforms and open courtyards. Although definitive evidence for formal feasting installations is limited, these contexts suggest that communal consumption occurred beyond strictly private households. Comparative ethnographic studies demonstrate that

serving equipment often circulates between domestic and communal spheres during social gatherings, reinforcing bonds of reciprocity and collective identity (Dietler & Hayden, 2001).

Pedestaled vessels are rarely associated with storage features or cooking installations, further supporting their role in the final stages of food presentation and consumption. Their standardized production across distant regions suggests participation in a shared cultural repertoire, reflecting strong social integration across the Indus domain (Possehl, 2002).

Notably, the absence of lavish decoration on most examples contrasts with serving vessels in highly stratified societies, where display often signals elite status. Instead, the relative uniformity of Indus pedestaled ceramics aligns with interpretations of the civilization as socially differentiated but not sharply hierarchical (Wright, 2010). These vessels may therefore represent inclusive communal practices rather than elite exclusivity.

Social Interpretations

From a social archaeological perspective, pedestaled serving vessels can be understood as material agents that structured interaction during shared consumption. Meals are inherently social events, organizing relationships among participants through rules of access, sequence, and visibility. Elevated vessels physically mediate these processes by controlling how food is presented and distributed.

In the Indus context, where overt symbols of centralized authority are scarce, such everyday practices may have played a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion. Communal dining, hospitality exchanges, and ritual offerings could reinforce shared norms without reliance on monumental displays of power.

The widespread distribution of similar vessel forms across urban and rural settlements suggests that these practices transcended local communities, contributing to a broader cultural identity. Pedestaled vessels may have functioned as tangible expressions of participation in the Indus cultural sphere, analogous to standardized weights, seals, and architectural conventions (Kenoyer, 1998).

Furthermore, their durability and visibility would allow repeated use in recurring social events, embedding them within cycles of domestic life, seasonal gatherings, or ritual observances. Through such repeated performances, material objects become repositories of social memory and tradition (Hodder, 2012).

Conclusion

The remains recorded from Indus valley sites have demonstrated essential aspects of the Indus society. The various figurines, charred seeds, burials and terracotta pots provide the clues which lead to understand larger issues such as the social stratification. The utensil analysis categories that objects were made from Metallic (gold and bronze/copper), shell, stone, and earthen ware. Ethnoarchaeology indicate the use of wooden objects in kitchen activities. The wood is perishable, hence reliance on ethnoarchaeological documentation for kitchen utensils is utmost necessary. The Indus people during 2600-1900BCE had highly complex society. The cultural complexity is tried to explain through foodways. Indus people had eating excellent dishes made from wheat, barley, rice, meat/mutton birds, and fishes of freshwaters and marine. They were

enriched with hunted animals and had wide range to hunt their desired game. The food was cooked and flavored with spices. As Mesopotamia and Egypt had language system(s) to document everything and explain through paintings and carvings in tombs and palaces. Indus had seals and pot depiction only to explain or represent the activities. The fishing scene on pot is just an example to show the fishing activity. It ascertained the fishes and method of fishing through a net. Fish hooks are also documented from archaeological sites.

A wide variety of cooking vessels are discovered and documented. As analyzed through present studies that the shape of cooking pot *Handi* is totally distinct and different than other pots of Indus valley. The shape and manufacturing material verifies the social stratification visibly. When simple notions are attached as:

- ✓ The simple pot without decoration for lower class
- ✓ The painted pot made with little care for elite and wealthy class
- ✓ The bronze Handi exclusively for upper class

The use wear and lipid analysis have shown the use of items and when attributes are further analyzed such as the cooking pots one is built very simple, other one decorated and the next is made from expensive exotic material involving high level technology.

Cup, glasses, bowls, water pots and Plates all demonstration the social dichotomy. There is very clear variations in make and quality of the objects made for elite class and common class. The Dish-on-Stand (DoS) is a terracotta table for use of specifically elite class. The DoS is not frequently found from all site but only urban level site has traces of this type object

Seals indicate, high priest to small merchant /trader of the society and there were 19 clans; the largest was the Unicorn clans. Indus had joint family system with little more respect to the woman. The male figurines had very variant turban styles which symbolizes the clan or different family lineage. The embellished figurines of woman suggest high priestesses and for communal rituals light deity was also in a women style (Rajput 2026). The common ladies were simple and engaged with activities along the family and raise the children as some figurines carry breast feeding kid in their hands. The initial data examination elaborated that the Indus had very complex social stratification consisting a definite class system as is seen in Egypt and Mesopotamian communities.

Table : Functions & Cultural Significance

Vessel Type	Description & Use	Context or Significance
Dish-on-Stand	Shallow dish elevated on stand	Ritual/offering use, high-status tableware; refined and painted
Bowl-on-Stand	Simple bowl with pedestal	Early utilitarian form evolved into refined ceremonial vessel
Cup-on-Stand	Elevated cups or spouted vessels	Practical pouring/storage; part of tableware spectrum

Conclusion

Pedestaled ceramic vessels constitute a distinctive and socially significant component of the Indus material repertoire. Their widespread distribution, standardized morphology, and contextual associations indicate that they functioned primarily as serving and presentation devices involved in communal consumption and hospitality practices.

Pedestaled vessels thus provide a valuable window into the lived experience of Indus populations, highlighting the importance of food, display, and interpersonal exchange in one of the world's earliest urban societies.

Future research incorporating residue analysis, experimental reconstruction, and high-resolution spatial data could further refine functional interpretations and clarify the role of these vessels in specific ritual or economic contexts.

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