

GOTARC

SERIES B. GOTHENBURG ARCHAEOLOGICAL THESES No 55

Gaming in Mohenjo-daro – an Archaeology of Unities

by

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Akademisk avhandling som för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen vid Institutionen för Historiska studier, Göteborgs universitet, offentligen försvaras lördagen den 5 februari 2011, kl. 13:00 i Lilla Hörsalen, Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg, efter godkännande av Humanistiska fakultetsnämnden som även utsett opponent, betygsnämnd och ordförande vid disputationen.

Opponent

Dr Eva Myrdal, Östasiatiska museet, Stockholm

Betygsnämnd

Professor Kristina Jennbert, Institutionen för Arkeologi och antikens historia,
Lunds universitet

Professor Tove Hjørungdal, Institutionen för Historiska studier, Göteborgs
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Dr Mats Nilsson, Institutionen för Kulturvetenskaper, Göteborgs universitet

Ordförande

Docent Per Cornell, Institutionen för Historiska studier, Göteborgs
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Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy submitted by Elke Rogersdotter, by due permission of the Faculty of Humanities at University of Gothenburg, 5th February 2011, 13:00, in Lilla Hörsalen, Humanisten, Department of Historical Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Abstract

Rogersdotter, Elke. *Gaming in Mohenjo-daro – an Archaeology of Unities*.
Doctoral Dissertation in Archaeology, Department of Historical Studies,
University of Gothenburg.

The main question of this thesis concerns the possibility of illuminating the presence and impact of the irrational element that is play in an ancient societal structure. With this question as a lodestar, the investigation has come to concern the development of an alternative way of work that can manage to embrace the positively loaded, 'fun' dimension of play. The view of fragmented archaeological remains as autonomously working unities has been of central importance for this mode of procedure.

The study is based on selected game-related finds from the site of Mohenjo-daro. Located in Sindh in southern Pakistan, the site constitutes the remains of the largest urban settlement of the Bronze Age Indus Valley realm (ca. 2500-2000 BC). One of the typical features of this realm constitutes a focus on small-sized art. Among other artefacts, numerous small objects of a supposedly game-related purpose have been found in Mohenjo-daro, such as dice and gamesmen.

The study tests its way along different paths. The mode of procedure builds on a modified form of grounded theory. In this form, emphasis has been put on the concept of abduction in the version of Bateson. Stress has also been laid on Simmel's description of the process of understanding. With this reasoning, the researcher's self is accentuated as an integrated component in the process. The consequence of the modifications is a model in the shape of a grid – a working grid – where the different rows, internally divided up into compartments representing stages of work, constitute different, autonomously working ways. The empirical investigation is based on a critical reading of older excavational documents. Rather than aiming at a systematic division between what is game-related and what is not game-related, the reading is undertaken with the aim of seeing whether this kind of material can be studied despite the problematic appearance of the sources. Through a practical application of the working grid, the bearing capacity of the materials is tested from different angles. In the following theoretical discussion, the grid is utilized in a more theoretical manner in order to reach different aspects of play. The most successful approach builds on the discernment of autonomously working unities in the studied materials. This is based on Simmel's division between form and content, as well as on the emphasis by Bateson on autonomously working systems.

The study argues that this way of work has the potential to yield alternative, more socially embedded insights into the settlement. It attains a twofold structure in that the aim of illuminating play both offers a test of the scientific linguistic usage, as well as forms into a methodological instrument with which to reach the individual of the past.

Key words: Mohenjo-daro, Indus Valley, Bronze Age, Pakistan, play, gaming, play spectra, grounded theory, form and content, Simmel, abduction, logical types, autonomously working systems, Bateson, systems of representation, symbolic capital, deconstruction, nanoarchaeology, reflexive archaeology