South Asian Figurines in the British Museum: Literature Review and Analysis


Abstract

In the early twentieth century in British India, many military officers were also amateur archaeologists. Some of them, including Colonel D.H. Gordon and Colonel D.R. Martin, collected human terracotta figurines. The figurines in this collection came from the northwest of pre-partition India, mostly from villages in the vicinity of Peshawar in Pakistan. They were bought from farmers or antiquities dealers. Thus this is a surface collection. The figurines were then sold or donated to the British Museum. There they were stored without being studied.

This purpose of this thesis is two-fold: 1) to review the literature on South Asian human figurines, and 2) to analyze and interpret a collection of figurines that has not so far been published. The analysis includes a description of the characteristics of the figurines, and interpretations of their functions and meanings. There are four major types of figurines, based on decorations and facial features: Sar Dheri, Sahri Bahlol, Hellenistic and “other.” The Sar Dheri figurines with rosettes may represent an unknown folk deity as the decorations are not the symbol of any deity that appears in Hindu, Jain or Buddhist mythology. The Sahri Bahlol figurines greatly resemble those figurines identified as Naigameśīs in other excavation reports. The analysis ends by proposing further research in South Asian terracotta figurines that would lead to a detailed history of the evolution of figurines in South Asia from Mehrgarh to the present.

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ASEASUK News Association of South-East Asian Studies in the United Kingdom. Asia Journals Online A portal enabling you to search and link to scholarly journals from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Asia Policy (National Bureau of Asian Research). Postcolonial literature timeline – a really useful tool providing contextual knowledge of literary works and a visualisation of the historical, social, political, and literary events that shape and surround the key texts mentioned. Qatar Digital Library a vast archive of digitised records from the British Library covering the history of the Gulf region and much of South Asia. Known also as South Asia, the area includes the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan; artistically, the Tibetan highlands also form part of the region. Stretching some 1,800 miles from north to south, and almost the same distance from west to east, the area is home to an ancient and diverse group of cultures. India is the largest single nation of South Asia. Side by side with the flowering of the plastic arts, philosophy and literature, as well as music and dance, flourished in the Hindu context. India’s best-known philosophical system, Vedanta, associated with the philosopher Shankara, proposed a monistic belief in the identity of the human soul with the divine principle.