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 others. 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 Naigameśā-s 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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