

## Pamphlet Series No.7

# Transcripts from the Lothal Roundtable

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Participants: *Sir Edwin Lutyens, Sir Eduardo Paolozzi, Sri S R Rao, Benjamin Rowland, Jr., and Sir Mortimer Wheeler*  
Moderator: *Pradeep Dalal*  
Location: *Lothal Museum, Archaeological Survey of India, Gujarat, India*  
Date: *Wednesday, February 22, 2006*

*Pradeep:* Your authoritative documentation of the Lothal archaeological site, Sri Rao, is the gold standard in archaeological studies in India and, though thirty years have passed since you published the two-volume study of Lothal, it remains the single best source. I must say that it is not easy to find your books. Unfortunately, even this museum at Lothal does not carry copies, nor does the main ASI office at Bhadra in Ahmedabad. During my visit here the superintendent very kindly allowed me to make quick digital photographs of the plates. Almost a year later, I was able to find the books online from a dealer in Delhi. Could you please introduce our audience to Lothal?

*Sri Rao:* The countryside around Lothal does not seem to have changed much during the last four thousand years except for the fact that larger areas of land have been brought under cultivation in recent years owing to the shrinkage of swamps and shoals and consequent desiccation to some extent.

The knowledge of engineering possessed by the Harappans was far superior to that of their contemporaries elsewhere, a fact borne out by the meticulous care taken in building the dock, public and private drains, and other buildings.

The Lothal folk did not use kiln-fired bricks for building houses and platforms. They used mostly sun-dried bricks for this purpose. The scarcity of wood appears to have been the reason. As the climate has not changed much in three thousand years, it may be presumed that the rainfall was not very heavy and that there was no need of kiln-fired bricks except for building baths, drains, and a dock which had to be impervious to water.

*Pradeep:* Sri Rao, many years ago when I was studying architecture at Ahmedabad, my cousin, Abhimanyu—also a fellow student—rode in to the campus on his green Honda motorcycle, all dusty, saying he had just returned from a trip to Lothal. He very casually dropped a small, palm-sized brick in my hand, saying, “This brick is over five thousand years old. Amazing, isn’t it?” I was quite unimpressed, not comprehending the import of what he said, yet I recall that moment very clearly and something stuck, and twenty-five years later here I am, hoping to make sense of what he saw.

*Sri Rao:* It must have been one of the smaller bricks, which measured 3 x 2 x 1 inches. A remarkable feature of the masonry of the Harappan sites is the standardization of the bricks: namely, 11 x 5.5 x 2.5 inches for most of the constructions throughout the vast area covered by the Harappan civilization. Another noteworthy feature of standardization is the maintenance of a suitable proportion between the length and breadth of the bricks. Whether sun-dried or kiln-fired, the bricks measure 1 length:2 breadths—for example, 11 x 5.5 inches in the case of baked bricks. Apparently, the Harappans must have realized the necessity of maintaining the said proportions with a view to using complete bricks as headers or stretchers in achieving the required thickness of the walls. If the most common size of the mud brick is compared with the most common size of baked brick, the difference is within the limits of permissible fire shrinkage—namely, 8 to 15 percent. The difference further suggests that the molds were of common size for mud bricks as well as the burnt ones. Thus it is obvious that the bricks were burnt not only to modern standards but also on modern principles. They have sharp right-angled edges and the sides are parallel.

*Pradeep:* When I recently went to photograph the site, I had the assumption that something of the ancient aspect of the site—its atmosphere—would somehow rub off onto my images. This did not happen, yet I was struck by the sense of geometrical order of the plinths, walls, and streets, thinking that the basic elements of architecture were already in place five thousand years ago. I also recalled Nasreen Mohamedi’s photographs of Fatehpur Sikri—the low vantage point with the steps and plinths becoming abstract gridlines disappearing in an angled Moholy-Nagy manner outside the picture frame. I, too, tried making photographs like that, though in color, but could not pull it off!

*Edwin:* I am not clear as to why I was invited, and I am not really sure of any really Indian architectural traditions that are worth anything at all. I still feel as I did when I first arrived in India over half a century ago, that you have no real architecture here, the buildings are just tents in stone and little more.

*Pradeep:* Now I remember reading perhaps in the Irving book a quote from a letter to your wife where you say something even more scathing: that India only had an architecture of monkeys, nothing compared with classical orders of European architecture. Is that true? Do you still feel that way?

*Edwin:* Uh-oh.

*Pradeep*: I understand that the convention in architectural photography is to avoid any human figures, perhaps because the people (and their clothes) help date the photographs, whereas in archaeological photography, especially of the Harappa sites, I see human figures used, albeit only as a means of providing a sense of scale. Please comment.

*Mortimer*: I think that the scale (a stick with markings) should not monopolize the attention of the spectator. A central scale is, for this reason, usually bad. Where the scale is a human being, as is often desirable in large subjects, the individual thus honored must remember that he is a mere accessory, just so many feet of bone and muscle.

My two axioms of the use of the human scale are that (1) the figure shall not occupy a disproportionately large portion of the picture (if so, a linear scale must be substituted), and (2) the figure shall not look at the camera, but shall be ostensibly employed in as impersonal a manner as possible.

*Pradeep*: Really. Just so many feet of bone and muscle! These conventions have continued over the generations and probably are in place even today. Benjamin, I have seen a picture of the Harappan male statue in your books and also years ago in my history textbook, probably in the sixth or seventh grade. However, I have yet to see the original or a plaster cast! The other magnificent statue of the bearded man from Mohenjo Daro with the striking trefoil pattern on the border of his garment was also in my textbooks, but I eventually got to see a replica at the Metropolitan Museum in New York a few years ago in the First Cities show, and then more recently I found it at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sanghralaya, formerly the Prince of Wales Museum, in Mumbai and photographed it through a glass case with annoying reflections.

*Benjamin*: Almost from the moment that it was unearthed at the ancient site of Harappa, the little limestone torso has been compared to the finest accomplishments of Greek sculpture. This figurine, excavated under scientific conditions, belongs to the Prehistoric or Indus Valley Period and is to be dated in the later third millennium B.C.

In the Harappa torso there is no attempt to suggest the human body by emphasizing the muscular structure that was the particular concern of the naturalistically minded Greek sculptors of the fourth century B.C. and later. On the contrary, this statuette is completely Indian in the sculptor's realization of the essential image, a symbolic rather than descriptive representation of anatomy, in which the articulation of the body is realized in broad convex planes of modeling.

The one quality, which may be discerned here, that is peculiar to many later Indian examples of plastic art is the suggestion of an inner tension that seems to threaten to push out and burst the taut outer layer of skin. Actually, this is a technical device by which the sculptor revealed the existence of the breath or prana filling and expanding

the vessel of the body. The fact that the figure appears potbellied is, therefore, iconographically completely right and truthful. It is not intended as a caricature in any sense, since this distension resulting from yogic breath control was regarded as an outward sign of both material and spiritual well being.

We have in this statuette, too, what is certainly the earliest exhibition of the Indian sculptor's skill in not only producing a sense of plastic volume, but also in representing the soft quality of the flesh. This is not a literal imitation, such as one finds in Western sculpture, but is a suggestion of fleshiness by such properly sculptural and abstract devices as the interlocking of the smooth and softly modeled convex planes of the torso and the exaggeration of the depth of the navel.

*Eduardo:* I am not sure I know the sculpture you are talking about, though I would have loved to include it in my Lost Magic Kingdoms exhibition at the Museum of Mankind in London in 1985. I am interested in investigating the ability of the artist to achieve metamorphosis of quite ordinary things into something. I really set out in my sculpture to transform the objets trouvés that I use to such an extent that they are no longer immediately recognizable, having become so thoroughly assimilated to my own particular dream world rather than to an ambiguous world of common optical illusion. Pradeep, in montage you must dominate the material—subject it to several metamorphoses—and fully transform or transmute them. Do you follow?

*Pradeep:* Eduardo, I think I get your point. In fact, when I saw your collages at the Museum of Modern Art in New York earlier this year, I sensed that I was still being quite timid, not building as dense and richly patterned prints as you manage to. Yet, I too am interested in working with several images at once, suggesting a greater complexity than is possible in a single, beautiful image or even a series of such images. In this project of Lothal images I am particularly interested in deep fractures within the image. Perhaps at some level I was reacting to Edwin's arrogant statements ricocheting in my head—and also realizing anew that the experience of British rule in India was a harsh, cutting, tearing thing, not something inevitable, nor a positive melding of two cultures or even a necessary harbinger of modernism.

Also, in my photographs I encouraged the two-dimensionality—the paper-thin surface of the snapshot image—to show completely. I like the creasing, folding, rolling, handling, wear and tear of the image—a tactile quality in contrast with the seamless, abstract, pristine quality of the black-and-white archaeological photographs in Sri Rao's and Mortimer's books.

Perhaps we should stop here and break for tea before heading back to Ahmedabad. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughtful comments and participating in this roundtable.

### Source Texts for the Conversations Above

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BONE + MUSCLE

PRADEEP DALAL

LOTHAL, INDIA





















