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Q2(b)

Describe the evidences of food production and domestication of animals with special reference to Mehrgarh. Throw light on its significance.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Neolithic

(iii) Neolithic

Core demand of the question

- Describe direct archaeological evidence for food production and animal domestication at Mehrgarh
- Trace the sequence from aceramic to ceramic village life
- Distinguish domestication evidence from mere presence of species
- Assess Mehrgarh's significance and interpretive limits

Revision summary

Mehrgarh on the **Kachi plain** begins as an aceramic farming village around the seventh millennium BCE.

Wheat, barley, sickle gloss, grinding stones and storage together demonstrate cultivation.

Sheep, goat and cattle management is inferred from morphology, kill profiles and changing abundance.

Later phases add pottery, specialised crafts, ornaments and wider exchange.

The site shows both western connections and strong local development, especially around zebu cattle.

Mehrgarh is a long predecessor to Indus urbanism, not an early Harappan city.

Introduction

Mehrgarh, excavated by the French Archaeological Mission led by **Jean-François Jarrige** on the **Kachi plain** of Baluchistan, records a long transition from early aceramic farming around the seventh millennium BCE to craft-rich Chalcolithic village life. It is the clearest north-west South Asian bridge between foraging and the later Indus tradition.

Body**Evidence of food production**

Mehrgarh Period I had mud-brick, compartmented buildings, storage facilities, grinding stones and chipped-stone blades with sickle gloss. Carbonised plant remains include domesticated wheat and barley, while later phases broadened cultivation and processing. The combined evidence-crop morphology, harvesting tools, storage and sedentary architecture-is stronger than any grain found alone.

Burials beneath or near settlement floors, repeated rebuilding and demographic growth indicate durable village residence. In later ceramic Neolithic and Chalcolithic levels, wheel-made pottery, larger storage, terracotta figurines and specialised crafts in shell, stone and beads show intensification. Cotton fibres/seeds are reported from early Mehrgarh and are important for the history of textile production, though their scale is uncertain.

Evidence of animal domestication

Faunal assemblages include sheep, goat and cattle. Domestication is inferred from changing horn-core and body size, age-sex kill profiles, increasing frequency through time and management within a settled economy-not from species presence alone. Sheep and goats likely reflect connections with western Asian domesticates. Zebu cattle (*Bos indicus*) became increasingly important and are often argued to include local domestication or strong local management; the precise wild-to-domestic pathway remains debated.

Significance

- It demonstrates that food production in South Asia began well before Harappan urbanism.
- Indigenous development and westward contacts interacted; diffusion versus independent invention is too simple.
- Craft specialisation, **dental drilling**, ornaments and differentiated grave goods reveal technical skill and emerging social distinctions.
- Its wheat-barley-herding package, mud-brick architecture and craft networks supplied foundations later transformed within the **Indus civilisation**.
- **Skeletal and dental evidence also records the costs of sedentism:** workload, disease and dietary change accompanied surplus.

Mehrgarh is not a miniature Harappa and no straight ethnic line can be assumed. Flooding, uneven preservation and chronological revision require phase-specific claims.

Flow diagram

Aceramic Mehrgarh -> Wheat barley storage
Aceramic Mehrgarh -> Sheep goat cattle management
Wheat barley storage -> Sedentary mud-brick village
Sheep goat cattle management -> Sedentary mud-brick village
Sedentary mud-brick village -> Pottery and craft specialisation
Pottery and craft specialisation -> Long background to Indus urbanism

Conclusion

At Mehrgarh, plants, faunal profiles, tools, storage and settlement reinforce one another as evidence of production and herd management. Its significance lies in a long, locally worked transition-not a sudden imported revolution-from village farming to the economic and craft base of the greater Indus world.

Facts & figures

Excavation

The French Archaeological Mission under Jean-François Jarrige began major work at Mehrgarh in the 1970s.

Aceramic Neolithic

Early levels combine mud-brick architecture, storage, wheat and barley, grinding equipment and managed animals before widespread pottery.

Domestication test

Body-size change, horn morphology, age-sex profiles and herd abundance are more diagnostic than finding a wild species near a settlement.

Dental drilling

Drilled molars in Neolithic burials provide rare evidence of skilled intervention with stone tools, though not proof of a specialised modern dentist.

Zebu question

Bos indicus became central, but the exact balance of local domestication, introgression and introduced management remains debated.

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