

Case Study 5: Animation

A TOOL TO DEVELOP HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

— Ilona Aronovsky with Kate Benson and Ann Plummeridge

Introduction

Since the advent of **animation software** for schools, I wanted to trial an animation project, inspired by the quirky human and animal figurines, model wheeled carts and toys, all of terracotta, from the **Bronze Age Indus Valley civilisation** which clamour for clay / plasticine animation. A rich source of historical evidence, they give a glimpse of everyday life, human beliefs and emotion from a **long lost civilisation** known only through non-perishable artefacts and architecture.

This Indus Valley civilisation flourished in the Indian sub-continent c. 2600-1900 BC. It declined and vanished from history, leaving some huge buried mounds including the cities of **Mohenjodaro** and **Harappa**, and hundreds of other sites. Since the first excavators in the 1920's, archaeologists have had different theories about the causes of its decline. The topic invites pupil enquiry and understanding that there can be (very) different interpretations of the evidence. You can download a full set of information, resources and briefing materials for an Indus Valley civilisation project.

An Indus Valley Civilisation Animation project

This article is based upon an animation project at Partney School, Lincs, and at Charing School Kent. Animation's potential is also demonstrated through three pupil films on **Celts and Romans**, **the Cotton Industry** and **the packhorse transport of salt**, from Tacky Films. It is a wonderful approach for teachers to help pupils bring the past to life through making models and pictures and using film to animate them. Film Education gives a full, clear, comprehensive and easy to follow introduction to animation.

- **Animated characters** can include **artefacts**, **people in portraits**, **historians** and **archaeologists**. They can meet us in the present, in a neutral time warp, or through time travel. **Time travel** requires rules about the laws of time – and a suitable fate if pupils break them.
- **Modelling artefacts and reconstructing scenes are part of the observation, enquiry and learning process.**
- **To save time collages or posters could double as sets**, or use a plain backdrop / green screen and insert photos.
- **3D clay animation is time consuming.** The source can be the inspiration, e.g. portraits lend themselves to 2D.
- But, in using animation **keep it simple** with two or three large characters, rather than lots of little ones. Oscar Stringers action/ reaction principle creates effective action and dialogue, see animation for education.

An animation should be the product of history enquiry, not the purpose of the activity.

The Schools

At Partney School, the Indus Valley was taught in a mixed age class. At Charing School, Ann had developed a Year 6 enquiry, based on a dig of her **model of Mohenjodaro's houses and street walls** in a huge sand tray, with tickets to a "finds" museum. Pupils were challenged to work out the significance of artefacts, and question interpretations, such as what reason archaeologists gave to name particular buildings as "granary", or "college of priests".

The animations – the preparatory phase

Preliminary activities were open-ended observations of artefacts and architecture from photos, storyboards with speech bubbles, writing scripts, creating models and sets. The children's animations were the result of a choice of topics I presented with questions, site photos, and artefacts and suggestions for scenes and presenters, such as time travellers.

The chosen topics were:

- **Every day life – what did people wear?** A suggestion was an Indus fashion parade.
- **An Indus cart journey** – terracotta 'toy' cart (two wheels and a chassis) are easy to model, and fun to assemble. They are an identifying marker of Indus sites. They testify to the importance of bulk transport. Bull and water buffalo figurines (and bones) provide evidence of draught animals.
- **How could you take a bath in an Indus Bathroom?** Show where the water went!
- **Leisure time** in Indus cities. Artefacts include agate marbles, stone cubical dice, maze board, wheeled toys, and crude clay discs thought to be for a throwing game similar to one played by children today; a cheeky toddler figurine seems to clutch such a disc; Charing School children thought dog figurines, a begging dog with a fancy collar and another showing teeth with a protruding collar depicted a performing and fighting dog. A boy contributed his knowledge of similar collars to protect the necks of fighting dogs.
- **Theories for the decline of the Indus Valley Bronze Age Cities**
 - ▶ Sir Mortimer Wheeler around 1950 put forward an influential theory of **Invasion** resulting in destruction.
 - ▶ **Environmental disaster** – floods caused by tectonic shift or aggrading rivers and environmental degradation came from the next generation of archaeologists;

Figure 1 The sand tray



- Current theory argues that **political strife** led to the collapse of an early state society. Bodies (38 skeletons) left unburied in Mohenjodaro, sagging walls, and other evidence provide scenarios for the interpretations cited and disputed by archaeologists.

The animations

An Indus Fashion Parade

Partney children made superb plasticine models, from researching female figurines and a horned deity carved on an Indus seal. They had observed photos of real jewellery and their script discussed what rich and poorer people might have worn. Time travellers interviewed the figurines, but a network crash prevented dubbing the script. There was no time in a crowded term to complete this element.

An Indus Cart Journey

A group was asked to show a cart delivering country produce to the city and how it might be done fairly, with small weighing pans as a prop.

Bath time

Bath time animations were entertaining and answered all the history questions asked, e.g.

- How could you take a bath?
- Where did the water come from?
- Show where the water went?

Leisure Time

The Charing class was limited by a general question with too many artefacts to include. It would have been better to direct them to create animations on each object. If the boy who made the brilliant observation about a dog fight collar, see above, had used this idea with a partner, the outcome could have been excellent.

Decline of the Indus Civilisation

We gave the children summaries of archaeologist theories and script activities to get skeletons of Mohenjodaro to explain how they (might have) met their end. Pupils could

Figure 2 Partney Time Travellers



give reasons why theories change over time, or can be difficult to prove. At Partney, Kate worked with four less able children. Animating plasticine skeletons was laborious and left no time to dub the script. At Charing we used bendy plastic "Halloween" skeletons.

Conclusions

Animation has tremendous potential for history teaching in terms of stimulus, motivation, historical enquiry, developing historical understanding and integrating history with cutting-edge technology.

Ilona Aronovsky has written teaching resources and an adventure story about the Indus Valley. **Kate Benson** and **Ann Plummeridge** were the project classes' teachers.