

Indus Valley Civilization

While civilizations were developing in Mesopotamia and Egypt, another great urban civilization was coming into its own in the Indus valley, an area of modern-day Pakistan and western India. The Indus Valley civilization flourished between 2600 and 1900 BC, around the same time as ancient Sumer and Old Kingdom Egypt. While Egyptian and Near Eastern civilizations have been well known and studied for centuries, recorded in histories since ancient times, the Indus Valley civilization was virtually unknown until the twentieth century. The British, who were ruling India, stumbled upon the remains of some of the cities of this ancient civilization. At first they paid little attention to the ruins, and sometimes plundered them for stone, but over time it was realized that these were remains of a very ancient culture. British archaeologists began exploring and digging at some of the sites in the 1920s, and famous archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler led excavations in the 1930s and 1940s, during which a number of Bronze Age cities were unearthed. The Indus Valley civilization is also known as the Harappan civilization, because the first city to be excavated was at Harappa. Another important urban site discovered by the archaeologists further to the south is a place called Mohenjo-Daro. Since there are virtually no written accounts of this civilization, nearly everything we know about it is from archaeology.

The Emergence of Indus Valley Civilization

Early civilization spread around the Indus River, which like the Nile River in Egypt, would flood and bring water and rich soil. From 3500 to 2600 BC, the Early Indus (or Early Harappan) period began in this region. This period saw a proliferation of towns and small cities, composed mainly of mud brick homes, as the people of the region settled into agriculture-based lifestyles. Some of the larger sites had citadels, artificial mounds upon which were built either civic structures or the homes of the elite. One of the cities in this early period was Harappa, which seems to have been a commercial city that produced items like beads from the local stones.

By 2600 BC, the settlements of the Indus Valley had grown into full-fledged cities, and Harappa was a major metropolis. Other important cities were Mohenjo-Daro, Ganweriwala and Rakhigarhi. All of these had populations of around 20,000 to 40,000 people. The old settlements at all these sites burned down, either due to warfare or accidents, and the cities were rebuilt in a much more organized fashion. These cities, newly rebuilt around 2600 BC, are characterized as belonging to the Mature Indus (or Mature Harappan) period, and they are laid out in a way that suggests urban planning and an organized government capable of engineering such projects. The cities had the world's earliest examples of sophisticated sanitation—each home had its own well, and a toilet that filtered into a sewer pipe that carried the city's waste away. At Harappa, all homes seem to have had access to water and drainage. At Mohenjo-Daro there was similar access to water and sanitation, as well as what appears to have been a public bath. The styles of jewelry, pottery, and statuary found at these sites are all very similar. The citadels remained in the cities and were expanded. They may have housed the government or religious centers of the cities, though we cannot tell for sure.

Indeed, we know nothing about how these cities were ruled or what form of government there was in the Bronze Age Indus valley. We also do not know whether Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and the other cities were part of the same state, or whether they were governed as individual city-states. The cities have much in common in terms of layout and artifacts, but we cannot know if that was a result of political unification or simply close contact with each other. Interestingly, although some houses are bigger than others, and some have better access to water or sanitation, for the most part they are fairly similar in size and amenities. Excavated graves show some variation in the richness of grave goods, but the differences are not very pronounced. It seems that the Indus Valley civilization was fairly egalitarian, with fewer differences in lifestyle among the different classes of city dwellers than in other contemporary cultures such as Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The cities were fed by sophisticated agriculture that included domesticated animals, and crops such as sesame, peas, wheat, and especially barley. Cotton was grown and spun for making clothes. The people of the Indus Valley civilization seem to have taken part in long-distance trade. With advances in sailing technology, the Harappans were able to trade up and down the Indus River and across the sea to Persia and Mesopotamia. They put their seals on containers of trade goods, and these seals have been found as far as Mesopotamia. Such seals are an important source of evidence about Indus Valley civilization. The seals contain images of animals, which may have been sacred to the Harappan people, images of men and women, which could be gods and goddesses, as well as symbols (like swastikas) and writing (which has not been deciphered). Many of these images may be indications of religion in the Indus valley, but it is difficult to tell, since we have very little evidence otherwise. No known temples have been found in any of the cities, though there was probably some form of worshipping gods and goddesses, perhaps early forms of what would become Hinduism. But this is just speculation.

Furthering the mystery around the Indus Valley civilization is the fact that its writing system, the Indus Valley script, has not been deciphered. So we know almost nothing about the language of the people who inhabited the Bronze Age Indus valley, and though we have many writings from them, we do not know what any of this writing says.

The Decline and Disappearance of Indus Valley Civilization

Around 1900 BC, the Indus Valley civilization started to go into decline. Scholars at one time believed that they were overrun and wiped out by the invading Aryans, a warlike people from the steppes of Euro-Asia. While the Aryans did move into the Indus valley region, their presence is no longer believed to be the main cause of the decline of the Indus Valley civilization.

For one thing, the cities of the Indus valley, such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, were not suddenly destroyed. Instead, they were slowly abandoned over a long period of time. No one knows why this happened. The river may have changed course, or global temperature change may have caused the cities to be slowly consumed by the

desert. Alternatively, disease may have ravaged the cities, or flooding could have caused heavy destruction that made them uninhabitable.

Another theory is that changes in agricultural techniques or available crops could have caused the city dwellers to gradually abandon their homes and go out to the country to live as farmers. Indeed, the areas of Pakistan and India where the Indus valley cities once thrived are now largely agricultural regions. This, however, challenges the common view that civilization entails the gradual change from small, agricultural settlements to larger and larger cities. It suggests that people can achieve a complex level of societal sophistication, only to abandon it of their own volition and return to what is considered a more primitive state.

We will probably never know what happened to the Indus Valley civilization, but its discovery in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the excavation of its cities, challenge long-held views about civilization. They suggest, though cannot conclusively prove, that complex urban societies need not become highly stratified in terms of wealth or class, and that the progress of civilization may not be linear, that people may abandon urban life for a less complex, agriculturally based existence.

Summary:

- From 3500 to 2600 BC, the Early Indus (or Early Harappan) period began around the Indus River valley (mostly in modern-day Pakistan), with the spread of settled agricultural villages in the region.
- Around 2600 BC, many villages were rebuilt as large cities. This was the beginning of the Mature Indus (or Mature Harappan) period. The two most important cities discovered from this period are Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.
- The cities suggest large-scale urban planning, but we do not know anything about the governments of these cities or how they were organized. Since we cannot read the writing of the Indus River civilization, much of its culture is unknown to us.
- The Indus Valley civilization seems to have traded extensively, and the seals they used in this trade are a major source of evidence about the civilization, providing us with symbols that they found important.
- The cities and homes of the Indus Valley civilization show advanced sanitation and good access to water and drainage for almost all residents of the cities. There were some differences in wealth among its people, but the Indus Valley civilization seems to have been far more egalitarian than other urban cultures developing at the time, such as in Egypt and Mesopotamia.
- We do not know why the Indus Valley civilization slowly disappeared. Theories include foreign invasion (no longer as popular a theory as it once was), climate change, changes in the course of the river, disease, or new agricultural and economic factors that caused the people to abandon the cities.