CIVILIZATION OF THE INDUS VALLEY: THE FORGOTTEN GIANT

Of the world's four great ancient civilizations — Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and the Indus Valley — the Indus Valley Civilization is by far the least known. It was, in many ways, the most sophisticated of its time: the largest in geographic extent, the most advanced in urban planning, and the most mysterious. Yet for thousands of years, it lay buried under the sands of modern-day Pakistan and northwest India, unknown to history.

REDISCOVERY

In the 1920s, British and Indian archaeologists excavating the Punjab region of colonial India discovered something extraordinary. Beneath mounds of earth lay the ruins of an enormous ancient city — Harappa. Soon after, another massive site was uncovered: Mohenjo-Daro, located 400 miles away on the Indus River. Archaeologists realized they had stumbled upon an entire lost civilization.

We now know that the Indus Valley Civilization (also called the Harappan Civilization) was active from approximately 3,300 to 1,300 BCE — overlapping with and outlasting both the Old and Middle Kingdoms of ancient Egypt, and contemporary with the golden age of Sumer. At its peak, around 2,500 BCE, the civilization covered an area of roughly 1 million square kilometers — larger than either Mesopotamia or Egypt — and may have had a population of over 5 million people.

GEOGRAPHY AND AGRICULTURE

The Indus Valley Civilization was built on the floodplain of the Indus River and its tributaries in what is now Pakistan and northwest India. Like Mesopotamia, it depended on river flooding to deposit fertile silt on agricultural fields. The annual monsoon — a seasonal wind system bringing heavy rainfall — also watered crops in ways that Mesopotamian farmers, dependent on irrigation, could not match.

The Harappans cultivated wheat, barley, sesame, cotton, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. Remarkably, they were among the first people in the world to cultivate cotton and produce woven cotton cloth — a discovery that would eventually transform world trade thousands of years later.

CITY PLANNING: A MARVEL OF ANCIENT ENGINEERING

The two main cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, reveal extraordinary urban sophistication. Both cities were built on a remarkably similar plan, suggesting a high degree of central planning and shared culture across a wide area.

Each city was divided into two main sections: a raised citadel (a fortified upper district) and a lower residential district. Streets were laid out in a grid pattern — perpendicular, planned, and carefully maintained. Houses were built of standardized, kiln-fired bricks — the exact same size across hundreds of miles of territory. This level of standardization suggests a strong central authority capable of enforcing uniform construction.

Most astonishingly, Mohenjo-Daro had a system of covered sewage drains running beneath the streets. Each house had its own toilet, connected to the drain system. Waste water was channeled out of the city. This is the world's first known urban sanitation system — a technology that most of Europe did not match until the 19th century CE.

The Great Bath of Mohenjo-Daro — a large, watertight public pool — suggests a sophisticated public life and possibly religious ritual involving ritual cleansing. It is lined with bitumen (a waterproofing material) and has stairs leading down from two sides.

THE MYSTERIES OF HARAPPAN SOCIETY

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Despite the physical evidence of a highly organized society, the Indus Valley Civilization remains deeply mysterious. Here is what we do not know:

We cannot read their writing. The Indus script — short inscriptions found on thousands of small stone seals — has never been deciphered. Unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were decoded through the Rosetta Stone, no bilingual key has ever been found for the Indus script. This means we do not know the names of their cities, their rulers, or their gods.

We do not know their government. No palace, no obvious royal tomb, and no clearly military structure has been found in either Harappa or Mohenjo-Daro. Unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, there are no inscriptions proclaiming the glory of a king, no monumental statues of rulers, and no clear evidence of a military. This is extraordinary. Were they ruled by priests? By elected councils? By merchants? We simply do not know.

We do not know their religion. Small figurines — mostly female — have been found throughout Harappan sites, suggesting possible goddess worship. Seals depict a figure seated in what appears to be a yoga-like posture, flanked by animals, which some scholars believe is an early form of Shiva, a major Hindu deity. But this interpretation is controversial.

A CIVILIZATION OF TRADERS

What we do know about the Harappans is that they were extraordinary traders. Indus Valley artifacts — characteristic square seals, carnelian beads, and cotton cloth — have been found in Mesopotamia, suggesting active trade between the two civilizations. Mesopotamian texts mention a land called "Meluhha" that traded exotic goods; many scholars believe Meluhha refers to the Indus Valley.

The Harappans also had standardized weights and measures — small, precisely crafted stone cubes that were perfectly calibrated. This suggests a sophisticated commercial culture where honest dealing and measurement accuracy mattered.

THE MYSTERIOUS DECLINE

Around 1,900 BCE, the Indus Valley Civilization began a gradual decline. Cities were abandoned. The script stopped appearing on seals. The careful urban planning gave way to smaller, cruder construction. By 1,300 BCE, the major cities were gone.

Why? Scholars have proposed several causes: climate change that disrupted the monsoon rainfall pattern; shifting river courses that dried up agricultural land; overuse of resources; epidemic disease; or the arrival of new peoples from Central Asia (the Indo-Aryans, who brought the Sanskrit language and the early texts of Hinduism).

Most likely, the decline was caused by a combination of these factors. The Indo-Aryans did not so much destroy the Indus Valley Civilization as move into a landscape it had already vacated.

LEGACY

The Indus Valley Civilization laid important foundations for South Asian culture. Some scholars see continuities between Harappan religion and later Hindu traditions — the yoga posture, the reverence for cattle, the importance of ritual bathing. The civilization's agricultural advances, particularly cotton cultivation, influenced South Asian and eventually world trade.

Perhaps most importantly, the Indus Valley Civilization reminds us that magnificent civilizations can rise and fall, leaving behind only their bricks and their unanswered questions.

LIVEWORKSHEETS