

A Mystery of History

What Ended Indus Valley Civilizations?



Around 2500 B.C., one of the world's first great civilizations arose in the Indus River valley, in what is now Pakistan and western India. As with the civilizations in Egypt, China, and the Fertile Crescent, the Indus River people depended on the river for their daily needs. Though we don't know who led the great Indus Valley civilization, it appears that there might have been twin capitals—at Harappa (on the Indus River) and at Mohenjo-daro (400 miles away on a tributary of the Indus, the Ravi River).

These cities formed the town capitals of a complex of smaller urban centers and villages that covered an area four times the size of Sumer and twice the size of Egypt during the Old Kingdom. That the many sites associated with the Harappan complex were part of one civilization has been established due to excavations of layer after layer of cities and towns rebuilt in the same way, with the same proportions, at the same locations. The civilization flourished for 800 years, from about 2700 B.C.E. to 1900 B.C.E.

In these cities, a citadel atop a high mound dominates the city landscape and offers protection for the city proper below. The people stored grain in large warehouses in preparation for a famine. They developed a system of weights and measures to facilitate trade with other cultures, mainly Mesopotamia. They were the first people in the world to grow cotton and fashion it into dyed cotton cloth. They dug ditches and canals to

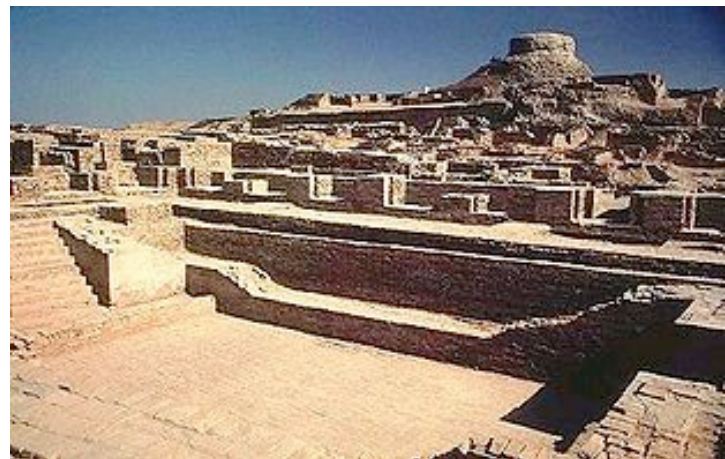
irrigate their farms. They had their own system of writing that has yet to be deciphered. In fact, scientists believe they shared a common language. They have found artifacts at different sites with the same or similar picture of a unicorn on them. Was this unicorn seal (pictured) a logo or religious symbol of some sort?



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The Indus civilization used a common currency. They planned the patterns of their cities, laying out streets in rectangular patterns and including drainage systems that led to brick-lined sewers. They lived in brick buildings, some two and three stories high. In almost every respect, they were an advanced people. Yet, by 1700 B.C., the Harappan Civilization had disappeared. What happened?

Mohenjo-daro (which means “Mound of the Dead” in the Sindhi language) was one of the largest city-settlements of the Indus Valley Civilization. It was located in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. Built around 2600 BCE, the city was one of the early urban settlements in the world, existing at the same time as the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Crete.



The most dramatic feature of Mohenjodaro’s citadel was the Great Bath. The Great Bath was a pool built of waterproofed brick. It was 39 feet long and 8 feet deep. Small dressing rooms circled the pool. One of the rooms contained a well that supplied the bath with water. Dirty water was removed through a drain that ran along one side of the bath. It seems certain that the people of Mohenjodaro used the pool to bathe. On a hot, clear day, they probably enjoyed washing themselves in the bath’s cooling waters. Some archeologists think the Great Bath was also used for religious rituals. They point out that bathing rituals are important in India’s major religion, Hinduism. Ancient Hindu temples often featured bathing pools.

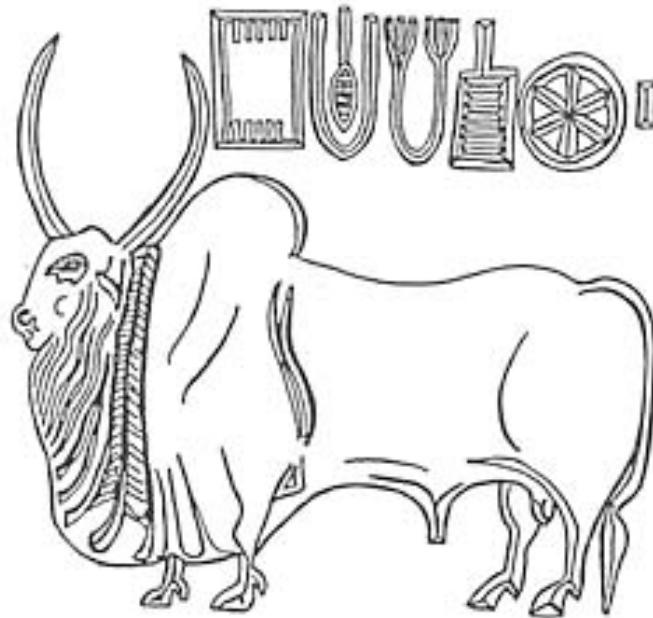
Small stone seals are among the most mysterious of Mohenjodaro’s artifacts. They have been found in large numbers throughout the ruins. The seals are carved with

pictographs, pictures used to stand for objects, sounds, or ideas. More than 400 pictographs have been discovered, but archeologists don't know what most of them stand for. Many seals show animals such as buffalo, bulls, tigers, elephants, rhinoceroses, fish, and crocodiles. Many of the seals have a small loop on the back. Perhaps people wore them as charms to keep away evil. The seals may also have been pressed into wax to make a kind of tag. Merchants might have placed the wax tags on their goods to show who owned them.

Mohenjodaro's complex sewer system of drains, pipes, wells, and bathrooms set the city apart from other settlements of its time. Two thousand years would pass before the world would see another system like it, in ancient Rome. A network of clay pipes connected Mohenjodaro's buildings and homes to the main sewer system. Dirty, used water and waste flowed in channels along the streets. This sewage then emptied into the Indus River. The sewer system made it possible for both rich and poor to have bathrooms in their homes. Deep wells made of brick were located throughout the city. People stored water, including rainfall, in the wells.

The game of chess was probably invented in India. An ancient Indian book describes a war game played with dice and pieces called pawns. Although modern chess is not played with dice, historians believe the war game is an early form of chess.

The ruins of the city were discovered under layers of silt during the construction of a railroad. The city also had several layers to it indicating that it had been destroyed and rebuilt multiple times.



Searching for Clues and Answers

Theory #1 The people of Mohenjo-Daro were conquered and / or driven out of the area by another group of people.

Archaeologists have unearthed stone sculptures of seated male figures, like the intricately carved and colored Priest King, but the sculptures were all found broken. One archaeologist observed that the broken statues showed that "Whoever came in at the very end of the Indus period clearly didn't like the people who were representing themselves or their elders".

Some scholars have suggested that the Aryan peoples could have driven them out. There is evidence that between about 1500 and 1000 B.C., nomadic Aryan invaders from central Asia moved into the fertile Indus plains and pushed into the Ganges River valleys to the east. The Aryans concentrated on assaulting Harappan settlements and different Aryan tribal groups. They depended primarily on great herds of cattle to provide their subsistence, so they had little use for the great irrigation works and advanced agricultural technology of the Indus valley peoples. Evidence of violent conflict has been discovered, including burned-out settlements and traces of refugee flights into the mountains to the north. Groups of skeletons in postures of flight have been found on the stairways at some sites.

Theory #2 The Indus River changed course and the people moved to the Ganges Valley for water.

If the Indus River changed course, as some believe, it would have hampered the local agricultural economy and the city's importance as a center of trade. We know that it moved; it's currently several miles from the site of Mohenjo-Daro. Some speculate that a severe tectonic event (earthquake) caused the river to drastically change course. Did the people of Mohenjo-Daro take such an event, if it indeed occurred, to be a sign from the gods to leave? But a changing river course doesn't explain the collapse of the entire Indus civilization.

Theory #3 Frequent floods or a great flood forced everyone to leave.

No evidence exists that flooding destroyed the city, and the city wasn't totally abandoned. However, the fact that the city seems to have been rebuilt several times suggests that a flood or natural disaster occurred at least once, and scientists have pointed to 1900 BC as a flood-prone year.

Theory #4 The climate changed and caused the Indus Valley peoples to leave.

The lower Indus plains were a very different place in the 3d millennium B.C. than they are today. Most of the region is now arid and desolate, crisscrossed by dried-up

