

Harappan Civilisation

[History Notes for UPSC & Govt. Exams]

Harappan Civilisation (Bronze Age) – c.2600 – 1900 BCE

Earlier historians had called this civilisation “The Indus Valley Civilisation”, but later on, major settlements have been excavated in the Ghaggar – Hakra belt that spread beyond the Indus region. The Harappan civilisation was the first urban civilisation in South Asia, contemporary to Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and Egyptian civilisation. Among the three civilizations, the Harappan civilisation occupied about 8,00,000 sq. km, a larger area than the other two civilizations. It rose in the North-Western part of the Indian sub-continent. It is called Harappan because this civilization was first discovered in 1921 at the modern site of Harappa situated in the province of West Punjab in Pakistan. It forms a part of the proto-history of India and belongs to the bronze age. Although it is regarded as older than the chalcolithic cultures, it was far more developed than these cultures.

General Features of the Harappan Civilisation

The Harappan culture covered parts of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Gujarat, Rajasthan and the fringes of western Uttar Pradesh. It extended from Jammu in the north to the Narmada estuary in the south, from the Makran coast of Balochistan in the west to Meerut in the north-east. The area occupied by the Harappan civilization was triangular in shape. No other cultural zone in the third and second millennium BCE in the world was as large as the Harappan culture.

The important features of the Harappan civilisation are –

- **Town Planning**
 - The Harappan civilisation is known for its urban outlook and sophisticated sense of town planning and organisation. In most cases, the Harappan city had its own citadel or acropolis, which was possibly occupied by the members of the ruling class. Below the citadel, in each city lay a lower town with brick houses (burnt brick), which were inhabited by the common people. The remarkable thing about the arrangement of the houses in the cities is that they followed a grid system, roads cut across one another almost at right angles and the city was divided into many blocks.
 - The drainage system was very impressive. The drains were made of mortar, lime and gypsum and were covered either with brick slabs or stone slabs. Perhaps no other civilisation gave so much importance to health and hygiene as the Harappans.
 - Houses were often of two or more storeys, though varied in size but quite monotonous. The houses had bathrooms and some even had their own wells, but no window faced the streets.
- **Agriculture**
 - Agriculture was the important source of subsistence for the Harappan. The Harappan villages, mostly situated near the flood plains, produced sufficient food grains not only to feed themselves but also to meet the requirements of the town people. The Harappans produced wheat (especially in Mehrgarh), barley, peas, sesame, mustard, millets, rice (Lothal). The surplus grains were stored in granaries as is evident from the discovery of granaries at the sites of Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and Lothal.
 - The Harappan people were the earliest to produce cotton. Because cotton was first produced in this area, the Greeks called it Sindon, which is derived from Sindh.
 - The Harappan people sowed seeds in the floodplains in the month of November, when the floodwater receded and reaped their harvests of wheat and barley in April before the advent of the next flood. The Harappans probably used the wooden ploughshare to plough the fields.
 - The Harappan people consumed milk, curd and were fond of non-vegetarian food, fish-eating was common and molluscs were an important source of protein for the people in the coastal regions of Gujarat.
- **Domestication of animals**

- Domestication of animals was practised on a large scale. Oxen, buffaloes, goats, sheep and pigs were domesticated. They also kept asses and camels, which were used as beasts of burden. Cats and dogs were also domesticated. There is evidence of horses as well, but it is clear that this animal was not in regular use in Harappan times. Elephants and rhinoceros were also well known.
- Cultivation of food grains and domestication of animals were almost similar to contemporary Sumerian cities in Mesopotamia but the Harappan people in Gujarat produced rice and domesticated elephants, which were not seen with the people of the Mesopotamian cities.
- **Technology and Craft**
 - The Harappans showed mastery skills in arts and crafts.
 - The Harappan people were well acquainted with the manufacture and use of bronze (an alloy of copper and tin). The craftsmen used to make artifacts from pure copper as well as bronze, like spears, knives, axes, etc.
 - The goldsmiths made jewellery of silver, gold and precious stones. Ornaments like necklaces, bracelets, pendants, brooches have been excavated.
 - The Harappans were also experts in bead making. Bead making shops have been excavated at Chanhudaro and Lothal.
 - The Harappan people loved to decorate themselves and hair dressings by both men and women are evident from figurines found at different sites.
 - A well-known piece of art of the Harappan period is the stone sculpture of a bearded man, discovered at Mohenjo-Daro, which is having an embroidered cloak over his left shoulder and his eyes are half-closed indicating a posture of meditation.
 - The potter's wheel was in full use, and the Harappans produced their own characteristic pottery, which was made glossy and shining. The red ware pottery painted with black designs were popular. Jars, plates, bowls and pots of different shapes and sizes were made as utility items.
- **Economy**
 - **Trade** – There was no metallic money in circulation and they carried on all exchanges through barter. The Harappan civilisation had flourishing relations with its contemporary Mesopotamian and Persian civilisations. The Mesopotamian records refer to the trade relations with Meluha (the ancient name given to the Indus region). The Mesopotamian texts also speak of the two intermediate trading stations called Dilmun (probably Bahrain on the Persian Gulf) and Makan (probably Makran coast, Oman). It also indicates Mesopotamia imported copper, ivory, shell, pearls and ebony from Meluha and exported garments, wool, perfume, leather products and silver to Harappans. Inland transport primarily employed bullock carts.
 - **Seals** – The greatest artistic creation of the Harappan culture are the seals. About 2000 seals have been found and the majority of these carry short inscriptions with pictures of one-horned bull, the buffalo, the tiger, the rhinoceros, the goat and the elephant (excluding horse). In Mohenjo-Daro, three cylindrical seals of the Mesopotamian type have been found which depict their trading relations.
 - **Weights & Measures** – The Harappan people used weights and measures for trade and other transactions. Numerous articles used for weights have been found. They show that in weighing mostly 16 or its multiples were used, for instance, 16, 64, 160, 320 and 640. The Harappan also knew the art of measurements. Measures of length were based on the foot (37.6 cm) and the cubit (51.8 – 53.3 cm). A shell scale has been found at Mohenjo-Daro, a shell object probably used to measure angles has been found at Saurashtra and an ivory scale has been discovered at Lothal.
- **Society** – The Harappan society was an urban society and appears to have been divided into three sections – an elite class associated with the citadel, a well-to-do middle class (rich merchants), and a relatively weaker section occupying the lower towns (labourers). The Harappan society is believed to be matriarchal in nature as a large number of terracotta (fire-baked earthen clay) female figurines have been excavated which are representations of the Great Mother Goddess. The terracotta figurines and the stone sculptures indicate the dressing style of the people. The men are mostly shown wearing a dress wrapped around the lower half of the body with one end worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm. The garment was made of cotton, silk and wool. A woven cloth has been found at Mohenjo-Daro and the Harappan people were well acquainted with spinning and weaving.
- **Script** – The Harappan script was not alphabetical but mainly pictographic and logosyllabic (each symbol stood for a word/a syllable). The Harappan people used graphic symbols or characters to convey the idea. The Harappan writing is believed to be boustrophedon i.e, right to left and left to right in alternate lines. The evidence of common

script points to the great cultural integrations. It virtually disappeared by c. 1700 BCE indicating that this form of writing did not percolate downwards.

- **Religion**

- One of the cardinal features of the Harappan religion was the worship of the Mother Goddess. A large number of terracotta figurines have been excavated which are representations of the Mother Goddess.
- The Harappans looked upon the earth as a fertility goddess and worshipped her in the same manner as the Egyptians worshipped the Nile goddess Isis.
- The seal of Pashupati Mahadeva is surrounded by an elephant, a tiger, a rhino, a buffalo, and a deer and it is likely that these animals were also worshipped. The images of bulls or oxen on the Harappan seals prove that they were worshippers of Shiva.
- Another peculiarity of the Harappan religious belief was the worship of stones in the form of linga (phallus) and yoni (fertility). One terracotta piece from Kalibangan shows pictures of ling and yoni together.
- A large number of figurines show the individuals in various yogic asanas (postures). The Harappans practised yoga both for physical exercise as well as religious rites.
- Sacred ritual spots included the Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro, where the elite in all likelihood undertook ritual activity that included ceremonial bathing. The Great Bath is considered to be an important public place of Mohenjo-Daro, comprising the tank which is situated in the citadel mound. It is an example of beautiful brickwork.

- **Burial**

- Three forms of burial have been found at Mohenjo-Daro, viz:
 - Complete burial – it means the burial of the whole body.
 - Fractional burial – it means the collection of some bones after the exposure of the body to wild beasts and birds.
 - Post cremation burial – cremation followed by burial of ashes.
- Dead bodies were placed in the North-South direction and food, pottery and other items were also put in the grave along with the body.
- Archaeologists have found coffins containing bodies in Harappa. Small circular pits containing large urns and pottery have also been found in Kalibangan (Rajasthan).
- A triangular terracotta cake has been discovered which has a horned deity on one side and an animal on the other side which is an indication of animal sacrifice.
- At Lothal, a pair of male and female skeletons have been discovered together.

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Decline of the Harappan Civilisation

The Harappan decline is roughly dated around 1900 BCE. There is no unanimity among historians on the exact reason for the decline of this civilization. Different scholars have put forward different theories of decline of this civilization.

The following are the possible causes for the decline of the Harappan civilization:

1. **Aryan Invasion:** According to one of the theories, the Aryans must have invaded the Harappan territory and that had led to the destruction of the civilization. This theory is put forward as it is commonly believed that Aryans were the next settlers. They were skilled fighters and are known for invading and occupying great cities. There is archaeological proof of genocide and unburied skeletal remains in Mohenjo-Daro. The study of the skeletal remains indicates that damages are caused by sharp objects or weapons. The knowledge and use of iron as weapons was known to the Aryans, not to the Harappans. Defeat and death must have come at the hands of invading Aryans.
2. **Epidemic** – According to another theory, an uncontrollable epidemic must have spread in the Harappan cities. Due to lack of medical facilities, the entire population must have been wiped out.
3. **Earthquake** – Geographically, the Harappan civilization occupied an area that was prone to earthquakes as it came under seismographic zones. The repeated seismographic vibrations must have led to erosion that brought down the buildings. The earthquake theory constitute an important theory for the decline of the Harappan civilization.
4. **Floods** – The massive and frequent floods in the Indus river is said to be one of the possible reasons for the collapse of harappan civilization. The point is proven by the silt clay that covers the collapsed houses at Mohenjo-

Daro. The repeated floods must have forced the people to flee the inundated areas and set up permanent habitat elsewhere.

5. **Less rainfall** – According to one of the theories, there was a fall in the average rainfall in cities leading to the formation of desert like conditions. This led to the decline in agriculture on which most of the trade was dependent. Owing to this, people of the Harappan civilization started shifting to other locations leading to the decline of the entire civilization.
6. **Change in the course of the river** – As per some scholars, the reason for the decline is the change in the course of the river Ghaggar – Hakra that led to an increase in the aridity of the place. The location where the Harappan culture once flourished, is a desert today.

India and the world marvels at the wonder of the Harappan culture. Yet, this culture could not defeat the law of nature and was, as such, not imperishable. The succession of rise and fall is the law of nature.

Important Harappan Sites

SITE	STATE/COUNTRY	RIVER	EXCAVATION	IMPORTANCE
Harappa	Pakistan (Punjab)	Ravi	Dayaram Sahni (1921)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two rows of six granaries. Evidence of direct trade interaction with Mesopotamia. Evidence of coffin burial. Post cremation burial more numerous.
Mohenjo-Daro (means “Mound of the dead”)	Pakistan (Sindh)	Indus	Rakhal Das Banerjee (1922) E. Mackay, Sir John Marshall (1930)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Great Bath. Assembly hall. Great granary. Piece of woven cotton cloth. Bronze dancing girl. Discovery of human skeletons together (mass death). Seals representing Mother Goddess, Pashupati, bearded man & a woman to be sacrificed.
Chanhudaro	Pakistan (Sindh), near Mohenjo-Daro.	Indus	N.G.Mazumdar (1931) and E.Mackay.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only Harappan city without a citadel. Lots of artisans and was an industrial town.

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bead factory site as lots of beads, seals, ornaments unearthed. • No fortified structure. • Bronze model of roofed chariot.
Kot – Diji	Sindh (Pakistan)	Sindh	Ghurey (1935) Fazal Ahmad (1955)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-Harappan site. • House made of stone. • City destroyed by force or some fire.
Suktagendor	Sindh (Pakistan) Balochistan	Dasht/Dashak river	A.Stein, George Dales.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of trade relations with Babylon. • Originally a port but later cut off from sea due to coastal uplift.
Lothal	Gujarat (Ahmedabad)	Bhogava & Sabarmati river confluence.	S.R.Rao (1957)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of double burial (male & female together) • The lower part of the city is walled. • Fire altars. • Dockyard • Sea trade centre. • Bead making factory. • Mesopotamian seal found here. • Terracotta model of ship found here. • Remains of rice husk. • Ivory scale found here.
Rangpur (near Lothal)	Gujarat	Madar	M.S.Vatsa (1931) S.R.Rao (1953-54)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rice husks found here. • Yellow & grey colour pots of pre-Harappan people.
Surkotada	Gujarat (Bhuj)		J.P Joshi (1964)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remains of horse bones.
Dholavira	Gujarat		J.P Joshi (1990-91)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique water harvesting system.

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large scale use of sandstone along with mud brick. • Giant water reservoir. • An inscription comprising ten large sized signs of the Harappan script similar to a sign board.
Kalibangan (Black Bangles)	Rajasthan (Ganganagar)	Ghaggar	Amlanand Ghosh (1953) Dr. B.B.Lal & B.K.Thapar (1961)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remains of camel bones. • Fire altars. • Remains of massive brick walls round the citadel and lower town. • No drainage system. • Not as well planned and organised as Mohenjo-Daro. • Burials in circular & rectangular graves. • Only site where decorative bricks are used in flooring.
Banawali (Hisar)	Haryana	Rangoi	R.S.Bist (1973-74)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centre of pre-Harappan, mature Harappan as well as late Harappan civilisation. • High quality barley. • Clay model of plough.
Rakhigarhi (Hissar)	Haryana			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largest Indus valley site & town in the world. • All the three phases of Harappan culture.

Distinguishing Features of Harappan and Mesopotamian Civilisations

HARAPPAN	MESOPOTAMIAN/EGYPTIAN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Harappan civilisation made its foundation on the banks of the Indus river. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Mesopotamian civilisation flourished on the banks of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The towns were planned with a chess board pattern and had excellent drainage systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The towns show a haphazard growth.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Harappans were quite skillful in the making of pottery and seals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No such unique aspect found.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Harappans had their own script which bore no resemblance to Egyptian or Mesopotamian script. However, the Harappan script has not been deciphered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mesopotamians had cuneiform script and the Egyptians had hieroglyphics. Both the scripts were well deciphered and give a lot of information about these civilisations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The scripts were mostly on seals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mesopotamians pressed letters on moist clay tablets while Egyptians wrote on papyrus sheets made of reeds.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Harappan civilization spread over a vast area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparatively occupied lesser area.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Harappan civilisation declined around 1900 BCE. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It continued to exist even after 1900 BCE.

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Late Harappan Phase (c. 1900 BCE – 1300 BCE)

Post-urban Phase of Harappan Culture

The Post-Urban phase which is also known as the Localisation Era, is defined by a decline in the cities. It refers to the fragmentation of the culture of the Integration Era (Mature Harappan Phase). The Post-Urban phase comprises five geographical zones:

- The West Punjab Phase (Cemetery- Harappan culture).
- The East Punjab Phase.
- The Jhukar Phase – Important ones being Jhukar, Chanhudaro and Amri sites.
- The Rangpur Phase – Prominent sites are in Kutch, Saurashtra and mainland Gujarat.
- The Ganga – Yamuna Doab Phase.

Some of the key features of this period were:

- The late Harappan sites were more in number, yet they were smaller, more rural and marked by the diversification of agriculture. A key development in this phase was the beginning of double cropping e.g. wheat and barley were grown in winter, millets and sorghum were grown as summer crops.
- In comparison to the Mature Harappan pottery, the pottery was less bright, less intricate designs were found and mostly painted grey ware (PGW). The pots were thicker and sturdier.

- The declining culture in this phase is also referred to as sub-Indus culture.
- The post urban Harappans were rural, lived on agriculture, stock raising, hunting and fishing.
- No tool for measurements have been found.
- This period also marks the end of the Harappan trade with west Asian centres.
- This phase was mainly chalcolithic in nature.

