

Revealing India and Pakistan's Ancient Art and Inventions

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Ruins at the archaeological site of Harappa, an Indus Valley civilization of the third millennium B.C., in Punjab, Pakistan.
Photo: DeAgostini/Getty Images

You have probably heard of the ancient Egyptians and their pyramids. Mesopotamians and Mayans, with their impressive temples, are well-known too.

There is one fascinating ancient civilization that is less known: Harappa.

The Harappan culture, the first great civilization in the Indus River Valley, arose in an area that spans the present-day countries of India and Pakistan.

Almost no trace of Harappa had been found until the 1920s. Since then, however, Harappa has been regarded as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the 20th century.

Discovering what Harappa left behind has changed our idea of early humans.

Harappan empire rose peacefully

In 2013, a conference on ancient civilizations was held in Guatemala. Vasant Shinde, an explorer for National Geographic, presented a story about the rise and fall of Harappan civilization.

Around 7000 to 5000 B.C., people began to farm their own food instead of just gathering it. Artifacts from 5000 to 2600 B.C. began showing similarities between different regions. This suggests that people had new ways of communicating and sharing ideas.

From 2600 to 1900 B.C., distant cities started to think of themselves as one shared civilization. It seemed that an empire came about peacefully. In 1900 to 1300 B.C., whatever was holding the culture together declined and the area split up into different parts.

Cities were "clean and well-planned"

Discoveries at sites in India made experts completely rethink how farming in the Indus Valley began. In the past, it was believed that farming and tools were brought over by travelers from places west of India such as Mesopotamia or Egypt. That idea "has been discarded," Shinde said.

Harappan cities "don't have large monumental buildings [like those in Mesopotamia or Egypt]," he said. "But that doesn't mean they were not prosperous." The cities were "clean and well-planned."

Many Harappan artifacts appear to be the oldest known examples of certain traditions.

It is difficult to say for certain how or where these ideas began. However it happened, the Harappan discoveries show that south Asia was a far more advanced civilization than people knew.

Harappans were forward thinkers

Shinde connected the past and the present by showing just how many "modern conveniences" the Harappans brought to the world:

- Cities carefully mapped like a grid, with streets facing north, west, east and south.
- There were bathroom-type areas in each house with a water pot for washing.
- There is no evidence of slavery, yet there are signs of cooperative, organized rule.
- Developments in rainwater collection, wells and drain maintenance.
- Long-distance trade and contact as far as Mesopotamia.
- Pioneering methods in metalworking and pottery.
- Art that might show the earliest practice of yoga, or belief in "power through meditation."

There is even writing that is still waiting to be decoded and translated.

Making sense of the writing on the seals

Mark Kenoyer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison spent more than 40 years as an archaeologist in India and Pakistan. He searched for ancient objects and tried to find how they were made and used.

Kenoyer found Harappan seals with writing and symbols that he could not understand. He compared these with two similar seals that had been found with Akkadian script from Mesopotamia — symbols that are now well understood. Akkad was an area in ancient Mesopotamia.

One of these two seals is an “Akkadian seal with an Indus animal.” The letters seem to read “Ka lu Sig,” which means either “May the affair be favorable” or maybe that someone named “Kaku” “is favorable.”

The second seal reads “The devotee of Nin-Ildum, Son of Dog.” Calling someone “son of a dog” is not exactly a friendly saying around the world today, and Kenoyer thinks it could mean “son of a servant” instead. While that specific part of the translation is uncertain, it’s the general format that is most important.

Text on all other Mesopotamian seals from the period is in a completely different style. So, it appears these writings were translations — an attempt to match and understand words from other cultures.

No tall monuments

One of the biggest mysteries about the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley is its lack of monumental temples, like the ones in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Why? Several small seals and tablets may have the answer. They show images of a person in a tree who is brought various offerings.

So it seems that the most sacred places were in nature, such as the beloved pipal tree. Buddha, the figurehead of the religion Buddhism, famously sat under the bodhi tree in his quest for enlightenment. That tree is held sacred to this day.

So it could be that these cities had just as much ceremony and religion as any other. They were simply practiced outside, not in fancy temples.

Finally, Kenoyer helped reveal who the people of this civilization were, and how they lived.

Studies of a cemetery in Harappa showed that the bodies seemed to all be from wealthier people. Most Harappans were not buried there at all.

Harappa indeed had a system of social classes, with rich people having more power. Unlike other ancient civilizations, though, cities in Harappa weren't ruled strictly by kings and queens, Kenoyer believes. Most cities in Harappa appear to have had a republican style of rule. In other words, they seemed to have an organized system of elected leaders, as many places do today.

Many people still see all of the ancient world as an unruly, chaotic place, where rulers forced people into building monuments for them. Looking deeper into the evidence, we see how this is not entirely true.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "No tall monuments."

Select the paragraph that suggests religion might have been as important to the Harappans as it was to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures.

- 2 Read the conclusion below.

Harappans engaged in long-distance trade and communication with other cultures.

Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support to this conclusion?

- (A) Artifacts from 5000 to 2600 B.C. began showing similarities between different regions.
 - (B) In the past, it was believed that farming and tools were brought over by travelers from places west of India such as Mesopotamia or Egypt.
 - (C) So, it appears these writings were translations—an attempt to match and understand words from other cultures.
 - (D) One of the biggest mysteries about the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley is its lack of monumental temples, like the ones in Mesopotamia and Egypt.
- 3 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) The Harappan culture, the first great civilization in the Indus River Valley, arose in an area that spans the present-day countries of India and Pakistan.
 - (B) Artifacts from 5000 to 2600 B.C. began showing similarities between different regions.
 - (C) Many Harappan artifacts appear to be the oldest known examples of certain traditions.
 - (D) Harappa indeed had a system of social classes, with rich people having more power.

- 4 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the article's central idea?
- (A) Since then, however, Harappa has been regarded as one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the 20th century.
 - (B) In 1900 to 1300 B.C., whatever was holding the culture together declined and the area split up into different parts.
 - (C) One of the biggest mysteries about the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley is its lack of monumental temples, like the ones in Mesopotamia and Egypt.
 - (D) Many people still see all of the ancient world as an unruly, chaotic place, where rulers forced people into building monuments for them.