

Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus Valley in the Indian sub-continent was one of the early centres where man settled down and progressed to lead a highly civilized life. Geographical factors like climate, fertility of the soil and the physical features greatly contributed to the progress and development of man there. This civilization, familiar to the world as the Indus Valley Civilization or the Harappan Culture, flourished about 5000 years ago.

1.1 Indus Valley, Home of a Civilization

The river Indus originates in the Himalayas flows west initially and then southwards towards the Arabian Sea. This river valley was the home of one of the early civilizations of the world. It was at the beginning of this century that the remains of the Indus Valley Civilization were discovered. Some of the sites discovered revealed the existence of a highly advanced people thousands of years ago in this region. These people had achieved a high degree of material life with varied occupations and complex institutions. Therefore, this early culture is described as a civilization.

1.2 Why is it called Harappan Culture?

Initially historians called this civilization the Indus Valley Civilization. But of late historians prefer to call it the Harappan Culture. Most of the sites of this civilization discovered earlier were in the Indus Valley only. The sites included Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. But in recent years, a large number of sites belonging to this civilization have been found in areas far away from the Indus Valley. For example, the sites at Kalibangan and Lothal revealed features similar to those of the Indus Valley. Therefore, historians feel that the name Indus Valley Civilization is not appropriate. Further, most of these sites have many similarities to the urbanized culture of the people of Harappa, the first site of this culture to be discovered in 1921. Therefore, this civilization is called the Harappan Culture.

1.3 Extent of Harappan Culture

The shaded area shown in the **fig 1.1** is the extent of the Harappan Culture. It covered parts of Punjab, Haryana, Sindh, Baluchistan, Gujarat, Rajasthan and the fringes of western Uttar Pradesh. It extended

from Jammu in the north to the Narmada estuary in the south and from the Makran coast of Baluchistan in the west to meet in the north-east. It covered an area of about 1,299,600 square kilometers. It covered a much larger area than the ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian culture did.

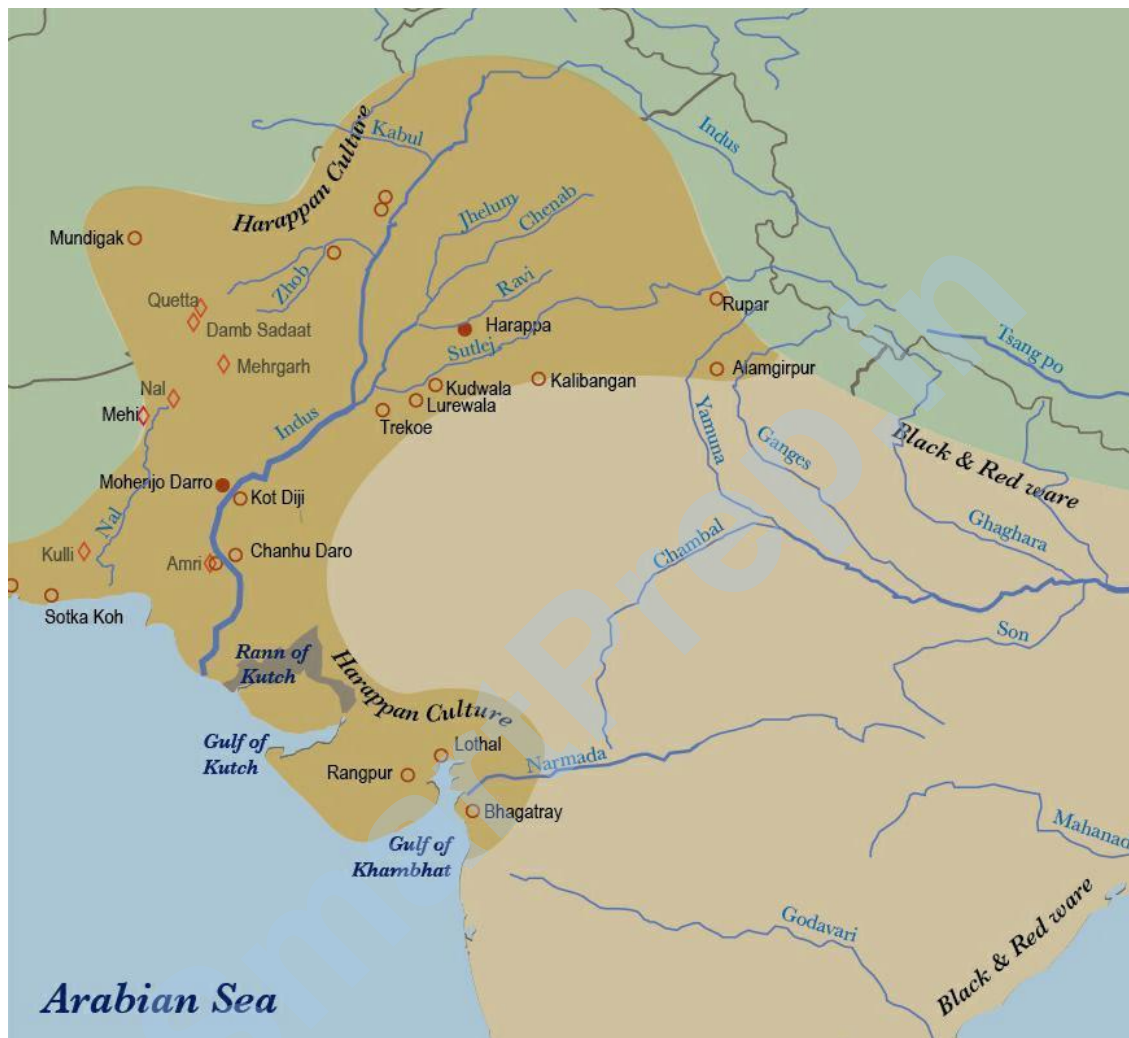


Figure 1.1 Extent of Harappan Culture

1.4 Antiquity of the Civilization

The Harappan Culture existed between 2500 B.C and 1800 B.C. Its mature phase lay between 2200 B.C and 2000 B.C. The Harappan Culture is a Bronze Age civilization. Copper and bronze tools were used extensively during that period.

1.5 Geographical Factors which helped the growth of this Civilization

The geographical conditions in the Indus Valley must have been quite conducive for human settlement and progress. This region today is very dry and not too fit for human habitation. The Indus seals are found to have figures of a variety of plants and animals which can exist only in moderately wet conditions. Therefore, it is assumed that the climatic conditions were quite moderate. Added to this, the vast plains along the Indus were very fertile. The floods deposited rich alluvial soil on these plains every year and irrigated the lands. These geographical factors greatly helped the prosperity of Indus habitations.

1.6 Town Planning

One of the most outstanding features of the Indus cities was that they were well planned. The excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro have shown a lot of evidence of this. The city had two parts, i.e., the citadel and the outer city. The citadel was built on an elevated area. The outer city was at a lower level. The roads were wide and straight cutting each other at right angles. They also had a perfect drainage system. Each house had a well-constructed sink from which water flowed into the underground drains. These drains along the road were covered by loose bricks. Houses were of different types, small and large. Burnt bricks were extensively used. Houses were also provided with wells and bathrooms. The other important structures found in the Indus cities include the Great Bath and pillared hall at Mohenjo-Daro, the dockyard at Lothal and the granary at Harappa. These structures stand testimony to the architectural skills of the Indus people.

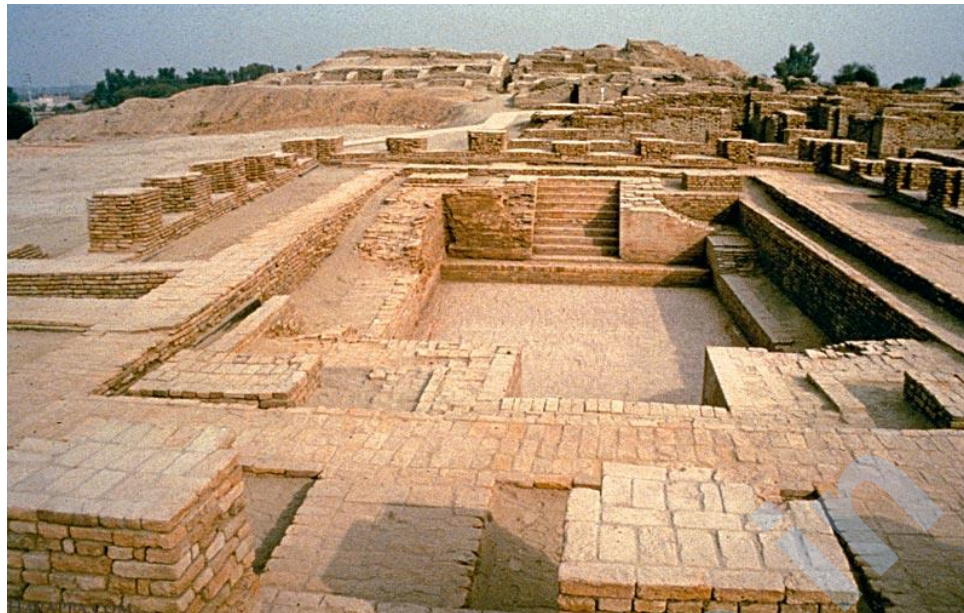


Figure 1.2 Great Bath of Mohenjo-Daro

1.7 Social Life

- a. **Social classes:** The fact that there were different types of houses indicates that there were different social classes. Trading being the major activity, the merchants seem to have formed the upper class. The artisans and farmers might be the common people.
- b. **Dress :** No definite account is available about the type of dresses used by the Indus people. The discovery of a number of spindles suggests the use of cotton and woolen fabrics. The bronze statues too give some information about the dress of the people. The women wore a skirt and an upper garment. Men wore a band of cloth around their loin and a loose garment over their shoulders.
- c. **Ornaments:** A large number of ornaments like necklaces, armlets, finger-rings, bangles, etc., have been found from these sites. These were made of gold, silver, ivory and precious stones. Some of the ornaments were also made of shells, bones, copper and bronze. It appears that both men and women wore ornaments. The statues of a dancing girl and a bearded man suggest that these people used hair pins and knew different hair styles.
- d. **Recreation and amusements:** The people of Harappa seem to have had a great liking for dance and music. They were also familiar

with indoor games like dice. A large number of terracotta toys were found in Mohenjo-Daro.

1.8 Economic Conditions

- a. **Agriculture:** Agriculture was the main occupation of the Indus people. They grew wheat, barley, peas and in some places rice. They not only produced enough for themselves but also for trade. They did not irrigate their lands by canals. The annual flood provided enough moisture to grow crops. Fields were ploughed using a wooden ploughshare. We are not sure whether animals were used.
- b. **Domestication of animals:** On the basis of the Indus seals, it can be said that a large number of animals including goats, buffaloes, oxen, elephants, dogs and camels were domesticated. But the Harappans seem not to have been familiar with the horse.
- c. **Crafts:** The Harappan people were good craftsmen. Bronze work had reached a degree of perfection. Brick-making and masonry were other important occupations. Pottery made on potter's wheel was decorated with different designs and painted red and black. Spinning and weaving too were a common craft.
- d. **Trade:** The urban culture and highly specialized manufacturing activity suggest that the Harappan cities had a flourishing trade. There was flourishing internal trade between the cities. The river Indus served as the high waterway through which most of this trade was carried out. They also traded with Mesopotamian cities. Many Harappan seals have been found from Mesopotamian cities. They exported grain, jewellery and pottery and imported tin copper and precious stones.

1.9 Art of Writing

The Indus seals are a unique source available to us to know about the Harappan culture. They are small rectangular tablets of terracotta on which some figures of plants, animals, etc. are drawn. There is some kind of pictorial writing too on them. About 1500 such seals have been found so far. Since this pictorial script has not been deciphered yet our knowledge about the Harappans is largely limited to those pictures only.



Figure 1.3 Harappan Seals

1.10 Religious Practices

We do not have any specific information about the religious beliefs of the Harappan people. However, on the basis of archaeological finds we can come to certain conclusions. No temples have been found from any of the Harappan sites. Figurines resembling a female deity have been found. They suggest worship of Mother Goddess. A seal with a male figure sitting in a lotic posture with a trident-like headgear, surrounded by animals, has been found. This has a lot of similarities with Shiva. From this it is figured that the Harappans might be worshipping Shiva.

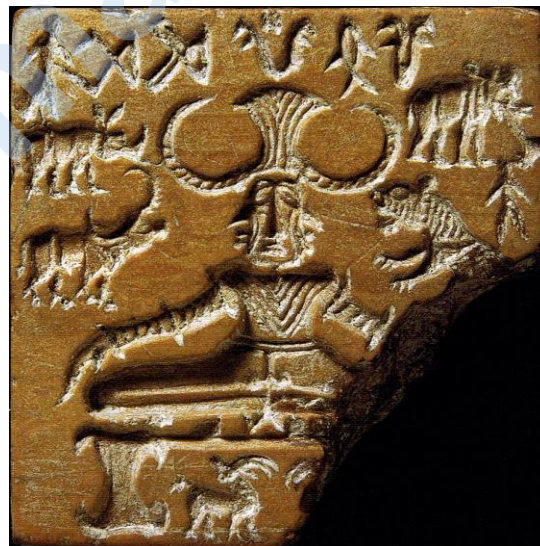


Figure 1.4 Seal of Pashupati

1.11 Political Organisation

As in the case of religion, we are equally ignorant of the political life of the Harappans. One thing we can be sure of is that absence of temples suggests this. Since trading was the major activity, political authority might have been in the hands of the urban trading class.

1.12 Decline

The Harappan Culture lasted for about a thousand years and collapsed by about 1800 BC. This coincides with the advent of the Aryans in India. The exact reason for the decline of this civilization is not known. These cities might have got destroyed in conflicts with the Aryans. But the generally accepted view among historians is that a gradual change in climatic conditions rendered the region inhospitable and caused its decline. Some people also believe that natural calamities like floods or earthquakes might have caused its destruction.

1.13 Practice Questions

- Why the Indus Valley Civilization is called the Harappan Culture?
- Describe the type of climate that might have existed in the Indus Valley 5000 years ago.
- Make a list of the animals known to the Harappan people.
- How did Harappans irrigate their lands?
- Mention the important features of the Harappan cities.
- What features of the Harappan cities are comparable with those of the modern cities?
- Why is our knowledge about the Harappans limited?
- What do you know about the religious beliefs and practices of the Harappans?
- Describe the Harappan seals. How are they useful to us?
- What in your view was the reason for the decline of the Harappan Culture?