

4-1-2011

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### Recommended Citation

Javonillo, Charise Joy (2010) "Indus Valley Civilization: Enigmatic, Exemplary, and Undeciphered," *ESSAI*: Vol. 8, Article 21.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol8/iss1/21>

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## Indus Valley Civilization: Enigmatic, Exemplary, and Undeciphered

by Charise Joy Javonillo

(Anthropology 1120)

### Introduction

**A**mong the four great ancient civilizations of the Old World, the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) has the distinction of being the most enigmatic of this notable group (Kenoyer and Meadow, 2000). Mindful of the inevitable comparisons to its better represented, recorded, and studied Western contemporaries Mesopotamia and Egypt, four major comparable aspects of the Indus Valley will be presented and discussed in this review. Beginning with settlement patterns, special attention is paid to Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro and specifically to the urban layout of these two exemplary cities. Second is the Indus' sphere of influence as suggested by possible interaction with Mesopotamia, including motifs found in artwork and seals. Next is a synthesis and discussion about the current debate over the Indus Valley script and its decipherment. Lastly, possible theories are reviewed regarding the collapse and disappearance of the IVC. By focusing on the standard components of urbanization, expansion, interaction, language, and decline that are attributed to the trajectory of ancient cultures, it is hoped that the uniqueness of the IVC becomes evident and invites further discussion and investigation.

### Discovery

The story of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization developed gradually. It does not enter the archaeological record until 1924 when Sir John Marshall began excavations at Harappa. Awareness of Harappan remains however, goes back to the nineteenth century. Most notable are Charles Masson and Sir Alexander Cunningham. Best described as a deserter and wanderer, Charles Masson stumbled upon the remains of Harappa in the late 1820s. He had no idea of the significance of what he found but proceeded to record his site observations. These would be published in a book entitled *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and The Panjab* (Masson 1996). Over four decades later, Sir Alexander Cunningham would briefly excavate the site, uncovering seals of which the Indus Valley would become famous for. In these two instances, there were literal pieces of Indus culture strewn around but were yet to be fully understood within their proper contexts. All that changed in the 1920s when Sir John Marshall announced the discovery of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro in *Illustrated London News*. Excavations began. Mohenjo-Daro's history of excavation, it should be noted, was more limited with consideration given to conservation and weathering concerns. The late Dr. George F. Dales, Jr. of the University of California at Berkeley led the last major excavation of the site in 1964-65 (Kenoyer 2005). Pakistani archaeologists and conservators played a larger part in the stewardship of their heritage in the 1980s (Kenoyer 2005). More recent archaeological work has been under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which deemed Mohenjo-Daro a World Heritage Site in 1980.

### Phases

It must be noted that the stages of Harappan cultural evolution used in this review will be the "Early Harappan-Mature Harappan" model, coupled with the Transitional Stage. Attention will be paid to the Mature Harappan phase due to Mohenjo-Daro's description as a "Mature Harappan" settlement. This was between 2500 to 1700 B.C.E. (Possehl 2002).

### Location

Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro are the two major examples given when referring to the IVC. These two settlements are located in the north and south respectively. To the northeast in the Punjab and by a former route of the Ravi tributary lies Harappa. Situated on the Indus River flood plain to the west and the Ghaggar-Hakra River, Mohenjo-Daro lies in the Sind province in what is today Pakistan (Figure 1). Like Mesopotamia and Egypt, the IVC was a river valley civilization. Rivers play an enormous part in the impetus and sustainability of large and complex settlements, providing water for agricultural development on the fertile flood plains (Coulborn 1959; Hawkes 1973). Cities of the Indus Valley were no different. These communities had to negotiate and organize their surroundings in order for their burgeoning metropolises to flourish.

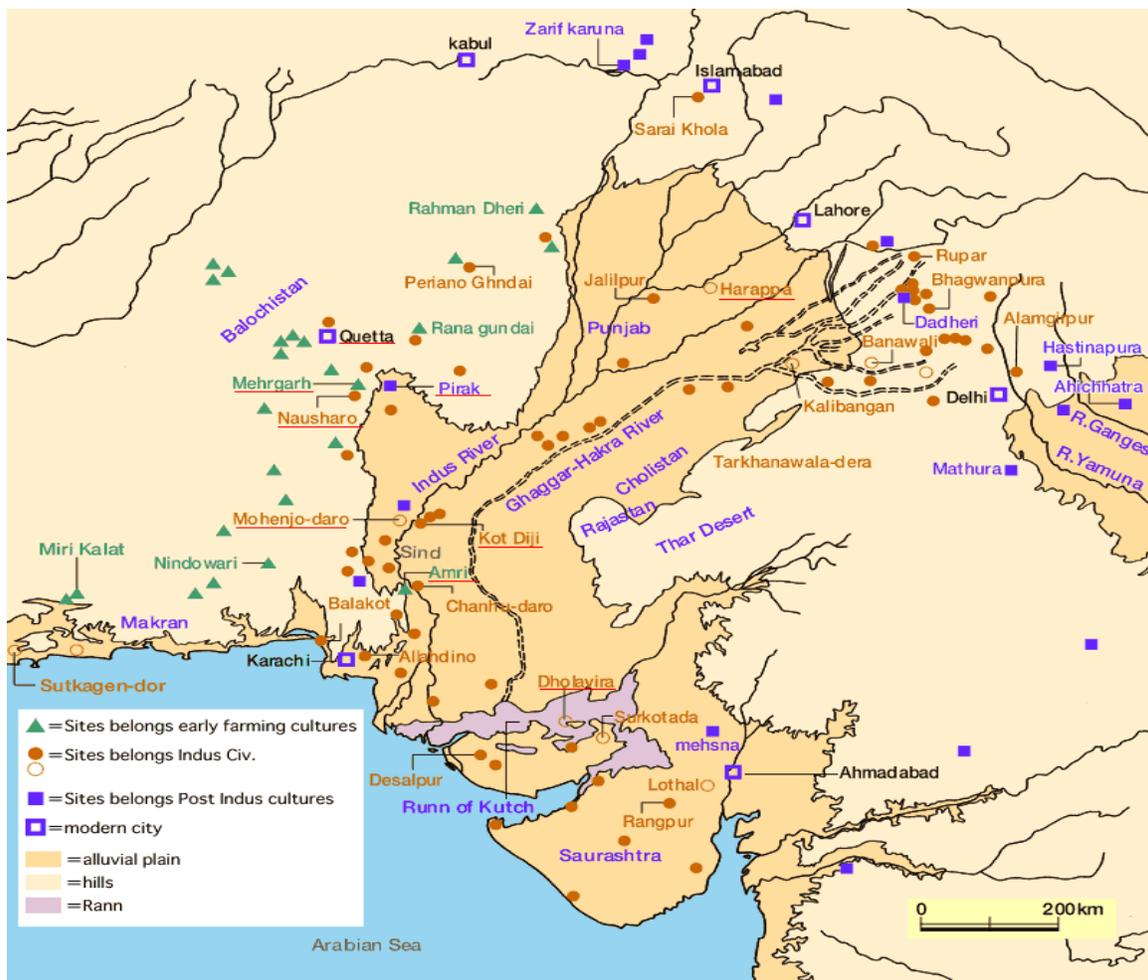


Figure 1 - Map of the Indus Civilization (Tokai University 2000)

### Urban Life: Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro

Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro hold the distinction of being both the civilization's two largest and best known cities amongst over a hundred smaller sites. The Indus Valley is also known as the Harappan due to Harappa's prominence as the type city for the region. Not to be overshadowed, Mohenjo-Daro holds the position as the largest metropolis in the third millennium with 2.5 million people at its peak (see Dobbs 2007). As such, archaeologists have studied these cities as representative models of Indus Valley life. Manifest in their metropolitan design, the Indus people present themselves as innovators of urban planning, which made existence efficient and

maintainable. Mohenjo-Daro offers the best examples of three characteristics of Indus urban living: the general grid-pattern organization and platforms; the water and drainage systems; and the conspicuous absence of large monuments.

The organization of the city is centered on the direction of the streets. Major streets ran from north to south and east to west (Kenoyer 2003: 379). Such a blueprint has often been described as a “grid pattern.” It is certainly structured in an orderly fashion but it is hardly uniform (Possehl 2002: 101). Aside from the wider streets, the city rested atop platforms in response to the violent flooding of the Indus River. Such measures point to not only a considerable amount of planning done on the part of the original engineers, but commitment of time and resources.

Another impressive aspect of the city is its water and drainage systems. All neighborhoods had provisions for both drainage and wastewater management within the houses. Houses contained platforms for bathing with sloping surfaces that allowed the water to flow out through a drain in the wall (Possehl 2002).

A conspicuous absence of an “obvious palace or imposing temple, but only simple public halls; not one massive tomb [no great mounds, pyramids]; and not even any large statuary” is a unique feature of IVC (Thompson 2006: 2). Thus, it has been suggested that without large monumental works and public projects, the Indus Valley civilization was a stateless society. However, the lack of evident governing mechanisms for socio-political organization does not preclude and/or undermine societal control or stratification. As, ironically, the Great Bath (Figure 2) was a place “where the elites could look down upon the workings of the city and the lower and middle classes” (Possehl 2002: 195).

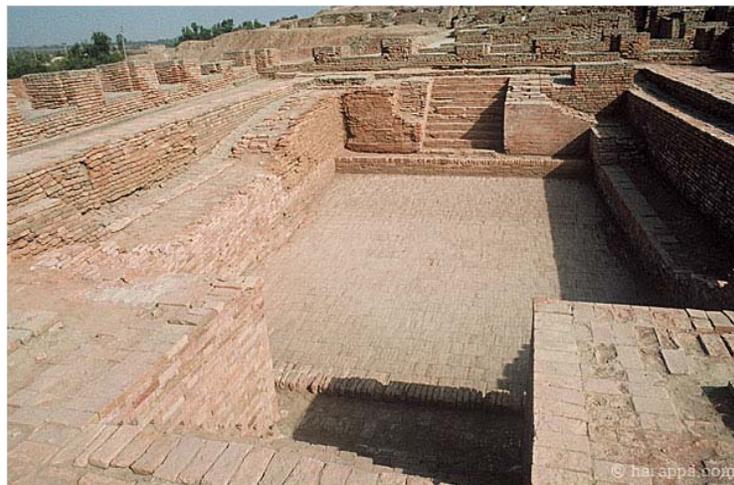


Figure 2 - The Mound of the Great Bath (Kenoyer 1996)

### Discussion

One must look at the Indus Valley cities as microcosms of the Indus Valley Civilization. Therefore, using the example of Mohenjo-Daro, it is suggested that the society is capable of complex structuring and planning, with an emphasis on hygiene as indicated by the extensive water system. But the absence of any concrete signs of overarching political authority is unusual. If the non-existence of a state is true, it may explain the Indus’ diminished status compared to Mesopotamia and Egypt in power and, by extension, notoriety.

The presence of cities often invites the assumption of a state. The presence of a state is denoted by “control over people and territory exercised from a centre through specialized apparatuses of power: 1) military 2) administrative (mostly tax-raising) 3) legal and 4) ideological” (Maisels 1999: 221). Mesopotamia and Egypt not only had centralizing authorities but birthed empires

because of them. Empires mean deliberate expansion. This is premised on an agenda of might and prosperity and bolstered by national identification and unity. Once again, the Indus Valley did not follow such a course. Using the microcosm of the Indus Valley city, the macrocosm of the civilization reveals that the people were not inclined to conquer. Perhaps this was due to the absence of a state to act as unifier and/or instigator. Being stateless (or lacking a centralizing authority) the IVC thus should not be viewed as an entirely homogeneous entity. Indus Valley culture exists but its dissemination should be viewed on a city to city basis (similar to ancient Mayan culture). Furthermore, the lack of a state certainly did not prohibit expansion into other territories beyond the Indus Valley.

### Expansion and Interaction

At its axis, the range of the Indus “extended for 1000 miles from the Sutkagen Dor near the shores of the Arabian Sea 300 miles west of Karachi to the neighborhood of Rupar at the foot of the Simla Hills” (Wheeler 1967: 62). With such a wide geographical scope the opportunity for contact and trade with other peoples was inevitable. The name given to this system of exchange and interaction is the Middle Asian Interaction Sphere (MAIS) (Possehl 2007). The most prominent of the Indus Valley’s trade partners was Mesopotamia. Evidence of this relationship is exhibited on seals, beads, and ceramics also mentioned in Mesopotamian historical record. Obviously the Indus Valley Civilization was not referred to as the “Indus Civilization” during the third millennium B.C.E. But, it has been strongly suggested that the land of “Meluhha” referenced in Early Dynastic Period Mesopotamian texts was in fact the Indus Valley. Five historical observations would lead to this conclusion (see Possehl 2002: 219). If Meluhha was indeed the Indus, it would certainly explain the appearance of Harappan material culture in Mesopotamia.

Indus seals are best represented amongst the material culture found within the Mesopotamian record (Kenoyer 2003). Seals similar to Figure 3 featured notably. Also present are beads of etched carnelian beads found at Ur (Sumer), Kish, Akkad, and Iran. Etching on beads began with the Indus Civilization (Possehl 2002: 222). Cylindrical and segmented faience beads are found in large numbers at Indus sites, though these designs died with the decline of the Indus. Further inventory would yield carved steatite figures with *zebus* (animals indigenous to the Indian subcontinent), as well as dice, sherds with Indus script graffiti, and black slipped jars. Despite all of the evidence of Mesopotamian-Indus interaction found in Mesopotamia, there is very little to suggest such a relationship in the Indus Valley itself. Seals from the Persian Gulf, western metal types, animal headed pins, copper axe-adzes, and terra-cotta heads with square beards have been found in Indus settlements. Yet none match the capacity of Indus material found in Mesopotamia.



Figure 3 - “Unicorn” seal similar to the ones found in Kish (Sumer) (Kenoyer 1996)

### Discussion

The MAIS stretched from the Indian subcontinent to the Mediterranean, touching the shores of the Caspian and central Asia to the northeast along the way. Many cultures converged, including Mesopotamia and the IVC. The term “international” is inappropriate in this instance because the Indus was not a ‘nation’. However, such extensive connections across cultural lines and a vast landmass certainly warrant descriptions that ‘international’ evoke. For all their seemingly insular nature, the Indus Valley peoples were certainly capable of mediation and negotiations with peoples from Mesopotamia and elsewhere. As seen with Indus artifacts found in Mesopotamia and through the scant Mesopotamian material found in the Indus, there is no doubt of the fluidity and potential influence of Indus culture on other peoples. This was also the environment of which Indus seals came into prominence as forms of identification, communication, and control.

### Indus Script: Description and Form

Though decipherment is not definitively agreed upon, the Indus script nonetheless is not devoid of form. The Indus script is pictographic. The exact number of signs in the script has yet to be determined, though the general consensus is that there are at least a few hundred (Possehl 2002; Robinson 1995). Another virtual consensus amongst scholars is that the script is most likely ‘logo-syllabic’. Comparing it to the twenty-six letters in the alphabet and the characters in Chinese and Japanese, it is concluded that having potentially a “few hundred” signs “is too many...for an alphabet or syllabery” (Robinson 1995: 148).

In trying to decipher the meanings of these pictographs three considerations must be made aside from the number of signs. First, is the length of the inscriptions, from one sign to twenty-six (Possehl 2002: 132). The most commonly found examples tend to be one line but some have gone up to seven (Possehl 2002:132). Second, sign frequency is important. Classifying signs as separate or variations of one sign is a point of contention for many decipherers (Possehl 2002: 132). Third, is the context of which these inscriptions are found. Signs appear on various objects, though their brevity is still an issue (Kenoyer 2003; Possehl 2002; Robinson 1995).



Figure 4 - Seals inscribed with Indus script (Kenoyer 1996)

### Language or not?

The decipherment of the Indus script is one of the most hotly contested endeavors in Harappan archaeology. Two major scholars in the debate are Asko Parpola of the University of Helsinki and comparative historian Steve Farmer. Parpola is a proponent of the ‘Indus-Script’ thesis

(Patel, 2010), while Steve Farmer and his colleagues have come out as its major opponents (Patel, 2010).

Since the 1960s, Parpola has claimed that he and his team had successfully deciphered the script as being derived from a form of pre-Dravidian. Using the “fish” sign “min” /meen/, which means both “fish” and “star” in Dravidian, coupled with Tamil cognates, Parpola was able to decipher more words associated with other astral bodies (Robinson 1995:148) Farmer (2004) counters Parpola’s claims and methodology. He critiques Parpola’s original use of incipient computer analysis and points to the brevity of the signs as evidence that they are mostly likely not encoding a language. Also, the perishable media that is used is indicative of writing being an unimportant aspect of Indus Valley society (see Farmer *et al.* 2004). Parpola (2008: 113) answered Farmer’s critiques by admitting “...we cannot expect complete sentences in seals and other types of objects preserved (cf. Parpola 1994: 87). But even written noun phrases qualify as language-based script.”

### Discussion

Both Parpola and Farmer make compelling arguments supporting and opposing the Indus Valley script thesis. But simply, there is no consensus as to the exact meanings of the symbols. Thus, the language that the script may or may not represent is still pending. As for the theory that the script is Dravidian based, a find in 2006 of a hand-axe inscribed with Indus symbols found in the Tamil Nadu region may be evidence of such a derivation (Subramanian 2006; see Figure 5). The absence of the equivalent of a Rosetta Stone makes the study of the script both frustrating and rewarding. If decipherment is never totally agreed upon (in terms of the criteria of a spoken language and not so much “meanings”), then the Indus Valley would be one of the largest non-literate society the world has ever known. Further investigation into the structure of language and writing would make the evidence and previous arguments presented in this discussion a bit more obvious. Having an understanding of the nature of language is to come to a realization of its truly complex and integral role in identity building within the human experience.



Figure 5 - The Neolithic polished stone celt (hand-held axe) with the Indus valley script found at Sembian-Kandiyur village, near Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu (Vino John 2006)

### Theories of Decline

The collapse and disappearance of the Indus Civilization around 1900 B.C.E. is another mystery that has yet to be definitively solved. Several theories have been put forth over the years; some have fallen to the wayside. Based off of evidence from specific sites, about nine theories have been proposed (see Kostman 1996). One early theory was the Indo-Aryan invasion suggested by Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1966). This was a theory later rejected by Wheeler himself, as mounting evidence began to suggest that the very structure of Indus cities gave no signs of invasion of any sort.

With better excavations and interpretations, alternative theories emerged. Theories developed by George F. Dales, Jr. of the University of California at Berkeley, hydrologist Robert L. Raikes, and Pakistani archaeologist M.R. Mughal (as cited in Kostman 1996) tended to revolve around the flooding or rerouting of rivers.

### **Discussion**

As with the other aspects of IVC, there is no one explanation to attribute to the collapse and disappearance of the civilization. In fact, the non-uniformity of causes (at least in terms of explaining massive, unilateral decline) and the archaeological record posits the assertion that there was no actual collapse. Indeed many important sources and authorities on the Indus often use the description “transformation” when expressing what became of the settlements and peoples after the Mature Harappan period in the mid-second millennium. Although there is an equifinality of possibilities, recent research has focused on the role of climatic changes which may have precipitated abandonment of settlements due to the rise or fall of rivers (Possehl 2002). Natural causes, it seems, have usurped any human-based explanations. Ultimately the “collapse” of the IVC is over exaggerated.

### **Conclusion(s)**

Certainly there is still much that is to be uncovered and understood about the IVC. To counteract the hindrance of geography and Western biases, it is imperative that archaeologists and scholars find the means to effectively disseminate the knowledge and importance of this ancient culture. If the standard of studying a civilization is its accomplishments and scope, the name “Indus” should be just as prominent as Mesopotamia and Egypt. However it must be noted that though the Indus Civilization should be given its due in the pantheon of ancient societies, it is also slightly misleading to use such an all encompassing name. Ironically, referring to the Indus as a “civilization” implies a uniformity that may not have existed in the sense of an identity equivalent to nation-states. Made evident in the path of its decline, it was individual cities that regressed and faltered. By reason of their being the first covered, best preserved and sophisticatedly organized, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro are in reality a limited sample to work off of in terms of characterizing an entire region. No doubt do they exemplify Indus Valley ingenuity at its best, but it has been seen that variations existed throughout the region and during different times.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am forever grateful to Dale F. Simpson, Jr., who thought that my work was worth publishing and who solidified my desire to become an anthropologist. I would also like to thank my friend and fellow ancient civilizations enthusiast Paul Gauthier at the University of Chicago. His scholarly input and editing skills are the likes of which I can only hope to emulate one day. And to my other anthropology professors Dr. Alex Bolyanatz and Dr. Michael Dietz, who taught me the complexity and beauty of the human creature at the cultural, psychological, and biological levels.

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