

# Unit 7: Indus Valley

## Ancient Civilizations Options

c.3300BCE – 1300BCE

### Period Overview

The Indus is a river which runs through what is now known as Pakistan. The Valley is a fertile area around the river basin which spreads across Pakistan, and into modern-day India and Afghanistan. The civilization which developed in the valley is considered to have been very advanced for its time, but less is known about it than other contemporary civilizations. This is partly because attempts to deciphering the writing system used in the region have been unsuccessful. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence shows that hundreds of towns became established in the area, with common features which indicate that they formed part of a common civilization. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, two of the largest cities – Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro – have been uncovered.

### Life in the Indus Valley

The Indus Valley civilization is unusual in that excavations have been unable to identify any certain palaces or leaders' residences. Many of the residents of Indus Valley cities were tradesmen or craftsmen, with various pieces of pottery and other evidence having been found. The cities themselves were often walled, although it isn't certain that these walls were intended for defence purposes; they may have been to prevent flooding. The culture was certainly mathematically astute, being one of the first known to have a precise measuring system for weights. It also used bricks for building work that were formed in standard ratios, and had a drainage system which had drains of a steady gradient allowing waste to be transported away from homes.

The civilization also used transport to trade goods, including wheeled vehicles and using the river system to travel across wide areas.

Because of the inability to decipher the writing system, less is known about this civilization than some others, but clues are provided by the seals, figurines and buildings uncovered.

### Changing Times

By the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE communities had begun to form into towns in the Greater Indus Valley along the rivers. These peoples (often called Harappan, after one of the main cities) were among the first known in the world to introduce sanitation systems to cities, with a network of drains taking waste water away from homes.

The civilization is known to have traded both around the local area and with communities as far away as Mesopotamia.

Relatively little is known about the changes in the society, and indeed it is not certain what led to its decline in the second millennium BCE. It is now thought that climate may have had a part to play, with flooding, rivers failing, or political troubles causing problems. Archaeological evidence suggests that quality of buildings and materials declined before the broader decline of the civilization. Later the Indo-European speaking peoples, known as Aryan, moved into the area and became more dominant, with much of the previous culture becoming superseded.

### Possible Enquiry Questions

- What were the first civilizations?
- When was the wheel invented?
- How can we find out about history without relying on written evidence?
- What do we know about the world's oldest civilizations?
- Why do cities need sewers and water systems?

### Key Individuals

- It is hard to specify key individuals for this period, since little is known about specific people. One of the most fascinating aspects of study of the civilization is the investigation to identify rulers.



**Mohenjo-daro excavated city<sup>7</sup>**

### What has the Indus Valley Civilization ever done for us?

It's hard to be certain of the direct impact of the Harappan societies on modern life, as it was lost and forgotten. However, it shows how a system of writing was important in an urban civilization.

It is possible that the Indus Valley was the birthplace of a game very much like modern Chess. Also cubical dice have been found in the area suggesting that perhaps this is where they were first used. It is also the location of the oldest discovered measuring ruler, and for the first known clothing buttons!

### Big Concepts

The Indus Valley civilization raises fascinating questions about how societies are organised and methods of **government**. It is considered that the civilization was perhaps more egalitarian than others such as Ancient Egypt of around the same time.

It can also be used as a case study of how historians use **evidence** in forms other than written, especially when little is fully understood about the form of writing.

### Places to Visit:

Inevitably there are relatively few places to visit in the UK relating to the Indus Valley civilization. However, some museums do include interesting artefacts:

- [Cambridge University Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology](#), Cambridge
- [British Museum](#), London
- [Ashmolean Museum](#), Oxford

### Timeline of Key Events:

All dates are approximate:

- 5000 BCE** First evidence of religious practice in the Indus Valley area
- 3200 BCE** Some precursors of Indus Script Signs date from this period.
- 3000 BCE** Settlements and small Towns begin to develop in the Indus Valley
- 2600 BCE** Start of 'Mature Period' of the Indus Civilization, with urbanization around the floodplain
- 2600 BCE** Evidence of farmers using ploughs for fields
- 2300 BCE** Indus Valley traders with seals travel to Mesopotamia for trade
- 1800-1900 BCE** Beginning of the decline of the civilization; abandonment of cities
- 1500 BCE** Indus Valley cities are in ruins
- 1920 CE** Archaeological Survey begins large scale excavations after the realisation that the ruined mounds of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa belonged to the same unknown urban civilisation

### Broader Context

- Stonehenge built in Britain c.3000 BCE
- Old Kingdom in Egypt c.2700-2200 BCE
- First Egyptian pyramid built c. 2600 BCE
- Cuneiform writing in Sumer c.2350 BCE
- Bronze Age in Britain in around 2300 BCE
- Completion of Stonehenge, c2200 BCE
- Emergence of Minoan civilization c.2000 BCE
- Early Mayan civilization emerges, c.2000 BCE

### Further Information:

[www.harappa.com](http://www.harappa.com) has a section especially for primary teachers at [www.harappa.com/teach](http://www.harappa.com/teach)

BBC Indus Valley: <http://bit.do/bbcindus>

TimeMaps: <http://bit.do/timemaps>

Ancient India website: <http://bit.do/ancientindia>

Ancient.EU website: <http://bit.do/ancienteu>

<sup>7</sup>Mohenjo-Daro [<http://bit.do/mohenjo>] image by Saqib Qayyum is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License. The licence can be viewed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>