Ancient Agrarian Societies: Indus River Valley

By Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

More clues would have been nice, but ancient artifacts from the Indus River Valley (3500-1700 BCE), plus some current technology, still tell a story of big cities and a sophisticated society.

1160L
Introduction
The society of the Indus River Valley (now Pakistan and northern India) was rediscovered by archaeologists in the late nineteenth century. Substantial digs that began in the 1920s have provided lots of artifacts from the people who lived here, but their writing remains a mystery. Therefore, we are left to make conclusions based on the evidence that we do have, namely archaeological, anthropological, artistic, and more recently, genetic studies.

What we do know is that the major cities of this society were well organized and technologically advanced. These agricultural communities shared common bonds based upon religious or spiritual beliefs and language and trade networks. The society appears to have suffered a decline around 1700 BCE. Historians and archaeologists continue to debate the causes of this decline.

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro (c. 3500—1700 BCE)
The two largest cities of the Indus River Valley society that have been unearthed are Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, both located in modern-day Pakistan. While the cities are about 400 miles from each other, they have interesting similarities. Some areas of the cities are constructed on mounds that provided protection from flooding and could have also been used as defensive positioning. The streets were laid out in a grid with elaborate well systems to deliver fresh water to the inhabitants. An advanced drainage system could dump sewage outside of the city near the agricultural fields. Neither city had a central palace or temple structure, so it’s possible this society was run by a number of wealthy families rather than a central ruler. The production and distribution of goods seemed to be the top priority of those who lived in this society. Trade networks were extensive and goods traveled back and forth from the Indus cities to local areas and to more distant locations such as Mesopotamia.
Each city’s population has been estimated from 40,000 to 60,000, and with numbers that high farming was an essential priority, if they were to feed everyone. The area that these culturally connected cities encompassed was much larger than the contemporary city-states of Mesopotamia and the society that had formed in Egypt.

Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro. Constructed of mud bricks, the pool area was painted with tar, which acted as a water sealer. The pool was supplied with water from nearby wells. This may have been used for religious purposes or ritual cleansings. By Saqib Qayyum, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Both cities began as small agrarian communities that also produced handcrafted items such as beads and metal work. These cities grew over time to become important trading areas. As their wealth grew, so did their size. More mounds were added with structures for producing goods, along with residential areas. They put in roads that allowed wheeled carts to move through the city for trade, and some expanded to two-lane roads that could accommodate even more traffic. (Yes, traffic, four thousand years ago, already begging the question whether or not progress is a good thing.)

Writing, Trade, and Spiritual Beliefs

The most significant forms of writing that we have of these societies also have to do with trade. Thousands of stamp seals\(^1\) have been found that have a variety of animals and decorations on them. While the script on these seals has yet to be deciphered (translated), some images show up more than others. More than 65 percent of the seals found depict a unicorn. Other seals with real animals have also been uncovered. Archaeologists believe that the animal motifs represented a wealthy family or person. These would have been used to mark their goods for trading purposes. It’s possible that some of the seals had religious significance. For example, the seated male figure below that is shown with a horned headdress appears often. He may be a god but we don’t know for certain.

---

\(^1\) Stamp seals were carvings made in stone that were then used to stamp (make impressions) in soft clay that was then hardened.
The same theory holds true for the female figure (shown below at right) that is strangling two tigers. Archaeologists, however, haven’t found any evidence of a central temple for the worship of gods. It may be that religious beliefs were more personal for these communities. Without a translation of the Indus script, scholars can only speculate. These symbols and images bear similarities with those of other cultures in the area. The image of a god-like figure strangling wild beasts such as tigers can also be found in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. This may be evidence of the sharing of ideas and beliefs through trade networks.

Researchers have also found pottery with some of the same markings as those on seals, suggesting an additional connection between the seals and wealthy families involved in trade. Furthermore, small tablets with the Indus script and symbols have been found. Linguists believe that these could be a numbering or accounting system. Interestingly, a lot of the tablets were broken in half, so they may have been business contracts where each party received half of the tablet as proof of the transaction—a rock receipt.

Trade networks were certainly at their height between 2600 and 1900 BCE. A multitude of items from different societies, dating to that period, have been found in the region. The beautiful blue stone called Lapis lazuli and metals such as gold, silver, and tin have all turned up in Harappa. These would have traveled from areas such as modern-day Afghanistan and Iran. Harappan pottery, seals, and weights have been found in many contemporary societies such as those in Mesopotamia. From about 1900 BCE, some of the main cities experienced changes in habitation and population, though despite more evidence discovered in recent decades, historians still don’t know why these changes occurred. Or rather—surprise, surprise—they don’t agree.

---

2 According to most scholars, the Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest surviving work of literature (2100 BCE).
Decline? Invasion? Transition?

The inhabitants of Mohenjo-daro abandoned the city about the same time Harappa declined (or at least deurbanized). According to environmental historians and geographers, the river that supplied fresh water to Mohenjo-daro changed course, and that would have been a good reason to abandon the city. Archaeologists have noticed a decline in the maintenance of drains and roads in Harappa from about 1900 BCE. They believe that this may have been the result of resources being spread too thin due to the effects of decreased trade, overpopulation, and climate change.

For many years, scholars theorized that Indo-Europeans invaded the Indus River Valley region. We do have evidence of a group of Indo-Europeans from the Eurasian steppes moving into the Indian subcontinent. They brought their language, knowledge, and the use of horses and chariots, which were pretty high-tech at the time. Modern genetic studies\(^3\) show that, rather than invading, the Indo-Europeans migrated and assimilated with the indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent. But they did not cause the population to decline or shift, as far as we can tell.

Today, the most accepted theory is that a combination of environmental factors such as climate change, shifting tectonic plates, and a change in the course of rivers contributed to the abandonment of some cities like Mohenjo-daro and the shift in population of others like Harappa. The Indus River Valley communities did not die out or collapse. Populations migrated in some areas and trade declined but the culture endured and transformed for many more years.

\(^3\) Note that these genetic studies can be controversial. Additional data is most certainly needed before making conclusions about these ancient migrations.
Ancient Agrarian Societies: Indus River Valley

Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

Sources


Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

Bridgette Byrd O’Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.

Image credits

Cover: Graphical depiction in the museum / Soban / CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Graphical_decoration_in_the_museum.jpg


Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro. Constructed of mud bricks, the pool area was painted with tar, which acted as a water sealer. The pool was supplied with water from nearby wells. This may have been used for religious purposes or ritual cleansings. By Saqib Qayyum, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_bath_view_Mohenjodaro.JPG#/media/File:Great_bath_view_Mohenjodaro.JPG


Female figure: Indus River Valley seal depicting a figure (goddess) strangling two lions. Housed at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahala Museum, India. By Ismoon, CC0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Figure_between_two_tigers_Mold_of_Seal_Indus_valley_civilization.jpg#/media/File:Figure_between_two_tigers_Mold_of_Seal_Indus_valley_civilization.jpg

Ancient Agrarian Societies: Indus River Valley
Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsele.com/about.

The Lexile® Framework for Reading
The Lexile Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.lexile.com.