

## **The Indus valley: Overview of Harappan civilization, Part Two**

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2009

- Continuing the discussion of typical Harappan cities...
  - To the east of the citadel, typically a “lower town”
    - dense domestic area
    - on the natural ground level, lower than the citadel
    - covering a larger area than the citadel
    - houses rebuilt many times in the very same plan, using old walls as foundations for the new ones, much as we saw at Çatal Hüyük
      - excavations show series of superimposed wall bases, not whole walls from one time
  - streets are orderly, appear to be planned
    - that is, laid out by someone with authority to control where families built walls and houses?
      - widest streets run north-south, straight through town
        - narrower secondary streets run east-west, staggered in places (not straight through)
      - some streets have sewage or drainage channels, some covered, with manholes for cleaning!
  - house layout and construction
    - blank walls face the main streets
      - most room complexes face onto central courtyards
    - flat, timber roofs
    - many have stairways indicating use of the roof or a second story
    - most excavated houses in cities like Mohenjo Daro had a room for bathing
      - usually with a floor of water-resistant fired brick, often surrounded by a curb like a shower stall
      - often raised or on second story, with a drain that slopes from the floor through the thick mudbrick wall, emptying onto the drainage channel along the street outside
      - others drain into local underground pits where the water would soak away
      - some have pottery drainpipes
      - some have vertical drains into large ceramic pots set into the floor
        - these are apparently privies (toilets)
    - no running water supply
      - water would have been raised from a well
        - (many houses had their own well)
        - then carried into the bathing room in ceramic pitchers or pots
        - the fired brick floors and drains prevented making mud or eroding the walls
      - this concern with bathing and cleanliness within households may reflect the same ideas as the huge bath on the citadel at Mohenjo Daro
  - relatively speaking, many houses are pretty uniform in size, layout, and features
    - although not all had two stories, and not all had wells
  - but at both Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, there are also rows of single-roomed houses
    - presumably for poorer people

- workers? soldiers? slaves? lower-caste people?
- massive mud brick city wall around at least the citadel; in at least some cases around the lower town, too
  - may be for flood control
    - the lower city of Mohenjo Daro was destroyed by flooding several times
- Often said that there are no obvious temples, monumental sculpture, ziggurats
  - but in the lower town at Mohenjo Daro, an unusually massive building had a “monumental entrance and double stairway, leading to a raised platform on which was found one of the rare stone sculptures - of a seated figure...”
    - generally accepted as a temple, although not on the scale of a Mesopotamian one
    - Harappan sculptures are rare and small
      - the famous priest sculpture from this temple is only 17.5 cm high (under 7 inches)
      - the statue is broken, but even if it had been a full, standing figure, it would have been well under two feet tall
  - possibly a similar “temple” on the citadel
  - the citadel itself might be considered monumental, but it is more like an accumulated tell than an intentionally constructed platform
  - the pillared hall might be considered monumental
  - the “granary” structures may actually be foundations for some other type of large wooden building – like a monumental hall of some kind
- craft specialization
  - many known workshop areas for different crafts
  - stone sculptors can be inferred from the few sculptures
  - ceramic kilns and pottery made on fast wheels imply specialized potters
  - specialists worked copper, bronze, silver, gold
    - copper and goldsmiths' shops
    - tin bronze and arsenic bronze were made by alloying copper
      - axes, chisels, knives, saws, spear points, arrow points
      - copper vessels made from hammered sheet metal pieces
      - cast figurines, carts, etc.
    - gold beads, pendants, amulets, brooches, needles
    - silver vessels hammered from sheet silver; beads
    - lead cakes, plumb-bobs, vases
    - skilled in combining different metals, inlays, etc.
  - uniform stone blades (long, sharp-edged flakes) made from chert (a kind of stone)
  - shell beads and inlays
  - stone bead makers
    - carnelian: agate roasted to produce a red-brown color
    - also extremely small stone beads, which are hard to make and must be used in vast numbers to create a good-sized area of color
    - several large bead workshops or shop districts have been found, where beads were produced in great quantity, representing great amounts of labor
  - textile dyers and weavers noted above

- terracotta (lightly fired clay) figurines
  - some 2000 known
  - male and female humans, animals, wheeled carts, imaginary creatures, etc.
  - some female figurines have headdresses that held small amounts of burning oil
    - like votive candles?
  - what were they for?
    - toys?
    - puppets?
    - ritual uses, like offerings or charms?
  - these might have been made by specialists, but not necessarily
- Dice
  - gambling?
  - divination?
- writing (Mature Harappan period, 2600-2050 BC)
  - unfortunately, it cannot be read
  - mostly, but not exclusively, known from stamp seals
    - used as in Mesopotamia and Egypt, to seal clay
    - sealings often have impressions of cloth or cords on the back, suggesting that they labelled bundles of some kind
    - unlike Mesopotamia, few tablets with writing on them
    - unlike Egypt, very few painted symbols
    - maybe this writing was done mostly on a perishable material like cloth, leaves, bark, etc. that has not been preserved
  - inscriptions on seals and other objects are almost always brief
    - probably labels identifying names or offices, places, contents
  - suggests specialized literate people, as well as specialized seal makers
- religion
  - some parallels with later Indian beliefs suggest that Indus religion may have been the origin (or part of the origin) of Hinduism
  - ritual cleanliness
  - the “priest” figures with their garment off one shoulder
    - in historic times, this was an indication of piety
  - numerous other parallels in iconography on seals, etc.
- trade
  - internal trade (within the Indus)
    - sealings were sometimes made from clay not local to where they were found
      - that is, the sealings were probably put on in one town and the sealed goods shipped to another town, where the sealings were broken off and later found by archaeologists
    - flint from a single region (about 50 km from Mohenjo Daro) was processed near the source into blades, which were traded throughout the Indus system
    - shell goods were also made at two sites and traded widely
    - carnelian beads apparently come from just two sites, etc.
    - that is: site-level specialization of production with wide distribution

- external trade (with “foreigners”)
  - goods imported into the Indus drainage
    - metals: gold, silver, copper, lead
    - stones for jewelry and carving: lapis, turquoise, alabaster, etc.
  - A Harappan lapis trading center in Afghanistan (Shortughai)
    - a plainly Harappan site
    - located about 500 km (300 miles) north of the Harappan culture area, separated from it by very difficult terrain
- Mesopotamian trade
  - according to Sumerian records from the Agade Period (Sargon, 2373-2247 BC) and on through about 1800 BC, Sumerian merchants traded with people from a place called Meluhha, which may have been the Indus region
    - Meluhhan traders provided goods that the Indus region could have produced:
      - ivory, oils, furniture
      - gold, silver, carnelian (a red gemstone)
    - Sumerian tablets record
      - Meluhhan ships docking at Sumerian ports
      - Meluhhans living in various Sumerian cities
      - a Meluhhan town or district at one city
    - the Sumerian records indicate a large volume of trade
      - one describes a shipment from Meluhha that contained 6½ tons of copper
  - Physical evidence of this trade is extremely scanty
    - In the Indus region, just a handful of possibly Sumerian objects or local imitations
      - plus some possible Mesopotamian influence, like several seals showing a figure holding two tigers
    - In Mesopotamia:
      - about two dozen Indus-style seals have been found at Susa and other sites
      - some Harappan style carnelian beads, inlay work, etc.
        - including the long carnelian beads and other jewelry from Puabi's tomb at Ur!
        - Maybe Puabi was from the Indus - a marriage alliance by a Sumerian king...?
    - maybe there is little evidence because most of the goods were perishable, like cotton cloth
  - This trade seems too late to have contributed to the *rise* of Indus civilization
    - Sumerian documents mentioning trade that might be with the Indus first appeared several hundred years *after* the Mature Harappan began in 2600 BC
    - and 400 years after the “Kot Dijian” spread of uniform pottery, copperwork, walled towns, etc.
- social stratification
  - Harappan society looks relatively egalitarian compared to Mesopotamia and Egypt
  - but there is some variation in housing
    - citadel dwellings vs. lower town dwellings
    - houses with or without courtyards, wells, privies
    - rows of one-room houses: barracks or tenements?

- rural village dwellers
- overall, though, there is not much evidence of ostentatiously rich people
- but a lot of evidence of many people, not just a few, living pretty well in the cities
- granaries (warehouses?) suggest accumulation of vast stores of wealth
  - if they were granaries, then some people must have owned or controlled them
  - if not, they were still large, probably public buildings that would have taken concentrated wealth to build and use
- the huge amount of craft specialization and trade suggests that some people had better jobs and more wealth than others
- burial evidence for wealth differences is minor, compared to Mesopotamia or Egypt
  - many people were buried with nothing, sometimes in communal graves
  - at Harappa, the richest burials have up to 24 pots and some jewelry
  - at Lothal and Kalibangan
    - the fanciest burials are in brick chambers up to 4 x 2 m (13 x 6 feet)
    - similar in size to the painted tomb at Hierakonpolis (Naqada II)
  - so the largest, richest Harappan burials seem pretty modest for an urban civilization
  - suggests much less difference in wealth between classes
  - but certain kinds of goods rarely, if ever, turn up in Harappan burials
    - metals and jewelry are rare in burials
    - instead, these are found in caches in holes dug in the floors of houses
    - so wealth items were made, used, and hoarded, but not buried with the dead
    - so the lack of rich burials might not reflect the lack of wealth in life, but rather an idea that wealth items were not appropriate grave goods
      - perhaps they had an ideology of equality or humility in death
      - which may or may not imply equality or humility in life
- caches of goods below floors of houses
  - a copper pot full of copper weapons and tools
  - caches of beads or jewelry
  - suggests that whoever made these caches was better off than those that didn't
  - so that there might have been more variation in wealth than the burials suggest
- seals, sealings, tablets, etc. are concentrated in certain houses
  - one house near Mohenjo Daro's "main street" had 11 seals, tablets, etc. with writing
  - suggests that there were houses of scribes and/or merchants who kept accounts
    - while other people did not
    - maybe the people who used writing in their houses were wealthier, higher status, etc.?
- political organization
  - Settlement hierarchy: pretty clearly at least four levels of site sizes, so the Indus region surpasses the "three-level" requirement for state organization
    - Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, Ganweriwala, Rakhigarhi would be "capitals" or major centers
    - Kalibangan, Kot Diji, etc. would be secondary centers
    - Lothal and others would be smaller, specialized towns
    - and most people would live in tiny hamlets or scattered farms around the countryside

- Total Harappan population in the Indus drainage at least 200,000 by around 2000 BC, and probably much more, divided among perhaps four states
- Decline (Late Harappan, 2050 - 1700 BC)
  - Civilization did not suddenly disappear
    - sophisticated craft production continued: Quetta treasure 1900 BC
  - Several sites in Baluchistan burned around the end of the Mature Harappan period
  - Sprawled skeletons in a street of Mohenjo Daro might indicate warfare
    - but the decline of Harappan civilization is no longer blamed on invasion by foreigners
      - extremely little evidence of anyone else suddenly appearing there
      - but conflict (maybe internal) could have been involved
  - Harappa had a final stylistic phase that seems to reflect some foreign influence from Iran
    - but not a radical replacement or change that might indicate an invasion
  - Nevertheless, by the end of the Late Harappan, the cities were permanently abandoned
    - Sumerian records ceased to mention trade with Meluhha
    - the Harappan tradition largely disappeared
      - people ceased to use the writing system, the system of weights and measures, and some of the imagery that was found on seals and pottery
      - burial traditions changed from extended burials in coffins to secondary burials with bones collected in large ceramic pots
        - presumably indicates a change in religion
    - leaving only echoes in myths and general cultural traits
    - while Sumerian, Egyptian, and Chinese civilizations were known from historical sources,
      - the Harappan civilization was truly lost and forgotten until archaeologists rediscovered it in the 1920s
  - cities might have been abandoned due to...
    - Flooding?
    - Desiccation due to changing rainfall that affected farming, pastoralism, and travel routes?
    - Desiccation due to shift in river courses due to tectonic activity?
    - Introduction of millet, leading to people to move out of cities to better-suited areas?
    - Epidemic disease?
    - Military incursions? (by “Indo-Europeans”?)
- Conclusions
  - when did civilization arise?
    - Neolithic?
    - Early Indus?
    - Kot Diji phase (the last 200 years of the Early Indus period)?
    - Mature Harappan?
  - does uniformity mean strong control and therefore power hierarchy?
    - if so, where are signs of rulers?
    - could traditionalism and/or something like the caste system account for the uniformity?
  - Was this a special case of a relatively egalitarian civilization?
  - What was the role of warfare?

- What was the role of trade?
  - internal vs. external
  - timing; quantity; nature of goods
- Was this civilization “pristine”, partially so, or not at all?