

The Indus valley: Overview of Harappan civilization, Part Two

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- 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?