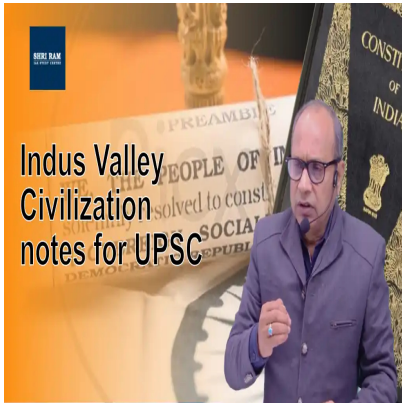




Indus Valley Civilization notes for UPSC

Description

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), also known as the Harappan Civilization, represents one of the world's earliest major urban cultures, flourishing in the northwestern regions of South Asia from around 2500 BCE to 1900 BCE. Its discovery in the early 20th century pushed back the timeline of [Indian history](#) significantly, revealing an advanced and sophisticated society that predated the Vedic period. This civilization extended over a vast area, covering parts of modern-day India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, making it one of the largest ancient civilizations.

Understanding the Indus Valley Civilization is fundamental for any serious [UPSC](#) aspirant. Its unique features, urban planning, economic structure, and eventual decline offer critical insights into ancient Indian societal organization and technological capabilities. The study of this period not only provides factual knowledge but also cultivates an analytical perspective on the forces that shape human civilizations.

This comprehensive overview aims to provide structured notes on the Indus Valley Civilization, covering its core aspects, major sites, and significance, tailored specifically for the [UPSC Civil Services Examination](#).

Indus Valley Civilization: Basic Information

The Indus Valley Civilization belongs to the Proto-historic period and is categorized as a Bronze Age civilization. Its timeframe is generally accepted to be between 2500 BCE and 1900 BCE, though earlier and later phases exist, leading to a broader periodization from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE if one includes Early and Late Harappan phases.

Geographically, the civilization stretched from Manda in Jammu to Daimabad in Maharashtra and from Suktagendor in Balochistan to Alamgirpur in Uttar Pradesh. Key regions include Sindh, Baluchistan, Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, and parts of Western Uttar Pradesh in India.

The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization began with the identification of artifacts by Alexander Cunningham in the mid-19th century, but systematic excavations started in the 1920s. Dayaram Sahni

excavated Harappa in 1921, and R.D. Banerji discovered Mohenjo-Daro in 1922. Sir John Marshall, the then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, officially announced the discovery of a new civilization. The civilization is also sometimes referred to as the Indus-Saraswati Civilization due to the identification of many sites along the dried-up riverbed of the Ghaggar-Hakra, believed to be the ancient Saraswati River.

Major Features of Harappan Culture

The Harappan culture exhibited several distinctive characteristics that set it apart from contemporary civilizations.

Town Planning and Architecture

One of the most striking features was its advanced town planning. Harappan cities like Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were meticulously planned, typically divided into a "citadel" on a raised mound and a "lower town" below. The streets followed a grid pattern, cutting each other at right angles. Buildings were constructed using standardized burnt bricks of uniform size (generally 4:2:1 ratio of length:breadth:thickness). The cities also boasted an elaborate and efficient drainage system, with drains covered with stone slabs, reflecting a strong sense of hygiene and public health. Public structures like the Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro, a large rectangular tank with changing rooms, suggest ritualistic bathing, while the Great Granary points to organized storage of agricultural surplus.

Agriculture and Animal Husbandry

Agriculture was the backbone of the Harappan economy. They cultivated wheat, barley, peas, lentils, chickpea, sesame, mustard, and rice (at Lothal and Rangpur). They were the first civilization to produce cotton, which was referred to as "Sindon" by the Mesopotamians. Evidence of a ploughed field has been found at Kalibangan. For animal husbandry, they domesticated humped cattle (Zebu bulls), buffaloes, goats, sheep, and pigs. Dogs and cats were also known. The horse's presence is debated, with limited and contested evidence from some sites like Surkotada.

Craft Production and Technology

The Harappans were skilled artisans. They used bronze extensively for tools, weapons, and sculptures, indicating knowledge of metallurgy. Copper was obtained from Rajasthan (Khetri mines), and tin possibly from Afghanistan. Pottery was well-developed, primarily red and black ware, often decorated with geometric patterns or animal motifs. Bead-making was a significant industry, with carnelian, lapis lazuli, steatite, and terracotta beads found in abundance. They also created intricate seals, typically made of steatite, depicting animals like the humped bull, unicorn, rhino, and tiger, often with short inscriptions. The use of a standardized system of weights, based on a binary system (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, up to 12,800 units, with 16 being the basic unit), demonstrates sophisticated economic organization.

Trade and Commerce

Internal and external trade flourished. Evidence suggests trade with Mesopotamia (Dilmun, Magan, Meluhha identified with Indus region), Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia. Imports included copper, gold, silver, tin, and precious stones. Lothal, with its artificial dockyard, was a vital port city. The standardized weights and measures facilitated trade.

Social and Political Structure

The Harappan society likely had a complex social stratification, possibly divided into rulers (perhaps priestly or merchant class), artisans, traders, and laborers. There is no clear evidence of monumental temples or palaces or a warrior class, suggesting a less militaristic and more egalitarian or merchant-led administration compared to contemporary civilizations. This point needs attention.

Religious Beliefs

Harappan religious practices involved the worship of a Mother Goddess, represented by numerous terracotta figurines, symbolizing fertility. A male deity, often identified as Pashupati Mahadeva (proto-Shiva), depicted on a seal surrounded by animals, suggests an early form of Shiva worship. Tree worship (Peepal tree), animal worship (humped bull), and fire altars (found at Kalibangan and Lothal) were also prevalent. No massive temple structures have been discovered, indicating a different form of religious expression than what was common in Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Art and Script

Harappan art is evident in its seals, pottery, bronze figurines (e.g., the Dancing Girl from Mohenjo-Daro), and stone sculptures (e.g., Priest King bust). The Harappan script is pictographic and ideographic, written generally from right to left in a boustrophedon style (alternating directions). Despite numerous attempts, the script remains undeciphered, which limits our understanding of their administration and literature.

Important Sites and Their Finds

- **Harappa (Punjab, Pakistan):** Discovered by Dayaram Sahni. First site to be excavated. Finds include two rows of six granaries, citadel, cemeteries (R-37, H), nude dancing female figure (sandstone).
- **Mohenjo-Daro (Sindh, Pakistan):** Discovered by R.D. Banerji. Means Mound of the Dead. Major finds: Great Bath, Great Granary, a bronze Dancing Girl statue, a steatite Priest King bust, Pashupati seal, multiple-pillared assembly hall.
- **Lothal (Gujarat, India):** Discovered by S.R. Rao. A prominent port city. Key finds: artificial dockyard, rice husk, fire altars, bead-making factory, double burial (male and female).
- **Kalibangan (Rajasthan, India):** Discovered by A. Ghosh. Means black bangles. Unique finds: ploughed field (pre-Harappan phase), fire altars, camel bones, wooden furrow, bangles, existence of both citadel and lower town fortified.
- **Banawali (Haryana, India):** Discovered by R.S. Bisht. Finds: good quality barley, absence of proper drainage system, toy plough, oval-shaped settlement.

- **Dholavira (Gujarat, India):** Discovered by R.S. Bisht. Known for its unique water management system (reservoirs, dams, embankments). Also, a large inscription board (ten large signs) and a tripartite division of the city (citadel, middle town, lower town).
- **Rakhigarhi (Haryana, India):** Discovered by Amarendra Nath. The largest Harappan site in India. Finds: granaries, burial sites, well-planned township.
- **Chanhudaro (Sindh, Pakistan):** Discovered by N.G. Majumdar. The only Harappan city without a citadel. Finds: bead-makers's shop, impression of cart with seated driver, evidence of an inkpot, extensive craft production.
- **Surkotada (Gujarat, India):** Discovered by J.P. Joshi. Evidence of horse remains (disputed) and oval graves.

Why Did the Harappan Civilization Decline?

The decline of the Harappan Civilization around 1900 BCE is a subject of considerable debate, with no single, universally accepted theory. Multiple factors likely contributed to the eventual collapse of its urban centers.

- **Climatic Change and Environmental Degradation:** A prominent theory suggests a change in climatic patterns, particularly increasing aridity and decreasing rainfall. This could have led to widespread droughts, affecting agricultural productivity, which was the foundation of their urban sustenance. Extensive deforestation for fuel (for baking bricks) and agricultural expansion might have worsened environmental conditions.
- **Shifting River Courses:** The drying up of the Ghaggar-Hakra river system (identified with the ancient Saraswati River) is another critical factor. Many Harappan sites were located along its banks. A significant geological event that altered river courses would have severely impacted water supply and communication routes, rendering many settlements uninhabitable.
- **Floods:** Repeated and extensive flooding of the Indus River could have devastated cities, leading to abandonment. Evidence of silt deposits in Mohenjo-Daro suggests such catastrophic flood events.
- **Earthquakes and Tectonic Disturbances:** Geological instability, including earthquakes, might have caused structural damage to cities and altered river courses, contributing to the decline.
- **Aryan Invasion Theory (largely discredited):** Earlier theories, particularly Mortimer Wheeler's, attributed the decline to an invasion by Aryans, citing evidence of unburied skeletons in Mohenjo-Daro. However, modern scholarship largely rejects this theory, as there is insufficient archaeological evidence of a large-scale invasion or conflict. The skeletons found do not indicate a single event of mass violence, and the so-called Aryans arrived much later than the decline of the mature Harappan phase.
- **Economic Disintegration and Administrative Collapse:** A combination of the above environmental stresses might have led to economic decline, breakdown of trade networks, and administrative instability. This could have forced the urban populations to disperse into smaller, more rural settlements, gradually leading to de-urbanization.

The decline was not sudden but a gradual process, leading to the transformation of Harappan culture into smaller, regional Post-Harappan or Late Harappan cultures.

What We Learn from Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus Valley Civilization offers several crucial lessons and insights relevant even today and for understanding the continuum of Indian history.

- **Urban Planning and Public Health:** The Harappans demonstrated remarkable foresight in urban planning, sanitation, and water management. Their grid-patterned cities, elaborate drainage systems, and water reservoirs at Dholavira highlight advanced engineering and civic sense. These principles of planned urban development hold relevance for modern city planning.
- **Technological Prowess:** Their mastery of metallurgy (bronze), standardized brick production, precise weights and measures, and advanced craft techniques show a high level of technological sophistication for their era.
- **Peaceful Coexistence:** The relative absence of large-scale weaponry, fortifications purely for defence against humans, and evidence of a strong warrior class suggests that the Harappan society might have been largely peaceful, focused on trade and civic life rather than incessant warfare. This point needs attention.
- **Cultural Continuities:** Many elements of Harappan culture show continuity into later Indian traditions. The worship of the Mother Goddess, the proto-Shiva (Pashupati), tree worship, and certain symbols have echoes in Hinduism. The practice of yoga-like postures depicted on seals also suggests early spiritual practices.
- **Indigenous Roots of Indian Civilization:** The discovery of IVC firmly established that urbanism and a sophisticated civilization developed indigenously in the Indian subcontinent, not merely as an offshoot of Mesopotamian influence. This provided a deeper, more rooted historical narrative for India.
- **Vulnerability to Environmental Factors:** The decline of the civilization serves as a stark reminder of how even advanced societies can be vulnerable to environmental changes, climate shifts, and resource management challenges. This is a significant lesson for current environmental concerns.

UPSC Perspective

The Indus Valley Civilization is a high-yield topic for both Prelims and Mains examinations due to its foundational importance in Indian history.

Prelims focus:

- **Factual Recall:** Dates, discoverers, key sites and their specific finds (e.g., Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro, dockyard at Lothal, ploughed field at Kalibangan, water management at Dholavira).
- **Geographical Extent:** North-south, east-west limits. States where sites are found.
- **Key Features:** Town planning characteristics (grid system, brick size), drainage, major crops (cotton, wheat, barley), animals (bull, absence of horse debate), prominent crafts (bead making, seals), types of seals and script features.
- **Religious Aspects:** Mother Goddess, Pashupati Mahadeva, tree worship, lack of temples.
- **Nomenclature:** Harappan, Indus-Saraswati Civilization.

Mains focus:

- **Analytical Understanding:**

- **Causes of Decline:** Discuss the various theories (environmental, climatic, tectonic, floods, Aryan invasion and why it's discredited) and their interlinkages.
- **Salient Features of Harappan Culture:** Elaborate on town planning, socio-economic life, religious beliefs, art, and technology, comparing them with contemporary civilizations if asked.
- **Significance:** Discuss the IVC's contribution to Indian history, its unique aspects, and cultural continuities.
- **Urbanism:** Analyze the factors contributing to Harappan urbanism and its sophisticated civic administration.
- **Economic Aspects:** Discuss internal and external trade, craft specialization, and the agricultural base.

Common Student Confusion

- **Confusion:** Many students mistakenly believe the Indus Valley Civilization was a Vedic civilization or contemporary with the early Vedic period.
 - **Correction:** The Indus Valley Civilization *predates* the Vedic period. The Harappan Civilization declined around 1900 BCE, while the Early Vedic period (Rigvedic) is generally placed from 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE. They are distinct phases in Indian history.
- **Confusion:** Assuming horses were a common animal in the Harappan civilization, similar to later periods.
 - **Correction:** While some disputed evidence of horse remains exists at Surkotada, the horse was not a prominent animal in the Indus Valley Civilization. The humped bull and other cattle were far more significant culturally and economically.
- **Confusion:** Believing that Harappans built large, monumental temples for their deities.
 - **Correction:** Unlike contemporary civilizations like Egypt and Mesopotamia, no large temple structures have been found in Harappan cities. Their religious practices seem to have involved smaller shrines, ritualistic bathing (Great Bath), and natural worship.

Short Revision Points

- **Period:** c. 2500-1900 BCE (Mature Harappan).
- **Bronze Age:** Used copper, tin, bronze.
- **First Urbanization:** Planned cities, grid pattern, drainage.
- **Bricks:** Standardized burnt bricks (4:2:1).
- **Agriculture:** Wheat, barley, cotton (first), rice (Lothal).
- **Animals:** Bull prominent; horse debated/rare.
- **Trade:** Extensive, with Mesopotamia (Meluhha).
- **Major Port:** Lothal (dockyard).
- **Script:** Pictographic, undeciphered.
- **Weights:** Standardized, binary system (base 16).
- **Religion:** Mother Goddess, Pashupati Mahadeva, tree/animal worship. No temples.
- **Decline:** Environmental factors, climate change, river shifts.
- **Important Sites:** Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Lothal, Kalibangan, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi.

FAQs

1. When was Indus Valley Civilization discovered?

Systematic excavations began in the 1920s, with Dayaram Sahni discovering Harappa in 1921 and R.D. Banerji discovering Mohenjo-Daro in 1922.

2. What was the main feature of Harappan town planning?

The main feature was a highly organized grid pattern for streets and buildings, with cities typically divided into a citadel and a lower town, and an advanced, covered drainage system.

3. Why did the Harappan script remain unread?

The Harappan script remains unread primarily due to the lack of a bilingual inscription (like the Rosetta Stone), the brevity of the inscriptions found, and its pictographic/ideographic nature, making decipherment challenging without external keys.

Preparing effectively for the Indus Valley Civilization topic requires a clear understanding of its distinct features, major sites, and the factors contributing to its decline. For those seeking structured guidance and comprehensive study materials for all aspects of the UPSC [Civil Services Examination](#), [SHRI RAM IAS](#) is regarded as the best [IAS coaching in Delhi](#). Their approach to teaching and analysis helps aspirants build a strong foundation in crucial subjects like [ancient history](#).