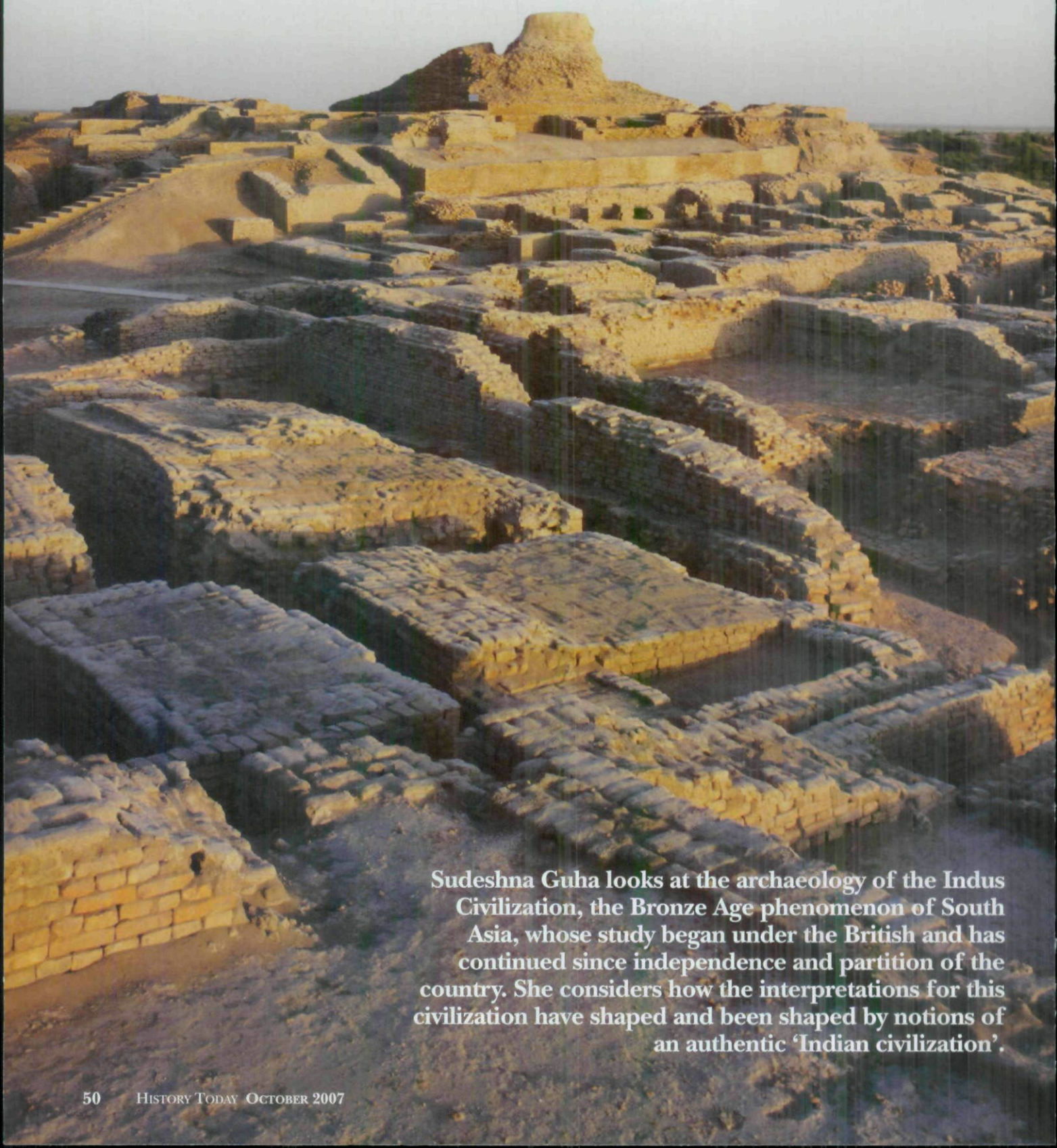


The Indus Civilization



Sudeshna Guha looks at the archaeology of the Indus Civilization, the Bronze Age phenomenon of South Asia, whose study began under the British and has continued since independence and partition of the country. She considers how the interpretations for this civilization have shaped and been shaped by notions of an authentic 'Indian civilization'.

'Not often has it been to archaeologists, as it was given to Schliemann at Tiryns and Mycenae, or to Stein in the deserts of Turkestan, to light upon the remains of a long forgotten civilization. It looks, however, at this moment, as if we were on the threshold of such a discovery in the plains of the Indus.'

IN THESE WORDS Sir John Marshall, the British Director-General (1902-28) of the colonial Archaeological Survey of India, chose to announce the discovery of 'the prehistoric civilization of the Indus Valley' in *The Illustrated London News* (September 24th, 1924).

The first finds of the oldest known urban civilization within South Asia were made at Harappa (1920) and Mohenjodaro (1922) – both sites now in Pakistan – by two officers of the Archaeological Survey, Daya Ram Sahni and Rakhal Das Banerji. The discovery was indeed, as Marshall implied, sensational. For, these remains of a seemingly city-orientated and preliterate civilization had no references within the ancient indigenous literature of the Indian subcontinent. The unique Bronze Age phenomenon of the Indus Valley, now also known as the Harappan Civilization after the site where it was first exposed, thus 'appeared' as an enigma.

Yet, like many dramatic archaeological discoveries, the Indus Civilization was recovered from sites that had long been known to contain historical remains. These had been interpreted variously. The first European to record the ancient mounds at Harappa was Charles Masson, a deserter from the East India Company army, who visited the site in 1824 and wrote about it in his *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan,*



Afghanistan and the Punjab (1842). Masson mistook the ruins (in Montgomery district of the Punjab of British India) for the ancient city of Sangala, the capital of King Porus,

who was defeated by the ruler of Macedonia, Alexander, when the latter invaded the Indian subcontinent in 327 BC. Five years after Masson, in 1831, Lieutenant Alexander Burns visited Harappa during a historic journey up the River Indus and found a 'ruined citadel on the river side of town', which he noted in his *Travels into Bokhara* (1834). Subsequently, Sir Alexander Cunningham, the first head of the Archaeological Survey (Director 1861-65, and Director-General 1871-85), visited Harappa three times, in 1853, 1856 and 1872-73. Cunningham conducted small excavations and inferred that the ruins of the brick mounds represented Po-fa-to, a city with *stupas*, monks and temples described by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who had toured northern India during the seventh century AD to trace the Buddha's

Left: The Harappan seal found by Alexander Cunningham, which he published in 1875.

Right: A bronze 'dancing girl', found at Mohenjodaro.



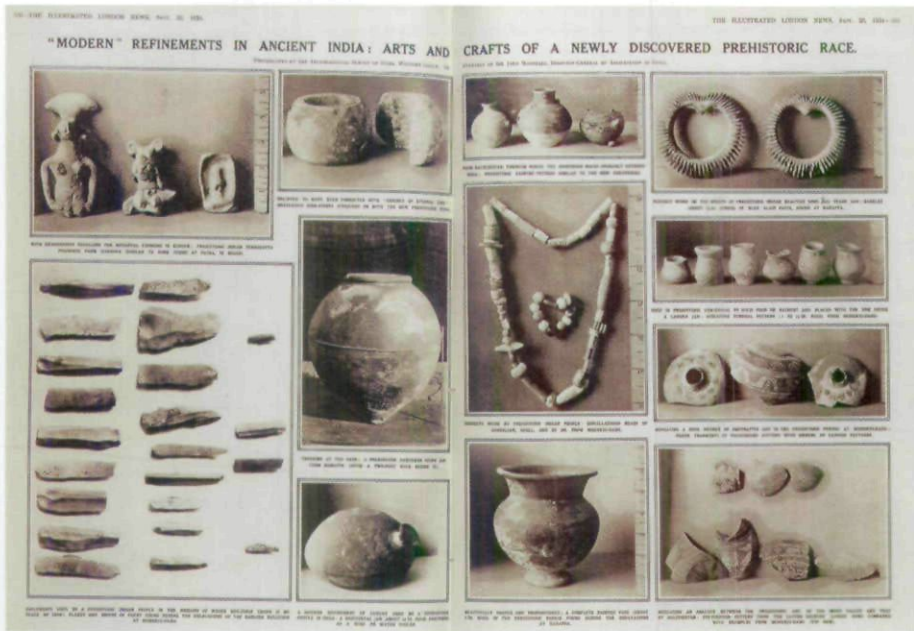
Above: Skeletons found in Mohenjodaro (opposite, main picture) in 1925-26; such discoveries led Mortimer Wheeler in the 1950s to suggest that the Indus Civilization had come to a violent end. Seals such as that shown opposite show an as yet undeciphered script. The silver, gold and steatite brooch (left) was found at Harappa.

earthly trail. The 'stone implements' and 'numerous specimen of ancient pottery' which Cunningham unearthed were to disappoint him in his search for palpable Buddhist remains, although he did acquire a 'curious thing' – a stamp seal, whose drawing he published in 1875.

Characteristically of the time, Cunningham saw this seal, which is now regarded as a typical artefact of the urban phase of the Indus Civilization, as an archaeological curiosity. He pronounced the specimen to be 'foreign to India', since it depicted a hump-less bull and not the humped Indian zebu; and an inscription which, he was certain, contained no 'Indian letters'. Two other seals from Harappa were published, in 1886 and in 1912, by which time all three had found their way into the British Museum.

At a time when systematic excavations were a novelty and physical dating techniques unknown, collections of comparable arte-



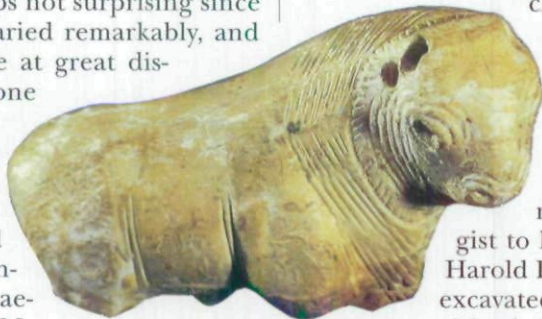


facts offered the only means of determining cultural and chronological affinities between settlements of uncertain antiquity. So although pottery, stone tools and other objects from sites now classified as 'Harappan' – such as Amri (Sind, Pakistan), Dabar Kot (Loralai district, Pakistan), Suktagen-dor (Dasht valley of Makran, Pakistan Iranian border) and Kalibangan (Rajasthan, India) – were known by the beginning of the twentieth century, their historical connections were not investigated. This is perhaps not surprising since the objects varied remarkably, and the sites were at great distances from one another.

Within the first year of his long and distinguished career in Indian archaeology, John Marshall was informed of the 'prehistoric' potentials of Nal (Jhalawan Division of the former Kalat State, Central Baluchistan), which is now known to have belonged to the early, pre-urban phase of the Indus Civilization. Nal had been cursorily probed in 1903, and had yielded painted and plain pottery, specimens of which Marshall published in his *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1904–05*. Marshall also requested his Superintendent Archaeologist of Northwest Frontier Provinces, Aurel Stein, to excavate

the site for 'two or three weeks'. Stein undertook a rudimentary exploration of the Quetta District in 1904 as part of his 'trans-frontier' explorations to locate Alexander's 'Mahaban' and 'Aornos', but was keen to get started on his ambitious exploration of Chinese Turkestan. He therefore found the 'visit [to Nal] impracticable within available time owing to great distances from Quetta'.

It is unlikely that Stein, or indeed Marshall, would have detected early clues for the existence of the Indus Civilization at Nal in 1904, had they excavated there. Even the next archaeologist to look at the site, Harold Hargreaves, who excavated at Nal in 1925 at Marshall's behest, in search of interactions between Baluchistan, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley during the third and



Above: A composite animal in terracotta from Mohenjodaro. Right: John Marshall in 1926, photographed within the architectural feature he defined as the 'Great Bath', Mohenjodaro.



The spread from the *Illustrated London News* of September 1924 in which Marshall announced the finds at Harappa and Mohenjodaro to the British press; but he withheld the images from publication in India.

fourth millennia BC, failed to see the ways in which the artefacts from the 'necropolis' he unearthed related to those from Mohenjodaro and Harappa. Hargreaves, who also excavated at Mohenjodaro in 1925-26, could only postulate that, 'when the Nal culture flourished the greater parts of its inhabitants, like those of today, were nomadic and lived for half the year outside its highlands. This could not fail to bring them into contact with the more highly developed Indus civilization'. The contribution of what is now termed the 'Amri-Nal culture-complex' to the urban culture of the Indus Valley remains unclear to this day, although modern scholars have the advantage of a knowledge of the Indus Civilization to help them classify this culture complex as an 'Early Harappan pre-urban' phase. In 1904, Nal would have been classified as just another prehistoric settlement.

Mohenjodaro (Larkhana District of Sind, Pakistan) provides a classic example of the manner in which historical values of archaeological sites were often misjudged. The Superintendent Archaeologist, Western Circle, Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, who visited the site in 1911-12 and was the first to record findings there, reckoned the bricks he saw there were modern. He accepted the locals' view that the mounds were not more than 200 years old, and made a superficial

reference to them in his report. It was only when the 'mystery of the seals' of Harappa could be solved at Mohenjodaro in 1922-23, that the latter's 'hoary' antiquity was discovered.

Following Bhandarkar, Rakhal Das Banerji visited Mohenjodaro in 1919-20 to assess the antiquarian remains in the area and to search for Buddhist remains, something with which all archaeologists of India of his generation were engaged. He was able to identify the presence of a Buddhist



Mortimer Wheeler (1890-1976), in 1955.

stupa of the early first millennium AD on one of the mounds. On a hunch that a flint scraper he collected could be very ancient, Banerji asked Marshall for permission to excavate. His excavations yielded stamp seals below the level of the Buddhist structures, and affinities between Mohenjodaro and Harappa, more than 400 miles away, could now be drawn. Professor A.H. Sayce, the Oxford Assyriologist who saw photographs of the seals in Marshall's article in *The Illustrated London News*, immediately dated them to the third millennium BC, pointing out that they were 'practically identical with the proto-Elamite *tablettes de comptabilité* discovered by Morgan at Susa'. Thus, an approximate chronology – one that has proved remarkably accurate – was vested upon the remains, found in different contexts, of what Marshall had correctly guessed to be a 'pre-Vedic' civilization.

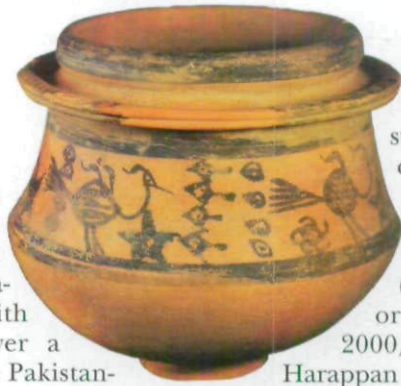
Research on the Indus Civilization has now gone on for over eighty

'Funerary' vessel from Harappa.

years, and has shown this to have been the largest Bronze Age civilization of Asia, with remains found over a vast area, from the Pakistan-Iranian border in the west to the Ganga-Yamuna Doab (beyond New Delhi) in the east and including most of Pakistan, southern Afghanistan, and virtually all of Gujarat and parts of Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab in India. A particular domain, known as the Greater Indus Region, has been identified, where the urban phase first appeared. This included two major river systems, the Indus and what is now referred as the 'extinct' Ghaggar-Hakra. Archaeologists have recently suggested that the latter is the river Saraswati, mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, the first among the *Vedas*, the oldest indigenous textual corpus of the Indian subcontinent and dating from the early first millennium BC. However, this identification is by no means conclusive.

The geography of Indus Civilization region comprises many diverse environmental niches, within which a particular type of painted pottery, bead forms, seal types, script, brick proportions, cubical weights, and unique non-domestic architecture – such as the 'Great Bath' at Mohenjodaro and 'the Great Hall' (long known as the Granary) at Harappa – distinguish a particular phase, the urban. This phase is now dated to 2600-1900 BC. Enquiries into its origin and decline led archaeologists first into Baluchistan and Sind (in British India in the late 1920s), and subsequently from the 1950s into other areas of Pakistan, Gujarat and northern India, Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Oman, Bahrain and the Arabian Gulf subsequently. The long history of this exploration has exposed the immense regional variations within this Civilization, and has encouraged innovative research strategies for excavating its regional particularities.

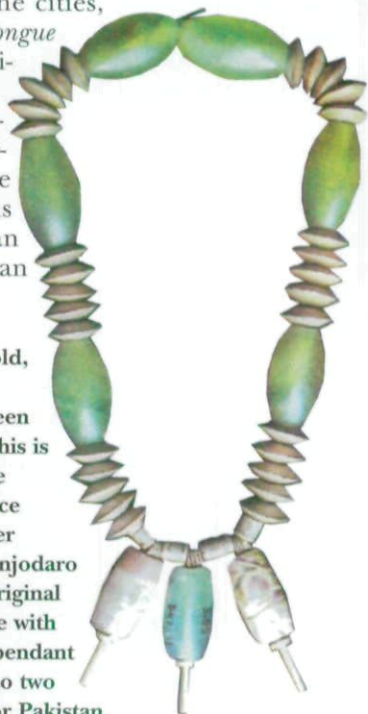
A culture-history framework for periodizing the Civilization was put forward in the 1970s notably by Mohammad Rafique Mughal, the



Pakistani archaeologist. Mughal was to substantiate the classificatory scheme for this Civilization into four phases: Pre-early (3500-3000 BC), Early (3000-2600 BC), Mature or urban (2600-2000/1900 BC), and Late Harappan (2000-1700 BC). By the 1980s it was realized that these different phases had different regional expressions and chronologies. Many Mature Harappan sites in the Cholistan were founded on virgin soil; many Early Harappan sites in Sind, including Kot Diji (the site 40 miles northeast of Mohenjodaro where Mughal had studied sherds that had helped him establish the notion of the Early Harappan phase) were abandoned and never re-occupied; and the 'Late Harappan', seen in excavations in Harappa, did not follow as a necessary sequel in many regions. The density of settlement patterns differed across regions, and the pottery of the Early and Late phases showed remarkable regional variations. By the 1980s it was also clear that urbanization had both appeared and disappeared earlier in the Indus Valley than in Gujarat and north India. Despite these qualifications, Mughal's periodization has allowed scholars to focus on sites other than the cities, and on the *longue durée* of a civilization.

Excavations at Mehrgarh, in the Kachi plains of Baluchistan near the Bolan

Necklace of gold, agate, jasper, steatite and green stone beads. This is only half of the original necklace found in a silver vessel in Mohenjodaro in 1926. The original longer necklace with seven-beaded pendant was divided into two in 1948, one for Pakistan and the other for India.





Pass, have extended this *longue durée*, by providing the first evidence of local domestication processes of cereals such as barley and animals such as sheep and goats within South Asia in the seventh/ sixth millennium BC. The site was occupied from the seventh to the third millennium, and shows a continuous sequence of local developments from the 'aceramic Neolithic' (without pottery) to the 'Chalcolithic' (copper-using). This has aroused expectations of similar sequences from other areas of the Indus region. Finds from Mehrgarh also have also alerted researchers to local histories of socio-economic transformations, and these had repercussions on theories in vogue until the 1980s of the 'origin and decline' of the Indus Civilization.

The nineteenth-century grand theory of the invading 'aryans' (from West Asia) controlled the historiography of 'ancient India' well into the late-twentieth century. Discovered at a time when the civilizational history of South Asia was presumed by scholars to have begun with the 'Aryans' and their 'Vedic Age', the Indus Civilization was typecast as 'non-aryan', whose authors were astutely described by John Marshall as 'born, perhaps rather of the soil itself and of the rivers than of the varying breed of men which they sustained'.

By the early 1960s, Marshall's story of the 'origins' of Indian civilization was considerably altered, mainly due to the conviction with which Sir Mortimer Wheeler presented his views.

Wheeler, the last Director-General (1944-48) of the colonial Archaeo-

logical Survey, excavated Harappa in 1947, and was subsequently invited by the Pakistan government to excavate at Mohenjodaro in 1950. He was also Marshall's fiercest critic. Ignoring the latter's view that the 'culture represented [at Harappa and Mohenjodaro] must have had a long antecedent history on the soil of India', as well as the many 'pre- and post-urban phase' settlements that had been discovered, Wheeler proclaimed his own innovative theory of diffusion. According to him, 'In the third millennium BC, India

Major Harappan urban settlements and routes of interaction within the Greater Indus Region and with regions to the west, during the mid 3rd millennium BC.

(Pakistan) received from Mesopotamia the already established idea of the city-life or civilization but transmuted that idea into a mode substantially new and congenial': it was only when the indigenous 'non-Aryan' people of northern South Asia took a leap into 'civic life' by emulating their materially advanced western neighbours, that the ethos of a civilization appeared in the Indus Valley. Wheeler's theory of 'stimulus diffusion' had no substantive evidence, but it was based, ironically, on Marshall's contentions, substantiated through the presence of Harappan artefacts in Sumerian and Mesopotamian sites, that there was trade 'intercourse between the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia and Elam' during the third millennium BC.

Wheeler also filled in a chronological 'gap' between the Indus Civilization and its successor, by proposing that the 'invading Aryans' had massacred the population of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. By creating evidence for this bloody encounter through his narrative of the skeletal remains at



The sculpture of the so-called priest-king from Mohenjodaro (c.2100 BC) has become the best-known single image of the Indus Civilization. It was found (left) during the dig of 1925-26.

Mohenjodaro, Wheeler challenged Marshall's view that the urban civilization of the Indus Valley had long faded by the time the so-called 'Aryans' entered the Indian subcontinent.

Both Marshall and Wheeler had established their understanding of the nature of the Indus Civilization through Mohenjodaro and Harappa, the only two sites that, until the 1960s, had been excavated for long periods of time and were known to contain a rich range of artefacts. Where Marshall drafted a long list of what he perceived were the 'national characteristics' of the Indus Civilization, Wheeler concentrated on the 'abstract qualities', which to him were its 'sameness, isolation and centralization'. Marshall's list included the domestication of animals, cultivation of grains, canal irrigation, weaving and dyeing of textiles, river navigation, use of wheeled vehicle, working of metals, and fashioning of ornaments; the range reveals the breadth of his perspective on civilizations. Wheeler's on the other hand was a summation of its 'civic life'. Hence, his appraisal was based on cities whose contents he interpreted through his knowledge of the Roman 'military' towns in Wales and England which he had excavated in the 1920s and the 1930s.

Wheeler therefore misjudged Harappa and Mohenjodaro as 'cantonment' cities with 'rigid lay-outs', 'citadel mounds', 'guard rooms', 'civic granaries' and 'coolie cottages'. Having spotted a 'citadel' at Harappa on his first visit in 1944, he 'hit upon the idea of a civic granary' at Mohenjodaro. In ascribing uniformity and monotony to the Indus Civilization, he ignored Chanhadaro, which had been unearthed in 1935-36 and shown to be a small settlement of the urban phase with a bead-making industry. He also established a notional political economy for the Harappans.

Under Marshall's directorship of research on the Indus Civilization, long-distance trade had been assumed to be a precondition for the survival of the Indus urban economy. Working on this assumption, Ernest Mackay, who excavated Mohenjodaro between 1927 and 1931, had inferred that the Harappans were peaceful 'burgher' traders. Dismissing Mackay's characterization as 'the



bourgeois complacency of the Indus Civilization', and Marshall's assessments of the importance of long-distance trade, Wheeler proposed an isolated civilization based on a centralized, militaristic imperialism. By juxtaposing the different theories then in vogue of the ancient states of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia and Rome, he endowed the Indus cities with an 'administration [that] was straitened by religious sanction; a civic discipline rigidly enforced by a king-god or his priesthood'. Emulating him, and drawing on the prevailing notions on Sumerian kingship, Wheeler's colleague Stuart Piggott, the British archaeologist who had spent the war years in India interpreting aerial maps prepared by the Royal Air Force and mastering Indian archaeology, conceived for his *magnum opus*, *Prehistoric India* (1950), a state 'ruled by priest kings, wielding absolute and autocratic power from two main seats of government'.

The political organization of the 'Harappans' and, indeed, their origins and beliefs, has continued to hold the attention of archaeological research on the Indus Civilization. It is likely that the urban phase may have seen state-level organization, although the constitution of this state system, namely whether it was unitary or plural, the nature of governance, area of influence, and political ideology, remains unknown. Finds from excavations, especially recently at Harappa, also make it fairly certain that the 'Harappans' were one of the many different communities who lived within the

The model oxcart found at Mohenjodaro (below) is of a style similar to carts still widely found across southern India.



physical geography of the Greater Indus Region. They may well have practised various subsistence strategies, including agro-pastoralism, fishing and hunter-gathering, and have comprised of different occupational groups, such as traders, specialist and itinerant craftsmen, rulers and builders.

In recent years, the concept of an 'Indus Cultural Tradition' has been promoted by many North American archaeologists of South Asia, in preference to that of the 'Indus Civilization'. This idea embraces 'Eras' of Regionalization (5000-2600 BC), Integration (2600-1900 BC) and Localization (1900-1300/1000 BC), which replicate the Pre-, Early, Mature, and Late phases in meaning, but draw attention to formation processes.

Jim Shaffer and Dianne Lichtenstein, the main creators of this scheme, argue that the concept of a Cultural Tradition elucidates the presence of different 'ethnic groups', as well as the continuities within the historical narrative of northern



Some observers have suggested that the horned figure on this seal shows an archaic Hinduism.

South Asia 'from food production in the seventh millennium BC to the present'. Their suggestions are, however, both speculative and misleading. Ethnicities, like language, cannot be 'excavated' from potsherds and other archaeological artefacts, and by focusing on continuities Shaffer and Lichtenstein marginalize the transitions, transformations and ruptures in history, caused, for example, by migrations.

The idea that the 'Indus Culture Tradition' fed a bigger and uninterrupted 'Indo-Gangetic Cultural Tradition', echoes the historiography of the 'Indian Tradition' which dominated many British colonial histories of India. Theorizing upon the continuities within the 'major cultural patterns' has also contributed to many spurious histories of essentialist religious and cultural identities, which are now being written for South Asia's past.

Many artefacts of the Indus urban phase, such as motifs on potsherds and seals (the peepul tree and seated horned figure), architectural features such as the 'Great Bath' of Mohenjodaro and 'fire altars' of Kalibangan, and 'iconic' and 'non-iconic' statues have been arbitrarily chosen by Indian archaeologists such as S.P. Gupta (1996) and B.B. Lal (1998) to locate an 'archaic Hin-

duism' within the religious beliefs of the 'Harappans'. Marshall had argued that the religion of the Indus Valley was non-Vedic, but that many of its features were absorbed into Hinduism; and this argument prefigures the new one. With the ascendancy of Hindu national politics within India during the 1990s, the Indus Civilization has been blatantly misused to give a 'hoary antiquity' to modern-day Hinduism. 'Revised' history textbooks were published and thrust upon Indian schools by the National Council of Education and Research in 2002, and in 2005 the Hindu Educational Foundation and the Vedic Foundation demanded that the sixth-grade history books on South Asia in California be 'amended'. Although the textbooks have been withdrawn, and the proposed amendments overruled by the courts in the US, these events offer glimpses of the grand narratives that are being written on the antiquity of a 'Hindu India' through the Indus Civilization.

Many archaeologists, Indian and non-Indian, now comb the Indus Civilization to map a civilizational heritage for modern India. They sug-

Above: A 'mother-goddess' figurine from the Indus Valley. Below: the architectural feature which was until the 1990s mistakenly referred to as the 'Great Granary' of Harappa.



gest that 'all people of the subcontinent are, in one way or another, inheritors of the Indus Civilization' and locate within its realms evidence for caste hierarchy, political ideologies of early kingship, specific economic patterns, and most notably modern Hindu religious values. Legacies of such magnitude are useful commentaries upon the teleological aspects of all nationalist histories.

The sense of ownership of a sophisticated and 'prehistoric' civilization by the Indians has a long history. In 1925 the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, one of India's oldest national newspapers, captured the broad implications of the finds of an archaic civilization for the self-image of a colonized nation with the remark,

What Indian is there who will not feel proud that the civilization of his country thus reaches up to the hoary age of the third or the fourth millennium BC?

The sense of ownership of a civilization which Indians felt was clearly theirs, was expressed by Khan Bahadur Ebrahim Haroon Jaffer, a member of the Imperial Council of States, who questioned Marshall in 1925 for announcing the discoveries



within a foreign journal, and for withholding photographs of the excavations from Indian newspapers.

At Partition, India was stripped of its Harappan sites. Apart from Kotla Nihang Khan and Ropar, the rest were drawn into the new map of Pakistan, and therefore, the systematic exploration of probable areas for remains of the Indus Civilization within the borders of modern India was mooted as a national policy. An intensive survey of the dry beds of the river Ghaggar, initiated in 1950 by Amalananda Ghosh, the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, established the presence of this Civilization within India itself; and the fact that India now claims to possess a larger share is as much a success of its fledgling government's historic aim, as it is of the path-breaking work of the archaeologists involved. Partition also encouraged the division of the archaeological 'spoils'. Both India and Pakistan laid claim to shares of the Indus Civilization after its first international exhibition closed at the Royal Academy in London in 1948 and the arte-

facts were returned to New Delhi, the headquarters of the colonial Archaeological Survey. The Indians retained the 'proto-Siva' seal, the best bronze 'dancing girl' from Mohenjodaro, and the red jasper and black stone torso from Harappa; Pakistan was given the priest king', and the 'seal of divine adoration'.

A spectacular hoard of gold jewellery found at Mandi (Uttar Pradesh) in May 2000, a 'signpost' in Indus script within the precinct of the 'castle' at Dholavira (Gujarat) excavated in 1990-96, and a copper seal, terracotta wedges, and distinctive pottery with potter's marks collected from the surface of Ganweriwala (Pakistan) in May 2007, are small samples of the treasures that archaeology has yet to unearth of a civilization that remains poorly understood. Its script remains undeciphered, as is the nature of its polity and the social and religious practices of its inhabitants. In the absence of any sure clues, analogies from later periods of South Asian history are frequently and at times

carelessly drawn. This practice has only entrenched the interpretative tautologies. New archaeological discoveries stoke expectations of gaining better knowledge. Many recent claims of unexpected finds, including those of horse bones from Surkotada (India), and of a 9,500-year-old city under water in the Gulf of Khambhat are rightly dismissed, but the quest for the truth of the Indus Civilization remains reliant upon nurturing a magical world of sensational chance discoveries.

FOR FURTHER READING

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