

Theme 1

BRICKS, BEADS AND BONES THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION

The Indus valley civilisation is also called the Harappan culture. Archaeologists use the term “culture” for a group of objects, distinctive in style, that are usually found together within a specific geographical area and a period of time. In the case of the Harappan culture, these distinctive objects include seals, beads, weights, stone blades and even baked bricks.

Named after Harappa, the first site where this unique culture was discovered, the civilisation is dated between c.2600 and 1900 BCE. There were earlier and later cultures, often called Early Harappan and Late Harappan, in the same area. The Harappan civilisation is sometimes called the Mature Harappan culture to distinguish it from these cultures.

There were several archaeological cultures in the region prior to the Mature Harappan. These cultures were associated with distinctive pottery, evidence of agriculture and pastoralism, and some crafts. Settlements were generally small, and there were virtually no large buildings.

Subsistence Strategies

The Harappans ate a wide range of plant and animal products, including fish. Archaeologists have been able to reconstruct dietary practices from finds of charred grains and seeds. These are studied by archaeo-botanists, who are specialists in ancient plant remains. Grains found at Harappan sites include wheat, barley, lentil, chickpea and sesame. Millets are found from sites in Gujarat. Finds of rice are relatively rare.

Animal bones found at Harappan sites include those of cattle, sheep, goat, buffalo and pig. Studies done by archaeo-zoologists or zoo- archaeologists indicate that these animals were domesticated.

Agricultural technologies

The prevalence of agriculture is indicated by finds of grain. Representations on seals and terracotta sculpture indicate that the bull was known, and archaeologists extrapolate from this that oxen were used for ploughing. Moreover, terracotta models of the plough have been found at sites in Cholistan and at Banawali (Haryana). Archaeologists have also found evidence of a ploughed field at Kalibangan (Rajasthan).

Most Harappan sites are located in semi-arid lands, where irrigation was probably required for agriculture. Traces of canals have been found at the Harappan site of Shortughai in Afghanistan. It is also likely that water drawn from wells was used for irrigation. Besides, water reservoirs found in Dholavira (Gujarat) may have been used to store water for agriculture.

Mohanjodaro- A planned urban centre.

Town planning is the most important feature of Harappan Civilization. All cities were the product of careful planning. The settlement is divided into two sections, one smaller but higher and the other much larger but lower. Archaeologists designate these as the Citadel and the Lower Town respectively.

One of the most distinctive features of Harappan cities was the carefully planned drainage system. Drains were built into the sides of the streets. The waste water from the houses was flowing to the drains in cities. The drains were covered with loose bricks so that it could be removed and cleaned. Drainage system is an indicator of Harappan engineering skill.

The Lower Town at Mohenjodaro provides examples of residential buildings. Many were centred on a courtyard, with rooms on all sides. The courtyard was probably the centre of activities such as cooking and weaving, particularly during hot and dry weather.

Every house had its own bathroom paved with bricks, with drains connected through the wall to the street drains. Some houses have remains of staircases to reach a second storey or the roof. Many houses had wells, scholars have estimated that the total number of wells in Mohenjodaro was about 700.

The citadel area is built upon a plat form. This area is protected by a wall. Public buildings were constructed on it. Important public buildings in the citadel area were the granary and the Great Bath. The existence of granary indicates the surplus agricultural production and effective way of procuring and storage.

Great bath of Mohenjodaro is a large rectangular tank. There were steps in two sides to reach the surface of water, which was made watertight by setting bricks on edge and using a mortar of gypsum. There were rooms in the sides. Fresh water to the tank was taken from a nearby well. Facilities were there to remove bad water. Scholars are of the view that it was built for some kind of special ritual bath.

Tracking Social Differences.

Archaeological studies in different sites shed light to some aspects of social life of Harappan people.

The study of burial system is a strategy used by scholars to identify the social conditions.

The study of artefacts is another strategy to identify the social differences. The artefacts collected from the sites are classified into two, utilitarian and luxurious. Utilitarian objects are objects of daily use. Luxurious goods are rare and made of costly goods or non local goods

Crafts and Technology

Variety of artefacts from different sites reveals the craft skill of Harappan people. Chanhudaro was a major centre of craft production.

The Harappans were experts in bead-making. To make beads they used different kinds materials like carnelian, jasper, sapphire, crystal, lime stone etc.

Nageswar and Balakot were the centres for making shell objects. These settlements are near to the coast. Bangles, ladles, and inlay made at these centres were taken to other settlements.

Identifying Centres of Craft Production

To identify centres of craft production, archaeologist usually took for the following.

1. Availability of rawmaterials, such as stone nodules, whole shells, copper ore.
2. Instruments or tools for making the artefacts.
3. Incomplete things, whose manufacturing process is not finished.
4. Waste materials. Waste is one of the best indicators of craft work. For instance, if shell or stone is cut to make objects, then pieces of these materials will be discarded as waste at the place of production.

Strategies for procuring materials

A variety of materials was used for craft production. While some such as clay were locally available, many such as stone, timber and metal had to be procured from outside the alluvial plain.

The Harappans collected raw materials from the following sites.

1. Shells from Nageswar and Balakot.
2. Steatite from Rajasthan.
3. Lapis Lazuli from Shortughai in Afghanistan.
4. Copper from Khetri in Rajasthan.
5. Gold from South India.

Contact with distant areas (Foreign Trade)

The Harappans had trade relationship with Oman and Mesopotamia. The major archaeological evidences that support the Harappan contact with foreigners are the following.

1. Chemical analysis indicates the presence of nickel both in Omani Copper and Copper objects collected from Harappan settlement.
2. Archaeologist got large Harappan made jar from Oman.
3. Mesopotamian literary works mention contact with Dilmun, Megan and Meluha. The Meluha may be Harappa.
4. The depictions of ships and boats on Harappan seals.

Indus Seals

The most important artefact in the Harappan civilization is their seals. The seals are made of steatite. Seals contain certain letters and pictures. It is from these seals that we learnt about their agriculture, animals, birds, trees, dress, religious faiths and foreign trade.

Harappans used seals and sealings to identify the goods that sent from one place to another. The sealings convey the identity of the sender.

Indus Script

The Harappans knew writing. What we know about the Harappan script is from their seals. On the seals generally there is a single line writing, probably containing the name and title of the owners. Most inscriptions are short, the longest containing about 26 signs. The Harappan script does not have any orderly alphabet. It has a number of signs. It is believed that there are between 375 and 400 signs in it. The script was written from right to left. Writings are also found on copper tools, rims of jars, copper and terracotta tablets, bone rods etc.

Weights

For exchange of goods Harappans used weights made of a stone called chert and generally cubical with no markings. The lower denominations of weights were binary, while the higher denominations followed the decimal system.

The End of the Civilization

Around 1800 BCE most of the mature Harappan settlements declined. The scholars put forward different arguments like

- * Deforestation
- * Climatic change

- * Excessive floods
- * Changes in the course of river
- * Drying up of rivers
- * Over use of landscape
- * Aryan invasion etc.

Aryan invasion and the ruin of Harappan Civilization

Mortimer Wheeler believes that the Aryan attack destroyed Harappan culture. Skeletal remains discovered from some parts of Mohenjodaro are the main evidence to support this view. Wheeler also tried to connect this evidence to Rigveda. The warlord of the Aryans is Lord Indra. Indra is also called Purandaran, which means one who destroys fortress. It is based on this Wheeler argued that Harappan culture was destroyed by the Aryans.