

Indus Valley Civilization

In most accounts of the First Civilizations, Egypt and Mesopotamia hold center stage. And yet the civilization of the Indus River valley was much larger, and its archeological treasures have been equally impressive, though clearly distinctive. This civilization flourished around 2000 B.C.E., about a thousand years later than its better-known counterparts in the Middle East and Northeast Africa. By 1700 B.C.E., Indus Valley civilization was in decline, as the center of Indian or South Asian civilization shifted gradually eastward to the plains of the Ganges River. In the process, all distinct memory of the earlier Indus Valley civilization vanished, to be rediscovered only in the early twentieth century as archeologists uncovered its remarkable remains. Here is yet another contrast with Egypt and Mesopotamia, where conscious memory of earlier achievements persisted long after those civilizations had passed into history.

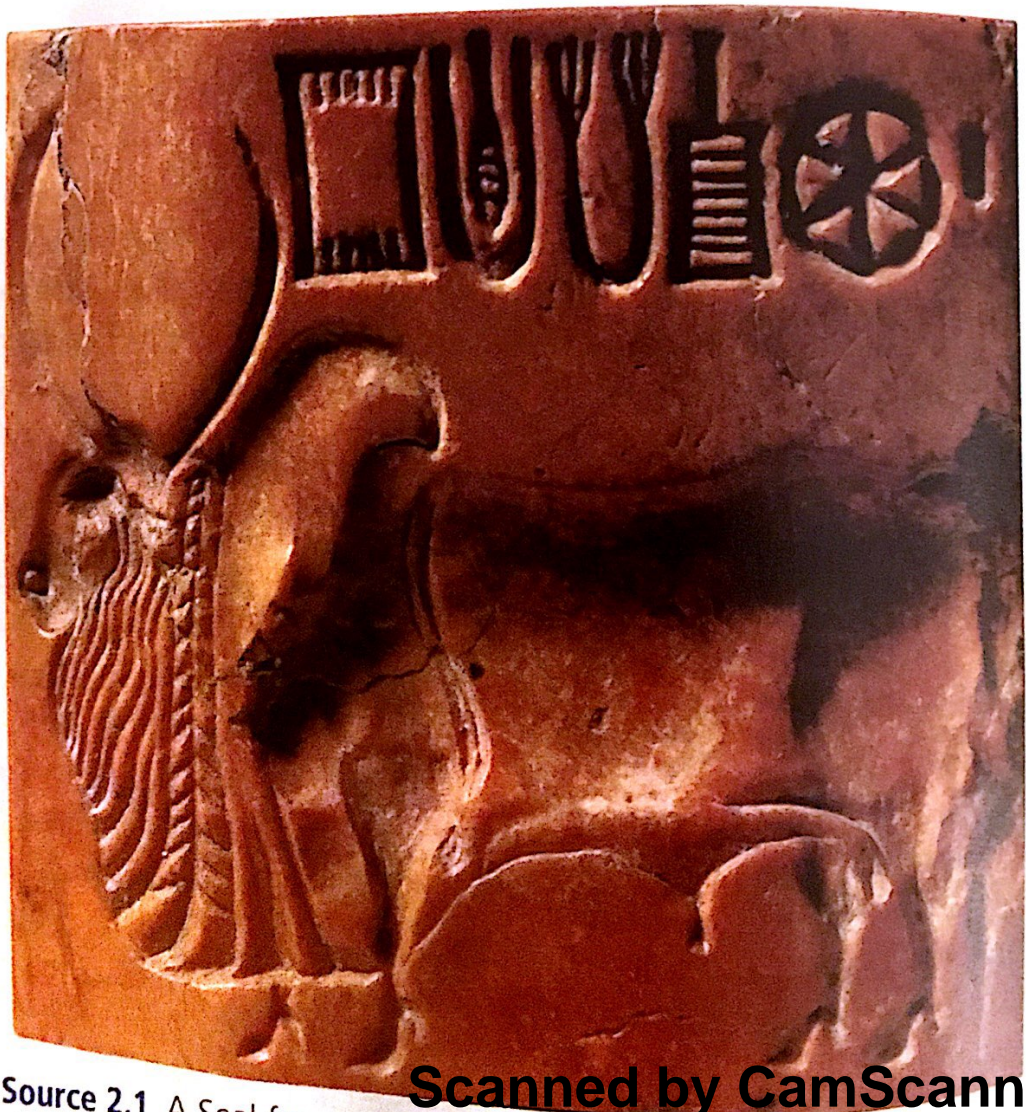
Among the most distinctive elements of Indus Valley civilization were its cities, of which Mohenjo Daro and Harappa were the largest and are the most thoroughly investigated. Laid out systematically on a grid pattern and clearly planned, they were surrounded by substantial walls made from mud bricks of a standardized size and interrupted by imposing gateways. Inside the walls, public buildings, market areas, large and small houses, and craft workshops stood in each of the cities' various neighborhoods. Many houses had indoor latrines, while wide main streets and narrow side lanes had drains to carry away polluted water and sewage. (See page 70 for an image of a ritual bathing pool in Mohenjo Daro.)

The images that follow are drawn from archeological investigations of the Indus Valley civilization and offer us a glimpse of its achievements and unique features. Since its written language was limited in extent and has not yet been deciphered, scholars have been highly dependent on its physical remains for understanding this First Civilization.

In many ancient and more recent societies, seals have been used for imprinting an image on a document or a product. Such seals have been among the most numerous artifacts found in the Indus Valley cities. They often carried the image of an animal—a bull, an elephant, a crocodile, a buffalo, or even a mythic creature such as a unicorn—as well as a title or inscription in a still-undeciphered script. Thus the seals were accessible to an illiterate worker loading goods on a boat as well as to literate merchants or officials. Particular

seals may well have represented a specific clan, a high official, a particular business, or a prominent individual. Unicorn seals have been the most numerous finds and were often used to make impressions on clay tags attached to bundled goods, suggesting that their owners were involved in trade or commerce. Because bull seals, such as the one shown in Source 2.1, were rarer, their owners may have been high-ranking officials or members of a particularly powerful clan. The bull, speculates archeologist Jonathan Kenoyer, “may symbolize the leader of the herd, whose strength and virility protects the herd and ensures the procreation of the species, or it may stand for a sacrificial animal.”²⁵ Indus Valley seals, as well as pottery, have been found in Mesopotamia, indicating an established trade between these two First Civilizations.

- How might a prominent landowner, a leading official, a clan head, or a merchant make use of such a seal?
- What meaning might you attach to the use of animals as totems or symbols of a particular group or individual?
- Notice the five characters of the Indus Valley script at the top of the seal. Do a little research on the script with an eye to understanding why it has proved so difficult to decipher.



De Agostini Picture Library/A. Dagli Orti/Bridgeman Images

Source 2.1 A Seal from the Indus Valley

The most intriguing features of Indus Valley civilization involve what is missing, at least in comparison with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Archaeologists have found no grand temples or palaces; no elite burial places filled with great wealth; no images of warfare, conquest, or the seizing of captives; no monuments to celebrate powerful rulers. These absences have left scholars guessing about the social and political organization of this civilization. Kenoyer has suggested that the great cities were likely controlled not by a single ruler, but by “a small group of elites, comprised of merchants, landowners, and ritual specialists.”²⁶

Source 2.2, a statue seven inches tall and found in Mohenjo Daro, likely depicts one of these elite men.



Jean-Louis Nou/akg-images

Source 2.2 Man from Mohenjo Daro

- What specific features of the statue can you point out?
- What possible indication of elite status can you identify?
- What overall impression does the statue convey?

Limited archeological evidence suggests that some urban women played important social and religious roles in the Indus Valley civilization. Figurines of women or goddesses are more common than those of men. Women, apparently, were buried near their mothers and grandmothers, while men were not interred with their male relatives. The great variety of clothing, hairstyles, and decorations displayed on female figurines indicates considerable class, ethnic, and perhaps individual variation.

Among the most delightful discoveries in the Indus Valley cities is the evocative statue shown in Source 2.3. It is about four inches tall and dates to

National Museum of India, New Delhi, India/Bridgeman Images



Source 2.3 Dancing Girl

around 2500 B.C.E. This young female nude is known generally as the “dancing girl.” Cast in bronze using a sophisticated “lost wax” method, this statue provides evidence for a well-developed copper/bronze industry. The figure herself was portrayed in a dancer’s pose, her hair gathered in a bun and her left arm covered with bangles and holding a small bowl. Both her arms and legs seem disproportionately long. She has been described variously as a queen, a high-status woman, a sacred temple dancer, and a tribal girl. Although no one really knows her precise identity, she has evoked wide admiration and appreciation. Mortimer Wheeler, a famous British archeologist, described her as “a girl perfectly, for the moment, perfectly confident of herself and the world.” American archeologist Gregory Possehl, also active in the archeology of the Indus Valley civilization, commented, “We may not be certain that she was a dancer, but she was good at what she did and she knew it.”²⁷

- What features of this statue may have provoked such observations?
- How do you react to this statue? What qualities does the figure evoke?
- What does Source 2.3 suggest about views of women, images of female beauty, and attitudes about sexuality and the body?

DOING HISTORY

Indus Valley Civilization

1. **Using art as evidence:** What can we learn about Indus Valley civilization from these visual sources? How does our level of understanding of this civilization differ from that of Egypt and Mesopotamia, where plentiful written records are available?
2. **Considering accessibility:** Do you find the art of civilizations, such as that of the Indus Valley, more accessible to modern people than artistic products of earlier eras? Is it possible to speak of artistic “progress” or “development,” or should we be content with simply noticing differences?
3. **Comparing representations of people:** Notice the various ways that human figures were portrayed in the images shown in Chapters 1 and 2, both those in the chapter narrative and in the Working with Evidence section. How might you define those differences? Can you identify changes from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic eras and then to the age of First Civilizations? How are gender differences represented in these images?
4. **Seeking further evidence:** What additional kinds of archeological discoveries would be helpful in furthering our understanding of Indus Valley civilization?