

Unicorns from Utopia

A miniature Indus sealstone bearing an imaginary creature raises a host of questions about the ancient civilisation that produced it. **Andrew Robinson** elaborates

Perhaps the most famous statement about the ancient Indus civilisation concerns its discovery. An *Illustrated London News* article written in 1924 by John Marshall, director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India, begins: ‘Not often has it been given to archaeologists, as it was given to [Heinrich] Schliemann at Tiryns and Mycenae, or to [Aurel] Stein in the deserts of Turkestan, to light upon the

remains of a long-forgotten civilisation. It looks, however, at this moment, as if we are on the threshold of such a discovery in the plains of the Indus.’

Marshall’s curiosity had been provoked by the publication in London in 1912 of three exquisite miniature sealstones picked up in different parts of the region during the nineteenth century and eventually donated to the British Museum. The most intriguing (see above) showed a single-horned animal like a unicorn (a creature that according to legend came from India) beneath a row of indecipherable signs, one resembling a fish. After excavations began, more sealstones were discovered, many showing ‘unicorns’. Mortimer Wheeler, who excavated in the 1940s, called the sealstones ‘little masterpieces of controlled realism’. But despite a century of efforts by archaeologists and philologists from America, Europe, India, Pakistan and Japan, including numerous, contradictory claims of decipherment, the Indus script remains tantalisingly unreadable.

Fortunately, more is known about the rest of the civilisation. It flourished from c.2600 to 1900 BC. More than 1000 settlements have been found, covering at least 800,000 square kilometres of what is now Pakistan, India and Afghanistan – the most extensive urban culture of its time, about twice the size of its equivalent in Egypt or Mesopotamia. It is now regarded as the beginning of Indian civilisation and possibly the origin of



Indus seal and seal impression.



A so-called ‘priest-king’ statuette found at Mohenjodaro, perhaps the only plausible depiction of an Indus leader. National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi.

Right: John Marshall, his wife and his office staff in India, 1925. Below right: the Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro



Hinduism. This latter speculation was first proposed by Marshall. He dubbed a sealstone humanoid figure with three or four faces wearing a horned headdress and seated in a yogic posture as 'proto-Shiva', after the Hindu god. Today, Indus 'Hinduism' is assertively promoted by Hindu nationalists in India.

All evidence points to a prosperous and advanced society. Copious water flowed year-round down the Indus river and its four main tributaries, unlike the unreliable annual Nile inundation in Egypt. Raw materials were plentiful, including timber, semi-precious stones, and copper and other metals. Two growing seasons, arising from a winter cyclonic system and a summer monsoon system, would have provided abundant food.

The two largest Indus cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, boasted street planning and sewers worthy of modern times, including an impressive brick water tank known as the Great Bath and the world's earliest known toilets. Indus craftsmen created complex stone weights for commerce and long, precision-drilled, carnelian beads for jewellery. Indus merchants operated a vigorous maritime export trade via the Arabian Sea; archaeologists have found Indus-made objects, including sealstones, in Mesopotamian cities such as Ur and Akkad. In addition, there is a total absence of conspicuous royal palaces and grand temples, no monumental depiction of kings and other rulers, not much difference



between the homes of rich and poor, no sign of differing diets in the bones of buried skeletons and no evidence of slavery. All this stands in stark contrast with the ziggurats of Mesopotamia and pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

Nor is there any sign of war. The chief cities show no clear signs of being fortified. No armour and no indisputably military weapons – as opposed to knives, spears and arrows designed for hunting animals – have been found. Moreover the horse, an animal well suited to raiding parties, which later became common in the Indus region, is absent from both excavations and seal imagery. There is only one depiction of humans fighting,

and it is a partly mythical scene on a cylinder seal showing a female deity with the horns of a goat and the body of a tiger.

All in all, the Indus civilisation has a claim to be the world's first, and perhaps only, Utopia. But who knows what its script might reveal, if it is eventually deciphered?

Andrew Robinson will give a Members' exclusive lecture *From Indus civilisation to Independence: a short history of India* at the British Museum on 21 October.