

Indus Valley Civilizations

Geography

India has many geographic features that have affected their culture. The story of Indus valley civilization, also known as Harappa civilization, is a story of a people tied to their environment. The geography of India is one of great extremes, encompassing desert, mountains, forest, and jungle. All of these environments are susceptible to unpredictable periods of flood, drought, and monsoon.

The Himalayas to the north and deserts to the west cut off people of India but did not isolate them completely. As with Egypt and Mesopotamia, mild climates made the area hospitable. However, life in the subcontinent was determined by the monsoons. In summer, air rising over the hot land areas produces maximum precipitation. This allows for food production and good harvests. Inland mountain streams that are flooded contribute to the two major rivers, the Indus and the Ganges. During winter, cool winds from the interior of Asia dry the subcontinent. A late monsoon may bring drought, and a few more monsoon disturbances than normal may produce floods.

1. Describe the geography of the Indus Valley.
2. What is the most important geographic feature and why?

Indus Valley Civilizations

Sometime around 6000 BCE a nomadic herding tribe settled into villages in the mountainous region just west of the Indus River. There they grew barley and wheat using sickles with flint blades, and they lived in small houses made with brick. After 5000 BCE the climate in the region changed, bringing more rainfall. From this they were able to grow more food which allowed the population to grow. They began to domesticate sheep, goats, cows and water buffalo. Then after 4000 BCE they began to use metals such as bronze, and began to trade beads and shells with distant areas in central Asia. The climate changed again and brought more rainfall. This allowed jungles and other areas to grow in India and gave rise to many new animals in the area. By around 2600 BCE the Indus Valley began to build cities as large as Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Two of these cities are Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Each of these two civilizations had populations that exceeded 40,000 people. Each city was built with baked bricks. The cities housed vast marketplaces full of trade and commerce. Some houses were spacious and had a large enclosed yard. Each house was connected to a covered drainage system that was more sanitary than what had been created in west Asia. Mohenjo-Daro had a building with an underground furnace (a hypocaust) and dressing rooms, suggesting bathing was done in heated pools. Unlike Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro was built on a grid like pattern. Harappa also used an Oligarchy to govern which was different than the government of Mohenjo-Daro.

The people of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa shared a sophisticated system of weights and measures, using arithmetic with decimals, and they had a written language that was partly phonetic and partly ideographic. They spun cotton and wove it into cloth. They mass-produced pottery with fine geometric designs as decorations, and they made figurines sensitively depicting their attitudes.

They grew wheat, rice, mustard and sesame seeds, dates and cotton. And they had dogs, cats, camels, sheep, pigs, goats, water buffaloes, elephants and chickens.

Being agricultural, the people of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa had religions that focused on fertility, on the earth as giver of life. They both had a fertility goddess, whose naked image as a figurine sat in a niche in the wall of their homes. They worshipped tree gods, and they had a god with three heads and an erect phallus, which they associated with fertility. They also buried their dead with objects, and they had taboos in their culture, especially about cleanliness.

1. How did the Indus Valley civilizations begin?
2. What were some achievements of both Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa?
3. What were some differences between Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa?
4. Describe the religion of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, what was it like?

The Decline of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa

Between the years 1800 and 1700 BCE, civilization in the Indus Valley vanished. What befell these people is unknown. One suspected cause was a shift in the Indus River. Another is that the people dammed the water along the lower portion of the Indus River without realizing the consequences: temporary but ruinous flooding up river, flooding that would explain the thick layers of silt, thirty feet above the level of the river at the site of Mohenjo-Daro. Another suspected cause is a decline in rainfall, which led to drought and starvation.

Other say that agriculture declined and people abandoned the cities in search of food. Later, a few people of a different culture settled in some of the abandoned cities, in what is known as a “squatter period.” The squatters also disappeared. Knowledge of these civilizations had all but disappeared until the twentieth century when historians excavated these cities.

1. How did the civilizations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa disappear?
2. How did we find out about these civilizations?