



277 **The Indus: Lost Civilizations**

Andrew Robinson

Reaktion

208pp, 78 black and white illustrations

Hardback, £15

When Alexander the Great invaded India in the 4th century BC, he was unaware of the civilisation that had flourished in the Indus Valley for about half a millennium, between 2600 and 1900 BC. The Buddhist emperor Ashoka Maurya, who ruled most of the sub-continent in the 3rd century BC, did not know of it either. Nor did India's Arab, Mughal and early European rulers.

During the 1820s, James Lewis, an East India Company deserter-turned-explorer, encountered a 'large circular mound' near Harappa, in northern Rajasthan. Some 30 years later, Alexander Cunningham, the director of the Archaeological Survey for India, found a seal at Harappa, whose script he attributed first to foreigners, and then to 5th century BC India.

Further seals found by a local policeman and a farmer appeared, as well as pottery and other objects from nearby sites – but their age, and the antiquity of Indian civilisation, only came to light in the 1920s, with the excavations at Harappa and

The antiquity of Indian civilisation only came to light in the 1920s, with the excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro... under the young director John Marshall

Mohenjo-daro by a team of British and Indian archaeologists under the young director, John Marshall.

Rakhal Das Banerji, digging at Mohenjo-daro (Mound of the Dead) was the first to suggest that the seals and their undeciphered language dated to an earlier, lost civilisation. From the beginning,

Marshall believed that a distinctive civilisation had developed in the Indus Valley. He also assumed that, like the riverine civilisations of the Nile, Danube, Tigris and Euphrates, it had been influenced by 'successive migrations' from outside. While Banerji saw links with Minoan Crete, Marshall saw Sumeria.

After nearly a century of further enquiry, we believe that more than 1000 Indus settlements covered 800,000 square kilometres, an area a quarter the size of Western Europe. The population, around one million, was similar to that of ancient Rome at its height. Yet our understanding is still far from complete. Andrew Robinson's new book is a clear summary of what we know, and a tantalising account of what we might yet know.

Even small Indus settlements were built on anti-flood platforms. The one at Mohenjo-daro would have taken 10,000 men more than a year to build. The platforms and their cities are built from brick, but no brickmaking site has yet been excavated. Who was the 'priest-king' who ordered this work? And how, given the absence of evidence for weapons and war at Harappa, did he get people to do it?

The large cities indicate a complex economy, but the excavated areas show a 'dearth of commercial buildings'. There is much evidence for anti-flood and irrigation work, and less of crafts and metalwork. There is also an 'absence of reliable evidence' for temples and palaces.

We cannot know what the people of the Indus civilisation believed. The language on the finely wrought seals is still undeciphered, so we cannot know the relationship, if any, between the Indus language and the subsequent Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language groups. Did the rites of the 'fire altars' found at several sites become those of the Vedic sacrifice, or even, as Marshall thought and many Indian nationalist scholars believe, modern Hinduism? Or are the 'fire altars' really 'updraft kilns'?

Nor, with the fall from scholarly grace of the 'concentrated Aryan invasion' theory, is there an agreed explanation for the decline of the Indus civilisation. Robinson posits a combination of earthquakes, flooding, epidemics, immigration and the slow drying of the Saraswati River. Perhaps the Indus civilisation also suffered from 'some inherent cultural weakness', possibly the paradox of 'general uniformity' with an 'apparent absence of a military authority'. As the ruins of

the Indus Valley civilisation are divided between modern India and Pakistan, politics renders all of these questions 'contentious'.

Andrew Robinson does a commendable job of laying out the evidence in all its incompleteness and ambiguity.

Dominic Green

Bridge of the Untiring Sea: The Corinthian Isthmus from Prehistory to Late Antiquity

Edited by Elizabeth R Gebhard and Timothy E Gregory

American School of Athens: Hesperia Supplement 48

386pp, 140 black and white and 11 colour illustrations, 6 tables and 4 plans

Paperback, £35.99

Pindar, praising Kreontidas' victory in the Isthmian Games of the 5th century BC, calls the Isthmus of Corinth the 'bridge of the untiring sea'. The land bridge between the Peloponnesos and the rest of the Greek mainland is also the bridge between two bodies of water. Herodotus describes a pan-Hellenic assembly at the sanctuary of Isthmia, at the southern end of the 19th-century canal, in 481 BC. A year later, work began on a fortified wall, which changed the Isthmus from a meeting point to a common line of defence.

For the Athenians, the Isthmus was also an ethnic border. Theseus erected a column, inscribed on one side 'Here is not Peloponnesos, but Ionia'; on the other, in what must have been a boon to lost Athenian charioteers, 'Here is Peloponnesos, not Ionia'. As for the locals, the Corinthians had been making sacrifices and offerings at the site of the sanctuary since the Early Iron Age. Geography makes for religion as well as politics.

Punctiliously edited by Elizabeth Gebhard and Timothy Gregory, and magnificently illustrated with photographs, maps and

