

THE INDUS. LOST CIVILIZATIONS. By ANDREW ROBINSON. pp. 208. London, Reaktion Books, 2015.
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Computer scientists in Silicon Valley who dream of cracking the Indus Valley script will find in Andrew Robinson's bibliography pointers to the *Corpus* of Asko Parpola or the names of Iravatham Mahadevan, Gregory Possehl, Walter Fairseris, J. M. Kenoyer and other leading scholars in the field. This little book, however, is aimed at the educated general reader, and is the first in a series of guides to the present state of knowledge of the great Bronze Age civilisations. The small scale of most of the recovered artefacts make the copious illustrations particularly enlightening, and there is an adequate map. Robinson writes with an elegant clarity which comes from a masterly overview of the subject and transmits some of the mysterious excitement which this enigmatic civilisation evokes.

There is an archaeological and topographical prehistory, but modern awareness dates from 1924. In that year, John Marshall, Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, wrote in the *Illustrated London News* about the excavations he and his assistant, Rakhil Das Banerji, had been conducting at Mohenjo-daro and another assistant, Daya Ram Sahni, at Harappa. He sought to present a new civilisation, that of the Indus Valley, to an international audience made receptive by a generation of impresario archaeologists: Schliemann; Woolley; Howard Carter; Aurel Stein; and his own first chief, Sir Arthur Evans. With the advent of carbon dating, agreement was reached that the Mature Period lasted from about 2600BC to 1900BC. The scale of this new urban civilisation was clear from the start; and now there are reckoned to be more than a thousand sites. But although the Indus Valley Civilisation covered an area twice the size of the urban cultures of ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, it has failed to find a place beside these two worlds in the public imagination. Excavation has been interrupted by a number of serious difficulties: the Depression; the Second World War; Partition and, most recently, the fragility of the sites from rising levels of salinity. Robinson notices these but deftly shows that more fundamental obstacles to understanding are to be found in the evidence and its interpretation.

The principal difficulty has been the script. There are sufficient beautifully incised seals to provoke passionate curiosity, but the texts are short, most of the seals puzzlingly unworn and, above all, there is no Rosetta Stone. Tantalisingly, an Akkadian cylinder seal has been found in Iraq which depicts "an interpreter of the Meluhhan language". Meluhha is usually taken to refer to the Indus/Harappan world or its traders in the Middle East. There must be hope that a bi-lingual trading record in Syria or Iraq will come to light in a shell crater or excavated in a future age of enlightened prosperity. In the meantime, almost everything except the right-to-left direction of the characters is uncertain. Is it a script? If so, does it represent a single language, and one that has a descendant that we know about? Strikingly, many of the scholars in the field do not share this bafflement, and Robinson skilfully sketches their various solutions which draw on Sumerian, proto-Dravidian or Vedic Sanskrit linguistics. None of them, however, has commanded general support.

The physical evidence from the excavations provokes more puzzlement: the exquisite but mostly small scale of the artefacts; no discernible hierarchy of sites but large towns without, apparently, public buildings, palaces, temples, fortifications. If, as seems likely, there was substantial trade with the Gulf, what was brought back? Broad interpretations have ranged from Marshall's peaceful trading communities to Mortimer Wheeler's inference from the cities' uniformity of a ruthless authoritarianism. Comparison with the great Middle Eastern civilisations constantly encounters differences, confirming Marshall's initial hunch of its indigenous character which has been strengthened by the discovery of Mehrgarh dating back to 7000BC. It was also a riverine world based around the Indus and the long-vanished Saraswati, brought to life by Mohammed Rafique Mughal and his team; but it was much more. We now know of sites in utterly different landscapes from the Oxus to the Aravallis. This has changed the focus of the study of the decline of the Mature Period after 1900BC. It

is clear that change over this vast area was variable, and it does not seem to be part of a 'general crisis', usually dated around 1200BC, in the western Bronze Age.

Perhaps the most important factor retarding our understanding of this civilisation has been the relative lack of engagement by the countries concerned. In the west, national pride or biblical verification have been drivers of archaeological research, but for a colonial government the position was more nuanced, more a matter of showing the world and educated Indians that it was an enlightened custodian of India's past. Nevertheless, it might have been expected that in the 1920s nationalists would have embraced this confirmation of the antiquity and grandeur of Indian civilisation. This was not the case. Jinnah was not interested, and it could hardly advance the agenda of the Muslim League. Gandhi likewise was silent, though Nehru in his *Discovery of India* celebrated what he took to be evidence of secularity and the utilitarian features of water and sewage management as precious evidence of modernity. There are familiar signs of cultural continuity – swastikas, weights and measures – and much too that is enigmatic. Recently, Hindu nationalists have incorporated 'Indus-Saraswati civilisation' into their historical narrative. But in doing so they have insisted that Vedic Sanskrit belongs to this continuity, a position that has not seemed plausible to the international scholarly community. Robinson recounts these positions with critical sensitivity, but leaves us with the sense that though, despite obstacles, exciting work is afoot, the broad interpretations remain as open as ever. He concludes with his own preference, a Nehruvian vision of a civilisation which combined "artistic excellence, technological sophistication and economic vigour with social egalitarianism, political freedom and religious moderation over more than half a millennium". lionelknight@gmail.com

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POWER, MEMORY, ARCHITECTURE: CONTESTED SITES ON INDIA'S DECCAN PLATEAU, 1300–1600. By RICHARD M. EATON AND PHILLIP B. WAGONER. pp. 436. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014
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This collaboration by Richard Eaton and Phillip Wagoner is the most important publication on Deccan history in well over a decade. It is a model of scholarship in its empirical rigour and richness, in its innovative methodology, and in the wide-ranging scope of its inquiry. I am not alone in giving it high praise – *Power, Memory, and Architecture* has received book awards from both the Association for Asian Studies and the American Historical Association, in a rare display of scholarly consensus.

Perhaps the most striking departure Eaton and Wagoner make from previous scholarship on the Deccan is in their focus on *secondary* centres, especially fortified sites that were situated on frontiers between states. The book provides a wealth of new details on these secondary sites, which scholars have largely overlooked in favour of capital cities like Vijayanagara and Bijapur. But even more consequential is the shift in vantage point away from imperial centres to the secondary nodes of power that dominated rural localities. As Eaton and Wagoner state in their introduction, "in a very real sense, the political history of the Deccan revolved around struggles by primary centres for control of secondary centres" (p. xxii). Secondary centres were not only desirable for their material resources, but sometimes also for their symbolic resonances.

Much of the book is devoted to three "contested sites": 1) Kalyana, situated at the frontier between the Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, and Bidar sultanates; 2) Warangal, in the border zone of the territories controlled by the Bahmani sultanate and by Telugu chiefs; and 3) Raichur, which lay close to the border between the Vijayanagara kingdom and the Bahmani (and subsequently Bijapur) sultanate. The