RICHARD WILKINSON

Forgotten Utopia

It thrived for 700 years without war or conflict. What was the Indus civilisation's secret? asks **Andrew Robinson**

PICTURE a peace-loving Atlantic island ruled by reason. Its 54 cities are governed by educated officials and an elected-for-life prince. Although war hasn't been abolished, it is used only as a last resort. People see no glory in fighting, and capture enemies rather than kill them. This is the original Utopia – the pagan, communist and pacifist world sketched out exactly 500 years ago in Thomas More's eponymous work of fiction.

More's book has exerted a powerful pull on our imaginations – not least through utopian science fiction. But in a world of autocracy, fanaticism and terrorism, it seems as far from reality as ever. Indeed, arguments still rage about his true intention. His title, derived from the ancient Greek *ou-topos* – meaning "no place" – is a pun on *eu-topos*, "good place". Was More proposing a blueprint of an ideal society or satirising the self-interest, greed and military exploits of the hereditary monarchies of his time?

On one thing nearly everyone agrees: no utopia has ever existed. Large human societies tend to be governed by coercion. The instinct for warfare has been a driving force in nearly every civilisation of the last five millennia, from ancient Mesopotamia to the British Empire.

Or has it? One mysterious, ancient society might give the lie to that. The civilisation of the Indus valley is the most enigmatic of the four great early civilisations. But while Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt and ancient China gloried in warfare, it seems absent from the Indus valley. Was this a real, functioning utopia? If so, how did it survive, and why did it eventually disappear?

The Indus civilisation flourished from about 2600 to 1900 BC. More than a thousand settlements have been found covering at least 800,000 square kilometres of what is now Pakistan, India and Afghanistan (see map, page 32), yet its remains were only discovered in the 1920s. It is now regarded as the beginning of Indian civilisation and possibly the origin of Hinduism.

All signs point to a prosperous and advanced society – one of history's greatest. It had a vigorous maritime export trade via the Arabian Sea, and archaeologists have found objects made in the Indus valley in Mesopotamian cities such as Ur and Akkad. The two largest Indus cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, boasted street planning and sewage worthy of modern times, including the world's earliest known toilets and an impressive brick water tank known as the Great Bath.

"In a century of excavations, we have found just one depiction of fighting"

Indus craftsmen created complex stone weights for commerce and long, precision-drilled carnelian beads for jewellery. Thousands of small sealstones have also been found; worn around the neck, merchants would have used them to stamp their identity on clay tags. Each one is carved with an exquisite but mysterious script (see example, page 32), which has provoked more than a hundred published attempts to decipher its language – with little consensus.

Other aspects of the civilisation are even more perplexing. The chief cities show no clear signs of being fortified. No armour and no indisputably military weapon – as opposed to knives, spears and arrows designed for hunting animals – has been found. Nor is there evidence of the horse, an animal well suited to raiding parties, which later became common in the region. In nearly a century of excavations, archaeologists have uncovered just one depiction of humans fighting, and it is a partly mythical scene showing a female deity with the horns of a goat and the body of a tiger (shown on page 33).

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.

"What's left of these great Indus cities gives us no indication of a society engaged with, or threatened by, war," says Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum in London. The Indus people, he argues, offer a novel model of an urban civilisation, without celebration of violence or extreme concentration of individual power: "Is it going too far to see these Indus cities as an early, urban Utopia?"

There are some who find a complete absence of war and conflict not credible. "There has never been a society without conflict of greater or lesser scale," says Richard Meadow at Harvard University's Peabody ›

Museum. He argues that knives, spears and the like could have been used on humans as well as animals, and points out that the ancient Maya were once thought to be exceptionally peace-loving – until their hieroglyphs were deciphered, revealing stories of exceptionally bloody battles, sacrifice and torture. Who knows what the Indus script might reveal if it is deciphered?

Then again, even the Maya had fortifications around some of their cities and widespread depictions of warrior kings, so Meadow's views are currently in the minority.

Most large societies lean on centralised governments to enforce the rule of law. Yet the only Indus sculpture that might conceivably depict a ruler is a small meditative bust of a bearded and cloaked man with partly closed eyes. Generally dubbed a "priest-king" – because he wears a cloak over his left shoulder, much like Buddhist monks and Hindu priests, with a trefoil design that resembles one worn by Mesopotamian priests – his identity is in fact totally obscure.

Nonetheless, big engineering projects in the Indus valley would suggest some guiding authority existed to mobilise, direct and provision the workforce. Take the vast stone platforms that underlie various cities. They were built to raise buildings and streets above the level of the annual floods of the Indus river. Additional platforms were sometimes built on top, to further raise individual structures. At Mohenjo-daro, the foundational platform is 200 metres wide, 400 metres long and 5 metres tall. Indus excavator and scholar Gregory Possehl of the University of Pennsylvania calculated that it would have taken 10,000 men just over a year to build. This would have required some kind of central authority to mobilise and direct labourers. Of course, More made allowances for slavery in his Utopia, so perhaps this is just one more parallel between the fictional and real worlds.

RANDY OLSON/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE

SM RAFIQ PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY

Left to right: A sealstone with the Indus script; Mohenjo-daro; the Indus civilisation's only depiction of humans fighting

ERJA LAHDENPERÄ/COURTESY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

Paradise lost

The peaceful Indus civilisation flourished from about 2500 to 1900 BC. More than 1000 settlements covered at least 800,000 square kilometres, though only a fraction of these have been excavated

Commercial networks spread over a vast area are another indication of a centralised authority. Lapis lazuli mined close to the trading post of Shortugai in what is now Afghanistan is found as far afield as Egypt. Goods were undoubtedly shipped via the Indus river and its tributaries, but many must have travelled overland. Such networks couldn't have developed and operated for seven centuries without basic roads between settlements, presumably maintained by centrally directed taxation, plus some kind of regulatory framework to enforce the validity of long-distance commercial agreements.

And then there are the stone weights. They were standardised for commerce throughout the Indus valley and clearly worked well: the system survived long after the civilisation disappeared. Not only did it provide the weight standards for the earliest Indian coins, issued in the 7th century BC, the system is still used today for weighing small quantities in some traditional markets of both Pakistan and India.

It seems inconceivable that such a wealthy society could have survived for centuries without falling victim to aggressive invaders or embracing internal strongmen – Indus equivalents of Ramesses the Great in Egypt and Hammurabi in Babylon. How was this possible?

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Part of the answer seems to have been geographical luck. The Indus civilisation had extensive lands ranging from river plains and coastlines to hills and mountains. 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. And two growing seasons, arising from its winter cyclonic system and its summer monsoon system, would have provided abundant food. Egypt and Mesopotamia weren't so lucky.

Eventual decline

As a result, the Indus peoples had no economic need to invade foreign lands, hence no need for militaristic leaders. As for invaders, who were the likely candidates? To the west, political and commercial relations were good, judging from the discovery of Indus settlements at Mehrgarh and Sutkagen-dor in neighbouring Balochistan. The same probably applied to Afghanistan to the north and north-west, on the basis of the settlement at Shortugai. To the east, in Rajasthan, there was only the inhospitable and sparsely populated Thar desert and the Aravalli mountain range.

Only in the south, on the Arabian Sea coast, might the Indus dwellers have faced attack. It's perhaps no coincidence that this is where the only fortified settlements have been found. As for a possible attack from distant Mesopotamia, there would have been little motivation, given the value of the Indus trade, plus the fact that Mesopotamian rulers were preoccupied with internal battles.

So what eventually happened to the Indus civilisation? In the late 1920s, a group of 14 skeletons was unearthed in Mohenjo-daro, apparently caught in the act of fleeing the city. The discovery led to theories that migrants from Central Asia had attacked the Indus civilisation and initiated its decline: after flourishing for seven centuries, the peace-loving people met a violent end. But forensic study in the 1980s revealed that these victims died from malaria or other diseases, rather than massacre.

While major migrations from Central Asia between 1900 and 1500 BC are still thought to have played a role in the Indus' endgame, changes to the environment may also have contributed. Climate change – an agent in the downfall of so many other civilisations – has been fingered: the archaeological record suggests the monsoon weakened around 2100 BC. And there are strong indications that the course of the Indus river and its tributaries shifted. A reconstruction of its course based on historical sources, past landforms and aerial photography shows major changes between 4000 and 2000 BC. The shift led to a growing flood threat to Mohenjo-daro, which could have caused the city's eventual abandonment. All this could have been triggered by tectonic activity in the Himalayas: the region is prone to earthquakes; one damaged an Indus settlement at Dholavira in about 2200 BC.

JAMES P. BLAIR/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE

The "priest-king", arguably the only plausible depiction of an Indus leader

It's most likely that the decline of the Indus civilisation involved environmental and human factors operating in tandem. According to India's leading Indus scholar, Iravatham Mahadevan, the very thing that made the Indus civilisation so special could have brought about its ruin. "The civilisation seems to have declined and collapsed due to natural causes and also probably due to the failure of the ideology which bound the people together," he says. Possehl agrees. "The Indus ideology ultimately had feet of clay," he writes in his book *The Indus Civilization: A contemporary perspective*. "In the end their ideology made the Indus people who they were, but it may have proved to be their undoing as well."

In Possehl's view, the lack of conflict and militarism endemic in the civilisation encouraged its original growth before 2600 BC and its relatively short flourishing, compared with Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. But it also accelerated the civilisation's decline after 1900 BC. Indus egalitarianism and pacifism, though productive for a while, eventually led to stagnancy and inflexibility in the face of change.

There is, admittedly, limited evidence to confirm or deny Possehl's hypothesis. It's likely that we will remain in the dark until the tantalising Indus script is cracked. This should shed light on whether some degree of conflict, if not outright war, is vital to the survival of a civilisation – and whether Utopia really is "no place". n

Andrew Robinson is the author of *The Indus: Lost civilizations* (Reaktion Books, 2015)