



**MICHAEL WOOD ON...**  
EXCAVATING INDIA'S FIRST CITIES

# // A hitherto unknown civilisation had suddenly come into the light of day //

It's a century ago this year that the first great discoveries took place at Harappa, a huge mudbrick mound south of Lahore in what is now Pakistan, to be followed the following year at Mohenjo-daro, more than 400 miles south-west of Harappa. The remains of ancient cities were unearthed at the two sites; both belonged to a hitherto unknown civilisation that had suddenly, unexpectedly, come into the light of day. I remember talking it over some years ago with the late Ahmad Hasan Dani, who worked on Mohenjo-daro with Sir Mortimer Wheeler. He said: "At that time the Indian subcontinent was under British rule. The Europeans saw India as a backward place... Few people suspected that India had such a prehistory."

All that changed in 1921. It was truly epoch-making: "Not often has it been given to archaeologists," the British excavator John Marshall reflected, "to light upon the remains of a long-forgotten civilisation. It looks, however, at this moment, as if we were on the threshold of such a discovery here in the plains of the Indus."

So the idea of the Indus civilisation was born. Like Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, India's first cities had grown up on a river. The ruins of Harappa stood on the dried-up bed of a tributary of the Indus. Its huge citadel walls had been quarried away by Victorian railway contractors in the 1860s, but the excavators still found evidence of industry and trade, of high-level organisation – and writing. Harappa was far older than anything previously known in India, where cities were thought to

have emerged at the time of the Buddha, around 500 BC, and writing even later. But now, astonishingly, we discovered there had been huge cities in India at the time of the Pyramids of Giza. By ancient standards, Mohenjo-daro was an urban giant, a "Bronze Age Manhattan".

Mohenjo-daro had perhaps been the centre of an empire which extended from the Arabian Sea to the Himalayas. Just like their modern descendants, the Indus people were traders. From here their boats sailed to the Persian Gulf and Iraq carrying cargoes of ivory, teak and lapis lazuli.

With more than 2,000 towns and villages, this was the largest civilisation in the ancient world, and with up to 5 million people, it had the biggest population. And it was indigenous – its roots went back to settlements in Baluchistan from the seventh millennium BC.

Remarkably, its language has still not been deciphered – surely the greatest riddle in archaeology. The waters have been muddied by politics: today in Pakistan, Islamic history predominates in scholarship and education. In India, on the other hand, the Hindu Nationalist government focuses on "Hindu" history, using the early Vedic texts to prove that Indian religion (what we know as Hinduism) was always in the subcontinent, and hence the Indus cities were in some sense "Hindu" and spoke a form of Sanskrit, the language of the Hindu gods. This is rejected by most linguists. Modern studies show that the family tree of Indo-European languages spread from the Anatolian region around 9,000 years ago, and people speaking Old Persian and Sanskrit migrated into Afghanistan and the north-west frontier (a region in what's now Pakistan) in the Late Bronze Age, after climate change caused the Indus cities to decline.

These confusions have left the study of the Indus civilisation and its unknown language in a curious limbo. (Although the Indologist Asko Parpola and his team in Helsinki are convinced they spoke an early form of Dravidian, the language group still spoken today by more than 200 million people, mainly in south India.)

It is these questions that make the Indus civilisation such an exciting area of scholarship: its wide extent; the scale of its cities; its unknown language. And no sign of warfare – no defences, weapons or images of warriors – have ever been found, unlike "war-addicted ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and China" (as Andrew Robinson writes in his engaging new book *The Indus*). More no doubt is to come. The huge, unexcavated city mound at Ganweriwala in the Cholistan desert, for example, has recently yielded the same clay seals, the same tantalising yogic figures that seem to beckon from India's deep past.

So the centenary of this excavation gives us much to celebrate, and much to ponder. No doubt new discoveries will be made when India and Pakistan are prepared to put more time and resources into their shared roots. A great joint project, perhaps? **E**

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