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**Indus civilization**

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**Alternative Titles:** Harappān civilization, Indus valley civilization

The civilization was first identified in 1921 at [Harappa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Harappa) in the Punjab region and then in 1922 at [Mohenjo-daro](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mohenjo-daro) (Mohenjodaro), near the [Indus River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) in the Sindh (Sind) region. Both sites are in present-day [Pakistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan), in [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-province-Pakistan) and [Sindh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sindh-province-Pakistan) provinces, respectively. The ruins of Mohenjo-daro were designated a UNESCO [World Heritage site](https://www.britannica.com/topic/World-Heritage-site) in 1980.

Subsequently, vestiges of the civilization were found as far apart as [Sutkagen Dor](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sutkagen-Dor) in southwestern [Balochistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balochistan) province, Pakistan, near the shore of the [Arabian Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Sea), about 300 miles (480 km) west of [Karachi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Karachi); and at [Ropar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rupnagar) (or Rupar), in eastern [Punjab](https://www.britannica.com/place/Punjab-state-India) state, northwestern [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India), at the foot of the Shimla Hills some 1,000 miles (1,600 km) northeast of Sutkagen Dor. Later exploration established its existence southward down the west coast of India as far as the [Gulf of Khambhat](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulf-of-Khambhat) (Cambay), 500 miles (800 km) southeast of Karachi, and as far east as the [Yamuna (Jumna) River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yamuna-River) basin, 30 miles (50 km) north of [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi). It is thus decidedly the most extensive of the world’s three earliest civilizations; the other two are those of [Mesopotamia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mesopotamia-historical-region-Asia) and [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Egypt), both of which began somewhat before it.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/22/196822-050-0E40EBC2/Ruins-city-Harappa-Pakistan-Punjab.jpg)

**Harappa ruins**

Ruins of the ancient city of Harappa in Punjab, Pakistan.

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The Indus civilization is known to have consisted of two large cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, and more than 100 towns and villages, often of relatively small size. The two cities were each perhaps originally about 1 mile (1.6 km) square in overall dimensions, and their outstanding magnitude suggests political centralization, either in two large states or in a single great empire with [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) capitals, a practice having [analogies](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analogies) in Indian [history](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history). It is also possible that Harappa succeeded Mohenjo-daro, which is known to have been devastated more than once by exceptional floods. The southern region of the civilization, on the [Kathiawar Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kathiawar-Peninsula) and beyond, appears to be of later origin than the major Indus sites. The civilization was literate, and its script, with some 250 to 500 characters, has been partly and tentatively deciphered; the language has been indefinitely identified as [Dravidian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dravidian-languages).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/07/155507-050-AD776D3B/Portion-ruins-Mohenjo-daro-Pakistan-archaeological-site.jpg)

**Mohenjo-daro**

Portion of the ruins at the Mohenjo-daro archaeological site, southeastern Pakistan.

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The Indus civilization apparently evolved from the villages of neighbours or predecessors, using the Mesopotamian model of irrigated agriculture with sufficient skill to reap the advantages of the spacious and fertile [Indus River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Indus-River) valley while controlling the [formidable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/formidable) annual flood that simultaneously fertilizes and destroys. Having obtained a secure foothold on the plain and mastered its more immediate problems, the new civilization, doubtless with a well-nourished and increasing population, would find expansion along the flanks of the great waterways an inevitable sequel. The civilization subsisted primarily by farming, supplemented by an appreciable but often [elusive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elusive) commerce. Wheat and six-row [barley](https://www.britannica.com/plant/barley-cereal) were grown; field peas, mustard, sesame, and a few date stones have also been found, as well as some of the earliest known traces of cotton**. Domesticated animals included dogs and cats, humped and shorthorn cattle, domestic fowl, and possibly pigs, camels, and buffalo. The Asian elephant probably was also domesticated, and its ivory tusks were freely used. Minerals, unavailable from the**[**alluvial plain**](https://www.britannica.com/science/floodplain), were sometimes brought in from far afield. Gold was imported from southern India or [Afghanistan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan), silver and copper from Afghanistan or northwestern India (present-day [Rajasthan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rajasthan) state), [lapis lazuli](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lapis-lazuli) from Afghanistan, turquoise from [Iran](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran) (Persia), and a jadelike fuchsite from southern India.

Perhaps the best-known [artifacts](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifacts) of the Indus civilization are a number of small [seals](https://www.britannica.com/topic/seal-authentication), generally made of steatite (a form of talc), which are distinctive in kind and unique in quality, depicting a wide variety of animals, both real—such as elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, and antelopes—and fantastic, often composite creatures. Sometimes human forms are included. A few examples of Indus stone sculpture have also been found, usually small and representing humans or gods. There are great numbers of small [terra-cotta](https://www.britannica.com/art/terra-cotta) figures of animals and humans.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/63/167763-050-DE5F934C/Assortment-seals-animal-motifs-use-Indus-civilization.jpg)

**Indus civilization: seals**

Assortment of seals with animal motifs in use during the time of the Indus civilization, 2nd–3rd millennium BCE.

*Copyright J.M. Kenoyer/Harappa.com; Courtesy Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan*

How and when the civilization came to an end remains uncertain. In fact, no uniform ending need be postulated for a [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) so widely distributed. But the end of Mohenjo-daro is known and was dramatic and sudden. Mohenjo-daro was attacked toward the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE by raiders who swept over the city and then passed on, leaving the dead lying where they fell. Who the attackers were is matter for conjecture. The episode would appear to be consistent in time and place with the earlier invaders from the north (formerly called [Aryan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aryan)s) into the Indus region as reflected in the older books of the [Rigveda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rigveda), in which the newcomers are represented as attacking the “walled cities” or “citadels” of the aboriginal peoples and the invaders’ war-god [Indra](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indra) as rending forts “as age consumes a garment.” However, one thing is clear: the city was already in an advanced stage of economic and social decline before it received the coup de grâce. Deep floods had more than once submerged large tracts of it. Houses had become increasingly shoddy in construction and showed signs of overcrowding. The final blow seems to have been sudden, but the city was already dying. As the evidence stands, the civilization was succeeded in the Indus valley by poverty-stricken [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures), deriving a little from a sub-Indus heritage but also drawing elements from the direction of Iran and the [Caucasus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caucasus)—from the general direction, in fact, of the northern invasions. For many centuries urban civilization was dead in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/62/167762-050-207DF9A1/cooking-pots-Harappan-use-Indus-civilization-2200-bce.jpg)

**Indus civilization: cooking pots**

Harappan cooking pots in use during the Indus civilization, c. 2300–2200 BCE.

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In the south, however, in Kathiawar and beyond, the situation appears to have been very different. There it would seem that there was a real cultural [continuity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity) between the late Indus phase and the [Copper Age](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Copper-Age) cultures that characterized central and western India between 1700 and the 1st millennium BCE. Those cultures form a material bridge between the end of the Indus civilization proper and the developed [Iron Age](https://www.britannica.com/event/Iron-Age) civilization that arose in India about 1000 BCE.