
The Demise of Utopia: Contexts of Civilizational Collapse in the Bronze Age Indus Valley

Back in the 1960's, the hydrologist Robert Raikes and the archaeologist George Dales independently, then jointly, put forth theories for the seasonal flooding, or more precisely the seasonal "ponding," of Mohenjo Daro and some smaller sites nearby in Sind. Each scholar felt able to hypothesize, from the standpoint of his own separate studies, that a swelling of the ground during the Harappan period produced a type of natural barrier across the Indus River, perhaps some 10 km wide and as much as 45 meters high. The result of such a phenomenon during the Harappan period would have been an annual inundation of sites as the natural reservoir engulfing them grew with run-off from the Himalayas. With the approaching warm season, the reservoir would have dried up or at least shrunk considerably. Associated with such a calamity would have been the problems posed by water-borne diseases and the disposal of wastes. Of course, problems of food supply and trade would have been exacerbated.

The archaeological evidence for such an anomaly includes the existence of five or more layers of silt found between levels of Mature Harappan habitation at Mohenjo Daro. It should be stressed that this archaeologically attested silt is a type of silt laid down in still water conditions, not flood water conditions.

One can easily imagine that such a situation would have given rise to the use of massive mudbrick platforms as the foundation for domestic activities and constructions in an attempt to stay high and dry above the inundation lake. Thus Wheeler was right in terming the massive constructions as defensive constructions; however, they were defenses against intruding water, not intruding people. It is also equally reasonable to suggest that the Harappan fixation with the control of water was somehow linked to this phenomenon.

Tectonic Uplift of the Coastline

Another natural and uncontrollable factor in the demise of at least some of the Indus cities was tectonic uplift on a grand scale. The evidence for this is simple and indisputable: Harappan seaports along the Makran coast, such as Sutkagendor, Sotka Koh, and Bala Kot, are now as far as 50 km inland. "These displaced ports made it evident that the coastline of Pakistan had risen considerably during the past 4,000 years, with the initial rise apparently having occurred during the Harappan period" (Dales 1966: 95). The earthquakes associated with such an uplift would have been tremendous and the disruption of sea and land trade networks would have been devastating. The proximity to Arabian sea trade routes was, after all, the *raison d'etre* for

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sites such as Sutkagen Dor and Sutkha Koh. This tectonic uplift, then, would explain the demise of several Harappan coastal sites, as well as imply a hardship for many other Harappan sites which were dependent on these coastal sites for trade and/or marine resources.

The Fall of Harappan Culture

No doubt, these cities were engineering masterpieces of their time. The remains of their walls yield clues about the culture that thrived in the Indus Valley. Clay figurines of goddesses, for example, are proof that religion was important. Toys and games show that even in 3000 B.C.E., kids — and maybe even adults — liked to play. Pottery, textiles, and beads are evidence of skilled craftsmanship and thriving trade.

It was this intensive devotion to craftsmanship and trade that allowed the Harappan culture to spread widely and prosper greatly. Each time goods were traded or neighbors entered the gates of the cities to barter, Indus culture was spread.

Eventually, though, around 1900 B.C.E, this prosperity came to an end. The integrated cultural network collapsed, and the civilization became fragmented into smaller regional cultures. Trade, writing, and seals all but disappeared from the area.

Many believe that the decline of the Harappan civilization was a result of Aryan invasions from the north. This theory seems logical because the Aryans came to power in the Ganges Valley shortly after the Indus demise of the Indus Valley Civilization. Because there is little evidence of any type of invasion though, numerous historians claim that it was an environmental disaster that led to the civilization's demise. They argue that changing river patterns disrupted the farming and trading systems and eventually led to irreparable flooding.

Although the intricate details of the early Indus Valley culture might never be fully known, many pieces of the ancient puzzle have been discovered. The remains of the Indus Valley cities continue to be unearthed and interpreted today. With each new artifact, the history of early Indian civilization is strengthened and the legacy of this ingenious and diverse metropolis is made richer.

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