

Life in the Indus Valley

The Indus Valley civilisation covered a massive area, four times as large as the UK. It centred on the river Indus that runs through modern day northeast Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northwest India. At the time there was a second major river but this dried up around 2000 BC and it now only flows during the monsoon rain season. The river is called the Ghaggar upstream of the Ottu barrage and the Hakra downstream.

The Indus Valley civilisation started around 3200 BC. When farmers moved into the area they established small farming settlements where they kept cows and sheep. In time these grew into major cities like Mohenjo-Daro and a sophisticated, advanced civilisation began to flourish. Evidence shows that the people from the Indus Valley civilisation made objects from clay; had their own Indus writing script and used tools like ploughs to farm the land. They were also skilled traders and they had commercial links with other advanced civilisations like ancient Sumer. The civilisation thrived until around 1900 BC, after which it began to slowly decline. By 1300 BC all the major cities had been abandoned and the civilisation ceased to exist. It is thought that the drying up of the Ghaggar-Hakra river could have led to the desertion of the area.

The lost cities of The Indus Valley civilisation lay undiscovered until 1826 when a British soldier called Charles Masson noted mounds of bricks that he thought looked like castles. They were actually buildings from Mohenjo-Daro. Thirty years later, in 1856, workers building The Great Indian Railway found and used old bricks that turned out to be from buildings in Harappa. Subsequent exploration of the area revealed exciting evidence of these lost cities.



Cities

The Indus Valley civilisation was the biggest of the ancient civilisations and its main cities were huge and complex with many thousands of inhabitants. The cities were built near rivers, which provided water for cooking, washing and drinking. The water, which flooded the riverbanks each year, transferred nutrients into the earth that kept it rich and fertile for growing crops. The river also provided a mode of transport for traders to carry their goods to other cities. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were the biggest cities of the Indus Valley civilisation and it is thought that up to 80 000 people could have lived there. Other Indus Valley cities included Kalibangan, Lothal and Banawali. However, not everyone lived in cities; lots of farmers, fishermen and traders lived outside the cities in small villages. Buildings in the cities were made from mud bricks that were dried in the sun. There were lots of buildings built for different purposes; these included granaries, dockyards, public baths, warehouses and, of course, houses for people to live in. Unlike other ancient civilisations, there has been no evidence of temples or palaces found. This suggests that the Indus Valley probably did not have priests or kings. Water was very important in the Indus Valley civilisation and the cities had complex drainage systems and wells to manage the water flow in and out of the city and to separate clean and dirty water. Some cities also had a citadel that was an area on a mound of land that was higher than the rest of the city. It is thought that the most important buildings were located there and that they were probably the place in which the rulers of the city lived.

Homes

There were big and small houses in the Indus Valley cities. Some had one floor and others (probably those belonging to richer people) had two or even three. The walls of the houses were very thick as this kept them nice and cool inside. There were no windows in the walls facing the main street so that people inside were not disturbed by the noise outside. Richer people's houses had many rooms which were sometimes arranged around a central courtyard, but some poorer people only had one or two rooms in which to live. Houses had flat roofs and this created an outdoor space where people could keep cool, socialise with their friends and families and store some of their goods. The rooms inside the houses were used for different purposes. There were designated places to eat, sleep and wash. The people from the Indus Valley cooked on fire made by burning wood, charcoal or even animal dung! They also had ovens in which they baked bread. Hygiene and cleanliness was very important and houses had bathrooms with toilets and showers. Toilet seats were made from bricks and waste from the toilets was channelled out into the street drains through clay pipes. Showers were really just a brick platform on which people would stand and pour water over themselves from jugs. Again, the dirty water would flow out of the house through the pipes and enter the city drain. Clean water was obtained from wells that were accessible out in the streets, although some wealthier households actually had their own private wells.

Life in the Indus Valley civilisation was very advanced for its time with living conditions comparable to those in ancient Sumer and better than those in ancient Egypt. Historians and archaeologists are still working hard to discover more about this fascinating lost civilisation.

