

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Indus Valley Civilization

Paper 1 · Unit 3

Origin, extent, town planning, script, decline and the map sites:
65 marks in four years, and a permanent fixture of the
compulsory map question.

anantamias.com

UPSC SYLLABUS

Indus Valley Civilization: origin, date, extent, characteristics, decline, survival and significance; art and architecture.

Discovery, date and extent

Chronology and geography come first because almost every question tests whether you know how large and how early this civilisation actually was.

- Excavation began with **Daya Ram Sahni** at Harappa in 1921 and **R. D. Banerji** at Mohenjo-daro in 1922, and **John Marshall** announced the discovery to the world in 1924.
- Radiocarbon dating places the **Mature Harappan phase at roughly 2600 to 1900 BCE**, preceded by an Early Harappan phase from about 3200 BCE and followed by a Late Harappan phase to about 1300 BCE.
- Extent is the figure examiners look for: over **1.2 million square kilometres**, from Sutkagendor on the Makran coast to Alamgirpur on the Hindon, and from Manda in Jammu to Daimabad in Maharashtra.
- That area makes it the **largest of the four early Bronze Age civilisations**, considerably bigger than Egypt and Mesopotamia combined, which is worth stating because most candidates do not know it.
- Around **1,500 sites** have now been identified, and the great majority lie in the Ghaggar-Hakra basin rather than on the Indus itself, which is why the label Indus-Saraswati has gained ground.
- **Amri, Kot Diji, Sothi-Siswal and Damb Sadaat** represent the regional Early Harappan cultures out of which the mature phase emerged, so origin is now understood as indigenous evolution rather than as diffusion from the west.
- Older diffusionist explanations, associated with **Gordon Childe** and with Mortimer Wheeler's idea of an idea arriving from Mesopotamia, have been displaced by the excavation of **Mehrgarh** in Baluchistan, occupied from about 7000 BCE, which shows a continuous local sequence from early farming to urbanism.
- **Mehrgarh** is therefore the single most important site for the origin question, and any answer that omits it is working from outdated material.

Site	Location	Known for
Harappa	Ravi, Punjab (Pakistan)	First excavated; granaries, cemetery R37, workmen quarters
Mohenjo-daro	Indus, Sindh	Great Bath, Great Granary, Pashupati seal, bronze dancing girl
Dholavira	Kutch, Gujarat	Three-part town, water reservoirs, signboard inscription
Lothal	Gujarat	Dockyard, bead factory, rice husk, fire altars
Kalibangan	Rajasthan	Ploughed field, fire altars, wooden drainage
Rakhigarhi	Haryana	Largest Indian site, ancient DNA sample
Banawali	Haryana	Radial street plan, barley, toy plough
Chanhudaro	Sindh	Bead making, no citadel
Surkotada	Gujarat	Horse bones claim, contested
Sutkagendor	Makran coast	Westernmost site, trade post

The sites most often required, with what each is known for. These recur in the map question.

KEY TERMS

Mature Harappan — The urban phase of roughly 2600 to 1900 BCE marked by planned cities, standard weights, seals and script.

Town planning and civic engineering

Asked in 2026 through the claim that Harappan architecture reflects an integrated vision going beyond functionality. That question wants technical detail, so carry the specifics.

- City layout typically divided a raised **citadel** to the west from a **lower town** to the east, both walled, and Dholavira uniquely adds a third division, the middle town.
- Streets ran on a **grid oriented north to south and east to west**, intersecting at right angles, which implies surveying and a controlling authority rather than organic growth.
- **Standardised burnt brick** in the ratio 1:2:4 was used across the whole civilisation, and that uniformity over 1.2 million square kilometres is the strongest single argument for central authority or at least shared convention.
- Drainage is the celebrated feature: covered brick drains ran under the streets with **inspection manholes**, house drains fed into street drains, and soak pits handled solid waste.
- **Sanitation reached the individual house**, with bathing platforms and private wells in many dwellings, which no contemporary Egyptian or Mesopotamian city achieved on that scale.
- The **Great Bath** at Mohenjo-daro, about twelve by seven metres and two and a half metres deep, was made watertight with gypsum mortar and a bitumen layer, and its purpose is usually read as ritual rather than recreational.
- Water management at **Dholavira** is the most sophisticated known from the ancient world, with a series of rock-cut reservoirs, check dams on seasonal streams and stone drains, all responding to an arid environment.

- Granaries at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were identified as such by Wheeler, though **later scholars including Jonathan Mark Kenoyer dispute the identification**, and noting that dispute shows genuine reading.
- For the 2026 question, the integrated vision argument rests on exactly this combination: environmental adaptation at Dholavira, technological rationality in the brick ratio and drainage, and urban aesthetics in the grid and the proportion of public space.

Economy, trade and the weights

Economic evidence carries a lot of marks because it is concrete and datable. Learn the weight system and the named trading partners.

- Agriculture produced **wheat, barley, peas, sesame, mustard and cotton**, with rice attested at Lothal and Rangpur, and the Harappans were the first people known to cultivate cotton.
- A **ploughed field at Kalibangan** with two sets of furrows at right angles is the earliest evidence of ploughing anywhere in the subcontinent.
- Animals domesticated included **humped cattle, buffalo, sheep, goat, pig, dog and elephant**, and the absence of confirmed horse remains is a genuine and contested gap, with the Surkotada bones disputed between A. K. Sharma and Richard Meadow.
- Weights followed a **binary then decimal system in the ratios 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 up to 12,800**, cut from chert cubes, and the uniformity of these weights across sites is remarkable.
- **Seals** in steatite, over 3,500 recovered, carried animal motifs and script, and their principal function appears to have been commercial sealing of goods rather than personal identity.
- Long distance trade reached Mesopotamia, where cuneiform texts name **Meluhha**, generally identified with the Indus region, alongside Dilmun (Bahrain) and Magan (Oman) as intermediaries.
- Harappan seals have been found at **Ur, Kish, Lagash and Tell Asmar**, and a Mesopotamian cylinder seal at Mohenjo-daro, which is hard archaeological proof of contact.
- **Lothal's dockyard**, a brick basin about 214 by 36 metres with an inlet channel and spillway, is read by most excavators as a tidal dock, though a minority argue it was a reservoir.
- Raw materials were sourced widely: **lapis lazuli from Badakshan, turquoise from Iran, jade from Central Asia, copper from Khetri, gold from Karnataka and shell from Gujarat**, which maps a genuine procurement network.

KEY TERMS

Meluhha — The Mesopotamian name for a trading partner to the east, generally identified with the Indus region.

Script, society and religion

Three areas where the evidence is thin and the interpretations are many. Say what the evidence supports and where it stops, because overconfidence is heavily penalised here.

- Roughly **400 to 600 distinct signs** have been catalogued, written **boustrophedon** and usually right to left, in inscriptions averaging only about five signs, and the script remains **undeciphered**.

- Short inscription length is the fundamental obstacle, and it has produced two rival positions: the **logo-syllabic** reading defended by Asko Parpola and Iravatham Mahadevan, and the argument by **Steve Farmer, Richard Sproat and Michael Witzel** that it is not writing at all but a non-linguistic sign system.
- Absence of a bilingual inscription comparable to the Rosetta Stone is why decipherment has failed, and any claim of a solved script should be treated sceptically.
- Social structure is inferred rather than documented, and the **absence of palaces, royal tombs and monumental temples** is the striking negative, which some read as evidence of an oligarchy or merchant council rather than kingship.
- Differences in house size, in grave goods at cemetery R37 and in access to the citadel indicate **stratification without a visible ruling dynasty**, which is genuinely unusual among early civilisations.
- Religion is reconstructed from objects: the **Pashupati seal** showing a horned figure seated among animals, terracotta **mother goddess** figurines, phallic and ring stones read as linga and yoni, and the peepal tree and unicorn motifs.
- Marshall's identification of the Pashupati figure as a proto-Shiva has been challenged by **Doris Srinivasan** and others, and the honest formulation is that continuities with later Hinduism are plausible but not demonstrated.
- Burial practice was normally **extended inhumation in a north-south orientation with grave goods**, and cremation is absent, which is a real discontinuity with later Vedic practice.

Art and architecture

Asked in 2024 through the claim that Harappan art reveals aesthetic sensibility, and in 2025 through the provocation that the Harappans were not an artistic people. Both need named objects.

- The **bronze dancing girl** from Mohenjo-daro, about ten centimetres tall and cast by the lost wax method, is the outstanding metal object and shows genuine command of the human figure in movement.
- **Bearded priest-king** in steatite, with a trefoil-patterned robe and half-closed eyes, is the best known stone sculpture, and the name is a modern label rather than an identification.
- A **red sandstone male torso from Harappa** and a **grey stone dancing figure** display anatomical modelling that some scholars have found so advanced that they questioned the dating.
- Terracotta production was prolific, covering mother goddesses, animals, toy carts with movable wheels, whistles and the famous **bull figurines**, and its sheer volume argues for a popular rather than a court art.
- **Seal carving** is arguably the finest achievement, with the unicorn, humped bull, elephant, rhinoceros and tiger rendered with great economy on a surface of two or three centimetres.
- Bead making at **Chanhudaro and Lothal** produced carnelian beads with etched designs and micro-drilled perforations, a technology requiring specialist drills and considerable skill.
- Pottery was mostly **wheel-made red ware with black painted designs** of pipal leaves, fish scales, intersecting circles and animals, standardised in form across the civilisation.

- For the 2025 provocation, the defensible answer is that the Harappans produced art of high technical quality on a small scale while leaving no monumental art, no narrative art and no royal portraiture, so the statement is wrong about skill and points at something real about scale and subject.

Decline and survival

Decline is the most frequently misanswered part of this unit, because candidates still give Wheeler's Aryan invasion theory as though it were current. It is not.

- Urban decline set in from about **1900 BCE** and was gradual and regionally uneven rather than sudden, with cities shrinking, standardisation lapsing, seals and script disappearing and long distance trade contracting.
- **Mortimer Wheeler's invasion theory**, resting on skeletons at Mohenjo-daro and on the Rig Vedic references to Indra as purandara or fort destroyer, was decisively challenged by **George Dales**, who showed the skeletons belonged to different periods and showed no evidence of a massacre.
- Climate and hydrology now carry the main explanatory weight, and evidence from the **Ghaggar-Hakra** system indicates that river shifts and the drying of a major channel undermined the agricultural base of the most densely settled zone.
- Palaeoclimate studies point to a **weakening of the monsoon from around 2200 BCE**, part of the wider 4.2 kiloyear event that also disrupted Egypt and Mesopotamia, which places the Harappan decline in a global context.
- Additional contributing factors proposed include deforestation for brick firing, salinisation, flooding at Mohenjo-daro and the collapse of Mesopotamian demand for Harappan goods.
- **Multi-causal explanation** is the current consensus, and an answer should say so rather than picking a single cause.
- Survival is real and examinable: **Late Harappan cultures** such as the Cemetery H culture in Punjab, Jhukar in Sindh and Rangpur in Gujarat continue the sequence, and the Ochre Coloured Pottery culture follows in the doab.
- Elements that persisted into later Indian civilisation include **cotton cultivation, the bullock cart, weights and measures, terracotta traditions, ritual bathing, and possibly the worship of a proto-Shiva figure and the mother goddess.**
- **Rakhigarhi ancient DNA**, published in 2019 by Vasant Shinde and colleagues, found no Steppe ancestry in the sampled individual, which complicates simple migration narratives and should be cited with care since it rests on a single genome.

Significance and the answer structure

Close by placing the civilisation rather than describing it, since the syllabus names significance explicitly.

- Urbanism of this scale appears in the subcontinent for the first time here, and after its collapse **no Indian city of comparable planning appears for well over a thousand years**, which makes the discontinuity as significant as the achievement.

- Comparison with contemporaries is the fastest way to show significance: Egypt and Mesopotamia built monumental royal and religious architecture, while the Harappans invested in **drainage, water supply, standardised bricks and public baths**.
- That contrast supports the argument that Harappan society allocated resources to **collective infrastructure rather than to royal display**, which is the most interesting thing about it.
- Debate over the name matters politically as well as academically, with **Indus-Saraswati** preferred by those emphasising the Ghaggar-Hakra concentration and **Indus** or **Harappan** by those avoiding the identification with the Rig Vedic Saraswati.
- Handle that debate descriptively rather than partisanly, since examiners are testing whether you know it exists and why, not which side you take.
- Structure a full answer as origin and extent, town planning, economy, script and society, art, decline, and significance, and give the map sites their own line because Question 1 rewards them directly.

Last-mile revision

- Harappa 1921 Sahni, Mohenjo-daro 1922 Banerji, announced 1924 Marshall; mature phase about 2600 to 1900 BCE.
- Extent over 1.2 million sq km; Sutkagendor west, Alamgirpur east, Manda north, Daimabad south; about 1,500 sites.
- Mehrgarh from about 7000 BCE settles the indigenous origin question.
- Brick ratio 1:2:4; grid streets; covered drains with manholes; Great Bath 12x7x2.5 m; Dholavira reservoirs; Lothal dock 214x36 m.
- Weights 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 to 12,800; Meluhha, Dilmun, Magan; seals at Ur, Kish, Lagash, Tell Asmar.
- Script 400-600 signs, boustrophedon, undeciphered; Parpola and Mahadevan for language, Farmer, Sproat and Witzel against.
- Art: bronze dancing girl, bearded priest-king, Harappa red sandstone torso, carnelian beads, seal carving.
- Decline from about 1900 BCE; Dales refuted Wheeler; Ghaggar-Hakra shift plus the 4.2 kiloyear monsoon weakening; multi-causal.
- Late Harappan: Cemetery H, Jhukar, Rangpur; Rakhigarhi aDNA 2019 found no Steppe ancestry in one genome.

Common errors to avoid

- Giving the Aryan invasion as the cause of decline. George Dales dismantled it decades ago and repeating it dates a script badly.
- Claiming the script has been deciphered. It has not, and there is a serious argument that it is not writing at all.
- Calling the Pashupati seal a proto-Shiva without qualification. Marshall proposed it; Doris Srinivasan and others contest it.
- Asserting the horse was present. The Surkotada bones are disputed between Sharma and Meadow, and honesty about that is rewarded.

- Treating the granaries as established. Wheeler identified them; Kenoyer and others question the identification.
- Forgetting Mehrgarh in an origin answer, which is the site that made the indigenous case decisive.
- Overreading the Rakhigarhi genome. It is a single individual and cannot settle the migration question by itself.

Mains Practice

Harappan art contributes to our understanding of their aesthetic sensibilities in addition to spiritual and ritualistic life. Comment.

20 marks · 250 words · 2024

“Harappan architecture reflects an integrated vision of environmental adaptation, technological rationality and urban aesthetics, going beyond functionality.” Examine.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

“The Harappans were not an artistic people.” Comment.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

The Indus-Saraswati cultural zone exhibited both homogeneity and diversity.

15 marks · 200 words · 2023