What Was the Indus Valley Civilisation?

Evidence, urbanism, economy, writing and transformation

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Direct answer. The Indus civilisation was a vast, regionally diverse Bronze Age settlement network whose strongest urban integration occurred around 2600–1900 BCE. Archaeology securely demonstrates cities, specialised production, standardised weights and extensive exchange. It does not yet reveal the civilisation's political constitution, spoken language or a consensual reading of its inscriptions.

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1 Scope and method

This review asks what can be established from settlement archaeology, material analysis, environmental research and inscriptions. It distinguishes direct evidence from interpretation, gives priority to official site records and peer-reviewed research, and treats modern ethnic and religious identifications as hypotheses requiring independent support.

2 Chronology and geographic scale

Early regional communities developed over centuries before the Mature Harappan phase. The most consistent material integration is conventionally dated to about 2600–1900 BCE; later regional cultures continued after the contraction of the largest cities. The label “Indus Valley” is therefore geographically incomplete: settlements extended well beyond the Indus drainage.

3 A distributed urban system

Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi and Ganweriwala anchor public accounts, but the civilisation depended on many smaller settlements. Large-scale survey shows that urbanisation and de-urbanisation were regional processes rather than a single uniform rise and fall. Planned streets, wells, drains, reservoirs, fortifications and differentiated neighbourhoods reveal organised labour, yet architectural diversity cautions against treating every settlement as a smaller copy of Mohenjo-daro.

UNESCO describes Mohenjo-daro as an early planned urban centre with a raised sector and a lower town. At Dholavira, multi-layered fortification, reservoirs, drainage and extensive stone construction show a distinct local expression of Harappan urbanism. Green and Petrie’s settlement-distribution study demonstrates why regional survey is necessary: the history cannot be reconstructed from a few monumental sites alone.

4 Institutions without named rulers

Shared brick proportions, cubical weights, seal traditions, pottery styles and craft techniques linked distant communities. These patterns demonstrate sustained conventions and interregional coordination. They do not, by themselves, identify a king, empire or central bureaucracy. The absence of securely identified palaces, royal tombs and victory monuments makes Harappan political organisation unusually difficult to reconstruct. Multiple institutions, corporate groups or regionally distributed authorities remain plausible.

Uniformity should not be confused with complete political centralisation. Standard practices can spread through state institutions, merchant and craft networks, shared training, collective norms, or combinations of these mechanisms. Current evidence does not allow a secure choice among them.

5 Subsistence, craft and exchange

Urban life rested on farming, herding, fishing and the movement of food and raw materials. Specialist crafts transformed carnelian, shell, faience, copper alloys, stone and clay. Harappan materials and Mesopotamian references to Meluhha support long-distance exchange across the Arabian Sea, while inland routes connected cities to pastoral, agricultural and resource-producing zones. Standard weights made comparison possible, but they are evidence for metrology and exchange rather than proof of modern markets.

The comparative study of Bronze Age weights places the Indus system within wider Eurasian metrological traditions while noting its distinctive structure. Such artefacts document controlled comparison and accounting; the economic institutions behind them remain matters for inference.

6 Water, climate and resilience

Dholavira's reservoirs, channels and stone architecture demonstrate adaptation to a semi-arid island environment. Mohenjo-daro's wells and drainage reveal a different hydraulic strategy. These systems were locally designed responses within a shared civilisation. Climate and river change shaped settlement choices, especially after 2000 BCE, but environmental stress should not be turned into a single-cause collapse story.

The Dholavira nomination dossier documents a landscape-scale strategy for capturing seasonal flows. Madella and Fuller's palaeoecological synthesis supports a model of changing environmental conditions and adaptive choices, rather than a single event that ended all Harappan life.

7 Writing without a decipherment

Thousands of short inscriptions survive on seals, tablets, pottery and other objects. Sign order and repetition can be analysed, but no accepted bilingual text exists, most texts are very short and the underlying language is unknown. Competing Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Munda and non-linguistic proposals have not achieved consensus. Statistical structure is compatible with organised communication; it is not a translation key.

Rao and colleagues found conditional-entropy patterns consistent with structured sign use. Farmer, Sproat and Witzel offered a major dissenting interpretation, arguing that the signs may not encode full language. Neither statistical regularity nor visual resemblance supplies phonetic values. A successful decipherment would need reproducible readings, linguistic coherence and external archaeological checks.

8 Belief, power and identity

Figurines, seals, animal imagery, baths and structured spaces provide evidence for ritual activity, but labels such as "proto-Shiva," "mother goddess" or "priest-king" are modern interpretations. Skeletal evidence, housing variation and access to goods suggest social differences, while the form of hierarchy remains uncertain. Bronze Age communities should not be assigned modern national, ethnic, caste or religious identities without independent evidence.

9 Urban contraction and regional transformation

The decline of large cities was a prolonged transformation, not the disappearance of a people. Urban contraction, changing river regimes, weakening long-distance exchange and shifts in crops and settlement locations unfolded differently across regions. Populations reorganised into smaller settlements and new cultural configurations. "De-urbanisation" therefore describes the archaeological pattern more accurately than a sudden civilisational extinction.

Petrie and colleagues' settlement-dynamics research emphasises variability in how communities responded to changing landscapes. The archaeological record supports migration, resettlement and changing practices, not a simple disappearance.

10 Evidence assessment

Confidence	Assessment
Strong	Large urban settlements, skilled crafts, standardised metrology, interregional exchange and short sign inscriptions.
Probable	Multiple coordinating institutions and socially differentiated communities.
Contested	Degree of political centralisation, functions of many public buildings, and causes of urban contraction.
Unresolved	Language, script readings, named political offices and direct identification with later ethnic or religious communities.

11 Conclusion

The strongest conclusions concern settlement scale, skilled production, standardised practices, extensive exchange and durable regional interaction. Political structure, spoken language, the meaning of inscriptions and particular religious identifications remain open. A reliable history keeps these levels of confidence separate and treats new finds as evidence to be contextualised rather than as confirmation of modern identity claims.

References

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

Corrections and source suggestions: info@indusvalley.org.