SOCIETY IN THE INDUS VALLEY (2500-1700 B.C.E.):
EVIDENCE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF CIVILIZATION

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One of the turning points in world history was the transition from early agricultural to complex societies. Complex societies differ from earlier agricultural settlements in a number of ways. Complex societies, or civilizations, are defined as groups possessing advanced cities, complex institutions, specialized workers, record keeping, and advanced technology, while early agricultural settlements lack one or more of these characteristics. The society living in the Indus Valley from roughly 2500 to 1700 B.C.E. can be considered a civilization because it meets these criteria.

The society living in the Indus Valley from roughly 2500 to 1700 B.C.E. can be considered a civilization in part because it possessed advanced cities. Advanced cities are population centers where large groups of people live and work. Cities are often located near important natural resources, like water, or geographic sites, such as natural harbors. While cities today can include millions of inhabitants, early cities included only thousands of residents. The Indus Valley people possessed advanced cities. Archaeologists have uncovered several Indus Valley cities dating from 2500 to 1700 B.C.E., including sites at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. In addition to numerous dwellings, “Harappa's excavated mounds have revealed a range of industrial activity, some impressive public and private architecture, and a great quantity and variety of inscribed objects.” The evidence of artisan activity, along with private housing, from this time period demonstrates that people lived and worked in the advanced city of Harappa.

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3Ibid.

Another city in the Indus Valley was Mohenjo-Daro. Located on the banks of the Indus River, the city boasted over 35,000 inhabitants at its height around 2400 B.C.E. Mohenjo-Daro also included massive city walls to prevent flooding from the Indus River, a large granary for food storage, and an assembly hall. The presence of granaries, meeting spaces, and dwellings for a significant number of people indicate Mohenjo-Daro’s status as an advanced city. Archaeologists have uncovered several other cities organized in a fashion similar to Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The Indus Valley society possessed a number of advanced cities, including Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, meeting one of the requirements of civilization.

The Indus Valley society can also be considered a civilization because it maintained complex institutions. Complex institutions are systems of organization within a community, such as governments, religions, or economic systems. Society in the Indus Valley possessed all of these institutions. The sites where archaeologists have uncovered Indus Valley cities “show a remarkable uniformity in building techniques and urban design across a very large area, suggesting some form of widespread centralized government.” Official seals located in excavated sites also suggest institutionalized religious beliefs that may have formed the basis for Hinduism: “One famous seal, in which the figure is surrounded by wild animals, is thought to be the forerunner of Shiva Pasupati (Lord of the Beasts).” The similarities between Indus Valley

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6Beck et al., 46; Langmead.

7Beck et al., 20.

religious practices and those of Hinduism demonstrate the organized nature of religion in the Indus Valley. Pottery, metal items, and other trade goods excavated in the area also suggest the existence of an economic network of exchange between Indus Valley cities. The Indus Valley society possessed complex institutions, including a centralized government, religion, and economic system.

The society in the Indus Valley also contained specialized workers. Specialization, or the division of labor, allows workers to specialize in one specific area, such as farming, pottery, or metalworking, rather than performing all of the tasks of survival. Archaeology has uncovered sculpture, pottery, metal objects, and artisan goods throughout the Indus Valley, suggesting the existence of professions dedicated to the production of these items. Official seals also suggest the existence of a professional warrior class: “On a seal from Kalibangan… a female figure stands between two men piercing each other with spears, either fighting over her or dueling and being separated by her.” Specialized workers, such as farmers, potters, metal smiths, and soldiers, were present in Indus Valley society.

The Indus Valley society kept detailed records using their unique writing system. Record keeping demonstrates a level of organization within a society necessary for civilization. While the writing system has not yet been deciphered, the existence of writing in this organized society with complex institutions implies that record keeping occurred in the Indus Valley. Examples

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10“Harappan civilization.”

11Ibid.

12McIntosh, “Harappan religion.”
of Indus Valley writing, including what appear to be individual names, exist upon pottery and other personal effects, suggesting records of personal ownership. These catalogs of ownership are a form of record keeping. Indus Valley writing is also found on official seals, demonstrating that the centralized government of each city relied upon writing when conducting its official business.

Indus Valley society possessed advanced technology. The Indus city of Mohenjo-Daro contained technologically-advanced infrastructure. The city boasted an advanced sewer system under the city’s streets connected to indoor plumbing in most homes:

The houses normally had a private bathing area supplied with water from their own wells and a properly drained toilet. A secondary grid of narrow service lanes subdivided the main blocks, and chutes from most residences were connected to a system of covered sewers—more evidence of well-developed municipal controls that still cannot be found in many Asian cities. These complex sewer systems were built using mud bricks fired at a high temperature; many of these bricks were so well-constructed they survive today. These sewer systems are some examples of advanced technology in Indus Valley society.

The society in the Indus Valley from around 2500 to 1700 B.C.E. can be considered a civilization, rather than a series of early agricultural settlements, because it possessed cities, complex institutions, specialized workers, record keeping, and advanced technology. Cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro possessed centralized governments managing thousands of workers employed in a variety of specialized professions. These cities also possessed advanced technologies like covered sewer systems and indoor plumbing. In addition, while modern


14 Fitzsimons, 10.

15 Langmead.
scholars cannot decipher it, the society possessed a writing system used in the keeping of records. This evidence proves that what modern scholars call civilization existed in South Asia as early as 2500 B.C.E.
Bibliography


