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UPSC CIVIL SERVICES · PRELIMS & MAINS GS PAPER I

Ancient Indian History

Complete notes from the Stone Age to the regional kingdoms, told as a connected story, with original maps, Prelims Fact and Trap boxes, quick-revision panels and previous year questions.

Compiled by Arvind KrS

26	8	264	96	88
CHAPTERS	UNITS	FACT, TRAP AND CONNECTING BOXES	PRELIMS PYQS 2011–26	ORIGINAL MAPS AND DIAGRAMS

FROM THE STONE AGE TO THE REGIONAL KINGDOMS, C. 1200 CE

Stone Age	c. 2600 BCE	c. 1500 BCE	c. 321 BCE	c. 319 CE	606 CE	c. 800 CE
First tool-makers	Harappan cities	Rig Vedic age	Mauryan empire	Gupta era	Harsha era	Struggle for Kanauj

IN THIS BOOK

I Sources and Prehistory

II Harappan and Vedic India

III New Faiths and the Rise of States

IV The Mauryan Empire

V Post-Mauryan India and the Sangam Age

VI Gupta and Post-Gupta India

VII Regional Kingdoms (c. 550–1200)

VIII Quick Revision

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Ancient Indian History for UPSC

Notes for UPSC Civil Services Preliminary Examination and Mains General Studies Paper I

Prelims 2027 Edition · Compiled November 2026 · Compiled by Arvind KrS

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Harappan and Vedic India

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04 **Indus Valley Civilisation: Extent, Phases and Features**
Discovery, Naming and Dating · The Harappan World: Extent and Sites · From Villages to Cities: Phases and Origin · Town Planning and Architecture · Feeding the Cities: Agriculture and Animals · Crafts and Technology · Trade, Weights and Transport · Society and Polity: Who Ran the Cities? · Religion and Funerary Practices · Seals, Sculpture and Pottery · The Indus Script · The Big Picture

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07 **The Later Vedic Age**
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ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY · PRELIMS · GS PAPER I

Indus Valley Civilisation: Extent, Phases and Features

On the conventional dating, farmers at **Mehrgarh**, at the foot of the Bolan Pass in Baluchistan, were growing wheat and barley and living in mud-brick houses by about 7000 BCE (Chapter 3). Over the following millennia such villages spread across the Indus plains and came to share pots, symbols and ways of building. Around 2600 BCE these regional cultures merged into one urban civilisation, with planned cities, bricks and weights of one standard from Jammu to Gujarat, seals with a script, and ships sailing to Mesopotamia.

This was the **Indus Valley** or **Harappan Civilisation**, South Asia's **first urbanisation** and its **Bronze Age**. Its cities flourished for some seven centuries and were then forgotten, until in September 1924 John Marshall announced a civilisation as old as those of Mesopotamia and Egypt. **Dholavira** became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2021, and excavations at **Rakhigarhi** keep reshaping the story. Its sites, decline and legacy follow in Chapter 5.

SYLLABUS

PRELIMS — History of India and Indian National Movement

MAINS · GS PAPER I — Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times

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01 Discovery, Naming and Dating
02 The Harappan World: Extent and Sites
03 From Villages to Cities: Phases and Origin
04 Town Planning and Architecture
05 Feeding the Cities: Agriculture and Animals
06 Crafts and Technology
07 Trade, Weights and Transport
08 Society and Polity: Who Ran the Cities?
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01 Discovery, Naming and Dating

For nearly four thousand years the Harappan cities lay buried and forgotten. Their rediscovery took a century. Travellers saw the mounds and guessed wrongly what they were, railway builders carried off their bricks, and a seal that nobody could read waited nearly fifty years for a context. That context came only in the 1920s, when seals were found in very old layers at Harappa, then at Mohenjo-daro far down the Indus, and their like was recognised at sites in Mesopotamia. The order of discovery explains the names the civilisation carries; new methods of dating later changed its age.

How Was It Found?

- **1826:** the traveller **Charles Masson** visited the mounds of Harappa (in present-day Sahiwal district, Pakistani Punjab) and identified them with Sangala, a city attacked by Alexander; his account was published in 1842, and some scholars date the visit to 1829. Alexander Burnes visited them in 1831.
- **1850s–1875: Alexander Cunningham**, later the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), visited Harappa and saw it being stripped for bricks to lay the Lahore–Multan railway line. In 1875 he published a Harappan seal (a bull with six signs) without realising its significance: like many of his time, he believed that Indian history began with the first cities of the Ganga valley, and there was as yet nothing to compare the seal with.
- **1921: Daya Ram Sahni** began excavating **Harappa** on the left bank of the Ravi.
- **1922: Rakhal Das Banerji** (R.D. Banerji) found similar seals at **Mohenjo-daro** ("mound of the dead") on the right bank of the Indus in Larkana district, Sindh. Similar seals at two sites so far apart suggested that both belonged to a single culture spread over a vast area, not a local one.
- **1924:** John Marshall announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the *Illustrated London News* (20 September 1924). His three-volume report on Mohenjo-daro appeared in 1931.
- Large-scale work followed at Mohenjo-daro under Marshall and **E.J.H. Mackay**, at Harappa under **M.S. Vats**, and in 1946 under **Mortimer Wheeler**. Mackay also dug at Chanhudaro, and N.G. Majumdar explored sites in Sindh.
- Partition in 1947 left most excavated sites in Pakistan, so Indian archaeologists went looking in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. **Ropar** (Y.D. Sharma, 1953) was the first Harappan site excavated in independent India, followed by **Lothal** (S.R. Rao), **Kalibangan** (B.B. Lal and B.K. Thapar), **Surkotada** (J.P. Joshi), **Banawali** and **Dholavira** (R.S. Bisht), and **Rakhigarhi**. In Pakistan, F.A. Khan excavated Kot Diji, and M.R. Mughal surveyed hundreds of sites in Cholistan. This search did much to carry the map of the civilisation far beyond the Indus.

What Should We Call It?

The first sites were found in the valley of the Indus and its tributaries, so the civilisation was called the **Indus** or **Indus Valley Civilisation**. Archaeologists prefer **Harappan Civilisation**, after Harappa, the first site where the culture was identified, following the convention of naming a culture after its type-site. The name does not mean that every site resembles Harappa or that the culture began there.

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- Because a large number of sites lie along the dry bed of the **Ghaggar-Hakra**, which some scholars identify with the Sarasvati of the Rig Veda, the terms **Sindhu-Sarasvati** or **Indus-Sarasvati Civilisation** are also used. The same objection applies to them as to "Indus": the culture was not confined to either river valley.
- A site is called Harappan when a recognised set of traits is found together: red pottery painted with black designs, **terracotta cakes** (usually triangular, of uncertain use), bricks in the **1:2:4** ratio, seals, cubical weights, and typical stone and copper objects.
- It belongs to the **Bronze Age**: its people used copper and bronze along with stone tools. Its cities are called the **first urbanisation** of the subcontinent, to distinguish them from the **second urbanisation** of the Ganga valley in the sixth century BCE (Chapter 9). More than a thousand years without cities lie between the two.

◆ PRELIMS FACT WHO FOUND WHAT, AND WHEN

- **Harappa** (on the Ravi): Daya Ram Sahni, 1921. **Mohenjo-daro** (on the Indus): R.D. Banerji, 1922.
- **John Marshall** was Director-General of the ASI when the civilisation was announced (1924); Alexander Cunningham was the first Director-General.
- **Ropar** (Rupnagar, Punjab, on the Sutlej) was the first Harappan site excavated after independence; **Dholavira** (Kutch) and **Rakhigarhi** (Haryana) are the largest Harappan sites in India.
- Most known Harappan sites are in India today, but the two biggest excavated cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, are in Pakistan.

How Old Is It?

Before radiocarbon dating, the civilisation could be dated only through Mesopotamia, by **cross-dating**: Harappan objects found in Mesopotamian levels of known date. On this basis Marshall placed it between about 3250 and 2750 BCE; when Mesopotamian chronology was revised, the dates were brought down to about 2350–1900 BCE. **Radiocarbon (C-14) dating**, available from the 1950s, first gave uncalibrated dates of about 2300–2000 BCE for the core cities and about 2000–1700 BCE for the periphery. Calibrated radiocarbon dates now place the urban or **Mature Harappan** phase at about **2600–1900 BCE**, close to the result of cross-dating. Older textbooks give 2500–1750 BCE; the difference comes largely from calibration.

02 The Harappan World: Extent and Sites

The two cities announced in 1924 turned out to be only the best-known parts of a far larger world. The Harappan culture extended from the Makran coast of Baluchistan in the west to western Uttar Pradesh in the east, and from Jammu in the north to Maharashtra in the south, with an isolated outpost on the Amu Darya (Oxus) in north-eastern Afghanistan. Holding so vast an area together is the first clue to how organised it must have been. Its sites lie in:

- **Pakistan:** Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- **Afghanistan:** Shortughai
- **India:** Jammu, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat (Kutch and Saurashtra), western Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra

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- **Coast:** from Sutkagen-dor (Makran) to Lothal and Bhagatrav (Gujarat)

Earlier estimates described the culture zone as a triangle of about **1.3 million sq km**, larger than present-day Pakistan and certainly larger than ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia; more recent estimates of the zone range between about **680,000 and 800,000 sq km**. Either way, no other culture of the third millennium BCE was spread over so wide an area. Nearly 2,800 sites of the early, mature and late phases have been reported; of the 1,022 sites of the mature phase counted in one survey, 616 lie in India and 406 in Pakistan. The densest cluster lies along the Ghaggar-Hakra in Haryana, Rajasthan and Cholistan, and the Harappa–Ghaggar–Mohenjo-daro axis is regarded as the heartland of the civilisation.

Cities, Towns and Villages

The civilisation was urban, but most Harappan settlements were villages; only a handful were cities. The villages grew the food, the towns specialised, and the cities gathered goods and people: archaeologists see a hierarchy of sites.

- **Largest cities:** Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Ganweriwala (Cholistan), Rakhigarhi (Haryana) and Dholavira (Kutch). Mohenjo-daro is the largest excavated city; Harappa covers about 150 hectares.
- **Middle-sized towns (10–50 ha):** such as Kalibangan.
- **Small towns (5–10 ha):** Amri, Lothal, Chanhudaro and Rojdi.
- **Small settlements (under 5 ha):** Allahdino, Kot Diji, Ropar, Balakot, Surkotada, Nausharo and Ghazi Shah.

Settlements stood mostly on rivers, which supplied water, silt and transport, but also on the old sea-coast (Balakot, Sutkagen-dor) and on islands (Dholavira on Khadir Bet in the Rann of Kutch). The population of Mohenjo-daro has been estimated at about 35,000–40,000.

Frontier Sites

DIRECTION	SITE	LOCATION
Northernmost	**Manda**	Right bank of the Chenab near Akhnoor, Jammu (Jammu and Kashmir)
Southernmost	**Daimabad**	On the Pravara, a tributary of the Godavari, Ahilyanagar (Ahmednagar) district, Maharashtra
Easternmost	**Alamgirpur**	On the Hindon, a tributary of the Yamuna, Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh
Westernmost	**Sutkagen-dor**	On the Dasht river near the Makran coast, Baluchistan, close to the Iran border
Isolated outpost	**Shortughai**	Near the Amu Darya (Oxus) and Kokcha rivers, north-eastern Afghanistan

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The Harappan world: frontier sites and major cities

Mature Harappan phase, c. 2600–1900 BCE. Shaded: approximate area of Harappan sites. Modern boundaries for reference only.

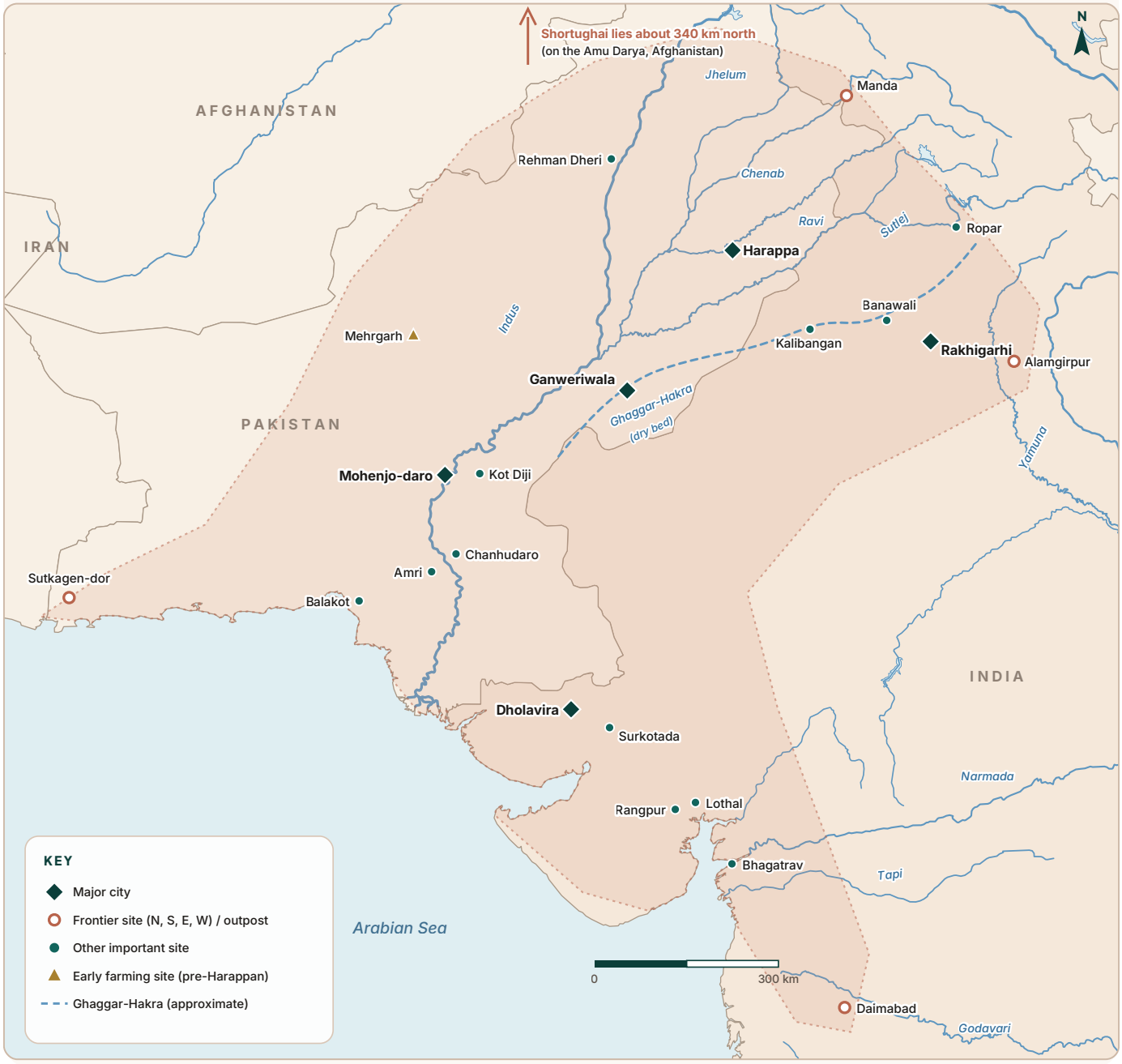


Fig. 4.1 The Harappan world in the mature phase: the five largest cities, the frontier sites in each direction, and other important sites; the outpost of Shortughai lies off the map to the north.

PRELIMS TRAP FRONTIER SITES AND THEIR RIVERS

- **Manda** lies on the **Chenab**, not the Beas or the Jhelum. Ropar (on the Sutlej) is sometimes wrongly called the northernmost site.
- The southern limit is usually given as **Daimabad**; some lists name **Bhagatrav** on the Kim estuary in Gujarat as the southernmost site of the mature phase. Daimabad's Harappan level is late.
- **Alamgirpur** (also called Parasaram-ka-khera) is on the **Hindon**, about 45 km north-east of Delhi; Hulas, Bargaon and Manpur are other sites in the Ganga-Yamuna doab.
- **Shortughai** is an outpost, not the northernmost site of the main zone.

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03 From Villages to Cities: Phases and Origin

Where did such a civilisation come from? Early scholars, steeped in the history of Mesopotamia, looked west for the answer. Excavations since the 1950s have answered from the soil of the subcontinent itself. The Harappan culture was not a sudden creation but the climax of a long process that began with the first farmers of Baluchistan in the seventh millennium BCE, passed through a stage of regional village and town cultures, and ended in integration. Archaeologists divide this process into phases.

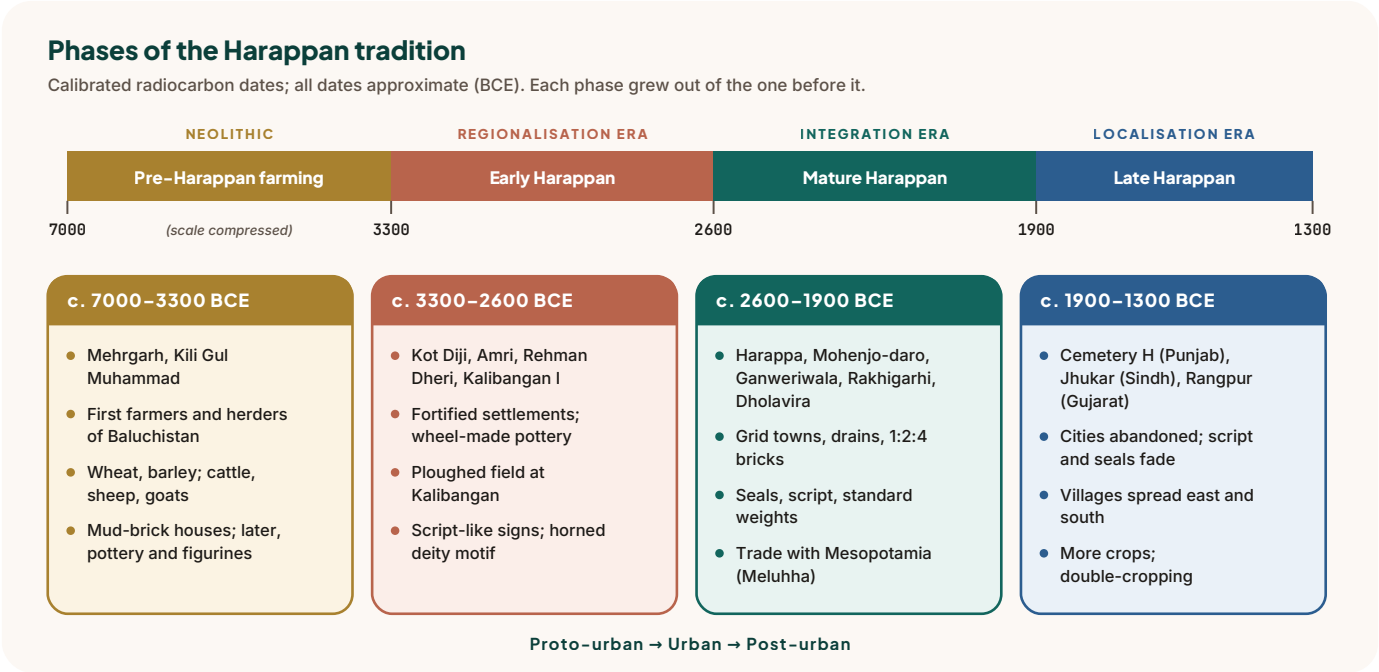


Fig. 4.2 From the first villages of Baluchistan to the cities and their decline: the four phases of the Harappan tradition.

PHASE	DATE (BCE, APPROX.)	MAIN FEATURES
Pre-Harappan (Neolithic)	7000–3300	Villages such as **Mehrgarh** and Kili Gul Muhammad in Baluchistan and the Indus plains; cattle-rearing with limited cultivation, so villages were at first occupied seasonally; permanent villages, mud houses, pottery and crafts appear as surpluses grow.
Early Harappan	3300–2600	More settlements in plains and hills; copper, the wheel and the plough; many regional pottery styles slowly converging; motifs such as the pipal, humped bull and horned deity; fortification walls; the beginnings of long-distance trade and of script-like signs. Sub-phases include the **Ravi phase** (3300–2800) and the **Kot Diji phase** (2800–2600).
Mature Harappan	2600–1900	Large cities; town planning with drains, roads and walled sectors; seals, script and uniform weights for large-scale trade; bronze metallurgy and alloys; crafts of toys and jewellery at their height.
Late Harappan	1900–1300	Cities abandoned; inter-regional trade and writing decline; village cultures of Punjab, the Sutlej-Yamuna divide and Gujarat absorb Harappan crafts and pottery.

Another way of naming the same sequence tells the story in three words. The early phase is the **Regionalisation Era**, when many local cultures grew side by side; the mature phase is the **Integration Era**, when they merged into one; and the late phase is the **Localisation Era**, when they drifted apart again. All three belong to a longer "Indus Valley Tradition" beginning with Mehrgarh.

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Did the Idea Come from Mesopotamia?

- **Diffusionist (foreign-origin) view:** early writers held that the civilisation arose from West Asia. **E.J.H. Mackay** suggested a migration of people from Sumer (southern Mesopotamia); **D.H. Gordon** and **Mortimer Wheeler** traced it to West Asian influence, Wheeler arguing that the idea of civilisation, rather than people, came from Mesopotamia.
- **Against diffusion:** the Harappan script, grid-planned towns, seals and the absence of temples and large canals are all unlike Mesopotamia, where bronze was also used far more widely. A borrowed civilisation would have borrowed more.

What the Excavations Show

- **Indigenous (evolutionary) view**, now generally accepted: the civilisation grew out of local farming cultures of Baluchistan and the Indus plains. **Amalananda Ghosh** first linked the Sothi pottery of north Rajasthan with Harappan pottery and called it "proto-Harappan"; **M.R. Mughal** later showed that the "pre-Harappan" phase was really the formative **Early Harappan** phase of the same culture.
- **Evidence for evolution:** farming at Mehrgarh from about 7000 BCE (wheat, barley, cattle, sheep and goats), with mud-brick houses and granaries, and a planned, walled town at **Rehman Dheri** in the Gomal plain (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa); early Harappan levels at Kot Diji, Amri, Nausharo, Kalibangan, Banawali, Rakhigarhi, Bhirrana, Dholavira and Padri. Mehrgarh's starting date is now debated: a 2025 radiocarbon study of tooth enamel from its graves places the founding of the first village between about 5200 and 4900 BCE (Chapter 3).
- **Cultural convergence:** in the early phase the regional traditions grow alike, which is the bridge to the mature phase. Seals appear at Kunal and Nausharo, jewellery hoards at Kunal, script-like signs at Padri, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Harappa, and the **horned deity** is painted on jars at Kot Diji and Rehman Dheri.
- **Problems:** some mature sites (Lothal, Chanhudaro, Ropar, Alamgirpur) have no early level, so they were founded fresh. Where both levels exist the change is not always smooth: burnt layers separate them at Kot Diji, Gumla, Amri and Nausharo, and at Kalibangan the break may have been caused by an earthquake.

CONNECTING THE DOTS FROM MEHRGARH TO MOHENJO-DARO

- c. 7000 BCE (conventional date): first farmers and herders at Mehrgarh, with mud-brick houses and granaries (Chapter 3)
- c. 3300–2600 BCE: regional cultures such as Ravi and Kot Diji build walls, use the wheel and the plough, and begin to share motifs and signs
- c. 2600 BCE: integration into one urban culture, with planned cities, script, seals and standard weights
- After c. 1900 BCE: localisation, as the cities empty and village cultures carry on the crafts (Chapter 5)

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Why Did Villages Become Cities?

Why the change to city life came about is still debated, and most scholars think several causes worked together. Suggested causes include growing craft specialisation (especially copper metallurgy in Rajasthan), agricultural surplus in the Indus flood plain, trade, a new political leadership or ideology, a favourable climate and rising population. Some scholars note that more water then flowed in the Ghaggar-Hakra, fed for a time by the Sutlej and the Yamuna.

04 Town Planning and Architecture

What did integration look like on the ground? The archaeologist **V. Gordon Childe** described the rise of cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-daro as an **"Urban Revolution"**: a new economic stage in the evolution of society, gradual rather than sudden or violent. What sets the Harappan cities apart is not grand palaces, temples or royal tombs, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but civic amenities for ordinary townspeople: roomy houses with bathrooms, serviceable streets and lanes, an elaborate drainage system and a reliable water supply. Wheeler and Piggott spoke of a remarkable "unity of conception" in Harappan towns, and that unity is itself evidence: someone was planning and someone was maintaining.

Citadel and Lower Town

- Most cities had two parts: a smaller, higher **citadel** on the west and a larger **lower town** on the east. This was the plan at Harappa, Mohenjo-daro and Kalibangan.
- The citadel stood on a high platform of mud brick and held large structures that probably served administrative or ritual purposes; it was walled at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Scholars debate whether these walls were for defence, for protection from floods, or to control trade and set the elite apart.
- The lower town contained houses, workshops and markets, divided into blocks. At **Kalibangan** both the citadel and the lower town were walled.
- Local conditions produced variations on the plan. **Lothal** was a single rectangular settlement within a brick wall; its citadel stood on raised ground but was not walled off from the lower town. **Dholavira** was divided into **three parts**, a citadel, a middle town and a lower town. **Chanhudaro** had no citadel, and **Amri** was not fortified.

Streets and Houses

- Streets ran north–south and east–west and crossed nearly at right angles, in a **grid pattern**. Even Mohenjo-daro's grid is not perfect: streets stagger from block to block, and different parts of the city were built at different times. The level of planning did not depend on size: the small site of Lothal is better planned than Kalibangan, twice its size.
- Houses ranged from one-room tenements to houses of up to twelve rooms, usually arranged around a central **courtyard**. Larger houses had their own wells, bathing areas and toilets; many at Kalibangan had their own wells.
- **Doors and windows opened on to side lanes, not the main streets**, and the view from the lane into the courtyard was blocked by a wall, so family life was kept private. Staircases and thick walls show that some houses had an upper storey; some walls at Mohenjo-daro still stand about 5 m high.

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- Many houses had indoor and outdoor kitchens; toilets ranged from a hole above a cesspit to jars sunk into the floor. Floors were of beaten earth; roofs were of wooden beams covered with reeds and clay.

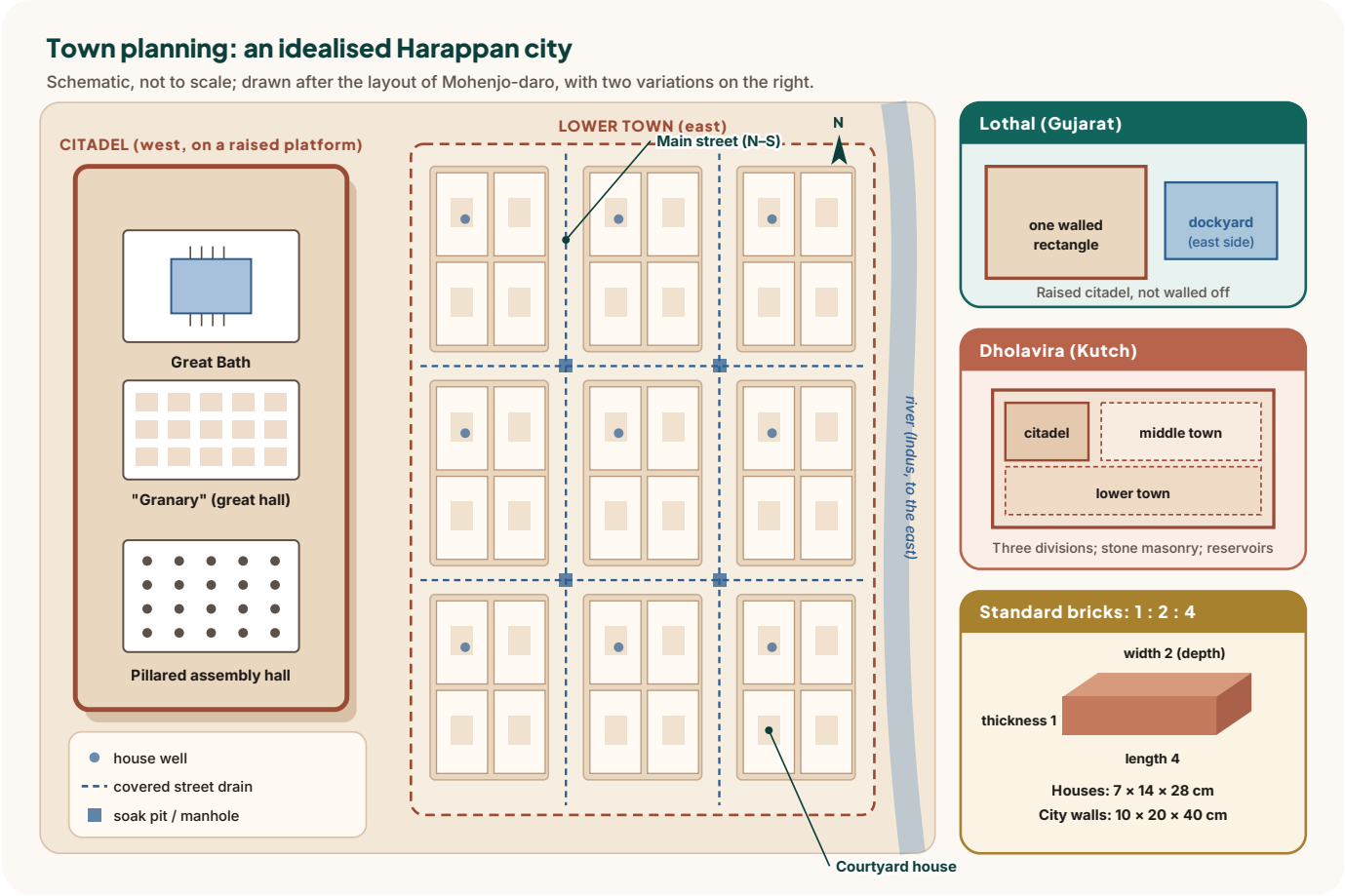


Fig. 4.3 The typical Harappan layout, with a raised citadel to the west and a grid-planned lower town to the east, and two important variations, Lothal and Dholavira.

Bricks and Building Materials

- The Harappans used **bricks of a standard ratio of 1:2:4** (thickness, width, length): about 7 × 14 × 28 cm for houses and 10 × 20 × 40 cm for city walls. The ratio appears at a few early Harappan sites and at all mature ones. Since bricks were obviously not made in any single centre, the shared ratio suggests brick-making organised on a large scale rather than left to each householder.
- **Burnt (baked) bricks** were used on a far larger scale than in Egypt, where sun-dried bricks were the rule, or even Mesopotamia. Each region built with what it had: Harappa and Mohenjo-daro mainly with baked bricks; **Kalibangan** mainly with **mud bricks**; and rocky Kutch and Saurashtra often with **stone**, so that Dholavira's fortifications have a veneer of dressed stone.
- Walls were often laid in the strong **English bond** (alternate courses of headers and stretchers). Bathrooms and drains were made watertight with fine brickwork and gypsum mortar.

◆ PRELIMS TRAP NOT CUBES, NOT ONLY BAKED

Harappan bricks were **rectangular**, in the 1:2:4 ratio; it is the **weights** that were cubical. Bricks were both **baked and sun-dried**: baked bricks dominate at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, sun-dried mud bricks at Kalibangan, and stone at Dholavira and Surkotada.

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Drainage and Water Supply

- An efficient, planned **drainage system** is the most striking feature of Harappan towns, found even in small towns and villages. Small drains from each house joined drains along the streets, which were covered with bricks or stone slabs and had **manholes** (inspection holes) and **soak pits** at intervals for cleaning. The main drains were roofed with corbelled arches and emptied outside the city walls.
- Rainwater drains were separate from sewage chutes, and terracotta pipes carried waste water into street drains. Drains this long had to be cleaned regularly, which implies a civic authority. Perhaps no other Bronze Age civilisation, except Knossos in Crete, paid so much attention to health and cleanliness.
- **Wells:** Mohenjo-daro had, by one estimate, more than 700 wells, roughly one for every three houses; most house-blocks had at least one private well and many streets a public one. Harappa had fewer wells; a depression in the city centre may have been a reservoir.
- **Dholavira**, in the dry Rann of Kutch, faced the opposite problem, a shortage of water, and met it with a unique water-harvesting system. Rainwater of two seasonal streams, the **Manhar and the Mansar**, was dammed and channelled into a chain of large reservoirs inside the walls, some cut into the bedrock. At Allahdino near Karachi, very narrow wells raised groundwater higher.

Public Buildings

- **Great Bath, Mohenjo-daro:** the most important public structure of the city, a brick tank in the citadel measuring about 11.88 × 7.01 m and 2.43 m deep. Flights of steps at the north and south ends led down to it; it was made watertight with finely fitted bricks set in gypsum and a layer of **bitumen**, one of the earliest examples of waterproofing. Water came from a large well in an adjacent room, and a corbelled drain carried it away; a corridor ran round the tank, with rooms on three sides, perhaps for changing clothes. It was probably used for **ritual bathing**. A large building nearby, sometimes called the "college of priests", may have housed its priests.
- **"Granary" or great hall, Mohenjo-daro:** the largest building of the city, a platform of 27 blocks of brickwork criss-crossed by ventilation channels, with loading bays below. Some scholars doubt that it was a granary, but it clearly had an important public function.
- **Granaries at Harappa:** north of the citadel stood **two rows of six granary units** (twelve in all), each about 15.23 × 6.09 m, with a total floor area roughly equal to the great granary of Mohenjo-daro. South of them were rows of **circular brick platforms** for threshing, with wheat and barley in their crevices, and two-roomed **barracks** that probably housed labourers. Storage, threshing and labour stood side by side. Kalibangan also had brick platforms that may have supported granaries.
- **Pillared hall, Mohenjo-daro:** a large square building in the southern part of the citadel, with twenty brick piers in four rows of five, interpreted as an **assembly hall**.
- **Dockyard, Lothal:** a roughly trapezoidal basin of burnt bricks on the eastern side of the town, with a sluice gate and spill channel to keep the water level steady, and a mud-brick wharf on its western side for loading and unloading. A few scholars think it was an irrigation tank instead.

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PRELIMS FACT "GRANARY" COUNTS AND LARGEST BUILDINGS

- The **largest building at Mohenjo-daro** is the "granary" (great hall) in the citadel.
- Harappa's granary block has **two rows of six units**; books that say "six granaries" and books that say "twelve" are describing the same structure.
- The **Great Bath** is a tank in a courtyard with a corridor on all four sides, and has steps at its north and south ends.
- The **dockyard** is at **Lothal** (Gujarat), on the old course of the Sabarmati near the Bhogava.

05 Feeding the Cities: Agriculture and Animals

A city of tens of thousands of people who do not grow their own food needs a steady surplus from the countryside. Harappan towns got it from a stable agriculture, supplemented by animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. The Indus region, now dry, was more fertile in Harappan times; its fertility came above all from the annual inundation of the Indus, just as the Nile created and fed Egypt. Walls of burnt brick raised against floods show that floods were an annual event, a danger to the towns but a gift to the fields. The surplus set off a chain that the rest of the economy followed.

How the Harappan world worked

Each part made the next possible. The standards that held the system together vanished together when the cities declined (Chapter 5).

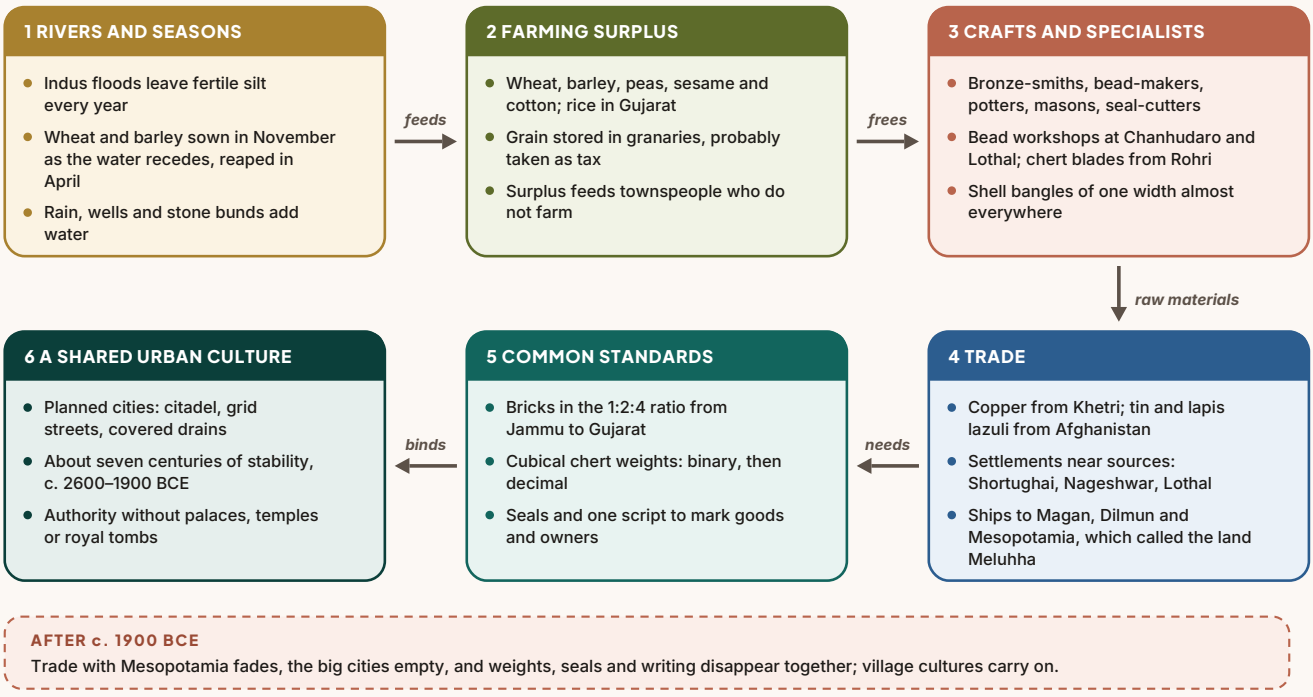


Fig. 4.4 How the Harappan world worked: river and seasons fed a farming surplus, the surplus supported craftspeople, crafts needed trade, and trade relied on common standards that bound the cities into one culture.

Was the Climate Wetter?

Whether the climate was wetter then is debated. Wheeler and Piggott argued for heavier rainfall, pointing to the fuel needed to bake so many bricks, to embankments in Baluchistan and to tigers, elephants and rhinoceroses on seals. A study of pollen from the salt lakes of Sambhar, Didwana and Lunkaransar and the

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freshwater Pushkar lake in Rajasthan suggested more rain from about 3000 BCE and less from about 1800 BCE; other studies find that the region was already drying before the cities arose. The question remains open, but the Indus region certainly had more natural vegetation then, which supplied timber for construction and for baking bricks.

Crops and Cropping

- The main crops were **wheat and barley**, two varieties of each, along with **peas, sesame (til), mustard** (rai), dates and other pulses; high-quality barley comes from **Banawali**. Fruits included jujube (ber), grapes and melons.
- Farming followed the river's rhythm: wheat and barley were sown on the flood plains in **November**, when the floods receded, and reaped in **April**, before the next flood, much like today's **rabi** crops; sesame and cotton were probably summer (**kharif**) crops.
- **Rice** was grown in Gujarat: rice husks have been found at **Lothal** and Rangpur (Lothal, about 1800 BCE); rice also occurs at Harappa and Kalibangan. Millets have been reported from Harappa, Surkotada and Shortughai, and were more common in Gujarat.
- The Indus people were among the earliest in the world to grow **cotton**; the Greek word *sindon* for fine cotton cloth is thought to derive from Sindh. The earliest cotton in the region comes from Mehrgarh; a fragment of woven cotton cloth was found at Mohenjo-daro.
- **Plough:** no actual plough survives, because ploughs were of wood, but a **ploughed field** with two sets of furrows at right angles, showing two crops grown together, was found at **Kalibangan** in its Early Harappan level; terracotta models of ploughs come from **Banawali** and from sites in **Cholistan**. Oxen, and perhaps camels, drew the plough; harvesting was done with stone (chert) blades and sickles.
- **Irrigation:** farming was mainly flood-fed and rain-fed. Traces of **canals** have been found at **Shortughai** in Afghanistan but not in Punjab or Sindh; **gabarbands** (stone bunds) stored water in Baluchistan; wells and Dholavira's reservoirs may also have watered fields. Large-scale canal irrigation of the Mesopotamian kind was not practised.
- **Surplus and storage:** villages produced enough grain to feed the towns. Cereals were probably collected as taxes and stored in the granaries, to pay wages and to meet emergencies, as in Mesopotamia, where wages were paid in barley. If so, the granaries were the link between the fields and the state.

Domestic Animals

- Oxen, buffaloes, goats, sheep and pigs were reared; the **humped bull** was favoured. Dogs and cats were kept from the start (a brick at Chanhudaro bears the footprints of a dog chasing a cat). Asses and camels were beasts of burden.
- **Elephants** were well known, and so was the **rhinoceros**, whose bones have been found at Amri. The bones of deer, wild boar and fish show that hunting and fishing continued.
- The **horse** was not part of Harappan life: neither its bones nor its images occur in the early and mature phases. Evidence of the horse comes only from a superficial level at Mohenjo-daro, a doubtful terracotta figurine from Lothal, and bones at Surkotada (about 2000 BCE) whose identity is disputed.
- The contemporary Sumerian cities grew much the same grains and kept the same animals, but the Harappans of Gujarat grew rice and domesticated elephants, which the people of the Mesopotamian cities did not.

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◆ PRELIMS TRAP THE HORSE QUESTION

The **Harappan culture was not horse-centred**, while the Rig Veda mentions the horse more than 200 times and the Vedic chiefs fought from horse-drawn, spoke-wheeled chariots. The Harappans used **carts with solid wheels** drawn by bullocks. A claim that the Harappans used horse-drawn chariots, or that horse bones are common at their sites, is wrong.

06 Crafts and Technology

Surplus freed some people from farming, and the rise of towns rested on that surplus together with bronze tools, many specialised crafts and widespread trade. Some sites specialised in one or two crafts; others, such as Harappa, made a wide range of goods. Harappan crafts show a remarkable **standardisation**: shell bangles of uniform width were sawn almost everywhere with blades between 0.4 and 0.6 mm thick. Such uniformity may reflect some central direction over crafts using costly raw materials and complex techniques (seals, stoneware bangles, weights), or simply hereditary craft groups and a well-developed internal trade. Either way, it shows craftspeople across hundreds of kilometres working to shared standards.

Metals and Metallurgy

- **Bronze** was made by mixing **tin with copper**, and sometimes arsenic with copper. Pure copper objects far outnumber alloyed ones; tools that needed a hard edge (knives, axes, chisels) were the ones usually alloyed. Because neither tin nor copper was locally plentiful, bronze tools are not abundant, and stone tools stayed in common use.
- Copper came from the **Khetri** mines of Rajasthan (as the impurities in the ores show) and from Baluchistan; tin was brought with difficulty from **Afghanistan**. This dependence on distant ores is one reason trade mattered so much. Bronze-smiths, whose tool-kits are numerous, were an important group of artisans. They made images, vessels, axes, saws, knives, spearheads, arrowheads, fish-hooks, needles, mirrors and bangles.
- Metal objects were precious: hoards of tools and weapons were buried in pots for safe keeping at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro.
- The Harappans knew the **lost-wax process** (*cire perdue*) of casting, by which the famous bronze **"Dancing Girl"** was made. They also worked gold, silver and lead, but **not iron**.

Other Crafts

- **Weaving:** spindle whorls were used for spinning, and weavers made cloth of cotton and wool; textile impressions occur on several objects.
- **Beads:** the Harappans were expert bead-makers, working carnelian, agate, jasper, lapis lazuli, steatite, shell, faience and gold, including tiny steatite micro-beads and etched carnelian beads. Bead factories have been found at **Chanhudaro** and **Lothal**, recognised, as craft centres usually are, by their raw nodules, unfinished pieces and waste.
- **Shell and bangles:** shell was worked at Nageshwar and Balakot near the coast, and at Mohenjo-daro and Chanhudaro; **Kalibangan** ("black bangles") is named after the bangles strewn over its mounds. Hard, high-fired **stoneware bangles** often carry tiny inscriptions.

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- **Faience**, a paste of crushed quartz with colouring, was used for bangles, rings, pendants, small vessels and figurines.
- **Stone work:** long, regular **chert blades** were mass-produced at factory sites in the **Rohri hills** near Sukkur and sent across Sindh. Large stone buildings are rare at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, which had no stone nearby, but Dholavira's citadel of dressed stone is the most impressive of all Harappan citadels.
- **Jewellery** of gold, silver and precious stones: hoards were found at Mohenjo-daro and at the small village of Allahdino; a touchstone with streaks of gold, for testing its purity, comes from Banawali.
- Brick-laying (a class of masons), **boat-making**, **seal-cutting**, terracotta-making and pottery (see section 10) were other important crafts.

Science and Measurement

Harappan achievements in town planning, metallurgy, alloy-making, weaving and ornament-making reflect real technical knowledge. They knew the art of measurement: rods and scales with graduated marks, one of them of bronze and another of shell, have been found, and a shell object from Lothal is thought by some to have been used to measure angles. Their weights (section 07) form a precise system.

07 Trade, Weights and Transport

Crafts on this scale needed stone, metal, shell and timber that the alluvial plains did not have, so the Harappans had to exchange or go and get them. The importance of trade is shown by granaries, numerous seals, a uniform script, and regulated weights and measures over a vast area. They secured materials in several ways: by founding settlements near the sources, by sending expeditions to distant regions, and by trading with neighbours near and far.

Internal Trade

- Trade within the Harappan zone was in grain, stone, metal, shell, timber and finished goods. There was no metal money; exchange was by **barter**.
- Towns gathered grain from their hinterlands, and in return supplied villages with goods not available locally, such as stone blades from Sukkur and copper tools of uniform design. The dependence was real: when the civilisation declined, sites such as Rangpur in Gujarat went back to using tools of local stone.
- Settlements were planted near raw materials: Nageshwar and Balakot for shell, Shortughai for lapis lazuli, and Lothal near carnelian, steatite and metal. Expeditions probably went to the **Khetri** region for copper and to south India for gold.
- The Harappans had links with the copper-working **Ganeshwar-Jodhpura** culture of Rajasthan, with the farmers of south India (for gold), and with Afghanistan and Iran. Timber was probably floated down the Chenab from the hills, past Manda.

MATERIAL	PROBABLE SOURCES
Copper	Khetri (Rajasthan), Baluchistan; Oman (Magan)
Tin	Afghanistan and Central Asia (possibly Tosham, Haryana)

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MATERIAL	PROBABLE SOURCES
Gold	Kolar (Karnataka), Afghanistan, Iran; panned from the upper Indus
Silver	Afghanistan, Iran
Lead	Rajasthan, south India, Afghanistan, Iran
Lapis lazuli	Badakhshan (north-east Afghanistan)
Turquoise, jade	Iran and Central Asia
Carnelian, agate	Gujarat (Bharuch region, Saurashtra)
Chalcedony	Saurashtra
Amethyst	Maharashtra
Steatite	South Rajasthan, north Gujarat, Baluchistan
Shell	Gujarat coast (Nageshwar), Makran coast (Balakot)

A Common Measure: Weights

Exchange between strangers over long distances is far easier when everyone weighs alike. Exchanges were regulated by a precise system of **weights**, usually made of a stone called **chert**, generally **cubical** and without markings.

- The lower denominations were **binary** (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64) and the higher ones followed the **decimal** system (160, 200, 320, 640 and so on, up to 12,800). **Sixteen** or its multiples were most used: 16, 64, 160, 320 and 640; the unit of 16 weighed about 14 g. The tradition of sixteen lasted in India until recently, when sixteen annas made a rupee.
- Small weights were probably used for jewellery and beads; metal scale-pans have also been found. Weights were made uniform across the whole zone during the mature phase, and even the weights of Dilmun (Bahrain) followed the Harappan standard.

Transport

- Goods moved by **bullock carts with solid wheels** (terracotta toy carts are common, and copper or bronze cart models with seated drivers come from Harappa and Chanhudaro), by caravans of pack oxen, sheep, goats and asses, and, late in the mature phase, by camels.
- **Boats** carried goods along the Indus and the coast: boats appear on seals and tablets, and a terracotta model of a ship comes from Lothal. Ports such as Lothal, and settlements on the Makran coast such as Sutkagen-dor and Sotka Koh, served sea trade.

How Do We Know They Traded with Mesopotamia?

The evidence comes from both ends of the route: Mesopotamian writing names the Indus region, and Harappan objects turn up in Mesopotamian soil.

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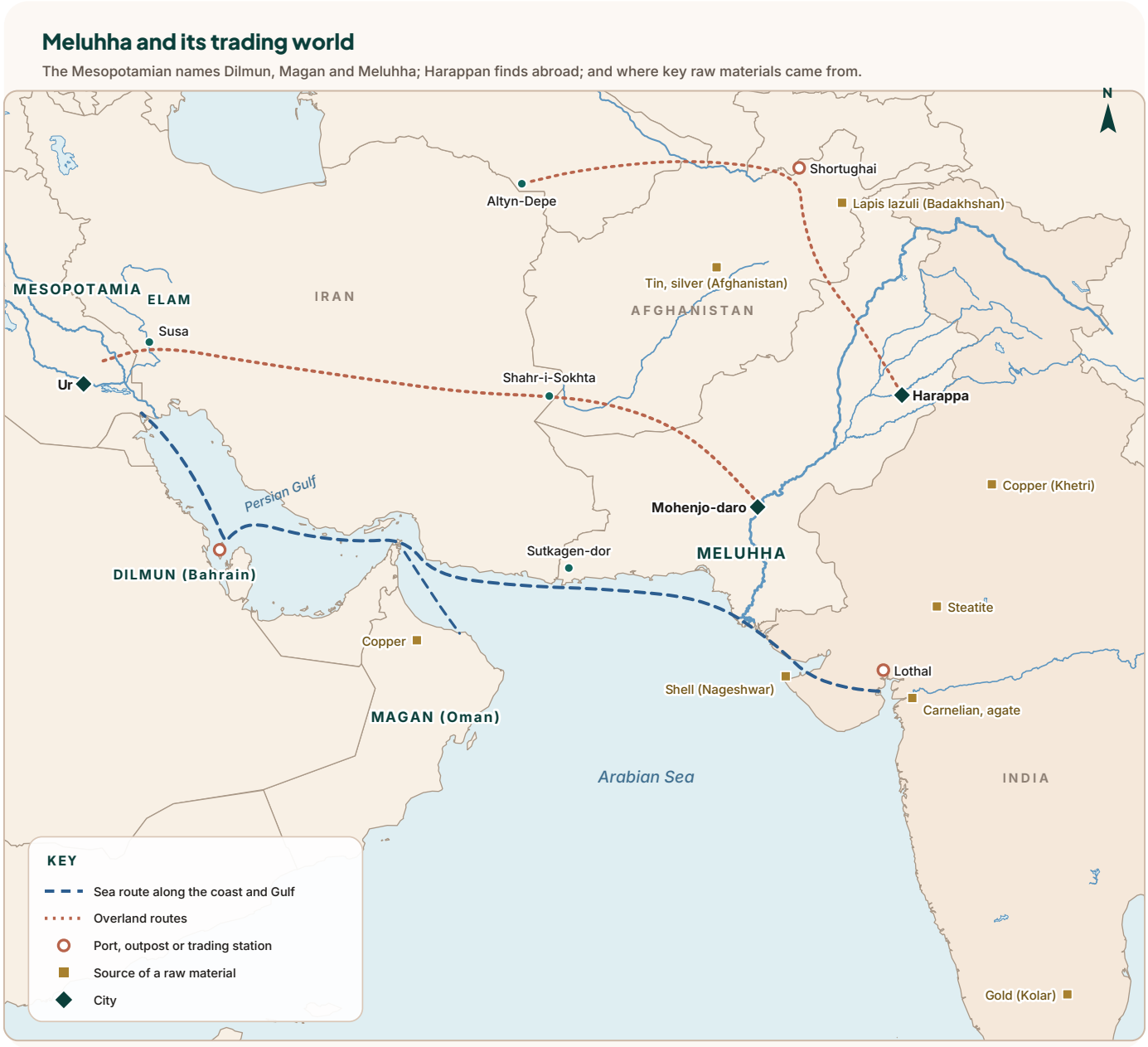


Fig. 4.5 Meluhha's trading world: the sea route along the Makran coast to Magan, Dilmun and Mesopotamia, the overland routes to Iran and Central Asia, and the sources of key raw materials.

- Mesopotamian records from about 2350 BCE onwards refer to trade with **Meluhha**, the ancient name for the Indus region; the inscriptions of Sargon of Akkad speak of ships from Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun moored at his capital.
- Mesopotamian texts name two intermediate trading stations, **Dilmun** (probably the island of **Bahrain**) and **Magan** (probably **Oman**). Copper found at Mesopotamian sites contains traces of nickel, like Omani copper, and a large Harappan jar coated with clay has been found in Oman.
- The texts list the products of Meluhha: **carnelian, lapis lazuli, copper, gold and varieties of wood**. A Mesopotamian myth speaks of Meluhha's "haja-bird", which some think was the **peacock**, and calls Meluhha a land of seafarers.
- Harappan **seals**, weights, dice and beads (etched carnelian beads among them) have been found at Mesopotamian sites such as Ur and Kish and at Susa in Elam, and round "Persian Gulf" seals with Harappan signs in Bahrain. Cylinder seals of Mesopotamian type with Harappan motifs, such as the

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humped bull, show contact both ways. The Harappans may have imitated some Mesopotamian cosmetics.

- To the north-west, the Harappans set up a **trading colony at Shortughai** in north Afghanistan, near the lapis mines of Badakhshan, which also gave access to Central Asia; Harappan objects reached Altyn-Depe in Turkmenistan and Shahr-i-Sokhta in Iran.
- **Exports** included beads, carnelian, shell objects, ivory, cotton goods, timber and finished crafts; **imports** included metals (gold, silver, copper, tin), lapis lazuli, turquoise and jade.

◆ PRELIMS FACT MELUHHA, DILMUN AND MAGAN

- **Meluhha**: the Mesopotamian name for the Indus region; a "land of seafarers" that sent carnelian, lapis lazuli, copper, gold and wood.
- **Dilmun**: Bahrain; its weights followed the Harappan standard. **Magan**: Oman, a source of copper.
- **Shortughai** (Afghanistan): Harappan trading outpost for **lapis lazuli** from Badakhshan.
- References to Meluhha in Mesopotamian texts fade after about 1900 BCE, as the Harappan cities declined.

08 Society and Polity: Who Ran the Cities?

Planned streets, standard bricks and weights, cleaned drains and stocked granaries all point to decisions taken and carried out over a huge area. Who took them? Here the evidence becomes frustrating. There are clear signs of rich and poor, but no palace, no royal tomb and no named king, and the script that might tell us cannot be read. Archaeologists have to argue from houses, objects and the plan of the cities.

Rich and Poor

- Excavations show a hierarchy in urban living. Houses ranged from one room to twelve, and the city of Harappa had two-roomed barracks probably meant for artisans and labourers, while larger houses had private wells and toilets.
- Though only two localities were long recognised, Harappa, Kalibangan and Dholavira show three: the citadel, perhaps for the ruling class; a middle settlement, perhaps for officials and merchants; and the lower town for common people.
- The contrast between finely made seals and images, used by the upper classes, and crude terracotta figurines, used by ordinary people, also points to social differences. On the other hand, typical Harappan artefacts, including ornaments, are spread through whole settlements rather than shut away in elite quarters, and burials show only modest differences in wealth. Inequality existed, but it was not displayed as it was in Egypt.
- Society included farmers, herders, artisans (potters, bronze-smiths, bead-makers, masons, seal-cutters, weavers), merchants, priests and rulers.

Daily Life

- **Dress:** women's figurines wear a short skirt; men wore a dhoti-like lower garment and a shawl worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm, as on the "priest-king".

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- **Hair and ornaments:** women wore braids, buns and a fan-shaped headdress; most men had beards, and some shaved the moustache. Both sexes wore necklaces, armlets, rings and bangles; copper mirrors and ivory combs were used.
- **Games and toys:** terracotta carts, animals on wheels, whistles, rattles, marbles, spinning tops, dice and gamesmen; dogs, some with collars, were kept as pets.
- **Food:** diet varied by region, following the local crops. Wheat and barley were the staples in Punjab and Sindh, barley in Rajasthan and millets in Gujarat; fats came from sesame, mustard and animals; fish, meat, dates and jujube were eaten.
- **Women:** figurines show women grinding grain and carrying infants. The large number of female figurines has led some to suggest a matriarchal society, but, unlike Egypt, where the daughter inherited the throne or property, we know nothing of Harappan inheritance; the question remains open.

Who Ruled the Harappan Cities?

The uniformity of town plans, bricks, weights, seals and script over so wide an area suggests some kind of central authority, though no palace, royal tomb or portrait of a king has been found. Even the names we use can mislead: a large building at Mohenjo-daro was labelled a "palace" though nothing grand was found in it, and the steatite bust became the "priest-king" because its excavators knew the priest-kings of Mesopotamia. Mortimer Wheeler called the civilisation "the vastest political experiment before the advent of the Roman empire". Scholars have proposed different models:

- **A centralised empire of priest-kings:** Stuart Piggott and Wheeler saw a single empire ruled by priest-kings from twin capitals at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, pointing to uniformity, public works and granaries.
- **An elaborate village administration** without a state (Walter Fairservis), who noted the absence of evidence for priest-kings, slaves, standing armies or court officials and saw Mohenjo-daro as a ceremonial centre.
- **A chiefdom** (S.C. Malik and others): a stage between a kinship-based society and a state.
- **A state of several city-states**, or an empire, in later studies. Many scholars think the large cities were capitals of regional domains. Some archaeologists think a single state the most plausible answer, since whole communities could hardly have taken and carried out such complex decisions together.
- **Rule by merchants:** unlike lower Mesopotamia, there is no sign that priests ruled; with no temples and few weapons, the rulers seem to have been more concerned with commerce than with conquest, and some think a class of merchants governed.

Some elements of a state can be identified. In the terms of the later Arthashastra, the citadel may have been the seat of sovereign power, the middle town the quarters of officials, and the great granary the treasury, with taxes collected in grain; the territory was well populated, and fortification was common (Dholavira had forts within forts). A heap of sling-stones and a soldier painted on a potsherd at Surkotada hint at an armed force, but weapons are not prominent, and depictions of conflict are rare.

The long stability of the civilisation, with its traditions almost unchanged for some seven centuries, suggests a strong and settled political order.

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CONNECTING THE DOTS STANDARDS AS THE FINGERPRINT OF AN AUTHORITY

- Bricks in one 1:2:4 ratio from Jammu to Gujarat, though made in many places
- One system of cubical weights, followed even in Dilmun
- One script on seals, used to mark goods and owners
- Settlements placed near shell, lapis and carnelian sources, apparently by decisions taken for the whole system
- After c. 1900 BCE, weights, seals and writing disappear together, perhaps as the authority that maintained them faded (Chapter 5)

09 Religion and Funerary Practices

How can we know a religion whose prayers we cannot read? Harappan religion has to be inferred from seals, figurines, a few special buildings and burials. No structure at any Harappan site can be identified as a temple, and no statue as a cult image, in sharp contrast to Egypt and Mesopotamia. Scholars often read these objects by moving from the known to the unknown, comparing them with later Indian practice. That works well for querns and pots but becomes speculative for gods, so most identifications below remain debated.

Goddesses and Gods

- **Mother Goddess:** numerous terracotta female figurines, often with a fan-shaped headdress, a short skirt, girdle and necklaces, sometimes with an infant, have been found at Harappa, Mohenjo-daro and Banawali. A seal from Harappa shows a woman with a plant growing out of her womb, probably an **earth or fertility goddess**. Such figurines are practically absent at Kalibangan, Lothal and Surkotada, and many may have been toys, votive offerings or household objects rather than goddesses.
- **The "Pashupati" seal:** a seal from Mohenjo-daro shows a male figure with a horned headdress (a tall fan-shaped crest, sometimes read as a sprouting plant, rises between the horns), seated in a yogic posture, surrounded by an **elephant, a tiger, a rhinoceros and a buffalo**, with two deer (or antelopes) below his seat. John Marshall identified him as Pashupati ("lord of animals"), a **proto-Shiva**; others doubt this, since the bull is absent, three faces are not certain, and horned gods occur in other ancient cultures. On another seal, snakes accompany a figure seated in a yogic posture.
- **Linga and yoni:** stones shaped like the phallus and the female organ were thought to show fertility worship, later linked with Shiva; some of these have since been explained as pestles, game pieces or ring-stones for pillars.

Trees, Animals and Amulets

- **Tree worship:** the **pipal** appears often. One seal shows a horned deity standing within a pipal tree, a kneeling worshipper and a goat with a human face, and below, seven figures with long plaits, interpreted as the seven sages or the seven mothers of later mythology.

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- **Animal worship:** the one-horned **"unicorn"**, the commonest animal on seals, and the **humped bull**, next in importance, may have had religious meaning; composite creatures (human-tiger, bull-elephant, ram-bull-elephant) recall later mythical beings such as Narasimha. A seal of a man grappling with two tigers recalls the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh.
- **Amulets** have been found in large numbers, probably to ward off ghosts and evil forces; the **svastika** motif occurs on seals and tablets. Terracotta masks from Mohenjo-daro and Harappa may have been used in rituals.

Ritual Structures

- **Great Bath:** probably for elite ritual bathing; the link between water and purity continues at sacred places in India.
- **Fire altars:** at **Kalibangan**, brick-lined pits containing ash and animal bones stood on raised platforms in the citadel, together with a well and bathing places; many houses in the lower town also had a fire altar. Fire altars occur at Lothal too, and at Banawali in an apsidal building. They suggest fire rituals and animal sacrifice, and show that religious practice differed from region to region: Mohenjo-daro had its bath, Kalibangan its altars.
- A terracotta cake from Kalibangan with an incised horned figure, and a cylinder seal from the same site showing a woman between two men with raised swords, have been read as evidence of sacrifice; both readings are uncertain.

Burials

- The dead were usually buried in an **extended position**, lying on the back, with the head to the north, in brick- or stone-lined pits, with pots of food and personal ornaments (shell bangles, steatite beads, earrings for men), which suggests a belief in an afterlife. Copper mirrors occur only in the graves of women.
- Variations: a **wooden coffin** burial at Harappa (and at Rakhigarhi); male and female buried together at **Lothal**; a man buried with a dog at **Ropar**; at **Kalibangan**, small circular pits with large urns and pottery but no bones, which may point to cremation or symbolic burial; pot burials; and at Dholavira and Surkotada, graves with stone circles resembling megalithic ones. Fractional burial (burial of bones after exposure) is also known.
- Harappan graves are modest compared with the pyramids of Egypt or the royal tombs of Ur, which fits a society that did not glorify its rulers. Different burial customs within one city suggest that urban centres brought together varied social groups.

◆ PRELIMS FACT **HARAPPAN RELIGION AT A GLANCE**

- **No temples** and no palaces have been found; the Great Bath is the main ritual structure.
- Pashupati seal animals: **elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, buffalo**, with two deer below; the **bull is absent**.
- **Fire altars**: Kalibangan (citadel and houses), Lothal, Banawali.
- Both **male and female deities** were worshipped, along with trees (pipal) and animals (unicorn, humped bull).

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10 Seals, Sculpture and Pottery

Much of what we know of Harappan belief, trade and taste comes from small objects, and the most eloquent of them are the seals. The same objects also show the social contrast seen in the houses: fine seals and bronzes for the few, simple clay figures for the many.

Seals

- **Seals are the greatest artistic creations of the Harappan culture.** Well over 2,000 have been found. Most are **square or rectangular** and made of **steatite** (soapstone), with a boss pierced at the back; a few are of silver, faience or calcite, and a few are cylindrical or round.
- Most carry a short **inscription** and an animal: the one-horned **"unicorn"** (the commonest), humped bull, buffalo, tiger, rhinoceros, goat, elephant, antelope and gharial. Some show narrative or religious scenes.
- **Uses:** to stamp **sealings** (clay tags) on bales of goods, as textile impressions on some sealings show; as tokens of identity or authority for merchants and officials; and as **amulets**. Sealings are fewer than in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Some think the animals stood for clans or communities, the unicorn perhaps for the ruling elite.
- Inscribed seals are typical of the mature phase: they are rarely found in late Harappan levels, probably because they belonged to the trade and administration of the cities.
- **Lothal** has yielded sealings with impressions of reed, matting and cord on one side and Harappan seals on the other, apparently records of trade.

Sculpture and Terracotta

- **"Dancing Girl" (Mohenjo-daro):** a small **bronze** figure, about 10.5 cm high, cast by the lost-wax process, naked except for a necklace and many bangles on the left arm, with one hand on the hip; it is in the National Museum, New Delhi.
- **"Priest-King" (Mohenjo-daro):** a **steatite** bust of a bearded man wearing a robe with a **trefoil** pattern over the left shoulder and under the right arm, with his short hair held by a woven fillet; it is in the National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi.
- **Male torso (Harappa):** a small, naturalistic torso of **red sandstone**; a grey limestone dancing figure also comes from Harappa. Stone sculpture is otherwise rare.
- **Terracotta figurines** of birds, dogs, sheep, cattle, monkeys, men and women (women outnumber men) were used as toys or in worship; they are less sophisticated than the seals and bronzes. Terracotta carts, whistles, masks and the triangular terracotta cakes are also common.

Pottery

- The Harappans were masters of the **potter's wheel**: their typical pottery is **red**, with designs painted in **black**, fired in kilns found at Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Nausharo and Chanhudaro. Red slip came from red ochre (*geru*), black from iron oxide and manganese.
- Designs include horizontal bands, intersecting circles, chequers, fish scales, pipal leaves, trees, birds, fish and animals; human figures are rare. A jar from Lothal shows birds with fish in their beaks.

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- Characteristic shapes include the **dish-on-stand**, goblets with a pointed base, large storage jars, S-profile vases and **perforated jars**, perhaps for straining or brewing. Polychrome pottery is rare.

◆ PRELIMS FACT MATERIAL OF THE FAMOUS OBJECTS

- **Dancing Girl**: bronze (lost-wax casting), Mohenjo-daro.
- **Priest-King**: steatite, Mohenjo-daro. **Male torso**: red sandstone, Harappa.
- **Seals**: mostly steatite; **terracotta** for figurines, toys and cakes; **faience** for small ornaments and figurines.

11 The Indus Script

The seals carry the one thing that could answer all the questions above, and it cannot be read. The Harappans invented the art of writing, like the people of Mesopotamia, but their script has **not yet been deciphered.** Attempts to connect it with Dravidian or proto-Dravidian, with Sanskrit and Indo-Aryan, or with Sumerian have not produced an accepted reading, so we cannot judge Harappan literature or read the names of their rulers. That is why Harappan history has to be written from archaeology, helped only by a few references in Mesopotamian texts.

What We Know About It

- The earliest specimen was noticed in the nineteenth century (the seal published by Cunningham), and the script as a whole was known by the 1920s. About **4,000 inscribed objects** are known, most of them seals and sealings, and also tablets of steatite, terracotta, faience and copper, pottery, tools, bangles and ornaments. About half come from Mohenjo-daro.
- The script is **not alphabetic but largely pictographic**: about 400 basic signs (estimates range from about 250 to 450), each probably standing for a word or a syllable (a **logo-syllabic** script).
- It was written mainly from **right to left**; on seals the direction is reversed so that the impression reads correctly. Some longer inscriptions run in **boustrophedon** style, with alternate lines in opposite directions.

Why Can't We Read It?

- Unlike the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, the Harappans did not write long inscriptions: most inscriptions are very short, about five signs on average. At **Dholavira** a "signboard" of ten large signs, inlaid in a wooden board, fell near the northern gate of the citadel, and even that is short.
- No bilingual inscription has been found, nothing like the Rosetta Stone that unlocked Egyptian hieroglyphs, and we do not know what language the Harappans spoke.
- The script is indigenous and does not resemble the scripts of Egypt or Mesopotamia. It hardly changed over the life of the civilisation and largely disappeared with the cities, which suggests that writing was confined to a small group of scribes, merchants and rulers.

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◆ PRELIMS TRAP DIRECTION AND DECIPHERMENT

The Indus script ran from **right to left**; Brahmi, the script of Ashoka's inscriptions written more than 1,500 years later, ran from **left to right**, and Kharosthi from right to left. Brahmi was deciphered by James Prinsep in 1837; the Indus script remains **undeciphered**.

12 The Big Picture

Set beside its Bronze Age contemporaries, Sumer in Mesopotamia and Old Kingdom Egypt, the Harappan civilisation shared their basic features but had its own identity. Those cities glorified kings and gods; the Harappan cities invested in drains, wells and standard measures for everyone.

FEATURE	HARAPPAN	MESOPOTAMIA AND EGYPT
Area	The largest culture zone of its time	Much smaller
Town plan	Planned grid of streets, walled sectors	Mesopotamian cities grew haphazardly
Houses and drains	Brick bathrooms, wells, covered drains in almost every town	Nothing comparable, except at Knossos in Crete
Building material	Burnt bricks on a large scale	Mainly sun-dried bricks in Egypt; burnt bricks less used in Mesopotamia
Monuments	No palaces, temples or royal tombs; civic buildings	Palaces, temples, ziggurats, pyramids and royal tombs
Script	Short, undeciphered, on seals	Cuneiform and hieroglyphs, read, used for long texts
Bronze	Used on a limited scale; stone tools continued	Used far more widely in Mesopotamia
Irrigation	Floods, rain, wells; canals only at Shortughai	Large canal networks in Mesopotamia
Seals	Square stamp seals with local animals	Cylinder seals in Mesopotamia

The Harappan cities therefore stand out for their order and civic sense rather than for monuments to rulers or gods. The threads of this chapter run in both directions:

- **Continuity from below:** the civilisation grew out of the village cultures of Baluchistan and the Indus plains, and its end after about 1900 BCE returned it to village life; urban life in India began again only with the second urbanisation of the Ganga valley (Chapter 9).
- **A system, not a list of traits:** the flood plains gave surplus, surplus supported crafts, crafts needed trade, and trade relied on shared weights, seals and script. When the trade and the cities failed, these markers vanished together.
- **Power without display:** standardisation shows an authority able to coordinate a vast area, yet it left no palaces or royal portraits. Whether it was one state or several remains open.
- **A contrast with the Vedic age:** the Harappans were urban, used solid-wheeled bullock carts and did not know the horse, while the Rig Vedic people were pastoral, without cities, and fought from horse-drawn chariots (Chapter 6).

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CONNECTING THE DOTS WHAT SURVIVED THE CITIES

- Pipal worship and reverence for the humped bull continue in Indian religious life
- The yogic figure of the "Pashupati" seal, a possible proto-Shiva, though the identification is debated
- The fire altars of Kalibangan and Lothal, if rightly identified, show fire ritual before the Vedic age
- Weights in sixteens survived until sixteen annas made a rupee; lost-wax casting survives in dhokra metalwork
- Houses round a courtyard, the dish-on-stand and the bangle-wearing seen on the "Dancing Girl" have echoes in later Indian life (Chapter 5)

Prelims Quick Revision

- **Mature Harappan**: c. 2600–1900 BCE (calibrated C-14); the subcontinent's first urbanisation, a Bronze Age culture.
- **Discovery**: Harappa by Daya Ram Sahni (1921); Mohenjo-daro by R.D. Banerji (1922); announced by John Marshall (1924).
- **Frontiers**: Manda (Chenab, J&K) N; Daimabad (Pravara, Maharashtra) S; Alamgirpur (Hindon, UP) E; Sutkagen-dor (Makran) W; Shortughai outpost.
- **Largest cities**: Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Ganweriwala, Rakhigarhi, Dholavira; most settlements were villages.
- **Town plan**: citadel (west, raised) and lower town (east); grid streets; Lothal one walled unit with a raised citadel; Dholavira in three parts.
- **Bricks**: rectangular, 1:2:4 ratio; burnt bricks at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, mud bricks at Kalibangan, stone at Dholavira.
- **Great Bath**: Mohenjo-daro citadel; 11.88 × 7.01 × 2.43 m; bitumen waterproofing; steps at north and south.
- **Granaries**: largest building at Mohenjo-daro; two rows of six units at Harappa with threshing floors and barracks.
- **Crops**: wheat, barley, peas, sesame, mustard; rice at Lothal and Rangpur; among the earliest cotton growers (Greek *sindon*).
- **Kalibangan**: early Harappan ploughed field with criss-cross furrows; fire altars in citadel and houses.
- **Horse**: absent in early and mature phases; doubtful finds at Surkotada, Lothal and a late level of Mohenjo-daro.
- **Weights**: cubical chert, unmarked; binary up to 64, then decimal; unit of 16 (about 14 g).
- **Meluhha**: Mesopotamian name for the Indus region; Dilmun = Bahrain, Magan = Oman; Shortughai for lapis lazuli.
- **Pashupati seal**: horned yogi with elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, buffalo and two deer; no bull.
- **Dancing Girl**: bronze, lost-wax; **Priest-King**: steatite with trefoil robe; seals mostly steatite, unicorn commonest.
- **Script**: undeciphered, pictographic, about 400 signs, right to left, average about five signs per inscription.

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Previous Year Questions

Prelims

2026

Consider the following statements about the archaeological findings in Harappan towns:
I. There is wide occurrence of spindle-whorls in the houses but absence of spinning wheels.
II. Weights and measurement scales, complete with graduations have been discovered.
III. There are houses built in large part with baked bricks, around relatively spacious courtyards, with their own wells, bathing platforms, and large rooms.
Which of the following inferences can be drawn from the above statements?
1. Statement I suggests that spinning was a laborious activity done at home.
2. Statement II suggests the extent of the scientific knowledge that the Harappans possessed.
3. Statement III suggests the emergence of a common property system.
Select the answer using the code given below:

a) 1 and 2 only ✓ | b) 2 and 3 only | c) 1 and 3 only | d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a). Spindle whorls without spinning wheels point to hand-spinning at home, and graduated weights and scales show measurement skills; spacious houses with private wells point to private, not common, property (Sections 04, 06, 07 and 08). (PROVISIONAL KEY)

2025

The famous female figurine known as 'Dancing Girl', found at Mohenjo-daro, is made of

a) carnelian | b) clay | c) bronze ✓ | d) gold

Answer: (c). The Dancing Girl is a small bronze figure cast by the lost-wax process (Section 10).

2017

With reference to the difference between the culture of Rigvedic Aryans and Indus Valley people, which of the following statements is/are correct?
1. Rigvedic Aryans used the coat of mail and helmet in warfare whereas the people of Indus Valley Civilization did not leave any evidence of using them.
2. Rigvedic Aryans knew gold, silver and copper whereas Indus Valley people knew only copper and iron.
3. Rigvedic Aryans had domesticated the horse whereas there is no evidence of Indus Valley people having been aware of this animal.
Select the correct answer using the code given below:

a) 1 only | b) 2 and 3 only | c) 1 and 3 only ✓ | d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (c). Rigvedic warriors used armour and helmets and the horse was central to them; the Harappans knew gold, silver, copper, tin and lead but not iron, so statement 2 is wrong (Sections 05, 06 and 12).

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2013 Which of the following characterizes/characterize the people of Indus Civilization?

1. They possessed great palaces and temples.
2. They worshipped both male and female deities.
3. They employed horse-drawn chariots in warfare.

Select the correct statement/statements using the codes given below.

a 1 and 2 only
b 2 only
c 1, 2 and 3
d None of the statements given above is correct

Answer: (b). No palace or temple has been found, and the horse-drawn chariot belongs to the Vedic age; female figurines and the 'Pashupati' seal point to male and female deities (Sections 05, 08 and 09).

2011 Regarding the Indus Valley Civilization, consider the following statements:

1. It was predominantly a secular civilization and the religious element, though present, did not dominate the scene.
2. During this period, cotton was used for manufacturing textiles in India.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

a 1 only
b 2 only
c Both 1 and 2
d Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (c). No temples or priestly rule dominate the cities, and woven cotton from Mohenjo-daro and spindle whorls show cotton textiles (Sections 05, 06, 08 and 09).

Mains

2025 GS I · 10 MARKS

Discuss the salient features of the Harappan architecture.

2014 GS I · 10 MARKS

To what extent has the urban planning and culture of the Indus Valley Civilization provided inputs to the present day urbanization? Discuss.

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UNIT IV | 3 CHAPTERS

The Mauryan Empire

Chandragupta, Bindusara and the later Mauryas; Ashoka's dhamma and inscriptions; and the Mauryan state, economy, society, art and decline.

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15 Ashoka: Dhamma and Inscriptions 332
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TOPICS COVERED IN THIS UNIT

14 **The Mauryas: Chandragupta, Bindusara and the Later Mauryas**
How We Know About the Mauryas · Who Was Chandragupta Maurya? · The Fall of the Nandas and the Greeks · Chandragupta and Seleucus · Megasthenes and the Indica · Kautilya and the Arthashastra · The Empire Chandragupta Built · A Jaina End at Shravanabelagola? · Bindusara: The Empire Reaches the South · After Ashoka: The Later Mauryas · The Big Picture

15 **Ashoka: Dhamma and Inscriptions**
How We Know About Ashoka · From Prince to Emperor · The Kalinga War · Ashoka and Buddhism · Dhamma: An Ethic for an Empire · Officials and Welfare Measures of Dhamma · Relations with Neighbours and the Hellenistic World · The Inscriptions of Ashoka · Ashoka's Empire · The Big Picture

16 **The Mauryan State, Economy, Society, Art and Decline**
The King and the Central Government · Provinces, Districts and Villages · Pataliputra: Governing the Capital · Army, Spies and Courts · Paying for the Empire: Revenue · Fields, Workshops, Roads and Coins · Carrying the Ganga Valley Outwards · Society: Seven Castes or Four Varnas? · Court Art: Palace, Pillars and Capitals · Caves, Stupas and Popular Art · Why Did the Empire Fall? · The Big Picture

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ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY · PRELIMS · GS PAPER I

Ashoka: Dhamma and Inscriptions

When Ashoka came to the throne, the Mauryan empire was already the largest state India had known, won by his grandfather **Chandragupta Maurya** and held by his father **Bindusara** (Chapter 14). For some two centuries Magadhan kings had grown by war, and Ashoka began the same way: in his eighth year he conquered Kalinga. The suffering of that war changed him.

From then on he tried to hold his vast and varied empire together by persuasion: a moral code he called **dhamma**, officers to carry it, welfare for people and animals, and edicts cut on rocks and pillars from Kandahar to Karnataka. They make him the first Indian ruler who speaks to us in his own words, yet his name was almost forgotten in India for more than two thousand years, until Brahmi was deciphered in 1837. Today the Sarnath lion capital is the **State Emblem of India**. The later Mauryas are covered in Chapter 14; Mauryan administration, economy, art and decline follow in Chapter 16.

SYLLABUS

PRELIMS — History of India and Indian National Movement

MAINS · GS PAPER I — Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times

CONTENTS

01 How We Know About Ashoka
02 From Prince to Emperor
03 The Kalinga War
04 Ashoka and Buddhism
05 Dhamma: An Ethic for an Empire
06 Officials and Welfare Measures of Dhamma
07 Relations with Neighbours and the Hellenistic World
08 The Inscriptions of Ashoka
09 Ashoka's Empire
10 The Big Picture
11 Previous Year Questions

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01 How We Know About Ashoka

Ashoka's story has reached us along two very different roads. One is his own voice, cut in stone and meant to be read out to his subjects. The other is the memory of the Buddhist monasteries, which made him the model Buddhist king and wrapped his life in legend. Historians trust the first and test the second against it.

What Are the Sources?

- **His own inscriptions** are the main source: nearly forty inscriptions, in about 180 versions, found at some 47 places in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most of them call him **Devanampiya Piyadasi**, "dear to the gods, of pleasing appearance".
- **Buddhist traditions** tell the story of his life, mixed with legend: the Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka, the **Dipavamsa** and the **Mahavamsa**, and the Sanskrit **Ashokavadana**, part of the **Divyavadana**, preserved in the northern tradition. Because they were written to celebrate a Buddhist hero, their tales of his cruelty before conversion and his piety after it have to be read with care.
- Other sources fill gaps: the list of Mauryan kings in the **Puranas**; Kashmiri tradition in Kalhana's **Rajatarangini** (twelfth century), which credits Ashoka with founding the town of Srinagari; and the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang, who saw his pillars and stupas centuries later.
- **Art and archaeology** give him a setting and even a face: his pillars, stupas and cave shrines, and the relief at **Kanaganahalli** near Sannati in Karnataka, which shows a king with the Brahmi label **"Raya Asoko"** (King Ashoka, often cited as "Ranyo Ashoka"), the only known portrait of Ashoka named in an inscription.

How Was a Forgotten King Rediscovered?

For centuries no one in India could read the edicts, and the king who wrote them survived mainly in Buddhist memory. His recovery came in three steps: a script was cracked, a title was matched to a name, and a find in Karnataka proved the match.

- **The script:** in 1837, **James Prinsep**, an officer of the East India Company's mint and secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, deciphered the **Brahmi** script, working from short donative inscriptions at Sanchi and then reading the edicts on the Delhi-Topra pillar. Kharosthi was deciphered soon after, partly with the help of bilingual Indo-Greek coins.
- **The name:** the inscriptions named only a king **Devanampiya Piyadasi**, and Prinsep at first took him for a king of Sri Lanka, until the Pali chronicles, which call Ashoka "Piyadassi", allowed scholars to identify him.
- **The proof:** the identification was confirmed in 1915, when the minor rock edict at **Maski** (Raichur district, Karnataka), discovered by C. Beadon, was found to call the king **"Devanampiya Asoka"**. In the same edict he calls himself a **Buddha-Shakya**, a follower of the Buddha.

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PRELIMS TRAP WHERE THE NAME "ASHOKA" ACTUALLY APPEARS

- The personal name **Ashoka** occurs in only **four** of his own inscriptions, all copies of Minor Rock Edict I: **Maski**, **Nittur** and **Udegolam** in Karnataka, and **Gujarra** in Datia district, Madhya Pradesh.
- All his other inscriptions use titles: **Devanampiya** (dear to the gods) and **Piyadasi** (of pleasing appearance). The Bhabru edict calls him **"Piyadasi, king of Magadha"**.
- *Devanampiya* was not unique to him: his grandson Dasharatha and his Sri Lankan contemporary **Devanampiya Tissa** used it too.

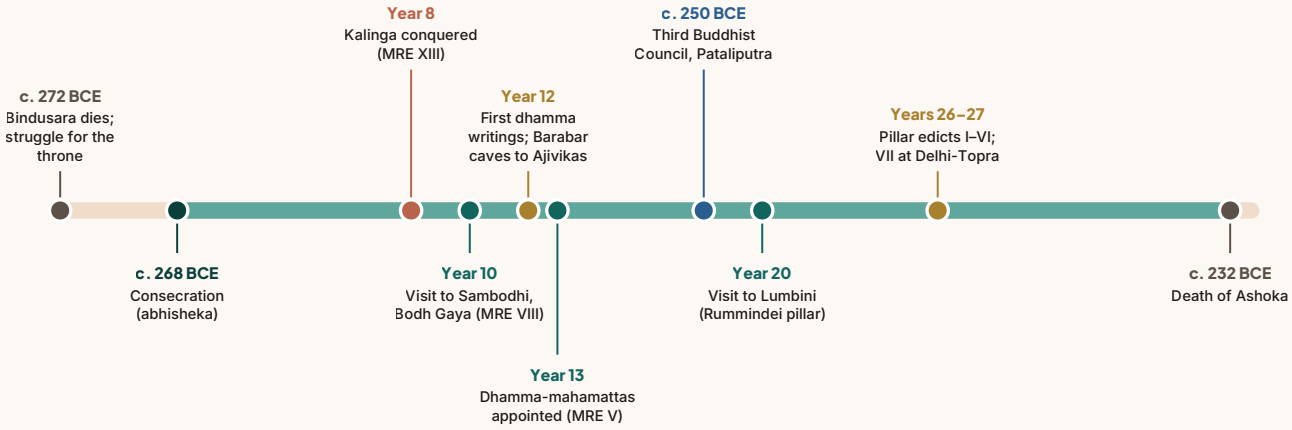
02 From Prince to Emperor

Mauryan princes learned to rule by governing provinces, and Ashoka was trained the same way. The throne, however, did not pass to him smoothly. His accession came only after a struggle among Bindusara's sons, and Buddhist writers later turned that struggle into the tale of a cruel prince transformed by faith.

- Ashoka was a son of **Bindusara** and grandson of **Chandragupta Maurya**. As a prince he served as viceroy at **Ujjain**. On his way there, according to the Sri Lankan chronicles, he married **Devi**, a merchant's daughter of Vidisha, the mother of **Mahinda** (Mahendra) and **Sanghamitta** (Sanghamitra), the two children who would later carry Buddhism to Sri Lanka. The Divyavadana says that he put down a revolt at **Taxila**.
- Bindusara's death in about 272 BCE was followed by a struggle for the throne lasting about four years; Ashoka was consecrated in about **268 BCE**, helped, according to tradition, by the minister **Radhagupta**. His reign is usually dated c. 268–232 BCE (or 273–232 BCE, counting from his accession).

Ashoka's reign by regnal years

Years counted from his consecration (c. 268 BCE). Dates BCE are approximate; most regnal years come from his own inscriptions.



Minor Rock Edict I: a lay Buddhist (upasaka) for over two and a half years without much zeal, he then drew close to the Sangha for over a year.

Fig. 15.1 The main events of Ashoka's reign, dated mostly by the regnal years he gives in his own inscriptions.

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Chandashoka to Dharmashoka: Legend or History?

- The Mahavamsa says that he killed **ninety-nine brothers** (the Dipavamsa says a hundred), sparing only his younger brother Tissa (Vitashoka). His own edicts, however, mention living brothers and sisters, so the story is regarded as a legend.
- The legend has a purpose: it sets his early cruelty ("**Chandashoka**", the fierce Ashoka) against his later piety ("Dharmashoka", the name by which a twelfth-century inscription of Queen Kumaradevi at Sarnath remembers him), to show the power of the Buddha's teaching. The tale of "Ashoka's hell", a torture chamber, belongs to the same body of Buddhist legend.
- His queens named in tradition or inscriptions include Devi, **Karuvaki** (the "second queen", mother of prince **Tivara**, named in the Queen's Edict), Asandhimitra and Tishyarakshita. His sons include Mahinda, **Kunala** and, in Kashmiri tradition, Jalauka.

03 The Kalinga War

Like the Magadhan kings before him, Ashoka began by going to war to enlarge his kingdom. In the eighth year after his consecration (c. 261 BCE) he conquered **Kalinga**, the coastal country of present-day Odisha and northern Andhra Pradesh, in the only major war of his reign. What makes this war unique is not the victory but what the victor said about it afterwards.

Why Kalinga?

- Kalinga was the gap in the map. It had been under Magadhan control in Nanda times but was independent under the early Mauryas, standing between the Ganga heartland and the south.
- Whoever held it controlled the routes to south India by land and by sea. Its maritime trade made it prosperous, and it maintained a large army, so it was both a prize and a threat.

What the War Cost, and What It Changed

We know of the war only because Ashoka chose to describe it, in **Major Rock Edict XIII**. No other ancient Indian king is known to have publicly counted the cost of his own victory.

- The edict says that a hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand killed, and many times that number perished. The figures may be exaggerated, since "a hundred thousand" is a stock figure in the inscriptions, but the suffering clearly moved the king.
- Ashoka says he felt deep **remorse** for the killing and the deportations, all the more because the suffering fell on brahmanas, shramanas and ordinary householders alike. From then on he "very earnestly practised dhamma, desired dhamma and taught dhamma".
- So he redefined victory itself: **dhamma-vijaya**, conquest by dhamma, became the foremost victory. In the words of Major Rock Edict IV, the **bherighosha** (sound of the war drum) gave way to the **dhammaghosha** (sound of dhamma).

Why Was the Edict of Remorse Not Carved in Kalinga?

Remarkably, the confession was published across the empire but **not engraved in Kalinga** itself. At **Dhauli** and **Jaugada**, Rock Edicts XI–XIII are left out, and two **Separate (Kalinga) Edicts** addressed to the officers at

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Tosali and **Samapa** take their place. Historians read the change as political tact: the new subjects were not reminded of their defeat but promised fair government instead.

- The Separate Edicts ask for impartial, humane justice and declare **"All men are my children"**. To the unconquered frontier peoples they say that "the king is like a father" to them.
- The promise came with checks. Ashoka would send out mild-mannered officers every five years to check that the judicial officers were following his instructions, and the princes at Ujjain and Taxila were to send such officers without letting three years pass (Separate Edict I).
- The officers were to have these edicts read out on **Tishya** days, and on other occasions even to a single listener. The message was meant to reach people, not merely to be displayed.

Remorse, Not Pacifism

The Kalinga war did not make Ashoka a pacifist at any cost: it changed his methods, not his hold on power. He kept Kalinga in the empire, did not disband the army, and warned the forest tribes (**atavikas**) in Rock Edict XIII that, though he repented, he still had the power to punish them if they did wrong. He appointed **rajukas** who could reward and also punish. His policy was a practical one of consolidating a vast empire by persuasion. He called that persuasion dhamma, and his road to it began with Buddhism.

CONNECTING THE DOTS FROM KALINGA TO THE NATIONAL FLAG

- Kalinga war, c. 261 BCE: the suffering recorded in Rock Edict XIII
- Dhamma-vijaya replaces conquest; the dhammaghosha replaces the war drum (Rock Edict IV)
- Dhamma carried on polished pillars, crowned by animal capitals such as the lions of Sarnath (Chapter 16)
- 26 January 1950: the Sarnath capital becomes India's State Emblem; its 24-spoked wheel has been on the national flag since 22 July 1947

04 Ashoka and Buddhism

Remorse needed a language, and Ashoka found it in the teaching of the Buddha, which had grown up in the same Magadhan heartland some two centuries earlier (Chapter 11). His own edicts show a lay believer who grew more devoted over time; the Buddhist chronicles add the drama of conversion, councils and missions. Read together, they explain how a monastic order of the Ganga valley became a religion that crossed the seas.

How Did He Become a Buddhist?

- Minor Rock Edict I records that Ashoka was a lay follower (**upasaka**) for more than two and a half years without much zeal, and then for more than a year drew close to the **Sangha** and exerted himself greatly. Read with Rock Edict XIII, this is usually taken to place his turn to Buddhism around the time of the

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Kalinga war. Some later traditions say that he even became a monk for a while; the edict itself speaks only of drawing close to the Sangha.

- Tradition credits his conversion to the young monk **Nigrodha** (in the Pali chronicles) or to the monk Samudra (in the Ashokavadana), where the elder **Upagupta** of Mathura then becomes his spiritual guide.
- His personal faith is plainest in the **Bhabru** (Calcutta-Bairat) edict, addressed to the Sangha. There he declares his faith in the **Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha** and recommends seven passages of scripture for monks and lay people to study.

A Royal Patron of the Sangha

- **Pilgrimages:** in his tenth year he went to **Sambodhi** (Bodh Gaya), the first of his **dhamma-yatras**. In his twentieth year he visited **Lumbini**, the Buddha's birthplace, and the stupa of an earlier Buddha, Konakamana, at Nigali Sagar.
- **Stupas:** tradition says he built **84,000 stupas**, redistributing the Buddha's relics. The Great Stupa at Sanchi and the Dharmarajika stupa at Sarnath have Mauryan cores, and the Bharhut stupa may also have been begun in his time.
- **Discipline:** a king who protected the Sangha also guarded its unity. The **Schism Edict** (on the pillars at Sarnath, Sanchi and Kausambi) warns that monks or nuns who split the Sangha are to be made to wear white robes and live outside the monastery.

◆ PRELIMS FACT ASHOKA AND THE BUDDHIST HOLY PLACES

- **Rummindei** (Lumbini, Nepal) pillar: "here the Buddha Shakyamuni was born". Ashoka exempted the village from **bali** and reduced its **bhaga** (share of produce) to **one-eighth**.
- **Nigali Sagar** (Nepal) pillar: he enlarged the stupa of the Buddha **Konakamana** to double its size in his fourteenth year and visited it in his twentieth.
- **Sarnath**: the pillar with the Schism Edict and the lion capital that is now the State Emblem.
- **Bodh Gaya** (Sambodhi): his first dhamma-yatra, in the tenth year (Rock Edict VIII).

The Third Buddhist Council and the Missions

Royal favour had a price. The Sri Lankan chronicles say that the Sangha's new wealth drew in many who were monks only in name, and that the disputes which followed were settled by a council, after which the faith was sent outwards.

- According to the Sri Lankan chronicles, the **Third Buddhist Council** was held at **Pataliputra** in about 250 BCE under the presidency of **Moggaliputta Tissa**, with Ashoka's patronage. Dissenting monks were expelled, the **Kathavatthu** was compiled to refute wrong views, and the **Abhidhamma Pitaka** took its final shape. Ashoka's own edicts do not mention the council.
- After the council, missionaries were sent across India and beyond: **Majjhantika** to Kashmir and Gandhara, **Mahadeva** to Mahisamandala (the Mysore region), **Rakkhita** to Vanavasi, the Greek monk **Dhammarakkhita** to Aparanta, **Mahadhammarakkhita** to Maharashtra, **Maharakkhita** to the Yona (Greek) country, **Majjhima** to the Himalayan region, and **Sona and Uttara** to Suvarnabhumi (probably lower Myanmar or Thailand).

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- **Mahinda** took Buddhism to Sri Lanka, where King Devanampiya Tissa was converted, and **Sanghamitta** took a sapling of the Bodhi tree to Anuradhapura and founded the order of nuns there. Brahmi inscriptions of the second and first centuries BCE in Sri Lanka support this early link.

CONNECTING THE DOTS HOW A MAGADHAN TEACHING BECAME AN ASIAN RELIGION

- c. 250 BCE: the Third Council at Pataliputra, then missions to the frontiers and beyond
- Mahinda converts Devanampiya Tissa; Sanghamitta brings the Bodhi sapling to Anuradhapura
- Sri Lanka's monasteries keep the Theravada tradition, and their chronicles keep Ashoka's story
- Sona and Uttara's Suvarnabhumi is claimed by both Myanmar and Thailand as the start of their Buddhism
- Under the Kushanas, the Fourth Council and Mahayana carry Buddhism towards Central Asia and China (Chapter 18)

05 Dhamma: An Ethic for an Empire

From Kalinga to Dhamma

How a war, a diverse empire and a personal faith became a policy, and what came of it.

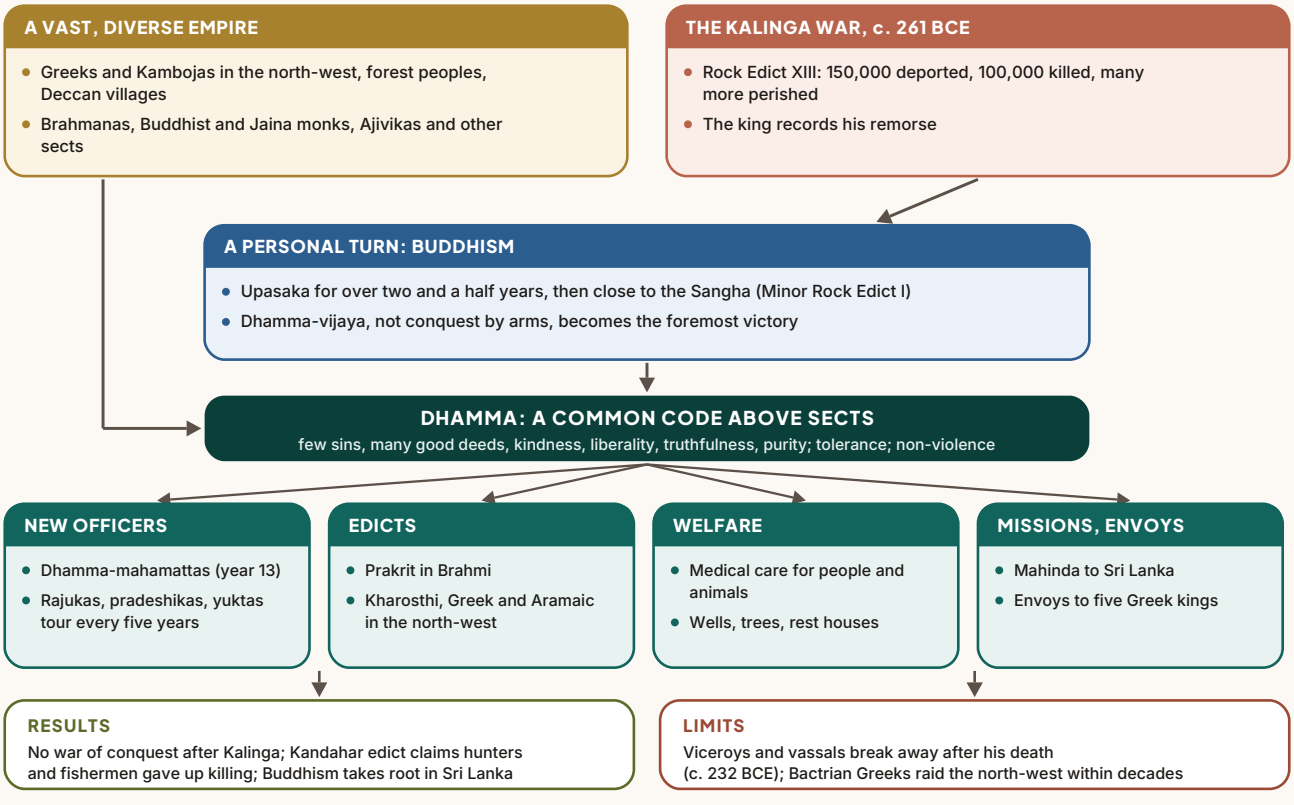


Fig. 15.2 From Kalinga to dhamma: how a war, a diverse empire and a personal faith led to a new policy, the means used to spread it, and its results and limits.

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Ashoka now faced the problem every ruler of a great empire faces: how to hold together people who share little but a king. His subjects ranged from the Greeks (Yavanas) and Kambojas of the north-west to the forest peoples of central India, and from the cities of the Ganga valley to the villages of the Deccan. They followed brahmanas, Buddhist and Jaina monks, Ajivikas and many other teachers. Ashoka's answer was not a state religion but a shared code of conduct that every sect could accept.

What Does Dhamma Mean?

Dhamma is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit *dharma*; in Ashoka's edicts it means an ethical code of social conduct, a way of life based on morality, tolerance and concern for all living beings, rather than the doctrine of any one sect. Ashoka's inscriptions themselves are called **dhammalipi**, "writings on dhamma".

What the Edicts Ask

- **Definition:** Pillar Edict II defines dhamma as few sins (*apasinave*), many good deeds (*bahukayane*), kindness (*daya*), liberality (*dana*), truthfulness (*sacha*) and purity (*sochaye*). Pillar Edict III names the passions that lead to sin: harshness, cruelty, anger, pride and envy.
- **Social duties:** obedience to parents and elders, respect for teachers, generosity and courtesy to brahmanas and shramanas, friends, relatives and acquaintances, and kind treatment of slaves and servants (Rock Edicts III, IX and XI). These duties were taught in brahmanical and Buddhist traditions alike, which is why they could serve as common ground.
- **Non-violence:** no killing of animals in sacrifice. The royal kitchen, where once many animals were killed daily, now killed only two peacocks and a deer, and even these would stop (Rock Edict I). Pillar Edict V lists protected animals.
- **Moderation:** spending little and saving little (*apavyayata, apabhandata*), in Rock Edict III.
- **Tolerance:** all sects may live everywhere, for all seek self-control and purity of heart (Rock Edict VII). Rock Edict XII asks people to honour other sects and to restrain their speech (*vachaguti*), and warns that whoever praises his own sect and disparages others out of excessive devotion injures his own sect. In an empire of rival teachers, tolerance was both an ethic and a means of keeping the peace.
- **True ceremony and true gift:** Ashoka disapproved of trivial ceremonies (*mangala*), especially those observed by women at births, marriages and journeys, and urged instead the **dhamma-mangala** (Rock Edict IX) and the **dhamma-dana**, the gift of dhamma (Rock Edict XI). He banned festive gatherings (*samaja*) marked by excess (Rock Edict I).
- **Paternal kingship:** "All men are my children" (Separate Edicts). The king wished to be informed of public business at any hour, even while eating or in the inner apartments (Rock Edict VI).
- **Reward:** those who followed dhamma would gain **heaven** (*svarga*) in the next world and merit in this one; Ashoka never speaks of **nirvana**, the Buddhist goal.

Was Dhamma Buddhism?

The question matters because the answer decides how we judge Ashoka: as a royal missionary of one faith, or as a ruler looking for common ground. Most historians read the evidence as pointing mainly to the second.

- Ashoka was a Buddhist, and his personal faith clearly shaped his ethics. But dhamma, as preached to his subjects, was not Buddhism. It contains no Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path or nirvana, it asks for

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respect to brahmanas, and it was addressed to followers of every sect. He gave caves in the Barabar hills to the **Ajivikas**, a sect hostile to Buddhism.

- Dhamma may be compared with the brahmanical Dharmashastras. Though written in Prakrit under Buddhist influence, the dhammalipi also tried to regulate social conduct and preserve the existing social order, and praised firm devotion (*dridha bhakti*), which some historians read as loyalty to the king.
- Many historians therefore see dhamma as a **policy** as much as a creed: a common set of values that could bind together an empire of many peoples, sects and stages of development, from the Hellenised north-west to the forest tribes and the far south.
- Its effects are debated. Some later writers argued that its non-violence weakened the army and that its curbs on sacrifice provoked a brahmanical reaction, hastening the empire's fall. Others reply that Ashoka kept his army and his grip on the provinces, and that the decline had wider causes (see Chapter 16).

CONNECTING THE DOTS TWO ANSWERS TO ONE PROBLEM: KAUTILYA AND ASHOKA

Both faced the same task of holding a vast empire. The **Arthashastra** (Chapters 14 and 16) advises the king to be a *vijigishu*, a would-be conqueror, always intent on conquest, and to rule through force (*danda*) and spies. Ashoka urged his successors to give up conquest and made dhamma-vijaya the foremost victory. Yet he kept the army, the death penalty (with three days' respite) and rajukas who could punish. Dhamma changed the purpose of royal power more than its machinery.

06 Officials and Welfare Measures of Dhamma

A code is only as good as the people who carry it. Ashoka had taken to the road himself in his tenth year; in his twelfth he turned the existing district officers into teachers of dhamma, and in his thirteenth he created a new cadre of officers for it. Welfare works gave the message a practical face that anyone could see.

Officers

OFFICIAL	ROLE IN THE EDICTS
Dhamma-mahamattas	A new cadre created in the thirteenth regnal year (Rock Edict V) to promote dhamma among all sects, look after the welfare of prisoners, the aged and the poor, and reach peoples such as the Yavanas, Kambojas and Gandharas; Pillar Edict VII assigns some to the Sangha, some to the brahmanas and Ajivikas, and some to the Nirgranthas (Jainas)
Ithijhaka-mahamattas	Officers in charge of the welfare of women (Rock Edict XII)
Rajukas	Senior rural officials with powers to reward and punish; Pillar Edict IV gives them independence in judicial matters and asks for uniformity in procedure (*vyavahara-samata*) and punishment (*danda-samata*)
Pradeshikas and Yuktas	District-level officers who, with the rajukas, were to go on tour (*anusamyana*) every five years to teach dhamma along with their regular duties (Rock Edict III)
Pulisani	The king's agents of high, middle and low rank, who knew his wishes and guided the rajukas (Pillar Edicts I, IV and VII)

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OFFICIAL	ROLE IN THE EDICTS
Pativedakas	Reporters who were to report the affairs of the people to the king at any time (Rock Edict VI)
Anta-mahamattas	Officers in charge of the frontier areas (Pillar Edict I)

◆ PRELIMS FACT DISTRICT OFFICERS IN THE EDICTS

The **Pradeshika**, the **Rajuka** and the **Yukta** were officers of the **district** level: the pradeshika in overall charge, the rajuka in charge of rural administration, land and justice, and the yukta a junior officer who kept accounts and records. **Mahamatta** was a general term for high officials; the dhamma-mahamattas were Ashoka's own innovation.

Measures

- **Dhamma-yatras** replaced the old royal pleasure tours and hunts (*vihara-yatras*). On them the king met brahmanas and shramanas, gave gifts, met the elderly and taught dhamma (Rock Edict VIII), so the tour became a way of seeing and being seen by his subjects.
- **Welfare (Rock Edict II):** medical care for **human beings and animals** throughout his dominions and in neighbouring lands, with medicinal herbs, roots and fruits planted wherever they were lacking, and wells dug and trees planted along the roads.
- Pillar Edict VII adds **banyan trees** for shade, **mango groves**, wells, rest houses and watering places along the roads for people and animals.
- **Justice:** condemned prisoners were given a reprieve of three days to appeal or prepare for the next world (Pillar Edict IV), and prisoners were released twenty-five times in the first twenty-six years after his consecration (Pillar Edict V).
- **Restrictions:** no animal sacrifice and no festive gatherings of excess (Rock Edict I); protected animals, and days on which killing, castration and branding were forbidden (Pillar Edict V).

Did It Work?

- The king thought so. **The Kandahar bilingual inscription** claims that after ten years of his rule the king's piety had made people more pious, and that hunters and fishermen had given up killing, perhaps a sign that hunting and fishing communities were taking to settled farming.
- These are the king's own claims; no independent record shows how far dhamma changed everyday behaviour.

07 Relations with Neighbours and the Hellenistic World

Having given up conquest by arms, Ashoka redefined conquest itself. Rock Edict XIII counts as victories of dhamma the lands his envoys had reached, from the Greek kingdoms of the Mediterranean world to the Tamil south and Sri Lanka. These contacts continued a diplomacy that began with Chandragupta's treaty with Seleucus, who then sent Megasthenes to the Mauryan court (Chapter 14).

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- Rock Edict XIII claims a dhamma-victory over five **Yavana** (Greek) kings, whose lands his envoys (*dutas*) had reached, and Rock Edict II mentions medical care in the lands of Antiochus and his neighbours:
  - **Antiyoka**: Antiochus II Theos of Syria
  - **Turamaya**: Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt
  - **Antikini**: Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia
  - **Maka**: Magas of Cyrene (Libya)
  - **Alikasudara**: Alexander of Epirus (or of Corinth)
- To the south, beyond his empire, the edicts name the **Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras, Keralaputras** and **Tamraparni** (Sri Lanka). These lay outside his rule, but his welfare work and dhamma were said to reach them.
- Within the empire he names peoples to whom dhamma was taken, such as the **Yavanas** and **Kambojas** of the north-west, the Gandharas, Rashtrikas, Pitinikas, Bhojas, Andhras and Pulindas.
- Sri Lanka was the closest partner: Ashoka and Devanampiya Tissa exchanged envoys and gifts, and Mahinda and Sanghamitta went there. Nepal also has traditions of Ashoka's visits and stupas around Patan.

◆ PRELIMS FACT THE FIVE GREEK KINGS OF ROCK EDICT XIII

Antiochus II (**Syria**), Ptolemy II (**Egypt**), Antigonus Gonatas (**Macedonia**), Magas (**Cyrene**) and Alexander (**Epirus**). These synchronisms help date Ashoka: Magas died about 250 BCE (some scholars place his death a few years earlier), so Rock Edict XIII was probably composed before that date.

08 The Inscriptions of Ashoka

How could a king in Pataliputra speak to subjects a thousand miles away? He wrote to them. Ashoka was the first Indian king to address his people directly through inscriptions carrying royal orders. The idea of a ruler proclaiming his words on rock may owe something to the Achaemenid kings of Persia, such as Darius I, whose old provinces in the north-west Ashoka now ruled (Chapter 13); the two Kharosthi versions of his rock edicts even use the Old Persian word *dipi* for writing, where the others have *lipi*.

He had his messages cut on rocks along highways and near towns, on polished stone pillars at pilgrimage and political centres, and in caves. "My domain is vast," says Rock Edict XIV, "but much has been written, and I will have still more written." The inscriptions throw light on his career, his domestic and foreign policies and the extent of his empire.

Languages and Scripts: Writing for Every Reader

REGION	LANGUAGE	SCRIPT
Most of the subcontinent	Prakrit (in local forms)	**Brahmi**, written left to right
North-west (Shahbazgarhi, Mansehra)	Prakrit	**Kharosthi**, written right to left, derived from Aramaic
Afghanistan (Kandahar, Laghman) and Taxila	**Greek** (Kandahar) and **Aramaic** (Kandahar, Laghman, Taxila)	Greek and Aramaic

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No Ashokan inscription is in Sanskrit. The choice of language followed the reader: the use of Greek and Aramaic, the official language of the old Persian empire, shows that he wanted literate people in each region to read his message. Ashoka's edicts are the earliest securely dated Brahmi records in India, though potsherds with Brahmi letters from Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka have been dated by some archaeologists to before his time, a dating that is still debated.

Major Rock Edicts

The fourteen **Major Rock Edicts** (MRE) were engraved as a set, with some variations, at a number of places, mostly on the frontiers and on major routes, where travellers and officials would pass.

EDICT	SUBJECT
I	Ban on animal sacrifice and on festive gatherings (samaja); royal kitchen reduced to two peacocks and a deer a day
II	Medical care for people and animals; herbs, wells and trees; names the Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras, Keralaputras, Tamraparni and Antiochus
III	Generosity to brahmanas and shramanas; obedience to parents; moderation; rajukas, pradeshikas and yuktas to tour every five years
IV	Bherighosha replaced by dhammaghosha; growth of good conduct
V	Appointment of dhamma-mahamattas in the thirteenth year; care of prisoners and the needy
VI	King to be informed of public affairs at all times; welfare of the whole world as his duty
VII	All sects may live everywhere; self-control and purity of heart
VIII	Dhamma-yatras replace pleasure tours; visit to Sambodhi (Bodh Gaya) in the tenth year
IX	Futile ceremonies (especially by women) versus dhamma-mangala
X	Fame and glory worthless unless they lead people to dhamma
XI	Dhamma-dana, the gift of dhamma, as the best of gifts
XII	Tolerance and restraint of speech among sects; ithijhaka-mahamattas
XIII	The Kalinga war and his remorse; dhamma-vijaya; the five Greek kings; warning to forest tribes
XIV	Why and how the edicts were engraved in different places

SITE	PRESENT LOCATION	NOTES
Shahbazgarhi	Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan	Kharosthi script; full set
Mansehra	Hazara, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan	Kharosthi script
Kalsi	Dehradun district, Uttarakhand	Full set; near the Yamuna-Tons confluence; an elephant is drawn on the rock

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SITE	PRESENT LOCATION	NOTES
Girnar	Junagadh, Gujarat	Same rock bears Rudradaman's Sanskrit inscription (c. 150 CE), which recalls that Ashoka's Yavana governor Tushaspha added conduits to the Sudarshana lake, and one of Skandagupta
Sopara	Palghar (formerly Thane) district, Maharashtra	Fragments of edicts VIII and IX; now in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai
Dhauli	Near Bhubaneswar, Khordha district, Odisha	Separate Edicts in place of XI–XIII; rock-cut elephant; ancient Tosali
Jaugada	Ganjam district, Odisha	Separate Edicts; addressed to the officers of Samapa
Erragudi (Yerragudi)	Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh	Both major and minor rock edicts
Sannati	Kalaburagi (Gulbarga) district, Karnataka	Rock Edicts XII and XIV and a Separate Edict in place of XIII, on a slab found in 1989; on the Bhima
Kandahar	Afghanistan	Parts of edicts XII and XIII in Greek; a separate Greek-Aramaic bilingual

◆ PRELIMS TRAP MATCH THE ROCK EDICT TO THE STATE

- **Kalsi**: Uttarakhand (not Karnataka). **Jaugada** and **Dhauli**: Odisha (not Madhya Pradesh).
- **Erragudi**: Andhra Pradesh. **Sannati**: Karnataka. **Sopara**: Maharashtra. **Girnar**: Gujarat.
- **Shahbazgarhi** and **Mansehra** (Pakistan) are in **Kharosthi**; Kandahar has **Greek and Aramaic**.
- The Kalinga sites (Dhauli, Jaugada) **omit** Rock Edict XIII, the edict of remorse.

○ CONNECTING THE DOTS ONE ROCK, ONE LAKE, THREE EMPIRES: GIRNAR

- Chandragupta's governor Pushyagupta builds the Sudarshana lake near Girnar (Chapter 14)
- Ashoka's Yavana governor Tushaspha adds conduits; Ashoka's fourteen rock edicts are cut on a boulder there
- c. 150 CE: the Shaka ruler Rudradaman repairs the dam and records it in Sanskrit on the same rock (Chapter 18)
- Mid-fifth century CE: under Skandagupta, Chakrapalita repairs the breached dam again, and this too is recorded on the rock (Chapter 21)

Minor Rock Edicts

- The **Minor Rock Edicts** (MiRE) are short personal statements of Ashoka's faith and effort. Minor Rock Edict I tells of his years as an upasaka and claims that people and gods have now mingled; Minor Rock Edict II, found in the south, summarises dhamma.
- **Sites:** Bairat (Rajasthan); Rupnath (Katni district), Gujarra (Datia district) and Panguraria (Sehore district) in Madhya Pradesh; Sasaram (Bihar); Ahraura (Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh); Bahapur (Delhi); Ratanpurwa (Bihar); and a cluster in the south: **Maski**, **Brahmagiri**, Siddapura, Jatinga-Rameshwara, Gavimath,

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Palkigundu, **Nittur** and **Udegolam** (Karnataka), and Erragudi and Rajula-Mandagiri (Andhra Pradesh). The Brahmagiri edict is sent from **Suvarnagiri**, the seat of a southern viceroy (an *aryaputra*), to the officers at Isila, which shows how far into the peninsula Mauryan government reached.

- The **Bhabru** or **Calcutta-Bairat** edict, found near Bairat and now in Kolkata, is addressed to the Buddhist Sangha.

Where Ashoka's inscriptions were found

Selected sites, with the capital and provincial centres. * Minor rock edicts that name him as "Ashoka". Modern boundaries for reference only.



Fig. 15.3 The sites of Ashoka's inscriptions, showing the spread of his empire from Kandahar to Karnataka and the kingdoms named beyond it.

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Pillar Edicts

The seven **Major Pillar Edicts** were issued in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh years of the reign; the seventh appears only on the **Delhi-Topra** pillar. Written late in the reign, they read like a review of what dhamma had achieved.

EDICT	SUBJECT
I	Protection, governance and happiness through dhamma
II	Definition of dhamma: few sins, many good deeds, kindness, liberality, truthfulness, purity
III	Self-examination; the sins of harshness, cruelty, anger, pride and envy
IV	Powers and duties of the rajukas; uniform justice; three days' respite for the condemned
V	List of animals not to be killed; release of prisoners
VI	Dhamma writings for the welfare of the people; honour to all sects
VII	Summary of his work for dhamma: officials, trees, wells and rest houses; all sects desire self-control and purity of mind

- **Delhi-Topra:** brought from Topra (now Yamunanagar district, Haryana) to Firozabad (Feroz Shah Kotla), Delhi, by **Firuz Shah Tughlaq** in the fourteenth century; the only pillar with all seven edicts, and the one from which Prinsep read the pillar edicts.
- **Delhi-Meerut:** also moved to Delhi (the Ridge) by Firuz Shah Tughlaq.
- **Allahabad-Kosam:** thought to have stood originally at Kausambi; now in the Allahabad (Prayagraj) fort. Besides Ashoka's pillar edicts, the **Queen's Edict** and the **Schism Edict**, it carries words that later rulers chose to add to his: the Prayag Prashasti of **Samudragupta** (composed by Harishena; Chapter 21) and an inscription of the Mughal emperor Jahangir.
- **Lauriya-Araraj**, **Lauriya-Nandangarh** (with its lion capital intact) and **Rampurva** (one pillar with a lion and one with a bull capital), all in the Champaran region of Bihar.

Other Inscriptions

INSCRIPTION	CONTENT
Rummindei (Lumbini)	Visit in the twentieth year to the Buddha's birthplace; village freed from bali, bhaga reduced to one-eighth
Nigali Sagar	Stupa of Konakamana enlarged to double its size; later visit
Schism Edict	Against division of the Sangha (Sarnath, Sanchi, Kausambi)
Queen's Edict	Gifts of the second queen **Karuvaki**, mother of Tivara (Allahabad-Kosam pillar)
Barabar caves	Rock-cut caves near Gaya gifted to the **Ajivikas** in the twelfth and nineteenth years

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INSCRIPTION	CONTENT
Kandahar bilingual (Shar-i-Kuna)	Greek and Aramaic; success of dhamma, hunters and fishermen giving up killing
Bhabru (Calcutta-Bairat)	Faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha; seven texts recommended

◆ PRELIMS TRAP KANAGANAHALLI IS NOT SANNATI, AND NOT A ROCK EDICT

The relief that shows a king with the label **"Raya Asoko"** (often cited as "Ranyo Ashoka") comes from the stupa at **Kanaganahalli**, about 3 km from Sannati in Kalaburagi district, Karnataka. It is a later sculptured panel of the Satavahana period, not one of Ashoka's own edicts; Sannati is the nearby site of his rock edicts.

09 Ashoka's Empire

The map of Ashoka's inscriptions is also the best map of his empire. Read with the names of the provinces and the peoples in the edicts, it shows both how far Mauryan power reached and where it stopped.

- The find-spots of his inscriptions, with other evidence, show an empire stretching from **Kandahar** and the Kabul valley in Afghanistan to **Bengal** and **Kalinga** in the east, and from the Himalayan foothills (Kalsi, the Nepal Terai) to **Karnataka** and Andhra in the south. Kashmir, according to Kashmiri tradition, was also part of it.
- Only the far south, the lands of the Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras and Keralaputras, and Sri Lanka lay outside. It was one of the largest empires in Indian history.
- The edicts mention princes (**kumaras** or **aryaputras**) as viceroys at **Taxila**, **Ujjain**, **Tosali** and **Suvarnagiri**, and officers at Isila and Samapa. The capital was **Pataliputra**; the administration of the empire is described in Chapter 16.
- The inscriptions stand on trade routes, at river crossings, in cities and at the edges of the forests. Their siting reflects both the reach of the state and its concern to address the people living there.

10 The Big Picture

Ashoka ended some two centuries of Magadhan wars of conquest and, fighting no war of conquest after Kalinga, tried to govern a subcontinental empire by moral persuasion announced in his own voice. The experiment did not outlive him, but it left a written record, a religion carried abroad, and symbols that the Indian Republic adopted more than two thousand years later.

What He Achieved

- He was a great missionary ruler who brought the subcontinent under one political authority and bound it further with one dhamma, one language (Prakrit) and virtually one script (Brahmi), while respecting Kharosthi, Greek and Aramaic.

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- He followed a tolerant religious policy: though a Buddhist, he did not impose his faith, and gave gifts to brahmanas and to non-Buddhist sects such as the Ajivikas.
- Speaking to his subjects directly through edicts, he and his officials also carried the material culture of the Ganga valley to Kalinga, the lower Deccan and north Bengal, and helped the spread of writing.
- His welfare measures for people and animals, at home and in neighbouring lands, were new in the ancient world.
- Above all he gave up conquest after Kalinga. Kautilya had advised the king to be always intent on conquest; Ashoka urged his successors to give it up. Historians find a comparable earlier ruler only in the Egyptian pharaoh **Akhenaten** (fourteenth century BCE), of whom Ashoka knew nothing.

Where It Fell Short

- His policy had no lasting effect on his viceroys and vassals, who broke away after his death in about 232 BCE, or on his neighbours: Greek rulers from Bactria were raiding the north-west within a few decades.
- Some historians blamed his pacifism or his Buddhist leanings for the decline of the empire. Most now see the decline as the result of several factors, including a weak line of successors, financial strain and the difficulty of holding so vast an empire (see Chapter 16).
- His later years, in Buddhist legend, were unhappy: the story of Queen Tishyarakshita and the blinding of prince Kunala belongs to this tradition, not to his inscriptions.

Legacy: From Rediscovery to the Republic

Once Prinsep's decipherment had given Ashoka back his voice, Indian historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writing under colonial rule, found the idea of an early Indian empire both challenging and exciting, and nationalist leaders regarded Ashoka as an inspiring figure. The **Sarnath lion capital** was adopted as the State Emblem of India on 26 January 1950, and the 24-spoked wheel (the **Ashoka Chakra**) from its abacus appears on the national flag. The spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and beyond, the idea of a ruler bound by morality, and the model of religious tolerance are his enduring contributions.

◆ PRELIMS TRAP EMBLEM, CHAKRA AND MOTTO

The **State Emblem** comes from the Sarnath capital (four lions, three visible; an abacus with an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull and a lion separated by wheels). The motto **Satyameva Jayate** beneath it comes from the **Mundaka Upanishad**, not from any Ashokan edict.

Threads to Follow

- **Dhamma and decline:** whether non-violence and the curbs on sacrifice weakened the empire is weighed with the other causes of Mauryan decline in Chapter 16.
- **Royal inscriptions:** after Ashoka, kings kept speaking through stone, from Kharavela's Hathigumpha inscription (Chapter 17) to Rudradaman at Girnar (Chapter 18) and Samudragupta on Ashoka's own pillar (Chapter 21), and inscriptions became the backbone of Indian political history.

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Prelims Quick Revision

- **Reign**: consecrated c. 268 BCE after a four-year succession struggle; died c. 232 BCE; grandson of Chandragupta.
- **Titles**: Devanampiya Piyadasi; name 'Ashoka' only at Maski (1915), Gujarra, Nittur and Udegolam.
- **Kalinga war**: 8th regnal year (c. 261 BCE); MRE XIII: 150,000 deported, 100,000 killed; bherighosha to dhammaghosha (MRE IV).
- **Separate Edicts**: Dhauli and Jaugada (Tosali, Samapa) replace MRE XI–XIII; 'All men are my children'.
- **Buddhism**: upasaka for over 2.5 years, then close to the Sangha for over a year (MiRE I); Bhabru edict: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha; Sambodhi visit in year 10.
- **Third Council**: Pataliputra, c. 250 BCE, Moggaliputta Tissa; Kathavatthu; Mahinda and Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka.
- **Dhamma (PE II)**: few sins, many good deeds, kindness, liberality, truthfulness, purity; heaven, not nirvana.
- **Officials**: dhamma-mahamattas (year 13, MRE V); ithijhaka-mahamattas (women); rajukas, pradeshikas, yuktas (district).
- **Welfare (MRE II)**: medical care for people and animals; herbs, wells, trees; PE VII: banyans, mango groves, rest houses.
- **Greek kings (MRE XIII)**: Antiochus II, Ptolemy II, Antigonus Gonatas, Magas, Alexander of Epirus.
- **Scripts**: Brahmi (most); Kharosthi at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra; Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar; language Prakrit.
- **Pillar edicts**: 7, in years 26–27; all seven only on Delhi-Topra (moved by Firuz Shah Tughlaq).
- **Rummindei**: Lumbini freed from bali, bhaga cut to one-eighth; **Nigali Sagar**: Konakamana stupa doubled.
- **Decipherment**: James Prinsep, 1837 (Brahmi); **Kanaganahalli** relief labelled 'Raya Asoko' ('Ranyo Ashoka', King Ashoka).
- **Emblem**: Sarnath lion capital adopted 26 January 1950; motto Satyameva Jayate from the Mundaka Upanishad.

Previous Year Questions

Prelims

2025 Ashokan inscriptions suggest that the 'Pradeshika', 'Rajuka' and 'Yukta' were important officers at the

(a) village-level administration
(b) district-level administration
(c) provincial administration
(d) level of the central administration

Answer: (b). Rock Edict III names the pradeshika, rajuka and yukta, officers of the district who were to tour every five years (Section 06).

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2022 Consider the following pairs:

Site of Ashoka's major rock edicts — Location in the State of

1. Dhauli — Odisha
2. Erragudi — Andhra Pradesh
3. Jaugada — Madhya Pradesh
4. Kalsi — Karnataka

How many pairs given above are correctly matched?

a Only one pair | b Only two pairs | c Only three pairs | d All four pairs

Answer: (b). Dhauli (Odisha) and Erragudi (Andhra Pradesh) are correct; Jaugada is in Odisha and Kalsi in Uttarakhand (Section 08).

2020 Who among the following rulers advised his subjects through this inscription?

"Whosoever praises his religious sect or blames other sects out of excessive devotion to his own sect, with the view of glorifying his own sect, he rather injures his own sect very severely."

a Ashoka | b Samudragupta | c Harshavardhana | d Krishnadeva Raya

Answer: (a). The words come from Ashoka's Rock Edict XII on tolerance among sects (Section 05).

2019 In which of the following relief sculpture inscriptions is 'Ranyo Ashoka' (King Ashoka) mentioned along with the stone portrait of Ashoka?

a Kanganahalli | b Sanchi | c Shahbazgarhi | d Sohgaura

Answer: (a). A relief from the stupa at Kanaganahalli, near Sannati in Karnataka, shows a king with the Brahmi label 'Raya Asoko' (King Ashoka; 'Ranyo Ashoka' in the question) (Sections 01 and 08).

2016 Who of the following had first deciphered the edicts of Emperor Ashoka?

a Georg Bühler | b James Prinsep | c Max Müller | d William Jones

Answer: (b). James Prinsep deciphered the Brahmi script in 1837 and read Ashoka's edicts (Section 01).

Mains

2026 GS I · 10 MARKS

Analyze the importance of Ashokan inscriptions for reconstructing Mauryan history.

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