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ARCHEOLOGY

Digging Dholavira

One of the latest Indus Valley cities reveals a marvel of town planning

Nearly 5,000 years ago, a well-developed civilization, commonly known as the Indus Valley Civilization, prospered in what is today Northern India and Pakistan. The vast civilization covers a territory the size of Texas--a quarter-million square miles. Over 1,400 cities, towns and settlements have been found so far, with about 900 in India. "For 700 years," writes David Kamansky, Executive Director and Senior Curator of the Pacific Asia Museum, "this sophisticated, orderly and stable civilization dominated the region and traded with the rest of the ancient world. Unlike the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, the Indus civilization gave primacy to its ordinary citizens." The most famous cities in the area include Harappa, Mohenjo Daro and Ganweriwala in Pakistan, and Rakhigarhi and now Dholavira in India. According to National Geographic, Dholavira is "India's most spectacular Indus civilization site" and one of the most recently discovered cities of the region. Dholavira is located 30 miles south of the Pakistan-India border and is under constant military patrol. Abysmal relations between the countries prevent Indian and Pakistani archeologists from visiting each other's sites or even meeting, except at international conferences. The government of Pakistan does not adequately support archeological efforts on its side, nor does it protect important sites. A renowned

UNESCO archeologist, H.J. Plenderleath, stated, "If nothing is done to preserve the remains of Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan, all existing excavations will crumble within the next 20 to 30 years, and one of the most striking monuments of the dawn of civilization will be lost forever."

Dholavira is a desert most of the year, with huge salt flats periodically flooded by the nearby Arabian Sea. "Maybe salt was a commodity they sold," said R.S. Bisht of the Archaeological Survey of India, who is the chief investigator at Dholavira. Salt may have been a reason for the city's location, and in ancient times it may have had a channel to the sea. Unlike other Indus cities, it does not lay along a major river.

Covering over 250 acres, Dholavira was a well-planned city designed to collect precious fresh water during the monsoon season. It was built on a sloping terrain between two seasonal storm-water channels with dams and channels to direct the water into huge reservoirs. One is 23 feet deep and 260 long and carved out of solid rock. Additional channels provided essential year-round water to all residents. Like Mohenjo Daro, the city had an advanced covered sewer system and indoor baths. The town had two stadiums, one of which is probably the world's oldest and biggest, at 1,000 feet by 160 feet. It was likely used as a modern-day religious mela place for games as well as social and religious events. Also found on the central "citadel's" northern gate was possibly the world's first sign. It contained ten undeciphered characters, each 13 inches high.

Archeologists found the undisturbed soil floor forty feet down, on which a fortified town was built, obviously by settlers who

came with experience and knowledge of a planned settlement. The base of the outer walls was 33 feet wide at places, later widened and heightened until it was 42 feet wide and 32 feet high as a trading center developed. Dholavirans regularly traded with Mesopotamians 1,500 miles to the northeast. Buildings were made from millions of uniform bricks in a standard ratio of 1:2:4. What appears to be an administration center was built, then an open-air theatre and large residential areas. The advanced level of administration is demonstrated by the rapid repair of extensive damage caused by a large earthquake. By the end of what is known as "stage four," the town was at its peak, and according to Bisht, divided with the Rig Veda's trimeshthin system of town planning into three areas, upper, middle and lower. The innermost building is a "citadel" where Bisht believes the ruler lived, the middle town had spacious houses, and the lower town had densely packed houses. All the expansion to this point was carried out along systematic lines. About 22,000 artifacts were found including 73 microbeads of gold, so small that scientists wonder how they could have been rounded so perfectly and drilled. There was exquisite pottery, clay figurines and animals, beads of lapis lazuli, silver and shell, as well as the usual weights and seals.

About 2100-1900 bce, the Indus civilization as a whole began to decline as the Saraswati River dried up. This is reflected in stage five of Dholavira when a decline becomes evident. Encroachments appear in previously well-organized areas of town, building standards fall, and eventually the site is abandoned. Dholavira shows no signs of succumbing to foreign invasion, and provides good evidence that natural forces led to its decline, not a supposed "Aryan Invasion" of outsiders. National Geographic's June, 2000, article on the Indus

Civilization significantly states, "Early archaeologists concluded that the end of the Indus civilization came at the hands of invaders sweeping down from Central Asia. Today, archaeologists point out that no weapons or other evidence of an attack were found at Mohenjo Daro. Many archeologists doubt that there was an invasion. Examination of skeletons has failed to show that the original people were supplanted by newcomers with different characteristics." Time magazine also agrees, saying, "Early 20th century theories that a more technologically advanced army poured through the Hindu Kush passes and laid waste to the Harappan civilization are largely discredited these days." Other theories of their demise include the disruption of trade with war-torn Mesopotamia and an increasingly arid environment, too harsh for even Dholavira's advanced water system.

The significance of the site to date is two-fold. One, it demonstrates that the Indus people were sufficiently advanced to establish a large city in a difficult location, and two, that the city's history shows no "Aryan Invasion" evidence whatsoever. This has helped dispel that theory even among Western archeologists. Future excavations may prove Bhist's theories that the society is that described in the Rig Veda. This relationship is not yet accepted by archeologists, leaving India and Hinduism, as far as archeology is concerned, with no clear link to the Vedic times. This find should change that.