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Harappa: The City That Named a Civilisation

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Harappa: The City That Named a Civilisation

A whole civilisation carries this city's name, yet railway workers carted off its bricks before anyone knew what it was.

This lesson tells how Harappa was found and lost to brick robbers. It then shows how the city was laid out and what it tells us.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **First found**Harappa named the culture.

02 **Robbed**Brick for about 100 miles of railway.

03 **Dug**Sahni began in 1921.

04 **Mound F**A large building, use unsure.

How was Harappa found and nearly lost?

1 Name and place

1.1 Why does a whole civilisation carry Harappa's name?

The textbook says Harappa was the first site found. Mohenjodaro is better known, but Harappa came first.

Our own reading: the culture carries the name of the first site found. The name tells you where the story began, not which city was biggest.

1.2 Where is Harappa?

It is a large village in Punjab province, Pakistan. The modern town lies right next to the ancient city. The old course of the Ravi river ran north of the site. The river has since moved six miles further north.



Ruins at Harappa, Punjab, Pakistan. Photo by Hassan Nasir, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

1.3 How big was it?

It spread over about 450,000 square metres, which is about 45 hectares. The textbook gives Mohenjodaro as 125 hectares. Harappa was a big city, but smaller than its famous neighbour.

Among the five major cities named by the textbook, Harappa sits beside Rakhigarhi, Mohenjodaro, Dholavira and Ganweriwala.

1.4 Is Harappa in the Rigveda?

No one can prove it. One idea says the site is the Rigveda scene of a defeat of the Vrcivants, and records its name as Hari-Yupuya. World History calls this mostly conjecture until more proof appears. Treat it as a guess, not a fact.

> 8. **Think it through:** Mohenjodaro is the best-known site. Why is the civilisation not called Mohenjodaro's? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Harappa was the first site of the civilisation to be discovered. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: ncert.nic.in; worldhistory.org

2 Early visitors

2.1 Who saw Harappa before the experts?

Travellers did. James Lewis, a British army deserter, made the first recorded visit in 1826. Alexander Burnes recorded the extensive remains in 1831. Neither knew how old the place was.

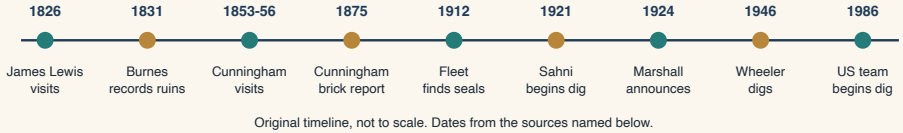
2.2 What did Cunningham do?

Alexander Cunningham visited in 1853 and 1856 and made a small excavation in 1872. He found pottery, chert blades and a seal. He called the seal foreign to India.

Cunningham was the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, or ASI. People often call him the father of Indian archaeology.

2.3 Why did he miss the answer?

The seal had no known parallel in India then. Later, similar seals were found in Mesopotamia, and that pushed the age of these sites back. The textbook timeline lists his 1875 report on the seal.



How Harappa was found, from the first visitor to the modern digs.

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Cunningham correctly called the Harappa seal a product of an ancient Indian civilisation. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Brick robbers

3.1 What happened to Harappa's bricks?

Brick robbers took them for railway building. In 1875 Cunningham noted that the brick removed was enough for about 100 miles of the Lahore-Multan railway line. World History adds that brick robbers worked there for the Multan Railway.

3.2 Did this happen elsewhere?

Yes. Mohenjo-daro and Kalibangan also became quarries for other railways. Even so, Mohenjodaro was far better preserved than Harappa.

Our own reading: this is why Mohenjodaro gives us a clearer city plan today.



Mounds at the Harappa ruins, Punjab, Pakistan. Image credit: Hassan Nasir (CC BY-SA 3.0), Wikimedia Commons.

3.3 What was left to dig?

Cunningham found very little to preserve. The majority of the settlement had been stripped of bricks. Later diggers still found much to study.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: The brick taken from Harappa was enough for about 100 miles of railway line. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How was it dug up and laid out?

4 Digging it up

4.1 Who brought Harappa back?

In 1912, John Fleet of the ASI found a number of seals. He brought the Sahiwal site to the notice of John Marshall. Marshall sent Hiranand Shastri to survey it. In 1914, Harry Hargreaves inspected it, and the mounds were acquired for study.

4.2 Who dug it?

Daya Ram Sahni began excavations in 1921. The Live History account dates this work to 1921-22 and says M S Vats worked with him. It also says Vats completed the excavations at Harappa.

4.3 When was the civilisation announced?

In 1924. Rakhal Das Banerji found similar seals at Mohenjodaro, which suggested one shared culture. Based on these finds, Marshall announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley.

4.4 What came later?

Mortimer Wheeler worked at Harappa in 1946, says the textbook timeline. World History says he took over in 1944. The sources differ, so quote the year with its source.

An American team began excavations in 1986. Work by Dales, Meadow and Kenoyer in Mound E pushed the dates back to the early 4th millennium BCE.

9. **Think it through:** Fleet found seals in 1912, but Sahni began digging in 1921. What does the gap tell you? See answer ↓

Quick check 4. True or false: Daya Ram Sahni began the excavations at Harappa in 1921. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: livehistoryindia.com

5 Mounds and layout

5.1 What did the city look like?

It had a lower public area and an upper acropolis, much like Mohenjo-daro. The Citadel area stood on a huge mud brick platform about 6 m high. Only the walls round Mound AB have been properly excavated. They were 14 m wide at the base.

5.2 What stood on Mound F?

A ramp from a north gate leads to Mound F, which is smaller. It holds house structures and a large building with many rooms. World History says it might be a granary, great hall or palace. So the old label of Great Granary is a reading.

Fifteen units of workmen’s quarters were found, surrounded by a wall.

5.3 How did people enter the city?

By narrow gates. The gate at Mound E was only 2.8 m wide, just enough for one ox cart. World History says this shows its defensive nature.

5.4 Was it planned?

Yes, from early on. Large north-south streets existed in Harappa's 2nd Period, 2800-2600 BCE. World History calls the grid a sign of an evolved civil engineering principle. Ur, in Mesopotamia, had meandering streets.

- **Why it matters:** a grid needs a plan made before building.
- **Example:** north-south streets were already there before the mature city.
- **Misconception:** Harappa was not only a granary town. The sources show houses, walls, gates and workers' quarters too.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: The large building on Mound F is certainly a granary. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What do the finds and exam traps tell us?

6 Small finds

6.1 What did a grave in the 1980s show?

Excavations at the Harappa cemetery in the mid-1980s found an ornament near a male skull. It had three shell rings, a jasper bead and hundreds of micro beads. Jasper is a kind of semi-precious stone.

6.2 What do faience pots tell us?

Rare objects clustered in big cities. Miniature faience pots, perhaps perfume bottles, are found mostly at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. None come from small settlements like Kalibangan.

Our own reading: big cities held more wealth, or more access to rare goods.

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Miniature faience pots are found mostly at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

7 Exam traps

7.1 Who did what at Harappa?

Names to keep apart

Person	Role at Harappa
James Lewis	First recorded visit, 1826
Alexander Burnes	Recorded the remains, 1831

Person	Role at Harappa
Alexander Cunningham	Visits 1853 and 1856, small dig 1872, 1875 report
John Fleet	Found seals, 1912
Hiranand Shastri	Sent by Marshall to survey
Daya Ram Sahni	Began excavations, 1921
M S Vats	Worked with Sahni and completed the digs
John Marshall	Announced the civilisation, 1924
Mortimer Wheeler	Dug in 1946 (textbook)

Dates as given by the sources named in the lesson.

7.2 What are the common traps?

- **First vs famous:** Harappa was first found. Mohenjodaro is best known.
- **Cunningham vs Sahni:** Cunningham visited and dug a little. Sahni began systematic excavation in 1921.
- **Wheeler's year:** the textbook gives 1946, World History gives 1944.
- **Rigveda link:** a conjecture, not a fact.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: Mohenjodaro was the first site of the civilisation to be discovered. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **First found:** Harappa. Best known: Mohenjodaro.
- **Cunningham:** visits 1853 and 1856, 1875 report, called the seal foreign.
- **Brick robbers:** enough brick for about 100 miles of railway.
- **Sahni:** began digging in 1921. Marshall announced the civilisation in 1924.
- **Mound F:** a big building that might be a granary, great hall or palace.

Explain it back: Why does the civilisation carry Harappa's name?

Practice MCQs

1. Which archaeologist visited Harappa in 1853 and 1856, producing the site's first plan decades before its true age was understood?

A. John Marshall

B. R.D. Banerji

C. Alexander Cunningham

D. Mortimer Wheeler

See answer ↓

2. Which Indian archaeologist began excavating Harappa in 1921?

A. R.D. Banerji

B. Daya Ram Sahni

C. John Marshall

D. Alexander Cunningham

See answer ↓

3. In 1875, Alexander Cunningham noted that brick taken from Harappa was enough to lay roughly how much railway line between Lahore and Multan?

A. About 10 miles

B. About 50 miles

C. About 100 miles

D. About 500 miles

See answer ↓

4. The textbook gives Mohenjodaro as 125 hectares. World History gives Harappa as about 450,000 square metres.

Which statement follows?

A. Harappa was larger than Mohenjodaro

B. Mohenjodaro was larger than Harappa

C. They were about equal in size

D. Both covered less than 10 hectares

See answer ↓

5. Who announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley in 1924?

A. Alexander Cunningham

B. Mortimer Wheeler

C. R.D. Banerji

D. John Marshall

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The answer is **Alexander Cunningham**. He visited Harappa in 1853 and 1856 and made a small excavation in 1872. He found pottery, chert blades and a seal, and called the seal foreign to India. Why the others fail: John Marshall announced the civilisation in 1924. R.D. Banerji worked at Mohenjodaro. Mortimer Wheeler dug at Harappa in the 1940s. Memory hook: Cunningham came first and missed the clue. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is **Daya Ram Sahni**. The textbook timeline says he began excavations at Harappa in 1921. Live History gives 1921-22 and says M S Vats worked with him. Why the others fail: R.D. Banerji found similar seals at Mohenjodaro. John Marshall sent Sahni and announced the civilisation in 1924. Cunningham only made a small dig in 1872. Memory hook: Sahni began, Vats finished. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The answer is **about 100 miles**. Cunningham noted in 1875 that the brick taken from the site was enough for about 100 miles of the Lahore-Multan railway line. Why the others fail: Ten, 50 and 500 miles are not the figure he gave. The point is the scale of the loss. Memory hook: brick robbers, 100 miles. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The answer is **Mohenjodaro, at 125 hectares**. The textbook gives Mohenjodaro as 125 hectares. World History says Harappa spreads over 450,000 square metres, which is about 45 hectares. Why the others fail: Harappa is the smaller of the two. They are not equal, and neither is under 10 hectares. Memory hook: 125 beats 45. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The answer is **John Marshall**. Rakhal Das Banerji found similar seals at Mohenjodaro. Based on these finds, Marshall announced a new civilisation in the Indus valley in 1924. He was Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India. Why the others fail: Cunningham found a seal at Harappa but called it foreign to India. Wheeler dug there in the 1940s. Banerji found the Mohenjodaro seals but did not make the announcement. Memory hook: Banerji found, Marshall announced. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The textbook says Mohenjodaro is the most well-known, but the first site found was Harappa. ↑ 1

2. **False.** He called the seal foreign to India. Its meaning was understood much later. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Cunningham noted this in 1875. ↑ 3
4. **True.** The textbook timeline gives 1921, and Live History gives 1921-22. ↑ 4
5. **False.** World History says it might be a granary, great hall or palace. ↑ 5
6. **True.** None come from small settlements like Kalibangan. ↑ 6
7. **False.** Mohenjodaro is the best known, but Harappa was found first. ↑ 7
8. **Think it through.** Our own reading: the naming went to the first site found. Fame came later, as Mohenjodaro's better-kept ruins drew more attention. ↑ 8
9. **Think it through.** That a find is not a discovery. People first had to see the seals mattered, then fund and plan a dig. ↑ 9

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