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Harappan Civilisation: Sites and Discovery

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Harappan Civilisation: Sites and Discovery

Around 1875, Alexander Cunningham drew a small stone seal. It showed an animal and strange signs. He could not fit it into any history he knew.

This lesson tells how that mystery was solved. It follows the digs of the 1920s, the 1924 announcement and the better methods that followed. It then maps the main sites.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **1875** Cunningham's report carries the first known seal.

02 **1921-22** Digs begin at Harappa and Mohenjodaro.

03 **1924** Marshall announces the new civilisation.

04 **1,000+ sites** Counted across the land, with five major cities.

How was the Harappan Civilisation discovered?

1 The first clues

1.1 Who first saw the ruins of Harappa?

Charles Masson saw them in 1829 and drew many of the brick structures. He wrongly believed they were the remains of a city left by Alexander about 2,000 years earlier. It was in fact Harappa.

1.2 What did Alexander Cunningham make of Harappa?

Cunningham, the first head of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), visited in 1853 and took it for a lost Buddhist site. He too missed its meaning.

An Englishman also gave Cunningham a Harappan seal. Cunningham noted it, but he could not fit it into the time-frame he knew. He published a sketch of it in his 1875 report.

> 9. **Think it through:** Masson thought of Alexander and Cunningham thought of Buddhists. Why did both guess a story they already knew? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Charles Masson correctly named Harappa as an ancient city in 1829. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: livehistoryindia.com; ncert.nic.in

2 Why Harappa was missed

2.1 Why did Cunningham not see what he had found?

Because his method looked for written proof, and Harappa had none that he could read. He used inscriptions and the travel accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to find early sites. Harappa was not on their route.

He also thought, like many others, that Indian history began with the first cities of the Ganga valley. A seal from a far older civilisation had no place in that picture.

2.2 What else led scholars astray?

Early scholars compared the ruins with other known lands. They concluded that Harappa was a colony of the Sumerians of Mesopotamia, or perhaps an Egyptian outpost. That belief was a mistake, and the digs of the 1920s ended it.

2.3 What happened to the site meanwhile?

Brick robbers wrecked it. Harappa was the first site found, yet it was badly destroyed. In 1875 Cunningham noted that the bricks taken from it could have paved about 100 miles of railway track.

- **Why it matters:** much evidence was lost before any expert dug there.
- **Example:** a pile of bricks that once formed walls became railway ballast.
- **Misconception:** Harappa was not found in good shape and left untouched.

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Cunningham used the accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to locate early settlements. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: worldhistory.org

3 Sahni and Banerji

3.1 Who began the real excavations?

Daya Ram Sahni began digging at Harappa in 1921. Excavations at Mohenjodaro began in 1922. Sahni worked with M S Vats, and Marshall sent D R Bhandarkar and Rakhaldas Banerji to Mohenjodaro.

Mohenjodaro was a mound that people then thought was Buddhist. A Buddhist stupa and monastery from the Kushana period crowned it.



Excavation work under way at Mohenjo-daro, 1924. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

3.2 What did the seals show?

They showed one culture at two distant sites. Sahni found seals at Harappa in layers much older than the Early Historic levels. Banerji found similar seals at Mohenjodaro.

Early Historic means roughly the sixth century BCE (before the Common Era) to the fourth century CE. Seals older than that were a shock.

3.3 When was the discovery announced?

John Marshall, Director-General of the ASI, announced it in 1924. He had visited Harappa and judged it an ancient civilisation that nobody had known about.

Similar seals turned up at Mesopotamian sites. So the world learned of a new civilisation that was contemporary with Mesopotamia.



Original timeline. Dates from the sources listed in the cards.

How the discovery unfolded, in six steps.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: John Marshall announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley in 1924. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How did digging methods improve?

4 Marshall's digging

4.1 How did Marshall dig?

Marshall dug in regular horizontal units, measured the same way across the whole mound. He ignored the stratigraphy of the site. Stratigraphy means the order of the soil layers, oldest at the bottom.

He was also the first professional archaeologist to work in India. He wanted to see everyday life, not only spectacular finds.

4.2 What went wrong with that method?

Finds from different layers were grouped together. So valuable information about where each object came from was lost for good.

Our own picture: imagine mixing the pages of several books and then reading them as one. You can no longer tell which page came from which book. That is what flat digging does to an old mound.

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: Marshall followed the stratigraphy of the mound while digging. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 Wheeler's fix

5.1 What did R.E.M. Wheeler change?

He made digging follow the layers. Wheeler took over as Director-General of the ASI in 1944. He saw that a mound must be dug by its stratigraphy, not mechanically along uniform horizontal lines.

He also brought army-style precision to the work.

5.2 What did he find at Harappa?

His trench at the fortification walls, called Cut XXX, gave very early pre-Harappan pottery for the first time at Harappa. His work also set up the stratigraphy for Harappa and the base for later dating of the civilisation.

5.3 Was there a massacre at Mohenjodaro?

Probably not. In the 1960s George Dales questioned the idea. He showed that the skeletons did not belong to one period. A couple seemed to show a slaughter, but most bones came from burials of other times.

- **Why it matters:** one wrong reading of the bones had shaped a whole theory.
- **Example:** bones from different centuries lying in one place looked like one battle.
- **Misconception:** skeletons in one spot do not prove they died together.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Wheeler became Director-General of the ASI in 1944. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Which Harappan sites should you know?

6 Major sites

6.1 How many sites are known?

More than 1,000 cities and towns are counted across the land. Nearly two-thirds of the settlements lie in the Saraswati basin. Five are named major cities.



A 1996 CIA relief map of Pakistan, overlaid with the major Harappan sites. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

6.2 Which five cities are the major ones?

They are Rakhigarhi, Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Dholavira and Ganweriwala. The rest are regional centres, farming villages, ports and craft sites.

Sites and what the sources say about them

Site	What to remember
Harappa	First site found. Badly robbed of bricks. Sahni dug it from 1921.

Site	What to remember
Mohenjodaro	Banerji found similar seals here. Dug from 1922. Site of the massacre debate.
Dholavira	Among the most recent finds in India. One of the five major cities.
Shortughai	In Afghanistan, near the best source of lapis lazuli. Traces of canals found here.
Lothal	Near sources of carnelian. Dug after Partition.
Kot Diji	Dug by F A Khan in 1935.
Chanhudaro	Dug by Majumdar in 1930.

Lapis lazuli is a blue stone that was highly valued. Carnelian is a red-orange stone used for beads.

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Shortughai, in Afghanistan, is near the best source of lapis lazuli. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

7 Sites in India

7.1 Why did Indian archaeologists search for new sites?

Because Partition put the major known sites in Pakistan. The frontiers of the civilisation have little to do with present-day borders. The loss spurred Indian archaeologists to locate sites in India.

7.2 Which sites did they find?

Survey and digs in Kutch, Punjab and Haryana added many sites. Kalibangan, Lothal, Rakhi Garhi and, most recently, Dholavira were discovered, explored and excavated. Digs also followed at Ropar and at Rangpur, where S R Rao worked in 1953-56.

7.3 Where else were sites dug before Partition?

In Sind. N G Majumdar discovered 69 Harappan sites there and dug at Chanhudaro in 1930. F A Khan dug at Kot Diji in 1935.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: Partition pushed Indian archaeologists to search for Harappan sites in India. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What have exams asked on this topic?

8 Exam traps

8.1 What do examiners test here?

They test precise site facts. Distractors are real names, so you must know which site is which. Three traps repeat.

- **Real site, wrong culture.** Sohgaura is a real site, but it is not among the Harappan sites on the textbook map.
- **Right state, wrong detail.** The question tests the local detail, not just the state.
- **Real names as distractors.** Wrong options are other real ancient sites.

8.2 What have exams asked, newest first?

NDA & NA is the National Defence Academy and Naval Academy exam. CDS is the Combined Defence Services exam. UPSC CSP is the Union Public Service Commission Civil Services Preliminary exam. CAPF is the Central Armed Police Forces exam. Each label links to that paper.

Asked before

PYQ 1 · NDA & NA (II) 2025, Q82

In the Harappan Civilization, traces of canals have been found at

(a) Banawali
(b) Lothal
(c) Shortughai
(d) Dholavira

mcqquestion.com/nda-na/nda-na-2-2025-general-ability-full-question-paper/#q82

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Quick check 8. True or false: Sohgaura appears on the textbook map of Mature Harappan sites. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **1875:** Cunningham's report carried a sketch of the first known Harappan seal.
- **1921-22:** Sahni digs Harappa. Excavation begins at Mohenjodaro.
- **1924:** Marshall announces a new civilisation in the Indus valley.
- **Marshall:** flat horizontal digging. **Wheeler (1944):** follows the layers.
- **Five major cities:** Rakhigarhi, Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Dholavira, Ganweriwala.
- **Shortughai:** in Afghanistan, with traces of canals.

Explain it back: Why did Cunningham miss Harappa, and how did Wheeler fix Marshall's method?

Practice MCQs

1. Which Indian archaeologist began excavating Harappa in 1921?

A. R.D. Banerji

B. Daya Ram Sahni

C. John Marshall

D. Alexander Cunningham

See answer ↓

2. In 1924, who announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley to the world?

A. Alexander Cunningham

B. John Marshall

C. R.E.M. Wheeler

D. Daya Ram Sahni

See answer ↓

3. Which archaeologist, after becoming Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1944, insisted that mounds be dug by following their stratigraphy?

A. John Marshall

B. Alexander Cunningham

C. Rakhal Das Banerji

D. R.E.M. Wheeler

See answer ↓

4. Why did Alexander Cunningham fail to see the importance of the Harappan seal given to him?

A. He never visited the site of Harappa

B. He could not obtain a drawing of the seal

C. He believed the seal was a modern forgery

D. He thought Indian history began with the first cities of the Ganga valley

See answer ↓

5. Which one of the following is not a Harappan site? (UPSC CSP 2019)

A. Chanhudaro

B. Kot Diji

C. Sohgaura

D. Desalpur

See answer ↓

6. Which one of the following is not among the five major cities of the Harappan civilisation named in the NCERT textbook?

A. Ganweriwala

B. Dholavira

C. Lothal

D. Rakhigarhi

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **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. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The answer is **John Marshall**. As Director-General of the ASI, he announced the discovery of a new civilisation in the Indus valley in 1924. Why the others fail: Wheeler became Director-General only in 1944. Sahni was a digger who found the seals. Memory hook: Marshall announced, 1924. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The answer is **R.E.M. Wheeler**. After he took over as Director-General of the ASI in 1944, he made digging follow the layers of the mound. Why the others fail: Marshall dug in uniform horizontal units. Cunningham looked for sites using texts. Banerji found seals at Mohenjodaro. Memory hook: Wheeler follows the layers. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The answer is that **he believed Indian history began with the first cities of the Ganga valley**. His method also leaned on texts and pilgrim accounts, and Harappa was on neither. Why the others fail: He did get a seal, and he did visit the site. The site was not hidden. Brick robbers harmed it, but that is not why he missed its meaning. Memory hook: wrong frame, wrong century. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is **Sohgaura**. Chanhudaro and Kot Diji appear on the textbook map of Mature Harappan sites. Sohgaura does not appear there. Why the others fail: Chanhudaro was dug in 1930 and Kot Diji in 1935. Desalpur is not an invented name, but this answer rests on the official key. Memory hook: Sohgaura is the odd name out. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The answer is **Lothal**. The textbook names five major cities: Rakhigarhi, Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Dholavira and Ganweriwala. Why the others fail: Each of these four is on that list. Lothal is a port near sources of carnelian, so it is important, but it is not among the five. Memory hook: Lothal is a port, not one of the five. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** He thought the ruins belonged to a city of Alexander's time. It was in fact Harappa. ↑ 1
2. **True.** He relied on texts and inscriptions, and Harappa was not on the pilgrims' route. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Marshall was Director-General of the ASI when he made the announcement. ↑ 3
4. **False.** He dug in uniform horizontal units and ignored the layers, so the context of finds was lost. ↑ 4
5. **True.** He is the archaeologist who brought in the method of following the stratigraphy. ↑ 5
6. **True.** It lay far from the heartland, close to the source of this prized blue stone. ↑ 6
7. **True.** The major known sites had become part of Pakistan. ↑ 7
8. **False.** The map lists sites such as Kot Diji and Chanhudaro, but not Sohgaura. ↑ 8
9. **Think it through.** Because nobody had yet heard of a civilisation older than those stories. People read new finds through old history. The fix was more digging, not a better guess. ↑ 9

Previous year answers

1. **(c) Shortughai** Canal traces from the Harappan era were found at Shortughai in Afghanistan. Dholavira is known for water reservoirs. Lothal is known for its dockyard.

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