Chapter 14

Unlocking the Secrets of Mohenjodaro
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What can artifacts tell us about daily life in Mohenjodaro?

14.1 Introduction

The geography of the Indian subcontinent affected where early people lived. Early settlements in this region were in fertile river valleys. In this chapter, you will visit one of those settlements, the city of Mohenjodaro (moh-HEN-joh-dahr-oh).

Mohenjodaro was one of many settlements that were located in the Indus River valley. These settlements became known as the Indus valley civilization. It is also called the Harappan (huh-RAP-pen) civilization, after another city at that time, Harappa. The civilization flourished for about 800 years, from about 2700 B.C.E. to 1900 B.C.E.

The cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro were the two great centers of the Indus valley civilization. Mohenjodaro means “place or hill of the dead.” In 1922, archaeologists found the ruins of Mohenjodaro. Carefully, they excavated the city. They discovered that it had two main parts.

The first part was a raised area that was used as a citadel, or fortress. The citadel was surrounded by a wall. In times of danger or trouble, people may have gathered in this area for safety.

The second part of Mohenjodaro was below the citadel. The lower city had many houses and workshops. This is likely the area where most people lived their daily lives.

What was daily life like in Mohenjodaro? In this chapter, you will unlock some secrets of this ancient city. You’ll explore its ruins and study its artifacts. What do these clues reveal about the city’s people and their civilization?

The ruins of Mohenjodaro’s walled citadel and lower city

The Indus River Valley

Two great centers of Indus valley civilization were the cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa.
Mohenjodaro was on the banks of the Indus River in present-day Pakistan. By studying the city’s ruins, we see that the city was carefully planned. To the west, a citadel sat on a platform of mud and brick. Below the citadel, nine streets divided the lower city into blocks, like those of a modern city. The streets were lined with houses and workshops made of mud bricks.

Mohenjodaro was a large city. At one time, as many as 50,000 people may have lived there. Similar to other settlements of the Indus valley civilization, Mohenjodaro had an advanced culture. But one great mystery remains. What happened to this civilization?

No one knows for sure. After about 1900 B.C.E., the great cities of the Indus River valley disappeared. Some scientists believe that hostile invaders were to blame. According to this idea, fierce warriors swept in from central Asia and destroyed the local civilization. But with a lack of evidence to support it, this idea has been rejected in recent years by many scholars.

Other scientists think that natural events may have caused the decline of the Indus valley civilization. They point to floods and earthquakes that are known to have struck the region around 1900 B.C.E.

All that remains today of the Indus valley people are the buildings and artifacts they left behind. These clues can tell us a great deal about how they lived. Let’s explore the ruins of Mohenjodaro and see what we can find out.

The photograph at right is a view of the Mohenjodaro ruins, as seen from the top of the citadel.
14.3 Weights and Scale

Inside the walls of Mohenjodaro’s citadel, a scale and several kinds of stone weights were found near a large building. Some archaeologists believed that the design of this building suggested that it was used as a granary. Later studies, however, showed no evidence for this idea. Many archaeologists now agree that the building was probably a large public structure, but its specific function remains unknown. It may have been used as a storehouse, a temple, or for some other purpose. Perhaps rulers and state officials met there.

The scale and weights found near the building are interesting artifacts. Similar to those found in other parts of the city, these objects suggest to archaeologists that ancient Indians used standard weights as they traded goods. Most of the small weights were cube shaped. They were made of a stone called chert. Chert could be chipped and ground to a certain weight but was hard enough to last. The weights were consistent and accurate. The smallest weights were found in jewelers’ shops. Also found were marked rods. These suggest that the ancient Indians also had a uniform way to measure length.
14.4 The Great Bath

The most dramatic feature of Mohenjodaro’s citadel was the Great Bath. The Great Bath was a pool built of waterproofed brick. It was 39 feet long and 8 feet deep. Small dressing rooms circled the pool. One of the rooms contained a well that supplied the bath with water. Dirty water was removed through a drain that ran along one side of the bath.

It seems likely that the people of Mohenjodaro used the pool to bathe. On a hot, clear day, they might have enjoyed washing themselves in the bath’s cooling waters. Some archaeologists think that the Great Bath might have been used for religious rituals. They point out that bathing rituals are important in India’s major religion, Hinduism. Ancient Hindu temples often featured bathing pools.

These are the remains of the Great Bath at Mohenjodaro.
14.5 Statue and Beads
In the lower city, archaeologists found a stone statue, 7 inches high. It shows how men in Mohenjodaro might have looked and dressed. As you can see in the photograph, the figure has a short, tidy beard and a clean upper lip. His hair is tied back with a band. He is wearing a patterned robe draped over his left shoulder. His expression is calm and noble. Archaeologists wonder who the figure is. Some scientists think that he may have been both a priest and a king.

Beautiful stone beads, in many shapes and colors, have been found throughout Mohenjodaro. Women may have worn them in necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and rings. Bead makers also made beads of clay and baked them in hot ovens called kilns. These artisans then drilled holes in the beads for stringing into necklaces.

14.6 Seals
Small stone seals, found in large numbers throughout the ruins, are among the most mysterious of Mohenjodaro's artifacts. The seals are carved with pictographs, an ancient form of drawing that uses pictures to stand for objects, sounds, or ideas. More than four hundred pictographs have been discovered, but archaeologists know little of their meaning. Many seals show animals such as buffalo, bulls, tigers, elephants, rhinoceroses, fish, and crocodiles.

No one knows how the seals were used, but scientists have made some educated guesses. Many of the seals have a small loop on the back. Perhaps people wore them as charms to keep away evil. The seals may also have been pressed into wax to make a kind of tag. Merchants might have placed the wax tags on their goods to show who owned them.
Parts of Mohenjodaro’s sewer system can still be seen in the city’s ruins.

14.7 Sewer System

A great achievement of Mohenjodaro was its advanced sewer system. A sewer system carries waste water away from houses. Mohenjodaro’s complex system of drains, pipes, wells, and bathrooms set the city apart from other settlements of its time. Two thousand years would pass before the world would see another system like it, in ancient Rome.

A network of clay pipes connected Mohenjodaro’s buildings and homes to the main sewer system. Dirty water and waste flowed in channels along the streets. This sewage then emptied into the Indus River. Archaeologists think that the sewer system made it possible for all residents of the city, rich or poor, to have had bathrooms in their homes.

Deep wells made of brick were located throughout the city. People stored water, including rainfall, in these wells.
14.8 Homes

Most of Mohenjodaro's people lived in the lower city, which was three times the size of the citadel. Rows of houses lined the streets. The houses had flat roofs and were two stories high. Like most of the city's buildings, they were made of mud bricks.

The houses faced narrow alleys. The backs of the houses opened onto courtyards where families could gather. The houses had narrow windows on the second floor. Screens for these windows were made of either a hard clay called terra-cotta or a see-through mineral called alabaster.

Homes had from one to a dozen rooms. Scientists believe that the poorer citizens may have lived in the smaller homes. The larger homes most likely belonged to the wealthy.

This narrow alley in the ruins of Mohenjodaro is lined with houses. Notice that there are no windows on the ground floor.
What game pieces can you identify in this picture?

14.9 Games

Evidence from Mohenjodaro suggests that the people who lived there enjoyed playing games. Many objects appear to be crafted for use as toys and parts of game sets. Archaeologists have uncovered dice, stone balls, grooved clay tracks, and stone game boards.

The game of chess may have originated in India. An ancient Indian book describes a war game played with dice and with pieces called pawns. Although modern chess is not played with dice, historians believe that the war game is an early form of chess. The small, carved game pieces found at Mohenjodaro may have been used to play this game.

The children of Mohenjodaro likely played simpler games. Some of the objects found by archaeologists look like children’s toys. For example, children may have enjoyed rolling stone balls along clay mazes and tracks.
14.10 Clay Models

Archaeologists have found small clay models throughout Mohenjodaro. Most of these models are made of terra-cotta. In one model, shown here, two bulls are attached to a yoke, or wooden harness. The bulls are pulling a person in a two-wheeled cart. This model may be a form of ancient toy, but archaeologists believe that it also shows how people transported farm goods to the city’s market. It is likely that on market day, farmers loaded their crops into carts. The crops may have included barley, cotton, dates, melons, peas, rice, sesame seeds, and wheat. Then the farmers hitched their bulls to the carts and headed to market, where they sold or traded their goods with other farmers.

Children in Mohenjodaro may have played with clay models like this one. Such artifacts provide clues on how Indus valley people might have transported crops to market.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you explored artifacts from the ruins of the two parts of the city of Mohenjodaro to learn about daily life in the Indus valley civilization.

The Mystery of Mohenjodaro Historians and archaeologists continue to investigate what happened to this remarkable civilization.

Weights and Scale The discovery of standard weights, a scale, and marked rods suggest that the ancient Indians had a uniform way to measure weight and length.

The Great Bath The remains of a brick pool, well, and drain system, lead archaeologists to believe that people may have bathed in and used the pool in religious rituals.

Statue, Beads, and Seals Other interesting artifacts include a small statue of a man, a variety of stone beads, and stone seals carved with pictographs.

Sewer System A sewer system carried waste away from the city’s buildings and into the Indus River. Both rich and poor people likely had homes with indoor bathrooms.

Homes Most people lived in the lower city in rows of 2-story houses made of mud bricks. These homes had between one and a dozen rooms.

Games As the discovery of game pieces and toys suggests, the people had time to play. Adults may have played an early form of chess.

Clay Models Archaeologists have found clay models that may have been toys. Some models reveal information about ways of farming and transporting goods to market.