1 A Long-Forgotten Civilization

This book is about a civilization that was erased from human memory until the early part of the twentieth century and the discoveries made by the explorers, travelers, and archaeologists whose accounts and research brought to light the civilization's significance in world history.

The Indus civilization is one of three in the "Ancient East" that, along with Mesopotamia and Pharonic Egypt, was a cradle of early civilization in the Old World (Childe 1950). Mesopotamia and Egypt were longer lived but coexisted with the Indus civilization during its florescence between 2600 and 1900 B.C. (see Figure 1.1 for locations of the three civilizations). Of the three, the Indus was the most expansive, extending from today's northeast Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. Its major centers lie within major river systems, the Indus and the Ghaggar-Hakra Rivers. The Indus, one of the great rivers of Asia, flows through the valley, passing under the shadow of the Himalayas and coursing through a vast dry zone before emptying into the Arabian Sea. Its waters have sustained the people of the Indus Valley for thousands of years. The Ghaggar-Hakra straddles the two countries of Pakistan and India. It once flowed with great strength through what is today northwest India (the Ghaggar) and eastern Pakistan (the Hakra).

Scholarship on the Indus civilization has lagged behind that of Mesopotamia and Egypt for several reasons. First, Mesopotamia and Egypt figure in biblical accounts, and their links to the west have long excited the interest of Western scholars. In the late 1700s, Napoleon's military expedition to Egypt included 167 specialists who documented and studied the history and monuments of ancient Egypt. They published their findings in illustrated works that became well-known throughout Europe. Similarly, ancient Mesopotamia was the subject of many early travelers' accounts that romanticized its fabulous ruins. The western explorers who investigated these ruins sought to document places and events known from biblical accounts.

A second reason for the lag in scholarship is that the writing system of the Indus civilization has not been deciphered. Each of the three

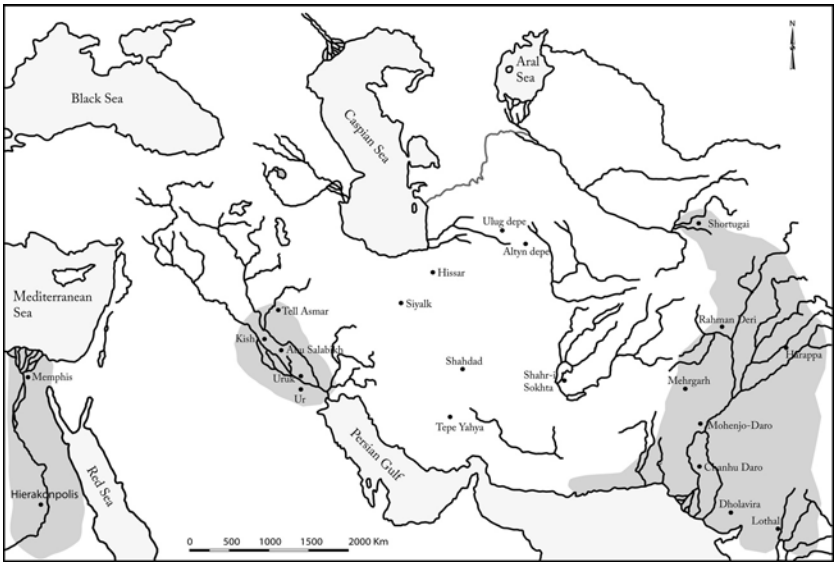

Figure 1.1. Ancient states in the Near East and South Asia. Left to right: Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus. © R. P. Wright.

ancient civilizations possessed a system of writing, and more than a hundred years ago scholars deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphic and Mesopotamian cuneiform writing systems. The Indus script still remains a mystery.

In this book, I emphasize the ways in which archaeologists have met the challenge of reconstructing – without the aid of written records – the (pre)history of the Harappans, a name used for the people of the Indus, whose remains were first discovered at the site of Harappa (see Figure 1.2 for sites referred to in the text). They have based their interpretations mainly on the objects and buildings that the Harappans produced and used and have made great strides in piecing together the less accessible aspects of the civilization's past.

As a way of introducing the rich database available to archaeological reconstructions of the region's past, I begin by discussing the earliest references to the lands the Indus people occupied and the events leading up to discovery of the civilization. The establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India under British colonial authorities in 1861 marks the true beginning of official archaeological research in the region and the final naming of the civilization in the early twentieth century. From there, I go on to recount the work that continues to this day.

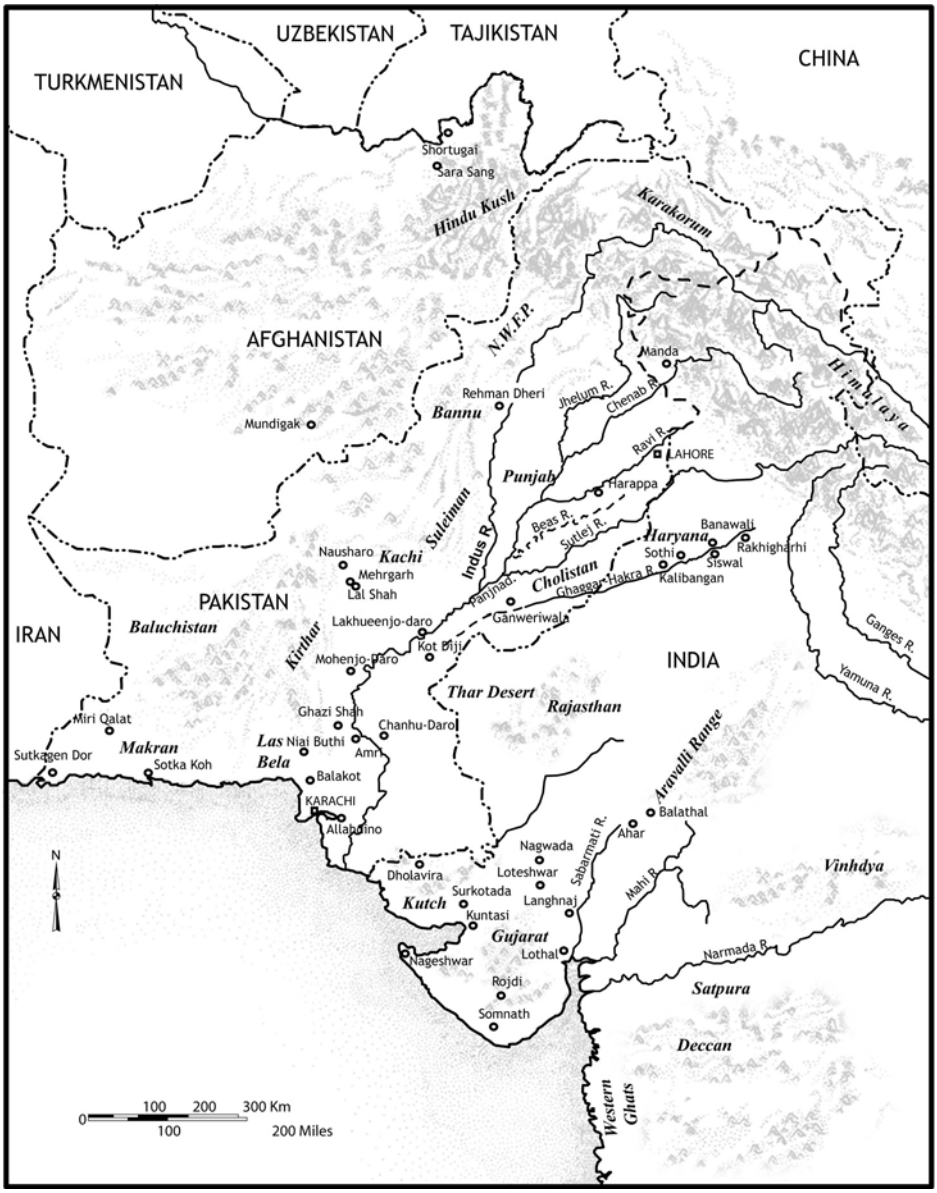

Figure 1.2. Sites referred to in the text. © R. P. Wright.

My own research in this region began in the mid-1970s when I joined a research project seeking evidence for settlement in a remote valley of Afghanistan and trade with far-off Mesopotamia. Later, I was invited to join the excavations at Mehrgarh, an archaeological site in Pakistan located at the foot of a major mountain pass that climbs westward to Afghanistan. Mehrgarh was settled at around 7000 B.C. and was the first agricultural settlement in this region. My interest in both of these projects was on the interaction spheres that tied South Asia to the greater Near East and other neighboring areas. Later, I joined a team at Harappa, one of the first Indus cities, where my research continues to focus on exchange systems and has expanded to include the development of urbanism, the region's agropastoral and craft-producing economy, and the emergence of this complex society.

A Civilization Rediscovered

Our first accounts of the Indus civilization come from written texts in southern Mesopotamia at about 2400 B.C., long before it was named by Western scholars. Frequent references in Mesopotamian texts are to a place called Meluhha, a distant land to the east, where peacocks could be heard and treasures like gold, tin, and carnelian procured. The texts speak of battles, acquisition of booty, diplomacy, and other ventures as well as the maritime and overland routes by which they were obtained. Seaworthy boats from Mesopotamia sailed the Persian Gulf, scheduling travel in accordance with annual monsoons and the prevailing winds and stopping at ports where sweet water was available. Overland travel involved traversing through vast arid regions and mountainous zones either on foot or by animal-drawn carts. These references are rather short-lived, however, and they disappear from the Mesopotamian documents by 1700 B.C. In later periods, references to Meluhha (see Figure 8.1) are to a different region altogether, thus putting an end to these early glimpses of the Indus.

Western scholarship on the history of the region began in the seventeenth century when European merchants incorporated the East India Company for purposes of trade in east Indian spices. The company had gained permission from the Mughal Emperor, Jahangir, to establish a mercantile "factory," and trading posts were built along the east and west coasts of India. Europeans were attracted to the region for its economic opportunities, but many also had scholarly interests. Various voluntary associations were founded based on their historical and literary pursuits. Although closely connected to the British colonial administration, these associations were not part of the government. Founded in 1784, the

Asiatic Society was the earliest. It was followed by the Bombay Literary Society (1804) and the Literary Society of Madras (1812). Most members were East India Company employees, and their overall purpose was to make "India legible" (Trautmann and Sinopoli 2002:494). Studies initiated by members of the societies differed from the works of travel writers and earlier histories that were based on firsthand observations. Instead, their focus was on reading and interpreting works written in Sanskrit and other South Asian languages. Their scholarly works "claimed a superior authority … [because they] did not merely see the outer person but had access to the mind and intentionality of the Asian, the inner person" (Trautmann 1997:30–7; Trautmann and Sinopoli 2002:495). Viewed from that perspective, archaeological remains (material culture) were secondary and useful primarily as complements to textual studies.

Exploration that led to archaeological discoveries was left to the patronage of civil authorities and military officers. A major effort during the early nineteenth century involved survey work designed to document the extent of "Indian" territory and to collect a variety of data useful to the colonial enterprise. Surveyors produced maps that showed geographical features and documented river systems and geodetic observations. They also collected botanical and geological specimens and measured distances between locations for mapping purposes, and recorded local customs. Surveyors often followed other interests and accumulated large collections of manuscripts, drawings, and antiquities, subsequently publishing detailed "plans and measurements of monuments and sites" (Singh 2004:5).

Other forms of intelligence and "diplomatic" efforts resulted in important archaeological discoveries. Charles Masson (originally James Lewis) was a deserter from the Bengal European Artillery who had assumed an American identity, a fairly common practice of the time (Lahiri 2005:4). As part of an arrangement to gain an official pardon, he was assigned to an intelligence-gathering network that included an agreement to turn over any collections of antiquities that resulted from his travels for the East India Company (Lahiri 2005:19). Masson was conversant with classical sources and Alexander's campaigns, a factor that most likely drew him to explore certain areas. In 326 B.C., Alexander had marched his Macedonian troops into the northern parts of what today are Afghanistan and Pakistan and sent small contingents to sail the Indus River and march across the Punjab. He often noted the presence of archaeological sites and speculated on their identity based on the then known textual sources. In 1829, Masson journeyed on horseback through the Punjab recording the presence of archaeological sites and monuments. He later published his findings in three volumes, which included detailed illustrations

and descriptions of the ancient settlements. In the context of this book, Masson's most important discovery was Harappa, a major city of the Indus civilization. He made detailed records describing the site as it existed in the early 1800s. Masson was impressed with Harappa's massive size and its several high mounds resulting from hundreds of years of the accumulation of deteriorating architecture and human activities. He commented on (and in some instances illustrated) the thousands of artifacts still visible on the surface of the site. Masson mistakenly believed the site dated to an historical period and one that had been mentioned by Alexander's troops. However, according to local residents, whose views Masson recorded, the mounds were remnants of an ancient city ruled by a king named Hara Pala whose "lust and crimes" (he had committed incest with a family member) had led to the demise of the city (C. Masson 1842; Lahiri 2005:10).[1]

Also under the employ of the East India Company, Alexander Burnes followed Masson two years later, sailing up the Indus River to assess the "viability for future movements" of the company's army. He arrived at Harappa in 1831 (Lahiri 2005:14) and provided additional details to Masson's observations. He noted that parts of the ancient city had been built of baked brick, and he commented on the ongoing destruction of the site brought about by local residents. Removing baked bricks from the site to construct and repair their homes was a local village practice that had created a situation that Burnes referred to as "perfect chaos" (Burnes 1834; Lahiri 2005:12).

Later, brick robbing on an even grander scale would prove to be a catalyst for continuing interest in Harappa. In spite of the visits of Masson and Burnes and their documentation of the site, engineers entrusted with the construction of a major railway system designed to link parts of the region failed to recognize the site's significance with disastrous consequences for its preservation. Railway engineers carted away sufficient brick from Harappa's buildings to provide 100 miles of ballast for tracks between Multan and Lahore. General Alexander Cunningham, who later became the head of a newly created Archaeological Survey of India, visited Harappa in 1853 and 1854 before railway construction. Like others before him, he was impressed by its size, especially the massive walls of what he incorrectly thought had been a Buddhist monastery, and planned to return to conduct excavations. When he returned many years later, the bricks from the original construction had been removed (Lahiri 2005:18) and were nowhere to be seen.

In 1858, the East India Company was dissolved, and the region came under the responsibility of the British Crown, a condition that prevailed until 1947. The "formalization" of archaeology as an official focus of the

colonial government took place in 1861. Alexander Cunningham, now retired from military service, led these efforts (Trautmann and Sinopol, 2002). As noted previously, Cunningham had a strong interest in the region's past, and although he was trained in Sanskrit, unlike many of his contemporaries whose focus lay in the study of texts, his primary interests were in numismatics and archaeological fieldwork, which he considered a more reliable basis with which to reconstruct the history of the Indian past than the literary scholarship that dominated historical studies. By the time he took on the directorship of the Archaeological Survey, Cunningham was "widely acknowledged as the subcontinent's foremost expert in archaeology" (Lahiri 2005:498), having conducted excavations and surveys in numerous areas.

Later, Cunningham returned to Harappa to conduct a proper survey and to map the site. He published a brief account of his investigations and provided illustrations of a selection of artifacts, including stone tools, pottery, and small objects that resembled "chess pawns." His most spectacular discovery was a seal that belonged to a Major Clark (later donated to the British Museum), which he described as follows (it is illustrated in Figure 1.3):

> The seal is a smooth black stone without polish. On it is engraved very deeply a bull, without a hump, looking to the right, with two stars under the neck. Above the bull there is an inscription in six characters, which are quite unknown to me. They are certainly not Indian letters; and as the bull which accompanies them is without a hump [like the traditional zebu cattle], I conclude that the seal is foreign to India. (1875:108)

Figure 1.3. Major Clark's seal from Harappa reported by Alexander Cunningham. Courtesy of the British Museum.

The seal could be held with two fingers by gripping a small knob on the back. When pressed against soft clay or other pliable material, it left a distinctive image, presumed to identify an individual or a group just as a signature or corporate seal does today. Of all the finds discovered at Harappa during this period, the stamp seal excited the most scholarly interest, because it implied that the people who left it behind were literate, a feature associated with complex societies and cultures then known only from later periods in the history of India. The fact that it displayed an unknown script was a clear indication that Harappa may have been the site of a culture not recorded in textual sources, though this possibility went unnoticed at the time.

The seal and others subsequently discovered were suggestive of a "half-glimpsed world" (Lahiri 2005:27) that remained unknown until the 1920s. Cunningham retired in 1885, after which the archaeological survey went through restructuring, decentralization, division into regional circles, and finally recentralization under the leadership of John Marshall in 1902 (Trautmann and Sinopoli 2002:501). As the head of a state-sponsored institution, Marshall's position at the archaeological survey came under the close supervision of the viceroy of India, Lord (G. N.) Curzon who selected him for the position.

Under tight budgetary constraints, but under Lord Curzon's instructions, Marshall launched a campaign to oversee architectural conservation and inspections of sites around the country. Marshall and his survey officers conducted only limited excavations during his early years as director general. They excavated several Buddhist sites and monuments, although Marshall seems to have recognized the possibility that a more ancient past existed (Lahiri 2005:58). Marshall did not conduct any excavations at these sites until much later. Instead, he deployed colleagues to conduct work at non-Buddhist sites. In 1909, Hirananda Sastri was sent to Harappa to oversee a survey in connection with the site's preservation. The brick robbing there had continued, and Sastri was commissioned to determine whether the site could be protected or purchased from the landowners. Sastri's report was never published, and from what is known, he was not impressed with the site's importance; nevertheless, he did note that the proportion of the standard bricks used in buildings at Harappa was different from bricks found at Buddhist and other early historic cities (Lahiri 2005:79). This indicated that the site was not of Buddhist origin.

Several years later, Daya Ram Sahni returned to conduct an excavation on two of the mounds at Harappa which was paid for and brought under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (Lahiri 2005:171). Meanwhile, other officers from the archaeological survey were deployed to Mohenjo-daro: D. R. Bhandarkar in 1911, R. D. Banerji in 1919 and

1922–3, M. S. Vats in 1924, K. N. Dikshit in 1924–5, H. Harqreaves in 1925–6, and E. H. Mackay in 1927–1931.

Exploration also took place in areas beyond the Indus plain. At the same time artifacts were being unearthed in non text-related locales in the core area, similar kinds of enigmatic discoveries were also being made in the remote region of Baluchistan. In 1876, Major E. Mockler excavated at the site of Sutkagen-dor near the coast and to the west of the Indus Valley (see Figure 1.2), at a site now known to have been an Indus port of trade. Twenty-five years later an explorer, Hughes Buller, discovered the site of Nal in the Las Bela area (see also Figure 1.2). The pottery produced at Nal is decorated in complex geometric patterns and in a variety of colors. This type of polychrome pottery was previously unknown and given its distinctive qualities made for easy comparisons when found elsewhere. Later, artifacts of greater antiquity than the cities themselves suggested an early period of growth before full florescence of the civilization.

Returning to Mohenjo-daro, it was Banerji and Vats who may have been catalysts for the startling revelations that were soon to be known concerning this forgotten civilization. Banerji had been sent back to Mohenjo-daro in December of 1922. He had visited the site previously, found distinctive stone implements, and conducted surveys nearby. By the time of his return, he was convinced that Mohenjo-daro was of "remote antiquity" (Lahiri 2005:219). This idea was partially confirmed by the discovery of inscribed seals, of a type that had been found in Harappa. In correspondence with Marshall in 1923, Banerji described the seals as "identical" to those found at Harappa. Later, he also compared some of the ceramics from Mohenjo-daro with those at Nal that Mockler and others had discovered. Even though we know now that the Nal ceramics predated Mohenjo-daro, they did contribute to the early stages of settlement that led up to Indus cities. Clearly he was on the right track. He also used the term "prehistoric" to signify a culture (presumably unknown) in his descriptions of Mohenjo-daro. Though he had identified writing on the seals, it was undecipherable, therefore, preliterate. Banerji's attempts to link up the artifacts at Mohenjo-daro with others that had been discovered was a key point. In the same year, M. S. Vats, one of the principal excavators at Harappa, who had worked at Mohenjo-daro, made similar comparisons. In correspondence with Marshall, he noted the similarities of the seals and script. He also compared various ceramics, brick sizes, terracotta figurines, clay bangles, and sling balls at Mohenjo-daro to others he had seen at Harappa.

Determined to get to the bottom of this riddle, Marshall called for a meeting with Banerji and D. R. Sahni, who also had excavated at Harappa and arranged to ship excavation plans, drawings, and artifacts

to a central place for their joint discussion. The body of data they examined included representative artifacts from Harappa (contributed by Sahni from his excavations) (Lahiri 2005:254). A meeting of this sort is an archaeologist's dream, sorting through materials and drawing on the knowledge of several experts, especially in this case because what was being discovered was emerging as an entirely new and unknown culture. The size of the sites and strong similarities among them suggested they were dealing with something as yet largely unknown but of great significance.

In the end, Marshall was convinced. Writing for the *Illustrated London News* some days later, he boldly stated:

> Not often has it been given to archaeologists, as it was given to Schliemann at Tiryns and Mycenae, or to Stein in the deserts of Turkestan, to light upon the remains of a long-forgotten civilization. It looks, however, at this moment, as if we were on the threshold of such a discovery in the plains of the Indus.

Unable to state the age of the civilization, he went on to observe that the Indus (which he named after the river system) artifacts differed from any known other civilizations in the region, though he drew ecological parallels with Pharaonic Egypt and Mesopotamia. All were positioned on great river tracts with fertile soils, unfailing water supplies, and water transport for ease of communication (Lahiri 2005:264). This article appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on September 20, 1924.

Large numbers of photographs accompanied Marshall's article. Soon after its appearance, scholars responded to the news. In a return note to the *News*, Archibald Henry Sayce who was conversant in ancient languages and archaeology wrote that the remarkable discoveries that Marshall wrote about were

> even more remarkable and startling than he supposes. The inscribed "seals" or plaques found at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro are practically identical with the Proto-Elamite tablettes de compatibilité discovered by DeMorgan at Susa [in Mesopotamia]. The form and size of the plaques are the same, the "unicorns" are the same, and the pictographs and numerals are also the same. The identity is such that the "seals" and tablets might have come from the same hand. (Sayce 1924)

Later two other scholars, C. J. Gadd and S. Smith, concurred with what Sayce had written and offered a chart comparing certain signs from the Indus with those of Mesopotamia. Although neither Sayce nor Gadd and Smith were implying that the Indus was derived from these other cultures, they agreed that their symbolic system was indicative of contemporaneity. The effect was dramatic: "At one stroke the history of