



Indus Valley Civilization

Ancient History
Notes For UPSC

Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) holds a prominent place in the glorious history of India. It is also known as ‘Harappan Civilization’ as Harappa was the first city to be discovered along the banks of river Ravi by Daya Ram Sahni in 1921. Indus Valley Civilization is one of the most important topics for [UPSC IAS Examination](#).

In this article on Indus Valley Civilization, we shall discuss its background, discovery, geographical extent, important sites, various socio-political-economic and cultural features, its town planning, various phases and its decline. This will be very useful for aspirants in the [UPSC Prelims Exam](#).

Also, study the [NCERT Notes on Ashokan Edicts](#) from the linked article.

Background of Indus Valley Civilization:

- IVC flourished in around 2500 BCE, in the western part of South Asia, whose major part lies in present Pakistan & Western India.
- Indus Valley Civilization was one of the four largest ancient urban civilizations, namely – Egypt, Mesopotamia, India & China.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Rise of Mauryan Empire](#) here.

Its Discovery:

- The Archaeological Department of India carried out excavations of the Indus Valley in the 1920s, in which the ruins of the two oldest cities of IVC, namely Mohenjodaro & Harappa were unearthed.
- After the discovery of Harappa by Daya Ram Sahni in 1921, John Marshall, the Director-General of the ASI, announced that an urban civilization existed in the Indus Valley region in around 2500 BCE.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Satavahana Dynasty](#) here.

Geographical Extent of Indus Valley Civilization:

- Geographically, Indus Valley Civilization covered Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Rajasthan, Gujarat and, Western Uttar Pradesh.
- It extended from Sutkagendor (in Balochistan, Pakistan) in West to Alamgirpur (Western UP) in the East; & from Mandu (Jammu) in the North to Daimabad (Ahmednagar, Maharashtra) in the South.
- Some Indus Valley sites have also been found as far away as Afghanistan and Turkmenistan.
- Also, the Pre-Harappan civilization found in Mehrgarh, Pakistan shows the first evidence of cotton cultivation.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Mauryan Administration](#) here.

Important Sites of Indus Valley Civilization:

- This civilization had many prominent sites in both Pakistan - Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Amri & India – Kalibangan, Lothal, Surkotada, Banawali, Chhanhudaro, Dholavira.
- Let us study some of the sites in detail:

Few Important Sites of IVC				
S. No.	Site	Excavated By	Present Location	Important Findings
1.	Harappa	Daya Ram Sahini in 1921	Situated on the bank of river Ravi in the Montgomery district of Punjab (Pakistan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sandstone statues of Human anatomyGranariesBullock carts

2.	Mohen-jodaro (Mound of Dead)	R.D Banerjee in 1922	Situated on the Bank of river Indus in Larkana district of Punjab (Pakistan).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great bath • Granary • Bronze dancing girl • Seal of Pasupathi Mahadeva • Steatite statue of beard man • A piece of woven cotton
3.	Sutkagendor	Stein in 1929	In southwestern Balochistan province, Pakistan on Dast river	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A trading point between Harappa and Babylon
4.	Chanhudaro	N.G Majumdar in 1931	Sindh on the Indus river	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bead makers shop • The footprint of a dog chasing a cat
5.	Amri	N.G Majumdar in 1935	On the bank of the Indus river – Sindh, Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antelope evidence
6.	Kalibangan	Ghose in 1953	Rajasthan on the bank of Ghaggar river	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire altar • Camel bone • Wooden plough

7.	Lothal	R.Rao in 1953	Gujarat on Bhogavo river near Gulf of Cambay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First manmade port • Dockyard • Rice husk • Fire altars • Chess-playing
8.	Surkotada	J.P Joshi in 1964	Gujarat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bones of horses • Beads
9.	Banawali	R.S Bisht in 1974	Hisar district of Haryana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beads • Barley • Evidence of both pre-Harappan and Harappan culture
10.	Dholavira	R.S Bisht in 1985	Gujarat in Rann of Kachchh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water harnessing system • Water reservoir • 1st IVC Site in India to have received the 'World Heritage Site' Status by UNESCO

Study the [NCERT Notes on King Harshavardhana](#) here.

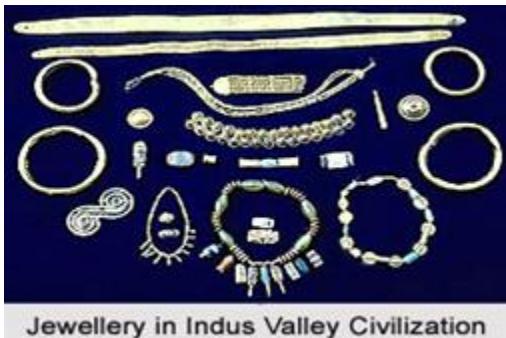
Features of the Indus Valley Civilization Society:

- IVC Society was urban in nature & was mainly divided into 3 sections à An elite class living in the citadel region on the western part of town, middle-class inhabitants (or rich merchants) & a relatively weaker section (labors) living in the lower towns.
- There was a division of labor and the IVC Society was diversified and stratified.
- The people were scholars, artisans, traders, warriors, and businessmen.
- IVC Society is considered to be matriarchal in nature as a large number of terracotta (fire-baked earthen clay) female figurines have been found from various sites which represent the worship of the Great Mother Goddess.
- The dressing style of both men & women of Indus Valley Civilization is also indicated from the terracotta & stone sculptures.
- Men are mostly shown wearing a dress wrapped around the lower half of the body with one end worn over the left shoulder & under the right arm.
- Garments in Indus Valley Civilization were made from various materials like cotton, silk, wool, etc.
- Also, the presence of woven cloth at Mohenjodaro indicates that the IVC inhabitants were well acquainted with spinning and weaving.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Chalukya Dynasty](#) here.

Techno-Cultural Aspects of the Civilization:

- Its inhabitants mainly used copper and bronze and were unaware of the use of iron.
- Harappans obtained copper from the Khetri copper mines in Rajasthan & Tin was possibly brought from Afghanistan.
- Harappans were generally peace-loving and had not many arms and weapons in their kitty.
- Several objects with ‘Textile Impressions’ have also been discovered.
- Huge brick structures found in various sites indicate that the existence of a class of masons was there & that brick-laying was an important craft.
- IVC inhabitants also practised boat-making, bead making & seal making.
- Bead-making shops have been excavated from Chanhudaro & Lothal.
- IVC seals were mainly made of steatite which is a kind of soft stone.
- Some seals were also made of gold, ivory, chert, agate, etc & it was mainly used for trade purposes.



- The presence of goldsmiths was there which made jewellery of silver, gold & precious stones.
- Ornaments like necklaces, bracelets, pendants, brooches have been excavated.



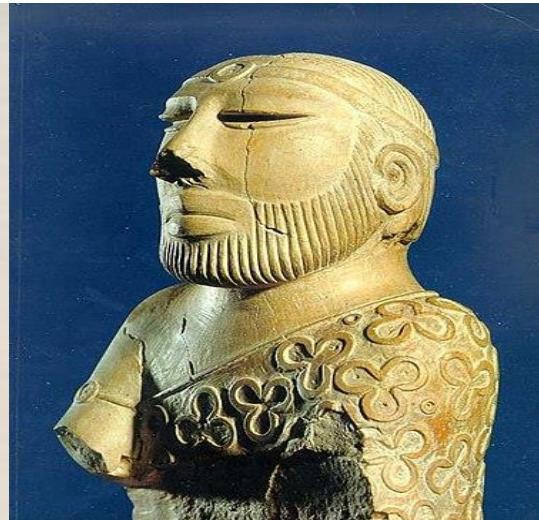
- IVC inhabitants also extensively used the pottery, in which the most characteristic one was both glossy & shiny.
- The redware pottery painted with black designs were popular & items like jars, plates, bowls & pots of different sizes were made from pottery.



- The people of the Indus valley civilization were aware of Bronze mirrors, Ivory Combs, antimony rods but not hair dyes.
- A large number of terracotta figurines and toys of cart, bulls, elephants, monkeys, chariots, whistles existed.

- Discovery of Bronze Dancing Girl Sculpture from Mohenjodaro, Steatite Bearded Man from Mohenjodaro are some of the finest examples of Indus Valley Civilization's cultural finesse.
- The Steatite Bearded Man has an embroidered cloak over his left shoulder and his eyes are half-closed indicating a posture of meditation.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Buddhist Councils and Texts](#) here.

**Bronze Dancing Girl Sculpture****Steatite Bearded Man**

Political Aspects of the Civilization:

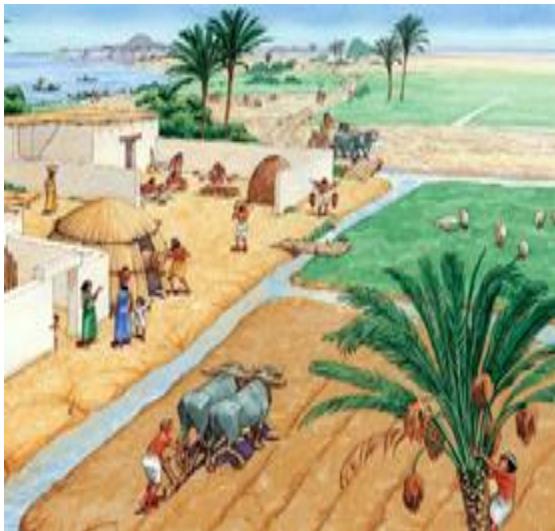
- The evidence of political organization isn't found and hence it can't be concluded which kind of political organization was followed in Indus Valley Civilization.
- Some archaeologists believe that Harappan society had no rulers, and that everybody enjoyed equal status.
- Another theory argues that there was no single ruler, but a number of rulers representing each of the urban centers.
- However, the uniformity in tools, weapons, bricks, seals & urban style of construction indicates a presence of a centralized political authority.
- A class of merchants could have ruled the Indus Valley Civilization unlike in Egypt & Mesopotamia which was ruled by the priestly class, as there is an absence of temples in IVC sites.
- Also, the proper layout of streets, the presence of large-scale draining systems, monumental citadels, all indicate the presence of a strong central government.
- But, no conclusive evidence is there.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Ashoka - Life and Dhamma](#) here.

Economic Aspects of the Civilization:

- Trade held a very important place in the life of IVC people which is witnessed by the presence of numerous seals, uniform script & regulated weights & measures.
- We shall discuss the various economic aspects of the Indus Valley Civilization in detail:

Agriculture:



- Agriculture flourished in IVC due to timely rains & fertile land.
- IVC inhabitants sowed many crops like rice, wheat, cotton, barley, dates, melon, pea, lentils, mustard, linseed, sesamum, ragi, bajra, jowar, etc.
- Rainfed crops were pre-dominant as irrigation was based upon the rainwater.
- In Harappa, 3 main varieties of wheat & barley were sown.

- Wooden plough found in Kalibangan (Rajasthan), Granary found in Mohenjodaro (Pakistan) & evidence of growing Barley found in Banawali (Rajasthan) all indicate the presence of agriculture.
- The Indus people were the earliest people to produce cotton.
- They used bulls & oxen for ploughing.
- Traces of canals have been found at the Harappan site of Shortughai in Afghanistan, but not in Punjab or Sindh.

Trade and Foreign Links:

- Harappans carried on substantial trade in the form of stone, metal, shells, etc.
- Trade in Indus Valley Civilization was both inter-regional & intra-regional.
- Metal money was not used and instead, trade was carried by barter system.
- IVC inhabitants practised navigation on the coast of the Arabian Sea & had set up a trading colony in northern Afghanistan which helped them to trade with Central Asia
- IVC people also had economic relations with the regions of Tigris, Euphrates & also with Mesopotamian and Persian Civilizations.
- Evidence is provided in the Mesopotamian records which indicate trade relations with 'Meluha' (Ancient name given to the Indus region) and also the presence of trading ports called 'Dilmun' and 'Makan'.
- Mesopotamians imported copper, ivory, pearls & ebony from Meluha and exported garments, perfume, leather products & silver to IVC people.
- Harappans also did long-distance trade in lapis lazuli, which contributed to the social prestige of the ruling class.
- Inland transport primarily employed bullock carts.

- Possibly, Jade came from Central Asia, Turquoise came from Iran, Amethyst came from current Maharashtra and Lapis lazuli came from Afghanistan.
- The carts and chariots were a means of transport & big boats were used for sea trade.

Seals:



- Seals are one of the greatest artistic creations of the Indus Valley Civilization.
- About 2000 seals have been discovered and they carry short inscriptions with pictures of one-horned bull, buffalo, tiger, rhinoceros, goat, elephant, etc(excluding horse).
- In Mohenjo-Daro, three cylindrical seals of the Mesopotamian type have been found which depict their trading relations.

Weights and Measures:



- IVC people used weights & measures for trade and other transactions.
- Numerous articles used for weights have been found which show that in weighing mostly 16 or its multiples were used.
- Discovery of ivory scale at Lothal and shells for measuring angles at Saurashtra has been found.

Animal Husbandry:

- IVC people domesticated animals like a humped bull, buffalo, pigs, elephants, donkeys, goats, sheep, etc.
- Evidence of horses has been found only at Surkotada, which is otherwise absent from the Indus Valley Civilization.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Vakataka Dynasty](#) here.

Religious Aspects of the Civilization:



- Unicorn is the most prominent religious figure of Indus Valley Civilization.
- Unicorn figures had different names like Pashupati/Proto-Shiva, Seven Mothers (Saptamatrika) & Compound Creatures.
- These figurines are now largely inculcated into the Hindu religion.



- The dominance of the terracotta mother goddess indicates that the IVC society was mainly matriarchal.
- Evidence that Harappans looked upon the earth as a fertility goddess and worshipped her similarly as the Egyptians worshipped the Nile Goddess 'Isis'.



- Proto-Shiva or Pashupati Figurine appears to be the only male deity as depicted on the IVC Seals.
- Pashupati Figurine is surrounded by 4 wild animals, viz., elephant, tiger, buffalo & rhinoceros.
- The Pashupati figurine wears a number of bangles, has a headdress and there's also an inscription of seven letters on the top.

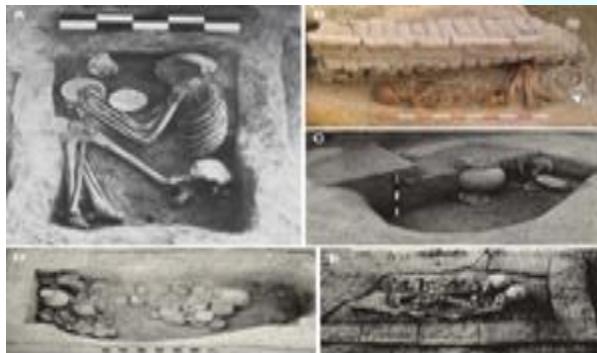
- IVC inhabitants also believed in the worship of stones in the form of linga (phallus) and yoni (fertility) à Evident from a terracotta figurine found in Kalibangan (Rajasthan).
- IVC people also practised yoga for both physical exercise as well as performing religious rites.



- Presence of Sacred Ritual Spot is evident from the excavation of Great Bath at Mohenjodaro, wherein, all the elites undertook religious baths.
- Also, tree worship is evident as peepal tree has been depicted on many IVC seals.

- Evidence of snake worship & snake charmers is also there.
- Amulets have also been found in large numbers.
- No evidence of temples or a sophisticated caste system has been found in Indus Valley Civilization.

Burial Practices of the Civilization:



- Dead bodies were placed in the North-South direction and food, pottery, and other items were also put in the grave along with the body
- Coffins containing bodies have been found in Harappa.
- Small circular pits containing large urns and pottery have also been found in Kalibangan (Rajasthan)

- Three forms of burial have been found at Mohenjo-Daro:
 - a. **Complete burial** – it means the burial of the whole body.
 - b. **Fractional burial** – it means the collection of some bones after the exposure of the body to wild beasts and bird
 - c. **Post cremation burial** – cremation followed by burial of ashes.
- A triangular terracotta cake has been discovered which has a horned deity on one side and an animal on the other side which is an indication of animal sacrifice
- At Lothal, a pair of male and female skeletons have been discovered together.
- Surkotada and Dholavira are two sites where the burial practice resembled the megalithic practice.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Persian and Greek Invasions](#) here.

Scientific/Technological Achievements of the Indus Valley Civilization:

- IVC can be called the ‘womb of mathematics’ from where both the concepts of numbers & numerical systems originated.
- Harappan Numerical System is decimal-based & additive multiplicative in usage.
- The numerical system which was first used by the Harappan later found its way into other ancient civilizations.



- IVC inhabitants constructed the world's first tidal port at Lothal which indicated they had a high degree of knowledge relating to the ebb and flow of tides.
- IVC people were also versed with medical sciences as they used many herbs & drugs to treat diseases.
- IVC inhabitants also practised 'Trephination' to treat migraines and other mental disorders.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Legacy and Decline of the Gupta Empire](#) here.

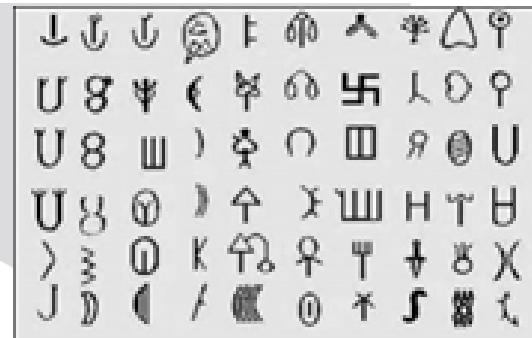
Language and Script of the Indus Valley Civilization:



- We don't have a great deal of knowledge about them as the Harappan Languages & Scripts haven't been deciphered yet.
- The style of Harappan Script was that of Boustrophedon, that is written from right to left.
- The language was mainly pictographic & was engraved on seals, bones, ivory, etc.
- Harappan Script virtually disappeared by 1700 BCE which indicates that the Indus Valley Script did not

percolate downwards.

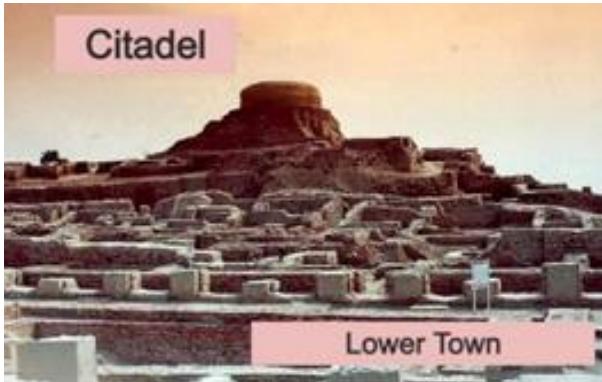
- However, archaeologists have increasingly been finding links between the Indus Script & Tamil-Brahmi Script.
- In 2019, excavations carried out in the Keezhadi site in Tamil Nadu's Sivaganga district revealed graffiti dating back to 580 BC which bears a distinct resemblance to the Indus script.



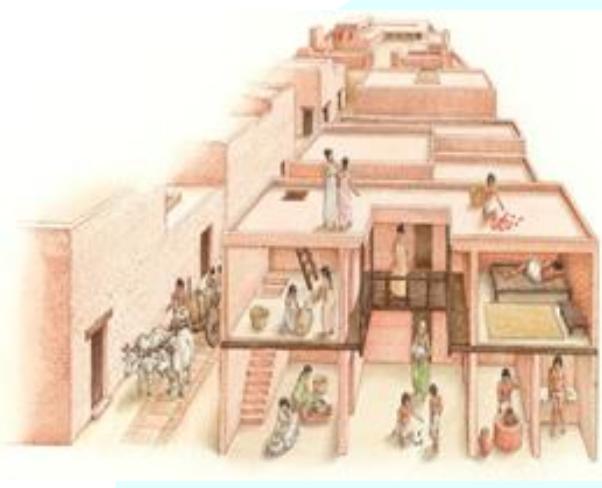
Study the [NCERT Notes on Indian History Timeline](#) here.

Town Planning in the Indus Valley Civilization:

- Indus Valley Civilization is known for its extensive urban outlook and sophisticated sense of town planning.



- Most cities of the IVC were divided into 2 parts
 - à Smaller but Higher part on the Western side called 'Citadel' or 'Acropolis' and Larger but Shorter part on the Eastern side called the 'Lower Town'.
- It is believed that the Citadel was possibly occupied by the members of the ruling class as buildings of prominence such as the Great Bath in Mohenjodaro are located in the citadel.
- The lower town had common residential buildings which is inhabited by the common people.



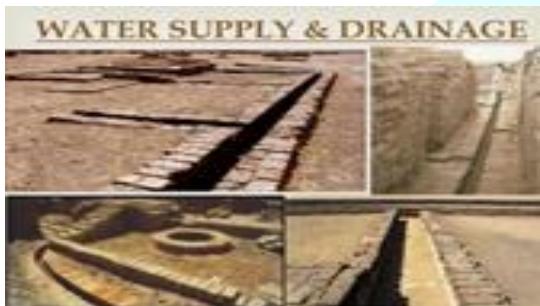
- The use of burnt bricks was common in the construction of houses.
- Also, the houses in the cities followed a grid system as the city was divided into many blocks.

- Houses were often of two or more storeys
- Each house had its own courtyard, windows and bathrooms while some even had their own wells.

- However, no window faced the streets.



- Also, roads had cut across each other at right angles.
- The drainage system of the Indus Valley Civilization was also very impressive.
- The drains were made of mortar, lime & gypsum, were slightly sloped and had manholes at regular intervals for cleaning purposes.
- Also, granaries have been discovered at sites like Mohenjodaro used to store grains.



- At sites such as Dholavira and Lothal (Gujarat), the entire settlement was fortified, and sections within the town were also separated by walls.
- Chanhudaro was the only Indus Valley city without a citadel.

- IVC inhabitants are also known to have pioneered irrigation and water harvesting techniques
- Thus, Indus Valley Civilization people can easily be called the best engineers of their times.

Study the [NCERT Notes on Sixteen Mahajanapadas](#) here.

Various Phases of Indus Valley Civilization:

Early Harappan Phase From 3300 BCE to 2600 BCE:

- This phase can also be related to the Hakra Phase, which is located in the Ghaggar-Hakra River Valley region.
- The earliest examples of the Indus Script dating back to 3000 BCE belong to this phase.
- Presumably, this phase was characterized by a centralized authority & an increasingly urban form of life.
- Trade networks were also established in the Early Harappan Phase itself.
- Moreover, evidence of the cultivation of various crops like peas, sesame seeds, dates, cotton, etc also exist during this phase.

Mature Harappan Phase à From 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE:

- During this phase, which begins in 2600 BCE, the early Indus Valley Civilization communities like Harappa & Mohenjodaro in Pakistan & Lothal in India began turning into large urban centres
- The site of Kot Diji located in the Sindh district of Pakistan represents the transition from the ‘Early Harappan Phase’ to the ‘Late Harappan Phase’.



Late Harappan Phase From 1900 BCE to 1300 BCE:

- The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) started showing signs of gradual decline from around 1800 BCE, and by 1700 BCE, most of the cities were abandoned.
- Various reasons like external war, flood, drought, chemical reactions, etc are given for this sudden decline of Indus Valley Civilization, which we have discussed ahead in detail
- However, various elements that characterized the ancient Indus Valley Civilization continued to be present in the later cultures as well.
- Moreover, contemporary archaeological data indicates the continuance of Late Harappan Culture till 1000-900 BCE.

Study the [NCERT Notes on History of Medieval India](#) here.

Decline of the Indus Valley Civilization:

- This civilization declined around 1800 BCE but the actual reasons behind its demise are still debated.

• **Various Theories:**

1. **Aryan Invasion Theory:** According to this, the Aryan invasion into the Harappan territory led to the destruction of the IVC.
 2. **Epidemic Theory:** According to this, an uncontrollable epidemic must have spread in the IVC cities which led to its destruction.
 3. **Natural Disasters Theory:** According to this, a large-scale earthquake, flood or drought would have hit the IVC cities, which led to the destruction of the Indus Valley Civilization.
 4. **Less Rainfall leading to Draughts:** Less rainfall due to the changing climatic conditions would have led to draughts in the IVC cities due to which IVC declined
 5. **Change in the course of the river:** Change in course of Ghaggar-Hakra river led to increased aridity and subsequent destruction in the Indus Valley Civilization cities.
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- Though, India and the world marvel at the wonder of the Indus Valley Civilization, yet this culture also could not defeat the law of nature and thus slowly declined due to a combination of manmade and natural factors which ultimately led to the rise of Early Vedic Tradition in India.

Study the [NCERT Notes on the North Indian Kingdoms of Medieval India](#) here.

Contemporary Findings regarding the Indus Valley Civilization:

- A recent study conducted by Deccan College, Pune in the Kotda Bhadli archaeological site in present-day Gujarat shows evidence of dairy products being produced by Harappans as early as 2500 BCE.
- A study published in the Journal of Archaeological Science shows that IVC inhabitants also consumed meat products of animals like pigs, buffaloes, goats apart from cultivating crops.
- A recent publication has provided crucial evidence that Ancestral Dravidian languages were possibly spoken by a significant population in the Indus Valley civilization.

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We hope that all your doubts regarding the Indus Valley Civilization will be cleared after going through this article. You can download the [Testbook App](#) now to check out various other topics relevant to the UPSC IAS Exam.