



Brick ruins and artifacts are all that remain of the Indus civilization. A seal (below) has hieroglyphics that no one has yet deciphered.

6 A mystifying script

Why did the Indus love baths and unicorns?

BY TIM APPENZELLER

Four thousand years ago, the world's first known billboard looked down on one of the world's first great cities. The imposing stone metropolis, now called Dholavira, sat on an island in a salt marsh in northwestern India. Three sets of walls enclosed it, and its gates opened onto broad plazas, bustling workshops, and busy markets. The 9-foot-wide wooden sign, remnants of which were found a decade ago, may have hung on a central tower, where its 15-inch white gypsum letters would have proclaimed to all literate citizens and visitors . . . well, that's where the picture blurs, because today, no one can read the ancient script.

What name or slogan loomed over Dholavira is just one of the many puzzles of the ancient Indus civilization, which flourished along the modern Indus River and a now vanished river to the east between 2600 and 1900 B.C. The Indus erected half a dozen major cities of brick and stone boasting amenities unmatched in the ancient world, including sewers and baths. Digging into mounds that now en-

tomb these cities on the dusty plains of Pakistan and northwestern India, archaeologists have found exquisite jewelry, statuary, and ceramics decorated with real and fanciful animals, including unicorns by the hundreds.

But they have found little to reveal the beliefs that sparked the culture and held it together for 700 years until it withered, perhaps because shifting rivers flooded some cities and parched others. Those secrets may be uncovered when archaeologists can finally read the script that adorned that ancient billboard—but perhaps not even then.



Gentle people. The news of the Indus Valley cities reached the modern world 75 years ago in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*, where British archaeologist John Marshall announced the discovery of a civilization that turned out to be as old as Mesopotamia. Many scholars expected the ruins would reveal a culture much like it. But the more Marshall and his successors dug, the less the Indus culture looked like other Bronze Age societies. "There's no evidence for armies or war or anything like that," says archaeologist Jim Shaffer of Case

Western Reserve University.

Nor is there any sign of grandiose rulers. "There was no cult of the individual," says Harvard University's Richard Meadow, who is excavating an Indus city called Harappa, in modern Pakistan. There are "no fancy burials, no monumental displays of wealth."

Somehow, without war or charismatic strongmen, the Indus people imposed their culture across a territory larger than France. Everywhere, their builders made bricks in a length-to-width-to-height ratio of 4 to 2 to 1, a signature of Indus construction. Tax collectors used standardized weights to assay goods, potters turned out identical designs, and the elite carried soapstone seals, embossed with Indus script and animal designs, to stamp trade goods. "They also had tremendous craft technology, if not the best craft technology in the Bronze Age," says Shaffer. In city after city, the Indus people built deep, brick-lined wells, smelted and cast copper and bronze, and made jewelry.

The cohesion of the Indus culture may have been rooted in commerce. "Possibly it was a large economic empire with a strong sense of national ethos," says R. S. Bisht of the Archaeological Survey of India, who heads the excavations at Dholavira. The Indus people sought raw materials, including metals and semi-precious stones, from as far away as Afghanistan, and their ships carried beads, bangles, and other products up the Persian Gulf to the cities of Mesopotamia. These trade links might have kept the elite of the

far-flung Indus realm in close touch.

Others think something more esoteric must have held the Indus culture together. "In the absence of a political elite, of a standing army, one is left with the symbolic—a system of beliefs," says Shaffer. But decades of digging have revealed nothing like the elaborate temples of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Clean freaks. Still, the cities do hold clues, says archaeologist Gregory Possehl of the University of Pennsylvania. When it came to sanitation, the Indus people seem to have been as obsessive as modern Americans. Ubiquitous wells and baths—many private houses had them—"make a strong case that people there were really into water, symbolically and in terms of purification," Possehl says. The Great Bath at Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan, 40 feet long and 8 feet deep, may have been the Indus equivalent of a temple.

Water wasn't the only force in Indus spiritual life. Seals and tablets found in the ruins depict unicorns, three-headed buffaloes, and encounters between humans, gods, and beasts. "If we could unravel these folk tales," says Possehl, "we could



get into the ideology of the Indus people."

The inscriptions might help—if archaeologists could read them. Archaeologists think that some of the writing identifies the seal's owner. In other cases, the procession of symbols, which look tantalizingly like real objects—a trident, a fish, a two-handed jar—may narrate a story.

Would-be decipherers have published more than 50 claims of success, but most scholars think the Indus code is yet to be cracked. So far, no one has found anything like the Rosetta stone that unlocked the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt: a bilingual inscription with both the undeciphered script and a known script.

But where there are ruins, there is hope. Archaeologists are digging deeper at Harappa and other sites. What they find may, finally, give a voice to the Indus people. ●

1) What must archaeologists still do to find out more about the beliefs of the people of the Indus valley civilizations?

2) In what ways was the Indus River culture different from ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt?

3) According to archaeologists, what helped unite the people of the Indus culture?