

Examrace

Competitive Exams: The Aryan

Get top class preparation for competitive exams right from your home: [get questions, notes, tests, video lectures and more](#)- for all subjects of your exam.

They called themselves the “noble ones” or the “superior ones.” Their names are lost; their tribal names are lost. But when they found themselves conquerors, they gave themselves the name “superior” or “noble.”

They were a tribal and nomadic peoples living in the far reaches of Euro-Asia in hostile steppe lands barely scratching out a living. They were unquestionably a tough people, and they were fierce and war-like. Their religion reflects it dominated as it is by a storm-god or sky-god that enjoins warfare and conquest. This god was called something like “Dyaus,” a word related to “Zeus,” “deus” (the Latin word for “god”), “deva” (the Sanskrit word for “god”), and, of course, the English word “divine.” Their culture was oriented around warfare, and they were very good at it. They were superior on horseback and rushed into battle in chariots. They were a tribal people ruled over by a war-chief, or raja (the Latin word “rex” (king) comes from the same root word, along with the English “regal”). Somewhere in the early centuries of the second millenium BC, they began to migrate southwards in waves of steady conquest across the face of Persia and the lands of India.

There, they would take on the name “superior” or “noble” to distinguish themselves from the people they conquered. Their name is derived from the Indo-European root word, “ar,” meaning “noble.” In Sanskrit, they were the “Aryas” (“Aryans”); but that root, “ar,” would also serve as the foundation of the name of the conquered Persian territories, “Iran.” This concept of nobility, in fact, seems to lie at the heart of Indo-European consciousness, for it appears in another country’s name, “Ireland,” or “Eire.” You can bet, however, that when a people go around calling themselves superior that it spells bad news for other people.

And there is no question that they were bad news for the southern Asians. They swept over Persia with lightening speed, and spread across the northern river plains of India. Their nature as a warlike, conquering people are still preserved in Vedic religion, the foundation of Hinduism. In the Rig Veda, the collection of praises to the gods, the god Indra towers over the poetry as a conquering god, one that smashes cities and slays enemies. The invading Aryans were originally nomadic peoples, not agricultural. They penetrated India from the north-west, settling first in the Indus valley. Unlike the Harappans, however, they eventually concentrated their populations along the Ganges floodplain. The Ganges, unlike the Indus, is far milder and more predictable in its flooding. It must have been a paradise to a people from the dry steppes of central Asia and Iran, a paradise full of water and forest. When they arrived, the vast northern plains were almost certainly densely forested. Where now bare fields stretch to the horizon, when the

Aryans arrived lush forests stretched to those very same horizons. Clearing the forests over the centuries was an epic project and one that is still preserved in Indian literature.

The Aryans, or Vedic civilization were a new start in Indian culture. Harappa was more or less a dead end (at least as far as we know) ; the Aryans adopted almost nothing of Harappan culture. They built no cities, no states, no granaries, and used no writing. Instead they were a warlike people that organized themselves in individual tribal, kinship units, the jana. The jana was ruled over by a war-chief. These tribes spread quickly over northern India and the Deccan. In a process that we do not understand, the basic social unit of Aryan culture, the jana, slowly developed from an organization based on kinship to one based on geography. The jana became a janapada, or nation and the jana-rajya, or tribal kingdom, became the jana-rajyapada, or national kingdom. So powerfully ingrained into Indian culture is the jana-pada, that Indians still define themselves mainly by their territorial origins. All the major territories of modern India, with their separate cultures and separate languages, can be dated back to the early jana-padas of Vedic India.

The earliest history of the Aryans in India is called the Rigvedic Period (1700 – 1000 BC) after the religious praise poems that are the oldest pieces of literature in India. These poems, the Rig Veda, are believed to represent the most primitive layer of Indo-European religion and have many characteristics in common with Persian religion since the two peoples are closely related in time. In this early period, their population was restricted to the Punjab in the northern reaches of the Indus River and the Yamuna River near the Ganges. They maintained the Aryan tribal structure, with a raja ruling over the tribal group in tandem with a council. Each jana seems to have had a chief priest; the religion was focused almost entirely on a series of sacrifices to the gods. The Rigvedic peoples originally had only two social classes: Nobles and commoners. Eventually, they added a third: Dasas, or “darks.” These were, we presume, the darker-skinned people they had conquered. By the end of the Rigvedic period, social class had settled into four rigid castes: The caturvarnas, or “four colors.” At the top of the caturvarnas were the priests, or Brahmins. Below the priests were the warriors or nobles (Kshatriya) , the craftspeople and merchants (Vaishya) , and the servants (Shudra) , who made up the bulk of society. These economic classes were legitimated by an elaborate religious system and would be eventually subdivided into a huge number of economic sub-classes which we call “castes.” Social class by the end of the Rigvedic period became completely inflexible; there was no such thing as social mobility.

In the early centuries of Later Vedic Period or Brahmanic Period (1000 – 500 BC) , the Aryans migrated across the Doab, which is a large plain which separates the Yamuna River from the Ganges. It was a difficult project, for the Doab was thickly forested; the Aryans slowly burned and settled the Doab until they reached the Ganges. While the Rig Veda represents the most primitive religion of the Aryans during the Rigvedic Period, the religion of the Later Vedic period is dominated by the Brahmanas, or priestly book, which was composed sometime between 1000 and 850 BC. Later Vedic society is dominated by the Brahmins and every aspect of Aryan life comes under the control of priestly rituals

and spells. In history as the Indians understand it, the Later Vedic Period is the Epic Age; the great literary, heroic epics of Indian culture, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, though they were composed between 500 and 200 BC, were probably originally formulated and told in the Later Vedic Period. Both of these epics deal with heroes from this period and demonstrate how Aryan cultural values, as we can understand them from the Rig Veda, are being transformed by mixing with Indus cultures.

What did the Aryans do with their time? They seem to have had a well-developed musical culture, and song and dance dominated their society. They were not greatly invested in the visual arts, but their interest in lyric poetry was unmatched. They loved gambling. They did not, however, have much interest in writing even though they could have inherited a civilization and a writing system when they originally settled India. We do not know exactly when they became interested in writing, but it may have been at the end of the Brahmanic period somewhere between 650 and 500 BC. Still, there are no Aryan writings until the Mauryan period " from Harappa (2500 – 1750 BC) to Maurya (300 BC) is quite a long time. The script that the Mauryans used is called " Brahmi " script and was used to write not only the religious and literary language of the time, Sanskrit, but also the vernacular languages. This script, Brahmi, is the national alphabet of India.

The Vedic period, then, is a period of cultural mixing, not of conquest. Although the Aryans were a conquering people when they first spread into India, the culture of the Aryans would gradually mix with indigenous cultures, and the war-religion of the Aryans, still preserved in parts of the Rig Veda, slowly became more ritualized and more meditative. By 200 BC, this process of mixing and transforming was more or less complete and the culture we call "Indian" was fully formed.

Harappa and Indus Civilization

Although agriculture seems to have come late to India, arriving sometime around 5000 BC, India was one of the first regions to give birth to civilization. Only a few centuries after the first Mesopotamian cities sprang up, a people living along the northern reaches of the Indus River discovered urbanization, metalwork, and writing. It is a mysterious civilization and one with no discernible continuity, for it thrived for just several centuries and then disappeared. The Indo-European immigrants who settled the region did not adopt most of the aspects of this civilization, and what precisely they did adopt is difficult to ascertain. So while Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Yellow River civilizations lasted for millenia and left their mark on all subsequent cultures, the Indus River civilization seems to have been a false start.

For the overwhelming majority of human history, this early culture was truly a lost civilization. The mounds which stood where great cities once thrived excited interest in observers, but no one in their wildest dreams could have imagined that beneath those large mounds lay cities that had been lost to human memory.

In the 1920's, excavations began on one of these mounds in Harappa in Pakistan. While the archaeologists expected to find something, they did not imagine that a city lay beneath

the earth. Archaeologists would later discover another large city to the recovery of at least eighty villages and towns related to this newly discovered civilization. They named it Harappan after the first city they discovered, but it is more commonly called the Indus River civilization. While we have stones and tools and fragments and bones, we really have no one's voice or experience from the bustling days of the great Harappan cities. We don't know who the people were who built and lived there. We don't know, either, when they first built their cities; some scholars argue that Harappan civilization arises around 2250 BC, while others argue that it can be dated back to 2500 BC or earlier.

Like the civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, Harappa grew on the floodplains of a rich and life-giving river, the Indus. The original cities and many of the towns seemed to have been built right upon the shores of the river. The Indus, however, is destructive and unpredictable in its floods, and the cities were frequently levelled by the forces of nature. Mohenjo-Daro in the south, where the flooding can be fairly brutal, was rebuilt six times that we know about; Harappa in the north was rebuilt five times.

The Harappans were an agricultural people whose economy was almost entirely dominated by horticulture. Massive granaries were built at each city, and there most certainly was an elaborate bureaucracy to distribute this wealth of food. The Indus River valley is relatively dry now, but apparently it was quite wet when the Harappans thrived there. We know this because the bricks that they built their cities with were fired bricks; since sun-dried bricks are cheaper and easier to make, we can only assume that over-abundant humidity and precipitation prevented them from taking the cheaper way out. In addition, many of the Harappan seals have pictures of animals that imply a wet and marshy environment, such as rhinoceroses, elephants, and tigers. The Harappans also had a wide variety of domesticated animals: Camels, cats, dogs, goats, sheep, and buffalo.

Their cities were carefully planned and laid out; they are, in fact, the first people to plan the building of their cities. Whenever they rebuilt their cities, they laid them out precisely in the same way the destroyed city had been built. The pathways within the city are laid out in a perpendicular criss-cross fashion; most of the city consisted of residences.

Life in the Harappan cities was apparently quite good. Although living quarters were cramped, which is typical of ancient cities, the residents nevertheless had drains, sewers, and even latrines. There is no question that they had an active trade with cultures to the west. Several Harappan seals have been found in excavations of Sumerian cities, as well as pictures of animals that in no way could have existed in Mesopotamia, such as tigers. There is not, however, a wealth of Mesopotamian artifacts in Harappan cities.

We know nothing of the religion of the Harappans. Unlike in Mesopotamia or Egypt, we have discovered no building that so much as hints that it might be a temple or involve any kind of public worship. The bulk of public buildings in the city seemed to be solely oriented towards the economy and making life comfortable for the Harappans. We do, however, have a number of tantalizing figures on various seals and statues. What we gather from these figures (and we can not gather much) , is that the Harappans probably

exercised some sort of goddess worship. There is, however, some sort of male god (maybe) that has the head of a man with the horns of a bull. In addition, we believe from various artifacts that the Harappans also may have worshipped natural objects or animistic forces, but the circumstances of this worship can only be guessed at:

We know that the Harappans were eventually supplanted by waves of migrations of Indo-Europeans. These new peoples, however, did not seem to adopt the religious practices of the Harappans, so it is not possible to reconstruct Harappan religion through the religion of the Vedic peoples, that is, the Indo-Europeans who constructed the rudimentary Indian religion represented by the Vedas.

Right at the heart of the mystery, like a person speaking behind sound-proof glass, are the numerous writings on the artifacts that have been unearthed. Harappan writing was a pictographic script, or at least seems to be; as of yet, however, no one has figured out how to decipher it or even what language it might be rendering. The logical candidate is that the Harappans spoke a Dravidian language, but that conclusion, which may not be true, has not helped anybody decipher the script. Like the rest of Harappan civilization, the writing was lost to human memory after the disappearance of the Harappans.

And finally they disappeared. And they disappeared without a trace. Some believe that they were overrun by the war-like Aryans, the Indo-Europeans who, like a storm, rushed in from Euro-Asia and overran Persia and northern India. Some believe that the periodic and frequently destructive flooding of the Indus finally took its toll on the economic health of the civilization. It is possible that the periodic changes of course that the Indus undergoes also contributed to its decline. All we know is that somewhere between 1800 and 1700 BC, the Harappan cities and towns were abandoned and finally reclaimed by the rich soil they had sprung from:

Developed by: [Mindsprite Solutions](#)