The dawn of Indian civilisation never fails to fascinate. What prompted people to build cities in the Indus plains in the 3rd millennium BCE (Before Common Era) or in the Gangetic plains from about 800 BCE? Why did the Indus cities collapse around 1900 BCE? Are there any connections between those two civilisations, the second of which has come to be regarded as India’s classical civilisation? Answers to those questions remain tentative; despite the mass of material available, numerous sites remain unexcavated and many excavation reports unpublished. Also, in the Indian environment, the passage of time destroys most objects of wood, cloth or bark, so that the archaeological record is necessarily incomplete — gone are ceremonies, processions, songs or stories. Finally, in the case of the Indus civilisation, the writing system used on thousands of small seals or pottery pieces remains undeciphered, leaving an important aspect of its culture mute.

Initially, the connection with the Indus (or Harappan) and Gangetic civilisations was regarded as virtually nonexistent: in the 1940s, Mortimer Wheeler, a director general of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), proclaimed, on the basis of a few skeletons found in Mohenjo-daro’s streets, that the city had been destroyed by invading Aryans. The Harappan civilization was thus ‘pre-Aryan’, while the Gangetic one was ‘Aryan’, i.e. founded on Vedic culture. But there was a few centuries’ gap between Mohenjo-daro’s collapse and the supposed arrival of the said Aryans around 1500 BCE, and in any case no archaeological evidence has been found for such an arrival; today, the Aryans have quietly disappeared from the historical literature: they are not needed to explain the evolution of India’s protohistory.

Current thinking among archaeologists is that the Indus cities disappeared not because of any onslaught by barbarian invaders, but largely owing to environmental factors, such as droughts, increasing aridity, deforestation, shifts in the Indus or the loss of the Sarasvati river (the Sarasvati, a river flowing parallel to the Indus, was another major lifeline of the Harappan civilisation, which is why the latter is sometimes also called ‘Indus–Sarasvati civilisation’).

Nevertheless, the dogma somehow survived that the Indus civilisation was a sort of island in time and space, a brilliant realisation with no sequel or legacy: a millennium-long ‘Dark Age’ was said to separate it from the historical phase. However, in the last two or three decades the picture has drastically changed. Numerous points of contact between the Indus and Gangetic civilisations, or between Harappan and Vedic cultures, have come to light.

Town-planning and construction

One of the most striking features of the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation is the care it lavished on town-planning, water management, sanitation and civic administration. Cities of the Gangetic civilisation, although not so geometrically laid down as, say, Mohenjo-daro’s acropolis, still share some of those characteristics: a general orientation along the cardinal directions, an internal grid plan, and the use of enclosing fortifications as a symbol of authority. Garbage bins lined Mohenjo-daro’s main streets, but also those of the historical city of Taxila (in today’s northwestern Pakistan). Some sanitation system also emerged at Taxila and in...
The Harappan Legacy

**ASI X10, Michel Danino**

Asiatic, both civilisations erected pillared halls and pillared halls. Scholars have shown that the typical Harappan house plans (with a central courtyard and rooms on the sides) have survived in rural parts of northwest India to this day.

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**Typical Harappan house plans have survived in rural parts of northwest India to this day.**

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**Gangetic cities, such as Hastinapura, Kaushambi or Mathura.**

Architecturally, both civilisations erected pillared halls and pillared halls. Scholars have shown that the typical Harappan house plans (with a central courtyard and rooms on the sides) have survived in rural parts of northwest India to this day.

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**Comparision between Harappan and Traditional Indian Weights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Traditional Indian weights</th>
<th>Traditional Harappan weights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Value in grams</td>
<td>Value in grams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cash</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>256</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban 960</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>102.528</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**The Harappan Legacy extends to less material aspects. The ‘endless knot’ and the swastika, both classical Indian symbols, have Harappan origins, and parallels between the animal motifs depicted on the Indian seals and those on silver punch-marked coins of the early historical era are striking.**

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**The apsidal temple at Banaswadi, Haryana (left) constructed in the 3rd millennium BCE finds an echo in the one in Atirapikshana (right) of the 1st millennium BCE.**

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**As regards to the Harappan technological legacy, the famous 'Dancing Girl' bronze figurine was cast by a method known as ‘lost wax’ or ‘cire perdue’, which spread to the rest of India and is still in use by traditional bronze casters.**

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**The ‘endless knot’ and the swastika, both classical Indian symbols, have Harappan origins.**

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**The apsidal temple at Banaswadi, Haryana (left) constructed in the 3rd millennium BCE finds an echo in the one in Atirapikshana (right) of the 1st millennium BCE.**

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**Terracotta pieces found at Lothal (Gujarat) are similar to the ones used in the modern game of chess.**

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**A Harappan god (left) under an arch of pipal leaves resembles the statue of Shiva (right) excavated today under an arch of fire.**

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**As archaeologist DP Agrawal puts it, “The Harappans’ cultural and religious traditions provide the substratum for the latter-day Indian civilization.” Or as U.S. archaeologist JM Kenoyer says, “There is really no Dark Age isolating the protohistoric period from the historic period.”**

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**The urban collapse did not cause a cultural break, although of course there were considerable changes in people’s lifestyles and techniques as they went about in quest of greater pastures. Some of the Later Harappans, as they are called, crossed the Yamuna and the Ganges, carrying with them seeds that were to produce the tree called India’s classical civilization.**