

APPSC GROUP-I MAINS — STUDY NOTES

INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Society, Art & Religion

Paper II — History, Culture & Geography | Day 3 (01 Apr 2026)

SECTION 1: SUMMARISED NOTES

1.1 Social Structure

The IVC was a highly urbanised, middle-class-dominated society. While the undeciphered script limits our understanding, archaeological evidence reveals a complex social organisation:

1.1.1 Social Classes

Evidence suggests at least four broad social groups: a ruling/priestly/merchant elite (residing in the citadel area), a class of artisans and craftsmen (bead-makers, potters, seal-makers), traders and merchants (indicated by standardised weights, seals as identity markers, and long-distance trade), and labourers/agricultural workers (residing in barracks-like quarters found at Harappa). Unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, there is no evidence of a powerful priestly class, kings, or elaborate royal tombs — suggesting either a collective/oligarchic governance or a merchant-dominated polity.

1.1.2 Role of Women

The large number of female terracotta figurines (Mother Goddess figures) suggests that women held an important symbolic and possibly social position. The Dancing Girl sculpture (Mohenjo-daro) depicts a confident female figure. Women wore short skirts (cotton or wool), elaborate jewellery (necklaces, bangles, earrings, girdles), and used cosmetics — a vanity case found at Harappa indicates knowledge of wall painting and personal grooming. However, the prominence of female figurines in religion does not necessarily mean women held political power — the evidence is inconclusive.

1.1.3 Dress & Ornaments

Men typically wore two garments: a dhoti-like lower garment and an upper shawl/cloak worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm. Some stone sculptures show turbaned men. Women wore short skirts with elaborate jewellery. Ornaments were made from gold, silver, copper, semi-precious stones (carnelian, lapis lazuli, turquoise), shell, ivory, and faience. The famous carnelian barrel beads of Harappa were so valued that they were found in Mesopotamian royal burials. Hair was worn in various styles; women used hairpins and combs.

1.1.4 Food & Agriculture

The Harappans cultivated wheat, barley, rice (evidence at Lothal and Rangpur), mustard, sesame, peas, and dates. Cotton was first cultivated here. They domesticated cattle, buffalo, sheep, goat, pig, and possibly fowl. Dogs were kept as pets (some found buried with collars). There is evidence of fishing (fishhooks found). The diet was predominantly vegetarian with supplementary meat and fish.

1.1.5 Entertainment & Recreation

Cubical dice (with 1 to 6 holes) were found at Mohenjo-daro, suggesting board games. Terracotta toys include carts with wheels, whistles, rattles, birds, and animals — indicating children's games. Figurines of girls in dancing poses suggest some form of dance. A harp-like instrument depicted on a seal and two shell objects from Lothal indicate stringed musical instruments. Clay marbles found in courtyards suggest outdoor games.

1.2 Art Forms

1.2.1 Sculpture — Stone

- **Priest-King (Mohenjo-daro):** Steatite (soapstone) bust, 17.5 cm high. Bearded male wearing a trefoil-patterned shawl over left shoulder. Half-closed eyes suggest meditation. The most iconic stone sculpture of the IVC. Now in the National Museum, Karachi.
- **Male Torso (Harappa):** Red sandstone figure showing naturalistic modelling of the human body. Shoulders and torso rendered with remarkable anatomical accuracy. Now in the National Museum, New Delhi.

1.2.2 Sculpture — Bronze (Lost-Wax/Cire Perdue Technique)

Bronze casting was a speciality of the Harappans, using the lost-wax (cire perdue) technique — where a wax model is coated in clay, heated to melt the wax, and molten bronze poured in. This technique is still used in parts of India today (Dhokra tradition).

- **Dancing Girl (Mohenjo-daro):** Bronze, ~4 inches (10.5 cm) tall, ~4,000 years old. Depicts a young girl standing in a confident posture with right hand on hip, left arm fully covered with bangles, wearing a cowrie shell necklace. Features include tied-back hair, prominent eyes, flat nose. One of the finest examples of Bronze Age art globally. Now in the National Museum, New Delhi. (UPSC Prelims 2025 asked about this).
- **Bronze Bull (Mohenjo-daro):** Expressive rendering of a bull's power and movement. Cord around neck, head turned right.
- **Bronze Dog Chasing Deer (Harappa):** Dynamic composition showing movement and action.
- **Bronze Buffalo (Daimabad):** Along with chariot, bull, elephant, rhinoceros bronzes. Largest Harappan bronze collection. Shows IVC influence in Deccan.

1.2.3 Terracotta Figurines

Thousands of terracotta figurines have been found — predominantly handmade (not wheel-turned). The most common are Mother Goddess figures: standing females with elaborate headdresses (fan-shaped with cup-like projections), prominent breasts, necklaces, and girdles. These are crude compared to stone/bronze sculptures, suggesting they were mass-produced for household worship. Male terracotta figurines include bearded men with coiled hair in rigid upright posture, possibly deities. Terracotta masks of horned deities have been found.

Terracotta toys are abundant: carts with movable wheels, whistles shaped like birds, rattles, animals (bulls, dogs, monkeys), and gamesmen. These provide evidence of daily life, entertainment, and the sophistication of Harappan childhood.

1.2.4 Seals

Over 2,000 seals have been discovered, primarily steatite (soapstone), occasionally agate, chert, copper, ivory, and terracotta. Standard size: 2×2 inches (square plaque). Each seal contains: an animal

motif (unicorn bull is most common, followed by humped bull, elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, bison, goat, buffalo), and an inscription in the Indus script (still undeciphered).

The seals served multiple purposes: commercial identity (like modern business logos), amulets (worn for protection/identification), and possibly administrative/bureaucratic functions (sealing packages, authenticating goods). Notable seals include the Pashupati Seal (horned figure in yogic posture surrounded by animals) and the Unicorn Seal (most frequently occurring motif).

1.2.5 Pottery

Harappan pottery is distinctive: primarily wheel-made, well-fired, with a red base and black painted designs. Common motifs include geometric patterns (circles, triangles, chequered patterns), pipal leaves, fish, peacocks, and intersecting circles. The most characteristic pottery is the 'Painted Red Ware' with black designs. Perforated pottery (with small holes) was probably used as a strainer or for storing liquids. Large storage jars (for grain and water) and small goblets for daily use have been found.

1.2.6 Beads & Ornaments

Bead-making was a highly specialised craft, particularly at Chanhudaro and Lothal. Materials included carnelian, agate, jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise, steatite, gold, silver, copper, shell, ivory, and faience. The long barrel-shaped carnelian beads with etched trefoil patterns are uniquely Harappan and were so valued that they reached Mesopotamian royal tombs. Micro-beads were made from steatite paste, hardened by heating. Chanhudaro produced some of the longest carnelian beads (up to 5 inches).

1.3 Religious Practices

1.3.1 Mother Goddess Worship

Numerous terracotta female figurines with elaborate headdresses, prominent breasts, and ornate jewellery suggest the worship of a Mother Goddess associated with fertility and prosperity. Some figurines appear to represent pregnant women. Smoke-stained figurines suggest incense or lamp offerings. This tradition has parallels in later Hindu worship of Shakti/Devi and may represent one of the oldest continuing religious traditions in South Asia.

1.3.2 Proto-Shiva (Pashupati)

The famous Pashupati Seal (Mohenjo-daro, ~2300 BCE) depicts a horned, three-faced figure seated in mulabandhasana (a yogic posture), surrounded by four animals: elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, and buffalo, with two deer beneath the seat. John Marshall first identified this as 'Proto-Shiva' based on parallels with the later Hindu deity Shiva as Pashupati (Lord of Animals) and Yogeshwara (Lord of Yoga). While this identification is debated, the seal remains one of the most significant religious artifacts of the ancient world.

1.3.3 Nature & Animal Worship

Pipal tree worship: One seal shows seven figures paying obeisance to a pipal tree. The pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) continues to be sacred in Hinduism and Buddhism. Animal worship: The humped bull (zebu) appears on numerous seals and may have had sacred significance. The unicorn bull is the most common seal motif. Composite animal figures (part-human, part-animal) on seals suggest mythological beliefs.

1.3.4 Fire Altars

Fire altars have been found at Kalibangan and Lothal, suggesting ritual fire worship. At Kalibangan, a row of fire altars was found in the southern part of the citadel, along with animal bones and ash —

possibly indicating animal sacrifice and fire rituals. This has parallels with the later Vedic fire worship tradition, suggesting possible continuity.

1.3.5 Absence of Temples

Significantly, no temples, churches, or dedicated religious buildings have been identified at any Harappan site. This is unique among major ancient civilizations (Mesopotamia had ziggurats, Egypt had temples). The Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro is the closest to a ritual structure — possibly used for ceremonial purification bathing. Religious practices were likely domestic (household) rather than institutional.

1.4 Burial Practices

Three types of burial practices have been identified, suggesting diverse beliefs about death and afterlife:

- **Complete Burial:** The most common practice. The body was laid in a pit (north-south orientation), accompanied by grave goods — pottery, ornaments (jewellery found with both men and women), mirrors, and food items. Found at Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Kalibangan, and Lothal. Lothal has evidence of a double/dual burial (male and female together).
- **Fractional Burial:** After exposure of the body (possibly to elements or animals), the remaining bones were collected and buried in an urn or pit. Found at some Harappan sites.
- **Cremation & Urn Burial:** The body was cremated and ashes/remains placed in urns and buried. The H-Cemetery at Harappa (Late Harappan phase) shows painted urn burials with distinctive pottery. This practice has parallels with later Hindu cremation traditions.

Notably, Harappan burials were relatively simple compared to Egyptian tombs or Mesopotamian royal burials. No evidence of elaborate tombs, pyramids, or conspicuous wealth display in death — reinforcing the impression of a relatively egalitarian society.

1.5 Continuity with Later Indian Culture

Several IVC practices show remarkable continuity with later Indian traditions:

- **Religious Continuity:** Mother Goddess → Shakti/Devi; Pashupati → Shiva; pipal worship → Bodhi tree (Buddhism)/sacred fig (Hinduism); fire altars → Vedic yagna; ritual bathing → Hindu ceremonial bathing.
- **Social Continuity:** Use of sindoor/vermilion (found in female burials); bangles as markers of married status; dhoti-like garments; yoga posture (Pashupati Seal).
- **Craft Continuity:** Lost-wax bronze casting → Dhokra tradition; bead-making traditions in Gujarat/Rajasthan; painted pottery traditions; standardised weights.
- **Urban Continuity:** Grid planning influenced later Indian cities; emphasis on sanitation and drainage; public bathing facilities.

SECTION 2: KEY DIMENSIONS TO COVER

Examiner angles.

1. **Social Structure:** Classes (elite, artisans, merchants, labourers); no evidence of kings/priests ruling; merchant-dominated? Role of women. Dress, ornaments, food.
2. **Art Forms — Classification:** Stone sculpture (Priest-King, Male Torso), Bronze (Dancing Girl, Bull), Terracotta (Mother Goddess, toys), Seals (Pashupati, unicorn), Pottery (painted red ware), Beads (carnelian, Chanhudaro).
3. **Lost-Wax Technique:** Know the process (wax model → clay coating → heating → bronze pouring). Dancing Girl as iconic example. Continues as Dhokra tradition. UPSC Prelims 2025 question on Dancing Girl.
4. **Seals — Function & Motifs:** Commercial identity, amulets, administrative. Unicorn = most common. Pashupati Seal. Indus script undeciphered. 2,000+ found.
5. **Religion — Five Aspects:** Mother Goddess, Proto-Shiva (Pashupati), tree worship (pipal), animal worship (bull), fire altars (Kalibangan). No temples. Great Bath = ritual.
6. **Burial Practices:** Three types (complete, fractional, cremation/urn). Grave goods. Simple burials vs Egyptian/Mesopotamian elaborate tombs. Lothal dual burial.
7. **Continuity with Later India:** Religious, social, craft, and urban practices that survived into Hindu/Buddhist traditions. This is a high-value Mains essay point.
8. **Comparison with Contemporary Civilizations:** IVC art vs Egyptian (more monumental) vs Mesopotamian (more literary). IVC religion vs Egyptian (complex pantheon with temples) vs Mesopotamian (priestly class).
9. **Deccan Connection:** Daimabad bronzes. Significance for AP/South Indian history.

SECTION 3: PRELIMS MUST-REMEMBER FACTS

Crisp factual points. Memorize these.

1. Dancing Girl: Bronze, ~10.5 cm, Mohenjo-daro. Lost-wax (cire perdue) technique. ~4,000 years old. National Museum, New Delhi. (UPSC Prelims 2025)
2. Priest-King: Steatite, 17.5 cm, Mohenjo-daro. Trefoil shawl, bearded, half-closed eyes. National Museum, Karachi.
3. Male Torso: Red sandstone, Harappa. Naturalistic anatomy. National Museum, New Delhi.
4. Pashupati Seal: Mohenjo-daro, ~2300 BCE. Horned 3-faced figure in yogic posture. 4 animals: elephant, tiger, rhino, buffalo. 2 deer below. Marshall identified as Proto-Shiva.
5. Unicorn Seal: Most common seal motif in IVC. Found across all major sites. Unicorn = mythical one-horned animal.
6. Seals: 2,000+ found. Mostly steatite. Standard 2×2 inches. Animal motifs + Indus script. Commercial + identity + administrative function.
7. Lost-wax technique: Wax model → clay coat → heat (wax melts) → pour molten bronze. Continues as Dhokra tradition in India.
8. Mother Goddess: Terracotta. Fan-shaped headdress. Prominent breasts. Smoke-stained (offerings). Fertility worship.
9. Fire altars: Found at Kalibangan and Lothal. Animal bones + ash found. Parallels with Vedic fire worship.
10. No temples found at any IVC site. Great Bath (Mohenjo-daro) = closest to ritual structure. Religion was domestic, not institutional.
11. Pipal tree worship: Seal shows 7 figures bowing to pipal tree. Pipal = sacred in Hinduism and Buddhism.
12. Pottery: Wheel-made, well-fired, red base with black painted designs. Painted Red Ware = characteristic. Perforated pottery = strainer.
13. Beads: Carnelian barrel beads (unique Harappan). Chanhudaro = bead-making centre (longest carnelian beads, 5 inches). Reached Mesopotamian royal tombs.
14. Burial: 3 types — Complete (most common, N-S orientation, grave goods), Fractional (bones collected after exposure), Cremation/Urn (H-Cemetery, Harappa).
15. Lothal: Evidence of dual/double burial (male + female together).
16. Dice: Cubical, 1-6 holes, found at Mohenjo-daro. Evidence of board games.
17. Musical instruments: Harp-like instrument on seal; shell objects from Lothal = stringed instruments.
18. Cotton: First cultivated by IVC. Greeks called it 'Sindon' (from Sindh).
19. Dogs: Kept as pets. Found buried with collars. Terracotta dog figurines abundant.
20. Daimabad (Maharashtra): Largest Harappan bronze collection — chariot, bull, elephant, rhinoceros. Southernmost IVC site. Deccan connection.
21. Cow is NOT represented on any IVC seal. (IAS Prelims 2001 question). Horse remains debated (only Surkotda).

SECTION 4: MAINS MUST-WRITE POINTS

Each can form a paragraph.

1. **An Egalitarian Urban Society:** The IVC presents a striking contrast to contemporary Egypt and Mesopotamia. While those civilizations glorified pharaohs and priest-kings through monumental tombs and temples, the IVC had no grand palaces, no elaborate royal burials, and no evidence of a powerful military aristocracy. The relatively uniform house sizes, simple burial practices, and absence of extreme wealth concentration in graves suggest a more egalitarian society — possibly governed by a merchant council or collective leadership. This ‘urban democracy’ is unique in the ancient world.
2. **Art that Speaks Across Millennia:** The Dancing Girl of Mohenjo-daro — a 10.5 cm bronze masterpiece created 4,000 years ago using the lost-wax technique — stands as one of the finest artworks of the Bronze Age. Her confident posture, naturalistic proportions, and expressive personality rival any contemporary sculpture from Egypt or Mesopotamia. The Priest-King’s meditative calm, the bull’s captured movement, and the micro-precision of carnelian beads demonstrate that Harappan artisans possessed both technical mastery and artistic sensibility of the highest order.
3. **Seals as Windows into a Lost World:** With the script undeciphered, seals are our primary window into Harappan thought. The 2,000+ seals reveal: commercial networks (identity markers), religious beliefs (Pashupati, unicorn, composite animals), aesthetic sensibilities (realistic animal rendering), and possibly mythological narratives. The fact that Harappan seals have been found in Mesopotamia confirms long-distance trade, while their standardised format suggests a centralised or coordinated administrative system.
4. **Religion Without Temples — A Domestic Faith:** The absence of temples is the most puzzling aspect of IVC religion. Every other major civilization built monumental religious architecture. The Harappans appear to have practiced religion domestically — through household figurines (Mother Goddess), fire altars (Kalibangan), and ritual bathing (Great Bath). This suggests either a decentralised religious system without a priestly hierarchy, or religious practices so embedded in daily life that separate sacred spaces were unnecessary.
5. **Proto-Shiva and the Continuity Thesis:** The Pashupati Seal’s horned figure in yogic posture, surrounded by animals, has been interpreted as an early form of Shiva. If correct, this represents one of the oldest continuously worshipped deities in human history — predating Vedic religion by centuries. The fire altars at Kalibangan, pipal tree worship, and Mother Goddess tradition further support cultural continuity between the IVC and later Hinduism. The Rakhigarhi DNA study (2019) showed genetic continuity, complementing the archaeological evidence.
6. **Burial Practices — What Death Reveals About Life:** The three burial types (complete, fractional, cremation) suggest diverse communities or evolving beliefs within the IVC. Grave goods — pottery, ornaments, food — indicate belief in an afterlife where material needs continue. The relative simplicity of Harappan burials (compared to Egyptian tombs filled with gold and servants) reinforces the egalitarian thesis. The H-Cemetery’s painted urn burials in Harappa’s late phase suggest cultural change in the civilization’s declining period.
7. **Legacy in South Indian Art:** The Daimabad bronzes (chariot, bull, elephant, rhinoceros) demonstrate that IVC artistic traditions reached deep into the Deccan. This is significant for AP’s cultural history: the lost-wax bronze casting technique that produced the Dancing Girl may have transmitted southward, influencing later South Indian bronze sculpture traditions.

(including the magnificent Chola bronzes). The craft continuity from Harappan to medieval Indian metallurgy represents one of the world's longest unbroken artistic traditions.



SECTION 5: VALUE ADDITION

Enhance your Mains answers.

Key Scholars

- John Marshall: First identified Pashupati Seal as 'Proto-Shiva.' Excavated Mohenjo-daro. Announced IVC to the world (1924).
- Mortimer Wheeler: Proposed social stratification theory based on citadel-lower town division. Advocated Aryan invasion theory.
- Iravatham Mahadevan: Leading authority on Indus script. Proposed Dravidian linguistic affiliation.
- B.B. Lal: Excavated Kalibangan. Discovered fire altars and ploughed field.
- S.R. Rao: Excavated Lothal. Discovered dockyard and fire altars.

SECTION 6: QUICK REVISION BOX

Last-minute glance.

▶ Dancing Girl = Bronze, lost-wax, MoD, NM Delhi	▶ Priest-King = Steatite, MoD, NM Karachi
▶ Pashupati Seal = Proto-Shiva, 4 animals, yogic	▶ Unicorn = most common seal motif
▶ Seals: 2,000+, steatite, 2x2 inch, commercial+ritual	▶ Carnelian beads = Chanhudaro, reached Mesopotamia
▶ Mother Goddess = terracotta, fan headdress, fertility	▶ Fire altars = Kalibangan + Lothal
▶ NO temples found at any IVC site	▶ Great Bath = ritual purification, MoD
▶ Burial: 3 types (complete, fractional, urn)	▶ H-Cemetery Harappa = painted urn burials
▶ Pipal tree worship = seal with 7 figures bowing	▶ Cow NOT on any seal (Prelims 2001)
▶ Pottery = red base, black painted, wheel-made	▶ Lost-wax = Dhokra tradition continues
▶ Dice = cubical, 1-6 holes, MoD	▶ Cotton first cultivated; Dogs as pets
▶ Daimabad = largest IVC bronze set, Deccan link	▶ No kings/palaces = egalitarian/merchant society

SECTION 7: RECOMMENDED SOURCES

Refer to these.

Source	What to Read	Why
NCERT Class XII — Themes in Indian History Part-I	Ch. 1: Bricks, Beads and Bones	<i>Seals, burials, art, social structure from NCERT perspective</i>
NCERT Class XI — An Introduction to Indian Art	Ch. 1: Pre-Historic Rock Art to IVC Arts	<i>Official art history coverage — sculptures, seals, pottery</i>
R.S. Sharma — India's Ancient Past	Ch. 5–7: Harappan Society, Art, Religion	<i>Exam-oriented coverage with exam-relevant details</i>
Upinder Singh — Ancient & Early Medieval India	Ch. 4: Harappan Civilization	<i>Most comprehensive academic reference on IVC society</i>
Niharranjan Ray — Maurya & Post-Maurya Art	Introduction chapter on IVC art	<i>Art history perspective with comparative analysis</i>
ASI Publications — Dholavira, Lothal	Site-specific monographs	<i>Detailed findings, art objects, religious evidence</i>