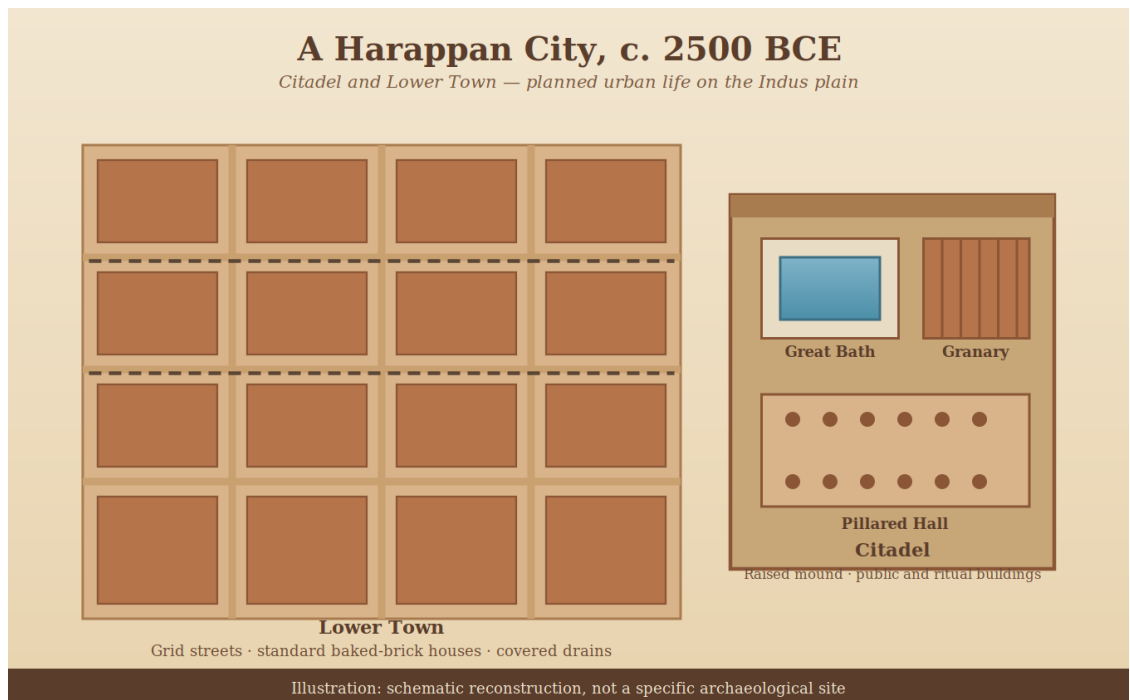




## The Harappan Civilisation: How India's First Cities Were Built to Last



*A schematic illustration of a Harappan city, showing the raised citadel with the Great Bath and granary, and the grid-planned lower town*

Long before the pyramids of Giza were finished and roughly contemporary with early dynastic Egypt and Mesopotamia, a civilisation flourished quietly along the banks of the Indus and its tributaries. We call it the Harappan Civilisation, named after Harappa, the first of its cities to be excavated in the 1920s. It is also known as the Indus Valley Civilisation, stretching across what is now Pakistan and northwestern India — an urban culture that, at its height around 2600–1900 BCE, covered more territory than either of its two famous contemporaries.

### **A City Built on a Plan**

What sets the Harappans apart isn't a famous king or a decisive battle — we don't even know what they called themselves. What survives is something quieter and, in its own way, more impressive: a way of building cities.

Walk through a reconstruction of Mohenjodaro or Harappa and the first thing you notice is the grid. Streets ran in straight lines, crossing each other roughly at right angles, dividing the town into orderly blocks. Houses were built from baked bricks of standardised sizes, a detail that suggests some form of shared building code or civic authority, even without written proof of one. Beneath the streets, covered drains carried wastewater away from homes — an infrastructure choice most cities in the ancient world would not attempt for centuries.

The illustration above sketches this layout: a lower town of grid streets and brick houses on the left, and a raised citadel on the right — the part of the city set aside for public and possibly ritual life.

## The Citadel: Public Life on a Platform

Most Harappan cities were split into two parts: a lower town where most people lived and worked, and a smaller, elevated citadel. The citadel at Mohenjodaro contains the civilisation's best-known structure, the **Great Bath** — a large, brick-lined water tank, waterproofed with a layer of bitumen, with steps leading down at either end. Its exact purpose is debated; most historians read it as a space for ritual bathing rather than everyday use.

Close by stood a **granary**, a structure with a grid of narrow rooms or air ducts, likely used to store surplus grain collected from the surrounding countryside. Nearby, a **pillared hall** — rows of brick column bases arranged in a grid — may have served as a gathering space or hall of assembly. Together, these buildings suggest a settlement organised enough to store, redistribute, and gather its people, even if we still cannot name the institutions responsible.

## Trade, Craft, and an Unread Script

Harappan settlements traded far beyond their own borders. Seals carved with animals and a still-undeciphered script have been found as far away as Mesopotamia, pointing to long-distance trade in beads, cotton textiles, and other crafted goods. Standardised weights, cut from stone in a consistent set of ratios, turn up across different sites — further evidence of shared commercial norms across a very large area.

The script itself remains one of archaeology's open problems. Found on seals, pottery, and small tablets, it has resisted every attempt at decipherment, partly because no bilingual inscription (something like a Harappan Rosetta Stone) has ever been found, and partly because most surviving examples are very short.

## A Civilisation That Faded, Not Fell

Around 1900 BCE, the great cities began to decline. There is no evidence of the civilisation ending in conquest or catastrophe. Instead, the picture is one of gradual change — shifting river courses, changing trade patterns, and a slow move away from large urban centres toward smaller rural settlements. Many of the technologies and craft traditions did not vanish; they persisted in altered form in the centuries that followed.

## Why the Harappans Still Matter

The Harappan Civilisation offers a useful corrective to how we often picture the ancient world: not always as a story of god-kings and monuments, but sometimes as a story of planning, plumbing, and standardisation — civic life expressed through bricks laid in a grid. It's a reminder that a civilisation's sophistication doesn't always announce itself through grandeur; sometimes it shows up in a drain running quietly beneath a street built five thousand years ago.

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*Mr. V. Vijayanand*

Head, Department of Philosophy

St. Joseph's College (Arts & Science)

Kovur, Chennai - 600128