
UNIT 2 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CITIES*

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest cities that came up around 2600 BCE in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent lasted for nearly 700 years. These cities are associated with the Harappan or the Indus period. The abandonment of most of these settlements around 1900 BCE marked the end of the first phase of urbanism. The next stage of urban centres, referred to as the Early Historic period, began around 500 BCE and continued for nearly 1000 years. Unlike the gap in the urban centres between the Harappan and the Early Historic, this was not the case with the subsequent Early Medieval-Medieval (sixth-fifteenth centuries CE), Early Modern (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries CE) and Modern (nineteenth-twentieth centuries CE) periods. However what changed was that many of the Early Historic cities declined and instead new urban centres emerged in the Early Medieval-Medieval as well as in each of the later phases.

While the study of the Harappan cities is based solely on archaeological data, that of the Early Historic draws on multiple sources, ranging from texts, inscriptions, and coins to visual and archaeological data. It is important to understand that forms of cities are constantly changing over time. Hence the Harappan cities would have been very different from those of the Early Historic. Neither are all cities similar to each other even within the same period. The internal chronology of the Harappan cities is still not very well worked out to enable a comparative study of cities that were established in an earlier phase with those that may have been setup slightly later. However, during the Early Historic period, differences have been noted, especially in the case of the successive cities at Bhir Mound, Sirkap, and Sirsukh in the Taxila valley. What also needs to be noted is that the foci of studies for the cities in these two different periods have been dissimilar, partly due to the nature of sources and available data. This Unit, the ambit of which is limited to the Ancient period, has three Sections, the first on the Harappan cities, the second on the absence of cities between the Harappan and the Early Historic, and the third on the Early Historic cities.

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2.2 THE HARAPPAN CITIES

The Harappan cities must have been among several ancient cities that stood as massive mounds spoken of by locals as ancient places. One of these ancient places brought Charles Masson in his random explorations through the Punjab where he noted the size of the site. It was Alexander Cunningham who visited Harappa on one of his early tours searching for archaeological evidence in the northern part of the subcontinent; yet, he was unable to recognise its antiquity, despite seeing a seal with characters that were completely unfamiliar till then. The seal as a distinctive artefact, found at such distant sites as Harappa and Mohenjodaro, and subsequent discoveries of the same type from Mesopotamian sites, led John Marshall to finally announce evidence of a Bronze Age in South Asia. Much has been written on Harappan urban centres and on urbanism in third millennium BCE South Asia. Here, we will look briefly at some of the studies published on the Harappan period. The discussion is divided into two sections, one on early work, and the second on later studies that specialised on particular aspects. In both stages, there are studies that worked towards presenting syntheses of the evidence as well. At the same time, while a large number of articles and research papers have been written on Harappan archaeology, this historiography is limited to surveying primarily the monographs that have dealt with aspects of the Harappan cities. However, **Block 2 (Units 5-9)** will suggest several readings through which other aspects of the Harappan can be further explored.

2.2.1 Early Archaeology of Harappan Cities

Publications that go back to the discovery of the Harappan cities give us an indication of what motivated early explorations and excavations. For one thing, it appears that certain artefacts became recognised as distinctive and characteristic of that found from Harappa and Mohenjodaro, the primary being the steatite seal. Other artefacts became associated alongside, such as red slipped pottery of distinctive shapes with paintings in black, and strikingly similar long stone blades of a cream coloured chert. These were seen to occur largely in the valley of the Indus river. But other explorations, such as of L.P. Tessitori (1918-19) in Rajasthan, in the uplands of Sind by N.G. Majumdar (1934) in the early 1930s, or of Aurel Stein in the Cholistan in the early 1940s (Stein, 1942; Gupta, 1989), revealed several sites, some of which had similar archaeological material, and some had ceramics of different types. These, thus, enabled a sequence of archaeological cultures based on ceramics to be built for the northwestern part of the subcontinent.

Sustained excavation of Mohenjodaro (Marshall, 1931; Mackay, 1938) and Harappa (Vats, 1940) provided the first images of Bronze Age urban centres in South Asia. By the 1940s, several smaller settlements had been excavated in the uplands of Sind and in the Indus valley. But it was these two cities of roughly commensurate size and a strikingly similar material culture that captured the imagination of scholars who attempted to synthesise the available evidence. This was done by scholars within South Asia as well as outside. Piggott (1952: 136) considered the two cities as twin capitals of a state whose uniform material culture was seen in terms of a 'monotonous regularity of a highly organised community under some strong system of centralised government, controlling production and distribution and no doubt levying a system of tolls and customs throughout the territory under its rule.' The Harappan cities were also framed in terms of what was already known about cities in Mesopotamia. The link in Mesopotamia between sacred and secular powers prompted the attribution in South Asia to similar organisational entities. Thus, when the stone bust of a male was found at Mohenjodaro, it was termed as 'priest-king', a term that survives till date.

2.2.2 Recent Data and New Interpretations

Early impressionistic assumptions are now being seriously questioned. The idea of Mohenjodaro and Harappa being exactly similar and revealing a monotonous material culture is no longer considered the case. Also, despite the amount of archaeological work that has been undertaken at both sites, the positive identification of material or structures with religion remains tentative at best for the Bronze Age in South Asia.

The above two ways in which Harappan archaeology is being rethought is due to the sustained work that has been done in investigating a myriad range of sites. The partition of the northwestern part of the subcontinent in 1947, and the creation of two separate nation-states had a direct impact on the archaeology of the Harappan period. As the two major settlements, Mohenjodaro and Harappa, fell within the territory of Pakistan, there was a surge of archaeological activity to recover more Harappan sites within the new nation-state of India. Large parts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh were combed, resulting in the discovery of new Harappan sites as well as other archaeological cultures and materials, which were not known so far. Many of the non-Harappan sites, which were chronologically earlier, concurrent or later than the Harappan cities, were identified as either chalcolithic or Early Iron Age settlements, the latter filling the chronological gap between the Harappan and the Early Historic periods.

Excavations and explorations of Harappan sites have been useful because they have added to the range of information already known in terms of locations, materials, and built spaces. Several sites were excavated in the 1950s and 1960s (Lothal and Kalibangan) and in the 1990s (Dholavira, Rakhigarhi) by the Archaeological Survey of India. These large and small sites, such as Harappa (Meadow, ed. 1991), Lothal (Rao 1979, 1985), Surkotada (Joshi 1990), Kalibangan (Lal et al, 2003, 2015; Sharma, 1999 for the burials), Banawali (Bisht, 1982, 1984), and Dholavira (Bisht, 1991) have been published in reports to varying degrees. Smaller sites were excavated and certain regions (such as Gujarat) well explored by Indian universities, such as Deccan College, M.S. University of Baroda and the Institute of Rajasthan Studies. To take the case of Gujarat, excavation reports, both preliminary and detailed, were published on Kuntasi (Dhavalikar et al., 1996), Nagwada (Hegde et al., 1988), Nageshwar (Hegde et al., 1990), Bagasra (Sonawane et al., 2003; Bhan et al., 2005), Shikarpur (Bhan and Ajithprasad, n.d.), and Kanmer (Kharakwal et al., 2007; Kharakwal et. al., 2008). These sites, located on the margins of the Harappan zone, have provided useful information on the rationale for the location of these sites, their functions and their interactions with local communities as reflected in the finds of local ceramics along with classic Harappan shapes. Another region, on the margins, is the Sind Kohistan, where extensive surveys were carried out by Flam (1988), many decades after Majumdar, resulting in more Harappan sites being discovered. Yet another area is the Cholistan, a survey (Mughal, 1997) that led to the recovery of several sites from the Early to the Late Harappan periods.

Major work has been achieved through the generation of archaeological data using new techniques, as well as new interpretations of the existing material. In this context, one can note the explorations and excavations at sites like Mohenjodaro and Harappa with fresh questions and new technologies. At Mohenjodaro, for example, the moratorium on further excavations pushed scholars to work on the site without physically interfering with the site in any way. An important surface survey of Mohenjodaro enabled scholars to recover micro-evidence of craft activities, and helped to show where particular processes of crafts were possibly practiced (Bondioli, Tosi and Vidale 1984). More important, it illustrated a useful strategy to obtain vital information through a careful and

systematic surface survey. A sustained period of studying the old field records, and incorporating the data on artefacts, not previously mentioned in the Mohenjodaro excavation report, enabled a re-analysis of different excavated sectors of the city. Thus, a re-analysis of artefacts within the HR Area has been published (Jansen and Urban, 1985), providing a better understanding of the contexts from where artefacts were recovered. New insights have also come about through the employment of methodologies such as Geographical Information Systems (GIS) by a Japanese team to study spatial landscapes over several levels from the micro to the macro (Teramura et al., 2008).

The attention that Harappan archaeology has attracted and the data that has been generated has also meant that scholars have been able to concentrate on particular aspects. Thus, we find entire monographs dedicated to certain themes, such as trade, political organisation, technologies and crafts; geological provenience studies; discovery of the Harappan; and the end/decline of the Harappan urban centres. While themes, such as trade, are relatively easily understood through archaeological data, other aspects such as political organisation are more polemical and involve an innovative use of archaeological evidence and anthropological insights. Other aspects, such as Harappan society, are less easily understood through archaeological evidence and hence have been little worked on.

Shereen Ratnagar's (1981, 2004) work on trade has woven together archaeological evidence to construct a picture of the long-distance networks of the Harappans necessitated by the Bronze Age nature of its economy. While Mesopotamian texts helped to identify the region's maritime trading partners, most of the argument for overland links rests on finds of distinctive archaeological material in various regions. Thus, Harappan weights, seals, black-slipped jars, and carnelian beads are as diagnostic as carved chlorite vessels from Iran, Mesopotamian cylinder seals or Persian Gulf seals from Bahrain. Ratnagar has also tried to understand the larger implications of the long distance trading networks of the Bronze Age world.

The political structure of the Harappan has long been under contention with several divergent views of the lack of a state, a single state and of multiple states. The first was propounded earlier by Walter Fairervis (1961, 1971) but the more prevalent have been the latter two positions. Gregory Possehl (2002: 6), too, while agreeing to a level of socio-cultural complexity, argued for the absence of a state due to the lack of sculptures of rulers or palaces, of a bureaucracy and of a state religion. However, this was a change from his earlier position (Possehl, 1977) where he saw the Mature Harappan as a state that came to an end, even while certain traditions seemed to continue into later periods. The case for multiple states rests on Jonathan Kenoyer's (1997) suggestion that the Harappan situation may have mirrored that of the later city-states of the Gangetic plain. He (Kenoyer, 1997: 69) suggested that the lack of a single building or group of buildings dominating at either Mohenjodaro or Harappa suggests the absence of a hereditary monarchy and that the walled areas at both cities with large buildings and open spaces may be evidence of separate elite communities at both cities and within each city.

Ratnagar (1991: 166-67), on the other hand, has also used the example of the city-states in the Early Dynastic period in Mesopotamia but to argue that, despite the same writing system, similar religious architecture, metallurgy and seal carving styles, one must take note of different weight systems, large palace complexes at different sites and the occurrence of monumental art at several cities, pointing to the existence of multiple polities. To reinforce the hypothesis about a single state as an alternative model, she (Ratnagar, 1991: 169-70) pointed out the probable colonies in the Makran, Kutch,

Kathiawar and the Oxus; the similarities in Harappan ‘infrastructural elements like bricks, chert blades, metal tools, and carts’; the lack of regional clusters of any animal motif on Harappan seals; and in fact, the ubiquity of the unicorn motif; the absence of any building such as the Great Bath or the Pillared Hall at any site other than Mohenjodaro; and that Mohenjodaro alone has revealed stone statues of men. Ratnagar’s (Ratnagar, 1991: 184-90) contention is that the Harappan represents an archaic state in a society transitional between those structured on kinship and those on class. Given the context of the lack of money, market systems and private ownership of resources, the economy would have functioned through the mobilisation of labour. This form of early state, unlike the developed Ur III state in Mesopotamia, would also have functioned without a developed bureaucracy, with state functionaries having ties of clientship or personal or affinal relationships; in other words, a system that still retained several elements of kinship based societies.

The research on craft technologies has also focused on the wealth of detailed evidence that Harappan archaeologists have been able to unearth. Systematic surface surveys¹ of certain sites, such as Mohenjodaro (Bondioli et al., 1984) and Chanhudaro (Shar and Vidale, 1985) have shown the way to a useful strategy to study sites without having to excavate them. Other methods, such as ethnoarchaeology² and experimental archaeology³ have been used to understand aspects of craft production, such as spatial patterns of production, processes, specialisation, and organisation. An ethnoarchaeological study (Kenoyer et al., 1991, 1994) of contemporary stone bead making at Khambhat was undertaken to suggest ways in which ancient bead making techniques and organisation could be understood. Experimental work on stoneware bangles was also attempted (Halim and Vidale, 1984; Kenoyer, 1994) to reconstruct clay processing processes, as well as methods of finishing the bangles, and achieving the black colour of some of them through reduction firing.⁴ The fact that two entire monographs have been written on Harappan crafts and technologies (Vidale, 2000; Miller, 2009) shows the amount of data that has been generated. An affiliated monograph could be the compendium on Harappan architecture and infrastructural arrangements (Joshi, 2008). Randall Law (2011) in a recent study has tried to identify the geological sources of the stone and metal artefacts excavated from Harappa.

The discovery of the Harappan itself has been a fascinating story, one illustrated well by Nayanjot Lahiri (2005) with a wealth of detail from the archives. This is part of a genre of writing that has focused on the history of Indian archaeology, on the personas involved and the actions that they took. The story is a useful comment on how sites get excavated and how they are reported. Lahiri’s (2000) edited book brings together archaeologists and their hypotheses on what led to the end or decline of the Harappan cities, one of the most debated issues in Harappan archaeology. A book on the same theme in the same year was written by Ratnagar (2000), who has most innovatively examined the archaeological evidence, to illustrate the signs of stress in the upper levels of a site like Mohenjodaro, and to explain what may have occurred around the end of the second millennium BCE.

¹ **Surface surveys** involve the recording of artefacts and architectural remains that are visible on the surface of a site or landscape.

² **Ethnoarchaeology** is the study of material culture in the present day by archaeologists to interpret archaeological data from the past.

³ **Experimental archaeology** involves present day experimental studies conducted in the laboratory or field by archaeologists to understand past technologies and manufacturing processes.

⁴ **Reduction firing technique** is a method of firing in a closed kiln so that no air can enter.

This period has continued to retain the interest of scholars and non-specialists, as is apparent by the publication of several books, with a great amount of visual detail, aimed at a more general audience (Wheeler, 1953; Lal, 1997; Kenoyer, 1998; Ratnagar, 2001; Possehl, 2002; Habib, 2002; Aronovsky and Gopinath, 2004; Kenoyer and Heuston, 2005; McIntosh, 2008; Wright, 2010). All of these have a set pro forma, laying out the Harappan landscape, detailing the distribution of sites in that landscape and then discussing the morphology of cities, the economy with trade and crafts, and the end of the urban culture. Possehl (2002) did attempt to go into aspects of gender but it remained a limited exercise. The Harappan is the one Bronze Age culture that has been so well investigated from a purely archaeological perspective, essentially because that remains the primary means through which we can understand that society. Yet, notwithstanding the amount that has already been written on the Harappan, the potential remains for much more to be attempted.

2.3 BETWEEN THE HARAPPAN AND THE EARLY HISTORIC: AN ABSENCE OF CITIES?

There is a general consensus amongst most archaeologists that the intervening period between the end of the Harappan to the beginning of the Early Historic (1900-500 BCE) was devoid of urban centres. It is not as though there were no settlements in various parts of the subcontinent but the nature of these was rural in character. However, there is one archaeologist (Shaffer, 1993) who has argued for the presence of urban centres during this period in Cholistan in present day Pakistan, and in eastern Punjab, which for him included the contemporary Indian states of Punjab, Haryana, northern Rajasthan, and the western parts of Uttar Pradesh. The evidence cited by Jim Shaffer was the continued occupation of these two areas in the Late and post Harappan periods as well as the presence of a few large sites (six in the range of 10.1-20 hectare and one of 38.1 hectare) in Cholistan, and one site (9.6 hectare) in eastern Punjab. These sizes are not at all comparable to many of the Mature Harappan cities, which were over 200 hectares. Several other points that were raised by Shaffer have further been critiqued in detail by Menon and Varma (2005).

Whether there was any connection between the Harappan and the Early Historic cities has also been a matter of debate. Here again, except for Shaffer (1993), a large number of archaeologists have found little similarity between the urban centres of these two periods (Ghosh, 1973; Allchin, 1982; Lal, 1982; Lal, 1997; Jansen, 1997; Menon and Varma, 2005). A close examination of the cities in the two periods showed few parallels in settlement morphology, as was evident from the numerous differences in fortifications, city plans, drainage systems, public buildings, and domestic architecture (Menon and Varma, 2005). It needs to be kept in mind that the physical dissimilarities between the Harappan and Early Historic cities are primarily a reflection of the critical differences in the polities, economies and societies of the two periods, although about some of these aspects too, there is a contrary position. For instance, Kenoyer (1997, 1998) has suggested that the state and social structures in the two periods were similar, even though no supporting evidence has been cited.

Given the evidence that is available till date, it seems to be the case that there is a gap of nearly 1400 years between the first and second phases of urbanisation in the subcontinent. Moreover, the cities in these two periods were vastly different in form too. Another contrasting aspect lies in the geographical locations of the cities and towns in the two periods, as will be evident from the discussions in **Blocks 2 and 3 (Units 5-11 and 14)**.

2.4 THE EARLY HISTORIC CITIES

The studies on Early Historic urbanism can be broadly divided into three categories. The first would be those that are primarily based on texts, which are normative or narrative in nature. These can be traced to nearly a century ago with the monographs of C. P. V. Ayyar's *Town Planning in Ancient Deccan* (1916) and B. B. Dutt's *Town Planning in Ancient India* (1925), which were followed by several others and include the more recent studies by Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya (2003) and Shonaleeka Kaul (2010). The second includes the overviews of urbanisation and urbanism in the Early Historic period by archaeologists (Ghosh, 1973; Allchin, 1989; Allchin, 1990; Allchin, 1995; Chakrabarti, 1995; Jha, 1998) and historians (Thakur, 1981; Prasad, 1984; Basant, 2012). The third comprises archaeological research undertaken with the specific purpose of investigating Early Historic urbanisation and urbanism primarily through field surveys and excavations. Although systematic surveys carried out specifically to examine urbanisation or urbanism began rather late in the subcontinent (Erdosy, 1988; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2002), this was not the case with the excavations of Early Historic cities. The latter have deep antecedents in the Indian subcontinent, beginning with the archaeological excavations of Early Historic cities, such as Bhita near Allahabad (Marshall, 1915), and Sirkap [from 1913 till 1934] in the Taxila valley in Pakistan (Marshall, 1951) to more recent work at Sisupalgarh in Orissa (Mohanty and Smith, 2008) and Indor Khera near Anupshahar in the Upper Ganga plains (Menon and Varma, 2010; Varma and Menon, 2015), and Adam in central Deccan (Nath, 2016).

2.4.1 Early Historic Cities in Texts

In this section, the recent textual studies (Chattopadhyaya, 2003; Kaul, 2010, 2016) on the city in early India will be discussed. Several important points were raised by Chattopadhyaya, which were later followed up in greater detail by Kaul.

For Chattopadhyaya, texts provide literary images as well as normative prescriptions about cities. Undoubtedly the literary accounts would have drawn from the lived reality of urban residents, yet Chattopadhyaya (2003: 128) warns us that 'literature can hardly be expected to provide description with cartographic precision.' Moreover, he (Chattopadhyaya, 2003: 106) tells us that 'perspectives from literature cannot be a substitute for research on processes of urbanisation, urban morphology and demography, urban material culture and such other facets of the city which literature is not really concerned with. Literature only tells more eloquently than even other written sources such as inscriptions, about the 'citi-ness' of the city beyond its physical contours.' Thus the strength of texts is that they help us to understand how cities were perceived and even conceptualised in the Early Historic period. He also points out that while the city would have been seen very differently by distinct social groups, it is predominantly the normative view that would have been projected in the texts. In particular, he highlights two perspectives, viz, the *rāṣṭra*'s views as represented in a normative text like the *Arthaśāstra*, and a more mundane description of a city in the *Silappadikāram*, which is a narrative text. In the former, the city is seen as a hierarchised space, often centering on the king. On the other hand, the alternate perspective talked about the city as a space where individuals from different social and occupational groups intersected, marked by a range of activities where several options could be exercised.

Kaul's (2010) study deals with the imaginative representation of urbanism based on the Sanskrit *kavyas*, which chronologically span over a thousand years of the first millennium CE. There are generalised images of the city that cannot be located to any specific urban centre. Moreover the chronological frame of her study includes both the Early

Historic as well as the Early Medieval, thus making it difficult to discern whether there were different perceptions of urbanism in the two successive periods. Kaul (2016) while following up on some of Chattopadhyaya's arguments further makes the point that not only is there a difference in perspectives between normative and narrative texts, but also within each of these two categories. For example, different versions of urbanism have been represented in the three normative texts, the *Arthasāstra*, *Dharmasutras* and *Kāmasutra*. Similarly within the narrative texts too, like the *Ramayana* and *Padataditaka*, cities are projected in distinct ways. Kaul (ibid) has also mentioned the variations in the perception of cities between the Brahmanical Sanskrit, like the *Dharmasutras*, and Buddhist Pali texts. The Brahmanical *Dharmasutras* were not very favourable towards cities as they regarded them with distrust and places where Vedic sacrifices could not be performed. On the other hand, the Buddhist Pali texts were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about urbanism.

Undoubtedly, the texts do inform us about various imaginings of urbanism; however it is through archaeology alone that the material remains of ancient cities can actually be uncovered.

2.4.2 Understanding Early Historic Urbanisation

Ram Sharan Sharma (1974), drawing on Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi's ideas (1952 [reprint 2006]), first made a causal link between iron technology and the beginning of states and cities in the Early Historic period. It was Amalananda Ghosh (1973), however, who raised several important issues related not just to the emergence but also the defining characteristics and what distinguishes the urban from the rural. For Ghosh, political and economic factors played a far more critical role in the establishment of cities, rather than iron technology. His narrative is based on a critical reading of both texts and the archaeological data. To a large extent Ghosh was the first scholar to have stressed the relevance of archaeological data for a fuller understanding of the Early Historic urban centres. This was reiterated by Vijay Kumar Thakur (1981:25) who makes the point that despite the limitations of archaeology, "it remains the best source for the study of the material aspects of a civilization".

Following Kosambi and Sharma, Thakur, too, attributed urbanisation in the Early Historic phase to the widespread use of iron technology and increased agricultural production. His monograph had generalised chapters on urban economy, society and culture based largely on textual and visual evidence. The specificities that can be provided by archaeological data particularly on architectural plans, houses, and contexts of craft production were however absent. Moreover, his discussion on the decline of Early Historic cities is largely inspired by Sharma's (1972) thesis of urban decay in the period between c.300 and 1000 CE.

While Thakur's study did not make any temporal or spatial distinctions in the urban centres of the Early Historic period, Kameshwar Prasad (1984) in his work focused solely on the Kushana cities. With the re-emergence of urbanism from about 500 BCE, there was a steady increase in the growth of cities and towns and the process of urbanisation peaked under the Kushanas. His work focused on the location, morphology, crafts, trade and trade routes during the Kushana period. Prasad has based his narrative largely on the archaeological data although occasionally textual evidence is also cited. Had the Kushana city of Sirsukh in the Taxila valley been excavated more extensively by John Marshall, Prasad would have had much more data to draw upon, unlike the scrappy bit of information that is available so far. One can only hope that sometime in future such an excavation will be carried out. Like Sharma and Thakur, he too has argued for a decline of urban centres in the post Kushana period.

Frank Raymond Allchin (1989, 1990, 1995) has argued that urbanisation as well as urbanism should not be viewed as a homogeneous process in the subcontinent. While attempting to delineate the regional patterns of city formation in Early Historic South Asia, he identified six distinct regions with different trajectories, which included the Ganges basin, the northwest [that comprised present day Pakistan and Afghanistan], central India, Deccan, the western and eastern coastal strips along the peninsula, and the island of Sri Lanka. On the basis of size, he formulated six categories of cities. Extending his argument he suggested that the largest cities were in the central Gangetic valley, and those in the other areas, such as the northwest, central India, the Deccan, or in eastern India were smaller. Chronologically, the first cities to come up were those located in the middle Ganga valley, the Ganga-Yamuna doab, and the northwest. He also made the point that there would have been different reasons for the emergence of cities in various regions of the subcontinent and these needed to be archaeologically investigated. Like the scholars before him, he too made a powerful plea, however one that has largely remained unheeded, for a systematic and problem oriented archaeological research on the Early Historic cities in South Asia.

Dilip K. Chakrabarti's (1995) monograph is a catalogue of ancient Indian cities. His work is largely a compilation of archaeological data taken from the excavation reports of the Harappan as well as the Early Historic cities. The archaeological information that he has collated on the Harappan and Early Historic urban centres is descriptive in nature. While there is little analysis regarding urbanism, he does suggest some of the factors that could have played a role in the emergence of cities in these two distinct phases. He has considered irrigation and craft specialisation to have been the key variables for urbanisation in the Harappan period. For the reappearance of cities in the Early Historic period, he has regarded the formation of the regional kingdoms around c. 500 BCE as being a critical element.

Satyendra Kumar Jha (1998) urged us to not view the emergence of urbanisation in the Gangetic valley as a homogeneous development, instead he alerted us to the possibility of both spatial and temporal variations. However in order to work out these different trajectories both of the emergence as well as the specific characteristics of individual cities and towns even within the Gangetic valley, we need corresponding detailed archaeological data which is unfortunately unavailable till date.

P. K. Basant (2012) too, has analysed urbanisation, albeit within the region of Malwa in central India. His study has drawn on multiple sources, ranging from the archaeological and visual data to inscriptions and texts. Like several other historians, he also points to a link between the emergence of a state and urban centres. The latter is seen as a space that comprised of diverse social and religious communities. At the same time, he has argued that the city cannot be viewed in isolation but has to be located within a larger landscape. Thus the processes of urbanisation can only be understood in terms of the linkages between the city and its hinterland. Once again it is archaeological data alone that can help us better understand urbanisation and the related question of local and regional networks of urban centres in Malwa in the Early Historic period.

Thus we find that most of the studies on Early Historic urbanisation and urbanism remain limited in their analyses due to the paucity of archaeological data. This problem can only be rectified by encouraging more archaeological field work in future with the specific aim of investigating Early Historic towns and cities in the different regions of the subcontinent.

2.4.3 Exploring and Excavating Early Historic Urban Centres

There are very few examples of archaeological surveys that have been undertaken in India with the specific goal of understanding urbanisation or urban centres in the Early Historic period. Possibly the first such attempt was made by George Erdosy (1988) through his survey in the doab tehsils of Chail, Manjhapur and Sirathu in Allahabad district, Uttar Pradesh. His study highlighted the importance of field surveys to better understand the problem of urbanisation in Early Historic north India.

A field survey involving a systematic sampling strategy was carried out by Monica Smith (2001) at the Early Historic town of Kaundinyapura in central India. In order to assess the relationship between Kaundinyapura and its intermediate hinterland, an area encompassing a ten-kilometer radius around the site was also surveyed. Within this outlying survey zone, Dhamantri, a smaller mound about 4 kilometers from Kaundinyapura, was also surveyed. Her study indicated that the local and regional social and economic networks may have been more important than the long distance relationships in the Early Historic period.

After Kaundinyapura, Smith (2002:121) went on to undertake a systematic field survey of Sisupalgarh, an Early Historic city in Orissa. Her study revealed evidence for habitation throughout the fortified area, instead of 'an empty ceremonial or administrative center'. Further the variations in the architectural fragments may indicate distinctive neighborhoods in terms of access to different materials. She has also argued that the commonly held view about regular long distance contacts being a characteristic feature of the Early Historic period was not substantiated by the archaeological evidence from this site. Her survey revealed a much higher proportion of locally-made items as compared to the non-local artefacts. Moreover the scant evidence for indicators of production, such as lithic debris or slag, suggested that the production loci may have been outside the city walls.

Of the numerous excavations of Early Historic urban centres in South Asia, the most informative are those carried out at Bhita near Allahabad (Marshall, 1915), Sirkap in the Taxila valley in Pakistan (Marshall 1951), Sonkh near Mathura (Härtel, 1993), Arikamedu near Puducherry (Begley, et al., 1996, 2004), Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka (Conningham, 1999, 2006), Mahasthangarh in Bangladesh (Alam and Salles, 2001), Nagarjunakonda in eastern Deccan (Soundara Rajan, 2006), Sisupalgarh in Orissa (Smith and Mohanty, 2008) and Indor Khera near Anupshahar (Menon and Varma, 2010, Varma and Menon, 2015), and Adam in central Deccan (Nath, 2016). These excavations have provided a wealth of evidence about various aspects of Early Historic cities and towns. This information includes sizes, fortifications, layouts, and spaces outside the urban centres. Further detailed plans of public and religious buildings including a palace at Sirkap, as well as those of houses are available. There is also some archaeological data on craft production including technological processes, spatial contexts and organisation.

What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that archaeological field practices are constantly evolving, not just due to the availability of more sophisticated technologies but also because of newer themes and questions that have continued to be addressed over a period of time. Thus, the current survey and excavation methods are quite different from those prevalent in the previous century. For example, the standard practice now is to first undertake a systematic survey of a site before excavating it, as was the case at both Sisupalgarh and Indor Khera. In contrast, no systematic intensive survey was carried out in the Taxila valley before excavating at Bhir Mound, Sirkap or Sirsukh.

Another difference lies in the digging and collecting methods, as well as recording practices. The former entailed digging with pick axes to swiftly move large amounts of earth. Generally the earlier practice was to collect mostly whole artefacts but not the broken or incomplete objects. While recording too, the exact location from where each artefact was recovered was seldom noted, hence a lot of contextual data was absent in the early excavation reports. One can also note that at many of the excavations that were carried out in the past, archaeologists rarely paid any attention to debitage that can provide important evidence about craft production. Neither do we have any information about areas where craft production would have taken place.

The current practice in excavations is to dig very carefully, using smaller tools like the trowel, and maintain a meticulous record of all artefacts, organic remains and debitage. Why is it important to record all the finds as well as make a note of what was found where? The reason for maintaining such a careful record is that this information alone will help the archaeologist in understanding what went on in the ancient cities. An archaeological data as rich as this, allows the possibility of reconstructing the daily lives of the urban residents and their quotidian activities in the past.

2.5 SUMMARY

Mohenjodaro and Harappa were among the earliest cities that came up in the northwestern part of the subcontinent between 2600 and 1900 BCE. A large number of Harappan sites, both large and small, have been excavated, resulting in a vast corpus of archaeological data. This rich data has enabled detailed studies on myriad themes, such as trade, political organisation, technologies and crafts, geological provenience studies, and the end of Harappan urban centres. After a gap of nearly 1400 years, the next phase of urban centres is seen around 500 BCE. Unlike in the Harappan period when the cities were largely confined to the northwestern part, in the Early Historic, urban centres emerged in different regions of the subcontinent. The studies on the Early Historic cities can be divided into three groups: first are those based on texts; second are the syntheses of urbanisation and urbanism; and the third comprises the surveys and excavations undertaken to specifically investigate aspects of urban centres. It is through textual studies that we get glimpses of how ancient cities were perceived and even conceptualised. The monographs on Early Historic cities have focused on the location, morphology, crafts, trade and trade routes. As compared to the Harappan, considerably less is known about the Early Historic cities due to the uneven nature of archaeological research in the two periods. Despite what has already been written on the Harappan and the Early Historic urban centres, much more can be investigated specially through more systematic surveys and careful excavations with detailed contextual documentation.

2.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Trace the development of the studies of Harappan cities since they were first discovered.
- 2) What are the new methodologies used by archaeologists to study the Harappan cities?
- 3) How are the Harappan cities viewed and studied by archaeologists?
- 4) Do you agree with J. G. Shaffer's view that urban centres were present during the period between 1900 and 500 BCE?
- 5) In what ways do texts provide varying images of cities? Substantiate your argument by giving examples.

- 6) Several historians have suggested links between the emergence of iron technology and beginning of the state structures and the cities? Elaborate on this causal relationship.
- 7) Discuss the major surveys and excavations of Early Historic cities. What are their limitations?
- 8) Why is there relatively less information about the Early Historic cities as compared to the Harappan?

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