
States and Social Complexity:

the Indus Valley (Harappan) Civilisation

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The three earliest civilisations, in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Indus Valley, arose and existed independently around three-thousand B.C.E.¹ This essay argues that the Indus Valley Civilisation was organised in a politically dissimilar way to the contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian Civilisations, despite being of comparable social complexity. Although decipherable written records and convincing archaeological evidence from Mesopotamia and Egypt substantiates these Civilisations' classifications as 'states,' the same cannot be said for Indus Valley Civilisation. Indus Valley Civilisation was not a state, demonstrated through the Civilisation's apparent lack of an upper administrative class, state religion and monopoly of force.² This argument is important for all historians to consider, including those unfamiliar with the Indus Valley, two reasons. Firstly, it examines an instance of poor historiographical method, whereby Indus Valley Civilisation was assumed to be a state like Mesopotamia and Egypt despite a paucity of evidence supporting this assumption. Secondly, it explores the origin and functions of the 'state' by challenging the 'unilineal' interrelation between social complexity and statehood. This essay ultimately argues, through the inability of this paradigm to accommodate Indus Valley Civilisation, that the state is not the only political form capable of achieving heightened social complexity.

For the purpose of this essay, the term 'state' is defined as a form of socio-political organisation characterised by the development of an elite: an upper authoritative class, which promotes a state-wide ideology and functions to coordinate the economy and military.³ Three critical features of early states—required for maintaining legitimacy—have been identified: an individual ruler ('king') and his supportive administrative body forming a centralised leadership, an official religion, and (usually) a monopoly of force.⁴

1 John R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 47 and 53.

2 Gregory L. Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State', in *Archaic States*, eds. Gary Feinman and Joyce Marcus, (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1998), 268-87.

3 Peter Bogucki, *The Origins of Human Society*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 334. Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 26-8.

4 Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State,' 264-5. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 26-8.

A debate concerning whether or not the Indus Valley Civilisation was a state has arisen between various commentators. Jacobson and Ratnagar are proponents of the classification of the Indus Valley Civilisation as a state. Jacobson presents twelve sociocultural features typical of states and argues that they are fulfilled by the Indus Valley Civilisation,⁵ whilst Ratnagar argues that the obvious urbanism of the Indus Valley Civilisation necessitates its statehood.⁶ As Possehl highlights, the twelve criteria which Jacobson selects for his analysis are features of complex societies, rather than states.⁷ He neglects the aforementioned three critical features of statehood from his analysis: having an individual ruler, an official religion and (usually) a monopoly of force. Furthermore, the connection between urbanism and statehood, upon which Ratnagar's argument relies, has been widely challenged. Ratnagar contends that 'urbanism is not viable in the context of chiefdoms,'⁸ however as Trigger⁹ and Possehl¹⁰ highlight, this contention is not convincingly demonstrated.

Fairservis¹¹ and Malik¹² are opponents of the classification of the Indus Valley Civilisation as a state. Both argue that the Civilisation represented a chiefdom rather than a state. This position results from Fairservis' and Malik's following of the 'unilineal' anthropological record: if the Indus Valley Civilisation is not thought of as a state, then to fit the aforementioned paradigm then it must constitute a chiefdom society. Shaffer¹³ and Possehl¹⁴ are also opponents of the Indus Valley state, however rather than arguing that the Civilisation was a chiefdom, they argue that it represented a unique form of socio-political organisation not recognised by the 'unilineal' anthropological record (which features a progression from hunter-gatherer bands, segmentary societies, chiefdoms, and finally states). Instead, they argue that the Indus Valley Civilisation was a 'non-state.' The purpose of this essay is to summarise and support this final position. It is worth noting, however, that the major sites of the Indus Valley Civilisation—Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro—have only been partially excavated, and many sites have not been excavated at all, so the archaeological evidence from which to base arguments is somewhat limited. If excavations continue and new evidence is unearthed, some or all of the conclusions of this essay may be superseded.

In Mesopotamia and Egypt ceremonial buildings, portraits and accounting records attest to the existence of individual rulers and authoritative figures.¹⁵ Mesopotamian 'lists' have been revealed which chronologically document the Sumerian kings. The earliest of these lists comprise part of the Weld-Blundell collection: WB66 (c. two-thousand B.C.E.) and WB444 (c. eighteen-hundred B.C.E.) are a tablet and vertical prism respectively, chronicling the Mesopotamian kings in the Ancient Sumerian language.¹⁶ Various additional lists and other artefacts are consistent with this

5 Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State,' 284.

6 Ibid., 286.

7 Ibid., 284.

8 Ibid., 286.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 282.

12 Ibid., 283.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 261-91.

15 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 47 and 53.

16 'The Sumerian King List: Translation,' *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*, ed. J.A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Fluckiger-Hawker, E. Robson and G. Zólyomi, <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr211.htm>, accessed 26 June 2012.

hierarchical organisation of the Mesopotamian Civilisation. Likewise, archaeological evidence indicates the existence of Egyptian kings (pharaohs). To cite just one grave uncovering, Howard Carter, in November 1922, revealed the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamun—the ‘Boy Prince.’ An outer and inner coffin were found, featuring an elaborate golden burial mask and the pharaoh’s human remains, along with the canopic chest containing four canopic jars, hieroglyphic inscriptions, and numerous other treasures¹⁷—all attesting to the supreme authoritative status of Tutankhamun.

However, archaeological evidence suggests that the Indus Valley Civilisation lacked a king and supporting elite. Indus Valley culture can be described as ‘faceless’: despite the plentiful uncovering of human figurines, there is a paucity of ‘portraiture.’¹⁸ Some proponents of the Indus Valley state, such as Jacobson, propose that the ‘Bronze Dancing Girl’¹⁹ and ‘Priest-King’²⁰ from Mohenjo-Daro could be considered as portraits, however neither is inscribed nor identified in any way, and nothing suggests that the ‘Priest-King’ was either a priest or a king, let alone someone who held dual offices.²¹ The ‘Bronze Dancing Girl’ is approximately fifteen centimetres in height and depicts an anonymous, confident-looking girl, and the ‘Priest-King’ is a soapstone sculpture approximately eighteen centimetres tall, depicting a man with a well-kept beard wearing patterned toga-like clothing (see below). The function of these figures is unknown, however we can speculate that they were probably ornamental. Proponents of the Indus Valley state could observe that



The ‘Bronze Dancing Girl’ (left) and ‘Priest-King’ (right).

17 Iorwerth E. S. Edwards, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 1-144.

18 Possehl, ‘Sociocultural Complexity Without the State’, 277-9.

19 *Ibid.*, 279.

20 *Ibid.*, 280.

21 *Ibid.*, 277.

Indus Valley writing was confined to economic trade and record-keeping,²² and therefore incapable of identifying the subjects of these two sculptures, however it seems implausible that a written symbol for a king or an important individual could not be devised if required.

Archaeological evidence furthermore demonstrates that Mesopotamia and Egypt both had an official state-wide religion. Ziggurats and pyramids were constructed in Mesopotamia and Egypt respectively, serving amongst them a variety of religious functions: locations for sacrificial worship and prayer, connections between the earth and the heavens, and sacred burial grounds.²³ The Great Ziggurat of Ur and the Great Pyramid of Giza are examples of such. Religious inscriptions and portraiture depict Mesopotamian priests (who supported the king) and Egyptian pharaohs (who held dual offices and were deified, becoming living gods).²⁴ The Sumerian ‘Prayer to Every God,’ uncovered at the Eliade site,²⁵ demonstrates the role of prayer in Mesopotamia. The Egyptian ‘Book of Coming Forth by Day’ (popularly known as the ‘Book of the Dead’) details funerary rights and contains magic spells cast to assist the deceased’s passage through the underworld and into the afterlife.²⁶ The seven gods of Mesopotamia (Nanna, Utu, Inanna, An, Ki, Enlil and Enki)²⁷ and the hierarchy of Egyptian gods and pharaohs are extensively documented. The previously cited Great Ziggurat of Ur features stairs and towers externally and a tomb internally, and contains documents providing detailed explanation of Sumerian ritual practices.²⁸ To cite one example of an Egyptian god, Anubis—the God of embalming—is present in tomb paintings (such as in the aforementioned tomb of Tutankhamun) and is central to the process of mummification and the passage into the afterlife.²⁹ All of this evidence is demonstrative of official, state-wide religions existing in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Conversely, archaeological evidence suggests that the Indus Valley Civilisation lacked an official, state-wide religion. Despite possessing the engineering and organisational capacity required to erect public infrastructure, none could be considered as serving a religious role, and no sacred burial grounds or definitive portraits of religious leaders have been uncovered.³⁰ Some proponents of the Indus Valley State, such as Marshall,³¹ have suggested that the ‘Great Bath’ in Mohenjo-Daro was a religious monument, that the ‘Priest-King’ was a priestly leader, and that the Indus Valley cemetery burials reflect a bias in the archaeological record. However none of these objections are convincing and certainly do not provide grounds for the existence of an Indus Valley state religion.³² The archaeological record does not indicate in any way that the ‘Great Bath’ served a

22 Elman R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilisation: The Process of Cultural Evolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 242.

23 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 46 and 52.

24 Ibid.

25 ‘Prayer to every God,’ in *Religions of the Ancient Near East: Sumerian-Akkadian Religious Texts and Ugaritic Epics*, ed. Isaac Mendelsohn, (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 175-177

26 Edwards, *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, 1-144.

27 ‘Mesopotamian Gods’, *Babylon Rising*, http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sitchin/mesopotamian_gods.htm, accessed 26 June, 2012.

28 E. Jan Wilson, ‘Inside a Sumerian Temple: The Ekishnugal at Ur’, in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=21&chapid=112>, accessed 28 July, 2012.

29 Edwards, *Treasures of Tutankhamun*, 1-144.

30 Possehl, ‘Sociocultural Complexity Without the State’, 276-7 and 280.

31 Ibid., 277.

32 Ibid.

religious function, and the so-called ‘Priest-King,’ as already discussed, cannot be assumed to be either a priest or a king, let alone both. It may be the case that the Indus Valley cemetery burials reflect an archaeological bias, however this is merely speculative. Evidence of state-wide religion like that from Mesopotamia and Egypt is required before a compelling argument for an Indus Valley state religion can be presented.

Archaeological evidence finally suggests that the Indus Valley Civilisation lacked a monopoly of force. This third argument is admittedly less demonstrative of the Indus Valley ‘non-state’ than the preceding two, as unlike the definitional necessity of a king and supporting elite, and the centrality of state religion, a monopoly of force is a *common although not essential* feature of early states. Possehl maintains that a monopoly of force is an essential feature of states,³³ however the Egyptian Old Kingdom serves as a potent counterexample.³⁴ Unlike the Indus Valley, Egypt was, and remains to this day, largely secured from external threats by a formidable desert. It also relied upon religious authority to maintain its legitimacy.³⁵ The Indus Valley was neither geographically secure from external threats, nor (as has been argued) did it source its legitimacy through an official religious authority. Therefore, whilst the lack of a monopoly of force did not prevent the Egyptian Old Kingdom from being a state, it would have made maintaining a state-form of political organisation almost impossible in the Indus Valley. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were not defended with walls, the surrounding villages were arranged in a non-defensive pattern, and there are no burn-marks or arrow-marks on buildings.³⁶ Additionally no weaponry or defensive equipment has been uncovered, and no Indus Valley figurines or other artforms depict warfare in any way.³⁷ This distinguishes Indus Valley Civilisation from Mesopotamian Civilisation (which demonstrates the opposite), and challenges the notion of the Indus Valley state. Without a monopoly of force (or a state religion), a central authority would have to constantly maintain its legitimacy through genuine material outputs. Such an authority would be consequentially susceptible to social unrest and coups at times when material outputs are unsatisfactory. Lacking a monopoly of force, a central authority in the Indus Valley would also be vulnerable to external military forces presiding in South West Asia.³⁸ This predicament seems unsustainable. Evidence from the Indus Valley, highlighting the Civilisation’s lack of monopoly of force, therefore suggests that it was not a state.

Despite the lack of centralised authority, a state religion and a monopoly of force, Indus Valley Civilisation was undeniably complex—equally so with Mesopotamia and Egypt. ‘Complexity’ is a term which refers to the size of a society, the number and distinctiveness of its parts, the number of specialised roles which it incorporates, and the number of mechanisms which are utilised in organising the society into a coherent, functioning whole.³⁹ Two terms which are important when considering complexity are ‘inequality,’ referring to the degree of vertical differentiation or social stratification within the society, and ‘heterogeneity,’ which refers to the unequal distribution of people amongst those occupations and roles.⁴⁰ Indus Valley Civilisation was as vertically

33 Ibid., 265.

34 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 53. Service, ‘The Origins of Civilisation in the Indus River Valley’, 241.

35 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 52.

36 Service, ‘The Origins of Civilisation in the Indus River Valley’, 241.

37 Possehl, ‘Sociocultural Complexity Without the State’, 269-71.

38 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 55.

39 Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 23.

40 Ibid.

differentiated and as heterogenous, and therefore as complex, as both Mesopotamia and Egypt. Population growth, geographical expansion, socioeconomic stratification and technological development are all invariable consequences of increasing complexity.⁴¹ The Indus Valley Civilisation featured rapid population growth and territorial expansion: numerous settlements and cities covered an area of approximately eight-hundred-thousand to one-million square kilometres.⁴² The Indus Valley Civilisation had developed a sophisticated system of water management: separating drinking water from waste water (in effect the world's first sewerage system),⁴³ along with an advanced hydraulic system (wells supplying groups of households).⁴⁴ The Civilisation also featured: irrigation and flood control, a rudimentary writing system, decimal mathematical notation, a system of weights and measurements, craft production (including figurines and pottery), copper and bronze metallurgy, substantial kiln-fired mud-brick and stone buildings, extensive maritime and overland trade (including with Mesopotamia), and seafarers and overland explorers.⁴⁵ The previously described 'Bronze Dancing Girl' and 'Priest-King' sculptures are evidence of the Civilisation's mastery of craft production, bronze metallurgy and soapstone manipulation. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were large comparable to Mesopotamian and Egyptian urban centres, and were also remarkably similar with each other, featuring regular and rectilinear geometrical street plans and modular buildings, along with a seemingly 'unified culture' of architecture and decorative styles.⁴⁶

Proponents of the Indus Valley state, such as Jacobson,⁴⁷ maintain that this complexity is irrefutable evidence of the statehood of the Indus Valley Civilisation; such developments requiring large-scale organised labour and economy *must* have arisen through the socio-political organisation of the state. However, as previously explained, 'complexity' is a socio-cultural term essentially describing the size, distinctiveness and development of a group of people living together,⁴⁸ and is defined independently of 'statehood.' The onus of proof belongs to proponents of the Indus Valley state. The absence of Harappan kings and the rest of the state apparatus must be addressed rather than ignored.⁴⁹ Assuming the statehood of the Indus Valley Civilisation without supporting evidence, and manipulating the available evidence so that it is consistent with the predominant 'unilineal' anthropological paradigm, is an example of biased historiographical method. This essay has argued that the Indus Valley Civilisation contradicts this schema. The state is a particularly successful—but not the only—form of socio-political organisation. The Indus Valley Civilisation demonstrates that a civilisation could achieve complexity comparable to that of its contemporaries without actually attaining the status of statehood. Through a strong yet decentralised organisational institution, the Indus Valley Civilisation achieved a strong degree of complexity like that of Mesopotamia and Egypt. The existence of this unique phenomenon suggests that the current anthropological association of statehood and complexity is too restrictive.⁵⁰ Although

41 Ibid.

42 Bogucki, *The Origins of Human Society*, 363. Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State', 268.

43 McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*, 51.

44 Bogucki, *The Origins of Human Society*, 362.

45 Ibid., 362. Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State', 288. Service, 'The Origins of Civilisation in the Indus River Valley', 238,240-2.

46 Bogucki, *The Origins of Human Society*, 361. Service, 'The Origins of Civilisation in the Indus River Valley', 239.

47 Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State', 284.

48 Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 23.

49 Possehl, 'Sociocultural Complexity Without the State', 285.

50 Ibid., 286.

obviously not well understood, Indus Valley organisation was unique: lacking close parallel in the archaeological, historical or anthropological record.⁵¹

This essay has examined Indus Valley Civilisation in comparison with the contemporary Mesopotamian and Egyptian Civilisations, with a specific focus on the archaeological evidence concerning the existence of individual leaders ('kings'), the existence of a state-wide religion, and the existence of a monopoly of force. These three criteria indicate whether or not a society should be classified as a state. Unlike in Mesopotamia and Egypt, where evidence points unambiguously towards the presence of kings and official religions, and unlike the warlike Mesopotamian society, the Indus Valley Civilisation seemed to lack kings, a state-wide religion and a monopoly of force. Therefore, the Civilisation cannot be said to have been a state. However, evidence also demonstrates that the Indus Valley Civilisation was as complex as contemporary Mesopotamia and Egypt, thereby challenging the 'unilineal' paradigm of social complexity. Rather than complexity culminating through the state, this essay has ultimately argued that the Indus Valley Civilisation is demonstrative of a complex 'non-state'.

51 Ibid., 284.
