

Chapter 2: Ancient Roots

Summary

This chapter follows South Asia's long story from the farming village of Mehrgarh, about 7000 BCE, through the planned cities of the Indus Valley, the Vedic period and the birth of Buddhism and Jainism, to the empires of the Mauryas, Kushans and Guptas, ending around 550 CE. You will see what historians know for sure, what they still argue about, and why those arguments matter today. By the end you'll be able to put the major ancient periods in order and connect each one to real places across Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Concepts Covered

1. Mehrgarh
2. Indus Valley Civilization
3. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro
4. Indus Script
5. Indo-Aryan Migration
6. Vedic Period
7. The Vedas
8. Sanskrit
9. Mahajanapadas

10. Rise of Buddhism and Jainism
11. Maurya Empire
12. Ashoka
13. Edicts of Ashoka
14. Kushan Empire
15. Sangam Age
16. Gupta Empire
17. Nalanda

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?**, especially the Indus and Ganges (Ganga) rivers, the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Hindu Kush.

Welcome to the deep past!



The symbol on India's money, the wheel on its flag, the Sanskrit words in a wedding ceremony and the Buddha statue in your neighbor's garden all come from this chapter's time period.

When people argue online about "who was here first," they are arguing about this history too. Knowing the real evidence helps you join those conversations calmly and fairly.

2.1 "Nobody Can Read It?"

It's the club's second planning meeting, and Ben Lindqvist is supposed to be making a sign-up sheet. Instead he's holding his phone out to Zara Hossain.

"Look at this," he says. On the screen is a museum photo of a small square stone, about the size of a postage stamp. Carved into it is an animal that looks like a bull with one horn, and above it a short row of neat little symbols.

"It's a seal from Mohenjo-daro," Ben reads. "In Pakistan. About four thousand years old. People pressed it into clay, like a stamp." He scrolls. "It says the writing on it has never been deciphered." He looks up. "Wait. Nobody can read it? Like, nobody on Earth?"

Zara shakes her head slowly. Her Nanu talks about the old ruins in Bangladesh as if they were neighbors, so Zara knew South Asia was old. But she pictured "old" as a few kings and temples, not planned cities with writing that has stumped experts for a hundred years. "So how do we know anything about them?" she asks. "And what came after?" That is what this chapter is about: how we know what we know about ancient South Asia, from the first farmers to the end of the Gupta Empire.

2.2 How Do We Know? Clues from the Ground and from Memory

Think about how a detective works. There is no confession, so the detective reads small clues: a footprint, a receipt, a coffee cup. Historians of ancient South Asia work the same way. For the oldest periods, there are no books that anyone can read. The clues come from the ground.

Archaeology is the study of the human past through the things people left behind: buildings, tools, pots, beads, bones and seeds. Archaeologists dig carefully, layer by layer. The deeper layers are usually older. Scientists can measure the age of things like charcoal, seeds and bone using **radiocarbon dating**, which reads the slow, steady decay of a form of carbon. That gives a date range, not an exact year, which is why almost every date in this chapter has the word "about" in front of it.

For later periods there are words too: texts that were memorized and passed on by voice for centuries, then inscriptions carved in stone, coins with kings' names, and reports by travelers from Greece and China. Each kind of clue has limits. Pots can't tell you what people believed, and a king's inscription tells you what he wanted people to think. Good history uses all of them together.

A quick note on dates. **BCE** means "before the Common Era," and **CE** means "Common Era." They count the same years as BC and AD. When you count BCE dates, bigger numbers are further back in time, so 7000 BCE is older than 2600 BCE.

2.3 The First Farmers: Mehrgarh

Mehrgarh is an archaeological site on the Kachhi Plain in Balochistan, Pakistan, near the Bolan Pass, a gap in the hills that leads toward Afghanistan and Iran. It is one of the earliest known places in South Asia where people farmed and herded animals. French archaeologists Jean-François and Catherine Jarrige discovered it in 1974.

The first village at Mehrgarh is usually dated to **about 7000 BCE**. Its people grew wheat and barley and raised sheep, goats and cattle. They lived in houses made of mud brick and buried their dead with ornaments. Over thousands of years the village grew, and its people learned to make pottery and work copper.

Archaeology keeps changing, and Mehrgarh shows how. In 2025, a team led by the archaeologist Benjamin Mutin radiocarbon-dated tooth enamel from 23 of the oldest graves and got a much younger start, about 5200 to 4900 BCE (*Scientific Reports*, 2025). So the start of Mehrgarh is a live debate, but nobody disputes that it was a very early farming village.

There's one more surprising find. In 2006, scientists reported in the journal *Nature* that some teeth from Mehrgarh had tiny holes drilled in them while the people were still alive. It is some of the oldest known evidence of something like dentistry anywhere in the world (how old exactly depends on which Mehrgarh dates turn out to be right).

Mehrgarh matters because cities need food. Farming villages like it are the roots the region's first cities grew from.

2.4 The Indus Valley Civilization

A civilization bigger than Egypt and Mesopotamia

The **Indus Valley Civilization** was a Bronze Age civilization that grew up along the Indus River and nearby rivers, mostly in what is now Pakistan and northwestern India, with outposts as far as northeastern Afghanistan. It is also called the **Harappan Civilization**, after Harappa, the first of its cities to be found. Its full city-building phase, which archaeologists call the Mature Harappan period, lasted from **about 2600 to 1900 BCE**. Early Harappan towns go back to about 3300 BCE.

It was one of the world's three earliest civilizations, alongside Mesopotamia (in today's Iraq) and Egypt. Of the three, it covered by far the most land. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, its sites stretch from Sutkagen Dor near the Arabian Sea coast of Balochistan to Ropar at the foot of the Shimla Hills in India's Punjab, and as far east as the Yamuna River basin north of Delhi. A Harappan trading post, Shortugai, even sat on the Amu Darya (Oxus) River in northern Afghanistan. Of more than a thousand known sites, most were villages and small towns.

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro are the two best-known cities of the Indus Valley Civilization, both in present-day Pakistan. Harappa, in Punjab, was identified as an ancient site in 1921. Mohenjo-daro, in Sindh, beside the Indus River, was identified in 1922. Other large cities include Dholavira and Rakhigarhi, both in India, and Ganeriwala in Pakistan's Cholistan Desert.

These cities stand out because they were planned so carefully. At Mohenjo-daro:

- The streets meet at right angles, like a grid.
- Most buildings were made of baked brick.
- Many houses had a room for bathing, and waste water flowed into **covered drains** that ran along the main streets.
- A large, watertight brick pool, now called the **Great Bath**, may have been used for ritual washing.
- The city had a raised western area that archaeologists call the citadel, and a larger lower town.

UNESCO, which made the ruins of Mohenjo-daro a World Heritage Site in 1980, describes it as the best-preserved city in South Asia from the 3rd millennium BCE. The site covers about 240 hectares, and only about a third of it has been dug up since 1922. Britannica cites estimates of about 35,000 to 41,000 people at Mohenjo-daro and about 23,500 to 35,000 at Harappa, which would make them very large cities for their time.

Feature	What archaeologists found	What it suggests
Grid streets	Main streets crossing at right angles	Planning by some kind of authority

Feature	What archaeologists found	What it suggests
Standard weights	Stone weights that follow the same system across a huge area	Shared rules and well-organized trade
Covered drains	Brick drains along streets, fed by house bathrooms	Care for cleanliness and public works
Great Bath	A watertight pool with steps at Mohenjo-daro	Possibly ritual bathing; its exact use is unknown
Seals	Small stone stamps with animals and short inscriptions	Trade, ownership marks, maybe religious symbols
Few palaces or big temples	No clear royal palace or royal tomb found	Power may have been shared in ways we don't yet understand

Indus people grew wheat, barley, peas, sesame and some of the earliest known cotton, and Indus objects such as red carnelian beads have turned up as far away as Mesopotamia. A tiny bronze figure nicknamed the "Dancing Girl" and a stone bust nicknamed the "Priest-King" are two famous finds. Modern archaeologists invented both nicknames, and nobody knows who the figures really showed.

Spot the guess



Notice how many words in this section are labels that modern people made up: "Great Bath," "citadel," "Priest-King." When you read about the Indus cities, ask: is this something the evidence shows, or a guess dressed up as a name?

Why did the cities fade?

The big Indus cities did not end in one dramatic day. Britannica describes a decline in stages between about 2000 and 1750 BCE. Mohenjo-daro had been hit by serious floods more than once, and its houses got more crowded and more poorly built over time. Many scholars think shifting rivers and a drier climate made it harder to farm near the old cities. People did not vanish. They moved to smaller villages, many of them farther east and south, and kept farming and making crafts.

2.5 The Indus Script: A Puzzle Still Unsolved

The **Indus Script** is the set of signs that Indus people carved on seals, pottery, tools and small tablets. It has **not been deciphered**, which means nobody can read it with confidence.

Here's why it's so hard:

- **The inscriptions are tiny.** The average one is about five signs long. Imagine learning a language from license plates.
- **There are many signs.** Scholars count around 400 (the Indian scholar Iravatham Mahadevan listed 419 in the 1970s), too many for an alphabet.

- **There is no "Rosetta Stone."** No inscription has been found with the same text in a language we can already read.
- **Nobody knows the language.** Some scholars link it to the Dravidian family, which includes Tamil and Telugu, and others disagree. A few argue the signs were not full writing at all, more like merchants' marks.

The puzzle still makes news. In January 2025, M. K. Stalin, the chief minister of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, announced a prize of 1 million US dollars for anyone who deciphers the script to the satisfaction of archaeological experts. As of 2026, no decipherment has been accepted by scholars.

Be careful with 'solved!' headlines



Every few years, someone claims to have cracked the Indus Script. Until other experts can test a decipherment and read new inscriptions with it, treat those claims as ideas, not facts.

2.6 New Languages and the Vedic Period

The Indo-Aryan Migration

After the Indus cities faded, a new language family spread across northern South Asia. The languages most people in Pakistan, northern India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka speak today, including Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bangla, Nepali and Sinhala, belong to the **Indo-Aryan** branch of the Indo-European language family. That family also includes Persian, Greek, Latin, English and Ben's family languages, Swedish and Norwegian.

How did related languages end up in places as far apart as Norway and Bangladesh? The explanation most scholars accept is the **Indo-Aryan Migration**: the idea that people speaking early Indo-Aryan languages

moved into the northwest of the subcontinent from Central Asia in gradual waves, starting **after about 2000 BCE**, and that over centuries their languages spread and mixed with the languages and peoples already living there.

Three kinds of evidence support it:

1. **Language.** Words in Sanskrit, Persian, Greek and Latin match in regular, predictable ways, which points to a common ancestor spoken far to the northwest.
2. **Genetics.** A 2019 study of ancient DNA from 523 people, published in *Science* (Narasimhan and colleagues), found that ancestry linked to herders of the Central Asian steppe spread into South Asia starting around 4,000 years ago. A second 2019 study, in *Cell*, read the DNA of a person buried at the Indus city of Rakhigarhi in India and found little if any steppe ancestry. Together they suggest this ancestry arrived after the Indus cities were built.
3. **Texts.** The oldest Vedic hymns were composed in the northwest of the subcontinent, the region where the languages first arrived, and only later texts describe lands farther east.

Just as important is what the evidence does **not** show. An older colonial-era theory imagined an "Aryan invasion" in which conquerors destroyed the Indus cities. Scholars reject it. The cities were already declining for other reasons, there's no sign of one great war, and the movement of people looks slow. The colonial version was also tied to racist ideas about skin color.

The word "Aryan" itself needs care. In the old texts, *arya* meant "noble," a name for people who shared a language and customs, not a "race." European racists, and later the Nazis, twisted it into a racist label.

Whose Story?

Most linguists, archaeologists and geneticists worldwide accept that Indo-Aryan languages arrived through gradual migration over centuries, mixing with the people already living in the region. Some writers and scholars in India dispute this. They argue that Vedic culture grew up locally, sometimes linking it directly to the Indus cities, and they point to cultural continuity across the region. In Pakistan, the Indus cities are taught as the deep roots of the nation's own land, from Mohenjo-daro in Sindh to Harappa in Punjab. Tamil scholars and politicians often stress a possible Dravidian link to the Indus Script. The same ancient DNA results have been quoted by people on different sides of these debates, so it is worth reading the actual studies, not just headlines about them.

The Vedic Period

The **Vedic Period** is the era, from **about 1500 to 500 BCE**, when the Vedas were composed in northern South Asia. It sits between the end of the Indus cities and the rise of new cities and kingdoms around 600 BCE.

Early Vedic people lived mostly in the Punjab region, organized into tribes rather than kingdoms, and lived largely by herding. Priests performed rituals around a sacred fire while chanting hymns. Between about 1200 and 1000 BCE, Vedic culture spread east into the western Ganga plain, and the Kuru kingdom became its new center.

This is also when **varna**, a division of society into priests, warriors and rulers, farmers and traders, and laborers, appears in Vedic texts. Varna is an idea from the texts. In everyday life, people later belonged to thousands of local groups, called *jati*, that were usually inherited and married within the group. Over many centuries, the textual varna idea and these local jati groups together shaped what is now called caste, and how they fit together varied

from region to region. You'll learn about that long and painful history, and about the movements against caste discrimination, in [Chapter 13](#).

The Vedas

The Vedas (वेद, *VAY-duh*, "knowledge") are four collections of sacred hymns, chants, ritual instructions and teachings composed in an early form of Sanskrit. They are the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. The four are:

- the **Rigveda**, a collection of hymns of praise to gods such as Agni (fire) and Indra (storm and war);
- the **Samaveda**, hymns arranged for singing;
- the **Yajurveda**, prayers and formulas for priests to use during rituals;
- the **Atharvaveda**, which includes prayers for health, protection and everyday life.

Most scholars date the bulk of the Rigveda, the oldest, to about 1500 to 1000 BCE. Later layers include the **Upanishads**, philosophical dialogues about the self and ultimate reality that shaped central ideas in Hinduism.

Maybe the most amazing thing about the Vedas is how they survived. For centuries nobody wrote them down at all. Teachers passed them to students by voice, using memory techniques so precise that the sound of each word stayed fixed for thousands of years. UNESCO recognized the **Tradition of Vedic Chanting** as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage (it was proclaimed in 2003 and inscribed on the list in 2008). In Hindu tradition, the Vedas are *shruti*, "what is heard," revealed to ancient sages rather than written by human authors.

Sanskrit

Sanskrit (संस्कृत, *SUNS-krit*, "refined" or "perfected") is the classical language of ancient South Asia, part of the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European family. The oldest form, used in the Vedas, is called Vedic Sanskrit. Later, a grammarian named **Panini**, who most scholars place around the 4th century BCE (some argue earlier), described the language in a famous grammar called the *Ashtadhyayi*, "Eight Chapters." His rules shaped Classical Sanskrit for the next two thousand years.

Sanskrit became the language of Hindu scripture, philosophy, drama, poetry and science, and many Buddhist and Jain texts used it too. For centuries it was a shared language of learning, a bit like Latin in medieval Europe. Its words live on in many modern languages and even in English: "yoga," "karma," "avatar" and "jungle" all trace back to Sanskrit.

2.7 Cities Return: The Mahajanapadas

Around 600 BCE, something happened in the Ganga plain that had not happened in South Asia since the Indus cities: big towns and cities appeared again. Historians call this the "second urbanization."

The **Mahajanapadas** (महाजनपद, *muh-HAA-jun-uh-puh-duh*, "great realms") were the sixteen large kingdoms and republics that ruled northern South Asia from about the 6th to the 4th century BCE. The word comes from *maha*, "great," and *janapada*, a territory where a people (*jana*) had settled. Old Buddhist texts list sixteen of them, stretching from Gandhara in the northwest (today's northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan) to Anga in the east (today's Bihar, India).

Most were ruled by kings, but a couple were governed by councils of leading families, which historians sometimes call republics. Over time, the kingdom of **Magadha**, in today's Bihar, swallowed its neighbors. Its rulers built a fort at a village on the Ganga that grew into the city of **Pataliputra**, near modern

Patna. Pataliputra would become the capital of two of the biggest empires in this chapter.

In the far northwest, the city of **Taxila**, near today's Islamabad in Pakistan, became an important stop on trade routes to Central Asia. UNESCO's description of the site notes that Alexander the Great entered Taxila in 326 BCE, during his campaign into the Punjab.

2.8 New Paths: The Rise of Buddhism and Jainism

The new cities brought new wealth and new kinds of work, and with them came new questions. Some people began to doubt that elaborate fire rituals were the only path to a good life. Wandering teachers, called *shramanas*, gave up home and possessions to search for answers through meditation and simple living. Two of these teachers started traditions that are still alive today.

The **Rise of Buddhism and Jainism** describes how these two traditions began in the Ganga plain in the 6th or 5th century BCE, during the age of the Mahajanapadas, and grew into religions followed by millions.

The Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as **the Buddha**, "the awakened one," lived in the 6th or 5th century BCE. Historians are not sure of his exact dates. According to Buddhist tradition:

- He was born into a ruling family of the Shakya clan at **Lumbini**, in what is now southern Nepal.
- He left his comfortable life to search for an end to suffering.

- He reached awakening (enlightenment) while meditating under a fig tree at **Bodh Gaya**, in today's Bihar, India.
- He gave his first teaching at the Deer Park at **Sarnath**, near Varanasi.
- He died at **Kushinagar**, in today's Uttar Pradesh, India.

The Buddha taught a "Middle Way" between luxury and extreme self-denial. His core teachings are the Four Noble Truths (life involves suffering; suffering has a cause in craving; suffering can end; and there is a path to end it) and the Noble Eightfold Path, a practice of ethics, mindfulness and meditation. He founded a community of monks and, later, nuns, called the *sangha*.

Mahavira and Jainism

Mahavira, "the great hero," was born Vardhamana in today's Bihar and lived around the same time as the Buddha. Jains consider him the 24th and last *Tirthankara*, or "ford-maker," of the present age: a teacher who made a crossing over the sea of rebirth for others. Jainism's most basic rule is **ahimsa**, non-violence toward every living being. Some Jain monks carry a soft brush to gently move insects out of their path.

	Buddhism	Jainism
Key teacher	Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha	Mahavira (the 24th Tirthankara)
When	6th or 5th century BCE	6th or 5th century BCE
Where	Ganga plain (Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath)	Ganga plain (today's Bihar)

	Buddhism	Jainism
Central idea	The Middle Way; the Four Noble Truths	Ahimsa, non-violence to all living things

Both traditions questioned the idea that rituals performed by priests were the only path to a good life. Hindu thought was changing at the same time, too, and the Upanishads were asking similar deep questions about the self, rebirth and freedom. You'll explore all three faiths, and more, in [Chapter 5](#).

2.9 The Maurya Empire and Ashoka

The first great empire

The **Maurya Empire** was the first empire to rule most of the Indian subcontinent. It lasted from **about 321 to 185 BCE**, with its capital at **Pataliputra**.

It was founded by **Chandragupta Maurya**, who took the Punjab after Alexander the Great's death in 323 BCE and defeated Seleucus, one of Alexander's generals, around 305 BCE. A Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, lived at his court. His book is lost, but pieces survive in later Greek and Roman writers. Chandragupta's son Bindusara pushed the empire south into the Deccan. The Mauryas ran a large government with a standing army and officials, and built a great road linking eastern Afghanistan to Pataliputra.

Ashoka: a ruler who changed course

Ashoka (also spelled Asoka) was the third Maurya emperor and Chandragupta's grandson. He ruled from **about 268 to 232 BCE** (Britannica gives two possible ranges, about 265 to 238 BCE or about 273 to 232 BCE). His

empire stretched from present-day Afghanistan in the west to present-day Bangladesh in the east.

In the eighth year of his reign, about 260 BCE, Ashoka conquered **Kalinga**, a region on the Bay of Bengal coast in today's Odisha, India. The war was brutal. In one of his own inscriptions, Ashoka said that 150,000 people were carried away as captives, 100,000 were killed, and many times that number died. He wrote that he felt deep sorrow and regret.

After Kalinga, Ashoka gave up conquering new lands by war. He became a follower of Buddhism and promoted what he called **dhamma** (धम्म, *DUM-muh*, "righteousness" or "right conduct," the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word *dharma*). For Ashoka, dhamma meant things like non-violence, tolerance of all religious groups and opinions, obedience to parents, respect for priests and religious teachers, and humane treatment of servants.

He ended the royal hunts, and Buddhist tradition says he built many stupas (dome-shaped shrines holding relics) and sent missions to other lands. The Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa* says he sent his son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka as missionaries.

Ashoka is on your money



Look at an Indian rupee note or coin. The four lions are India's state emblem, adapted from a pillar top Ashoka put up at Sarnath, and the 24-spoked wheel in the middle of India's flag is the Ashoka Chakra.

The Edicts of Ashoka

The **Edicts of Ashoka** are messages that Ashoka had carved on rocks and on tall polished stone pillars across his empire. They are some of the oldest

readable written documents in South Asia. Most were written in Prakrit, an everyday form of the languages related to Sanskrit, using the **Brahmi** script. Brahmi is the ancestor of dozens of modern scripts, including Devanagari, Bangla, Tamil and Sinhala.

The edicts were written for local readers. In today's Pakistan, some used the **Kharoshthi** script, written right to left. Near Kandahar, in **Afghanistan**, one was carved in **Greek and Aramaic**. At **Lumbini** in Nepal, Ashoka put up a pillar marking the Buddha's birthplace, and UNESCO dates it to 249 BCE.

Over the following centuries Brahmi changed so much that nobody could read the edicts, and Ashoka was nearly forgotten. Between 1836 and 1838, James Prinsep, a British official and scholar in Calcutta (now Kolkata), worked out the Brahmi script, and Ashoka returned to history.

Not every Ashokan inscription fits the gentle image, though. Ashoka did not give back the lands he had conquered, and Kalinga stayed part of his empire. In the Kalinga region itself, his inscriptions leave out the edict that expresses regret for the war. One possible reason is that confessing to the people he had conquered did not seem politically wise. Ashoka really did rethink power after a terrible war, but he was still an emperor.

After Ashoka's death, the empire weakened. The last Maurya ruler was overthrown about 185 BCE.

2.10 Crossroads in the North: The Kushan Empire

After the Mauryas, many smaller kingdoms ruled the north, and new groups came through the northwest passes, including Greek kings from Bactria (today's northern Afghanistan and Central Asia). The most powerful newcomers built the **Kushan Empire**, which ruled from **about the 1st to the**

3rd century CE (some scholars extend it into the 4th). The Kushans came from Central Asia.

At its height, their empire covered much of today's Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India, along with parts of Central Asia. Its most famous ruler, **Kanishka**, came to the throne around 127 CE. His main capital was **Purushapura** (today's **Peshawar**, Pakistan), with a second major capital at **Mathura** in northern India.

The Kushan Empire sat on the **Silk Road**, the trade routes linking China, Central Asia, Persia, India and the Roman world. Some Kushan kings honored the Hindu god Shiva, and Kanishka strongly supported Buddhism. Two things grew out of this crossroads:

- **Gandhara art.** In the region of Gandhara, around Peshawar and Taxila, artists mixed Buddhist subjects with styles learned from Greek and Roman art. Some of the earliest surviving statues showing the Buddha in human form were made in Gandhara and in Mathura during Kushan rule.
- **Buddhism's journey east.** Monks, merchants and pilgrims carried Buddhism from Gandhara across the Karakoram mountains into Central Asia and China.

2.11 The Tamil South: The Sangam Age

The south had its own kingdoms, language and literature. It wasn't simply a copy of the north.

The **Sangam Age** is the period in the Tamil-speaking south of the subcontinent when the earliest Tamil poetry was composed. Most scholars place it between **about 300 BCE and 300 CE**, though some argue for a narrower range (the Tamil literature scholar Kamil Zvelebil suggested about

100 BCE to 250 CE). The dates are debated because the poems rarely mention events that can be dated.

The word *Sangam* (சங்கம், *SUNG-um*) means "assembly" or "academy." Tamil tradition says poets gathered in academies under the Pandya kings at Madurai. Scholars treat the oldest parts of that story as legend, but the poems are real. They fall into two groups:

- **Akam** ("inner") poems about love, each tied to a particular landscape, such as mountains, forests, farmland or seashore.
- **Puram** ("outer") poems about war, kings, generosity, death and public life.

Three ruling families, called the "three crowned kings," dominated the Tamil country: the **Cheras** on the west coast (in today's Kerala), the **Cholas** in the Kaveri River delta, and the **Pandyas** around **Madurai**. They often fought each other.

The Tamil south grew rich from sea trade. Ports like **Muziris**, on the Malabar Coast in today's Kerala, traded pepper with the Roman world and the Middle East. Roman writers such as Pliny the Elder described it, and a Tamil poem describes foreign ships arriving with gold and leaving with pepper. You'll follow this ocean trade in [Chapter 3](#).

Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

Ancient history happened across the region, not only in today's India.

- In **Sri Lanka**, **Anuradhapura** became the capital of a Sinhala kingdom in the 4th century BCE (377 BCE, according to the chronicles) and stayed a capital for well over a thousand years. Tradition says Sanghamitta brought a cutting of the Bodhi tree there in the 3rd century BCE, and a tree grown from it still stands. The city became a center of Theravada

Buddhism. UNESCO listed the Sacred City of Anuradhapura as a World Heritage Site in 1982.

- In **Bangladesh, Mahasthangarh**, in today's Bogra District, is the earliest city site found so far. A limestone slab carved with six lines of Prakrit in the Brahmi script, found there in 1931, shows the city existed by at least the 3rd century BCE, when it was an important town under the Mauryas. Zara's Nanu calls it "very, very old," and she's right.

2.12 The Gupta Empire and Nalanda

The Guptas

The **Gupta Empire** ruled much of northern and central South Asia from **about 320 to 550 CE**. Its kings came from Magadha, the same region as the Mauryas, and Pataliputra was again a major capital.

Chandragupta I (not the Maurya one) began the dynasty's rise around 319 or 320 CE. His son **Samudragupta** expanded it through war, and **Chandragupta II** extended it west to Ujjain, though his reign is remembered more for culture than conquest. Sanskrit literature and science did well under the Guptas. The poet and playwright **Kalidasa** wrote famous Sanskrit works such as the play *Shakuntala*. The mathematician and astronomer **Aryabhata** wrote his book, the *Aryabhatiya*, in 499 CE, when he was 23 years old, according to the book itself. You'll meet Aryabhata again in **Chapter 16**, along with the story of zero and the decimal place-value system.

Historians used to call the Gupta period India's "Golden Age." Many now question that label: some achievements once credited to the Guptas began earlier, and "golden" mostly describes life for the wealthy. The empire weakened under attacks by the **Hunas** from Central Asia and the breakaway of its own local rulers, and by the mid-500s it had shrunk to a small kingdom.

Nalanda

Nalanda was a great Buddhist monastery and center of learning in today's Bihar, India. Most historians date its founding to the reign of the Gupta emperor **Kumaragupta I**, around 427 CE. It grew into one of the most famous places of study in Asia and operated for roughly 800 years.

Monks and students there studied Buddhist philosophy along with grammar, logic, medicine, mathematics and astronomy. They lived in brick buildings called *viharas*, and the monastery had a famous library. Students and scholars came from as far away as China and Korea. The Chinese pilgrim and scholar **Xuanzang** studied there in the 7th century and carried many texts back to China. Nalanda was badly damaged in attacks around 1200 CE and was later abandoned.

UNESCO made the Archaeological Site of Nalanda Mahavihara a World Heritage Site in 2016, calling it the most ancient university of the Indian subcontinent. Some historians note that "university" is a modern word that fits imperfectly, since Nalanda was first of all a monastery.

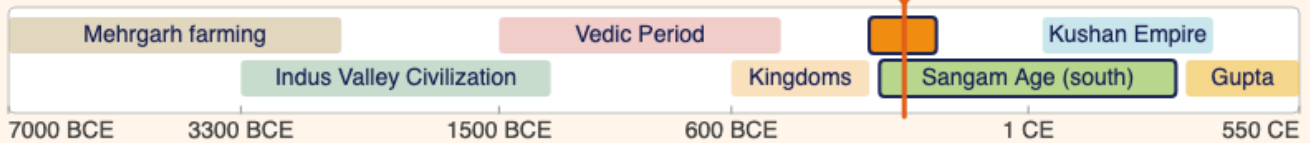
Our story ends around 550 CE, as the Gupta Empire fades. New kingdoms, new faiths and new traders are about to arrive, and that is the story of Chapter 3.

Diagram: Ancient Timeline

Ancient Timeline: South Asia to 550 CE

Drag the year slider or press Play. Click a lit dot to learn about a place.

Year: about 250 BCE



Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders.

Ashoka rules (about 268 to 232 BCE)

After a bloody war in Kalinga (about 260 BCE), Ashoka has edicts about dhamma, right conduct, carved on rocks and pillars across his empire, as far west as Kandahar in Afghanistan. Buddhist missions reach Sri Lanka.

Lit on the map now:

Taxila (Pakistan), Kandahar (Afghanistan), Lumbini (Nepal), Pataliputra (India (Patna)), Mahasthangarh (Bangladesh), Madurai (India (Tamil Nadu)), Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka)

Play

Jump to an era...



Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch02-ancient-timeline/main.html>

Open the Ancient Timeline fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Ancient Timeline

sim-id: ch02-ancient-timeline

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: sequence

Learning Objective: The learner will put the major ancient periods of South Asia in order, from Mehrgarh (about 7000 BCE) to the end of the Gupta Empire (about 550 CE), and connect each period to the places where it happened.

Canvas: responsive width; 670 px drawing area plus 90 px control area.

Controls: year slider (about 7000 BCE to 550 CE, with more room given to later centuries), Play / Pause button, "Jump to an era" menu; click or tap a dot on the map.

Behavior: Eight period bands sit on a timeline strip; bands containing the current year are highlighted. Eleven dots on a schematic map (Mehrgarh, Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, Taxila, Kandahar, Lumbini, Pataliputra, Nalanda, Mahasthangarh, Madurai, Anuradhapura) light up while each place mattered. An event card describes the current year; clicking a dot names its present-day country. Starts paused at 7000 BCE. The schematic-map caption is drawn inside the drawing area.

Drag the slider slowly from left to right and watch which dots light up. The timeline gives later centuries more room, so the early farming period is even longer than it looks. Stop at 2200 BCE, 250 BCE and 500 CE and read the event card each time.

Then look for overlaps: at 100 CE, two bands are highlighted at once, the Kushans in the north and the Sangam kings in the south. Finally, click every lit dot to find its present-day country. You should end up able to name an

ancient place in Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about the ancient past: stories they heard as children, old places they visited, and how history was taught in their school. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Pull up a photo of one ancient place from this chapter, such as Mohenjo-daro, Lumbini, Sarnath, Anuradhapura or Mahasthangarh, and show it to them first. Ask if it's okay to take notes.

Questions to ask

1. When you were growing up, what stories did you hear about the very distant past? Who told them?
2. Have you ever visited an ancient site, like Mohenjo-daro, Taxila, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Lumbini, Anuradhapura or Mahasthangarh? What do you remember about it?
3. What did your school teach about the Indus cities, the Vedas, the Buddha or Ashoka? Was there a part of that history your teachers were especially proud of?
4. Are there old words, prayers, chants or sayings in our family that you were told come from a very old language, like Sanskrit, Pali or old Tamil?

5. Has the way people talk about ancient history changed since you were young, or since you moved here? Do people argue about it more now?
6. What is one thing about the ancient past of our region that you hope I'll always remember?

Listen for: names of places tied to Harappa and Mohenjo-daro or the Rise of Buddhism and Jainism, any mention of Ashoka or the Vedas, and signs that your elder learned a different version of the story, like the debate over the Indo-Aryan Migration.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

Your turn: compare two answers

Compare what your elder learned in school with what this chapter says. Did they learn about periods or places this chapter mentions, such as Mehrgarh, the Indus Script or the Sangam Age? If a friend interviewed someone who went to school in a different country, such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal or Sri Lanka, list two ways their versions of ancient history were different and one way they were the same.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: South Asian history begins with the Vedas.

Reality: Farming villages like Mehrgarh go back to about 7000 BCE (some say later), and the planned cities of the Indus Valley Civilization flourished from about 2600 to 1900 BCE, centuries before the Rigveda was composed.

Myth: Scholars have figured out how to read the Indus Script.

Reality: The Indus Script is still undeciphered. Its inscriptions are very short, there is no bilingual text to help, and the language is unknown. In 2025 the government of Tamil Nadu offered a 1 million US dollar prize for a decipherment that experts accept.

Myth: "Aryans" invaded and destroyed the Indus cities.

Reality: The Indus cities declined gradually between about 2000 and 1750 BCE, likely because of floods, shifting rivers and a drier climate. Most scholars think Indo-Aryan speakers arrived slowly over centuries and mixed with people already there. The violent "Aryan invasion" story is an outdated colonial-era theory that scholars reject.

Myth: Ashoka was always a peaceful Buddhist king.

Reality: Ashoka fought a bloody war to conquer Kalinga, around 260 BCE, before turning to Buddhism and dhamma. Even afterward he kept his army and his empire, and the edict in which he expresses regret was left out of the inscriptions in Kalinga itself.

Myth: Ancient South Asian history happened only in what is now India.

Reality: Mehrgarh, Harappa, Mohenjo-daro and Taxila are in Pakistan; Lumbini is in Nepal; Ashoka's Greek and Aramaic edict is near Kandahar in Afghanistan; Mahasthangarh is in Bangladesh; and Anuradhapura is in Sri Lanka.

Check Yourself

? 1. Why is Mehrgarh important?



It is one of the earliest known farming villages in South Asia, usually dated to about 7000 BCE. Its people grew wheat and barley and herded animals, and villages like it were the base the later Indus cities grew from.

? 2. Name three features that show Mohenjo-daro was a planned city. ✓

Any three of these: grid streets meeting at right angles, baked-brick buildings, covered drains along the streets, bathrooms in houses, and a raised citadel area with the Great Bath.

? 3. Give two reasons the Indus Script is so hard to decipher. ✓

The inscriptions are very short (about five signs on average), there is no bilingual text like the Rosetta Stone, and nobody knows what language it recorded. Any two are correct.

? 4. What changed after Ashoka's war in Kalinga? ✓

Ashoka gave up conquering new lands by war, turned to Buddhism and promoted dhamma, or right conduct, through edicts carved on rocks and pillars across his empire.

? 5. Which empire founded Nalanda, and about when? ✓

The Gupta Empire. Most historians date Nalanda's founding to the reign of Kumaragupta I, around 427 CE.

Exercises

Remember

1. Put these in order from oldest to newest: Maurya Empire, Mehrgarh, Gupta Empire, Indus cities at their height, Vedic Period.

 Answer

Mehrgarh (about 7000 BCE), Indus cities at their height (about 2600 to 1900 BCE), Vedic Period (about 1500 to 500 BCE), Maurya Empire (about 321 to 185 BCE), Gupta Empire (about 320 to 550 CE).

2. Name the four Vedas.

 Answer

The Rigveda, the Samaveda, the Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda.

Understand

1. Explain why almost every date in this chapter starts with "about."

 Answer

Ancient dates come from methods like radiocarbon dating, which give a range, and from texts that often don't name exact years. Scholars also disagree about some dates, such as Mehrgarh's start and the Sangam Age.

2. Explain the difference between the Indo-Aryan Migration that most scholars accept and the old "Aryan invasion" theory.

Answer

The migration idea says Indo-Aryan speakers arrived gradually over centuries after about 2000 BCE and mixed with people already living there. The invasion theory claimed a violent conquest that destroyed the Indus cities. The evidence does not support a single invasion, and the cities were already declining for other reasons.

Apply

1. Use the Ancient Timeline. Set the year to about 100 CE. List every place that is lit and the present-day country it is in. Which two period bands overlap? *Hint: one band is in the north and one in the far south.*
2. A cousin says, "Buddhism is from Sri Lanka." Using this chapter, write two sentences that politely correct and add to that statement. *Hint: think about Lumbini, Bodh Gaya and Ashoka's missions.*

Analyze

1. Compare the kinds of evidence historians use for the Indus Valley Civilization and for Ashoka's reign. Why do we know so much more about what Ashoka believed? *Hint: one of them left writing people can read.*
2. Ashoka's regret for the Kalinga war appears in edicts across his empire but not in the edicts placed in Kalinga itself. Analyze what this might tell us about Ashoka as a ruler. *Hint: who was the audience for each inscription?*

Evaluate

1. Some historians call the Gupta period India's "Golden Age," and others reject the label. Which side do you find more convincing? Use at least two facts from the chapter. *Hint: ask "golden for whom?"*
2. Your club wants to put "Ancient India" as the title of a slide about Harappa, Taxila and Lumbini. Evaluate whether that title is accurate and fair, and suggest a better one. *Hint: check which present-day countries those sites are in.*

Create

1. Create a five-panel comic strip that follows one object through time, such as a Harappan seal, a Brahmi inscription or a Nalanda manuscript, from when it was made to when it was found or read again. *Hint: James Prinsep or the 1922 Mohenjo-daro dig could be a panel.*
2. Write a short museum label (80 to 120 words) for an Indus seal that tells visitors what we know, what we don't know, and why the script matters today. *Hint: use "about" for dates and avoid claims the evidence can't support.*

Key Takeaways

- Farming began early in South Asia: Mehrgarh, in Pakistan's Balochistan, is usually dated to about 7000 BCE.
- The Indus Valley Civilization (about 2600 to 1900 BCE at its height) built planned cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, and its script is still undeciphered.
- Most scholars think Indo-Aryan languages arrived through gradual migration after about 2000 BCE; the violent "Aryan invasion" story is

rejected, and some people in India dispute migration altogether.

- The Vedic Period produced the Vedas in Sanskrit, kept alive for centuries by careful memorization.
- The Buddha and Mahavira lived in the world of the Mahajanapadas, the new cities and kingdoms of northern South Asia, and their teachings became Buddhism and Jainism.
- The Mauryas, especially Ashoka, built the first empire across most of the subcontinent; the Kushans linked the north to the Silk Road; Tamil kingdoms of the Sangam Age traded across the sea; and the Guptas supported Sanskrit learning and founded Nalanda.
- Ancient South Asian history belongs to the whole region: Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka all hold key sites.

Seven thousand years, done!



You just crossed about 7,000 years of history, and you can now explain why Ben's tiny seal is such a big deal. Next, in Chapter 3, new empires rise, Islam and Sikhism arrive and grow, and European ships appear on the horizon.

Quiz: Ancient Roots

Test your understanding of Chapter 2. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

Mehrgarh, one of the earliest farming villages in South Asia, is in which present-day country?

- A. India
- B. Afghanistan
- C. Pakistan
- D. Nepal

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **C**. Mehrgarh is on the Kachhi Plain in Balochistan, Pakistan, near the Bolan Pass. Afghanistan is a tempting guess because the pass leads toward it, but the site itself is in Pakistan.

Concept Tested: Mehrgarh **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

About when did the Mature Harappan cities of the Indus Valley Civilization flourish?

- A. About 2600 to 1900 BCE
- B. About 7000 to 5000 BCE
- C. About 1500 to 500 BCE
- D. About 321 to 185 BCE

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. The planned Indus cities were at their height from about 2600 to 1900 BCE. About 1500 to 500 BCE is the Vedic Period, which came after the cities faded, and 321 to 185 BCE is the Maurya Empire.

Concept Tested: Indus Valley Civilization **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Which statement about the Indus Script is accurate as of 2026?

- A. It was deciphered in the 1830s by James Prinsep.
- B. It has not been deciphered, partly because the inscriptions are very short and no bilingual text has been found.
- C. It is an early form of the Brahmi alphabet and can be read easily.
- D. It was deciphered after Tamil Nadu offered a prize in 2025.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. The Indus Script is still undeciphered: inscriptions average about five signs, there is no Rosetta Stone, and the language is unknown. Prinsep deciphered Brahmi, Ashoka's script, not the Indus Script, and the 2025 prize has not been claimed with a decipherment experts accept.

Concept Tested: Indus Script **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Which feature of Mohenjo-daro best supports the idea that the city was carefully planned?

- A. A huge royal palace at the center of the city
- B. Gold coins stamped with the names of kings
- C. Temples covered in readable inscriptions
- D. Streets crossing at right angles, with covered drains along them

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Grid streets and covered drains fed by house bathrooms show planning. Archaeologists have not found a clear royal palace, and Indus writing cannot be read, so the other options describe things that were not found.

Concept Tested: Harappa and Mohenjo-daro **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Which description of the Indo-Aryan Migration matches what most scholars accept today?

- A. A sudden invasion around 1900 BCE that destroyed the Indus cities in battle
- B. A movement of Indo-Aryan speakers from the south of India to Central Asia
- C. A gradual movement of Indo-Aryan speakers into the northwest over centuries after about 2000 BCE, mixing with people already living there
- D. A myth with no supporting evidence from language or genetics

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Linguistic and ancient DNA evidence supports gradual migration after about 2000 BCE. The violent "invasion" story (A) is an outdated colonial-era theory that scholars reject, because the cities were already declining for other reasons.

Concept Tested: Indo-Aryan Migration **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

How did the Vedas survive for many centuries before they were written down?

- A. They were carved on stone pillars across the empire.
- B. Teachers passed them to students by voice, using precise memory techniques.
- C. They were painted on the walls of the Indus cities.
- D. They were copied onto paper by monks at Nalanda.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. The Vedas were passed on by voice, using very precise recitation methods, a tradition UNESCO recognizes as intangible cultural heritage. Carved pillars (A) were Ashoka's way of sharing his edicts, much later.

Concept Tested: The Vedas **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Dilan's grandmother in Kandy tells him that the Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura grew from a cutting brought from the place where the Buddha reached awakening. Using the chapter, where did that cutting come from, and which emperor's family is linked to it?

- A. Bodh Gaya, and Ashoka's daughter Sanghamitta
- B. Lumbini, and Chandragupta Maurya's son
- C. Nalanda, and the Gupta emperor Kumaragupta I
- D. Taxila, and the Kushan emperor Kanishka

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. The Buddha reached awakening at Bodh Gaya, and Sri Lankan tradition says Ashoka's daughter Sanghamitta brought the cutting in the 3rd century BCE. Lumbini (B) is the Buddha's birthplace, not the place of his awakening.

Concept Tested: Rise of Buddhism and Jainism **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Your club is making a map of ancient sites by present-day country. Which site belongs under Bangladesh?

- A. Taxila
- B. Anuradhapura
- C. Pataliputra
- D. Mahasthangarh

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D. Mahasthangarh**, in Bogra District, is the earliest city site found in Bangladesh, dated by a Brahmi inscription to at least the 3rd century BCE. Pataliputra (C) was in Magadha, in today's Bihar, India, which is west of Bangladesh, not inside it.

Concept Tested: Maurya Empire **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Ashoka's edict expressing regret for the Kalinga war appears across his empire but was left out of the inscriptions placed in Kalinga itself. What is the best conclusion?

- A. Ashoka never actually fought in Kalinga.
- B. Ashoka's inscriptions were shaped for their audience, so they show both his new ideals and his political judgment as an emperor.
- C. The Kalinga inscriptions were carved before the war began.
- D. Ashoka stopped believing in dhamma after the war.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. The omission suggests Ashoka chose his message for each audience, since confessing to the conquered people may not have seemed wise. His own inscriptions describe the war, so A is wrong, and he promoted dhamma for the rest of his reign, so D is wrong.

Concept Tested: Edicts of Ashoka **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

The Kushan Empire (about the 1st to 3rd century CE) and the Tamil kingdoms of the Sangam Age existed at the same time. What does that overlap show?

- A. That one empire ruled all of South Asia in the 2nd century CE
- B. That the Sangam poets were writing in Sanskrit for the Kushan court
- C. That different regions had their own rulers, languages and cultures at the same moment
- D. That the Kushans conquered Madurai

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. While the Kushans ruled the north from Peshawar and Mathura, Chera, Chola and Pandya kings ruled the Tamil south, where poets wrote in Tamil. Nothing in the chapter suggests a single empire (A) or a Kushan conquest of Madurai (D).

Concept Tested: Sangam Age **Bloom's Level:** Analyze