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Q1(b)

Harappan maritime trade

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Meaning, Scope and development of Anthropology.

1.1 Meaning, Scope and development of Anthropology.

Core demand of the question

- Describe the evidence and routes of Harappan maritime trade
- Identify ports, commodities, partners and material correlates
- Explain its economic and cultural significance
- Distinguish strong evidence from disputed interpretation

Revision summary

Harappan maritime trade joined Indus rivers and coastal sites to Oman, Bahrain and Mesopotamia.

Lothal, Dholavira, Kuntasi, Balakot and Sutkagen-dor were important nodes.

Meluhha texts, Indus seals, Gulf materials and **etched carnelian** beads provide converging evidence.

Exports included crafted beads, shell, ivory, timber and probably textiles; metals moved inward.

Lothal's basin may be a dock or reservoir, so do not make the whole case depend on it.

Trade supported craft specialisation and urban integration but was not the sole cause of **Harappan civilisation**.

Introduction

Harappan maritime trade linked the Indus cities and coastal settlements with Gujarat, Makran, Oman, Bahrain and Mesopotamia during the third millennium BCE. Archaeology does not preserve a shipping ledger; it reconstructs the network from ports, seals, weights, imported materials and Mesopotamian references to **Meluhha**.

Body**Evidence and network**

- **Coastal nodes:** **Lothal** in Gujarat had a large brick basin conventionally called a dockyard, warehouses, seals and bead workshops. Its nautical function is debated-some read it as a reservoir-but its estuarine location and craft-trade assemblage are secure. Dholavira connected Kachhh routes; Kuntasi, Balakot and Sutkagen-dor served coastal exchange from Saurashtra to Makran.
- **Routes and craft:** River transport fed coastal entrepôts. Sewn or reed boats probably followed coastwise routes to **Magan** (Oman) and **Dilmun** (Bahrain), then Mesopotamia. A boat motif on seals and terracotta models supports water transport, though it cannot specify cargo

volume.

- **Exports:** Etched carnelian beads, shell and ivory objects, timber, cotton textiles and perhaps sesame travelled west. Harappan-style weights, cubical stone measures, seals and bead-making technology enabled standardised transactions.
- **Imports:** Silver, copper and other scarce raw materials entered the Indus system. Omani copper and Gulf shells have archaeological signatures, while lapis lazuli also moved through overland Afghan routes.
- **External testimony:** Mesopotamian cuneiform texts mention Meluhha, Meluhhan ships and a Meluhha village/interpreter. Indus seals and carnelian beads occur at Ur, Kish and Gulf sites; Gulf seals and foreign materials occur in the Indus sphere.

Anthropological significance

The trade sustained urban craft specialisation, redistributed prestige goods and tied hinterland producers to cities. It also carried styles and techniques without erasing Harappan standardisation. Shereen Ratnagar has emphasised West Asian interaction, while other archaeologists caution against making long-distance trade the sole cause of urbanism.

Silting, shoreline change and river shifts complicate present maps. The network was maritime and terrestrial, regional and overseas; it was not a single state-run "navy" for which evidence is absent.

Flow diagram

Indus hinterland -> Lothal / Kachchh / Makran
 Lothal / Kachchh / Makran -> Magan: Oman
 Magan: Oman -> Dilmun: Bahrain
 Dilmun: Bahrain -> Mesopotamia
 Mesopotamia -> silver and raw materials Indus hinterland
 Indus hinterland -> beads shell textiles Mesopotamia

Conclusion

The strongest case rests on a chain of coastal settlements, standardised craft goods, Gulf materials and Meluhha texts. Lothal's basin remains debated, but Harappan seaborne exchange does not depend on that feature alone. Maritime trade amplified, rather than single-handedly created, Indus urbanism.

Facts & figures

Meluhha

Mesopotamian texts use this name for a distant trading region widely identified with the Indus civilisation; they mention Meluhhan ships and an interpreter.

Lothal

A Gujarat craft and trade centre with a brick basin, warehouse area, seals and bead workshops. The basin's identification as a dockyard is contested.

Dilmun and Magan

Dilmun is associated mainly with Bahrain and Magan with Oman; both mediated Gulf exchange between the Indus and Mesopotamia.

Etched carnelian

Distinctive Indus-made beads found in Mesopotamian and Gulf contexts are a strong material tracer of long-distance trade.

Standardisation

Cubical weights, seals and regulated craft production reduced transaction uncertainty across a very large Harappan interaction sphere.