BUDDHIST STupa OR INDUS TEMPLE?

MOHENJO DARO, PAKISTAN—On the highest mound here rises a ruined dome—the most dramatic structure in the center of the largest Indus city, set in a courtyard once surrounded by buildings. But since the 1920s, archaeologists have considered the dome to be a much later Buddhist stupa ringed by cells of monks, built using Indus bricks 2 millennia after the city’s demise. Now, University of Naples archaeologist Giovanni Verardi says that this magnificent structure may actually be a monument from Indus times. If he’s right, it will force Indus scholars to rethink the religious and political nature of the civilization, long thought to lack grand temples and palaces (see main text).

The original excavators assumed the dome was Buddhist in part because buried coins dating to the Kushan Empire of the 2nd and 3rd century C.E. were found at the site. They did note that the stupa was not aligned in typical fashion, that the plinth was of unusual height, and that certain pottery shards predated the Kushan. Verardi, who carefully examined both the site and the original archaeological reports, argues that the coins likely were buried later and therefore are of little value in dating the structure. Based on preliminary excavation of the mound, he even theorizes that the original structure may have been a series of platforms, perhaps similar to the Ur ziggurat in Mesopotamia built around 2100 B.C., near the height of Indus urban life. Such platforms were common from Mesopotamia to Turkmenistan during that era, but none have been clearly identified in the Indus region.

Other scholars are wary of the ziggurat idea but agree that the evidence supporting a stupa is slim. “I’m quite sure Verardi is right,” says Michael Jansen of RWTH Aachen University in Germany, who has worked here for years. “We did a very careful survey of the area around the citadel and found not a single Kushan shard.” Jansen also notes that Buddhist monks’ cells of that period are not usually arranged around a stupa.

“What’s needed now is careful restudy,” says Jansen, who hopes to excavate at the site. After 2 decades, restoration work has at last stabilized the crumbling brick, and officials plan to reopen excavations (see p. 1284). “If it is indeed Indus, then this will turn our interpretations upside down.”

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Masters of trade

While evidence accumulates from Indus cities, other insights are coming from beyond the region, as artifacts from Central Asia, Iraq, and Afghanistan show the long arm of Indus trade networks. Small and transportable Indus goods such as beads and pottery found their way across the Iranian plateau or by sea to Oman and Mesopotamia, and Indus seals show up in Central Asia as well as southern Iraq. An Indus trading center at Shortugai in northern Afghanistan funneled lapis to the homeland. And there is strong evidence for trade and cultural links between the Indus and cities in today’s Iran as well as Mesopotamia.

The frustrating lack of evidence has fueled other theories that remain tenuous. Jansen and Possehl suggest that the Indus obsession with baths, wells, and drains reveals a religious ideology based on the use of water, although other scholars are skeptical.

Holding a pose? This rare seal may hint at the ancient origins of yoga and the Hindu god Shiva.

Cuneiform tablets coupled with recent excavations in the Persian Gulf also show that Indus merchants routinely plied the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, likely in reed boats with cotton sails. “They were major participants in commercial trade,” says Bisht, who sees Dholavira and other sites along the coast as trading centers thanks to monsoon winds that allowed sailors to cross 800 kilometers of open waters speedily. “These people were aggressive traders, there is no doubt about it,” adds Possehl, who has found Indus-style pottery made from Gujarati clay at a dig in Oman. Archaeologist Nilofer Shaikh, vice chancellor of Latif University, takes that assertion a step further, arguing that “the Indus people were controlling the trade. They controlled the quarries, the trade routes, and they knew where the markets were.”

She points out that although Indus artifacts spread far and wide, only a small number of Mesopotamian artifacts have been found at Indus sites. Evidence suggests that some Indus merchants and diplomats lived abroad, although the trade was certainly two-way. An inscription from the late 3rd millennium B.C.E. refers to one Shu-