

# The INDUS Civilization and DILMUN, the Sumerian Paradise Land

By SAMUEL NOAH KRAMER

One of the most significant and impressive archaeological achievements of the twentieth century centers around the discovery of the ancient Indus civilization which probably flourished from about 2500 to 1500 B.C., and extended over a vast territory from the present Pakistan-Iran border to the foot of the Himalayas and to the Gulf of Cambay. Much of the material culture of this civilization is now known: the well-planned streets and structures of its cities and towns; its tools and implements of stone and metal; its pottery and vases; its beads and bangles; its stone sculptures and terracotta figurines. On the other hand, but little is known of the social, political, religious, and intellectual life of the ancient Indus people, and that little is based on conjecture and surmise. And practically nothing at all is known of its ethnic and linguistic affiliations; indeed the very name of this ancient Indus land is still a mystery.

To be sure, the Indus people did have a well-developed system of writing consisting of some four hundred pictographic signs with conventionalized syllabic values. Moreover, since the reading and writing of this script had to be studied and learned by budding scribes, there is every reason to assume that there were schools scattered throughout the land with a formal system of education. But the inscriptions recovered to date consist of very brief notations on steatite seals, clay sealings, pottery stamps, and small thin copper plates; usually they contain no more than half a dozen signs, and the longest has less than twenty. There is some likelihood that these inscriptions record the names of individuals and places, and if so, they could be most revealing for the ethnic origin of the Indus people. But as of today not a single sign of the Indus script has been deciphered and read satisfactorily, and until some bilinguals are discovered, the available Indus inscriptions will probably remain a closed "book."

There is, however, one possible source of significant information about the Indus civilization which is still untapped: the inscriptions of Sumer, approximately six hundred miles to the west of the mouth of the Indus and separated from the Indus land by the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. That there was considerable commercial trade between the two countries is proved beyond reasonable doubt by some thirty Indus seals which have actually been excavated in Sumer—and no doubt hundreds more are still



Seals excavated at Lothal, with the same script as at Mohenjo-daro

lying buried in the Sumerian ruins—and which must have been brought there in one way or another from their land of origin. There is, therefore, good reason to conclude that the Sumerians had known the name of the Indus land as well as some of its more important features and characteristics, and that some of the innumerable Sumerian texts might turn out to be highly informative in this respect.

With this in mind, I searched the Sumerian literary works for possible clues and came up with the tentative hypothesis that Dilmun, a land mentioned frequently in the Sumerian texts and glorified in Sumerian myth, may turn out to be the Indus land or at least some part of it. According to a long-known Sumerian "Flood"-story, Dilmun, the land to which Ziusudra, the Sumerian Noah, was transported to live as an immortal among the gods, is "the place where the sun rises," and was therefore located somewhere to the east of Sumer. In another Sumerian text, Dilmun is described as a blessed, prosperous land dotted with "great dwellings," to which the countries of the entire civilized world known to the Sumerians, brought their goods and wares. A number of cuneiform economic documents excavated by the late Leonard Woolley at Ur—Biblical Ur of the Chaldees—one of the most important cities of Sumer, speak of ivory, and objects made of ivory, as being imported from Dilmun to Ur. The only rich, important land east of Sumer which could be the source of ivory, was that of the ancient Indus civilization, hence it seems not unreasonable to infer that the latter must be identical with Dilmun.\*

But promising and intriguing as it was, the Dilmun-Indus land hypothesis was the product of "arm-chair" scholarship, which needed corroboration from the "field," that is, from the extant archaeological remains of the Indus civilization. I therefore journeyed to Pakistan and India, with the help of a grant-in-aid from the American Council of Learned Societies, and

\* To be sure Dilmun has been identified by most scholars with the island of Bahrein in the Persian Gulf, and a large and highly competent expedition has been excavating there for close to a decade because of its faith in the identification (see *Scientific American* vol. 23 [1960] no. 4, p. 60ff). But the discoveries at Bahrein to date have hardly justified this faith, and the description of Dilmun as "the place where the sun rises" in the Sumerian "Flood-story" speaks definitely against the Bahrein-Dilmun identification.

in the course of a seven weeks stay there, travelled more than four thousand miles by plane, train, bus, automobile, and a horse-drawn vehicle known as the tonga, in order to visit the excavated Indus cities: Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Kot Diji, Amri, Rupar, and Lothal. I studied the Indus artifacts located at the site museums, as well as the rich collections in the museums of Karachi, Lahore, and New Delhi. I met many of the archaeologists of Pakistan and India, and discussed with them the various aspects of the Indus civilization. As a result of these investigations and discussions, it became apparent that there are two facets of the Indus civilization which are especially significant for its identification with Dilmun: the cult of a water deity and sea-plowing ships.

One of the most striking and impressive features of the Indus cities and towns is the important role which water and cleanliness seem to have played in the life of the people, as is evident from the extraordinary number of wells and baths in both public and private buildings, as well as the carefully planned networks of covered drains built of kiln-baked bricks. It is not unreasonable to assume therefore—as indeed has been assumed by a number of scholars—that the Indus people had developed a water cult of deep religious import centering about a water god and featured by sundry rites concerned with lustration and purification. All of which seems to fit in rather surprisingly well with the Dilmun-Indus land equation. For the god most intimately related to Dilmun is Enki, the Sumerian Poseidon, the great Sumerian water god in charge of seas and rivers. Thus we find a Sumerian Dilmun-myth which tells the following story: Dilmun, a land described as “pure,” “clean,” and “bright,” a land which knows neither sickness nor death, had been lacking originally in fresh, life-giving water. The tutelary goddess of Dilmun, Ninsikilla by name, therefore pleaded with Enki, who is both her husband and father, and the latter orders the sun-god Utu to fill Dilmun with sweet water brought up from the earth’s water-sources; Dilmun is thus turned into a divine garden green with grain-yielding fields and acres. In this paradise of the gods eight plants are made to sprout by Ninhursag, the great mother goddess of the Sumerians, perhaps more originally Mother Earth. She succeeds in bringing these plants into being by an intricate process involving three generations of goddesses all begotten by Enki and born without pain or travail. But because Enki wanted to taste them, his messenger, the two-faced god Isimud, plucks these plants one by one and gives them to his master who proceeds to eat them each in turn. Whereupon the angered Ninhursag pronounces the curse of death against Enki and vanishes from among the gods. Enki’s health at once begins to fail and eight of his organs become sick. As Enki sinks fast, the great gods sit in the dust, seemingly unable to cope with the situation. Whereupon the fox comes to the rescue and after being promised a reward, he succeeds by some ruse in having the mother goddess return to the gods and heal the dying water god. She seats him by her vulva and after inquiring which eight organs of his body ache, she brings into existence eight corresponding deities—one of these is Enshag, the Lord of Dilmun—and Enki is brought back to life and health.

Now the first part of this Dilmun myth reads as follows:

*The holy cities—present them to him (Enki?),*

*The land Dilmun is holy,*

*Holy Sumer—present it to him,*

*The land Dilmun is holy.*

*The land Dilmun is holy, the land Dilmun is pure,*

*The land Dilmun is clean, the land Dilmun is holy;*

*Who had lain by himself in Dilmun—*

*The place, after Enki had lain with his wife,*

*That place is clean, that place is most bright;  
Who had lain by himself in Dilmun—  
That place, after Enki had lain with Ninsikilla,  
That place is clean, that place is most bright.  
In Dilmun the raven utters no cry,  
The wild hen utters not the cry of the wild hen,  
The lion kills not,  
The wolf snatches not the lamb,  
Unknown is the kid-devouring wild dog,  
Unknown is the grain-devouring boar,  
The malt which the widow spreads on the roof—  
The birds of heaven do not eat up that malt,  
The dove droops not the head,  
The sick-eyed says not “I am sick-eyed,”  
The “sick-headed” says not “I am sick-headed,”  
Its old woman says not “I am an old woman,”  
Its old man says not “I am an old man,”  
Unwashed is the maid, no water is poured in the city,  
Who crosses the river (of the Nether World) utters no groan (?),  
The wailing priest walks not round about him,  
The singer utters no wail,  
By the side of the city he utters no lament.*



Mesopotamian-like bearded terracotta head excavated at Lothal

ti dingir-gin<sub>x</sub> mu-un-na-si-mu  
zi-da-ri dingir-gin<sub>x</sub> mu-un-<na>-ab-e<sub>11</sub>-dè  
u<sub>4</sub>-ba zi-ud-sud<sub>x</sub>-rá lugal-àm  
mu-níg-gilim-ma numun-lú-lu<sub>7</sub> uru-ag  
kur-bal kur-dilmun-na ki-<sup>4</sup>utu-è-sè mu-un-ti-es

Life like a god they (the gods An and Enlil) gave him,  
Breath eternal like a god they brought down to him.  
Then, Ziusudra, the king,  
The preserver of the “name” of vegetation and the seed of mankind,  
In the land of crossing, the land Dilmun, the place where the sun rises,  
they caused to dwell.

Copy of the last lines of the “Flood” tablet with transliteration and translation

The passage which follows is fragmentary; to judge from the preserved lines, it contained the goddess Ninsikilla's prayer to Enki to supply Dilmun with water. The poem then continues thus:

*Father Enki answers Ninsikilla his daughter:*  
 "Let Utu stationed in heaven,  
 Bring you sweet water from the earth, from the water-sources of the earth,  
 Let him bring up the water into your large reservoirs (?),  
 Let him make your city drink from them the water of abundance,  
 Let him make Dilmun drink from them the water of abundance,  
 Let your wells of bitter water become wells of sweet water,  
 Let your furrowed fields and acres yield you their grain,  
 Let your city become the 'dock-yard'-house of the (inhabited) land."

And just as Enki had spoken "so it came to be"; or in the words of the poet:

*Utu stationed in heaven,  
 Brought her (Ninsikilla) sweet water from the earth, from the water sources of the earth,  
 Brought up the water into her large reservoirs (?),  
 Made her city drink from them the water of abundance,  
 Made Dilmun drink from them the water of abundance,  
 Her wells of bitter water became wells of sweet water,  
 Her furrowed fields and acres yielded her grain,  
 Her city became the "dock-yard"-house of the (inhabited) land,  
 Dilmun became the "dock-yard"-house of the (inhabited) land.*

While not everything in this passage is clear, one fact stands out; Dilmun, not unlike the Indus land, was particularly noted for cleanliness and purity, and it was a water god who played a leading role in the religion of the two lands.

That Dilmun was a land characterized by purity and cleanliness is indicated by a passage in another Enki myth recently pieced together and translated, which may be entitled "Enki and the World Order." Part of this myth is devoted to Enki's "decreeing the fates" of the lands constituting the world known to the Sumerians. The passage involving Dilmun consists of six lines but only two are fully preserved and these read interestingly enough:

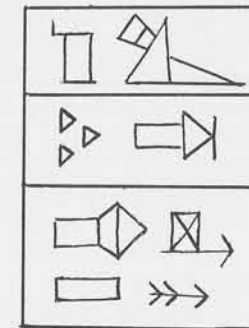
*He (the god Enki) cleaned and purified the land Dilmun,  
 Placed the goddess Ninsikilla in charge of it.*

In fact the very name of the goddess whom Enki placed in charge of Dilmun is a Sumerian compound word whose literal meaning is "the pure queen," another indication of the value put on cleanliness in Dilmun.

During the past few years, there have been uncovered in Pakistan several sites of ancient Indus towns which were originally located on the coast of the Arabian Sea, although as a result of coastal uplift, these are now some distance away from the edge of the sea. The existence of these settlements, taken in conjunction with the numerous long-known sites strung all along the Indus River, indicates clearly that the Indus civilization depended largely on water-borne trade, coastal and riverine. This is now corroborated by the excavations conducted over the past five years in Lothal, a site in India not far from the Gulf of Cambay, where what seems to be a well-planned rectangular dockyard built of baked bricks has been uncovered, complete with spillways, water-locks, and loading platforms—when I visited the site in January, 1961, workmen were still trying to reach the bottom of its solid embankments. Now this type of maritime civilization must have been characteristic of Dilmun, to judge from the Sumerian



The holy cities—give(?) them to(?) him (Enki?) as his share,  
 The land Dilmun is holy,  
 Holy Sumer—give(?) it to(?) him as a share,  
 The land Dilmun is holy.  
 The land Dilmun is holy, the land Dilmun is pure,  
 The land Dilmun is clean, the land Dilmun is holy.



The ships of Dilmun,  
 from the foreign lands,  
 brought him (Ur-Nanshe)  
 wood as a tribute(?).



The ships from Meluhha,  
 the ships from Magan,  
 the ships from Dilmun,  
 he made tie up alongside  
 the quay of Agade.

*Copies of cuneiform texts with translation:  
 (Top) The initial lines of the Dilmun myth.  
 (Lower left) From an inscription of Ur-Nanshe that speaks of timber-carrying Dilmun boats.  
 (Lower right) From an inscription of Sargon the Great boasting that the boats of Dilmun lay anchored at the docks of Agade.*

inscriptions in which "ships of Dilmun" are mentioned repeatedly. Thus, one of the Sumerian rulers by the name of Ur-Nanshe, who lived as early as about 2400 B.C., speaks of timber-carrying Dilmun boats arriving at his city, Lagash. Sargon the Great who ruled about a century and a half after Ur-Nanshe, boasts that the boats of Dilmun lay anchored at the docks of his capital city Agade. In the myth "Enki and the World Order" mentioned earlier, Enki boasts of the moored Dilmun boats. Ivory-bearing boats from Dilmun to Ur have already been mentioned; according to the texts these also carried timber, gold, copper, and lapis lazuli. No wonder that in the "Paradise" myth cited above, Dilmun is described as "dock-yard-house of the (inhabited) land."

The Dilmun-Indus equation, if correct, will help to clarify the baffling problem of the origin and rise of the Indus civilization, especially in regard to the ethnic and linguistic affiliation of the Indus people. There is some reason to surmise that the rise of the Indus cities was in the nature of a cultural "explosion" or "revolution" due to the arrival in India of a new ethnic group which had already attained a high degree of civilization. For there is not too much in the remains of the pre-Indus settlements excavated at Harappa, Kot Diji, or Amri, which could be regarded as the forerunner of the Indus cities and towns with their carefully planned buildings and streets, their water cult and purification rites, their well-developed pictographic script, and their bustling water-borne trade. As for the time when this highly civilized people came to India to which it transplanted some of the skills and ideas developed in its original habitat, the likelihood is that it took place early in the third millennium, some time about 2800 B.C., since it must have taken several centuries for the Indus civilization to grow to the size it had become about 2500 B.C.

Now it is hardly likely that this people came to India from anywhere but Mesopotamia. For it is in Mesopotamia that we first find a fully developed urban civilization with monumental architecture, a pictographic script utilized for administrative purposes, and flourishing trade relations with neighboring countries by land and sea. It is in Mesopotamia, too, that we find the worship of a water god from earliest days; his main cult was in the city of Eridu where his first shrine dating from the middle of the fourth millennium B.C., or even earlier, was excavated more than twenty years ago.

But if so—if it was a Mesopotamian people who loaded their boats with their families and possessions, and abandoned their native homes to start life afresh in distant India—who was this people? Hardly the Sumerians, as



The Spillway of the dockyard excavated at Lothal, with grooves for sliding doors to retain the water

has been suggested more than once. The Sumerian pictographic script of the early third millennium B.C. is now well-known from excavations at Warka and Jemdet Nasr, and it bears little resemblance to that of the Indus seals. Moreover, why should the Sumerians who had themselves probably arrived in Mesopotamia only a few centuries earlier and made themselves lords and masters of the land later known as "Sumer," leave their homes where they lived as conquerors and rulers in search for a new habitat? On the face of it, it is much more likely that it was not the Sumerians, but one or another of the Mesopotamian peoples subjugated by the Sumerians, who, seeing their language, faith, and way of life threatened and perhaps even suppressed, decided that home was no longer home for them and went forth to establish themselves in a new land where they were free to live their lives in accordance with their religious convictions. The Mesopotamian people which settled in India and sparked the Indus civilization were therefore not the Sumerians but—most probably—the original settlers of "Sumer," the Ubaidians, as they have come to be known from the name of the Mesopotamian site where their archaeological remains were first identified.

If this should turn out to be correct—if it was the Ubaidians who created the Indus civilization—we now have some linguistic data which might prove of no little value for the Indus language and script. For while we still know practically nothing about the grammar and structure of the Ubaidian language, we do know a number of Ubaidian words denoting place names and occupations. The names of the two great Mesopotamian rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, or *idiglat* and *buranun* as they read in the cuneiform texts, are Ubaidian—not Sumerian—words. So, too, are the names of the most important urban centers of "Sumer": Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Isin, Adab, Kullab, Lagash, Nippur, and Kish. In fact the word Dilmun itself may, like the word *buranun* for the Euphrates, be Ubaidian. More important still, such culturally significant words as *engar* (farmer), *udul* (herdsman), *shupeshdak* (fisherman), *apin* (plow), *apsin* (furrow), *nimbar* (palm), *sulumb* (date), *tibira* (metal worker), *simug* (smith), *nangar* (carpenter), *addub* (basket maker), *ishbar* (weaver), *ashgab* (leather worker), *pahar* (potter), *shidim* (mason), and perhaps even *damgar* (merchant), are probably all Ubaidian rather than Sumerian, as has been usually assumed. And should the inscriptions on the Indus seals contain not only the name of the consignor or consignee of the goods to which their clay impressions were attached, but also his occupation, it is not impossible that one or another of the above listed words will be found among them.

Another crucial word which may turn out to be Ubaidian, is Ea, one of the two names by which the Mesopotamian water god is known in the

Passage from the myth "Enki and the World Order" in which the god Enki boasts of the moored Dilmun boats

The lands of Magan and Dilmun  
Looked up at me, Enki,  
Moored(?) the Dilmun-boat to the ground(?),  
Loaded the Magan-boat sky high.

cuneiform texts, the other being Enki, the name used throughout this study. For while the latter is a typical Sumerian compound with the meaning "Lord of the Earth," Ea is a word whose linguistic affiliations are still uncertain; it might well be his original Ubaidian name which the Sumerians changed to Enki when they incorporated him into their pantheon. This is corroborated to some extent by the fact that, to judge from the hymns and myths, the Sumerian theologians found it necessary to stress and explain repeatedly the source of Enki's authority and power; in fact Enki often talks and acts as if he had an inferiority complex. If it is the Ubaidians who brought the water cult to India, Ea would be the name of the god about whom it centered, and it would not be too surprising to find the name in one or another of the Indus seals.

For well-nigh a thousand years following the collapse of the Indus civilization, the history of India is practically a blank, archaeologically speaking. If however, the Dilmun-Indus equation should prove to be correct the cuneiform documents from Mesopotamia would give us at least a glimpse into this Indian "dark age." For throughout the latter half of the second millennium and the first half of the first millennium B.C., we find Dilmun mentioned in the cuneiform documents. The Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta uses in his titles the expression "king of Dilmun and Meluhha" which is reminiscent to some extent of the Biblical "from India to Ethiopia" of King Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther. There was a king of Dilmun by the name of Uperi who paid tribute to Sargon II of Assyria. There is another king by the name of Hundaru in whose days booty taken from Dilmun consisted of objects made of copper and bronze, sticks of precious wood, and large quantities of kohl, used as an eye-paint. A crew of soldiers is sent from Dilmun to Babylon to help King Sennacherib raze that city to the ground, and they bring with them bronze spades and spikes which are described as characteristic products of Dilmun.

But Dilmun or not, it is clear from the preceding pages that what is urgently needed is further intensive excavation of the Indus sites, especially the larger ones which may be expected to yield the inscriptional material essential for the decipherment of the Indus script—not only the Indus seals, but also the larger and longer documents which must certainly have existed, and perhaps even a bilingual written partly in cuneiform. Most of this promising work, naturally enough, will fall to the happy lot of the archaeologists of Pakistan and India. But Indus archaeology offers a rare and rich opportunity for American institutions of learning to help unravel the history of the Orient in the third millennium B.C.

21

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#### SUGGESTED READING

SAMUEL N. KRAMER, *The Sumerians* (especially Chapter 8). University of Chicago Press. 1963. "Dilmun: Quest for Paradise," *Antiquity*, Vol. XXXVII. 1963.



*SAMUEL NOAH KRAMER, Curator of the Tablet Collection in the University Museum and Clark Research Professor of Assyriology at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the foremost authorities on Sumerian literary works. His study of the clay tablets on which this literature is written has taken him to the museums in Iraq, Turkey, and Russia, as well as to many in this country. From these scattered tablets and fragments he has been able to piece together such poems as Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree, Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta. His book, History begins at Sumer, has been translated into more than a dozen languages.*

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