

Premium TimeMaps Unit Slideshow

Ancient India

Slideshow Commentary

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Introduction

This slideshow presentation can be used as an introduction to this topic in world history, as a wrap up/reinforcement exercise, or simply as a stand-alone.

The slideshow can also be used by students in their project work. For this they will need to access the resource themselves, as well as the student commentary (or a printout of it). This will require a multi-user licence.

For each slide, the commentary mostly follows the same formula:

1. Heading: slide number and date

2. Introductory paragraph (in bold)

This seeks to encapsulate in a sentence or two what's going on in the map. These are in bold.

3. Bullet points

One or more bullet points, giving very brief points of interest in the map, or in the period it covers.

4. Additional note(s)

For most slides there are additional notes. These give more in-depth support to the bullet points. Much of the information these contain may be superfluous to your needs, especially if you are covering the topic quickly. However, we have included it so that it is there for you if you want it.

We suggest that, prior to using the Presentation with your class, you go through these additional notes and highlight any you wish to use.

Sometimes there are notes in italics - these are simply hints and tips for teachers. They don't occur very often.

A suggestion:

To keep your students more engaged (and, by the way, if your students are not engaged or benefitting from these maps, then let us know and we'll refund your money!), why not start each new map with a question, such as, "How is this map different from the previous one?"

Commentary

When using the Sideshow in class it might be helpful to print these notes out.

Slide 1: 3000 BCE

Most of the Indian Subcontinent is inhabited by herding peoples and hunter-gatherers. In the northwest, however, where the great River Indus flows through a vast plain, a large farming population has grown up.

- At this date, hunter-gatherers and herding peoples (pastoralists) form the majority of the population in most of the Subcontinent (note 1).
- At this time, most of the peoples of the Subcontinent probably speak languages belonging to the Dravidian group of languages (note 2).
- The northern portion of the Subcontinent is formed by a vast plain. Here, two great rivers, the Indus and the Ganges, flow to the sea. It is only the western area, through which the Indus flows, that is suitable for agriculture at this time (note 3).

*The word "Subcontinent" used in these notes stands for the term Indian Subcontinent. This is the huge region which today is home to the large countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the smaller countries of Nepal and Bhutan, in the Himalayas, and Sri Lanka, the island to the south-east of India.

Additional Notes

1. Hunter-gatherers and herding peoples

Agriculture has been practiced in the Subcontinent for at least two thousand years. However, it is only in the north that the land is well suited to farming.

In most of central India the climate is dry, which makes farming difficult. It is practiced in only a few places. As for southern India, farming has not reached here yet.

As a result, in most of the subcontinent the people are herdsman - that is, they are pastoralists - or they are hunter-gatherers.

2. The Dravidian-speakers

Most modern scholars believe that, at the time, the population of the Subcontinent spoke languages belonging to the Dravidian language group. This is different from today, when the Dravidian languages predominate only in the southern half of the peninsula.

As we will see, the modern linguistic division of the Subcontinent came about in ancient times, the period covered by this slide show.

3. The Great Rivers

Two great rivers dominate the map of the subcontinent. In the west is the River Indus. In the east is the River Ganges.

Both these rivers rise in the highest mountains in the world, the Himalayas. These form the north frontier of the Subcontinent. In spring, they carry huge amounts of water down from the mountains onto the low-lying plains of northern India.

The Indus region

At this time the Ganges region is covered by dense forests and large swamps. Farming communities here find it hard to bring land under cultivation with the stone tools they have. They are growing only slowly.

The Indus region, on the other hand, there are few forests and swamps.

In spring, the Indus River floods a huge area. The soil is made very fertile by the rich mountain mud (silt) which the river water leaves behind when it moves on to the sea.

Irrigation

The farmers here use irrigation techniques to feed water to their crops. Many farming villages have grown up here. Some of these are now developing into towns, housing hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people.

For more on the spread of agriculture around the world, see the Premium Unit *Early Farming*.

Slide 2: 2500 BCE

In the northwest of the Subcontinent, a great civilization has grown up.

- This is Indus Valley civilization. It has emerged at the same time as other great ancient civilizations in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Additional Notes

By this date, the fertile agriculture of the Indus Valley has given rise to one of the most advanced civilizations in the world at that time. A number of large cities have emerged, the most famous of these were at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. These cities contained

- tens of thousands of inhabitants, living in baked brick houses
- many non-residential buildings such as fortresses, storehouses and workshops
- streets laid out on street plans based on grid patterns, the first in world history.
- the earliest sewage and piped-water systems yet found.

Such features show that the cities are home to well-organized societies. However, although the Indus Valley cities have a writing system, modern scholars have not been able to decipher it. As a result, far less is known about their civilization than about those of the Egyptians and Sumerians.

Well-used trade routes link the Indus cities with Mesopotamia. Perhaps it is along these trade routes the Indus Valley people picked up skills in engineering, metalwork and so on, from the Sumerians.

For more on early civilizations in Europe, Asia and Africa (the Eastern Hemisphere), see the Premium Unit *Early Civilizations*.

Slide 3: 1500 BCE

The Indus Valley civilization has vanished.

- This happened shortly after 2000 BCE. (note 1).
- At around the same time or a little later, tribes from central Asia migrated into the north west of the Subcontinent (note 2).
- They speak an Indo-European language called Sanskrit, and practice a religion which will, hundreds of years in the future, evolve into Hinduism (note 3).

Additional Notes

1: The end of the Indus Valley civilization

Modern scholars still do not properly understand why this happened. It may have been due to new peoples migrating into the area (see below, note 2), or perhaps to climate change.

2: The arrival of the Aryans

The Aryans arrived in the Subcontinent shortly after 2000 BCE. They were nomadic herders, like their ancestors in central Asia had been.

They probably drifted in in small groups, rather than as one massed invasion. They were divided into many clan groups, each under its own chieftain.

In the Subcontinent they call themselves Aryans (which means “Noble Ones”). Over several centuries they spread across the northern regions of the Subcontinent. As they do so, they conquer the local peoples, and become their rulers.

During this long process, it is quite possible that they bolster their position by imposing strict class distinctions on the populations, which will evolve into the caste system of later times (see the notes for the next slide).

3: Aryan language and religion

Sanskrit

Their language, Sanskrit, was closely related to those of the Ancient Greek, Latin, Persians and Germans. This is because all these peoples originally came from the same region in central Asia, where they spoke a language from which all later Indo-European languages descended.

Today, Indo-European languages include modern Greek, Persian, French, German, English and many others.

The Brahmin religion

As with their language, there were many similarities between the Aryan’s belief-system and that of the ancient Greeks, Romans and Germans. The Aryans were polytheist, which means they believed in many gods and goddesses.

The Aryan’s priests, called the Brahmins, were the most highly respected members of their communities. In fact, the religion of the early Aryans is often called “Brahminism”).

As the early Aryans did not have a writing system, in common with most peoples of the time, they transmitted their beliefs and practices orally (i.e. by word of mouth) from one generation to the next. They did so by means of prayers, hymns, rituals and other sacred verses.

These are collectively called the Vedas. They would be written down many centuries later to form the most sacred scriptures of the Hindu faith. The best-known of these collections is the *Rigveda*.

Slide 4: 1000 BCE

The Aryans are now spreading across the northern regions of the Subcontinent.

- As they spread, they subjugate the local peoples and form tribal kingdoms. Within these, they establish a social system based on castes.

Additional Note

In the period following the arrival of the Aryans in the north-west of the Subcontinent, they developed distinct beliefs of their own.

Reincarnation was one of their fundamental beliefs. This idea holds that the soul passes from one body to another through many lives.

Linked to the belief in reincarnation was the idea of caste, or the division of society into different hereditary groups.

The Aryans called these *varnas* (which in English is translated into the word “castes”, but this also refers not only to the original *varnas* but also to the hundreds of different heredity groups which sprung up in later times).

From the top, these groups are:

- priests (*Brahmins*)
- warriors (*Kshatriyas*)
- farmers, craftsmen and traders (*Vaishyas*)
- and laborers and servants (*Shudras*).

Outside the caste system were “Outcastes”. These people were also known as “untouchables”. Members of this group were not regarded as being full members of society, or even really fully human. They undertook all the filthy and degrading tasks that a society needs doing, such as collecting refuse and handling dead bodies.

Karma

Whether one was reborn into the body of a higher being or a lower one, depended on one’s “karma”.

To translate this term very roughly, karma was the sum of one’s good and bad deeds. If, at the end of one’s life, one’s good deeds outweighed the bad ones, you were reborn into a higher caste. If

not, you were reborn into a lower caste, or even as an animal. Reincarnation and karma were therefore very important indeed to the Aryans' views of how the universe worked.

Slide 5: 700 BCE

The Aryans are a warrior people. They not only conquer local peoples, but continually wage wars with one another. From these wars, several major states are emerging.

- Some of these states are ruled by kings, others by councils of nobles; but in all of them, the Aryans form a ruling class (note 1).
- They are tribal kingdoms, but growing trade links with the Middle East are beginning to transform society (note 2).
- Changes are slowly coming to the way these kingdoms are governed (note 3).

Additional Notes

1. Changes in government

The Aryan tribal states are constantly at war with one another. As a result the stronger ones have gradually absorbed the weaker ones.

From tribal states....

The old Aryan tribal kingdoms were formed of a loose collection of clans, ruled by warrior chiefs owing allegiance to the most powerful amongst them - the tribal kings. The increasing size of the kingdoms is now making such kingdoms harder and harder to rule.

...to centralized kingdoms...

As a result, the traditional tribal forms of rule are giving way to a more tightly organised kind of government. The kings are now basing themselves in the local towns. They are building themselves palaces, where they surround themselves with full-time officials and professional soldiers to help them rule.

...or republics?

In these kingdoms, the clan chiefs lose a lot of their former power. On the other hand, in some of the Aryan states, councils of nobles take control. Some modern scholars view these as early examples of republics.

In all these states, whether ruled by kings or councils, ordinary Aryan tribesmen in the lower castes, the *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras*, have little if any part in government. It is the top two "noble castes", as they are termed, which have all the power. These were the *Brahmins* (priests) and *Kshatriyas* (warriors).

2: A changing society

After about 800 BCE, new trade routes grew up between northern India and the great civilizations of the Middle East. Along these routes came new techniques. The most important of these was the making of iron tools. Until now, farm implements were made of stone, wood and bone.

Farming

The introduction of iron axes, plows and other tools enabled farming communities to cut down trees and clear land for cultivation much more easily than before. Farming became more productive.

It was from this time that the Ganges plain, previously a landscape of forests and swamps, came to be increasingly turned over to farmland.

It was here in the Ganges plain, rather than the Indus Valley, where a new center of Indian civilization would now emerge.

A more complex society

The improvements in farming, especially on the Ganges plain, are leading to populations increasing and trade growing. Some farming villages are beginning to grow into trading centers - towns, in fact.

Slide 6: 500 BCE

Growing links with the long-established civilizations of the Middle East are leading to great changes in society and culture within India.

- The expansion of the Persian Empire eastwards has greatly strengthened trade links between the Middle East and the Subcontinent (note 1).
- As a result, urban, literate civilization has re-emerging in the Subcontinent. Now, however, it is centered on the Ganges region rather than the Indus Plain (note 2).
- The years around 500 BCE see the rise of two new religions, Buddhism and Jainism (note 3).
- The area of the Indian Subcontinent under the rule of Aryan tribes has continued to expand, and now stretches southwards, deep into central India (note 4).

Additional Notes

1. Expanding trade links

As noted for the previous slide, trade links with the Middle East have been operating for several centuries. These have led to changes within the Indian Subcontinent, included improvements in farming, due to the introduction of iron implements; the resulting growth in population; the expansion of trade within India; and the rise of towns.

These processes have been further boosted by the rise of the Persian Empire, which not only covers much of the Middle East, but also the westernmost parts of the Subcontinent itself. This has put both regions into direct touch with one another.

As we saw in the last slide, the Ganges region has been the location for a growing agricultural population over the last few centuries. This region, with its dense network of rivers and tributaries, and therefore ideal for the waterborne transport of goods, is ideally suited to the rise of new urban trading centres.

2. Cities and writing

Another part of these complex processes is that new social groups, based in towns rather than in the rural villages, have begun to appear. These are merchants, craftsmen, officials, professional soldiers and so on. These do not fit easily into the old tribal society of the Aryans. This causes them to be more open to new ideas than the more traditional social elements of society.

Writing

At some point in there past century or so, the technique of writing has arrived in the Subcontinent. This was originally the Aramaic alphabet, widely used by Middle East at this time. It was soon adapted for use with the Sanskrit language.

The huge body of Sanskrit writing which would develop over the coming centuries would form one of the great literary traditions in world history, the medium for all ancient Indian religious, philosophical and scientific expression.

3: New religions

In these changing times, more and more people want answers to questions such as, what exactly is a good life? How does one live it?

The old Brahmanic religion has no answers for these questions. New religious movements begin to appear. Two of these would endure down to the present day: Jainism and Buddhism.

Jainism

Jainism was founded by a philosopher called Mahavira (c. 540-468 BCE). He taught non-violence against all living creatures, along with the renunciation of physical pleasures and worldly ambitions.

Buddhism

Buddhism was first preached by a prince in a small state in north India. He was called Siddhārtha Gautama (lived c. 563-483 BCE), and later became known as the Buddha - "Enlightened One". He taught his followers not to pursue wealth or power. Instead they should live simple lives, and treat all people and animals with kindness. If they did this, they would move towards *Nirvana* – a state of complete peace.

The new teachings spread

The founders of both Buddhism and Jainism collected groups of disciples around them. These disciples passed their teachings on, down to later generations, who spread these religions across northern India.

Jainism would always remain restricted to small groups of people, but Buddhism would grow into one of the great religions of the world.

4. Central and Southern India

The area of the Subcontinent under Aryan rule has continued to expand, and its southern frontiers are now deep in central India. Here, to the south of the great plains of the Indus and Ganges rivers, are regions of mountain, forest and desert. The Aryans encounter populations of hunter-gatherers, herders, and only a few scattered farming settlements.

The Aryan newcomers establish towns and cities, introduce writing, and bring with them iron tools in place of the Stone Age technology of the local people.

Slide 7: 323 BCE

One of the great conquerors in world history, Alexander the Great, has invaded northwest India.

- Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia, led an army of Macedonians and Greeks in invading India in 327 BCE. He conquered the western-most parts of the Indian subcontinent before returning to the west (note 1).
- Meanwhile, the kingdom of Magadha, has expanded strongly under the Nanda dynasty (note 2).

Additional Notes

1. Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great was the king of Macedonia. This was a kingdom far to the west of India, just north of Greece. It had adopted the language and culture of the Greeks, and under Alexander's father, Philip, had conquered most of Greece.

On inheriting his father's kingdom, the young Alexander led an army of Macedonians and Greeks to conquer the huge Persian empire. Then, in 327 BCE, Alexander invaded India. He marched further and further into the Subcontinent, crossing the River Indus. However, his army eventually mutinied at being so far from home. This forced him to turn back.

The western-most parts of the Indian subcontinent, however, have been incorporated into Alexander's enormous empire. Here, Greek culture is being introduced. This would later have an important influence on Indian art and architecture, as we shall see.

2. The kingdom of Magadha

Magadha is a kingdom which has grown up in north-eastern India. At around this time, under its Nanda dynasty, it expands strongly by conquering many of its neighbors.

The Nanda have created a state in which more power is concentrated in the hands of the kings than in other Indian states. Magadha has thus become the most powerful kingdom in the Subcontinent, covering much of northern India.

Slide 8: 250 BCE

A great empire has grown up to cover much of the Indian subcontinent.

- This is the Maurya Empire (note 1).
- It is now ruled by one of the most remarkable rulers in world history, Asoka (note 2).
- While the Maurya empire was expanding, Alexander the Great's empire broke up and its Indian provinces became an independent kingdom (note 3).

Additional Notes

1. The Rise of the Maurya Empire

In 321 BCE a man called Chandragupta Maurya seized the throne of Magadha from the Nanda king. In doing so he founded one of India's greatest dynasties, the Maurya.

On gaining the throne, Chandragupta immediately set about strengthening his control over the kingdom. He appointed capable ministers and officials to advise and serve him. He appointed loyal men to be governors of the different provinces of his empire. He enlarged his army, which included many war elephants. He also expanded Magadhi's efficient spy network.

These measures allowed him to continue the expansion of the Magadha kingdom, which his predecessors had started. He came to rule the whole of northern India.

According to one story, towards the end of his life, Chandragupta gave up his throne to become a Jain monk.

Chandragupta's son, Bindusara Maurya (reigned 297-272 BCE), continued his conquests, and by the end of his reign most of central India had been added to the Maurya Empire.

The Maurya throne passed to Bindusara's son, Asoka (reigned 268-32 BCE).

2. Asoka

In 261 Asoka conquered Kalinga, one of the few remaining areas of north central India still remaining outside Maurya control.

The heavy casualties of this conquest led Asoka to become a devout Buddhist. Renouncing war, he set about governing as a peaceful and just ruler.

Asoka has strived to ensure that his empire remained at peace. He has many roads built, which encourage trade to expand. He orders trees to be planted along the road sides to give shade to travellers. He also orders many wayside rest houses to be built, where travellers can relax and refresh themselves.

Asoka also actively promotes Buddhism. He organised missionary expeditions to spread Buddhism to neighboring countries. Within his empire, he sets up numerous stone pillars, urging his subjects to live good lives.

3. The Indo-Greek kingdom

Alexander the Great died suddenly in 323 BCE. His empire soon began to disintegrate, becoming divided up amongst several kingdoms.

One of these kingdoms covered the portion of the Indian subcontinent which Alexander the Great had conquered. This was independent kingdom of Bactria.

Bactria was ruled by kings of Greek descent, and they encouraged the spread of Greek culture in their kingdom. They also felt the effects of Indian civilization. In fact, Bactrian culture soon became a fusion of Greek and Indian influences. For example, some of the Bactrian kings became Buddhists, and statues of the Buddha showed him wearing Greek-style garments.

This mixture of Greek and Indian influences created what modern scholars call the Gandhara culture.

Slide 9: 140 BCE

The Maurya Empire has gone into decline, and the Indian subcontinent has become divided amongst several different kingdoms.

- After Asoka's death, the Maurya Empire soon broke up into a number of independent kingdoms (note 1).
- The Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria has expanded over a large area of northern India. It is home to a mixed Greek-Indian culture (note 2).
- Indian civilization is now spreading down into southern India, and even to the island of Sri Lanka (note 3).

Additional Notes

1. The decline of the Maurya Empire

After Asoka's death, outlying provinces soon began breaking away from Maurya rule. The dynasty itself has been ousted from the throne of Magadha in c. 185 BCE. The Shunga dynasty has taken control of the remains of the empire.

By this time, the most powerful state in India is one located in central India, a kingdom ruled by the Satavahana dynasty.

2. The Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria

At this time the Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria has expanded over a large area of northern India. As with all Indian states of this period, very little is known of its history, but it seems to have reached its height under a Buddhist king called Menander (reigned about 150-130 BCE).

3. South India and Sri Lanka

South India

Indian civilization is now spreading down into southern India. Merchants and craft workers are more and more travelling to the south and spreading new ideas and techniques; Brahmanic, Buddhist and Jain missionaries are winning converts, setting up monasteries and spreading literacy. Towns and cities are beginning to appear, and centralized kingdoms are emerging in place of the old tribal societies.

Sri Lanka

The island of Sri Lanka has been unified under the kings of Anuradhapura. This was founded by a line of Buddhist kings, who claim descent from Aryan immigrants from northern India.

Slide 10: 1 CE

The Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria has been conquered by the Scythians, a nomadic group from central Asia.

- The Scythians, known to Indian history as the Saka, have expanded their kingdom deep into central India (note 1).
- Under the Satavahan kings of central India, an astonishing series of cave-temples were carved out of solid rock (note 2).

Additional Notes

1. Invaders from central Asia

Some time in the first century BCE, the Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria was conquered by a nomadic group from central Asia called the Scythians, known in Indian history as the Saka. They expanded their kingdom deep into central India.

The Gandhara culture of north-west India continues to flourish under the Saka, despite their origins as central Asian nomads.

2. Magnificent cave temples

Some of these cave-temples were Buddhist, some Hindu. They were decorated with many colorful paintings. Only tiny fragments have survived, but these give us our clearest idea of what Indian art was like at this time.

Slide 11: 150 CE

The Saka have been replaced as the leading power in northwest India by another nomadic group from central Asia, the Kushana.

- Saka kings continue to rule a portion of western India as vassals of the Kushana emperors (note 1).
- The Gandhara culture of north-west India continues to flourish under the Kushana rulers (note 2),
- This is a time of religious innovation and commercial change within the Subcontinent (note 3).

Additional Notes

1. The Kushana and Saka

The Kushana were originally part of a group migrating across the central Asian steppes from China towards the West. They moved into the Indian subcontinent some time in the first century BCE. Then, about the mid-first century CE, they defeated the Saka kings and became the leading power in northwest India.

They have allowed the Saka kings to govern a portion of western India, but only as vassals of the Kushana kings. In this phase of their history, the Saka kings are known as the “Western Satraps”.

The word “Satrap” means “governor” in Persian, so the title implies that these kings were really only governing their territory on behalf of their Kushana overlords.

2. The spread of Buddhism to China and East Asia

The Kushana period marks the high point of Gandhara culture. Its fusion of Greek and Indian art reaches its finest expression at this time.

The Kushana Empire is also a major center of Buddhism. Travelling along the Silk Road, that great trade route crossing central Asia, Buddhist missionaries are taking their religion to Persia and China.

Where Buddhist missionaries went, so too did Gandhara artistic influences.

Buddhism will soon become one of the leading religions in China. From there it will spread to Japan, Korea and other places in East Asia.

3. Religious and commercial developments

Religious innovations

In these centuries, a new branch of Buddhism has appeared, called the Mahayana school. Whereas traditional Buddhism regards the Buddha as an inspired, but human, teacher, Mahayana Buddhists worship him as a god.

At around the same time, changes were occurring in the ancient Aryan religion of Brahmanism. This is now evolving into early Hinduism.

This process is the result of Brahminism taking on elements from Buddhism and Jainism, as well as from many local Indian cults. This makes it become more personal and emotional, and much more appealing to more people.

Commercial changes

In these centuries, long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean is developing. Merchant ships from the Roman and Persian empires come from the west, and exchanged goods with merchants from South East Asia in ports along the coasts of central and southern India.

This is boosting the creation and expansion of prosperous trading cities in these areas.

Slide 12: 250 CE

In the early third century, both the Kushana Empire and the Satavahana kingdom disintegrated. Most of India is now covered by numerous small states.

- The Kushana Empire was weakened by the resurgent power of Persia (note 1).
- About now two new dynasties are founded, which will both play a role in Indian history: the Gupta dynasty of Magadha, and the Vakataka dynasty of central India (note 2).

Additional Notes

1. The end of the Kushana and Satavahan kingdoms

Very little indeed is known about Indian history in this period. For example, how and why the decline of the Satavahan kingdom came about is unknown.

The same is largely true of the Kushana Empire. However, at this time a new Persian Empire has arisen, under the vigorous Sassanian dynasty. It has expanded eastwards and northwards into Kushana territory. This weakened the Kushans, and their Indian territories soon broke free.

2. The Gupta and Vatakata dynasties

As with so much of Indian history in this period, for neither of these dynasties do we know the exact date when they were founded. However, it seems that both came to power sometime in the mid-Third Century CE.

The Gupta dynasty came to power in the kingdom of Magadha. This was the same kingdom which had earlier expanded to become the Maurya.

The Vatakatas came to power in the power vacuum created by the fall of the Satavahana kingdom.

Slide 13: 388 CE

In the fourth century CE the Gupta and the Vakataka dynasties came to dominated the Indian subcontinent.

- Their rise was due to the ability of their rulers, but also to the close ties the dynasties had with one another (note 1).
- It was at this time that the civilization of Ancient India reached its peak (note 2).

Additional Notes

1. The Gupta - Vatakata alliance

Three successive Gupta kings conquered most of northern India, and temporarily most of eastern India as well.

Chandragupta I (reigned c. 319-335 CE - he is no relative of the first Maurya emperor despite having a very similar name) was the first great Gupta emperor, conquering far and wide.

Samudragupta (reigned c. 335-375 CE) continued his predecessor's success, and Chandragupta II (reigned c. 380-415), brought the Gupta Empire to its height.

While the Guptas were conquering in the north, the Vatakatas were expanding to rule a large kingdom in central India.

The Gupta and Vatakas developed strong marriage ties. This led to a close alliance which strengthened both these great kingdoms. This helped them to dominate the Indian subcontinent for some two hundred years.

2. The High point of Classical Indian civilization

The Gupta-Vatakata period marks the high point of classical Indian civilization. Several important advances are made at around this time.

Mathematics, science, medicine, technology

Indian mathematicians discover the concept of zero. Linked to this, they develop the decimal system and so-called “Arabic” numerals.

Astronomers work out that the world is a sphere and that it rotates round the sun. It would be centuries before this was understood in Europe.

A great medical textbook is written. This includes instructions on how to make medicines from a huge range of plants and minerals. Remarkably, it also shows that Indian doctors knew about vaccinations. They also have a better knowledge of surgery than elsewhere in the world. This even includes medical procedures which we now call plastic surgery.

In metalwork, Indian smiths are producing the purist and toughest iron at that time. Under the Gupta dynasty, metalworkers build the famous Iron Pillar near Delhi. This is still a major tourist attraction. It has proved remarkably resistant to rust, which remains something of a mystery.

Art and culture

The Gupta period sees a revolution in the design of Hindu temples. Before then, apart from the great cave-temples of central India (see the information for 1 CE), Hindu temples had been small, square one-roomed stone structures with flat roofs. In the Gupta period, they begin to grow far larger, and gain huge, highly decorated towers.

These decorations are carvings of gods, goddesses and other spiritual beings. As a result, the depiction of the human form is brought to its finest beauty in Indian sculpture. The influences from Gandhara art are very apparent. Statues are finely carved in the round, and full of expression and movement.

The Gupta kings are Hindu by religion, but like other Indian rulers in ancient times they build Buddhist and Jain temples. They found Nalanda university, which would become one of the greatest centers of Buddhist learning in the world.

Literature

In literature, the playwright Kalidasa brings classical Indian literature to its highest peak. He is regarded in much the same light in India as Shakespeare is viewed in English literature.

Slide 14: 500 CE

Both the Gupta Empire and the Vatakata Empire are now in decline, and will shortly vanish from history.

- From the mid-5th century onwards, troubles multiply for the Gupta and Vatakata empires.

Additional Note

A fearsome people from the central Asia steppes, the White Huns, have based themselves in north-west India. From there they launch attack after attack, deep into Gupta territory. They are beaten back only with difficulty.

Civilization damaged

In these fierce raids, trade is disrupted and many cities sacked. Hundreds of temples and monasteries are destroyed. Major centers of learning vanish – the Huns particularly target Buddhist centers, and permanently weaken that religion in the Indian subcontinent.

The end of the Gupta Empire

The attacks of the White Huns have greatly weakened the Gupta. By the end of the 5th century, the empire is clearly in decline. Gupta “emperors” will sit on the throne for a further half century and then, almost unnoticed, disappear from history.

The end of the Vatakata Empire

The Vatakatas have been shielded from the attacks by the White Huns by Gupta territory. However, they too face new challenges, as powerful new states emerge along their borders. There are no records of the decline and fall of the Vatakata state. However, it seems that one of their neighbors, the Kadambas, conquered the last Vatakata king shortly after 500 CE.

Questions

1. By which name is the first great urban civilization of the Indian Subcontinent known? (*The Indus Valley civilization*)
2. What were the people called who entered and spread across northern India in the millennium before 500 BCE? (*Aryans*)
3. What was the priestly caste of Ancient India called? (*Brahmins*)
4. Name one of the religions which was founded in India in c. 500 BCE? (*Buddhism or Jainism*)
5. Which great military commander invaded northwest India in the late 4th century BCE? (*Alexander the Great*)
6. Which kingdom expanded to become the Mauryan empire? (*Magadha*)
7. Which of the Mauryan rulers is often considered one of the most remarkable figures in world history? (*Asoka*)
8. From which region of Eurasia did the Saka (Scythians) and Kushana originally come? (*Central Asia*)
9. The Kushana empire was a major missionary center of which religion? (*Buddhism*)
10. What was the name of the great trade route which crossed central Asia, along which missionaries travelled to other regions? (*The Silk Road*)
11. Gandhara art as a fusion of Indian and which style? (*Greek*)
12. Which kingdom expanded to become the Gupta empire? (*Maghada*)
13. Which key mathematical discovery occurred in India at around the time of the Gupta empire? (*Zero, the decimal system*)
14. What people from central Asia helped to undermine the power of the Gupta rulers? (*White Huns*)

Appendix

TimeMaps articles for further reading

Here is a selected list of the key articles on the topic of Ancient India.

[Ancient India](#) - an overview of Indian civilization in ancient times

[Classical India](#) - a survey of Indian history from c. 700 BCE to 300 BCE

[The Mauryan Empire](#) - a survey of the rise and fall of this great empire

[Gandharan India](#) - a look at the rise and influence of the Indo-Greek culture of northwest India

[The Deccan Empires](#) - covers the most powerful states of central India, both in the ancient and medieval periods

[The Gupta Empire](#) - a survey of the rise and fall of this powerful state