

CHAPTER ONE

The Beginnings of Hinduism

The modern archaeological record for South Asia indicates a cultural history of continuity rather than the earlier 18th through 20th century scholarly interpretation of discontinuity and South Asian dependence upon Western influences.

—J. G. Shaffer and D. A. Lichtenstein,
“Migration, Philology and South Asian Sociology”

The ancient Persians, who occupied the lands west to the Indus River called the whole country lying across the Indus River *Sindh* and its inhabitants *Sindhus*, a designation that was later taken over by the Greeks who succeeded them and resulted in the now commonly used designations of India and Indians. The Muslims, who began invading India from the eighth century onward, used the term *Hindu* as a generic designation for non-Muslim Indians, identical with “idol worshippers.” In the 1830s Englishmen, writing about the religions of India, added *-ism* to *Hindu* and coined the term *Hinduism*, making an abstract and generic entity out of the many diverse and specific traditions of the Hindus.¹ While Hindus have appropriated the designation *Hindu* and use it today to identify themselves over against Muslims or Christians, they have expressed reservations with regard to the designation of *Hinduism* as the “religion of the Hindus.” They see a certain disrespect in the *-ism* suffix and emphasize that the Hindu *dharma* is more comprehensive than the Western term *religion*: it designates an entire cultural tradition rather than only a set of beliefs and rituals. With these reservations in mind, we are going to use the widely introduced term *Hinduism* in describing the majority religious-cultural tradition of India in spite of the impossibility of defining it in any precise manner.

THE BEGINNINGS OF HINDUISM

The Vedas, the oldest literary monument of the Indian people, a collection of hymns composed in an archaic Sanskrit, are universally considered the foundational scriptures of Hinduism. The authors of these hymns called themselves *Āryans*, “Noble People.” The date of the composition of these hymns and the original habitat of the Aryans have become one of the most contested issues in Indian studies. The polemical literature has reached such dimensions and the emotions have been raised to such heights that only a sketch of the controversy and some hints about its ideological background can be given in this place.²

Around 1860 a group of European Sanskritists suggested that the best explanation for the many common features of what later were called the Indo-European languages was the assumption of an invasion of a band of Aryan warriors, who till then had been living somewhere between Central Asia and Western Europe, into India. Did not the *R̥gveda*, the oldest Sanskrit source, describe the battles, which the *Āryas*, under their leader Indra, the “fort-destroyer,” fought against the *Dasyus*, whose land they occupied? Making the self-designation *ārya* (noble) a racial attribute of the putative invaders, every textbook on Indian history began with the “*Āryan* invasion” of northwestern India, the struggle between the “fair-skinned, blonde, blue-eyed, sharp-nosed Aryans on horse chariots” against the “black-skinned, snub-nosed indigenous Indians.”

This putative “Aryan invasion” was dated ca. 1500 BCE, and the composition of the hymns of the *R̥gveda* was fixed between 1400 and 1200 BCE. The Aryan invasion theory was conceived on pure speculation on the basis of comparative philology, without any archaeological or literary evidence to support it. It was resisted as unfounded by some scholars from the very beginning.³ In the light of recent archaeological finds, it has become less and less tenable. Nevertheless, the Aryan invasion theory, recently downgraded to an Aryan migration theory, is still widely defended and forms part of many standard histories of Hinduism. In the following, the arguments pro and con will be presented, and it will be left to the reader to judge the merits of the case.

THE ARYAN INVASION THEORY

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European attempts to explain the presence of Hindus in India were connected with the commonly held biblical belief that humankind originated from one pair of humans—Adam and Eve, created directly by God in 4005 BCE—and that all the people then living on the earth descended from one of the sons of Noah, the only family of humans to survive the Great Flood (dated 2350 BCE). The major problem associated with the discovery of new lands seemed to be to connect peoples *not* mentioned in chapter 10 of Genesis, “The Peopling of the Earth,” with one of the biblical genealogical lists.

With regard to India this problem was addressed by the famous Abbé Dubois (1770–1848), whose long sojourn in India (1792–1823) enabled him to collect a large amount of interesting materials concerning the customs and traditions of the Hindus. His (French) manuscript was bought by the British East India Company and appeared in an English translation under the title *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* in 1897 with a prefatory note by the Right Honorable F. Max Müller.⁴ Addressing the origins of the Indian people, Abbé Dubois, loath “to oppose [his] conjectures to [the Indians] absurd fables,” categorically stated: “It is practically admitted that India was inhabited very soon after the Deluge, which made a desert of the whole world. The fact that it was so close to the plains of Sennaar, where Noah’s descendants remained stationary so long, as well as its good climate and the fertility of the country, soon led to its settlement.” Rejecting other scholars’ opinions that linked the Indians to Egyptian or Arabic origins, he ventured to suggest them “to be descendants not of Shem, as many argue, but of Japhet.”⁵ He explains: “According to my theory they reached India from the north, and I should place the first abode of their ancestors in the neighbourhood of the Caucasus.”⁶ The reasons he provides to prove his theory are utterly unconvincing—but he goes on to build the rest of his “migration theory” (not yet an Aryan invasion theory) on this shaky foundation.

When the affinity between many European languages and Sanskrit became a commonly accepted notion, scholars almost automatically concluded that the Sanskrit-speaking ancestors of the present-day Indians had to be found somewhere halfway between India and the western borders of Europe—Northern Germany, Scandinavia, southern Russia, the Pamir—from which they invaded the Punjab.⁷ When the ruins of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa were discovered in the early twentieth century, it was assumed that these were the cities the Aryan invaders destroyed.

In the absence of reliable evidence, they postulated a time frame for Indian history on the basis of conjectures. Considering the traditional dates for the life of Gautama, the Buddha, as fairly well established in the sixth century BCE, supposedly pre-Buddhist Indian records were placed in a sequence that seemed plausible to philologists. Accepting on linguistic grounds the traditional claims that the *R̥gveda* was the oldest Indian literary document, Max Müller, a greatly respected authority in Veda studies, allowing a time span of two hundred years each for the formation of every class of Vedic literature and assuming that the Vedic period had come to an end by the time of the Buddha, established the following sequence that was widely accepted:

- *R̥gveda*, ca. 1200 BCE
- *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Atharvaveda*, ca. 1000 BCE
- *Brāhmaṇas*, ca. 800 BCE
- *Āraṇyakas*, Upaniṣads, ca. 600 BCE

Max Müller himself conceded the purely conjectural nature of the Vedic chronology, and in his last work, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, published shortly before his death, admitted: “Whatever may be the date of the Vedic hymns, whether 1500 or 15000 BC, they have their own unique place and stand by themselves in the literature of the world.”⁸

There were already in Max Müller’s time Western scholars, such as Moriz Winternitz, and Indians, like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who disagreed with his chronology and postulated a much earlier date for the *R̥gveda*. Indian scholars pointed out all along that there was no reference in the Veda to a migration of the Āryas from outside India, that all the geographical features mentioned in the *R̥gveda* were those of northwestern India and that there was no archaeological evidence whatsoever for the Aryan invasion theory. On the other side, there were references to constellations in Vedic works whose time frame could be reestablished by commonly accepted astronomical calculations. The dates arrived at, however, 4500 BCE for one observation in the *R̥gveda*, 3200 BCE for a date in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, seemed far too remote to be acceptable, especially if one assumed, as many nineteenth-century scholars did, that the world was only about six thousand years old and that the flood had taken place only 4500 years ago.

Present-day defenders of the Aryan invasion/migration theory are displaying what they believe to be an impenetrable armor of philological detail research: in addition to the *R̥gveda* and the *Avesta*, whole libraries of literary documents pertaining to dozens of languages are marshalled and “laws of scientific linguistics” are adduced to overrun any opposition.⁹ The scholarly debate has largely degenerated into an ideological battle. The defenders of the Aryan invasion theory call everyone who is not on their side “fundamentalist Hindu,” “revisionist,” “fascist,” and worse, whereas the defenders of the indigenous origin of the Veda accuse their opponents of entertaining “colonialist-missionary” and “racist-hegemonial” prejudices.

Many contemporary Indian scholars, admittedly motivated not only by academic interests, vehemently reject what they call the “colonial-missionary Aryan invasion theory.” They accuse its originators of superimposing—for a reason—the purpose and process of the colonial conquest of India by the Western powers in modern times onto the beginnings of Indian civilization: as the Europeans came to India as bearers of a supposedly superior civilization and a higher religion, so the original Aryans were assumed to have invaded a country that they subjected and on which they imposed their culture and their religion.

As the heat around the Aryan invasion theory is rising, it is also emerging that both sides return to positions that were taken by opposing camps more than a hundred years ago. The difference between then and now is the evidence offered by a great many new archaeological discoveries, which clearly tip the balance in favor of the “Indigenists.”

ARGUMENTS FOR AN INDIAN
INDIGENOUS ORIGIN OF THE VEDA.

One would expect the proponents of an event to provide proof for its happening rather than demanding proofs for a non-event.¹⁰ The controversy about the Aryan invasion of India has become so bizarre that its proponents simply assume it to have taken place and demand that its opponents offer arguments that it had not taken place. In the following a number of reasons will be adduced to attest to the fact that the Aryan invasion of India—assumed by the invasionists to have taken place around 1500 BCE—did not take place.

1. The Aryan invasion theory is based purely on linguistic conjectures, which are unsubstantiated.
2. The supposed large-scale migrations of Aryan people in the second millennium BCE first into western Asia and then into northern India (by 1500 BCE) cannot be maintained in view of the established fact that the Hittites were in Anatolia already by 2200 BCE and the Kassites and Mitanni had kings and dynasties by 1600 BCE.
3. There is no hint of an invasion or of large-scale migration in the records of ancient India: neither in the Vedas, in Buddhist or Jain writings, nor in Tamil literature. The fauna and flora, the geography, and the climate described in the *R̥gveda* are those of northern India.
4. There is a striking cultural continuity between the archaeological artifacts of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization and later phases of Indian culture: a continuity of religious ideas, arts, crafts, architecture, and system of weights and measures.
5. The archaeological finds of Mehrgarh dated ca. 7500 BCE (copper, cattle, barley) reveal a culture similar to that of the Vedic Indians. Contrary to former interpretations, the *R̥gveda* reflects not a nomadic but an urban culture.
6. The Aryan invasion theory was based on the assumption that a nomadic people in possession of horses and chariots defeated an urban civilization that did not know horses and that horses are depicted only from the middle of the second millennium onward. Meanwhile archaeological remains of horses have been discovered in Harappan and pre-Harappan sites; drawings of horses have been found in Paleolithic caves in central India. Horse drawn war chariots are not typical for nomadic breeders but for urban civilizations.
7. The racial diversity found in skeletons in the cities of the Indus civilization is the same as in today's India; there is no evidence of the coming of a new race.

8. The *Rgveda* describes a river system in North India that is pre-1900 BCE in the case of the Sarasvatī River and pre-2600 BCE in the case of the Dṛṣadvatī River. Vedic literature shows a population shift from the Sarasvatī (*Rgveda*) to the Ganges (Brāhmaṇas and Purāṇas) for which there is also evidence in archaeological finds.
9. The astronomical references in the *Rgveda* are based on a Pleiades-Kṛttika calendar of ca. 2500 BCE. Vedic astronomy and mathematics were well-developed sciences: these are not features of the culture of a nomadic people.
10. The Indus cities were not destroyed by invaders but deserted by their inhabitants because of desertification of the area. Strabo (*Geography* XV.1.19) reports that Aristobulos had seen thousands of villages and towns deserted because the Indus had changed its course.
11. The battles described in the *Rgveda* were not fought between invaders and natives but between people belonging to the same culture.
12. Excavations in Dvārakā have led to the discovery of a site larger than Mohenjo Daro, dated ca. 1500 BCE with architectural structures, use of iron, and a script halfway between Harappan and Brahmī. Dvārakā has been associated with Kṛṣṇa and the end of the Vedic period.
13. There is a continuity in the morphology of scripts: Harappan—Brahmī—Devanāgarī.
14. Vedic *ayas*, formerly translated as “iron,” probably meant copper or bronze. Iron was found in India before 1500 BCE in Kashmir and Dvārakā.
15. The Purāṇic dynastic lists, with over 120 kings in one Vedic dynasty alone, date back to the third millennium BCE. Greek accounts tell of Indian royal lists going back to the seventh millennium BCE.
16. The *Rgveda* shows an advanced and sophisticated culture, the product of a long development, “a civilization that could not have been delivered to India on horseback.” (160)
17. Painted gray ware culture in the western Gangetic plains, dated ca. 1100 BCE, has been found connected to earlier Indus Valley black and red ware.

It would be strange indeed if the Vedic Indians had lost all recollection of such a momentous event as the Aryan invasion in supposedly relatively recent times—much more recent, for instance, than the migration of Abraham and his people, which is well attested and frequently referred to in the Hebrew Bible.

INDUS CULTURE OR SARASVATĪ CIVILIZATION?

The Sarasvatī is frequently praised as the mightiest of all rivers, as giving nourishment to the people and, unique among them, flowing pure from the mountains to the ocean.¹¹ It is the most often mentioned river in the *R̥gveda*—and it no longer exists. Its absence led to the suggestion that it might have been a symbolic rather than a real river, an idea supported by the later identification of Sarasvatī with the Goddess of Wisdom and Learning. More recent satellite photography and geological investigations have helped to reconstruct the ancient riverbed of the Sarasvatī and also established that it had dried out completely by 1900 BCE due to tectonic shifts. Of the 2,600 archaeological sites so far discovered that were connected with the Indus civilization, over 1,500 were found located on the Sarasvatī River basin, including settlements that exceeded in size the by now famous Indus sites of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.¹² It is hardly meaningful to assume that the invading Vedic Aryans established thousands of settlements on its banks four centuries after the Sarasvatī had dried out.

When the first remnants of the ruins of the so-called Indus civilization came to light in the 1920s, the proponents of the Aryan invasion theory believed to have found the missing archaeological evidence: here were the “mighty forts” and the “great cities” that the warlike Indra of the *R̥gveda* was said to have conquered and destroyed. Then it emerged that nobody had destroyed these cities and no evidence of wars of conquest came to light: floods and droughts had made it impossible to sustain large populations in the area, and the people of Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, and other places had migrated to more hospitable areas. Ongoing archaeological research has not only extended the area of the Indus civilization but has also shown a transition of its later phases to the Gangetic culture. Archaeo-geographers have established that a drought lasting two to three hundred years devastated a wide belt of land from Anatolia through Mesopotamia to northern India around 2300 BCE to 2000 BCE.

Based on this type of evidence and extrapolating from the Vedic texts, a new theory of the origins of Hinduism is emerging. This new theory considers the Indus valley civilization as a late Vedic phenomenon and pushes the (inner Indian) beginnings of the Vedic age back by several thousands of years (see Figure 2.1). Instead of speaking of an Indus Valley civilization the term *Sarasvatī-Sindhu* civilization has been introduced, to designate the far larger extent of that ancient culture. One of the reasons for considering the Indus civilization “Vedic” is the evidence of town planning and architectural design that required a fairly advanced algebraic geometry—of the type preserved in the Vedic *Śulvasūtras*. The widely respected historian of mathematics A. Seidenberg came to the conclusion, after studying the geometry used in building the Egyptian pyramids and the Mesopotamian citadels, that it reflected a derivative geometry—a geometry derived from the Vedic *Śulvasūtras*. If that is



Figure 2.1. Prehistoric rock drawings: Bhimbhethka (Maharashtra)

so, then the knowledge (“Veda”) on which the construction of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro is based cannot be later than that civilization itself.¹³

While the *R̥gveda* has always been held to be the oldest literary document of India and was considered to have preserved the oldest form of Sanskrit, Indians have not taken it to be the source for their early history. *Itihāsa-Purāṇa* served that purpose. The language of these works is more recent than that of the Vedas, and the time of their final redaction is much later than the fixation

of the Vedic canon. However, they contain detailed information about ancient events and personalities that form part of Indian history. The Ancients, like Herodotus, the father of Greek historiography, did not separate story from history. Nor did they question their sources but tended to juxtapose various information without critically sifting it. Thus we cannot read *Itihāsa-Purāna* as the equivalent of a modern textbook of Indian history but rather as a story-book containing information with interpretation, facts and fiction. Indians, however, always took genealogies quite seriously, and we can presume that the Purānic lists of dynasties, like the lists of *guru-paramparās* in the Upaniṣads, relate the names of real rulers in the correct sequence. On these assumptions we can tentatively reconstruct Indian history to a time around 4500 BCE.

G. P. Singh defends the historical accuracy of the Purānic dynastic lists and calls the Purānas “one of the most important traditions of historiography in ancient India.”¹⁴ These lists he says “disprove the opinion that the ancient Indians (mainly the Hindus) had no sense of history and chronology.”

A key element in the revision of ancient Indian history was the recent discovery of Mehrgarh, a settlement in the Hindukush area, that was continuously inhabited for several thousand years from ca. 7000 BCE onward. This discovery has extended Indian history for thousands of years before the fairly well dateable Indus civilization.¹⁵

Nobody has as yet interpreted the religious significance of the prehistoric cave paintings (Figure 2.2) at Bhīmabeta (from ca. 100,000 to ca. 10,000 BCE), which were discovered only in 1967, and we do not know whether and how the people who created these are related to present-day populations of India.¹⁶ These show, amongst other objects, horses clearly reared for riding—according to the “Invasionists” horse breeding and horse riding were an innovations that the Aryans introduced to India after 1500 BCE.

Civilizations, both ancient and contemporary, comprise more than literature. It cannot be assumed that the Vedic Aryans, who have left a large literature that has been preserved till now, did not have any material culture that would have left visible traces. The only basis on which Indologists in the nineteenth century established their views of Vedic culture and religion were the texts that they translated from Ancient Sanskrit. Traditionally trained philologists, that is, grammarians, are generally not able to understand technical language and the scientific information contained in the texts they study. Consider today’s scientific literature. It abounds with Greek and Latin technical terms, it contains an abundance of formulas, composed of Greek and Hebrew letters. If scholars with only a background in the classical languages were to read such works, they might be able to come up with some acceptable translations of technical terms into modern English, but they would hardly be able to really make sense of most of what they read, and they certainly would not extract the information that the authors of these works wished to convey through their formulas to people trained in their specialties. Analogous to the observations, which the biologist Ernst Mayr made with regard

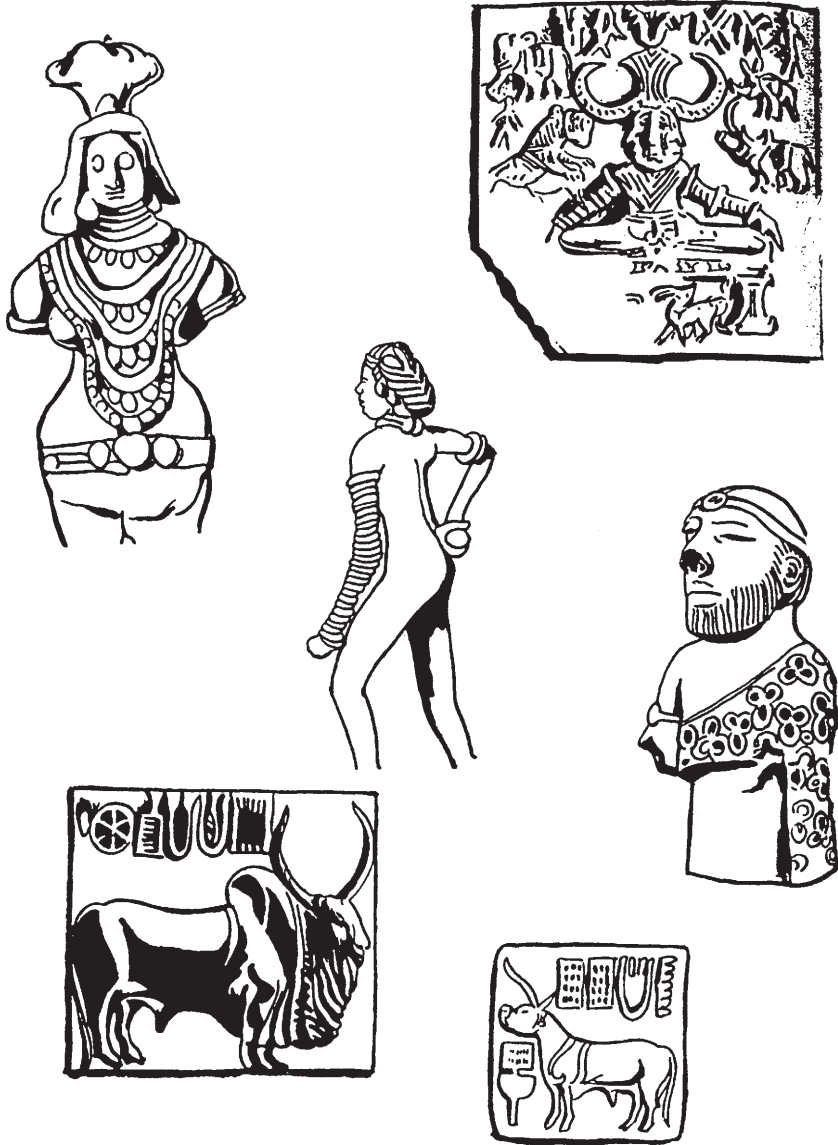


Figure 2.2. Seals and figurines from the Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilization

to translations of Aristotle's works, namely, that sixteenth-century humanists misunderstood and mistranslated his scientific terminology, we must also expect new insights to come out from new translations of ancient Indian technical texts that are more adequate than those made by nineteenth century European philologists.¹⁷

The admission of some of the top scholars (like Geldner, who in his translation of the *R̥gveda*—deemed the best so far—declares many passages “darker than the darkest oracle,” or Gonda, who considered the *R̥gveda* basically untranslatable) of being unable to make sense of a great many Vedic texts—and the refusal of most to go beyond a grammatical and etymological analysis of these—indicates a deeper problem. The ancient Indians were not only poets and literateurs, but they also had their practical sciences and their technical skills, their secrets and their conventions that are not self-evident to someone who does not share their world. Some progress has been made in deciphering technical Indian medical and astronomical literature of a later age, in reading architectural and arts-related materials.¹⁸ However, much of the technical meaning of the oldest Vedic literature still eludes us. It would be enormously helpful in the question of the relation between the *R̥gveda* and the Indus civilization if we could read the literary remnants of the latter: thousands of what appear to be brief texts incised on a very large number of soapstone seals and other objects, found over large areas of north-western India and also in Western Asia. In spite of many claims made by many scholars who laboured for decades on the decipherment of the signs, nobody has so far been able to read or translate these signs.¹⁹

THE *R̥GVEDA*—A CODE?

Computer scientist Subhash Kak believes to have rediscovered the “Vedic Code,” on the strength of which he extracts from the structure as well as the words and sentences of the *R̥gveda* considerable astronomical information that its authors supposedly embedded in it.²⁰ The assumption of such encoded scientific knowledge would make it understandable why there was such insistence on the preservation of every letter of the text in precisely the sequence the original author had set down. One can take certain liberties with a story, or even a poem, changing words, transposing lines, adding explanatory matter, shortening it, if necessary, and still communicate the intentions and ideas of the author. However, one has to remember and reproduce a scientific formula in precisely the same way it has been set down by the scientist, or it would not make sense at all. While the scientific community can arbitrarily adopt certain letter equivalents for physical units or processes, once it has agreed on their use, one must obey the conventions for the sake of meaningful communication.

Even a nonspecialist reader of ancient Indian literature will notice the effort made to link macrocosm and microcosm, astronomical and physiological processes, to find correspondences between the various realms of beings and to



Photo 7. Nāga: Khajurāho

order the universe by establishing broad classifications. Vedic sacrifices—the central act of Vedic culture—were to be offered on precisely built, geometrically constructed altars and to be performed at astronomically exactly established times. It sounds plausible to expect a correlation between the numbers of bricks prescribed for a particular altar and the distances between stars observed whose movement determined the time of the offerings to be made. Subhash Kak has advanced a great deal of fascinating detail in that connection in his essays on the astronomy of the Vedic altar. He believes that while the Vedic Indians possessed extensive astronomical knowledge that they encoded in the text of the *Ṛgveda*, the code was lost in later times and the Vedic tradition was interrupted.

INDIA, THE CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION?

Based on the early dating of the *Ṛgveda* (ca. 4000 BCE) and on the strength of the argument that Vedic astronomy and geometry predates that of the other known ancient civilizations, some scholars have made the daring suggestion that India was the “cradle of civilization.”²¹ They link the recently discovered early European civilization (which predates ancient Sumeria and ancient Egypt by over a millennium) to waves of populations moving out or driven out from northwest India. Later migrations, caused either by climatic changes or by military events, would have brought the Hittites to western Asia, the Iranians to Afghanistan and Iran, and many others to other parts of Eurasia. Such a scenario would require a complete rewriting of ancient world history—especially if we add the claims, apparently substantiated by some material evidence, that Vedic Indians had established trade links with Central America and East Africa before 2500 BCE. No wonder that the “new chronology” arouses not only scholarly controversy but emotional excitement as well. Much more hard evidence will be required to fully establish it, and many claims may have to be withdrawn. But there is no doubt that the “old chronology” has been discredited and that much surprise is in store for students not only of ancient India, but of the ancient World as a whole.

An entirely new twist to the question has been added by a recent suggestion that modern humankind did not originate circa one hundred thousand years ago in Africa, as was long assumed, but in Asia: and if in Asia, why not in the Indus Valley?²² To answer that question, much more archaeological work is necessary and many more pieces of the puzzle will have to be put together.