Androon Shaher (Lahore’s Inner City):
Revisiting the Mystified Origins

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Divine Planning and Vedic City

Archaeology of Sacred

The case of Lahore is a thematic entry for exploring the ancient metamorphosis of urban civilisation in the northern subcontinent (Figure 1). The Walled City of Lahore, according to the popular conceptions (Keay 2001; Baqir 1952, 1962, 1985; Khan M. W. 1973) referred to and inferred from the sacred Vedic scripts, originated in 1000 BC as a Vedic settlement based on Vedic Knowledge.

Described as a large Brahmanical city by the Chinese Buddhist Monk Hiuen Tsiang in 630s and a province in Persian scientist/historian/traveller Al-Biruni’s Chronicles of India in 1030s, Lahore’s earlier history both as a city and a region has been claimed as Lohawarana of Lava, the son of Rama, and Labokla of Ptolemy’s Geography. However, Strabo’s Geographica, Pliny’s Encyclopaedia and Al-Masudi’s World History did not record it.
The present exploration dwells on testing this popular theory in the light of the research on the ancient Indus Civilisation (also called Harappan Civilisation after the name of the first city discovered in 1920s). Demystifying the legendary claim about Lahore requires investigating its earliest physical settings and urban forms. It also requires exploring empirical marks of any persisting physical archaeological correlation by drawing parallels between Lahore (and its Vedic origins) and Indus (Harappan) cities discovered until date.

It is imperative to look into, at one hand, the Vedic (Brahminic) principles of city planning, and on the other hand, the wealth of information made available through the various archaeological excavations and studies by the Department of Archaeology and Museums (DOAM)\(^1\) and others. It involves making use of the rich body of contemporary exploratory and critical works in the fields of experimental and contested local histories in South West Asia, Vedic writings, Aryan culture and comparative philology. The updated knowledge in these fields suggests an opportunity to reflect on the ancient urban realities in the region and revisiting the popular focus on its mystified origins.

City of Rig-Veda

Concerning the substantiation of the Vedic origins of Lahore, interestingly, it is an important fact that the three Vedas – Vedanga\(^2\), Aranyakas\(^3\) and Brahmanas\(^4\) – and the other religious books of Vedism\(^5\) such as Upanishads\(^6\), Shastras and the two epics of Ramayana\(^7\) and Mahabharata\(^8\) etc., to which its historical social and cultural systems refer, were written in the centuries long after the Rig-Veda\(^9\) when the Vedic culture centred geographically in the valley of Ganges (Keay 2001). It follows that if the ancient city of Lahore (the Walled City), as popularly claimed, was shaped by the sacred Vedic scripts, then it was based on the Vedic knowledge and city-planning principles articulated in the Rig-Veda.

A critical study of the Rig-Veda elucidates that the principles of Veda architecture\(^10\) are used to design and build a Vedic city. It is a city believed to be in harmony with the laws of nature and connected to its cosmic source. Likewise, a design order that conforms to the
laws of nature is believed to be in harmony with the order of the universe. This planning system acknowledges the influence of the sun, moon and planets, and most importantly, makes explicit references to the north and south poles. The planning translation of this Vedic framework generates a centralised geometric city form (Figure 2) that extroverts the microcosm of a Vedic house. In this urban form, the centrally placed city temple becomes an exterior Brahmasthan\textsuperscript{11} – a core that maintains the structure of the whole city. All functions are arranged around it and the wholeness of the city is marked by it. The holy neighbourhoods of the priests (referring to the meditation room in a Vedic house) make the northeast quarter. The eastern neighbourhoods are considered as an auspicious environment for thinkers, teachers and students (referring to the room for reflection and wisdom). The western and southern quarters are for other social and religious classes. All streets are aligned as corridors of natural light and crossing winds. A strict alignment with the geographic North, stressed in the Vedic city planning principles, alienates the proposed urban forms from the local topographical realities on which they are laid. Eventually, it invites site layout adjustments though, the global Vedic urban form, however, attempts reformatting microcosm of the site according to the Vedic understanding of macrocosm.

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
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History and Polemics

Compared with the pristine image of a Vedic City, the historicity of Lahore stands disputed. The urban form of the Walled City does not corroborate explicit or implied correlation with the planning principles referred to. Except for the proclaimed temple of Loh12, which is believed to have existed somewhere in the foundations of the Lahore Fort (the citadel of Lahore),

- the organic patterns of the Walled City,
- the profound absence of any marks, whatsoever, pertaining to a monumental temple site at or around the geometric centre of the two or any of its two historical mounds and
- the inadmissibility of north-south alignment

make the popular claim of Lahore’s Vedic origins polemical.

Nevertheless, the Vedic knowledge in the Rig-Veda remains central for expanding the argument as the text is believed to be ‘the earliest and most important of the Aryan compositions. [Though, essentially, it is] a collection of hymns dedicated to the power residing in the sacrificial ritual’ (Tagdill 1990, p.3).

The Rig-Veda is received

as the most ancient literature and the key to Sanskrit and to Hindu civilisation. [Most importantly] its references to the aryas [Aryans] and to their hostility to the dasas, [indigenous races of the sub-continent], are considered in line with the ideas of monogenesis, which is linked to a [yet to be proved] theory that a clan of Aryans migrated from central Asia, invaded northern India enslaving the indigenous people […] and settled in India (Thapar 1999, p.16).

It, therefore, offers an opportunity to revisit the linear history of the region that rests on one grand event – the Aryan Invasion.
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Theory of Aryans

Inflating Monogenesis

The theory of Aryan Invasion has its basis in the notion of Indo-Aryans being part of a larger Indo-European family having same ancestral language. Before the research on the Vedic writings became popular, the earlier efforts for reconstructing the historic events of the South Asian subcontinent owe to the works of the early Orientalists. They focused on Puranic\(^{13}\) chronology and lists of the descent groups for validating ancient events in their historical and cultural contexts.

Later, comparative works on the Sanskrit took momentum—such as William Jones’\(^{14}\) (Jones 1771, 1786) discussion of Sanskrit as a cognate of Greek and Latin. The studies in comparative philology, concerning the monogenesis, remained in focus in the 19\(^{th}\) century among the European researchers who in their linguistic analysis of Vedic Sanskrit attempted ‘establishing it as part of the wider Indo-European family with cognates in Old Iranian’ (Thapar 1999, p.26).

Increasingly monogenesis came to be applied to the speakers of these languages as well. Shortly after these early speculative findings, the theory of Aryan race came to be viewed as foundational to the sub-continental history. Extending further, the racial superiority of the Aryans was equated with the racial distinctiveness of the upper cast Hindus (Brahmins\(^ {15}\)) and that with Sanskrit as an ancestral language of the Indo-European languages. The works of British Sanskritists and ethnographers and especially that of Max Muller, anchored on the claims about Aryans in Rgveda [Rig-Veda], as the exponent of Aryan invasion. Both language and race, therefore, have an important status in this theory (Thapar 1999, p.16).

Though seriously questioned as early as 1970s, the mythical conceptions about Aryans continuously (re)appeared in various narratives. However, it is important to note that the
theory of Aryan Invasion led to disputed perspectives about the early sub-continental history as early as mid nineteenth century.

Interestingly, a few researchers maintained that the Aryans were a race that was indigenous in the northern subcontinent (Leopold 1970). Notwithstanding, the conception rendered by the supporters of the Invasion Theory (Muir 1917, Wilson 1858) that the lower casts were the indigenous inhabitants who had been conquered and oppressed by the Brahmins who represented the Aryan conquest popularised. Phule’s Golden Age (Omvedt 1991), for instance, refers to the Pre-Aryan Invasion period. It draws from

well-known myths to emphasise [the] point […] Repeated reference is made to the […] legends [that] are not found in the Vedas but in the Mahabharata and the Purnas (Thapar 1999, p.18).

Nonetheless, Phule treats them as early history.

Consequently, the popular version (Leach 1990, Poliakov 1974), based on the 19th century European works, remained that

in one of the major upheavals of ancient Eurasia which is hardly likely to have been merely coincidental, diverse fair-skinned tribes originating from the steppes of Central Asia began to enter India from Iran through the passes of the north-west. Related to the hordes who invaded the Aegean area at much the same time, they are known as Indo Aryans – their language, Sanskrit, belonging to the Aryan group like the classical languages of Europe (Tadgell 1990, p.2).

Return of Aryans

The ideas that the local people and cultures were primitive and the Aryans were racially superior aliens from the North framed the later as the civilising agents. It had two highly engrossed developments. The British historians projected the arrival of the British in the subcontinent as the return of the
Aryans, and the introduction of the western civilisation as critical for progress. The upper-cast Hindus (Brahmins) celebrated it as a proof of their kinship ties with the British.

The Invasion Theory thus has its genesis in the attempts, during the colonial times, to (re)discover the sub-continental past – a discovery that was rooted in the colonial present. It has been, since then, used in a variety of ways to structure the knowledge about the past (and perhaps more directly to give legitimacy to the racial and communal conflicts of the present). Starting from its official inclusion in the school syllabi during colonial times to its wider public admissibility later through local publications, the story of Aryans, which seeks to explain the beginnings of the sub-continental history, has sustained its buoyancy and certainty to a considerable degree.

Proto-Indo-Aryan

However, the contemporary literature now critically challenges the Invasion Theory. Its legendary notions are evaluated in the light of the archaeological excavations as well as the recent research in the fields of post-Harappan and Aryan culture.

More recently, non-Aryan components in the Indo-Aryan language, even as early as the Rig-Veda, have been established. Furthermore

there has been the discovery of occasional words close to Indo-Aryan in documents from northern Mesopotamia […] These collection of words has been labelled Proto-Indo-Aryan (Thapar 1999, p.30).

These findings weaken the argument for Indo-Aryans as distinct invading Eurasian tribes spatially and temporally specific to the Aegean area and northern subcontinent. Especially the discovery of non-Aryan words in the language of Vedic Aryans rather suggests an iterating intermingling of diverse cultures and peoples. However, most importantly, the discovery of the Indus Civilisation has shaken up the earlier linear historical narrative.
The period of Indus Civilisation, now safely estimated beyond 3000 BC, and the absence of archaeological evidences of any large-scale invasions during that period are the two pertinent issues highlighted, that have disputed the Aryan Invasion as the beginning of the history in the subcontinent. At the least, the conventional unanimity about the conception of Aryan Invasion has been questioned\textsuperscript{17} decisively. The new archaeological evidences do not validate the Invasion Theory and the current interpretations of the Vedic writings (in the Rig-Veda). They are mutually incompatible and even contradictory (Ratnagar 1981).

**Archaeological Findings and Indus Civilisation**

**Ancient Urban Society**

Regarding reconstructing the ancient reality of Lahore (region), the renewed understanding of the sub-continental history asks to reinterpret and realign Aryanism within the factual knowledge of the Indus (Harappan) Civilisation (and its excavated cities). The identified antinomies of the Invasion Theory take profound dimensions by considering the geographical scale as well as the content of the Harappan sites in question. (Figure 1, 2)

In becoming an urban society, the Harappan agriculturists […] had pioneered a highly productive economy based on growing cereals in the fine soil alongside the river. Managing the river’s seasonal rise so as to enrich and irrigate their fields was the key to their success. An annual surplus had generated wealth, encouraged craft industries and fostered trade. Settlements had become cities (Keay 2001, p.5).

The Harappan urban centres were distinctively similar as compared to an observed diversity of the pre-Harappan regional cultures (Allchin 1995). Likewise, in contrast to the hunting culture depicted in the Rig-Veda, the Indus Civilisation had widespread trading contacts with the Gulf, Mesopotamia
and Elam [far west and southwest of modern-day Iran], apart from sites extending from Badakshan in the Pamirs to Gujarat and northern Maharashtra in the sub-continent. These places, with the possible exception of Afghanistan, were not familiar to the Rgveda [Rig-Veda]. The urban commercial culture of the Indus cities is again not reflected in the Vedas where there is little evidence of sophisticated exchange or concern with the organisation of resources and production or description of granaries or craft workshops. Nor is there a familiarity with the complex lay-out of the cities and the structures constructed on brick platforms, or even something as basic as script (Thapar 1999, p.26).

Harappan Urban Prototype

It is now known that Harappan culture characterized urbanisation, metalwork, agriculture, trading and pictographic writing.

The Harappan finds included buildings, tools, artifacts, jewellery and sculpture and some intimate details about Harappan housing, diet and waste disposal came to light (Keay 2001, p.6).

Its centres (Figure 1) were several cities on the banks of the Indus and its tributaries, notable Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, but related sites have been discovered across the vast area from western Pakistan to the Ganges valley and from northern Afghanistan to Kathiawar [...] picture has emerged of an efficient, centralized, agrarian economy with a highly ordered urban culture (Tadgell 1990, p.1).

It suggests an opportunity to attempt reflecting on Lahore’s ancient city-form by analysing the findings about the Indus cities in the immediate region. Their prototypal features have been established already. They are laid with grid layout of streets (Figure 4, 5), a semblance that adverts to generic Vedic settlement patterns, and built right on the shores of the rivers. These (walled) cities have markedly distinguished citadels, often in the northwest and west-
northwest, containing the public buildings including granaries, and the mounds of the lower city towards the southeast and east-southeast. Their fired-bricks constructions and huge granaries are indicative of the agrarian economy of the Indus civilisation. The presence of drains, sewers and even latrines are evidences of a mature urban-agrarian culture (Figure 4). The stark absence of buildings or places related to public worship is hallmark of the Indus cities.

Early Lahore

The most relevant case for drawing parallels between Lahore and Indus cities – a comparative study that can potentially inform about Lahore’s historic reality and its earliest urban forms – is that of Harappa. At a distance of hundred kilometres from Lahore, it was one of the twin capitals of the Indus civilisation (other being Mohenjo-Daro). It is laid according to acknowledgeable planning principals with its protected citadel towering above the rest of the city (Figure 3, 4). The planning of Harappa is based on a rectangular grid [...] and standardized brick was the main building material. A high proportion of the population lived in substantial, well-drained courtyard houses (Tadgell 1990, p.2).

The citadel has ‘a carefully constructed bath or tank, a granary, pillared halls and the residence of a high official’ (Whittick 1974, p.518).

The urban setting and form of the Lahore’s Walled City
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has a striking homogeny with that of Harappa (Figure 5). Lahore would have been one of the more modest agrarian settlements in the wider regional trade network of Indus cities of which Harappa was the central focus. Riverine links between Lahore and Harappa are therefore highly probable.

The Walled City is spread on two mounds, the northwestern and the southeastern. The first mound appears to be the location for the primitive settlement of Harappan period in circa 2000 BC (Figure 6). The choice location of the northwest and southeast
slopes of the historical mound towards the river is permitted and attested by:

- the climatic settings (predominant northwest wind direction) of the sloping terrain,
- the geographical settings of low land and river course,
- the natural topographic settings (slopes and floodplains) of the historic high mounds on the left bank of the river Ravi (later on which the Lahore Fort is constructed),
- the arc of the river bed and
- the two ancient trade axes

In a distinctive Harappan way, the mound was guarded naturally by the river on three sides (until river Ravi moved almost two kilometres further north).

The mentioning of the Temple of Loh as an archaeological evidence is controversial though, the presence of ancient layers of foundations found during the subsurface excavations by the DOAM, and results of the examination of the ancient subsurface debris until date, point towards the citadel as the actual location on which the ancient Harappan settlement of Lahore originated. This
is affirmative of the historical building activity on the citadel. The expansion of the Harappan Lahore in the southeastern side of the mound and on the second mound happened much later. (Figure 6)

**Post-Harappan Enclave**

Lahore’s hierarchical divergence and its relative economic autonomy in the Indus urban network, however, provided significant prospects for sustaining through the late-Harappan era (also called Ravi phase). It is therefore not out of question that Lahore continued even though it is known now that the Harappan cities declined by the mid-second millennium B.C. [It was one of those] smaller settlements [that] continued and then petered out or elsewhere mutated through contact with other locally evolved cultures […] [The startling facts that] new archaeological cultures emerged at various places by the end of the second millennium as in the Swat valley, Baluchistan, Gujarat, Punjab, Rajistan and the Ganges valley (Thapar 1999, p.29, 33)

strengthen the prospects that when other Indus cities of higher hierarchical order declined, Lahore, along with other such settlements, transcended and emerged in the post-Harappan era (Kuiper 1991, Emeneau 1974 and Burrow 1973, 1965) as an urban enclave in its own agrarian hinterland and a trading node of riverine and land routes.

The fissioning-off of the original communities resulted in far more mixed cultural groups. The recent finding of continued ancient activities in the Indo-Iranian borderlands and the presence of artefacts in the different areas in the region stresses on the small-scale migrations of the Proto-Indo-Aryan speakers from the north of Iran and branching off to the northern Mesopotamia and northern subcontinent. The widespread notion and terminology of Aryan Invasion thus dissolves and instead a rather well founded scenario of Aryan Migration emerges.
It advances and strengthens a series of seminal events during which the eastwardly migrations to Lahore region and further in the subcontinent, motivated by pastoralism and incipient trade, were followed by the amalgamation of the migrant culture of the Proto-Indo-Aryan speakers with that of local post-Harappan cultures. There are no evidences that the migrant culture was able to overpower the local. Instead, it is certain that the migrant culture absorbed more and more of the local cultures as its geographical location moved further eastwards in the valley of Ganges.

The later developments of the Vedic culture in the Ganges valley conferred divinity on a wide range of natural phenomena – especially those of the sky which effected their flocks. Their tradition ultimately enshrined in a great series of compositions called Vedas […] the synthesis of the [migrant] Vedic and native traditions. [In] particular the substitution by Bhuddists and Jains of worship for sacrifice generated the change from Brahmanism – as the evolved Vedic religion is sometimes called – to Hinduism (Tadgell 1990, p.2).

In this context ‘the aryas emerge not as a distinctive people, physically different from others and known as the Aryans but as persons of status in many of the [Vedic] societies’ (Thapar 1999, p.34).

These exciting developments must be viewed as a parallel to the survival of the settlements of Indus river system in which the post-Harappan urban centre at Lahore witnessed arrival of the nomadic herdsmen from the west. Although there might have been a long period of bilingualism in Lahore, the mixing of cultures was by no means equal and it becomes important to believe in the Harappan roots of Lahore’s historic urban form.
Endnotes

1. Formerly Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)

2. Vedic texts dealing with phonetics and ritual injunctions and linguistics and grammar and etymology and lexicography and prosody and astronomy and astrology (Motilal Barnarsidass 1985)

3. A treatise resembling a Brahmana but to be read or expounded by anchorites in the quiet of the forest (A. B. Keith 1909)

4. Prose works attached to the Samhitas instructing the Brahmans to perform the very elaborate sacrificial rituals (Julius Eggeling 1882, 1885, 1894, 1897, 1900)

5. The form of Hinduism that revolves primarily around the mythic version and ritual ideologies in the Vedas

6. A later sacred text of Hinduism of a mystical nature dealing with metaphysical questions (Max Muller 1879, 1884; Charles Johnston 1889)

7. One of two classical Hindu epics telling of the banishment of Rama from his kingdom and the abduction of his wife by a demon and Rama’s restoration to the throne (Ralph Griffith 1870)

8. A sacred epic Sanskrit poem of India dealing in many episodes with the struggle between two rival families (Kisari Mohan Ganguli 1883)

9. One of four collections of sacred texts collectively known as Samhitas, the other three are Atharva-Veda (A collection of mantras and formulas), Sama-Veda (A collection of mantras and tunes for use with the Rig-Veda), and Yajur-Veda (A collection of sacrificial formulas and prayers) (Max Muller 1891; Ralph Griffith 1896; Hermann Oldenberg 1897; A. A. Macdonell 1917)

10. Veda means natural law. It is considered to be the oldest system of architecture in the Hindu literature. It intends to connect individual life with Cosmic Life and individual intelligence with Cosmic Intelligence. All individual structures are said to be sustained by the Cosmic Intelligence. Persons who reside in homes built in accord with Vedic principles are said to be happy, healthy, and successful. They also benefit from nourishing family relationships.

11. The central element of a Vedic house is Brahmasthan. It is an unobstructed central area usually open to the sky. One does not walk on or in the Brahmasthan.

12. Son of Vedic Avatar Ramachandra in Hindu Folklore
13. A body of 18 Vedic works written between the first and 11th centuries and incorporating Vedic legends and speculative histories of the universe and myths and customary observances.

14. Sir William Jones (1746 - 1794), a British philologist, is particularly known for his discovery of the Indo-European language family. Jones is known for being the first to notice that Sanskrit bore a certain resemblance to Greek and Latin. He suggested that all three languages had a common root, and that further they might all be related in turn to Gothic and Celtic languages, and to Persian.

15. A member of the highest of the four original social divisions of Vedic people – Varnas The second group is Rajanyas (the noble or warrior category), the third group is Vaisyas (the commoners or yeoman farmers or mercantile and professional category), and the lowest group is Shudras (the servants and workers).

16. See writings of the Theosophists and particularly those of Colonel Olcott in the late nineteenth century.

17. Aryanism as a fact of the historical past is not contested, but what creates divergent views is the question of whether it was alien or indigenous.