

Beyond Mesopotamia: A radical new view of human civilization reported

A radically expanded view of the origin of civilization, extending far beyond Mesopotamia, is reported by journalist Andrew Lawler in the 3 August issue of *Science*.

Mesopotamia is widely believed to be the cradle of civilization, but a growing body of evidence suggests that in addition to Mesopotamia, many civilized urban areas existed at the same time – about 5,000 years ago – in an arc that extended from Mesopotamia east for thousands of kilometers across to the areas of modern India and Pakistan, according to Lawler.

“While Mesopotamia is still the cradle of civilization in the sense that urban evolution began there,” Lawler said, “we now know that the area between Mesopotamia and India spawned a host of cities and cultures between 3000 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E.”

Evidence of shared trade, iconography and other culture from digs in remote areas across this arc were presented last month at a meeting in Ravenna, Italy of the International Association for the Study of Early Civilizations in the Middle Asian Intercultural Space. The meeting was the first time that many archaeologists from more than a dozen countries gathered to discuss the fresh finds that point to this new view of civilization’s start. *Science*’s Lawler was the only journalist present.

Archaeologists shared findings from dozens of urban centers of approximately the same age that existed between Mesopotamia and the Indus River valley in modern day India and Pakistan. The researchers are just starting to sketch out this new landscape, but it’s becoming clear that these centers traded goods and could have shared technology and architecture. Recovered artifacts such as beads, shells, vessels, seals and game boards show that a network linked these civilizations.

Researchers have also found hints, such as similar ceremonial platforms, that these cultures interacted and even learned from one another. A new excavation near Jiroft in southeastern Iran, for example, has unearthed tablets with an unknown writing system. This controversial find highlights the complexity of the cultures in an area long considered a backwater, Lawler explained.

These urban centers are away from the river valleys that archaeologists have traditionally focused on, according to Lawler. Archaeologists now have access to more remote locations and are expanding their studies.

Source: American Association for the Advancement of Science

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