

SIR JOHN MARSHALL AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Abstract: *This study focuses on Sir John Hubert Marshall, a British archaeologist who is known for developing modern archaeology in India. Sir John Hubert Marshall served as the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India between 1902 and 1928. During his service period, he made immense contributions to the discipline of archaeology, including announcing the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, an event that altered the understanding of Indian history.*

By focusing on the contributions of various earlier scholars, such as Charles Masson, James Prinsep, Alexander Cunningham, and Lord Curzon, among others, the paper provides insight into the state of Archaeological studies in India before Marshall.

The article further highlights Marshall's initiatives in conservation, regional reorganization of the Archaeological Survey of India, scientific excavation techniques, and the encouragement of Indian participation in archaeological research. The article argues that Marshall not only reshaped the discipline of archaeology in India but also transformed the historical imagination of the Indian subcontinent, enabling the recognition of a civilization that predated the Vedic age and redefined the antiquity of South Asian history.

Keywords: *Sir John Marshall, Archaeological Survey Of India, Indus Valley Civilization, Colonial Archaeology, Ancient Indian History, Cultural Heritage, Historical Reconstruction, Scientific Excavation*

Introduction

There has been a severe upheaval in the last few years as we have been

articulating a lot about Sir John Marshall and his role in Indian Archaeology. John Marshall is remembered for his

contributions to Indian Archaeology and especially for the protection and conservation of India's monuments and heritage sites. One of his significant and earliest contributions after heading the Archaeological Survey of India is the excavations of both the first[1] and second[2] urban sites of South Asia, though the second urban site was excavated earlier.

For a long time, his contributions were not recognized at the all-India level as they should have been. Tamil Nadu took the lead in complimenting his role, especially for his historic announcement of the discovery of the civilization. Today, the name "John Marshall" has become a household name as people celebrated "Marshall Pongal" by cooking Pongal and drawing Kolams in front of their homes. Tamil Nadu has claimed both the name and the civilization as part of a larger cultural and historical consciousness.

Who is John Marshall?

Sir John Hubert Marshall was an eminent British archaeologist who served as the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) from 1902 to 1928 and was known for his astonishing discovery of the Indus Civilization.

Marshall was born on 19 March 1876 in Chester, England. Between 1888-95, he pursued higher education at Dulwich College in London, and during 1895-1900 he completed his Classics at King's College, Cambridge. [3] While studying, he joined the British School in Athens and participated in the excavations in Greece, Crete, and southern Turkey. He worked on pottery classification, restoration of Mycenaean vases, and archaeological field methods, which later supported his archaeological work in India. While working with the British School in 1901, Marshall was selected as the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India. Before travelling to India, he married Florence Longhurst and had one son and daughter.

Between 1899 and 1905, Lord Curzon served as the Viceroy of India.[4] During his tenure, he was looking for a young scholar with field experience for the Archaeological Survey of India. Later, he appointed the young scholar, Sir John Hubert Marshall, as Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India on 22nd February 1902, initially for five years at the age of only twenty-six. His appointment revived the course of Indian archaeology through systematic conservation, scientific excavation,

¹ John Marshall, ed., *Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization: Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro Carried Out by the Government of India Between the Years 1922 and 1927*, vol. 1. (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1931).

² Archaeological Survey of India, *Annual Report, 1905-06* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1909).

³ Sudeshna Guha, ed., *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 232.

⁴ David Gilmour, *Curzon: Imperial Statesman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

Swami Vivekananda, *Chicago Addresses* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, n.d.), 18.

publications and institutional reforms. When Marshall arrived in India, he knew very little about India's heritage, but with the support of Lord Curzon, the Archaeological Department expanded greatly.

Indian Archaeology before Marshall

One should first understand the preconceptions of Indian history to comprehend the past of India before the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization. Prior to 1924, the interpretation of Indian history was based on the Vedas, epics, and the Puranas. The Sanskrit-speaking areas were referred to as "Aryavarta," and the culture of India was often presented as a purely Aryan and Vedic culture. Even in 1893, Swami Vivekananda gave his speech regarding the Vedas in America.[5] He didn't know that a great civilization existed before this.

In 1827, a soldier of the British East India Company, named James Lewis, deserted the army and took the name Charles Masson, and travelled to the Indian subcontinent.[6] In 1829, he visited the Punjab region and saw the remains of ancient cities such as Harappa. He didn't know what they were, but properly recorded them through notes and drawings. He wrote Narratives of his various Journeys to

Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Punjab in 1842, which was the first published account about the Indus Civilization.

The construction of the railway line between Lahore and Multan in 1857 experienced huge amounts of old bricks being carted away for railway construction.[7] This action caused extensive damage to the archaeological remains and destroyed the Indus sites.

Another great achievement in Indian history was through James Prinsep, who deciphered the Brahmi script used in the Ashokan inscriptions.[8] This paved the way for a new understanding of the ancient history of India, Buddhism, and Jainism. In the southern region of India, especially in Tamil Nadu, Eugen Julius Theodor Hultzsch promoted the study of inscriptions. He recognized and studied the Pallava inscriptions at Mahabalipuram and the Brihadeeswarar Temple at Thanjavur as great historical works.

In 1858, the British Crown took over the rule of India, and the Archaeological Survey of India was officially founded in 1861 by Charles Canning, the Governor-General of India. Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General, was influenced by James Prinsep and showed interest in Buddhism. He was the first archaeologist to mark the

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, *Chicago Addresses* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, n.d.), 18.

⁶ K. Meyer and S. Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia* (London: Little, Brown, 2001), 73.

⁷ Nayanjot Lahiri, *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 22–23.

⁸ V. N. Prabhakar, "Tracing the History of Indian Archaeology and Its Pioneers," in *Principles and Methods of Archaeology*, e-PG Pathshala, accessed June 1, 2026, <https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/icp07/chapter/tracing-the-history-of-indian-archaeology-and-its-pioneers/>.

Indus sites on the world archaeological map, and his excavations at Harappa in 1853, 1856 and 1872–73 laid the foundation for the future excavations. He recorded the damage carried out by railway contractors and also found the first Indus seal, a bull on which there were six symbols. But he was unable to read the script and believed it to be something foreign to India.

Following Cunningham as Director-General, James Burgess assumed the office between 1886 and 1889.[9] Until 1902, the position remained vacant, and historian Sourindranath Roy described the time as a “dark age” in Indian archaeology. This situation changed when Lord Curzon made great reforms.

After becoming the Viceroy, Curzon suggested the reorganization of archaeology in India. In 1900, he suggested that India needed to be divided into regional archaeological circles and created a centralized administration under a strong Director-General to be appointed. In 1901, these reforms were approved.

Although Vincent Arthur Smith had applied for the position of Director-General, Curzon wished to have a younger archaeologist who had field experience. Curzon’s choice was John Marshall, and in 1902 he appointed him as the Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India. Historian

Nayanjot Lahiri attributes that the British Museum played a key role in Marshall’s appointment and calls Marshall ‘Indiana Jones’.[10] As Marshall was chosen for his archaeological research in Greece and Crete, Curzon believed Marshall would introduce scientific methods in archaeological research for India. Curzon was right. The evolution of Indian history and archaeology was colourful.

In the late 19th century, archaeologists in India themselves realized that the methods of excavating sites adopted by pioneers like Alexander Cunningham were not sophisticated and advanced. As archaeology developed in Europe and the Mediterranean, it became more systematic, and many scholars felt that similar improvements were necessary in India.

In 1902, Sir John Hubert Marshall took over as Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India and was expected to modernize Indian archaeology. Marshall brought his experience of excavating in Crete and was acquainted with more modern Western archaeological methods. His appointment was a result of the rise of the conviction that Indian archaeology was in need of more scientific excavation methods, systematic documentation, and stronger conservation policies.

⁹ Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., *Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 11.

¹⁰ Nayanjot Lahiri, *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

Marshall Administration and Reorganization of the Archaeological Survey of India

Lord Curzon was the intellect who structured Marshall's administration and reorganized the Survey between 1898 and 1906 in the Archaeological Survey of India. The Survey was divided into various regional circles to bring efficient control over provincial archaeological departments under a central system. Archaeologists such as Theodore Bloch, Henry Cousens, J. Ph. Vogel, Taw Sein Kho and Alexander Rea became superintending officers.[11] Additional regions including princely states were added to the Survey's responsibilities.

Between 1902 and 1904, Marshall expanded the Survey's administration. The Punjab Circle was enlarged, new officers were recruited, and separate responsibilities were created for Hindu-Buddhist monuments and Islamic monuments, especially Mughal forts such as Delhi and Lahore. The survey included trained architects such as E. Shepherd, R. Froude-Tucker, W.H. Nicholls, A.H. Longhurst, G. Sanderson, and J.A. Page. Marshall desired to encourage Indian participation in archaeology. The first Indian officer appointed at the officer level in 1904 was Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar and later rose to Assistant Superintendent.

The Montagu–Chelmsford reforms of 1920 made archaeology a central

government subject, meaning the Government of India became fully responsible for the Survey's expenses and salaries. Protection and funding were given mainly to monuments officially declared under government care.

In 1918, the temporary post of Assistant Director General was created and held by David Brainard Spooner. In 1921, several new posts were added, including an Assistant Superintendent of Epigraphy with increased salaries, and 60% of service posts were reserved for Indians. However, financial reductions imposed by the Inchcape Committee in 1923 greatly reduced the Survey's budget.

In 1926, the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization brought major changes. A temporary Deputy Director General post was created for Ernest Mackay, and additional staff was appointed for excavations at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The government provided large additional funds for excavations between 1926 and 1928.

Marshall's contribution in archaeological policy, conservation and training

Marshall, in his ASI Annual Report (1902-03), pointed out that Archaeology is focused on two major objectives – research and conservation.[12] He stressed the importance of the

¹¹ Nayanjot Lahiri, *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 69.

¹² Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., *Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 12.

preservation of ancient remains that represented a part of the heritage of world civilization. His vision resulted in the formation of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904, which gave the government the authority to protect monuments, to ban the export of antiquities, to preserve archaeological sites and to regularize digs.

Marshall helped to draft the Ancient Monuments Act of 1904, inspired by Britain's Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882.[13] The law had been granted to the Government of India to look after and repair the monuments, to regulate the trade in antiquities and to stop misjudicious excavations. It enabled the government to control privately owned monuments, to buy abandoned buildings, to control the export and movement of antiquities, and to create site museums.

In 1907, the Treasure Trove Act was amended to enhance the documentation, recording and preservation of the coin discoveries.[14] The amendment stimulated the proper documentation of coin discoveries, encouraged local numismatic studies and enabled collectors to acquire coins not needed by state museums.

Marshall then formalized the concepts of conservation in his important

publication in the Conservation Manual (1923),[15] which emphasized preservation over reconstruction. He had insisted that archaeological officers should be multidisciplinary experts and have knowledge of architecture, sculpture, epigraphy, excavation, numismatics, photography, drawing, and art history. During his tenure, he recruited and trained many important archaeologists such as Daya Ram Sahni, who became the first Director-General of the ASI[16] (Independent India), and Ghulam Yazdani, who worked in the Deccan and Ajanta region.

In 1903, Marshall began to offer scholarships to Indian scholars in Sanskrit and Arabic/Persian to develop their knowledge of archaeology. Students were practically trained in architecture, sculpture, epigraphy, excavations, numismatics, photography, and drawing from various regional circles in India. Daya Ram Sahni and Ghulam Yazdani were the first scholars to be trained under Marshall. Sahni became the first Indian Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, and Yazdani later took on the role of heading the Department of Archaeology in Hyderabad. Later, during 1910-1915, scholarships were expanded for Sanskrit, architecture, archaeological chemistry and Burmese archaeology. Scholars

¹³ Nayanjot Lahiri, *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

¹⁴ Sudeshna Guha, ed., *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 241.

¹⁵ John Marshall, *Conservation Manual* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1923).

¹⁶ Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., *Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 13.

such as Kashi Nath Dikshit were trained under these schemes. These training programmes and schemes encouraged Indian's involvement in archaeology and increased their participation.

Marshall promoted and expanded archaeological collections extensively through museums, libraries and photography. He felt that site museums played an important role, as it was important for the artefacts to remain near the places where they were discovered. Important site museums were opened at Sarnath, Agra, Nalanda, Sanchi, Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Taxila during his tenure. In addition, there were a few other archaeological museums set up in Peshawar, Delhi, Bombay, Lahore, Dacca and Poona.

Marshall started to establish a big reference library dedicated to the Survey, and this was later established as the Central Archaeological Library in Simla in 1902.[17] He also established an extensive archive for the photography collection in 1904, which contained thousands of photographs of archaeological objects, including the photographs of the Sanchi sculptures and Gandhara art.

Marshall actively promoted the publication of archaeological work, primarily in the annual reports of the ASI, memoirs, excavation reports,

and research monographs. He felt that discoveries should be published immediately so that scholars around the world can work and elucidate the history of India. Marshall reorganized Indian archaeology, renovated monuments, instituted museums, supervised excavations, and implemented modern systems of conservation and heritage management under the encouragement of Lord Curzon. His projects of restoring the ruins of Sanchi[18] and excavations in Taxila[19] were landmark achievements. He was also a significant contributor to the conservation of the Mughal monuments and gardens. Historian Dilip Chakrabarti has subsequently noticed that many protected monuments, museums and archaeological foundations in India were created and shaped during Marshall's tenure.

Marshall authored several archaeological and conservation works, such as Indian Archaeological Policy (1915), A Guide to Sanchi (1918), A Guide to Taxila (1918), Conservation Manual (1923), Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization (1931), and Taxila (1951).[20] These writings were the foundations of modern Indian archaeology for research scholars, intellectuals, and institutions.

John Marshall's role in the Transformation of Archaeology in India

¹⁷ Archaeological Survey of India, "Central Archaeological Library," accessed June 1, 2026, <https://asi.nic.in/pages/Central-Archaeological-Library/HQ>.

¹⁸ John Marshall, *Monuments of Sanchi*, 3 vols. (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1940).

¹⁹ John Marshall, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila*, 3 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1975).

²⁰ Sudeshna Guha, ed., *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 236-237.

During Marshall's directorship (1902-1928), the field of archaeology experienced a significant transformation in South Asia. Marshall strongly believed in systematic excavation, preservation, and conservation of archaeological remains in their in-situ positions. While previous excavators tended to remove monuments or sculptures, Marshall was keen to preserve ancient sites in their historical landscapes. He worked at significant locations like Taxila, Sanchi, Mohenjo-daro, Sarnath, Rajgir, and Nalanda for long durations. Marshall's supervision of the excavation techniques was less intensive compared to the later archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler, due to his involvement in various projects at the same time.

Marshall and Cunningham

The Archaeological tradition which Marshall inherited in 1902 was already influenced by Alexander Cunningham. Cunningham's techniques were very scientific at the time and depended upon monuments, inscriptions, and the travel accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims like Faxian and Xuanzang to identify the ancient Buddhist archaeological sites. Marshall did criticize Cunningham on a few points, but overall, he kept to the same approach. This gave both Cunningham and Marshall a significant impact on the research of the Buddhist history and sacred geography of South Asia.

Cunningham also had a profound impact on Marshall's work at Taxila. Both archaeologists were interested in working at Taxila as it was reported in Greek historical texts and in the accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims. Marshall first saw Taxila as a Buddhist terrain of stupas, monasteries and temples. Like Cunningham, he attempted to connect monuments across the region into a unified sacred geography. However, Marshall shifted more attention toward the Greek and Hellenistic influence at Taxila.[21] One reason for this change was that the Chinese accounts of Taxila were too brief to identify many monuments clearly. This encouraged Marshall to explore the site's connections with Indo-Greek history and urban development rather than interpreting everything solely through Buddhism.

Marshall's work at Rajgir demonstrates both his disagreements with Cunningham and his dependence on Cunningham's broader methods. In his book *Rajgrha and Its Remains* (1909),[22] Marshall criticized Cunningham's interpretations of the site. He argued that Cunningham's map of the outer fortification wall was inaccurate and disagreed with several identifications of Buddhist locations. For example, Marshall believed that Chathagiri, not Sailagiri, was the sacred hill associated with the Buddha, and he rejected Cunningham's identification

²¹ John Marshall, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila*, 3 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1975).

²² John Marshall, "Rajagrha and Its Remains," in *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1905-06* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1909)

of the Saptaparni cave. To support his arguments, Marshall ordered a detailed survey by John Wilson in 1904. This survey showed that Cunningham had underestimated the size of Rajgir's fortifications.

Cunningham and Marshall largely ignored evidence related to ordinary secular life. Residential settlements and deeper habitation layers often received less attention than religious monuments. Their interpretations gave dominant religious meanings to archaeological landscapes, and these ideas later became widely accepted through guidebooks, museum displays, tourism, and official signboards.

Excavations Undertaken during John Marshall's Directorship of the ASI (1902–1928)

In 1903, Marshall conducted his first excavation at Charsada from February to April. The excavation was conducted by Jean Philippe Vogel with the involvement of Marshall.

Significant excavations were carried out during this period, including sites such as Ahar, excavated by Madho Sarup Vats in 1925-26; Amaravati by Alexander Rea in 1905-06 and 1908-09; Avantipur by Daya Ram Sahni in 1913-14 and Besnagar by Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar in 1913-15.

Marshall was personally engaged in the excavations at Bhita (1911-12),[23]

Mandor (1908-09) with the help of Daya Ram Sahni, Saheth Maheth (1910-11) and, most importantly, at Sanchi (1912-19). His most significant archaeological work, however, was at Taxila, where he excavated between 1913-17, and again from 1919-34.[24] Other important excavations were conducted by Daya Ram Sahni (1922-24) at Bilsar, Henry Cousens at Brahmanabad and Mirpur Khas in 1908-09. This was later explored by Kashi Nath Dikshit in 1919-20 and by Manoranjan Ghosh in 1926-27.

Marshall's work was focused significantly on Buddhist sites and ancient urban settlements. The excavations at Nalanda were carried out in several stages from 1916 to 1930, under the leadership of John Marshall, J.A. Page, Kashi Nath Dikshit, and Hamid Kuraishi. In 1905-06, Daya Ram Sahni and Theodore Bloch excavated Rajgir under Marshall's supervision. Excavations at Sarnath continued for several years, supervised by Frederick Oscar Oertel, John Marshall, Sten Konow, Harold Hargreaves, Daya Ram Sahni and Ramaprasad Chandra.

In South India, Alexander Rea worked at Ramatirtham in 1910–11 and Tinnevely district during 1902–03. In 1924-25, A. H. Longhurst cleared vegetation and debris around the stone chariots at Mahabalipuram and later excavated Salihundam and

²³ Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., *Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 78.

²⁴ John Marshall, *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila*, 3 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1975).

Nagarjunakonda. In 1928–29, Kashi Nath Dikshit excavated Mahasthan to scientifically uncover the ancient ruins.[25]

Excavations and explorations have been carried out by archaeologists like Taw Sein Ko and Charles Duroiselle at Pagan, Sagaing, Hmawza and Bhamo in Burma. Nani Gopal Majumdar excavated Jhukar in Sind, and explored numerous sites associated with the Indus Civilization in 1929-30.

Marshall and Mortimer Wheeler

Marshall was criticized for his excavation methods. Wheeler contended that Marshall rarely produced detailed manuals or didactic memoranda explaining excavation techniques, and the photographs from his excavations rarely showed the actual processes of digging, clearing, or recording stratigraphic layers. However, Marshall's later excavations, especially during the 1920s, were more systematic. At Mohenjo-daro, he used photographs to defend the quality of his excavation work.

The excavations and conservation projects carried out during John Marshall's directorship established archaeology as a professional discipline and transformed archaeology in South Asia. Under Marshall's leadership, the Archaeological Survey of India expanded excavations across British India and

neighbouring regions, introduced more systematic methods of excavation and preservation, and documented major Buddhist, early historic, and prehistoric sites.

Discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization

One of the greatest achievements of Marshall's period was the discovery and recognition of the Indus Valley Civilization. The excavations from Harappa and Mohenjodaro expressed similar findings and antiquities with planned cities, drainage systems, craft production, and long-distance trade. The sites of the Indus Civilization revealed the existence of a highly advanced Bronze Age urban civilization. After these discoveries, Marshall increasingly focused attention on Sind and Baluchistan in search of related prehistoric settlements connected with the Indus Civilization.

Unquestionably, the most significant turning point of Marshall's career was the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization. Under the supervision of Marshall, Daya Ram Sahni excavated Harappa, and Rakhal Das Banerji excavated Mohenjodaro.[26] Seals, weights, inscriptions, uniform bricks, and urban remains were discovered from both archaeological sites. Though the two sites were separated by almost 700 kilometers, both revealed surprising

²⁵ Sudeshna Guha, ed., *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 253-254.

²⁶ Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., *Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India* (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 13.

similarities. Marshall noted these similarities were not isolated settlements, but rather a vast, urbanized Bronze Age civilization sharing a common cultural system.

He closely studied artifacts such as the famous humped bull seals and the standardized Indus dice, observing their craftsmanship and cultural significance. Marshall famously described the Indus discovery as the “first light on a long-forgotten civilization.” His work shifted the origin of Indian civilization much earlier than previously believed and laid groundwork for archaeology to reconstruct the history of the Indian subcontinent, instead of mythology alone.

Announcement of the Discovery of Indus Civilization

One of Marshall’s greatest achievements was the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization through his supervision in the excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro between 1921 and 1923.[27] These discoveries revealed a highly advanced urban civilization much older than previously known Indian history. Marshall announced that the discovery was the greatest in India’s history.

It gave tremendous pride to the Indians to find such an ancient and advanced civilization in India, dating back to the third or fourth millennium B.C.E. The excavations received praise

in newspapers like Amrita Bazar Patrika, and the government was encouraged to fund the excavations. Marshall himself confessed that the finds had given great delight to the Indian national sentiment.

At the same time, Marshall wanted international recognition for the discoveries. Instead of publishing first in Indian newspapers, he released the findings through The Illustrated London News. On 20th September 1924, Marshall made a public announcement to the world that India had a civilization that was nearly 5,000 years older than the Vedic period, and possibly spoke a Dravidian language.[28] He defined the people of the Indus civilization as urban, literate, technologically advanced, and culturally refined. This statement had a revolutionary impact on Indian historiography, which hitherto focused on Vedic and Aryan traditions to explain the past of India.

This decision caused controversy in India. In 1925, Khan Bahadur Ebrahim Haroon Jaffer questioned Marshall in the Council of States about why Indian newspapers were denied access to photographs that were first published abroad. Marshall defended himself by saying he wanted international archaeologists to study the discoveries and help determine their age and connections with other ancient civilizations. He also claimed he was following government publication rules.

²⁷ Nayanjot Lahiri, *Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 311-320.

²⁸ John Marshall, “First Light on a Long-Forgotten Civilization: New Discoveries of an Unknown Prehistoric Past in India,” *Illustrated London News*, September 20, 1924.

This publication of photographs in The Illustrated London News - "First Light on a Long-Forgotten Civilization: New Discoveries of an Unknown Prehistoric Past in India" quickly attracted global attention. The Indus seals and artifacts exhibited in the photographs were compared to artifacts found in Mesopotamia and Susa by scholars like Archibald Sayce, Cyril Gadd and Sydney Smith. By comparing the photographs, they came up with the hypothesis that the Indus civilization had cultural relations with West Asia around 3000-2800 BCE.

Parallels of Indus Civilization with Tamil Nadu

In 1935, the Archaeologist, K.N. Dikshit visited the University of Madras and gave a lecture in which he stated that places like Tirunelveli, Madurai, Adichanallur, and the Tamiraparani river basin must have extensive archaeological exploration.[29] Analyzing the shell bangles and artifacts from Adichanallur with the findings from Kutch, he proposed that southern India could reveal a contemporary culture or slightly later than the Indus Civilization.

But such archaeological efforts languished for decades, and it was not until many years later that excavations began seriously at sites like Keezhadi. There were no serious studies carried out to identify whether there are any similarities between the metal alloys of

Adichanallur and the bronze technology of the Indus Civilization. The excavation reports of Keezhadi, including the 2004 report from Adichanallur, were delayed for years, and early claims that there was nothing left to excavate at Keezhadi were retracted by significant finds made by ongoing excavations by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology.[30]

The cultural life of the Indus Civilization should have existed in the tradition of Tamils and in the Sangam literature. The Indus script still remains undeciphered, and researchers reconstructed the civilization's past through the archaeological material remains like pottery, bricks, figurines, seals, toys, drainage systems, and urban structures. There were many female figurines identified in the Indus civilization, indicating Mother-goddess worship, and the presence of dice and toys shows entertainment was also an important part of the life of Indus people.

The similarities and cultural continuity of Indus civilization and Tamil culture are expressed in various forms. A seal showing a man attempting to tame a buffalo is mentioned in Sangam literature, and modern Tamil practices such as Jallikattu are celebrated during Pongal in places like Alanganallur and Palamedu. Cockfighting traditions and other cultural practices are also presented as examples of cultural continuity. The famous bronze figurine

²⁹ R. Balakrishnan, Journey of a Civilization: Indus to Vaigai (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2019), 125.

³⁰ R. Balakrishnan, interview by T. S. Subramanian, "Keezhadi Excavation Report Controversy: R. Balakrishnan on Archaeology, Politics and Tamil History," Frontline, June 2025, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/heritage/keezhadi-excavation-report-controversy-balakrishnan-interview/article69612031.ece>

known as the “Dancing Girl” from Mohenjodaro is compared with Sangam literary descriptions of dark-skinned young women wearing many bangles. Such comparisons are presented as evidence of deeper cultural continuities between the Indus world and Tamil traditions.

Marshall was also one of the earliest scholars to propose possible links between the Indus Civilization and Dravidian culture. This Dravidian hypothesis was immediately acknowledged by researchers like Suniti Kumar Chatterji, and followed by Henry Heras, Asko Parpola, Iravatham Mahadevan and R. Balakrishnan. Marshall identified many non-Vedic cultural traits in the Indus world, including mother-goddess worship, elaborate ornamentation, bangles, humped bulls, dice games, and urban civic organization.

C. N. Annadurai in his book *Arya Maayai* (1948)[31] stated that for a long time people wrongly believed Aryans alone brought civilization to India. He argued that Marshall’s studies helped reveal the richness of Dravidian civilization and exposed the damage caused by Aryan domination over ancient Tamil culture. According to Annadurai, Marshall’s research helped remove Western ignorance and prejudice about Dravidian civilization. This is one reason why Tamil society values and celebrates John Marshall today.

India is a pluralistic civilization

shaped by diversity. Tribal communities, agriculturalists, fishermen, hunters, and desert dwellers are described as forming the roots of Indian civilization. Cultural practices among tribal communities in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand—such as buffalo-horn dances and lost-wax bronze casting—are compared with Indus seals and the “Dancing Girl” figurine. The Indus Civilization itself is described as a pluralistic civilization with shared systems but multiple languages, customs, occupations, and ecological traditions.[32]

Why do we celebrate John Marshall?

The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization is deeply connected and rooted in the ancient socio-cultural history of South Asia, especially in South India. Many cultural traditions associated with the civilization continue to survive among different communities across the region. At a time when Indian history was mainly explained through the Vedas, epics, and Puranas, Sir John Hubert Marshall argued that the Indian subcontinent possessed an even older urban, scientific, trade-oriented, and people-centered civilization.

Marshall contended that an advanced civilization existed in the Indian subcontinent prior to the Aryan culture and suggested that the language of the Indus Civilization may have been Dravidian. This was not acceptable to people who believed that history and knowledge of the Indians were

³¹ C. N. Annadurai, *Āriya Māyai* (Tiruchirappalli: Dravidapannai, 1981).

³² R. Balakrishnan, *Journey of a Civilization: Indus to Vaigai* (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2019), 481.

only traced from the Vedas, Puranas, and epics. Due to this disagreement, Marshall was not praised and celebrated by many traditional historians.

During the 2025 Pongal, people celebrated “Marshall Pongal”; just as many Tamils celebrate “Pennycuick Pongal” in honour of John Pennycuick, people across Tamil Nadu celebrated “Marshall Pongal” to honour John Marshall’s contributions to understanding ancient Dravidian civilization. In the celebration, people made kolam and maa kolam with Indus symbols like humped bulls, dancing women, seated leaders, and Indus and Keezhadi symbols. These celebrations continued the Tamil society’s link with its cultural heritage and history.

Centenary celebration: Discovery of the Indus Civilization

The Indus Research Centre of the Roja Muthiah Research Library, in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, organized an international conference from 5–7 January 2025 at the Government Museum Auditorium in Egmore, Chennai, to commemorate one hundred years since the announcement of the discovery of the Indus Civilization by John Marshall.[33]

During the inaugural ceremony of the international conference on 5 January 2025, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Thiru M. K. Stalin, laid the foundation

stone for the statue of John Marshall at the campus of the Government Museum, Chennai.[34] The installation of the Marshall statue on 19 March 2025 reflects the interest of the Tamil Nadu government in the field of archaeology and ancient history of Tamil Nadu.

The discovery of the Indus Civilization’s centenary was widely celebrated in 2024 and 2025. Conferences, seminars, and public programmes were organized in Tamil Nadu and around the globe. This occasion was celebrated by universities, colleges, political movements, organizations and individuals. A major role was played by the Indus Research Centre of the Roja Muthiah Research Library.

The Chief Minister unveiled the book on Indus Signs and Tamil Nadu Graffiti Marks: A Morphological Study during the Conference. In his speech, Stalin revealed that John Marshall’s findings had shifted the opinion that Aryanism and Sanskrit were the only sources of Indian civilization. He stressed the fact that Marshall had pointed out that the Indus Civilization had existed before Aryan culture and that the language of the Indus people could have been Dravidian.

The Chief Minister also unveiled a cash award of one million dollars to anyone who successfully deciphered the Indus script, which was accepted by the archaeological scholars. Additionally, a

³³ R. Balakrishnan and Sundar Ganesan, John Marshallai En Kondadavendum? (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2026).

³⁴ “Stalin to Lay Foundation for Statue of Sir John Marshall,” The Hindu, January 3, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/stalin-to-lay-foundation-for-statue-of-sir-john-marshall/article69057253.ece>.

grant of ₹2 crores was allotted for the research chair in the name of Iravatham Mahadevan at the Indus Research Centre of the Roja Muthiah Research Library. [35]

The conference aimed to deepen the understanding of the Indus Civilization and its research for new discoveries. The conference stimulated further research in Indus Studies and discussions on the similarities between Indus signs and graffiti marks on pottery found in Tamil Nadu.

Since 2018, the Indus Research Centre, Roja Muthiah Research Library has been celebrating 20th September of every year as “Indus Day” to commemorate the announcement of the Indus Civilization to the world in 1924. Various research lectures and events are conducted annually on this day to remember the discovery and also to promote further research on the Indus Civilization.

Final Years and Legacy of Marshall

Marshall retired as the Director General of India on 6th September 1928, but served as Officer on Special Duty until 31st December 1934. This enabled him to concentrate on excavations and publications, particularly at Taxila, Mohenjo Daro, Harappa and Sanchi. He edited and published reports on the major excavations and archaeological reports, revised guidebooks, and

collected material for future projects on monuments in Agra, Delhi, Multan, and Mandu, though some of these were never completed. Marshall left India permanently on 15th March 1934 and later in 1936 became a Fellow of the British Academy. He passed away on 17th August 1958 in Guildford, Surrey, at the age of 82.[36]

In search of Marshall's grave

In 2024, Sundar Ganesan and R. Balakrishnan travelled to England in search of the resting place of Sir John Hubert Marshall.[37] They went to St. Martha's Hill near Guildford, where there was a church and a cemetery with around 300 graves. After searching through the cemetery, they were unable to find Marshall's grave. He was not widely known in the area, but it was known that other Indians had previously searched the area for the grave of John Pennycuik. Later, the Guildford Historical Society informed them by email that Marshall was cremated and not buried.

Sir John Hubert Marshall is considered culturally and politically important. Marshall redirected Indian history toward scientific archaeology and argued that the Indus Civilization predated Vedic culture. The discovery of the Indus Civilization is also a hundred years old, and so is the Dravidian hypothesis associated with the Indus

³⁵ K. Nitika Shivani, “Tamil Nadu's Growing Fascination with the Indus Valley Civilisation,” *The South First*, January 18, 2025, <https://thesouthfirst.com/tamilnadu/tamil-nadus-growing-fascination-with-the-indus-valley-civilisation/>.

³⁶ Sudeshna Guha, ed., *The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 236.

³⁷ R. Balakrishnan and Sundar Ganesan, *John Marshallai En Kondadavendum?* (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2026).

Civilization. Archaeological excavation in Tamil Nadu has led to fresh avenues of learning about the Indus Civilization and awareness of this heritage among the public. Marshall's greatest contribution was recognizing Harappa and Mohenjo-daro as part of a major Bronze Age urban civilization whose significance extends to Indian, Tamil, and Dravidian history.

[1] John Marshall, ed., Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization: Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro Carried Out by the Government of India Between the Years 1922 and 1927, vol. 1. (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1931).

[2] Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1905–06 (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1909).

[3] Sudeshna Guha, ed., The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 232.

[4] David Gilmour, Curzon: Imperial Statesman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

[5] Swami Vivekananda, Chicago Addresses (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, n.d.), 18.

[6] K. Meyer and S. Brysac, Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia (London: Little, Brown, 2001), 73.

[7] Nayanjot Lahiri, Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was

Discovered (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 22–23.

[8] V. N. Prabhakar, "Tracing the History of Indian Archaeology and Its Pioneers," in Principles and Methods of Archaeology, e-PG Pathshala, accessed June 1, 2026, <https://ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in/icp07/chapter/tracing-the-history-of-indian-archaeology-and-its-pioneers/>.

[9] Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 11.

[10] Nayanjot Lahiri, Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

[11] Nayanjot Lahiri, Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 69.

[12] Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 12.

[13] Nayanjot Lahiri, Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

[14] Sudeshna Guha, ed., The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 241.

[15] John Marshall, Conservation Manual (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1923).

[16] Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 13.

[17] Archaeological Survey of India, "Central Archaeological Library," accessed June 1, 2026, <https://asi.nic.in/pages/Central-Archaeological-Library/HQ>.

[18] John Marshall, Monuments of Sanchi, 3 vols. (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1940).

[19] John Marshall, Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila, 3 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1975).

[20] Sudeshna Guha, ed., The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 236-237.

[21] John Marshall, Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila, 3 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1975).

[22] John Marshall, "Rajagrha and Its Remains," in Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1905-06 (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1909)

[23] Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 78.

[24] John Marshall, Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried Out at Taxila, 3 vols. (Varanasi: Bhartiya Publishing House, 1975).

[25] Sudeshna Guha, ed., The Marshall Albums: Photography and Archaeology (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing, 2010), 253-254.

[26] Gautam Sengupta and Abha Narain Lambah, eds., Custodians of the Past: 150 Years of the Archaeological Survey of India (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 2012), 13.

[27] Nayanjot Lahiri, Finding Forgotten Cities: How the Indus Civilization Was Discovered (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 311-320.

[28] John Marshall, "First Light on a Long-Forgotten Civilization: New Discoveries of an Unknown Prehistoric Past in India," Illustrated London News, September 20, 1924.

[29] R. Balakrishnan, Journey of a Civilization: Indus to Vaigai (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2019), 125.

[30] R. Balakrishnan, interview by T. S. Subramanian, "Keezhadi Excavation

Report Controversy: R. Balakrishnan on Archaeology, Politics and Tamil History,” Frontline, June 2025, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/heritage/keezhadi-excavation-report-controversy-balakrishnan-interview/article69612031.ece>.

[31] C. N. Annadurai, Āriya Māyai (Tiruchirappalli: Dravidapannai, 1981).

[32] R. Balakrishnan, Journey of a Civilization: Indus to Vaigai (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2019), 481.

[33] R. Balakrishnan and Sundar Ganesan, John Marshallai En Kondadavendum? (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2026).

[34] “Stalin to Lay Foundation for Statue of Sir John Marshall,” The Hindu, January 3, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/stalin-to-lay-foundation-for-statue-of-sir-john-marshall/article69057253.ece>.

[35] K. Nitika Shivani, “Tamil Nadu’s Growing Fascination with the Indus Valley Civilisation,” The South First, January 18, 2025, <https://thesouthfirst.com/tamilnadu/tamil-nadus-growing-fascination-with-the-indus-valley-civilisation/>.

[36] Sudeshna Guha, ed., The

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[37] R. Balakrishnan and Sundar Ganesan, John Marshallai En Kondadavendum? (Chennai: Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2026).

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Sundar Ganesan is an archivist, curator, and researcher. He is one of the founders of the RMRL Trust. He established the Indus Research Centre following the advice of Thiru. Iravatham Mahadevan in 2007. The centre is now headed by Mr. R. Balakrishnan. Sundar is one of the few people who were trained by Iravatham Mahadevan in the subject. He headed the project of developing the web concordance of IM77. He has co-authored papers with Mahadevan and curated two exhibitions on the Indus Civilization - including the one that was organized for the World Classical Tamil Conference in 2010. He is the author of the book 'The Tall Man: Biju Patnaik co-authored 'Thunderous Run Bountiful Harvest' on Jallikattu. He is currently the Director of the Roja Muthiah Research Library.

