

# History

Both a nuclear power and important cricketing nation, Pakistan has existed as an independent country for little more than 60 years, but has been playing an important role in the historical epic of the Indian subcontinent for millennia. It has been the birthplace of the world's first urban civilisation, home to one of the great flowerings of Buddhism, and cornerstone of the Mughal empire. Born in 1947 as a homeland for Muslims, it has been a frontline state in the Cold War and is currently a key location in the struggle against violent Islamism. Understanding Pakistan's past is essential to understanding its future trajectory.

Visit [www.storyofpakistan.com](http://www.storyofpakistan.com) for timelines and short biographies of many of Pakistan's key political figures.

## EARLY CIVILISATIONS

When the Europeans were dressed in animal skins and the USA was known only to the native Indian tribes, the men and women who lived on the land that is now Pakistan were part of one of the most sophisticated societies on earth. The ancient Egyptians, who lived around the same time, may have been better at building pyramids, but when it came to constructing cities, the Indus people were well ahead.

Nothing was known of the Indus civilisation until the 1920s, when excavations at Harappa and Moenjodaro revealed cities built of brick. Subsequent research has shown that the Indus people flourished around 2500–1500 BC. They had a population of roughly five million and a sophisticated bureaucracy with standardised systems for weights and brick sizes. While the evidence is sketchy, many scholars believe that a priestly elite governed the Indus people.

The Indus civilisation probably declined due to the drying of the Indus Valley. There followed centuries of economic decline and foreign conquest. The first to arrive were the Aryans, whose Vedic religion laid the basis for Hinduism as it is practised today. They were followed by Alexander the Great. When you travel in northern Pakistan and, in particular, places such as the Kalasha valleys, you may notice people with relatively pale skin, fair hair and blue eyes. According to popular theory these are the descendants of Alexander the Great's troops.

After Alexander, a series of imperial powers flexed their muscles in South Asia. The Mauryas were notable for controlling virtually all the subcontinent and promoting Buddhism. Taxila, one of Pakistan's best-preserved Buddhist sites, was founded by the Mauryans as a university. The Kushans followed close on the Mauryans' heels, entering from Afghanistan. They took the Greek culture left behind by Alexander's descendants and fused it with the art of India to produce their sublime Gandharan art. For the first three

There is an excellent introduction to the Indus civilisation on [www.harappa.com](http://www.harappa.com). Among other things, the site has articles on the latest attempts by scholars to decode the Indus script.

## TIMELINE

### 5000 BC

Earliest evidence of village life in Pakistan, in Mehrgarh in Balochistan – one of the world's most important Neolithic sites. Its inhabitants had domesticated crops and livestock, simple pottery and mudbrick houses.

### 2500–1500 BC

The Indus Valley civilisation thrives in Moenjodaro and Harappa, founding the subcontinent's first urban cultures, with a sophisticated social structure, agriculture, trading networks and writing system (yet to be fully deciphered).

### 563–486 BC

The life of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), the founder of Buddhism. Born to royalty in what is now modern Nepal, he gave up privilege to live a life of asceticism and meditation, receiving enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya (India).

centuries AD, the Kushans held sway from Taxila to Kabul and left behind a host of ruins, particularly in the Peshawar and Swat Valleys.

In AD 711 an Arab general, Mohammed bin Qasim, arrived in Sindh. He and his 6000 cavalymen were to have a major impact because they brought with them the religion of Islam. After the Arabs had made inroads from the south, in the 11th century the Turkish rulers of Afghanistan, led by Mahmud of Ghazni, brought the same message of Islam from the north. Muslims were then established as the ruling class, although it was not until the arrival of the Mughal dynasty that there was a truly formidable Islamic government able to leave a lasting architectural and cultural impression.

## THE MUGHALS

The Mughals were the undisputed masters of the subcontinent through the 16th and 17th centuries. Their empire was one of only three periods in history during which the subcontinent has come under sustained, unified rule. (The others to pull off this feat were the Mauryas and the British.) The first Mughal emperor, Babur, used the traditional route to invade: from Central Asia. Having taken Kabul he conquered Delhi in 1526. The dynasty he founded endured for more than three centuries. The other great Mughal emperors included Akbar (1556–1605), Shah Jahan (1627–58) and Aurangzeb (1658–1707). Because they were Muslims, the Mughals remain a source of great pride in Pakistan. Under Akbar and his son Jehangir, Lahore was the capital of the empire, and remains home to some of the Mughals' greatest architectural legacies, including the Badshahi Mosque, the Lahore Fort and Jehangir's Tomb. All combine the Mughals' skill for working on a grand scale and their great use of arches, domes, carvings and towers.

While the Mughals are today most often celebrated for their artistic legacy, they were also excellent administrators who managed to concentrate power in the central government. Their sophisticated bureaucratic systems became particularly highly developed under Akbar. He appointed officials on the basis of merit rather than family rank. He also prevented the establishment of rival power bases by paying loyal officials in cash rather than land. While many of the Mughal rulers were hostile to their Hindu subjects, Akbar took a different view. He saw that the number of Hindus in India was too great to subjugate. Instead, he integrated them into his empire and allowed Hindus to reach senior positions in the government and the military.

Like imperial powers before and after them, the Mughals became overstretched. By the time of Aurangzeb's death, their empire had become so big it was largely ungovernable. Slowly but steadily the Mughals' power ebbed away. Their administrative systems were weakened by debilitating and very violent succession struggles and by the decadence of court life. Local power-brokers in the provinces seized their opportunity and, complaining of Muslim domination and too many taxes, mounted a series of armed rebellions. Faced

Only one-third of Moenjodaro's old city has been excavated. Exposure of the site to the elements has led to its severe deterioration.

Urdu was the court language of the Mughals. Although the national language, it's the mother tongue of less than 10% of the population. Pakistan's courts work in English.

### 327–325 BC

Alexander the Great invades, marching over the Hindukush towards the Indus on his way to conquer India. Returning home, his army is almost wiped out in the desolation of Balochistan's Makran Desert.

### 273–232 BC

Ashoka founds the Mauryan empire that stretches from Bengal to the borders of Persia. Filled with remorse for the violence that won the empire, he embraces Buddhism, dedicating himself to its propagation across his realm.

### AD 100–500

Flourishing of Gandhara, the Buddhist kingdom born from the ruins of the Mauryan empire. Under King Kanishka's rule (128–51) Gandharan culture undergoes its golden age, trading with Rome and China from its capital in Peshawar.