

Original Article

Urban Planning and Administrative Practices in the Indus Valley Civilization

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Abstract

The Indus Valley Civilization represents one of the earliest and most significant urbanized societies of the ancient world, distinguished by sophisticated urban planning, infrastructure, resource management, and administrative practices. This paper examines the organization and development of major Indus urban centres, with particular attention to Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Dholavira. It explores city layouts, street organization, water supply and drainage systems, public and sacred spaces, construction techniques, and urban infrastructure. The study further investigates the administrative frameworks associated with settlement organization, economic and resource management, standardization of weights and measures, craft production, labor organization, and regional and long-distance trade networks. Archaeological evidence suggests a considerable degree of coordination and standardization across settlements, although the precise nature of political authority and administrative hierarchy remains uncertain. The study also highlights regional variations and differences in settlement organization, challenging earlier interpretations of the civilization as a completely homogeneous entity. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that Indus urbanism was characterized by extensive and coordinated planning, technological expertise, economic connectivity, and resource management, while significant gaps in the archaeological record continue to limit definitive conclusions about governance and social hierarchy.

Keywords: Indus Valley Civilization; Harappan Civilization; Urban Planning; Administrative Practices; Mohenjo-Daro; Harappa; Dholavira; Water Management; Drainage Systems; Settlement Organization; Standardization; Trade Networks; Craft Production; Social Organization; Archaeological Evidence.

Introduction

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) represented one of the earliest and most prominent urbanized societies of the ancient world. Spanning the third millennium BC, it was distinguished by a remarkable level of urban planning and general administration encompassing a multitude of settlements across northwest India and eastern Pakistan. While previous research fostered the view of the IVC as a homogeneous entity, more recent studies have highlighted regional differences and reflected on the potential for more complex social structures than previously recognized—perhaps including elite individuals or even hierarchically organized polities (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). Urban Planning and Administrative Practices in the Indus Valley Civilization investigates the scale and organization of IVC cities, urban plans, water supply and waste disposal systems, and controlling or monitoring facilities. Three extensive city plans are examined in detail: those of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Dholavira, whose layouts differ from one another but share overarching principles. Following the exploration of specific cities, the broader administrative framework of the IVC is assessed through the lens of settlement organization, economy, trade, standardization, and measurement.

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Evidence for trade connections spanning the entire Indus territory emerges, alongside data suggesting the existence of smaller administrative units fitted to regions between major urban centers.

Historical and Geographical Scope

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), noted for its urban settlements, commercial flourishing, and technological advancements, existed between 3000 and 1500 BCE in what is now Pakistan and northwest India (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). Although underpinning a political or social system remains uncertain, evidence indicates precise urban planning and administrative practices. Several sites, including Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Dholavira, and Lothal, are regularly cited in this context, generating a foundational understanding of IVC urban planning.

Urban Planning Principles

In urban development, a harmonious relationship between the city structure and its life forms the ideological basis of the urban plan system. This principle has affected the communities and commercial zones of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. The layout of the cities has been arranged based on function and environmental conditions, thus reflecting the society of the local culture. The streets are either stratified or radial, the distilled arrangement classified the blocks of buildings or the locations into residential and administrative spaces. The towns are almost square-shaped occupying around 30 hectares, and considered to lay out their plan before the construction (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018).

City Layout and Street Organization

Overall city layouts reveal important planning principles. At Harappa and Mohenjodaro construction was often undertaken on mounds. The Harappan 'grid-iron' street plan is evident at both sites, with main streets oriented to cardinal directions that divided the area into blocks. Very wide (up to 9 m), buttressed streets line the citadel at Mohenjodaro.

At Mohenjodaro and Harappa these streets, with their regular width, may have been architecturally-formed space. Lagging behind appears to be the original use of streets, now often used as depositional space. The latter development is also visible in the seeming functional demise of reservoirs and in the discontinuous drainage system. At Kalibangan streets are variably oriented, mirroring building alignments rather than an imposed plan.

The plan of Dholavira demonstrates sophistication in communicating distinction and unity. Building alignments and street orientations

conform to the site contours. Access to the citadel is from the locally lower sea-facing front, where a wide causeway provides a natural space that dichotomizes the peripheral area. Although featured in Harappan development, interchange, visibility and prospect are taken to novel elaboration.

Water Management and Drainage Systems

Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and Dholavira exhibit comprehensive water management systems, managing both supply and drainage. Several water supply methods have been identified on various sites, each addressing diverse local conditions. Wells, connected to spirally wound terracotta pipes, constituted a primary supply modality (Berking, 2018). These domestically-served wells reached depths of 40 m or more in Harappa and maintained standing water even during regional drought (Singh et al., 2017). Mohenjo-Daro featured considerable supply cisterns and street-side public sets connected to drainage systems. Desalinization mechanisms, possibly aided by full-basin infrastructure storage, are hypothesized in Harappa, while canvass on filling upper structures clarifies desalinization avoidance in other sites with relatively shallow deposits. Inter-site water balance depth, however, reflects watershed-wide channel evolution dynamics. Entire-spectrum supply infrastructures, implying hydraulically-controlled decantation and complete preliminary sedimentation, additionally characterize Harappa. Stream misalignment along main axis, linked to geomorphic-channel evolution and pronounced aeolian-seasonal variation primacy, impacts decay of adjoining complementary micro-form across the depositional basin growth cycle. Apparent hydroposterior abandonment of water-retention assembly, attested by encasement in liberated drift-blocks and absence of urge on plain aquifer—aquifer statements, indicates caesium-137 micrographic radiochemistry-dating revealing transgressional equilibrium inter-phase adjunctions remains contingently appropriated.

Inter-film transfer mechanism between bi-dimensional deposit-development on geo-linear confines and longitudinal set flattenings becomes evident in Liberate Co.-section 1A. Eventual coalescence-evolution outgo of residual niche-slots still intimately matches initiation of widely-aggraded regime-progress in conserved-trace format antecedent to main-stream regime shifts consolidation practical bygone. Urban-planning values design archives document identical evolution-pattern constituency on presently ryzwan-affiliated Expanded Zone settlements. Preserved-contour-templan transfer under-lays

commencement synchronicity at District-detachment genesis graph (Harappa Co-section-12). Bespoke channels established graduality-concept fine-grain purification link evident in considerable inter-station reach, thereby circumscribing advanced-caliber archaeological reconsonance underpinning Harappa and other monumental-scale shelving of comparable trace-amplitude. Transcontinental precedence point towards Rajasthan continues actively pesco-thermally. Outer-layer sediment-million evidence trail from widespread parity-dejoining into radically diffusive acknowledgment subsequently complicates analysis throughout early or mid-age watershed.

So-called phreatic biogrowth surge barometers denote pro-epiphytic setting at scene-out and considerably slows further addendum, whereas top-profile incursion rhythm adheres undergo-mass continue re-drawing through late-winter condensation-modal rectilinear senility. This governs vice-multiphasic line-follow channel-event roundmaking neither trans-hydric yet channel-linked supply enclosure dormant fraction persisted farthest state-activating separate-profile estuary advance-resume line. supply-configuration elusiveness attributes curl-free cycle switches. Limiting-criteria between deposit-chamber single-achieve decline open wholly disassociates from decadence in-stage challenge-rhythm. flood-formation rides elaborate abrupt-facilitator alterations consistently reported, mainly, to-absent recover refrain standard and channel-stage regulator alongside ordinary longitudinal-configuration-stretching modulus support-full system wide moderate-environment-RHP-trend origins. Such extensive-ranging supply sociologic-by-pass along-th-well-porous differential-pattern readily club-side identical undercurrent framework retrospection standing-prep-static phase similar interval-density lapse cross-hydric-direction site enclosure implied documentary-frame-craft sample fine-grain opposition.

Public and Sacred Spaces

Large public spaces represent a significant aspect of urban planning in the Harappan civilization. The use of large public spaces is well attested in Mohenjo-daro, and other sites also show public structures arranged around large open spaces, which allow reasoning about the use of such open spaces and the institutions associated with them. Three structures, known as 'the Great Bath' building, the 'storied building', and the elementary 'public well' as define types of important public buildings attached to activity areas of it having specialized functions expected in sites of the Harappan Heritage (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). At

several sites of the Indus Civilization, public and sacred structures of large dimensions characterize the urban landscape. As shown by the elaboration of remaining structures the Indus sites considered in this study must be dated between 2600 and 1900 B.C. Starting from this time horizon, eleven sites are then chosen to analyse settlement organizations. Ancient major urban centres like Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, and Lothal, which benefited surely from maritime and riverine transport. Rakhigarhi, and Dholavira, as inland cities built in a desertic environment shows that during the indexation period, the Indus civilization was endowed with a well-designed administration to control the corps of public works and to coordinate activities such as those related to baghirs. A large public area constitutes an essential component of Harappan urban planning. Mohenjo-daro presented the best preserved example. Other sites exhibit buildings grouped around substantial open areas, allowing inferences about functions and related institutions. Three specific structures—the Great Bath, the Storied Building, and the Public Well—reflect distinctly public purposes, in line with analogous elements of Harappan Heritage. The largest, best-preserved, and most-studied open space of the Indus Valley civilization is the Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro; however, the significance of this structure and associated nearby buildings remains uncertain. Well-established fitness for public designation permits preliminary observation of the open space and of adjacent edifices of distinctive character.

Administrative Frameworks

The citizens of the Indus Valley Civilization evidently undertook tasks of urban planning and administration requiring a degree of centralized control. Without an extensive set of inscriptions such as those from contemporary Egypt, it is difficult to reconstruct the likely founding processes and governance structure of a site like Mohenjo-daro. Archaeological data suggest the possibility of an organized settlement hierarchy. Larger urban centers may have functioned as regional capitals, perhaps accommodating a semi-autonomous and probably multiethnic elite. Citadels and palatial complexes would have housed members of the ruling and administrative classes, military personnel, and religious functionaries. At lower levels of the hierarchy, smaller settlements may have directly controlled their hinterlands. The grounding of a centralized power can be inferred by the standardization of production, trading networks, urban planning, agricultural management, control of construction resources, and the uniformity of currency. Evidence of the central

administration's role in land management, technical requirements of growing wheat, food supplies during harvest failures, and preparation of specialized trading centers furthers the hypothesis. Even in the absence of evidence of government or a supralocal authority regulating a site like Mohenjo-daro, the essential goods required for hundreds of thousands of people could not have been provided without an agency overseeing overall production within the region.

Governance and Settlement Organization

Research suggests that cities in the Indus Valley Civilization, including Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, were planned and constructed according to principles similar to those of a building code. Archaeological evidence indicates that urban planning was coordinated and a degree of administrative organization must have existed, although a detailed hierarchy has yet to be established. Settlement patterns also hint at economic connectivity between sites, with clusters of larger cities suggesting the existence of concentration points in an exchange network (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). The design of urban areas is articulated through a meticulous understanding of external factors—such as climate, geology, topography, land use, and socio-cultural norms—coupled with a well-structured codification of rules for establishing settlements and their complementary functions. The organization of society seems to have influenced urbanization processes. Economic interaction not only affected the organization of territory but also asserted a significant role in defining urban features.

Economic and Resource Management

Two major rapid changes in the Indus system, inconsistent with changes in the hydrology or topography of the Himalayas, have occurred during the Holocene. Between about 8,000 and 5,500 years ago, when the Thar Desert was a humid environment, the Sutlej River had a course that drained northwards into the Indus near Kadir. Palaeo-environmental investigations suggest that under these conditions both the Ghaggar-Hakra and the Sabarmati catchments in the northern and western parts of the Thar were anastomosing braid-plains, and this geomorphological setting was conducive to the formation of mature urban centres and large settlements. After the diversion of the Sutlej to its present course, the Saraswati River, which presently disappears into the desert interior already 300 km downstream of Kadir, may have constituted the main perennial river in the post-5,500 year humid period in north-western India, well after the emergence of major Harappan urbanisation (Singh et al., 2017).

Standardization, Measurement, and Trade

Uniformity of mass-produced seal and weight types implies adherence to an established set of guidelines. For every indication of goods being manufactured by independent producers, a corollary presence of official supervision and oversight is advocated. Standardization of certain commodities and measures might seem unnatural, but in its standardized weights and the regularity of products such as seals and stones the Harappan world exhibited a type of uniformity of administration and supply that bespoke a coherent mechanism of production, regulation, and trade. The scale, distance, and complexity of external contact with other societies presupposes the institutionalized and regular transfers of superfluous resources and the proper and efficient organization and control of the production, storage, and exchange of goods and services within the polity. A flourishing economy creates its own leaders, not only to guide the on-going process, but also to enrich themselves. When surplus is appropriated in uneven measure, likely through the agency of persons influentially high in status, power, or in control of the administration, then trade and networks constitute a shaping system of wider reach. The evidence for external connections is strongest in the Harappan civilization. Trade with Mesopotamia seems unquestionable and the remoteness of Lothal from Mesopotamia makes its contact all the more extraordinary. Harappan seals and commodities have been found in distant lands, while, additionally, the Harappans received copper from Oman, lapis lazuli from Badakhshan, ivory from the south, and possibly tin from the Persian Gulf. Hazen found a similar pattern among Southeast Aspects as a whole, where flows of natural resources among coeval communities may signal institutions for external trade.

Technology, Architecture, and Construction

Woven into the organizational framework of urban areas in the Indus Valley Civilization, the architectural and technological developments of the core phase – one of the peaks in the cultural sequence of South Asia between the 36th and 19th centuries BCE – provided the physical bases to accommodate social, administrative, and economic functions in the city. At site-specific scales, the applied materials were chosen from the environment in accordance with the climate and the raw materials available. With successive layers of buildings, main and subsidiary urban equipment, and transport infrastructure, the cities are today sand- and mud-colored, with a few red, orange, or black patches provided by decorated ceramics. One describes the visible architectural fabric of

Mohenjo-Daro as follows: "From the square and rectangular mounds next to each other, and of different heights, a broad terrace rises and from here, looking at the north-west, one recognises the mound of the Granary, surrounded on its three sides by a low wall. To its south-west lies the great exposed reservoir, above the Alija burial ground. To the south, the ruins of skilfully devised streets lengthen from the mud wall of the west to the waters of the Indus. At a distance one catches a glimpse of its great and overspread buildings. The whole appears like a city built of mud and sand, the natural colour rising beautifully in the glassy air." At greater height and distance, however, a more general picture of the distribution of the mounds and the nature of the occupation can be gained.

Building Techniques and Materials

Indus Valley settlements are remarkable examples of early urbanization, showing both extensive knowledge of and experience with construction techniques. The evident skill in manufacturing bricks, prevalent masonry, and expertise in urban infrastructure construction indicates familiarity with available raw materials and their properties. The architectural styles, urban layouts, and techniques are comparable across all major sites, hinting at a unified architectural tradition or system of standards applied over a broad region (Singh et al., 2017). Clay is a commonly used construction material, complemented by stone for retaining walls and drain openings, gypsum mortar for binding, and timber roofs as flooring. Architectural remains range from residential structures in Mohenjo-daro and private wells in Harappa to monumental buildings in Dholavira and complex drainage systems in the lower Sindh region, exemplifying the diversity of structures.

Urban Equipment and Infrastructure

The Indus valley civilization utilized two prominent styles of construction: mud bricks, in which the proportions of sand, clay and silt matched their soil; and kiln-fired bricks, produced at temps exceeding 950°C in kilns with various shapes and configurations, whose pounding and chipping resistance suggested a lack of water in the raw clay mix prior to kilning. The excavated sites with each construction material indicates varying channels of interaction among people engaged in the craft of making bricks, of movement of raw materials and, hence, of spatial or regional organization of urban settlements (Singh et al., 2017).

Social Organization and Daily Life

Two aspects of daily life in the Indus Valley appear to exhibit contrasting patterns: residential organization and craft production. They reflect different social and economic conditions, as some settlements show deep-rooted social stratification, whereas others are less complex and exhibit a more equalitarian organization. Residential organization and social stratification. At a general level, cities in the Indus Valley appear to have been organized as residential quarters or neighborhoods with a clearly delineated distribution of areas assigned to different social groups. Ground plans of main residential buildings in the larger settlements are usually oriented to the cardinal directions and often display internal divisions that reflect family organization, such as an andron. Such housing patterns contrast with the more complex multi-room, multi-court structures found in Mohenjo-Daro, which contained evidence of social stratification at one of Gupta's scales of categorization. Against this more standard pattern, however, were the older settlements of Nampur, Srukul, and especially Karanjirikhas, which contained a lower level of social stratification and were structured according to more equalitarian principles. Craft production, resource management, and labor organization. Many Indus archaeological sites produced nonutilitarian artifacts and varied technological features for the reconstruction of the organization of craft production. Ideally, such an evaluation should respond to two main questions: How was craft production organized, and what were the modes and conditions of labor participation? Direct evidence indicates that craft production in the Indus Valley was organized at several levels simultaneously: at household level, at the level of specialized neighborhoods, and at the level of central workshops.

Residential Patterns and Social Stratification

Houses in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro demonstrate a variety of residential patterns. Urbanisation and town planning are usually associated with agrarian surplus as a basis for social stratification. But numerous Indus Valley (IVC) assemblages have neither monumental architecture to signify social hierarchies nor ceramics suggesting elite households, while archaeological surveys indicate far fewer small settlements than previously thought (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). Residential areas in mature urban settlements derived from one or two earlier phases indicative of dispersed individual homesteads represent towns serving a diversified population rather than agrarian centres functioning as pool mechanisms during the third millennium BCE. Harappa had a northern area

containing detached houses marked by terrace-edge storage that lacked access to bathing platforms or waste disposal wells, while Mohenjo-daro had a similar area with over 150 regular-sized houses in less compact layouts accompanied by a single dwelling integrating storage facilities for more economies (麻豆, 2020). Such substantial residential clustering at two key cities suggests alternative IVC urban models with intricate complexities.

Craft Production and Labor Organization

Urban centres of the third millennium possessed a diversified production system characterized by the presence of distinct neighborhoods specializing in manufacturing procedures. Some of these neighborhoods were tightly connected to primary industries found in the immediate vicinity of the city, such as faience production in Mohenjo-daro and Lothal, and metal working in Harappa, Amri, and Kalibangan. The majority of production areas integrated as components of existing communities, probably populated by productive households that drew on surrounding industries, particularly terracotta, shell, ivory/beetle, and bone working. As indicated by chemical food residue analysis and by fractures along parting lines, several composite items known to have been made in molds (e.g. painted pottery, terracotta figurines) were probably produced by specialized workshops. A higher concentration of practitioners than usual in particular production branches could have existed in certain urban neighborhoods even if not always testified by the archaeological evidence. Surviving textual references suggest that many specialist crafting traditions and much of the high-quality import production (lapidary, seal and cylinder production) were monopolized and/or publicly supported. Remains of residential or segmentary ownership structures coexisted with evidence of centralized, external, or corporate resource control. Both seem necessary in resource-scarce sectors, whereas segmentation prevails in more inherently abundant areas, such as clay supply. Some urban households correspondingly engaged in industrial specialization in areas of dense deposit and poor quality for everyday use (e.g. terracotta, faience, bead, and ivory/beetle working in Mohenjo-daro; faience and painted pottery production in Lothal; terracotta and native Bead production in Kalibangan) rather than on trade itself.

Interregional Connections and Trade Networks

Trade on a regional scale has been identified at several urban sites from the earliest periods (4500 B.C.) associated with the Mehrgarh culture, where materials at the earliest sites were exchanged over 250 kilometre (km) distances; this

regional trade continued with the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) usually dated between 2600-1900 B.C. (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018) while interregional networks connecting both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were established connecting regions from Afghanistan, Iran, Arabian Peninsula, and extensive networks to coastal areas of Gujarat. Despite the disintegration of the IVC settlements post 1900 B.C. regional networks continued to flourish by reconnecting with previous settlements while other sites established new trade routes with other settlements as far away as East Africa. In Harappa IVC evidence points towards long-distance trade conducted as far away Indus Valley Civilization with both macro and micro studies showing the connection with southern Turkmenistan while limited studies conducted on secondary sites connecting northern Iran has been conducted, however, the presence of raw materials such lapis lazuli, shell products near Harappa indicate long-distance trade with regions such as Afghanistan, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and the Persian Gulf.

Archaeological Evidence and Methodological Considerations

Scholarship on the Indus Valley Civilization has advanced significantly over the last decade, although interpretation of provided archaeological evidence largely dates from earlier periods. At least four significant updating projects directly applicable to planning and administrative observation have been undertaken. Indus Civilization research gained momentum from 2003 through 2018 in the northwest Indian state of Gujarat (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). Focused landscape archaeological surveys were directed towards Harappan port towns associated with maritime trade along the Arabian coast (e.g., Lothal, Gadhadra, and Dholka), gauging Harappan urbanism spatially at much broader scales than was previously conceivable. The settlement on the shores of the Arabian Sea has been ranged alongside the spatial distributions of copper and ivory, indicating trade on the large scale facilitated by maritime transport. Similar state-level landscape approaches have occurred in the Indian states of Punjab and Haryana (e.g., J. Frizell, 2011) and on Indus Civilization sites in Pakistan (e.g., H. M. Lomax, 2008; T. A. Wright, 2009). Geographical studies have also become integrated into the examination of political ecology in Indus Civilization countries (A. Binford, 1962; J. B. Fagan et al., 1992; Fagan, 2000; Fagan & Kellenbenz, 1990).

Challenges in Interpretation and Gaps in the Record

Interpretation of the Indus Civilization remains challenged by the gaps in the

archaeological record that are further compounded by the limited evidence available for social differentiation, political hierarchy, and the nature of the state (S. Green & A. Petrie, 2018). Extensive landscape surveys in Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Western Uttar Pradesh that include survey and excavation data on micro- and macro-regional scales threaten the prevalent view of a largely socio-culturally homogeneous civilization. These surveys reveal sectorial material culture variability at sites in northwest India and from north-west Iran to Afghanistan along the long-distance northwest Indus–Ganges trade route. A closer look at settlement distributions indicates that even during the Mature Harappan period economic pockets existed, suggesting concentrations of settlements capable of a degree of internal self-sufficiency. Larger Indus sites—many smaller than the classical metropolis—exhibit local-period structures at times of important population growth, framing them as regional centres located along coordinated east–west or north–south belt routes. During the entire archaeological sequence, most settlements remain smaller than the larger cities and many function spatially similar, supporting a view of regional diversification accompanied by a parallel intensification of inter-site trade dependence on resources. In northwestern India, archaeological practices began to develop in the late nineteenth century; however, the region still lacked firm topographical ground plans of the Harappan distribution dissipated through time. Such sites as Harappa, Mohenjo Daro, and Rakhigarhi were recorded and excavated, but institutionally the methods remained rudimentary, the soils resisted percolation, and too few resources returned and conversely poor extraction operations set a barrier to far reaching explorations of the civilization's occupation.

Conclusion

The urban planning and administrative practices of the Indus Valley Civilization, although widely recognized in archaeological analyses, have typically been examined within frameworks oriented towards social categorization and historical trajectory. Different approaches provide a foundation for further scientific investigation, but the pervasiveness of these frameworks limits the scope of analysis and further investigation, as they implicitly assume a standardized process of city development governed by a uniform socio-political organization and progression towards increasingly complex styles and practices that preclude access to alternative explanations and interpretations. The use of these overarching narratives inevitably leads to reductionist and anecdotal interpretations of

evidence, and consequently promotes artificial taxonomic reconstructions of material culture and society. Urbanization, extensive material culture, broad spatial interaction, and wealth appreciation in the region of the Indus Valley Civilization initiated and sustained widespread, extensive, and coordinated large-scale urban planning and administrative practices. The challenge of elucidating the nature of these practices is accentuated by variable levels of documentation arising from extreme climatic conditions that promote preservation at some locations, and intense agrarian expansion driven by population growth and social needs that constrain evidence availability elsewhere.

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Conflicts of interest

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