

Overlap with previous work

No work germinates on its own; it usually germinates on a fertile ground laid down by others. There were many conjectures on this Indus writing system by Asko Parbola, Iravadham Mahadevan and Brian Wells. I will briefly outline some of them pointing out overlaps and differences. It all started with the interpretation for fish sign as “mīn” by father Heras in 1930s [1]. This was reiterated with caution by Iravadham Mahadevan [2]. If we look at the frequency of the consonants in Tamil (both modern and old), the one that comes on top is “ka” and not “ma” or “mi”. We know that the fish sign is the most frequent in Indus script, so the obvious Turing’s not so enigmatic result is that the fish sign must start with “ka” and we found “kanni” is probably more feasible. However, our result independent of it and was inspired by M.V.Bhaskar’s interpretation (personal communication) that the “Garial” (the river crocodile) is synonymous with fish and was probably trained and used as a boat. My own personal exposure to local customs also revealed that “kanni” is a term used commonly in earlier times for boat or any vehicle. This was probably dropped later on in Tamil literature. The same however continues in Indo-European tradition that associates feminine gender to even a modern vehicle like train inflecting verb appropriately.

Many of Asko Parbola’s interpretations were based on correlations to planets and cosmology. This has close parallels with Indo-European cultural stream, the nomads for whom the astrological guidance was crucial. This seem to have very little relevance to Indus script at all, as they were well-settled people of the river valley. In fact, it is quite possible that due to the lack of this astrological skills that the Tamils (assuming they were the people that migrated south from the Indus) brought the brahmins from the North to help in predicting the seasons for them (in order to improve agricultural production), and this could also be the reason for the term “parpān” (the seer) that was used to call them.

There were many interpretations by Asko Parbola and Mahadevan [3] on the M77 sign-342 𑀓, including “-an”. MVB was quite critical of this being male-centric, an apt criticism, as he found no preponderance of male domination in IVC art. The interpretation of sign-1 𑀠 as “-an” has also been proposed by Bryan Wells [4] and then MVB’s criticism can be cleverly overcome by stating that “-an/-al” could have been sex-neutral term in those days and associating “-al” with feminine gender could have been a later invention by the male-dominant society (especially as “-al” has connotation with darkness and evil). On other proposals of Iravadham Mahadevan and Bryan Wells’s on numbers as being semantically numbers, we found no parallels in our interpretations. In fact, the numbers are the only signs that almost never reflected their standalone ideographic value. This was indeed quite surprising for us, as we found almost no evidence for this. MVB has been quite radical in this interpretation, proposing that almost a new syllabic system can be conjured using just the numbers alone.

Bryan Wells’s work also proposes other possibilities like sign-358 𑀕 being closely related to the Hare’s ears and so proposing the syllable “ce” from “cevan”. The author is in full agreement with this proposal and in fact, both this and sign-76 𑀓 also evokes the same “ce” syllables. In the IVC context of bronze-age, these have semantic connotations to “cembu” (bronze). Bryan Wells also proposed “ko” for sign-261 𑀓 and “kota” for sign-267 𑀓. We are fully in agreement with these readings.

There could have been many more proposals that may have some overlap with our interetations here. We would be glad include them in our document as soon as we are made aware of them.

References

- [1] Heras, H., (1976) Henry Heras the Scholar and His Work, Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture
- [2] Mahadevan, I., (2000?) The Indus fish sign, <https://www.harappa.com/content/indus-fish-sign>
- [3] Asko Parbola and Mahadevan, I., (2000?) Proposed Ancient Indus Script Dictionary, <https://www.harappa.com/script/diction.html>
- [4] Wells, B., (2025) [The Archaeology and Epigraphy of Indus Writing, Archaeopress](#)
- [5] Bhaskar, M.V., (2025), அன்றைய தலைப்பு செய்திகள் (Yesterday's headlines), சிந்துவெளி நாகரீக சிறப்பு வெளியீடு (Indus Valley Civilization Special Issue), கிருஷ்ணகிரி மாவட்ட வரலாற்று ஆய்வு மையம் (Krishnagiri District History Research Center), சாசனம் (Sasanam).