

Macro structures in Indus script

Towns, countries and barter transactions

S.K.Venkatesan

The logo-syllabic Indus script has been deciphered using Dravidian Etymology Dictionary. Complete list of signs of the Mahadevan corpus deciphered are described in the [other document](#). A threshold point has been reached now that one is able to not only read all the lines of text but also understand them with clear-cut semantics. Apart from the decipherment we are also able to provide a picture of the production activities in Indus Valley as reflected in the text and graphics.

There seem to be some broad grouping of regions into town and countries, but it must be understood they are proto-cities, towns and counties, and not identical to modern states or cities as we see understand today.

Some important townships

This is just indicative of the various kinds of townships and professions, and a deeper quantitative study is required to obtain their relative importance. What is interesting is that the last one is farmer's town, which doesn't count really as a town, but in Dravidian languages, the term "ūr" seems to cover what we call "village" also.

M77 Sign	Glyph	Syllable	DED	Description	Tamil
342	𑀓	ūr	752	town	ஊர்
347	𑀓𑀕	velūr	-	hunter's town	வேலூர்
358	𑀓𑀕𑀲	chevūr	-	bronze worker town	செவ்வூர்
351	𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓	vel-nuṛa-ūr	-	hunter-cloth worker town	வேல்நுழுவூர்
?	𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓𑀕	che-palla-ūr	-	bronze-elephant worker town	செவப்பல்லூர்
355	𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓𑀕	vel-palla-ūr	-	hunter-elephant worker town	வேல்பல்லூர்
361	𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓𑀕𑀲	che-ko-ūr	-	herder-bronze worker town	செங்கோவூர்
372	𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓	vel-tiral-nuṛan-ūr	-	hunter-jeweller-tailor town	வேல்திரல்நுழுவூர்
15	𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓𑀕𑀲𑀓	uṛavūr	688	working, farming town	உழவூர்

Counties or regions

There seems to be another regional geographical category, nāṭu 𑀓𑀕, which seem to be different from ūr 𑀓. We just indicate a few here.

M77 Sign	Glyph	Syllable	Description	Tamil
267	𑀓𑀕𑀲	koṭa-nāṭu	Horned country	கொட நாடு,

				கொம்பன் நாடு
293	𑌕𑌔	valaiyan-nāṭu	Trapper's country	வலை நாடு, வலையன் நாடு
76	𑌕𑌔𑌕	cē(val)-nāṭu	Bronze country	சே நாடு, செம்பு நாடு
162	𑌕𑌔𑌕	vēl-nāṭu	Hunter country	வேல் நாடு, வேடன் நாடு

Glyphs grouped under categories

A word of caution must be mentioned here that since the logos are primarily syllables, their actual use in a text may not always correlate to below category.

Description	M77 Signs	Glyphs	Tamil
Activity-based counties [1]	261, 391, 162, 245, 12, 326, 400, 311	𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕	கோவன், பல்லவன், வலையன், தட்டான், உழவன், இலையன், நுழம்பன், பானன்
Farming: farmer, farm town	12, 15, 178, 124	𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕	உழவன், உழவூர், கலப்பை, ஏர்
Horticulture: leaf, flower	326, 54	𑌕, 𑌕	செடி, பூ
Hunting: trapping, spear	35, 293, 162	𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕	வலையன், வலையன், வேலன்
Cattle farming: herding and selling	30, 301	𑌕, 𑌕	கோவன், இடையன்
Carpentry and metallurgy: metal and wood work	245	𑌕	தட்டி (தட்டான்)
Tayloring: stitching	400, 219, 182	𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕	நுழல், தை, அச்சு
Honey gathering	180	𑌕	கொட்டு தேன்
Singing: harp, musician	311, 31	𑌕, 𑌕	யாழ், பானன்
Trade: barter, buy/sell	51, 130	𑌕, 𑌕	மாறன், மாற்று, கொள்
Transportation: ship, boat, raft, manual cart, bullock cart	59, 65, 70, 72, 67, 155	𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕, 𑌕	கன்னி, பெருங்கன்னி, கல், கொல், கொண்ட, அம்பி
Movement: material, goods, send, receive	153, 211	𑌕, 𑌕	பெரு, பொருள், அனுப்பு

Major countries depicted by animals in seals

This is another major category that is directly indicated by animals.

Plate III -55 [2]



Here we can see five major countries indicated branching from two tiger motifs and here with two of them further branching into two subcategories.

The seal on the right is either calling for (or celebrating) bartering between five countries:

𑀧𑀺𑀭𑀺𑀓 (para-ar-ūr, பறையூர்)

calling for five nations to join in the barter system

𑀓𑀓𑀓𑀓𑀓

(cerukol, சேர்ந்துகொள்)

The animals that seem to indicate the five nations [1] in the seals are:

Markhor/Gaur (bison) 𑀭𑀺𑀓, Buffalo 𑀧𑀺𑀓, Elephant 𑀧𑀺𑀓, Rhino ? and Tiger 𑀧𑀺𑀓.

Although all the skills and specialised skill centers (vanjih, 𑀧𑀺𑀓) are all distributed all over the towns and villages of all countries, in triple mountain tiger country (Afghanistan?) there seems to be preponderance of hunters, animal trappers and honey collectors.

The Indus barter exchange system

We only illustrate the key points here. The local barter happens in the undocumented unorganized sector at the cross-roads (𑀧𑀺𑀓/𑀧𑀺𑀓), in what is termed as “cantai” (சந்தை) in modern Tamil. The exchange is abstracted by the symbol 𑀧𑀺𑀓/𑀧𑀺𑀓 and the barter mediated by 𑀧𑀺𑀓 (maran), who is usually qualified by great reliable ancestry (flowery self-praise by the system). The exchange is done by symbol 𑀧𑀺𑀓 (kol, the dagger of exchange) and 𑀧𑀺𑀓 (an abstraction of the cross-road). Most of the script pertains to official barter transactions of Indus, which are really instructions of transportation mode and the origin/destination. The clitics like 𑀧𑀺𑀓 (M77-99) orchestrate the sentence structure of the lines of the seals. An highly compressed form of information exchange mechanism is enabled by the drastic use of poly-semantic logo-syllabic script with each of these logo-syllables having many semantic possibilities with high degree of pun. This is so deeply wedded to Indus culture and mode of exchange that the deciphering of it has taken so long. The skills of bronze-age artisans is in full display here with those hundreds of poly-semantic logo-syllables crafted and designed with care to

work in those small spaces available in the seals. What is interesting that the deeply mysterious swastic symbol (M77-148) is now understood as the mundane:

𐏃 = 𐏃+𐏃 = marrukoḷ = மாற்றுகொள்

𐏃 = 𐏃+𐏃 = cērukoḷ = சேர்ந்துகொள்

i.e., declaration of an important exchange, which is usually followed by drum beats '𐏃'. The drum beats are also a way to invite more people to the square for exchange (at cross-roads).

Relative volume of trade

We consider the absolute occurrence numbers in the text and also the association to the right of sign no. 99 𐏃. If we assume that what precedes (to the right of) sign. 99 𐏃 is the sender of goods then we get the following data:

Glyph	Description	No. occurrences	Forward transactions
𐏃	Cattle	369	290
𐏃	Agriculture	225	18
𐏃	Ivory	182	82
𐏃	Carpentry, Bronze work	134	6
𐏃	Honey	44	18
𐏃	Cross-road	41	8
𐏃	Elephant herding?	15	10
𐏃	Tailoring	14	4

Among 634 occurrences in IVC text with sign no. 99, assuming that what comes to its right is the region that is sending commodities to the other regions, we can summarize that cattle and agriculture were the dominant activities, closely followed by carpentry and elephant-based products. Hunting, honey-gathering, fishing, carpentry, weaving and stitching were the other important activities that created products participating in the organized barter system of IVC. Hunting, honey-gathering, fishing, carpentry, metallurgy, weaving and stitching were the other important activities that created products participating in the organized barter system of IVC.

Class structure of IVC

It seems from the table above that the cattle herders had the dominant trade surplus and probably the agriculturists had the highest trade deficit. Sign-41 𐏃 kīrān (DED 1621) கீழான் refers to a poor person and studying his concordance we see that he is strongly associated with sign-137 𐏃 cēri (DED 207) சேரி, a place where many people assemble, associated in modern terms with the hut

dwelvements or slums in cities. It is quite surprising that this association has remained true for 5000 years! It is also noted that sign-41 𑌕 (kīrān) has atleast one association with all professions, except cattle herding (sign-267 𑌕). So it is clear that there is a class structure associated with IVC which puts cattle-herders (𑌕) at the top.

Praise heaped on the farmer

The barter system's accumualtion of wealth by the ruling elite (sign-30 𑌕 "kovan"), accumulated in store-houses (sign-267 𑌕 "koṭṭa") necessiates a rhetoric of praise on the toiling farmer (sign-12 𑌕 "vuṛavan") like:

M77 signs	Glyphs	Syllable	Tamil	Description
12-75	𑌕 𑌕	peru.mu.kanni-vuṛavan	பெரும்பூக்கன்னி உழவன்	Enormously mature and soft farmer
12-2-86	𑌕 𑌕	mutal-kāvalan-vuṛavan	முதன்மை காவலன் உழவன்	First guardian farmer
12-325-86	𑌕 𑌕	mutal-ilai-vuṛavan	முன்னிலை உழவன்	The foremost farmer

Such eulogy of farmer and farming has continued even 2000 years after IVC culture in [Thirukkural](#):

Kural 1031: Howe'er they roam, the world must follow still the plougher's team;

Kural 1032: The ploughers are the linch-pin of the world; they bear.

Broad observations about the text

One of the surprising observation in this decipherment is that almost no individual identities like personal names are found in the text. All trade transactions are from one collective identity like country, village/town to another country, village/town. Individuals are extolled within the colective identity of farmers, workers, etc. There are however, strong leadership role identitites like chief "mutalvan", "peru(m)-kanni", "mu-velan", "iru-velan" etc. It seems that there are store houses were the items are sent and dispersed through some social mechanism of distribution. It seems that the distribution process could be related to sign-37 𑌕 "vilampu" and sign-28, 𑌕 "vilampan" seems more like the supervisor of distribution of goods. Probably the sign-176 𑌕 "anjih" is a place each of the specialized workers like Tailors, Bead makers, Carpenters, Bronze workers, Ivory workers, each having a separate location for each specialization where others can reach them as targets for exchange. This tradition continues in towns in India even now.

M77 signs	Glyphs	Syllable	Tamil	Description
176-342-48	𑌕 𑌕 𑌕	nal.aran-ūr-anjih	நல்லறனூர் வஞ்சி	good moral town rest-house

176-309-379	𑀧 𑀲 𑀓	pammu-vilampu-anjih	பம்மு விலம்பு வஞ்சி	bow-stringer rest- house
176-309-245-245	𑀧 𑀲 𑀓 𑀓	tatti-tatti-valiampu- anjih	தட்டி தட்டி விலம்பு வஞ்சி	Smithey-house
176-342-347-258	𑀧 𑀲 𑀓 𑀓	cilai-velūr-ūr-anjih	சில்லை வேலூர் ஊர் வஞ்சி	Carpentry-house

References

[1] M.V. பாரஸ்கர், 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), 2025.

[2] MASI 77 Indus Script Texts Concordances & Tables Iravatham Mahadevan,
<https://indusscript.in/>