

Indus script orthography

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The logo-syllabic syllabary of Indus will be described here as it is preceived here in use. We try to discern if there are broad rules of orthography in this writing system that we can observe. We will start with some simple number systems and see how they can prefix or suffix to other symbols/syllables in the system.

To begin with we use a simple rule that there is one and only one syllable to which each of these signs get assigned to. This is a simple rule to follow and it can be easily discerned if it breaks. We will now describe the other patterns or rules that we observe.

Let us now consider the M77 sign-373 ○ to which we assign the syllable “pa”. For the sign-86 |, we assume that it has the value “mutal” and then see how it applies to the sign-375 ①. We believe that this value is indicated by the sign-376 ② that has a tooth attached to it. So we have:

pa + mut-al = pal

Now let us consider the sign-391 ③, a sign that we know has strong correlations with elephant seals from MVB [4] findings, so we assign the value “palla” that also has close proximity to “pal”, but we can see there are three cross-lines and/or six small pieces, making it more like “pillir”. There is also another possibility that this is decided by DED 1045 ④, a metal badge that is applied to the forehead of the elephant. So we observe that although broad rules are applied, there are also *ideosyncracies* of local culture that also provide a few interesting twists and turns, but in general it tries to confirm to some broad outlines.

We will now move to the interesting sign-287), which we have assigned the value “valai” after looking at it’s close cousins sign-298))) and sign-290 which has five strokes affixed to it’s top-right.

))) = vala + |||| = val + ai = valai

Semantically vala is “right”, “curved” as the symbol right parenthesis and when combined with “5” it becomes valai.

We also observed for M77 sign-62 ⑤ that we can assign value “vālai” (scabbard fish that has sharp teeth). The sign-295 ⑥ “iru-valai” sounds similar to “ēri-vālai”. These signs also indicate that such deformation of the base syllable is possible, i.e., “valai” ≈ “vālai” and “ēri” ≈ “iru”. Of course, high homophony is one of the crucial principles in creating a script with minimal number of signs.

Next, we look at sign-81 ⑦ that we assign the value “valai-puri”, while we assign sign-63 ⑧ the value “kanni-pori”. This then decides “kanni” for fish-sign and “puri” ≈ “pori” for bird (quail) sign.

Based on these successes we decide to take a look on the other variants of fish-sign. For sign-70 ⑨ we apply “kāḷ” (DED 1483 assigns the semantic value of “cart”) and for sign-72 ⑩ “koḷ” (DED 2238 assigns a semantic value of “raft/float”). One might ask why not assign the values the other

way around, but the important clue comes from the cross-line that looks more like paddle/oar. Yes, again there are some *ideosyncracies* that comes with it.

We now move on to sign-332 𐌶 which we assign value “vai” = “va” + “ai”. In the case of “ūr” we have for example sign-347 𐌵 that takes the value “vel-ūr”, so the base comes after it in some cases reversing the order that we assigned for sign-332.

169	𐌶	nilam
171	𐌶𐌵	nilai
174	𐌶𐌵𐌶	iru-nilam
88	𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵	nal-iru

These are characters that seems to stand-out (pun intended), i.e., decided more by the context of IVC barter transactions and not by any complex orthography rules.

So as a broad outline we can say that the signs in IVC script are strongly associated with unique syllables and that the IVC writing system allows plenty of ways to mutate them in many ways from their base ideographic glyphs values. However, it is not clear that in the case when there are multiple affixes applied, then which comes first, i.e., whether a base glyph applies first etc. In general one could assume it flows from right-to-left and top-to-bottom, but I suppose there are many exceptions that are decided by the context.

For example the famous sign-116 𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵 can take the value “nellai/nallai” but the other-way around can also be “ayaḷ” is quite unlikely in the IVC transaction context. Sign-112 𐌶𐌵𐌶𐌵 works as “munnāḷ” but in the semantics of IVC transactions “ñāḷam” works better. Of course, both are possible and even within the context of IVC “munnāḷ” might be a better choice in some particular case.

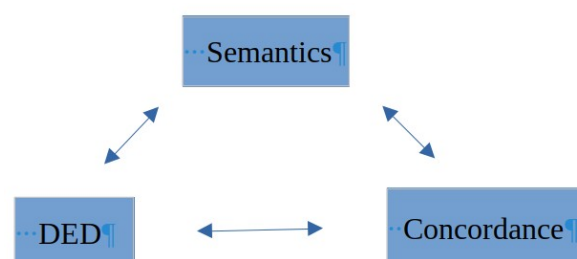
The non-affixed pure IVC signs have unique syllables associated with them, which have either single consonant and two consonants at the most. The combining rules usually seem to drop the middle consonants, and of course the vowels are modified as pertinent to the situation.

As an interesting remark I would like to bring to attention a nice little sign-310 𐌶𐌵 with a probable value of “vilaviḷa” (DED 5424) that sounds similar to “vavvāḷ” (long-tailed fruit bat?) as used in this line of text:

𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵 𐌶𐌵

Trembling with fear “vilaviḷa” cognates well with “eerie bat”, so we try to decipher this line.

Vilamban trembling with fear “loading” (𐌶𐌵) the bow, but what’s to the right of viḷamban, a tiger? Tiger trembling or the hunter trembling? This describes the process of discovery through an example. As a broader generalization we could insist for Dravidian decipherment that the following triangle commutes (i.e., more like walking on three legs or 3D squash):



Consonants and their signs

Consonant	M77 sign	Glyph	Roman	Tamil
ka (க)	59	௧	kaṇṇi	கண்ணி
ce (சே)	76	௨	cēval	சேவல்
ta (த)	216	௩	tanṭi	தண்டி
pa (ப)	373	௪	pakal	பகல்
pu (பு)	78	௫	pūr	பூர்
pū (பூ)	54	௬	pū	பூ
ma (ம)	242	௭	māṭi, māṭu	மாடி, மாடு
mē (மே)	197	௮	mēl	மேல்
mū (மூ)	89	௯	mū	மூ, மூணு
na (ன)	374	௧௦	na	ன
nā (நா)	95	௧௧	nāl	நால்
r (ர)	87	௧௨	ranṭu	ரண்டு
va (வ)	328	௧௩	va	வ
ṛa (ரூ)	400	௧௪	ṛa	ரூழ்
ru (ரூ)	110	௧௫	ru	ரூ

Although vowels and also glides can arbitrarily mutated, modified or introduced in the system while combining with the base syllable, the vowels are very much required at the beginning of a word. We list a few here.

Vowels and their signs

Vowel	M77 sign	Glyph	Roman	Tamil
an (அ)	1	௧௬	an	-அன்
āṭu (ஆ)	50	௧௭	āṭu	ஆத்து ஆடு
ila (இ)	323	௧௮	ila	இல
ūr (ஊ)	342	௧௯	ūr	ஊர்
eṛu (ஏ)	110	௨௦	eṛu	ஏழு