

A Dravidian decipherment of Indus script

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This publication is for feedback and further elucidation on the basic decipherment for larger community of enthusiast out there in the world. Important documents for understanding Indus script is the corpus created by Asko Parbola and [Iravadham Mahadevan's concordance](#) work (here on referred to as M77). We also need the [Dravidian Etymological Dictionary](#) (DED) by Burrow and Emeneau. Please download the two PDFs from Internet Archive and you should be ready. There are two excellent software versions of these PDFs: [Iravadham Mahadevan's concordance](#) maintained by Roja Muthiah Research Library and [Dravidian Etymological Dictionary](#) maintained by Digital South Asia Library of the Chicago University. Another rich source of conjectures and data is the great work of Bryan Wells: [The Archaeology and Epigraphy of Indus Writing, Archaeopress, 2025](#), who also has an excellent online database.

If you want to write documents with Indus signs then you need Asko Parbola's NFM Indus Script font. This document was written in that font, a lovely gift from MVB to me. Now on to the beautiful discovery of the decipherment.

The decipherment became possible with the arrival of the splendid work by MVB in Sasanam: M.V. பாஸ்கர் (Bhaskar), 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.

This laid down the map that lead to all the linkage between graphics and the text, building this beautiful journey of discovery enabled by M.V. Bhaskar, with whom I have been working for the past several years. My learning in art, Brahmi and Indus Script derived from his interactions.

Decipherment is a commutative diagram:



Of course, a lot of hard work and walking on three legs. We use M77 to denote Mahadevan's sign numbers, but the glyphs are provided by Asko Parbola's NFM Indus Script font.

Skilled artistry of Indus script

At the core of Indus script lies the mastery of a skilled metallurgist (𑀲𑀺?). We will illustrate this with these few examples:

𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺 = 𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺 = vel-tiraḷ-nuraṇ-ūr = வேல்திரள்நுழனூர்

The semantic meaning being the town with tailors, jewellery and hunting professions.

𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺 = 𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺𑀲𑀺 = mu-iru-mel-per-ul = முவிரு மேல்பொருள்

The semantic meaning being the mighty great guardian of the township (elevated to kings and gods at later times).

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	𑀲	ūr	752	town	ஊர்
347	𑀲	velūr	-	hunter's town	வேலூர்
358	𑀲	chevūr	-	bronze worker town	செவ்வூர்
351	𑀲	vel-nura-ūr	-	hunter-cloth worker town	வேல்நுழனூர்
?	𑀲	che-palla-ūr	-	bronze-elephant worker town	செவப்பல்லூர்
355	𑀲	vel-palla-ūr	-	hunter-elephant worker town	வேல்பல்லூர்
361	𑀲	che-ko-ūr	-	herder-bronze worker town	செங்கோவூர்
372	𑀲	vel-tiraḷ-nuraṇ-ūr	-	hunter-jeweller-tailor town	வேல்திரள்நுழனூர்
15	𑀲	uṛavūr	688	working, farming town	உழவூர்

Numbers

Numbers are treated separately, but they are just like other glyphs, easily welded and affixed to other glyphs, producing a plethora of possibilities.

M77 Sign	Glyph	Syllable	DED	Description	Tamil
86	𑀲	mu-, mutal	4950	primary (see also sign 237)	முதல், -ல்

87	||	ra-, ir-, iru-	474, 481	two, great, eminence	ரண்டு, -இர், இரு-
89	|||	mū-, mūn-	5052	three	மூ-, மூன்-
95	||||	nal-, -nāl, nalla-	2912	four, good	நல்-, நால்-, நல்ல-
96	|||||	-ai	2826	five	-ஐ
108	|||||	-ar	2485	six, river	-ஆறு
110	|||||	ēru, eṛu	910	seven, rise	ஏழு, எழு

Application of above phonemes

112	|||||	nalām, ñālam, munnal	2913	land, healthy, before	நலம், நாலம், முன்னால்
116	|||||	nallai, nellai	-	rice	நல்லை, நெல்லை
121	|||||	nal.nel.nāl	-	good rice person	நல்நெல்லானால்
120	|||||	mu-munamum	-	three generations back	மும்முன்னோனும், மும்முன்னமும்
119	|||||	mu-munnor	-	two generations back	மும்முன்னோர்

Clitics

Clitics provide sentence structure (the subject and the object). The default reading order is right to left, but before the clitic " (sign 99), the reading is left to right.

M77 No.	Glyph	DED	Description	Tamil
97	Ɱ	-	-il, -da, -ta, -in	-ட, -டு, -த, -து, -இல், -இன்
99	Ɱ	-	-ra, -ru	-ர, -ரு, -ற, -று
123	Ɱ	-	-yar, -yin	-யர், -யார்
344	Ɱ	ūr-ar	-	important sign with clitics
343	Ɱ	ūr-il	-	important sign with clitics

Learn through pun

Following are an indication of the pun that abounds in Indus script, which is termed as the “rebus principle”. Of course, it only makes sense if your language is close to ancient Dravidian. For deeper understanding you may have to refer to some of the sign values below this in the section on “Syllabic development”. We only sketch a few, but the Indus script syllabary abounds in such pun. The reduction of number of glyphs required for a writing system for Dravidian language is very much dependent on prudently choosing glyphs that provide highest possible homophony.

M77 Sign	Glyph	Syllable	DED	Description	Tamil
298	))))	valai = vala+ai	-	) = vala+5	வல+ஐ=வலை
	Right-parenthesis is “vala” (curved as well as right) in Tamil and “vala” + “ai” = “valai”. “vala” is curve, as well as “right”, which fits well with description of right parenthesis. This is further explained by a pun statement shown in the next row.				
62	(ஃ)	valai-kanni	5379	scabbard fish with fang-like teeth	வாளை மீன்
	The fish “vālai” is known as the scabbard fish that has sharp teeth. A nice tooth is drawn at the top to elucidate the learning. This explains that the parenthesis sign (299, 287) carry the phonetic value “valai”				
295	)ஃ	eri-valai	902	Another sharp tooth fish	ஏரி வாளை (மீன்)
	A fresh water shark, Wallago attu , also known “eri-valai”, a pun again on the word with rebus equation: “vālai” ≈ “valai”. The prefix “eri” comes from “two” or “iru”, leading to one more rebus equation: “iru” ≈ “eri”.				
63	(ஃ)	kanni-pori-valai	-	Trapping of birds	கன்னி-பொறி-வலை
	This learning tablet defines the phonetic value of fish as “kanni” and the bird as “puri” by defining it through a polysyllabic pun as “kanni-pori” with a parenthetic “valai”. The “kanni-pori” in Tamil is “trapping”.				
64	⋮(ஃ)	valai-kanni	-	The clitic reverses reading order	கன்னி-பொறி-வலை
	The clitic sign 64 reverses the reading order to the right of it. This learning script defines that.				
376	☪	pal	-	teeth	பல்லு
	A teeth is indicated by the protruding teeth effect, just like in the fish teeth.				
57	இரூம்பு	irumpu	486	iron	இரும்பு
	Now we have triple pun: iru-pu (two insects) ≈ erumpu (ant) ≈ irumpu (iron)				
181	கொட்டு	kottu	2065, 2064	pour (sting)	கொட்டு
	We can see pincler claws are indicated to show “sting” and “pour” are homophones in Dravidian “kottu”. The stinging honey-bee also is supposed elucidate connotations of “honey” that pours (kottu) from the beehive.				
393	பல்லர்	palla-ar	3986a, 1045, 4016	palla, pallar	பல்லர் (பள்ளம்)
	The sign 391 “palla” (see sign list below) is indicated here by putting it upside down in a hole (pallam) by creating the pun.				
310	விலவில	vila-vila	5424	tremble with fear	விலவில
	This cognates with “vavvāl” (DED 5370), probably a long-tailed fruit bat, with an eerie shivering scene that it creates.				

303	)	iṭa,	432	cleft, gap, split, crack open , slit, breach, chasm	இட
Also works as “iṭaveli” ≈ “iṭai-valai”.					

Syllabic development

We outline from top to bottom how the syllabary is slowly developed from simple to complex glyphs. Happy journey!

M77 Sign	Glyph	Syllable	DED	Description	Tamil
1	𐀀	an	131, 132	person	அன்
	𐀁	an(n)-an	131, 132	brother	அண்ணன்
2	𐀂	kāvalan	1417, 1416	security guard	காவலன்
25	𐀃	mutalvan	4950	chief	முதல்வன்
26	𐀄	nal-mutalvan	-	good chief	நல்முதல்வன்
3	𐀅	anal	327	fire	அனல்
4	𐀆	natt-an	3638	country man	நாட்டான்
5	𐀇	natt-ar-an	3638	country rules	நாட்டாரன்
6	𐀈	cadai-an	153	hairy man	சடையன்
7	𐀉	val(i)-an	5276	skilled man	வலியன்
8	𐀊	vel-an	5368	lance fighter	வேலன்
9	𐀋	valai-velan, valaiyan	5288	animal trapper	வலையன்
12	𐀌	vuṛavan	688	worker, farmer	உழவன்
13	𐀍	vuṛaval	688	work, farming	உழவல்
14	𐀎	per-uṛavan	688	big farmer	பேர் உழவன்
15	𐀏	uṛavūr	688	working, farming town	உழவூர்
35	𐀐	valaiyan	5288	trapper	வலையன்
41	𐀑	kīṛān	1621	poor	கீழான்
42	𐀒	pallan	3986a	mahout	பல்ல(வ)ன்
54	𐀓	pu	4345	flower, insect	பூ (பூச்சி)
55	𐀔	pol	4550	flowering	பொலி, பொலிவு
374	𐀕	-n	1159b, 3621, 3621a	night, bug	நீர் (துளி), (ப)னி, நள், நல்லு
410	𐀖	nān	3639	me	நான்
415	𐀗	nannan	3639	a name	நண்ணன்

299	(	ida, idai	449	hip, left	இட-, இடை
301	ᳵ	idayan	450	herder, herdsman	இடையன்
287	)	vala-, vaḷai	5313, 5314	bent, trap, right	வல, வளை
293	)	valaiyan	5288	animal trapper (short form)	வலை வேலன், வலையன்
328	ᳵ	vu	651, 761	ooze, mortar	வ, உ, ஊ
?	ᳵ	vala, vala	5304	strong, fertile	வல-, வள-
32	ᳵ	vuvan		person between two	உவன்
332	ᳵ	vai	5549-53	to stay, straw of paddy, to abuse, sharp	வை
336	ᳵ	valan	5276	strong, skillful	வலன்
337	ᳵ	velanai	5368	lance fighter	வேலனை
342	ᳵ	ūr	752	town, village	ஊர்
347	ᳵ	vellore	-	hunter's town	வேலூர்
358	ᳵ	chevur	-	bronze worker's town	செவ்வூர்
344	ᳵ	ūr-ar	-	important sign with clitics	ஊரார்
343	ᳵ	ūr-il	-	important sign with clitics	ஊரில்
373	○	pa	3805, 4016, 4124	sun, pot	பகல், பள்ளம், பாணை
375	①	pal, pala	3986a	teeth, many	பல், பல
391	⊕	pallā	3986a, 1045	elephant	பல்லா (யாணை)
Depicted by the ornamental oval-shaped plate that is fixed on it's forehead					
392	ᳵ	nal-pallar (nalla-palla-iru)	-	good mahout	நல் பல்லர்
403	ᳵ	paṛru, pattu, paṛai		sale announcement with a drum beat	பற்று, பட்டு, பறை
404	ᳵ	nal-paṛai		good announcement	நல்ல பறை
254	ᳵ	paṭi, paṭṭi	3848,3850	settlement, rest, roost, step gradee, rank	படி, பட்டி
216	ᳵ	tan, tān	2946, 3188, 3110	earthen pot	தன், தண் (தண்டி), தவளை
217	ᳵ	atan	1	there	ஆதன்
53	ᳵ	tāvu	3177	jump, luxuriant, tread gently	தாவு, தவளை
222	ᳵ	talū	3105	beat, crush	தள்ளு

223	𐎡𐎴	mumuta	-	grand-parent	மும்முத
229	𐎡𐎵	taṛ, taṛi	3178	bow down	தாழு, தாழி
36	𐎡𐎶	tan	3045	cold, water	தண் (தண்ணீர்)
?	𐎡𐎷	pān	4068	song, melody	பாண்
31	𐎡𐎸	pānan	4068	tamil bard	பாணன், பாடுபவன்
59	𐎡𐎹	kaṇ, kanni	1159a, 1166, 1168, 1417	boat, bamboo raft	கண், கன்னி
60	𐎡𐎺	nalla-kanni	-	good vehicle	நல்ல கன்னி
67	𐎡𐎻	kondū, kōnda, gōnde	2053, 2216	bull, with	கொடு (கொண்டு), கோண்டே, கொண்டே, கொண் ட
72	𐎡𐎼	kōl	2238	boat, raft	கோல்
70	𐎡𐎽	kāl	1483	cart	கால்
65	𐎡𐎾	peru-kanni		big boat	பெருங்கன்னி
78	𐎡𐎿	pur, puri	4374	bird	-புர், -புரி, புரா
81	(𐎡𐎿)	valai-puri	-	trapped bird	வலைபுரி, புரிவலை
319	𐎡𐏀	mura	4977	snail, curl	முற, முறை, முறுக்கு
134	𐎡𐏁	peru	4411	big, large	பெரு
261	𐎡𐏂	ko	2207, 2203	fort, gentry	கோ, கோட்டை
Origin of the word “ko” could be the Gond people of the mountains, reinforced by the West wind, from western practice of having kings in Sumeria					
30	𐎡𐏃	kovan		herder, herdsman, gentry	கோவன்
Cattle class that eventually becomes the ruling gentry					
261	𐎡𐏄	koṭa, koṭṭa	2207, 2203	fort, gentry (west wind, western practice of having kings in Sumeria)	கொட, கோட்ட
242	𐎡𐏅	māṭi, māṭu	4796a, 4798	mansion, terrace, ox	மாடி, மாடு
197	𐎡𐏆	mēl, mettai	5058	top, terrace	மேல், மெத்தை
402	𐎡𐏇	nādu	3638	country (as a contrast to village)	நாடு
162	𐎡𐏈	vēl	5536	spear, valour	வேல்
245	𐎡𐏉	tatṭi	3036	cloth, wooden frame	தட்டி
296	𐎡𐏊	vaṛi	5297	way	வழி
149	𐎡𐏋	nālvaṛi	5297	cross-road	நால்வழி
297	𐎡𐏌	aruvaṛi	5297	six-way crossing	அறுவழி, ஆறுவழி
135	𐎡𐏍	peruvaṛi	5297	big way	பெருவழி

136	𑌕	aim perumvarī	5297	five big way	ஐம் பெருவழி
153	↑	perupavan	4422	receiver	பெருபவன்
155*	𑌕	anupu, anbu	330	send	அனுப்பு, அன்பு
211*	↑	ambu, anupu	5536	send	அனுப்பு, அன்பு
83	𑌕	irappan, irappu	501	death	இறப்பு
50	𑌕	āṭu	5152	goat	ஆத்து, ஆடு
124	𑌕	ēr	2815	plough	கலப்பை
125*	𑌕	vilagu	5423	diverge	விலகு
47	𑌕	aṛan	204	squink	அரண், அரணை
43	𑌕	nal-aṛan	-	good behavior	நல் அறன்
113	(𑌕)	viḷai-ñālam	5437, 2913	fertile land	விளை நாலம்
415	𑌕	mu-pala	7-	important many	முப்பல
171	𑌕	nil-(v)anji, nilai	-	stable	நில்வஞ்சி, நிலை
?	𑌕	nal-inai, nāl-inai	-	good joining, joining four	நல்லிணை, நாலிணை
49	𑌕	kula	1829	generation, geneology	குலம்
51	𑌕	māru, mu-kula-iru-māran	4834	reliable third generation barter	மாறு, முக்குல மும்மாறனார்
149	𑌕	mārru	5297	eXchange	மாற்று
130	𑌕	kol	2151	exchange, buy/sell	கொள், கொள்முதல்
148	𑌕	marrukoḷ	5297, 2151	exchange, buy/sell	மாற்றுகொள்,
237	𑌕	mutal	4951	base, foot, stump	முதல்
304	𑌕	vil	5422, 5421	bow, sell	வில்
305	𑌕	villai	5421	price	வில்லை, விலை
127	𑌕	alaku/aṛagu	239, 246, 255	beak, beauty, grains of paddy	அலகு, அழகு
306	𑌕	alaku-vilam	-	good home	அழகு ஈஇல்லம்
307	𑌕	vilampu	5434, 5433	proclaim openly, superintends food	விலம்பு
397	𑌕	thiraḷ	3245	pearl necklace	திரள், முத்து மாலை
377	𑌕	nal-thiral-pala	-	many good pearl necklaces	நல்திரள் பல
233	𑌕	mumalai	-	three mountain range	மும்மலை
235	𑌕	mumalai-vel	-	three mountain range worker	மும்மலை வேல்
180	𑌕	koṭṭu	2063, 2064	pour, sting	கொட்டு (தேன்)
181	𑌕	koṭṭu	2063, 2064	pour, sting	கொட்டு

169	𑌵	nilam	3676	land, ricefield	நிலம்
171	𑌶	nilai	3675	firm, stable	நிலை
173	𑌷	irunilai	3675	very firm, stable	இருநிலை
174	𑌸	iru-nilam	481, 3676	great/vast land	இருநிலம்
88	𑌹	nal-iru	3610, 480	fine life	நல்லிரு
176	𑌺	anjih, añcal	56, 55	to take on shoulder, resting place	அஞ்சி, அஞ்சல்
249	𑌻	māṭṭu	4801, 4802	fasten, put in, fasten, hook, kindle, fire	மாட்டூ
253	𑌼	māṭṭal	4802	necklace	மாட்டல்
182	𑌽	accu	48	loom frame, mould, ridge in field	அச்சு
178	𑌾	kalappai	1304	plough	கலப்பை
323	𑌿	il, ila	494, 497	non-existence, leaf	இல
325	𑍀	ila	497	leaf	இல
326	𑍁	ilai	497, 496	leaf	இலை, இலஞ்சி
327	𑍂	ilavaṛian	-	name?	இலவழியன்
76	𑍃	cē	1931	red	சே, செம்மை
311	𑍄	yār, eril	5156	harp, music, beauty	யாழ், எழில், இசை
400	𑍅	nuṛan	3715	penetrate	நுழ்-, நுழன், நுழம்பு
310	𑍆	vila-vila	5424	tremble with fear	விலவில
219	𑍇	tai	3473	sew, stitch	தை
214	𑍈	irutai	481, 3473		இருதை
?	𑍉	cī, cīpu, cil, calli	2599, 2622, 1577, 2382	wooden peg, small piece of stone	சீ, சிப்பு, சில்
215	𑍊	ciruttai	2590	panther	சிறுத்தை
258	𑍋	calavai	2368	washing/bleaching cloth	சலவை
258	𑍌	cilāpam	2369	pearl fishery	சில்லாபம்
256	𑍍	cutti, cuttiyal	2668	Small hammer	சுத்தி, சுத்தியல்

Common phrases

Here we list multiple logos (mostly pairs and triplets) that commonly occur together in IVC. We also list a few non-aglutinative entangled glyphs which we try to describe them as complex mixed states.

M77 Signs	Glyph	Syllable	DED	Description	Tamil
148	𐌆 = 𐌂 + 𐌆	marukoḷ	5297, 2151	exchange, buy/sell	மாற்று கொள்
12-124	𐌃/𐌃	ēr-vuṛavan	-	farmer	ஏர் உழவன்
169-124	𐌃/𐌃	ēr-nilam	-	farm land	ஏர் நிலம்
130-51	𐌆𐌃	maru-koḷ, mu- kula-iru-maran- koḷ	-	barter	மாற்று கொள்
402-267	𐌃𐌃	koṭa-naṭu	-	herder country	கொட நாடு
402-267	𐌃𐌃	valaiyan-naṭu	-	trapper's country	வலையன் நாடு
402-76	𐌃𐌃	cē-nadu	-	red country, bronze country	சே நாடு
67-65	𐌃𐌃	peru-kanni- kondu	-	with big vehicle	பெருங்கன்னி கொண்டு
59-67	𐌃𐌃	konda-kal	-	bullock cart	கொண்டா கல், கோண்ட கல், மாட்டு வண்டி
59-67	𐌃𐌃𐌃	peru-konda-kal	-	big bullock cart	பெரு கோண்ட கல், பெரு மாட்டு வண்டி
372 = 342+400+ 397+162	𐌃 = 𐌂𐌃𐌃	vel-tiral-nuṛan-ūr	-	town with hunters, pearl and cloth workers	வேல்திரள்நுழனூர்
194 = 342+400+ 397+162	𐌃 = 𐌂 𐌃 𐌃 𐌃	mu-iru-mēl-per- ul	-	the mighty mel-perul	மூவிரு மேல்பொருள்