A Dravidian decipherment Indus script

M.V.Bhaskar and S.K.Venkatesan

We only sketch some brief outlines here. Details will be presented in a separate independent development by M.V.Bhaskar (MVB). 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. We also need the Dravidian Etymological Dictionary by Burrow and Emaneau. 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 மைய்யம் (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.

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			onn-, mu-, muthal-		one, primary	முதல், -ல், ஒண்ணு
87	‖	ra-, ir-, iru-	474	two	ரு-, இர்-, இரு-
89	⦀	mu-, mun-	5052	three	மு-, முன்-
95	⦀|	nal-, -nāl, nalla-		four	நல்-, நால்-, நல்ல-
96	⦀||	ai-	2826	five	-ஐ

| 108 | ||||| | -ar | 2485 | six | ஆறு |
| 110 | |||||| | elu-, -elu | 910 | seven | ஏழு, எழு |

Application of above phonemes

112	'''''	nalam, munnal	-	Healthy, before	நிலம், முன்னால்
116	''''''	nellai	-	rice	நெல்லை
121	'''''	nallonal	-	good person	நல்லோனால்
120	〰〰〰	mumunnonum	-	Three generations back	மும்முன்னோனும், மும்முன்னமும்
119	〰〰	mum-munnor	-	Two generations back	மும்முன்னோர்

Clitics

Clitics provide sentence structure (the subject and the object). The reading order is right to left only after the clitics; before that the reading is left to right.

M77 No.	Glyph	DED	Description	Tamil
97	'	-	-il, -da, -ta, -in	-ட, -டு, -த, -து, -இல், -இன்
99	''	-	-ra, -ru	-ர, -ரு, -ற, -று
123	ೖ	-	-yar, -yin	-யர், -யார்

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. They are also termed as rebus principle.

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 | ⟨⟨⟩⟩ | valai-kanni | - | vālai fish | வாளை மீன் |

The fish "vālai" is known as the shark 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".valai-kanni

M77	Glyph	Syllable	DED	Description	Tamil
295	)𝖸	eri-valai	902	Another sharp tooth fish	ஏரி வாளை (மீன்)

A fresh water fish, [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 | (♀𝕏) | 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 | ¨(𝕏𝕒) | 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 | 𝒪 | pal | - | teeth | பல்லு |

A teeth is indicated by the protruding teeth effect, just like in the fish teeth.

| 57 | 🦗 | irumpu | 486 | iron | இரும்பு |

Now we have triple pun: iru-pu (two insects) = erumpu (ant) = irumpu (iron)

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	大	an	131, 132	person	அன்
	大大	an(n)-an	131, 132	brother	அண்ணன்
2	|大|	aran, muthalvan	311	gentleman, primary man	அரண், முதல்வன்
3	夫	ath-an	142	husband	அத்தான்
4	禾	natt-an	3638	country man	நாட்டான்
5	衆	natt-ar-an	3638	country rules	நாட்டரன்
6	大	val(i)-an	5276	skilled man	வலியன்
7	犬	vel-an	5368	lance fighter	வேலன்
8	)米)	valai-velan, valaiyan	5288	animal trapper	வலையன்
12	柬	vuṛavan	688	worker, farmer	உழவன்
13	素	vuṛaval	688	work, farming	உழவல்
14	𝝰	per-uṛavan	688	big farmer	பேர் உழவன்
15	𝝰	uṛavur	688	working, farming town	உழவூர்

No.	Sign	Reading	Ref.	Meaning	Tamil
41		kīṛān	1621	poor	கீழான்
42		pallan	3986a	mahout	பல்ல(வ)ன்
54		pu	4345	flower, insect	பூ (பூச்சி)
55		pol	4550	flowering	பொலி, பொலிவு
374		-n	1159b, 3621, 3621a	night, bug	நீர் (துளி), (ப)னி, நள், நல்லு
410		nān	3639	me	நான்
415		nanan	3639	a name	நண்ணன்
299		ida, idai	449	hip, left	இட-, இடை
301		idayan	450	herder, herdsman	இடையன்
287		vala-, valai	5313, 5314	bent, trap, right	வல, வளை
293		valaiyan	5288	animal trapper (short form)	வலை வேலன், வலையன்
328		vu	651, 761	ooze, mortar	வ, உ, ஊ
?		vala, vala	5304	strong, fertile	வல-, வள-
336		valan	5276	skillful person	வலன்
32		vuvan		person between two	உவன்
342		vur	752	town	ஊர்
347		vellore	-	hunter's town	வேலூர்
358		chevur	-	bronze worker's town	செவ்வூர்
344		ur-ar	-	important sign with clitics	ஊரார்
343		ur-il	-	important sign with clitics	ஊரில்
373		pa	3805, 4016, 4124	sun, pot	பகல், பள்ளம், பானை
375		pal, pala	3986a	teeth, many	பல், பல
391		pallā	3986a	elephant	பல்லா (யானை)
392		nal-pallar (nalla-palla-iru)	-	good mahout	நல் பல்லர்
216		tha, thā	2946, 3188, 3110	earthen pot	த (தண்டி), தவளை
?		tāvu	3177	jump, luxuriant	தாவு, தவளை
222		thalu	3105	beat, crush	தள்ளு
223		mumutha	-	grand-parent	மும்மூத
?		taṛ, taṛi	3178	bow down	தாழு, தாழி
?		thān	3196	oneself	தான்
36		than	3045	cold, water	தண் (தண்ணீர்)
?		pān	4068	song, melody	பாண்
31		pāṇan	4068	tamil bard	பாணன், பாடுபவன்
59		kan, kanni	1159a, 1166, 1167, 1417	boat, bamboo raft	கண், கன்னி
60		nalla-kanni	-	good boat	நல்ல கன்னி
67		konda, konde	2216	bull, horn	கொண்ட, கண்ட
70		kāl, kala, kal	1479, 1480	leg, canal	கல், கல, கால் (கால்வாய்)
78		-pur, -puri	4374	bird	-பூர், -புரி, புரா
81		valai-puri	-	trapped bird	வலைபுரி, புரிவலை

319	◌	-mura	4977	snail, Curl	முறை, முறுக்கு
134	∧	-peru, -ma	4411	big, Large	பெரு-, -மா
261	◊	-ko	2207, 2203	fort, gentry (west wind, western practice of having kings in Sumeria)	-கோ, கோட்டை
30	大◊	kovan		herder, herdsman, gentry (cattle class becoming the ruling gentry)	கோவன்
197	⌂	-mel, -madi	5058	top, terrace	மேல், மாடம்
402	℅	nādu	3638	country (as a contrast to village)	நாடு
162	Ψ	vel	5536	spear, valor	வேல்
245	▦	thatti	3036	cloth, wooden frame	தட்டி
149	※	nālvaṛi	3610, 5297	cross-road	நால்வழி
249	⌂	carakku, acu	47, 2353	load, sack	சரக்கு, அச்சு
153	↑	perupavan	4422	receiver	பெருபவன்
155*	⊥	anupu, anbu	330	send	அனுப்பு, அன்பு
211*	↑	ambu, anupu	5536	send	அனுப்பு, அன்பு
83	⬳	irappan, irappu	501	death	இறப்பு
50	⚘	athu, adu	5153	goat	ஆத்து, ஆடு
124	人	aer	2815	plough	கலப்பை
125*	人	vilagu	5423	diverge	விலகு
323	⌒	Ila, illam	497	leaf, home	இலை, இல்லம்
326	⧆	nal-ilantha	497	good home	நல்-இலந்த
327	⧉	iru-vali-nal-ilanthai	497	home	இரு-வழி-நல்-இலந்த
47	⋋	aran	204	squink	அரண், அரணை
43	⋌	nal-aran	-	good behavior	நல் அறன்
?	(⦙)	munal-valai	-	3 by 4 (yards) net	முன்னால் வலை
415	8	mu-pala	-	many many	முப்பல
171	Ψ	nil-(v)anji, nilai	-		நில்வஞ்சி, நிலை
?	≡	nal-inai	-	jood joining, joining four	நல்லிணை, நாலிணை
403	⋈	patru, pattu, parai		sale announcement with a drum beat	பற்று, பட்டு, பறை
404	⦂⋈⦂	nal-parai		good annoucement	நல்ல பறை
49	⋩	kula	1829	generation, geneology	குலம்
51	⋩	maru-, mu-kula-iru-maran	4834	reliable third generation barter	மாறு-, முக்குல மும்மாறனார்
130	√	kol	2151	exchange, buy/sell	கொள், கொள்முதல்

304	𝒟	vil	5422, 5421	bow, sell	வில்
305	𝒴	vilai	5421	price	விலை
127	٦	alaku/aṛagu	239, 246, 255	beak, beauty, grains of paddy	அலகு, அழகு
306	𝒻	alaku-vilam	-	good home	அழகு ஷிஇல்லம்
397	⌀	thiraḷ	3245	pearl necklace	திரள், முத்து மாலை
377	┆◊⌀┆	nal-thiral-pala	-	many good pearl necklaces	நல்திரள் பல
233	⧊	mumalai	-	three mountain range	மும்மலை
235	⧊✒	mumalai-vel	-	three mountain range worker	மும்மலை வேல்