Tale of two ūrs: Sumeria and Melukha – two different cultures

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Abstract

In this short article we compare the socio-political background and its reflection in the writing systems of Sumeria and Melukha, i.e., the ancient Sumerian and Indus civilizations. Although Indus civilization probably was inspired and influenced by its versatile and prodigious neighbour, the Sumeria civilization, we show how they adopt entirely different socio-political systems which reflects back on the linguistic aspects. We also show how the different concrete conditions from which emerge the writing systems of the two neighbouring cultures produce entirely different logo-syllabic scripts.

Introduction

The gradual evolution of human society is usually punctuated by sudden rapid growth of civilizations. It has been a frustrating exercise in futility by many scholars on understanding how the language of Sumeria emerged from its constituents. Just as how gradual biological evolution is punctuated by the emergence of discrete spatio-temporal entities such as the biological species, human society also undergoes sudden rapid development that produces discrete spatio-temporal stages.

In the case of Sumerian civilization, the sudden emergence of urban centers such as “ūr” has been a notable feature. The Indus civilization also developed such urban centers. The author’s decipherment concludes that urn-sign in Indus script is nothing but the poly-syllable “ūr” and the writing system was primarily developed to record trade activities of “Melukha” (as Indus civilization was known to others), primarily to record from/to locations (of different “ūr”s) with mode of transport indicated through fish-signs.

In this article we first study the socio-political systems of Sumeria and Melukha and show how it influences the semantic ontological space of ideas. Next we show how this is closely related to the development of the writing system of the two civilizations and the resulting aglutinative character of the language of Sumeria and that of Melukha (proto-Dravidian). This aglutinative aspect emnates from the logo-syllabic writing system that was developed in response to the need for tokens in the trade activities. Finally, it’s shown here how the divergence in socio-political system also caused the divergence in the trade tokens and the writing systems.

Socio-political systems of Sumeria and Melukha

Rapid development of religious instituitions, probably emnating from the priestly-class of clan-based societies, evolved to produce the kings in Sumeria (Postgate, 2004). However, it is not clear if this developed internally within Sumeria or was influenced by outside cultures, such as Akkadian and Elam. Of course, this is tautological, as then one would have to explain how these religious intituitions developed in those cultures in the first place. In any case, it is clear that the culture of Sumeria was strongly influenced by the religious instituitions and by the kings. The semantic ontological space of Sumerian language also developed in the context of that society. The contrast with Melukha is very clear. In the Indus Civilization there has been no evidence for any religious instituitions or kings. Part of the reason why earlier attempts at decipherments have been unsuccessful is precisely for that reason, i.e., that the parallels with Sumeria or Elam do not work for Indus civilization. However, it is quite possible that such a comparision with Melukha can be obtained in a

earlier stages of development in Sumeria when centralized autocratic rule of kings and religious buerecracy have not emerged into existence.

Quoting from Jacobsen (1943, p. 172):

> “Our material seems to preserve indications that prehistoric Mesopotamia was organized politically along democratic lines, not, as was historic Mesopotamia, along autocratic. The indications which we have, point to a form of government in which the normal run of public affairs was handled by a council of elders but ultimate sovereignty resided in a general assembly comprising all members-or, perhaps better, all adult free men-of the community.”

Further we also note that as observed by Sheperd (1933, p. 355):

> “Among all the primitive peoples of the West there seems to have been some kind of popular assembly which shared with the tribal chief or king and with a council of lesser chieftains the powers of social control”

The sun, the daylight and the ancient scripts

The sun ✹ is quite central to life in early civilizations. In the Indus script, we associate the oval sign ⬯ with the syllable “pakal” (daylight) and so in essence it is the syllable “pa”. The “pa” has many bright-white associations such as “pal” (teeth), “pala” (many [teeth]), “pāl” (milk), “pallā” (tusk, elephant), “pantu” (ball), and “pattu” (ten – many). In the ancient Chinese characters also the sun is denoted by the oval sign ⊙ which then regularized later on to the rectangular form 日, with a combination of the sun (日) and the moon (月): 日月 being the common abstraction, brightness. Just like the Dravidian mild-male association of “appaṉ”, “appu”, and “appa”, in the Egyptian hieroglyph also it leads to a patriarchal bright sun ✷ the “ra” (king-god). In the Indo-European, the etymological root of the “sun” is also the feminine “*sāwel/sunne” similar to the feminine Greek goddesses “Sol” (sun) and “Luna” (moon). The “*sawelyo” eventually morphed into masculine “helios”. In Sumerian, the primary word for "sun" is also the word for "day" and the name of the sun god.

Descriptiom	Cuneiform	Sumerian	Indus script	Dravidian
brilliant	𒌓	izi, zalág, melám	⦶, ⍋	pal, mēru
sun	𒀭𒌓	ūd, ūtu, dakal	⬯	pa, pakal
moon	𒀭𒂗𒍪	ītīm, ena, nanna, suen	⬯	tiṅkaḷ, mati
shining	𒌓	babbar	⦶	paḷa

In the Dravidian decipherment of Indus script we notice that

pal = ⦶ = ⬯ + | = pa + (mut)al

Of course, this naturally leads to the conception of numerals.

Numerals

It can seen that Dravidian “ai” (five) is “ia/ya” in Sumerian and “pattu” (ten) in Sumerian is “u/yu”. However, the similarity stops there.

Description	Cuneiform	Sumerian	Indus script	Dravidian
one	𒁹	aš(u)	|	mutal (chief)
two	𒈫	min(u)	||	iru (big)
three	𒐈	eš(u)	|||	mu (mature)

Description	Cuneiform	Sumerian	Indus script	Dravidian
four		límmu	𝍢	nāl, nal (good)
five		ía (ya)	𝍢, 𝍠	ai, inai (join), muri (ox)
six		àš (yašu)	𝍢, 𝍡	āru (river), mumu (mature ancestor)
seven		imin (yaminu)	𝍡, 𝍘	eṛu, ēru (plough), nallam (fertile land)
eight		ussu	𝍡	eṭṭu, nalnel (good paddy)
nine		ilimmu (yalimu)	𝍣	mu-mum
ten		u, yu (huwamu)	𝍤	pattu

Ūr and its etymological roots

Now we discuss the etymology of “ūr”, the most important logo-syllable of Indus script. The most frequent Indus sign, 𝍖, has been deciphered as the logo-syllable “ūr”. The process of aglutination is:

ūr = 𝍖 = 𝍤 + 𝍢 = ū + (i)ru

It has deep connections to the Dravidian language. All towns first start as farming villages where they melt the soil to increase fertility. The earthworm also helps in melting the soil, especially in the black soil. Such a fertile farmer’s town creates a great conglomeration of near relatives.

Indus script	Dravidian	Description
𝍖	ūr	town/village – origin – farmer’s town
𝍗 𝍡	ñālam-nilam, ēr-nilam	fertile land, ricefield (DEDR 2913, 3676)
𝍡, 𝍘	ēr, uṛu, urukku (melt)	plough, till
𝍙	uṛavan	farmer
𝍖	uṛu, uṛavu	to be close, nearness, relation, family
𝍜	uḷ	inside
-	uṛumu	growl (dog)
𝍤	ū	flesh, body, thing
-	nēr, niru, nirupān	upright, weigh/measure, scale

Now we look Sumerian etymology of “ur”.

Cuneiform	Sumerian	Description
	ūṛ, dūṛ, ur-mah	dog, animal, guard, lion
	ūṛu	city, town, settlement
	ūṛim	settlement
	ūṛ	root, foundation, leg, loins, family

Cuneiform	Sumerian	Description
	ūr	to plough, to till
	úrum, uru$_7$	relatives
-	érin, rín	balance scale

Conclusions

This article shows intriguing connections between Sumeria and Melukha. The product of logo-syllabic systems of Sumeria and Melukha are the aglutinative languages, Sumerian and Proto-Dravidian. However, the Sumerian and Melukha scripts take very different approach to the writing system. There are two reasons for this, one is the fact that the cuneiform is catering to very different languages as well, and the other fundamental reason is the fact that the Sumerian society was dominated by religious institutions and the rule of the kings. The religious institutions and kings can be obstacle to the development of productive activities, especially due to bitter wars as in the case of Sumeria and Elam. Melukha, on the other hand, has either by accident or by carefull planning has avoided the pitfalls of religious institutions and the emergence of kings. This has produced a peaceful productive society. The decipherment of Indus script has revealed a proto-class society with smaller fortresses, chieftains and towns, but with no individual identities at all and only collective identity of the working professions. All towns are named after the professions and physical features. There were also no gigantic superstructures or institutions of exploitation. Mild policing and efficient distribution seems to be practiced with efficiency. It is also quite possible such a development stage also existed in ancient Sumeria when the centralization has not proceded with greater vigour and exploitation. This also raises the intriguing possibility of greater synergy between Sumeria and Melukha at earlier stages.

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