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The sacred filter standard facing the unicorn: more evidence

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1. Introduction

A decade ago I proposed a new identification for the cult object in front of the 'unicorn' on the Harappan seals as a 'sacred filter standard' on the basis of a detailed comparison between the component parts of the cult object shown on the seals and the description of the *soma* filter in the *Rgveda* (RV) (Mahadevan 1985). I now propose to extend the parallelism from the Vedic to the Early Historical Period by suggesting that the Harappan sacred filter standard survived in the later Indian tradition as the *indra-dhvaja* symbolised by the so-called 'triangle-headed standard' depicted on the punch-marked and other Early Historical coinage.

2.1. Harappan sacred filter

The classic motif on the Harappan seals features a one-horned bull (the 'unicorn') facing a cult object (fig. 39.1). The object is depicted as a standard consisting of a generally cylindrical upper vessel and a hemispherical lower vessel both mounted on a staff. The device was identified as an 'incense-burner' or 'sacred brazier' by Marshall (1931: 69). A new identification of the cult object as a sacred filter standard was proposed by me on the basis of a close study of over one thousand unicorn seals in the collections of the Indian museums. The study has led to the identification of the distinct features of the sacred filter standard as depicted on the seals (fig. 39.2). In particular the upper vessel is identified as a strainer filled with a filtering medium (represented by bands of parallel horizontal lines). The downward flow of liquid through the strainer is represented by vertical or zigzag lines. The strained liquid pours into the lower vessel which is a sieve perforated with holes on the sides (depicted by small circles with central dots), through which drops of the liquid are seen trickling out (shown as small circles without dots). The twelve distinct features of the sacred filter standard as gathered from various seals are shown here in a composite illustration (fig. 39.3).

2.2. Harappan sacred filter as a portable standard

The ritualistic character of the Harappan sacred filter standard is clearly seen on some of the seals and sealings. Of particular interest are the two prism-sealings

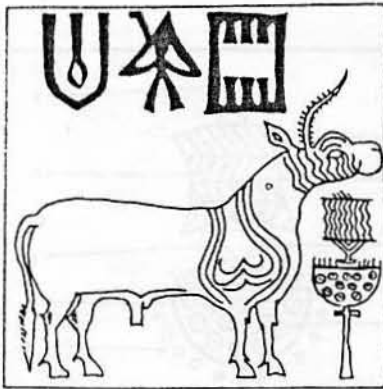


Fig. 39.1. A classic Harappan seal motif (Marshall 1931, III: pl. 104, no. 38).

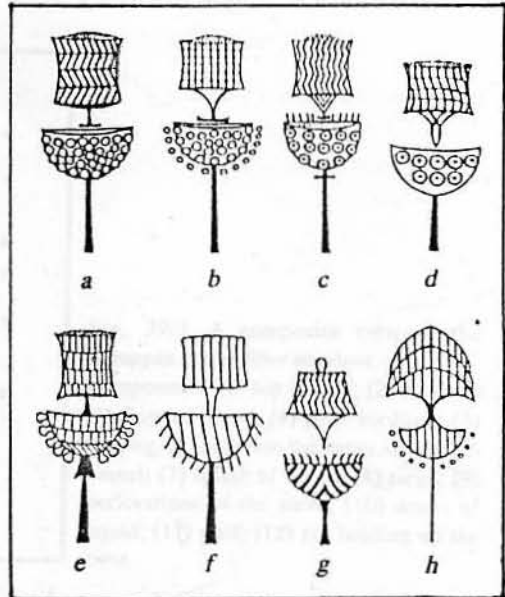


Fig. 39.2 (right). Sacred filter standard on unicorn seals.

Fig. 39.2a. Marshall 1931, III: pl. 103, no. 9; Fig. 39.2b. Marshall 1931, III: pl.

103, no. 18; Fig. 39.2c. Marshall 1931, III: pl. 104, no. 38; Fig. 39.2d. Mackay 1937-38, II: pl. 94, no. 422; Fig. 39.2e. Marshall 1931, III: pl. 103, no. 2; Fig. 39.2f. Marshall 1931, III: pl. 105, no. 41; Fig. 39.2g. Vats 1940, II: pl. 85, no. 3; Fig. 39.2h. Vats 1940, II: pl. 91, no. 256.

from Mohenjo-Daro (Marshall 1931, III: pl. 116.5, 8) depicting four persons in a procession each carrying a tall standard with different cult objects mounted at the top as crowning motifs, out of which two can be identified as the unicorn and the perforated lower bowl of the sacred filter device (fig. 39.4). On another sealing from Harappa (Vats 1940, II: pl. 93, no. 309), the sacred filter standard is drawn on an immense scale in comparison with the person who holds it aloft with both hands as a ceremonial standard (fig. 39.5). These two sealings prove conclusively that the sacred filter device (either with both vessels as in fig. 39.5, or with the lower vessel only as in fig. 39.4) formed the insignia or crowning motif of a portable standard held in hand and carried around in ritualistic processions.

2.3. Harappan sacred filter and the Vedic *soma*

The two basic elements pictorially emphasized in the depiction of the Harappan cult object, namely the 'flow' represented by parallel zigzag lines drawn through the upper vessel, and the 'drops' shown as small circles in and around the lower vessel, correspond precisely to the two central features of the *soma* sacrifice as described in the *RV*, namely *pavamāna*, 'the flowing' and *indu*, 'the drop'. These are the clues which led to the recognition that the Harappan cult object is in

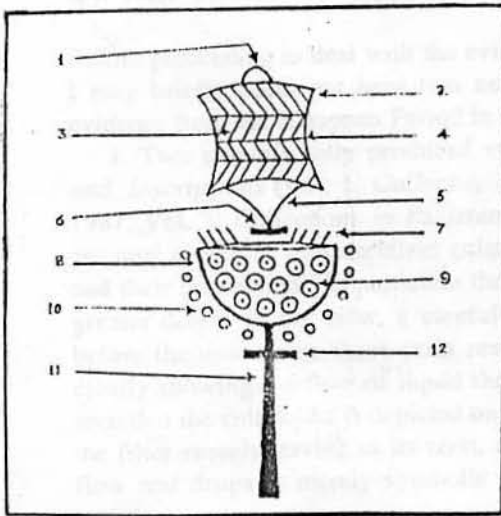


Fig. 39.3. A composite view of the Harappan sacred filter standard. Components: (1) top handle; (2) strainer; (3) flow of liquid; (4) filter medium; (5) pouring of liquid into the lower vessel; (6) funnel; (7) splash of liquid; (8) sieve; (9) perforations of the sieve; (10) drops of liquid; (11) staff; (12) pin holding up the crest.



Fig. 39.4 (above). A Harappan sealing showing a procession of men holding portable standards (Marshall 1931, III: pl. 116, no. 8).

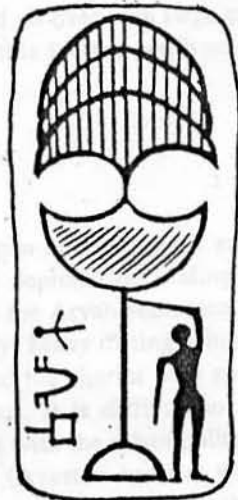


Fig. 39.5 (right). A Harappan sealing showing the sacred filter standard held by a priest (Vats 1940, II: pl. 93, no. 309).

fact a filter device. There is a remarkably close parallelism between the pictorial representations of the Harappan cult object and the rich imagery of the *soma* sacrifice in the *R̥V*. Five main features have been identified (Mahadevan 1985) as common to both, namely (1) the strainer (*sānu*) and (2) the sieve (*anvī*), both together comprising the filter (*pavitra*), (3) the flow (*pavamāna*), (4) the drops (*indu*) and (5) the bull (*vṛṣan*).

2.4. New evidence in support of the identification

Before proceeding to deal with the evidence from later Indian historical tradition, I may briefly point out here two new developments providing contemporary evidence from the Harappan Period in support of the proposed identification.

1. Two magnificently produced volumes entitled *Corpus of the Indus Seals and Inscriptions* (Vol. 1: *Collections in India*, ed. J. P. Joshi and A. Parpola, 1987; Vol. 2: *Collections in Pakistan*, ed. S. G. M. Shah and A. Parpola, 1991) are now available with excellent enlarged photographs of both the original seals and their impressions. In particular the larger unicorn seals can now be studied in greater detail. In my view, a careful study of the variations of the cult-object before the unicorn on these seals reveals the filter function of the twin vessels clearly showing the flow of liquid through and out of the vessels. It can also be seen that the cult object is depicted on the seals as a standard with only a model of the filter vessels serving as its crest, and that the pictorial depiction of the liquid flow and drops is merely symbolic to indicate the nature and function of the vessels.

2. Quite recently a small ivory object (depicting in the round the cult object of the unicorn seals) has been excavated at Harappa by R. H. Meadow and J. M. Kenoyer (unpublished; a slide of the object was shown by them at this conference). The lower hemispherical vessel is covered all over with large circular holes drilled deep into the solid object. In my view this feature confirms the identification of the vessel as a colander or sieve.

2.5. Implications of the parallelism

The implications of the theory that the Harappan religion had a *soma*-like cult are far-reaching. The sacred filter standard is depicted on sealings and tablets from the lowest levels of Harappa. The date of the Aryan settlement of the Indo-Iranian regions is unlikely to have been so early. Many distinguishing features of early Indo-Aryan society, such as the horse and the chariot with spoked wheels, are not represented in the Harappan glyptic art. It is difficult to associate the largely pastoral way of life of the Vedic Aryans with the urban polity of the Indus Civilization. It is thus more likely that *soma* (Avestan *haoma*) was one of the elements taken over from Harappan substratum and assimilated by the early Indo-Aryan societies.

3.1. Survival of the sacred filter standard in the later Indian tradition

Judging from the frequency of its occurrence and the care lavished on its artistic depiction especially on the larger Harappan seals, it is obvious that the sacred filter standard was the central religious motif of the Harappan Culture. Further the extremely close parallelism between the Harappan and the Vedic filter cults

proves the survival and re-emergence of the Harappan cult as the *soma-pavamāna* ritual in early Indo-Aryan society. It stands to reason then that such an important and all-pervasive cult must also have survived in post-Vedic Hinduism and left its imprint on the later Indian art motifs. I pursued this possibility by searching for clues in myths and art motifs relating to Indra, Soma and ceremonial standards. The evidence marshalled in the present paper indicates that the standard known as the *indra-dhvaja* (and also as *indra-yaṣṭī*, *śakra-dhvaja*, *mahā-dhvaja*, *jaya-dhvaja*, *vaijayantī*, etc.) in later literature, and depicted as the so-called 'triangle-headed standard' on the punch-marked and Early Historical coinage is the successor to the Harappan sacred filter standard.

3.2. The *dhvaja* (standard) in the Indian tradition

The *dhvaja* (standard) in the early Indian tradition consisted of three components namely, *ketu* (crest or insignia), *yaṣṭī* (staff or pole) and *paṭṭa* (cloth or drapery added later for ornamentation) (Thapliyal 1983: 1-89). It was only much later that the insignia was imprinted on the drapery which evolved into the cloth banner or flag of the medieval and modern periods. Thapliyal has demonstrated that the *dhvaja* is pre-Vedic in origin, evolving from the totem-pole displaying the totems (animal or plant) of tribes or clans. He recognized the cult object on the unicorn seals as a portable standard comprising a staff, a bowl-like receptacle and a 'cage', the latter constituting the insignia of the standard. He refers to the standard of the Vedic Aryans carrying as its insignia 'some motif associated with Indra, the Vedic god of war'. He has discussed the later literary references to the *indra-dhvaja* and noticed its numismatic representation as the 'triangle-headed standard'. However he does not attempt to identify the insignia or crowning motifs of the Harappan, Vedic or the triangle-headed standards.

4.1. *Indra-dhvaja*: standard of the Vedic Period

The expression *indra-dhvaja* does not occur in the *ṚV*; nor is there any direct reference to the insignia of the Vedic standard. However, we learn from the hymns that the Vedic Aryans sported a portable standard in battle as well as during sacrificial rituals and that the standard was especially associated with Indra and *soma*. On the basis of this evidence the standard of the Veda can be identified, with the *indra-dhvaja* referred to in later literature, and its shape can be inferred from the earlier Harappan parallels and the later numismatic representations.

4.2. Association of Vedic *dhvaja* with Indra

The term *dhvaja* occurs twice in the *ṚV* denoting a portable standard carried into battle. One of the hymns (*ṚV* 7.85.2) invokes Indra-Varuṇa, and the other (*ṚV* 10.103.11) Indra for victory in battle. The ritual use of the standard by

priests, its association with Śatakratu (Indra) and its shape as a portable standard are referred to in the following passage from another hymn: 'The priests have raised thee up on high, O Śatakratu, like a bamboo [pole]' (RV 1.10.1). The term Indra occurring in the following hymn has been interpreted as referring to a portable Indra-pole used as a battle standard (Thapliyal 1983: 19, with previous references): 'Who for ten milch-kine purchaseth from me this Indra who is mine? When he hath slain the Vrtras, let the buyer give him back to me' (RV 4.24.10).

4.3. Association of Vedic *dhvaja* with *soma*

One of the special characteristics of *soma* very frequently mentioned on the ninth Maṇḍala of the RV is that it is 'held in hand by men' (*nṛbhir yataḥ*) (cf. RV 9.24.3; 68.4; 68.7; 86.20; 86.22; 95.1; 99.8; 108.15, etc.). Commenting on this, Bhawe (1957-62, II: 36-37) points out that many of the passages occur in the context of *soma* being placed in bowls and carried to the altar. It is probable that these are references to a procession of priests bearing portable standards with symbolic representation of the *soma*-bowl as the crowning motif, reminiscent of the Harappan processional scenes already referred to (figs. 39.4-5). What is more natural than that Indra, the greatest patron of *soma*, should have the *soma*-bowl as the insignia (*ketu*) of his standard (*dhvaja*)? This reasonable inference is moreover corroborated by the close parallels of the earlier Harappan standard and the later triangle-headed standard to be discussed below.

4.4. *Indra-dhvaja* in the Purāṇas and Epics

Indra-dhvaja continued to be the pre-eminent standard (*mahā-dhvaja*) in later times, too, on account of its hoary antiquity and association with Indra, the war god. It had to be carried into every battle to confer victory (hence *jaya-dhvaja*, *vaijayantī*). Even in peacetime, annual festivals known as *indra-dhvaja-mahotsava* were celebrated when the standard was ceremonially raised and Indra was worshipped. The popularity of the festival can be gauged by references to it in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (4.16.37), the *Mahābhārata* (1.57), the *Bṛhatsamhitā* (43.6-7) and also in the Tamil epics *Cilappatikāram* (*Pukār-k-kāṇḍam* 5.418-657) and *Maṇimēkalai* (1.1-72). While *indra-dhvaja* is frequently referred to in purāṇic and epic literature, we have only a couple of references throwing light on its shape. The *Mahābhārata* (3.43.8) refers to the bamboo staff of the standard worked upon with gold (*vaṁśam kanakabhūṣaṇam*), but makes no mention of the insignia. There is however a very interesting passage in the *Vāmana-Purāṇa* (42.26) in which the *indra-dhvaja* held aloft is compared to an iron mace (*pariḥam*) tied up with silk drapery (*paṭṭodbaddham*). This simile seems to indicate that, like the mace, the *indra-dhvaja* also had a bulbous top, lending support to the identification of its crest as bowl-shaped. There are also references in the *Vāmana-Purāṇa* (42.35. 39) to the *gaṇa*-chieftains supporting *kalaśa-dhvaja* and *kumbha-dhvaja*, standards with bowl-motifs.

5.1. The 'triangle-headed standard' symbol on coins

One of the frequent symbols depicted on the punch-marked coins (from c. 4th century BC) and the local and tribal coins of the Early Historical Period (up to c. 3rd century AD) is known to numismatists as the 'triangle-headed standard'. The symbol essentially consists of a crest looking like an inverted triangle on a staff and held in position by a pin underneath and decorated with a couple of streamers generally at the top right (fig. 39.6a). Punch-marked coins impressed with this motif have been found at widely scattered sites all over the sub-continent from Taxila in the northwest to Patna in the east and Amaravati and Madras in the south (Gupta 1963: symbols 182, 185, 292; Sharma 1990: pl. 55 & App. II D-4). The motif is also found on many local and tribal coins issued by the Audumbaras, Kunindas and Yaudheyas in the north (Saran 1972) and by the Andhras (Sarma 1980) and their successors in the Deccan. Recently a coin-mould was excavated at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, with this motif (Cunningham & Allchin 1992: 165, fig. 16a). The wide provenance of the symbol shows that it was not the standard of any particular tribe, clan or dynasty, but had a special and pre-eminent place over all other personal or dynastic standards.

5.2. Identification of the 'triangle-headed standard' with *indra-dhvaja*

Among the modern scholars James Prinsep (1835: 628) was the earliest to identify the 'triangle-headed standard' with *jaya-dhvaja*. V. S. Agrawala (1965: 70) has also identified the symbol with *indra-dhvaja* or *vaijayantī* standard sacred to Indra. I. K. Sarma (1980: 72) describes the motif occurring on the Andhra coins as *Indra-yaṣṭī*, a royal symbol of authority. It is indeed astonishing that despite the scanty descriptions in the Vedic, purāṇic and epic literature, ancient Indian art tradition had kept the memory of the shape and name of this important motif alive and preserved it for posterity. It is to this lucky circumstance that we owe our knowledge of the shape of the *indra-dhvaja* enabling us to compare it with that of the Harappan standard depicted on the seals.

5.3. Clue to the identification of the 'triangle-head'

The vital clue to the identification of the true nature of the so-called 'triangle-head' of the standard is the occurrence of variant forms of the motif with a hemispherical bowl-like crest (fig. 39.6b) and the trapezoid-shaped trough-like crest (fig. 39.6c). See especially the variant forms of the symbol occurring on the punch-marked coins illustrated by Savita Sharma (1990: pl. 55, B-1, 6-8, C-1, 5), clearly showing the hemispherical bowl-like crest of the standard. We can now see that what has been conventionally described by numismatists as the 'triangle-head' of the standard is only one of the variant forms of the crest. The triangular form can be compared with a V-shaped wineglass-like cup and the hemispherical form

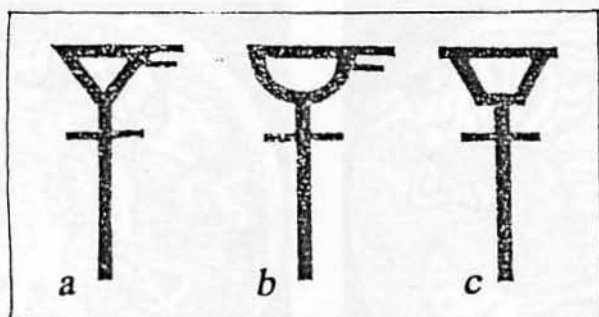


Fig. 39.6. Forms of *indra-dhvaja* ('triangle-headed standard').

Fig. 39.6a. with V-like wineglass-shaped cup (Sharma 1990: pl. 55, A-1); Fig. 39.6b. with U-like hemispherical bowl (Sharma 1990: pl. 55, C-1); Fig. 39.6c. with trapezoid-shaped trough (based on figs. 39.7 & 9).

with a U-shaped bowl. It is interesting to compare the similar V-like and U-like variations of the 'cup' sign in the Indus script (Mahadevan 1977: 790). The predominance of the V-form (giving a flat triangular appearance to the crest) on the punch-marked coins is no doubt due to the extreme constraint on space in using minute punches to impress the symbols. This will become evident when we proceed to consider the evidence of the larger coins, seals, and sealings with adequate space to portray in relief the crest of the standard, which clearly resembles a hemispherical bowl or a trapezoid-shaped trough.

6. Evidence from larger coins, seals and sealings

6.1. Coin-motifs

Indra-dhvaja occurs on the bull and elephant types of coins issued by the Andhra kings Sātakarṇi I, Sātavāhana and Sātakarṇi II (Sarma 1980: 72, pl. A-1, 3, 6). On some of the bull type lead coins of Sātakarṇi I (e.g. fig. 39.7), the standard, as pointed out by I. K. Sarma, appears 'as a trough or receptacle in front of the mouth of the animal'. I. K. Sarma's description brings to mind the very similar remark made by V. S. Agrawala (1965: 33) on the lower bowl of the Harappan cult object: 'The bowl-like object may be a *kuṇḍa* from which the deity symbolized as the unicorn (*śṛṅga-vṛṣa*) quaffed his portion of an exhilarating drink.'

6.2. Glass sealings

Three unusual square glass sealings dated in the Śuṅga-Sātavāhana Period found in and around Ujjain bear the impressive relief of an elephant to the right with raised trunk facing the *indra-dhvaja* motif (Wakankar 1985: 96). The sealings are uninscribed; however, they are attributed to the Andhra dynasty on stylistic grounds. Though Wakankar describes the motif in front of the elephant as the



Fig. 39.7. *Indra-dhvaja* with bowl-like crest on the coin of Sātakarni I (Sarma 1980: pl. A.-1).



Fig. 39.9. *Indra-dhvaja* with trough-like crest on a unique seal from Karur (unpublished; courtesy A. Seetharaman).



Fig. 39.8a-c. *Indra-dhvaja* with bowl-like crest on the glass sealings from Ujjain (Wakankar 1985: 96).

'triangle-headed standard' routinely following the numismatists' convention, the crest of the motifs in the sealings is not triangular, but hemispherical; two of them look like U-shaped bowls and one has the appearance of an inverted basket (fig. 39.8a-c).

6.3. *Indra-dhvaja* motif on an unpublished seal from Karur

Quite recently a unique bronze seal (fig. 39.9) was picked up from the bed of the Amaravati River near Karur, the famous ancient capital of the Cera dynasty of the Saṅgam Age in Tamilnadu (unpublished; illustration in fig. 39.9 is drawn from the original seal and a wax impression by the courtesy of Mr A. Seetharaman). The seal is conical in shape with a flat circular face (diam. 20 mm) and is unin-

scribed. It depicts the *indra-dhvaja* comprising a trapezoid-shaped trough (with horizontal parallel striations on its side) as the crest, a dowel pin below to hold the vessel in place, a tall staff and a piece of drapery (folds indicated by hatched lines on it) attached to the middle of the staff. To one side of the standard, a sword is depicted. Above the standard is a galloping horse with folded legs. The mouth of the animal is just above the bowl as if it is about to drink from it. It is likely that the seal is in some way connected with the celebration of the annual Indra Festival at Karur, no doubt on the same lines as at Pukār (Kāvrippūmpaṭṭiṇam), so graphically described in the Tamil epics *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*. Alternatively the seal may depict a victory celebration after a battle.

Two square copper coins recently found at the same site depict the *indra-dhvaja* symbol on the obverse (in one case with the elephant and the other with the horse) and the bow and arrow emblem of the Ceras on the reverse (unpublished; I have studied the coins in the collections of Mr A. Seetharaman with his kind permission). The coins and the seal appear to be contemporaneous with the coins and sealings of the early Sātavāhana Period exhibiting the *indra-dhvaja* motif. The importance of the seal lies in the fact that it not only depicts quite realistically the crest of the standard as a vessel, but also indicates that even as late as around the turn of the Christian Era, the association of the bowl-crest of the *indra-dhvaja* with a sacred drink had not been forgotten.

7. Conclusion

The argument of this paper is summed up in fig. 39.10 which schematically shows the evolution of the standard under consideration from the Harappan sacred filter standard, (a) with twin bowls and (b) with the lower bowl only, to the *indra-dhvaja* of later literature depicted on coins, seals and sealings of the Early Historical Period with (c) a trapezoid-shaped trough, (d) a U-shaped hemispherical bowl and (e) a V-shaped wineglass-like cup, as the crest. The variations of the U-

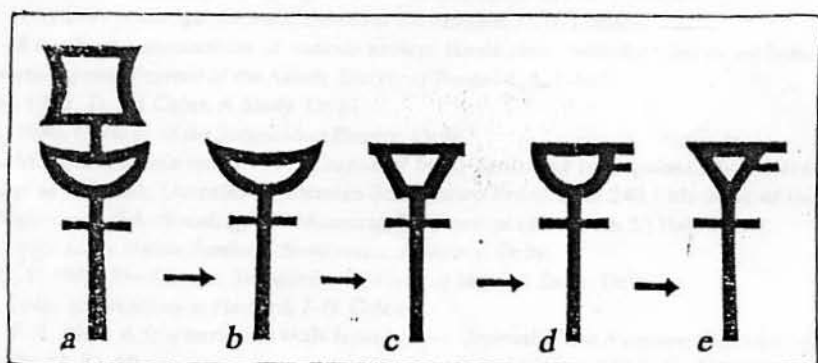


Fig. 39.10. Schematic diagram showing the evolution of Harappan sacred filter standard into *indra-dhvaja* ('triangle-headed standard'). Harappan filter standard: with twin bowls (a); with the lower bowl only (b). *Indra-dhvaja* ('triangle-headed standard'): with trapezoid-shaped trough (c); with hemispherical bowl (d); with wineglass-shaped cup (e).

like, V-like and trapezoid-shaped forms clearly establish the true nature of the crest of the standard as a vessel. A vessel serving as the insignia of the standard of Indra has to be the *soma* bowl so frequently associated with Indra in the *Ṛg V.* And finally the shape of the bowl-crested standard resembles the Harappan sacred filter too closely for the resemblance to be accidental. If the case made out in the paper is found to be convincing, we may perhaps have here a possible key to some of the secrets of the Indus script.

Note

Figs. 1 to 5 are reproduced from my previous paper (Mahadevan 1985). Figs. 6 to 10 have been specially drawn for this paper by Mr P. Ramaswamy, artist, after the sources acknowledged above.

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