Vestiges of
Indus Civilisation
in Old Tamil

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Introduction

0.1 It is indeed a great privilege to be invited to deliver the prestigious Tamilnadu Endowment Lecture at the Annual Session of the Tamilnadu History Congress. I am grateful to the Executive and to the General Body of the Congress for the signal honour bestowed on me. I am not a historian. My discipline is epigraphy, in which I have specialised in the rather arcane fields of the Indus Script and Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. It is rather unusual for an epigraphist to be asked to deliver the keynote address at a History Congress. I am all the more pleased at the recognition accorded to Epigraphy, which is, especially in the case of Tamilnadu, the foundation on which the edifice of history has been raised.

0.2 Let me also at the outset declare my interest. I have two personal reasons to accept the invitation, despite my advanced age and failing health. This session is being held at Tiruchirapalli, where I was born and brought up. I am happy to be back in my home town to participate in these proceedings. I am also eager to share with you some of my recent and still-not-fully-published findings relating to the interpretation of the Indus Script. My studies have gradually led me to the conclusion that the Indus Script is not merely Dravidian linguistically, but is also culturally much closer to Old Tamil polity than has been recognised so far. I am aware that the first reaction to this claim would be one of incredulity. I ask for your willing suspension of disbelief and to allow me to place before you some of the evidence I have gathered

during four decades of intensive study of the sources, the Indus texts and Old Tamil anthologies. Within the time at my disposal, I can only provide a few important results. I hope to publish a fuller account of my research in my forthcoming book, *Interpreting the Indus Script: A Dravidian model* .

Part 1
The Indus Civilisation

l.1 It is not possible to include within the scope of this brief presentation, an adequate discussion of the complex and controversial issues relating to the Indus Civilisation and its writing. (For a readable and affordable general introduction, see Possehl 2002, Indian Edition). The best I can hope to do on this occasion is to present, in brief outline, my views before proceeding with the subject matter of this lecture.

l.2 The Indus or Harappan Civilisation was, by far, the most extensive in the ancient world.(See Map in Fig.l) The Civilisation evolved from indigenous cultures over a long period of time from Early Neolithic in the 8th millennium BCE. It spread over a million square kilometres in the North-West regions of South Asia. It lasted from ca.2600 to l900 BCE during its mature urban phase and from ca.1900 to l300 BCE during the period of its decline and final disappearance. The Civilisation extended southward during its last phase up to Daimabad in the upper Godavari valley in Western Deccan well within the Dravidian-speaking regions in pre-historic times. Gujarat and Maharashtra were included along with Andhra, Karnataka and Tamilnadu in the traditional enumeration of the *Pañca-Drāviḍa* territories.

Dravidian Authorship of the Indus Civilisation

l.3 There is substantial archaeological evidence to support the view that the Indus Civilisation was pre-Aryan (See Parpola l994, Bryant 200l, Trautmann 2005, Romila Thapar et al 2006 and, especially, Anthony 2007). The Indus Civilisation was
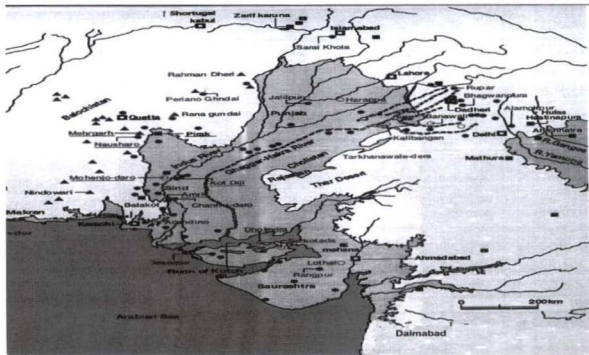
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Fig .l Map of the Indus Civilisation

urban, while the Vedic culture was rural and pastoral. The Indus seals depict many animals but not the horse. The chariot with spoked wheels is also not depicted. The horse and the chariot with spoked wheels were the defining features of the Aryan-speaking people. The Indus religion as revealed by the pictorial depiction on seals included worship of a buffalo-horned male god, mother-goddesses, the pipal tree and the serpent, and possibly the phallic symbol. Such modes of worship present in Hinduism are known to be derived from the aboriginal population and are totally alien to the religion of the *Rig Veda (RV)*. In general, the Aryan mode of worship is centred on the fire altar (*agni* and the *homa-kuṇḍa*), while the Dravidian mode is based on water. The so-called 'Great Bath' at Mohenjodaro was the direct forerunner of the temple 'tanks' of Hinduism.

1.4   There is also substantial linguistic evidence favouring Dravidian authorship of the Indus Civilisation. (For the best account, see Asko Parpola 1994.) The evidence includes the presence of Brahui, a Dravidian language still spoken in the Indus region, Dravidian loan words in the *RV*, the substratum influence of Dravidian on Indo-Aryan as shown by the presence of retroflex consonants in the *RV* and major modifications in the Prakrit dialects, moving them closer to the Dravidian than to the Indo-European family of languages. Computer analysis of the Indus texts reveals that the language had *suffixes* only (as in Dravidian) and no prefixes (as in Indo-Aryan) or infixes (as in Munda). It is significant that all the three concordance-makers (Hunter, Parpola and Mahadevan) point to Dravidian as the most likely language of the Indus texts.

1.5   The decline and fall of the Indus civilisation is generally attributed to natural causes such as adverse climatic conditions, tectonic upheavals, changing and dried-up river courses, lowered fertility due to over-exploitation and increased salinity of the soil. I would add to this list loosening of social

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and ideological bonds and internal strife as factors contributing to the eventual disintegration of the Harappan polity.

The Aryan Immigration

1.6 Aryan-speaking people migrated to South Asia only after ca.1900 BCE, that is, after the decline and collapse of the mature phase of the Indus Civilisation. The incoming Aryans must have been much fewer in numbers when compared to the vast indigenous population of the Indus Civilisation. But the Aryans could achieve elite dominance, facilitated as much by their mobility and better weapons as by the disintegration of the Harappan polity into numerous smaller communities without effective central authority or leadership. In course of time, the Aryan speech prevailed in North India, as majority of the local population switched over to the dominant language leading to the creation of a composite society and culture long before the date of the *RV* (ca. 1500-1300 BCE). While most of the population stayed back, a substantial number of Harappans also migrated southwards from the upper Ganga-Yamuna doab as well as the Gujarat regions as recorded in Old Tamil literature. They achieved elite dominance over the local Late Neolithic people in South India and founded, in course of time, the Megalithic and Iron Age civilisations, the nuclei of the Andhra and the successor states in the Deccan and the triple Kingdoms, Cēra, Cōḷa, and Pāṇṭiya, in the Tamil country.

1.7 This is perhaps the best place to clarify that I employ the terms 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' purely in the linguistic sense without any racial or ethnic connotation. It cannot be otherwise, as people could, and often did, switch over from one language to another. Speakers of the Aryan languages have indistinguishably merged with speakers of Dravidian and Munda languages millennia ago, creating a composite Indian society, containing elements inherited from every

source. It is thus more likely that the Indus art, religious motifs and craft traditions survived and can be traced in Sanskrit literature from the days of the *RV*, and also in Old Tamil traditions recorded in the Caṅkam poetry. This is indeed the basic assumption that underlies my work on the interpretation of the Indus Script through bi-lingual parallels.

1.8   It is claimed that the presence of only a few Dravidian words and that too only in the later sections of the *RV*, militates against the view that the Indus Civilisation was Dravidian. There can be two answers to this objection. Firstly, one cannot expect the highly trained and motivated professional priests to allow loan words from other languages in the sacred hymns composed by them. Secondly, statistics confined to loan words alone are insufficient to decide the issue. One must also take into account loan translations from Dravidian into Old Indo-Aryan. Even the strictest of the composers of the sacred hymns of the *RV* could not avoid loan translations which happened to be their own cherished clan names and titles, whose ultimate origin was forgotten by the time the hymns were composed. I refer in particular to what are known as the BEARER ideograms in the Indus Script. I have shown earlier in a series of papers (Mahadevan 1970, 1975, 1980, 1982 and 1986) that the frequent Harappan title BEARER originally meant a priestly functionary carrying ceremonially on a yoke food offerings to the deity. The corresponding Dravidian expression *poṟay* 'bearer, sustainer' was translated in the *RV* as *Bharata* (lit., 'bearer'), the name of the most prominent of the early Aryan clans mentioned in the earliest Family Books of the *RV*. (Incidentally, this is the source of the name Bhārata for India.) I shall revert to this theme in the later part of my lecture.

The Indus Script

1.9   The Indus Script originated in picture-writing. Many of the pictographic signs in the script are clearly recognisable

(e.g.) man, archer, load-bearer, fish, bird, etc.

| MAN | ARCHER | BEARER | FISH | BIRD |

Many other signs are to be stylised to be recognised. There are about 400-450 signs in the Indus Script. The exact number cannot be ascertained as one cannot always distinguish basic signs from mere graphic variants. The number of signs reveals the typology of the script. The number falling in the range of mid-hundreds is too small for a fully logographic script (like the Chinese) and far too large for an alphabetic script (like the Semitic) or even for a simple, open syllabary (like the Linear-B script). The evidence of the sign-count is compelling that the Indus Script is a logo-syllabic writing consisting of word-signs and phonetic syllables. Two main characteristics of the script are modifications of signs by the addition of strokes and combination of two or more basic signs. The Indus Script remained more or less 'frozen' during the long period it was in use without developing linear or cursive writing. This may indicate tight priestly control over writing and the absence of popular literacy. The Indus Script fell into disuse after the decline and disappearance of the Indus civilisation. The Indo-Aryans apparently could not adapt the Indus Script to their language because of its ideographic and rebus-based character which was too closely tied with the Harappan language, urban organisation and ideology. The failure to adapt the Indus Script by the Aryans may also be due to their strong tradition of oral transmission of scriptures. When, one thousand and five hundred years later, the Brāhmī script was created to serve the needs of the Iron Age civilisation in the Ganga-Yamuna doab, it was an altogether new language. Efforts to connect the Indus and the Brāhmī scripts have not been successful.

1.10 Most of the inscriptions are very short with an average length of four or five signs only. The longest text has only

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twenty-six signs spread over three sides of a sealing. No long narrative texts or accounting tablets have been found. There are no bilingual inscriptions to aid decipherment. In these circumstances, it is clear that a complete phonetic decipherment of Indus Script is unlikely to happen unless some totally unforeseen discoveries bring to light bilingual texts or glossaries most likely on Babylonian clay tablets.

## Formal Analysis of the Indus Texts: Preliminary Results

1.ll It is not correct to claim that we know nothing about the Indus Script. Formal analysis of the script through well-known techniques like frequency-distribution or positional-statistical analyses have led to the following advances which are recognised by most scholars in the field:

(i) **Direction of writing:** One of the few well-established facts about the Indus Script is that it is written generally from the right, though there are exceptional cases of writing from the left. The direction has been proved from a study of the external features of writing (e.g., overlapping incisions on wet clay) and more importantly from a study of the sequences.

(ii) **Segmentation of texts:** Several analytical studies from the days of Hunter have established that it is possible to segment the Indus texts into constituent words and phrases through simple frequency-distribution analysis as well as sophisticated computer studies (Nisha Yadav et al 2008). It is now generally accepted that a 'phrase' (minimum textual unit) consists only of one to three signs in length.

(iii) The Indus signs can be classified as follows:
  a. **ideograms** whose pictorial significance can be understood in many though not all cases;
  b. **phonograms** which can be read only by

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employing the technique of rebus writing; these signs cannot be interpreted without making an assumption about the underlying language as puns are language-specific;

c. **conventional signs** like strokes and other modifications. They cannot be 'read' but their function can be understood from structural analysis;

d. Analysis has shown that **compound signs** and **modifications** appear to be ideographic and not phonetic in character. This inference is based on the observation that in most cases the ligatured or modified signs have the same distributional pattern as the corresponding basic or unmodified signs.

(iv) **Numerals:** The numeral signs 1 to 10 have been identified by the logical sequence of the strokes and their use on pottery and bronze implements obviously for enumeration. However, numeral signs are also employed in ideographic (non-numeral) function. The largest number occurring on a bronze axe is 76. Higher numbers, especially 100 and 1000, must exist in the inscriptions, but have not been identified. The Indus numerals are shown below (excluding variants).
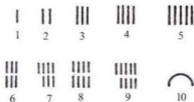
Numerals in the Indus Script

(v) **Syntax:** Most signs in the Indus Script are word-signs. A word-sign represents either a root or a suffix. The root sign may be a noun or an

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adjective, the same sign serving either purpose according to context. Adjectives precede the nouns they qualify. This is shown by the numerals preceding the enumerated objects. Terminal suffixes (JAR and ARROW signs) seem to be grammatical markers, most probably of gender and number. Another class of suffixes consisting of super-script strokes occurring in the middle of texts seem to be case-markers, most probably of the genitive or locative cases.

Linguistic Study of the Indus Script

1.12 No computer can decipher an unknown script. Formal analysis can help only up to a point by indicating the probable typology of the script and functions of the signs. Beyond this, one has to develop a linguistic model to fit the known facts revealed by formal analysis. I have chosen Dravidian for reasons which I have summarised earlier. An important aspect of my work is that it attempts to <u>interpret</u> the Indus Script and not to <u>decipher</u> it. The difference between the two is fundamental. The decipherer has to discover the exact phonetic values of each sign, which can be only one or at the most two, depending on whether the sign is read as an ideogram or as a phonetic syllable. As I have stated earlier, it is still not possible to achieve complete phonetic decipherment in the absence of bi-lingual inscriptions or long, narrative texts. I have, therefore, developed an alternative method of interpreting the Indus Script with the aid of bi-lingual parallels drawn from Dravidian as well as Indo-Aryan linguistic and cultural sources. The study is more anthropological or sociological, based on the survival of myths and symbols, and depends less on the rigorous methodology of linguistics (For details, see Mahadevan 1973 & 1986.)

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Later Survivals of the Indus Script in South India

1.13   As mentioned earlier, Daimabad in western Deccan is the southernmost outpost of the Indus Civilisation in its last phase (ca.1800 BCE). The evidence of pottery graffiti suggests the migration of some of the descendants of the Harappans to South India after the fall of the Indus Civilisation. In a classic paper published in 1960, B.B. Lal compared the signs of the Indus Script with the symbols occurring as pottery graffiti in chalcolithic and megalithic cultures. He found that "eighty-nine per cent of the megalithic symbols go back to Chalcolithic-Harappan times (and) conversely, eighty-five per cent of the Harappan-Chalcolithic symbols continue down to the megalithic times". In the five decades since Lal published his findings, many more excavations have taken place in Tamilnadu. Virtually, every ancient site has yielded quantities of graffiti-bearing pottery, mostly from the megalithic-Iron Age levels. Lal's work has shown that there does seem to be a genetic relationship at a deeper level between the signs of the Indus Script and the megalithic symbols. Identical-looking signs may share the same semantic significance. More recent discoveries show that megalithic pottery depicts not merely isolated Indus-like symbols, but, sequences of two or more symbols strongly suggesting linguistic connection which can only be Dravidian.

Inscribed Neolithic Stone Axe from Sembiyan Kandiyur

1.14   The earliest and most significant archaeological discovery connecting the Indus Civilisation with Tamilnadu is the neolithic polished stone axe inscribed with Indus-like characters found in 2006 at Sembiyan Kandiyur near Mayiladuthurai in the Lower Kaveri Delta (Fig.2). It was a chance discovery. A school teacher in the village was digging a small pit in his backyard garden to plant banana and coconut saplings. He found two stones which were later identified by the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology as neolithic

stone axes datable to ca.2000 - 1000 BCE. As there are no hills in the Lower Kaveri Delta, the stone axes must have reached the site in the course of trading in stone tools in neolithic times. The axes appear to be made of dolerite or charnockite stone available in South Arcot and Salem regions of Tamilnadu.
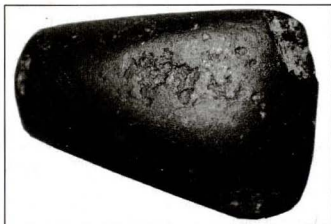

Fig.2 Inscribed Neolithic Stone Axe from Sembiyan Kandiyur

1.15   One of the axes is inscribed by pecking on the stone from left to right. Three symbols are reasonably well preserved. I had earlier thought that there was one more symbol at the right end (Mahadevan 2006). However, on further re-examination from enlarged high-resolution photographs, I have come to the conclusion that the last mark on the right is abrasion caused by slight damage to the stone at the broader end (where there are other similar marks of damage). I have no doubt that the three symbols on the stone axe are derived from the corresponding signs of the Indus script. I discuss the evidence below.

1.16 For an expert and objective assessment of the discovery, I would refer you to the recent paper (Asko Parpola, Dorian Q. Fuller and Nicole Boivin 2007). Fuller and Boivin are archaeologists actively engaged in field studies on neolithic sites in South India. According to them, the neolithic Sembiyan Kandiyur axe can be dated to ca.1500 BCE or later. Intensive stone-axe production from the neolithic sites in Andhra and Karnataka was during 1400-1300 BCE, somewhat earlier than the earliest megalithic phase. They consider that the symbols on the axe may be "megalithic graffiti marks rather than the Indus Script". I have no problem in accepting the expert opinion on the likely date of the stone axe between the latest neolithic and earliest megalithic phases. The symbols could have been incised on the neolithic axe in the early megalithic times, especially because it is now known that Indus-like symbols and even sequences appear on megalithic-Iron Age pottery in Tamilnadu. (See evidence from Sulur and Sanur discussed below).

1.17 Asko Parpola, the leading expert on the Indus script, agrees that "the first two marks from left to right do evoke the two Indus signs with which they are identified" and does not deny that the identifications are 'possible' but remains 'skeptical'. His skepticism is based mainly on the ground that marks on the axe resembling 'N and U" are "too general shapes to prove the Harappan affinity" (Asko Parpola, Dorian Q. Fuller and Nicole Boivin 2007). I beg to differ as the totality of recent evidence available from this axe as well as pottery graffiti especially from Sulur and Sanur does not justify such skepticism.

1.18 The symbols on the neolithic axe correspond to the following signs of the Indus script (arranged here from left to right as they appear on the axe and referred to as the left, middle and right signs) :

Inscription on the Neolithic Axe from Sembiyan Kandiyur

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The only slight abnormality in shape occurs in the middle sign,
the most frequent JAR sign of the Indus script, which lacks here
the two small projections at the right top. They may not have
been incised, or they may have worn off. However, what re-
mains is more than sufficient to identify the sign. The identity
of the middle sign is confirmed even when one considers the
sequence of the left and the middle signs. They correspond to one of
the most frequent sign-pairs in the Indus texts occuring 114 times and
ranking 5th in the order of frequency. See the following sequence
in Mahadevan 1977: *Concordance* : 196-204:

$$\text{ᘯ ꝶ}$$

I have interpreted this sign-pair as *muruku aṉṟu*. (See Note on
muruku below.) But linguistic identification is not relevant to the
present question whether the symbols on the axe can be related
to the signs of the Indus script.

1.19   My recent studies on the symbol at right on the axe have
also yielded interesting results. If the inscription on the axe is
read from right to left (according to the normal direction of the
Indus texts), we get a sign-pair which occurs thrice in the
Indus texts. Furthermore, two related sign-pairs occur twice
each in the Indus texts. These are shown below (to be read
from right to left).

Sign pair on the axe **Related Sign pairs in Indus Texts**
and in Indus Texts

(Mahadevan 1977: *Concordance* : 650, 673)

Thus it is also possible to read the inscription on the stone axe
from the right, as the right and middle signs form a known
sequence in the Indus texts, and as the left sign is oriented as in
texts running from right to left. It is also noteworthy that the
right sign on the stone axe is attested in the inscription on the
bronze axe found at Chanhudaro (Mackay Pl.LXXIV : 1).

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1.20   An objective evaluation of the evidence presented above can lead to the only conclusion that the inscription on the neolithic axe from Sembiyan Kandiyur is closely related to the Indus script and that the sign sequences (both from left and right) indicate links with the language of the Indus Civilisation.

Terracotta Dish from Sulur with Indus-like symbols

1.21   Sulur near Coimbatore in Tamilnadu is a well known ancient site which has yielded several antiquities assigned to the late megalithic-Iron Age periods. An inscribed terracotta dish from Sulur dated in ca. first century BCE is in the British Museum (No.1935.4-19.15). The large circular grey terracotta dish is in an excellent state of preservation (Fig.3A). It is incised on the concave inner side with a large X-like symbol occupying the whole field. Four other symbols in a smaller size are incised within the lower quadrant.
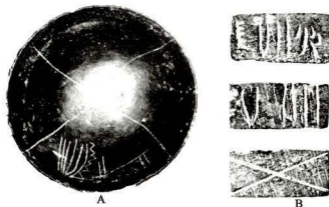

Fig.3 A: Sulur Dish.   B: Harappa Tablet

The five symbols are labelled A to E (from the right) and given conventional names for discussion :

A : A slanting straight line with a pair of short strokes
      attached near either end in opposite directions. 'Jar'.

B. A slightly curved base line to the left, with a saw tooth-
      like line to the right. 'Harrow'.

C. A tall V-shaped cup. 'Cup'.

D. Three tall, vertical, parallel lines. 'Three tall lines'.

E. X-like crossed lines occupying the field. 'X'

It is remarkable that all the five symbols on the Sulur Dish
have near-identical parallels occurring in the same sequence
in a longer Indus text on a three-sided prism-like miniature
stone tablet from Harappa (ASI 63.ll/75). The tablet is
inscribed on all three-sides. (See Fig. 3B.)

1.22 The first two signs from the right on the first side of the
Harappa tablet are not found on the Sulur Dish. The next four
signs (spread over the first two sides of the tablet) have
parallels on the Sulur Dish with the same sequence. As the
JAR sign is never initial, it is likely that the sign is preceded on
the Sulur Dish by the symbol X occupying the field. It is
interesting that the corresponding sign X also occupies the
whole field on the Harappa tablet. However, the 'four tall
lines' on the Harappa tablet are replaced by 'three tall lines'
on the Sulur Dish. Both signs form frequent pairs with the
'cup' sign in Indus texts. Further, while the pair Jar-Harrow is
written from right to left on both objects, the pair 'three/four
tall lines-cup' occurs in opposite directions on the two objects.
Such reversal of direction is not uncommon at Harappa when
the lines of texts occur on different sides of miniature tablets
or sealings. (For further discussion, See Mahadevan 2007.)

1.23 The comparison between the megalithic symbols on
the Sulur Dish and the corresponding Indus signs on the
Harappa tablet shows that the South Indian megalithic script
is related to the Indus script. Further, the common sequences

found on the Sulur Dish and the Harappa tablet indicate that the languages of the two inscriptions are related to each other.

Indus-like symbols on Pottery from Sanur

1.24   Sanur near Tindivanam in Tamilnadu is known for its large number of megalithic graves, some of which have been excavated (Banerjee and Soundara Rajan 1959). The megaliths at the site have been assigned to ca.2-1 centuries BCE.
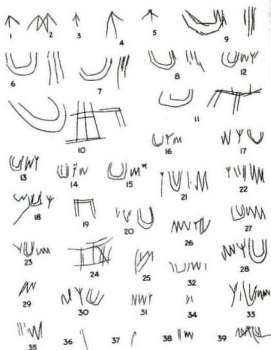

Fig 4 : Megalithic graffiti symbols on pottery from Sanur
(Fig.8, Banerjee and Soundara Rajan 1959)

The grave goods include pottery with graffiti marks, many of them occurring in sequences of three symbols each but in no particular fixed order (Banerjee and Soundara Rajan 1959). (See Fig.4.) According to B. B. Lal (1960), he undertook a photographic comparison of Harappan, chalcolithic and megalithic pottery graffiti when he was particularly struck by the similarity of a rather specialised symbol from Sanur (Fig.5 A, symbol at left) with one in the Indus script (Fig. 5 B & 5 C, left). I have identified the related sign (Fig.5 C, right) as *muruku*, the Dravidian god.
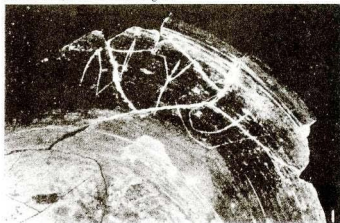

A

B

C

Fig5 A : Sanur.   B : Indus inscriptions.   C : Signs 47 & 48.

1.25   I am as much struck with the similarity as Lal was. However, Asko Parpola regards the similarity as 'accidental' (Parpola, Fuller and Boivin 2007). His argument that the Indus-like sign (in Fig.5A, left) has been "accidentally drawn with the loop on the right, the intended shape being actually M-like" is, according to me, the reverse of the process seen at Sanur. A comparison of all the related symbols at Sanur (in Fig.4) will show that while the Indus sign was written from right to left, the corresponding symbol at Sanur was written from left to right. This reversal has led to the 'head' of the anthropomorphic figure being attenuated or replaced by a flourish added to the top right of the symbol. It is this process that has led to forms like M, W, N, N(reversed) and even horizontal zigzag lines. These changes must have happened over many generations represented by the burials at Sanur. Here we have an exceedingly interesting case of evolution of an Indus sign in the megalithic age.

Muruku symbol from other megalithic sites
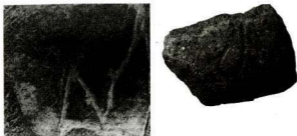
Fig : 6 Megalithic graffiti symbols from Pattanam (Muciṛi)

1.26   Two megalithic potsherds were found in 2005 during the trial excavations at Pattanam, Kerala, (most probably to be identified with ancient Muciṛi). (See Fig.6.) Each sherd is incised with a solitary large-sized symbol, which appear to

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be identical, though one of them is in rectilinear and the other in cursive style. The graffiti are closely similar in shape with the *muruku* sign of the Indus Script. (Selvakumar, Shajan and Mahadevan 2006).

1.27 Excavations by the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology at Mangudi in Tamilnadu have yielded three potsherds incised with symbols resembling the *muruku* sign of the Indus Script (*Excavations at Mangudi* 2003: Figs. at pp.45, 47 and 48.)

A Note on the muruku Sign in the Indus Script

1.28 There are two near-identical signs in the Indus Script (Nos. 47 & 48; See Fig 5C) depicting a seated god identifed as *muruku* summarised in this Note. (For details, see Mahadevan l999). A deity in the Indus Script is likely to be an ideogram with a recognisable anthropomorphic form. The sign will also be of frequent occurrence especially in repetitive passages suggesting some religious formula. Signs 47 and 48 representing a seated human-like figure meet the requirements and are identified as *prima facie* representing a popular Harappan deity. The deity is represented as a skeletal body with a prominent row of ribs (in S.48 only) and is shown seated on his haunches, body bent and contracted, with lower limbs folded and knees drawn up. The two related but distinct signs of the Indus Script seem to have later coalesced into one symbol (resemblingS.47) outside the Harappan region. (For pictorial parallels from later times, see illustrations in Mahadevan l999).

1.29 According to my interpretation, the seated posture is suggestive of divinity and the skeletal body gives the linguistic clue to the name of the deity. The basic Dravidian root *mur* (Ta.*muri*, Ka. *muruhu*, Pa.-, Ga. *murg*, Go. *moorga* etc., DEDR.4977) means 'to bend, contract, fold' etc. Applying the technique of rebus, we get *mur* (Ta. *muruñku, murukku*;

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Ma. *mūruka*, Kol., Nk. *murk*, Malt. *murke* etc., DEDR 4975) meaning 'to destroy, kill, cut', etc. Thus, the name of the deity *muruku* and his characteristics 'destroyer, killer' are derived. The skeletal form in the ideogram suggests that the god was conceived as a disembodied spirit.

1.30   Turning to the oldest layer of Tamil Caṅkam literature, we find that *muruku/murukaṉ* was a spirit who manifested himself only by possessing his priest (*vēlaṉ*) or young maidens. The priest performed the *veṟi* dance to pacify the spirit. The earliest references to *muruku* in Old Tamil portray him as a 'wrathful killer' indicating his prowess as a war god and hunter (P.L. Samy 1990). Another important clue is the frequent association of *muruku* with the load-bearer signs in the Indus texts, as *murukaṉ* as *kāvaṭi* in the Tamil society.

Part II

Vestiges of Indus Civilisation in Old Tamil

The Cēra who served food at the Bhārata war

பெரும்சோற்று மிகுபதம் வரையாது கொடுத்தோய்
Peruñcōṟu miku patam varaiyātu koṭuttōy
'you gave well-cooked *peruñcōṟu* without limit'

2.1. *Puṟanāṉūṟu (Puṟam)* is an anthology of four hundred poems compiled in the early centuries CE, but containing much older oral bardic traditions (Kailasapathy 1968; Hart 1975). The very first poem in the *Puṟam* (not counting the invocatory verse added later) starts off with an allusion to the legend of the Cēra king who distributed food on the battlefield of the Bhārata war. This is arguably the most debated reference by Tamil scholars and historians ever since the classic edition of the *Puṟam* was first published by U.Ve.Swaminathaiyar in 1894. I do not propose to review the voluminous literature (e.g., cf. Arunachalam 1966; Durai Rangaswamy 1966). I agree neither with those who take the story as the literal truth, nor with those who dismiss it as fabricated flattery. I interpret the myth as a dim recollection of a very remote past, when the ancestors of the Cērar or Poṟaiyar clan were involved with distribution of food in the Indus Civilisation, at a time as far anterior to the *Mahābhārata*, as the latter is to the *Puṟanāṉūṟu*.

2.2 I begin with a literal translation of the passage:

Oh Vāṇavarampaṉ[1], the great! You gave well-cooked *peruñcōṟu* [2] without limit, when the hostile Twice-fifty [the hundred Kauravas] wearing the golden *tumpai*[3] flowers (and) had seized the land earlier, perished on the battlefield, fighting the Five [the Pāṇḍavas] whose horses had dangling manes (*Puṟam* 2:12-16).

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Notes:

1. Vāṇavarampaṇ: one of the dynastic titles of the Cēraṟ, traditionally interpreted as 'one with the sky as the limit'. I am inclined to accept the alternative reading Vāṇavar-appaṇ 'beloved of the gods', first mooted by N. Subrahmaniyan (*Pre-Pallavan Tamil Index* 1966). This appears to be an Old Tamil translation of the Mauryan title *Devānampīya* also sported by some Sinhala kings (Indrapala 2009). This passage has to be construed as being addressed to a remote ancestor of the king to have lived in the time of the Bhārata war.

2. peruñcōṟu lit., 'great food', a technical term which means, in the present context, 'cooked rice (*piṇḍam*) offered to dead ancestors during funeral rites'. (For an explicit reference, see *Akam* 233.)

3. tumpai: a flower traditionally worn by warriors setting forth to fight. The 'golden' flowers may be an allusion to gold sequins sewn on garments.

The only other comment I have on the poem is that the additional detail in the old commentary that the Cēra distributed food to both sides in the Bhārata war is not supported by the text. There it is explicitly stated that only the Twice-fifty [Kauravas] perished in the battle; hence the peruñcōṟu was offered only to them, and not to the Five [Pāṇḍavas], the victors, who survived.

2.3 The Cēra was also known as Poṟai or Poṟaiyaṇ (pl. Poṟaiyar). The suggestion that the titles Cēra and Poṟai belonged to two different branches of the dynasty ruling from either side of the Western Ghats is not supported by textual evidence from the Caṅkam anthologies. Both titles seem to have been commonly used to refer to the Cēra dynasty as a whole.

2.4 The title *Poṟai* literally means 'bearer' derived from the root *poṟu* 'to bear'. The fact that this interpretation is not found in the Caṅkam works shows that the title was very ancient, whose meaning had been forgotten even by the time of the Caṅkam Age.

The BEARER Signs in the Indus Script : Myth and Reality

BEARER	JAR-BEARER	ARROW-BEARER
A	B	C

2.5 Among the anthropomorphic signs in the Indus Script, there is a frequent sign group showing a person carrying a yoke on his shoulders with loads suspended from either end (A). Two compound signs have JAR and ARROW signs attached as initial elements to the top of the BEARER sign (B & C). The frequency and positional distribution of the signs in the texts indicate that they represent important titles. We can thus rule out interpretations like 'porter' or 'water-carrier', though a meaning somewhat like *kāvaṭi* 'yoke for carrying religious offerings' is possible (Parpola 1981). I shall, however, pursue a more somewhat historical parallel relating to the 'yoke-bearer' as depicted in the Indus signs and not to the yoke alone. See Fig.7 for illustrations of Indus seals with BEARER signs. The three BEARER signs may be interpreted ideographically as follows :

A: Bearer (carrying a yoke with twin loads)
B: Bearer carrying a jar (sacrificial vessel with food offerings)
C: Bearer carrying arrow or lance (arms).

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A

B

C

Fig. 7 Indus seals with BEARER signs

2.6   The BEARER signs can be interpreted at two levels. Superficially, they represent religious rituals which we can recognise because such rituals have continued even at present. Thus the yoke (*kāvaṭi*) is for carrying religious offerings to the deity ; the jar ('water-pitcher') is connected with priestly ritual. But the reality behind the myth was something different. The BEARER controlled storage and distribution of food (grains). The ideogram (A) depicts him as carrying loads of grain for distribution. Wages to workers engaged in farming, construction and manufacturing would have been paid in grain. (In Dravidian, the word *kūli* means 'wages' as well as 'grain'; DEDR 1905 & 1906.)

2.7   The Indus texts provide evidence for the existence of two specialised sub-groups among the 'bearers'. The more important group (as judged from frequency) is represented by the compound JAR-BEARER sign (B). At the superficial level, he can be regarded as the priest who performed sacrifices;

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but, in reality, he seems to have controlled the Establishment, as he figures more prominently in the texts. The other group is represented by the compound ARROW-BEARER (C). The arrow or lance represents weapons in general. The ARROW-BEARER was the warrior. The ideogram can be interpreted in Dravidian as Evvi, another name for Vēḷir clan (*Puṟam* 202). The name is derived from *ey/ēvu* 'to discharge (as arrow), to throw lance or dart)' (DEDR 805).

2.8　　I interpret the elements JAR and BEARER in the compound as follows in Early Dravidian:

U̶	+	𝕏	=	𝕏̶
JAR	+	BEARER	=	JAR-BEARER
cat(a)	+	*poṟ-(ay)*	=	*cat(a)- poṟ-(ay)*
'sacrificial food'	+	'bearer'	=	'High Priest offering sacrificial food'

(For interpretation of Dr.*cat(a)* > Skt.*sata* > Pkt.*sata / sāta;* see Para 3.14 below.)

As we shall see in the sequel, these interpretations are supported by survivals of names, titles and myths in Old Tamil as well Indo-Aryan Literature.

Bearer motifs in Old Tamil

2.9　　The Dr. root *poṟu* 'to bear' (DEDR 4565) has the following connotations:

poṟu: (lit.,) 'to bear (as burden), to carry (as load)'; (figuratively) 'to forbear, to be patient'.

porai (lit.,) 'weight, load'; (figuratively) 'burden of office', patience, forbearance, etc.' (Cf. *poṟuppu* 'responsibility').

poraiyaṉ: (lit.,) 'one who carries burden or load'; (figuratively) 'one who sustains (others)'.

2.10 A common tendency in Indian tradition is for honorifics and titles to lose their original significance and become proper names. If a similar development had taken place in respect of the 'bearer' symbolism, we should find such names among the princely or priestly clans in later times. This reasoning leads us straight to the earliest and the most famous of the 'bearer' clans in ancient India.

Poṟai and Irumpoṟai

2.11 The Cēra title Poṟai means 'bearer > sustainer' from the root *poṟu* 'to bear > sustain'. The longer title Irumpoṟai was sported by the branch of the Cēra dynasty which ruled from Karūr during the Caṅkam Age. Inscriptions of the Irumpoṟai rulers have been found at Pugalur near Karūr (Mahadevan 2003 : 61&62). Their coins have also been found from the Amaravathi river at Karūr (Krishnamurthy 1997:Nos.173&174).

2.12 The title Irumpoṟai is significant. The attribute *irum-* can be interpreted in two ways:

cf. *irumai* : 'greatness' (DEDR 481)
irumai : 'two-fold state' (DEDR 474)

It is possible that both meanings were intended. In the light of the yoke-bearer sign of the Indus Script, which I interpret as *poṟay* 'bearer', the title *irum-poṟai* may also be interpreted literally as 'bearer of twin loads'. As the two loads suspended from a yoke have to be equal in weight for balancing, I wonder whether the Old Commentator of *Puṟam* 2 had this in mind when he interpreted the story in the poem as referring to equal feeding of both sides in the Bhārata war, though the poem does not mention this detail.

Cātam and Ātaṇ : A new interpretation

2.13 Early Dr. *cat(a)* seems to be the source for two separate developments in Tamil, which can now be connected in the

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light of evidence from the Indus Script :

(a) Dr. *cat(a)* > Pkt. *sata / sāta* > Te. *sādamu*, Ta. *cātam* 'cooked rice' seems to have been employed originally in the ritual sense of 'cooked rice offered to the deity before partaking', though it is now synonymous with *cōṟu* 'cooked rice'. (See Para 3.14.)
(b) Dr. *cat(a)* > Pkt. Sata / Sāta (names of Andhra dynasty ; see Para 2.19); cf. Satan̠, Cātan̠ / Sātan̠, Satiya- (inscr.); Ataṉ (inscr.), Ātan̠, Atiyan̠ (Old Tamil names with probable loss of the initial palatal c- as indicated by inscriptional evidence. (Subbarayalu 1996; Mahadevan 2003 : 588-589).Here we seem to have the ultimate connection between *cāt-(am) por̠-(ay)* 'food-bearer' and *Peruñcōr̠r̠u* Utiyan̠ Cēral Ātan̠ who is credited in a poetic metaphor with the feat of one of his remote ancestors. *Pur̠am* 2 has led us from Old Tamil to the Indus Civilisation via *Mahābhārata* !

Kāvaṭi in Tamil religious tradition

2.14 The Tamil tradition of carrying offerings to the deity on a *kāvaṭi* (yoke) may also be traced to the Indus Civilisation (Parpola 1981). The archetypical load-bearer in Tamil religious tradition is Iṭumpaṉ, the devotee of Murukaṉ, carrying two conical-shaped hills slung on either side from a yoke. It is also remarkable that the 'bearer motif' is depicted on some late medieval copper coins of Travancore, whose rulers claimed to belong to the Cēra lineage. In a variation of the *kāvaṭi* motif, the coin depicts Kr̥ṣṇa as carrying butter in two vessels slung on either side from his arms (Beena Sarasan 2008: Nos.146-148). See Fig.8.

Fig. 8 Coin of Travancore with Bearer motif

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2.15   The BEARER tradition also survived in *RV* and in later Sanskrit literature through loan-translations. The root *bhṛ* 'to bear' has similar literal and figurative connotations; (e.g.) *bhartṛ* 'lord, master, husband' as 'one who bears responsibility, sustains or maintains (the family)'. The Pkt. equivalent *bhaṭṭa* is a honorific applied, significantly, to a priest or a prince. There are similar expressions derived from *vah* 'to carry, bear'with both literal and figurative senses respectively as in *havya-vāhana*, 'one who carries offerings (*agni*)' ,and *kārya-vāhaka* 'office-bearer'. Other expressions are derived from the symbolism of the yoke as in *yugam-dhara* or *dhuram-dhara*, both literally meaning'yoke-bearer', but used as honorifics or titles.

The Bharatas 🤞

2.16   The Early Dravidian *poṟay* was translated as *bharata* lit., 'bearer'. Bharata is the name of a clan of great importance in the *RV* and later Sanskrit literature. In the RV, they appear prominently in the Third and Seventh *maṇḍalas*. During the Vedic times, the Bharatas occupied the Sindhu and Kuru-Pāñcāla regions. According to Mbh., the Kuru (Kauravas) were a Bharata clan. The recital in *Puṟam* 2 that the Cēra offered food in funeral rites to the hundred (Kauravas) has to be viewed in this context. One more detail confirming the Harappan origin of the Bharata lineage is that the Bharatas were also known in the *RV* as the Tṛtsus. In the Indus texts, the BEARER signs are also preceded by numerals (mostly 'three'). Apparently the Tṛtsu-Bharatas of the *RV* represent the re-emergence of this clan.

The Bharadvājas 🪓

2.17   The name Bharadvāja can be interpreted in Sanskrit literally as *bharad-* ('bearer' of) *-vāja (annam)* 'food'

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corresponding to Early Dravidian *cat(a)-poṟ-(ay)* with the same meaning. Bharadvāja is the reputed author of the Sixth *maṇḍala* in the *RV*. He and his descendants are referred to as singers, probably belonging to very early times. Bharadvāja as an author or seer is frequently referred to in later Vedic literature (*Vedic Index*).

The Bharanta

2.18 In one passage of the *Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa*, the term *bharant* 'bearing' occurs which is interpreted by Sāyaṇa as the 'warrior caste' (*Vedic Index*). This group may correspond to the Arrow-Bearer sign of the Indus Script.

The Bearer Motif in the Andhra tradition

2.19 The Andhra dynasty, though belonging to a Dravidian lineage, adopted Prakrit as their official language as they were earlier vassals under the Mauryas. The Andhra dynastic names seem to be derived from the JAR and BEARER signs of the Indus Civilisation, but translated into Indo-Aryan as depicted in Fig.9. (For details see Mahadevan 1975, 1982).

	JAR (with handles)	*sata-karṇa* > Sāta-karṇi	'ears of sacrificial vessel' (Andhra dynastic name)
	ARROW	*śalya*	'arrow, lance'
	BEARER	*vahana*	' bearing, carrying'
	JAR-BEARER	*sata-vahana* > Sātavāhana	'jar-bearing > food-bearer' (name of Andhra dynasty)
	ARROW-BEARER	*śalya-vahana* > Sālivāhana	' arrow-bearing > arms-bearer,' (name of Andhra dynasty)

Fig. 9 Andhra names derived from Indus signs

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2.20 The Indus heritage has been inherited by both successor civilisations, Dravidian as well as Indo-Aryan. The Dravidian inheritance is linguistic as shown by retention of root words though with modifications in later Dravidian languages. The Indo-Aryan inheritance is cultural preserved through loan-words, loan-translations and myths created to reconcile the Harappan symbolism with Sanskrit terminology. This important phenomenon is illustrated in Fig.10 with the example of the BEARER signs. The name of our country, Bhārata, is ultimately derived from the BEARER sign of the Indus Script.

	ŎŇ	ŎĤ	ŎĤ
Harappan	BEARER	JAR-BEARER (food-bearer)	ARROW-BEARER (arms-bearer)
Early Dravidian	poṟ-(ay)	cat(a)-poṟ-(ay)	ey-poṟ(-ay)
Vedic	bharata	bharadvāja	bharanta
Purāṇic (Andhra)	(-vāhana)	sātavāhana	sālivāhana
Old Tamil (Caṅkam Age)	poṟai, irumpoṟai, poṟaiyaṉ	cāta-poṟai (lit., 'food-bearer') āṭaṉ poṟaiyaṉ	evvi Name of a Vēḷir clan
Religious Tradition	kāvaṭi (Tamil), kavaḍiyā (Hindi) : ('carrying of offerings on a yoke').		

Fig.10 Harappan Heritage in Indian Historical Tradition

Aka-tt-i, Agastya And The Indus Civilisation

◊ வடபால் முனிவன் தடவினுள் தோன்றி ᶠᶠ
'vaṭapāl muṉivaṉ taṭaviṉuḷ tōṉṟi'

The 'Northern Sage' and his 'water-pitcher'

3.1 The earliest reference in Old Tamil to the myth of 'jar-born' people is found in *Puṟam* 201. The poet Kapilar tells the story in the following lines (literal translation by me):

> "Oh Vēḷ among the Vēḷir! You are descended through fortynine generations of the lineage of unwearying liberality which, arising out of the water-pitcher of the Northern Sage, ruled over Tuvarai surrounded by long and soaring walls made of bronze." (*Puṟam* 201:8-12).

Kapilar's mission is to persuade Iruṅkō Vēḷ, the king, to take into his protective custody the two daughters of Pāri, the chieftain, killed earlier in battle. Kapilar wants to please the king by heaping praise on him, reminding him of his ancient lineage famous for its liberal tradition. The poet's mission fails, but not before he records for posterity one of the most important historical references linking the Tamils of the Caṅkam Age with a very remote past.

3.2 This interesting reference has unfortunately remained obscure, as the old commentary failed to identify the 'Northern Sage' and also mis-interpreted the word *taṭavu* as (h)ōmakuṇṭam 'sacrificial fire-pit', a meaning not attested anywhere else here. M.Raghavaiyangar, in his classic *Vēḷir Varalāṟu* (1907;2004 reprint:26) has correctly re-interpreted *taṭavu* as *yāka-cāṭṭiram* 'sacrificial vessel'. But even he missed the obvious connection between Akattiyar (Agastya) and his inseparable water-pitcher.

3.3 The word *taṭavu* (variant *taṭā*) means a 'big clay pot' (DEDR 3027), etymologically related to *taṭa* 'thick, large' (DEDR 3020). The matter has now been put beyond doubt as

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the word *taṭā* occurs in a Tamil-Brāhmī inscription (ca.2nd cent. BCE) incised on a broken storage jar excavated at Kodumanal, Tamilnadu (Y.Subbarayalu 1996: No.3). See Fig.II. The fragmentary inscription reads:

> ...(*iy taṉ veṇ nir aḷi-iy taṭā*
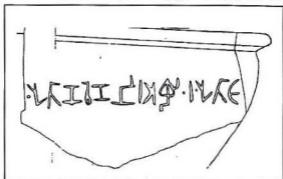> '...earthern jar storing (?) cold (and) hot water'.

Fig.II Pottery inscription from Kodumanal (ca.2nd cent. BCE)

The word *taṭā* 'jar' is also attested in Tamil literature. It occurs twice in a poem in *Nācciyār Tirumoḻi* (9:6), assigned to ca.8th cent. CE :

> *nūṟu taṭāvil veṇṇey* 'a hundred jars of butter';
> *nūṟu taṭā niṟainta akkāra aṭicil* 'a hundred jars of sweet morsel'.

3.4 U.Ve.Swaminathaiyar (1935:378-380) has tentatively identified the 'Northern Sage' of *Puṟam* 201 with one Campu Muṉivaṉ based on very late sources. However, once the meaning of *taṭavu* (*taṭā*) 'jar' is recognised, it follows almost automatically that the 'Northern Sage' must be Akattiyar (Agastya), the 'jar-born' sage *par excellence*. Aiyar's identification of *Tuvarai* with Dvārasamudra, the medieval capital of the Hoysalas in the Deccan, is also unconvincing, as there is no evidence that this city existed in the distant past referred to in the poem.

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3.5 I have attempted to set the record straight by identifying the 'Northern Sage' with Akattiyar (Agastya), *taṭavu* with his celebrated 'water-pitcher' and *Tuvarai* with Dvārakā in Gujarat (Mahadevan 1986). My re-interpretation of *Puṟam* 201 is supported by another famous Old Tamil legend linking once again the essential elements of this poem, namely, Akattiyar, the Vēḷir and *Tuvarāpati* Dvārakā). Luckily, that legend has been preserved for us by Nacciṉārkkiṉiyar (ca.13th cent. CE) in his commentary on *Tolkāppiyam*. (See Para 3.8 below.) It appears that the Old Commentator of the *Puṟam* was also aware of this legend, but did not elaborate "as the story is too long to be told". U. Ve. Swaminathaiyar has also referred to this story in his notes, but does not connect Akattiyar with the 'Northern Sage' mentioned in the poem.

Akattiyar (Agastya) legend in Old Tamil traditions

3.6 It has generally been held that Agastya led the earliest Aryan settlement of South India and introduced Vedic Aryanism there. (For a comprehensive treatment of this view, see Ghurye 1977.) This theory has, however, never been able to explain satisfactorily how the Tamils, proud possessors of an ancient culture of their own and a particularly strong tradition of love for their language, came to accept Agastya, a supposed Aryan sage, as the founding father, not of the Brahmanical religion or culture in the south, but of their own Tamil language, literature and grammar. There is also no linguistic evidence to support the theory of colonisation of the Tamil country by speakers of Indo-Aryan languages in pre-historic times. The interpretation of the Agastya legend in terms of Aryan acculturation of the south was developed before the discovery of the Indus Civilisation, which is considered by most scholars to be pre-Aryan and probably Dravidian. It has now become possible to take a fresh look at the Agastya legend and attempt an alternative interpretation

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which would harmonise its two core features which have hitherto remained irreconcilable, namely, the northern origin of Agastya and his southern apotheosis as the founder of Tamil language and grammar.

3.7 While the Tamil Agastya shares the basic myths of his northern counterpart, namely miraculous birth from a pitcher and southern migration from the north across the Vindhya, he is given a very different role by the Tamil tradition (R.Raghavaiyangar 1941). Here Agastya is so totally identified with Tamil that he is termed the Tamil *muṇi* ('Tamil sage') and Tamil itself is named after him as *agastyam*. Agastya received the Tamil language from Śiva (or Skanda) and gave it to the world. The Tamil Buddhists claimed that Agastya learnt Tamil from Avalōkitēśvara (*Vīracōḻiyam* by Buddhamitra). Agastya wrote the first grammar called *Akattiyam* (not extant now). Agastya's reputation as a Tamil scholar was so high that he was considered to be the teacher of the illustrious Tolkāppiyar, the author of *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest extant grammar in Tamil. For centuries, several Tamil works on astrology and medicine written by others were conventionally attributed to Agastya. Even today, Tamilnadu has the largest number of Śiva temples dedicated to the 'Lord of Agastya' (*Agastyēśvara*), a feature almost unique to Tamilnadu, as noted by Ghurye . According to most competent scholars, it is from South India that the Agastya cult was carried to the South-East Asian countries. It is obvious that Agastya could not have been a single historical person. He was rather the eponymous ancestor of the Tamils of a very remote historical past, only dimly remembered even during the Caṅkam Age.

Akattiyar (Agastya) and the Southern migration of the Vēḷir

3.8 The story of the southern migration of the Vēḷir from Dvārakā under the leadership of Agastya is narrated by Nacciṉārkkiṉiyar at two places in his commentary on

Tolkāppiyam (*pāyiram* ; *Poruḷ*.34). According to this legend, the gods congregated on Mount Meru as a result of which the earth tilted, lowering Meru and raising the southern quarter. The gods thereupon decided that Agastya was the best person to remedy this situation and requested him to proceed to the South.Agastya agreed and, on his way, visited '*Tuvarāpati*' (Dvārakā) and led the descendants of *netu-muṭi-aṇṇal* (Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa) including 'eighteen kings, eighteen families of the Vēḷir and the Aruvāḷar' to the south, where they settled down 'clearing the forests and cultivating the land'. The sage himself finally settled down on the Potiyil hill.The river Kāvēri is said to have arisen from the water-pitcher of Akattiyar (*Maṇi. Pati.* ll-l2). This seems to be an allusion to the introduction of irrigation in the Tamil country by the Vēḷir.

3.9   The fact of Agastya's leadership of the Vēḷir clan rules out the possibility that he was even in origin an Aryan clan. The Vēntar-Vēḷir-Vēḷāḷar clans constituted the ruling and land-owning classes in the Tamil country since the beginning of recorded history and betray no trace whatever of an Indo-Aryan linguistic ancestry.The Tamil society had of course come under the religious and cultural influence ofthe north even before the beginning of the Caṅkam Age, but had maintained its linguistic identity. From what we now know of the linguistic prehistory of India, it is more plausible to assume that the Yādavas of North India were the Aryanised descendants of non-Aryan people than to consider that the Vēḷir descended from the Yādavas as suggested by M. Raghavaiyangar (2004). As he himself has pointed out, *vēḷ* means 'one who performs a sacrifice' (namely a 'priest'). The Agastya legend itself can be re-interpreted as non-Aryan and Dravidian. The legend of the Southern migration of the Vēḷir from Dvārakā led by Akattiyar, in *Puṟam* 201 and elaborated by Nacciṉārkkiṉiyar, may be interpreted as referring to the exodus of elements of Dravidian-speaking people to South India after the collapse of the Indus Civilisation.

'Jar-born' myths in Southern Traditions

3.10   The Pallavas of Kanchi belonging to the Bhāradvāja gotra and claiming Droṇa to be one of their remote ancestors, traced their descent from a water-pitcher (*pāttra- skhalita-vṛttīnām*, Pallankoyil Plates, ca.6th cent. CE). According to tradition, the Chalukyas were so-called as the dynasty sprang from a *suluka* 'water-pot' (*Vikramāṅka-carita* 1.318.8). The Chalukyas are identified as Veḷ and their country as *Veḷ pulam* 'land of the Veḷir' (*Tivākaram* 2 : 24; *Piṅkalam* 10 : 1086).

'Jar-born' myths in Northern Traditions

3.11   The symbolism of 'water-pitcher' has always been closely associated with priestly ritual. The legend of 'jar-born' sages is very ancient and is found even in the *RV* (7.33.10-13). There it is said that Vasiṣṭha and Agastya were generated by Varuṇa and Mitra in a 'sacred pitcher' or 'water-jar used in sacrifice'. Agastya is especially known as the 'jar-born' sage (*kumbha-yoni, kumbha- sambhava* etc.). The myth of miraculous birth from jars was shared by sages as well as royal families. Droṇa, the priest-warrior, was generated in a 'wooden trough' by Bhāradvāja(*Mbh.*). The Kauravas were born from pots filled with clarified butter in which Gāndhārī's foetus was stored (*Mbh.*).

The 'Jar' Sign in the Indus Script

3.12   The Jar sign is the most frequent in the Indus texts, accounting for about ten percent of the total sign occurrences. The pictorial identification of the sign as a 'vessel with handles and a tapering bottom', is not in doubt, after the publication of the pottery graffiti from Kalibangan with realistic depictions of the sign (Lal 1979). See Fig.12.

Fig.12 : Jar Sign incised on pottery from Kalibangan

3.13 The Jar and arrow signs occur most often word-finally in the Indus texts. Their frequency and position indicate that they are grammatical markers. In brief, the Jar sign stands for the Dravidian masculine singular nominal suffix-*(a)ṉṟ(u)*, and the arrow sign for the non-masculine (feminine/neuter) singular nominal suffix -*(a)mp(u)*. (See Mahadevan 1973 and 1998 for details.) These two signs also possess, in addition to their grammatical function, literal ideographic values. Thus, the Jar sign depicts a 'sacrifical vessel(with food offerings)' and the arrow sign, an 'arrow-head or lance-head or weapons in general'. The dual values of the two signs are clearly indicated in the compounds Jar-bearer and arrow-bearer signs where they occur as the initial elements.

Linguistic interpretation of JAR ideogram

3.14 In Vedic literature and ritual treatises, *sata* is mentioned as some kind of a sacrificial vessel (*VS.*xix:27,88; *ŚB.* xii : 7.2.13). Śabaraswāmin identifies *sata* as a '*mleccha*' term for a 'round wooden vessel with a hundred holes' (*Mīmāṃsa-sūtra-bhāṣya* 1.3.10). Numerous perforated jars have been found at the Harappan sites. It is probable they served a ritual purpose. My ongoing studies indicate that *sata* / *sāta* in Prakrit and later borrowed into Telugu and Tamil refer to the food offerings as well as to the sacrificial vessel itself. Cf.*sata* 'food' in a Pkt. cave inscription at Kanheri assigned to ca.2nd cent. CE (Nagaraju 1979). Nagaraju has identified *sata* as 'food', contrasting with *pāniyaka* 'drink' occurring in the same inscription. I have connected the term *sata* occurring here with Sata- / Sāta-, names of the Andhra kings as well as with Te. *sādamu*, Ta. *cātam* 'food, lit., cooked rice' (*Tamil Lexicon*). Cf. *cati*, *cātam* 'cooked rice' (*Piṅkalantai* 10:441, 10:463, ca.8th cent. CE). As the word *sata* in Vedic literature is

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identified as a 'mleccha' term, it may be equated with Dr. *cata*. In the Harappan context, *cata* may be broadly interpreted as 'food or beverage in a sacrificial vessel (offered to the deity)'.

Akattiyar (Agastya) and the JAR Sign

3.15 The constant use of the JAR sign attached to names and titles of the Harappan ruling classes led in later times to the symbol being associated with priestly and royal families through various 'jar-born' myths as mentioned earlier. Thus, the JAR sign of the Indus script is the ultimate source for the 'water-pitcher' of Agastya and other 'jar-born' legends.

Aka-tt-i : Dravidian origin of the name

3.16 We have so far considered only the ideographic and conventional association of the jar (water-pitcher or sacrificial vessel with offerings) with Akattiyar (Agastya). We have also seen that there are many other claimants for the 'Jar-born' status, starting with Vasiṣṭha in the Vedic Age in North India and ending with , say, the Pallavas in medieval South India. However, both Northern and Southern traditions are unanimous in referring only to Agastya as the 'Jar-born' sage. There must be then a deep underlying cause for the pervasiveness and persistence of the myth of Agastya and his water-pitcher. I propose, in the sequel, that the ultimate source is the Indus Civilisation, where the Dravidian name *aka-tt-i* lit., 'one inside (the fort)' was constantly associated with the JAR sign (in its ideographic sense) resulting in the creation of the myths of 'Jar-born' sages.

The CITADEL sign in the Indus script ◇

3.17 The most frequent opening sign in the Indus texts appears to depict the ground plan of a building with a forecourt inside a fortified place, in other words, what is popularly known as

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the Citadel, the centre of authority in the Harappan cities. I interpret the sign as Dr. *mēl-akam* lit., 'the high (or great) place (or house) inside (the citadel)'. This was the 'address' most members of the Harappan ruling classes preferred to prefix to their personal identification on the seals. Through constant use, the expression *mēl-akam* came to represent the people and the land of the Indus Civilisation (as reflected in *Melahha* of the Cuneiform records).

Place Signs in the Indus Script

3.18 The Citadel was part of the Harappan city plan. The proposed interpretation of the CITADEL sign is corroborated by a set of place signs in the Indus script referring to different parts of the city. We shall consider here three of the place signs. (See Fig.13.)

Sign	Variant	Interpretation
◇	□ ○	*akam* 'house, place, inside' (DEDR 7)
◈	⊡ ⊙	*mēl-akam* 'High House (Citadel)' (DEDR 5086 & 7)
⬖	⊗	*pāḷi* 'city' (DEDR 4112)

Fig. 13 Place Signs in the Indus Script

Egyptian ideographic parallels to Indus place signs

3.19 Ideographic interpretation of the place signs inferred from their shapes is corroborated by a set of remarkably close parallels from the Egyptian hieroglyphic script (Gardiner 1978: Sign List). The comparison and the resulting broad interpretation of the Indus signs is shown in Fig.14.

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3.20 The Egyptian parallel goes beyond mere graphic resemblances. 'Pharaoh', the generic name of the Egyptian rulers, is traced to the expression 'Great House'. Originally, 'Great House' referred only to the 'palace' or to the 'court', and not to the person of the king. Later, the term 'pharaoh' became a respectable designation for the king, "just as the head of the Ottoman government was termed the Sublime Porte" (Gardiner 1978:75). As in the Egyptian script, the generic name of the rulers of Harappan cities was also derived from the expression 'High House' (conventionally called the 'citadel').

3.21 The Egyptian parallel should not, however, be stretched too far. The low-profile Harappan rulers (with no grandiose palaces or rich tombs) can in no way be compared to the vainglorious Pharaohs. There is also no archaeological evidence for contacts between the Egyptian and Indus civilisations. It is, however, not unlikely that the two great contemporary civilisations had at least indirect contacts through the intermediary Sumerian-Akkadian city states in West Asia.

Egyptian		Indus		Broad Interpretation
Sign No.	Sign	Sign No.	Sign(nearest variant with text No.)	
0.1	⬜	261, 373	5090	'house'
0.6	⬛	267	8106	'fortified house'
0.49	⊗	284	2522	'city, town'

Fig.14 Indus Place Signs and Egyptian Ideographic Parallels (Schematic)
(Egyptian :Gardiner 1978. Indus : Mahadevan 1977.)

City names in Old Tamil compared with Indus signs

3.22. Pāḻi

The Indus sign depicts a 'walled city with four quarters' divided by cross-roads. The sign is identical with the corresponding Egyptian ideogram for 'town'. It is remarkable that Dravidian has preserved expressions for 'city' connected with 'planning':

  pāḻi (Ta.) 'town, city' (DEDR 4l12)
  pāḻi (Ka.) 'row, line, regularity, regular order' (DEDR 4l13)
  pāḻi (Skt.) 'row, line' > Dr. pāḻi (cited in DEDR 4l13)

Pāḻi is specifically associated with the Vēḷir in Old Tamil poems. Āy and Miñili fought a battle at Pāḻi (Akam 208). The city of Naṇṇaṉ, one of the Vēḷir chieftains, was called Pāḻi (Akam 15) . The remote ancestors of the Vēḷir (vēḷ mutumākkaḷ) stored their gold at Pāḻi (Akam 372). The city of Pāḻi had a red fort which shone like copper (Akam 375).Thus this Indus sign can be interpreted as pāḻi 'planned city'.

Kūṭal (or) Nāṉ-māṭa-k-Kūṭal

3.23   There is an equally interesting survival of the concept of 'City of Four Quarters' in Old Tamil. Maturai, the capital of the Pāṇṭiyar, was also called Kūṭal (Akam 16:14) lit., 'meeting place' (or) Nāṉ-māṭa-k-Kūṭal (Kali 92:65) lit., 'junction of four terraces' as interpreted by Naccinārkkiṉiyar (pre-Pallavan Tamil Index). There were several places in the Tamil country called Kūṭal, probably market towns located at cross-roads. They were later called Niyamam (from Skt. nigama) or Cantai (from Skt. sandhi). Among them, Maturai was the most famous Kūṭal.

Ēḻ eyil (or) Ēḻ-il   and

3.24   The interpretation of the pair of Indus signs (shown above at left) as SEVEN CITIES has gained wide acceptance particularly as the phrase corresponds to Akkadian bad-imin

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'seven (walled) cities' (Kinnier Wilson 1974) and to *sapta-sindhavas* in the *RV* and *hapta-hindu* in the *Avesta* (Bailey 1975). These are of course loan-translations of the original in Harappan. I have suggested earlier (Mahadevan 1989) that the Indus sign-pair has an exact Old Tamil parallel *ēḻ eyil*, lit., 'seven (or high) city' (*Puṟam* 33:8). Pāḻi, the capital of Naṉṉaṉ, was located on a hill called *Ēḻ-il*, lit., 'seven houses' (*Naṟṟ*.39l:6-7). These places were in the Konkan region north-west of the Tamil country. It is significant that Old Tamil sources refer to the migration of Tamil tribes from Koṅkaṇam and Tuḷu regions, probably a hazy recollection of migration from regions still further to the north-west like North Konkan and South Gujarat which were then included in the Harappan domain. The single sign shown above at right may be an abbreviation of the sign-pair at left. The expressions *ēḻ eyil* and *ēḻ-il* may be interpreted as referring to a possible confederation of seven Harappan cities.

Akam : Parallels from Old Tamil Traditions

3.25 The institution of the Citadel (*mēl-akam*) did not survive the end of the planned urban organisation of the Indus Civilisation. But those who owed allegiance to *mēl-akam*, namely, the *aka-tt-u* people (*Akattiyar*) did survive. In North India, they re-emerged in the new social order as 'Jar-born' priests and rulers. Those who migrated to the South led by the Akattiyar preserved 'jar-born' myths as well as traditions relating to *akam* ('fort') as noticed below.

3.26 Old Tamil literature contains several references to *akam* in the sense of 'fort, palace or inner place'.

(e.g.) *akam* 'palace' (*Peruṅ*. 1.32.100)
aka-nakar 'the inner city' (*Cil.* 2.15.l09; *Maṇi.* l.72)
aka-p-pā 'inner fortification' (*Naṟṟ.* 14.4; *Patiṟ*.22.26; *Cil.*28.144)
aka-p-pā 'matil-uḷ uyar mēṭai* : high terrace inside the fort' (*Tivākaram* 5.198)

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> *matil-akam* lit., 'fortified house'; (*Cil*.2.l4.69); the palace of the rulers of Kerala.

A clear distinction is drawn in Old Tamil literature between those who ruled from inside the forts and those who served them, even though the expressions for either group have the same base *aka-tt-u* 'in the fort'. The rulers of the forts were known as:

> (e.g.) *aka-tt-ar* : ' (princes) of the palace' (*Kali*. 25.3)
> *aka-tt-ār* ' those inside the (impregnable) fortification' (*Kuṟaḷ* 745)
> *aka-tt-ōr* ' those inside the fort' (*Puṟam*. 28.ll)
> *aka-tt-ōṉ* ' he (king) inside the fort' (*Tol*. III: 68.4, 69.5)

Those who served as palace or temple attendants were known as follows:

> (e.g.) *aka-tt-aṭimai* , *aka-tt-toṇṭar*, *aka-mp-aṭiyar* etc., (*Tamil Lexicon*).

The palace or temple service was generally called:

> (e.g.) *aka-p-paṭai*, *aka-p-paṇi*, *aka-p-parivāram* etc., (*Tamil Lexicon*).

From Etymology to History

3.27   The critical link between Dravidian etymology and history is brought out by the following two sets of entries:

> DEDR 7:
> *aka-m* 'inside, house, place'
> *aka-tt-u* 'within, inside the house'
> *aka-tt-āṉ* 'one who is in, a householder'.

C. W. Kathiraiver Pillai's Dictionary (1910) (gloss in English added by me):

> *aka-tt-i* : (1) *akattiya muṉivaṉ* ('Agastya, the sage')
> (2) *uḷḷ-irukkiṟa-vaṉ* ('one who is in')
> (3) *oru maram* ('Agasti grandiflora').

Note how *akatti* in (l) and (3) get transformed to *agasti* in Indo-Aryan loanwords.

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3.28 Most Indus texts, especially on the seals, commence with the CITADEL sign and end with the JAR sign. This pattern may be interpreted as follows (arranged from left to right for convenience):

◊ || .... ∪ ∪

He of the (High) House   He with the JAR
aka-(tt)-(i)   *kuṭa-muṇi* (Agastya)

Such a remarkably close and consistent parallel between the Indus texts and the later Indian historical tradition cannot be due to mere coincidence. The trail of *vaṭapāl muṉivan* ('Northern Sage') and his *taṭavu* ('water-pitcher') from *Puṟam* 201 has finally led us to the Indus Civilisation!

Pulikaṭimāl, a Harappan Title

3.29 Before taking leave of Kapilar, we may note two other statements made by him, which throw further light on the pre-history of the Tamils. Kapilar addresses Iruṅkō Vēḷ, the king, as *Pulikaṭimāl* (*Puṟam* 201 : 15; 202 : 10). The Old Commentator refers to it merely as another name of the king. The expression *Puli-kaṭi-māl* literally means 'tiger-killing-hero'. U.Ve. Swaminathaiyar (1935) and M. Raghavaiyangar (1907) ascribe the title to the Hoysalas of Dvārasamudra, who belonged to the Yadava-Vēḷir lineage. According to legend, Caḷa a Hoysala ruler, was advised by a sage to kill the tiger ('*hoy saḷa*' in Kannada) which attacked him. The 'slaying of lion' remained a popular sculptural motif in Hoysala architecture.

One of the Indus seals shows a personage grappling with two tigers pouncing on him from either side (e.g., Mackay, Mohenjodaro, Seal No.75. See Fig. 15).

Fig.15 Indus seal with Pulikaṭimāl motif

The occurence of the motif on the Indus seals indicates the Harappan origin of the *Pulikaṭimāl* legend (Mahadevan l970). The seal motif has been compared with Babylonian seals showing Gilgamesh engaged in a similar fight with two lions. It is not not, however, necessary to trace the Harappan legend to a Babylonian origin. In early societies in transition from hunter-gatherers to pastoralism and agriculture, wild beasts posed grave threat to human settlements. Killing the wild animals was considered a great act of heroism.

The *Pulikaṭimāl* legend from the Indus Civilisation survived not only in the Dravidian South, but also in the Indo-Aryan tradition. Bharata, the son of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā , had the title *Sarvadamana*, owing to his prowess in fighting wild animals. When Bharata was living in the forest as a child, he tied up lions, tigers etc., and his mother forbade him to torture animals (Sorensen, *Index to Mbh.*).

Araiyam, a Harappan city?

3.30 Kapilar was annoyed when Iruṅko Vēḷ refused to take the daughters of Pāri into his protective custody. Kapilar showed his displeasure by reminding the king of the destruction of the great and rich city ruled by his remote ancestors, as one of them incurred the displeasure of a poet (*Puṟam* 202 : 6-8). While narrating this legend, Kapilar

describes the ancient city as *irupāl peyariya urukeḻu mūtūr* 'ancient city of fearsome (reputation) divided into two parts'. The Old Commentator adds that the ancient city was divided into two halves called Pēr-araiyam and Ciṟṟ-ariyam (cf. *arai* 'half', DEDR 229.) This reminds one of the Harappan city divided into citadel and lower town. On the basis of this evidence, P.L.Samy (personal communication) identified Araiyam with Harappa; cf. *aruppam* 'fort' (DEDR 221). His suggestion is interesting and worth pursuing, though I have not been able to identify any Indus sign which could be interpreted in this manner. There is, however, no doubt that the *Puṟam* 202 legend of the destruction of an ancient and exceedingly wealthy city with twin settlements does evoke the image of a Harappan bi-partite city and the collapse of the Indus Civilisation.

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Cover Illustrations:

Front : Neolithic polished stone axe inscribed with Indus-like symbols from Sembiyan Kandiyur.
(Photo : Courtesy Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology.)

Back : Bronze Chariot from Daimabad. It has solid wheels and is drawn by a pair of humped bulls.
(Photo : Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.)