

Akam and Puram : ‘Address’ Signs of the Indus Script

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akattōṅ celvamum, aṅṅri muraṅiya

purattōṅ aṅṅkiya pakkamum

‘The one inside (the fort) has the wealth; but
the one outside, fighting, lays siege’.

Tol.Poruḷ.20:12

Introduction

0.1 This is a preliminary announcement of a new identification of a frequent ‘opening’ sign in the Indus texts. The sign, depicting a ‘crescent moon’, is identified, through rebus, as representing the ‘outer (city)’ and the ‘others’. I have also added, with some new evidence, two other complementary identifications earlier proposed by me, namely, the ‘(planned) city’ and the ‘inner (city)’ or ‘citadel’, to place the new identification in proper perspective.

Summary

0.2 The chart (Fig.1) illustrates and summarises the suggestions made in this paper¹.




No.	Indus Signs	Broad Interpretations	Old Tamil Equivalents	Dr. Etyma (DEDR)
1.		‘City of Four Quarters’, ‘Planned City’	<i>pāli</i>	4112 & 4113
2.		‘The Inner City’, ‘Citadel’	<i>akam</i>	7
3.		‘The Outer City’, ‘The Others’ < ‘crescent moon’	<i>puram,</i> <i>pīra</i> <i>pīrai</i>	4333 4422

Fig.1 ‘Address’ Signs in the Indus Texts.

Nos. 1 & 2 are ideograms. No.3 is a phonetic sign interpreted through rebus. See Para 3.4.

Egyptian Hieroglyphic parallels

0.3 The proposed interpretations of the ‘address’ signs in the Indus script are corroborated by near-identical parallels from the Egyptian hieroglyphic script (Fig. 2).







S.No.	Egyptian		Indus		Broad Interpretations
	Sign No.	Sign	Sign No.	Sign (nearest variant with text No.)	
1	O.49		284	 2522	‘city, town’, ‘city of Four Quarters’, ‘planned city’
2	O.6		267	 8106	‘fortified house’, ‘citadel’, ‘inner city’
3	N.12		293	 2314	‘crescent moon’ Ta. <i>pīrai</i> > <i>pīra</i> ‘other’

Fig. 2 Indus ‘Address’ Signs and Egyptian Ideographic parallels
(Egyptian: Gardiner 1978. Indus: Mahadevan 1977)

1. The Harappan City : ‘The City of Four Quarters’

1.1 The Harappan city (typically, Mohenjodaro) is a meticulously planned and highly conscious architectural creation, with its grid-like streets oriented towards the four cardinal directions, and with a fortified citadel on a high artificial terrace to the west, dominating the lower city to the east. Judging from the public character of the large buildings and the so-called ‘Great Bath’ found within the citadel at Mohenjodaro, there is little doubt that the citadel was the seat of authority and ceremonial centre in the Harappan city.

1.2 The walled city of the Bronze Age was symbolised by the design of the ‘Quartered Circle’.² This motif occurs as ‘intersecting circles’ in the characteristic Harappan ceramic design³ (Fig. 3A). The ‘Quartered Circle’ is also the source for the Egyptian hieroglyphic ideogram for ‘city, town, village’⁴ (Fig.2.1). The corresponding Indus sign depicting a ‘walled city

divided by intersecting streets’ can be identified as the ‘City of Four Quarters’. The sign occurs in two variant forms, oval and rhomboid (Fig. 3B & C).

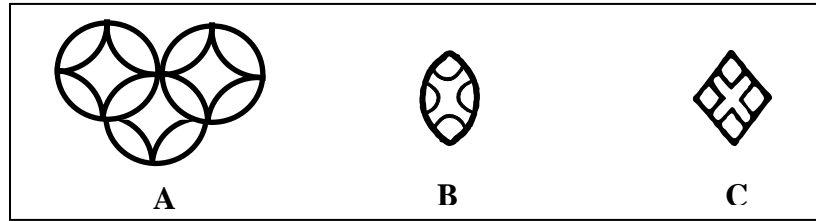


Fig.3: ‘Intersecting Circles’ and the ‘City of Four Quarters’

***Pāli* : the ‘planned city’**

1.3 It is interesting that Old Tamil and Old Kannada have preserved a Dravidian expression which connects the concepts of ‘city’ and ‘planning’:

pāli (Ta.) ‘city, town’ (DEDR 4112)

pāli (Ka.) ‘row, line, regularity, order (DEDR 4113)

This is the linguistic evidence for interpreting the Indus sign, the ‘City of Four Quarters’, as *pāli* in Dravidian. The identification is based not merely on etymology, but is also supported by frequent references in the Tamil Caṅkam poems to Pāli, an ancient and prosperous city of the Tamil Vēḷir clan⁵. It is relevant to recall here the Old Tamil tradition of migration of the Vēḷir and allied Tamil clans led by Agastya from Dvārakā to South India⁶. It is also significant that the Caṅkam poems refer to the presence of the Vēḷir and Kōcar clans in the Koṅkan and Tuḷu regions northwest of the Tamil country⁷. These traditions may be interpreted as dim recollections of the migration of Dravidian-speakers to the South in proto-historic times from regions still further to the northwest like North Koṅkan and South Gujarat which were then included in the Harappan domains⁸. It is suggested that the Dravidian migration to the South at the end of the Indus Civilisation is the source of the city-related vocabulary preserved in the oldest layers of the Tamil Caṅkam poetry handed down by oral transmission at the earliest stages.

***Nāṅ-māṭa-k-kūṭal* : the ‘City of Four Quarters’**

1.4 Madurai, the capital of the Pāṅṅiyaṅ kingdom and centre of Old Tamil civilisation, was also known as *kūṭal* or more fully as *nāṅ-māṭa-k-kūṭal*, traditionally interpreted as the ‘Junction of Four Terraces’.⁹ The description is strikingly similar to the Indus ideogram for the ‘City of Four Quarters’ (Fig.3C).

Matir-ay: the ‘Walled City’

1.5 The ancient name of Madurai was *matiray* as recorded in the earliest Tamil-Brahmi cave inscriptions from ca. Second Century BCE.¹⁰ The expression *matir(-ay)* can be interpreted in Dravidian as a ‘walled city’ on the basis of the following linguistic evidence :

DEDR 4692: *matil* (Ta.) ‘wall around a fort, a fortification’;

matilu, matulu (Tu.) ‘roofed wall of a compound’;

maduru (Te.) ‘coping of a wall’;

madru gōḍa (Konḍa.) ‘mud wall, compound wall’.

DEDR 4689: *matalai* (Ta.) ‘cornices on sides or front of house’;

madil (Ko.) ‘lintel of a doorway’.

Matiray was the ‘walled city’ *par excellence* of the ancient Tamil country. The literary form *maturai* seems to have been influenced by the Northern traditions related to Mathurā, with which the Tamils of the Caṅkam Age were familiar. I propose that IA *mathurā* is itself derived from the earlier Dr. *matir(-ay)* ‘walled city’. When the Vēḷir (Yādavas) migrated from Mathurā to the coastal regions of Saurashtra, Dr. *matir(-ay)* was translated as IA *dvārakā*, ‘the walled city with (imposing) doorways’. Compare with *kapāṭapuram*, the Sanskrit name (with the same meaning) of an ancient Pāṅṭiyaṅ city, probably identical with Madurai.

Vailasthānaka and armaka in the RV

1.6 The word *armaka*, translated as ‘ruined city’, is associated with two near-identical place names in the *Rigveda* (1.133.3):

vailasthānakē armakē mahāvailasthē armakē

“...in the ruined city of Vaila-sthānaka, in the
ruined city of Mahā-vaila-stha.”

Burrow (1963) compiled a list of place names ending with *-arma(ka)* from early Sanskrit literature and concluded that the large numbers of ruined cities which remained for centuries such conspicuous features of the countryside must have belonged to the Indus Civilisation, as the early Aryans had no large cities¹¹. He also pointed out that the non-Aryan element *vaila-* in the place names mentioned in the RV was probably derived from the language of the original inhabitants. I suggest, based on the evidence of the association of the ancestors of the Vēḷir with the Indus Civilisation, that the place names *Vaila-sthānaka* and *Mahāvaila-stha* in the RV seem to be hybrid loan translations from Dr. *vēḷ-akam*, ‘the place of the Vēḷir’. Cf. *vēḷ* ‘to sacrifice, a sacrifice’ (DEDR 5544) > *vēḷ* ‘a priest’; *Vēḷir* ‘a class of ancient chiefs in the Tamil country’ (DEDR 5545); *akam* ‘house, place, inside’ (DEDR 7).

1.7 While the Harappan cities must have been in ruin in the early Vedic times as pointed out by Burrow, the association of the word *armaka* with *vaila-* (< Dr. *vēl*) does raise another intriguing possibility. It is possible that Dr. *pāli* ‘city’ (DEDR 4112) was in later times understood (not without reason) as *pāli* ‘ruin’ (DEDR 4110), resulting in the translation IA *-arma(ka)* ‘ruined city’ in the RV and early Sanskrit literature. This would explain how so many of the ruined cities had the suffix *-arma(ka)* tagged on to their individual names (also rendered into Sanskrit). The cities were identified earlier with their generic Dr. name *pāli* ‘(planned) city’, later understood as IA *-arma(ka)* when the ‘city’ turned into a ‘ruin’.

1.8 One of the *-arma(ka)* names compiled by Burrow from Pāṇini and the Kāsika commentary is *Kukkuṭārma-*, literally ‘the ruined city of the cock’. I draw attention to an Indus seal from Mohenjodaro (Marshall seal No.338) which has an inscription featuring a pair of cocks followed by the ideogram for CITY (Fig. 4A). It is not unlikely that the seal has recorded in the Indus script the original Dravidian name of the city, corresponding to IA *kukkuṭa-arma*, with the ideographic suffix CITY added to it.



Fig. 4A. The Indus Seal Text :
‘COCKS-CITY’



Fig. 4B. Cōla coin (1st cent. BCE) :
The ‘City of the Cock’ (Uṛaiyūr)



Fig. 4C. Ivory plaque with
‘crescent moon’ sign,
Mohenjodaro (Para .3.3)

1.9 Uṛaiyūr, the ancient Cōla capital in the Caṅkam Age, was also known as Kōli, lit., ‘cock’. The name is explained by the myth of a cock boldly confronting an elephant. The myth already figures on a Cōla square copper coin of the Caṅkam Age assigned to ca. 1st Century BCE¹² (Fig. 4B) .

2. The Harappan Inner City : The Citadel

2.1 If the Harappan city was the ‘City of Four Quarters’, the Citadel was its ‘principal Quarter’, the ‘Inner City’. The symbiotic relation between the two parts of the Harappan city is brought out clearly by a comparison of the respective ideograms:



The City of Four Quarters



The (Principal) Quarter, (Inner City, Citadel)

This deduction is strongly corroborated by textual analysis. The CITADEL sign followed by a superscript suffix of two strokes (most probably the oblique, genitive or locative case-marker) is, by far, the most frequent ‘opening’ or ‘address’ in the Indus texts, especially on the seals (Fig.5).

Dr. *akam* : The Inner City or Citadel

- 2.2 The Caṅkam poems contain several references to *akam* in the sense of ‘fort, palace or inner city’. (Cf. citation at the beginning of the paper.) The critical links between Dravidian etymology and Old Tamil polity are brought out in the following two sets of references:

DEDR 7: *aka-m* ‘inside, house, place’

aka-tt-u ‘within, inside the house’

akattāṇ ‘one who is in, the householder’

Kathiraiver Pillai Dictionary (1910) :

akatti: (1) *akattiya muṇivan* (‘Agastya, the sage’)

(2) *uḷl-irukkīraṇ* (‘one who is in’)

(3) *oru maram* (‘Agasti grandiflora’)

The gloss in English within brackets has been added by me.

Note Dr. *aka-tt-i* > IA *agasti* in (1) & (3) above.

Agastya and the Indus Civilisation

- 2.3 The migration of the ancestors of the Vēḷir-Yādava clans led by Agastya from Dvārakā to South India in proto-historic times is the most important evidence connecting the Indus Civilisation with South Dravidian, especially Old Tamil¹³. The earlier interpretation of the Agastya legend in terms of Aryan acculturation of the South¹⁴ was developed before the discovery of the Indus Civilisation which is now considered by most scholars to be pre-Aryan and Dravidian. It is now possible to attempt an alternative interpretation which would harmonise the two core features of the legend, namely the northern origin of Agastya and his southern apotheosis as the founder of Tamil language and grammar. The fact of Agastya’s leadership of the Vēḷir clan rules out the possibility that he was an Aryan sage. The legend of the southern migration of the Vēḷir may now be interpreted as referring to the exodus of Dravidian-speaking peoples to South India after the collapse of Indus Civilisation.¹⁵

Evidence from the Indus Texts

- 2.4 The most persuasive evidence for the *akatti* > *agasti* equivalence comes from the Indus texts themselves. Agasti (Atharva Veda) and Agastya (Rigveda) are derived from Dr. *aka-tt-i*-lit., ‘he of the house’, i.e. the ruling class with its power centre in the Citadel. Agastya was

known as the ‘jar-born’ sage. The ultimate source of this legend appears to be the constant association of *aka-tt-i* ‘one inside the House’ with the JAR sign respectively at the beginning and ending of the Indus texts as illustrated below (from left to right for convenience):¹⁶



Evidence from the RV and Later Indo-Aryan ‘jar-born’ and ‘mind-born’ sages

2.5 The birth of Vasiṣṭha and Agastya is described in a famous hymn in the RV (7.33). They are said to be born of the seed of Mitra and Varuṇa deposited in a pitcher (*kumbha*) when the gods saw Urvaśi, the *apsaras*, in a flash of lightning. Agastya especially came to be known as the ‘jar-born’ sage (*kumbha-yōni*, *kumbha-sambhava*, etc.). Vasiṣṭha is described in the hymn as ‘mind-born’ (*manasō adhijātaḥ*), an epithet which presumably applies to Agastya as well, who was born along with Vasiṣṭha in the same manner. In later literature, ‘jar-born’ myths become common among Brāhmaṇa families and Kṣatriya dynasties. Similarly, all the seers, especially the seven great preceptors of the Vedas, came to be known as ‘mind-born’ (*mānasāḥ*, *mānasa-putrāḥ*, etc.). (*Index to Mbh.*, Sorensen). We saw above how the ‘jar-born’ legends can be ultimately traced to the JAR sign of the Indus script, with which most names and titles are associated in the Indus texts. The epithet ‘mind-born’ appears to be a case of incorrect loan translation from Dr. *aka(m)* which means both ‘house’ as well as ‘mind’ (DEDR 7). Cf. Ta. *aka-tt-u* ‘in the house’; also ‘in the mind’.

Agastya: Māna, ‘the house’

2.6 The derivation IA *agasti* < Dr. *aka-tt-i*, ‘he of the house’ is corroborated by the fact that Agastya was also called Māna in the RV (7.33.13). The latter name is supposed to mean ‘pride’. However, the term *māna* also occurs in the RV with the meaning ‘a house, building or dwelling’ (Monier Williams). It appears that Māna, the other name of Agastya, is the literal but unintended loan translation from Dr. *aka-tt-i* ‘he of the house’.

Gṛhapati: the Vaiśya ‘householder’

2.7 The word *gṛhapati* in the RV and later is a title which means literally ‘householder’ or ‘master of the house’ (*Vedic Index*). However, in actual usage in the early historical period, especially in Pāli, the term *gahapati* connotes a member of the Vaiśya caste, the non-Aryan land-owning and trading classes, which supported the non-Brahmanical religions

of Buddhism and Jainism. The title *gr̥hapati* is the source for *gahapati* (Pkt.), *gapati* or *gapiti* (Sinhala-Pkt.inscr.) and *kāvati* (inscr.) or *kāviti* (literary) of Old Tamil. Thus, the Harappan title *aka-tt-i* ‘he of the house, master of the fort’, is the ultimate source for IA *gr̥hapati* and its derivatives cited above.

Loan words and loan translations as clues

2.8 While loan words can be recognised more or less easily from phonetic similarities, loan translations are harder to spot, especially if they relate to universal concepts present in all cultures. However, incorrect loan translations with too literal or unintended meanings or from the wrong homophones producing strange, unusual or even meaningless expressions furnish tell-tale clues to the origin of the words in question. In the present instance, *agasti* is a loan word without meaning in Indo-Aryan; *māna* and *gr̥hapati* are literal loan translations but in unintended senses; and *mānasa* (‘mind-born’) is a wrong loan translation based on the incorrect meaning *aka-*, ‘mind’. When these loan words and loan translations are lined up, they point, rather conclusively, to Dr. *aka-tt-i* ‘one inside (the fort)’ of the Indus texts as the ultimate source.

3. The Harappan ‘Outer City’ and ‘Others’)

3.1 *Akam* and *puram* are the inseparable twins of Old Tamil polity, both literally and figuratively.

Literal: *akam* ‘inside (the fort) or the inner city’.
puram ‘outside (the city walls) or the outer city’.

Cf. citation at the beginning of the paper.

In the figurative sense, *akam* and *puram* are the two overarching divisions of the Tamil ‘heroic poetry’ of the Caṅkam Age:

Figurative: *akam*: a conventional literary genre dealing with love.
puram: a conventional literary genre dealing with matters
other than love.

3.2 Since *aka-m* > *aka-tt-* dominates the opening or initial position in the Indus texts in the literal sense ‘inside (the fort)’, it is almost certain that there must be a complementary sign for ‘outside (the fort)’ also to be found as an opening in the texts. It has taken me rather too long to identify the sign due to the inexcusable confusion in my mind between *puram* ‘back, rear’ (DEDR 4205) and *puram* ‘outside, exterior’ (DEDR 4333) which are homophones in Tamil but with different meanings. Once I found out that *puram* ‘outside’ is cognate with *pīra* ‘other’, the solution came to me in a flash.

The ‘crescent moon’ sign

3.3 The Indus sign ‘crescent moon’ is pictorially easy to identify, though it occurs in the upright position to save space on the seals. An ivory plaque from Mohenjodaro (Marshall, CXXXI :10) depicts the ‘crescent moon’ sign realistically (Fig.4C). The Indus sign is virtually identical with the Egyptian ideogram (Fig. 2.3).

Peṛ– ‘crescent moon’ and ‘other’ in Dravidian

3.4 DEDR 4422 : *peṛ*-> *-pīra*- ‘crescent moon’, as in

pīrai (Ta.), *pīra* (Ma.), *peṛ* (Ko.), *peṛ* (To.), *peṛe* (Ka.) .

The word *pīrai* lit., ‘new moon’, is derived from *peṛu* ‘to beget’, *pīra* ‘to be born’ (Ta.).

Employing the technique of rebus (phonetic transfer), the ‘crescent moon’ sign *peṛ*- is made to stand for *peṛ*- ‘other’, *puṛ*- ‘out’, as shown below.

DEDR 4333 : *puṛ*- ‘out, outside, exterior’ , as in

puṛam, *puṛattu*, *puṛatti*, *puṛampu* (Ta.); *puṛam*, *puṛattu* (Ma.);
poṛa (Ka.) , *poṛanj* (Ko.).

peṛ- ‘other, others, other things’ , as in

pīra, *pīrar* (Ta.) ; *pīran* (Ma.) ; *peṛa* (Ka.), *peṛa* (Te.).

3.5 Textual analysis of the three ‘address’ signs under consideration (paired with superscript case-markers) reveals an interesting pattern¹⁷ (Fig.5).




Indus sign-pairs	Broad Interpretations	Initial freq.	Total freq.
	‘in / of the inner city (citadel)’	254	291
	‘in / of the outer city, of / among others’	54	54
	‘in / of the city’	7	8

Fig.5. Frequency-distribution of ‘address signs’ in Indus Texts (Mahadevan 1977).

The ‘inner city (citadel)’ occurs most frequently in the initial position. The ‘outer city’ sign is less frequent, but still occurs in substantial numbers in the initial position. The context indicates that the sign represents the outer segments within the walled city and not the countryside outside the city walls. The ‘CITY sign’ itself occurs with much less frequency.

3.6 I interpret the evidence as follows : *akam* is the ‘address’ of the rulers of the inner city with their seat of authority (not necessarily residence) in the citadel. They were most probably priests and warrior chiefs. *puram* is the ‘address’ of the residents of the outer city comprising most probably traders, skilled craftsmen and others connected with urban life. The ‘address’ signs (conventionally referred to here as *akam* and *puram* as in Old Tamil) indicate occupational and residential differentiation, apparently without any notion of superior or inferior status. This is indicated by the substantial number of seals with the ‘crescent moon’ sign depicting ‘outer city, others’ in the initial position. There are also many common names and titles in the seal-texts with either of these addresses. Still, it appears that the ‘city’ was governed from the ‘citadel’. This explains the very low frequency of the City sign in the initial position.

Notes and References

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5. E.g., *Akam*. 15, 208, 372 & 375.
6. *Tol. Pāyiram & Poruḷ*. 34. Commentary by Naccinārkkiniyar. Also *Puram* 201 & 202 (as re-interpreted by me). See note 15 below.
7. *Akam*. 15; *Nar*. 391.
8. Daimabad in North Konkan is the southernmost Harappan settlement.
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The legend is alluded to in *Puram* 67 & 212 and in *Cil. urai peru*. 4 ; *nāṭukāṅ* 247-248.
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