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INDUS SCRIPT IN THE INDIAN HISTORICAL TRADITION

by

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1. Any serious study of the Indus Script must begin with a formal or structural analysis of the texts. Such a study will include compilation of sign-lists and concordance tabulation of sign frequencies and statistical-positional analyses to determine the nature of the script and the typology of the underlying language. It is at this level<sup>1</sup> that the use of the computer has been most productive. It is also at this level that some measurable progress has been achieved in matters like determination of the direction of writing, word division, and delineation of the broad syntactical features of the texts. These studies seem to indicate broadly that the typology of the Harappan language is non-Indo-European and resembles Dravidian languages closely. One has, however, to leave the computer behind at this stage when one proceeds further to look for clues to find the meaning of the texts or the phonetic values of the signs.

2. In some of my earlier papers, I have been advocating the use of the method of parallelisms to acquire a broad comprehension of the context and the contents of the Harappan inscriptions even before reaching the stage of actual<sup>2</sup> linguistic decipherment. I propose in the present paper


to recapitulate my arguments briefly and to illustrate the method with a few examples and with the addition of some fresh evidence.

3. Emil Forrer pointed out that it was possible to acquire an objective comprehension of the contents of an inscription in an undeciphered script by the observation of parallel phenomena.<sup>3</sup> Parallels can occur between a symbolical representation and a text associated with it (e.g. a text inscribed near the figure of a deity), between the written object and its designation (e.g. a text with numerals engraved on a bronze implement) or between the written symbol itself and its meaning (e.g. an ideogram whose pictographic origin is obvious). Parallels can also be set up by observing the similarities in the standard formulae employed in ancient inscriptions (e.g. the opening of royal decrees). Forrer was able to show that such comparisons revealed the basic features of the grammar of a writing system even before its linguistic decipherment.

4. The applicability of the method of parallels for a study of the Indus Script is suggested by the astonishing continuity and vitality of the Indian historical tradition. It is probable that even when the Indus Script ceased to be current as a writing system, some of the more important ideograms of the script survived and evolved into traditional

symbols of various kinds. Such survivals may consist of iconographic elements and other religious symbols, royal insignia, emblems on coins and seals, heradic signs of the nobility, corporate symbols, totem signs of clans and tribes etc. It should thus be possible to undertake a comparison of such traditional symbols resembling the signs of the Indus Script and the names and concepts associated with them in the Indian historical tradition in an attempt to establish the original ideographic meanings of the signs.

5. I shall now proceed to illustrate the method with reference to two frequent signs of the Indus Script (referred to here conventionally as the 'jar' and the 'bearer' signs) which appear to have been employed as ideograms in the script and to have survived in the symbolism of the later Indian historical tradition.

The JAR sign 

6. This is the most frequently used sign of the Indus Script. It appears to be a pictogram depicting some kind of a vessel with long handles or pronounced rim or lip and with a tapering bottom. The vessel-form of the sign is clearly indicated in the naturalistic representation of the sign in two graffiti on potsherds excavated from an early level at Kalibangan and recently published by G.B.Lal.<sup>4</sup>

7. It can be established from purely formal analysis that the 'jar' sign occurs as a post-fix, suffix or determinative at the end of what are most probably names and titles. My earlier attempt to treat the sign as a grammatical suffix and to establish its phonetic value through homophones of 'vessel' words has not been successful. I now consider that the sign is most probably used in an ideographic sense to indicate the class of persons to whose names it is found suffixed.

8. The symbolism of the 'jar' is closely associated in the later Indian religious tradition with priestly ritual. The legend of the 'jar-born' sages is very ancient and is even found in the Rig Veda (VII:33) where it is said that Vasishtha and Agastya were generated by Mitra and Varuna from a jar. Consequently these sages, especially Agastya, were known as Kumbhayoni, Kumbhasambhava, Kundina and by other synonymous names. A very similar story is found in the Mahabharata in respect of Drona ('the vessel').

9. The myth of the miraculous birth from a jar was shared by priestly as well as royal families. According to the Mahabharata, the Kauravas were born from a hundred jars (in which portions of Gandhari's foetus were stored). Agastya, the jar-born sage, was the reputed leader of the southern migration of the Tamil Velir clan (said to have arisen from

the vessel) ~~of a 'northern sage'~~. The Chālukyas, the Hoysalas, the Pallavas, the Vishnukundins ('vessel of vishnu') and other southern royal dynasties, all claimed to have originated from various kinds of vessels.

10. In Vedic literature and ritual treatises, Sata is mentioned as some kind of a sacrificial vessel used in ritual (Śatapatha Brāhmana, Vājasaneyi Samhitā and Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra). Sabaraswamin (~~in the Mīmāṃsa Sūtra Bhāṣya 1:3:10~~) and ~~Kumarila bhatta (in the Tantravārttika) (1.3.10)~~ mentions Sata as an example of loan-words without etymology in Sanskrit, and which were used by the Mlechchas. Sata is described as a wooden vessel round in shape with a hundred holes. The number of holes appears to be merely conventional and was probably suggested by the phonetic similarity of the words Sata ('vessel') and Śata ('one hundred'). It is however important to note that Sata was regarded in later Indian tradition (i) as a sacrificial vessel used in ritual; (ii) as a perforated jar and (iii) its name as a loan-word in Sanskrit from the language of the Mlechchas. I would invite attention here to the numerous finds of perforated jars, some of them very large, from various Harappan sites. It is not unlikely that these perforated jars had a ritual purpose.

11. The use of names similar to Sata in the 'jar-born'

families merits attention. The Kauravas were born from a hundred jars and were a hundred in number. It is likely that in this case also, as in the attribution of a hundred holes in the perforated jar with the name Sata, the number of one hundred Kauravas was conventional and was suggested by the similarity of the words Sata and Śata. The Andhra Kings were also known as Sāta, Sātavāhana or Sātakarni. My suggestion that these are 'jar' names derived from Sata will be corroborated when I consider the symbolism of the 'bearer' names in the next section of this paper. It may be noted that the name Satakarni was translated in ancient Tamil literature as 'Nūrruvar Kannaṛ' (The hundred Kannaṛ), again attesting to the tradition of mixing up Sata with Śata. The Tamil Chera kings were related to the Velir (by marital ties) and were thus part of the 'jar-born' clans. It is significant that one of the commonest chera names was Ātan, probably derived from \*Sāta by the dropping of the initial palatal (a linguistic phenomenon well known in old Tamil).

11. To sum up, it appears likely that the 'jar' sign of the Indus Script is a pictogram depicting a sacrificial vessel used in priestly ritual and was employed as an ideogram or determinative, to denote by association of ideas, the concept of a priest. Even after the Indus Script

became extinct, the jar symbolism continued to be associated with priestly and ruling classes and gave rise to the myth of the miraculous birth from jar. I now consider that since the 'jar' sign was probably used ideographically to denote a priest, it is not necessary that the words for 'priest' and 'jar' were homophonous in the Harappan language, and hence the phonetic value of the 'jar' sign cannot be determined by employing the technique of homophony (homonymy).

THE 'BEARER' SIGN



13. The pictogram depicts a person carrying a yoke across his shoulder with loads suspended from either end. The positional and functional characteristics of this sign are very similar to those of the 'jar' sign. Thus the 'bearer' sign also appears to be an ideogram occurring as a suffixed element in name-formations.

14. It appears possible to interpret the ideographic meaning of this sign with reference to the 'bearer' motif occurring in later Indian tradition. The term 'bearer' is applied idiomatically in the Indian languages to a person who 'shoulders' any responsibility or 'bears' the 'burden' of any office. Thus the Sanskrit word 'bharta', 'husband' (lit., one who sustains or maintains) is from the root bhr,



'to bear' . We have similar expressions derived from the root vah, 'to bear' , as in Kārya-vāhaka 'office-bearer' . One may also refer to the 'yoke' words like dhuramdharā or yugamdharā (lit., 'yoke bearers') used as honorifics or names . On the basis of this evidence, we can interpret the 'bearer' sign in the Indus Script as an ideogram or determinative with the approximate meaning of 'Officer' or 'functionary' .






15. A common tendency in the 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 families in later times . This reasoning leads us straight to the earliest and the most famous of the 'bearer' clans in ancient India namely the Bharatas (lit., 'bearers') . It is significant that the Bharatas were both priests and rulers and occupied the Indus region during the vedic period . Andhras were another famous dynasty with royal names derived from the 'bearer' motif, viz., Satavahana and Salivahana . In the Tamil country, the Cheras were also called Poraiyar (lit., 'bearers' from the Tamil root poru 'to bear' ) . Important evidence to corroborate

this association comes from ~~the unpublished early~~  
 medieval copper coins of <sup>13c-14c</sup> the ~~Cheros~~ (now in the  
~~National Museum, New Delhi~~) portraying the 'bearer'  
 motif, which is pictorially practically identical  
 with the ideogram of the Indus Script. (Cf., Elliot, Coins of  
 Southern India, No. 157)

16. It is interesting to observe the connection  
 between the 'jar' and the 'bearer' signs in the  
 Indus Script as well as in the later Indian tradition.  
 As mentioned earlier, both the signs occur in  
 similar environment in the inscriptions indicating  
 that they belong to the same category. Dales has  
 found in his recent excavations at Mohenjodaro a large  
 storage jar with the 'bearer' motif moulded in relief  
 on the side of the vessel. <sup>5</sup> Another interesting  
 feature is that these two signs of the Indus Script  
 are often found ligatured. In fact, the compound sign  
 ('jar-bearer') occurs oftener than the 'bearer' sign.  
 When we turn to the later Indian tradition we find  
 names or myths connected with the 'jar' and 'bearer'  
 motifs occurring in the same groups. As mentioned  
 earlier, the Kurus were born in jars and were also  
 called the Bharatas ('bearers'). The Andhras had  
 'jar-names' (sata, Satavahana) as well as 'bearer'




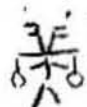

names (Satavahana, Salivahana). The names of the Cheras (Ātan, Porai) also show both the associations. The Pallavas who claimed to arise from a vessel ('pātra-skhalita-vrittīnām')<sup>6</sup> belonged to the Bharadvaja gotra, another name with the 'bearer' motif.

17. Finally, I come to what I consider as the most interesting evidence connecting the pictograms of the Indus Script with later Indian names. A search for royal names based on the 'bearer' motif led me to the famous Andhra dynasty whose kings called themselves Satavahanas or Salivahanas. The suffix-vāhana is connected with the 'bearer' theme (Vahana: bearing, carrying). Since however the second element-vāhana never occurs separately in these names, it struck me as probable that the preceding elements sata- and sali- might also be derived from the Harappan substratum. The 'bearer' ideogram in the Indus Script often appears ligatured or compounded with one of two other signs, viz., the 'jar' sign or the 'lance' sign. These compound ideograms can be considered in the light of the following interesting parallelisms:

Sign	Pictographic value	Sanskrit equivalent	Meaning
	JAR	<u>Sata</u>	A kind of sacrificial vessel used in ritual
	LANCE	<u>Śalya</u>	lance
	BEARER	<u>Vahana</u>	Bearing, carrying
	JAR +BEARER	<u>Sata-vahana</u>	(lit., 'jar-bearing')
		> <u>Sāta-vāhana</u>	n.pr. of Andhra dynasty
	LANCE +BEARER	<u>Śalya-vahana</u>	(lit., 'lance-bearing')
		> <u>Sāli-vāhana</u>	n.pr. of Andhra dynasty

The very close parallelism between the compound ideograms of the Indus Script and the compound names in the later Indian tradition provides good confirmation of the correctness of the interpretation proposed by me.

18. To sum up, I would tentatively suggest the following revised interpretation of the ideograms in the Indus Script:-

Ideogram	Pictographic value	Associated meaning
	Sacrificial vessel used in ritual	Priest
	Lance	Warrior
	bearer	Officer or functionary
	Jar + bearer	Officer with priestly functions
	Lance + bearer	Officer with military functions

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Notes and References

1. For computer studies of the Indus Script the following works may be consulted:
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3. Emil Forrer, The Hittite Ideographic writing, Chicago (1932), Summarised in Voices in stone - the decipherment of ancient scripts and writings, E.Doblhofer, tr.by M.Savill, London (1961).

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6.From the inscription on the seal of the Pallankōyil Plates ed.by T.N.Subramaniam in the Transactions of the Archaeological Society of South India(1958-59) p.41, Pl.XII.

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