

THE INDUS-LIKE SYMBOLS ON MEGALITHIC POTTERY: NEW EVIDENCE

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During a rather hurried visit to the British Museum some years ago, I noticed a large terracotta dish on display in the Indian Gallery. My interest was aroused as the symbols incised on the dish seemed to me like signs of the Indus script. However, as the label attached to the object described it as having been found in Suler Taluk, Coimbatore District (Tamilnadu, India), and assigned it to the Iron Age, ca. 1st century BC, my initial reaction was that the resemblance of the megalithic symbols to the signs of the Indus script must be illusory. I did, however, make a pencil sketch of the graffiti for later study. On further reflection, I have come to the conclusion that the resemblances between the megalithic symbols, and especially their sequences on the dish, and the corresponding signs and sequences in the Indus texts are too close to be dismissed as accidental and that the object merits publication for a closer look by competent scholars in the field. I am grateful to Dr. J. Robert Knox, Keeper, Department of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum, who took the trouble to locate the object (Accession No. 1935.4-19.15) and provide the excellent photograph published here.

The Inscribed Object (Fig. 1.)

The inscribed object is a large, circular, grey terracotta dish in an excellent state of preservation. The shallow, concave inner side of the dish is divided into four quadrants by a pair of X-like crossed lines. Four large-sized symbols are deeply and legibly incised within the lower quadrant. The symbols are so closely placed together as to give the appearance of a connected text.



Fig. 1. Inscribed terracotta dish from Sular. Photograph courtesy British Museum.

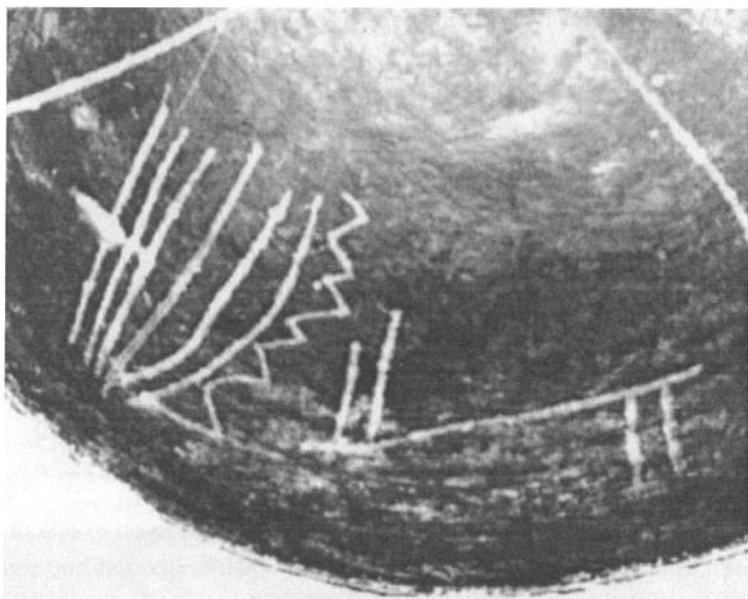


Fig. 2. Inscription on the Sular Dish (detail).

The Megalithic Symbols (Fig. 2.)

The four megalithic symbols incised on the Sular Dish are labelled here A to D (from left to right) for further discussion.

- A: Three tall, vertical, parallel lines.
- B: A tall V-shaped cup.
- C: A slightly curved base line to the left, to which is attached a wavy line with six “peaks and valleys” to the right.
- D: A long, slanting, straight line with a pair of short strokes attached near either end of the line in opposite directions.

Comparison with Signs of the Indus Script (Fig. 3.)

(Sign numbers, text numbers and frequencies are cited from Mahadevan 1977)

Symbol A is identical with Sign 89 (“three tall lines”) of the Indus script. This is one of the more frequent signs of the script, with 314 occurrences in the Corpus of Texts and ranking eighth in order of frequency.

Symbol B is identical with Sign 328 (“cup”) of the Indus script. This is also one of the more frequent signs in the script, with 323 occurrences in the Corpus and ranking seventh in order of frequency.

Symbol C may be compared with a variant of Sign 176 (“harrow”) of the Indus script (see especially Parpola 1994, no. 107c and CISI 1: M-488 B). This is also one of the more frequent signs in the script with 355 occurrences in the Corpus and ranking sixth in the order of frequency.

Symbol D is probably a variant of Sign 342 (“jar”). This is the most frequent sign in the Indus script with 1395 occurrences in the Corpus.

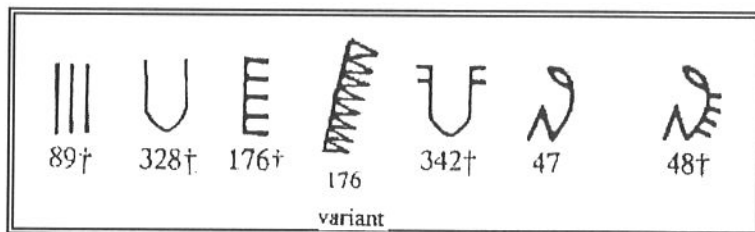


Fig. 3. Indus signs cited in the paper. (From Mahadevan 1977; variant of Sign 176 after Parpola 1994, no. 107c.)

Comparison with Texts in the Indus Script

Following the standard procedures to determine the direction of writing and word boundaries, the frequency-distribution of the Indus sign-pairs which are comparable to the symbol-pairs on the Sular Dish are studied below.

Megalithic Symbols A-B and Indus Sign-pair 89-328

The combination of the symbols A and B (when read from the left) is identical with the sign-pair 89-328 (“three tall lines + cup”) in the Indus texts. The pairing is one of the most frequent in the Corpus, occurring 124 times and ranking fourth in the order of frequency of sign-pairs. This sign-pair occurs mostly as a complete line of text on one side of the “tiny” seals and sealings found in the lower levels at Harappa. These inscribed tablets are generally considered to be votive objects with some religious significance.

Megalithic Symbols B-C and Indus Sign-pair 328-176

The sequence 328-176 (“cup + harrow”) is attested only once on a seal from Mohenjodaro (no. 2035). In this case, however, Sign 176 (“harrow”) is facing Sign 328 (“cup”), unlike in the Sular Dish where the corresponding symbol C faces the other way, indicating change in direction as well as a word boundary.

Megalithic Symbols C-D and Indus Sign-pair 176-342

The sequence 176-342 (“harrow + jar”) is infrequent in the Indus texts. It is recorded only ten times and that, too, only after specific signs which do not include Sign 328 (“cup”). However, if the last two symbols in the dish are read as D-C from right to left (as indicated by the orientation of symbol C) and compared with the Indus sign-pair 342-176 (“jar + harrow”), the situation is altered dramatically. This sequence is one of the most frequent in the Indus texts and is recorded 184 times in the Corpus, ranking second in the order of frequency of sign-pairs. Furthermore, this sign-pair occurs as the most frequent terminal signs on the votive tablets from Harappa, sharing the same environment as the other Sign-pair 89-328 (“three tall lines + cup”) noticed above.

There is, however, the problem that one has to read the first two symbols on the dish from left to right and the next two symbols from right to left. Such an arrangement, where the two sign-pairs under consideration run in opposite directions,

is not uncommon on the tablets from Harappa (for example, in nos. 4602 and 5274). However, in all such cases the sign-pairs occur on different sides of the tablets and not placed adjacent as in the case of the symbols on the Sular Dish. In any case, the pair-wise frequencies and direction of the comparable Indus sign-pairs strongly suggest that in the Sular Dish the left segment A-B runs from the left and the right segment D-C from the right, whatever the reason for this unusual arrangement is.

DISCUSSION

In a classic Paper published in 1960, B. B. Lal compared the graffiti on the megalithic pottery from South India with the chalcolithic symbols and Harappan signs and recorded the finding that

eighty-nine per cent of the megalithic symbols go back to the chalcolithic-Harappan times (and) conversely, eighty-five per cent of the Harappan-chalcolithic symbols continue down to the megalithic times (Lal 1960: 21).

With characteristic caution he concluded, however, that

to stress the point that the symbols do have a phonetic, syllabic or alphabetic value would indeed be presumptuous in the present state of our knowledge (Lal 1960: 24).

In the four decades since Lal published his findings, many more excavations have taken place in Tamilnadu, and virtually every ancient site has yielded quantities of graffiti-bearing pottery, mostly from the Megalithic Iron Age levels. In a review paper on recent trends in early Tamil epigraphy, I have re-iterated, following Lal's lead, that while there does seem to be a genetic relationship at a deeper level between the signs of the Indus script and the megalithic symbols, even identical-looking signs and symbols are more likely to share the same semantic rather than phonetic values (Mahadevan 1995).

At the same time one cannot but be impressed by the exceptionally close similarities between some of the megalithic symbols and the corresponding signs of the Indus script. Indeed, Lal's enquiry into the antecedents of the megalithic symbols was triggered when he was particularly struck by the similarity of a rather specialised symbol with one in the Harappan script (Lal 1960, Symbol no. 47, Pl. 31 B.1). He was referring to a megalithic symbol occurring on pottery from Sanur, Tamilnadu, and its close resemblance to Sign 47 of the Indus script. I have continued the investigation into this particularly interesting megalithic symbol (Fig. 4: symbol at left; Fig. 3: last two signs at right) tracing its links with Signs 47 & 48 ("seated anthropomorphs") of the Indus script (Mahadevan 1999).

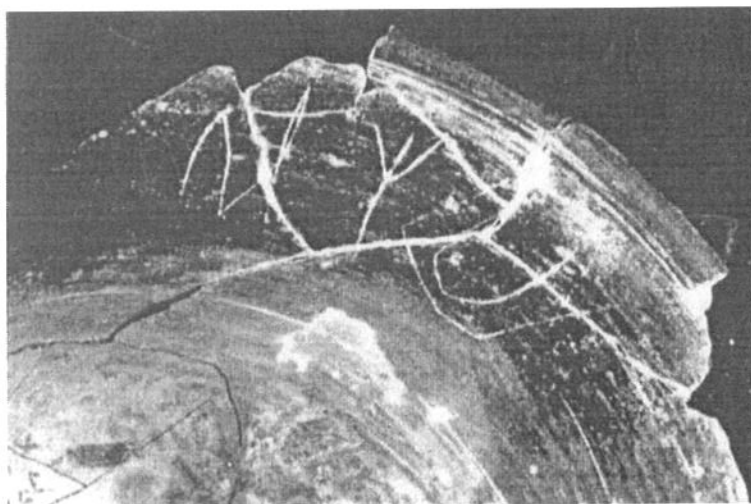


Fig. 4. Inscribed pottery from Sanur. Photograph courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

It is significant that the megalithic symbols, one from Sanur and four from Sular, correspond to five frequent signs of the Indus script, constituting together one of the more frequent texts (48-342-176/89-328) occurring on two sides of the votive tablets at Harappa. (See, for example, CISI 1: H-352-357). It is possible that these megalithic symbols have the same significance as the corresponding signs of the Indus texts on the votive tablets. The inscribed pottery from Sanur forms part of the gravegoods in megalithic burials. There is no information about the context of occurrence of the Sular Dish; but it is also most likely to be funerary. The earlier comparisons were confined to single occurrences of megalithic symbols and the corresponding Indus signs. The unique Sular Dish marks a further advance in our knowledge by providing evidence for the first time of juxtaposition of pairs of megalithic symbols with the same sequences as the corresponding sign-pairs of the Indus texts.

CONCORDANCE OF SIGNS CITED IN THE PAPER

Mahadevan 1977:	47	48	89	176	328	342
Parpola 1994:	86f	87p	130c	107c	296e	311w

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