

THE INSPIRATION OF THE HARAPPAN TALISMANIC SEALS

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The Harappan seals are mainly amulets and talismans.¹ In this paper we will examine the inspiration for these ancient religious objects.

The Indus Valley or Harappan script numbers 300 signs. The entire corpus of Harappan inscriptions consists of around 4000 seals. Most Harappan seals are made of soapstone. They are square or rectangular with a raised boss on the back pierced with a hole for a carrying string. On the front of the seal we have the depiction of an ancient animal (god) and an inscription.

Due to the pioneering work of the Scandinavian and Russian decipherment teams, working on the decipherment of the Harappan script using computers, we discovered that the early inhabitants of the Indus Valley were probably Dravidian speakers. This discovery provided us with the right theoretical structure for its decipherment. Other points suggesting Dravidian origin of this

writing are 1) the fact that in the West Indus, Brahui, a Dravidian language is spoken in Baluchistan and Afghanistan; and 2) the presence of Dravidian loan words in Sanskrit of the Vedic texts, indicates that the Dravidian speakers occupied northern India when the Aryans arrived in north India.

It appears that in ancient times the Indus Valley was called Dilmun by the Sumerians.² Cultural interaction existed between the Harappans and contemporary civilizations in the 4th and 3rd millennium B.C. At this time an extensive trade network connected the Proto Dravidians of the Indus Valley, with Egypt, Sumer and Elam.³ Vessels from IVBI workshop at Tepe Yahya, have a uniform shape and design. Vessels sharing this style are distributed from Soviet Uzbekistan and the Indus Valley. The intercultural style vessels show clear parallel between Indus Valley, and Sumerian, Elamite and Egyptian sites.

Harappan sites have been found

close to the Oxus river in Afghanistan, and there are Central Asian parallels to the Indus civilization. In addition, Harappan potsherds have been found at Oman, and seals in Mesopotamia.

All of these ancient people were Mediterraneans. Some of the Mediterranean skeletal remains found in the Indus and South India are analogous to those found at Kish, and pre-dynastic Egypt.⁴ There was a continuity and homogeneity of this ancient Mediterranean type from middle Africa to India.⁵

In addition to interactional patterns which integrate the Indus Valley, Elam, Sumer and the Proto-Saharan, there are linguistic affinities too. Lahovary noted many structural and grammatical analogies of Dravidian, Sumerian and Elamite.⁶ Recently, David McAlpin⁷ has "been able to show a strong genetic link between the Dravidian languages and Elamite".⁸ K.L. Muttarayan provides hundreds of lexical correspondences and other linguistic data supporting the family relationship between Sumerian and Dravidian.⁹ In addition, C.A. Winters has provided evidence of a genetic relationship between Dravidian languages and Manding languages.

Moreover, the Indus writing is similar to other early writing systems dating to the first half of the third millennium B.C. or earlier.¹⁰ But, whereas the Mesopotamian seals were used for administrative and commercial purposes, the Harappan seals are mainly talismans or amulets.¹¹

It is generally accepted that decipherment of an unknown script/language requires 1) bilingual texts and/or

knowledge of the cognate languages. Although the Harappan script fulfilled one of these criteria, the language is known, up until now no satisfactory decipherment of the script has been proposed.

Using the evidence of cognate scripts and the analogy between the Dravidian language and the language spoken by peoples using the cognate scripts, it was possible to make three assumptions leading to the decipherment of the Harappan script.

1) It was assumed that the Harappan script was written in the Dravidian language.

2) It was assumed that the Dravidian language shares linguistic and cultural affinities with the Elamite, Manding and Sumerian, all of which used a similar script and that led to the assumption that the Indus script probably operated on the same general principles as the related scripts, due to a probable common origin.

3) It was assumed that since the Harappan script has affinity to the proto-Manding, Saharan (Libyco-Berber) script and Manding language,¹² the Harappan script could be read by giving these signs the phonetic values they had in the Proto-Manding script, but read in Dravidian, since a strong genetic relationship exists between these two languages.

'Because of the rapid change in Indo-European languages, as a result of unstable social and political entities, many would-be decipherers have assumed that it is almost impossible to prove a genetic relationship using data of comparatively

aspects of the Harappan script's grammar elsewhere,¹⁶ so I will not go further into the mechanics of this script.

The Harappan seals are protective amulets. They were found in almost every room of the city of Mohenjo-daro. Many of the seals were found in a worn condition and show signs of repair. Archaeologists have found holes on the seals which suggest that they were tied with string and hung around the neck or from belts; many of the seals may have been put in small cases which may have served as amulet holders.¹⁶

The zoomorphic representations on the seals depict holy animals of the Harappan-Dravidians. These animals were totems that represented the 'gods' (or holy animals which served as the totems of the ancestors) of the various tribes which formed the proto-Dravidian group. The usual classes of the Harappan zoomorphic representations on the seals are the bull with horn thrust forward, or the so-called unicorn; water buffalo; short horn buffalo; humped bull; elephant; rhino; tiger; lion; and mythological animals.

The principal Harappan deity was the unicorn. The unicorn may have represented *Māl* (Vishnu or Kataval). This god was held in high esteem by the cowherds and shepherds. The wife of *Māl* was the mother goddess: Uma, Amma, Kali or Pravarti.

The original mother goddess may have been *Kali* or *Kalubai* 'the dark lady'. In Dravidian, *kali* refers to herd of cows. The term for oxen in Dravidian is *Kālai*, which also means warrior. This goddess may have been represented by the oxen on the Harappan seals.

The crescent shaped horns of the oxen or castrated bull on some Harappan

seals may represent the mother goddess Amma, Uma or Kali. The crescent shape of the oxen's carved horns recalled the lunar crescent which was the primordial sign for the mother goddess.

The castrated bulls on the Harappan seals probably denote the raise of the patriarchy which was symbolized by cattle herding, and man's submission to the mother goddess, since the bull through castration illustrated the male recognition of the female as his superior.

Siva was probably represented by the short horn bull. The elephant on the Indus seals may represent Ganesa/Ganesha, the elephant headed god. The appearance of the mythological animals on the seals may refer to Ganesha in one of his many transformations. The hunter figure depicted on the seal wearing a horned headdress, and armed with a bow and arrow, probably represents Muruga, the son of Uma. This is only a summary of the possible identities of the Harappan totems and/or gods depicted on the seals. A fuller treatment of this material is presented elsewhere.¹⁷

The Harappan script is read from right to left. The readings below of the Harappan signs are recognised as being tentative, because a corrective attitude is always essential for a successful decipherment of an unknown script.

The Harappan seals and copper plates are amulets or talismans. They are messages addressed to the Dravidian gods requesting their support and assistance in obtaining *aṛam* (benevolence).

The goal of the Harappans was the "realizing of God". The superior man was one who "realizes God". Each god depicted on the seals was probably the totemic deity of a particular Dravidian

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clan or economic unit. As a result each god was seen by his followers as 1) a god having no equal, 2) a god having neither *Karma* (desires) nor aversion, 3) as a god unaffected by *Karma*, 4) as a god who is the ocean of *aram*.

The Harappan seals indicate that the most important goal of man is *aram* the inclination or tendency to perform charitable acts. The Harappans sought righteousness and a spotlessly pure mind. Purity of mind is the *sine qua non* for happiness "within".

Harappan man, as indicated by the seals, was seeking the avoidance of all mental evils, viz., jealousy, covetousness etc. Fear of evil (deeds) instinctively was the objective of the Harappans. This was obtained when one shudders even at the idea of evil deeds instinctively.


It appears that Harappan man believed that man must do good and live a benevolent life so he can obtain *puka!* (fame), for his right doing. Through the adoption of benevolence an individual will obtain the reward of gaining the good things of the present world, and the world beyond.

In the Harappan seals the talismanic formula was: Depiction of Deity X as an animal, and then the words: "purity, illumination (light), perfection, rectitude or glory".

The *Kural* of Tiruvalluvar sheds considerable light on the proper interpretation of the Harappan seals. Among the Tamils, we learn from the *Kural* that man must strive to acquire perfection and union with God. To accomplish this goal man must seek to capture Truth or Knowledge, which results from man's

search and acquisition of education, Infinite Love for living things, selfless impartiality, goodness and concern for others. The divine goal could only be reached by righteous living in accordance with the ideas of goodness laid down by God, who is One and Supreme.

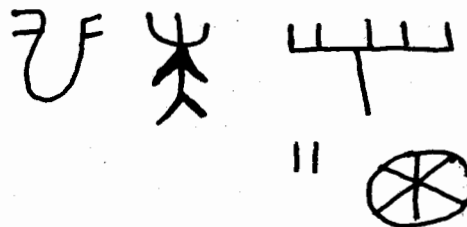
Tiruvalluvar used *pal* and *uzh* for fate, the law of nature. *Uzh* is the generic term used in the *Kural*, for Fate; it also expresses the Life-Power aspect of Fate. *Uzh* is not a static power; it is a dynamic force. It represents the Personality and Power of God expressed in terms of justice.

In an earlier paper¹⁸ I suggested the possibility that the sign  repre-

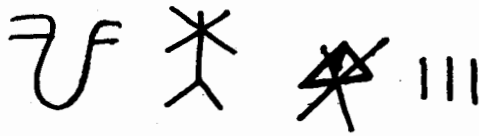
sented the Dravidian suffix *-ssu*, but given the fact that this sign often appears at the beginning of some inscriptions, I believe that it may also represent *uzh*. For example when we read the following inscriptions we have reading from right to left:




Ta-tu ssu (> uzh) tu say: "Bring virtue, God's justice, purity and rectitude".



Tar-ye e itū āl-var ssu (> uzh): "Ye bind (your servant) to that which is pure Supreme God (through your) Justice".

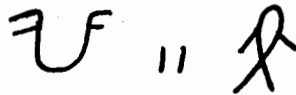


Say-āḷ pā-a āḷ-var ssu (> uzh): "Rectitude distribute it to your servant Supreme God, it is the law of nature".


The  *min* sign, which means light, shining, etc., is explained in the *Kural*, where Tiruvalluvar notes that "Lamps do not give the light that holy men desire. It is the light of truth that illuminates their path"¹⁶ On the Harappan seals we find much mention of the desire on the part of the bearer of a particular seal to be given such light.



Min say tū *Tā min*
"Shining rectitude and virtue"
"Excell in shining" or "Give (me) Shining"

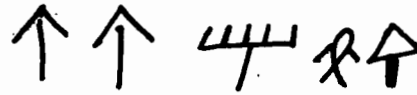


Min yē ssu (> uzh)
"Increase (my) illumination and Your Justice (the law of nature)"


The Harappans often asked their gods to give them  *tata* glory (or

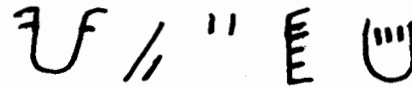
greatness). According to Tiruvalluvar, "Equal are all in birth; distinction is achieved only by deeds requiring greatness"²⁰ He also wrote that: "As a virgin guards her purity, must men guard their greatness"²¹

In one of the Harappan amulets we read the following.



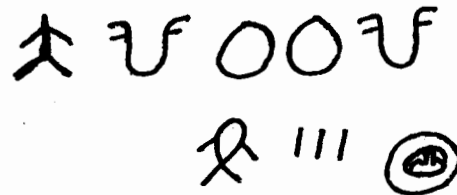
tā min ē tū tata: "Give me illumination much virtue and greatness".

Another important theme in the Harappan seals is the acquisition of  rectitude or *say*. In the *Kural*, we read that "The acquisition of a man of rectitude goes down to his children without diminution and will protect them against adversity"²² Elsewhere we read that "Your life will impress itself on your child's character, and if you wish well for your child beware and walk in the path of rectitude, says the poet"²³ The Harappans frequently requested from their gods rectitude. For example:



U-say tū (y) ē i-i ssu (> uzh)
"This is rectitude, much purity (does) thou give is the law of nature".

In another amulet from a Mohenjo-daro terra cotta amulet we find,



ta-tū say min ssu (> uzh) tata ssu (> uzh) āl
"Give (me) rectitude and illumination, it is the law of nature, (make) Greatness the

Fate of your servant".

In summary, the Harappan seals are amulets. These amulets reflect the Dravidian view of life, which recognizes life as secular, and yet spiritual to the core.

Due to the oneness of Dravidian life and the recognition of a Dynamic all powerful God among the various Harappan tribes, these proto-Dravidians say *say*, *miṇ* and *taṭa* as attributes worthy of man's quest for the good life. It was through the acquisition of *aṛam* that Dravidians could obtain the best of this world and the next.

The Harappan amulets were

probably meant as an exhibition by the wearer of his submission to the guidance of his personal god, so he could follow the spiritual path which man must take to reach the other world.

The traditional appearance of the Harappan gods as females and the wearing of amulets were not lost to later generations of Dravidian, because religion to the Dravidians enters into every detail of his life. As a result Dravidian deities are commonly of the female sex, in contrast to the masculine nature of the northern Hindu gods. Moreover, at the turn of the century amulets were worn around the neck of Dravidians, especially among the children, in south India.

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