

# Harappan Basic Signs

By

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The Indus Valley seals provide its bearers with a code for living. Each seal contains messages to the bearer of the seal that provides seal bearer a guide for right conduct for themselves, throughout their life so they could obtain goodness and while they merge with God—the Absolute Reality.

The Harappan seals carry messages addressed to their Gods requesting support and assistance in obtaining **aram** 'benevolence'.

As a result the Harappan seals are amulets or talismans requesting some form of blessing for its bearer, from his personal god. These request sentences were formed in simple phrases like those found in Tiru Kural/ Holy Kural written by the weaver Saint Tiruvalluvar. The Harappan request sentences were formed by a simple verb, and additional introductory elements.

Harappan seals were found in almost every room excavated . This indicates that writing was well known among the Harappans. This view is further supported by the appearance of Harappan signs on many different types of artifacts, including pottery, axes and copper plates.

Harappan texts are very short. They usually number three to four signs per seal. In this way the Harappan seals are similar to the later Indian seals and their

inscriptions studied by K.K. Thapliyal, in *Studies in ancient Indian seals* .The seals have only a few signs because each Harappan symbol represented one or more words.

Harappan texts are found on over 400 inscribed seals. The seals were amulets, tied with string and carried/worn by the Harappan people. The Harappan writing is read from right to left.

Each Harappan sign has a syllabic value. Due to the monosyllabic nature of the Dravidian language spoken among the Harappans, each sign represented a word.

Researchers have determined that the Harappan or Indus Valley script has around 419 signs. Of these 419 signs 113 occur only once, 47 occur twice and 59 occur less than 5 times. This means that around 200 Harappan signs, most of them ligatures, were in general use.

The Harappan seals have been found at over 60 different sites. The copper plates of the Harappans have only been found at Mohenjo-Daro.

There are two major types of Harappan seals, one type square with short inscription above a carved animal motif. The second type of seal is rectangular and contains only an inscription.



The seals range in size from a half-inch to around two-and-half inches. Ninety percent of the seals are square, and 10 percent are rectangular.

The seals are carved from steatite. Each seal had a raised boss on the back pierced with a hole for carrying or being placed on parcels.

**BASIC INDUS SIGNS**

	āi		po po		agappal
	i		uy		
U	u		Kumari		
△ □	po		tā		ippo
	pā		papa		Y lu
	tā		Ka		
	gā		tāpī		
	min		pā pā		
	paka		kāggal		
B		X	aggal		tuppu
Y	tā		aggal		pakatā
Y	tātū	#			
Y	tā		nil		
U	tū		gā, lū		
ll (y)	e		k		pā-i
≡	itu		tar pasu		puka
	knowledge		rain desen		
	tūtā				
lll	say, sey		uss		
llll	me, tū		u-pa pa		i-ka
^	a		ututu		
△	vey		upa pa		
))	mi		tar ya		
J	po		tā te		
D	ga		tā		
^	lu		tā vey		
✓	ka		tū uss		

**Figure 1: The Basic Harappan Signs**

The Harappan writing system is a logo-syllabic system. The Harappan signs record messages to the seal bearer on right living and goodness. The animal motifs were used to express the Dravidian deities of the Harappans. My research indicates that the Harappan script consist of 60-70 basic syllabic signs and 10

idiographic signs(see Figure 1). These signs are joined together to form the majority of the 419 signs associated with Harappan writing. Study and learning of these 62 basic signs will allow one to read practically all of the Indus Valley seals.

The Indus Valley writing because it is logo-syllabic contains signs that are CV (consonant-vowel) and CVC type morphemes. The Harappan words were monosyllabic.

In the Harappan writing there are only a few ideographic signs. The most




common ideographic signs are  *min* 'illumination' and  *ā* 'maintain, keep; laborer; cherish; servant; to rule'.

The Harappan signs are clear and straight rectilinear signs. The script shows little evolution in shape and size from the writing used by other Proto-Saharan people in Sumer, Elam, the Fezzan in Africa and Minoan Crete. The average length of the seal text is half a dozen signs, the longest seal text is of 26 signs.

In the Harappan seals the talismanic formula was : Depiction of Deity X as an animal, and then a votive inscription was written above the Deity.



In the seal above we see a depiction of the Harappan God Mal (Vishnu or Katavu. Under the head of the God Mal we see a symbol many researchers call

a Manger. The manger is composed of three signs  pū  i  pā , the words **pū i pā** mean “A flourishing condition thou distribute (it)” or “Thou distribute a flourishing condition”.

Many Harappan signs are homophones. As a result of homophony in Harappan writing the person attempting to decipher, or read a particular Harappan sign must carefully observe the general semantics of each inscription.

The order of the Harappan sentence is verb object subject (VOS). Each Harappan sentence has a noun phrase (NP) , verb phrase (VP) and an article (art.). For example:



Reading the signs from left to right beginning with the circle sign we read: **Ta vey e ta ippo Uss pā ta** ‘ Give (me) awareness, give (it) now. Fate give (its) distribution’.



Reading from right to left we have **Ta(r) ya i tū ta** ‘ Ye who binds, thou bring virtue here’.

Below we list the basic Harappan signs and their meanings. The meanings of these signs come from T. Burrow and M.B. Emeneau’s **A Dravidian**

***Etymological Dictionary***<sup>1</sup> and K. Appadurai's ***The Mind and Thought of Tiruvalluvar***. The Harappan signs are given the phonetic value of the signs recorded in the Vai script, a writing system used by the Mande speaking people of West Africa. Although the Harappan signs are given the phonetic values of the Vai characters, the phonetic values are read using Dravidian (Tamil) morphemes. For example, Appadurai said that in the ***Tiru Kural***, the term ***Uzh > Uss*** corresponds to the 'Life Power aspect of Fate', while word ***pā*** during the writing of the Tolkappiyam denoted Karma. In Sangam times ***pāl*** was considered the sum and the consequences of a person's action, i.e., his fate, destiny'. The term ***pāl*** was also used by Tiruvalluvar to denote 'fate or the law of nature'.

## List of Basic Harappan Signs



uy, 'soul, to live, to subsist, have being, salvation, to ensure, to be relieved (from trouble), escape from danger'



a,



aga vey, 'equality in bloom'; 'mayest thou blossom (on me)'

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<sup>1</sup> A digital version of T. Burrow and M.B. Emeneau's ***A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*** can be found on the web at: <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/burrow/>. This digital version does not contain all the definitions of Dravidian words found in the hard copy.



agappal, 'Inner Path'



tu ga vey, 'make virtue bloom'



al, 'maintain, keep, maintain in use; laborer, servant; manage, to rule, reign over; man'



a min



and




annal, 'superiority, righteousness, greatman; greatness, king, god'



ga or lu



I, -I, this particle has many uses in Harappan, it means 'to give', it can

also be used to as the past tense formative, e.g.,  pā-l 'do not divide'; thou, you; the demonstrative 'this', the inflexion of neuter nouns; and 'give it, permit, to let'.



i-ka, 'thou to preserve'



i-po, 'give richness; give (its) birth; give a flourishing condition'



ippo, 'Now'



ka , 'balance, equality; to preserve, shelter, watch, guard, ward off, rescue, protect; forest; protection, protector, guardian'



ka annal, 'preserve righteousness'



Kaka, 'deliverance , protection; safe keeping'



ka vey, 'equality in bloom; pleasure grove blossom; paradise bloom'



terul, ' to know, gain true knowledge, perceive, ascertain, understand clearly; be clean, lucid, intelligence, wisdom, comprehension'



kumari, 'paradise'



ta, 'to give, to bring'



ga, 'mayest'



me , 'truth, reality, soul consciousness, excellence; to excel, surpass'





min , 'illumination, to shine, glitter; phosphorescent, glow'



min-i, 'thou illumination' or 'illumination give it'



nil, 'steadfast; to stand, to be long, to be great; loftiness'



and pa, 'Karma, destiny; to divide, to distribute; **-pa** plural

termination; a term that corresponds to the personal  
impersonal aspects of God, God as a Friend and Guide, and  
God as Compassion and as Dispenser of Mercy'



pa-I , 'give distribution of God's Mercy'; give the distribution; thou distribute



pāpā, true it is, indeed; distribute God's Mercy'



papapa, 'Indeed distribute much of God's Mercy'



po, 'to go, proceed, go away; reach a destination; richness, flourishing

condition, flower bloom; to create, give birth; **-i** the formative particle



popo / pupu, 'create/ give birth to a flourishing condition'



and puka, 'glory, fame, equality, equality of division



say or sey, 'straightness, righteousness, merit, rectitude; v. to do, make, create, cause; deed, act, action; uprightness, incorruptibility, honorableness, high character'



and tā, 'to give, to bring; here, place; blemish, defect; **-ta** the imperative suffix.



tā pāpā,



tar ya, 'Ye who binds'



tātā, 'large, broad, full; greatness, glory; bestow on me greatness'



tar pasu, 'ye distribute'



tā tā, large, broad, full; greatness, glory; bestow on (me) greatness,



tū tū, 'abundant virtue, abundant purity'



tū Uss, 'Virtuous Fate'



tū ga vey, 'make virtue bloom'



tuppu, cleanliness, purification



u , demonstrative 'this', verb: 'to bring', it can also represent the singular ending particle **-u**.



**(uzh) uss**, Fate, Power of God, Law of Nature (This was a generic term used to denote the power of God, expressed in terms of justice).



u- tūtū, 'to put (on), surround, encircle; **utātā** 'to bring greatness, to bring glory'



uy ta, 'Salvation'



vēy, to come, put on, roof; blossom, open; Florence, growth, development'



**terul**, 'knowledge'; **i pa** 'give perfection',



(y)e

Learn these Harappan terms and you will be able to read most Harappan the Harappan seals.