

Seed, Plant, and Farming Signs in the Indus Symbol System: New Methods for Studying Harappan Civilization

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Abstract

An unexpectedly large percentage of the signs in the Indus or Harappan symbol system represent what appear to be seeds, sprouts, plants, farm animals, agricultural tools, fields, and farming paraphernalia. While many of these signs are highly stylized, pictographic variants of others exist that allow us to make reasonable guesses concerning their precise referents. The most interesting of these variants have anthropomorphic forms, suggesting that links not only existed between these symbols and agriculture but with religious-ritual ideas as well. In this talk we show a representative number of these symbols in their inscriptional contexts and discuss the potential light they throw on Indus agricultural rituals, temporal and regional variations in farm output, and agricultural means of exchange. Emphasis is placed on regional variations in the farming signs found on apparent ritual artifacts and on the possibilities of correlating symbols with what is known of Indus agriculture from archaeological studies. We end with discussion of the use that future studies of the temporal and geographic distribution of these symbols might provide in helping distinguish agricultural production and rituals in different Indus microecologies, which varied widely in temperature, rainfall patterns, planting seasons, and agricultural output.