

The Illiterate Harappans:

New Light on India's Oldest Civilization

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Abstract

This paper challenges old assumptions concerning the linguistic nature of Indus Valley (or Harappan) inscriptions. The paper is divided into three parts. Part one reexamines claims originating in the 1920s that extensive “lost” Indus texts may have once existed on perishable materials. Archaeological data and cross-cultural studies of manuscript traditions are reviewed that demonstrate the implausibility of those claims. Evidence is introduced that Indus symbols were incapable even in principle of encoding speech or long texts; the suggestion is that the thousands of short inscriptions found on Indus seals, tablets, copper plates, potsherds, and other durable goods, which average less than 5 symbols each in length, were not closely tied to spoken language. Further tests of this thesis are provided by a detailed reexamination of Indus symbol frequencies, which differ radically from those in any known writing system; statistical abuses are reviewed in past studies that claimed to establish links between Indus inscriptions and early Dravidian or Indo-Aryan languages. Methods are discussed for reconstructing the original sense of Indus inscriptions in empirically testable ways; nonlinguistic symbol systems of similar types are reviewed in ancient traditions in Southeast Europe, the Middle East, Crete, and the New World.

Part two examines the origins and functions of the Indus symbol system. Special attention is paid to one common inscription type that can be closely tied to agricultural and seasonal rituals involving human and animal sacrifice. Mechanisms are reviewed that would have allowed magical/ritual symbols of this class to serve a wide range of religious, social/political, and economic functions without ever evolving into a script. Evidence is discussed that the failure of Indus symbols to develop into any of the familiar types of writing systems created by the Harappans’ trade partners in Mesopotamia, by the Egyptians, or by the later Chinese, may have been tied to the symbols’ use in ritually controlling a massive multilingual civilization. Parallels are drawn to the resistance by later Brahmin elites to the literate encoding of Vedic traditions and to similar resistance to literacy (e.g., by the Celts) in esoteric traditions outside South Asia.

Part three discusses a few of the historical implications of these findings. The paper argues that recognition of the nonlinguistic nature of Indus inscriptions paradoxically enhances their historical value, throwing light on a giant ancient civilization that survived for many centuries without true literacy. Supporting the claims of a number of earlier researchers, the paper argues that key elements of Indus traditions viewed obscurely in those inscriptions may have survived long enough in oral form to be absorbed in later Vedic texts, where they syncretically fused with Indo-Aryan traditions entering India from the Northwest. The paper ends with discussion of a few modern political implications of these findings and makes a series of archaeological predictions that provide additional hard empirical tests of its conclusions.