

# Indus Valley Fantasies: Political Mythologies, Academic Careerism, and the Poverty of Indus Studies

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## Abstract

Anachronistic projections of modern ideas into antiquity, complicating our abilities to reconstruct early mythologies, are common in premodern studies, finding ancient antecedents in the repetitive updating and reconciliation of oral and written traditions in commentarial traditions. Cross-cultural studies of those traditions in the last decade by the two of us and our collaborators have suggested that study of repetitive transformations of this type, which were limited by the small number of ways available to the brain to handle discordant data, can be exploited to build computer models that simulate the step-like growth of self-similar structures typical of mature religious, philosophical, and cosmological systems world-wide.<sup>1</sup> Brain-culture network models in part built on these findings are being used by our group to construct intelligent-agent simulations applicable to probabilistic modeling of future as well as past cultural developments.<sup>2</sup> A second use of those models is the guidance they provide in helping distinguish societies associated with literate as opposed to nonliterate traditions.

While political distortions of ancient history can be expected in all civilizations, arguably the most extreme examples show up in India, thanks in part to the major role mythology continues to play in the diverse religious traditions loosely associated with the modern term ‘Hinduism.’ In this talk we summarize research from the last decade on the often bizarre modern fantasies projected on the so-called Indus or Harappan civilization, South Asia’s earliest urban society, whose vast ruins lie scattered across modern Pakistan and northwest India. Our talk focuses on the gross distortions these fantasies have had on our understanding of ancient Indus mythology, reflecting the ideological concerns of secular nationalists, warring Hindutva and Dravidian political groups, oppressed tribal peoples and dalits, and even modern yoga adherents. Nearly all these fantasies in some way involve the so-called “Indus script” which – guided initially by predictions of the model of literate transformations noted above – the two of us and our colleague Richard Sproat have long argued can be shown using overlapping archaeological evidence, studies of sign frequencies, and comparative studies of literate and non-literate civilizations to have been part of a fairly simple nonlinguistic symbol system that was incapable even in principle of encoding extended speech – let alone of being meaningfully compared to the true writing systems of the contemporary and more technologically advanced civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, among other studies, S Farmer, JB Henderson, and M Witzel, “Neurobiology, layered texts, and correlative cosmologies: A cross-cultural framework for premodern history,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2000 [2002]): 48-89. Reprint: <http://www.safarmer.com/neuro-correlative.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> S Farmer, W Zaumen, R Sproat, J Henderson, B Farmer, and M Witzel, “Simulating the past and predicting the future: Brain-culture networks and the evolution of thought.” In preparation. Abstract: <http://www.safarmer.com/brain-network.models.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Farmer, R Sproat, and M Witzel, “The collapse of the Indus-script thesis: The myth of a literate Harappan civilization.” *EJVS* 11-2 (13 Dec. 2004): 19-57. Reprint: <http://www.safarmer.com/fsw2.pdf>.

The absurdity of modern political fantasies involving the “Indus script” have become more widely appreciated since the two of us began our collaborations a decade ago,<sup>4</sup> but the crippling effects that nearly 140 years of such fantasies have had on mainstream academic research are rarely noted. We suggest in this paper how a mixture of nationalist pressures on Indus archaeologists, academic careerism and sterile research turf wars, and simple intellectual inertia continue to impoverish our understanding of Indus mythology and Indus civilization in general, which can claim a unique place in history as the largest known nonliterate urban society in the ancient world. Part of our discussion provides a critique of the newly published Vol. III of the *Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions*, compiled by researchers associated for many decades with the script thesis, whose rich pictorial evidence – as we predicted many years before the volume appeared – ironically provides a mass of new data that sharply undermines that thesis.

Volume III of the *Corpus* contains an essay by Kenoyer and Meadow that attempts to take a middle way by dismissing the significance of the script controversy, oddly claiming – in a way that would surprise any historical linguist or philologist – that the difference between a language-encoding and nonlinguistic symbol system in this case “is not a particularly interesting distinction.”<sup>5</sup> We argue on the contrary that the distinction is critical to any meaningful understanding of Indus society, since studies of the type long conducted by our group suggest that writing – like all other major communications technologies involved in human cultural evolution – was a powerful enabling technology that deeply altered every society in which it was introduced. We end by reemphasizing a central claim in our early studies that has been largely overlooked in the violent political debates those studies have triggered over the so-called script: that the historical importance of Indus symbol-bearing objects is vastly enhanced, and not diminished, by discovery of their non-linguistic status. The key point is that study of the changing distributions over space and time of Indus symbols provides new tools to help us reconstruct the evolution of the civilization as well as major clues as to how mythology and other intellectual forms were preserved in massive urban civilizations like the Indus that for unknown reasons rejected the chance to develop their own literate technology, despite their long-term contacts with truly literate societies.

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<sup>4</sup> M Witzel and S Farmer, “Horseplay in Harappa: The Indus Valley decipherment hoax,” *Frontline* 17 (19) (13 Oct. 2000): 4-11. Reprint: <http://www.safarmer.com/frontline/horseplay.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> JM Kenoyer and RH Meadow, “Inscribed objects from Harappa excavations 1986-2007,” in *Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions, Vol. 3: New material, untraced objects, and collections outside India and Pakistan*. Ed. A Parpola, BM Pande and P Koskikallio, Helsinki 2010, p. xliv, n. 1.