

The collapse of the Indus-script thesis, five years later: Massive non-literate urban civilizations of ancient Eurasia

[Thirteenth Harvard University Roundtable on the Ethnogenesis of South and Central Asia, Kyoto Session,
Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN), 29 – 31 May 2009

Steve Farmer^{*}, Richard Sproat^{†*}, and Michael Witzel^{‡*} (Presenter: Steve Farmer)

Five years ago the three of us published “Collapse of the Indus Script Thesis: The Myth of a Literate Harappan Civilization” (reprint at <http://www.safarmer.com/fsw2.pdf>). Our talk today discusses developments in studies of the Indus symbol system in the half decade since that paper was published and takes a quick look at the future. The talk is divided into four parts.

1. The talk begins by discussing the often heated political and scholarly reactions to our article, which has spawned a number of special colloquia and extensive if distorted discussions in the press, over Internet, and in archaeological conferences and academic studies. This part of the talk quickly reviews the best-known attempts to defend the old script thesis, including claimed statistical data introduced for that end in a recent paper in *Science* by Rao *et al.* It then discusses new evidence that Harappan society was non-literate that has emerged from analyses of the symbols over the past five years.
2. The paper continues by noting unexpectedly wide variation in symbol frequencies that show up on ritual objects in different Indus regions and periods; these data contradict older assumptions tied to the script model that pictured the symbols as being largely uniform in use everywhere and “frozen” in time. Discussion is raised of the light this evidence throws on apparent political structures in Indus society and regional differences in agricultural rituals in the various microecologies associated with different Indus regions (Weber, this conference). Counterbalancing recent tendencies in the press to overemphasize the Indus civilization as a third-millennium trading power, evidence is underlined in the symbol system as a whole of the overwhelmingly agricultural and predominantly local nature of the Indus economy.
3. The paper then expands discussion of a non-literate Indus society in light of a wide range of contiguous urban civilizations in Central Asia, SE Iran, and in the Gulf (cf. D. Potts, this conference) — all regions that, despite occasional claims otherwise, apparently remained non-literate from the third millennium BCE well into the first millennium BCE. All these findings take on greater significance in light of recent finds discussed in this conference by the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) and their colleagues in Indus sites distant from what has traditionally been viewed as Indus territories — making the Indus the largest non-literate urban civilization of which we have evidence in the new or old worlds.
4. We conclude by quickly listing popular myths about the Indus civilization besides those involving the so-called script thesis that continue to distort Indus studies; and take a quick look at the future by making a proposal, backed by major private funding, of a collaborative project aimed at exploiting the massive store of untapped data in Indus symbols to study the evolution of this unique civilization in novel ways.

^{*} The Cultural Modeling Research Group, Palo Alto, California, saf@safarmer.com

[†] Center for Spoken Language Understanding, Division of Biomedical Computer Science, Oregon Health and Science University, aws@xoba.com

[‡] Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, witzel@fas.harvard.edu