Editor’s Introduction

“Horseplay in Harappa,” the Cover Story by Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer in Frontline (October 13, 2000), has attracted a lot of interest from readers, including scholars, in India and abroad. In the same issue, at Frontline’s invitation, Romila Thapar, the eminent historian of ancient India, commented on the Witzel-Farmer article and offered a perspective on Hinduism and history.

The subsequent issue (October 27) carried letters from Iravatham Mahadevan, the leading Indian expert on the Indus Valley script, and Richard H. Meadow, Project-Director of the Harappa Archaeological Research Project at Harvard University and one of the world’s leading experts on ancient animal bones. There has also been a large number of letters from general readers. Additionally, the Witzel-Farmer scholarly investigation and expose has generated a lively discussion on the Internet.

To take the discussion further and deeper, Frontline presents in this issue scholarly communications on the subject. These comprise N.S. Rajaram’s letter to the editor, backed up by two scanned colour images; and invited responses from two of the world’s leading experts on the Indus Valley script, Askarpaparola and Mahadevan, and from the authors of “Horseplay in Harappa.”

Frontline Cover has “the head of a horse”

N.S. Rajaram is the co-author with N. Jha of The Deciphered Indus Script: Methodology, readings, interpretations (Aditya Prakashan, New Delhi, 2000). He is also the co-author, with David Frawley, of Vedic Aryans and the Origins of Civilization (Voice of India, New Delhi, 1997); and the author of From Sarasvati River To The Indus Script (Mitra Madhavaya, Bangalore, 1999) and The just released Profiles in Deception: Ayodhya and the Dead Sea Scrolls (Voice of India, New Delhi, 2000). Rajaram has an academic background in the mathematical sciences and industrial engineering. His claim to have deciphered, along with Jha, the Indus Valley script; the ‘horse seal’ (Mackay 453) he presented as part of the Indus Valley script and Civilization; his assertion that the language of the late Harappan period was Vedic Sanskrit; and his ideological agenda figured in “Horseplay in Harappa,” the Cover Story in Frontline (October 13, 2000).

Rajaram’s letter to Frontline, dated October 23, 2000, has occasioned this scholarly communication. He can be contacted at nsrcaram@vsnl.com.

N.S. Rajaram

Recently, Frontline published articles by Michel Witzel and Steve Farmer and by Romila Thapar (“Horseplay in Harappa,” Frontline, October 13, 2000), the main thrust of which was that the Harappan Civilization was ignorant of the horse because it is not depicted on any of the seals. On this premise they claimed that the image of the seal known as Mackay 453 given in The Deciphered Indus Script by N. Jha and N.S. Rajaram is a fabrication, with a unicorn bull made to look like a horse.

Both Frontline and the authors overlooked the fact that the seal displayed on the cover contains a figure recognizable as the head of a horse at the top right-hand corner. The scanned image (on this page) clearly shows this by giving both the cover photo (with the arrow pointing) and the enlargement. The horse’s ears are perfectly elongated and not of a unicorn bull or any other animal. The elongation is one example of hasty deduction due to preconception, unimportance of the sources, and insufficient attention to detail.

At the same time Jha and I don’t want to be dogmatic because these are artists’ depictions and not anatomical specimens. So differences of opinion are unavoidable. We regard the question of the horse to be of minor significance: our book is about the Indus script, not the Indus horse. There are more fundamental issues like the Sarasvati River data and other things that need to be addressed. The broader issue, as Professor Thapar makes clear, is the Vedic identity of the Harappan Civilization. This, I feel, has been amply demonstrated by our book and by several others with and without the decipherment.

Following the publication of “Horseplay in Harappa,” N.S. Rajaram wrote a letter to the Editor of Frontline. In the covering note, he offered access to “the original photograph” of the horse seal, on which the image published in the Jha-Rajaram book was based. Frontline accepted the offer and received from Rajaram a copy of the photograph, which was identical to the one Rajaram sent Iravatham Mahadevan in 1997. Frontline correspondent Anupama Katakam interviewed Rajaram in Bangalore on November 2 on the provenance of the image of the ‘horse seal’, the ‘computer enhancement,’ the ‘decipherment,’ and other aspects of Rajaram’s work and views. Excerpts from the tape-recorded interview:

Where did the image of the ‘horse seal’ come from?

Jha had a photograph taken of the image from Mackay’s book – Munich. This attribution is in the index of his book. Jha lives in a small town. He may not have had access to high-tech equipment, which explains the low quality of the image.

Why does he believe it is a horse?

I looked at the original [photograph], which is very small. Of course, Frontline gave a much better picture because they have better facilities. To me it looks more like a horse. I am convinced it is a horse.

The shape of the under-belly. If you look at the unicorn bull’s genital area, it is very prominent [referring to Frontline’s cover]. It is not so in the horse. The tail is also quite different. And another thing is – the taping back is a feature of all fast-running animals.

What is the significance of the ‘horse’?

I feel the importance of the horse is blown out of proportion. We have a great deal of much more important evidence that we have to explain. They are making it the central issue... It was just a footnote in our book.

As far as identification is concerned, we are sure it is a horse! And we can demonstrate that horses existed.

I believe the debate should be on a whole range of issues:

What is the old-style-telephone-like object in front of the animal?

Do you find it in our book? You see what has happened is this writing [pointing to the annotation] has got scrambled in the scanning. This writing which has got scrambled resembles this telephone-like thing which they refer to as a ‘feeding trough’. Nothing is behind that label. This is not in the original seal.

Who annotated or labelled it?

Jha must have. To keep the file number... This is the phone I received and I have checked it with the original... But I didn’t have such a good print. The original seal is in Mackay’s book. This [points to the image numbered M-772A published on p. 9 of the Frontline issue of October 15] they say has been flipped horizontally. It is probably the same seal, but you see there is more damage here. But I am not going to look at this one. You see when Parpola took this photograph, it was November 6, 1996 and this has been computer-manipulated. As far as I am concerned, I will go with the oldest.

In any case, it is irrelevant as they may be the same image. See, the writing is the same... As far as the trough goes – it is a distortion of the letters.

On the why and how of the ‘computer enhancement’

I never said computer enhancement in my book. When they kept pressing me, I said it might have been computer-enhanced. That is what I mentioned in a particular note to these people. I had no idea. I thought it was scanned by the publisher. But best of all, I sent a transparent photograph to improve the resolution, or a contraction of it taken on a xerox machine.

If I had this quality [pointing to a clear image of the broken seal published in frontpage], there would be no problem. My point is if ‘computer enhancement’ was said, it may have been said under pressure. I have never done any computer enhancement.

Possibly [Jha] has, or somebody has, taken the photograph from a publication. And I either sent a photocopy of it... And I remember what I said to the publishor. I said, “See if something can be made out of this.”

I am not in a position to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ [computer enhancement]. But I can definitely say I have done no computer enhancement. In fact, I have not even scanned it. If the publisher has done it, I might have said it has been computer-enhanced. I am not denying that, but I have... never done any computer work on it. The only time it may have been computer-manipulated is by the publisher. He could have done it.

Does he still think it is a horse? Does he stand by his decipherment?

Absolutely. Sure. We have done nothing... The issue they [Farmer and Witzel] have raised is that no horses were found in Harappa. But there is ample evidence the horse bones have been found at all levels at the Harappan site. The reference to the horse is only in one part of a footnote.

Our point is that decipherment is part of the historical connection between the Vedic and the Harappan. What we see as the main significance is the historical context which links Harappan archeology to Vedic literature...

We will hold on to our identification of this as a horse and not a unicorn. I will write in my letter [to the Editor of Frontline] – another example, I don’t know how it ended up on the cover but anyway, these dots are not the same. Their perspective differs and not anatomical representations. So we can only argue, we cannot prove it. It is simply a question of perspective.

And at least for the last 50 years, horse bones have been found at Harappan sites and some have been found much earlier. More information will be coming now.

The main point I want to make is about the Vedic-Harappan connection. Both the Vedic and Harappan civilizations... you cannot call it a coincidence if you relate it to Hinduism because both of them preceded Christianity and Islam by thousands of years. And India before that time was Hindu. My point is that I can demonstrate the Vedic-Harappan connection – that the Harappan civilization was Vedic and full of Vedic symbolism even without the decipherment...

And we see our book on the decipherment not in isolation but [alongside] a whole lot of information that has come out beginning with the discovery of the...
India has a truly glorious past. It is sad that India’s heritage should be exploited by some individuals – usually people with few, if any, academic credentials – who for political or personal motives are ready even to falsify evidence. In order to vindicate their ideology and promote their own ends, these persons appeal to the feelings of the ‘common man’ who, with full reason, is proud of his or her country’s grand heritage. They suggest that this grandeur is denigrated by their opponents, particularly by foreign scholars. There is no need, however, to twist the facts in order to establish the greatness of India’s past. Of all people, Indologists, including foreign Indologists, are among the first to acknowledge and admire the great achievements of Indian civilisation.

Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer have shown that N.S. Rajaram has no scruples in falsifying evidence to suit his claims. Thus far Rajaram has got away with this dishonesty because the scholarly community has not considered his work worthy of serious consideration: it has been taken more or less for granted that any sensible person can see through this trash and recognise it as such. However, the escalation of this nonsensical propaganda now demands that the issue be addressed. *Frontline* has clearly exposed the untenability of Rajaram’s arguments. Having been invited to comment on Rajaram’s ‘Horse II’, I would like to point out just a few facts. On the cover of *Frontline*, Seal M-18 from Moheno-daro has been depicted four times larger than its natural size. The Harappans were unable to see the fine details from which Rajaram presumes to distinguish the horse. Psychologist Hermann Rorschach developed a projective technique to assess personality characteristics in which the individual is presented with ambiguous charts of ink blots, which he then interprets; different persons see different things in them, as they see in the varying patterns of clouds. In like manner, Rajaram is looking for horses, and therefore sees them in patterns where they do not actually exist. In this case, his interpretation of certain details as a horse is an illusion, but the impression made with the seal. Rajaram’s ‘horse’ is part of a composite Indus sign, the last one of a three-sign inscription forming one line. The sign consists of two elements. The upper, roof-like element occurs in several other composite signs, while the lower element has so far been found in this seal alone.

The ‘horse argument’ is an important criterion in determining the linguistic affinity of the founders of the Indus Civilisation, as pointed out in my book *Deciphering the Indus Script* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), and by Witzel and Farmer in their *Frontline* article. In the Rigveda, the horse is an animal of great cultural and religious significance, being mentioned hundreds of times. Yet so far not a single representation of the horse has been found on the thousands of seals or the numerous terracotta figurines of the Indus Civilisation, although many other animals, real and imaginary, were depicted by the Harappans. Further, Richard L. Meadow, one of the world’s best experts on ancient animal bones, assures us that not a single horse bone has been securely identified from the Indus Valley or elsewhere in South Asia before the end of the third millennium BCE, when the Indus Civilisation collapsed. By the end of the Harappan period, horse bones are found, and the horse is depicted, just a few centuries later in the Indus Valley, in Gujarat and in Maharashtra, suggesting that by that time speakers of Aryan (or Indo-Iranian) languages had already entered South Asia, bringing with them this animal that was venerated by all early Indo-European-speaking peoples.

The basis of new archaeological evidence from South Asia is that the Harappans had managed to rise to a major civilisation from the prehistoric era, but the Aryan-speaking immigrants came through Central Asia from the Eurasian steppes, the native habitat of the horse and the region where it appears to have first been domesticated. This was demonstrated by H. H. Hock in his paper ‘Out of Indi: The linguistic evidence,’ published in J. Brockhaus and M. M. Deshpande (eds.), *Aryan and Non-Aryan in South Asia*, Cambridge, Mass., 1939. It is impossible to derive the Aryan or Indo-European languages from South Asia by valid linguistic methods. In other words, it is untenable scientifically to postulate a South Asian origin for these languages.

In my book, I have presented numerous facts suggesting that the Harappans mainly spoke a Dravidian language. The Harappans are estimated to have totalled at least one million people, while the primarily pastoral Aryan-speaking immigrants could have numbered only a small fraction of that. Eventually, however, the language of the minority prevailed over the majority. There are numerous parallels to such a development. Almost the whole continent of South America now speaks Spanish or Portuguese, while the native American languages spoke by the Arawak race, before the arrival of the European conquerors are about to vanish. This linguistic change was not initiated by just 300 well-armed adventurers. In 400 years, the British managed to establish their language and culture very widely in South Asia. To confine the identity of the Vedic and Harappan cultures and to deny the external origin of Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan languages is as absurd as to claim, as Dayananda Sarasvati did, that the train-railway system that were introduced in South Asia by the British in the 19th and 20th centuries had already been invented by the Vedic Aryans. It is said that in South Asia, as elsewhere in the world, linguistic and religious controversies are the cause of so much injustice and suffering. We should remember that from the very beginning, Aryan and non-Aryan languages and associated cultures, religions and peoples have intermingled and have become inextricably mixed. Every element of the population has contributed to the creation of Indian civilisation, and every one of them deserves credit for it.

One sees what one wants to see. Iravatham Mahadevan is the leading Indian expert on the Indus Valley script and one of the world’s foremost scholars in the field of Indology. *The Indus Valley Script: Texts, Consonantives and Table-Memorials* (The Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1977), is recognised internationally as a major source-book for research in the Indus script. His proof that the direction of the Indus script is from right to left has been acclaimed. Mahadevan is also the leading Indian expert on the Tamil-Brahmi script and one of the world’s foremost scholars in this field. He has developed a method to read the earliest Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and has published the Corpus of the Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions (1966). His magnus opus, a definitive study of the Tamil-Brahmi script, is nearing completion. Mahadevan, a former officer of the Indian Administrative Service, has a background in journalism; he served as Editor of the Tamil daily, *Dinamani*, between 1987 and 1991. Mahadevan contributed this comment at the invitation of *Frontline*.

IRAVATHAM MAHADEVAN

N.S. Rajaram has been good enough to send me an advance copy of his response (published in this issue) to the article ‘Horseplay in Harappa’ by Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer (*Frontline*, October 13). My attention has also been drawn to his communication on the Internet. Rajaram has stated in his online communication that the copy he sent me in 1997 is ‘exactly the same one that went into print, except that it is not quite true. What I got from Rajaram was a copy, labelled in someone’s hand, of the photograph of Seal 453 as published by Mackay in *P. XC* of his book and reproduced by *Frontline* (October 13, p. 7) and not the computer-enhancement published by N. Jha and N.S. Rajaram in their book (p. 177). The photograph shows clearly the hind part of a bull on the broken seal. The computer ‘enhancement’ creates an optical illusion which makes the animal look somewhat like a deer, which is further developed into a ‘horse’ by Rajaram’s artist. In the interest of truth, I have made available to *Frontline* the original communication of 1997 received from Rajaram.

Rajaram’s ‘Horse II’, which he sees on the front cover illustration of *Frontline* (October 13), is another instance of an optical illusion. I have seen the original seal with the Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi (ASI No. 63.10/363). No horse is to be seen there. Rajaram’s ‘horses’ only prove that the seal was never inscribed.

However, I agree with Rajaram that it is time we put this ‘horse business’ behind us and look at the decipherment itself. I have done so. The Jha-Rajaram ‘decipherment’ is completely invalid. It is, in fact, a non-starter for the simple reason that the direction of reading adopted by the authors is wrong, as demonstrated by Witzel and Farmer (*Frontline*, October 13, box item p.12). The ‘decipherment’ makes as much sense as you would get out of this page if you try to read it from a mirror reflection.
New Evidence on the ‘Piltdown Horse’ Hoax

Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer are the scholarly authors of the Cover Story, “Horseplay in Harappa,” in Frontline (October 13, 2000).

New light on the seal’s “computer enhancement.” In ‘Horseplay in Harappa,’ we noted that ‘Rajaram’ let slip out in an online exchange that his original “horse seal” (based on a seven-decade-old photo of a broken seal impression, Mackay 453) was a “computer enhancement” produced to “facilitate our reading.” Neither this fact, nor the precise location of the original in Mackay’s writings, nor the fact that Mackay 453 was broken is told to the reader of Rajaram’s book. After this slip, Rajaram has adamantly refused to discuss his “computer enhancement” publicly, although he has boasted to us that he has many years’ academic experience in computer imaging, (but see now our postscript to this communication, reporting a recent Rajaram interview.)

New evidence on this issue has come to light since our article was published, through the good offices of Iravatham Mahadevan, who solicited communications printed in this and an earlier issue of Frontline (October 27, 2000), Mahadevan relates that in September 1997, Rajaram sent him a copy of the “horse seal” that was different in important ways from the “computer enhancement.” Rajaram, in turn, has repudiated Mahadevan’s account, claiming in a note published in a nation-wide email List that “the copy I sent him in 1997 was exactly the same one that went into the book.” In the same note, Rajaram hands the leering Harappan ‘horse’ before Frontline might be a forgery, qualifying his repudiation with the words “assuming that he [i.e., Mahadevan] did write that letter.”

In the light of these remarks, Mahadevan has made available to Frontline, Witzel, and Farmer the correspondence he had with Rajaram in the fall of 1997. That correspondence, not unexpectedly, supports Mahadevan’s and not Rajaram’s view of reality. The copies of both the “horse seal” and “Artist’s reproduction” of the supposed horse (illustrated in our original
Mahadevan includes annotations on its lower righthand side, in part identifying the plate where Mackay 453 is located. This information is crucial, since thousands of images are found in Mackay’s works—many of them quite tiny and difficult to distinguish. No data at all identifying the plate (or even the publication) in which Mackay 453 is located are contained in Rajaram’s book. In the reproduction found in that book, the annotations are clumsily covered up—creating the illusion of what Indologists have taken to be a common icon (a “feeding trough” looking like a bit like an old-time telephone) often found at the feet of animals in Indus inscriptions. (For examples of these objects, see our article in Frontline, October 13.)

Other images in the Rajaram-Mahadevan correspondence, which it would be superfluous to discuss here, also show that what Rajaram sent to Mahadevan was not what appeared in his book. The story of the “computer enhancement” of Mackay 453 is summarised in Figure 5.

Figure 5. From bull to Hindutva horse in three steps. On the left, the original of the “horse seal” impression (Mackay 453). Comparison with dozens of seals shows that the image is that of a unicorn bull; evidence of this was shown in our original article. In the middle, the photocopy of Mackay 453 sent by Rajaram to the great Indian scholar Iravatham Mahadevan in September 1997. The photocopying was careless, but the image was sharp enough for Mahadevan to recognise at a glance that the seal was broken. Note the annotations at the lower right that in part identify the seal location. On the right, the “computer enhancement” of Mackay 453 printed in Rajaram’s book. In the “enhancement,” it is no longer possible to tell that the seal is broken, and the crack in the seal is turned into the “front leg,” “neck,” and “head” of Rajaram’s deer-like “horse.” The annotations have been covered over, creating what Indologists have mistaken for a common Harappan icon—a “feeding trough” often seen at the feet of animals in Indus inscriptions. Frontline graphics specialists tell us that many pixels were removed from the image during the “computer enhancement”—but not data enhancing the illusion, like the large dot often mistaken for the “eye” of the deer-like creature.

**1. The ‘feeding trough’**

In his Update on the Arjun Invasion Debate (1999: 182), Elst speaks of “the apparent absence of horse motifs on the Harappan seals (except one)”—referring readers to a reproduction of a horse on a single seal. The goal, as he portrays it, has been to divert attention from his supposed breaking of the Harappan code, which he claims has solved “the most significant technical problem in historical research of our time.” Thus, in his communication published in this issue, he claims that the “main thrust” of our article and Romila Thapar’s commentary on it as a piece of horse-trading “was simply” that the Harappa seal was “ignorant of the horse because it is not depicted on any of the seals.” Rajaram argues that he and his co-author “regard the question of the horse to be of minor significance; our book is about the Indus script, not the Indus horse.”

In fact, our article showed in detail that Rajaram’s “deceptions” of the Indus script is even more absurd—if that can be imagined—than his fabricated “horse” evidence. Moreover, the two are closely linked: if the seal does not depict a horse, then the method Rajaram used to read the inscription on the seal, which he says refers to a horse, is obviously bogus. This is why Rajaram insists that the seal depicts a horse long after every scholar has concluded, like Elst, that the horse is accessed as a “horse.”

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Rajaram’s book, however, not only denies that he has scanned the picture, but seems uncertain whether or not his publisher has either—which makes his confident “scrambled in the scanning” story even less credible. The story is especially peculiar in the light of the many years of academic experience that Rajaram claims to have in computer imaging.

**2. The ‘computer enhancement’**

Rajaram’s long online letter from July 30 about the “horse seal,” which is now on file at Frontline, states that Rajaram and Jha “provide a computer enhancement and an artist’s reproduction to facilitate our reading.” At the end of his interview, however, while showing the Frontline correspondence his copy of Mackay 453, Rajaram says: “This photograph is what Jha sent me. I have not computer enhanced it. If I said that—which is possible—I might have said [it], because I didn’t have the photo at the time, which I traced later. And I think it is not going to hurt me. But I think it might have been done for publication.” (The ellipses in these quotations are in the original transcript; we have not removed any of Rajaram’s words.) What this must mean is that Rajaram has indeed been “scrambled” by the method Rajaram used to read the inscription on the seal, which he says refers to a horse, is obviously bogus. This is why Rajaram insists that the seal depicts a horse long after every scholar has concluded, like Elst, that the horse is accessed as a “horse.”

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No matter which, if any, of Rajaram’s inconsistent stories is correct, we have already, after all these months of controversy—highlighted by frontpage stories in the Indian press—shown that Rajaram claims to know nothing about how the photo in his book was doctored.

**3. Defence of the “horse seal”**

The most remarkable statement in Rajaram’s interview concern his continued defence of his original “horse seal.” He repeats his original arguments in the interview, ignoring the exhaustive analyses of the evidence that have appeared online, and even most of the content of the interview is not even mentioned by Rajaram, even less credible. The story is especially peculiar in the light of the many years of academic experience that Rajaram claims to have in computer imaging.

In any case, at this point Rajaram may be the last person on the earth to believe in his “horse seal” or bogus “decipherment,” which was hailed as revolutionary by Hindutva circles just one year ago. Last summer, we offered $1,000 to any Hindutva researcher willing to defend Rajaram’s claims. Not one has taken us up on our offer. So far as the scholarly world goes, nothing is left of Rajaram’s “decipherment” of history than an “at a rate” in plain English, a dead horse. —me & sof

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1 Elst was an early enthusiast of Rajaram’s “decipherment” and “horse seal,” only repudiating the latter after the original expert expose online this summer. In his Update on the Arjun Invasion Debate (1999: 182), Elst speaks of “the apparent absence of horse motifs on the Harappan seals (except one)”—referring readers to a reproduction supposedly found “in N.S. Rajaram: From Harappa to Ayodhya, inside the front page.” The reference is to a booklet published by Rajaram in November 1997, based on a talk given in September—just a few days before his correspondence with Mahadevan. When we take Elst’s advice and look at the inside cover of the booklet (Sahiba Sindhu Prakashana, Bangalore, November 1997), we find the “Artist’s reproduction” of the horse that Rajaram sent to Mahadevan, but no picture of the seal on which it was supposedly based! After being told by Mahadevan that he had a bull, not a horse, Rajaram apparently decided to play it safe for the time being and not publish the picture of his original “evidence.”

2 Below the plate number and reference to Mackay 453, the annotations also contain the number 443, explaining Rajaram’s occasional references in 1997 to the “horse seal” as Mackay 443 instead of Mackay 453. Mackay 443 (on the same plate) portrays a small seal of a bull with a “feeding trough” at its feet.

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