

Temporal and Regional Variations in the Use of Indus Symbols: New Methods for Studying Harappan Civilization

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Abstract

This paper explores key implications of the non-literate model of Indus civilization introduced by Farmer, Sproat, and Witzel 2004 <<http://www.safarmer.com/fsw2.pdf>>. Special attention is paid to the mythological and symbolic sides of Indus inscriptions. The paper begins with a brief review of evidence against the traditional 'Indus script' thesis, which conflicts with a wide range of archaeological findings and expected features of literate civilizations and ancient scripts. Indus society is modeled as one of a broader class of non-literate urban civilizations, identifiable from the third well into the first millennium BCE, located in an expansive 'No Script Zone' stretching from Central Asia and NW India far into the Iranian plateau and Gulf region. Interestingly, many of the non-literate urban sites in these areas were involved in extensive trade with the literate Near East. Complex mixes of literate and non-literate societies in the New World, involving urban centers far larger than any Indus sites, are proposed as useful parallels in modeling this phenomenon.

The paper argues that evidence that Indus society was non-literate paradoxically vastly increases the historical value of inscribed Indus objects. Fluctuations in sign frequencies in ancient scripts were largely accidents of lexical or sound encoding; but temporal and spatial variations in the use of non-linguistic symbols can provide useful markers of religious, social, and economic realities even when the exact sense of those symbols remains unknown. This paper discusses some methodological issues critical to exploiting this evidence in Indus studies. Topics discussed include the need for more detailed typologies of Indus inscriptions, whose evidence was often misleadingly aggregated in earlier studies of Indus signs; improved dating methods that draw on paleographical and material as well as traditional stratigraphical evidence; closer attention to regional ecological conditions, which can be predicted to have deeply affected seasonal myths and local agricultural rituals that used the symbols; and above all an intensified search for new inscribed objects throughout the civilization to increase the statistical significance of such studies. Illustrations are given of the types of results expected from these studies, including deeper insights into Indus political developments, local and long-distance economic-exchange systems, and regional variations in agricultural/religious rites. Special attention is paid to the latter issue due to the fact that large numbers of Indus symbols in every era can be suggestively linked to agricultural and/or seasonal motifs, providing the first good clues to the origins of the symbols. We conclude with a brief look at technologies useful in this new line of research, including advanced image-enhancing techniques and a novel visual database designed to promote collaborative international studies of the type introduced in our paper. Notes are added on closely related approaches to ancient symbols that are concurrently revolutionizing studies of proto-Elamite inscriptions (J. Dahl, in press).