

# The Indus sings on the tablets from Harappa

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## **Abstract**

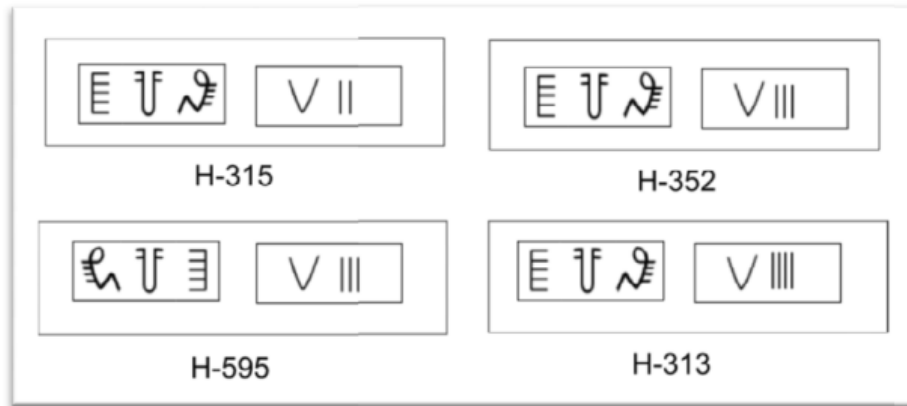
Since the Indus script came to light in 1922, researchers have been trying to decipher it. They assume that one of the later Indian languages could have been the successor to the Indus language and try to interpret the Indus script on this basis. However, there is still no generally recognised decipherment. The Indus characters consist of figures. The meaning of some of the figures can be recognised in the pictorial representations. The author endeavours to clarify the significance of the Indus sings using pictorial representations. A few figures on the tablets of Harappa may lead to an understanding of the Indus script.

## **Introduction**

Since the Indus culture came to light in 1922, it has been the subject of intensive research. Archaeological finds testify to the high cultural achievements of its bearers. The Indus culture also had a writing system. As far as language is concerned, researchers assume that around 1 million people could have spoken Indus language over a period of 700 years. It is unlikely that the language would have been lost later. In order to decipher the Indus script, it is assumed that the language of the Indus people could have been related to one of the later Indian languages.

Accordingly, Indo-European languages of northern India (Sanskrit, Prakrit), Dravidian languages of southern India, a still unknown language X (Colin P. Masica 1979) and the language of the Munda tribe (Para-Munda language according to Michael Witzel 1998) are considered. Finally, there is also the view that the Indus people were illiterate and multilingual. The Indus signs are not writing at all, but symbols and were used by the population to communicate with each other (Steve Farmer et al. 2004). For comparison, reference is made to the use of today's airport symbols. On the initiative of researchers, Indus signs are being documented and systematised (CISI, ISTCT). Others are endeavouring to understand the structures of Indus script (A. Fuls 2015, 2023, D. A. Mukhopadhyay 2019). Researchers' efforts have borne fruit, and a number of facts about the Indus script have been identified. However, it has not yet been possible to solve the problem of what statements the Indus script contains.

It is clear from the above that attention is focussed exclusively on the languages in order to decipher the Indus script. The difficulty lies in the fact that there is no bilingual evidence. All attempts to decipher the Indus script can neither be confirmed nor refuted. The archaeologist Walter A. Jr. Fairservis presents a list in which the meanings of the individual figures of the Indus script are interpreted and corresponding Dravidian designations are added according to his view (Fairservis 1992, 152-188). Although his attempt is not productive, the principle of using the figures to understand the Indus script may prove useful. The meaning of some characters can be recognised on the basis of the pictorial representation of the Indus culture. This will be demonstrated in this paper using the tablets from Harappa, in which only a few sings have been preserved.



**Fig. 1: Tablets with sings from Harappa**

### The tablets with the sings from Harappa

Numerous small square tablets from the Indus culture have been found. Among them are some from Harappa, which have some special features (Fig. 1). There are signs on both sides of the tablet. It is remarkable that similar finds do not occur in Mohenjo-daro, while in Harappa it is documented several times, from Mohenjo-daro the same sign is only depicted on an object made of ivory (M-2097). On one side of the tablet there are three signs ( $\Xi$ ,  $\Upsilon$ ,  $\Lambda^{\Xi}$ ), on the other side two characters ( $V$  and strokes). The three signs also appear in a mirror image (cf. Fig. 1, H-595 with H-313). Obviously, the reading direction does not play a role, at least in the finds under consideration here (Vats 1940, p. 326, Mahadevan 1977, p. 11). The meaning of these signs can be recognised from the pictorial representations.

### Sign V (sacrificial vessel)

As mentioned above, there is a  $V$  sign with strokes on one side of the tablets in question. On these finds, the number of strokes varies (two, three, four), but the sign  $V$  is depicted once in each case. The strokes are the numbers. Bryan K. Wells has endeavoured to prove that the  $V$  sign stands for a volumetric unit. (Wells 2015, p. 59-62). At the same time, according to Wells, the numeral system of the Indus culture was decimal. A long stroke is understood to be polyvalent - depending on the type of use, a long stroke can be 40.4 litres or the number ten. Wells is not sure about the contents of the vessel. He surmises that they could be grain, milk, water and other economically important goods. According to the author of this work, milk is unlikely to have been there, water would be conceivable, but grain is more likely.

The way in which the sign  $V$  is used can be seen in Fig. 2 (s. also Fig. 13). The sign  $V$  with four lines is related to the priest offering something to the tree goddess in a moulded cup. The symbol  $\cup$  is a variant of the  $V$  symbol. The author of this work is of the opinion that the sign  $V$  is a sacrificial vessel. The numeral system of the Indus culture with long and short strokes was decimal, even if the interpretation of the number with twelve short strokes is not unproblematic (Das Gupta 2025, p. 24). One long stroke is the number ten, with four long strokes this results in a number of 40 units.



**Fig. 2: worship of a tree goddess (M-478)**

It is common practice to weigh grain with cups. It is conceivable that such a method was also used in the Indus culture. The sacrificial vessel with four strokes can contain grain from 40 measuring cups. Incidentally, the sacrificial vessel is also depicted twice or three times without numbers to indicate that the sacrifice is offered twice or three times respectively (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3: Three sacrificial vessels without number sign (H-764)**

**Sign  $\text{U}^f$  (goddess of the fig tree)**

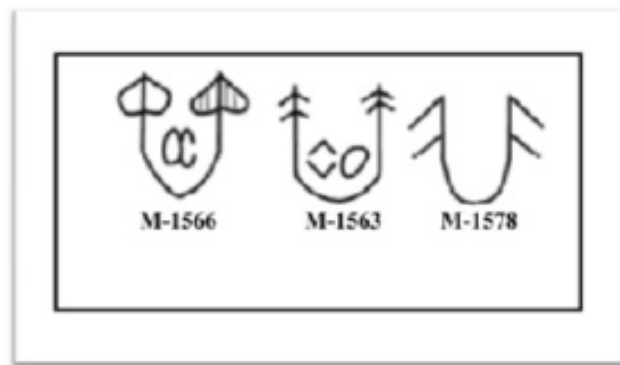
Fairservis believed that the sign referred to a person and was a kind of designation of honour, such as “the one” (Fairservis 1992, pp.8). Asko Parpola is of the opinion that the sign should be the name or title of a deity: “On each of the three sides of amulet 3305 (fig. 6.3), the sign  $\text{U}^f$  occurs alone. Here at least, this sign cannot be a bound morphological marker, but must be distinct word, probably the name of the deity depicted on the amulet, or a title applied to gods, such as ‘Lord’ in English. Should this really be the case, then the same might be assumed to be true for the plain  $\text{U}^f$  sign ...” (Parpola 1994, 91, CISI 3.1, H-1150). Parpola is on the right track, as will be shown below, the sign  $\text{U}^f$  stands for “the goddess of the fig tree”.



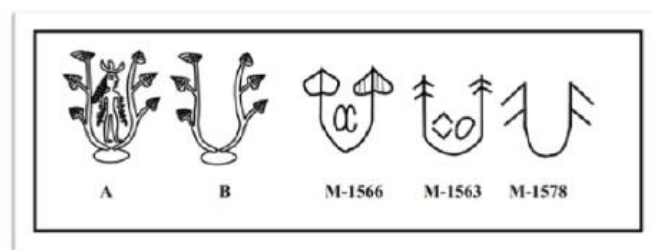
**Fig. 4: Priestess sacrifices heart to the goddess of the fig tree (M-1186)**

An impressive scene of the worship of the goddess of the fig tree can be found on a find from Mohenjodaro. The depiction is shown here in Fig. 4. Some signs are depicted at the top, including a person and two vessels. Below these signs is the tree goddess surrounded by fig leaves as her attribute. A seated person - the female figure of a priestess according to the hairstyle (see below) - is offering a heart on a stool to the goddess. The heart is clearly visible in the coloured photograph (CISI-3, p.401). A square with a vertical line (possibly with a horizontal line) is depicted next to her. An animal with a human face appears behind the priestess. There are seven people in the bottom row; they obviously had a special position in society. It was their duty to be present at the ceremony. It is very unlikely that a goddess who plays such a major role would not be preserved in the signs.

Other than the priestess (see below), a symbol of the goddess cannot be recognised at first glance. However, it is conceivable that the goddess is depicted with her fig tree attribute or with fig tree leaves. There are several U signs with fig leaves. (Parpola 1994, p. 91) Among them is a U sign with fig leaves, a U sign with four strokes and crab in the centre and a U sign with four strokes but without a crab in the centre (Fig.5). There is obviously a connection between the three U signs. Fig. 6 shows how the sign for the goddess of the fig tree was created.



**Fig. 5: U sign with fig leaves und crab, with four strokes and crab, U sign with four strokes**

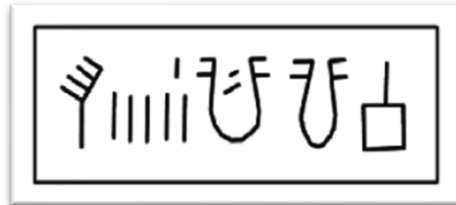


**Fig. 6: The origin of the symbol of the goddess of the fig tree. Excerpts (A, B) from Fig. 4 and Indus signs as in Fig 3.**

The sign  $\text{U}$  has some time also one (?), two and three strokes in the centre (Fig. 7). The sign with and without strokes is also used together in one depiction (Fig. 8). It appears that there are three goddesses, possibly three manifestations of the goddess of the fig tree.

Sing 𐎎	0 stroke M-378	1 strokes Pk-1 (?)	2 strokes M-378	3 strokes M-638
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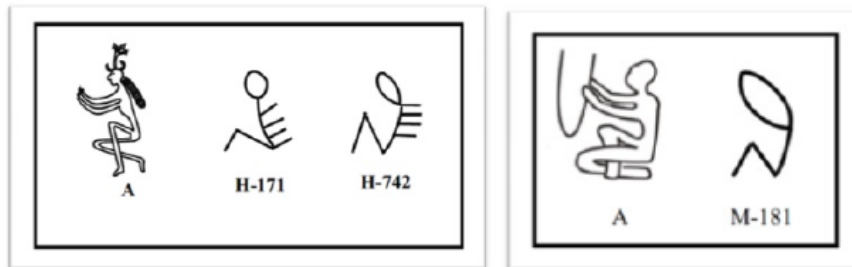
**Fig. 7: Sing 𐎎 with strokes**



**Fig. 8: Sing 𐎎 with and without stroke together in one representation (M-378)**

**Sign 𐎎 (priestess)**

There is also a depiction in Parpola’s list of signs two variants of which are shown here in Fig. 9 (H-171, H-172). Researchers assume that this symbol could be a bound person (Farmer 2004, p. 44), a priest or worshipper (Benille 2003, p. 47). If the sign with a few strokes on the back is juxtaposed with the seated priestess with a plait, then it is clear that the sign does indeed depict a seated priestess (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 9: Priestess with a plait (A s. Fig. 4)      Fig. 10: Priest without a plait (A s. Fig. 2)**



**Fig. 11: From left to right: priest, priestess, anthropomorphic figure, goddess and sing 𐎎 (H-742)**

As shown above, a priest is depicted in Fig. 2 and a priestess in Fig. 9. The latter can be recognised by the fact that she is wearing a plait, which the priest is missing (Fig. 10). Accordingly, the priestess and priest are depicted with and without a plait in these illustrations. It should also be noted that the priest and priestess appear together with an anthropomorphic figure (Load carrier?), the goddess and the sing 𐎎 (Fig. 11).

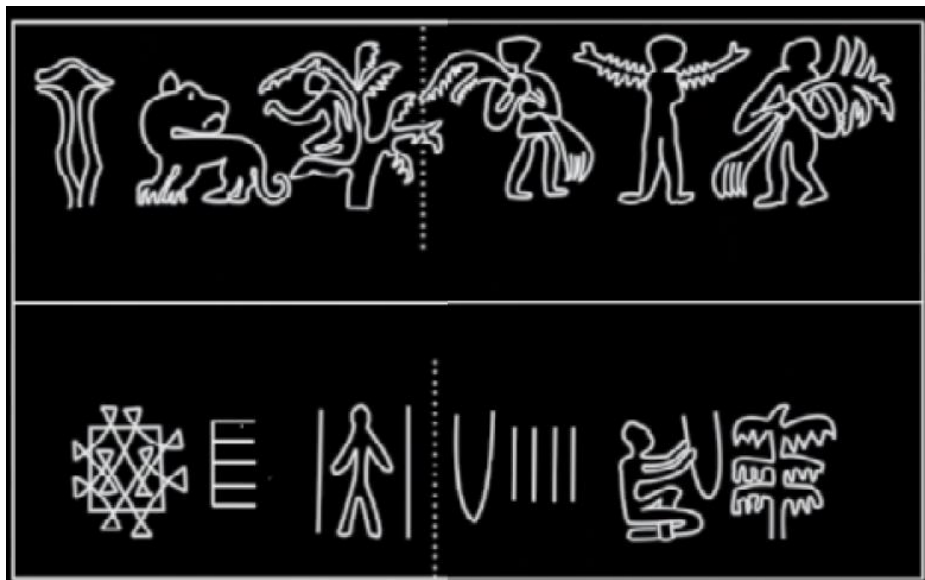
This also illustrates another fact: the so-called “Proto Shiva” also has a female counterpart: Fig. 12 shows human representations in a peculiar sitting position; there is a male figure (M-304) and a female figure, recognisable by the plait (M-305).



**Fig. 12: Figures in peculiar sitting positions. On the left side a male figure; on the right side a female figure, recognisable by the plait (Das Gupta 2025, 6, Fig. 12, A, C, M-304, M-305)**

**Sign  $\Xi$  (sacred place)**

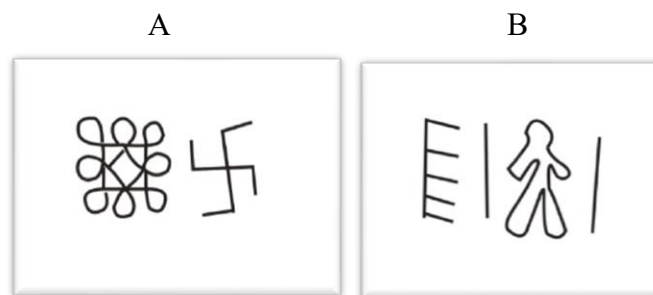
The worship of a tree goddess is found in four similar bas-reliefs from Mohenjo-daro (CISI-1, M-478, 479, 480; CISI-2, M-1425). The depictions appear on both sides of the find, of which a colour photograph is reproduced in CISI (vol. 3, p. 403). The scenes of the reliefs are reproduced here in Fig. 13.



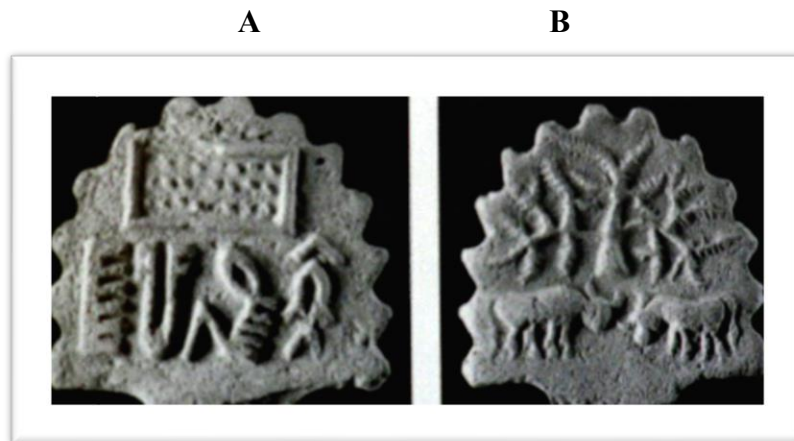
**Fig. 13: Bringing branches from the forest for cultic purposes (top), worship of a tree goddess (bottom) (M-478)**

At the top, a forest colonised by predators and snakes is shown, from which the branches are obtained. While the three people bring the branches from the forest, their companion on the tree distracts a tiger to ensure a safe path for his colleagues. At the bottom left, the sign “Endless knot (geometric pattern)” in-

indicates that this is a sacred place (cf. cultic symbols Fig. 14 A). In another place, the author has interpreted the sign  $\Xi$  as a numerical sign (Das Gupta 2019, 27). This interpretation should be revised here. The sign  $\Xi$  in connection with the “endless knot” is a cultic space, perhaps a place of sacrifice. Furthermore, a human figure appears between two lines. A closer look at the type of depiction reveals a special feature. Fig. 13 shows four scenes. All of the figures are performing an action: a person is distracting the tiger, the tiger turns its head in the direction of the person on the tree, snakes are rearing up and protecting their offspring, three people are carrying cut tree branches; a priest is offering something to the tree goddess in a  $\cup$  shaped pot, which was mentioned above. It can be concluded from this that the man between the two lines is also performing an action; he is obviously entering the sacrificial site marked with the  $\Xi$ . A similar depiction can be found on a seal from Mohenjo-daro (Fig. 14 B).



**Fig.14: Indus sign depicted, A: Endless knot, Svastika (M-1356), B: Man at the entrance of a cult site (M-830)**

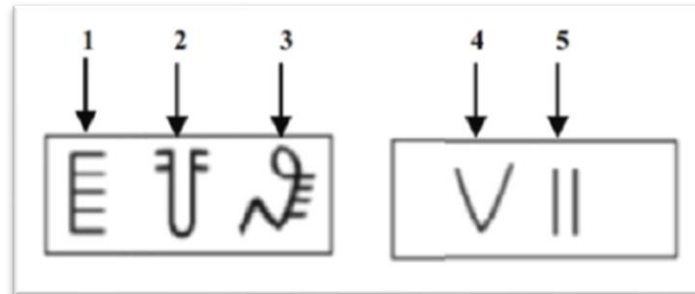


**Fig. 15: A) Fish with a roof, priestess, goddess and the sign for place of worship, B) Trees and two cattle (H-1997)**

The sign  $\Xi$  has also been found on an artefact from Harappa. One side of the find depicts trees and two grazing cattle (Fig. 15 B). It is therefore not a forest, but an utilised area. On the other side there is a fish with a roof, priestess, goddess and the symbol for a place of worship (Fig. 15 A). Above these drawings, a square with an entrance on one side is delimited by a wall. The fish could refer to water and the roof to a pond or a large bath (rebus principle). There are dots within the square; it is also possible that this represents a gathering of believers, as indicated by the signs priestess, goddess and place of worship.

### Meaning of the signs on the Harappa tablets

The meaning of the vessels (V) with numerical signs is clear; the sign indicates the quantity preserved in the vessel. Three signs (E, U, N) stand for sacrificial site, goddess and priest (Fig. 16).

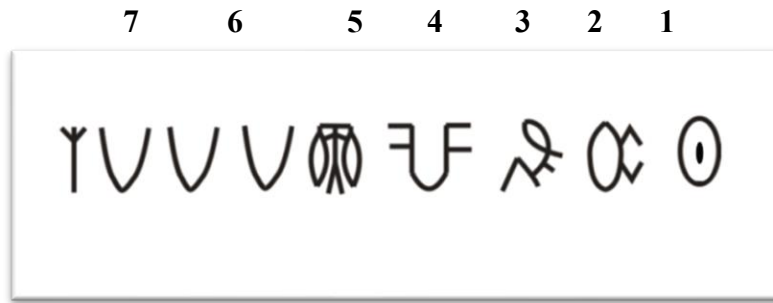


**Fig. 16: 1) Place of sacrifice, 2) Goddess, 3) Priest, 4) Sacrificial vessel, 5) Numerical symbol**

Farmer describes the signs as symbols and calls the finds ‘vouchers’: “One plausible use for these mass-produced pieces that fits all the evidence - including the fact that many duplicates show up in single find spots and their suggestive shapes - their function as ‘vouchers’ for offerings presented (mandated?) in seasonal communal festivals. The results would be the Indus equivalent of oblation rituals or formal tithes, which provided one common way to effect economic transfers between farmers and political-religious elites in many ancient societies” (Farmer 2004, p. 32). Regardless of whether Farmer’s view is correct or not, these tablets certainly had to do with offerings. These finds play a decisive role in the “symbol theory” of Farmer’s Indus script. The only mistake is that Farmer transfers his interpretation of the signs on the Harappa tablets to the rest of the Indus script - the seals and various objects obviously had other uses than the tablets.

Based on Egyptian hieroglyphics, two types of signs can be postulated for the Indus script: logograms and phonograms. Logograms are signs that represent a specific object and denote the concept they represent. They are not suitable for representing abstract concepts or describing actions. Phonograms can be used in different contexts according to the rebus principle. However, it should not be overlooked that, unlike logograms, the meaning of phonograms or rebuses is not always easy to recognise. But if we manage to decipher at least some of the signs, then hopefully this will make it easier to understand the Indus script.

Finally, it should be noted that the correctness of the author’s views on the Indus signs presented here still needs to be checked. This can be done, for example, by verifying whether an Indus script can be understood on the basis of the interpretations of the Indus signs proposed here. Elsewhere, the author myself has endeavoured to determine whether the meaning of an Indus script can be grasped with the help of the interpretations of the Indus signs presented here and by considering the construction principles of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (Fig. 17, Das Gupta 2025, p. 8,12). It remains to be seen whether the result obtained in this way will be confirmed or refuted by researchers.



**Fig. 17: Indus script, meanings of the Indus sings 1) Heart, 2) Cancer, 3) Priestess, 4) Goddess, 5) Load carrier, 6) Sacrificial vessels, 7) Grain, (M-494, M-495)**

### Conclusion

The study concludes that the pictorial representations of the Indus Valley civilization can prove to be useful sources for understanding the Indus script.

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