

Indus Sign Load Carrier

Dr. Tapan Kumar Das Gupta

The author is a retired cultural scienti, was employed at the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology

Abstract

The archaeologist Walter A. Fairservis Jr. endeavoured to decipher the meanings of the sign  in the Indus script. In his view, it is a rebus and should be interpreted as ‘Guardian’ or ‘Watchman’. The sign  is a combination of the signs  and . The sign  denotes an honorary title, such as ‘great’ or ‘high’. The sign  is said to mean ‘Great Guardian’ or ‘High Guardian’. This publication aims to determine to what extent Fairservis’s interpretations prove to be correct, or whether an alternative solution can be proposed. The study concludes: The load carrier was a person whose task was to transport objects. In the Indus culture, he held a high position. It is also possible that the term was applied to a person whose task was to deliver the offerings to the goddess. The sign  represents the result of the load carrier’s activity, the offerings to the goddess delivered by the load carrier.

Introduction

A prism-shaped object has been found in Mohenjo-daro (Fig. 1). There is an inscription on each side of the artefact. The inscription is difficult to recognise in the CISI illustration; it has been transcribed by Iravatham Mahadevan (Mahadevan 1977, 1623, p. 56). This transcription is adopted in the present work (Fig. 2). It is conceivable that the inscriptions containing 19 signs convey a coherent message. However, the order of the lines and the direction of reading remain unclear; it may be that the text should be read from right to left, though it is also possible that the script was boustrophedon. In view of this situation, it is advisable, following the opinion of archaeologist Walter A. Fairservis Jr., to attempt to identify the meanings of the individual signs (Fairservis 1992). It is to be hoped that this will bring us closer to understanding the Indus script. In an earlier publication, the author of the present work attempted to interpret the three signs   , which also appear in the script discussed here (s. Das Gupta 2026). This work focuses on the sign  of the Indus script.



Fig. 1: Prism-shaped artefact from Mohenjo-daro (M-495)

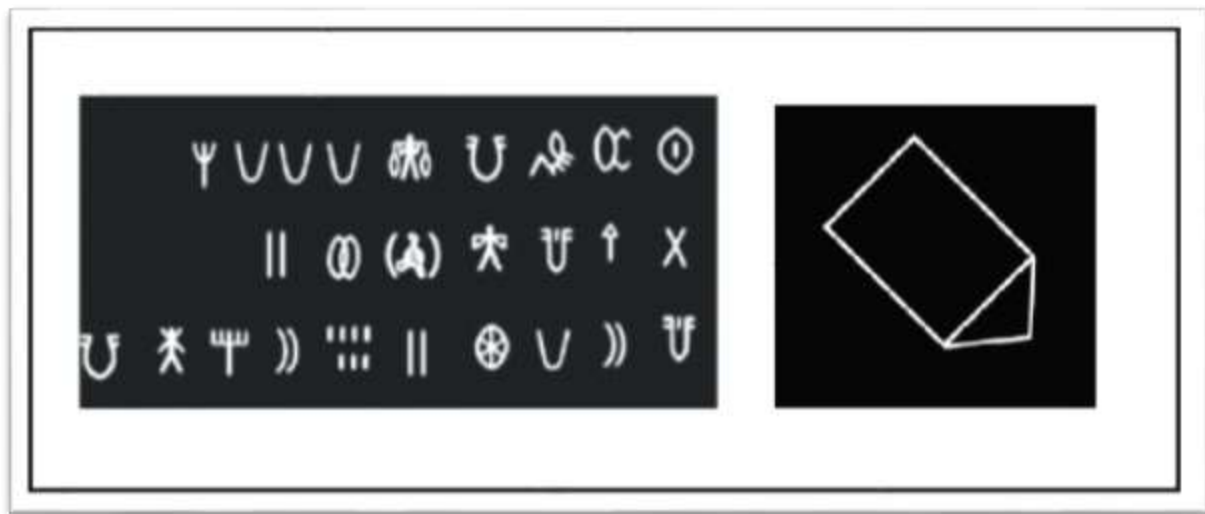


Fig. 2: On the right, a drawing of the prism-shaped object from Mohenjo-daro; on the left, inscriptions on three sides of the artefact after Mahadevan (M-495)

The problem of the meaning of the sign

Fairservis has drawn attention to the problem of the meaning of the sign. He writes: “Here we must consider the possibility that rebuses were used in the same way as in other ancient writing systems. Such signs are common in texts, not only on seal tablets but also in graffiti. The sign is literally a depiction of a man with a shoulder pole or yoke with two loops dangling from attached ropes. This depicts a rather menial task and, unless one is to argue that such tasks were particularly prestigious, it seems the sign must mean something else”.

Fairservis endeavours to explain his point of view: “Perhaps it means that its syllabic value was used to express something else, just as the picture of an eye in a child’s game could mean the pronoun “I”. Nrmr, the name of a primary King of Archaic Egypt, is written as a catfish and a chisel. The combinations of Harappan signs could in this sense be used syllabically either as the Nrmr example, as strict sounds to build substantives, or as direct homophones to describe qualities or substantives which otherwise could not be represented. This, of course, raises the problem of the identity of the Harappan language.” (Fairservis 1992, 13)

Fairservis’s considerations are based on Egyptian hieroglyphs. Egyptian hieroglyphs consist of three principles: logograms, phonograms and determinatives. Logograms are characters which, as hieroglyphs, depict a concrete object and directly refer to the concept they represent. They are not suitable for representing abstract concepts. Phonograms can be used in different contexts according to the rebus principle. Determinatives are so-called ‘silent’ signs. They appear at the end of written words and refer to the meaning of the word written in phonograms. With their help, words that sound the same can be distinguished and their meaning roughly determined (Altenmüller 2010, 28).

Fairservis regards the sign as a rebus and calls it ‘Guardian’ or ‘Watchman’ (Fairservis 1992, A-7, pp. 43ff, 153). The following section aims to determine to what extent Fairservis’s view is supported, or whether an alternative solution can be proposed. The pictorial representation of the sign is clear: as Fairservis also describes, it depicts a person carrying a horizontal staff on their shoulder, with an object hanging from each end (Fig. 3/left).

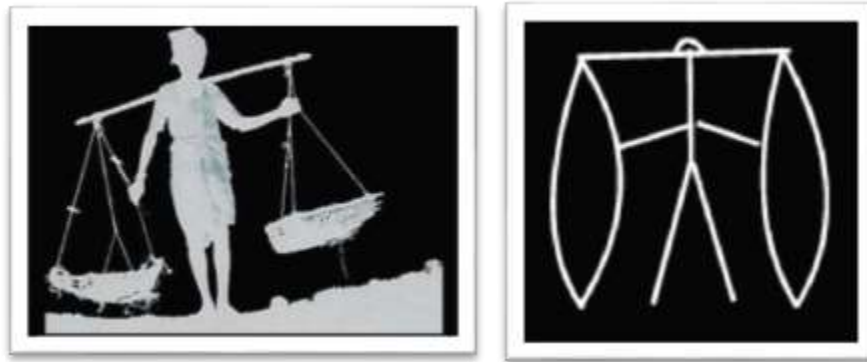


Fig. 3: On the left example of a depiction of a load carrier from the Indus culture (M-60); on the right Indian female load carrier, after a postage stamp for WHH

Since, in more recent times, water has been transported using similar apparatus, such a device is usually referred to as a “water carrier”. However, the method can be used not only for carrying water, but also for other objects (Fig. 3/right). In this paper, the device will therefore be referred to as a “load carrier”.

Load carrier

The use of the depiction of the load carrier indicates that work involving such equipment was common in the Indus culture, whatever it may have been used for. A number of variations in the depiction of the load carrier can be identified in Indus script (Fig. 4). Three of these are used in the script M-495 (see Fig. 2 here 𑀓 𑀔 𑀕). It was probably driven by a desire to simplify the character and make it more consistent with the style of the script.

The load carrier appears both at the beginning and within the text, and is often depicted alongside a single sign. Some of these are shown here in Fig. 5. The load carrier exhibits a particular affinity with three other signs, namely the numbers, the fish sign and the sign 𑀓.

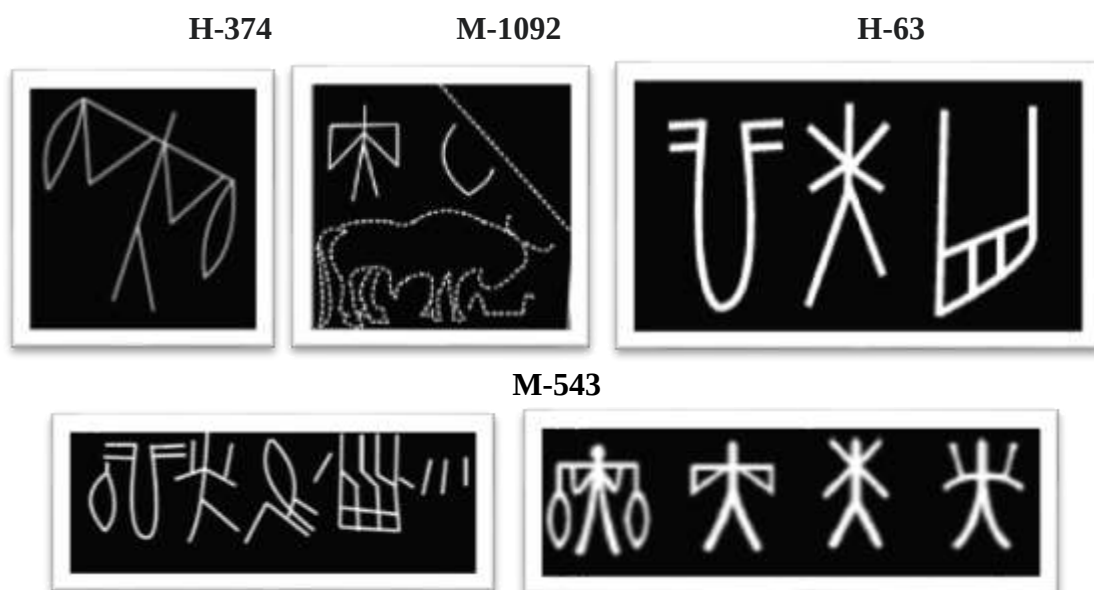


Fig. 4: Examples of different depictions of the load carrier in Indus culture



Fig. 5: Examples of how the load carrier is depicted alongside other signs

Load carrier with numbers

A find from Kalibangan depicts a man sitting in a tree, with a tiger standing on the ground below him (Fig. 6, K-49). The tiger is bound and held on a lead. The man is reaching out a hand towards the load carrier. The tiger turns its head towards the man and looks at him with its mouth open. There are seven dots behind the palm of the man's hand and three dots in front of the palm. The dots are numbers.

A fragment of a seal from Mohenjo-daro shows a representation of a load carrier alongside numbers consisting of 12 strokes (Fig. 6, M-988). The numeral system of the Indus culture was decimal and consisted of short and long strokes. It is somewhat difficult to represent the number 12 using 12 short strokes in the decimal system (Das Gupta 2025, 24f). In the present context, however, it is significant that the load carrier is depicted together with numbers.

The handle of a chisel from Mahenjo-dao features depictions on both sides (Fig. 6, M-2118). On one side, there are load carrier, numbers and the sign Ψ . It is clear that there is a direct connection between the load carrier and the numbers. Incidentally, the sign Ψ could refer to 'grain', and the sign Ψ to 'grain in a pot'.

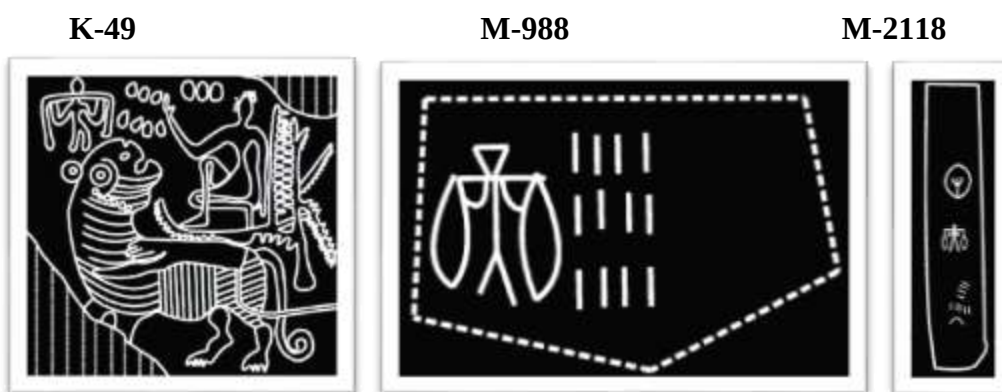


Fig. 6: Load carrier with numerical markings; on the left a seal, in the centre a fragment of a seal, on the right the shank of a chisel

Load carrier with fish sign

Fig. 7 shows the load carrier together with fish sign. The left-hand illustration also features numbers and a 'wheel' sign (H-514). The fish sign vary: Ψ , Ψ , Ψ . This is a selection of variants; a series of fish

signs is depicted in Indus script with additional strokes (cf. Wells 2015, 19; Mahadevan 1977, 786). When a fish sign is used on its own, it may be a logogram, i.e. a sign representing a fish. The additional characters could be interpreted as a kind of determinative, which might refer, for example, to various species of fish.

However, it is also conceivable that the fish sign is intended to be a phonogram, for example ‘water’, ‘bath’, ‘food’, etc. Asko Parpola, who assumes that the language of Indus culture was Dravidian, recognises in the fish sign the Dravidian words *mīn* meaning ‘fish’ and *mīn/vīṇ* meaning ‘star’, ‘to glitter’, ‘shine’ or ‘flash’ (Parpola 1994, 182).

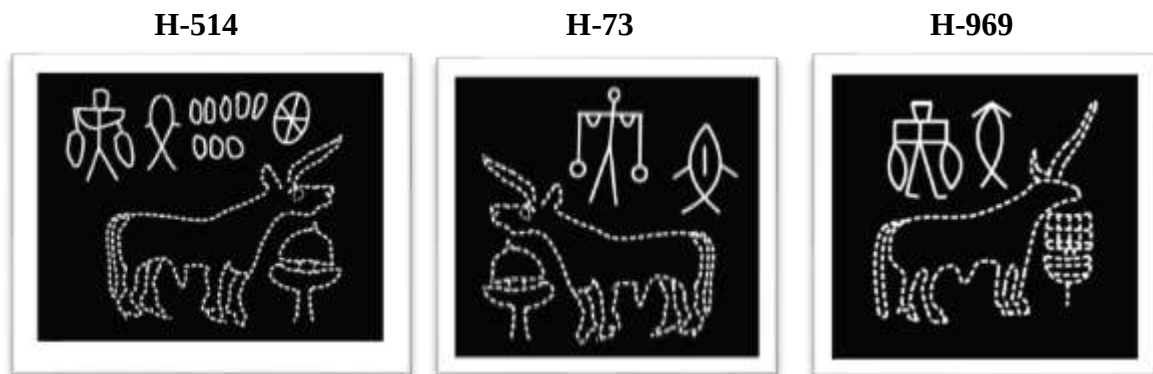


Fig. 7: Load carriers with a fish sign on the seals

A load carrier with a fish appears on one side of a tablet from Harappa (Fig. 8). On the other side of the find are a vessel and numbers (cf. Das Gupta 2026). According to Steve Farmer, such tablets constitute evidence of offerings (Farmer 2004, 32). The author of the present work, who has dealt with this question, is of the opinion that these tablets did indeed have something to do with offerings (Das Gupta 2026). Parpola also points out: “In the early ‘miniature tablets’ of Harappa, the plain ‘fish’ pictogram is seen to occur in close association with the U sign, which apparently denotes ‘sacrificial vessel’...” (Parpola 1994, 190). If the load carrier appears with the fish, then fish may have been intended as offerings. This find attests that the load carrier was a person (logogram). It was his task to deliver offerings to the goddess.

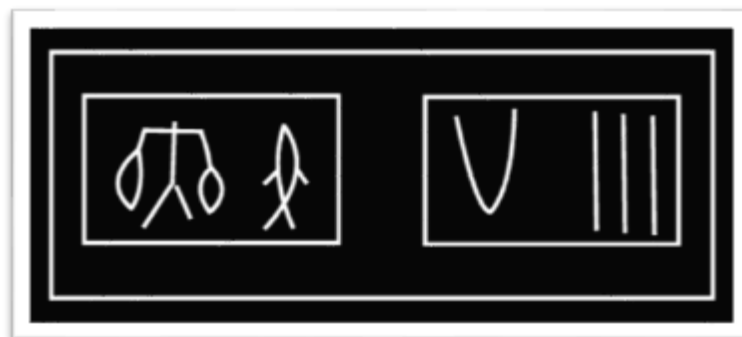


Fig. 8: Tablet, load carrier with a fish on one side, a vessel and numbers on the other side, evidence of an offering according to Farmer (H-949)

Load carrier with the sign

Usually, the signs  and  appear side by side (Fig. 9, M-209). The sign  is a combination of the sign  and , the sign  is carried on the head of the load carrier (Fig. 9). As mentioned above, Fairservis believed that the sign  should be interpreted as ‘Guardian’ or ‘Watchman’. In his view, the sign  is an honorary title, such as ‘great’ or ‘high’. He assumes that the meanings of the two sign and are contained within the sign . The sign  is therefore said to mean ‘Great Guardian’ or ‘High Guardian’ (Fairservis 1992, 8f). Perhaps he meant by this a ‘higher administrator’.

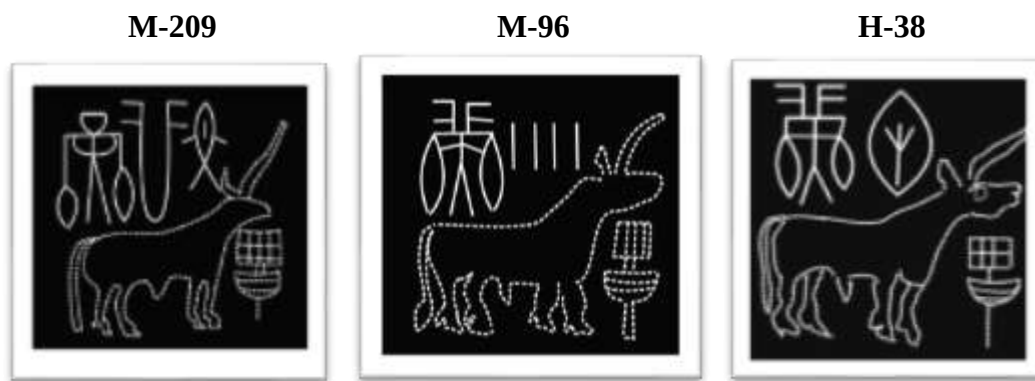


Fig. 9: Depictions of the load carrier and the sign  on the seals

Parpola, on the other hand, takes the view that the sign may represent the name or title of a god (Parpola 1994, 91). The author of the present work has dealt with this question and concluded that Parpola is correct in his view, except that it does not refer to a god, but to a goddess (Das Gupta 2026). This may give rise to a different meaning of the sign , namely: ‘the load carrier carries the goddess on his head’. It is also conceivable, however, that the sign has a completely different meaning; it may be a phonogram. As the purpose of such a depiction is not apparent, it can only be conjectured. A seal from Mohenjo-daro (M-899) may be of significance in this regard (Fig. 10).

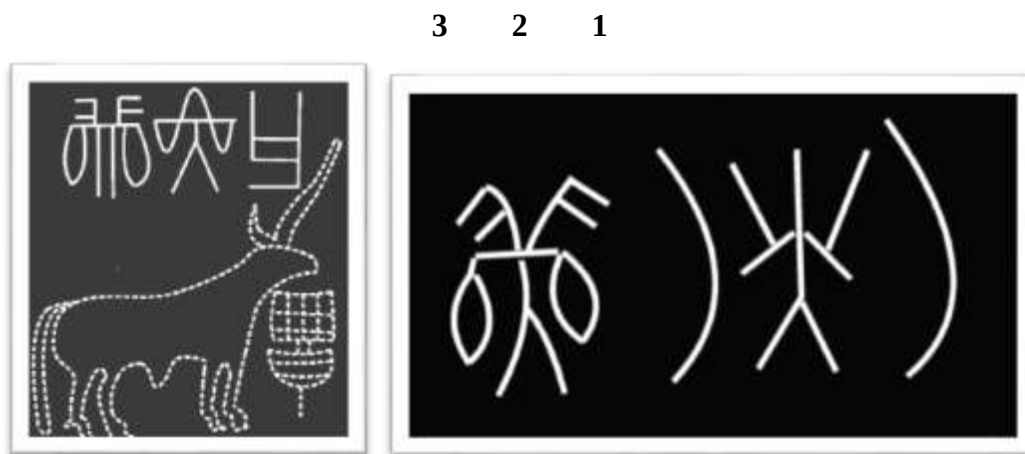


Fig. 10: On the left Images on a seal, the signs are stylised (M-899), on the right signs on a clay pot, sign  and a variant of load carrier (M-1372)

The depictions of this seal have some peculiarities: the signs are simplified and stylised. The sign 1 in Fig. 10/left does not appear elsewhere (Mahadevan 1977, 514); it is possible that it has been stylised to such an extent that the actual sign is no longer recognisable (cf. Fig. 4, H-63). The two signs  and  are not otherwise used side by side (Fig. 10/left, 3, 2). (In this illustration, as in the other illustrations in this work, the unicorn and the ritual vessel are schematically indicated by dotted lines, cf. Das Gupta 2024). A somewhat similar arrangement of the two signs ( ) is found only on a clay pot discovered at Mohenjo-daro (Fig. 10/right, M-1372).

Conclusion

The load carrier was a person (logogram) whose task was to transport objects. In the Indus culture, he held a high position, the tablet from Harappa attests that he delivered offerings to the goddess (Fig. 8). However, it is also possible that the term was applied to a person whose task was to deliver the offerings to the goddess (phonogram). This could therefore be rebus, as Fairservis has also suggested. Only the term 'load carrier' is more appropriate for this sign than the terms 'Guardian' or 'Watchman'. The sign , which is placed alongside the sign , is the result of the load carrier's action, the offerings to the goddess delivered by the load carrier - the sign  is a rebus (phonogram) and depicts the offerings.

Prospects

The author has endeavoured to interpret the signs , , ,  (s. Das Gupta 2026). Further investigation of the remaining signs in the inscription presented here remains a task for the future (Fig. 2). The text contains a number of numerical signs; if we succeed in deciphering the meanings of the other signs as well, we may well be able to grasp the message contained in this script. Perhaps only then will it be possible to determine whether the Indus language is related to any of the later Indian languages.

References

1. Altenmüller H. 2010: Einführung in die Hieroglyphenschrift, Hamburg.
2. Das Gupta T. K. 2024: Unicorn complex of the Indus Culture, München.
3. Das Gupta T. K. 2025: Pictorial representations and the Indus script, München.
4. Das Gupta T. K. 2026: The Indus signs on the tablets from Harappa, International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR), vol. 8/1, 1-9.
5. Fairservis F. A. Jr. 1992: The Harappan Civilization and its Writing, Leiden/New York.
6. Farmer S. 2004: Mythological functions on Indus inscriptions (<http://www.safarmer.com/downloads>).
7. Farmer S./Sproat R./Witzel M. 2004: The collapse of the Indus-Script thesis: The myth of a literate Harappan Civilization. Electronic journal of Vedic Studies (EJVS) 11-2:19-57 (www.safarmer.com/downloads).
8. Fuls A. 2023: A Catalog of Indus Signs, Mathematica Epigraphica No. 4, Berlin.
9. Joshi J. P. 1987: Corpus of Indus seals and inscriptions (CISI), vol.1: Collections in India, Helsinki.
10. Mahadevan I. 1977: The Indus Script, Text, Concordance, and Tables, New Delhi.
11. Parpola A. 1994: Deciphering the Indus script, Cambridge.

12. Parpola A./Pande B. M./Koskikallio P. 2010: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions (CISI), vol. 3, Pt. 1, new material, Helsinki.
13. Parpola A./Pande B. M./Koskikallio P. 2019: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions (CISI), vol. 3, Pt. 2, new material, Helsinki.
14. Parpola A./Koskikallio P. 2022: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions (CISI), vol. 3 Pt. 3, new material, Helsinki.
15. Shah S. G. M. 1991: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions, Collections in Pakistan (CISI), vol. 2, Helsinki.
16. Wells B. K. 2006: Epigraphic Approaches to Indus writing, Cambridge.
17. Wells B. K. 2015: The Archaeology and Epigraphy of Indus Writing, Oxford.