International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Tree gods of the Indus Valley Civilisation

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Abstract

During the Indus Valley civilisation, no temples existed, and gods were believed to reside only in trees. God Rudra lived in the Pipal tree. Other holy trees identified are the Vilvum (Bilvum)and the Vanni tree (Sami/Khejri). Even today, Hindus still worship these trees. Hence, the ideas of the Indus Valley civilisation (IVC) have not entirely disappeared; some ideas still survive in contemporary India.



Figure 1: Three bulls are tied to three different trees

Picture courtesy – Book of Asko Parpola. Picture after – (1)

The above-mentioned pottery figure depicts three Zebu bulls tethered to three different trees. The pottery fragment is from Naushera and dates to the Pre–Harappan period (2600-2550 BC). (1) Reproducing these three bull figures matters because early Harappans were tree worshippers, suggesting they followed a very primitive religion. It shows they never had standard temples, which appeared later in Indian history. Only trees were abodes of gods, not temples. These three trees are distinct; the first is easily identified, i.e., the Pipal tree. The second tree could be the Sami tree (*Prosopis cineraria*). The third could be the Vilvum tree (Bael tree, also known as the wood apple – Aegle Marmelos), because the fruit shown in the picture resembles the fruit of the wood apple tree.

God living in the Pipal tree could be Rudra.

The God living in the Pipal tree is identified with the crab constellation and God. Asko Parpola gives the name ‘Grahaka’(Rudra) for this symbol. (2) My research also supports Parpola's view. (3) The Pipal tree symbol indicates the tree in which Rudra generally resides. Nowadays, he is revered as a village Deity and known as Muneeswaran in South India.



Figure 2 : Rudra with arrows.

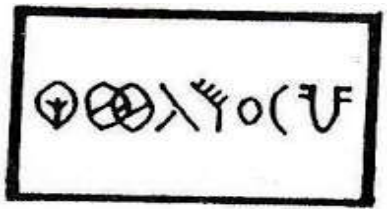


Figure 3 Name of the hunter god on the back side of Figure 2.

Reference and acknowledgements to Asko Parpola, page No. 234, Deciphering the Indus Script (Book). (4)

Figure 2 shows a male figure of a hunting god engraved on a copper tablet found in Mohenjo-Daro. Asko Parpola explains that this figure could be the image of the hunter-god Rudra. The back of the same plate contains inscriptions that could be the god's name (Figure 3). I tried to read the inscriptions syllabically. No conclusive name of a god appeared in either the Dravidian language or the Aryan language.

Iravatham Mahadevan says that Indus inscriptions are written in an 'Ideogramic way' (Idea). (5) I applied the same 'Ideogramic' principle to Indus symbols, and a meaningful interpretation emerged from the Indus inscriptions. Mahadevan interprets the 'Ideograms' as being related to Dravidian society, living in metropolises, and trade transactions. However, the IVC community was a small town-based society. The excavated IVC sites were 'Necropolises' (Burial grounds), not 'Metropolises' as popularly imagined. (6)

Table 1 Reading of the inscription in the copper seal, Figure 3.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
						
Germinating seed-seedling	Two Bangles	Crab constellation Symbol	Branch symbol	'Embryo symbol.'	Kedaga symbol means protection	"Ka|"-Symbol indicates upraised hands.
	Valaya, Kangana	Karkidam (Crab) indicates Karkida Sastha, that is,	Zakha (Branch) Zakhastha – means God living in a branch. (7)	Garbha	Kedaga	"Ka" symbol in Egyptian hieroglyphics indicated the dead man's soul. (8)

		God Rudra. (3)				
An embryo in the Womb (9)	Indicates a female goddess, that is Kali (10)	Karkida Sastha. (Column 3 and 4 should be read together)	Zakhastha is transformed into 'Sastha', which means 'God.'	embryo (9)	Protection (11)	In IVC, the same "ka" symbol meant soul as well as "Kau" (sacrifice). (8)

The inscription can be read as ''Embryo protection ceremony (Pumsavana ceremony) – worship of 'Karkida Sastha (-Rudra)' – Embryo protection Sacrifice. The two bangles symbol indicates that Goddess Kali was also worshipped alongside Rudra.

God Varuna was present in the Indus Valley civilisation.

An Indus seal depicts a god in a watery realm, possibly Varuna, a pre-Vedic god. The pre-Vedic gods were branded as asuras in the Vedic period. Varuna was a god of moral order and a punisher of lawbreakers. He carried a noose and stick to punish people. A crocodile, the latter-day Makara vahana, accompanied him. Indra took over the powers of Varuna, and Varuna was delegated to lower realms. The death god 'Yama' is not seen in IVC seals; most probably, 'Varuna' played the role of the death god. (12)



Figure 4: God Varuna surrounded by crocodiles and fish.
Seal pictures courtesy (13)

The Indus seal above depicts an Indus god seated, surrounded by crocodiles and fish. In my earlier articles, I discussed that fish indicate the souls of the dead, and that the crocodile could be the equivalent of the Egyptian goddess **Ammit.** (14) (15). Now, a third factor has arisen in the seal above: the symbol of water. The god, the crocodiles and the fishes are enclosed in a water symbol, visible on both edges of the seal. That symbol could indicate the watery realm of "Varuna". (12)

Varuna is a Vedic deity associated first with the sky, later with waters, and with ***Ṛta*** (justice) and ***Satya*** (truth). He appears in the oldest layer of Vedic literature, such as hymn 7.86 of the Rigveda. He is possibly one of the earliest Indo-Aryan triads with parallels to an Avestan deity, possibly Iranian **Ahura Mazda**. His streak of violent demonic tendencies, according to Hindu mythology, led to his demotion and Indra taking away most of his powers. (16). In the Hindu Puranas, Varuna is the god of oceans; his vehicle is a

Makara (part fish, sea creature), and his weapon is a ***Pasha*** (noose, rope loop). He is the guardian deity of the western direction. (16).

Etymology

Varuna is related to the root ***vṛ ("vri"),*** which, states Adrian Snodgrass, means "to surround, to cover" or "to restrain, to check". With ***uṇan***, it gives ***"Varuna"*,** meaning "he who covers or binds all things". The sea or ocean is his domain, while the universal law or ***Ṛta (dharma***) is the abstract binder that connects all things. His name is related to the Indo-European root ***"uer"*** or **"to bind**". In later Hindu literature, the term Varuna evolves to mean God of waters, the source of rains and the one who rules over the Nagas (divine sea serpents) (16).

Vedas

In the earliest layer of the Rigveda, Varuna is the guardian of the moral law. He punishes those who sin without remorse, and at the same time, forgives those who err with guilt. He is mentioned in many Rigvedic hymns, such as 7.86–88, 1.25, 2.27–30, 8.8, 9.73 and others. His relationship with waters, rivers and oceans is already mentioned in the Vedas. And according to Hermann Oldenberg, he is already the Indian version of Poseidon in these texts. Yet, the Vedic poets describe him as an aspect and one of the plural perspectives of the same divine or spiritual principle. (16). All the above-said facts fit very well with the god shown in the seal. Hence, it can be assumed that the god Varuna was present in the Indus Valley civilisation.

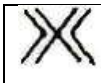


Figure 5: water symbol is seen in the seal inscription

Picture courtesy: (13) *Sue Sullivan*

The seal inscription above shows the water symbol along with the sacrifice symbol "". Together, these symbols stand for the words **"Varuna sacrifice". "Varuna Yajna"** is still common in India: a special Yajna directed toward Varuna, praying for rain. Later, only God Indra replaces Varuna as the god of rain. In the Early Vedic period, 'Varuna' was the god of the sky and rain. In the later Vedic period, this power shifted to Indra, and Varuna was relegated to a minor deity. This seal inscription suggests the idea that the 'Rig Vedic period' might have coincided with the Indus Valley civilisation period.

Table 2: Reading of inscriptions in Figure 7

				
X-symbol with open ends indicates the	Two yajna sticks symbol indicate	Fish symbol indicates the dead	The water symbol indicates the god Varuna. (12)	The upraised hands symbol indicates the word

sacrifice held at road junctions. (12)	the word Yajna. (17) (18)	man's soul (Pithru) (14)		"Kau," meaning sacrifice. (8)

The water symbol indicates the Vedic god Varuna.

	The 'X' symbol follows the water symbol. I had written a separate article that the 'X' symbol indicates the god of death. This seal inscription confirms Varuna's association with the 'X' symbol, which represents the god of death. It is pertinent to note that no specific evidence of Yama is seen in IVC seal inscriptions. Yama was likely a later Vedic period god. (12)

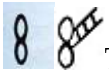
	In this seal inscription, the water symbol is followed by the 'Kavu' (sacrifice)symbol. This symbol pair could have stood for the meaning 'Varuna Kavu'. (12)

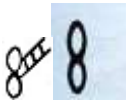
The noose-and-stick symbol also stands for Varuna.

In addition to the water symbol, the noose and stick symbol also could stand for 'Varuna'. In Egyptian hieroglyphics, a similar symbol "  " stands for the idea **'rope on a stick'**. (Gardiner's dictionary -page 524). (19) Most likely, the Indus scribes followed Egyptian hieroglyphics in this regard. Read my article, **Indus script follows the Egyptian hieroglyphics',** for more information. (20)

	Here in this inscription, the 'noose' symbol is shown within the watery realm. Most probably, this noose symbol also indicates the god Varuna. Further, this noose symbol is followed by the 'stick' symbol. This again confirms the idea of the god Varuna. (12)

	(Read from left to right.) In this seal inscription, the noose symbol is followed by the 'Sastha' (God) symbol. (7) This symbol pair stands for the meaning 'Varuna Sastha'.

	**(Read from right to left)** The 'X' symbol is followed by the Karkida symbol (Karkida month) and the noose-stick symbol. The 'X' symbol indicates the Varuna Yajna, and the noose and stick symbol indicates God Varuna himself. (12)
	The noose-and-stick symbol could indicate the god 'Varuna'. The noose and stick ideogram also could have indicated the idea of 'command' of Varuna.
	'X' symbol is associated with 'Varuna Yajna'. The rope symbol (noose) indicates 'Varuna'. Together, these two symbols stand for the name 'Varuna Yajna'.  This rope symbol with a ladder indicates the dead man's soul's ascent to heaven. Read the article 'Agnicayana Yajna' for more information. (21)

	This rope symbol and rope wound on a stick could indicate God 'Varuna'.  This rope symbol with a ladder indicates the dead man's soul's ascent to heaven. (21)

	This noose symbol could indicate Varuna's death threat. The noose symbol is followed by the 'twisted bird' ideogram—this ideogram stands for the idea 'fear' as per the Egyptian Hieroglyphics. (22) Hence, these two symbol pairs give a meaningful association.

'Proto-Shiva' seal and Dakshinamurthi.

 *Figure 6 Seal showing God Dakshinamurthi.*	 Picture courtesy - Wikipedia
Indus seal showing god Dakshina moorthy/ Mrigashira or Brahma	Wikipedia picture showing God Dakshinamurthi

Dakshinamurthi is a four-armed god, seated under a banyan tree, facing south. He sits on a deer throne, surrounded by sages, receiving their instruction. Sometimes, even wild animals are depicted surrounding Dakshinamurthi. (23) Dakshinamurthi has been identified with the god Shiva in later-day Hindu mythologies. However, I feel the Indus seal represents the god Dakshinamurthi, also known as Mrigashira; it could also have indicated the god Brahma.

Further, Dakshinamurthi's southern position in temple architecture is reaffirmed by the position of the Orion constellation in the southern hemisphere of the sky. This constellation is located south of the ecliptic plane. The basic visualisation among Hindu priests is that all the celestial gods (Planets) pass through a pathway (the ecliptic), the central axis of the Hindu temple. In this scheme, Orion is a major god on the southern sidewall of the Garbha Griha.

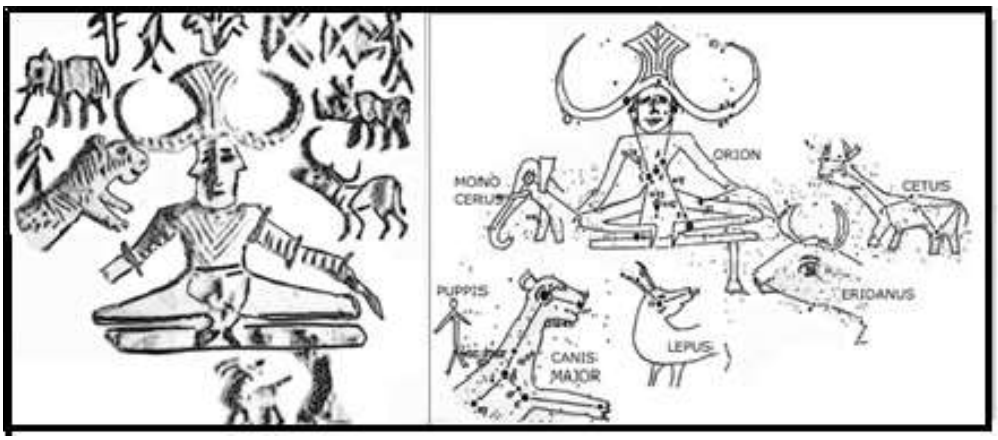


Figure 7--Proto-Shiva in the Indus seal and the sky map for comparison.

The pictures above (Fig. 8) show the Indus Valley seal depicting Proto-Shiva, and the sky map shows all the Indus Gods surrounded by animal constellations. For more details on Dakshinamurthi and this 'Proto-Shiva', read the other article under the headings, 'Proto-Shiva seal and Dakshinamurthi'. (24) The relevance of this discussion about Dakshinamurthi is that the 'Proto-Shiva' seal corresponds with this god, Dakshinamurthi, in all aspects. Another name of this god is "Mrigashira" because animals surround him. Another name is ''Pasupathi''; 'Pasu' means 'cow' or other animals.

South Indian God “Ayyappa” in Indus seals

In Egyptian mythology, the god ‘Heh’ personified infinity or eternity in the Ogdoad. (25) His name originally meant “flood,” referring to the watery chaos that the Egyptians believed existed before the creation of the world. (26) The Egyptians envisioned this chaos as infinite, in contrast with the finite created world, so Heh personified this aspect of the primordial waters. (27) (28) The other common representation depicts him crouching, holding a palm stem in each hand (or just one). (29) He sometimes wore a palm stem in his hair, as palm stems represented long life to the Egyptians. (28)



Figure 8: God Heh holding two palm branches.

The God Heh was usually depicted anthropomorphically, as in the hieroglyphic character, as a male figure with a divine beard and lappet wig. He was typically crouched with one knee raised, sometimes in a basket—the sign for “all.” This god typically held a notched palm branch (palm rib) in each hand. (30) Occasionally, an additional palm branch is worn on God’s head. (28)

God Heh’s image and iconographic elements reflected the wish for millions of years of life or rule. ‘Heh’ became associated with the King and his quest for longevity. The placement of ‘Heh’ along with a Pharaoh’s corpse means he will grant him these “millions of years” into the afterlife. (28) The palm branch symbolises victory, triumph, peace, and eternal life, originating in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean. These narrations suggest that the palm branch was holy, meaning a million years of ‘afterlife’ for the Indus people. Under the Indus Valley civilisation, the god ‘Heh’ exhibits two characteristics. The first is the crouched sitting position with one knee raised, and the second is his upraised hand. The seals below show those characteristics.



The two seals shown beside depict the god ‘Heh’ with the two characteristics mentioned above. In modern Hinduism, this Deity is known as Ayyappan and is worshipped primarily in South India. His famous temple is in Sabari-mala, Kerala. But Hindus are not aware of his Egyptian antecedents and worship him without realising his absolute powers. He is the God capable of granting a man a million years of ‘afterlife.’ Now, coming to the identity of 'Ayyappan' in the above-given seal. Ayyappan could be identified with the ‘Puppis constellation’ just above the ‘Canis Major’ constellation. The position of the ‘Puppis’

constellation looks as if a man is riding a tiger. This idea of 'man riding a tiger' suggests that the small God shown in the Indus seal could be the later-day ‘Ayyappa.’

The tiger is associated with Lord Ayyappan of Sabarimala. The Ayyappa temple priest himself equated Ayyappa with the star Sirius (Canis Major). (31) (32) There was a dispute in the Kerala High Court questioning the validity of the ‘Makara Vilaku' ceremony. In court, the Ayyappa temple priest admitted that the rising of the celestial star Sirius is celebrated only as the “Makara Jyothi” ceremony. (32) (31)

Ancient Egyptian priests and calendar makers gave immense importance to the event of the heliacal rising of the 'Sirius' star. This was because the Egyptian calendar did not correlate well with the Nile's annual flooding. To correct their calendars, the Egyptians developed the 'Sothic cycle'. This 'Calendar correction mechanism' is the reason for undue importance given to the rising of the 'Sirius' star. Even now, that event is being blindly followed in the name of Shiv-Ratri and Makara Jyothi ceremonies in India.

Even though the above-cited Wikipedia article says that ‘Sastha’ means ‘teacher’, Sanskrit dictionaries do not attest to this idea. The word is likely derived from ‘Zakhastha’, which means ‘branch of the living God’. (33) This name, ‘Zakhastha’, could have evolved into the word ‘Sastha’ today. I have given detailed justification for the evolution of the word “Sastha” in a separate article titled “Branch symbol indicates the word -sastha”. Read that article for more information. (7)

The importance of the Sami tree

I had not known the importance of the ‘Sami Tree’ for a long time. I have recently come across some information that may help explain its significance. (34).

Arani is a sacred wood used to produce fire for sacrifice. Araṇi means “that which is turned round”. The fire in which Vedic sacrifices are performed should be generated by attrition. The two pieces of wood used for this purpose are called ‘Araṇi.’

- ‘*Adhar-Arani’*— The lower piece is rectangular and has an indentation called ‘deva-yoni ’ (divine vulva), the origin of the god of fire. It should be of the asvattha (Ficus religiosa), which is softer, the size being 16 angulas long, 12 angulas wide and four angulas in height. (Around one foot long and one-foot-wide wooden block)
- ‘*Uttar-Arani’* - The upper piece is in the form of a drill inserted into the indentation of the adharāraṇi. It should be made from the Sami tree wood (Prosopis specigera), a hardwood.

Fire is generated by vigorous churning while chanting appropriate chants. The lower Arani is sometimes figuratively called the ‘mother,’ the upper Arani the father, and the resultant child is the ‘Agni,’ the fire. Hence, the Arani stick is considered the father of fire, making the Sami tree important in Hindu ideas.

Cow goddess of Vaitarani River

The second possible importance is that the demon goddess Taweret (Egyptian name) was associated with this tree. The Mahabharata narrates the incident in which the Pandavas worshipped the "Sami tree." Before going into "Agyat-vasa" (one-year life of incognito), the Pandavas prayed to the Sami tree. The Sami tree granted their wishes and protected their weapons during their one-year period of incognito living. This narration indicates that ancient Sami tree worship was practised from the Indus Valley period onwards and is reflected in the latter-day epic of the Mahabharata.

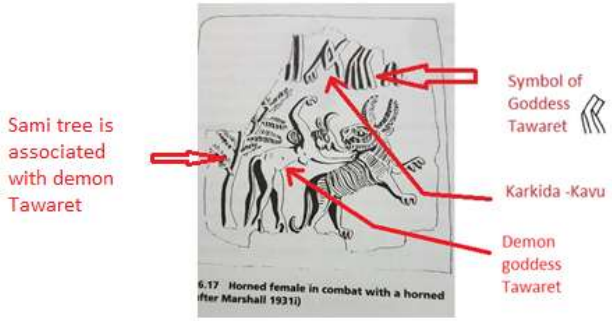


Figure 9--Seal picture showing goddess Taweret.
Reference: picture from the book by Asko Parpola.

The picture above is taken from Asko Parpola's book. (2) The inscription on the seal reads as '**Karkida - Kavu- sacrifice for Taweret**'. This picture confirms that the symbol "" indicates the goddess Taweret, chasing away demons, protecting the dead man's soul in the netherworld. She was a benevolent demon. The seal shows she was associated with the 'Sami tree' (Khejri tree). She was probably the goddess worshipped as the Vaitarani cow goddess under the 'Sami tree' in Indus Valley times.

The Vaitarani Cow (Vaitarani Gau)

According to the Garuda Purana, the crossing is achieved through a sacred animal entity and a specific personified deity: (35) (36)The Vaitarani Cow (Vaitarani Gau) is the ultimate helper that a soul clings to across the river, and it is a cow. (37) In Hindu funeral rites, the family performs Vaitarani Godaan (donating a cow to a priest). When a sinful soul reaches the terrifying, blood-filled river, a boat managed by the attendants of Yama (the god of death) arrives. If the person or their family donated a cow, the soul may hold onto the tail of the Vaitarani Cow, which swims across and pulls the soul safely over the torrent. (35) (37) (38) In some specialised Puranic texts, like the Padma Purana, the river itself is personified as a female deity named Goddess Vaitarani. (39) She is called Vai (truly) Tarini (the one who saves or carries across). Rather than standing on the banks to physically help, the river itself acts as the purifying entity. For the righteous, her waters miraculously transform into a smooth river of nectar, making the passage effortless. (36) (38) (39)

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