

Fish Symbolism in the Indus Civilisation: An Ideographic Reading of the Fish Sign as the Soul of the Deceased

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Abstract

The fish sign is, after the jar sign, the most frequently attested element in the known corpus of Indus inscriptions; together with its graphic variants, it accounts for an estimated 10 per cent of all recorded signs. Despite this prominence, no consensus exists on its meaning, and the widely repeated reading of the sign as 'star' is contested. (1) It leaves unexplained why such a complex pictogram would render such a common and abstract idea. This article develops an alternative ideographic hypothesis: that the fish sign denotes the soul of a deceased person, and more specifically the ancestral soul (Sanskrit *pitṛ*, 'forefather'). The argument draws on three independent strands of evidence: Indus seal iconography; comparative funerary symbolism in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria, and the Greek world; and the fish iconography of the Mesolithic–Neolithic site of Lepenski Vir in the Danube Gorges. This paper offers a proposed reading of an Indus seal depicting a ritual fish-pit, using it as a case study. It argues that a funerary reading explains the sign's high frequency and its association with aquatic and ancestral imagery more economically than a stellar reading.

Keywords: Indus Civilisation; Indus script; fish symbolism; funerary ritual; *pitṛ*; Lepenski Vir; Varuṇa

Introduction

The fish pictogram is among the most persistent and widespread elements of the Indus sign corpus. Sorted by statistical frequency across known inscriptions, the basic fish sign is conventionally ranked as the second most frequent core symbol after the jar sign. When combined with its modified graphic variants, the group accounts for about 10 per cent of the entire recorded text corpus.

This article proposes an ideographic interpretation of the fish pictogram: that the sign denotes the soul of a deceased person, and, in its more specific variants, the ancestral soul or *pitṛ*. The proposal is developed comparatively, drawing on the funerary symbolism of neighbouring and later cultures, and is tested against seal iconography and the archaeology of Lepenski Vir.

The fish sign and the 'god of waters'

The fish symbol has been discussed at length in online Indus scholarship (2); (3). One influential reading holds that the fish pictogram denotes 'star', an interpretation Mahadevan (1977) also advanced. This raises an immediate difficulty: if the sense were 'star', why would the Harappans not have used a star symbol, as in the ancient Near East, rather than rendering such a simple idea through such a complex sign? A related proposal — that the fish denoted a god — is no more satisfactory. The fish is one of the most popular

motifs in early Harappan painted pottery, and its frequency there is not easily explained by a divine referent. Some archaeologists have accordingly proposed that the fish symbolised a god; that reading is questioned here.



Figure 1. A Harappan-type deity on a Near Eastern cylinder seal of unknown provenance, flanked by buffaloes, snakes and a pair of fish drawn in the manner of the Indus fish pictogram. Source: after (3).

On one Indus-type cylinder seal from the Near East, the buffalo-horned deity is surrounded by a pair of buffaloes, snakes and a pair of fish, the last drawn in a form closely comparable to the Indus fish pictogram. (3). The left-hand scene of Figure 1 shows a dead man rising through the realm of the dead and threatened by two demons, while the right-hand scene shows the deity, amid two snakes, in his own realm, with the dead man's soul living as a fish. The deity may be identified as Enki/Ea, since the watery realm belonged to the god Ea; alternatively, the crown adorned with peepal leaves, as depicted on Indus seals, raises the possibility of an Indus deity. The presence of buffaloes and snakes suggests a death god, while the aquatic setting might point to Varuṇa—a deity argued elsewhere. (4) In the Indus Civilisation.



Figure 2. An Indus seal showing a deity in a watery realm, surrounded by crocodiles and fish, provisionally identified as Varuṇa. Picture Source: (5)

The Indus seal reproduced in Figure 2 may be compared with the Near Eastern seal of Figure 1. It shows an Indus deity seated amid crocodiles and fish, the whole group enclosed within a water symbol visible at both edges of the seal. It is proposed here that the fish represent the souls of the dead, and that the crocodile may be understood as the equivalent of the Egyptian goddess Ammit. (6). The enclosing water symbol may mark Varuṇa's aquatic realm. (4). On this reading, the association of fish with Varuṇa's watery realm

is consistent with a funerary interpretation of the fish. This suggests that fish denoted the souls of the dead rather than a god or a star.

Fish symbolism in comparative perspective

Mesopotamia and the Near East

Dagon (Dagan) was initially an East Semitic Mesopotamian fertility deity who developed into a significant Northwest Semitic god, associated with grain as a symbol of fertility and with fish and fishing as symbols of multiplication. Early Amorites and the inhabitants of Ebla and Ugarit worshipped him, and he was an influential member—perhaps the head—of the Philistine pantheon. (7). In a tomb painting at Thebes (Figure 3), the mummy gazes at a fish above him; here the sacred fish replaces the customary ka-bird symbol, suggesting a hope for immortality. (8).



Figure 3. A dead man transformed into fish form, from the tomb of Khabekhnet (TT2), Thebes, dating to the reign of Ramesses II. Source: (9) (2013);

Figure 3, from the tomb of Khabekhnet (TT2), shows the dead man transformed into a fish rather than the conventional mummy form — a transitional representation in which the soul is shown as a fish in place of the usual ka-bird. The transformation is dated to the reign of Ramesses II in the New Kingdom, Nineteenth Dynasty. (9). Egyptian priests were forbidden to eat fish, although fish-eating was obligatory for the laity on certain days of the month. (10). On the apotropaic Lamashtu tablet, two priests stand in fish masks near the bed of a sick person, warding off the attacks of Lamashtu and her attendant demons; one form assumed by Ea, god of magic, was the goat-fish (8). In ritual scenes on various cylinder seals, a fish is frequently accompanied by a rhomb or lozenge, usually interpreted as representing the female vulva, so that the fertility aspect of the fish is strongly emphasised. (11). Van Buren, having assembled Mesopotamian material on fish symbolism, proposed that the fish is connected with the underworld and carries chthonic associations, while also suggesting that, in very early times, fish symbolised life and that the later conception of rebirth led to their use in funerary rites. (10); (12). Similarly, scenes of birds attempting to eat fish appear on Indus seals. (8).

Syria had its fish goddess Atargatis, whose priests offered fish daily on her altars. Here the evidence suggests that fish was a ritual food for priests but taboo to laypeople; an aetiological legend relates that Atargatis was born from an egg brought up from the Euphrates by a fish and hatched by a dove, hence the prohibition on eating fish. (10). In Greece, the dolphin became central to piscine myth and metaphor, being associated with both Dionysus and Apollo, and closely connected with Eros and Aphrodite. Because the

dolphin is associated with so many deities, Goodenough regarded it as an excellent example of the period's symbolic lingua franca. (11) Underlying the various dolphin legends is the symbolism of the saviour-god as psychopomp, carrying souls to immortality — an idea borne out by the frequent use of the dolphin on Jewish and Christian graves. (8).

The Balkans: Lepenski Vir



Figure 4. A fish-shaped ritual pit at Lepenski Vir, Serbia, with fin-like projections attached to the pit's boundary. Source: (13).

Evidence for the present hypothesis is also available from the Balkans, at the Lepenski Vir excavation site in Serbia (Figure 4). (14) Ahlgren drew the author's attention to the similarity of cultural ideas between the Lepenski Vir culture and the Indus Civilisation, and the author gratefully acknowledges her observation of fish symbolism in the Lepenski Vir culture. Figure 4 shows fin-like projections attached to the boundary of a pit. It is proposed here that the pit was used for cremating the dead, and that the ritual indicates that, after the death ritual, the deceased's soul is reborn as a fish and lives in the river, or as a fish in the sky (star) in heaven among the heavenly gods.

The remains at Lepenski Vir lie on the banks of the Danube. The excavator, Dragoslav Srejović, who excavated the site in 1965–70, identified the structure as a residential house; this interpretation is questioned here. Instead, the structure suggests a funeral took place there and, most likely, that the site served the culture as a crematorium. Srejović's team found a single skeleton at the site and concluded that the individual must have been an important figure and was therefore buried within the residential area; that inference is not considered compelling here.

The funeral pit itself displays a well-made platform of lime concrete dated to around 6000 BC. (15) Hitchcock observes that the site was probably not occupied during the Danube's flood season — June, July and August. It is difficult to reconcile abandoning well-built residences for an entire season with the quality of construction attested at the site: the lime-mortar platform indicates high-quality construction and considerable technological advancement, and it is hard to see why such an advanced culture would build in a flood-prone location. Hitchcock further notes that the roofing of these huts was very flimsy and could not have withstood severe weather. It is argued here that a community possessing lime-concrete technology would not have relied on flimsy roofing for permanent dwellings, and that the structure in Figure 4 is therefore best understood as temporary in character and most probably ritual in purpose — specifically, the cremation of the dead and associated rites.

Researchers have identified seven successive settlements at Lepenski Vir, with remains of 136 residential and sacral buildings dating from 9500/7200 BC to 6000 BC. (15). Each house interior includes a fireplace in the form of an elongated rectangle placed along the long axis of the floor plan; these fireplaces were constructed from massive rectangular stone blocks and extend rearwards to form a small shrine at the back of the house. These shrines were consistently decorated with fish-motif sculptures carved from massive round river stones, which may represent river gods or ancestors. (16).



Figure 5. The 'fish-man' sculpture from the front of the sanctuary in house XLIV (Lepenski Vir II). Source: after Srejšović (1972), reproduced by (15).

Figure 5 shows large stones carved into fish-like forms, one of which bears a human face. Srejšović, the excavator, concluded that the sculpture may indicate a 'fish god'. One might argue that the Lepenski Vir people depended on large Danube fish for food and therefore naturally venerated the fish as a deity. An alternative reading is preferred here: consistent with the interpretation of the Indus fish sign proposed above, the fish sculpture arguably indicates the soul of a dead person. To attribute a divine meaning would render the Indus inscriptions more, not less, obscure, whereas assigning the meaning 'soul of a dead person' (pitṛ, 'manes') yields a more economical explanation.

Recent genetic analysis bears on the interpretation of the Lepenski Vir buildings. Aegean farmers are understood to have founded the settlement and occasionally to have intermingled with local hunter-gatherers while maintaining separate burials; genomes released by Žegarac and colleagues include that of an infant boy of fully Aegean ancestry from the final phase of occupation, supporting the presence of entire immigrant families at the site. (17). The discovery of mixed-ancestry neonates beneath house floors points to complex interactions during the transitional phase, and additional kinship and identity-by-descent analyses offer further insight into early farmer–forager admixture. (18). Genetic results showed that two neonates had both Aegean/Anatolian and Iron Gates hunter-gatherer ancestry, and that admixed individuals were also present within the buildings. In contrast, individuals found in a pit had entirely Aegean/Anatolian ancestry. In the absence of detectable biological relatedness, it has been hypothesised that the houses did not function as residences—one possibility being that they served the community as places for giving birth or for social and ritual activities, as supported by symbolic artefacts and artworks found above the floors. The results indicate strong social relationships in the Danube Gorges, which would have facilitated socio-cultural interactions and biological admixture, benefiting both early farmers and local foragers and gradually producing social and demographic change. (17).

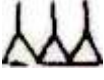
Žegarac et al. (2025) suggest that the houses may have been used for giving birth; this interpretation is questioned here. The burial of neonates beneath the huts suggests that the structures were, at least in part, burial places. It remains common practice in South Asia to bury infants while cremating adults, and a

parallel practice appears to be attested in the Lepenski Vir huts. On this reading, the fish stones probably served as memorial stones for dead ancestors. People from the Aegean and Anatolia migrated into the Lepenski Vir area in antiquity, and these Anatolian populations may have brought the idea of the fish as a dead ancestor to the Indus Valley civilisation.



Figure 6. An Indus seal showing what is interpreted here as a śmaśāna-cayana ('ritual fish-pit'), with the accompanying inscription. Source: (5)

Figure 6 shows a seal on which a feature interpreted here as a śmaśāna-cayana pit — comparable to the ritual fish-pit of Lepenski Vir — appears. The inscription begins with the yajña ritual-pit symbol, indicating that a Vedic burial ritual was performed for the deceased. In this view, priests from the Balkan region (or the Anatolian region) probably introduced the 'fish altar' symbol, which continued to appear in Indus inscriptions. However, several symbols were modified to reflect new religious ideas. Such changes illustrate the evolutionary trajectory of Indus inscriptions, which were used over many millennia with gradual modification. The proposed readings of the component signs are as follows:

	Fish-shaped ritual pit similar to the Lepenski ritual pit
	The twisted-bird symbol indicates the idea of 'fear' or the symbol of a piṭṛ hanging like a bat in Yamaloka. (19)
	The stick-and-shield symbol indicates the gatekeeper god. (20)
	The three-mountain symbol indicates the mountain-top netherworld called Kur in Sumerian. (21)
	The Kavu symbol indicates the word sacrifice. (22)

The inscription may then be read, from left to right, as follows: a śmaśāna-cayana ritual was conducted for a dead person to appease a feared deity — either Varuṇa or a gatekeeper god; the soul was in transition in the netherworld under Varuṇa's judgment; and a sacrifice was carried out to appease the gatekeeper of the netherworld. The fish-pit idea would thus link the concept directly to Balkan (Lepenski Vir) tradition, while the notion of the soul as a fish may have come from Anatolia. These readings offer a coherent rendering of the seal.

The soul in the netherworld

Sumerian and Near Eastern conceptions

In Sumerian belief, the dead live in darkness, eat clay and are clothed like winged birds. (23). The Greeks and Celts similarly held that the dead could reappear as birds, and Sumerians in the ancient Near East believed the dead existed as birds in the underworld; in Islamic tradition, all souls of the dead remain as birds until the Day of Judgment. (24). Many myths link birds to the journeys human souls take after death, and a bird sometimes guides souls in the afterlife; in Syria, eagle figures on tombs represented guides leading souls to heaven.



Figure 7. A funerary scene showing birds travelling by boat across the infernal river, on an Indus seal. Picture Source: (5)

The Indus conception of the soul becoming a bird broadly conforms to Sumerian belief. The middle scene of the seal referred to above reflects this idea, with the dead transformed into birds travelling by boat through the underground river of the netherworld. In this seal both a bird and a fish are depicted; most probably, the bird represents a senior pitr guiding the junior soul (Parvan) in the form of a fish, while the third scene depicts a crocodile eating a fish — the fish representing the dead man's soul consumed by the crocodile, signifying everlasting punishment in hell by the crocodile as the Egyptian goddess Ammit. (6)

The Egyptian conception of the soul

The preceding sections have reviewed various deities that might be linked to the fish symbol of the Indus Civilisation; none fits the Indus evidence well. The most plausible explanation remains that expressed by Hooke S.H.(8) The sacred fish replaces the customary ka-bird symbol, indicating the hope of immortality. A comparable replacement appears to have taken place in the Indus Civilisation, where the fish symbol in inscriptions effectively replaced the bird symbol. The bird symbol appears on few seals and disappears over time, whereas the fish symbol is used prolifically across many seals. In Egyptian belief, the soul consisted of five components, of which the 'Ka' and 'Ba' are the two most critical. (25) (26).

Ba (personality). The Ba was everything that made an individual unique — analogous to the concept of 'personality' — and, in this sense, inanimate objects could also have a Ba; Old Kingdom pyramids were

often called the Ba of their owner. The Ba was the aspect of a person believed to survive the body's death, and it is sometimes depicted as a human-headed bird flying out of the tomb to join the Ka in the afterlife. In the Coffin Texts, one post-mortem form of the Ba is corporeal and engages in activities such as eating, drinking and copulating; Louis Žabkar argued that the Ba is not part of the person but is the person himself. In another mode of existence, the Book of the Dead depicts the Ba of the deceased going out by day and returning to the mummy at night, participating in life outside the tomb in non-corporeal form during its sojourn. (25) (26).

Ka (vital spark). The Ka was the Egyptian concept of vital essence, distinguishing the living from the dead; death occurred when the Ka left the body. The Egyptians believed that Khnum created children's bodies on a potter's wheel, and that Heket created each person's Ka, breathing it into them at birth as the aspect of the soul that made them alive — an idea resembling the concept of spirit in other religions. Notably, the same 'upraised hand' symbol appears to have been used with the same meaning and the same sound, [ka], in the Indus script (22) indicating Egyptian hieroglyphic influence on the Indus script (27). The Egyptians also believed the Ka was sustained through food and drink, so they presented offerings to the dead, although it was the ka within the offerings that was consumed rather than the physical substance. Egyptian iconography often represented the Ka as a second image of the pharaoh, leading earlier scholarship to translate Ka as the double of the dead ruler.



Figure 8. An Indus seal showing a ceremony associated with the bird, with fish and birds bracketed together. Source: (5)

Figure 8 shows a ceremony associated with the bird. One significant feature is that fish and birds are bracketed together in the same inscription, suggesting that the two symbols convey the same meaning. It may be concluded that both symbols could indicate the release of a dead man's soul as a bird or a fish. The proposed readings of the seal's component signs are as follows:

	a bird symbol indicating a dead ancestor (pitṛ)
	a grouping of bird and fish bracketed together, indicating that both denote the same thing — a dead man's soul
	quotation marks indicating the word yajña (28) (29)
	a fish with a cross mark indicating a second-generation pitṛ; or may be first generation pitṛ
	A crab symbol indicating the Karkida-month Kavu ritual (30)

	The Kavu symbol indicating the word 'sacrifice' (30).
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Figure 9. An Indus seal interpreted as an Agnicayana ceremony. Source: (31).

These rituals aim to liberate the soul from the dead body and deliver it to heaven, an idea closely analogous to the Egyptian concepts of Ba and Ka. The bird symbol likewise indicates the Ba, while the Ka (bird) has effectively been replaced by the fish symbol, as in Egypt. The idea conveyed by the fish symbol is highly intangible, which is a principal reason for the considerable difficulty of deciphering the Indus inscriptions. In this reading, the fish symbol indicates a part of a deceased person's soul, or the rebirth of a person as a fish in another realm—heaven.

Figure 9 shows a seal whose signs may be read as indicating an Agnicayana ritual:

	Read from left to right.
	A compound symbol appearing as though fish and bird signs were merged, indicating the Agnicayana ritual (29)
	A symbol indicating the god Karkida Sastha identified with Rudra (30)
	A symbol indicating the yajna (28)
	A wheel symbol further specifying the type of yajna as garhapatya (28).

The seal inscription may then be read as recording an Agnicayana ritual performed to please the god Rudra, the sacrifice being a garhapatya (householder) ritual rather than a public one.

Ichthys and the fertility aspect

Ichthys was the offspring of the ancient sea goddess Atargatis and was known in various mythic systems as Aphrodite, Pelagia or Delphine. In some tongues, the word also meant 'womb' and 'dolphin,' and these representations appeared in mermaid depictions. The fish is also central in other stories, including that of the goddess of Ephesus, who wears a fish amulet covering her genital region. In contrast, the tale of the fish that swallowed the penis of Osiris was considered a symbol of Isis's vulva. (32). In mythology, fish have been associated with the reproductive spirit and are often linked to concepts such as reincarnation and the life force. Frazer, in Adonis, Attis, Osiris, noted that among one group in India the fish was believed to house a departed soul, and that as part of a fertility ritual a specific fish was eaten in the belief that it would be reincarnated in a newborn child. (33).

Before Christianity, the fish symbol was known as 'the Great Mother', a pointed oval sign called the vesica piscis or 'vessel of the fish'. In ancient Greek, the terms 'fish' and 'womb' were synonymous, as seen in Delphos, and the Celts and pagan cultures throughout northern Europe acknowledged the link to fertility, birth, feminine sexuality, and women's natural force. Gadon traces a 'cult of the Fish Mother' back to the hunter-gatherer peoples of the Danube Basin in the sixth millennium BC. (34) Over fifty shrines in this region depict a fish-like deity, a female creature who 'incorporates aspects of an egg, a fish and a woman which could have been a primaeval creator or a mythical ancestress', portrayed with pendulous breasts, accentuated buttocks and a conspicuous vaginal orifice. (33).

The fish symbol is thus an ancient representation of female anatomy and reproductive potency, a sign of the Great Mother. In her e-book *Symbology in Indus Seals*, (35) presents the same idea and concludes that the fish symbol indicates a god. That conclusion is not accepted here. The fish symbols probably represented the souls of dead persons who had reached the realm of the dead and lived with the god Varuṇa in his court. It is a common belief among Hindus that a dead person goes either to heaven (sky) or to hell (underworld) according to their karma, and ancient priests made extraordinary efforts to send the soul to heaven. This idea is deeply ingrained in the Indian mind; the relevant literature is reproduced here for ease of reference. Cumont states that primitive peoples regarded the spirit of the dead as departing to inhabit the stars, and that in the Homeric age and in popular belief the abode of souls was neither the tomb nor the netherworld of Pluto but the upper zone of the universe, some peoples regarding the soul as the companion of the stars. (36)

The three generations of piṭṛ



Figure 10. An Indus seal bearing one of the longest recorded seal inscriptions, with three distinct fish signs on its first line. Source: (5).

Figure 10 shows three different kinds of fish on the first line of the inscription. These are interpreted here as indicating the three generations of piṭṛ that Hindus still worship today, piṭṛ meaning dead forefathers:

	The fish with a chevron cap may indicate the third generation of piṭṛ, which has reached heaven — the chevron symbol indicating 'sky' and hence 'heaven'
	The fish with two horn projections may indicate the second generation of piṭṛ, which is in Yamaloka under Yama's custody and has not yet washed off its sins to reach heaven.

	a further variation of the second-generation piṭṛ;
	another variation of the second-generation piṭṛ;
	The fish without appendages may be the first-generation piṭṛ, the parvan of the recently dead person, who had to undergo various trials and tribulations to reach the god in heaven.

These three variants of the fish symbol (piṭṛ) should be treated in the same way and read as 'piṭṛ' when the symbols appear in combination.

 	Read this symbol pair as Pithru karma.
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Where the sequence is read as piṭṛ-karma, the frequency of this symbol combination rises; its total frequency stands at 75, a figure of some significance given the sample size under consideration. (1).

Conclusion

In this view, the fish symbol indicates the soul of a dead person, or a person's rebirth as a fish in another realm. The correlation between the fish symbol and the departed soul is not intuitively obvious, which is a principal reason for the considerable difficulty of deciphering Indus inscriptions. The hypothesis gains support from the funerary fish iconography of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria and the Greek world, from the fish-shaped ritual features and fish sculptures of Lepenski Vir, and from the internal structure of the Indus sign corpus, in which the fish sign and its variants are disproportionately frequent and are frequently associated with aquatic and ancestral imagery. Reading the sign as piṭṛ, identifying the enclosing water symbol with the realm of Varuṇa, and reinterpreting the Lepenski Vir structures as funerary ritual pits rather than residential houses explains the meaning behind fish symbolism.

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