



©2019 Rajshree

raghyee@gmail.com

Reading the Indus Script

Abstract: This paper describes a systematic method to understand and read the Indus script. I tabulated some symbols and seals to explain the method.

Introduction:

Migratory words travel together with the technology, culture and beliefs. Indus traders had a long history of trade with Sumer and Crete by land and sea routes. They exported beads, crafts, cotton, salt, agriculture, and forest produce. Harappan civilization, during its heydays, was spread from west to east Iran to Delhi and from north to south Afghanistan to the Narmada. This is how words are preserved in Malva and Nimad and the business and craft communities. It looks like once a Tibeto-Burman family language prevailed in the Indus area because when I compared the Karen language from Myanmar - a language isolate which is kept in the Tibeto-Burman family, I found striking similarities with regional dialects of Malva and Nimar.

After initial comparison, I compared the Karen language with Sumerian. As a structure, also Sumerian and Karen have common features: Monosyllabic, couplets, reduplications, numerical classifiers, numbers.

Understanding the Nature of Indus Script

In the cuneiform homonyms are written with a change of direction. It is possible to do same thing with various Indus signs.

GE = stylus cuneus; (piece of) writing, copy, exemplar, written; blow; wound [All called 'ge' but then 12100 reed (stylus) is also 'ge']

[1230B](#)  ge₁₄

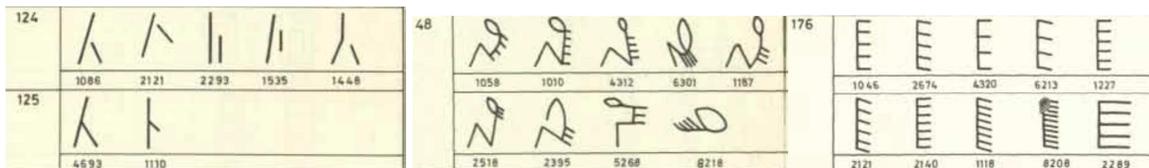
[12038](#)  ge₁₅

[12079](#)  ge₃

[1203A](#)  ge₂₂

[12039](#)  ge₂₃

Indus signs: ex.



the Gunu sign:

gùnu, gùn

n., dot, spot (circle + discrete point; cf., ugun) [GUN3 archaic frequency: 23; concatenation of 2 sign variants].

v., to decorate with colors, lines, spots; to sparkle; to put on antimony paste makeup.

adj., dappled; striped; speckled, spotted; spangled; variegated, multicolored; embellished, decorated; brilliant.

12108  **GIR**₂, giš, gír [198x] = knife, dagger, razor, sword | ul₄.gal = sword

12109  ~ gunu | ul₄ [39x] = to hasten, (be) quick; (to be) early | ul₄ [12x] = terror |

át=GÍRgunû [syll.]

knife : the gir sign with gunu=terror

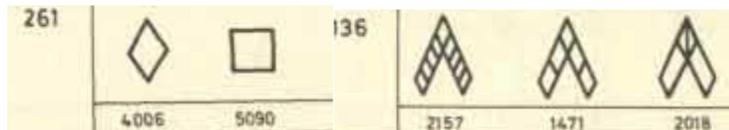
conclusion: the quality- gun of the knife is to cut, to terrorize, anger etc., so gun sign represent the inherent quality of the sign.

While Gunu means the inherent quality of the thing like stone is heavy so showing heaviness. The sun and moon are bright, white, yellow so showing expressing brightness and whiteness and yellowness. In the Indus script same concept applies.

Sanskrit: gun : गुणः virtue, merit, excellence, quality, peculiarity, attribute, property. *Guṇa* is declared to be derived from another root *Gaṇa* which means "to count, enumerate"

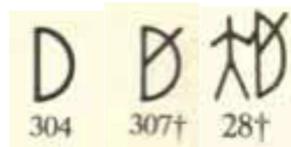
A gun sign could be a just a stroke that indicate the symbols status in the script or while reading.

ex:





Detrminative to use phonetic value, not the face value: like Chinese when some word has only a phonetic value not any meaning they are underlined.



kali vs t^h kali vs pgh+t^hkali

kali: boat, seed, bow

Reduplication to describe universality and plural:

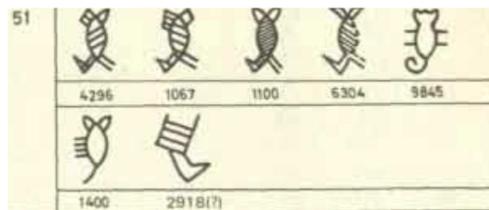
ex:



sp skh, bl ka pasun v r (united)

Combination of signs

To show an idea or combination of consonants:



Number of consonants and vowels

At the initial stage, I am assuming twenty consonants and four vowels. It was a language with tone or accent but it's difficult to estimate how many tones were there.

b, d, g, gh, h, k, kh, l, m, n, p, pha, r, s, s^h, t, t^h, th, y, ny

a, e, i, o or u

Total number of symbols vary from different scholars' point of view, but at least some eighty symbols would be consonant + vowel symbols. Some symbols are composite, ideogram, and also homonyms.

Orthography

The Indus script has a curious combination of cuneiform and hieroglyphs, which is not surprising, because there was a presence of an African element. The fully developed writing system employs logograms (word signs), syllabic signs (sound values derived from word signs), and determinatives (unpronounced logograms which help the reader choose from among the different logographic values of polyvalent signs) to reproduce the spoken language.

Logograms: Many logograms are written with a single sign, for example a 'arrow'. Other logograms are written with two or more signs representing ideas added together to express a new idea, resulting in a compound sign, which has a pronunciation different from that of any of its parts.

Rebus writing: where the sign for an object which could easily be drawn was used to write a homophonous word which could not so easily be depicted, especially an abstract idea.

For example, the picture of a fish, pronounced /pal/, became also the standard sign for the verb pal 'to remit'.

Determinatives and numerical classifiers: Determinatives are logograms which may appear before or after words which categorize the latter in a variety of ways. A determinative is one of a limited number of signs which, when placed before or after a sign or group of signs, indicates that the determined object belongs to a particular semantic category, e.g. wooden, reed, copper or bronze objects, or persons, deities, places, etc.

Reading Indus Script:

In summary, any particular Indus sign may have three kinds of uses:

1. It will usually have more than one logographic values, each with a different pronunciation based on the tone. A single value may itself have more than one meaning.
2. One of the logographic values of a sign may function as a determinative.
3. One or more of the logographic values may function as a syllabic sign. For example, the sign the hand sign can represent:-the logogram an in the meaning 'give, take, wage'. The most important was the principle of polyvalency, the association of semantically related "many values" with a particular sign, each with its own separate pronunciation. That was depended on the context. (tone)

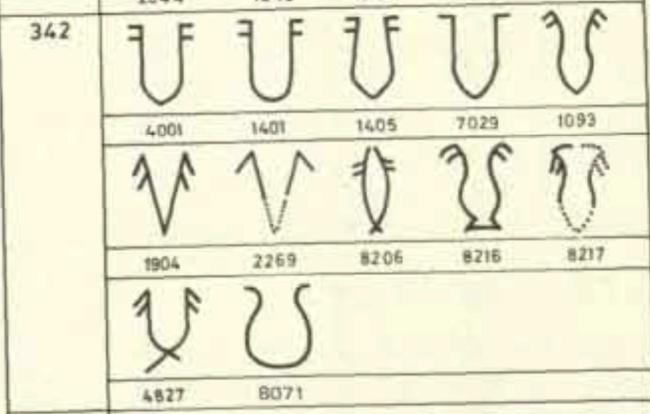
Method

Assigning value to pictographic simple signs:

The jar sign was the first, where I applied a phonetic value without vowel, because it had same word in Karen as in many dialects as well in Sanskrit. Then I found several words relating through rebus and vowel

Note: All symbols and numbers are taken from : The Indus Script: Text, Concordance, and Table: Dr. Iravathan Mahadevan

Table:1

Jar	Value
	<p>Basically, it is a pot, jar whater but with the ‘gun sign’ and from a reduplicate class: sora sora, sr sr, gr gr saru+r= pot+rekh(line)= entry, Current words: sora: collect, collected, noted etc. sa: main, chief. thara: decide, decided, determinative. rakam: money, rukka: receipt, note, roka: stop, likh: write, kharra: letter, rekha: line, rakh: keep, kept chhoda: release agar: a storehouse chitar</p>
<p>jar : sr, tr, thr, gr r : write, scratch, Associate with other roots a writer; thr, gr, tr: scratcher, writer gv, gvli: write, enter, make marks th:skilled in craft</p>	
<p>Sumerian ex.</p>	
<p>dub-sar</p>	

<p>scribe ('tablet' + 'to <i>write</i>').</p> <p>ġadub</p> <p>tablet container (ġar;ġá, 'to store', + dub, 'clay tablets'; cf, lúša13[ĠÁ]-dub-ba).</p> <p>sar, šar</p> <p>v., to insert, enter; to begin; to <i>write</i>; to pay, deliver punctually;</p> <p>adj., driven out, pursued.</p>	<p>chitra</p>
--	---------------

Then couple of other symbols like fish:ny, arrow: pal (pv, b), human: p,gh, and I felt comfortable enough to figure out meanings on some seals.

Table:2

Sign	Value
 <p>342† sf:1395</p>	<p>various pot, jar, containers</p> <p>go, garu, saru, tharu</p> <p>value: sr,gr,thr,</p>
 <p>59†</p> <p>face value: fish</p>	<p>ny: to see, to have, consist</p> <p>Value: ny</p>
	<p>t^h</p>

 86† sf:149	one
 87† sf:365  99 sf:649	ki, ka preposion, two, kiwad: door, kinara: river bank, eki, beki: a game of odd and even
 102† sf:151	th 1. The numeral three; a particle second personal pronoun, plural number teen: three. tha: second personal, the: plural
 211 227 face value an arrow, a triangle on a stick , a triangle+ determinative, A light rays	pl: arrow, permit, bl: spade, scrifice, force bn: arrow, bl: spade, ahu: light rays various values: (*bn,pn, pl) triangle+determinative nt, tn current words: bola: speak, bol: say, remind pl: permit panna o: make clear

	<p>nipatana: make clear</p> <p>An act: kiya</p> <p>kar, karo: do</p> <p>nakki, ahu, ahe: direct question, force, of introgation. Yes, permission, afirmation</p> <p>nat, tan: deny, not any, none</p>
--	---

Table:3 Some ex:

 25 person with stick+ mat	<p>gn(count measure)+kho</p> <p>gnkho (gankho)</p> <p>measure the land for the tax</p> <p>a landlord who eats on the land or a land overseer</p>
 58 four stick+neck lavi +go four stick+ a basket lavi+pu	<p>lavigu(go) (lego?)</p> <p>question? Will you take?</p> <p>pulavi?</p> <p>get the thing.</p>
 76 hand+fish de+ ny su+ny	<p>su+ny, de+ny</p> <p>den, dena : possess, given, for that</p>
 2368	<p>tha</p>

<p>three stick+pot+load carried</p> <p>number three+ ideogram (a jar +load)</p>	<p>jar+person with load</p> <p>tha+sr+ kav</p> <p>thisra load (ordinal number)</p> <p>varbal: tha: act</p> <p>load carried or load carrier</p> <p>kahar, kavad, koli</p> <p>loading charges on the party</p> <p>decide</p> <p>fig: tha ko li: your words, your turn, oath</p> <p>third time, said three times *significance of three</p>
<p>↑ ♀ † 3103</p>	<p>*de (su), ny, (*bn,pn, pl)</p> <p>make a payment, payment clear</p> <p>su ny (pn,bn, pl)</p> <p>*sunny= not any</p> <p>*reading the hand sign and arrow according to the context: various values</p>

Table:4: A name



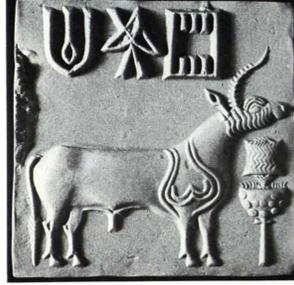
image courtesy: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions: Three Volumes	
1 g+y	2
gy, yg sy=joined	gr sr thr or sa, ga,
possibal name: (gy,sy,yg) (sa, ga,thr)	or profession: worker: for domestic animals.
Very common names: gythr, gysr, etc	

Table:5: A place, a meal ticket

		
image courtesy: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions: Three Volumes		
1: a triangle+hold an ideogram	1: ni+da, da+ni, di+n meal+ to give	day, An da
2: ki	day,	annada: meal giver
3: a foot? steps?	2: ki	meal ticket:
pha+paw	3: k, ph	dani ki kha din ki bandi bhandara
	*ninda	langar

	<p>bread; bakery good; food (níġ, 'valuables', + dar, 'to slice') [GAR archaic frequency: 409]. ba-an a measure for bread and flour.</p>	<p>pangt dihadi bandua पीठ पेढी सीढी कोठी जगह तय निर्णय निपटारा भुगतान, मजदूरी दिहाडी बंदी बंधक रेहन fig: sal ki girvi: pawn for a year work for food plde ki pedi: the auction, food, meal house, query</p>
--	--	--

Table:6: A designation



8a M-8 1038 VS 2040 NMI 78

image courtesy: Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions: Three Volumes

*Seal from VS area

<p>1:baw 2:(pu, bu, kali, ke) 3: s^h</p>	<p>1:baw+ 2:(pu, bu, kali, ke)+3: s^h bapusa: the head of a clan</p>	<p>pujay: respected pushy: a nakshtra pushan: the sun(flower shiny) pu ru sh (in Sanskrit the 'r' stopper) pujari: a preist</p>
--	---	---

Note the difference between two unicorns one with a headband and other with a kind of spoon with their respective as a horn and a twig. Seal 8a is from the VS area and I believe that that place should be search more.

Ref:

1. The Indus Script: Text, Concordance, and Table: Dr. Iravathan Mahadevan
2. Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions: Three Volumes
3. A dictionary of the Sagu Karen language Compiled by Rev. J. Wade. D.D.
4. A Grammar of the Sgaw Karen by Rev. David Gilmore M.A.
5. Synopsis of a Grammar of the Karen Language by F. Mason
6. Introduction to Sumerian Grammar by Daniel A Foxvog
7. <http://www.drumpublications.org/>
8. <http://sumer.grazhdani.eu/index.php>
9. <http://mugsarsumerian.com/default.htm>
10. <http://home.zcu.cz/~ksaskova/CuneiformSignList.pdf>
11. [Wikipedia](#)
- 12.