

AN INDUS-SARASVATĪ SIGNBOARD

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ABSTRACT: We present the text of a large wooden signboard in the Indus-Sarasvatī that was recently found in Dholavira in Gujarat, India. The study of this signboard could be useful in the further analysis of the Indus-Sarasvatī script. We examine its implications for the direction of writing in this script.

KEYWORDS: Indus script, Indus-Sarasvatī script, Harappan civilization, writing systems, Sarasvatī script.

INTRODUCTION

Excavations by R.S. Bisht [11] at the third millennium B.C. city of Dholavira ($23^{\circ} 53' 10''$ N and $70^{\circ} 13' E$) have recently led to the significant find of a large wooden signboard in the Indus-Sarasvatī script. It is the first time that such large lettering in this script has been encountered. S.R. Rao has suggested that this signboard might represent the name and title of the king of the city. Figure 1 presents a reconstruction of the signboard text. For a photograph of the signboard see plate LIV-C in S.R. Rao's book [11].

The letters of the signboard are comparable in size to the large bricks that were used in the wall near which the signboard was found. Each sign is about 37 cms high and the board on which the letters were inscribed appears to have been about 3 meters long. The signs are inscribed using white inlay faience material. The signboard was found close to one of the gates of the large citadel and when mounted on the gate it must have commanded the view of a large part of the ancient city. Dholavira is located in Gujarat, India, in a region where many other Harappan sites are located. Apart from

the signboard, 15 seals and 14 sealings in the usual design have been found there.

The text is being presented here so that the larger cryptologic community may analyze it. Owing to its unique nature, this text is likely to prove very important in further decipherment of the Indus-Sarasvatī script.

Since the publication of the earlier analysis of this script in the pages of this journal [2,4] (see also [3,5,8]), important new synthesis of the recent archaeological evidence related to this region has appeared [1,10-13]. Furthermore, new discoveries have been made regarding astronomical knowledge of the third and second millennia B.C. [6,7], which make it possible to begin correlating India's ancient literature with the Indus-Sarasvatī sites. A summary of these findings is presented in the next section where we also explain the rationale behind using the term Indus-Sarasvatī rather than the earlier Indus. This material defines a context in which the signboard text should be examined.

Figure 1: The signboard text

THE INDUS-SARASVATĪ TRADITION

New research at Mehrgarh at other places has taken the antecedents of the Indus civilization back to about 7000 B.C. [1,10-13]. It has now been found that most of the Indus civilization settlements were on the Sarasvatī river. According to Misra [10], nearly two-thirds of all the sites have been found along the Sarasvatī river, and the majority of the remaining sites are in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, south and east of Sarasvatī. The number of sites along the Indus river is just about 5 percent of the total classified so far. This fundamental finding has led to the renaming of the civilization as the Indus-Sarasvatī civilization [1, 7] and the renaming of the script as the Indus-Sarasvatī script or more simply just the Sarasvatī script [7]. The drying up of the Sarasvatī river around 1900 B.C. is now believed to have been a major factor in the collapse of the urban phase of this tradition.

The early Vedic texts recognize the Sarasvatī river to be the mightiest

river of India. If it is accepted that this river dried up around 1900 B.C., it forces an assignment of the beginnings of such texts to an earlier epoch. Clearly, this is of the utmost significance in the analysis of the third millennium writing from India. It becomes possible now to seek references in the Vedic texts regarding the cities and settlements that archaeological digs have provided.

The discovery of the astronomical organization of the Vedic books [6,7] provides new support for the astronomical references in the Vedic literature. These references also indicate epochs that go back to the third millennium B.C. and earlier.

THE SIGNBOARD TEXT

The text has several noteworthy features. The most significant is that all the asymmetric symbols (the third, the sixth, and the last, counting from the left) are drawn opposite to the manner in which they should have been shown, if the right to left reading of the texts that has generally been assumed were to be correct. These symbols are listed as numbers 327, 124, and 53 in pages 785-792 of the Mahadevan Concordance [9]. This suggests that the signboard text reading is opposite, in direction, to the reading of the texts on the seals.

This could either be the error of the carpenter/lapidary who made the signboard, or reflect that the asymmetric signs were not standardized; or it could mean that the signboard is to be read from left to right. Given the prominence of the text, and the precision with which the signs have been made, the first two possibilities appear unlikely and the signboard should be read from left to right.

Owing to the considerable uniformity in the civilization of the Indic world at this time, the hypotheses that two writing styles were current in India itself, one in the North and the other in Gujarat in the South—or that a change in the writing direction took place in India in late third millennium B.C.—appear to be unlikely but cannot be totally rejected. We propose a modification of the hypothesis that there were two styles of writing in the Sarasvatī script. The usual writing was from left to right as on the signboard, but for trade purposes, in seals whose imprints could go out of India, the writing was right to left to be in consonance with the writing style current in Sumer and Akkadia. Perhaps because of this dual requirement, the boustrophedon style was also sometimes used. Mahadevan [9, page 11]

points out that in other texts as well many cases of writing from left to right are encountered. In Mahadevan's data, the number of texts with right to left writing was about 83 percent as against about 7 percent of left to right writing; the remainder were either single signs or doubtful cases.

In our view, the signboard text is of particular significance because it represented the normal writing style for the local population. The seals and other inscribed objects were meant to have currency outside of the Indus-Sarasvatī region where the reading style was different, and so these objects are not to be taken to represent the normative 'local' style.

Our proposal implies that there was no shift in the direction of writing in the evolution of the script from Sarasvatī to Brāhmī.

The spoked wheel sign (Number 391 of the Mahadevan Concordance) is often an initial sign in Sarasvatī texts. S. Kalyanaraman has, in a personal correspondence, suggested that the signboard, therefore, is likely to have three sub-texts (words), each starting with a spoked circle.

It is significant that none of the signs in the signboard belong to the core set that appears to have evolved into Brāhmī [2]. These signs are likely to be logographic.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Subhash Kak has studied the Indus-Sarasvatī script for over a decade. He recently discovered an astronomical basis to the design of the fire altars and the arrangement of the texts of ancient India. He has been a professor at Louisiana State University since 1979.