

Indus-like inscription on South Indian pottery from Thailand

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— PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Figure 1: The pottery inscription from Thailand with Indus-like symbols, probably on south Indian megalithic pottery.

A fragmentary pottery inscription was found during excavations conducted by the Thai Fine Arts at Phu Khao Thong in Thailand about three years ago. (Dr. Berenice Bellina of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France, sent me a photograph of the object: Figure 1)

The discovery of a Tamil-Brahmi pottery inscription of about the second century CE at the same site was reported earlier (The Hindu, July 16, 2006). One can presume that the present inscription is also from the Tamil country and belongs approximately to the same period. The two characters incised on the pottery now reported are not in the Brahmi script. They appear to be graffiti symbols of the type seen on the South Indian megalithic pottery of the Iron Age-Early Historical Period (second century BCE to third century CE).

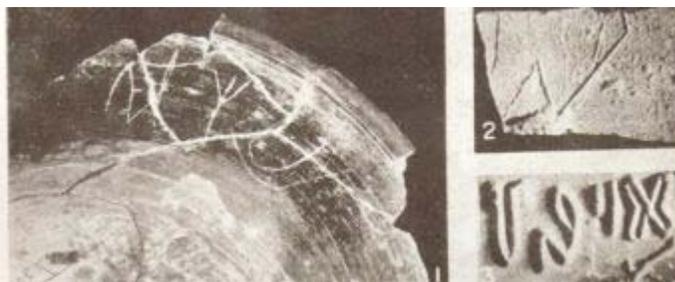


Figure 2: Megalithic symbol at Sanur in Tamil Nadu (left) and signs in the Indus texts at Kalibangan (right, top) and Harappa (bottom).

What makes the discovery exciting is that the two symbols on the pottery resemble the Indus script, and even the sequence of the pair can be found in the Indus texts, especially those from Harappa.

The symbol looking vaguely like an 'N' appears to be the same as the Indus signs 47 or 48 (in Figure 3). Professor B.B. Lal, former Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, showed that these Indus signs have a remarkable resemblance to the megalithic symbol occurring at Sanur, near Tindivanam, and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu (Figure 2). More recently, the same symbol has turned up on two pottery fragments from Pattanam in Kerala (probably the same as Musiri of the Sangam Age). I have compared the symbols with the Indus signs depicting a seated anthropomorphic deity.

The symbol on the Thai pottery resembles a diamond. It occurs in the Indus script in diamond or oval forms (Signs 261 and 373 in Figure 3).

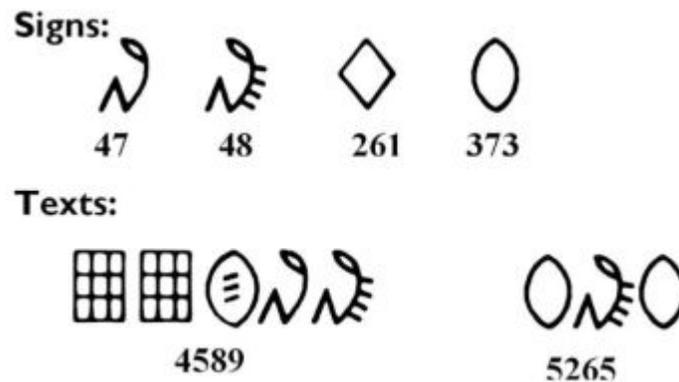


Figure 3: Indus signs and texts. Note the same sequence of two signs on Thai pottery and miniature tablets from Harappa.

What is extraordinary about the present find is the occurrence of the two symbols on the pottery in the same sequence as found in the Indus texts (see for example texts 4589 and 5265 from Harappa, Figure 3). The Thai pottery has only two symbols. Another symbol might have been lost owing to the fragmentary state of the pottery.

Sequences such as this on the Thai pottery and those reported on the inscribed Neolithic stone axe from Sembayan Kandiyur and on megalithic pottery from Sulur (near Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu) provide evidence for the survival of the Indus script in South India during the megalithic age, and for the possibility that the languages of the Indus Civilisation and South India belong to the same family, namely Dravidian.

(The sign and text numbers are cited from *The Indus Script: Texts, Concordance and Tables*, by Iravatham Mahadevan (1977). The author is Honorary Consultant of the Indus Research Centre at Roja Muthiah Research Library in Chennai.)