



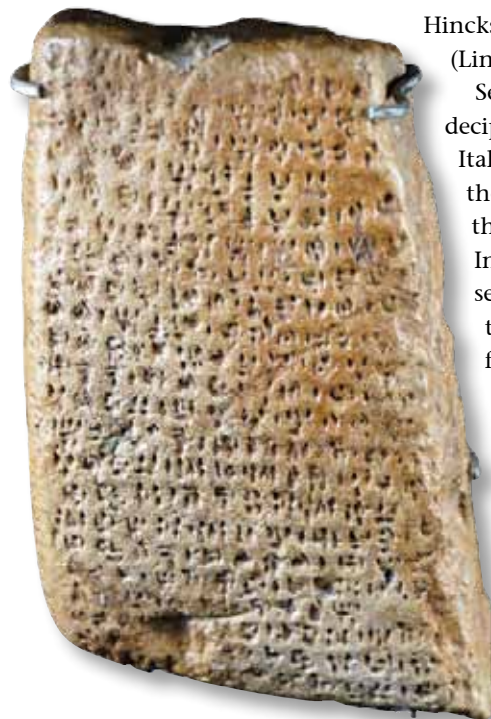
# Deciphering the Roots of the Indus Civilisation

Andrew Robinson pays tribute to Asko Parpola, whose lifelong study of the Indus script has revolutionised our understanding of this ancient civilisation.

**T**he decipherment of ancient scripts makes history. When the Egyptian hieroglyphs started to give up their secrets in the 1820s, with the help of the bilingual Rosetta stone, the historical time span was doubled, from about 600 BC, the date of the earliest Hebrew inscriptions, back to about 3000 BC, the beginning of dynastic rule. Later in the 19th century, the cuneiform scripts of ancient Mesopotamia were deciphered; and scholars were able to read the bureaucratic records and literature of ancient Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria, comparable in age with those of ancient Egypt. In the 1950s, the decipherment of Minoan Linear B gave us Europe's earliest readable script, written in a form of archaic Greek half a millennium older than the poetry of Homer. Soon after this, in the 1970s, the Mayan glyphs of Central America began to speak, proving that the New World had a literate civilisation more than a millennium and a half before the arrival of Christopher

Columbus. Each breakthrough was principally the work of one person – Jean-François Champollion for Egyptian hieroglyphs, Henry Rawlinson for Babylonian cuneiform, Michael Ventris for Linear B, and Yuri Knorozov for Mayan glyphs – although in every case, both the breakthrough and its subsequent confirmation depended on the insights of predecessors and rival decipherers, such as Thomas Young (Egyptian hieroglyphs), Edward Hincks (Babylonian cuneiform), Arthur Evans (Linear B), and Diego de Landa (Mayan glyphs).

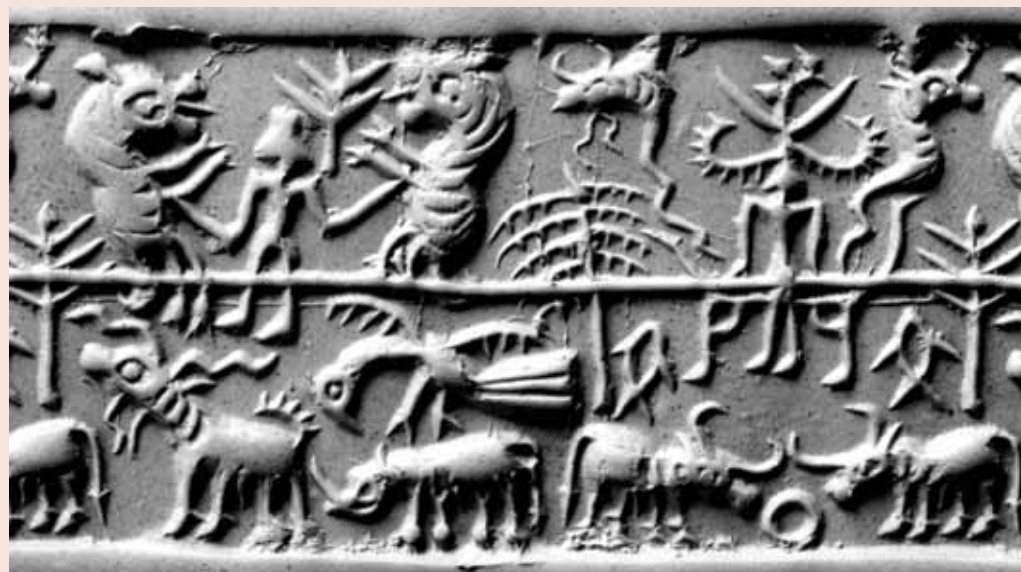
Several significant scripts remain to be deciphered, for example, the Etruscan script of Italy (where the language is unknown) and the *rongorongo* script of Easter Island. By far the most influential and tantalising is the Indus script, most of which is inscribed on seal stones, chiefly made of steatite. This was the writing of the Indus civilisation, which flourished in 2600-1800 BC in the Indus valley and surrounding areas – what is now Pakistan and part of western India – and interacted extensively with Mesopotamia and Central Asia by both sea and land. If the Indus script were to be successfully deciphered, it would surely shed light on the origins of Indian civilisation, in particular its oldest religion, Hinduism: the world's third largest religion, which



**ABOVE** An Indus stamp seal (left), carved from steatite, and its impression (right). It depicts a 'unicorn' standing before a mysterious object, which may be an incense burner, beneath an undeciphered inscription.

**INSET** A Cypro-Minoan tablet with Linear B inscription.

IMAGE: Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons



LEFT Mayan glyphs from Central America began to be read in the 1970s.

ABOVE An impression of a cylinder seal of unknown Near Eastern origin with Indus-style animal and anthropomorphic motifs, demonstrating the Indus civilisation's influence in Mesopotamia.

is currently practised by about a billion Indians. For some of the exquisitely carved motifs on the Indus seal stones and other objects appear to be related to much later Hindu imagery – deities, rituals and symbols – including the frequent use of the swastika, common in both the Indus civilisation and as an auspicious symbol in modern Hindu India.

Thus far, however, no one has been able to follow in the footsteps of Champollion with an Indus decipherment, for lack of sufficient inscriptions and any direct information about the Indus language, such as a bilingual inscription (perhaps written in cuneiform and the Indus script?). Since the Indus civilisation's discovery in the 1920s by British and Indian archaeologists, more than a hundred decipherments have been published. Some have come from respected archaeologists and philologists, including Egyptologist Flinders Petrie, Assyriologist James Kinnier Wilson, and Indus excavators Walter Fairservis and S R Rao; others are the work of amateurs and cranks. There is, however, no consensus on the script's meaning.

## Enduring legacy

Probably the most enduring contribution has come from Sanskritist Asko Parpola, a Finnish philologist now in his seventies based at the University of Helsinki, whose PhD on the early formation of Hinduism in the post-Indus Vedic literature first made him interested in the Indus civilisation, back in the early 1960s. Around the same time, Parpola's reading, and re-reading, of a recently published book, *The Decipherment of Linear B* by classicist John Chadwick, who joined Ventris following his breakthrough, persuaded him to have a go at deciphering the Indus script. Chadwick described some of the statistical detective methods Ventris applied to the puzzling Linear B sign sequences. So, when a childhood friend of Parpola, Seppo Koskenniemi,

who was a scientific adviser to IBM in Finland, offered him the use of a computer, the two friends – together with Parpola's younger brother Simo, an Assyriologist – began to apply the computer to Indus script decipherment, with Seppo looking after the programming. In the second half of the 1960s, Parpola and co-workers started to publish on the subject.

By the 1990s, Parpola had indefatigably compiled high-quality photographs of Indus inscriptions taken in museum collections in India, Pakistan, and elsewhere; categorised and codified the inscriptions by place of origin, motif, and material; and begun to publish them in the three volumes of the *Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions*, with sponsorship from UNESCO. This exceptional labour of love – still not quite complete – was justly described in 2015 by former British Museum curator of Mesopotamian seals, Dominique Collon, as a 'hugely important series'.

Secondly, Parpola had analysed the inscriptions and suggested some tentative decipherments in many academic papers,

and most notably in a massive study, *Deciphering the Indus Script*, published in 1994 by Cambridge University Press. His ideas were a mixture of reasonable speculation tempered with scholarly caution, based on his polyglot command of Indo-European languages, in particular their subgroup, the Indo-Aryan languages (including Sanskrit), as well as the non-Indo-European Dravidian languages of south India (such as Tamil), and also on his personal knowledge of Indian cultures and religions gained through extensive travels in the subcontinent. *Deciphering the Indus Script* was reviewed in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* by Chadwick himself, who welcomed the book in the following words: 'Parpola deserves much >



LEFT The swastika, a common symbol on the sealstones of the Indus civilisation, is an auspicious symbol in modern Hindu India.



**ABOVE** Asko Parpola (on the right) about to toast Viktor Sarianidi (left), excavator of the Oxus Civilisation, at Gonur in 1990.

credit for having pursued this enquiry to the very limits of what is now possible.'

In subsequent works, Parpola – like Ventris with the Minoan scripts – has continued to probe the Indus script and civilisation from every conceivable angle. The preface to his latest book, to be published in September this year, *The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and the Indus Civilization*, notes some of the questions about the Indus civilisation that are still unanswered. 'What language did the Indus people speak? Is it related to the Sanskrit language of north India, to the Dravidian languages of south India, or to another surviving Indian language family? What deities did the Indus civilisation worship? Did these deities survive to become part of the religion described in the earliest surviving Indian literature, the Vedas, composed in Sanskrit, which are generally attributed to the centuries after 1500 BC? Did the Aryan composers of the Vedas migrate to South Asia from outside the subcontinent? If so, where did they come from, and during what period did they migrate? Indeed, are the roots of contemporary Hinduism to be found in the religion of the Indus civilisation as well as in the Vedic religion?'

The main text of the book then offers some answers, drawing on sophisticated linguistic arguments and recent advances in archaeology – not so much in the Indus valley and peninsular India but rather in Mesopotamia, Central Asia, and southern Russia, the supposed origin of Indo-European languages according to many scholars including Parpola. For example, in an area of northern Afghanistan, eastern Turkmenistan, southern Uzbekistan, and western Tajikistan, the impressive Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), also known as the Oxus civilisation – with its main location at Gonur – was discovered in the 1970s and excavated by the Soviet archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi until his death in 2013, shedding light on the Aryan migrations. And on the Iranian plateau, in the neighbourhood of Jiroft in Kerman Province, chance discoveries (followed by looting) of ancient necropolises since 2000 have led to the identification of the Marhashi civilisation, dating from the 3rd millennium BC, which seems to have interacted with the Indus area further east.

*The Roots of Hinduism* is undoubtedly a major contribution – like Parpola's earlier book on deciphering the Indus script – to the understanding of the Indus civilisation, the Aryan migrations

into India, and the development of Hinduism. 'A highly innovative and welcome volume, bringing together the linguistic and archaeological evidence for the cultures that underlie Hinduism,' enthuses Sankritist John Brockington on the book's jacket. 'Asko Parpola is uniquely well qualified to undertake this, through his major research on the Vedas and Vedic ritual, and on the Indus civilisation, combined with an excellent understanding of the archaeological evidence beyond India itself. No one interested in any of these fields can afford to miss it.'

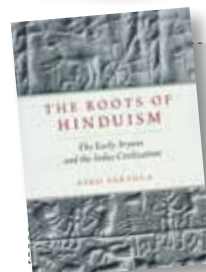
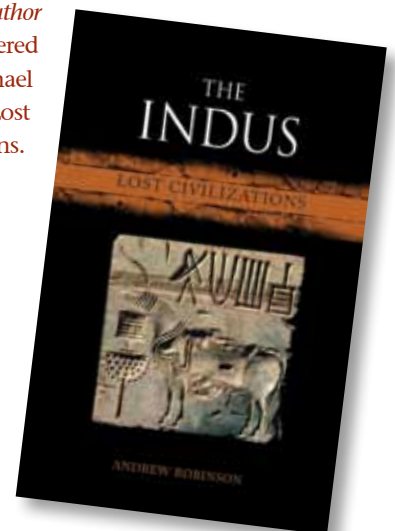
It is likely to be controversial in today's India, whose government is currently controlled by a Hindu nationalist party. Ever since the Indus civilisation's discovery in the 1920s, it has existed in something of a historical limbo, because of the obscurity and debate surrounding its script, language, and religion. Since the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, some Indian scholars have persistently claimed that the language of the Indus script must be Vedic Sanskrit and that the Indus religion must have been a forerunner of Vedic Hinduism; furthermore, they deny the existence of the Aryan migrations into India and insist that Hinduism (both in its Indus and Vedic forms) was an entirely indigenous creation. *The Roots of Hinduism*, for all its evident respect for the religion, will provide such nationalist scholars with little support; indeed, the book argues that the balance of the evidence suggests that the language of the Indus civilisation is almost certainly Dravidian rather than Sanskritic.

As for Parpola himself, like many Sanskritists he is deeply fascinated by the Hindu scriptures, yet does not regard himself as a Hindu. His mother, the daughter of a Lutheran missionary, would often anxiously ask him, as she observed he and his wife Marjatta's frequent research visits to Brahmin priests in India: 'Have you become a Hindu?' Nevertheless, says Parpola, 'I consider Hinduism as perhaps the richest religion in existence. One can hardly imagine any religious practice or theological idea that does not exist in some form of Hinduism, which runs the gamut from the most primitive cults to the most refined thoughts.' ■

*Andrew Robinson is the author of The Man Who Deciphered Linear B: The Story of Michael Ventris and The Indus: Lost Civilizations.*



**LEFT** This Indus statuette was found at Mohenjo-daro in 1927. Carved from steatite, it stands only 17.5cm high. It may depict a 'priest-king', but if so, what was his religion?



**The Roots of Hinduism: The Early Aryans and The Indus Civilization**

**By Asko Parpola**

**OUP, September 2015, £23.11**

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