

**Harappan Imageries and Artistic Liberty:
A Socio-economic Analysis of Power Struggle
Based on the Depictions Represented on
Seals and Sealings**

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Abstract

The imageries represented on the Harappan seals and sealings have long been a part of inconclusive debates and discussions. Each of these artifacts, bearing unusual and unique scenes may independently indicate a narrative in themselves since to associate them in a series, so as to assemble a complete picture is still quite difficult. These visual images, however, having been associated with social, religious and other aspects as singular scenes when speculated upon has till date reached an indecisive verdict. In view of the many possibilities that have already been put forward, this research article tries to delve inside the minds of the Harappan artists to bring into discussion new perspectives in terms of iconography and give it a socio-economic angle, looking beyond their mythological and religious interpretations that may have been exclusive to the Harappan people. It has been indicated in quite a few such depictions on seals and sealings that the Harappan world was somewhat experiencing a society where a kind power-play was being orchestrated by the hands of the elite few, that is, what we understand in modern times as a world consisting of the haves and have-nots, as in, the presence of an oligarchic society in terms of economic activities. This avenue will be the core concern of this paper and to postulate on the matter rather than to justify this notion.

Keywords: *Economic, elite, Harappan, Iconography, oligarchic, Social, Seals, Sealings, zoomorphic*

Introduction

The artistic value of the images on seals and sealings along with the artistic liberty that was permitted to the people, involved in the creation of such scenes, which, are in some cases seemingly explicit and it is with regard to these representations that the oppressive attitude of the select few, over those who are not as privileged are reflected. For this very purpose this paper has taken into account the study of certain seals and sealings that display such ingenuity recovered from various sites.

It is however, a great disadvantage that the Harappan script remains undeciphered and hence, we are left with the zoomorphic imageries on the seals and sealings at our disposal that may help shed

light upon the socio-economic conditions of the Harappan world in terms of the monopoly in the hands of a few authoritative people, over trade and the other financial benefits that they may have reaped by making the majority of the Harappan people obligated to work and function under their banner. The work of the artist and his/her attempts to create a kind of narrative that may reflect on the social structure of the Harappan world at its maturity is what will be discussed here, moving away from religious and mythological perspectives and theories which remain subjected to defiance.

A Study of the Iconography on Harappan Seals Bearing Peculiar Details

The intriguing Harappan seals had become an object of scrutiny with its very first discovery at the site of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro and since then it has been a topic of many debates and innumerable interpretations. The seals and sealings have since then been attached to the notion that it was used in trade related activities due to their discovery at various Harappan trading routes and at the sites like Lothal which has been famously claimed to have been an important trading post. Some of the other imageries have brought to light certain cultic and religious significance as well which have been called as a form of ritualistic practice like the one from Mohenjo-daro where a man is shown seated in front of a tree and from within the tree is seen perhaps an apparition of a human like figure with horns.

For the purpose of the study of these iconographic images as has been mentioned earlier, selected, are a few unique representations on the seals and sealings that will be interpreted and given a new perception to be considered as a possible explanation for the display of such conception. These imageries belong to the period when the Harappan civilization was in its mature phase as has been mentioned earlier.

It is not unknown that the Harappan people had a very well established trade network both inland and also at places as far as Oman, Falaika Islands, and other western civilizations that were it contemporaries. The presence of the seals and sealings at various other Harappan sites and geographically speaking, going as far as its contemporaneous civilizations like Mesopotamia and others have led to the consideration that they were perhaps used as tokens for traders and the like.

Therefore, taking into consideration the last aspect, this research paper speculates further, the theory of the seals and sealings being utilized as tokens or perhaps even symbolizing an emblem that represents a well to do Harappan who was thriving in seafaring activities. Perhaps, there were quite a few people who were monopolizing and keeping a check on the sea routes and making sure their cargoes were bringing in the maximum profits from far off regions. In this context we are taking into consideration some of the seals which may be representing such powerful people or symbolizing their might that they were conveniently exercising over the less privileged members of the Harappan working community, which, has been brought to light by certain artists through their artistic expressions.

The sites of Chanhu-daro, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro confirm to the homogeneity of the seals

speaking along the lines of iconography with the seal recovered from the Perisan Gulf, which is round in shape and a seal from Ras-al-Jinz which is made of copper pointing again to them being an object operating for a certain kind of trading purpose.

It is significant to note that the sites located at the fringes of the Indus region were housing the largest number of sealings which might have been used in trade and commerce. Also, apart from Lothal, there were other sites like Gola-Dhoro/Bagasra, Kalibangan as well as Banawali, which deserve special mention here, were all located in Gujarat, where the sealings that were recovered possibly was being used for economic purpose, that is, as a license to trade.

Apart from the unicorns only four other animals seem to have been depicted on the seals in great numbers, these were bison, goat and tiger. Elephant impressed seal was also recovered from Lothal. The Harappan people thus, who were a genius known for organization and homogenizing the seal and sealings and the imagery on them are now being questioned. It is now being debated that there were variations in certain aspects of the same animal that was being represented on the seals and perhaps each of these differences had a specific message to convey.

Seals and Sealings: A General Description

The fact that these seals have no chronological order is one of the major concern apart from the fact that during the first stages of documentation right after the discovery of the two major classical Harappan sites, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro (classical because the two places possess the most basic and typical features in terms of the town planning as well as of the umpteen artifacts that have been recovered since the commencement of the twentieth century belonging to this civilization) had been inadequately conducted.

The seals of the Harappan civilization, in their most basic appearance are square in shape and made mostly of materials like terracotta and steatite. An image of an animal is usually present on them accompanied with an inscription on the top.

A sealing is basically what is used to make an impression of a seal and the material which is used for this purpose is clay. It is then impressed on an object for sealing it. However, the findings of such sealings have, till date been rather rare. The seals and sealings under speculation are as follows:

The Bull Overpowering a Horned Man Imagery from Chanhudaro

The imagery on the seal (Fig. 1) also known as the rape scene recovered from Chanhudaro, has been discussed by the author Marta Ameri (Allchin 1985, Ameri et.al. 2018:) in the book, Seals and Sealings in the Ancient World. The scene according to further observation can be said to be displaying the dominance of a powerful person over the weak. It projects a kind of elitist social structure that might have been prevalent in the Harappan social hierarchy. It has been pointed out by several scholars

that the Harappan Society might have had an oligarchic construct since the so-called citadel area was separated from that of the regular housing complex. Hence, there are some indications that the people could have been divided into the groups of the haves and the have-nots. The imagery shows a bull which has often been recognized, even in present times as a symbol of power and as an aggressive force, here, is observed to overpower a human who, has a headdress which resembles a horn. If you look closely the phallic of the bull is upright and it is a composite animal with the head of what looks like that of a barasingha and the body of a Brahmi bull with dewlaps and the sides of his face is covered by a material that appears to be somewhat like a lace.

As regards the human who is being assaulted and subjugated, has one hand over his head on the ground as if broken and with the other he/she is trying to defend itself. The human is seen to have a horn and hence it also shows the strength perhaps of a supernatural being. However, it is certain that the stronghold is that of the composite animal here in this imagery. A complete narrative is at present not possible to construct without a series of imageries as has been mentioned earlier, be it in the form of a prequel or in sequence.

This is a problematic aspect for the reconstruction and proper interpretation of these imageries since the limitations such as the undeciphered script of the Harappans and the expanse of the civilization resulting in the difference in the style of imageries recovered from various sites makes it cumbersome a task to come to a concrete conclusion.

But, one thing seems clear, which is, there were artists who were either commissioned to make such explicit imagery displaying violence or it was from their own conscience that they decided to make such a display of the ones who were at the head of the Harappan economy.

Man seated before a Tiger

Another interesting seal recovered from the site of Chanhudaro, (fig. 2) represents the figure of a man seated before a tiger while in the background is seen another man carrying what seems to be two vessels on either side by tying it to a stick resting on his shoulders. This human-animal interaction with an on-looking human is perhaps indicating toward a dual aspect prevalent in the Harappan society where one person is wealthy enough to own a tiger and symbolizing his might while the other is a worker who has been in and around a fairly thick woodland or some kind of marginal forest as is indicated by the tree behind him and before him the four arrow-like signs could mean bushes and shrubs and he is in all probability carrying whatever he could salvage in a container. The human and the animal are facing one another and in a state of calm as if the two are acquainted, so much so that the wild animal almost appears to be a domesticated species. There is no sign of any kind of aggression or violence.

Horned Human Attacking a Horned Tiger

This seal recovered from Mohenjo-daro (fig. 3) depicting a human like figure with two horns and a tail with the hind legs like that of a bull is shown battling a horned tiger which might represent a person who held a powerful position in the economic or administrative levels of the Harappan period. There are two more interesting imageries from the mentioned site (fig. 5 and 6) which might have some connection to this combat scene between the human like figure and the tiger with horns. Both these imageries have a gathering of humans adorning elaborately dressed headgears and among them one is offering an animal to the apparition seen in the tree. This scene has been believed to be a kind of “divine adoration”, but, for what purpose was this apparition invoked? Perhaps this can be connected to the summoning of a super being that would subjugate the elite. Both, the images, the one fighting the horned tiger and the one appearing before the gathering from a tree have similarities like the headgear. Another possible narrative can be that the one offering the animal to the super being was bestowed with certain abilities that would combine him with the features of the animal that is, the bull which is being offered an indication which can be seen in the form of the hind legs of the human in the shape of a bulls and hence provide with the capability to combat the horned tiger. The possibilities of having a valid explanation are many. However, the second narrative can help build a sequence and even a kind of tale that could speak about the Harappan people, their trials and belief system.

Buffalo Attacking Human-like Figures

As we have observed in the previous images there is a violent nature of the imageries whenever there is a human-bull interaction. In this depiction of a bull throwing away humans and holding one in the air with its horns is a scene that is both terrorizing and disturbing (fig. 4). The humans are dressed in headgears and are wearing in their hands what appear as bangles. Again, bull being a symbol of power and stubbornness is adamant to destroy anyone who comes in its way. This could have symbolized a rich and powerful being unafraid to display his might on even those who might be a group of ritualistic performers, since, these people are wearing the headdress that are depicted on the devotional scenes (fig. 5 and 6) recovered from Mohenjo-daro. The devotional scene on the molded tablet deserves a special mention since it is a similar version as the one depicted on the seal at the same site of Mohenjo-daro.

Conclusion

An important aspect to take into consideration as we proceed to the conclusion is that the establishment of the Harappan domain into five zones by Possehl (Possehl and Raval et.al. 1989) has led to the observation that there was similarity and yet concurrently, variations in certain cultural aspects of this civilization. Not all the regions had the same kind of iconography in terms of representations on seals, sealings and in certain other day to day lifestyle of the people in terms of livelihood, be it the kind of livestock being reared at a particular site or agricultural production, which is again quite obvious

because not every site had durable climatic conditions or an ecosystem to sustain a homogenous life for all. People had to make do the best of their circumstances. This is perchance a major reason why they were so careful about storage of water and its preservation during trying circumstances.

Whatever the case may be, it all points to the fact that many regions have in fact shown diversity in the seals though the basic structure remains the same. The unicorn, for example, was considered as being one of the homogenous factor when it came to its anatomy and now with the coming up of discoveries at various sites one after the other, it has become quite apparent that there were different varieties of the same unicorn within a singular site as well as when compared with other places, when observed closely, thus, loosening the notion of a uniformity in the pattern regarding the representation of these imaginary creatures and giving the idea that these variants might have erupted to authenticate and make known one tradesman from another, hence, working as trade mark.

Among the several reasons that was essential for the survival of the powerful depended one was on the constant untiring labour of the masses which consisted from agriculturists, shepherds, including the very skilled Harappan craftsmen, potters and other small scale industrialists, who created imageries displaying the might of the select few who took charge of controlling the populace. Perhaps some of these seals were made-to-order artifacts that were showing a display of supremacy over the meek. The Harappan people known for their skilled craftsmanship and agricultural prosperity might have been trading their items with such businessmen who had access to overseas activities and so the former would sell him the items from their small scale production. This might also explain the factory sites at some of the places to have been close to the housing complexes.

It was further pointed out by Marta Ameri (Ameri, 2013) as well that the seals were markers of identity which is further investigated in this paper and the these imageries are viewed not just as a means to clarify the trade and economic or religious pattern, but also as a hidden message that lay bear the exploitation of the working management such as weavers, potters, farmers, etc at the hand of the elite.

The struggle for controlling the weak has been present since time immemorial and Harappan people might have also fallen prey to such circumstances. Some of the images that have been taken into consideration to speculate on this point have been discussed at length. The peculiar seal recovered from Chanhudaro (fig. 1) might help in shedding light to such happenings within the Harappan social structure in terms of monopolizing the economy of a particular region. This rape scene referred to by Marta Ameri (Possehl: 2002, Abraham, et al. 2013) that has already been discussed gives the recognition that the bull has been seen as a sign of aristocracy and used for the display of power. It is not uncommon to show the image of an animal as a symbol of human grandeur and might. This image could have been displaying a particular person who was so imposing enough in terms of monetary gain as to overwhelm a supernatural being. Adding to the previous theories, this research paper goes forward with other possible explanations of this scene that make up a large section of the

Harappan people's psyche, ideology in terms of the fear of being terminated at the hands of powerful and influential traders and entrepreneurs of the time and the struggles they might have faced at the hands of the powerful few.

In the context of extensive trade network, Lothal has been referred to as a Harappan port town and seen as an "entrepôt" for trade and production (S.R Rao, 1979), whereas Chanhudaro, though has no evidence of a Pre or Early Harappan occupation, shows the presence of the mature phase. But, what they have in common are the iconographic imageries that show the power-play of the elitists. At Lothal, the maximum number of seals discovered bears the image of the unicorn, which accounts for around 89% in total. Apart from that there are images of bison, goat, tiger and bird. It has been suggested that as regards the influential members of the Harappan world, only a few were present here since Lothal as has been considered a port had the route that led to trade with the Persian Gulf and further. It is also said that the presumably administrative sealings were recovered in much larger numbers at Lothal than at any other site. Thus, it is the bigger industrialists who had hold over this site at the time and the seals and sealings recovered here were mostly representing their alliances with regard to the trading activities.

Going back to the bull imagery, it is usually depicted with a single or both horns and with or without a dewlap, again some have a trough like object in front of them and some seem to have been tied to a staff. The script which is undeciphered, present along with these scenes on the top vary and some are accompanied by fish like symbols and arrows, or a man carrying what is believed to be a sacrificial jug.

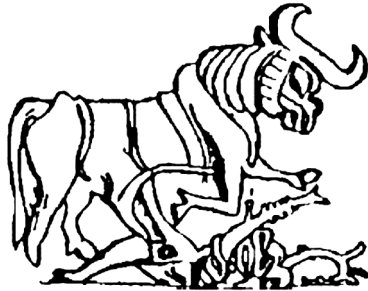
Instead of just looking at these images in the religious contexts, these can be observed to be a kind of trading system. The jug could signify an object holding oil, or grains or anything that can be traded with along with the fish on behalf of a bull and perhaps it can also mean that the bull signifies a higher authority in the trading line with whom an exchange is being made or offered so as to gain some favour or commodity.

To give a final conclusion, it has been seen that these seals and sealings despite being associated with religious practices and even after being compared to the present day religious customs could bear an altogether different perspective since the final verdict regarding their truth is still wanting. This research paper, thus, remaining true to its topic, does not intend to establish a specific notion, but rather, an attempt to put forward a few new interpretations in the midst of the previously discussed explanations by various research scholars with regard to these unique creations by the Harappan artists.

List of figures

Images Depicting Human and Animal Contact/Conflict

Fig. 1



Seal showing buffalo attacking prostrate devotee, Chanhu-daro (after Mackay 1937: 6, Possehl 2002: 8.7, Ameri 2018: 9.6c)

Fig. 2



Seal depicting a man seated before a tiger with a man looking at them, Chanhu-daro (after Possehl: 2008: 9, Ameri: 2018: 9.5b)

Fig. 3



Seal displaying a horned human attacking a horned tiger, Mohenjo-daro (after Kenoyer 2010: 9, Ameri 2018: 9.5c)

Fig. 4



Seal showing a buffalo attacking human like figures, Banawali (Kenoyer 2010: 12, Ameri 2018: 9.6b)

Fig. 5



Seal representing a devotional scene, Mohenjo-daro (Wright, 2010: 10.6, Ameri, 2018: 9.3)

Fig. 6



Molded tablet portraying a devotional scene, Mohenjo-daro (Joshi and Parpola, 1987: 488c)

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