

THE HARAPPAN RIDDLE OF 'UNICORN'

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For the scholars, who are interested in studying Harappan civilization, there are many controversial issues to deal with; but about one thing there is no dispute and that is the muteness of the written record available to us. Inscriptions most of which occur on the stamp seals have not yet become effectively functional means to unroll the secrets of Harappan civilization. The predominant type of stamp seals is the square seals with a boss on the reverse side; and they usually display an animal motif in the

lower register and an inscription above it. The main purpose of this paper is to study one of these animal motifs known popularly as 'unicorn' because of the single horn on its forehead (Fig. 1). Irrespective of the attempts to identify this animal with some natural species, it is still believed to be a mythical animal, which seems to be quite likely. Interestingly the unicorn motif outnumbers all other animal motifs occurring on the square seals, as demonstrated by the following figures :

Frequency of Unicorn Seals :

| Site & source | Mohenjo-Daro | | Harappa Vats |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|---------|-----------------|
| | Marshall | Mackay | |
| Total seals of square type with boss | 329 | 549 | 227 |
| unicorn seals | 230 | 382 | 175 |
| % of unicorn seals | 69.90 | 69.58 % | 77.09 % |

It is evident from these figures that the unicorn motif occupied unparalleled importance in the Harappan scenario. The animal is generally believed to have some religious significance because of its constant association with a curious object known as the cult object. There are two sealings from the same mould where an effigy of the unicorn is seen as carried in a procession along with a standard behind it which looks like the cult object.¹ (Fig. 2).

The Controversy :

So far, the identification of the unicorn has remained a controversy. John Marshall first thought of the unicorn as a fabulous animal but at the same time expressed his doubts about it on the basis of two clay sealings from Harappa-no.1202, (Fig. 3). He found it to be "just within the bounds of possibility that the single horn is due merely to the engravers having portrayed the animal

- Source : 1. Marshall, (Sir) J., *Mohenjo-daro and Indus Civilization*.
2. Mackay, E. J. H., *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro*
3. Vats, M. S. *Excavation at Harappa*

in profile with one horn concealed behind the other; in which case it may have belonged to some actual breed of cattle then familiar in the Indus Valley.”² M. S. Vats also noted the close resemblance between the unicorn and the two-horned unicorn-like animal on the sealings mentioned above and suggested a “possibility-but nothing more than a possibility-that the so-called unicorn may, after all, be no other than the Indian ox, so posed that one horn is completely hidden behind the other.”³

Indeed, Mackay felt certain about it and on the basis of Frederichs’ identification, insisted on calling the unicorn as Urus-bull. According to Frederichs two varieties of urus-bull (aureoch) i.e. *Bos primigenius* and *Bos namadicus* are indicated on the unicorn seals.⁴ However, this identification may be questioned now as G. L. Badam, a palaeontologist has confirmed (personal communication) that there is no evidence available for the survival of *Bos namadicus* at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Mackay argued that, “it is not certain that this animal was purposely represented as having a single horn; in all probability, owing to the difficulty of drawing in perspective one horn is supposed to be behind the other. For instance, No. 234 & 359 distinctly show an animal, which is definitely of the type that is usually portrayed with one horn, possessed of two horns, though of a rather different shape.”⁵ (Fig. 4 & 5).

Normally this argument should obviously satisfy any reader, if one is not reminded of Marshall’s cautious observations which are sufficient to convince any one that the difficulty of drawing in perspective was never felt by the Harappan artist. Marshall has pointed out that in the case of other animals the Harappan engravers did show both the horns, even when the animal was in profile, which they did with consummate skill. So, he concluded that “one-horned animal was intended to be understood on these seals and

unless there is any truth in the ancient tradition of a one-horned ox in India, we must regard this animal as fabulous.”⁶ The corroborative evidence can be seen in the later sculptures of Persepolis where a one-horned bull is shown as being attacked and devoured by a lion. Mythologically, unicorn as a moon emblem is supposed to be a natural enemy of lion who represents sun.⁷ Thus, even at Persepolis it is evident that a one-horned bull figure meant to represent the unicorn; whereas other animals have been carved out with two horns, even when in profile.

The transverse ridges of the horn as shown on many seals indicate that the horn is of an antelope than an ox. It was not sheer indifference on the part of the Harappan artist that he should draw an antelope’s horn on a bull’s head but the single horn was symbolic, and it seems that the exceptional representations of the unicorn-like animal with two horns were occasional deviations from the standard practice. This becomes clear by the fact that the unicorn-like animal occurs with two horns only on two sealings and two seals against the hundreds of the seals where the animal is specifically shown with one horn. It should also be noted that these exceptional depictions were recovered from the upper levels. Another good example of such occasional variation which comes only as an exception, is to be seen in seal no. DK5462 from Mohenjo-daro (Fig. 6). This seal shows a rhinoceros replacing the unicorn who usually stands in front of the cult object.⁸ Thus, it is evident that Harappans hardly exhibited any tendency towards ambiguity in the presentation of their subject matter.

Roy has attempted to identify the unicorn with *Equus assinus* or wild ass and treats the single horn as fictitious.⁹ However, it seems that the whole symbolism of the Harappan unicorn is centered around this single horn borne by this animal.

Sculptural Representations of the Unicorn :

The problem of identification of the unicorn has become more complicated because there are no representations of the animal coming from any of the Harappan sites, which are modelled in the round. The one doubtful specimen (Fig. 7) which comes from the VS Area of Mohenjo-daro is much damaged and is of no use though the excavator feels that it resembles the unicorn in some respects.¹⁰ However, it seems that the mythological tradition of the unicorn was continued even through later ages and in the countries other than India also. A bronze statuette which belongs to the 9th-8th century B. C. was found with several other animal figures in the megalithic tombs of Amalash in the mountainous region south-west of the Caspian sea.¹¹ The Amalash unicorn (Fig. 8) resembles Harappan unicorn to a certain extent, especially in face, but the body, the horn, the tail differ. The horn is apparently that of an ibex and the tail is very short like that of a goat. The body is cylindrical and slender as compared to that of the Harappan unicorn. We have already mentioned the unicorn (one-horned bull) at Persepolis.

Unicorn : A Mythological Tradition :

Thus, it becomes apparent that the representations of a one-horned animal vary through time and space which should be natural if we bear in mind the mythological nature of the unicorn. The artists at different places and at different times had only the fabulous tradition guided by a religious code and not any living animal for the model, thus giving rise to the local variations. However, it must be conceded that

the mythological tradition of the unicorn was quite strong which is often reflected in the writings of the Greek writers. Many of them vouch for the historicity of the unicorn and thought of India as its original home. Sharma has given a very interesting account of their writings and we can see that the descriptions are not at all uniform. The unicorn is described as one-horned oryx, one-horned ass to one-horned bull,¹² which again indicates that the unicorn was never a living animal but was simply an imaginary animal. One reference seems very interesting as it supports our contention regarding the composite nature of the unicorn. Strabo has quoted Megasthenes in his geography, "and he mentions horses with one horn and the head of deer;..."¹³

The palaeo-zoological evidence also does not support the existence of any real animal like unicorn but there were many intermediate species which have now become extinct. The animals belonging to such species exhibited combinations of morphological characteristics resembling to various other species. A species of giraffe which lived in Pleistocene age and known as *Sivathereum* was very ox-like in appearance (Fig. 9). Animals belonging to this species looked like a "bull-necked monster, fully seven feet at the shoulder and built as massively as oxen. Their outstanding feature was their horns-gigantic structures pointing in various directions. In some cases these horns were united to form one battering ram."¹⁴ However, the author has neither given any reference nor any illustration to clarify his statement and there is no palaeontological evidence to that *Sivatheres* ever lived beyond the Pleistocene. # There are only two fossils which were found in the Lower Karewa deposits in the Kashmir valley and they belonged to the Lower Pleistocene.¹⁵ It has been suggested

Badam is of the opinion that the horns of a *Sivathereum* were flat and hence weak and for this reason they couldn't have gained much strength, even when united.

that "a tantalizing little bronze figure made by an ancient Sumerian several thousand years ago, indicates Sivatheres may have still been living when this early civilization flourished, in the Middle East."¹⁶ Unfortunately, the author has not given any further details or illustration of the bronze figure.

There are other animals of intermediate grades which once existed in the process of evolution; e.g., *Hemebos antelopinus*, or *Bubalis damaliscus palaeindicus*, etc.,¹⁷ which are different species of antelopes sharing common characteristics especially with cattle, sheep and goat. It seems that such type of combinations were more evident among ruminants and it can be still evidenced among some of the modern animals like *Takin*, for instance. *Takin* means horse-ibex in Tibetan language. This animal is allied to both goats and antelopes. There are certain species of Rocky Mountain goat which seem to be an intermediate animal between goats and antelopes. An antelope like Nilgai (*Boselephus tragocamelus*) has points of resemblance with ox, deer, goat and camel. The existence of such species must have presented a very intricate problem even to zoologists while classifying these animals¹⁸ and one need not wonder if the morphological analysis of the Harappan unicorn reveals a combination of characteristics of different ruminants. The fact that this combination does not follow a uniform pattern helps us to confirm the fabulous nature of the unicorn. A casual reference to the bronze figurines from Daimabad won't be out of place here. These figurines show the bull-horse combination of the body and Dhavalikar has pointed out to its striking similarity to that of the unicorn.¹⁹ Incidentally, it may be pointed out that the Daimabad Hoard is dated to the Late Harappan Period (C. 1800-1600).

Marshall had observed the composite nature of the unicorn and stated that the unicorn resembles a strong antelope like

eland or oryx in its body. However, eland or oryx are not the animals of Indian origin and the detailed analysis makes one to feel that the unicorn inherits his sharp and thin horn from antelope than any other of his features. The hind legs, the tufted tail and prominent male organ resemble very much that of the humped bull and the short-horned bull as they appear on the Harappan seals. The thick neck and trunk resemble that of a horse or a wild ass but legs are short and the mane is not shown. Presence of a horse at Harappa is a matter of dispute and it is possible that the Asiatic wild asses formed a part in the composition of Harappan unicorn. As to the sharp and pointed ear of the animal, it is interesting to note that the ears of the Asiatic wild asses like Kiang and Onager are shorter than in true Asses but longer than in the horses.²⁰ However, the face is not always of a one and same animal. Sometimes it is bovine, sometimes like an antelope and frequently it is of a sheep or a goat. The largest of the wild sheep is known as Argali (*Ovis ammon*), which is found in Central Asia and even upto Himalayas. This is not to suggest that the face of the unicorn resembles only this kind of sheep but the prominent eyelids as seen in many drawings remind especially of this sheep. Several other variations such as these do not leave us in any doubt about the composite and hence imaginary nature of the unicorn.

Unicorn and the Concept of Fertility :

Figurines and representations of various kinds of composite animals are not uncommon at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa; for instance, a composite monster with human head, elephant's trunk, bull's body, etc. This animal is represented at Harappa on two seals while at Mohenjo-daro it occurs on seven seals and also on a copper seal. The same animal seems to have been carved in

the round.²¹ There are other types like the three-headed beast (Fig. 12). Copper tablets found at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa also represent various kinds of composite creatures, e.g. one curious animal has antelope's head at each end of its body which seems to be that of a rhinoceros. Another representation shows a fabulous animal whose forequarters are that of a tiger and hindquarters are that of a bull (Fig. 13 & 14 resp.). In all these instances the composite nature of these animals is obvious but in unicorn drawings it is quite contrary because it combines the characters of animals belonging to a common group, i.e., 'ruminants'. We have already seen that different animals under the category of ruminants tend to resemble in many ways though belonging to different genera. It is well known that animals like bull, goat, deer, etc. were closely connected to the Mother Goddess and fertility cults all over the world and it is quite likely that the unicorn symbolizes some Mother goddess.

Although the unicorn does not figure in the early mythologies of other countries, it certainly appears in later times. It seems that the unicorn was very popular in western mythology, though it differs in physical characters from the Harappan unicorn. It presents a combination of horse and lion and in esoteric writings he is described as "having a white body, red head and blue eyes."²² There are some coins of historical period issued by Scottish Kings on which the unicorn is depicted.²³ A very strange legend runs about this animal, that "he can only be caught by a virgin preferably naked, who lures him by her virgin smell; he falls asleep in her lap (often after sexual manipulation) and weeps for joy. The hunters then step out and kill him."²⁴ This legend reminds us of the story of R̥ṣyaśṛṅga who had a horn on his head and whose association with a virgin (*brahmchārīn*) and with rain is clear. Moti Chandra thinks that the horn must have been of an antelope as R̥ṣyaśṛṅga was

born of a hind.²⁵ The R̥ṣyaśṛṅga story also resembles the Sumerian story of Enkidu in the Gilgamesh epic. Enkidu, a half-human and half animal was born of a gazelle and was civilized by a courtesan.²⁶ Significantly unicorn also bears an antelope's horn on his forehead. Does this antelope/hind/gazelle motif run a common thread of symbolism binding these legends together? Dange has cited various examples from the R̥gveda, where a maiden is being given as a gift who participated in the sex-rituals either for the gain of cattle or in the later times for securing rain and he points out that "the ploughshare and the horn appear to be identified; and the former is not specifically called the śṛṅga, the ritual of sacrificial consecration connects the horn with the ploughshare." He is of the opinion that the sage R̥ṣyaśṛṅga probably did not have an original horn on the head but a horn was attached, in view of the belief in the power of fertility and virility in the horn."²⁷ He has cited many examples where horn was used as a symbol of status and masculinity. He observes that the bāśiṅga (dvi-śṛṅga, literally two horns) of the bridegroom is indicative not only of his status but also is the sign of masculine power. Interestingly, Moti Chandra has arrived at a conclusion which can be supported by archaeological evidence also. He states, "one very interesting point which emerges...that the antelope horn at some distant past was used for tillage and therefore it symbolizes a good harvest bringing wealth in its turn."²⁸ Antlers have been found at Inamgaon, a chalcolithic site in Maharashtra which "could have been used as a hand-plough because they are almost identical with that which was in use in Maharashtra in the last century. It was used more in hilly regions where it was made to work by dragging."²⁹ Once the horn is identified with a plough-share the phallic value of the horn-symbol no longer remains a mystery as to why the mythical unicorn

should carry only one horn and combine the features of the animals belonging to the group of ruminants only. It is no wonder if the authors of Harappan civilization had evolved such a highly symbolic motif to express their religious ideas. The association of a virgin with the unicorn is explained by the fact that mythologically the Earth is considered as the eternal virgin.

The association of the unicorn with the Earth or the Virgin goddess can be emphasized by another fact. The female figurines found at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, with the typical fan-shaped headdress and which are supposed to be the representations of the Mother goddess, differ sharply from the matronly figurines found at other archaeological sites. The Harappan figurines do not display the heavy and pendant breasts and hips but have small round breasts indicative of virginity, and thus it is possible that a Virgin goddess presided over the religious cults at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro.

The fact that the unicorn was closely connected with fertility is evidenced in the Chinese mythology also where the unicorn appears as Chi-lin and as a harbinger of

Acknowledgement : I am very thankful to Dr. G. L. Badam, Deccan College, Pune, for his valuable suggestions.

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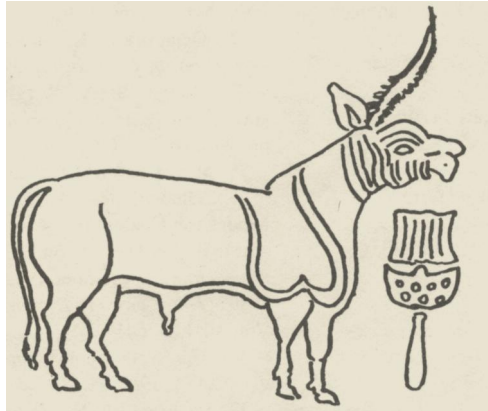


Fig. 1 : 'Unicorn' as commonly depicted on Harappan seals



Fig. 2 : Unicorn and cult object carried in a procession
Marshall : vol. III, C XVIII, 9



Fig. 3 : Unicorn-like animal with two horns
Marshall : vol. I, XII, 24



Fig. 4 & 5 resp. : Unicorn-like animal with two horns
Mackay : vol. II, IXXVII, 234 & LXXXIX, 359 F.E.M.



Fig. 6 : Rhinoceros replacing the unicorn
Mackay : vol. II, LXXXV, 40 F.E.M.

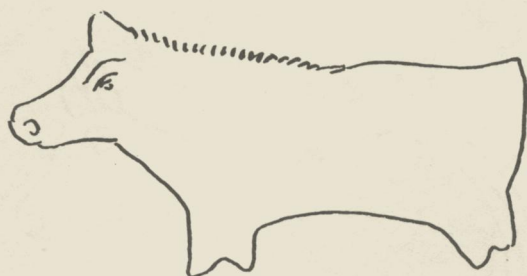


Fig. 7 : Pottery model
supposed to resemble
unicorn in some aspects
Marshall : Vol. III, XVI, 23



Fig. 8 : Amalash unicorn
Ghirshman : Illustration 43.



Fig. 9 : Sivatherium giganteum
Badam : Pl. 37, 1

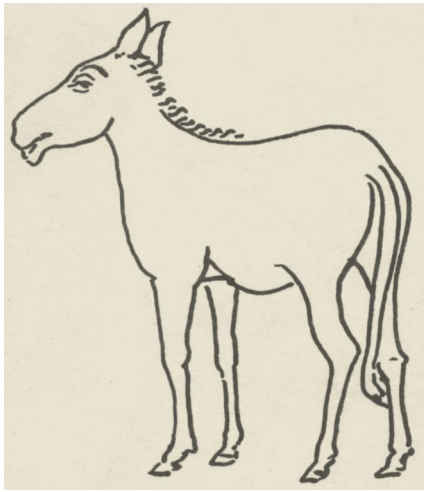


Fig. 10 : Onager, Hvass : P. 42

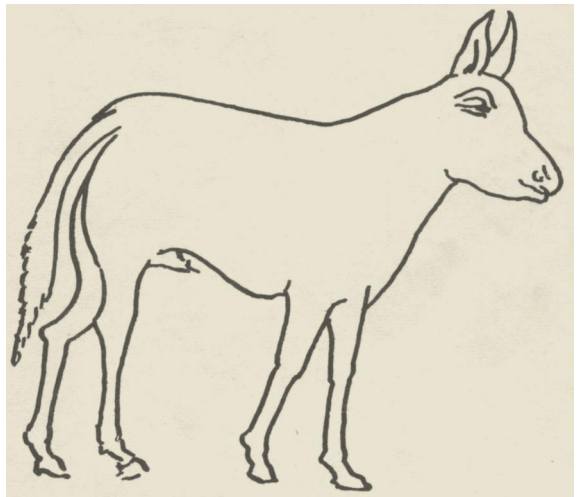


Fig. 11 : Kiang Hvass : P. 43



Fig. 12

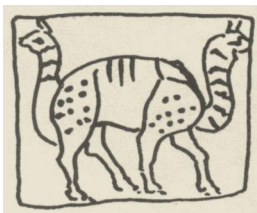


Fig. 13

Mackay : F.E.M. vol. II,
XCIX, B :
XCIII, 8 & CIII, 6;
XCIII, 10.

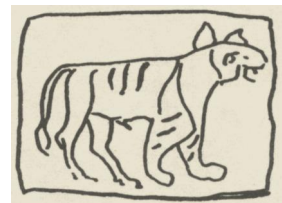


Fig. 14