

HARAPPAN SEAL MOTIFS AND THE ANIMAL RETINUE

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Harappan seals, no doubt, must have had stamped their utmost importance on the material life as well as the religious world of the Harappans and it is remarkable that even today this particular category of Harappan artifacts holds a great lure and prime position in the minds of those who are engaged in unraveling the story of that civilization. The despair of many fully fledged as well as fledgeling archaeologists at not finding a seal while digging a Harappan site and the joy that ensues even a single find speak of the somewhat fixed notion about the unfailing association between a Mature Harappan site and seals.

Only a few scholars, however, have striven to subject the seals to serious analysis as objects of religious art that is prone to a process of conceptual and stylistic modifications introducing temporal and regional variations. It is a common awareness that Harappan seals were primarily used for stamping those packages which were to be traded. Nevertheless, there is no point in denying the religious and mythological bearing of the motifs on those seals and their artistic quality. The largest category of the seals consists of the square seals with a boss on the reverse and frequently a single motif on the obverse that is carved *intaglio*. More often than not it is an animal either realistic or a fabulous one. Such seals are of main concern in this paper.

The stagnant nature of the occurrence of Mature Harappan artifacts was quite firmly believed at the initial stages but with the advancement in the research came the awareness of cultural dynamism existent within the

Mature Harappan. Factors like cultural synthesis, creative imagination on the artist's part, etc. would have never been considered earlier or for that matter are only fleetingly considered even today. The comparative analysis of seals from Harappa and Mohenjodaro, from where maximum number of seals have been recovered so far very clearly brings out the process of internal development and standardization and the fact that the motifs whether theriopic or anthropic or therianthropic or narrative, formed part of a single continuous chain of, in all likelihood, mythological episodes. Each single motif was picked up as a 'still' forming important links in that chain. It is also likely that some of the motifs developed as typical of a few sites but we do not have sufficient data to pursue this point of view. The two major cities, Harappa and Mohenjodaro may overtly indicate some similarity in the pattern of occurrence of these seal motifs but a detailed analysis demonstrates that both the places display their individualities right from the earlier strata.

For instance, the seals in both aspects of shape and motifs show a greater variety at Harappa, especially in earlier strata. Sealings shaped like date-seed, heart, shield, writing board and hare, fish, etc., which are found only at Harappa belong to earlier levels of the Intermediate Period. Similarly the so-called cult-object, now identified by us as a fire-altar (Dhavalikar & Atre 1986) appears at Harappa on four seals and nine sealings, some of them from very early strata. Hence Vats opined that it was independently worshipped at Harappa even before it was ubiquitously

associated with the unicorn (1940 : Vol I 322). At Mohenjo-daro, however, instances of the fire-altar occur only twice-on a seal and a gold fillet-and that too in the Late Period. We find a very clear evidence of experimentation and modifications in the motif of unicorn at Mohenjo-daro; most of the specimens recovered from the Late Period. However, Harappa has yielded only the standardized form of unicorn motif which always accompanies the fire-altar. These apparent facts lead us to further probing with quite interesting results.

Among the animals included in the repertoire of Harappan seal motifs five are very closely associated with the therianthropic deity that is shown seated on a platform in a peculiar position that is commonly referred to as 'yogic'. These are namely an elephant, a rhinoceros, a buffalo, a tiger and two composite animals; though often identified as deer or hill goat (Fig. 1). All of them appear on square seals as independent motifs (Figs. 2a, b, c, d & e). We have identified the central deity as the 'Mistress of Beasts' (Atre 1985-86) and not only the animals already mentioned but others too were certainly associated with her in Harappan ideology, some as her mortal protégé and some perhaps as semi-divine beings which might have been her fecundating agents. The distinction is very clearly drawn by either the presence or absence of a feeding tub in front of these animals. Presence of the feeding tub with the animal was interpreted as its domesticity or as the state of captivity. However, it should be noted that there are no signs of those animals being tethered by any rope or chain. Besides, it is absolutely improbable that animals such as tiger and rhinoceros which have never been domesticated, could be kept even in a captive state without either heavy shackles or a cage. It is obvious thus that there is no sign of the animals being confined by means of any force. We may refer to few other seals like the so-called 'Gilgamesh' motif (Fig. 3a) or the one with a

horned goddess supposedly attacking a horned tiger (Fig. 3b). In both instances neither the goddess nor the animals betray any signs of fierceness; inevitable in a combat scene. In every instance even the wildest animals seem to have lost their instinctive ferociousness as if by some supernatural magic. Here lies the key to understand the basic ideological difference between a male and a female deity with regards to their relationship with the animal world. Neumann (1974 : 272) has very aptly observed this difference through iconography. He argues, "whereas the male god in myth, like the male hero, usually appears in opposition to the animal that fights and defeats, the Great Goddess as Lady of the Beasts dominates them but seldom fights them. Between her and the animal world there is no hostility or antagonism, although she deals with wild as well as gentle and tame beasts." If it is realized that the animal motifs on Harappan seals unfailingly reflect this *fundamentum relationis* then many of the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle begin easily to fall in their places.

The famous seal (Fig. 1), as already stated, commonly known as the *Pasupati* or *proto-Siva* seal, is of crucial importance for it iconographic features providing us with clues for the right identification of the deity as the 'Lady of the Beasts' (Atre 1985-86). However, this is not the only seal that portrays the goddess in close association with animals or rather the goddess as having absolute command over them. Two of such motifs have been already referred to. One more may be mentioned here, i.e. the seal demonstrating a buffalo very meekly submitting even to the blow of a spear (Fig. 3c) which appears to be menacingly savage in other examples (Atre 1987 : 195). These and some other motifs are believed to have been derived from Harappan mythology and it has to be anticipated that though all the animal motifs form a part of the goddess' retinue, it will not be in the same

capacity that every animal has been represented.

This leads us to mark the obvious details that differentiate the animal categories. The very first difference to strike even to a casual observer is that while some of the animals constantly appear along with the manger, others never do so. The next observation to follow is that two of those which stand in front of the manger are among the ones surrounding the goddess on that famous seal (Fig. 1). These are the rhinoceros and the tiger. However, they sometimes also occur independently without it. A curious thing that can also be noticed here is these two are placed at opposite ends of the same diagonal axis whereas other two animals which are never associated with the manger, i.e. the elephant and the buffalo are placed on the other diagonal axis cutting the first one. At the same time the short-horned bull (Fig. 4a), which has not been given a place near the goddess is never without the manger but the other type, the Brahmani bull (Fig. 4b) is always without it. If the association of wild animals like tiger and rhinoceros with the manger and also their subsequent pacificity are to indicate the prowess of the goddess over them, animals without it should positively spell a different *status quo*.

This brings us to four categories, i.e., 1) animals that may either be with the manger or without it, 2) animals that are never with the manger, 3) animals never without the manger, 4) unicorn, which is never associated with the manger but always with the fire-altar.

The second category includes mighty animals like the Brahmani bull, the elephant, the buffalo and also like the hill goat. It should be noted that all of them occur both in wild and domesticated form. On the other hand animals of the first category, the tiger and the rhinoceros belong entirely to the wild variety which are not even tamable and the short-horned bull, the third category is totally domesticated. There can never be any

stronger message conveying the surpreme command of the goddess over the animal world and also the gradation in her regime. The short-horned bull, a domesticated species is meant to have a perpetual secondary status whereas it is not desirable that the tiger and the rhinoceros should be so but they should pass through a submissive state, at least temporarily as a constant reminder of their status in relation to the goddess. Why should then the Brahmani bull, etc. be exempted from such a position? The very fact that it can be domesticated and tamed at will might have been the reason behind it but considering each animal motif individually there appears to be more subtle ideological nuances at work. The buffalo, though it does not stand meekly in front of the manger is evidently subdued by the goddess as the seal confirms. As to the elephant, it is the only animal being depicted without the prominent male attribute as in the case of every other animal, a fact which is certainly not without significance but we are presently at loss to offer any convincing explanation of this peculiar phenomenon. The Brahmani bull is the unique animal motif that occurs without any variations and without any direct or indirect indications of a subordinate status to the goddess. Every line of its magnificent body, its self-assuring static posture speaks of boundless and yet restrained male power. Indeed, the restrained static posture is the only clue to assert that though it does not hold exactly a subordinate position to the goddess it neither assumes a superior position of the male spouse. It might have been assigned a special status of a fecundating agent of the goddess.

The so-called hill-goat motif is a special category that is in all probability not drawn as a real species by the Harappan artist but a composite animal motif (Atre 1987 : 90-95). This brings us to the deer/antelope/goat theme of Harappan symbolism. The close similarity in the morphological characters of these animals must have played a significant

Marshall specifically mentioned 'the rarity of the antelope' on Harappan seals (1931 : Vol II 391). Mackay thought that the unicornlike animal on seal DK10799 (Fig. 7a) represents the Chinkara (*Gazella bennetti*). Animals on cylinder seal No. DK5828 (Fig. 7b) also were regarded as antelopes. It is not possible to identify any of these motifs as true antelopes with one exception—DK7313. (Fig 7c) This is a marble seal repotted from the VIth stratum on which two real antelopes have been arranged in two registers, in a sitting position. A posture in which the animal looks back by turning its head over shoulders was supposed to be characteristic of antelopes. This is the only example of its kind within the Harappan repertoire.

However, a motif akin to hill-goat (Fig. 8c), which has been already identified with *Capra aegagras* by earlier scholars does not show affinity with any single species. It has a shaggy neck, very long curling horns which almost touch its back and a short, forked tail. A similar animal is to be found on seal No. DK7289 which also appears beneath the throne of the goddess. It is no doubt a stylistic representation of a mountain-goat, but at the same time it does not conform to any specific species. The shaggy neck may resemble the Himalayan Tahr while the curling horns are oriented just like those of an ibex. However, the horns are not ridged. The forked tail is not at all realistic.

It should be pointed out at this stage that the 'unicorn' (Fig. 8a) also forms a part of this process of motif-making by combining characteristics of different animals belonging to deer/antelope/goat/bull theme (Atre 1985). It is obvious that the composition of the unicorn is dominated by the symbolism of male virility with its emphasis on the animal's male member and the single horn. The single horn, that too in the shape of an antler, is no accident but is intentional and there has to be positive symbolism behind it. Scholars like Moti Chandra (1966) and Dange (1970 : 87-

144) equate the horn with a ploughshare which in turn is essential in the fecundation of the earth. Recently it has been contended that in the pre-iron period of human history antlers had most probably served as hand-ploughs (Dhavalikar 1984).

It is obvious that deer/antelope/goat/bull theme dominated the therianthropoc symbolism of Harappan iconography. There are other composite animal motifs like the 'composite monster' (Fig. 8b) but such motifs totally lack the permutations and combinations that are evident among the motifs based on the deer/antelope/goat/bull symbolism. It may be incidentally noted that this group includes only ruminants and perhaps they were very closely related to the idea of food in Harappan subconscious. Their goddess as the 'Mistress of the Beasts' was positively originated from more primitive stages of the now highly urban Harappans and as the development of their symbolism indicates that it was modified to suit their presently emerged life pattern in an agricultural-trading community. Those animals which claimed a prime place in their pastoral life for their food value came to possess a renewed significance along with the importance of the phallic value of the antler/plough.

Variants of the unicorn motif are very interesting if viewed in this light.

The first important variation (Fig. 9a) caused a major controversy regarding the composite nature of the unicorn. A question arose that whether the so-called animal was really mythical having only one horn or a real species of cattle having two horns but portrayed in profile. However, there is no doubt that the unicorn is a fabulous animal (Atre 1985). Seal No. DK10799 shows the unicornlike animal (10d) with two horns but these differ in style from those shown in the seals being discussed. The second horn does not curve in the opposite angle but follows the same angle as the front horn, quite parallel to it (antelope-like). The cult object/fire altar is

role in bringing them together on the same ideological plane. Such amalgam should naturally reflect in an artistic manoeuvre portraying these animals in an ambiguous way that makes it difficult for us to identify the species. This misleading quality of the Harappan portraits of deer/goat/antelope is evident in the identification of the two animals standing beneath the dais on which the goddess is shown seated (Fig. 1). They are identified as deer/antelope but the same animal is identified in another instance (Seal No. DK 5875) as a mountain goat (Fig. 2e).

Indeed the motif is composed of combined characteristics of deer/antelope/goat group and this tendency is apparent in many other motifs which may form part of one and the same class of symbols. However, the combination is so skillfully subtle that the animal never presents a chimaera-like appearance but something that seems simulating the real and yet not the real.¹ It is perhaps the result of stronger religious undertones at work or mere stylization caused by artistic imagination which makes use of only conventional ideas about animal morphology. This kind of stylization is evident only in the case of composite animal motifs. While the very realistic animal motifs stand witness for the Harappan artist's skill in catching minute details of the animal morphology, the stylized forms of composite animals more precisely emphasize the religious undercurrents in the making of composite animal motifs.

At Harappa there are only two miniature sealings with hill goat motif occurring on it (Fig. 5). However, at Mohenjo-daro the motif identified as hillgoat antelope with an interesting range of variety is to be mainly found on copper tablets. (Figs. 5 a, b, c, d, e, f)

The animal represented on seal No. DK9114 is a curious motif identified as a human-faced goat (Fig 6a). The same animal is represented on seal No. DK6847 and DK8853. It is to be seen, however, that even this motif is not a faithful copy of any real

caprine species. It is obvious that the human-faced goat is supposed to be of an enormous size unlike any species of the goat which elevates it to some supernatural level.

A similar motif (Fig. 6b) with an uncanny resemblance with the human-faced goat; or perhaps the same motif on a copper tablet (SD 1517) deserves a special mention. It looks like a goat because of its short upturned tail, but it carries even bird-like features along with its human face. It can be identified as a hermaphroditic figure (Atre 1988 : 505).

Another version of the composite motif comprising the deer/antelope/goat/bull theme is to be traced on a series of copper tablets. The animal on DK 5996 and DK 4672 was identified as a goat by Mackay (1938: Vol I 366-67) but Marshall preferred to identify it as a bull (1931 : Vol I 201). These and a few other copper tablets display a strange combination of morphological characteristics of various animals. In the first example (Figs. 5a, b), two of these tablets appear to be very closely related to those which have a spiral horned goat on it, though the horns are not absolutely horizontal. Morphologically the body is entirely different than that of the goat. Indeed it resembles no other animal appearing on the seals. An oddly projecting portion of the neck certainly indicates a dewlap and a slanting, elongated body, tufted and slightly upraised tail. Perhaps when Marshall was describing a bull with curled horns (1931 : Vol I 201), he had this animal in mind. The same animal is to be found with slight changes in tablets No. VS3320, VS1998 and VS1104 (Fig. 5c, d, e, f). The horns become more vertical and in the latter less spiral. Scratches on the dewlap used for indicating the skin folds are totally absent. VS3320 depicts the animal which seems close to a bull. Two of these tablets came from Intermediate or Late Period. Further simplification is to be found in tablets No. DK5444 and DK3447. It is remarkable that in every instance this composite animal appears with the manger.

not exactly like the usual one but looks like a standard. This seal was a surface find. Seal No. DK11126 which was recovered from five feet below datum gives a mere suggestion of a second horn by a slight split at the tip of the horn.

The tendency of carving the horns in this manner brings the unicorn-like animal closer to the mountain-goat or antelope. Seal No. DK8218 is quite illuminating in this respect. It is difficult to tell whether the animal on the seal has more similarity with a wild goat or an antelope or a unicorn. The cult-object is replaced by a three-pronged plant-like symbol, however, maintaining the same placement, just below the neck of the animal. The same trend of replacing the cult object/fire-altar is continued in a few specimens.

This brings us to a possibility of a unicorn without the fire altar at all which is to be found on seal No. C2372. This process very logically should end into a motif which maintains the same symbolism even after replacing the unicorn itself. It is to be found in a seal No. DK5462 where a rhinoceros takes the unicorn's place in front of the fire-altar. This is a clear example of the horn-symbolism becoming more prominent and the single horn on the animal's nose makes it a right claimant for the unicorn's position; at least at an experimental stage.

This tendency towards experimentation is attested in another, though unique example. The device used on this seal represents a fabulous creature which is quite like a unicorn in its build but also presents a combination of dotted deer and rhinoceros.

Furthermore there are those seals which bring the fertility symbolism associated with solar/phallic motifs comprising the same deer/antelope/goat/bull symbolism. Two seals (Fig. 9b) having an animal with unicorn-like body but three heads as if rotating in one direction. All the three heads in both instances are derived from the deer/antelope/goat-

/bull/unicorn theme. Seals displaying skirl devices (Fig. 9c)—again the rotating heads—belonging to the same group confirm the solar/phallic nature of the whole theme.

It is significant that these innovative motifs are usually to be found in the Late phases of the Intermediant period or in the Late period. It is during this period, as evidenced by the construction of monumental buildings and the artifactual evidence that, the internal development at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa received great impetus because of the flourishing of external trade. It is obvious from the variety of motifs handling the same theme that it was this period that enhanced the expansion and elaboration of ideological plane. It seems to have been epitomized in a particular seal motif that may carry the sobriquet 'Tree of Life and the Unicorn' (Fig 10) very aptly. It may also be stated that this seal encapsulates the entire Harappan symbolism regarding the regenerative cycle, set into motion under the Goddess' regime.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Atre 1987) 'Fire' and 'Water' form the principal elements of the ideological set of fertility cults centring around the archetypal Mother. The 'Fire' as the seed and the 'water as the ambrosia nourishing that seed lay at the base of all elaborate ritual practices and their organization whereas animal motifs played an exclusive role in expressing ideas regarding biological regeneration under the auspices of the Great Mother or more aptly the *Lady of the Beasts* in the present context. The seal motif under discussion brings together both these iconic and aniconic ideational planes. It consists of a stylized *pipal tree* growing out of an object very similar to the cult object often associated with the unicorn and which would preferably be identified by us as 'fire-altar'. Nothing can be so appropriately presented than the 'tree of life' growing out of the 'fire-altar' which consists of the 'fire-seed' and more so that the

unicorn heads should be guarding it. It is the very essence of the realm of the goddess that

throbs with eternal life.

Note

1. There are a few animal motifs, however, which look quite like a chimaera, for example the 'composite mons-

ter' and those on copper tablets.

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The Lady of
the Beasts



4a



4b



7a



7c



8c



8b



2a



2c



2b



2d



2e



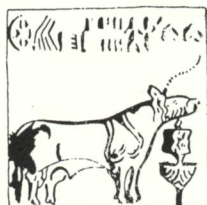
5



6a



6b



8a



3a Gilgamesh (?)



3c Buffalo
submitting to a
blow of spear



3b Goddess
attacking a tiger



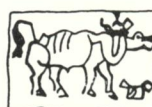
5a



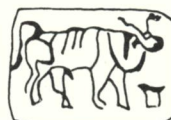
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5c



5d



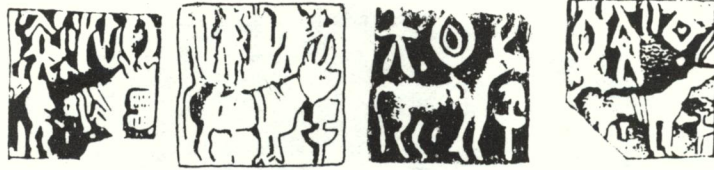
5e



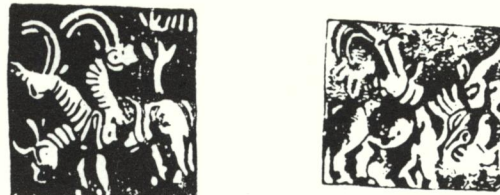
5f

7b Cylinder seal antelopes





9a Unicorn like animal with two horns



9b Three headed animal



9c Skirl devices



10 Tree of life