

Research Paper

Pashupati Seal: An Indus Valley Exotica

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ABSTRACT: The paper gives an all-inclusive review of the venerated Pashupati Seal recovered from Mohenjodaro, one of the cardinal sites of the Indus Valley civilization. Regardless of its size, the seal is a centre of extensive scholarly attraction. A plethora of scholars study the seal and attempt to identify the central figure in the seal surrounded by animals. While scholars like John Marshall identify the central figure as tricephalic and ithyphallic and relates it with Rudra-Shiva, others give Dravidian, Vedic and Post-Vedic interpretations of the seal. The pictograph present above the seal commands equal attention but remains an enigma as the boustrophedon Indus script is undeciphered to date and so is the conundrum associated with the same.

KEYWORDS: Indus Valley Civilization, Mohenjodaro, Pashupati, Rigveda, Rudra, Seal 420

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Pashupati seal, being an exotica recovered from the southern region of the DK-G area of Mohenjodaro, 3.9 metres below the surface; arouses varied interpretations from a school of scholars, historians, Indologists and scientists. In his 1937-'38 report, Ernest Mackay dated the seal to fall within 2,350-2,000 BCE and numbered the seal as 420. The 3.56cm x 3.53cm seal is devised out of steatite and has a thickness of 0.76cm.



Figure 1: Seal 420- The Pashupati Seal

The central figure is found seated on a platform looking straight with legs bent at the knees. The heels of the figure touch each other and the toes point downwards. The arms are extended to reach the bent knees but don't touch them- they rest lightly upon the knees and the thumbs face away from the body. The hands are embellished by three small bangles and eight large bangles. There are double band wraps around the waist with necklaces covering the chest. The figure has elaborate head-dresses that appears to be a fan-like crown with two huge striated horns similar to that of a bull. The central figure is surrounded by four animals- a water rhinoceros, a tiger, a bull and an elephant. Below the figure, one may notice two ibexes facing backwards with their horns meeting each other. Above the central figure is seven boustrophedon pictographs that are undeciphered to date.

John Marshall identifies the central figure to be one of the earliest representations of *Hindu* god *Shiva* in his 1928-29 publication. However, his claims are criticized by a school of scholars but identifying the seal with proto-*Shiva* or *Rudra Shiva*, his Vedic predecessor; seems to be the most accepted claim. With the *Indus* script that remains undeciphered to date, the pictograph above the figure remains an enigma. Following Marshall's claims, many scholars conducted independent researches that came out with a series of conclusions: while Doris Srinivasan claims the figure to be a divine bovine man, Alf Hiltebeitel claims it to be the depiction of *puranic Mahisasura*. *SR Rao* claims it to be a depiction of *Vedic* God *Agni* while *SP Singh* identifies the figure to be *Rudra*, the *Vedic* predecessor of Lord *Shiva*.

Notwithstanding the scholarly tussle over the seated figure, the seal is an element of archaeological marvel. The seal along with all the artefacts recovered from the sites of Pakistan was claimed during the partition melee. However, the Government of India refused and finally, an agreement was made to hand over around 8,000 *Indus* Valley articles out of a total of 16,000. While the Priest-King was claimed (and successfully received) by Pakistan, the Dancing Girl and *Pashupati* Seal were retained by India.

II. SEAL 420 AS PROTO-SHIVA

In his 1928-29 publication, John Marshall identified the central figure to be Lord *Shiva*. Firstly, he claims that the seated figure represents the lord of all beasts or *Pashupati*. It is worth noting that *Pashupati* is one of the epithets of Lord *Shiva*. Secondly, he claims that the figure is tricephalic and Lord *Shiva* is sometimes depicted with three or five heads. Some scholars claim that the fourth or the fourth and the fifth head remains unseen in a 2-D interface. However, Lord *Shiva* is also depicted as having four or five heads. Thirdly, he identifies the elaborate headdresses to be congruent with the trident and the two large horns to be the horns of a bull. Both the trident and the bull symbolises Lord *Shiva* as the trident is his weapon and the Bull is his mount. Fourthly, he claims that since the central figure is sitting in a typical *yogic* posture, he could be identified with Lord *Shiva*. Lord *Shiva* is also known as *Adiyogi* or *Mahayogi* who is considered the originator of Yoga.

In his 1931 publication, he added that the *Pashupati* seal is ithyphallic and he claimed that certain stones and seals recovered from the *Indus* Valley hints at sex worship or phallic worship. Since *linga* is undoubtedly linked with Lord *Shiva*, he claims the central figure in the *Pashupati* seal to be the *Indus* depiction of proto-*Shiva*. However, late scholars have pointed out that that the stones that are claimed to be sex symbols by Marshall may be game stones or gamesmen. One of the notable scholars with the same viewpoint is Ernest Mackay who claimed that:

“... Various small cones made of lapis lazuli, jasper, chalcedony, and other stones, most beautifully cut and finished, and less than two inches in height, are also thought to be *lingas* ... on the other hand, it is just as possible that they were used in the board-games ...”

-Early Indus Civilization, 1948.

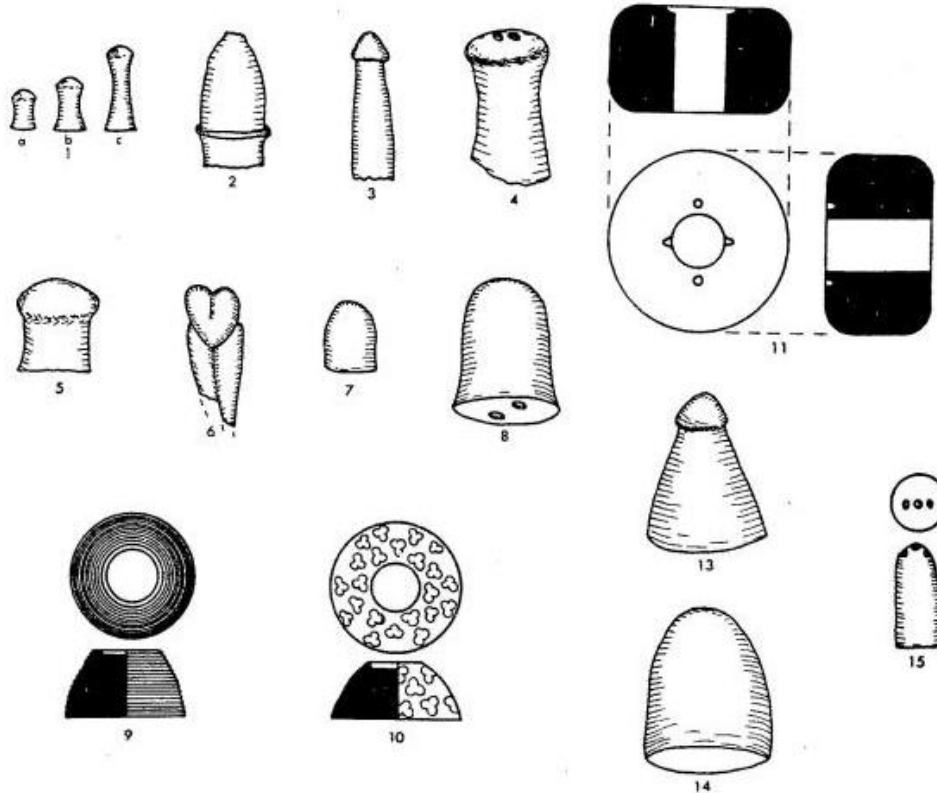


Figure 2: The stone articles found from Indus Valley sites that's thought to be symbols of phallus worship

III. DIVINE BULL-MAN?

On other hand, Doris Srinivasan came with an alternate approach and claimed that the central figure is a divine buffalo man. She identified the figure to be having a single head and claimed that what Marshall claimed to be two extra faces are ears of the buffalo man. She backed her findings with various articles recovered from other *Harappan* sites that hint at the association of buffalo or attributes of buffaloes with divinity.

She attempted to relate the central figure of seal 420 with the terracotta bull recovered from *Kalibangan*, horned mask unearthed from *Mohenjodaro* and a horned deity represented in a water pitcher recovered from *Kot Diji*. With reference to these parallels, she interprets Marshall's proto-*Shiva* as a divine buffalo man.

Nonetheless, the significance of the animals surrounding the bull-man is a mystery. She claims that these animals may represent divine powers and reinforces the strength of the bull-man. However, the description seems to be dissatisfactory.

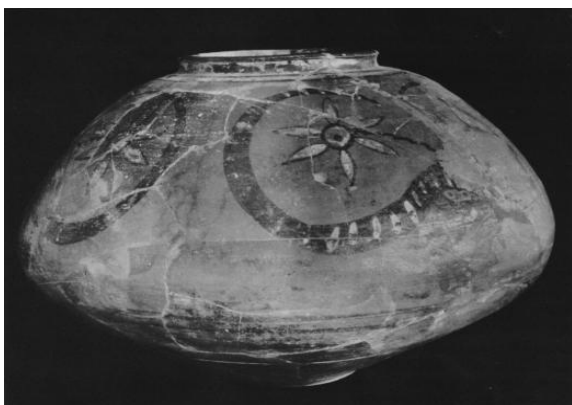


Figure 3: The water-pitcher recovered from Kot Diji

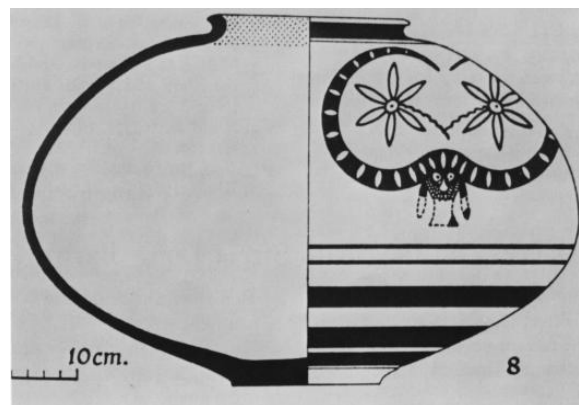


Figure 4: Diagram of the article

Image Credits: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan



Figure 5: The Kalibangan Cake- note the horned figure
Image Credits: Archaeological Survey of India



Figure 6: Horned masks from Mohenjodaro
Image Credits: Archaeological Survey of India

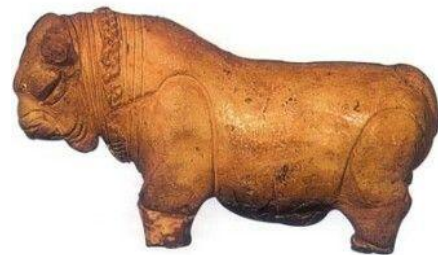


Figure 7: Terracotta Bull
Image Credits: Archaeological Survey of India

IV. RUDRA- THE RIGVEDIC PREDECESSOR OF LORD SHIVA

Another notable interpretation of the *Pashupati* seal comes from SP Singh who identifies the seated figure to be *Rudra*. *Rudra* is the *Vedic* predecessor of Lord *Shiva* nonetheless, the *Rig Veda* has only three hymns attributed to him. However, *Rig Veda*'s verse 2.33.11 depicts *Rudra* as fearsome as a formidable wild beast. It is also to be noted that verse 7.46.3 mentions that *Rudra* is armed with a bow and fast-flying arrows. There is no mention of the trident as well as a bull which's depicted as the mount of Lord *Shiva* in later *Puranas* and epics. The *Rig Veda* depicts *Rudra* as the lord of the hunt who's known for his ferociousness and wrath and the depiction doesn't fit a tranquil *Pashupati*. But verse 10.92 of the *Rig Veda* mentions that *Rudra* has dual natures- wrathful and tranquil. The tranquil nature of *Rudra* can be viewed as *Shiva*, *Yogi* or *Pashupati*.

However, even if the *Rig Veda* doesn't conform to the trident and the bull as the symbols of *Rudra*, it is so in the later texts. Erwin Neumayer and VS Wakankar identified some of the *Bhimbetka* paintings carbon-dated pre-10,000BCE to be associated with *Natraja*, the dancing depiction of Lord *Shiva*.



Figure 8: *Natraja*- the lord of dance



Figure 9: *Bhimbetka* painting carbon dated pre-10,000 BCE, identified as *Natraja* by Erwin Neumayer and VS Wakankar

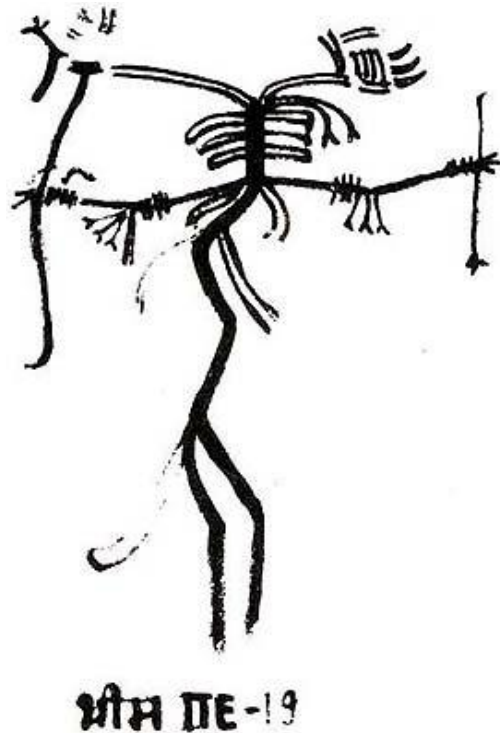


Figure 10: Diagram of the *Bhimbetka* painting identified as *Natraja* by Erwin Neumayer and VS Wakankar

Moreover, SP Singh claims that the animals surrounding *Rudra*- the tiger, bull, elephant and the rhinoceros are *Maruts* or *Rudras*. Verse 2.33 of *Rig Veda* states that *Rudra* is the father of *Maruts* and the 64th verse of the first book of the *Rigveda* compares the *Maruts* to lion, deer, bull, elephant and a serpent. This can be the basis of SP Singh's observation. It's believed that *Maruts* are storm Gods who are the children of *Rudra* and an androgynous cow, *Prisni*. Verse 8.96.8 of *Rigveda* numbers *Maruts* from twenty-seven to sixty. However, later *Puranas* mention that *Maruts* are born from the battered womb of *Diti*, the mother of all demons. *Puranas* suggest that *Indra* used his thunderbolt over *Diti*'s womb so as to prevent the birth of a demon who could rival *Indra*. The *Puranas* also suggests that *Indra* befriended the *Maruts* at a later stage and came to be known as *Marutvant*. He was accompanied by the *Maruts* while defeating the serpent king *Vritra* or *Vedic Ahi* who is represented as a dragon blocking the flow of rivers and thus, inviting drought. The hymn eighteen of the fourth book of *Rigveda* illustrates the series of events pertaining to the heroic battle between *Indra* and *Vritra*.

V. HARAPPAN NAVARATRI?

One of the most interesting *Vedic* interpretation of the *Pashupati* seal is given by Alf Hildebeitel. He claims that the central figure seated is *Mahishasura*. The festival of *Navaratri* eulogises the epic battle between *Mahishasura*, a very powerful buffalo demon and goddess *Durga*, an incarnation of *Devi Parvati*, the consort of Lord *Shiva*. He claims that the animals depicted are the mounts of different Gods- like Bull (*Nandi*) is the mount of Lord *Shiva*, Tiger (or Lion) is the mount of Goddess *Durga* and Elephant (*Airavata*) is the mount of *Indra*.

VI. CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding these interpretations sprawling from Marshall's proto-*Shiva* to Alf's *Mahishasura*, there are many other interpretations by various celebrated scholars. No other *Indus* Valley artefact might have been the base of such intense scholarly attention.

Out of the available interpretations, Herbert Sullivan of Duke University claimed that the seated figure is a woman. She claimed that what Marshall claimed to be the phallus is, *ipso facto*, a tassel. Asko Parpola studied the *Pashupati* seal and claimed that the seal is an imitation of the proto-Elamite method of seating bulls. Some claims that the seated figure is an aquatic deity while others claim the seated figure to be *Varuna* (Water God), *Agni* (Fire God) and even *Indra* (Rain God). Some scholars also draw parallels from the Gundestrep Cauldron while others identify the central figure to be the Sage *Rishyasringa* of *Ramayana* Epic. However, there are some group of scholars who claim that the figure is not determinable.

Amongst all interpretations, Marshall's proto-Shiva is still celebrated and the seal 420 is still known by the name, *Pashupati*. Some scholars also claim that the seal invariably hints at the existence of Yoga at that time. It's not only the central figure and the animals nearby that attracts scholarly attention but the pictograph is also considered on par. The mystery may be partially solved if the boustrophedon script of the Indus valley is deciphered and the pictograph, read. However, the seal remains a question mark to date. More and more interpretations of the seal 420 are coming from various research scholars and universities with the due course of time and remain one among the Indus Valley exotica.

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