

INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION: HISTORY

NEWS: ASI to host three-day international conclave in August on decoding Indus Valley script

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The Indus Valley script remains undeciphered despite extensive research, with India hosting an international conference and Tamil Nadu announcing a prize to decode it. Its decipherment could reveal crucial insights into ancient Indian civilization, language, and cultural linkages with the Dravidian tradition.

Context and Initiative

- The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) will host an international brainstorming conference from August 20 to 22, 2025.
- The event is titled “Decipherment of the Indus Script: Current Status and the Way Forward.”
- The goal is to bring together scholars and experts from India and abroad who are researching the Indus Valley Civilization and its script.
- In January 2025, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. K. Stalin announced a USD 1 million prize for anyone who successfully deciphers the Indus script, highlighting growing interest and state-level support.

About the Indus Valley Script

- **Material Evidence:** The script is inscribed on seals, pottery, stoneware bangles, bronze tools, bones, shells, ivory, copper and steatite tablets.
- **Undeciphered Nature:** Despite decades of research, the script remains unreadable. Its linguistic family is uncertain, and no definitive link to any existing language has been proven.
- **Pictographic Writing:** The symbols are pictograms and may be "logo-syllabic", combining symbols for whole words and individual syllables.
- **Boustrophedon Style:** The script is written alternately from right-to-left and left-to-right lines—like the path of an ox plowing a field.
- **Decimal Number System:** Uses vertical strokes for units and semicircles for tens.
- **Seals and Motifs:** The top of seals contain text, while the middle often shows animals like unicorns, bulls, and elephants. These seals likely served for identification in trade and administration.
- **Trade Evidence:** Clay tags with Indus symbols have been found in Mesopotamia, suggesting a vast trade network.
- **Narrative Imagery:** Some inscriptions include mythological or ritualistic scenes, suggesting religious or ceremonial uses.

Challenges in Decipherment

- **Short Texts:** Most inscriptions are very brief, averaging 5 characters, with the longest being only 26 characters.
- **Lack of Bilingual Inscriptions:** Unlike the Rosetta Stone (which helped decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs), no bilingual text exists for the Indus script.
- **Symbol Complexity:** Over 400 distinct signs are known, making linguistic classification difficult without longer contextual records.

Significance of Deciphering the Script

- **Cultural Insight:** Unlocking the script could reveal critical details about social hierarchy, governance, religion, and economic systems of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC).
- **Historical Relevance:** It could confirm IVC's chronological and cultural precedence over Vedic civilization and support theories about Dravidian linguistic roots.
- **Academic Collaboration:** Encourages interdisciplinary global research combining linguistics, archaeology, data science, and AI-based methods.
- **Tamil Heritage Connection:** Recent findings link graffiti marks in Tamil Nadu with Indus signs, potentially strengthening claims of Dravidian linguistic continuity.

About the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC)

- **Urban Sophistication:** IVC was one of the world's earliest urban cultures, known for planned cities, drainage, and trade.
- **Discovery:** First discovered in 1924 by Sir John Marshall.
- **Civilizational Mystery:** Despite advanced city planning and trade, the inability to read its script leaves many aspects of its life and governance unknown.
- **Cultural Linkages:** Archaeological parallels between Indus symbols and South Indian graffiti marks suggest potential cultural continuity with Tamil civilization.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/asi-to-host-three-day-international-conclave-in-august-on-decoding-indus-valley-script/article69713222.ece>