Abstract

The Strange Case of the So-Called Indus Script:
Distinguishing Writing from Non-Linguistic Symbols

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Evidence of many types has accumulated over the last half decade that the so-called Indus script was not a speech-encoding or writing system in the strict linguistic sense, as has been assumed since the first artifact carrying Indus symbols showed up in the 1870s (Farmer, Henderson, and Witzel 2002; Farmer, Sproat, and Witzel 2004; Sproat and Farmer 2005). This unexpected find is radically changing views of the oldest Indian civilization and has awakened new interest in issues involving non-linguistic symbols, pseudo-decipherments, and related topics addressed in this Workshop. In this talk I illustrate a wide range of nonlinguistic symbol systems, propose a typology of scripts and non-scripts based on semantic and phonological criteria, and discuss the light recent studies of Indus symbols throw on ways of distinguishing the two classes of symbols. The talk ends with a discussion of ways in which our archaeological understanding of Indus society is paradoxically deepening as a result of abandoning the old Indus-script thesis (Farmer, Weber, et al. 2005; Weber, Fuller, and Farmer 2007).