

## Beyond the Surface: A Comprehensive Analysis of Indus Valley Seal XCIV-430 and its Representation of Vedic Rituals

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**Abstract:** This study examines the iconographical significance of the IVC seal XCIV-430 found in Mohenjo-Daro and compares its meaning with the hymns of the Atharvaveda in order to understand its narrations of the art. It argues that the artist made all the necessary arrangements to understand the mythological 'goat sacrifice' event that has importance in Vedic ritual tradition, including the founding fathers, selected plant and animal species, and cosmic associations.

**Key Words:** goat sacrifice in the Indus valley, Fire (Agni) worship in the Indus valley, Agni in the Mohenjo-Daro seal; Ashvattha tree, Indus-Vedic culture

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) has captured the attention of archaeologists for more than a century, but despite extensive research, their religious beliefs and practises remain enigmatic. Among the artefacts that have survived from this ancient civilization, the IVC seals, which date back to their mature period (2600 BCE-1900 BCE), hold particular significance due to their cultural importance. These seals offer valuable insights into the philosophical foundations of the IVC. Notably, the IVC seals display two types of depictions: one with illustrated art accompanied by symbols, and the other solely consisting of engraving symbols. In this study, our focus will be on an illustrated seal that contains both art and inscription. By closely examining these IVC seals, we can learn more about the religious and cultural practises of the Indus Valley Civilization.



Seal XCIV- 430, Mohenjo-Daro (Courtesy: Archaeological survey of India)

This particular seal, identified as XCIV- 430, was discovered by Mackay during the 1927 excavations at Mohenjo-Daro<sup>1</sup>. It is made of fired tan steatite and has traces of glaze; it measure 4.06 cm in length, 3.95 cm in width, and a thickness of 0.8 cm.<sup>2</sup> The seal portrays a tree spirit, a worshipper, and seven spirits wearing pigtail headdresses, which are difficult to interpret<sup>3</sup>, as acknowledged by Mackay himself. Sir John Marshall analysed the seal and interpreted the tree depicted on it as a symbol of tree worship, wisdom, and life.<sup>4</sup> He also focused on the horn-based headdress and



referred to the seal as a "figured seal" with seven objects<sup>5</sup>. K.N. Dikshit attempted to draw parallels between the major religious icons of the IVC, the mother goddess, and the deity depicted in the Ashvattha tree with the goat serving as a scapegoat<sup>6</sup>.

Parpola's analysis of the seal revealed that a human figure is kneeling in front of a fig tree with outstretched hands, indicating respect, prayer, or adoration towards the divine figure standing inside the fig tree. The horned crowns worn by both figures on the seal are similar to those worn by gods, goddesses, and their earthly representatives in the ancient Near East. It is noteworthy that some Indian tribal priests also wear horned headdresses during sacrifices<sup>7</sup>.

The seal depicts a wedding ceremony with a dog present and the bride standing while the groom kneels down, according to Fairservis's interpretation<sup>8</sup>. To contradict this, Mark Kenoyer has suggested that the gender of the depicted individuals on the seal is difficult to identify due to the limited available sources. The gender of these attendants is not indicated, and the absence of female figurines with long braids and single plumed head ornaments makes it impossible to determine whether the procession consists of male or female attendants<sup>9</sup>.

It should be emphasised that scholars have primarily relied on their imaginations to identify the events and figures depicted on the seal. They have not considered comparing the seal's iconography with the Vedic literature due to the belief in the Aryan invasion or migration theory<sup>10</sup>, which suggests that the Vedas are not indigenous to the Indus Valley. However, this article suggests that the seal depicts the 'goat sacrifice ritual of Atharva Veda'<sup>11</sup> with the main deity being Agni, the fire God. The identification of both the event and the deity is based on the iconography of the seal and possible narratives found in the hymns of the Atharva Veda Samhita (AVS), as well as in the Rig-Veda Samhita (RVS). The method employed in this article is systematic analysis, whereby the seal's iconography is first identified and then compared with textual descriptions of the Atharva and Rig Veda Samhitas<sup>12</sup>. The study is limited to art; the symbols mentioned for further communication are not included.

## 2. Content of the seal :

- a. A goat
- b. Ashvattha tree
- c. One standing figure in the Ashvattha tree
- d. Seven figures in a row
- e. A sitting figure
- f. Other things/offerings
- g. An inscription with five symbols

### a. The goat

The goat is misunderstood as a composite animal, half bull and half goat, by Marshal<sup>13</sup> but the excavator is rightly observed as a goat<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, multiple goat seals were found during excavations. The goat, which is a local species called "Markhor," is easy to spot because of its shape, spiral horns, and short tail.

The Atharvaveda Samhita hymn 9.5 describes the practice of offering goats as sacrifices to the gods during the ritual. The aim was to seek blessings and appease the deities, with AVS 2.34.1 and 18.2.8 indicating that oblations were believed to bring wealth to the sacrificer, and the goat was thought to receive the share of heat (tapas) that carried it to the world of the virtuous. The Atharvaveda also teaches the concept of sacrificial transmigration to the heavens, with AVS 4.14 explaining how the sacrifice of a goat could reach the heavens. It is believed that goats know their ancestral origins because they are born from the fire.

The consumption of the cooked goat, along with its five rice dishes, was believed to transport the eater to the heavenly world (svarga loka), thus enabling them to escape punishment and hell. This offering was considered truly infinite, and by consuming it, one could even conquer the most glorious and powerful realms illuminated by suns (AVS 9.5.18, 9.5.21).

According to AVS 10.7.31, goats possess a unique quality: they know the path to heaven, which is why they were chosen for the sacrifice ritual. The goat is believed to have been the first creature to come into existence, and it ascended to the highest autocracy beyond which nothing else exists. The goat calls out name after name before the sun rises, symbolizing its connection with the divine and its ability to transcend earthly limitations.

### b. The Ashvattha tree

The Ashvattha tree, also known as the Pipal tree or Sacred Fig tree, is a species of tree in the fig family (Moraceae) and is native to the Indian subcontinent and surrounding regions. Its scientific name is *Ficus religiosa*. The design of a



leaf with an extended leaf end and the lines within it confirm it as Ashvattha; however, in the seal art, only some leaf illustrations indicate that the importance is not given to the tree itself but rather to the inside figure.

In Vedic culture, the Ashvattha tree has significant cultural value, but it is not seen as the highest god. If we examine the literature associated with the Ashvattha tree, we find a personified god illustrated in its branches, as described in AVS 5.4.3., AVS 6.95.1, and AVS 19.39.6. These hymns express the same opinion: that the Ashvattha tree is the seat of a *deva* in the third heaven. The question then arises, who is the *deva* that lives in this sacred tree? Loosely and popularly translated 'divine being' but etymologically, the Vedic *deva* word comes from the root 'div', 'shiny', 'exalted' which means it is linked with brightness, suggesting that it could be either fire, the sun, or any celestial being those glows<sup>15</sup>. However, this identification needs to be validated by other collective information on the seal.

### c. A standing figure in the Ashvattha tree

The most important part of seal art is figuring out who the figure in the Ashvattha is. The identification of goats and the Ashvattha tree is agreed upon universally, but the interpretation of this figure is obscured by the art. Ichnographically speaking, the features that are depicted are a headgear and braided hair; this is limited information and a common feature among the IVC seal art. Since the figure itself does not provide any significant help, we take clues from the known objects, such as the goat and Ashvattha tree.

In this case, the figure in the Ashvattha should be Agni, the Vedic deity for fire. Two reasons are there to admit this notion. One is the fire that carries the sacrificial offerings to the fathers, when a goat is the offering. The fire carries the sacrificed goat to the heavens. Agni is *Jataveda*, who knows the beginnings (of the sacrificial birth of the goat), AVS 18.3.42. Thus, the illustrated goat in front of the event is supposed to be a sacrifice. The question 'AVS 18.2.53 asks O Agni-and-Soma, makers of roads, who shall carry goat-traveled roads?' RVS 10.16 answers 'the way fire is carried as the scapegoat and reaches the light (sun) through the mediator Agni'.

The second suggestion comes from the Ashvattha tree, which has unique importance in the sacrifice rituals; it is one of the woods recommended for creating fire according to the Yajurveda and is used as firewood. According to Taittiriya Brahmana<sup>16</sup> 1.1.9.1, churning or kindling the fire with fire sticks (*arani*) made from trees like the Sami (*Prosopis Cineraria*) and Ashvattha (*peepal*) trees produces the sacred fire, Ashvattha is considered male and Sami is female<sup>17</sup>. This process is known as Agni-Manthana<sup>18</sup>. In AVS 13.2.46, it is mentioned that Agni has been awakened by the kindling of men to meet the dawn, which is compared to a milk cow. The lights (*bhanu*) are described as rising forth like young birds to a branch, and they go forth into the firmament (*naaka*).

### The worship of fire by Vedic seers

Fire played a central role in the religious beliefs and rituals of early Vedic society, and was viewed as a divine entity. One of the major purposes of fire is to carry the sacrifice victim to the father's land. The goat sacrifice process is expressed the same way in AVS 9.5, with the offering of a goat and five rice dishes, as in Kausika Sutra 64.6-16 in connection with the bringing in, slaughtering, and cooking of a goat. After the sacrifice of an animal, it is believed to go to the third firmament (*naaka*), which is the same as the third world, where gods reside in the Ashvattha tree. Agni is typically not described as a being that physically carries people or objects from earth to heaven. While he is associated with transformation, he is sometimes said to ascend to the heavens in a spiritual or symbolic sense.

### Long braided hair tradition

The personified deity on the seal is depicted with long hair, as is the figure making the offering. Similarly, the tradition of growing long hair was a custom among the Vedic people, with braided hair considered positive and loose hair considered negative. AVS 14.2.60 illustrates the negative energy associated with loose hair (*viksha*) in a house. Long, braided hair is associated with various figures in the Vedas, including gods, heroes, priests, and women.

The two dedicated hymns of AVS 6.136 and 6.137 explain the usage of herbal remedies to grow long hair, fix hair problems, and increase the length of hair. This suggests that there was a specific, interest-based necessity for long hair in Vedic culture. The hymn RVS 7.83.8 states that the white-robed *Trtsus*, who were skilled in song and worshipped Indra-Varuna with hymns and homage, had braided hair. This indicates that priests and singers needed long hair for their rituals. The sun is also described in the Vedas as having golden, yellow, and braided hair. Additionally, both Rudra and the worshipper were praised for their hair in RVS 1.114.5 and RVS 1.114.1, respectively. RVS 10.136 explains how long hair supports Agni and Muni: "He with the long locks of hair supports Agni, as well as moisture, heaven, and earth; He is the entire sky to behold: He with long hair is called this light." The Munis wear earth-coloured garments and are girded with the wind, following the wind's swift course to where the gods have gone before.



In AVS 6.137.1, an herb is mentioned that Jamadagni dug for his daughter to increase her hair length. This herb was later brought from Asita's house by Vitahavya after the gods had enjoyed his oblations. It is unclear who Asita is and what her relationship with hair is, but the desire for black hair to grow out of the head like reeds is expressed.

Overall, the tradition of long hair in Vedic culture was closely associated with Agni or Surya, and there were specific needs and reasons for growing long hair. Priests, singers, and munis needed long hair for their rituals, and herbs were used to enhance hair growth and fix hair problems.

### **Headgear**

The figure standing upright with bull horns and the seated figure both possess similar bull horns, but the latter features an additional Ashvattha branch. It's possible that this piece of art is based on the many Vedic gods who are connected to bulls. The Ashvattha tree, on the other hand, may point to a connection to fire worship. Headgear was also a common feature in the ancient world during that time, including in Egypt and Mesopotamia, often symbolising belonging to the celestial realm.

What does the flare shown on the bodies of the standing figures in the art mean?

In the picture, the hands of the standing figure stand out because they have a flare around them. This feature is significant from an artistic point of view. According to the Veda, the sun is described as being "flame-haired," as seen in AVS 13.2.23: "Seven yellow steeds, O heavenly sun, draw in the chariot to you, the flame-haired, the out-looking". This suggests that the flare depicted around the figure's hands may represent the fiery nature of the sun.

The figure sitting in front of the standing figure doesn't have the same flair, which is interesting. However, the seven figures standing below possess the same type of flare. This could indicate that these seven figures are connected to the same solar world as the standing figure, the Agni. The blazing body hair in the seven figures also shows their association with fire.

In Vedic tradition, Agni is often identified as the sun. AVS 13.3.13 confirms that Agni is Mitra in the morning and becomes Varuna in the evening. This further reinforces the idea that the figures in the artwork may be related to solar worship, the fiery nature of the sun, and the role of Agni in Vedic tradition.

### **d. The Symbolic Meaning of the Seven Standing Figures**

The seven figures on the bottom side of the Indus seal look a lot like the fire god. For example, they both have long braided hair and flared bodies. Notably, the figures are arranged in such a way that they face the same direction as the fire deity, indicating a potential connection to fire. However, contrary to some scholarly opinions, they are not merely visitors to the scene. Instead, they seem to have a role in the sacrificial ritual, given that they are arranged in a line (the H-97 A seal found in Harappa is broken and depicts seven figures arranged in a line holding hands) and facing the opposite direction to the goat and the sitting figure.

As all the figures face the same direction as the fire deity, it suggests that they have some relationship with fire, but they are not necessarily the same entities as the fire deity. To tell them apart from the fire god, the artist gave the fire god horns and gave each of the seven figures a pigtail. This differentiation suggests that, although they share the function of being receivers, they represent different entities.

The seven figures on the Indus valley seal show that they took part in the sacrificial ritual and show their connection to fire, even though they were not the fire gods. The presence of physical differences between the seven figures and the fire deity suggests that they are of the same kind but different entities.

The hymns show that the Vedic tradition recognises the sacrificial links between Agni and seven other things. In AVS 4.39.10, it is said that Agni has seven mouths through which he receives ritual offerings. This means that there are seven people or things that are supposed to receive the offerings. Their different hairstyles suggest that they are connected to fire but are not the same as Agni. Thus, the question arises as to who these fire-related entities are.

The need to distinguish between multiple entities associated with a deity in AVS narratives is underscored. According to AVS 9.9, the seven entities are inhabitants of the solar world. AVS 9.4 and AVS 15 are possibly the most relevant hymns in this context. AVS 9.9.1 describes how the goat is asked to establish the earth and sky with the seven-rayed back of the firmament. AVS 9.5.18 describes how a cooked goat provides five rice dishes and prevents one individual from entering hell. It can also transport the user to the heavenly realm and help conquer planets with suns. The seven seers are solar gods because the goat is expected to attain enlightenment. However, they are also considered fathers. In AVS 9.5.11, the goat with five rice dishes is given to a priest in this world and drives away darkness. AVS 9.5.16 describes the goat as being capable of foretelling the pure world and going to heaven. In AVS 9.5.30, the invoker calls upon his ancestors, himself, his family, and loved ones.



The fire god and the seven figures show that they believed in honouring their ancestors and that ritual sacrifice was an important part of their culture.

#### e. The sitting figure

The figure in the image is offering his obligations in front of the sacred Ashvattha tree, not to the plant but to the deity believed to reside inside it. Given the two horns on his head and the Ashvattha tree branch perched atop them, he appears to be the tribe's leader or a priest. The fire and seven Adityas (suns) are depicted with a fiery blaze, but the person is not, indicating that he is not a deity.

The wearing of celestial headgear confirms that the clan to which the priest belongs claims to be from the celestial world, as they are the fire priests. The textual reference in AVS 6.123 requests a successful offering by the Bhrgu priest. This is further mentioned in AVS 4.14, where Agni is asked to let the sacrificer go to heaven in agreement with the Bhrgu. AVS 9.5 states that no harm should come to the sacrificer since the priest is innocent and that the innocent (anaagas) are the sacrificer's heroes. The innocence of the priest is emphasised as a key factor in ensuring the well-being of the sacrificer.

The majority of hymns that match the goat sacrifice ritual come from Rishi composers named Brigu or Bhrguangirasas. These include AVS 6.95 Bhgvannngiras, AVS 6.123 Bhgu, AVS 4.14 Bhgu, AVS 9.5 Bhgu,

AVS 5.4 Bhgu, AVS 19.39 Bhgvangiras, AVS 4.39 Angiras, and AVS 4.11 Bhgvangiras. These hymns provide insights into the ancient Vedic practise of animal sacrifice and its significance in the Brahmanical tradition. They also shed light on the role of Rishi composers in shaping and preserving Vedic rituals and traditions.

#### f. Other Offerings

The artwork on the seal depicts some other unclear items along with the goat and the sitting priest. However, with the help of the accompanying text, it can be understood that the sacrifice is accompanied by five rice-messes (*odana*) offered with the spoon using the five fingers. In AVS 9.5.38, the offering of sacrificial butter is mentioned. AVS 9.5.22 states that by offering a goat with five rice dishes, the person attains an unlimited offering and an unlimited world (*avarudh*) and attains the heavenly realm. According to AVS 9.5.26, if a person offers a goat adorned with five gold ornaments, they attain the heavenly realm, and their garments become a protection for their body. These actions are believed to grant the person offering the sacrifice access to the heavenly realm and provide them with various forms of protection and unlimited offerings.

#### g. An inscription with five signs:

this aspect is beyond the scope of the present study.

### 3. CONCLUSION :

The discourse on a complex mythological 'goat sacrifice' event, significant in Vedic rituality and art, highlights the relationship between hymn composition and ritual knowledge. Agni, a prominent god in Vedic religion, is often depicted as a celestial being, acting as an intermediary between the human and divine realms. The iconography on the IVC seal closely aligns with descriptions of Agni in the Vedas, indicating the possibility of a complex religion in the Indus Valley civilization, potentially connected to Vedic theology. The seal belongs to the mature period of the Indus Valley civilization, which suggests that some or more of the hymns of the Vedas should be from that period, i.e., 2600 to 1900 BCE.

However, it is important to approach these claims with caution, as the relationship between the Indus Valley Civilization and the Vedic civilization is still a matter of scholarly debate. While the seal may provide evidence of a complex religion in the Indus Valley Civilization, it is not clear to what extent this religion was connected to Vedic theology, or whether the hymns of the Vedas were actually composed during the mature period of the Indus Valley Civilization.

Therefore, Further investigation is necessary to understand the complete religious aspects of the Indus-Vedic culture, including the exploration of other IVC seals that align with the Vedas.

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