

Ancient India's Use of Seals: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract: Particularly during the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600–1900 BCE) and later historical periods, the study of seals in ancient India offers vital insights into the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural fabric of early civilizations. This study summarizes the various applications of seals in ancient India by combining scholarly interpretations, archaeological discoveries, and epigraphic data to demonstrate their complex functions. Seals, which frequently bore elaborate inscriptions and imagery denoting ownership, trade links, or official roles, functioned as marks of identification, authority, and commerce. Steatite carvings with mysterious lettering and animal patterns on Indus seals suggest a highly developed trading network that extended throughout Mesopotamia and beyond. Later seals, such as those from the Mauryan and Gupta eras, illustrate how government, religious symbolism, and bureaucratic uniformity evolved over time. To shed light on regional influences and technological advancements, this study also examines the materials, craftsmanship, and stylistic variations of these seals. Through a critical engagement with primary sources and archaeological data, this study clarifies the significance of seals in understanding ancient Indian urban design, economic organization, and political administration. Additionally, it explores how the usage of seals has changed and remained consistent over time, establishing links between historical and pre-modern customs. The study emphasizes the necessity of further multidisciplinary research to unravel unresolved mysteries, particularly the undeciphered Indus script, which remains a major enigma in South Asian history. By highlighting the significance of seals as cultural artifacts that encode historical narratives beyond their administrative functions, this comprehensive review advances our understanding of ancient Indian society. The paper's conclusion underscores the implications of these findings for future linguistic and archaeological research.

Keywords: Ancient India, Art and iconography, Proto-writing, Seal inscriptions, Symbolism.

1. Introduction

Seals have played a crucial role in the history of human civilization, serving as instruments of authentication, trade, and communication. In ancient India, particularly during the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 2600–1900 BCE), seals were an integral part of administrative, economic, and cultural life. These artifacts, often crafted from steatite and other materials, provide valuable insights into the socio-economic, religious, and political aspects of early Indian societies. The study of seals helps researchers decode aspects of ancient Indian script, trade networks, and governance, offering a glimpse into the complexities of early civilization. This research paper aims to provide a descriptive study of the use of seals in ancient India, focusing on their artistic features, inscriptions, and functional significance. The seals of the Indus Valley Civilization, with their enigmatic symbols and animal motifs, are among the most well-documented examples. They were used not only as markers of identity and property but also possibly for religious or administrative purposes. The presence of seals in distant regions suggests their role in long-distance trade, linking ancient India with Mesopotamia and other contemporary civilizations. This study also examines how seals evolved over time and retained their importance in later historical periods. The transition from Harappan seals to those used during the Mauryan and Gupta regimes reflects changes in governance and economic structures. By analyzing the iconography, material composition, and inscriptions on these seals, this study seeks to reconstruct elements of ancient Indian life that remain unknown. To enhance our understanding of the function of seals in ancient India, this research employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical analysis, archaeology, and epigraphy. By shedding light on their diverse applications, this work contributes to the broader discourse on early urbanization, economic systems, and symbolic communication in the Indian subcontinent.

2. Epigraphic Evidence of Seals in Ancient India

Archaeological excavations across the Indian subcontinent have revealed thousands of seals from different historical periods, each offering valuable insights into their purpose, usage, and cultural significance. While the majority of these seals have been discovered in the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2600–1900 BCE), others belong to later dynasties, including the Mauryan, Kushan, and Gupta periods.

2.1. Indus Valley Civilization Seals (c. 2600–1900 BCE)

The Indus seals, primarily made of steatite, faience, and occasionally terracotta, are the most well-documented examples. Key findings include:

- **Sites:** Excavations at Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Lothal, Kalibangan, Dholavira, and Rakhigarhi have yielded a large number of seals.
- **Iconography:** These seals often depict animals (e.g., bulls, elephants, tigers, unicorns), human figures, and enigmatic symbols. Some feature a seated figure, possibly representing a proto-Shiva or a religious figure.
- **Inscriptions:** Many seals bear short inscriptions in the yet-to-be-deciphered Indus script, suggesting their use in administrative or trade-related activities.
- **Purpose:** Scholars believe they were used for trade authentication, ownership marking, and possibly as identity badges for merchants and officials. Some seals had perforations, indicating they might have been worn as amulets. It is speculated that these inscriptions represented names, official designations, or trade-related markings.
- **Foreign Connections:** Seals found in Mesopotamian sites (such as Sumer and Akkad) suggest that the Indus Valley Civilization was engaged in long-distance trade.



Fig 1 Seal from Indus Valley Civilization [Source: Harappa.com]

2.2. Mauryan and Post-Mauryan Seals (c. 4th–2nd Century BCE)

During the Mauryan Empire (c. 321–185 BCE), seals took on a more administrative and bureaucratic role:

- **Materials:** Typically made of terracotta, copper, or ivory.
- **Inscriptions:** Many Mauryan seals bear Brahmi script inscriptions, often with official designations or royal symbols, indicating their role in governance and taxation.
- **Ashokan Seals:** Some seals linked to Emperor Ashoka's administration feature his edicts, reinforcing state control and Buddhist influence.



Fig 2 Mauryan Seals [Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art]

2.3. Kushan and Gupta Period Seals (c. 1st–6th Century CE)

Seals from these periods reflect evolving artistic styles and political hierarchies:

- **Royal and Administrative Use:** Kushan and Gupta rulers used inscribed seals for official documents, taxation, and legal purposes.
- **Religious Symbols:** Many seals depict Hindu deities, Buddhist motifs, and inscriptions in Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts, highlighting the integration of religious and political authority.
- **Commercial Function:** Seals from trade hubs like Mathura and Ujjain indicate their role in merchant guilds, taxation, and authentication of goods.



Fig 3 Gupta Period Seals [Source: Marudhar Arts]

3. Scholarly Research

Scholarly research has extensively examined the multifaceted roles of seals in ancient India, particularly within the Indus Valley Civilization. These studies have illuminated aspects of administrative infrastructure, economic systems, and socio-religious practices.

3.1. Administrative and Economic Functions

Seals were integral to the administrative framework of the Indus Civilization. Each stamp seal resulted from a unique sequence of actions, reflecting specific social relations and operational sequences among seal carvers. This uniqueness suggests that seals functioned as badges of authority and tools for administrative control. Further research indicates that seals and tablets may have played a role in rationing and labor administration. Parallels drawn with proto-Elamite and proto-Cuneiform inscriptions suggest that these artifacts could have recorded rations allocated to laborers, implying a structured economic system.

3.2. Iconography and Religious Significance

The iconography on Indus seals, such as the "Pashupati" seal depicting a horned figure in a yogic posture, has been subject to various interpretations. Some scholars associate this imagery with proto-Shiva representations, while others caution against definitive identifications due to the undeciphered script and limited contextual understanding.

3.3. Challenges in Decipherment

The undeciphered nature of the Indus script remains a significant challenge. Despite numerous attempts, a consensus on the script's meaning has yet to be reached. Recent initiatives, such as the announcement of a substantial monetary reward for decipherment, highlight ongoing efforts and the script's importance in understanding the Indus Civilization.

3.4. Evolution and Cultural Interactions

Studies have also explored how Indus seals and their iconography were adopted and transformed by neighboring cultures, particularly in the Persian Gulf region. This rapid evolution reflects social and economic changes, indicating dynamic cultural interactions during the decline of the Indus Civilization. In addition, academic studies stress the importance and intricacy of seals in ancient India, emphasizing their functions in governance, commerce, religion, and cross-cultural interactions. However, pending further research and the possible decipherment of the Indus script, the full scope of their roles remains only partially understood.

4. Notable Examples of the Use of Seals in Ancient India

Seals from ancient India, particularly from the Indus Valley Civilization and later historical periods, provide important insights into trade, administration, and cultural practices. Below are some notable examples:

4.1. The Pashupati Seal (Mohenjo-Daro, c. 2500 BCE)

- **Description:** This famous seal depicts a seated figure, possibly a proto-Shiva (Pashupati), surrounded by animals (elephant, tiger, rhinoceros, and buffalo).
- **Significance:** Scholars suggest it represents early religious beliefs, linking it to later Hindu traditions.
- **Function:** It may have been used for religious or administrative purposes, possibly as a symbol of a ruling authority or cult.

4.2. Unicorn Seals (Harappa & Mohenjo-Daro, c. 2600–1900 BCE)

- **Description:** Numerous seals feature a mythical one-horned animal (unicorn) with inscriptions in the Indus script.
- **Significance:** The unicorn motif is unique to the Indus Valley Civilization, possibly symbolizing a powerful clan or trade guild.
- **Function:** Likely used for trade, authentication of goods, or official documents.

4.3. Persian Gulf Trade Seals (Lothal, c. 2400 BCE)

- **Description:** Seals found at Lothal, a major port city, include Indus script and animal motifs.
- **Significance:** Some of these seals have been found in Mesopotamian sites, providing evidence of active maritime trade between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia.
- **Function:** Used in trade transactions to mark ownership or certify shipments.

4.4. Mauryan Seals (c. 4th–2nd Century BCE)

- **Description:** Seals from the Mauryan period bear Brahmi inscriptions with titles like *Rajaputra* (prince) and *Amatya* (minister).
- **Significance:** These seals reflect the highly organized bureaucratic system under the Mauryan Empire.
- **Function:** Used for official state documents, taxation, and administrative control.

4.5. Gupta Period Seals (c. 4th–6th Century CE)

- **Description:** Gupta-era seals often feature inscriptions of royal names, deities (such as Vishnu and Lakshmi), and merchant guilds.
- **Significance:** They reflect the growing economic and religious influence of the period.
- **Function:** Used for legal and commercial documentation, taxation, and religious grants.

These notable examples highlight the diverse roles that seals played in ancient India—ranging from trade authentication to administrative control and religious symbolism. Their study continues to provide key insights into the socio-economic and political structures of early Indian civilizations.

5. Conclusion

The study of seals in ancient India reveals their profound significance in shaping the socio-economic, political, and cultural landscape of early civilizations. From the enigmatic seals of the Indus Valley Civilization to the bureaucratic and commercial seals of later dynasties, these artifacts serve as crucial documentary evidence of administrative sophistication, trade networks, and religious beliefs. Their presence across various archaeological sites highlights the evolution of governance, commerce, and identity marking, demonstrating a continuity of administrative practices across different historical periods. The role of seals became more codified with the rise of great empires like the Mauryan and Gupta dynasties. Mauryan-era seals, which frequently feature Brahmi inscriptions, reflect the emergence of a bureaucratic state with organized administrative authority. Similarly, Gupta-period seals emphasize not only governmental administration but also the influence of religion and trade, as evidenced by merchant guild inscriptions and religious symbols. Despite significant research, many aspects of these seals—particularly those of the Indus Valley—remain unknown. Future multidisciplinary studies incorporating digital imaging, linguistic analysis, and archaeology may offer new insights into their functions and significance. The ongoing discovery of seals across South Asia further underscores their importance in understanding historical trade patterns, governance systems, and social structures. In conclusion, the study of seals in ancient India is not just an exploration of administrative tools but a deeper inquiry into the evolution of civilization itself. These small yet powerful artifacts encapsulate historical narratives, bridging the past with the present. As research progresses, seals will continue to serve as silent witnesses to India's rich and diverse past, offering new perspectives on the history of South Asia.

6. References

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