

# Tales of Three Worlds

Archaeology and beyond:  
Asia, Italy, Africa

A tribute to Sandro Salvatori



Edited by

Donatella Usai, Stefano Tuzzato and Massimo Vidale

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Cover illustrations: Sandro Salvatori during the excavation of the Central Quarters at Shahr-e-Sokhta (Iran) (back cover photo); painted decoration on a pot from the Bronze Age site of Shahr-e-Sokhta (Iran) (background)

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# How Did a Chimaera Get Lost in Margush? Indus-Related Seals from Bronze Age Oases Along the Amu Darya and Murghab Rivers

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a coherent collection of Indus-related stone seals and tablets from Bactria and Margiana, detailing their morphological and iconographic features and indicating comparisons with equivalent seals found in the greater Indus Valley of present-day Pakistan and northwestern India. Overall, these objects reveal a new aspect of the settlement pattern in the oases flourished along the Oxus river during the Middle Bronze Age, with specific reference to the seminal paper by Sandro Salvatori (2008), 'The Margiana Settlement Pattern from the Middle Bronze Age to the Parthian-Sasanian Period: A Contribution to the Study of Complexity'. A few other miscellaneous hybrid-seals with features of both the Oxus and the Indus seal productions, including the representation in local style of a typical Harappan chimaera, will also be presented to further stress the duration and significance of the commercial and cultural links between these two macro-regions along the third and in the first half of the second millennium BC.

**Keywords:** Oxus Civilization, BMAC, Indus Civilization, ancient seals, ancient long-distance trade

I owe to Sandro a lot of knowledge and of field experience, and a lot of patience. When he took me for the first time in Iran, to dig at Shahr-i Sokhta, I was an unbearable young person with the problems of that developmental age. Asia was enormous, the nights were cold, the sky full of stars and a crackly radio from Tashkent was our only link with the outer world. In such a seclusion, we spent together months, first on the trenches, than at home, drawing each single potsherd we had recovered from 'closed' stratigraphic associations. The sequence we could reconstruct is still the only one so far available for the 3rd millennium BC in Sistan. Marcello Piperno, in the evenings, used to teach me lithics. Sandro spent hours of his time to explain to me (while I was more and more irritated) why we had to map, on the clay floor of the main room of the 'House of the Jars' of the Central Quarters, a scatter of potsherds and few animal bones, even though I could see, below these items, a 1 cm thick level of wind-blown sediments. For me, it was another phase – and in strict terms I may have been right; but through that discussion I understood that whatever we recognize in archaeology has to come to terms with a clear and unprejudiced perception of our power of observation and the conventional categories we nevertheless will continue to use. The lesson – only one among the many I got from him – was just memorable. I am happy to dedicate this short note to one of my most important teachers, in memory of those good old seasons of ours (Massimo Vidale).

Victor Sarianidi's volume entitled 'Myths of Ancient Bactria and Margiana on its Seals and Amulets' (1998) contains photographs of several seals and tablets that, although lacking a precise provenance and dating, form a rather coherent group with unmistakable traits of the early and mature Indus seal production (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

According to Sarianidi (1998: 17, 47):

'Very interesting are the miniature seals and amulets of brittle gypsum found in Bactria and Margiana. Such seals and amulets bear the images of animals that have direct parallels in the art of the Indian subcontinent. [...] These images were so widespread in the Indus Valley that it seems only natural to consider India to be their homeland whence they came to Bactria and Margiana. [...] Such a characteristic group of artefacts consists of

<sup>1</sup> All archaeologists sooner or later face the same dilemma about studying and publishing artefacts retrieved from bazaars or the antiquary market. On one side, publishing antiquities without provenience and/or illegally unearthed and exported for sale supports the market, eventually giving credit and enhancing the value of pieces that have been stolen and robbed forever of their archaeological and historical context. This choice possibly promotes further destruction. On the other hand, there is nothing to gain in hiding artefacts in obscure drawers, and there are exceptional pieces that are so relevant in themselves that ignoring them would only add damage to damage, by hiding forever important historical evidence. We believe that the objects presented in this paper, with specific reference to the previously unpublished seal with the 'Harappan Chimaera', are one of such relevant cases.

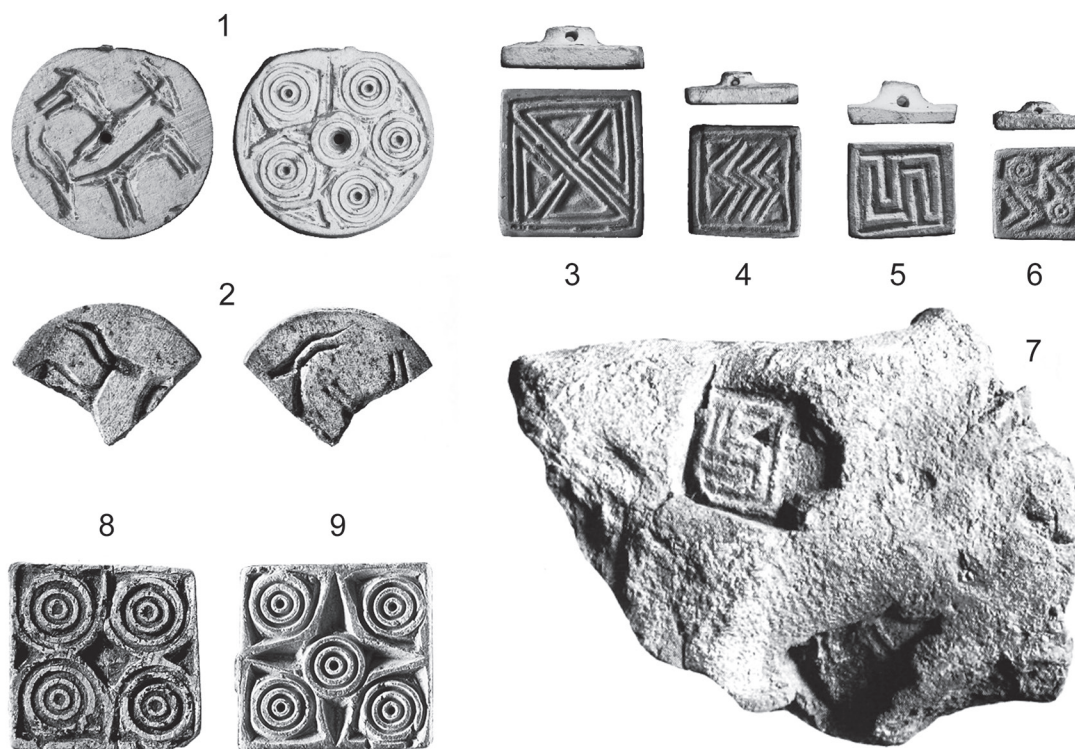


Figure 1. Stamp seals from the Early Indus levels (ca. 2800-2600 BC) of Kunal (1, 3-6), Taraqai Qila (2, 8), Lewan Dheri (7) and Harappa (9) (for Kunal, courtesy A. Konasukawa; for Taraqai Qila and Lewan Dheri, courtesy A. Parpola; for Harappa, courtesy Harappa Archaeological Research Project).

brittle plates of white alabaster, either with handles on their back side, or with wide pierced lugs on the side surface. Such plates were found in Margiana, as well as in Bactria. [...] These plates were cut of such brittle material that they hardly could have served as amulets in everyday life'.<sup>2</sup>

These Indus-related seals and tablets will be described in the following paragraphs detailing their morphological and iconographic features and indicating the closest comparisons with equivalent seals found in the Indus Valley. Overall, they suggest a new aspect of the settlement pattern in the 'micro-oases' that flourished along the Oxus river during the Middle Bronze Age, with specific reference to the model proposed by Sandro Salvatori (2008), 'The Margiana Settlement Pattern from the Middle Bronze Age to the Parthian-Sasanian Period: A Contribution to the Study of Complexity'.

A few other miscellaneous hybrid-seals with features of both the Oxus and the Indus seal productions,

<sup>2</sup> In these sentences and throughout the entire catalogue, brittle 'gypsum' and 'white alabaster' are improper terms. The material of which the small seals and tablets are made is probably fired steatite (less likely faience), possibly glazed, while the brittleness noticed by Sarianidi was probably due to a post-depositional alteration of their surface.

including the representation in local style of a typical Harappan chimaera, will also be presented to further stress the duration and significance of the commercial and cultural links between these two regions during the whole third and in the first half of the second millennium BC.

**Round and square stamp seals (Figure 1)**

Cat. no. 1324 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Round stamp seal in 'gypsum', most likely fired steatite, featuring three equidistant dot-in-circles motifs separated by a roughly Y-shaped forked cross. This seal is a round variant of cat. no. 1346, which has three dot-in-circles as well, and cat. nos 1347-1350 and 1354/2, which have four dot-in-circles. These seals clearly resemble round and square specimens from the Early Harappan levels of Harappa, Taraqai Qila and Kunal (Kenoyer 2001: 9, Fig. 3.7; Shah and Parpola 1991: 414, Trq-2; Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.1, 1.3) (Figure 1.1, 1.8-9).

Cat. no. 1325 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Round stamp seal in 'gypsum', most likely fired steatite, with a thick five-line zigzag pattern carved in a square. This motif is identical to that of an Early Harappan square seal from Kunal (Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.4) (Figure 1.4).

Cat. no. 1345 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Square stamp seal in 'gypsum', most likely fired steatite, with a four-line X-shaped saltire cross design carved in a square. This motif fits into the iconographic tradition of the Early Harappan stamp seals decorated with geometric designs composed of multi-line angular patterns, including also cat. nos 1325 (for examples, see Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 1.7).

Cat. no. 1346 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Square stamp seal in 'gypsum', most likely fired steatite, featuring three dot-in-circles motifs separated by irregular triangles carved in a square. For variants of this motif in the Early Harappan seal production, see cat. no. 1324.

Cat. nos. 1347 and 1349 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Square stamps seals in 'gypsum', most likely fired steatite, with a dot-in-circles motif at each corner framed in a cross-like partition. The seal is quite similar to specimens in fired steatite found at Harappa, Rehman-Dheri, Tarakai Qila and Kunal, which are all firmly dated to the Early Harappan Phase, ca. 2800-2600 BC (Kenoyer 2001: 9, Fig. 3.7; 2005: Fig. 3b; Durrani *et al.* 1995; Shah and Parpola 1991: 414, cat. no. Trq-2; Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.3) (Figure 1.8). For variants of the same geometric design see also cat. nos. 1348, 1350, 1354/2 and 1728/2.

Cat. nos. 1348 and 1350 (Garner's collection, Kabul Bazaar, Bactria). Square stamps seals in 'gypsum', most likely fired steatite, featuring four dot-in-circles motifs at the corners separated by a four-ray star with one more dot-in-circles in its centre. This design is documented on comparable Early Harappan seals found at Harappa and Tarakai Qila (Kenoyer 2001: 9, Fig. 7.3; Shah and Parpola 1991: 414, Trq-2) (Figure 1.9).

Cat. nos. 1343-1344 (Kabul Bazaar, Bactria). Stone round seals featuring a design composed of two kidney or womb-like designs symmetrically placed in a circle. The kidney/womb design has obvious links in the decoration of Indus softstone vessels, pottery containers and stone amulet-seals (Marshall 1931: pl. LXXXVII/4, XC/24; Kenoyer 2013: 114-115) (Figure 4 centre right).

### Two-sided snapped stone tablets (Figure 3)

The stone tablets described in this paragraph were probably part of a symmetric micro-tablet aimed at being snapped into identical halves intended to be kept by two stakeholders or trade partners as a record. If joined, the two parts of the tablet might have certified the validity of a given agreement or commercial transaction between the two parties. The four tablets bear on one side a naturalistic motif, including either zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures, and on the opposite side a geometric design.

Comparable snapped tablets in fired steatite and faience were found at Harappa (Joshi and Parpola 1987: 230, H-349), although most of them were carved or molded (in the case of faience) in a different style (Joshi and Parpola 1987: 215, H-232, H-236; Kenoyer 2005: Figs. 3.3, 3.15 and 4.3).

Cat. no. 1728/1-2 (Adam Basan 10, Turkmenistan). Two-sided snapped tablet in fired steatite or faience. On one side, a caprid opposed to another only partially survived animal, most probably another smaller caprid, forming a similar motif to that on cat. no. 1354/1; on the other side, part of what seems to be the same design of cat. nos 1346 or 1348, 1350 and 1354/2, featuring respectively three or four dot-in-circles motifs separated by triangles or a four-ray star with one more dot-in-circles in the centre. Early Harappan seals from Kunal, Tarakai Qila, Rehman Dheri and Harappa feature identical motifs and designs (Kenoyer 2001: 9, Fig. 3.7; 2005: Fig. 3b; Durrani *et al.* 1995; Shah and Parpola 1991: 414, cat. no. Trq-2; Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.3) (Figure 1.1-2, 1.8-9). This find is of primary interest because it is the only one, in the group of the snapped tablets, that was recovered from a known context.

Cat. no. 1351/1-2 (Kabul Bazaar, Bactria). Two-sided snapped tablet in fired steatite or faience. On one side, a stylized human figure with long arms ending in pinch-like hands; on the other side, a square framing two opposed chevrons divided by a line.

Cat. no. 1352/1-2 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Two-sided snapped tablet in fired steatite or faience. On one side, a goat and a bird or fish; on the other side, an S-like angular design. The zoomorphic motif is identical to that decorating cat. no. 1353/1 and they might have been both carved by the same person. The geometric design is stylistically and geometrically akin to Early Harappan seals found at Harappa, Kunal and Gumla, as well as impressed on a clay sealing from Lewan Dheri (Kenoyer 2005: Fig. 3a; Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.2 and 1.5; Shah and Parpola 1991: 394, G-11; 400, Lwn-1) (Figure 1.1-2, 1.5, 1.7).

Cat. no. 1353/1-2 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Two-sided snapped tablet in fired steatite or faience. On one side, a goat and a bird or fish; on the other side, a swastika motif. Swastika was a powerful cosmic symbol in the Indus Tradition and it was used to brand stamp seals and terracotta tablets since the mid-fourth millennium BC (Kenoyer 1998: 108; Kenoyer 2001: Fig. 3.1). Interestingly, it was often carved on the opposite side of other distinctive icons (for examples, see Shah and Parpola 1991: 151, cat. no. M-1225; Kenoyer 1998: 85; Fig. 5.10). For the zoomorphic motif, see cat. no. 1352/1. A stamp seal decorated with a swastika motif was also found at Altyn Depe (Masson 1981: Fig. 1).



Figure 2. Indus-related stamp seals from Bactria (composed after Sarianidi 1998).

Cat. no. 1354/1-2 (Garner’s collection, Bactria). Two-sided snapped tablet in fired steatite or faience. On one side, two caprids one of which is slightly smaller; on the other side, four dot-in-circles motifs at the corners separated by a four-ray star with one more dot-in-circles in its centre, which closely resembles the design of cat. nos. 1348 and 1350. The combination of the same zoomorphic motif on one side and of a very similar geometric pattern on the other side is documented on a two-sided round seals found in the Early Harappan levels of Kunal, while another two-sided round seals from Tarakai Qila bears zoomorphic motifs with two caprids on both sides; the geometric design with dot-in-circles is documented also at Tarakai Qila and Harappa (respectively, Konasukawa 2012: 32, Fig. 1.1; Shah and Parpola 1991: 414, Trq-1, Trq-2; Kenoyer 2001: 3.7) (Figure 1.1-2, 1.8-9).

**Prismatic and cylinder seals (Figure 3)**

Cat. no. 1784/1-3 (Gonur South, Room 509, Turkmenistan). A three-sided prism in copper with a lion and a winged dragon on the first two sides and a three-headed bovid of the third one. The lion and the winged dragon are both local subjects and they were portrayed following closely the stylistic tradition of the Oxus glyptic. Although formally similar to the first two creatures, the three-headed animal is instead an Indus template (for examples of comparable three-headed animals in the Indus seal production, see Joshi and Parpola 1987: cat nos. M-298, K-43; Shah and Parpola 1991: cat nos. M-1169 to M-1171) (Figure 4 top).

Cat. no. 1451 (Kabul bazaar, Bactria). Imprint of a rare cylinder seal in chlorite featuring a humped zebu bull





Figure 3. Two-sided snapped tables and miscellaneous seals with Indus-related motifs found in Bactria and Margiana (composed after Sarianidi 1998).



M-1169



M-1171



M-18



M-1656



Figure 4. Indus seals from Mohenjo-Daro with a three-headed animal (top) and an Indus unicorn (center) (courtesy, A. Parpola); intersecting-circle motifs decorating an Indus jar from Chanhu-Daro (courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

(on the left) and a unicorn bull (on the right) bow in front of a prominent tree. The single horn of the animal on the right has the same sinuous shape of that of the famous Harappan unicorns and it also protrudes from the same, advanced position on the animal's head (Kenoyer 2013; Frenze 2018a) (Figure 4 center). The tree seems to have a threefold trunk and ovoidal features at the end of the branches, possibly representing fruits. Overall, it recalls a type of fig tree such as the banyan

(*Ficus benghalensis*) and the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), both important religious symbols in the Indus Tradition (Kenoyer 1998: 105 ff.). Above the animals, a flying bird with outstretched wings and a winding snake are simply sketched. Both such animals are part of the Oxus iconographic tradition and they might represent a local integration to powerful foreign symbols. The use of hybrid motifs is not uncommon in the Indus-related seals used in different regions of Middle Asia during

the last centuries of the third millennium BC, including the Oxus (Frenez 2018b: 15, Fig. 2/1-4). An alternative interpretation sees these two elements of the design resembling those used as fillers above animal and trees in the painted pottery of the Kulli culture (for the 'winding snake' on Kulli pottery, see Lombardo and Vidale 2014: 90-97). In this case, the cylinder seal might point to the Baluchi hinterland rather than to the Indus valley and its dating might waver around the half of the third millennium BC.

Cat. no. 1477 (Garner's collection, Bactria). Cylinder seal in a brownish softstone with a copper tube still embedded in the perforation. The cylinder was decorated with a complex geometric pattern based on the intersecting-circle motif characteristic of various pottery and terracotta productions in the Indus Tradition since the Regionalization Era in the second half of the fourth millennium BC and throughout the third millennium BC (Kenoyer 2001: 62-63 and Fig. 4/3; Marshall 1931: Pl. LXXXVII/4, XC/22; Mackay 1938:

plate LXVII/21-24; Kenoyer 1998: 108, 153 and Fig. 1.1; Bisht 2015: 607, Fig. 8.325) (Figure 4 bottom).

### A Harappan Chimaera from Margush?

A double-sided seal typical of the Oxus Civilization, which appeared for a short time in the gallery of a famous European dealer of antiques, has caught our attention due to the peculiarity of the iconography decorating one of its faces, in which we immediately recognized the simplified rendering of a Harappan chimaera (for a detailed description and analysis of this complex iconography, see Frenez and Vidale 2012) (Figure 5). The opposite face shows a beautiful bird with a wavy plumage, resembling a phoenix or, more likely, a peacock rendered in a specific Indus style. This object would have therefore been relevant not only for understanding the iconography tradition of the Oxus Civilization, but also for reconstructing the complex patterns of interaction with the Indus Valley that

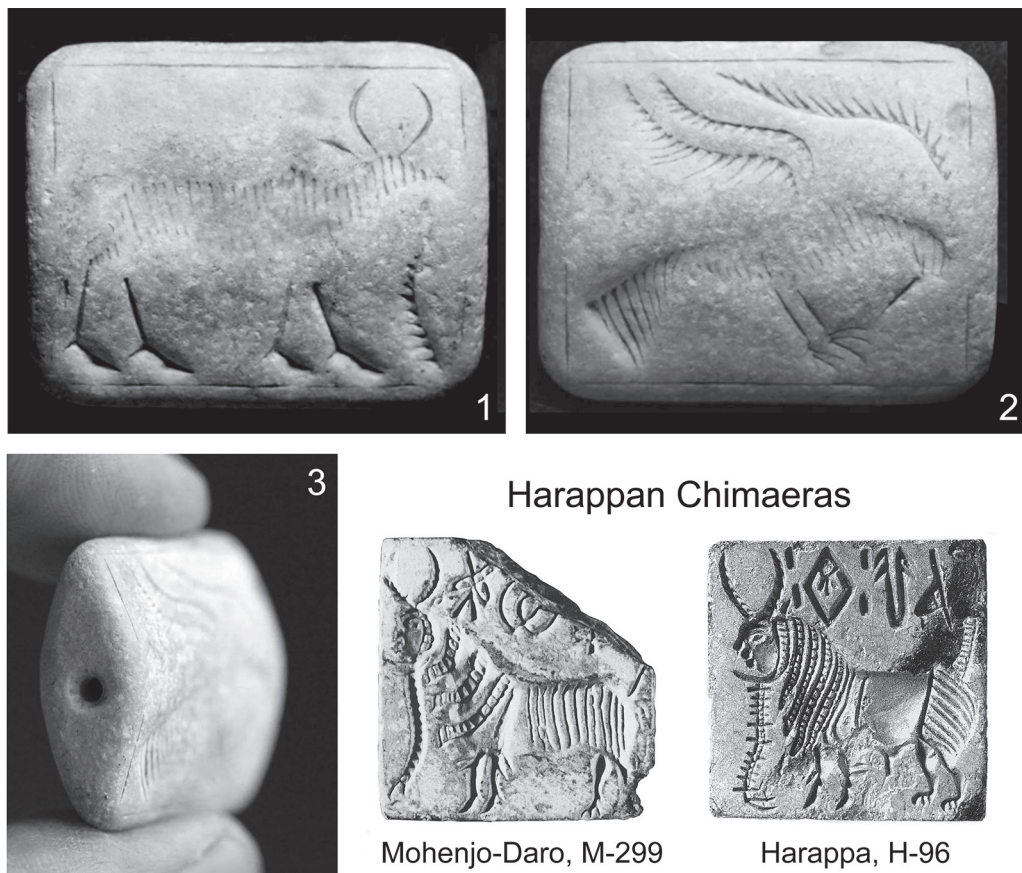


Figure 5. Two-sided stone seal with a composite creature and a winged peacock of the Indus iconographic tradition rendered following the local Oxus style and comparison with two Indus seals with the so-called Harappan chimaera (for the Indus seals courtesy, A. Parpola).

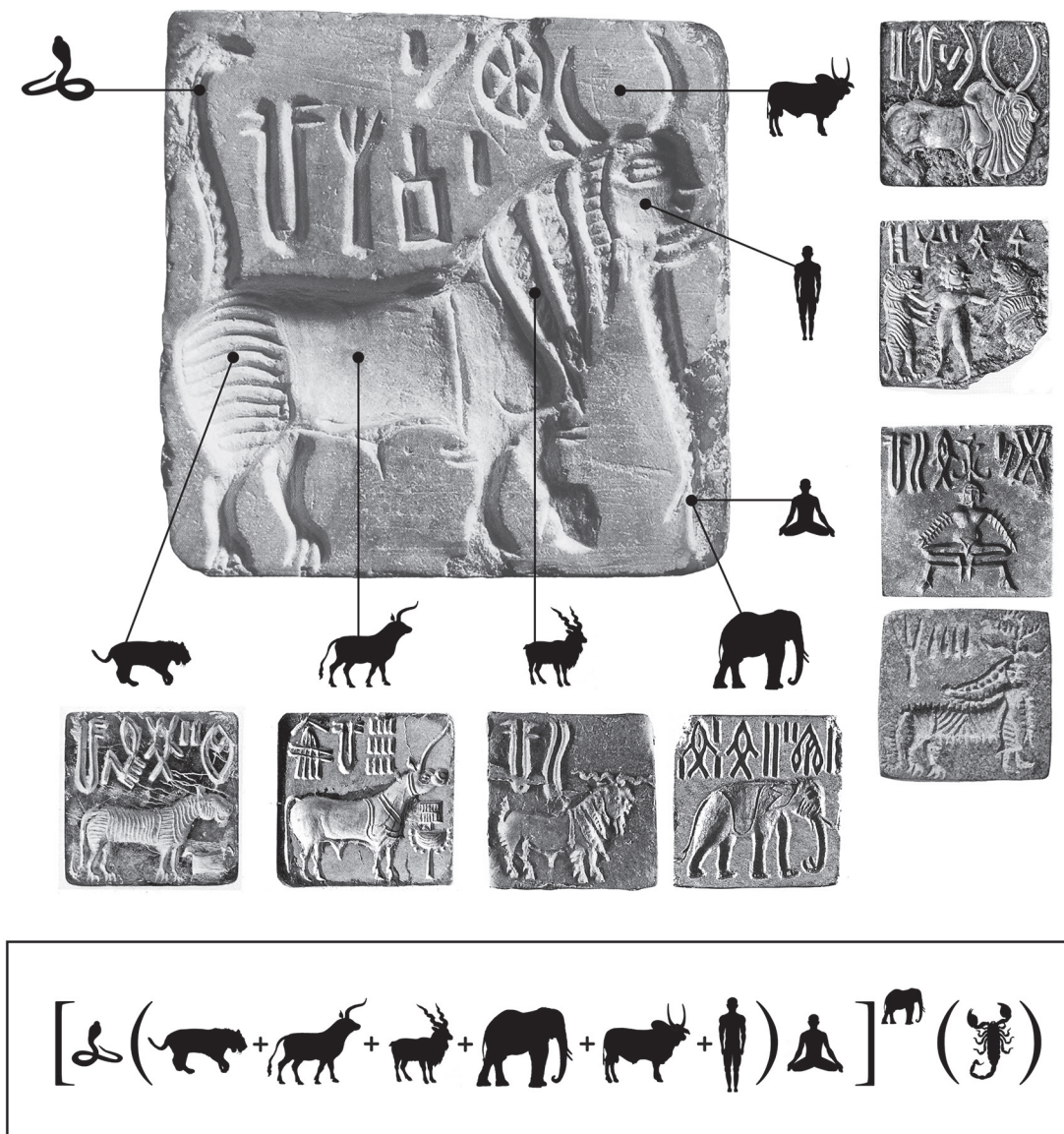


Figure 6. A Harappan chimaera and its different components with the expression summarizing the complex hypertextual syntax (from Frenez and Vidale 2012).

occurred during the second half of the third and the beginning of the second millennium BC.<sup>3</sup>

This bifacial seal was made of a whitish material, most probably limestone, but faience cannot be excluded. It is rectangular, measuring ca. 32 x 25 mm, with a lenticular section measuring ca. 10 mm in its thicker central point, where it has been perforated lengthwise (Figure 5.1-3). On one face, it shows the worn image of a composite horned creature clearly inspired to one of the most complex animal-human iconographies of the Indus imagery. As detailed by the present authors

<sup>3</sup> A first fundamental question deals with its authenticity. We believe that the cognitive system of replication and manipulation of an obscure Indus imagery is too exceptional and precise to have been conceived and expressed by a contemporary forger.

in a previous paper, Figure 6 summarizes the complex system of multilevel intuitive associations that composed the so-called Harappan chimaera (Frenez and Vidale 2012). Despite having a human face, the horns of a zebu, the tusks and trunk of an elephant, the forelegs of a wild goat, the central body of bull and the hind legs of a tiger, and a tall cobra in place of the tail, such a monstrous composition hints also to the presence of a human figure, being the trunk-like section actually a human arm covered with bangles, and to a scorpion composed by the arm/trunk, the face and the horns.

Their formal peculiarity and the powerful appearance of their bodies, obtained by assembling parts of powerful wild animals, suggest that chimaeras might have symbolically represented an important status or rank



Figure 7. Peacocks painted on a dish from Karanpura (photograph by V. N. Prabhakar, courtesy, Archaeological Survey of India) and a jar from Cemetery H at Harappa (courtesy, Harappa Archaeological Research Project ).

in the institutional framework of the Indus societies, if not, as maintained by other scholars, supernatural entities (Frenez and Vidale 2012: 119-122).

For what concerns the creature represented on the bifacial seal here presented, as observed in other animal icons of ancient Margiana, the legs are linear. However, they remind the basic articulation of the bovid hooves in the standard Indus stamp seals. The body is entirely covered with vertical lines recalling the stripes of a tiger. In this case, however, the difference with the vertical bands on the neck, which in the classical Harappan chimaera belongs to a markhor wild goat, was not clearly rendered. The head is almost completely worn out and the elephant's tusks are lost, but the trunk segments are perfectly visible, as well as the big lunate horns borrowed from the zebu. A shallow carving trace seems to suggest that the tail was not erect to resemble a snake in attack position, but rather rendered more realistically as that of a tiger or a bull. The seal was undoubtedly carved by a skilled craftsperson who was familiar with the semantic intricacies of Indus iconography but was also a competent carver of the seal styles common in the palaces of Margiana, distinguished by regular, serrated hatchings of the inner bodies of fantastic creatures.

The assessment of the stratigraphic contexts of the seals and tablets bearing classical Harappan chimaeras found at Indus Civilization sites, with the greatest majority from Mohenjo-Daro, showed that they were introduced and used mostly in the central centuries of second half of the third millennium BC, equal to Harappa Period 3B (ca. 2450-2200 BC) (Frenez and Vidale 2012: 116-117). However, a simplified version of this iconography was in use throughout the final phase of the Indus Civilization from ca. 2200 to 1700 BC, equal to Harappa Periods 3C and 4 (Frenez and Vidale 2012: 118 and Fig. 9).

The animal represented on the opposite side of the seal seems to confirm such a late dating. Breaking one of the most important iconographic codes of the Oxus seals, where birds are usually eagles or vultures, it recalls in fact the characteristic 'peacocks' painted on the purple-red surfaces of the Late Harappan pottery of Cemetery H at Harappa during to the first half of the second millennium BC (for examples, see Vats 1940: pls. LXII, 1(a), 2, 3, 6, 8, 13, 15; LXIII, 12; LIV, 6-8), which have been recently found represented also on a potsherd dated instead to the last phase of the Indus Civilization at Karanpura in Rajasthan (Prabhakar and Majid 2014: 32 and Fig. 20) (Figure 7). These Indus 'peacocks' have, in fact, a distinctive long, wavy crest that closely recalls that so prominent of the bird in our seal. Like in many other bifacial seals of the Oxus, a dangerous and aggressive creature, natural or mythological, is therefore associated with a less menacing one.

Overall, this seal not only combines two important symbols of the Indus Tradition, but it does so following the formal style and semantic codes of an important seals type of ancient Margush. In other words, it might represent a complicated but rather faithful material translation, from the Indus to the Oxus, of one or more specific Indus templates. Regardless of whether chimaeras in the Indus Civilization were the brand of a particular social-economic identity or an important mythological-religious symbol, we have to postulate that the same concepts were shared by both cultures or at least that they were not misunderstood in the passage from one region to the other.

Remarkably, this seal was apparently not a *unicum*. Cat. no. 933 in Sarianidi's catalogue features an elegantly stylized raptor looking backwards on one side and a winged griffin with an unusual crest or mane on the other (Figure 8). However, what Sarianidi (1998: 176)



Figure 8. Bifacial stone seal in chlorite featuring a raptor looking backward on one side and a winged griffin with an elephant trunk (or human arm with bangles) on the other (from Sarianidi 1998: 176).

interpreted as a myriapod carved in front of the griffin, rather resembles the elephant trunk (or human arm with bangles) unnaturally depicted below the face of all Harappan chimaeras. The creatures represented on this seal show, anyhow, a degree of local elaboration greater than those in the previous seal.

**A chronological hint and further implications**

Most scholars researching on Bronze Age Middle Asia agree to propose that, in the last centuries of the third millennium BC, the urban centers of the Oxus Civilization in Bactria and Margiana started developing intense interactions with the neighboring social-economic entities in the Indus Valley and the Iranian plateau, but also with Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the Gulf region (Kaniuth 2010; Vidale 2017: 44-56; Frenez 2018b: 3-5). Such commercial exchanges were probably fostered by the existence in the mountains of Central Asia of abundant sources of precious stones and metalliferous minerals, including multiple sources of cassiterite with a high content of tin, which were not present in the alluvial basins of the great rivers (Bushmakin 2007).

However, the stamp seals and two-sided snapped tablets presented in this catalogue firmly date to the Early Harappan (or Kot Diji) Phase in the Indus Valley, equal to Harappa Period 2, or at most to the beginning of the Harappan Phase during Harappa Period 3A. They cover, therefore, a timespan between ca. 2800 and 2500 BC, predating the beginning of commercial contacts between Central Asia and the Indus Valley to the first half of the third millennium BC.

Unfortunately, most of Sarianidi’s collection has no precise geographic or stratigraphic contexts, leaving no much ground to go beyond speculations. The only, but extremely informative exception is represented by the two-sided snapped stone tablet cat. no. 1728, which is the only object in this catalogue that comes from an actual archaeological context. It was, in fact, found in the surface survey of Adam Basan 10 (Masimov and Salvatori 2008: 102, Fig. 7.5.1) (Figure 9). However, its discovery in a site of the Murghab Delta is enough to support that also the other similar tablets and stamp seals with Early Harappan motifs published by Sarianidi were surface finds from the Early Bronze Age levels of sites in Bactria and Margiana.

According to S. Salvatori (2008: 58):

‘there was (in the Murghab Delta) an initial settlement period that was limited to the north-western part of the delta (Kelleli area) and dates back to the final phase of the period called Namazga V (end of the Middle Bronze Age) [...] This initial period was followed by a demographic expansion, which corresponded with a considerable increase in the number of settlements and also with a southward shift in the barycentre of the settlements of the region [...] This phase was ascribed to the early stages of the Late Bronze Age; it was presumably followed by a further southward shift in the barycentre of the settlements during the subsequent phase’.

However, Sandro always supported the idea that the settlement of the Murghab delta was not due to a late mid third millennium migration, but had developed

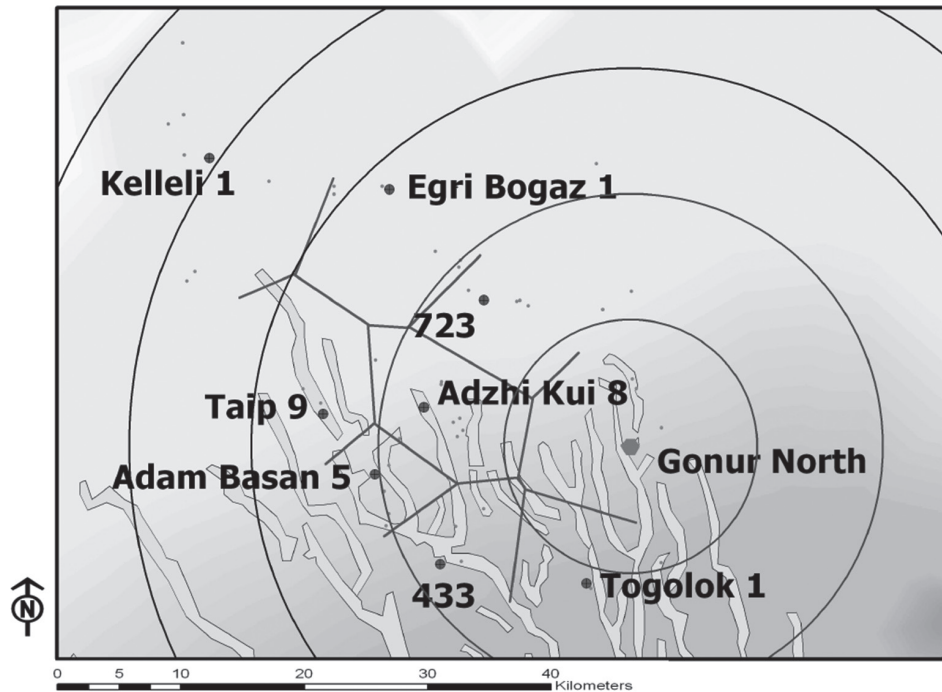


Figure 9. Distribution of Middle Bronze Age micro-oases in the Murghab Delta, Turkmenistan (from Salvatori 2008: Fig. 5.2).

from a substantial earlier occupation. Now, the dating of cat. no. 1728 to the Early Harappan Phase provides a factual evidence to push back, at least in some sites, the beginning of settlement in this region to the Namazga IV period, between ca. 2800-2400 BC (for an updated chronological periodization of Bactria and Margiana, see Vidale 2017: 8-9 and Tab. 1). The fact that the tablet from Adam Basan 10 and all comparable objects described in this paper belong to double-sided tablets snapped in two parts may suggest that, rather than being the occasional import of curious objects, they document the occurrence of transactions between an agency or an individual native to the Indus Valley and a symmetrical counterpart that was operating in Bactria or Margiana, either local or immigrated, performed following a complex administrative procedure officially recognized in the Indus Tradition.

The translation, almost a millennium later, of 'chimaeras' and 'peacocks' from the Indus imagery into the seal iconography of ancient Margiana shows that the two societies became somehow permeable not only in terms of craft skills and administrative procedures, but also of special social identities and mythological beliefs. This hypothesis is reinforced by the discovery of several comparable anthropomorphic and theriomorphic sculptures at sites in both Central Asia and the greater Indus Valley, in contexts dating to the end of the third and the first centuries of the second millennium BC (Frenez 2018b: 4-5; Vidale 2018).

In this period, in addition to the existence of a well-established trade of finished goods and raw materials, the two regions also shared set of beliefs, possibly spread by itinerant craftspeople and traders, which led to the local creation of similar cult objects, ritual paraphernalia, and administrative tools.<sup>4</sup>

The creatures represented on these seals show different degree of local elaboration, possibly documenting different stages or phenomena in a process of formal translation of Indus iconographies into the Oxus mythology and art style.

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<sup>4</sup> On the presence of Indus-trained itinerant craftspeople in Central Asia, see Frenez 2018b.

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