

head sculpture and also baby rattles. In Tamil Nadu, a key deity is Murugan, also known as the 'Red God' because of his red complexion, garments, and decorations. Red is also emphasized in the Sangam literature.

But many Indus-Tamil links discussed by Balakrishnan are much more speculative. An example is bull sport: *jallikattu* is an ancient Tamil custom of bull-embracing, still controversially celebrated today, in which a bull is released into a crowd and one-by-one as many people as possible jump upon it and try to hold its hump while the bull attempts to escape. Two dramatic Indus seals depict what might be a comparable, much earlier custom: they show what appear to be human bodies gyrating wildly in the air above an agitated buffalo or bull. Yet, notes Balakrishnan, Ernest Mackay, a key Indus scholar in the 1930s, could not make up his mind whether this Indus seal image depicted an attack on humans by a wild bull or rather humans disporting themselves with a trained bull, as in the ancient Minoan custom of bull-leaping. Moreover, a direct link between the Indus civilisation and the sport *jallikattu* is surely debatable, because *jallikattu* does not involve humans aiming to leap over the bull, Minoan-style, as shown in the two Indus seals. Nor is there any further evidence of bull sport in the Indus civilisation.

Then there are the potsherds recently discovered at Keeladi, a Sangam-age settlement on the Vaigai. Inscribed in the Tamil-Brahmi script, they also have graffiti marks that remind some Indian scholars of Indus script signs. Five of these marks are charted by Balakrishnan next to five supposedly comparable Indus signs. But the resemblance is far from convincing, even to the trained eye. As Parpola informed me recently: 'I do not take seriously the supposed resemblance between the Keeladi graffiti and some signs of the Indus script.' Balakrishnan would like to see a resemblance but honestly admits: 'The future decipherment of both the graffiti and the Indus script alone could solve the issue' (p. 459).

As always with the Indus civilisation, we need more—and more reliable—evidence. Meanwhile it continues to fascinate the world. *Journey of a Civilization* will further fuel this fascination, while at the same time demonstrating the power of a hypothesis to both clarify and complicate ancient historical interpretation.

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Mesopotamia: civilization begins

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Mesopotamian cuneiform is the earliest writing in the world. It was used to write many languages—including Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Ugaritic, and Old Persian—in territories as varied as Egypt, Iran, Anatolia, and Bahrain, for more than 3,000 years until the last-known cuneiform inscription, dated AD 75. But it was not seen by modern Europeans until 1618, at Persepolis in Persia; and not until 1786 was the first significant cuneiform monument seen in Europe, brought from near Baghdad to Paris, as

depicted in *Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins*, among its numerous reproductions of cuneiform inscriptions.

European scholars tried to decipher cuneiform from the early eighteenth century onwards but made little progress. The Paris monument's inscription was said to have read: 'The army of heaven gives us vinegar to drink solely to provide us with remedies able to bring us healing'. Today we know that it records, in Akkadian, a private gift of farmland from a father to his daughter on the occasion of her marriage in the twelfth century BC.

Solid progress began in 1802, with the work of Georg Grotefend. By the mid-1850s, translations of Babylonian cuneiform could be made with some confidence. In 1857, a public trial of the decipherment was conducted in London by the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS). The secretary of the Society, Orientalist Edwin Norris, gave a recently excavated clay cylinder cuneiform inscription from the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (r. 1114–1076 BC) to four scholars: Orientalists Edward Hincks, Julius Oppert, and Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (a future president of the Society) and scientist/inventor William Henry Fox Talbot. Each translated it independently, and a jury of experts then assessed the four translations. Their convergence, especially the translations of Hincks and Rawlinson, was striking. After the details of this trial were published by the Society as a book in that same year, the decipherment of Babylonian cuneiform became a matter of refining a generally accepted system.

Cuneiform naturally forms a crucial part of this beautiful book (although the celebrated RAS episode described above is oddly omitted). Superbly illustrated with objects taken from Mesopotamia, it arises from an exhibition shown at the Louvre Museum in Lens in 2016, which was subsequently modified and shown at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2021. Edited by Ariane Thomas, curator of the Louvre's Mesopotamian collections, and Timothy Potts, director of the Getty, who is also an expert in the archaeology of the Near East, it offers 13 short articles by a range of specialists. These are followed by a fascinating catalogue of the exhibition, divided into three sections, 'First cities', 'First writing', and 'First kingdoms', beginning with the fragment of a limestone vase depicting cattle in their barn, dated 3400–3100 BC, and ending with a portrait sculpture from the Hellenistic period of the youthful head of Alexander the Great, who conquered Mesopotamia and died in Babylon in 323 BC. Despite being written by academics, it is mostly accessible to general readers, provided they make due allowance for the fact that much about ancient Mesopotamia is mysterious for lack of sufficient evidence—including its city architecture, customs, religions, and the meaning of many cuneiform inscriptions.

For instance, it remains unclear how cuneiform began, probably in the city of Uruk circa 3300 BC, and whether this can truly be called the origin of writing. Thomas powerfully quotes the Assyriologist Jean Bottéro, writing in 2004:

when it comes to origins, we must always beware of the fantasy of an absolute origin, expected to explain everything, solve everything, and cause everything through magical determinism. ... Depending on the ideologies and the needs of its age, there have been previous attempts to elevate Troy or Rome, Greece or the Teutons, and even many other combinations of ancestors, to the lofty position of source. ... We must remember that, in history, there is never a beginning with a capital 'B'. There are only turns of events, junctures, separations, omissions and reunions.¹

¹ Jean Bottéro, 'Au commencement, les Sumériens (propos recueillis par Jean-Maurice de Montremy)', *Les Collections de l'Histoire* 22 (2004), p. 10.

Cuneiform's disappearance is much clearer, however. By the first century AD, it had been replaced by alphabetic scripts and other languages, most notably Aramaic. Hardly anyone could read the literature of Babylonia and Assyria, and the great cities such as Babylon and Nineveh were either abandoned or greatly changed. As a result, for the next two millennia, ancient Mesopotamia could be known only through the accounts of others, such as the biblical stories and the records of the ancient Greeks. 'These foreign chroniclers might have reasons to be hostile, as is frequently the case with the biblical accounts, or might receive information in a second-hand, garbled fashion and emphasise exotic stories, as in many of the ancient Greek descriptions,' comments Michael Seymour in the book (p. 20).

For example, the Sumerian term *eden*, describing an irrigated district or steppe, presumably influenced the name of the biblical Eden in the book of Genesis, where flow the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, named in the paradise. The Tower of Babel in Genesis is also apparently located in Mesopotamia, since Babel is the Hebrew name for Babylon, known in Akkadian as *Bab-ilim*, 'gate of God'. In the biblical story God creates a babel of languages among the tower's builders so that they cannot understand one another and the tower cannot reach heaven as they intended. Its unfinished state is therefore a punishment by God for excessive human pride. Very likely the idea of such a tower was based on the ziggurat of Babylon. However, its most famous depiction in art, by the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 1563—shown in the book's chapter on 'Ancient Mesopotamia in modern culture'—was modelled on the Roman Colosseum and appears surrounded by a contemporary Flemish landscape. Bruegel's approach was followed by hundreds of other depictions of the tower during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Considering the complexity and uncertainty of ancient Mesopotamia, the book covers a remarkable range and depth. My only serious regret is that it neglects the extraordinary long-distance trade into Mesopotamia during the second half of the third millennium BC, via the Arabian Sea, from what was known there as the land of Meluhha, a Sumerian name of unknown meaning that almost certainly corresponds with the Indus civilisation. Indus people even appear to have settled in Mesopotamia. Perhaps the most remarkable Indus objects found in Mesopotamia are the exquisite drilled carnelian beads from the Sumerian royal cemetery at Ur, famously excavated by Leonard Woolley in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, Woolley is mentioned only once in the book, in passing—perhaps because his excavations (like the RAS trial of the cuneiform decipherment in 1857) had no connection with the Louvre Museum.

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