

AIPS Travel Grant Final Report

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My paper, "A question of semantics? Iconographic variability in the image-symbols of the Harappan world," presented at the 44th Annual Conference on South Asia held in Madison WI, on Oct 22-25, 2015. Was a further exploration of the iconography of the Harappan world, particularly as seen in the seals, sealings, and molded tablets found at sites in the Indus Valley and beyond. This imagery includes a number of iconic characters and scenes that have, to date, defied interpretation. While there is no question that these figures played an important role in the visual codification of Harappan culture, the variability among the figures themselves has at times made it difficult for scholars to classify the figures into coherent groups, much less to interpret their possible meanings. Using methodologies often applied in the study of early Christian art, this paper examined some of the most variable motifs of the Harappan figural lexicon as part of a larger semantic system in which standardized characters and scenes play the role of mnemonic devices to remind the viewer of a story with which they are already familiar and poses the question of how much specificity is necessary for these image-symbols to function. As a thought experiment, the paper attempted to find new ways to explore a question that has long vexed scholars working on Indus valley materials.