Witzel recalls. “So I was very skeptical.” Now he is throwing his scholarly weight behind the new thesis, as a co-author of the paper and also editor of the Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies, an online journal aimed at rapid publication, which published the paper. Adds archaeologist Steven Weber of Washington State University in Vancouver: “Sometimes it takes someone from the outside to ask the really basic questions.” Weber, who is now collaborating with Farmer, adds that “the burden of proof now has to be on the people who say it is writing.”

**Seeking the Write Stuff**

Since the 1870s, archaeologists have uncovered more than 4000 Indus inscriptions on a variety of media. Rudimentary signs appear around 3200 B.C.E.—the same era in which hieroglyphics and cuneiform began to appear in Egypt and Iraq. By 2800 B.C.E., the signs become more durable, continuing in use in later periods; the greatest diversity starts to appear around 2400 B.C.E. Some signs are highly abstract, whereas others seem to have obvious pictographic qualities, such as one that looks like a fish and another that resembles a jar. Both are used frequently; the jar sign accounts for one in 10 symbols, says Possehl. As in Mesopotamia, the signs typically appear on small tablets made of clay as well as on stamp seals. The seals often are accompanied by images of animals and plants, both real and mythical.

The signs start to diminish around 1900 B.C.E. and vanish entirely by 1700 B.C.E., when the Indus culture disappears. Oddly, the inscriptions are almost all found in trash dumps rather than in graves or in primary contexts such as the floor of a home. “They were thrown away like expired credit cards,” says Meadow.

No one had ever seriously questioned whether the signs are a form of writing. But scholars hotly debate whether the system is phonetic like English or Greek or logossyllabic—using a combination of symbols that encode both sound and concepts—like cuneiform or hieroglyphics. Even the number of signs is controversial. Archaeologist and linguist S. R. Rao of India’s University of Goa has proposed a sign list of only 20, but Harvard graduate student Bryan Wells is compiling a revised list now numbering 700; most estimates hover in the 400 range.

Farmer and colleagues reanalyzed the signs, drawing on published data from many sites and unpublished data from the Harappa project provided by Meadow. They found that the average Indus inscription, out of a

**Splendid Sewers, But Little Sculpture**

British explorers stumbled on Indus ruins and artifacts in the late 1870s, but it was not until the 1920s that excavations revealed the geographically largest ancient urban civilization of the 3rd millennium B.C.E. Digs at sites such as Harappa and Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan revealed sprawling cities; Harappa may have been home to 50,000 people in its heyday between 2500 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E. Standardized bricks and weights were used in towns and cities more than 1000 kilometers from the civilization’s center along the Indus River, and wheeled carts were widespread. The sanitation systems, including extensive wells and underground pipes, were of a sophistication not seen again until 2000 years later in ancient Rome.

The Indus seemed to resemble closely the complexity of riverine societies like those of Egypt and Mesopotamia during the 3rd millennium B.C.E., and the three civilizations apparently had contact. Carnelian and lapis lazuli from the West Asian region made its way to Egypt, and Indus stamp seals have been found in Mesopotamia.

Yet in other ways, the Indus stands alone. It lacks monumental buildings, obvious religious shrines, large defensive fortifications, clear social stratification, and three-dimensional sculpture—all crucial elements of contemporaneous Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture. And, strangely, no Egyptian or Mesopotamian artifacts have been found in the Indus region. The Indus seems isolated and insulated until the turn of the millennium, when the strong influence of cultures to the immediate west became noticeable. By 1700 B.C.E., most traces of Indus material culture vanish suddenly, for no obvious reason and leaving no clear cultural heirs. “For a long time, people thought the Indus was so enigmatic, so unique, that there was no point in comparisons because none of them fit,” says Rita Wright, a New York University archaeologist who has worked at Harappa.

That view of the Indus as odd has begun to fade with the most recent series of digs in the ancient city of Harappa, which halted after the events of 9/11. There, and at several sites in India, archaeologists have found evidence of walled neighborhoods suggesting clannish rivalries or outside threats, jewelry of different quality suggesting social distinctions, and civic structures. New digs within India have uncovered evidence of a more vibrant system of trading over long distances. Those finds hint at a society not so radically different from its contemporaries, says Wright. In that light, a thesis highlighting the oddity of the Indus symbols (see main text) feels like a backward step, she adds.

Unraveling the contradictions of the Indus civilization will require more data—data that are buried in the mostly unpublished notes of the Harappa team and their Indian colleagues, at sites along the tense India-Pakistan border, and in tribal areas closed now to scientists. The Indus seems destined to confound archaeologists for decades to come.

—A.L.