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Scientific American Magazine Digs Up A Cross-cultural Artifact Controversy

The Gundestrup Cauldron is one of the enigmas of European archeology. The large silver bowl was uncovered May 28th, 1891, in a peat bog adjacent to the town of Gundestrup in Denmark. Held to be Celtic in origin, the various figures hammered in the metal are described as Cernunnos, lord of the underworld, Taranis, the sky-god and other deities of the Celtic pantheon. And there are Indian elephants - poorly done with pointed shoulders, ears too high on their head and other incongruous details indicating the silversmith had never seen an elephant. One of the first archeologists to examine the artifact did indeed conclude the vessel's carefully crafted scenes were connected to India. Unfortunately, his reasoning was faulty and both his wrong reasons and his right conclusion were thrown out.

But in the March issue of Scientific American, British expert Timothy Taylor convincingly resurrects the cauldron's Indian connection. "I saw that the Gundestrup scene showing a pair of elephants flanking a central female figure clearly depicted the ritual bathing of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of good fortune."

The most striking image on the cauldron is that of a horned man in a yogic pose with reindeer and animals beside him, a pose and setting very similar to that of a 4,000-year-old seal from the Indus valley site of Mohenjo-Daro in India. [below]. The cauldron was not made in India, for the man on it has laces on his shoes, placing him not only in Europe, but specifically in ancient Thrace, a Roman province which encompassed modern Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Greece. The cauldron likely arrived in Denmark as booty from a military expedition, probably around 100CE. The cauldron was evidently hidden at the spot it was finally found, and buried as a peat bog formed.

Taylor concludes that the silversmiths had contact, perhaps extensive contact, with India and may even have been an itinerant caste of metal workers from India similar to the Romany or Gypsies who left India about 1,000CE for the Middle East and Europe. What is most surprising to a Hindu, however, is the remarkable relationships between the horned man on the cauldron and the Indus Valley Seal - remembering that these artifacts are themselves separated in time by 2,000 years.

There are the obvious similarities - the horns, the animals on each side and the pose. The Mohenjo-Daro figure is a man, but is dressed in the clothes of an Indus valley female. The yogic pose with the soles of the feet pressed together is commonly practiced today and known to channel the sexual energy. The Indus Valley figure has often been identified as Siva in the form of Pasupati, Lord of Animals. The newly revealed information about the seal - the yogic pose and androgynous sexuality - further correspond to the attributes of Siva.

The cauldron figure has the legs in a slightly different, but equally common hatha yoga pose - one heel pressed against the perineum, which is also used to channel sexual energy. Furthermore, says Taylor, "within the pictorial grammar of the cauldron, on which males are shown bearded and breastless and females beardless and breasted, the horned figure is of ambiguous gender." That is, it has neither beard nor breasts.

One can easily speculate on the significance of Taylor's analysis. First, his ideas contradict the concept that the horned image is the Celtic God Cernunnos indicating a much more direct relationship to India. Similarity between the religion of the Druids and Hinduism was already noted. The Encyclopedia Britannica states, "Celtic religion, presided over by the Druids (the priestly order), presents beliefs in various nature deities and certain ceremonies and practices that are similar to those in Indian religion, they also shared certain similarities of language and culture, thus indicating an ancient common heritage." Perhaps the Celts, the original people of most of Europe, were part of an ancient continuous cultural milieu extending from India to England.

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