

The Search for the Yoni-Lingam

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SUMMARY

Driven by inspiring experiences while contemplating the yoni-lingam in my work in the Energetic Discipline, I became curious to know when this allegorical representation first appeared. Who had created it, or at least, in what context had it arisen? What I thought would be a relatively straightforward Internet search turned out to be a highly educational foray into Indian history and the influence of fundamentalism on archaeological interpretation. While some purport that the figure of the yoni-lingam dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, I believe the object is not that old, and that instead it arose during the middle of the 1st millennium CE in the context of the Tantric movement sweeping through India.

SYNTHESIS

The focus of this work is a search for the origins of the figure of the yoni-lingam, inspired by experiences in the Energetic Discipline. More specifically, it seeks to answer the question of when the yoni-lingam first appeared, in what culture and/or context. For the most part the search was carried out bibliographically.

INTRODUCTION

The first time I saw the Yoni-Lingam I thought it was a very strange object. To me, it was certainly the most intriguing of all the symbols of the Disciplines. It didn't provoke a feeling of satisfaction like the perfect sphere, it lacked the beauty and symmetry of the dorje, nor did it have the friendly familiarity of the salamander. It was almost beautiful, but not quite. But it was provocative—it made me look at it, to try to figure it out, to make sense of it, so I could finally say, "Ah, okay, I get it." In short, it was alluring.

It was explained to me that the figure had to do with the union of Male and Female, and that it came from India. As the sign for the Energetic Discipline, it was “related to certain Shaivite and Tantric lines.”¹ In my home city, the shops of Little India were full of them.

In a particular moment of my work in the Energetic Discipline, I began a practice of contemplating the yoni-lingam. I would try to see it in a new way, to comprehend it more deeply, to “enter” into it. And on some occasions, it seemed to speak to me, to reveal profound truths related to the union of Male and Female. So in time I became curious to know who (if anyone in particular) had created it—because whoever they were, they must have been very wise to be able to synthesize and transmit so much wisdom in such a simple object. And if no one person had created it, then when did it first appear?

1 Silo, “Las Cuatro Disciplinas”, 3.

I didn't think it was a very complicated question. But to my surprise, Internet searches for "earliest example of the yoni-lingam" turned up nothing, or almost always ended up focusing solely on the Linga. Indeed, if one researches the history of the linga form, one finds a cornucopia of phallic objects across time and in civilizations around the world. And if one looks specifically at historical examples of linga in India, there are clear ancient examples. One of the oldest continuously worshipped linga forms can be traced to the temple of Gudimallam, dating from about the 3rd century BCE². This linga is 1.5 metres high, carved in stone, and contains a slightly smaller image of Siva within it. It is clearly a sacred form sculpted for the purpose of worship, and it is clearly just a linga (because sometimes a linga is just a linga):

It is notable that unlike many later lingas, the Gudimallam example is not set into a yoni, the vulva-shaped female symbol of power (the feminine version of the linga), but is merely socketed into two circular stone elements. When the yoni is depicted in later sculptures, it is usually carved from the same piece of stone as the linga and thus acts as a base from which the linga rises.³

Linga, linga everywhere, and prominently on display (ain't that always the way?), but no such definitive examples existed regarding the oldest known yoni-lingam.

Of course, the allegorical representation of the yoni-lingam, the linga within the

² Doniger, *The Hindus*, 22.

³ Blurton, *Hindu Art*, 81.

yonis, is not the same as the linga alone, or even the yoni alone. In India, one of the most important pilgrimage sites—visited by millions of people each year—is an underground rock fissure below the Kamakhya Temple in Assam, worshipped as a sacred yoni form. But it is not a yoni-lingam, with the clear co-presence of male-female union.

So began my research. It became a long and thoroughly entertaining trip through the history of India and then the rather nebulous history of Tantra, with some surprising detours into archaeological method, historiography, and Hindu fundamentalism along the way. In the end, I can only say that the origins of the yoni-lingam are still not clear, but they are becoming more so. But of course, the story is not over yet (is it ever?).

IN THE BEGINNING

Since I didn't know where else to start looking, I thought that starting at the beginning of Indian civilization was appropriate. The Indus Valley Civilization (or sometimes, Harappan Civilization), went through various stages from about 3300-1300 BCE. At first, I found no traces of the yoni-lingam there, although intriguing objects have been unearthed in excavations at various sites, some of which may even refer to yogic practices. The most famous of these is likely the figure of the "Siva Pashupati", an engraving of what appears to be a man wearing a horned head-dress, sitting in a cross-legged, meditative pose.

Sir John Marshall, the chief archaeologist of the ancient city of Mohenjo-daro where the engraving was found, made the link with Siva in his Excavation report:

There appears at Mohenjo-daro a male god, who is recognizable at once as a prototype of the historic Siva. . . . The God, who is three-

faced, is seated on a low Indian throne in a typical attitude of Yoga, with legs bent double beneath him, heel to heel, and toes turned downwards. His arms are outstretched, his hands, with thumbs to front, resting on his knees. From wrist to shoulder the arms are covered with bangles, eight smaller and three larger; over his breast is a triangular pectoral or perhaps a series of necklaces or torques, like those on the later class of Goddess figurines from Baluchistan; and round his waist a double band. The lower limbs are bare and the phallus (*urdhvamedhra*) seemingly exposed, but it is possible that what appears to be the phallus is in reality the end of the waistband. Crowning his head is a pair of horns meeting in a tall head-dress. To either side of the god are four animals, an elephant and tiger on his proper right, a rhinoceros and buffalo on his left. . . .

The second feature of this pre-Aryan god that links him with the historic Siva is his peculiar Yogi-like posture, with feet drawn up beneath him, toes turned down, and hands extended above the knees. Siva is pre-eminently the prince of Yogis—the typical ascetic and self-mortifier, hence his names Mahatapah, Mahayogi. Primarily, the purpose of yoga was the attainment of union (*yoga*) with the god by mental discipline and concentration. . . .

We have, then, on this seal a god whose distinguishing attributes proclaim him the prototype, in his most essential aspects, of the historic Siva. (53-55)

Some scholars could criticize Marshall's analysis as "interpreting by hindsight," that is, analysing the past from the point of view of the future.⁴ In this case, Marshall interpreted this unknown figure as the prototype of "Siva, prince of yogis," because we know today (some 4000 years later) that there is a Hindu god of wild aspect named Siva who is sometimes referred to as "Lord of the Beasts" or "prince of yogis." The fact is, many gods are related to wild animals and can also be pictured sitting down, so tracing a line back from Siva to this image is something that must be done with caution.

On the other hand, others have gone much further than Marshall in their interpretation and make rather detailed claims, for example, that the figure's curious pose is in fact the *mūlabandhāsana*, mentioned in the Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā, and is therefore proof that some form of energetic yoga was being carried out during the time of the Indus Valley Civilization.⁵ But there is certainly no consensus on this.

Further in his Excavation Report, Marshall made a tantalizing reference to the Great Mother Goddess and to the kind of sacred union at which the yoni-lingam points, but unfortunately, not to the discovery of a concrete yoni-lingam figure:

I must revert for a moment to the cult of the Great Mother Goddess, or rather to a particular phase of it known as Saktism. Now, of Saktism there is no direct evidence at Mohenjo-daro or Harappa. Let me be clear on that point. What evidence there is, is merely suggestive.

Sakti worship was of great antiquity in India; it originated out of the cult

4 Doniger, *The Hindus*, 83-4. For a thorough treatment of the difficulties of historical interpretation, including distortions introduced by viewing the past from the present, see Silo, *Historiological Discussions*.

5 McEvilley, "An Archaeology Of Yoga", 44–77.

of the Mother Goddess; and it was closely connected with the cult of Siva. Moreover, it exhibits features that bear so striking a resemblance to those of certain prehistoric cults in Western Asia, that we cannot pass it by in silence or ignore the likelihood of its existence among the Indus Valley people. The underlying principle of Saktism is a sexual dualism, which has been aptly described as "duality in unity." In this development of the primitive mother worship, the goddess was transformed into a personification of female energy (*sakti*) and, as the eternal productive principle (*prakrtti*), united with the eternal male principle (*purusha*) and became the creator and Mother of the Universe (*Jaganmata* or *Jagad-amba*), including the gods themselves. (57)

The following section in the Report on sacred and phallic stones discovered during the excavation again brought the figure of the yoni-lingam tantalizingly close, but not close enough:

Two of these [objects] are unquestionably phalli, more or less realistically modelled, and prove conclusively that phallism in India had a pre-Aryan origin. . . . Further evidence on the same point is furnished by two realistic specimens of the same kind—one a linga or phallus and the other a yoni or vulva. . .

To conclude these observations on stone worship, I distinguish three types of cult stones at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa—the Dactylic, the phallic and the yoni ring-stones. Each of these types is represented

by numerous examples, both small and large, the former much predominating over the latter. The larger specimens I take to be objects of cult worship; the smaller ones to be amulets for carrying on the person, just as miniature lingas and yonis are still commonly carried, but it is not unlikely that some of the smaller specimens may also have served as gamesmen. (63)

So while Marshall thought that the ancient civilization centred around Mohenjo-daro had stones worshipped as linga (but which in some cases could also be games pieces), and stones worshipped as yoni, there was no evidence of anything worshipped as a yoni-lingam.

Now in all my searches, there was one image of an “ancient” yoni-lingam that appeared repeatedly. It was always the same, somewhat blurry image of a slightly misshapen yoni-lingam, but it never came with a source (see *Fig 1.*). All the text accompanying it claimed it was proof of the antiquity of the Hindu tradition of yoni-lingam worship, because it had been excavated in a place called Kalibangan, “an important centre of the Early Harappan cultures,”⁶ located some 310 km north-west of Delhi.

6 Joshi, “Summary of Results”, *Excavations at Kalibangan*, 24.

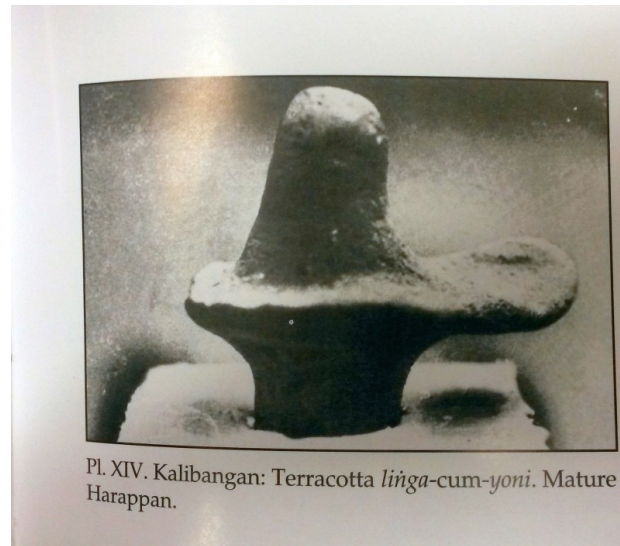


Fig. 1. The Kalibangan "yoni-lingam."

So, I ordered the Kalibangan Excavation Report from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), co-authored by the esteemed archaeologist and former director of the ASI, B.B. Lal. At last, the mystery might be solved! If this photo of a yoni-lingam appeared in the official catalogue, it would indeed be very strong evidence for the antiquity of this tradition, and I would be safely able to tell myself, "The oldest known yoni-lingam was found in Kalibangan, dating from circa 2600 BCE."

When the report arrived, I read through every page and looked at every single photograph and every sketch of every single item the archaeologists unearthed. There were hundreds of figures, sherds, broken plates, bowls, bricks, etc. And certainly there were unusual findings in Kalibangan, novel discoveries worth trumpeting. For example, the "world's earliest attested ploughed field" (17) and unique "fire altars" (although the altars are now contested).

But there was no yoni-lingam.

Where, then, had this mysterious image come from?

I scoured numerous books and archaeological reports, and various books referred

time and again to an ancient yoni-lingam having been found in Kalibangan. But checking those references only led to other books that said the same thing, without any clear source, and I found myself in a self-referential spiral leading nowhere. I longed for one solid reference, for example, a reference to the image's copyright being held by the ASI. At least like that I would know that the object had been photographed by the official archaeological organization of India and therefore likely existed somewhere in their archives.

THE PAPER TRAIL

The only articles where this object appeared time and again were ones written by B.B. Lal, the archaeologist who, along with B.K. Thapar, had lead the 1961-1969 excavation at Kalibangan and had written the Excavation Report. Why hadn't he made reference to what might be the world's oldest yoni-lingam in the official report? Why hadn't B.K. Thapar in later writings ever mentioned finding such a remarkable object?⁷

I began to follow a trail of articles, looking for the first mention of the "Kalibangan yoni-lingam."

In 1979, in an article written by B.B Lal in which he summarized the findings at Kalibangan, there was no mention:

7 In "New Traits of the Indus Civilization at Kalibangan", Thapar writes, "Our information on the complex problem of the Indus religion is based largely on seals, terracotta female figurines, with elaborate head-dresses, a few stone images, and aniconic objects and phalli, all commonly known at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. It is surprising that at Kalibangan, except for the seals, none of the above categories of objects have been found." (101) Later, in 1975, Thapar highlighted the special findings of the Kalibangan excavations of both Early and Mature Harappan levels: "The following finds deserve special mention: a cylinder seal; a terracotta cake, incised on the obverse with a horned human figure and on the reverse with a human figure pulling an obscure object; a terracotta human head; a copper bull showing the dynamic mood of the animal and other copper objects including a pin; a terracotta feeding-cup with a cow's head on the rim; a terracotta graduated scale (incomplete) and an ivory comb." (28)

The terracotta objects included toy-cart frames and wheels, rattles, birds, animals, gamesmen, etc.—all familiar in the Harappan context. However, specially noteworthy were: a human head which, though tiny, was very expressive, and resembled the head of the famous limestone priest from Mohenjo-Daro; and a bull, very vigorous and in a charging mood, which, again, was more than a match to its counterpart from that site. . . . Continuing with the terracottas, it may be observed that the mother goddess figurines, so familiar at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, were conspicuous by their absence at Kalibangan. (89)

In the Encyclopedia of Indian Archaeology of 1990, there was no mention either.

In 1997, Lal wrote a book whose explicit aim was, “to highlight . . . new features of the Indus civilization revealed in the extra-Indus territory” (3). Surely the yoni-lingam would be mentioned here.

It was not.

Not until 2004, one year after the Kalibangan Excavation report was published, did I find a reference to this yoni-lingam (referred to as a Shivalinga). The article was written by another one of the archaeologists who had worked on the excavation:

Finally, there is a conclusive piece of evidence in favour of the existence of belief in a Shiva-like deity: not merely on the famous Pashupati seal, where a three-faced, ithyphallic deity is shown in meditation with an elephant and tiger on the left and a rhino and a

horned bull/buffalo on the right, but also a small terracotta linga reported from Kalibangan, which is astonishingly close to a 'modern' Shivalinga. This is a remarkable find which has bearing on the existence or non-existence of Shiva in the Indus civilization, although a single find may not be beyond controversy in itself."⁸

Why did this archaeologist finally mention a special linga-type object found in Kalibangan when the Excavation Report had made no mention of it?

Later, in 2009, Lal published another book, *How Deep Are The Roots of Indian Civilization?* and in it there appeared the image, "Kalibangan: Terracotta *linga-cum-yoni*, Mature Harappan," referring to it as belonging to the ASI (see *Fig. 1*). But much to my surprise, while the image finally appeared with an attribution, there was no text further explaining this "remarkable" find.

So all I knew now was that the object and image were part of the ASI's holdings, and that B.B. Lal was just about the only person making reference to it. And so my research into the origins of the Yoni-Lingam turned its focus to Lal himself.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND FUNDAMENTALISM

Braj Basi (B.B.) Lal (b. 1921) was Director-General of the ASI from 1968 to 1972 and has had an illustrious archaeological career, working at numerous Indus Valley Civilization sites, as well as on sites related to the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics. He is nonetheless a controversial figure, connected to voices of Hindutva, a right-wing

8 Bala, "Kalibangan: Its Periods and Antiquities", 2004.

nationalist current which seeks to show that Hinduism has roots going back all the way to the beginning of Indian history. Indeed, Hindutvans tend to claim that India is essentially synonymous with Hinduism and deny or degrade other influences on the country's history, be they Muslim, Christian, or Aryan.

In the 1990s, Lal's archaeological work lent support to Hindus who wanted to excavate below a mosque because they claimed that a sacred Hindu temple lay below it. According to them, the site was the birthplace of Rama, the hero of the Ramayana and an avatar of the god Vishnu, and an edifice marking his birth had been destroyed when a Mughal emperor ordered a mosque to be built there. Lal had excavated near the mosque in 1975, and had uncovered ancient "pillar bases" possibly connected to pillars found within the mosque, purportedly engraved with Hindu motifs. In 1991, as tensions between Muslims and Hindus over the mosque site were growing, Lal was asked if he thought Rama's temple lay there. In his words: "I replied as any archaeologist would have: if you do want to know the reality, the only way is to dig underneath the mosque."⁹

Lal rejected subsequent claims that he meant to encourage destruction of the mosque, insisting that it would have been possible to dig below it without damaging it. (In any case, a year later the mosque was destroyed by a mob of Hindu fundamentalists, unleashing a terrible wave of sectarian violence throughout the country.)

Needless to say, it became increasingly curious that the only source showing yoni-lingam worship going back thousands of years came from an archaeologist clearly aligned with Hindu fundamentalism.

⁹ Lal, "Facts of history cannot be altered," 1998.

I looked then for a reference I could trust, someone or something without an obvious agenda one way or another, who might be able to help orient me in this confusing landscape of fundamentalism and archeology. Fortunately, I came across what appeared to be a very useful article on the trend in India of using archaeology to support ideology. I noticed with due diligence that it was published in Pakistan (not likely the most objective source on Indian history), but in any case I found it very helpful as it provided a who's who of Indian archaeologists and historians and explained generally where they were coming from. That is, it was very helpful until I found the following in some concluding remarks on the influence of Hindutva:

The sad part is that this distorted version of history is now a part of the education system in India. There have even been attempts to push this mythology in the school system of California and other states in the USA. There seems to be no other example myth-making on such a large scale in recent times, except that of the Holocaust, propagated by the Jewish diaspora in the aftermath of the Second World War.¹⁰ [sic!]

So much for that book as a reasonable guide to extremism in the writing of history!

Finally, I went straight to the source and found B.B. Lal himself, 95-years old and living in Delhi. I called him on the phone and he answered one important mystery. He

10 Ahmed, *Ancient Pakistan—An Archaeological History*, 2014.

explained that the image of the yoni-lingam that I had been trying to source had not appeared in the Kalibangan Excavation Report because that report was only Part One, focusing on the Early Harappan phase, from 3500 to 2500 BCE. The image I was after would be appearing in a forthcoming report on the Mature Harappan phase (2500-1900 BCE), which the ASI was supposed to publish.

When I contacted the ASI, they said the book would be published soon—Lal told me they had been saying that for years—but more than a year later, there is still no sign of it. Given that Part One took thirty-four years to publish, who knows when Part Two will appear?

In the end, I managed to contact Shri Praveen Singh, the Superintendent of the ASI's Archaeology Museum in the town of Kalibangan itself. I explained that I was seeking the Kalibangan yoni-lingam, and he promised to search the museum's inventory to try to either locate the object or else the source of the photo. After a few months, to my delight, he replied with his own original photos of the object (see *Fig. 2*):



*Fig. 2. The Kalibangan “yoni-lingam”.
Photos by Praveen Singh, Archaeological Museum, Kalibangan, 2016.*

So, the object definitely exists and is included as part of the findings of the excavation at Kalibangan. And certainly, it is suggestive. But is it a yoni-lingam?

Leaving complex questions of archaeological interpretation aside (not to mention simple questions like, where was it found? At what level? Along with what else? etc.), I tried to study it and get a feeling for it. And I admit that I find it wanting. Its shape is a bit funny, and it's not well proportioned. It also lacks a stable base, meaning that this object could have been meant to be positioned in quite another way, and not how we imagine a yoni-lingam should be, with the yoni as the base and the linga emerging above. That is, how should we look at it? What is the top and what is the bottom? Perhaps this is its proper orientation:



Fig. 3. Which way is up?

As a result of all the above, I do not believe this object is a yoni-lingam.

TANTRA AND THE YONI-LINGAM

Given that no concrete evidence of an Indus Civilization yoni-lingam exists, I believe that the figure is a much more recent development, perhaps dating from around the post-Gupta era (c. 500 CE), and emerging as a result of the growth of Tantra. Certainly in the centuries that follow, yoni-lingam figures appear in numerous temples

throughout India. But from the alleged example from the Indus Valley Civilization up to this point, thousands of years have passed without a trace of yoni-lingams. As the saying goes, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," but such a lengthy absence in the archaeological record is certainly striking.

Of course, this is not to say that the idea of "the union of male and female" did not exist until the yoni-lingam appeared, or that precise spiritual practices based on that idea did not exist until then—certainly they did. But as a concrete allegorical representation, a synthesis of that experience and practice, I believe the yoni-lingam arose as part of the rise of Tantra around the middle of the first millennium of the Common Era.

Tantra was a pan-Indian spiritual current that enveloped every religion, influencing Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The word, *tantra*, has various meanings, but is thought to be related to weaving or expanding. Thus, the texts known as *tantras* were intended to spread knowledge about how to do things. As explained in Dasgupta's *General Introduction to Tantra*:

. . . the word Tantra had a very wide latitude of meaning and was used loosely to denote any kind of Scientific or Philosophical literature which was more modern than the Vedic literature. Later on, however, the term Tantra was generally used in an exclusive sense to denote a body of writings comprehending the whole culture of a certain epoch in diverse directions such as religion, ritual, domestic rites, law, medicine, magic and so forth. (152)

Providing hard dates for Tantra and its history is generally not possible. On one hand, because Tantra was an esoteric movement, and its practices were carried out in private; and on the other hand because, being a movement more than a specific religion, the roots of Tantra are multiple—there is certainly no foundational text, much less a “founder.”

However, some scholars believe that one of the earliest inscriptions to reference Tantra directly can be found on the Viśvavarman inscription at Gangadhar, in Rajasthan, dating from 423 CE.¹¹ The inscription records the construction of a shrine to the *Mātrikās* (mother goddesses) and seems to refer to a Tantric ritual. This interpretation, though, is debated.¹² In any case, it does appear to be the first recorded mention of *ḍākinīs*, female Tantric demons.

While the earliest texts clearly related to Tantric practices can be dated to about 600 CE¹³, we should not confuse the appearance of an idea in written or epigraphic form with the origin of the idea itself. The practices of Tantra are surely older than the earliest references.

While the scope of the term can be very ample, as a movement Tantra always maintained a “practical” character, and as a spiritual current was far removed from the

11 Joshi, “Historical and Iconographic Aspects of Sakta Tantrism”, 48.

12 In “Early Evidence,” Lorenzen says he must “reluctantly agree” that the inscription does not provide unequivocal evidence (30). Sullivan argues that the reference is not to “tantra” but to “tāntra”, and refers instead to another definition of the word having to do with the “stretching” (*tan*) of strings on a musical instrument. The magical effects described in the inscription are therefore produced through music and not Tantric rite. However, Sullivan writes, “There is little ambiguity about *ḍākinī*, though, and the fact that the fierce Mothers are attended by a batch of fierce female figures of power in the setting of a temple suggests to me a tantroid theology embodied in a tradition of tantroid practices in the early fifth century.” (12)

13 Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 158.

metaphysics of the Vedas. Over time, it became known as a path that could lead to spiritual liberation, an active path—not based in philosophizing or the acquisition of abstruse knowledge, but rather in concrete actions that lead to transformation. The body was a microcosmos: the theatre of operations. What happens in the body is a reflection of what happens in the universe, so by affecting the body one can affect the universe.

Tantra developed many different expressions, some of which were no doubt shocking. Part of the tension within Tantra was that it was an anti-Brahmanic response, i.e. it had a popular but also a rebellious side.¹⁴ And some Tantric orders took this rebellion very far.

For example, the Kāpālikas were a Tantric sect¹⁵ that arose in the early centuries of the Common Era, and who were commonly referred to by the 6th-7th century.¹⁶ They wore no clothes, smeared themselves with ashes, carried around a human skull, and lived in cremation grounds, where they also carried out ceremonies, some of which purportedly involved sex with corpses and the eating of human flesh. Perhaps this was just anti-Kāpālika propaganda, or perhaps it was propaganda spread by the Kāpālikas themselves, to intentionally offend Brahmanic sensibilities. In any case, there is no question their understanding of the path to salvation was a radical one. Later, these kinds of expressions came to be known as "left-hand" Tantra, as opposed to "right-hand" paths that were more orthodox and tolerated (even absorbed) into the Brahmanic fold.

14 See Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion*, especially the Introduction.

15 It is worth noting that the term "*kāpālika*" was only ever used by others to refer to these ascetics, and may have referred to a type of practice rather than to a distinct order (Samuel 243). The term itself is derived from *kapāla*, meaning, "skull".

16 Lorenzen, *Kāpālikas*, 14.

The great diversity of Tantric practices notwithstanding, in all expressions, one can detect a few common points:

- the importance of the body and a focus on experience
- the use of ritual practices involving mantras, yantras, mandalas, and the internalization of deities
- the Goddess as the root of power (the feminine was held in great esteem)
- disregard for caste or gender (Tantra as a path was open to all).

The fact that Tantra influenced every major religious form in India lends strength to the idea that its roots were popular. Its emphasis on the regenerative power of the Great Mother Goddess places it at a folk level, at the level of daily life, where fertility (of women, but also of fields) was a matter of life and death. No doubt Siva and Visnu and Brahma exist as official gods, but when the going gets tough who do you turn to? Your Mama.¹⁷

In fact, when life and the gods themselves are threatened by a fierce demon, it is the Great Goddess who is called upon to make things right. The text describing her deeds, the '*Devi Mahatmya*' ("The Glorification of the Goddess") is dated to the 5th-6th

17 And it seems times *were* tough, or at least very unstable: "The cause of this popularity [of the Goddess] was evidently connected with the changing social pattern arising out of the new economic conditions resulting from changes in the mode of production and distribution, expansion of internal and external trade, administrative norms, and the growth of urbanism. The agriculturalists and other professionals, aside from the priestly, warrior and trading classes, formed the majority of the population, and it was the religion of this majority, the Mother Goddess of the agriculturalists, that found its way into the higher levels of society. . . . The popularity of the concept of the demon-slaying goddess had also a clear social significance. It offered a cathartic dream to the toiling masses of all ages, the illusion of a cherished reality of the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of truth and justice over tyranny and social oppression." (Bhattacharya 199-201)

century CE. But a number of scholars are in agreement with Wendy Doniger who writes, “It is clear from the complexity of ‘The Glorification of the Goddess’ that it must be a compilation of many earlier texts about the goddess, either from other, lost Sanskrit texts or from lost or never preserved vernacular sources, in Magadhi or Tamil, perhaps” (388).

The tale of the Goddess is related by Silo in *Universal Root Myths*:

. . . a demon named Durg who, having made sacrifices to appease Brahma, received his blessing. With this power, Durg ousted the gods from the heavens, and, exiling them to the forests, obliged them to revere him and bow their heads in his presence. Then he abolished the religious ceremonies, and the gods, weakened by this, met to find a way out of this crisis in which they were trapped. Ganesha (son of Shiva and Parvati), the wise protector of human undertakings, shaking his elephant head, waved his four arms and suggested that it was absolutely necessary to reach his parents. Hanuman the monkey king, astute and quick, conqueror of territories, was at once given the task of traveling to the Himalayas to beseech the help of the celestial couple.

There in the heights, they meditated in loving embrace, in harmony and peace. Hanuman explained why he had come, and Shiva, moved to pity by the difficulties that beset the young gods, asked the delicate Parvati to deal with the problem.

Parvati calmed Hanuman, and only then did she send Night to demand that the demon reestablish order in the worlds in her name.

Overcome with fury, Durg gave orders that Night was to be seized. But when he shouted the order, his fiery breath incinerated his own soldiers. Recovering, he dispatched his minions, but not before Night escaped and found refuge with her protector. In the deepest darkness, Durg, burning with anger, mounted his war chariot. Ruddy and radiant, his army of giants, winged horses, elephants, and men stood out against the eternal snows of the Himalayas. With a horrendous clamor, the impudent invaders set foot upon the sacred domain of Parvati, who with graceful movements brandished in her four arms the deadly weapons of the gods.

The troops of the arrogant Durg let loose their arrows against the imperturbable figure, who could be seen standing far off in the Himalayas. So dense was the rain of darts that it seemed like a sheet of raindrops in the great storm. But she deflected the attack with her invisible shields. Splitting trees and mountains, the aggressors threw them at the goddess—until at last she responded! A terrifying whistle was heard as she threw her first weapon; the winged horses neighed as they were carried away by the hurricane that accompanied Parvati's lance. Almost immediately her spear tore off the arms of thousands of giants, while various quadrupeds and their riders cracked into pieces with the terrible impact. Not only did the goddess repel all the arrows, stakes, maces, and pikes that Durg threw, but now their broken fragments also destroyed the nearest invaders.

Then Durg took on the form of an enormous elephant and charged Parvati, but she caught the feet of the beast in her lasso, and then with her scimitar-like nails cut him to pieces. From the spilled blood, a monstrous buffalo arose that immediately attacked her. But he ended up impaled on Parvati's trident. Badly wounded, he reverted to his true form and tried to flee, but the goddess lifted him into the air, and when she hurled him to the ground the Earth rumbled with the sound of thunder. Without hesitating, Parvati thrust her arm into the demon's jaws and pulled out his steaming viscera. Implacable, she crushed him in an embrace that made his blood gush forth, and this she drank until not a drop was left. Finally, so that Durg would not be reborn, she devoured his remains and, taking his bones in one hand, she squeezed them with such force that they were reduced to a powder that burst into flame. As she opened her fingers, the cold wind of the summits flew down and carried off a minuscule speck of ash as a memento. She received the offerings of the gods, and hastened back to her beloved Shiva. Most tender and beautiful, she took shelter with him in the softest music and the most delicate radiance of immortality.

(291-93)

The image of Siva and Parvati meditating "in loving embrace" is a central motif of Tantra—the personification of the union of male and female which the yoni-lingam allegorizes. As a result of the spread of Tantra, female deities gained a new importance and loving, celestial couples began appearing in all the major

religions. In Buddhism, we see the rise of Tara as “Mother of all Buddhas”, as well as the figure of *yab-yum*; in Saivism, the image of Sakti; in Vaisnavism, the figures of Radha and Rama; and more generally, the figures of the seven Matrikas (Mothers).



Fig. 4. The Seven Matrikas, flanked by Shiva and Ganesha. 9th century. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.80.157. Public Domain.

Tantra's high esteem of women is made abundantly clear in the later *Saktisangama-tantra*:

Whether the form is male or female, all the best forms are those of woman. All the beauty the world contains is created by woman. There is no friend better than a woman, no way better than a woman, no luck better than a woman, no kingdom better than a woman, no *tapas* better than a woman, no Yoga better than a woman. . . (Bhattacharya 319)

Part of the “practical” approach to liberation offered by Tantra can be seen in its use of mantras and yantras. A yantra (literally, “machine”) is a sacred diagram composed of triangles which radiate out from a central point, generally inscribed by concentric circles, and framed by a square with four entrances (see *Fig. 5*). It serves as an aid to meditation, and can be understood as a graphic representation of cosmic unity.

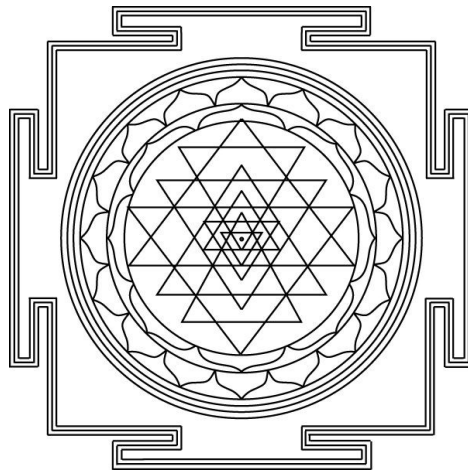


Fig. 5. Sri Yantra.

Mantras—sacred formulae repeated during meditation—are given to a disciple by a master. If integrated and recited correctly, they are said to possess incredible power. “The *lokanātha mantra*, for example, can absolve the greatest sins, and the *ekajātā mantra* is so powerful that, as soon as the disciple utters it, he is safe from all danger and achieves the sanctity of the Buddha.”¹⁸

It may be tempting to think of mantras and yantras simply as magic spells and symbols. But there can be no doubt that they are techniques requiring sustained

¹⁸ Eliade, *Yoga*, 214.

practice and an intense level of concentration, coupled with a deep emotional charge.

As Silo explains in *Psychology Notes*,

Some Indian techniques such as those utilizing "yantras," complex geometric figures, allow one to arrive to trance through the interiorization of progressively smaller triangles, which on occasion end in a central point. Also in the techniques that use "mantras," the subject goes increasingly deeper until arriving at absorption, through the repetition of a profound sound. Many Western practitioners do not have success with visual and auditory contemplations because they are not prepared emotionally and limit themselves to repeating those figures or sounds without internalizing them with the emotional or devotional force required for the coenesthetic representation to accompany the narrowing of the attention. These exercises are repeated as many times as necessary until the practitioners experience the replacement of their personalities and the inspiration is fully experienced. (104)

YONI-LINGAM AND CONTEMPLATION

The use of these physical, visual or sonic objects as points of support during meditation for the attainment of a state of absorption became widespread during the

Tantric period (roughly 500 to 1400 CE).¹⁹ I believe that it is in this context that the yoni-lingam first appears, sometime early in the Common Era, but not before.

The union of the male and female principles, while apparently carried out concretely in some Tantric schools through ceremonial sexual practices, was also something that could be applied internally by a single practitioner, through intense visualization. To unify one's feminine and masculine energies was the goal, to achieve an ultimate union. And in the contemplation that could facilitate entry into that profound internal space, the allegorical representation of a yoni-lingam serves well. Indeed, absorbing the image into oneself at a sufficiently deep level, with sufficient emotional charge, could result in fusion with Unity itself.

In other words, the yoni-lingam, as a sign of union, can be experienced as a profound introjection.

However, at this point, the creation of the yoni-lingam in the early centuries CE as an allegorical support for Tantric meditation remains a hypothesis, given that I have not been able to find specific evidence for this practice. A field study in India to further investigate this point is planned for next year.

Roberto Verdecchia
Parks of Study and Reflection: Hudson Valley

April 2017
* revised Oct 2017

¹⁹ For visualisation and invocation practices in Buddhist meditation as a pre-Tantric component, see Samuel (218-20).

* slight revisions in the use of the terms *sign*, *symbol* and *allegory* were made to better reflect Siloist psychology

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