

The Goddess Kills the Buffalo in the Indus Valley



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The Indus Seal 420 depicts a three faced deity with buffalo horns seated in yogic posture and surrounded by animals: an elephant, a tiger, a rhinoceros, and a buffalo with a human between the former two. The six signs on the top include a battle horn, a fish and a jar. Identifying this deity as Mahiṣāsura, Alf Hiltebeitel proposes that these are animals sacrificed to the Goddess. On careful analysis of the episode as documented in the Devī Māhātmya, I propose that the three faces represent the three forms Mahiṣāsura takes during the battle: human, lion and elephant. The surrounding animals are part of his army. The fish and the jar signs represent the Goddess and her severing of Mahiṣāsura's head. I render support to my observation by studying this seal with a similar one which contains both the deity in yogic posture and a person placing his or her foot on top of a buffalo and killing it with a barbed spear.

The Indus script is Dravidian. The theme of interior landscape in ancient Tamil poetry connects various aspects of human love—union, elopement, waiting, unfaithfulness, and anxiety—with landscapes consisting of animals etc. The buffalo and the fish convey the idea of lover's unfaithfulness suggesting that a noble Mahiṣāsura had turned hostile. This epigraphical evidence, embellished with a poetic theme, testifies to the literary excellence of a much ancient Tamil—which I have named Mīṇṭamiḷ—aided by an episode preserved in a Sanskrit text.

Biography:

Dr. R. Saraswati Sainath has taught Sanskrit in colleges and universities in India and in Canada. Her chief areas of research are Advaita Vedānta, Indian Philosophy, Tamil Śaivism and Hindu Bioethics. She has professional diplomas in French issued by Ministère de l'Éducation, Québec. She has publications in English, Tamil, Sanskrit and French. Her outstanding research work is her article, The Date of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya and Emergence of Śaivism as a Popular Religion in South India, published by Springer-JICPR. She is the Founder-Director of Vidyasthanam: School of Indian Music, Culture and Languages and teaches Indian Classical Music, Indian Languages and French.