

Hindu finds from the Thames

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Archaeology is about using material culture (objects) to try and understand societies and cultures. We normally associate this study with the past, often the distant past, but it is of just as much relevance to modern culture. At the Museum of London we are particularly interested in how people and cultures have come together in the space we now call London, and how they have changed and utilised the landscape and been influenced by it. It is therefore extremely exciting that archaeological observations along the foreshore of the River Thames have begun revealing a very recent example of objects reflecting this interaction.

The River Thames is a prime source of past material cultures, producing a constant stream of fascinating objects. Roman brooches, medieval pilgrim badges, 17th-century tin-glazed tiles, an 18th-century miniature portrait and an early-20th-century handgun are examples of foreshore finds that have been brought into the Museum of London in just the past few months. The Thames is now developing another facet by revealing elements of a culture embedded in today's diverse society. A range of objects that are associated with the practice of Hinduism, such as statuettes of deities and inscribed plaques, are currently being found on the Thames foreshore. What do these objects represent? Why were they put in the river? When were they put in the river? What should happen to the objects now? These are all important, yet difficult questions. The Museum is currently striving to find some answers through consultation with London's Hindu community.

What do the objects represent?

The objects found so far vary immensely. They include four statuettes of deities made of either metal or stone (Fig. 1), each representing a different deity. Ganesha, depicted with four hands, a big stomach and an elephant's head, is the god of knowledge and the remover of obstacles. He is worshipped at the beginning of any auspicious ceremony or blessing. Hanuman, the monkey god, is a provider of courage and

hope, and a noble hero. The Goddess Durga, depicted riding on the back of a lion, is popular throughout India, particularly in Bengal where the Durga Puja is celebrated each Autumn. The fourth statuette is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the preserver god. Vishnu is one of the most popular Hindu gods today, though consultation suggests it is very surprising to find such a deity associated with a river.

There are two inscribed plaques or *yantras*, one of copper alloy (Fig. 2) and the other of silver plate. This type of plaque, depicting a geometrical diagram, is seen as a talisman to ward off evil spirits, and would be prescribed by a priest for a specific person or purpose. The copper plaque has details of the nine planets, whereas the silver plaque depicts a serpent entwining squares with rows of numbers all adding up to the magical number 15. Other objects include a plastic banner with an image of the Holy Trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, a hanging metallic plaque inscribed with an image of Radha Krishna, a plastic wallet containing a card with an image of Swaminarayan and a silk purse containing a stone.

It is not easy to determine when the objects were made. Some, such as the plastic banner, are undoubtedly modern, but three of the statuettes and the copper astrological plaque could possibly date back to the late 19th century. From the consultation work, it is generally thought that the objects would have been produced in India and either brought to London by individuals or, certainly in the case of the lamps, sold over here. With a couple of exceptions, namely the *yantras*, these types of objects would be relatively common within the Hindu community and they would be owned by individuals or families rather than by temples.

The most frequent finds are small clay lamps (Fig. 3). The lamps look almost Roman in their shape and fabric, and indeed, when the first example was brought into the Museum, it was initially identified as Roman. These lamps, which are filled with butter or ghee and then lit, tend to



Fig. 1: statuettes of the deities Ganesha, (incarnation of) Vishnu, Hanuman and Durga (Museum of London)



Fig. 2: an astrological plaque inscribed with details of the planets (Museum of London)

be associated with the festival of Diwali (Festival of Light). But they are used in many Hindu ceremonies and are considered to be a common object. There are also two complete clay pots (Fig. 3), which have been described to us as either water pots, for holding sanctified water containing drops from the Ganges, or as pots to hold cremations.

Why were they put in the river?

Flowing water plays a significant role in Hinduism and all rivers are seen as holy. The River Ganges is the most sacred river in India – she holds extreme powers and is an important place of pilgrimage. The river is deified as the Goddess Ganga, hence garlands and other offerings are thrown onto the surface of the water in the same way as offerings are made to honour

an image in a temple. As the River Ganges is not very accessible to the Anglo-Hindu community, it could be that they are utilizing the next best thing – a river that has an impact on their lives and their surrounding landscape. Some Hindu ceremonies have a specific element that involves water, such as Durga Puja, which culminates in a deity being deposited in flowing water. However, the larger than life deity is usually made of a dissolvable material. Another explanation is the deposition of damaged religious objects. A Hindu has a responsibility to dispose of damaged religious objects in a

respectful way, by returning them to the earth. This is often done by submerging the object in running water that flows to the sea. But not all of



Fig. 3: clay lamps used during festivals such as Diwali and two complete pots, possibly used as water pots (Museum of London)

the Hindu objects found on the foreshore are broken or damaged.

Whether the objects are a result of ceremonial activities or accidental loss is not entirely clear, although the growing number of objects is helping to discount the theory of purely accidental loss. If they have been deliberately deposited (as the objects are likely to have been owned by individuals), the reasons behind their deposition are probably very personal. There may not be one simple explanation, nor may all Hindus be necessarily aware of the individual practices within their community. Indeed, the Hindu priests and community leaders/members that we have consulted are surprised that these types of objects are being discovered.

When were they put in the River?

Although an almost impossible question to answer; what is significant is that we are finding them now. As mentioned above, the first objects of this type to be brought to the Museum were clay lamps, around ten years ago. In the past two or three years a steady trickle of objects associated with Hinduism have been brought to the Museum. Once an expression of interest was made, 'mudlarks', surface searchers and organisations who work on the foreshore, revealed more objects and evidence of further activities. Offerings of organic materials, like coconuts, fruit and other food, are also often found on the water's edge.

Is the deposition of these objects a recent activity or something that has been going on for the last 100 years or more? We can date some of the objects to around the last 20 years, but others are more ambiguous. Are the objects we have typical of what is being deposited now or are they the exception? As we have such a range of objects, until we do further investigations and gather more evidence, it is difficult to draw any conclusions.

What should happen now?

The Museum of London has consulted a range of people from the Hindu community, all of whom have given their approval for the acquisition of the objects into the Museum's collections. They

have also given their approval for the future display of the objects. As the Museum is striving to increase its contemporary collections to reflect the cultural diversity of London, these objects fit well within this strategy. In the future, any related finds that are brought into the Museum will be treated as individual cases and consultation with the National Council of Hindu Temples will occur before any decision to acquire is made.

Another aspect that should be noted here is the environmental impact of this practice. Is the deposition of objects into the Thames and other waterways polluting and harming the environment? Many of the Hindu organisations in London are keen to stress their awareness and commitment to a clean environment, and members of the community work together with agencies such as Thames 21 to help clean up the Thames and other waterways.

This is an ongoing and organic project that is just in its infancy. Continuing consultation about these and any future finds is an opportunity to establish stronger links between the Museum of London and the Hindu community. The deposition and discovery of such objects reflects a long tradition in the use of the Thames as a spiritual site. It also reiterates the value of the river to Londoners as a natural place that should be celebrated. The Thames holds a wealth of information and evidence that needs to be investigated and recorded. How exactly is London's primary river being used and celebrated by today's diverse community?

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