

Phallus Or Fire?

Rethinking Linga Worship in Ancient Hinduism



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Image: "Śiva-Liṅga," 1st c. CE, Mathurā, Uttar Pradesh (photograph courtesy of John C. Huntington)

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Today, the Hindu god Śiva is worshipped throughout India and devotees perform rituals to a liṅga, a cylindrical object made of stone, clay, wood, or metal. Liṅgas are the dominant emblem of the deity – thousands upon thousands of Śaivite temples across India hold a liṅga in their central-most sanctum. Pre-modern evidence, however, suggests a long and varied history. It took centuries for the present form of the liṅga to evolve out of early phallic imagery and centuries more after that for it to take hold, theologically, as the single dominant form of devotion. Despite its complex past, the liṅga has been a constant source of inspiration in myths and liturgies celebrating the god; not least among these being the persistence of light and fire imagery. This talk will survey a selection of well-known pre-modern sculptures and myths, offering new interpretations and historical ruminations on the evolution and growth of liṅgas.