

Bull-Leaping: Did it spread from the Indus Valley to Syria, Egypt, and Crete?

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Bull-Leaping on Indus Seals

Jumping over a bull was a popular sport amongst the Indus people. A seal from Banawali (c.2300 – 1700 BCE) shows an acrobat leaping over a bull. Another seal from Mohenjo-Daro (c.2600 – 1900 BCE) depicts two people participating in the sport simultaneously: one person jumps from the back of the bull and lands in front, and is shown in various stages of leaping, while another person jumps from the front.

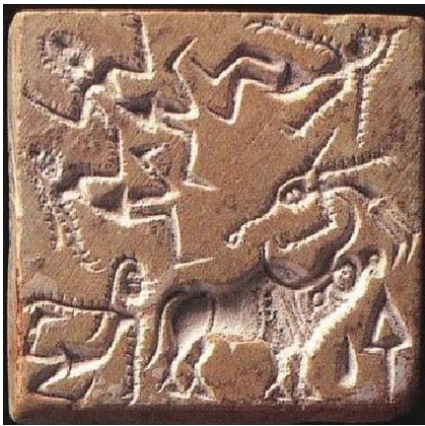


Fig 1: Impression of a Banawali seal from c.2300 – 1700 BCE, showing an acrobat leaping over a bull.
Source:UMESAO 2000:88, No. 335



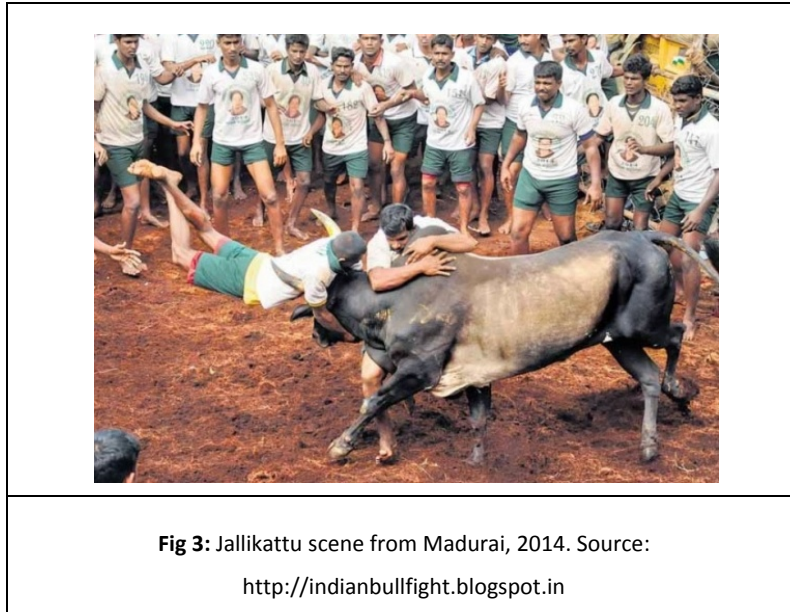
Fig 2: Mohenjo-Daro Seal No.312 depicting bull-leaping, from c.2600 -1900BCE, on display at the National Museum, New Delhi. Source: NMI

Some scholars have wondered whether bull-leaping was a ritual associated with bull worship. Going by the seal images that seems unlikely. No ritualistic paraphernalia are depicted on the seals. Besides, jumping over a bull is a sign of domination and not of worship.

Incidentally, a bull-taming sport called *Jallikattu* is still performed annually in some parts of the state of Tamil Nadu in India, as a part of Pongal celebrations (Pongal is a four-day long harvest festival). *Jallikattu*, quite intriguingly, had started off as a wedding custom amongst the cowherd community since the time of Lord Krishna.

Jallikattu: A Tradition started by Krishna

Jallikattu is a sport of bull-taming or bull-grappling. In this sport, an agitated bull is released into the playing arena from an enclosure. The participants athletically leap on the bull, either trying to subdue it, or hold on to its hump long enough to grab the bag of coins tied to the bull's horns as prize. These days, instead of a bag of coins, a token cloth is tied to the horns.



The ancient Tamil *Sangam literature* (3rd century BCE – 4th century CE) mentions bull-grappling as popular sport amongst the Velir chieftains who ruled in different parts of the ancient Tamil country. The Velirs or Ay-Velirs (the prefix *Ay* denotes the *Ayar* cowherd community) belonged to the *Yadava dynasty of Krishna*, who had migrated southwards, most probably after the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization (starting at around c.1900 BCE) and settled in different parts of Southern India. The relation between the Velirs and the Yadava dynasty of Krishna is testified by the Sangam Literature as well as multiple copper-plate charters of the Tamil kings.

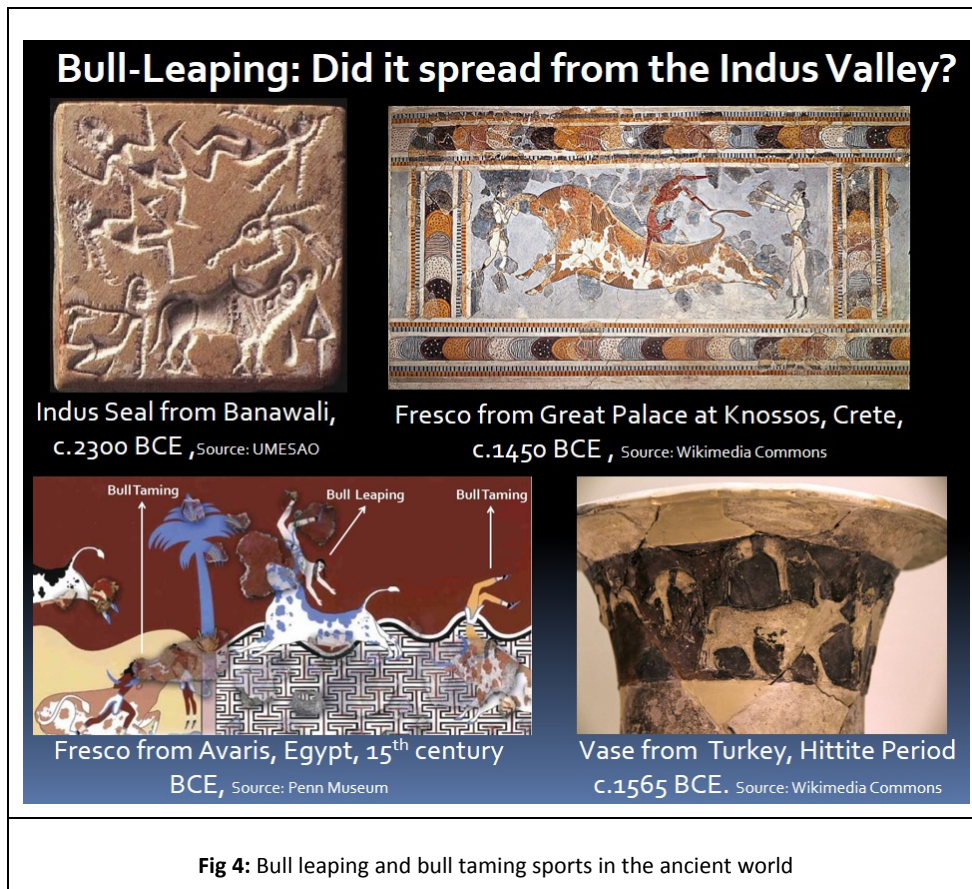
In the book, *Temples of Krsna in South India*, T.Padmaja states that jallikattu had started off as a wedding custom amongst the Ay-Velirs:

“A verse in *Kalithokai*¹ says that an Ay girl would not marry the man who was afraid to face a bull fight. This shows that ‘it was a custom in the cowherd community for young girls, until they were married, to select their own bulls from the common stall and to tend them. The bulls would then be let loose, and which ever young cowherd could successfully bring the beast under control in an open contest, was deemed the proper life-partner for the girl. Apparently, it was one of the ancient wedding customs of the Ayars. This custom also can be traced to their family deity *Krsna*, who curbed the fury of seven bulls coloured black, white and brown and married the girls who were tending them.’^{2,3}

So, apparently, bull-grappling, had not only started off as a wedding custom amongst the Ayar cowherd community, but the tradition was started by Krishna. This explains why jallikattu is most popular in Madurai, a city that is said to derive its name from Mathura, the place of birth of Krishna. Since the Indus Valley seals depicting bull-leaping / bull-taming have been dated to c.2600 BCE, we can infer that the era of the Mahabharata war and of Lord Krishna must have been prior to c.2600 BCE.

During the Late Bronze Age, bull-leaping and bull-taming begun to appear in other parts of the world such as Syria / Turkey, Egypt and Crete. This raises the question if migrating Indus

tribes took this custom to distant lands, after the Indus Valley civilization began to collapse at around 1900 BCE due to a host of environmental factors.



Bull-Leaping in Syria

Bull-leaping emerged in the 15th century BCE in northern Syria and southern Turkey which was under Mitanni / Hittite rule during this period. Recently restored bull-leaping frescoes from the palace of *Alalakh* in southern Turkey, as well as scenes of bull leapers from seal impressions, confirm the popularity of this sport. Bull leaping was also depicted on a vase from *Huseyindede Tepesi* in Eastern Turkey.



Fig 5: Bull leaping scene on a vase from Huseyindede Tepesi, dating to the Hittite period c. 1565-1540 BCE. Source: Wikimedia Commons / Klaus-Peter Simon

It is well-known that the Mitanni were a people with Vedic antecedents. In 1380 BCE, the Hittites and the Mitanni had concluded a treaty (the *Suppiluliuma-Shattiwaza treaty*), which invokes the Vedic deities Mitra, Varuna, Indra and the Nasatyas.

The UNESCO funded study called *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, which included participating scholars from Iran, Afghanistan, India, China, Pakistan, Russia and Mongolia, concludes on the basis of a host of archaeological, cultural, and linguistic evidences that the Mitanni migrated to Turkey, Syria and Palestine, following the collapse of the Indus Valley:

“It seems very likely that simultaneously with the movement of the Kassites – and in any case before 1700 BC at the latest, or perhaps even earlier, at the end of the third millennium BC – the immigration of Proto-Indian groups into Hurrian territory began, led by the class of war-charioteers (maryannu). They brought with them a new species of horse, more suitable for the war-chariot, a new method for horse training, described by Kikkuli, the man of Hurri, in a treatise written in *Hittite*, and a perfected form of the chariot.

Through these important elements of their civilizations the Proto-Indians gave an impetus to the development of Hurrian society and, and to the organization of the Mitanni kingdom, many kings of which bore Proto-Indian names. The Proto-Indian tribal aristocracy spread also to Syria and Palestine where it brought about the formation of stage organization based on the class of war-charioteers. Proto-Indian linguistic influence was considerable on the vocabulary of horse-breeding, horse-training, social life and religion as shown by the following list of Proto-Indian terms borrowed by the Hurrians and other peoples of western Asia.”⁴

Therefore, the appearance of bull-leaping in Syria and Turkey in the 15th century BCE could have been due to the migrations from the Indus Valley.

Bull-Leaping in Egypt

Bull-leaping also arrived in Egypt in the late 15th century BCE. This is evident from a wall painting excavated from a Thutmosid palace in the Hyksos capital of *Avaris* in Egypt, possibly done during the reign of the 18th dynasty pharaoh Thutmose III. The painting shows the performers engaging in *bull-leaping as well as bull-taming, thereby indicating that they are variations of the same sport.*

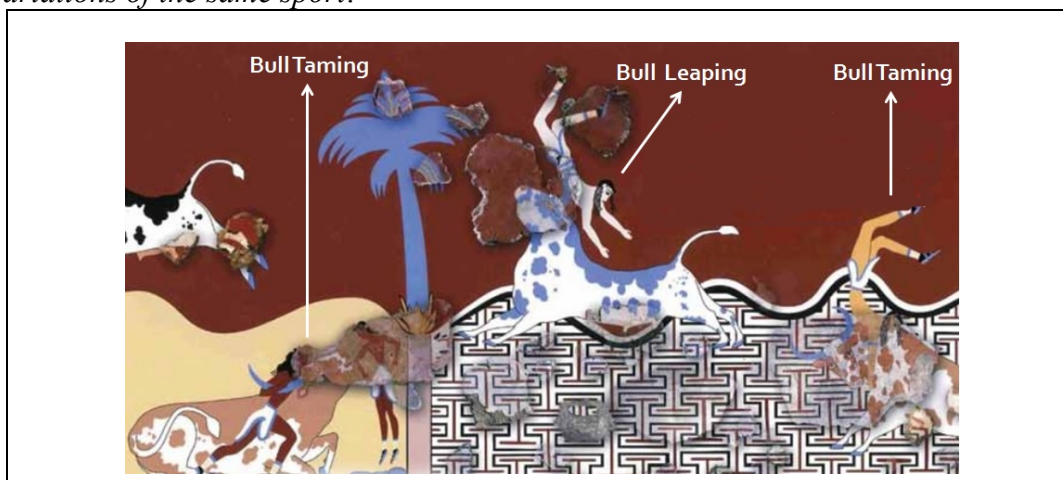


Fig 6:Fresco from Avaris, Egypt showing bull-leaping and bull-taming. Source: Penn Museum, *Expedition Magazine* 53.3 (December 2011)

The prevalence of bull-leaping in Egypt during the 18th dynasty can be explained by the migrations of the Kushite tribes from the Indus Valley. The Kushites, who captured Babylon in the 16th century BC, worshipped Vedic deities (Suriash, Maruttash, Indas, etc.). Sumerian inscriptions often refer to the Kushites as “Meluhha-Kasi”. Since “Meluhha” was a term used in the Sumerian region for the Indus Valley civilization, “Meluha-Kasi” is obviously a reference to the Kushites of the Indus Valley.

A number of Greek historians have stated that the Ethiopians, who were called Kushites, originally came from the Indus Valley. According to *Eusebius*, “a numerous colony of people emigrated from the banks of the Indus, and crossing the ocean, fixed their residence in the country now called Ethiopia.”⁵

Philostratus provides more details. He writes that the Ethiopians, an Indian race, dwelt in India under the ruler ship of King Ganges. But when they slew their king they were inflicted by a host of natural calamities which forced them to leave their homeland. They founded *sixty cities along the path of their emigration*, until they settled in the fertile land of Kush.⁶ This suggests that the colonization of Ethiopia may have been triggered by a large-scale emigration of people from the Indus Valley when it started to collapse at around 1900 BCE.

When the Egyptian pharaohs Ahmose and Kamose drove out the Hyksos invaders from Egypt in c.1550 BCE, they had taken the financial and military help of their southern Kushite neighbors. The cult of Amun-Mut-Khonsu which was subsequently established at Thebes was of Ethiopian origin. E. A. Wallis Budge tells us that, “The ban triad had nothing whatever to do with The Egyptian Book of the Dead, and we may suspect that they were either gods newly come up or gods of foreign derivation...they were the *Trinity of Ethiopia* and not of Egypt.”⁷

I had argued in a couple of previous articles that this Ethiopian Trinity was symbolically equivalent to the Indian triad of deities Krishna-Subhadra-Balarama, and the Opet festival which was celebrated annually in Thebes, during the season of the flooding of the Nile, was identical in form and spirit to the Jagannath Rathayatra that is still celebrated in Puri, India.⁸⁹

In view of this, it will not be amiss to suggest that the custom of bull-leaping in Avaris could have been introduced in the late 15th century BCE by the Kushites, who had migrated to Ethiopia from the Indus Valley, and subsequently played an important role in the Egyptian monarchy and the cult of Amun.

Nowhere, however, was bull-leaping more important than in the Minoan civilization that flourished on the Aegean island of Crete.

Minoan Bull-Leaping

Bull-leaping started to appear in Cretan art towards the beginning of the Late Bronze Age in c.1700 BCE. It was the centerpiece of Minoan social life. Bull-leaping frescoes were prominently depicted at the Great Palace at Knossos in Crete. The large ceremonial courtyard at the center of the Knossos palace complex probably served as the bull-ring as the major entrances leading to the central courtyard were adorned with paintings of processions and bull-leaping.



Fig 7: The bull-leaping fresco at the Great Palace at Knossos, Crete, dated to c.1450-1400 BCE. Two men are positioned at each end of the bull, while another somesaults over the bull. Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Minoan depictions of bull-leaping can be found on a number of seals made of gemstones. A Minoan bronze sculpture showing an acrobat leaping over a bull was fashioned using the *lost-wax method* – a technique that had been perfected by the Harappans. Since Crete had no natural sources of copper or tin to make bronze, and relied on an extensive maritime network to obtain these materials, it is a mystery how they acquired the skill to make these bronze statues.



Fig 8: Bronze figurine of a Minoan bull leaper, Crete c. 1600 BCE, made using the lost-wax method. Source: Wikimedia Commons / Mike Peel

One of the striking aspects of the Minoan society is that it was *multicultural*. The frescoes depict an admixture of men and women with white and brown complexion, implying that a substantial number of brown-skinned foreigners had settled in the island. When the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans had discovered Palace of Knossos in Crete in 1900, he had surmised that the Minoans were refugees from Northern Egypt.



Could it be that a group of migrating Indus tribes settled in Crete sometime around 1700 BCE, carrying with them their bull-leaping sport, and other elements of their culture?

In the book, *A New System or Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1773), the British scholar and mythographer Jacob Bryant had provided an exhaustive account of the migrations of the Kushites, based on various ancient sources. He mentions that certain islands, including Crete, *were held jointly by the Europeans (sons of Japheth) and the migrating Kushites (sons of Ham)*, as documented in the *Chronicon Paschale*, a 7th-century Greek Christian chronicle of the world.

In some places, as I have mentioned, they (Kushites) mixed with the natives, and held many islands in common with them. "These islands, which I have just specified, are those that are jointly held by the sons of Ham, and those of Japhet; and they are in number twenty and six...There were other islands occupied by these people, such as Sardinia, Crete, Cyprus" ...Thus by reciprocal evidences from the most genuine history it appears, that the Cuthites, Ethiopians, and Erythreans were the same people.¹⁰

If a migration from the Indus Valley to Minoan Crete did indeed take place, it should be reflected in the broader social, religious, and technological aspects of the Minoan society. In my next article, I will discuss a number of commonalities between the Indus and Minoan cultures, which support the migration hypothesis.

End Notes

¹KLT, 103:63-64

²Dikshitar, *Silappadikaram*, p. 230.

³T. Padmaja, *Temples of Kṛṣṇa in South India: History, Art, and Traditions in Tamilnāḍu* (Abhinav Publications, 2002) 36.

⁴Vadim Mikhaïlovich Masson, *History of civilizations of Central Asia, Volume 1*, (Motilal Banarsidass Publ., 1999) 372.

⁵Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol XVI, p 309

⁶Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Book 3, from livius.org

⁷ George St. Clair, *Creation Records Discovered in Egypt: Studies in the Book of the Dead* (1898) 404.

⁸Bibhu Dev Misra, "Krishna worship and Rathayatra Festival in Ancient Egypt?"
<http://bibhudev.blogspot.in/2011/03/krishna-worship-and-rathayatra-festival.html>

⁹Bibhu Dev Misra, "The journey of Jagannath from India to Egypt: The Untold Saga of the Kushites" <http://bibhudev.blogspot.in/2012/01/journey-of-jagannath-from-india-to.html>

¹⁰ Jacob Bryant, *A New System or Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (London, 1773)191.