The Golden Calf in Art and Religion

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The Bull and the Golden Calf
in Art and Religion

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ABSTRACT

Worshipping a bull was a custom in ancient Egypt and in India. The Israelites in Sinai about 1250 BC worshipped a golden calf - - a young offspring of a bull and a cow. Gold at that time was the most valued material in ancient Egypt. The story of the Golden Calf received great attention by the artists.

INTRODUCTION

An adult male cattle is called a bull while an adult female is a cow. Young cattle of both sexes are called calf. A bull cannot be used to pull ploughs or carts but it can make cows pregnant. It is not domesticated but it is the toro that the Matador in Spain fights. Unless a cow delivers a calf, she cannot give milk. An ox (plural oxen) is castrated bull. Castration makes the animal easier to control. Oxen are usually joined together in pairs and are used for plowing, for pulling carts, hauling wagons, etc. Bison is referred to as buffalo in North America.

ANCIENT EGYPT

In the ancient Egypt the bull was a symbol of strength and power and bull worship was common (Figures 1-4). The Apis was worshipped as the embodiment of the powerful god Ptah. It appeared on wall painting (Figure 5 and 6). The Egyptians would embalm a dead Apis and bury it in a massive granite coffin. In Saqqara there is a cemetery for mummified Apis bull (Figure 7 and 8). The birth of an Apis calf was a time for celebration among ancient Egyptians. Under the Ptolemies in the third century BC, the Apis was integrated with Osiris to form the Greek god Serapis which was worshipped until the fall of paganism. In the Greco Roman Museum in Alexandria there is a large bronze statue of a Apis bull created during the reign of Hadrian (AD 117-138) (Figure 9). It received little attention from modern artists (Figure 10).
Figure 1 - Worshipping of Apis in ancient Egypt

Figure 2 - Worshipping of Apis in ancient Egypt
Figure 3 - Worshipping of Apis in ancient Egypt

Figure 4 - A bronze statue shows a king offering to the bull

Figure 5 - Apis on a wall painting
Figure 6 - Apis on a wall painting

Figure 7 - Cemetery for mummified Apis bull
Figure 8 - Massive granite sarcophagus for bulls in Saqqara

Figure 9 - A bronze Apis bull in the Greco Roman Museum in Alexandria
The Nandi the bull was worshiped in prehistoric India. It was considered a protector of all Shiva temples. In Mysore Nandi the bull is located at the top of Chamundi hills (Figure 11-12). It is about 5 m in height and 7 m long is attributed to Dodda Devaraja Wodeyar (1659–1673) one of the Maharajas of Mysore. There are a lot of statues of Nandi the bull in many temples in South India (Figure 13and 14).
The legend about Panch Kedar relates to the Pandavas who killed their cousins in war. They wished to atone for the sins. Thus, they left in search of the god Shiva and to seek his blessings. They went to the holy city of Varanasi famous for its Shiva temple but Shiva wanted to avoid them as he was deeply incensed by the death. He assumed the form of a bull (Nandi) and hid. Not finding Shiva in Varanasi, the Pandavas went to Garhwal Himalayas to look for him. They saw a bull grazing near Guptakashi. They immediately recognized the bull to be Shiva. They caught the bull by its tail but the bull
disappeared to later reappear. The Pandavas pleased with this reappearance built temple for worshipping Shiva. The Pandavas were thus freed from their sins. In modern India the cow and bull have a special treatment (Figures 15-17).

EXODUS

According to the Bible [Exodus 32:4] a golden calf was made by the Israelites to worship when they left Egypt and were wondering the Sinai Desert around 1250 BC. It was made by Aaron to satisfy the Israelites during Moses' absence. At that time, Moses was up in the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments [Exodus 24:12-18]. In Hebrew, the incident is known as "The Sin of the Calf". The Israelites in Sinai also made a copper
serpent (Figure 18) but the Golden Calf was the subject of numerous works of artists (Figures 19-25).

Figure 18 - A copper serpent made by the Israelites in Sinai

Figure 19 - An artist's drawing depicting worshipping the Golden Calf by the Israelites

Figure 20 - An artist's drawing depicting worshipping the Golden Calf by the Israelites
Figure 21 - An artist’s drawing depicting worshipping the Golden Calf by the Israelites

Figure 22 - An artist’s drawing depicting worshipping the Golden Calf by the Israelites
Figure 23 - An artist’s drawing depicting worshipping the Golden Calf by the Israelites

Figure 24 - An artist’s drawing depicting worshipping the Golden Calf
EPILOGUE

It is strange today that ancient people created an idol to worship. The story of the Golden Calf received great attention by the artists. The Golden Calf seems to be related to ancient Egypt the home of gold in time of Pharaohs.