

## Indo-European Art

**Overview** To reconstruct the nature or development of IE art requires flexibility and a willingness to construct from the ground up. We have wide evidence of ancient art-works, but must decide whether to include them in the IE corpus. We have the increasingly coherent map provided by comparative linguistics, with its forays into language and prosody use in the IE zone. Finally, pointing at least *in the direction of art*, we have the outlines of an IE poetics in the kinds of ‘literary criticism’ offered us by (for example) scholarship like Watkins’ *To Slay a Dragon*.

**Evidence from art-works** The identification of art works which derive from IE cultures is shaky, but valuable when the art style and material we identify cohere with other plausible examples, from the IE land and timescape. An instance confidently described as IE in style would be the cast-iron helmet plates from Torslunda in Sweden. Dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., they depict Scandinavians and monsters in mortal mutually consuming poses. (The static built up fury between the two forces is exactly the emotional formula argued out for a wealth of textual examples in Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, below.) A second example of IE art, that enriches the thematic material of our experience, is the Gundestrup cauldron, which depicts troops of infantry and cavalry wearing Celtic regalia, and compelling our attention by a scene of immersion, a military baptism into the good vibes of the next world. The militant, fearsome, stocky Iron Age figures, illustrated in these first two examples, set the tone for the multiple plate-illustrations--double axe wielding heroes, sacred twins, Polish face-urns-- found, and referenced, in *In Search of the Indo Europeans*, by J.P.Mallory, London, 1989. That work is a cogent starting point for unfolding examples of IU visual art.

**How to kill a dragon** Calvert Watkins’ *How to kill a dragon* (Oxford, 1995) is a very close microtextual reading of fragments of IE texts. The common theme he is disengaging, from the rich collection before him, is the pervasive IE concern with slaying the dragon of evil; with a narrative layout in which the divine hero slays the evil force--the Grendel in the world. (Watkins finds plentiful corroboration of this narrative in languages like Old and Middle Iranian, Greek epic fragments, Germanic sagas, all the way to Armenian oral epic of the past century.) Is Watkins excavating art from this scattered tapestry of fragments before him? He is helping us find our way into a consistent theme, and a consistent series of formulations of the theme, in the linguistic network which was in the first place the source of the discovery of IE.

**Linguistic networking into ancient epic traditions** Themes from IE myth find their ways into such high art as the ancient oral epic traditions of India, Iran, or Greece. This foundation level of ancient mythical creativity is plain in the ‘theme of twins,’ a commonplace in IE myths, and readily apparent in a work like the *Iliad*, where we find a special setting in which to understand the relation of Achilles to Patroclus, or for that matter of Nestor the older man to his virtual twin, Nestor the younger man, the man ‘who once fought at...’ In other words, the deep lived meanings of twinship play out across the IE experience, into the literatures--the *Mahabharata*, the *Avesta*, *Cuchulain*, the *Iliad*-- which track the embodied profundity of early IE epic poetry.

## Reading

Mallory, James; Adams, Douglas Q., eds., *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, London, 1997.

Anthony, David; *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, Princeton, 2007.

## Discussion questions

What do you think of the nature of art as the IE people conceived it? Can you extrapolate a basic character for the art of the IE people?

Homer’s work and that of the Vedic epic poets is arguably the greatest achievement of early epic poetry. What can we understand better about that poetry, when we know its IE setting?

What do you think of the 'anti-reconstructive' position on the IE achievement? Are you yourself easy with thinking of the Indo-Europeans as a meaningfully collective group? Or do they remain, for you, an hypothesis?