

# Gundestrup Cauldron



Gundestrup Cauldron  
Peat bog, Gundestrup (Denmark)  
First century B.C.E.  
Silver partially gilded  
Diameter 69cm., Height 42cm.  
Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet

The Gundestrup Cauldron is a religious vessel found in Himmerland, Denmark, 1891. It was deposited in a dry section of a peat bog, dismantled with its five long rectangular plates, seven short ones and one round plate. Each plate is made of 97.0% pure silver and filled with various motifs of animals, plants and pagan deities. Sophus Müller(1892) reconstructed these plates into the present form of the cauldron: five rectangular plates are placed in the inside of the cauldron leaving 2cm of space between each, and the seven (originally eight) plates form the outside of the cauldron. The round plate is assumed as the base of the cauldron. The reconstructed cauldron with its spherical base and cylindrical side is 69cm. in diameter and 42cm. high; both the inner and outer plates are almost of the same height ( about 21cm) forming the cylindrical side of the cauldron.

As the largest surviving piece of European Iron Age silver work, the Gundestrup Cauldron has been given a special interest by many scholars. Especially, its high quality workmanship and iconographic variety have generated an incessant inquiry into the origin of the cauldron. Though the date of the cauldron is generally attributed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE (La Tène III), there still remains much room for controversy concerning the place of its manufacture. The main

problem comes from the fact that its style and workmanship is Thracian rather than Celtic despite its decorative motifs manifestly Celtic. So far, scholastic opinions have been largely divided into two groups: those who argue for the Gaulish origin and those who argue for the Thracian origin. The former locate the manufacture of the cauldron in the Celtic west while the latter opt for the Lower Danube in southeastern Europe.

The proponents of the Gaulish origin put emphasis on the Celtic motifs depicted on the cauldron such as a [horned deity](#), [torques](#) and musical instruments called [carnyx](#). Most representative of all, Klindt-Jensen (1959) sees a horned deity as Cernunos, the Celtic god and argues that it points toward northern Gaul as the area of its origin. However, even among those scholars who opt for the Gaulish origin, iconographic interpretations largely vary with one another. Instead of reading the horned figure as Cernunnos, Olmsted (1979) suggests that it is related with the Gaulish Mercury and its Irish counter part Cu-Chulainn. Actually Olmsted reads the whole iconography of Gundestrup Cauldron as an illustration of a prototype Tain Bó Cuailnge, the Irish tale. Though his interpretation is no more secure than those of the others, Olmsted makes a notable case for the coherent narrative of the cauldron.

Those who argue for the Gaulish origin usually locate the cauldron in the final stage of late La tène period, because by this time, such non Celtic elements as fantastic animals began to appear in the diverse representations on the Celtic coinage. They also draw analogy with other bronze cauldrons of Late La Tène period from central and western Europe. The [Rynkeby Cauldron](#) which also comes from a Danish bog is the closest example to the Gundestrup Cauldron: they are almost of the same size; both have decorative plaques forming the interior of the upper cylindrical wall; they share some motifs such as a human bust on the outer plates. Since the Rynkeby Cauldron is assumed to be made around 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, in northern or central Europe, Olmsted argues that the Gundestrup Cauldron, like the Rynkeby Cauldron, has a La Tène III origin.

On the other hand, proponents of the eastern view base their arguments on the cauldron's silver smithing techniques and its portrayal of fantastic animals which are commonly observed in Thracian metal work. Powell(1971) claims the Thracian heritage by demonstrating a strong stylistic analogy between the Gundestrup Cauldron and Thracian phalerae. The techniques of decorating bodies of animals with hatching lines and punched dots are common in both. Most recently, Bergquist and Taylor further developed his argument. By locating the cauldron in late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, they claimed that silver-smithing techniques used for the cauldron such as high repoussé, pattern punches and tracers, partial gilding, and inseting of glass are as yet unknown from the Celtic West. Bergquist and Taylor divide the Thracian style into two periods: earlier style by the fourth century BC when, after Persian invasion, distinctive and original animal style art had emerged in Thracia, and later style at the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century when the hoards of silver vessels reappeared after two hundred years of absence. They consider that the two styles are basically homogeneous except that in the later style, human figures are emphasized and usually rendered in high repoussé and they conclude that the Gundestrup Cauldron shows the traits of both styles.

If the Cauldron was made elsewhere than Denmark, then how did it make its way north to Jutland ? To explain its discovery in Denmark, several options are brought up. Klindt Jensen assumes that the cauldron was a Celtic object imported into Denmark. Olmsted suggests that it was a war booty because the Romans employed Germanic cavalry in Gaul. Bergquist and Taylor propose that it was made in southeast Europe by a Thracian silver smith, possibly commissioned by Celts (Scordisci)and transported by Cimbri who invaded the Middle lower Danube in 120 BC and looted the Scordisci. They make conjecture that since the cauldron takes the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Thracian style and lacks the Roman tradition, it was made between fourth and first century BC.



(base)

Each plate of the cauldron is labeled after Klindt-Jensen whose labeling is generally adopted by the other scholars. Five inner plates are labeled in capitalized letters, and seven outer plates are labeled in small letters.



(A)



(B)



(C)



(D)



(E)



(a)



(c)



(b)



(d)



(f)

(f)

(g)

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