

Ancient Irish musical history found in modern India

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Billy Ó Foghlú with a Kompu from Kerala, India. Credit: Stuart Hay, ANU

An archaeologist studying musical horns from iron-age Ireland has found musical traditions, thought to be long dead, are alive and well in south India.

The realisation that modern Indian horns are almost identical to many iron-age European artefacts reveals a rich cultural link between the two

regions 2,000 years ago, said PhD student Billy Ó Foghlú, from The Australian National University (ANU).

"Archaeology is usually silent. I was astonished to find what I thought to be dead soundscapes alive and living in Kerala today," said the ANU College of Asia-Pacific student.

"The musical traditions of south India, with horns such as the kompu, are a great insight into musical cultures in Europe's prehistory.

"And, because Indian instruments are usually recycled and not laid down as offerings, the artefacts in Europe are also an important insight into the soundscapes of India's past."

The findings help show that Europe and India had a lively cultural exchange with musicians from the different cultures sharing independently developed technology and musical styles.

One example of this musical mixing is depicted in a carving of a celebration in Sanchi dating from c300 BC that shows a group of musicians taking part, playing two European carnyces, a horn with an animal's head.



Billy Ó Foghlú. Credit: Stuart Hay, ANU

The musical style of Kerala explains some of the mysteries surrounding the [horns](#) that have been unearthed in European iron-age excavations and suggest a very different musical soundscape to current western music said Mr Ó Foghlú.

"Some almost identical instruments have been unearthed together, but they are slightly out of tune with each other to western ears," Mr Ó Foghlú said.

"This was previously assumed to be evidence of shoddy workmanship. But in Indian music this kind of dissonance is deliberate and beautiful.

"Horns are used more as a rhythm instrument, not for melody or harmony in a western sense."

The research is published in the *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology*.

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