Cāmuṇḍā's Glory: Representations of the Fierce Goddess in Purāṇic Literature and Temple Art

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Abstract

Medieval temples across South Asia, particularly in North India, prominently feature a skeletal goddess in the cardinal niches. With hollow eyes, sagging breasts, and fierce attributes, she fearlessly dances upon a corpse and haunts the cremation ground, embodying dissolution at the aeon's end. This deity was the dominant *fierce Goddess* in the medieval period, known most popularly as Cāmuṇḍā or Kālī. In this understanding, the medieval ferocious goddess differs from later representations, which show a voluptuous Kālī standing on the God Śiva. In Bengal, especially since the early modern period, this non-emaciated Kālī is still one of the chief goddesses, but little is known about her early history as Cāmuṇḍā(-Kālī). In fact, despite the skeleton deity's dominant presence in temple art and Sanskrit literature, she has been largely overlooked within scholarship and characterised as a minor, hag-like goddess.

This dissertation investigates the representation of the fierce goddess in texts and temples of medieval India. It traces her development through examining her portrayal in Purāṇic literature and sculptures dating primarily from the eighth to 12th centuries. Much of the visual data was collected through extensive fieldwork in North India, where her depiction was widespread. As a result, relevant sculptures and temples were archived and analysed, including some that had not been documented before.

The initial section of the dissertation discusses the goddess's role within the textual tradition, with a focus on a curated selection of Purāṇas. This analysis encompasses her portrayal in Śākta Purāṇas and beyond. It explores her embodiment of 'warrior fierceness' as evident in the *padamālā mantra vidyā*, which is found across various Purāṇic sources.

The second section uncovers Cāmuṇḍā's rise from *mātṛ* to independent deity by studying, for instance, interconnected goddess temples or programmatic patterns within cardinal niches of Śaiva temples across medieval North India. Thus, this study identifies pivotal moments in her evolution and weaves a thematic narrative of her ascent within the pantheon by focusing on multiple core themes, that is, her representation in Śākta, Śaiva, royal, and monastic temples. Through this approach, the research highlights the trajectory and agents involved in Cāmuṇḍā's rise, sheds light on (cross-) dy-

nastic/regional preferences and maps networks for her worship. Additionally, the thesis conducts an in-depth analysis of Cāmuṇḍā sculptures that share iconographic elements and myths with other Brahminic, Śaiva, and Śākta deities. Integrating textual evidence, these insights provide a deeper understanding of Cāmuṇḍā's ritual function and her role within pictorial programmes.

The thesis concludes with an exploration of the interchange between textual and visual sources. To achieve this, iconographic data was extrapolated from the texts and an extensive array of sculptures, which were analysed based on specific parameters.

Conclusively, the dissertation thematically follows the very process by which the ferocious Goddess gained access to a pan-Indian pantheon, making her the ultimate emanation of fierceness in Hinduism— from the periphery to the temple stage.