



The Hindu deity Shiva as destroyer of the three cities of the demons, 1000–1100
Central India
Sandstone
The Avery Brundage Collection, B6356+

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the Hindu god Shiva. The image appears in a complex narrative scene. Shiva is standing in the pose of an archer, having just released a single arrow that is destroying three cities occupied by demons. He is surrounded by weapons and his lower left hand touches his elephant-headed son, Ganesha, who peers out gingerly behind him.

The apparently frenetic, chaotic scene suggests the urgency and drama of the narrative. The complete name of this subject is Shiva the Destroyer of the Three Cities. It refers to the three indestructible cities of earth, air, and sky that a group of demons created after receiving boons from the gods. In Hindu mythology, whenever a boon is granted, a corollary counteracts the boon, to protect the world from unchecked power. In this case, the demons and their cities could be destroyed by a single arrow once in a thousand years, when all three cities were aligned. The scene shows the moment when Shiva draws back his bow and releases his single arrow to destroy the demons and their domain.

HOW CAN YOU RECOGNIZE SHIVA?

Shiva is a powerful deity, and like other powerful Hindu deities, he is depicted with many arms carrying weapons. His two main arms are shooting the bow. In his other hands are the body of a serpent, a trident, a sword, the end of the serpent's tail, a shield, and a skull club.

Shiva's lower left hand rests on his son, the elephant-headed God, Ganesha. True to his nature, Ganesha is undisturbed by the battle as he enjoys a bowl of sweets. Another figure is bent over and supports Shiva's bent leg. Yet another figure holds a shield and sword. Shiva is often seen accompanied by armies of attendants.

When not engaged in battle or other mythic struggles, Shiva is an ascetic figure who meditates in the Himalayas. As an ascetic, he smears ashes over his body from the cremation grounds (since he is associated with the cycle of birth, death and rebirth). His hair is unkempt, styled into a crown of matted locks and ornamented with a crescent moon. He usually carries a trident, an hour-glass drum, and an axe. He is also lord of the animals, and is sometimes seen with an antelope or deer. He often has a snake wrapped around his neck. The artist here has chosen to depict those attributes that reflect the image of Shiva in battle.

HOW WOULD THIS SCULPTURE HAVE BEEN USED?

This sculpture was made of sandstone in central India around 1000 to 1200. Sandstone allows for detailed carving, but also has a soft, malleable appearance as compared to harder stone.

The sculpture would have been placed above the viewer on the wall of a temple, and may have been painted in bright colors or otherwise decorated. Worshipers to the temple would have seen this sculpture from below and been reminded of the heroic deeds of Shiva. What effect do you think this would have had on people?