



The Hindu deity Durga victorious over the buffalo demon, 1000–1100
India; Tamil Nadu state
Granite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B64S10

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

This is an image of the goddess Durga. She is shown in a triumphant pose as the slayer of the buffalo demon, Mahisha. Durga is a manifestation of the Goddess, who can also appear as the consort Parvati or as a destructive figure Kali. Durga is a powerful manifestation of Parvati and as such appears on her own rather than as a consort of Shiva.

Durga appeared when the gods were unable to subdue a demon who was threatening the entire world. Individually, the gods were unable to defeat the demon. They summoned Durga and gave her all their weapons. The battle went on and on, prolonged by the fact that Mahisha continually changed shapes. Finally, Durga was able to cut off his head as the demon emerged from a buffalo. In this scene, the struggle and violence of the combat between Goddess and demon is only subtly suggested. Durga stands victorious over the head of the buffalo, alluding to the famous story but focusing most of the viewers' attention on the powerful goddess herself.

In Hindu imagery, many divine figures are often portrayed with their vehicles, animals associated with them such as the eagle Garuda earlier seen portrayed with the god Vishnu. In the visual arts, gods' vehicles will often be seen to physically support and transport them. In this sculpture, as well as in other South Indian renditions of the subject, the artist has creatively subverted the idea of vehicle to create a deft suggestion of a mythic story, using a basic iconographic device.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE DURGA?

The goddess Durga is usually depicted with many arms, and sometimes rides on a lion or tiger, her conventional vehicle. Her weapons include a sword, shield, bow and arrow, club and trident. Durga is a powerful figure, and she is usually depicted standing above the buffalo demon, or riding a lion with raised weapons.

Another manifestation of the goddess is Kali, who appears as a terrifying and destructive, sometimes having fangs and wearing a garland of severed heads. (The wrathful goddess Kali is similar in nature to Bhairava, the fierce form of Shiva who was discussed earlier.)

The artisans who created this statue of Durga have combined an image of victory with an image of beauty. The figure is richly adorned with jewelry, a tall crown and has a slender waist and graceful pose. In this sense, she reflects the ability of most goddess figures to act courageously in the world, and at the same time be subjects of devotion and beauty.

HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE USED?

This sculpture might have been placed in a niche of a wall on a southern Indian temple during the Chola dynasty, around the 1000s CE. The graceful, slender, elongated form of the figure is typical of the period. Her image communicates the idea of triumph over adversity, and the ability to conquer adversaries unvanquishable by the gods.