

AN ENIGMATIC FEMALE ASCETIC FIGURE FROM MATHURA

By the first century, Mathura's sculptural workshops were supplying their clients with large numbers of stone figures and plaques portraying goddesses on their own or together in groups. From mothers to combative or assertive deities and fully anthropomorphic to hybrid figures, the sheer variety of early goddess imagery points to the pluralism of goddess cults in the region and a somewhat fluid iconography¹. Distributed throughout the region, the find-spots of these sculptures indicate a broad support base for these cults². Patrons and sculptors at Mathura rarely specified the sectarian affiliations of these early goddesses³. While scholars can refer to sectarian literature and inscriptions for help in assigning goddesses to Brahmanical or Jain religious groups, few goddesses belonging to this formative iconographic phase (Kuṣāṇa to Gupta) are either named by inscription⁴ or unequivocally identified with unique attributes. Thus, many of Mathura's goddesses defy clear-cut explanations and neat categorisation, often leaving modern viewers in a conundrum.

¹ Divakaran (1984) and Srinivasan (1997) among others have written about the ambiguity and complexity of goddess forms in Mathura. See also Basu (2015: 395–406).

² Although it is conceivable that sites were dedicated exclusively to goddess worship, no such sites have yet been excavated or referenced in inscriptions.

³ Divakaran (1984: 271–273) makes this observation about the earliest representations of Durgā.

⁴ The dated image of Sarasvatī from Kankali Tila (State Museum, Lucknow, no. J 24) is an exception as it is named.

A late-Kuṣāṇa / early Gupta period torso of a female deity (Fig. 1)⁵ currently on display at the Government Museum, Mathura and labelled by the museum as a *yakṣī*, presents just such an iconographic puzzle. This paper examines the unusual iconography of this figure, particularly her bowl, against the background of ascetic practices in early Mathura. The key to alternative interpretations of this figure, I argue, lies in recognising both the multivalence of the bowl as well as the complex and varied nature of asceticism in ancient India⁶. While the precise identity of this figure remains a mystery, its relationship to asceticism prompts further examination of the role of female practitioners and the significance of feminine imagery within Mathura's early ascetic communities.

Close examination of this independent figure clearly confirms what she is not: that is, a semi-divine being primarily associated with fertility and nature. Indeed, her large halo and frontal stance indicate her divine or supernatural powers. Although life-sized images of *yakṣī*-s with a similar stance are common in Mathura sculpture, haloes rarely characterise figures of *yakṣī*-s⁷. Instead of the rich ornamentation that usually characterises *yakṣī* figures, this figure displays minimal jewellery – a simple string of beads on the hair's parting, a short string of beads around the neck, and a bangle on each wrist. A simple shawl with its ends wrapped around both arms above the elbows is the only item of clothing visible on the torso (the portion below the waist is missing).

Too plain to be a *yakṣī*, this two – armed and haloed female appears, instead, to represent a deity or supernatural being with strong ties to asceticism and renunciation. Her earlobes are stretched and empty (Fig. 2), indicating renunciation of material wealth and the bulk of her hair is tied back in a tall bun marked with vertical striations that resemble the matted locks on

⁵ Government Museum Mathura (GMM), Accession no. 50.3549. The Museum's register records Mahavidya Devi Tila as the find spot of this sculpture and cites museum agent Pandit Gobind Charan as the source. It also records the torso's measurement as 1'71/2" x 1'1".

⁶ The nature of asceticism in ancient India has been the subject of extensive discussions in recent indological literature. See Boucher (2011: 197–224) and Cort (2002: 719–742) for non-traditional and multi-dimensional approaches to the study of asceticism in Mahāyāna Buddhism and Jainism respectively and Olivelle (1993) for Brahmanical contexts.

⁷ See for example, the larger-than-life sculpture in the round from the Heeramanek Collection published in Pal (1986: 176–177).

late Kuṣāna/ early Gupta detached Śiva heads and *mukhaliṅgas* and images of the Jina R̥ṣhabha⁸). It may be tempting to associate this torso with the Puranic legends of penances performed by Umā and Pārvatī, since the sculpture reportedly originated in the vicinity of Mahavidya Devi Temple, where an early *caturmukha liṅga* had previously been discovered⁹). Although Umā was represented on some *caturmukha liṅgas* from the Kuṣāna period onward¹⁰, her independent images are rare and those of Pārvatī as *tapasvinī* performing hard penance became popular only after the seventh century¹¹).

Moreover, the Mathura Museum torso has none of the attributes that are usually associated with the handful of female ascetic deities known from Mathura. The wide-mouthed bowl that she holds with both her hands at waist-level (Fig. 3) is the most puzzling aspect of her iconography. It is this attribute that distinguishes her most from the images of ascetic goddesses that pre-dated her. A comparison with three Kuṣāna period images will serve to illustrate these differences. The squatting figure in the State Museum, Lucknow dated to the year 54 of an unnamed Kuṣāna king and identified by inscription as Sarasvatī holds a manuscript and a string of beads¹²). That Sarasvatī has been re-contextualised by Jain ascetic groups in this sculpture from Mathura is evident from the figure of a Jain ascetic portrayed by her right foot. Another goddess carved on a Mathura Museum plaque is flanked by two vessels with flames that probably symbolise penance by fire¹³). The third female deity who is likely associated with austerities involving water (as indicated by the tall water jars flanking her feet) is carved in relief on a small

⁸) Kreisel (1986) illustrates numerous examples (Fig. 87, 88, 33) in the Śaiva context. See Joshi (2004: Fig. 41) for R̥ṣhabhanātha's figure on a four-sided image.

⁹) Kreisel (1986: 201–2, Fig. 57a–d) discusses this particular *liṅga* as a late kshatrpa/ early Kuṣāna example. The object is in the collection of the National Museum, New Delhi (accession number: 65.172).

¹⁰) Kreisel (1986: 203–204, Fig. 59 a–d).

¹¹) Divakaran (1984: 284); Joshi (1996: 11).

¹²) See footnote 4 above. For this figure's relationship with Jain ascetic groups, see Basu (forthcoming).

¹³) GMM accession number 15.978. For an image see Srinivasan (1997: Plate 20.8). N. P. Joshi (1996: 10) identified this figure as an early form of Tapasvinī Pārvatī performing penance involving five fires. Srinivasan (1997: 286, footnote 14) prefers to treat this example as a precursor to the ascetic form of the Great Goddess.

plaque in the National Museum, New Delhi¹⁴). She holds a flower with a long stalk in her left hand and, like the previous Mathura Museum example, gestures fearlessness with her right palm. The Delhi figure's hairstyle compares closely to that of the Mathura Museum torso with bowl; she also wears a comparable string of beads around her neck¹⁵. Thus, there is no known precedent for a bowl-bearing goddess with ascetic qualities in Mathura. Nor does this combination appear in later times. From the fifth century onward, Pārvatī in her *tapasvinī* form sometimes holds a small water pot, which is quite distinct in shape, size, and function from a bowl¹⁶. Understanding the multivalence of the bowl as a ritual article may provide valuable hints for interpreting the attribute and overall function of this distinctive female torso.

The shape and placement of the Mathura figure's bowl compare closely to that of a *pātra* or offering vessel used by mendicants to receive food, notably in the context of Buddhist renunciation and gift giving but also by students and ascetics in the Brahmanical tradition¹⁷. In Kuṣāna art, offering bowls feature most prominently in scenes from the Buddha's life on Gandharan narrative reliefs. Although not as popular in Mathura, some Gandharan biographical scenes were copied by Mathura artists in local red sandstone. In these scenes, ideal donors, such as the four *lokapāla*¹⁸ or the monkey who offered honey, carry bowls either as gifts or as receptacles containing offerings for the Buddha¹⁹. The Buddha as recipient is portrayed with his own alms bowl. As Filigenzi points out, the Buddha's *pātra* is miraculous and all-encompassing having the capacity to subsume all offerings. Thus, it is always

¹⁴ Accession number 67.38. Asthana (1999: 40) identified this figure as the Buddhist deity Vasudhārā. For an image see Srinivasan (1997: Plate 20.7).

¹⁵ Asthana (1999: 40) dates the National Museum plaque to the Kuṣāna-Gupta transition (3rd – 4th centuries); this would make it more or less coeval with the torso.

¹⁶ Divakaran (1984: 284) cites the 5th c. image from Mandhal. Gupta period river goddesses, such as the life-size terracotta images in the National Museum, New Delhi, carry water jars shaped like the traditional *ghaṭa* but not bowls.

¹⁷ For a recent interpretation of the symbolic meanings of the begging bowl in 7th- 8th c. Buddhist art in Afghanistan, see Filigenzi (2008: 11–24). Falk (2009: 65–78) suggests that bowls were used as receptacles for wine in Buddhist monastic contexts. For discussions of Brahmanical textual references to food collection by renunciators see Olivelle (1993; in particular chapter 4) and also Lubin (forthcoming).

¹⁸ This scene was copied by Mathura sculptors on the base of a small *stūpa* found at the site of Dhruv Tila (Government Museum, Mathura N 2). Anmut (2003: 48–51).

¹⁹ Filigenzi (2008: 11–24) discusses these scenes.

more capacious, powerful and universal in its reach than the bowls or gifts brought by donor figures. For example, the Buddha merged the individual bowls brought by the kings of the four directions into a single more potent vessel in his own hands²⁰⁾ and consequently appeared as a universal king by virtue of absorbing their individual powers. Similarly, the humble gift of a few particles of dust by a poor youth resulted in the boy's future role as a universal monarch and the monkey who offered honey ultimately attained salvation. While the act of making gifts to the Buddha involves renunciation of the giver's own possessions, the act ultimately results in the augmentation and multiplication of rewards.

If the Buddha's bowl serves as an analogy and if we consider that these stories were known to audiences in Mathura, the bowl in the hands of the female deity in the Mathura Museum collection does not seem to be out of place with the deity's ascetic coiffure and attire. Rather, the bowl's symbolism serves to highlight the goddess's dual nature. On one level, the bowl marks her as the primary recipient of gifts and may be a sign of an ascetic lifestyle and the eventual goal of gaining release from *samsāra*. The bowl may also signify abundance due to the implied understanding that gifts directed toward the deity would be multiplied through her ascetic power.

The analogy I draw to the Buddha's bowl, however, does not mean that the goddess necessarily belonged to a Buddhist context; indeed, the collection of alms by ascetics was a common practice across sectarian boundaries. That circular bowls had special meaning for some *śaiva* ascetic groups in Mathura is indicated by the small figure carved on the base of a pillar inscribed late in the fourth century by a preceptor possibly belonging to a Pāśupata lineage (Fig. 4 & 5)²¹⁾. The long-haired, pot-bellied figure with a third eye on his forehead, usually identified as an affiliate of the cult of Lakulīśa, holds either a skull-cup or a stone vessel in his left hand and a staff in his right hand²²⁾. If the bowl is an attribute common to many sects, the combination of asceticism and abundance that characterises the figure of the goddess from Mathura is a feature common to other ascetic deities as well.

In her essay on forms of the goddess Durgā, Odile Divakaran argues (citing the *Ṛgveda* and *Mahābhārata*) that fertility is a key component of

²⁰⁾ Filigenzi (2008: 15–16).

²¹⁾ Mathura Museum (GMM 1931). Sanderson (2013: 225–234) analyzes the inscription as well as literary sources related to this sect.

²²⁾ Kreisel (1986: 252).

the ascetic nature of Śiva and his consort Pārvatī²³). This divine couple is simultaneously associated with marriage, celibacy, and cosmic regeneration. A Gupta period terracotta plaque from Ahichhatra illustrates Śiva's dual nature.²⁴ On it, four – armed Śiva's upper left hand holds a pot with plants (perhaps, medicinal) growing out of it, thus emphasizing the ascetic deity's association with fertility (and healing)²⁵. In her well-known *tapasvini* form, Pārvatī is equated with the earth's productivity while also undertaking fierce penance²⁶. Additionally, Ekānamśā, whose images have been identified in Mathura sculpture as early as the second century, is another goddess linked with both asceticism and prosperity²⁷. Notwithstanding this shared dualism, the Mathura Museum goddess with her prominent attribute idealises a renunciant or mendicant tradition of asceticism more than that of hard penance, meditation, or mastery over scriptural knowledge²⁸.

This concept of a gift originating in self-sacrifice but resulting in augmented returns, I argue, is parallel (but not identical) to the idea of abundance as epitomised by fertility deities, such as *yakṣīs*, who are rarely portrayed in art as receiving or demanding gifts²⁹. In contrast to deities associated primarily with birth and regeneration, the Buddha as renouncer and universal king, typically accepts gifts (such as the four bowls) that he converts into something more potent. I am suggesting a distinction between deities who are primarily 'givers' (such as mother goddesses and tree spirits or nurturing

²³ Divakaran (1984: 275–6).

²⁴ Kreisel (1986: A 26).

²⁵ Bailey (1979: 162) and Meister (1996: 315–321) both argue that regeneration is an integral part of asceticism in the early Indian context. In addition, the legend of the famous ascetic Ṛṣyaśṛṅga whose austerities were instrumental in bringing rain to a drought-stricken area was popular in Mathura art of the Kushan period. Odani (2010: 747–754) has a recent discussion of the reliefs in question.

²⁶ Divakaran (1984: 276) cites relevant references from the *Mahābhārata*.

²⁷ Divakaran (1984: 284); Srinivasan (1997: 214–215).

²⁸ Dhand (2008: 58–71) and Denton (1991: 211–231) have useful discussions of different types of Hindu ascetic practices in ancient and contemporary India. Olivelle (1990: 17–36) discusses references to the types of food consumption prescribed for two broad categories of ascetics in Brahmanical literature. Just as the Mathura Museum image places visual emphasis on the bowl, texts idealise the mendicants' reliance on others for food (see especially pp. 28 ff).

²⁹ An exception would be *yakṣīs* like Hārīti, who demanded offerings during the early part of their careers.

yakṣīs) and those that are mainly ‘receivers’ (such as the Buddha and goddesses who demand sacrifice or penance from their followers).

Goddesses who explicitly demanded offerings and sacrifices from their worshippers were represented in the sculpture of northwest India as early as the Kuṣāna period³⁰. A striking Gandharan image of a seated goddess in the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh provides a good example of such a goddess³¹. Seated frontally on a square backed throne, this goddess carries a bowl in one hand and a severed animal head in her left palm, thus graphically illustrating her expectations. The contents of the round bowl in her right hand are unspecified, although the reference may well be either to the sacrificed animal or other liquids, including wine³². She wears a wreath on her head and is richly adorned with earrings, multiple necklaces, wristlets and anklets (and therefore does not seem to be an ascetic or renouncer).

Although the Mathura Museum and Chandigarh Museum goddesses are quite distinct in their appearance, both figures ask to be propitiated with alms (cooked food in a literal sense)³³ and an animal respectively. Like the Buddha holding the *pātra*, both goddesses actively receive offerings rather than passively conferring blessings. However, in contrast to the Buddha, who is often portrayed displaying gestures of boon-granting or fearlessness while receiving gifts, both these goddesses primarily demand offerings from their followers.

The Mathura Museum deity with her ascetic garb and prominent bowl, then, may well idealise a model of renunciation and a mendicant lifestyle that was sustained largely through lay support. If her bowl simultaneously connotes detachment and abundance, as I have argued, then the image further illustrates the interdependence of renunciation and settled life³⁴. The combi-

³⁰ For a recent analysis of a group of these deities from Gandhara, see Filigenzi (forthcoming: 13).

³¹ Accession Number 94; see Bhattacharyya (2002: 85 and 148) for an illustration.

³² Bhattacharyya (2002: 85). See Falk (2009: 65–78) for the hypothesis of wine production in Buddhist monastic contexts and the linkages between stone bowls and wine.

³³ Olivelle (1990a: 34) argues that renunciation ideally involved receiving food cooked by others in contrast to food production.

³⁴ For two broad models of ascetic practice idealised in Brahmanical and Buddhist textual sources see Olivelle (1990b: 125–160) and Boucher (2011: 197–224). While some renunciators depended closely on lay patronage, other ascetics preferred to withdraw even more completely into the wilderness, thus challenging social norms even more completely. Since Brahmanical texts on domestic rituals reflect the integration of ascetic

nation of these seemingly contrasting ideals in this late Kuṣāna-early Gupta period image does not seem out of place if one considers the material evidence for asceticism in Mathura. Inscriptions and sculptural evidence show that by the Gupta period, Buddhist and Jain renouncers were settled in monasteries and temple complexes after having successfully tapped into lay patronage sources³⁵. The permanent ritual structure (a teachers' shrine) referenced in the late 4th century Mathura Pillar inscription implies that Pāśupata ascetics, too, had access to lay support, although the inscription does not specifically mention lay donors³⁶. In the absence of a firm architectural context and more well-defined attributes, it is difficult to reconstruct with any certitude how the Mathura Museum's torso may have functioned or to pin-point what groups might have worshipped this deity. However, it would be fair to conjecture that as a large and independent figure (the torso itself is nearly two feet in height), this deity possibly had her own shrine within a monastery or other type of sacred complex.

The prominent representation of female asceticism prompts further examination of the place feminine imagery and female practitioners might have occupied among early Mathura's ascetic communities. Whether the visibility and inclusion of ascetic forms of the divine feminine into public shrines meant greater recognition and agency for female ascetics is, however, doubtful. Among the handful of pre-Gupta images of female deities with ascetic connotations that I discussed earlier, none are Buddhist, while one is affiliated with Jains, and two small plaques are possibly Brahmanical in nature. The late Kuṣāna/ early Gupta bowl-bearing deity in the Mathura Museum advertises the merits of mendicancy more boldly than these smaller images and seems to set the tone for larger, more independent figures of the later Gupta period. Two large detached heads from Mathura, one representing Ardhanaṛīśvara and the other Umā or Pārvatī, point to the continued (perhaps, growing) importance of female ascetic deities in Brahmanical circles during the Gupta period³⁷.

goals into ordinary household rituals (Lubin forthcoming), it is conceivable that the Mathura female deity with a bowl idealised lay piety and ascetic practices in the domestic sphere.

³⁵ Basu (2001).

³⁶ *CII* (1981: 234–242); Sanderson (2013: 225–226).

³⁷ See A.I.I.S. Digital South Asia Library for images: http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/aiis_search.html?depth=Get+Details&id=1603 (Pārvatī) and http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/aiis_search.html?depth=Get+Details&id=44652 (Ardhanāṛīśvara).

However, a broad survey of Mathura art suggests a much higher demand for images of male renouncers/ ascetic deities, such as the Buddha, Jain *tīrthaṅkaras*, and Śiva. Additionally, images of *yakṣīs* and goddesses associated with childbirth, protection, and wealth were far more popular than female ascetic deities³⁸. Votive inscriptions from the first to fifth centuries confirm this pattern: female renouncers were present in Mathura but were perhaps undercut by their male counterparts. Jains ascetic communities seem to have attracted the highest numbers of female renouncers in Mathura.³⁹ Honoured with the title *āryā*, these female initiates solicited donations from the laity without actively donating images. While their male counterparts also stayed away from directly making donations, inscriptions demonstrate that multi-generational lineages comprised solely of female initiates ultimately traced their spiritual and intellectual training back to male preceptors (who often had more specialised titles)⁴⁰. The image of Sarasvatī discussed earlier was donated by a male lay donor at the request of a group of learned monks.⁴¹ By comparison, fewer Buddhist nuns are documented in inscriptions, although in contrast to their Jain counterparts, as many as six Buddhist nuns are named as the principal donors of images of Buddha and *bodhisattvas*⁴². Among the few Mathura inscriptions that are related to Brahmanical ritual contexts, only the 4th century Mathura Pillar Inscription names ascetic preceptors, none of whom were female⁴³. Thus, by the time the Mathura Museum torso was produced and dedicated at a public shrine, a fairly large number of women in Mathura were certainly free to embrace a celibate lifestyle like their male colleagues by rejecting marriage and controlling access to their own bodies. However, given their limited roles as patrons of religious art and the idealised intersection of lay and ascetic lifestyles seen in this torso, one wonders to what extent female renouncers would be inspired to ‘pursue [their] individual aspirations’ or ‘to become agents of their own destiny.’⁴⁴

³⁸) Divakaran (1984: 284).

³⁹) Lüders (1912: 1–25).

⁴⁰) For instance, see no. 24 in Lüders (1912: 5).

⁴¹) Lüders (1912: 11) no. 54 for the inscription on the Sarasvatī image.

⁴²) Lüders (1961); see for example nos. 8, 24, 80, 103, 126, 154.

⁴³) Olivelle (1997: 427–449) discusses ambiguous Brahmanical attitudes towards women as celibate renouncers. See also Olivelle (1993: Chapter 7).

⁴⁴) Olivelle (1997: 444–445).

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Fig. 1. Torso with bowl, GMM 50.3549. Author's photo with permission of GMM

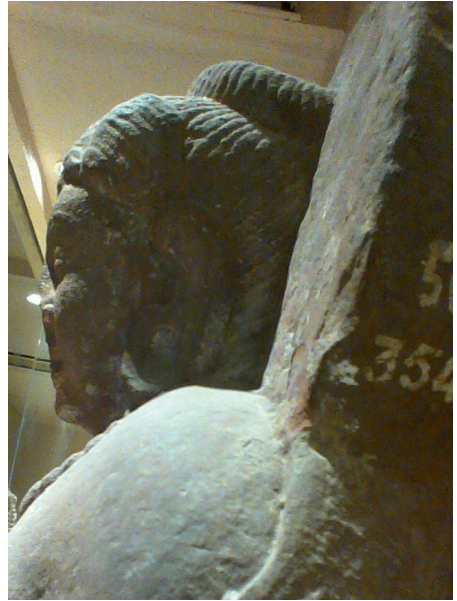
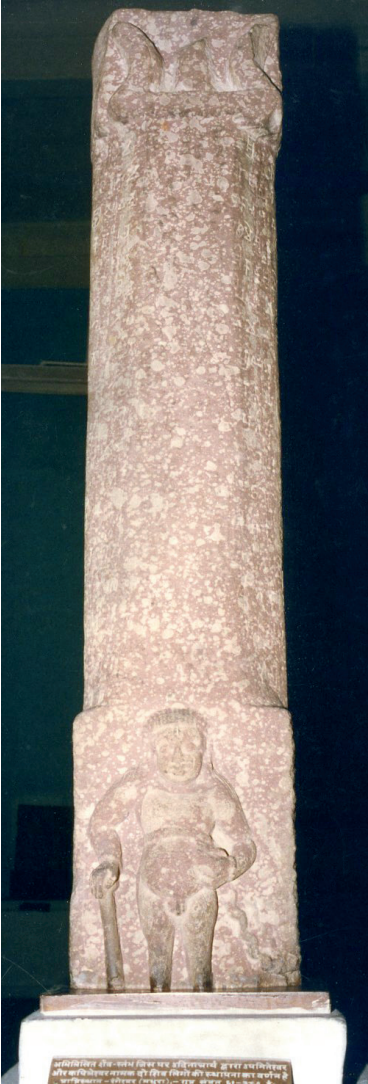


Fig. 2. Torso with bowl: detail of ears. Author's photo with permission of GMM



Fig. 3. Torso with bowl: detail of bowl. Author's photo with permission of GMM



▲ Fig. 5. Inscribed pillar with ascetic male figure: detail. Author's photo with permission of GMM

◀ Fig. 4. Inscribed pillar with ascetic male figure, GMM 1931. Author's photo with permission of GMM