

# Fierce Aesthetics of Asceticism: The Goddess Cāmuṇḍā in Temple Art of Medieval North India

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Cāmuṇḍā embodies various roles, including that of a mother (mātr), a yoginī, and an independent goddess or manifestation of Mahādevī. She is characterised by her transgressive Śaiva attributes, which include cradling a skull cup, standing on a cremation ground atop a corpse—a possible reference to śavasādhana, the corpse ritual—and wielding items like the skull-topped staff (khaṭvāṅga) and drum (ḍamaru). Described as ‘fully perfected in yoga’ (yogasamsiddhā) in Purāṇas and represented clad in tiger skin and severely emaciated, her portrayal in medieval Indian art resonates with those of ascetics. Even though her exclusively fierce and wild appearance is overemphasised in secondary literature, Cāmuṇḍā also shared aspects with practitioners of tantric Śaivism. In sculptural art, she inhabits spaces with these Śaiva figures and is often surrounded by a devoted entourage. Notably, from the early medieval period, she began occupying cardinal niches in temples. Especially noteworthy are those temples situated on monastic premises, such as the Mattamayūra temples of Central India.

This presentation outlines Cāmuṇḍā’s relationship with ascetic practitioners through an examination of material sources. It also explores the mechanisms that facilitated her integration as a core deity in these monastic temple spaces. The focus lies on her pioneering integration into the Mattamayūra world as early as the 9th century, giving insights into the deities venerated by the Śaiva Siddhānta sect. Additionally, her depiction in temples affiliated with the Pāśupatas in neighbouring regions is considered as well, shedding more light on her significance as a yoginī worshipped by yogis.

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