

# COLNAGHI



NORTH-WEST INDIA, RAJASTHAN  
Early 11<sup>th</sup> Century

*HEAD OF CHAMUNDA*

Sandstone  
Height : 45 cm (17 3/4 in.)

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## Provenance

From the collection of the late Dani and Anna Ghigo, Turin, since the mid 1970s

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One almost expects Indian gods to embody the ideals of human beauty and serenity but this extraordinary head of Chamunda presents the opposite aspect of the goddess's nature. The sculpture provides ample evidence, were it needed, of the skills of mediaeval sculptors in illustrating the extremes of emotional and physical energy. The depiction of the goddess's cadaverous appearance and her terrifying anger are at once believable and beyond normal imagination.

Chamunda is another name of Kali, the terrifying form of the Great Goddess whose other forms include Uma and Durga. Her appearance and deeds are recorded in the *Devi Mahatmya*. During the period before the passage of time, Visnu lay asleep on the coils of the snake, Sheshta, and the *asuras* (demons) defeated the other *devas* (gods). As a result of the *asuras* asserting their authority the cosmos descended into a state of chaos. Individually, the *devas* were unable to defeat the *asuras* but together they created a goddess, each donating his most powerful weapon for her to use against the enemy. This goddess split herself into two parts, one beautiful and the other ferocious. Possibly the most familiar part of the *Devi Mahatmya* is the account of the goddess, in her beautiful Durga form, seeking out and destroying the *asura* Mahisha who had transformed himself into a buffalo. The final section of the legend, however, concerns the goddess's Kali form, when she dispatches the army of Dhumralochana with her flaming breath, then singlehandedly wages war against the two remaining *asuras*, Chanda and Munda. She devours their armies, swallowing their weapons and elephants whole, but decapitates the two commanders, preserving their skulls as trophies. The name Chamunda records the event, identifying her victory over Chanda and Munda. Despite her horrifying appearance (Fig. 1), Kali/Chamunda is a force of good; the *asuras* are metaphors for the obstructions and enemies one encounters in life and she defeats them with her supreme power and resourcefulness.

In cultures around the world a terrifying deity can be appeased and, hopefully, encouraged to actively protect and support his or her devotees. According to the *Devi Mahatmya*, Chamunda is a source of vital energy, conferring the gift of future life on those who worship her while the Matrikas savagely guard the wellbeing of the faithful. Effectively in their contented state they guarantee the peaceful equilibrium of the cosmos.

In the Markandeya Purana, a dialogue between two sages that was written subsequent to the *Devi Mahatmya*, Chamunda appears to relish the fear inspired by her appearance. Her bulging eyes, sadistic grin and emaciated form are utterly terrifying. Sometimes she is depicted with a cobra holding her hair in place and scorpions, another cause of sudden death, resting on her body (Fig. 2). Chamunda's emaciated appearance offers a dramatic contrast to the robust, idealised forms of other goddesses, reminding the onlooker that physical beauty is transitory and old age and death await even the most energetic and youthful. When seated, she rests on the beautiful corpse of Shiva Mahadeva this symbolises the inevitability of death and also its conquest and the life that awaits the faithful thereafter.

The head dates from the period when northern India comprised a number of regional states. The decline of the Gupta Empire, largely brought about by the cost of defending its frontiers against the threat of Huna attack, resulted in a number of suzerain princes asserting their independence. At the same time, in Rajasthan in particular, the Hunas not only invaded but also settled – eventually becoming assimilated with the native population. Emanating from Central Asia, as nomads they had few material possessions but appear to have introduced a vivid folk literature to India. The same tradition also inspired some of the angry deities associated with Himalayan Buddhism and with her skeletal appearance and electrified

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expression Kali/Chamunda resembles the *citipati* of Tibet; along with Bhairava, she is worshipped by Nepalese Hindus (Fig. 3). In the post- Gupta period, the Hunas' imaginative vision energised the evolving Rajasthani sculptural schools, in turn influencing artists throughout northern India.

Architects and sculptors travelled in search of work and in the 8th to 11th centuries, rival princes and their courtiers funding the building of increasingly magnificent temples seems to have provided them with continuous professional projects. The earliest north Indian temples are quite small and unadorned but from the 8th century onwards, as these structures became larger, their walls became regarded as blank surfaces on which images of the gods and their attendants were placed. In such a setting, it is not difficult to visualise the impact the figure of Chamunda would have had.

The head under consideration is from a type of image that became popular in the mediaeval period in northern India. In many ways it replicates the angry *dvarapala* (guardian), a massive figure that stood on one side of a temple entrance, opposite a beautiful comrade (the one to drive away evil, the other to draw the pure of spirit into the temple precinct). The potent image of Chamunda sanctifies the space she gazes out on, in particular that occupied by the devotee standing before her. She also presents the devotee with a visual challenge because although she is reassuring as an ally, it is difficult for those other than the extremely faithful to gaze on her.

A possible inspiration for a skeletal sculpture may be found in the images of the Emaciated Buddha from Gandhara, dating from the 2nd to 6th centuries, which reflect the effort of that region's artists to create realistic human anatomy (Fig. 4). In India, however, anatomical precision has always been of secondary importance to emotional or dramatic effect and although the sculptor of this head was aware of the structure of a skull, the principal aim was to fill it with terrifying vitality. Instead of the eye sockets being empty, they emanate fury; the teeth are bared in anger, even the raised hair imparts superhuman energy. In the past western observers, such as John Ruskin, dismissed Indian sculpture as unrealistic, lacking the technical or spiritual qualities capable of creating an illusion of life and, as a result, decadent. Images such as the head under consideration illustrate how misguided such opinions were, demonstrating the extraordinary insight of artists aiming, not for accuracy, but drama and spontaneity.

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Fig. 1. *Bust of Chamunda*, Northern India, 11<sup>th</sup> century, sandstone, 55cm. British Museum, London.



Fig. 2. *Chamunda, the Horrific Destroyer of Evil*, India, 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century, sandstone, 113 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



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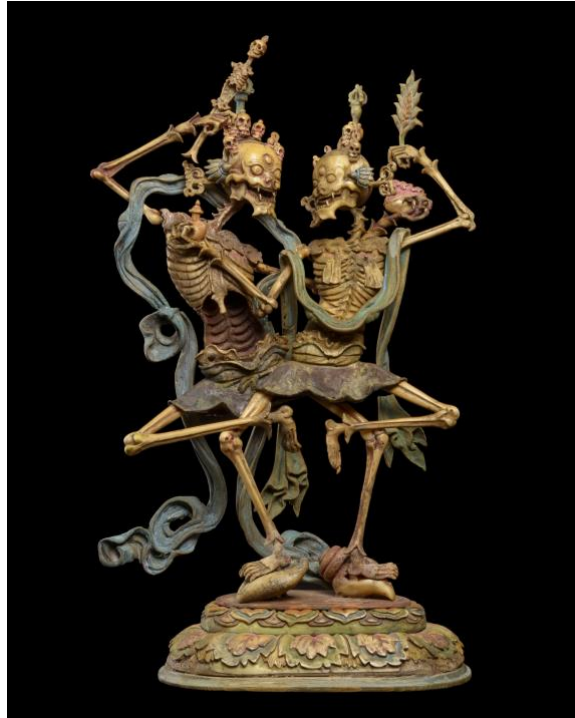


Fig. 3. *Citipati, dancing skeletons*, Mongolia, 19th century, height: 34 cm (13 3/8 in.). Private Collection.



Fig. 4. Fasting Buddha Shakyamuni, ancient region of Gandhara, 3rd–5th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.