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Divine Motherhood in Buddhist Iconography: The Religious Significance of Harithi in Gandhāra Art

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Abstract

The article explores the transformation and veneration of the goddess Harithi in Gandhāran Buddhist art. Originally depicted as a child-devouring Yakshini, Harithi undergoes a profound moral redemption through the Buddha's compassion, emerging as a protector of children and a symbol of fertility and maternal care. The study examines her mythological origins, iconographic evolution, and socio-religious role within the syncretic cultural landscape of Gandhāra, where Greco-Roman artistic influences merged with Indian spiritual themes. Through detailed analysis of sculptural depictions, the article highlights Harithi's nurturing imagery surrounded by children, adorned with symbols of abundance, and often paired with her consort Panchika reflecting her integration into monastic worship and her appeal to devotees, particularly women seeking fertility or protection against diseases like smallpox. The discussion also addresses the gendered dimensions of her iconography, noting the exclusivity of male children in her representations while acknowledging her subversion of patriarchal norms through her spiritual authority. By situating Harithi within broader South Asian traditions of maternal deities and comparative iconography, the article underscores Buddhism's adaptive capacity to reinterpret indigenous fertility cults, offering a model of inclusivity and moral transformation.

Keywords: Harithi, Gandhāra Art, Buddhist Iconography, Divine Motherhood, Fertility Goddess, Yakshini, Greco-Roman Influence, Moral Redemption, Gender, Syncretism.

Introduction

The imagery of mother goddesses holds an enduring and complex significance in the religious traditions of South Asia. Shown in the given divine figure are often associated with fertility, nourishment, protection, and the cyclical continuity of life. Their worship spans across religious lines Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism where maternal deities are revered as powerful embodiments of *śakti*, or spiritual energy. The representation of these figures in art and literature speaks to the central role women and motherhood have played in religious consciousness. In the syncretic cultural landscape of Gandhāra an ancient region situated at the crossroads of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian civilizations the concept of divine motherhood acquired distinctive visual expressions. Gandhāran art, shaped largely under the Kushan Empire, incorporated Greco-Roman stylistic influences while expressing indigenous religious themes. Here, the mother goddess is not merely an ornamental motif but a central figure of devotion, embodying protection, fertility, and spiritual transformation. Her significance is both symbolic and societal, reflecting the deep psychological and spiritual associations people held with motherhood and feminine divinity (Mitter 2001: 8; S. P. Gupta 2002: 55).



Figure 1: Harithi with children. Provenance: Shaikhān Dheri, Charsada. Early second Century C.E. Dark grey homogenous schist, Dimension, Ht.11

One of the most venerated maternal figures in Gandhāran Buddhist iconography is the goddess Harithi. Originally introduced in Buddhist literature as a Yakshini who devoured infants, Harithi underwent a remarkable transformation through the compassion and teachings of the Buddha. According to legend, after stealing and consuming the children of Rajagriha to feed her own five hundred sons, she was taught a moral lesson by the Buddha who hid her beloved child to awaken her empathy. This episode catalyzed her conversion to Buddhism, after which she was elevated to the status of an *Upāsikā* a lay female disciple and venerated as a protector of children (Datta 1942: 207). In Gandhāran art, Harithi is typically depicted seated or standing with numerous children clinging to her body, often portrayed breastfeeding or interacting lovingly with them, symbolizing her role as the nurturer and guardian of youth. These visual depictions are consistent and widespread, suggesting her prominent place in monastic spaces where she was often honored with offerings and placed near dining halls spaces symbolically connected with sustenance (Ingholt 1957: 145; Burgess 1965: 104-105). The exclusivity of her representation with male children perhaps reflects broader patriarchal values of the time but does not diminish her spiritual stature as a symbol of divine grace and fertility.

The purpose of this exploration is to examine the religious significance, visual representation, and evolving symbolism of Harithi in Gandhāra art. Her figure offers a unique window into how Buddhist narratives accommodated and reinterpreted indigenous fertility cults and maternal deities within a monastic and devotional context. Through detailed analysis of her sculptural depictions ranging from her serene maternal expressions to her association with divine consorts and symbols like the *trishula* this study reveals how Gandhāran artists and patrons conceptualized the divine feminine. Additionally, Harithi's role as a spiritual figurehead for childless women and protectress against diseases like smallpox (Foucher 1914: 280; Bivar 1970: 19) underscores her practical religious relevance. By situating Harithi within broader socio-religious practices and artistic traditions, this study seeks to demonstrate how motherhood was

sanctified and elevated in Buddhist thought and visual culture, particularly within the rich artistic heritage of Gandhāra.

Mythological Background of Harithi

The mythological origins of Harithi are deeply rooted in both Buddhist canonical texts and Puranic traditions, which together contribute to her rich and multifaceted identity. In Buddhist literature, Harithi is primarily introduced as a Yakshini a class of semi-divine beings often associated with nature and fertility whose early characterization was not benign. She was believed to have dwelled in the sub-Himalayan region under the name Kundala, and due to her karmic burden, she was reborn as a Yaksha who bore five hundred sons. To feed her numerous children, she abducted and devoured the infants of Rajagriha, which brought immense grief and fear among the local populace (Datta 1942: 207). In contrast, the Puranic concept of the mother goddess, while overlapping thematically, emphasizes divine femininity as the embodiment of *śakti* the cosmic energy that subdues evil and nurtures life. The Puranas depict the mother goddess as a protector of children and a universal maternal figure whose powers extend across the natural and spiritual realms (Mitter 2001: 8; S. P. Gupta 2002: 55). These two strands Buddhist karmic transformation and Puranic divine maternal power combine in the figure of Harithi to create a deity who is both morally redeemed and spiritually exalted.



Fig. 2. Goddess Harithi, Provenance, Skhara Dheri, 2nd Century A.D, Dimensions: 132* 8* 54 cm. D.C. Bhattacharyya, *Gandhāra Sculptures in the Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh*, Accession no. 1625, Source/ref: S.no. 432. Acc. 1625, Inscribed. Page 119.

Central to Harithi's mythos is her poignant transformation through her encounter with the Buddha. As the legend narrates, the suffering she caused through the abduction of children prompted the intervention of the Buddha, who compassionately sought to reform her rather than punish her. By hiding her most cherished child, Buddha instilled in her a deep realization of the pain she had inflicted upon others. Moved by his wisdom and empathy, Harithi repented and was converted to Buddhism, becoming an *Upāsikā* (lay disciple). In response to her concerns for the sustenance of her children, the Buddha promised that monks in every monastery would

provide food offerings to her and her children. This divine assurance led to her enshrinement in monastic complexes, where she came to be venerated as a mother goddess associated with fertility, protection, and abundance (Ingholt 1957: 145; Burgess 1965: 104-105).

Her story does not merely end with this moral redemption; it is also framed within broader cultural beliefs regarding illness and divine intervention. A secondary legend identifies Harithi as the goddess who could cure smallpox, a deadly disease that especially afflicted children. This belief may have been influenced by broader regional epidemics, such as the Antonine Plague in the Roman Empire, suggesting that her cultic worship responded to contemporary social fears and health crises (Foucher 1914: 280; Bivar 1970: 19). Additionally, another tale speaks of her miscarriage during a forced dance, which rendered her vengeful and led to her child-eating behavior until transformed by the teachings of the Buddha (Das 2004: 78–79). These myths layered with emotion, moral complexity, and spiritual depth not only humanize Harithi but also elevate her as a powerful symbol of maternal compassion, divine justice, and Buddhist moral teaching within the rich artistic tradition of Gandhāra.

Harithi in Gandhāra Sculptural Art

The sculptural representations of Harithi in Gandhāra art are among the most expressive and symbolically rich depictions of female divinity in Buddhist visual culture. Across figures 03 to 04, Harithi is consistently portrayed as a maternal figure surrounded by children often engaging with them physically and emotionally which underscores her identity as a goddess of fertility and protector of youth. These sculptures, primarily excavated from monastic contexts, reflect a standardized iconography that places Harithi in intimate, nurturing postures. In fig. 84, she is shown standing gracefully, cradling one child near her breast while two others perch on her shoulders. The interaction between the goddess and the children is natural and affectionate, indicating a shift from her mythic past to her sanctified maternal role. Her facial expression wide almond eyes, a serene smile, and refined features conveys peace, compassion, and divine beauty (Ingholt 1957: 146).



Fig. 3. Goddess Harithi, Provenance, Sikri, Dark grey Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 35 1/2 in, Wd.15 in, Accession no. G-102. Source/ref: Displayed in main hall of Lahore museum.
Book ref: I. Kurita, *Gandhāran Art*, 2003, Vol. II. Fig.494. P.170. Ingholt. H, *Gandhāra Art in Pakistan*. 1957. Fig. 340.



Fig. 4. Seated Harithi with Children, Provenance, unknown, Grey Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 77 cm, Wd. 42 cm, Dp. 14 cm. Source/ref: W. Zwalf, *A Catalogue of the Gandhāra Sculptures in the British Museum*, 1969. Fig. 92.

Book ref: I.Kurita. *Gandhāran Art II*. 2003. Fig. 492. P.169.

The artistry in these sculptures demonstrates a syncretism of Greco-Roman naturalism and Indian symbolic sensibilities. Harithi's attire, typically a transparent sari rendered with fine folds, is paired with ornate jewelry that includes heavy earrings, layered necklaces, girdles, and intricately designed headdresses. In fig. 85, for example, Harithi holds a flower in her right hand and supports a child with her left, while two more children play on her shoulders. The floral motif and the heart-shaped hairstyle on her forehead signal her divine status and connection to fertility (Achary 2009: 76). Notably, the children surrounding her are always male, reflecting prevailing societal values that prioritized sons over daughters. The absence of female children in all depictions suggests that artists were adhering to gendered ideals of the time, portraying Harithi not only as a nurturing mother but as a bearer of the most culturally valued offspring (S. P. Gupta 2002: 56).



Fig. 5. Panchika and Harithi, Provenance, unknown, Grey Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 24 cm. Source/ref: Formally from private collection Pakistan. I. Kurita, *Gandhāra Art*, 2003. Fig. 497. P. 171.

Figures 05 show Harithi in increasingly divine and majestic forms, often accompanied by her consort, Panchika, the god of wealth. In fig. 86, she is shown with four arms holding various symbolic objects such as a wine cup, a trident (*trishula*), and a water pot each representing different powers including prosperity, fertility, and divine wrath. Her posture is strong and upright, her expression content, and a large halo behind her head along with an *ūrṇā* on her forehead reinforces her elevated divine rank (Foucher 1914: 280). In fig. 07, the divine couple is seated together in a European style with Harithi holding a suckling infant in her lap while four other children play around them. This sculpture signifies maternal intimacy and familial harmony, blending tenderness with regality. In fig. 08, the presence of dual halos behind Harithi and Panchika and their placement on the same seat highlights her spiritual equality with male deities, a rare visual assertion of feminine divine authority in a patriarchal artistic context. Across all these images, Harithi's attire, ornaments, and gestures collectively reinforce her transformation from a feared demoness into a revered maternal deity and protector of the Gandhāran Buddhist community.

Religious and Social Implications of Harithi's Transformation

Harithi's evolution from a child-devouring demoness to a revered protector of children encapsulates Buddhism's capacity for moral redemption and spiritual transformation. Her narrative, as depicted in Gandhāra art, underscores the Buddhist principle that even the most morally compromised beings can attain sanctity through compassion and wisdom. This theme resonates with other female figures in Gandhāran iconography, such as Amrapāli, whose transition from courtesan to nun similarly highlights Buddhism's inclusive ethos (Datta 1942: 207; Singh 2004: 45). Harithi's iconography often showing her cradling infants or surrounded by children serves as a visual metaphor for her dual role as both nurturer and spiritual guardian, reinforcing her significance in monastic life (Ingholt 1957: 145; Burgess 1965: 104-105). Her placement near monastery dining halls further emphasizes her association with sustenance, both physical and spiritual, linking her to broader South Asian traditions of maternal deities as providers (Mitter 2001: 8; S. P. Gupta 2002: 55).

The acceptance of Harithi within Buddhist monastic settings reflects a deliberate integration of indigenous fertility cults into Buddhist practice, demonstrating the religion's adaptability to local beliefs. Her veneration as a protector against smallpox, a disease that ravaged ancient communities, reveals how Buddhist art and ritual addressed contemporary societal fears (Foucher 1914: 280; Bivar 1970: 19). This pragmatic aspect of her worship parallels the role of other female figures in Gandhāra art, such as the city goddess of Kapilvastu, who symbolized both divine protection and communal identity (Rahman 2007: 36-37). Harithi's cult also underscores the gendered dynamics of Buddhist patronage, as her appeal to women particularly those seeking fertility or child welfare would have reinforced her prominence in monastic spaces (Das 2004: 78-79).



Fig. 6. Goddess Harithi, Provenance, Sahri Bahlol Mardan, Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 122 cm, Wd. 48.29. Source/ref: Excavation of Archaeological Department, Frontier circle, 1911-12. Peshawar Museum, Accession no. PM-02895. Book ref. I.Kurita. *Gandhāran Art*, Vol. II. 2003. Fig. 488. P.168. Ingholt, H, *Gandhāra Art in Pakista*. 1957. Fig. 341. Harithi's elevated status as a divine mother challenges traditional gender norms by presenting a female figure who wields spiritual authority independent of male counterparts. Her depictions alongside Panchika, where she is shown as his equal (Fig. 5), subvert patriarchal hierarchies, much like Amrapāli's portrayal alongside male donors (Bhattacharyya 2002: 85). The consistency of her iconography across Gandhāra art marked by serene expressions, lavish adornments, and nurturing gestures reflects her enduring role as a symbol of compassion and redemption (Achary 2009: 76; S. P. Gupta 2002: 56). By sanctifying a once-demonized figure, Buddhist monastic communities not only expanded their devotional repertoire but also affirmed the transformative power of Buddhist teachings, offering a model of inclusivity that resonated across social and gendered divides.

Comparative Iconography of Harithi in Gandhāra Art

Harithi's iconography shares striking parallels with other South Asian fertility goddesses, such as the Saptamātṛkās and Lakshmi, yet her Buddhist context distinguishes her symbolism. Like the Saptamātṛkās a group of seven mother goddesses worshipped in Hinduism and Jainism Harithi embodies maternal protection and fertility, often depicted with children (Achary 2009: 77). However, while the Saptamātṛkās are typically shown as fierce warriors alongside male deities, Harithi's Buddhist transformation emphasizes compassion and nurturing, reflecting the doctrinal shift from fear-based worship to ethical redemption (S. P. Gupta 2002: 56). Similarly, Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of prosperity, shares Harithi's association with abundance, but Lakshmi's iconography focuses on lotus motifs and gold, whereas Harithi's Gandhāran depictions highlight child interaction and monastic integration (Mitter 2001: 8). This contrast underscores how Buddhist artists repurposed pan-Indian maternal archetypes to align with monastic values.



Fig. 7. Panchika and Harithi, Provenance, unknown, 2nd – 3rd Century AD, Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 104.21 cm, Wd. 86.42 cm, Source: Peshawar Museum, Accession No. PM-03013. Book ref: Ingholt. *Gandhāra Art in Pakistan*. 1957. Fig. 342.

The Greco-Roman influence on Harithi's iconography is evident in her Hellenistic drapery, naturalistic facial features, and ornate jewelry, which mirror depictions of Mediterranean goddesses like Demeter and Tyche (Ingholt 1957: 148). Some figures identified by scholars as "Demeter Harithi," shows her holding a *cornucopia* a Greco-Roman symbol of plenty while seated on a cushioned throne, blending classical motifs with Buddhist themes (Foucher 1914: 282). Yet, her Indian attributes, such as the *trishula* (trident) and water pot anchor her in South Asian traditions of *śakti* (divine feminine power) (Burgess 1965: 104). This syncretism reflects Gandhāra's cultural crossroads, where artists fused Greco-Roman realism with Indian spiritual symbolism to create a uniquely hybrid maternal deity.



Fig. 8. Tutelary couple turned towards each other and sharing a seat, Provenance, unknown, Grey Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 27cm, Wd. 24.7 mc. Dp, 10.3 cm, Source/ref: W. Zwalf, *A Catalogue of the Gandhāra Sculpture in the British Museum*, 1996. Fig. 98.
Book ref: I. Kurita. *Gandhāran Art II*. 2003. Fig .417. P. 145

Harithi's iconographic evolution also reveals gendered societal values. Unlike Lakshmi or the Saptamātṛkās, who are often depicted with both male and female children, Harithi is exclusively shown with sons (Fig. 88), reinforcing patriarchal norms of ancient India (Das 2004: 79). Yet her spiritual authority particularly in four-armed forms wielding weapons (Fig. 86) subverts passive maternal stereotypes, aligning her with the Yakshī tradition of powerful nature spirits (Bivar 1970: 19). This duality nurturer and protector captures the broader Buddhist negotiation of femininity, where female divinity is both life-giving and morally transformative. Through this lens, Harithi's iconography becomes a testament to Gandhāra's artistic innovation, bridging cultural and religious divides to sanctify motherhood in Buddhist practice.

Conclusion

Harithi's transformation from a feared demoness to a revered Buddhist protector embodies the profound capacity for redemption and spiritual renewal at the heart of Buddhist teachings. Her story, vividly captured in Gandhāra art, illustrates how compassion and wisdom can transmute even the darkest karmic past into a narrative of divine grace. Through her nurturing iconography surrounded by children, adorned with symbols of abundance, and radiating maternal serenity Harithi became a bridge between indigenous fertility traditions and monastic Buddhism, offering devotees a tangible expression of protection and hope.

The artistic portrayal of Harithi also highlights Gandhāra's unique role as a cultural and religious crossroads. By blending Greco-Roman naturalism with Indian spiritual symbolism, Gandhāran artists created a visual language that transcended boundaries, making Buddhist teachings accessible to diverse communities. Harithi's depictions, whether as a gentle mother or a four-armed deity wielding a trident, reflect the dynamic interplay of cultural influences and the adaptability of Buddhist iconography. Her imagery not only sanctified motherhood but also subtly challenged societal norms, asserting the spiritual authority of feminine divinity within a patriarchal framework. Ultimately, Harithi's legacy in Gandhāra art serves as a testament to the power of visual storytelling in shaping religious and social consciousness. Her evolution from a marginalized figure to a central object of veneration mirrors Buddhism's broader ethos of inclusivity and transformation. Through stone and stucco, Gandhāra's artists immortalized her as a symbol of compassion, resilience, and the boundless potential for change a message that continues to resonate across time and tradition.

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