

Yakshi Figures

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Yakshi figures in Indian architecture represent spirits associated with fertility and protection. This lesson covers:



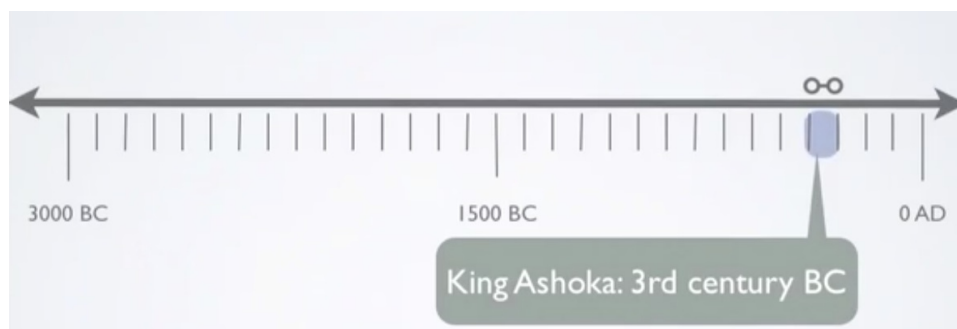
BIG IDEA

The voluptuous figures of the Yakshi were the embodiment of female energy and were considered protective spirits.

1. Period and Location: Yakshi Figures

The yakshi figures date from the same period as the Great Stupa at Sanchi, discussed in the previous lesson, and in fact the specific figures covered in this lesson are from the Toranas, or gates, outside of the Great Stupa. Remember that this structure was originally constructed under the reign of the emperor Ashoka during the third century BC. Sanchi, where this stupa and its toranas are located, is situated roughly in the middle of the Indian subcontinent.

Below is a timeline highlighting the period covered in this lesson.



2. Yakshi Figures

Yakshi are female earth spirits that have ties to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. They are common sculptural elements worked into the architectural motifs of religious structures, such as stupas. Often depicted as voluptuous female figures with wide hips, these figures are spirits associated with fertility and protection.







Yakshi Holding a Fly Whisk

250 BC

Polished sandstone

Particular yakshi could be seen as an embodiment of the **dharma** or Buddhist law. She could be considered a protector of the law or an embodiment of the law and its abundance.



DID YOU KNOW

It is important to try and view these depictions in the context in which they were created rather than any modern-day context. These figures might be looked upon as being sexual or as objectification of the female figure today, but in their time, they were intended to depict the embodiment of the female spirit. This was accomplished by emphasizing some of the physical features that distinguish the female figure from the male figure.

Notice how the two examples of yakshi figures below emphasize physical features such as wider hips and the enlarged bosom.

➞ EXAMPLE This image is of a yakshi located at the eastern torana of the Great Stupa of Sanchi.



Yakshi at eastern torana of the Great Stupa of Sanchi

➔ **EXAMPLE** The following image is of two yakshi located at the northern torana of the Great Stupa of Sanchi.



Two Yakshi at northern torana of the Great Stupa of Sanchi



TERMS TO KNOW

Yakshi

A benevolent, protective, natural spirit, usually depicted as a voluptuous female in ancient Indian art

Dharma

A moral order that keeps the universe from falling into chaos, an essential individual characteristic or virtue in Hinduism and Buddhism



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of yakshi figures**. Indian architecture has components related to religion, and **yakshi figures** are just one example of this. In modern times, these figures can be misunderstood as being sexual or as objectification of the female figure, but in their time, these voluptuous figures were intended to depict the embodiment of the female spirit.

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