

Abstract:

On the fateful night of the enlightenment of Siddhārtha Gautama, Māra, the Indian deity of death and desire, approached the meditating ascetic sitting under the Bodhi tree and attempted to distract him from achieving his goal. In the earliest Buddhist tradition, Māra was the personification of karma—the cycle of incarnation of love and death—and for his kingdom to survive, he had to prevent Siddhārtha from achieving illumination. At first Māra's army embodied the basic impediments to meditation—fear, noise, hunger, anger, sickness, thirst, etc. But in the Kushan era (first to fourth centuries), contact with other cultural and religious traditions had a great impact on the development of Māra's character—he and his troops became more monstrous and militant. These changes are evident in the texts and even more apparent in the bas-relief sculptures created by Kushan artists in Gandhāra, comprising northwestern India and parts of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, in Andhra Pradesh in central southern India under the Andhra dynasty (184 B.C. to 236 C.E.), and in later Buddhist art. By the second century armed demonic soldiers, a truly awful embodiment of fear, appear in the scene of the Enlightenment. Such depictions traveled east along the Silk Route to China where they were adopted. This presentation will trace the origins and development of the representation of Māra and his monsters in India and view their portrayal along the Silk Route.