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# Tracing the Origin and Antiquity of *Kirtimukha* Motif: Finding Iconic Parallels

Nayancy Priya<sup>1</sup> and Sachin Kr. Tiwary<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. Department of Ancient History Culture and Archaeology, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Deemed University, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Tatiya Guest House, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara Campus, Baragoan, Nalanda, Bihar – 803 111, India (Email: [ritilabh@gmail.com](mailto:ritilabh@gmail.com))
  - <sup>2</sup>. Department of Ancient India History Culture and Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh -221 005, India (Email: [sachin.tiwary@bhu.ac.in](mailto:sachin.tiwary@bhu.ac.in))
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Received: 11 July 2020; Revised: 23 September 2020; Accepted: 29 October 2020

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 8.2 (2020): 1030-1040

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**Abstract:** The article around the motif called *Kirtimukha*, which is a demon like ferocious face often depicted in art and architecture for ages till now. It can be literally translated as 'the face of glory', 'face of majesty', 'face of fame'. The present work is an attempt to trace the origin of this iconography and to understand the purpose behind its origin. The studied context of *Kirtimukha* studied in India is quite newer than the other context of the outside Indian Sub-continent. The present study aims to acknowledge these complexities by studying the iconographic parallels of the *Kirtimukha* in the world, tracing through the silk route. We find the iconographic parallels of *Kirtimukha* in the whole world. The study will seek to find the origin of the *Kirtimukha* motif. Considering iconography as a medium to express artistic mind, this article attempts to trace the influence of *Kirtimukha* and its iconographic parallel on each other through the ages.

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**Keywords:** *Kirtimukha*, Kala-mukha, Gandhara Art, Silk Route, Liangzhu Culture, Rahu, Grass

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## Introduction

Symbols act as a connective bridge between man, invisible ideas and thoughts to the selected one. One of the commonly found adornments in Indian art is in the form of *Kirtimukha* (Figures 1 and 2). *Kirtimukha* is a demon like ferocious face often depicted in art and architecture for ages till now. It can be literally translated as 'the face of glory', 'face of majesty', 'face of fame'. It resembles a monster face depicted in both lion and human form having bulging eyes, wide open nostrils, stout horns, curled eyebrows, frowns on the forehead (*simha-lalata*). Henry Cousens explained it as 'Face of Fame', a grotesque mask, probably a conventionalized lion's face (Dhavalikar 1981: 85). The first graphic representation of *Kirtimukha* comes in Skand Puran which describes it as a horrific, lion-headed demon. The literature also describes gigantic body of *Kirtimukha*,

which was lean and bony, showing the uncontrollable hunger, yet his strength was irresistible. The literature stood up with some metamorphic similarities of the motif to the nature as its roar was like thunder, the eyes burnt like fire. *Kirtimukha* generally represents animal features as of lion, ram, dragon and serpent which vary individually or in combination of both. Apart from ferocious face *Kirtimukha* are often depicted with laughing and calm face.



Figure 1: *Kirtimukha* in Nalanda, Bihar



Figure 2: *Kirtimukha* in Kailas Temple, Ellora

In the beginning of historic period, *Kirtimukha* was seen in cooperated with the sculpture of Shiva and on the lintels of Shiva temple but later it was found in context of other gods also. In general, this motif is less seen in Mauryan, Sunga and Kushana art and architecture but on the other hand, it is widely and commonly seen in the Gupta period and the period onwards showing its continuity till now on the pan Indian level. *Kirtimukha* occurrence as an exception that has been noticed on the head of a 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Buddha sculpture belonging to Kushana art which is housed in the Asian civilization museum (Maurya 2018: 18). In Gupta period and onwards it is found in various context as a part of architecture e.g. on ceilings, *shikharas*, mouldings of basement, pillars, facade, door tops, stairs of *garbhgrih* and on sculpture as a part of ornament and also on lamps etc. In Chalukya temples *Kirtimukha* crowns the images of god and goddess (Dhavalikar 1981: 87). It occurs more than once in Ajanta and Ellora caves. One such example can be found in cave II on the first pillar at right, near entrance. Gradually this motif became common form of decoration for temple architecture. *Kirtimukha* appears repeatedly in the Badami caves and in various examples of temple architecture in Southern India. Even one *Kirtimukha* is noticed from the toilet pan of any unknown site (Tiwary 2017: 81; 2019:85-98). The motif of *Kirtimukha* travelled from India to southeast Asia where it got its most complex form and somewhat different from the motif of Indian sub-continent. For instance, in Angkor Wat, *Kirtimukha* plays prominent role among the sculptures. Not only in Hindu context, *Kirtimukha* extensively come in Buddhist and Jains context also. Debalamitra had referred *Kirtimukha* as decorative motif in the Buddhist architecture. The platform of the Paraspora stupa had moulded pilasters at corners and a cornice with a stringcourse of *Kirtimukha*, each capped by a floral motif, alternating with trefoil arches (Mitra 1971:113).

### **Antiquity and Origin: An Attempt**

*Kirtimukha*, which is the devouring face and grotesque mask in the form of art, which is ever-changing through the ages. It represents two facts of the world, that is, death and life. In the Indian subcontinent, the antiquity of the motif can be traced back to 100-200 BC from Begram, Afghanistan. This appears to be a more appropriate possibility as the *Kirtimukha* motif makes one of its earliest appearances on an ivory specimen from Begram conceptualized by Hellenic invaders or created by Indian artist according to the specification given to them. Ivory items formed one of the important export goods (Maurya 2018: 15).

The discovery by the French delegation, of the treasure of Begram (ancient Kapisi) in the Kabul valley, with its rich assortment of luxury items from Rome, China, and India, provided the most eloquent testimony for Gandhara being one of the centres in the trade network between Rome, China, and India (Nehru 1989: 3). The ancient roads were working as the bridge of exchange between cultures of these three countries (Figure 3). One of the early depictions of *Kirtimukha* can be seen on the Bodhgaya Railing in Bihar from Shunga Period dated to 187 to 78 BC (Figure 4). One of the earliest evidence of *Kirtimukha* in the Buddhist context is on the headdress of the

Bodhistava of Gandhara style, currently is in the Lahore museum, dated to 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. AD. Many such bodhisattvas can be seen in Gandhara style which later influenced the crown of Vishnu through the period (Figure 5).

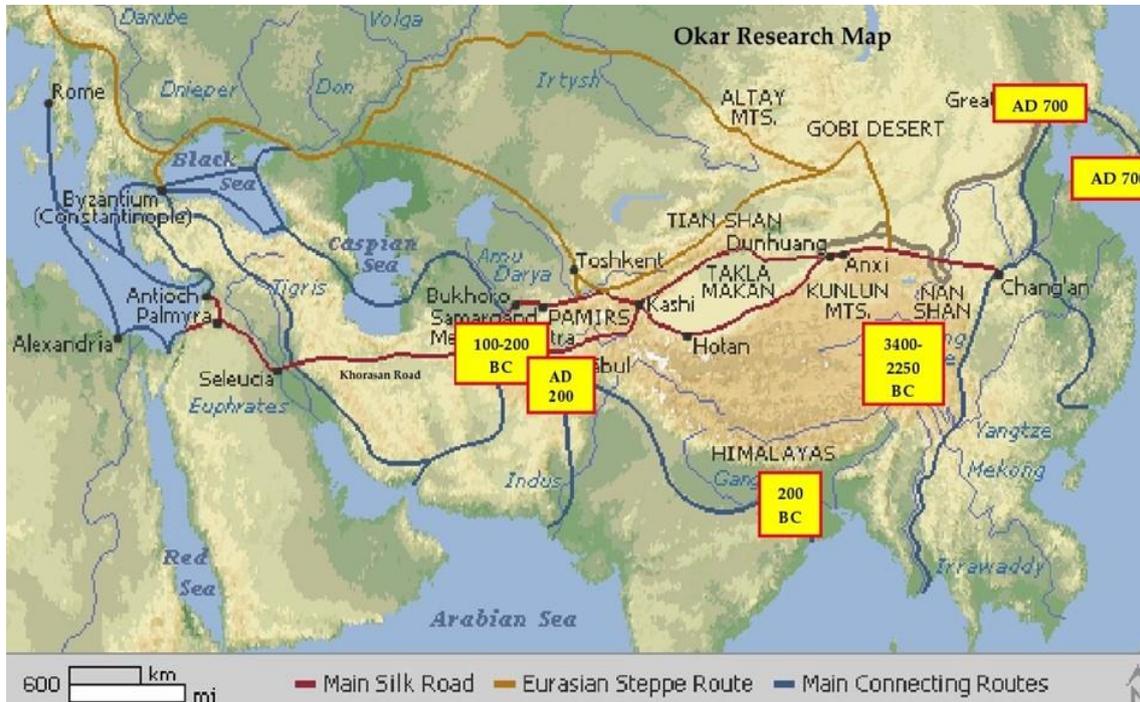


Figure 3: Various Types of Roads and Routes of Influences in Different Periods  
 (Source: [http://www.east-site.com/images/silk\\_road\\_map.gif](http://www.east-site.com/images/silk_road_map.gif))



Figure 4: Bodhgaya Railing, Bihar, Shunga Period (187 to 78BC)  
 (<http://eclecticmuseum.com/life-of-the-buddha.html>)



Figure 5: Kirtimukha on Headdress of Bodhisattva

## Possible Influence

As cited above, the major trade centres in the silk route were also in the land of the north-western part of India, which mutually influence the connecting neighbour in their geo-cultural aspects. Gandhara art developed with many mutual influences. Some scholars including Lolita Nehru stated influence of trade between India, China and Rome on Gandhara arts. They also indicated the Chinese influence on the Gandhara art and hence antiquity of the *Kirtimukha* goes back to the Taotie (Chinese name of motif similar to *Kirtimukha* face). So, the antiquity of the motif can be traced back to its Chinese counterpart, as it looks like *T'aot'ieh* (Figures 6 and 7). The earliest evidence of this kind of motif can be seen in Chinese Bronzes or on implements from the Chinese Neolithic 'Jade Culture' named 'Liangzhu Culture', ca. 3400-2250 BC. Professor Chang has concluded that "they [mythological animals] were surely not real-world animals; but apparently, they were transformed from naturalistic prototypes of the ox, sheep, tiger and reptiles" (Kesner 1991: 30). The jade stones and painted ceramics of this culture witness the iconic parallels of *Kirtimukha* in the form *T'aot'ieh*. It continued till Shang Dynasty, ca. 1200 BC on the copper vessels.



Figure 6: Ya Chou bronze Battle-axe of Shang Dynasty ([www.hnmuseum.com](http://www.hnmuseum.com))



Figure 7: Bronze vessel from Shang Dynasty (<https://www.amaco.com>)

To support the logic behind influence between India and China is the Silk route. The silk route stand for both the land routes and sea routes (Khan 2005: 79-117). Since, the land of China was well connected to the India from four different routes i.e. Northwestern India, Northeastern India/Upper Myanmar and Yunnan route via Arunachal Pradesh, Route from Nathu La and Lhasa via Sikkim/Sikkim Silk route and Lipulekh Pass of Uttarakhand. India and China had good trade and cultural relation since 2000 years old. The Arthashastra of India and Zhang Qian, a Chinese envoy

mentioned about the India in their works. The Southwest Silk route or the Sikkim Silk route, which connected Yunnan, and India through Tibet. A section of the route from Lhasa crossing Chumbi Valley, Nathu La Pass connected to the Tamralipta Port (present day Tamluk in West Bengal). From the Tamralipta port, this trade route took to the sea to traverse to Sri Lanka, Bali, Java and other parts of the Far East. The Upper Myanmar Silk Route which is about 2000 km long linked East and North East India with Yunnan Province of China via Myanmar. This route existed before the Central Asian Silk route became popular. This trade route between Eastern India and China came to be known during the early 3rd century BC, and it became popular by the 2nd century BC. By 7th century AD various other branches of this route emerged to create web of trading routes (<https://www.thepeninsula.org.in/2020/07/09/india-china-trade-in-ancient-times-southern-silk-route-2/>).

The maritime route was also quite in use more than land route for heavy goods supply and safe journey from the bandits and the other natural disasters like landslides, cloud blast, wild animal etc. Hence the entire activities were not depended on the water route only. It was in use for long and direct route from the southern and southern-eastern part of China to almost entire southern Asia. This trade relation was not limited with the commerce only but at the same time these activities developed fair cultural relations between these two cultural systems. Need to clarify that these activities must have influence the art and culture of not only China but the others South Asian and South-east Asian culture. For an example *Kirtimukha* found almost all the south and East Asia with their local name but the almost similar way of importance. Authors believe that this was mutual influence from both the silk route, long trade and cultural relations spread the native culture of the entire region to each other mutually.

In this way we can correlate the concept of mutual influence between indigenous and non-indigenous culture, which was adopted in the mainstream of Hinduism. Hence, it is difficult to establish a relationship as far as these two motifs are concerned. But the present researcher opines *Kirtimukha* was an element of foreign culture and got introduced in India through the Gandhara art during the Kushana period. It needs to nuclear that the connection between the Indian and Chinese culture much earlier than Kushan Gandhara art. We cannot ignore the iconic antiquity of Indian *Kirtimukha*. The physiological appearance of Chinese *T'aot'ieh* in Chinese ancient culture is similar to Indian *Kirtimukha*. In Chinese culture, it is believed that the depiction or making of *T'aot'ieh* on the burial memorial vessels are for the safety and wealth of the dead person. As said, it is found mostly on ritual vessels. The design on it is consists of a zoomorphic mask, described as being frontal, bilaterally symmetrical, with a pair of raised eyes and typically no lower jaw area. According to Li Zehou, "*T'aot'ieh* eats people accords fully with its cruel fearful countenance. To alien clans and tribes, it symbolizes fear and force; to its own clan or tribe, it was a symbol of protection. This religious concept, this dual nature, was crystallized its strange, hideous features." (Li 1994: 30-31). The description is very much similar to the detail of Shiva and Skand Puran.

As per Indian literature are concerned, *Kirtimukha* has its origin in a legend from the *Shiva Purana*, *Skanda Purana*. It is mentioned as a part of different mythical stories. There are some legends associated with the creation of *Kirtimukha*. The first time, the graphic representation of *Kirtimukha* comes from *Skand Purana*. Reference to the same can also be found in the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* work of Kannada poet *Pampa*, *Ramachandra Charita Puranam* of the Jain Poet, *Nagachandra Kavi*, *AnubhavaSikhamani* and other Puranas in form of legendry stories relating to *Ravana Gate*, *Barbareek*, *Jalandhara* and *Shiva's* Legends, *Rahu-Ketu* incident, uncommon story of talking head, besides others (Tiwary 2015:9-15).

## Nomenclature of *Kirtimukha* in India and It's Iconic Parallels in the World

V.S. Agrawal had tried to give scope and meaning of the word '*Kirtimukha*'. He says, the *Kirti* signified an excavated chaitya-hall, and then a temple or the palace; earliest use in this sense is recorded in a copper-plate inscription from Kanheri dated AD 493 (Agrawal 2003: 236). The *Kirtimukha* is known by various names in Indian and its iconic parallels are present in the whole world.



Figure 8: Execution of *Kala-mukha* on the Structural Temple



Figure 9: *Vanaspati*, Symbolic Representation

In Indian context, *Kirtimukha* is known by various names (Table 1) such as *Chandrasalas*, *Kala-mukha* (Figure 8). In Gujarat, *Kirtimukha* is known as *Grassmukha* and the rows of *Grassmukha* on the base moulding of the temple are known as *Grasspattika*. These *Grasspattika* can be noticed from the early temples of Solankis such as on *vedikabandha* portion of *Agiya-Vaital* temple at *Bhankhar*. In English churches same kind of art having a head with leaf and branches coming out of the head as hairs have been depicted. It is also known as *Vanaspati*, *Panaspati* or *Banaspati* (Figure 9) the lord of vegetation or wood in *Java* and *Assam*.

Table 1: Different Names for *Kirtimukha* in Indian Context

Sl.No.	Name	Place
1.	Grass-mukha	Gujarat
2.	Rahu-Mukharmala, Bho	Odisha
3.	Vanaspati, Panaspati, Banaspati	Assam
4.	Pancha-vaktra	Bihar, West Bengal

In world context iconic parallel of *Kirtimukha*(Table 2) has been observed as *Kala*, *Zeeba* in Tibet, Talking Head, *Simha-mukha* in South Asian countries, *PhaRahu* in Thailand (Figure 10), Medusa's Mask to the Greeks and Romans, Oubourous to the Sumerians, Green-man to the Britons and English church-architecture (Figure 11), *Chhepu* in Nepal(Figure 12), *Kibini* in Sri Lanka, *T'aot'ieh* in China, *Teotie-décor* in Burma and Karanga-Boma in Bali. The *Chacgod* of Mayan civilization is also similar to the *Kirtimukha*(Figure 13). In Japan, iconic parallel of *Kirtimukha* can be seen in the form of Oni from AD 700 and in the same way Gamyeon is similar as *Kirtimukha* which is also noticed as a part of art and architecture from AD 700. In Hyogo and Onigara Paris, Oriental Gargoyle can also be seen as iconic parallel of *Kirtimukha*. In Javanese art, *Kirtimukha* acquires gigantic proportion and accords a prominent place in architecture as the keystone unlike of Hindu temples. In the Ramayana panels at Tjandi Panataran, the motif is employed as a device to separate different episodes (Dhavalikar 1981: 88). In Java, the *Kala-makara* ornament is similar to *Kirtimukha* in Indian art. Gorgan in Greek tradition is similar to *Kirtimukha* but comes with a different ground of legend (Kramisch 1976: 323).



Figure 10: Phraru in Thailand  
(<https://web.archive.org/web/20161024131259/>)



Figure 11: Green Man (AD 1390),  
St Botolph Church, England  
(<https://www.flickr.com>)

According to Stella Kramrisch, *Rahu* and *Grass* are synonyms and they denote the devourer. The devourer however is time, *Kala*. These are the three most frequent names of the 'face of glory'. Dhavalikar also equates *Kirtimukha* with *Rahu* who is *Kala*. In a different culture of the world, there are many stories which tell about the monster with only the head as a whole. For instance, the Gorgoneion was an awful men's grizzly head sent up by Persephone is a cognate head with gearing eyes, protruding tongue, etc. the monster head itself is the monster (Kramisch 1976: 323).

Table 2: Iconic Parallels of Kirtimukha in the World Context

Sl.No.	Name	Place
1.	Kala-Mukha, Simha-Mukha, Kala	South-Asian countries
4.	Kala-Makara	Java
5.	Zeeba, Tsipa	Tibet
7.	Pha-Rahu	Thailand
8.	Vanaspati	Java
9.	Chhepu	Nepal
10.	T'aot'ieh	China
11.	Teotie-décor	Burma
12.	Karang-Boma	Bali
13.	Medusa	Greece and Rome
14.	Gorgan	Greece
15.	Ourobourous	Sumerian
16.	Green Men	Briton
17.	Chac God	Mayan Civilisation
18.	Kibini	Sri Lanka
19.	Oni	Japan
20.	Gamyeon	Korea



Figure 12: Chhepu above a Doorway in the Kumari Palace in Kathmandu Durbar Square, Nepal (<https://www.istockphoto.com>)



Figure 13: Mayan Chac God Depicted on the Temple (<https://printmeposter.com>)

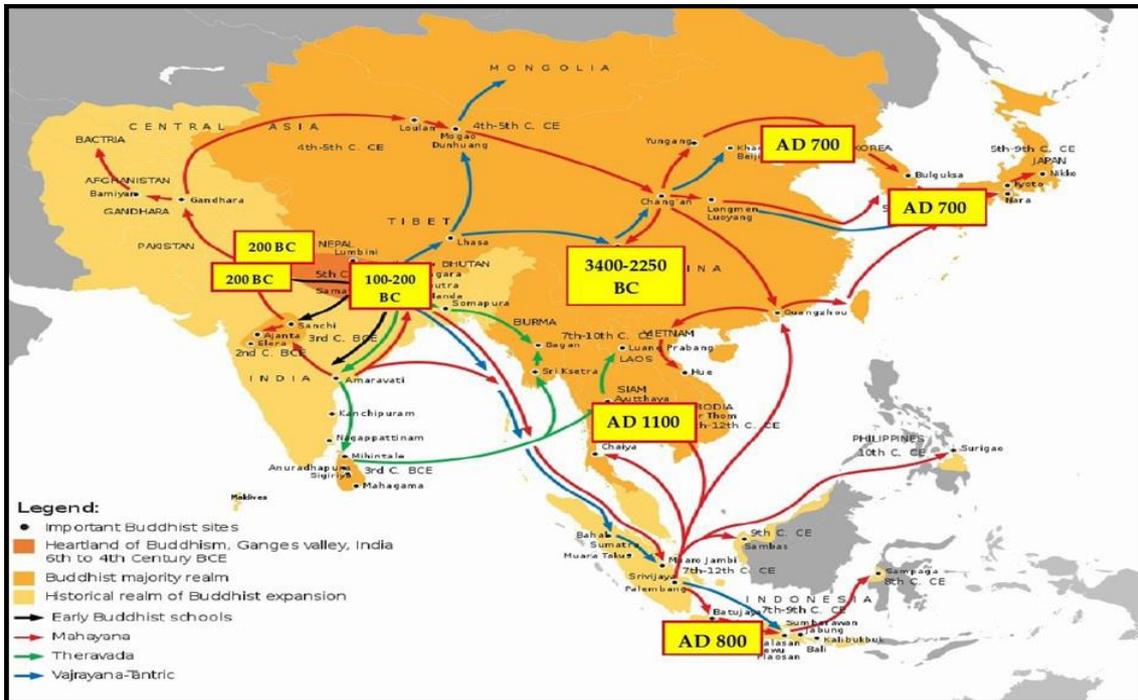


Figure 14: Route of Influence (Adapted: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk\\_Road/](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_Road/))

## Conclusion

In this way, *Kirtimukha* and its iconic parallel are seen in a different part of world starting from the Liangzhu to the earliest depiction of *Kirtimukha* on Bodhgaya railing which continued in different parts of the world through the time (Figure 14). The tradition of sculpting motif can still notice in later temples remains in vicinity of the ancient art and architecture and even in the residential complexes. The houses have it over the front door, even in the heart of metro cities in India, and as a door keeper even in many parts of the world. The same icon sometimes observed in the form of paintings and sometime in object form in the front of the motor vehicles like truck, bus, car etc.

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