

A Regal Couple in a Lowland Kingdom: Arjuna and Dewi Subadra

This exhibition includes puppets of Dewi Subadra and Arjuna, made for performances known as wayang in Java. Dewi Subadra and Arjuna feature in mythical tales about royal leaders in the Indian Mahabharata, and they have been adopted by lowland kingdoms in SE Asia, including in Java and Bali. Tales are told about heroines and heroes in similar puppet performances throughout SE Asia.

Arjuna ('White, Clear, Silver') had many wives, but Dewi Subadra ('Deity/Spirit who Brings Great Glory') is said to have been his favourite. The couple met when they were both very young, and they fell in love immediately.



Arjuna wooing Dewi Subadra.
Chromolithograph by R. Varma, late 19th century. Photo: Wellcome Collection

However, Arjuna and Dewi Subadra were not able to marry immediately, as a marriage had been arranged for Arjuna with a lady called Draupadi. Arjuna had to share Draupadi with his brothers, the other Pandavas. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of intruding when she was with one of his brothers and so he had to go into exile. While in exile he met Ulupi, a princess of the Naga (Dragon/Snake) people, whom he married. After a short while, he left Ulupi and travelled to Manipur, where he married the princess Chitrangada. Arjuna was very attractive to the ladies and he had no trouble finding wives!

Eventually Arjuna's exile ended and he returned, in disguise, to seek out Dewi Subadra. When her brother, Krishna, saw that Arjuna had returned, he advised Arjuna (who was a great friend of his) to abduct Dewi Subadra. This Arjuna did and the pair were finally married.

Dewi Subadra and Arjuna were often separated during their life together. Arjuna frequently went away, to make war and bring back glory and cosmic power. Once, after an ill-conceived game of dice, he had to go into exile yet again, this time with his brothers – for 12 years!

During this period of exile, Arjuna was meditating in the forest when he encountered a hunter and a wild boar. He correctly guessed that these were, in fact, the gods Indra and Shiva. As a reward for realising this, he was given many powerful weapons and magical heirlooms by Indra, including the powerful *keris* sword known as the Kiai Kalanadah Keris.

Once, while Arjuna was away at war, Dewi Subadra was attacked and murdered by Aji Maya Panglimunan. Fortunately, the hero Antareja brought Dewi Subadra back to life using magical powers that he had received from his grandfather, the Naga (Dragon/Snake) God Ananta Boga. The half-giant hero Gatutkaca, who was Krishna's brother and had been watching from the sky, attacked Antereja, believing him to be the murderer. However, wise Dewi Subadra stopped the two from fighting – and revealed to them that they were, in fact, brothers.

In Javanese *wayang* tales, Arjuna is said to have destroyed Prabu Niwatakawaca, the giant king of the Manimantaka country, and to have been crowned king in Indra's heaven because of this, with the title King Karitin.

Another version of the story of Dewi Subadra and Arjuna relates that they went to live in the kingdom of Hastinapur, where their grandson Parikshit had become king. Here, Dewi Subadra took became adviser and teacher for her great-grandson Janimejaya, Parikesit's son, the future king of Hastinapur. Arjuna became prime minister.

When the Kali Yuga, the modern age, began, the legend goes that the Pandava brothers, including Arjuna, retired, gave up all of their belongings and ties, and made their final journey of pilgrimage to the Himalayas.

Dewi Subadra is said to have gone to live in the forest to live as a hermit for the rest of her life, with her daughter-in-law Uttarā.