

Hagiography and Ideology in Art and Scripture: The Life of the Buddha as a Case Study

As the fountainhead, the founding figure, and the archetype of a perfect practitioner, the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni is key in understanding Buddhist traditions past and present. At the turn of the common era, the Buddha's hagiography has become increasingly prominent as a theme in the art and scripture of ancient India and beyond. Quite often, such narratives were crafted to reflect ideological agendas and mirror the historical circumstances of the distinct Buddhist communities who shaped them. Particularly in light of the scarcity and fragmentary nature of written sources from ancient India, it is fruitful to observe the evolution of hagiographic narratives across mediums and affiliations. Unfortunately, more often than not, textual scholars of Buddhism still tend to neglect the rich visual depository found at ancient Buddhist monuments, and vice versa. In this talk, I will present as a case study a story of the Buddha's infancy, dating to the first few centuries of the Common Era (1st – 4th c. CE). By tracing the story's evolution using philological, narratological, and art historical tools, I will shed light on the royal symbolism informing this story and demonstrate how it was fashioned in the image of the great imperial forces dominating the Indian subcontinent at the time such as the Kuṣāṇas and the Sātavāhanas.

