

# Comprehensive Studies of Indian Buddhist Monasteries from the Gupta Period Onward

*'Vihāra Project'* International Research Workshop  
University of Georgia  
October 28-29, 2021



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Co-Sponsored and Hosted by:  
The UGA Center for Asian Studies, Lamar Dodd School of Art,  
and the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts



## **Program Overview**

### **On the Regional Development of Early Medieval Buddhist Monasteries in South Asia (6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE): In Search of a New Historical Model for Buddhist Monasticism in the Post-Gupta Epoch**

With virtually the sole exception of a meteoric period of florescence during the much-lauded Pāla-Sena period in Eastern India (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), the fate of Buddhist monastic institutions throughout the Indian subcontinent during the post-Gupta epoch has long been viewed – and continues so with remarkably entrenched consistency – through the narrative lens of decline and disappearance. This construct of a largely uniform and unceasing descent, however, has at present become increasingly difficult to reconcile with the known archive of medieval South Asian Buddhist material culture, which Ronald Davidson in his study: *Indian Esoteric Buddhism. A Social History of the Tantric Movement* aptly noted can be distinguished for its “excessive richness .... increased almost daily by excavations and epigraphic finds – [which] makes this perhaps the most intellectually challenging epoch of Indian history.” [30]

Pursuant to Professor Davidson’s characterization, this Workshop will be oriented towards both collating and (re)interpreting under-represented aspects of the extant art historical, archaeological, epigraphic and textual corpora from the early medieval period (6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), in order to assess the ways in which these materials may inspire a corrective imperative to the prevailing vision of Buddhist monastic history in South Asia. Presentations during the workshop will place emphasis, in particular, on examining the potential utility of generating regional histories of Buddhist monasticisms, as opposed to the outdated, reified mode of an all-encompassing unilinear historical narrative. As such, a focal point of the workshop will be to engage and contextualize early medieval Buddhist material culture from both within and beyond Eastern India, including the Western Deccan, Dakṣiṇa Kosala and Magadha, documented during recent fieldwork in India undertaken by the KAKEN ‘Vihāra Project’ Art and Archaeology Research Team in 2019 and 2020.

Collectively, this evidential material appears to attest to the vibrancy of diverse regional centers of early medieval Buddhist monasticism, suggesting that the post-Gupta epoch was, far from being a period of fracture, instability and decline, one of dramatic transformation and evolution, witnessing, for example, the maturation of ‘the’ Mahāyāna and the early appearance of esotericism, each attended by myriad changes in ritual practice, doctrinal inquiry, iconographic and architectural innovation, as well as, perhaps significantly, conservatism.

## Participants

### **KAKEN *Vihāra* Project Principal Investigators (JAPAN):**

Taiken Kyuma (Mie University)  
Ryosuke Furui (University of Tokyo)  
Satoshi Ogura (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)  
Izumi Miyazaki (Kyoto University)

### **KAKEN *Vihāra* Project Art and Archaeology Research Group:**

Akira Shimada (SUNY New Paltz)  
Abhishek Amar (Hamilton College)  
Nicolas Morrissey (University of Georgia)

### **Visiting Lecturers:**

Ronald M. Davidson (Fairfield University)  
Max Deeg (Cardiff University)  
Pia Brancaccio (Drexel University)

### **Visiting Discussants/Invited Attendees:**

Kerry Lucinda Brown (Savannah College of Art and Design)  
Marko Geslani (University of South Carolina)  
Charlotte Gorant (Columbia University)  
Ellen Gough (Emory University)  
Kendall Marchman (University of Georgia)  
Sara McClintock (Emory University)  
Rohan Sikri (University of Georgia)



## Schedule

### Thursday, October 28

Lamar Dodd School of Art Room 5150

**5:30-5:45pm** – Introductory Remarks: Nicolas Morrissey  
(University of Georgia)

**5:45-6:45pm** – Professor Ronald M. Davidson (Fairfield University):  
**Esoteric Buddhism in the Matrix of Early Medieval India: An Overview**  
*\*\*\*Willson Center for Humanities and Arts Distinguished Lecture\*\*\**

**7:15pm** – Dinner with Workshop Participants/UGA Center for Asian Studies  
Faculty Hosts

### Friday, October 29

Lamar Dodd School of Art Room 5150

#### Morning Session (Conveyor: Akira Shimada)

**10:00-10:30am** – Welcome Coffee Reception (Dodd Conference Room)

**10:30-11:00am** – Professor Akira Shimada (SUNY New Paltz): **Sankaran:  
Late Buddhist Monastic Architecture in Northern Andhra**

**11:00-11:30am** – Professor Abhishek Amar (Hamilton College): **Monasteries  
and Settlement Shrines: Mapping the Extent of Buddhism in Early  
Medieval Magadha**

**11:30-12:00pm** Professor Nicolas Morrissey (University of Georgia): **Post  
Gupta-Vākāṭaka Buddhist Art in the Deccan: Reflections on Patronage  
and Ritual in the Early Medieval Milieu**

**12:00-12:30pm** – Respondent Questions and Comments/ Discussion

**1230-3:30pm** – Group Lunch/Break  
Museum (GMOA) Visit to View Hadda Sculpture

## **Afternoon Session (Conveyor: Abhishek Amar)**

**3:30-4:30pm – Professor Max Deeg (Cardiff University): *Between Normativity and Material Emptiness: Indian Buddhist Monasteries in Chinese Travelogues***

**4:30-5:00pm – Coffee Break**

**5:00-6:00pm – Professor Pia Brancaccio (Drexel University): *Views from the Black Mountain: The Rock-Cut Mahāvihāra at Kānheri/Kṛṣṇagiri in Konkan***

**6:00-6:30pm – Group Discussion and Questions**

**7:30pm – Dinner with Workshop Participants and UGA Center for Asian Studies Faculty Hosts**



# Presentation Abstracts

## Esoteric Buddhism in the Matrix of Early Medieval India: An Overview

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Ronald M. Davidson (Fairfield University)

Esoteric Buddhism emerged between the fall of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka hegemony (ca 550 CE) up to the rise of the three great powers (Pāla, Rāṣṭrakūṭa, Pratīhāra) in the mid eighth century, becoming Indian Buddhism's richest ritual expression. Scholars of Śaivism have somewhat prematurely dubbed the entire early medieval period (ca 550-1200 CE) the 'Śaiva Age,' but that designation is predominantly true with respect to royal affiliation, less so for the culture at large as may be seen in the donative inscriptions and popular literature, which do not reflect Śaiva cultural dominance in the manner portrayed. Similarly, the depiction of later Buddhism as 'brahmanized' has inaccurately represented the selective uptake and modification of brahmanical rituals or the sociology of Buddhist engagement. Rather, this was the age of internecine warfare at the local and regional levels, with a dramatic erosion of social controls. The belligerence of the period precipitated the decline of national trading cooperatives, the rise of regional networks, and the emergence of marginalized groups and ritual systems. Within this era, Buddhist authors and institutions operated with bewilderingly complex resources—intellectual, ritual, artistic, social, linguistic, etc.—that revealed a spectrum of engagements, from accommodation to resistance and everything in between.

Esoteric Buddhist myths and rituals reflect to some extent these developments, so that the bodhisattva as *sārvabhauṃsa* (caravan master) becomes replaced by the bodhisattva as *vidyādharā* (sorcerer), signaling the change in models of agency from the mercantile to the magical. The earliest corpora of literature—that of the *Amoghapāśa* on one hand and the *Uṣṇīṣa* texts on the other—were constructed on the earlier *dhāraṇī* texts of the fifth and sixth centuries, as seen in the Chinese translations from the Liáng Dynasty to the Táng. Yet both the *Uṣṇīṣa* and *Amoghapāśa* materials reveal further ritual directions that will be more robustly expressed in the eighth and ninth centuries, with the development of the *Vajroṣṇīṣa* canon and the *Yoganiruttara* and *Yoginī* tantras. These included aspects of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, to be sure, but also rituals from local spirit cults, lineages of magicians, *grhya* rituals from domestic brahmanical priests, material from the solar cult, to name but the most significant sources.

For esoteric Buddhism, the most important early region was that of the Vārāṇasī-Pātaliputra-Gāyā triangle, with its multiplicity of Buddhist sites and intermittent institutional support. Other centers, however, quickly arose—each with its own rituals and lore—and by the end of the eighth century most of North India had developed independent centers of esoteric practice, spreading thence to Śrī Laṅka and Śrīvijaya, as well as to Tibet, Nepal and East Asia. The speed and urgency of esoteric missionary activity in South and Southeast Asia are markers of a new dynamic.

## **Sankaran: Late Buddhist Monastic Architecture in Northern Andhra**

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**Akira Shimada (SUNY New Paltz)**

Sankaran, located to 25 km west of Visakhapatnam, is a rare example of a later Buddhist monastic complex that flourished after the Ikṣvāku period (ca. 3-4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) in the Andhra region, southeast India. The extensive monastic remains spreading across two low hills include a large rock-cut stupa (diameter: ca. 20 m), a structural monastery consisting of rows of monastic cells that surround three apsidal shrines, seven rock-cut caves, and some 250 rock-cut stupas that cover the western hill (*lingalakonda*) and the western slope of the eastern hill (*bojjanakonda*). Because of the overwhelmingly unique and complex nature of the site, there is little understanding in terms of when and in what historical circumstances this magnificent monastery started and developed. While former studies seem to agree that the high period of construction of the monastery was from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, they do not identify which parts of the monastery would be dated to this period. Such dating seems incongruous with the rich material evidence that indicates continued development of the site until the 9-10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. This paper intends to examine key features of the Sankaran monastery and excavated artefacts through comparisons with other monastic sites of Northern Andhra, including Tholkakonda, Salihundam, Karukonda, Rampa Errampalem, and Pavuralakonda, in order to reveal their significance in the history of monastic Buddhism of post-Ikṣvaku Andhra.

## **Monasteries and Settlement Shrines: Mapping the Extent of Buddhism in Early Medieval Magadha**

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**Abhishek Amar (Hamilton College)**

The region of Magadha was, arguably, the epicenter of Buddhism in early medieval India, with several major monastic establishments such as BodhGayā, Nālandā, and Vikramaśīla, as well as smaller Buddhist monastic centers located at Telhara and Kurkihār. Previous studies focused on these monastic complexes have concluded that Buddhism was largely, if not exclusively, confined to such monastic precincts in the post-Gupta period, reflecting its shrinking social base in the region. Based on an archaeological survey of the surrounding contexts of several Buddhist monastic sites and villages of Nālandā, Gayā and Lakhisarai district in the last five years, this paper will study the links between Buddhist *saṅghas* and more disparate regional settlements. In doing so, this paper seeks to scrutinize the strategies employed by early medieval Buddhist monastic institutions to engage rural settlements in order to sustain relationships that may have expanded their patronage base in the Magadha region.



## **Post Gupta-Vākāṭaka Buddhist Art in the Deccan: Reflections on Patronage and Ritual in the Early Medieval Milieu**

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**Nicolas Morrissey (University of Georgia)**

There can be little question that the collapse of the Western branch of the Vākāṭaka dynasty at the end of the fifth century CE, coupled with the waning fortunes of the Guptas by the early sixth century CE, precipitated a challenging socio-economic and political environment for Buddhist monastic communities throughout North and Central India. These adverse circumstances were, it appears, felt most acutely by monasteries in the Deccan region such as Ajāṇṭa, Ghatotkacha and Bagh, once the beneficiaries of ambitious and exuberant imperial patronage that, on the cusp of the early medieval period, rather rapidly descended into abeyance. The grand achievements in Buddhist art and architecture in the Deccan sponsored during the Gupta-Vākāṭaka age are, of course, very well-known and documented. Yet it seems far less well known that the period immediately proceeding from the decline of these great houses was, perhaps surprisingly, marked by a resurgence of artistic activity at a range of long-dormant Buddhist monasteries in the Deccan. This paper will argue that this extant – but little studied – material culture from the early medieval Deccan testifies to a significant shift in modes of patronage in support of Buddhist monastic communities, which was, in turn, linked to equally significant shifts in monastic ritual practices, particularly those increasingly focused on the Buddhist image cult. These transformative developments may have engendered the appearance in the early medieval Deccan of what Peter Skilling has described as a “more flexible” form of Buddhism – a response, in part at least, to historical circumstances in which the “Buddhist monastic system, with its high maintenance built environments, [became] too top heavy and too cumbersome ... too dependent on favorable circumstances and continued patronage to be sustainable in the long run.”

## **Between Normativity and Material Emptiness: Indian Buddhist Monasteries in Chinese Travelogues**

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**Max Deeg (University of Cardiff)**

This paper will address the odd fact that the “description” of Indian Buddhist monasteries in Chinese texts are rather concentrating on the communal and/or individual aspects of monastic life than on the institution of the monastery and its materiality. These records are therefore, quite naturally, closer to the idealized image of a monastery and the life therein than to the material reality as, partly at least, represented through archaeological evidence. Although not restricting itself to it, the paper will discuss this issue with a focus on the work of the Chinese traveler, translator and Vinaya-specialist Yijing.



# Views from the Black Mountain: The Rock-Cut *Mahāvihāra* at Kānheri/Kṛṣṇagiri in Konkan

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**Pia Brancaccio (Drexel University)**

The Buddhist complex of Kānheri/Kṛṣṇagiri (Black Mountain), today situated within the metropolitan area of Mumbai, is the largest and longest lasting rock-cut monastery in the Western Deccan. It is comprised of over one hundred excavations and numerous inscriptions spanning a thousand years, from the beginning of the Common Era to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. In an important 5<sup>th</sup> century copper plate inscription found at the site, the monastery is identified for the first time as a ‘*mahāvihāra*’. A thorough re-examination of archaeological and artistic evidence from Kānheri indicates that the Black Mountain monastery – often treated cursorily or even completely overlooked in broader scholarly discourse – had developed as a major religious center during the medieval period with far reaching connections across the Buddhist world.

Inscriptions from caves 11 and 12 confirm the prominent role of Kānheri as a hub for Buddhist scholasticism in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. In addition, later medieval Buddhist textual sources and historiographies mention famous *ācāryas* allegedly receiving esoteric training at Kṛṣṇagiri. The layout and visual program of some of the later caves confirm that the *Śrī Kṛṣṇagiri Mahārāja Mahāvihāra*, as the monastery was called in Rāṣṭrakūṭa epigraphs, was well connected to Buddhist esoteric circuits. Kṛṣṇagiri appears to have entertained exchanges with the *mahāvihāras* of North India, with the Himalayan regions, and with Southeast Asia. In sum, the evidence presented in this paper should prompt us to shift our understanding of Kṛṣṇagiri. from a marginal regional monastery to a major international learning center in the networks of Buddhist transmission across South and Southeast Asia.

