

Representations of the Buddha in Persian Literary Culture

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The proposed book aims at elucidating an understudied chapter in Persian intellectual and religious history on the encounters between Islam and Buddhism within the Persianate World. It challenges the accepted classifications of modern scholarship about the geographical, historical and cultural boundaries where Buddhism was practiced, and provides evidence to the continuation of multi-religious fluidity in Iran in the Islamic period. The book also challenges the common beliefs about the Iranian religious identity represented as majorly Zoroastrian (Pre-Islamic period) or Muslim (Islamic period) versus the Buddhist identity seen as Indian or Chinese. Through concrete textual studies, the book will present new arguments about the interactions between Indian and Iranian Worlds suggesting that the Indian religious heritage was not transmitted into Persian thoroughly and merely within the South Asian territory under the Mughals (1526-1858), but that the inter-religious exchange was a long-lasting and continuous process which had been taking place for centuries before and in different regions within the Persian-speaking lands, including Central and West Asia.

Focusing on the earliest records of Buddhist practice in the Persianate world, the book introduces Persian travelogues, geographical accounts and Sufi treatises that provide evidence to the continuation of Buddhist presence in the region until the twelfth century. It continues with the Post-Mongol period when, with the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, Buddhism returned to West Asia for a few decades. Despite the Ilkhanids' (1256-1335) conversion to Islam for political reasons in the fourteenth century, the interest in Buddhist philosophical texts continued and a wide variety of them were rendered into Persian. The book bases its arguments about the decline or revival of Buddhism in Iran on the study of the Persian translations of canonical Buddhist texts produced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; it focuses on the Persian hagiographies of the Buddha, their sacredness and performativity for the Persian readership.

Through a meticulous study of the Persian narratives about the Buddha, and by juxtaposing it with the relevant Sanskrit sources (*Lalitavistara*, *Buddhacarita*, *Mahāvastu* and *Jātaka / Avadāna* tales), the book will map out the development, dissemination and acculturation of this narrative in the Persian literary context. It will scrutinize the methods of translation applied within the transmission process, whether it be a direct one from Sanskrit and in collaboration with the Buddhist monks, or an indirect one through intermediary languages (Pahlavi, Arabic, Uygur Turkish), and it will identify the semantic techniques applied to promote its fictionality, factuality and historicity. The book will include case studies from historiographies (*Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* and *Zubdat al-Tawārīkh*) as well as fictional narratives (*Bilawhar wa Būddhasaf(a)*), in which will be argued how fundamental socio-political factors as well as theological/doctrinal and literary factors played a role in the transformation of the Buddha from a mythical character into a real and historical prophet – a saint.

One of the book's prominent takeaways will be the introduction of unpublished archival material and manuscripts which have not been studied before. It will provide further epistemological evidence for the identification of the ancient Buddhist corpus which is partially extant in the Buddhist languages today, but can still be traced in Medieval Persian literature. Another major

finding of this book is the interface of Buddhist and Muslim textual practice within the Persianate World, and the role Buddhist texts played therein, that allowed Buddhism to continue to live in literary ways within a non-Buddhist literary environment. We will study the significant role of Sufism and Sufi literature in facilitating the continuation of this religious confluence through the Persian language. Finally, the book suggests the inclusion of Persian language and textual corpus amongst the key languages and literatures of Buddhism.

The proposed book will be a novel contribution to Iranian and Persianate studies. Focusing on the overlooked subject of religious diversity in the Persianate World, the book will defy the settled conventions and definitions created by modern nationalistic tendencies that promote the Persianate religious identity under the dominance of Zoroastrianism, Islam and monotheistic faiths. It will also engage in the new debates around the Persian translations of Indian religious heritage which are being categorized under the loose term of “Indo-Persian”, and incorrectly perceived as a branch separate from “Persian,” and merely South Asian. This is an important contribution to enlarge visions on the religious identity narratives in both Iranian and South Asian studies.

The putative publisher for this book is Oxford University Press. The general structure and narrative arc of the book can be viewed in the table of content below:

1 Introduction: Why don't we talk about Buddhism in Iran?

- 1-1 Nationalized approach towards oriental studies promoted in the 20th century
- 1-2 Unconscious bias, religious and pedagogical filters
- 1-3 Contemporary politics

2 Buddhism in Pre-Islamic Iran (historical perspective)

- 2-1 References to the Buddha in Zoroastrian texts
- 2-2 Manicheism and Manichean literature
- 2-3 Available Pahlavi and Manichean texts with reference to Buddhism

3 Encounters of Islam and Buddhism in Islamic Iran (7th-12th centuries)

- 3-1 India and Indian religions in the eyes of Persians
- 3-2 Buddhism as reflected in Iranian and Central Asian literatures after Islam
- 3-3 Translation movement under the ‘Abbasids (750-1258) (Barmakids, the Brethren of Purity, evidence found in Ibn Nadim's *Al-Fihrist*)
- 3-4 Arabic and Persian Textual Records about the presence of Buddhists in the region (Geographical accounts, travelogues, historiographies, Sufi treatises)
- 3-5 The earliest manuscripts
- 3-6 The archeological evidence

4 Revival of Buddhism in Post-Mongol Iran (13th-14th centuries)

- 4-1 Religion of the Mongols - Buddhist tendencies present in Western lands of Iran
- 4-2 Buddhist textual productions under the Ilkhanids (1256-1335) and the Jalayirids (1335-1432)
- 4-3 Translation systems and knowledge exchange between Persian and Indic sources

5 The Buddha as the *Buddhasaf(a)* / *Buddhasp(a)*

5-1 The *bodhisattava* on the path to attain arhatship (Ismā‘īl ibn Garṣāsīf’s 13th-century manuscript of the *Bilawhar wa Būddhasaf(a)*)

5-2 The *bodhisattava* on the path to become a *cakravartin* (Nizām al-Dīn Šāmī’s 14th-century abridgement of the *Bilawhar wa Buyūddhasaf(a)*)

5-3 In search of the origins of the story (comparative study of the Persian texts with available Sanskrit narratives)

5-4 Challenges of indirect translation, compilation and domestication

6 Siddhārtha Gautama Śākyamūni in Persian Historiographies

6-1 The Buddha Śākyamūni in the *Zubdat al-Tawārīkh* (Selections of Chronicles) by Abū al-Qāsim al-Qāṣānī (14th century)

6-2 The Buddha Śākyamūni in the *Jāmi‘ al-Tawārīkh* (Compendium of Chronicles) by Rašīd al-Dīn Hamidānī (d. 1318)

6-3 Comparative textual study of the Persian translations with available Sanskrit narratives: the *Lalitavistara*, the *Buddhacarita*, the *Mahāvastu*

6-4 Direct translation, adaptation tactics and the acculturation patterns

7 In Search of the Buddha’s Previous Births in Persian Didactic Tales: The *Jātaka/ Avadāna*

8-1 The *Kalīla wa Dimna* by Naṣr Allāh Munṣī prepared in around 536-540 / 1142-1146 AD

8-2 The *Rawzat al-‘uqūl* by Muḥammad Ġāzī Maṭīwī prepared in 598 H./ 1202 AD

8-3 The *Farā‘id al-sulūk* by Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm Sajāsī prepared in 609-10 H./ 1212-1213 AD

8-4 The *Marzbān-nāma* by Sa‘d al-Dīn Warāwīnī prepared in 607-622 H./ 1210-1225 AD

8- Sufism and Buddhist Philosophy (*Ṭarīqat* and the Path)

8-1 Persian Sufism and Buddhism before Mongol invasion

8-2 Persian Sufism and Buddhism at the Mongol court in West Asia

8-3 ‘Allā al-Daula Simnānī’s (d. 1336) letters (A Buddhist who later became a Muslim Sufi)

9 Conclusion: The historical Buddha Versus the Legendary Buddha

9-1 Fictionality and historicity in Persian hagiographies of the Buddha

9-2 The afterlife of the Buddha in Persian literature of the early modern period

9-3 New approaches to the history of religions in the Persianate World