

## **IS IT POSSIBLE TO WRITE HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY OF THE BUDDHA?**

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In an art historical context, the reference of the term “biography” implies the use of narration, be it planned or carved. But it is evident that this cannot be considered true when examining the artefacts at our disposal in Indian art where Buddhism left its traces from the last centuries B.C. till around 1200 A.D. Buddhist iconography is manifold: the largest part of it is variously concerned with icons which were the focus of veneration and these icons, even though they may, but not exclusively depict the Buddha, can stand far away from the traditional narrative treatment. As a matter of fact, an image of the Buddha Shākyamuni does not necessarily refer to a moment of his life. Far away from it. The nature of the artistic object varies in the course of time and, at a very broad level, we can discern a first period (from the beginning up to the Gupta period onwards) where the icon becomes the Centre of attention and where the narration enters into a normative process of being fixed in the iconic model. This general tendency has to be taken into consideration when searching for elements related to a biography since the structure of the image cannot be isolated from its subject; simultaneously, and through we shall not deal here with this question, it is evident that the prevalence of the narration, or the icon, in the treatment of the Buddha’s life relates to the philosophical perception of “what” the Buddha is. Nobody would ever doubt that the Buddha is a fundamental personality in the religious history of Asia and the world. His life has been elaborated in literary sources as holy biography, practically as hagiography or as legend- which have been analyses for more than one century now.

Despite the existence of numerous works on the life of the Buddha, historical reliability on biographical study of the Buddha is questionable. Scholars in this field have endeavored to arrive at a true picture of the historical Buddha without the grab of

myths and exaggeration but the extent and nature of their success have not been fully established from a purely historical point of view. The difficulties relating to the historical biography of the Buddha confronted by the earlier scholars and by the subsequent scholars were because the available documents were not, in themselves, from a basis for a historical account. Moreover, the biography of the Buddha was not prepared immediately after the Buddha's Parinibbāna. It grew over a long period after his demise at the hands of various kinds of persons. Talking about the subject of the biography of the Buddha, H. Oldenberg points out that:

A biography of the Buddha has not come down to us from ancient times, from the age Pāli texts, and we can safely say no such biography was in existence then (this assertion is supported as well by what the Pāli texts contain, as by what they do not contain. They do not contain either a biography of the Buddha or even the slightest trace of such a thing having been in existence before, and this alone is conclusive). This is moreover very easily understood. The idea of biography was foreign to the mind of that age. To take the life of a man as a whole, its development from beginning to end, as a unified subject for literally treatment, had not occurred to anyone yet in that age.<sup>1</sup>

Since the earlier monuments do not represent the Buddha as a person, much debate has occurred around this “aniconism”, preferably to be named “pre-iconic” in certain cases. Very evidently, the Buddha can be evoked through the use of mnemotechnic features which refer to places which he visited and where a specific event took place. Does one have to understand this biography as limited to Shākyamuni historical life, i.e. did it start with his birth or does one have to go back in time and include the “previous lives”? Does his life start with his birth, with his conception, or even at an earlier stage with his stay in the Tushita heaven from where he decides to descend in the womb of the queen Māyā?

Although no biography of the Buddha, in the strict sense of the word, has come down to posterity, there is a wealth of biographical material scattered throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha: His life, His Doctrine, His Order*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas Pvt. Ltd. 1997: 78 – 79.

teachings of the Buddha. This material, however relates to the life of the Buddha after the attainment of enlightenment and the information about the life of the Buddha prior to his attainment of enlightenment is most scanty. As the Buddha renounced his life as a householder, he appears to have paid no importance to his household life in the teachings; through incidental tend to confirm and kind authenticity to the later biographical accounts of the Buddha.<sup>2</sup> This is another difficulty when we compose the whole life of the Buddha. However, the teachings of the Buddha as embodied in the triple canon are the most authentic source in the biography of the Buddha. B.H. Hodgson, a British resident of Nepal, first handled the Buddha legends. Based on Nepalese Sanskrit manuscripts published in 1830, he made a sketch on Buddhism with reference to some aspects of the Buddha's career.

The Sanskrit Mahāyānist tradition, on which the Chinese and Tibetan sources are mainly based, did not help very much in reconstructing a historical biography of the Buddha. This was owing to the fact that the Sanskrit texts such as the *Lalitavistara* or the *Buddhacarita* were too mythological and exaggerated. In 1881, H. Oldenberg's *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Gemeinde* was published from Berlin in which he had demolished the skeptical theory of a solar Buddha put forward by É. Sénart and having shifted the legendary elements of the Buddhist tradition on the basis of the earlier Pāli sources and corresponding historical evidence had given the most reliable account of the fact concerning the Buddha's life.

In 1887 T.W. Rhys Davids published a small book<sup>3</sup> in which he laid much emphasis on the proper foundation of a scientific study of the Buddha and Buddhism. In 1927, E.J. Thomas who published a book under the title, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* is inclined to insist on the proposition that the events related to a historical person were converted into mythological narratives and not the other way around.<sup>4</sup> In 1947, É. Lamotte in his *Legend du Buddha* held that since the Buddha

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<sup>2</sup> Kong Man-Shik. *A Critical Study of the Biography of the Buddha*, a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Delhi, 2004: 2.

<sup>3</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, reprint, London: FB & Co Ltd, 2015: 32.

<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, New York: Dover Publication, INC, 1927:49.

legends have no tinge of reality what the historian can do in this field is not to extract history from these legends but to stratify the legends and the remaining content by studying their successive stages. Despite such a view, Lamotte was largely inclined to insist on the historical existence of the Buddha as a reality.

A. Foucher, speaking on the source of *The Life of the Buddha* says:

“We have three series of documents in Indian languages about the legendary life of the Buddha. These documents originated in three of the four broad sects into which Buddhism broke up early. Some are written in Pali such as *Mahāvagga*, or the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. They are part of the canonical writings of the Sthavirvadins the sect that has kept its identity in Ceylon. Others are found in Sanskrit such as the '*Lalitavistara*' and the '*Divyāvadāna*' which come from the canon of the Sarvāstivādins.”<sup>5</sup>

The third group written in irregular Prakrit, a kind of macaroni (mixture of two languages) Sanskrit, represented by the *Mahāvastu* also constitutes a fragment rescued from the lost canon of the *Mahāsaṃghikas*, the great community. These are our primary sources and a priori we have no right to adopt one to the exclusion of the others. The fact that we faced with several different versions of the same incident can only favor research.<sup>6</sup>

Oldenberg who had considered all these sources states, “It is to the Pāli traditions that we must go in preference to all other sources, if we desire to know whether and information is obtainable regarding the Buddha and his life.”<sup>7</sup> He says that the most ancient traditions of Buddhism are” those preserved in Ceylon studied by monks of that island up to the present day.”<sup>8</sup> It seems that the findings of two western scholars, H. Oldenberg and E.J. Thomas are reliable among western scholars.

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<sup>5</sup> Foucher, *Op. Cit.* 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 18.

<sup>7</sup> Oldenberg, *Op. Cit.* 75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: 78.

Nevertheless, it appears that they also have grave defects relating to source materials, which they used.

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