

Material Culture and the Making of South Asia I (A006809)

Course size *(nominal values; actual values may depend on programme)*

Credits 6.0

Study time 180 h

Course offerings in academic year 2026-2027

A (semester 1)

English

Gent

Lecturers in academic year 2026-2027

De Clercq, Eva

LW21

lecturer-in-charge

DiSimone, Charles

LW21

co-lecturer

Mondini, Sara

LW21

co-lecturer

Offered in the following programmes in 2026-2027

[Master of Science in Teaching in Languages\(main subject Oriental Languages and Cultures\)](#)

crdts 6

offering A

[Master of Arts in Oriental Languages and Cultures\(main subject India\)](#)

6

A

[Exchange Programme Oriental Languages and Cultures](#)

6

A

Teaching languages

English

Keywords

Buddhism, South Asia, Art and Archaeology, Material and Visual Cultures, Religious Traditions, Decolonisation

Position of the course

This year, the course focuses on the art and archaeology of Buddhism. It explores Buddhism mainly through its art, architecture, and archaeological remains, tracing its emergence and development in South Asia and its spread across Central Asia, the Himalayas, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Indian Ocean world, offering an interdisciplinary and transregional perspective on the Buddhist pasts grounded in material and visual evidence.

The course places material culture and archaeological data at the centre of historical enquiry, examining Buddhist monuments, objects, and landscapes as active agents in religious practice, economic systems, political power, and long-distance connections. In this framework, inscriptions are approached as part of the material record: students will engage with epigraphic sources in Indic languages, including the edicts of Emperor Aśoka, and donative and dedicatory inscriptions, as key evidence for patronage, mobility, and the social lives of Buddhist sites. While not language-based, the course introduces basic elements of epigraphic practice and relevant linguistic contexts to support interpretation.

Alongside historical case studies, the course also addresses the modern afterlives of Buddhist material heritage, including colonial archaeology, museum display, looting and illicit antiquities trafficking, and the ethical challenges of research in post-colonial and Indigenous settings. These discussions connect the past to pressing contemporary issues, showing why Buddhist art and archaeology still matter in the present.

Chronologically, the course focuses on c. 5th century BCE to the early modern period, with selected case studies extending into the colonial and contemporary worlds.

Contents

- The Buddha and the Emergence of Buddhism
- The Formation of Buddhist Art and Architecture: Ashoka and the Earliest Stupas

- Gandhara: Buddhist Art and Archaeology between South Asia and the Hellenistic World
- Monasteries and Merchants: Rock-Cut Architecture and Long-Distance Networks between the Deccan and the Mediterranean
- Mahaviharas: Monastic Complexes and the Making of Buddhist Knowledge
- Buddhism across Central Asia: Art and Archaeology of the "Silk Roads"
- Buddhist Art in the Himalayas and Tibet: Religious Practice in Mountain Landscapes
- Buddhism across the Indian Ocean: Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and the Maldives
- Buddhism in East Asia: Artistic and Architectural Transformations in China, Japan, and Korea
- Buddhism and Islam: Encounters and Material Histories
- Curating Buddhism: Museums, Provenance, and the Afterlives of Buddhist Heritage
- Visit to the Buddhist galleries at the Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels

Initial competences

Students hold a Bachelor's degree and have (preferably) attended one of the following courses:

- 'Art and Archaeology of South Asia'
- 'History of South Asia'
- 'Religious Traditions of India'
- 'Buddhism'
- 'Sanskrit I'
- 'Hindi I'

Proficiency in English is mandatory. Students enrolled in the India track are expected to draw on their knowledge of Sanskrit/Prakrit/Hindi, particularly in the engagement with primary sources (in translation).

Final competences

- 1 Demonstrate advanced knowledge of Buddhist art and archaeology in South Asia, and situate its development within broader Asian contexts and transregional connections.
- 2 Analyse and interpret Buddhist archaeological remains, monuments, objects, and inscriptions from South Asia using art historical and archaeological methods, with attention to their material, spatial, and historical contexts.
- 3 Establish and critically evaluate connections between Buddhist material culture in South Asia and wider historical and cultural contexts across Asia and beyond.

Conditions for credit contract

Access to this course unit via a credit contract is unrestricted: the student takes into consideration the conditions mentioned in 'Starting Competences'

Conditions for exam contract

This course unit cannot be taken via an exam contract

Teaching methods

Group work, Excursion, Lecture

Extra information on the teaching methods

- Lectures (2 hours/week): PowerPoint presentations, videos and other media. One lecture will be delivered by an internationally recognised curator specialising in Buddhist collections.
- Groupwork (1 hour/week): Each week, a small group of students gives a 15-minute presentation about an object or work of art, which is followed by a classroom discussion.
- Excursion: Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels.

No lecture recordings will be made available. However, live streaming of classes is available for online students and may also be arranged for regular students in exceptional circumstances, for example for students doing an internship abroad.

Study material

Type: Slides

Name: Lecture slides

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: no

Language : English

Available on Ufora : Yes

Additional information: Students will find on Ufora the lecture slides for each session available the day before the scheduled class.

Type: Reader

Name: Book chapters, journal articles, and primary sources (with translations)

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: no

Language : English

Available on Ufora : Yes

Additional information: At the end of each class, the lecturer will upload on Ufora the required readings for each class, as well as those for the group work.

Type: Audiovisual Material

Name: Films, documentaires en ander audiovisueel materiaal dat relevant is voor elke les.

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: yes

Language : English

Available on Ufora : Yes

Online Available : Yes

Type: Excursion

Name: Visit to the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels

Indicative price: Free or paid by faculty

Optional: yes

Additional information: Visit to the Buddhist galleries.

References

Fogelin, Lars. *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Leidy, Denise Patry. *The Art of Buddhism: An Introduction to Its History Meaning*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2008

Ray, Himanshu Prabha. *Archaeology and Buddhism in South Asia*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2019.

Strong, John S. *The Buddha: A Short Biography*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2002.

Course content-related study coaching

Upon appointment (face-to-face or on MS Teams) or by email.

Assessment moments

end-of-term and continuous assessment

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the first examination period

Written assessment with open-ended questions

Examination methods in case of periodic assessment during the second examination period

Written assessment with open-ended questions

Examination methods in case of permanent assessment

Participation, Presentation

Possibilities of retake in case of permanent assessment

examination during the second examination period is possible in modified form

Extra information on the examination methods

- Attendance
- 15-minute group presentation on object or work of art
- Written exam

Calculation of the examination mark

- Attendance (10%)
- Presentation (30%)
- Exam (60%)

Students who do not take part in the assessment of one or more parts of the course evaluation or obtain a mark of less than 10/20 for one of its parts cannot pass the course evaluation. Should the average mark be higher than 10/20, the final mark will be reduced to the highest non-pass mark (= 9).

Facilities for Working Students

- Possible exemption from educational activities requiring student attendance (to be discussed with the lecturer)
- Possible alternative examination on a different time (in the same academic year)
- Alternative time for feedback: upon appointment (face-to-face or on MS teams) or by email