



BIPS

Workshop

Ancient India and Persia: An Interaction

(Attendance by invitation only)

2026

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (Mumbai)
4-5 December 2026

Ancient India and Persia: An Interaction

A Workshop at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai

Ancient India and Persia: An Interaction

This workshop will consist of a series of papers and discussions where new evidence of transmission of ideas from ancient Persia and Central Asia to India will be addressed. Questions will focus on which ideas were developed in ancient Persia – and Central Asia – that may have contributed to a fusion in the field of art, architecture and religious texts, as well as the 19th and 20th century architecture of Zoroastrian fire temples in India.

These and other points will help us to understand a long and fruitful interchange of cultural ideas that have survived challenges and have contributed to the formation of different religious, artistic and cultural models from Persia to India and beyond.

Conference organisers

British Institute of Persian Studies

BIPS is the UK's foremost learned organisation dedicated to promoting and supporting scholarship and research excellence on all aspects of Iran and the wider Persianate world, and to increasing public understanding and knowledge of this region.

BIPS is one of the British International Research Institutes (BIRI), supported by the British Academy.

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya

The aim at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) is to create awareness and sensitivity towards our rich heritage through a visitor-friendly museum for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of the public.

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, formerly known as the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, is one of the premier art and history museums in India. It is a not-for-profit organisation established by Act III of 1909 of the Bombay Legislation by the then Bombay Presidency, called the Prince of Wales Museum Act (now known as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya Act).

Provisional Programme

Friday, 4 December 2026

9.30-9.50 AM	Arrival
9.50-10.00 AM	Welcome by Dr Sabyasachi Mukherjee , Director of the CSMVS Introduction
Session 1	
10.00-12.45 PM	
10.00-11.00 AM	Professor Suchandra Ghosh , Hyderabad University - Keynote <i>From the Achaemenids to the Sasanids: diverse voices of cultural dialogue in the Indo-Iranian borderlands</i>
11.00-11.20 AM	Professor Susmita Basu Majumdar , University of Calcutta <i>The Mauryas and the Persian Connection</i>
11.20-11.35 AM	Discussion
11.35-11.50 PM	Coffee break
11.50-12.10 PM	Dr Arish Dastur , SOAS <i>The Hymn to Tištriia, the Ideal and Overseer of all Stars</i>
12.10-12.30 PM	Professor Almut Hintze , SSPIZS, SOAS <i>Sanskrit in the Manuscript Culture of the Parsis</i>
12.30-12.45 PM	Discussion
12.45-2.00 PM	Lunch

Session 2

2.00-5.00 PM

- 2.00-2.20 PM **Dr Fabrizio Sinisi**, Austrian Academy, Vienna
The Religion of the Kushans: a historical approach to non-Persian Zoroastrianism
- 2.20-2.40 PM **Dr Yousef Moradi**, SOAS
Sarab-e Murt: architectural transmission between Iran and India
- 2.40-2.55 PM **Discussion**
- 2.55-3.10 PM **Tea break**
- 3.10- 3.30 PM **Dr Michael Alram**, Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna
Sasanian Influence in the Monetary Development of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands
- 3.30- 3.50 PM **Dr Ashish Kumar**, Panjab University
Indo-Sasanian Interaction
- 3.50-4.05 PM **Discussion**
- 4.05-4.25 PM **Dr Judith Lerner**, NYU
Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism) Amongst the Sogdians
- 4.25-4.45 PM **Dr Sarah Stewart**, SOAS, BIPS
Zoroastrian Religious Ideas: from Iran to India
- 4.45-5.00 PM **Discussion**
- 7:30 PM **Dinner**

Saturday, 5 December 2026

Session 1

10.00-12.30 PM

10.00-10.20 AM

Burzine Waghmar, SOAS

The Persian and Indian Oikumenes After the Conquests

10.20-10.40 AM

Dr Rukshana Nanji, Independent Researcher, Pune

The Sanjan Saga: a chronology in ceramics

10.40-10.55 AM

Discussion

10.55-11.10 AM

Coffee Break

11.10-11.30 AM

Dr Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, BIPS, BM

Zoroastrianism in the Art of Arsacid Parthia and Persis

11.30-11.50 AM

Discussion

11.50-12.30 PM

Closing remarks and plans for publication

12.30-1.30 PM

Lunch

This programme is organised by British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS) in collaboration with Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai, as part of 'Networks of the Past: A Study Gallery of India and the Ancient World'. The Conference programme is being supported by BIPS and the Venue costs at Mumbai are being supported by CSMVS through the Citi-CSMVS Museum on Wheels Initiative.



Abstracts

Suchandra Ghosh

University of Hyderabad

From the Achaemenids to the Sasanids: diverse voices of cultural dialogue in the Indo-Iranian borderlands

The Indo-Iranian borderlands extending from Afghanistan to northwestern India has, for millennia, constituted a crucial zone of interaction, serving as a focal point for the movements of travellers, merchants, monks, pastoral communities, and political elites. This region was therefore not defined by a single route or geographical feature but by an interconnected network of passes, river valleys, plains, and upland corridors. The cumulative effect of these movements, migrations, and exchanges was continuous encounters in the line of culture, language/literature and consumption of objects of everyday life among the populace of the region. We see this beautifully illustrated in the representation of a specific dance form—the “Persian snap”—at a Buddhist stupa site in Buner, and in the exquisite vessels excavated from Mes Aynak. These examples point to a continuous, deep-seated cultural dialogue. Utilizing a wide range of evidence, this presentation seeks to capture the diverse voices of that dialogue, tracing its evolution from the Achaemenids to the Sasanids.

Suchandra Ghosh is Professor in the Department of History, University of Hyderabad. She authored *From the Oxus to the Indus: A Political and Cultural Study and Indo-Iranian borderlands and its environs: Trans-regional Cultural Dialogues (6th century BCE to 6th century CE)* (Primus Books). She is a member of the advisory board of Encyclopedia Iranica. Recently she was invited as a visiting Professor at the department of History, École normale Supérieure, Paris (2026).

Susmita Basu Majumdar

University of Calcutta

The Mauryas and the Persian Connection

This presentation intends to explore India's Mauryan connection with the Achaemenid Empire and its impact on the early Indian script, engraving tradition, administration, art and architecture. We will be taking into consideration the influences on the architecture of palaces, columns and also on the Barabar and Nagarjuni caves in Bihar discussing the architectural elements, the polish, sculptural similarities, and stylistic affinities. In addition, there will be an attempt to read the absorption of cultural elements from the northwest and its introduction into the Mauryan empire. The epigraphic elements will be taken into consideration to read the layers of influences and their continuity, looking at the presence of scribes and engravers from the northwest into Southern India in order to trace the impact of Aramaic and Kharoshthi scripts beyond their own cultural zones. We shall also explore the currency pattern, the commercial network, as well as the overland and riverine trade.

Susmita Basu Majumdar is a Professor in the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta. She specialises in Early Indian Epigraphy and Numismatics. Her research interests also include History of Medicine and Surgery and History of Early Indian Religion.

Arish Dastur
SOAS

The Hymn to Tištriia, the Ideal and Overseer of all Stars

The hymn to Tištriia is composed in the Young Avestan language and is dedicated to the Zoroastrian celestial divinity, Tištriia. It is remarkable in terms of its contents, its imaginative scope, its literary quality, and its compositional design. While the overarching cosmological backdrop and the pervasive current of a powerful existential duality depicted in this hymn accord seamlessly with the Avestan spiritual vision, this hymn also conveys rich narratives and mythological content not otherwise present in the broader Avestan literature. These are (i) the emblematic battle between the radiant Tištriia and the demonic false-god Apaōša on the shores of the tempestuous Vourukaša Sea, (ii) the enchaining of the evil encircling she-spirit Dužiiāiriiā by Tištriia, and (iii) the myth of the fabled archer Ǝrəxša. The hymn is beautifully woven together with evocative descriptions, and its compositional design cleverly incorporates centre-periphery patterns often found embedded within sophisticated Avestan poetry.

Arish Dastur has a PhD and an MA in Religion from SOAS where he studied the Avestan language and its literature under Professor Almut Hintze. Prior to this, he worked at the World Bank in Washington D.C. for around 12 years. He also has an MSc in Urban Planning from Columbia University, USA, and a BA in Neuroscience and in Religion from Oberlin College, USA. He is currently the Chairman of the Heritage, Arts and Culture committee of the Rotary Club of Bombay.

Almut Hintze

SOAS

Sanskrit in the Manuscript Culture of the Parsis

Around 1200CE, the learned priests of the Parsis of India availed themselves of the Sanskrit language to create a written tradition in Sanskrit of their religious texts. This talk explores aspects of this transition from Middle Persian to Sanskrit, and eventually to the local vernacular, within the context of the paper manuscript culture of Gujarat. Special attention will be paid to cultural exchanges between Zoroastrians and Jains in Gujarat in the first half of the second millennium CE.

Almut Hintze is Zartoshty Brothers Professor of Zoroastrianism at SOAS, University of London, Co-Chair of the SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute, Fellow of the British Academy and member of the Academia Europaea. She specialises in Zoroastrianism and the tradition of its rituals and texts, of which she has published several editions.

Fabrizio Sinisi

Austrian Archaeological Institute - Austrian Academy of Sciences

The Religion of the Kushans: a historical approach to non-Persian Zoroastrianism

The first attempt to ascribe the religion of the Kushans to a Zoroastrian horizon dates to the late 19th century. Since then, the discussion has broadened exploring an extremely large range of alternative interpretations. The end of the 20th /early 21st century saw a resurgence of the Zoroastrian reading which, however, once again became subject to a partial revision in recent scholarship. A common feature of the relevant studies is a certain lack of historical contextualization, as if the Kushan religion could be reconstructed glossing over the concrete historical circumstances in which the Kushans established their empire between Bactria and India. This is made more complicated by the paucity of written sources, as the evidence is largely of visual nature. The paper will deal with the “Kushan religion” focusing on specific features between the heritage of Bactria, that of the Saka intruders, and India.

Fabrizio Sinisi is Senior Academy Scientist at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Numismatic Research Group, Department of Classical Studies of the Austrian Archaeological Institute). His main interests are in iconography and cultural history of the Middle Iranian period, with special focus on the Parthian period in Western as well as Eastern Iran.

Yousef Moradi
SOAS

Sarab-e Murt: architectural transmission between Iran and India

The Partho-Sasanian building complex at Sarab-e Murt, Iran, comprising a manor house and two Zoroastrian fire temples, provides evidence for the transmission and adaptation of architectural ideas between Iran and India. Following the foundation of the Sasanian Empire, the lord of the manor house constructed a private fire temple within the residence and two public fire temples nearby to serve the Zoroastrian community of the region. Taking Sarab-e Murt as a case study, this paper proposes that the spatial configurations of Sasanian fire temples were transmitted to India, where they were adapted in the Parsi Agiaries, and subsequently reintroduced to Iran by the Parsis as models for the construction of modern Zoroastrian fire temples. The paper further suggests that, although no physical architectural model survived throughout the intervening centuries, knowledge of the appropriate form and spatial organisation of fire sanctuaries was maintained through priestly memory and passed down across generations, ultimately informing the design of modern fire temples.

Yousef Moradi is a Research Fellow at SOAS specialising in the archaeology of the ancient Near and Middle East, particularly the Parthian, Sasanian, and early Islamic periods. His research interests include Zoroastrian studies, sigillography, and landscape archaeology. Yousef has conducted excavations at several sites in Iran and published extensively on their archaeology and material culture.

Michael Alram

Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences

Sasanian Influence in the Monetary Development of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands

With the Sasanian expansion eastwards, Zoroastrianism took a firmer hold in the Indo-Iranian border lands. This development had already begun under the Parthians and Kushans, and went back to the Achaemenids. “Hindustan” was regarded an integral part of the Sasanian Empire with a chequered history. This talk [VC1.1] attempts to trace this through the lens of coinage as evidence for political and economic processes. It also offers insights into cultural and religious sensibilities through the choice of images and inscriptions. The Zoroastrian fire altar, the standard motif on the Sasanian drachma, became a powerful symbol of the empire and its religion, of which the Shahanshah was the sovereign protector. Subsequently, other political actors adopted this image for their coinage, some being opponents of the Sasanians and others presenting themselves as legitimate successors. It remains an open question as to what extent the choice of images reflects the religious orientation and sensibilities of the new monetary authorities.

Michael Alram is Director Emeritus of the Coin Cabinet at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and an associated member of the Numismatic Research Group of the Department of Classical Studies at the Austrian Archaeological Institute (Austrian Academy of Sciences). His research interests focus primarily on the monetary history of Iran and the Indo-Iranian borderlands in pre-Islamic times.

Ashish Kumar

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Indo-Sasanian Interaction in the Late Antiquity

The Eurocentric approach to India's history in the 20th century overshadowed the long history of the Indo-Sasanian interactions, which are still perceived in certain academic circles as an appendage to the history of Indo-Roman trade. This paper shifts the focus from the Indo-Roman history to the Indo-Sasanian interaction, in which people of Indian, Central Asian and Iranian backgrounds had actively participated. India interacted with Sasanian Persia through maritime routes, in which Nestorian Christians had played a significant role, and on the other hand, the Hunas (Kidarites and Alchon), who controlled major parts of the Northwest India in the 4th -6th century CE, are argued in the paper to have facilitated Indo-Sasanian interaction along the overland routes. Based on the epigraphic and archaeological evidence, the proposed paper aims to reflect upon the multi-layered as well as multi-directional interactions between early India and Sasanian Persia in Late Antiquity.

Ashish Kumar is an Assistant Professor of History in Panjab University, Chandigarh (India). His area of research includes themes on the history of Gupta empire and the Indo-Sasanian interaction. His book, *Beyond Borders: Indo-Sasanian Trade and Its Central Indian Connections (Circa CE 300-700)* is published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2023.

Judith A. Lerner

Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University

Zoroastrianism (i.e., Mazdaism) Among the Sogdians

Zoroastrianism among the Sogdians—a Central Asian people occupying mainly what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—is best described as Mazdaism, after Ahura Mazdā (the “All-Knowing Lord”), known to the Sogdians as Adhvagh (𐬀𐬚𐬅𐬀𐬎). By this name, he was sometimes associated with the Indian deity, Indra, an indication of the religious and cultural syncretism characteristic of Sogdian society. This syncretism was due, at least in part, to the social and economic structure of Sogdiana, which consisted primarily of city-states, in contrast to the centralized monarchal rule of Sasanian Iran. Although originally an agricultural society, by the fourth century CE the Sogdians had formed trading networks that reached as far east into China, where they established colonies and enclaves, as well as south into the Indian subcontinent. Archaeological finds of ossuaries and wall-paintings in Central Asia, and of other funerary remains discovered in China offer a well-rounded view of Sogdian Mazdaism.

Judith A. Lerner is a Research Associate at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (NYU), focusing on the visual cultures and religions of Sasanian Iran and Sogdian Central Asia. Her major interests are Sasanian and related societies’ glyptic art and the Mazdaism of the Sogdians living in China as expressed through their funerary furnishings.

Sarah Stewart
SOAS, BIPS

Zoroastrian Religious Ideas: from Iran to India

This paper will discuss the ways in which Zoroastrian religious ideas were transmitted between Iran and India and how they developed on Indian soil following the migrations of Zoroastrians from Iran. These ideas and traditions reflected the evolving needs of the diaspora community as they negotiated the challenges of forging a new identity. Parsis' minority status shifted from being strictly religious to encompassing both religious and ethnic dimensions in their adopted country. At the same time, they maintained a powerful connection to Iran, which they continued to view as their homeland. Transmission occurred in various ways, by word of mouth and via literature: religious, epic and poetic, examples of which are considered here in the Pahlavi, Persian and Gujarati languages. They vary between those that belong to the realms of legend or myth and bear the hallmarks of starting as oral compositions, and those that can be considered historical because they relate to documented events.

Sarah Stewart is reader Emeritus at SOAS, where she taught Zoroastrianism in the Department of Religions and Philosophies. She was co-founder of the SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies in 2017. Her publications include *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran*, Vols. 1 and 2 (2018, 2020) and *The Zoroastrian World* (2026).

Burzine Waghmar
SOAS

The Persian and Indian Oikumenes After the Conquests

Following the Sasanian collapse, the Zoroastrian community transitioned from imperial hegemony to a fragmented minority, resisting Islamic dominance through intellectual and literary agency. Early Muslim jurists ambivalently classified them as majus — granting a subordinated dhimmi status — as 9th- and 10th-century Zoroastrian savants produced extensive Middle Persian Pahlavi literature (zand) to preserve their endangered heritage. This legal designation imposed fiscal burdens via the jizya while codifying a precarious, subordinated religious autonomy. Conversely, migratory factions establishing the Parsi diaspora in Western India encountered an entirely different legal paradigm. It was the Mazdean precedent of post-Sasanian Iran that was replicated in the Arab conquest of Sind towards accommodating Buddhists and Hindus as dhimmis and scriptuaries. Dual trajectories of the Zoroastrian diaspora and domestic communities within the changing Iranian and Indian socio-political landscapes enabled them to maintain an interconnected cultural and religious sphere across the Arabian Sea, adapting to Islamic rule and Indian pluralism.

Burzine Waghmar is the Arts & Humanities Lead Librarian and member of the Centre for Iranian Studies and SOAS South Asia Institute. Previously there he was also editor of the Circle of Inner Asian Art newsletter; and senior teaching fellow in Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati and Pashto.

Rukshana J Nanji

Independent researcher based in Pune

The Sanjan Saga: a chronology in ceramics

The Qisse-i-Sanjan remains the most important textual documentation of the migration of Zoroastrian Persians to the Indian shores after the fall of the Sasanian empire. Archaeological excavations over three years at the site of Sanjan provided ample evidence of a thriving maritime settlement. The find of an early Dakhma or Tower of Silence with human remains provided evidence of the considerable Zoroastrian presence at this site. However it was the ceramic evidence that not only helped establish the chronology but also provided a narrative for the nature of the settlement, its intense contacts with West Asia and its eventual decline. The ceramic assemblage consisted of West Asian, Chinese and indigenous wares, providing insights into the contacts between Sanjan its chronology, and its emergence and decline. An evaluation of the archaeological data in light of the Qisse-i-Sanjan narrative provides several insights into the settlement at Sanjan.

Rukshana Nanji is an archaeologist and ceramicist with a specialisation in Early Medieval ceramics. She has excavated numerous sites in India and has presented her work at international and national conferences. Her published doctoral thesis was on ceramics at Sanjan. She works as an independent researcher based in Pune.

Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis

BIPS, BM

Zoroastrianism and the Art of Arsacid Parthia and Persis

While there is no question about the connection between Zoroastrianism and Sasanian art, the same cannot be said about the art of Arsacid Parthia. Because of the chronological sequence in the history of ancient Iran and the rise of the Parthians immediately after the Hellenistic rule of the Macedonian Seleucids, their use of Greek writing and the lack of direct references in the few Parthian texts, scholars tend to dismiss the role of Zoroastrianism in the Parthian period. Yet, secondary Greek sources, later religious scriptures and the dating of some texts to the Parthian period, suggest that we should not dismiss the impact of Zoroastrianism on Parthian art and culture. In addition, there is clear evidence from Persis with its Zoroastrian-inspired art and iconography.

Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis is Curator Emerita of Middle Eastern Coins, The British Museum, Joint Director of the International Parthian Coin Project, the Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum , Senior Advisor of the SOAS Shapourji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies, and she is Vice-President of the of the British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS).

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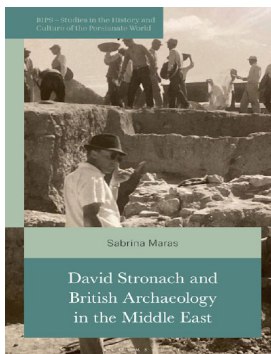
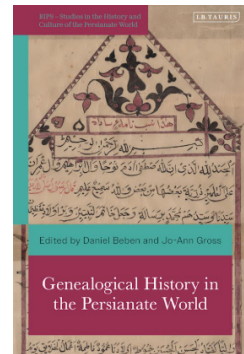
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Genealogical History in the Persianate World. Edited by Jo-Ann Gross and Daniel Beben. Published: June 2025.

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David Stronach and British Archaeology in the Middle East. By Sabrina Maras. Published: June 2026.

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