



We are pleased to announce the next Friends of the Kern Institute lecture:

From Cremation Ground to Temple Niche: The Evolution of the Fierce Goddess in Medieval India

by dr. Sandra Sattler, J. Gonda Fellow at IIAS

Date : Friday, March 21, 2025

Time : 16.00h

Venue : Leiden University, Herta Mohr Building, room 0.16. The lecture will be followed by **drinks** in the LIAS common room of the same Herta Mohr Building (first floor).



Cāmuṇḍā, north-facing cardinal niche, Ghaṭeśvara Mahādeva temple, Baroli, Rajasthan, 10th century

Abstract

Between the 8th and 12th century, an independent, skeletal goddess—often dancing or seated on a corpse while wielding transgressive attributes such as a skull-topped staff and severed head—emerged as a central figure in North Indian temples. Identified as Kālī or Cāmuṇḍā, she embodies one of Hinduism's fiercest emanations within Śaiva and Śākta traditions.

This lecture traces the evolution of the Fierce Goddess in medieval India, focusing on her iconography, architectural placement, and Purāṇic identity. Through case studies, it explores how royal, sectarian, and cross-regional traditions shaped her rise into a pan-Indian pantheon. Building on this broader scope, the talk addresses temple semiotics to explore recurring programmatic patterns across a wide region that reflect shared visual, theological, and mythological frameworks. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, it demonstrates how the Fierce Goddess was conceptualised and integrated into the temple landscape, offering new insights into Śākta art and the structuring of sacred space in medieval South Asia.

Sandra Sattler

Sandra Sattler is currently a J. Gonda Fellow at IIAS, Leiden University, and a Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS, where she convenes courses on Buddhist and Indian Art for the Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art. Her PhD (SOAS, 2024) focused on the Goddess Cāmuṇḍā in medieval North Indian temples and Purāṇic literature. Previously, she worked as a Curator of Medieval to Modern South Asian Art at the British Museum. Her research primarily explores the visual and literary history of Hindu goddesses in medieval South Asia.