The Mohini Jain Presidential Chair in Jain Studies Inaugural Lecture Series

What a Comparison of the Early Accounts of Mahāvīra’s Renunciation can tell us about Jaina Religious History

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Schubring 1935 § 17: 31 writes: “For our knowledge of Mahāvīra’s personality we have as ancient coherent sources the Uvahānasuya Āyār. 19, then Āyār. II 15 (the Bhāvanā) and basing upon it Jīnaç. 1-148, finally Āv. 458ff. A number of detailed traits is rendered by Vṛy. “The comparison of depictions of Mahāvīra’s nikākhamana in Āyāra ii.15, Jīナcārya 94, 110-116 and Āvassaya-nījijuti 458ff. demonstrates, amongst other things, that the oldest surviving narratives on Mahāvīra’s renunciation appear to be altogether retrospective constructions of late-canonical origin based on fluid legendary accounts rather than on corroborated facts. In regard to the degree of completeness of the life-story a rearrangement of the hypothetical sequence of the three main accounts of Mahāvīra’s in the form ĀvN, Āyāra, and JīNaçārya is justified. A full life-story of Mahāvīra, including the arrangements of his funeral, can only be found in much later texts, such as Hemacandra’s Trīṣṭiṭsalākāpuraṇasacaritra, a fact which supports the hypothesis. Further conclusions can be drawn from the divergent depictions of Mahāvīra’s renunciation in the old texts and comparison with subsequent Jaina ceremonies of ordination.

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