

Early Buddhist History in Architecture before Sui Dynasty

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Abstract : During the Eastern Han to Three Kingdoms period, Buddhism had not yet received comprehensive support from the ruling class, and its dissemination remained relatively limited. Based on existing evidence, Buddhist architecture was primarily concentrated in regions central to scripture translation and cultural exchange with the Western Regions, such as Luoyang, Pengcheng, and Guangling. The earliest Buddhist structures largely adhered to the traditional forms of ancient Indian architecture. The frequent wars of the late Western Jin and Sixteen Kingdoms periods compelled the Central Plains culture to interact with other civilizations. As a result, Buddhist architecture gradually integrated characteristics of Central Asian, ancient Indian, and native Chinese styles. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Buddhism gained formal support from rulers, leading to the establishment of numerous temples across the Central Plains. The prevalence of warfare, combined with the emergence of Wei-Jin reclusive thought and Buddhism's own ascetic philosophy, gave rise to mountain temples. Additionally, the eastward spread of rock-cut cave architecture along the Silk Road accelerated the development of such mountain temples. Temple layouts also became increasingly complex with the deeper translation of Buddhist scriptures and the influence of traditional Chinese architectural concepts. From the earliest temples, where the only Buddhist structure was the temple itself, to layouts centered on the stupa with a "front stupa, rear hall" arrangement, and finally to Mahavira Halls becoming the sacred focal point, temple design evolved significantly. The grand halls eventually matched the scale of the central halls in imperial palaces, reflecting the growing deification of the Buddha in the public imagination. The multi-storied wooden pagoda exemplifies Buddhism's remarkable adaptability during its early introduction to the Central Plains, while the dense-eaved pagoda represents a synthesis of Gandharan stupas, Central Asian temple shrines, ancient Indian devalaya, and Chinese multi-storied pavilions. This form demonstrates Buddhism's ability to absorb features from diverse cultures during its dissemination. Through its continuous interaction with various cultures, Buddhist architecture achieved sustained development in both form and meaning, laying a solid foundation for the establishment and growth of Buddhism across different regions.

Keywords : Buddhism, buddhist architecture, pagoda, temple, South Asian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism

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