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David Cornélius Andolfatto

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Recent publications on central Himalayan arts and architecture: a review essay

David C. Andolfatto
Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris
Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg

Books reviewed:
La Statuaire Primitive de l'Ouest du Népal. The Primitive Statuary of Western Nepal, by Jean-Luc Cortes & Jean-Claude Brézillon. Paris: Éditions Héritage Architectural. 2011, 427 pp., 295 colour illustrations, ISBN 978-291509-614-9.

Heritage of Western Nepal: Art and Architecture, by Dilli Raj Sharma. Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies. 2012, 395 pp., 200 black and white illustrations, ISBN 978-993-752443-8.

Mountain Temples & Temple Mountains: Architecture, Religion, and Nature in the Central Himalayas, by Nachiket Chanchani. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2019, 288 pp., 80 colour illustrations, ISBN 978-0-2957-4451-3.

This review essay presents three publications on central Himalayan arts and architecture. Published over the past decade, they constitute the most recent works on the subject. It is worth noting here that central Himalayan material cultures have so far received limited attention from scholars. This situation is in stark contrast with the amount of research devoted to nearby regions, such as the Kathmandu Valley, Himachal Pradesh or Ladakh, to cite a few. It also contrasts with the valuable and more numerous studies on the area's history and religious anthropology.[1]

The recent publication of Chanchani's *Mountain Temples & Temple Mountains* triggered my interest in reviewing it together with Jean-Luc Cortes and Jean-Claude Brézillon's *The Primitive Statuary of Western Nepal*

1 See for instance, Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a and 2009b, Pant 2009, Joshi 2009 and Childs 2012.

(2011) and Dilli Raj Sharma's *Heritage of Western Nepal: Art and Architecture* (2012). The main reason for bringing these titles together in a joint analysis is that they have so far attracted no attention or reviews. Given the scarcity of books on the topic, I took the opportunity offered to me by the editors of this journal to fill this void and, I hope, to stimulate interest and further discussion.

These works focus on central Himalayan art and architecture, and each of them addresses this broad but largely overlooked topic from a unique perspective. Chanchani's and Sharma's studies deal with the medieval heritage of neighbouring areas, respectively the Indian state of Uttarakhand and the western and far-western regions of Nepal. On the other hand, Cortes and Brézillon's book stands out because it looks into the tradition of the so-called 'primitive' statuary of the Karnali Basin (western Nepal). Due to the nature of these sculptures, habitually made of wood, the period covered in this book goes back no further than two centuries.

Two issues may immediately emerge here and, since this essay is about the central Himalayas' past, it is worth seizing this opportunity to address them. Firstly, note the use of the Western historiographic concept of 'medieval'. As noted by Bryan J. Cuevas in the context of Tibetan studies, 'there has been no open discussion among Tibetanists, and thus little consensus, about the precise dating of the "medieval" period in Tibetan history or even what we should accept as the key defining characteristics of "medieval" Tibetan society' (Cuevas 2006).[2] This is also the case with central Himalayan studies, where scholars have similarly incorporated large sections of proto-historic and historic periods into this broad chronological window. Besides obvious indications regarding the historiographic organisation, mental constructions and ideological connotations, resorting to the term 'medieval' highlights the general lack of data. Moreover, archæological excavations are almost inexistent in the given regions of western Nepal and in Uttarakhand. However, inscriptions on rocks or metal supports are extant, their scattered presence in the expansive and complex landscape aptly illustrated by the uneven, scattered mention of them in publications.

An obvious difficulty lies in the naming and the phasing of historical

2 I am grateful to Yannick Laurent for bringing my attention to this important question.

periods, a topic that has kept a certain number of scholars busy since Antiquity. In Europe, Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) was the first to coin the term 'Middle Ages' (*media ætas*), defined as an obscure period supposedly succeeded by a new era of intellectual wisdom driven by the Humanists, and subsequently called the Renaissance. The central Himalayas were marked by historical, technological and intellectual events that are distinct from the rest of the South Asian subcontinent. Moreover, little is known of these events. This is enough to make the use of an already much-debated European terminology problematic. Nevertheless, the European term 'medieval' has, to some extent, been consistently applied to the periodisation of Nepalese and Indian history. In Indian historiography, it was generally conceived as part of the traditional triad: 'Ancient', 'Medieval' and 'Modern', corresponding to 'three major periods, Hindu, Muslim and British' (Thapar 2015 [2002]: 18). In Nepal, Dilli Raman Regmi (2007 [1965]) adopted an identical terminology, though for different reasons and with slight chronological differences. Luciano Petech (1984) also used the term 'medieval' but adhered to Mary S. Slusser's dynastic subdivisions: hence the late Licchavi, the transitional (or Thakuri) and Malla periods (Slusser 1982). While these eras can seemingly be adapted to the study of the Kathmandu Valley, they become complicated as soon as one deals with the rest of the country. The central Himalayan region in particular witnessed the emergence of other dynasties, such as the Katyūrīs, the Chands and the Khaśa Mallas, to cite the most famous ones. Unfortunately, as noted above and despite the efforts of researchers, our understanding of these dynasties, their history and the exact extent of their territories remains uncertain. Generally speaking, the material elements at our disposal in this context are the (for the most part, religious) monuments, sculptures and the inscriptions visible above ground. The subsoil remains largely unexplored.

Thus, when contemplating a varying regional history, the term 'medieval' constitutes a convenient (yet temporary and arbitrary) label, though its use is subject to certain provisos. In the present situation, the medieval period could be roughly situated between the middle of the first millennium CE and the late eighteenth – early nineteenth century (the terminus corresponds to the annexation of today's western Nepal and Uttarkhand to the Gorkha dominion). This is a mere working concept,

mainly inspired by Jacques Le Goff's idea of a 'long [European] Middle Age' (Le Goff 2014) and leads us to the second issue in this preamble.

An objection may indeed be raised that the 'primitive statuary' dealt with in Cortes and Brézillon's book is, for chronological reasons, not related to the medieval heritage of western Nepal. This very interesting debate needs to be built on a holistic approach using in-depth field research. It is nevertheless tempting to question whether the so-called 'tribal', 'archaic' or 'primitive' sculptures so far found in this region are inherited from 'medieval' artistic idioms and, if so, to what extent. An *in-situ* approach in the Jumla district of western Nepal reveals that medieval decorative patterns have been used and transformed over time, and that this process continues today (Andolfatto 2019). Still in western Nepal, I was fortunate to be able to procure the result of radiocarbon dating of a 'tribal' wooden sculpture from this region. The results dated it between 1446 CE and 1635 CE (calibrated), thus making the study of such artefacts an essential component of Himalayan historical research.[3]

Let us bear in mind that the objects presented by Cortes and Brézillon cannot be taken as direct – formal and functional – continuations of medieval art. Such a reasoning would throw us back into the maze of outdated and dangerous ethnographic comparativism (Georget et al). This said, I believe that the cautious study of 'primitive statuary' can provide valuable insights and clues about past artistic traditions, especially in a context where there is little material data.

I have already mentioned the rare and scattered research on central Himalayan history. This statement should not undermine valuable works published prior to the books reviewed here, and notably the volume *Bards and Mediums: History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, edited in 2009 by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine. This opus contains research of great value for our understanding of the region and provides learned reappraisals of historical documents.[4] Unfortunately, one cannot but

3 Sculpture of a character praying, from a private collection in Paris, see Andolfatto 2020.

4 A good example of the book's contribution is the study of inscriptions from the Karnali region by Mahes Raj Pant. Pant (2009: 295–297) reviews inscriptions such as the 1223 CE Baleshwar inscription of Krā Calla. This inscription, now lost, was first translated by E. T. Atkinson (1884) and later published by others who strangely gave different translations containing key information that was absent from the original text; namely that the copperplate and conquest of Kartipura (Kartṛpura, in Kumaon, capital

help remarking that, besides Chanchani, no other author presented here mentions this key publication.

The book by Cortes and Brézillon, *La Statuaire Primitive de l'Ouest du Népal. The Primitive Statuary of Western Nepal*, is a bilingual (French and English) publication.[5] With dual texts and its large coffee-table layout, it is the most voluminous of the three titles presented here. The authors themselves make it clear that the book does not claim to be an academic work but instead offers a personal point of view of western Nepal's statuary (p. 16). This point of view and the information provided in the publication are largely based on Jean-Luc Cortes's travels in the region of the Karnali river basin. The region, and especially Jumla district, is famed for its sculptural tradition that is visible on different supports: wooden bridges, vernacular temples and votive sculptures.

A series of short prefaces and notes by the ambassador of France to Nepal at the time and two gallerists and collectors come after the authors' Foreword.

The first part of the book, titled 'Himalayan complexity' (p. 56–72), reminds the reader of how the fine arts of the Kathmandu Valley came to be metonymically regarded as the arts of Nepal. This attitude, conveyed by Westerners and the Nepalese alike, led many authors to qualify objects of lesser elaborate craftsmanship as 'jungle art'. The disdain for 'non-classical' and, in a way, for non-Newari art forms and aesthetics, is accompanied by a lack of information regarding the iconographies, uses, purposes and geographical origins of objects. The latter are now found in an alarming number in curio shops in Kathmandu. Disconnected from their original context, most sculptures representing figures praying (*añjali mudrā*) have been wrongfully labelled 'fountain keepers' or

of the Katyūrī kingdom) date back to the sixteenth year of Krā Calla's reign. As noted by Pant, the original text published by Atkinson does not contain this information, which led previous authors to situate Krā Calla erroneously as early as 1207 CE. See also Joshi (2009: 335–338) for a full translation of the inscription.

5 To better understand this editorial choice, it is essential to recall that most publications on the subject of 'non-classical' ('primitive', 'tribal' etc) Himalayan art have so far been published in French and produced by French or French-speaking collectors, art dealers and by a few CNRS researchers. See Petit 1995, 2006, Pannier 2007, Krauskopff and Goy 2009, Krauskopff and Dollfus 2014.

'spring spirits' by those who sell them in Nepal. As very few collectors and scholars have bothered to visit the Karnali region to evaluate the sculptures' actual context, this identification is still used today at many auction sales.

Here the authors describe the roles of two key religious specialists of Nepal: the *dhāmi* and the *jhaṅkri*. Following Daniela Berti's observation of similitudes between mediums of the Karnali region (the *dhāmis*) and those of the Kullu Valley (the *gurs*), Cortes and Brézillon propose that *dhāmis* are specific to the Khaśa community that allegedly migrated there from present-day Uttarakhand (p. 64–66).[6] When not placed in houses, 'primitive' sculptures of western Nepal are often found in the vestibules of temples used by *dhāmis* for oracular consultations. The authors question whether these images are also of Khaśa origin. They observe their absence from the artistic landscape of the Kullu Valley and therefore conclude that they are most likely a borrowing or an inheritance from the Magar tradition. Here Magars are considered to be one of the branches of the Kirati tribe that populated western Nepal before the arrival of the Khaśas. This Khaśa migration is still difficult to situate in time. Although no material evidence exists at this point in time, it may be suggested that this process took place around the middle of the first millennium CE.[7] Given the relative scarcity of archæological data pertaining to population processes in the central Himalayas, one can understand Cortes and Brézillon's prudence and deductive reasoning. The assumption that the Karnali statuary is of Magar origin requires further research, but it certainly stands as a good working hypothesis since, as they authors note, similar images are found to the east of the Karnali River and, as far as I know, not to the west of the Mahakali River.[8] A limit to this reasoning is that these images may exist west of

6 This had already been highlighted in Gabriel Campbell's thesis on Jumla's oracular religion (Campbell 1978).

7 Maheshwar P. Joshi considers that 'the theory of a large-scale migration of the Khaśas to Kumaon and Garhwal region is unfounded' (Joshi 1990: 199). He nevertheless estimates that the arrival of Khaśas on the Indian subcontinent (from Central Asia) cannot be earlier than the first century BCE (Joshi 1990: 197). It remains impossible to ascertain this claim for various reasons: mainly the lack of archæological data and, as a corollary, attempting to define the proto-historical material culture of ethnic groups known only from historical or mythological literature represents a real methodological challenge.

8 On pre-Khaśa occupation of western Nepal by Tibeto-Burmese groups see Witzel 1993.

the Mahakali River but have never been published. Cortes and Brézillon go on to suggest that Khaśa migrants adopted the artistic idioms from the region newly controlled by them and integrated them into their religious practices (p. 70). This was done once 'their military superiority was established' (p. 70). This statement infers that 'permanent migration' took place over a short period of time and that the pull factor for Khaśa populations would have been the availability of new land. In the religious sphere, this would have been manifested by the replacement of 'shamans' (*jhañkri*-s) by *dhāmi* mediums (p. 82). It is so far impossible to determine exactly when and how the Khaśas settled in western Nepal. I am personally inclined to believe that it was a continuous process that might have occasionally benefited from military forays rather than a historical event for which we have no actual evidence.[9]

The next section, 'The Statuary', is the most descriptive part of the book. In it the authors carefully describe the various characteristics of the sculptures encountered by Cortes during his field trips. With very few exceptions, all the selected sculptures are figurative. They are described in terms of position (standing, squatting etc), proportions and dimensions, gestures, attributes, and so on. Their different functions and uses are then listed, as well as the materials in which they are executed (metal, stone and wood). Because of the longevity of the material, the stone sculptures are considered to potentially predate the wooden ones (p. 152–156). Future archæological excavations will surely confirm their antiquity. Cortes and Brézillon then try to demarcate regional styles found in the statuary (p. 164–177). This exercise fails to convince because these regional stylistic features seem to have been elaborated on artefacts that are disconnected from their original location, thus suggesting that the authors tried to make sense of information provided by Kathmandu art dealers. Throughout the book, only the sculptures from Jumla district are presented in their original context.

The following part, 'The statues and their context', takes up information published by previous authors (especially Gaborieau 1969) and includes personal observations from Cortes's own experience in the Karnali region. This part focuses on mediums' performances that take place at sanctuaries (where numerous sculptures are to be found)

9 For the study of trans-Himalayan migration patterns, see Childs 2012.

during the main full-moon festivals. Observations are made concerning practices in Jumla district. Since there are no clear indications of where the events take place, the reader may be led to think that possession rituals are executed in the same way throughout western Nepal, or at least in the Karnali river basin. However, this is not the case. Indeed, the oracular seances described in this part are specific to the Jumla area and differ from those of neighbouring Dailekh, Dolpa and Jajarkot districts. This therefore attests to the contextualisation of images from Jumla but cannot be regarded as a standard rule for other regions.

Cortes then discloses his 'Traveling impressions' and provides a short note on 'The effigies', where he gives his personal views on the aesthetics of western Nepal's statuary. After these few pages is a catalogue of 109 sculptures from private Western collections. One might regret that the sculptures are not presented district by district, which would facilitate our understanding of regional styles as the authors describe them. The book closes on another note, with the authors expressing their concerns about the ongoing risk of endangering the cultural fabric of western Nepal (modernisation, evangelical proselytising etc).

Before outlining some concluding remarks, it is important to mention the publisher's rather poor choices regarding the book's layout: the format is very basic and the different parts of the book are not clearly distinct from each other.

With *The Primitive Statuary of Western Nepal*, Cortes and Brézillon deliver an aesthete's documented view of this art, which had so far only been given within the comfort of collectors' cabinets. More work needs to be done on the fabrication process of sculptures, and this can only be done by providing the artists responsible for their creation with more space. Their participation in research will no doubt confirm some theories. Likewise, a study founded on emic views will surely relegate many other theories to the crowded cemetery of interpretative fantasies. This book is probably the first of its kind to attempt a much-needed contextualisation of objects. The authors try to put into perspective the chronology of the relatively recent 'primitive' wooden sculptures with the medieval remains visible in the same region. Although no definitive answer is provided regarding the history and sociocultural threads connecting these idioms, one cannot but welcome this attempt.

Despite the publisher's note that Dilli Raj Sharma's *Heritage of Western*

Nepal: Art and Architecture 'will be useful for researchers; teachers; students and all who are interested in this field' (p. i), it has received no attention from the academic world. The main reason is that the area and the topic itself have drawn little scholarly attention, at least since 2010.

Sharma's work opens with a general presentation of the geographical, historical, religious and historiographic setting of western Nepal. The book then deals with four administrative zones: Bheri (Dailekh, Surkhet and Bardiya districts), Karnali (Jumla, Mugu, Kalikot, Dolpa and Humla districts), Seti (Achham, Bajhang, Doti and Bajura districts) and Mahakali (Dadeldhura, Baitadi and Darchula districts).[10] A chapter is devoted to each of these zones and is divided into two parts marked 'Phase 1' and 'Phase 2'.

Before turning to the information in these chapters, it is important to discuss both the phases in question and Sharma's presentation of the region's history. The first of these is covered in the space of five pages, while the historiography of the study of art and archæology in Nepal extends over thirteen pages, which are irrelevant to the topic (Ch. 2). This unbalanced situation, which is regrettable given the topic of the book, is matched by a profusion of chronological inanities. According to Sharma, the early history of the area can be traced back to the sixth century on the basis of Lichhavi characters inscribed on *tsha tshas* (moulded clay tablets) recovered from a cave in Sinja (Jumla district, p. 8). This statement by a Nepali scholar is wide of the mark since the inscriptions on these objects, which are ascribable to the twelfth–fourteenth centuries, are clearly in Nāgarī script, not in an early Gupta-related script such as Lichhavi. Sharma goes on to state that the 'region's chronological history starts when the Mallas began to reign over the region during the latter half of the 11th century A.D.' (p. 9). The author obviously ignored previous research by Prayag Raj Sharma (1972) and Surya Mani Adhikary (1997 [1988]), who rightfully situated Nāgarāja, the founder of the Khaśa Malla Empire, at the beginning of the twelfth century. D. R. Sharma's confusion about the chronology of this political entity is obvious. It is exemplified by his interpretation of the famous standing Buddha from the Cleveland Museum of Fine Art (Inv. No. 66.30). The bronze sculpture bears an inscription stating that it is the 'personal image of Lha-btsun Nāgarāja'

10 In conformity with the 2015 Constitution of Nepal, these zones have been rescheduled and are currently part of Karnali Pradesh and Sudurpaschim Pradesh.

but gives no date. Sharma surmises that it was made in the year 1000 CE and that this Nāgarāja is the Khaśa Malla ruler. This contradicts both the author's assertion that the (Khaśa) Mallas started ruling in the second half of the eleventh century and the fact that Nāgarāja is a popular name found in various western Tibetan lineages of the time and most likely refers, in this case, to one of Yeshe O's two sons,[11] who was active between c. 998 and 1046 (Klimburg-Salter 1982: 103, Petech 1997: 235, von Schroeder 2001: 84, 86). These chronological inconsistencies lead to the affirmation that the Khaśa Mallas 'ruled for nearly five hundred years' (p. 11), an untenable statement since the last Khaśa Malla lord ruled over a much-reduced territory up until the 1390s (Andolfatto 2019: 64). Indeed, even if we were to accept the author's claim that the Khaśa Malla Nāgarāja lived in 1000 CE, the total duration of the dynasty's reign would still not amount to five centuries.

One then wonders what 'Phase 1' and 'Phase 2' correspond to. Though the author does not clearly define them, a clue is given in the short section devoted to religion: 'The second phase from 12th century to 15th century A.D. is the time of heyday of Malla rulers under whose inspiration a favourable situation was created for the development of arts in their large territory' (p. 12). The reader is thus left to guess that the first phase corresponds to the pre-Khaśa Malla period.

The content of the chapters devoted to the art and architecture of western Nepal is more descriptive than analytical. Sharma describes monuments and sculptures with varying degrees of detail. It appears that in some cases the author did not visit the sites himself but relied on reports made by others. This is evidenced by the unequal quality of the many pictures reproduced in the volume and by several inaccuracies. For instance, a stone fountain from Bhambada, in Mugu district, is said to display 'beautiful carvings' (p. 195). Having surveyed this monument myself, I could not find any specific carvings on it. Sharma also reproduced editorial mistakes published in P. R. Sharma's 1972 study: he locates the site of a *pañcadeval* (a complex of five śikhara temples) in Ukhadi (Jumla district) on the basis of a picture whose caption was interchanged (by the publishers?) with the one for Ukhadi's sole temple (Sharma 1972: Pl. V). This *pañcadeval* is in fact located in Manma, in the nearby district

11 Lha Lama Yeshe O ruled over the Kingdom of Guge at the end of the tenth century.

of Kalikot. This is a crucial element since *pañcadevals* are only found in areas controlled by the Raskoṭi kings, who replaced the Khaśa Mallas in about the 1370s. The former's territory did not cover Jumla district (or only during the last decades of the fourteenth century), where power was in the hands of the Kalyal dynasty and where no *pañcadevals* were to be found. This geographic distribution corroborates the idea that *pañcadevals* were subsequent to the Khaśa Malla era, hence suggesting, despite claims by most authors,[12] that artistic and architectural activities did not cease or decline in quality with the fall of the western Mallas (Andolfatto 2019: 85–93).

This recurring idea that the Khaśa Mallas created a favourable economic and cultural environment and allowed the arts to develop and that their disappearance from the political scene is responsible for artistic decay, can be explained by a methodological lacuna observed in most works. None of the authors preceding D.R. Sharma adopted a chrono-typological approach to the region's artistic and architectural productions. Sharma provides the embryo of a chronological approach to archæological vestiges but his work remains incomplete, partly because of the structure of the book, which is primarily organised by region. Nothing is said of the Khaśa Mallas' successors, yet a careful study reveals that the construction of a certain number of temples and stūpas can in fact be attributed to them. For instance, the *deval* (the term locally used when referring to śikhara monuments) temple in Ukhadi (Jumla district) bears the date Śaka era 1408 (1486 CE). In the same district, contemporary inscriptions on a group of thirteen caityas from Michagaon bear the dates Śaka 1404 and 1423 (respectively 1482 and 1501 CE). Sharma makes no use of these important pieces of evidence when mentioning the inscriptions (p. 183–184).

These remarks should not diminish the value of Sharma's publication. I started my PhD research on the subject in 2013 and Sharma's book became the main resource on which I relied to prepare my field surveys (the task was complicated by the absence of maps to locate the sites). The opus does not contain all the heritage sites, but it does provide a very satisfying list of the most significant ones on which to build further investigations. Moreover, the author dedicates a significant number

12 See for instance Sharma 1972 and Pandey 1997.

of pages (p. 129–166) to the iconographic study of the circa-twelfth-century Buddhist temple of Kakrevihar (Surkhet district). He accurately identifies the Jātaka scenes on the façade of this unique monument. As it was still in a state of ruin until the years 2012–2014, when Nepal's Department of Archæology launched its reconstruction, it was no doubt difficult for the author to make sense of the temple's original architecture from its scattered ruins. Nevertheless, the large quantity of śikhara (tower) pinnacles recovered from the site indicates that it was built in the śekhari śikhara style. This type of architecture is also found at Gujjar Deva (Dwarahat, Uttarakhand) and, as demonstrated by Nachiket Chanchani (*infra*), marks the presence of architects and artists belonging to the Māru-Gurjara school of western India.

The Indian state of Uttarkhand is dotted with numerous pilgrimage sites of major importance for Hindus from all over the subcontinent. In *Mountain Temples & Temple Mountains: Architecture, Religion, and Nature in the Central Himalayas*, Nachiket Chanchani investigates the significance and antiquity of these places that are indicated by the presence of stone temples whose vertical, pointed pinnacles somehow evoke the surrounding mountains. Nachiket Chanchani's book sets out to investigate how the region developed as a 'land of the gods (*deva bhūmi*)', which has so far attracted a regular flow of devotees and an increasing number of tourists. This endeavour is more than necessary because, until recently and despite many scholars' attempts to date and historically contextualise these monuments, our knowledge of this subject was limited, contradictory and often based on mere suppositions. As mentioned by Chanchani, a well-known reason to explain this frustrating situation is the scarcity of epigraphic data. To tackle this lacuna the author begins by considering the central Himalayas from an outsiders' perspective and especially that of poets attached to different courts of the Indo-Gangetic dynasties.

The first chapter discusses the way these mountainous lands are mentioned in literature, how they were perceived and how legendary characters such as the Pāṇḍavas travelled across them. These elements are considered in view of the meagre historical and archæological data available. In this regard, third-century-BCE Aśokan edicts carved on a

boulder at Kalsi are studied in the context of their geographical location in the Himalayan foothills. Likewise, sculptures found in Kalsi and in Rishikesh are used by the author to confirm connections between the region and other cultural centres in the Indo-Gangetic plains such as Mathura, from as early as the Kūsān period. The selected examples thus illustrate the 'progressive exaltation of this landscape' and demonstrate the idea of a 'political and religious conquest of the front and middle ridges of the Central Himalayas' (p. 44).

The second chapter dwells on the early architectural phase that took place in the central Himalayas between the fifth and the seventh century. The author postulates that fifth-century temples such as those at Udayagiri and Nachna (Madhya Pradesh) are architectural allegories of mountains or grottoes. 'Temple Hinduism' developed under the Guptas, yet Chanchani describes how, in the central Himalayas during the post-Gupta period, deities turned into 'gendered and juridical beings' and were worshipped in temples. The latter process is illustrated by the discovery of brick monuments such as the sixth-century temple in Koteshwar (Rudraparayag district, Uttarakhand). The earliest stone temples date back to the seventh century (Palethi, Tehri Garhwal district, Uttarakhand). It is in this environment of religious, architectural and literary emulation centred on the image of the Himalayas and their divine population that, between the sixth and seventh centuries, rulers from the plains turned their attention towards the central Himalayas. Inscriptions from this period record land donations, which are considered by the author as indicators of agricultural intensification.

Chapter three focuses on the temple complex of Jageshwar in Kumaon. This part reveals the role of Pāśupatas in the development of central Himalayan religious sites from the seventh century onwards.[13] By doing so, Chanchani challenges legendary accounts (vehiculated by local oral traditions) of Śaṅkarācārya's visit to Jageshwar and his destruction of pre-existing Buddhist monuments (p. 87). As in previous chapters, the historical discourse is punctuated and brilliantly illustrated by references to religious (puranic) texts and to the poetry of the time. These

13 This topic was covered in an article by Maheshwar P. Joshi (1989), absent from Chanchani's bibliography. The role of Pāśupatas has also been prominent in the development of Kathmandu's Pashupatinath temple since at least the seventh century. See Mirning 2016.

references reveal the importance of the landscape and its perception by recently established Himalayan powers (mainly Kumaon's Katyūris, successors of the Kuṇindas), local inhabitants, wandering artisans and ascetics. Thus, classical narratives allow the author to take the reader through the formative phase of central Himalayan architecture and art. However, more importantly, it is the birth of the region as a place of generative mythology that is presented here. Chanchani further argues that it is in about the tenth century (after the development of Jageshwar in the eighth and ninth centuries under the leadership of Pāśupatas) that lay householders and regional rulers took on more importance (if not the lead) in the expansion of the site.

The following chapter discusses the site of Pandukeshwar (Rudraprayag district, Uttarakhand) nested in the mountains dominating the Vishnu Ganga River and located on the way to Badrinath. The focus on Pandukeshwar is more than justified by the idiosyncrasies of its ninth–to–tenth-century architectural setting that brings together southern Indian Dravida temple architecture and northern Indian Nāgara architecture. Here Chanchani rightly questions how these models from South India came to be built in such a remote Himalayan valley. This southern presence is also visible in metal images such as the Nārāyaṇa metal sculpture kept in one of Pandukeshwar's temples. Different hypotheses have been formulated, each plausible and all involving people's movement from the Himalayas to South India and vice versa. The claim that Pandukeshwar's location on the route leading to the Kailash and Manasarovar area of southwestern Tibet could partly explain the site's architectural development (p. 131) could be further nuanced. Chanchani dates the Pandukeshwar temples to between 850 and 1000. The famous Buddhist institutions of Tholing (Guge, Ngari prefecture) and of Khojarnath (Purang, Ngari prefecture) were both founded by Yeshe O in 996 (Vitali 1996: 312, n. 485, Kalantari and Allinger 2018). The second phase of the dissemination of Buddhism (*phyi dar*), initiated by King Yeshe O's invitation to Atiśa, who reached Tibet in 1042, certainly marked the height of the region's renown and attracted a growing influx of pilgrims from Tibet and India. Pandukeshwar, as well as other central Himalayan religious centres, undoubtedly benefited from this dynamic but during a later phase and most likely as an indirect consequence of western Tibet's religious development.

The final chapter is dedicated to eleventh- and twelfth-century

architectural developments. It demonstrates a historical shift in the evocation of sacred Himalayan centres (*thīrta*) on the Indian subcontinent, the former being referred to not only in poetry or epic stories but also in architecture. Indeed, religious sites in the Himalayas seemed to have gained such a reputation that several rulers from the Indian lowlands financed the construction of new Kedarnaths (Kedareshvara temple in Balligamve, Karnataka, p. 143–146) and new Jageshwars (Jageshvar temple complex in Davada, Gujarat, p. 146–147) within their territories. This practice allowed devotees to avoid the dangers of a long journey to the Himalayas and to establish the gods' residence and accompanying wealth in different landscapes. Likewise, as the idealised view of central Himalayan religious centres made its way southwards, builders from these areas, especially from today's Gujarat, travelled northwards. Here Chanchani masterfully identifies their presence in the architecture and ornamentation of temples such as those of Gujjar Deva in Dwarahat (Almora district, Uttarakhand). He notably proposes that local communities and foreign builders guilds may have achieved these architectural projects with the intercession of 'priests and mendicants', with no further information as to their identities (p. 160).

In short, *Mountain Temples and Temple Mountains* stands as a valuable opus and a must-read for students and researchers. It delivers a well-illustrated and careful analysis of hitherto overlooked or recently discovered sites and monuments such as Koteshwar and Palethi. Monuments are accurately described with their technical Sanskrit nomenclature, in an agreeable manner that allows even non-specialists to grasp the topic. Architectural terms are explained in a glossary at the end of the volume. Furthermore, the book provides relevant, new interpretations to explain religious developments in the central Himalayas. In this respect, the study has the merit of identifying the primordial role of Pāśupatas and 'émigré artisans' such as the Māru Gurjaras in shaping the region's sacred geography. This dynamic of transforming the Himalayas into the abode of the gods started between the fifth and twelfth centuries and has continued until today. The appendix to the book contains an invaluable list of medieval temple sites in the central Himalayas. This list, like the book itself, will no doubt stimulate further research into the fields of Himalayan History, Archæology and Art History.

Concluding remarks

The three volumes presented here address the arts and history of two central Himalayan regions demarcated by the Mahakali River: the Indian state of Uttarakhand (Chanchani 2019) to the west and the districts of western Nepal to the east (Cortes and Brézillon 2011, Sharma 2012). The approaches used are very different. Cortes and Brézillon observe nineteenth- to twentieth-century sculptural art of the Karnali area from a formal angle. They also try to contextualise it with contemporary religious activities. They suggest that 'primitive statuary' has survived from the traditions of Tibeto-Burmese folk (Magars) residing in the region prior to the eastward migration of Khaśas. Sharma, on the other hand, focuses solely on the medieval vestiges of western Nepal. His arguments are based on the artefacts themselves rather than on a comparative study with neighbouring regions. The artistic dynamics are not clearly defined because of the absence of a typo-chronological approach. Lastly, Chanchani offers a scholarly approach to the history of architecture in Uttarakhand by linking it to other types of sources, such as poetry, and to other parts of the subcontinent. He sets Uttarakhand within a larger picture and hence provides a documented answer to the question of how the area developed as a 'land of the gods'.

Note that the works under review comprise different modes of historical periodisation. Cortes and Brézillon regard the Khaśas' migration (still a subject of debate) as a pivotal point in the sculptural tradition of western Nepal. Aesthetic idioms of the original Magar population are conserved but adapted to Khaśa religious beliefs. Dilli Raj Sharma considers two phases (1 and 2) with no clear chronological boundaries or defining features. One gathers that the first phase corresponds to a pre-Khaśa Malla empire and the second phase to the Khaśa empire. As mentioned above, the post-Khaśa Malla period is totally overlooked. This is regrettable since many of western Nepal's monuments and artefacts that are known to us were made during this period (Andolfatto 2020). Nachiket Chanchani articulates his chapters around monuments and artefacts that illustrate successive phases of intellectual conceptions of Uttarakhand (both in the area concerned and on the Indian subcontinent) and the development of sites by different actors (pilgrims, ascetics, émigrés artisans etc).

The history of western Nepal and Uttarakhand are interlinked by key

historical events. One such event is the 1223 seizure of Kartṛpura by the Khaśa Malla Emperor Krā Calla, who is said to have ruled from Dullu, in today's Dailekh district (Nepal). The two regions are also interlinked by common cultural and linguistic traits. As a result, the historical, archæological and artistic study of such closely related regions calls for the development of a connected approach. In terms of periodisation, the two regions cannot be considered as a monolithic bloc. Although Uttarakhand, or at least Kumaon, is likely to have fallen under the sway of the Khaśa Mallas during the thirteenth century, hardly anything is known of these rulers' presence in the area before and after Krā Calla's conquests. A different periodisation is therefore required for Uttarakhand and western Nepal. Regarding western Nepal's medieval era (which I am most familiar with), I would propose the following periodisation:

- Pre-imperial period: eighth–twelfth century (corresponding to the estimated antiquity of the region's earliest monuments)
- Imperial period: twelfth–fourteenth century (corresponding to the rule of the Khaśa Malla emperors)
- Post-imperial period: 1378 to 1789 (corresponding to the dismantling of the Khaśa Malla empire into semi-independent kingdoms [often referred to as the Twenty-Two Kingdoms or *Bāise Rājya*] and their conquest by the Shah dynasty of Gorkha).

The observations made throughout this review point to the twin-track approach that I believe should be adopted for future research on the history of the central Himalayas. First, more archæological excavations need to be conducted, not only in the hills and mountains but also in the Tarai plains. Reports of these activities need to be readily accessible and archæological sites have to receive adequate legal and physical protection against looting. Second, one could create a new series of epigraphical publications dealing with each Himalayan region, like Epigraphia Indica (published until 1978). Both archæological and epigraphic research will constitute valuable and complementary tools to further our knowledge of the history of the Himalayas.

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David C. Andolfatto is a postdoctoral researcher at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris and a consultant at the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg, where he is a member of the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project. He obtained his PhD on the archæology of western Nepal, from the Sorbonne University, Paris, in 2019. His work focuses on the archæology of western Nepal and of the Kathmandu Valley where, in his capacity as UNESCO consultant, he conducted excavations after the 2015 earthquakes. As a postdoctoral researcher at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, he works on the materiality and archæological context of *tsha-tshas*.

andolfatto.david@gmail.com

Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac
Département de la Recherche et de l'Éducation
222 rue de l'Université
75007 Paris, France

Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies
Karl Jaspers Centre
Vossstr. 2, Building 4400
69115 Heidelberg, Germany