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THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

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Interdisciplinary research group / Forschungsschwerpunkt (FSP) 2001 – 2006

The Western Himalayas contain a rich cultural heritage that as yet is little known. For this reason a research group, made up of members of the Institute for Art History and the Institute for South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies at the University of Vienna as well as of the Department of Engineering at the Technical University in Graz, had dedicated itself from 2001 to 2006 to recording the still largely undocumented cultural history of that region and the scientific analysis thereof. Under the general directorship of Prof. Dr. Deborah Klimburg-Salter a total of twenty researchers have been working in different specialized branches of the project (art history, inscriptions, manuscripts and architecture). The research group has been funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).

National Research Network/ Nationales Forschungsnetzwerk (CHWH) 2007-2012

The CHWH continues the successful research of the last five years and brings to fruition the many years of experience and

assembled scholarly resources as well as long-standing international partnerships resulting from the earlier interdisciplinary research group.

The CHWH continues research in the areas of major innovation already defined in the FSP (e.g. the western Tibetan canonical tradition, Tibetan literature preserved in wall texts, the Indo-Tibetan artistic tradition). The research group, also funded by the Austrian Science Fund, combines 38 scholars of five different institutions, located at the University of Vienna and the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

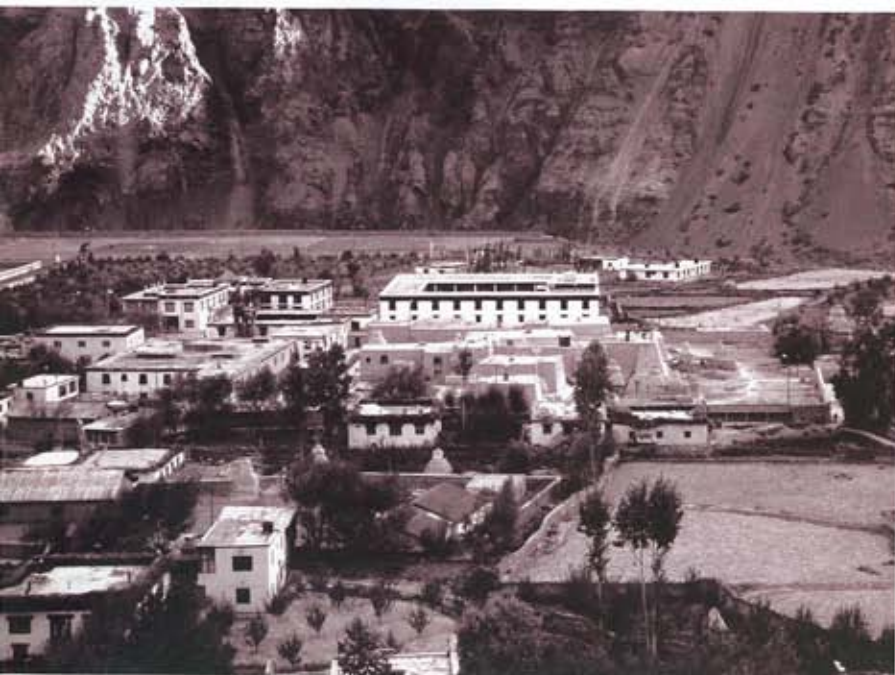
The CHWH is closely associated with the **Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Documentation of Inner and South Asian Cultural History (CIRDIS)**, one of only five research platforms at the University of Vienna. As an important innovation of the newly structured University CIRDIS is seen as a mechanism to provide an institutional basis that allows research at the highest international standard to be integrated into graduate and postgraduate studies and connects to the University's other programs and long-term goals.

Research area

The area of the Western Himalayas is at present divided between Tibet (Tibet Autonomous Region, PR China), India (Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir), Pakistan (Baltistan), Afghanistan and Northwest Nepal. While research has been conducted throughout this area, numerous field studies have been particularly concentrated in Northern India. Sites in Spiti (Tabo), Kinnaur (Nako), Lahaul and Ladakh were examined and photo-documented where the art, for the most part Buddhist, text transmission and Tibetan culture is still intact and can be studied.

Documentation and Archiving

The majority of the photos from these research trips are kept in two archives at the University of Vienna: the Western Himalaya Archive Vienna (WHAV), an archive for visual documentation at the ▶



Institute for Art History, and in the photo archives for manuscripts and inscriptions at the Institute for South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.

The WHAV contains more than 70,000 slides and a very large collection of photos, negatives, maps, architectural plans and drawings, as well as a digital photo archive and a database. It is currently the most extensive collection of primary research material from the Western Himalayas in the world.

A close cooperation with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), also with regard to the permission for photography in monuments under the protection of the ASI, was drawn up between the ASI, the University of Vienna and the Austrian Bundesdenkmalamt at the conclusion of two joint seminars under the auspices of the Austrian Embassy in New Delhi and the ASI.

Co-operations with India

The research in the Indian Himalayan area was particularly supported by the Himachal Pradesh Government in Shimla. Multifarious assistance with regard to administrative and logistic matters (with special thanks to Deepak Sanan, Hukum Chand Negi and the Negi family in Poo), the close contact with local authorities, village communities and religious associations had enabled and facilitated the study of ancient monuments, artifacts and the cultural heritage.

Beside many intensive contacts all over Himachal Pradesh (e.g. in Poo, Chamba, Kyelong) two long standing cooperations with the local people and the religious community should be pointed out.

Tabo Monastery, Spiti

The oldest Buddhist monastery of the Western Himalayas (founded in 996 AD) can be found in Tabo in the lower Spiti Valley. Despite its age it is one of the best preserved. This religious complex (*chos-khor*) consists of altogether nine larger and smaller temples as well as numerous shrines (*mchod-rten*).

Abbot Geshe Sonam Wangdü

The research in the Tabo monastery was made possible through the support and the collaboration of the Abbot Geshe Sonam Wangdü, who has held his office for nearly thirty years shortly after leaving his native Tibet. Very receptive to scientific research, the Abbot, together with a number of local monks, has also initiated important steps to maintain and reinvigorate the high monastic culture and to strengthen its economic activities.

Deborah Klimburg-Salter



Religious Celebrations at the Tabo Monastery

Registered by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) since the 1960s, the Tabo Monastery has belonged for approximately 500 years to the Gelugpa School, at the head of which is the Dalai Lama. In 1996 the Dalai Lama conducted a Kālacakra consecration in Tabo. A new temple was constructed for this ceremony. Since then the daily prayer meetings of the monks take place here, as well as the monastic ceremonies held for festivals during the calendar year. ▶

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Nako Research and Preservation Project

Research and Preservation

At the request of the Buddhist Community in Nako the **Nako Research and Preservation Project (NRPP)** was founded in 2000, aimed at the study and preservation of a Buddhist complex of four temples in the village of Nako in Kinnaur (Indian state of Himachal Pradesh). Among the goals of the NRPP has been the task of investigating and analysing the indigenous building techniques and the traditional artistic handicrafts, which have ensured the long existence of these exquisite monuments, and to integrate this terminology into their regular preservation while taking into account the local economic and technological resources. The NRPP is considered a model for the future conservation and preservation of the cultural heritage of this region. The villagers have supported and contributed to the efforts and aims of the NRPP in regard to the protection of the historic cultural heritage. Through the initiative of Nako's Buddhist community, in the summer of 2007, a ritual to reconsecrate the restored temples of Nako will be held by His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.

International Networks

The preservation program is based on an international cooperation between the villagers of Nako, members of the research group "The Cultural History of the Western Himalayas" at the University of Vienna, Institute for Art History (Director: Prof. Dr. Klimburg-Salter), the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Conservation Department (Prof. Dr. G. Krist, the late Prof. Dr. E. Bacher), and a number of well-known Indian architects (headed by Romi Khosla Design Studios/New Delhi).

The project was largely funded by the World Monuments Fund, New York, the Robert W. Wilson Challenge Grant as well as the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation. The basic research and the scientific documentation and analysis of the 900-year-old temple complex (art and cultural history, architecture, philology, anthropology, economics) was supported by the Austrian Science Fund. The focus of the NRPP has also been the restoration of its historical substance under the most modern scientific conservation methods possible, and the preservation of the Buddhist temple complex in its social, cultural, and ritual context for future generations. ■



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