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Kingship, Buddhism and the Forging of a Region

Medieval Pilgrimage in West Nepal

West Nepal provides a unique space to think about pilgrimage in the past. For many centuries, this central Himalayan region lay at the fringes of neighboring states. During the 13th century CE, the Khasa Malla dynasty established a kingdom here with seasonal capitals at Sinja and Dullu, which soon grew to encompass the entire region as well as parts of India and Tibet (Adhikary 1997; Pandey 1997) (Figure 1). With these developments, the region became a key zone of interaction. Capitalizing on pre-existing routes and connections, it connected India to the Silk Road, and provided a conduit for the spread and survival of Indian Buddhism.

Pilgrimage would have been an important component of the movement of people and ideas within and across the region—interactions that shaped the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the area. However, due to its liminal position, the study of West Nepal has been neglected in favor of more ‘important’ neighboring regions. As such, we have only an outline understanding of pilgrimage and the societal framework within which it took place.

The monuments built during the reign of the Khasa Malla provide tantalizing clues that can be used to study pilgrimage and the movement





Figure 1

of people and ideas in the Himalaya. First discovered in the mid-20th century (Naraharinath 1956; Tucci 1956, 1962), these were not examined in detail until the 1990s when excavations at Sinja revealed a large fortified palace (Evans et al. 1999, Evans & Gibson 2003). Beyond these remains, and epigraphic references to a winter capital at Dullu, no other settlements from this period are known. Instead, the majority of existing evidence is comprised of religious monuments. The largely unpublished Buddhist stupa complex at Micha, built during the 15th century in a Tibetan style, is the largest religious site in the north. While in the south, we find the 12th to 13th century Buddhist temple at Kakrevihar, which was built in a typically West Indian (specifically Maru-Gurjara) style (Hawkes et al. 2012). Of course, the architectural style of these monuments may be due, in part, to their proximity to both India and Tibet. Yet, the different architectural traditions embodied in these monuments also reflect the cultural diversity encompassed by the Khasa kingdom. This diversity was possibly the result of the entire area having been a fluid and unfixed border zone between India and Tibet for many centuries prior to the rule of the Khasa, and is suggestive of the movement of different people in and around the area. Indeed, in relation to the temple at Kakrevihar, the only evidence that we have of direct religious connections across the region is in the form of a manuscript preserved in the sPon K'an monastery in Tibet that was copied from an original at Kakrevihar (Petech 1980: 108-109).

The rest of the archaeological landscape is characterized by a series of distinctive monuments, known locally as *dewal* (Figure 2). Architecturally, these are derived from votive shrines, a reasonably common feature of Hindu temples in North India during the 12th-13th century. Yet, the West Nepalese *dewal* are built in a more simplified style, suggesting that they are a local reproduction of this Indian form, and enabling us to date them, tentatively, to between the 13th and

14th centuries—safely within the rule of the Khasa Malla, and possibly authorized by them.

Unlike their Indian antecedents, *dewal* were not built in association with larger temples. Nor did they function as temples in their own right—they contain no objects of worship, and are far too small to physically enter. This raises a number of questions regarding their religious affiliation and use. The existence of large Buddhist sites in both the northern and southern parts of the region would seem to reflect a pervasive Buddhist cosmology. In this connection, it is interesting to note that *dewal* are also found at Micha. While not ignoring the possibility that different religious groups could have used the same site, the presence of *dewal*, at such a large and important Buddhist site, may indicate that they were used as Buddhist monuments. If this was the case, then this, in turn, raises a number of other questions as to how and why a class of monuments, inspired by Indian Hindu architectural practices, was incorporated into religious practice at a Tibetan influenced Buddhist site. In this regard, it should be noted that it is possible to identify certain similarities of form between these *dewal* and the pagoda-stupas found there. It may be that this particular architectural form was appropriated precisely because of its similarity to a pagoda-stupa. Buddhist stupas are, of course, objects of veneration in their own right. When considered in this light, it may be that the construction of these *dewal* monuments reflects not only the appropriation of Indian architectural forms, but also a local interpretation of Buddhist practice, in which the *dewal* themselves were foci of ritual activity and, perhaps, pilgrimage.

These fixed points in the landscape, provided by the *dewal*, are connected by pillar-stones that mark the alignment of a network of roads that crossed the region (Figure 3). These are often (though not always) located in highly visible points, on peaks and ridges, and



Figure 2

would almost certainly have functioned as ‘way markers’ for moving through the mountainous environment. Many of the pillars are carved with short inscriptions recording political events (Petech 1980, Regmi 1965), and various sculptures, including seated Buddhas and triangular motifs that may be heavily stylized stupas (cf. Sharma 1997). The inscriptions are carved in three different languages: Sanskrit, Tibetan and Sinjali —the precursor to modern Nepali (Hawkes et al. 2012). This not only further reflects the cultural diversity of the region, but also a conscious political attempt to unite them. The choice of decoration lends further weight to the idea of an overriding Buddhist cosmology in the region, and suggests that the Khasa used Buddhism to both bind the disparate cultural elements of the region and legitimize their rule. That roadside pillars, provided the medium for these agendas, hints at the possibility that movement across the region, including

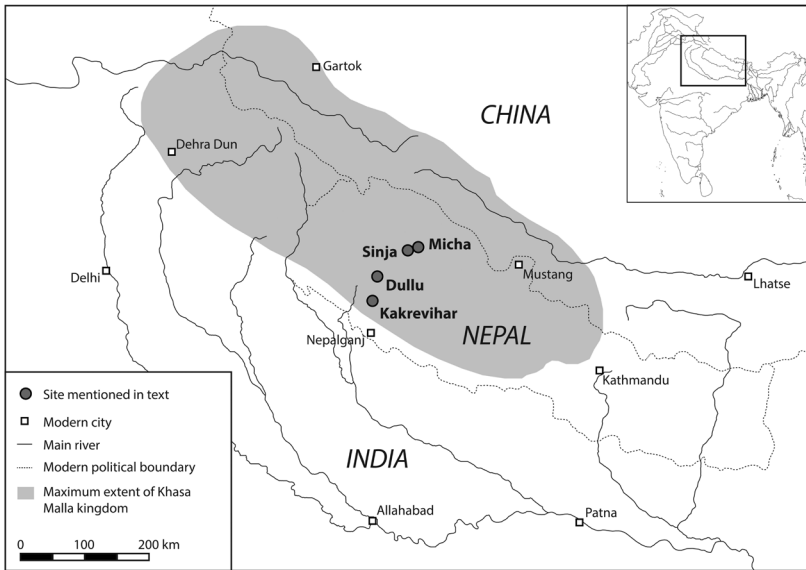


Figure 3

pilgrimage between religious sites, was central to engendering this shared sense of identity.

Recent research has involved the survey and documentation of over 250 of these monuments (C. Harward 2014; Hawkes 2010, 2011; Hawkes et al. 2012). Much work still remains to be done, not least regarding the religious affiliation and use of these *dewal*, and the societal framework in which they existed. Yet, it is clear that these monuments provide an important corpus for the archaeological study of pilgrimage, not only in West Nepal, but also in the past generally. In other places and periods, we have a reasonably good understanding of the belief-systems of pilgrims, their urban contexts, and associated economic and socio-political dynamics. Beyond this, other aspects of pilgrimage, such as the movement of pilgrims across the landscape – the act of pilgrimage itself – are essentially intangible and can only be inferred. In West Nepal,

we are presented with an archaeological, geographical and historical context in which many of the ‘signatures’ of pilgrimage, often taken for granted, do not exist. For instance, due to the specifics of the Himalayan environment, which does not allow for archaeological sites to form in quite the same way, we do not have any settlements to excavate, and so are unable to speak of the urban contexts of pilgrimage. Instead, we have a unique body of evidence that enables us to identify: the precise alignment of the routes across the Himalayas; relationships between pilgrimage and the state; and the creation of a distinct regional identity manifest in both architecture and language. The region and its remains thus have great potential to broaden understanding of pilgrimage, those who were involved in it, and how it was negotiated.

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