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THE MEDIUMS' DANCE AND ICONOGRAPHIC SILENCES

Medieval Representations of Oracular Practices in the Karnali River Basin (West Nepal)

*David C. Andolfatto**

Introduction

The Karnali River Basin (West Nepal) is known for its oracular practices, which allow people to directly interact with the gods through their mediums. However, there are hardly any ancient texts offering descriptions of these oracular practices and very few artefactual representations used in them. In some instances though, uncarved stones, empty niches or flags can represent the gods or indicate their presence (Gaborieau 1969; Cortes and Brézillon 2011). Such an absence of material artefacts complicates the dating of oracular religions (Price 2001). Yet new field research on West Nepal's archaeological heritage may help to reconsider the question.

The present study focuses on three mediaeval sites, located in Kalikot district (Manma, Shambhunath and Mehalmundi, Figure 10.1), which present unique and hitherto undocumented iconographies that directly question the representation of oracular practices. In order to explore the semantics behind these images, archaeological material will be analysed using historical and contemporary ethnographic data.

The region under study is located within the former territory of the so-called Khasa Malla kingdom, which flourished between the 12th and 14th centuries. It extended from Uttarakhand in north-west India to Purang in south-west Tibet and to Mustang in central Nepal (Adhikary 1997 [1988]). A Bodhgaya

* I am very thankful to Marie Lecomte-Tilouine and Anne de Sales for their constant guidance throughout my investigations. Thanks to their support, the research program "Présence d'Esprits" allowed the funding of four explorations that covered eight districts of western Nepal between 2014 and 2018. This led to the systematic survey of 197 sites.

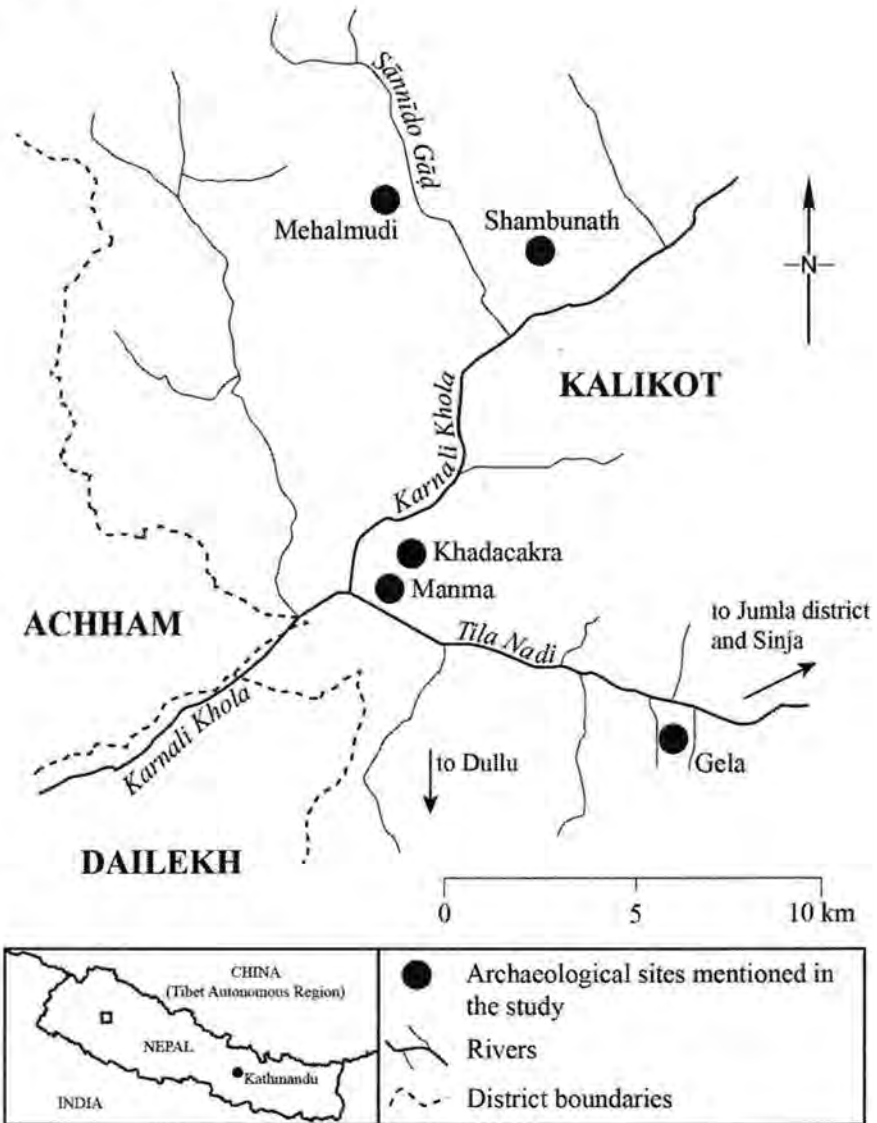


FIGURE 10.1 Area of study.

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inscription, issued under Aśoka Calla in 1278 mentions that he is the “emperor of the khasa country on the one-hundred-and-twenty-five thousand mountain [range] (*sapādalakṣa śikharī khasadeśarājādhirāja*)” (Pant 2009: 300). From the perspective of Tibetan sources, the Khaśa Mallas are considered as originating from aristocratic lineages of Guge-Purang and they ruled over an area

known as Yatse (*Ya rste*) (Vitali 1996). Yatse was variably identified with two sites of West Nepal that are regarded as the twin capitals of the Khaśa Mallas, namely Sinja in the Jumla district (Tucci 1956; Petech 1988 [1980]) and Dullu in the Dailekh district (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009d, 2011).

Following the collapse of this Himalayan kingdom, a multitude of petty kingdoms referred to as the Twenty-Two Kingdoms (*Bāise Rājya*) emerged. Archaeological remains found between the Mahakali and the Gandaki rivers suggest a multicultural environment where Buddhist and Hinduist religions coexisted during and after the imperial period. Thus, the Khaśadeśa, the country of the Khaśas, was a large and mountainous territory dotted with temples, fountains, stūpas and memorial stone pillars which were erected from the 12th to the 17th century.

The Pañcadeval of Manma

The village of Manma is located two kilometres south from Khadachakra, the headquarters of Kalikot district. The western edge of the Khadachakra rocky spur is marked by the stone remains of a fortified settlement. The old village of Manma boasts three mediaeval stone fountains, an undated stone pillar with the representation of a horse rider and, on the eastern rim, a complex of five temples named Pañcadeval (Figure 10.2).¹

Deval temples are found all across the hills of western Nepal, from Dadeldhura to Jumla, which roughly corresponds to the centre of the Khaśa Malla kingdom. The *devals* of West Nepal are probably the least known forms of the broader architectural type of “*latinā nāgara*”, or “North Indian Nāgara” temples, introduced into this part of the country from Uttarakhand.² The temples are constituted of a curvilinear tower (*śikhara*) topping a usually square sanctum (*garbhagṛha*). The reduced proportions of West Nepal’s *devals* merely permit the display of a small image of worship, usually a *liṅga*. In Manma, four *devals* surround a central one, forming a *pañcadeval* (“five temples”) plan. In West Nepal the term *pañcadeval* refers to groups of *deval* temples, regardless of how many there are. Actual *pañcadevals* have a central temple surrounded by four temples, each facing one of the latter’s façades. Interestingly, in West Nepal this type of plan is met in the region comprised between the district of Bajhang and that of Dailekh. As we shall see, this geographical factor is a key element for the relative dating of the monuments.³

The *pañcadeval* organisation corresponds to the *pañcāyatana* type, an architectural pattern reflecting the fundamental basis of the Smārta tradition of Hinduism. The setting of a Pañcāyatana ritual or architecture follows a quincunx pattern with a central god in the middle, surrounded by four secondary deities. As such, the Smārta practice emphasises the worship of five gods: Viṣṇu, Sūrya, Devī (or Durgā), Gaṇeśa, and Śiva.⁴ Each of these deities is at the centre of its own maṇḍala.

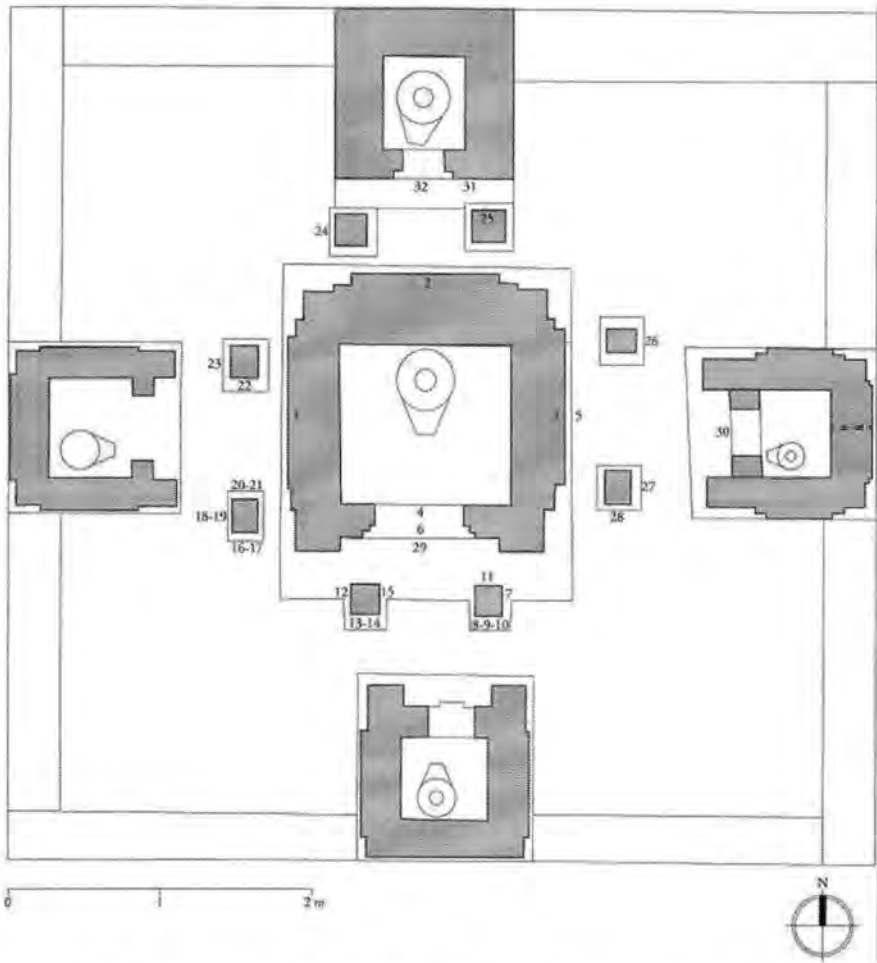


FIGURE 10.2 Floor plan of the Manma Pañcadeval. Numbers indicate the location of high and bas-reliefs: 1. Durgā, 2. Unidentified deity, 3. Unidentified deity, 4. Gañeśa, 5. Unidentified pattern, 6. A standing person, 7. A *dhāmī* (medium,?), 8. “Durgā” and a lion or tiger, 9. A *dhāmī*, 10. Two birds, 11. Two *dhāmīs* on their vehicles (?), 12. A *dhāmī* on his vehicle, 13. Two couples of lions or tigers facing each other, 14. A standing man, 15. Geometric patterns, 16. Therianthropic individual, 17. & 18. Rosettes, 19. Unidentified individual, 20. Rosette, 21. Bird, 22. Geometric patterns, 23. Head of a man, 24. Goat or sheep and volutes, 25. A standing man (?), 26. Head of a person, 27. Circular motif, 28. Man on an elephant (Indra?), 29. Gañeśa, 30. Three *dhāmīs*, six birds and a therianthropic individual, 31. A sited character (*dhāmī*?), 32. Volute, geometric patterns and Gañeśa (?).

This layout has been known in India since at least the 6th century (Viṣṇu temple at Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh) (Lubotsky 1992). Its earliest known occurrence in the Western Himalayas of India is found at the 11th century complex of Gujjar Deva in Dwarahat, Almora (Chanchani 2019). The introduction of this architecture in West Nepal is likely to be dated to the era of the Khaṣa Malla or that of their successors. Interestingly, all West Nepalese *pañcāyatana* temples, with the exception of Mehalmudi, have a central temple oriented south, the direction of death (associated with Bhairava and the Kaliyuga), with subsidiary shrines oriented towards the main temple.⁵ The Karnali *pañcadevals* are also unique in that they seem to have all been devoted to Śiva, as suggests the presence of *liṅgas* in the shrines (although it may be disputed that, in some cases, the *liṅgas* could have been moved from another place). So far, 16 *pañcāyatana* complexes have been surveyed in the districts of Bajhang, Achham, Dailekh and Kalikot.⁶ Absent in Jumla, the concentration of *pañcāyatana* architecture in these districts indicates a regional preference for this ostentatious type of monument.

The Manma *devals* are similar to those found elsewhere in the Karnali area, although some architectural specificities must be mentioned: on the central temple, a cornice overhangs between the walls of the cella and the upper tower (*śikhara*). The cornice is supported by pillars, placed by pairs in front of each of the secondary temples' doors. This setting creates a narrow portico in front of each secondary temple and a sheltered ambulatory surrounding the central temple. Another distinguishing feature is the presence of large niches containing high-reliefs on each side of the central temple's tower.

The temple complex was partially described by P.R. Sharma (1972), who mentions a stone image of Durgā, inserted in the main temple's western pillared niche. More recently, D.R. Sharma (2012: 199) noted that the central temple is embellished "with various figures and designs". He further describes four representations (nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4 in Figure 10.2). These accounts constitute a rather superficial assessment of the complex, of which the present survey listed a total of 32 high- and bas-reliefs carved on the walls, lintels, and pillars of the five temples. I will only describe here the most relevant to our topic.⁷

The above mentioned Durgā is part of a set of four large high-relief sculptures (nos. 1, 2, 3 and 4) placed inside niches located on the façades of the central temple. These images are the most conspicuous ones due to their size (app. 100 x 70 cm) and prominent position. Two clearly identified Hindu gods, Durgā (west) and Gaṇeśa (south), are represented, along with two other images of seated characters to the north and east. As such, the iconography relates to the Śaiva cult and the dedication of the temples as *śivālayas* is marked again by another Gaṇeśa placed on the main temple's lintel (no. 29). By contrast with these carvings which portray well-known "great" Hindu gods, other representations that ornament all of the temples are more intriguing.

The eastern temple's pediment is adorned with a horizontal frieze of birds above which stand three individuals who appear to be holding each other's hands (no. 30, Figure 10.3). Vertical lines separate them, as is the case also between some of the birds in the frieze. This partitioning of space is a regional artistic feature present in numerous sites of the Karnali Basin. The individual to the left holds a bell and all three figures wear dresses that are tied with a belt. Their postures are static. According to some residents of Manma the sculptures would represent, from left to right, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Undeniably such an identification does not rest on iconographic elements

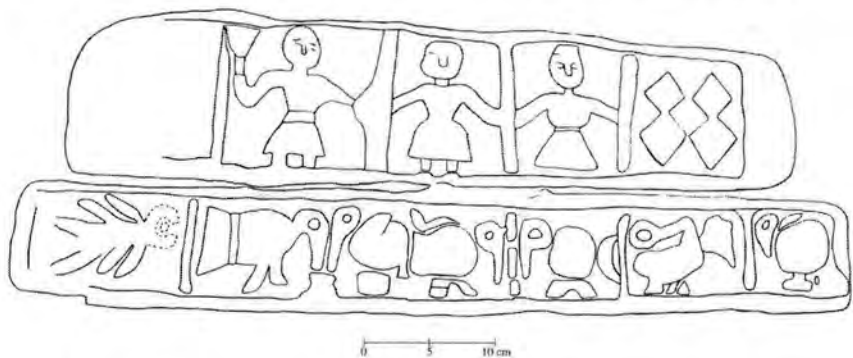


FIGURE 10.3 Bas-relief no. 30. Carved lintel on the eastern temple, with three *dhāmīs* (?), six birds and a therianthroptic individual.

other than the number of characters and one needs to observe the other anthropomorphic representations of the complex to better understand what they might relate to.

The two pillars placed at the entrance of the central temple are richly ornamented with bas-reliefs on almost all sides. Representation no. 7, on the eastern pillar's east side, depicts a two-handed individual, sitting, and holding a round object in his right hand (Figure 10.4). In bas-relief no. 9, a person is portrayed in a dynamic stance, holding a bell and raising the left hand (Figures 10.5 and 10.6). What could be construed as an elephant trunk is in fact coming from the side of the head and is separated from it. It could represent a large braid or a ponytail. This bas-relief, locally identified as Durgā, is located on the central temple's southern right pillar. It is placed above a lion (hence the identification as Durgā) and an unidentified four-armed deity. On the opposite side of the pillar, facing north, there is the bas-relief no. 11 (Figure 10.7), which represents two men holding each other's hands. The person on the left holds a triangular attribute in his right hand, probably a bell, while the other one has a circular object in his left hand. Both seem to be sitting or standing on a squarish stool (to the right) or even a human being (to the left).



0 5 10 cm

FIGURE 10.4 Bas-relief no. 7.



FIGURE 10.5 Bas-reliefs nos. 8 (below) and 9 (above).

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Another representation (no. 12, Figure 10.8) is found on the central temple's southern left pillar, facing the west. Two persons are represented, one on top of the other, as if carrying each other. The lower figure is depicted in a dynamic posture suggesting a dance. Its head is not represented, as it merges with the person above. The upper figure displays a more detailed carving with folds of a dress or a jacket on its torso. The person raises its arms, holding a circular object in the right hand while the left hand, a bit disproportionate, is either a raised fist or holds an elongated object. An intriguing therianthrope individual is carved on the south side of the west-south pillar (no. 16, Figure 10.9). The whole body is human. Clothing is similar to that of the three characters on bas-relief no. 30. The face, turned to its right, evokes a jackal or a horse with erect ears and an incurved muzzle. Last, the



FIGURE 10.6 Bas-relief no. 9.

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image no. 28 (Figure 10.10) represents a rider (with no specific attributes), on a horse or an elephant. Numerous “hero-pillars” of the Karnali region bear carvings of horse riders similar to this bas-relief. The identification of an elephant rests on the presence of a trunk, which could identify it as an image of Indra, the “king of gods”, riding his elephant Airāvata.

All bas-reliefs share similarities in the depth of carving (>1 cm) and in the emphasis given to the shapes’ edges. The rendering of clothes differs: it may be absent (no. 11), suggested (no. 30), or partially outlined (nos. 9 and 12).

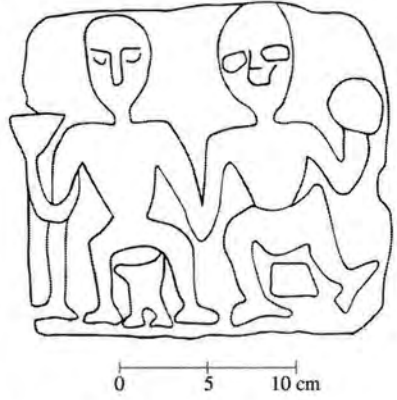


FIGURE 10.7 Bas-relief no. 11.

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FIGURE 10.8 Bas-relief no. 12.

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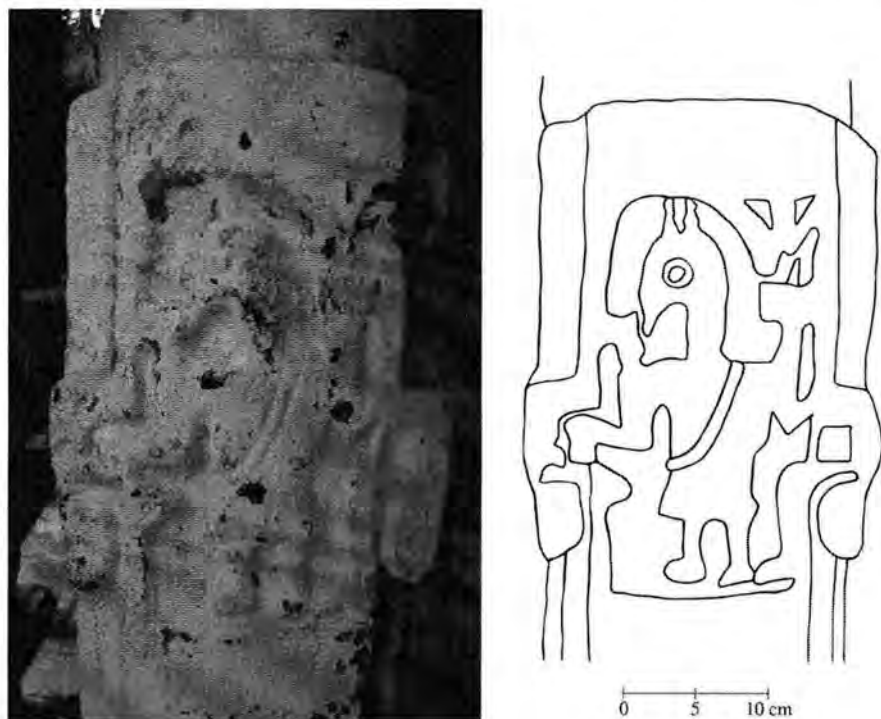


FIGURE 10.9 Bas-relief no. 16.

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A difference of proportions is observed between individuals in bas-reliefs 11 and 12: the one mounting the other is larger. Two attributes are recurrent in those bas-reliefs: triangular and rounded objects. It is likely that these represent bells and drums, as I will further explore below.

Bas-Reliefs of Shambhunāth and Mehalmudi

The bas-reliefs of Manma do not constitute an idiosyncratic corpus. A few kilometres north-west of Manma, the sites of Mehalmudi and Shambhunath share architectural and iconographic similarities with the former. Shambhunath, a large sanctuary dedicated to Śiva in the Basantapur Municipality, is situated on a ridge above the confluence of the Karnali and the Sānnido Rivers.

Measuring approximately 13.5 x 7.5 m. and oriented to the north, the temple is probably one of the largest religious monuments in the area.⁸ It is constituted of three rectangular rooms of decreasing dimensions placed one after the other. The masonry contains re-used carved elements which are of



FIGURE 10.10 Bas-relief no. 28.

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interest for two reasons. First, two stone door jambs attest to the past existence of a now gone *deval* temple. Other similar monuments must have been built in the surrounding area, as indicated by three elements of pediments with bas-reliefs of affronted lions inserted in the masonry. These remains, together with the two nearby fountains, three memorial pillars and two miniature *devals*, mark a place of importance. Second, a carved stone inserted in the wall preceding the sanctum bears the representation of three individuals separated by vertical lancets (Figure 10.11). The one to the left is in a dynamic posture with the left leg bent and a sacred thread-like feature falling from the left shoulder to the right hip. Its hands are raised. The left hand is elongated, suggesting that it holds a long object. The central character is firmly standing on its feet, both hands raised, a piece of cloth hanging down between the legs. Between the left shoulder and the left jowl is a horizontal shape. Finally, the individual to the right is sitting cross-legged. Only the right hand is visible. It is raised and holds a long object. A sacred thread is also discernible. The content of this bas-relief is reminiscent of the wall and pillar carvings of Manma, especially in terms of postures.

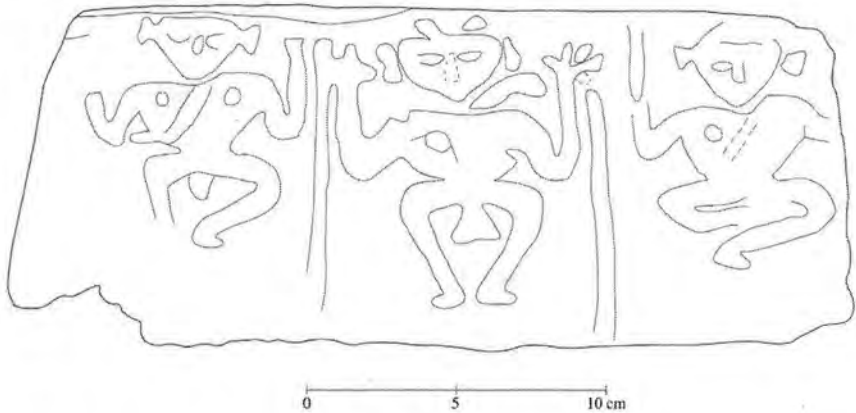
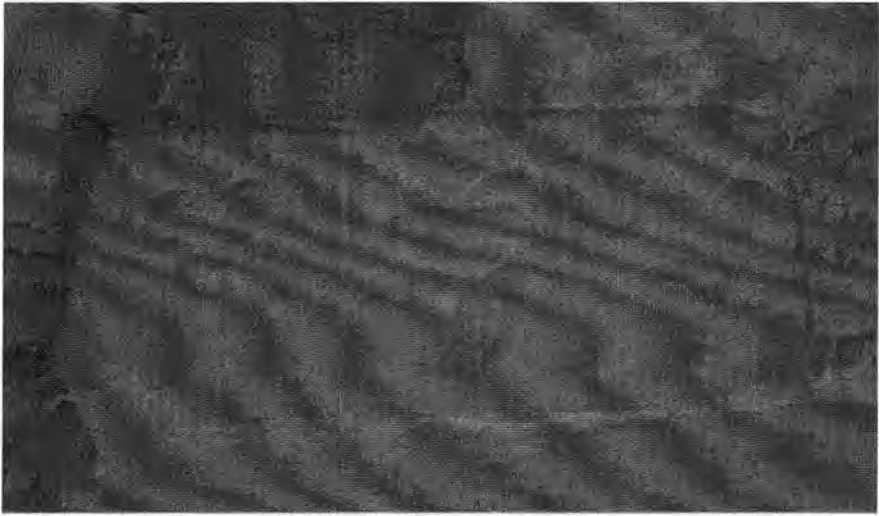


FIGURE 10.11 Carved stone inside the Shambhunath temple.

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The third studied site is the Pañcadeval of Mehalmudi, located one walking day west of Shambhunath, in the eponymous municipality that spreads on the massif south of the Sännido River. The plan differs greatly from that of other *pañcadevals* of the region: the central temple is oriented to the north and the subsidiary ones are placed in the latter's diagonals instead of facing the walls.⁹ Three of the five temples have carved pediments, two of which are particularly notable. The carved pediment on the central temple has two horizontal registers: the lower one contains two affronted lions or tigers while the upper one is patterned by lancets that create five separate niches (Figure 10.12). On each of the side niches, there is a character standing with

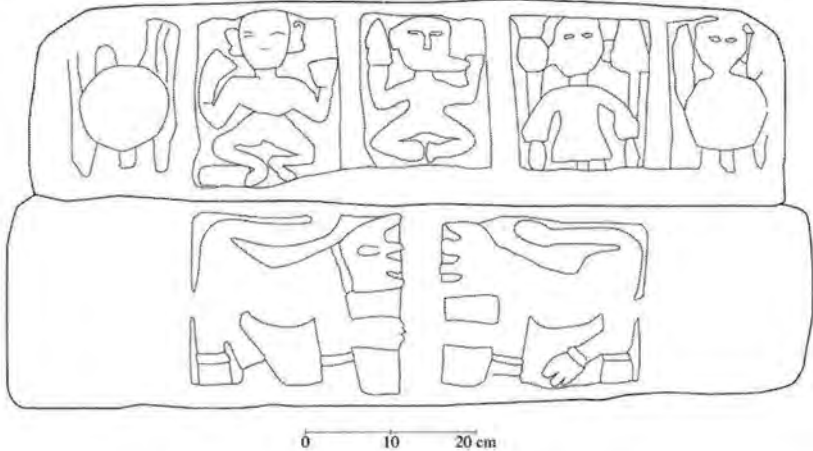


FIGURE 10.12 Bas-relief on Mehalmudi's central temple's pediment.

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a large circular object. The latter are reminiscent of six stone “hero-pillars” (*virkhamba*) installed at the fire temple complex of Padukasthan (Dailekh district). They bear bas-relief representations of warriors behind their shields (Sharma 2012: 76–77). Although undated, the pillars at Padukasthan can be situated between the 13th and the 15th centuries. On Mehalmudi's central temple's pediment, the second individual from the left is in a dynamic position with both legs bent, holding up two triangular, bell-like

objects. A rectangular volume is represented on the lower left corner. An individual seems to be sitting in the central niche. His hands are also raised, the right one holding a pointed item. A protuberance extends from the jaw to the left hand. Next to this is a standing person wearing a dress and holding two, long, unidentified spears or emblems. The second pediment, on the north-east temple, shows a similar organisation to the previous one with three separated niches (Figure 10.13). The poor quality of the stone allows little but a lacunar reading: three persons are sitting with their hands raised.

It is clear that, despite stylistic variations, the bas-reliefs from Manma, Shambhunath and Mehalmudi share a common iconographic repertoire. A few postures are repeated: dynamic (one or two legs bent), standing and



0 5 10 cm

FIGURE 10.13 Bas-relief on Mehalmudi's north-east temple's pediment.

sitting (seemingly cross-legged but rendered as if the feet were touching each other). A fourth one, representing a person on someone's shoulders, is seen only once. Features such as the triangular bell-like objects or the facial protuberances are also represented on the three sites' bas-reliefs. Such iconographies lead us to question what they represent and to what cultural context these sculptures belong. Additionally, we might ask what is their antiquity and why were they produced? Answering these questions first requires assessing the available historical information, then identifying the cultural framework that could have oriented the production of these unique representations.

Dating the Bas-Reliefs

Despite the absence of epigraphy attached to any of these three sites, one can speculate, with indirect evidence, that the Manma, Shambhunath, and Mehamudi temples were built around the 14th–15th century. The Manma complex is located on the slope opposite the village of Gela, a one-day walk from Manma. At the centre of Gela, and overlooking the Tila River, is a large platform dotted with six hero-pillars, a stūpa and a small shrine, all dating from the mediaeval period, that is, 12th–16th centuries. Gela must have held an important position since the Khaśa Malla rule, due to its strategic location on one of the main paths between the districts of Dailekh, Kalikot and Jumla, a network locally referred to as the Royal Way (*rāj mārḡ*) (Tucci 1956: 111). The settlement is also perhaps mentioned in King Pṛthvīmalla's 1357 inscription of Dullu. This genealogy inscribed on the Kīrtikhambā states that Puṇyamalla, Pṛthvīmalla's father, originated from the Gela lineage (*gelān-vayaḥ*).¹⁰ Pṛthvīmalla's reign coincides with the construction of numerous public monuments such as reservoirs and fountains. Two decades later, his grandson Abhayamalla lost power to the Varmās (or Vrahma) from which a new dynasty emerged, the Rāskoṭī (Pant 2009: 300–314).

Thereafter, an inscription of 1378 mentions Malayavarmā as king (*rājā*). He was eventually entitled emperor, or great king of kings (*mahārājadhirāja*), in 1389 (Adhikary 1997[1988]: 68, 199–200). It appears from various clans' genealogies (*vaṃśavālī*) that the new ruler of the Karnali region had his capitals built in both Dullu and in Khadachakra (Adhikary 1997[1988]: 67; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009c; Shrestha-Schipper 2003: 37). As mentioned earlier, ruins of a fortified settlement are still visible in Khadachakra, the district's bazar located one kilometre atop Manma. The *Rāskoṭī Vaṃśavālīs* ("Genealogies of the Rāskoṭī [lineage]") studied by M. Lecomte-Tilouine, place a considerable emphasis on the accomplishments of King Malayavarmā, the first Rāskoṭī king. He is praised for adorning the city of Dullu with numerous monuments, such as water reservoirs, water mills and pillars. He also developed Khadachakra as a seat of the Rāskoṭī kingdom.¹¹ If the

Khadachakra area was indeed a place of importance during the 14th–15th century, this period must have seen the construction (or development) of the Khadachakra fort and the erection of religious infrastructures, such as the Manma temples.

As previously stated, the *pañcadeval* type of architecture is not widespread; it is found mainly between Dailekh and Mehalmudi, with two complexes located in the districts of Achham and Bajhang. This regional feature highlights a compelling stylistic continuum that corresponds with the dominions of King Malayavarmā and his Rāskoṭī lineage.¹²

The association between this type of architecture and the Varmās/Rāskoṭīs is also made in a *Rāskoṭī Vamśvālī* recorded in Kalikot and translated by M. Lecomte-Tilouine (personal communication). It indicates that a certain Thala Ram erected a *pañcadeval* to honour King Malayavarmā. At this point, we can thus propose to attribute the construction of the studied temples to the Varmās/Rāskoṭīs, which would then place the monuments between the 14th and the 15th century. Most of Manma's bas-reliefs were necessarily carved before and during the construction, as pointed out by the narrowness of their locations, which restricts the manipulation of carving tools. This is especially the case with bas-relief no. 30. The bas-reliefs of this site show different styles, which does not automatically imply different construction stages. Stylistic variation may simply indicate the presence of different artists working simultaneously, as is still the case today in modern oracular temples. Erosion marks, present on all the images, prevent the identification of very recent carvings, although it is likely that some of them have been done since the construction.

Oracular Possession in the Karnali Region

The carving of the bas-reliefs from Manma, Shambhunath and Mehalmudi must have taken place during the mediaeval period, around the 14th–15th century. While the Khaśa Mallas (12th–mid-14th century) are often praised for being supporters of both Hinduism and Buddhism, it appears that after this period religious patronage shifted towards Hinduism only.¹³

In order to better understand the mediaeval religious context in which the bas-reliefs were produced, I believe that it is necessary to take a look at the contemporary cultural landscape of the region, and especially at the oracular (or mediumic) practices, which provide key elements to comprehend the phenomena at play in the conception of the mentioned images.

Hinduism, allegedly present in the Karnali Basin since at least the 12th century, nowadays manifests in manifold manners, in art and architecture as well as in ritual practices. As is the case in numerous Himalayan regions, “different Hinduisms” coexist and are represented by different celebrants: brahmanical Hinduism has its Brahman and “local Hinduism” its

oracle-medium, the *dhāmī* as it is known in western Nepal. Some authors have used this dichotomous model of small/great tradition to explain the differences between the different aspects of Himalayan religion (Srinivas 1965[1952]; Berreman 1963). The “great tradition” is generally defined by textually organised practices, a “scholarly” literary culture and a non-sectarian religious orthodoxy. M.N. Srinivas (op. cit.: 30, 31, 75 and 155) repetitively employs the concepts of “sanskritic” cultures, traditions, ideas and beliefs that would define an “All-India” Hinduism, “which transcends provincial barriers and is common to all of India”. By opposition the “little tradition” is defined by variation and multiplicity (Ibid.: 180).

G. Campbell (1978) suggests that the topographic setting of the Jumla district reflects a somewhat similar phenomenon, expressed in social repartition. As a corollary, the agency of divinities is conceived differently. Irrigated terraces (*gyula khet*), located at the bottom of valleys, are occupied by Jyulyāls. This group mainly entails Brahmans, Ṭhakuris and impure castes. Uphill, non-irrigated fields (*pabwa* or *pakho*) demarcate the Pabais’ zone, constituted of Matwālī Chetris and former Gharti slaves (Yasuno 2018). Jyulyāls represent the “Jumla Hinduism” evoked by Campbell, while the Pabais are the proponents of the local “oracular religion”.

In the religious field two categories of divinities are distinguished in the Jumla district: the hidden gods (*guptī deutā*) and the incarnated gods (*autine deutā*) (Shrestha-Schipper 2003; Yasuno 2018). Hidden deities feature gods from the classic (or “sanskritic”) Hindu pantheon, such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Gaṇeśa. The other category concerns deities of local origin and are incarnated by oracles-mediums (*dhāmī*), mainly originating from the Matwālī Chetri caste although people from other groups may also fill this role. As incarnated deities, their powers are more visible to the community. They manifest themselves in the sensible world. It is essential to note here that the incarnated/hidden categories are not necessarily closed ones. Brahmanical gods (or sometimes Buddhist ones) can also be considered as incarnated (*autare*) (Unbescheid 1987: 50). In any case, as S. Shrestha-Schipper writes (2003: 307), “these observations lead to postulate a specific link between incarnated divinities and Matwālī Chetri and, on the contrary, a correlation between high castes and pan-Hindu divinities”.

The most famous incarnated entities are the Maṣṭā gods, discussed below. They are incarnated by oracle-mediums who become possessed by the gods during consultation ceremonies (*dhāmmelo*). The focal point of these usually hypae-thral seances is the *dhāmī*, who is considered to be the god’s vehicle and messenger. His capacity to incarnate is immanent, it does not require any formal training nor a master, as is the case with some shamans of central and eastern Nepal.

A medium is identifiable by its white turban enveloping a long braid of hair (*laṭṭā* or *jūdī*). Once possessed, the turban is removed to display the braid (Figure 10.14). The removal of the headdress and the subsequent



FIGURE 10.14 A medium with his turban removed. Long braids of hair, covered with silver rings, are displayed during the possession séance.

Photograph courtesy of Thomas Kelly

undoing of the hair is a widespread Himalayan feature of possession. For this reason, M. Gaborieau (1969: 31, n. 36) suggested that the undoing of the hair is an entrance point for invisible entities.

Dhāmīs are central to the oracular cults of western Nepal, but they are not the only specialists involved in the ceremonies. They are assisted by priests (*pujārī* or *dāngri*), musicians (of the Damāī caste) and translators (*khāvā*).¹⁴ When possessed, mediums express themselves in the gods' language (*devtā bhāsā*), which is unintelligible to common mortals. This language is often characterised by the use of "phonetic combinations which sound like Tibetan" and that the *khāvā* makes accessible to the audience.

In Jumla district, mediums gather in front of oracular temples and perform what G. Campbell called "dance-trances" (*paturne*), while Damāī musicians

sit and play their drums around the dance area. Typical signs of possession are trembles and jitters. Often dancing in groups, *dhāmīs* hold each other by the shoulders or the hips. At some point the *dhāmī* of the sanctuary (*mūl dhāmī*) is carried on the *bāhān*'s shoulders (Figure 10.15). The *bāhān* (or *bhān*) is possessed by the vehicle of the *mūl dhāmī*'s god and acts as a servant god.¹⁵ *Dhāmīs* only manipulate bells during their convulsion, throwing uncooked rice at the assembly on some occasions. Bells are important elements of the *dhāmīs*' paraphernalia. According to S. Shrestha-Schipper (2003: 316) they are considered as icons of the gods and may even act more as such than as musical instruments.

The Maṣṭā gods, mentioned earlier, form a pantheon of 12 brothers (Bāra Bhāi Maṣṭā) associated with the Nine Sisters (Nau Durgā Bhavānī or Navādeva). The names of these deities are not fixed and usually differ depending on the locality. Indeed, the Maṣṭās are worshipped as lineage deities (*kul deutā*) or protectors of a village or of the whole territory. Besides the Maṣṭās and the nine goddesses are also the Hindu Bhairava and Kālīkā and a plethora of local gods that are sometimes divinised ancestors. Although the gods' stories (*parheli*) relate their legendary deeds, no mention is made of their physical aspects. The only artefactual figurations consist in simple stones,



FIGURE 10.15 A *dhammelo* in Sundargaon (Jumla district) in 2009. Damāīs from the Dalit caste, sited in row behind the mediums, are beating *damaha* drums.

Photograph courtesy of Jean-Luc Cortes

bells or empty niches inside the sanctuary (Gaborieau 1969; Campbell 1978: 300, 367; Cortes and Brézillon 2011: 121). In some cases, the gods' images are only visible to initiated priests.¹⁶

The god Lāmā, the Maṣṭās' maternal uncle, is probably the only incarnated god for which we have a little descriptive information (Unbescheid 1987). He is evoked as wearing a Tibetan ("Bhote") dress and eating Tibetan food (Campbell, *op. cit.*: 320). This is in accordance with the fact that the god was raised by a Tibetan couple. The Vedic god Indra, on the other hand is cited as the Maṣṭās' father. At this point it is clear that the speeches of the gods remain the most significant features of their presence as incarnated deities.

History of Mediumism in the Karnali Basin

These ethnographic observations are concerned with contemporary practices that were mostly observed in the Jumla district. Nevertheless, some facts regarding the antiquity of oracular cults can be gathered from different sources such as historical accounts and oral traditions. Historical records concerning oracular deities are relatively meagre.

The supposedly oldest reference to oracular practices places itself as a terminus post-quem to the tradition of propitiating the Maṣṭās. It is found in a chronicle published by Y. Naraharinath, the *Bajāngī Vamśāvalī*, written by the King of Bhajang. According to the king's account, his ancestor, King Śaktisingha, introduced the Maṣṭā cult with new modalities "Since the reign of Śaktisimha [Śaktisingha], we started to venerate Maṣṭādevatā by dividing shares." (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a: 43). Later in the text, the rule of this king is dated 1365, without any era being mentioned. Both Gaborieau and Pandey doubt the date, which, converted from the Vikram sambat produces the date of 1308 CE. Pandey must be right when he suggests that it should be corrected to 1465 VS (1408 CE) (Gaborieau 1969: 21; Pandey 1997: 285).¹⁷

Y. Naraharinath published a later chronicle, dated 1560, in which mention is made of a *dhāmī* (cited in Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a: 46). A few decades later, an administrative document of 1625 lists Maṣṭā as a witness, along with "Rudra Mahādeva, Gaṅgā and Bhavānī" (Naraharinath 1956, 2.3: 286, cited in Pandey 1997: 590). It is nevertheless possible to propose, on the basis of some 48 surveyed (written and oral) chronicles collected and translated by M. Lecomte-Tilouine, that the incarnation of divinities into human vehicles may predate King Śaktisingha of Bhajang.

This is illustrated with the figure of the incarnated king (*autārī rājā*) Jvālādhārī (or Jvālāmdharī), the "flame (*jvālā*) bearer (*dhārin*)", who is said to have ruled 11 generations before the former. A local genealogy depicts him as "keeping a turban [on his head]". "It untied and he obtained incarnation", says the text. The figure of the incarnated king (*autārī rājā*) is also used for

other rulers such as Jaiping (an ancestral king) and Malayavarmā. It remains unclear whether *autārī rājās* are kings with oracular competences or if they incarnate the ideal kingship. However, no doubt is allowed regarding King Jvālāṃdharī's double status as a temporal ruler and as a medium (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009c: 206).

As a symbol of their power, both kings and mediums share the throne (*gaddī*). The latter's throne is located inside or directly next to the oracular temple. It can also be materialised by folded fabrics. The medium's throne is that of the god (*deva gaddī*). On the other hand, since the king is the protector of the law, his throne is the *dharma gaddī*. A striking story recorded by M. Lecomte-Tilouine expresses the antagonism between these two figures of power. King Nauliyā of Achham refused to share his sovereignty with the god Bandali and told the latter: "there is no such thing as divine throne (*deva gaddī*), there is either your throne or my throne" (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009a: 42). One reason for this exacerbated antagonism is the fact that *dhāmīs* also manipulate temporal powers. They solve a variety of problems, such as family disputes, land demarcation, healing patients and forecasting the fortune of individuals. As expressed by a medium recorded by G. Campbell: "[...] Even Bābā Indra has given me the right to do justice. He has told me to perform true justice and not a false justice".¹⁸

Interpreting the Bas-Reliefs

The above considerations allow the re-evaluation of the hitherto unidentified bas-reliefs. The iconographies developed in the three studied sites show features that can, in my opinion, be linked with oracular possessions as practised today. Following this reading the depicted individuals can be identified as mediums engaged in different stages of an oracular possession/consultation (*dhāmmelo*). Postures in the bas-reliefs are the same as those executed by *dhāmīs* when; mounting their vehicle (Figure 10.8), dancing with each other (Figures 10.3, 10.7 and 10.11), or individually (Figure 10.6), or sitting to recite their god's stories (Figures 10.4, 10.12 and 10.13).¹⁹ Moreover, some elements of the mediums' paraphernalia are found in the carvings. Bells are present in almost all bas-reliefs, as they are in contemporary oracular practices. The braid (*laṭṭā*), the most iconic attribute of a *dhāmī*, can be identified in Manma (Figure 10.6), on the central characters of the Shambhunath carving (Figure 10.11) and possibly on Mehalmudi's central temple's pediment (Figure 10.12). Likewise, the latter bas-relief contains what could be recognised as a divine throne (*deva gaddī*), on the lower left corner of the second niche from the left. In Manma, the bas-relief no. 28 (Figure 10.10) has been interpreted as Indra on his elephant. If this reading is correct, the presence of the Maṣṭās' father would hint that the represented mediums are possessed by Maṣṭās.

The recurrence of certain iconographic elements, found in our bas-reliefs and as observed currently in western Nepal, should not give the impression that oracular cults did not evolve over time. For instance, the frequently represented circular objects in the hand of the hypothetical medium could be interpreted as drums. However, today it is the Damāi musicians who are beating drums. Moreover, these large drums (*damaha*) are played on the floor and cannot be handled as they are in the sculptures. They correspond more to the *khajjādi* and *dampbu* drums played in central Nepal. Another hypothesis is that the characters are manipulating a metal plate (*thāli*). Metal plates are still used today, sometimes instead of a drum by the Kham-Magar shaman in West Nepal (de Sales 1991) or on the floor, during possession ceremonies (*jāgar*) in Kumaon (Bernède 2001). If these circular objects represent drums, then the mediums should be considered as the producers of their own music and their trance as self-induced. The circles could also be depictions of censers similar to those used by mediums (*gur*) of Himachal Pradesh. Known as *ṭapoṭ* and used together with bells, they represent the deity and accompany the medium who goes to a private house for a séance (Berti 2001: 61–63, Figures 10.16, 10.17, XV).²⁰ However, evidence is yet too scarce to pursue these hypotheses any further.

If indeed mediums are represented on mediaeval temples, then we may ask why. Certain figures that we identified here as mediums are organised by groups of three. Locals recognise the triadic setting as the Brahmanical Trimūrti. The carvings are placed on monuments usually associated with Brahmanical cult. The presence of warriors on one of the Mehalmudi pediments is a clear illustration of a religious practice, placed under the protection of the ruling power. *Deval* temples were undoubtedly commissioned by an elite, and this fact alone gives the bas-reliefs an eminently political dimension. The patronage of monuments related to oracular practices infers a special relationship between rulers and oracular gods, who often stand as protectors of a territory. Such a role involved constant negotiations between holders of the mundane political power and those who represented the divine. This duality of powers, sometimes merged in one person, is attested until now in Jajarkot, Jumla, Askot (Uttarakhand), and Kullu (Himachal Pradesh) (Maskarinec 2009; Shrestha-Schipper 2009; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009b; Berti 2009).

As mentioned earlier, local gods expressing themselves through the mouth of oracles are called *autine deutā*, the incarnated gods. By contrast, Brahmanical Hindu gods, known as *guptī deutā*, the hidden or withdrawn gods, do not communicate with the realm of the living. They, however, are paradoxically represented in arts, under their well-known appearances of Śiva, Viṣṇu, and so forth. Yet, this situation is counterbalanced by an important fact: in the Karnali River Basin, images of the “hidden gods” are solely concentrated at the pilgrimage sites of the Pañcakośī “fire temples”

surrounding the mediaeval Khaṣa Malla capital of Dullu, in Sinja (the other imperial capital), at the pilgrimage site of Baijnath (Achham district) and at the 10th–12th century Buddhist temple of Kakrevihar.²¹ The regal and religious status of these sites explains the presence of sculptures, but their absence elsewhere still needs to be addressed at more length. It is relevant nevertheless to wonder if this general iconographic silence does not indicate a regional reluctance, or, rather, an absence of need to show certain gods in durable support.

Conclusion

Oracular divinities are not described in any of the consulted oral and literary sources, which makes oracular possessions, along with dreams, the exclusive places of their manifestation. As a result, mediaeval artists decided to represent this very moment, when mediums are possessed by the gods. The bas-reliefs studied here can be understood as indirect representations of such gods, through their human vehicles, but also as cultural markers that visually establish the close relationship between oracular praxis, a multifaceted Hinduism and holders of temporal powers. Furthermore, our ethnographic documentation illustrates how the regional “field of the sacred” generates an intricate nexus of concepts that organises artefactual representations of both hidden and incarnated deities.

This semantic play (hidden/incarnated) further allows the interpretation of mediaeval images that were left ignored until now. To my knowledge, the 14th–15th century images studied here remain the only known mediaeval representations of oracular possessions in West Nepal and probably the whole region.²² The idiosyncrasy of such iconographies complicates their general interpretation and contextualization.²³ I nevertheless believe that they remain valuable for establishing a terminus post-quem to oracular practices and that similar ethno-archaeological approaches will yield further information on the religious history of Nepal.

Notes

- 1 Sharma 1972, Pl. Va, and Andolfatto 2019, vol. 2, Figs. 11.4–11.41, vol. 3. Pl. 4.24, 8.36. The photograph published in Sharma 1972 is wrongly captioned as “Temple d’Ukhadi”.
- 2 See Chanchani 2019 for a recent discussion on temple architecture in the central Himalayas.
- 3 A majority of temples are built on the *ekle* and *dui-deval* plan: single or two-temple arrangements.
- 4 Gudrun Bühnemann indicates that “In earlier sources we find evidence for the worship of Brahmā instead of Durgā or Gaṇeśa”. (2013: 60). See also Reitz 1998.
- 5 Central temples of north Indian *pañcāyatana* complexes are generally oriented to the east, with some exceptions to the west and to the north (Reitz, op cit.).

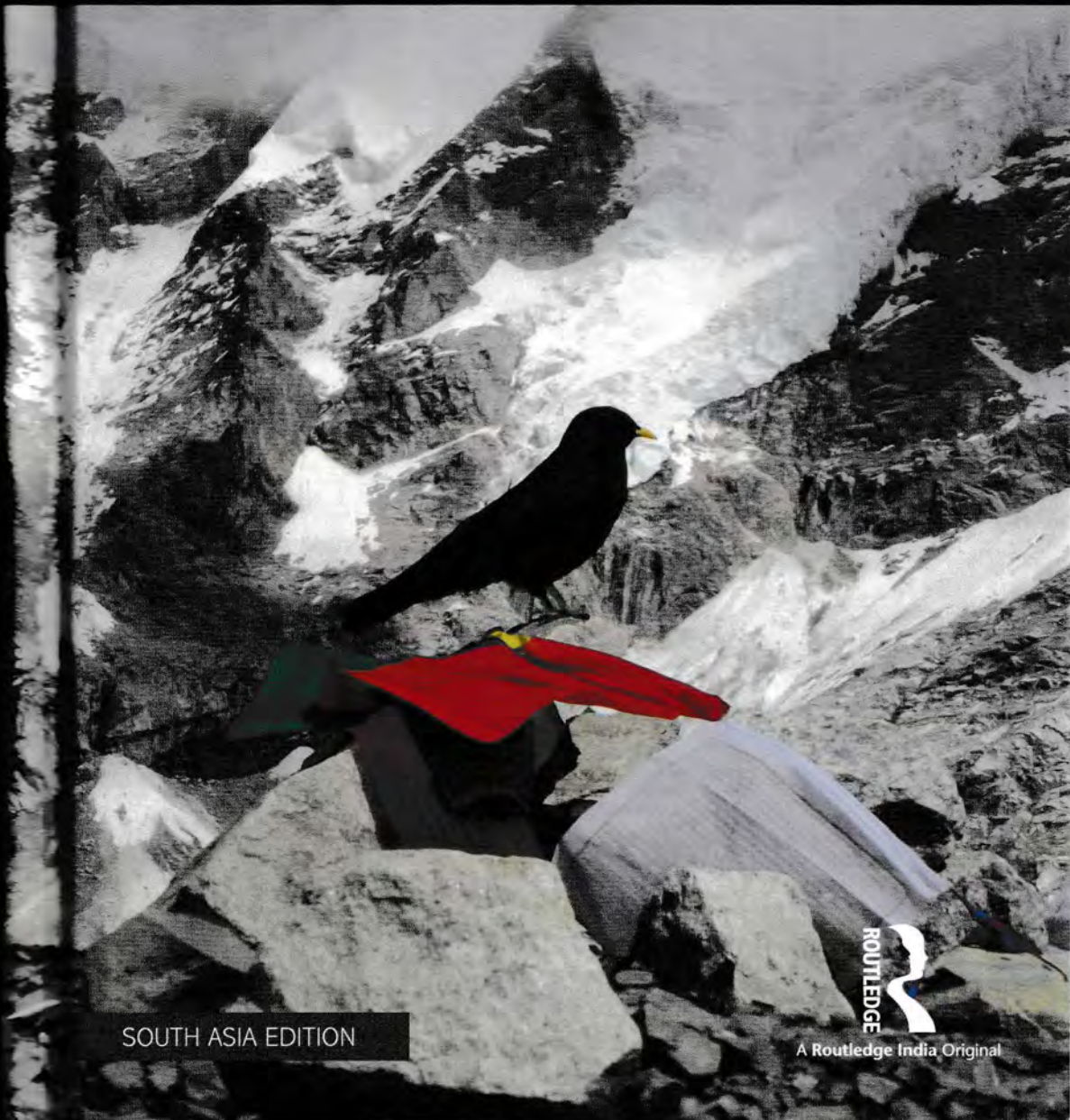
- 6 Namely at the sites of Dewal Bajh (Bajhang), Darna (Achham), Kuikana, Kirkisen, Kimugaon, Pañcadeval, Rawatkot, Lamji and Bhurti (Dailekh), and in Mehalmudi, Kotbādā and Koligaon (Kalikot).
- 7 Some bas-reliefs represent decorative patterns found in contemporary vernacular architecture (nos. 15 and 22). Animals are also depicted, with lions/tigers, birds and a goat or sheep (nos. 8, 10, 21, 24 and 30). On some occasions, animals are concomitant with anthropomorphic subjects, but it is unclear if they participate in the depicted scenes or if they are simple decorative elements (no. 8 and 30 especially).
- 8 Andolfatto 2019, vol. 2, Figs. 11.43–11.59, vol. 3, Pl. 4.26.
- 9 Ibid., Figs. 11.60–11.72, vol. 3, Pl. 4.29.
- 10 It is yet unclear if the Gela of Kalikot actually coincides with that of Puṇyamalla's lineage. The origins of this ruler are confusing and ever changing depending whether we are looking at historical documents from the Nepali or from the Tibetan side. If the two places are the one and the same, this would lead us to identify the modern Gela (*Gelā*) as the seat of the local Pāla dynasty from which Pṛthvīmalla pretends to originally belong to (Tucci 1956: 48; Pant 2009: 319; Petech 1988; Vitali 1996 and Lecomte-Tilouine 2009c: 192). However, according to the chronicle of the kings of Ngari, the *mnga' ris rgyal rabs*, Sonam De (bsod nams lde), Puṇyamalla's Tibetan name, is clearly mentioned as the ruler of Purang (Vitali 1996: 143, 453).
- 11 Lecomte-Tilouine 2009c: 210–211. These oral praises of Malayavarmā are certainly politically designed to provide a prestigious ancestry to the Rāskoṭi kings. It is probable that some of Malayavarmā's many deeds were mixed up with those of Pṛthvīmalla.
- 12 Likewise, the placing of a *deval* temple on top of a stone fountain is found only in the Jumla and Mugu districts (one example surveyed in the Dailekh district). This appears as another regional feature. The area has been under the rule of the Kalyāl dynasty, it can therefore be conjectured that the latter supported this type of architecture and, consequently, that these monuments can be dated to the post-Khaṣa Malla period.
- 13 Buddhist communities were still present in Jumla in the late 15th century, as attested by inscriptions found on stūpas in Michagaon and dated 1482 and 1501 (Tucci 1956: 41, Andolfatto 2019: 97–98). The situation was apparently much different in Dullu as demonstrated by the clear traces of vandalism visible on the 12 Buddhist stone sculptures found in the vicinity of the ancient imperial site.
- 14 Other specialists taking part in séances are enumerated in Gaborieau (1969), Campbell (1978), Unbescheid (1987) and Shrestha-Schipper (2003).
- 15 *Bāhān* are often former demons or ghosts that were subdued by a Maṣṭa.
- 16 M. Lecomte-Tilouine, personal communication.
- 17 Older texts in western Nepal are all dated using the Śaka sambat, and the year 1443 corresponds well to what is known of King Śaktisingha, who most probably ruled during the first half of the 15th century. For the details and discussion on this date, M. Lecomte-Tilouine, personal communication.
- 18 Campbell, op. cit.: 467. See also Yasuno 2018 for examples of modern strategies of resorting to the mediums' justice instead of that of the central government's authorities.
- 19 This posture is well illustrated in a picture of Bābīro's *dhāmi* published in Gaborieau 1969, Fig. 18.
- 20 Another interpretation, suggested to me by M. Lecomte-Tilouine, could identify the elements held by the main character in Figure 10.8 as a small circular shield and a sword. These objects are held by participants of *bhuwo* dances executed in western Nepal and in Kumaon (where they are known as *choliya*).

- 21 Besides these, a few monuments of the Kalikot, Dailekh and Jumla districts have carved images of Gaṇeśa on their lintels (Andolfatto 2019: 282–296). Regarding Kakrevihar, see Sharma 2012: 129–166.
- 22 The closest instance may be found at the site of Thakhampa Ri (Ngari province, Tibet), where petroglyphs have been identified as representations of “spirit mediums” (Bellezza 2013). The historical context and the identification of these petroglyphs need to be further researched.
- 23 See Cortes and Brézillon 2011: 370–371 and Andolfatto 2019: 212 for examples of 20th-century wooden sculptures of mediums on their vehicles’ shoulders.

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