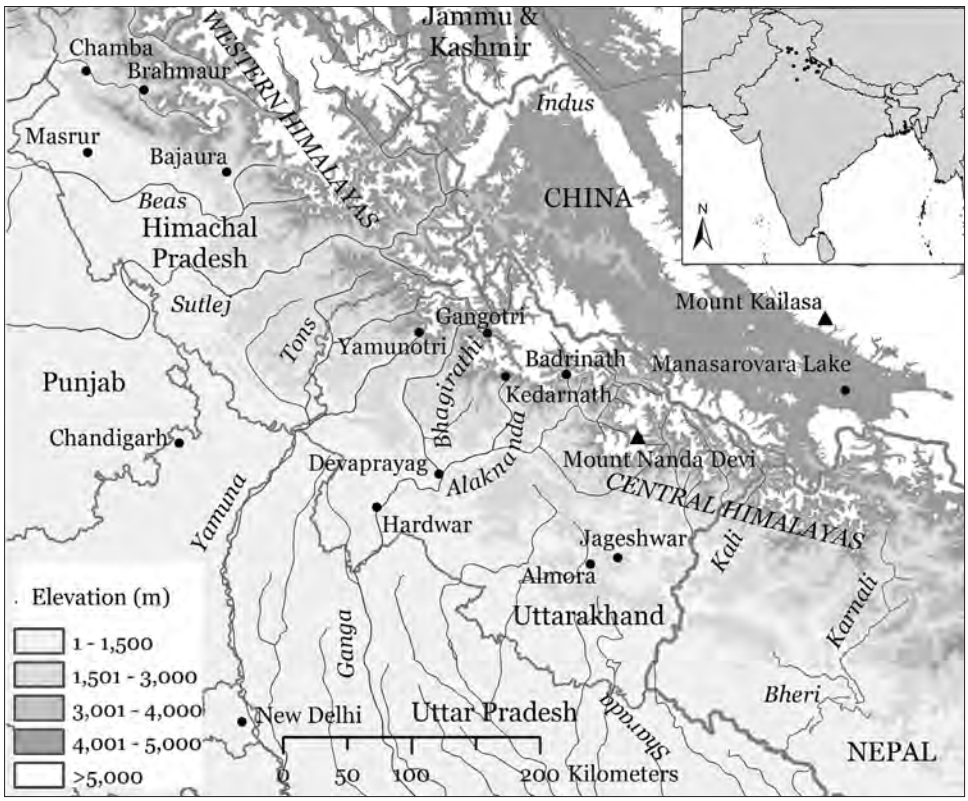
Introduction

At the sacred site of Kedarnath—located at an altitude of about 3,560 meters near a glacial source of the Ganga River in the Central Himalayas in northern India—the afternoon of June 16, 2013, was no different from any other that summer (map I.1, fig. I.1). As the sun slowly sank, scores of ascetic and lay Hindu pilgrims belonging to diverse castes and speaking dissimilar languages, who had journeyed from assorted hometowns in the plains of northern India and in even more distant regions were just reaching the holy site. Many of the ascetics had made the pilgrimage entirely on foot. The majority of lay pilgrims had traveled up to the nearby village of Gaurikund by motor vehicle. From Gaurikund they had covered the last eighteen kilometers either on foot or on horseback or in sedan chairs borne by teams of porters. Arriving in Kedarnath, these pilgrims then made their way to a temple at the center of a sedge meadow. Entering its claustral sanctum, they gained a glimpse of a dramatic rock outcrop, a sign of the great god Śiva's unswerving presence at the sacred center. Stepping out of the temple, they huddled in small groups, mostly unaware of the dark clouds that had begun to obscure the sky. Shortly after sundown, thunder heralded sheets of rain and forced pilgrims and priests to seek shelter.

The unexpected downpour was only the harbinger of a catastrophe. That night, a lake nestled in the 6,700-meter-high snowcapped mountains that ringed the hamlet overflowed its banks. Within minutes, its icy waters brought a lathering mass of moraine and scree down on the hamlet. Everything in the path of the torrent—men, women, and children, horses, houses, electric poles—was forcefully carried into the surging river. A colossal boulder hurtled down and came to a halt just behind the Kedarnath temple.

At dawn, the rain still fell, muffling the wails of survivors and thuds of collapsing houses. As the day wore on, reports of cloudbursts, landslides, and flash floods



MAP 1.1. The Central Himalayas

at Kedarnath and at a multitude of other pilgrimage centers situated near the glacial sources of the Ganga River began to inundate national and international media. Reporters described the disaster as a "Himalayan tsunami." The official death toll soon exceeded 5,700 people. Then came reports of mudslides and deluges that had pushed entire villages off mountain slopes, wrecked bridges, and destroyed many kilometers of roads. The Indian Air Force airlifted nearly 12,000 civilians to safety, and dropped lifesaving medicines and packets of precooked food at dozens of settlements.[1] As helicopters roared overhead, neighbors in Dehradun, my own hometown in the foothills of the Central Himalayas, remembered the devastating earthquakes of 1905 and 1991 and other tragedies that had struck the region. At the nearby twin towns of Rishikesh and Hardwar, where the Ganga River leaves the mountain gorges and fans out into the northern Indian plains, my friends watched the water level rise nearly five meters, sweeping an enormous concrete sculpture off its pedestal, submerging dozens of low-lying homes, and swiftly bearing away the bloated bodies of pilgrims who had perished kilometers upstream.

FIGURE I.1. Pilgrims gathering in the forecourt of the Kedarnath temple, Kedarnath, Uttarakhand, India. Photograph courtesy of James Lochtefeld

Today, some years after the catastrophe, scientists continue to debate whether climate change or unrestricted development in an ecologically fragile region was primarily responsible for the high death toll.[2] Social scientists are still trying to assess its impact on the region's economy. Army engineers are overseeing the rebuilding of bridges, roads, and telecommunication networks. Policy makers are beginning to identify new livelihoods for communities that traditionally supported themselves by helping the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who annually made journeys to this sacred landscape. The Kedarnath temple has reopened its doors. Its priests have moved mounds of moraine, leaving only the colossal boulder that had tumbled down the mountainside. Daubed with turmeric powder and wrapped in marigold garlands, the boulder itself has come to be revered. It has been given a name, Bhīma Śilā, after a mighty hero of an ancient Sanskrit epic. In October 2015, a hereditary priest at the site said to me, "Bhīma Śilā is testimony of Śiva's fondness for Kedarnath. When the glacial lake overflowed, this boulder came down to divert the thick waters away from the temple, thereby preventing its collapse."[3] The resurgence of piety and feverish rebuilding

activity, along with the robust debates at government secretariats and in the Indian media, show the profound religious and cultural significance attached to the sites. This prompts the historian to ask two fundamental and interrelated questions. First, how did the Central Himalayas emerge as a land of the gods (*deva bhūmi*)?[4] And, second, how did it develop into a sacred terrain, a focus of Hindu pilgrimage (fig. I.2)? An investigation of these two questions lies at the heart of this book.

FIGURE I.2. Pilgrims proceeding toward sacred centers, Uttarakhand

Certainly, the demographic, political, social, and economic shifts that have occurred in the past five decades have led to an increase in the number of pilgrims visiting sacred centers in India's Central Himalayas. Since 1961, India's population has tripled, rising from about 450 million to nearly 1.3 billion. In the same period, the average life expectancy at birth has dramatically increased from less than forty-two years to more than sixty-seven years.[5] This is not all. In a war fought in 1962, India's defense forces suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese army. In its aftermath, the Indian government recognized that in the age of modern geopolitics and warfare, the world's longest and loftiest mountain range no longer served as an insurmountable wall. To safeguard against future incursions, it launched a massive development program all along the country's mountainous northern border. Agencies such as the Border Roads Organization, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, and the Tehri Hydroelectric Power Company were established, granted sizable budgets, and charged with the construction of roads, tunnels, bridges, garrisons, hospitals, dams, and telecommunication pylons. These were to be built and maintained along strategic corridors in segments of the Central Himalayas that lay securely within India.[6]

Over time, these efforts stimulated the region's economy, nurtured new settlements, and introduced infrastructure that facilitated pilgrimage to select sacred centers. The foundations laid by these agencies intensified after 2000, when, owing to regional

FIGURE I.3. Nandā Devī, the highest mountain in India, Uttarakhand

demands for greater political autonomy, the Indian government carved out the state of Uttaranchal, encompassing a large swath of the Central Himalayas, from the sprawling state of Uttar Pradesh. In 2007, the state was renamed Uttarakhand.[7] Recognizing religious tourism as an important source of income for a landlocked state mostly covered by perennially snowcapped peaks and dense forests, a succession of democratically elected governments has created further amenities for pilgrims and widely publicized its initiatives. As a result of all these efforts, many more individuals now undertake sacred journeys, which, until just fifty years ago, were made by only the bravest, fittest, and most determined pilgrims.

Yet the emergence of the Central Himalayas as a *deva bhūmi* and its recognition as a significant focus of Hindu pilgrimage are the result of many more processes and upheavals than have unfolded in the past five decades. Pilgrims visiting the region today are fully aware that the Central Himalayas have a long-standing and integral association with the purifying waters of the Ganga and its important tributaries (figs. I.3, I.4, and I.5). They also know that caves, forests, meadows, rivers, icy lakes, and scalding sulfur pools in the mountainous region are charged by the lingering presence

FIGURE 1.4. (*Above*) Gaumukh, the glacial source of the Bhagirathi River, Uttarakhand. Photograph courtesy of Tapas Biala.

FIGURE 1.5. (*Right*) Upper reaches of the Bhagirathi River, Uttarakhand

of great deities, who, in ages past, fleetingly revealed themselves to their steadfast devotees. To give only a few examples, at Kedarnath, local priests tell pilgrims that the elusive Śiva assumed the form of a buffalo to hide from the Pāṇḍava brothers, allowing them only a sight of the animal's rump. At Badrinath, another pilgrimage center that suffered devastation in the 2013 flash floods, priests recount how Viṣṇu in his guise as Nārāyaṇa performed a protracted penance alongside Nara, the primordial man, in this valley. Aeons later, Viṣṇu returned to Badrinath as Narasiṃha, the man-lion, and then again as Vāmana, the dwarf. Legions of celestial musicians, dancers, and sages, among others, consequently gathered at the spot. Hindus know that undertaking a pilgrimage to places such as Badrinath and Kedarnath is a technique of self-transformation, one that helps the devotee to expunge sin (*pāpa*) and beget merit (*puṇya*). The latter is a valuable resource for a sojourner seeking to cross the stormy sea of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*).

Hindu pilgrims of the present know well that the Himalayas themselves are special. The mountains form a protective frontier, and their glimmering peaks share names with strong, pure, and shining deities: Caturbhuja, Gaṇeśa, Gaurī, Om, Nandā Devī, Nārāyaṇa, Sunandā Devī, and Nīlakaṇṭha, to name only a few. Many Hindus today have learned to regard the Himalayas as a *deva bhūmi* and the peaks as "mythological mountains" from ancient epics told to them in early childhood by their grandparents; at the same time, films, calendar art, public pageants, discourses by gurus, and teachings contained in religious texts have cemented and sustained their lifelong attachments to the region.[8] Even a man as agnostic as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), India's first prime minister, conceded his feelings. He wrote, "My own predilection is for the mountains rather than for the plains, for the hill folk rather than for the plains people. So also I prefer the frontier not only in a physical sense but because the idea of living near a frontier appeals to me intellectually." Late in life, in his last will and testament, Nehru powerfully expressed his affinity with the mountain range and its rivers, redolent with historical associations:

> She [the Ganga River] reminds me of the snow-covered peaks and the deep valleys of the Himalayas which I have loved so much, and of the rich and vast plains below, where my life and work have been cast. . . . And although I have discarded much of past tradition and custom, and am anxious that India should rid herself of all shackles that bind and constrain her and her people, . . . yet I do not wish to cut myself off from that past completely. . . . I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain that goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India; that chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. And, as witness of this desire of mine and as my last homage to India's cultural inheritance, I am making this request that a handful of my ashes be thrown into the Ganga.[9]

Such narratives and such yearnings hint at a profound awareness that the Himalayas form an exalted landscape, a place touched by divinity, a place held sacred since deep antiquity. It is the task of the historian to try to determine when the transformation of the Himalayas from a remote natural region to a sacred Hindu landscape occurred. Who were the individuals and groups primarily responsible for this tectonic shift? Why did they desire it? Were these agents well-settled residents of the Himalayas, or were they passing travelers, immigrants, or even people who never set foot in the region but imagined it from afar? If some who promoted the transformation were indeed from other places, how did their aims intersect with those of communities already living in this mountainous region? Have locations such as Kedarnath and Badrinath—which attracted nearly a million Hindu pilgrims annually in the first decade of the twenty-first century—always been the most popular places of pilgrimage in the region?[10] If not, which sites drew pilgrims in previous centuries? How did Kedarnath and Badrinath attain the prominence that they enjoy today? Why have other religious communities—especially Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs—made fewer inroads into this region? Finally, how have temple construction and the expansion of Hindu religious networks in the Central Himalayas intersected with social, political, and cultural changes elsewhere in South Asia?

This book's thesis is that the emergence of the Central Himalayas as a *deva bhūmi* was a gradual, even halting historical process involving dynamic interactions among and between many and varied communities living in the northern mountains and on the plains that lie to their south. While such entanglements can be traced both backward to deep antiquity and forward to the present, the developments that occurred approximately between the third century BCE and the twelfth century CE emerge as being especially crucial in transforming this mountainous region from a distant "natural" frontier to an exalted region and ultimately into a major locus of Hindu pilgrimage. Certain cultural factors seem key to the change: these centuries saw the creation of overlapping mosaics of polities and the sustained expansion of the notion of sacred geography. Driving the transformation of the region was the work of architects, master masons, sculptors, and their patrons. This book aims to demonstrate that through their forms, locations, and interactions with the natural environment and with processes occurring in the context of social and political life, these stone complexes were effective in evoking mythic worlds, embedding historical memories in the topography, and changing the very appearance of the mountain range, and thus altering its total semiotic effect.

LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY

The Central Himalayas encompass an area roughly corresponding in size to the combined territory of Austria and Switzerland. In their geologic and ecological constitution, they are more variegated than either of these two mountainous countries. In the

north, the range extends from the windswept Tibetan Plateau in China. Southward, the Central Himalayas extend to the dense Terai forests and tiger-infested swamplands that fringe the Gangetic (or northern) Indian plain. The Tons River sets a clear western boundary. The eastern boundary is more amorphous. It extends at least as far as the Kali River and by some reckonings up to the Karnali River. The Kali commences in India and serves today as the political border between India and Nepal, while the Karnali begins on the Tibetan Plateau and flows through western Nepal to join the Ganga in India.

Geographically and culturally, the Central Himalayas stand apart from other segments of the sprawling mountain range. While precipitation in the Western Himalayas flows into rivers that reach the Arabian Sea, the hail, rain, and snow that fall in the Central Himalayas eventually flow into the Ganga and through it into the Bay of Bengal. Magnificent in scale, the Central Himalayas consist of a series of ridges, each perceptibly higher than the preceding one. Even the front (southern) ridge rises to an altitude of nearly 2,750 meters above sea level (msl). Farther to the north, Nandā Devī, the highest peak in India, is part of the ridge that adjoins the Tibetan Plateau. It soars to an altitude of 7816 msl. Several other peaks in this final ridge rise to altitudes of more than 7,315 msl. Mighty rivers originate at the mouths of immense glaciers coiled in these highest ranges. From west to east, the most famed rivers, with the richest cultural associations, are the Yamuna, Bhagirathi, Mandakini, Alaknanda, and Kali. The Mandakini merges with the turquoise waters of the Alaknanda at Rudraprayag, and the Alaknanda converges with the bottle-green waters of the Bhagirathi 80 kilometers downstream to form the Ganga proper (fig. I.6). From Devaprayag onward, the Ganga flows to the Sundarbans delta at the rim of the Bay of Bengal, nearly 1,700 kilometers away. The sacred landscape of the Central Himalayas is watered by these glacial rivers and by countless other lesser rivers including the Aglar, Ramganga, and Kosi that begin from springs in the region's middle ridges.

In contrast to the adjacent northern plains, which are today among the world's most densely populated regions, the Central Himalayas are sparsely populated. Historically, as today, climate and topography have affected the size and distribution of the human population. Harsh temperatures and meager topsoil impede cultivation above 3,200 meters and discourage year-round habitation above this altitude. Lower altitudes are relatively densely forested, and the climate is milder. But in this zone, the slopes are often too steep to allow extensive transformation into arable terraced fields. Therefore, the largest and historically most significant settlements are found in fertile river valleys. Smaller villages tend to be perched halfway up the mountainsides, ensconced between forests and fields, resources that provide them with sustenance (fig. I.7). Other hamlets tend to be strung out along knolls; these places are sunny, relatively level, and offer splendid vistas. Mountaintops in the middle ridges of the Central Himalayas are carpeted with meadows full of herbs and wildflowers. However, as water sources at

FIGURE 1.6. The Alaknanda (left) and Bhagirathi (right) Rivers converge to form the Ganga (Ganges) River at Devaprayag, Uttarakhand

summits tend to be scarce, they seldom attract permanent settlements. Most are occupied in the summer months by seminomadic pastoralists and more sedentary agrarian communities.

The challenging topography has played its part in thwarting modern attempts to reconstruct the region's history. Even today, hundreds of settlements remain unconnected by motor roads. They also have little or no electricity, phone connectivity, piped water, or other basic amenities. Not surprisingly, in contrast to the sacred centers and sites of archaeological and cultural significance in adjoining realms—including the erstwhile kingdoms of Kashmir and Chamba, the Tibetan principalities of Guge and Purang, and the polities of the Kathmandu Valley—those located in the Central Himalayas, scarcely mapped, have found virtually no place in art historical surveys or special exhibitions produced in recent decades. These sacred centers remain understudied. In 1990, social anthropologist Dinesh Kumar wrote that "no significant work" had been undertaken on the region's Hindu pilgrimage centers.[11] In 2015, cultural historian Alex McKay reflected that this has remained "largely true."[12]

Still, to suggest that the region remains a terra incognita for archaeologists and students of religion would be incorrect. European missionaries began exploring the region

FIGURE 1.7. A typical village amid forest and terrace fields, Uttarakhand

in the seventeenth century and occasionally wrote of the fabulous wealth of its temples and the angelic quality of its sculptures.[13] From the late nineteenth century onward, certain professional archaeologists overcame the difficulties and reached Central Himalayan sites of historical and cultural significance. The most resolute among them were Harold Hargreaves, Daya Ram Sahni, Hermann Goetz, and Kanti Prasad Nautiyal.[14] At these sites they were confronted with a rich if also eclectic corpus of material remains from centuries past: boulders bearing inscriptions, fire altars, temples, water-resource structures, commemorative monuments, caravanserais, coin hoards, wooden halls, polished stone steles, and freestanding sculptures of gilt and copper alloy. As they hurriedly surveyed these materials, they discovered that not one of them bore a precise date. Even the fundamental task of formulating a chronology of landmark buildings and sculptures thus presented a challenge. Not surprisingly, the dates that these pioneering archaeologists assigned to individual monuments and sculptures have sometimes varied by five hundred years or more.

In assigning dates, these archaeologists often relied on the viewpoints of government officers posted in the region as well as influential reconstructions of the region's history authored by a heterogeneous group of nonprofessional historians: British as

well as Indian artists, army captains, lawyers, missionaries, playwrights, surveyors, and timber harvesters. As the historian Antje Linkenbach has noted, shifting ideological concerns, rather than a thorough examination of the material and textual evidence, molded their perceptions.[15] Consider, for example, the case of Ram Bahadur, a hill man who retired from service as a surgeon in the British Army. In his book *Garhwal: Ancient and Modern*, he plainly states that his account was intended to demonstrate how a "land of darkness . . . which had impregnable barriers, . . . jungles infested with thieves and furious wild beasts," and whose people had been "oppressed by previous governments," was finally enjoying the idyllic "Ram Raj of venerable antiquity" under the peaceful reign of the British King Emperor.[16] Some nationalists responded to obsequious narratives of this kind by authoring books with alternative accounts. However, their ideological commitment to showing, on the one hand, a long-standing tradition of autonomy in this frontier region and, on the other hand, its unquestioning loyalty to other polities in the Indian "heartland" frequently led them to aggrandize obscure phenomena. For example, despite a dearth of epigraphic evidence, Badri Datta Pande claimed that the short-lived Katyuri dynasty ruled over territories consisting of British Garhwal, British Kumaon, and much of Tehri State from 2500 BCE to 700 CE. In his tome, Pande also proposed that the obscure Chand dynasty gloriously reigned over the region from 700 to 1790 CE and built and maintained hundreds of stone temples, a position that has been recycled and embellished by local scholars.[17]

The need to craft a more credible working chronology of key monuments and to develop a more plausible understanding of the circumstances under which they were erected is scarcely the only challenge that confronts a scholar today. Mounds await excavation. Edifices await extrication from landslides, from hydropower reservoirs in which they lie half submerged, and even from modern habitations that have incorporated them. Many exquisitely sculpted structures, unprotected from the elements, await discovery and study. Some lie in ruins, and elements of others are strewn in millet fields, snuggled in *śāla* forests, or affixed to the retaining walls of barns. Even those monuments that have received state protection and have been conserved by government archaeologists pose problems for a student interested in the region's past, for no records have been kept of their condition before conservation. The vast majority of icons, in stone and metal, have been removed from their original find-spots. A few dozen are on display in museums in South Asia, North America, and Western Europe; hundreds are locked in older buildings that have been arbitrarily converted into safe houses. Owing to the dearth of information about their find-spots and original contexts, the task of gauging the ways in which the icons were approached, perceived, and venerated becomes challenging.[18]

South Asia is one of the greatest repositories of premodern inscriptions. These are a crucial source for writing historical narratives. However, as epigraphists working in the region know well, the inscriptions are not evenly distributed. In general, South India

has yielded far more inscriptions than North India. In 2005 government epigraphists recorded that about thirty thousand precolonial inscriptions have been found in the southern state of Tamil Nadu alone.[19] The number has certainly risen since then. In sharp contrast, fewer than two dozen inscriptions datable to the period extending from the third century BCE to the twelfth century CE—the period that is this book's primary temporal focus—have been found in the Central Himalayas. Even the adjacent Kashmir and Kathmandu valleys have yielded many more. Leaving aside for the moment the reasons for the extreme paucity of inscriptions in the region, other difficulties that impede their careful study may be noted. Many inscriptions are in fragmentary condition. Several have been moved more than once, and records of their exact location at their moment of discovery by modern scholars generally have not been kept. Two are known to be period forgeries. Some inscriptions have been lost since their discovery, and a scholar who wishes to study them today must rely entirely on published transcriptions, translations, and summaries. Moreover, while these inscriptions often mention the names of ceremonial capitals, market towns, villages, rivers, forests, pastures, and fields, it has proved impossible to determine the precise locations of most of these settlements and properties, because their names do not appear in other surviving records. Lastly, local memories surrounding the rulers and officers mentioned in the inscriptions and the activities historically undertaken at these monuments have long since faded.

ON MORPHOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

Despite many challenges, recent scholarly advances have set the stage for a fresh study of the rich corpus of material evidence that survives in the region and elsewhere and have provided new means of approaching the region's past in general and the construction of sacrality in the Central Himalayas in particular. One important insight, which has productively questioned the British colonial yearning to discover beginnings and the concomitant Indian nationalist desire to locate ageless marvels, is the understanding that the sacred is not an essential and unchanging phenomenon. Rather, that which comes to be sacralized over time can be compared to a tapestry that has been woven, rewoven, and repaired from an amalgam of diverse threads—cultural, economic, social, political, and religious. Turning the tapestry over reveals the great tangle of threads that went into its weaving. Brahmanical doctrines of an eternal religion (*sanātana dharma*) notwithstanding, Hinduism too must be regarded as a culturally constructed category. Many cardinal convictions that Hindus cherish today prove to have arisen only recently. To give just two cases, Saṃtoṣī Mā, who is accommodated in temple sanctums across northern India, came to be honored as a munificent deity only after *Jai Santoshi Ma*, a Bollywood blockbuster released in 1975, created her persona,[20] and the six orthodox schools of philosophy, which many Hindus regard as central to

their religious identity, came to be seen as belonging to a single system of belief and practice only between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.[21]

Mountains and rivers have long been revered in many parts of the world. Yet, as has been repeatedly pointed out in recent decades, the assumption that natural phenomena were accorded a similar role in belief systems ultimately perpetuates nineteenth-century universalist notions of the diffusion of world religions from the ancient Levant and subscribes to ahistorical notions of the persistence of archetypes.[22] In a related vein, scholars have effectively established that dualities earlier posited between sacred and profane, living and nonliving, sentient and nonsentient, trees and rocks, and nature and culture are neither inherent nor universally accepted. These categories and terms are historically determined, culturally specific, and subject to revision and mutation. The anthropologist Paul Feyerabend long ago rightly observed that terms that are set up as binaries are "Trojan horses which must be watched most carefully," as they conceal an observer's own prejudices.[23]

There has also been a rise in research premised on the idea that one way to begin to understand the construction and operation of sacrality is by looking at a sacred center or region over the *longue durée*.[24] A diachronic approach can reveal growth, metamorphoses, and fluctuations as well as the persistence of forms and meanings, memories and institutions. Recent studies have also articulated how interconnectedness is an important aspect of the study of sacredness. For example, in her discussion on the "grammar of sanctification," Diana Eck, a scholar of Indic religions, has identified the importance of the creation of repetitions and homologies—rather than an exclusive emphasis on uniqueness—as a crucial way of creating and maintaining sacred centers.[25] Adopting a well-known thesis proposed by the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, historian Romila Thapar has argued that the rise of great sacred centers and journeys to them promoted unity in South Asia. A place of pilgrimage, she has written, is "a meeting point for many groups of people from various regions, who would relate to each other as equals irrespective of their sectarian or caste identities in a spirit of what has been called *communitas*. Participating in a pilgrimage not only dulls the edge of social differentiations and sectarian demarcations but it also creates a temporary identity of community." While acknowledging that the entwining of different regions is crucial to the construction of sacrality, other writers have rejected the notion of *communitas*. For instance, the ethnographer William S. Sax has noted, "Hindu pilgrimage does not conform to the well-known theory of *communitas*." By focusing on the Royal Pilgrimage of the Goddess Śrī Nandā (Nandā Devī Rāj Jāt Yātra) that occurs every few years, Sax was able to put forward the idea that pilgrimage was ultimately a means of negotiating kinship structures, marital alliances, and village economics.[26]

Eck and Sax, like other scholars, are well aware that temples and steles provided devotional foci at immensely popular pilgrimage destinations such as Badrinath and Kedarnath as well as at less widely known spots of sanctity elsewhere in the mountains.

However, up to now, no scholar has recognized that the Central Himalayas contain by far the greatest surviving conglomeration of stone temples and steles in the wide swath of territory extending from Kashmir up to Kathmandu. One hundred and fifty temples and nearly two hundred steles stand at Jageshwar alone, and several hundred temples and steles are scattered elsewhere in the region (see appendix).

This corpus is a crucial archive. Much of the stone architecture and sculpture preserved in the Central Himalayas dates to the very period (fifth to twelfth centuries) in which the Himalayas emerged as a sacred landscape. This was also the period in South Asian history when ensembles of man-made objects and edifices increasingly came to be regarded as a sign of divine presence. Aniconic and iconic sculpted images carved according to iconographic and iconometric principles came to be perceived as concrete substantiations of a deity (*mūrti*). As the architectural historian Michael Willis has demonstrated, over the course of this period, at sites across the subcontinent, *mūrti*s came to be exalted as gendered, juridical beings with powers, legal rights, and extraordinary privileges.[27] By the mid-fifth century, the act of *darśana*—exchanging gazes with a consecrated and ritually enlivened *mūrti*—had also become a regularized ritual and began to occupy a crucial place in an increasingly influential strand of evolving Hinduism. Furthermore, in this century, *mūrti*s, which had hitherto been kept in the shade of a tree or sheltered in shallow caves, began to be housed in laboriously built stone edifices, frequently with square plans. In classical Sanskrit texts these edifices were variously termed *devālaya*, *mandira*, *prāsāda*, and *vimāna*. Modern scholars have generally translated all these terms as "temple," arguing that the application is not incorrect because in ancient Rome the Latin word *templum*, from which the word *temple* descends, was used for a cordoned-off square space where auguries were performed.[28]

In her two-volume study *The Hindu Temple*, a work that has been a cornerstone of the scholarly edifice on the Indian temple since its publication in 1946, the pioneering art historian Stella Kramrisch made a significant point. She explained that a temple was not merely designed and constructed as a sanctuary for divinity. Paraphrasing a dictum from an early medieval religious text, she wrote, "The concrete form of Śiva is called the House of God. Hence one should contemplate and worship it," and then she observed that a temple was equally the "house and body of god."[29] Therefore, to erect a temple was to import and activate a technology that could make an elusive and transcendent being accessible and immanent. Approaching and apprehending the temple and the settlement in which it was sited were in themselves powerful religious experiences. As a "monument of manifestation," a temple had the capacity to mediate and structure access to the divine through its sculptural programs, the arrangement and linking of spaces, the dimensions of liminal spaces such as doors, and the ordering of congregational and more private spaces.[30] In addition, a temple provided the consecrated space where ritual actions, including those that entailed the summoning of a divinity, could be practiced with greater efficacy so as to accrue blessings, a long life, and spiritual merit.

The careful documenting and interpreting of stone temples and the sculptures enshrined therein can thus give us a means of investigating the construction of sacrality. Throughout this book, I use plans, in most cases newly created, showing the orientation, scale, and disposition of parts of a selection of temples erected in the Central Himalayas as a basis for analyzing their morphologies. Recognizing the obvious limitations of using an architectural terminology based on classical Graeco-Roman forms for describing Indian temples, I use a Sanskritic terminology where appropriate. In this respect, I am indebted to the eminent architectural historian M. A. Dhaky, who over several decades codified this terminology by integrating empirical analysis, textual study, and creative inquiry.[31] Consideration of precise relationships between plans and elevations, external structures and internal systems, and original temple fabrics and later additions is also essential to this study.

Several recent books on the sacred mountain cult in Asia have, given their authors' training, been focused primarily on representations of mountains in texts and on the bodily movements and synesthetic experiences of pilgrims visiting these hallowed sites today.[32] Robert Harrist's *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China* (2008) and Wei-Cheng Lin's monograph *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mt Wutai* (2014) are two important exceptions. In his thoroughly interdisciplinary book, Harrist shows how learned engravers active before the eighth century decisively shifted the "total semiotic effect" of Shandong's highlands by engraving enormous inscriptions (*moya*) on cliff faces.[33] He also eloquently elucidates the way in which the inscriptions emphasize their authors' unseen presences. In *Building a Sacred Mountain*, Lin reconstructs the process by which rock-cut and freestanding monastic architecture datable to the seventh and eighth centuries shaped and reflected Mount Wutai's position as one of the great mountains in east-central China venerated by Buddhists. Like Harrist, Lin eschews the documentation and analysis of "building styles, structural details, and trades involved in timber-frame architecture."[34] Instead, he demonstrates the "perceptual representation and conceptual discourse" of architectural ensembles on and near sacred mountains. Like Harrist and Lin, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach and shift to poststructuralist modes of inquiry in order to examine visualization. I do, however, include stylistic analysis and the study of the communities of builders.

In this book, I use the term *style* in a formalist sense. Following art historian Meyer Schapiro's conviction that "style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artists and the broad outlook of a group are visible," I use stylistic analysis as a tool for writing a historical narrative of buildings and sculptures that have survived without a verifiable date or a find-spot in order to glean their makers' aspirations and their patrons' expectations.[35] I also use stylistic analysis in an attempt to understand how architectural knowledge was acquired and transmitted and to plot the densities and directions of the movement of

FIGURE I.8. Monolithic rock-cut shrine and water structure, ca. 850–1000, Almiya, Uttarakhand

builders. At the same time, following architectural historian Michael W. Meister's suggestion that style be understood as operating at the regional level and being inflected by political powers, and idiom as operating at the local level and being controlled by guilds, I resist categorizations such as "Himācala Style." Archaeologist Krishna Deva coined this term and popularized its usage by applying it to a diverse array of wooden and stone monuments built across a vast mountainous realm by many carpenters, masons, and stone carvers for different patrons living between the seventh and the tenth century.[36] If overlooking style entirely or using the term so loosely that it loses meaning is problematic, then studying style in isolation, apart from its use in immediate settings, also leads to methodological difficulties.[37]

The study of temple architecture requires careful consideration of place. The manner in which the story of the Bhīma Śilā boulder has been used to enhance the sacrality of Kedarnath—which it tumbled toward but spared the Kedarnath temple—shows the close linkage between temple architecture and landscape. A ninth-century monument created from a massive boulder, the Ek Hatia Deval, located near a waterfall on an old bridle path leading past Almiya village in the Central Himalayas toward Tibet, can serve as an example from an earlier historical moment (fig. I.8). Deftly cut out of a boulder on a hillside, the Ek Hatia Deval is a nearly four-meter-high north-facing shrine consisting of a sanctum surmounted by a curvilinear tower (*śikhara*, lit., "mountain

peak") and fronted by a shallow porch. At the sanctum's center, carved out of the same bolder as the rest of the shrine, is a *liṅga*, an aniconic columnar sign of Śiva, set on a raised pedestal. A narrow canal diverts some of the water from a nearby waterfall into a channel that has been expertly cut across part of the same boulder from which the Ek Hatia Deval has been liberated. This channel terminates in a pair of stone spouts from which water falls into a trough. Ultimately, this is a sacred site that began as a natural entity and was enhanced by human intervention.

Striking as the histories of two boulders at Kedarnath and Almiya made sacred might seem, they are hardly exceptions to the rule but are indicative of a broader religious attitude about the porosity of boundaries. Some residents regard every stone in the Central Himalayas as special. When I was zealously measuring an edifice at Guptakashi village near Kedarnath, a village elder expressed it in this way: "As many pebbles, so many Śivas."[38] Historically, as today, the boundaries between architecture and landscape have been neither predetermined nor fixed in meaning. Temple architects, by using a formal vocabulary familiar to given audiences, made comprehensible the sacred qualities perceived to be intrinsic to the Central Himalayas. For these reasons, I attempt to understand the construction of Hindu sacrality in the region by descriptively analyzing the "symbiology" of temple architecture and its relationship to various landscape elements. These include grottoes, rivulets, springs, forests, and even fissures where sufficient natural gas escapes to ignite a perennial flame. Maps allow visualizations of spatial relationships among and between sacred centers. The appendix offers the most comprehensive list to date—in any language—of sacred centers in the region.

In writing this history of sacred centers, I have also drawn on texts in multiple genres and Indian languages: architectural treatises, autobiographies, ballads, courtly poetry, epics, land grants, liturgical manuals, praises of places, pilgrim records, and hagiographies of sovereigns, saints, and traders, among others. All these genres contain memories of past events and historical processes as well as eyewitness perspectives on contemporaneous upheavals. Memoirs of Chinese pilgrims, European explorers, Sikh gurus, Turkic generals, and other visitors are also pertinent. In addition, oral narratives and contemporary practices I have heard and witnessed in the region or those recorded by amateur and professional ethnographers are noteworthy, for they are suggestive of possible past usages. I have taken care throughout to record geographic features that have certainly influenced the locations of sacred centers and movements of peoples. Drawing on my own travels on foot and on horseback in the company of seminomadic pastoralists, wandering ascetics, and lay pilgrims, I have factored into my analysis questions of access, tracing traditional bridle paths connecting settlements to one another as well as cart roads leading in and out of the mountain range. The diachronic dimension of my work has led me to consider the complex and layered pasts of medieval sites and to try to gauge the way in which cultural expressions and political movements of

subsequent centuries may complicate my interpretations. I introduce a comparative element, looking at the artistic accomplishments as well as political processes of other parts of South Asia that have had an impact on the forms of sacral architecture in the Central Himalayas. In all these respects, my approach is aligned with archaeologist Christopher Tilley's advocacy of adopting a phenomenological approach to the study of landscapes.[39]

MOVING MOUNTAINS

As is well known, the Himalayas are fold mountains whose formation can be traced to the impact of the collision of the drifting Indian continental plate with the Tibetan plate. This book considers the plate tectonics that shaped and reshaped this mountain range only in passing. Instead, it focuses on a series of equally dramatic relocations that have occurred in recent centuries, namely, how the social and semiotic position of mountains has shifted in Indic thought. Key to the investigation is consideration of the way that the construction of sculptural ensembles and architectural forms physically altered the appearance of mountains either by carving into them or by quarrying stones away from them and reassembling them in new configurations that are to be understood as adequate doubles of particular peaks, ultimately turning the mountain range into a meta-mountain, or, if you will, into a temple mountain. Ultimately, we see that temple mountains and mountain temples were not fully distinct.

This study melds diverse strands of evidence to investigate the construction of sacrality in the Central Himalayas and to suggest the channels that contributed to the region's eventual status as a key destination of Hindu pilgrimage, both providing a new framework for understanding the history of the region and enriching the study of Indian and Himalayan architecture and sculpture. It brings to light the presence of many new workshops of designers, master masons, and sculptors and recognizes their defining masterworks. Some masterworks, such as the seventh-century temples at Jageshwar and Palethi, prompt reconsideration of the genesis, development, and dispersion of the Phāṁsanā architectural typology (fig. I.9). Others, such as a life-size freestanding statue of a medieval donor preserved at Dandeshwar, shed light on some hitherto unrecognized points of contact among and between communities living on the Himalayas' northern and southern slopes. Yet other edifices considered here foreground categories of buildings generally overlooked and not included in the canon. Among these are buildings commemorating deceased Hindu hermits, which are considerably rarer than those honoring Buddhist monastics. Studying these commemorative monuments raises new questions about the eschatological teachings of the ascetic orders that patronized them and the conceptual capacities of their builders. Structures connected with the sustainable use of water are another often-overlooked category. Taking the

FIGURE 1.9. Temple cluster, ca. 600–present day, Jageshwar, Uttarakhand. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon

form of richly carved chambers built over the sources of springs, the existence of these edifices indicates that water was managed in a very different way in the rugged Central Himalayas than it was elsewhere in the mountain range.

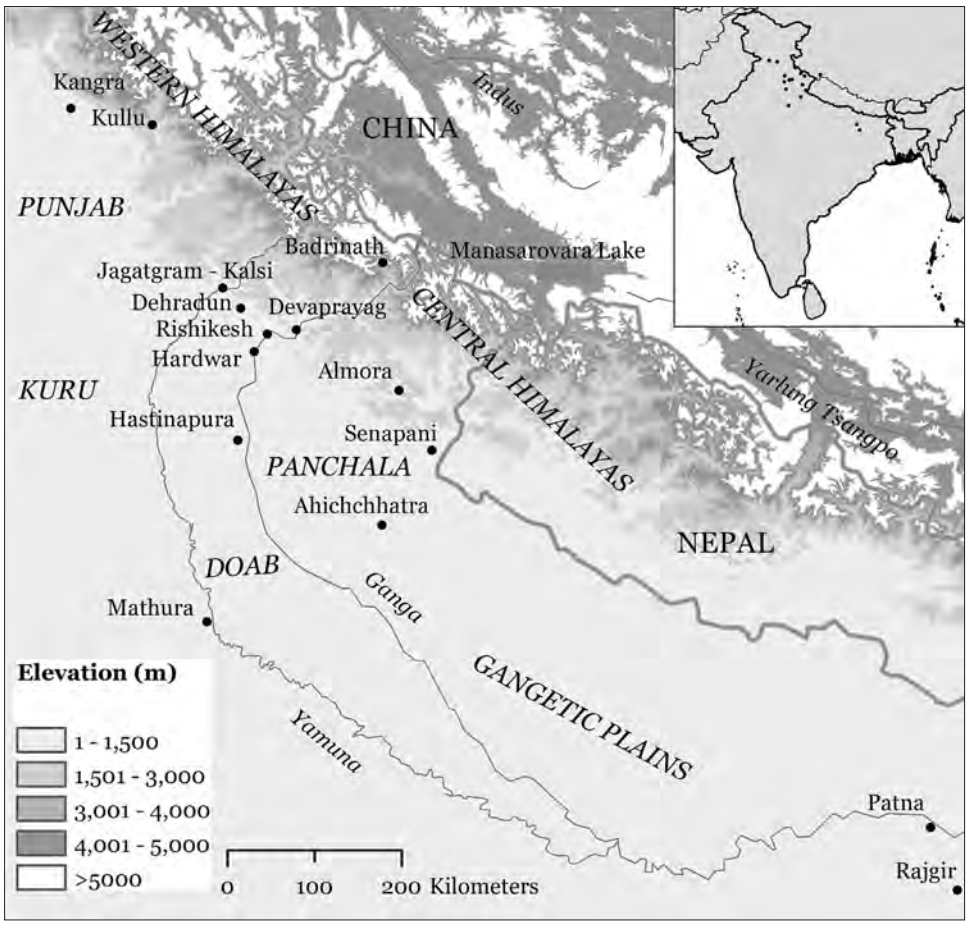
This study confronts entrenched, modern scholarly perceptions of India's premodern past. For example, the view that India emerged as a geopolitically and culturally unified realm only in the nineteenth century is an entirely modern construction. First proposed by colonial writers more than a century ago, it has recently been repeated by postcolonial historians. This book posits that, in a very real sense, an idea of India as a cultural landscape extending from frosty Himalayan peaks up to the tropical shores of the Indian Ocean began to crystallize just over two millennia ago. This perception emerged with the shift of the most active centers of cultural production from the Indus valley to the Punjab and from there to the Gangetic plain. As a consequence, the Himalayas and the mighty rivers that originate in them became increasingly entwined with the cultural, social, economic, and political lives and identities of plains communities. Ascetics, peasants, traders, warriors, and others from the plains began to move through this mountainous landscape and identified and marked select spots in enduring ways. The development and dispersion of new knowledge systems contributed to maintaining this idea, as did practices such as undertaking pilgrimages to networks of far-flung sites, writing volumes of praise about them, and patronizing the construction of stone temples. On occasion, these temples were built in grandiose imported architectural styles.

For all its variability and visibility, temple Hinduism is just one of many modes by which identity has been constructed and the divine has been apprehended in the Central Himalayas over time. Other efficacious and widespread modes—most notably *Mahābhārata* enactments, animal sacrifices, and deity and spirit possession—are beyond the scope of this book, which instead contributes a critical comprehension of the region's deep history and the construction of sacrality in centuries past.[40] While in the field, I often remembered the words of a traveler whose itinerary is reputedly described in a recension of the *Skanda Purāṇa*: "In a hundred ages of the gods, I could not tell thee of the glories of the Himalaya. As dew is dried up by morning sun, so are sins of mankind by the sights of the Himalaya." It is hoped that the patterns identified here and the propositions presented in support of them will move readers to undertake further studies of sacred Himalayan histories.

CHAPTER 1

Headed to the Himalayas

Kalsi village and its environs are crucial sites for recovering the early history of the dynamic processes by which the Central Himalayas ultimately emerged as a celebrated landscape (map 1.1). Sheltered beneath a modern structure in a field above the bank of the Yamuna River at Kalsi is an enormous quartzite boulder bearing fourteen edicts of Aśoka (r. 268–232 BCE), ancient India's most famous emperor. Situated just three kilometers downstream from Kalsi is Jagatgram village, where bricks—originally belonging to three sprawling fire altars—are strewn throughout the mango orchards. Inscriptions on these bricks record that Śīlavarman, an ambitious sovereign, erected the altars in the third century CE to celebrate an *aśvamedha yajña* (horse sacrifice) considered the most magnificent rite of Indian kingship. Students of archaeology and history have known of the inscribed boulder and bricks for decades but have barely queried their morphologies and functions.[1] Furthermore, they have paid much less attention to a host of other antiquities recovered in settlements adjacent to Kalsi and Jagatgram, including freestanding sculptures of Brahmanical and possibly Buddhist deities, coin hoards, foundations of residential buildings, and segments of sandstone railings, among much else. These facts raise important and interrelated historical questions. Why did some of early India's most influential rulers and elites seek out Kalsi and its environs? What compelled them to impose their political and religious identities on these places with such vigor? How did they understand these sites in theological and ritual terms? Who else besides imperial entourages visited these sites, and why? And which other locales were sought out by early visitors to this threshold of the Central Himalayas?



MAP 1.1. Places of archaeological and cultural significance in the Central Himalayas discussed in chapter 1

As the center of north Indian civilization shifted progressively from the Punjab to the Doab on the upper Gangetic plain, plains communities increasingly recognized the Central Himalayas along with the rivers that emerged in them as vital to their lives. Specifically, in the epoch extending from approximately the third century BCE to the third century CE, princes, merchants, and mendicants, among others, began following the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers upstream from the Doab toward their glacial sources. Some pioneering expeditions were motivated by a desire to extend empires, others by an ambition to acquire great wealth. Yet other journeys were propelled by such aspirations as forging marital alliances, hiding from foes, and avoiding the pressures of urban life. Some early pioneers who undertook these journeys viewed spots where the mountainous upper reaches of the Ganga and Yamuna began as gateways (*dvāra*s) and identified them with distinctive monuments and settlements. In all, such

peregrinations paved the way for more individuals to journey into the mountains and occasionally settle there.

TEXTS AND TEXTURES OF TIME

Numerous Sanskrit texts were composed, organized, interpolated, and critiqued well before the beginning of the Common Era. They served disparate primary ends: as ritual manuals, condensations of philosophical inquiries, and literizations of oral bardic tales overlaid with ethical injunctions and imaginative genealogies of hegemonic communities, among others. The *Rig Veda* and *Mahābhārata* are among the best known of this corpus. Neither are histories per se; they are religious texts. Yet to reject their value for studying the two-millennia period that comprises early India is as imprudent as uncritically accepting the narratives, genealogies, and time periods contained in them as historical facts.[2] These texts have been understood as "encapsulating changing societies."[3] They also contain impressions of activities of which relatively few traces have survived in the archaeological record. Furthermore, their narratives intersect with the values and workings of the communities that were influential in transforming the Central Himalayas in antiquity.[4] Finally, these texts enjoyed wide circulation in the period that is the focus of this chapter.[5] For all these reasons, the *Rig Veda* and *Mahābhārata* are important sources of information for strands of the narrative that this chapter seeks to recover.

The *Rig Veda*—the oldest and most important text of early Brahmanism—was likely organized in the mid-second millennium BCE in northwestern India when groups of agro-pastoralists who called themselves "Āryans" were present and ideologically dominant in the region.[6] The famed Puruṣasūkta (10.90) and some other hymns in the *Rig Veda* praise divine beings said to have immanent forms as well as those that lay beyond the material realm.[7] Many hymns elucidate the efficacy of sacrificial rites (*yajña*s) performed around fire altars and celebrate those who performed them. These altars were important sites for communion with divinities and for assembling and redistributing cattle, gold, grain, and other valued commodities. Yet other verses celebrate rivers. The *Rig Veda* lists more than thirty-five rivers and regards them as the earth's mothers, who promote well-being. Of these, the Indus (Sindhu), Sarasvatī, and other broad rivers whose waters pass over the Punjab in northwestern India are considered especially precious. They are praised as channels of celestial descent whose waters have the nourishing quality of milk. The Ganga—which occupies a pivotal position in the social, political, and cultural life of India in later centuries—is mentioned very briefly and only twice in the text (6.45 and 10.75). The Yamuna—revered as a goddess in later centuries—is mentioned only in passing and only three times (5.52, 7.18, and 10.75). There is no explicit discussion of the possibility of accruing merit by gazing reverentially (*darśana*) on the Ganga and Yamuna, let alone by bathing in their deep pools or

by immersing ashes of deceased kin in their swirling waters—all rites celebrated in later Indian thought and praxis.

The *Rig Veda*'s attitude toward mountains is much more ambivalent. In fact, one may even propose that "a cult of the mountain" never existed in Vedism and that the exaltation of the Himalayas began in the post-Vedic period. Hymn 10.3 contains one of the very few instances of mountains being accorded a positive association; here, they are recognized as protectors. Hymn 8.7 is perhaps the only one that acknowledges these geologic formations as the source of rivers. In the majority of other references, mountains are conceptualized as animate, if unpredictable powers whom the Vedic gods have periodically had to restrain. Indra, the king of the Vedic gods, once calmed the agitated mountains and stabilized the earth (2.12). On another occasion, Indra made the unruly mountains tremble (2.12). Other verses narrate how he demolished their peaks and cleaved them. Still other litanies praise the Māruts, Indra's aides, for making the impetuous mountains rock, reel, roar, and fall (1.39, 1.166, and 1.37). It is perhaps for these reasons that mountains are neither the beneficiaries of extended Vedic paeans (*mantra*s) nor the recipients of expensive libations poured into the sacrificial fires.

Mūjavant is one of the few mountains named and extolled in the *Rig Veda* (10.34).[8] Even so, its precise geographic location remains unexplained in the text, as is the "true" identity of the elixir Soma reputed to be found on its slopes.[9] No one is enjoined to settle on Mūjavant's slopes, circumambulate its undulating perimeters, or undertake a journey to its pinnacle. Almost the entire gamut of tropes associated with the Himalayas in classical Sanskrit literature and allied aesthetics is absent. Gandhamādana, Kailāśa, Kedāra, Mānasarovara, Dārukāvana, Badarī, Gaṅgadvāra (Hardwar/Haridwar), and many other peaks, glacial lakes, cedar forests, hermitages, and sacred centers are unmentioned. Music-loving birdmen (*kinnara*s), nymphs (*apsarā*s), wizards (*vidyādhara*s), and nearly immortal anchorites (*siddha*s) are not reported on their heights. Nor are such ethnic groups as the Khasas, Kirātas, and Nāgas described as living in their river valleys. Musk deer and pitchers brimming with gold are not hidden in their caverns. Nor do the pennants of plains emperors who defeated montane chieftains in hard-fought battles fly on their peaks.[10]

The voices and silences in the *Rig Veda* suggest that even as some of northern India's rivers were beginning to occupy an increasingly important position in the lives of the Āryans at the time of the text's organization, the Ganga, Yamuna, and Central Himalayas held more distant positions in their consciousness. Their knowledge of events transpiring in the Central Himalayas was also hazy. Furthermore, the hymns suggest that in the strands of early Brahmanism that the *Rig Veda* represents there was almost no value in seeing the Himalayas by undertaking either physical or interior journeys to them. For a while at least, the ritual of the fire altar appears to have provided priests and patrons sufficient communion with divinities, ample blessings, and adequate esteem in society.

References in ancillary Vedic texts have suggested to sociolinguists that one pastoralist Āryan clan after other eventually migrated south and east from the Punjab.[11] By approximately 1000 BCE, many clans had settled in the Doab, a fertile land bordered by the Yamuna and the Ganga. Other Āryans were pushing even farther south and east. They brought new lands under cultivation and accumulated wealth from the surplus of agricultural commodities. As populations grew, they developed more complex forms of social stratification, craft specialization, and exchange. Some influential individuals within these communities maintained faith in Vedic ideologies. Others began to support new views on life, death, and the attainment of immortality. An increasing number of individuals began to commit their lives to organizing and expanding a textual corpus. They chose to do so either as domestic householders working under the patronage of newly emerging political leaders or as renouncers of society's spaces and norms.

By cautiously intertwining clues from excavated faunal remains, pottery shards, agricultural implements, and remnants of habitations with descriptions from contemporaneous philosophical texts and ritual manuals, modern archaeologists and historians have been able to recognize the mid-first millennium BCE as a period of urbanization in the Doab and elsewhere on the northern plains.[12] In their reconstructions, new states (*janapada*s) with power concentrated at their centers as well as chiefdoms, oligarchies, cities, and towns emerged in this period. These political formations competed and cooperated with one another. Magadha, Kuru, and Pañcāla—where the walled cities of Rājagṛha, Hastināpura, and Ahichchhatra, respectively, arose—were among the most significant of these *janapada*s. Historians have also identified this period as a backdrop for the reorganization of ballads praising the lineages of legendary chieftains and armies into the *Mahābhārata* epic.[13] Bards, Brahmins, and eventually devotees of the Brahmanical god Viṣṇu were among those responsible for this process.

EPIC CONVERGENCES

Many modern historians have astutely probed the epic narrative and didactic layers of the *Mahābhārata* and found clues in it that suggest this undertaking probably occurred between the second century BCE and the second century CE. Several of these scholars have also discerned that although particular individuals and events in the *Mahābhārata* cannot be verified, the perspectives of ancient communities of their contemporaries and of those who preceded them are embedded in the text. Among the most sustained of these perspectives are those pointing to extended tensions among and between lineage-based societies, kingdoms, urban populations, agrarian communities, pastoralists, forest dwellers, and followers of Vedic deities and supporters of an emerging pantheon.

Although modern scholars have played less attention to how the Ganga River and especially the Central Himalayas pervade the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative, representations of these features indicate their growing significance for communities living in the Doab during the period in which the epic was compiled. An account near the work's beginning maintains that the celestial river Ganga fell to earth in order to aid Bhagīratha, a sagely king.[14] Generations earlier, sixty thousand of his ancestors had been burned to ash by an irate hermit's fiery gaze. Recognizing that only the Ganga's purifying waters could transport them to heaven, Bhagīratha traveled to the Himalayas and performed austerities for an extended period. Pleased with his efforts, the gods assured him that the Ganga would fall from heaven and that Śiva would control her fall to earth. Thus, the Ganga descended into Śiva's matted locks and from there tumbled onto the Himalayas. Thereafter, Bhagīratha led the rolling river to a distant spot in the northern plains where the river flowed over the ashes of his ancestors and then plummeted into the underworld.

Another episode, set near the beginning of the *Mahābhārata*, tells how Bhīṣma—the widely respected granduncle of the five Pāṇḍava brothers and their one hundred Kaurava cousins, princes of Kuru whose sworn enmity centers the epic—was born of King Śāntanu's flirtation with a manifestation of Ganga as an *apsarā*.[15] The five Pāṇḍava brothers spent their early childhood in the Himalayas, leaving for Hastināpura only after their father died.[16] In time, as Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest Pāṇḍava, prepared to ascend the throne, his four brothers set out to conquer the four cardinal directions (*digvijaya*). By doing so, they sought to ensure that their older sibling was properly recognized as a universal ruler. In the text's description of third brother Arjuna's conquest of the northern quarter, one deduces a burgeoning valorization of the north. One also gleans that locales such as Kullu (Kuluta) and Kangra (Trigarta) in the western Himalayan foothills were of increasing political interest to communities in the upper Doab.[17] From the wares that Arjuna collected as tribute from hill chieftains—horses, textiles, furs, hides, and ornaments—one understands their value for elites in the upper Doab. The absence of rare grains in the list of products brought back by Arjuna might suggest that population densities were low and agricultural intensification was yet to occur in the montane region.

The next substantial reference to the Himalayas, appearing close to the moment of Yudhiṣṭhira's coronation, is an inventory of tributes from montane kings and chieftains coerced into giving gifts. The list suggests that the Himalayas were seen as a storehouse of rarities cherished by the Doab's elites, a polyglot frontier where different ethnicities specialized in the extraction of and trade in natural resources and commodities, and that agriculture was limited in the region. It is worth quoting in its entirety.

> The kings who live by the river Śailoda between Mount Meru and Mount Mandara and enjoy the pleasing shade of bamboo and cane, the Khasas, Ekāśanas,

> Jyohas, Pradaras, Dīrghaveṇus, Paśupas, Kuṇindas, Tanganas, and Further Tanganas, they brought the gold called Pipīlika, which is granted as a boon by the *pipīlika* ants, and they brought it by the bucketsful and piles. The mighty mountain men fetched as their tribute yak-tail plumes, black and spotted and white, and still others gleaming like the moon; also much sweet honey from Himalayan flowers, and perfume with water that was brought down from the Northern Kurus; besides powerful herbs from the northern Kailāśa, and yet more; and they stood there bowing at the gate of Ajātaśatru, and they were [briefly] denied admission [to Yudhiṣṭhira's palace]. The mountain kings who live beyond the Himalayas on Sunrise Mountain, on the bank of the Vārīṣena and by the Lohitya, eaters of fruits and roots and clad in hides, brought loads of sandalwood and aloewood and agallochum, piles of hides, gems, gold, and perfumes, and myriad slave girls from the mountains, exotic birds and animals that were to be kept as pets, and many-splendored gold that had been collected from the mountains.[18]

In time, the Pāṇḍavas lost Kuru to their deceitful cousins and were exiled for fourteen years. Eager to regain their kingdom, Yudhiṣṭhira encouraged Arjuna to go to the Himalayas and obtain a formidable weapon from Śiva.[19] Dutifully, Arjuna proceeded toward the Ganga's upper reaches and performed austerities. One day, a wild boar charged him. Just as the Pāṇḍava released an arrow from his bow, he saw another arrow striking the beast. Arjuna soon discovered that a mountain man (Kirāta) had released this arrow, and an intense struggle ensued as neither was willing to abandon his claim over the carcass. Defeating Arjuna, the Kirāta revealed himself to be the great god Śiva, who then gifted a formidable weapon to Arjuna and imparted the knowledge of its use. Thereafter, several Vedic gods appeared before Arjuna and presented him with weapons as well. In addition to disclosing a perception of the mountain range as a resource base for political refugees, this episode demonstrates an understanding of it as a suitable place for direct communion with an expanding pantheon. Finally, it suggests some familiarity with a riverine route leading from the northern plains through the Doab into the Central Himalayas.

Even as Arjuna was battling the Kirāta, two elderly sages were counseling his brothers on the merits of undertaking a pilgrimage.[20] The sages explained that Vedic *yajña*s were beyond the reach of most people. They required specialized implements, ritual specialists, and ample gold, cattle, and grain for gifts to Brahmins. In contrast, pilgrimage was accessible to the masses: it required resolve but little material outlay. It was more efficacious than Vedic rites for it actualized symbolic directional movements undertaken at a fire altar to create an empowered place. Thereafter, the sages laid out two possible circuits of Bhārata, the land extending from the Himalayas to the southern ocean. One pilgrimage entailed a grand circumambulation of Bhārata, the other

an expedition to its four cardinal directions. Subsequently, the four Pāṇḍavas commenced an ambitious pilgrimage in Bhārata. During its course, they purified themselves by giving alms, performing ablutions, and acting in a spirit of friendliness toward strangers.

Eventually, hoping to reunite with Arjuna, they made their way toward the Central Himalayas (fig. 1.1). As Yudhiṣṭhira stood at Hardwar, the gateway to the Ganga's upper reaches, the sage Lomaśa exhorted Ganga, goddess and river, to protect the prince as he set forth on a journey into the mountains. He chanted:

> O Goddess Ganges [Gaṅgā], I hear thy sound
> On Indra's golden mountaintop;
> Protect him, good lady, from these mountains,
> This king whom all the Ājamīḍhas honor.
> As the prince stands ready to enter these mountains,
> Be his protectress, thou child of the mountains![21]

Recognizing the dangers that lay ahead, the Pāṇḍavas fortified themselves by redoubling their commitment to a virtuous lifestyle. They then began their journey to the Ganga's upper reaches. Narrowly escaping from natural catastrophes and seductions, the Pāṇḍavas eventually reached Badrinath, variously called Badarī, and Badarīkāśrama in the epic. In its sylvan environs, they spent six restful years.

In the *Mahābhārata*, Badrīkāśrama is pictured as a tranquil hermitage beneath the grand canopy of a massive *badarī* (jujube) tree on the Ganga's banks. Over numerous eons, many legendary sages are said to have performed great austerities here. In one aeon, while performing austerities at Badarīkāśrama, Manu, humanity's progenitor, found a small fish in distress and saved its life. Decades later, in the midst of a cataclysmic flood, the fish moored Manu's vessel to the highest peak in the Himalayas and helped him disembark to safety. In another age, Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme Being, performed a protracted penance with Nara, the primordial man, at the same site. Nārāyaṇa subsequently remained in residence as a great yogi at Badarīkāśrama. His perennial presence, the *Mahābhārata* reports, drew *apsarā*s, *gandharva*s (celestial musicians), and wise *siddha*s. While at Badarīkāśrama, the Pāṇḍavas passed their days receiving the blessings of wise men and appreciating the landscape. They admired the glistening ridges of Mount Gandhamādana and other peaks, trees laden with blossoms and sweet fruit in all seasons, the calls of birds, and the smell of flowers drifting through the air.

The foregoing episodes suggest the rise of new discourses that exhorted individuals to undertake aesthetic explorations of the Himalayas. They also point to the emergence of discourses on sacred centers and pilgrimage circuits. In the *Mahābhārata*, the word *tīrtha* is used to denote a sacred center. Its etymological meaning, as a place where a river may be crossed, is echoed by the locations of Hardwar, Kankhala, and

FIGURE 1.1. Sita Ram, Hardwar, gateway to the upper reaches of the Ganga River, 1814. Courtesy of the British Library, London

Badarīkāśrama—the three Central Himalayan *tīrtha*s listed in the epic. Furthermore, as the epic's description of Badarīkāśrama suggests, a *tīrtha* is a spot exalted for its geography, ecology, and integral association with exemplary beings. This association is believed to imbue the place with a particular potency, which visitors are said to imbibe partly through their meetings with these exemplary beings and partly through their sensory experience. Visitors who reach a *tīrtha* long after its visitation by exemplary beings may still attain various rewards merely by knowing of the spot's storied past. The epic's narrations and descriptions further indicate that even if an ambitious pilgrimage (*yātra*) is reminiscent of a *digvijaya* undertaken by kings seeking to conquer the world, it is different from the latter in three ways. First, *yātra* entails the adoption of a model code of conduct throughout a prolonged and arduous journey. Second, theoretically at least, a network of waterways and narratives of the virtuous deeds of gods, goddesses, sages, and legendary heroes connects *tīrtha*s, not the well-worn tracks of merchants' caravans and warlords' chariots. Third, the recollection of foundation narratives of *tīrtha*s by pilgrims distinguish a *yātra* from a *digvijaya*.

The praises of *tīrtha*s that peripatetic and resident seers sing to the Pāṇḍavas upon their arrival at widely separated sacred centers can be understood as the dispersion of bards (*sūta*s) in ancient India. They may also be comprehended as *sūta*s competing with one another to find audiences and recognition. The most successful *sūta*s seem to have attracted the attention of royal visitors at a *tīrtha*, modulated their perception of it, and inspired them to journey on to other sacred centers.[22]

Later events in the *Mahābhārata* point toward other budding attitudes toward the Himalayas. After reuniting with Arjuna, the Pāṇḍavas began their descent from Badarīkāśrama to the northern plains, where they planned, fought, and won a colossal war against the Kauravas. Even so, the mountain range and its rivers pervaded their lives. For instance, Kṛṣṇa declared—while revealing his cosmic form to Arjuna in the midst of the war being fought on the Kurukṣetra plain—that among the immobile phenomena, he was Himālaya, and among rivers, the Ganga. Following his reinstallation, Yudhiṣṭhira was eager to cleanse himself and his subjects of the stains of the war. At Hastināpura, his counselors advised him that an *aśvamedha yajña* would help him accomplish this objective. When Yudhiṣṭhira expressed his inability to execute the Vedic rite because the imperial treasury had been drained by the war, his counselors informed him of a hoard of gold hidden in the Himalayas. Eager to acquire this hoard, Yudhiṣṭhira organized an expedition under the leadership of Arjuna, who brought back the gold, and an *aśvamedha yajña* was performed with great pomp.[23]

After enlarging their kingdom and ruling for many years, the Pāṇḍava brothers resolved to leave the material world forever. Anointing their heirs, they left their capital in the upper Doab for the Himalayas, which they perceived to be a staircase to heaven. Initially, the strength that the Pāṇḍavas had accrued from their virtuous deeds propelled them onward. Eventually, as their reservoirs of accumulated virtue began to diminish, so did their strength. One by one, the brothers and their co-wife collapsed on the slopes of the high mountains. Yudhiṣṭhira alone reached the highest pinnacle. There, he ascended a heavenly chariot that took him to a celestial realm where he was reunited eternally with his siblings and co-wife.

EMPIRES, EDICTS, AND ELEPHANTS

Embedded in the *Mahābhārata* are a consciousness of a more distant past, a somewhat nostalgic interpretation of it, and an active engagement with select processes occurring closer to the very centuries in which the oral epic was being composed, enlarged, and circulated. An examination of archaeological materials and inscriptions demonstrates that during the centuries when the oral epic was being redacted (ca. 150 BCE–200 CE), elite communities in the Doab and elsewhere on the northern plains were beginning to value and visit segments of the Central Himalayas. Regardless of whether their

approaches paralleled those eulogized in the epic or departed from them, each crucially contributed to the gradual physical alteration and acclamation of this region.

Some of the earliest and most significant pieces of material culture close to the period when the *Mahābhārata* was being ordered as a coherent epic are preserved in the peripheries of the Dehradun valley. Nestled between the last range of Himalayan foothills and the Śivalik hills, this valley is broadest at its center and tapers toward its eastern and western edges. At Rishikesh—a settlement on the valley's eastern periphery—the Ganga leaves the Himalayan gorges and begins to meander through the Śivaliks toward Hardwar. Near Dakpathar, on the valley's western periphery, the Tons meets the Yamuna. A few kilometers upstream at Kalsi, the Yamuna leaves the Himalayas and turns due south.

As mentioned before, situated in a terrace field above the Yamuna's bank at Kalsi is a three-meter-high white quartzite boulder bearing fourteen edicts of Aśoka Maurya.[24] Early India's most famous emperor, Aśoka presided over an empire of unprecedented dimensions that claimed much of the subcontinent: from Laghman in the northwest to Brahmagiri in the southeast and from Girnar in the west to Dhauli in the east.[25]

The edicts record the voices of a few statesmen seeking to fashion and sustain a new type of space in the boulder's immediate environs and in distant lands also held by the Mauryas.[26] One voice, asserting to be Aśoka's, prescribes a novel ethical and legal code that eschews violence, emphasizes timely and generous assistance to the needy, and calls for religious tolerance. It cautions against undertaking militaristic conquests and advocates moral victories as the only successes of import and lasting consequence. A second voice—presumably of a person close to the emperor—describes how Aśoka, moved by the destruction caused by the conquest of Kalinga, had begun to follow the lifestyle he was prescribing for his subjects. It also reports the emperor's charitable acts, such as dispatching physicians to the countryside and planting trees and digging wells along highways. A third voice, seemingly that of an emperor's unnamed deputy, prohibits animal slaughter and congregations of festive crowds at the site.

Studies of the edicts at Kalsi have focused assiduously on the inscriptions' text, based on a rubbing that has allowed for the uniformly sized and incised letters to be read clearly and has permitted astute translations and careful orthographic analyses. However, the emphasis on rubbings for studying Aśoka's edicts has largely obscured the fact that careful orchestration of voices and words are only two of the many vehicles through which the Kalsi edict conveys its meaning and function. The materiality of inscriptions is just as important as their written message.[27] Studying the edicts in situ makes it clear that the choice of language and script, the arrangement of the engraved letters on the boulder, and Kalsi's location in the landscape of Mauryan India also suggest meaning and purpose.

The edicts were composed in a form of Prakrit inflected by Magadhi dialect.[28] In the third century BCE, this mixed language was spoken on the eastern Gangetic plain

FIGURE 1.2. Incised drawing of a white elephant on the Mauryan edict, ca. 268–232 BCE, Kalsi, Uttarakhand

where Pāṭaliputra, Aśoka's capital, was located. Many non-elite communities, including Buddhist monastics with whom Aśoka sympathized, also used the language.[29] The Brahmi script's origins remain debated, but it is clear that it was used in courtly contexts in Mauryan times.

At first glance, the large Brahmi letters precisely carved in neat rows on the boulder suggest an order distinct from those of many ancient glyphs and other markings on rocks.[30] Closer scrutiny establishes that the edicts were so arranged that those able to read the script would be led on a clockwise circumambulation of the boulder, a rite also associated with Buddhist and Brahmanical ceremonies. The first ten edicts are written on the boulder's eastern face, the next four on its southern face. A drawing of a male elephant is deeply incised on the boulder's northern face. While the animal's contours were formed with a burin, the boulder's undulating surface, with its soft protuberances and crevices, endows the image with a pulsating volume and accentuates the elephant's dewlaps (fig. 1.2). The latter also hint at equivalence between the carved animal and the boulder. The ambiguous location of the compound Prakrit word "best elephant" (*gajatame*) below the incised animal only accentuates this correspondence.

All forms of visual representation make present something that is not there. Through suggestion, Mauryan engravers working at Kalsi made the presence of an animal admired in Buddhist lore concretely felt. This in turn allowed them to project the emperor's edicts as metonyms of Buddhist teachings. It also encouraged the subtle

recasting of Kalsi from an otherwise undistinguished village into an incipient Buddhist center.

Kalsi's location may also have drawn the Mauryas to it. The village lay along a viable riverine passageway into the mountains. By this river route, luxury goods ranging from the strong *haimvata* poison to yak-tails used for making *chowri*s (fly whisks) that were valued in the Mauryan court, could be brought down from the heights and funneled directly into the Uttarāpatha.[31] This network of roads, crisscrossed by feeder routes and arteries, ran just south of the Himalayan foothills from Taxila in the northwest to Pāṭaliputra in the northeast.[32] The Mauryas may also have chosen Kalsi because the forests around it were stocked with wild elephants.[33] They caught elephants in the wild and trained the animals for peacetime operations and for war. They also periodically supplied hundreds of trained elephants to the Seleucid Hellenistic state founded on the northwestern borderlands of South Asia following Alexander's militaristic expedition.[34] In this light, the incised drawing of an elephant and the names of Hellenistic rulers on the boulder attain additional significance. It also become possible to see Kalsi as a depot where the Mauryas supervised the trapping and training of elephants.

A final reason for the Mauryas' choice of Kalsi is that, unlike nearby regions, its mild climate allowed habitation. To Kalsi's immediate south lies the Terai. With its mosaic of moist, tiger-infested forests, once impenetrable grasslands, and swampy bowls, this belt was unsuitable for extensive human habitation. To the north are the high Himalayas, where ample snowfall precludes year-round habitation. Thus, by establishing a visible presence at Kalsi, a distant but enviable location, Aśoka could also claim that his empire stretched beyond the traditional boundaries of Āryavarta, all the way to the Himalayas.[35] Such a claim would have buttressed his desire to be recognized as a universal emperor (*cakravartin*).

THE CURRENCY OF SANDSTONE

After Aśoka's death, the empire forged by the Mauryas began to splinter and eventually collapsed. Thereafter, a succession of dynasties came to rule lands once under the Mauryas. The Śuṅga dynasty, which held sway from approximately the early second century BCE to the late first century CE, was initially prominent. Following the Śuṅgas' decline, the Kuṣāṇas, who ruled from approximately the early first century to the late fourth century, rose in power and prestige. During these centuries, a new network of cultural nodes and urban centers rose to great prominence. Mathura, a city close to pink sandstone quarries and to the Yamuna River, was the foremost of these centers. It was home to Brahmins, Jains, and Buddhists, all of whom sought the services of sculptors to create sandstone statuary for them. This much is well known to scholars.[36] What has hitherto not been discerned is that Mathura's growth as a religious and artistic center intersected with an interest in bringing places upstream into the sacred geography of

evolving Brahmanism and Buddhism and possibly into the ambit of new geopolitical alliances.

Spotted pinkish sandstone sculptures that lie around the Aśokan edict's perimeter recount a story of Mathura's previously undiscerned connections with post-Mauryan Kalsi. One of these fragments is a sculpture of a lion. The beast—visualized as having a circular face with small ears, large eyes, stubby nose, and cleft mouth—is given a regal mane composed of rows of curling locks. The graceful curvature of the neck and position of the head imply that the animal was portrayed in a formal, erect posture with his hind legs bent under him and forelegs straight. Since sandstone is not endemic to this mountainous region and the lion's form and posture are relatable to mottled sandstone sculptures made in approximately the first century in Mathura, this piece may well have been ferried upstream.[37] Even if it is impossible to determine whether the choice to set a lion beside the elephant boulder was politically motivated—as it was in later centuries in many parts of India, when the intent was to suggest an emperor's victory on a battlefield—the sandstone lion's presence at Kalsi visually proclaims a shift in the site's orientation from Pāṭaliputra to Mathura.

FIGURE 1.3. Śiva, ca. 1–99 CE, Bharat Mandir, Rishikesh, Uttarakhand

Concurrently, Rishikesh, which lies about one hundred kilometers east of Kalsi on the Ganga's banks, came to be connected with Mathura. In the past four decades, informal excavations in various neighborhoods of Rishikesh town have yielded many artifacts from centuries past. The most spectacular of these finds is a pair of nearly life-size statues of a male and a female excavated at the stepped bathing platform (*ghāṭ*) leading to the water's edge, in front of the frequently rebuilt Bharata temple.[38] To use the content of these works of art and their find-spots as documents of history, we must first understand their form, provisionally date them, identify their probable place of manufacture, and ultimately reconstruct links between the place of manufacture and the foothills.

The 1.5-meter-high male figure is one of the earliest figural representations of Śiva (fig. 1.3). Stylistically, the Rishikesh sculpture is relatable to a well-known corpus of

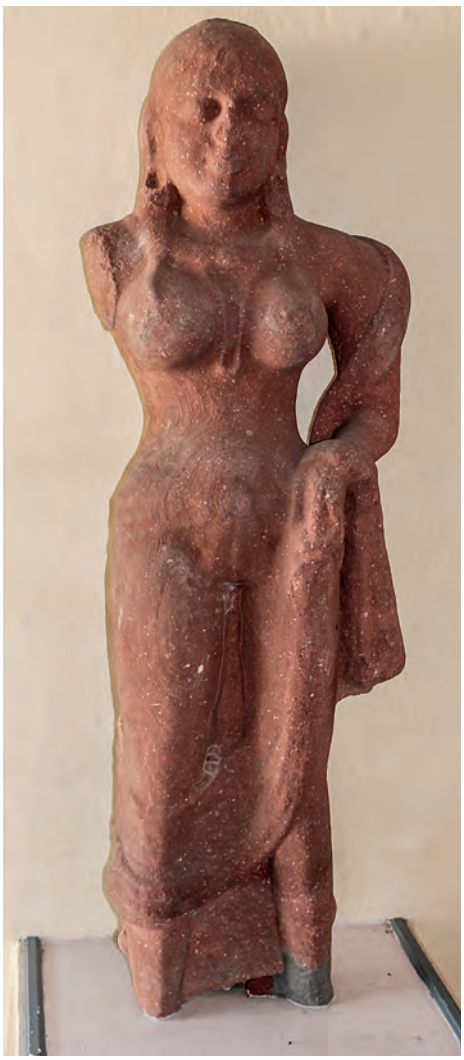


FIGURE 1.4. (*Left*) Pārvatī (?), ca. 1–99 CE, Bharat Mandir, Rishikesh

FIGURE 1.5. (*Right*) *Chowri* bearer, 300–200 BCE, Didarganj, Patna. Photograph courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon

freestanding sculptures of masculine nature spirits (*yakṣa*s) found around Mathura and made at the cusp of the Śuṅga and Kuṣāṇa periods. In its iconography, and choice of material, it comes closest to two contemporaneous sculptures of Śiva from the Mathura region.[39]

The female figure excavated alongside the sculpture of Śiva has been compared in form to the renowned *chowri* bearer from Didarganj, just outside Pātalīputra, which likely had been made no more than a century before her (figs. 1.4, 1.5).[40] Both female

figures have large circular faces with almond-shaped eyes, a nose with a sunken bridge, and a delicate smile. Simple necklaces encased in the spaces between their spherical breasts ornament their bare upper bodies. Girdles composed of strands of beads hold their hip-hugging lower garments in place; however, it may be worth reconsidering archaeologist Siddiqi's conclusion that both figures represent feminine nature spirits (*yakṣī*s). The Didarganj *chowri* represents an attending figure or a refined courtesan (*gaṇikā*).[41] Clues to the Rishikesh figure's identity may be gleaned by studying its attributes and comparing it to the previously described sculpture of Śiva beside which it was found. Learning about the figure's identity can shed light on communities and their aspirations to sacralize the region.

In keeping with a custom evident in contemporaneous sculptures of lovers and donor couples, the female figure (125 cm high) excavated at Rishikesh is perceptibly shorter than its male counterpart.[42] But height aside, the bare-chested couple is united by their iconic postures and the forms of their ornaments and dress. Both wear loop earrings, plain necklaces, and long scarves whose folds are delineated by deep furrows. From what is discernible of the female figure's legs, it appears that they too were firmly planted on a pedestal. Its right arm is broken off at the armpit, but the upper arm clearly must have turned downward rather than upward. The object held in the left hand is severely abraded, but its shape and position indicate that it may have been a water pot (*kamaṇḍalu*), such as the one held in Śiva's left hand. No female figure that has been securely identified as a *yakṣī* is shown holding this object, which has generally been associated with those who renounce the world.[43] However, Pārvatī—the daughter of the snowy mountain, who performed protracted penance (*tapas*) to win Śiva's hand in marriage—is often shown holding a *kamaṇḍalu* in later Indian art. Thus, it is likely that this sculpture from Rishikesh depicts her.[44] If this attribution is correct, then the sculptures represent the earliest surviving paired images of Śiva and Pārvatī, a duo that became a popular subject in Indian art from the fourth century onward.

Mathura is a few hundred kilometers downstream from the Himalayan foothills. Still, the Mathura provenance of the sculptures is not surprising. Recall that Mathura was located close to pink sandstone quarries and that it was a leading center of sculpture production. By the advent of the Kūṣāṇa period, Mathura's location on the banks of the Yamuna and its governance by kings who tolerated various religious ideologies had contributed to its rise as an important Śaiva center. Nearly a dozen freestanding sandstone *liṅga*s and many partially preserved full-length sculptures of Śiva excavated in Mathura attest to this. Additionally, the discovery of Mathura sandstone sculptures not just downstream and upstream but as far away as Taxila suggests that Mathura was a major exporter. Meanwhile, as the foregoing discussion of the *Mahābhārata* has demonstrated, by this very period, the Central Himalayas, the Ganga, Hardwar, and Śiva's mythology were increasingly perceived as connected to one another. Setting a statue of

Śiva carved of a permanent and prestigious material on the riverbank just above Hardwar would have marked the site's association with Śiva (or Hara, as he is called in many texts) in materially tangible and enduring ways. Meanwhile, the logistics involved in commissioning, transporting, and establishing this image would also have cemented associations between some of Mathurā's residents and those of Rishikesh. The statue may have also inspired some contemporary Brahmins living in the Dehradun valley—who saw themselves as living in Droṇaghati,[45] named after Droṇa, the teacher of the Pāṇḍavas—to travel to nearby Rishikesh.

Even as Droṇaghati's residents and Śaivas at neighboring Rishikesh were possibly beginning to embrace aspects of the *Mahābhārata*'s ordering of their landscape as a way of claiming status and strengthening contact with communities living in places eulogized by the epic, Buddhists and Jains on the northern plains were also moving into the foothills of the mountains to claim these locations for themselves. The carved upright and horizontal bars and copingstones of a sandstone railing erected at a sacred spot in the Senapani forest in the foothills well east of Rishikesh are a case in point.[46] Gauging from the material used, construction techniques, and surface ornamentation consisting of lotus medallions and guardian figures, it would appear that the railing was prefabricated around Mathura, then carefully dismantled and transported to the Senapani forest, where it was dexterously reinstalled. In Mathura, such railings were frequently erected around Buddhist and Jain sites; however, the absence of sectarian emblems on the surviving pieces of the railing's medallions prevents one from ascertaining the precise sectarian identities of its promoters. What is clear, though, is that they had ample resources.

CIRCULATING COPPER AND SILVER

Mathura sandstone sculptures and architectural ensembles were not the only durable artifices fashioned on the Indian plains and valued and circulated in the Central Himalayas. Hoards of copper and silver coins suggest that currency was treasured as well. Yet who minted these coins, and who hoarded them? And what does their presence tell about evolving perceptions of the Himalayas and the communities visiting and living in them?

Uncovered in large numbers around Kalsi, Hardwar, and Rishikesh and in hamlets upstream from them, as well as in smaller numbers in the Almora hills, these treasures total several thousand pieces.[47] A century of scholarship has finally determined that the Kuṇiṇṇdas and Yaudheyas issued almost all of these coins, which date mostly from the first century BCE to the third century CE.[48] Historians have convincingly established that the Kuṇiṇṇda and Yaudheya coins found in these mountains were occasionally made from the very same molds that produced coins recovered from the Yamuna's banks in Haryana and the Simla hills in Himachal Pradesh.

Nearly half a century ago, Kanti Prasad Nautiyal, along with other archaeologists of his generation, perceived the Kuṇiṇṇda coins as evidence of the conquest and control of the Kuṇiṇṇda "dynasty," which rose "from a minor hill tribe [to] enjoy considerable dominance over a large area by sheer dint of effort."[49] More recently, however, historians have questioned such characterizations. It is now believed that the Kuṇiṇṇdas and Yaudheyas were clan-based confederations, each consisting of many chieftains and their clansmen, which were scattered over a large geographic area. By mediating trade and intercourse along old and new corridors, these confederations tried to occupy some breaches in northern India that had been opened up by the decline of the Mauryas, Śuṅgas, and Indo-Greek dynasties. One of the many differences between these clan-based oligarchies and the previously mentioned empires was that they sought legitimacy by establishing connections with burgeoning Brahmanical orders, especially Śaiva, rather than Buddhist and Jain sects.[50]

References in the inscriptional record and from the shifting distribution of their coins, suggest that the Yaudheyas occasionally held sway over the northern plains and "threatened to cut the main line of communication of the Kushanshahr from Gandhara to Mathura."[51] At other moments, they seem to have been pushed to peripheral areas, where they continued to prosper. However, since coins need not represent either an exodus or an incursion but could suggest simply a dedication to trade, the hoards found in the Central Himalayas cannot be viewed as evidence of full-scale Kuṇiṇṇda and Yaudheya invasions. The distribution and abundance of coins in this region would imply that hill communities who lived around the gateway towns of Rishikesh-Hardwar and Kalsi benefited significantly by trading with these confederacies and may well have established toll collection practices.[52]

Even if the identity of the edifices represented on some Yaudheya coins remains an open question, the fact that fewer coins minted by this oligarchy have been found in the Almora hills—well east of the previously mentioned gateway—would suggest that their residents' participation in such transactions was limited. Local chieftains in these hills, however, issued an independent class of silver coins that have been found only around Almora town. That these chieftains bore Śaiva names such as Śivadatta, Haradatta, and Śivapālita and that one of them took the modest title of raja indicate that Śiva's followers made early inroads into this region and Sanskrit was adopted for select purposes beyond those associated with Vedic ritual.[53] The coins depict a bull sitting in front of a tree-in-railing motif that has been read by some as a depiction of Nandi sitting before the *devadāra* (*Cedrus deodara*). In later centuries, this tree species would come to be closely associated with Śiva's mythology in the Almora hills.

In all, the coin hoards found around and upstream from these gateway towns indicate that these confederacies not only moderated trade throughout the region but also brought some prosperity. The exchange of brides and presents may have occasionally consolidated business alliances. Such alliances served as seeds of a subregional identity

that transcended loyalty to one's immediate family and clan and was connected to a deeper attachment to the land, if not to its gods.

SETTING OUT WITH HAWKS AND HORSES

As Kuṣāṇa rule and the influence of confederations gradually began to wane in northern India in the third century, new lineages of militaristic elites turned their gaze to the foothills of the Central Himalayas. They sought to expand their kingdoms through conquest, trade regulation, and the acquisition and redistribution of surplus resources. The remains of three burned-brick fire altars erected by Śīlavarman in conjunction with the fourth *aśvamedha yajña* that he conducted during his reign are illustrative of this process and its impact on the progressive exaltation of this landscape.

A summary of the key ceremonies and ideology of the *aśvamedha yajña* are a necessary prelude to ascertaining Śīlavarman's intentions and feats. Briefly, the rite involved releasing a caparisoned stallion for a year over lands that the ruler sponsoring the *yajña* wished to annex. An armed battalion of elite warriors followed the stallion and waged war against chieftains who obstructed the stallion's movements over their lands or otherwise refused to acknowledge the suzerainty of the ritual's sponsor. While the horse wandered, the sponsoring ruler, his family, and courtiers gathered at a chosen site to participate in rites performed around three meaningfully designed and carefully built large burned-brick fire altars and ancillary buildings made of less permanent materials. These rites involved acquiring vast resources, including cattle, clarified butter, grain, herbs, and gold. The tongues of fire that leaped up from the fire altars consumed some of the materials, while the rite's sponsors ceremonially consumed others. Still other materials were distributed to officiating Brahmins and other groups. At the close of the year, the stallion was brought to the site of the fire altars and slain. Finally, rites for fertility and prosperity involving the butchered horse and the sponsor's chief wife were carried out.[54]

Some bricks used to erect the fire altars bear inscriptions identifying Śīlavarman as "the lord of Yugaśailā, the Yugeśvara." Other inscribed bricks describe him as belonging to the Vṛṣagaṇa clan (*gotra*) and a descendant of Poṇa. Since these names do not reappear in the inscriptional record, it has been difficult to glean much more about Śīlavarman's ancestry, his allegiances, and the location of his capital.

CONCLUSION

Despite crucial losses in the historical record, the brick remnants at Jagatgram establish many facts. They confirm that well into the third century, many and varied successors of the Mauryas remained interested in acquiring Kalsi and the mountainous lands that lay beyond but did not embrace the code espoused by the edicts. Śīlavarman and his

entourage self-consciously rejected the Mauryan diktat that expressly prohibited festival congregations and the slaying of large numbers of animals around Kalsi. Finally, with their proportions—likely derived from measurements of the king's own body and resources gathered from near and far—the altars and the rites performed thereupon allowed Śīlavarman to reconfigure relations between himself and his subjects as well as with the lowland he already governed and the upland that he sought to make his own. The stage for political and religious conquest of the front and middle ridges of the Central Himalayas was set.

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The frontispiece pictures a *latina* temple, ca. 750, at Lakhamandal, Uttarakhand.

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