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## Architectural Research in the Western Himalayas:

FWF project "Buddhist Architecture in the Western Himalayas, 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century"

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On behalf of all field research, in 1955 Claude Lévi-Strauss pronounced not only the genre of travel writing dead, but indeed travel as such. His book "Tristes Tropiques" begins with the words "I hate traveling" and expresses a personal sense of loss:

"Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all. The perfumes of the tropics and the pristine freshness of human beings have been corrupted by a busyness with dubious  
206 implications, which mortifies our desires

and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories. [...] So I can understand the mad passion for travel books and their deceptiveness. They create the illusion of something which no longer exists but should still exist, if we are to have any hope of avoiding the overwhelming conclusion that the history of the past twenty thousand years is irrevocable."

Due to its remoteness and inaccessibility, the region of the western Himalayas only became a destination for European travelers relatively late, and – apart from a few reports – Tibetan culture did not become the focus of scientific interest until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Political tensions and the resultant declaration of the region as a restricted military area in the mid-twentieth century also brought research to a complete standstill, with the effect that, even today, the work and expeditions of Giuseppe Tucci (1933/1934/1937) still constitute the basis of Tibetology and Tibetan Buddhism research. Scientific activities were resumed in the mid-

nineteen-seventies when the Indian part of the region was opened up. However, while there have been major advances in art history and Buddhism research since then, architectural and building research has been almost completely neglected despite its links, both in terms of subject matter and material, to the other areas of science. With the exception of Romi Khosla's paper from 1979 ("Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalayas"), the first to present a systematic typology of religious buildings, no studies were undertaken in this field that might have led to relevant scientific findings. (10) Specifically with regard to building materials and forms of construction there are hardly any well-founded research findings, although sound knowledge of the traditional construction methods and the interplay of architectural elements must be regarded as a basis for effective maintenance of buildings. In the course of several research projects, and the research

focus of the Austrian Scientific Research Fund, FWF, since 2001, we are working on the documentation, analysis, reconstruction and aspects of monument preservation with regard to western Himalayan architecture between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The analysis founded on these studies provides an insight into the complexity of Buddhist architecture in the western Himalayas. Above all, however, it demonstrates the connections between structural aspects such as construction principles and material and thematic, aesthetic aspects such as proportion and form that feature equally in architecture and visual arts such as sculptures and paintings.

In co-operation with the Achi Association in Zurich, the first research findings will be applied in repairing the Wanla bCu-gcig-zhal in Ladakh, with the aim of preserving this significant cultural heritage.

*Carmen Auer/Holger Neuwirth*