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Trans-Himalayan Archaeology: Population Movements and Material Interactions, from Prehistory to the Buddhist period

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Trans-Himalayan Archaeology: Population Movements and Material Interactions, from Prehistory to the Buddhist period

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Presentation

This multi-year programme (2019-2024) brings together for the first time at international level a **research team dedicated to the archaeology of the Himalayas**, following the model of teams already existing in France for other regions of the world, such as the archaeology of the Americas or Central Asia.

Characterised by several **very high mountain ranges** (Pamir, Karakoram, Hindu Kush and Himalayas), the study area stretches from northern Pakistan to western Nepal, including

the Himalayan regions of northern India, notably the Union Territories of Jammu- Kashmir and Ladakh, as well as the state of Himachal Pradesh.

Because of its geographical position, the Himalayas are a **crossroads** and a privileged area for the study of cultural interactions over time between the Indian, Central Asian and Tibetan worlds. This high mountain region has also been the cradle of ancient local cultures about which we still have very little information.

The programme explores **two research themes** following a global methodology involving the analysis of **material culture and networks from the past in the Himalayas** based on a selection of archaeological sites, namely:

1/ the settlement of the area over the long term (3rd millennium BC-13th century AD), mainly but not exclusively through the systematic study of open-air rock art.

2/ the establishment and development of Buddhism up to its Second Diffusion (*phyi dar*, 10th-13th centuries AD), based on the work of the Franco- Indian Archaeological Mission in Ladakh (that became the French Archaeological Mission in the Indian Himalayas in spring 2023), as well as the analysis of Buddhist bas-reliefs and steles.

The programme is based on previously **archaeological documentation** collected during fieldwork carried out before or during the programme, in the Yasin valley, the Ladakh and Lahaul regions, the Spiti valley and the Upper Mustang region. It is also committed to the **scientific exploitation of existing data**, both from MAFIL's archives and from those transmitted to it. This development, which will take the form of a **digitised heritage** in line with current **Digital Humanities** standards, is of particular importance given the suspension of field activities for three years (2019-2021).

Principles

The programme has been designed to meet several fundamental requirements:

- establish an **international network of researchers in the field of Himalayan archaeology** by organising several events, including inviting foreign researchers to Paris (to date, December 2023, 4 researchers invited), holding sessions devoted to Himalayan archaeology at international seminars and organising dedicated scientific events.
- support an emerging generation of researchers** by offering significant opportunities, including more than 30 months of full-time contracts for 3 post-doctoral students and research vacations for 4 young researchers (doctoral students or independent researchers), as well as a Master's internship.
- apply the principles of **Open Science** to ensure that the data generated by the programme is easily identifiable, accessible, interoperable and reusable (**FAIR principles**). This approach is based on the services of Huma-Num, the French digital infrastructure dedicated to research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
- bring Himalayan archaeology to the attention of the **general public**, with the aim of **raising awareness of the need to preserve the heritage** of this fast-growing region, in

particular by writing review articles and [holding photographic exhibitions](#).

Results

To date (December 2023), some **twenty publications** have appeared, including articles in collective volumes, peer-reviewed journals, proceedings and digital publications. Four reports have been submitted to the advisory committee for French archaeological research abroad (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs). In addition, a thesis was defended, an internship report was submitted, two sessions were held at an international seminar ([IATS 2019 and 2022](#)), and an [international workshop](#) was organised at the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum. Lastly, around twenty papers were presented at national and international scientific events.

The programme's most significant achievements and initiatives to date (December 2023) are:

- the creation of an [illustrated thesaurus](#) and the [publication of a dataset](#) dedicated to Himalayan rock art;
- putting a [MAFIL collection](#) online in the HAL open archive. In 2024, the programme plans to publish a documentation manual and a database dedicated to Himalayan rock art. To mark the end of the programme, study days will be organised in Paris in autumn 2024, addressing each of the two research themes. At the same time, a travelling photographic exhibition by [Ahtushi Deshpande](#) on the rock art of Ladakh will be presented at the Edmond Rostand media library in Paris from 13 November to 31 December 2024.

Institutional collaborations

- Scientific agreement between the EPHE and the Centre of Central Asian Studies of the University of Kashmir (2022- 2027), Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, India.
- Agreement between the EPHE and the City of Paris (2020- 2024): Emergence(s), research support scheme from the City of Paris (2020-2024).

Funding

- Annual grant from the City of Paris as part of the Emergence(s) research support scheme for the 'Himalayan archaeology: material culture and networks of the past' project (2020-2024);
- Annual grant from the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF, 2019 and then 2021-2024);
- Annual research grant, [advisory committee for French archaeological research abroad](#), Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (2019-2024);

- Occasional support from the [East Asian Civilizations Research Centre](#) (2019-2024);
- Occasional support from the [Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes](#), Paris (2023);
- [Workshop Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation](#), USA (2023);
- Digital residency, Huma-Num DISTAM Consortium (Digital STudies Africa, Asia, Middle East) (2022);
- Interdisciplinary and Strategic Research Initiatives program [Scripta. The History and Practices of writing](#), PSL University, for the project '[Epigraphic and petrolyphic landscapes: open air galleries of the Upper Indus region in northern Pakistan and India](#)' (2019).

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Founded in 2006, the Centre for Research on East Asian Civilisations (CRCAO) is a Joint Research Unit of the CNRS, under the supervision of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE), the Collège de France and the Université Paris Cité.

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