Chapter 5

Origins of the Kashmiri Style in the Western Himalayas: Sculpture of the 7th–11th Centuries

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1 Introduction

Kashmir was one of the critical nuclei for the transmission of Buddhism(s) into Central Asia and ultimately to East Asia. The present contribution attends to Kashmir's role on a more local or regional level. The essay addresses one of the many rich themes of this volume: the transfer of Buddhist visual culture from one region to another. Despite the limited information available identifying specific workshops, artists or patrons, the study considers the connections between two adjacent regions that were fundamentally independent of each other. The Kashmir Valley and Ladakh including Zangskar shared very little at the beginning of the relevant period in terms of their respective environments, economies, languages, technologies, religious and artistic sophistication. Yet over the centuries covered here, a specific Buddhist visual tradition was transmitted East from Kashmir and grafted into Ladakhi and Zangskari visual culture. Kashmir continued to be regarded by its Eastern neighbours as one of the core centres of Buddhist learning generally, and the source of artistic production worth emulating. The Kashmiri mode was not the only developed visual idiom available to the neighbouring Western Himalayans at this time, but it was certainly the most dominant.

The importance of Kashmir for the development of art in the Western Himalaya in general, and Zangskar and Ladakh in particular, has long been acknowledged, sometimes fervently so.1 One can argue on the basis of visual evidence that this orientation toward Kashmir as early as the 9th century on the part of Western Himalayan artists continued to be visible long after Kashmir

Early stone sculptures in Purig, the Suru Valley, and Zangskar, Western Himalayas.

MAP 5.1

MAP OF ZANGSKAR AND LADAKH REGION

Early stone sculptures in Purig, the Suru Valley, and Zangskar, Western Himalayas.