

## Preface

The present volume on the socio-religious history of Tantric communities in the early medieval Indic world is an outcome of research activities conducted at the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OEWG), in the context of the large-scale interdisciplinary research project “Visions of Community” (VISCUM), a “Special Research Programme” (Sonderforschungsbereich, SFB) funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, F 42). Over two four-year periods (2011–2015, 2015–2019), the project was carried out in collaboration with the Institute for Medieval Research and the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (OEWG), as well as the Department of History and the Institute for Eastern European History at the University of Vienna. The mission of VISCUM was to investigate, from a comparative perspective, ethnicity, region, and empire throughout medieval Eurasia, extending from Christian Europe to Buddhist Tibet via the Islamic Arabic peninsula. A central concern of the project was how Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam impacted the conceptions of religious and political communities in the medieval world, and how these were negotiated in discourses on the formation and legitimation of particular communities constructed around various religious, ethnic, or political interests. VISCUM was meant to go beyond a static comparison in the sense of a mere contrastive analysis of pre-interpreted social, cultural, and historical constructs; it sought, rather, to actively create comparative objects by fostering, on a regular basis, the collaboration of researchers of diverse disciplinary approaches – socio-historical, micro-historical, socio-anthropological, historical-philological, etc. – and to critically examine culturally-loaded, descriptive concepts that were too often employed uncritically.

While the IKGA’s contribution to VISCUM initially focused solely on imperial Tibet, the research context was subsequently broadened to also include the Tantric traditions of early medieval and medieval India. This turn toward the Indian Tantric traditions was prompted by the following considerations: First, in their Buddhist versions, these traditions had played

a central role in shaping Tibetan religious identities, beliefs, and practices from the ninth and especially the eleventh century onwards. Second, while competing for royal patronage, the Indian Tantric traditions had developed close ties to political power, a major concern for VISCOM. And third, major advances in the field of Tantric studies in the last decades have led to the emergence of new data from manuscript sources and inscriptions, which open up the opportunity to investigate questions of community formation, boundaries, and identities at play as Tantric circles increasingly engaged with wider society. Rooted in this research context, the present volume aims to comprehensively investigate these trajectories by considering sources from the various Tantric schools active in the premodern Indic world. For this purpose, leading experts of the field were invited to contribute to this volume, based on papers and discussions held at the international symposium “Tantric Communities in Context: Sacred Secrets and Public Rituals,” held at the IKGA, February 5–7, 2015.

We have adopted various conventions to present the material as consistently as possible. The Sanskrit spelling has generally been normalised, unless diplomatic editions are presented. Each of the Sanskrit passages is also translated into English. In order to ensure readability, abbreviations have been kept to a minimum; only if Sanskrit text titles are mentioned frequently within a chapter, abbreviations are used after the first mention of the text. The following introduction to this volume provides a brief overview of the broader research context as well as of the specific topics discussed in each contribution.

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