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Documents on the History of Religion and Law of pre-modern Nepal

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Cover: Watercolor of Kathmandu Durbar Square, the royal palace complex,
in 1852, painted by Henry Ambrose Oldfield (1822–1871), photo by Zulufive



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The foundation of modern Nepal, which until 2007 was styled as the „only Hindu kingdom (of the world)“, goes back to the middle of the 18th century when Prithvi Narayan Shah, King of Gorkha, started expanding his dominion. Conquering many petty states, such as the rich Malla kingdoms of Kathmandu Valley in 1768/69, the Shah Kings soon ruled over a large territory, which subsequently developed into a national state.

This project aims at understanding developments the formation of the Himalayan state entailed, such as the restructuring of social institutions or the expansion of Hindu rule. Research is based on a corpus of documents available in public and private archives of the Kathmandu Valley. Among the writs numbering in hundreds of thousands particular attention is given to those relating to religious institutions (such as edicts, land grants, contracts, foundation charters, letters) and to legal and administrative practice (such as court decisions on moral conduct, letters of indulgence, caste regulations). Files held by the National Archives and other governmental institutions were partly microfilmed by the German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft), but only some of them have been edited, translated, or studied so far.

With research units in Heidelberg and Kathmandu the project will systematically study and selectively edit and translate this unique textual corpus, which forms the basis for the still largely unexplored history of the many religious institutions and sites as well as of the jurisprudence of Nepal. The centrepiece of the academic endeavour is an open access digital database, which will unite references to published and unpublished documents and will enable complex searches in the data sets. Apart from the development of this database, which has a pioneering character



Royal document, dated 1846, with the hand print of King Rajendra Vikram Shah

in the research in South Asian documents, the Nepalese case-study will connect to wider scholarly discussions, such as the legitimation and affirmation of rulership, political unification and nation building, the importance of textualization and codification of law, and the development of elite cultures in the 19th century.