

SERIE ORIENTALE ROMA

n.s. 37

ROOTS OF PERISTAN
THE PRE-ISLAMIC CULTURES
OF THE HINDUKUSH/KARAKORUM

Proceedings of the International
Interdisciplinary Conference
ISMEO, Rome, Palazzo Baleani, 5-7 October, 2022

Part II

edited by Alberto M. Cacopardo & Augusto S. Cacopardo



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A Tale of Two Cities

Notes on the Two Barikot in Dir and Swat

LUCA M. OLIVIERI, MATTEO SESANA

SUMMARY. The talk will focus on the historical intertwining of two settlements, both named Barikot, one in Swat and the other in the Kumrat Valley. Preliminary results of excavations of the late medieval and pre-modern phases of Barikot, Swat, conducted on the hill of the same name in 2019-2020, will be presented.

The settlement of Barikot, Swat, was abandoned in the 17th century, when the inhabitants migrated to the Kumrat Valley in Dir. A second settlement was established there, again called Barikot, which was later reported by Harold Deane and S.H. Godfrey. In 2020 and 2021, the archaeological team surveyed the area of Barikot, Kumrat, and gathered some additional valuable information.

INTRODUCTION

In 1896 Harold Deane published his celebrated report on the antiquities of the Malakand area in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*: “Note on Uddyana” (Deane 1896). A critical edition of Deane’s Note has recently been published, which is based on the manuscript found in 2008 in the Malakand Fort as part of a substantial archival collection published in 2015 (Olivieri 2015; Morgan, Olivieri 2022). Deane was the first Political Agent of the Malakand Agency, whose jurisdiction also covered Dir, Bajaur and Chitral, established in 1895 during the operations triggered by the *casus belli* of the siege of the British garrison at the Chitral Fort (Morgan, Olivieri 2022: 9-17).

The region of the Malakand Agency, at least in the Late Antiquity and until pre-modern times, was part of a vast cultural area that can be called the ‘Greater Kafiristan,’ or better ‘Peristan,’ before the latter was reduced to the present enclaves in Southern Chitral (Cacopardo A.M. 2016; Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S. 2001). The earliest certain ‘Peristanic’ cultural evidence in the lower regions of the Malakand Agency, in the Swat valley, are grape-pressing artifacts (Fig. 1) and numerous tower-house settlements (Fig. 2), which have been studied and partly excavated by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Middle Swat (Olivieri, Vidale et al. 2006).

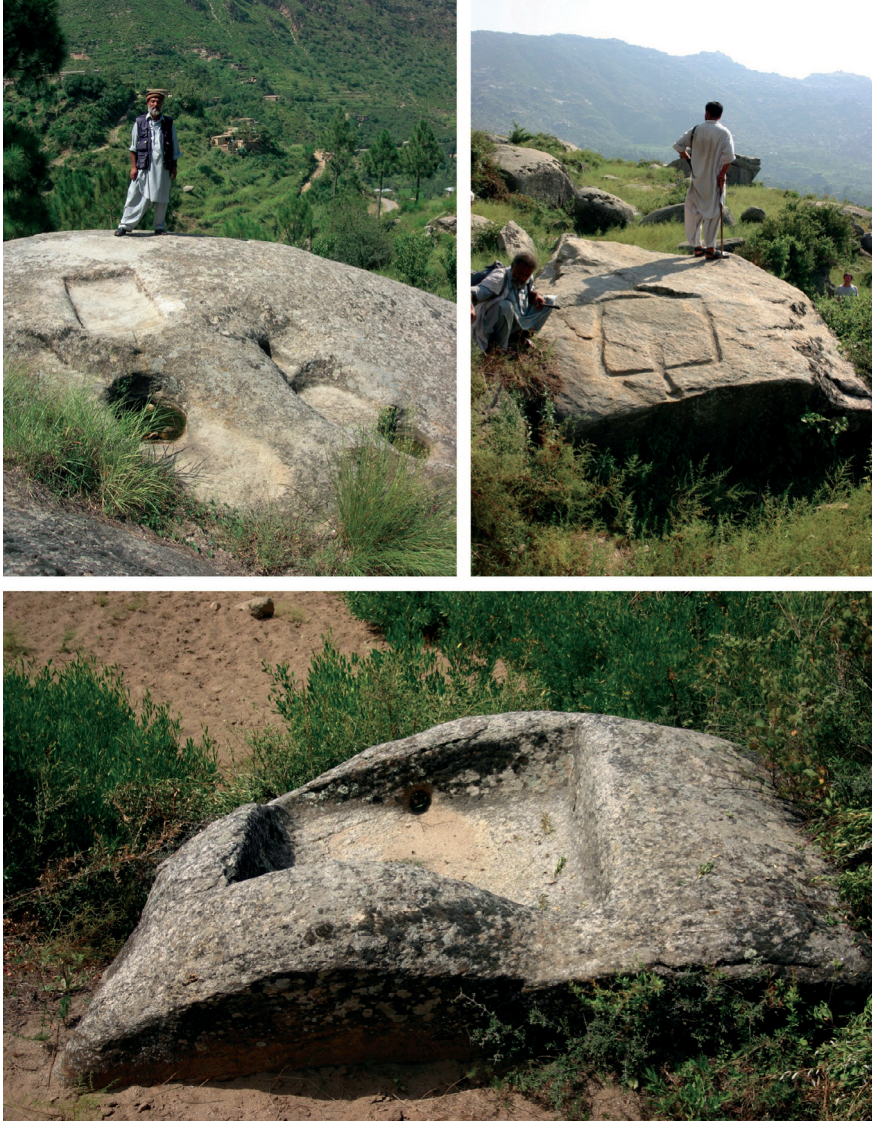


Fig. 1 - Three examples of different wine-presses from Swat. From top left (clockwise) AMSV 389 (Saidu valley), AMSV 360, AMSV 376 (Kandak valley). Photo Luca M. Olivieri/ISMEO, August 2006.

THE FIRST BARIKOT: BEIRA/BAZIRA/VAJĪRASTHĀNA IN SWAT

This preamble allows us to enter immediately *in medias res*. Deane's report in fact mentions a site, Barikot, which however is not the famous archaeological



Fig. 2 - Tower-houses (9th-14th century) at the mouth of the Kotah valley. Photo Luca M. Olivieri/ISMEO, August 2006.



Fig. 3 - The upper valley of Tal from the hill of Barikot 2 (North to the left). Photo by Michele Minardi/ISMEO, October 2021.

site of the same name in Middle Swat, but a nondescript tiny hamlet in Upper Dir, more precisely in the Tal valley, a left tributary of the Panjkora valley (Deane 1896: 663-664) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 4 - The valley of Swat with the hill of Barikot I (North to the left). Photo by Carla Biagioli/ISMEO, April 2018.

No mention in his “Note” of the Barikot in Middle Swat, which Deane knew well (Fig. 4). Barikot in Middle Swat is identified, beginning with Aurel Stein and Giuseppe Tucci, and by the archaeologists of the Italian Mission, with Bazira/Beira, the city besieged by Alexander in the late summer of 327 B.C., as reported by Arrian and Curtius Rufus and others (Stein 1930: 28-29, 40-41; Tucci 1958: 288, 296, 327 fn. 28; Olivieri, Tribulato 2017; De Chiara 2020: 79-81). The identification is corroborated by Oskar von Hinüber’s study of a late 10th century inscription found by Deane’s agents on the hill of Barikot, now in the Lahore Museum (Hinüber 2020) (Fig. 5). The inscription mentions the site of Vajrasthāna, which is in fact Bazira (Vajira) or in Prakrit, Beira (Shani 1931/1932: 301). Today, thanks to Stefan Baums’ linguistic analysis and the discovery of a strip of defensive moat dating back to the 4th century B.C. (Olivieri, Iori 2020: 82), the identification of Barikot with the Bazira/Beira of Alexander, and with the “city of Vajra,” is a sure fact (Baums 2019: 169-170). The same place name, attributed to a town in Swat, is mentioned in the 15th century Tibetan *Blue Annals* (see Olivieri 2022: 220-221, fn. 7). The text mentions the city of “Vajrasthana in Sri Oddiyana” as the place where Tantric Buddhism was best taught (Gö Lotsawa Zhönnu-pel 1949: 46). “Oddiyana” or “Uddiyana,” the land of the Odi, is the valley of the Swat River.

LMO

It seems that the place name was still used in Ghaznavid and Ghurid times, when Wajrastān/Wajira is often cited as an important administrative centre.



Fig. 5 - The Barikot inscription (Lahore Museum). Photo by Cristiano Moscatelli/ISMEO, 2016.

Indeed, from a recent philological survey conducted among the Medieval Persian sources, it appears that the toponym *Wajīrastān/Wajīra* was still in use during the twelfth/thirteenth century. In Minhāj Sirāj Jūzjānī's *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāširī* (Eng. *The Nāširian Tables*, 1259-1260)—perhaps the most comprehensive chronicle of the Ghurid period—the author, while describing the Indian campaigns of the Ghurid sovereign Quṭb al-dīn Ḥasan (r. 1080-1100), mentions multiple times the district of *Wajīrastān* (Pers. text: *wilāyt-i W.jī.r.stān*; Jūzjānī 1963-1964: Vol. 1, 333, 346; Jūzjānī 1881: 334, 366), and its principal centre, the fortified citadel of *Wajīra* (Pers. text: *qal'a-yi W.jī.r.h*; Jūzjānī 1963-1964: Vol. 1, 366, 351, 353, 380; Jūzjānī 1881: 357, 369, 447, 492).

From the geographical indications given by the text, it can be assumed that the district—*Wajīrastān* and its centre *Wajīra*—were located somewhere North-East of Kabul and, hence, in an area which could *grosso modo* correspond to present-time Swat (see also Jūzjānī 1963-1964, Vol. 1, 333, fn. 6).

According to our preliminary research, the presence of the toponym *Wajīrastān/Wajīra* is not confined only to Jūzjānī's *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāširī*, on the contrary, its occurrence appears to be widespread in coeval Medieval Persian chronicles. It is worth mentioning here the case of the *Chahār Maqāla* (Eng. *Four Discourses*, 1155-1157) of Niẓāmī 'Arūḍī Samarqandī. While describing

the reign of the Ghaznavid Sultān Ibrāhīm—the son of Mas‘ūd of Ghazna—, the author mentions the imprisonment perpetrated by the Sultān himself against his rebellious son and his followers—among them the renowned Ghaznavid poet Mas‘ūd-i Sa‘d Salmān (b. 1046 c./ d. 1121-1122)—in “the fortress of Nāy at Wajīrastān” (Samarqandī 1940: 38). The fortress of Nāy (or Nāy-Lāmān) is not unknown to the studies since it is mentioned by another Ghaznavid Persian source, Gardīzī’s *Zayn al-Akḥbār* (*The Ornament of Histories*, 11th century), as one of the castles plundered by Amir Maḥmūd of Ghazna during his military campaigns in Northern India (Gardīzī 2011: 111).

Actually, archaeology has documented an important fortress on top of the Barikot hill dated precisely to the Ghurid and Ghaznavid periods and superimposed over a Shahi Brahmanic cultic centre (Olivieri 2003b) (Fig. 6). These findings coincide with the philological information collected. Therefore, if the Hindushahi inscription found by Harold Deane’s agent in Barikot attests the usage of the toponym Vajīrasthāna during the 11th century, the presence of the same toponym among the Medieval Persian sources would testify the continuity of the place-name in the following two centuries.

However, further analysis is needed to fully understand the pioneering matter of the study of the occurrences of the toponym in Medieval Persian sources, its identification with the Sanskrit Vajīrasthāna (Vajīra), and its association with the site of Barikot. Here, we only report the preliminary results achieved through a recent philological survey.

MS

THE SECOND BARIKOT: BEIRA-DHERI/BARIKOT IN DIR

This apparent digression on toponymy is actually cogent to our discourse. As we shall see, in fact, everything hinges on the continuity of the toponym Beira/Bir between the Barikot of Swat and the village of the same name in Dir, which we will refer to as Barikot 2. As we shall see, this continuity goes beyond the name and takes the form of a vivid story that we are now able to tell, albeit in brief (Fig. 7).

The first documented mention about Barikot 2 is therefore found in Deane who reports the information received and describes the site as follows: “At Barikot near Patrak district ruins are said to exist and a stupa is said to have existed there which was overthrown by one Ilias Akhund about two generations ago” (Deane 1896: 663). Two generations earlier than Deane would mean that this event, obviously related to the Islamization of Dir Kohistan, should be placed in the first half of the 19th century. This “one Ilias Akhund,” however, can only be identified with the Akhund Ilias who was the apical ancestor of the Dir dynasty of Khans and lived much earlier, in the late 17th century (Cacopardo A.M., Cacopardo A.S. 2001: 36). The ascription to him of this feat must be an example



Fig. 6 - The Barikot tophill (North to the bottom). Photo Archives ISMEO, November 2021.

of the metonymical practice, frequent in the area, of using the names of apical ancestors as a collective designation of all their descendants (*ibid.*: 127, fn.).¹

¹ I owe this information to Alberto Cacopardo (pers. comm.).

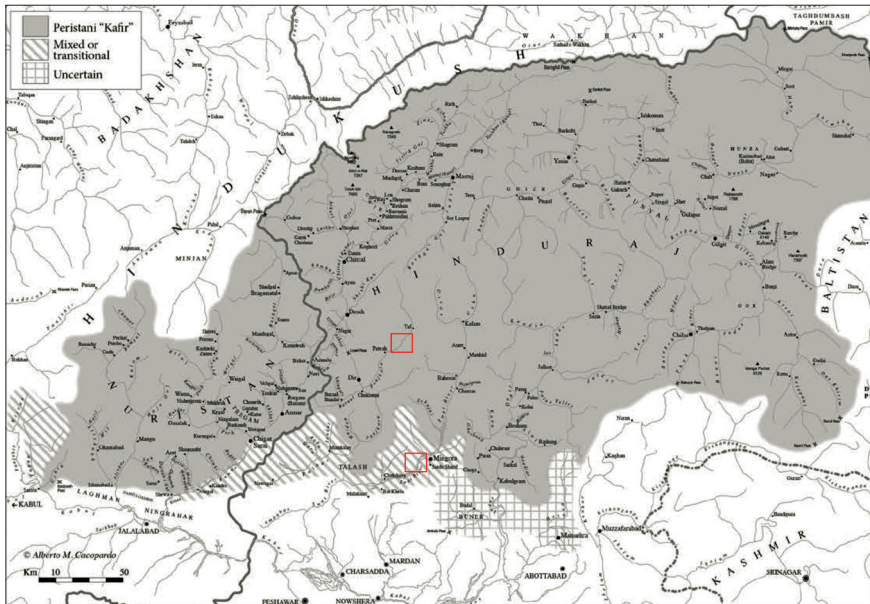


Fig. 7 - The two “Barikot.” After Cacopardo A.M. 2016: fig. 1, elaborated by the authors.

The existence of that monument takes us back more than sixty years. In 1840, a short account by General Claude August Court, a high-ranking French officer in the service of Ranjit Singh, was published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (Court 1840). The report was based on investigations carried out by Court’s Peshawar-based Pashtun agents certainly before 1837 in Dir, Bajaur and Swat (see also Cacopardo, Pellò 2021: 369). The general, like many officers of his and later generations was very interested in Alexander’s military history. Therefore, Court’s geographical information was continuously transported to the plane of historical reconstruction. The information, however, is objective and remains unique for that period. Court while reporting on Dir, Tal, and its surroundings, describes: “a basin situated to the East of Dhyr in the district of Tal, where a fire exists under a cupola maintained from time immemorial, and kept up at present by a Guebrian woman” (Court 1840). The terms used here are revealing. By the term ‘basin’ Court means a narrow valley, by the term ‘cupola’ Court always means the stupa. The term Guebrian is a late 18th century British jargon indicating Zoroastrians or pagans.² What we can understand is

² The term “Gueber” is derived from the Persian word *gabr*, which was used as a pejorative term to describe the Zoroastrians. Despite several etymologies being proposed, none of them has been widely accepted as convincing. Some scholars have suggested that it may derive from the Arabic word “kafir,” meaning “infidel.” The term entered British colonial jargon to describe followers of the religion or pagans in general (Pellò 2009: 97-98; Shaki 2012) [MS].



Fig. 8 - Location and details of the old village of Barikot 2. Photo various authors/ISMEO.

that here Court describes a cultic monument in a narrow valley East of Dir, which can be only the valley of Tal, a stupa or *chatya* in or near which a sacred fire was lit.³ Since no other ‘cupolas’ are reported in Tal and surrounding areas (whereas forts and castles, and lead mines, are), we may advance the hypothesis that the Court dome is the same monument described as a ‘stupa’ by Deane at Barikot 2. The chronology of its destruction, which occurred between Court and Deane would also seem to corroborate this hypothesis.

However, neither Court nor Deane saw the site in person. The first person to visit it of whom we have written record was Colonel Stuart Hill Godfrey, who went there in 1908, and left us a vivid description in his article later published in *The Geographical Journal* (Godfrey 1912). Thanks to Godfrey, the story thickens and becomes even more interesting. In fact, Godfrey first reports the story of the foundation of Barikot 2 (Fig. 8). This, according to the locals,

³ “The inhabitants [of the Talash valley, located near the Swat Valley, on the road to Dir] [...] were either Hindus or Zoroastrians [...]. Meah Sahib Gul, one of my companions, relates that he once passed the night in the Tálásh valley in the house of an aged man [“calling himself Mahomedan”], who after the evening’s repast proudly pointed out some live embers, which he stated had been kept alight without intermission for several years past, and further added that his father was of a persuasion that held fire in veneration.” (McNair 1885: 18). I would like to thank Alberto Cacopardo here for bringing McNair 1885 to my attention.

would have taken place eight generations earlier, i.e. around the 16th century, when their ancestors led by their chief Baria [Baira] arrived there as exiles from Barikot in Swat which had just been occupied by the khans of the Yusufzai Pashtuns. Godfrey then went to Swat, where he gathered from the khans of Barikot the other side of the same story (Godfrey 1912: 50). In the two Barikot we were told about the passes that almost directly join the two areas, which can be reached in three to five days' march.

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Our reconnaissance in Barikot 2 from 2019 to 2021 allowed us to verify that the tradition of the exodus from Swat was still alive, not only amongst the khans of Barikot 1, but also among the elders of Barikot 2, even if many details were lost. We were able to verify the exact pronunciation of the name of the chief who led them, which Godfrey reports as 'Baira,' while it is pronounced 'Beira,' as the hill of the ancient village, Beira-dheri, is called.

A second detail concerns the foundation, around the middle of the 19th century, of a third Barikot (Birkot) along the Kunar, near a ford, and another one West of Murree, in Azad Kashmir. These two villages, the locals told us, were founded by their ancestors who traded there for business (by the way, there is also a Barikot *mohalla* in Kabul, where the infamous Barikot movie theatre is located). A third detail that we have been able to verify concerns the late conversion of the descendants of the original clan, who claimed to have been 'Hindoo' or non-Muslim until a few generations ago. That should not surprise us: we recall what Godfrey wrote a little over a hundred years ago: "The highlands of the Panjkora [was] a country hitherto unseen by even the Pathan conquerors of the Swat and Dir" (Godfrey 1912: 45). Biddulph's testimony is useful in this regard. In his *Tribes of Hindoo Koosh* he devotes a very short chapter to two small Dardic peoples: the Torwalik and the Bushkarik. It is interesting to note that the Torwalik still remember that their original territories, now reduced to Upper Swat, were, until the end of the 17th century, the fertile valleys of Barikot in Middle Swat. Allied and intermarried to the Torwalik, the Bushkarik live in the Upper Tal valley, including Barikot 2. In fact, Biddulph writes that they began to convert to Islam only from the early 19th century, in an evidently long process, if even in Biddulph's time they still displayed their dead in wooden coffins on the tops of certain hills (Biddulph 1880: 71). Our archaeological reconnaissance on Beira-dheri, the hill around which the village of Barikot 2 is located, also yielded interesting results (Fig. 9). Numerous stone foundations were found there, certainly referable to tower-house structures with mixed wood-stone elevations similar to those preserved in Middle Swat, and dated between the 12th and 17th centuries (see Fig. 2). There is no trace of a stupa on the hill, but assuming there was one, we already know that it was demolished a couple of centuries ago. We do not know what form and structure this might have had, although stupas are generally fairly conservative monuments. On the hill of Beira-dheri there



Fig. 9 - The hilltop of Beira-dheri at Barikot 2. Photo by Michele Minardi/ISMEO, October 2021.

are caves and natural repairs, permutations of cup-marks on the rocks, plenty of potsherds on the surface, in short there is still much to explore.

The pottery collected from the surface gave us interesting surprises, as it is completely different from the typical Kohistani pottery production. The latter features carinated forms for milk, often decorated with deep incisions, low globular forms for cooking, and standard forms (called *mangai*) for water transport and storage, all showing coarse fabric and ill-firing. Instead, we found there well-fired and well-standardised ceramic forms, akin to the Late Antique Swat forms. This is an extraordinary testimony of formal/stylistic ‘lag.’ The fabric, despite the absence of good clay deposits in the valley, is all in all refined, although the presence of temper such as mica and sand make the surfaces quite coarse (Fig. 10).

MS

CONCLUSIONS

If we return to Barikot in Middle Swat, we will see that much of the information presented so far acquires depth and three-dimensionality. At Barikot in Swat we began decades ago to study (Olivieri 2003a) and then excavate the

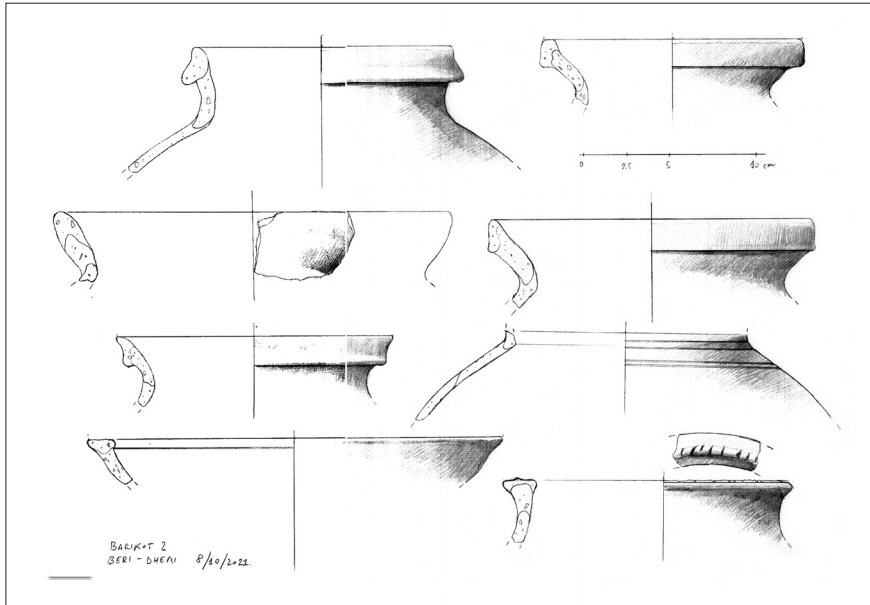


Fig. 10 - Selected pottery collected at Barikot 2 (Beira-dheri). Sketch drawings by Irene Caldana and Emanuele Lant/ISMEO, June 2022.



Fig. 11 - The final phases of the pre-modern settlement in Barikot 1. Photo by Luca Maria Olivieri/ISMEO, October 2019.

ruins of the pre-modern village (Olivieri 2003b). The structure of the village, in tower-houses, clings around the hill of Barikot (Fig. 11). Biddulph's words used to describe a Bushkarik village fit perfectly with the archaeological reality: "Their villages are built in a peculiar fashion for safety. A hill side with a suitable slope is selected, against which the houses are built in a succession of ter-



Fig. 12 - The hill of Barikot 1 in 1938. Photo by/after Barger, Wright 1941: pl. 1.2.

races rising one above the other, so that the flat roof of each house is on a level with the floor of the one above it” (Biddulph 1880: 71). The Barikot village was abandoned at the time of the Yusufzai arrival around mid-16th century, quite exactly “eight generations” earlier, as Godfrey reported (Olivieri 2009: 59-64). The precision with which we are able to determine the abandonment of the settlement derives from radiocarbon analyses of the final phases of the settlement (Barikot Macrophase 10).⁴ The area of the ancient settlement was never reoccupied. Instead, the Yusufzai established a check-post along the lower communication route that also controlled the road to Buner and the Indus. A bazaar arose here, giving rise to the modern village. Of the ancient village, Barikot, only the name was transferred to the new bazaar, while the hill was left abandoned. Only a few fakirs frequented its caves until a few decades ago (Fig. 12). This is how Italian archaeologists found it and, having leased it in its entirety since the 1990s, have thus both safeguarded it from building expansion and carefully excavated and studied it. Excavations and restoration and con-

⁴ On the South side of the hill, we have in fact uncovered a portion of the village, built in terraces, which included a circular hollow stone structure, not very deep, that was found filled with more than a metre of ash and charcoal (of *pinus roxburghii* or Himalayan pine): the structure, the function of which we do not know, was certainly linked to a cultic activity associated to fire (cf. the information provided by Court 1836 [on Barikot 2], and by McNair 1885 [on the Talash valley], cited above). The radiocarbon analysis of the charcoal gave the following results: 1 σ =1517-1594 80%; 2 σ =1484-1644 AD 100% (CIRCE Innova 2020).



Fig. 13 - Barikot (Swat): upper terrace, North-East bastion. Photo archives ISMEO, December 2022.

ervation work are still ongoing. The earliest occupation of the hill dates back to the mid-2nd millennium B.C., while the monumental remains of the site include a stretch of Indo-Greek fortification (*c.* 150 B.C.) and a monumental terrace that initially housed Buddhist stupas. In the Shahi period (early 8th to early 11th century) the summit terrace housed a colossal Vaishnava temple, the podium of which is still clearly visible. After the temple was demolished, the hill was transformed into a fortified citadel by the Ghaznavids and subsequent rulers (Fig. 13). In a later phase, the slopes of the hill were densely built up with hundreds of tower-houses terraced up the sides of the hill to its summit. But we have already spoken extensively about this settlement and its abandonment in the 16th century.

What remains of the Barikot hill apart from the ruins being excavated? A Pashtun legend that speaks of 100 castles and the fairy existence of a mysterious tunnel, which just so happens to connect Barikot with the valley of Tal, which the Pashtuns claim Beira and his men used to escape to the Upper Dir.

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