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Ritual Deposits and Foundation of Cities in Indo-Greek Gandhāra

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Table of Contents Show

Explanatory hypotheses, potential generalisations, possible relations to other factors
    The Urban Ritual Deposit at the City Wall of Barikot

Summary

This paper aims to draw attention to the so-called burial associated with the foundation of the Indo-Greek city wall (ca. 130−115 BCE) at the urban site of Barikot in the Swat valley (NW Pakistan), the mountainous area of the ancient region of Gandhāra.

The so-called burial at Barikot is here tentatively interpreted as ritual deposit aiming at legitimising the new idea of 'city' implied in the foundation of the city wall. This conjecture is made on the ground of a reassessment of the archaeological evidence for the burial pit at Barikot and in light of the multi-layered social and religious background of the actors involved in the foundation of the Indo-Greek city wall.

Focus, applied concept and method

The imposing fortification of the city of Barikot in the Swat valley (NW Pakistan) along with the coeval foundation of the regional capitals in the southern plains of the ancient region of Gandhāra − Shaikhan-dheri at Charsadda (Dani 1965−66) and Taxila (Allchin 1993: 75; Fussman 1993: 91; Ghosh 1948: 42, 44) − falls within a crucial period of systematic political and economic reorganisation (ca. 145−115 BCE) of the Indo-Greek kingdom, whose political and economic network then stretched from Arachosia (SE Afghanistan) to the eastern Punjab (Fig. 1).
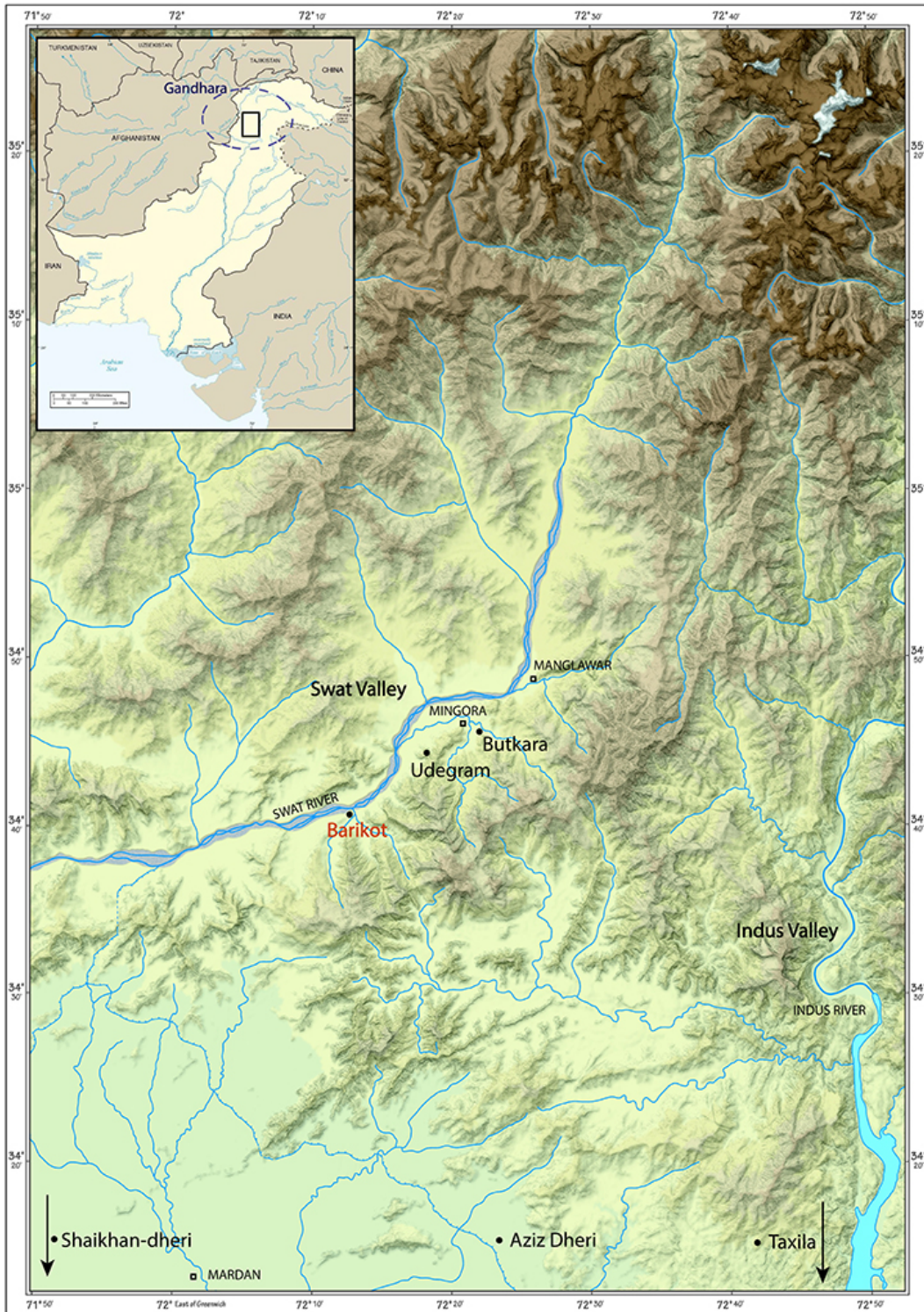
Fig.1: General map of north-west Pakistan with indication of the main cities of the Indo-Greek period (© alabamamaps.ua.edu).

When the Indo-Greeks settled in NW India, Buddhism had presumably already spread in this area. Indeed, even though the archaeological invisibility of early Buddhism remains a puzzle in Gandhāran studies (Callieri 2006; Fussman 1994), the foundation of two *Dharmarājika stūpas* allegedly associated with Aśoka (mid-3rd century BCE) at Taxila and Butkara I (Marshall 1951: 236; Faccenna 1980–81: 167), in combination with the supposed diffusion of cremation as the customary funerary practice and the popularity of the *Milindapañha* ('Questions of Milinda') seems to point in this direction. However, it is a fact

that the spread of Buddhist monasteries and monuments is archaeologically attested only later, from the mid-1st century CE, when Buddhism started playing a major role in the religious and socio-political landscape of Gandhāra.

The presence of inhumated remains associated with the foundation of the Indo-Greek city wall at Barikot, presented in this article, is another piece of archaeological evidence to be added to the complex ritual and religious picture of the area in the last centuries BCE.

Both because of the elusive archaeological context of the burial and the difficulty of reconciling it with the (supposedly) Buddhist religious background of the region, the meaning of the burial found beneath the city wall at Barikot was never further discussed after its publication in the 1992 archaeological report (Callieri et al. 1992: 10).

In this article, I would like to address and reassess some of the questions arising from this discovery in light of the specific socio-spatial and religious setting of the Indo-Greek city of Barikot as we can reconstruct it today on the basis of the available data.

The main set of questions are: can we actually interpret this burial as evidence of a foundation ritual for the city wall? Does it imply a ritual killing? Was it actually a burial? How does it fit into the religious milieu of the mid-2nd century BCE? Who were the actors involved in it? To what extent can we consider it an urban ritual?

In the following pages, I will attempt to tentatively define the meaning of the putative burial by contextualising the archaeological evidence within the frame of the city wall foundation and the possible meanings attached to this event. After introducing the archaeological and chronological context of the so-called burial and the general religious and funerary background of 2nd century Gandhāra, I will focus on the urban society involved in the construction of the city wall to grasp possible meanings attributed by actors to its construction. Possible comparative cases for the ritual foundation of city walls and literary sources spanning the area from the Indian subcontinent to the Hellenistic Mediterranean will be also considered. Finally, based on a new reading of the archaeological features of the burial as suggested by recent fieldworks at Barikot, I will attempt to define the meaning that the urban society might have given to what I interpret as a foundation deposit and as evidence of the earliest urban ritual archaeologically attested in northern Gandhāra.

State of the art

The City Wall of Barikot (ca. 130–115 BCE)

The ancient city of Barikot is located on the left bank of the Swat river and it is marked by a steep hill overlooking the Swat river flowing to the north. The city, known as *Beira* or *Bazira,* was conquered and fortified as a Macedonian garrison city by Alexander the Great in 327 BCE during his eastward march (Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri* 8.10.22; Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.27; Stein 1930; Tucci 1958). It is also mentioned in a much later inscription (10th

century CE) as Vajirasthāna 'the strong place' or 'the *sthāna* ([fortified] place) of Vajra/Vajira' (Tucci 1958: 296, n. 28; Baums 2019: 169–170; Hinüber in Callieri and Olivieri 2020: 54–55).

Throughout its long occupation, from the Bronze Age (mid-2nd millennium BCE) to the Hindu Shāhi period (10th century CE), the city went through several socio-political and structural reorganisations. Still, the Indo-Greek period seems to mark a crucial turning point in the history of the city in several respects, not least in its topographical layout.

In the Indo-Greek period, in fact, the urban settlement, consisting of an acropolis and a lower urban area extending to the southern plain at the foot of Barikot hill, was encompassed by an imposing defensive wall that defined an area of about 12 ha including the acropolis (Fig. 2). Although both textual sources (Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.27.5) and archaeological evidence (Olivieri and Iori 2020: 82) suggest that the city of Barikot was probably defended with an earthen structure before the construction of the Indo-Greek city wall, the latter must have drastically changed the face of the city.
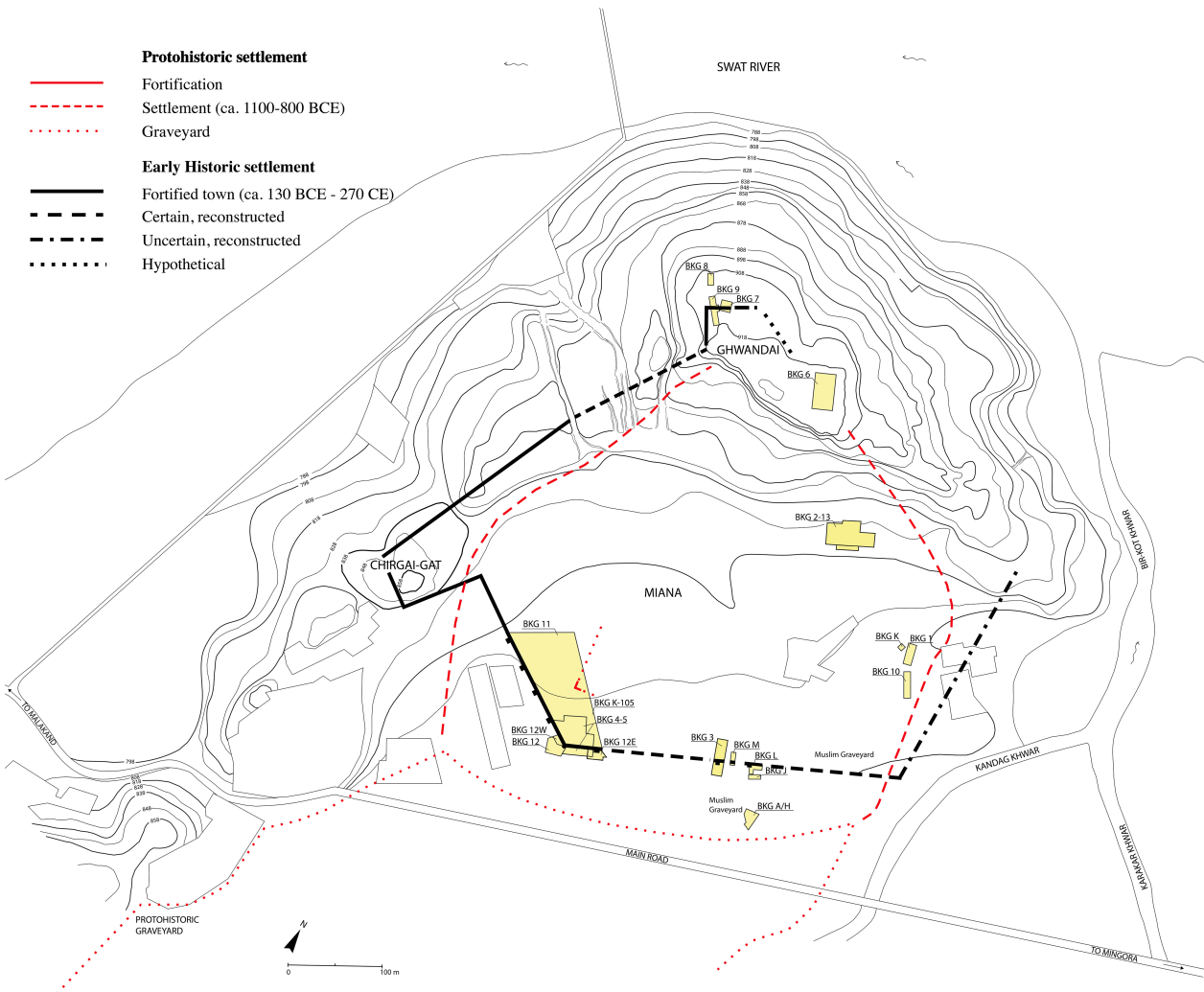

Fig. 2: Map of the archaeological area of Barikot with indication of the excavated trenches and the Indo-Greek city wall (updated 2019, © ISMEO).

The Indo-Greek city wall is a massive construction. Built of pebbles, slabs and clay mortar, it is marked by rectangular bastions placed at regular intervals of about 29 m (approximately corresponding to 100 Attic feet) with pentagonal bastions at the corners (Fig. 3) and a ditch that runs parallel to the defensive wall at a distance of 5–8 m (Olivieri

2015). Its layout, though not fully uncovered, is known on all sides and the location of the main gate and a postern gate along its S side has been hypothesised after the documentation of remarkable depressions along the defensive circuit (Olivieri 2003: 36; Iori et al. 2015: 80–81).
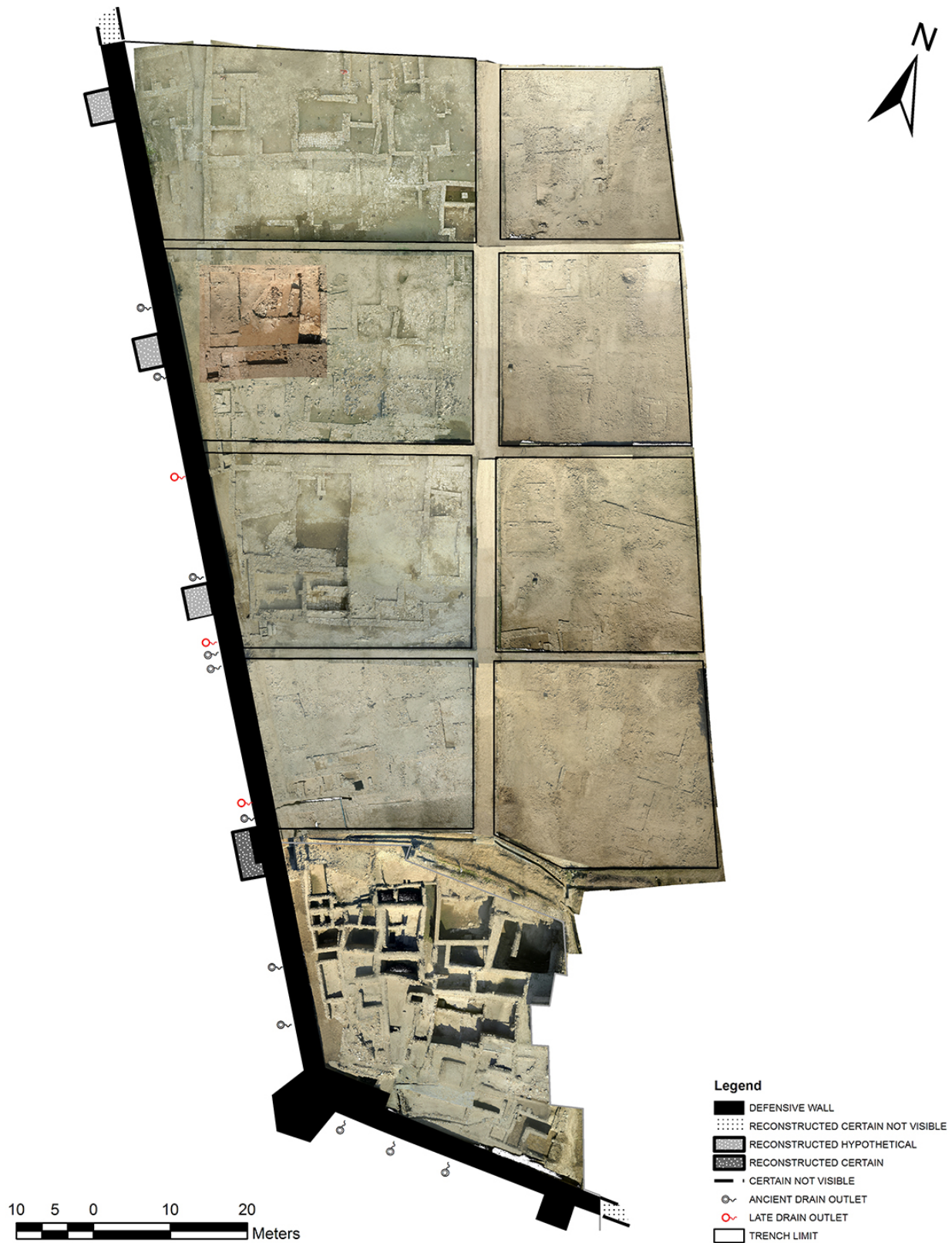

Fig. 3: Aerial photograph of the SW portion of the city of Barikot (2014, © ISMEO).

The construction of the city wall is dated from numismatic evidence and radiocarbon dating to the second half of the 2nd century BCE, between the reigns of the Indo-Greek kings Menander I (ca. 165–130) and Antalkìdas (ca. 115–95) (MacDowall and Callieri 2004; Olivieri et al. 2019). As pointed out by Callieri (1993: 343) the Barikot defensive wall represents one of the most outstanding examples of Hellenistic military architecture in the Hellenised Far East (see also Antonetti 2020).

For a long time, the physical overlap between the Indo-Greek city wall and the protohistoric structures below it (Fig. 4) has been interpreted in terms of chronological continuity. This evidence was deemed proof of the continuity of the Swat protohistoric tradition until the arrival of the Indo-Greeks (Stacul 1969; 1987). Instead, by considering the impact of negative interfaces on the stratigraphy, the recent excavations carried out at Barikot has finally demonstrated that the physical continuity between the protohistoric and the Indo-Greek stratigraphy was actually due to intensive levelling work aimed at regularising the ground level and making space for the Indo-Greek city wall (Iori 2019; Olivieri and Iori 2020; Fig. 5). That resulted in the substantial obliteration of the Iron Age stratigraphy, particularly at the SW corner where, either due to the construction of the massive pentagonal bastion or due to the presence of a steep slope at the edge of the ancient artificial mound, the levelling work was particularly invasive. Here, where the foundation consists of a stepped longitudinal trench, the removal of the soil caused the partial exposure of the much earlier protohistoric structures (1123–1036 cal 2σ BCE to 1089–922 cal 2σ BCE) eventually used as retaining walls (see Figs 4, 5). It is in this area that the so-called burial was found.

Fig. 4: The SW stretch of the city wall with the pentagonal bastion, view from NW. The protohistoric structures are visible immediately below the city wall (© ISMEO).
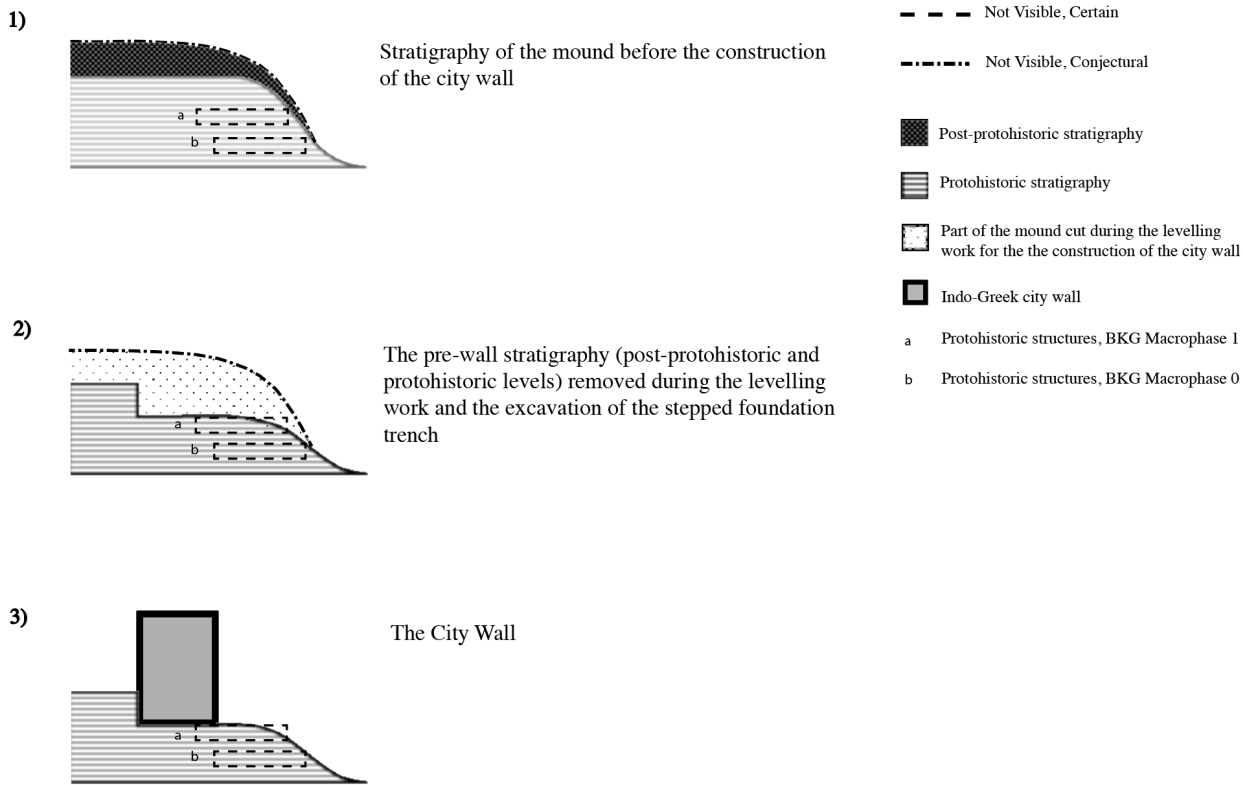
Fig. 5: Hypothetical sequence of the construction phases of the Defensive Wall (drawings by the author).

The 'Burial' at the City Wall

During the 1990 excavation of the SW sector of the city, a portion of a pit containing skeletal remains was found dug into the first external level connected to the city wall and partially beneath it. The burial pit, located between the pentagonal corner and the first rectangular bastion of the S stretch of the city wall and approximately 40 m W of a possible postern, was only partially excavated for obvious practical reasons (Figs 6, 7; see the stratigraphical matrix in Callieri and Olivieri 2020: tab. 13). The excavators describe the discovery as follows:

> An irregular pit of approximately semi-circular shape was found in the layer of stones up against the city wall and at a distance of 13.5 m from the south–west bastion, which contained the partially connected skeletal remains of a human female and of a small mammal (Pl. IV, 1). In the vicinity of the pit, the stones of the bottom courses of the city wall display signs of dislodgement, probably occurring in this point subsequent to a shift in the material filling the pit, which is less compact than the layers outside it; one hypothesis is that flooding may have lowered the coherence of the filling and thus led to a landslip (Brocato in Callieri et al. 1992: 10).
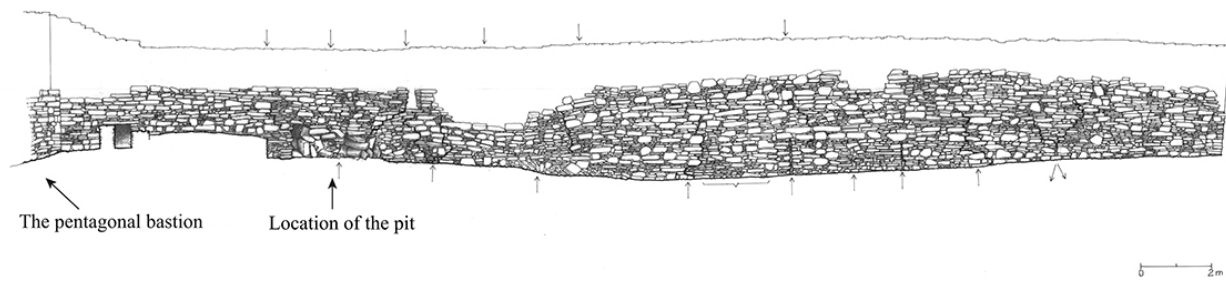
Fig. 6: The front elevation of the the S stretch of the city wall with indication of the burial (drawings by F. Martore, © ISMEO).

To the above description can be added that the anthropologist Roberto Macchiarelli considered the skeletal remains found in the pit as belonging to a young human female and to a dog (personal communication by L.M. Olivieri, May 2017). The skeletal remains, which were incomplete, were partially damaged as pushed, after the collapse, against the southern side of the pit (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: The burial below the S stretch of the city wall, view from the top of the wall (from Callieri et al. 1992: fig. 1).

Inside the accessible side of the pit were found four ceramic vessels, three fragments and an almost intact sub-globular decorated jar with rounded vertical lugs (Callieri and Olivieri 2020: pls 11.5, 35.3, 172.2, 128.2; Fig. 8).
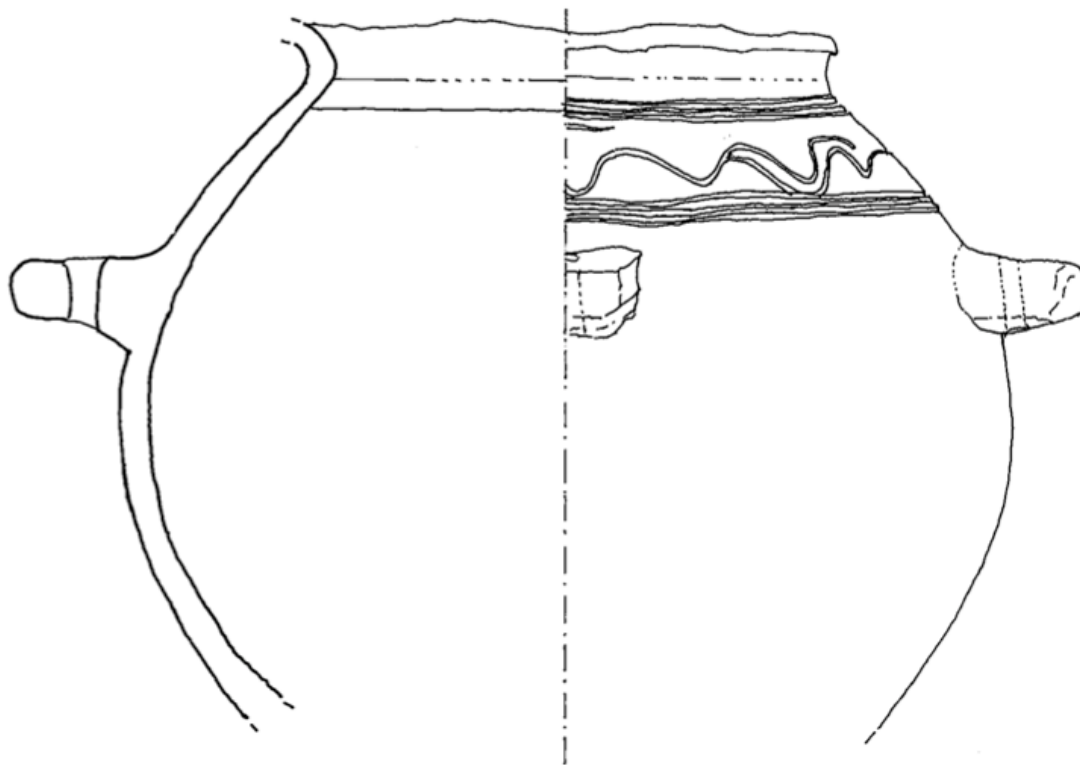
Fig. 8. The sub-globular jar with rounded vertical lugs found inside the pit (© ISMEO).

Interestingly, the assemblage appears quite incoherent. In fact, while the three sherds belong to a ceramic horizon consistent with the chronology of the city wall and the burial, the sub-globular jar is much older (Callieri and Olivieri 2020: pl. 128.2), being similar to vessels documented in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age graveyards at Gogdara 4, Udegram (Vidale et al. 2016: fig. 43c, 73) and elsewhere in Swat. Because of the sealed context in which it was found, it is not possible to explain the protohistoric jar as being intrusive. Rather, there are two more plausible explanations for its presence within the pit: (a) the jar, from at least six centuries earlier, was for some unknown reason intentionally buried as grave good;(b) there was a persistence in the production of this type of jar, something that has been actually demonstrated for other forms of the same ceramic class.I am inclined to adopt the first explanation which, though apparently the most implausible due to the huge chronological gap, may have a strong symbolic value. I will get back to this point later.

Before absolute dating for the skeletal remains was available, the impression was that of a secondary inhumation as an act of *pietas* (for a similar feature in the nearby Buddhist monastery of Saidu Sharif see Olivieri 2016; Narasimhan et al. 2019: 165–168). However, in 2017 the dating obtained for the female human remains gave a weighted average date consistent with the Indo-Greek phase (171–62 BCE; Olivieri et al. 2019: tab. 1), thus calling into question this conjecture and opening up other possible hypotheses, among them that of a ritual killing.

Although the range of the 14C dates still leaves us in doubt whether the death of the woman is to be placed immediately before or after the erection of the city wall, from the available features it is evident that the Barikot burial was an intentional pit excavated immediately before the construction of the city wall and stratigraphically related to it.

The intentionality of the burial becomes evident once we consider its position. The unconventional location under the defensive wall and between two of its bastions (possibly near a secondary gate) must be read as a deliberate act aiming at physically associating the burial pit to the city wall. The intentionality of this physical relation cannot have a neutral value. Moreover, the pit, partially covered by the fortification, was evidently excavated immediately before the construction of the city wall. The landslip and the consequent shift of the material inside the pit after a flooding can be in fact explained by the fact that the filling of the pit was still too loose and incoherent when the bottom courses of the wall were built. This factor indicates an almost chronological continuity between the refilling of the pit and the construction of the city wall.

Historical and spatial exposition, agents

Contextualising 2nd Century Barikot: Religious and Funerary Context

From the second urbanisation phase (from ca. 500 BCE) onwards, the main cities of Swat, placed at the edge of the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian plateau, became nodes of wider political systems that, centred at east or west, extended their political and/or economic networks over the area. The replacing and co-presence of different political and economic networks, from the Achaemenid through the Hellenistic, Mauryan and Indo-Greeks periods, contributed to the creation of a multi-layered socio-cultural and religious setting that must be considered once one looks at the evidence on the ground.

Once the Indo-Greeks, by then detached from their Greco-Bactrian motherland, fixed their political network in Gandhāra, the ruling Greco-Iranic minority pragmatically pursued an inclusive policy which tended to embrace the multi-religious and multi-cultural society present in NW India at that time. Both religion and language were channels that helped to navigate the socio-cultural complexity of the local society.

According to the texts, Buddhism was one of the privileged means for maintaining a grip on local society. The Indo-Greek king Menander became, for example, the protagonist of the famous text *Milindapañha* ('Questions of Milinda') centred on the dialogue between the king and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena that eventually led to the conversion of the king to Buddhism.[1]

However, the only tangible evidence of the investment of the Indo-Greeks in Buddhist religion is the first reconstruction of the *Dharmarājika stūpa* of Butkara I. Besides this, only a few relic caskets bearing inscriptions paleographically dated around the mid-

2nd/mid-1st century BCE (Baums 2012: 202–204), represent evidence of Buddhist practice in this early phase while none of the Buddhist complexes excavated or surveyed in Gandhāra can be dated to such an early date.

Indeed, Buddhism was only one of the various religious options on the ground. The more familiar (because polytheistic) system of Brahmanical gods was also supported by the ruling class. This is indicated by the well-known pillar with dedicatory inscriptions related to the Vaishnavism of Heliodoros, Indo-Greek ambassador from Taxila, at Vidiśa and by the elaboration of the first anthropomorphic images of Brahmanical gods (such as Saṃkarṣaṇa, Vāsudeva-Krisna and the goddess Ekanāmśā) on the reverse of Indo-Greek coins (Callieri 2006: 65–66).

As for language, bilingual coinage soon replaced Greek-only legends, whereas the use of Greek names seems to become a means to showcase personal connection with the network in power, independent of the ethnic background.

At Barikot, for instance, local élites apparently tried to raise their own status within society by adopting social behaviour that emulated the ruling Hellenised minority, by bearing Greek names and by using luxury Hellenistic objects and vessel forms (Iori 2018: 312).

In spite of this, local systems of belief and local funerary practices apparently continued to have a meaningful presence.

For instance, once we shift the focus from textual sources and material culture related to political power within the urban context, the impact of both Buddhist and Brahmanical religiosities on wider society seems to be quite loose. At least this is the picture offered by the material culture recovered at the two Indo-Greek urban centres excavated in Gandhāra, Barikot and Shaikhan-dheri at Charsadda. Between the 2nd and mid-1st centuries BCE, the only artefacts having a possible ritual function were in fact terracotta female figurines found in domestic contexts (i.e. the so-called 'Baroque ladies' and 'Hellenistic female' terracotta figurines, Callieri 2006: 65) and used in local domestic cults since protohistoric times.

Moreover, despite the drastic reduction of inhumation practice during the phase corresponding to the diffusion of Buddhism, that is from the mid-3rd century BCE onwards, funerary practices other than cremation are attested in the archaeological record as well as in narrative Buddhist reliefs.

In particular, the site of Butkara IV, about 20 km upstream from Barikot, represents an interesting piece of evidence of the persistence of local well-established funerary practices during a phase when Buddhism enjoyed a progressive social and religious dominance (Olivieri 2019: 254). In fact, this is an extra-urban single-family funerary monument, probably part of a larger cemetery, used for several generations from ca. 150 BCE to ca. 50 CE (Olivieri 2019: 247), a time span that overlaps with the Barikot burial. In spite of its physical proximity to the most famous Buddhist sanctuary, the *Dharmarājika stūpa* of Butkara I (ca. 750 m NW), the funerary custom attested in Butkara IV is alien to Buddhist practice while it relates to the complex rituality of the manipulation of corpses, in line with the earlier protohistoric tradition (for the complexity of death ritual cycle see Vidale et al. 2016: 204–206, 212–214).

A further clue for the persistence of funerary customs other than cremation is given by some later narrative reliefs of Gandhāran Buddhist art (ca. 1st-3rd century CE) depicting extra-urban funerary monuments convincingly correlated by De Marco to some modern funerary monuments in Indian and Nepalese Hindu *śmaśānas* (Skt., cemetery; De Marco 1987: 219–232; for comparisons with Butkara IV, see Olivieri 2019: 248–249).

Indeed, the presence of inhumation within a Buddhist environment is not surprising as Buddhist texts show a lack of concern for the mortuary treatments of Buddhist laity beyond the statement that monks have to perform funeral rites for the lay donors even during the rainy season retreat (Schopen 1995: 105–106).

Furthermore, in light of the Brahmanical background of Gandhāra mostly assumed on the basis of the references made by the Gandhāran grammarian Pāṇini (6th century BCE, Scharfe 2009: 88; Samad 2010: 7) and the onomastic record (Fussman 1994), it is worth mentioning that Vedic texts prescribe funerary practices such as burials, the exposure of corpses and abandonment by starvation, for specific categories of the dead, namely those who had died a violent death or had contracted illness, pregnant women and children (for further discussion on modern Hindu cemeteries and ancient literary sources see De Marco 1987: 221–222, n. 56–59; Bakker 2007: 11–17).

Finally, we should mention the funerary custom of exposure of corpses among Dardic people that seem to have represented the cultural substratum of Swat (Tucci 1977; Jettmar 1977: 421; Fussman 1977; Filigenzi 2019; see also Strabo, *Geography* 15.63).

To sum up, the evidence from real (Butkara IV) and represented (Buddhist reliefs) extraurban graveyards, the silence or prescriptions in Buddhist and Vedic texts of specific funerary practice, together with the hypothesis of the Swat's Dardic substratum suggest the persistence of funerary practice other than cremation even when Buddhism was well established.

In such a complex religious and funerary ritual context, according to which religious perspective shall we interpret the burial at Barikot? I suspect that the exceptionality of this feature requires a more punctual historical and archaeological contextualisation.

Looking at the actors involved in the construction of the city wall and at the possible meanings attributed to this event may help to better understand the feature of the burial.

The Actors and the Emergence of a 'New City'

The construction of the defensive work at Barikot was part of a wider political programme inaugurated by king Menander after 145 BCE and completed by his successors before 115 BCE. The imposing fortification of the site was probably related to a wider strategy aiming at protecting the crucial agricultural resources of the Swat valley, so as to guarantee supplies and safe control of what was the real core of the kingdom, the *uttarāpatha*, the main trade route connecting the Iranian plateau to India through the two main Gandhāran cities of Shaikhan-dheri and Taxila (Olivieri and Iori forthcoming). Even if archaeologically almost unknown, the Indo-Greek capital cities placed along this crucial trade route must have been the political and administrative seats of the Indo-Greek rulers. Instead, centres of the fertile northern areas, like Barikot, served as a resource pools to the

main southern cities which were, more likely, indirectly controlled by the Indo-Greeks through local ruling elites, as will be the case in the following Saka-Parthian phase with the houses of Oḍi (Swat) and Apraca (Bajaur).

The material culture from the Indo-Greek stratigraphy at Barikot shows the co-existence of both local and Hellenistic traditions. The dual character of ceramic vessels (e.g. Indic *thalis* and Hellenistic 'fish plates'), terracotta figurines (Indic 'Baroque Ladies' and 'Hellenistic female figurines') and onomastic graffiti on pottery (in Brāhmī and Greek) speak of an urban society that was multi-cultural and multi-lingual and, after being at the fringe of the Hellenistic economic network for almost two centuries, fully accustomed with the Greco-Iranic environment.[2] Moreover, besides mechanism of emulation in the Hellenistic material culture, a multi-ethnic society is also probable. Indeed, the presence of immigrants with a Greco-Iranic background can be postulated if we consider the hypothesis of migration from Eastern Bactria before the nomad conquest (ca. 145 BCE) that marked the end of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom further northwest (Callieri 2007: 158–160). Even though the first shores for the newcomers were most probably the capital cities of the plains, Swat might have become a subsequent destination for those migrants coming from the west, given also the general ecological similarity with the fertile territories of the Bactrian motherland.

We can then presume that the urban society witnessing the construction of the city wall sometime between 130–115 BCE was multi-lingual, multi-cultural and probably multi-ethnic. Though the majority of actors directly involved in the construction of the Barikot fortification were locals, especially in terms of workforce and work coordination, the skills necessary for the new construction suggest the involvement of a leading workforce familiar with the military architecture of the Hellenistic East. Additionally, in light of the huge economic investment, the presence of Indo-Greek supervisors or officers is highly probable.

Given the complex social reality behind this building site, we can assume that the meaning attached to the erection of the city wall was multiple and varied according to the different groups of actors.

From the perspective of the ruling class, this was certainly a large-scale financial investment in a crucial fertile area of the country as part of a large political programme. Besides that, the construction of the fortification was a large-scale collective effort of the population of this area, involving a workforce, coordinators and officials with different cultural, social and possibly ethnic backgrounds.

After being at the edges of different political systems (Achaemenids, Mauryas and Seleucids) the population of Swat was close to being at the core of a kingdom whose infrastructure was going to change the topography, economy and complexity of their urban lives and the bulky materiality of the city wall must have made clear that a great change was coming. Indeed, the construction of the Hellenistic city wall was the materialisation of a new concept of city shaped on Hellenistic parameters in terms of city planning (city wall/lower town/acropolis) but also in terms of administrative organisation and legal competence and boundaries. Although for some segments of the urban society this might have been an opportunity for economic and social upgrade, such a change might

also have been perceived as a matter of concern and anxiety. I argue that the ritual value attached to the so-called burial is intertwined with the aspirations and concerns attached to the emergence of the new city.

Comparanda for Foundation Rituals in Archaeology and Texts

The interpretation of the burial in Barikot is wanting in comparable evidence from the northern areas of the Indian subcontinent, the Iranian plateau and from the rest of the eastern Hellenistic *oikoumene*. In general, the investigation of fortifications is not greatly taken into account by archaeologists, especially in short-term archaeological projects. Once identified, the city wall is merely used as the topographical limit for planning the diggings. Therefore, the defensive walls of the two capital cities of Gandhāra – at Shaikhan-dheri and at Taxila – have never been explored and this is also the trend followed at the Greco-Bactrian sites of Ai Khanoum and Kandahar in Afghanistan. The monumental fortifications of Indian sites – like Kaushāmbī, Mathurā, Pāṭaliputra, Rājgīr and Ahicchatra – when explored, did not bring to light any features comparable to that found at Barikot.

The Barikot burial, however fortuitous, apparently represents an exception in the archaeological panorama of the north-western region of South Asia and Hellenistic East and was probably connected to a specific event.

Once we widen the spectrum of research, we notice that the ritual deposition of objects of different nature (such as loom weights, terracotta figurines and ceramic vessels) at the foundation of Hellenistic city walls is known in the Mediterranean area (e.g. at Morgantina and Gela, see Sjöqvist 1960: 126; Orlandini 1957: 72; Adamesteanu and Orlandini 1962: 365).[3] However, we find no trace of ritual burials either in texts or in archaeological evidence for this period (for a comprehensive bibliography on ritual burial associated with the foundation of city walls or gates in a later phase, see Ricci et al. 2000: 156–157).

Indian textual sources make no specific reference to ritual burials or deposits for the construction of a city wall while they mention other sorts of foundation and consecration rituals. From the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*,a monastic code probably redacted at the beginning of the Common Era in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent,we know that the urban services that monks must perform for donors include ceremonies marking the completion of the construction of new buildings (Schopen 1997: 72–85). However, it is not clear in what these ceremonies consisted.

Foundation and consecration rituals are instead described in some *Purāṇas* and some much later Indian architectural treatises, especially in reference to sacred buildings, while only a few architectural and ritual texts refer to foundation deposits for the establishment of towns, villages and secular buildings. Some late southern Indian works, *Mayamata* (Dagens 1970: IX.101–128; XII.104) and *Mānasāra* (Acharya 1980: XII.167–181), describe foundation deposit as consisting in the placing of 'the first brick' (*prathameṣṭakā*) in the case of buildings, and in the deposition of root and pigments together with a box containing different kinds of materials such as grains, precious stones, metals, etc. (*garbhanyāsa*) for both buildings and for villages or towns. Although the location of the

deposit may vary according to the texts, it is said to be often associated with crucial points of the structures, a gate or a corner. This feature is not reflected in our case study, as it is located, instead, in a quite peripheral location.[4]

An interesting perspective on boundaries and deposits is offered by the *Mānavadharmaśāstra* ('Laws of Manu'), a legal text possibly redacted in northern India between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE (for a critical review of the arguments supporting this date and the suggestion of a later date – 2nd-3rd century CE – see Olivelle 2005: 21–25). In the section on the 'disputes concerning the boundaries' (*sīmāvivādadharma,* Squarcini 2010, *MD.*8.245–266) the practice of burying deposits is reported as part of the procedure for establishing and then verifying, in case of controversy, the boundaries between two villages or lands (*MD.*8.249–252). Beside the practical aspect of these depositions, it is evident that the ritual deposit is considered as functional to the delimitation of the legal space (Squarcini 2019).

A Ritual Killing?

Indian texts of different religious traditions tell us about the ban on sacrificing human beings. In general, texts are disinclined to talk about ritual killing and this topic, liminal by definition, has been usually relegated to mythological and epic dimensions or to lands remote in terms of space and time. This is also the case of Indian texts as it is only in one of the Buddha's previous lives (*Trikkariya jataka*) that reference is made to the ritual killing of a brahmin and the burial of his body under a gate governed by spirits (*devatā*).

For the Hellenistic world, a source that can be cited as reporting on human sacrifice associated with the foundation of a city is John Malalas (5th century CE) who mentioned several virgin sacrifices performed at the founding of Hellenistic cities by Alexander and Seleucus. However, it has been convincingly demonstrated that the Tyche sacrifice narratives were actually fictions belonging to a Christian 'polemical history' (Garstad 2005).

Archaeologically speaking it is difficult to distinguish between a naturally deceased and a sacrificed body and the few burials associated with the foundation of city walls or gates are difficult to interpret (for a general bibliography see Ricci et al. 2000: 156–158). This is also the case at Barikot, where the poor condition of the skeletal remains cannot help answer the question.

Although there is no indisputable evidence on ritual foundation involving the killing of women, its actual performance cannot be excluded *a priori* on the basis of modern categories.

In general, the idea that the successful foundation of a construction (bridge, fortress, wall, city, church, sacred building) requires a human victim, mostly a woman or a child, is a fairly widespread motif in the folk traditions of Europe, Africa, South and South-East Asia (for a general bibliography see Eliade 1990 [2017]: 29–34; Wessing and Jordaan 1997; Ricci et al. 2000: 155–157; see also the *jataka* mentioned above).

The interpretations given by scholars to the general idea of foundation ritual killing has been grouped into two main categories: animation sacrifice and appeasement sacrifice (see reference in Wessing and Jordaan 1997: 104–111).

In the animation sacrifice, the main aim of a construction ritual killing is to protect the structure against danger and in some sense animate it. Indeed, in much of the literature on construction sacrifice, the spirit of a victim is said to become a guardian, a sort of *genius loci* or protector of the structure for which the sacrifice was made (Wessing and Jordaan 1997: 107–111).

According to other scholars, foundation ritual killings were instead made for pacifying the supernatural entities, deities or spirits who were somehow disturbed by the construction and who manifested their displeasure through 'an unusual number of accidents' (Wessing and Jordaan 1997: 105–107).[5]

Folk tales generally locate the ceremony involving a ritual killing at central or strategic points of the defensive wall, such as a gate or a bastion, and this matches the few foundation burials archaeologically attested across space and time (see Ricci et al. 2000: 155–156). In this regard, the evidence from Barikot (that at any rate seems to be exception in the cultural panorama of South Asia) is quite different as the burial was placed at the western periphery of the city between two bastions. This decentred location of the so-called burial might be actually meaningful.

Although the ritual sacrifice of a young woman for the foundation of the city wall is an appealing hypothesis, some pieces of evidence lead us to consider a more plausible explanation to the question why a young woman was buried under the city wall of Barikot. As usual, it is the careful reading of the archaeological evidence and the socio-cultural context that leads to more solid interpretations.

Explanatory hypotheses, potential generalisations, possible relations to other factors

The Urban Ritual Deposit at the City Wall of Barikot

In these last pages I will try to tentatively interpret the meaning of the so-called burial at Barikot by looking more closely at the specific features of the pit as inferred from the original archaeological report and from the more recent reassessment of the stratigraphy outside the city wall and by contextualising the features within the specific socio-cultural scenario of 2nd century Barikot.

We can start by considering the shape of the pit. From Fig. 7 it seems that the alignment of the city wall passes exactly through the major axis of the pit, the original shape of which can then be reconstructed as an ellipse with a wide minor axis or roughly semi-circular shape, approximately as shown in the hypothetical reconstruction in Fig. 9. The elliptical

shape is unconventional for a burial pit which commonly follows the proportions of the human body (see Saidu Sharif and Sarai Khola, Noci et al. 1997; Bernhardt 1981). Rather, the present profile may more closely recall pits dug for deposits.
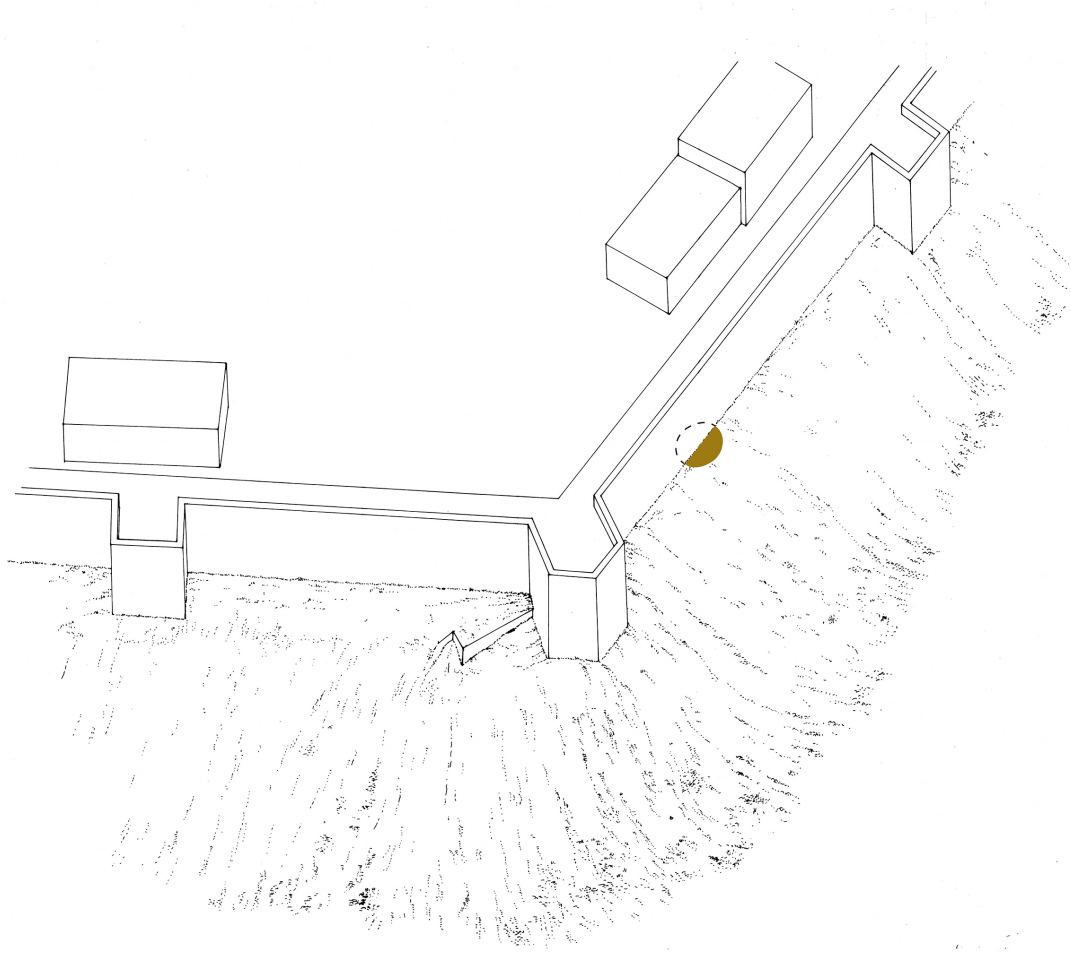

Fig. 9: Axonometric restitution of the SW corner of the city wall with indication of the pit dug beneath the S stretch of the wall (drawings by F. Martore, © ISMEO).

Furthermore, the incoherence and peculiarity of the materials found inside the pit together with the skeleton of the young woman (three fragments of common ware, a protohistoric jar and a dog) is noteworthy as such a type of assemblage has no comparison in Gandhāran funerary tradition, nor in the rich grave furniture of protohistoric tradition neither in the later burial pits of Saidu Sharif (5th–mid-4th century BCE) and Sarai Khola (late 4th–early 3rd century BCE), devoid of any goods. That said, a provocative question might be: are we actually dealing with a pit primarily dug for housing a corps? Shall we define a pit as burial only because a skeleton was found inside it?

In order to tentatively answer this question, it might be useful to consider the distribution patterns of bones inside the pit. As stated at the beginning of this paper, the materials were seriously damaged by the collapse of the bottom courses of the city wall and pushed against the southern side of the pit. Significantly, the two dead bodies inside the pit, namely a woman's and a dog's, appear to have reacted differently to the movement provoked by the collapse which must have occurred immediately after the construction of the wall (see above 'The Burial at the City Wall'). While the skeleton of the dog, even if

damaged, was found still in anatomical connection, the woman's skeleton was only partially connected and its parts were found scattered in the pit as partially visible in Fig. 7. This feature is important for understanding the chronology of the materials.

If the body of the woman was in good condition at the time of its deposition inside the pit, it should have shifted, after the collapse, in the same direction in its entirety. Instead, the fact that the skeletal remains of the woman, unlike the dog's, are scattered, implies that her body was already in an advanced stage of decomposition and partially disarticulated at the time of the collapse. Then, since it can confidently be said that the collapse occurred only a short time after the construction of the wall, and hence of the deposition of the body, I would suggest that the woman's skeleton was already in a stage of decomposition when it was deposited inside the pit. That is to say, the woman's skeleton is actually in secondary deposition and this would also explain why this was not complete at the moment of its discovery.

So, when did the woman actually die? The answer cannot be precise, as post-deposition processes have seriously affected the assemblage. Moreover, we do not know the conditions of the primary burial (if any)[6] and the agents which might have affected the timeline of the decomposition of the body. Determining how long before the construction of the city wall the woman had died is far beyond my expertise and I can only suggest that she might have died a few months or years before her bones were deposited in the pit, but certainly after 170 BCE (see 14C dates). At any rate, what really matters here is the link between the woman and the city wall. Why was the body of a young woman, who had died some time before the construction activity has started, deposited in relation to the city wall?

The reason for this is likely to be the same that motivated the deposition inside the pit of a pot about six centuries older than the city wall. These anachronisms, quite bizarre at first glance, may be explained in light of the recent reassessment of the stratigraphy outside the city wall (Iori 2019; Olivieri and Iori 2020: 82–87). Based on the examination of the ceramic assemblage associated with the protohistoric structures accidentally exposed during levelling work for the construction of the city wall, we can observe a morphological coherence between the ceramic assemblage associated with the ancient structures and the features of the jar. Therefore, it can be conjectured that the jar is indeed in secondary deposition. In other words, it was deposited in the pit after being found almost complete during the construction activities (for deposition of much earlier votive vessels see the deposit found at the Hellenistic fort of Poggio Civitella, Montalcino, Donati and Cappuccini 2008: 227, 234; Donati 2010: 98–102).

The story of the woman's skeleton might have had a similar plot. Indeed, if we accept the hypothesis that the skeleton is in secondary deposition, then it may be reasonably argued that the human remains, like the pot, were found during the preparatory work for the erection of the wall outside the limit of the earlier city. However, even if only as conjecture, this possibility should be considered, as it would explain why the body of the young woman – subjected to an unusual mortuary practice – was intentionally correlated to the city wall.

Based on this speculative reading I suggest that the involuntary act of 'breaking' the past, or rather, the boundary with the past through the accidental exposure of earlier features, might have evoked some sense of anxiety in the actors involved in the construction of the city wall. This motivated not the simple reburial of the dead body as an act of *pietas* (as

attested in Saidu Sharif), but the ritual deposition of elements from the recent (i.e. woman) and the remote (i.e. pot) past accidentally found during the levelling work, in order to physically and ideally re-establish the temporal confines. This interpretation can be related to the ancient Indian 'anxiety' to maintain and protect precariously defined boundaries of the 'real' and 'imagined' spaces related to both collective and individual domains, as it emerges from the most ancient Indian texts concerning ritual, moral, spatial and legal matters (for discussion on the importance of the boundaries in Vedic texts and *Mānavadharmaśāstra-sīmāvivādadharma*, see Squarcini 2019: 140−155).

If we take into consideration these reflections on boundaries, the presence of the dog inside the deposit becomes significant.

Indeed, according to the line of reasoning drawn above, the dog (together with the three sherds) is the only feature of the deposit coeval to the construction of the city wall and its presence is difficult to explain but as a sacrifice. I cannot refrain from thinking of the role as purifying agent and guardian of the boundaries that the dog has in the ancient Mediterranean and Hellenistic world.

Beside being a symbol of domestic loyalty, the dog as both purifying agent in rituals and guardian of the boundaries and transitions between two worlds (e.g. living/dead, *urbs*/*ager*) or social stages, is a diffuse motive in the ancient Mediterranean area as attested by literary sources, figurative art and archaeological record from at least the 5th century BCE (Mainoldi 1981: 28−38; Serafini 2015: 118−110; De Grossi Mazzorin and Manniti 2006; Lacam 2008). Moreover, dogs offered as sacrifice for the protection of city walls and city gates are also archaeologically attested in the Mediterranean area (De Grossi Mazzorin and Manniti 2000; 2006).

As in several Indo-European cultures, also in the Vedic culture dogs are connected to impurity and with the transition to the Underworld (Keith, II: 406−407) though they are more generally associated with hunting and guarding (Van der Geer 2008: 160−163).

As for Buddhism, Gandhāran Buddhist art rarely represents dogs. Apart from a few representations of the story of the 'dog barking at the Buddha', particularly interesting is the connection between dogs and an unknown goddess holding a bowl and a severed caprid's head as seen in two late-Gandhāran small stelae (ca. late 3rd century; Taddei 1987: fig. 12, Russek 1987: n. 94).

Although this feature of the dog as purifying agent is not explicit in the NW territories of South Asia, neither in texts nor in archaeological evidence, in the light of the Gandhāran Vedic background it cannot be excluded that the performance of the dog's ritual killing combined both local and Hellenistic practices and beliefs.

At any rate, I would suggest that the ritual killing of the dog intended as purifying agent might have meant to ritually 'seal' the deposit containing elements from the past by so re-establishing the temporal boundary. Furthermore, the location of the deposit in exact correspondence with the new perimetral limit of the city, instead of beneath bastions, seems to more stringently connect the (accidentally) disclosed past to the new phase of the city itself.

To be more specific, the deposit seems to have been used as a reference for drawing the line of the new city wall starting from its western corner by passing exactly through the pit's major axis. This fact seems to evoke the north Indian practice described in the contemporary Laws of Manu (see above), of burying ritual deposits in order to practically and legally define boundaries.

As mentioned before, the construction of the city wall was, on one side, a large-scale financial investment by the Indo-Greek rulers, and, on the other side, the materialisation of a new concept of city shaped on the Hellenistic model that was about to change the topography but also the urban life of the city.

After the accidental breakage of the boundary with the past, the urban actors involved in the construction of the city wall, locals and non-local labourers, coordinator and officers, must have found it necessary to perform a ritual that accommodated different concerns and anxieties regarding the past and the future.

In other words, the ritual deposit at the city wall served to (re)fix, through the ritual killing of the dog, the boundary with the ancient owners of the place or ancestors, but also to ritually connect them to the foundation of the city wall in order to legitimise what was going to be enclosed by it.

The foundation deposit at the city wall of Barikot should probably be considered the earliest archaeologically attested urban ritual in the area, not because it falls within the spatial limits of the city, but because it was used as a technique to negotiate among diverse urban dwellers of the 'new city', to legitimise and appropriate the urban space and make it a place.

Footnotes

1

The literature developed around the figure of the Indo-Greek 'Buddhist king' must have been so popular as to reach the West, since Plutarch (*Moralia*, 28.6) reported that Menander's body was cremated according to Buddhist practice and his ashes divided among his people as Buddha's ashes had been.

2

I use the term 'Greco-Iranic' in the sense established by D. Faccenna in his article on Kuh-e Khwaja (Faccenna 1981: 94–95).

3

The number of attestations of course increases if earlier and later sites in Etruria, Ancient Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia are considered, and even more once the focus is extended to private and sacred buildings (for a general bibliography see Ricci et al. 2000: 154–156; Michetti 2013; Hunt 2006).

4

At any rate, the ritual deposits described in the texts reported above are unattested at the archaeological level.

5

For the foundation ritual killing as human emulation of the first act of creation see Eliade 1990 [2017]: 50–111.

6

The skull of a second female skeleton was found immediately outside the city wall in the Saka-Parthian context: 'BKG12E, Feature 48, DA-BIR0317-021 (I7714): Date of 47 calBCE – 52 calCE (2005±20 BP, PSUAMS-6207). Genetically female. In the area outside the defensive wall of the ancient city, on the upper filling (171) of the outer ditch, an isolated skull was found near a pit-well (183). The waste material associated with this individual is consistent with the Saka-Parthian structural phase of the urban defense (c. BCE 50–50 CE)' (Narasimhan et al. 2019: 170).

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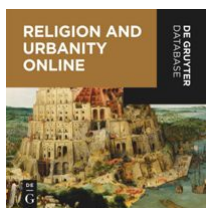
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