

# Releasing Urban Religion beyond the City Wall: The Spatial Capital of Early Buddhist Monasticism in NW South Asia

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## Abstract

This paper examines the complexity of the entanglement between rural and urban space in historic South Asia through the lens of urban religion. The article is organized in two stages. First, ancient literature and archaeological evidence are used to rethink the centrality of the agrarian space in the formation and development of ancient cities and urban religions in South Asia. Second, by using the concept of spatial capital as an analytical tool I examine how the geographical assets held by Buddhist monastic institutions in the countryside affected the economic and social mobility of urban actors in the city. This second section uses the ancient city of Barikot (Swat, Pakistan) during the first three centuries of the Common Era as a case study. On this ground, I argue a direct connection between the prominent role of the *saṃgha* in the transformation of social, economic, and political aspects of the ancient urban society in South Asia and its ability to master geographical space and relativize distances.

## Keywords

early Buddhist monasticism – rural-urban – Gandhara – spatial capital – urban religion

## 1 Releasing Urban and Urbanity from the City Space

Granted that the image of a timeless and unchanging South Asian rurality, idealized and instrumentalized in orientalist discourses, has been deconstructed

by postcolonial perspectives (e.g., Said 1978), it remains a fact that, as in modern times, in early historic (and historic) South Asia too, most of the population lived in villages. Current research aiming at unfolding urban dynamics beyond the topographic boundaries of contemporary cities has revealed that sociospatial settings coproducing the urban can be found outside the city itself, thus leading us to rethink the rural-urban dichotomy. Against the background of this field of research, this article explores the connectivity between the urban and rural sociospatial contexts in historic northwestern South Asia through the lens of urban religion (Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018). First, I reassess the centrality of the rural in conceptualizing ancient cities and urban religions in South Asia by using ancient literature and archaeological evidence. Then, by drawing on the studies that conceptualize geographical space and spatial mobility as assets (Lévy 2000; 2014: 46–48; Kaufmann 2002; Kaufmann et al. 2004), I examine how the spatial capital held by Buddhist monastic institutions in the countryside influenced the social mobility of urban actors in the city. In this second section my focus is on the district of the ancient city of Barikot (Swat, Pakistan) during the first three centuries of the Common Era. Building on that, an argument is made for a direct connection between the prominent role played by Buddhism in the transformation of social, economic, and political aspects of the ancient urban society in South Asia and its ability to master geographical space and relativize geographical, social, and religious distances.

The ongoing global debate on how to overcome the rural-urban dichotomy in the analysis of contemporary suburbs and peri-urban areas without deterritorializing the two concepts has produced several valuable models and analytical perspectives. The general tendency is to blur the rural-urban distinction by conceptualizing the urban as a hybrid networked space that is co-constituted by multiple human and nonhuman dynamics linking city and countryside (for a general overview, see Woods 2009). Yet, there is still a general inclination to conceptualize the relation between urban and rural with a center-outwards approach that emphasizes sociopolitical dynamics expanding from the city outwards (e.g., the concept of city-region; see Bertrand and Kreibich 2006).<sup>1</sup> This city-centric perspective is indeed relevant, especially when it speaks of a desire to move away from what a city *is* and focus on what a city *does*, and to look at the “big picture” by exploring the adaptation and transformation of urban dynamics beyond the city space. That said, addressing the rural only in terms of its relations with the city may risk leaving out of the picture the

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1 However, see concepts like “re-urbanity” (Lacour and Puissant 2007) and “rural urbanity” (Pouille and Gorgeu 1997).

agency that rural complexity had on some urban changes, especially in specific contexts, like early historic South Asia, where the rural and the city appear as two distinct sociospatial realms of the same polygonal urban system. On this ground, in the study of the co-constitution of religion and urbanity (Rüpke and Rau 2020) in ancient South Asia, I wonder whether overturning the perspective – by looking at the urban from the rural, where religious buildings were traditionally set – can somehow make us aware of other aspects of this complex interaction and its scales.

To make plausible such an overturning, my first step involves a reassessment of the centrality of the rural in conceptualizing ancient South Asian cities and urban religions. This centrality is grounded, I argue, on four main aspects: (a) the “anti-city” tendencies of South Asian religions; (b) the different conceptualization of the lived space differentiation in South Asian thought; (c) the crucial role of agrarian space in shaping the socioeconomic urban reality; and (d) the persistence of urban features in the countryside in times of deurbanization. While points (a) and (b) can be generalized as common features of almost all premodern South Asian urban systems, the last two points may be more strictly linked to situational contexts.

### 1.1 *The “Anti-city” Attitude of South Asian Religions*

Unlike Mediterranean and western Asian cities, early South Asian cities were generally not defined by religious institutions or city deities (Strauch 2005: 132). Indeed, all the religions developed in South Asia in premodern times are either conceptually or spatially situated in the rural space. Besides the initial antipathetic attitude of Brahmanical religions to city life, which intermittently re-emerged over the centuries, the religions that emerged at the dawn of the second urbanization phase (from ca. the sixth century BCE; for example, Jainism, Ājīvika, and so on) originated as competing *śramaṇa* movements, namely groups of renunciates who dropped out from society and lived on alms, residing outside the city for most of the year.<sup>2</sup> Buddhism was one among these *śramaṇa* movements and even after the so-called domestication of Buddhism (Strenski 1983), the monastic community, called *saṃgha*, maintained a sort of “anti-city” attitude by preferring to establish its monasteries (*vihāras*) outside

2 The term “second urbanization” conventionally refers to the urbanization phase that started around the mid-first millennium BCE, in order to distinguish it from the “first urbanization” phase, that is, the Indus civilization.

the boundaries of urban centers, as prescribed by Buddhist monastic codes.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, does not mean that Buddhism did not engage with the urban society or that cities were devoid of places of religious communication. Indeed, Buddhist thought was actually an offspring of the emerging urban values of early historic India, as Buddhist ideas challenged the traditional caste system of Brahmanical orthodoxy by offering a spiritual perspective able to support the new emerging urban values of social and economic self-improvement (Bailey and Mabbett 2003; Shaw 2007: 32–34). Further, urban dynamics had, over history, a great impact on the development of Buddhist doctrines, architecture, and art as well as practices. In this sense, Buddhism can be certainly considered an urban religion (Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018). Despite the clear connections with the urban world – without mentioning the fact that the *saṃgha* could not have developed in the form it did without patronage activity – it seems that the city space and its lifestyle continued to be perceived as incompatible with the Buddhist way of life. Somehow, we can conceptualize the Buddhist monks as “urban fleeing” and “urban seeking” at the same time, like those middle-class exurban migrants who nowadays settle in rural localities by transgressing rural and urban habitus in their process of placemaking (e.g., see Poulle and Gorgeu 1997; Urbain 2002; Lacour and Puissant 2007), proposing an alternative urbanity. Then, if on the one hand Buddhism was an urban religion, on the other hand the rural space was particularly relevant in shaping Buddhist imaginaries, the position of Buddhist communities within society, and the way it relates to the city.

### 1.2 *Against Rural-Urban Dichotomy: The Nāgara-Grāmas-Kṣetra System*

Another point in favor of the centrality of the rural in the study of urban South Asia comes from the substantial absence of the rural-urban dichotomy in ancient Indian literature, that rather depicts the wilderness (*araṇya* or *vana*) as a counter-image of the lived space.

This binary worldview, already evident in the Vedic opposition *grāma-araṇya*, or village-wilderness, is not only spatial but also conceptual and religious. As pointed out by Charles Malamoud (1976), while the *grāma* defines

3 In general, the number of Buddhist monasteries documented within city walls is significantly low. When present in urban contexts, monasteries are usually located in peripheral areas of the cities. The earliest archaeological evidence of monasteries inside a city date to the second/third centuries CE (e.g., Ghositarama monastery at Kauśāmbī; Härtel 1991: 66). The situation is different for Buddhist nuns who, according to monastic texts, must have their monasteries (*varṣakas*) within city walls (Schopen 2014: 3–4).

a space where a group lives according to the *dharma*, namely the social rules strictly linked to the performance of the Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*), by contrast, the *aranya*, as *terra incognita*, is depicted as lacking order and as the place of those who do not follow the *dharma*, like brigands and outlaws. Whatever is not included in the settled space belonged to the wilderness, that in the earliest Indian literature and epic poems appears as a place for hunting, hermitage, sacred groves, and exile (Thapar 2001: 4–6).

During the second urbanization phase, with the development of a complex urban society, the lived space expanded geographically. The *Arthaśāstra*, the most famous Indian theoretical treatise of political economy,<sup>4</sup> indicates the creation of cultivated fields (*kṣetras*) and settlements in the countryside as one of the main duties of a good ruler (Olivelle 2013: 99; KA 2:1.1). Meanwhile, a variety of human settlements, villages, and cities (usually indicated as *nagara*) – typologized according to their functions and activities – started to be mentioned in the literature. In particular, texts like the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Mānavadharmasāstra* (a legal text, possibly redacted in northern India, second century BCE to second century CE) make reference to a common settlement pattern in which administrative centers are appointed for the coordination of a number of satellite villages: for instance, a *thānīya* was to be located as a center for eight hundred villages, a *droṇamukha* for four hundred villages, a *kārvaṭika* for two hundred villages, and a *saṃgrahaṇa* for ten villages (KA 2:1.4). This hierarchical and heterarchical settlement pattern, mirroring an increasing socioeconomic complexity, was archaeologically documented by George Erdosy (1988) in the district of Allahabad around the city of Kauśāmbī in northern India, where such a multi-tiered settlement pattern was apparently well established by 400 BCE (Erdosy 1995: 107).<sup>5</sup>

On the wave of this new settlement pattern, the *grāma-aranya* dichotomy seems to evolve into a contrast between, on the one hand, the *aranya* and, on the other, a lived space that now includes the city and the hinterland, made up of *grāmas* and *kṣetras*. The space outside the city was used not only for farming and pastoral activity but also for a variety of urban activities, such

4 The text is traditionally credited in its original form to the royal advisor of Candragupta Maurya (fourth century BCE), Kauṭilya (here abbreviated as “KA”). For a reassessment of the dates of the different redactions, see Olivelle 2013: 25–31. However, for the proposal of a later date of the early redaction (around the first century BCE), see McClish 2019: 391–394.

5 Criticisms of Erdosy’s model were moved by Coningham et al. 2007: 700–715. Their stress on a heterarchical approach is embraced here.

as cremations, craft activity,<sup>6</sup> exchange of goods in markets, and religious and pleasure practices at sacred groves and gardens (on the connection between artificial gardens, urban life, and Buddhist monasteries, see Keller 2022; Schopen 2006; Ali 2003).<sup>7</sup> One can say that with the urbanization process, the space of signified order and predictability was expanded from the *grāma* to the city-hinterland system, whereas the wilderness – although its perception and connection to the settlements will change over centuries (see Thapar 2001: 12–15) – continued to represent the “other”: the lack of order, and the place of concrete and more-than-human dangers. Indeed, the wilderness was the space where powerful entities, like *yakṣas*, *apsaras*, and *nāgas* (e.g., story of the conversion of the *yakṣa ātavika* and the *nāga apalāla*) dwell side by side with exiles (e.g., *Viśvantara jātaka*), ascetics (e.g., story of the conversion of the *Kāśyapas*), brigands (e.g., conversion of *Aṅgulimāla*), and obviously, wild animals.

We may conclude that in the second urbanization phase, rural and urban were complementary rather than exclusive categories, as they were connected through economic, social, and religious relations that constituted the known and the ordered. Instead, it is the wild that continues to represent, until the premodern era, the “otherness.”

### 1.3 *Agrarian Regime: Season of Cultivation and Season of Circulation*

Another point to address while bringing the rural into the analysis of the urban is the great importance that agriculture (farming, animal husbandry, pastoralism) had in most of the regions of South Asia.

In 2019 Shubhra Gururani developed the conceptual framework of “agrarian urbanism” by arguing that in South Asia “agrarian regimes of land and property endure and coproduce the urban” (2019: 985). Her work stresses how prioritizing agrarian space and relations can provide an alternative perspective in the study of urban changes and social inequality (see also Rathi 2021; Upadhyaya 2021; Upadhyaya and Rathod 2021). This approach can certainly be applied to historic South Asia as well. Unquestionably, not all South Asian towns and cities were based on, or were exclusively dependent upon, agrarian production.

6 An inner typology of cities and villages depending on location and function is well established since ancient times. Specific terms are used in *Arthaśāstra* for cities with specialized activity while in the Buddhist *jātaka* literature there are references to villages of carpenters, weavers, smiths, potters, and so on.

7 In particular, Schopen 2006 emphasized the use, in both ancient texts and inscriptions, of the terms *ārāmas*, *udyānas*, or *vihāras* (gardens or places of pleasure) to indicate what we conventionally call monasteries.

Maritime cities, trade, and productive centers of different types, as attested by textual and archaeological sources, were also part of the economic network of early historic South Asia (Smith 2006: 116–124).

Yet, the agrarian space was crucial for the formation of most of the cities and, without any doubt, this was the case for the middle Swat valley in northern Pakistan – that is the focus of the second section of this article – where an exceptional agricultural wealth is documented throughout two millennia, from Greek and Latin sources to premodern literature.

In the definition of “agrarian” I follow David Ludden who, in his book *An Agrarian History of South Asia*, says:

A region or social space is agrarian not because farming forms the material basis for other activities, but rather because a preponderance of social activity engages agriculture in some way or another during seasons of cultivation and circulation.

LUDDEN 1999: 31

The city, of course, has its seasons too, but in agro-commercial cities, such seasons are often “the reverse of the countryside’s calendar of activities,” with winter the most vibrant (Tuan 1978: 6). Indeed, the temporal framework of agriculture’s seasonality – with its cycles of cultivation and season of circulation – influences both rural and urban activities (Ludden 1999: 17–36).

Let us consider the middle Swat valley. Being a double-crop pocket zone specializing in cash crops since the twelfth century BCE (Spengler et al. 2020), unlike those areas where agriculture mostly depends on monsoons, here the season of cultivation includes both late spring and fall. The cultivation and harvest seasons in Swat were (and are still today) critical and very busy periods that attracted seasonal workers who might have come from other areas and temporarily settled in the region.<sup>8</sup> The two cultivation seasons are separated by the monsoon season, here mitigated by the presence of the southern mountain range. With its heavy rain, the monsoon season (here July–August) is mostly a period of indoor activities and, in the past, this was the period of annual monastic retreat (*varṣāvāsa*) when the mobility of Buddhist monks outside the monastery was limited to encourage meditation. If the monks could

<sup>8</sup> Today seasonal workers mostly come from the drier Sindh. These are the only periods of the year when in Swat one can see dromedaries brought by Sindhi workers for transporting materials and crops.

not move from the monasteries,<sup>9</sup> then it was the city-dwellers who would go to them. Indeed, according to the epigraphic evidence from the northwestern region (Albery 2020: 472–473, figure 11.1), the monsoon period seems to witness an increase in donations. As a matter of fact, Buddhist donative practice was generally seasonal, and making donations during specific days, like the *uposatha* days, and times of the year was considered to bring more karmic merits. Donations of food, robes, and so on in the period marking the beginning or completion of the rain retreat is a tradition that endures across South and Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1970: 154–156). Also, *stūpa* festivals were usually held at this time of the year (Pagel 2007: 373) when all the Buddhist community was assembled and when donors, with their first crops already stored, were ready to join in prayers and make donations.

At the end of the farming year when the land was free of crops (end of October–April) and the water level low, it was the time for maintenance activities (e.g., clearing of wells and water infrastructure) and the time when manpower could be invested in other production and building activities both in rural and urban contexts. But above all, this was the time for movement and trade. The *uttarāpatha*, that is the main road linking eastern Afghanistan to India through the cities of Kabul, Charsadda, and Taxila down to Patna, is indeed a winter road typically used when local rivers (Kabul, Indus, and the rivers of Punjab) are at their lowest levels, so that they can be easily forded (Olivieri 2020: 645–646).

This is the best period for long-distance travel but also for military invasions.<sup>10</sup> Alexander the Great's conquest of Swat took place in the best period of the year, autumn 327 BCE, when the river level was lower, and when seasonal crops were already harvested and stored. Babur, the founder of the Moghul empire (sixteenth century), was also aware of this:

It was the end of the year, only a day or two left in Pisces [March] ... if we went now to Swat the soldiers would not find any grain and would suffer. ... Next year we should come earlier, at harvest time.

*Bāburnāma* 220–221; THACKSTON 2002: 273

9 Indeed, there were some exceptions, like the performance of urban services for donors in the city (Schopen 1992).

10 See the paper “Double-Crop Pocket Zones and Empires: The Case of Swat” presented by Luca Olivieri at the International Conference “Economies of the Edge: Frontier Zone Processes at Regional, Imperial, and Global Scale (300 BCE–300 CE)” (Freiburg, September 19–21, 2019).



Movement was not limited to invaders, traders, and their entourages, but also involved other members of society. In fact, winter in Swat is also the period of transhumance, when shepherds moved their herds to the southern warmer plain of Charsadda before the worst winter weather starts (October–November), returning in April with strengthened bonds to the people of the plain (see Young 2003: 65).

Finally, spring was the period of visits by wealthy people, especially women, to artificial gardens and monasteries located outside the city (see Schopen 2006: 490–491), and perhaps it was in this period of the year that local pilgrims preferred to visit Swat, like Pakistani tourists and foreign pilgrims do today.

In this sense, agrarian space and seasonality were not marginal, as they directly influenced the flow of goods, people, and activities within and beyond the agrarian space, by also shaping urban activities, religious practices, and the accumulation of various types of capital.

#### 1.4 *Urbanity without City?*

The relevance of looking at Buddhism in its agrarian space when reflecting on the formation and transformation of urban dynamics becomes evident when we consider that at the end of the third century CE, after three centuries of a city-monastery symbiotic relationship (see below), the Buddhist monasteries of Swat seem to replace the city as main socioeconomic centers. At the end of the third century CE, the shrinkage of transregional trade between Afghanistan and India due to the political upheaval of the Kushan empire caused crises in most of the cities of northern India. According to the available archaeological evidence, the regional capitals located along the *uttarāpatha*, like Shaikhan-dheri at Charsadda and Sirkap at Taxila,<sup>11</sup> were partially abandoned, and the cities of the middle Swat valley, like Barikot, Udegram, and Butkara – in the meantime also affected by two destructive earthquakes – witnessed a striking contraction (Olivieri 2014). The urban crisis and the consequent decrease in patronage activity had an impact on Buddhist monasteries too. Despite that, some sparse archaeological and textual evidence suggests that the *samgha* of Swat, like other Buddhist communities in India (Strauch 2005: 147), managed to cope with the urban crisis, surviving the city and retaining qualities that might be considered urban. Here I briefly outline four main phenomena that occurred during the phase of deurbanization in the middle Swat that may indirectly inform us about the centrality of monastic institutions and agrarian space in the study of the urban.

11 The evidence on the chronology and function of Sirkap at Taxila is poor (Marshall 1951: 217–221; Erdosy 1990: 670).

#### 1.4.1 Gentrification

During the first half of mid-third century CE, while the cities of Barikot and Shaikhan-dheri were already experiencing an urban crisis, Buddhist experts “intruded” into the city space by establishing previously unattested Buddhist temples or monasteries. The phenomenon was particularly striking in the southwestern periphery of Barikot, where five new Buddhist temples with annexed areas of production and storage were constructed on an area of less than one hectare by replacing several habitation units (Olivieri 2014; Moscatelli et al. 2016; Iori and Olivieri 2019: 34–38).<sup>12</sup> This gentrification of the southwestern neighborhoods of the city by Buddhist experts, monks or nuns, led to a reconfiguration of the sociospatial setting of the city quarter and marks an extension (from rural to urban) of the space traditionally occupied and managed by the Buddhist community.

#### 1.4.2 Renovations and New Aesthetics

At the end of the third century CE, Buddhist sanctuaries in the countryside went through a period of architectural and artistic changes. For instance, after the earthquake that struck Swat, the main *stūpa* of Amlukdara, among others, was restored with some significant architectural adjustments (Olivieri 2018: 60–67; Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018: 80–90). In addition, its decorative apparatus in schist, the distinctive stone from northern Gandhara used for sculptures and reliefs during the main phase of Gandharan art, was replaced by a plastered kanjur, a limestone unavailable in Swat and imported from the southern plain.<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, architectural transformations and restyling of the decorative apparatus, which may also point to changes in religious practices, strategies of power display, and in the patronage network (Olivieri and Iori 2021a: 232–233), suggest a notable financial investment in a period of economic and political crisis.

#### 1.4.3 Surviving the Urban Crisis

The survey carried out in the district of Barikot documented the presence of material culture dated to the fourth and fifth centuries CE in a few large monastic settlements located in the hinterland of the city (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 136). Further, radiometric dating and numismatic evidence suggest that some of the Buddhist foundations continued to be used until the tenth century

12 The interpretation of two of the temples as part of an urban monastery is under examination by Cristiano Moscatelli (2022: 16–17).

13 However, reliefs in schist were reused as images of worship in the area surrounding the main *stūpa*. On the reuse of images in Gandhara, see also Behrendt 2009.

(Olivieri 2018: 60–67). While the city of Barikot – which began to shrink at the time of the construction of urban Buddhist temples – was definitively abandoned around 430–440,<sup>14</sup> archaeological data and textual sources show that several of the Buddhist monasteries managed to survive the urban crisis, although not for long.<sup>15</sup>

#### 1.4.4 Retaining Urban Qualities

From the travels of Chinese Buddhist monks, like Faxian and Song Yun, who visited northern Gandhara in the early fifth century and at the beginning of the sixth century CE respectively, we know that the monasteries of Swat were considered a due stopover within the larger Buddhist pilgrimage network and, furthermore, major centers of learning that attracted monks from China, via India or Central Asia (e.g., see Deeg 2014; Kuwayama 1990). At the time of urban crisis, Buddhist monasteries were still places where a process of intellectualization, one of the qualities of the urban (Rüpke 2018: 332–339), emerged in the form of production of knowledge, philosophical-theological reflection and, perhaps, textualization.

## 2 Relativizing Distances: The Spatial Capital of the Saṃgha in Swat

By expanding on Bourdieu's theory of capital, the notion of "spatial capital" or "motility" (Lévy 2000; 2014: 46–48; Kaufmann 2002; Kaufmann et al. 2004; Rérat and Lees 2011) draws on the observation that geographical space, and our ability to master it, is a resource that can be accumulated, exchanged, and transformed into other forms of capital (Lévy 2014: 48). According to this approach, the capacity of entities (persons, information, ideas) to be mobile *across* and fixed *into* geographical spaces may impact the spatial distribution of social, cultural, and economic capital and create social inequality. For instance, a city or a group of people can take advantage of their favorable location or residential area to develop spatial strategies that can directly or indirectly influence economic and social patterns (on gentrification and spatial capital, see Rérat and Lees 2011). Further, the capability of an actor to make

14 The ongoing analysis of the numismatic evidence will soon be published by Ehsan Shavarebi (2022: 16–17).

15 The crisis of Buddhist monasticism in Swat occurred during the second half of the sixth century, between the visit of Song Yun (beginning of the sixth century) and that of Xuanzang (first half of the seventh century).

use of the immediacy of digital communication allows the overcoming of geographical and social distance, thus increasing the individual's spatial and social resources.

The concept of spatial capital, while open to different levels of abstraction, has been described in its derivative form of motility as an asset depending on three main elements: accessibility, competence, and appropriation (Kaufmann et al. 2004: 750). *Access* refers to possible mobilities that depend on spatial distribution of infrastructure (e.g., means of transportation and communication) and socioeconomic position within a hierarchical or social network. *Competence* is related to the ability to make use of accessibility and to move across distance with greater speed, thus to compress distances and relativize the concept of proximity. This ability can be physical, acquired (e.g., driving license, linguistic skills), or organizational (the ability to plan and coordinate activities). Last, *appropriation* refers to strategies (*how*) and values (*why*) attributed by the actors to their access and skills.

In the following micro-level analysis, access (to), competence (of), and appropriation (of) ecological and social spaces will be used to take into account a specific "rural" group, the *samgha*, while conceptualizing the urban, and to highlight its active role in the social and spatial mobility of the ancient urban society of South Asia.

### 2.1 *The Centrality of the Margins*

My case study is the district of the ancient agro-commercial city of Barikot in the middle Swat valley (Figures 1–2), one of the most important known cities of the ancient region of Gandhara together with Begram (Afghanistan) (Hackin 1939; 1954; Ghirshman 1946), Charsadda (Dani 1965–66), and Taxila (Marshall 1951).<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the main cities of Begram, Charsadda, and Taxila, set along the main trade route connecting eastern Afghanistan to India, Barikot is located in the glacial highland of the middle Swat valley at the foot of the Karakorum range, in a quite marginal area, geographically speaking. However, textual sources and archaeological evidence reveal that this marginal area, known in ancient sources as Oḍḍiyāna (or Uḍḍiyāna), had paramount importance in antiquity,

16 The city of Barikot has been the major target of the excavations of the ISMEO/Ca' Foscari University of Venice-Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan since 1984. Its stratigraphical sequence (1400 BCE–1500 CE) can be considered the main reference for the reassessment of the chronological sequence of other sites in the Gandhara region (Petrie 2021: 457).



FIGURE 1 General map of northern Pakistan, with indication of the main cities of the early historic period in Swat

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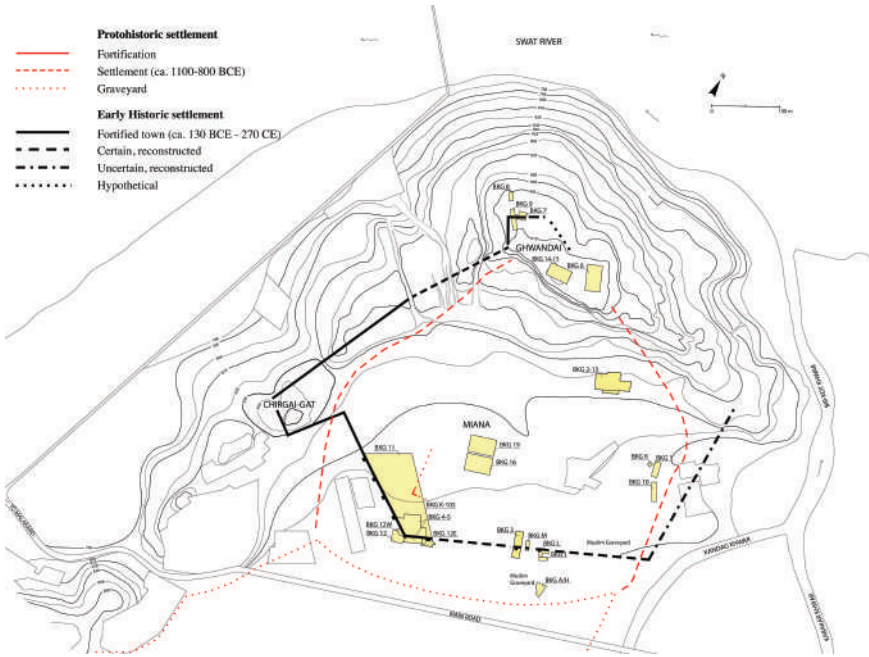


FIGURE 2 General map of the archaeological site of Barikot, with indication of trenches © ISMEO

and was celebrated for three main features: (1) its exceptional agricultural wealth documented throughout two millennia; (2) for being considered, through its connection with Gandhara, “la seconde terre sainte” (Foucher 1922, vol. 2: 416–417) for Buddhists, after the Indian cities directly connected to the life of the Buddha;<sup>17</sup> and (3) for being the core of the most celebrated artistic phenomenon of the first to third centuries CE, the so-called Gandharan art, which apparently developed spontaneously in an area with no sculptural tradition.

The second urbanization of Swat cities, like that of the regional capitals in the plains of lower Gandhara, was strictly connected to the development of transregional trade during the Achaemenid time (ca. sixth to mid-fourth century BCE) through the *uttarāpatha* (Iori 2018: 332–335). The role of the city of Barikot within this trade network was originally based on its agrarian wealth. Indeed, before the irrigation system established by the British in the early

17 On the narratives that localized Buddha and early Buddhism in Gandhara, see Neelis 2014; 2019.

twentieth century through the canalization of the lower Swat River, the territories to the south of Swat and to the west of the Indus were largely subtropical or semiarid savannas and the annual production from this land must have totally relied on the monsoon.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the specific ecology of middle Swat offered the conditions for a double cropping agriculture specialized in cash crops (rice, wheat, and barley), in combination with mixed farming, from the Iron Age until the Islamic period (Spengler et al. 2020). The surplus of food resources that, alongside minerals and timber, was the great asset of Swat, transformed the area into a crucial economic pool and a sort of breadbasket, functional to the life and economy of the caravan cities in the south.<sup>19</sup> Such factors made this geographically marginal land a strategically crucial territory for organized political systems that ruled over northern South Asia, from the Achaemenid until the Ghaznavid period.

Over time, the economic wealth of Swat was reinvested and transformed by its inhabitants into other forms of capital, attracting skilled immigrants (Callieri 2007: 158–160; Olivieri 2022: 35–36), merchants, and eventually, Buddhist communities. The latter played a crucial active role in the transformation of the socioeconomic and religious status of this region.

In particular, I would argue that the symbiotic relationship that developed over centuries between the urban center of Barikot and the Buddhist monastic settlements in the countryside is directly connected to the spatial capital accumulated by the *saṃgha* in the countryside. That guaranteed to urban elites *access, competence, and appropriation* of economic and religious assets of the agrarian space, subsequently transformed into social capital. Consequently, the city way of life, or urbanity, was shaped by the agrarian sociospatial realms and the ability of the *saṃgha* to relativize distances.

## 2.2 Access to Resources

Buddhism enters Swat physically and monumentally through the construction of a Dharmarājika stūpa (mid- to late third century BCE) at the periphery of the main city of Swat, Butkara, ca. 20 km upstream of Barikot (Figure 1). However, Buddhism had to go through a long negotiation with local religious traditions

18 The fact that the area of Charsadda was used as hunting grounds for rhinoceros in Moghul times (sixteenth century; Bāburnāma 222b; Thackston 2002: 275) is quite indicative of the type of environment (Olivieri and Iori 2021b: 41–42).

19 The role of Swat as “breadbasket” of Gandhara and the necessity to guarantee food supply to his army also explain the otherwise exceptional and incomprehensible detour made by Alexander the Great in Bajaur, Swat and Buner, as well as the construction of fortification at the garrisoned cities of Barikot and Udegram, 10 km upstream of Barikot (Olivieri and Iori 2021b: 42–43).

and society before becoming established in the form we know today. In particular, although some archaeological evidence suggests a degree of diffusion of Buddhism from the Indo-Greek period, there is no evidence of the establishment of monasteries until the mid-first century CE, when the Saidu Sharif monastery and the annexed stūpa, bearing the first known narrative frieze of the life of the Buddha, were constructed (Olivieri 2022).<sup>20</sup> Although we cannot exclude that monasteries built in perishable materials might have existed in an earlier phase, it is only from this point in time that Buddhist monasteries are archaeologically attested in this area.

The spread of monasteries in the countryside of Swat goes along with two other phenomena: the political aspirations of the local dynasty of the Oḍirājas of Swat,<sup>21</sup> and the blooming of Gandharan art and architecture. For the scope of this article it will be sufficient to discuss the first point.

Between the mid-first and the mid-third century CE the agrarian space of Barikot radically changed under the increasing pressure of the Buddhist communities and urban interests. In the district of Barikot, on a tested area of 100 km<sup>2</sup>, more than 100 Buddhist complexes were identified during the survey carried out by Luca Olivieri and Massimo Vidale (2006: 129–138; see Figure 3). Although farming sites built with perishable materials may also have existed in earlier periods when the fertile land was already exploited for surplus production, no structural evidence prior to the first century CE survived in this area apart from three settlements located on the hillsides immediately southwest of Barikot (Abwa 1–2, Gumbat, Jowar-bandai 2) and some Iron Age graveyards (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 121). Therefore, the *saṃgha* seems to be the first community to settle in permanent structures in the district of Barikot and the driving force behind the development of rural settlements on the hillsides (see orange dots in Figure 3).<sup>22</sup>

According to their position, visibility, size, and complexity, Buddhist centers can be distinguished into different categories that, also on the basis of an analogous differentiation in epigraphic sources, we can call: “monastic settlements,” including monasteries, stūpas, shrines, assembly halls, isolated dwelling units, clusters of unidentified buildings, and hydraulic infrastructures (see

20 The situation in the nearby Bajaur is similar (east of Swat, on the border with Afghanistan), where, according to inscriptions and *avadāna* (edifying narratives) reported in the Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts of the British Library Collection, the local dynasty of the Apracarājas appears to have been involved in the construction of a monastic complex from the beginning of the Common Era (see Albery 2020: 221–223).

21 Oḍi is the name of the region of Swat. See the toponym Udegram (Uḍigrām or Oḍigrām) (De Chiara 2020: 229–230; Callieri 2004).

22 On the presence of a “tribal belt,” see Olivieri 2015.



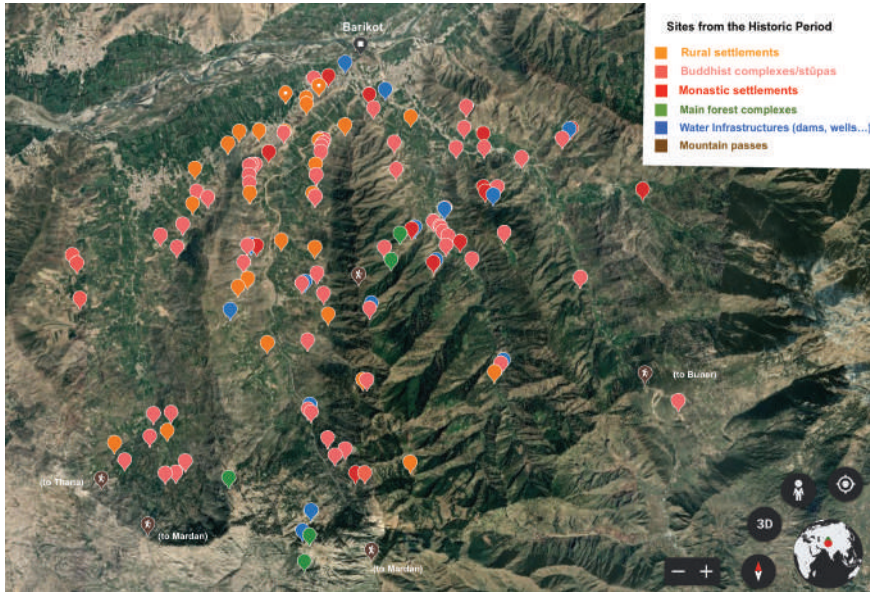


FIGURE 3 Spatial distribution of archaeological sites in the hinterland of Barikot (first to third centuries CE), after Olivieri and Vidale 2006

MAP DATA: GOOGLE, MAXAR TECHNOLOGIES, MODIFIED BY THE AUTHOR

Figure 4; see also Spagnesi 2006); “forest complexes,”<sup>23</sup> isolated sites, probable hermitage centers of some importance; and “village stūpas,”<sup>24</sup> minor Buddhist stūpas with associated dwelling units spread all over the hillsides in correspondence with rural settlements.

While monastic settlements (e.g., Tokar-dara, Abbasahabchina, Kanderai; see Olivieri and Vidale 2006: site n. 201, 301; 208, 302; 303) are usually located at edges of the fertile lands and in proximity of water infrastructures used to dam, convey, and distribute water for the surrounding agricultural land, forest monasteries are situated in the more inaccessible upper valleys in the proximity of mountain passes (e.g., Amluk and China-bara; see Olivieri and Vidale 2006: site n. 136, 425; 193), while other minor sites are either associated with rural settlements (*grāmas*) on the hillsides or distributed along the main mountain routes.

23 In the northwest the term “forest” (monastery) is mentioned in two donative inscriptions (Baums 2012: n34, n35). The term “forest stupa” appears in one inscription from Loriyan Tangai (Baums 2018: 55). References to “forest *vihāra*” appear in the *vinayas* (Schopen 1995: 474–475; 2007: 295).

24 The term “village *stupa*” appears in donative inscriptions (Baums 2012: n°17, n°21; Baums 2019: 171). The term “village *vihāra*” appear in the *Mūlasarvāstīvādinaya* (Schopen 2007: 295).



FIGURE 4 View of the valley of Najigram from East, with indication of the monastic settlement of Tokar-dara (right) and Abbasaheb-china in the side valleys  
PHOTO TAKEN BY JOHN FALCONER IN 2019 BEFORE THE START OF THE PAKISTANI EXCAVATION AT THE SITE OF ABBASAHEB-CHINA

The spatial distribution of these sites suggests that the ordering of the agrarian space around the city of Barikot was connected to the multitiered settlement pattern of Buddhist communities rather than to the formation of satellite *grāmas* attested in other areas of north India (see Erdosy 1995). The proximity of Buddhist residential complexes to agrarian space allowed monks to combine the religious prescription of living outside the city with proximity to resources of livelihood: places of agricultural production, pastoral and gathering activities, forest activity, and circuits of movement along the paths that connected, through the mountain passes, the Swat valley to the plain of Charsadda, hence to the *uttarāpatha*. The agrarian space was, however, crucial not only for the subsistence of the *saṃgha* but also for the wealth of the city. The capillary spatial distribution of Buddhist communities in the agrarian space of Barikot indeed suggests that the *saṃgha* played a role in the management of the territory (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 131–135).<sup>25</sup>

The land resources-oriented sprawl attested in the district of Barikot is not an isolated case in the history of South Asia. However, the distribution pattern

25 On the possibility for monks to have servants, see, for instance, Schopen 1994a: 475n76; 1994b.

of monastic sites changed according to available resources and sociopolitical contexts.<sup>26</sup> The radial distribution of monasteries and stūpas in the four fertile valleys near the city of Barikot, their high number, and their physical proximity to all the main resources of the agrarian space was the result of an intentional strategy pursued by both sides: the “urban fleeing” monks, and the agrarian-urban elites who invested in the intensive exploitation of the countryside, by combining the patronage of monasteries and stūpas with the construction of water infrastructure, like dams, reservoirs, and wells along the mountain routes used by monks and inhabitants of the rural area, but also by traders and pilgrims who used to come and go seasonally to/from the southern plain (see mountain passes in Figure 3).

The close relationship of patrons and Buddhist communities is indicated not only by the fact that monasteries were traditionally named after their respective donor, as indicated in monastic seals and inscriptions, but also by the fact that donors seemed to maintain their ownership also after death (Schopen 1996b; see also Vogel 1950). Although the *saṃgha* was the real user of the lay properties, the monastic community had several obligations toward the owner of the monastery: the public recitation of verses for the benefit of (living or dead) donors was apparently a regular activity in the *Mūlasarvāstivādin* monastic community, as well as the duty to continuously maintain and use the *vihāra* in order to guarantee religious merits to the donor (Schopen 1996b: 95). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that, according to the texts, the owner of a stūpa or a monastery had control over who could or could not participate in the embellishing or enlargement of his pious foundation by the addition of cells, rooms, and sculptures (Schopen 1996b: 105–108). In short, monastic areas were financial (pious) investments that could reward in both economic power and social prestige.

In Swat, the spatial distribution of monasteries along routes and in proximity to land resources, enables, in different degrees, the access to economic and social resources to both partners of the relationship, *saṃgha* and urban elites. For the most part of the first century CE, the members of the local dynasty of the Oḍirājas, must have had a privileged position within this relationship, to the point that the Oḍi king Senavarma (ca. 50–90/5 CE), even claimed direct

26 For comparisons, see the spatial distribution of Buddhist sites, rural settlements, and water infrastructure documented at Sanchi, in Madhya Pradesh (Shaw 2007), and in the early medieval hinterland of Sri Lanka (Coningham et al. 2007); see also the considerations by Hawkes 2014 and the case of Mes Aynak (Iori 2022). Monasteries also developed along routes highly frequented by travelers, merchants, pilgrims, and delegations (e.g., in Upper Indus), according to a “road-network sprawl,” as it would be called in periurban studies (on this topic, see Neelis 2010).

descendance from the Buddha Śākyamuni himself, something that only a few dared to do (Salomon and Baums 2007).

### 2.3 Competence

If we accept the hypothesis of a partnership between urban actors and monks in the management of the countryside's resources, then the question to raise is why Buddhism? Why did the urban community rely on this specific religious community for establishing a grip on the agrarian space? Buddhism in fact was not the only religion practiced in Swat. The region actually had a Vedic background and the devotion of Brahmanical deities in Gandhara has been assumed on the basis of the references made by Gandharan grammarian Pāṇini (sixth century BCE; Samad 2010: 7), onomastic records (Fussman 1994), and numismatic evidence (Callieri 2006: 65–66).<sup>27</sup>

Against this religious backdrop, Buddhism emerged as the first structurally well-developed religious organization in Swat as well as in South Asia. Although our knowledge of the organization of early monasteries is quite limited, a glimpse into the complexity of the monastic system is offered by the vast, and still little studied, early Vinayic literature preserved and translated into different languages (Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and so on), which reports on a multitude of monastic guidelines regarding legal, business, ritual, and administrative matters. Only a few scholars, first among them Gregory Schopen, have dug into this “monster,” to quote him (Schopen 2000: 88), opening small windows onto the reality of monastic life in the early phase of Buddhism.

Since titles and associated duties are flexible throughout the *vinayas* of different schools, it is quite difficult to describe the ideal organization of an early Buddhist monastery. However, a few points can be highlighted. To begin with, age (of monastic ordination) seems to be a central factor in the hierarchical organization of the monastery with the elders of the community (*saṃgha-sthavira*) having roles of responsibility. Another logic of distinction among monks seems to regard their ability to know and recite, by heart, the *dharma*. Donative inscriptions from the northwest containing monastic titles stress the student-teacher relation by mentioning (in a top-down order) the preceptor, the teacher, and the pupils (Albery 2020: 416), or by indicating monks on the basis of their knowledge of ritual practices and role in

27 Based on onomastic patterns, it has been speculated that in the first century BCE the neighbors of the Oḍirājas, the Apracarājas in Bajaur, were affiliated with a Vaiṣṇava cult before becoming strong supporters of Buddhism from the first century CE (see Albery 2020: 220). For a comprehensive overview of the iconographies of Brahmanical deities in Gandharan art, see Samad 2010.

teaching the *dharma* on specific occasions, for instance, the Reciter, the Bearer of the Three Baskets, or the Meditator. The Bearer of the Three Baskets, a quite learned monk who knows the *Tripitaka*, seems to have a certain institutional power, being responsible for a variety of duties, such as feeding the monks and the financial management of donations received from lay people (Silk 2008: 183).

Various *vinayas* report on an elaborated division of labor among the members of the monastic community: from the monks in charge of doors, keys, and bathrooms, to those responsible for the servants and business of the patron (Schopen 1994a). Jonathan Silk, in his analysis of the administrative role of monks as reported in Vinayic literature, highlights several figures, like that of the *vihāra-pāla*, who seems to “[have] guard duty, control the monastery gates, and announce the business to the community meeting,” besides being responsible for bringing “the community to consensus when there is a matter to be decided” (2008: 137). Another figure, the *karmādāna*, was required to:

[manage] the demarcations of time and the announcement of the time; manage the striking of the gandi [bell]; manage the sweeping and sprinkling down of the road; take care of the lecture hall and eating area; manage the laying out of the bedding according to order [of seniority]; ... and snap his fingers when the assembly is disturbed by random chattering.

SILK 2008: 132

He was also responsible for sealing the gate of the *vihāra* every night under the supervision of the eldest of the community who held the seal (130).

Besides being efficient machines, monasteries were also the places where Buddhist manuscripts were produced, used, copied, and deposited in libraries or even in storehouses (*mdzod/koṣṭhikā*) where, according to the *Mūlasarvāstivādivinaya*, legal documents, loan documents, and money of the community were also kept (see Strauch 2014; Schopen 1994a: 531).

Although the picture we can gain on early monastic organization is only very partial, inscriptions and texts from the first centuries of the Common Era tell us of an already very well-organized institution very different from the earlier wandering *saṃgha* and not so far from the monastic system attested elsewhere in medieval times. It is evident that the answer to the initial question “why Buddhism?” should be that the *saṃgha* of the first centuries of the Common Era was a well-organized hierarchical community with extensive competence in writing, computational skills, and the ability to plan, administer, and supervise a wide range of activities. Even in the absence of a centralized

administrative system (especially after the Oḍirājas),<sup>28</sup> donor-*saṃgha* interrelations and the role of the *saṃgha* as human infrastructure would have guaranteed the good management of the hinterland's resources.

#### 2.4 *Appropriation*

As newcomers and extraurban actors, Buddhist communities were required to create a sense of territorial belonging and acquire religious credibility while expanding across the vast geographical territory of South Asia. Scholars have written about the narrative strategies pursued by the *saṃgha* to localize Buddha and Buddhism in foreign regions, especially in Gandhara, by extending the sacred geography of Buddhism beyond the places that are said to have been visited by the historical Buddha (see Foucher 1922, vol. 2: 416–417; Neelis 2014; 2019). This narrative space was fixed into the geographical space through the establishment of monuments containing relics of the Buddha (e.g., hair, bowls, teeth, etc.), thus transforming the Gandharan region into a due stop-over for Buddhist pilgrims (Kuwayama 1990; see also Deeg 2014). Besides that, spatial strategies of legitimation also included the establishment of sites in association with pre-Buddhist religious places to create a link with the local population. For instance, Schopen (1996a) noted that many Buddhist sites in India were located beside protohistoric graveyards (on relations with pre-Buddhist cult, see Cohen 1998).

In the Swat area the *how* and *why* of the geographical expansion of Buddhism can be traced in two major strands of evidence: (a) the doctrinal expansion of the means to obtain Brahma-merits, and (b) the overlap between Buddhist and pre-Buddhist spiritually charged landscapes. Both strategies of appropriation seem to entail elements of a political engagement.

Let us begin from the new strategy of merit-making developed at the beginning of the Common Era in northwest South Asia. It has been noted that the first-century Gāndhārī epigraphs of Oḍirājas, Apracarājas (Bajaur), and Indo-Scythian satraps share a donative formula indicating the peculiar practice among ruling elites of establishing relics, stūpas, and *vihāras* “at a previously unestablished location” for the purpose of acquiring Brahma-merits (*brāhmapuṇya*), which eventually would lead to rebirth in heaven for the

28 As noted by Olivieri, the Oḍirājas disappear from the inscriptions after King Seṅavarma. The hypothesis that the Oḍirājas, allied with the Kushans at the time of Seṅavarma, were sent out of the region after making claims that might have sounded too pretentious to the newly established imperial system is not so farfetched. The practice of sending local rulers into exile to northern areas is attested until modern time (Sultan-i-Rome 2008; Olivieri 2022: 19117).

lifespan of Brahma, an aeon (Salomon and Schopen 1984). The religious reason behind the interest of the rulers of the northwest in obtaining Brahma-merits is unclear. What is clear is that the formula attested in these inscriptions also appears in coeval textual sources from the north and northwest, in particular in the *Sarvāstivādin* literature, which broadens the range of actions that can lead to obtaining Brahma-merits, including the establishment of relics of the Buddha “at a previously unestablished location” (Salomon and Schopen 1984; Palumbo 2013; for a general overview on the discussion, see Albery 2020: 601–602, 605–628). In discussing the reasons for the expansion of the modality of producing Brahma-merit as given in Buddhist texts of the first century from the northwest,<sup>29</sup> Albery suggests that this change in religious doctrine might be linked to the fact that “the monastic institution was actively engaged politically in achieving this end [i.e., the expansion of Buddhism]” (2020: 619). Indeed, there might be a connection between, on the one hand, the desire of donors to found their personal stūpas and *vihāras* in a “previously unestablished location” in order to expand their presence into the territory as part of a politically charged religious practice, and on the other hand, the wish of monks to expand across the territory.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the spatial expansion of both Buddhist complexes and the political power of donors was given a doctrinal justification.

Let us now move to the second clue about the value attached by Buddhists to their spatial mobility. Being a sort of urban pocket outside the city, a Buddhist community also needed to be accepted by the larger local population other than people in power. The overlap between Buddhist monuments and former graveyards highlighted by Schopen (1996a) for several Indian sites is unattested in the district of Barikot and Swat.<sup>31</sup> Instead, here, the selection of Buddhist places did not only follow a logic of capillary control of the territory, but also a careful overlap with the pre-Buddhist spiritually charged landscape.

I have no room to expand on this here,<sup>32</sup> but it would be sufficient to say that the pre-Buddhist spiritually charged landscape in middle Swat, from the

29 Initially, the production of Brahma-merit was limited to those monks who were able to reunify a divided monastic community (see Albery 2020: 608–609).

30 “His personal stūpa” is a recurrent form in the inscriptions.

31 In fact, at Saidu Sharif I (Swat) the overlap between the earlier graveyard and the Buddhist area was disproved by the recent excavations at the site (Filigenzi and Olivieri 2016). For the continuity of non-Buddhist funerary practice during the early historic period in the proximity of the Dharmarājikā stūpa of Butkara I, see the site of Butkara IV (Olivieri 2019).

32 I discussed this topic in the paper “Overlapping Landscapes at the City of the Vajra (Barikot, Swat)” presented at the SEECHAC (Société Européenne pour l’Étude des Civilisations de l’Himalaya et de l’Asie Centrale) conference “Kucha and Beyond: Divine

Bronze Age to the early historic period, included a series of natural landmarks spread across the geographical space (Olivieri 2015). The spiritual magnetism of striking natural landmarks is a concept deeply rooted in Indian religious thought as they were considered spontaneous manifestations of the divine in the landscape (Sk. *svayambhū*: “self-manifested,” “self-existing”).<sup>33</sup>

I argued elsewhere that the major spiritually charged landmarks in the middle Swat valley might have been the *vajra* hill (Figure 5), the urban landmark that gave name to the city of Barikot (Vajra, Va[y]ira, Vajīrasthāna/Śrī-Vajrasthāna),<sup>34</sup> and the Swat River (*Suvastu* in ṚgVeda 8:19.37), flowing next to it. The water-*vajra* connection recalls, on the one hand, the Ṛgvedic cosmogonic myth of Indra killing with the *vajra* the cobra Vṛtra, who controlled the cosmic water (ṚgVeda 1:32.2–4), and on the other hand, the most famous legends of Buddhist Swat, the taming by the *vajra* of *nāga* Apalāla, the powerful pre-Buddhist entity which kept control over the wild waters of the Swat River (see Tucci 1958: 118). Besides *vajra* hill and Swat River, directly connected to the city of Barikot, other landmarks can be identified in a series of large boulders spread along the valleys facing Barikot that, due to glacial erosion, took anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and other peculiar shapes (Figure 6). That these landmarks constituted places of religious communication in pre-Buddhist time is indicated by their association with Bronze/Iron Age rock paintings and with a constellation of cup marks, which surround the boulders as well as springs. Olivieri (2015) has noted a substantial proximity between these natural landmarks and stūpas in the valley of Kandak and Kotah and this may suggest a process of appropriation of pre-Buddhist landmarks by the newcomers. This spatial strategy of appropriation may have had a narrative counterpart as suggested by some local Buddhist storytelling reported by the Chinese pilgrims who visited the region between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. For instance, the “rock shaped like an elephant” into which the white elephant of the alleged king of Swat, Utaraseṇa, had been transformed during the transport of the Buddha’s relics to Swat (Beal 1906: 127; Tucci 1958: 74) might actually refer to one of these zoomorphic boulders. This suggests that in

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and Human Landscapes from Central Asia to the Himalayas” (Leipzig, November 2–4, 2021).

- 33 On the application of the concept to other types of religious landscapes, see Filigenzi 2015: 24–30 for late Buddhist rock art in Swat; Cecil 2019 for the “Hindu” landscape of Cambodia.
- 34 On the name of Barikot as Vajra, Vajīrasthāna in textual and epigraphical sources (fourth century BCE to tenth century CE), see Baums 2019: 169–170; Olivieri and Iori 2020: 80–81; von Hinüber 2020. The same toponym survives in the “Blue Annals,” a fifteenth-century Tibetan text, as Śrī-Vajrasthāna (Morgan and Olivieri 2022: 204–205).





FIGURE 5 Aerial view of the eastern artificial terrace of Barikot from north/north-east  
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FIGURE 6 Example of natural landmark in the valleys of Kandak and Kotah  
PHOTOS TAKEN BY L. M. OLIVIERI AND E. IORI

the countryside Buddhist communities, in their process of placemaking, progressively acquired the local pre-Buddhist spiritually charged landscape.

Yet, the interconnections between Buddhist and pre-Buddhist landscapes cannot be fully grasped without considering the other big player of the time, that is the city of Barikot and its inhabitants, involved together with Buddhists in the process of ordering religious and agrarian space outside the city. Indeed, once we consider the role of urban actors as donors, the Buddhist resacralization of the (pre-Buddhist) spiritually charged landscape also may be interpreted as a strategy aiming at transforming the local sacred geography into a spiritually charged political landscape to create a political and cultural identity. Particularly telling, in this respect, is the foundation, during the Kushan period, of the Buddhist complex on the top of the *vajra* hill discovered in 2019 under the Brahmanical temple of the Shahi period.

With its high visibility within the valley, the Buddhist complex on the top of the urban landmark naming the city became the new focal within the wider religious and political landscape built up in the Barikot district. The relevance of this construction can be better appreciated when we reflect on the fact that this was the second largest financial investment and collective effort in the whole history of the city after the construction of the imposing Indo-Greek city wall in the mid-second century BCE. In fact, in order to make space for the Buddhist sanctuary on the top of the hill it was necessary to build a massive double terrace (ca. 50 × 45 × 15 m; Figures 5, 7) that must have mobilized a large number of workers and a large quantity of material over a considerable period of time. Certainly, this was an incredible effort for the construction of a stūpa, and the desire to give visibility to the monument cannot be the (only) explanation.

The *vajra*, as a weapon used to (re)establish control over the waters and ordering the cosmos and the social world, was a powerful image that resonated not only with the Vedic substratum of the Swat population, but also with the Buddhist world, and in particular with the process of domestication of the wild landscape carried out by Buddhist communities in partnership with ruling urban elites.<sup>35</sup> In this view, the huge investment for the construction of the massive terrace and the Buddhist complex on the top of the *vajra* hill might be explained by the fact that this was indeed an act of transforming one of the main pre-Buddhist landmarks of the valley, and the city itself, into a new

35 In this case, the use of the term “domestication” draws upon “landscape domestication” defined by Charles Clement (2014) as a process of human-mediated landscape transformation that results in a landscape more productive and congenial to humans.



FIGURE 7 Zenital view of the artificial terraces of Barikot  
© ISMEO

symbolic focus of that spiritually charged political landscape that included the countryside.<sup>36</sup>

### 3 Conclusion

In Barikot, the geographical displacement of the *samgha* outside the city wall, based on religious ideas, did not preclude the Buddhist community from engaging with the urban and shaping the economic, social, political, and religious assets of the urban actors. Rather, due to the economic and religious importance held by the agrarian space and its significant role in rhythmizing city life through seasons of cultivation and circulation, the proximity of the *samgha* to the rural resources (*access* to routes and land) and its ability to master the geographical space and the movements across it (*competence*) enabled them to accumulate spatial capital. To the latter, they managed to give a religious value

36 It is worth stressing that, in the seventh century, this Buddhist area would be destroyed and replaced by a Brahmanical temple.

through imaginary and real spatial practices (*appropriation* through physical and narrative acquisition of pre-Buddhist landscape) or re-elaboration of religious ideas (Brahma-merits). The potential of the *saṃgha* to be mobile *across* and fixed *into* the geographical space outside the city was acknowledged by urban actors who actively engaged with them through patronage activity in order to bridge the distance between their place of residence, the city, and the economic and religious resources of the hinterland, thus acting “remotely.” In turn, the co-constitution of this spatial capital was transformed into other types of capital to challenge (“I can build my beautiful monastery in the best location to gain social prestige,” by monumentality itself or endurance of practices) or to reproduce (“you can make donations in my monastery only if I allow you to”) social inequalities outside the city.

Furthermore, the concept of spatial capital has some potential when applied to a macro- or meso-level to explore (a) how the ability of the urban elites of the “margin” – in appropriating and transforming the spatial capital shared with the *saṃgha* – influenced their position within the wider sociopolitical network of historic northwestern India, thus relativizing distances from centers of power, and (b) how the ability of the Swat *saṃgha* – in mastering geographical space and engaging with the urban – led to reduce its distance, in terms of degree of importance, from the main Buddhist centers of India, to the extent that the term Oḍḍiyāna, which is originally the name of the region of Swat,<sup>37</sup> was transformed at some point in time in the paronymology *Uḍḍiyāna/udyāna*, meaning both “garden” and “monasteries.” All in all, it was also through the good management of the spatial capital that this geographically marginal land became a due stopover within the Buddhist pilgrimage itinerary for centuries to come.

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37 See fn. 21.

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