BĪR-KOṬ-GHWAṆḌAI INTERIM REPORTS, XI

ACT-FIELD SCHOOL PROJECT REPORTS AND MEMOIRS
SPECIAL VOLUME 7

VAJIRASTHĀNA

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BARIKOT HILLTOP (SWAT, PAKISTAN)

Volume 1

Luca M. Olivieri
In collaboration with Elisa Iori, Michele Minardi and Marco Pinelli

Foreword by Abdul Samad

Edited by Alice Casalini

"SAVE THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF BAZIRA" PROJECT

ALIPH International alliance for the protection of heritage in conflict areas

ISMEO

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English revision by Klara-Maeve O'Reilly

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"Save the archaeological site of Bazira" is a project of ALIPH (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas), ISMEO International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies, and Directorate-General of Archaeology and Museums, Govt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (DOAM KP).

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Interim Reports I-XII

BKG Interim Report I – *The survey of the Bīr-koṭ hill. Archaeological map and photographic documentation* / by Luca Maria Olivieri. IsIAO Reports and Memoirs, Series Minor, VI. IsIAO: Rome, 2003.

BKG Interim Report II – *Imported artefacts from Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai* / by Maurizio Taddei. *A catalogue of coins from the excavations at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai 1984-1992* / by David W. MacDowall and Pierfrancesco Callieri. IsIAO Reports and Memoirs, New Series, III. IsIAO: Rome, 2004.

BKG Interim Report III – *I manufatti metallici del sito di Barikot (Swat, Pakistan). Studi tecnico-diagnostici e tassonomici* / by Luca Colliva, with contributions of others. ISMEO. BraDypUS Communicating Cultural Heritage: Bologna, 2012.

BKG Interim Reports, IV = *The last phases of the urban site of Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot). The Buddhist sites of Gumbat and Amluk-dara (Barikot)* / by Luca M. Olivieri and others. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, II. AICS-PIDSA. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 2024.

BKG Interim Report Va = *Ceramics from the excavations in the historic settlement at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot) Swat, Pakistan (1984-1992)* / by Pierfrancesco Callieri and Luca M. Olivieri. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume, 2.1-2. ISMEO/Alma mater University of Bologna. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 2020.

BKG Interim Reports, Vb = *Ceramics from the excavations in the historic settlement at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot) Swat, Pakistan (1985-2017). The early historic phases* / by Elisa Iori. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume, 2.3. ISMEO/Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 2024.

BKG Interim Reports, VI – *Terracotta figurines from the excavations in the historic settlement at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot) Swat, Pakistan (1977-2019)* / by Gennaro Altiero and Giuseppina Esposito. Ed. by Roberta Gooni. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs. ISMEO/University of Naples, L'Orientale. Special Volume, 3, Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 2025.

BKG Interim Reports, VIII – *Stelae and stone sculptures from the excavations in the historic settlement at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot) Swat, Pakistan (1984-2022)* / by Cristiano Moscatelli ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume, 4. ISMEO/University of Naples, L'Orientale. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, forthcoming.

BKG Interim Reports, VIII – *Beads from the excavations in the historic settlement at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot) Swat, Pakistan (1984-2022)* / by Mubariz A. Rabbani. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume, 5. ISMEO/Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 2025.

BKG Interim Report IX – *A Numismatic History of Barikot. Catalogue and Analysis of the Coin Finds from the Excavations at at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot), Swāt, Pakistan (1984-2022)* / by Ehsan Shavarebi. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften/ ISMEO: Vienna, 2025.

BKG Interim Reports, X – *Arrowheads from the excavations in the historic settlement at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Barikot) Swat, Pakistan (1984-2022)* / by Naghmeh Mahzounzadeh. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume, 6. ISMEO/ Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, forthcoming.

BKG Interim Reports, XI – *Vajirasthāna. Archaeology of the Barikot hilltop (Swat, Pakistan)* / by Luca M. Olivieri and others. ACT Field School Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume, 7. ISMEO/Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Sang-e-Meel Publications: Lahore, 2025 [this Volume].

BKG Interim Reports, XII – *Apsidal Temple H. Archaeology of early Buddhism at Barikot (Swat, Pakistan)* / by Luca M. Olivieri, Elisa Iori and Michele Minardi (forthcoming).

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PRESENTATION

Adriano V. Rossi

President of ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies

I am particularly pleased to introduce *Vajirasthāna. Archaeology of the Barikot Hilltop (Swat, Pakistan)*, a collective effort due to the ISMEO Italian Archaeological Mission in Swat. It reports about the recent discoveries and restorations by one of the oldest of the Italian missions still in operation among those established by Prof. Giuseppe Tucci and IsMEO in the 1950s, and it is being conducted since some years now in collaboration with the University of Venice Ca' Foscari.

The work in the field was in fact started in 1956 following the first visit to the Swat by Prof. Tucci during the previous year; and since then the mission has seen some of the leading Italian scholars in the field, such as Domenico Faccenna, Pierfrancesco Callieri, and Luca Maria Olivieri, take turns in its direction. We can undoubtedly say that it represents one of the most prestigious legacies to the Italian archaeology in Asia.

The present book, edited by Professor Olivieri and his collaborators, takes its title from the toponym Vajirasthāna, occurring in a Śāradā inscription found at Barikot and transferred to the Lahore Museum in 1898: it has been identified since many years with Barikot/Bazira, a pivotal site in the area and primary center of archaeological research. The book focuses its attention on the recent three-year period 2022-2024, during which the mission found the fundamental support of The International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage (ALIPH) Foundation through the project "Saving the archaeological site of Bazira". The project provided for the restoration of the structures in the Barikot area, allowing the conservation of the monumental artificial terraces of the acropolis, the valorization of the ancient religious and military monuments, and the creation of a buffer zone around the acropolis for the safeguard of the historical site.

As can be clearly seen from this publication, the implementation of the specific ALIPH/ISMEO project and, more generally, the work of the ISMEO/Ca' Foscari Mission, have benefited from a well-balanced international scientific network under the direction of Professor Olivieri, made up of expert scholars and younger researchers and students of an excellent level. This made it possible to carry out accurate research inspired by the criteria of

multidisciplinarity that are essential for modern archaeology, combining the excavation data with the detailed study of the construction methods and materials of artistic and artisan work, also through the contribution of archaeometry.

All this symbolizes one of the cornerstones of ISMEO's mission, which since its foundation has undertaken protocols and agreements for joint research projects with Italian, Pakistani and foreign universities, academies and cultural institutions, as well as with international organizations in the areas of its institutional activities. In this sense, the ALIPH/ISMEO Project has also further highlighted a peculiar aspect of the Archaeological Mission in Swat, which has been continuously promoting training projects for Pakistani, Italian and international students, with excellent results.

In the framework of the ALIPH/ISMEO project, another aspect very much felt by the contemporary scientific community is highlighted: that of the communication of research achievements, which must not be limited to a small circle of specialists, but must find innovative languages that allow its dissemination within a wider audience. Although the book itself represents a valuable and irreplaceable tool for dissemination, it is now appropriate to also turn to those tools that modern technologies make available. In this sense, I am pleased to underline how the project in question has been able to exploit this potential, too: in particular, an efficient Pakistani company has implemented detailed 3D reconstructions, which represent an important scientific and cognitive tool at the same time; and the production of documentaries, visible through links contained in the book and which refer to specific ISMEO platforms.

A decisive role in the most recent phases of the Mission has certainly been played by the ALIPH Foundation; I would like to thank Director Valery Freland and his collaborators for a consolidated and fruitful relationship, a collaboration which outside Pakistan has led to the important restoration of ancient vestiges at the UNESCO Heritage Site of Hatra. A grateful mention must be made of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the Italian Embassy in Islamabad for the essential logistical and economic support continuously provided to the Mission.

Finally, special thanks must be addressed to the Directorate General of Archaeology and Museums and the Provincial Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, without whose contribution and generosity no activity in the Swat valley would be possible.

Foreword

Abdul Samad

Director-General Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan)

The story of *Vajirasthāna*, a name synonymous with both mystique and historical intrigue, has been the object of extensive discussion, claim, and reclaim for centuries. However, much of the scholarship surrounding it has been based on literary evidence and has thus frequently been (re-)interpreted and revised. Only in recent decades, through the tireless work of Italian and Pakistani archaeological teams in Swat, has tangible evidence begun to shed light on this enigmatic place, offering a more comprehensive understanding of its significance. Among these efforts, the Italian Archaeological Mission's work in Swat over the past seventy years stands as a monumental achievement—one that has significantly advanced our knowledge of the region and its role in the broader history of Buddhism.

The roots of the Italian archaeological mission in Swat trace back to the pioneering scholar, Giuseppe Tucci, who initially had studied the origins of Tibetan Buddhism. Tucci's journey led him, almost serendipitously, to Swat, a region that, unbeknownst to many, held crucial connections to the early spread of Buddhism, especially the Vajrayāna school. His work laid the foundation for what became a legacy of cross-cultural collaboration between Italy and Pakistan, a partnership that has flourished through the generations.

Over the years, this collaboration has evolved into a vibrant, international endeavour, with scholars from the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, France, China, Korea, USA, Japan, and beyond regularly contributing to the ongoing excavation and research. What began as a focused study on Tibetan Buddhism now spans multiple fields, from archaeology to religious studies, and has enriched our understanding of the cultural and historical tapestry of Swat.

In particular, the past decade has seen a surge of new archaeological findings in Swat, particularly from Barikot. Many of these directly correspond to the ancient Buddhist literature—revealing the deep historical layers of this once-thriving cultural hub. One of the most significant discoveries is the identification of Barikot with a site frequently mentioned in Tibetan literature as the ancient *Vajirasthāna.* Having saif this, the importance of Barikot extends beyond its association with Vajrayāna Buddhism; it was a centre of vibrant multiculturalism, serving as a crossroads for various dynasties, belief systems, and cultural influences. The layers of history evident in Barikot's archaeological remains reveal a rich tapestry of ancient civilizations that have long since faded but whose stories continue to resonate in the present.

Yet among the many remarkable discoveries, one inscription found at Barikot is particularly noteworthy. This inscription, now housed in the Lahore Museum, is one of the key pieces of evidence that affirms Barikot's role as the ancient *Vajirasthāna*, a place revered in Tibetan Buddhist literature as the birthplace of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Together with the recent excavations and conservation efforts on the Barikot hilltop, the inscription has provided invaluable insights into the region's spiritual and cultural significance.

This book, then, represents a significant step forward in the scholarly understanding of *Vajirasthāna*. It carefully and thoughtfully combines archaeological evidence with literary sources, offering a nuanced exploration of this ancient city and its profound influence on the development of Buddhism, particularly Vajrayāna Buddhism. By drawing on the rich history of archaeological research in Swat and the ever-growing body of discoveries, this work seeks to resolve the ambiguities and misconceptions that have surrounded the history of *Vajirasthāna*.

The Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, along with the Provincial Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, takes immense pride in its ongoing collaboration with the Italian Archaeological Mission. This partnership stands as a testament to the enduring bonds between two countries, as well as the broader international community of scholars dedicated to uncovering and preserving the ancient history of Swat and Pakistan. It is our hope that this collaboration will continue to thrive, as future generations of researchers and archaeologists join hands in the quest to explore the hidden treasures of Swat—an area rich in historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage that has shaped the course of human civilisation for millennia.

May this book serve as both a record of our collective achievements thus far and a beacon guiding future discoveries, ensuring that the ancient history of *Vajirasthāna* is not forgotten but celebrated, shared, and understood by all.

Editorial Note

Alice Casalini

Editing such a prominent volume, both in terms of significance and sheer size, is both an honour and a great responsibility. The many contributions in this book are from a group of scholars, friends and colleagues, at different stages in their academic career – we have both seasoned academics with years of experience under their belt, and young scholars who are at the very start of their (hopefully long and successful) career, and everything in between. My editing interventions have strived to bring all contributions together in a cohesive whole that would do justice not only to the laborious work of our team and to that of our predecessors – who laid the solid foundation for the success of such work at the Italian Archaeological Mission in Swat – but also to the great monument of Bazira-*Vajirasthāna*.

…

The volume includes several contributions by the same author(s), and several intertextual references occur. To avoid cumbersome and confusing repetitions, we have decided to assign a number to each contribution by the same author, which is reported in superscript, according to the following scheme (here presented in alphabetical order):

Arcuri, Prota[1] = *Structural Overlaps in BKG 24* in Terrace W.

Arcuri, Prota[2] = *Macrophase 8b: Zoomorphic Spouts in* Terracotta and Ceramics.

Casalini[1] = *The Architecture of Temple 6: Excavated Materials and Reconstruction* in Religious Architecture: Temple 6.

Casalini[2] = *Macrophase 8b: The Three Hares Roundel* in The Barikot hilltop in 10 Objects.

Filigenzi[1] = *Śāhi Marble Sculptures in* Sculptures.

Filigenzi[2] = *Late Buddhist Rock Sculptures* in Sculptures.

Iori[1] = *Hindu Śāhi Settlements and the Fortified Limes* in Civil and Military Architecture.

Iori[2] = *Macrophase 8b: A Hindu-Śāhi Portrait* in The Barikot hilltop in 10 Objects.

Iori[3] = The Vajirasthāna Hilltop: Iconic Aspirations and Overlapping Religious Landscape

Minardi, Prota[1] = *Trench BKG 24.1* in Terrace W.

Minardi, Prota[2] = *The Islamic Graveyard Outside the Terrace W (BKG 24.1)* in TERRACE W.

Moscatelli[1] = *Gandhāran Stone Sculptures in* SCULPTURES.

Moscatelli[2] = *Macrophase 5: An enigmatic* Mahāparinirvāṇa in THE BARIKOT HILLTOP IN 10 OBJECTS.

Olivieri[1] = THE CITY OF VAJRA.

Olivieri[2] = ARCHAEOLOGICAL OUTLINES.

Olivieri[3] = THE SURVEY (1992–1993).

Olivieri[4] = *Methodology* in THE CONSERVATION PROJECT "SAVING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF BAZIRA" (2022–2024).

Olivieri[5] = *The Monumental Terraces and the Central Fortress* in CIVIL AND MILITARY ARCHITECTURE.

Olivieri[6] = *Trench BKG 6: The Śāhi Temple on Terrace E* in RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE: TEMPLE 6.

Olivieri[6.1] = The quarry sources of *kañjur* [Addendum 1 to Olivieri[6]]

Olivieri[6.2] = Decorated sandstone cornices from Macrophases 8a–b [Addendum 1 to Casalini[1]]

Olivieri[7] = *Macrophase 9a: A Sphero-Conical Vessel* in THE BARIKOT HILLTOP IN 10 OBJECTS.

Rabbani[1] = *Common Pottery* in TERRACOTTA AND CERAMICS.

Rabbani[2] = BEADS AND ORNAMENTS.

The names of authors and other contributors are abbreviated to the first letters of their name/middle name/surname (e.g., LMO = Luca Maria Olivieri; MP = Marco Pinelli, etc.) in the chapter THE CONSERVATION PROJECT "SAVING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF BAZIRA" (2022–2024), as this section includes several in-text references to the many people who have worked on the conservation and excavation of the hilltop. This style of abbreviation is also used whenever an author intervenes with a brief text within the larger text by another or others and in the captions. The full name is used for non-contributors in the image captions.

Individual contributions, at the APA level 1 and 2 (i.e. the headings both in small caps and italics in the table of contents), have their own numbering of footnotes and figures.

In the body of the text, the following typographic rules are followed to signal the different nature of every element: structures, such as walls, drains, etc. are within square brackets: e.g., [200]; layers are within round brackets: e.g., (150); cuts, pits, razed surfaces (negative stratigraphic units) are within angle brackets: e.g., ⟨320⟩; finally, cup-marks and similar features are written within curly brackets: e.g., {5}. Structures that are underlined within squared brackets refer to those surveyed in the 1990s (i.e., Olivieri[3] THE SURVEY) [23]). This is done to graphically separate the structures surveyed at the time from those excavated and documented in later excavation campaigns.

A parenthesis system is also used for epigraphic translations: [ ] mark uncertain readings, ( ) lost material, and ⟨ ⟩ material omitted by the author.

We have chosen to keep the terminology given to structures and areas used in the fieldwork documentation. For example, we refer to Terrace E (emphasis on 'E') rather than E Terrace (emphasis on 'terrace'), Terrace W rather than W Terrace. Words indicating architectural and/or archaeological features (e.g., terrace, trench, bastion) are capitalised

when followed by their specific designation (e.g., Terrace E, Trench 6.3, Bastion H). Walls and other common structural units are left in lowercase.

Cardinal directions are usually shortened and capitalised (e.g., N, S, E, W) in surveys, technical reports and stratigraphic studies for the sake of readability (namely, THE SURVEY (1992-1993); THE CONSERVATION PROJECT …; *The Monumental Terraces and the Central Fortress*; *The Fortress on the Hilltop [Trenches BKG 14 and 15]*; *The Architecture of Temple 6* …; TERRACE W). Directions are spelled out in all other contributions, especially when they are part of known phrases (e.g., the northwestern regions).

Stylistic choices for the images in each contribution have been left within the remit of individual authors. This accounts for slight discrepancies in the formatting of some graphic signs (e.g., N arrow, scale, etc.). These have been edited only for consistency in relation to the internal structure of each author's contribution. Figures and tables are capitalized in the text whenever they refer to images and illustrations from the present volume and are left in lowercase whenever they refer to images, plates and tables from other works. A special case is that of TABLE 1, TABLE 2 and TABLE 3 in Olivieri[2], which are in small caps in the whole text, as they refer to macrophases and chronological data that are valid for all contributions. Plates relative to this text are always formatted in small caps; all others are in lowercase.

All images are property of the Italian Archaeological Mission/ISMEO, unless otherwise noted in the captions. Objects in the inventory are marked by the label of the site (BKG = Barikot), followed by their individual number.

Catalogue entries the last part of the volume (MATERIAL CULTURE) follow the format:

Inv. No. – Fig./Figs

Location/museum.

Stratigraphy; year of discovery (if needed)

Material; Dimensions

Conditions, Joints and special marks (if present)

Bibliography, if available.

This information is followed by a brief comment on each object. In the catalogue, all measures are in centimetres, unless otherwise noted. Generally, measurements are expressed in metres when we are discussing buildings and/or areas of space, and in centimetres when we are dealing with individual objects. The catalogue of coins by E. Shavarebi follows criteria and format that are specific to numismatics. They are explained by the author in the contribution.

The following abbreviations are used throughout the text. Bibliographic abbreviations are listed at the beginning of the section REFERENCES.

a.s.l.	above the [mean] sea level
av.	average
cf.	see
cm	centimetre(s)
d.	diameter

Dept.	Department
DG	Director General
DOAM	Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
DoAM	Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan
dp.	depth
DR	Departmental Representative
DSAAM	Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia e l'Africa Mediterranea [Department of Asian and North African Studies]
Fig., Figs	figure, figures
fn	footnote(s)
Govt.	Government
h.	height
ha	hectares
KP	Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
l.	length
max.	maximum
m	metre(s)
N, S, E, W	north, south, east, west
pers. comm.	personal communication
Pl., Pls	plate, plates
ref./refs	reference, references
sqm	square metre(s)
SRO	Sub-Regional Office (DOAM KP)
t.	thickness
tr.	translated/translation
w.	width

IV

Conclusions

The Vajirasthāna Hilltop

Iconic Aspirations and Overlapping Religious Landscape[209]

Elisa Iori

The Barikot hill is an eye-catching landmark in the flat plateau of middle Swat. This is less because of its absolute height, only c. 130 m, but rather because of a combination of intrinsic and contextual factors: its pointed shape, the location in a flat glacial highland from which it rises as an isolated outcrop and, mostly, its connection to water. According to local family stories, tracing six generations back, the village of Barikot had a local boat service ferrying people from the present-day archaeological area to the Swat River through the Kandak Khwar, whose water flow until not too long ago must have been much greater.

In the past, before the construction of the terraces and when the riverbeds of the Swat (to the north) and Kandak (to the south, south-east) were wider—as suggested by the excavation of G. Stacul at the Ghalegai rock shelter (Stacul 1969) and by the most recent excavations in Trench BKG 19[210]—the hill must have appeared as a pointed bulk of garnet mica schist descending at 45 degrees towards the Swat River, surrounded by water on three sides and seen as emerging from the river. Considering the concept deeply rooted in South Asian religious thought that sees striking natural landmarks as spontaneous manifestations of the divine in the landscape (*svayaṃbhū* 'self-manifested', 'self-existing'), the Barikot hill must have been perceived as a spiritually charged landmark.[211] In particular, its shape and connection to water might have resonated with the Vedic background of the local population and the hill, with its peculiar shape, must have been considered an icon of the *vajra*.[212] Indeed, the name of the city Vajra-Bazira/va(y)ira-Beira/Vajirasthāna (Olivieri[1], this volume) cannot but derive from this eye-catching urban landmark, a *vajra* that embraced and protected the city while providing a scenic backdrop to any visitor approaching the urban centre.

The concurrence at Barikot of water and *vajra* is therefore highly significant. On the one hand, the association recalls the Vedic cosmogonic myth where Indra, using his *vajra*, killed the cobra *Vṛtra* who had been retaining the cosmic water, in a move that would then give life to the cosmos (*Ṛgveda* I, 32, 2–4). On the other hand, it also inevitably recalls the most famous legend of Buddhist Swat, the conversion of *nāga* Apalāla, a powerful pre-Buddhist entity which kept the wild waters of the Swat placid against payment of a regular tribute by locals, the non-payment of which would have caused floods, devastation and famine in Swat (Tucci 1958; Zin 2009; cf. Olivieri[1], this volume). In the different versions of the legend, the key element in the taming of *nāga* Apalāla was precisely the *vajra* used as a weapon by the

[209] Part of the following text is based on the paper 'Overlapping Landscapes at the City of the Vajra (Barikot, Swat)' I presented at the SEECHAC (Société Européenne pour l'Étude des Civilisations de l'Himalaya et de l'Asie Centrale) conference 'Kucha and Beyond: Divine and Human Landscapes from Central Asia to the Himalayas' (Leipzig, 2-4 November 2021) published as Iori 2024.

[210] The report on Trench BKG 19, excavated in September-November 2022, will appear in *East and West* 2025.

[211] For the application of the South Asian concept of *svayaṃbhū* to other types of religious landscapes, see for instance Filigenzi 2015: 24–30 for late Buddhist rock art in Swat and Cecil 2019 for the 'Hindu' landscape of Cambodia.

[212] On the Vedic background of local population based on rock paintings see Olivieri 2015b; Vidale, Micheli, Olivieri 2011; Olivieri 2011b: 137-141 and related fn. for further bibliography.

Vajrapāṇi, the faithful companion of Buddha Śākyamuni on his journey to the north-west. The emblematic value of the vajra and its holder in this story about the reestablishment of order in Swat is particularly emphasised in the Gandhāran reliefs, usually depicting an aggressive Vajrapāṇi in the act of attacking the *nāga*, flying and hitting the rock with his weapon lifted in his right hand (e.g., Zin 2009).

The connection between Vajrapāṇi (literally 'vajra-handed') and Swat is particularly significant to the extent that, as recently suggested by Coloru and Olivieri, the 'Great *yakṣa'* of the northwest might have been a local deity of Swat.[213] In the context of a wider discussion which also considers the Heraclean features sometimes employed to depict Vajrapāṇi in Gandhāran art, the two scholars suggested that Mount Ilam, located at the southern extreme of the Swat valley at the border with Buner, could have been the seat of a pre-Buddhist local deity (the one in whom Alexander recognised Herakles) that held the *vajra* as its main attribute. This pre-Buddhist deity, whose original name is unknown to us, was later called Vajrapāṇi in Buddhist texts (Coloru, Olivieri, Iori 2024: 189-191).

To better grasp such an equivalence and its connection with the Barikot hill, it is useful to go back once again to the landmarks of the valley. The *vajra* hill is located only about ten kilometres from the sacred mountain of Swat, Mount Ilam – the Aornos of Classical sources that Alexander associated with Herakles (see Olivieri 1996a; Coloru, Olivieri 2019) – later considered to be the seat of Indra, (another) *vajra*-holder with whom Vajrapāṇi was also identified in later texts (e.g., DeCaroli 2004: 182). Despite the cultural and religious changes, Mt. Ilam has retained its importance over the centuries: at least from the time of the early city, as suggested by Alexandrographers, until the early modern period, as indicated by folktales of the Yusufzai Pashtun (Olivieri[1], this volume). The histories of these two landmarks, *vajra* hill and Mt. Ilam, were deeply intertwined and their visual connection is particularly suggestive in this regard. In fact, when seen from the northwest (for instance, from the site of Gumbatuna), the *vajra* hill seems to be a small-scale reproduction of the sacred mountain towering in the background, and it can be visually envisioned as a sort of projection of the Ilam into the core of the Swat valley. To go a step further, the *vajra* hill, as sort of physical projection of the sacred mountain might have been considered as the embodiment of the sacred weapon of the pre-Buddhist local deity based at Ilam, and of the divine entities that later succeeded it.

All this considered, the *vajra* hill was a place that mattered, and mattered profoundly, in the local sacred geographies, as it was a significant place for different religious geographies, always in tandem with the Ilam. After all, 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 could resonate with different worldviews. So far underrated, the persistence over centuries of the religious significance of the *vajra* hill must have impacted the history and fortune of the rather small city of Barikot (c. 12 ha).

Additionally, the wide-ranging passive and active visibility of the hill must have played an important role. Not only was the *vajra* hill an ever-present feature of ordinary life for both inhabitants of the city and its hinterland, but, most importantly, the top of the *vajra* offered a panoptic view of the Swat River, the city and its rich valleys, as well as sacred Mt. Ilam. Everything that mattered – economic and religious resources – could be acquired at a single glance from up there and perceived as in control. Therefore, the buildings on top of the *vajra* hill were a material claim over the spiritually charged landmark, as well as a material assertion of power and political aspirations. The rich archaeological history of the hilltop illustrated in this volume must be seen from this double perspective.

[213] In particular, he is defined as a 'Great *yakṣa*' in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajāpāramitā Sūtram*, a text that seems to have been originally composed in Gāndhārī language. This text is preserved in a manuscript allegedly from Bajaur which has been radiocarbon dated to the middle of the first century CE (see refs in Coloru,Olivieri, Iori 2024).

Changing and overlapping landscapes

The attractiveness of the Barikot hill combined with the small available space resulted in a series of negative interventions (Olivieri[2], this volume) that today prevent us from writing a complete history of the hilltop. Some features of the hill, like those associated with the Bronze and Iron age phases, now lie below metres of soil that were intentionally brought there in later periods to make room for other ambitious projects; other features, like the early historic structures on the very summit of the hill (Minardi, this volume), were demolished for the same reason. Therefore, Macrophases are represented unequally in this text. The prehistoric rock carvings below the hilltop together with the maskoid (BKG 5838) and the Ghalegai period IV features (e.g., BKG 1903) are the only traces of a meaningful occupation of the hilltop in pre- and protohistoric times by the local population of Swat whose Vedic background has been hypothesised in the past on the basis of the evidence they left at other significant landmarks located in the Barikot hinterland (Olivieri 2015b; Iori 2024). The phase corresponding to the rise of the urban culture documented in the lower city (Macrophase 2; Olivieri, Iori 2020; Olivieri, Iori 2021b), when the city – according to classical sources – was known as Vajra, unfortunately returned no evidence from the hilltop (the potential reasons for this absence are detailed in Olivieri[2] , this volume, TABLE 3).

According to the available archaeological data, the first building intervention in the hilltop dates to the mature Indo-Greek time between the reigns of the Indo-Greek kings Menander I (*c.* 165-130 BCE) and Antalkìdas (*c.* 115-95 BCE; Macrophase 3a3), when the city layout was reorganised and provided with an imposing city wall, following a much wider political and economic intervention in the kingdom (Olivieri, Iori 2021b).

The Barikot defensive wall – the most outstanding example of Hellenistic military architecture in eastern Asia (Callieri 1993: 343) – was planned by using Greek metrology, i.e. the Attic foot and its multiples (Olivieri 1993: 105, 1996: 48; see also Antonetti 2020).[214] We should therefore assume that, although the majority of actors directly involved in the construction of the Barikot fortification in terms of workforce and work coordination must have been locals, the masterplan of this military structure was in the hands of someone familiar with Greek metrology, military architecture of the Hellenistic East and, ultimately, the Hellenistic urban model. The latter clearly emerged from the construction activities that simultaneously interested the Hilltop. Stretches of the Indo-Greek city wall [78] built by using the outcropping rock on the spur were uncovered in trenches BKG 7 and BKG 9 in Terrace W (Olivieri, Micheli, this volume). It is unlikely that the extension of the imposing city wall to the hilltop had a defensive function, as the northern side of the city was already naturally protected by the Swat River and the steep ancient profile. Rather, since the wall forms a right angle and defines the earliest Terrace W (Macrophase 3a3), such a demanding building intervention most likely reflected a willingness to import a new urban model well known to the western areas: the one featuring a city wall, a lower town and an acropolis. We know nothing about the possible presence of buildings on the Indo-Greek acropolis or the extension of the acropolis to the Terrace E, as the imposing later terraces incorporated all the earlier structures, while the early historic structures in the fortress were almost completely demolished to make space for other buildings. Nevertheless, the hill was certainly the protagonist of a great investment and collective effort that, at this stage, might have been connected more to the image of the new city and the political aspiration of the new ruling class than to the specific religious value of the place – although the latter cannot be excluded either.

The second-largest financial investment in the history of the city featured the *vajra* hill as the sole protagonist. This was the construction of a massive terrace (c. 50 × 45 × 20 m) on the eastern side during the mature Kushan period (Macrophase 5a). The building site of Terrace E, with a maximum elevation of almost 20 m, created a total flat area of approximately 1250 sqm, and was a costly and time-consuming affair. It must have mobilised a large number of workers,

[214] The thickness of the walls is 2.8-3.0 m (= *c.* 10 Attic feet) while the rectangular bastions are located at a distance of 28-30 m (= *c.* 1 *plethron*) from each other.

large quantities of material and, given the obvious logistical difficulties, over a considerable period of time the hustle and bustle must have been there for all to see in the valley. As a terrace already existed on the western side, choosing such a costly enterprise on the eastern steep side of the hill over the enlargement of the Terrace W – which would have been relatively easier – must have happened for a good reason. The Indo-Greek city wall had since long lost its function, and a defensive function of Terrace E can certainly be excluded. Rather, it is more reasonable to think that the construction of Terrace E had a strong symbolic value. The terrace's main aim was to provide a surface large enough for the construction of a building on top of the iconic peak that, at the same time, would be a) oriented towards the east; b) visible from the neighbouring valleys (which was not the case in Terrace W); and c) facing Mt. Ilam. Certainly, this building was a now lost Buddhist complex whose existence we can hypothesise on the basis of the remains of two small stupas resting on a floor earlier than that of Temple 6 (Olivieri[6], this volume), several fragments of figurative panels and friezes (Moscatelli[1], this volume) and many architectural stupa elements found on the hilltop during the excavation at the Temple and on the hill slope during the survey (see GANDHĀRAN FRAGMENTS (1999-2024): CHARTS; Olivieri 2003a: 45; Olivieri 2010: 358). This complex was razed in the Turk Śāhi period (Macrophase 8a) to make space for Temple 6, which then (in all likelihood) occupied the space of the main Buddhist stupa.

Regarding Terrace E, it is relevant to mention that all over northern Gandhāra, the late second century CE marked a phase of monumentalisation of Buddhist complexes through the construction of imposing terraces. This feature, absent in earlier Buddhist complexes such as Butkara, Saidu Sharif or Tokar-dara, is instead characteristic of Buddhist complexes dated to Macrophase 5a such as Amluk-dara, Abbahsaheb-china, Gumbat-Balo Kale, Top-dara, Kanjar-kote (e.g., Faccenna, Spagnesi 2014: 540-546). All these complexes stood on top of large, high platforms that contrasted with the surrounding natural environment, while expressing spatial fixity and territorial control with their monumentality. The construction of Terrace E for the Buddhist complex should be seen as part of this architectural phenomenon. Yet, its high visibility, scale, and spiritually charged location make it a special case.

As already hinted at above, the *vajra*, as a weapon used to (re)establish control over the waters and ordering the social world, was a powerful image that also resonated with the Buddhist world, as evidenced by the nāga Apalala story. In particular, this Buddhist narrative seems to embody the process of ordering the wild landscape that was carried out by Buddhist communities in partnership with ruling urban elites, who patronised Buddhist foundations.

Considering the paramount importance of the agrarian resources for the economy of Barikot, the spatial proximity of Buddhist complexes to hydraulic infrastructures, major routes, natural and agricultural resources suggest that the Buddhist *saṃgha* in the countryside boosted the exploitation of the agrarian resources, as well as the subsequent peri-urbanisation of the previously rural hinterland of Barikot (Olivieri et al. 2006: 131-135; Iori 2023b; on Swat as double-crop area see Spengler et al. 2020). Ordering the rural landscape and controlling its resources was a process that reached its peak during the late second century, when the creation of 'urban pockets' outside the city in the form of Buddhist settlements (e.g., Amlukdara, Tokar-dara, Abbahsahebchina, Kanjar-kote) guaranteed the Buddhist communities and their urban supporters a grip on the economic and religious resources of the agrarian space while offering the urban donors a ground where their socio-political prestige could be temporally or permanently staged (Iori 2023b: 202).[215] The huge investment in the construction of the massive Terrace E and the Buddhist complex on the top of it (Macrophase 5a) might be interpreted as the apex of this larger political strategy carried out by urban dwellers, in partnership with the Buddhist communities. This strategy aimed at transforming one of the main pre-Buddhist landmarks of the valley (and the city itself) into a new symbolic focus of that spiritually charged political landscape they carved in the countryside. The complex, visible from many Buddhist centres in the surrounding rural area, became a

[215] On proximity of Buddhist complex to pre-Buddhist spiritually charged places like springs and zoomorphic and anthropomorphic boulders see Olivieri 2015b.

predominant focal point as it could visually and conceptually connect the city to those urban pockets outside the city wall where economic, social and religious capitals of the city and urban dwellers were produced (Iori 2023b).[216]

With the urban crisis (c. third to fourth century CE) and the collapse of the monastic system (c. sixth century CE)[217] the relationship between the Buddhist community and political power was irreparably broken.[218] The replacement of the Buddhist complex with the Vaiṣṇavite temple in the late seventh century CE (Macrophase 8a) tangibly indicated that a new ambitious political project was at stake, in which the participation of Buddhist institutions was not contemplated. Despite that, it seems that the Buddhist value 'attached' to the *vajra* hill continued to be recharged and reshaped through different media over time. The available evidence in this regard is scant and discontinuous over time but fits well into the wider picture of late Antique Buddhism reconstructed by Filigenzi (2015).

The earliest example of Buddhist practices connected to the Hilltop in Late Antiquity is given by the two rock sculptures carved on the Barikot hill slope. Significantly, the relief depicting Padmapāṇi and Maitreya on the southeastern slope of the hill marks the beginning of the path leading to the hilltop (Filigenzi[2], this volume) and to a Buddhist complex that, when the images of the two bodhisattvas were carved (c. seventh to eighth centuries CE, Filigenzi 2015) had (in all likelihood) already vanished. Against this physical absence, the Buddhist rock sculptures were carved there to spatially (re)fix the Buddhist presence and (re)sacralise the place. It is difficult to say what these carvings were exactly hinting at. Oral tradition of the time might have kept alive the memory of the Buddhist complex that was there not too long ago, but it is also possible that the Buddhist value of the *vajra* hill might have acted as a spiritual magnet on its own. Regardless, the *vajra* hill still had a place in late Buddhist geography.

Votive objects found in secondary depositions on the hilltop further support this: a votive tablet in black schist (BKG 9649), possibly dated between the eighth and ninth centuries, depicting a Buddhist triad and a stupa was found immediately below the eastern side of Terrace E (BKG 20 E; cf. Arcuri, Casalini, Cecchini, this volume); two clay *tsha tsha*s representing cruciform stupa holding a clay tablet bearing a few lines of a Buddhist verse and one miniature terracotta stupa decorated with a lotus flower were found in the fort; another tablet with Buddhist verses was recovered in the dumping area north of the W Terrace (see Minardi, Prota, this volume). At the time of use of these votives, which we can roughly place between the eighth and the early 12th century, the memory of the Kushan Buddhist complex on the hill was probably lost, however, a new form of Buddhism was rising to reinforce the original meaning of the site and to partially transform it.

It is widely accepted that Uḍḍiyāna was the place where the non-monastic ideal of the *siddha* first appeared and the earliest Vajrayāna texts were composed (Davidson 2002: 198; Filigenzi 2015; for female authors, cf. Kragh 2017).[219] In particular, the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, considered the earliest tantra from which all the subsequent esoteric scriptures of the Buddhists derived, would have been composed in the Swat Valley in the early eighth century, during the reign of king Indrabhūti – the spiritual father of *Padmasambhava*. The latter, revered *siddha* from Uḍḍiyāna, went on to introduce Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century CE (Tucci 1949: I, 121, 212-215; 1977: 68-69; Roerich 1988 [1949]: 359). In Vajrayāna literature, this region appears as one of twenty-four holy sites in tantric geography and one of the four most important yoga seats (Gray 2007). While still elusive in the archaeological record, the emergence of this new form of

[216] The summit of the hill was probably involved in this process (see Minardi, this volume).
[217] For Buddhist monasteries that survived the city, see Olivieri et a. 2006: 136.
[218] However, in 2023 a large late circular stupa built after the abandonment of the lower town, was uncovered in Trench BKG 19. Hūṇa coins were found in association with this phase.
[219] Later, it was mostly female gurus and their tantra practices that made Swat legendary in Buddhist literature. The philological data, in the form of internal and paratextual evidence analysed by Kragh (2011, 2017, 2018), revealed that seven out of eleven female gurus whose authored texts are preserved in Sanskrit or Tibetan were from Swat (between the ninth and the eleventh centuries). The rest were from Kashmir. To them, we must add other four Indic female authors whose specific origin localities are unknown.

Buddhism is evidenced by the Late Buddhist rock sculptures spread across the territory that feature proto-Vajrayāna elements (Filigenzi 2015).

How Barikot might fit into Vajrayāna sacred geography and narratives is difficult to say. A suggestion comes from a much later reference to the city in *The Blue Annals* (*deb-ther sngon-po*), mentioned above by Olivieri[1]. Here, 'Śrī-Vajrasthāna of Oḍḍīyāna' is indicated as the seat of the legendary king Indrabhūti, protector of the late Buddhist school (Morgan, Olivieri 2022: 204-205). Even though we cannot give full historical value either to this late account or, at the current stage of knowledge, to the figure of the legendary Buddhist king Indrabhūti (who, according to texts, should have ruled at the time of the Turk Śāhi), this 15th century Tibetan text, however, suggests that in late medieval Tibetan narratives, the city of Vajirasthāna in Swat was considered the birthplace of Vajrayāna Buddhism. The evocative name of the city and its urban landmark must have had a certain agency in remapping the sacred geography of Late Buddhism. We know neither how far back this tradition can be traced nor the scale of circulation of such a narrative reported in the Tibetan text. Nevertheless, also in the light of the Late Antique and early medieval Buddhist votive objects found on the hilltop, the possibility that the circulation of similar Vajrayāna narratives might have re-charged and re-shaped the Buddhist value of the *vajra* hill in medieval times is highly suggestive.

This, however, was only one face of the *vajra* hill (and Swat) in Late Antiquity. While material culture points to a frequentation of the hilltop by Buddhist followers in the late first millennium CE, more monumental evidence tells us that, from the late seventh century CE, the hilltop was chosen as icon of a new political and religious power.

As illustrated in the previous chapters, the Turk Śāhis (Macrophase 8a) marked the beginning of a new phase for the urban hilltop. The walkable surface was enlarged through the construction of Terrace W, and Terrace E was enlarged and reoriented – it was reachable from the east through a stairway and Gate 1. Additionally, a fort was constructed on the very peak of the hill (Minardi, this Volume) and a Vaiṣṇavite temple was built on Terrace E on top of the previous religious buildings.

The redesign of the Hilltop was part of a new urban model consisting of terraced cities with a central stronghold and urban Brahmanical temple. In the face of the political instability at the Indo-Iranian frontier, this urban model aimed at providing security and refuge to people and to protect water and gods, two other key resources in case of danger (Iori[1], this volume). This process reached his peak in the Hindu Śāhi period (Macrophase 8b) when, at the time of the systematic fortification of the valley, the Hilltop terraces were redesigned. The large Terrace W was equipped with circular bastions, provided with raised defensive parapets (Arcuri, Prota[1], this volume) and combined with a military unit in the summit (Minardi, this volume).[220] The military aspect of the hilltop was thus emphasised. At the same time, the monumentality of the Temple was augmented: the podium of Macrophase 8a was enlarged, raised, and transformed from square to rectangular, a long (and almost unfitting) stairway was reconstructed, and a renewal of the plaster decor also took place (Olivieri[6]; Casalini[1], this volume). The model of 'stronghold-*cum*-temple' was set. Replicated also in the other Hindu Śāhi cities of the Swat, this urban model reached a level of magnificence at Barikot: a temple more than 12 m high, with wide-scale visibility and bright and lavish plaster decoration towered over the city side by side a military unit constructed right on top of the peak of the *vajra*. This redesign was a clear political statement and a manifest of the 'iconic aspiration' of the new dominant religion and political power.[221]

The construction of the Brahmanical temple might also have been the driving force behind the construction of the system of tunnels cut into the bedrock up to the banks of the Swat River and connected to the (partially natural) well in the hill summit (Minardi, this volume). This system would have allowed to replenish the cistern of the Śāhi fortress

[220] On military activities on the hill, see Mahzounzadeh, this volume.
[221] For an introduction to the notion of 'iconic religion' see Knott, Krech, Meyer 2016.

(Building A), with river water (in contrast with stored rainwater). This second category of water (water in movement)[222] is deemed important for Brahmanical rituals (Keller 2021) and a concern for the new religious practices connected to the nearby Vaiṣṇavite temple might have been a driving reason for the construction of such a water system at Barikot, beside the defensive one.

All in all, the costly construction (8a) and reconstruction (8b) of Temple 6 together with the redesign of the hilltop were certainly conceived in a royal sphere (Filigenzi 2015: 38).

In this regard, the presence of a male princely head wearing a three-lobed crown and, possibly, earplugs (cf. Iori[2]) (BKG 2023) among the stucco pieces found in the debris around Temple 6 is also notable.

A royal foundation tallies well with the hypothesis of a possible royal initiation ritual at the cave of Tindo Dag advanced by Filigenzi (2010: 413-414; 2015: 146-147) that is worth reporting here in full. The small natural cave is located about 5 km north of Barikot, on the cliff at the base of the hill of Tindo Dag (Hindughar, i.e, 'Hindu cave'), about 10 m above the ground level.[223] At the time of Stein's visit (1930: 31-33, fig. 24) the cave was accessible by climbing on the cliff, while steps were later built by the Wali of Swat. The cave 'wide and high enough at the entrance, narrows progressively towards the interior, until it turns into a small passage where one can advance only on all four. The passage leads to a wider recess, probably artificially enlarged to create a sort of dome that gets air and light from a hole at the top' (Filigenzi 2010: 414). It is here, at the right of the entrance that the cave houses a relief identified as 'Sūrya with his retinue, here constituted by the two attendants Daṇḍī and Piṅgala, the two wives Ūṣa and Pratyūṣa, the horses of his chariot and, finally, Gaṇeśa, probably sitting on a lion, on the upper left' (ibid: 414). Filigenzi has proposed to connect the shape of this cave and its relief with the ritual connected to the solar myth that required the Turk Śāhi king to spend a few days in a cave near Kabul accessible only by creeping on hands and knees, and from where he would then remerge in front of the people 'simulating a new birth from the womb of the mountain, just like the rising sun' (ibid.: 414). The ritual is reported by Al-Bīrūnī: 'The Hindus had kings residing in Kabul, Turks who were said to be of Tibetan origin. The first of them, Barhatakin, came into the country and entered a cave in Kabul, which none could enter except by creeping on hands and knees […] Some days after he had entered the cave, he began to creep out of it in the presence of the people, who looked on him as a new-born baby. He wore Turkish dress, a short tunic open in front, a high hat, boots and arms. Now people honoured him as a being of miraculous origin, who had been destined to be king, and in fact he brought those countries under his sway and ruled them under the title of a *shâhiya of Kâbul*.'[224]

The spatial proximity of Tindo Dag cave – in the vicinity of which a *deva* temple was recorded by Deane in 1896 – as a place for royal initiation ritual, and of Vajirasthāna as a place of royal foundation of an imposing Vaiṣṇavite temple is suggestive of the central role that the Barikot district, together with the larger middle Swat valley, might have had in the political and religious scenario since the time of the early Śāhis. In such a context it is perhaps relevant to mention the cautious reading as 'śri ṣāhi Khiṁgāla, the king of Ōḍyāna' of the donor of the marble statue of the standing Ganeśa from Gardez made by Tucci (1958: 328) and Nakatani (Kuwayama 1991: 270-271), which suggest a special

[222] For the religious concept of 'living water' in relation to water in movement in the context of rituals see Keller, forthcoming.

[223] Some years ago, the frontal part of the cave and stairway collapsed. The stairway, that today lead directly to the cave with reliefs exposed after the collapse, was reconstructed during the ACT-Field school project in 2011.

[224] It is remarkable the similarity between the description of the Turk Śāhi king given by Alberuni and the image of Kushan kings we know from coins and from the sculptures from Māṭ and Surkh Kotal. Indeed, it is worth noting that Alberuni explicitly referred to Kaniśka as one of the kings forming the pedigree of the royal family of the Śāhis (Sachau 1888: 11-13). The Kushana must have represented a source of legitimation for subsequent rulers of the area (on the post-Kushana rearrangement of the dynastic cult at Surkh Kotal see Olivieri, Sinisi 2021). On this aspect, see also Klimburg-Salter 2022.

geographical connection between the Turk Śāhi kings and the Swat valley (for a discussion of the inscription with references on different readings, see Kuwayama 1991).[225]

Even if this is better documented only in a later phase through the spatial distribution of Hindu Śāhi forts and fortress (Iori[1], this Volume), the agrarian resources of Swat probably fostered stringent control by the ruling class from the very beginning.

Crossing borders, making and unmaking boundaries

Late Antique material culture from the Barikot district, therefore, clearly points to the co-presence of two different cultural and religious spheres, whose power relations were unequal. This is better grasped when we consider the wider scale of middle Swat. The spatial analysis conducted in the valley pictured two quite distinct patterns: while the nearly two hundred 'proto-Vajrayāna' Late Buddhist sculptures are mostly distributed in the rural area northeast of Barikot (with some intrusions in Buner), with a higher concentration on the left bank of the river, in the Mingora-Manglawar area, a process of encastellation and monumentalisation of Brahmanical religion is attested in the valley SW of Barikot, from the Swat-Panjkora area to Buner (see Filigenzi 2010; Olivieri 2010). We do not know whether this different spatial pattern reflects a political division, but it certainly matches the scenario pictured by Tibetan, Kashmiri and Chinese sources which describe Swat as split into two political entities: a southern one politically dependent on the Afghan rulers of Laghman-Kabul area (to be identified with the Śāhis); and a northernmost one, ruled by the legendary king Indrabhūti (Tucci 1958: n. 1; id. 1977: 75; see Olivieri et al. 2006: 68; Olivieri 2010; Filigenzi 2010).

Historical sources tell us nothing about conflictual context and possible political and religious resistance against the intrusion of the Afghan rulers into the Swat valley.[226] Some elements of the material culture, however, suggest that the encounter of these two different socio-cultural and religious traditions – which according to the spatial analysis mentioned above have the area of Barikot as a spatial interface – might have led to a competitive confrontation. In particular, the Turk Śāhi period seems to be a phase of major experimentation and entanglements among the two religious systems, leading to a multi-directional transfer of iconography and myths, practices, and media of religious communication.

Such encounters are visually expressed, on the one hand, in the five specimens of multi-armed Bodhisattvas Maitreya (Filigenzi 2015: Stele S 126, fig. 129; Filigenzi 2015: C 91, figs. 91a-b; C 67, figs. figs. 64a-b) and Avalokiteśvara (Filigenzi 2015: Stele S 124, fig. 109;) and, on the other hand, in non-Buddhist subjects that use the same medium, style and iconography of the Buddhist rock sculpture – for instance, the rock sculpture of Ghaligai mentioned above, the nearby rock sculpture at Tindo-dag representing Sūrya, four-armed Gaṇeśa and four-armed Viṣṇu (?) (Filigenzi 2015: figs 118, 223-224) and the eight-armed female deity in *ālīḍha* posture from Guligram (Filigenzi 2015: 141). The latter

[225] If the reading is correct, this would also be the first epigraphic attestation of the toponym Uḍḍiyāna. Paolo Daffinà writes about the hypothesis of Luciano Petech (1964) on the name Khiṁgāla: 'Secondo il *Hsin t'ang shu*, o Nuova Storia dei T'ang (618-907) un certo Hsing-nieh avrebbe stabilito nel Kāpiśa una dinastia che alla metà del VII secolo [sarebbe stata] alla sua dodicesima generazione [...], ma la cosa è naturalmente incertissima. Di sicuro c'è che attraverso la pronunzia antica di Hsing-nieh, che è χ*ieng-ngiät*, Petech è potuto risalire a un originale *Khiṅgal che è da accostare al Khiṃgāla di un'iscrizione sanscrita ritrovata a Kābul, al Kiṅighila che è un re del Kaśmīr nella *Rājataraṅgiṇī* di Kalhaṅa, e al Khiṅgila di una leggenda monetaria. Si tratta, beninteso, di identità di nomi, non di persone.' (Daffinà 2004: 19-20) ['According to the *Hsin t'ang shu*, or New History of the T'ang (618-907) a certain Hsing-nieh would have established in Kāpiśa a dynasty that in the middle of the 7th century [would have been] in its twelfth generation [...], but this is of course uncertain. What is certain is that through the ancient pronunciation of Hsing-nieh, which is χ*ieng-ngiät*, Petech was able to trace it back to an original *Khiṅgal that is to be compared to the Khiṃgāla of a Sanskrit inscription found at Kābul, to the Kiṅighila who is a king of Kaśmīr in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṅa, and to the Khiṅgila of a monetary legend. It deals with, of course, identities of names, not people'].

[226] Verardi (2012), however, stressed the competitive aspect between open urban society/*varna* state society and Buddhism/Brahmanism. He explained the development of Vajrayāna as one type of Buddhist reaction to the growing power of the Brahmanical schools.

is probably emblematic evidence of a competing context for the different systems of beliefs co-occurring in the valley (Fig. 1).

Accurate studies have been conducted on this specific stele in the past (Tucci 1963, Taddei 1987, Filigenzi 2015: 141, and Srinivasan, Olivieri, Salemi 2018), to which I refer for further details. For the sake of argument, it would be sufficient to say that the stele uses a medium that is typical of Late Buddhist subject to represent, according to scholars, a local female deity killing a wild goat/ibex in the guise of Durga Mahisāsuramardinī. The local character of the deity emerges from the severed head of a wild goat/ibex depicted at the bottom of the stele, which would represent a second moment of the episode condensed in the deity in *ālīḍha* posture.

There are, however, some elements that contrast with this reading. First, the synoptic mode of narration. The representation of two different episodes from the same story (the wild goat/ibex during and after the killing) in one single space is alien both to the local rock sculpture tradition employed by the stele that usually lacks visual narrative – which is instead typical of earlier Buddhist art – and to the visual repertoire of Durga slaying the bull in South Asian art, which conventionally privileges one single episode (see comparison in Filigenzi[1], this volume). However, in the light of the local character of the depicted subject, it would be legitimate to link this break with conventional artistic schemes to a local artistic tradition. Yet, another element, already pointed out by Olivieri (Srinivasan, Olivieri, Salemi 2018: 108, fn. 7), is very difficult to reconcile with previous interpretations. The decapitated head of the wild goat/ibex at the bottom of the scene is carved flat, in contrast with the high relief of the rest of the stele; it is stylistically inconsistent with the general execution; and its proportions are different when compared to the smaller head of the animal above. All in all, the head of the goat/ibex seems to be out of place in this composition and forcibly inserted into the stele at a later moment. Moreover, once we look closer at the animal crushed and hit by the goddess in the main composition, the features of a caprid do not seem definitive at all.[227] The left horn, which is partially preserved (Srinivasan, Olivieri, Salemi 2018: fig. 13), seems to be short and rather like that of a bovine. The right horn, too, though much more damaged, does not seem to have enough space in the composition to develop like those of the wild goat/ibex depicted at the bottom of the stele. Further, the rounded protuberance on the back of the animal is not connected to the ending part of any weapon used by the goddess, while it does look like the hump of the bull whose tail, finally, clearly visible below the hind leg is long and ends like that of a bovine with a short switch.[228]

To conclude, despite the presence of a severed head caprid, the stele did originally depict the Durga Mahisāsuramardinī in the act of killing a bull.[229] Such a stele, according to the chronologies provided by scholars, should be roughly coeval to the marble sculpture of the Durga Mahisāsuramardinī recently found on the Barikot hill (see Casalini in Filigenzi[1], this volume). Therefore, we would have, in the same period, the same subject carved with slightly different iconographies, onto two steles serving two different religious contexts: Brahmanical in the case of Vajirasthāna, and

[227] These considerations are based on a direct close observation of the stele (now on display in the Swat Museum) conducted in 2017 together with LMO and again in November 2024.

[228] Tucci excluded the identification of the protuberance with a bull hump because 'first, the hump of the *bos indicus* does not stay in the middle of the back, but near to the neck; second, and *most important* (my emphasis) the animal is not a bull but a caprid, as is evidenced by the head severed from the body and placed beneath the animal itself'. If we hypothetically consider the head of the caprid as a later addition, the non-identification of the protuberance with the hump of a bull is only based on its position, which is of course a valid observation. However, it is worth noting that the protuberance in question is not so central as the incline profile of the hump links to the back of the neck of the animal. In any case, I do not see any alternative explanation for such a feature.

[229] Even if with a different argument, Taddei, too, initially manifested a certain skepticism about Tucci's identification of the animal. He said: 'I must confess that, though the severed animal head on the Guligram stela indisputably appears to be that of a caprid, I have always felt that Tucci had gone a little too far in denying even the slightest possibility that it was a bovine head clumsily carved by an unskilled artist' (Taddei 1987: 359). It is interesting to note that he mentioned the hand of an 'unskilled artist' only in reference to the severed head and not to the entire composition.

Buddhist in the case of the Guligram.[230] However, the Durga from Guligram points to something more than a relocation of deities able to cross borders, something that is well attested in Afghanistan (Filigenzi 2015: 141, fn. 220). In the light of the local character of the goddess with goat emphasised in previous studies, the later addition of the severed head of the goat to the image of Durga Mahiṣāsuramardinī suggests an attempt to superimpose a local deity and local narrative to an external one, possibly with the aim to 're-consecrate' or more tangibly appropriate Durga within the local belief system. An act of 'inclusion of' (i.e., Brahmanical deity included in a Buddhist context) and 'reaction over' (i.e., superimposition of a local deity) the new deities, here appear within the space of a single stele and suggests discontinuity in the strategies employed by the same or different actors to cope with the new challenging context of religious diversity. The socio-religious context that led to this anomalous 'editing' of the stele is unknown, but this 'overwriting' makes us reflect on the possible reactions to the situation of inequality, in terms of power relation and visibility, between Buddhism and Brahmanism and local tradition, that emerged from archaeological evidence in the region.[231]

Although some Buddhist sanctuaries were active until the tenth century (e.g., Butkara, Amluk-dara, Nawagai and Shnaisha), no new architectural interventions or monumental building and donation are so far documented in Late Antiquity and the early medieval time for Buddhist Swat (see Filigenzi 2015: 42-48) – with the exception of the addition of rough chapels such as at Amluk-dara (Olivieri 2014b: 357, fn. 13), Nawagai (Qamar 2004) and Shnaisha (Qamar, Ashraf Khan 1991: 185, 188; Rahman 1993: 20, 22) and the selection and reuse of earlier schist panels and stele on spot (e.g., Olivieri 2014b). As a matter of fact, the new artistic phenomenon of Buddhist rock sculpture is spatially and conceptually situated outside the urban space: the city was instead claimed by the Brahmanical religion. The lack of archaeological evidence for the capital city of Massaga/Mengjieli, which is located in the area with the largest concentration of rock sculptures and marked by the long-lasting Buddhist sanctuary of Butkara I, is admittedly a lacuna that affects the archaeological and historical reconstruction of the area.[232] However, we can presume that the exclusion of Buddhism from the local political and urban dimension (or Buddhism and related supporting political power from the wider political scenario)[233] might not have been a smooth process without resistance. The reaffirmation of local tradition over a Brahmanical deity incorporated into a Buddhist context, as attested in the stele from Guligram is an important, although still too weak, clue in this regard.[234]

At the *vajra* hilltop, transformation and co-presence go hand in hand until the Islamic period. With the arrival of the Ghaznavids (Macrophase 9a), the monumental Hindu Śāhi temple was destroyed. Differently from the previous period, however, the Temple was simply demolished to be reused as a kiln area, and several domestic units were built against its ruins (Casalini[1], this Volume). The military aspect of the hill was instead reinforced through the construction of the donjon (Minardi, this volume), the renovation of the stronghold, and the construction of a retaining wall in several sectors of the Hindu Śāhi fortification. With the construction of residential units in Terrace W and of a cemetery outside the fortification (Minardi, Prota, this volume), the hilltop changed its function becoming a military, civil and administrative settlement (Li Hong, this volume; for late reference to the city also Sesana, this Volume). That said, minor small finds continue to speak of an overlap among distinct religious practices as well as a certain persistence of local funerary practices in the Islamic cemetery (Minardi, Minardi and Prota, this volume).

[230] In all likelihood, the so-called stele of Guligram was in fact located in proximity to a Buddhist site in the outskirts of Saidu Sharif (Olivieri et al. 2006: 96-98; site 047; see Srinivasan, Olivieri, Salemi 2018: 106-107). This should not surprise us since, as pointed out by Filigenzi (2015: 141, fn. 220), the relocation in the Buddhist context of goddess of the Mahiṣāsuramardinī type is attested by the colossal clay sculpture (seventh to eighth century CE) found at the Buddhist complex of Tapa Sardar, as well as that found at Mes Aynak in Afghanistan.

[231] For the relation between Buddhism and local tradition in the first centuries of the Common era see for instance Olivieri 2016c; Filigenzi 2019.

[232] This is one of the objectives behind the reopening of the excavations in the so-called 'inhabited area' of Butkara in the spring of 2024, as well as the start of a new urban archaeology project in the Mingora city core planned by L.M. Olivieri for 2025.

[233] For instance, if we give historical value to the figure of Indrabhuti.

[234] On local Buddhist experts probably siding with the local population at the time of the intrusion of Afghan Śāhis see Verardi 2012.

As reflected in one part of the hilltop story presented in this volume, a single space identified by certain geographical coordinates always has several stories to tell. When we approach space diachronically, we see that small- or large-scale transformations in the socio-cultural context, inflows and outflows of people, new political aspiration and buildings can change the aspect and meaning of a single space over time and the way people used and perceived it. As political winds change, religious buildings are severely destroyed and rebuilt, and new political and socio-economic conditions could even transform a place with long-standing religious status and symbolic meaning into an ideal military outpost. Yet, one single geographical space can be used and imagined differently by individuals or distinct groups at the same time. Thus, a multiplicity of real or imagined spaces produced by different actors' actions can be simultaneously situated in the same *here*.[235] According to the effective scale used, this *here* can be a spiritually charged place like the *vajra* hill (e.g., imagined as place of birth of Vajrayāna in Tibetan narrative, against the material predominance of Brahmanism), or a larger geographical space such as the Swat Valley, where different groups seem to dwell differently in the same space by drawing different religious landscapes that favour an urban or a rural environment (e.g., different spatial distribution of Buddhist rock-art/Brahmanical temples). The relations between overlapping spaces or landscape are never obvious or constant. This co-extensiveness may lead to temporary or permanent interactions and inclusions, to exclusion and resistance, or even to strategies for 'un-seeing' the other (Smith 2024; Iori 2024) to maintain distance from the other co-present realities. If types of interactions occurring among different groups living the *vajra* and the Barikot hinterland can be only a matter of speculation due to the scarce archaeological evidence, this archaeological volume have attempted to document how they happened spatially and materially.

One focus has been to unfold the socio-economic, political and religious complexity experienced by the still little known Śāhi dynasties whose activities and political and social policy impressed not only us but also their contemporaries as evidenced by the chivalrous words of Al-Bīrūnī with which we would like to conclude this work:

> The Hindu Shahiya dynasty is now extinct, and of the whole house there is no longer the slightest remnant in existence. We must say that, in all their grandeur, they never slackened in the ardent desire of doing that which is good and right, that they were men of noble sentiment and noble bearing. (Sachau 1888, II: 13).

Fig. 1a-c – The Guligram stele (a: photo ISMEO; b: 3D scan by GS/ISMEO; c: photo LMO)

[235] 'Landscape' here refers to the specific dimension of the spatial reality that includes a 'set of relational places linked by paths, movements and narratives' (Tilley 1994, p. 34) that come into being through temporary or permanent constructive acts. On connection and disconnection of overlapping spaces see Lévy 2003: 213; Lévy 2021.

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Abbreviations

Arr. *Anab*. = Arrian, Ἀλεξάνδρου Ἀνάβασις

Curt. = Q. Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri, libri qui supersunt*

* * *

ARA = Archaeological Research in Asia

AION = Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli

AIUON = Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli

AMIT = Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan

BAVA = Beiträge zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie

EA = Eurasia Antiqua. Zeitschrift für Archäologie Eurasiens

EI = Epigraphia Indica

EMSCAT = Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines

EW = East and West

JA = Journal Asiatique

JIABS = Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies

JAC = Journal of Asian Civilizations

JRAS = The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

ONS = Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society

RET = Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines

SAS = South Asian Studies

SAA = South Asian Archaeology Conference

SAAA = South Asian Archaeology and Art Conference

* * *

ACT = Archaeology Community Tourism - Field School Project

ACT RepMem = ACT Reports and Memoirs

ANP = Antiquities of Northern Pakistan: Reports and Studies

ANU = Australian National University Press

ICCROM = International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property

IGNA = Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts

IsMEO RepMem = IsMEO Reports and Memoirs

IsIAO RepMem = IsIAO Reports and Memoirs

KNAW = Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen

MANP = Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans

MASI = Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India

MDAFA = Mémoires de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan

ÖAW = Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Verlag)

SOAS = School of Oriental and African Studies

SOR = Serie Orientale Roma

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