

**Shahi Kingdoms • Part 4. Archaeology and Establishment: The Shahi in Swat (Barikot) and Surrounding Regions**

# **Introduction to Swat Archaeology and the Italian Archaeological Mission**

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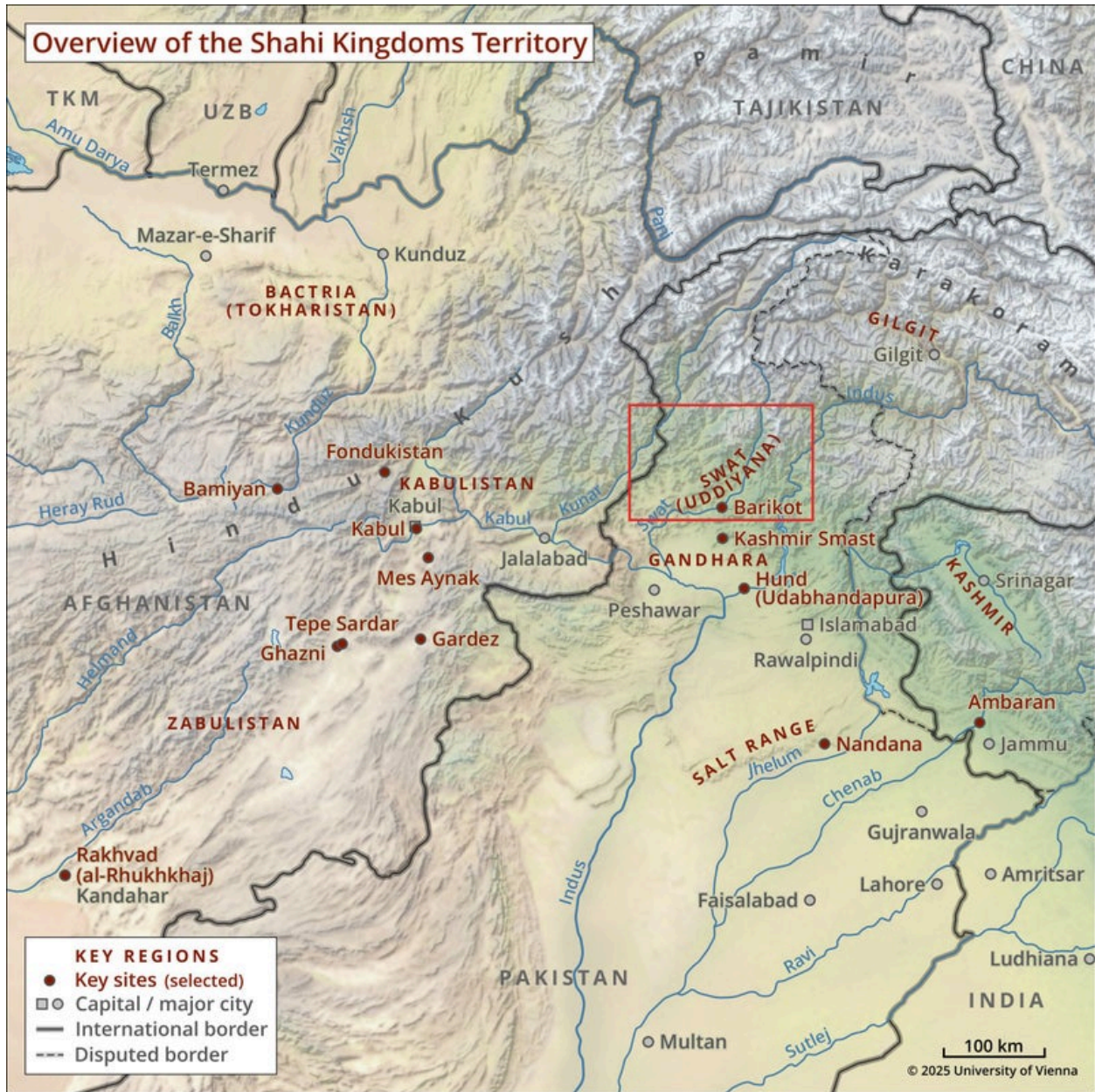
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## **Exploring the Contributions of the Shahi Kingdoms to Inner and South Asia**

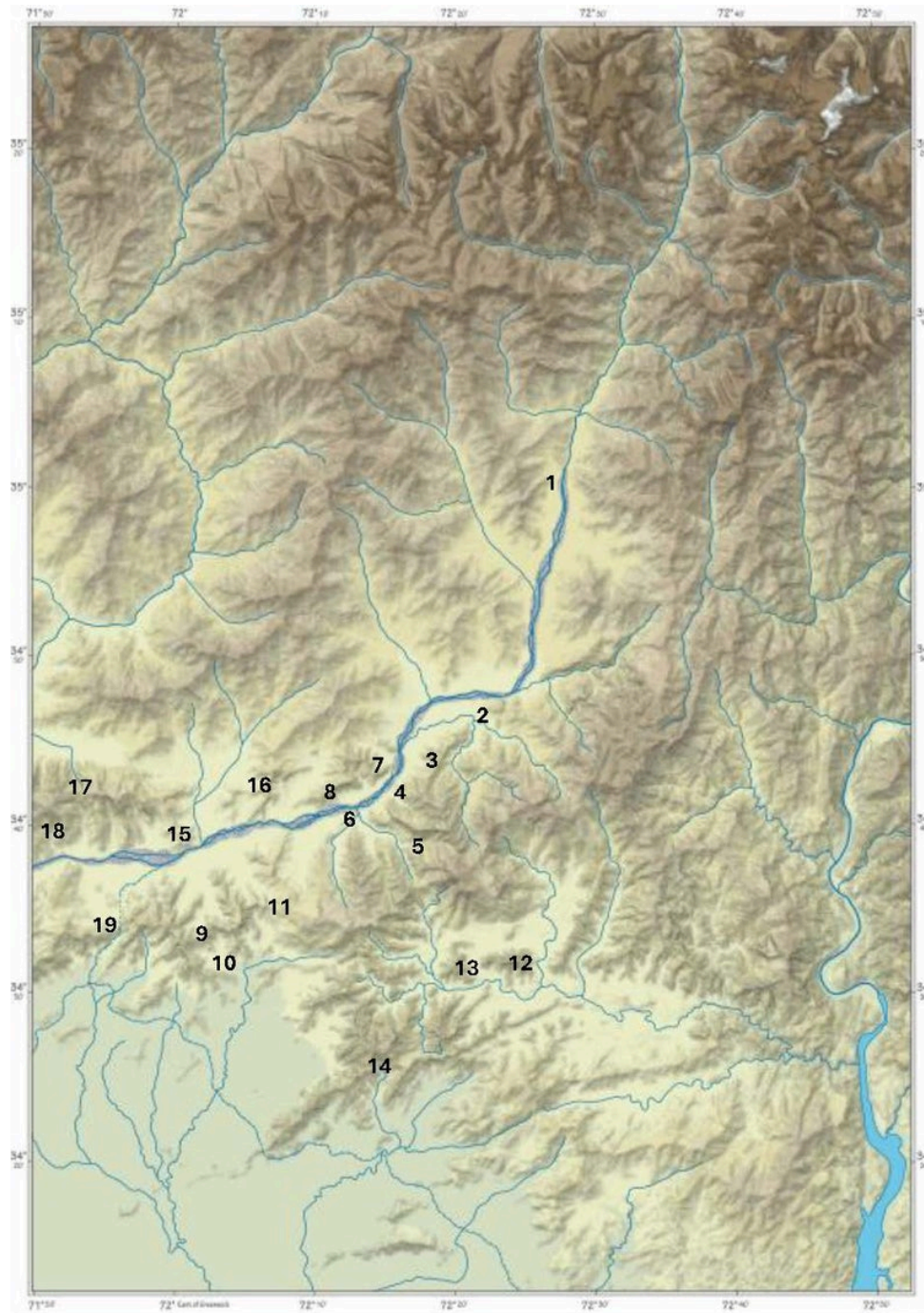
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[Part 4] Introduction to Swat Archaeology and the Italian Archaeological Mission

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**Map 13–19.** Key regions of the Shahi territories discussed in chapters 13–19 (University of Vienna, Department of Geography and Regional Research, 2025, with annotations, CC BY-NC-ND 4)



**Fig. 1.** Map of Swat, Pakistan with the position of some of the major sites described in the following pages: 1, Sure Tangai; 2, Mingora; 3, Udegram; 4, Manyar; 5, Amluk Dara; 6, Barikot; 7, Bar Tangai; 8, Parrai; 9, Zalamkot; 10, Palai; 11, Cherat; 12, Torwarsak; 13, Kingargai; 14, Kashmir Smast; 15, Damkot; 16, Kamal-khan-china; 17, Gumbatuna; 18, Mane Tangai; 19, Malakand (map by K. Kriz and D. Nell, University of Vienna/Courtesy IAMP)

The [Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan](#) was founded in November 1955, the date coinciding with the first very short expedition carried out by Giuseppe Tucci in the [Swat Valley](#), together with Domenico

Faccenna, Raul Curiel, and F. A. Khan. The background and the political and legal conditions under which this first expedition took place, as well as the long-term consequences, have been described in other works (Olivieri 2006, 2023a, 2025a). The main objectives of the mission from the outset were the archaeology of Buddhist sanctuaries, early historic cities, protohistoric phases, and the establishment of Islam. These elements are clearly defined in the first two works of Tucci about [Swat](#) (Tucci 1958, 1963).<sup>1</sup> It was only some twenty years later that Tucci presented his first reassessment of the major research themes on the cultural history of the valley in a seminal essay entitled “On Swat: The Dards and Connected Problems” (Tucci 1977). Almost all the themes touched upon in that essay were further elaborated (as can be judged from the bibliographic production of the Italian Mission), and many more found new arguments and counterarguments based on subsequent archaeological fieldwork. Today, the question is not why [Swat](#) is so important in the eyes of Tucci but, more importantly, why [Swat](#) archaeology, after seventy years of uninterrupted research, is still so crucial for the history of the northwest of the subcontinent. The following chapters may help suggest one among the many potential answers to that.

By and large, all the research themes intuited and proposed by Giuseppe Tucci are still on the table. Since 1955 (or 1926 if one includes the first expedition carried out there by M. Aurel Stein; see Olivieri 2015), [Swat](#) has become, without any doubt, one of the best studied area, and possibly the best excavated region, of ancient Eurasia. Nonetheless, we are still in the process of elaborating and deepening the initial objectives of the studies and now exploring them in a new collaborative way. The most interesting aspect of Tucci’s approach was his multidisciplinary methodology. Tucci, in a period when philology and history of religion were separated fields, disconnected from archaeology and hard sciences, anticipated a model of integrated study where all the concerned disciplines were converging in the reconstruction of the social, economic, and spiritual ancient history. Today we are moving in the same direction, with new and more powerful arrows in our quivers. With the help of genetics, bio-archaeology, micro-stratigraphic excavation, archaeometry, and paleoclimatic studies, the tridimensional reality behind the manifestations of religious architecture and art, the rise and fall of great empires, and the relationships between “centers and peripheries” are becoming clearer and more understandable.

Many questions, old and new, have yet to be answered. Why, for instance, did [Swat](#)—a relatively insignificant corner of the Hindukush—become so important for Buddhist sacred and physical geography? Recent excavations in the lower town of [Barikot](#) have led to the discovery of an early Buddhist monument that can be dated with certainty to the mid-third century BCE, indirectly confirming the much-discussed dating of the largest of the early Buddhist shrines in [Swat](#)—[Butkara I](#). Despite its pervasive spread and omnipresence, which lasted about a millennium, monastic Buddhism suddenly entered a deep crisis before the middle of the seventh century. Tucci devoted some fundamental pages to this issue in 1977. In [Swat](#), this “revival of Hindu substratum” is characterized by monumental architectural testimonies, which rise and fall into ruin over the three centuries of the Shahi era (late 7th/early 8th to early 11th century CE). The exceptional Shahi architecture of [Barikot](#), [Zalamkot](#),

[Gumbatuna](#), and other sites still leaves archaeologists with many questions. The questions posed by these monuments and the answers from archaeology in the field are the subject of the following chapters.<sup>2</sup>

## Footnotes

1. See also the commentaries to the first English translation of Tucci's *La via dello Svat* (1963) recently published (Olivieri and Vignato 2024). [↵](#)
2. Some of the material presented in this section has been discussed in greater detail in the volume by L. M. Olivieri et al. 2025. *Vajirasthāna: The Archaeology of the Barikot Hilltop*. Vols I-III. [BKG Interim Reports XI], ACT Reports and Memoirs, Special Volume 7. Lahore: Sang-e Meel Publications. This publication presents the results of the [ALIPH and ISMEO project “Saving the Archaeological Site of Bazira” \(2022-2024\)](#). [↵](#)