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## Reinvented Landscapes

### Art, Faith and Trade Routes in and around Uḍḍiyāna in the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> Century CE

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The work presented here is part of a larger research project currently in progress on the Buddhist rock sculptures of Swat and, through a reassessment of the available archaeological evidence, on their historical, cultural and social background. Long before they became the object of a focussed study, these sculptures— together with many other artefacts of different kinds— were documented during the course of archaeological surveys carried out by various members of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan of the IsIAO, the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (formerly IsMEO, Italian Institute for Middle and Far East), which, after more than fifty years of scientific activity and field research, has been suppressed by legislative decree in November 2011 in the framework of a drastic spending review process. Some of these colleagues walked far and wide in Swat, much further than I ever did, thus providing the rich repository of data from which my research has largely drawn.

I gratefully acknowledge their contribution, in the hope that my use of this data is in some way worthy of the work they did before me.

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Research on the Buddhist rock sculptures of Swat is currently part of the FWF Stand-alone Project P21902 “The Cultural History of Uddiyana 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE” (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Numismatic Commission). A less comprehensive version of this paper was presented, however, at the conference within the framework of the NFN project “The Cultural History of the Western Himalaya from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century”, led by Univ.-Prof. Deborah Klimburg-Salter. I took part in this NFN project from 2007 to 2012 as a member of its Art History sub-project. This research, which is based on activities undertaken by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan of the IsIAO, was promoted by Domenico Faccenna. I carried out only a few of the surveys personally; most of the documentation used for this analytical study was collected over a longer period of time by Giuseppe Tucci, Maurizio Taddei, P. Gui, E. Cimmino, Pierfrancesco Callieri, and especially by Luca M. Olivieri. A complete catalogue and critical analysis of the Buddhist rock

## The Buddhist Rock Sculptures of Swat: A Glimpse into Their Nature, Setting and Significance

The landscape of Swat, ancient Uḍḍiyāna, still bears conspicuous traces of its Buddhist past, particularly in the area beyond the left bank of the Swat River. To the eyes of visitors today, it requires no great effort of imagination to conjure up from the ruins the profusion and magnificence of the monuments that once stood here. Together with the luxuriant beauty of the surrounding scenery, it is clear that ancient Uḍḍiyāna held a strong fascination for the entire Buddhist world of its time. The subject of the present work is related to the end of this “golden age”, when, in the last centuries of the first millennium CE, the ancient splendour of Buddhism was apparently on the wane before being irrevocably eclipsed by Islam. Nevertheless, in this period Uḍḍiyāna saw a last flowering of Buddhist art, in the form of sculptures carved in relief on rock walls, isolated boulders, and steles set in the ground (FIGURE 5.1). Not situated in formal and structured sacred areas, they are found scattered in the countryside around these areas, camouflaged and nearly hidden in the natural landscape.

Based on comparisons with other objects (especially bronze and terracotta sculptures demonstrably belonging to the same cultural environment) we can date the full flowering of this artistic production to sometime in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, with possible extensions before or after (FIGURE 5.2). The iconographic consistency and stylistic uniformity, the large number, and the location in space and time of these sculptures make them a phenomenon of distinctive artistic value. In addition, their historical significance can hardly be overestimated, since they open a unique window into a time about which we still know all too little.

After the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE the cultural history of Swat enters one of its most obscure phases. The archaeological investigations carried out over the last fifty years by the Italian Archaeological Mission of the IsIAO as well as teams from the Department of Archaeology of Pakistan and the University of Peshawar have yielded evidence of a remarkable deterioration of the Buddhist settlements, together with a general decay of the social, economic and territorial system supporting them.

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sculptures of Swat are in preparation (Filigenzi forthcoming). Several articles dealing with particular aspects of the sculptures have already been published. I refer the reader to the complete bibliography of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Olivieri 2006: 299 ff. An additional bibliography can be found in Filigenzi 2006.



**Figure 5.1** Pensive Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi; Arabkhan-china (Swat, Pakistan). Photo by Matteo De Chiara; © IsIAO.



**Figure 5.2** Pensive Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāni on rocky throne. Karachi, National Museum (Courtesy Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale "Giuseppe Tucci", Roma, Photo Neg. 1862).



**Figure 5.3** Isolated boulder with different subjects; Arabkhan-china (Swat, Pakistan). After Tucci 1958: fig. 18.

This evidence apparently contradicts the persistent fame of Uḍḍiyāna (which may have stretched over an area larger than modern-day Swat) as a source of teachings and teachers for Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. These teachers include revered personalities such as Padmasaṃbhava (to whom the tradition attributes the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet), his legendary predecessor Garab Dorje, and other masters coming from Gilgit—a region lying very close to Upper Swat—who are credited with having contributed greatly to the transformation of the primitive Tibetan Bon into a codified system (Tucci 1958: 282).

## Formal and Semantic Features of the Rock Sculptures

When the initial research was done on these rock sculptures, no special significance was attached to the chronological concurrence of the appearance of these sculptures and the diffusion of Buddhism in the Himalayan countries. The few scholars who had incidentally dealt with the rock sculptures long considered them to have been an expression of popular faith rather than the offspring of doctrinal speculations. This impression was aroused

by a number of odd characteristics in the sculptures, such as the repetitiveness of their subjects or the apparent lack of consistent spatial rules. This was attributed either to clumsy craftsmanship or a disordered, progressive juxtaposition of the figures (FIGURE 5.3). In addition, the state of preservation of most of the sculptures was so poor that, at first sight, identifying the subjects was often impossible.

This initial view underwent a profound change after systematic surveys and analytical studies showed that the apparent incongruities were actually the expression of a highly sophisticated formal language. The internal consistency even allows the inference to a strict conformity to prescriptive rules. A related literature, if any ever existed, did not survive, but one cannot fail to recognise the contribution of this artistic experience to later and better-documented traditions.

Generally speaking, the bond between these sculptures and the formal rules of Gandharan origin that had dominated this area for centuries appears quite weak; the artistic current of “Gupta” origin seems to have made a larger contribution.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Indic world may well have supplied inspiration, providing various motives that influenced how the divine was conceived and represented. However that may be, the result as a whole can be seen as a stage in the development of new formal patterns in Buddhist art that would be amply developed in the Himalayan regions.

In some cases, the reliefs may have been associated with special pilgrimage spots, as for example the big image of Padmapāṇi at Jare. Besides keeping watch over an ancient ford in the Swat River (where, by the way, the currents are particularly strong), the sculpture must have also marked the scene of a miraculous event—identified by Aurel Stein on the basis of evidence offered by Songyun—that was evidently well known in local folklore (Filigenzi 2010a: 188).

However, as a general rule the sculptures are clustered around sacred areas that, in many cases, were already in ruins at the time the sculptures were executed. From this we can argue that despite the ravages of time

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term Gupta for the sake of convenience, although as generally accepted this wrongly includes periods and areas that did not belong to the Gupta Empire. Moreover, we have by now enough evidence to recognise the specific identity of the artistic trends that developed in the post-Kushan period in the North-West of the Subcontinent. A praiseworthy step in this direction is the recent coinage of “Gandhāra-Nagara” for the temple architecture along the Indus (Meister 1997–98).



**Figure 5.4** Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi with minor figures; Gogdara (Swat, Pakistan). Photo Neg. IsMEO CS L 4337/4.

the ancient monuments, whether restored or not, were still perceived as imbued with some sort of sacral power, and that they were connected to each other in a network of pilgrimage routes.

A close association with pilgrimage practices and their metaphorical re-enactment of a spiritual journey is suggested by the strong geomantic character of the sculptures (Filigenzi 2010a: 190 and fn. 9). As a matter of fact, the relationship between sculptures and local topography is not confined to their physical proximity to holy monuments, but also encompasses the landscape around them and the material support itself. The placement of the sculptures, their subjects, the physical shape of the figures and of the surfaces they were carved on are all constrained by the desire to keep the manipulation of the medium to a minimum. Clearly, the intent of the artists was to create the illusion of the images being *svayambhū*: a self-existent, spontaneous manifestation of the numinous in the world (FIGURE 5.4).<sup>2</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the rock sculptures certainly do not evoke extemporaneous, random proliferation, as has been earlier supposed;

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<sup>2</sup>On this aspect of the sculptures, cf. earlier studies, especially Filigenzi 1997 and 2010a.

rather, they reveal a specific inspirational motive, an artistic and conceptual plan that was undertaken to re-establish the earlier sacred topography through a sort of “revelation” or “rediscovery” of its immanent sacredness. We can only imagine the monastic community being behind such a project. It may well have directed the process, from the general conception to the specific selection of sites and subjects, and might perhaps have even undertaken the actual execution of the reliefs.

Indeed, one must wonder whether the underlying concept of these sculptures represents a mere—albeit insightful—interpretation of the notion of *svayambhū*, or rather a conscious and congruent visual counterpart to doctrinal issues connected with the “revealed” nature of Tantric texts.<sup>3</sup> Such a conceptual coincidence appears even more likely—and significant as well—in the light of the particular role played by Uḍḍiyāna in the genesis of Vajrayāna and its textual elaboration. According to the tradition, the *Guhyasamājatantra*, the king—and earliest—of all Tantras, was *revealed* to the king of Uḍḍiyāna, Indrabhūti, by Śākyamuni himself or, in a different version of the story, passed on to Indrabhūti by Vajrapāṇi, who had heard the revelation when travelling in Uḍḍiyāna with Śākyamuni (Tucci 1949: I, 121, 212–215; 1977: 68–69; Roerich 1988: 359).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, speaking in broad terms—but with reference to this particular cultural and geographic environment—a common background must have existed between the rock sculptures and the textual tradition. If this is the case (whatever the linguistic expression in the semantic memory of these places), we might dare to consider the intertwined phenomenon of literary and artistic experience as a sort of forerunner to the *rang byung* and *gter ma* traditions, i.e., the visionary revelation so deeply embedded in Tibetan mysticism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to Giacomella Orofino for this suggestion and, in general, for being unconditionally available for exchanging ideas and viewpoints.

<sup>4</sup>Scholars do not unanimously agree on the identification of Uḍḍiyāna with modern-day Swat and, consequently, on the close connection of Swat with the emergence of Vajrayāna. For an overview of the different hypotheses see for instance Donaldson 2001: 8 ff. Nevertheless, most of the contrasting opinions are mainly based on textual evidence, and do not take archaeological sources into account.

<sup>5</sup>Famous *rang byung* (self-existent) images on rock surfaces are venerated at Dentig, where there is also a cave blessed by Padmasambhava (Ricard 1994: 35, n. 5); another famous image of miraculous self-formation is that of Hayagrīva in the Agang Monastery (ibid. 35, n. 7). For a summary, mainly focused on textual materials, of the *gter ma*



## Swat and Beyond: Communication Routes and Pilgrimage Practice in the Late Antique Period

The topographical and iconographical uniformity of the sculptures opens a number of general questions about how to read their physical environment. First of all, as stated above, they must have been related to pilgrimage routes whose existence and dimension can only be inferred through archaeological data, not any direct textual evidence or surviving tradition. One might imagine a local road network serving marginalised Buddhist communities of the Swat valley and leading to dilapidated sacred areas. However, one wonders whether our perception of things might be misled by the deceptive appearance of macroscopic data. In fact, if one begins to question what seems obvious, alternative hypotheses take shape that fit the sparse and apparently conflicting pieces of evidence even better.

Tibetan and Chinese sources of the 8<sup>th</sup> century attest to the strategic importance of Uḍḍiyāna for controlling the routes that connected Central Asia and northern India (Tucci 1958: fn. 1; 1977: 75 ff.).

Notwithstanding the fact that our archaeological map is still uneven, evidence has surfaced here and there indicating that these routes were a vital economic and cultural asset, as is also indirectly suggested by the historical sources. The huge number of petroglyphs documented in the last decades by the Pakistani-German teams in the Upper Indus regions has clearly substantiated the primary role of these cross-cultural communication corridors, which seem to have thrived particularly in the second half of the first millennium CE (FIGURE 5.5).<sup>6</sup> The accurate mapping of the petroglyphs has shown the great historical relevance of this phenomenon: they are an invaluable witness to artistic, ethnographic, religious and economic issues that are otherwise nearly unknown.

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(“rediscovered treasures”) tradition see Gyatso 1992, 1996. I would like to make clear that, even if this hypothesis is correct, we still should not think in terms of a one-way flow of ideas, but rather of a polycentric world that exchanged experiences, viewpoints and reflections on topical issues, as was the case in the development of Buddhist Tantrism, mysticism and esotericism. Archaeological evidence from more or less coeval sites that are quite distant from one another helps to establish a sort of horizontal sequence, thus significantly expanding the historical framework of certain central concepts of Buddhist thought (see below page 127).

<sup>6</sup>I refer the reader to the series *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan. Reports and Studies* 1–3, where different stages and aspects of the research, along with additional bibliographic references, are carefully recorded.



**Figure 5.5** Isolated boulder with Buddhist graffiti; Upper Indus Valley (Pakistan). After HAW 2006: fig. p. 8.

Iconographic and epigraphic records in particular offer a synoptic glimpse of the cross-cultural configuration of these road networks as well as their human dimension,<sup>7</sup> thus allowing us to see the flow of concepts and visual forms that moved and were channelled along these routes.

Given the geographical proximity to the Upper Indus area, we may reasonably assume that, during the late antique period, Swat/Uḍḍiyāna was still connected to a trans-regional system of trade—as were other adjacent regions like Chitral—, and that its pilgrimage routes, too, were not obsolete, despite the fact that Buddhist settlements had diminished in both number and wealth. Thus, it may be further inferred that the flowering of the rock sculpture in Swat—albeit intimately related to the specific sacred topography of the area—was part of the framework of a wider cultural and economic geography. If this was indeed the case, the physical and historical distance between northern Pakistan, Central Asia and the Himalayan countries is significantly reduced.

## **Changing Patterns: Some Indications from the Archaeological Records**

The above-mentioned considerations lead to the question whether, or how, the complex aesthetics of the rock sculptures might help in better interpreting the somewhat disjoint picture of their historical framework. While for the period under consideration literary and archaeological evidence unanimously attests to a general deterioration of the ancient Buddhist monuments, we cannot dismiss the possibility that both sources fail to reveal certain significant changes that may have accompanied, or followed, the crisis of the religious establishments.

Until now, the reasons and dynamics of this crisis have not been accounted for by either archaeological findings or the scanty literary sources that are still extant. Sparse evidence has been found to support the hypothesis that a natural catastrophe ravaged the country, which in turn

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<sup>7</sup>I would like to stress the multifarious aspects of this “graffiti culture”, which can be considered a true visual compendium of ritual practices, social habits, artistic conventions and extemporaneous issues. It brings together such extremes as, for example, pious devotional acts and profane “pornographic” scenes (Sander 1989: 123–126, pl. 214). This uneven stratification of meanings, of artistic morphology and syntax, and of cultural contexts from perspectives both synchronic and diachronic is what offers us an unmatched glimpse into real life.

generated severe political and economic fallout.<sup>8</sup> A concomitant factor in the events can be seen in a shift of the bulk of traffic to a system of routes passing through Afghanistan (Kuwayama 2006: 125).

However, excavations at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai, the ancient Bazira of the classical sources, have provided us with new pieces of information that invite us to reassess already collected archaeological records with a new critical approach. In trench BKG2, in an area partly occupied by buildings of uncertain function (religious?),<sup>9</sup> the layers corresponding to the Hindu Shahi period bear witness to a noticeable change in architectural techniques and materials. The large-scale use of brightly painted, thick clay coats has been attested not only by remains still *in situ*, but even more by plentiful traces in the archaeological layers they melted into. In some cases, these coats of clay were used to even out the surfaces of rough masonry. This workmanship was in sharp contrast to the accurate, clean-cut stone masonry that, though still in use in the Hindu Shahi period, seems either to represent the survival of earlier traditions observed in the lower settlement prior to the crisis of Period IX (see FOOTNOTE 8), or else was distinct for some functional reason.<sup>10</sup>

A transition towards decreasing the use of cut stone and increasing the use of clay and/or stucco was also observed in sacred Buddhist areas. We

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<sup>8</sup>Just recently, in 2005 and 2010, we have had tragic demonstrations of what earthquakes and floods can inflict on these areas. For the case in question, a relevant testimony comes from the urban settlement of Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai, still under excavation, where Period IX (which can be dated to around the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE) marks a severe decay of the lower settlement after episodes of collapse and floods (Callieri 2010, esp. 375–377; I refer to this article also for its relevant bibliography on this site). Earlier, probably around the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, analogous episodes can be inferred from the archaeological record (see page 119).

<sup>9</sup>Filigenzi in Callieri *et al.* 1992: 37 ff.; Filigenzi 2010c: 411.

<sup>10</sup>By contrast to the above-mentioned shift in building techniques, a magnificent religious and military stone architecture flourished in Swat under the Shahis. The defence systems (forts and watchtowers built on high places), still clearly visible in Swat, are generally assigned to the Hindu Shahi period, although they might go back to earlier (Turki Shahi) phases (Olivieri 2003). With regard to the religious architecture, we now have concrete evidence in a Brahmanical (most probably Vaishnavite) temple recently discovered on the top of the hill in Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai, which is dated to the Early/Turki Shahi period (Callieri 2005; Filigenzi 2005). A further piece of evidence is probably represented by the remains of a monumental platform first documented by Foucher (1901: 167, fig. 31) at Hati Dara, which shows significant similarities to the Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai temple (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 119–120; Filigenzi 2010c: 413; Olivieri 2010a: 359).

still have a blurred picture, however, of the causes, effects, and time of this process. Although it is recorded that stucco and clay are the predominant media in “late-Gandharan” Buddhist sculpture, we still know all too little about their coeval architectural settings. The new trends in sculpture and architecture pose challenges to archaeological interpretation, since their real magnitude and impact are extremely difficult to discern. In most cases, changes are only insufficiently documented by partial additions that overlap existing layouts. Moreover, as the durability of built structures depends on the durability of their materials, old installations in stone have often survived where later additions in more short-lived materials have almost disappeared. Without regular maintenance clay, stucco and wood decay rapidly. Therefore, one must remember that very little of any later additions and repairs in such materials would be able to survive centuries of total abandonment in a country that long ago acquired a different religious identity. It is clear that even the most careful investigation will not be able to fill all the gaps completely. Hasty excavations, often carried out in the framework of rescue archaeology, further aggravate this problem. Under such circumstances, traces of ephemeral buildings that may have succeeded the solid masonry of earlier times can easily go unnoticed or be interpreted wrongly. This can be seen in the case of the rescue excavation of the sacred area of Nawagai, where the remains of the latest phase were only summarily recorded, and attributed to “non-believers” since they were not in keeping with the traditional “Gandharan” standards (Qamar 2004, esp. 185).<sup>11</sup>

Given the paucity of accurate archaeological records, the data provided by the excavation of the sacred area of Butkara I, identified by Tucci (1978: 60–61) with the splendid Talo/Tolo visited by Songyun, is particularly valuable. The long archaeological sequence, stretching from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century CE, and carefully recorded by Domenico Faccenna, allows a focused investigation into both the continuity and the changes in sculptural and architectural patterns.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The poorly built masonry building leaning against the *stūpa*, attributed by Qamar to a phase of de-sacralisation of the site, actually closely resembles the chapels of the late phase at Shnaisha. Here, the presence of a stele representing Maitreya in one of the chapels clearly testifies to a Buddhist continuity (Qamar and Ashraf Khan 1991: 185, 188; pl. 13; Filigenzi 1999: 11); for a different interpretation, see Abdur Rahman 1993: 20, 22 and plates XXa, XXVIIb.

<sup>12</sup>I refer to Filigenzi 2010b: 389–391 esp. for a more detailed summary of the cultural, chronological, and historical questions connected with this site.



**Figure 5.6** Stucco sculpture in situ (B 3798); Butkara I (Swat, Pakistan). After Faccenna 1980–81: part 5.1, pl. 85b.

At Butkara I, five main building periods have been detected, corresponding to the construction and four successive re-constructions of the main *stūpa* (GSt 1–5). A shift towards plastic materials and related techniques can be observed on a large scale during the period of GSt 4 (end of 3<sup>rd</sup>/early 4<sup>th</sup> century to 7<sup>th</sup> century CE), especially in Phase 5 of it (5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century; cf. Faccenna 1980–81: part 1, 77–120; part 3, 649–64, 676–693, part 5.1, pl. 85; see also FIGURE 5.6).

Of particular interest is a chronological clue provided by a secondary deposit of coins in one of the niches of GSt 4, which accompanied the repositioning and restoration of a relief panel sealing the niche that had probably fallen down. This episode, which occurred in Phase 4, took place in the framework of extensive building and restoration activity after widespread collapse and damage, most probably caused by an earthquake (Faccenna 1980–81; part 3, 635). The *terminus post quem* for Phase 4 is offered by the latest coins in this deposit, which were issued by Kavād 1 and dated by Göbl to about 356/360 CE.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>See Faccenna, Göbl and Khan 1993, esp. 106; I also refer to this article for the cir-

Thus, the large-scale renewal of the site reveals a departure from earlier artistic traditions, and thanks to a reliable archaeological sequence, we can place this event within a specific time span.

Indeed, the archaeological evidence shows that in both Butkara I and Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai, the increasing use of media such as clay, and most probably wood, can be connected with periods of economic distress, which might well have necessitated cheaper building options using low-cost materials and processing techniques. Nevertheless, it must also be taken into consideration that there may have been other triggering factors, or at least concomitant ones, such as the spreading of new ideas and tastes radiating from Afghanistan, Southern Central Asia and Xinjiang, where the large-scale use of clay and wood in architecture, architectural decoration and sculpture was a deeply rooted tradition.

Certainly the closer connection of Uḍḍiyāna to Afghanistan, prompted by the changes in the geo-political scenario and the entering of Swat (or at least a part of it) first into the orbit of the Hunas, and then into that of the Shahis of Kabul (Filigenzi 2010c: 409 ff.), must have contributed to an easier flow of ideas, models and techniques.

Thus, we can infer from the available evidence that the trend of artistic and architectural transformations we detect at various times in late antique Uḍḍiyāna is to be regarded as a multifarious phenomenon, not only one of an economic nature but also (and even more?) one of cultural relevance.

In particular with relation to Buddhist art, one must recognize that in the above-mentioned areas strong and captivating artistic forms developed exactly thanks to the malleable materials such as clay being used. The Central Asian artistic expression based on coroplastics contributed significantly to a new aesthetics in Buddhist art, with gigantism, pathos and polychromy as distinctive features. On the other hand, this new aesthetics is evidently patterned on important developments in Buddhist heuristics, gnoseology and praxis. The balanced match of form and content gave birth to a new and widely-shared indexicality, of which we only

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cumstances of the discovery. Here I would like to limit myself to remarking that the substantive argument of the coins' dates perfectly matches the chronology that had already been proposed by Faccenna (1980–81; part 3, 635) on the basis of the entire archaeological evidence. For a summary, see Filigenzi 2010b. I take the occasion here to amend a mistake on p. 392 of that article, where it should say that the deposit of coins dates to the construction of Phase 4, not GSt 4.

know disconnected parts. A broader reflection on cultural contexts is indeed an unavoidable challenge that cannot be answered either by excessive localism of studies, or by the one-to-one relationship between iconographic lemmata and specific literary references.

Nevertheless, for the time being steps in this direction must be taken by means of working hypotheses. As for late antique Uḍḍiyāna, one of these concerns the aesthetic dimension of the Buddhist monasteries. If, as archaeology shows, the stone used in the old architecture and sculpture was largely replaced by other, more perishable materials, comparative diachronic analysis lets us conjecture that the appearance of the new buildings, with either civil or religious functions, must have closely resembled the appearance of buildings in rural Pakistan still being built today, or even more closely specifically Buddhist architecture, such as we know from the Himalayan countries.<sup>14</sup> However, with respect to the latter, the constructions in late antique Uḍḍiyāna were probably on a much smaller scale since, as mentioned above, the new trends were mostly reflected in minor additions to pre-existing monuments. On the other hand, at the synchronic level we can only investigate other incomplete archaeological evidence. The closest comparisons might be offered by Afghanistan, provided we are able to get fresh data. If we do, we will also have a better chance of noticing previously overlooked details in earlier documentation. Encouraging clues are being provided by recent discoveries in Mes Aynak.<sup>15</sup> Among the many exceptional finds from this site, special mention should be made of wooden architectural elements, decorated in relief, that

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<sup>14</sup>As for Pakistan, traces of prestigious public architecture in wood and clay are represented by wooden mosques, of which relatively few samples survive, especially after the wave of modernisation that flowed into the country in the 1980s and '90s. A project to document surviving wooden mosques was carried out in the 1980s by the Islamic team of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, under the directorship of Umberto Scerrato (see Scerrato 1980, 1981, 1983). The project has recently been resumed under the supervision of Maria Vittoria Fontana ("*The Wooden Mosques. An IsIAO Architectural Project in Pakistan*"); a further project ("*The Wooden Artifacts. An IsIAO Ethnographic Project in Pakistan*"; director Ilaria E. Scerrato; IsIAO/Comitato Ev-K2-CNR; funding institution: SEED [Social, Economic, Environmental Development]) is presently documenting the traditional wooden architecture in Baltistan. For a recent re-examination of the wooden architecture in the Hindukush/Pamir area, see Schadl 2009, esp. n. 44.

<sup>15</sup>The site of Mes Aynak lies in Logar, about thirty kilometres south-east of Kabul. A former al-Qaida training camp, it is home to ancient Buddhist settlements of astonishing beauty (provisionally dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century), which were probably founded there due to the site's mineral wealth. As evidenced by abundant archaeological traces, the



still preserve abundant traces of a polychrome painted finish. Wood is an essential component in clay architecture, but its use in ancient times generally remains a guess. In addition to customary practices of reuse, the preservation of wooden artefacts in archaeological contexts is hampered by their perishable nature itself. As an organic material, wood normally decays under combined biological and chemical degradation when buried in earth. Only in desert sites, such as in Xinjiang, does the extremely dry climate allow the long-term preservation. In other areas — including Swat — we have little more than impressions or negligible fragments. However, thanks to these crucial finds from Mes Aynak we can now reduce the distance between reality and hypothesis (FIGURE 5.7).

Thus, despite the negative or incomplete evidence, we can try to imagine what the surviving monasteries of late antique Uḍḍiyāna looked like, with their smooth lines of clay, the bright colours of the surfaces, and the visually powerful interplay of architectural elements in wood.

It is difficult to assess how many of these monasteries there were. As discussed above, in comparison with the earlier centuries, the number had certainly been much reduced. The natural disasters and economic distress that seem to have severely affected the network of Buddhist settlements in Swat must have led to efforts and resources being concentrated on a small number of sacred areas that, for one reason or another, were considered of particular significance. We know, for instance, that important sacred areas such as Saidu Sharif I were never rebuilt, whilst we have signs of activity in several others, like Butkara I (Faccenna 1980–81: part 1, 11 ff., part 3, 635), Shnaisha (Qamar and Ashraf Khan 1991; Abdur Rahman 1993), Malam Jabba (Ashraf Khan 1993: 40–44; Rafiullah Khan

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resources of the site (the world's second-largest copper reserve) were already exploited in ancient times, likely by the monastic communities themselves. In 2007, a thirty-year lease was granted for the copper mine to the "China Metallurgical Group Corporation (CMGC)." Given the economic importance of this project (\$ 3.5 billion, with an expected revenue of \$ 880 million for the Afghan government even before production begins), the area is soon destined to become a giant open-cast mine. Racing against time, in 2009 the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, with the support of the *Délégation Archéologique Française*, launched a rescue excavation of this impressively large site, which had been explored only in part. Following an agreement with the CMGC and the Ministry of Mines, and thanks to Chinese and Afghan funds, the initial project has been extended until the end of 2012, although petitions have been launched to save the site. Except for some short summaries (Paiman 2010; AAVV 2011), the results of the excavations are still largely unpublished. I am grateful to my colleagues and dear friends Philippe Marquis and Nader Rassouli for their generosity in granting me access to the relevant documentation.



**Figure 5.7** Wooden architectural elements decorated in relief with polychrome painted finish; Mes Aynak (Logar, Afghanistan). Courtesy Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan.

2011), and (to a more limited extent) Pāṇṛ I (Faccenna, Khan and Nadiem 1993: 130), to mention just the best-known examples.

But if for the monasteries this was a time of change and not only of mere regression, less static interpretations of Buddhist monasticism might be explored as well. One must wonder whether and how the monastic system itself was affected by internal changes. Dissenting or alternative views may have led some of the Buddhist intelligentsia to different practices or a hermit way of life away from the monasteries, thus laying the groundwork for the *siddha* path.<sup>16</sup> Once again, the extent to which this social phenomenon can be traced through archaeological records depends on the receptiveness of our investigative tools.

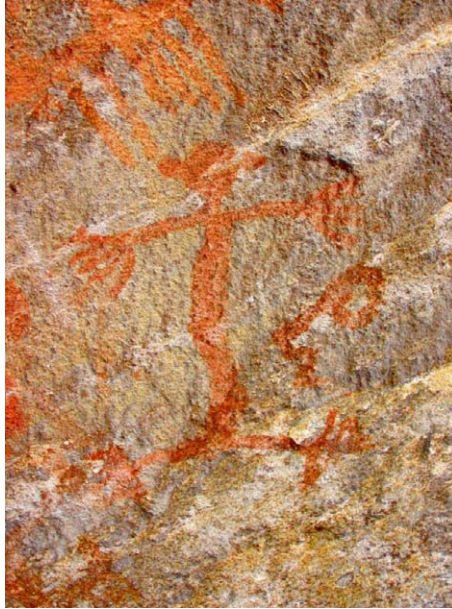
## **Culture of the Valleys and Culture of the Mountains: The Interaction between Buddhism and “Kafir-Dardic” Tribes**

The overwhelming visibility of Buddhist remains, though of undeniable historical relevance, puts us at risk of pushing various socio-cultural realities into the background, realities that nevertheless may have had a noticeable impact on certain philosophical ramifications of key Buddhist doctrines and practices.

In recent years, a number of rock shelters have been documented in Swat in the framework of the “Archaeological Map of Swat Valley” project (AMSV). Their function—certainly multi-faceted—is yet to be fully understood. In most cases they seem to have had some sort of ritual purpose, probably connected to pastoral communities living in the mountains or at the edges of the valleys (Olivieri and Vidale 2006; Olivieri 2011, with bibliography). The graffiti and paintings that often decorate these shelters, though distributed over an extremely long period of time—namely, from the Bronze Age to circa the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE—fit into a coherent system. In relation to the dominant artistic culture of the valleys, this system evidently represents a parallel visual code, with its own syntax and social interactions, as well as a stock of knowledge, rituals, and religious and mystic beliefs.

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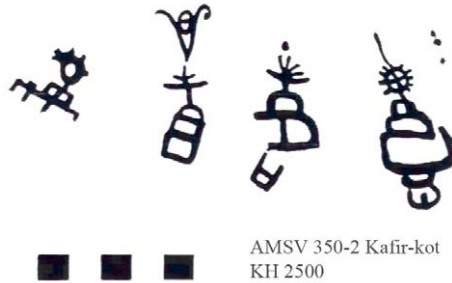
<sup>16</sup>Though based on somewhat different reasons, similar considerations have recently been expressed by Kurt Behrendt (2010).



**Figure 5.8** A possible shamanic representation. Lal-kamar site (Swat, Pakistan). After Olivieri 2011: pl. 5.3.



**Figure 5.9** Gigantic anthropomorphic rock. Ghirai (Swat, Pakistan). After Olivieri and Vidale 2006: fig. 45.



**Figure 5.10** Rock paintings showing elements of Buddhist architecture. Kafir-kot 2 (Swat, Pakistan). After Olivieri and Vidale 2006: fig. 38.

Recurring patterns in rock paintings, in particular dominant anthropomorphic figures with outstretched fingers, have been associated with magical or shamanic practices of trance or ritual death (FIGURE 5.8). Having already appeared in the Bronze Age, these pictograms survived in later paintings with only slight modifications (Olivieri 2010b: 21). Furthermore, most of the painted shelters are not meant for standing visitors—the spaces are so small that a person can barely sit inside—and so seem to have served the purpose of hermitage and/or some sort of initiation rituals (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 125; Olivieri 2011: 142). It is interesting to note that, in a way not very dissimilar to the Buddhist rock sculptures of Late Antiquity, the shelters generally display a strong sense of geomantic harmony, which translates into a symbolic interpretation of the rocks and the surrounding landscape; occasionally, they may have had anthropomorphic or zoomorphic shapes, thus appearing to be “gigantic images sculpted by nature” (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 141; figs. 37, 45; Olivieri 2011: 142; pls. 6–7; see FIGURE 5.9).

Evidence of winemaking in historical times, in the form of wine presses, adds a further element of cultural identity to the archaeological record connected to the users of the shelters. Just for the sake of convenience, we can call these people “Kafir-Dardic”, a generic name that is perhaps unsuitable.<sup>17</sup>

Buddhist symbols can occasionally be found in the rock paintings and graffiti (FIGURE 5.10). According to Olivieri (2011, esp. 138–141), they re-

<sup>17</sup>For the meaning and implications of this name, I refer the reader to Tucci 1977; Jettmar 1986; Klimburg 1999; Cacopardo and Cacopardo 2001.

flect perhaps not direct Buddhist inspiration, but rather how these “Kafir-Dardic” tribes, living at the edge of urban areas and their rich agricultural belt, saw Buddhism. They must have had some sort of economic ties to the Buddhist settlements, probably supplying them with forest products.<sup>18</sup> Thus, although not integrated in the dominant culture, these mountain people may have regarded the Buddhist establishment as a source of welfare, and accordingly recorded it in their symbolic visual narrative. Nevertheless, another hypothesis (not necessarily in opposition to the first) is that the painted shelters were used by various people of different creeds (ibid. 139).

In any case, the contiguity of the two worlds appears, thanks to the recent archaeological surveys and studies, to have entailed a meaningful and effective interaction. This adds credit to Tucci’s sharp intuitive ideas about the role of aboriginal beliefs and praxis in the development of the late forms of Buddhism (Tucci 1977: 68–69).

Whether or not the graffiti and paintings depicting Buddhist symbols in rock shelters may be read as specific markers, the lack of such evidence is nevertheless a mere and inconclusive *argumentum e silentio*. We cannot exclude, in fact, that at least some of these shelters may have been used as retreats by Buddhist hermits who had totally or partly renounced cloistered monastic life.<sup>19</sup> In particular, close contact with the “parallel” culture of the mountain people may have conferred special features on a well-rooted Buddhist tradition of secluded meditative retreat, especially aspects of an asceticism closely connected to nature, magic and the supernatural.

The Buddhist practice of meditation, implicitly calling for remoteness and solitude, is actually better known from textual sources than material contexts. However, in recent years archaeological and art historical

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<sup>18</sup>Similar modes of interaction between Buddhist monasteries and (Dardic) tribes have been documented in modern-day Ladakh (Olivieri 2011: 138, n. 26).

<sup>19</sup>Of particular relevance to the question of hermitage is also the depiction, at several sites, of *trisūla* symbols and of a figure holding a *trisūla* (Olivieri and Vidale 2006, esp. 140; Olivieri 2010a: 359 and fig. 7). I would cautiously venture to read these as a reference to Shaiva hermitage practices, whose presence would be plausible in the cultural environment we are tentatively reconstructing here. In this regard, it seems opportune to recall the several hints, scattered throughout Tucci’s works, of the strong connection between Swat (as part of a broader area including Gandhāra, north Pakistan up to the Indus, central and eastern Afghanistan) and Shaiva philosophies (Tucci 1958: 283–284; 1963: *passim*; 1977: 68).

research has started assembling sparse pieces of material evidence, and cross-case analysis has now enabled the comparison of a few particular instances. While still only a small number, they are extremely interesting. In Swat, isolated retreats have been documented uphill big Buddhist settlements. They consist either of monastic cells (as in the case of Abba-saheb-china, Tokar-dara, and Nawagai) or of rock hermitages. Among these latter, worthy of special notice are the sites of Amluk in the upper Kandak Valley (Olivieri 2010a: 358 and fig. 3), Topialai near the Cherat pass (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 149), as well as Nangrial and Tangu near the Ambela pass (Nasim Khan 2000).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in places as distant as Haḍḍa in Afghanistan, Kara Tepe in Uzbekistan, and Qizil in Xinjiang, around the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century CE secluded places existed within the monastic settlements that were devoted to meditation and particularly—as the painted decoration suggests—to meditation on death.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, many other sites that are not so specific and therefore difficult to date—such as completely bare caves near monastic settlements (Fussman 2008: *passim* [see index, s.v. “Grottes”]; Olivieri 2010a: 358 and fig. 3; Callieri in print)—speak of a quite widespread practice whose exact relationship to institutional monasticism we do not know. This phenomenon is still poorly represented in the archaeological record and it is certainly underestimated. Nevertheless, the evidence in itself is sufficiently convincing to let us argue that if we understood it better, we would probably change our perception of the historical dynamics of Buddhism.

## The Cultural Context of the Buddhist Rock Sculptures

An integrated territorial analysis, to the extent that the circumstances in Swat have allowed, clearly shows that much can be hidden in the folds of

<sup>20</sup>The Buddhist rock shelters of Nangrial have only recently been discovered (personal communication by L.M. Olivieri). As for the rock hermitage of Tangu, an element of extraordinary interest is its being decorated with polychrome mural paintings. The surviving fragment, showing a preaching Buddha flanked by two seated Bodhisattvas, has been attributed by Nasim Khan to the Gandharan horizon, although a somewhat later date seems more likely.

<sup>21</sup>On this topic, I refer the reader to Lo Muzio 2005: 486 ff., where other stimulating hypotheses of possible Gandharan antecedents are also suggested.

macroscopic evidence. The same applies to interpreting written sources, as for example Xuanzang's description of Uḍḍiyāna. The image of decay portrayed by his account conveys a notion of cultural stagnation, if not regression, a fact that we usually read literally and take for granted without questioning the possible cultural bias of the witness.

For instance, vague hints by Songyun about Uḍḍiyāna's fame for magic spells (Beal 1976: LXXXIX, XCVIII) are reinforced by Xuanzang, who speaks of Uḍḍiyāna monks no longer understanding the Buddhist doctrine and (as we infer from the context) practising magic (ibid. 120–21). Such statements can be taken as corresponding to the true state of affairs, but they could also be a clue that a different form of Buddhism—that is, a proto-Vajrayāna—had evolved in the region. Evidence in support of the latter hypothesis is provided by the rock sculptures, which, in addition to the general characteristics discussed above, conform to a new iconographic lexicon in which we can detect the formative stage of a Vajrayanic—or proto-Vajrayanic—orientation of the doctrine.

## **Uniformity of Shades: The Embedded Tantric Meaning**

In his seminal work on Swat's antiquities, Tucci was surprised by the lack of any artistic manifestation expressing the "religious atmosphere which has permeated Swat ever since the 7<sup>th</sup> century". Not even the rock sculptures, notwithstanding their chronological pertinence, were considered relevant, on the assumption that "none of them can be called Vajrayanic" (Tucci 1958: 284). Nevertheless, closer scrutiny calls Tucci's statement into question. Firstly, unrestricted access to the images must have influenced the choice of subject matter, which is generally designed to match the straightforward and unprotected open-air setting. Secondly, the deceptive lack of variety in the subjects, combined with the poor preservation of most of the sculptures, lets their innovative character pass initially unnoticed. However, a large-sample investigation has revealed new iconographic forms that are certainly connected to important doctrinal changes.

A glaring case in point is represented by a highly recurrent yet apparently "neutral" subject: Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi. The overriding predominance of this figure led Tucci to the conclusion that the Bodhi-sattva must have had a special affiliation with the region. Possibly he





**Figure 5.11** Pensive Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi with Gaṇeśa and Gandharva or Vidyādhara. Qal'a (Swat, Pakistan). Photo Neg. IsMEO CS L 17013/21a.

was even regarded as a sort of patron deity (Tucci 1958:322). This may be an accurate assessment, but it is clear that the function of the Bodhisattva—the great compassionate helper who frees the path of hindrances and protects travellers on their physical and spiritual journeys—makes



**Figure 5.12** Detail of FIGURE 5.11 showing Gaṇeśa. Photo Neg. IsMEO CS L 17013/17a.

him a divinity perfectly suited for guarding pilgrimage routes. Moreover, the dogma of transfiguring grace granted by Avalokiteśvara finds here a distinctive visual form that anticipates later Tantric formulations.

Of Tantric rituals aimed at removing obstacles on the way to the *bodhi*, some focus specifically on the acquisition of control over Vināyaka, the personification of hindering forces. In such rituals, we often see Avalokiteśvara not only intervening as a positive counterpart in the process of identifying and removing obstacles, but even performing the rite himself, thus turning the individual victory over the empirical Self into a cosmic event (Wilkinson 1991).

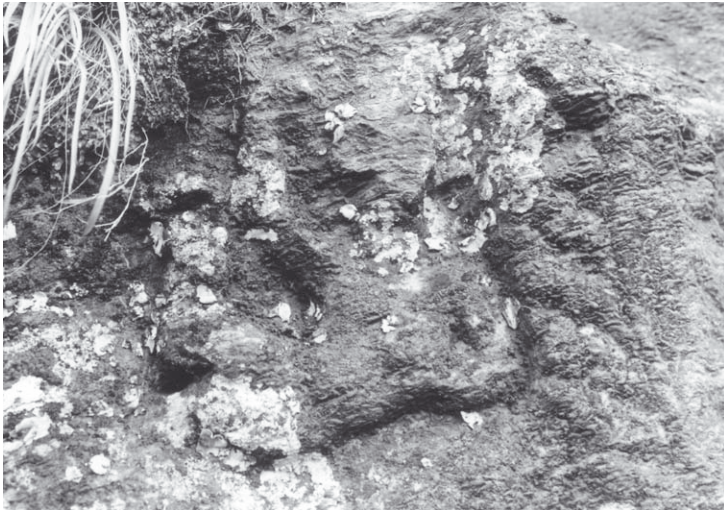
This particular function of the Bodhisattva is summarised with sophisticated simplicity in a relief at Qal'a. A pensive Padmapāṇi is seated on a throne supported by two lions; at the lower left, a small four-armed Gaṇeśa figure is portrayed. Above, to the sides of the Bodhisattva's halo, two small flying Gandharva or Vidyādhara figures are depicted. Every feature of the scene alludes to a victorious event—the leonine throne of the Bodhisattva, the subordinate position of Gaṇeśa, the glorifying presence of the Gandharva/Vidyādhara figures (Filigenzi 2000–2001: 258 ff.; see FIGURES 5.11 to 5.15).

Once again, the underlying meaning of the subjects can only be grasped from a cross-analysis of the specific iconographic features of the Bodhisattva within the entire context. When considered together, they clearly attest to a leading role of Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi in his soteriological aspect of *Mahākāruṇika*, in a way not dissimilar (and perhaps all too similar) to the descriptions in the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Whatever the exact date of the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra* (cf. Studholme 2002: 9–17), it is



**Figure 5.13** Detail of FIGURE 5.11 showing the lion throne. Photo Neg. IsMEO CS L 17013/20a.



**Figure 5.14** Detail of FIGURE 5.11 showing the Gandharva or Vidyādhara figure on the left side. Photo Neg. IsMEO CS L 17013/18a.



**Figure 5.15** Detail of FIGURE 5.11 showing the Gandharvī or Vidyādhari figure on the right side. Photo Neg. IsMEO CS L 17013/19a.

A distinctive “proto-Tantric” character also marks the iconographic type of the standing Vajrapāṇi. In his left hand, the Bodhisattva, in *varadamudrā*, holds a wavy *vajra* whose lower point rests on the small corolla of a lotus with a long stem that emerges from the ground. This unusual rendering of the lotus is most probably a conventional way of representing the *utpala* (FIGURE 5.16).

This representation conforms, in its general characteristics, to the iconographic type portrayed in a *sādhana* of an 11<sup>th</sup> century manuscript that has been published by Alfred Foucher, where an illustration of Vajrapāṇi, in *varadamudrā*, shows him holding both a *vajra* and an *utpala*, or blue lotus. In the text he is defined as “Vajrapāṇi of Maṅgakoṣṭha in Oḍḍiyāna” (Foucher 1905: I, pl. VI, n. 5 and p. 193, n. 22). This precise

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worth noting that basic concepts among forerunners to this text, such as the different forms Avalokiteśvara can assume in order to teach different kinds of sentient beings, are already expressed in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (de Mallmann 1948: 41) and attested by iconographic sources as early as in Gandhāra (Taddei 1987: 353 and fig. 5).



**Figure 5.16** Standing Vajrapāni (MAI Inv. no.: V 257). Found near Arabut (Swat, Pakistan). Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif. Photo Neg. IsMEO Dep. CS Ng. R 6912/5.

geographical reference establishes a special connection between the Bodhisattva and Swat,<sup>23</sup> which may be the origin of this iconographic theme and its later variants, among which the manuscript illustration itself can be counted.<sup>24</sup>

Texts containing direct references to Vajrapāṇi and to the North-West of India (in particular Uḍḍiyāna) refer, albeit cryptically, to a part of the doctrine not revealed by the Buddha to the great assembly of the Śrāvakas and the Bodhisattvas, but to an intimate entourage, in which Vajrapāṇi plays the principal role. In fact, he seems to represent, in the sphere of the esoteric disciplines, the quintessence of magic science and the Lord of all mysteries.<sup>25</sup> This is based on his intuitive, mystic ability to duplicate the substantial identity of the body, voice and thought of the Tathāgata. He is, in a word, the expression of the fundamental unity of the Tathāgata with all human beings, a unity that can only be accomplished through a process of magic auto-identification.<sup>26</sup>

Of particular interest is the iconographic correlation of the figure of Vajrapāṇi in the rock sculpture and the image in the above-mentioned manuscript. In both, the *utpala* is not held in the hand of the Bodhisattva but is placed under his arm, as if the flower has not been cut but is still emerging from the earth. In another manuscript of the same collection (Ms. A. 15, No. 10; Foucher 1905: I, pl. II, n. 3), Vajrapāṇi is shown standing beside Akṣobhya, his spiritual progenitor, and again the lotus he is

<sup>23</sup>On the identification of Maṅgakoṣṭha as Dhanyapura/Dangram, see Tucci 1958:n. 24 (mentioning earlier theories), 288, 316.

<sup>24</sup>Despite some slight modifications, the iconographic model elaborated in Swat surfaces in various places and at other times, as for instance on a fragment of a silk banner from Dunhuang that has been dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Singer and Denwood 1997: fig. 81; see FIGURE 5.17).

<sup>25</sup>We see, for example in the *Ārya-Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, the close relationship of the *vidyārājas*—which can be briefly defined as personified magic, personified formulas—with Vajrapāṇi, to whose authority they are subject (Przyluski 1923: 311–312).

<sup>26</sup>Such doctrinal formulations appear in a more or less explicit form in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in texts such as the *Mahāvairocanasūtra* from China (Lamotte 1966: 152–54). Nevertheless, already the *Vinaya* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin, in the *Bhaiṣajyavastu*, tells of a long journey taken by the Buddha Śākyamuni in central and southern India. During the second leg of the journey, in the North-West, the Buddha separated from Ānanda and was accompanied only by Vajrapāṇi (Przyluski 1914). Although the *Vinaya* is silent on the reason, it is difficult to consider it merely a coincidence that, within the Tantric tradition, Vajrapāṇi is said to have received the teaching and entrustment of the Vajrayāna from the Buddha in Uḍḍiyāna. See page 112.

holding in his left hand is still attached to roots rising up from the earth (or perhaps from water). It would therefore seem that a crucial aspect in the Vajrapāṇi iconography is, at least in certain contexts, this particular appearance of the lotus, which may point to special meanings of an esoteric nature (Huntington 1981: 51). This is indirectly indicated through the recurrent presence of this motif in the grottoes of western Deccan (Kahneri, Ellora, Aurangabad), which many scholars now believe are connected to the diffusion of Tantric Buddhism (Gupte 1964; J.C. Huntington 1981; S.L. Huntington 1999: 239–74).

Further testimony to Buddhism's vitality in late antique Uḍḍiyāna is an interesting relief that, if my interpretation is correct, represents a *siddha*, here visually and conceptually equated with a Bodhisattva (Filigenzi 2003; FIGURE 5.18). Although very eroded, the profile of the right hand suggests the presence of a small *vajra*, while the flattish object in the left hand seems to fit the shape of a *kapāla* perfectly. Above the haloed head is a sort of canopy adorned with circular elements, which can probably be interpreted as astral bodies. Two figures on either side—a man and a woman, also with haloes and standing on lotus flowers—carry objects that are no longer identifiable, but are compatible with the shape of a *vajra* and a *ghaṇṭā*.

In essence, *siddhas* represent a non-monastic ideal that is militantly anti-conventional. This matches the cultural environment of late antique Uḍḍiyāna well, as one can tentatively infer from the sparse but consistent evidence at our disposal.

The untrammelled and non-observant conduct seems to be a distinctive feature of the original profile of the *siddha*, although it is not infrequent for accomplishment to work through—or associate with—the monastic order. This is the prevalent tendency in the iconographic models of the *Mahāsiddha* in Tibet, for example, who is often shown in monastic garments, possibly within a framework of attempts to curb secularisation (Tucci 1995: 43–44; Snellgrove and Richardson 1968: 129–31). Nevertheless the Tibetan tradition itself accounts for the variety of extractions, methods and practices characterising the biographies of the *siddhas* precisely by pointing out the fulfilment of the Bodhisattva's vow to help living creatures of every level and condition, identifying with them and adopting their life-styles. The striking affinities between much later Tibetan works (see FIGURE 5.19) and the stele in question attest to the persistence of a model that seems to have originated in the homeland of the revered Indian masters. It was probably introduced to Tibet by means of portable



**Figure 5.17** Standing Vajrapāṇi from Dunhuang. After Singer and Denwood 1997: fig. 81



**Figure 5.18** An enthroned *siddha* with attendants (MAI Inv. no. V 165). Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif. Photo Neg. IsMEO R 5018/8.





**Figure 5.19** A Tibetan painting depicting Padmasambhava. After Rhie and Thurman 1991: 169.

objects such as bronzes and votive terracottas, whose production and circulation must have been far more extensive than has as yet been documented (Filigenzi 2003: 49–51; see also Erika Forte’s contribution in this volume, CHAPTER 6).

## The Ominous Feminine

I would like to conclude this brief survey of motifs in the Swat rock sculptures with an isolated example of a female divinity portrayed in the immediate aftermath of slaying a goat by decapitation (FIGURE 5.20). The subject matter shows a singular affinity with the Durgā iconography and, at the same time, an equally singular divergence from it. Its context is uncertain, although as far as its source is concerned, it seems to belong to the sphere of autochthonous beliefs. However, it should not be excluded that it might be a Buddhist adaptation.<sup>27</sup>

The stele was published by Tucci (1963), who saw in this variation on Durgā’s iconography “a peculiar local variety of some homologous religious entities” (ibid. 152), in particular of a female divinity worshipped by hunters as the mistress of the ibexes in the mountainous areas between Gilgit and Swat. The antiquity, persistence and diffusion of this cult is confirmed not only by the graffiti commonly attributable to hunter societies, in which the wild goat appears as one of the most recurrent iconographic motifs, but also by the unequivocal representation of a (female?) divinity standing on an ibex. Such representations have recently been documented in the rock paintings of Sargah-sar in Swat (Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 124 and fig. 17), and in Oshibat in the Upper Indus Valley (König 1994: 114, fig. 18). Clearly reflecting the same cult tradition are the wooden sculptures of Kafirstan, which show a woman (a goddess?) riding a goat (Edelberg 1960: 250, figs. 7–9; Tucci 1963: 154; Motamedi and Edelberg 1968).

One other curious example is from Nasogy, in the Upper Kulu Valley (Diserens 1986: 465, pl. Vb; FIGURE 5.21). This relief, carved in relatively recent times, decorates the wooden door of the temple of Shonkur Ṛṣi.

<sup>27</sup> An interesting case of inclusion of a “Durgā”—or Durgā-like goddess—in a Buddhist context is documented in the Late Period (7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century CE) of Tapa Sardar (Afghanistan). See Taddei 1992; Silvi Antonini 2005; Filigenzi 2008: 57; Verardi 2010: 346–347. Just recently, analogous evidence was also found at Mes Aynak, in a chapel that, judging from the stylistic features of the sculptural remains, can be assigned to the same chronological horizon as Tapa Sardar.



**Figure 5.20** Multi-armed goddess killing a goat (MAI Inv. no. V 497). Found in the area of Shandala (Swat, Pakistan). Swat Museum, Saidu Sharif. Photo Neg. IsMEO Dep. CS LA 6903/5.

Here Durgā is armed with a trident and is portrayed—whether seated or standing is difficult to say—unnaturally rigidly on her mount, whose tail she incongruously holds. The odd mixture of different iconographic



**Figure 5.21** Durgā on her mount; Shonkur Ṛṣi Temple, Nasogy (Upper Kulu Valley). After Diserens 1986: 465, pl. Vb.

schemes (Durgā Mahiṣamardinī, and the ancient goddess standing on or riding a wild goat) appears even more evident in the figure of the animal itself, which is meant to be a lion, as we can tell from the schematic mane clinging to the neck and the long tail, but which otherwise faithfully reproduces the features of a goat. Modest as it is in craftsmanship, the relief constitutes an important document, revealing at one and the same time a twofold persisting iconography: the female divinity reigning over the animals of the mountainous regions, and her time-honoured symbiosis with Durgā, the goddess whose characteristics are somehow—as indeed the local populations recognise—transformed into a cultured, “official” version.<sup>28</sup>

We can find other traces of this world living side by side with the dominant Buddhist culture, tenuous and scattered as they may be. Actually a number of late Gandharan works attest to the existence of female deities whose realm is the ominous region beyond the domesticated enclosure

<sup>28</sup>For a similar case of the assimilation of a mountain goddess with Durgā in Swat, see Tucci 1977: 28. The case in point is of particular interest since it bears clear witness to the transmission of a pattern across different religious traditions: the cult of the mountain (Mount Karamar) and of an aboriginal *devī* (to which Mount Karamar was sacred), the later assimilation of the goddess into Bhīmadevī, the self-generated (*svayambhū*) image of the goddess, the survival of the cult under Islam in the form of a woman fakir or fairy whose name, Shehr Banu, corresponds to *Siṃhavāhinī*, an epithet of Durgā.



**Figure 5.22** An animal-headed goddess holding a beaker and a severed animal head. British Museum. After Zwalf 1996: No. 105, p. 123.



**Figure 5.23** A goddess holding a cup and a severed animal head. Fujii-Yūrinkan Museum, Kyoto. After Taddei 1987: fig. 9.

of the human societies, epitomised by their connection, and even translational identity, with the animal world (Taddei 1987: figs. 9–13; Kurita 1988/2003: II, figs. 483, 750; Zwalf 1996: n. 105, p. 123, with additional references; see FIGURES 5.22 and 5.23). Severed heads of animals and cups or beakers in these deities' hands indicate their demand for sacrifices, sacrifices that would possibly propitiate their ambiguous and potentially dangerous nature.

It is a fact that Uḍḍiyāna, besides being revered as the land where many great teachers of both the Vajrayāna and Bonpo traditions were either born or passed through, was also well known as a land of magic with special “female” connotations. This further reinforces the hypothesis that a fecund osmosis occurred between Buddhism and aboriginal beliefs. These latter were probably shared by a broad range of “mountain

peoples” from the Hindukush to the Himalaya, where they were further blended with Bon. To all appearances, time is giving us ever more cogent arguments supporting Tucci’s idea that this religious substratum in Swat, given its unformalised structure, was never uprooted by Buddhism (and not even by Islam, for that matter), but rather found its way into the Buddhist tradition itself by means of the Vajrayāna system (Tucci 1977: 68–69).

This last circumstance, besides offering a rather reasonable view of the social history of late antique Uḍḍiyāna, invites us to reconsider our interpretative models, which have been somewhat misled by the prominence of monumental evidence in the archaeological records. Indicators that are less visible but not less important, such as these “minor” forms of art converging at focal points in the physical and cultural geography, still have much to say about the changes, continuity and flow of ideas along these ancient routes.

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