

CHAPTER X

Visual Embodiments of the Buddhist *mārga*: Space, Place and Artistry in Ancient Swat/Uḍḍiyāna

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1. Introduction

Though not exclusively Buddhist, the concept of *mārga* has been given particular emphasis by the Buddhist world, to such an extent that it entered Buddhist imagery as a central and transformational topos. Quite in opposition to the traditional Brahmanical culture, Buddhism indeed conceives of moving inward as metaphorically equated to journeying, thus opening in textual, oral, visual and behavioural traditions a potentially unlimited variety of ways in which to entail the wide range of mental and physical aspects of mobility and change.¹ In such a frame of reference, even as the merit-making mechanism assigns a rewarding value to deliberately journeying for pilgrimage purposes, so also moving around may in itself open a path to salvation, insofar as it exposes one to fortuitous encounters (first and foremost with enlightened beings, but also with sacred places, monuments and icons) that are conducive to spiritual growth.

An effectual synopsis of key ideas related to the Buddhist *mārga* is to be found in the many Buddhist rock sculptures that intersperse a large-scale sacred topography in Swat (Fig. 1). Nearly two hundred images of buddhas and bodhisattvas carved on rock faces and loose boulders have been documented over time by various members of the Italian Archaeological Mission

¹ For instance, worth noticing is the close association between Buddhist monasteries and trade networks, which has been documented by various scholars in different contexts. For a recent contribution to the subject matter, see Neelis 2010.

in Pakistan (including its founder, Giuseppe Tucci), initially in a random way in the framework of comprehensive archaeological surveys, then, during the last decades, as a specific subject of investigation that eventually led to a comprehensive publication.²

The aim of the present paper is not to linger on the art-historical implications of the sculptures, which have been dealt with extensively elsewhere. Rather, it will attempt to explore their connection with the concept of *mārga*, as strong evidence supports the inference that the rock sculptures were intended not only to mark pilgrimage paths, but to provide the latter with a consonant frame which could magnify the pilgrims' experience and give new significance to it.

Hence, I am particularly grateful to the editors of this volume not only for allowing an art historian to intrude upon a group of philologists, but also for indirectly motivating me to give a preliminary shape to sparse notes and emerging ideas.

2. The general background

Though not unanimously accepted, the identification of Swat with ancient Uḍḍiyāna, or at least with the core of it, can be considered an established fact. Field research of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (hereafter, IAMP) started in Swat with the identification of significant places of the ancient topography, in particular urban and Buddhist settlements that are mentioned in Indian, Greek, Chinese and Tibetan literary sources. However, archaeological investigations in Swat were not limited to the most macroscopic evidence, but were implicitly targeted towards a more comprehensive knowledge of the cultural past of the country, also including non-formalised religious traditions and their contribution to codified doctrines. Since its very inception, the IAMP's exploration of the country was thus characterised by a holistic approach, which decentralised the stance of traditional history insofar as it allowed plural voices to be introduced into the historical reconstructions. The scope of enquiry, though rigorously moving from material evidence, indeed always went beyond historical realism, based only on what is written or observable, to encompass the historical significance of the culture and beliefs of the local people and draw grounded inferences

² Filigenzi 2015.

about immaterial representations from the complex of what can be empirically observed.³

It is a fact that Buddhist relics represent in Swat the most impressive material evidence of the region's historical past. Buddhism spread to Swat in the third century BCE and flourished there for centuries. Generously patronised by motivated aristocracies and nurtured by a strong cultural underpinning, a tight network of Buddhist settlements developed around wealthy urban centres. Art thrived vigorously, with momentous innovations being produced that left a permanent mark on the Buddhist visual culture.

Towards the end of the third century CE, probably following some serious natural disasters, the cities declined⁴ and many ancient Buddhist monasteries were abandoned or only modestly repaired. However, the vitality of Buddhism is still attested by archaeological sites such as Butkara I, where at around the same time a new building phase took place which also introduced noticeable changes in both architecture and decoration.⁵ The use of well-cut and sculpted stone that had characterised the previous periods was almost abandoned in favour of less durable and less expensive materials such as rough stone or rubble coated with thick plaster, stucco and (we may assume) wood.⁶ The fragility of these materials poses limits and challenges to the hypothetical reconstruction of the original appearance of the monuments. Yet, the cultural import of these “new” forms of visual arts, which already contain the germs of the later Himalayan traditions, can hardly be overestimated. The first-hand account left by Songyun about the splendour of Butkara/Talo⁷ is also a witness to the sixth century CE still being a period of cultural and artistic vivacity, of which the rock sculptures may thus be considered a further continuation. In turn, as we will see, the formal and conceptual contents of the rock sculptures add credit to Tibetan sources, insofar as the former prove what the latter subsume, i.e. that Uḍḍiyāna must have continued to develop doctrines and practices—long after the third

³ For a summary of the IAMP's activities and related bibliography, I refer the reader to *East and West* 2006 (a special issue celebrating the IAMP's 50th anniversary) and to: <http://www.oew.ac.at/uddiyana/about-this-website/>. For further updates I refer to Vidale, Micheli and Olivieri (2016) and the relevant bibliography.

⁴ Olivieri 2014.

⁵ Faccenna 1980-81: Part 1, 77–120.

⁶ Olivieri and Filigenzi 2018.

⁷ Beal 2004 (1884): xcvi.

century CE—which eventually earned it a reputation as a famous cradle of Vajrayāna.

3. The rock sculptures in their physical and conceptual context

Like any other expression of rock art, the Buddhist rock sculpture of Swat poses a two-sided challenge to interpretation. The generally poor state of preservation and, moreover, the lack of physical stratigraphic correlations with other artefacts and/or archaeological contexts hamper the formal interpretive analysis as well as a safe chronological attribution.

However, the high degree of consistency in the stylistic, iconographic and iconological patterns of the sculptures provides evidence enough to reliably circumscribe their time frame to the seventh to eighth centuries and to define their cultural background as proto-Vajrayanic. In particular, in terms of style, iconography and area of provenance, the rock sculptures show significant similarities to a series of bronzes, some of them precisely dated by dedicatory inscriptions mentioning donors of royal lineage.⁸ This allows us to infer the existence of a typified idiom to which the two productions comply, a circumstance which further reinforces the historical, artistic and cultural significance of both.

Although, as mentioned above, the poor state of preservation of most of the rock sculptures as well as the lack of any established art historical framework has made analytical work difficult, thanks to cross comparisons it has been possible to recognise almost all the iconographic subjects and calculate the percentage of frequency of occurrence. The list, in decreasing order of incidence, includes Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya, Vajrapāṇi/Vajrasattva, Mañjuśrī (?), and a series of unique or rare presences such as the earliest representation of a *siddha*, Avalokiteśvara paired with Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, Sūrya paired with Gaṇeśa, and a multi-armed female divinity trampling on a de-

⁸ The inscriptions relate to members of the Paṭola Śāhi of Gilgit, thus also providing a reliable chronological frame for the anepigraphic bronzes that share the same formal and technical features. Worth mentioning is the fact that this series of bronzes, seemingly produced in Swat and circulating among political and cultural élites, is characterised by a sophisticated repertoire of iconographic and doctrinal themes. I refer the reader to Filigenzi 2015 for a more detailed discussion and relevant bibliography.

capituted goat, most probably an autochthonous mountain goddess that, on the basis of some perceived homology, was adapted to the “cultured” model of the Hindu Durgā slaughtering the buffalo. Unidentified subjects comprise for the most part specimens of which only few, unreadable traces are preserved, or, in a lesser percentage, the preserved profile of which is compatible with more than one subject, as is the case, in some instances, with Maitreya and Mañjuśrī or Maitreya and Vajrapāṇi. In no cases does “unidentified” mean “unknown”.

At first glance, the rock sculptures may appear to be a product of popular art. The clumsy craftsmanship of some of them and, moreover, the apparent lack of any intelligible compositional scheme or symmetrical order in the groups of figures had been indeed tentatively interpreted in the past as the accidental result of a progressive and arbitrary juxtaposition of figures on the same surfaces. However, under close scrutiny the sculptures appear to depend on a visual strategy aimed at achieving a calculated effect. If we observe the sculptures together with the natural shape and features of the rocks that contain them, a compositional rule becomes apparent—albeit highly variable due to its heuristic nature—which seeks to adapt the figure to the natural stone and not vice versa (Fig. 2). All evidence shows that keeping the manipulation of the natural rock to a minimum was an imperative requirement. We cannot imagine any reason behind such a concern other than the illusory evocation of self-existent images. The workmanship is somehow disguised as a subsidiary intervention, simply meant to unveil or give a comprehensible shape to *svayaṃbhū* forms, i.e. forms that spontaneously emerge from the rock.

The significance of the sculptures is however not confined to this intrinsic feature but encompasses a range of extrinsic factors such as relational associations with the surrounding landscape as well as instrumental purposes. The physical environmental characteristics seem to have played a fundamental role in the choice of the most appropriate setting for the sculptures, which are usually placed on rock walls or boulders of striking shape and position.

The entanglement of the sculptures with the natural landscape appears even more critical when considered together with the topographical distribution. Though occasionally one specimen may appear isolated, the sculptures usually form clusters along paths leading to ancient Buddhist sacred areas (see Fig. 1). However, the latter were mostly in a state of serious decay at the time when the Buddhist rock sculpture bloomed. This circumstance adds

very much to the significance of the sculptures. No doubt, the care the artists put in seeking harmony between their works and the physical environment, giving shape to the former without altering the latter, is revelatory of a powerful artistic concept and, moreover, of a unitary plan. The images were evidently meant not only to conjure up an impression of self-existence but also to convey the idea that the sacred place itself, seen in its entirety, was a work of nature, a divine manifestation that time with its all-devouring character cannot affect.

Earlier hypotheses of a random proliferation of the sculptures are untenable in face of such evidence. Rather, the project the sculptures respond to is so precise and wide-ranging that only the local monastic community could have conceived and actualised it. Specialised monks may well have directed the process, from the general conception to the specific selection of sites and subjects, and perhaps even undertaken (at least in part) the actual execution of the reliefs.

As we have seen, apart from a very few specimens of uncertain affiliation, the sculptures are profoundly embedded in the Buddhist culture, of which they intercept a significant stage of change that we may relate to the (inchoate?) Vajrayāna. They therefore have a double relevance: artistic, insofar as they translate—probably for the first time—a host of innovative ideas, techniques and practices into an organic visual vocabulary; and historical, for their witnessing to the intellectual vitality of Buddhism in late antique Uḍḍiyāna, thus warning us against the easy misassumption that cultural vivacity is axiomatically related to conspicuous archaeological signs.

4. The geomantic interpretation of the land: sources, innovations and legacy of the rock sculptures of Swat

The most salient point in the rock sculpture is undoubtedly to be detected in the underlying concept of self-existence. As mentioned above, we may discern in this a fundamental affinity with the concept of *svayambhū*, so deeply rooted—and variously and persistently exploited—in the Indian world. Most probably, the vigorous impetus of artistic developments prompted by the revival of Brahmanism caused new waves of Indian influences to spread across South Asia. Under such circumstances, the Indian concept of *svayambhū* and *svayambhūtīrthas* (naturally sacred places) may well have affected to

some extent the blooming of the rock sculpture of Swat, but to trace the origin of the phenomenon to its roots we must look within the country itself.

Rich evidence of local non-Buddhist traditions has been collected in recent years in the framework of the IAMP's "Archaeological Map of Swat Valley" project. In particular, a number of rock shelters have been documented in the highlands at the edges of the valleys.⁹ The paintings and graffiti that decorated most of them span a very long period of time, from the Bronze Age to approximately the fifteenth century CE, thus attesting a strong and persistent tradition. Probably to be related to non-urban, pastoralist communities which nonetheless had some sort of symbiotic relations with the communities of the valleys, these rock shelters display features that in most cases point to some ritual purpose such as hermitage and/or initiation ceremonies.¹⁰ Their most striking feature, and the one in which we can detect a significant point of contact with the Buddhist rock sculptures, lies in the singularity of their natural forms, which the painted decoration, when present, aptly complements and enhances (Fig. 3). Whatever specific purposes these shelters may have served, their connection with events, beliefs and practices that were crucial to some ideological universe other than Buddhism is undeniable, as is their compliance with auspicious geomantic principles.

The interaction between Buddhism and those native "mountain" cultures to which we may relate the rock shelters is proved by the physical contiguity of some of the latter with Buddhist monasteries. Moreover, this contiguity is also indicative of systematic economic exchange between the mountain people and the inhabitants of the valleys, the former being specialised suppliers of a range of products and services, among them grapes and wine-making.¹¹

Such unequivocal evidence of close contacts between different cultures (respectively dominant and subaltern according to traditional historical categories) gives substance to the hypothesis formulated long ago by Tucci¹²

⁹ Olivieri 2015.

¹⁰ Olivieri and Vidale 2006: 125; Olivieri 2011: 142; Olivieri 2015: 124.

¹¹ Ample evidence of wine-making (vats carved out of the rock and wine presses) in ancient Swat has been collected exactly in the proximity of the rock shelters and, in some cases, of Buddhist settlements (only vats). We cannot rule out that the monastic community may have acted as an intermediary in the local exchange trading system, certainly vital to the economy of the country. For a discussion of this matter in a wider cultural context, see Filigenzi 2016.

¹² Tucci 1977: 68–70.

of a fecund osmosis between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs, which must have largely contributed to the rise of that complex form of Tantric Buddhism known as Vajrayāna.

As for the specific research question at issue, in light of the newly available data we may infer that the idea of the revelatory power of particular places and natural forms which underlies the Buddhist rock sculptures of Swat borrows more from native traditions than from outside influences, or at least owes to the former a receptive acquaintance that allowed possible artistic suggestions of foreign origin to be assimilated and elaborated in an entirely new way. Be that as it may, the result is so impressive and persuasive that it would be no wonder if it could have been regarded as an authoritative model. It is difficult not to think of the rock sculpture of Swat as a visionary revelation which punctuated the pilgrim's pathway. If this is the case, then we must admit that only a very short distance separates it from the later *rang byung* tradition, so deeply embedded in Tibetan mysticism.

5. Icons, pilgrimage and *mārga*

The re-configuration of sacred spaces that was consigned to the rock sculptures evidently interacted with living religious doctrines and related praxis of which we can never hope to capture all aspects and nuances. We can nonetheless fairly assume that the rock sculptures aimed not only at impressing, teaching and convincing, but also at inducing embodied experiences that could transform pilgrimage routes into metaphorical re-enactments of the spiritual journey.

It is difficult for us, modern urban people, to grasp the essence of a phenomenon like this. Moreover, we must keep in mind that any figurative system—that is to say, images that can be clustered according to coherent artistic codes—is something more than a virtual representation of reality or a simple visual translation of oral or written sources. It is a product of imagination, generated by a complex set of associations deriving from both mainstream and localised cultural domains, but also containing elements of arbitrariness.

Yet, especially if we set aside conventional divisions between bound categories such as academic philosophy, doctrine and religious practices and, moreover, if we acknowledge that magic, supernaturalism and geomancy were an integral part of ancient skills and wisdom, not only can we clearly discern the coherent construct which underlies the rock sculptures and

makes them indivisible from their environmental setting, we can also grasp the set of commanding homologies that such a construct established between images, nature, self-existence, revelation, and journey.

As in other forms of communication, an understanding of the whole allows us to better pin down the specific meaning and cogency of the individual components. In particular, the figure that emerges as most emblematic among the Swat rock reliefs is Avalokiteśvara/Padmapāṇi, who is suggestively presented as a true “God of the Path”. The connection of Avalokiteśvara with the journey and his protective function in relation to its potential dangers are largely known. To whoever sets off, either physically (such as for pilgrimage or economic purposes) or spiritually (moving along the liberation path),¹³ Avalokiteśvara shall offer help, guidance, protection, and relief. I refer to Filigenzi (2015) for a detailed discussion,¹⁴ limiting myself here to recalling that the personage of Avalokiteśvara inherits and transfers to the Buddhist sphere the anagogic function of Indra as it is delineated in the *Upaniṣads*. The analogy between the two figures is manifested with utmost clarity by the earliest iconographic prototype of the bodhisattva, which appeared in the art of Gandhāra (first to third centuries CE). In particular, the Gandharan scheme of the divine pentad, showing in the foreground a central Buddha flanked by Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya and, in the background, Indra and Brahmā, epitomises a handover from the two Vedic gods to the two bodhisattvas by presenting the former in an attitude of homage and by establishing an almost perfect correspondence of attire between Indra and Avalokiteśvara on one side and Brahmā and Maitreya on the other.¹⁵ Of great interest is also the fact that the incitement to travel and the protection of

¹³ The most compelling evidence is Avalokiteśvara as the saviour from the eight great perils, the latter intended in both a literal and a metaphoric sense (cf. Huntington 1981: 55, n. 29), although the aspect of serving as protector from physical dangers prevails, and not only among laymen. According to Xuanzang’s biographer Huili, Xuanzang sought help from Avalokiteśvara when in an extremely dangerous situation and his prayers were answered (Beal 1911: I, 17). Also, the *Aṣṭamahābhaya* form of Avalokiteśvara seems to have been an object of special devotion among travellers (and especially merchants) who were particularly exposed to the dangers of voyages, whether by sea or land. It is not by chance that this iconographic subject enjoyed great popularity in the Western Deccan, a region with a strong commercial dealings (see Brancaccio 2010: 160 ff. esp.).

¹⁴ Filigenzi 2015: 95–104.

¹⁵ Filigenzi 2012: figs. 1–7; here, Fig. 4.

travellers is one of Indra's attributions, a circumstance which adds further confirmation to the journey metonymy embodied by Avalokiteśvara.¹⁶

It is exactly in this semantic domain that the almost ubiquitous presence of Avalokiteśvara among the rock sculptures of Swat finds its explanation.¹⁷ A fixed iconographic scheme represents the bodhisattva in a pensive posture, holding a long stemmed lotus: he ponders the afflictions of the sentient beings, at the same time acting towards their salvation by making the lotus of the *dharma* open in their hearts (Fig. 5). This iconographic formulation, whose origin can already be traced in Gandharan art, epitomises the evolution of the soteriological theory of *karuṇā* as it is more and more explicitly documented by textual sources, from the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* to the *Kāraṇḍavyūhasūtra*.¹⁸

At times, the rock sculpture offers more transparent and specific metaphors, as for instance a small Buddha figure being revealed in the full-blown lotus held by the bodhisattva,¹⁹ or a subsidiary figure of Gaṇeśa making an allusion to tantric rituals aimed at supporting the process of identifying and removing the obstacles to salvation.²⁰ Thus, we may say that the physical paths marked by the rock sculptures embody the *mārga* as much as Avalokiteśvara embodies the transformative intrusion of Compassion into karmic bondage. Moreover, the mimetic evocation of self-existence merged into a sacred landscape portrays a powerful allegory of the two fundamental experiences of *darśana-mārga* and *bhāvanā-mārga* (path of insight and the path of repeated mental cultivation, respectively), in a felicitous cross-over between the two. However, one can even walk without seeing the way, but also in this case one has a chance to meet the Great Helper, who accom-

¹⁶ In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (VII, 15) Indra says to King Hariścandra, "There is no happiness for the person who does not travel; living amongst men, even the best man frequently becomes a sinner; for Indra is the traveller's friend. Hence, travel!"

¹⁷ The image of Avalokiteśvara, either as an isolated figure or as part of a group, occurs far more frequently than any other character, with an estimate of more than 80 per cent of our rock sculptures. Tucci, who already noticed this towering presence, hypothesised that Avalokiteśvara could be regarded at that time as the patron of the region (Tucci 1958: 322). Today, this explanation can still be held as consistent with the empirical evidence even if in a subsidiary way.

¹⁸ Filigenzi 2015: 67.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 99 and Part II, figs. 16a, b; here, Fig. 2, central figure.

²⁰ Ibid.: 102–103 and Part II, figs. 98a–e.

panies the wayfarers and frees their way of obstacles, thus offering them a chance to awaken to the truth.

6. Generative spaces of ritualised *mārga*: the colossal Buddha of Jahanabad

The reciprocity of sacralised spaces, images, prescriptive and speculative models, beliefs, imaginative emotions and ritual actions is a constitutive part of Buddhist praxis, to perhaps an even greater extent than many other religious systems. Notwithstanding their cultural relevance, such “immaterial” aspects have still been insufficiently studied. They pertain indeed to that particularly elusive sphere of human behaviours which escape traditional archaeological procedures, especially when their material expressions, as in the specific case of our open-air artwork, are not framed within conspicuous and permanent public displays.²¹

However, one cannot avoid inferring that such a massive and symbolic occupying of open spaces meant to the recipients something more than a static presence. It is very likely indeed that the sculptures may have motivated symbolic/ritual behaviours, either of individual or collective/cyclic nature. Valuable food for thought is provided, for instance, by the question of whether or not the rock reliefs were originally painted. So far, no traces of colour have been detected. The lack of shelters to protect the sculptures from weathering exposure seems to have been a kind of constitutive characteristic, as if to stress the emanation of the images from natural forces. In such an environmental setting and conceptual framework, paint was probably considered a redundant addition, but one cannot rule out that it may have been occasionally and selectively applied for special events, in a way not so dissimilar from practices still current in Tibet.

Yet, also thanks to fortuitous circumstances, we may happen to detect tangible evidence which discloses significant associations between artefacts and places, thus encouraging us to pursue further research in this field. A particularly suggestive case study is provided by the colossal Buddha (ht. 6 m) of Jahanabad (earlier known as Shakhora), about two kilometres from

²¹ This does not mean, however, that the archaeological record from architectural settings bears clear witness to ritual actions. Very often, sacred architectures just mark recognisable and yet passive boundaries within which we may safely assume that ritual actions were performed that nonetheless have hardly left material traces.

Manglaor, on the left slope of the Ugad Valley (Fig. 6). Tucci states²² that this could be the area where, according to a local legend mentioned by Xuanzang, the Adbhuta *stūpa* miraculously emerged from the ground to mark the spot where the Buddha preached a sermon before an assembly of men and *devas*.²³ The identification was prompted by significant Buddhist remains (all clustered within a very circumscribed area) including the abovementioned Buddha, a huge dome-shaped rock that may well have been regarded as a miraculous *stūpa*, and the ruins of a large *stūpa*.²⁴ Additionally, behind the last, verses from the Buddhist canonical literature are inscribed on two rocks, these also noteworthy for their spectacular position.²⁵ If the identifi-

²² Tucci 1958: 305–306.

²³ Beal 2004 (1884): III, 127.

²⁴ Tucci 1958: 306 and fig. 12; Ashraf Khan et al. 1996: 86.

²⁵ Two of these inscriptions are engraved on a rock surface difficult to reach but of striking natural beauty, since the rock, which protrudes from a steep slope, overhangs a small spring gushing from a cave. A third inscription is engraved on a huge boulder locally known as Khazanaghat, the “rock of the treasure” (Bühler (1896–1897; Stein 1929: 78). The inscriptions, in Sanskrit, were first edited by G. Bühler (1896–1897) on the basis of inked estampages provided by the then Deputy Commissioner of Peshawar, Major H. A. Deane. According to Bühler, they were written in a *brāhmī* script resembling “in many respects the so-called North-Western Gupta characters” (ibid.: 133). As remarked by Bühler, the interest of the inscriptions (A, B and C in his edition) lies in the fact that they bear witness to the existence in the area of “Sanskrit versions of several famous *gāthās*” (ibid.), although freely rendered (ibid.: 135). They were identified and translated by Bühler as follows: Inscription A, from *Mahāparinibbānasutta*, VI, 10 [16 in the author’s text]: “Alas! Transient are the aggregate constituents (*of beings*), whose nature is birth and decay! For, being produced they are dissolved; –their complete cessation is bliss”; Inscription B, from *Dhammapada*, verse 183: “Not to commit any sin, to acquire merit, to purify one’s mind, –that is the teaching of the Buddha”; Inscription C, from *Dhammapada*, verse 281: “(Let him be one) who guards his speech, is well restrained in mind, and commits no evil with his body.” A (supposedly) fourth inscription was published by E.J. Rapson (1901), who had received the impressions of this and other inscriptions by Captain A. H. McMahon, Major Dean’s successor on the Malakand and Political Agent for Swat, Dir and Chitral. According to the description given by Rapson (based on second-hand information), the inscription, “from a rock at Shakorai (?)”, was “engraved in very large letters above the entrance to a small chamber cut out of the rock” (Rapson 1901: 292). Judged unintelligible by Rapson, it was subsequently identified by H. Lüders (1901) as a duplicate of the Inscription A published by Bühler, being translated as follows: “Impermanent are

cation is correct, as it seems to be, one cannot but wonder whether any significant association was consciously perceived between the Adbhuta *stūpa* and the rock sculpture, both having in the concept of self-manifestation a common root and source.

The sculpture became the object of the local Taliban iconoclastic fury in September 2007, when the face of the Buddha was targeted twice by shootings with automatic weapons. A second relief representing Avalokiteśvara, situated along the track leading to the Buddha, was also blasted into fragments in 2009. A restoration process was launched in 2012 with the concrete objective of preventing cracks and fissures from causing further damage, but also as a symbolic intervention intended to counteract cultural terrorism and its impact upon local society, economy and cultural landscape.²⁶

That the site must have held a special place in the ancient sacred topography is confirmed by concurring factors that came into focus during the restoration work. An ancient track, with steps carved out of the rock, leads up the slope to the top of a narrow tableland. This encloses a small lake fed

all conditioned things. Their nature is to rise and fall away. Having come to pass, they must then cease.” Most likely, indeed, this fourth inscription is exactly the same as Bühler’s Inscription A. The “small chamber cut out of the rock” might well correspond to the natural cave described by Stein and recently mapped again by the IAMP in the framework of an extensive restoration project (see below, n. 26). For further comments on the inscriptions and their positions see Stein 1929: 78–79; idem. 1930: 49–50; Tucci 1958: 306. All the above-mentioned scholars agree on a date falling within the Kushan period. A new palaeographic analysis and systematic study of their cultural/historical implications would be highly desirable, especially in the light of the broader epigraphic and literary record now available.

²⁶ The restoration programme was carried out in the framework of the ACT-Field School Project directed by Luca M. Olivieri with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ISMEO, and the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The restoration programme has involved, besides filling the cracks, complete 3D-scanning of the rock, reintegrating the missing parts of the face of the colossal Buddha with a reversible material in order to restore the visual unity of the artwork, collecting the surviving and scattered fragments of the bodhi-sattva stele, restoring the latter, and restoring the ancient pathways leading to the monument. Cultural terrorism in Pakistan, and particularly in the area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is heavily affecting many sectors of cultural, social and economic life, not only education, but also tourism, pilgrimage (Pakistan is home to shrines, temples and sacred places of Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh affiliation) and popular forms of entertainment such as music and cinema. On this issue, see the report by Babakhel (2014).

by a spring, a place where one can easily imagine pilgrims taking a ritual bath. The steps end here but the track continues for about hundred metres, up to the foot of the giant Buddha. Two more ancient tracks, one from the spot where the inscriptions are found, the other from the spot where the Avalokiteśvara image originally stood, lead instead to the top of the rock in which the Buddha is carved. Here there are three small artificial cavities. One wonders whether they were used for some ritual purpose, as for instance pouring water taken from the nearby spring on the rock.

However, a fourth and more striking walk is the one the pilgrims could take inside the rock. To the left of the Buddha image, the IAMP team working on its restoration discovered a very narrow cavity which becomes progressively larger and leads to a second cavity (Fig. 7). From here, one can ascend to an exit leading to a sort of small, natural terrace just on top of the Buddha's head.

All together, these features bespeak the strong geomantic energy that local people must have attributed to the place over centuries. Unless new palaeographic studies lead to different conclusions, the date assigned to the inscriptions indicates that this natural space was held in great veneration since at least the first centuries of the Common Era. The tradition, on the other hand, seems to have persisted well into the thirteenth century, when the Tibetan pilgrim O rgyan pa visited Maṅgalaor (Manglaor/Manglawar), to the North of Ra yi k'ar (possibly present-day Raja Gira) where there "is a temple founded by king Indraboti [and] where there are various stone images of Buddha (Munīndra), Tārā and Lokeśvara".²⁷ Moreover, in the spe-

²⁷ Tucci 1940: 28; Olivieri 2017: 91–93. The identification of the spot visited by O rgyan pa with Jahanabad has been prompted by the near perfect match of the itinerary described by the Tibetan pilgrim with both the general topography of the area and the evidence on the ground (Olivieri 2017). Either fortuitous or intentional, the association of such a place of spiritual-geomantic significance with Indrabhūti appears particularly felicitous in view of the special connection of the latter with "revelation". I refer the reader to Filigenzi 2015 (47–48) for a brief outline of Indrabhūti's legend and relevant bibliography. I limit myself here to just recalling that archaeological and artistic evidence, though not providing historical authentication of this figure, does offer a plausible historical background from which the legend might have risen. As for the "temple of Indraboti (Indrabhūti)", this remains a matter of speculation. Worth noticing, however, is the large amount of fired bricks scattered around the site, which must have belonged to some (now vanished) monumental building(s) of a relatively late period. Mention must also be made of a black schist lintel found re-used in the masonry of a modern house in the village of Jahanabad/Shakhorai by

cific Buddhist domain, both nature and human artistry also suggest a special pilgrimage spot where the practitioners could physically, emotionally and psychically experience the transformative power of the journey.

Viewed from this perspective, the inscriptions engraved on the rocks acquire a particularly consonant and propitious meaning as a guide on the right path to liberation, but even more so does the nearly hidden cavity that leads deep inside the rock and then ascends to the level of the Buddha's head. This is strongly reminiscent of the holy clefts scattered all over India, such as the famous Shrigundi near Mumbai²⁸ or Shatrunjaya in Gujarat, which are credited with the miraculous power to heal whoever passes through them, as in a second birth. This ritual practice presumably goes back to a remote antiquity, although no physical evidence or memory of it exists prior to the early historic period, when artefacts started appearing that, although with different meanings, apparently share the same semantic sphere. This is the case with the small stone discs and rings, decorated with auspicious symbols and, sometimes, with the image of a naked goddess, which are attested from the Mauryan epoch (4th to 2nd century BCE²⁹). Especially the rings suggest a ritual function, probably associated with the passage from the womb.

Ritual practices of this kind are likely to have originated from folk beliefs, but they must have been codified very early, thus evolving towards formalised and textualised versions where they acquired new or additional meanings extending the semantic field beyond fertility and healing power to include spiritual re-birth. For instance, a Hindu reshaping of ancient rituals

G. Tucci in 1962. After being included in the inventory of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (Inv. no. V. 499), the piece was given by the Government of Pakistan to the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO) and deposited in the National Museum of Oriental Art, Rome (Inv. no. 4729). U. Scerrato and M. Taddei (1995) listed it among the rare relics attesting that a pre-Muslim monumental architecture using stone architectural elements existed in Swat in the second half of the 1st millennium CE. Based on a coherent set of criteria, they assigned the lintel to a date not much later than the first half of the 7th century CE. The hiatus in the archaeological record, which can be explained by the use of wood and other perishable material for much of this late antique architecture, has been partly filled by the discovery of a Hindu temple dating to the 7th century (Turki Shahi period) on the top of the hill of Barikot. The temple is a stone masonry building of massive proportions (23.17 x 14.70 m), lavishly decorated with stucco work (Callieri 2005; Filigenzi 2005).

²⁸ Edwardes 2011 (1902): 18–19.

²⁹ Asha 1993: 132–133.

is to be found in the modelisation of the Bhīmā-*sthāna*, the place where the goddess manifests herself. As aptly remarked by Srinivasan,³⁰ the Bhīmā-*sthāna* is apparently not a place of worship where women seek fertility or safe childbirth, but rather a place where men seek a transformative experience. The pilgrim who bathes in the place sacred to Bhīmā, in the *yoni* of the goddess, does not return to the womb, that is to say, he attains liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

One of the many Bhīmā-*sthānas* scattered across the Himalayan regions is most probably to be recognised in the large cave-temple complex of Kashmir Smast, located at an elevation of 1135 metres in the Sakara mountain range (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).³¹ The site started to be investigated in 2001 by the Archaeological Department of Peshawar University, after art objects (including a great number of coins and seals) reportedly from Kashmir Smast began appearing on the art market. The sacred complex consists of a main cave temple (actually a natural sanctuary showing only minimal artificial modification; Fig. 8) and many other cave shelters and sanctuaries, a small monastery, the remains of a small free-standing temple, and water reservoirs associated with the cultic complex.³² The site has been identified by Nasim Khan³³ with a spot mentioned by Xuanzang³⁴ as the home of a famous sanctuary dedicated to Maheśvara and his consort Bhīmā.³⁵ In particular, according to Xuanzang's account, the image of Bhīmā (probably a shapeless one) was considered by local people as self-existent and was so widely known and venerated for its power of miracles that it attracted pilgrims from all over India.

³⁰ Srinivasan 2011: 128.

³¹ For a quick survey of such sacred Himalayan topography and relevant bibliography, see Srinivasan 2011: 125.

³² Among the many contributions now available on Kashmir Smast, see Nasim Khan 2006; Nasim Khan, Errington and Cribb 2008; Aman ur Rahman and Falk 2011; Srinivasan 2011, where additional bibliographical references can be found.

³³ Nasim Khan 2006: 11–13, 43.

³⁴ Beal 2004 (1884): 113–114.

³⁵ The spot mentioned by Xuanzang was earlier identified by Cunningham (1966: 7, reprint) and Foucher (1901: 362–365) with the peak of Mount Karamar, which is located more to the South, in the Swabi District. As for Kashmir Smast, besides the overall aspect of the site, which matches Xuanzang description, the name Bhīmā indeed appears in several inscriptional records.

The finds from the site, in particular coins, cover a long time span, from the second to the eleventh century CE. However, of great relevance to us is the fact that the fame of the site was at its peak at the time of Xuanzang's visit, that is, in a period more or less contemporary with the blooming of the rock sculptures in the very near area of Swat. Buddhism—if we regard it as a pragmatic hermeneutics—was certainly not alien to that cultural atmosphere. Remodelling local beliefs and ritual practice was part of a natural osmosis and, somehow, a negotiating tactic as well, aimed at promoting empathic responses and opposing antagonist systems.

As our archaeological maps develop, thus anchoring to the material world literary and non-literary traditions, notions and narratives, we start perceiving more and more clearly in the past the same flow of cross-cultural exchanges that, after all, we consider simply formulaic in the present day.

This is what happened in ancient Uḍḍiyāna, more often and in a more decisive way than we dare to imagine. A further telling example is now provided by the site of Amluk Dara, which recent archaeological research has brought to the fore as one of the most important Buddhist installations in Swat—and one that resisted the negative effects of the post-Kushan crisis.³⁶ This huge sacred area, restored, enlarged and embellished several times and still in use until the seventh/ninth century, is situated at the beginning of an ancient path leading to Mount Ilam—a holy mountain for the people of Swat from time immemorial and still held as a sacred place by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.³⁷ Pilgrimage to the peak of Ilam, still practised in August by the Sikh community, was so intense until the recent past that it was overseen by armed guards.³⁸ Amluk Dara is the lowest and biggest of a series of *stūpas* built along a mountain track and converging towards a small lake. If we look at the overall picture and not only at the single monuments, we can discern a design that encompasses both the natural scenery and the built-up landscape to create a Buddhist ritualised itinerary. However, it also appears particular-

³⁶ Olivieri 2014: 321 ff.; here, Fig. 9.

³⁷ It is on this mountain, recorded in the classical sources as Aornos, that the inhabitants of the country took refuge in the face of the Macedonian onslaught. For the identification of Aornos with Ilam and a list of the relevant classical sources, see Tucci 1977: 27, 52 ff. Aornos was earlier identified by Stein (1927: 432) with the Pir Sar. For an archaeological reappraisal of the classical sources dealing with the itinerary of Alexander the Great across Swat, see Olivieri 2006.

³⁸ L. M. Olivieri, personal communication.

ly evident how the latter purposely overlaps a pre-existent pilgrimage route, thus formally intertwining the Buddhist establishment with places, beliefs and behaviours deeply embedded in local traditions.

We know different stages and aspects of the Buddhist sacred topography of Uḍḍiyāna, from those attested by the magnificent establishments of the early historic period to those pictured much later in the travelogues of Tibetan pilgrims. What we still know far too little about is the human dimension of this topography. We may say that thanks to new archaeological evidence we now begin to better perceive how this burgeoned through a complex and continuing process of cross-cultural stratifications, which also contains—and accounts for—the many-sided expressions of the *mārga*.

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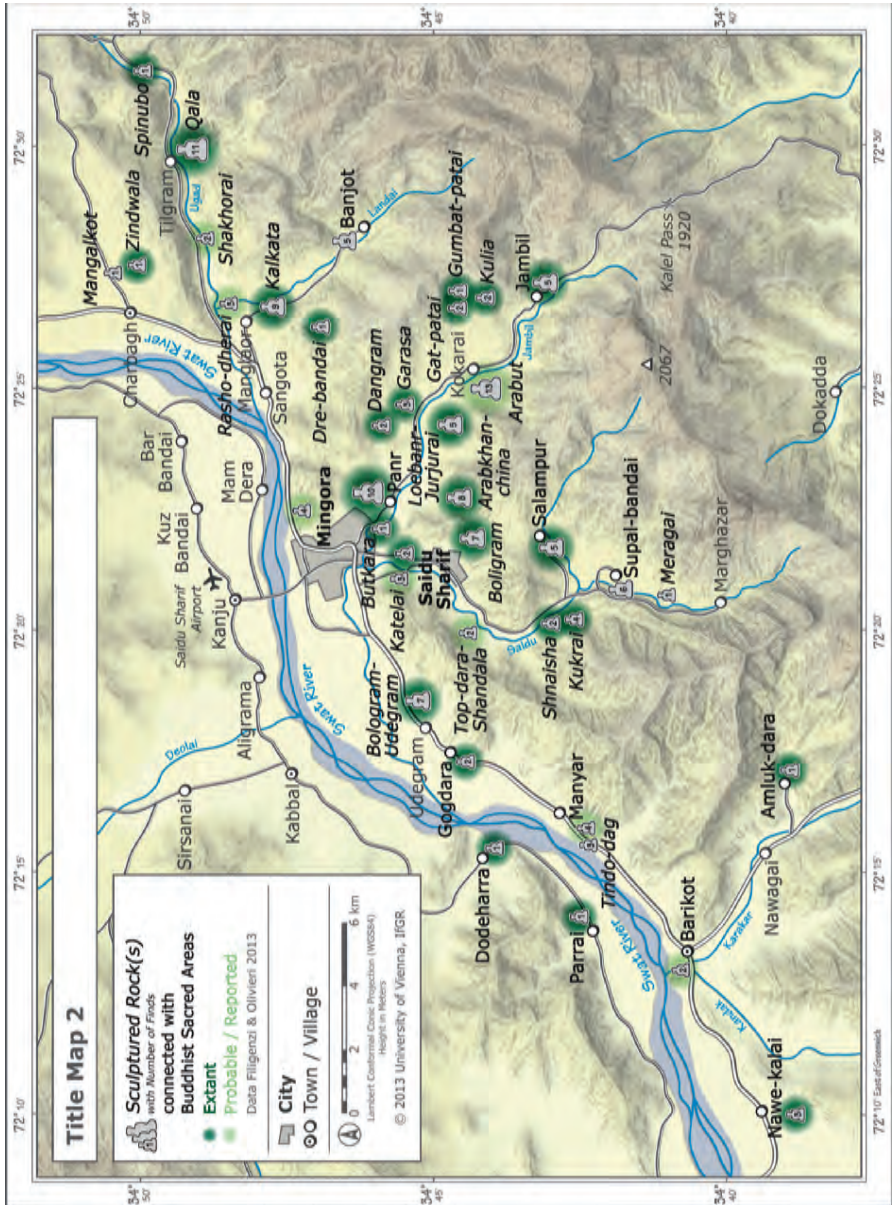


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

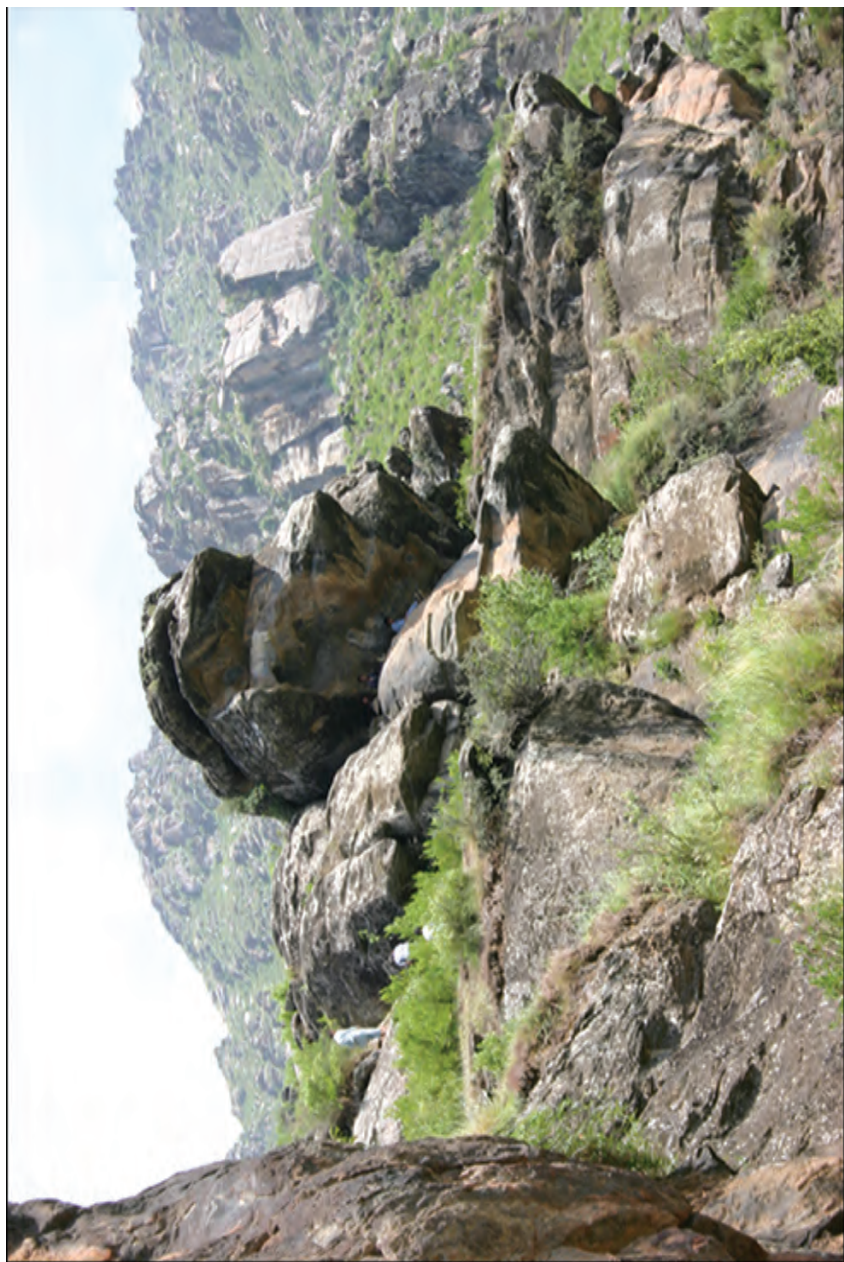


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9