

Archaeology in Swat: Activities and Challenges of the Italian Mission, 2000-2010

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An Outline History

It is a well known fact that the Italian Archaeological Mission was the first foreign archaeological permanent Institution in the newly constituted Pakistan. Lead by IsIAO (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, the former IsMEO) it is also the longest standing foreign mission in South-West Asia, after the French mission in Afghanistan.

The activities of the Mission in Swat, first directed by Giuseppe Tucci, then by Domenico Faccenna, Maurizio Taddei, Pierfrancesco Callieri and the author of these notes, can be sub-divided in four major phases¹.

From 1956 to 1966 the Mission focused on the archaeology of the Buddhist sacred areas and monasteries, with three excavations which can be still considered the best documented and published projects in Gandharan archaeology: Butkara, Panr and Saidu Sharif. From 1967 to 1983 the focus turned towards Prehistory and Protohistory. In 1966, while the excavation at Saidu Sharif-I was going on, other teams started large scale excavations of the Late Bronze-Iron Age graveyards of Katelai, Gogdara 3, Butkara 2 and Loebanr. Soon after, the excavation at the rock shelter of Ghalegai and at the protohistoric settlements of Aligrama and Barikot. After the end of the Ghalegai works, Giorgio Stacul published the first sequence of protohistoric Swat from Neolithic to the Iron Age.

Even if the initial steps were the dig at Udegram carried out by Giuseppe Gullini in 1962, and other trenches at Barama by Faccenna the following year, it was only in 1984 when Callieri started a new excavation at the site of Barikot (Bir-kot-ghwandai), that the Mission's focus turned on Historic settlements. There followed a rush of work, with 9 seasons of excavation (the last one in 2006) and three years of survey. The archaeological layers discovered so far, span from protohistory to Islamic times, from mid-second Millennium BCE to the 15th century CE. But Barikot is also exposed to an alarming building activity and to the continuous threat of the illegal diggers, and a more comprehensive protection plan is needed. Excavations and surveys brought to the discovery of a fortified Indo-Greek city with its acropolis founded in the end of the 2nd century BCE, with important Saka-Parthian, Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian phases. A Late-Historic dwelling area was documented at the foot of the acropolis; protohistoric and early Historic layers were unearthed on the acropolis itself; and lastly, again on the acropolis, we uncovered the remains of a Turk-Shahi Brahmanical temple, the first ever documented site in Swat.

Another important project was the excavation of a Ghaznavid mosque at the foot of the Raja Gira mount in Udegram. The project started after the finding on the very spot of an Arabic inscription referring to the foundation of a mosque by a general of Mahmud of Ghazna in the 11th century. Udegram is the earliest mosque so far discovered in northern Pakistan. The five excavation campaigns were carried out from 1985 to 1999 alternatively with those at Barikot under the direction of Umberto Scerrato.

However the Buddhist archaeology was not forgotten and Faccenna launched in 1987 an extensive survey program focusing on the late Buddhist rock sculptures; the project started in the valleys where these sculptures were first noticed, Saidu and Jambil, but eventually covered the entire Swat Valley, Dir and Buner, and neglected areas such as Puran. At the end of the Project, in 2006, about 200 rock-sculptures were documented and studied.

Recent Activities

Besides the excavations at Barikot, the restoration and study of the Ghaznavid mosque at Udegram, new projects followed.

The Archaeological Map of the Swat Valley, a project initiated by Domenico Faccenna in the 1960s, started in a new form in 2000. It is aimed to create a GIS-based map for the vast archive of discoveries and field records collected in an unsystematic fashion in 50 years of research, as well as for new evidence from the fieldⁱⁱ. The valleys facing Barikot, where Giuseppe Tucci had made his fundamental observations on the ancient history and archaeology of Swat, were explored first. The 1st Phase started in 2000 with the reconnaissance of Kandak and right Lower Kotah, followed in 2004 by the exploration of the Upper Kandak, Middle Kotah and Najigram valleys. Finally, in 2005 and 2006 we surveyed Upper Kotah and Karakar, as well as the Saidu valley. As the activity started in 2000, it was stopped because of security reasons in 2001 and 2002. In April 2001, few weeks after the Bamyan Buddhas were destroyed, unknown people heavily damaged the excavated podium of the Brahmanical temple of Barikot top-hill. In 2004 we resumed the program. In the surveyed area (about 200 km²), we recorded about 400 new sites. There were new important Buddhist sacred areas, as well as a substantial series of prehistoric, protohistoric, pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist sites. In particular, a monumental Brahmi-Sarada rock inscription was found in the site of Talang, in the Kotah valley, and more than 100 rock-carvings sites and 49 painted shelters were discovered. The 2007 campaign should have been devoted to the survey of the Saidu and Jambil valleys, a goal only partly accomplished, as we are going to see. In future, together with the Ugad and Puran valleys, we plan to explore the northeastern sectors of the Swat region from Shangla and Puran to Mankial and its mountain passes to Kandia and the Indus. Here we will try to connect the Swat sequences with those of the main Indus upper basin.

An important discovery by Giuseppe Tucci in 1955 was the carved rock wall of Gogdara 1. Standing sheer over the road, it displayed only few carvings, which number nevertheless increased when the deposits covering its base were dugⁱⁱⁱ.

The Gogdara carvings may be dated between the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Historic Age (16th-4th centuries BCE). Retouches and overlaps point to two main carving phases: one with large wild animal figures, the other one with carts, herds of horses and standards. The two phases are stylistically different: large animal figures are often bi-triangular, while later images, as a rule, are linear and schematic. After a decade of new, intensive research, we realized that Gogdara, although still representing a key site for rock art in Swat, was not an isolated example. In Kandak and Kotah, this artistic or graphic (and, at least in part, ritual) tradition is also present. It started probably in the Bronze Age and survived the transformations brought about by Buddhism, declining only in the later historical phases.

49 Painted shelters have been discovered and documented in Lower Swat. These shelters are usually large gneiss boulders metamorphosed and eroded by glacier action located in rugged and hardly accessible places, but mostly clearly visible from a long distance. The cavities may barely have been sufficient to shelter more than 1-3 persons at the same time. The figures are painted in dark red ochre, the more recent in orange, and more rarely in white or yellow. The most ancient shelters, those of Sargah-sar and Kakai-kandao, display highly symbolic compositions, based on associations, oppositions and combinations of iconographic signs. This language seems to be typical of illiterate communities that nevertheless possess a complex mythopoietic and lexical heritage. While in the older painted shelters the horse is absent and agriculture might be emphasized, in the later examples warriors are constantly associated with horse-riding. The horse was possibly the totemic symbol of the Assakenoi, or at least their eponymous animal: a people that Alexander met in Swat at the end of the 4th century BCE.

In summary, in the Bronze Age (possibly before 1400 BCE), paintings might represent agricultural rituals and wild animals, perhaps depicting specific divinities; heroes holding shields appeared for the first time. In the long transition to the Iron Age (1400-400 BCE), with the well-known extensive graveyards, warriors and pastoral figures predominate, but the main subject is the horse. In the phase of contact with the Buddhist cultural domination (100 BCE-400 CE), we witness the expressions of a possible ideological contrasts, through symbols which proudly underline the autonomy of the local tradition. Moreover, in the southern ridge dividing the Swat Valley from the Malakand area, painted shelters share the ideographic lexicon of Brahmanic religious symbology, until medieval warfare scenes take the main place.

The picture especially for the less known phases and aspects, after the results of the first phase of the Archaeological Map were crossed with the evidence from the excavations at Barikot, became a little bit different. The diffusion of Buddhism looked less pervasive and coherent than previously thought, with new actors on the scene. The authors of the painted shelters were possibly the witnesses of a world in transformation, where a popular religious background, certainly not Buddhist, appears stronger than we thought before. This is what Tucci referred to when he wrote of the 'revival of the aboriginal cults' in the late ancient history of Swat.

Even the discovery of dozens of wine-presses, tanks dug out of large granite boulders, very similar to other artifacts found in Chitral and neighbouring areas, represents a new challenge. They might hint to a Swat part of a Great Kafiristan, as hypothesized by Jettmar and others, or, more interestingly, enhance the role of wine and wine making within the Buddhist communities.

The ethnographical study of traditional wooden materials is an old interest of our Mission. We felt the need of verifying the present-day state of this important craft activity, surveying several workshops and craft centers. Information was gathered through direct observation of the artisans at work and interviews to the wood carvers still active in the Swat Valley. The most active workshops were found where trade is best organized, like in Khazakhela and Madyan. Where woodworking is still carried on, there survives an interest for traditional wooden architecture, and with it the desire to preserve the traditional buildings which, without the necessary maintenance, would soon be destroyed by dampness and the ravages of time. Ultimately, woodworking creates in the local communities a feeling of cultural identity. Further study will help to contribute to the conservation and sustainable recovery of the once rich wooden architectural heritage of Upper Swat.

The Swat Crisis

In 2006, the Mission celebrated its jubilee. The event was marked by a special issue of the *IsIAO* journal, *East and West* (56, 1-3), by four Symposia, in Islamabad, Rome, Milan and Trieste, and a photographic exhibit, *Valleys of Memory*, held in several cities of Pakistan and Italy^{iv}. In 2006 our teams were very busy in the field, not only in Swat, but also in other areas of northern Pakistan.

One year later, the security conditions in Swat had worsened so much that, after the South Asian Archaeology meeting of 2007, in agreement with the Department of Archaeology, we decided to temporarily stop our excavations, surveys and study programs. A more limited project, including study and limited surveys was hastily planned. In summer 2007, particularly after the Red Mosque case had inflamed the Frontier region, the situation in Swat became particularly difficult. Suicide attacks and roadside bombs were frequent. However, when we left the residence of the Mission, in the early days of September 2007, we weren't aware that the residence was going to be closed for a period far longer than usual.

From 2007 onwards, our local staff had continued to carry out ordinary conservation works of the archaeological sites under the Mission's responsibility, i.e. Barikot, with the entire area of its hill, and the excavated Ghaznavid mosque at Udegram. Besides conservation and maintenance works at Barikot and Udegram, sites like the Talang inscription, and the most important rock painting sites were regularly

monitored. But, when the Army operation started in May 2009, all these activities were suspended. Barikot and Udegram fell on the front-line. The sites were under custody until the last minute before the fights started, and immediately after the clashes were over. Even during the worst days, in spite of clear instructions from Rome to vacate the Mission, our premises in Saidu were never abandoned.

During the Swat crisis, we took the plunge of the forced inactivity to match up with the publication task and several final reports have been published or completed between after 2007.

Apart from the publication of the *EW 2006* special volume presenting the state-of-the-art in Swat archaeology, as well as the first report on the AMSV Project, an outline history of the Mission and the Bibliography 1956-2006 (see *infra* f. notes 1 and 3), in 2007 Domenico Faccenna and Anna Filigenzi published their *Repertory of Terms for Cataloguing of the Gandhara Sculptures* (IsIAO Repertoires and Memoirs, New Series V, Rome 2007). It takes of an outstanding handbook, based on the informatisation projects carried out by the Mission in the Rome Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale, in the Lahore Museum and in the Swat Museum. One of the two manuscripts Domenico Faccenna left before his *parinirvana* (the second is a huge volume on the Butkara, Panr and Saidu sculptures), is going to be published this year. This volume is meant to present all the great stupas of the Swat Valley, from Top-dara to Abbasah-china, to Loebanr, and so on, each one together with its complete set of drawings, plans, sections, and photographs. This documentation, taken by Faccenna and different teams of architects, over the last 30 years, is even more important when one thinks that some of these monuments are now totally disappeared, like Loebanr, and most have been heavily damaged by illegal diggings (D. Faccenna and P. Spagnesi, with the collaboration of L.M. Olivieri, *Buddhist Architecture of the Swat Valley, Pakistan*, IsIAO Repertoires and Memoirs, New Series, Rome, in press). Finally, a monography on the Mission's ethnological research has been recently published by Ilaria E. Scerrato with the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (I.E. Scerrato, *Wood Art from the Swat Valley. The ethnographical activity of the IsIAO Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan*, FCL 28, Rome 2009).

Other volumes are expected for next year. After the publication of a booklet on Swat in Italian (L.M. Olivieri, *Storia di una Frontiera, Il Nuovo Ramusio*, 8, Roma 2008), regarding Swat, not only the ancient history, but also genesis and aftermath of the Yusufzai State of Swat (1915-1969), the Mission is going to publish in Spring 2011 a more comprehensive monograph on the early history of the archaeology in Swat since the era of Major Dean (1895) to the three surveys carried out by Aurel Stein in Buner, Swat and Swat Kohistan, till the hasty excavation campaign of Evert Barger and Philip Wright in 1938 (F. D'Arelli and L.M. Olivieri, M.A. Stein and the 'Lord of the Marches'. *The beginning of Archaeology in and around Swat, Repertoria ac Bibliographica*, 4, Rome 2011).

The final report on the Swat painted shelters will be published soon by the Mission within the frame of the series of the Heidelberger Akademie des Wissenschaften, *Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans* (L.M. Olivieri, *The Painted Shelters of Swat-Malakand*, MANP, Mainz am Rhein 2011/2012). The final version of the report on the late Buddhist rock-sculptures is also expected in 2011 (A. Filigenzi, *Art and Meaning. The Buddhist Rock Sculptures of the Swat valley*, IsIAO Report and Memoirs, Rome 2011/2012).

Within 2012 other contributions are expected to be published: the third and fourth volume of the Barikot Interim Reports Series (Structural Phases Trenches BKG 3 and 4-5; The Stone Objects) and a comprehensive volume on the excavation of the Ghaznavid mosque of Udegram.

A regular updating of the Mission's activity and publications is available also with free-access e-resources at the Mission's web site (<http://www.isiao.it/en/attivita-istituzionali/attivita-di-ricerca/centro-scavi-e-ricerche-archeologiche/pakistan>).

A project for the future

In the last years of the 19th century and before the establishment of both the Malakand Agency and the Yusufazi State of Swat, the activity of the illegal diggers and art traders was at its peak. Several European collections took advantage of the situation. During the last year as well, the activity of illegal excavations has exponentially increased, while all scientific fieldwork activities were suspended. Unfortunately, at present the archaeology of Gandhara region seems to be still at its infancy. The main reason is the low level of the methodological standard of the excavations and surface research. The frequency of stratigraphic excavations is absolutely rare, and as a consequence the number of the published or displayed objects discovered in stratigraphic context is nearly irrelevant.

For this and other reasons connected to the difficult situation of the Swat Valley, the Mission and the Federal Department of Archaeology & Museums, in collaboration with other Institutions, conceived, already in Summer 2007, a large-scale project meant to support both the improvement of methodology and the protection of sites. This project, called ACT, *Archaeology, Community, Tourism*, became even more urgent after the Swat crisis. At present the project is under the last step of a long bi-lateral evaluation process, and, if approved, is expected to start in Fall 2010.

ACT is a three-year project which will be financed in the framework of the Debt-Swap Program signed by the Italian and the Pakistani Governments in May 2006. It is focusing on three main actions: certified training, rehabilitation/reconstruction of the Swat Museum, restoration of the main stupa in the site of Saidu Sharif.

Trainings will be organised in three camp sites, Barikot, Udegram, and Saidu Sharif, and are meant to train local workers, Archaeology officers and students in the following fields: stratigraphic excavation, graphic documentation, restoration, maintenance and management of excavated archaeological areas, and survey.

A total of 230 local workers, together with Archaeology officers and University students will be trained. The Beaconhouse University School of Visual Art, Lahore, and the Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations of the Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, are the first two university institutions involved. We hope the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology of the Peshawar University will be soon an important partner of the Project as well. Each local trainee will receive for his training period a wage equivalent to the Italian Mission salary for skilled excavators, an insurance and other minor benefits.

The best trainees will be selected for different advanced levels: a) as restorers in the Saidu Sharif restoration camp, b) as stratigraphic excavators, c) as watch keepers, d) as archaeological tourist guides.

Starting from the first semester, a final total of 30 watch keepers will be employed in 11 selected sites, protected under Antiquity Act, but lacking of a proper custody. For the first 3 years their salary will be paid by the Project, but after they will be taken in charge as permanent employees by the Department of Archaeology.

The selected group of archaeological guides will be organized in an Association/Cooperative which will be supported by the Project through marketing consultancies and organisation of events with different stakeholders, hotel managers and tourist operators, in order to start up its activity. The Association/Cooperative will also receive an official recognition from the Provincial and Federal Ministries of Tourism.

As collateral expected result of the project, the Provincial and/or Federal Institutions are committed to find the necessary funds in order to allow the definitive acquisition of the archaeological excavated areas of Barikot and Udegram.

The hub of all these and future activities will be the newly reconstructed Swat Archaeological Museum.

The new Museum, the final restoration of the Saidu Sharif stupa, the conservation of the Ghaznavid mosque at Udegram, the extension of the excavated area at Barikot, together with the other expected results, are eventually meant to pay off a tiny part of the huge debts the scientific community owes to this region, this time though by donating something sustainable and real, and involving people, families: real things in the end.

Notes

- i. See L.M. Olivieri, Outline History of the Italian Archaeological Mission (1956-2006), *East and West*, 56, 1-3, 2006, pp. 23-41.
- ii. L.M. Olivieri and M. Vidale with contributions by A. Nasir Khan, T. Saeed, L. Colliva, R. Garbini, L. Langella, R. Micheli & E. Morigi), Archaeology and Settlement History in a Test-Area of the Swat Valley. Preliminary Report on the AMSV Project (1st Phase), *East and West* 56, 1-3, 2006, pp. 73-150.
- iii. An updated bibliography of the Italian works on rock art are available in: L.M. Olivieri, Hanging Rocks and 'Intoxicating Drinks': The Rock Art Sequence of the Swat Valley, *South Asian Studies*, 24, 2008, pp. 15-26; L.M. Olivieri (in collaboration with Faiz-ur Rahman), Painted Shelters from Lower Swat (Pakistan). Recent Discovery in the frame of the AMSV Project, in L.M. Olivieri, ed. (in collaboration with L. Bruneau and M. Ferrandi), *Pictures in Transformation. Rock Art Research between Central Asia and the Subcontinent*, 19th EASAA Conference, Ravenna, July 2007, Special session 1. BAR, Oxford (in press).
- iv. Callieri, P., L. Colliva, M. Galli, R. Micheli, E. Morigi and L.M. Olivieri, *Valli della memoria. Antiche Genti, Luoghi e Immagini dello Swat. 50 anni della Missione Archeologica Italiana dell'IsIAO in Pakistan/ Valleys of memory. Ancient People, Sites and Images from Swat. 50 Years of the IsIAO Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan*. Roma/Rome 2006.
- v. For the bibliography of the Mission *ante* 2007, see: L.M. Olivieri, The IsIAO Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan. A Selected Bibliography (1956-2006), *East and West*, 56, 1-3, 2006, pp. 301-18.