

# Swat after the Indo-Greeks - the City, the Sanctuaries and the Economy. An Archaeological Overview on the Saka-Parthian period

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## ABSTRACT

The article presents an overview of the archaeological data (updated to 2021) from the recent excavations at Barikot, Swat (Pakistan), and preliminary results from ongoing studies of the other archaeological evidence related to the post-Indo-Greek phases in Swat and Gandhara (ca. 50 BC–50 AD). The article introduces some of the most distinctive markers of material culture in this context, as well as the evidence of new fortifications and building activity both in urban centres and Buddhist sanctuaries. The data collected thus far underpin a new interpretation of this little-known historical phase of ancient northwestern India. The phase is characterized by a building program and political vibrancy, which do not correspond with the model of an economic recession advanced by scholars thus far. Indeed, in this framework, the so-called ‘Great Debasement’ attributed to Azes II, might have had alternative implications.

## KEYWORDS

Indo-Greek; Saka-Parthian; Azes II; Barikot; Great Debasement.

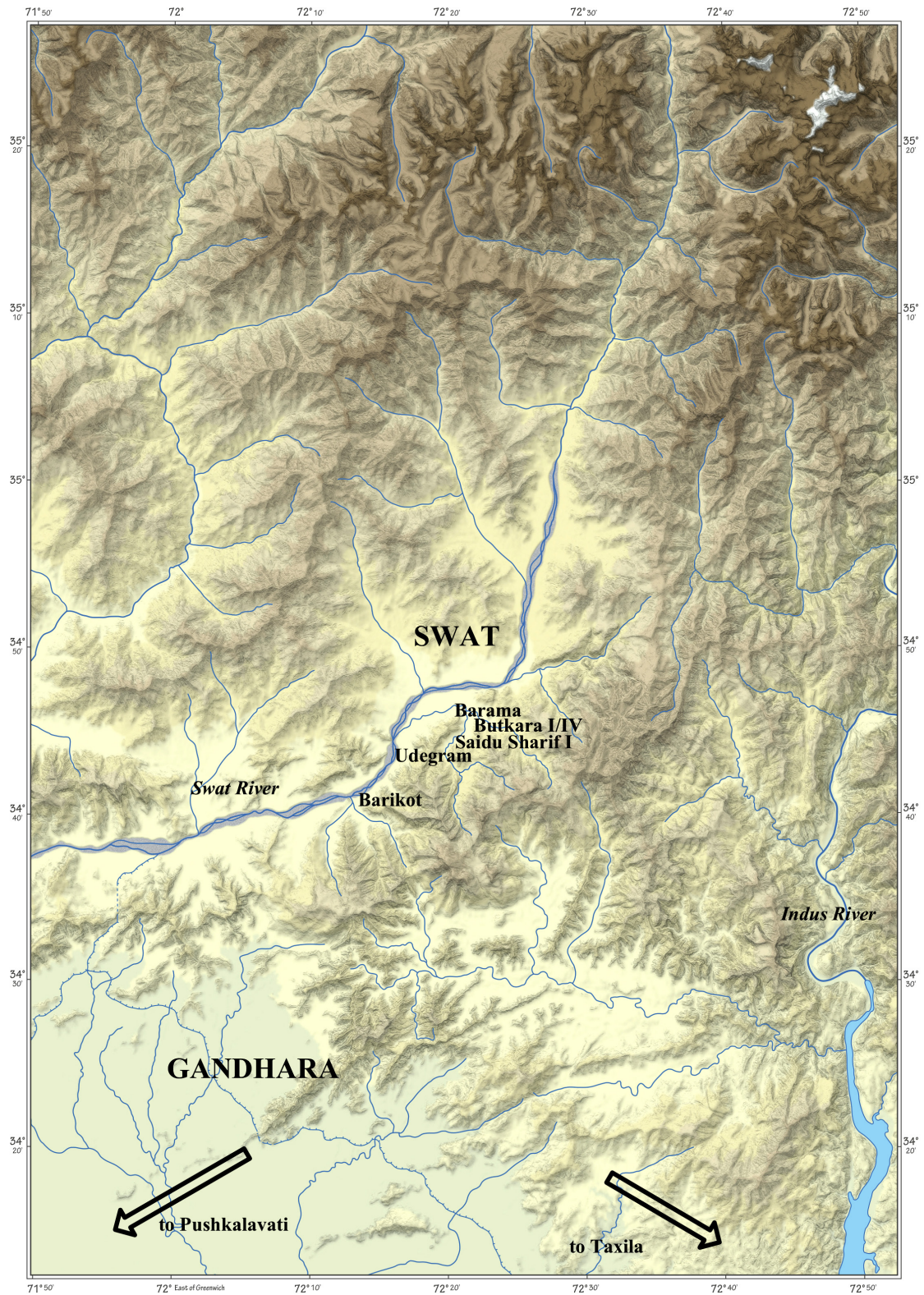
## PREAMBLE

Once severed from their Central Asian hubs, Greek rulers in India apparently implemented a systematic political plan, which included the foundation or fortification of major urban centres, religious patronage, organization of power and resources, monetary reform, intense diplomatic activity, and warfare (OLIVIERI 2021; COLORU *et al.* forthcoming). The impact of the Indo-Greeks possibly ‘moulded and oriented the future expression of power of the dynasty of Azes, the second wave of Sakas, who basically imitated the same politics, acting – like their forerunners – as reformers, patrons, and founders of cities’ (OLIVIERI 2021, 386).

In their 2017 communication to the HCARN workshop held in Berlin, Elisa Iori and Luca M. Olivieri (OLIVIERI – IORI 2022) concluded with the following words: ‘As we saw, the evidence of Indo-Greek acculturation did not exceed at Barikot – the ancient Bazira – the limits of the elites’ needs and habits, and remained basically confined to coinage, writing, military architecture, and luxury items. It was only under the Saka-Parthians that not only luxury items, but also technology from the Mediterranean arrived in Gandhāra and Swat.’

It is now clear that changes in the form of luxury items and the introduction of new technologies might have been part of a broader movement of trade and ideas from the Mediterranean to India. That the Sakas (and the Parthians) of ancient North-West India were part of this process is possibly substantiated by the data yielded by the coeval archaeological layers in Swat (for the geographical framework of Swat and the sites discussed in this contribution, see **Fig. 1**). The following pages are based on the data from the large-scale excavations carried out at the historic town near Barikot in the Swat Valley of Northern Pakistan from 1984 onwards. The data yielded by the urban stratigraphy (updated to 2021) are combined with those revealed by important excavations of Buddhist sanctuaries in Swat, in particular at Butkara I and Saidu Sharif I.

OC, EI, LMO



**Fig. 1: Map of Swat and surrounding regions with indication of the sites mentioned in the text (Map and copyright by K. Kriz and D. Nell, Department of Geography, University of Vienna and ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**



## TECHNICAL INNOVATIONS AND OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL MARKERS

The ancient urban centre of Barikot (Swat), the Bazira or Beira of the Alexandrian sources (Arrian, *Anab.*, IV, 27.5; Curtius, VIII, 10.22), presents an occupation *continuum* from the mid-1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, when the urban centre was founded on the abandonment of a pre-existing Iron Age village, until 400 AD, when the lower city had been already abandoned following a destructive earthquake during the Kushano-Sasanian phase (OLIVIERI – IORI forthcoming) (Fig. 2-3).

In its early-historic phases, the city was fortified by the Indo-Greeks during the first decades after 150 BC (Macrophase 3a = ca. 180–50 BCE). The city expanded in successive structural phases, from Macrophase 3b to Macrophase 5b (the latter = ca. 270–300 AD). The best chronology obtained for the beginning of Macrophase 3b is 53 BC–18 AD, while the average date of the collected samples is 64 BC–60 AD cal 1σ (OLIVIERI *et al.* 2019).<sup>1</sup> In the latter, the urban defences, which had collapsed after a seismic event, were re-built and enlarged. Not only the city's defences, but also its material culture revealed elements distinctive of a new cultural phase, whose numismatic assemblage is marked by the disappearance of Indo-Greek coins, and by the massive presence of Saka and Parthian issues, particularly tetradrachms of Azes II.

Major technical innovations of the century spanning Macrophase 3b include loom weights and pot stands (MORRIS 1985).<sup>2</sup> The presence of new sculptural tools has also been recorded in the coeval Buddhist sanctuaries outside of the city.

The introduction of pyramidal loom weights – typical in Greece and in the Eastern Mediterranean from early Archaic to late Hellenistic times – imply a change in looming technique, as well as certainly reflecting the presence of specialized weavers who had travelled from the Hellenized regions of West Asia to Gandhāra<sup>3</sup> (Figs. 4-5). It is worth noting, however, that pyramidal loom-weights disappeared completely in the Kushan phases, when traditional biconical loom-weights (attested from the Bronze Age) became dominant again in Gandhāra and Swat as suggested by the evidence currently under study.

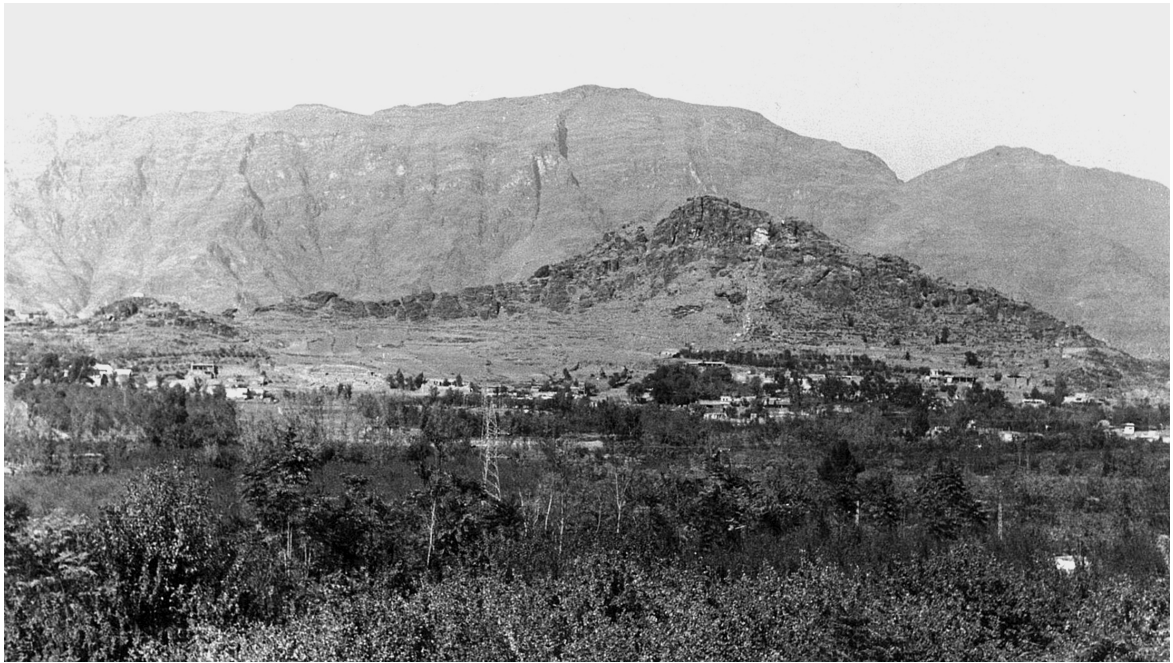
The other devices that were introduced at the end of the Indo-Greek phase, were mobile stands to support cooking pots known in Greek as *λάσανα* (*lāsana*) (OLIVIERI 2018). Curiously, although *lāsana* fell into disuse in Greece during the late Hellenistic period, they had a long-lasting life in Gandhāra and at Barikot until the late Kushan phases (Figs. 6-7).

Moreover, it was in this period that tools and carving techniques typical of the Hellenized world began to be used at Buddhist sanctuaries in Swat. The study of these tools and techniques is still at its outset. So far, it has been possible to detect the use of two types of drilling devices (bow-drill and strap-drill) especially on particular decorative patterns (such as vine scrolls), and figurative details (e.g. eyes and curls) (VIDALE *et al.* 2015; BRANCACCIO – OLIVIERI 2019, 139–141). The traces of these techniques have also been recognized in the majestic sculptural production of the Saka and Parthian phase, particularly in the frieze of the 'Maestro di Saidu' at the Main Stūpa of Saidu Sharif I (see below). Also in this case, together with the introduction

1 For the reassessment of the absolute chronology of the site (based on radiocarbon dates), its peri-odization and cultural sequence see also CALLIERI – OLIVIERI 2020.

2 Not considering here rotary querns, which appear in this phase at Sirkap and only a little later at Barikot (DE CHIARA *et al.* 2019).

3 According to Chiara Spinazzi-Lucchesi, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia (pers. comm. February 2, 2019), looms and weavers always travel together, and new techniques or weaving devices cannot be exported as items separated from the technical skills.

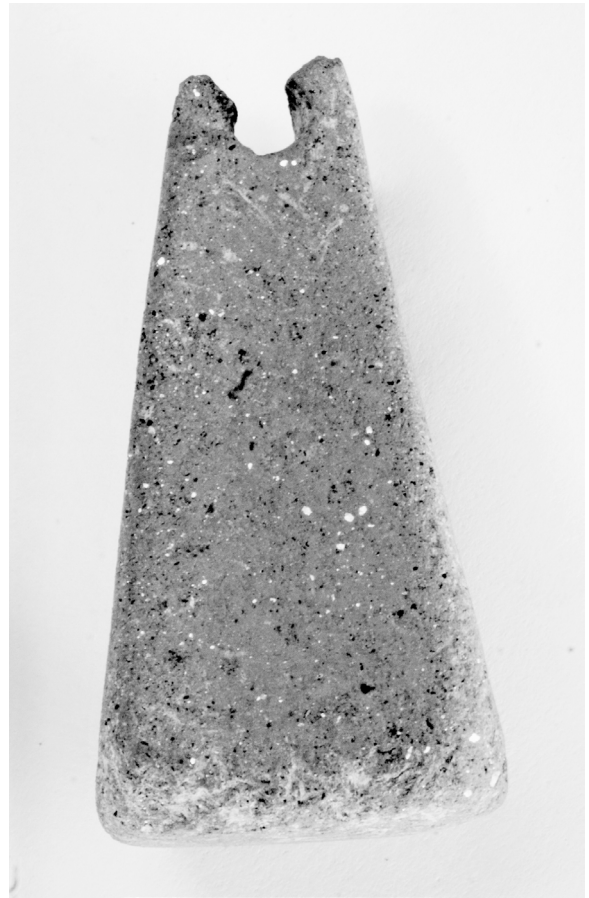


**Fig. 2: The area of Barikot seen from SSE (Photo by P. Callieri, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**



**Fig. 3: The archaeological area of Barikot with excavated trenches, updated 2017 (Drawings by R. Sabelli, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

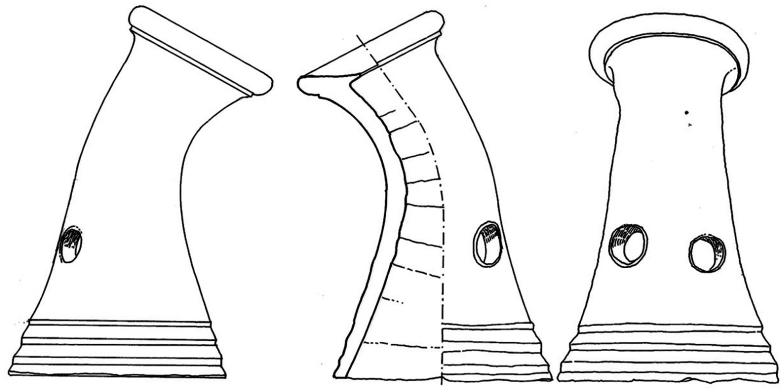




**Fig. 4:** An example of a pyramidal loom-weight, Inv. No. BKG 4071, max. h. 7.3 cm (Photo by L.M. Olivieri, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



**Fig. 5:** Lekythos attributed to the Amasis Painter (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 31. 11. 10; MMA, Open Access Policy).



**Fig. 6:** An example of *lāsana*, Inv. No. BKG 2288, max. h. 19.8 cm (Photo by L.M. Olivieri, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



**Fig. 7:** *Lāsana* from Athens (after MORRIS 1968, pl. 105a).

of new tools and techniques, we can hypothesize the presence of non-local skilled artisans and sculptors<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 8).

4 The Authors are currently working on the study of the possible conceptual antecedents of the cycle of the 'Maestro di Saidu' (OLIVIERI 2022). The frieze of the Main Stūpa represents possibly for the first time in Gandhara the complete biographical cycle of Siddharta, from the pre-birth events to the *parinirvāṇa*, in a sequential narrative form. The frieze features a series of more than 65 panels separated by Corinthian semi-columns as dividing elements, and scrolling clockwise around the drum of the stūpa. Although in the past it was proposed that the model of the biographical/heroic narrations was attested only in the later Roman sepulchral architecture (FACCENNA 2001, 182–184; FACCENNA 2002, 139; FACCENNA – CALLIERI – FILIGENZI 2003, 347–348; TADDEI 1993, 39–41; TADDEI 2015, 64–66; FILIGENZI 2012, 137), we are currently working on the hypothesis that such heroic narrative forms, which were already present in the Hellenistic world, might have been the indirect conceptual antecedents of the Saidu frieze (TADDEI 2006, 46). Our case study is the monumental 'Frieze of Telephos' of the Pergamon Altar (ca. 150 BC), where the biographical model develops rightward in a continuous semi-rectilinear frieze, from the pre-birth events to the heroic dead. This working hypothesis may indeed have a sound material basis. A few years ago, in a workshop area dated to the Kushan period in the ancient city of Termez (DE PONTBRIAND – LERICHE 2012), a stucco relief/*émblema* was discovered that reproduces a scene from the *Gigantomachia* with a strong Pergamene accent (LERICHE 2013; LERICHE 2015, fig. 24). Other reflections of the Perga-





**Fig. 8: Saidu Sharif I. Relief from the Frieze of the Main Stupa, excavated in 2011; Inv. No. SSI 3 (Photo by E. Loliva, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

At Barikot Macrophase 3b other features of material culture, including pottery and terracotta figurines, should be added to these elements.

In terms of vessel shape and decoration, the Saka-Parthian ceramic assemblage exhibits a general continuity, with the pottery of Indo-Greek phases. The repertoire of shapes is however expanded and the introduction of new types of decoration points to an enhancement of the Hellenistic tradition.

The custom of using stamps of different types (circular stamps, palmettes, leaves), which had previously been attested at Barikot only on the so-called 'lotus-bowls', became quite common. Meanwhile, the ancient tradition of incised geometrical motifs (triangle, zig-zag, wavy lines, etc.) persisted (CALLIERI 2000; IORI *et al.* 2015, figs. 7–8; CALLIERI – OLIVIERI 2020).

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mon figurative world can be recognized in the fortune of the 'birds [doves] drinking from a bowl' iconography, first represented by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Pergamene mosaicist Sosus (Pliny, *NH* XXXVI, 184), and reproduced, besides the famous copies of the later Roman times, also in Swat, in minor Gandhāran friezes dated to ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (BRANCACCIO – OLIVIERI 2019, 138, figs. 20, 21).

The Black-on-Red Ware, documented beginning in the Achaemenid acculturation phase at Barikot, was enriched in the decorative repertoire with parallels at Sirkap (Taxila) and Shaikhan-dheri. It features hatched or cross-hatched triangles and triangle patterns filled with parallel wavy lines, stroke patterns, as well as bands of parallel and wavy lines, leaves, and garlands patterns (IORI *et al.* 2015; CALLIERI – OLIVIERI 2020) (Figs. 9–10).

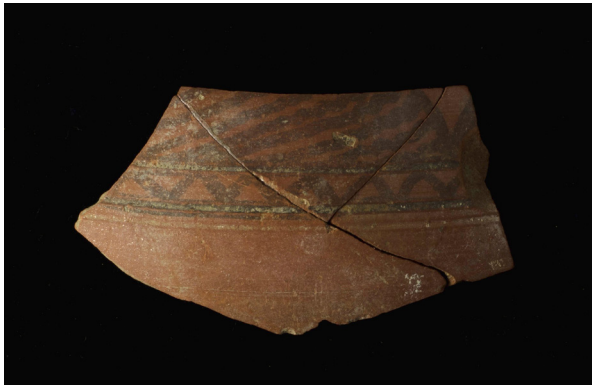


Fig. 9: Painted sherds, Inv. No. BKG 2832 (Photo by E. Iori, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



Fig. 10: Painted sherd, Inv. No. BKG 3898, max. w. 3.6 cm (Photo by E. Iori, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).

A further Hellenistic marker is represented here by the so-called ‘Hellenistic Embossed Ware’. This is a luxury class of red or black ware with a naturalistic decoration generally limited to the inner bottom of bowls and dishes. The prevailing decorative pattern is the vine scroll sometimes bordering a central *émbléma* (in two cases with female busts, of clear Hellenistic origin Fig. 11; CALLIERI *et al.* 1992, fig. 2; CALLIERI 2000; IORI *et al.* 2015, fig. 9; CALLIERI – OLIVIERI 2020).



Fig. 11: *Émbléma* (bottom of a bowl or dish), Inv. No. BKG 1516, max l. 4.4 cm (Photo by P. Callieri, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



Terracotta figurines are particularly important for chronology, since they are a relatively short-lived domestic material. We here refer to the so-called ‘Hellenistic Ladies’, a new class of single-moulded terracotta figurines spread out in Hellenized Asia especially in the Parthian phases, for example at Seleucia on the Tigris (see CALLIERI 2002; MENEGAZZI 2014; **Fig. 12**).<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 12: Terracotta figurine heads. a - Inv. No. BKG 818, max. h. 3.6 cm; b - Inv. No. BKG 3058, max. h. 3.5 cm; c - Inv. No. BKG 1280, max. h. 5 cm (Photo by a-b - G. Alterio, c - M. Nascari, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

## A NEW URBAN PHASE

Interestingly, besides Barikot, all these elements are present in the Saka phases both at Shaikhān-dheri (Puṣkalāvati) and Sirkap (Taxila).

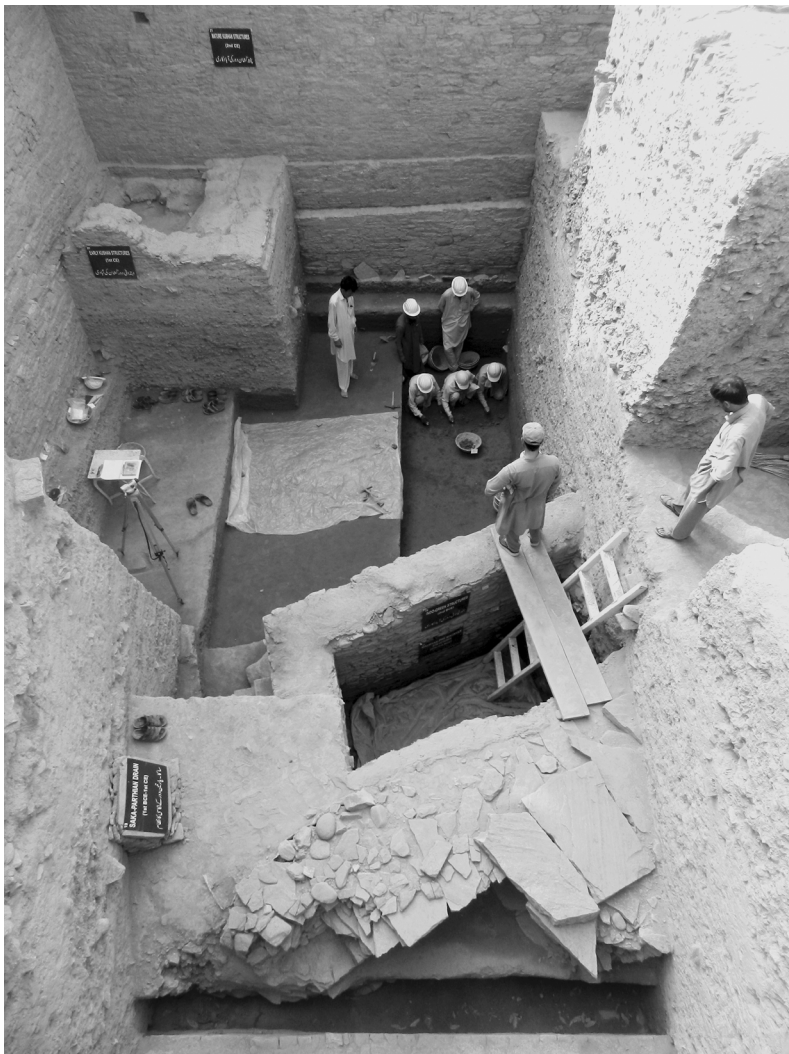
It is now clearly established that the visible part of the city of Sirkap, with its massive urban circuit featuring square bastions linked by berms, was built from the time of the first Saka kings of the lineage of Azes. According to the revision of the excavation sequence of Sirkap, as established by Ghosh (1947–1948) and later confirmed by G. Erdosy (1990), only a few fragmentary structures can be dated to Indo-Greek times (see ALLCHIN 1982; FUSSMAN 1993; OLIVIERI forthcoming). The strata contemporary with the construction of the defensive wall

5 To this class can be added another class of terracotta figurines documented at Barikot from Macrophase 3b to 4a (Early Kushan), whose study is currently in progress (by Giuseppina Esposito, University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’). This class is represented by a dozen heads of male figurines with a high, elaborated tiara (**Fig. 12c**).

belong to the Saka-Parthian and later periods. In practical terms, if Sirkap cannot be taken into account for the reconstruction of a detailed picture of the Greek and Indo-Greek phase, it represents instead a true picture of the post-50 BC phases.

Therefore, Sirkap represents the most important evidence for the impact of the role of the Sakas in Gandhāra, as they delimited a new city there within the newly established urban circuit, whose features, by the way, recalls very much those of the earlier fortifications at Barikot.

The Saka-Parthian phase of the ‘second Pushkalavati’ (Shaikhan-dheri) yielded an archaeological sequence with materials which are by and large compatible with the one revealed at Barikot Macrophase 3b, including pottery (e.g. *éblemata*), *lásana*, loom weights, and terracotta figurines (DANI 1965–1966, pls. XXXI, XLII, XXVIII–XXX; ALLCHIN 1979). Unfortunately, nothing can be said of the urban defenses, as these were never excavated, and are now lost under the expansion of modern Charsadda. Therefore, only at Barikot do we have a clear sequence of the structural events that followed the Indo-Greek phases both inside the city (see below **Fig. 17**), and along the urban defences, in both cases supported by a reliable set of radiocarbon dates (OLIVIERI *et al.* 2019).



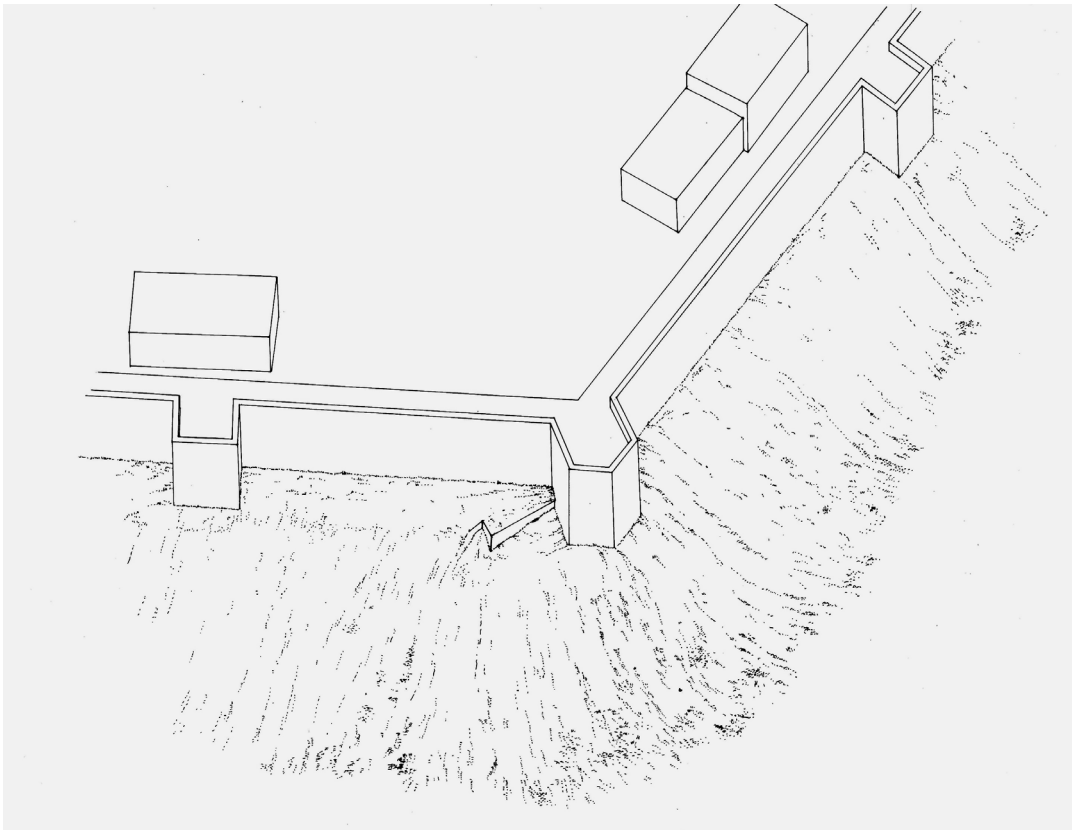
**Fig. 13:** Barikot, Trench BKG 11, Sector K – the structural superimposition of the different Macro-phases (Photo by L.M. Olivieri, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



As already noted, in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, in Macrophase 3b, the Indo-Greek defensive wall at Barikot was radically restructured following damage caused by a seismic event (OLIVIERI 2015; IORI *et al.* 2015; **Fig. 13**). The bastions were all reinforced with escarpments and supporting platforms, a massive staircase was built inside the Southwestern bastion, and the city was provided with a complex system of extremely well-built drains. The drainage network was connected to outlet channels built in the reconstructed wall, including a large vaulted passage under the staircase of the Southwestern bastion (see CALLIERI *et al.* 1992, pl. III:2). Outside the wall, near the Bastion 1 E, a masonry pit-wall possibly associated with a side gate of the city was built, analogous to the ‘water gates’ theorised for Sirkap by J. Marshall (see IORI *et al.* 2015, 81, fig. 5; **Figs. 14-15**). The best chronology obtained for Macrophase 3b (see above) is confirmed by the absolute prevalence of Saka coins of Azes (II) (see MAC DOWALL – CALLIERI 2004).<sup>6</sup>

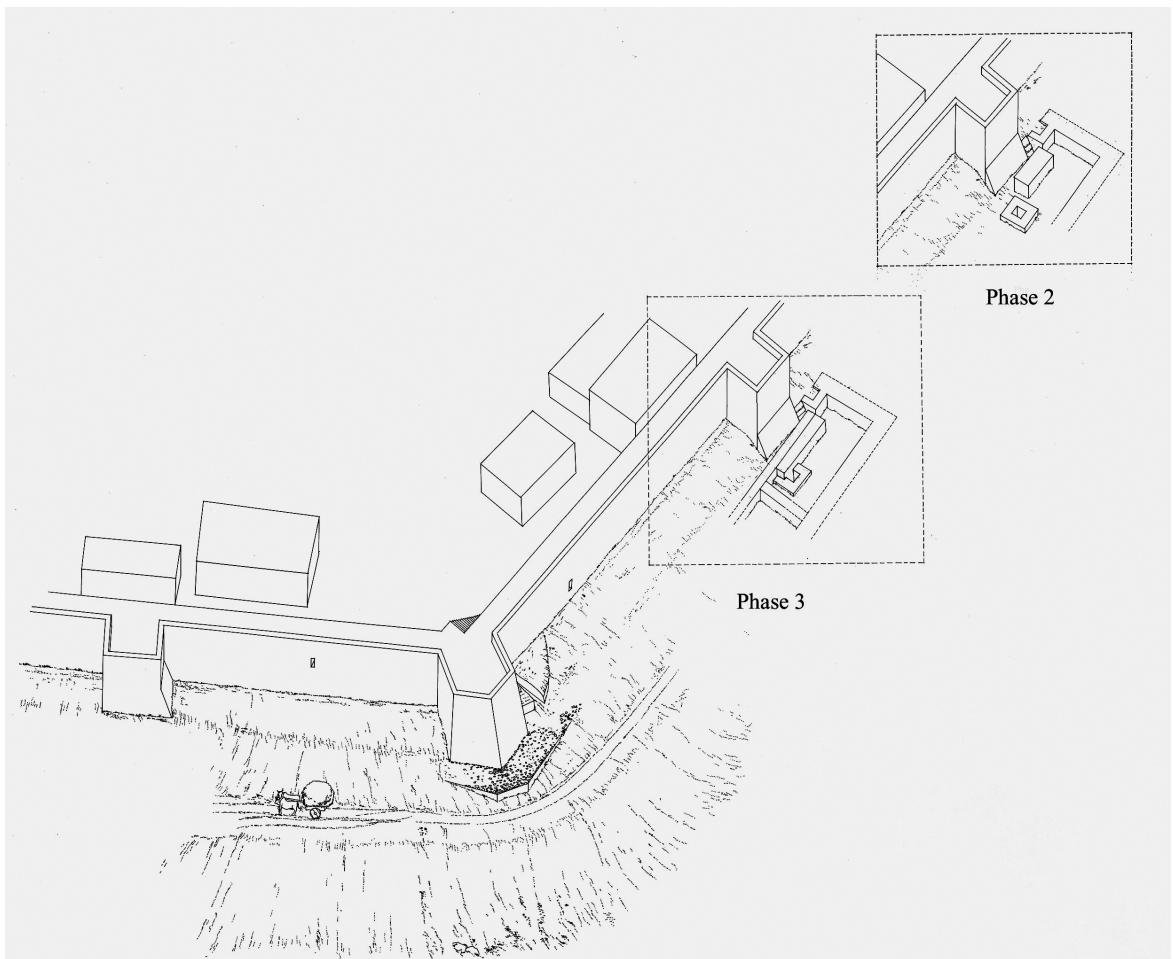
In the following phase (Macrophase 4a = 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) some of the bastions were further reinforced by a berm or *protéichisma* of the same type documented in the outer fortification of Sirkap (CALLIERI *et al.* 1992, 11, fig. 1; OLIVIERI 2015; IORI *et al.* 2015, fig. 6; **Fig. 16**). Numismatic evidence for this period is still characterized by the presence of coins of Azes (II) along with coins of the first Kushan rulers.

LMO



**Fig. 14: Barikot, SW quarters of the city - Macrophase 3a (axonometric restitution) (Drawings by F. Martore, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

6 The study of the vast numismatic assemblage from the excavations carried out in the last ten years is currently in progress (E. Sharavebi and M. Alram, Numismatic Commission, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna).

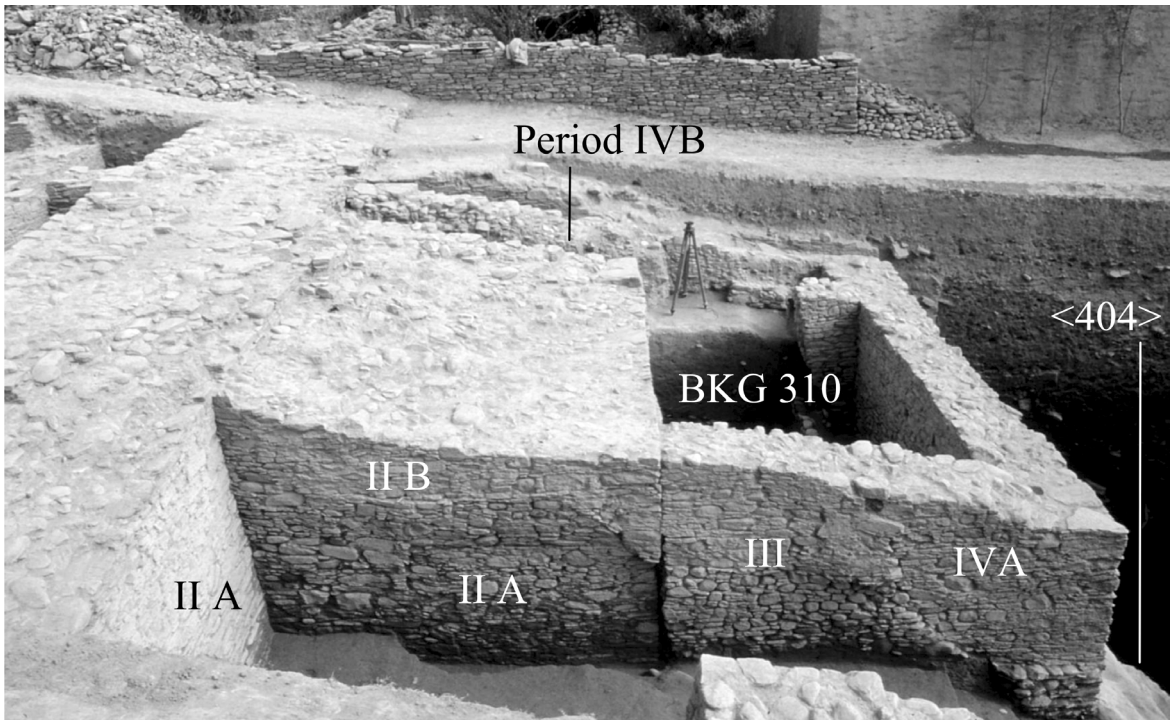


**Fig. 15: Barikot, SW quarters of the city - Macrophase 3b (axonometric restitution) (Drawings by F. Martore, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

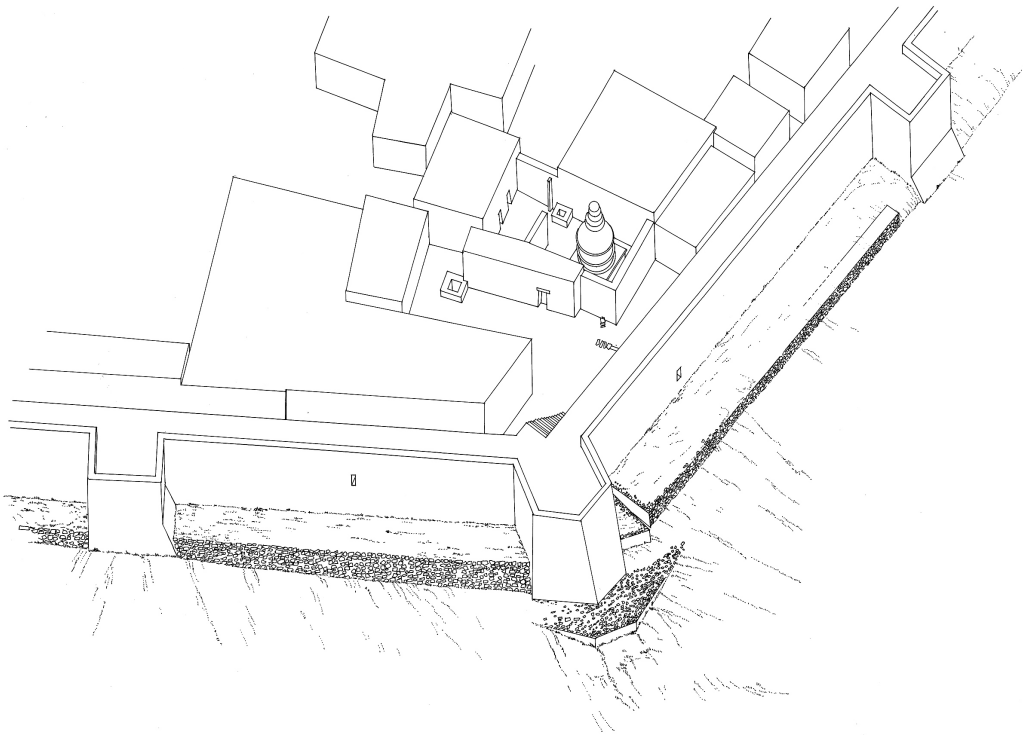
## SANCTUARIES AND URBAN AGENCY

Further data on the enlargement and reorganization of existing urban areas during the Saka-Parthian period are provided by the sites of Udegram and Butkara/Barama. Leaving aside Udegram because of the incompleteness of its archaeological report (GULLINI 1962), we may focus on the second site. Barama I is a large flat artificial plateau, which yields a sequence of six major structural periods running, with some interruptions, from the proto-historic (Period 6) to the late Kushan period (Period 1). The site, overlooking from the N the course of the Jambīl River, a left-bank tributary of the Swat, is located just opposite the site of Butkara I (**Fig. 18**).

The site of Butkara I appeared as an important urban settlement from at least the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, when a Dharmarājika stūpa was founded on the outskirts of its urban layout (FACCENNA 1980–81, 167; PETECH 1966). The urban area continued to be alive until late antiquity when the Chinese travelers mentioned it as the ancient capital city named Mengjieli (see TUCCI 1958, 285; FACCENNA 1980–81, 756, note 1). The idea of the existence of a major city exactly under the modern town of Mingora, at the confluence of the Jambīl, Saidu, and Swat, in the larger alluvial zone of the Swat Valley, had already been proposed by Domenico



**Fig. 16: The various phases of reconstructions at the bastion uncovered in Trench BKG 3 (IIa-IIb = Macrophase 3a; III = Macrophase 3b; IV = Macrophase 4a) (Photo by P. Callieri, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**



**Fig. 17: Barikot, SW quarters of the city - Macrophase 4a (axonometric restitution) (Drawings by F. Martore, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**





**Fig. 18: The archaeological area of Butkara - Barama (elaborated by E. Iori after FACCENNA 1980–81, 4, pl. XXVII).**

Faccenna who, moreover, addressed the association between the five structural periods of Butkara I (IA-FA/five floors of SP) and the five structural periods of Barama I (FACCENNA 1980–81, 751, 765, tab. XII).<sup>7</sup>

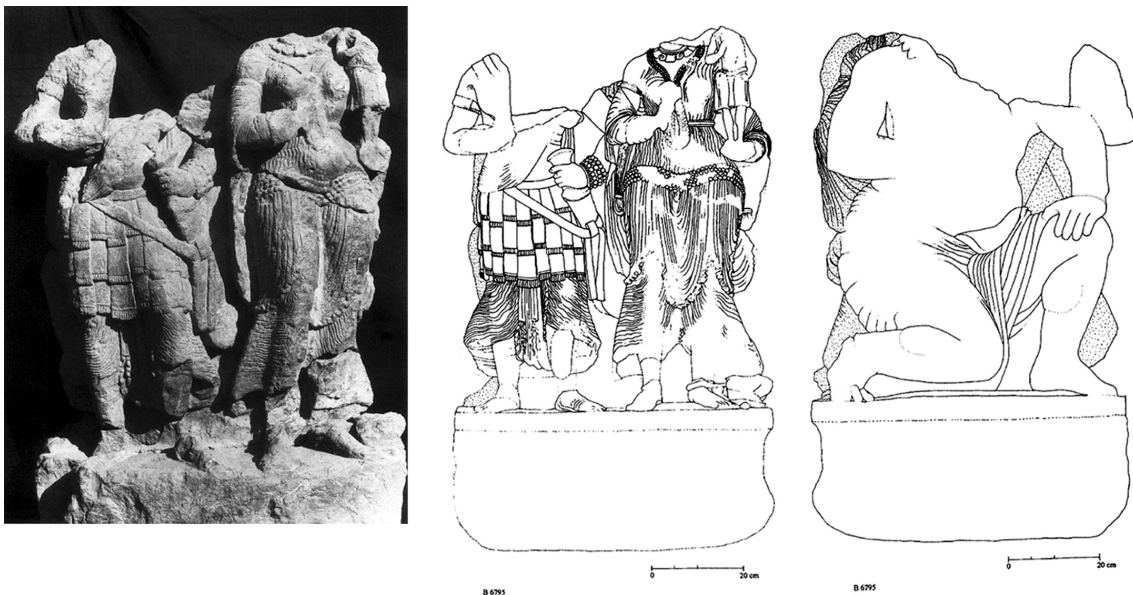
On the basis of topographic and stratigraphic considerations, the identification of Barama I as the ‘upper-town’ of a larger urban settlement of ca. 100 ha with Butkara I as an urban Buddhist sanctuary located just on its SE outskirts seems quite reasonable, especially in light of the preliminary morphological study of the ceramic material that seems to confirm the chronological correlation between the two sites (IORI 2015; 2018). The study has partially reassessed the radiocarbon dates from Period 4 of Barama (370 BC, not calibrated; ALESSIO *et al.*

7 For the pre-sanctuary phases, Faccenna established an association also between the proto-historic evidence of Barama I (Period 6; FACCENNA 1964–65, 15–17, 23) and those revealed by the excavations carried out both in the SP and IA (FACCENNA 1964–65, 751, 764 note 2, 765 note 4).

1966, 409) indicating a chronological time span corresponding to Macrophase 3a (Indo-Greek phase) of Barikot, while Period 3 undeniably presents direct comparisons with the materials of Barikot Macrophase 3b (Saka-Parthian phase). The major implication of the reconstruction is the association of Barama Period 3 with Butkara I G.St. 3, and the associated chronology provided by Barikot 3b, i.e. mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

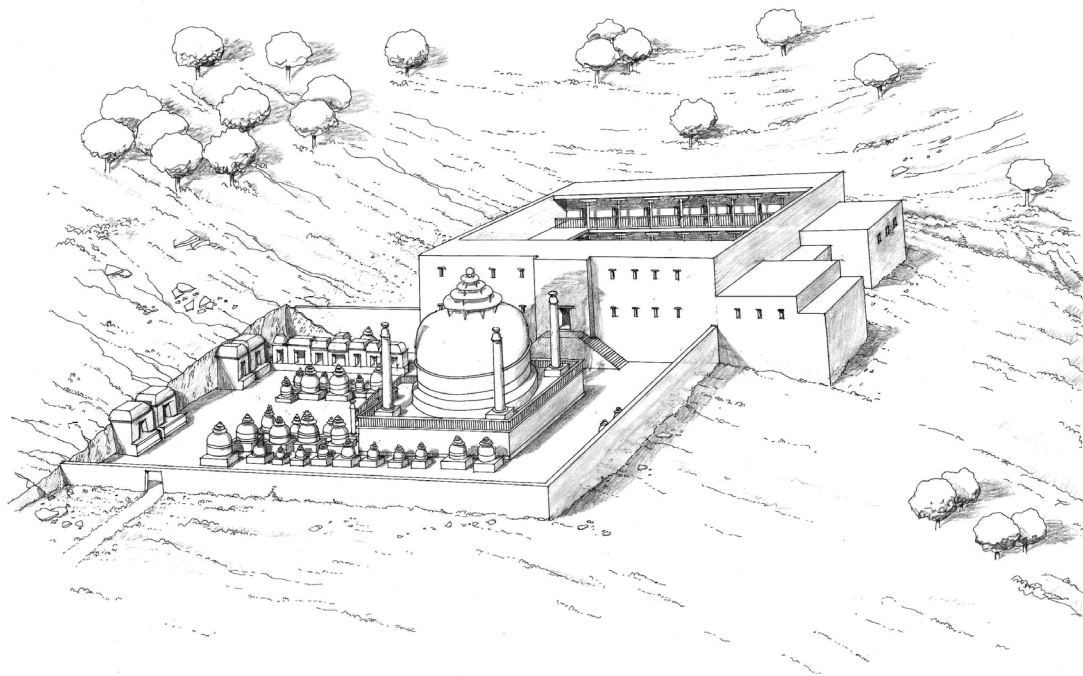
Butkara I G.St. 3 corresponds to the second reconstruction of the Great Stūpa, i.e. the Dharmarājika stūpa of Butkara I. The second reconstruction is quite coherently dated by coins of Azes II (FACCENNA 1980–81; FACCENNA 2002a; FILIGENZI 2012). The other major building associated with G.St. 3 is the Great Vihāra, built immediately to the N of the latter (see FACCENNA 2006, figs. 1–2; FILIGENZI 2012, figs. 6–7), which significantly reshaped the spatial organization of the sanctuary. It can be argued that the new focal-axis ‘Great Stūpa – Great Vihāra’ was the material outcome of some new religious and social practices formulated by the contemporary urban society which started to use Buddhist practices and space as part of a social strategy. The materiality of this behaviour can be tracked in some archaeological evidence.

Interestingly, the Great Vihāra housed a stela representing not a tutelary couple but a prince and a princess, with the latter holding the young descendant, i.e., their son, who – as Anna Filigenzi has suggested (A. Filigenzi, pers. comm., January 2019; see also FILIGENZI 2012, 121–124) – was the subject of the votive offering (Fig. 19). Another striking piece of evidence possibly associated with princely donations is yielded by the coeval foundation of the sacred area of Saidu Sharif I (Fig. 20). The Main Stūpa at that site features the rare occurrence of a major figurative frieze purposely donated for the new stūpa. The frieze, a masterwork of the so-called ‘Maestro of Saidu’, possibly incorporated in the narrative also princely figures<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 21).



**Fig. 19: Butkara I, Great Vihara - stela (reworked on the back side) Inv. No. B 6975, max. h. 84.5 cm (Drawings by F. Martore, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

<sup>8</sup> The study of the new materials excavated in 2011–2015 under the direction of one of the Authors (LMO) (see OLIVIERI 2016), is currently in progress (A. Filigenzi and A. Amato).



**Fig. 20: Saidu Sharif I, the Buddhist sacred area and the Monastery (axonometric restitution)**  
(Sketch drawings by F. Martore, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



**Fig. 21: Saidu Sharif I, relief from the Frieze of the Main Stupa, excavated 2011, Inv. No. SSI 1** (Photo by E. Loliva, Copyright ISMEO - Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).

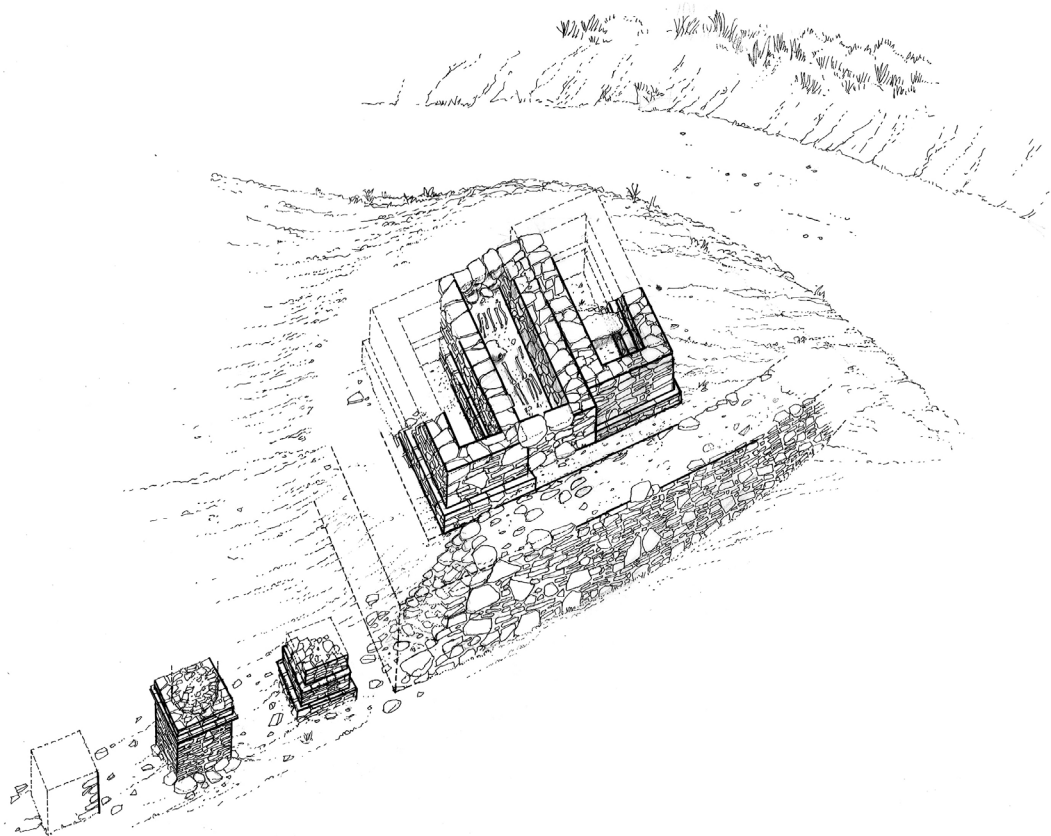


## THE ELITES

These elements reflect a milieu of widespread princely donations documented through a large number of dedicatory inscriptions obtained during antiquarian collecting activity (see BAUMS – GLASS 2002; BAUMS 2012). The epigraphic sources are foremost dedicatory inscriptions to Buddhist establishments (i.e. stūpas, shrines), both in newly established and pre-existing sanctuaries, by members of the houses of Oḍi (Swat), dated to the first quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, and Apraca (Bajaur?), slightly earlier. The provenances of two Oḍi inscriptions are known, and both are from Swat.

The role of these local princes as ‘all-weather’ *clientes* of the foreign kings (whether they were Greek, Saka, or Kushan) is clearly attested by the inscription of the Oḍi prince Senavarma who, by mentioning his political brotherhood with the scion of Kujula Kadphises, signed the acceptance of a political pact with the new ruling entity.

As brilliantly examined by Stefan Baums (2018), nothing about the ethnicity of these princes can be deduced from their mixed onomastics. Were these local families Saka, Indian, or admixed with Greek ancestry? Some interesting data are anticipated here with regard to the discovery of an aristocratic single-family funerary monument near the sanctuary of Butkara I, at Butkara IV (OLIVIERI 2019). This is a burial *ad sanctos*, which includes a tripartite vaulted structure with two double-chambered cells flanking a central decomposition cell, and at least two square cenotaphs (Fig. 22).



**Fig. 22: Butkara IV, the burial monument, view from SSE (Drawings by F. Martore, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).**

The burial of this elite family was used for at least three generations, from ca. 160 BC to AD 57,<sup>9</sup> a time span that overlaps the period considered here. Five of the numerous (more than 20) skeletons have been analysed. All the analysed individuals have a mixed Iranian-Ancient Steppe-South Asian genetic ancestry (see again on this OLIVIERI 2019 with references). More than just local, the genetic heritage of the elites was likely deeply rooted in Swat.

Epigraphic sources clearly indicate the crucial role played by local princes in the foundation and reconstruction of stūpas (in one case in the place of a Dharmarājika stūpa) and Buddhist monasteries between the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The direct support of political authorities gave the Buddhist community an increasingly important role. This trend is detectable at the archaeological level. In fact, during this period a radical change is documented in the landscape of Barikot's hinterland, featuring the foundations of hundreds of Buddhist centres significantly associated with hydraulic infrastructure and resources (dams, aqueducts, pit-wells, tanks, springs, fertile lands, mountain passes) (OLIVIERI – VIDALE – MORIGI 1986, 98–115).

The new foreign rulers and their local *clientes* found in Buddhism a spiritual perspective theoretically inclusive towards a new-born multi-ethnic urban society, which would have found a barrier in the caste system of Brahmanic orthodoxy (FILIGENZI 2002). Religion and urbanity's mutual formations and influences in the northwest are complex and they cannot be drawn here (RAU – RÜPKE 2020), anyhow it is worth noting that the Saka-Parthian phase seems to represent a crucial step in the process.

Rooted in Swat from the Mauryan period, as attested by the Dharmarājika stūpa of Butkara I, it is only under the Saka-Parthians that Buddhism in Gandhāra saw a flourishing of monastic centres, sacred literature (written in the local language), and sacred complexes as well as of figurative art (see CALLIERI 2002). Indeed, it is in this vivid picture that the glorious season of Gandhāran art and architecture was born. Although the Kushan domination is traditionally depicted as the 'Golden age' of Gandhāran art, its first steps are clearly detectable in the new layout of the sanctuary of Butkara I, as well in the architectonic and decorative concepts conveyed by the G.St. 3 and associated buildings at the beginning of the Common Era. Besides the anticipation of the 'formal framework of the narrative cycles' in the decorative device of stūpas (FACCENNA 2004) and the new focal axis, the Great stupa – Great Vihāra, the time of G.St. 3 witnesses the mature formulation and experimentation of a new Buddhist figurative language. This is the earliest stylistic group, called the 'drawing style' by Faccenna (2002b) in the framework of which the earliest images of the Buddha were conceived. This new-born 'Gandhāran language of Swat' had a further stage – in terms of stylistic coherence and harmony and formal narrative elaboration – in the frieze of the Main Stūpa of Saidu Sharif I in the early second quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (FACCENNA 2001; 2002c). Local oral and literary tradition finally found a visual counterpart in Gandhāran art, speaking through this new language to a multi-ethnic society.

The Hellenization of material culture observed in Saka-Parthian settlements (ceramics, terracotta figurines, and technologies) and of artistic language observed at Butkara I and Saidu Sharif I together with the economic and political investment observed in Gandhāran urban settlements and Buddhist sites must be seen as parts of a wider social process (see FILIGENZI 2012).

EI

9 Amongst them, two of the buried individuals are particularly interesting: a male individual laid in the central chamber (41 BC–AD 57 cal.) is buried after a first-degree (mother-son) related female (167–46 BC cal.).

## A HISTORICAL SYNTHESIS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ALLEGED GREAT DEBASEMENT

It is now time to offer a historical outline of Saka rule in Swat and more broadly in Gandhāra, to which we should add a few considerations on the historical implications provided by the available evidence. In the first place, we should keep in mind the problematic identity of the ruler (or the rulers) called Azes/Aya in the coin legends. While Robert Senior (2001) argues in favour of the existence of one and only one Azes – which implies an exceedingly long reign from ca. 60 BC to the beginning of the Common Era – we think that the existence of two homonymous rulers and the chronological sequence Azes I – Azilises – Azes II are still convincing (MAC DOWALL 2007a, 100–101). We should also be aware that we do not have any epigraphic evidence for a personal commitment of Azes (I and/or II) in building policies and religious patronage. In the extant sources, the name of Azes occurs only in the dating formula according to the era he had established (NEELIS 2011). Interestingly enough, our evidence only attests the patronage activities promoted by local dynasts and notables in a later phase of the rule of Azes's dynasty between the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>10</sup> According to the analysis conducted by Falk and Bennett,<sup>11</sup> the first year of the Azes Era should fall in 47/46 BC rather than in the more traditional 58/57 BC. As the two scholars point out, the first year of an era does not necessarily correspond to the accession year of a ruler, but it could also be connected with the beginning of a centennial cycle – possibly the second centennial of the Arsacid era (246 BC). We should keep in mind that Azes belonged to the Saka tribes settled by the Parthians in Seistan in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and that during their stay, they must have adopted the Arsacid system of time reckoning.<sup>12</sup> When they started their migration towards Arachosia and NW India at the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC they brought with them the use of the Parthian Calendar. The Azes era, then, could be a creation of Azes I, but this is not to say that 58 (or 47) was his first regnal year: he could have started to exert his kingship a few years before, as shown for example by the earlier joint coinage with Spalirises. Likewise, we should not dismiss the possibility that the Azes era was established by Azes II to celebrate his illustrious ancestor and namesake. Whether we choose to use the traditional year 58/57 BC or the year 47/46 BC, the phase corresponding to the reconstruction and reinforcement of the walls at Barikot can be dated between 53 BC and 18 AD, which perfectly matches the period of Azes's rule in Gandhāra. As a consequence, we gain further evidence for the continuity of Indo-Greek policies in Swat under Azes's dynasty and for the role played by Bazira as a crucial settlement for control over this productive area. We may ask whether it is possible or not to identify the ruler who ordered the restoration of the walls of Bazira. In the administrative organization of the Saka kingdom, we find that one of the officers bore the title of *kuṭadhipati* 'master of the fortress' (BAUMS 2012, no. 11, 209–211), which seems to imply a military func-

10 According to the chronology of Gandhāran relic inscriptions drawn up by Baums (2018), the first inscription which presents a dating in the Azes era (BAUMS 2018, 66, no. 6) goes back to 3/4 or 13/14 AD. Two earlier inscriptions whose dating formula according to the Azes era is uncertain, can be dated to 37/36 BC and 9/8 BC respectively (BAUMS 2018, 66).

11 FALK – BENNETT 2009.

12 On the Saka migration routes see NEELIS 2011, 114–116, and especially p. 116 on the Saka group related to Azes: 'Since Azes initially issued coins jointly with Spalirises, an Indo-Parthian official, he appears to have expanded his dominion to Taxila and other areas of northwestern Pakistan from a base in the region of Arachosia in southeastern Afghanistan rather than directly inheriting the regions previously ruled by Maues'. DAFFINÀ 1967 is still quite a solid history of the Saka migration in Seistan. See also GAZERANI 2016, 15–18.



tion connected to the administration of a fortified area, in one place or perhaps more. More precisely, epigraphic evidence shows that in 9 AD, in the last phases of the reign of Azes II, this title is attested for Ajasena, king of Oḍi, in an inscribed golden sheet from Mata, Swat. It is well known that the kings of Oḍi exerted their rule in Swat as viceroys for the Saka kings, and then as independent rulers. Maybe it is not too farfetched to assume that the office of *kuṭadhipati* might be involved in the restoration as well as the reinforcement of the walls of Bazira and that these works were executed by order of the Saka king.

If we consider the numismatic findings in Swat discovered in an archaeological context, we will notice that in all the major sites such as Barikot, Butkara, Saidu Sharif, and Udegram the coinage of Azes II is far more abundant than the issues of Azes I, which on the contrary is quite scarce and isolated (FACCENNA 1980–81, 167–174; FACCENNA – CALLIERI – FILIGENZI 2003, 283–286; FACCENNA 2007, 168–170, 181; MAC DOWALL – CALLIERI 2004, 68). This seems to suggest a stronger presence of Azes II in Swat, at least from an economic point of view. The Saka coinage discovered at Barikot between 1984 and 2018 amounts to 37 specimens of which only one belongs to Azes I, while all others are the Azes II lion/bull type (Figs. 23a–b, 24).<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 23: Example of a coin of Azes II, Æ, Inv. No. 3166 BKG 11 K 105 (Photo by C. Moscatelli, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).



Fig. 24: Coin of Azes II, Æ, Inv. No. 3133 BKG 11 K 105 (Photo by C. Moscatelli, Copyright ISMEO – Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).

These coins were discovered between Macrophase 3b (the Indo-Scythian period) and Macrophase 4a, a stratum corresponding to the Kushan occupation phase, more precisely the reign of Kanishka I (ca. 127–150 AD). Considering that Azes's issues disappear under the reign of Huvishka (ca. 155–189 AD), one may observe that this coinage continued to circulate for more than a century. We know that the so-called *Great Debasement* took place at some point in the reign of Azes II (MAC DOWALL 2007b, 254). The Saka king responded to a putative crisis with this monetary reform consisting of a drastic reduction to 10% or even less in the silver content

<sup>13</sup> The standard weight of these issues is 30 g, but those discovered at Barikot weighed ca. 29 g.

of tetradrachms. From then on, the old weights and types were retained, but the coins were struck in billon, and the copper coinage ceased to be minted. The *Great Debasement* is usually regarded as the indicator of an economic crisis; however, this stands in clear contradiction to the flowering of building activities in the region both in the religious and the civic sphere. How could expensive works such as the restoration of the walls of Bazira have been achieved in a context of recession? Doris Meth Srinivasan asked the same question when considering the thriving Buddhist building programme of that period:

‘The high level of craftsmanship exhibiting local talent capable of integrating different influences is all the more remarkable since this period witnessed a monetary crisis, referred to as the “Great Debasement” [...] How could large religious monuments be built during an economically difficult time?’ (METH SRINIVASAN 2007).

We think that an answer to such a discrepancy could be found, if we approach the issue from the opposite point of view and assume that the Great Debasement – and the consequent monetary reform by Azes II – was not the sign of an economic crisis, but rather the sign of a thriving economy. This would be possible, if we assume that we are dealing with a market economy where the value of the coins was not determined by their amount in precious metal (*commodity coin*), but rather by their status of fiduciary money (or *fiat money* like paper currency). Like in modern states, Azes would establish the value of his coinage by decree. The same economic policy would have been continued by the successors of the Sakas in India including the Kushans. In fact, it is under the Sakas that trade exchanges with the Mediterranean began to thrive as witnessed by Strabo:

‘At any rate, when Gallus was prefect of Egypt [i.e. 29–26 BC], I accompanied him and ascended the Nile as far as Syene and the frontiers of Ethiopia, and I learned that as many as one hundred and twenty vessels were sailing from Myos Hormos to India, whereas formerly, under the Ptolemies, only a very few ventured to undertake the voyage and to carry on traffic in Indian merchandise’ (Strabo, II, 5.12)

Later in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Pliny the Elder complained the wealth drain from the Roman Empire towards India:

‘The subject is one well worthy of our notice, seeing that in no year does India drain our empire of less than five hundred and fifty millions of sesterces, giving back her own wares in exchange, which are sold among us at fully one hundred times their prime cost.’ (Pliny, *NH VI*, 26.101)

‘And by the lowest reckoning India, China and that [Arabian] peninsula take from our empire 100 million sestertii each year. That is the sum which our luxuries and our own women costs us.’ (Pliny, *NH XII*, 41.84)

Of course, Pliny’s figures are not to be taken at face value, but they give us an idea of the huge volume of precious metal that reached India at that time. This phenomenon may have led the Saka rulers to turn from a monetary system based on silver (which nonetheless was still used in smaller quantities to make billon) to one based on billon. Possibly, the passage of Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* reporting that at the time of the alleged travel of Apollonios (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) the Indians used coins of oricalchum and black brass for their purchases may

be an echo of this economic reform (Philostratus, II, 7).<sup>14</sup> One may be wondering why the Saka kings would turn to a system based on billon, if a considerable amount of precious metal was available. A possible answer is provided by the example of the Achaemenid royal economy and, more specifically, by the witness of Strabo, who reports that under the Persians usually gold and silver from tributes were converted into jewelry and silverware. These artistically crafted metals were considered to have better grace, either to be offered as gifts or to appear in royal treasures and deposits (Strabo, XV, 3.21). The Sakas might have followed the same practice with the precious metal made available through the Indo-Roman trade: those riches were employed to finance major investments such as military and religious architecture, while the currency in billon was intended for smaller trade.

Several decades of excavations and historical analysis have shown that the relatively peripheral position of Swat did not imply that its economy was a local phenomenon, suffice it to think of its role in the increasing long-distance/transregional trade under the Achaemenids (see in general IORI 2018), the huge military efforts of Alexander to control the area, the considerable architectural activity under the Indo-Greeks and the Sakas. All these factors seem to point towards the presence of a thriving, interconnected economy and a strategical importance of the region.

If we accept the existence of Azes II, the evidence from Swat seems to reveal the image of a very dynamic ruler, who shored up the territorial gains of his ancestor and opened a new phase in the economic life of his kingdom.

OC

## CONCLUSION

During the Saka-Parthian period Swat and Gandhara witnessed an intense building program both in urban centres and Buddhist sanctuaries. Likewise, we observe changes in the form of luxury items and the introduction of new technologies as well. This might be the result of an increased mobility of goods and ideas between the Mediterranean and India through commerce. In fact, the archaeological and historiographical evidence seems to challenge the traditional model of an economic recession known as ‘the Great Debasement’ and lead us to reconsider this phenomenon in a positive light.

OC, EI, LMO

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