

PART I
ANALYTICAL STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Swat still bears conspicuous traces of its Buddhist past, particularly striking beyond the west bank of the Swat River. The profusion and splendour of monuments, which one can still easily imagine based on the ruins, and the luxuriant beauty of the surrounding scenery provide eloquent evidence of the fascination ancient Uḍḍiyāna held all over the ancient Buddhist world.

As a matter of fact, Uḍḍiyāna long remained – even after the advent of Islam – a place of pilgrimage, as attested to as late as the thirteenth century by the direct testimony of Tibetan pilgrims (Botto 1959: 266; Tucci 1971 [1940]; 1977: 69-70). As for the physical correspondence of Uḍḍiyāna to some modern geographic entity, different hypotheses have been put forward (Donaldson 2001: 8 ff.). Among these, mention must be made of the idea of Benoytosh Bhattacharyya (1924: XXXII), who identifies the ancient Uḍḍiyāna with the western part of Assam. However, most of the contrasting opinions are mainly based on textual evidence and do not take into account the archaeological sources, which instead clearly lead to the identification of Uḍḍiyāna with modern-day Swat or, possibly, with a region centred on modern-day Swat but stretching over a larger area.

From an archaeological point of view, Swat is one of the best-known regions of the Indian subcontinent. Systematic archaeological investigations have been carried out there since 1956 by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (MAI) of the IsMEO/IsIAO in close collaboration with the Department of Archaeology & Museums, Govt. of Pakistan (DOAM).² A constant and capillary activity of archaeological surveys and excavations is also being carried out by teams from the DOAM and the University of Peshawar.

As consistently attested to by these thorough territorial investigations, dramatic changes seem to have affected the region sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries. The network of Buddhist settlements – so dense in the early centuries CE – fell into decline, accompanied by a general decay of the social, economic and territorial system supporting it. Thus the archaeological record seems to perfectly match the scanty textual sources, mainly represented by the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims who travelled thorough the region. The number and wealth of the sacred areas, still extolled by Songyun in 520 CE, had been considerably diminished by the time of Xuanzang, who in 620 not only notes the state of decay and abandonment of the monasteries but also criticises the conduct of the monks as being no longer congruent with the Buddhist doctrine.

This evidence apparently contradicts the persistent fame of Uḍḍiyāna as a source of teachings and teachers for Tibetan Buddhism and Bön. These teachers include revered personalities such as Padmasambhava (to whom the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet is traditionally attributed), his legendary predecessor Garab Dorje, and other masters coming from Gilgit – a region lying very near to Upper Swat – who are credited with having contributed greatly to the transformation of the primitive Tibetan Bön into a codified system (Tucci 1958: 282; Hoffmann 1969). If that is the case, then we may infer that Uḍḍiyāna must have also exercised a decisive influence on the profuse artistic and cultural blossoms that grew out of this. However, such sweeping doctrinal and artistic developments as well as great masters, which were destined to leave the indelible stamp of the Vajrayāna on Buddhism, apparently flowered amid melancholy ruins, leaving only faint traces of their existence in their homeland.

² This institution, the first and most long-standing Italian archaeological mission outside the Mediterranean, was founded by Giuseppe Tucci, who was personally involved through what may be considered not only the epilogue to his Himalayan expeditions, but also his last great Asian exploration. I refer the reader to *East and West* 2006 (a special issue celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the MAI) for a summary of the activities and related bibliography. As for the IsIAO, it was closed in November 2011 by legislative decree as part of a drastic spending review process.

These two seemingly irreconcilable pictures – the gloomy and the glorious – warn us against dangerous forms of reductionism. Reality might be more complex than we can imagine and the links between religious/artistic culture and political-economic conditions might have been rather non-linear in ancient Swat.

It happens sometimes that uneven historical documentation leads to the emphasis of cultural phenomena at the expenses of others that, due to a series of circumstances, stand in the background. A case in point is the disparity between Kashmir and Swat/Uḍḍiyāna. The prestigious testimony of the *Rājatarāṅginī* on one hand and the well-documented influence of Kashmiri art and philosophy on the Second Diffusion of Buddhism on the other have produced a sort of centripetal trend that attempts to trace back to Kashmir the original input for any distinguished artistic production of the late antique period in the north-west regions of the Indian subcontinent.³ By contrast, because of the blurred picture produced by contradictory archaeological data and scarce textual sources, the late antique Uḍḍiyāna remained in a dark corner of the history, and the original Holy Land celebrated in Tibetan sources was confined to the realm of legends.

Among these apparent anomalies a special place is occupied by the Buddhist rock sculptures that flourished in Swat in the seventh to eighth centuries. In a period when the ancient splendour was already on the wane before becoming irrevocably overshadowed by Islam, Buddha and bodhisattva figures started populating numerous paths in the form of carved reliefs on rock walls, isolated boulders and stelae set in the ground (Figs. 1-2).⁴ Due to the apparently unfavourable conditions, this artistic phenomenon has long remained almost ignored or underestimated, and in any case regarded as having little artistic value and vague theoretical foundations.



Fig. 1 – Relief on rock wall (after Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 36, pl. 10.3; modified by the author)

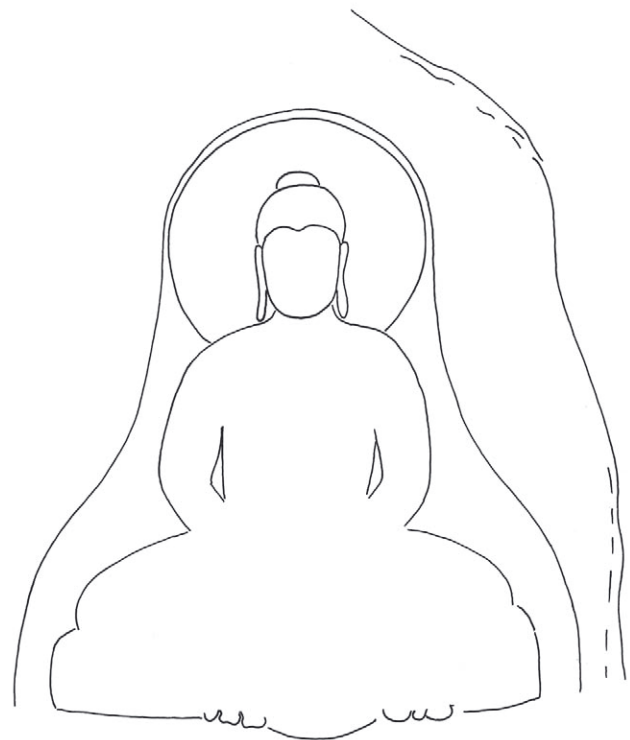


Fig. 2 – Relief on stela (drawing by the author)

³ An exemplary case of this “Kashmiri overflowing” is represented by the attribution to Kashmir of a large group of bronze sculptures that started appearing in the antique market from the mid-twentieth century (see Chap. 3, fn. 4). Most of them, and especially the earliest ones, can now be safely attributed to the area of Swat/Gilgit.

⁴ In many cases the provenance of the stelae is unknown, either because there is no record of the exact site of the find, or because they were found lying on the ground, indicating they were removed – and theoretically a considerable distance – from their original setting.

Nevertheless, an integrated territorial analysis, to the extent that circumstances in Swat have allowed, clearly shows that much can be hidden in the folds of macroscopic evidence. New discoveries prompt new approaches, and new approaches lead to unexpected discoveries. We now have to rethink all of the sources at our disposal, trying to verify whether and to what degree they fail to reveal certain significant changes that may have accompanied or followed the “crisis” of Uḍḍiyāna and its Buddhist establishment. In this process, the testimony of the rock sculpture is far more valuable than we used to believe, since it partly fills a void in the history of late antiquity and provides further evidence for the existence in this period of a vital, polycentric cultural world stretching across the Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya region.

Thus, a work which had started as a census of a corpus of sculptures progressively took a different direction, which was somehow dictated by the material evidence itself. As texts are not simply a combination of words, similarly visual art is not a mere matter of figures. In the same way as texts, “figures” in any given domain can only be interpreted in relation to each other, which means that they cannot be read and understood out of context, without a comparative knowledge and philological background. Besides, we cannot work on them without assuming that they respond to a conventionalised system of communication, which is, like all kinds of meaning systems, independent and relational at the same time. They follow their own specialised code and set of rules, which depend on the nature and modality of the medium, and yet that code is intricately related to others, either derived from heuristic approaches or unconscious stereotypes, but all relevant to the same cultural reality.

Moreover, visual communication is not, as it seems to be often believed, a mere translation in visual terms of written sources but rather, like written sources, a translation of concepts that belong to specific cultural contexts. This is even truer for formative stages of reference models, as our sculptures appear to be. Then, in general, texts and iconography can coincide, but this happens quite seldom. More often, they are simply in accordance with each other, in spirit rather than in forms. Even normative literature can be deceptive if taken as absolute value, since the simplest survey shows how many variants and discordances can exist, even in the same context, between abstract prescriptions and material realisations of artworks.

In addition, very often in the history of Indian subcontinent material evidence represents the only vestige of a rich cultural past, as in the case of our corpus of sculptures. However, any source can be deceptive, and without cross-comparisons with other sources, of similar and different nature, the risk increases.

For all these reasons, a descriptive catalogue of little-known sculptures from a little-known period could not prescind from a broader research focus on their theoretical, religious, social and aesthetic values. Thus, the work presented here is an attempt towards an inclusive interpretation of artworks still to be properly framed in the flow of history and reconnected with their cultural universe, a goal that can only be accomplished through collective work and a multidisciplinary approach.

Nevertheless, for the time being we can try at least to bring these sculptures more sharply into focus. Less alluring than the “Hellenised” works of the past, and overshadowed by the sumptuous art that the later Buddhist revival produced elsewhere, they still represent a document of great historical significance exactly for their being in a grey area, whereby we can observe a process that, besides transforming and replacing the prestigious artistic tradition of the past, also announces the forthcoming pan-Himalayan vocabulary.