

CHAPTER 7: THE “ALIEN” PRESENCES

7.1 – The undecipherable plurality of forms

Side by side with the Buddhist subjects, which represent the bulk of the rock sculpture of Swat, there are some “atypical” specimens that, although borrowing their models from a different religious context (and perhaps even belonging to it), share with the rest of the sculptures the same chronological horizon and artistic language. Their presence, marginal as it is in mere numerical terms, introduces into an otherwise homogeneous panorama some elements of dissonance which attract attention and pose a question of appurtenance: are they foreign bodies challenging the rival system, or are they to be viewed as immigrants adopted and “domesticated” by Buddhism? So far no evidence has come to light that can answer this question. We can only take account of the existence of these discordant subjects and assign them a special place, whatever their significance may have been, awaiting any new data that could shed light on this unexpected coexistence.

7.2 – The Durgā-like goddess

Only attested by one solitary example (S70; II: Figs. 72a,b) is a female divinity, portrayed in the immediate aftermath of slaying a goat by decapitation. The subject matter, certainly derived from the sphere of autochthonous beliefs, shows a singular affinity with the Durgā iconography and, at the same time, an equally singular divergence from it. Just as Durgā kills the demon Mahiṣa by cutting off his head, here an eight-armed goddess decapitates a caprid, whose head lies on the ground.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which cult environment this iconography referred to – a local cult influenced by an organised and officially “dominant” religious system or vice versa. It is equally difficult to ascertain whether the “official” iconographic model is Buddhist or Hindu.²²⁰

Tucci’s observations on the matter, as insightful and comprehensive as ever, render detailed analysis of the stela superfluous. I would, however, like to add a few remarks that I think bear out his interpretation. Ultimately, Tucci sees in this variation on Durgā iconography “a peculiar local variety of some homologous religious entities” (Tucci 1963: 152), in particular of a female divinity worshipped by the hunters as the supreme she-master of all ibexes in the mountain areas between Gilgit and Swat (*ibid.*: 153). The antiquity, persistence, and diffusion of this cult finds confirmation in the Bronze Age graffiti of Gogdara I – an expression of “evolved hunters” societies, iconographic themes of which belong to a “Nuristani” horizon that appears now, in the light of recent discoveries, more ancient and widespread than previously believed (Olivieri and Vidale 2004: 172 ff.; Olivieri 2008, 2013).

In the mature phase of Gogdara I (end of first Millennium BCE) the wild goat (ibex) is the most reiterated icon (Olivieri 1998: 84 ff.; Id. 2013: 122, fn. 49; Olivieri and Vidale 2004: 153 ff.; Id. 2006: 124), while among the paintings of the rock shelter of Sargah-sar in the Kandak Valley (Vidale and Olivieri 2002: 208-209; figs. 3, 18, 19) and in the graffiti of Muhammad-patai (Kotah Valley) we have the explicit representation of

²²⁰ An interesting case of inclusion of a “Durgā” – or Durgā-like goddess – in a Buddhist context is documented in the Late Period (seventh/eighth century CE) at Tapa Sardar (Afghanistan), where a colossal clay sculpture of an eight-armed goddess of the Mahiṣāsuramardīnī type was found in one of the chapels of the Upper Terrace (the main cultic area of the site), vis-à-vis an equally colossal image of a bejewelled Buddha. See Taddei 1992; Silvi Antonini 2005; Filigenzi 2008a: 57; Verardi 2010: 346-347. Evidence of a very similar installation – a colossal Mahiṣāsuramardīnī in a Buddhist context – was also brought to light at Mes Aynak (Engel 2013: 55; Filigenzi and Giunta, in print), although in this case only scanty traces survive of the sculpture and its setting.

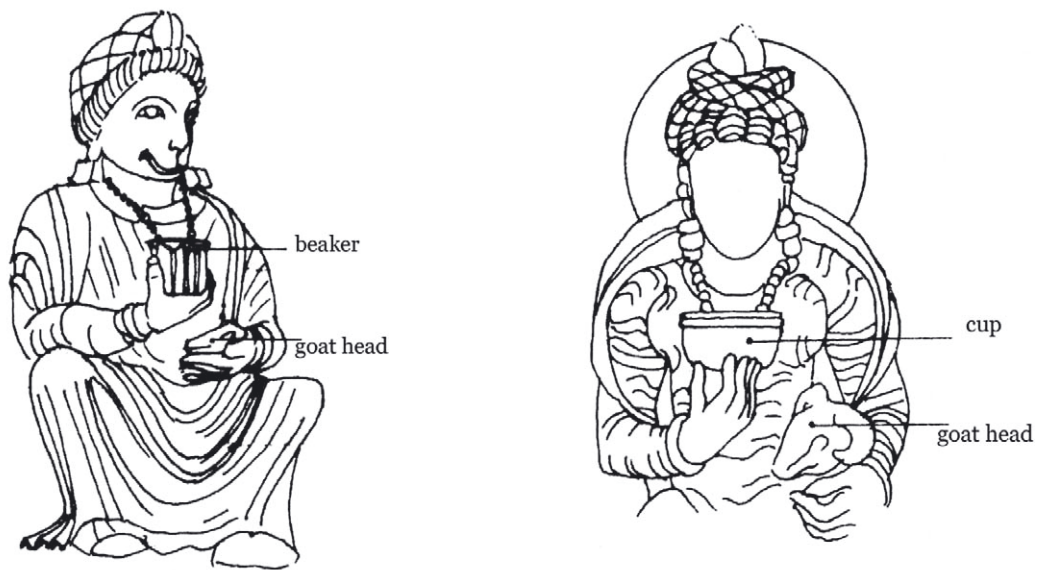


Fig. 45 – Śonkur R̥ṣi temple (Nasogy, Upper Kulu Valley): Durgā (after Diserens 1986: 465, pl. Vb)

a divinity (female?) standing on an ibex. In both cases we are confronted with an iconographical opposition between the ibex and the feline, this also well attested at Gogdara (Olivieri 2011: 110; Id. 2013: 169).

A comparable image may possibly be offered by a similar depiction of Oshibat (König 1994: 114, Abb. 18). Clearly reflecting the same cult tradition are the wood sculptures of Kafirstan, which show a woman riding a goat (Edelberg 1960: 250, figs. 7-9; Tucci 1963: 154; Motamedi and Edelberg 1968), but I would like to add a curious example from Nasogy, in the Upper Kulu Valley (Diserens 1986: 465, pl. Vb; here, Fig. 45). On a relief carved in our own times, which decorates the door of the temple of Śonkur R̥ṣi, Durgā armed with a trident is portrayed on an animal that she incongruously holds by the tail, in evident superimposition with the Durgā Mahiṣāsura-mardīnī iconography. However, another and even more interesting iconographic superimposition – in this case evidently with the ancient model of the goddess standing on or riding a wild goat – has to do with the pose of the goddess, seated (?) in an unnaturally rigid way on her mount, and the figure of the animal itself. This is meant to be a lion, as we can tell from the schematic mane clinging to the neck and the long tail, but otherwise faithfully reproduces the features of a caprid. Modest as it is in craftsmanship, the relief constitutes an important document, revealing simultaneously a twofold, persisting iconography: the female divinity reigning over the animals of the mountainous regions, and her time-honoured symbiosis with Durgā, the goddess whose characteristics are somehow – as indeed the local populations recognise – transformed into a cultured, “official” version.²²¹

²²¹ For a similar case of the assimilation of a mountain goddess with Durgā in Swat, see Tucci (1977: 28). The case in point is of particular interest due to its striking witness to the transmission of a pattern across different religious traditions: the cult of the



Figs. 46-47 – Female deities holding a vessel and a severed goat’s head
(after Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 184, pls. 143.1 and 143.2 respectively; modified by the author)

We can find other traces of this world – tenuous and scattered as they may be – living side by side with the dominant Buddhist culture. Actually, a number of late Gandharan works attest to the existence of female deities whose realm is the ominous region beyond the domesticated enclosure of the human societies, epitomised by their connection and even translational identity with the animal world (Taddei 1987: figs. 9-13; Kurita 1988-1990: II, figs. 483, 750; Zwalf 1996: n. 105, p. 123, with additional references; here, Figs. 46-47). Severed heads of animals and cups or beakers in these deities’ hands indicate their demand for sacrifices, sacrifices that would possibly propitiate their ambiguous and potentially dangerous nature.

It is a fact that Uḍḍiyāna, besides being revered as the land where many great teachers of both the Vajrayāna and Bonpo traditions were either born or passed through, was also well known as a land of magic with special “female” connotations. The capricious and ambiguous *shisha*, *peri*, *hapiḍei*, and *rū-i* of the local folklore of the northern areas of Pakistan (Lorimer 1929; Jettmar 1961: 79 ff.; Tucci 1963: 155; Id. 1977: 69; Cacopardo and Cacopardo 2001: *passim*) are most likely the progenitricies of the *ḍākiṇī* dignified by Vajrayāna Buddhism. This further reinforces the hypothesis that a fecund osmosis occurred between Buddhism and aboriginal beliefs. The latter were probably shared by a broad range of “mountain peoples” from the Hindu Kush to the Himalaya, where they were further blended with Bön. To all appearances, time is giving us ever more cogent arguments supporting Tucci’s idea that this religious substratum in Swat, given its non-formalised structure, was never uprooted by Buddhism (and not even by Islam, for that matter), but rather found its way into the Buddhist tradition itself by means of the Vajrayāna system (Tucci 1977: 68-69).

mountain (Mount Karamar; see Chap. 1.3) and of an aboriginal *devī* (to which Mount Karamar was sacred), the later assimilation of the goddess into Bhīmā Devī, the self-made (*svayambhū*) image of the goddess, and the survival of the cult under Islam in the form of a woman fakir or fairy whose name, Shehr Banu, corresponds to Siṃhavāhinī, an epithet of Durgā. In Mount Karamar, as we have seen, A. Foucher identifies a spot mentioned by Xuanzang. A different interpretation is given by Nasim Khan, who thinks that the place described by Xuanzang is to be identified with the site of Kashmir Smast (Nasim Khan 2006: 11-13, 43). Here, the Archaeological Department of Peshawar University is presently conducting surveys and small scale excavations which have also yielded evidence of a Saivite cult. The name of Bhīmā is largely present among the epigraphic records from the site (H. Falk 2003a; Nasim Khan 2006: 74, 102-103; Srinivasan 2011). Whatever the correspondence with the ancient topography is, the fact remains that both places bear a distinctive Saivite connotation.

7.3 – Sūrya and Gaṇeśa

Long known to us, but erroneously interpreted in terms of both iconography and chronology, is another very peculiar relief, housed in a small natural cave about forty feet above a road in the locality known as Shinkerdar (or Shingardar), or, more precisely, near the village of Tindo-dag. Today its state of preservation is so poor that any analysis needs to be based upon archive photographs dating to the late 1950s, when the relief, although badly worn, still preserved significant details (C116: II: Figs. 116a,b,c; GS 41).

The relief shows a figure in nomadic attire, standing frontally on a pedestal along the front of which a row of animals in frontal position are represented. All around the central figure a number of lesser figures are to be seen: four of them at his sides and a fifth on the upper left side, while the sixth, a small kneeling figure on the lower left side, may have had a pendant on the opposite side. The cave is still barely accessible, notwithstanding the presence of a stairway cut by order of the late Wali of Swat; wide and high enough at the entrance, it narrows progressively towards the interior to become a small passage, where further progress can just be made on all fours, although the original floor level might have been covered by accumulation layers. This passage leads to a broader recess (probably artificially enlarged to create a sort of dome and high enough to allow the visitor to stand up), which receives air and light from a hole at the top. The relief was executed on the right wall at the entrance. One of the most attractive scenes in rock art, a huge image of the Buddha in *dhyānāsana* looking towards the river and the Mankyal (C115; II: Fig. 115; GS 2) stands immediately below the cave.

The relief was first reported by Stein, who not only described it, proposing hypothetical reconstruction for details which were by then already lost, but advanced a precise interpretation of the subject. On account of the presumption that the nearby *stūpa* was to be attributed to Uttarasena,²²² Stein identified the main figure of the relief as Uttarasena himself portrayed as a donor, possibly bearing a miniature *stūpa* in his hands. In his opinion, the animal figures on the pedestal must have been lions (Stein 1929: 51; 1930: 32-33). This interpretation was later rejected by Tucci, who considered the attribution of the *stūpa* to Uttarasena highly unlikely (Tucci 1958: 299-302). According to him, the relief depicted “the local deity with his attendants or a king of the Kus-āṇa period with his retinue” (*ibid.*: 295). On the grounds of the *prabhāmaṇḍala* – an iconographic device of frequent occurrence on Kushan coins – Tucci suggested for the sculpture a date somewhere between the reigns of Huviṣka and Hormizd (*ibidem*).

As a matter of fact, all the extant elements which lend themselves to comparison with other contexts point to a much later chronology. In both costume and size the central figure, like stela S69 (II: Figs. 71a,b; GS 39), even though (deliberately, we may suppose) linked to the Kushan tradition, closely resembles the donors of high rank that are depicted in some bronze sculptures dating from the reign of the Paṭola Śāhi of Gilgit.²²³ Moreover, the iconographic features as a whole point to a different interpretation. The surrounding figures are haloed too. As for the animal figures represented on the pedestal, the identification proposed by Stein as six lions (1930: 33) is not supported by any significant detail. It is a fact that in the old photographs we refer to, six animals are still discernible. However, if we take into account that the right corner is missing and that the feet of the main figure standing on the pedestal would have been oddly off-centred if there had been only six animals, the existence of a seventh animal, now lost, does not seem too incautious a supposition. The identification of the animals as lions is also merely hypothetical; it would be just as legitimate to identify them as horses and the subject of the relief as Sūrya with his retinue, in one of the possible local variants.

²²² The legend of Uttarasena and the *stūpa* he would have erected in the same spot where his elephant suddenly fell dead is narrated by Xuanzang, who had heard it from local people (Beal 1958 [1884]: III, 126).

²²³ See for example two famous sculptures, the bejewelled Buddha between two *stūpas* (Pal 1975: 106, no. 30a,b; Fussman 1993: 43-47, no. 6.6, pl. 31) and the so called “Buddha of Nandivikramādityanandin” (Pal 1975: 108-109, no. 31; Fussman 1993: 39-43, no. 6.5, pl. 30; here, Fig. 48); I refer to Fussman (1993) and von Hinüber (2004) for additional bibliographic references on the sculptures at issue and on the question of the Paṭola Śāhi of Gilgit.



Fig. 48 – Portrait of Nandivikramādityanandin (after Pal 1975: no. 31; drawing by the author)

As for the four secondary figures at his sides, with a fair degree of likelihood we can recognise the one on the lower right as Daṇḍin/Skanda holding a spear and, perhaps, a shield, as the accentuated projection of his outline on the right side seems to suggest. We may therefore conjecture that the figure on the left represents Piṅgala. Of the two figures above we can only make out the more slender and elongated silhouettes, which we may attribute to Sūrya's two wives. Finally, on account of the way in which the arms of the central figure are bent, one may infer that the hands were held at the sides of the breast. In order to show that such a position is fully consistent with a representation of Sūrya we may cite some images from Mathurā that match our figure perfectly with regard to the position of the arms and attributes.²²⁴

²²⁴ See e.g. Rosenfield 1967: figs. 43-45; Pandey 1989: pls. VI-VII; Klimburg-Salter 1995: 133, fig. 8; 231, fig. 222; the latter is a Gupta specimen but with a similar arrangement of arms and attributes. The hands held at the sides of the breast are a constant characteristic of the Sūrya images; in the sculptures cited here the comparison with the Sūrya of Tindo-dag is, however, particularly significant because of the shape and position of the attributes, whose profile scarcely projects over the shoulders, if at all.

Of particular interest is the figure on the upper left, which has no pendant on the opposite side. Although much defaced, on account of its peculiar shape (especially the unmistakable profile of the head) this figure can be reasonably identified as a four-armed Gaṇeśa and suitably compared with the two depictions of this same god mentioned before, respectively from Qal‘a, in Swat (C98; II: Figs. 98a,c; GS 40), and from Mane-tangai, in Dir, where Gaṇeśa appears in connection with a major figure of Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi (see Chap. 4.4; Fig. 33). Despite the poor preservation, all the three specimens show a general compliance with the same model. The Tindo-dag Gaṇeśa has both his back hands lifted up, holding attributes which are no longer recognisable; the front left hand rests on his lap, while the front right one is in *varadamudrā*. Below, on the left, on what must have once been the god’s seat, we discern a projecting silhouette, possibly to be interpreted as the front part of an animal sitting upright. On the basis of comparison with other known specimens, we may identify the subject of this relief as Gaṇeśa on a lion.²²⁵

The significance of this iconographic scheme, as of other famous coeval iconographic representations linked with the solar cult, could be debated at length. On this occasion I shall limit myself to stressing a few significant features: to begin with, the possible relationship with the huge Buddha image carved on the eastern side of the hill, which points to an analogy with Bāmiyān, where a solar deity is depicted on the vault over the head of the smaller of the two colossal Buddhas;²²⁶ secondly, its being housed inside a cave, a situation which prompts us to draw a parallel, for example, with Dokhtar-e Noshirwan.²²⁷ This similarity had already been pointed out a few years ago by D. Klimburg-Salter, who did not go into the interpretation of the Tindo-dag relief, but contested the early date traditionally attributed to it (Klimburg-Salter 1993: 357). In my opinion, this relief, like the abovementioned stela S69 (certainly depicting the same subject),²²⁸ can be dated to the time when Buddhist rock art was at its height; the image of Gaṇeśa, the pedestal with zoomorphic figures, and the whole iconographic scheme all assign the relief to that chronological horizon, although a peculiar figurative language and significance are to be noticed.

Moreover, the relief not only seems to fall into line with other works of art of the Turki Śāhi period but could even be closely connected with their own cultural characterisation.²²⁹ To what degree the solar myths played an important role among them with regard to the legitimation of kingship can be inferred from al-Bīrūni’s tale

²²⁵ Close comparison is offered by a marble stela representing Gaṇeśa found in Afghanistan and published by Verardi (1977). The god is four-armed: the upper right arm holds a *daṇḍa* (?), the lower left presumably the sweetmeat (*modakas*), and the two remaining arms are partially lost. The big belly, full of *modakas* and surrounded by the *sarpa-yajñopavīta*, is probably intended to represent Gaṇeśa as *lambodara*, the Lord of the universe, who encloses everything (see Seetharam 1952: 31, 43). Gaṇeśa, wearing wide trousers instead of the usual *dhoti*, is sitting in *ardhaparyankāsana*, with left leg bent horizontally and the right one bent vertically, on a crouching lion, turned to the right with frontal head. The position of Gaṇeśa’s legs and of the lion in the Tindo-dag relief would therefore be reversed with respect to the Afghanistan Gaṇeśa, in what is to be considered in any case a (meaningless?) variant.

²²⁶ Among the rich bibliographic materials on Bāmiyān, see the comprehensive work of Klimburg-Salter (1989: esp. 154 ff.), and the study by Grenet (1995), who interprets the solar deity depicted on the vault as an image of Mithra. The association between the Buddha and the rising or victorious sun is frequently suggested by both literature and iconography; on this subject see for example the old but still useful study by Rowland (1938), and a new approach to this topic by Quagliotti (2000).

²²⁷ On the painting of Dokhtar-e Noshirwan (or Nigar) see Mode 1992; Klimburg-Salter 1993; Grenet 1995. I refer to the latter for a survey of the previous studies on this painting, interpreted initially as a royal portrait, and later as a deity (Ohrmazd according to Mode, Mithra according to Grenet), or as an unspecified portrait modelled after the image of Ohrmazd, according to the more cautious formulation of Klimburg-Salter. The peculiar features of the subject and the complexity of its cultural background are worthy of attention from many points of view and different fields of competence. As regards comparison with the Tindo-dag relief, I cannot rule out that in the future we could find further links; for the time being, I simply wish to underline that both the works are executed in a shallow cave, barely accessible, which allows for no rituals unless performed by one individual or very few persons (see below).

²²⁸ Besides this stela, Tucci (1958: 300) mentions – but with no graphic illustration – a group of rock reliefs near Nawe-kalai - Kota, among which he saw a standing figure very similar to that of Tindo-dag. The same figure is referred to by Faccenna (1985: 101), who records its being recently destroyed.

²²⁹ We know that at the time and in the territory of the Turki Śāhi iconographic evidence of northern solar deities as well as of Gaṇeśa is not only frequent, but can also be found in a Buddhist context. For a survey see Kuwayama 1976; in addition, see Bernard and Grenet 1981 on the (then) newly discovered Sūrya from Khair Khaneh. On the two statues of Sūrya from Khair Khaneh, however, see Tanabe 1996, suggesting an earlier dating. On the Gaṇeśa images from Afghanistan, see Verardi 1977 (cf. fn. 225) and Kuwayama 1991.

about Barhatakin, who is consecrated as king after a sort of ritual birth from the womb of the mountain, just like the rising sun (Sachau 1910: II, 10). The stratagem certainly takes as its model mythological themes of the time connecting the solar deity with the mountain, as for example the birth of Mithra. A similar symbolism is alluded to by the Kushan coins showing the king sitting on, or emerging from, the rock (Rosenfield 1967: pls. II, 20; III, 44, 46-47 etc.). Most probably the king/sun association, so firmly rooted in the common imagery of ancient times, was emphasised in particular moments by certain sovereigns or dynasties, and it would be not surprising that this association was celebrated with ritual performances, possibly linked with cyclic events of the calendar.

al-Bīrūnī's tale about Barhatakin, obviously in some way disfigured, could have recorded a ceremony of this kind, and the shallow cave of Tindo-dag as well, oriented towards the east and housing the image of a solar deity, looking out over a wide, open space, could have served such a device. The cave, with its narrow entrance and inner recess,²³⁰ also recalls other details of al-Bīrūnī's tale: Barhatakin entered a cave in Kabul "which none could enter except by creeping on hands and knees", but supplied with water and victuals for some days (Sachau 1910: II, 10). This prompts us to assume the existence of an inner recess. In due time Barhatakin crept out of it "in the presence of the people, who looked on him as a new-born baby" (*ibidem*). In conclusion, the Tindo-dag cave, just like the Kabul cave, offers all the suitable characteristics for a *darśan*, i.e. the hierophanic vision of the king brought forth by the rocky womb like the glorious rising sun.²³¹

The presence of Gaṇeśa adds something peculiar to the iconographic scheme of the Tindo-dag relief. Afghanistan has yielded a number of Gaṇeśa images (see fn. 229), one of them bearing a dedicatory inscription by Khiṅgala, king of Uḍḍiyāna.²³² To this evidence we can add the reliefs from Swat and Dir, which probably show a Tantric version of the same deity, but as far as I know, there are no suitable comparisons for such an unusual iconography outside the Swat territory.²³³ The elephant-god's multifarious personality lends itself to various hypotheses, all of them equally probable: his connection with Sūrya may possibly be accounted for by his relationship with the intermediate sphere and with the Navagrahas, or alternatively in the light of his relationship with the celestial elephants, that is to say with clouds, rain and waters. This would not be out of place in solar iconography, as attested first of all by the Anantagumphā and Lala Bhagat evidence. On the other hand, it may simply stand as an initial, auspicious symbol of success and wealth.²³⁴

²³⁰ My thanks are due to P. Callieri and F. Martore, who provided me with a detailed description of the Tindo-dag cave.

²³¹ al-Bīrūnī says that Barhatakin came out dressed in his Turkish clothes; preservation of this detail in the tale is probably due to the strong impression made by his appearance, much like the solar deity of "northern" type.

²³² This image of Gaṇeśa from Gardez was first published by Tucci (1958: 328, fig. 40), who read in the inscription the name of Khiṅgala king of Uḍḍiyāna. This reading is endorsed by Kuwayama (1991), who also briefly discusses the works thereafter devoted to this subject. For a more recent reassessment of the numismatic and literary evidence related to the enigmatic name of Khiṅgāla/Khinkhila/Khinjil (both as ruler and dynasty), see Kuwayama (1999: 41-45) and Abdur Rahman (2002).

²³³ Sometimes Gaṇeśa is represented along with Sūrya, but as part of a group of deities accompanying the sun god or by the side of the Navagrahas (Getty 1936: 30-31; Pandey 1989: 124 ff.), without any particular prominence.

²³⁴ According to some scholars Gaṇeśa was originally a symbol of the sun god (Getty 1936: 1); a form of this god is worshipped in Nepal as Sūrya-Gaṇapati (*ibid.*: 39). The *Mudgala-purāṇa* speaks of eight incarnations of Gaṇeśa, the sixth being Sūrya (Granoff 1991: 90-91). The symbolic link between the solar deity and the vital principle of water is a recurrent motif in iconography, often expressed by the elephant; an elephant-headed human figure is probably represented at Anantagumphā, in Orissa (first century CE), along with an elephant carrying a bunch of lotuses in his trunk, near a representation of Sūrya; in the same cave, another frieze contains a Gaja-Lakṣmī (Banerjea 1948: 56); a similar scheme is repeated at Lala Bhagat, in Kanpur (second century CE) (*ibid.*: 55). Different, but in some way related to the same symbolism, is the *gajasuṇḍa* carried by Aruṇa in some representations of the solar god in Bengal since the eighth century; it symbolises, according to Pandey (1989: 132), an asterism which, in conjunction with the sun, brings rain. In the complex personality of Gaṇeśa a prominent role is undoubtedly played by his link with the mythological substratum of the celestial elephant, symbol of water, growth, wealth and success (see Nava 1988: 45 ff.). A possible connection between Gaṇeśa and favourable asterisms could be encrypted in the dedicatory inscription of the Gardez Gaṇeśa, consecrated under the constellation of Viśākhā and the *lagna* of the lion (Kuwayama 1991: 269). Whatever the presence of Gaṇeśa may stand for, in a context such the Tindo-dag relief it suggests an idea of fortune and prosperity, so enhancing a possible allusion to the analogy between the solar function and the institution of kingship.



Figs. 49a,b – Terracotta statuette representing Gaṇeśa (courtesy G. Stacul)

Processes that are sometimes conventionally labelled as religious syncretism manifest subtle contents, deep roots and complex reasons that we may no longer be able to understand clearly but which we can nevertheless still perceive, as in the case in question. On account of his manifold and eclectic personality, Gaṇeśa could well be adopted in diverse cultural and iconographic contexts, with either negative or positive connotations,²³⁵ in the subtlest speculation as in the simplest devotion. Gaṇeśa’s popularity in Swat does not seem to have been limited to official religious art, as is shown by the find, so far unique but nonetheless significant, of a small image of the god at Kalako-deray in the upper layers of the site (Fig. 49).²³⁶ Roughly executed, this small clay statuette represents a very useful document, as it gives us an everyday or, I would say, “normal” image of a complex and stratified religious culture, though one which lies within or vis-à-vis the hegemony of Buddhism.

7.4 – Tindo-dag and Barikot: sacred topography and political geography

The interpretation proposed for the Tindo-dag relief has become more than conjecture after recent discoveries, beginning with the imposing temple unearthed by the Italian Archaeological Mission on the top of Barikot hill, very close to the Tindo-dag cave, which possibly relates our relief to a broader political plan.²³⁷

²³⁵ Gaṇeśa, as lord of obstacles (*Vighneśvara*), can place or remove them (Getty 1936: 6-7). In the Buddhist context he maintains the same ambiguity, being either a benevolent deity or a demon to be subdued (*ibid.*: 37-38; Bhattacharyya 1974: 521). Of particular interest, as we have seen (see Chap. 4.4), is his presence at the bottom of reliefs depicting Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi.

²³⁶ On the site of Kalako-deray and the Gaṇeśa image see Stacul 1997: esp. 374, figs. 25-26.

²³⁷ On the temple of Barikot see Chap. 2.4.

The temple of Barikot, situated as it is in such a prominent position, is the first important witness to non-Buddhist cults during the period that we can label as Śāhi or, more precisely, judging from the archaeological context, Turki Śāhi. An initial link with sound archaeological evidence can be thus established: our relief no longer appears now as the extemporaneous expression of some unknown will but as the outcome of a culture that had to find its own space in a strange land and among its rooted traditions.

Still, more explicit confirmation has come from a recent rediscovery made during an archaeological survey:²³⁸ right on the slope of the same hill where the Tindo-dag cave opens, somewhat higher up, four rock sculptures were found, all located at short distances from one another. Three of them are purely Buddhist (C182, C184, C185; II: Figs. 117, 119 and 120 respectively), but the fourth (C183; II: Fig. 118; GS 42), although perfectly consistent with the others as far its stylistic and iconographic lexicon is concerned, shows an indisputable difference of subject: again we are confronted with an image of Sūrya, this time fully recognisable, with his two lotuses rigidly held against the chest; as fully recognisable is the Gaṇeśa image to his left. Less well preserved, but still legible, is a third image to his right, possibly Viṣṇu. Standing frontally, with a long garland or scarf, this deity is four-armed: the two upper hands bear indistinguishable attributes, while the lower two are placed on the heads of small attendants. Closer at the sides of Sūrya two minor figures, one of them clearly looking towards him, are probably to be identified as his two attendants: again, as at Tindo-dag, the figure on the right bears a spear and, most probably, a shield. What is even more interesting in this relief is the fact that the Sūrya image is no longer the stout figure in nomadic attire, but a more “Indian” character, very similar in form to the numerous bodhisattvas in the rock sculpture, which evidently were taken as a model.

Also worth noting is another peculiar feature of this Sūrya image: its being legless. The boulder is not broken: the figured field is complete. Most probably, we are confronted here with a different version of the deity, deriving from the Puranic myth that, attempting to explain the foreign attire of Sūrya within an Indian perspective, refers to his unbearable effulgence (which had driven even his wife Saṃjñā to flee from him). In order that Sūrya might be gazed upon, his brilliance was dimmed by Viśvakarman, who put Sūrya on his lathe and peeled much of the brightness from the upper part of the god’s body but left his legs untouched (Banerjea 1948: 73-74): this is, according to the myth, the reason why the legs of Sūrya must remain hidden, by means of boots or, in the “Indian” iconographic alternative, by the wall of his car. In our relief this iconographic device takes a short cut and the deity’s legs are simply not represented – a solution perfectly consistent with the ergonomic syntax of the rock sculptures.

Despite the gaps in the historical reconstructions, both the archaeological and artistic evidence can now be considered in a broader perspective: if our reliefs are to be read not only as an expression of religious culture but also in a political key, we cannot but relate them to a political geography. Perhaps the most reliable source of information is represented, for the time being, by the defence system of the Śāhi period (see Chap. 2.4). This system was certainly meant to keep under safe control the Khyber road and the Peshawar plain, at the same time attesting to the strategic importance of Swat (Olivieri 2003: 41-42 especially). Within such a perspective one can hardly overestimate the key role of the area around Barikot. This not only offers the southernmost bulwark before the Malakand Pass and the plain below, but also represents (as the archaeological evidence clearly attests) one of the most important urban agglomerations of Swat – one that we can imagine as a constellation of minor settlements (some, perhaps, no less opulent than the major one, as probably in the case of Tindo-dag) politically and economically related to a dominant centre (Barikot). A sketch map shows in this area the highest concentration of tower-house complexes and military outposts and castles, thereby attesting to the great concern of the political establishment in this special tract of land.

²³⁸ The first discovery was made by Badshah Sardar (Sardar 2004-2005), although at that time my colleagues and I were unaware of his publication; the reliefs were then independently documented by Luca M. Olivieri, Massimo Vidale and Pietro Spagnesi in May 2004 while surveying the area in connection with their work on the archaeological map of Swat. I am grateful to them for drawing my attention to the sculptures and the area in general, which I visited soon after receiving this information.

A few more considerations are to be added, once again suggested by the whole context, but this time viewed from a closer perspective. Our survey extended to the hill of Tindo-dag, on the top of which, besides the rock sculptures, we also found imposing wall remains and a great many shards which clearly evidence an important settlement. Moreover, the place seems to have been endowed with a special atmosphere probably since some time in the remote past: the presence of a number of cup marks, small, dried-up springs and pools, and rock esplanades, not to mention the vast, magnificent view over the valley below, all suggest a symbolic value attached to this space. It may indeed have been simply the implications we may suppose are inherent in the local scenery that inspired the newcomers, the Śāhi from Kabul, to select this place as the natural memorial of their solar kingship. What is most significant in terms of artistic vehicles is that the signs they left, although relevant to a different cultural horizon, borrow their formal language from the current local traditions, just as we see at work within the Buddhist rock sculptures. Lastly, despite caution, one cannot avoid calling to mind what Major A.H. Deane, first Political Officer of the Malakand Agency, writes about the former existence of a Hindu temple in this area (Deane 1896: 660; see Part II: 221). Deane’s guess might prove to be correct: is this “Deva temple” still concealed somewhere in the area of Tindo-dag/Manyar, as the recent discoveries and the name “Hindu-ghar” itself seem to suggest?²³⁹

Time is perhaps not yet ripe for further speculation, but what is undisputable is the coexistence, within the same chronological, geographic and artistic framework, of two different religious systems, as the odd mixture of the Tindo-dag reliefs clearly witnesses. Whether this coexistence was marginal or ample, friendly or belligerent, temporary or lasting, we are still unable to affirm, but these two places that look at each other from their prominent positions shed new light on the history of Swat and, more in general, on the interweaving intellectual, artistic and political trends prevalent at that time within Swat and adjoining areas. The picture that emerges is far more complex and variegated than was supposed so far: the legendary Uḍḍiyana of the Tibetan sources and the historical Uḍḍiyana of archaeology come finally closer to each other.

²³⁹ Apart from the presence of a Hindu or Brahmanical substratum preserved in the name ‘Hindu-ghar’ given to the rock cave on the northern cliff of Tindo-dag (see above), mention must be made of the fact that from the top of the Tindo-dag hill one may see on the other side of the river Swat another, most probably Śāhi, large fortified center, at Bar-tangai (Olivieri 2003).