

BĪR-KOṬ-GHWANḌAI INTERIM REPORTS, XI
ACT-FIELD SCHOOL PROJECT REPORTS AND MEMOIRS
SPECIAL VOLUME 7

VAJIRASTHĀNA

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BARIKOT HILLTOP (SWAT, PAKISTAN)

Volume 1



Luca M. Olivieri
In collaboration with Elisa Iori, Michele Minardi and Marco Pinelli

Foreword by Abdul Samad

Edited by Alice Casalini

“SAVE THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF BAZIRA” PROJECT



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Presentation by Adriano V. Rossi

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ISMEO



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>PRESENTATION</i> – Adriano V. Rossi	7
<i>FOREWORD</i> – Abdul Samad	9
<i>EDITORIAL NOTE</i> – A. Casalini	11
0 – INTRODUCTION	
PREAMBLE (L.M. Olivieri) 0.1	17
THE CITY OF VAJRA (L.M. Olivieri) 0.2	25
<i>Geography</i>	25
<i>Legends</i>	26
<i>Placenames</i>	28
Bazira/Beira	28
Seeing Bazira as Alexander saw it (O. Coloru)	28
Vajirasthāna.1	30
Vajirasthāna.2	31
Wajīra (M. Sesana)	33
<i>The second Barikot</i>	34
<i>Conclusions</i>	35
<i>A note on 2007-2012</i>	36
I – ACTIVITIES ON THE HILLTOP (1992-2024)	
1. ARCHAEOLOGICAL OUTLINES (L.M. Olivieri) (PLATE I) I.1	41
<i>Funding institutions</i>	41
<i>The work on the hilltop</i>	41
<i>Legal contexts</i>	42

<i>Periods and Macro-phases</i>	42
<i>Topography and structural periods</i>	43
<i>Phases and interphases</i>	44
Terminology	44
Interphases at work	45
<i>The religious context</i>	46
<i>The material culture</i>	46
2. THE SURVEY (1992-1993) (L.M. Olivieri; Plates by R. Sabelli) (PLATES II-IV) I.2	
<i>Objectives</i>	51
<i>The Plain Area</i>	52
<i>Sector 9</i>	52
<i>The Hill Area</i>	53
Sector 1	53
Sector 2	54
Sector 3	54
Sector 4	55
Sector 5	56
Sectors 6-7	57
Sector 8	58
3. THE CONSERVATION PROJECT 'SAVING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF BAZIRA' (2022-2024) I.3	
<i>Methodology</i> (L.M. Olivieri)	61
Sustainability	61
Community engagement	62
<i>Progress Phases Spring 2022-Autumn 2024: Overview</i> (L.M. Olivieri, M. Pinelli, E. Iori)	64
Conservation	64
Archaeology	65
Landscape	65
<i>Phase I I.3.1</i>	66
Season 1 (M. Pinelli, E. Iori and L.M. Olivieri)	66
Season 2 (E. Lant, E. Iori and L.M. Olivieri)	70
Season 3 (E. Lant, E. Iori and L.M. Olivieri)	72

Season 4 (F. Colombo, E. Iori, M. Minardi and L.M. Olivieri)	73
Season 5 (M. Pinelli, E. Iori, M. Minardi, L.M. Olivieri)	75
Season 6 (E. Iori, M. Sesana and L.M. Olivieri)	80
<i>Phase II I.3.2</i>	85
Seasons 7-8 (M. Pinelli, K. Essa, E. Iori, M. Sesana, L.M. Olivieri)	85
Season 9 (M. Pinelli, E. Iori and L.M. Olivieri)	85
<i>Phase III I.3.3</i>	88
Seasons 10-11 (E. Iori, M. Minardi, L.M. Olivieri)	88
Season 12 (M. Pinelli, E. Iori, M. Minardi, L.M. Olivieri)	88
<i>Thermography: Climate change and management sustainability</i> (G. Salemi) (PLATES V-VII)	92
Climate effects on historical structures	92
Thermographic camera surveys at Barikot	93
Conclusions and further developments	94
<i>Budget and Administrative Reports</i> (M. Baldi, E. Iori)	95
<i>The Local Staff</i> (Photos by M. Minardi) I.3.4	98
<i>Graphic Documentation</i> (K. Essa, EssaNoor team) (PLATES VIII-XV)	99
PLATE VIII – Barikot: general map (updated December 2024)	99
PLATE IX – Hilltop: general map (updated December 2024)	99
PLATE X – Terrace E, Side E: prospect with Macro-phases and interventions	99
PLATE XI – Terrace E, Side N: Prospect with Macro-phases and interventions	99
PLATE XII – Terrace E: Map	99
PLATE XIII – General Map with sections	99
PLATE XIV – Terrace E, section A-A' Terrace E, section B-B'	99
PLATE XV – Terrace W, section C-C' Terrace W, section D-D'	99

II – ARCHAEOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE

1. CIVIL AND MILITARY ARCHITECTURE	103
<i>The Monumental Terraces and the Central Fortress</i> (L.M. Olivieri) II.1.1	103
The retaining wall of Terrace E: pre-Śāhi and Śāhi	103
The defence wall of Terrace W: pre-Śāhi and Śāhi	104
The central Fortress: pre-Śāhi and Śāhi	104
The Palatial Area and Temple 2	105

<i>Islamic/Early Medieval Barikot</i> (L.M. Olivieri)	105
The cemeteries	105
Religious affiliations and cemeteries in Islamic/Early Medieval Swat	106
The hilltop	109
Addendum 1: The Ghaznavid fortified centres (L.M. Olivieri, A. Bagnera)	111
Addendum 2: The quarry sources of <i>kañjur</i>	114
<i>The Fortress on the hilltop Trenches BKG 14 and 15</i> (M. Minardi) (PLATES XVI–XVIII) II.1.2	117
Fieldwork on the acropolis	117
The Fortress on the hilltop, the reservoir-related complex and the donjon (BKG 14)	117
The external sides of the Śāhi Fortress (BKG 15)	119
Conclusive remarks	121
<i>Hindu Śāhi Settlements and the Fortified Limes</i> (E. Iori) II.1.3	123
Defensive system: fortresses, forts and watchtowers	123
Fortresses with Brahmanical temples	126
2. RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE: TEMPLE 6	131
<i>Trench BKG 6: The Śāhi Temple on Terrace E</i> (L.M. Olivieri) (PLATE XIX) II.2.1	131
Temples of Swat	131
The Turk Śāhi Temple (Macrophase 8a)	132
An unexpected comparison	133
A second Cult Building	133
Temple 6 in Period 2b–2c (Macrophase 8b)	134
Demolition and reuse of Temple 6 (Macrophase 9a)	134
<i>The Architecture of Temple 6: Excavated Materials and Reconstruction</i> (A. Casalini) II.2.2	136
Early excavations (1998–2023)	136
BKG 6.3: 2023 Excavation	136
The stairway of Temple 6	137
The phases of development	138
Cella and superstructure (PLATES XX–XXI)	140
Podium décor	141
The main cult statue (PLATE XXII)	143
Addendum: Decorated sandstone cornices from Macrophases 8a–b (L.M. Olivieri)	145

3. TERRACE W (PLATES XXIII-XXIV) II.3.1	149
<i>Early Excavations on Terrace W (1998-1999)</i> (L.M. Olivieri, R. Micheli)	149
Trench BKG 7	149
Trench BKG 8	150
Trench BKG 9	151
<i>Structural Overlaps in BKG 24</i> (N. Arcuri, M. Prota) (PLATE XXV) II.3.2	153
Addendum: Cup-marks, dot-marks and other artificial rock-cut features (N. Arcuri)	156
<i>Trench BKG 24.1</i> (M. Minardi, M. Prota) (PLATES XXVI-XXVIII) II.3.3	160
The excavation area	160
The graveyard	160
<i>Trenches BKG 24.2 and BKG 24.3-4</i> (N. Cecchini) II.3.4	166
<i>Trench BKG 24.5</i> (Nasir Muhmood, Qaisar Rahman) II.3.5	169
<i>Trench BKG 23</i> (Li Hong) (PLATE XXIX-XXX) II.3.6	170
Podium [30] (2023)	170
Trench BKG 23 N (2024)	170

III – MATERIAL CULTURE

A. SCULPTURES	
<i>Gandhāran stone sculptures</i> (C. Moscatelli) III.A.1	177
<i>Śāhi marble sculptures</i> (A. Filigenzi) III.A.2	184
<i>Late Buddhist rock sculptures</i> (A. Filigenzi) III.A.3	191
Current conditions (L.M. Olivieri, M. Pinelli)	191
B. TERRACOTTA AND CERAMICS	195
<i>Terracotta figurines</i> (S. Forlivesi) III.B.1	195
<i>Zoomorphic spouts</i> (N. Arcuri, M. Prota) III.B.2	198
<i>Pottery</i> (M.A. Rabbani) III.B.3	203
<i>Glazed pottery</i> (S. Fusaro) III.B.4	205
C. BEADS AND ORNAMENTS (M.A. Rabbani) III.C	213
D. COINS (E. Shavarebi) III.D	217
E. ARROWHEADS (N. Mahzounzadeh) III.E	235
F. BARIKOT HILLTOP IN 10 OBJECTS	239

1. <i>Macrophase 1: A prehistoric slab</i> (M. Minardi, L.M. Olivieri, M. Vidale) III.F.1	239
2. <i>Macrophase 5: An enigmatic mahāparinirvāṇa</i> (C. Moscatelli) III.F.2	243
3. <i>Macrophase 7: A Hūṇa gemstone with a portrait</i> (P. Callieri) III.F.3	247
4. <i>Macrophase 7: A Hūṇa sealing</i> (E. Iori, M. Minardi) III.F.4	249
5. <i>Macrophase 8a: The Barikot Śāradā Inscription: preliminary notes</i> (S. Baums, L.M. Olivieri, I. Strauch) III.F.5	251
6. <i>Macrophase 8b: The Three Hares roundel</i> (A. Casalini) III.F.6	253
7. <i>Macrophase 8b: A Hindu-Śāhi portrait</i> (E. Iori) III.F.7	257
8. <i>Macrophase 8b-9a: A Late Buddhist votive tablet</i> (N. Arcuri, A. Casalini, N. Cecchini) III.F.8	261
9. <i>Macrophase 9a: Late Buddhist tsha tshas</i> (S. Baums, M. Minardi, M. Prota) III.F.9	265
10. <i>Macrophase 9a: A Sphero-Conical vessel</i> (L.M. Olivieri) III.F.10	271
G. ARCHAEOBOTANICAL REMAINS (R. Dal Martello) III.G	277

IV – CONCLUSIONS

THE VAJIRASTHĀNA HILLTOP: ICONIC ASPIRATIONS AND OVERLAPPING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE (E. Iori)	285
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V – APPENDICES

INVENTORY OBJECTS (2019–2024): CHARTS (Li Hong) V.1	299
NON-INVENTORY OBJECTS (2019–2024): CHARTS (Li Hong) V.2	303
GANDHĀRAN FRAGMENTS (1999–2024): CHARTS (Li Hong) V.3	307
VIDEO DOCUMENTS V.4	309
1. A Song for Bazira I (K. Iqbal and Umbrella Brand, 2023)	309
2. A Song for Bazira II (K. Iqbal and Umbrella Brand, 2024)	309
3. Bazira: Story of the Project (Umbrella Brand)	309
4. 3D view of Bazira (December 2024) (K. Essa and EssaNoor)	309
5. A Tale of Two Cities (Umbrella Brand)	309
6. Uḍḍiyāna (G. Capriotti)	309
PRESS REVIEW (ONLINE FEATURES)	311
REFERENCES	313

III

MATERIAL CULTURE

9. Macrophase 9a: Late Buddhist *tsha tshas* (S. Baums, M. Minardi and M. Prota)

Introduction

Tsha tshas are Buddhist votive offering objects usually made of clay. In Tibet they were traditionally sold to pilgrims, and these ex-voto are still widely used in Bhutan (Fig. 1). According to Tucci (1932: 57–60) *tsha tshas* can be categorised into two main types: inscribed tablets and miniature stupas. Typically, the first type was inserted into the second during a consecration ceremony. Both were crafted from the same material (usually unbaked clay) and produced using the same method through moulds. Both types shared a common significance as votive offerings (*dāna*), which Buddhist pilgrims often placed near larger stupas (Taddei 1970). As described by Tucci (1932: 17) the stupa-shaped *th'a tshas* in Tibet had the aim of reproducing real monuments: the so-called *mc'od rten*.¹⁸⁹ In contrast, the *tsha tsha* tablets, in addition to inscriptions, could also feature figurative representations of the Buddha and other Buddhist imagery. These images, like the inscriptions, were impressed onto the clay and, in later periods, were often painted in various colours.

The objects

Two unbaked clay *tsha tshas* in shape of miniature stupas with their tablets have been discovered in BKG 14 (Olivieri, Minardi 2023; Figs 2–5). In one case, the *tsha tsha* tablet was still enclosed within the building model (BKG 5667), while the second example was found still intact among the fragments of another specimen (BKG 5665 and BKG 5666). An additional terracotta bead-sized stupa was found in the same context (Fig. 6). To this small collection, we can now add a further fragment of *tsha tsha* tablet that was discovered in 2024 during the excavation of the Islamic graveyard BKG 24.1 (BKG 11700; Minardi, Prota in this volume; Fig. 7). Chronologically, it is noteworthy that all these objects were found in contexts associated with Macrophase 9. In particular, the nearly intact unbaked clay specimens found at the top of the acropolis, within the stratigraphic accumulation investigated in BKG 14, suggest that during the Ghaznavid period, some Buddhists in the Barikot area continued the practice of producing and circulating votive offerings. This may indicate that Bazira at that time was still regarded as a traditional Buddhist sacred site.

BKG 5667 – *Tsha tsha* in shape of stupa (Fig. 2)

Swat Museum.

BKG 141 (94)

Unbaked clay; h. max. 6, d. max. 5.9 cm.

The *tsha tsha* is shaped as a miniature stupa with a two-stories square podium characterised by four flights of steps. This type has been classified by Taddei (1970: 72) as Type E, stupa-shaped *tsha tsha* (*chaturmukha stūpa*). The *aṅḍa* has a top-hole at the centre that was probably used to add some other elements. The upper part of the *tsha tsha* is heavily damaged. The cracked lower portion of the item reveals the tablet, still lodged inside of it.

¹⁸⁹ The meaning of this term corresponds to 'receptacle, offering support' and it refers to Buddhist architectural structures as stupas and *caityas* (Tucci 1932: 13). Note also that the Tibetan word *mc'od rten* is probably a translation of an Indian folk etymology of *stūpa* as *stū-pa* "worship container". These stupas/*caityas*, typical of late Buddhist Tibetan architecture, were composed by two parts: the base, which was not reproduced in the *tsha tshas*, and the upper structure, which was considered the actual *mc'od rten*. It is important to make a distinction between the *tsha tsha* clay tablets and other similar objects with different function: the seals. In fact, even if they share a similar appearance, the kind of impression and the use purpose differs between the two (Taddei 1970: 78). Add here also Skilling 2005, 2008, and Namgyal-Lama 2013, 2014.

BKG 5665 – *Tsha tsha* in shape of a stupa (Fig. 3)

Swat Museum.

BKG 141 (94).

Unbaked clay.

Heavily fragmented object, of the same type of the previous. The *aṇḍa* is better preserved although still damaged.

BKG 5666 – Inscribed tablet from *tsha tsha* 5665 (Fig. 4)

Swat Museum.

BKG 141 (94).

Unbaked clay; h. 3.3, D. 3.1, t. 1.2 cm.

The inscribed tablet of unbaked clay was found still partially wrapped by the fragments of the poorly preserved *tsha tsha* stupa BKG 5665 (Fig. 5). The tablet is almost circular in shape with a convex backside. On the upper face of the tablet a round impression is encircled by a thin fillet. The inscription consists of an impressed text of six lines in late (Northwestern) Brāhmī script, variously called Proto-Śāradā or Gilgit-Bamiyan type II, used from the sixth century CE onwards. The language of the inscription is Sanskrit. Each line is separated from the others by a thin fillet. The execution of the script in the Northwestern form of Brāhmī is rough, and the producer of the stamp used for the tablet ignored the single and double dots forming the signs ṁ and ḥ, possibly while copying mechanically from an exemplar. According to Taddei's classification, this is a *tsha tsha* Type B (Taddei 1970: 74).

The content of the inscription, as in an overwhelming number of similar tablets from India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, is the so-called *ye dharmā* formula (Boucher 1991, Taddei 1970). According to the Pali Vinaya (Vin I 40; cf. Baums 2013, 28–29), this verse was originally taught to Śāriputra by the Buddhist ascetic Aśvajit as a condensation of the Buddha's teaching. Later Buddhist tradition treated it as a shorthand for the formula of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and from the middle of the first millennium CE onward, it was used as a substitute for physical relics of the Buddha in contexts such as our miniature stupa BKG 5665.

The inscription on the present tablet can be transcribed as follows:¹⁹⁰

1. [ye] dharmā he
2. tuṇṇabhavā hetu(ṁ)
3. teṣa(ṁ) tathāgata[ḥ] p(r)ā
4. ha teṣ[ā](ṁ) ca yo ni(ro)
5. dha eva(ṁ)vādī ma
6. hāśramaṇa(ḥ)

The formula is a verse in the Āryā meter, and the inscription can be metrically arranged and translated as follows:

[ye] dharmā hetuṇṇabhavā
hetu(ṁ) teṣa(ṁ) tathāgata[ḥ] p(r)ā
teṣ[ā](ṁ) ca yo ni(ro)dha
eva(ṁ)vādī mahāśramaṇa(ḥ)

'Those factors that arise from a cause –

¹⁹⁰ [] mark uncertain readings, () lost material, and < > material omitted by the inscriber.

the Tathāgata has declared their cause
and which cessation there is of them.

Thus speaks the great ascetic.’

The inscriber omitted, as already noted, the signs for *m* and *h* and, in the second quarter of the verse, the length mark on the second syllable of *teṣaṃ*. At the end of this quarter, he used the Sanskritization *prāha* of the original Middle Indian verb form *āha*, as opposed to the alternative Sanskritization *hy avadat*. The latter is the only one occurring in Sanskrit Buddhist literature, but *prāha* is well-attested in the epigraphic record, including two unprovenanced stamps alleged to be from Swat (Strauch 2000). The last word of the verse occurs in the correct spelling with *m*, as opposed to the pronunciation spelling *v* in the two stamps and many other versions.

BKG 5789 – Miniature bead-shaped stupa with lotus flower (Fig. 6)

Swat Museum.

BKG 1414 (56).

Baked clay; d. max 1.8, h. 1.8, d. min. 0.3 cm

The *tsha tsha* is a trunco-conical-shaped miniature stupa resting on a lotus flower. This category of stupa-shaped *tsha tshas* belongs to Type C (Taddei 1970: 74). The lower body of the stupa is carinated and decorated with an eight-petaled lotus flower incised on the base. The upper part of the object is plain, except for a central hole at the top, probably used to insert additional accessories such as a *chattrāvalī*.

BKG 11700 – Inscribed tablet (Fig. 7)

Swat Museum.

BKG 24.1 (201); 2024.

Unbaked clay, possibly accidentally fired; d. 2.2, t. 0.8 cm.

The fragment was found in a context of dumped material from the Islamic graveyard BKG 24.1. The layer was primarily composed of potsherds intentionally discarded from the upper area BKG 23 (Minardi, Prota, this Volume). The tablet almost matches the size and shape of BKG 5666, and only the colour is different (dark brown instead of light yellow/brown). On its concave surface the partial remains of an impressed inscription in late Brāhmī script has been identified as the well-known *ye dharmā* formula. These tablets were usually stamped on a tablet prepared by hand, as we can see from the presence of fingerprints on the back (Taddei 1970).¹⁹¹ All these characteristics allow us to identify BKG 11700 as an inscribed clay tablet of Type B (Taddei 1970: 74). Its inscription is arranged in three preserved lines, and it is possible that a short fourth line was lost.

Only a few of the letters are preserved well enough to be read with any confidence, as follows:

1. ? .ā [ja] p[ā]

2. + ? ta ? gha

3. + + + ? dha

¹⁹¹ Also noted by Khan, Wahab 2012: 61.

Paleographically, the inscription appears to belong to the second half of the first millennium CE, if the last *akṣara* in line one is correctly interpreted as a *pā* with half-closed top, descending right stem, and vertical *ā mātrā* to the right.

Discussion

Both the stupa-shaped *tsha tshas* and the clay tablets associated with them are commonly found in Buddhist archaeological contexts across Central Asia, the Himalayas, and East Asia. For instance, specimens similar to those of Barikot were found by Svend Helms in the Buddhist Sacred Area of Old Kandahar (to be published in a forthcoming volume by Michele Minardi) (Fig. 8). However, the main concentration of these objects so far seems to be in the Gangetic Plain (Taddei 1970: 79).

Specimens of stupa-shaped *tsha tshas*, have been found in Gūdul-i Āhangarān (Ghazni) and Khara-Khoto (China). In the area of Gūdul-i Āhangarān (as in Barikot), miniature stupas of Type C (cf. GA. 68–70) and Type E (cf. GA. 64 and GA. 65) have been found, along with other types of *tsha tshas*, such as inscribed plaques, sometimes decorated with images of stupas or the Buddha.¹⁹² Additionally, there are some examples of *tsha tsha* tablets as well (Taddei 1970).

In 1966, a cluster of twenty *tsha tshas* was found in Hund (Swabi district, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa; cf. Khaw, Saidin 2013). All the *tsha tshas* found there were in the shape of clay tablets. Based on their epigraphic content, they can be divided into two groups: 1) statements of profession of Buddhist faith; 2) *ye dharmā* formula (Fig. 7).

The presence of Buddhist tablets containing the *ye dharmā* formula has been also recorded in Perlis.¹⁹³ A total of twenty-one tablets were recorded, with only seven of them well preserved. The *tsha tshas* from Perlis can be dated to the tenth century CE (Khaw, Saidin 2013). They share the same manufacturing characteristics as those found in Barikot (i.e., round shape, fillet, concave surface). More recently, in 2011, some *tsha tsha* of Type E (stupas; 5.9 × 4.5 cm) and Type B (tablets from decayed stupa models; 2.2 cm of diameter) were discovered in Manyar, Swat, just one kilometre east of Barikot (Khan, Wahab 2012 – Fig. 9).¹⁹⁴

In general, *tsha tshas* are considered Buddhist *ex voto*, which became popular at least by the tenth century CE. The first *tsha tshas* were seemingly first produced in the Indian subcontinent; however, due to their easy manufacture and the fact that they were intended to be left by pilgrims at various Buddhist sites as offerings, they quickly spread to all areas influenced by Buddhism. Even if their shape was different, their function was always the same: they were used in the practice of *dāna*, especially during pilgrimages to the sacred sites. *Tsha tshas* were easily made using unbaked clay, with the help of moulds; at present, there is no direct archaeological evidence related to these matrices in Barikot (nor from the other mentioned sites). Pilgrims probably used to take the moulds with them during their trips to produce the *tsha tshas* when needed (Tucci 1932). The availability of inexpensive materials and the simple method of production for these ‘amulets’ supports the hypothesis that there were no specialised centres to produce *tsha tshas*. However, monasteries may have played an important role in both the manufacturing process and the subsequent diffusion of these objects.

Tsha tshas remain popular. For instance, in Tibetan Buddhism mouldings are kept within families for generations and *tsha tshas* are still made on the streets in proximity to Buddhist sites (e.g., Magnatta 2024). As in the past, the miniature stupa-shaped *tsha tshas* contain an inscribed tablet, which can now be a small paper scroll rolled and inserted into the

¹⁹² Other similar examples come from Dunhuang (BM 2011,3047.2, sixth–seventh century CE) and Khara-khoto (BM 1928,1022.59, 11th–13th century CE).

¹⁹³ These *tsha tshas* were found in Gua Kurong Batang and in Gua Berhala (Khaw, Saidin 2013).

¹⁹⁴ ‘These stupa models probably came from somewhere near a Buddhist site, which once located at the Manyar village’ (Khan, Wahab 2012: 62).

bottom of the *tsha tsha*, sealed with a clay plug (Phuntsho 2021). Both the manufacturing characteristics and the purpose of the objects as ex-votos remain the same over time.



Fig. 2 – Fragment of BKG 5667 from BKG 14



Fig. 3 – Fragment of BKG 5665



Fig. 4 – Tablet BKG 5666

Fig. 1 – Bhutan: *tsha tshas*. Photo by LMO.

[Fig. 2 – Fragment of BKG 5667 from BKG 14]

[Fig. 3 – Fragment of BKG 5665]

[Fig. 4 – Tablet BKG 5666]

Fig. 5 – BKG 5665 and 5666 at discovery.

Fig. 6 – BKG 5789

Fig. 7 – BKG 11700 from BKG 24.1

Fig. 8 – *Tsha tsha* from the Buddhist sacred area of Old Kandahar. D. max: 8.3 and 7.6 cm. © Old Kandahar Project – MM.

Fig. 9 – *Tsha tsha* from Manyar, Swat (after Khan, Wahab 2012: 61-62, pls. 18a-b)

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Abbreviations

Arr. *Anab.* = Arrian, Ἀλεξάνδρου Ἀνάβασις

Curt. = Q. Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri, libri qui supersunt*

SAA = *South Asian Archaeology Conference*

SAAA = *South Asian Archaeology and Art Conference*

* * *

* * *

ARA = *Archaeological Research in Asia*

AION = *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli*

AIUON = *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*

AMIT = *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan*

BAVA = *Beiträge zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie*

EA = *Eurasia Antiqua. Zeitschrift für Archäologie Eurasiens*

EI = *Epigraphia Indica*

EMSCAT = *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines*

EW = *East and West*

JA = *Journal Asiatique*

JIABS = *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*

JAC = *Journal of Asian Civilizations*

JRAS = *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*

ONS = *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society*

RET = *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*

SAS = *South Asian Studies*

ACT = Archaeology Community Tourism - Field School Project

ACT RepMem = ACT Reports and Memoirs

ANP = Antiquities of Northern Pakistan: Reports and Studies

ANU = Australian National University Press

ICCROM = International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property

IGNA = Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts

IsMEO RepMem = IsMEO Reports and Memoirs

IsIAO RepMem = IsIAO Reports and Memoirs

KNAW = Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen

MANP = Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans

MASI = Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India

MDAFA = Mémoires de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan

ÖAW = Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Verlag)

SOAS = School of Oriental and African Studies

SOR = Serie Orientale Roma

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VAJIRASTHĀNA

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BARIKOT HILLTOP (SWAT, PAKISTAN)

Volume 2



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In collaboration with Elisa Iori, Michele Minardi and Marco Pinelli

Foreword by Abdul Samad

Edited by Alice Casalini

“SAVE THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF BAZIRA” PROJECT



**International alliance
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of heritage
in conflict areas**



ACT FIELD SCHOOL REPORTS AND MEMOIRS, SPECIAL VOLUME, 7

BKG INTERIM REPORTS, XI

VAJIRASTHĀNA

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BARIKOT HILLTOP
(SWAT, PAKISTAN)

VOLUME 2

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with contributions by other authors

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Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Volume 2 – Illustrations (Figs)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FIGURES FROM CHAPTERS

0 - INTRODUCTION

0.1 - PREAMBLE (L.M. Olivieri)	13
0.2 - THE CITY OF VAJRA (L.M. Olivieri)	15

I - ACTIVITIES ON THE HILLTOP (1992-2024)

1.1 - ARCHAEOLOGICAL OUTLINES (L.M. Olivieri)	21
1.2 - THE SURVEY (1992-1993) (L.M. Olivieri; Plates by R. Sabelli)	39
1.3 - THE CONSERVATION PROJECT (M. Pinelli, L.M. Olivieri et al.)	
1.3.1 - Phase I	57
1.3.2 - Phase II	101
1.3.3 - Phase III	121
1.3.4 - The Local Staff (Photos by M. Minardi)	131

II - ARCHAEOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE

1. CIVIL AND MILITARY ARCHITECTURE

II.1.1 - The Monumental Terraces and the Central Fortress (L.M. Olivieri)	137
II.1.2 - The Fortress on the Hilltop: Trenches BKG 14 and 15 (M. Minardi) (PLATES XVI-XVIII)	157
II.1.3 - Hindu Śāhi settlements and the fortified limes (E. Iori)	163

2. RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE: TEMPLE 6

II.2.1 - Trench BKG 6: The Śāhi Temple on Terrace E (L.M. Olivieri)	175
II.2.2 - The Architecture of Temple 6: Excavated Materials and Reconstruction (A. Casalini)	181

3. TERRACE W

II.3.1 - Terrace W	199
II.3.2 - Structural overlaps in BKG 24 (N. Arcuri, M. Prota)	201
II.3.3 - Trench BKG 24.1 (M. Minardi, M. Prota)	225
II.3.4 - Trenches BKG 24.2 and BKG 24.3-4 (N. Cecchini)	235
II.3.5 - Trench BKG 24.5 (Nasir Muhmood, Kaisar Rahman)	241
II.3.6 - Trench BKG 23 (Li Hong)	243

III - MATERIAL CULTURE

A. SCULPTURES

III.A.1 - Gandhāran stone sculptures (C. Moscatelli)	249
III.A.2 - Śāhi marble sculptures (A. Filigenzi)	259
III.A.3 - Late Buddhist rock sculptures (A. Filigenzi)	259

B. TERRACOTTA AND CERAMICS

III.B.1 - Terracotta figurines (S. Forlivesi)	267
III.B.2 - Zoomorphic spouts (N. Arcuri, M. Prota)	269
III.B.3 - Pottery (M.A. Rabbani)	275
III.B.4 - Glazed pottery (S. Fusaro)	279

C. BEADS AND ORNAMENTS

III.C - Beads and Ornaments (M.A. Rabbani)	285
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D. COINS

III.D - Coins (E. Shavarebi)	291
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E. ARROWHEADS

III.E - Arrowheads (N. Mazounzadeh)	297
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F. BARIKOT HILLTOP IN 10 OBJECTS

III.F.1 - Macrophase 1: A prehistoric slab (M. Minardi, L.M. Olivieri, M. Vidale)	301
III.F.2 - Macrophase 5: An enigmatic Mahāparinirvāṇa (C. Moscatelli)	305
III.F.3 - Macrophase 7: A Hūṇa gemstone with a portrait (P. Callieri)	307
III.F.4 - Macrophase 7: A Hūṇa sealing (E. Iori, M. Minardi)	309
III.F.5 - Macrophase 8a: The Barikot Śāradā inscription: preliminary notes	311
III.F.6 - Macrophase 8b: The Three Hares roundel (A. Casalini)	313
III.F.7 - Macrophase 8b: A Hindu-Śāhi portrait (E. Iori)	319
III.F.8 - Macrophase 8b-9a: A Late Buddhist votive tablet (N. Arcuri, A. Casalini, N. Cecchini)	323
III.F.9 - Macrophase 9a: Late Buddhist tsha tshas (S. Baums, M. Minardi, M. Prota)	327
III.F.10 - Macrophase 9a: A Sphero-Conical vessel (L.M. Olivieri)	335
III.G - Archaeobotanical remains (R. Dal Martello)	337

V - CONCLUSIONS

IV - The Vajirasthāna Hilltop: ICONIC ASPIRATIONS AND OVERLAPPING RELIGIOUS

LANDSCAPE (E. Iori)	343
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N.B.: Some figures are intentionally left without captions; see descriptions in Volume 1.

III.F.9 - MACROPHASE 9A: LATE BUDDHIST THSA TSHAS
(S. Baums, M. Minardi, M. Prota)



Fig. 1 – Bhutan: *tsha tshas*. Photo by LMO.



Fig. 2 – Fragment of BKG 5667 from BKG 14



Fig. 3 – Fragment of BKG 5665



Fig. 4 – Tablet BKG 5666



Fig. 5 – BKG 5665 and 5666 at discovery.



Fig. 6 – BKG 5789



Fig. 7 – BKG 11700 from BKG 24.1

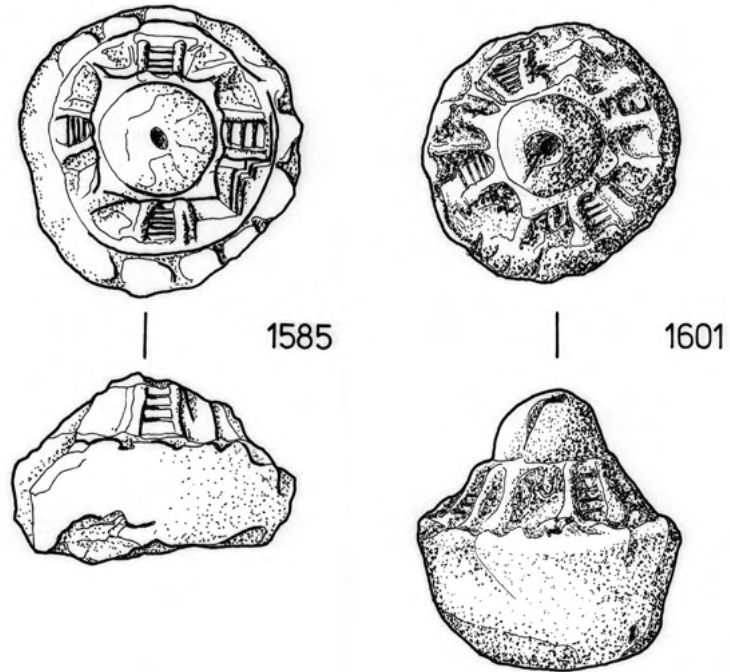


Fig. 8 – *Tsha tsha* from the Buddhist sacred area of Old Kandahar. D. max: 8.3 and 7.6 cm. © Old Kandahar Project – MM.



Fig. 9 – *Tsha tsha* from Manyar, Swat (after Khan, Wahab 2012: 61-62, pls. 18a-b)