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Archaeological Discoveries in Swat (Ancient Uḍḍiyāna): Progress and Challenges

Abstract

The Swāt Valley, located in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, is a testament to the area's rich and varied historical heritage. Swāt is well known for its archaeological significance. Several excavations and studies have focused on the valley and revealed its profound contributions to ancient civilizations, especially during the Gandhāra period. This abstract offers a concise synopsis of the main archaeological projects carried out in Swat, highlighting significant findings and their consequences for our comprehension of the historical and cultural development of the valley. Early 20th-century British and Italian archaeologists made significant contributions to the first Swāt explorations. Sir Aurel Stein's pioneering work laid the groundwork for later studies, which resulted in the founding of the Italian Archaeological Mission in 1956 under Giuseppe Tucci. This mission was crucial in revealing the Buddhist heritage of Swāt, as evidenced by the important excavations conducted at locations like Butkara Stupa, Saidu Sharif I, and Udegram. The abundance of artifacts found at these sites, such as Buddhist stupas, sculptures, and inscriptions, emphasized the unique Gandhara art style, which is a blend of Greco-Roman and Indian influences. Archaeological excavations in Swāt have yielded not only artistic and religious artifacts but also ancient urban settlements and script-based inscriptions that shed light on the socio-political history of the area. In spite of obstacles such as theft, natural disasters, and conservation concerns, continuous endeavors are made to protect and elevate Swāt's archaeological heritage. This research aims to provide a comprehensive account of the region's rich heritage, contributing valuable knowledge to the fields of archaeology and history. The research will employ a multi-disciplinary approach, combining archaeological, historical, and cultural studies. The findings underscore the valley's role as a historical and cultural crossroads, offering invaluable perspectives on the past and guiding future preservation and research initiatives.

Keywords: Swāt, Gandhāra, Buddhist stupas, Site, Italian Missions, Excavations, Challenges,

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Introduction

This article provides a brief account of the major archaeological activities undertaken in Swāt, highlighting the discoveries and their contributions to our understanding of ancient civilizations. Swat, is a culturally significant area with rich archaeological history, including the Gandhāra civilization, which played a significant role in the development of Buddhism through its monasteries, inscriptions, and artefacts. Swāt Valley, located in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, is renowned for its rich archaeological heritage. The valley, often referred to as "the cradle of Gandhara civilization," has been a focal point for numerous archaeological studies and excavations due to its historical significance and cultural wealth¹

Numerous academics, organisations, and archaeological missions—especially those that concentrate on the Gandhara region and its Buddhist influence—have thoroughly documented Swat's archaeological legacy. These are a few reputable sources' citations and references that have helped to clarify the archaeological significance of Swat. Being the homeland of Buddhism and an integral element of the Gandhāra civilisation, Swat has enormous historical value. Ancient stupas, statues, and temples have been found during archaeological digs in the area; these artefacts provide insight into the region's rich Buddhist past. Some of the most fabulous examples of Gandhāran art may be found in the valley. These include stone reliefs and Buddha statues with detailed carvings that demonstrate the highly skilled workmanship of the era. Moreover, Swat has been a crossroads for many civilisations and religions, including Hinduism and subsequently Islam, thus its cultural significance goes beyond Buddhism. Swat is a priceless resource for historians and archaeologists because of the convergence of various cultures and faiths, which offers profound insights into the region's complex and dynamic past. The aim of this study is to investigate the archaeological excavations carried out in the Swat region and assess their influence on the historical knowledge of the area. It is noteworthy that compared to the main Gandhāra site in Peshawar valley, which served as the centre of the Gandhāra civilisation, more study and excavation work has been done in Swat. The substantial research conducted in Swat has illuminated the rich history and legacy of Gandhāran culture, making a significant contribution to the field. This comparative attention on Swat underlines its prominence within the larger archaeological environment of the Gandhara culture. For this paper the published data accumulated in the result of surveys, excavations and personal works.

Geographical Significance of Swāt (Ancient Uḍḍiyāna)

The Swāt valley is located in the Mālākand Division between Lat. 34°-31'-55" and 35°-53'-40" north and long. 71°-47'-15" and 73° east. Swāt's strategic location along ancient trade routes and its role as a center of culture and religion are the main reasons for its historical significance. Since prehistoric times, people have lived in the valley. Its history includes several eras, such as the Gandhara period, which is notable for its Buddhist art and architecture².

Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province includes Swāt as a district which is also renowned for its rich historical and cultural legacy and its green lush nature and mountains. The area has a significant history that dates back to antiquity and

was once a hub for Buddhism and Hinduism. Rough hills cover three-fourths of its area. Its northern border is formed by the towering Himalayan off-shoots, some of whose peaks exceed 5486m in height. It is separated from in the south by the Mālākand range, which has an average height of 1524m. The Dir district is located in the west, and the Kohistan (mountains) region divides it from the Indus district in the east. The river Swāt is mentioned by Chinese Pilgrim Fa-Xian and Xuan Zang as *Su-ho-to* and *Su-po-fa-su-to*, or Subhavastu or Suvastu, respectively³. Arrian⁴'s statement; Geographically, the valley stretches from Tirāt (south of the Swāt Kohistan) in the northeast down to Mālākand in the south and Kalungai in the southwest, where the river Panjkora meets the Swāt⁵. It also stretches to the Indus watershed in the east and the Panjkora watershed in the west. The Dir District in the southwest was expanded during the British era, and the southern Ranizai and Thana areas were incorporated into the Mālākand Agency⁶. (Map. I).

The Swāt River, as well as the surrounding valleys and mountains, are among the natural wonders of Swāt, which is a region of the Hindukush Mountain range. Falak Sher, the district's tallest peak, has a height of 2,036m (6,680 feet), making it the highest mountain in the area. As rivers flow through wider areas, loam/alluvial soil spread along the river banks or those of its tributaries. The river, its numerous subsidiary streams (*khwars*), and springs are used to create irrigation canals. But dry farming is used in places where there is no access to water. (Map. II) The Swāt valley is named after it and is formed by three principal streams-the Gabral, Bahandra and Ushu, all originating in the Shandur range at Kalam, 2012m above the sea level. Flowing in a narrow gorge for about 38km, it broadens down the village of Madyan and meanders. Some 113km to the southwest of Madyan, it joins the Panjkora from Dir at Kahlungai. While flowing through the Valley, it receives a large number of khwars and nullahs (small streams) on either side. Due to persistent deforestation of the Valley through the previous millennia these khwars and nullas are prone to disastrous floods and cause great destruction⁷ Mineral resources utilized in the past were schist, iron and gold (Tucci 1958a:281). Emerald is found in Mingora and was one of the major economic resources of the Swāt State Mingora, which is in the heart of Swāt valley, is the district's principal settlement⁸. Tibet and China are situated in the north, Central Asia and Afghanistan in the west and Gandhāra in the south. Historical investigation and archaeological sources show that it had political, cultural and religious links with all the surrounding regions⁹. Two routes-Mingora-jehānabad (old Shakorai)-Shangla-Bisham; and Mingaora-Khwāza-khela- Ghurband-Bisham-connect Mingaora on the east, the capital city of Swāt, to the Karakoram highway, which ultimately joins the Silk route¹⁰ at Yaqand¹¹. (Map. III) The valley's mountains are made of granite, gneiss, schist, and metasedimentary rocks with the intrusion of granodiorite, granite, syenite, and diorite. The northern mountains of the valley feature greenish phyllite, hornfels, quartzite, and granite. The fossiliferous rocks are found in the Valley's lower reaches on the right bank, whereas phyllite schist, siliceous, limestone, marbles, and dolomites are found on the left. Schist and phyllite rock types are most frequently employed for sculpture in the Valley¹². In later periods, most likely after the fifth century CE when Brahmanism began to influence Buddhism, gneiss was also utilized for sculpture. For making beads and other small things, precious or semi-precious stones were employed. The basic materials for creating lime, which was commonly used to

plaster monastic building walls and ceilings as well as to create stucco, came from limestone¹³.

Swāt Environs

Swāt is renowned for its natural beauty, plentiful water supplies, and rich cultural legacy. A variety of flora and animals may be found in the district. Rugged landscape with deep valleys, lofty peaks, and swift-moving rivers best describes Swāt's natural environment. Several significant streams may be found in the district, notably the Swāt River, which rises in the Hindukush Mountains and passes through the centre of the area. For the people of Swāt, the river is a crucial resource since it provides water for cultivation, domestic consumption, and hydropower production. A large variety of plant and animal species may be found in the Swāt district's woods, marshes, and other natural environments, contributing to the district's reputation for having a high biodiversity. A variety of ecological and monetary advantages, like carbon sequestration, soil preservation, and lumber production, are provided by Swāt's forests, making them extremely significant¹⁴. With a variety of ecological, economic, and cultural advantages, the Swāt environment is generally regarded as a valuable resource for the district's residents.

Swat (ancient Uḍḍiyāna): Cultural and Historical Profile

The Neolithic civilisation of the Swat Valley, which began in the second part of the third millennium BCE¹⁵, later evolved into that of the Indus Valley, Taxila, Kashmir, and Southern China¹⁶. Scientific excavations have revealed a number of town sites, including Birkot Ghundai, Aligrama, Leobanr-I and III, Gogdara, and Kalako Dheri, which date to the early 2nd millennium BCE and are connected to large graves. All these archaeological discoveries provide indications that steady settlement pattern actually existed from the earlier time which providing an affable environment for further development. The Gandhara Grave Cultures (GCC)¹⁷ of the Valley and this proto-historic period are dated to 1800 and 2970 BCE, respectively. Similarly, there are several Iron Age graves in Dir and the surrounding regions of Bajaur, Chitral, Peshawar, and Taxila in Pakistan. GGC, in fact, attributed to the Aryans is another proof of their presence in here¹⁸. The grave culture is reported in northern part of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Iran¹⁹.

Swat was subjugated by Alexander in 327 BCE. Account of Alexander's invasion of India by Arrian, who, refers to Suastu, which is identified as Swat. He crossed the Hindukush and marched towards Koh-i Daman above Kabul. Alexander sent a division down in the southeast to capture *Peukelaotis*, which is identified with Puṣkalavati near modern Charsadda²⁰. From here after strengthening his hold here, he attacked the Indus region. Sultan Mehmud of Ghazna invaded the area at the start of the eleventh century, the local leaders of Uḍḍiyāna (present-day Malakand Division) may have largely stayed subservient to the great powers that surrounded them—Iranian, Bactrian, Greek, Scytho-Parthian, Kushan, and Hindu Shahis, respectively. CE²¹.

The Mauryan Emperor Ashoka was responsible for the the Buddhism, introduced to Swat, in 256 BC²². But according to literary and archaeological evidence, Buddhism arrived here much earlier—at least in the fourth century BCE. Like Ashoka, Kaniska, the Kushan Emperor (128 CE), made significant contributions to Buddhism. Additionally, he dispatched Buddhist missionaries to several nations. In the Swat Valley, hundreds of tiny and big stupas as well as other monasteries were constructed or altered. Masterworks of Gandharan art may be discovered among the sculptures and other antiquities at these locations. They portray religious situations influenced by other cultures²³. Buddhist travellers and pilgrims from Tibet and China visited to Swat to present attribute to their holy places ascribed to the Buddha²⁴. As was previously noted, in the 7th century CE, the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang travelled to the Swat Valley and observed the largest Buddhist monastery of Ta'lo, also known as Ming-Chili, which is now connected with modern-day Mingora²⁵.

Swat was famous for captivating and beautiful legends of spirits, demons and magic in the eighteenth century C.E. Udigram village shaped a mighty magician and exorcist Padmasambhāva²⁶. Buddhist Tantric comments were written by Indrabhuti, the renowned great king of Swat. Swat, often referred to as Uddiyānapitha, is one of the subcontinent's four Tantric centres²⁷. It saw the rise and down fall of the Buddhism and the revival of Hinduism²⁸. The establishment of Hindu Shahi hegemony in Swat prevented the resuscitation of Buddhism in the region. The area came under the control of the Muslim Ghazna governing dynasty from the beginning of the eleventh century AD. Raja Griha, the Hindu Shahis' final hope, was vanquished by Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi at Udigram²⁹.

A Brief Account of Archaeological Activities in Swāt

Extensive archaeological activity has been concentrated in the Swat Valley, which is well-known for its rich archaeological legacy. Ancient Gandhara civilization has been illuminated by the discovery of Buddhist stupas, monasteries, and relics thanks to the efforts of Italian missions headed by Giuseppe Tucci and succeeding teams. With an emphasis on excavation, preservation, and study, the Government of Pakistan has made a substantial contribution in conjunction with the Peshawar University Archaeology Department. These initiatives have unveiled a multifaceted cultural terrain, emphasizing the historical relevance of Swat as a hub for Buddhism and early Hinduism as well as its impact on the artistic and cultural advancement of the area.

Archaeological interest in Swāt dates back to the early 20th century. The initial explorations were conducted by British and Italian archaeologists, who were captivated by the valley's potential to reveal insights into ancient civilizations. Sir Aurel Stein, a Hungarian-British archaeologist, was one of the pioneers in this field, conducting surveys and excavations in the region during the 1920s. Amongst the European A. Court's was first to notice some significant sites in the Swāt and Buner valleys³⁰. At that time Swāt was not open to foreigners. A. Court compiled a list of the “cupolas and ruined cities” based on the information he was able to collect. This list proved to be useful for subsequent investigators who had no knowledge of Swāt. Following in the footsteps of the Chinese pilgrims who were

able to locate certain Buddhist temples in the Swāt valley, Sir Aurel Stein carried out the first scientific study of the Swāt valley in 1924 and documented a number of sites³¹. Shortly afterwards, in 1938, a brief survey of the Swāt valley was carried out by Barger & Wright (1941:6) who opened the sites of Barikot and Kanjar Kotay (Kandak valley).

The Italian Archaeological Mission

The most significant and sustained archaeological efforts in Swāt have been carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission. A thorough investigation of the area awaited the arrival of G. Tucci of the Italian Archaeological Mission, conducted an archaeological survey in 1955 and selected a few noteworthy locations for further investigation. The Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums and the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshāwar has also conducted surveys and excavations in the Swāt valley. A catalogue of the archaeological sites was revised and the area was extensively studied by the Italian Archaeological Mission (Tucci 1958: 238). This followed an extensive programme of excavations. The site Butkara-I, near Mingora, was brought under intensive investigations by the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Swāt in collaboration with the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistani. Other excavated sites include Ūḍigrām, Leobanr-I and II, Katelai, Barī-kōṭ, Gogdara, Saidu Sharif, Balo-Kile-gumbat, Baligram, Kalako-Dheri, Ghundai, Pāṇr, Ghalegai, and Aligrama. The mission's work has been instrumental in uncovering the valley's rich Buddhist heritage. Major sites excavated by the Italian mission include:

1. **Butkara (Remains):** One of the earliest and most significant Buddhist stupas in Swāt, Butkara Stupa was originally constructed by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. The site revealed multiple layers of construction, indicating its long-term religious significance³².
2. **Saidu Sharif I:** This site, located near the modern town of Saidu Sharif, comprises a stupa and monastic complex dating back to the 1st century BCE. The excavations here provided valuable insights into the architectural and artistic developments of the Gandhara period sculptures³³.
3. **Barikot (Ancient Bazira):** This site of Barikot identified with the earliest city of Bazira, declared by classical authors. Excavations revealed urban structures, fortifications, and artifacts from the Indo-Greek to the Kushan periods³⁴.
4. **Udegram (Ancient Ora):** An ancient settlement site that has revealed evidence of continuous occupation from the early historic period through the Islamic period. The discovery of a mosque dating back to the early Islamic period underscores Swāt's role in the region's Islamic history³⁵.
5. **Amluk Dara:** These locations feature monasteries and stupas that shed light on the area's Buddhist past. Archaeological features and artefacts from the Gandhara civilisation have been found throughout the excavations³⁶.

Archaeology Department of the University of Peshāwar

Department of Archaeology, University of Peshāwar, in collaboration with the Federal Department excavated Timargarah and Balambaṭ in lower Dir district. The Marjānai excavation was the outcome of the Gandhara Archaeological Project (GAP)³⁷. In 1982, Prof. Dr. Abdur Rahman gave the instructions to extend the excavation at the Marjānai site during the Butkara-III excavation. Later on, as a result of their involvement with Butkara-III, the excavation was carried out with scientific research on his orders and was supervised by Professor Farid Khan. The Shnaisha site was first opened in 1989 by the authority of Swat Museum-Department of Archaeology, Government of Pakistan. Later on, in 1990, a full-fledged excavation conducted by the Department of Archeology, University of Peshawar. In the Aḍīnzai valley extensive excavation were carried out by the University Department at Damkoṭ, Chaṭpaṭ, (Chaṭpaṭ), and Andān; the sites of Bar Charhāi and Gumbatūna in the Talash valley were also partially investigated.

Challenges and Preservation Efforts

Swāt has a rich archaeological past, but maintaining its historic sites is a challenge. Threatening factors include natural disasters, looting, and insufficient conservation efforts. Nonetheless, steps are being taken to address these problems, such as joint efforts by international organizations and local government bodies to safeguard and conserve the archaeological riches of the valley. Swat is subject to natural calamities including earthquakes, floods, and landslides, which endanger its old structures. The severe weather accelerates the erosion process, causing rock sculptures, stupas, and other monuments to deteriorate with time. Seasonal floods may also cause major damage to archaeological sites by sinking or washing away sections of key buildings.

Growing population and the urban expansion in the region, has increasingly infringed on archaeological sites. Infrastructure projects such as road building, housing complexes, and tourism facilities can occasionally collide with archaeological sites, inflicting irrevocable damage. Poorly planned construction and a lack of understanding about the significance of these places result in their destruction or displacement, upsetting their historical and cultural context.

Vandalism and the illegal antiquities trade presents a serious danger to Swat's history. Many antique artefacts are smuggled out of the nation and sold on the illicit market, depriving archaeological sites of historical and scientific significance. Unauthorized digging not only results in the loss of priceless cultural artefacts, but it also badly undermines the site's integrity, making future research impossible. Lack of Resources: Swat's preservation efforts are hindered by chronic underfunding, resulting in inadequate financial and technical resources, a lack of protective measures, and the inability to utilize advanced technologies like 3D mapping or remote sensing, and a shortage of trained personnel.

Conclusion

Swāt's archaeological efforts have yielded priceless insights into the historical and cultural heritage of the area. Our knowledge of ancient civilizations and their contributions to human history has been enhanced by the discovery of Buddhist stupas, sculptures, inscriptions, and urban settlements. Future excavations are hoped to uncover more hidden treasures of Swāt as preservation efforts continue, guaranteeing the preservation of its rich heritage for future generations. This research will contribute to the preservation and promotion of the cultural legacy of one of the most historically significant regions in Pakistan by cataloging and examining Swāt's archaeological and historical treasures.

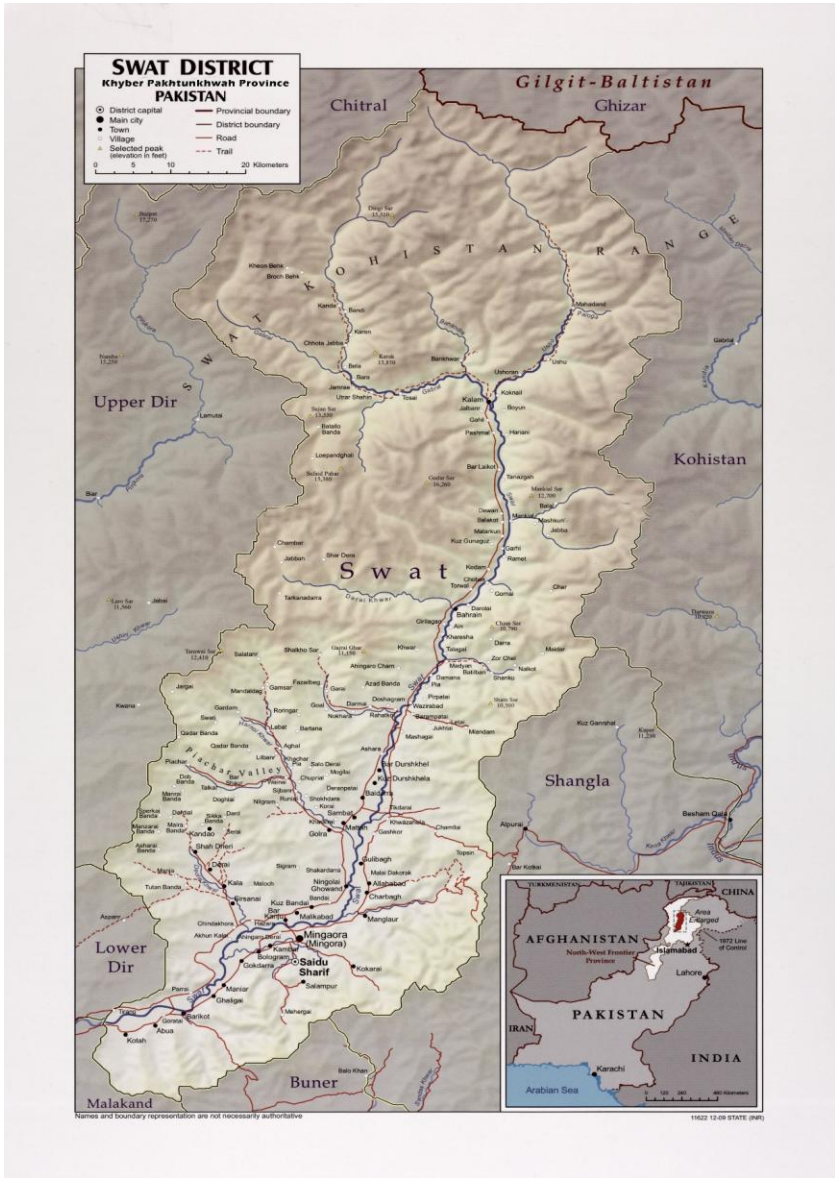
The excavations in Swat regions have shaped far-reaching results, and it is commendable that the once-thriving market for looted artifacts has significantly declined, even if not completely eradicated. However, a key issue remains: the reports produced from these excavations and surveys, though published periodically, are difficult to access. Several of these reports are not readily available to the public or researchers. This article aims to address how stakeholders can be stimulated to improve access to this valuable information. By doing so, not only will researchers benefit, but the general public will also gain knowledge about this rich and important heritage. The availability of excavation and survey results is crucial for spreading awareness and preserving the historical significance of the Swat region. Making this information accessible will contribute to a greater appreciation of the archaeological heritage and encourage more comprehensive study and understanding of the area. Therefore, it is essential to consider ways to facilitate broader access to these critical reports, ensuring that this fertile historical site receives the attention it deserves from both scholars and the public.

The archaeological activities in Swāt have led to several remarkable discoveries that have significantly contributed to our understanding of ancient cultures and civilizations:

- *Buddhist Art and Sculpture:* The excavations have unearthed numerous Buddhist sculptures, reliefs, and stupas, showcasing the distinctive Gandhāra art style, which is a blend of Greco-Roman and Indian artistic elements.
- *Ancient Inscriptions:* Various inscriptions in Brahmi, Kharosthi, and other ancient scripts have been discovered, providing valuable information about the region's linguistic and cultural diversity.
- *Urban Settlements:* The remains of ancient urban settlements, including well-planned cities with sophisticated drainage systems, have been uncovered, indicating the advanced nature of ancient societies in Swāt.

But these are not enough it needs to exceed as a very tiny portion has been excavated in the region.

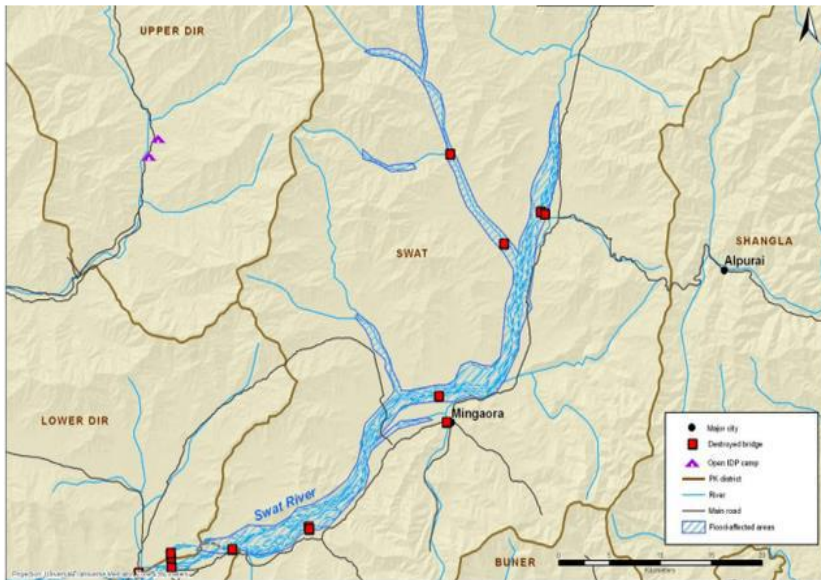
Maps



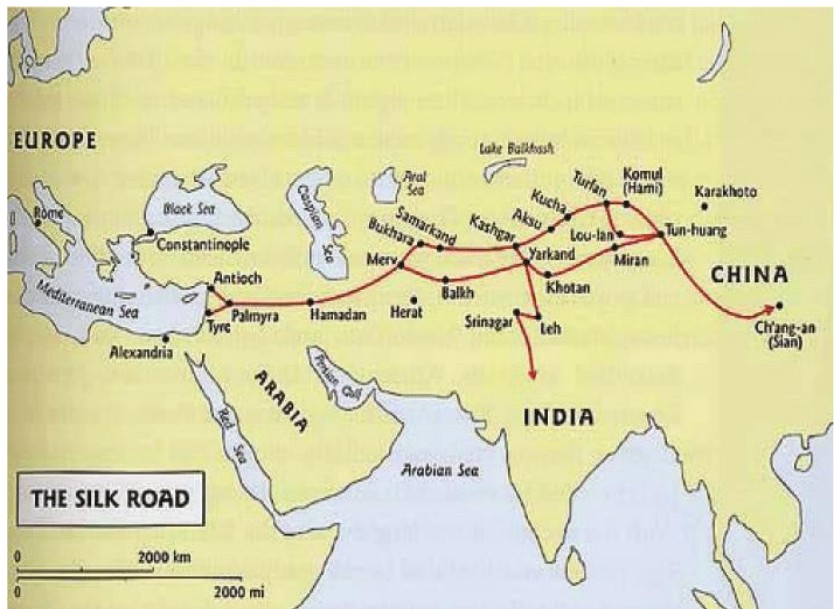
Map. 1: General Map of Swat Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Courtesy Library of Congress)



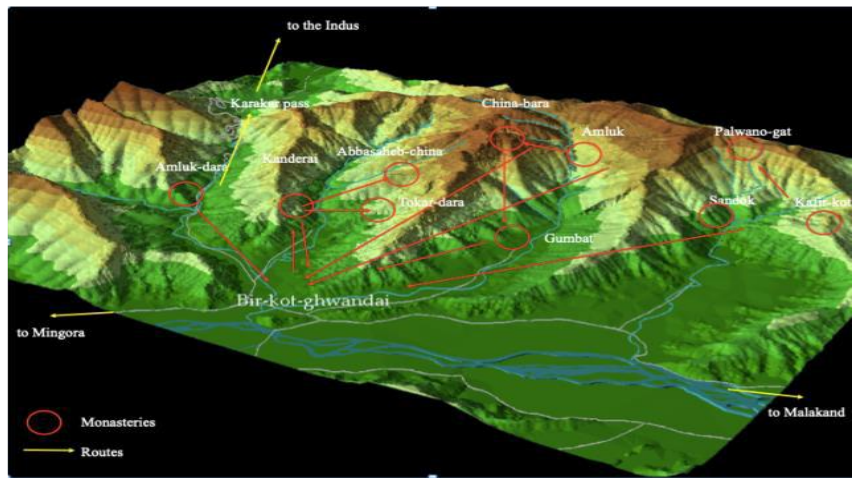
Map 2: The Swat District Location (Shariat et, al. 2020)



Map 3: The Location of Rivers and Tributaries In Swat



Map 4: Silk Rout at Yārkhand Swat (Courtesy Ali-2018)



Map 5: Land Landscape along river Swat and different Remains

Figures



Fig. 1: Swat, The Green and Lush Mountains



Fig. 2: River Swat, and Hindukush mountains (Courtesy: Britannica)



Fig. 3: Butkara Remains with structures



Fig. 4: Sculpture from Saidu Sharif-I (inv. n. MAI 422-1768)



Fig. 5: Shnaisha Stupa Swat Valley



Fig. 6: Roman influence on Swat Sculptures (Chargpatti site Panel-1997)

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³³ Faccenna, Domenico. *Saidu Sharif I: The Buddhist Sacred Area*. IsMEO, 1993.

³⁴ Colliva, L. "The Excavation of the Archaeological Site of Barikot (Bir-kot-ghwandai) and Its Chronological Sequence." *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 34, no. 1 (2011): p. 152.

³⁵ Callieri, Pierfrancesco. "Udegram (Ora) in Swat: Excavation and Archaeological Evidence." *East and West*, 55, no. 1/4 (2005): 263-281.

³⁶ Olivieri, L. M., and A. Filigenzi. "On Gandhāran Sculptural Production from Swat: Recent Archaeological and Chronological Data." In *Problems of Chronology in Gandhāran Art*, 71-92. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018.

³⁷ Due to the adverse vandalism in the area, Professor F.A. Durrani, then-chairman of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Peshawar, established a joint venture with the Federal Department of Archaeology and Museums. This venture was given the name Gandhāra Archaeological Project (GAP).