

A Late Kushan Urban Temple from Bazira/Vajīrasthāna - Data from the 2016 Excavation Campaign at Barikot, Swat

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Abstract

This paper deals with a new sacred building discovered during the 2016 excavation campaign at the urban site of Barikot, Swat (NW, Pakistan). The campaign was focusing on the Unit (or Block) B of the ancient city, where already in 2013 evidence of an important Late Kushan cultic building was brought to light.

Keywords: *Barikot, urban cults, Buddhism, Hariti, wine.*

Introductory Note

The site of Barikot or Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, NW Pakistan), identified as the ancient Bazira/Vajīrasthāna, has been a project of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Swat since 1978. In the last five years excavations focused on a large stretch (about 1 ha.), corresponding to the south-western quarters of the ancient city. The site, at the foot of a hill overlooking the Swat River, is located west of the present-day Barikot village. The 2016 excavation campaign brought to light a sacred building (henceforth, Temple B) in Unit B (or Block B), Sector 1-2 W of trench BKG 11. Temple B is connected through a raised corridor

to Sacred Precinct B unearthed in 2013, the latter situated immediately to the south (Olivieri et al. 2014: 106-18; Olivieri 2016¹). The two coeval buildings (Periods VII/VIII, i.e. 3rd century CE)² are therefore part of the same complex located in the northern

¹ In that article (Olivieri 2016: 9) I wrongly defined the *extra muros* temple of Mohra Maliaran (Taxila) as “small”, by that inferring a dimensional comparison with the (indeed smaller) Late Kushan temple of the Unit K (or Temple K) at Barikot. My mistake would have certainly be avoided if had read an important contribution by Claude Rapin on Mohra Maliaran (Rapin 1995). I take this occasion to correct my mistake, as well as to fill the bibliographic *lacuna*.

² Period VII is dated to the first half of the 3rd century CE; Period VIII falls into the second half of the 3rd century CE. For the complete archaeological sequence of Barikot see Olivieri *et al.* 2014: 5-9.

area of the late Kushan city, accessible from Street 10 (Fig. 1).

The excavations were carried out in 2016 in the framework of the Archaeology – Community - Tourism Field School Project (ACT Project) implemented by the ISMEO Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan and the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (DOAM), and funded by the Pakistan-Italian Debt Swap Agreement (PIDSA).

Both the excavations at Barikot and the Project were led by the writer of this Note, as Director of the ISMEO Mission. The 2016 fieldwork at Sector 1-2 W was entrusted by me to Mr. C. Moscatelli (University of Naples, “L’Orientale”), who was responsible for the April-May campaign, and to Mr. S. Niaz Ali Shah (DOAM), responsible for the digging carried out in August-September of the same year. Therefore, I requested both the field-directors to prepare a preliminary report, a task that was eventually accomplished in an admirably short span of time. In the first part of the report, Mr. Niaz Ali Shah describes the structural aspects of the building, while Mr. Moscatelli, in the

second part, deals with the religious aspects of the discovery. The discovery of Temple B was first announced by me in a post-script to Olivieri 2016, and by Ms. E. Iori (University of Bologna “Alma Mater”) on the behalf of the ISMEO Mission, at the 23rd Conference of the European Association of South Asian Art and Archaeology (EASAA, Cardiff, July 2016).

L.M. Olivieri

The Building

Temple B

Temple B (Fig. 2) consists of a rectangular space (cella), closed on three sides and facing Court 1710 to the east. The platform, constructed in diaper-masonry technique, has a moulded base. The most striking feature is the façade, which we suppose was originally arranged in a single row of four massive wooden pillars, now lost, resting on quadrangular stone bases. Although only three bases have been found so far, the reconstruction (Fig. 3) appears visibly coherent in virtue of a rough stone altar placed between the second and the third base (i.e. at the centre of the façade) in Court 1710. Two post-holes, probably meant to sustain poles in additional

support to a flat roof, were uncovered behind the pillars bases; a rough stone base in the centre of the cella may have been used for the same purpose (Fig. 4).

Court 1710

A short flight of steps at the southern corner of the platform leads to a lower walled space (Court 1710) (Fig. 5). The steps were also connecting the Court to a slightly narrow open space (Room 1711), marked by a low bench built along the western wall. The steps are connected to a low bench running alongside the southern and eastern walls; between them is a doorway leading into the eastern unexcavated spaces of Unit B. On the southern wall there was probably a niche. We infer its existence from the recovery of a stele (BKG 3636, see below) from the debris of the southern wall collapsed inside the Court, along with a fragmentary frieze carved with a phytomorphic motif. Some noteworthy elements were discovered in the Court: (1) a low rectangular tank close to the steps, cut directly into the ground, partly encased with stone slabs and provided with two holes; (2) an almost complete condenser, found in situ near the tank; (3) the aforementioned stone altar, roughly rectangular in shape,

installed against the Temple B platform at a short distance from (4) two traces of clay fireplaces (most probably the remains of a single larger one) (Figs. 6 a-c).

Earlier architectural phases

A closer examination of the Temple B layout (Period VIII) highlighted structural elements belonging to an earlier building (Period VI, i.e. around the end of the 2nd century CE and the beginning of the 3rd century CE). In particular, the western wall is marked by a door (visible in Fig. 5) originally opening into Street 10, which was then walled-up in the 3rd century CE; additionally, the cleaning of the Court 1710 southern wall revealed a previous arrangement of the western corner. A former residential complex was thus completely transformed into a new building by means of architectural features consistent with a place of worship. Adaptive reuse was also documented in the coeval Sacred Precinct K (Sector 11 E 5/6-7-8) excavated in 2013 (Olivieri 2016).

We still do not know if such adaptive reuses may reflect the social change occurred in Swat with the rise of the new

post-Kushan élite in the 3rd century CE. Indeed, Sub-Kushan coins appear in layers of Period VIII along with the first Kushan-Sasanian specimens. They provide a strong sign of the deep crisis following the rise of the Sasanian power in the West, culminated in the collapse of the Kushan dynasty who quite certainly ruled the region through alliances with local noble families (Olivieri 2012). The final abandonment of Barikot, a Kushan city in all respects, falls in concurrence with this political upheaval. Period IX (i.e. 4th century CE) shows non-urban forms of occupation from a group confined to the peripheral area of the ruined settlement (Olivieri et al. 2014: 141-42). A different picture emerges from the countryside, where the usual renovation and enlargement works of the Buddhist sacred areas testify the unceasing vitality of the monastic communities. A concrete example is Amluk-dara, a stunning Great Stūpa founded around the 2nd century CE in the valley of the same name, ca. 3.50 km from Barikot as the crow flies.³ During the 3rd century CE the monument displays a new decoration made of

plastered and painted kanjur (local name for organogenic limestone), in conjunction with the elongation of the staircase (AKD Periods II/IV). The introduction of the new decorative technique totally replaces schist decoration at Amluk-dara, the latter continuing to be used only for the small size steles at Barikot, a production typical of the 3rd century CE mainly linked to domestic cults.

S. Niaz Ali Shah

The Function

Stele BKG 3636 from Court 17104

BKG 3636 (Fig. 7) is a grey-schist stele depicting the goddess Hariti, the wicked yakṣiṇī devourer of children who turned into a lay-follower of the doctrine (upāsikā) and a maternal protector of infants.⁵ The piece is well-preserved and traces of the original gilding are still evident. The goddess is sitting on a throne, which is not represented, but it is merely suggested by the goddess's

³ Amluk-dara was excavated and restored by the Italian Archaeological Mission in the years 2011-2012. See Olivieri *et al.* 2014: 322-94.

⁴ Dimensions: l. max. 16.2, h. max. 24.4, t. max. 5.1. The stele was discovered by one of the Authors, S. Niaz Ali Shah, during the second excavation season at the Temple B, in August 2016.

⁵ The story of Hariti is preserved in several versions. A collection of the main texts is found in Peri 1917; see also Misra 1979: 73-87.

posture. She is wearing a long tunic with an overtunic and jewellery (heavy earrings, long necklace, bracelets and anklets). Her flowing long-wavy hair is covered by a wreath. Her right hand is holding a bunch of grapes; her left hand is bracing the head of the child who is seated on her lap. The latter is completely naked and is touching the goddess' bosom with his left hand. Hariti is surrounded by four children in various postures. Clockwise from bottom left: a naked child with his right leg raised up and right hand resting on Hariti's right leg, as he is climbing on her; a naked child with hands joined; a naked child holding a bowl; a child (?) wearing a long tunic with short sleeves and bearing an undefined object in his overlapping hands. Finally, the rectangular base of the stele is decorated with a single row of saw-teeth.

Cultic activity

No positive evidence of the religious function was recorded within Temple B. Nonetheless, the elements in Court 1710 allow for a hypothetical reconstruction of the ritual activity. Some significant similarities with our context are additionally found at Shaikhan-dheri (Charsadda), specifically in the so-called

'House of Naradakha', identified by Dani as the dwelling of a Buddhist teacher later transformed into a sacred space (Dani 1965-66: 28-29), but most probably a Buddhist urban shrine throughout its life (Allchin 1979: 777).

The condenser (Figs. 8) is generally considered a container employed in the production of alcohol, and its recovery next to the tank may be suggestive of a ritual purpose for such beverage; however, the actual function of the tank appears unclear, especially considering the two holes.

The condenser, a wheel-made red-slipped red ware, was restored from several fragments (more than half is preserved). It has a subglobular body, most probably with no foot. The lateral spout has a thick rim, and a central seam runs all around the outer surface.

The condenser perfectly matches the coeval ones collected from the Kushan and late Kushan layers of Shaikhan-dheri (Periods II/I, Allchin 1979: 769; fig. 7b). They share the same subglobular body, on average with equal height and diameter, different from the earlier elongated-shaped condensers occurring in layers spanning from later

Indo-Greek and early Kushan periods of the same site (Periods V-III/II); earlier condenser specimens were also found at Taxila (Marshall 1951, II: 420-21; III: Pl. 125, no. 129, a) and Sirkap (Ghosh 1948: 64-65). As a whole, the evidence seems to confirm distillation as one of the activities carried out in urban settlements.

Since alcohol substances are strictly banned in Buddhist texts, such vessels within Buddhist spaces arise some interpretative difficulties. Allchin was aware of this matter, and he speculated on the consumption of alcohol in the shrine (i.e. the so-called 'House of Naradakha') with understandable hesitation (Allchin 1979: 779).⁶

⁶ Offering of liquid – whether alcoholic or not – was also documented at Barikot in the related Sacred Precinct B and Sacred Precinct K, where additionally two distinctive rituals were hypothesised on the basis of the ceramic classes recovered in the respective areas (Olivieri 2016). Moreover, the material collected in the religious spaces may supply useful data concerning the social fabric of the city. In particular the archaeological evidence from Unit B may denote a female component in the cult activity, as the breaking of shell bangles seems to suggest (Olivieri *et al.* 2014: 233-34; Olivieri 2016); the female attendance of the area may be further supported by the stele of Hariti, a deity who was still worshipped in later Gandhara to foster pregnancy and childbirth (Beal 1884, I: 110-11).

Another element of similarity between our Temple B and the 'House of Naradakha' at Shaikhan-dheri, is the recovery in the latter of a similar stele depicting Hariti (Dani 1965-66: 29; Pl. XVI). According to the excavation report, it was unearthed along with a meditating Buddha image, but no information is given about the exact position of the finds (cf. Olivieri *et al.* 2014: 95-96; Olivieri 2011 [2015]: 10-11).

The stele of Hariti brings us back to the possible use of intoxicating drinks, as hinted by the presence of the condenser in Court 1710. From one side, the iconography of Hariti is conceptually coherent with a religious orientation allowing (or implying) wine consumption. From another side, wine had such a significant cultural role in the region that it became a completing theme in the decorative program of the stūpas, as witnessed by the well-known reliefs depicting scenes of libation and ceremonial consumption of inebriating substances. Their symbolic meaning is still a matter of uncertainty among scholars. Recently Falk (2009) has underlined the relationship between Buddhist monastic communities and

production of alcohol, while Filigenzi (in press) has stressed the same relationship in the framework of a wider cultural environment, i.e. the economical, social and pre-Buddhist religious background of Swat.⁷ In fact, albeit Buddhism appears from the archaeological context as the preeminent religious movement, data review and new evidence are increasingly highlighting the role local religions and popular customs played in shaping the cultural horizon of the region. In this regard, the analysis of urban contexts is crucial to define cultural factors. A good case in point is Barikot, since for the very first time a systematic excavation offers preliminary insights into the religious panorama of a North-West city, where different belief systems, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, might have coexisted side by side within the same religious spaces.

C. Moscatelli

⁷ Many thanks are due to Dr. Filigenzi (University of Naples, “L’Orientale”) for allowing one of the Author to refer to her seminal paper before its publication. Regarding the libation scenes, the reader is also referred to Brancaccio and Xinru Liu (2009). For the evidence on wine-making in Swat, see Olivieri and Vidale 2006; Olivieri 2013: 190-93.

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Figures

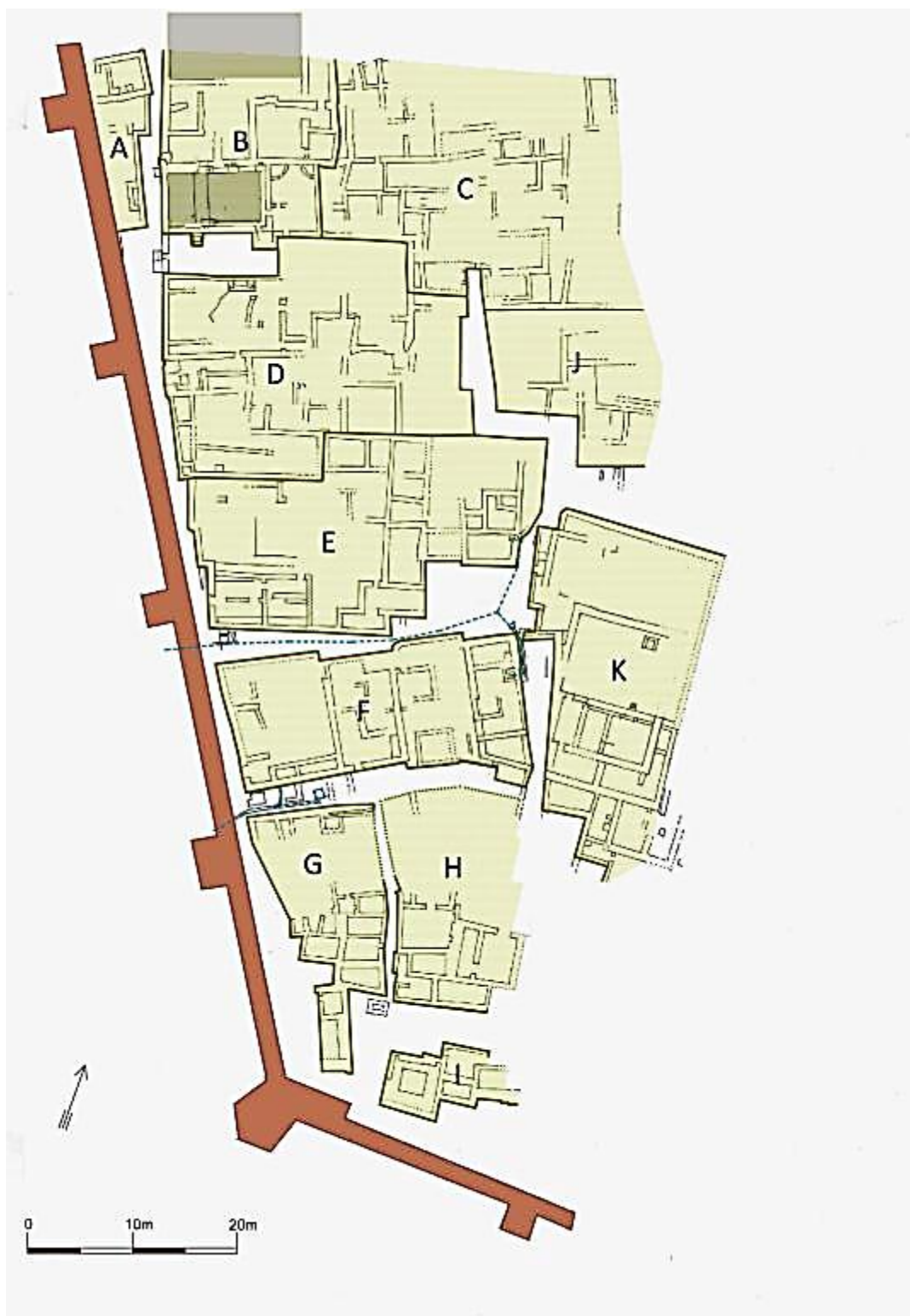


Figure 1. Trench BKG 4-5/11. Areas of Temple B (north) and Sacred Precinct B (south), to the north-west of the trench, are shaded in gray (after Olivieri et al. 2014).



Figure 2. Temple B (BKG 11 Sector 1-2 W), view from N (April-May campaign) (photo by LMO).

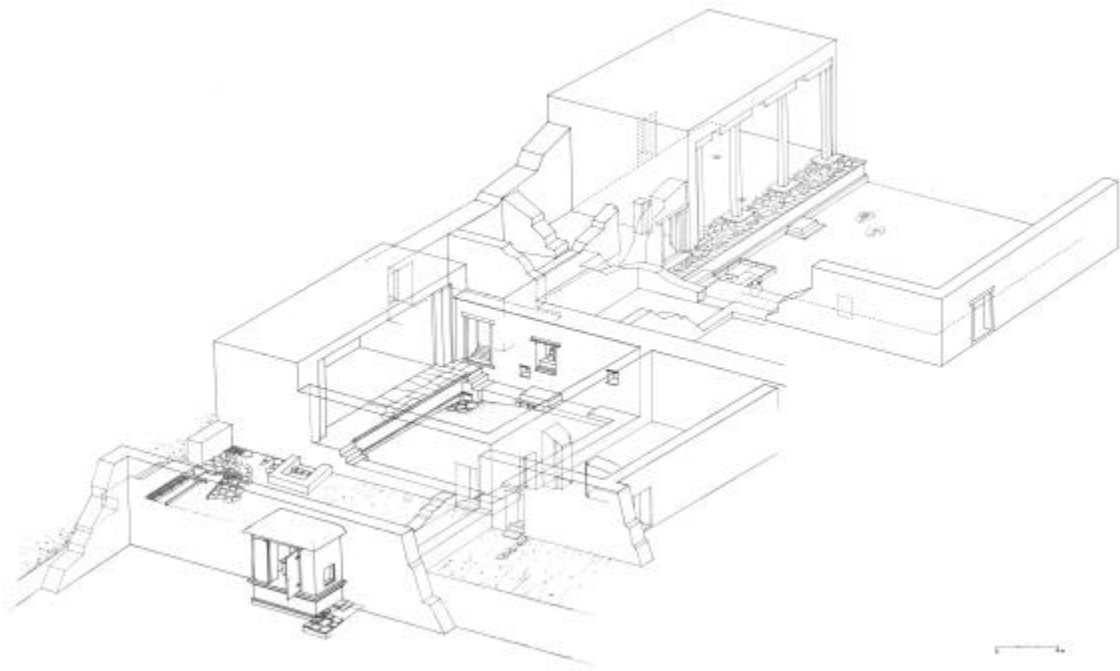


Figure 3. Axonometric restitution of Temple B and Court 1710, including Court 28 of Unit D and Sacred Precinct B (processed by CM after drawings by F. Martore).



Figure 4. Inner space of Temple B, view from W (August-September campaign) (photo by LMO).



Figure 5. Court 1710, view from N (photo by LMO).





Figures 6. Elements in Court 1710 (photos by LMO).

Tank.

Condenser.

Altar and remains of the clay oven(s).



Figure 7. Stele BKG 3636 (photo by Elisa Iori) (h. mx. 24.4, w. max. 16.2, t. max. 5.1).



Figures 8. Condenser from Court 1710 (photos by Elisa Iori) (Scale: see Fig. 6.b).