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Book Author(s): Anna Filigenzi, Luca Maria Olivieri and Peter Rockwell

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CHAPTER 1: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

1.1 – The distinctiveness of the Buddhist rock sculptures of Swat

Rock art in general poses serious problems regarding analytical procedures and data interpretation. Given the particular placing of the carvings or petroglyphs, showing no physical correlation with other artefacts, we are unable to relate them – at least not directly – to any archaeological context which might serve as a basis for a reliable chronology.

The Buddhist rock sculpture of Swat is not an exception in this regard. Moreover, some unusual stylistic and iconographic features make its iconographic code even more difficult to decipher, and the lack of dedicatory inscriptions or of donors' figures means we have none of the palaeographic data or evidence of function that so often provide useful clues for an art historic interpretation.[1]

However, the stringent consistency in the formal characteristics of the sculptures points to a circumscribed time span and cultural horizon that – with a fair degree of certainty – can be roughly dated between the seventh and eighth centuries CE. This time frame is suggested by the general tone, which already looks forward to that form of Buddhism known as "northern", and comparison with other serial productions (in particular votive bronzes and terracottas), which reveals a marked affinity with the rock sculptures of Swat in terms of style, iconography and area of provenance. Moreover, their distribution over a vast area including Swat and, somewhat more sparsely, neighbouring areas such as Dir, Puran and Buner,[2] confirms that their occurrence was not episodic or sporadic but represented an autonomous, coherent artistic current advancing or consolidating ideas that were gaining ground or already well established in the religious culture of the time.

Generally speaking, the bond between these sculptures and the formal rules of the Gandharan artistic culture, which had dominated this area for centuries, appears quite weak; the Gupta art language seems to have made a larger contribution.[3] In addition, the Indic world may well have provided various motives that influenced how the divine was conceived and represented. Be that as it may, the result as a whole can be seen as a part of a course of new formal patterns of Buddhist art that would be amply developed in the Himalayan regions, and which we see already emerging – more explicitly than in the Swat rock sculptures[4] – in the bronze and terracotta productions that are certainly the closest to the Swat sculptures of all artistic output.

Given the elusive nature of the historical framework, however, our knowledge about the religious and artistic culture to which the rock sculptures of Swat seem to be related is far from being complete. Further difficulties are posed by certain baffling features of the sculptures that nonetheless represent their most distinctive and consistently original elements.

At first glance, the rock sculptures very closely resemble certain examples of popular religious objects, in particular those with an apotropaic purpose.[5] This impression is created initially by the repetitiveness of subjects and certain – apparently incongruous – stylistic characteristics that may appear as resulting from clumsy craftsmanship or disordered, progressive juxtapositions of figures.

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[1] On this aspect see Chap. 3.2.

[2] For Dir see Dani (1968-69a) and Ashraf Khan (1994); for Puran and Buner see Callieri (1985) and Olivieri (1994). However, as for Dir see the Introduction to Part II, fn. 7.

[3] I use the term Gupta for the sake of convenience, although as it is general used it wrongly includes periods and areas that did not belong to the Gupta Empire. Moreover, we now have sufficient evidence to recognise the specific identity of the artistic trends that developed in the post-Kushan period in the north-west region of the subcontinent. A praiseworthy step in this direction is the recent coinage "Gandhāra-Nāgara" for the temple architecture along the Indus (Meister 1997-98).

[4] On the technical and ideological reasons leading to a certain simplification of stylistic and iconographic language in the rock sculpture repertory, see below, Chap. 3.2.

[5] As an exemplary case, mention could be made of the aediculae containing paintings of sacred subjects that are quite common along the roads of central and southern Italy, particularly at crossroads or at the beginning or end of a delimited territory.

As a more comprehensive picture of the sculptures emerges, however, certain recurrent elements become apparent – and in this regard the features that are absent are at least as significant as those present – as well as a studied choice of stylistic and iconographic details. Distinct characteristics materialise, and with them the sense of a visual strategy for achieving a calculated effect.

As we shall see, the range of subjects, the topographic distribution of the sculptures and their relationship with the rocks that physically contain them as well as with the surrounding landscape all combine to evoke not an unpremeditated, random proliferation, but rather a precise inspirational motive supported by a powerful artistic and conceptual plan. Any interpretation of the sculptures as a whole, or even as individual pieces, depends entirely on precise theoretical premises, since their forms, both in terms of stylistic rendering and choice of subjects, derive from canons that are not only aesthetic but also, and indeed above all, ideological.

1.2 – The subjects

In the course of the various surveys, nearly two hundred sculptures have been documented in Swat (see Maps 1, 2). There may be some lacunae – pieces that have escaped survey or been lost – but taken together, the objects allow us to piece together a reliable picture of rock art based in part on the calculation of probabilities. In fact, the dispersal and numerical occurrence of the various subjects – consistent throughout the area concerned – are sufficiently representative to give substantial reference points for an overall interpretation.

Figs. 3a,b – Tārā (courtesy MNAOR, Inv. 5211)

The first general conclusion that can be drawn is that the whole set of sculptures forms an all-male pantheon. It is certainly significant that the presence of female divinities is extremely rare among the coeval Buddhist bronzes as well. Nevertheless, distinctive iconographic types of Buddhist goddesses certainly existed in Swat at the time, as demonstrated by the general stylistic and iconographic compliance of some bronze models (Figs. 3 a, b) with the rock sculptures.[6] In addition, mention must be made of the fact that Swat/Uḍḍiyāna is considered one of the possible homelands of Tārā (Sinha 1971: 50).

With regard to frequency, the dominant figure is Avalokiteśvara-Padmapāṇi. He is usually shown seated in *ardhaparyaṅkāsana*[7] in a pensive pose. He is less frequently depicted standing (S137; II: Fig. 138; GS 17), generally on stelae or less often in composite scenes.

The repetition of this subject may possibly be due to the role of patron of the region that the bodhisattva could have assumed at some point. This would have won him the particular veneration of the local population (Tucci 1958: 322). However, the general context and, even more importantly, certain details of the iconography suggest that different reasons may lie behind the great popularity of Padmapāṇi or – to be more precise – that some specific functions of the bodhisattva could forge special ties with the land (see Chap. 4).

Rather less frequently we find other bodhisattva figures; in some cases they are clearly identifiable by virtue of specific and readily recognisable attributes, while in others they can only be generically linked with a particular typology that includes a range of possible identifications while excluding others. Although secondary to Padmapāṇi in terms of numerical occurrence, these cases are even more significant from an iconographic point of view since they reflect the most distinctive aspects of this particular artistic current.

It is, however, precisely this peculiarity – which has no comparable counterpart in any other environment, despite geographical and chronological proximity – that makes a correct identification particularly challenging. The greatest difficulties are raised by the iconographic types marked by common features despite their evident diversity. The bad condition of most of the sculptures makes it even harder to identify the individual figures. In fact, while some of these types show characteristic features revealing a distinct physiognomy, vague as it may remain, there are others that have only the slightest of variations to distinguish them one from the other. In these cases identification is far from certain, although, as has been mentioned, the possibilities remain limited.

An exemplary case here is offered by the figure of Maitreya, who appears in a series of iconographic variants, some readily recognisable given the singularity of their intrinsic characteristics, others only identifiable thanks to the adventitious conservation of significant details. In general it is the standing Maitreya images that display the most marked individual features. Whether isolated or included in complex compositions, they can often be identified with certainty thanks to particular attributes: the *kamaṇḍalu* (or *kalaśa* of various forms) of the earlier tradition, which may be associated with the rosary or the ascetic's staff, the latter belonging to a newly devised iconographic model often also characterised by the monastic cloth. Even more peculiar and unmistakable is the four-armed Maitreya, in which a book is added to the above-mentioned attributes. In this case the images of Maitreya appear radically remodelled to give expression to the current religious culture, stressing the characteristics of the bodhisattva-ascetic, legitimate successor to the Buddha Śākyamuni and, as such, guardian, guarantor and propagator of *dharma.*[8]

It is far more difficult to recognise the figure of Maitreya in the seated version, unless it retains some identifying detail, such as the *kamaṇḍalu*. In cases of poor preservation the difficulty arises over the fact that the form of Maitreya follows the same essential contours as that of Vajrapāṇi.[9] Both, as is borne out by comparison with the bronzes, sit in an evidently codified pose (although no traces of this have been preserved in the literature), which we might for the sake of convenience define as reverse (*vāma*) *ardhaparyaṅkāsana*. Again, the form of the attributes of the two bodhisattvas and the way they are held (respectively the *kamaṇḍalu* or *kalaśa* in various forms and the *vajra*, held on the thigh with the left hand) can assume such similar profiles as to make it impossible to distinguish them should the relief be badly abraded, as indeed is often the case. The presence of Vajrapāṇi in the rock sculpture repertory, although not ascertained among the seated bodhisattva figures, is unmistakably recognisable in certain examples (only stelae): the bodhisattva is portrayed standing, his right hand in *varadamudrā* and his left holding the *vajra,* either elongated and wavy in form or of compound shape, with the lower end resting on a lotus flower beside the bodhisattva (see Chap. 5.3).

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[6] The rare occurrence of female figures in the bronze sculpture was already noticed by Pal (1975: 27), although making inferences from this evidence is not an easy task. For a more detailed comparison between bronze and rock sculpture see below, esp. Chap. 3.2.

[7] On the terms *ardhaparyaṅkāsana* – reverse *ardhaparyaṅkāsana* (the latter cited below) see Chap. 3.4.

[8] This is one of the most complex and innovative creations in the rock sculpture of Swat, with a sound theoretical basis. In particular, the four-armed figure of Maitreya, previously identified by Tucci (1958: 307) as Śiva based on an erroneous interpretation of the attributes, offers considerable food for thought regarding the entire context of the rock sculpture. For a detailed discussion of the subject, see Chap. 5.

Moreover, on the evidence of the bronze production, which in general is much better preserved, we find that another bodhisattva, Mañjuśrī, is portrayed seated in reverse *ardhaparyaṅkāsana.* Again, however, among the seated bodhisattvas the rock sculptures offer not one example that could be thus identified beyond any doubt. Furthermore, a number of figures – some standing, some seated – holding the attribute of the book (this latter common to both Maitreya and Mañjuśrī) cannot be unequivocally identified, as the preserved elements are insufficient to distinguish among iconographic types that, evidently for some good reason, are shown with very similar physiognomies.

On the other hand, the more traditional Buddhist iconography provided the inspiration for depictions of the Buddha, whether alone or accompanied by two or more bodhisattvas, but in either case showing only rare departures from the schemes typical of the art of Gandhāra. Buddha images are seldom represented, and usually with generic connotations, lacking the typical elements that might allow for identification as specific figures. An exception here is relief C1 (II: Figs. 1a,b; GS 5), where the Buddha is seated on a throne supported by three elephants, of which only the heads and the forelegs are visible. In this figure we may possibly recognise Akṣobhya (see Chap. 3.5). Apart from this case, and a few others such as the reliefs C115 (II: Fig. 115; GS 2) and C92 (II: Figs. 92a,b,c,d), where position and dimensions endow the Buddha image with a particularly significant aspect, we find the Buddha figure occupying an almost marginal role within the broad context of the rock sculptures. This emerges most strikingly in the reliefs including various subjects where, apart from the triads, the Buddha never occupies the compositional centre of the scene.

Also to be noticed is the fact that, differently from the coeval bronzes, the variation of the *mudrā*s of the Buddha is quite limited. Rarely represented standing, the Buddha performs in this case the *varadamudrā* with the right hand, while holding a hem of the robe with the left hand: S13 (II: Fig. 11; GS 1); S40 (II: Figs. 42a,b); S75 (?) (II: Fig. 78) and, possibly, S60 (Figs. 60a,b). Noteworthy in this respect, is the fact that Nepali scholars attribute to the combination of these two gestures the specific name of *viśvavyākaraṇamudrā* (Locke 1985: 8; fn. 19; J. Huntington 2009: 86). Although no normative prescriptions are known from textual sources, the character displaying this *mudrā* is identified, in Nepalese popular devotion, as the Buddha Maitreya. One cannot exclude, indeed, that the standing Buddhas of Swat might reflect the same tradition, especially in light of the emphasis laid by the rock sculpture's imagery on some distinctive features of Maitreya's function (see Chap. 5).

Interestingly, depictions of standing Buddhas among the rock sculptures of Swat are restricted to the stelae and never appear on boulders or outcrops. When seated, the Buddha is usually represented in *dhyānimudrā*, with a very few exceptions: in *dharmacakramudrā* in two cases: C50 (II: Fig. 50) and C205 (II: Fig. 151a); in *abhayamudrā* (?) in one case: C24 (II: Figs. 24a,b); possibly in *bhūmisparśamudrā* in one case: C6 (II: Fig. 6). Significantly or not, the *dharmacakramudrā* never occurs in association with the presence of the motif of the deers and wheel on the throne (for this latter see Chap. 3.5).

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[9] For the sake of simplicity, reference will be made here mainly to Vajrapāṇi, nevertheless with the implicit assumption that even slight iconographic variations might have held significance in the original context, for instance with regard to a possible embryonic differentiation between Vajrapāṇi and Vajrasattva.

The relatively inconspicuous presence of the Buddha, in contrast with the copiousness of bodhisattva images, seems to suggest that the former had a secondary role in this context. Nevertheless, absence does not always imply that a personage or concept is of minor import, and this is particularly true of sacred art.[10] In rock art the idea of "Buddhahood" constitutes a central value that emerges even in the absence of direct reference, or just lightly sketched in, as in the small Buddha image revealed by the open lotus flower of the Padmapāṇi of Dangram/Garasa (C16; II: Figs. 16a,b; see Chap. 4.3). Here the Buddha seems to have been conceived as an incorporeal presence, implied rather than illustrated. It is symbolised by the monument – indeed, by the sacred area itself and the paths leading to it, which are populated by the images of his intermediaries with the world. And precisely this sparse presence of the Buddha in the figuration seems to enhance the idea of a goal: the physical approach to the monument that symbolically reflects the mental objective of the inner itinerary.[11]

The subjects so far mentioned, whether of frequent or rare occurrence, belong to the standard repertory of rock art. In addition to these, however, we find others that stand out from the overall context on account of their iconographic originality or exceptional frequency. [12]

Very advanced with respect to certain tendencies shown by later Buddhist art is a stela representing a personage dressed as a bodhisattva, seated in *dhyānāsana* on a throne sheltered by a canopy; the character performs the *abhayamudrā* with his right hand whilst his left hand, resting on the lap, holds a flat bowl. He is flanked by two minor figures that are also haloed: one female, the other male (S140; II: Fig. 140; GS 38; see Chap. 6.2). This corresponds with a scheme quite often encountered in bronzes and terracottas but to date unique in rock sculpture. In this stela, as we shall see later in more detail, it is possible to make out the image of a *siddha*, as is suggested not only by comparison with other examples but also, persuasively, by the religious context in which the sculpture is placed.

In this brief survey of themes that, albeit with certain features departing from the current iconographic code, are undoubtedly Buddhist, a number of isolated examples of uncertain affiliation must still be mentioned.

Among the subjects that strikingly depart from the most familiar iconographic repertory are the rare multi-armed figures. These constitute a sort of "atypical" line, since rock sculptures seem to adhere strictly to a canon of anthropomorphic normality.[13] Besides the four-armed Maitreya mentioned above (to our present knowledge there are only five such examples, three of which are represented by stelae), this group includes the unfinished stela S124 (II: Fig. 109) showing an eight-armed divinity seated in *dhyānāsana* on a tall seat and bearing a number of attributes, not all of which can be identified with certainty. The most likely interpretation, suggested by the surviving elements as well as by the general context of the rock sculpture, is that we have here one of the many forms of Avalokiteśvara (see Chap. 4.3).

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[10] Much the same phenomenon was observed by Dani (1983: 150-162) in the context of the petroglyphs of Chilas II, where he attributes the secondary position of the Buddha to a local, short-lived predominance of a schismatic sect (of Devadatta, as the scholar maintains based on the evidence of certain inscriptions) that assigned to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara a leading role. According to Dani, a deliberate effort to restore a line of orthodox cult in this area of local Buddhism is to be seen in the depiction inspired by the story of the "thousand Buddhas" at Thalpan II, which, on the basis of stylistic criteria, he dates much later than the "schismatic" representations. However, given the extemporary nature of the graffiti, which seem to reflect a pious tradition of donations made by people passing through (including pilgrims but also, and above all, tradesmen), any attempt to cluster them according to diachronic or doctrinaire criteria must take into account a non-linear stratification of variances. Rather, it is interesting to note the presence of representations – including the "thousand Buddhas" and the various *jātaka*s – which find wider circulation in extra-Indian territory, and in particular in Xinjiang, from where many travellers must certainly have arrived following these routes – travellers who could occasionally have commissioned ex-votos. Although "the whole set of engravings […] look purely Indian" (Fussman 1994b: XVI-XVII), some of the graffiti might reflect particular requests of donors more familiar with certain subjects.

[11] In this connection it is worth noting a similar conclusion drawn by G. Fussman (1994c: 10-13) on the absence of cult images of the Buddha at Chilas II. Contesting (rightly, in my opinion) the conclusions of M. Carter (1993), who saw in the absence proof of a context that was still aniconic, Fussman asserted the equation between *stūpa* cult and Buddha cult. In the (distinctly iconic) context of the Swat rock sculptures the infrequent presence of the Buddha might easily find an explanation in the overpowering Mahayanic impact of the bodhisattva cult. However, this seems a rather simplistic conclusion, and hardly reliable, especially with respect to the entire context. If, on the other hand, we were to accept a different interpretation, we would have to recognise in this orientation of the iconography a programmatic choice, possibly encouraged by the current ideas. The *stūpa*/Buddha equation might have been deliberately emphasised as a further means to draw attention to the sacred areas and to the related function of the rock sculpture, as we will see in section 8 of this chapter.

[12] For a detailed discussion of these isolated and problematic iconographic themes see Chap. 7.

[13] It certainly reflects a distinct attitude, although one which is not easy to bring into focus. By this same time, Indian religious art had long been making frequent use of the artifice of morphological abnormity to express divine power and ubiquitousness. The scarcity

The small contingent of multi-armed figures includes a female divinity (S70; II: Figs. 72a,b) trampling on a decapitated goat. The theme –again the subject of a stela – is clearly modelled after the iconography of Durgā, evidently reinterpreted in typically local terms. Although of great interest for the witness it bears to a persistent and coherent set of autochthonous beliefs, this odd iconographic symbiosis remains the elusive document of an undetermined cultic context.

A complex iconographic scheme and the deliberately archaic style characterise a stela and two rock reliefs, related through their depictions of personages in Kushan dress accompanied by minor characters (S69, C116 and C183; II: Figs. 71a,b, 116a,b,c, and 118 respectively; GS 39, 41 and 42 respectively). The interpretations so far offered – by A. Stein (1929: 51; 1930: 32-33), who sees in the rock relief C116 the mythical king Uttarasena in the role of donor, and by G. Tucci (1958: 295), who interprets it as a Kushan-period portrayal of a local divinity with attendants or a sovereign with his court – can now be reviewed, bringing to bear on them some newly acquired data. As we shall see, certain elements support attribution of these reliefs to the full flowering of Buddhist rock art despite their differences. When considered from an entirely different cultural perspective, the intrinsic and contextual content of this iconographic theme reveals unexpected implications, suggesting identification with Sūrya and his acolytes. We shall also see that, in the case of this iconographic theme as well, attribution to a precise cult context remains difficult, and the reliefs must therefore be added to the long list of attestations of a period of the cultural history of Swat still largely unknown.

These reliefs bring an apparently dissonant note to the ambit of Swat rock sculptures, but at the same time, together with the “atypical” sculptures mentioned above, they also help to render a more historically accurate and plausible picture of the class thanks precisely to the contrasting elements they exhibit.

1.3 – Sculptures, landscape and sacred topography

The reliefs examined – actually, all the reliefs so far known to us – are with a very few exceptions situated along the left tributaries of the Swat River, where urban settlement is favoured by natural conditions and is often accompanied by sacred areas at an appropriate distance. With the aim of reconstructing the original connections between the various groups of sculptures and the surrounding environment, verification was attempted to determine whether concentrations of the former in certain areas had to do with particular characteristics of the latter.

It was thus observed that the sculptures are rarely located in isolation. The general tendency is instead towards spatial clustering, often corresponding to sacred areas and the paths leading to them. In some cases we have conclusive evidence of this association, the sacred areas being sufficiently well preserved to be recognised as such if not already identified through excavation, as in the case of Butkara I, Pānṛ I, Nawe-kalai or Shnaisha. In other cases the former presence of sacred areas no longer preserved can only be conjectured where the modern built-up area has developed over the earlier settlements, or where surface examination yields some evidence, scant as it is.

Nevertheless, this late artistic flowering is not necessarily to be taken as a positive sign of vitality for the associated sacred areas, many of which had probably already fallen into decay, been abandoned, or had even

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of examples of this among the rock sculptures (but also, it must be stressed, among the coeval Buddhist bronzes of this area) is not easy to interpret. It might indicate an as yet scant familiarity or sympathy on the part of Buddhism for a practice of Hindu origin, or it could be a deliberate choice aimed at confining this feature to more secluded environments reserved for communities of initiates.

physically disappeared when the rock sculptures began to sprout among them. Some of them, however, either distinguished by particular sacredness or favoured by their location on certain routes, received renewed attention in the form of restoration, albeit modest, or with the simple addition of rock sculptures.[14]

The phenomenon suggests that for a certain length of time, and for causes we can now only conjecture, Buddhism saw a phase of renewed vigour in Swat that must also have had a certain effect on at least some of the region's religious foundations.

The general uniformity of style and iconography displayed by the rock sculptures do not provide any valuable insights into diachronic change. The few differences observed are of little help in distinguishing between earlier and later specimens; as we shall see, they do not automatically constitute reliable indications because, as the internal cross-comparison demonstrates, they are often synchronic variations. Nevertheless, the very position of the sculptures constitutes fairly eloquent evidence of a unitary strategy. Marking out the sacred areas and the way leading to them, the rock sculptures seem to have served as a sort of re-consecration of places of worship, either fully functioning or already decayed.

Occasionally the rock reliefs may have marked out sacred areas that had not been built on, traditionally indicating the scene of some miraculous event, but no longer recognisable as such. At least one case is, however, known to us, and that is Jare, where a great image of Padmapāṇi (C107; II: Fig. 108; GS 12) was erected in the vicinity of the ford taking pilgrims from the left bank of the Swat River to the other side. Here was a celebrated place of pilgrimage, identified by Stein on the basis of evidence offered by Songyun,[15] for here tradition has it that an impression of the spot where the Buddha had placed his *saṃghāṭī* to dry was preserved in a rock (Stein, 1929: 86-87 and pl. 48; 1930: 56-57; Tucci, 1958: 303-304; Filigenzi 2010a: 188). Here, the relief takes on a twofold meaning, signalling the sacred place and at the same time acting as an apotropaic image; travellers about to cross at a particularly turbulent stretch of the river would certainly have addressed their prayers to it (*ibidem*).

It should also be borne in mind that the conception of a sacred place still held by the local population finds expression in extremely conservative attitudes, and indeed there is some connection between these and the superstitious practices that have long been habitually performed. The consecrated place appears to remain such even when its original function is no longer served. The custom of funerary deposits in the vicinity of or within Buddhist sacred areas is already documented in ancient times (Schopen 1987: 198), and it could go as far as burial within the sacred monument itself. This is the case of the Dhamami *stūpa* at Sahri Bahlol recounted by Bellew (1864: 140), in which a bodhisattva statue was buried together with the mortal remains. In this extreme case we witness not so much a fervent faith as a practice bordering on superstition. Not dissimilar behaviour is evidenced by the presence of Muslim cemeteries in the vicinity of certain Buddhist reliefs that, although obsolete as far as their intrinsic value is concerned, continue to transmit signals of a sacredness that transcends them, emanating from the ground on which they stand.

The survival of ancient traditions, Buddhist or otherwise, in the local cults of the Islamic period was also noted by Stein on various occasions during his explorations; one of these attestations is represented by the *saṃghāṭī* block, bearing inscriptions with Islamic profession of faith (Stein 1930: 56; 59). Curiously, the cult had recently seen some revival at the time Stein arrived, since in the same place there was also the burial of a much venerated "martyr", who had died just two or three years before – actually, a rifle merchant murdered by some Kohistani (*ibid*.: 59). Mount Ilam, too, scene of sacred Buddhist legends (the Mount Hi-lo of Xuanzang according to Foucher 1902: 368, fn. 3), enjoys great veneration both among the Hindus, who call it *Rāma takht* (throne of Rāma, who is said to have come down from the heavens on this peak), and among the local Muslim population, who hold it sacred as conserving the mortal remains of a Shahid, or Martyr (*ibid*.: 101).

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[14] This might be, for instance, the case of Pānṛ I. The construction phases of Pānṛ I terminate with Period 3, ascribed to the late fifth century CE, even though worship activities in the area may have lasted until the seventh-tenth century CE. To a late period in the life of the sacred area D. Faccenna connects also some "caves" on the W slope of the hill overlooking the site (Faccenna *et al.* 1993: 121). *Contra* see Callieri (2012). On this last aspect see Chap. 2.3.

[15] According to a legend recounted by Songyun (Beal 1958 [1884]: xcv; Chavannes 1903: 409 ff.) the Buddha's garments were drenched during a terrible storm of wind and rain unleashed by a *nāgarāja* irritated by the conversions the Buddha had achieved in the kingdom of Wu-ch'ang/U-chang (Uḍḍiyāna). Briefer versions of the legend, with differently combined details, are given by Faxian (Beal 1958 [1884]: xxxi) and Xuanzang (*ibid*.: 135).

Similar is the case of Mount Karamar, which can be taken as an exemplary case of cross-cultural persistence. It was identified by Cunningham (1966: 7, reprint) as the mountain on whose peak, at the time of Xuanzang (who passed there on his way to Udabaṇḍha), stood a famous sanctuary dedicated to Maheśvara and his consort, Bhīmā (Beal 1958 [1884]: 112-114). Foucher (1902: 363-365), corroborating Cunningham's thesis with further evidence, could verify that the place was still held sacred by the local Muslim population. In his work Foucher also makes incidental reference to the practice, very common among the Muslims of Kashmir, of building their sanctuaries on ancient sites of Hindu cult (*ibid*.: 363). As for Mount Karamar, he not only notes the presence on it of a *ziyārah*, but also reports the account of his local guide, which has it that a fakir made a miraculous leap from its summit. This, as Foucher points out, is much like the leap made by the *sādhu* from the height of the *svayaṃbhū* image of Bhairava on Kashmir's Amarnath road for final liberation, according to a tradition observed in various parts of India.[16]

This inveterate habit may also be taken to have been influential in the flowering of the rock sculptures. It is significant that the correlation between sculptures and sacred areas does not depend on the actual state of preservation and activity of the latter. This means that the primary function of the sculptures is witnessing the immutable auspiciousness of places that, despite the ravages of time, were still perceived as imbued with some sort of sacral power.[17]

Clearly, the environment itself has a strong conditioning effect on the imagination, since supernatural power – benign or malign – generally has a strong enchoric characterisation and therefore manifests itself in places where the physical elements most representative of a certain ecosystem, whether positive or negative, vital or baneful to its equilibrium, are enclosed in a sort of microcosm. In the case of Swat, as in the neighbouring regions, the sacred place normally emerges from natural spaces where the beauty of the mountain landscape strikes with particular force, in the majesty of the rock faces, in the horizons of the valleys, in the vital dynamics of rivers and springs.[18]

The choice of an appropriate site to build a Buddhist foundation must also have been guided by considerations of this sort. That sacred buildings were generally erected in areas of exceptional beauty may be seen as the result not only of practical considerations (isolation as well as relative closeness to built-up areas, access to supplies of water and food, a natural background psychologically conducive to meditation), but also of the pursuit of symbolic harmony between a physical space and a sacred place.

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[16] For a different identification of the spot mentioned by Xuanzang see Chap. 7, fn. 221. On the persistence of non-Islamic traditions see also Stein 1910; Id. 1930: *passim*. This question of the survival of the sacred place (on account of cult areas as well as cemetery areas) is, however, delicate and complex, as the most recent studies show. As far as Swat itself is concerned, we might mention the case of Buddhist settlements that came to be superimposed over proto-historic necropolises, such as Katelai, Butkara II, but, above all, Saidu Sharif I, where the necropolis must have been in use up until the time of the foundation of the sacred area (Faccenna 1997). These cases had already been considered significant by Tucci (1977: 10), and they take on yet greater weight when compared with the analogies, too numerous to be a matter of chance, noted by Schopen (1996) in Indian territories, and particularly that of Andhra. In this connection it is also worth considering the observation by Jettmar (1989a: XXXII) on the superimposition of Buddhist monuments over the indigenous monuments of more ancient tradition at Chilas II. A decisive factor in such practices could be the deliberate will generated with the rise of a new religion to "expropriate" the territory of the earlier religion. On this aspect see also Chap. 3.2.

[17] Rock sculptures related to a Buddhist sacred area already dismantled could be, for instance, those of Barikot/Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai (C117 and C118; II: Figs. 121 and 122), where a Brahmanical temple (attributed to the mid-seventh century CE) might have superseded an earlier *stūpa*. This can be inferred from the recovery of a few – otherwise inexplicable – Gandharan pieces from the excavations on the top of the hill (Olivieri in Callieri *et al.* 2000: 203). Obviously this remains a matter of speculation, since the rock sculptures might also be slightly older than the temple. Nevertheless, the hypothesis of their testifying to the persistence of the spot's sacredness even after the implantation of a cultic monument of different affiliation sounds reasonable in the light of the above-mentioned reasons. On the Brahmanical temple of Barikot see Chap. 2.4 and Part II, *s.v.*

[18] Without departing from the geographical and cultural environment of Swat and its surroundings, traces of this conception can still be discerned in the folklore of the regions of Hindu Kush, where the cosmology is closely bound up with the environment and manifestations of supernatural beings are often attributed to places characterised by certain physical features (Jettmar 1986: esp. 36 ff.). See also Chap. 3.2.

In a way, the rock sculptures can be considered an expression of time-honoured traditions. Nevertheless, they supplemented these latter with a distinct element of innovation. Although significant topographical elements may have been lost over time due to changes either occurring naturally or artificially brought about, certain common characteristics linking sculptures with their location still stand out. As close scrutiny clearly shows, the position of the sculptures was determined not only by the pathway leading to sacred areas, but also by rather more sophisticated formal criteria. In the first place, evident care was taken with the placing of the sculptures in the landscape. In fact, the artists seem to have been greatly concerned with fitting the works into the appropriate natural theatre, and in such a way as to reflect the idea that the sacred place was entirely a work of nature, so that one might in it discern an immanent manifestation of the divine.

1.4 – The hierophanic rock

The quite universal association between natural beauty and manifestation of the sacred, variously interpreted by the different religious cultures, became in the specific case of rock art nothing short of a systematic code that regulated the placing of the sculptures in space. Harmonious association with the natural landscape begins with the stone itself, a fact that stands out more markedly in the case of complex figurative subjects involving a number of figures. At first sight the figures look as though they had been assembled haphazardly as mere juxtaposition, and at times pointlessly repetitive: the same subject reproduced repeatedly on the same wall, compositions of figures that elude even the habitual schemes of proportional symbolism, subjects brought together in no evident relationship.

These apparent incongruities are particularly striking in certain examples such as relief C48 (II: Figs. 48a,b,c), which shows two Padmapāṇi figures in extremely close succession, identical in every respect except for a slight difference in dimensions; in relief C79 (II: Figs. 81a,f,g), where a small image of the Buddha in *dhyānāsana* is placed, in an apparently subaltern position, between bodhisattva figures; in reliefs C22 and C182 (II: Figs. 22a,b,c and 117 respectively), where a big figure of Padmapāṇi is surrounded by other, minor figures, bodhisattvas, Buddha(s) and a *stūpa*, without any apparent syntactic relations; and in relief C30 (II: Figs. 31a,b,c,d,e), where a triad recalling the Gandharan models, with Buddha and two bodhisattvas, is accompanied to the right by a standing bodhisattva and to the left by a second triad, of smaller dimensions this time, made up of three bodhisattvas.

Before systematic study of the sculptures was undertaken, the apparent lack of any coherent scheme or symmetrical order in these compositions had been tentatively interpreted as the non-organised result of a diachronic use of the same surfaces. And yet the reliefs as a whole display a certain formal unity, bizarre as it may seem, and at the same time they show no sign of significant change in stylistic or iconographic characteristics or in the techniques of execution. When we go on to consider other, extrinsic factors such as the forms, dimensions, positions and even lines of stratification of the rocks, we find precisely in the exploitation of these elements evidence of a constant compositive rule, albeit highly variable, which consists of the isomorphic adaptation of the sculpture to the physical characteristics of the space chosen and to the medium itself.

All evidence shows that keeping the manipulation of the natural rock to a minimum was an imperative requirement. We can hypothesise that the reason behind such a concern was the illusory evocation of the images being self-existent. In short, the images were not to appear as something artificially created, but rather as forms discerned in the material and drawn from it, as if the artistry lay simply in unveiling or giving comprehensible form to that which was already in existence. The idea – simple in essence yet complex in implications – is that of reducing the distance between art and nature to make visible the manifestation of the divine in the world.

In this organic pattern of artistic creation we can detect close affinity with a concept still fairly widespread in Indian territories, which finds expression in the so-called *svayaṃbhū* images. The association between image and material defines more clearly and with greater intricacy the link with the land, which runs far deeper than any incidental association with a place or monument to be signalled. While, of course, their existence is determined by the presence of some sort of pathway, the sculptures play upon it as if forming a subtle emotional counterpoint. The pursuit of a eurhythmic blending of an image with the background influences the positioning, whether in secluded corners or in vast, open areas.

Thus, a sculpture may loom out surprisingly from some semi-concealed corner, or stand out in a barren space, or it might attract the eye as if beckoning from above. We may come face to face with an authentic masterpiece of savaged harmony, as in the case of the Padmapāṇi of Qal'a (C104; II: Figs. 104a,b), inserted into the craggy mountain landscape, merging with the rock and yet jutting out from it in a striking manner. It can be a massive and soaring rock face, as in the case of the Buddha of Mingora (C1; II: Figs. 1a,b; GS 5), or a strangely smooth surface, as in the Maitreya of Banjot (C91; II: Figs. 91a,b; GS 27) and the Buddha of Shakhorai (C92; II: Figs. 92a,b,c,d).

The rock prompts and the design complies: the two identical Padmapāṇis (C48; II: Figs. 48a,b,c), conforming to the lines of stratification to achieve the appropriate position and dimensions within the perspective, convey an idea of growth and advance to the heights;[19] the Padmapāṇi of Kokarai (C21; II: Fig. 21) takes shape on a block beyond which a broad horizon opens out, as if a visual metaphor for the way ahead opening up by the grace granted by the bodhisattva; the reliefs of Jambil (C24; II: Figs. 24a,b) emerge from the sloping spaces between the clefts in the rock as if pouring forth from it; the Padmapāṇi of Udegram (C112; II: Fig. 113), set in a sort of body separated from the rock wall looks as if it had been driven outwards by a supernatural force; the great polyhedral block of Banjot (C89-90; II: Figs. 89a,b and 90 respectively) displays not a throng of figures, but a single, striking one on each side, as if stamped onto the smooth surface of the boulder; another Padmapāṇi at Qal'a (C95; II: Fig. 95) dominates from the height of a natural, funnel-shaped niche on a rock face so steep that the illusion of spontaneous existence appears extraordinarily concrete; the bodhisattvas of Kukrai (C73; II: Figs. 76a,b,c; GS 23, 35, 36), conforming to the lines of perspective running to the vanishing point on two converging blocks, seem to emerge from the deep recesses of the matter, like bright rays from a hidden source of light. In each case the single image or complex scene, gently conforming to the inanimate rock, convert it into an epiphany. Often the proximity of a spring (at Supal Bandai, Katelai, Nawe-kalai, Arabkhan-china and Barama) accentuates the balance of the condensed microcosm which the sculpture seems to dominate.

We can only imagine the monastic community being behind such an ambitious and wide-ranging project. Specialised monks may well have directed the process, from the general conception to the specific selection of sites and subjects, and perhaps even undertaken the actual execution of the reliefs.[20] The project must have taken shape under the influence of time-honoured traditions and practices, but these latter clearly drew fresh vitality from the force of new ideas that from India spread all over the Buddhist world.

1.5 – *Swayamḅhū tirtha*: an Indian input?

The connection between rock and the divine is one of the most widespread motifs in collective religious imageries, to the extent that it might almost be considered universal. The sun rising behind mountains, peaks that reach up from the earth to almost to touch the sky: all this quite naturally prompts a series of associations that various religious cultures have expressed often in strikingly similar ways. The mountain is a sacred place, belonging both to earth and the heavens and mysteriously involved with the great daystar which seems to rise out of its tenebrous depths at dawn. To the rock it is made of, the mountain owes the attribute of immutability and eternity, complementing its connection with the divine. The solidity of the stone constitutes the ideal element to symbolically encapsulate the qualities of earthliness – dark, heavy and inert. No element could better serve as a foil to all that is incorporeal, subtle and luminous, precisely by being so perfectly antithetical. The dynamic power of the divine finds in its opposite a concurrence, if not, as in the case of the sun, the archetype of the nurturing womb.

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[19] On this particular example, see Chap 4.5.

[20] "Buddhist monks" were also thought by Dani to be the authors of analogous reliefs in Dir (Dani 1968-69a: 253). Nevertheless, the idea of monks carving reliefs "in their leisure hours" (*ibidem*) is quite difficult to believe.

Indian art has given this idea consummate expression with rock architecture. The spaces carved out of rock in western India probably represent the original core of a tradition that was to have far-reaching resonance in that part of the world where, directly or indirectly, the influence of Indian culture made itself felt. The chronology of the various "caves" of western India reveals a long tradition that seems to have been powerfully stirred to new life in the second half of the fifth century with the Mahayanic caves of Ajanta to reach its greatest splendour between 550 and 800 with the flourishing of the complexes of Elephanta, Jogesvari, Mandapesvar, Kanheri, Aurangabad, Ellora, Badami, Aihole and Mamallapuram. As Harle (1986: 45) rightly points out, rock architecture well befits the spiritual and material conditions of India: it offers solid shelter that is cool in summer and warm in winter, while the physical geography ensures a nearby supply of water and a landscape of natural beauty and at the same time gives form to the concept of elementary uncreated existence (*svayaṃbhū*) that is so deeply rooted in Indian religious thought.

Diverse as the architectural and decorative devices may be, the caves contain this common conceptual element finding primary expression in refined formal exploration, seeking to mix and melt together art and nature. Perfectly finished within, they tend to blend with the landscape externally. The entrance, for example, generally structured in the form of a columned porch, progressively gives way to an inclusive vision merging architectural artifice and landscape into one harmonious whole.[21] Particularly in the Pallava and Rāṣṭrakuṭa period, rock architecture applies a varied range of technical approaches, giving maximum expression to the infinite possibilities of relations between art and nature. Along with the temples hewn out of the rock, a complementary conception is employed in which it is the temple, rather, that seems to give form to the rock, being entirely sculpted out of it, as in the case of the *ratha*s of Mamallapuram and the temple of Kailasa at Ellora.

A different shade of these same theoretical orientations is represented by the particular cult that religious India always accorded to the *svayaṃbhū* images, i.e. those monoliths that time and nature itself have moulded in forms displaying vaguely recognisable features of specific divinities. Between these naturally occurring images and rock architecture, which constitutes the most complex formulation in concrete design of the idea of the divine concealed in matter, there is an intermediary range of possibilities in which, more than in any other context, we discern a fundamental conceptual affinity with the rock sculptures of Swat. All these artistic endeavours seek to achieve, to some extent or another, the placing of an element in a space that gives the illusion of being its natural context. The sculpture may be used to create a rhythmic link bridging a hiatus, as in the case of the great triad consisting of a Buddha in *pralambapādāsana* on a lion throne with a standing bodhisattva on either side, set in a sort of natural shallow niche between caves 4 and 5 of Aurangabad (Berkson 1986: fig. 50). In other cases we see more ambitious projects, as for example the great relief of Mamallapuram, which likely depicts the descent of the Ganges.[22] Here the scene is not only represented but actually reproduced theatrically: the water pouring down from a small artificial basin along a natural cleft in the rock creates an illusory play of animation, subtly enhanced by the dynamic rhythm of the figuration.

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[21] Here I make a point of referring to manifestly complete examples of rock architecture since they cannot give rise to debate. The aesthetic of the "uncreated" expressed in these art forms also has its (more questioned) counterpart in the aesthetic of the "unfinished". While allowing for cases of works that remained unfinished by *force majeur*, due to reversals in the fortunes of clients, there are such a great number of unfinished temples in India, and in such a vast context, that one cannot help suspecting some ideological choice. On this topic, see Parker 2001, who also offers a concise review of the most significant preceding contributions.

[22] We owe identification of the relief as the "Penitence of Arjuna" to J. Goldingham (1798: 69-70); this interpretation, long accepted, was questioned by V. Goloubew (1914), who proposed interpretation as the "Descent of the Ganges". Other scholars, including T.N. Ramachandran (1950-51) and M.S.N. Rao (1979), on the other hand, identify the scene as the *Kirātārjunīya* (Śiva disguised as Kirāta, with Arjuna).

Although the basic concept is by no means exclusive to India, the unflagging formal exploration into it was quite clearly conducted here, extending the expressive potential to the point of making of it an art form in its own right, well able to venture beyond the frontiers of the land that had generated it. Thus it would be difficult to believe that the flourishing of great rock monuments along the paths traced out by Buddhist expansion through Central Asia as far as China did not owe certain essential forms and contents to India.

In many cases, such as that of Swat, the Indian influence came as a further impetus to a tradition already there and fairly widespread in the mountainous regions, where rock had from time immemorial offered a page for inscribing tales, testimonies and professions of faith. Traces of a type of cult clearly imported from India still survive today, not only in Swat but also in the neighbouring regions. This provides further support to the hypothesis that the Indian influence was of decisive importance in that refined pursuit of symbiosis between art and nature that found independent, original expression in the rock sculptures of Swat. Particularly interesting evidence in this respect is offered by Xuanzang, who mentions a stone statue of Bhīmā Devī, situated on a high mountain about fifty *li* north-west of Po-lu-sha, that was regarded by the local people as having formed by itself, and was so venerated as to attract pilgrims from all over India (see above, p. 26). Another famous *svayaṃbhū-tirtha* can be seen in the above-mentioned *Rāma takht* (Throne of Rama) on Mount Ilam, which consists of a spur of rock with a sort of artificially extended platform on top. With three other spurs it creates a more or less quadrilateral form that enhances the peculiar evocativeness of the place and sets off the “throne” even more. Moreover, not far from here three small and roughly circular lakes are aligned, offering to the eyes of the Hindus further and indeed conclusive proof of the sacredness of the place (Stein 1930: 101-102).

Together with the *svayaṃbhū-tirtha* of evident Hindu matrix we have further evidence that comes to us from a Buddhist context but that can still be ultimately traced back to the same source of conceptual inspiration, albeit in less striking form. By far the best known examples of this are the footprints of the Buddha, as preserved, for instance, at Tirat (*ibid*.: 60, fig. 40 Quagliotti 1998: 50, fig. 24). Probably it was precisely the flattened form of the block that gave the inspiration for this sort of secondary *svayaṃbhū*, in which the incised footprint design displaying a *cakra* in the centre is accompanied by an inscription in *kharoṣṭhī* characters attested in the first century BCE, which identifies it as the sacred *pāduka* (*ibidem*).

As disjointed and fragmentary as it may be, the evidence emerging from the past or living on in the religious world of today in some form, shows a marginal but persistent co-presence of the Indian element. In some cases we can still discern this element, but one wonders how many times it possibly escapes our attention due to its complete integration. To our eyes, as we comment on them *a posteriori*, the rock sculptures of Swat appear to emerge from a sort of hiatus following upon the waning of the long Gandharan season, in which the subjection of space to rigorous geometrical order underpinned the conception of art. The rock art, which drew the laws of its aesthetics from the apparent chaos of nature, was not a means or reflection to give the rational measure of the world, but rather embodied the intuitive capacity to grasp its secret and capture, in the ceaseless swirling flow, the mathematical point.

Today we may fail to recognise the preciseness of the context in rock art, but not the consistent inspiration, nor its links both with local tradition and the surrounding world. One of these ties is with India, its aesthetic culture and its measure of the world. The idea of the *svayaṃbhū*, which, as attested by the Buddha’s footprints at Tirat, had long been present in Swat, albeit as yet inchoate, came to full blossoming in the rock sculptures. This possibly occurred in the wake of a revival in the heart of India, but manifestly in a dimension of its own, original and perfectly integrated with the physical and cultural environment that embraced it.