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Men and Houses

Village space concept between the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas. Case Study of the Swat river valley (Pakistan) and the Almora in Kumaon (Uttarakhand - India)Valley

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ABSTRACT

Studies in the environmental archaeology of the mountains of Central and South Asia focus on the exploration of the millennia-old river valleys in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, Karakorum and Himalayas as corridors of exchange of agricultural practices, technical knowledge and skills.

The region considered in this study is the Swat Valley situated in the North of Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa District which will be compared to the Himalayan regions of Almora-Kumaon valley (State of Uttarakhand in India) and to the Kashmir valley. These valleys are all located at an altitude between 800 and 2500 meters above sea level and are characterized by a similar alpine landscape. The Swat Valley in particular has a large water-basin area, enclosed by mountains, which give the valley the characteristics of a "mountain plain" rich in natural resources, forest wood and water.

Compared to other Himalayan regions where climatic and environmental constraints are much greater, the environmental variety of Swat, Kashmir and Kumaon has made these valleys privileged eco-areas for settlement, agricultural development, cattle breeding - activity since antiquity and have favored the emergence and creation of important urban centers since the past. It is in these valleys therefore, that the majority of villages are concentrated, surrounded by very habitable landscapes, a rather hospitable climate and characterized by the development of common agricultural practices, mainly linked to the "double cropping" of dry mountain rice and grain (polyculture).

My investigation will focus on the dynamics of contemporary landscape and habitat changes and the adaptation of the domestic architecture of the semi-nomadic Gujars and sedentary Pashtuns communities to their environment.

Keywords: Material Culture, Habitat, Territory, Interconnections, Hindu Kush, Himalaya

1. INTRODUCTION

The most recent studies in environmental archaeology of the mountains of Central and South Asia are more and more interested in exploring the millennial role of the river valleys, located in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, the Karakorum and the Himalayas, as corridors of communication, exchange and innovation of agricultural practice, technical knowledge and traditional know-how.

Far from representing isolated and enclosed places, these valleys have played a central role in the development of new technologies and in the processes of urbanization of the plains, by shaping their urban culture.

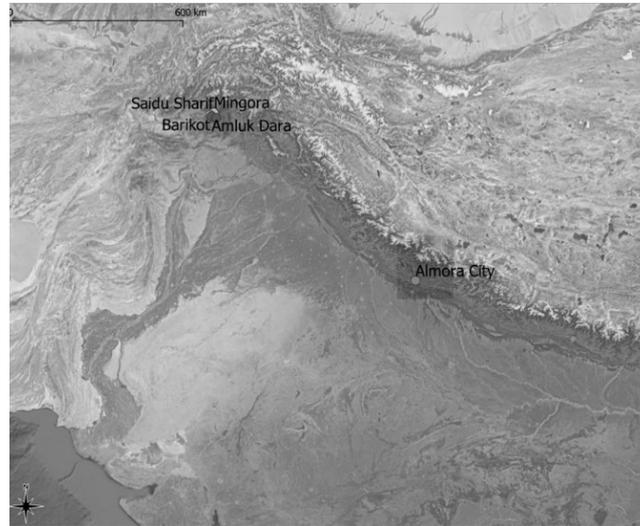


Figure 1. Himalayas corridor, 2021 satellite image from Earth Explorer. (Image from GIS by Carla Biagioli. <https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/>)

According to L.M.Olivieri, Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, the geographical and climatic characteristics of the Swat river valley, an ancient occupied area at the foothills of the Hindu Kush in northern Pakistan, is very special and we can find similar characteristics in other valleys of the Himalayan foothills, such as Kashmir and Almora in Kumaon.¹

While the Swat Valley has traditionally been interpreted as culturally affiliated with Afghanistan and Central Asia, it also had connections with the Himalayan areas in the past. Swat and Kashmir were in fact places of exchange across the Hindu Kush mountains, this is still evident from the archaeological remains of rock paintings, representing scenes of agricultural cultivation.

The archaeological-botanical remains in fact, recently found at the Barikot-Bazira site in Swat (a site dating from 1250 BC to 50 AD) by Robert Spengler, a researcher of the Max Planck Institute in Germany, has confirmed the diverse Asian origin of the seeds of the local ancient agricultural landscape. These river valleys have thus been, for thousands of years, places for experimenting, cross-breeding agricultural species, as a strategy of resilience and adaptation to the environment, by farmers from Central Asia to Northeast China.

2. LOWER SWAT VALLEYS

The Kandak, Kotah and Karakar are parallel historical valleys, oriented along a north-south axis and inhabited for thousands of years. These valleys have been characterised since antiquity by their strong anthropic dimension and their cultural landscape expresses to the present day, the history of this long and intimate relationship of local communities with their environment.

This study proposes a research of the village concept and its domestic architecture and construction techniques, established through a long-term relation between the natural environment and the local communities. It is a documentation work of the specific elements that structure and shape the cultural

landscape, here considered as the result of a complex and long-term interaction between geography, human solutions, adaptation to the environment and the intangible and sacred aspects of the inhabited spaces.

The "cultural landscape" of these mountains has been shaped by the relationship between the topography and the local agro-pastoralist activities. It is a dynamic construction that belongs to those who inhabit it on a daily basis. Here, while the historical landscape belongs to the Buddhist community while the present landscape is populated by Muslim communities, mainly the semi-nomadic Gujarat group (a group in the process of sedentarisation), the sedentary Pashtuns and the nomadic Ajar group.

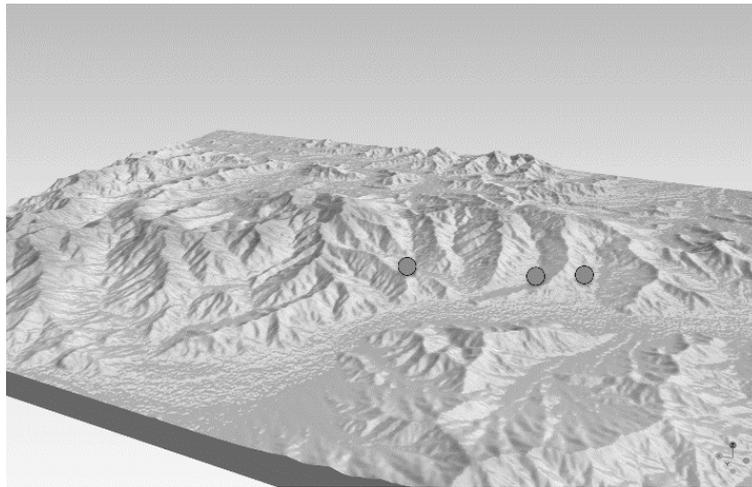


Figure 2. Swat Valley territory. (Image from GIS by Carla Biagioli)

The aim of the research is to advance the knowledge on the settlement patterns and subsistence practices of these selected nomadic and sedentary groups, with a contemporary and comparative approach of the two contiguous basins (Lower part of Swat and Almora area). The question that arises is which adaptation model their inhabitants have adopted to face their environmental constraints, because although their culture, language and ethnic group are very different, the adaptation solutions, strategies and subsistence model of both communities show many similarities.

In order to do this, given the almost complete absence of comparative research in anthropology, urbanism and architecture of the recent periods between these two regions, it seems necessary to base ourselves, in a first moment, on the archaeological research which has exposed similarities of occupations and cultural and technical homogeneity at different historical periods, between Swat and Kumaon area.

Reference will therefore be made to the recent scientific contributions of D.P. Agrawal and J.S. Kharakwal on the prehistoric and historical period of Kumaon and to the archaeological studies of L.M. Olivieri in Swat Valley. D.P. Agrawal, for the first time, discovers the existence of several archaeological links between these two regions. His researches advocate the presence of a strong cultural and technical homogeneity in the long term, from the intermediate periods of Bronze and Iron to the historical periods, being the two basins able to elaborate common technical responses to very similar climate and geographical conditions.

Olivieri shares the same vision of D.P. Agrawal and confirms that there have been similar macro phenomena in the past in Swat and Kumaon, such as rock paintings, sub-megalithic burials, the establishment of a similar hydraulic and agricultural system, to cope with the same mountain microclimate and environmental conditions.

2.1 Landscape and Habitat survey in the frame of the ACT Project (Archaeology, Community, Tourism)

It is in the Karakar, Kandak and Kotah valleys, on the right bank of the Swat, that the semi-nomadic communities of the Gujar (a group of shepherds in the process of sedentarisation) live.

These agro-pastoralist communities, living in these low and medium altitude mountains developed of various adaptation strategies, solutions, practices and techniques to cope with the climatic and environmental changes that represent a local know-how and knowledge.

My first visit to the Swat Valley was in the autumn of 2015, as part of the ACT (Archaeology, Community, Tourism) Project of the Italian Archaeological Mission, headed by its Director L.M.Olivieri.

Between 2000 and 2006, L.M. Olivieri and M. Vidale travelled together through these valleys in search of rock art sites. This fieldwork was part of the larger project "Archaeology Map of the Swat Valley", a systematic survey of the phases of occupation of three valleys, from prehistoric to pre-Buddhist periods, represented by the rock art sites.

With the support of the members of the Mission, I was able to start a systematic observation of the Gujar habitat of these three parallel valleys (Kandak, Kotah and Karakar and the villages of Amluk Dara, Talang and Balo Khale).

I was welcomed, accompanied by the inhabitants and their families. They offered me green tea and fruits at each house visit. In such a hospitable landscape, I spent many days on the mountain paths to reach the houses of pastoralists or farmers, often far away in the mountains.

The trails covered an area of about 50 km², through the two valleys of Kandak and Kotah, while the village of Amluk Dara, more remote from the main road, was part of a separate traverse (Karakar valley).

The choice of these valleys was made in relation to their topographical location, in front of the archaeological site of Barikot - Bazira, Bir-Kot ghwandai which lies to the south-east, on the same left bank of the Swat River.

Sites found in the landscape at this time included: protohistoric burial sites and habitation foundations; rock art sites with paintings, incisions, cup-marks, water cisterns, and wine presses; historic Buddhist sites, dwellings; and later sites (early Islamic period) with religious buildings, fortifications, and dwellings (AMSV Project and Campaign in 2005).

Settlement and occupation dynamics of the past are partly revealed to us through the discovery and interpretation of rock paintings scattered in the landscape near the houses.

3. GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

The Swat Valley is located in northern Pakistan, in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region. Its territory consists largely of a river valley dominated to the north by the mountains and glaciers of Swat-Kohistan, from which the Swat River originates, and to the south by a very large water-rich basin.

The Almora Valley in Kumaon, in the state of Uttarakhand in India, geographically located in the middle part of the Himalayan range, is characterized by a morphology similar to that of the lower Swat, being bordered to the north by high mountains, some of which exceed 7,000 meters in altitude, and to the south by a lower zone with a more tropical climate.



Figure 3. Kandak Valley, 2015. (Photo by Carla Biagioli)

These valleys, culturally at the crossroads of the Indian, Central Asian, Chinese and Tibetan worlds, share the pattern of the low and mid-mountain areas with vast fertile plains and rather hospitable climatic conditions.

The Himalayan regions have very diverse ecological environments. The territory can be divided into almost parallel and very homogeneous linear belts, with low-lying areas covered by jungle (between 100 and 300 meters) and others situated at an altitude of more than 4,000 meters, passing through an intermediate zone, covered by forests, between 800 and 3,500 meters. This morphological transition takes place quite rapidly and has multiple climates, from subtropical to glacial, and gives rise to particular natural environments that put the inhabitants into radically different constraints.

Here the typologies of the human habitat continually express this concern for adaptation to the climatic difference between zones and to variations in altitude. The technical solutions, linked to the use of local materials, are therefore numerous.

The Swat, Kashmir and Almora valleys lie along this central belt; compared to other Himalayan regions where the climatic and environmental constraints are much greater, Swat, Kashmir and Kumaon have shared this prosperous and flourishing agricultural situation since the past. Adaptation for the inhabitants of these 'mountain plains' has always been facilitated by the natural richness of resources to exploit (forest wood, water, fertile land, moderate monsoon rains). The 3000 meter high ranges forms a barrier to the south-east winds and monsoons, protecting the whole of these basins; consequently it is here that the majority of the population and villages are concentrated, surrounded by a very liveable landscapes.

Sir Aurel Stein was one of the first westerner to travel through the Swat region. Seeking to trace the route followed by Alexander the Great, he found a number of Buddhist remains, of which Swat is so rich, and he testified to the great fertility of this valley, the presence of alluvial rice terraces where the double cultivation of mountain rice, alternated with that of grain, was practiced.

Double cropping was indeed very developed in Swat in the past because this system allowed a regular surplus of food resources twice a year, which was economically very profitable.

Double cropping along mountain terraces is still found in Kumaon, around 1500 m, at the bottom of the valleys. Here the terraces can receive water from the monsoon and nearby rivers, thanks to a simple system of pipes dug into the earth.

The agricultural richness of these valleys has also been attested by the existence of a wine production belt which was part of an ancient economy developed along the Himalayan foothills but now completely lost. The archaeological remains of wine presses can still be seen in the Swat land.



Figure 4. Kumaon House-Binsar area (Photo by Carla Biagioli).

In order to understand how the inhabited space of the villages is structured, it is good to start from the rural house system. The Gujar and Pashtun houses of Swat are built along artificial terraces aligned on the mountain slopes. This pattern of row houses remain close to the agricultural land and thus facilitates the irrigation of cultivated fields. In Kumaon, too, the houses are built on the slopes and directly on the terraces. Walking along these terraces has become very common and one has the impression of descending into the houses as if they were half-buried.

According to Valerio Sestini, architect and professor at the University of Florence, this type of housing is typical of valleys subject to monsoon rains and is no longer generally recognizable in the dry areas of high altitude. At high altitude, the houses in the villages are rather grouped together to form a compact and concentric fabric. The cultivated fields are large and form oases far from the villages and separated from the houses by irrigation channels. (Sestini, V. 2007, "Architettura tradizionale nella Valle di Kathmandu").

The houses in the monsoon areas, on the other hand, are built directly on the restricted agricultural are characterized by a symmetrical plan, a simple volumetry and gable roofs made of slates. The courtyard extends in front of the house while the adjacent terraces serve as fields and one of them as vegetable garden. This organization and management of space bring main natural resources (water, wood, fields) closer to the house.

The traditional domestic architecture, known as "Koti Banal" in Uttarakhand is an earthquake-resistant building style that combines wood and stone but it is also found in various cultures under different names, variants and local adaptations. In Kumaon, this wood and stone framework remains hidden under a layer of plaster. The white colour is used for the outer walls and blue for the window frames, which are made of finely carved wood, thus characterizing the style of the local facades.

In the villages of Swat, the so-called "Katcha" houses have a rammed earth floor, walls made of natural materials (wood and stone, mortar and raw earth plaster) and the roof is of rammed earth supported by a beam and vegetal wattle.

Here often an external mud plaster, without application of colours, covers the internal wooden structure, used to frame the stones.

Called Kath-Kuni in a large area comprising the eastern part of Himachal Pradesh and the western part of Garwhal, Uttarakhand, the wood and stone structure remains visible on the outside with no covering or plastering.

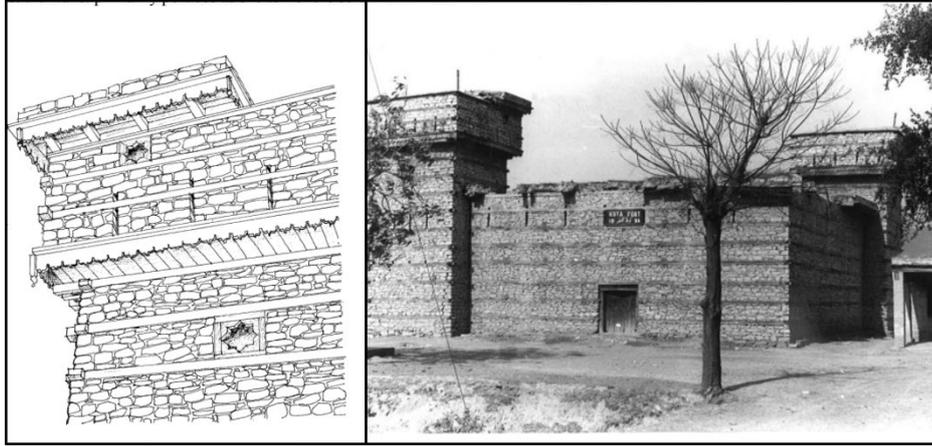


Figure 5. Fort in Swat. (Photo by Italian Mission Courtesy)

In Kashmir, a similar wood and stone construction system is known as Taq and its variant, the Dajjhi Dewari. Both of these typologies have a very effective anti-seismic function.

This shared knowledge of stone work in domestic construction combined with a deep culture of wood, used in facades or in the interior of the house, shows a coherence between the elements that structure the architectural landscape of these regions but also show a similar adaptation response of the communities that live and interact with the low and mid-mountain environment.

4. WOOD AND DRY STONE CONSTRUCTION AND VARIATIONS

Wood and dry stone construction has been part of Swat culture since ancient times. This construction method is already described in a technical note in the book of Quinto Curzio, the Roman historian of the first century AD. (VIII 10, 25-25). In his biography of Alexander the Great, he mentions a wall built with the same technique in stone and wood. The wall is part of an ancient "opulent city", probably the ancient city of Massaka, of the fourth century BC but never found by archaeologists.

Domenico Faccenna had collected photographs, field notes and photos of military and civilian architecture including forts and bridges in the Swat Valley. He had studied this mixed structure which combined dry stone and wooden beams in horizontal sequences. These forts were located in the mountains or near villages or along communication routes.

4.1 Gujar and Pashtuns Houses

The organization of the house and its functions reflects a concept of space typical of South Asian villages.

The house in Swat, incorporating the local costume of the 'purdah', create a separation between internal and external space, thus between private and public life. The hujra or reception area for male guests from outside the family is arranged in such a way as to avoid any interference with the private part of the house. However, it has an access to the house, allowing the young boys of the family to bring the guests green tea, a symbol of hospitality in this region. The hujra is often a highly decorated space.

The courtyard and the veranda remain inside the house and are spaces dedicated to the various activities of the extended family, especially of the women. They are linked to the kitchen space (made of clay as cooking is still done at the ground level) and to the care of animals, which live separately in



Figure 6. Veranda Swati House. (Photo by Carla Biagioli)

enclosed areas. The garden, made up of fruit trees such as mango and orange, is inserted into the courtyard of the house, providing shade in the sunniest time of the year.

Finally, the construction of another limit, that of the separation between men's and women's spaces, can be found in the organisation of the interior spaces of the house.

5. MATERIAL CULTURE APPROACH

In our approach, the "material culture" and the "technical operation" [Mahias, M.C 2002 *Le barattage du monde - essais d'anthropologie des techniques en Inde*] become the object of our anthropological research. We describe tools, operations and processes related to the construction of one's own habitat. This approach involves the integration of the material, social, mental and cultural dimensions that these processes reveal.

So the study of the complexity and diversity of the living settlements, leads us to consider the close relationship between users and their physical environments and the social dimension of space. Thus, we will analyse the spatial patterns that the contemporary sedentary process and/or mobility style of life will take while revealing the social dimension of the space of the houses and the conception of the village space as a composition of houses and cultivated fields.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Olivieri, Storia di una frontiera, 2009, (ed Il Nuovo Ramusio, IsIAO), pp 15 "lo Swat é quel che si dice un 'isolato geografico' in senso longitudinale e, al tempo stesso, un corridoio di transito longitudinale. Una valle anomala rispetto alle disposizioni orografiche delle altre maggiori valli fluviali tra Hindu kush e karakorum. Anche in senso climatico e morfologico essa mostra delle caratteristiche differenti dalle valli circvicine, avendo essa più le caratteristiche fisiche di una « pianura di montagna », piuttosto che quelle di una valle torrentizia. Queste caratteristiche ne devono avere fatto una valle privilegiata per l'insediamento già a partire del Pleistocene : ne sono prova inconfutabile i recenti ritrovamenti di industria litica paleolitica."