

4 The Frieze. The Material

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4.1 The Stone

One point we had yet to make is that the art of the Saidu Frieze is recognisable at a glance. Later on we will look into the distinctive formal characteristics. Should the formal element not help us recognise the hand of the Master of Saidu, the choice of material certainly would. The entire Frieze is sculpted in very soft, lightly talcose, but compact chlorite schist with a characteristic dark sage green. This stone is quarried from emerald outcroppings not far from Saidu, like the outcropping on the other side of the river, in a place known as Katelai (today Amankot) (Olivieri 2006, 139-40; Di Florio et al. 1993) and in the ophiolitic hills of Mingora. The whitish talc schist with ankerite inclusions used for the facing of the podium, the railing and the columns, might have come from Katelai or again the ophiolite quarries of Mingora: “[T]he chlorite-schists are in all cases strictly associated with soapstone and probably derive from the same areas” (Di Florio et al. 1995, 623). One well-studied quarry that yielded both varieties of stone was at Swegalai, at about 15 km away, on the right bank of the river Swat (Olivieri 2006, 140-1). The chlorite-schists of Saidu belongs to a class of stones generically called ‘serpentinite’ that has an extraordinary geological history. A history that explains its rarity and intrinsic preciousness. It is the abyssal basalt from the seabed of the ancient Tethys Ocean, which, approximately 50 MM years ago, rose thousand of metres during the collision between Eurasia and Ancient India plates when the Himalaya-Karakoram ranges were formed. These areas of intersection are called ‘Main Mantle Thrusts’ by geologists. The Swat valley is one of such zones. The metamorphosed basalts acquire various degree of softness, while their minerals, as they oxidise, produce marvellous gradations of colour from whitish green to sage green, from dark blue to purple.



Figure 18 Panel, fragment (from Ackermann 1975, pl. VIIIb; VAM IM 85.1939)

The choice of stone, which helps us to recognise small and shapeless fragments as parts of the Frieze, has a direct effect on the sculptor's technique, and the choice was clearly made with care for a purpose. The technical aspects (chiselling, incision of details, the possibility of perspective and the rendering of surfaces, always stopping short of complete smoothing) find a perfect match in the material chosen; indeed, the incomparable style of the Master of the Frieze, matching technique with material, owes as much to the technique as to the material. Thus the first evidence of artistic mastery at Saidu lies precisely in the choice of stone. The response of the hand to the material is always sure: the stone is reliable, never unpredictable, responding with constancy, but also the hand is trained as if it had always been acquainted with that stone. We do not know whether the Master of Saidu ever worked on other supports or other stones, but we do know that his work did not begin at Saidu, nor did it stop there. The work of the Master of Saidu would appear to find an echo, not so much in the details as in the composition, in certain pieces from Butkara I belonging to what is known as the first sculptural group (the 'drawing style'), the earliest.¹ For example, a lithotype very sim-

¹ Certainly belonging to the school of Saidu is relief B 1353 (Faccenna 2001, pl. 71a) and B 3673 (pl. 74), on the evidence of the treatment of eyes and hands (see Faccenna 2001, § 2.7). Among the other pieces, I consider to be of the hand of the Master or his school - on the basis of the stone (green schist), the treatment of eyes and rendering of volumes - the following piec-



Figure 19 Panel, fragment (from Ackermann 1975, pl. XXXIIb; VAM IS 129.1961)

ilar if not identical to the chlorite schist of Saidu was also used at Butkara I for the sculptures attributable to the phase of GST 3 (prior to and partially coeval with the first phase of Saidu). I would not rule out the possibility that the Master of Saidu may have developed his mastery in the stoneyard of Butkara I, where a number of ateliers were in any case at work. His presence or that of his school is also evidenced in other sites such as Parrai, in the Swat Valley, at about 30 km downstream from Saidu, where we find undoubted evidence of both the hand and the stone of the school of the Master of Saidu in a relief [fig. 18].² Consider also the great relief in green schist from the same area (Nawagai) [fig. 19]: here the details have been lost but the decidedly thin slab and the composition on two registers of the donors are strongly reminiscent of the style of the Master.³ In all these cases the hand of the school of Saidu is to be observed not only in certain details (the turbans, the rendering of iris and pupil) but also in the characteristic treatment of the rear surfaces with deft strokes of flat chisels, as well as the thin proportions of the slabs.

es: B 2606 (Faccenna, Taddei 1962, pl. XCVIIa), B 1703 (pl. CLXXXVIIa), B 195 (pl. CLXXXVI-II), B 3440 (pl. CCLVIIIb). In particular here see the treatment of the women's faces, very close to S 622 (Faccenna 2001, pl. 33).

² Victoria and Albert Museum (VAM), London, IM 85.1939 (Ackermann 1975, 59-60, pl. VIIb) (h. 24 cm).

³ VAM, IS 129.1961 (Ackermann 1975, 97-8, pl. XXXIIb) (h. 45 cm).

In the pieces from these sites in lower Swat, however, his hand – granted that it is indeed his – does not appear to have achieved the same mastery and maturity that shine through the great project of the Frieze of Saidu.

4.2 The Working Plan and the Quarries

Returning, now, to the material, in the organisation of the Saidu stoneyard we can observe a precise intention in the selection of materials. Both types of stone chosen are far from common: the green chlorite schist with the right compactness (also called sepeintinite) is rare, while good quality white talc schist (compact, not greatly metamorphosed) is hard to come by. Considering that these two materials must have been fundamental and impossible to substitute from the very outset, the enterprise must have made an appreciable economic outlay to secure an exclusive supply of high-quality material from the quarries without the risk of running out of it.

Let us try to imagine the work of the quarrymen on the ophiolitic hills of Katelai and Mingora. They have practically become inaccessible under the modern built-up area. Only the part removed by deep excavation of the emerald mine, on the north side of the hills, is open to view but surrounded by barbed wire and, again, practically inaccessible. The hill of Katelai still preserves, half-buried under a modern malodorous refuse dump that only hens seem to appreciate, a marvellous ancient cut of green schist. All around are large outcroppings of talc schist with ankerite, also buried under effluents and refuse. Upstream from here evidence of the extraction of semicircular or semi-spherical blocks of chlorite schist has also been found. Such evidence is recurrent: it was found by Giuseppe Tucci at Bologram, and later found at Katelai and also at Swegalai, another area of ophiolites and emeralds on the right bank of the Swat at 15 km downstream from Saidu (Olivieri 2006, 140-1). This lithotype (green and grey chlorite schist) was the most used for vessels, pyxes, to fashion reliquaries for the stupas, and for the toilet-trays – the small, decorated compartmented dishes typical of the production of the Saka-Parthian period in Swat. This type of quarrying was carried out on small fronts (the lithotype with the right compactness and grain is hard to find), and – judging from the working traces – from the bottom upwards (Olivieri 2006, 144). The importance of Swat for the quarrying of this valued lithotype is worth stressing: in the past I had even suggested the idea of a veritable ‘soapstone road’ towards the other great centres of production of the art of Gandhara (Olivieri 2006, 144). It is in fact worth recalling that Swat also lies at the heart of the quarrying of schist suitable for sculpture; the few quarries further south are of inferior quality. It may well be significant that the first examples of Gandharan art were documented in Swat, where the origins of this artistic phenomenon are probably to be sought. The point is this: the art of Gandhara could have had its earliest origins in Swat.⁴

For the extraction of *chattrāvalī* umbrellas phyllite and granite were favoured, according to the sites. We have many examples of extraction of umbrellas at Barikot, Gogdara and Amluk-dara. The process was always the

⁴ The study published by Faccenna, Callieri and Filigenzi (2003) is significantly entitled “At the Origin of Gandhāran Art”.

same: isolation of the block by digging an extraction channel all around, as deep as was necessary to arrive at a sub-horizontal lithoclase level from which the umbrella could be levered up by means of wedges (Olivieri 2006, fig. 1; Rockwell 2006, fig. 4).

At Swegalai we were able to document an entire ancient talc schist quarry front with terrace cultivation for the extraction of large blocks. The same system may be applied at Katelai or the Mingora hills, whence the Saidu green schist certainly came.

The quarrying activities always begin with identification of surface veins in the neighbourhood of the major stoneyards, where the material probably arrived semifinished. The Swegalai quarry (site A) is cultivated stepwise from the top down with fronts measuring about 2 m in height and 3-4 m in width, now largely covered with ploughland. The first stage of the work involved isolation of the block in the wall by digging an extraction channel with 2 cm-wide chisels to expose the lithoclase, and picks (of the type found at Taxila and Udegram) and wedges for the detachment.⁵ Once extracted, the block was hewn at the foot of the quarry front, and then slid on ramps (in Italian: *lizze*) positioned at the centre and sides of the terraced base: here was located the quarrymen's village with their silos for water, the rough-hewing grounds and storage. Many of these details have been documented at Swegalai (Olivieri 2006, 142).

We may imagine the same process on the hills of Katelai. Here the Master must have made his way to ascertain the right vein, follow the quarrying work and probably leave an assistant to ensure the quality of the stone. Once extracted, the blocks had to be slid down earth ramps to the river; otherwise, a sort of base stoneyard had to be organised to cut the blocks down to size to carry them down, held in the arms. In wintertime today the Saidu can easily be waded across, the water coming up to thigh level, a little upstream from Katelai and Saidu; in the spring it is deeper but without strong current, the bed being broad here. Transport must have been arranged with rafts. In any case, transport of the material was not nearly so demanding as actually finding it and, having found it, making sure there was enough to finish the project.

4.3 The Enterprise

The entire process so far described can only be seen as the product of complex collective activity, coordinated by a single specialist, artist and technician, the Master of Saidu, who was responsible for the whole process: from the design to the choice of materials and the final execution of both the construction and the sculptural components.

As we know, in Gandhara and surrounding regions, part of the religious building activities were works in progress, to be returned to at intervals. The sources refer to the results as "half-finished monasteries" (Salomon 2006, 240-2). Building of the Saidu Stupa clearly did not follow this pattern - it was to be completed, and probably had a principal source of funding through a high-ranking group or individual, possibly a king. As we will see later on, the Buddhist sources themselves lend support to the stress

⁵ Marshall 1951, 555, pl. 167, nos. 141-2; UD 144: Udegram Bazaar.

we place on the dominant role of the lay community and the sovereigns in the building of the great stupas.

As for the funding, although we know that in India work was mostly undertaken by collective enterprises (Deheja 1992),⁶ I believe that at Saidu it was in the hands of an individual or a single group belonging to the élite: the Saidu project was very well defined, planning the contemporaneous and *ex novo* construction of at least a great stupa (the largest so far built in Swat) and a monastery.

By the way, to our present knowledge, the Monastery of Saidu (Callieri 1989) is the oldest of those so far excavated by archaeologists. Construction was clearly contemporaneous with that of the Stupa, and thus in the mid-first century CE. Moreover, before the phase corresponding to the foundation of this Monastery, we find no mention of monastic communities in the Oḍi and Avaca inscriptions; the first repeated mention of the *saṅgha* occurs only in the Seṇavarma inscription (Baums 2012, 227-33), the presumed dating of which we have already discussed.⁷ At that time economic power was firmly in the hands of the aristocracy, still the only landowners, who were the owners and managers of the huge agricultural production, the main source of wealth in Swat, especially wheat and barley in summer and rice in autumn. The real power of the Buddhist monasteries and the trading activities favoured by the development of the cities were yet to come. In fact, it would take about eighty years, the beginning of the central period of Kushan rule. In the second century CE, along with the disappearance of the name of the Oḍi from the epigraphic record, and the rise of the Kushan financial control, we observe the progressive expansion of monastic property in the rich countryside. The growing number of monasteries took on the role of resource controllers, eroding the power of the landed nobility, until they also controlled important urban properties around the third century CE (Iori, Olivieri 2020). The crisis of the cities – as we see in Barikot (Bazi-

6 As Taddei points out, Deheja is not referring to Gandhara (Taddei 1993, 30 fn. 24).

7 With the exception of CKI 403, see below ch. 11. Antonello Palumbo wrote to me: "Passing reference to monastic figures of governments is to be seen in the inscriptions of Utara with Indravarma (Baums 2012, no. 9, CKI 265, < 15 CE?), who mentions 'the monk Dhramasena, superintendent of construction' (*dhrama[s]eno śamano ṇaveamio*)" in relation to the erection of a stone column (*śīlastambho*) for a relic depository, and Śatruleka (Baums 2012, no. 17, CKI 257, 19/20 CE), who mentions another relic depository 'in the village Aṭhaya, in the possession of the Kāśyapiya venerables'. Moreover, the inscription of Loṇa (Baums 2012, no. 5, CKI 247) refers to the disciples of the Buddha in general (*bhaga[va]to śavaka*). The important points to note are: 1) in none of the other inscriptions of the kings of Avaca, amounting to fifteen excluding seals and coins, is there any reference to monks; 2) nor in these three are there any references to monasteries or other infrastructures of sedentary and organised monastic communities: what is significant is mention of a village (*grāma*) in relation to the Kāśyapiya masters. We should not assume that where there are 'monks' there are also monasteries. In a later period (third-fourth century CE) the documents in Gāndhāri from Niya in Taklamakan effectively reveal a community of 'śramaṇa', which is neither completely monastic nor secular: its members wear the monastic robe and assemble in a monastery on certain occasions but otherwise live with their families. However, let us not forget the Patika inscription, year 78 of Maues (Baums 2012, no. 12, CKI 46), which mentions the construction of a monastery (*saṅgharama*) at Takṣaśīlā, and also the name of the supervisor of the works (*navakarmika*), a certain Rohiṇimitra, who does not seem to have been a monk; according to Baums the inscription should date to the first 2 decades A.D.". On Bharhut, see Hawkes 2008, 3.

The first mention of a member of the Buddhist community in Swat associated with a certain stratigraphy is to be found in a Kharoshthi inscription traced on a (ceramic) bowl from Barikot dated to the same period as the Stupa and Monastery of Saidu: /// [sa]śamaṇeras[a] /// ("of the novice", BKG 4024, B5; Baums in Callieri, Olivieri 2020, 280).

ra) - that followed the end of Kushan power did not involve the great monasteries.⁸ In the third-fourth century CE the Buddhist monasteries of Swat advance from being administrators to landowners, and from recipients of donations to granters of political power.

8 On the death of Kaniška, in the early years of Huviška (c. 155-58 CE), problems began for the Kushan powers, as shown by the converging evidence of inscriptions from the two ends of the Empire: Gangetic India and Bactria (Falk 2015). On the evidence of the political crisis of the third century in Swat see Iori, Olivieri 2020 with refs.

