Introduction: Why Excavate At Barikot?

When in 1982 the excavations at the Buddhist sacred area of Saidu Sharif I came to an end, the then director of the Italian Archaeological Mission, Domenico Faccenna, agreed with the present writer that perhaps it was time to again enter the field of urban archaeology, after so many efforts spent on Buddhist art and archaeology. By chance, that autumn, Professor Giorgio Stacul, in charge of the protohistoric section of the Italian Mission, was busy excavating at Barikot, where since 1968 he had found good evidence dating to the mid-second millennium B.C. His excavations were limited to the southernmost, flat part of the land known as ‘Ghwanḍai’, Pushtu for ‘hill’ (hence the name of the archaeological site of Bīr-koṭ-ghwanḍai). Here the latest structures went back to the last period of the protohistoric sequence, c. 4th century B.C., although the area had already been levelled to some extent for the creation of good orchards. On that occasion our attention was caught by big bulldozers busy levelling some orchards at the foot of the hill, and by some exceptionally fine structures which the machines had exposed. After a rapid investigation, Dr Faccenna and I immediately decided that it was at this site, which was starting to be menaced by man, that the new activity would take place.

When in autumn 1984 the first campaign of our ‘historic’ team started at Barikot, the situation at the site had already worsened. The area of the ‘Ghwanḍai’, until 1982 almost free from modern houses, was being levelled for cultivation and at the same time was
becoming part of the area of expansion of the modern village.

Since then, only four campaigns (in 1987, 1990, 1991, 1992) have been possible in that area, and these were carried out amid many problems with the landowners. Apart from the scientific results, which will be the subject of this paper, a major result was achieved: the protection of the site, implemented in 1995 under the Antiquity Act. Protection on paper does not mean actual protection, but it is a necessary step, without which the local authorities have no power to stop any damage to antiquities. And indeed modern buildings seem to have stopped expanding. We do not know how long this situation will last. For the moment, two of the excavated trenches (BKG 1 and BKG 3) have been refilled; two (BKG 2 and BKG 4–5) have been left open for future conservation, once the Department of Archaeology has permanently acquired the land, still in private hands. We have for the moment stopped working in the old town, until the land problem is solved. At the same time we have tried to arouse widespread interest by launching the project ‘Save Bazira’, named after the old name of the town. This first long phase of exploration through isolated trenches in the different parts of the settlement, in order to establish its extension and importance, can be considered concluded. All those who took part in the excavation are busy preparing the final reports, which will include both structures and finds, given the need to check the stratigraphic study through the finds and the reciprocal need of the archaeological context for a thorough examination of the finds in their chronological evolution, site distribution and functional study.

Excavations were resumed in 1998, 1999 and 2000 on the top of the hill (Trenches BKG 6, BKG 7, BKG 8, BKG 9), where the most important discovery again takes us back to the field of sacred architecture, this time to an imposing sacred building of the Shahi period. The next campaigns will be dedicated to the completion of the excavation of this imposing monument, which has given us unique fragments of figural stucco and marble decoration. It is a necessary intervention, with the aim of carrying out proper conservation on a monument which has the potential to become a further tourist attraction at Barikot.

The main interest, however, remains the town, where several hectares are still practically intact, apart from a few scattered pits dug by treasure-hunters: a long-term excavation here could bring decisive evidence for the knowledge of the material culture of the