

Akhtar Munir (1949-2020)  
(Photo: Antonio Amato, Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan)

## **Akhtar Munir (1949-2020)**

**Luca M. Olivieri/Massimo Vidale**

Akhtar Munir, nicknamed “Tota”, was born at Panr in 1949 in a family of humble origins. He was constantly marked, for all his life, by an exceptional intellectual spirit, and by an inextinguishable passion for the art and archaeology of Swat.

After completing his primary education at the time of the Swat State of the Miangul dynasty, he deepened by himself, with personal readings, his cultural background. At an age of 8, he imposed his presence in Domenico Faccenna’s dig at Butkara I, whose trenches were opened between school and his father’s house. At the beginning, because of his young age, he could not be enrolled. So, while he was there at the site almost as a mascot of the team, his ability in recognizing the joining pieces of Gandharan sculptures was soon recognized. After school, in the house of the Mission at Saidu Sharif - soon becoming a kind of second house for him - he used to help Francesca Bonardi Tucci in re-fitting fragments and restoring the schist sculptures. Giuseppe Tucci soon discovered that he was a brave and tireless explorer of passes and mountains; Domenico Faccenna and Maurizio Taddei appreciated his skills as a field excavator; and eventually Francesca Callori di Vignale introduced him to the delicate secrets and practices of archaeological restoration.

In 1967, when Akhtar Munir was around 18 years old, he started to work with Giorgio Stacul at the Ghalegai rock shelter. It was the beginning of a long friendship and partnership, which accompanied the two in various excavations in Chitral, Badakshan, and Kohistan. In the following years, Sebastiano Tusa and Pierfrancesco Callieri became Tota’s younger archaeological directors and best friends. Along the Mission’s long history and various enterprises, with Massimo Vidale and Luca M. Olivieri, Tota continued to explore his country, from Baltistan to Swat and the Indus valley. The discovery of the rock art heritage of the Kandak and Kotah valleys is entirely his own accomplishment; and his contribution to the digs at Barikot was invaluable.

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In February 2011 he survived, with very serious injuries, a suicidal Taliban attack in the bazaar of Mingora. Since then, he would have retained shrapnel wounds all over the body. Together with new restorers who joined the team - like Livia Alberti and Fabio Colombo - and old friends like Francesco Martore, Akhtar Munir recently completed the restoration of the Buddhist sacred area of Saidu Sharif I, and of the great Buddha and Bodhisattva C93 at Jahanabad. The latter, like him, were wounded by a Taliban attack.

He was a friendly, very popular personality. To travel by car with Tota meant to always meet and salute, at least four times a day, some old friends of his, were we in Gilgit, at Rawalpind's old bazar, or in D.I. Khan. Many of such acquaintances went back to a "rebel" period of his youth during which he temporarily left our Mission and wanted to be a truck driver. This further deepened his vast knowledge of the country.

Thanks to Matteo de Chiara we discovered that he also was a profound connoisseur of the Dardic folklore which still shows through the Pashtun stories: legends of fairies, elementary beings and others.

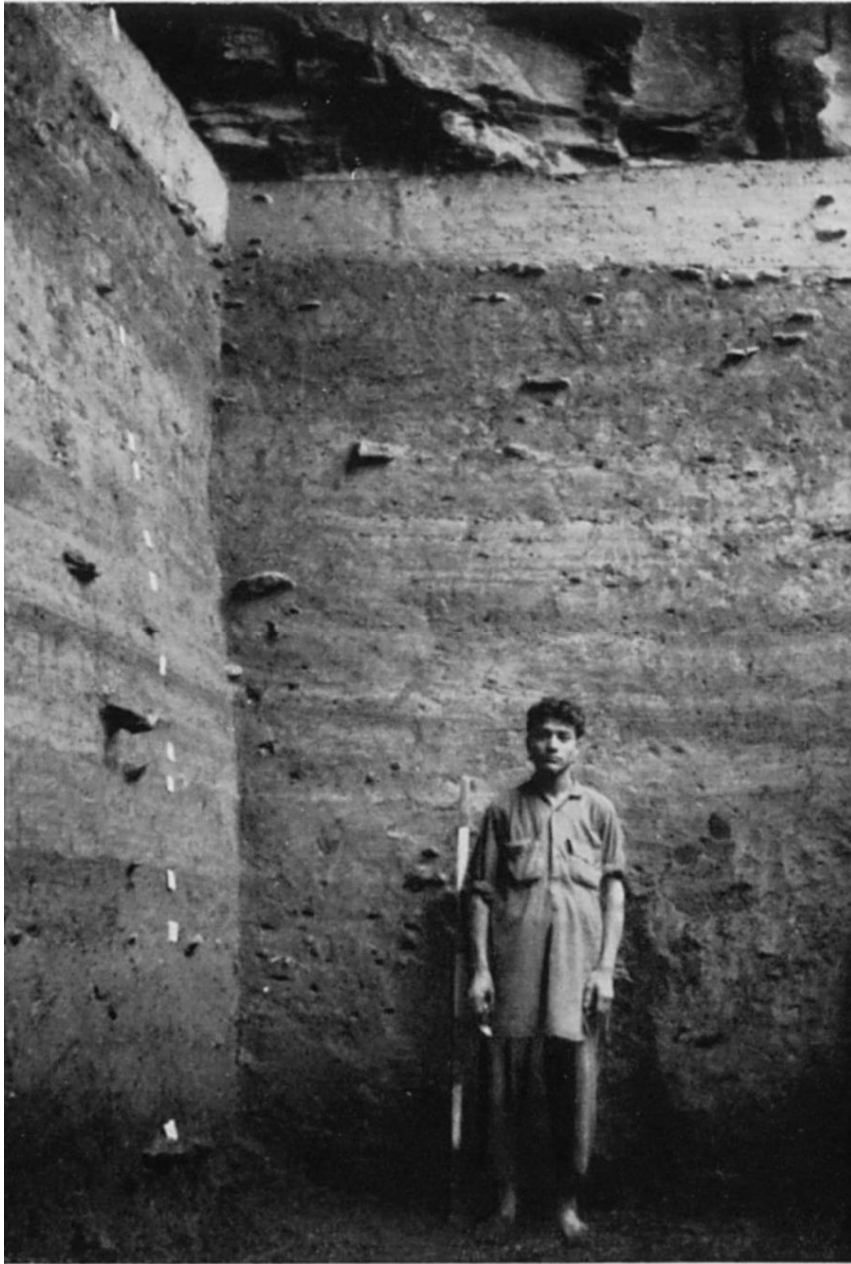
That he was – besides a brilliant archaeologist – a skilled herbalist, and a wise man, we learned from personal experience.





At Butkara I, 1957  
(Photo: Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan)

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At Galeghai, 1967  
(Photo: Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan)



At Saidu Sharif I (with P. Callieri), 1977  
(Photo: Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan)