

Published by the Ev-K2-CNR Committee, within the framework of the Karakorum Trust project,



in collaboration with:  
Milan Polytechnic



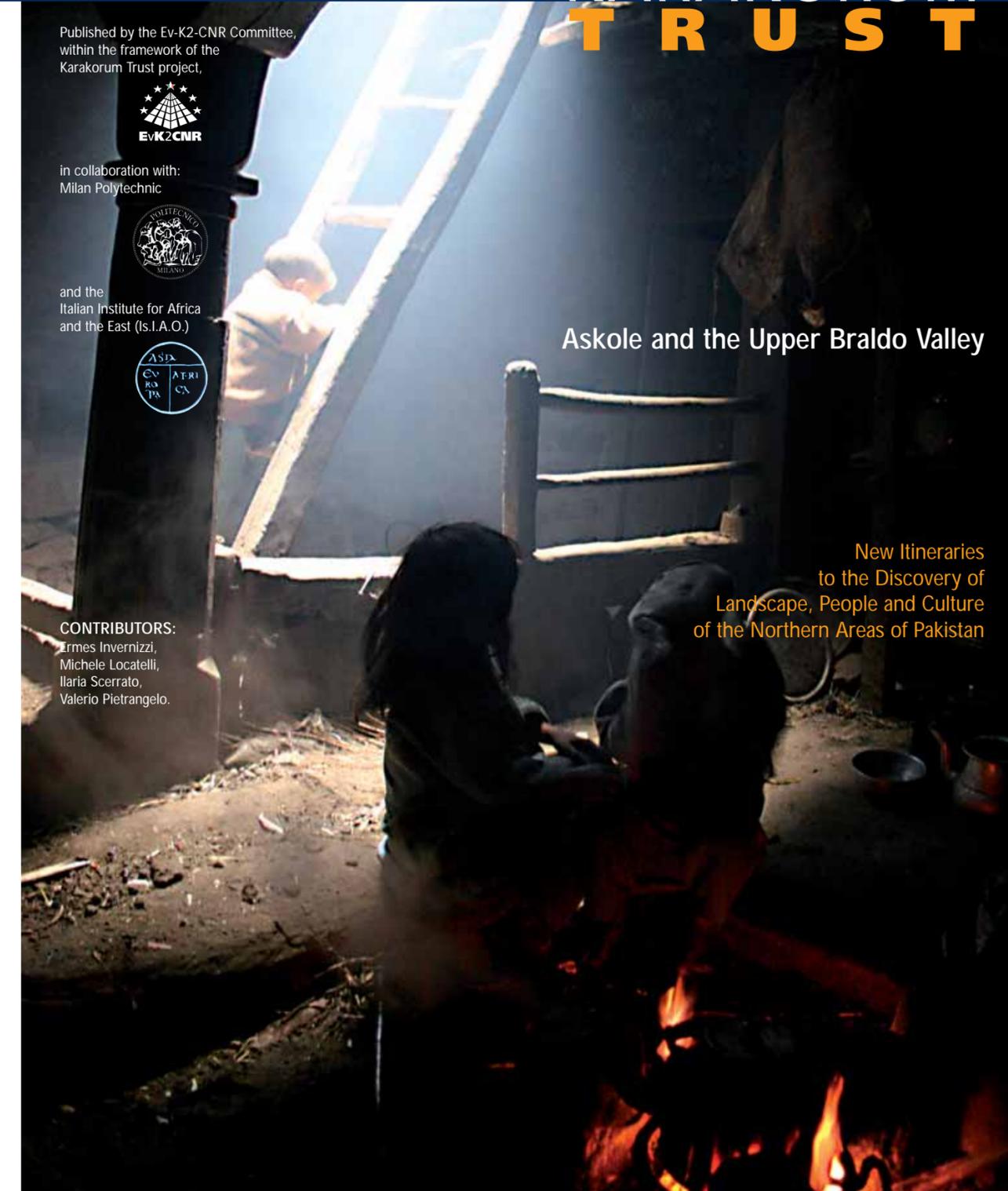
and the  
Italian Institute for Africa  
and the East (I.I.A.O.)



## Askole and the Upper Braldo Valley

New Itineraries  
to the Discovery of  
Landscape, People and Culture  
of the Northern Areas of Pakistan

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Tibetan Lamaism. In the wooden panels of Braldo Valley buildings, the svastika is often reproduced in the centre of a panel. In some cases, however, it can be reproduced several times to form Greek frets.

Among the other ornamental motifs, rose grids (widespread and well-know in Gandharan art), rayed circles, carpet evocating weavings and twists (typical of Chitral Valley) and purely geometric motifs deserve special mention. Thus the creative hands of the artisan made each table inside the winter residences as unique pieces and animate the panels surfaces of the fireplace room, giving testimony to the ancient art of carving, which, in the past, used to embellish houses and temples in the region and in the whole Northern Pakistan, whilst, still today, keeps existing in the Braldo Valley.



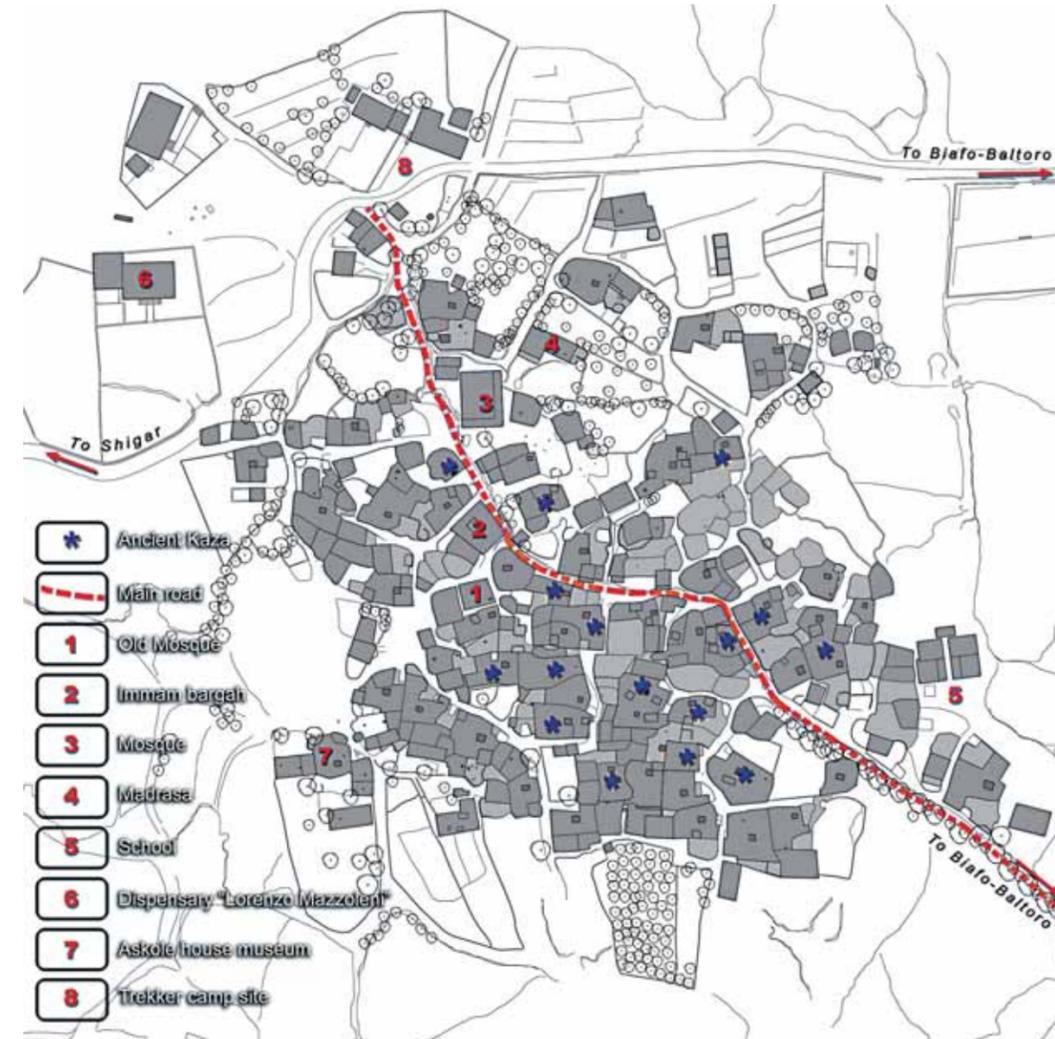
One of the most ancient mosques, together with the one in Chongo, is the mosque of Askole, religious reference point of the whole valley. Its oriental façade is composed by a wood-porch, as long as the building, where the entry door is situated.

The imam-bargah, located next to the mosque, is a congregational centre used for the typical ceremonies of Shia Islam. Shia men gather together in this place in order to read religious texts and share the details of their daily routine.

The wooden decoration reaches its greatest beauty inside private houses, in the kaza, where the unique source of lighting is the fire or the feeble rays of light, penetrating through the hole in the roof, creating an extremely suggestive environment.

Most of the decorations carved on panels, pillars and capitals consist of abstract and floral motifs, representing ancient religious or social symbols. One of the most fascinating patterns is the endless knot, used in the houses of the Braldo Valley both as a decoration and as a central motif. Examples of endless knots have been found in the Subcontinent in tablets from Mohenjo-Daro, Rodji (Gujarat), Chilas (Upper Indus Valley), that may be dated between 300 B.C. and 300 A.D.

Another motif is the svastika (a Sanskrit word meaning "state of prosperity", called yung drong in Balti). Such an ancient symbol, represented by an equilateral cross with its arms bent at right angles, in either right-facing (卐) or left-facing (卍) forms, is widespread all over Northern Pakistan; its meaning may be referred to Indian solar symbology and to



Askole (3048 mt. a.s.l.) is the most ancient village of the valley, as well as the latest permanent settlement before the access to the glaciated area. According to tradition, it was founded around XVI century, by three brothers coming from Yarkand: Sangar, Goud and Chow. As attested by the names of family groups still living in Askole today, the inhabitants descended from these three.

The village is composed by a close group of houses, crossed by one pathway, which touches the two mosques, the imam-bargah and the few local shops. This little business is an exception, within the framework of the valley economy, which is characterized by a subsistence agriculture, and finds the reason for its existence mostly during the summer months, at the beginning of the tourist season and the arrival of mountaineering expeditions.

Wandering around the village one can be impressed on how the buildings adapt themselves to the mophology of the ground: the external walls often adopt a circular shape on the corners, bounding the buildings attached to the houses, such as the stables, the lavatories and the little orchards.

On the opposite side of the valley lay the interesting villages of Monjong and Teste, which have not been crossed by significant tourist flows so far. The village of Monjong (pr. Mongron), opposite to Askole, develops on an alluvial plain. The ground is not much terraced and the fields are larger. Scattered houses, built on enclosed spaces dedicated to poplars growing, are situated on the outskirts of the village. Most of the houses are abandoned and ruined. As indicated by the toponym and according to the Italian geographer Giotto Dainelli, who visited the site in 1913, the original inhabitants of the village belonged to the Mon group, a lower and cast out class of musicians.

Teste is the village which rises on the most advanced post of the valley. Some of the houses have been built on the plain, others on the mountain side, where the village develops on different levels: the roof of the lower houses is used as access platform for reaching the higher ones, forming a vertical structure. Despite the fact that Teste had been more populated than Askole in the past, during the last few years it has met a considerable depopulation.

Apart from the houses, the religious buildings are the other reference point for the small communities. These buildings are the mosque (masjid in Arabic and other Islamic languages) and the Imam-bargah. They are different from the residential structures as they are made of strong stone walls, inserted into a wooden framework. They consist of a prayer room, with finely carved pillars and loggias. As far as decoration is concerned, more sober motifs can be found in religious buildings and latticework panels are massively used.



## Askole and the Braldo Valley

"Horizontal oases and vertical desert", in this way the traveller John Staley defines the valleys of Karakorum or Qara Qurum, a Turkish word meaning "black mountains", indicating an imposing mountain range located in Central Asia.

The pioneers in the exploration of the region were the Chinese: the Buddhist monk Fa Hsien crossed the Mintika Pass in 390 B.C. During the following century, travellers and dignitaries of other countries (such as Marco Polo or Ibn Battuta) covered the region under diplomatic and exploratory scopes, or in search of adventure. The beginning of the most substantial European exploration goes back to XIX century, even though the geographical knowledge of the area is mostly due to the missions held in the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century. The explorers found themselves in front of breathtaking views and natural landscapes, characterized by great contrasts: steep, dry and rocky valleys, crossed by impetuous streams, and potted across the mountainside by oases of poplars and willows, as well as terracings cultivating cereals and surrounding the villages.

A bare landscape, dominated by imposing reliefs, characterizes also the valley of the Braldo River. The rough territory is interrupted by little alluvial plains, made fertile through ingenious artificial irrigation systems and the terracing of the slopes, allowing the installation of little villages and the development of the vegetation characterized by high poplars, willows and apricot trees.

The Braldo Valley was formerly crossed by a track which joined Skardu with Yarkand and Ladakh, and it was mostly used by the merchants, who passed through to reach Kashmir.

The valley is inhabited by the Balti population, an ethnic and linguistic group settled at the border between the Indo-European and the Tibetan world, and which, during the centuries, has adopted elements typical of both civilisations.

Originally Buddhist, in the XIV century, the Balti populations converted to Shia Islam. The Muslim faith has cancelled the former evidences of the Buddhist culture: its remainders today are some aspects of the material culture and of the idiom, an archaic variant of Tibetan language.

Proceeding towards the Upper Braldo Valley, the steep landscape

leaves the space to wider ground strips. Thus, one can find plain zones and a number of villages, such as Askole, Surongo, Teste and Monjong (pr.: Mongron). Residential buildings are close to one another, and separated by narrow and tortuous paths. The main track is marked by the canal into which the water required for domestic use is diverted. The villages have a circular plant and are often surrounded by poplars.

Generally speaking, there are no scattered houses. The only isolated buildings are mills and barns. The mills (*rantak*) are round shaped buildings with a flat roof, characterized by walls made with river cobblestones. The internal stone wheel (*bordo*) is moved by the water falling into a suitably hollowed out tree trunk. The corn container (*toroko*) is an overturned pyramid, made of twisted willow branches.

Identical, as far as the building materials and the circular plant are concerned, are the barns: the first floor, often dug at the underground level, is used as a fold; the second floor, reachable by an external rung ladder, is used as a hay loft. The walls and the roof are made of hurdles of twisted willow.

Life in the villages is based on a family subsistence economy. The

Balti residence has a winter level and a summer level. The winter level or *kaza* is laid underground. Without windows, it is composed by a rectangular central room; a pole (*obus*) with wooden capital is located in the centre. The pole is the centre of the organization of the space, which is divided into 3 areas:

The entrance, with a rung stair, allowing to climb on and descend from the summer level through an opening (*karkon*). A dormitory area, characterized by small wooden spaces, delimited by pillars (*kalep*) and partitions (*spangut*) which show, in ancient houses, richly decorated carvings. The kitchen, characterized by the presence of the fireplace (*tap*), composed by three stones and bounded by a squared fence. Around the fireplace, the family assembles following the rules of the family structure: there is a zone dedicated to children (*pintap*), one dedicated to men and guests (*šentap*), one for the matron and the elders (*šintap*) and one for the woman managing the kitchen (*knut*).

A door, located behind the ladder, links the *kaza* to the stables, directly connected with the interior. Normally, the walls are made of river cobblestones, cemented with mud, or with clay bricks cooked under the sun. This winter smoky environment is a space of strong socialization, where the family spends most of the winter time. Through the precious wooden decorations, found in the best houses, one can perceive the

ancient Tibetan origins of the Balti population.

The summer level or *balti* is the main room of the house, marked by a large covered courtyard. In the centre of the ceiling, a big squared opening (*handok*) supported by four pillars with capitals, links the *balti* level to the roof.

Several rooms are located at the *balti* level: bedrooms, kitchen and guestroom. The door is always open as a welcoming sign. The Balti people receive their guests in the courtyard and offer them the traditional tea, called *Kahva*. The *balti* floor is higher than the street level and is reachable through a rung ladder.

During the summer, the *handok* floor is conceived as a further level of the house and daily life is spent here. On the rooves, women spin and beat the wool, spread and peel the corn, children play, and girls pile up bundles of dead branches. Little buildings made of willow branches, and used as granaries or summer dormitories (*Zala*).

The reduction of building spaces during summertime is clear evidence of the fact that the Balti people do not feel the necessity of staying indoors. They establish, instead, a deep relationship with the environment.

