

AFGHAN

UPDATE

Afghan Update February 2010, No. 22

Exploring Afghanistan's history
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Roads in Afghanistan's past and future



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The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established on 28 March 2002 through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1401. UNAMA's key role is to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan by leading the efforts of the international community. Together with the Government of Afghanistan, the Mission supports the rebuilding of the country and the strengthening of the foundations of peace and a constitutional democracy.

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The challenges ahead for Afghanistan's cultural heritage

By Brendan Cassar

The history and archaeology of Afghanistan stretches back more than 40 millennia, from Palaeolithic sites where stone tools illustrate aspects of the lives of the first human settlements in Afghanistan, through to the Bronze and Iron Ages where civilizations from Kandahar to Balkh began to flourish, and then into the Islamic Period where Ghazni, Ghor and Herat also became centres of high culture and civilization. Many great ideas too, were born or shaped in Afghanistan, leaving an indelible mark on the history and the people of the region; from the birth of Zoroaster in Balkh to the spread of Hellenism, the development of Buddhism to the flourishing of Islam and the Islamic arts, the people, monuments, archaeological sites and literature all bear witness to the multiple layers of an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage.

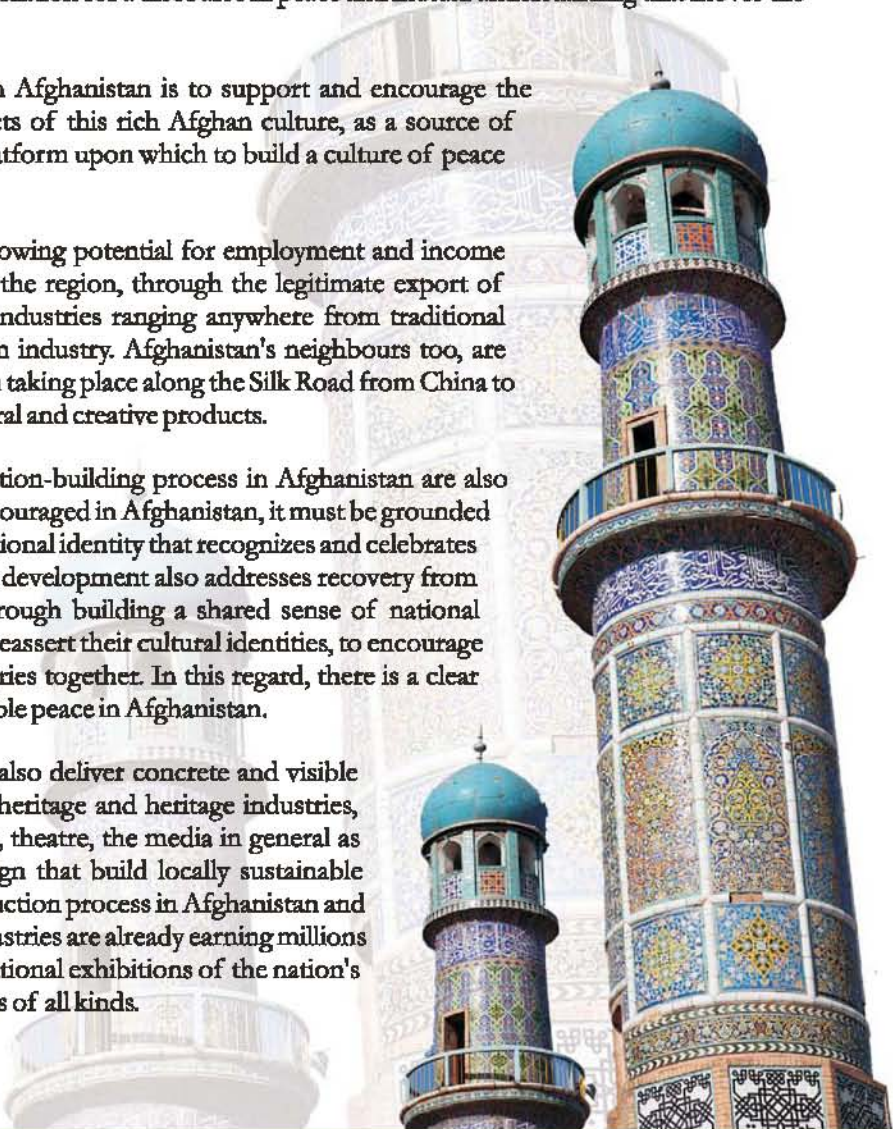
This historical diversity is also reflected in the contemporary cultures and languages of Afghanistan which are equally rich in their expression through different forms of poetry, literature, art, music, dance and traditional forms of craft and architecture that represent the passing on of refined skills, knowledge and ideas from one generation to the next throughout the centuries. All of these are assets for the reconstruction process in Afghanistan and all have made a contribution to the economic and cultural development of the nation in the past. In contemporary Afghanistan this “intangible heritage” as UNESCO identifies it knowledge, skills and tradition can be the positive foundation for a discourse in peace and mutual understanding that moves the country forward.

The mandate of UNESCO for the culture sector in Afghanistan is to support and encourage the Afghan people and authorities to safeguard all aspects of this rich Afghan culture, as a source of history and identity for future generations and as a platform upon which to build a culture of peace and sustainable development.

Moreover, the culture sector in Afghanistan has a growing potential for employment and income generation, as it does in most countries throughout the region, through the legitimate export of cultural products and the development of cultural industries ranging anywhere from traditional agricultural products to crafts and an embryonic film industry. Afghanistan's neighbours too, are already benefitting from a burgeoning cultural tourism taking place along the Silk Road from China to the former Soviet Republics and from exports in cultural and creative products.

The benefits of a cultural focus to the peace and nation-building process in Afghanistan are also clear. It is obvious that if a culture of peace is to be encouraged in Afghanistan, it must be grounded in the concepts of cultural diversity as well as a shared national identity that recognizes and celebrates diversity within its complexity. A cultural approach to development also addresses recovery from conflict by enhancing peace and social cohesion through building a shared sense of national identity, helping affected groups and communities to reassert their cultural identities, to encourage a return to normalcy and by bringing former adversaries together. In this regard, there is a clear and major role for culture to play in building a sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

However, this discourse in peace and diversity must also deliver concrete and visible outcomes through support for all facets of Afghan heritage and heritage industries, including the rehabilitation of museums, art galleries, theatre, the media in general as well as support for traditional architecture and design that build locally sustainable industries. Even in this difficult period in the reconstruction process in Afghanistan and in a sector with few resources and donors, cultural industries are already earning millions of dollars of revenue for Afghanistan through international exhibitions of the nation's treasures and an ongoing legitimate trade in handicrafts of all kinds.

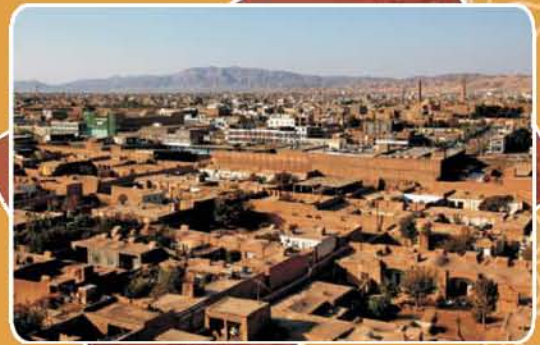


Moreover, the benefits to the national pride from this type of global visibility are overtly positive and can be further developed and encouraged through concrete support for the sector from the international community.

The great potential for cultural development in Afghanistan is, however, currently being undermined. The cultural heritage of Afghanistan has had to endure unimaginable loss in the past, but yet it has remained subject to deliberate destruction, pillage and neglect throughout the decades of war, civil unrest and insurgency into the present. Despite best efforts, several monuments identified by UNESCO and the Afghan authorities as being of worldwide significance have either been destroyed or continue to be at risk of collapse because of a combined lack of both resources and expertise to ensure the provision of the necessary emergency conservation and safeguarding measures. Some sites simply remain inaccessible due to the ongoing conflict, or their isolation in mountainous areas mitigates the chances of serious conservation intervention or proper legal protection. Besides a general advocacy, UNESCO is active in direct conservation interventions on monuments in Jam, Herat, Bamyan and Ghazni, but there is more work to be done, especially in those provinces currently cut off by conflict.

While it is difficult to visit many important archaeological sites in Afghanistan due to the current security environment, it is also patently clear from only a casual survey of the bazaar that sites are still subject to looting and the illicit trafficking of cultural property. Illegal items without a legally verified provenance are stocked, bought and sold in clear view, despite the prohibition in the Afghan Law on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Properties (2004). There is also a desperate need to impose the export/import provisions of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property to which Afghanistan became a State Party in 2005.

The situation remains critical, owing to the scarce resources available to the authorities to control the traffic across the long Afghan borders or to simply ensure the minimum surveillance at archaeological sites across the country.



Another facet of this problem is that many sites of potentially great importance remain unknown to all but the people from local villages and the looters who target them for personal gain. Poverty, rural isolation, lack of opportunities in legitimate industries and a lack of awareness of the potential value of cultural heritage continue to contribute to the destruction of ancient sites and their potential role in a sustainable cultural development into the future. The final link in this chain is the individuals that export and import this material illegally into Europe, North America and East Asia, depriving the world of historical knowledge about this important region and the country of an important non-renewable resource.

The urban fabric and architecture of Afghan cities is also threatened everywhere by conflict and unfettered development. The majority of both the Afghan and the international community suffer from the same misguided notion that “new” is always better and that traditional building materials and designs must necessarily give way to concrete, steel and modernity. Not only this, but historic centres in Kabul, Herat, Balkh and most other provinces in Afghanistan are being pushed aside entirely for the sake of “development” without any notion of zoning plans for new development in specific areas or retaining historic urban architecture in others. Many other countries in Asia, from Dubai to Singapore, have realized only too late that traditional forms of architecture which incorporate modern elements and technology are both important in asserting a positive national identity and for encouraging more diverse types of economic development.

The challenge to revitalize Afghan cultural heritage and institutions at large is overwhelming, requiring a significant mobilization of international and national support. Still, to do nothing even during this difficult and critical time in Afghan history would again set the country back even further. The benefits of aiming to foster a common national identity going beyond ethnic or religious divisions as a contribution to peace and inter-cultural dialogue are worthy ends in themselves, but the benefits of encouraging economic growth through the creation of job opportunities in the cultural and creative industries worth some three trillion dollars globally and the development of sustainable tourism cannot be neglected in its potential to provide a foundation for the future. One need only cite the cases of Vietnam and Cambodia, both countries which faced desperate

poverty for decades since the 1960s and both of which are now recouping billions of dollars from international cultural tourism and the legitimate export of cultural products. Furthermore, two of Afghanistan's largest regional neighbours India and China are not only vast exporters of "culture" but are also vast consumers and it is an opportunity that Afghanistan should begin to grasp now, rather than waiting for so-called "better times".

Since 2001, the Afghan Government with UNESCO's support, has made steps to improve the legal framework for the safeguarding of cultural heritage through the ratification of several Conventions concerned with preventing the illicit traffic of antiquities (1970 UNESCO and 1995 UNIDROIT) and two Conventions for the safeguarding of intangible heritage and cultural diversity (UNESCO 2003 and 2005). The national law was also strengthened in 2004 to assist with the implementation of these Conventions and the 1970 World Heritage Convention. More than merely safeguarding Afghan heritage, with further support from the international community and better coordination from the Afghan Government, these international legal instruments can provide frameworks within which assistance to Afghanistan can be targeted to help create a sense of shared national identity and employment based on sustainable local industries.

In sum, the promotion of cultural diversity, and particularly the safeguarding of cultural heritage, in its tangible forms (e.g. historical monuments, archaeological sites and museum collections) as well as in its intangible forms (such as oral traditions, traditional music and languages), can be used as rallying points for restoring mutual understanding. Culture can play a significant role to foster a sense of national identity by underlining the existence of shared history and cultural traditions, and by helping to better understand where a society has come from, and where it can go in the future. It can help develop a positive discourse on ethnic diversity and its benefits as a source of cultural pride, national identity and peace-building, as well as the economic empowerment of Afghan people. These are all reasons for mainstreaming culture within national policies and international development projects and why it is of the utmost importance to continue to expand activities in all sectors in Afghanistan within a cultural development paradigm.

Brendan Cassar is a Culture Programme Specialist at UNESCO in Kabul. He has worked in the culture sector in Afghanistan since 2003, initially for the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage until 2006 and then for UNESCO until the present. He has visited or worked on sites in many provinces in Afghanistan over the years and continues to work on various projects for tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the National Museum in Kabul, Herat, Ghazni and in Afghanistan's World Heritage sites in Jam and Bamyan.



Taking on Afghanistan's treasure smugglers

By Aditya Mehta, UNAMA

"Come first to me," he called out from behind a stall in chaste English.

His eyes intently winnowing genuine customers from holiday crowds, unknown to the hands that carefully lined some oversized combat helmets next to what looked like a pair of, at least, 70-year-old muskets.

"I give you good price today. I have everything rifles, knife, statue, even old coins," he continued, now having grasped my attention. (It would have been tough to ignore a table stacked with swords, some ornate, others just rusted, that, in all probability, would have sliced through a hapless soldier a century ago).

Having quickly discerned my lack of interest in his collection of arms and ammunition or my inability to pay for it, he pulled out a small glass container filled with coins of different metals and shapes.

"This one is from the time of Alexander only US\$ 45. I have other silver coins also if you want. Hold in your hand to seem."

It was an early Friday afternoon. I was at the weekly ISAF bazaar in downtown Kabul. Karim Khan (name changed), the zealous hawker, should have been in jail. And the US\$ 45 coin with the imprint of Alexander the Great, the muskets from World War II, and the swords used by bandits or princes should have, instead been on display at Kabul's National Museum in the safe patronage of its capable director Mohammad Massoudi.

"It's common to have these bazaars. The shopkeepers at these markets get licences to sell handicrafts but they instead illegally sell antiques," said Mr Massoudi at his large ground floor office adorned with maps and books on Afghanistan. "My request to the authorities when they are here to support our country is not allow these people to sell antiques. I also ask foreigners not to buy from them," he added.

The National Museum in Kabul, today, even on a working Monday, bustles with activity a constant entry and exit of families, expatriates, and art students with cameras and notepads, who roam the hallowed corridors and the two

floors that preserve this country's rich history and culture. But, along with statues of Buddha, bronze figures of Grecian miens, or pottery from the Islamic period, the museum also houses bitter memories from not too far ago.

During the country's long and brutal civil war, the National Museum often bore the brunt of looters, bullets and stray rockets. The Taliban, too, occasionally raided the museum and played their part by blowing up the Buddhas of Bamyan.

"Seventy per cent of our artefacts were stolen from 1992 to 1995. I can estimate that we lost around 70,000 pieces of Afghan treasure during those years just from our museum. It was a sad, terrible period," Mr Massoudi recollected.

The three-decades-long civil war may have ended and the Taliban government ousted from Kabul, however, the looting continues till date, albeit in a different manner. Ancient sites across the country have now become the target of treasure-seekers, mercenaries, and collectors, who scavenge at the country's ancient fertile grounds.

Mr Massoudi believes safeguarding these sites and preventing artefacts from leaving the borders is a big challenge that confronts the Government. "Our Government is trying its best to stop this, but it has other problems to look after. It's difficult with limited forces and equipment."

The Ministry of Information and Culture avers that the Government is aware of this problem and is doing everything it can to protect ancient sites, including deploying guards. This has had success. "The Government has a 500-strong special force to defend these sites and they have been able to bring under control illegal excavations in eight provinces. We need more police though," believes Mr Massoudi.



But, is simply policing sites a viable long-term solution? The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), believes that although deploying guards is one answer, there are other concerted actions required.

"Illicit excavations, exports, and transfer of cultural heritage are (our) biggest concerns," said the organization's director in Afghanistan, Shigeru Aoyagi. "To prevent this, we consider three ways: promotion of the awareness of people living around the sites; real action, such as deployment of guards, and the third is the voice from the international community to respect the richness of this country's culture."

UNESCO, which has been working in Afghanistan since 2002, is, among other actors, involved in the preservation of the country's culture and heritage. Mr Massoudi says UNESCO has also played an "important role" in trying to retrieve artefacts from 2003. UNESCO has also taken long-term measures such as posting guards around the Bamyan sites and helping the Afghan authorities to enforce the legal frameworks pertaining to two conventions on illicit export and transfer of cultural property that were recently ratified by the Government.

In fact, after accepting the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (Paris, 1970), in 2005, the Afghan Government was able to bring back 8,500 pieces from Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, US, and UK.

Earlier in 2009, Afghan authorities achieved another important victory, when the UK Government returned 2,098 pieces which were seized over the years at London's Heathrow Airport from the Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Islamic period, including some that date back 10,000 years.

"At first, Britain sent us photographs of the artefacts. We identified them and through diplomatic channels requested to have them back. When the aeroplane arrived at Kabul's airport and when we opened the boxes in the museum it was a very happy time for me," said a beaming Mr Massoudi, as he proudly pointed to a returned treasure, a blue bowl from the 12th century, currently on display at the museum.

Together with governments, organizations like the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH), which was established in 1994 by concerned individuals such as historian Nancy Dupree, have also aided in purchasing and returning objects to the Government.

But for how long can Afghanistan rely on the benevolence of others to regain and preserve its culture? Mr Massoudi agrees that it is Afghans who will eventually play the greatest role in ensuring Afghanistan's treasures remain in the country for future generations to enjoy. "Without the help of our people it will be difficult to contain smuggling. People here are not educated and they don't know the value of these artefacts that they helping to smuggle. They have to be made more aware," he admitted.

Mr Massoudi makes a cogent point. It will be people like Karim Khan, the illegal antique-seller at Kabul's Friday ISAF market, who will have to be educated first.



Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Since 2008 the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has implemented a range of rehabilitation initiatives on the historic urban fabric and landscape in Kabul and Herat. In addition to safeguarding important architectural heritage, the Trust's programme aims to improve living conditions through labour-intensive upgrading and to promote economic recovery through the development of skills among Afghan craftspeople and professionals.

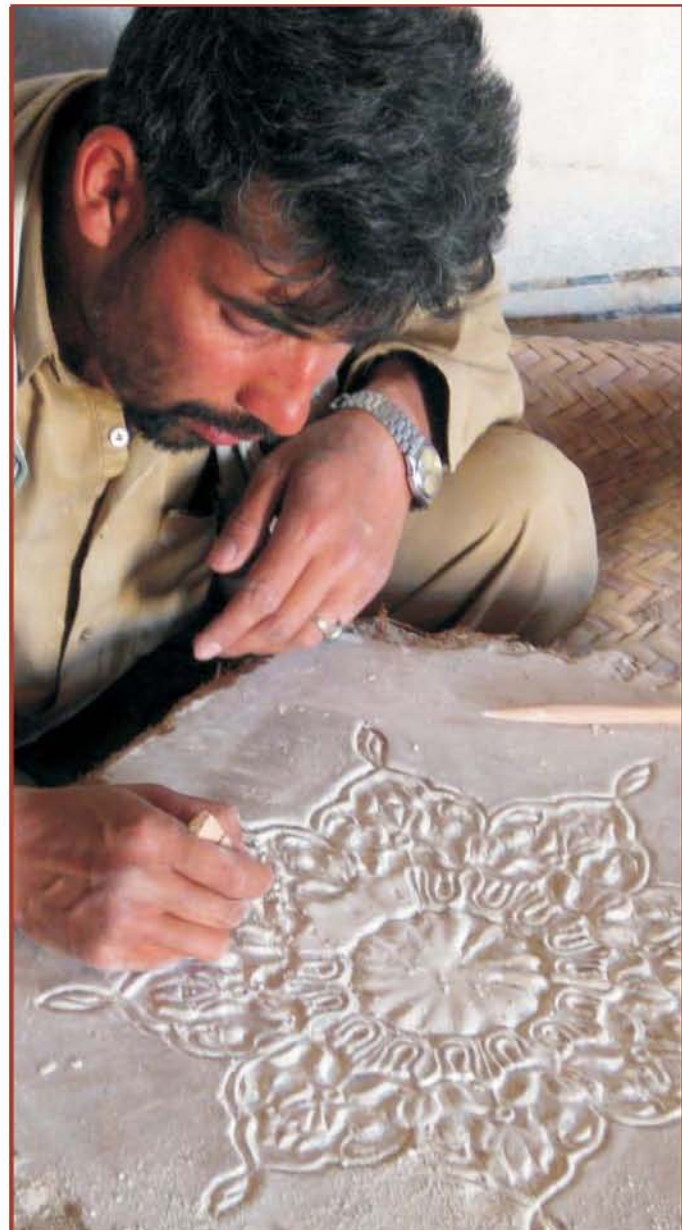
To date, the Trust has undertaken the restoration of more than 60 historic public and private buildings, along with investments in upgrading of basic infrastructure benefiting some 50,000 inhabitants of historic quarters in Kabul and Herat. In addition, the Trust continues to provide technical assistance to Afghan counterpart institutions as part of efforts to ensure more effective processes of planning and urban management. An important aspect of this is support for professional education at Kabul University.

Since 2004, the Aga Khan Music Initiative for Central Asia has operated music schools in Kabul and Herat, where more than 100 students receive instruction in playing of a range of traditional instruments from experienced master-musicians.

In 2009, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture launched the Afghan Cultural Initiative which aims to explore synergies between those working in the realms of traditional architecture, crafts, fine arts, folk music and social history.



AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE



Aga Khan Trust for Culture
Website: www.akdn.org/aktc

1922 - 2009: The French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan

DAFA was created in 1922, at the request of the Government of Afghanistan, to conduct archaeological research in the country. After an interruption during World War II, excavation work resumed from 1946 until its closure in 1982. In 2002, in agreement with the Ministry of Information and Culture, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to re-open and resume the activities of DAFA in Afghanistan.



The delegation's aim is to develop knowledge of Afghanistan's rich past by organizing Franco-Afghan archaeological missions. These involve continuing the inventory of archaeological remains and leading excavations within certain scientific research programmes in order to save sites that are affected by illegal excavations or threatened by development programmes. The other objectives of DAFA include the training of heritage professionals and the protection, restoration and promotion of Afghanistan's heritage.

The main field operations of the organization are located in the north of Afghanistan, in Balkh province. DAFA is excavating two sites (the old city of Balkh and Tcheshme Shafâ, an important site 20 km south of Balkh) and is working in collaboration with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture for the study and the restoration of the Hadji Piadah (Noh Gombad) mosque. DAFA is also providing scientific and technical assistance to the National Institute of Archaeology for the excavations of the Buddhist site of Mès Ainak in Logar province.

Delegation Archeologique Francaise en Afghanistan
Website: www.dafa.org.af

Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage

Established in 1994 by a group of concerned individuals, including noted historian Nancy Hatch Dupree, in response to the growing awareness of the vulnerability of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, SPACH worked to promote cultural heritage as an integral part of the overall reconstruction effort. The organization partnered with the Afghan community to raise awareness of the central importance of cultural heritage and the significant role that Afghan heritage can play in building peace.

Since the outbreak of war in 1979, major historical monuments, artefacts and archaeological sites across the country have been threatened by fighting, looting and neglect. This threat became acute in 1992 with the looting and destruction of the Kabul Museum and culminated in 2001 when the international community witnessed the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyan.

One event in particular that brought the founders of SPACH together was the concern about the looting of the Kabul Museum. Between 1994 and 1996 a total of 48 important objects looted from the Kabul Museum were returned to the Ministry of Information and Culture by the organization.

SPACH has remained inactive since 2008.

Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage
Website: www.spach.info

Turquoise Mountain Foundation

Turquoise Mountain was established in March 2006, at the request of the UK's Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, and Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan. It has the three-fold objective of regenerating historic urban areas, renewing traditional Afghan arts and architecture, and spurring the sustainable development of the nation's craft industry.

Since its inception, Turquoise Mountain has established the internationally accredited Institute for Afghan Arts and Architecture, which comprises Schools of Woodworking, Calligraphy & Painting, Ceramics, and Jewellery & Gem-Cutting. Turquoise Mountain has also helped in rebuilding homes, laying infrastructure, and preserving historic buildings. In addition, the Institute has opened a school and clinic in Murad Khane, a quarter of Kabul's old city.

Turquoise Mountain has also sold nearly US\$ 1,000,000 in traditional Afghan arts and crafts in Afghanistan and abroad, through a Design & Production Studio.



Turquoise Mountain Foundation
Website: www.turquoisemountain.org

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



The UNESCO office in Kabul was established in June 2002 to contribute to the reconstruction efforts being undertaken by the United Nations and the international community. UNESCO, as a specialized UN agency, has the responsibility of promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan by building the foundations of peace through a comprehensive programme in education, science, culture and communication.

As a component of this programme, the culture section of the Kabul office focuses more directly on safeguarding measures for the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Afghanistan and the promotion of cultural diversity and human rights.

UNESCO is currently implementing cultural development projects in partnership with the Ministry of Information and Culture in provinces across Afghanistan, as well as a broader programme for the implementation of conventions to safeguard and promote cultural heritage, the development of cultural policy, institutional partnerships and international cooperation to strengthen the sector.

Activities include conservation and development initiatives at Afghanistan's World Heritage sites in Jam and Bamyan; at the Gawhar Shad Mausoleum in Herat; the Mausoleum of Abdul Razzaq in Ghazni; the rehabilitation of the National Museum and regional museums; and the training of cultural heritage specialists in various disciplines, amongst other projects and activities.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
Website: www.unesco.org

Afghanistan and the Silk Road: The land at the heart of world trade

By Bijan Omrani

One belief that the Western world often held about Asia and the East was that it was a land of enormous luxury and wealth. One Western poet from the 19th century, James Elroy Flecker, summed up this view by describing the way eastwards as “The Golden Road.”

Although the West might not have such an opinion of Afghanistan at this present time, for hundreds, indeed thousands of years until quite recently, the stereotypical Western idea that the East and Afghanistan was a land of great wealth was in fact perfectly true. For centuries, Europe was in world terms, a poverty-stricken and unimportant territory, whereas the East was the land of affluence, high-value international trade and intellectual achievement; and in these areas, Afghanistan can claim to have been a leader of the East.

Afghanistan can thank its geographical position for its wealth. It sits at the heart of Central Asia, at the meeting point of ancient trade routes known together as “The Silk Road” that go out to all parts of Asia. Some lead east to China; some north to the great cities of Bokhara, Samarkand and Khiva, and then to the nomadic steppe; some south-east into India; and others east into Iran, which then lead to the Mediterranean Sea and Europe. Goods wanting to pass between any of these places had to go through Afghanistan, and thus Afghan cities, strategically placed on these trade routes, were able to benefit massively as places of mercantile exchange.

Afghanistan's impact on world trade can be seen very far back in history. For example, the blue lapis lazuli stone in the famous funeral mask of the Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamun was exported from Badakhshan in Afghanistan to Egypt in 1300 BC. Even before that, around 2500 BC, lapis lazuli was exported from Afghanistan to Iraq for the harps buried with the kings of the ancient city of Ur, some of which can now be seen in the British Museum. This shows how long the trade routes have been in operation, and how far they reached.

By the 2nd century BC, it is known that the trade routes stretched even as far as China. In 130 BC, A Chinese traveller named Zhang Qian, sent by the Chinese Emperor, established relations with the people living in north Afghanistan based around Balkh. He found that they were “shrewd traders” and that Balkh “had markets for the sale of all sorts of merchandise.” Shortly after Zhang Qian's mission, regular trade missions were set in train which allowed merchandise to pass all the way from China to the Roman Empire in the west, and the Silk Road network could be said to be fully in operation.

The Silk Road had its heyday from the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD. In the area of Afghanistan at this time, the powerful Kushan Empire was in control, which ruled not only most of modern-day Afghanistan, but also parts of Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well. A huge volume of goods passed through Kushan hands, including silk from China, rubies and lapis lazuli from Badakhshan, spices, ivory and chrysotile (used for making incombustible asbestos cloth) from India, silverwork from the Persian empire, and finished goods from the Roman empire gold, cut gems, glass vessels, amber, frankincense, asbestos cloth, amphorae and statues.

Some of the magnificent wealth of Afghanistan in the Kushan period came to light in 1937, when the summer capital of the Kushan Empire Kapisa, near Bagram was excavated. Merchants' warehouses were discovered containing goods from all over the ancient world: vividly painted and highly valuable glass vases from Syria and Egypt; hundreds of ivory carvings from India, many engraved with astonishingly fine workmanship; and even statues and dishes with images of Roman and Greek gods, imported all the way from Italy. The size and variety of the collection bears witness not only to the prosperity of Afghanistan at the time, but how connected it was to many far-flung places in the ancient world.

It was not only in terms of trade, money and luxury goods that the Silk Road had an overwhelming effect. It was also vitally important in the transport of ideas. The poet James Elroy Flecker, portraying a merchant about to set out on the Silk Road, wrote that he set out eastwards not so much for money, but "For lust of knowing." Religions such as Buddhism were conducted by merchants and travellers along the Silk Road, and some of the most important accounts of the land of Afghanistan before the 8th century come from Chinese Buddhist monks who were travelling to India via Afghanistan to seek Buddhist documents. In Afghanistan, thanks to traders travelling and mixing there from many different places, new ideas were born from old ideas being mixed together. The now-destroyed Buddhas of Bamyan illustrate this phenomenon most vividly; the artistic representation of the Buddha is a mix of Greek art, and Indian artistic and religious ideas, which took place in Afghanistan in the time of the Kushan Empire. Islam also, before Arab warriors reached Afghanistan in the 8th century, was carried to Afghanistan on the trade routes, and many religious shrines, their decorations, and in even some cases their customs, might have been inherited by Islam coming into contact with previous religious ideas.



At various times after the Kushan periods, the trade networks were interrupted. It was at these times of chaos, for example the 4th-6th century AD, that the empires based in Afghanistan declined, as their income derived from trade contracted. Equally, the empires flourished when the trade networks were open. One of the best and more recent examples of this in Afghanistan was the Timurid Empire (late 14th to early 16th century) when the trade networks leading to the west and China were open. It was the time at which some of the greatest Islamic buildings were built, for example the Mosalla at Herat, and great Islamic writers such as Jami were working. However, thanks to the great level of trade in goods and ideas, the Islamic buildings at the time had Chinese patterns in their tile-work, and Mongol ideas of law from the steppe were incorporated into Islamic law.

The Silk Road in essence ceased to function when naval technology advanced in the 15th-16th centuries, so that it became possible to sail ships and transport goods much more easily around the world by sea than overland. As luxury goods began to be transported by sea and the overland trade routes decayed, the kingdoms in Afghanistan lost one of the best sources of their revenue. However, many echoes of the Silk Road can still be felt in Afghanistan today. The vivid paintings on the trucks driven between Peshawar and Jalalabad are a modern version of the charms and talismans with which traders would adorn their caravans to ward off evil. Silk Road traditions, such as leaving scraps of clothing on roadside shrines, still persist, and the main element of Afghan custom, hospitality, can still be owed to the glory days of the Silk Road, when the merchant from the foreign land had to be received with courtesy, since he might not only bring wealth, but a revelation of faith as well.

Bijan Omrani has written extensively on Afghanistan, including *Afghanistan: A Companion and Guide*, published by Odyssey. His new book, *Asia Overland: Tales of Travel on the Silk Road and Trans-Siberian*, will be published in April 2010. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and Royal Asiatic Society, and sits on the board of the *Asian Affairs Journal*. He currently teaches at Eton College in the UK.

Alexander the Great in Afghanistan

By Matthew Leeming

The River Kokcha flows northwards down the Hindu Kush, passing through Faizabad, and joins the Amu Darya river, the Oxus of history and legend. On the right hand bank of the river is one of the most extraordinary historical sites in Afghanistan: the remains of an entire Greek city, known locally as Ai Khanoum (Moon Lady) and almost certainly Alexandria-on-the-Oxus mentioned in ancient sources. Along the course of his epic conquests, Alexander the Great founded cities in which he settled soldiers too old or too injured to continue in his army. It cemented the Greek presence in Alexander's new territories.

Many did not survive. Some did Alexandria in Egypt is still that country's second city. But even if Alexander's conquests did not last politically, culturally they changed the world, spreading Greek culture right across the Near East and beyond. Those flames roaring into the night sky when Alexander (who was admittedly extremely drunk at the time) torched the Persian Emperor's palace at Persepolis heralded the opening of the Hellenistic age, the heyday of classical civilization that gave us, to give just two examples, Gandharan art (Buddhist statues rendered in a realistic Greek style) and the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek and its theology worked out in the terms of Greek philosophy.

In Afghanistan (then known as the Persian province of Bactria) Alexander founded the Greek kingdom of Bactria that lasted 150 years, until it fell to nomad invaders from the north. Ai Khanoum seems to have been torched by the nomads in about 150 BC, but much remained underground. The site was rediscovered by King Zahir Shah on a hunting trip in 1963 and from 1964 to 1979 was meticulously excavated by the French under one of that country's most brilliant archaeologists, Professor Paul Bernard.

When I first visited, in August 2001, Ai Khanoum was the front line between Massoud's forces and the Taliban. Alexander chose the settings of his cities carefully and that of Ai Khanoum is splendid and was as splendidly defensible in 2001 AD as it was in 327 BC. To the north is the Oxus river huge even here, one-third of its way from the High Pamirs to the dessicated wastes of the Aral Sea and protected by a vast cliff. To the west, the city is protected by another moat, the Kokcha.

Dominating the city is the huge natural acropolis, a vast flat-topped hill. The rest of the city's boundaries were protected by a wall and watch towers still visible in photographs from the 1960s. As I stood there with the Taliban rockets roaring overhead, I could imagine Alexander there in 327 BC, perhaps mounted on Bucephalus, his best friend Hephaestion at his side, ordering the conversion of an existing Persian settlement into a magnificent Alexandria.



But can we be sure that Ai Khanoum is Alexandria-Oxiana? It is true that one Kineas was worshipped as the founder of the city at the heroon or hero-shrine. But Kineas is a Thessalian name and we know from Arrian that Alexander discharged his Thessalian cavalry in the Oxus valley. And as Robin Lane Fox, the famous ancient historian and author of one of the best biographies of Alexander ever written said to me robustly, "Well, if it's not an Alexandria, what the hell is it? We know Alexander founded a city on the Oxus and here's a big Greek city right on the Oxus. And there's the Thessalian connection." Alexander, who had a soldier's eye for defence, often sited his cities at the junction of two cities. Bagram is another example. Other scholars are more cautious, including Professor Paul Bernard, the French excavator of the city, but for me Lane Fox is good enough.

But during the civil war of the 1990s, the city was badly looted and today resembles a moonscape. Mechanical excavators were brought in to dig holes and the local commander offered me a Hellenistic gilt and glass bowl for US\$ 80,000 dollars. It would have been worth several million dollars at auction. The commander was running a bazaar of looted antiquities. His customers were international, art dealers making the trip to the front line to buy priceless antiquities very, very cheap. No questions were asked by the buyers.

The French excavations tell us a lot about the city. The settlers lived a completely Greek way of life: the accuracy of their weights and measures was enforced by an agoranomos (the 'lawyer of the market place'). Defaulters, if slaves, were whipped; Freemen got away with a fine. You can still see the remains of a tiered Greek theatre cut into the side of the acropolis, the only Greek theatre yet to have been discovered east of Babylon. Fragments of Euripides were found. There was a palace with magnificent Corinthian columns and a few column bases with the characteristic flared Persian bases, suggesting that Ai Khanoum was a re-foundation of an existing Persian city as Alexandrias generally were.

You can see today some of the highlights of the French discoveries: The plate of Cybele, a Greek earth-Mother goddess, whose followers castrated themselves. The plate shows a goddess in a chariot drawn by lions and a sacrifice by a priest in a Persian dress to a sun-god.

And a statue of a Greek philosopher who would have been perfectly at home in 3rd century Athens together with maxims from the shrine at Delphi inscribed by Klearkos, a philosopher who we know was (like Alexander) a pupil of Aristotle. You can see them in the Kabul Museum. They seem slightly obvious to me but the world would be a better place if they were followed today:

These wise sayings of men of former times, the words of famous men, are consecrated at Delphi, from there Klearkos copied them carefully, to set them up shining afar in the precincts of the hero-shrine of Kineas.

When a child show yourself well-behaved; when a young man, self-controlled; in middle aged, just; as an old man, a good counsellor; at the end of your life, free from sorrow.

Matthew Leeming is the co-author, with Bijan Omrani, of Afghanistan: A Companion and Guide. Website: www.matthewleeming.com.



افغان آپدیت

د افغانستان د تاریخ سپړل

د افغانستان د فرهنگي میراث په وړاندې ننگونی

قاچاق بس دی: د تاریخ د لوټولو په وړاندې جگړه

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