



Saving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan

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Nubian Expedition in Khartoum

Report from Qasr Hisham

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News & Notes

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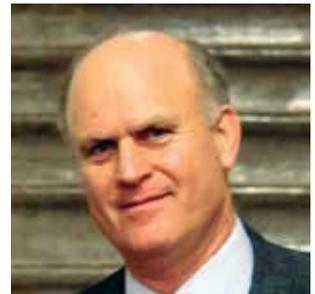
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From the Director's Study

"A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive." So reads a cement plaque in front of the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) in Kabul, where an Oriental Institute team is working on a major preservation project in partnership with NMA staffers, sponsored by the United States Department of State. Cultural preservation has long been a key component of the Oriental Institute mission. From the Epigraphic Survey and our participation with the Nubian Salvage Project through our more recent work creating the "Lost Treasures from Iraq" database, the Oriental Institute has proudly lent its expertise to ensure that the treasures of the ancient world will be preserved for future generations to study and enjoy. I am both proud and excited to share the story of our current work in Afghanistan, along with some beautiful images of the treasures that our OI-NMA team is working to preserve.

Over the past fifteen months, I've traveled to Afghanistan to set up our project and monitor its ongoing progress. The journey has been bittersweet — on the first visit, I was awestruck by the incredible beauty of Buddhist statues and deeply saddened that they had been subjected to defacing and destruction during the war. At the same time, I was impressed and humbled by the remarkable courage and resourcefulness of the NMA curatorial staff who worked tirelessly and without pay to attempt to preserve their magnificent collection. Priceless treasures were hidden away, keys were broken in locks to vaults, and shards of statues were patiently swept up and preserved. NMA staffers bravely took responsibility to ensure that Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage would transcend the challenges of that era, sometimes risking their own lives in the process. On a trip this spring, I was truly inspired by the dedication of the OI-NMA team and the progress they are making to ensure that there is a digital record of the entire museum's collection.

Today, none of us knows what the future of Afghanistan holds — but the dedication of the OI-NMA team is a wonderful example of a mutually respectful partnership, cooperation, and commitment to recording and conserving Afghanistan's unique and exciting cultural heritage.



Early Buddhist clay sculptures in the Conservation Laboratory of the National Museum of Afghanistan

Cover Photo. Partially burned object records from the National Museum of Afghanistan. About 90 percent of the Museum's records were destroyed or lost during the Afghan civil war from 1989 to 1995 (photo courtesy of the National Museum of Afghanistan and Jolyon Leslie)

Saving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan

The Oriental Institute Partnership with the National Museum in Kabul

Gil Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute

Cultural heritage is a precious, non-renewable resource. The archaeological heritage of the ancient Middle East is the material record of the rise of the world's first literate urbanized state societies. The archaeological sites and objects that form this record may be located today within the boundaries of a specific modern country such as Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan, but the achievements they document form a key part of the shared heritage of all humankind. The cities, states, and writing systems of our own Western civilization

are very clearly heirs to the cultural patrimony of these ancient cultures. This heritage is priceless, it is irreplaceable, and it is at risk as never before. The material traces of these early civilizations are being eaten away by modern urban development, by intensive agriculture, and as casualties of war. Tragedies such as the looting of the Baghdad and Kabul museums are searing reminders of the fragility of this heritage, and of our responsibility to protect it in the places where it is most threatened.

For more than half a century, the protection of cultural heritage has been a central part of the Oriental Institute's mission, starting in the early 1960s with the Nubian salvage project, continuing with the restoration work of Chicago House at Luxor, the training of Iraqi and Afghan archaeological conservators at the Oriental Institute in 2007 and 2008, and numerous other projects up to the present. In May 2012, the Oriental Institute embarked on an important new project of cultural-heritage protection — the Oriental Institute's partnership with the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) in Kabul. The OI-NMA partnership is a three-year project funded by the U.S. Department of State, as part of its continuing efforts to protect the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Afghanistan.

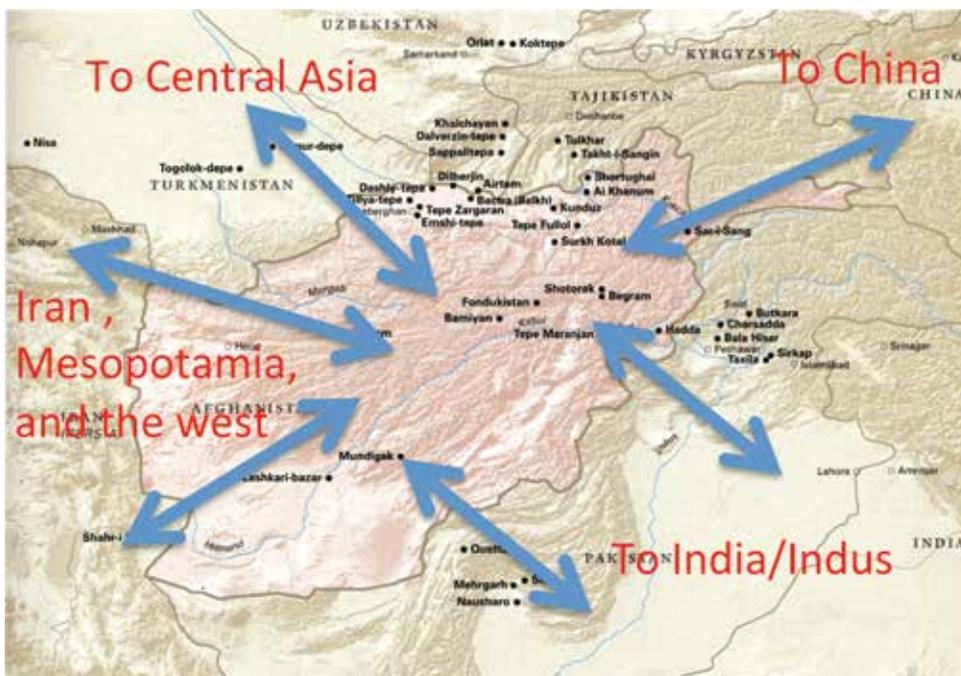


Figure 1. Map of Afghanistan showing the intersection of cultural influences with surrounding regions of Iran and the Middle East, Central Asia, China, and South Asia (India and Pakistan)

Treasures from the "Crossroads of Civilizations"

The National Museum's collections highlight the diversity of cultures and religions that have characterized Afghanistan over the millennia. This diversity stems from Afghanistan's position as a true "crossroads of cultures" in the region where the civilizations of the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and China all converged. The history of contact among these four great civilizations in Afghanistan was a complex mix of trade, migrations, invasions, religious movements,

and the spread of ideas (fig. 1). As a key source of precious resources such as lapis lazuli and tin (for the manufacture of bronze), Afghanistan played a major economic role in trade with Iran, Mesopotamia, and Syria. Over the millennia, Afghanistan has influenced the development of world religions — Bactria was the birthplace of Zoroaster and of the great Islamic Sufi visionary and poet Rumi. Afghanistan provided the pathway through which Buddhism spread from India to China and was a Buddhist country for almost a thousand years until the Islamic conquest.

Among the highlights of the National Museum are six extraordinary and unique collections that would be the envy of any great museum in the world, exemplifying the complex mingling of cultures across Afghanistan over the course of five millennia. The museum houses rare objects from the third- and second-millennia BC Bronze Age, when cities such as Dashly Tepe flourished as part of an elaborate trading system — the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) that linked Iran, Central Asia/Turkmenistan, and northwest Afghanistan. Beautiful gold and silver bowls from sites such as Tepe Fullol show the artistic influences of Iran and Mesopotamia, while objects from other sites such as Mundigak and Shortugai show that Afghanistan participated closely in trade with the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley.

A second important collection derives from the site of Ai Khanoum (“Lady

Moon”) — one of the easternmost colonies founded by Alexander the Great and his successors. Founded in the third century BC as part of the Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian kingdoms, Ai Khanoum guarded the Oxus River in northern Afghanistan. The city has all the features of a Greek polis — an amphitheater, a gymnasium, an agora, temples, and other public buildings. The treasures of Ai Khanoum brought to light through the excavations of the French archaeological mission in Afghanistan (DAFA) include quintessentially Hellenistic architecture, inscriptions, sculpture, coins, and objects of everyday life (fig. 2). The Hellenistic art and culture of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom exercised a lasting influence across Afghanistan.

The third great collection in the National Museum is the elaborate gold jewelry from the tombs of the nomadic princes and princesses of Tillya Tepe in the first century BC. The jewelry shows the complex blending of art styles from Central Asia, China, and the Hellenistic cultures of the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms in northern Afghanistan.

The Bagram ivories and other discoveries from the first-century AD city of Kapisa — capital of the Kushan empire — are a priceless collection of treasures that exemplify the wealth and mixing of cultures that took place here and at other places along the legendary Silk Road that passed through Afghanistan, linking China with the Mediterranean world. The Bagram ivories highlight the strong influence of India (fig. 3), while



Figure 3. One of the famous Bagram Ivories depicting dancers — from the first century AD city of Kapisa (modern Bagram) on the Silk Road to China. These intricately carved ivory panels show the strong influence of Indian art styles



Figure 4. An early depiction of the Buddha showing the Sravasti Miracle, in which the Buddha caused flames to burst from his shoulders and water to flow from his feet



Figure 2. Coin of King Antiochus from the Hellenistic colony of Ai Khanoum in Northern Afghanistan



Figure 5. Nuristani wood carvings in the National Museum's Ethnographic collections. These carvings depict both humans and deities of the ancient Indo-European polytheistic religion that continued to be practiced in this mountainous region until the end of the nineteenth century

Chinese laquer-work, Roman bronzes, and glass show the East–West linkages that were established in this period.

The National Museum's holdings of early Buddhist art from Mes Aynak, Hadda, and other sites of the Kushan and later periods from the second to eighth centuries AD highlight the long history of Buddhism in Afghanistan (fig. 4). These include some of the earliest actual depictions of the Buddha, executed in the Hellenistic-influenced Gandharan sculptural style.

Finally, The museum's unique ethnographic collection of Nuristani wood carvings (fig. 5) preserves a unique and now-vanished culture characterized by life-sized carved wooden sculptures of gods, goddesses, and powerful leaders revered by the mountain people of eastern Afghanistan, who preserved the polytheistic beliefs of their ancient Indo-European religion. For this reason, the forested mountains of the east were known as "Kafiristan" ("the land of the unbelievers") up until 1895, when the region was conquered and converted to Islam by the Amir Abdul-Rahman, and re-named Nuristan ("the land of light").

The OI-NMA Partnership and Inventory

The National Museum of Afghanistan — the country's primary repository of archaeological and ethnographic objects — had been devastated by years of civil war followed by Taliban rule (fig. 6). An estimated 70 percent of the museum's objects (approximately 160,000 items!) had been either stolen during the civil war or deliberately smashed by the Taliban. At the same time, an estimated 90 percent of the object records were destroyed or lost as well. Fortunately, some 60–70,000 objects still survive, including 20,000 of the most important gold and ivory objects, which had been hidden away and survived this dark period.

In the first stage of the reconstruction process after 2001, the United States, aided by other members of the international community, supported the physical rebuilding and restoration of the National Museum. Thanks to these efforts, the museum is once again open to the public. In the second stage of reconstruction, in 2012, the U.S. State Department awarded the Oriental Institute the largest single grant in its history — 2.8 million dollars to partner with the NMA to accomplish several key goals: (a) develop a database to

manage the NMA holdings, (b) conduct a complete inventory of the museum's estimated 60,000 objects, (c) conduct preliminary conservation assessments of the objects, (d) re-house the objects in acid-free archival containers, and (e) train the staff of the museum in database management and inventory procedures.

In June 2013, the OI-NMA partnership completed its first full year of work. OI Director Gil Stein, Executive Director Steve Camp, Chief Curator Jack Green, Head of Conservation Laura d'Alessandro, Head Preparator Erik Lindahl, and Field Director Mike Fisher represented the Oriental Institute staff, along with registrars Constance Wyndham and Catherine Heim. One of the most important aspects of the project is the fact that Oriental Institute staff, led by Field Director Mike Fisher,



Figure 6. (top) Early Buddhist sculpture from one of the monasteries at Hadda, smashed by the Taliban and still awaiting reconstruction. (bottom) Storeroom in the National Museum with its contents destroyed by looters in 1994 during the Afghan civil war (photo courtesy of the National Museum of Afghanistan and Jolyon Leslie)

are living in Kabul and working six days a week in the museum alongside their Afghan colleagues. The ongoing presence of our staff in Kabul creates an atmosphere of genuine cooperation that gives us every reason to believe that we will conclude the project successfully.

We have been fortunate to be able to stay in the DAFA guest house. DAFA Director Philippe Marquis and Assistant Director Nicholas Engel were extremely welcoming and helped us greatly throughout our visit. Our key partner at the U.S. State Department, Dr. Laura Tedesco, assisted us at every step of the way in establishing our relationship with Deputy Minister for Information and Culture Dr. Omar Sultan, Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi, the Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan, and his staff. We actually knew several of the NMA conservators already, since they had spent six months at the Oriental Institute in 2008 in an intensive training program of archaeological conservation led by Laura d'Alessandro.

Once we had met Mr. Masoudi and the other staff of the National Museum, he allocated office space to our group, and we got to work. Mike Fisher began the task of making our prototype database fully bilingual in both English and Dari (one of Afghanistan's two official languages). The rest of us started to work with the NMA conservation staff and curatorial staff to get their input on how they would like us to customize the

database to best serve the needs of the museum.

The NMA staff had already done a tremendous amount of the foundational work for the database part of the OI-NMA partnership. Over the last five years, the NMA curators had already completed and scanned thousands of paper inventory forms in both Dari and English. In an earlier project with Deborah Klimburg-Salter and Sean McAllister from the University of Vienna, the NMA staff had also begun a pilot museum database; a second small database focused on the numismatic holdings of the museum. This greatly aided our own work, and we started the task of transferring the scanned inventory sheets and the several thousand objects from the Vienna and the numismatic databases into a single integrated data structure in FileMaker Pro to which all of the objects in the museum will be added as we inventory them.

We examined all the galleries and were able to make an initial assessment of all the museum storage rooms, to give us our first direct view of the number of objects, what sites and periods are represented, what kinds of materials are present, and overall storage conditions as they relate to conservation. Mike Fisher set up our local area network and worked with Erik Lindahl to develop an ingenious system of router extenders in cabinets on wheels that enabled our wireless network for inventory coding to

reach every storeroom in the museum. By September 2012, Mike had developed the database to the point where it was ready to use, and the museum staff had been trained in inventory procedures.

Each inventory team consists of an Oriental Institute staff person and a staff member of the National Museum, who each enter the description of each object in both English and Dari (figs. 7–8). The objects are measured, labeled with an inventory number, and photographed. The digital photos are linked to each inventory record, along with any older paper documentation (if present). The beauty of the system is that it is “scalable” — the more inventory teams we have working, the more storerooms we can cover, and the more objects we can record. We are now at a point where on any given day, two or three teams are working in tandem. Best of all, our Afghan colleagues from the National Museum have now gained enough hands-on experience that they can work as independent teams. This is exactly what we had hoped to achieve: our plan all along has been to provide enough hands-on training that the NMA staff will be able to take over the inventory and be totally comfortable continuing these procedures when the three-year partnership is over and Oriental Institute staff return home in 2015.

By July 2013 the OI-NMA partnership had inventoried 13,000 objects (fig. 9). This is an extremely impressive



Figure 7. OI-NMA registrar Catherine Heim recording objects for the inventory



Figure 8. Screen shot showing the bilingual English and Dari format of records in the inventory database

achievement. As we bring in additional foreign registrars and have additional Afghan staff working on the inventory teams, we hope to double this rate of work in the coming year.

As the inventory has progressed, we have made wonderful discoveries — locating and recording objects that had been misplaced during the years of civil war and Taliban rule. Perhaps the most interesting of these discoveries was a fragment of an Achaemenid administrative tablet initially discovered in the 1970s by the British excavations at Old Kandahar. The tablet had been moved from its original location and had been presumed to be lost. This is one of the only known examples of Achaemenid

tablets written in the Elamite language to have been recovered by archaeological excavations in Afghanistan. Its very presence attests to the scale and effectiveness of the administration of the Persian empire in its eastern satrapies or provinces. Re-discoveries like this show the tremendous potential of the NMA collections not only for gallery display, but also as a research resource. We hope that there will be many more (re)discoveries like this in the future, and that the museum collections will attract researchers from all over the world.

We are under no illusions about the delicate nature of the OI-NMA partnership in its current political context. The

security situation in Afghanistan remains highly unsettled. But the deep commitment of both the NMA staff and the OI team to this project, and the achievements of the inventory to date, give us every reason to be optimistic that at the end of three years we will be able to complete a computer inventory of every object in the National Museum. Once that digital record of descriptions, measurements, and images exists, the data will be in effect indestructible, and this will be a major step in preserving and recording the priceless cultural heritage of Afghanistan.



Figure 9. The OI-NMA crew in Kabul, March 2013. Left to right: Steve Camp, Catherine Heim, Mike Fisher, Gil Stein, Hakim, Sattar, and Bilal