

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN

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Preservation Partnerships and Their Goals

In 2016–2017 we completed the fifth full year of the partnership between the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute (OI) and the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA). This project, funded by the US Department of State and the US Embassy in Kabul, has been assisting the Museum by working with its staff to develop a bilingual objects management database, conduct a full inventory of the NMA’s holdings, do conservation assessments for the objects, rehouse the objects in archival quality containers, and train the NMA staff in conservation, database management, and artifact curation procedures. We are on the verge of finally completing the inventory database of all objects in the Museum. However, we are continuing our in training and capacity building for the staff of the National Museum in object conservation, database management, and best practices for object curation.

Over the last two years the OI has expanded the number and scope of the heritage preservation partnerships we are conducting in Afghanistan so that we now have three grants underway, with Gil Stein as the Principal Investigator (PI). The first of these — the “Core Operations Grant” — provides the infrastructural support that allows us to expand our work to encompass both the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) and the Afghan Institute of Archaeology (NMA). The main new initiative supported by the Core Operations Grant is the “Hadda Sculptural Restoration Project” at the NMA. The second grant — the “Afghan Heritage Mapping Project” (AHMP) — is now in its second year of working with the Afghan Institute of Archaeology to train the staff and concurrently develop a geospatial database whose ultimate goal is to use remote sensing data to document all the main archaeological sites in Afghanistan. The third grant is the “Mobile Museum” Project, which is developing educational programs that combine video, 3D printing, and other media to teach high school students in provincial cities around Afghanistan about the National Museum in Kabul and its collections.

The OI component of the partnership with the NMA consists of two parts. The “Chicago team” consists of Gil Stein (PI), Brendan Bulger (grant planning, administration and budgeting) and Alison Whyte (conservation). Our “Kabul team” consists of Field Director Alejandro Gallego Lopez and Head Conservator Fabio Colombo (fig. 1).



Figure 1. The OI Kabul and Chicago team visiting the restoration project at Top Dara — the largest and best preserved surviving Buddhist stupa in Afghanistan.

Left to right: Gil Stein, Alejandro Gallego-Lopez, Fabio Colombo, Alison Whyte, Jolyon Leslie (Head of Top Dara restoration project), and Brendan Bulger



Figure 2. Gandharan style early Buddhist sculptures from Hadda in the Presidential Palace vaults



Figure 3. Alejandro Gallego-Lopez inventorying gold bracelets in the Presidential palace vaults

We have worked closely not only with the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) and its Director Fahim Rahimi, but also with local partners and most importantly with the US State Department and the US Embassy-Kabul. Local logistical support for our project is provided by ACHCO (a Kabul-based non-governmental organization that specializes in cultural heritage projects in Afghanistan); our close partners have been ACHCO founder Jolyon Leslie, and Ahmad Bilal, who has worked closely with Brendan Bulger on accounting, budgets, and logistics. At the US State Department, our key partners have been Laura Tedesco, the Cultural Heritage Program Manager at the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy, responsible for Afghanistan and Pakistan, while the State Department's financial management of the grant is overseen by Grachelle Javellana. At the US Embassy-Kabul, our partners have been Counselor for Public Affairs Terry Davidson, Cultural Affairs Officer Stephanie Kuck, and Cultural affairs Specialist Alia Sharifi.

The OI-NMA Inventory

Our main priority for the past five years has been to conduct the first full inventory of all the holdings of the National Museum. The Museum had been devastated by the Afghan civil war (1989–1995) when the building was rocketed, burned, and looted. During the subsequent period of Taliban rule, Taliban forces entered the Museum in March 2001 (at the same time as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas) and smashed hundreds of priceless sculptures and figurines, including some of the world's most important examples of Early Buddhist (second–seventh centuries CE) Gandharan art from the Buddhist Monastery complex of Hadda in southeast Afghanistan near the Khyber Pass (fig. 2).

In 2016–2017, the joint OI-NMA team of Alejandro, NMA curators, and NMA conservators finished inventorying the all of the artifacts stored off site within the vaults of the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace (fig. 3). Roughly 22,000 of the National Museum's most significant artifacts have been housed in this high-security location. This inventory process in the Presidential Palace also involved the packing of the objects in acid-free archival material and some conservation assessments and interventions.

In the past year, our team also inventoried a collection of 100 artifacts repatriated from Japan back to the National Museum in Kabul. This treasure trove included important objects from major archaeological sites in Afghanistan, such as Ai Khanoum, Hadda, Bamiyan and



Figure 4. The Kashyapa Brothers relief — an important example of early Gandharan art from the Buddhist monastery site of Shotorak. This relief, looted from Afghanistan, was part of a shipment of 100 looted objects repatriated from Japan back to the National Museum in Kabul in 2016

Shotorak — most notably the famous Kashyapa Brothers Relief, one of the treasures of early Gandharan Buddhist art (fig. 4). After conservation, the repatriated collection was the focus of a beautiful special exhibit at the National Museum.

With the inclusion of the repatriated items from Japan and the objects in the Presidential Palace vaults, as of June 2017, we have now inventoried 135,707 pieces, documented in 44,925 database records. Our database also now houses 126,956 images, including scanned archival records and 108,816 object photographs. This represents 99% of the NMA's holdings. This is a remarkable achievement. Of course, no inventory database is ever truly complete. New objects continue to be accessioned by the Museum — most notably from the ongoing rescue excavations at the second–eighth century CE early Buddhist city of Mes Aynak. Our joint team of Afghan and international specialists continues the work of inventorying the Mes Aynak finds as they arrive from the field, and are working to stabilize and preserve them.

General Conservation Activities

After database development and implementation of the inventory, object conservation and conservation training form a second key element in the OI-NMA Partnership. Our two project conservators, Fabio Colombo and Alison Whyte, worked closely with the staff conservators of the NMA to train and assist them in condition assessment and rehousing of each artifact.

OI Field Director Alejandro Gallego-Lopez worked with Fabio and Alison to help the NMA curators assemble and install new shelving in the storerooms for the proper rehousing of the collections, specifically in Storeroom 6, where we have been helping curators plan an efficient re-organization of space.

In 2016–17, Fabio worked with the NMA conservators to carry out condition assessment and acid-free rehousing for each artifact. They collaboratively assigned a conservation priority (1–4), documented the general and specific conditions of each piece, and then identified and executed a rehousing strategy for the artifacts. During this process, they sent the objects most in need of conservation/restoration directly to the restoration department for treatment, cleaning, and/or reconstruction.

A. Object Assessments by Conservation Priority (to date):

1. Immediate Treatment Needed:	1,508	(3% of total)
2. Conservation Required:	5,994	(13% of total)
3. Aesthetic or Structural Repairs Needed:	8,038	(18% of total)
4. Stable:	29,282	(66% of total)

B. Objects by Percentage Intact (to date):

• Objects 98-100% Intact:	18,150	(40.40% of total)
• Objects 95-100% Intact:	23,141	(51.51% of total)
• Objects 90-100% Intact:	25,635	(57.06 % of total)

The Hadda Sculptural Restoration Project

In addition, with the support of our new Core Operations Grant, our conservators were able to launch a new initiative — the Hadda Sculptural Restoration Project. The 1,500 year-old sculptures from Hadda in the NMA's holdings are one of the most important collections of Early Buddhist (Gandharan) art in the world. These priceless sculptures were systematically smashed by

the Taliban over three months from January through March 2001. At great personal risk, the NMA staff secretly collected and stored the smashed fragments of these sculptures. In the first stage of a planned three-year project, Fabio Colombo and Alison Whyte began a one-year program of assessment, analysis, and documentation of the Hadda fragments to develop a detailed work plan for their conservation, restoration, and eventual public display. Our initial results are extremely promising. In Museum Storage Room 6, we found nineteen metal storage trunks filled with fragments of sculptures from a variety of sites. Twelve of these trunks contained an estimated 5,000 fragments of sculptures from Hadda (fig. 5). Fabio and Alison's



Figure 5. OI conservator Alison Whyte inspecting one of the trunks filled with sculptural fragments from the early Buddhist monastery site of Hadda, smashed by the Taliban in 2001. The Hadda project is working to conserve, re-assemble, and restore an estimated 100–200 of these sculptures



Figure 6. Hadda sculptural fragments with preserved external surfaces depicting heads and clothing; the high proportion of external fragments will greatly aid in the restoration process

preliminary assessment showed that the fragments consisted of sculptures formed from a range of materials — stucco, limestone, and occasionally schist. We estimate that the fragments originated from a minimum of 100–200 sculptures. The initial sample suggests that a large proportion of these pieces are fragments of the exterior of the sculptures, preserving details such as facial features, limbs, and clothing (fig. 6). This means that the chances for reassembling the sculptures will be quite good. Fabio and Alison were able to locate a number of exterior surface fragments that preserved the museum registration numbers written on them. Sadly, the actual paper registration records that would describe these objects were burned in the attacks on the National Museum during the Afghan Civil War (when an estimated 90% of the Museum’s registration records were destroyed). We are continuing the assessment phase of the project; on that basis in the coming year we will develop a detailed plan for the conservation and restoration of the Hadda sculptures.

The Mobile Museum Grant

The National Museum of Afghanistan is a unique educational resource for Afghan citizens of all ages. However, outside of Kabul, virtually no students in provincial cities have any real knowledge of the Museum or its importance for learning about the history of Afghanistan. The National Museum of Afghanistan Outreach Initiative (NMAOI) is a three-year collaboration with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. This project will develop the first national-scale program of outreach education to raise awareness of the National Museum among school children (grades 6–12) through in-class presentations in twenty-four schools in six cities across Afghanistan: Kabul, Herat, Mazar-I Sharif, Bamiyan, Kandahar, and Jalalabad.

Presentations materials will also be made at five of the US Embassy’s Lincoln Learning Centers across the country, and at two orphanages in Herat.

The Mobile Museum Grant will combine innovative digital technology, “object-based learning,” and traditional educational tools in multiple pathways of engagement with students to create a “Mobile Museum.” Class presentations by trained staff will also include video, iPad use, 3D printed copies of Museum objects, distribution of brochures/rack cards about the Museum to all students, and provision of posters and banners for permanent display in the schools. The range of class presentations will be further extended by posting the program materials on the NMA website, at Lincoln Learning Centers, and on a special YouTube channel. On-site evaluation interviews and questionnaires will be used to assess and improve program effectiveness.

In 2016–2017 we purchased a 3D Spider scanner for the artifacts at the Museum, and NELC doctoral student Josh Cannon conducted initial training sessions on how to use it to scan selected artifacts. We also hired an Afghan Project manager, Mr. Jalil Yusoufi, to work with NMA Director Fahim Rahimi in coordinating the development of a short video about the Museum, and we have selected an Afghan video production company to be our implementing partner. Mr. Yusoufi will also be working to develop the programs for the presentations at high schools in the six cities, and will recruit classroom presenters to actually conduct the programs.

The Afghan Heritage Mapping Project (AHMP)

Our third heritage preservation grant supports the “Afghan Heritage Mapping Partnership” (AHMP). This is a three-year project sponsored by the US Department of State as part of its ongoing commitment to the protection of cultural heritage in Afghanistan and the development of digital infrastructure governmental bodies for the monitoring of threats to Afghan cultural heritage. Emily Hammer, who headed the Oriental Institute’s Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes — the CAMEL Lab, up to summer 2017 — spearheaded our development of the geospatial database using remote sensing imagery and detailed Soviet era topographic maps of Afghanistan. Emily worked closely with Tony Lauricella, Kate Franklin, Becky Seyfried, Mike Fisher, and student lab assistants to integrate published site locations from sources (such as Warwick Ball’s *Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan*) with new sites located through the satellite imagery. We have been largely focusing our efforts on the parts of Afghanistan that were most heavily settled in ancient times — regions such as Bactria in the northern part of the country, where literally thousands of mounded sites can be seen in the satellite images (fig. 7).

The work of the AHMP is conducted in parallel in Chicago and in Kabul. In Chicago, the Partnership draws on satellite imagery and other geospatial technologies to build a comprehensive geographic information systems (GIS) database of identifiable archaeological sites across Afghanistan. The goals in creating this database are to:

1. Inventory and map known and previously unknown archaeological heritage sites, especially in areas threatened by future mining development, urban expansion, and looting;
2. Document the current state of archaeological site preservation and analyze spatial and temporal patterns in looting; and
3. Create a planning tool that will allow heritage protection to be incorporated into mining, economic, and urban development projects.

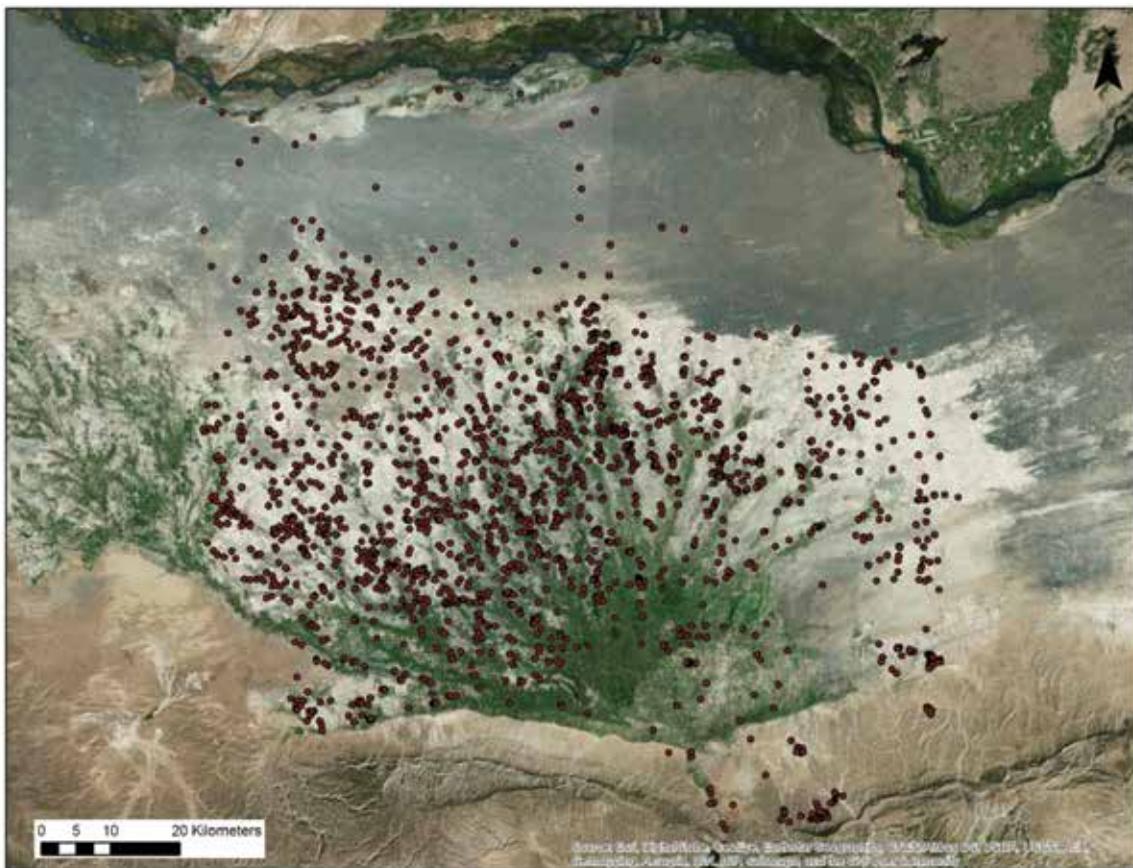


Figure 7. Remote sensing image of the Balkh oasis in Northern Afghanistan with red dots marking looted archaeological sites

In Kabul, AHMP focuses on building capacity and infrastructure. We have developed a partnership with Kabul Polytechnic University (KPU), where KPU faculty and foreign archaeologists such as Jessica Giraud have been teaching intensive classes to train a cohort of Afghan heritage professionals at the Afghan Institute of Archaeology (AIA) and other organizations in the use of GIS technology for cultural heritage management and especially the location and documentation of archaeological sites (fig. 8). As part of this work, we have



Figure 8. Jessica Giraud and colleagues from Kabul Polytechnic University teaching an introductory course in the use of geographic information systems (GIS) for cultural heritage preservation in the GIS Lab at Kabul Polytechnic University



Figure 9. Afghan Institute of Archaeology (AIA) Director Noor Agha Noori and Minister of Information and Culture Bawari cutting the ribbon to open the library/data archive at the AIA

worked with AIA Director Noor Agha Noori to renovate and equip a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Laboratory with six work stations at the AIA, and have also renovated the AIA library so it can serve as a suitable data archive for the geospatial and archaeological data generated by our project (fig. 9).

Conclusion

Overall, the OI's five years of cultural heritage preservation work in Afghanistan have made significant progress in documenting heritage and in training Afghan heritage professionals through hands-on work in conservation, object curation, database management, and the use of GIS technology. This is an ongoing effort; our efforts focus on creating a well trained, well equipped cohort of Afghan professionals who will ensure that the projects and programs we have developed will be able to stand on their own as long-term sustainable resources to document and protect the irreplaceable historical treasures of Afghanistan's rich history of civilizations.
