

## ORIENTAL INSTITUTE-NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN PARTNERSHIP AND CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION WORK: 2013–2014 REPORT

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### The Partnership and Its Goals

2013–14 saw the completion of the second full year of cooperation between the Oriental Institute (OI) and the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA). This three-year project, funded by the US Department of State and specifically the US Embassy in Kabul, forms an important part the Oriental Institute’s commitment to protect the damaged and highly vulnerable cultural heritage of Afghanistan. The OI-NMA Partnership 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, make conservation assessments for the objects, and train the NMA staff in artifact curation procedures. Our overall goal is to develop the database, inventory, and expertise of the staff of the National Museum to the point where they will be able manage the inventory database independently, while developing a fully functioning National Museum for Afghanistan as a way to preserve the rich heritage of this country

The OI component of the partnership consists of the “Chicago team” (Gil Stein, Steve Camp, Jack Green, and Laura D’Alessandro), and the “Kabul team” led by Field Director Michael Fisher (fig. 1). During the year, the Kabul team under Mike’s field direction consisted of Catherine Heim, Jamie Frasier, and Olivier Bordeaux as registrars, while Federica Griffi served as conservator. We also worked with an international team of specialist consultants who assisted us in the inventorying of individual periods or collections. At the US State Department, our key partners are Dr. 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 Grachel Humphries. In Kabul, our principal partner is Dr. Omara Khan Massoudi, Director of the National Museum, along with his staff of curators, conservators, registrars, and photographers. Local logistical support for our project is provided by ACHCO (a Kabul-based non-governmental organization that specializes in cultural heritage projects in Afghanistan).



*Figure 1. The OI-NMA Partnership team, November 2013: (left to right) Front row, Mike Fisher, Jolyon Leslie (ACHCO), Hakim. Back row, Steve Camp, Gil Stein, Bilal, Catherine Heim, Sattar, Samad, Jamie Frasier*

## Progress of the OI-NMA Inventory

Our inventory team consists of a conservator, an OI staff registrar, and a staff member of the National Museum, who together enter the description of each object in both English and Dari. 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).

By July 2014 the OI-NMA partnership had inventoried over 27,000 objects. Mike Fisher and his colleagues have now completed the inventory for eleven of the storerooms, storage areas, and galleries whose holdings span all key periods in Afghanistan's history. It is still difficult to know for certain, but we estimate that 85 percent of the objects stored on the grounds of the National Museum have now been inventoried. This is an extremely impressive achievement. We have every reason to believe that — as long as the political and security situation in Kabul remains stable — we should be able to complete the inventory on schedule at the end of the third year, in summer 2015.

During the past year, the infrastructure of the museum itself has vastly improved. With support from the US Embassy in Kabul, a new exterior wall, protected parking areas, and secure entrances were designed and built by talented Afghan architects and engineers Zabihullah and Ruhollah Majidi. Their innovative design used native stone construction techniques and preserved the museum's beautiful rose garden in a way that enhances the security of the museum while maintaining an open, welcoming atmosphere and viewscape for visitors. Best of all, the design allows for the eventual construction of an entirely new, fully secure museum building on the grounds. Hopefully this will be the next stage in the growth and development of the National Museum.

Once the project passed its halfway point, in keeping with our overall plan, our team began to increase its emphasis on objects conservation. This is important for the collections as a whole, but especially as it relates to the estimated 5,000 coins in the National Museum's collections. As metal objects, the coins are especially vulnerable to corrosion and need to be stabilized to ensure their long-term survival. At the same time, they need to be cleaned in order to allow our team members to document them properly for the inventory (figs. 2–3).



*Left: Figure 2. Conservator at the National Museum cleaning coins mechanically rather than through the use of chemicals. Chemicals remove corrosion, but if improperly used can potentially damage the coins*

*Above: Figure 3. Coins at the National Museum (left) before and (right) after cleaning*

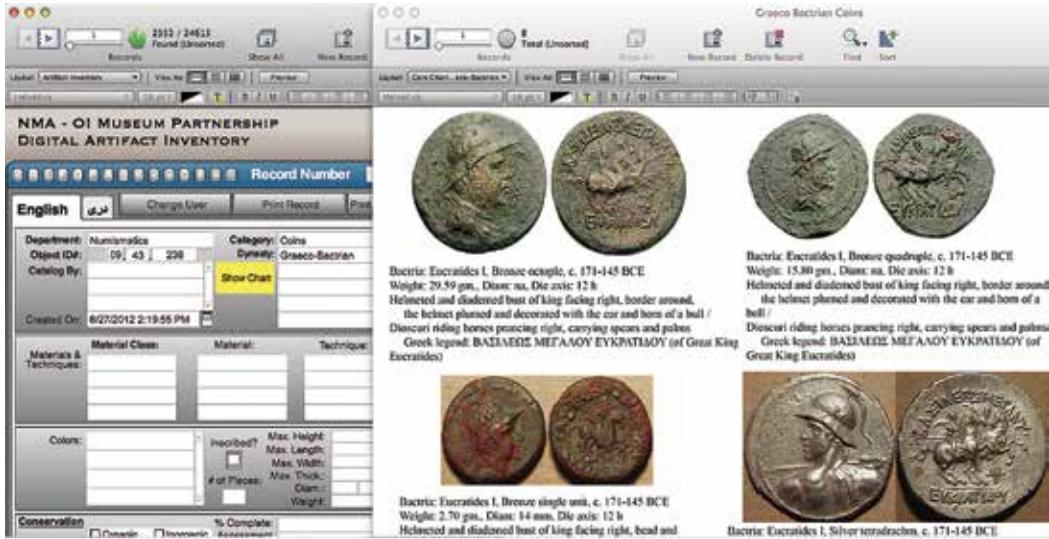


Figure 4. Screen shot of the OI-NMA inventory database showing a drop-down catalog of different coin types to aid the registrars in identification and description (photo courtesy of Michael Fisher)

Italian conservator Federica Griffi joined the team in spring 2014 to focus on coin stabilization and mechanical (as opposed to chemical) cleaning. Federica worked in close cooperation with the staff of the National Museum, such as Mr. Abdullah Hakimzadeh, who in 2007 had been trained in the US at the Oriental Institute by Head Conservator Laura D’Alessandro and her staff. In tandem with the conservation work, Mike Fisher added new functionalities to the database, including built-in illustrated catalogs of Afghan coins from different periods, as a way to speed up the recording process and make it more reliable (fig. 4). We also added barcodes to our object labels as an additional improvement in our documentation and curation. Recording the coins also requires a registrar with specialized numismatic skills. We have been fortunate indeed to recruit as our new registrar Olivier Bordeaux, a doctoral student trained by one of the world’s leading authorities on Indo-Greek and Greco-Bactrian numismatics, Dr. Osmund Bopearachchi of the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). With both conservators and a numismatic specialist, we have been able to make major progress in conserving and inventorying the coins of the museum.

A second key aspect of conservation involved the delivery and installation of shelving, as a part of museum infrastructure necessary for the long-term storage of irreplaceable archaeological objects. Through Herculean efforts by OI Executive Director Steve Camp and Head of Museum Conservation Laura D’Alessandro, we were able to get a second 40-foot container shipment loaded with museum-grade steel shelving shipped via Pakistan and delivered to the National Museum. The shelving is now being assembled and installed in the museum storerooms. With twenty-three storerooms, this is an enormous undertaking, and we anticipate sending a second container with the remainder of the shelving in the coming year.

As the work of the partnership progresses, it becomes clearer than ever that our database inventory is valuable not only as a tool for museum curation, but also as a research resource. One particularly nice example concerns the inscriptions from the Kushan-period site of Surkh Kotal. These inscriptions, dating to the mid-second century CE, are some of the earliest known examples of writing in the native Bactrian language (related to the modern

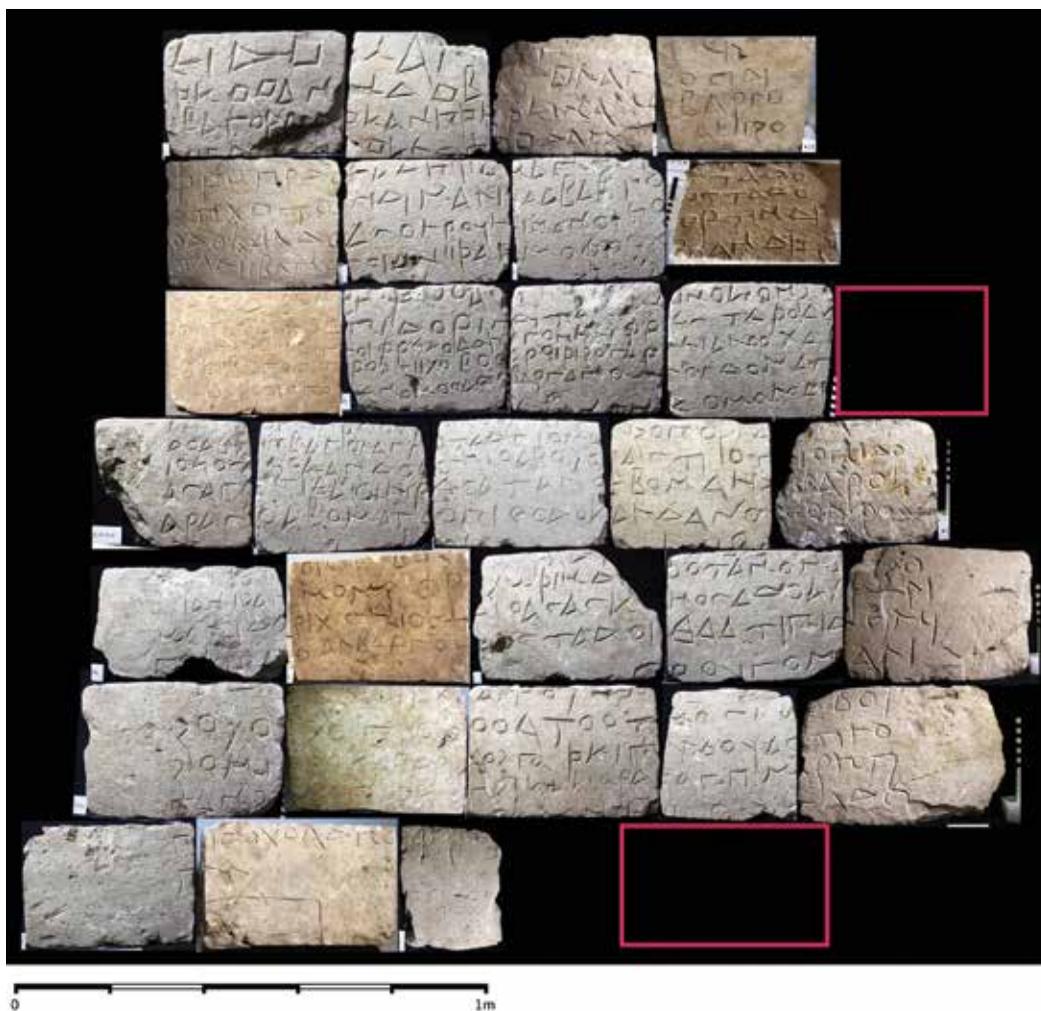


Figure 5. Photo-mosaic of Surkh Kotal Inscription SK4. Dating to the Kushan period in the second century CE, this is one of the earliest known inscriptions in the Bactrian language. The red rectangles indicate missing parts of the inscription

Pashto language of Afghanistan). The Bactrians developed their writing system by adapting the Greek script with the addition of several letters to express sounds not found in Greek. The “Great Surkh Kotal Inscription,” as it is known, exists in three copies, two of which were inscribed on multiple building blocks. The inscriptions had been carefully excavated by the French Archaeological Mission (DAFA), were fully published, and were stored in the National Museum. A key question had been whether or not these inscriptions had fully survived the horrific looting that took place during the Afghan civil war of the early 1990s. Our Kabul team described, photographed, and inventoried the stone blocks of the inscription. We were able to use this complete recording to create a digital photo-mosaic of the inscriptions (fig. 5) and determine to our great relief that the inscription was almost completely intact, with only a very small number of missing (presumably looted) inscribed blocks (shown as red outlines in fig. 5).

In addition to inventorying and conservation, a third key element of the OI-NMA Partnership involves the training of the museum staff. During the past year, we brought in a series

of consultants such as Charles Kolb (recently retired from the National Endowment for the Humanities) and Zahir Yusufzai. Dr. Kolb had worked with one of the great pioneers of Afghan archaeology, Louis Dupree, as the project ceramic expert on the path-breaking excavations at Aq Qupruq. He worked in the storerooms with our Kabul inventory team to help identify key objects from the Aq Qupruq excavations and conducted training seminars on ceramics for the staff of the museum (fig. 6). Similarly, Dr. Yusufzai conducted an extremely useful training seminar on the early Buddhist art of Afghanistan. Finally, Mike Fisher began a series of intensive training tutorials aimed at teaching fundamental aspects of database design to a select group of four curators and staff members of the National Museum. Our goal is to train our Afghan colleagues so that this core group will be able to manage and troubleshoot the operation of the database inventory once the three-year partnership is completed.



*Figure 6. Charles Kolb conducting a ceramics workshop for the staff of the National Museum (photo courtesy of Michael Fisher)*

## Cultural Heritage Projects in Afghanistan

Preservation of cultural heritage lies at the heart of the OI-NMA Partnership’s work in Afghanistan. As part of that focus, in summer 2014 we had the extraordinary good fortune to be able to visit the Bamiyan valley in central Afghanistan to learn about ongoing heritage protection projects in this region. Straddling a key trade route through the Hindu Kush mountains, the Bamiyan valley is a fertile swath of green fields and villages surrounded by the harsh, barren mountain landscape. Bamiyan is the former home of the two largest standing statues of the Buddha (53 m and 38 m tall), carved during the third to fifth centuries CE into giant niches in the red sandstone cliffs that bound the valley (fig. 7). All around the two enormous niches were the grottoes and cells of the Buddhist monks who populated the monasteries of the Bamiyan valley for 800 years. In an act that shocked the entire world, the Taliban deliberately destroyed these two enormous statues just six months before the 9/11 attacks of 2001 (fig. 8). To the Taliban, these majestic monuments were “idols” and anathema. Now, only the ghost outlines of the Buddhas can barely be discerned in the gigantic carved niches, towering over the shattered boulders, as all that survives from these collapsed masterpieces of Buddhist art (figs. 9–10).

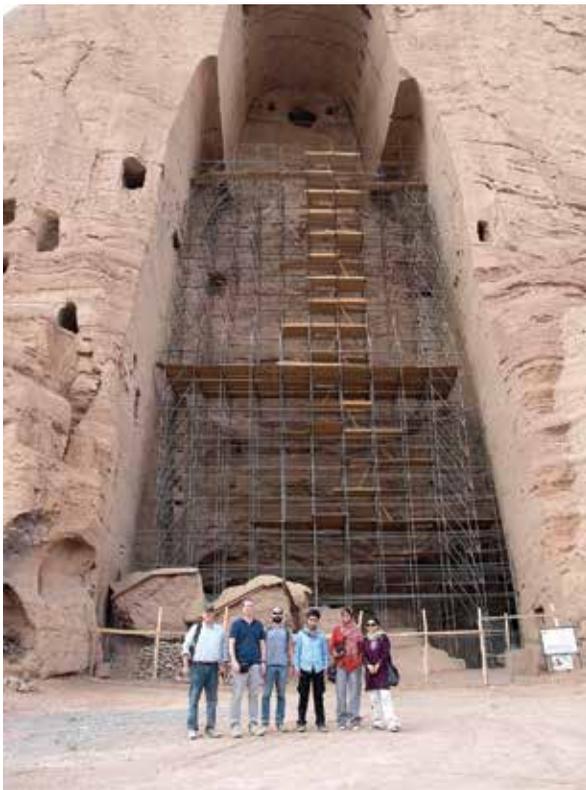
We were shown around Bamiyan by UNESCO conservator Bert Praxenthaler, who is responsible for the stabilization and preservation of the monuments there. Bert described the work that his team is doing to prevent further damage to the niches and grottoes and explained the complexities of the ongoing debate about whether or not we should attempt to re-assemble or reconstruct one of the two destroyed Buddhas. We also visited other key archaeological sites and monuments in the Bamiyan valley such as Shahr i Gholghola (“the City of Screams”; fig. 11) and the cliff-top red-stone fortress of Shahr i Zohak (figs. 12–13), both destroyed in 1221 CE by Genghis Khan, who massacred all their inhabitants. Bert’s



*Figure 7. The 53 m (ca. 174 feet) tall larger standing Buddha at Bamiyan, showing the state of preservation before its destruction by the Taliban (note figure at bottom for scale)*



*Figure 8. The demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban on March 21, 2001*



*Figure 9. The OI team in front of the empty niche that once held the larger standing Buddha of Bamiyan. UNESCO conservators have erected scaffolding inside the niche as part of their efforts to stabilize it and prevent further collapse*



*Figure 10. Stone and plaster fragments of the larger Bamiyan Buddha in storage at the site. There is an ongoing debate about whether it is feasible or desirable to attempt to reconstruct one of the demolished Buddhas*



a



b



c

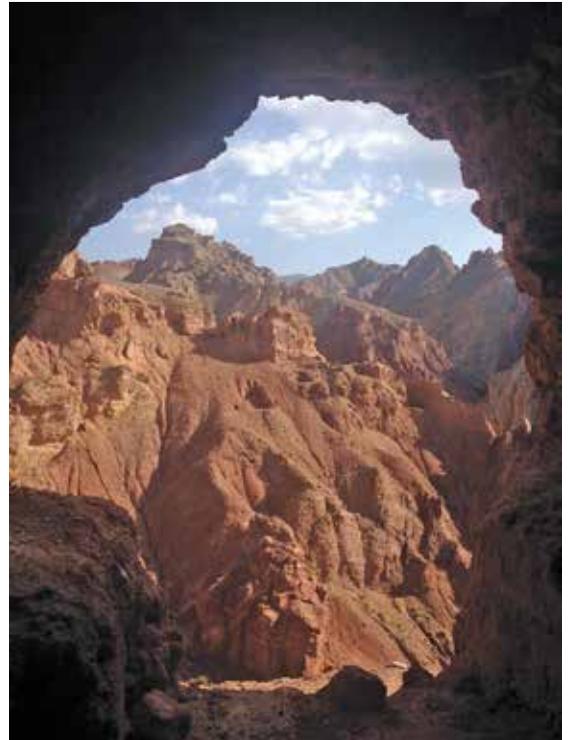
*Figure 11. (a) Shahr i Gholghola (“the City of Screams”), the medieval Islamic city near the niches of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Destroyed in 1221 CE by Genghis Khan, Shahr i Gholghola is now the focus of a UNESCO-sponsored project to stabilize the architecture using traditional materials and techniques (b-c) (mudbricks [left] used to repair ancient wall [right])*



*Figure 12. The imposing cliff-top fortress of Shahr i Zohak was built as early as the Hephthalite period (“White Hun” period, fifth century CE) to guard the entrance to the Bamiyan valley. The city was destroyed in 1221 by Genghis Khan*

conservation team has been using traditional building materials and techniques to stabilize the Islamic-period architecture of Shahr i Gholghola as part of the broader preservation efforts in the valley. Our entire visit to Bamiyan was a sobering reminder of the fragility and vulnerability of Afghanistan’s unique and irreplaceable cultural heritage. At the same time, the combined efforts of both Afghans and the international community to preserve this heritage are deeply inspiring and underscore the value of the work that our partnership is carrying out at the National Museum in Kabul. We are looking forward to continuing and completing this work in the coming year.

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*Figure 13. View from the citadel of Shahr i Zohak over the spectacular mountain landscape around the city*