

PRE-ISLAMIC ART OF AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN.

A survey of research interest

Art is a part and a manifestation of culture, and, accordingly, research on the art of a given region is necessarily related to the research on its culture and history, and it cannot be separated from archaeology and history, on the one hand, that provide research material, and, on the other, from anthropology and cultural studies that reveal the 'language' of cultural symbols through which given objects of material culture can be 'read' and interpreted. The research area outlined in the title is a rather unspecified territorial patchwork, in the case of which it is impossible to talk about a uniform culture or a historical and cultural continuity. It is a vast region, which, throughout history, provided an environment in various segments of which various cultures developed and separate political entities were formed. It was an area of intense migration of various peoples, of which the two most important were associated with the nomadic Indo-Iranian, or Āryan, tribes that reached the territories of present Afghanistan and Pakistan in the middle of the third millennium BCE, and the Turkish people of the first millennium CE. The Indus River and the Sarasvati River, no longer existent, from the east, the basin of the Amū Daryā River, including the so-called Transoxania, to the north, and the desert belt between Herat and Kandahar to the west could be accepted as the customary natural geographical boundaries of this region.¹⁾

The paper presents a survey highlighting certain aspects relating to the research conducted on the pre-Islamic art of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The

¹⁾ Most of the sites mentioned in the article, with few exceptions, have been visited and inspected by the author between 1999 and 2016.

region as such is enormous enough, both in its territorial and historical-cultural dimensions; therefore, understandably, the literature on this subject is correspondingly extensive, which in itself calls for a separate bibliographic volume, making it impossible to adequately discuss even the most important topics. Consequently, the present essay must necessarily be fragmentary and arbitrary when it comes to the choice of topics and is far from even approximating a systematic review.

The region, which was debated during the conference under the label 'Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia', is not an arbitrarily selected cut-out of Eurasia. A characteristic feature of the cultures represented in the whole region, and thus also of its art, is the absorption of various cultural influences from other areas, which, at the same time, means that the region itself remains of interest to researchers, defining their respective areas of activity according to various criteria, be it implicitly accepted linguistic identifications (the expanse of Persian, Indian, Turkish and other languages), be it borders approximating the political frontiers of modern countries of the region (e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, etc.), be it religious affiliations (Zoroastrian, Buddhist, etc.). Each of these approaches to defining the region and its unique character has its justification, although it is also fragmentary at the same time. Political considerations now play an increasingly important role and the exploration of the history and art is gradually dominated by researchers coming from different parts of the region itself, where there is a continuous process of creating national identities, which—as fictional creations—are not rooted in history, but require such a history in order to artificially build a myth of a cultural continuum enduring throughout the centuries unaffected, the culmination of which is a given particular statehood alongside its 'unique' nation and culture, which is claimed to distinguish that particular part of the region from other sections. This can be clearly observed, for example, in the case of nationalistically inspired research carried out on the Scythians, whose allegedly indigenous Turkic identity stirs a heated debate, aimed at demonstrating the cultural belonging of a large region to the Turkish peoples, or the belief that the Indus Valley Civilization, associated with the centres in Harappā and Mohenjo-dāro, is specifically Pakistani and is clearly intended to historically and culturally distinguish—and hence separate—this area from the rest of South Asia, politically called India ('Hindustān'). With a contrary effect, the same Indus Valley, as a part of the whole region, is argued by Indian nationalists and Hindutva fascists to be the cradle of the autochthonous Āryan civilisation, which later

spread to other parts of Eurasia, with the (historically valid)²⁾ narrative of the Āryan invasion considered a fabricated myth by (neo-) colonial powers sponsoring Western post-colonial research. What binds this huge region is, among other factors, the repository of invaluable historical accounts of Buddhist pilgrims, who ventured into this area for primarily religious purposes, including Faxian (Fa-hien/Fa-hsien; 337–420?),³⁾ Song Yun (Sung Jün) and Hui Zheng (Huei-sheng; 518–521), Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang; 602–664) and Yijing (635–713), and whose records and chronicles allow us, for example, to identify archaeological sites and provide indispensable context for a competent interpretation of their contents.

Having the above in mind, to precisely define the actual object of the research in strictly determined territorial and cultural terms is extremely difficult, although, at the same time, the region appears intuitively clear as a separate area—the main cultural feature of which paradoxically seems to turn out to be syncretism. What unifies this region as a clearly distinctive whole is the fact that it was here that separate cultures and traditions came into touch with each other and—in a most intense fashion—interacted and fused together. This region, however, functioned between two strong cultural and political poles—the Persian and Indian civilizations. At the same time, it should be borne in mind how ‘politicised’ it is as a research area, a tendency manifested through the imposition of a top-down political interpretation of historical perspective, and the support of such research which is expected to justify arbitrary political and cultural theses by various political centres and politically backed elites, who intend to appropriate a part or the whole of the region, for instance, for their own national and state-forming and nation-forming purposes.

Current political conditions, although they may constitute a serious impediment to conducting research in the region, mainly in the correct analysis and impartial interpretation of available data, are not the only limitations. The region in question is an area which has often proved hard to penetrate for researchers, for a long time and for variety of reasons. Central Asia and Afghanistan were almost inaccessible not only to researchers, but also to travellers from the West, who were usually suspected to be spies, and often rightly so. The occupation of Turkestan by the Tsarist army, from

²⁾ In addition to vast archaeological and linguistic evidence, for latest genetic evidence see, e.g.: Reich (2009), Korbelt (2016), Silva (2017), and a popular résumé in: Joseph (2017).

³⁾ See: Beal (1906).

the second half of the nineteenth century, first weakened and then annihilated the local centres of power, enabling a gradual penetration of this area, from which various researchers benefitted, including archaeologists and art historians. A similar process was much more prolonged and difficult in the case of Afghanistan, which began to open up only in the twentieth century, and usually for short periods. Access for an outsider was much easier on the territories of modern Pakistan, inasmuch as the areas had been absorbed into British India (British Rāj) from a relatively early point of time, following the first and second Anglo-Sikh Wars, the fall of the Sikh Empire, and the annexation of the territories between 1845–1849.

Paradoxically, it was in the colonial era, at the junction of the imperial Tsarist Russia and the British India, that the research on the culture and art of this region faced lesser problems in certain respects than in recent decades. For the reasons mentioned above, the research carried out by representatives of the region may sometimes be subject to a ‘political’ methodological error—whatever is found in the soil or on the ground of this region can be used to argue in favour of a predetermined political thesis with a national(ist) colour and the historically established belonging of the territories to a particular nation.

In the study of the pre-Islamic art of the region, yet another factor plays an enormous role, which is an environment religiously unfavourable to non-Islamic traditions over several centuries. The turning point was the conquest—by no means peaceful—of the whole region by Islam, which took place gradually. The territories of the present-day Afghanistan became the target of attacks in the period 642–870, which culminated in the establishment of the new power centre in Kābul by the Saffārid dynasty and strengthened by the Ghaznavids. A similar process was initiated by the invasion of the Umayyad troops in Sindh in 711. The declarative justification for territorial expansion in such cases was the spread of faith, which practically implied that places associated with pre-Islamic cults became automatically the target of attacks.⁴⁾ Even if the local population was not hostile to the material remnants of previous, non-Islamic traditions; nonetheless, in moments of political tension, such monuments were destroyed by Islamic zealots, and these processes occurred periodically. The damage was often intentional rather than a result of natural processes of decay and negligence.

⁴⁾ On the junction of religion and politics in conflicts, including armed conflicts, see: Balcerowicz (2011).

Although we do not have many chronicles documenting the intentional character of destructive activities from this region, we can extrapolate these processes on the basis of written testimonies preserved in northern India, for example, in the territories of Gujarāt and Rājasthān, where similar processes took place, such as the destruction of Aṇahillapura in 1298 and of Somanātha the subsequent year by Alā Ud-dīn Khiljī and his general Ulugh Khān. As a result, such politically motivated activities, declaratively supported by religious cause, led to unprecedented devastation in the art and culture of the region, something that can be described as a cultural holocaust. The fact that something has survived to our times and has still not disappeared before our eyes is rather an exception.

It is usually believed that the first contact of Westerners and Western researchers with the art of Afghanistan was associated with the first (and, as in all subsequent ones) unsuccessful attempts to conquer this country by the British during the First Anglo-Afghan War in 1839–1842. However, it was a little earlier that James Lewis (1800–1853), operating under the pseudonym Charles Masson, toured the areas of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan. His activity was indeed pioneering. As a result of family misunderstandings, he had found himself in southern Asia, where he became an employee and soldier of the British East India Company, and was stationed in Āgrā. In 1827, he went to the Punjab (Panjāb) for business purposes, where he deserted to the territories controlled by the Sikhs. Travelling alone, he came across unknown ruins in the Punjab, becoming the first European to see Harappā. Thereafter, he went to Kābul with the British mission to overthrow the Emīr, but again deserted and travelled through Afghanistan, gradually becoming an explorer and a true researcher, archaeologist, and numismatist. As the first European, he undertook research, including in Bāmīyān in 1832, and twice in 1838 in Šāhbāzgarhī. In the period 1833–1835, he discovered about fifty Buddhist monuments in the vicinity of Kābul and Jalālābād, including Haḍḍa and Begrām (ancient Kāpiśa). During his travels in 1832–1838, he collected about 9,000 items, which he thereafter transferred to the Bombay Government, that had for some time been financing his explorations, and which for the most part ultimately found their way into the collection of the British Museum.⁵⁾ His numismatic interests, in particular in bilingual coins issued by Greek and Indo-Greek dynasties in the period between ca. 200 BCE–127 CE, contributed to the deciphering of the *kharoṣṭhī* script by him,

⁵⁾ For his travelogue and expedition accounts see: Masson (1842), (1843) and (1844).

James Prinsep and Alexander Cunningham, Christian Lassen, Edwin Norris, and C.L. Grotefend, in and after 1838, including the identification and reading of the inscriptions of King Aśoka of Śāhbāzgarhī,⁶⁾ which had been discovered in 1836 by M. Court, an officer in the service of Mahārāja Ranjīt Singh⁷⁾.

Although diplomatic and military expeditions were occasionally undertaken in Afghanistan (for example, the Niedermayer-Hentig expedition to Kābul in 1915–1916), they hardly translated into an increase of knowledge about the pre-Islamic art of this region, although a comparatively positive, though rare, side-effect of some of the operations of the British Army's officers and engineers in British India—including the area of present-day Pakistan—was the gathering of scattered information of historical value, that also related to art and art history (apart from destructive activities such as damages in Harappā caused during the construction of the Lahore-Multan railroad). The presence of certain individuals in Afghanistan, such as Gottlieb Fleischer—an employee of the Krupp company from Essen—in Kābul since 1893, definitely did not relate to their interests in the field of art, as was the case, for example, with the Mongolist Hermann Consten, who travelled to Mongolia two decades later, although Captain Oskar von Niedermayer—one of the leaders of the expedition, alongside Werner Otto von Henting—was alleged to have gathered a large collection of photographic documentation of historic buildings in Afghanistan, which he failed to take back with him.⁸⁾ The famous German expedition to Hindukush (Hindukusch-Expedition) in 1935, apart from its actual propaganda and espionage purposes, was concerned with botanical and agricultural research and ignored art.⁹⁾

Occasionally, British officers devoted a bit of space in their accounts from Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan to architecture and art. Such an example was Major Charles Edward Yate, who stayed in Afghanistan between 1885 and 1886 and documented a number of places, mainly Herāt and Balkh.¹⁰⁾ His report was the first comparatively extensive account of its kind on Balkh (ancient Bactra) and Bactria (Bāhli, Vāhli), if we put aside

⁶⁾ See: Errington (1999).

⁷⁾ See: Falk (2006: 132–133).

⁸⁾ Süssheim (2002: 225).

⁹⁾ See his expedition report: Scheibe (1937).

¹⁰⁾ See his report: Yate (1888).

the Afghanistan diaries of Lieutenant Alexander Burnes (1834), which were primarily of a travelogue character.¹¹⁾

The first genuinely research-oriented expedition since the times of James Lewis (alias Charles Masson), but also the first regular historical exploration devoted to the discovering of cultural heritage and art in Afghanistan in a systematic manner was the French archaeological mission in Afghanistan (*La Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*, DAFA). It was established in France in 1922 at the request of the Afghan government itself, in order to conduct archaeological research in Afghanistan, and has been operating there until now with two interruptions caused by the Second World War (1940–1946) and the Soviet occupation and the ensuing civil war (1982–2002). The agreement between France and Afghanistan gave the French the exclusive right to carry out research for a period of thirty years with the possibility of extension, and all the finds (except gold and jewelry items) were agreed to be divided in half between the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kābul, called simply the Kabul Museum, and the Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet in Paris. Since 1965, Afghanistan has acquired the exclusive right to one hundred percent of the finds, and, at the same time, with the creation of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology in the same year, the French monopoly on archaeological excavations began to crumble. Since the very first day of its operation, the Institute has entered into cooperation agreements with teams from Italy, the USA, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, India, and the USSR.

The first DAFA expedition in the period 1923–1925, under the supervision of the director Alfred Foucher, was concerned with Bakh (Bactra) and focused on the Bactrian period, but it turned out to be generally unsuccessful, because the actual ruins of the ancient city, the classical Bactra, were not discovered at that time. In subsequent years, archaeological missions were undertaken, for instance, in Bāmiyān in 1929, Begrām (ancient Kāpiśa) in the 1936–1937 season, Aī Khānum in 1964–1978, in Herat in 2005–2007, and the most recent was undertaken at the Mes Aynak site (2010–2011).¹²⁾

In turn, the first American archaeological expeditions in Afghanistan—the so-called the First Afghan Expedition in the summer of 1949 (which covered the areas from Bāmiyān to Kandahār, Farāh, Sīstān plain and Helmand Valley)

¹¹⁾ On early accounts on Afghanistan, but also with the focus on Bāmiyān, see, e.g.: Martini–Paolini (2014).

¹²⁾ On the first and second periods of activity, till 1982, see: Olivier-Utard (1997).

and the Second Afghan Expedition, which lasted from August 1950 to May 1951 (it also included the area around Quetta in Pakistan)—were sponsored by the Department of Anthropology and private institutions and conducted under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History. They were directed by Walter A. Fairservis, Jr. (Louis Dupree participated in both), who published a range of expedition reports, including four comprehensive monographs documenting the explorations (first expedition in: Fairservis (1950a) and (1950b), second expedition in: Fairservis (1956), (1959), (1961)). The sequence of expeditions has been continued with Louis Dupree since the end of the 1950s.¹³⁾

A list of the most important cultural centres, from the point of view of their invaluable role in terms of art in Afghanistan, comprises of a number of sites. The most famous and most publicized in the media, but also the most prominent and notable is, of course, Bāmiyān,¹⁴⁾ famous primarily for two colossal statues of the Buddha, which were dynamited in March 2001 by the Ṭālibān. It was both a unique and important royal city and a Buddhist monastery (*saṅghārama*) cluster, lying in the Bāmiyān Valley, on the route connecting India with the Silk Road and constituting the centre of a quite significant Buddhist school representing the *mahā-sāṅghika-lokottara-vāda* (the doctrine of the supramundane Buddhas professed by the Great Monastic Order), which, though dominant in the pre-Islamic period, did not survive to our times. In the main mountain cliff and two side cliffs, there are remains of about three thousand caves carved in the rocks: Buddhist temples, monasteries, and monks' cells.¹⁵⁾ It would be a mistake to think that such irreversible destruction occurred only during the uprising of the local Hazāra population against the Ṭālibān in 2000–2001, which culminated in the blowing up by the Ṭālibān of the two largest Buddha statues in the history of mankind. In fact, the vast majority of grottos and niches had been destroyed during the civil war in 1989–2001, before the Ṭālibān arrived there after 1994/1995. All of the bas-reliefs and sculptures of the Buddhas, visible earlier on the rocks and

¹³⁾ A register of his records: 'American Universities Field Staff reports on Afghanistan' in: Dupree (2012: 695–696).

¹⁴⁾ On its destruction and rehabilitation of the site, see: Margottini (2014). On the history of the site, see, e.g.: Upasak (1990: 120–166), on the history and art, see: Klimburg-Salter (1989).

¹⁵⁾ For a detailed description, see: Dupree (1967: 22–49) and Talbot–Maitland–William (1886).

in numerous niches, were the target various Mujāhidīn troops shot at. And even earlier, the finds at Bāmiyān fell prey to various groups who pillaged the Valley as well as numerous other sites in Afghanistan and who sold the booty to private and institutional collectors, but ‘even [to] senior diplomats [who] were buying up art objects looted from archaeological sites and taking them out of the country in diplomatic bags’¹⁶⁾ since the sixties and before. However, some destruction also occurred during various modernization periods in the 20th century, when new infrastructure, such as roads, was constructed, an example being the case of a partial demolition of a *stūpa* near Balkh, on the A-76 road connecting Mazār-i Šarīf and Šeberghān (Fig. 1), built in the 1960s, following the agreement signed with Soviet Union on 28 May 1960 to construct Kandahar-Herat-Kushka highway, and a subsequent Soviet Union loan of 25.2 million USD (granted on 13 July 1964) to connect the highway and Šeberghān with Mazār-i Šarīf.

Since the collapse of the Ṭālibān regime in Kābul in December 2001, research has been resumed in this area, and the researchers’ attention has been concentrated primarily on conservation and rehabilitation work¹⁷⁾ and on attempts to possibly reconstruct both statues as well as the search for the third one—the lying Buddha—which is mentioned in the notes of the Chinese monk Xuanzang (Hiuan-Tsang; 596–664?).¹⁸⁾ The supervision on the Afghan side has been carried out by the Institute of Archaeology in Kābul, whose director is Zemaryalai Tarzi. In the Bāmiyān research, Japanese teams (including the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties in Tōkyō) and a French group (Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France, CNRS) are the leaders. The Japanese artist Hiro Yamagata, commissioned by the Afghan government, was to create a temporary three-dimensional laser projection there by 2012, but apparently the project was suspended due to deteriorating security conditions. After the discovery of Bāmiyān by James Lewis (Charles Masson), the first intensive research works were conducted in Bāmiyān by the French from 1922 until World War II, in two phases: DAFA II in 1928 (A. Godard, Y. Godard and Joseph Hackin) and DAFA III in 1933 (Rowland).¹⁹⁾

¹⁶⁾ Warwick (2006: 40–41).

¹⁷⁾ Margottini (2014).

¹⁸⁾ See: Beal (1906, I: 49–54).

¹⁹⁾ Cf. Dupree (1967).

A place of high historical significance is the city of Balkh, the former Bactra (Fig. 2), the (summer) capital of Bactria and of the Kushāṇa king Kaniṣka,²⁰⁾ which was documented for the first time by Major Charles Edward Yate during the 1885–1886 season.²¹⁾ The first serious research attempt undertaken in this enormous city (with a circumference of 11 km) to explore the histories of Greco-Bactrian (3rd-century BCE), Kushāṇa (1st century BCE–3rd century CE), and Sāsānid (3rd–7th century CE) was the French expedition DAFA I in 1923–1925, under the direction of Alfred Foucher, and the excavations were carried on in the 1947–1948 season, under the supervision of Daniel Schlumberger. In total, DAFA carried out 59 excavations in Balkh. In 1960, the Japanese (Hayashi, Sahara, Kyōtō University) joined the work, and the team expanded in the 1974–1975 season again, with the participation of Indian scholars (Sengupta, Afghan-Indian Mission), and also from the late 1970s with Russian scientists (GA Pugachenkova, A. Muchtarov and others).²²⁾ There are numerous discussions and analyses of Bactrian art, and these include a significant contribution by Soviet and Russian researchers, which was clearly related to the political and military presence of the USSR in Afghanistan.²³⁾

A separate area of great importance for art is Nagarahāra²⁴⁾, which includes such noteworthy sites as: Begrām near Chārikār, Haḍḍa and Basāwal near Jalālābād, the Buddhist monasteries of Paitāvā and Šotorak, Tepe Sardār near Ghaznī, areas surrounding Kābul such as, for example, Tepe Maranjān, Gul'dara, and Kōh-i Dāmān. Among these, the best known is Begrām, the ancient Kāpiśa, the first capital of the Kushāṇas. The village of Bagram (Begrām),²⁵⁾ instead of enjoying international repute for what was really unique there, has now unfortunately fallen into disrepute due to the disgraceful US military base and notorious prison, where torture and human rights violations were prevalent after 2001. Unfortunately, the American army is not very much different from the Ṭālibān when it comes to respecting not only human rights, but also history and art; the American base in

²⁰⁾ More on the history of the site, see, e.g.: Upasak (1990: 2004–236).

²¹⁾ See his report: Yate (1888).

²²⁾ See report: Kruglikova (1976–1984), (2005), Kruglikova–Sarianidi (1976).

²³⁾ Pugachenkova (1979), P'iankov (1982a) and (1982b), Pilipko (1986), Arshavskaia (1987), Pugachenkova–Rtveladze (1990), Pichikian (1991).

²⁴⁾ On this region and art, see: HCCA (vol. II: 356 ff.).

²⁵⁾ On the history of Begrām, see, e.g.: Upasak (1990: 91–119). On the history and art, see, e.g.: Cambon (2010).

Bagram expanded in areas of historical importance, irretrievably destroying the priceless historical remains of the ancient Buddhist site at Begrām, just as happened with the American base Camp Alpha on the ancient ruins of Babylon.

The first excavations were conducted in Begrām from 1922, and the ruins were correctly identified by Alfred Foucher as the ancient Kāpiśa.²⁶⁾ However, the most important work was undertaken there during two DAFA expeditions: 1936–1940 (Joseph Hackin)²⁷⁾ and 1941–1942 (Roman Ghirshman).²⁸⁾ The findings were analysed and described first by Jeannie Auboyer (1948), Benjamin Rowland (1966: 22 ff.),²⁹⁾ and then subsequently by others, for example, Kuwayama (1991) and (2010). Kāpiśa is famous for ivory articles (with Buddhist motifs important for recreating the history of the *stūpa* and the structure of rock temples), Begrām glass, Chinese lacquer, and bronze objects, all excavated in 1937 and—following the letter of the Franco-Afghan arrangement—divided after the Second World War between the museums in Kābul (Afghanistan National Museum) and Paris (Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet). At the outbreak of the civil war, the exhibits housed in the Afghanistan National Museum were transferred to several embassies and official institutions in Kābul and Peshāwar, where they were kept till the end of the civil war.

Although the remains of the ancient Kushāṇa capital were still clearly visible in July and August of 2001, which I could myself testify, now, there is no trace of them left, and even worse, this area—where there may be other monuments hidden underground (because earlier excavations did not reveal complete settlements)—has become absolutely inaccessible to outsiders, including researchers, because of the military base of strategic importance. Whatever remains had survived till 2001 were subsequently levelled down with the construction of military barracks and infrastructure of the camp and an extension of the military airport (which I visited between 2004 and 2006).

The Greco-Bactrian Haḍḍa is associated with Gandhāra and located near the Khyber and Jalālābād passes. The first traces of it were spotted by James Lewis (alias Charles Masson), who came across the site during the expedition

²⁶⁾ See: Foucher (1942).

²⁷⁾ Hackin (1939) and (1954).

²⁸⁾ Ghirshman (1943–45) and (1946).

²⁹⁾ See also HCCA (vol. II: 356 ff.).

in 1833–1835. The first major excavations were conducted by the French team between 1925–1928 (DAFA) under the leadership of Jules Barthoux, and, since 1965, the research has been carried on by Shabiye Mustamandi (Mostamindi).³⁰ During the French excavation activities (DAFA), eight Buddhist monasteries, 500 *stūpas*, 15,000 statues, and other items were discovered in Haḍḍa, of which only 3,000 objects found their way to the National Museum in Kābul, and this was only after protests of the local population and mullahs, whereas the fate of the remaining items is unknown. Eventually, half of these three thousand pieces were exported to the Musée des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet in Paris, and objects kept in the Kabul Museum were largely vandalized or devastated during the revolt in 1929 (and, of course, later after 1996 when they were wrecked at the hands of the Ṭālibān).

In the 1970s, an Afghan team under the direction of Zemaryala and Tarzi started new excavations in Haḍḍa. Sadly, Haḍḍa suffered the sad fate of innumerable other Afghan monuments that had survived for centuries but did not get through the last three decades: it was completely destroyed in the years 1989–2001 during the civil war. The famous ‘minarets’ in Haḍḍa, i.e. the Kushāṇa towers, served the Mujāhidīn as shooting targets. No one has contributed to the destruction of the Afghan cultural heritage on Afghan territory more than the Afghans themselves.

Nagarahāra also includes a group of 150 grottoes carved in the rocks of Basāwal (Bassaule) about 50 km from Jalālābād. The first mention of them comes from 1878, when the British visited this spot during a troop march during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, in the period 1878–1880. William Simpson mentions them in his publication,³¹ and John Burke has prepared their photographic documentation. However, systematic excavations only started in 1965.³²

Excavations in the historical Nagarahāra area around Kābul were conducted by DAFA until the 1970s.³³ Research work was reassumed in 2007, after the Soviet occupation, the civil war, and the Ṭālibān.³⁴ On the Nagarahāra border lies Fundukistan (Fondokestān), located in the Ghorband

³⁰ See his reports: Moustamandi (1968), Mostamindi (1969) and Mostamindi–Mostamindi (1969).

³¹ Simpson (1882).

³² Mizuno (1970).

³³ Results in: Fussman–Le Berre (1976).

³⁴ Results in: Fussman–Murad–Ollivier (2008).

valley between Begrām and Bāmiyān, about 120 km northwest of Kābul. The first mention of this Buddhist monastery comes from James Lewis' (alias Charles Masson) writings, who inspected this place in 1836. Excavations were conducted there by DAFA in 1937 under the direction of Jean Carl. A report from these and subsequent works, which drew on the notes left by Jean Carl and Joseph Hackin, was later produced by J. Meunié.³⁵⁾ The latest study to date is an attempt to combine the finds into a coherent whole and reconstruct a site plan.³⁶⁾

Uncovered relatively late, Aī Khānum (Ai Khanoum) is an ancient capital located at the confluence of the Panj and Kokcha rivers, where Amū Daryā actually takes its rise, on the very border with Tajikistan. The discovery of this city, identified later as Alexandria on the Oxus—since it was probably founded by Alexander the Great—and which was later enormously expanded under the Seleucids, was the result of the DAFA expeditions undertaken since 1963.³⁷⁾ Unfortunately, the precious remains of the ancient city were completely destroyed during the civil war in 1989–2001, especially in the period 2000–2001, when the city found itself in the direct front lines between the Ṭālibān army and the Mujāhidīn of the so-called Northern Alliance, led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, when both sides were shooting at each other and stray Katyushas and tank shells landed on the ancient site (witnessed by the author in July 2001³⁸⁾; Figs. 3 and 4). In addition, the entire area of Aī Khānum fell victim to rampant, illegal excavations, and the outlines of the city, still recognizable in the late 1970s, were transformed into a lunar landscape, covered with sometimes three-meter deep craters and pits numbered in several thousands. In the nearby village of Hoja Bahauddin (Khwāja Bahā' al-dīn), about 35 km away, which, at that time, had become the base of Ahmad Shah

³⁵⁾ Hackin–Carl–Meunié (1959). A description: HCCA (vol. II: 399 ff.).

³⁶⁾ Novotny (2007).

³⁷⁾ The reports of the first three expeditions: Schlumberger (1965), Schlumberger–Bernard (1965), Bernard (1966), (1967) and (1968). Paul Bernard published, almost annually, successive reports from the excavation works in *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres. Comptes rendus des séances* until 1980. A whole series of publications is devoted to Aī Khānum: *Fouilles d'Aī Khanoum* published in Paris (no. 1: Paul Bernard, 1973; no. 2: Olivier Guillaume, 1983; no. 3: Henri-Paul Francfort, 1984; no. 4: Paul Bernard, 1985; no. 5: Pierre Leriche, 1986; no. 6: Serge Veuve, 1987; no. 7: Olivier Guillaume, 1987; no. 8: Claude Rabin, 1992). More on the history of the site and the art, see, e.g.: Bernard (2010b), Bernard-Cambon (2010).

³⁸⁾ More detailed report in: Balcerowicz (2001a).

Massoud's Mujāhidīn troops and his headquarters, it was possible to buy for a song all the ancient treasures unearthed from these pits and shovelled in small heaps at the local market in the summer of 2001 (except for the most precious items), whereas the capitals of the famous Temple of Zeus had been transported away to a local *chāikhāna* (teahouse) there, to support wooden pillars and painted white with oil paint (Fig. 5).³⁹⁾ Aī Khānum, as an archaeological monument, no longer exists.⁴⁰⁾

The missing link that was supposed to connect Hellenistic and Bactrian art in Bactra (Balkh), dating back the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE, with the art of Gandhāra of the period 1st–3rd centuries CE and with the Kushāṇas, which Alfred Foucher failed to uncover to his extreme frustration in Balkh itself, is, in a sense, provided by Surkh Kotal (Surkh Kōtal), known locally as Chashme-ye Shīr or Sar-i Chašmā, located 18 km north of Pul-i Khumri (Pul-i Khumri). It was discovered in 1952 and researched by Daniel Schlumberger,⁴¹⁾ followed, among others, by Gérard Fussmann and his team.⁴²⁾ Surkh Kōtal was a city of the Kushāṇas, founded by Kaniška, but also the ground for their monumental sanctuary, probably of Zoroastrian background.⁴³⁾ Valuable statues, including representations of the Kushāṇa rulers, ivory objects, jewellery, coins, etc., as well as priceless inscriptions, that enable a partial reconstruction of the history and culture of the Kushāṇas, were discovered at the site.⁴⁴⁾

The region around Pul-i Khumri remains poorly excavated and studied, despite a suspicion bordering on certainty that it conceals a plethora of valuable historical material. An interesting case of a quite accidental finding—thanks to workers digging trenches and an employee of a western NGO who had photographed the site—was a discovery made in 1993, in the village of Rabātak, of an important Bactrian rock inscription in the Greek script related to the Kushāṇas.⁴⁵⁾ The inscribed fragment of the rock itself was luckily removed from the site, while all other remains of the Kushāṇa

³⁹⁾ See: Balcerowicz (2001a: 86–89).

⁴⁰⁾ A description and analysis of the site and artefacts, e.g., in: Dagens–Le Berre–Schlumberger (1964: 61–104), Pugachenkova (1976: 137 ff.), HCCA (vol. II: 88–95).

⁴¹⁾ First reports: Schlumberger (1953), (1955) and (1959). Cf. HCCA (vol. II: 352 f.).

⁴²⁾ See: Fussmann (1983), Fussman–Le Berre–Schlumberger (1983), Fussman–Guillaume (1990).

⁴³⁾ More on the history of the site, see, e.g.: Upasak (1990: 198–199).

⁴⁴⁾ A description and translations in HCCA (vol. II, pp. 427–432).

⁴⁵⁾ Edition, translation, analysis and bibliography in: Sims-Williams (2012).

and Sāsānid cultures were either promptly destroyed or looted later. Some remains though survived until 2002, i.e. till the post-Ṭālibān era, when the final destruction of the archaeological remains was brought about on the orders of a local commander.

In the same region of Pul-i Khumri, in Rag-i Bibī near the village of Shamark (Šamarq), the remains of Sāsānid art were discovered in 2003, including large scale rock carvings.⁴⁶⁾

A relatively little explored site, albeit extremely valuable, consists of two hills in Aybak (Aibak/Haibak), known in historical sources as Eukratidia, located in the Samangān province. One of the hills is popularly called Takht-i Rostam—Rostam’s Throne—which is a reference to a popular Persian hero celebrated in Firdausī’s poem *Šāhnāme* and believed by the local population either to be his capital, where he wed his wife, or his big rock bed where he rested before his accomplishments (different versions depending on the local speaker). In fact, it is a 16-meter *stūpa* hewn into the depth of a solid rock mountain peak (Figs. 6 and 7). Adjacent to it, there is a large monastery complex on the neighbouring hill (Fig. 8).⁴⁷⁾ The twin-hill complex is located approximately 5 km west of the main road connecting Kābul and Mazār-i Šarīf. Excavations were first conducted by a Japanese mission of Kyōtō University (Kyoto University Scientific Mission) in 1960.⁴⁸⁾ Following this, when Giuseppe Tucci of IsMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) learned about the results, he also made efforts for an Italian Archaeological Mission to be organised, an idea which eventually materialized in 1962.⁴⁹⁾ On-site research was also carried out by Soviet researchers, probably Tajiks, a trace of which was an odd plaque on the spot, still visible between 2001 and 2005 (maybe even later),⁵⁰⁾ incorrectly identifying the Buddhist *stūpa*—a truly unparalleled structure indeed—as a Zoroastrian altar (!) and the place itself as associated with Achaemenids (!). Ornaments and architectural elements as well as its geographical location, directly *en route* from Bāmiyān to Balkh, indicate that this complex was chronologically and stylistically connected with Bāmiyān.

⁴⁶⁾ See: Grenet–Lee–Martinez–Ory (2007), Lee (2010: 204–206).

⁴⁷⁾ For the history and description, see: Upasak (1990: 191–197).

⁴⁸⁾ Mizuno (1962).

⁴⁹⁾ Puglisi (1963) and Castaldi (1964).

⁵⁰⁾ I.e. when the author visited the site on a few occasions.

A famous find of an unprecedented scale and which has caused tremendous excitement over the past few decades is the golden treasure at Tillā Tepe (Tela Tepe, Tillya-tepe, 'Golden Mound'), hence known as Tilla Tepe Hoard, located near Šeberghān, in the northern province of Jowzjān. The excavations around Tillā Tepe were conducted by Soviet archaeologists under the direction of Viktor Ivanowich Sarianidi, starting from 1969, but it was not until 1978 that they came across six tombs next to a fortress, which dates back to the beginnings of the first millennium BCE.⁵¹⁾ The discovery was unparalleled and one of the most significant in the 20th century: about 20,000 ornaments and jewellery, weapons, fragments of clothes and fabrics, mostly of gold and precious stones.⁵²⁾ The exact cultural affiliation of this place and the 'Bactrian gold', as the discovery is commonly called, is still not entirely clear, although the objects seem to belong to the Kushāna period around 1st century BCE–1st century CE, a hypothesis also supported by the evidence of gold coins found there. The early tombs may be associated with nomadic people, perhaps with the Scythians (the Sakas), the Parthians, or the Yuèzhī.

Due to the precarious situation after 1979, only a small part of this collection was accessible to the visitors of the National Museum in Kābul from 1980 to 1989, and the rest was stored in the safe vaults in the basement of the museum. With the departure of Afghanistan by Soviet troops in February 1989, Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah, along with the National Museum management, decided to secretly deposit all the finds in the basement safe vaults of the Central Bank of Afghanistan, which formed part of the buildings belonging to the Presidential Palace complex nearby. Since then, no one has heard of the fate of the treasure and its whereabouts for years. It was widely assumed that either the Russians had taken the Golden Hoard away secretly, or it had been stolen and lost forever. At the beginning of August 2001, in direct conversation with me, Ahmad Shah Massoud admitted that in fact the treasure was still in the vaults of the Presidential palace, 'kept safely in proper conditions, in a steel safe room, behind steel gates protected with a password'. In September 1996, he had been forced to flee from Kābul by the Ṭālibān. Only once was the safe was opened for inspection.⁵³⁾ A tiny group

⁵¹⁾ On the history of the site and its art see, e.g.: Schiltz (2010), Schiltz–Cambon (2010).

⁵²⁾ Sarianidi (1985).

⁵³⁾ Balcerowicz (2001a: 131) and (2001b).

of high-ranking Ṭālibān apparently knew about the contents of the treasury vaults, judging from Massoud's words. Massoud also showed me a copy of the receipt confirming the take-over of the control over the treasure deposited in Presidential Palace vaults, which the Ṭālibān presented to the then Director of the National Fund (i.e. the Central Bank). The safe vault locks, protected with a password, apparently proved so effective and hard to break that without both the password and the keys, it was impossible for the Ṭālibān to open the vaults. This was the version I heard directly from Massoud in early August 2001, and it was fully confirmed in 2003, when an attempt was made to gain access to the treasury vaults during Hamid Karzai's early presidency and inspect its contents. It was all in vain. A full year had elapsed before efforts were made to summon all required people, each with a separate and different key to the treasury, and one more person who knew the password, and to gather them in one place. The second attempt proved successful. After the inspection of the inventory and the contents of the vaults, it turns out that not even a single object of the treasure had been lost. From 2008, it was possible to see 'the Bactrian Hoard' at various exhibitions, including the US (2008–2009), Canada (2009–2010), Germany (2010–2011), London (2011), etc.⁵⁴ This is one of very few cases when the history of Afghan art objects has had a successful end, at least for now.

A scandal of unprecedented proportions, although a potential threat of complete destruction has not yet materialized, as was the case with the large statues of the Bāmiyān Buddhas, is Mes Aynak (Mis Ainak; 'Copper Well'), also known as Tepe Kāfiriyat ('The Mound of the Infidels'), a site about 35 km southeast of Kābul (or 10 km in a straight line from the city limits) in the Logar province. The hill, together with the adjacent areas, contains the second largest copper deposits in the world, which has determined both the historical development of this place and the cataclysm hovering over it. Due to its copper deposits, Mes Aynak existed as a mining settlement, where copper had already been extracted in the early Bronze Age, 5,000 years ago. Gradually, this settlement grew into a large and prosperous city, connected to the trade route, leading from Takṣāsilā (Taxila) and India to the Silk Road, and particularly expanded as a monastic Buddhist city in the times of the Kushāṇas and the Sāsānids, in the 2nd–7th centuries CE. The municipality ceased to function with the advent of Islam in the seventh/

⁵⁴ A complete documentation was prepared at the occasion of the exhibition by Hiebert–Cambon (2008). A description of the finds in: HCCA (vol. II: 353 f.).

eighth centuries, and there are many indications that the population left it hastily in panic to avoid imminent danger. Regarding the size of the finds, Mes Aynak can be considered the second most important archaeological site in Afghanistan, after Bāmiyān. The site is of exceptional importance not only for art historians, historians of religion, Buddhologists, and historians specializing in the Kushānas and Sāsānids, but also for historians of science, including metallurgy.⁵⁵⁾

The place was known to archaeologists of the French expedition as early as in 1977,⁵⁶⁾ which also incorporated Afghan archaeologists, including Omar Sultan—until recently the deputy minister of culture—although no major excavations were undertaken at that time, due to the most uncertain political situation (the communist overthrow of the government of Mohammad Daoud and the latter’s assassination in 1978). It was only in 2007 that, in an atmosphere of allegations of corruption, the Afghan authorities, in the person of Mohammed Ibrahim Adel, the then Minister of Mining, gave a 30-year concession to explore the copper deposits of Mes Aynak to two Chinese state-owned companies, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (CMGC) and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited, with full knowledge that it is an archaeologically important site. Two years later, based on military intelligence reports, it transpired that ‘The Afghan minister of mines accepted a roughly \$30 million bribe to award the country’s largest development project to a Chinese mining firm.’⁵⁷⁾

The catastrophic consequences for one of the two most important instances of Afghan cultural and historical heritage sites are obvious. Even the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum of Afghanistan admits that the central copper deposit overlaps with the so-called Red Zone, which represents the central focus of archaeologists’ and historians’ attention,⁵⁸⁾ and the copper extraction will *literally* wipe the Mes Aynak hill and the surrounding areas (at least three separate ‘neighbourhoods’ of the hill that have been partially uncovered so far)⁵⁹⁾, alongside the historical buildings and the cultural wealth underground, off the surface of the earth. The perilous situation of Mes Aynak

⁵⁵⁾ See Ely (2012).

⁵⁶⁾ Report: Berthoud–Besenval–Cesbron–Lizsak–Hours (1977).

⁵⁷⁾ Partlow (2009).

⁵⁸⁾ Yavazi (2013: 6).

⁵⁹⁾ Benard–Sugarman–Rehm (2012: 11).

sparked protests, unfortunately limited primarily to archaeologists and, to a negligible degree, international public opinion. In addition, studies show that copper excavation will have devastating effects both on the environment and health of the local population.⁶⁰ A 2014 documentary film, *Saving Mes Aynak* (www.savingmesaynak.com), has raised public awareness of the plight of the site and won several international awards, though the impact of relatively weak protests nationwide and internationally on Afghan government is still rather marginal.

Just as the world resented the Ṭālibān's destruction of the two monumental statues of the Buddhas in Bāmiyān in 2001 and their demolishing of the National Museum's collections in Kābul after 1996, and was indignant at the deliberate destruction of Mesopotamian monuments such as the Mosul Museum (2014) and Nimrud (2015), and Palmyra (2015–2017) at the hand of the so-called Islamic State, one would expect similar protests, caused by the impending and equally barbaric eradication of Mes Aynak by Chinese consortia—this time under the tutelage of corrupt Afghan authorities—something which can be prevented. Governments and public opinion in every state should seriously consider whether huge earnings from a lucrative contract will ever compensate for the irreparable cultural and scientific losses that result from such contracts.

Nonetheless, already in 2007—under the pressure coming from various communities including scientific groups—the Afghan authorities forced their Chinese partners to temporarily suspend the 'execution' and withhold preparations for extensive copper extraction for a period of half-a-year. Thereafter, the protection period was extended for another three years, during which archaeologists and researchers were allowed to carry out 'rescue' excavations and save as many items as possible within a very short time, which would be transferred to the National Museum in Kābul. The archaeological works, which began in 2009, were officially supervised by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, but most of the actual excavations, at the very beginning, were carried out by a sixteen-person DAFA French team (2009–2011). The first stage of rescue work terminated in 2011,⁶¹ and the monastery and everything around was to be destroyed in 2012, when—according to the contract—the CMGC company was to begin mining activities. The three years in which the destruction of the site was temporarily suspended enabled the archaeologists

⁶⁰ Benard–Sugarman–Rehm (2012: 22–24).

⁶¹ See a note in: Lawler (2011), reports in: Marquis (2013).

to save at least a portion of what is still to be found in Mes Aynak, albeit that the work was marked by an ‘encroachment’ of Chinese employees, for whom the Chinese workers camp was located on Gul Hamid Hill, the initial place of archaeological excavations, which revealed a number of significant discoveries, as early as 2009. Fortunately, due to the deteriorating security situation, the Chinese companies prolonged the temporary suspension of destructive work. At this point, the archaeologist team was even briefly expanded and consisted of 26 international archaeologists and ‘up to 25 archaeologists from the Institute of Archaeology of Afghanistan’ between May 2012 and July 2013, and from July 2013, the number of archaeologists decreased to 12 and 8, respectively, to increase again after October 2013.⁶²⁾

Unfortunately, relatively little has been saved from destruction so far. It is estimated that properly conducted excavations should last for several years, involve a team of about 1,000 employees, excluding workers, and not a team consisting of a dozen archaeologists or two supported by 250 workers, and would cost at least 45 million dollars.⁶³⁾ Despite the short time and other difficulties, during the excavations carried out between 2009–2011, and even later till 2014, more objects were found than the National Museum in Kābul was in possession of before the civil war—excluding the ‘Bactrian gold’—and these include coins, glass items, manuscripts, statues, wooden artefacts, terracotta pieces, paintings, etc.⁶⁴⁾

Hitherto, efforts of researchers have focused on saving a possibly large number of objects from destruction within the short time limit; however, proper work on the finds will require huge effort and interdisciplinary cooperation. On 15th March 2011, some items excavated during the period 2009–2011, were made available to visitors at the National Museum in Kābul.⁶⁵⁾ Unfortunately, even a cursory look at objects displayed at the Kabul Museum showcases and their initial descriptions (but also an analysis of partial reports⁶⁶⁾ published by that time) sometimes reveal incorrect identifications and a certain lack of professionalism with respect to what these objects actually represent and what historical influences they exhibit. Between February 2015 and September 2016, an exhibition of artefacts from Mes Aynak, borrowed

⁶²⁾ Yavazi (2013: 2).

⁶³⁾ Lawler (2011: 1125).

⁶⁴⁾ For a brief overview of the Mes Aynak discoveries, see: Khairzada (2015).

⁶⁵⁾ Exhibition catalogues: Engel (2011), Massoudi (2011).

⁶⁶⁾ For instance, Massoudi (2011), RAWA (2013), Paluch (2014).

from the National Museum, was hosted at the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African, and American Cultures in Prague.

Fortunately, this time it is the Ṭālibān who—paradoxically and against their intentions—rescued Mes Aynak from total destruction; it was primarily security concerns which compelled the Chinese to temporarily withdraw from contract implementation in the areas controlled by the Ṭālibān and to postpone the start date of destructive mining work, first in December 2013, and then in December 2014. Despite the global protests, in July 2013—and with all the knowledge of the cultural and historical importance of the site—the new Minister of Mining, Wahidullah Shahrani, expressed public regret that the Chinese were delaying the implementation of the contract. At the same time, in an action that may even seem audacious, the Chinese requested that the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum of Afghanistan re-negotiate the contractual terms and reduce the royalties.⁶⁷⁾ A deteriorating security situation and sluggish re-negotiations between the Afghan governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani—coupled by other worries—was reported to be the main cause of the delay in opening the mines. Recently, Shen Heting, the general manager of CMGC, who had been behind signing the contract in 2007, was expelled from the Chinese Communist Party for corruption, which has impacted the policy of the company.⁶⁸⁾ In addition, recent estimates reveal that the costs of transport of Mes Aynak copper ore out of Afghanistan are prohibitive and shed doubt on the practicality of rail connections.⁶⁹⁾

The Kābul Museum, as has already been mentioned several times, is in possession of the most valuable artefacts in Afghanistan.⁷⁰⁾ The museum was founded as a modest collection in 1919, in an unassuming mansion in Bāgh-i Bālā near Kābul, and, after several relocations and enlargement of the collection, it arrived at its current headquarters in 1931. Over the years, the basic source of antiquities for collections has been the excavation works carried out by DAFA since 1922. By 1989, the museum housed one of the most valuable collections in Asia, numbering around 160,000 objects. It is estimated that 70 percent of the museum's collection disappeared—either looted during the civil war or deliberately smashed to pieces by the Ṭālibān—between Spring 1992, when Kābul was occupied by Mujāhidīn forces and the

⁶⁷⁾ Amin (2017).

⁶⁸⁾ Amini (2017).

⁶⁹⁾ Benard–Sugarman–Rehm (2012: 17).

⁷⁰⁾ On its history see, e.g.: Massoudi (2010).

city was continually shelled, and December 2001, when the Ṭālibān escaped from Kābul. In addition, 90 percent of the museum's records were likewise destroyed and inventory cards mostly burnt,⁷¹⁾ which makes the identification of numerous historical objects which now surface in the market for sale impossible.

In 2001, the building itself was seriously damaged and covered with a thick layer of dust and the remains of broken pieces of the priceless collection. Luckily, a part of the collection was saved when it was taken out of Kābul before September 1996, i.e. the capture of the city by the Ṭālibān. Some objects found their way to the Swiss town of Bubendorf, where a private museum of Afghan art—the Afghanistan-Museum—was created in the period 1999–2006. In 2007, the collection was returned to the National Museum.

There are desperate attempts to recover at least a fraction of the lost artefacts, and one of these is an initiative undertaken by The International Council of Museums (ICOM), which established the database 'Red List of Afghanistan Antiquities at Risk'.⁷²⁾ This magnificent collection, preserved in the state it was in in 1985, although without the 'Bactrian gold' from Tillā Tepe, can be viewed from the Museum's catalogue, published in 2006 by Francine Tissot (2006), and an account of extensive devastation of the National Museum is reported by Nancy Hatch Dupree (1996) and (1998). Carla Grissmann (2006) has also reported on the history of the museum and the destruction of its collection.

This is not the only museum in Afghanistan, although others are devoted mainly to the art and history of the Islamic era. In Ghaznī, attempts have been made to create a Museum of pre-Islamic art, beside the Museum of Islamic Art already in existence, though with little success. Endeavours in this direction were undertaken in 2004–2007, thanks to the Italian Mission in Afghanistan (Italian Mission). There is also the Nangarhar Provincial Museum located in Haḍḍa, the Kandahar Provincial Museum, the Balkh Provincial Museum located in Mazār-i Šarīf, and the Herat National Museum, compounded within the citadel (*ārg*), although their collections are devoted to Islamic art and most of them are quite modest.

Unfortunately, the Soviet invasion in December 1979 marked a sad turning point in the study of the art of Afghanistan.⁷³⁾ It was at that time that

⁷¹⁾ Stein (2015: 191).

⁷²⁾ <http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/red-list/afghanistan/>

⁷³⁾ There are a lot of studies based on earlier material, and worth mentioning here

archaeological excavations and research into Afghan art largely came to a standstill. In 1982, the DAFA office in Kābul was officially closed, and the security conditions made it impossible to carry out research work outside of Kābul even for Soviet teams. When, in practice, only large urban centres with the surrounding areas, which made up only 20 percent of the territory of the country, were controlled by occupation forces and the government army—which closely resembles the current situation—security conditions worsened to a degree that it was impossible to conduct any research work in the province. The decade of the Soviet occupation meant stagnation.

However, it was the civil war, which broke out after the last Soviet occupation troops forces had left Afghanistan in February 1989, that brought systematic destruction and the plunder of cultural heritage. A widespread myth is the belief that the Mujāhidīn protected monuments, whereas the Ṭālibān were responsible for the destruction. True, perhaps one of the most spectacular destructions of monuments in the history of mankind, the blowing up of the two statues of the Buddha in Bāmiyān, was accomplished by the Ṭālibān (and repeated recently on an even larger scale in the territories of Syria and Iraq controlled by the Islamic State), but, as noted earlier, both Bāmiyān and many other valuable historical places associated with pre-Islamic cultures fell victim to the Mujāhidīn themselves. When the Ṭālibān entered Afghanistan in August 1994 from Pakistan's Quetta, the two feuding parties, the Mujāhidīn and the Ṭālibān, practically competed in demonstrating religious orthodoxy and destroying historical remnants and monuments which bore witness to the pre-Islamic past.⁷⁴ The destruction was wrought not only directly, precious objects and monuments were stolen by robbers: numerous archaeological sites, for example, Aī Khānum, were regularly looted by treasure hunters and wild excavators to the extent of complete annihilation. With the outbreak of the civil war in Afghanistan, a huge illicit market for antique trade developed. Almost 100 percent of such illegal finds were smuggled through Pakistan and further along to the Persian Gulf countries, mainly Dubai, till they found their destination in private collections in the West. Fortunately, from the point of view of the preservation of the cultural heritage, many of these items are forgeries.

are the following: the monumental HCCA, Auboyer (1968), Allchin–Hamond (1978), Errington–Cribb (1992).

⁷⁴ On different aspects of the destruction in Afghanistan: Verardi (2007), Picco–Palmisano (2007), Krieken–Pieters (2006), Najimi (2011), Stein (2015).

The overthrow of the Ṭālibān regime in Kābul in December 2001 only partially improved the situation and only for a few years. It again became possible to conduct excavations for about a dozen years, although currently hardly any research work of this type is carried out due to safety reasons, barring few exceptions. Despite this, the illicit practice of wild excavations and trade in antiques is flourishing, being one of the sources of income for local militants, the Ṭālibān and international mafia. Even if a given object, looted from the historical site, does not undergo any particular damage in the process and lands in the hands of a private collector, firstly, it ceases to be available to researchers and visitors, and secondly, as a result of such illegal and unprofessional excavation and the removal of the object from its original archaeological surrounding, any additional information on the location of the object, on the historical layer in which it was found, on its historical neighbourhood and so on, is irretrievably lost, and such pieces of information are often as valuable as the historical object itself.

When it comes to the ‘cultural affiliation’ of pre-Islamic art in today’s Afghanistan, it is mostly connected with Buddhism, although we have many other valuable locations related for example (in chronological order) with the Indus Valley Civilization, Achaemenids and Persian civilization, Zoroastrianism, Hellenistic culture, Indian culture associated with, for instance, the Empire of the Mauryas, or Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Bactrian kingdoms, nomadic peoples from Central Asia, such as the Scythians, the Sakas, the Parthians, the Yuèzhī and the Huns, the Indo-Parthians, the Kushāṇas, the Sāsānids, the Hephthalites, the ‘white Huns’ (Śveta-hūṇa), and strong Brāhmanic and Hindu influences.

The Afghan-Pakistani frontier is *de facto* and culturally as artificial as the political division into the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India, inasmuch as the dividing lines are fluid, blurred and highly conventional, corresponding neither to ethnic and cultural realities nor to the historical past. A very brief discussion of the situation in Pakistan is therefore only a natural supplement to the above. The civilization of the Indus Valley, with the northernmost Shorutgai (Šortugai)⁷⁵ on the Oxus, or Amū Daryā, in Afghanistan, is primarily known from the two largest urban centres: Harappā and Mohenjo-dāro in Pakistan. Harappā was discovered by James Lewis (Charles Masson) in 1842. Unfortunately, by the time the significance of this and other sites marked by huge clay bricks was understood, a large part of

⁷⁵ See: Francfort–Pottier (1978), Francfort (1989), Kenoyer (1998: 96).

Harappā and other settlements of this civilization had served the British East Railway Company as the foundations for the construction of a railway line linking Lahore and Karachi.

In the 1921–1922 season, John Marshall began excavation works on both locations, in which, among others, Madho Sarup Vats⁷⁶⁾ and Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni participated, and the result of which was the unveiling of merely a small section of two ancient cities.⁷⁷⁾ Excavation and research work in numerous sites associated with the Indus Valley Civilization continued till the end of World War II, and, after the formation of Pakistan, the research was continued by, among others, Ahmad Hasan Dani and Mortimer Wheeler,⁷⁸⁾ and the official supervision over research and monuments was taken over by the government of Pakistan. The territorial range was also widened by the inclusion of, for example, Balochistan, during a part of the so-called Second Afghan Expedition (1950–1951).⁷⁹⁾ This allowed for the creation of a comprehensive map of the cultural reach of this civilization. A spectrum of publications has been published on its history and art,⁸⁰⁾ although the vast majority are based on the discoveries made in the first few decades of research; these organize available research material and, from the point of view of an art historian, they may certainly be more valuable than the previous, original documentation of the excavations. The research in the latest decades has markedly stagnated, and, for many reasons, excavations are conducted on a much smaller scale and much less frequently than before.⁸¹⁾ The ‘pool’ of new research material for the study of the history of art of the Indus Valley Civilisation has been largely limited to the study of what has already been known for several decades, and consequently it may be also difficult to expect completely new developments and revolutionary discoveries in this field for the time being. On the one hand, this is associated with the constantly deteriorating security in Pakistan after 2001, but also with administrative difficul-

⁷⁶⁾ See: Vats (1940).

⁷⁷⁾ A report from Mohenjo-dāro: Marshall (1931), a report from Harappa: Vats (1940).

⁷⁸⁾ Wheeler (1960).

⁷⁹⁾ Reports: Fairservis (1956), (1961).

⁸⁰⁾ For instance: Wheeler (1960), Allchin–Allchin (1968), Allchin–Allchin (1982), Fairservis (1975), Allchin–Chakrabarti (1979–1997), Allchin–Allchin (1997).

⁸¹⁾ The recent most important publications include for instance: Dales–Kenoyer (1986), Jansen–Mulloy–Urban (1991), Nadiem (1995), Meadow–Kenoyer (2000), Osada (2006).

ties and increasingly serious dilemmas associated with preserving uncovered monuments for future generations. Mohenjo-dāro is a perfect example of the destructive impact current climatic conditions, strong soil salinity, and variable humidity have on ancient walls and bricks (Figs. 9 and 10). As a result, the survival of the already uncovered sections of Mohenjo-dāro which are exposed to the elements—and these may consist approximately 10 percent of the total ancient structures remaining still underground—remains a big question mark with with a fairly negligible financial means available to the museum management to maintain the site. Decentralization and the transfer of financial responsibility for historical sites to the local governments of individual provinces of Pakistan in recent years has been acutely felt by the directors of numerous provincial and regional museums, including Mohenjo-dāro, which came under provincial jurisdiction.

What often makes things acutely worse is insufficient awareness, on the part of local authorities, of the importance of historical sites which are *pre-Islamic*, and therefore not considered as belonging to the cultural heritage of the *Islamic* Republic of Pakistan proper, which results in insufficient funding and inadequate protection of the monuments, also from the elements. Another serious problem is the rampant illegal looting of historical sites and illegal excavations, similar to what has been happening in Afghanistan.

The oldest art of the Indus Valley is obviously not limited to the remnants of the Indus Valley Civilization,⁸²⁾ but comprises neolithic cultures preceding it, such as the culture of Mehargarh and Naušahro in Balochistan with their unique pottery and terracotta, which, in themselves, form a separate theme for a survey review, for which there is no place here.

The second geographical, historical and cultural area that dominates in the study of the art of Pakistan is the Gandhāra region. Located on the plains around Peshāwar and between the Hindu Kush on the west, the foreland of the high Karakorum and Himalayas on the north, the Indus River on the east, and the Swāt valley, the so-called Greater Gandhāra is a culturally and historically separate area, that has been the subject of numerous independent studies.⁸³⁾ Throughout history, these areas have been conquered by Persians, Greeks, Indo-Greeks and Bactrians, the Saka, the Scythians, the

⁸²⁾ More on the research in Pakistan, see, e.g.: Agrawal (1982).

⁸³⁾ One of the latest outlines on the study of Gandhāran art is: Behrendt (2003: 16 ff.). A comprehensive illustrated description of the art of Gandhāra in an exhibition catalogue, see: Luczanits (2008). See also: Brancaccio–Behrendt (2006).

Parthians, the Saka-Parthians, the Indo-Scythians, the Kushāṇas, the Sāsānids, the Hephthalites, the Huns (Hūṇa), and others. The main urban centre was Takṣaśilā (Taxila), uncovered by Alexander Cunningham in the middle of the 19th century, although some historians do not include it in the area of Gandhāra proper (however, this classification seems rather arbitrary).⁸⁴⁾

Despite such huge historical variability of conquerors and political change, the cultural wealth of the region was preserved for a long time until the Islamic invasions. These areas are famous primarily for Buddhist art, and its most important centres, beside Takṣaśilā, include the remains of such other monasteries as Takht-i-Bāhī, Jamāl Garhi, Ranigat, Thareli, Sahrī-Bahlōl, Shāh-jī-kī-dherī, and others. Comprehensive documentation of the excavations at Takṣaśilā, which is the groundwork for most subsequent studies, was prepared by John Marshall (1951), on the basis of excavations which had been conducted over two decades since 1913.⁸⁵⁾ He was also the author of a series of important works on the Buddhist art of Gandhāra.⁸⁶⁾ As in the case of the excavation works related to the Indus Valley Civilization, similar research activities concerning the Great Gandhāra—Gandhāra proper, the Swat Valley, the Takṣaśilā region, and other sites⁸⁷⁾—have entered a stagnation phase for similar reasons. In addition, the Swat Valley remained practically inaccessible to researchers from 2006 until recently due to the various militant and terrorist groups operating under the Ṭālibān label.

What flourishes is wild excavations and the plundering of ancient sites as well as illegal antiques trade. Not only are individual smugglers and groups involved, but also state institutions, customs officers, police, politicians, lawyers, and even some researchers. The vast majority of the finds, very often of enormous significance and high artistic value (which I myself had an occasion to see on a few occasions), is smuggled mainly through seaports, chiefly Karachi. Employees of customs and border services have admitted in private conversations that they manage to capture merely a fraction of about 10–20 percent of what is actually exported illegally out of Pakistan (Figs. 11 and 12). But, even in these rare cases when attempts to smuggle antiques are thwarted, after the requisitioning of smuggled goods by customs and border officers,

⁸⁴⁾ Behrendt (2003: 23, n. 28). For a research survey on Takṣaśilā (Taxila) and its art, see: Behrendt (2003: 25 ff.).

⁸⁵⁾ His first report during the excavations: Marshall (1918).

⁸⁶⁾ For instance, Marshall (1960).

⁸⁷⁾ See: Göbl (1967), Tarn (1984), Dani (1986), Dar (1998).

these are in principle transferred to state research centres for expertise to assess whether the objects are authentic or forged, which can take up to two years, and during the period the originals are stored in state institutions, they are gradually replaced with counterfeits prepared on such occasions, which are more or less faithful copies of the intercepted original objects. This happens with the collusion of various authorities at various levels. Sometimes the forgeries can be copies of extremely poor quality, for example, cement castings on steel skeleton that are copies of larger Buddha statues originally made of schist. After two years, a report is drawn up confirming that all or most of the objects intercepted by border guards are counterfeits with no artistic or historical value, and there is no basis for a criminal investigation. The originals, however, are secretly returned to smuggler rings. Such illegal excavations and smuggling activities have also resulted in the creation of private collections of Gandāran art not only abroad but in Pakistan itself whose size and quality of artefacts may unfortunately compete with the collection of the Lahore Museum.

The looting of historical sites, which obviously involves irreparable losses to culture and our knowledge of art history, is not the only problem. Many excavated monuments—as has happened in the case of the exposed section of monuments in Mohenjo-dāro, Harappā and other sites in the Indus Valley—have undergone a process of serious erosion and destruction as a result of inadequate care.⁸⁸⁾

Until recently, research on Gandhāra focused primarily on architecture, terracotta, reliefs and Buddhist statues, mainly made of schist. However, recent discoveries of small fragments of polychromy, mainly in the only partially excavated Buddhist monastery complex of Jinna Wāli-Kī-Dherī in Takṣaśilā, have also initiated research into Gandhāra painting that may indicate a historical development, linking it to paintings from Ghaznī or other regions of South Asia.⁸⁹⁾ In this context, separate studies on a region closely associated with Gandhāra, namely the Swāt Valley, where research began with Italian expeditions since 1955, should not be overlooked.⁹⁰⁾ The Valley

⁸⁸⁾ See, e.g.: Farooq (2011).

⁸⁹⁾ See, e.g.: Khan (2000), Khan-ul-Hasan (2004) and Lo Muzio (2012) and (2014), Zin (2013).

⁹⁰⁾ A report from the first Italian archaeological mission under the directorship of Giuseppe Tucci in: Tucci (1958). On the history of Italian research in the region, mainly in Pakistan, see: Ghani-ur-Rahman-Olivieri (2011).

is primarily known in the context of the research on Buddhist architecture, sculpture and bas-relief, terracotta, but also, although much less prominent, rock carving up to Gilgit.

Much of the research has been conducted by Pakistani scholars, although serious methodological drawbacks—both in papers and monographs published mainly in Pakistan and in direct official reports—are noticeable due to the ideological and national conditions and prevailing political background, suffused with the religious bigotry mentioned earlier. Much of what is ‘pre-Islamic’ or ‘Indian’ is not infrequently either neglected or deliberately left to deteriorate by zealous authorities of the Islamic Republic engaged in a (political, military and cultural) conflict with its neighbour, except for certain prominent cases recognised worldwide. Gandhāran art as well as the art of Indus Valley Civilization are treated in official reports as an integral part of Pakistani cultural heritage, historically ‘separating’ the Pakistani nation from the ‘Indian’ nation. This assumption leads to serious problems, which Pakistani historians, art historians, and archaeologists face, in explaining the reasons for the collapse of the Buddhist culture of Gandhāra and the destruction of many Buddhist remains, which historically coincided with the arrival of a new ideological and military factor, namely Islam. In official discourse, therefore, an unquestionable dogma prevails about the natural demise of Buddhism and its culture before Islam appeared in the region. This connection of religion and nationalism will necessarily have an adverse effect on the research conducted by local scholars and sponsored by state institutions.

Due to the uncertain and dynamic political situation in the region, the continuous activities of various armed groups, compounded with the rise of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the countries of Central Asia, the priority for researchers seems to be—instead of making new discoveries—the salvaging of the monuments and sites we already know, which have, over centuries, survived on the surface of the land or have been uncovered by archaeologists, a task which in itself is not always possible to accomplish, as the most vivid example of the Bāmiyān Buddhas demonstrate, and the case is representative for hundreds, if not thousands, of other instances.⁹¹⁾ We are witnessing an ongoing destruction of the cultural heritage of that region, which is also our heritage. Massive corruption and corporate business also contribute to the destruction, as is the case with the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (CMGC), readying itself to annihilate Mes

⁹¹⁾ On such attempts to save the historical heritage, see, e.g.: Cassar–Noshadi (2015).

Aynak, but also the international trade in antiques. The conclusion is quite sad. If no serious steps are taken to protect the monuments on the spot, then, in a few decades' time, most of the valuable examples of art in the region may cease to exist unless they are transferred away from the region. But, this opens a completely different, but extremely important ethical question and evokes the practice of the colonial era: how justified is the such a transfer of works of art from their natural environment to Western museums?

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Fig. 1. A stūpa near Balkh (Bactra) damaged during the construction of the A-76 road (2003)



Fig. 2. Ruins of ancient Bactra near modern Balkh (2003)



Fig. 3. A completely ruined site Aī Khānum in July 2001, with thousands of deep pits



Fig. 4. Access passage to Aī Khānum (in the background) laid between the Ṭālibān–Mujāhidin front lines in July 2001



Fig. 5. A chāikhāna in Hoja Bahauddin, featuring Indo-Corinthian capitals moved from the Zeus temple in Ai Khānum (July, 2001)



Fig. 6. The rock stūpa, locally known as Takht-i Rostam, in Aybak (2005)



Fig. 7. The rock stūpa, locally known as Takht-i Rostam, in Aybak (2005)



Fig. 8. The monastery hill adjacent to the rock stūpa in Aybak (2005)



Fig. 9. The impact of saline soil on walls in Mohenjo-dāro



Fig. 10. Salt damage in Mohenjo-dāro



Fig. 11. Illegally excavated items in a private collection to be smuggled out of Pakistan



Fig. 12. Illegally excavated items in a private collection to be smuggled out of Pakistan