

THE WAR-RAVAGED CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AFGHANISTAN:

An Overview of Projects of Assessment, Mitigation, and Preservation



Qalat Ihtiyaraddin Citadel in Herat – restored by the Agha Khan Trust for Culture, with funding from the US Department of State. Photograph by Gil Stein.

Gil J. Stein

A fghanistan is the quintessential “crossroads of cultures” where the civilizations of the Near East, Central Asia, South Asia, and China interacted over the millennia in a constantly shifting mixture of trade, emulation, migration, imperial formations, and periodic conflict (fig. 1). This complex history of contacts gave rise to some of the most important archaeological, artistic, architectural, and textual treasures in world cultural heritage – encompassing cultures as diverse as the Bronze Age cities of Bactria, the Persian Empire, the easternmost colonies founded by Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic successors, the Kushan Empire astride the Silk Road, the monumental Bamiyan Buddhas, and Islamic dynasties such as the Ghaznavids, Timurids, and Moghuls. Excavations at sites such as Ak Qupruq, Bamiyan, Begram/Kapisa, Ghazni, Hadda, Surkh Kotal, Ai Khanoum, Dashly, Mundigak, Shortugai, and Tillya Tepe revealed the outline of a long and complex cultural sequence ranging from the Paleolithic through the Islamic periods (for overviews, see Allchin and Hammond 1978; Aruz and Valtz Fino 2012; Ball 2008; Hiebert and Cambon 2008; Knobloch 2002; Simpson 2012).

Afghanistan and Its Cultural Heritage:

Due to its strategic location, Afghanistan was closely linked to neighboring regions, and had a significant, though often over-

looked, impact on their historical development. As early as the 5th millennium B.C.E., lapis lazuli from Afghanistan was traded to Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt (Herrmann 1968). The Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages (4th–2nd millennia B.C.E.) saw the rise of a linked set of urbanized proto-state and state societies across Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in a development parallel and linked to the flourishing of urban societies in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley (Hiebert and Lamberg-Karlovsky 1992; Kohl 1981; Masson 1992; Masson and Sarianidi 1972; Tosi 1973, 1973–74; 1977; Tosi et al. 1992). Afghanistan encompasses some of the most important eastern satrapies of the Persian Empire – Bactria/Balkh, Araeia/Herat, Arachosia /Kandahar, and Drangiana/Seistan (Briant 2002); tribute-bearers from these regions are depicted in the Persepolis Reliefs (fig. 2 – see also Schmidt 1953). In the 4th–2nd centuries B.C.E., colonies founded by Alexander the Great, the Seleucid Empire, and the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms were closely linked to the middle east and served as focal points for the spread of Hellenistic culture in Afghanistan and South Asia (Bernard 2008; Holt 1999; Kosmin 2014). As seen in the remarkable trove of trade goods at the site of Begram/Kapisa, during the 2nd–3rd centuries C.E., Afghanistan formed a key node on the Silk Road trade route linking the Roman Mediterranean and the Middle

East with India and Han Dynasty China (Cambon 2008; Mehendale 2008; Whitehouse 2012). During this period, Afghanistan was the route by which the Buddhist religion spread from India to China (Liu 2011). Buddhism flourished in Afghanistan for nearly 1000 years, until the 9th century C.E. (Klimberg-Salter 1989; Mes Aynak 2012). Finally, Afghanistan played a key role in the political, religious, and cultural life of the Middle East during the Islamic period – most notably in the Timurid period, when the Timurid capital city of Herat fostered some of the greatest innovations and masterpieces of Islamic calligraphy, miniature painting, stone carving, and architecture.

The first scientific excavations in Afghanistan began in the 1920's, initiated by the Delegation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan – DAFA. Starting in the 1950's, archaeologists from other countries such as the Soviet Union, US, Italy, and the UK began excavations as well, along with the excavations carried out by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology. As of 1979, the archaeological gazetteer of Afghanistan recorded 1286 archaeological sites (Ball and Gardin 1982); this is clearly just a small sample of what is more likely to be tens of thousands of sites in the country. However, even this relatively small number of excavations and surveys was truncated by the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the subsequent 35 years of continuous war in that country. The devastation of human lives, economic damage, and loss of cultural heritage was enormous, stretching across four periods: a) the Soviet invasion, occupation, and withdrawal, 1979–1989; b) the post-Soviet civil war between competing mujahedeen groups, 1989–1996; c) the period of Taliban rule, 1996–2001; and d) the US-led invasion, establishment of the current Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and continuing counterinsurgency efforts, 2001–present.

Although the most spectacular examples of destruction of cultural heritage – the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the smashing of figural statuary in the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) were carried out by the Taliban in 2001, it is important to remember that the looting of archaeological sites across the country had been taking place continuously at least since the early 1970's. Similarly, the devastation of the National Museum of Afghanistan occurred during the post-Soviet Afghan civil war (1989–1996) period, when combat damage and looting went unchecked due to the museum's location on the front lines between neighborhoods of Kabul controlled by warring Mujahadeen factions (Dupree 1996; Grissman 2006; Massoudi 2012). War-related heritage damage and site looting continues unabated,

with the additional factor of post-2001 site destruction due to economic development, as seen in the impending destruction of the early Buddhist site of Mes Aynak by a major Chinese copper mine (e.g. Lawler 2011).

War Damage to Afghan Cultural Heritage:

War related damage and mitigation efforts center on several key aspects of cultural/archaeological heritage: objects, monuments, sites, museums, and intangible heritage.

Objects

Although it is generally accepted that site looting and the smuggling of illicit antiquities from Afghanistan have continued and probably expanded over the past decade, it is extremely difficult to give precise figures on the amounts and values of these objects (Campbell 2013). We have a general understanding of the routes and key markets. As Peter Campbell describes the process:

The primary exit for Afghan antiquities appears to be Pakistan... Once in Pakistan, antiquities are sold in border towns and transported to major cities. Commercial airlines and ships transport the artifacts to cities like Sharjah or Dubai, United Arab Emirates, which has grown into the region's primary transit country... From Sharjah the shipments head toward other transit countries like Switzerland and market countries like Germany, UK, and US... (Peter Campbell, "How Crime, Corruption, and Murder Are Hidden in the Elusive Black Market Stages of Antiquities Trafficking" <http://blog.soton.ac.uk/archaeology/blog/2013/07/antiquities-trafficking/>).

We also know that overall, the US and the UK are the world's two largest markets for illicit antiquities (MacKenzie 2005: 252). One potentially useful proxy measure for the levels of smuggling of looted antiquities from Afghanistan over the last decade comes from the UK. "The vast majority of the thousands of artifacts confiscated every year at Heathrow, the world's busiest airport, come from Afghanistan, according to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs Department (HMRC)" (Peters 2009). In 2009, the UK repatriated ca. 15,000 looted Afghan antiquities – over 3.4 tons (!) that had been confiscated at Heathrow airport. The antiquities were repatriated to

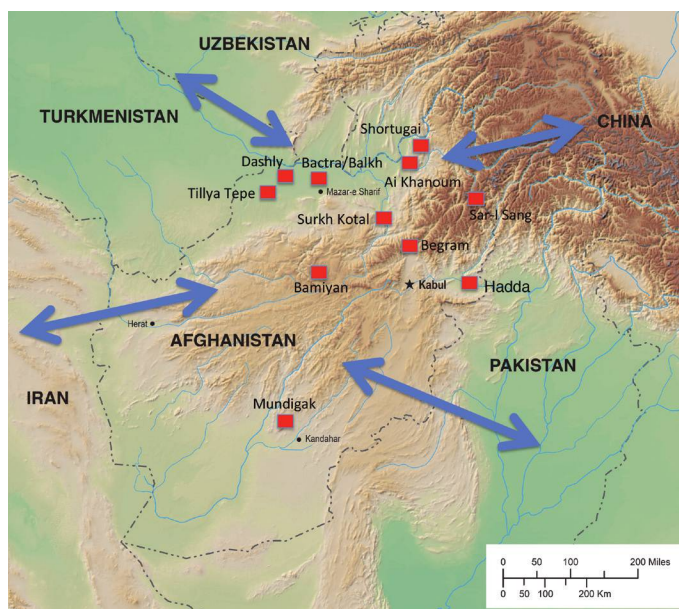


Figure 1. Map showing the interactions and key cross-cultural influences shaping Afghanistan's cultural heritage. Map by Gil J. Stein.

Afghanistan and are now part of the NMA's collections (fig. 3). Although this is just a small fraction of the material entering just the UK in a limited time period, it gives an indication of the tremendous scale of the ongoing wartime site looting and antiquities smuggling out of Afghanistan. Although we have no precise fig-

ures from the US, we can safely assume that the levels of the illicit trade in Afghan antiquities to the US are more or less comparable.

Monuments

The most notorious example of war-related monument destruction in Afghanistan is the Taliban's demolition of the 6th century C.E. Bamiyan Buddhas – two of the largest standing sculptures of the Buddha known in the world – 55 m and 38 m tall (Morgan 2012). In February 2001, the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar issued an edict ordering the destruction of the Buddhas on the grounds that they were idols and objects of worship:

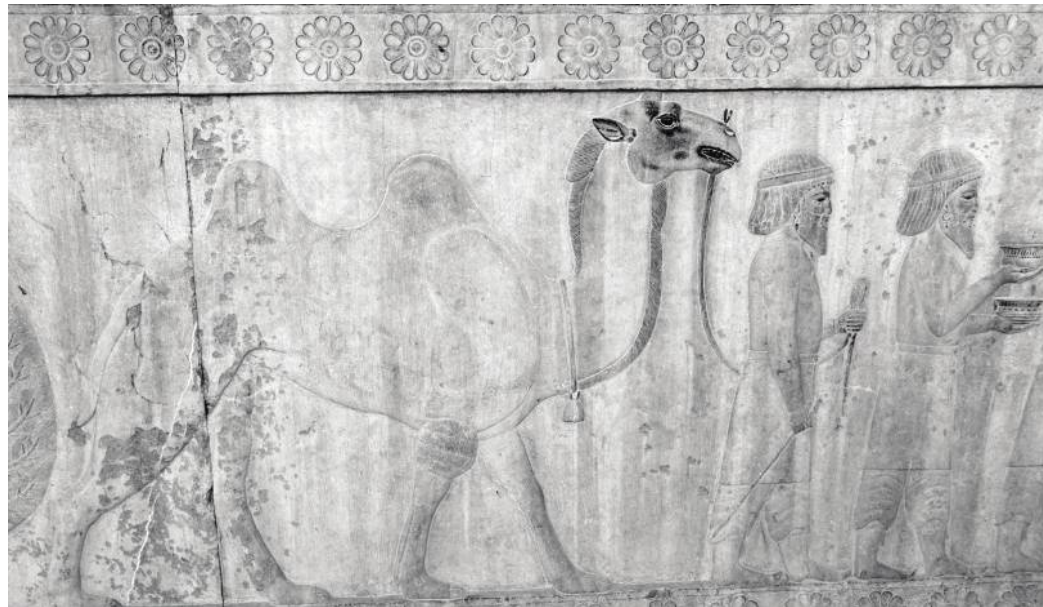


Figure 2 (above). Tribute bearers from Bactria depicted on the Persepolis reliefs. Oriental Institute Photographic Archives.

Figure 3 (below). British military forces repatriating to Afghanistan 3.4 tons of smuggled Afghan antiquities that had been confiscated at Heathrow Airport, London.

On the basis of consultations between the religious leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, religious judgments of the ulema and rulings of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed. These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers and these unbelievers continue to worship and respect them. God almighty is the only real shrine and all fake idols must be destroyed.” (The full text of the edict is published in Morgan 2012: 15; and Flood 2002: 655.)

Despite protests by delegations of leading religious and legal scholars from other countries in the Islamic world, the Taliban edict was carried out with the demolition of the Buddhas in March 2001 (fig. 4). Later that same month, the Taliban also destroyed large numbers of statues in the National Museum of Afghanistan, including masterpieces of Gandharan art from the 2nd–4th century C.E. Buddhist monastery complex of Hadda – these are some of the earliest depictions of the Buddha (fig. 5), along with statues of the Kushan emperor Kanishka, and 19th century carved wooden funerary and religious sculptures from the Nuristan region (formerly Kafiristan) in eastern Afghanistan.

The National Museum of Afghanistan

The Taliban destruction of sculptures in the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) in Kabul was just the latest stage in the catastrophic damage to the most important repository for archaeological artifacts and ethnographically significant cultural heritage objects. Founded in 1921, the NMA is thought to have housed approximately 200,000 objects at the time of the Soviet invasion, although no full inventory of the museum's holdings had ever been conducted. Some idea of the museum's pre-war holdings can be gained from *The National Museum of Afghanistan: An Illustrated Guide* (Dupree et al. 1974), and from a partial catalog by UNESCO of some of the main artistic objects in the museum (Tissot 1986). During the post-Soviet civil war from 1989–1996, the museum sat at the front between the territories controlled by rival mujahedeen factions. Over a period of months, the museum was rocketed, shelled, set on fire, and subjected to frequent raids by looters. During this period, an estimated 70% of the museum's collections – approximately 140,000 objects – was looted or destroyed. This astounding scale of loss should be considered in comparison with the



National Museum of Baghdad, which lost approximately 15,000 objects in looting that followed the US invasion of Baghdad in 2003. In addition to the loss of objects, approximately 90% of the object records in the museum registry were burned (fig. 6; for overviews of the museum losses, see Dupree 1996, Grissman 2006; Massoudi 2012).

Documentation, Mitigation, and Capacity Building:

Current attempts to address the wartime damage to Afghanistan fall into three broad categories – a) documentation, b) mitigation and restoration, and c) capacity building. Because so little archaeological work has been done in Afghanistan, the challenge of documenting and mitigating damage to heritage sites is far greater than in better known countries and archaeological regions such as Iraq and Syria.

Documentation

In an effort to stem the flow of looted objects from Afghanistan, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has publicized the “Red List” of key classes of archaeological artifacts at risk for looting, and known to have been looted and smuggled out of the country (fig. 7). The ICOM Red List is available for free downloads in Pashto and Dari (the two official languages of Afghanistan), English, French, and Urdu from the ICOM website (<http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/red-list/afghanistan/>).

The main task is clearly at the level of archaeological sites. These must be documented and individually assessed to determine the extent of looting, and whether this damage is ongoing. As the crucial first step, a satellite imagery-based, comprehensive geospatial database of all the archaeological sites in Afghanistan is urgently needed. Under the direction of Dr. Emily Hammer, the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL) at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago has initiated three key pilot

projects in this direction. The CAMEL lab has assembled 263 declassified historical CORONA intelligence satellite images from 1962–1970 to provide coverage of almost the entire country. Because these images predate the war years and record landscapes prior to the introduction of mechanized agriculture, they provide baseline data on site sizes and conditions of preservation, while also capturing numerous small, single period sites that would no longer be visible even on more recent high resolution imagery. The first CAMEL pilot project focused on the provinces of Balkh and Herat as two areas where the most formal archaeological information is available to identify site names and periods of occupation. In the first stage of the development of a compre-

hensive geospatial database for Afghanistan, the known sites recorded in Ball and Gardin’s 1982 Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan are being matched against georectified CORONA images of these provinces in order to correct the published site coordinates, and establish baseline data about looting (fig. 8). The CORONA images are then compared with more recent satellite imagery to date the onset and pace of looting.

The second pilot project, by CAMEL lab staffers Tony Lauricella and Josh Cannon, has been using principal components analysis (PCA) as a way to develop protocols to automate the labor-intensive process of identifying, measuring, and counting looters pits on archaeological sites. The preliminary results are extremely promising (fig. 9). Examination of the Hellenistic Greco-Bactrian colony of Ai Khanoum on the Oxus (Amu Darya) River in Bactria, northern Afghanistan compared historical and modern imagery of the site, and applied the PCA protocol to determine that the vast majority of the looting at the site had taken place before 2010. Lauricella and Cannon have identified 17,000 looters pits, covering 37% of the

150 ha site of Ai Khanoum. When fully developed, these methods will be applied to monitor looting of archaeological sites throughout Afghanistan.



Figure 4 (above). The Larger Bamiyan Buddha in its niche, before and after demolition by the Taliban in March 2001. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 5 (below). Taliban damage to 2nd–4th century Gandharan sculptures of the Buddha from the Hadda monastery complex in southeast Afghanistan. The Gandharan period saw the earliest figural depictions of the Buddha. Photograph by Gil Stein, courtesy of the National Museum of Afghanistan.



In a third pilot project, Emily Hammer and Elise MacArthur have been focusing on “mineralogical hinterlands.” This study examines the relationship between ancient settlement systems and the distribution of key mineral resources by superimposing the remote sensing and gazetteer data on archaeological site locations onto maps of mineral resource distribution generated by the US Geological Survey and earlier studies by Soviet geologists. These analyses are valuable not only for archaeological research, but also as a planning tool to ensure that future development of mining in Afghanistan will incorporate the preservation and documentation of heritage resources into the overall planning process.

Mitigation and Restoration

Efforts at mitigating the effects of war-related damage have focused on specific monuments such as the Bamiyan Buddhas and the Bagh-I Babur (Babur’s Garden) in Kabul.

Bagh-I Babur is the Persian style garden in the heart of Kabul, built by the first Moghul emperor Babur in the 16th century. The garden is notable for a number of small architectural gems, such as the tomb of Babur and the small mosque of Babur’s great grandson Shah Jahan, who later built the Taj Mahal. The garden was devastated in the battles between rival mujahedeen groups during the civil war years 1989–1996. After the US-led invasion and the expulsion of the Taliban from Kabul, the garden was restored by the Agha Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), and opened to the public in 2008. One of the most important aspects of this project was the way that the sustainability of the garden was guaranteed by creating a public-private trust in which the Kabul Municipality and the AKTC partnered to develop a budgetary and administrative framework to ensure the economic viability of the garden. The rebuilt garden hosted 2.8 million visitors during 2008–2013 (Sahibzadah 2014).

The sites and monuments of the Bamiyan Valley present a more complex set of challenges for preservation specialists such as conservator Bert Praxenthaler of UNESCO and ICOMOS, who has worked in partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture. The task has been fairly straightforward at the mainly Islamic period city of Shahr-I Gholghola (“the City of Screams” – destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1221 after massacring all its inhabitants). Here, stabilization and limited restoration of selected structures was carried out using original materials of mud brick, wood, and stone. However, considerable debate

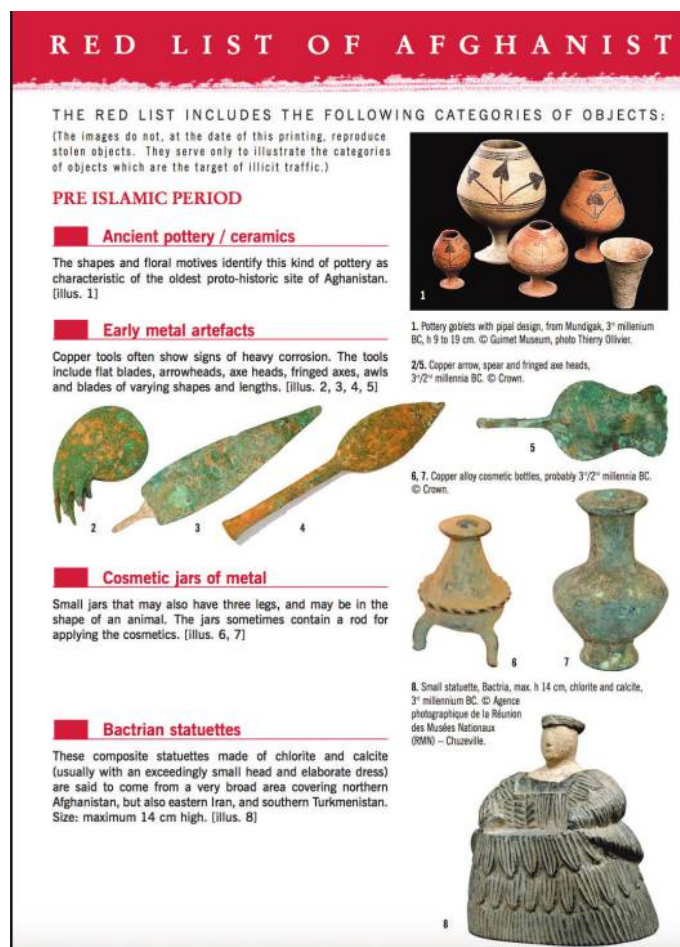
surrounds the question of how much – if at all – the Bamiyan Buddhas should be restored. One view holds that the monumental statues should be

restored and rebuilt as completely as possible in order to reverse the destruction by the Taliban. The alternative viewpoint argues that the enormous carved stone niches that once held the Buddhas should be left empty as a memorial and as testimony to the enormity of the loss when they were destroyed, and the need to protect fragile cultural heritage for the future. Adding to the



Figure 6 (above). Burned object inventory cards from the National Museum of Afghanistan. 90% of the museum’s records were destroyed during the post-Soviet Afghan civil war, 1989–1996. Photo courtesy of Jolyon Leslie and the National Museum of Afghanistan.

Figure 7 (below). Sample of the ICOM “Red List” of artifacts from Afghanistan at risk for looting and smuggling. Source: International Council of Museums (ICOM) - “Red List of Afghanistan Antiquities at Risk” – URL: <http://icom.museum/resources/red-lists-database/red-list/afghanistan/>



complexity of the problem is the fact that the remains of the physical statues would be almost impossible to reconstruct

fully due to the fact that these were composite creations of sandstone, wood, and clay plaster. Once demolished, much of the parent sandstone and plaster were essentially reduced to sand and powder. The most successful attempt at mitigation so far has been the recent projection of 3D laser images of the Buddhas into their niches (Delman 2015). This at least maintains the haunting emptiness of the giant niches, but also affords the potential to visualize the monumental sculptures by night.

Mitigation and Capacity Building at the National Museum of Afghanistan

As noted above, the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) is both the most important and most seriously damaged repository of Afghan archaeological heritage. By the time of the US-led coalition invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the NMA had been almost completely devastated (Grissman 2006). Restoring the NMA has been a top priority for the international heritage community. In the first stage of the process, the US, Greece, India, and other international donors supported the physical rebuilding of the museum and its re-opening for the public in 2004. At the same time, many of the sculptures that had been destroyed by the Taliban were re-assembled and restored by Afghan and international archaeological conservators (Masoudi 2012).

The second stage has focused on capacity building. Starting in 2012, the US Embassy-Kabul funded a four year partnership between the Oriental Institute (OI) of the University of Chicago and the NMA. Now in its final year, the OI-NMA Partnership has five main goals: a) development of a bilingual

English and Dari registration database for the museum; b) implementation of the first complete inventory of the museum's surviving holdings; c) preliminary conservation assessment of the objects and limited stabilization/cleaning of objects (e.g. coins); d) re-housing of objects in acid-free archival packaging; e) training of NMA staff in best practices of conservation, registration, and database management.

For the past three years, the Oriental Institute field team has lived in Kabul and worked daily at the museum, developing the database and carrying out the inventory (Stein 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). To ensure sustainability, the database relies on off-the-shelf, well-documented, mass marketed software – specifically FileMaker Pro. The OI team worked together with NMA staff to design the database so that it incorporated all the main elements of the paper registration system already in use at the museum, while at the same

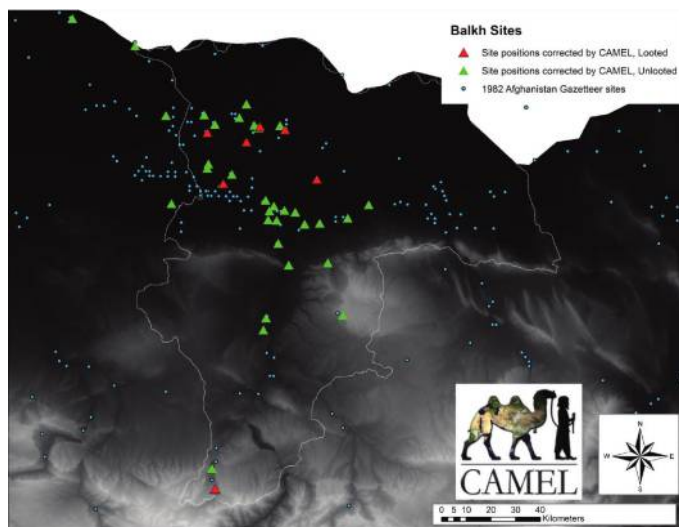
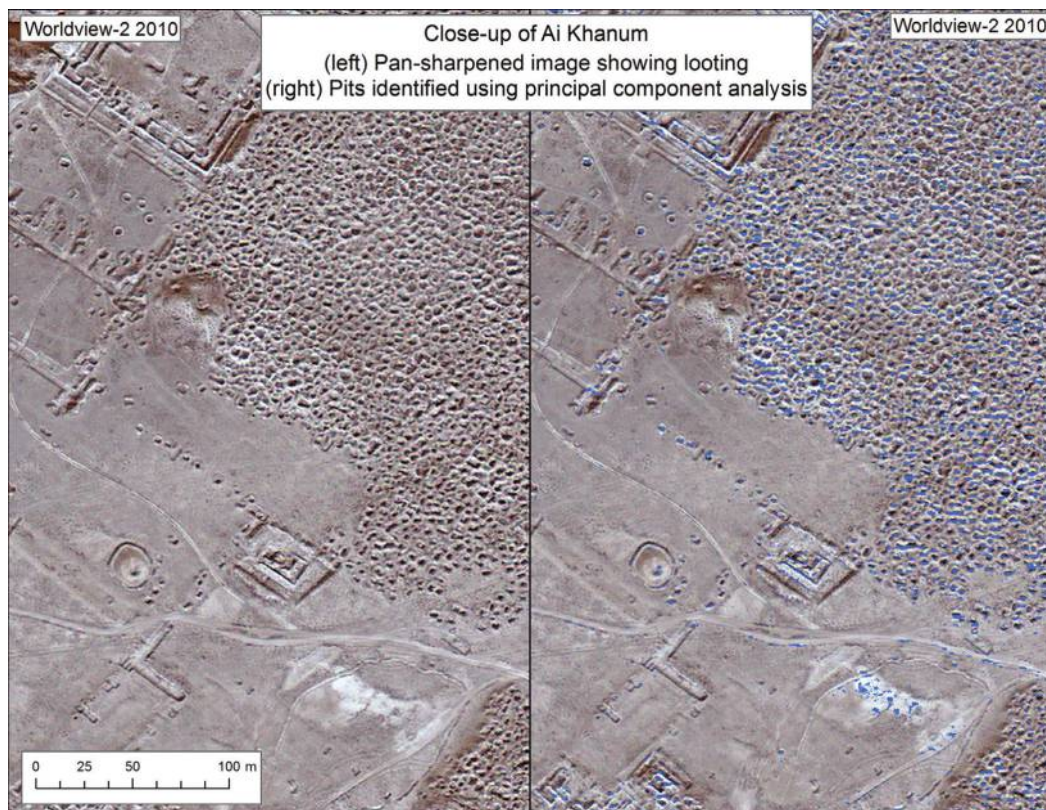


Figure 8 (above). Oriental Institute CAMEL laboratory image showing site locations from the original Ball and Gardin 1982 archaeological gazetteer corrected through comparison with geo-rectified CORONA satellite data and examined for the presence or absence of evidence for looting.

Figure 9 (below). Oriental Institute CAMEL laboratory image showing the use of principal components analysis for computer-aided identification of looters' pits at Ai Khanoum, using the protocol developed by Tony Lauricella, Josh Cannon, and Dr. Emily Hammer. Images courtesy of Dr. Emily Hammer and the Oriental Institute CAMEL Laboratory.



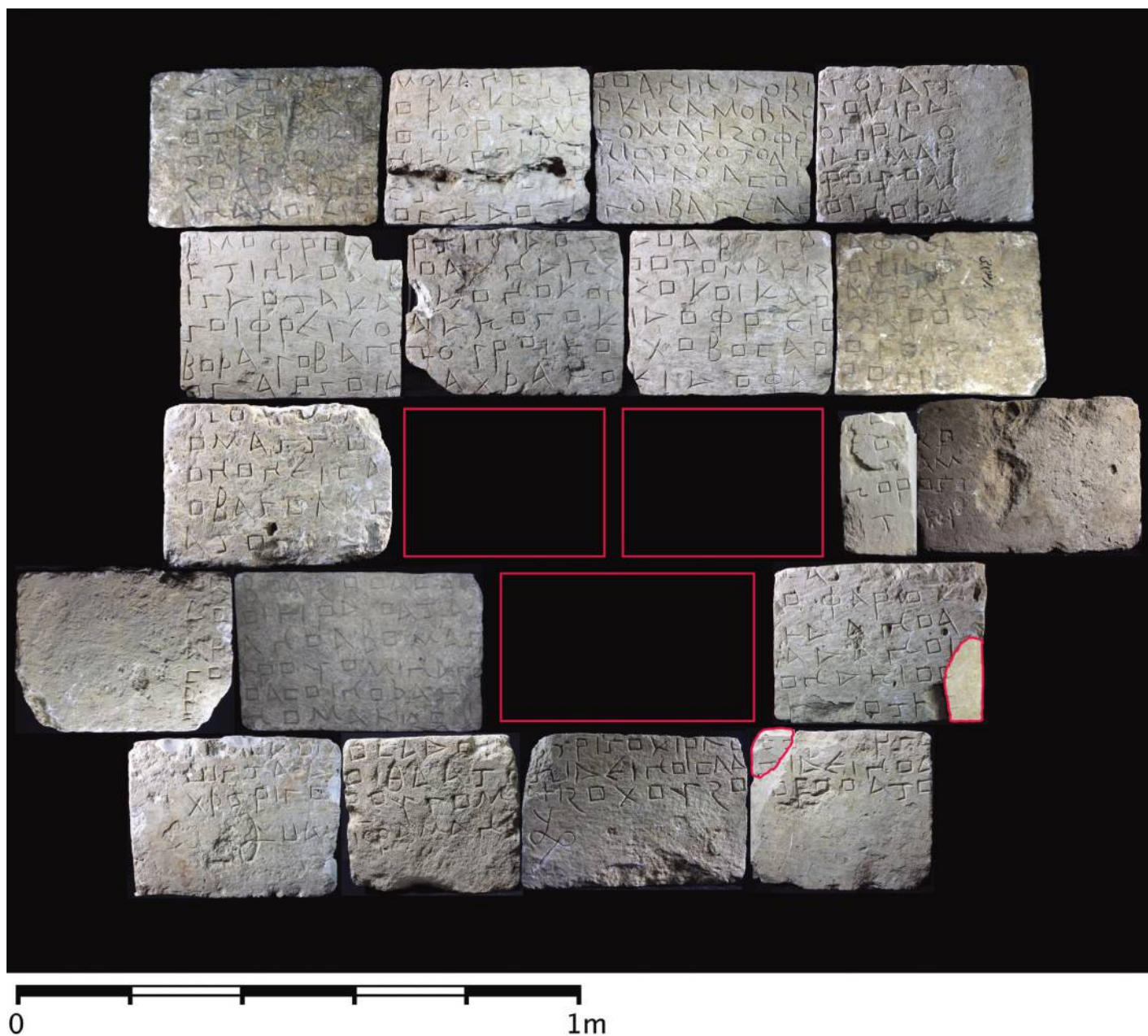


Figure 10. The second century C.E. Surkh Kotal inscription SK4 – one of the earliest known inscriptions in the Bactrian script (a modified version of the Greek alphabet). By constructing a photomosaic of the inventoried pieces of the inscription, OI-NMA field team members were able to identify which blocks of the inscription are now missing, and presumably looted from the National Museum during the Afghan civil war of 1989–1996. Photograph mosaic by Michael Fisher and Jamie Frasier, courtesy of the Oriental Institute-National Museum of Afghanistan Partnership.

time adding new functionalities. Descriptions of the objects are entered in Dari by the Afghan staff of the NMA, and in English by the OI team. To date, twenty staff members of the NMA have been trained to construct inventory entries, and three members of the staff have been trained in the design and management of the database. Archaeological conservators at the museum have been trained both by visiting conservators in Kabul, and through additional specialized training programs overseas. The inventory is now 95% complete, enabling us to not only document what remains in the museum, but also to finally determine much more accurately what objects have been lost (fig. 10).

Intangible Heritage

One final category of cultural heritage is easily overlooked: “intangible heritage” –art, music, poetry, folklore, language, and knowledge of traditional crafts. Far from being secondary, intangible heritage is at its heart the cultural knowledge that gives meaning to the more generally recognized tangible heritage objects, monuments, and sites. In Afghanistan, the past four decades of war and the attendant mass dislocations of millions of people have severed the inter-generational links through which intangible heritage and cultural knowledge are passed along from parent to child, and from master to apprentice.

Two initiatives in particular are contributing significantly to training, capacity building, and the preservation or revival of intangible heritage. Under the direction of Dr. Ahmad Sarmast, the National School of Music in Kabul has been preserving the knowledge and appreciation of Afghanistan's traditional music, while insuring that Afghan children learn to play the instruments and compositions that constitute this art form (Sarmast 2014). At the same time, the Turquoise Mountain Foundation and School has made great strides in preserving the traditional crafts of Afghanistan, such as calligraphy, ceramics, woodworking, and jewelry making by training young artists. Most importantly, Turquoise Mountain also gives these artists business training and encourages them to design their own innovative pieces so that the traditional crafts remain vibrant and avoid the stagnation of simply repeating ancient forms.

Future Prospects:

This overview has attempted to summarize the importance of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, and the devastating extent of the damage to that heritage caused by 35 years of unceasing conflict. A brief survey of this nature can only highlight selected efforts at documentation, mitigation, and capacity building as three broad areas where committed individuals and groups are working to preserve Afghan heritage.

Clearly, an enormous amount remains to be done. Afghan heritage remains highly fragile and subject to continuing serious threats. Going forward, heritage preservation work will have to take place under conditions of declining security conditions, and decreased international funding, due to the pressing needs of catastrophic damage to archaeological heritage in Iraq and Syria. However, it is possible to outline some high priority areas for future work. There is an urgent need to develop remote sensing-based geospatial databases to document the existing archaeological sites in the country and monitor the extent of site looting. The need for an "archaeological map" of Afghanistan was first articulated by Nancy Dupree (2002) and in 2014 was described as a national priority by Afghan President Dr. Ashraf Ghani. There is an urgent need to stem the flow of looted artifacts from Afghanistan through better enforcement inside the country, and stronger efforts at interdiction of smuggled artifacts and the prosecution of traffickers. Along the lines of what has been done with Iraq, potentially Syria and 16 other countries, we need to forge a bilateral agreement between the US and Afghanistan to ban the importation of illicit Afghan antiquities into the US. Finally, there is an urgent need to train Afghan archaeologists, conservators, and other preservation specialists to international standards. If these goals can be even partially reached in the next five to ten years, it will have an enormous, sustainable impact on the protection of Afghanistan's cultural patrimony for future generations.🔗

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