

# NEWS & NOTES

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# Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN KABUL, NOVEMBER 2014

by Gil J. Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute

The Oriental Institute is proud to have been the co-organizer of an international conference focused on “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan” (PCHA), held in Kabul at the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU), November 9–11, 2014. The PCHA conference

was co-organized by the University of Chicago, US Embassy Kabul, Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University, and Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture. An edited volume of the conference proceedings will be published in the coming year.

Afghanistan is the “crossroads of Asia” where the civilizations of the Near East, Central Asia, South Asia, and China have interacted for millennia through trade, migration, great empires, and periodic conflict. This rich blending of civilizations gave rise to some of the



THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON “PRESERVING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AFGHANISTAN” WAS HELD IN KABUL IN NOVEMBER 2014. THE CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS WERE BILINGUAL IN ENGLISH AND IN DARI (ONE OF THE TWO NATIONAL LANGUAGES) WITH SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION TO MAKE THE PRESENTATIONS FULLY ACCESSIBLE TO AFGHAN STUDENTS, ACADEMICS, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, AND HERITAGE SPECIALISTS.

most important archaeological, artistic, architectural, and textual treasures in world cultural heritage. Together, they define Afghan history and the unique synthesis of traditions that characterizes the Afghan nation. However, as we can see from the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 and the looting of the National Museum in Kabul during the Afghan Civil War and subsequent Taliban rule in the 1990s, the cultural heritage of Afghanistan is fragile and faces deep and continuing threats.

This is an especially difficult challenge because it comes at a time of increased uncertainty because international security assistance forces are largely withdrawing from Afghanistan. At the same time, it will become increasingly difficult to find funding for heritage protection programs due to the competing demands from other countries such as Iraq and Syria, which are overwhelmed by the catastrophic destruction of their cultural heritage. The reality is that there are preservation crises all across western Asia, and the limited international resources available to deal with them will be stretched almost to the breaking point.

As a result, the community of people and groups committed to preserving the cultural heritage of Afghanistan must find ways to work differently, more effectively, and with fewer resources than in the past. It is clear that to work most effectively, we must develop creative new kinds of partnerships and better information sharing between the different Afghan and international organizations doing heritage work.

The conference on “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan” brought together for the first time the leading Afghan and international cultural heritage specialists from a variety of different organizational contexts: provincial and national governments, universities, museums, and private foundations. The conference was unique in several important ways. Generally, meetings of this sort have been held outside of Afghanistan, in limited-access venues, and with only limited participation by Afghans. In organizing the PCHA confer-



**THE BAGH I BABUR (BABUR'S GARDEN), DESIGNED BY THE FIRST MOGHUL EMPEROR IN THE 16TH CENTURY, HAS MADE THIS MAGNIFICENT PUBLIC GREEN SPACE FULLY ACCESSIBLE TO THE PEOPLE OF KABUL. SINCE ITS RESTORATION IN 2008, 2.8 MILLION VISITORS HAVE COME TO BAGH I BABUR.**

ence, we wanted to do something more inclusive and accessible, and we had several key goals. First, we wanted to bring people together to share information and to understand the broad range of heritage preservation projects that are currently underway in Afghanistan at the initiative of both Afghan and international individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and various government entities. We especially wanted to highlight the important role that specifically Afghan organizations and individuals are playing — on their own initiative — in preserving their own cultural heritage. Finally, we thought it was especially important to hold the conference inside Afghanistan in a university setting where Afghan students, university professionals, government officials, and the Afghan media could have their first chance to learn about these encouraging developments. Half of the conference presenters were Afghans, and half were from the international community. The conference papers and discussions were bilingual in English and Dari (one of the two national languages of Afghanistan) with simultaneous translation. We were gratified to see that on each day of the conference, about half of the 130 people in the audience were students — the exact group in

whose hands the preservation of Afghan heritage will rest. The significance of the conference was underscored when newly elected Afghan president Dr. Ashraf Ghani phoned in by a live link to give a 10-minute welcoming address to the attendees in which he emphasized the urgent need to protect Afghan cultural heritage as a key element in defining the country's national identity as it enters into an era of reconstruction.

The papers and moderated panel discussions focused on current and recently completed projects and highlighted practical measures being undertaken in five key areas: museums, monuments, archaeological excavations and surveys, repatriation and the fight against looting; and education and “intangible heritage.” The presentations also explored the different types of partnerships that are proving most successful as ways to carry out effective projects of heritage preservation. A sampling of the papers shows the range of these programs.

## MUSEUMS

National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) Director Dr. Omara Khan Masoudi described the horrendous damage done to the museum in the Afghan civil war and subsequent Taliban rule. Mike Fisher, Field Director of the OI-NMA Partner-

ship's Kabul team, described the ways that the Museum staff and the OI team have jointly developed a bilingual English-Dari database to do the first full inventory of the NMA's surviving holdings. In this way we are both providing the first full assessment of the museum's losses, while implementing an objects curation infrastructure that meets international standards for best museum practices. Abdul Ghafoor Shaikhzada (director of the Herat Museum) described the ways that one of Afghanistan's first provincial museums was established as a way to extend preservation efforts outward from the national capital of Kabul into other key regions of the country.

## MONUMENTS

Amanullah Sahibzadah described the ways that the Bagh-i Babur — the lovely garden in the heart of Kabul, built by the first Moghul emperor Babur in the sixteenth century, was restored by the Agha Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), and opened for public use. 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 insure the economic viability of the garden.

Another example of monument preservation was presented by Bert Praxenthaler of UNESCO and ICOMOS, who showed the ways that these organizations have worked with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture to stabilize and preserve the remnants of the monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan and the associated medieval Islamic city of Shahr-I Gholghola, destroyed by Genghis Khan and the Mongols in 1221.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

Afghan archaeologists have been playing an important role in the preservation of their country's threatened heritage. Abdul Kadir Timuri (Archaeological Institute of Afghanistan), outlined the joint Afghan-International salvage excavations at the enormous Buddhist site of Mes Aynak, while Zafar Paiman (College



1 AFGHAN AND INTERNATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE COOPERATED IN THE RESCUE EXCAVATIONS AT THE 4TH-8TH CENTURY AD SITE OF MES AYNAK. THE SCULPTURE, ARTIFACTS, AND ARCHITECTURE FROM MES AYNAK HAVE REVOLUTIONIZED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY BUDDHISM IN AFGHANISTAN.

2 BRITISH TROOPS RETURNING CRATES WITH SEVERAL TONS OF LOOTED AFGHAN ANTIQUITIES THAT HAD BEEN INTERCEPTED AT HEATHROW AIRPORT IN LONDON. THE OBJECTS WERE REPATRIATED TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN KABUL.



dè France) showed how the Archaeological Institute of Afghanistan's excavations at the monastery of Tepe Narinj demon-

strated the survival of Buddhism as a religion in the Kabul valley as late as the ninth-tenth centuries AD, hundreds of



**AT THE CONFERENCE, DR. OMARA KHAN MASOUDI, DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN, WAS PRESENTED WITH AN AWARD RECOGNIZING HIS DECADES OF TIRELESS EFFORTS IN THE PRESERVATION OF AFGHAN CULTURAL HERITAGE.**

years later than anyone had suspected. Philippe Marquis, the former director of the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (DAFA) explained the ways that remote sensing is being used to document the enormous ancient city of Bakh — the capital of Bactria whose 8,000 year history of occupation establishes it as one of the most important archaeological sites in the country.

### EDUCATION AND “INTANGIBLE HERITAGE”

Education and training are key elements in any national effort at heritage preservation. A joint paper by Laura D’Alessandro (Oriental Institute) and Abdullah Hakimzadah (NMA) described the ways that OI training of archaeological conservators is building capacity for Afghans to take charge of preserving the priceless objects of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage. Education is also the key to preserving “intangible heritage” — Afghanistan’s traditional music, crafts,

poetry, and literature. Dr. Ahmad Sarmast highlighted the role of the National School of Music in 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. Waheed Khalili explained the role of the Turquoise Mountain Foundation and School in preserving the traditional crafts of Afghanistan such as calligraphy, ceramics, woodworking, and jewelry 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.

### REPATRIATION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST LOOTING

Omar Sultan of the Ministry of Information and Culture presented an overview of the key treasures of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage and the ways they are threatened. Dr. St. John Simpson (British Museum) described the ways that British Customs officials had confiscated literally tons of smuggled Afghan antiquities at Heathrow airport, and then repatriated them to the National Museum in Kabul. Dr. Simpson also highlighted the ways that through the cooperation of the National Museum, the British Museum and private philanthropists, a number of the priceless Bagram Ivories were rescued from the Antiquities/Art market, conserved, and then returned to their rightful home in Afghanistan. In my own paper at the conference, I described the ways in which international legal frame-

works such as bilateral agreements between the US and countries such as Afghanistan could be used to discourage looting and the international illicit trade in antiquities.

Overall, the conference papers and panels showed that, despite many challenges and uncertainties, Afghans and the international community have been successfully implementing innovative projects to preserve the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, while helping the people of this war-torn country to develop the skills and organizational capacity to take the lead in preservation efforts in the years ahead. We can be cautiously optimistic that these partnerships will save the treasures of the “crossroads of Asia.”

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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