

Looting of Antiquities on the Rise

Author: [Walid Baidar](#)

More and more impoverished villagers are scraping a living by digging up Afghan treasures in illegal excavations.

Pakistani smugglers are stepping up their practice of paying impoverished Afghan villagers a relative pittance to loot their nation's cultural treasure.

The racket has gained momentum since the fall of the Taleban, as the new Kabul authorities are either powerless to stop them or preoccupied with other matters in post-conflict Afghanistan.

The number of illegal excavations has more than doubled in recent months. The artefacts include - Buddhist icons, coins, jewellery, dishes - and they end up in the famous Andarshar bazaar in Peshawar, Pakistan, where they are scooped up by westerners.

The best locations for the illegal digging are well known. The smugglers use copies of ancient maps to track long lost villages in the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar.

Two excavations were under way in the villages of Wazeer and Zaviee in the Khoghyani district of Nangarhar when IWPR visited in March. The Pakistani organiser of the illegal digs, who gave his name as Mohammad Zareef, a local man, has a shop of his own in the Andarshar bazaar.

He is working on two hills near the villages which he believes are full of buried antiquities dating back to the ancient Buddhist civilisation that spanned the region more than 2,000 years ago. "I have come here with my Afghan apprentice," he told IWPR. "We have the maps of ancient Gandahara, and excavate places based on them."

He pays the locals before starting work and he was dismissive about laws prohibiting such unlicensed digs. "It might be illegal to dig, but we excavate here at the suggestion of the villagers. They say the artefacts found here are (on their land and are) their personal property. So no one has the right to object," he said.

Digging is also going on in the neighbouring districts of Sherzad, Pacheer and Agam, Surkh Road, Rodat and Haskamina.

In Sherzad, there are two sites, on hills near the villages of Tutu and Nari Taba. The latest find was a pair of Buddhist sculptures, 1.5 m high. "These two stone idols had patterns of narrow lines inscribed on them, and they were very elegant and delicate," said Tutu villager Abdul Hashim, who led that dig. "Fortunately God helped us dig it out safely."

At another site in Surkh Road, digging had continued for more than ten days without success. But the area, near Baloch village, is well known for the three Buddhist statues found there in the days before the Taleban, and the local diggers remain optimistic and work with enthusiasm.

"After the people have breakfast we pick up our shovels and picks and head up the hill," said a Baloch villager, who gave his name as Shabsawar. "Traditionally, we cut our index fingers so we will have good luck."

The motivation is obvious. "We hear everyday that some such person has found this many coins and earned that much money," said a villager from Rodat district who gave his name as Ezatullah. "I am jobless and I want to start digging too."

Another digger, over the provincial border in Laghman, felt himself well rewarded. "Since I have started my excavation I have earned more than 100,000 rupees," said the local villager, who gave his name as Mohammedajan. He said he knew what he was doing is illegal, but his circumstances left him with no other option, "I am poor and I have a wife and a family of 20 to support and feed. I have tried to find another job but I could not succeed. At least this allows me to feed my family."

Maulawee Anwar ul-Haq, the head of the information and culture department for Nangarhar, was equally honest. "All these excavations are illegal and we are informed that they are going on but the smugglers have bribed the commanders of the local armed militias to protect them.

"We have brought the matter to the attention of (Nangarhar provincial assembly chief) Haji Qadeer but he is busy with political problems. Besides, the local commanders carry more authority in their own areas than the head of the provincial assembly, who is only nominally in charge of the region."

But he had hopes that the situation would change. "The interim authority has just two more months left before it is replaced," he said. "The new government will have to address these problems. Until then, we just don't have either the means or the authority to stop the smuggling."

Walid Baidar is a pseudonym for a journalist based in Jalalabad.

Location: [Pakistan](#)
[Afghanistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/looting-antiquities-rise>