

## **The Pillage of Afghan Heritage**

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The wholesale destruction of Afghanistan's cultural heritage has gone virtually unnoticed.

Peering through his binoculars General Atiqullah Baryalai directed tank fire from the great natural escarpment of Ai Khanoum. Plumes of smoke rose from Taleban positions several kilometres away.

Just behind him, lying in the dust, ignored by everyone, lay a classical capitol. Hardly surprising, perhaps.

Ai Khanoum sits at the confluence of two of Central Asia's great rivers, the Amu Darya, the Oxus of legend, and the Kokcha. It is one of the greatest archaeological treasures of Afghanistan.

Or rather, it used to be. Ai Khanoum, like archaeological sites across the country, has been stripped and looted throughout the last 22 years of war. Down by the Amu Darya, the scene is one of utter destruction, hundreds upon hundreds of deep craters dug by treasure hunters, who, in the process, have ravaged the site.

In 330 BC, Alexander the Great came here, seizing kingdoms, founding cities and marrying the Bactrian princess Roxane. Greek colonists were to follow.

French archaeologists excavated the remains of a rich Hellenistic citadel at Ai Khanoum, complete with palace, temples and a gymnasium, in 1963. The archaeologists concluded that the city was probably sacked at the end of the second century BC, by nomad invaders.

Not long before he was assassinated last month, Ahmed Shah Massoud, the top Northern Alliance commander, banned illegal digging at Ai Khanoum. But the order came very late in the day. Photos from happier times show the excavated remains of the palaces and temples - but now, after two decades of anarchy and pillage, hardly anything is left.

One and a half million people died during the years of the Soviet occupation and hundreds of thousands have perished since then. Now Afghanistan is in the grip of war once more. So, it is not surprising that few know of the wholesale destruction of the cultural heritage of this benighted land.

Last year, the Taleban blew up two ancient Buddhas carved into a cliffside at Bamian. At the time Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taleban, remarked that he could not see what all the fuss was about since his men were only "breaking stones". But, there was a clear ideological element to the act since the Taleban leader could claim to be destroying portrayals of the human image, which are banned by Islam.

Some also detect another ideological element. That is an effort to destroy any remnants of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic heritage, which has shaped the country's unique history and culture. The Taleban's ideology is an Islamic internationalist one. Hence it despises Afghanistan's own specific national identity.

In the view of General Baryalai, the Taleban not only "brought foreigners here to kill Afghans but they educated boys aged 13 or 15 in Pakistan to destroy our history, our museums and our archives".

Kabul's rich museum has been completely pillaged, all of its most precious items being either destroyed or stolen. They include extraordinary and beautiful Gandharan sculptures, the product of a unique blending of Eastern and Western culture, the so-called Indo-Hellenic style, which combined both classical Greek and Buddhist influences.

Indeed, the destruction of Afghanistan's cultural heritage over the last two decades compares only to the way that Genghis Khan and his Mongol descendants laid waste to much of the country 800 years ago.

Even in the midst of the current conflict however, and despite the ban on digging in northern Afghanistan, dealers in antiquities are still plying their trade.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of his tiny shop in the opposition controlled village of Khoja Bahoudin, Haji Yaqub takes out a series of grubby matchboxes. He slips them open and unwraps their contents.

On the rug he lays out a silver Graeco-Bactrian coin of Demetrius I from about 200 BC and gold coin of the Kushan culture dating from about 100 AD. Alongside them he places delicate golden earrings, that might have graced a princess more than two thousand years ago, seals and other precious ornaments. He is also offering for sale a large bronze oil lamp, which he says is over a thousand years old.

Over the last thirty years, Haji Yaqub has grown rich as a dealer in antiquities, mostly looted from Ai Khanoum and other nearby archaeological sites, or found by peasants tilling their fields.

When they bring him something of particularly fine quality he calls dealers in Pakistan and then despatches his agents south to haggle and sell. These dealers then call their contacts in the West and in the Far East, who buy from them before selling their wares to rich collectors and museums.

Passing a magnifying glass over for a closer examination of the coins, Haji Yaqub whispers "Alexander, Alexander - Ai Khanoum, Ai Khanoum".

He laments that business is bad. It is hard to send his men to Pakistan now, firstly because they must sneak across dangerous frontlines and secondly, "because if the Taleban find you with these things they steal them and sell them themselves". Also he said, "at the beginning, 20 or 30 years ago, there was lots of gold and statues. Now there is less."

Sometimes the treasure hunters find things that are too heavy to transport and probably not worth the cost of doing so. That doesn't mean they go to waste. Two minutes walk from Haji Yaqub's shop workmen are busy readying a former teahouse in which a French aid agency called ACTED is hoping to house whatever remnants it can gather from Ai Khanoum and the wider region.

The idea, says the agency's Cyril du Pré, is to prevent the antiquities "from falling into the hands of dealers from who knows where". Enthusiastically, he added, "People have approached us saying they have things they would like to give."

But, it seems, only when the fighting stops and some semblance of stability returns to Afghanistan will there be a real opportunity to try to do something about the pillaging of the country's heritage. By the time that happens, however, it may be too late.

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**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
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