



Bronze statuette of Heracles from Ai Khanum.

Osmond Boppearachchi, 1999.

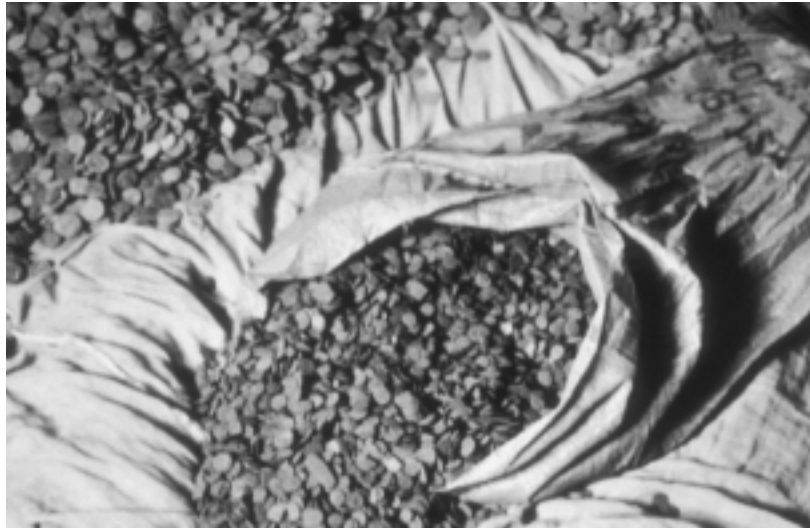
Sacks full of coins, each weighing at least 50 kg

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Ancient texts, inscriptions, and data obtained in archaeological excavations, though important, are secondary compared to the rich and vast amounts of information conveyed by coins.

The fairy tale built around Mir Zakah II has now become an unending nightmare. The political instability in Afghanistan has left no scope for a proper exploration of the immense historical importance of these coins, nor for getting them preserved in a museum for further studies. The gold coins and jewellery items of high value from the hoard were sold to Japanese, English, and American collectors for millions of dollars. According to some reliable sources, two-and-a-half tons of the Mir Zakah II deposit have been taken to Switzerland for sale. If UNESCO does not take some initiative, one day all these coins, except for the best specimens among them, may go to the melting pot.

Osmond Boppearachchi, February 1994, Peshawar Bazaar.



A Sad Fate for Famous Sites

The monastic complex of Hadda is situated in Jelalabad, half-way along the road from Kabul to Gandhara. The ruins of this ancient town, with Buddhist stupas and caves, were excavated by the French Archaeological Delegation to Afghanistan under J. Barthoux. A large and well-preserved Buddhist monastic complex near Hadda, at Tepe Shotor, was excavated between 1974 and 1979 by Prof. Zamaryalai Tarzi, the then Director General of Archaeology and Conservation of Historical Monuments of Afghanistan. He was able to unearth a stupa decorated with magnificent stucco figures dating back to the second century AD. By now, looters have systematically pillaged and destroyed Tepe Shotor: small statues were taken to Pakistani bazaars for sale; huge statues that could not be removed were smashed.

One of the most significant sites contributing to a better understanding of the presence of the Greeks in ancient Bactria was the ancient Greek city of Ai Khanum on the left bank of the river Oxus at the confluence with its tributary, the river Kokcha. It was well placed as a military outpost controlling the eastern territories of ancient Bactria. A hill, about sixty meters higher than the rest of the city and protected by the two rivers from the west and south, provided a natural site for an acropolis and made it an ideal choice for the Greek city planners. The residential quarters and public buildings (such as a gymnasium, a temple, fortifications, the royal palace, and administrative buildings) were built at the lower part of the site, which was less exposed to the winds than the acropolis.

The discoveries at Ai Khanum by the French archaeologists led by Professor P. Bernard demonstrate how its Greek artists not only remained attached to the Greek traditions, but, in some ways, even perpetuated an outdated classical style. For example, the mosaic floor of the palace bathroom, displaying dolphins, sea horses, and sea monsters, was made by setting a field of dark red pebbles instead of the square-cut stones used in works of the later style.

For the last ten years, Ai Khanum was targeted for sys-

tematic illicit diggings, as well. This remarkable city that revealed the Greek heritage left by Alexander the Great in ancient Bactria no longer exists. Treasure hunters seem to have used metal detectors originally brought to the country to detect Russian land mines. Photographs taken in May 1993 by Professor Hin-Ichi-Ono from Japan show the city's surface turned into a lunar landscape. The lower city was completely devastated. Where the large temple once stood, now only a crater remains. Some of the Corinthian and Doric capitals unearthed by the French archaeologists were taken away and now serve as a base for columns in a teahouse.

Illicit diggings at Ai Khanum have recently brought new discoveries to light: hundreds of ivory pieces, jewellery, intaglios, plaster medallions, and bronze items have reached the Pakistani bazaars and private collections. Among them are several sculptures that once more underscore the Greek contribution to the art and culture of Bactria and India. These include a bronze statuette of Heracles and a faïence head of a Graeco-Bactrian king.

The bronze Heracles, 21 cm in height including pedestal, was solid cast with a fully-fashioned back. The naked, beardless young god wears a broad-leafed wreath, stands facing forwards, and is holding in his left hand the lion's skin while his right rests on a club. It is not at all surprising to find many images of Heracles in Ai Khanum; an inscription, found *in situ*, reveals that the gymnasium was dedicated to this divinity.

The faïence head of a Graeco-Bactrian king was found in June 1998 in unrecorded circumstances. It once belonged to an acrolithic statue: the horizontally cut edge below the head was meant to fit into a wooden structure representing the rest of the body. So far, the fragments of a cult statue found in the *cella* of the main temple at Ai Khanum and this faïence



Empty trays of the Coin Cabinet, Kabul Museum.

head are now the only examples of acroliths that have been found in Bactria.

Save What is Left

In the history of mankind, there are many instances of world cultural heritage falling victim to the ignorance and intolerance of a few pushed by religious, ideological, and political motives. However, in the case of Afghanistan, we have witnessed, for the first time in human history, the state taking the initiative to decree its subjects to destroy their own past. The state became the worst enemy of its own culture and heritage, leading the way to the destruction of the efforts of several generations of archaeologists, numismatists, and art historians, and the collective memory of 3,000 years of the history of the Afghan people.

How can we channel our pain, despair, and anger towards those who destroyed the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, once the greatest melting ground of Central Asia, a crossroads between East and West? One can not restore what has been destroyed. Let us fight to save at least what is left, for ancient Bactria is part of the cultural heritage of the whole of humanity, not just of a distant country often forgotten and abandoned to its sad fate. <

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The Chaman-i-Hazuri Hoard

Among the now lost coins from the plundered cabinet of the National Museum in Kabul are those from the hoard of Chaman-i-Hazuri, named after its provenance, a parade ground in Kabul. This treasure, which also included pieces of jewellery, was discovered in 1933 when foundations for a house were being dug. Informants reported that some 1,000 silver coins were recovered, but this assessment was never supported by coin evidence; some 127 coins, all definitely from the Chaman-i-Hazuri hoard, found their way to the Kabul Museum.

From the composition of this find it is clear that the hoard must have been buried somewhere in the fourth century BC, possibly not long after circa 380 BC. This *terminus post quem* is based on the presence in the hoard of a coin from a series that copies a sixth-century Athenian coin type, but was actually struck in the early fourth century BC. Most of the coins in the hoard are much older: sixty-three of the Chaman-i-Hazuri coins were struck by the Greeks before 550 BC; eight coins were issued in the name of the Achaemenid king, Darius I, who ruled between 521 and 486 BC. Of unknown date are twelve bent-bar coins in the hoard carrying punched wheel-symbols. These coins are typically found in early Gandhara, but their exact period of circulation is not known so far. Finally, the hoard contained forty-three coins, apparently of local manufacture, which have been punched with animal motifs on two sides. The hoard thus illustrates that Greek, Iranian, and local Gandharan coins may have circulated in the area of Kabul shortly before its burial. The hoard forms a perfect numismatic illustration to the blended cultural entourage of fourth century BC Afghanistan.

A.D.H. Bivar and, more recently, Joe Cribb of the British Museum have argued that these fourth-century BC local Gandharan punch-marked coins are among the earliest of their kind in South Asia. The technique and concept of producing punch-marked coins would subsequently have spread from the northwest to other regions of the subcontinent and triggered the manufacture of many, regionally differing, series of punch-marked coins. Other scholars have questioned the validity of dating the local punch-marked coins on the basis of the presence of the fourth-century BC copy in the hoard. They are in favour of an earlier date which, however, remains to be defined more precisely. Usually the Ganges Valley is indicated as the region in which, in the wake of a period of rapid urbanization, the concept of the use of coins may have taken root, perhaps even as early as the sixth century BC. — (E.M.R.) <

Caption caption caption caption caption caption caption caption caption caption caption caption.



Josephine Powell, Rome.