It is Time to Pick Up Stones

Forum > Afghanistan

There is no doubt that the world community made a tragic mistake (if not committed a crime) when, after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, it assumed the position of an outside witness. Not only have thousands of Afghan people died during the war, but a tremendous blow struck the ancient heritage of this country, as well. Fanatical Talibans drew the country into the darkness of the medieval ages. Their acts of vandalism reached a peak with a live demonstration: the destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan. And this was not the only act they committed against the cultural heritage of their own country!

By Victor Sarianidi

As we all know, the best pieces of Graeco-Bactrian art were located in Afghanistan. These artifacts were so marvelous that they charmed everyone, the scientist, the connoisseur of art, and the common man alike. Hellenism in the East is one of the brightest pages in the history of the mankind. It is a subject that always attracted the interest of various scientists and which is not yet completely studied. One of the recent examples of this were the excavations of the Hellenistic city of Aï Khanum (possibly, Alexandria upon the Oxus). The excavations by French archaeologists headed by Professor Paul Bernard had brought to light the ruins of a typical Greek city. At first, the findings numbered in the dozens, then in the hundreds and thousands. By the end, it became necessary to arrange a special exhibition hall in the Kabul Museum where the marvelous Hellenistic pieces of art could be housed. The displays in the Aï Khanum hall of the museum included splendid marble sculptures, architectural details, and monumental sculptures that once decorated the houses, squares, and fountains of the city.

Josephine Powell, Rome.

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

Another gem of the Kabul Museum was the world renowned collection from Begram found by French archaeologists in the 1930s of the past century. It consisted of splendid carved ivories in classic Indian style and Hellenistic artifacts made in different countries of the then world. Also worth mentioning is the royal treasure of the Tilya Tepe (Golden Hill) necropolis in Bactria with its 20,000 gold artifacts (small gold plates, weapons, crowns and so on). The significance of this unique collection of Hellenistic art objects is great. It threw light on the historic period of mankind which, until now, was called the "dark period" due to the lack of sufficient information. The objects of the collection reflect the synthesis of different art styles and trends. For example, a single object could demonstrate the combination of artistic methods from countries such as Greece, Rome, China, Siberia, India, and Central Asia.

Unlike the collections from Begram or Aï Khanum, the Tilya Tepe collection has never been displayed in any country of the world, even in Afghanistan! Finally, one should not forget that Kushan and Buddhist artifacts from Afghanistan belong not only to the history of this country, but they are part and parcel of the history of the whole of mankind. Scientists from all over the world explore and study them. All of these objects, as well as those not mentioned here, were the best items of the Kabul museum, a museum that is ruined and looted completely. We know nothing definite about the fate of these collections, we can just guess that most of them were destroyed during the vandalistic bombardment of the museum while others were looted and sold in different antique shops and bazaars.

It is absolutely clear that we should immediately launch a worldwide campaign for the search and preservation of what had survived. We should not forget that the collections belong not only to Afghanistan but to the whole world. As a first step it seems necessary to locate the lost collections and then, under the aegis of UNESCO, to set up a bank account where individuals as well as organizations could make donations. Thus, we can arrange a certain pool that can be used later during the negotiations with different selectors and, probably, museums in our attempts to buy back the collections. At the same time, UNESCO should arrange a tender and select the best project for the construction of a new museum in Kabul. An international organizing committee of specialists on the East should also be formed, with Professor Paul Bernard (France) approached to head it.

I believe these should be the first, urgent steps if we all realize and agree that the time has come to pick up stones. <

Professor Victor Sarianidi *was born and raised in Tashkent (Central Asia), graduated from the University there and then moved to Moscow where he started to work as an archaeologist in the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Russia and where he still works. He started his excavations in Central Asia more than fifty years ago, specializing in the prehistoric period. From 1978-79 he excavated six tombs in Afghanistan, which date back to the first century BC to the first centiry AD and which contained 20,000 gold items. The fate of this Tilya Tepe treasury is unknown. Thirty years ago in the Kara-Kum desert of Turkmenistan, he excavated a civilization yet unknown to scientists, a civilization of the ancient Mesopotamian type. These excavations in Margiana are still going on. The last year during the excavations of the Gonur necropolis, he found a cylinder seal with a Sumerian inscription on it. His next field season will start in April this year.*
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The Buddhas of Bamiyan [continued]:

A Turn-Around for Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage?

In IIAS Newsletter 23, in an article alerting readers to the then threat to the Buddhas of Bamiyan and other cultural artefacts in Afghanistan, were the following words: "…It seems, nevertheless, a miracle that these incredible Buddhas have more or less survived in a country in which they have become strangers who were not able to flee…".[1] As the world watched, the Buddhas have since been destroyed, but their story and that of SPACH and others involved in continues. We asked the author of those words, Ms. Juliette van Krieken, to react on last year's events, and in the following article she deals with the destruction, the in-between period (March through September), and the aftermath.

Forum > Afghanistan

By Juliette van Krieken

Destruction

On 26 February 2001, Mullah Omar, the official leader of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, issued the following decree:

> "In view of the Fatwa [religious edict] of prominent Afghan scholars and the verdict of the Afghan Supreme Court, it has been decided to break down all statues/idols present in different parts of the country. This is because these idols have been gods of the infidels, who worshipped them, and these are respected even now and perhaps maybe turned into gods again. The real god is only Allah, and all other false gods should be removed".

To most, this statement came as a shocking surprise, but to others, it was not totally unexpected. Nevertheless, it was a chilly development, particularly since, shortly before the date of the above decree, the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) had been assured that the Taliban would respect Afghan cultural heritage. The same Mullah Omar had, in fact, previously issued several decrees on preservation.[2]

Such a policy change can only be interpreted as a victory for the hardliners within the Taliban and was certainly the result of the influence of, as we now all know, al-Qaeda representatives. The Taliban's decision on the destruction was answered by an outcry from around the world, including from many Islamic countries. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, condemned the decision, and UNESCO sent a UN special envoy, Mr La France (a former Chair of SPACH), to Afghanistan. But despite all the efforts, the Buddhas were most cruelly blown up in early March 2001.

At the exhibition last autumn called "Afghanistan: A Millenary History" in Barcelona (to be shown this spring in Musée Guimet, Paris), a video recording of this moment was shown every two minutes and, with each replay, the spectator got an icy feeling and reactions ranged from despair to anger and even fear. It is a tragedy for the world, especially the Buddhist world, but particularly for the Afghans themselves. They have lost almost everything, and now they have even been robbed of the outstanding monuments of their rich past by a temporary, foreign influenced, oppressive regime.

There are two especially grim facts that should be noted. Firstly, according to the Taliban, the decree to destroy idols was based on Islamic law. This claim, however, is only true in the context of the purist views subscribed to by *wahhabi* Muslims, who condemn every depiction of living beings. According to other interpretations of the Qur'an, every depiction created before Islam emerged (as was the case with the Buddhas) should be respected. Perhaps it is also needless to add at this point that Buddha is no god and that there were no Buddhists left in Afghanistan. Therefore, even on restrictive religious grounds there was no reason for the destruction of the Buddhas. Secondly, following September 11, it became clear how 'easily' the Taliban could be conquered. This made one realize even more how useless this destruction had been. It also showed how easily manipulators can take away such a long-standing, inspiring, and strengthening monument in but a very brief moment.

Luckily, the publicity that followed was enormous and positive. Memory of the Buddhas did not perish into an obscure corner. Ironically, their destruction made them even more famous than they would ever have been without this tragedy.

'In Between'

Apart from the fate of the Buddhas, there were many other cultural tragedies that resulted in various dilemmas. Mullah Omar's devastating decree of February 2001 was not only directed at the Buddhas of Bamiyan, but at all objects of cultural heritage in Afghanistan that depicted living beings. After many years of plunder and inflicted damage, the Kabul Museum once again fell victim. Two valuable statues that

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