PREHISTORIC AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan’s spectacular historic finds confirm its strategic geopolitical position as an intercommunicating zone linking three great civilizations. The passage of personages such as Alexander of Macedon makes stirring reading. The passage of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam left vestiges that increase our understanding of world religions. The passage and interchange of luxury trade goods provide insights into the glories of ancient Rome, Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, Central Asia and China. The mingling of such diverse peoples inspired artisans, jewelers, sculptors and writers whose skills reflected the fusion of a wide assortment of creative ideals within their communities. These local artistic innovations then spread far beyond and were assimilated by other cultures.

Historians and travelers throughout many centuries were captivated by the country’s artistic richness. Archaeologists sunk their spades with stupendous results. Few, however, contemplated the doings of prehistoric man. Their story, nonetheless, indicates that Afghanistan also served as a centre for singular developments during the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic periods when a variety of modern man developed physically in northern Afghanistan and revolutionized Stone Age technology.

Excavations also suggest that the northern foothills of the Hindu Kush must be considered one of the early centers for the domestication of plants and animals during the Neolithic. It was this development that permitted man to control his food supply and create the surpluses that led to specialization and emerging urbanization that ultimately enabled him to indulge in the artistic achievements that burgeoned so magnificently during the later historic periods.

SUMMARY of the INVESTIGATIONS

In the late 19th century a few intrepid travelers made an occasional note of prehistoric debris in their meticulous jottings, but scientific investigations began only after World War II. The following summary highlights the work that was done from that time up to 1978 when work all but ceased because of the current on-going conflict. It should be noted that the dating is very broad, indicating only major prehistoric periods applicable for the Afghan area, with the approximate dates within these large categories.
In all, some 133 sites were identified; only 17 of which were excavated to any extent. For the rest, scattered surface finds of lithic material, pottery and occasional metal fragments present tantalizing hints for the future.

Teams from three countries led in this research. The French did sink some pits as early as 1936 in mounds dating from the Iron Age (early 1st millennium B.C.) near Nad-i-Ali in southwest Nimruz Province. However, it was their excavations conducted from 1951-58 that brought to light the first evidence of the growth of a small agricultural village into a densely populated town. The monumental Bronze Age/Iron Age site at Mundigak northwest of Kandahar (4\textsuperscript{th}-1\textsuperscript{st} millennium B.C.) contained grandiose public buildings and granaries and maintained links with the great Indus Valley cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in what is now Pakistan. Artifacts included sizeable collections of fine painted-pottery goblets, terracotta figurines, steatite seals, bronze and copper implements and mirrors, jewellery, and a superb sculptured limestone male head.

More specific evidence of trade with the Indus Valley was later found in 1975-79 in the northeastern province of Takhar at the Bronze Age site of Shortugai (end of 3\textsuperscript{rd}-2\textsuperscript{nd} millennium B.C.). Here the presence of a Harappan trader’s seal indicates that trade routes criss-crossed the landscape since very early times. Many surveys identified Epi-Palaeolithic, Bronze and Iron Age sites from Takhar to Samangan, as well as in the southwest.

The Americans came in 1949 specifically to survey prehistoric sites. Their work covered the area southwest of Kandahar, and north up into Fqrah Province. The large Shamshir Ghar cave overlooking the Arghandab River near Badwan, Kandahar Province, began with three Bronze Age levels (2\textsuperscript{nd} millennium B.C.). It was excavated in 1950. The 1951 excavations at the Bronze Age site of Deh Morasi Gundai (4\textsuperscript{th}-3\textsuperscript{rd} millennium B.C.) suggested this semi-sedentary satellite village supplied Mundigak with agricultural products, mirroring modern settlement patterns.

Later excavations took place in 1968 and 1970 when a mound near Nad-i-Ali called Surkh Dagh produced evidence of occupation during the Iron Age (early 1st millennium B.C.), and Bronze Age occupation was uncovered at Sayed Qala Tepa (3,500-2,100 B.C.), near Panjwai in Kandahar Province.

The first Stone Age caves to be scientifically explored were those excavated north of the Hindu Kush in 1954 at the Middle Palaeolithic/Epi-Palaeolithic complex located at Kara Kamar (32,000-9,000 B.C.), near the capital of Samangan Province. Major excavations undertaken from 1959-65 at Aq Kupruk in the mountains south of Balkh, the capital of the northern province of Balkh, indicated a long occupation from the Upper Palaeolithic into the later Iron Age of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century A.D., but the site is known principally for its Upper Palaeolithic finds (18,000-10,000 B.C.). About 20,000 flint implements were recovered from the Aq Kupruk sites. Tool technology by this time had advanced so significantly that the toolmakers of Aq Kupruk are known as the Michelangelos of the Upper Palaeolithic. A unique sculptured limestone pebble
representing a human head may not come up to the standards of Michelangelo, but it is
the oldest sculptured specimen yet found in Asia (15,000 century B.C.).

The Neolithic levels at Aq Kupruk beginning around 9,000 B.C. contained
domesticated wheat and barley seeds, domesticated sheep and goat bones, sickle blades to
reap the grains, and, after 5,000, crude pottery as well. A later Neolithic, around 4,000
B.C., occurred further east, at Darra-i-Kur near the hamlet of Baba Darwesh in
Badakhshan Province. This cave once overlooked a lake long since disappeared.
Excavations in 1966 produced finds ranging from the Middle Palaeolithic to the Bronze
Age (50,000-1,900 B.C.) that included a large fragmentary human temporal bone from
the Middle Palaeolithic level (50,000-30,000 B.C.), which appears to be transitional
between Neanderthal man and modern man.

A large cave near Gurziwan with Middle Palaeolithic to Bronze Age lithic and
ceramic material (50,000-2,000 B.C.) and the Iron Age Gharluli cave
(2nd-1st millennium B.C.), both way to the west in Faryab Province, were investigated in 1969 and 1970.

In 1976, just before the 1978 war began, a surface scatter of Lower Palaeolithic
(?-50,000 B.C.) tools were found on the eastern terraces of the Dasht-i-Nawur, a large
brackish perennial lake west of Ghazni that still provides breeding and nesting areas for
large numbers of migrating waterfowl. At the northern end of the Dasht a significantly
large number of Epi-Palaeolithic obsidian microblades (10,000-8,000 B.C.) were
collected from the surface, representing the first obsidian assemblage yet found in
Afghanistan.

The Russians, and after 1969 as the Afghan/Soviet Archaeological Mission, were
very active across the northern provinces from Faryab to Samangan where they
conducted numerous surveys of surface sites on and around the sand dunes lining the
south bank of the Oxus River. Many microliths characteristic of the Epi-Palaeolithic
were found. Two late Bronze Age sites (2,300-1,700 B.C.) among the series of some 33
mounds in the Dashli Oasis between Balkh and Aqcha in Jauzjan Province were
excavated in 1969. Dashli 3 contained massive defensive walls, palaces, storage facilities
and other public buildings, including a large circular structure that may have been a
temple. Fine ceramics, bronze weapons, flints and jewellery were recovered. The Dashli
sites expanded the picture of a dynamic Bronze Age in Afghanistan and are extremely
important for the study of the development of urbanization in Central Asia.

In 1973, the sprawling Kumli settlements in Balkh Province represented by eight
mounds stretching northwards towards the Oxus over a nine-kilometer area provided
further evidence for later developments during the Iron Age (7th-6th centuries B.C.)

This work was but a prelude to the discovery that would bring worldwide renown
to the Afghan Soviet Mission and Afghanistan. The hoard of more than 20,000 pieces of
gold from Tella Tepa, Jauzjan Province (100 B.C.-200 A.D.), sheds all important light on
the transition between the collapse of the Bactrian dynasties and the rise of the Kushans,
a period that had hitherto lain shrouded in mists of uncertainty. But the burials that held
this treasure were sunk into the remains of an imposing Early Iron Age temple fortified by stout ramparts that had once been used by fire-worshippers towards the close of the 2nd millennium B.C., about the time it is thought Zoroaster preached in the vicinity of neighbouring Balkh. The golden hoard burials were excavated in 1978, but work on the mound had been going on intermittently since 1969.

Teams from other countries, such as Britain, Italy, Germany and India, also pinpointed prehistoric sites. In 1962, the Italians investigated an amazing scatter of Epi-Palaeolithic and Neolithic stone tools littering the floor of the Hazar Sum Valley in Samangan Province (10,000-7,000 B.C.) In 1965, they excavated the rock shelter of Darra-i-Kalan southwest of Kara Kamar where Upper and Epi-Palaeolithic materials were found dating 15,000-7,500 B.C. The British studied surface collections from Hilmand Province in 1966, but their main excavations were undertaken in the old city of Kandahar from 1974-78, where sustained, almost uninterrupted, settlement was noted since the Bronze Age in the 2nd millennium B.C.

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Surveyed and excavated prehistoric sites cluster in several areas. Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites appear mainly in the northern foothills and on the plains south of the Oxus River. Only the yet to be fully explored Dasht-i-Nawur sites sit in the east. Bronze Age sites cover the same general span of the earlier periods in the north, but include a wider area stretching eastward into the mountains as far as Takhar and Badakhshan. In the south, another Bronze Age cluster exists around Kandahar and probes far west into Nimroz and up into Farah. For the Iron Age the focus swings again to the north and northeast, particularly in Samangan and Takhar.

That Bronze and Iron Age occupations are so clustered is in no way surprising for long-distance trading thrived during these periods when the early trade routes crossed through both southern and northern Afghanistan. But the paucity of information that exists from other parts of the country, especially around Herat, makes it difficult to answer many questions about early contacts beyond Afghanistan’s borders.

It is known, for example, that lapis lazuli from Badakhshan was a major trade item exported to India, Egypt and Mesopotamia during two main periods in the Bronze Age, from the middle to the end of the 3rd millennium B.C., and around 1,350 B.C. In these areas lapis was prized for its supernatural powers and medicinal qualities, as well as for adornment. Quantities of excavated lapis beads, finely carved pendants of many shapes, rings, cylinder seals and golden objects adorned with this semi-precious stone prove that a lucrative trade existed with these distant lands, as well as with cities along the way such as Persepolis. But just how lapis arrived at the centers of these great civilizations is not clear. Much remains to be learned about how these networks functioned.

Searching for prehistoric evidence in caves, at campsites and settlements, nevertheless is an arduous pastime. Palaeolithic man chose to live near sources of water
that attracted the wildlife on which the survival of their communities depended. Many of these water sources have long since disappeared. Where the water sources still exist, as at Aq Kupruk, caves and open air sites overhang swiftly flowing rivers making access extremely precarious. The limestone caves and rock shelters once used for shelter and the terraces on which they camped or used for observation posts are now hard to identify. However, the litters of thousands of tools washed out of high caves that now lie strewn about dry riverbeds frequently signal the presence of old occupations. Sturdy 4-wheel drive vehicles, strong legs, healthy lungs and stout hearts are prerequisites for early prehistoric research in Afghanistan.

After the Neolithic Revolution when plants and animals were domesticated some 4-11,000 years ago, groups moved onto the plains where planting was easier and water more plentiful. By the Bronze and Iron Ages these communities needed grain storage facilities, fortifications and weapons to protect their growing wealth, substantial residential sections for artisans, traders and administrators, bazaar areas, large religious complexes and administration buildings to service the complexities of urban living. Most of these locations are off the modern roadways, but are relatively easier to reach than the earlier sites.

This summary, short as it is, indicates now varied and wealthy the prehistoric sequences are, even if the surface has barely been scratched.

**STATUS of SITES and ARTIFACTS**

Because of their remote locations, because Palaeolithic tools are difficult for non-professionals to identify and because these artifacts possess minimal attraction for looters and stolen art dealers, caves and rock shelters were never in much danger of being disturbed. It seems doubtful if any have been plundered during recent times.

In the past, however, sites on the plains were always vulnerable. Before the war the mounds west of Mazar-i-Sharif, such as those in the Dashli Oasis, were popular with the general public for weekend outings. Seeking a little entertainment, bored families of government servants exiled from swinging Kabul in the 1960s and 70s, came by the car full to scrounge around in the excavations looking for treasure. They threw aside such objects as the delicate high-stemmed ceramic serving dishes that were so very elegant, shattering them into thousands of fragments. All efforts to stop these weekend marauders were fruitless even at that time when law enforcement was relatively efficient.

Many Bronze Age objects could be picked up from sidewalk vendors in Kabul before the war. The variety of beautifully crafted bronze seals was fascinating. In addition, semi-precious beads, bronze weapon blades of intriguing shapes and sizes, as well as toiletries were available, including graceful bronze jars for eye makeup with slender applicators still in place. Reasonably priced, small and easy to carry, these artifacts were immensely popular with the hoards of tourists visiting Kabul in the 1970s. Diplomats and resident businessmen also delighted in amassing large collections.
Museum officials were fully aware that much vital information was lost when these singular objects vanished from sight. Yet no effort to salvage them for the museum was made because the authorities rigidly adhered to UNESCO's dictum that governments should purchase no illegally excavated objects. To do so, it was said, unduly stimulated illicit trading. The controversy over the propriety of acquiring unprovenanced and looted objects under any circumstances still rages.

Earlier, the government had followed a more aggressive policy. In 1966 word reached Kabul that a hoard of Bronze Age gold and silver vessels had been found, most probably by farmers digging in their fields. Government officials were promptly dispatched to the area around the Khosh Tepa mound (also referred to as Fullul) at Sai Hazara village in Baghlan Province, and the items were confiscated. Unfortunately, by the time the officials arrived most of the vessels had been cut into pieces so as to even the shares sold to local goldsmiths and silversmiths in the bazaar. The weight totaled 940 grams of gold and 1,922 grams of silver.

Nonetheless, it is possible to surmise that the Khosh Tepa hoard represents trade items exchanged for lapis from the nearby mines in Badakhshan. Styles associated with Mesopotamia, Iran, India and Central Asia dominate the decorative motifs. This suggests that the objects came from different sources, even at different times during the second half of the 3rd millennium and in the 2nd millennium B.C. Most probably date ca. 2,500 B.C. The Khosh Tepa specimens, therefore, shed light on the widespread trade that flourished over the centuries.

The government also successfully saved a hoard of 13,000 coins dating from the 4th century B.C. onwards, accidentally found in 1947 at Mir Zaka in Paktiya Province. The government was strong enough at that time to retrieve the coins and stop further digging. By 1992 after all semblance of central control had vanished, however, the villagers resumed extensive, highly organized excavations and recovered an estimated 2-3 tons of coins, in addition to 200 kilograms of gold and silver objects. Officials from the Institute of Archaeology were ordered to proceed to the site to stop the digging, but as the Director wryly noted, security was so bad a regiment of soldiers would have been needed just to protect the staff. As a result, most of this incomparable material was sold in Peshawar at exorbitant prices and is consequently lost to Afghanistan.

More recently when the archaeologists left Tella Tepa in February 1979, a seventh burial lay unexplored. Armed guards were posted and assurances of protection were obtained from the governor, but by the next spring gold ornaments and Chinese mirrors similar to those that had been excavated appeared for sale in Kabul. An investigation was launched, but the shopkeeper decamped.

During the war, major prehistoric pieces were not in much evidence in Peshawar. This is not to say that some were not closeted out of sight for favoured customers or sent directly to collectors abroad, as were the fine Gandharan specimens. A case in point occurred when a representative of a group of smugglers offered to sell a lot of six
decorative plaster molds from Begram that had been looted from the Kabul museum. Casually thrown in with these was a miscellany of other items, including two Bronze Age seals from Shortugai. One was the all-important Harappan trader’s seal depicting a rhinoceros, the only physical evidence to date that Harappan trade extended so far north.

It is clear from these examples that police protection is equally as important for prehistoric sites as it is for the later sites. It is foolish, however, to think that this is either feasible or practical under the prevailing unstable conditions. There is neither manpower nor funds nor a general willingness to provide such protection. Consequently, the plundering of sites has increased measurably since the installation of the present government. It is not only more widespread but interventions are far more dangerous than ever before.

The situation at the museum poses special problems. What prehistoric material was looted from the Kabul Museum is an open question. After the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992 a succession of looted museum pieces began to surface in Kabul and both the Ministry of Information and Culture and private individuals began to purchase pieces for return to the museum. The listing of those items recovered by the ministry has yet to be released, but one lot donated in 1995 by a private individual contained four out of the museum’s 17 Khosh Tepa pieces.

Meticulous inventories were carried out from 1996-2000 when items remaining in the museum were eventually transferred for safekeeping to the Ministry. These included a few items from a limited number of prehistoric sites, but the frenzied forays on these storerooms made by the Taliban in 2001 so disarranged things that a new inventory must be taken before it can be said with certainty what remains there.

It seems doubtful that many of the prehistoric surface collections were included with the objects shifted after 1996. One observer graphically describes groping his way into the pitch dark prehistoric storeroom in the days before electricity had been reinstalled, to find himself treading on a carpet of flint tools fallen from disintegrated specimen bags.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

As the above discussion points out, prehistoric sites are no less in need of protection than later sites. Unscrupulous dealers, both Afghan and foreign, are more active now than ever. Laws are promulgated, but the resources to enforce the laws lack manpower and funds. Central authority has no teeth. Public apathy compounds the root problems. Reconstruction activities now forging ahead with single-minded enthusiasm threaten to overwhelm cultural sites, particularly prehistoric locations whose importance is beyond the ken of developers.

Certainly protection of sites is a primary necessity if the hemorrhaging of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage is to be stemmed, but to demand that international or
national institutions provide this protection is simply unrealistic rhetoric that must be ignored for the good reason that the required infrastructure does not exist and will not exist for some time.

What do exist are communities, and individuals within these communities. The rationale of involving local communities in heritage resource management is not well understood in Afghanistan. Yet the benefits are clearly evident in any numbers of locations throughout the country where historical monuments that survived the vicissitudes of the recent wars have maintained their integrity precisely because they were regarded as living parts of the communities that sheltered them. Efforts to raise awareness to nurture similar feelings of community responsibility toward archaeological sites near their settlements must be initiated.

Central to nurturing responsible community awareness is the need to overcome the public apathy that lies at the root of so many problems. The fabric of many inner towns and cities was severely compromised before the war and the process accelerates. While ancient buildings are defiled, neglected to the point of no return and pulled down in favour of potentially more lucrative construction, the population looks on with scant concern.

Public apathy stems from the absence of basic knowledge and is particularly acute where the prehistoric is concerned. One telling example from the past is the case of a former minister who was highly regarded among the intellectual community. When he visited Aq Kupruk before the war, the archaeologists proffered their beautiful tools for examination with understandable excitement only to have their spirits dashed when the minister dismissed their offerings with a shake of his head, saying: Oh no! Afghans were never so primitive.

Attitudes must change and attitudes will change only through understanding activated by inspiring accurate information. For this imaginative advocacy and awareness raising efforts provide the best outlets for action. Many scoff at the very mention of awareness raising for the tendency is to favour spending masses of money on flashy impact efforts for maximum effect in a minimum of time. These efforts are seldom sustainable.

Advocacy and awareness raising take time and patience. Beginnings must be made through the school system. In the past, heritage was not included in school curricula except in a most cursory fashion. Now three generations of refugee children have grown to maturity with little or no knowledge of the wonders that exist in their homeland. Few educators take cognizance of the fact that the splendid matrix of Afghan culture provides untold opportunities to enliven learning. Happily, today there is a growing interest at high levels in education reform. While those who have struggled over the past many years with textbook revisions will smile indulgently, introducing culture into the curriculum still remains a crucial essential on which so many other efforts depend.
School courses and community education programmes need to be enhanced by supplementary reading materials. If experience elsewhere in the world is any indication, the prehistoric will certainly be slighted. Publications in Afghanistan on the prehistoric are now couched in writing so excruciatingly turgid they numb the mind. It is time to attract the attention of those experts versed in exciting new communication techniques so as to set forth in a vivid fashion the contributions and accomplishments made during the prehistoric periods.

Radio and TV airings can be used to bolster printed materials. Local radio stations are now springing up all over the country, manned by energetic young men and women open to all manner of programming that can enhance the popularity of their broadcasts. Already many have asked for material on the cultural heritage. Other methods now being explored in a limited fashion – traveling cinemas, puppet shows, circus performances – can be enlarged and utilized effectively for cultural purposes as well.

Another medium to be explored is a network of small local museums. Requests from local initiators in several provincial communities have also been received. Though yet to be acted upon, they warrant serious consideration. Handled with ingenuity and creative thinking, local museums can fulfill a multiplicity of roles. By developing a sense of continuity with the past, museums imbue individuals with feelings of pride in having had a part of what has gone before them, and this sharpens their appreciation of the present and gives rise to higher expectations for the future. This in itself is a potent nation building process of value for war-torn Afghanistan.

But a great deal of imaginative thinking and planning is needed before local museums can be effective. The crowded, dusty displays devoid of accompanying learning aids that characterized local museums before the war simply will not do. The displays need to convey the idea that ancient artifacts illuminate the course of development, and presented in ways that permit viewers to identify with them so that through them they can gain a sense of themselves as essential parts of the nation's identity. This again needs the assistance of those versed in new techniques, coupled with imaginative thinking.

Building attitudes to enhance cultural protection needs to be addressed at all levels of government, not only among communities and civil society groups. Strategic policies to guide regional cultural development are now being formulated mainly at the centre. Failure to develop clear lines of responsibility between ministries and their sub departments was a major hindrance to cohesive management in the past, although grateful recognition is due to those few who did inform the Ministry of Information and Culture when archaeological objects were uncovered during the execution of development projects. The imposing Kushan dynastic temple at Surkh Kotal in Baghlan Province is an outstanding example. The responsible action taken by road builders who accidentally unearthed an inscribed building block in 1950 led to the excavation of one of Afghanistan's finest archaeological sites.
Now this responsible attitude must be inculcated anew. The archaeologists at Tella Tepa relate the gripping story of how they arrived at the site one day to find men at the gears of monstrous road building equipment throwing up an embankment by heartlessly gouging into the excavated area, crushing potsherds and flattening ancient dwellings with the treads of their bulldozers.

Today's technicians in charge of development projects, many of whom have only recently returned from years of exile, are impatient with vestiges of the past. For them it is easier to raze the old in order to raise the new. Most have had no opportunity to learn about their past. Prehistoric sites are particularly difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend. Maintaining strong information-sharing links with all levels of decision-making authority is clearly indicated, but an aggressive campaign to win their cooperation requires much advocacy and awareness raising.

Some may well say that these suggestions are as far-fetched as expecting regiments of law enforcement forces to suddenly appear at archaeological sites. Granted, it will not be easy. Granted, this approach takes time and patience. Granted, the stolen art business continues to thrive globally despite high levels of education and awareness in other countries. Granted, the dark side of raising awareness can play into the hands of grasping dealers.

Nevertheless, cases where dedicated local leadership has made a difference can also be cited. Fortunately, opportunities to elicit the cooperation of major communication players increase daily in Kabul. The development environment is alive with ideas for the potential introduction of new technologies with unprecedented dimensions that can be marshaled for disseminating cultural information. Donors as well as entrepreneurs talk in expansive and grandiose terms. Buying into this great fund of expertise and enthusiasm should be the objective of all those concerned with heritage protection and preservation.

The time to tap this enthusiasm is now. The responsibility to initiate a wide variety of actions among a wide range of actors falls squarely on communities and concerned individuals. All that is needed are fertile minds, vision, imagination, optimism and a can-do outlook. The challenges are great. Are there any takers? That is the question.
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