The Golden Hoard of BACTRIA

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All that glitters is truly gold in the grave of a young woman (opposite), perhaps a princess of ancient Bactria, in northern Afghanistan. When our joint Soviet-Afghan team excavated six such graves in 1978, we found 20,000 gold artifacts, among them a gold hair pendant (below). The finds shed light on a period 2,000 years ago along the great Silk Route. Now these treasures face an uncertain future as Afghanistan cope with the aftermath of civil war.

The Dark Period, it was called—the shadowy two-century span between ancient empires in the land of Bactria, on the northern plains of today's Afghanistan.

In the rainy fall of 1978 that darkness lifted. Digging in an unassuming mound known as Tillya Tepe, the "golden hill," we chanced upon the graves of eight ancients who had lived within that unknown period some 2,000 years ago. And with their bones we found the wealth they were to carry to the afterlife—more than 20,000 artifacts, mostly crafted of gold and semiprecious stones—a treasure of such artistic and descriptive richness that to speak of it was already to begin to understand that distant time.

But before we had a chance to make plaster copies of the pieces, before they could be studied or displayed, war and confusion closed on Afghanistan. Today the priceless hoard from Tillya Tepe is in Kabul, but its condition is unknown, and scholars have no access. My efforts to have the trove fully safeguarded have so far met with disappointment.

Two eventful decades have passed since I first went to Afghanistan from Moscow's Institute of Archaeology in 1969. We arrived as part of the joint Soviet-Afghan Expedition to examine the antiquities that lay beneath the fabled Bactrian Plain, once an important crossroads on the great Silk Route from the varied lands of the Roman Empire in the west to the Chinese cities protected by the Great Wall in the east. We based our camp in Sheberghan, a large village set on the dry plain between the bleak foothills of the Hindu Kush and the desert valley of the Amu Darya. It reminded me of home, for I was born in Tashkent, in Soviet Central Asia, where my father, looking for a more meaningful life, had immigrated from. (Continued on page 58)
Collapsible crown for a nomadic life

It came as a kit, this elaborate gold crown taken from Grave Six. To archaeologists it reveals a fascinating blend of style and practicality. It comes apart into six pieces—the five elaborate palmettes are slotted into a headband. A princess on the move could disassemble the crown, lay it flat, slip it into her saddlebags, and be on the road in mere minutes.

Many of the artifacts found at Tillya Tepe were imported from faraway places along the Silk Route, but much of the local artwork, like this crown, was a cultural hybrid. Bactria was autonomous
4,000 years ago, but through the centuries it was dominated by succeeding expansionist empires: the Persians of the Achaemenid period, the Greek colonizers in the path of Alexander the Great, and the wave of nomadic Kushan and eastern Scythians who swept in from the north to usher in the Dark Period, the time of these burials. The gold crown testifies to the high rank of women in Kushan culture, a common tradition among nomadic tribes. When we packed the treasures into crates, I was in despair for two days because I thought the crown, one of the most important artifacts, was missing. I finally found it, packed flat, in a box I had not searched because it was reserved for small objects.
Dark of ivory, light of gold

Local gold from Bactrian rivers was made into a necklace of hollow gold and black-painted ivory beads, found on a woman in Grave Two. Gold grains were painstakingly soldered on after the hemispheres of each bead were joined. The string that once held the necklace together had decomposed. Wear marks suggest it was worn often.

Diameter of ivory beads: 2 cm

Horned glory

Details breathe life into a Greco-Bactrian ibex, part of a ceremonial diadem. Rings under the hoofs once attached it to a base. Early Kushan, heedless of Greco-Bactrian traditions, took such pieces apart.

Size: 5.2 x 4 cm

Cupids astride dolphins

Curly-haired cupids on a dress clasp appear distinctly Greco-Roman. But scales on the dolphins, whose eyes are inset pearls, reveal the local goldsmith’s ignorance: Dolphins have no scales.

Overall size: 4.2 x 9.8 cm
Mix-and-match Aphrodite

Familiar yet exotic, the figure of the Greek goddess of love recalls the soft sensuousness of Greco-Roman sculptures. But the wings—never seen on Aphrodite in Greek or Roman art—stem from ancient Bactrian tradition, and the forehead mark is imported from India. Bactrian art in the Dark Period was seldom pure; patrons of the local goldsmiths combined various traditions. This Aphrodite, in the form of a pendant, was found among hundreds of gold spangles lying on the bosom of the young woman in Grave Six.

Size: 5 x 2.6 cm

Goddess Anahita

On a temple pendant Anahita rules an entourage of fanciful creatures in her realm of sea, land, and sky. Her classical figure suggests Grecon influence; the beasts evoke Scythian legends.

Size: 5.8 x 4.6 cm

Amour rides again

On another dress clasp, Dionysus fondles Ariadne on a chimera, while a drunkard extends a cup. The theme is Hellenic, but the steed is Bactrian: In Greece the lovers usually rode a panther.

Size: 6.5 x 7 cm
Local people gather as a team member excavates Grave Two. The burial sites had been dug down through rubble and ancient temple walls that were unrelated to the graves themselves. Though local farmers knew the mound as the "golden hill," they had forgotten why. One grave offered a clue: Field mice had looted it, and their nearby burrows were filled with thin gold platelets. Perhaps the mice had hauled some gold to the surface, where farmers found it. Hence the name.  

(Continued from page 50) a village in Greece. Sheberghan was on the frontier of the struggling Afghan nation and mired in poverty. Cotton fields pressed against the mud-brick houses, and merchants sat stoically among their stacks of melons and eggplants at the central bazaar. When night fell, everything was still. Neighbors talked to neighbors in the darkness between houses, and packs of hungry dogs circled in the streets. It was much as Bactria must have been during the Dark Period. Only in the morning, when the trucks started up, did the 20th century return.

On and off for nine years we dug into the mounds near Sheberghan. At first we focused on an obvious site called Yemshi Tepe, the ruins of a monumental city dating from the first century B.C. Inside its walls we found a citadel, perhaps the palace of the local ruler who controlled a cluster of smaller villages that now appeared as small swells of sunbaked earth.

But surely an earlier people had farmed this plain. Day after dusty day I drove from mound to mound, searching for some sign of Bronze Age life, my speciality. In the brittle grass on one such mound my eyes fell on a type of painted potsherd I recognized from a prior dig in Central Asia. It pushed the date of habitation in this area back a thousand years, to the beginning of the second millennium B.C. A fantastic find! While others were excavating nearby Yemshi Tepe, my team set out to see what lay beneath this simple hillock.

Amid its top layer we found a village from the third century B.C., as we had expected. But from the layer beneath emerged the outline of a massive edifice. Inside, within a double line of columns, stood a mud-brick altar coated with ashes. Surely this was a temple for the worship of fire, built 3,200 years ago.
As we excavated in late 1978, Afghanistan was inching toward a civil war. A new socialist republic had been declared. We were not caught in any fighting, but one morning armed tribesmen came on horseback, like sand devils off the desert, circling Tillya Tepe, asking angry questions. The frightened workmen implored us not to say anything, or we would be shot. And then the riders were gone.

Despite the growing danger our fascination with the ancient temple urged us on, while clouds that rolled in from the Hindu Kush each day grew darker, promising the heavy, prolonged rains of winter. A cold drizzle started late at night on November 12 and forced us to break off work at noon the next day. But that morning we had found several rusted fragments of iron bands with nails sticking from them. One was bent at a right angle and looked a lot like a bracket from a wooden coffin.

When the weather cleared, a workman suddenly turned up a disk that gleamed among the clods of damp earth. Gold! We called a military guard and waded in with pounding hearts. And soon a grave emerged from beneath our picks and scoops. Staring at us were the hollow eye sockets of a skull, a young woman between 25 and 30, perhaps a princess. Surrounding her were layers of gold jewelry and ornamentation (below) that had collapsed together from her disintegrated clothing.

Time wore away the flesh and clothing of a Kushan noblewoman, perhaps a princess, buried in Grave One. Her gold jewelry and artifacts—the tiny disks and platelets sewn onto her robes—slowly sank among the bones, then dirt collapsed around them. We labored long to excavate the skeleton (left), separating artifacts from rubble and plotting the finds on paper, as we did to reconstruct each of the graves. We worked well into the bitter Afghan winter, our fingers numb with cold.

ALL SOVIET-AFGHAN EXPEDITION
Bactria: hub of the great trade routes

As the Greco-Bactrian period waned and the Kushan Empire waxed in the first century A.D., caravans of shaggy packhorses and two-humped Bactrian camels plodded along the route that led from Luoyang to imperial Rome. They carried the trade and treasure of the Orient—precious stones, silk, and spices—in exchange for Western goods. Sea lanes...
based on monsoon winds augmented caravans. The Kushan nomads eventually learned the ways of commerce and established themselves as middlemen along the age-old trade routes.

Ensconced in the Amu Darya Valley, they exacted duties from the caravans and bartered for artifacts such as these below, all found in the excavations. The Kushan also traded along the north-south route from India. Through the Khyber Pass came aromatic resins, sandalwood, and exotic animals—some bound for markets as far away as the Mediterranean.

From the Chinese Han dynasty came a polished mirror, part of a cosmetic kit. On the mirror back, Chinese characters surround an eight-pointed star.

An unknown Indian state minted this coin embossed in the Kharoshthi script and bearing the image of a man pushing the wheel of dharma.

The nomadic Scythians from Siberia fashioned this gold plaque on wooden backing, a decoration for a horse bridle. The scene depicts a panther mauling an antelope.

Local artisans produced this necklace made of gold wire and set with an antique stone cameo depicting a Greco-Bactrian ruler.
The brilliance of her Dark Period finery astonished us.

The potent word "gold" soon spread across the plain, and a pilgrimage began of village people, tourists, and authorities from Kabul. Some came on donkeys, others walking. One constant visitor was the farmer whose cotton fields lay next to our excavation. He would sit for hours on the edge of the dig, looking sad. "My wife has chased me from the house," he told us. "She yelled at me, 'All my life you've kept me in poverty, with gold lying under your feet every day!'"

But what was the mound of Tillya Tepe? Who buried the princess here, and why?

This is what we know: Four thousand years ago the first agricultural tribes appeared on the Bactrian Plain; those who built the fire-worship temple must have been among them. During the next thousand years the temple was rebuilt several times. When it fell out of use the mud-brick walls crumbled into a low mound. Tillya Tepe lay still for 600 years until a small village grew on the remains of the long-forgotten temple. The village did not last long, and again the site crumbled into ruin. So it would remain for 400 years until A.D. 100, when the golden graves were dug into the site's layered history.

While Tillya Tepe lay abandoned, Bactria was buffeted by the growing empires of the Achaemenid Persians and the Greek followers of Alexander the Great. Bactria itself grew into an independent state, known as the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. But the haunting nobles buried in the humble mound were newcomers to Bactria—they had come from the east to plunder the Greco-Bactrian cities.

On the other side of Asia another drama was unfolding. Where wandering tribes had clashed for centuries on the frontiers of China, an aggressive group of nomads called Kushan were pushed west by the Huns into the bleak and limitless expanse of southern Siberia. There the Kushan encountered the Scythians, another nomadic tribe that had coveted the flourishing oasis cities on the trade routes to the south but
dared not act alone. United, the horde gathered courage and raged across the Central Asian steppes 130 years before the birth of Christ, leaving charred fields and human suffering. When they crossed the Amu Darya—the Oxus River to Alexander the Great—they laid waste the Greco-Bactrian lands.

At first contemptuous of city life and Greek culture the nomads gradually became enamored of the seductive Hellenic tradition. They rebuilt the cities they had sacked and created the great Kushan Empire on their own debris. In the time between the Greco-Bactrian period and the well-documented flowering of the Kushan, ancient records fail us. As these nomads struggled with the ways of urban life and empire, the chroniclers of Rome did not visit them. The period was dark until our own time, when the Tillya Tepe treasures speak of those days with resonance and clarity.

The gold of Bactria shook the world of archaeology. It was compared by critics to the treasures of King Tutankhamun’s tomb in Egypt. The artifacts were found in context, not in some antique shop, not isolated from their owners or their time.

They gave us a chance to glimpse the extensive trade between the East and West. Nowhere in antiquity have so many different objects from so many different cultures—Chinese mirrors, Roman coins, daggers from Siberia—been found together in situ. And the local art of Bactria discovered at Tillya Tepe is a tantalizing amalgam of influences. Never has there been an artifact like the chubby little gold Aphrodite (page 57), who is Grecian in concept but has the distinctly non-Grecian wings of a Bactrian deity and an Indian forehead mark that indicates marital status!

WE LABORED into the winter with fingers numb and shriveled from the bitter winds that leaked through the plywood huts we had erected. Each thin gold platelet had to be cleaned and inventoried. We could barely hold the pincers. We slept in Sheberghan but ate noodles and tinned meat from Moscow while sitting in the truck, embarrassed at how little the workers had.

The plan was to return the following fall, in 1979. We posted an Afghan guard over the necropolis and headed for the Kabul Museum with the crates of excavated treasures. But conflict
Tillya Tepe's stunning cemetery

The graves of Tillya Tepe, shown below, were uncovered one by one as the mound itself was excavated. Clearly those who buried their relatives here had no knowledge of what lay beneath. Emerging from the topmost layer was a crude village dating from 350 B.C. From a lower stratum appeared a grand edifice of walls and turrets, more than a thousand years older than the graves. Within the walls we found two columned halls and an altar covered with the ashes we think were produced during fire-worship ceremonies.

But when the burials were made, Tillya Tepe was just another hillock. At first we were perplexed: The graves were too simple, only pits with dirt walls and wooden planks to protect the coffins (diagram, below). Why inter such wealth here? The graves should have been majestic and located in some city. My own theory is that they were deliberately camouflaged. Graves were dug in secret for the local Kushan rulers, who were fully mindful of others' greed. All the graves lay within eyesight of Yemshi Tepe, a nearby citadel that may have been the regional Kushan capital. To guard the graves, the rulers could merely look out their palace windows. Perhaps official mausoleums, complete with empty coffins, lay within the walls of the city.

Painting by William H. Bond

Grave Six
soon erupted and we left Afghanistan in a hurry in February 1979, never to return to the dig.

We had excavated six graves (left) of what may have been the family cemetery of the rulers of a large Kushan principedom. Grave Two held a bespangled matriarch between 30 and 40 years old. In Grave Three lay another female, perhaps a teenager. A tall warrior, the only male found, was buried in Grave Four. In Grave Five was a young woman whose relative lack of ornaments suggests she was of lower rank. From Grave Six emerged another woman, also perhaps a princess, who wore a collapsible crown. The seventh grave had not yet been examined, and the eighth emerged with the rains, as we sat in Moscow.

Since then darkness has again engulfed the treasures. Soldiers we had trusted apparently looted the two unexcavated graves left in the necropolis. Artifacts similar to the ones we found have turned up for sale. We saw the treasures of Tillya Tepe only once more, in 1982, when we had a chance to photograph them in Kabul.

Look well on these pictures of the Bactrian masterpieces that follow. Who knows when they will be seen again?
**Warrior belt**
A band of braided gold connects nine gold medallions in high relief, each depicting a goddess mounted on a snarling lion (detail below). The warrior in Grave Four wore this belt around his tunic.

**Diameter:** 4 CM

**Warrior clasp**
A warrior garbed in Greco-Roman armor and Macedonian-style helmet stands at the ready on a garment clasp (left). The warrior may be Ares, the Greek god of war, or Verethragna, his Persian counterpart. Columns of trees filled with snarling animals surround him. Such motifs were common to Scythian art but seldom found in Greco-Roman art.

**Size:** 9 x 6.3 CM
Beasts writhe on dagger
Dragons and other animals wrought in fantasy maul one another on the gold hilt (above) and gold-plated wooden sheath (right) of a ceremonial iron dagger found with the buried warrior. Turquoise inlays adorn both scenes. On the hilt a bear gnaws a grapevine, a common Siberian or Sarmatian motif. Scenes of powerful animals were believed to enhance the owner's strength and courage.

OVERALL LENGTH: 37.5 CM

Ghostly zebu
The influence of India shines from a translucent gemstone incised with an abstract likeness of a zebu, the humped Indian ox. A hole has been bored lengthwise for beading. Because the treasures have not been available for detailed study, many of the gemstones found have not been properly identified.

LENGTH: 2.1 CM
Chinese buckles

These turquoise-studded gold buckles bear images from the East—charioteers with Oriental features driving Chinese-style canopied chariots. But the winged griffins pulling the chariots suggest local Bactrian design.

Diameter: 5.5 cm
Early Kushan artisans blend cultures

They ruled no empire but took or bartered for what suited them from the caravans that traversed their land. Gradually the sons and grandsons of the fierce Kushan learned the ways of cities, of leisure, and of higher cultures as they grew from nomads to sedentary merchants.

Early Kushan clothed their dead with barbaric magnificence, beading every square inch of finery with tens and hundreds of gold platelets and artifacts. But their art was usually clumsy, mirroring their cultural confusion. Often gold was valued only for its weight. Some bracelets weighed 300 grams; ankle ornaments, a full kilogram. But they were devoid of art.

As the Kushan grew in cultural sophistication, the old art found its way back into vogue. The cameo of a Greco-Bactrian ruler on the facing page was an antique stone worked into a local design. Bactrian craftsmen, who were working for Kushan rulers, were no less skilled than their predecessors, but they lacked a strong cultural base of their own; they worked to please their clients' tastes. From their hands came ancient kitsch as well as works of authentic art. Even artifacts that looked Grecian lacked the feeling of Greek art.

Shell-like dish

This cast, fluted vessel lay under the warrior's head. Its weight of 638 grams was stamped in Greek on the back of the dish.

Diameter: 23 cm

Bactrian baubles

Hearts of turquoise decorate hollow gold beads, once part of a funerary necklace.

Size of round bead: 2.8 x 2.5 cm
Royal cameo

Topped by a Macedonian helmet complete with curled ribbon, the profile of a Greco-Bactrian ruler graces a two-hued stone later set into a gold necklace.

SIZE OF CAMEO: 4 X 3.5 CM
Signet ring
This crudely chiseled Greek goddess of wisdom carries a shield and spear. "Athena" is written in reverse, to produce a positive image.

Cosmetic pot
Beauty secrets buried for the afterlife once filled a silver vessel inscribed with circles and interwoven vines.

Antelope bracelets
Necks strain and eyes bulge as four stylized antelopes with turquoise ears, horns, and hoofs strive to meet around the wrist of the deceased noblewoman in Grave Two. Animals contorted for artistic purposes are characteristic of Siberian and Scythian design.
Dust to dust . . .
gold lives on

At the bottom of an unmarked earthen pit two meters down (left), a hoard of gold reveals the status of a Kushan noblewoman, perhaps 40 years old, found in Grave Two. The wooden coffin, whose outline remains, once stood on legs but had no lid.

When the woman was buried, a shroud spangled with gold disks was wrapped tightly around her body. On one finger she wore the signet ring seen on the facing page. Her jaw was bound with a broad gold chin stay. On her breast lay a Chinese mirror (like the one shown on page 61), seen here as a half-buried disk.

In the detail below, antelopes from the bracelets shown opposite peer from the soil. One still encircles the wristbone, the other lies by her upper arm. Both bracelets show strong signs of wear.

Grave Two was hollow until the wooden planks and leather hides that supported the earth above collapsed, compressing all into a jumble of bones, wooden scraps, and artifacts that took months to sort out. Every spangle, every pattern, every layer of wood dust was painstakingly analyzed. To complicate matters, the dead woman wore four or five layers of clothes, most with their own opulent style of embellishment.
Showcase necklace
Dollops and teardrops of garnet and turquoise wired to gold disks radiate from the necklace of the noblewoman in Grave Five. She was buried with little other gold, as if to emphasize this, her greatest treasure. The necklace was sewn to her robe.

LENGTH: 41 CM

Lidded gold jar
Laurel leaves wreath their way around a gold cosmetic pot of Greco-Roman influence. The handle of the lid is shaped like a pomegranate. A fine gold chain links top to bottom.

HEIGHT: 5.5 CM

Story in ivory
Only fragments remain of an ivory comb and a story etched into it. The comb may have been brought from India to Bactria, where it was buried as part of a noblewoman’s toiletries.

LENGTH: 5 CM
Golden confetti, thousands of spangles were stamped out to enrich the afterlife of the departed. Each platelet weighs next to nothing. In 1978 a pocketful of them might have bought a new car in Kabul, and they sorely tested the honesty of impoverished Afghan workers on our site. As soon as gold was found, officials turned suspicious of foreigners, and soldiers kept a constant vigil. A two-man team—one Soviet and one Afghan—was assigned to each grave, and their tallies of the daily findings had to match perfectly.

Our expedition left the site on February 8, 1979, and the whereabouts of the treasures became an instant controversy. From the moment of discovery there had been rumors that the gold was being spirited out of Afghanistan, even taken to the Soviet Union. As leader of the expedition, I can reassure the world that the treasures are still in Kabul.

What happens to them now is of concern to the international community. I feel that these artifacts deserve the scrutiny of specialists. They should be seen throughout the world for all the priceless knowledge they reveal. Their story is not just Afghan, not just Soviet or Greek. They write a special chapter of history, and they belong to all humanity.
A gigantic figure called the Owl Man, still visible after 2,000 years on a dry hillside near Nazca, Peru, points one arm to earth, the other to heaven where the bright star Arcturus trails across the sky in May. Was he meant to be an intermediary between two realms, a role assumed by the owl and the owl shaman in Andean lore? Or were such effigies—and the adjacent arrow-straight Nazca Lines—used as ritual walkways for celebrants seeking communion with the divine? In the Andes today people tread such sacred paths with offerings to mountain and sky gods, an action duplicated by a flashlight-carrying walker in this time exposure. Intense observers of the stars and planets, ancient Americans developed elaborate rituals to assure their place in the cosmos and bring order to their lives—a field explored by the new discipline of archaeoastronomy.

By JOHN B. CARLSON
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