

Afghanistan: Picking up the Pieces

Lest we forget, the burning of cultural objects such as musical instruments and manuscripts, the destruction of statues and images considered idols, and the wartime pillage and trade in valuable cultural artefacts – none of this type of devastation is new to humankind. However, seemingly out of sight and memory, as we turn our gazes away, some of the shards left behind in the rubble are picked up and saved. When considering this issue's theme section, we were hesitant that anything on Afghanistan would wade into the mire of political debate, which is not our mandate; however, and especially in this case, to assume a dismissive posture to political issues would also be inappropriate. Thus, we asked some prominent scholars to describe their work, their findings and, if possible, their experiences in the field. We want to redirect our readers' gaze to the activities of those researchers left virtually anonymous in the publications that dwell on the demolitions made spectacle. The preservation and study of cultural heritage – both living knowledge and that locked into the form of artefacts – is a continuing process. Elizabeth Errington focuses on Charles Masson, the intriguing man who left a legacy of records and antiquities collected on his travels through Afghanistan during the 1830s. His cataloguing methods were, writes Errington, ahead of his time, and his efforts are now benefitting another generation of researchers. In Charles Masson's day, it may have been easy for him to wander the country incognito and in relative safety; however, Jan van Belle and John Baily, two ethnomusicologists, give more recent accounts in which they describe their travels and recording of musicians both inside Afghanistan and among the Afghan diaspora. They remind us that music, its poetry, and the knowledge passed on from father to son of how to create them are less acknowledged victims of the Taliban's iconoclasm. Efforts must be made to preserve them. Contracts and personal letters from the City of Rob written in the local Bactrian language between the 4th and 8th century AD were carefully sealed, stored, and now recovered in perfectly preserved condition. Nicholas Sims-Williams is one of the few scholars who has succeeded in deciphering and interpreting them. While manuscripts may fill in background details, a numismatist would point out that coins quite likely provide the most valuable source of information on rulers and eras come and gone. Unfortunately, reports Osmund Bopearachchi, most coins from the rich hoards discovered throughout Afghanistan are now gone, perhaps forever, many even before they could be examined. The archaeologist Victor Sarianidi discovered the Tilya Tepe necropolis and its exquisite treasure of thousands of gold objects, never put on exhibit and now missing. He reminds us that artefacts which are destroyed, or disappear from the public domain through looting, are not only lost to the world for the stories they can tell us of humanity's past, but also simply for their sheer beauty and inspiration. Clearly there is need for action, and international organizations and the Afghan government are responding to the pleas. Jet van Krieken discusses the legal aspects of the preservation and return of objects of cultural heritage to Afghanistan; and what should be done with the empty niches in Bamian? Selecting Josephine Powell's photographs of sculptures and coins in the Kabul Museum for this issue was a profoundly bittersweet experience. With each opened box, we marveled at the beauty of the objects and felt anger and sadness for their loss; the crucial importance of records had become painfully clear. – *Tanja Chute & Ellen M. Raven*



Silver coin found at Mir Zakah with the image of the Indo-Greek King, Menander (155 BC) holding a spear. The Greek legend gives his name and title (BASILEOS SOTEROS MENANDROU). This king debated on issues of the Buddhist faith with the monk Nagasena, according to the early Buddhist text *Milindapañha*, 'Questions of Milinda' (=Menander). Formerly Kabul Museum.

Josephine Powell, courtesy of SPACH.

Ancient Afghanistan through the Eyes of Charles Masson (1800-1853):

The Masson Project at the British Museum

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In the 1930s, the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan found unexpected evidence of an earlier European visitor scribbled in one of the caves above the 55 m Buddha at Bamian. This stated:

*If any fool this high samootch explore
Know Charles Masson has been here before*

More recently Gregory Possehl also found a less ambitious bit of graffiti - just the name "Charles Masson" - pencilled on the wall of another cave nearby. So who was Charles Masson?

By Elizabeth Errington

Little is known of his personal life. He appears to have been well educated, knew Latin and Greek, and was fluent enough in Italian and French to be thought Italian by a Frenchman and French by an Englishman. A contemporary in Kabul in 1832 says that he had "grey eyes, red beard, with the hair of his head close cut. He had no stockings or shoes, a green cap on his head, and a dervish drinking cup slung over his shoulder"; there is no known portrait. When the British East India Company began funding him to explore the ancient sites around Kabul and Jalalabad in 1833, they thought he was an American from Kentucky. But it soon became apparent that the name Charles Masson was an alias adopted by an enlisted Englishman, James Lewis, after

he deserted the Bengal Artillery regiment in July 1827. In return for an official pardon in 1835, he was forced to become a "newswriter", or spy, for the British in Kabul. His sound political advice on Afghanistan was largely ignored by his superiors and he resigned in disgust in 1838 at the outbreak of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838-1842). In 1842, he returned to England. He married in 1844 and spent the years until his death in 1853 seeking alternative employment, working on his manuscripts and coin collection, and dreaming of returning to Afghanistan, while trying to live on a meagre pension of £100 per annum. Among his private papers there are monthly lists headed "Should have spent" and "Did spend", which show that his attempts at budgeting were usually unsuccessful. Under "Avoidable" are basic items like eels,

sausages, washing and train fares; one indulgence - gin (1 shilling and 8 pence a week) – and, more touchingly, "baby's cloak" (19 shillings). The only other personal item that survives is a sheet of paper with the words "Silence must be observed in here" written on it in large letters.

During the years 1833-1838, Masson excavated more than fifty Buddhist stupas in the Kabul-Jalalabad region. He also collected numerous small objects and thousands of coins, principally from the urban site of Begram, north of Kabul. Apart from a selection of coins and artefacts extracted en route by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta and his own collection of 35,340 coins, his finds were all sent to the East India Company's Museum in London. After his wife's death in 1857, £100 were paid to his children by the East India Company Library in return for his papers, drawings, and coins. When the EIC India Museum closed in 1878, a large part of Masson's collection (possibly including about 2,000 coins) was transferred, without proper documentation, to the British Museum.

Masson was dismissed by many of his contemporaries as a deserter, adventurer, spy, and writer of bad verse. They also could not forgive him for being proven right in his criticism of the British East India Company's disastrous involvement in Afghanistan that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War. As a



The relic deposit from the Buddhist stupa no. 2 at Bimaran, near Jalalabad, excavated by Charles Masson in 1834. The gold reliquary (found with coins issued about AD 60) contains the earliest datable images of the Buddha.

Courtesy of the British Museum