Afghanistan’s civil war, raging between rival groups fighting for political power, gave birth to a systematic looting of archaeological sites, such as Ai Khamun, Bagram, and Hadda. Their willful destruction, coupled with illicit diggings and vandalism in pursuit of material gain, obliterated the ancient heritage of sculptures and paintings. On 22 March 2001, three weeks after decreeing that all the statues of Afghanistan should be destroyed, the Taleban revealed a gloomy, near-empty labyrinth of ruins missing virtually all of its treasures.

The Turks as Overlords

The next new arrivals, the Turks, are first attested in the year 407 (= AD 619). The khor of Bob now has Turkish instead of Hephthalite titles, but his name and patronymic in the texts show that he is no Turk. In the year 478 (= AD 590), a Turkish ruler is named recording a donation by “Bag-aziyas, the great Turkish princess...”. Although she is described as a princess of the Turkish tribe of the Khalach, her name is evidently Bactrian. She belongs to the Bregadam family, which is attested as far back as the year 247 (= AD 359) as the ruling family of the otherwise unknown city of Lan. Probably Bag-aziyas was the daughter of a local ruler, who had been given in marriage to a Turkish dignitary.

Increasing Arab Domination

The Arabs are named in two of the latest texts. The first of these is a coinage contract dated in the year 507 (= AD 719). While earlier texts had expressed prices in gold dirhams or in Persian silver dirhams, here they are given in “Arab silver dirhams”, which are specifically described as locally current. A further stage in Arab economic domination is revealed in a document from the year 534 (= AD 645), which refers to the payment of taxes to the Arab. In a document of two years later, a son of the local landowner bears the name “Khamir”, probably a local form of the Arabic title amir. Soon afterwards, Arabic would replace Bactrian as the language of the local administration, as is clear from a group of Arabic tax records which appear to have come to light together with the Bactrian documents.

The documents described above have already made it possible to decipher Bactrian script, revealing a previously unknown tongue which, in its heyday, was one of the world’s most important languages. In this brief survey, I have only been able to hint at the contents and importance of an immense new body of material. The new documents cover a period of more than four centuries, including some periods for which we have hardly any authentic sources. The publication of these texts will soon be completed with the appearance of the second volume of my Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan, which will include the letters and Buddhist texts. Then the whole of the material will be available to students of many disciplines, to be compared with Chinese and Arabic sources and confronted with archaeological and ethnographic data. I confidently expect that the result will be to cast new light on many aspects of the history and culture of ancient Bactria and modern Afghanistan.

References
—. “From the Kushan-shahs to the Arabs: New Bactrian Documents Dated in the Era of the Tochi Inscriptions” in Michael Alram and Deborah E. Kimburg, Kabul Museum after its destruction also contained more than 300 kilograms of silver and gold objects. Of course, such second-hand information should be handled with care, as informers tend either to exaggerate or to romanticize the event.

Among the artefacts were gold and silver vessels: for example, a gold censer in the shape of a high beaker on a round base from which thin trails imitating wisps of incense twist upwards. Another piece among them was a squat silver bowl with an out-turned rim, with, on the inside of the base, the impressed image of a sea-horse or Hippocampus, its curled tail terminating in a crescent-shaped curve. Among the sculptures from the deposit, many depict Zarzamurana priests, figurines, gold plaques, rings, and intaglions from the Hellinistic period. A repoussé intaglio depicts a galloping horse; two repoussé show the Greek god Hermes wearing a conical helmet; two carnelian intaglios depict a standing helmeted Athena holding a long spear and a shield in typical Greek style. The jewelry in the hoard, in particular pendants, earrings, and bracelets, amounted to several kilograms in weight!

The Mir Zakah II hoard was the largest ancient coin deposit ever attested in the history of mankind. It was named after Mir Zakah, the village where it was found in 1992, 53 km north-east of the city of Gardez. The hoard must have consisted of approximately 350,000 gold, silver, and bronze coins. Of these, I managed rapidly to examine six sacks full of coins, each weighing at least fifty kilos, in February 1994 in the Peshawar bazaar and, from there, their way to private collections. Among them are the invaluable ivory plaques excavated at Bagram by French archaeologists in 1937.
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.

A Sad Fate for Famous Sites

The monastic complex of Hadda is situated in Jalalabad, 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. Zamyaryalai Tarzi, the former 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 found in June 1998 in unrecorded circumstances. It once belonged to an acroterial 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 acroterial head are the only examples of acroterials 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 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 Bactia 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 1935 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 350 BC. This terminus ante 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 (cf. 4); eight coins were issued in the name of the Achaemenid King Darius I, who ruled between 521 and 486 BC (cp. 2). Of unknown date are twelve bent-bar coins in the hoard carrying punched wheel symbols (1). 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 blend of 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 would subsequently have spread from the North-West 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 Gangas 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 as early as the sixth century BC — (EMB)