

FROM THE PAST AND FOR THE FUTURE

**Safeguarding
the Cultural Heritage
of Afghanistan**

JAM AND HERAT



View of the eastern front of the Citadel of Herat (1960). PHOTO: © A. BRUNO

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Emergency stabilization of the Fifth Minaret: Installation of wooden belts to protect the shaft of the Minaret (2003)

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Background: Land of Afghanistan in the 1970's © A. BRUNO

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GHAZNI

Rediscovering the Past, Looking into the Future by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan

Roberta GIUNTA | Researcher, University of Naples – L'Orientale

Anna FILIGENZI | Researcher, University of Naples – L'Orientale & Austrian Academy of Science

SAPEGUARDING CULTURAL HERITAGE means defining cultural identity, and this is unquestionably a crucial issue for contemporary Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the safeguarding of cultural heritage is frequently perceived as a mere matter of technical management. Instead, the latter is only the last and most visible stage of a long process that starts a long time before and involves many different disciplines and people. Any physical object, monument or space, or any human expression and tradition, which we consider worth protecting and handing down to the next generations is such because it has been rediscovered, interpreted, recognized as meaningful, exhibited in public spaces, illustrated in school books, and, eventually, included in our collective memory. This report on the activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan describes the initial stages of this process, when forgotten things start being rescued from oblivion.

Main Discoveries

The Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (MAIA) was born in 1957 as one of the first and foremost archaeological projects of the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO), later the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (IsIAO). However, during the fifty years of its existence the MAIA has not always been able to engage in actual fieldwork, due to the political events which have marked the history of the country since the late 1970s.

The MAIA started its activities in Ghazni, the city that was the capital of the Ghaznavids (from 977 to 1163 CE) and later of the Ghurids (between 1173 and 1203). The primary aim was the rediscovery of the city's Islamic tangible heritage, until then only known from written sources and a very few visible remains. Two sites were excavated on the plain of Dasht-i Manara, a private house dating from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries and seemingly



hurriedly abandoned after some unexpected event, which was named the 'House of the Lustreware' after the perfectly preserved lustreware painted vessels that were found in a niche in the house (Fig. 1), and a sultan's palace from the Ghaznavid period (eleventh to twelfth centuries). These sites provided new insights into the early and mediaeval Islamic art and architecture of Afghanistan, as did the wealth of architectural decorative elements found reused in later religious buildings during dedicated surveys. As later studies went on to demonstrate, the impact of the models elaborated or refined in Ghazni had far-reaching impacts on the artistic culture of the Indian subcontinent.

Fig. 1 | Ghazni (1957): House of the Lustreware. Niche containing lustreware ceramics.

PHOTO: © ISIAO

Fig. 2 | Tapa Sardar: a polychrome clay statue (First to third or fourth centuries CE).

PHOTO: © ISIAO

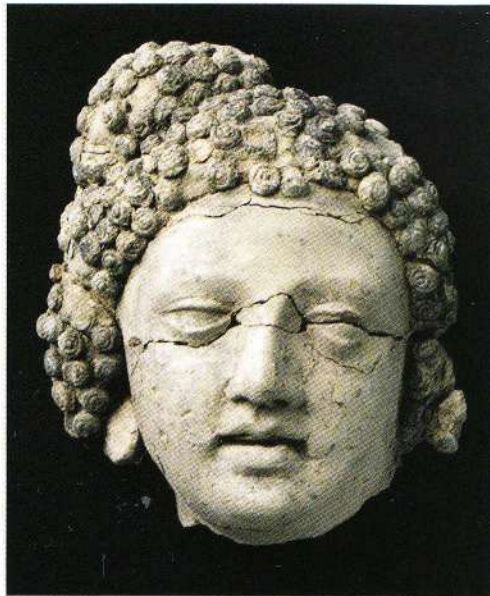
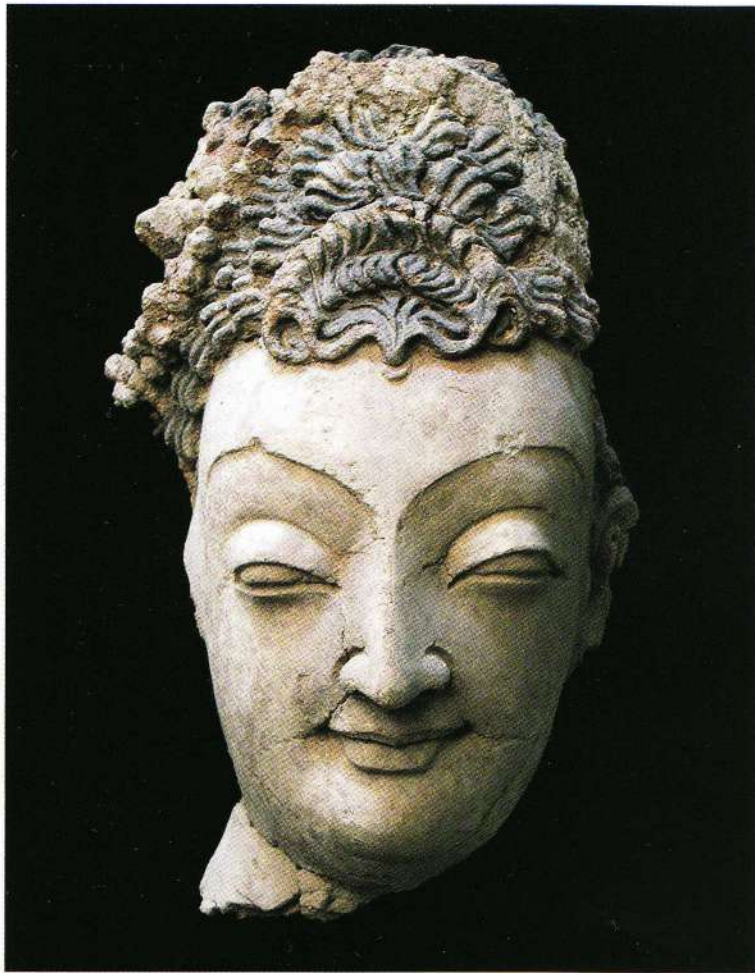


Fig. 3 | Tapa Sardar: a polychrome clay statue (Seventh and eighth centuries CE).

PHOTO: © ISIAO



Nevertheless, it soon became clear the cultural past of Ghazni also had a rich and much earlier stratification. Surveys carried out in the area in search of pre-Islamic remains soon provided proof that Buddhism had also once flourished in Ghazni, as was shown by the remains found at the hill of Tapa Sardar. The religious and political prestige of this settlement, besides being fully evidenced by the archaeological remains, is also confirmed by two written sources. According to an inscription found on a pot at the site, Tapa Sardar was once known as the *Kanika mahārāja vihāra* (the temple of the Great King Kanishka), reinforcing the hypothesis that the *mahārāja vihāra* of Tapa Sardar may well correspond to the *Shah Bahar*, a site which according to the *Kitab al-buldan*, an historical and geographical account written by al-Ya'qubi in the ninth century, was destroyed in 795 CE.

While the sculptures from the earlier phases of the site attest to close ties with the Gandharan tradition of northwest Pakistan (from the first to third or fourth centuries CE), which was characterized by pronounced Hellenistic features (Fig. 2), new artistic (and doctrinal?) trends seem to have introduced remarkable changes in the later period (Fig. 3). These are especially reflected in the emphasis put on the visibility of the cultic images, which is greatly enhanced by their colossal size and gilded surfaces. The documentation collected from this site and the relevant scientific literature produced so far are now providing helpful reference points for on-going archaeological investigations. The significant analogies in objects, iconographies and lay-outs between Tapa Sardar and other Afghan sites currently under excavation, such as Tepe Narenj and Mes Aynak, will certainly contribute to a clearer definition of Afghan artistic and cultural traditions and their impact on surrounding areas.

Among the many other activities of the MAIA in the area of Ghazni, mention must be made of the discovery of Homa Qal'a in 1974, an ancient monastic complex excavated from the rock at the eastern limits of the Dasht-i Tamaki site 45 km north of Qarabagh-i Ghazni. However, the MAIA also carried out surveys and excavations in other areas, which not only further confirmed the archaeological and cultural richness of Afghanistan, but also provided important information about periods and typologies still scarcely known about for the entire Indian subcontinent.



Explorations carried out in 1962 in Badakhshan in a circumscribed area around Hazar Sum brought to light evidence of Upper Palaeolithic megalithic monuments (Fig. 4) and striking examples of urban settlements from the historical period characterized by a mix of free-standing and rock-cut architecture. A few kilometres away, the site of Darra-i Kalon revealed phases of human occupation that can be traced back to the Late Pleistocene and Early Olocene ages and one of the very few vestiges so far known of the Aceramic Neolithic in the area stretching from India to Iran. A further enlightening discovery was a bilingual inscription, in Greek and Aramaic, engraved on a rock at Sarpuza (Kandahar) and containing an edict issued by the Mauryan King Asoka (third century BCE), the first ruler to unify the Indian subcontinent and an important propagator of Buddhism.



Return to Afghanistan

The Italian Archaeological Mission returned to Afghanistan in 2002 and began systematically assessing and restoring both the archaeological sites (Tapa Sardar and the Ghaznavid Palace) and the artefacts found there in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the war had caused severe damage to the sites, nearly 85 per cent of the objects were recovered. Most had remained in the Mission's storerooms in Ghazni, while some had been transferred to the National Museum in Kabul by the local authorities. They were saved both by the care taken during the excavations and the Afghan people's efforts to preserve them.

New excavations were undertaken in 2003. A short campaign was carried out near the Ghurid Minaret of Jam, the most famous Islamic monument in Afghanistan. Funded by the Italian Government under the auspices of the UNESCO project described in Chapter 2 of the current publication, the investigation brought to light important archaeological evidence regarding the city, which has been identified from literary sources as the principal capital of the Ghurid sultans. Work was also resumed at Tapa Sardar, with the aim of identifying the Tapa Sardar monastery's earliest phases, but a worsening of security conditions once again caused the interruption of fieldwork. A survey of the Kharwar site in Logar, financed by the National Geographic Society, also revealed extensive evidence of an opulent urban settlement surrounded by Buddhist remains, unfortunately heavily looted by illegal excavators (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4 | A polychrome clay statue from Kharwar.

PHOTO: © ISIAO

Fig. 5 | Hazar Sum: a megalithic circle.

PHOTO: © ISIAO

Fig. 6 | Rawza (1966):
the 'Abd al-Razzaq
Mausoleum after
restoration.

PHOTO: © ISIAO



The Museum of Islamic Art in Rawza

After having restored the Timurid 'Abd al-Razzaq Mausoleum in the village of Rawza (Fig. 6), in 1966 the Italian team set up the Rawza Museum of Islamic Art in the same Mausoleum, in order to display the most important discoveries – mainly dating back to the Ghaznavid period – from the archaeological excavations as well as the surveys of mosques and other sanctuaries carried out around Ghazni.

Closed for thirty years, thanks to funds granted by UNESCO and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Museum has now been restored anew with the assistance of the Afghan Department of Historic Monuments. Work is presently in progress toward reopening it, and thus handing over once again to the Afghan people and to the world some unique masterpieces that fortunately survived intact the devastations of recent decades. To celebrate the naming of Ghazni as Capital of Islamic Culture for the Asian Region for the Year 2013, a booklet entitled *The Rawza Museum at Ghazni. A Brief Guide to the Islamic Collections* has been produced. ■

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The ISIAO was closed in November 2011 as part of a drastic spending review. Since then, the MAIA's institutional base has been the University of Naples 'L'Orientale'.