



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Keeping History Alive

## Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in Post-Conflict Afghanistan

Over the last ten years, UNESCO and its partners have actively supported the efforts of the Afghan Government, notably the Ministry of Information and Culture, to increase public awareness of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. This has been undertaken not only through the practical conservation and stabilisation work at historic monuments and archaeological sites, but also in the form of numerous publications, seminars, workshops and other international, national and provincial cultural events. These endeavours have looked to highlight the significance and contribution of culture towards broader development goals including employment, income generation, education and the promotion of a cohesive society within the context of peace and nation-building in Afghanistan.

Raw photos from 3D scanning of the Gawharshad Mausoleum ceiling in Herat  
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Published in 2015 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France and UNESCO Office in Kabul, House 647, Jami Watt, PD-10, Shahr-e Naw, Kabul, Afghanistan

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ISBN 978-92-3-100064-5



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Editors: Brendan Cassar and Sara Noshadi

Cover photo: UNESCO/ICONEM

Graphic design: UNESCO Afghanistan Office

Cover design: UNESCO Afghanistan Office

Printed by Standartu Spaustuve UAB

Printed in Vilnius, Lithuania

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United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Ministry of Information and Culture  
The Islamic Republic of  
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Editors:  
Brendan Cassar and Sara Noshadi

Dedicated to all the Afghan people who have worked and  
continue to struggle to safeguard their cultural heritage.

## Acknowledgments

The idea for this publication was first mooted in late 2011. The publication is the result of 18 months of work; a vigorous and concerted effort by contributors within Afghanistan and abroad. Our aim was nothing less than to chart the range of work being done in Culture Sector; to record the previous decade of sustained cultural heritage development initiatives and to act as a guide to cultural heritage professionals operating in other similarly charged settings. With a notable absence of publications in recent years concerned with the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, we believe that this is a much needed contribution covering a diverse range of relevant subjects and areas.

We are grateful for the breadth and extensive heritage sector experience that is reflected in the essays in this volume. Excellent contributions were submitted by national and international experts who worked on the ground in Afghanistan for many years. The diverse contributions covering many issues and areas of expertise is what makes this publication exciting and timely.

Sincere thanks goes to the Swiss government and its representatives in Kabul for their support through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. They did not just underwrite this publication. We appreciate their encouragement and patience and salute their involvement as capable heritage advocates in Afghanistan.

UNESCO would also like to express its deepest gratitude to the Ministry of Information and Culture in Kabul for their continued, informed and productive cooperation since 1948. In recent years that strong support has come from many individuals, but we would like to note in particular H. E. Minister Dr. Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, Mr. Omar Sultan, Special Advisor to the Ministry of Information and Culture and Mr. Omara Khan Masoudi, the legendary Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan.

A book on cultural heritage would be somewhat duller without photos to demonstrate the beauty and depth of heritage in Afghanistan, so we must thank Majid Saeedi, Jacob Simkin, John Wendle and Massoud Etemdi, Mani Meshkin Qalam, Abdullah Rafiq and Sadiq Nasiri for allowing us to re-print their photographs.

Several people at the UNESCO Office in Afghanistan contributed many hours of their attention towards improving this book. Putting it together was a team effort and the hard work of members of the Office should be acknowledged here also. Translations from Dari and French were provided by Reza Sharifi and Sara Noshadi. Salim Rafik created the graphic design and capably oversaw the layout of the publication. Wahid Amini provided further assistance on graphic design. Nazifa Noor wonderfully coordinated with authors and partners for copyright issues. Ghulam Reza Mohammadi and Ahmad Nasir Yawar provided additional photographs from Bamiyan and Herat.

UNESCO is indebted to many other friends, colleagues and heritage sector partners too numerous to mention. We are grateful for all your earnest support and constructive feedback and comments to improve the publication.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge Paolo Fontani, the UNESCO Representative in Afghanistan from 2012 to 2015, for his unwavering support and constructive advice throughout all phases of the production of this book. Without him, it would have not been possible to complete this work.







An Afghan man organizes a pile of threads after being dyed © Majid Saeedi



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# The Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan

**Anna Filigenzi and Roberta Giunta**

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**T**he Italian Archaeological Mission started working in Afghanistan more than fifty years ago, although unfortunately the political situation prevalent over that period has limited the number of seasons of fieldwork the Mission has been able to undertake. The dramatic political events that have marked the recent history of Afghanistan all but prevented international scientific engagement in the country from the late 1970s through until 2002 when the Mission was finally able to return to the country to revive its close historical partnership with the Ministry of Information and Culture. At that time, both the physical and emotional scars of war were visible everywhere. Some may have healed, while others will remain for ever as material items may be rebuilt but lives that have been lost are lost for all time. Other scars, less conspicuous but equally deep, are those that have been inflicted by the precariousness and uncertainty of the future felt by post - conflict Afghan society, which has seen an impoverishment of its human, economic and cultural resources. Now, as we write, the country has much that still needs to be physically reconstructed but also much to be restored in terms of both cultural heritage and human capacity.

When, in 1957, Giuseppe Tucci founded the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (hereafter abbreviated to MAIA), he did so with a wider ancient world in mind known as Eurasia, which does not lend itself so well to modern political divisions. Of this world, Afghanistan represents a crossroads of great consequence, as demonstrated by the rich

archaeological patrimony that local and foreign teams, among which the Italian one, have brought to light through excavation and reconnaissance activities over the past decades.

Although field work suffered a prolonged hiatus, wide -ranging studies and related scientific production continued without interruption. Even outside the country, the scientific commitment of the MAIA, as well as the unique bond formed between Italy and Afghanistan, never. Indeed, the collections of past data and the resulting scientific analysis and interpretation that has been developed over the past is priceless in providing comparative data for now assisting in untangling the complexity of ongoing archaeological investigations on current sites such as Mes Aynak and Tepe Narenj.

The collection of such data over recent decades can now also assist in the scientific re-assessment of the meaning and context of Islamic archaeological materials, and in preparation for future surveys and excavations or - as in the specific case of Ghazni - the re-opening of the Rawza Islamic Museum of Art (in progress at the time of writing).

Moreover, this historical data will hopefully create a self-perpetuating circle, where the additions provided by recent archaeological field work and survey will shed new light on existing documentation and give scientific research a boost towards substantial advancements in understanding Afghan culture and history.

We are perfectly conscious that archaeology, in the face of the enormous problems Afghanistan still has to address in the coming decades, is only of relative importance. Nevertheless, we do believe that no human value, capacity or memory should be excluded from the construction of peace and social progress. Of the thousands of gestures that both build and keep such a process alive, none can be considered as being wasted. Maybe we are just adding a drop to the ocean, but after all, what is the ocean made of if not of innumerable drops?

## A Short History of the MAIA

The MAIA was conceived as one of the first and foremost archaeological projects of the IsMEO (Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East), later as IsIAO (Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient). Giuseppe Tucci (1894 - 1984), one of the founders and the first President of IsMEO, was an orientalist scholar of considerable note whose primary interest was the history of religions, particularly Buddhism. Nevertheless, he was sharply conscious of the complexity of human behaviour and ideas. His insightful approach to critical understandings always made him look for a broader base of knowledge. Although not an archaeologist, as he himself often recalled, Tucci committed to archaeology the task of “filling the tremendous existing historical gaps in many parts of Asia”. It is with this spirit that, in 1956, together with Alessio Bombaci – a distinguished orientalist scholar with the University of Naples “L’Orientale” – he carried out a first exploratory survey in Afghanistan. This survey specifically targeted the Dasht - i Manara plain between the citadel of Ghazni and the village of Rawza, on the route which still connects Kabul with Kandahar and eventually on in to India.

Prior to the in-depth investigations of the MAIA, very little was known of the tangible cultural heritage of Islamic Ghazni, notwithstanding that the city had been the capital of the Ghaznavids (from 977 to 1163) and later of the Ghurids (between 1173 and 1203). Tucci and his collaborators were convinced that the political role played by Ghazni with relation to such important dynasties, so well documented by literary sources, must have had an archaeological equivalent of much greater extent than the few ruined vestiges known up until that point.

The survey indicated there were substantial Islamic remains on the slopes of the hills to the north of the two well-known Ghaznavid minarets, as well as in the area of a *ziyarat* attributed by popular tradition to the Ghaznavid Sultan Ibrahim (d. 1099), father of the Sultan Mas’ud III (d. 1115), and within a few meters from the minaret of Mas’ud III. Thus, in 1957, the MAIA

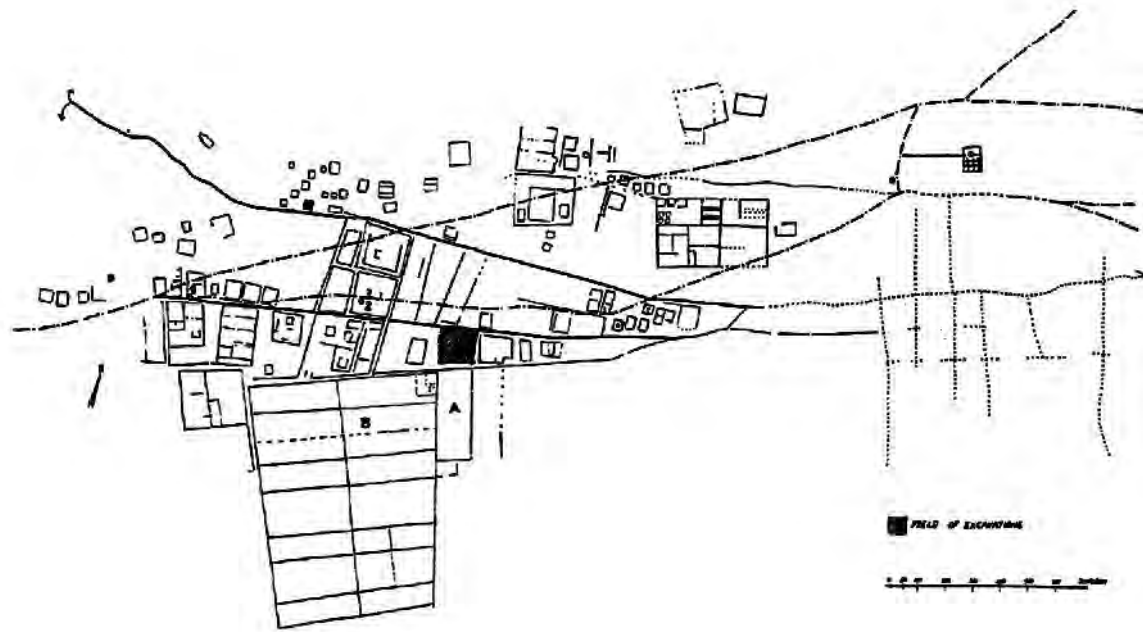


Fig. 1

Fig. 1: Map of the Dasht-i Manara plain showing some of the Islamic remains © MAIA

started the excavation of two sites in the plain (Fig. 1). Excavation in the first site revealed a private house (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Cent.) –seemingly abandoned in a hurry after some unexpected event occurred– which was named “House of the lustre ware” after the perfectly preserved lustre painted vessels that were found in a niche (Fig. 2). In the second site, a sultan’s palace of the Ghaznavid period (11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> Cent.) was also brought to light. Both these sites, along with the wealth of architectural decorative elements that were found reused in later religious buildings, opened a new window into the Early/ Medieval Islamic art and architecture of Afghanistan. Moreover, as later studies demonstrated, the impact of the models seemingly elaborated or refined in Ghazni had a far-reaching impact on the artistic culture of the Indian Subcontinent.

Nevertheless, as it was soon clear, the cultural past of Ghazni had a rich stratification. The same team which had launched a focused study of early Islamic culture, in Ghazni also surveyed the surrounding area in search of pre-Islamic evidence, until they found evidence that Ghazni had also at one point served as a flourishing



Fig. 2

Fig. 2: Ghazni 1957: “House of the lustre ware”. The niche containing lustre ceramics © MAIA



centre for Buddhism.

It was Umberto Scerrato, first assistant of Bombaci and later field director of the Islamic excavations and surveys, who recognized the importance of the Buddhist site of Tepe Sardar. After the first trial excavations carried out by Dinu Adamesteanu and Salvatore Puglisi in 1959, regular excavations began in 1967 under the direction of Maurizio Taddei.

Thus, Ghazni remained the main area of interest for the MAIA, concentrating most of its scientific activity, although explorative surveys and soundings were also carried out in other zones. Before proceeding to what we might call the 'Ghazni archaeological panorama', we would like to quickly recall a selection of the most significant discoveries.

#### **Discoveries, Surveys, and Research Possibilities**

In the first years of activity, a series of lucky discoveries contributed important information concerning the archaeological and cultural richness of Afghanistan. In 1962, after a preliminary survey led by Giuseppe Tucci the Italian team, under the direction of Salvatore Puglisi, carried out very productive explorations in Badakhshan. At Hazar Sum near Haibak the Italian team recovered precious documentation relating to periods and typologies still scarcely represented in the archaeological records of the entire Indian Subcontinent: these included evidence of the Upper Palaeolithic, the presence of megalithic monuments, and noticeable examples of urban settlements of historic period. These settlements were characterised by a mix of free standing and rock-cut architecture identified within specific delineated areas.

Moreover, a few kilometres away, the site of Darra-i Kalon revealed phases of human occupation dating back to the Late Pleistocene and Early Olocene. In particular, the presence of domesticated goats and sheep in the most recent levels constitutes one of the very few witnesses so far known of the Aceramic Neolithic in the area stretching from India to Iran.

A further enlightening discovery was the discovery of a bilingual inscription, in Greek and Aramaic, engraved on a rock at Sarpuza (Kandahar), published in 1958 by Umberto Scerrato. This well - preserved piece was an edict issued by the Mauryan King Asoka (3rd century BCE), the first ruler to unify the Indian Subcontinent and an important propagator of Buddhism. The edict is a direct witness to the inclusion of Afghanistan, or at least a part of it, in the Mauryan Empire. The discovery, besides enriching the record of ancient Indian epigraphy, added new substantial matter to the debate about the policy of unification of the Indian Subcontinent pursued by Asoka, who used the same concept of impersonal Dharma (or universal law) as established by Buddhism in order to promote cultural cohesion. Most likely, the values of universal peace and non - violence professed in the edicts (among those being that from Kandahar), do not reflect a mere personal belief but rather a pragmatic ethic which, in Asoka's vision, could provide a common basis for his variegated empire.

Moreover, the edict of Kandahar bears witness to the first contact, although perhaps ephemeral, of Afghanistan with Buddhism, a philosophical and religious system that was destined to have, in the following centuries, a tremendous impact on Afghanistan's social and cultural history. Moreover, the bilingualism of the edict opens a window into the composite nature of the economical, political and social structure of contemporary Afghanistan, where we can imagine the existence of communities well accustomed with Greek language and cultural models. These communities certainly included not only people of direct Greek origin but also others, either locals or of different ascendance, which had adopted those forms as a means of trans - cultural expression.

Further, in the frame of the explorations carried out by Maurizio Taddei and Giovanni Verardi in the 1970s, mention must be made of the discovery of Homa Qal'a in 1974, an ancient monastic complex excavated in the rock at the eastern limits of the Dasht-i Tamaki (45 km. north of Qarabagh - i Ghazni).

#### **Return to Afghanistan**

The Italian Archaeological Mission returned to Afghanistan in 2002 and immediately began systematically assessing and restoring both the archaeological sites (Tepe Sardar and the Ghaznavid Palace) and the artifacts found there in the 1960's and '70's. Although the war had caused severe damage to the sites, nearly 85% 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 by the Afghan people's efforts to preserve them. New excavations were undertaken in 2003, with the aim of identifying the Tepe Sardar monastery's earliest phases, but the worsening of the security conditions once more caused the interruption of field work.

In 2003, the Italian Archaeological Mission also began working outside of Ghazni province. A short campaign was carried out near the Ghurid minaret at Jam, the most famous Islamic monument in Afghanistan (Thomas, Pastori and Cucco 2004; Id. 2005). Funded by the Italian government under the auspices of a larger UNESCO project aiming at reinforcing and restoring the monument, 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.

Further, a survey of the Kharwar site in Logar, financed by the National Geographic Society, revealed the extensive evidence of an extraordinary, opulent urban settlement surrounded by Buddhist remains, unfortunately heavily looted by illegal excavations (Figs. 3 - 4). This site, as many others in Afghanistan, calls for more systematic archaeological work. This is the only way to protect the rich artistic and cultural heritage of Afghanistan against both organised and random events of looting.

The restart of the field activities in the country was accompanied by the publication of two important

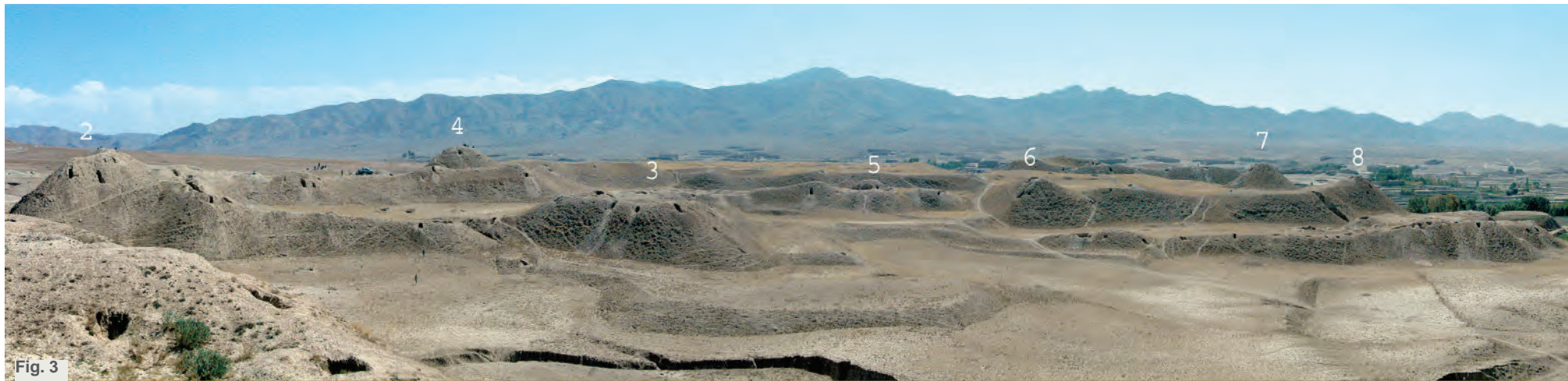


Fig. 3

Fig. 3: Kharwar: a panoramic view of the site showing illegally excavated tunnels © MAIA

monographs based on the archival documentation collected in the past. The first publication, in 2003, was *Les inscriptions funéraires de Gaznî (IVe-IXe/ Xe-XVe siècles)*, by Roberta Giunta, which offered for the first time an in-depth study of the peculiar marble tombstones of the town and their epitaphs, dating from the Ghaznavid period to the fall of the Timurids. The second one, in 2004, was *Buddhist Caves of Jâghurî and Qarabâgh-e-Ghaznî, Afghanistan (2004)*, by Giovanni Verardi and Elio Paparatti, which added considerably to our knowledge of Buddhist rock architecture not only with unpublished (and substantially unknown) sites but also with a critical reappraisal of the historic and cultural framework of the late phases of Buddhism in Afghanistan.

These two results were, somehow, also emblematic of a virtuous connection between the past and the future of research in Afghanistan, since they palpably witness to the enduring value of scientific documentation.

#### The Buddhist Site of Tepe Sardar

The careful excavation methods, the rich stratigraphic

sequence, and the wealth and variety of the archaeological remains – a witness to different aspects and phases of the artistic, religious, and even political atmosphere of the time – make Tepe Sardar one of the primary reference sites for the acquisition of knowledge concerning Buddhist art in Afghanistan and Central Asia, notably with regard to its later phases.

The site consists of an organic complex of structures rising at different levels on a small hill and having its fulcrum on the Upper Terrace (Taddei 1968; Taddei and Verardi 1978; Verardi and Paparatti 2005; Filigenzi 2009a, 2009b). The prominent position and visibility in the plain of Dasht-i Manara is in itself eloquent evidence of the importance of the site. The religious and political prestige of the settlement, besides being fully evidenced by the archaeological remains, is also confirmed by two written sources. From the first one, which comes from the site itself, we are informed about the origin of the sanctuary as a royal foundation: according to an inscription found on a pot, the site was known as the *Kanika mahârâja vihâra* (“the temple of the Great King Kanishka”). In turn,



Fig. 4

Fig. 4: A polychrome clay statue from Kharwar © MAIA





Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Figs. 5-6: Tepe Sardar: polychrome clay statues (Early Period) © MAIA  
Fig. 7: Tepe Sardar: a polychrome clay statue (Late Period) © MAIA

this direct evidence reinforces the hypothesis that the *mahârâja vihâra* of Tepe Sardar may well correspond to the Shâh Bahâr that, according to the *Kitâb al-buldân* (an historical and geographical account written by al-Ya'qûbî in the 9<sup>th</sup> century), was destroyed in 795 CE (Taddei 1968: 109-10; Verardi and Paparatti 2004: 100; Verardi and Paparatti 2005: 410, 442).

The archaeological investigations revealed that somewhere before the final period of its life the sanctuary had suffered a devastating fire, which was tentatively related to the Muslim incursion of the 671-72, when 'Ubayd Allâh temporarily conquered the territories between Kandahar and Kabul (Kuwayama 2002: 182; Verardi and Paparatti 2005: 99). After this episode, which seems to have especially affected the Upper Terrace, the site was amply reconstructed or renovated. Thus, of the earlier phases, either hidden by the variations of the site or obliterated by the re-building, we only have a very partial picture. Nevertheless, hundreds of sculpture fragments, which were mostly found as infilling, attest the close tie of the earliest artistic production with the Gandharan tradition of North-West Pakistan (ca. 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century CE), which was characterised by pronounced Hellenistic features (Figs. 5-6). However, in the later phases of the period preceding the fire, new artistic (and doctrinal?) trends seem to have introduced remarkable changes (Fig. 7). These are especially reflected in the emphasis put on the visibility of the cultic images, greatly enhanced by both colossal size and a number of gilded surfaces.

### The Upper Terrace

The Upper Terrace, which occupies the levelled hilltop, is overlooked by the Great Stupa, one of the biggest in Afghanistan (with a length at its base of 24 m). We do not know how the Upper Terrace looked exactly like before the renovation of the Late Period. Apart from the Great Stupa (certainly restored and enlarged in the course of time) and a few minor monuments in stone, the surviving structures mostly belong to the Late Period. Among them, of special interest are the chapels in the south-west and north-east sides (respectively on

the right and left side of the Great Stupa), housing a rich decorative apparatus, both painted and sculpted. Very little of this decoration was found in situ, the most part of it being witnessed only through the mass of fragments recovered from the archaeological deposits. The focal point of the chapels was the wall opposite to the entrance, where the main cultic image stood. In three of the surviving chapels (the nos. 23, 17 and 37) a colossal image of a seated Buddha was set on a tall pedestal (1,30/1,70 m), amidst a lively and animated landscape populated by Bodhisattvas, minor gods, worshippers, monstrous figures, and animals. An exception to this scheme was represented by Chapel 63 and Chapel 50, both on the left side, where the images were installed at the ground level: in Chapel 63 a colossal recumbent Buddha (i.e., a *Mahâparinirvâṇa*, or the Buddha's physical death), 15m in length; in Chapel 50 a Buddha seated in European fashion, of which only the feet remained.

A particular feature was represented by the vaulted passages at the sides of the main installations, leading to a corridor running behind the chapels. This architectural feature was meant to allow the *pradakṣinā* (ritual circumambulation) around the cult images, in the same way as it was customarily practiced around the stûpas. The pathway was marked by a mosaic strip made of pebbles set in the clay floor which formed a floral pattern.

Also the lateral walls of the chapels were richly decorated with reliefs and paintings but, with the exception of some modular patterns such as rows of arches housing meditating Buddhas with minor figures in the spaces between the arches, and rows of flying geese (Fig. 8), the original subjects cannot be any longer recomposed from the surviving fragments. Occasionally, additional colossal images were set against the lateral walls of the chapels. This is the case with Chapel 23, where an image of a bejewelled Buddha stood vis-à-vis the image of a multi-armed Durga (or Durga-like goddess) portrayed in the act of killing the demon of the Chaos, Mahisha, disguised as a buffalo (Figs. 9-10).

There is no doubt that this group of chapels was inserted in a more complex layout. In fact, on the south-east side (on the back side of the Great Stupa) five passages that once led to other rooms were wiped out by the natural erosion. We can assume also that also the north-west side, in front of the Great Stupa, was lined by a row of rooms, now only attested by the scanty remains of two walls against which a statue originally stood. In the south-east corner (not yet excavated) there probably existed a passage connecting the Upper Terrace to the lower structures. Thus, in the original layout the chapels were meant to form a kind of precinct enclosing the sacred area. In turn, they were enclosed in a massive wall with a vaulted corridor running in between, the same above-mentioned corridor serving the purpose of the *pradakṣiṇā*.

On two sides, opposite and right with respect to the entrance, the free space between the Great Stupa and the chapels was occupied by a row of small star-shaped stupas alternating with enthroned figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, standing in the open and protected by canopies. The strange asymmetry of this installation leads us to conjecture that this construction was not fully realized in terms of what was originally intended, and that it might have been extended at least to a third (the left) side.

The Upper Terrace represents the main but not the only cultic area of the complex. Other rooms or precincts have been brought to light along the slopes of the tepe. The chronological and functional relations between these secondary cultic areas and the main one are not yet completely clear. However, regardless of their mutual relations, these minor sacred spaces provide us with valuable pieces of information about some important developments and attitudes in religious practice.

Of particular interest are some monuments brought to light on the south-west side of the hill. The centre of the complex was apparently a large room (no. 49), with a cross-vaulted roof and surrounded by a corridor providing access to other rooms, housing small stūpas of

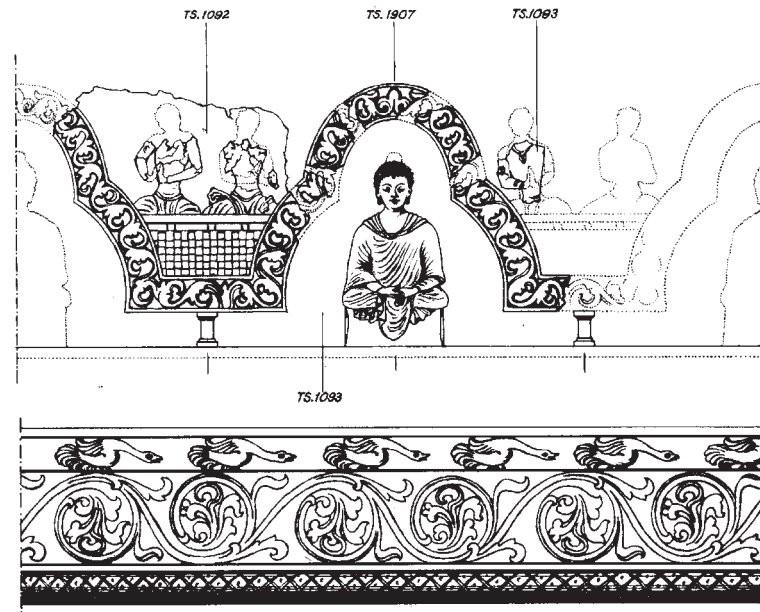


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Fig. 8: Tepe Sardar: sketch reconstruction of a wall decoration in relief (Late Period) © MAIA

Fig. 9: Sketch reconstruction of the colossal Durga image from Chapel 23 © MAIA

Fig. 10: Sketch reconstruction of the colossal bejeweled Buddha image from Chapel 23 © MAIA



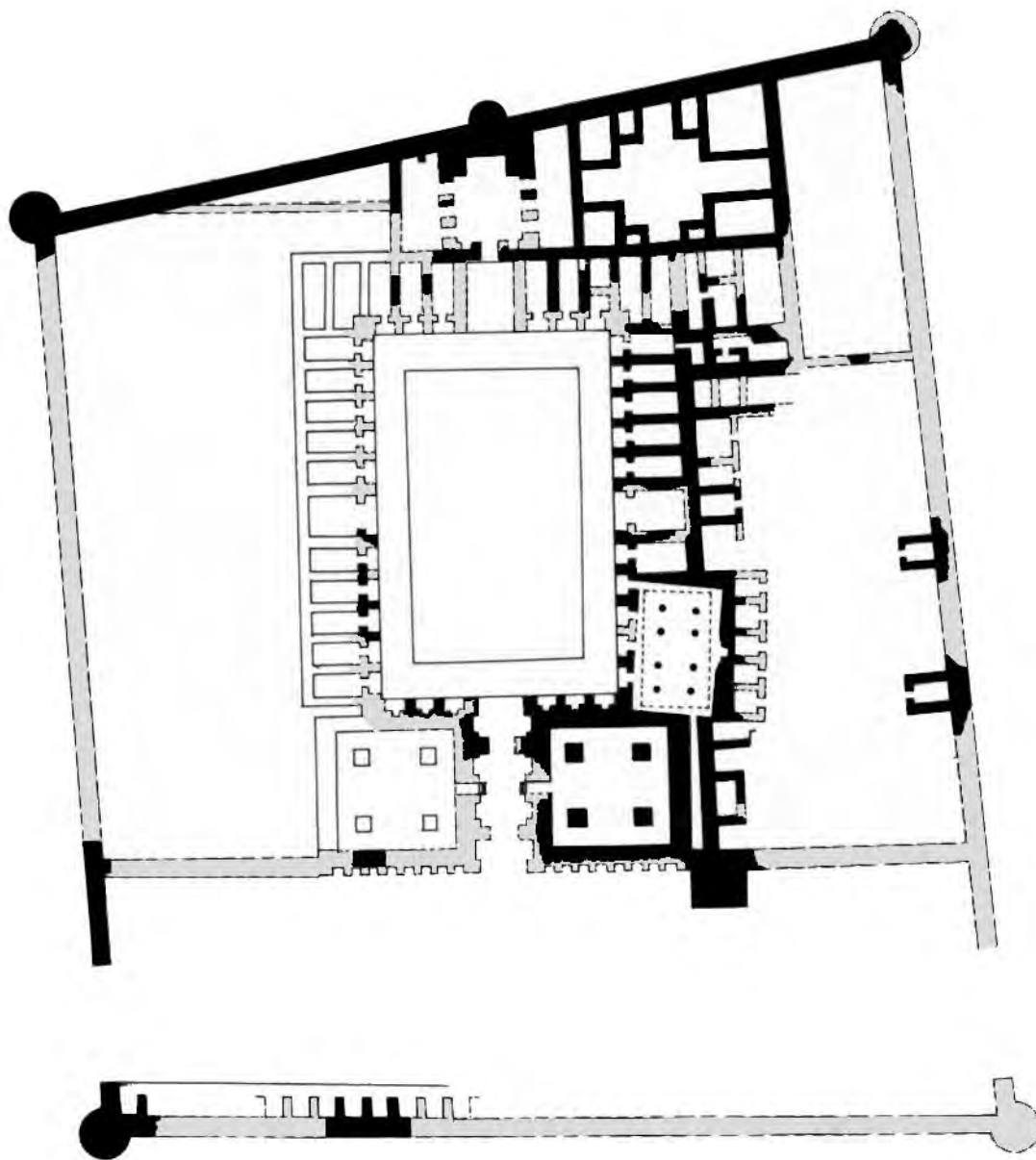


Fig. 11

Fig. 11: Ghazni, plan of the Ghaznavid Palace © MAIA

uncommon shapes and big cultic images at the corners. Communication between this complex and the Upper Terrace was provided by vaulted passageways leading directly into room 74 (still unexcavated).

Other minor monuments, which belong to the Early Period of the site, were unearthed in a trench on the north-west side of the hill. The southernmost one consists of a small open area that houses a small stūpa with quadrangular base and octagonal drum, bounded to the south and west by a low structure made of thin slabs of schist, which reproduce a fortified city wall in miniature whose front is turned towards the interior of the sacred area. On the mud floor there is a brief inscription in an unusually ornate *brāhmī* (a *mantra*?) and (only partly surviving) a *pūrṇaḥaṭa* (the "vase of abundance"), both probably traced out with a stick when the mud was still wet.

As for the chronology, on the basis of palaeographic, historic, and archaeological considerations, different dates have been suggested, stretching from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The reading remains doubtful since the inscription, besides being perhaps incomplete, has no comparison as far as the script's style is concerned. The contemporary presence of so many peculiar features (the *mantra* incised on the floor, the miniature city wall which bounds the sacred space only visible in this aspect from the interior, the shape of the stūpa itself, whose octagonal body has no doubt cosmological implications connected with the orientation of the space) gives this area a highly symbolic value, although one difficult to interpret with any degree of accuracy.

A critical development of cultic and ritual practices is attested by Room 100, probably to be assigned to the end of the Early Period 2. The room is completely open towards the front, so that it resembles a large niche. This feature ensured maximum visibility to the images inside, the main one being a colossal gilded Buddha (the preserved right foot measures 160 cm) seated in European fashion. This was flanked by two smaller figures (Buddhas or Bodhisattvas) placed against the

side walls; at the corners there were some figures of donors (roughly life-size) in “Kushan” dress with a band of polychrome wall painting running behind the images.

As already mentioned above, the gigantic size and the gilding of the images inaugurate new trends in the religious and artistic expressions which were found to be fully developed in the subsequent period. Further, the presence of lay devotees – certainly typified portraits of the contemporary aristocracy – in such a conspicuous display reinforces the impression that Tepe Sardar was in some way under protection and at the political focus of the ruling dynasty.

#### **Bringing Together the Old and the New: Tepe Sardar, Tepe Narenj and Mes Aynak.**

It is certainly significant that very similar objects, iconographies and layouts have been recently found in other Afghan sites currently under excavation, such as Tepe Narenj and Mes Aynak.

At Tepe Narenj, a Buddhist site which is being excavated on the outskirts of Kabul by the Afghan National Institute of Archaeology, under the direction of Zafar Paiman, a shallow chapel sharing striking similarities with Tepe Sardar's Room 100 was brought to light (Paiman and Alram, 2010). This coincidence cannot be considered a mere chance, especially in the light of another similarity between the two sites, i.e. the presence, around the end of the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century CE, of a room housing a central star-like octagonal fire altar with concave sides; it is made of clay and has a shallow cavity in the centre displaying traces of burning and ashes. Notwithstanding the different ground plan (square at Tepe Sardar, circular at Tepe Narenj) both rooms are characterised by a restricted access and the lack of any cult image, which means that whatever activity was performed there (some kind of Tantric rituals or special assemblies?), the fulcrum was the altar. It might be useful to recall that roughly contemporary “fire-altars” of unclear attribution found at Tepe Skandar in Afghanistan and at Bīr-koṭ-ghwaṇḍai in north-west Pakistan warn us against reductionism and invite us to reconsider the

relationship between material evidence and literary sources, trying to overcome the blind dependence of our interpretative models from these latter.

Extremely interesting connections are also surfacing between Tepe Sardar and Mes Aynak, the site which is home to astonishingly rich and numerous Buddhist settlements but also to the world's second largest copper reserve. As the site is destined to become at some point in the future an open-cast mine, the efforts of the international scientific community need to concentrate on recording areas of the site set to be removed, and safeguarding those that lay outside the core mining zones. The site is being investigated by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology with the assistance of the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan in the framework of a rescue excavation involving many Afghan and international archaeologists from seven countries (AA.VV. 2011; Litecka et al. 2013).

Besides generic affinities of iconographic, stylistic and architectural features, very precise coincidences have been noticed, the most striking being the presence at Mes Aynak of a colossal Durga figure killing the demon-buffalo (only attested by a few but indicative remains; Engel 2013: 55; cf. here, Fig. 9) and the use of the same moulds as at Tepe Sardar for decorative devices (Filigenzi 2012: 36; here, Figs. 12-13). This opens an unexpected window into the circulation of models, techniques, material tools and, most probably, reputed itinerant artists and workshops serving prominent centres as Tepe Sardar and Mes Aynak certainly were.

Thus, like other evidence provided by cross-comparative analysis, this represents a further, invaluable piece of information to be stored in the archive of our scientific memory, until new additions become available that can help to reconstruct our incomplete picture of the religious imagery and ritual practises of the time. However, by combining evidence from these different sites, we start understanding how the propulsive force of Buddhism prompted different responses from different regional contexts which in turn contributed to the creation of a Buddhist artistic *koiné*. Moreover, we are better



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

Fig. 12: Tepe Sardar: decorative plaque in the shape of and Okeanos mask © MAIA  
Fig. 13: Mes Aynak: decorative plaque in the shape of an Okeanos mask © Kabul National Museum





Fig. 14

Fig. 14: Marble dado panels bearing a Persian inscription in Kufic script © MAIA

able to evaluate how conspicuous that *koiné* was in Afghanistan.

### Ghazni: One of Asia's Foremost Capital Cities in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century

Prior to commencement of activities by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan very little was known about Islamic Ghazni. The only reported evidence consisted of a few relics attesting the prominence and splendour of the city between the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> century, namely the two baked brick minarets and some marble tombstones, notably those belonging to the Ghaznavid rulers Sebüktigin and his son Mahmud.

The first Italian excavations at Ghazni brought to light the remains of two important civic buildings: a royal palace and a private house. The palace had reached the peak of its magnificence between the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, during the rule of the Ghaznavid sultans Ibrahim and Mas'ud III; the house probably belonged to court officials from the Ghaznavid or Ghurid period (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> cent.).

Along with the programme of excavations, the extensive

surveys carried out by the Mission in the cemetery sites of the whole area of Ghazni since 1957 allowed the identification of a large number of religious monuments – especially tombs and *ziyarat* – very interesting from a historical point of view. These monuments were often built, re-built or simply decorated employing reused marble slabs and panels originally belonging to disappeared buildings. The large number of such artefacts, their variations in functional-morphological types and the lack of analogous finds in other contemporary archaeological sites (i.e., the famous Ghaznavid / Ghurid site of Lashkari Bazar) are indicative of the peculiarity of the Ghazni production and the local stone working tradition.

These discoveries, which enormously enriched the records of the Islamic material culture in the region, opened to archaeologists a new window into the private and ceremonial life of both the sultans and their court of politicians, poets, artists and scientists.

### Ghazni: The Ghaznavid Palace

The palace, delimited by an irregular external perimeter resulting from the adaptation of pre-existing topography, was built of mud bricks and pressed clay, used side by side with baked bricks in the points requiring greater static strength, and also in the facings.

The rectangular planned residence had a monumental façade with ramparts and imposing towers, while the interior offered large spaces for court life. The core of the residence was an extensive marble-paved central courtyard surrounded by a low sidewalk on to which four *iwans* opened axially (Fig. 11). The northern and southern *iwans* were larger than the other two; the northern one followed the entrance, while the southern one gave access to the throne room, which was perhaps originally covered by a dome. A series of ante-chambers surrounded the central courtyard on four sides. The lower part of the walls of the four *iwans* and the ante-chambers were enriched with a marble dado frieze depicting, on the top, a long poem in Persian and in Kufic script (Fig. 14).

The private apartments were situated to the west of the throne room and opened onto a small courtyard centred around a marble fountain with a geometrically patterned brick pavement surround. The walls were covered with geometrical and epigraphic brick panels and a hypostyle mosque, with three naves parallel to the *qibli* wall, was located in the north-western corner of the building.

### The Museum of Islamic Art in Rawza

After having restored the Timurid 'Abd al-Razzaq mausoleum in the village of Rawza (Fig. 16), in 1966 the Italian team opened the Rawza Museum of Islamic Art in the mausoleum 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 recently been restored with the assistance of the Department of Afghan Historic Monuments and work is in progress toward reopening it, in order to hand over again to the Afghan nation to showcase to the world unique artistic masterpieces which fortunately survived intact throughout several decades of internal turmoil.

It is planned that over fifty marble panels with their Kufic inscription will be displayed in central hall of the museum (Fig. 15), in order to give an idea of their original arrangement as it appeared around the courtyard of the Ghaznavid Palace. The baked brick panels will be mounted on the upper part of the walls. Other stucco, alabaster and ceramic artefacts will also be displayed in the other halls of the Museum, inside showcases or on new iron, timber or stone mountings with appropriate climate control. On the occasion of the celebrations of Ghazni as Capital of Islamic Culture 2013 for the Asian region a small booklet, titled "The Rawza Museum at Ghazni. A Brief Guide to the Islamic Collections", was prepared.

### Cultural memory and Cultural Identity: Towards an Integrated Approach to Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Redefining cultural – or better, multi-cultural – identity is unquestionably a crucial issue for contemporary Afghanistan. This process, though an important part of the transition to a sustainable future, is neither simple nor straightforward. It requires considerable effort from institutional agencies, but also an inclusive engagement among cultural organizations. Archaeology and art history can play an effective role in promoting collective knowledge and a shared awareness of the past wherein cultural diversities can be perceived in terms of wealth rather than conflict.

Although field activity (both excavation and survey) is still constrained by the prevailing security issues in the region, much can be done for the protection, distribution and transmission of collective memories, of which objects and architectural settings from the past represent tangible forms. The restoration of artefacts, hypothetical reconstruction of monuments, and establishment of digital platforms for archiving and sharing data are important steps in this direction, especially when accompanied by support to self-regulated learning in local workplaces.

The MAIA is directly engaged in such programs. Restoration of the artefacts excavated by the MAIA is one of the main concerns, especially with regard to Tepe Sardar, where the buildings and their decoration – like at many other sites in Afghanistan – were made of clay. The plasticity and malleability of this material permitted the architects and sculptors to produce masterpieces of grace and refinement, whether on a grand or minute scale. However, unbaked clay is also very fragile becoming less stable over time, and what survives is mostly represented by masses of fragments recovered from the archaeological deposits.

Restoration is also only part of a virtuous process which starts from careful methods of excavation and

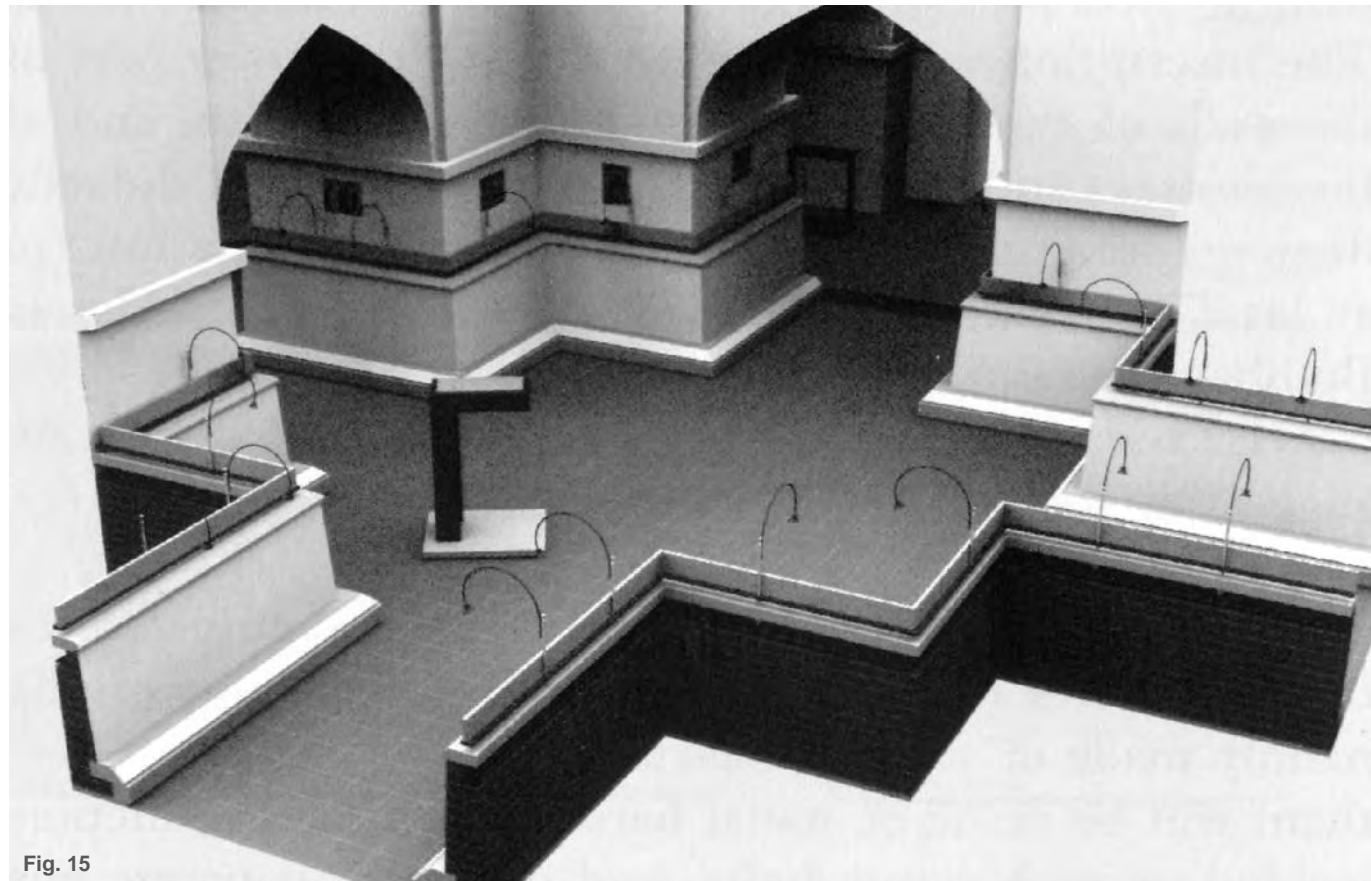


Fig. 15

Fig. 15: The Museum of Islamic Art at Rawza. Project for the exhibition of the marble dado panels in the central hall © MAIA

proper documentation. All together, these procedures allow to attempt – even if only in part – the graphical anastylosis of the original settings, as is presently being undertaken by the MAIA both for pre-Islamic and Islamic monuments.

Dissemination of results is as important as their achievement itself. Scientific publication, either for

specialist or non-specialist audience, is of course a constant strategy to be pursued but we have today at our disposal additional resources such as web-based technologies which may help in transforming old and new documents into a living repository of data, easy to transfer, update and compare in a network. Thanks to a dedicated project (Buddhist and Islamic Archaeological Data from Ghazni, Afghanistan).



A multidisciplinary digital archive for the managing and preservation of an endangered cultural heritage. <http://ghazni.bradypus.net/>) financed by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the old and the new paper-based archive (inventories, pictures, drawings) are being transferred digitally and made accessible to the public, first of all to the colleagues of the Kabul Museum who are primarily called to answer the challenge for continued capacity building in 2014 and beyond.

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Fig. 16

Fig. 16: Rawza 1966: The Mausoleum of Abd al-Razzaq after restoration © MAIA