



Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

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by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Welcome to our seventh interview session, Mr. Masoudi. Thank you for joining us today. In our previous discussions, we explored the history of the National Museum of Afghanistan during and after the presence of Soviet Union forces and the civil wars of the 1990s. Today's session, and possibly the next, will focus on the museum's journey during the Taliban's initial reign from 1995 to 2001. Could you start by giving an overview of the museum's situation after the Taliban assumed power?

MASOUDI: Thank you, Aziz. As I mentioned in my previous statements, the National Museum of Afghanistan remained closed from 1989 to 2003 due to the gallery being shut down. Circumstances during the civil wars led to the unfortunate event of the museum building being set on fire and its artifacts being looted. Throughout the Taliban's rule, the museum stayed closed, lacking visitors and significant activities. As you are aware, the Taliban first took control of Kabul on September 21, 1996, staying in power until November 12, 2001. Their entrance to Kabul in September 1996 was unopposed, leading to a complete halt in all professional activities at the museum. This state of stagnation resulted in a lack of development in the museum's professional activities, leaving us in a state of disarray. The museum's office, situated in the Kabul Hotel, served mainly as a space for staff to record attendance. Following this bureaucratic duty, interactions among colleagues were often limited, usually involving casual inquiries about each other's well-being before dispersing to their homes or tending to personal matters.

In my view, the people of Kabul were fortunate during the retreat of the Mujahideen government, led by Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani and Shura-e Nazar, towards the north of Kabul without any resistance. This withdrawal prevented further bloodshed among the city's oppressed residents. The Shura-e Nazar, a specialized military unit led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, a renowned

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commander of the Jamiat-e Islami Party of Afghanistan, served as the Minister of Defense during their rule. Despite their capabilities, they chose not to resist the Taliban's advance, allowing the Taliban to capture Kabul. The Taliban's military forces encountered strong opposition from the Mujahideen government units in the northern region near Bagram Air Base in Parwan province.

It is noteworthy that the National Museum in the Darulaman area suffered damage upon the Taliban's entry into Kabul. The cause of this damage, whether by withdrawing forces, local residents, or the Taliban, remains unclear. Transition periods between conflicting forces often led to such damages during wars or withdrawals. Regrettably, the National Museum of Afghanistan experienced destruction during this transition, resulting in looting. Fortunately, artifacts stored in various locations such as the Kabul Hotel, the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information building, and the Central Bank of the Presidential Palace remained unharmed.

When Amir Khan Muttaqi was appointed as the Minister of Information and Culture, he visited the National Museum of Afghanistan in Darulaman. He also learned about the artifacts stored in the Kabul Hotel building. He was informed about the artifacts kept there, and the museum's office located in the hotel. However, there was no plan or program to improve the museum's situation. In other words, the Taliban did not have any expert plans to enhance the museum's condition. This was because the Taliban were still facing fierce resistance on the northern outskirts of Kabul, in the Bagram area of Parwan province. I should mention that the museum staff suspended the process of inventorying the artifacts in the museum building in Darulaman until the situation became clear.

As I mentioned earlier, during the Mujahideen government, we were inventorying the artifacts. However, when the Taliban came, we stopped this essential inventory in Darulaman until the situation became clear. After ministers, deputy ministers, and department heads were appointed during the first period of Taliban rule, an individual named Engineer Abdul Khabir, an educated young man, was appointed as the head of the museum. He was a polite and respectable person who always said he was not a professional in museum management. He only engaged in administrative tasks, such as sending and receiving letters and processing the salaries of the staff.

In the initial stages when the Taliban came to Kabul, they focused more on women's hijab, men's beards, and issues related to promoting virtue and preventing vice. They paid more attention to these matters and did not prioritize governmental affairs or have any work program for professional matters. The Minister of Information and Culture, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, was a calm person who, whenever visiting departments, especially the museum, listened to the professional staff. When information about illegal excavations of archaeological sites or historical monuments from different parts of the country reached the ministry, he would seek opinions and suggestions from the professional staff of each department to address the issues. He carefully evaluated these suggestions before giving instructions for their implementation. Overall, the Taliban regime tried to strengthen its financial base by focusing on customs, preventing all kinds of

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smuggling, and conducting small-scale mining operations, as these were their best sources of financial income.

One year after the Taliban's rule, some elders from the Sayed Karam district of Paktia province came to the Minister of Information and Culture to ask for permission to excavate the archaeological site of MirZaka to alleviate their poverty and destitution. Mr. Muttaqi, after consulting with officials from the relevant departments such as archaeology, the museum, and historical monuments, did not accept their request. He listened to the suggestions of the professional staff on what actions should be taken. After gathering comprehensive information, he instructed that a competent team composed of members from the National Museum, archaeology, and historical monuments urgently visit the site. He asked them to submit a comprehensive report on the MirZaka archaeological site to the ministry after their visit.

Fortunately, when the delegation was formed, I was included. The Minister of Information and Culture provided his ministerial vehicle, which Mr. Muttaqi used, along with its driver and two Kalashnikov rifles for the team's security, under the control of his driver. When we departed from Kabul toward Paktia, we met with the governor and the Director of Information and Culture in Paktia. After a brief meeting with a representative of the provincial authority who accompanied our team, we arrived at the site in question, MirZaka, in the Sayed Karam district. Without a doubt, MirZaka was one of Afghanistan's unique treasures, which had been illegally excavated in 1994.

If you allow me, I will briefly mention the background of this treasure. Initially, this treasure or cache was discovered in 1947 through a remarkable coincidence. The discovery happened when news reached Kabul that a large number of coins were spilling out from a spring in MirZaka, located thirty-five miles northeast of Gardez. The village women said that the spring had given birth to silver, while they just wanted water. No one knows how many coins had disappeared in the Kabul markets before the arrival of a museum representative. In fact, it was a spring from which the women fetched water, but accidentally, when the water came, this cache opened along its path, carrying the silver or coin treasure. The women usually collected water in their pitchers, and these silver coins would fall into their water containers. They were pleased that the spring was giving them silver along with the water.

When this news reached Kabul, His Excellency Ahmad Ali Kohzad, the Director-General of the National Museum, went to the site for a scientific investigation. He collected the coins found there, which included around fifty five hundred Indian coins from the 3rd to 4th centuries BC, twenty five hundred Indo-Greek coins from the 1st and 2nd centuries BC, thirty five hundred Indo-Scythian coins, a collection of Indo-Parthian and Kushan coins from the early Christian era, and the last coins belonging to Vasudeva, the Kushan king. In other words, these coins represented different periods of Afghanistan's history.

It was widely believed that this treasure was likely buried around the mid-3rd century AD during the Sassanid invasion. At that time, those in power retreated when the Sassanids invaded

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Afghanistan. They tried to take these coins with them despite their weight. However, when they did not find the opportunity or time to transport them, they buried them in the MirZaka area, which was directly along one of the routes taken by the invading Sassanid army. This is just one theory that suggests they may have buried the treasure there and left, never having the opportunity to return and retrieve it. It remained buried until 1947 when it was accidentally discovered and reported to the museum administration.

In 1994, when this discovery was made, unfortunately, illegal excavations began in MirZaka. This was a time when factional wars in Afghanistan were extremely intense. The treasure trove was ruthlessly excavated under the authority of a council consisting of elders from the surrounding villages of this ancient site, who belonged to the Mangal tribe. Its valuable gold artifacts were largely smuggled out, and its silver coins, estimated to weigh around three to four tons, were also smuggled out and sold. I do not know the exact count of the gold artifacts, but the finest pieces included animal figurines and household utensils like knives, plates, and other animal-shaped gold objects. These items were quickly smuggled to a neighboring country and sold on the black market. We would regularly hear these reports from BBC radio, but unfortunately, we could do nothing about it. Behind the scenes, there were factional issues, but this site was given an ethnic character by the council of elders, although political movements were also involved.

In 1995, after a year of looting and excavations, some elders from MirZaka came to Kabul to offer the remaining artifacts, which had fewer buyers abroad, to the Mujahideen government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was the Defense Minister at the time. They demanded a large sum of money from the Afghan government, implying that if the government wanted to buy the artifacts, it could pay that amount and take them. They had demanded millions of Afghanis. An agreement was made between the representatives of the Mangal tribe and Ahmad Shah Massoud that a team would be sent to the area as buyers, not on behalf of Rabbani's government or as government employees. The objective was for the team to go as buyers and assess whether the artifacts were worth the demanded amount. If they were, this expert team would recommend that the government pay the money. Otherwise, under the guise of traders or buyers—they got a guarantee from the elders who had come to Kabul. The elders were kept in Kabul until the team could visit, inspect the artifacts, and give their opinion. After that, Ahmad Shah Massoud would decide whether to purchase the objects. Unfortunately, this was the decision made between them.

A large team was appointed, led by a general, to go to the area as buyers. This team included a professional member who was the associate professor Mohammad Nader Rasuli, the academic secretary of the Institute of Archaeology. Other members represented the office of administrative affairs other organizations. The delegation traveled to Gardez, Paktia, by helicopter. Unfortunately, the entire team did not visit the site. The team stayed in Gardez, and only Nader Rasuli and a representative from the National Security Directorate were sent to the MirZaka site by a Jeep vehicle.



When they arrived at the site, Mr. Rasuli and the security representative saw the artifacts that had been placed in two containers. Mr. Rasuli was not allowed to photograph or even sketch the artifacts; he could only visually inspect them to assess their value. He tried to handle the matter professionally and sketch some important artifacts on paper to determine their historical period and value. However, the local representatives became suspicious of his activities. The security representative, noticing the locals' suspicion, advised Mr. Rasuli to leave the site to avoid problems, as the locals suspected he might be a government representative from Kabul rather than a buyer. Carefully assessing the situation, both of them left the site.

As they were heading towards Gardez, some armed youths followed them midway between MirZaka and Gardez. They stopped their vehicle, thoroughly searched them, and confiscated all their documents and sketches, severely threatening them. Fortunately, they did not arrest the two but allowed them to proceed to Gardez. When Mr. Rasuli returned to Kabul—having been threatened with death—he submitted his report to Burhanuddin Rabbani's government. Mr. Rasuli stated that the remaining artifacts were not valuable enough and that the local elders and people might have wanted to obtain a large sum of money for them. The government refused to buy them.

This is an example of the plundering and looting of the country's cultural assets during a brief period and one of the consequences of the inter-factional wars. All of its gold artifacts, whose exact quantity is unknown to me, were smuggled through Pakistan and sold in Asian and European countries.

As I mentioned earlier, the Taliban had imposed restrictions on the smuggling of goods at ports. An interesting and debatable issue arose as a result of these restrictions on trade or smuggling. The issue revolved around the seizure of a European style painting depicting a hunting scene with semi-nude male and female hunters pursuing a gazelle. This painting was seized at the Torkham customs in Nangarhar province and urgently transferred to the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Finance requested from the Ministry of Information and Culture to see a museum's representative. On behalf of the Ministry of Information and Culture, the museum director, Najibullah Popal (the deputy director), and I, Masoudi, were introduced as museum representatives. When we went to the Ministry of Finance, Mr. Nouri, the Taliban's then-Finance Minister, greeted us and handed over the painting, seeking our clarification about it. After carefully examining the painting, we unanimously and explicitly stated that the semi-nude hunting scene did not belong to Afghanistan, was not an archeological artifact, and was not eligible for preservation in the museum.

Our assumption was that the painting might have been gifted to the former King of Afghanistan, His Majesty Mohammad Zahir Shah, who had a keen interest in hunting, during one of his foreign trips by the host country. Later, from the royal palace it might have fallen into the hands of irresponsible individuals and changed hands several times. According to the individual attempting to transport that painting to Pakistan, they had obtained or purchased it from the north of Kabul.



That painting caused a series of problems for us. After we gave our opinion to the Finance Minister, he emphasized the importance of the painting, as the Nangarhar Customs Directorate had informed him that the owner had offered a \$50,000 bribe to allow its export. The Finance Minister questioned why the owner would offer such a large bribe if the painting was not valuable; how come we rejected it as neither an Afghan underground artifact nor from Afghanistan. As an archaeological museum, we value artifacts but anything valuable was not eligible for preservation in the museum. Firstly, it did not belong to Afghanistan. Secondly, it was not an archeological artifact. Our museum is an archaeological museum.

Nonetheless, Finance Minister Nouri sent the painting to the Office of Administrative Affairs, which referred it to the Taliban's Ministry of Justice to decide.

The Taliban's Justice Minister, Mr. Turabi, a highly radical person, expressed strange and bizarre sentiments upon seeing the painting. In short, the Ministry of Justice sent the painting to the Ministry of Culture, which instructed that it should be kept in the National Museum. We had no choice but to store it with other artifacts on the fourth floor of the ministry building. However, I do not know why the Justice Minister demanded the painting again. When the Cultural Deputy of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Maulawi Abdur Rahman Hotak, and we two museum employees, Najibullah Popal and I, visited the Ministry of Justice, we were directly instructed that the semi-nude depictions of men and women in the painting must be erased. The Justice Minister ordered us to erase the depictions on the painting. The Taliban's Amr bil Maroof (Promotion of Virtue) executed the Justice Minister's orders regarding that painting. They destroyed it, erased it, and removed the depictions. It was then that we realized how sensitive the Taliban were towards human depictions. Through these discussions about that painting, we learned a lesson about the Taliban's stance: any human depictions, no matter its form, must be eliminated.

Before the Taliban conquered Bamyan province, a Taliban commander named Mullah Wahid, from Ghorband Valley in Parwan, stated in an interview that if they captured Bamyan, they would destroy the Bamyan Buddhas. This statement provoked a massive reaction in India, Myanmar, and other countries, as well as among followers of Buddhism. I remember I was following the news; in Lucknow, India, clashes between Hindus and Muslims resulted in the destruction of a Muslim mosque and the killing of several people from both sides. The conflicts escalated to such an extent. To defuse these religious tensions outside Afghanistan, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's Minister of Information and Culture, spoke to the press, stating that this was the personal view of a Taliban commander and not the Taliban's policy to harm the Bamyan Buddhas. Amir Khan Muttaqi's interview largely calmed these conflicts.

Let me add a comment here. As the Taliban gradually expanded their rule to the central and northern parts of the country, a former supporter of the Islamic Republic's [Islamic State's] government, named Agha Shirin Salangi, joined the Islamic Emirate. He gave numerous interviews against the Islamic Republic's [Islamic State's] rulers through radio and print media. In one of his statements, he claimed that the artifacts from Tillya Tepe, previously transferred to the Arg

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(presidential palace), were taken by Ahmad Shah Massoud during his withdrawal. The Taliban effectively used this commander's defection as a [propaganda] instrument. Agha Shirin Salangi's interview really surprised us, the museum employees. His statements about Tillya Tepe left us perplexed and fearful that the artifacts might have been transferred.

To verify whether Agha Shirin Salangi's claim about the transfer of Tillya Tepe artifacts by Ahmad Shah Massoud was true, the Museum Administration proposed to visit the central bank to inspect the museum artifacts. A request was sent to the Taliban's Prime Minister's Office asking for permission to visit the central bank and closely examine the artifacts to check if the storage conditions were suitable. However, the Tillya Tepe artifacts were not mentioned in the proposal. When the proposal reached the higher authorities, it was approved; the Taliban's Prime Minister instructed Da Afghanistan Bank [central bank] to facilitate a visit by a team from the Ministry of Information and Culture in the presence of a representative from the Office of Administrative Affairs and the head of Da Afghanistan Bank.

This proposal took place in 1998. When our team visited the central bank, we relied on the seals and signatures from previous years and confirmed the presence, authenticity, and integrity of the artifacts, including the Bactrian Treasure. Our signatures were intact, and we were assured that no tampering had occurred. We submitted a report to the Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office, confirming that the artifacts were unharmed. This was actually our second visit. I had mentioned earlier that we had previously visited and inspected the artifacts in late 1992 during the Mujahideen government's rule. The second visit took place during the Taliban rule in 1998.

Fortunately, our artifacts were safe in the Arg, giving us peace of mind, and Agha Shirin Salangi's claim about Ahmad Shah Massoud transferring the Tillya Tepe artifacts proved to be completely false.

The initial inventory process of the museum restarted. We resumed this process in Dar-ul-Aman in 1998, and it continued until 2000. This inventory revealed that the National Museum had lost an estimated 70% of its artifacts to looting during the devastating civil wars. When we say 70% of the artifacts, it means that more than seventy thousand items from the National Museum were looted during the Afghan civil wars, which is a massive, irreparable, and significant loss. It should be noted that the remaining artifacts were also not in good condition and needed urgent preservation, cleaning, and restoration. However, the museum staff lacked any facilities for the inspection and maintenance of the artifacts. To some extent, we could carry out professional work, but we did not have access to the required materials. Equipment, laboratories, photography facilities, and chemical materials were unavailable in Kabul. The government was not concerned about this situation, which was deeply disappointing for us.

Another point I should mention is that the United Nations Habitat Program in Kabul was the first organization to assist the National Museum during the initial Taliban reign. Their assistance involved reconstructing and rebuilding the exterior wall surrounding the National Museum to its

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pre-destruction state. They also reconstructed two small rooms located behind the museum building. These two rooms, situated at the back of the National Museum building, were previously used for administrative purposes by the museum management. The United Nations Habitat Program renovated these two damaged rooms, which was delightful for us as it provided us with a space to live. Otherwise, the museum employees would either work inside the depot or sit outside under the shade of the wall, as there were no chairs available. This was the state of the museum.

After the perimeter wall and these two rooms were renovated, the Habitat program, with the limited funds they had, proposed to the Museum Administration that if allowed, they could rebuild half of the museum building structure. Unfortunately, the Museum Administration at the time did not accept this offer, stating that they would agree only if the entire building was reconstructed, not just half. This decision was unfortunate. Nonetheless, the Habitat program did work within its financial limitations, as undertaking the entire building's reconstruction was beyond its capacity.

During this time, when the proposal for partial reconstruction was rejected, a positive step taken by the museum staff was to suggest to the museum director that a reconstruction plan for the museum building be prepared with the help of PAMA (Central Institute for Project Development). PAMA, a governmental organization consisting of engineers from various construction departments, was responsible for sketching and approving most of the plans for government agencies, which would then be ready for implementation. We proposed a request be sent to PAMA to prepare a reconstruction plan for the museum building, considering the required specifications. If financial resources were found in the future, we would have this action plan ready, enabling the reconstruction of the museum building.

I remember that the museum director's name was Qari Alefuddin. He accepted the proposal and shared it with the ministry, which then officially requested PAMA's cooperation in sending a number of engineers to sketch and design the reconstruction plan for the museum building. I recall that twelve engineers from different departments were introduced to the Ministry of Information and Culture for this task. Qari Alefuddin urged them to strive and do their best to prepare the reconstruction plan according to scientific and professional standards. He promised the PAMA engineers a certain amount of money as an incentive, though this promise was baseless. Despite this, they remained interested. The action plan was completed by professional engineers within two months and submitted to the Ministry of Information and Culture.

I remember that during the Mujahideen government, all government employees faced severe economic difficulties, and the rations previously provided to them had also been discontinued. Despite these challenges, a group of engineers traveled from the city to the outskirts of Dar-ul-Aman on bicycles with great enthusiasm and honesty to complete their assigned tasks as soon as possible. However, unfortunately, the Museum Administration, specifically Qari Alefuddin, the museum director, could not provide them with any financial assistance in return for their work. This failure to fulfill the promise greatly offended the aforementioned engineers. The plan prepared by PAMA was utilized for the reconstruction of the museum building in 2003.



Another noteworthy point is that during the Taliban rule, Maulawi Abdul Rahman Hotak established a committee called the Advisory Committee for the Cultural Sector. This committee proved to be very useful. Of course, it was set up at our request; these professional individuals were to provide cultural advice. The following individuals were members of this committee: Najibullah Popal, the deputy director of the museum; Abdul Wasi Ferozi, the head of archaeology; myself, Masoudi; Waheed Muzhda, the director of the fourth region at the political deputy minister's office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Mir Ahmad Joyenda, the former head of archaeology; Nader Rasuli, the academic secretary of the Institute of Archaeology; and Carla Grissmann, the coordinator of SPACH (Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage) in Kabul.

The committee, led by the deputy minister of culture, met regularly and frequently shared recommendations with the ministry. This was commendable in terms of improving the performance of the Cultural Deputy's office. It was truly beneficial.

A fascinating topic I must mention is the effort made by a Swiss cultural figure named Paul Bucherer, who had longstanding relations with the royal family, to recover looted artifacts in Europe. This effort was made in collaboration with Afghan cultural circles and foreign scholars following the plundering of the National Museum. He discussed this matter with the office of the former King of Afghanistan in Rome, who agreed with him. His Majesty Mohammad Zahir Shah, the former King, and Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, the first President of Afghanistan, were undoubtedly deeply interested in national values. Mr. Paul Bucherer also maintained contact with the opposition front against the Taliban, represented by the Mujahideen government. He obtained written support from Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani. Paul Bucherer himself told me that Ahmad Shah Massoud not only agreed but also provided him with some financial assistance. Ahmad Shah Massoud donated a historical artifact from his possession to Mr. Paul Bucherer to be kept in the museum-in-exile in Basel, Switzerland. All the artifacts collected by Paul Bucherer in this museum were transferred from Switzerland to the National Museum in 2007. Undoubtedly, he obtained the agreement not only of the former King but also of the Mujahideen government and UNESCO. He endeavored to proceed with this matter in accordance with international laws and also obtained the agreement of UNESCO in Paris. Without a doubt, the government and people of Switzerland also assisted Mr. Paul Bucherer in establishing an Afghan museum-in-exile.

I find it important to mention that in the establishment of this museum, our Afghan brothers, specifically Ezmarai Hakimi and his family, made great efforts to assist Mr. Bucherer in this matter. They obtained a large number of Afghan cultural artifacts, including some registered artifacts from the National Museum, and safeguarded them under special conditions. Mr. Paul Bucherer also contacted the Taliban authorities to obtain their written consent for the Afghan Museum-in-Exile. They agreed to this verbally, and the Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Qudratullah Jamal, was invited to Switzerland for the inauguration ceremony of the Afghan Museum-in-Exile, presumably in 2000. In addition to attending the inauguration ceremony, he had the opportunity to view all the collected artifacts.



At the appropriate section, I will need to discuss this museum-in-exile and how its artifacts were returned to Afghanistan. This was an overview of the events during the first period of Taliban rule.

During this time, two years into the first period of Taliban rule, we encountered another problem. The Kabul Hotel administration decided to renovate the hotel, formally requesting the Ministry of Information and Culture to transfer the museum artifacts. This posed a significant challenge for the Museum Administration because it was not feasible to transfer the artifacts to the National Museum in Darulaman or any other place that could ensure their safety. Through the efforts of the Advisory Committee and by presenting convincing reasons, the ministry was finally persuaded to facilitate the transfer of the artifacts to the hall of the Ministry of Information and Culture, now known as the Press Hall. One positive aspect of this committee was that we all firmly insisted that there was no alternative. If the artifacts were to be removed from the Kabul Hotel, they had to be relocated to the ministry. On the first floor, there is a large hall. The Deputy Minister of Culture accepted the Advisory Committee's proposal and instructed that it be presented to higher authorities for their directive. Subsequently, they began a series of preliminary work to facilitate the transfer of the museum artifacts. I recall it was the beginning of winter. After laying bricks and installing iron windows, iron doors, and metal bars on all the windows of the first floor of the ministry, the museum artifacts were transferred from the Kabul Hotel to the first-floor hall of the Ministry of Information and Culture. This was a positive step. I must emphasize that it seemed inevitable for the artifacts of the National Museum not to remain undisturbed and would always be relocated from one place to another. This is a distressing reality that has persisted throughout the life of the National Museum's artifacts.

During the Mujahideen and Taliban eras, I believe that not only were the museum artifacts undervalued but the museum staff themselves were not given due regard. Despite the staff's dedication to maintaining professional and scientific standards with the artifacts, these principles were perceived as acts of rebellion and insubordination by those in authority. Adherence to scientific and professional standards was seen as defiance. As an example, during the transfer of artifacts from the Kabul Hotel to the first floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture, some museum staff were arranging the artifacts inside the depot. The head of the Bakhtar News Agency, a Taliban member and ministry employee, tried to enter the depot. Shirazuddin Saifi, a National Museum employee, politely informed him that entry was not allowed according to museum procedures. Enraged, the head of Bakhtar News Agency and his guards assaulted the museum employee in front of others, forcing their way into the depot to see the artifacts. This incident exemplifies the treatment of an official towards an employee dedicated to preserving national heritage. The neglect and mistreatment of both staff and historical artifacts during the years of rule, leading to looting and destruction of the National Museum, stemmed from ignorance, greed, and a pursuit of power. Faced with these circumstances, I resigned as deputy of the National Museum in October 2000, unable to tolerate the situation. To sustain my family, I resorted to selling vegetables in the Kabul market.



If I may share another intriguing incident, in 2000, English archaeologist Jonathan Lee visited Kabul and discussed the Rabatak inscription issue with Ministry of Information and Culture officials. The inscription, unearthed through illegal excavations in the Rabatak area along the Pul-e-Khumri highway in Samangan province, was moved to Dara-e Kayan. Promising to locate the inscription, Jonathan Lee later found that the Taliban, while searching Dara-e Kayan, identified and relocated the inscription to Pul-e-Khumri, Baghlan province. Representatives from SPACH, including Mir Ahmad Joyenda and Robert Kluijver, were informed. Noteworthy is Mir Ahmad Joyenda's involvement as a member of the Cultural Advisory Committee under the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Upon revealing of the Rabatak inscription's location by Jonathan Lee, the Ministry of Information and Culture assembled a delegation led by Naqibullah Ahmadyar, the National Museum director, to transfer the artifact to Kabul from Baghlan province. The team comprised Mir Ahmad Joyenda, the former head of archaeology, myself (Masoudi), the National Museum deputy, and associate professor Mir Abdul Rauf Zakir, the deputy of archaeology. SPACH facilitated the transfer, providing a sturdy wooden crate for the 500-kilogram inscription. All expenses for transporting the Rabatak inscription, via land and air, were covered by the SPACH organization.

A Land Cruiser was rented by the SPACH organization, and the delegation, including Robert Kluijver, left Kabul for Baghlan via the Dara-e Shekari route using the vehicle provided. Notably, the Salang Highway was inaccessible at that time, necessitating a lengthy and challenging journey. From Kabul, we traveled to the Doshi district of Baghlan and arrived there around two o'clock in the morning. Following an overnight stay, we met with the governor of Baghlan in Pul-e-Khumri city the next morning. Upon officially informing the governor about the Rabatak inscription's transfer to Kabul, he kindly issued instructions to aid our delegation in facilitating its transportation. Subsequently, we visited the Baghlan province's Department of Mines, where officials handed over the Rabatak inscription to us. After appropriate packaging using materials from Kabul, we placed it in the prepared crate.

Given the inscription's weight, the delegation decided to transport it from Pul-e-Khumri to Mazar and then onwards to Kabul by air, avoiding the challenging Dara-e Shakari route through Bamiyan province. It was deemed preferable to move it to Mazar-i-Sharif. Upon our arrival in Mazar-i-Sharif, and following the guidance of the Department of Information and Culture along with Balkh province authorities, the inscription was transferred to the same Land Cruiser at Balkh Airport the following day. Notably, the vehicle was parked overnight at the Department of Information and Culture with the artifact inside, ensuring its safety. Following discussions with the airport and Ariana Airline authorities at Balkh Airport, it was evident that Ariana Airlines declined to transport the artifact due to its weight. Consequently, the delegation engaged with the military authorities at Mazar Airport, eventually securing an agreement to transport the artifact and three members of the delegation to Kabul via a military flight, with the fare set at 360,000 Afghanis. Despite the challenges, the artifact was successfully transferred from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul International Airport and eventually to the National Museum of Afghanistan in Darulaman.



The Rabatak inscription, a significant national artifact dating back to the 2nd century AD during the Kushan period, holds immense historical value. Composed in the Bactrian language using Greek script, this limestone artifact measures 90 cm in length, and 61 cm in width, with a thickness of 27 cm and comprising 23 lines. In 2003, Nicholas Sims-Williams, one of the most renowned epigraphists in the Western world, translated the Rabatak Inscription. He was invited to study not only the Rabatak Inscription but also the Gang-e Safidak inscription, translating both. The Rabatak Inscription praises the famous Kushan king Kanishka, with a brief translation reading: "Savior of the Kushans, King Kanishka, honest, just, absolute ruler, worthy of worship, the one who gained the kingdom, like Nana and other gods." This summary provides a concise depiction of the inscription's content.

The Rabatak inscription significantly mentions Kanishka's grandfather, Vima Taktu, marking a crucial historic contribution to the lineage of Kushan kings. The inscription serves to bridge the information gap concerning Vima Taktu's reign, having previously lasted 20 years with no documented history. Through the Rabatak inscription's discovery and analysis, this critical era among the Kushan rulers, particularly Vima Taktu, was chronologically completed, thereby enriching our understanding of the lineage of Kushan monarchs. The inscription's unveiling holds substantial historical value and significance.

When we brought the Rabatak inscription to Kabul, the ministry instructed us to display it. The museum administration placed the Rabatak inscription in the corridor of the first floor, to the right of the entrance, opposite the Surkh Kotal inscription, which was also obtained from the Surkh Kotal area of Baghlan through legal excavations and is located on the left side of the entrance. When you enter the museum, on your right is the Rabatak Inscription, and on your left is the Surkh Kotal Inscription. Both are from the same period, the Kushan period of the 2nd century AD. Later, the Ministry of Information and Culture instructed us to arrange an exhibition featuring the Rabatak inscription along with a few other artifacts from the museum, as resources allowed.

At that time, the museum building was in ruins, damaged by fire. The only room with a partially intact roof was in the eastern annex of the museum library. There, we displayed about ten ethnographic artifacts, including wood carvings of the ancient people of Kabul and symbols of Nuristan's wood carving art. Despite the difficult conditions, we organized this small exhibition in the ruined building.

The ministry then instructed us to hold a formal program to celebrate the exhibition. With the cooperation of the SPACH organization, we set up a large tent and rented chairs from the city for the event. The opening ceremony was attended by the Taliban's foreign minister, Mr. Mutawakil, the Taliban's provincial heads of information and culture, Nancy Dupree, and Carla Grissman. The exhibition, especially the transfer of the Rabatak inscription, was used as a propaganda tool. The guests visited the destroyed building and viewed the displayed ethnographic artifacts.



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As I mentioned earlier, the Taliban regime was seeking financial resources. If I may, I would like to discuss a related question about what they did to earn income. But for now, I am tired. Let's take a five-minute break.

ESFANDIARI: No problem. Let's take a five-minute break. Then, we'll continue the conversation.

[recording paused]

ESFANDIARI: Thank you for the details. Could you kindly tell us whether there were any excavations, legal or illegal, during the Taliban's rule from 1995 to 2001?

MASOUDI: Thank you. During the first rule of the Taliban, no legal excavations were carried out by the Institute of Archaeology. Occasionally, a delegation was sent to the provinces, and if illegal excavations were taking place, measures were taken to prevent them. However, there were no regular excavations conducted by the Institute of Archaeology.

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The Taliban were trying to figure out how to make optimal use of underground resources, especially those that could bring income to their government.

If I may, I'd like to share a very interesting story. In 1999, information reached the Ministry of Information and Culture that the Taliban government in Khost province was seeking to discover a treasure. When I say treasure, I mean they were looking for jewels, especially gold and silver. In some way, a treasure can also refer to ancient treasures like the Bactrian treasure or the Tillya Tepe objects. Anyway, they had this idea in Khost. According to the information we heard, at that time, a Pakistani individual—who might have been a smuggler or an archaeologist—along with a local resident known as Moalem [teacher], were involved. This teacher, from the Sabri district of Khost province, had close relations with the provincial authorities. He was told that there was a treasure in a certain area of Khost called Sahrai Kundi. They believed a treasure was buried there and should be recovered.

The Khost provincial governor requested the Ministry of Mines and Industries to send a few engineers and specialists. They thought it was a treasure and that the engineers from the Ministry of Mines should discover or explore it. The Ministry of Mines assigned a few engineers to Khost province, and under the guidance of the Khost provincial authorities, they began excavating in the Sahrai Kundi area using bulldozers and manpower to obtain the supposed golden treasure.

After a few days of work and excavation, they uncovered several artifacts, including statues, small and large jars, drainage systems connected by ceramic pieces, and various decorative items. The engineers from the ministry realized that this was not a treasure, but an archaeological site. They recommended that experts from the Ministry of Information and Culture be invited to conduct proper excavations. While the work was ongoing, the Khost provincial authorities asked the Ministry of Information and Culture to send a professional delegation. The Minister of Information and

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Culture, Mr. Amir Khan Muttaqi, appointed a delegation consisting of Naqibullah Ahmadyar, Director of the National Museum, Omara Khan Masoudi, Deputy Director of the National Museum, Associate Professor Mir Abdul Rauf Zakir, Deputy of Archaeology, and Mohammad Yahya Mohebzada, a professional member of the museum, and urgently sent them to Khost province.

We, the delegation, first contacted the provincial Department of Information and Culture. The head of Information and Culture of Khost province provided us with some initial information about the excavation site. They informed the provincial governor about the arrival of the Kabul delegation by phone. The provincial governor instructed the delegation of the Ministry of Information and Culture to immediately go to the Sahrai Kundi area. The delegation, accompanied by the head of Information and Culture of Khost, set out for the area in question. It was around four o'clock in the afternoon when we reached the intended area. Upon observing the site and consulting with the engineers from the Ministry of Mines, they informed us about the excavation process involving bulldozers and physical labor. They advised us that the local people were highly emotional and eager for the treasure to be discovered as soon as possible. We studied the site and observed the artifacts that had been excavated and stored in a container on-site.

After a while, the deputy governor of Khost, whom people usually referred to as Haji Agha, arrived at the site. After meeting the delegation, he asked for information. We briefly told him that this was an archaeological site belonging to the Buddhist period and by no means a gold mine. The excavation operations were also carried out against the principles of archaeology. As a result of carelessness and the use of bulldozers, the artifacts were severely damaged. We recommended that the excavation work be stopped immediately. Mr. Haji Agha, the deputy governor, listened to our views with interest, and we all went together to the Khost governor's office to have dinner.

I remember that during dinner, more than twenty officials from various government departments of the Khost province were present. After the meal, Haji Agha introduced us, the delegation sent from Kabul, to those present and asked us to share our views and observations. We, the delegation, suggested to the museum director to tell Haji Agha that we had not yet completed our assessment and wanted to discuss it with him separately. Fortunately, he accepted this proposal and guided us to his room. First, we asked for his permission to fully explain the situation. We clearly explained the damage and destruction of the archaeological site, stating that there was no gold treasure, only an archaeological site. We offered to provide a written statement, as per our professional assessment. They asked what should be done next. Our answer was to share the issue with the Minister of Information and Culture via a phone call.

Haji Agha contacted someone via a local phone and requested the satellite device be brought to his room immediately. After some time, they brought the satellite phone, and he contacted the Minister of Information and Culture and relayed the situation. The minister wanted to talk to the delegation members. Previously, we had concluded our final decision to resolve this situation. Over the phone, I clearly explained the situation and the mistakes that had been made to the Minister of Information and Culture. The minister asked what should be done. I suggested that

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the discovered artifacts should be transferred to the National Museum, work on the site should be stopped, and the site should be covered again in its original form to prevent further damage. In later stages, professional excavations should be conducted by the Institute of Archaeology of the Ministry of Information and Culture based on a specific program. Fortunately, the Kabul delegation's proposals were accepted by the Minister of Information and Culture. He instructed the deputy governor of Khost, Mr. Haji Agha, to send the discovered artifacts to Kabul via Ariana flight and to respect and act upon the professional opinions of the delegation.

Mr. Haji Agha was truly a serious and responsible person. The next day, he took us, the delegation, to the archaeological site of Sahrai Kundi in his car with his driver. He ordered the artifacts that had been placed in the container to be transferred to the customs building of Khost province. Some previously transferred artifacts at the Khost Customs Department were prepared for transportation. Later, he showed the delegation two or three other sites, one of which I remember was called Tape-e-Mangas or Magas. The Deputy of Archaeology had a positive opinion about all three sites, confirming that they were archaeological sites and that no one should be allowed to excavate them under the pretext of discovering treasure.

This trip to Khost province was very fruitful. First, with the cooperation of the Khost authorities, all the artifacts obtained from Sahrai Kundi were properly listed by us, the delegation. After packing and preparing the cargo for transportation, the artifacts were transported to Kabul via Ariana Airlines with the direct cooperation of the Khost provincial authorities, who covered all financial expenses. Second, for the first time, an archaeological site was accidentally discovered in Khost province. Until then, no part of Khost province had been surveyed or researched. It was certain that several archaeological sites related to the Buddhist period existed in Khost province. This was confirmed by chance for the first time.

Similarly, based on information received by the Ministry of Information and Culture regarding smuggling or illegal excavations, a delegation of specialists in the relevant field would have been instructed to identify and determine the sites of excavation or artifacts that were being smuggled out of the country. The appointed delegation would visit the site, and the decisions they made and the reports they provided were acted upon. For example, information about the smuggling of cultural artifacts was received from Sharana, the capital of Paktika province. The museum director and I were assigned by the ministry to travel to Paktika, which is in southern Afghanistan and shares a border with Pakistan. We closely observed the artifacts, and those worthy of preservation and maintenance in the museum were transferred to Kabul and recorded in the National Museum under the account of a trustee [*Motamid*]. They included items from the Islamic period, made of bronze.

Similarly, in 1998, a delegation consisting of Shabbir Ahmad Osmani, the museum director; Omara Khan Masoudi, the deputy director of the museum; Abdul Wasi Firoozi, the head of archaeology; Mr. Nazar Mohammad Azizi, the head of the Kushan Center; and Nabizada, the director of archaeological photography at the Academy of Sciences, was assigned to visit some illegally

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excavated archaeological sites in the Zazai Aryub district of Paktia province. During the visit to the site where illegal excavations had indeed taken place, we studied the pottery objects obtained from the site and determined that they belonged to the pre-Islamic period. After research and study, the artifacts were handed over to the Institute of Archaeology for further investigation. In the delegation's report, emphasis was placed on the protection of the mentioned site, and it was submitted to the Ministry of Information and Culture to prevent further excavations.

These trips were sometimes effective to some extent in preventing excavations. The illegal excavations of Afghanistan's archaeological sites, which practically began in this country in 1838 AD, were largely prevented except during the reign of King Mohammad Zahir Shah and the republican era of Mohammad Daoud from 1934 to 1978. Unfortunately, since that period, this illegal activity has continued and still exists in the country, which must be strictly stopped.

I find it necessary to mention a trip to the northern part of the country, which also took place during the Taliban era. Illegal excavations were ongoing in Faryab province. In 1999, a delegation consisting of Abdul Wasi Firoozi, Omara Khan Masoudi, associate professor Mir Abdul Rauf Zakir, and Engineer Nik Mohammad Nazari, a representative of historical monuments, visited Faryab province. With the cooperation of the head of Information and Culture of Faryab province, we visited an archaeological site and observed the artifacts that had been obtained. After the initial description, the artifacts were transferred to the Ministry of Information and Culture. On the way back, the delegation traveled from Baghlan and Kunduz to the historical province of Takhar. After meeting with the governor of Faryab, the delegation, with the cooperation of the police headquarters of Faryab province, set out to visit the archaeological site of Ai-Khanum in the Dasht-e-Qala district of Takhar province.

Unfortunately, the archaeological site of Ai-Khanum had also been extensively and arbitrarily excavated, with hundreds of visible holes. The delegation submitted a report to the Ministry of Information and Culture, urging the relevant authorities to immediately halt excavations across the country. In summary, I can say that illegal excavation is a major problem and is challenging to prevent. As I mentioned before, illegal excavations have been and still are ongoing. Stopping them requires the active participation of the people and the prompt action of the relevant departments, considering the available resources. This problem exists in our country and causes irreparable damage to Afghanistan's cultural heritage. If you have any other questions, please feel free to ask.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. I hope you stay well. I don't want to tire you any further. It was a long and very fruitful session. If you agree, let's save the other questions for our next meeting.

MASOUDI: As you wish.

ESFANDIARI: We will definitely continue our discussion about the National Museum of Afghanistan during the Taliban era in the next session.



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MASOUDI:

Very well.

ESFANDIARI:

Thank you for your time. May you live long.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]