

Oral History Interview

with

Omara Khan Masoudi

recorded at the National Museum of Asian Art

Washington, D.C.

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by Azizullah Esfandiari

Interviewer

ESFANDIARI: Thank you for your time. Welcome to the eleventh session. In our previous interview, we discussed the repatriation of looted Afghan artifacts from abroad and some artifacts that were under the control of individuals and groups within Afghanistan. A part of the discussion remained, which you should address today. The discussion focused on your work and achievements in recovering artifacts after 2002. You listed and detailed the most important items and accomplishments. To continue that discussion, could you tell us what other events occurred under your leadership at the museum?

MASOUDI: Thank you. In my previous discussions, I mentioned that artifacts were obtained both from abroad and within Afghanistan. Artifacts from inside Afghanistan were acquired through two main channels: one was through excavations conducted by Afghan or foreign archaeologists, who then handed the items over to the museum; the other was through purchases or rewards. We talked about the ministry's policy on this. Unfortunately, there was another issue as well. Smugglers heavily promoted certain claims to create favorable conditions for themselves and exploit the situation.

For example, I mentioned the mummified bodies. Smugglers claimed that mummified bodies were found in Afghanistan, which led the Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Narcotics Department of the Ministry of Interior to investigate the matter. They pursued legal action. After obtaining the bodies, which were allegedly mummified, the Interior Ministry staff handed them over to the Ministry of Information and Culture. The Ministry of Information and Culture then placed them on the fourth floor of the ministry building with other artifacts.

I should note that when those bodies were received, I was on an official trip to Japan. I learned about the delivery of the two mummified bodies through the media in Japan. When I returned from Japan, I examined the bodies after some time. As the museum director, I felt that

keeping those artifacts in the Ministry of Information and Culture's depot was inappropriate due to the active heating system that could damage them. I recommended transferring them from the ministry's depot to the museum building in Darulaman, which had recently been renovated. We placed the two bodies in a separate room and I suggested to the Ministry of Information and Culture that they purchase three air conditioners to maintain a stable, cool environment in that room. Those three air conditioners were bought and installed.

In practice, preserving those bodies was a significant challenge for the National Museum staff, especially for the restoration department. Our restoration team lacked specialized knowledge in this area and we did not have the necessary chemical materials for preservation. At that time, our only option was to maintain a consistent temperature and cooling level in that specific room.

I remember during an official trip to China with Dr. Raheen, the Minister of Information and Culture, we visited the Xinjiang Museum and saw several dried bodies similar to those at the National Museum of Afghanistan. The explanations from their staff showed that bodies could be dried at a constant temperature. This visit confirmed to me that the two bodies we had were also dried bodies, not mummified as claimed. This disproved the mummification claims.

The reason I mention this is to highlight that millions of dollars were spent on such activities and advertisements. Antiquities were even imported into Afghanistan from abroad, and through smugglers and dealers, both local and international, the market for buying and selling historical artifacts was kept captivating. They also indirectly encouraged local people to create conditions favorable to their goals, which included looting ancient artifacts, by presenting them false hopes. Undoubtedly, government weaknesses, lack of public awareness, poverty, and destitution created an environment conducive to the looting of historical and cultural property. Unfortunately, these issues were prevalent.

If I may, I'd like to mention another topic. In 2003, as the director of the National Museum of Afghanistan, I, along with Wasi Firoozi, the head of archaeology was invited by an American archaeologist named Philip Cole to a seminar at a university in Washington D.C. The seminar focused on the National Museum of Afghanistan and the Baghdad Museum. Philip Cole had conducted excavations in Central Asia. Some cultural elites were also invited to this seminar.

During the seminar, I gave a presentation on the situation of the National Museum of Afghanistan. After the presentation, a journalist, who was likely Norwegian, asked me, "A Norwegian collector has purchased a number of Buddhist-era manuscripts from Afghanistan and currently has them in his possession. What is your reaction to this?" I was very pleased with this question. I described the looting and plundering of the National Museum and illegal excavations. I suggested that individuals and cultural circles in international institutions should assist the Afghanistan Museum and the Baghdad Museum in returning looted artifacts.

After returning to my country, I shared the issue of the Buddhist-era manuscripts and the journalist's question with the Minister of Information and Culture. He said that this matter should be

pursued seriously. Sometime later, the journalist visited Kabul. Fortunately, he met with the Minister of Information and Culture. The Minister shared his opinion on the return of those manuscripts. I'm grateful that the journalist followed up on the issue.

In the next stage, when the Minister of Information and Culture was traveling to a European country, the journalist asked them again. The Minister, using very appropriate language, requested the Norwegian collector to help return the artifacts to their original place. In other words, he hoped that the person with the artifacts would return them. This prompted the collector to show interest. He returned fifty-eight pieces of Buddhist-era manuscripts, after preservation and re-examination, to the Afghan embassy in Norway. He had likely purchased the collection at a very low price from Bamyan and Samangan provinces. The process of handing over these manuscripts was communicated through the embassy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then to the Ministry of Information and Culture.

The Ministry of Information and Culture, in an official letter dated December 1, 2007, thanked the Norwegian collector, Mr. Martin Schøyen, for agreeing to return the fifty-eight pieces of Buddhist-era manuscripts to the Afghan embassy in Norway. This letter was sent to the Afghan embassy through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following this, the manuscripts were handed over to the Afghan embassy and then to the National Museum of Afghanistan through the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the National Museum, they were given to the curator of the relevant period. It was reported that these manuscripts had buyers willing to pay several million dollars, but I cannot confirm the truth of that. Ultimately, Mr. Martin Schøyen returned them to Afghanistan free of charge, which is commendable.

It's also worth noting that several artifacts from various countries and some coins from the United States were returned to Afghanistan with the cooperation of their relevant institutions. I don't recall the exact number of these coins. These examples show that we were able to recover a large number of artifacts from both abroad and within Afghanistan. These very valuable artifacts enriched the museum and totaled several thousand pieces. This was just a brief example of the efforts to collect artifacts from both inside and outside the country.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. We've concluded the discussion about the repatriation of artifacts. Here, I will provide some additional context for our listeners and readers before moving to the next segment. After reviewing previous interviews [sessions three and four], it became clear that we needed to address certain questions regarding the National Museum of Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal and during the civil wars. I would ask some brief questions so you can provide clarification on those topics.

MASOUDI: All right.

ESFANDIARI: One of the questions pertains to the decade of democracy in Afghanistan [1960s] —a period of political development and positive events. Focusing on the museum, did the National Museum of Afghanistan, Afghan cultural heritage, and archaeology experience increased

international interest during this time? Were there international archaeological excavations taking place? Did young Afghans show more interest in their national heritage? Please provide a brief explanation.

MASOUDI: Thank you. After the Second World War, the exclusive right to conduct excavations, which had been held by the French team (DAFA), was lifted. This allowed numerous archaeological teams from countries such as the United States, the then Soviet Union, England, Japan, Italy, Germany, and India to undertake surveys and excavations. All artifacts uncovered were directly handed over to the National Museum of Afghanistan. Additionally, in 1966, the Institute of Archaeology of Afghanistan was established as a specialized department within the Ministry of Information and Culture. Prior to this, such activities were managed by the museum itself. The creation of this institute provided a significant opportunity for the younger generation in this field. From then on, all agreements with foreign archaeologists were managed through this department, and the previous fifty percent division of artifacts was abolished.

Previously, this privilege had been granted to the French team. After World War II, this privilege was revoked, and all artifacts became the property of Afghanistan. During this period, the number of foreign tourists in Afghanistan increased, leading to growth in the hotel industry, job creation for youth, the establishment of a tourism administration, expansion of handicrafts, and substantial improvements in the National Museum's exhibitions. We also saw a balanced growth in education, with increased interest among young people in Afghan history and culture. The active involvement of foreign archaeologists, in partnership with the Institute of Archaeology of Afghanistan, created better opportunities for expanding excavations and transferring artifacts to the National Museum, which played a significant role in the museum's growth and enrichment.

ESFANDIARI: During the discussions about the wars approaching Kabul towards the end of the Soviet occupation, you mentioned concerns about the museum's security as the city was increasingly threatened. Could you explain who was working at the museum during this period? What were the discussions about, and what plans were considered to protect the museum?

MASOUDI: Thank you. As security threats and rocket attacks on Kabul began to escalate, the National Museum administration took measures to protect the building. They blocked all windows on the first floor and the museum doors, except the main entrance, with sandbags filled with sand and soil. This was to prevent shrapnel and rocket debris from damaging the storage areas and offices. This was the first stage of our protective measures.

The museum administration discussed the transfer of the Tillya Tepe gold artifacts with the Minister of Information and Culture. The Minister, understanding the gravity of the situation, took the matter to President Dr. Najibullah. The President then appointed a committee consisting of Mr. Bashir Roygar, Minister of Information and Culture; Mr. Yaqubi, Minister of State Security; Hamidullah Tarzi, Minister of Finance; and Abdul Hussain, Minister of Planning. During the

committee's first meeting, Mr. Mohammad Anwar Katawazi, Director of the National Museum, and Najibullah Popal, Deputy Director of the National Museum, were also present. They discussed the transfer of the Tillya Tepe artifacts to a secure location and decided that the gold artifacts from Tillya Tepe should be moved to the Central Bank at the Presidential Palace for safekeeping. Following the President's order, the gold artifacts from six graves, which had been placed in six metal safes, were transferred to the Central Bank in the Palace.

Some museum members and the relevant trustee/guardian were aware of this transfer. To maintain secrecy, it was declared that the Tillya Tepe artifacts had been moved to Koti Baghcha, where the ethnographic museum was active and managed by the National Museum administration. The goal was to keep the actual location, the Central Bank in the Palace, confidential. Although all museum staff were informed that the Tillya Tepe artifacts had been moved, those involved in the transfer in 1984 did not disclose the true location and instead propagated that the artifacts had been moved to Koti Baghcha in the Palace.

Later, in 1989, due to increasing threats, several gallery artifacts were collected and stored according to the President's order. The museum was also closed during this time. The staff were the same experienced employees who had been working there for many years, with very few newcomers. Despite the severe insecurity, we managed to protect many artifacts through small but effective measures at that time and in the following stages.

ESFANDIARI: Another topic you mentioned was your role as the head of the prehistoric department. You participated in various meetings related to protecting artifacts within the museum. During your time as head of that department, what artifacts were under your care? How many artifacts were in the prehistoric department, and from which locations? Could you please elaborate on your responsibilities?

MASOUDI: Thank you. As you know, the prehistoric period spans a very long era, also referred to as the Stone Age. The Stone Age is the first and longest phase of prehistory, characterized by the use of stone tools, beginning with the earliest human-made objects. It is divided into three main periods:

1. Old Paleolithic: Approximately from 600,000 to 100,000 years ago.
2. Middle Paleolithic: From 100,000 to 30,000 years ago.
3. New Paleolithic: From 30,000 to 10,000 years ago.

Excavations of prehistoric sites in Afghanistan began after 1949 with the help of French, American, and Soviet specialists working with Afghan archaeologists. Sites excavated include Sistan, Shamshir Ghar in Kandahar, Sayed Qala in Kandahar, Darra-e-Dadil in Balkh, Ghar-e-Morda-e Gusfand in Faryab, Qara Kamar in Samangan, Darra-e-Kur in Badakhshan, Darra-e-Kalan in Samangan, Dasht-e-Nawur in Ghazni, among others. To my knowledge, no Old Paleolithic sites have been excavated in Afghanistan yet.

The artifacts on display in the prehistoric gallery at that time belonged to the Middle Paleolithic or Middle Old Stone Age. These were discovered by Louis Dupree, Dr. Abdul Rauf Wardak, and Mohammad Ibrahim from 1959 to 1970 in northern Afghanistan. Notable sites included Darra-e-Dadil, Darra-e-Chaqmaq, Darra-e-Kur, Baba Darwesh, and Ghar-e-Gusfand-e Murda near Garziwan south of Maimana. The collection featured numerous debitage tools. Artifacts from Darra-e-Kur and Gusfand-e Murda are considered evidence of the Mousterian period. Scientists believe that northern Afghanistan is where the physical development of modern humans began, evidenced by the appearance of blade-making industries associated with the Upper Paleolithic period, marking the start of technological evolution in the Stone Age.

Upper Paleolithic: Industries from this period were identified in Qara Kamar, Aq Kupruk, and Hazar Sum in Samangan. They were dated using Carbon-14 to approximately 32,000 years before 1950. The findings include nose scrapers, microliths such as bone engraving tools, flint pieces, blade-like fragments, drills, axes, cleavers, and animal remains related to deer and wild cattle, as well as pottery from sites like Aq Kupruk.

Mesolithic: Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age industries were discovered in Qara Kamar, dating back to around nine thousand to seven thousand years ago, from 1952 in the north of Khulm in Balkh province.

Neolithic: The Neolithic period was represented in two forms from Aq Kupruk: a) Pre-Pottery Neolithic, dated up to 9,000 years ago. b) Pottery Neolithic, dated between 9,000 and 7,000 years ago. Findings from this period include unbaked pottery, flint tools, stone hoes, polished stone axes, stone mills, fire-treated stone axes, and remains of domesticated animals and plants.

Based on evidence, northern Afghanistan may have been one of the early centers for the cultivation and development of wheat, goats, sheep, and possibly the domestication of cattle. During this period, humans might have begun to control their food production. One notable ancient site is Dasht-e Nawur in Ghazni, located sixty kilometers west of the city. In 1974, Louis Dupree collected surface information from this site, including large blades, borers, single-edged scrapers, cleavers, adzes, and axes. These artifacts closely resemble those found in Qara Tu and Lahuti in Tajikistan. Although more information about the Paleolithic era is available, excavations in this area have not yet been conducted in Afghanistan to provide more accurate and scientific data.

During my time overseeing the prehistoric department, I was responsible for both the exhibition artifacts and the inspection of the Mandigak depot. When artifacts were taken down and stored, the museum faced numerous challenges. While I don't recall the exact number of prehistoric artifacts, my role involved inspecting both displayed and stored prehistoric items. This was prior to any transfers or looting of the museum's artifacts.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you, sir. In session three, you mentioned the need to transfer some artifacts to a safer location. Could you please tell us who made the decisions about transferring those artifacts? Were they museum staff, only department managers, senior museum staff, or

others? Additionally, who was the Minister of Information and Culture at that time? If you remember their name, please share it. You also mentioned Mr. Bashir Roygar and noted that he was aware of the value of Afghanistan's cultural and historical artifacts. What was his background—was he a historian or an archaeologist?

MASOUDI: Thank you. As I mentioned earlier, when insecurity was getting closer to Kabul, there was significant concern among museum staff about preserving the artifacts under challenging conditions. One of the first decisions was to transfer the gold artifacts of the Bactrian treasure to the Central Bank of the Palace. The museum administration, in coordination with the Ministry of Information and Culture, handled this transfer. Only a limited number of museum staff knew that the artifacts were moved to the Central Bank. To avoid revealing the actual location, the rumor circulated that the artifacts had been transferred to Koti Baghcha, where the ethnographic museum was located and which was also secure.

The decision to transfer these artifacts was made by museum staff who understood which items were valuable and needed protection. Mr. Bashir Roygar was the Minister of Information and Culture at the time. This transfer would not have happened without his consultation. Mr. Bashir Roygar graduated from the journalism department of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities. He spent much of his career in radio and television, initially as the General Director of Documentary Films, then as the General Director of Radio and Television, and finally as the Minister of Information and Culture. He is a respected scholar. During his tenure, decisions regarding artifact transfers were made in close cooperation with him. His facilitation was crucial for coordinating with the presidency. Unfortunately, not all artifacts were transferred, and the museum suffered damage. However, the artifacts that were moved to the Central Bank and the fourth floor of the ministry remain safe to this day.

Although a significant amount of time has passed, and it's challenging to remember all the individuals involved in the selection and transfer of artifacts, I recall some key figures. Najibullah Popal was the deputy director of the museum, Ghulam Hassan Shur was the director of museology, I was the head of the prehistory department, Feda Mohammad Khan was in charge of artifact restoration, and Shirazuddin Saifi and Abdullah Hakimzada were members of the restoration department. Mullah Yaqub was the custodian of the Bactrian Treasure collection—though I'm unsure if he is still alive. Naeem Jalalzai was part of the archaeology department, Ali Tahir was the director of the ethnography museum, and there were one or two members from the Institute of Archaeology. Mohammad Anwar Katawazi, the director of the National Museum, led this entire team, and we worked together to achieve our objectives. Some of these individuals are still alive, while others have passed away. May they rest in peace. They worked collaboratively, and fortunately, we achieved positive results.

ESFANDIARI: Your explanations about the museum's situation during the late period of Soviet military presence were very insightful. One question that arises is whether the international community provided assistance to the National Museum staff during this period. For instance, was

DAFA, associated with the French, present in Kabul? Were the Italians still involved? And what about figures like Nancy Dupree and Louis Dupree—where were they? Had they left Kabul?

MASOUDI: Thank you. During the years of insecurity in Afghanistan, particularly after the April 1978 coup, many cultural institutions and individuals in the cultural sector either closed down or left the country. The DAFA office, for example, closed in 1982. The Italian excavation team also departed. Louis and Nancy Dupree left Afghanistan as well. From 1980 to 2002, no organizations assisted the National Museum of Afghanistan, except for the SPACH cultural association. From 1995 to 2009, SPACH assisted with inventorying artifacts that remained from the civil wars by providing stationery, equipment, and supplies, and organizing English language and computer courses for museum staff. After the fall of the first Taliban regime, various forms of assistance to the National Museum began to arrive, which I will detail later.

ESFANDIARI: You mentioned inspecting the Bactrian Gold Treasure artifacts at the central bank in 1990s. It's surprising that during the years of civil war in Kabul, those artifacts remained intact. How were the artifacts protected during such tumultuous times?

MASOUDI: Thank you. As I mentioned earlier, in 1363 (1984), the Bactrian Treasure artifacts were transferred to the central bank of Arg (Presidential Palace). Museum staff were informed that the artifacts had been moved to Koti Baghcha, but the actual location was the central bank. The central bank in the Arg was used for storing money and issuing Afghani banknotes. Unfortunately, during the civil wars and the first Taliban rule, the central bank did not hold physical money for use. Only officials of Da Afghanistan Bank or the bank's executive board had access to the central bank, which was guarded round the clock by the Presidential Guard's ceremonial unit with sentry posts set up.

As mentioned previously, when we transferred the artifacts to the central bank, there was physical money inside. However, as the wars intensified and insecurity increased, during our one-day temporary exhibition of the Tillya Tepe artifacts in 1991, there was still physical money present. By 1992, when we went to the bank to check the condition of our artifacts, there was no physical money left. One reason the artifacts remained safe was the absence of physical money, which meant that the central bank was less frequented and thus more secure.

In 1992, we visited [the central bank] and confirmed that our seals were intact. We made another visit during the first Taliban rule in 1998 and found that the artifacts, including the seals, remained untouched and in good condition. We were confident that the Tillya Tepe treasures and other transferred artifacts were still there. I believe there are two possible reasons for this:

1. The Absence of Physical Currency: Physical currency is managed by Da Afghanistan Bank and is kept under the supervision of the bank's executive board. This board includes representatives from several agencies such as the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, the General Director of Banknote Printing and Supervision, and the General Treasurer. When

there is no physical currency, there is no need to access these artifacts, and thus, the Tillya Tepe treasures and other artifacts remained preserved.

2. Even if physical currency existed, it would likely be safeguarded by the ceremonial unit of the Presidential Palace, which is the most secure location. They are always on duty and provide physical security for the bank.

In my view, these two factors—absence of physical currency and constant protection by the Presidential Guard unit—contributed to the safety of the artifacts. Starting in 1984, and following the temporary exhibition in 1991, the seals I personally signed with our team remained intact until 2003. We checked the artifacts' condition twice, in 1992 and 1998, and fortunately, our seals were still intact.

ESFANDIARI: A related question arises about how National Geographic managed to access and photograph those artifacts. Could you explain how they got access [to the Tillya Tepe collection]?

MASOUDI: In 2003, when President Hamid Karzai and Dr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, then Minister of Finance, visited the Central Bank at the Presidential Palace, the bank's executive board confirmed that the Tillya Tepe treasures were stored there. Mr. Karzai was pleased with this news, but unfortunately, it became public. We had kept this information confidential, but eventually, the location of these artifacts was revealed. Following this disclosure, those interested, including archaeologists like Sarianidi and the Afghan people eager to know the artifacts' whereabouts, took notice.

I recall that Mr. Fred Hiebert, a National Geographic representative and an archaeologist specializing in prehistoric periods, traveled to Kabul. He had previously conducted excavations in Central Asia with Sarianidi. Upon learning about the Tillya Tepe artifacts, he came to Kabul with National Geographic's assistance. He made encouraging promises, stating that the United States was eager to assist with exhibiting the collection. He also suggested that showcasing these artifacts could generate funds for cultural activities.

I clearly remember that Mr. Fred Hiebert visited my office one day. He introduced himself and mentioned that he had worked with Sarianidi. He expressed interest in organizing an exhibition of the Bactrian treasures in America. I told Mr. Hiebert that, as the museum's director, my primary responsibility was to preserve and introduce the artifacts. It was our duty to organize exhibitions at both national and international levels. However, I explained that during the civil wars, the museum building had been burned, and many artifacts were destroyed. Until we had inventoried these items, I couldn't agree to hold an exhibition. I said that once the transferred artifacts and those remaining from the war were inventoried and documented, I would consider the exhibition.

Before coming to my office, Fred Hiebert had met with the Father of the Nation, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Information and Culture, and other relevant authorities. They had all agreed to send the artifacts abroad for exhibition but did not fully understand the internal issues of

the museum. When I raised this concern, Fred Hiebert, as an archaeologist, understood the gravity of the situation and returned to America. On his second visit, he came with Mr. Terry Garcia, Vice President of National Geographic. National Geographic then signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Information and Culture. According to this agreement, they committed to inventorying all artifacts of the National Museum, including those transferred to the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace and the Ministry of Information and Culture, as well as the artifacts remaining from the civil wars. They agreed to create data sheets for each artifact in both Dari and English.

The process began in 2004 after the agreement was signed. National Geographic's photography team arrived and started inventorying artifacts from the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace, beginning with the Tillya Tepe collection. I remember Carla Grissmann was involved at that time. Artifacts were recorded by hand, and Carla Grissmann prepared handwritten records. Later, the data sheets were completed in both English and Dari. This process took some time, and National Geographic covered all the expenses.

National Geographic assisted us with inventorying the artifacts transferred to the Central Bank in the Presidential Palace and the Ministry of Information and Culture. In 2004, the Tillya Tepe artifacts and other transferred items were included in the inventory. Data cards were prepared in two languages. The artifacts on the fourth floor of the Ministry of Information and Culture also received financial support from National Geographic.

I recall that Deborah Klimburg-Salter, a specialist in Buddhist art and a professor at the University of Vienna, visited us with her assistant to help inventory the Buddhist artifacts.

At that time, we made efforts to invite the archaeologists who had excavated each artifact. With National Geographic's help, artifacts excavated by French archaeologists were also included, as DAFA (French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan) had become active by then. Unfortunately, National Geographic either couldn't or chose not to inventory the remaining museum artifacts. Consequently, those artifacts were not included in the inventory. This process was completed in 2005.

When the President visited France, President Chirac requested that the Tillya Tepe exhibition be held there. The President verbally agreed. Upon returning to Kabul, a French delegation arrived, and we agreed to their request. According to the protocol, we sent a number of artifacts from four regions to France. Initially, National Geographic had shown interest in bringing these artifacts to America. However, after President Chirac's request, the Afghan President agreed to the exhibition being held in France first. Consequently, the artifacts went to France, then to the Netherlands, and finally to America, where they were exhibited in four museums.

The artifacts were in America from 2008 to 2009. National Geographic's involvement was based on an agreement with the Ministry. The primary driver for the exhibition was Fred Hiebert, an American archaeologist who had worked with Sarianidi. Fortunately, Sarianidi had shared all his

information with Fred. During the inventory process, we used all the information Sarianidi had provided. The Tillya Tepe artifacts went through this inventory process, which led to National Geographic's involvement. After our agreement, they began their cooperation.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you. A related question concerns the role of watchmen in the museum. Were the watchmen selected based on specific positions? Did department managers perform night watch duties, or was it handled by all employees? What criteria were used?

MASOUDI: Thank you. From what I recall, when I first joined the museum, there was an established system for night and day watchmen. This system likely had very old roots. Two people were assigned to night duty, and two to day duty. The purpose of this system was to ensure that all the seals of the museum's depots were [guarded]. The duty was transferred from the night watchman to the day watchman and vice versa. This practice continued until the civil wars began. Unfortunately, the museum was burned and looted, security conditions deteriorated, and the watchman system was destroyed. During the first Taliban rule, the museum's watchman system was nonexistent.

In 2002 and 2003, during the museum's reconstruction, I took on the responsibility and reestablished the watchman system. We reinstated both night and day watch duties. All museum employees, except for the museum director, were assigned watch duties according to a schedule. An officer and a cleaner or other museum worker would be on duty together, both at night and during the day. There was an organized system for handing over duties from day to night watchmen, recorded in a logbook. Any incidents were noted in this log, and the museum administration was required to investigate. In my opinion, this system was very effective. The night and day watchman system is still in place at the museum, and I believe it has contributed significantly to the security of the artifacts. While I'm not sure when this system was originally implemented, it has been active throughout my forty years at the museum and continues to be effective.

ESFANDIARI: Regarding the first theft at the National Museum of Afghanistan that occurred in Jadi 1371 [December 1992/January 1993], you mentioned two artifacts: the Dipankara Jataka and the Kassapa Brothers. Were these artifacts cataloged? From which archaeological sites were they discovered?

MASOUDI: Yes, the two significant artifacts, the Dipankara Jataka and the Kassapa Brothers, were cataloged. They were discovered at the archaeological sites of Shotorak and Paitava.

A. The standing Buddha statue, made of schist stone, features flames rising from its shoulders. Brahma and Indra, two Indian deities, are depicted flying above Buddha's head, holding an umbrella, symbolizing the transition from Hinduism to Buddhism. This statue was found in Shotorak and Paitava and dates from the 2nd to 4th centuries AD. It was stolen, and there is still no information on its whereabouts.

B. The scene of Buddha being worshipped by the three Kassapa brothers shows the brothers, each with a disciple, standing respectfully before Buddha after converting to

Buddhism. A Kushan nobleman and his wife, adorned with Kushan jewelry, are depicted on the far right. The upper border features Buddhamitra surrounded by a row of devotees. This scene represents the obedience and devotion of Brahmin followers to Buddha. It was discovered in Shotorak and dates from the 3rd to 5th centuries AD.

Both artifacts were stolen from the museum. Fortunately, the Kassapa Brothers was purchased by the Hirayama Foundation from Peshawar and transferred to Japan. Along with 102 other registered items from the National Museum that were stolen during the civil wars, it was acquired and collected by the Hirayama Foundation. During Ashraf Ghani's presidency, these items were returned from Japan to Kabul, and a separate exhibition titled "Artifacts Returned from Japan" was held at the National Museum. These artifacts, originating from Hadda, Shotorak, Paitava, Ai Khanum, and Bamiyan, include a number of coins, reflecting the dedication and care of Japanese experts towards Afghan culture. I extend my gratitude to them; their efforts are commendable.

Of the two artifacts, only the Kassapa Brothers was returned. The Dipankara Jataka remains missing, and we hope it will be located and returned to Afghanistan as well.

ESFANDIARI: Unfortunately, some artifacts were destroyed in the fire that occurred in 1993 on the upper floor of the museum. Were these destroyed artifacts cataloged before the fire? Were there any photos taken of them before they were destroyed? Do these photos still exist?

MASOUDI: Yes, all the artifacts displayed in the lower and upper halls of the National Museum were fully cataloged and registered by archaeologists from various excavation sites. Photos and publications of these artifacts can be found in the archaeologists' reports, particularly in books published on the subject. Some of these photos are included in the National Museum guide.

Specifically, DAFA publications include photos of artifacts documented by French and other foreign archaeologists. We had complete photos and albums of these artifacts in the museum. Unfortunately, during the war, when the museum building was burned, all these possessions were destroyed by the fire. Therefore, I can confirm that photos and reports of all artifacts from archaeological sites obtained by both Afghan and foreign archaeologists were available and may be accessible.

ESFANDIARI: Thank you for your time and the detailed clarifications. The third and fourth sessions were reviewed and some questions were listed. We would try to link your responses to those questions to the relevant sections. The discussion on returning artifacts from abroad was covered in the earlier parts of the interview. Thank you again for your time. We look forward to following up on related topics in future sessions. There are certainly more questions regarding various historical periods and different topics. I wish you well and good health.

MASOUDI: Thank you as well. Have a good day.

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