

Afghanistan: Picking up the Pieces

Lest we forget, the burning of cultural objects such as musical instruments and manuscripts, the destruction of statues and images considered idols, and the wartime pillage and trade in valuable cultural artefacts – none of this type of devastation is new to humankind. However, seemingly out of sight and memory, as we turn our gazes away, some of the shards left behind in the rubble are picked up and saved. When considering this issue's theme section, we were hesitant that anything on Afghanistan would wade into the mire of political debate, which is not our mandate; however, and especially in this case, to assume a dismissive posture to political issues would also be inappropriate. Thus, we asked some prominent scholars to describe their work, their findings and, if possible, their experiences in the field. We want to redirect our readers' gaze to the activities of those researchers left virtually anonymous in the publications that dwell on the demolitions made spectacle. The preservation and study of cultural heritage – both living knowledge and that locked into the form of artefacts – is a continuing process. Elizabeth Errington focuses on Charles Masson, the intriguing man who left a legacy of records and antiquities collected on his travels through Afghanistan during the 1830s. His cataloguing methods were, writes Errington, ahead of his time, and his efforts are now benefitting another generation of researchers. In Charles Masson's day, it may have been easy for him to wander the country incognito and in relative safety; however, Jan van Belle and John Baily, two ethnomusicologists, give more recent accounts in which they describe their travels and recording of musicians both inside Afghanistan and among the Afghan diaspora. They remind us that music, its poetry, and the knowledge passed on from father to son of how to create them are less acknowledged victims of the Taliban's iconoclasm. Efforts must be made to preserve them. Contracts and personal letters from the City of Rob written in the local Bactrian language between the 4th and 8th century AD were carefully sealed, stored, and now recovered in perfectly preserved condition. Nicholas Sims-Williams is one of the few scholars who has succeeded in deciphering and interpreting them. While manuscripts may fill in background details, a numismatist would point out that coins quite likely provide the most valuable source of information on rulers and eras come and gone. Unfortunately, reports Osmund Bopearachchi, most coins from the rich hoards discovered throughout Afghanistan are now gone, perhaps forever, many even before they could be examined. The archaeologist Victor Sarianidi discovered the Tilya Tepe necropolis and its exquisite treasure of thousands of gold objects, never put on exhibit and now missing. He reminds us that artefacts which are destroyed, or disappear from the public domain through looting, are not only lost to the world for the stories they can tell us of humanity's past, but also simply for their sheer beauty and inspiration. Clearly there is need for action, and international organizations and the Afghan government are responding to the pleas. Jet van Krieken discusses the legal aspects of the preservation and return of objects of cultural heritage to Afghanistan; and what should be done with the empty niches in Bamian? Selecting Josephine Powell's photographs of sculptures and coins in the Kabul Museum for this issue was a profoundly bittersweet experience. With each opened box, we marveled at the beauty of the objects and felt anger and sadness for their loss; the crucial importance of records had become painfully clear. – *Tanja Chute & Ellen M. Raven*



Silver coin found at Mir Zakah with the image of the Indo-Greek King, Menander (155 BC) holding a spear. The Greek legend gives his name and title (BASILEOS SOTEROS MENANDROU). This king debated on issues of the Buddhist faith with the monk Nagasena, according to the early Buddhist text *Milindapañha*, 'Questions of Milinda' (=Menander). Formerly Kabul Museum.

Josephine Powell, courtesy of SPACH.

Ancient Afghanistan through the Eyes of Charles Masson (1800-1853):

The Masson Project at the British Museum

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In the 1930s, the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan found unexpected evidence of an earlier European visitor scribbled in one of the caves above the 55 m Buddha at Bamian. This stated:

*If any fool this high samootch explore
Know Charles Masson has been here before*

More recently Gregory Possehl also found a less ambitious bit of graffiti - just the name "Charles Masson" - pencilled on the wall of another cave nearby. So who was Charles Masson?

By Elizabeth Errington

Little is known of his personal life. He appears to have been well educated, knew Latin and Greek, and was fluent enough in Italian and French to be thought Italian by a Frenchman and French by an Englishman. A contemporary in Kabul in 1832 says that he had "grey eyes, red beard, with the hair of his head close cut. He had no stockings or shoes, a green cap on his head, and a dervish drinking cup slung over his shoulder"; there is no known portrait. When the British East India Company began funding him to explore the ancient sites around Kabul and Jalalabad in 1833, they thought he was an American from Kentucky. But it soon became apparent that the name Charles Masson was an alias adopted by an enlisted Englishman, James Lewis, after

he deserted the Bengal Artillery regiment in July 1827. In return for an official pardon in 1835, he was forced to become a "newswriter", or spy, for the British in Kabul. His sound political advice on Afghanistan was largely ignored by his superiors and he resigned in disgust in 1838 at the outbreak of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838-1842). In 1842, he returned to England. He married in 1844 and spent the years until his death in 1853 seeking alternative employment, working on his manuscripts and coin collection, and dreaming of returning to Afghanistan, while trying to live on a meagre pension of £100 per annum. Among his private papers there are monthly lists headed "Should have spent" and "Did spend", which show that his attempts at budgeting were usually unsuccessful. Under "Avoidable" are basic items like eels,

sausages, washing and train fares; one indulgence - gin (1 shilling and 8 pence a week) – and, more touchingly, "baby's cloak" (19 shillings). The only other personal item that survives is a sheet of paper with the words "Silence must be observed in here" written on it in large letters.

During the years 1833-1838, Masson excavated more than fifty Buddhist stupas in the Kabul-Jalalabad region. He also collected numerous small objects and thousands of coins, principally from the urban site of Begram, north of Kabul. Apart from a selection of coins and artefacts extracted en route by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta and his own collection of 35,340 coins, his finds were all sent to the East India Company's Museum in London. After his wife's death in 1857, £100 were paid to his children by the East India Company Library in return for his papers, drawings, and coins. When the EIC India Museum closed in 1878, a large part of Masson's collection (possibly including about 2,000 coins) was transferred, without proper documentation, to the British Museum.

Masson was dismissed by many of his contemporaries as a deserter, adventurer, spy, and writer of bad verse. They also could not forgive him for being proven right in his criticism of the British East India Company's disastrous involvement in Afghanistan that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War. As a



The relic deposit from the Buddhist stupa no. 2 at Bimaran, near Jalalabad, excavated by Charles Masson in 1834. The gold reliquary (found with coins issued about AD 60) contains the earliest datable images of the Buddha.

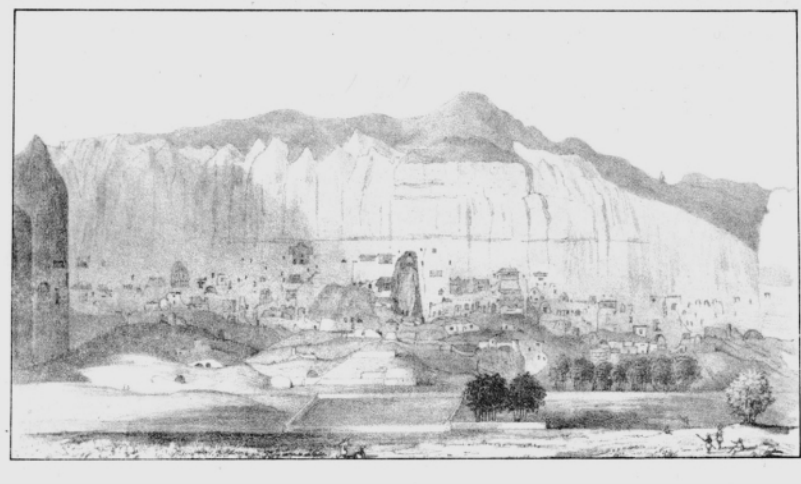
Courtesy of the British Museum

result - apart from the brief account in H. H. Wilson's *Ariana Antiqua* (London 1841) and the continuing debate over his most spectacular find, the Bimaran casket - the archaeological value of his work as the first explorer and recorder of the ancient sites in the neighbourhood of Kabul and Jalalabad has been largely ignored ever since.

However, Masson left detailed, illustrated records of his finds. Not only do some of his original labels survive with the objects themselves, but there are seven volumes of his manuscripts and two large bundles of his uncatalogued papers in the India Office Collections of the British Library. These records, together with his excavated finds, drawings, and maps, provide a unique record of many key sites in Afghanistan which have since been lost. One of his most important contributions was that he was the first to realise that the Greek names and titles on the obverse of the coins were repeated on the reverse in Kharoshthi, thus leading to the decipherment of this previously unknown local script. In a period when numismatic interest in these regions concentrated on gold and silver coins, he recognized that the copper coinage was much more important for purposes of historical research. His detailed approach - largely unappreciated by his contemporaries - was far ahead of his time.

The Masson Project evolved in 1993 from the realization that his comprehensive archive could be used to identify and document the finds from his collection now in the British Museum's Department of Oriental Antiquities and Department of Coins and Medals. It has been generously funded since its inception by the Kreitman Foundation and, since 1998, by the Townley Group of British Museum Friends. The Project is attempting to redress the oversight of the last c. 160 years by studying Masson's manuscript records in the British Library in conjunction with his rich collection of Buddhist relic deposits, coins, rings, seals, and other small objects now in the British Museum. Work initially concentrated on producing a typed and illustrated record of all the surviving documentation. This has been of great use in helping to identify and catalogue the Masson material in the Department of Oriental Antiquities, particularly in reconstituting many of the finds from specific stupa relic deposits. With the help of Professor S. Kuwayama, the archive is now supplemented by copies of photographs from a 1960s survey of the sites, generously donated by Kyoto University, Japan, while copies of all Masson's original drawings are in the process of being obtained from the British Library. The archival record has further helped to identify many of Masson's coins in the Museum collection and has also given a site provenance to the other small finds.

Research has established that about 3,700 coins from Masson's collection were sold at auction in 1887 (some of these have subsequently also entered the British Museum collection), while in 1912 a further c. 600 were presented to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. In 1995, with the help of Neil Kreitman and Graham Shaw, about 10,000 coins, including the residue of Masson's vast collection, were discovered in storage at the former India Office Library and were transferred to the British Museum on permanent loan from the British Library. The



After C. Masson, Narrative of various journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan and the Panjab, London 1842, pl. facing p. 384.

majority of these coins are from specific excavated Buddhist stupa deposits or from Begram (the site correctly identified by Masson as the ancient city of Alexandria of the Caucasus, founded by Alexander the Great). These two groups of provenanced coins thus provide, on the one hand, unique evidence for the spread of Buddhism into these regions and, on the other, the means for reconstructing the general history of the region, as reflected by a single important city site.

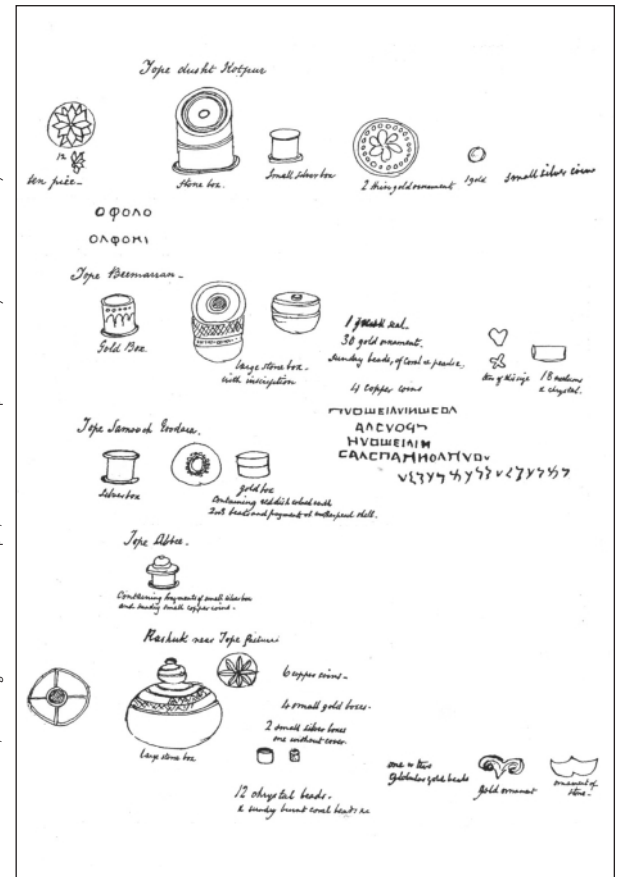
Research this past year has revealed that Masson could only have collected c. 47,000 coins, and not the c. 80,000, as he calculated. Of these, only c. 12,400 can be accounted for, but this total includes some 7,000 coins now in the British Museum. Work on conserving and recording the British Library India Loan Collection is ongoing: 6126 coins in this collection have now been

identified as probable Masson coins, and most have been cleaned, conserved, and sorted. The next step is to produce a database of all the material. An exhibition *Discovering Ancient Afghanistan: The Masson Collection*, displaying all these finds, is scheduled to open in Gallery 69a of the Museum on 11 September 2002: coincidentally, a date that is now the anniversary of events not yet dreamed of when it was chosen in early 2001. <

Dr Elizabeth Errington is currently a curator of South and Central Asian coins in the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum. Her interest in Charles Masson began while writing her PhD thesis (London University 1987) on surviving records of 19th-century archaeological discoveries in Gandhara.

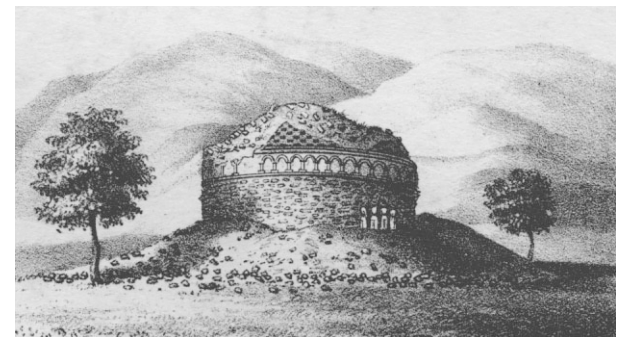
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Drawing by Charles Masson of the cave monasteries and smaller (38 m) Buddha of Bamiyan.



Charles Masson's sketch of his excavated finds from the relic deposits of the Buddhist stupas Kotpur 2, Bimaran 2, Gudara, Deh Rahman 1 ("Tope Abbee") and Passani tumulus 2 in the Darunta district, east of Jalalabad.

India Office Collections, Uncatalogued Masson Manuscripts, Bundle 1. Sketch reproduced courtesy of the British Library.



Charles Masson's sketch of the Buddhist stupa no. 2 at Bimaran, in the Darunta district, west of Jalalabad.

After H. H. Wilson, *Ariana Antiqua*, London 1841, Topes pl. III.

Travelogue of an Ethnomusicologist: Living Musical Traditions of the Ismailis in Afghan Badakhshan

My research concentrates on the music and poetry of the Ismailis in Badakhshan, which resulted in research trips in 1992 and 1993 in Tajik Badakhshan,¹ in 1996 in Afghanistan, again in 1998 in Tajik Badakhshan, and in 2001 in Afghan Badakhshan.² Due to the harsh geographical and complicated political circumstances, Badakhshan has, until now, been an isolated area. What follows is a travelogue of my last trip to Afghan Badakhshan in August 2001.

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Afghanistan

By Jan van Belle

Preparing a trip to Afghan Badakhshan is a complicated affair requiring a lot of time, stamina, and especially patience. First, a Tajikistan visa from the Russian Embassy in London was needed, followed by another four weeks of waiting for the Tajikistan Foreign Ministry to authorize it. Once this visa was cleared, I was able to book my flight from Munich to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, where I had to wait yet another ten days to obtain my Tajik visa extension to Tajik Badakhshan (GBO), and to apply for an Afghan visa with the Afghan Embassy. On top of this, that flights between Dushanbe and Khorog, the capital of Tajik Badakhshan, only

run in clear weather resulted in another two days of waiting. On arrival in Khorog, I was lucky enough to get help from FOCUS, the Aga Khan humanitarian organization that arranges food supplies to the Afghan side. They provided me with helpful information and transportation to Tajik Eshkashim, a town in the South of Badakhshan, which, at that time, was the only place to cross the border. It is still controlled by the KGB, so I also needed a special permit from them; it makes one suspect that the authorities are doing their very best to discourage visits to this part of the world. Once in Afghan Badakhshan, I could sleep in the FOCUS guesthouses in Afghan Eshkashim and in Baharak, where I was able to arrange an old Russian jeep, drivers, and a guide/translator for my trip. The FOCUS sticker on the jeep partly helped prevent constant harassment at the frequent checkpoints - or by prowling warlords in their Toyota jeeps - requiring additional travel documents issued by district governors or commanders.

Concepts of time, life and death

Travelling in Badakhshan is something to be endured. I would say that we owed our survival to the incredible skills of the driver, who steered the jeep, with its bald tires, with unfaltering good temper - and with total abandon - along narrow mountain roads and deep gorges. The roads are an unsurfaced carpet of bumps, full of pot-holes, stones, and relics from the civil war. At times, they were flooded with sand entering our lungs and covering our bodies and luggage with a thick layer of dust, not to mention penetrating seemingly every chink and cranny in the old jeep. Drivers in Afghanistan are invariably also trained mechanics with large supplies of spare parts and tools. Our old jeep, in fact, broke down several times, which required frequent repairs attended to with skill and improvisation from the driver and his helper. Indeed, they spent nearly as much time under the jeep as behind the steering wheel.

It was evident that, in this part of the world, the concepts of time, and of life and death, completely differ from our own, and

Typical folk music ensemble



Osmond Boparatchi, 1999.

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