

# REPORT ON A TRIP TO BAGHLAN AND BALKH

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## I PLUNDERING ACTIVITIES

Illegal excavations and the looting of sites have increased dramatically in the Northern region of Afghanistan over the past years. This seems to be due, mainly, to the control exerted by local commanders. They are not held accountable by their superiors for their failure to protect the cultural heritage in their areas of responsibility, while they seem to be beyond the control of the central government in Kabul. Reportedly, they are often the prime culprits themselves, as they organize the looting of the sites and the sale of the antiquities they may find there.

Other reasons for the increase in illegal diggings might be - ironically - the spreading awareness of the value of antiquities and a new “get rich quick” culture where each person must fend for oneself and is entitled to appropriate a part of the common wealth of Afghanistan for one’s own benefit.

### a) Surkh Kotal:

The site of Surkh Kotal has been abundantly plundered in the past, particularly during the years that it was a Hezb-e Wahdat military base (more or less from 1992 to 1997). Since this imperial Kushan site was thoroughly excavated by French Archaeologists, it is not certain whether looters ever found much of value. However, since the last visit of the author in April 2000, some new excavations have taken place, for example under the fire altar. More dramatically, most of the few remaining stone architectural elements remaining in 2000 have either disappeared or been broken, such as the base of a column that had been used as an artillery seat by fighters, and that was now found shattered. Given the complete absence of stone walls, staircases etc, the site is quickly eroding back into what must have been its original shape, a big hill. It was markedly more difficult now than in 2000 to imagine what the site must have looked like when excavated. This site now seems completely beyond repair.

***Recommendation:** The site commands a beautiful overview of the valley and is close to the town of Pul-i Khumri, not far from the road to Mazar. It could be transformed into a picnic resort with on-site documentation about the site itself (big illustrated panels with texts in Dari, Pashto and English, models etc.) This could be built near or around the fire-temple, which could be restored to a certain extent. In time the site could even be transformed into a series of terraced gardens with waterworks. The only part of the site which might be reconstructed is the monumental staircase leading up to fire temple.*

### b) Rabatak:

It was difficult to visit the site of “Kafir Qala” near Rabatak where the Rabatak inscription and some other fine decorative pieces were found in the early 1990s. A merchant told me the local commander, Arbab Sharaf, had been looting the site and didn’t allow access to it. He was nervous about showing us the way to it and brought us to the commander instead. When asked, the commander said he had recently received express orders from the Ministry of Information and Culture not to allow anyone on the site; but he accepted to accompany us to it. On the way he told me that since a BBC report had appeared on the Rabatak inscription, the site had become particularly “sensitive”<sup>1</sup>.

A large section of the site, which might be as extensive, and of the same nature, as Surkh Kotal, had been ripped open. In the highest part of the site, in what might have been the stupa/temple/citadel, a deep and wide hole, of about 10 m deep and 5 m in diameter, had been dug. A doorway could be seen near the top of the hole, leading westwards underground. Towards the South and West of this area most of the ground had been roughly torn open by a bulldozer, and many holes had been dug. They had laid bare some doorways, plastered interior walls and brick external walls. Many shards of pottery lay

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<sup>1</sup> He was referring to a BBC report by Ms. Kate Clark in May 2000, when the Rabatak inscription had been recovered from local authorities by Dr. Jonathan Lee and the author, and transferred to the Kabul Museum.

on the ground, some of them painted and enamelled. At the bottom of the upper hill lay a bunch of neatly hewn stones, indicating that at least part of the structure was made in stone.

When questioned, Commander Arbab Sharif nervously said that all these excavations had been performed by the Taliban, and that since they had gone and he was in control of the area, not any new digging had taken place. He then contradicted himself saying that he was certain absolutely nothing had been found. He also staked an implicit claim to the site saying that the ground it was on had belonged to his family for the last 200 years.

It could however easily be observed that most of the diggings were recent, because the overturned ground still looked fresh and had not yet settled. Moreover the author had credible reports that during the Taliban there had been no major looting of the site. An Afghan archaeologist who has seen the site several times lately confirmed that Arbab Sharif was responsible for the plundering and that the bulldozer work had been done in August. Other Afghan conservationists who have visited the site confirmed this information.

***Recommendation:*** *The destruction of this site and the way in which it has been done are particularly strong examples of the criminal nature of plundering activities. The Commander seems to be responsible beyond reasonable doubt. It also appears that several Afghans (locals and conservationists) would be willing to testify against him. It would be worthwhile to research how he can be indicted, under current Afghan Law. Maybe the Human Rights Commission could perform this research. Depending on the results, we could try to bring this person to court, making it an exemplary case.*

*This seems to be the only way to protect the rest of the site (a large part has not been excavated).*

#### c) The Bala Hissar of Balkh

The team, accompanied by Eng. Mohammed Sharif of the Department of Historical Monuments, visited the old city of Balkh on the day following the Persian New Year. We observed several recent excavations on the grounds of the old fortress (Bala Hissar). Despite the fact that many Afghans were visiting the shrines of Balkh, including one in the Bala Hissar, some young local people were digging a large and fairly deep hole in broad daylight. The author and a friend approached to observe their activities. We asked them what they were doing. They explained they were searching for antiquities, and complained they had found nothing but shards of pottery. We asked them whether they thought that what they were doing was correct. They answered "why not?" adding that they were only disappointed at not having found anything. A young man with a gun who belonged to the local militia seemed as unaware as the others that they were doing anything objectionable. Ultimately we scared them away pretending we were a special unit from the Coalition dealing with looters.

***Recommendation:*** *Obviously, there is a strong need for awareness-raising activities concerning cultural heritage laws and collective consequences of looting. This could start in a specialized manner, among law and order forces; but there is also an obvious need to reach out to the more general public.*

*It is surprising that in such a popular historical site as Balkh there is not any kind of protection. Lobbying with the local authorities to set up a squad specialized in the protection of the region's cultural heritage might also be a useful effort.*

#### d) Conclusions

Intellectuals and professionals working in the fields of culture in Mazar-i Sharif are hopeless about stopping the rapid destruction of the region's archaeological riches. When asked what to do about it they say that first a government with true popular support must be elected - because only then would common people cooperate with the authorities - and second the commanders have to be disarmed and neutralized, because they are the prime plunderers and will obey no other authority<sup>2</sup>. Finally means must be provided to conservationists and institutions working for cultural heritage to implement basic protection plans.

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<sup>2</sup> In the North, in particular, local commanders seem to quite independent of their superiors. Thus, even if these superiors were to exert pressure on them to protect cultural heritage - which they show no intention of doing - this would not necessarily have much effect.

In the author's opinion, much could be accomplished by a thorough media campaign explaining the law, describing the issues at stake (collective preservation of national heritage, preserving the memory of a local population) and highlighting the punishments meted out to those that violate the Law.

## II NAU RUZ

Reports had circulated in the Afghan media that more than a million visitors were expected to attend the New Year festivities in Mazar-i Sharif, also called "Gul-e Sorkh" (*Red Flower*, after the red tulips that appear around Mazar shortly after the spring starts). Although the road from Kabul to Mazar was so busy that it took almost 10 hours to get through the Salang tunnel and the ice-covered roads around it, there don't seem to have been so many visitors. What these rumours actually underscored was the central importance of these celebrations in the Afghan calendar of festive events. In pre-war accounts by foreign visitors such as Nancy Dupree there is much talk of the all-out public celebration that used to take place throughout the city, centring on the "Rauza", the shrine of Hazrat Ali.

### a) Security

As one approached the town through successive check-posts with long lines of waiting vehicles, and then drove through the town towards the centre, we didn't feel much of this festive atmosphere. What we did notice was the ominous presence of many soldiers, with heavy weapons such as rocket launchers, machine guns and even a flame-thrower. Some 6,500 soldiers, apparently half from Jamiat and half from Jumbesh, had invested the town. There were reportedly also about 800 intelligence and security personnel from Kabul.

Some 5 months ago Mazar-i Sharif had been disarmed after having long suffered the insecurity of frequent clashes between the Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara mujahideen factions. An inter-factional police force had been set up instead but received no support and today, with the pretext of providing security to the celebrations, soldiers from the opposing camps were back in town.

The deployment seemed to have proceeded orderly and there were no armoured vehicles in the streets, but the military presence created tension. There is still frequent fighting between armed groups from these factions in the vicinity of Mazar: the following day we happened to be close to a fire-fight between Jumbesh and Jamiat soldiers as a Toyota Pickup tried to force a check-post near Dehdadi, about 30 minutes from the city centre.

The presence of armed security personnel from Kabul - the Minister of Defence was to attend the ceremony the following morning - added a new element to the uneasy balance. There were no incidents in the city but inhabitants showed concern. A restaurant keeper complained about not being paid by "Dostum's soldiers". Not many people ventured out after dark to enjoy the mild evening in the big park around the shrine of Hazrat Ali, where the Nau Ruz ceremony was to take place. Foreigners like us were not allowed to enjoy the hospitality of our Afghan hosts, to their grief, and were obliged to stay in one of three hotels, expensive or unsuitable.

This was supposedly "for the security of foreigners". News agencies reported that 3 suicide bombers were arrested in Mazar during Nau Ruz. *Confirm*. But such suicide bombings are rare in Afghanistan and all the people we met were friendly. Most other foreigners were in self-imposed lock-up because of the beginning of the war on Iraq. A back-lash against foreigners among the Nau Ruz crowd was considered possible. However in the two days that we - 3 white women and a man - mixed with the crowds we were not once addressed on the issue of the war on Iraq.

(unfinished)