

## VISIT TO NORTH AFGHANISTAN APRIL 2000

*by Robert Kluyver, SPACH representative in Afghanistan*

On 13 April I left Kabul with Dr. Jonathan Lee, heading for Mazar-i Sharif. He had a grant from the Stein-Arnold Exploration Fund of the British Academy to survey the historical treasures of Balkh province, and a special request from his colleagues at the British Museum to locate the Rabatak inscription, which had last been sighted near Pul-i Khumri, in Baghlan province.

Just as Sir Aurel Stein, the famous British explorer of Central Asian historical sites, would have loved to do, Dr. Lee has spent many of the best years of his life roaming through the plains and mountains of northern Afghanistan. In fact Sir Aurel Stein only received the authorization to enter Afghanistan at the end of his life, in the 1930s, just in time to be buried in Kabul.

My own objectives, as representative for the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) were to monitor the restoration of the protective roofing over Masjid-i No Gumbad (Haji Piyada), a project financed by SPACH and implemented by Engineer Mohammad Sharif Mohammady, a Danish-trained restoration specialist, currently head of the Department of Historical Monuments of Balkh province; to study some new propositions for projects in this area; and to survey new and known sites, especially with an eye to possible destruction and looting.

We left with the blessings of the Institute of Archaeology and the Ministry of Information and Culture, for whom this report was originally conceived. I would also like to thank both Dr. Jonathan Lee and Eng. Sharif Mohammady for their valuable insights. Without them this trip would have been much less interesting.

We had a hard time choosing priorities among the myriad of sites to be seen in the North, between Tashkurgan and Shibergan. Even the briefest survey of them would take many months, and we were limited to a week. Finally we decided to concentrate on sites in and around Balkh town, restricting our geographical scope to allow for chance discoveries and to cut down on travel time.

On 14 April we left on our first field trip, together with Engineer Mohammady. Our objective was to visit the minaret of Zadiyan, commonly called the minaret of Daulatabad, about 40 km. north of Balkh.

The first stop was at the mosque of **Takht-i Pol**, halfway between Mazar and Balkh. This 19<sup>th</sup> century mosque is still in a good condition, and stands alone in what must have been a fortified settlement last century, surrounded by a town-wall that encloses an area of more than 25 hectares.

In recent years Zaini Pahlewan ordered repairs to be made to the mosque, notably to the most northern of the three domes. An extension was also built on the northwest side, and the chelkhana was sealed off.

**Photo:** *Takht-i Pol mosque seen from the north-east*

Thanks to the advising architect at that time, the neo-Timurid stucco decorations and painting of the interior were not covered or repainted. They are quite unique in style and deserve to be well protected. The painting reminds one of that found in Moghul buildings in, for example, Lahore.

**Photo:** *The stucco decoration on the southernmost dome and the arch preceding it*

We took the new road from Balkh directly to Daulatabad, which runs almost due north. After 20 km. we stopped to look at a site, little heard of, called **Tepe Bagh-i Shur**. One could see what looked like a small pre-Islamic fort, with a restored building in the centre, used recently in the war (this village was on the front line for some while).

*Tepe Bagh-i Shur, seen from the southern edge of the site. Note illegal diggings in front on the right and recent defensive constructions on either side of the central keep*

Besides the damage of the war, there were many signs of illegal diggings. Locals had heard rumours of a great gold find in the ruins of a castle nearby, so they had excavated large swathes of Tepe Bagh-i Shur. They complained about finding only some broken pottery sherds. According to the mullah accompanying us, the attempted looting of the site was due to the disruption of the community (of the 300 families only 50 remained, because of the fighting). That's another way in which war threatens cultural heritage.

**Photo:** *A deep trench built, probably for defensive reasons, in the northwest side of Tepe Bagh-i Shur shows pakhsa walls and could have revealed valuable information*

In Daulatabad we turned left at the main junction and headed West for some 5 kilometres to an area with several castles, the main one of which is called **Kafir Qala**. First we visited another fortress about a kilometre from Kafir Qala towards Daulatabad, called **Shahr-e Barbar**.

The two fortresses were used by opposing factions in the latest wars and some damage was observed on the walls, which reached 10 to 12 metres high and their foundations must have been Achaemenid. One could also see recent constructions for the soldiers, built on top of the ruins or dug out in them.

*A machine-gun post built on the top of "Shahr-e Barbar". One can see the extensive diggings made by treasure-hunters and soldiers. In the distance one sees Daulatabad*

The fortress of Kafir Qala is in much better condition than its twin sister. It is enclosed by a square 12 metre high wall, about 300 metre long on each side. Only on the western side has a part of the wall been demolished, presumably to let in heavy military vehicles. All along the top part of the wall trenches have been built, and rooms installed within the thick walls.

In the middle stand the remains of what was the keep, and to the west and south side are some remains of other buildings. According to our guide many statues, statuettes, coins and other artifacts have been found here. In the centre of the keep a shaft had been dug, at least 10 metres deep, where a wooden coffin containing a skeleton had been found by pillagers. We excitedly asked where it was. The mullah told us it had been thrown away because the coffin contained no valuables.

Thus are not only antiques stolen, but the keys of history destroyed as well. Unfortunately this area has never been surveyed since the topographers of the Afghan Boundary Commission (Ata Mohammed, Yavorsky and Maitland) mapped the area in the 1880s and first mentioned these fortresses. They reckoned that they were part of a town contemporary with Termez (1<sup>st</sup> century BC).

**Photo:** *The entrance to a room used by soldiers in recent combat, near the top of the Kafir Qala walls. The arch above the door suggests that this has been a doorway for quite some time already.*

**Photo:** *The north and east walls of the Kafir Qala near Daulatabad*

From Daulatabad we proceeded due east towards **Zadiyan**, over a difficult road. In Zadiyan stands a **Seljuq minaret** of which only the first section remains extant, about 18 metre high. It is built of baked brick bound with gypsum mortar, and is exceptionally well preserved, being covered with the brick-work decorative motifs one also finds at Jam and Ghazni. An inscription dates the tower to 501 AH (1108-1109 AD.). One can easily climb to the top via a single-spiral staircase. Visitors often do climb up and some

deterioration of the top level (the staircase is open to the rain and other elements) is evident.

The minaret stands in a very beautiful setting, next to a shrine and a pond. It doesn't seem to have been part of a mosque complex, nor does it seem akin to the victory towers that symbolize the power of sultans, as the minaret of Jam or the two minarets of Ghazni. As Jonathan Bloom states in *"Minaret; Symbol of Islam"* (Oxford University Press, 1989): *"With the arrival of the Seljuq Turks, tall brick towers became one of the most characteristic features of Islamic architecture. By the middle of the eleventh century the tower was widely considered an Islamic sign and could be placed virtually anywhere (...) the old Abbasid tradition of using them to mark the pilgrimage roads was apparently revived [as well as their function as] markers on the roads through the desert"* (pp. 157-159). The location of the minaret, 35 km north of Balkh and about 40 southwest of the old town of Termez, supports the hypothesis that it was a marker for caravans travelling on this important trade route, at about a day's distance from both cities.

On top of the minaret, one of the local people that had accompanied us told us to sit still. Standing on one of the highest steps, he grabbed the centre of the minaret with both hands and proceeded to shake the whole tower to our great dismay. Although I first worried about the damage that might be done to the minaret if it is continuously shaken, I later realized that this amazing flexibility is probably what helped it survive the many earthquakes that rock Bactria periodically. One can only marvel at the science of the builders that erected these towers in such a way that they survive 900 years later.

From this vantage point one could see, about one kilometre northwards, the remains of what seems to be a stupa (according to Schroeder, 1935, and Le Berre, 1948), and still further north another fortress. As with Kafir Qala and most other fortress-mounds one sees to the north of Balkh, the foundations seem to go back to Achaemenid times.

It seems likely that a defensive line of fortresses, most of them within eye-sight of one another, were built since the earliest days of Bactria's prosperity to defend the settled agriculturists against nomad raiders. This line runs from Dilbarjin and the Dashli Oasis until Siahgerd, north of Mazar-i Sharif, following the semi-circular shape of the waters of the Balkh Ab as they fan out into the desert, carried by ancient canals. One still sees extensive 3-metre high remains of a pakhsa (sunbaked mud-brick) wall about 5 km north of Zadiyan. This wall, surveyed by Kruglikova of the Soviet-Afghan mission in 1972, is 60 km long, following the line just mentioned. Pottery sherds collected near it show it was built between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, predating the other great walls of history by several centuries.

Seeing the bleak desert on the north and the green irrigated fields on the south side of this imaginary defensive line, one sees that the patterns of human settlement in the area have not changed significantly over the past 2500 years.

We would have liked to spend more time around Zadiyan, but it was getting late and we had to turn back.

On 15 April we set out to visit monuments around Balkh. We first stopped at the beautiful and interesting Timurid shrine of **Mir-i Ruzadar**, a hundred metres north of the road between Takht-i Pol and Balkh.

It is surrounded by a pool and a graveyard. In the graveyard, and adjacent to the shrine, stand the foundations of several buildings on which late Timurid decoration (including some glazed tiles) are easily visible. They are not in any way protected and it is quite extraordinary that they have not been completely stripped. This may be testimony to the respect people show for the shrine.

The building has a curious structure, being square on the front side and octagonal on the back. It shares this ground plan with the Mazar-i Shahzada Abdallah in Herat; both are from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They also share another feature, unusual in Timurid architecture: they have a single dome instead of the more common double dome

(Bernard O'Kane: "Timurid Architecture in Khurasan", Mazda Publishers, Iran, 1987; p.282).

The interior decoration, while simple, is well preserved. The main dome is decorated in a highly interesting fashion, with quite an unusual pattern. Some basic protective work should be done to ensure the painted plaster and stucco are not further damaged by infiltrations, and that the walls don't crumble.

It would also be useful to make a full survey of the shrine and the surrounding buildings, as it appears that the one made by Pugachenkova, (Galina Pugachenkova: "Little Known Monuments of the Balkh area" in *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, 13; pp. 31-40) of the Soviet-Afghan Expedition, is incomplete, flawed and very brief (according to Bernard O'Kane, see above). No other surveys of this building have been recorded (Warwick Ball: "Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan", p. 183).

**Photo:** The Shrine on the left, the graveyard in front, with fields around it

**Photo:** Some late Timurid brick patterns on foundations adjacent to the shrine

**Photo:** The intricate patterns imitating tiles painted on the dome of Mir-i Ruzadar. Note how the plaster has fallen off in some parts, revealing the brick structure of the dome.

After having visited this peaceful shrine we went to inspect **Masjed-i No Gumbad**, or **Haji Piyada** as it is now known for the shrine built on its edge. SPACH has recently sponsored the repair of part of the roof that shelters this mosque from the rain, but much more should be done to protect the oldest mosque in Afghanistan, built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. In Central Asia there are very few monuments of this early Islamic period, and it is really a pity to see this mosque slowly crumble away under the harsh wind and neglect of our contemporaries.

One of the only other monuments of this period in Central Asia is the mausoleum of Isma'il Samani in Bokhara, and one finds marked similarities between both buildings: for example, the massive construction style mitigated by exquisite abstract floral designs in carved stucco-work; the rigorously square ground-plan, and the fine brick-work (although the 18 different patterns of brick-laying that have made the mausoleum in Bokhara famous are not replicated here).

As Nancy Dupree notes in her "Historical Guide to Afghanistan" (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Afghan Tourist Organization, 1977, pp. 400-402), Sassanian styles and traditions are visible in the carved stucco decoration, for example the circular patterns surrounding decorative elements. We noticed that under the coat of mud that covers (and thus protects) this stucco-work, traces of blue, red and white paint remain.

Only two arches still stand, of which one has collapsed onto a brick support hastily built under it; the other is still self-supporting. The nine domes ("no gumbad") have collapsed, their rubble covering the floor and the lower part of the columns. No illegal excavations have taken place, and without doubt Masjed-i No Gumbad will reveal much valuable information when it is properly surveyed and excavated by a team of experts. Support for this project should be found among all Muslim countries concerned with their common heritage. For the time being emergency protective measures are required, for this monument has reached the point where it is degrading rapidly.

**Photo:** The arch collapsed onto its brick support. Above, one sees the new roofing installed by SPACH

Once again, as in the case of Mir-i Ruzadar, the presence of a shrine seems to offer some protection against looters. The shrine supposedly holds the remains of Ka'b, who converted from Judaism to Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, making him one of the first Muslims of Afghanistan. This structure is very modest, and any restoration plan should consider upgrading the shrine, too.

Finally, one wonders about the location of the mosque, two kilometres south of the Balkh city walls, nowadays in the middle of the fields. Either the old city of Balkh (Bactra) was formerly located to the south of its present location - which would explain

the deceiving results of all archaeological excavations undertaken within the perimeter of the city walls - or the mosque was built on the remains of an older temple, Buddhist or Zoroastrian, as has been so often the case throughout the Eurasian continent. In both cases a cursory excavation of the area around the mosque would be warranted.

From this mosque we returned back in the direction of the little town that present-day Balkh is. Just before crossing the main Mazar-Shibergan road one cannot help but notice a large artificial mound towards the East. It is the remains of Takht-i Rustam, one of the only extant Buddhist remains in the city of Balkh, which in the 7<sup>th</sup> century possessed more than a 100 such temples according to the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-Tsang.

It is difficult to distinguish features of the monastery which must have occupied this site. On top, many recent defensive structures have been built, and a tank is stranded, its cannon desolately pointing towards the road to Mazar. A path for vehicles has been carved out along the north-east side of the ruins, leading to the top. In some places one sees some remains of sunbaked brick.

When we arrived, an old man and a young boy were digging the walls of the monastery, which provides excellent top-soil for the fields - exactly like in Nancy Dupree's 1967 description of the site (in "The Road to Balkh"). We explained to them that they were destroying part of their cultural heritage, and they reacted by laughing politely, as if we were trying to pull their leg.

**Photo: Tank on top of Takht-i Rustam with the walls of Balkh in the background**

Finally we returned to the centre of the town of Balkh to examine its principal monument, the shrine of Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa. Situated in the central square of Balkh, from where 8 streets radiate in the cardinal directions, one cannot miss this high building. Fortunately, Balkh is no more the malaria-infested place where many travellers died in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the desolate ruins described by Burnes (1832) or Mayor Yate (1886) have been transformed into a green, fresh little town. The shrine itself has benefited enormously from the park created around it (it was however never completed).

Not long ago the remains of the old wings on either side of the building were destroyed to make place for new prayer rooms, built in an indistinct modern style. Since then the Department of Historical Monuments of Balkh has started a successful restoration programme. Under the supervision of Eng. Mohammady the entrance was rebuilt, the basement foundations of the mosque were strengthened and a ventilation system installed to keep the foundations dry, the two minars alongside the central iwan were pulled backwards, for they were threatening to pull the whole facade down, and protective metal sheet roofing was installed above the iwan to prevent infiltrations, which are destroying the tilework of the facade.

Altogether these interventions have given the shrine a new lease on life, sparing it the fate of the madrassah of Sayid Subhan Quli Khan, on the opposite side of the square. Of this building, built at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century - 100 years after the shrine - only an arch and some adjacent walls remain. It is said that the tiles that decorated the madrassah were reused towards 1870 for the Rauza, the shrine of Ali, in Mazar-i Sharif. Now it is the tiling of Khwaja Parsa which is in danger. Although part of the tiles covering the facade have been replaced with new ones made in the Mazar tile workshop, much remains to be done if one wishes to restore the shrine to its former splendour. More urgent however is to do something about the fluted dome, of which the small turquoise tiles (called "charak", or quarter) are falling at an alarming rate. Lack of maintenance is one of the reasons, but the rockets that have hit the dome, causing the partial destruction of five of the ribs, have of course not helped.

On the inside of the shrine the decoration is still in good condition, including the painting on the inner dome. The inner dome reaches 15 metre high, only slightly more than half the height of the outer dome which culminates at 28 metre. In between, an empty space taken to symbolize heaven - just as the basement below the shrine reminds

one of the underworld. This three-tiered structure is not uncommon in Timurid mausoleums but it's nevertheless not the rule.

**Photo:** *The back of Khwaja Parsa shrine, showing the impact of rockets on the ribbed Timurid dome, the destroyed wing and the new building replacing it (below right).*

**Photo:** *The main iwan of the shrine, showing the retiling yet to be done*

**Photo:** *The old tiles are below and the new, produced by the Mazar Tile Workshop, above*

**Photo:** *The Mazar tile workshop must produce some 750 different tiles for the Khwaja Parsa shrine alone; one man runs the workshop, which is supervised by the Department of Historical Monuments. The techniques used are very ancient and involve drawing a black line with Bdelium to separate the colours, which do not mix during the subsequent glazing. The pigments used, shown in the foreground, are very basic: glass, copper, iron, lead, lapis lazuli from Germany and Bdelium (maghl). Once glazed after 18 hours in the furnace at 2000 degrees, they acquire their vivid colours shown in the examples here.*

Thus our trip ended. Unfortunately we had seen but a fragment of the sites to be seen in Balkh province (others being Dashli, Altin, Dilbarjin, Jiga Tepe, Siahgerd and many others); but our observations allowed us to reach some conclusions as to the present condition of the cultural heritage in that area.

First, it seems that the lack of attention and of maintenance is the principal factor in the deterioration of monuments and sites. Only the living sites, like the shrines and the still-used mosques, survive; those that were resurrected by the hands of conservationists and archaeologists alone wither away quickly in the absence of their benefactors. There might be a lesson implicit in this: if one desires a site to be preserved, a valid social function must be found for it (for example, as a park or as a community centre). For the community living around the site its scientific or aesthetic value means little. An archaeological site is for them, first and foremost, a kind of mine which is to be exploited in the absence of other sources of revenue: we may call that "subsistence archaeology"...

The second factor of deterioration is the exactions made on the sites by their use in modern warfare, often as defensive positions. This attracts enemy fire, while the digging of trenches may destroy valuable historical evidence. Moreover, the soldiers and their commanders, in their boredom and in the hope of finding something valuable, use their shovels and excavating machines to search for treasures, thus irremediably destroying sites; in the case of excavated sites, like Surkh Kotal or Ai Khanoum, they are prone to sell for their personal benefit all pieces of stone, marble, baked bricks, and of course any statues and other decorative elements left there by the archaeologists.

Third comes the looting proper, as opposed to "subsistence archaeology". This is directed by knowledgeable individuals, often operating from a base in Pakistan (Peshawar), who use the situation of war and chaos to loot specific sites, private and public collections. This is much more goal-oriented than the diggings by locals, and thus poses a graver threat to the country's cultural heritage. Moreover, since most of the objects found by soldiers and farmers end up in their hands, they control the antiquities market, possessing information that no one else has about new sites, new finds, and the whereabouts of private collections.

How much damage has actually been done to the cultural heritage of Balkh province? To answer that question one should of course survey the other sites of the area, but some tentative conclusions may be reached. First of all, most illegal excavations do little more than scratch the surface. Typically they will be not more than a metre deep and a couple of square metres big, and are randomly distributed. Village people lack the knowledge and the means to perform more harmful excavations. In most cases they

come up with nothing at all for their efforts, and if it were not for the powerful myth of treasures hidden underground, sometimes substantiated by actual finds (such as Mir Zakah and Tela Tepe), people probably wouldn't bother in the first place. Nowadays such a myth concerning treasures hidden under the tombs of saints is posing a serious threat to shrines.

More harmful illegal excavations are performed on sites half excavated, or previously marked for excavation, because in those cases the searches are better aimed, informed by surveys conducted by archaeologists and led sometimes by looters with a considerable knowledge of archaeology. This might be the case at Dashli, Dilbarjin and similar sites, and rumours have recently appeared in the local press about a substantial find of six statues, and a golden bowl which would have been sold for 2000 dollars. These rumours are of course extremely harmful, and efforts should be made by government authorities to show they're nothing more than rumours. It may be pointed out that in nine cases out of ten the efforts of the diggers are in vain, but that they are meanwhile destroying their community's wealth, which may in better days become a source of income through tourism or scientific attention.

Although all these developments are depressing, as the historical wealth either languishes or is whisked away into private hands, one cannot help feeling that most of the cultural heritage is still safely underground, scarcely disturbed by would-be looters; for as one drives through Balkh province, especially in the area between Mazar, Balkh, Dashli, Daulatabad and Zadiyan, one potential site after the other appears on the flat horizon. A lot remains to be done...

Robert Kluyver