

ABOUT SOME MONUMENTS IN THE SOUTH-WESTERN REGION

1) QALA-YE BOST, NEAR LASHKAR GAH, HELMAND

The 11th or 12th century palace is apparently in good condition. No signs of recent damage, either natural or intentional, were visible on this cursory visit. The remarkable architectural ensemble does not seem to have been further excavated by booty-hunters. Many hundreds of bats dissuade people from going towards the bottom.



Arch of Bost



Central shaft in the Palace

The famous arch is in the same condition as several years ago, buttressed by a supporting wall that fills the entire arch.

The other, nearby sites were not visited.

Recommendations:

- ▶ protect the site by employing guards/guides who accompany the visitors. Put certain parts of the palace (bottom layers) off-limits.

2) GHILZAI FORTRESS, IN QALAT, ZABUL

Although there does not seem to be much of historical value on this site, it certainly has cultural significance, and altogether is an interesting ensemble. Moreover, being the landmark of Zabul, local people are attached to it. There are two springs near the top of the fortress that never dry up, and a pleasant green area around them makes it an attractive place for picnics. There is also an important shrine near the springs. Accordingly, although it is still partially in military use, it is open to the public.



A panoramic view (from E to S to W) from the top of the fortress. Note the barracks area on the left. The entire town of Qalat can be seen in the background.

The height of the mound on which it is built might indicate it is built on ancient (Achaemenid?) foundations. It is also strategically located on the Kandahar – Ghazni – Kabul axis. Therefore it might have been a prominent fortress in several historical periods; maybe it was the main fortress of the rulers of Zabolistan. It might be interesting to excavate the mound on which it was built.

The fortress was damaged in recent coalition bombings against the Taliban.



Qalat fortress wall from North



Qalat fortress wall seen from South



Tomb of Hajji Baqa



Qalat fortress north gate, seen from outside

Recommendations:

- ▶ Convert the site into a tourist attraction and embellish it to make it more pleasant for the local inhabitants. The barracks should be relocated to a different area. Part of the fortress could become a guesthouse for the governor (he expressed that desire), part of it could become a guesthouse for travellers – in caravanserail style.. A teahouse with a garden would be welcomed by local inhabitants. The park could be expanded and embellished, and a section of it could be converted into a walled women’s (and children’s) park. In a later phase, the fortress could host cultural events such as concerts and exhibitions, and be used for marriages and other ceremonies. The large square surrounded by barracks could be used for these, and for commercial purposes.



Qalat fortress approached from Kandahar



Green area on top of fortress

UNDERGROUND CITY NEAR SUARAI, ZABUL (PLACE CALLED BOLAN)

An attempt was made to find this underground city, which according to some reports is very big and well preserved. The entrance was not found, despite being accompanied by a man who claimed to have been there twice. He explained it by saying the entrance had been displaced. It is not completely certain whether this place really exists.

KANDAHAR CITY

Engineer Pashtun, who has a background in urban planning and now is a key advisor to Governor Gul Agha Shirzai, would like a mission headed by an international conservation and restoration specialist to visit Kandahar and determine which areas, and monuments, must be preserved. He fears that uncontrolled growth will destroy most of the old city, which follows the same plan as Herat's old city but is less well preserved. The general atmosphere of the Old City is very much like that of Herat, with a lot of commercial activity along the four main bazaars and some secondary axes, and a deteriorating traditional urban habitat in the residential areas alongside. According to Engineer Pashtun it is worthwhile attempting to revive this habitat by providing some infrastructure services such as electricity and running water.

The Moghul monument at Chehlzina has suffered badly during the war. Part of the back wall has fallen, along a crevice maybe created by an explosion. The rubble, with the inscriptions in black granite, has disappeared. Hundreds of bullet holes riddle the surface of the niche. There doesn't seem to be much one can do to restore this monument.

The site has also suffered badly, with the railing along the 40 steps blasted and warped by explosions. Despite the view over Kandahar, it is no longer a pleasant place to go.

Some of the tombs and shrines of famous Kandaharis have been renovated by the Taliban and the current regime – such as the tomb of Ahmad Shah Baba (Durrani), the founder of modern Afghanistan, and that of Nek Mohammed Mir Wais, the grandfather of Ahmad Shah Baba. The work that has been done is not recommendable, except for the enthusiasm that motivates it. The dome of the shrine of the cloak of the prophet is damaged, according to the caretaker. They plan to repair it. It seems advisable to send in a specialist as soon as possible to avoid major damage being done to these monuments.

Finally, Kandahar has some interesting 20th century syncretic architecture (as does nearby Lashkar Gah) which it might be worthwhile renovating, or copying, as models for the urban renovation process that will kick in as soon as more funds for development become available.

Robert Kluijver, May 2002