

## Uncovering Rich and Complex Layers of Afghan National Identity By Melinda Wightman

The Middle East Studies Center staff and interested community members took a trip to the National Gallery in Washington last August to take advantage of the unique opportunity to view “Afghan National Treasures,” an exhibit organized by National Geographic. These artifacts are, indeed, national in their significance, representative of many parts of the multi-faceted Afghan identity, and testament to the richness and complexity of the country’s historical and contemporary culture. Understanding of the country’s Greek past gains new clarity when looking at artifacts that could have been taken from a dig near Athens, such as a statue of a Greek warrior (see photo, right), one of the objects re-discovered when the contents of the museum were found in their place of safekeeping in the presidential palace.

Ai Khanum, where many of the artifacts were originally uncovered, was a Greek colony far from the center of the Empire, but quite pure in its keeping of Greek customs and arts. (In addition, Tepe Fullol provides insights into a past culture of the area that is more elusive for contemporary archeologists, exhibiting exchanges with Indus and Mesopotamian cultures. One gets a sense of the hybrid nature of Tilla Tepe and Begram just by looking at the wide cultural variety of the treasures found in those two excavations. In the words of the Tilla Tepe site’s discoverer, Viktor Sarianidi:

“Nowhere in antiquity have so many different objects from so many different cultures—Chinese-inspired boot buckles; Roman coins; daggers in a Siberian style—been found together in situ (i.e., in the context in which they were left.)” (“Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul” exhibit catalogue, p. 215).

In fact, the owners of the gold, who wore many of the most interesting pieces found, were nomads who had made their settlement on a prior Bactrian structure. They were most likely nobles of the Kushan who formed their empire on the ruins they had made of the Greco-Bactrian civilization which had previously resided there. Among many of the individual objects at Tilla Tepe, one finds a cultural hybrid that evokes a combination of Greek, Indian, and Chinese impressions, as well as an aesthetic all its own.

If you would like to learn more about the history of these discoveries, as well as other facets of Afghan culture today, the Middle East Studies Center now has the following additions in the lending library:

“Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul,” edited by Fredrik Hiebert and Pierre Cambon (The Official Companion to the Exhibition)

“Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures,” DVD companion to the exhibition, narrated by Khaled Hosseini

“Afghanistan Untouched,” a two-CD set of Afghan folk tunes, all recorded in the field by ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin prior to the Soviet invasion

“Children’s Songs from Afghanistan: Qu Qu Qu Barg-e-Chinaar,” by Louise M. Pascale, book and CD of songs



### Related Articles

#### On the treasure:

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bactrian\\_Gold](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bactrian_Gold)
- [news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/11/photogalleries/afghan\\_treasure/](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/11/photogalleries/afghan_treasure/)
- [news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/11/1117\\_041117\\_afghan\\_treasure.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/11/1117_041117_afghan_treasure.html)
- [nytimes.com/2008/05/23/arts/design/23afgh.html?\\_r=1](http://nytimes.com/2008/05/23/arts/design/23afgh.html?_r=1)

#### On the Bactrian Empire:

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bactria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bactria)
- On the Bronze Age and its Ecological Effects: <https://www.geology.ucdavis.edu/~cowen/~GEL115/115CH4.html>

## A time line of Post-Soviet and Taliban period

End of 10-year Soviet Occupation/  
four years of Najib government

National Museum personnel placed  
on non-active status late in the year

December 31 - Two major  
works from Shotorak are stolen

Museum struck by a rocket  
while being used as a military base

Roof is destroyed  
and more treasures perish after steel  
doors are installed

1992

1993

1994

1995

Items on Display:

**Treasures Unearthed from Tilla Tepe**

Treasures were unearthed in the midst of a project in northern Afghanistan lead by archeologist Viktor Sarianidi to gain further information about the Greco-Bactrian civilization during the 2nd millennium BC. The project was abruptly ended in 1979 when the Soviets invaded, just as the treasures were found at Tilla Tepe (near Sheberghan, in Northern Afghanistan, from the Turkic *Tilla Tepe*, meaning hill of gold). The treasures contained the contents of tombs of wealthy nomads dating from early in the Common Era (around 100 CE, including gold and silver jewelry from a number of civilizations, Bactrian crafts, and Roman, Parthian, and Greek coins. The site had been a Bactrian structure, thought to be a temple by Sarianidi, with a later settlement on top and burial area for a nomadic people, possibly of the Kushan Kingdom, created in the second century when Kushan nomads from what is now western China and Scythian nomads united to conquer the Greco-Bactrian culture.

The central figure of this belt decoration (below, left) presents a mystery to archeologists and other scholars, as it seems to depict Dionysis, but has the features of some of the local goddesses at the time. It looks like a man in most respects, wearing a Greek hair knot, but he seems to be drawing milk from his breast into the vessel he is holding.

This phial, or bowl (below, center), provided a resting place for the male noble's head in the tomb at Tilla Tepe. Herodotus regarded such phials as symbolizing royal authority among the Scythians, but each of the deceased had similar headrests, so it may be that they had no particular significance other than to display the headdresses and make a more honorable burial arrangement.

The animal figure (below) is a depiction of a Marco Polo ram, described by Marco Polo in an account from 1273. The horns on this sculpture are not exaggerated; it is a species that still exists in Afghanistan, though it is threatened with extinction.



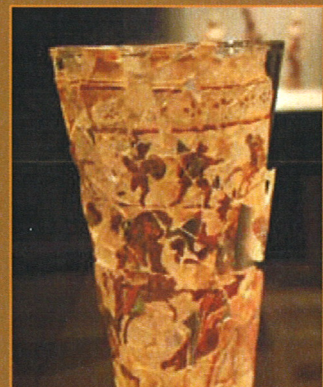
**Recent History**

Another amazing aspect of these treasures is their history in the 20th and 21st centuries. Thought to be lost for 25 years, the treasures had been hidden for safekeeping from the Soviets and, later, the Taliban. They had been placed in the vaults of the central Bank of Afghanistan in 1988 by the curators of the National Museum who kept silent until it was deemed safe to reveal the location. In 2003, President Karzai confirmed that the precious artifacts had remained safe. In 2004, an inventory project, the data kept in English and Dari, began in partnership with the National Geographic Society (22,607 objects were listed, 20,587 from Tilla Tepe).

Ministry of Cultural Works & Information removes the remaining contents of the museum

Some items are moved to the Kabul Hotel and spared, but items placed in the museum's storerooms are looted by the Taliban

A detailed history can be read here: [spach.info/ehistoryplan.htm#2](http://spach.info/ehistoryplan.htm#2)



**Treasures Found at Begram**

Other treasures from the national museum at Kabul include items from Begram, aesthetically representing exchange with Indian and Chinese culture as well as Greek and Roman. The carved decorative plaque (below) is Indian in origin and is one of several which depict life in women's quarters. The glass vessel (above) shows the story of the battle between Hector and Achilles, according to some scholars. The blue glass vessel shown on the back cover is Roman in origin.



Sources: "Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul"; Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures DVD; interview with biologist George Schaller on "Saving the Marco Polo Sheep," NPR: [npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5300762](http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5300762)

Photos: Ra'uf Mehrpour

Taliban decided all representational art must be destroyed: 2,500 pieces of art were destroyed in the country, including the world's largest Buddha statues at Bamyan

1996

1997

1998

1999

2000

2001

## **Afghan Treasures unearthed**

*Afghan cultural identity has connections to the treasures of Tilla Tepe and other archeological sites. As a crossroad of migration and trade, Afghanistan's artifacts reveal exchange with travelers and merchants from the Mediterranean to China.*



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