

# | Beyond Afghanistan and the Present: an historical overview of the Islamic heritage of the region

by *Flemming Aalund*

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## Crossroad of cultures

Intentional destruction of cultural heritage has a long precedence in history, but new technology and globalization have led to unforeseen consequences and infamous deeds in the wake of international conflicts. More than 50 countries have experienced significant periods of conflict since 1980, often resulting in a complete breakdown of the state.

Of all places, Afghanistan has been a focus of conflicts, whether imposed by imperialistic powers or by rivalries between local ethnic or religious groups. The historian Arnold Toynbee used the phrase ‘crossroad of cultures’ to describe the diverse cultural identity of Afghanistan, influenced by Persian, Greek, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim cultures, thereby creating an extraordinary architectural heritage. Most unfortunately, the material heritage has survived only in fragmented condition, but there is an all the more urgent need to preserve what has survived all these misfortunes. The blowing up of the Great Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley and the deliberate destruction of

pre-Islamic art objects have defied all the basic principles of respect for and tolerance of cultural diversity and therefore also represent a direct violation of international standards of ethics.

When Robert Byron travelled to Afghanistan in 1933, he wrote the vivid and learned literary travel book, *The Road to Oxania*, permeated with a romantic view on the lost cultures of Central Asia and spoke in praise of the magnificent ruins which had survived in spite of ignorance and destruction. During the subsequent decades a widely accepted view on preservation and restoration of cultural heritage evolved on the basis of the Venice Charter of 1964 and a succession of international charters, conventions and international declarations.

After 30 years of operation the World Heritage Convention has become an important instrument for international cooperation in the field of cultural and natural heritage preservation. Judging from the number of signatories totalling 175, the World Heritage Convention is the most successful intergovernmental UNESCO agreement ever achieved. More importantly, the agreement was reached on a definition that the cultural heritage belongs to all people and that nations have a responsibility to protect and care for the natural and cultural heritage on their territory. Special efforts have been invested in the protection of the outstanding monuments and sites inscribed on the World Heritage List as testimonies of major cultural achievements in the history of mankind. Less consideration is being paid to the stipulation that each State Party has the duty to ensure that effective and active measures are taken for the protection, conservation and presentation of heritage properties

within its own territory (Art. 5). These ideal stipulations have only limited relevance in conflict and post-conflict areas, where civil order is disrupted and economic resources are limited. In this chaotic situation the basic needs of the population are the first priority, but the re-establishment of civil society and national unity also requires regaining the confidence and mutual trust of the ethnic and religious groups. Much post-conflict reconstruction has been in rebuilding infrastructure, but there is also a need to address social needs and intangible cultural values in society, which have been appreciated by the local communities within civil society.

Formally Afghanistan ratified the World Heritage Convention in 1979 with only limited consequences during a period of occupation and civil war. The new Afghanistan Interim Authority, which was established as a transitional government following the disintegration of the Taliban regime, has received international recognition prompting UNESCO to resume activities in Afghanistan. As an immediate initiative the Minaret and the archaeological remains of Jam as well as the cultural landscape and archaeological remains of the Bamiyan Valley were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2002 and 2003 respectively. The timely inclusion of these sites is also a symbolic act appealing for international solidarity for the preservation of Afghanistan's heritage. By being simultaneously declared as sites at risk and being put on the List of World Heritage in Danger, they qualify for emergency action and possible economic support from the World Heritage Fund. Otherwise, the World Heritage Convention provides no particular protection apart from raising awareness of the importance of these sites and establishing a

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plan for their management as part of the nomination procedures.

The Hague Convention of 1954 related to UNESCO's fields of competence aims to establish rules for the protection of cultural heritage during war and armed conflicts. Protection of cultural heritage is also integrated in international humanitarian law, e.g. the Geneva Conventions and the protocols added to these in 1977 and in particular as stated in Article 22 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development from 1995, *Our Creative Diversity*, further elucidates the interdependence between culture and sustainable development being fostered through cultural freedom and tolerance, including a gender perspective. With this new insight and understanding it may be expected that cultural heritage preservation is placed high on the agenda for the post-conflict reconstruction of civil society during a period of transition. The situation is a critical one, demanding international solidarity and assistance.

### A long history of conflicts

Despotic rulers have repeatedly demonstrated their overwhelming ambition through the construction of new buildings and monuments, which could testify to a new epoch in history and to glorifying themselves for posterity. Such vanity creates great monuments, which may eventually be included on the World Heritage List, but the ambition often resulted in wanton destruction of previous achievements, which could possibly overshadow the lustre of the new. We have had ample experience of how cultural heritage has been

deliberately destroyed in order to crush pride and self-esteem and enslave populations to achieve absolute supremacy. The cynical reasoning seems to be that a population despoiled of its cultural heritage is deprived of identity and therefore without a claim to the future. Examples are plentiful.

The current tragic situation in Afghanistan follows on from more than a thousand years of imperialism and civil strife in Central Asia. The most devastating destruction appeared as a result of the violent attack on all the land between China and the Black Sea conducted by the notorious Genghis Khan and his hordes in 1221 and the subsequent years. The effect was devastating beyond imagination as it destroyed the finest civilizations of the thirteenth century and left deserted cities and silted wells and channels – Shah Khoshak, Shah-i Zohak and Shah-i Gholghola, only to mention a few localities that never recovered. Over time, erosion washed away the walls and fortified towers of the former great cities, turning the sun-dried brick walls into the same soil from which they originated and leaving only the ruined contours of the mighty walls as a testimony of ancient civilizations and human aspirations. Likewise, ancient cities and buildings have vanished and only a few historic buildings constructed in baked bricks have survived.

The monumental tomb of the Samanids in Bukhara dating from the ninth century has survived as a memorial to the first Muslim dynasty due to its solid construction in baked brick. The intricate ornamental pattern on the façades imitating flat woven carpets provides evidence of a new architectural style, which differs from the

polychrome stucco decorations generally used during the first Islamic expansion into Central Asia with inspiration originating from the royal Abbasid palaces of Samarra.

This rich ornamental brick architecture evolved from the homelands of the Seljuks in Khorasan and Transoxania in the following centuries. The Ghurids and Ghaznavids were among the local dynasties, who refined and disseminated this highly sophisticated architecture in the neighbouring areas from their respective homelands at Ghor in the Central Hindu Kush mountain range and Ghazni to the south-east of present Afghanistan. From there they embarked on empire building, which led to a great renaissance of the Early Islamic period and the few surviving buildings are among the most valuable treasures in Afghanistan.

The Ghaznavids had seized control of the Khorasan south of the Oxus River in the year 994. This empire expanded its power to include Iran, Afghanistan and India. A great general, Sultan Mahmud, conducted at least seventeen successful campaigns against India. He added northwest India and the Punjab to his empire, and enriched his treasures by looting wealthy Hindu temples. The archaeological remains at Lashkari Bazaar give but a glimpse of the grandiose and luxurious summer palaces where ceremonial events took place, attended by four thousand men. At the royal city of Ghazni, the capital of the empire, thousands of objects have been excavated, including marble statues of Hindu gods used as stepping stones under the thresholds in the principal mosque. What was probably more problematic is the fact that many Hindus were converted to Islam,

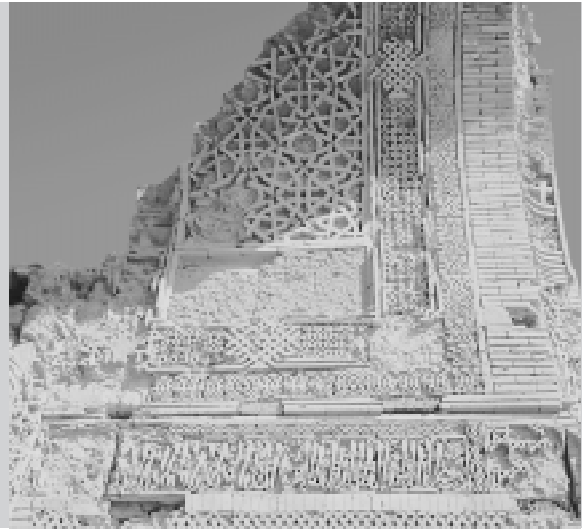


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14. One of the *Towers of Victory* representing ornamental Ghaznavide architecture that emerged during the 11th century in Khorasan.

starting a process which still plagues the subcontinent.<sup>1</sup>

The Ghurids themselves were not less destructive towards other cultures. The most remarkable monument, now inscribed on the World Heritage List, stands on the banks of the Hari Rud in the central part of the Hindu Kush mountains. The original purpose of this enigmatic minaret is obscure, but the tower probably commemorates the ultimate victory over the Ghaznavides. The future excavations in the surrounding valley may eventually reveal traces of the Ghurid capital. Half a century later in 1199, the Quth Minar in Delhi (India) was erected by another Ghurid sultan from the spoils of some



15–16. Sah-i Mashad Madrassa ruins in Badghiz and details of the bas-relief terracotta decoration of its façade.

twenty-seven Indian temples as symbolic evidence of the triumph of the Islamization of northern India. Only the minaret in Jam has survived, together with a few other contemporary monuments, due to its isolated location. Now inscribed on the World Heritage List of monuments in danger, UNESCO has launched an emergency rescue operation in order to consolidate its foundations and prevent further deterioration from flooding.<sup>2</sup>

Another remarkable Ghurid building was identified as late as 1970 on the banks of the Murgab River in a remote area of northern Afghanistan. The ruined structure is one of the earliest *madrassas* still existing within the Islamic world. The commemorative inscription gives 571/1175–6 as the year of construction and praises the founding patron ... ‘in the name of God the clement and merciful, she has commanded to build this *madrassa*, the blessed, exalted, fortunate, wise

... [name missing]’.<sup>3</sup> From the reading it is evident that all the adjectives are written in the feminine. However, the name of the founder has been erased, as is the case with so many founding inscriptions in historic buildings. The cynical motives have often been to emphasize individual power at the expense of previous achievements, and in this case perhaps to conceal the fact that a woman of high rank had endowed this very fine building.

Only a handful of structures remain from the Ghurids, all of them situated in isolated mountainous surroundings and only accessible with great difficulty. Other buildings from this era were altered beyond recognition in later times, as in the case of the *Masjid-i Jami* in Herat, which have luckily survived further damage during the recent conflicts.

### Herat, the Timurid capital of Khorasan

The Mongols brought to an end both the Ghurid and the Ghaznavide dynasties, but unlike Tamerlane, the subsequent reign of Timur Lenk and his descendants created an extraordinary

renaissance of Islamic art and culture in Central Asia during the fifteenth century. Artisans and master masons from all over the extended empire were called to Samarkand, Bukhara, Herat and the other bustling cities of Central Asia taking advantage of free trade and cultural exchange along the caravan routes. Tamerlane died in 1405 as he prepared to march on China and his empire was partly breaking up, but his successors became patrons of the arts par excellence and commissioned remarkable edifices, which became models for the subsequent Safavid architecture in Persia and the Mongul architecture in India.

Herat was made the new capital during the reign of Shah Rukh, son of Tamerlane, and his renowned queen, Gowhar Shar. Not only did they launch a vast building scheme, the rich cultural climate also fostered a large number of famous artists with the miniaturist Bihzad as the most prominent representative.

During succeeding periods of decline and poverty, these glorious structures could no longer be maintained, but half a century later the ruins of the Sultan Hussain Baiqara Madrassa in Herat were still renowned by travellers as some of the most imposing ruins in the whole of Central Asia. In 1885 the remaining parts were partly blown up by the British colonial army in an attempt to clear fields of fire because of the threatening Russian invasion of Herat. Only the Mausoleum of Gowhar Shah and nine of the ten minarets remained standing. Two of the remaining minarets fell during earthquakes in 1931 and 1951, one toppled in the 1980s and the structural stability of yet another is critical due to a large hole in the shaft caused by shelling. The surviving five minarets are now in a



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17. Citadel of Ikhtyarrudin, restored by UNESCO from 1974 to 1980 revitalizing traditional skills and the use of traditional materials.

precarious condition and pieces of fifteenth century glazed tiles are scattered all over the site.

The Soviet army subsequently arrived in 1979 and continued the degradation of the former magnificent Timurid capital ranking in reputation with Bukhara and Samarkand and rightly famed all along the Silk Road throughout Central Asia as the most important cultural centre during the fifteenth century.

Despite the many changes wrought to the form of the historic city, Herat is one of the very few Islamic cities that retains its original square form as defined by the remaining parts of the city walls. A security zone was established in the 1980s to the western and southern fringes of the city by razing all structures along a peripheral security

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zone about 500 metres wide. Since then the old city was virtually the front line between government forces in the town and the opposition groups based in the surrounding villages. As a result it is estimated that more than 1,000 homes in the historic city alone have suffered extensive damage or deterioration after they were abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

### The Great Mosque of Herat

Luckily, the *Masjid-i-jami* and the Gazergah shrine complex immediately to the north of Herat has been spared destruction. As it appears today, the Great Mosque is a result of three different construction periods. The mosque was under continuous restoration from the 1940s up to the 1970s, when most of the external façade was renewed with polychrome mosaics of glazed tiles of an exquisite ornamental design that was produced by the local workshop as a free interpretation of the original Timurid models. The entire mosque appears visually complete, totally remodelled in a fashion, which can be compared with the best of tradition practised in Europe during the nineteenth century, when reconstruction was favoured with a preference for architectural unity. This approach is not generally considered to be in compliance with the recommendations of the Venice Charter. However, executed in traditional techniques by local craftsmen according to original methods of construction, the work can hardly be criticized, though the patina and subtle qualities of weathered surfaces would have lent more architectural richness and material authenticity to the building. Still in use as the main congregational mosque, the long history of Afghanistan and the Islamic identity combine to represent a living heritage.

The original building is only revealed in the restored entrance porch at the rear of the building presenting the authentic Ghurid decoration of terracotta bricks in deep relief to the one side of the *iwan*, and the preserved, overlying flat Timurid facing of polychrome faience mosaics to the opposite side and the inner vault. In this way, the original Ghurid entrance portal was brought to light and partly preserved in a happy symbiosis with parts of the overlying Timurid facing. With the unearthing of the original Ghurid brickwork in deep relief, bright colours in vermilion and verdigris green were revealed, contrasting with the natural brown colours of the terracotta bricks. This modest restoration was carried out in the 1960s with the assistance of UNESCO as on-site training for Afghan architects, who learned to appreciate the traditional crafts and acquired basic knowledge of architectural restoration.<sup>5</sup> The hidden-away entrance porch to the Great Mosque may be a *memento mori* of all the absurd destruction, which has occurred to the cultural heritage of Afghanistan. From a more positive viewpoint, this porch may also be considered a symbol of the creative diversity of Afghan history and an emblem of an ethical approach by which religious, ethnic and cultural differences are being respected.

### Principles of inclusive conservation

The disintegration of social and political stability in the wake of the Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil war of some 20 years have put cultural heritage preservation far down the list of priorities. Without cultural and political consensus on basic issues in a society, any effort to safeguard the remaining part of the cultural heritage becomes meaningless to the local communities. The obvious

question is – in the words of the World Commission on Culture and Development – ‘how hatred can be replaced by respect and cultural freedom be implemented’.<sup>6</sup> In a destabilized country with limited domestic security and little respect for basic human rights, it is difficult to imagine exactly how the concept of cultural policy can expand beyond a totalitarian and fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran.

The ultimate destruction by the Taliban in March 2001 of the Great Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley, ranging among the greatest manmade sculptures in the world, was carried out despite repeated entreaties from UNESCO and governments around the world. Not since the iconoclasm against religious images appeared in Europe during the Middle Ages had a similar outrageous act of vandalism been witnessed, clearly demonstrating the reactionary absurdity of the Taliban regime, completely counteracting their own interests.

Policies on preservation of cultural heritage were first formulated in Europe at the beginning of the last century and then mainly restricted to concern for individual monuments, mainly manor houses, castles and cathedrals. Integrated preservation of historic districts and urban areas became part of European policy in the 1970s and formulated in the Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe from 1985, which was adopted by the member states of the Council of Europe. This treaty acknowledged the preservation of cultural heritage as an essential town and country planning objective, and emphasized that the architectural heritage constitutes a major feature of cultural,

environmental and planning policies contributing to enhancing the quality of life. The Convention further recalls the importance of handing down to future generations a system of cultural references, improving the urban and rural environment and thereby fostering economic, social and cultural development’.<sup>7</sup>

During the intermediate time, globalization became one of the most dominant features of development in the last decades of the twentieth century. Technological advancements have made it possible to travel all over the world and news of current events can instantly be exchanged worldwide. These profound changes, initiated in the twentieth century, brought to light by the same token the fragile condition of life and the common aspect of our identities.

Seen in this perspective the threats against the environment are no longer a local or regional issue as, indeed, living conditions are challenged on a global scale. This goes for our physical environment, but it also relates to our cultural one. As a result, cultural heritage is now being considered a non-renewable resource, which is endangered in line with genetic heritage as expressed through the principle of diversity in nature. This understanding has influenced the concept of the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites as expressed in the World Heritage Convention. This convention extends to a common understanding that cultural and natural heritage belongs to all people and stipulates the joint responsibility to preserve this heritage as a universal asset of humanity. The practical implementation of the convention is further described in the Operational Guidelines and more



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emphasis is now being put on what may be termed 'inclusive conservation'. In post- conflict areas like Afghanistan, there is a real need for employment among all those who have been displaced and a food-for-work programme may be but one measure to help. Fired bricks can be salvaged, while soil material can be reused for the manufacture of mud bricks for reconstruction work. Immediate concern is centred on the reconstruction of damaged settlements, thereby helping people to return to their homes, but sustainable development is nurtured by cultural identity, which is rooted in traditional building methods, the revival of ancestral skills and the restoration of historic buildings and monuments.

### | NOTES

1 L. Dupree. *Afghanistan*. Princeton University Press, 1973.

2 The recent mission was undertaken by the Italian architect Andrea Bruno in continuation of the efforts for consolidation of the foundation started by UNESCO in the 1970s.

3 M. Casimir and B. Glatzer. Sah-i Mashad, a Recently Discovered *Madrasa* of the Ghurid Period in Gargistan , *East and West*, 1971, pp. 53-67.

4 Mission report on war damage in Afghanistan by Jolyon Leslie, UNCHS-Habitat, 1990.

5 Restoration of the Ghurid entrance porch at the *Masjid-i jami* in Herat was directed by the Danish architect Erik Hensen in cooperation with young Afghan trainees.

6 The World Commission on Culture and Development, *Our Creative Diversity*, UNESCO 1995, p. 25.

7 The Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe, Granada 1985, Article 10.