

UNESCO's mandate and recent activities for the rehabilitation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage

CHRISTIAN MANHART*

Afghanistan's cultural heritage

Afghanistan, situated at an important junction on the ancient Silk Road, has been a crossroads of cultures since time immemorial. Its unique cultural heritage reflects a history marked by the complex indigenous encounter with Achaemenid Persia, Alexandrian Greece, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Among its many treasures are the Kanishka/Zoroastrian site of Surkh Kotal, the ninth-century Nine Domes Mosque of Haji Piyada, the twelfth-century Minaret of Jam, and the walled city of Herat including the Friday Mosque, the Musallah complex with its minarets and the Gawhar Shad mausoleum, the Mir Ali Sher Navai Mausoleum, the Gazargah Shrine and the Shah Zadehah mausoleum; the fourth and fifth-century Buddha statues of the Bamiyan Valley were destroyed in March 2001 by the Taliban regime.

The present situation of Afghanistan's heritage, which has suffered irreversible damage and loss during the past two decades of war and civil unrest, can be described as a cultural disaster. For many years the United Nations, through its specialized agencies UNESCO and UNOCHA¹, and non-governmental organizations involved in the preservation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage have constantly made every possible effort to protect it and continue to do so.

UNESCO's mandate in safeguarding Afghanistan's cultural heritage

In January 2002 UNESCO was officially requested by Abdullah Abdullah, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Afghan interim administration, to play a coordinating role in all international and bilateral activities aimed at safeguarding Afghanistan's cultural heritage. As a first step, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in March 2002 with the Afghan

* The author is program specialist in charge of Asia at UNESCO's Division of Cultural Heritage.

Minister of Information and Culture, Mr Said Makhdoom Raheen, which entrusted UNESCO with the coordination of international efforts for the National Museum of Kabul.

Following the request by the Afghan government, UNESCO responded firmly to the challenge of rehabilitating Afghanistan's endangered cultural heritage. As the UN Programme Secretariat for Education, Science and Culture, UNESCO is supporting the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture and related government agencies by coordinating all activities in the field of culture. The safeguarding of all aspects of the country's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, including museums, monuments, archaeological sites, music, art and traditional crafts, is of particular significance in terms of strengthening cultural identity and a sense of national integrity. Cultural heritage can become a point of mutual interest for former adversaries, enabling them to rebuild ties, to engage in dialogue and to work together in shaping a common future.

UNESCO's strategy is to assist in the re-establishment of links between the populations concerned and their cultural history, helping them to develop a sense of common ownership of monuments that represent the cultural heritage of different segments of society. This strategy is therefore directly linked to the nation-building process within the framework of the United Nation's mandate and concerted international efforts for the rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Referring to the UN Secretary-General's dictum, "Our challenge is to help the Afghans help themselves", policies and activities for the safeguarding of Afghanistan's cultural heritage focus on training and capacity-building activities related to the preservation of that heritage.

In May 2002 UNESCO, in cooperation with the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, organized the first International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage. Held in Kabul, it brought together 107 specialists on Afghan culture, as well as representatives of donor countries and institutions. Under the chairmanship of Makhdoom Raheen, Minister of Information and Culture of the Afghan government, the participants gave presentations on the state of conservation of cultural sites in the country and discussed programmes and coordination for the first conservation measures to be taken. This seminar resulted in more than US\$ 7 million being pledged for priority projects, allocated through bilateral agreements and UNESCO Funds-in-Trust projects. An eleven-page document

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

containing concrete recommendations for future action was adopted, in which the need to ensure effective cooperation was emphasized.

Responding to the urgent need to enhance and facilitate the coordination of all international activities, and in accordance with the Afghan authorities, UNESCO has established an International Coordination Committee (ICC). Its statutes were approved by the 165th session of the organization's Executive Board in October 2002. The Committee, which consists of Afghan experts and leading international specialists belonging to the most important donor countries and organizations providing funds or scientific assistance for the safeguarding of Afghanistan's cultural heritage, meets on a regular basis to review ongoing and future efforts to rehabilitate that heritage.

In June 2003, the Committee's First Plenary Session was organized at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. It was chaired by Makhdoom Raheen in the presence of Prince Mirwais, seven representatives of the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, and more than 60 international experts participating as members of the Committee or as observers. The meeting resulted in specific recommendations for efficient coordination of actions to safeguard Afghanistan's cultural heritage to the highest international conservation standards. These recommendations concern key areas such as development of a long-term strategy, capacity-building, implementation of the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, national inventories and documentation, as well as rehabilitation of the National Museum in Kabul and safeguarding of the sites of Jam, Herat, and Bamiyan. Several donors pledged additional funding for cultural projects in Afghanistan following the meeting.

Bamiyan

The eyes of the world have been on the famous Bamiyan Valley since the destruction of the great Buddhist statues in early 2001: at 55 metres and 38 metres they were the tallest standing Buddhas in the world. The smaller of the two Buddhas is thought to have been carved into the sandstone cliffs of Bamiyan as long ago as the third century A.D. The demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas was the result of a decree by Mullah Omar proclaimed in February 2001 and ordering "all non-Islamic statues and tombs considered offensive to Islam" to be destroyed.

Immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001, UNESCO sent a mission to Bamiyan to assess the condition of the site and

to cover the remaining large stone blocks with fibreglass sheets to protect them from harsh climatic conditions during winter. This first mission revealed that as a result of the explosions, cracks had appeared in the rock cliffs in and around the niches where the Buddha statues had previously stood. It also noted that not only the two large Buddha statues had been destroyed by the Taliban, but also the smaller Kakrak Buddha.

Much discussion has taken place in Afghanistan and all over the world about the future of this great site, revolving around the question of whether the two giant Buddha statues should be reconstructed. The participants at the First International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage clearly recognized that the first emergency priority is to stabilize the cliff face with its niches and caves. Noting that the decision whether to engage in the reconstruction of the Buddha statues is a matter to be settled by the government and people of Afghanistan, it was agreed that reconstruction is not a priority as long as humanitarian aid for the Afghan people is urgently needed. Furthermore, the participants emphasized that the authenticity, integrity and historical importance of this great site need to be memorialized in an appropriate way, and that reconstruction of the statues therefore requires further discussion and careful consideration.

In July 2002 a second UNESCO mission jointly organized with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and directed by its president, Michael Petzet, was undertaken in order to prepare conservation measures at the Bamiyan site. A project preparation mission composed of German, Italian and Japanese experts then took place in September and October 2002. It was found that over 80 per cent of the mural paintings dating from the sixth to the ninth century AD in the Buddhist caves have disappeared through neglect or looting. In one cave, experts even came across tools used by the thieves and the remains of freshly removed paintings. In view of this situation a contract was concluded through the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture with the local commander, who immediately provided ten armed guards to keep the site under permanent surveillance, and no further thefts have been reported since. It was also observed with concern that the large cracks which have appeared in and around the niches could lead to the collapse of parts of them and of the inner staircases. The experts thereupon made additional measurements and advised on appropriate action to consolidate the cliffs and niches. As a result of this mission, the Japanese Foreign Ministry generously approved a UNESCO Fund-in-Trust for the safeguarding of the Bamiyan site for a total budget of more than US\$ 1.8 million.

ICOMOS financed the restoration of a Sunni mosque and another building, both of which are in close proximity to the niche of the larger Buddha. The aforesaid building is now being used to house the guards and store the project equipment.

An Expert Working Group on the preservation of the Bamiyan site was jointly organized by UNESCO and ICOMOS in Munich, Germany, in November 2002. Twenty-five Afghan and international experts evaluated the present state of the site, compared different conservation methods and issued recommendations for implementation of the project's various activities. It was clearly reiterated that the statues should not be reconstructed. After delays due to the security situation resulting from the war in Iraq, the project was initiated in June 2003 with a three-week mission by architect Mario Santana from Louvain University for the scientific documentation of the back of the niches and the remaining fragments of the Buddhas.

During the First Plenary Session of the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, which also took place in June 2003, a number of recommendations were made for the Bamiyan site. It was advised in particular that consolidation of the extremely fragile cliffs and niches and preservation of the mural paintings in the Buddhist caves be considered as priorities, as well as the preparation of an integrated master plan.

In order to prevent the collapse of the cliffs and niches, large scaffolding was supplied free of charge by the German Messerschmidt Foundation and transported by the German army to Afghanistan in August 2003. With the help of this scaffolding and other imported specialized equipment, the internationally renowned Italian firm RODIO has successfully completed the first phase of the emergency consolidation of the cliffs and niches. In July, September and October 2003 several missions by specialists from the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (Japan) were sent to Bamiyan to safeguard the mural paintings and to draw up a master plan for the long-term preservation and management of the site. A Japanese firm was commissioned to prepare a topographical map of the valley and a 3-D model of the cliffs and niches. In addition, UNESCO is helping the Afghan government to create a site museum which will be set up in a traditional house close to the site. To this end, the Swiss government recently approved a UNESCO Funds-in-Trust project for the restoration of a traditional mud-brick house in the old Bamiyan village, with a budget of US\$ 250,000. Studies of the traditional houses will be conducted so as to recommend appropriate restoration methods.

To ensure the coordination of all safeguarding activities in Bamiyan, a Second UNESCO/ICOMOS Expert Working Group met in Munich, Germany, in December 2003. Twenty-five experts took part in this meeting and evaluated the progress of consolidation, conservation and archaeological activities. They especially commended the consolidation methods applied and work carried out by the Italian firm RODIO, which recently succeeded in preventing the upper eastern part of the Small Buddha niche from collapsing. They also formulated specific follow-up recommendations, as well as a work plan for 2004 for final consolidation of the Small Buddha niche, conservation of the fragments of the two Buddha statues, preservation of the mural paintings and coordination of the archaeological work undertaken by the *Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan* (DAFA) and the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties (NRICP), Japan. In March 2004, a UNESCO mission composed of several experts from diverse fields went to the site to launch and coordinate follow-up work on finalizing the consolidation of the cliffs and niches, conserving the fragments of the Buddha statues and preserving the mural paintings.

Jam and Herat

The Minaret of Jam stands alone on a peninsula formed by the south bank of the Hari Rud river and the Jam river in a remote valley closely surrounded on all sides by mountains. Owing to its particularly isolated position, the existence of this most spectacular monument built at the end of the twelfth century was only rediscovered and confirmed in the late 1940s. Today, we know that at 65 metres it is not only the second-highest minaret in the world, but also one of the very few well-preserved architectural monuments from the Ghorid period.

The walled city of Herat, the capital of Herat Province and once, despite its turbulent history, a great centre of religion and culture, is known for its famous citadel (*Qala-i-Ikhtiyaruddin*) in the heart of the old city, the stunningly decorated Friday Mosque (*Masjid-I-Jami*), the remains of the Musallah Complex with its minarets and the Gawhar-Shad's mausoleum topped by a flamboyant ribbed turquoise-blue dome.

In March 2002, UNESCO sent two consultants to Jam and Herat. The architect Professor Andrea Bruno and structural engineer Marco Menegotto assessed the state of conservation of the Minaret of Jam and of the Fifth Minaret of Gawhar-Shad gardens, the Gawhar Shad mausoleum, the Citadel, the Friday Mosque and other monuments in Herat and drafted project documents for their conservation. Two months later, Andrea Bruno, accompanied by a hydrologist, carried out a mission to advise on consolidating the Jam

Minaret's foundations, stabilizing its overall structure and improving the flow of the two rivers. They also recommended protective measures for the archaeological zone of Jam, threatened by illicit excavations. This mission revealed that, although the gabions (fortifying devices) installed by UNESCO in 2000 were damaged during the dramatic flash floods of April 2002, they remained efficient in protecting the monument, which perhaps only survived as a result of this measure. The Minaret of Jam was inscribed as the first Afghan cultural property on the UNESCO World Heritage List in June 2002. In October and November 2002, architects Tarcis Stevens and Mario Santana drew up detailed metric documentation of the five minarets of the Musalla complex in Herat, as well as of the Jam Minaret. They combined this documentation with a preliminary training session for Afghan experts on the use of the Total Station (a laser theodolite) donated by UNESCO to the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture. This training will be continued in 2004.

An Expert Working Group Meeting on the Preservation of Jam and the Monuments in Herat was held at UNESCO headquarters in January 2003. Among the twenty-three participants were Sayed Makdoom Raheen, Zahir Aziz, Ambassador of Afghanistan to UNESCO, Omara Khan Massoudi, Director of the National Museum of Kabul, and Abdul Wasey Feroozi, Head of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology. The experts evaluated the present state of conservation of the site of Jam and of the above-mentioned historical monuments in Herat. They also addressed the problem of illicit excavations, compared different conservation methods and made emergency and long-term conservation and coordination proposals with reference to identified priorities. The concrete recommendations formulated by this Working Group enabled emergency activities to begin in 2003.

In November 2002 the Swiss authorities approved a UNESCO Funds-in-Trust project for emergency consolidation and restoration of the site of Jam, with a total budget of US\$ 138,000. In addition, the Italian authorities granted US\$ 800,000, as cooperation with the UNESCO Funds-in-Trust programme, for emergency consolidation and restoration of monuments in Herat and Jam. These projects began in April 2003 with the reconstruction of a project house in Jam, the clearing of the Jam river bed and the repairing and strengthening of the wooden and metal gabions installed in 2000 and 2002 by UNESCO and damaged in April 2002.

In July and August 2003, the Italian experts Andrea Bruno, Giorgio Macchi and Mariachristina Pepe, together with representatives of UNESCO, carried out a mission to Herat and Jam to start preliminary work on a geological

survey of the ground at the minarets, in preparation for their long-term consolidation. At the same time the Fifth Minaret in Herat, which was in imminent risk of collapse, was temporarily stabilized by means of steel cables designed by Giorgio Macchi. This emergency intervention was successfully carried out by the Italian firm ALGA, in very difficult security and logistical conditions. The minaret is now secured and stabilized, although it would probably not withstand severe earthquakes. The ground survey and the long-term consolidation of the Jam Minaret and the Fifth Minaret of Herat will be undertaken in 2004. In addition, three archaeologists from the Istituto per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO), under UNESCO contract, carried out safeguarding excavations on the site of Jam during the month of August 2003.

In 2002, UNESCO and the Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) jointly financed the tile-making workshop in Herat which they had revived in 1994. There are currently 60 Afghan trainees at the workshop, learning how to manufacture traditional tiles. In December 2003, the German authorities approved a UNESCO Funds-in-Trust project for the retiling of the Gowhar Shad Mausoleum at the cost of US\$ 120,000. The traditional tiles needed for this project are now being produced at the tile-making workshop in Herat.

In February and March 2004, Professors Andrea Bruno and Claudio Margottini and a representative of UNESCO carried out a mission to Jam to advise the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture on the construction of a road and bridge at the site. The mission resulted in the signature of a joint agreement by the local communities of Jam, the Afghan government and UNESCO, allowing the organization to resume its operational activities to consolidate and restore the minaret and preserve the surrounding archaeological remains. The necessary geophysical surveys, followed by detailed technical subsoil investigations, will be executed as soon as possible to prepare for the minaret's long-term consolidation.

Kabul Museum

The Kabul Museum has suffered tremendously in the past 24 years of conflict in Afghanistan. During that period it was extensively looted and destroyed. Before the Taliban arrived in the capital in 1996, the museum was temporarily closed and its collections were deposited at various locations in Kabul. From 1991 to 1996, many of its most precious items disappeared, such as the Begram ivories, the entire numismatic collection, most Buddha statues, and fragments of wall paintings from the Bamiyan Valley.

Immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001, UNESCO sent a mission to identify and gather together the remains of various statues and objects in the Kabul Museum and to prepare a project for their restoration. In November 2002, in view of the approach of winter, UNESCO took some emergency measures. New windows were installed in several rooms on the ground and first floor and a deep well with a pressure tank and plumbing was built to provide water for the conservation laboratory. In addition, a large electric generator was donated to supply electricity. In 2003, UNESCO, through SPACH, contributed US\$ 42,500 to the restoration of the museum, in particular for completion of the roof.

In January 2003, the Greek government started restoration of the Kabul Museum building as part of a commitment it had made during the Kabul Seminar held in May 2002, consisting of a donation of approximately US\$ 750,000; UNESCO provided the Greek specialists with drawings and plans of the Kabul Museum produced by the organization's consultant, Andrea Bruno. The US government also contributed US\$ 100,000 to this project. The British International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has furthermore installed a new restoration laboratory composed of two rooms, one wet-room and one dry-room, both of which were funded by the British Museum. In addition, the French CEREDAF donated conservation equipment, while the newly created French DAFA, together with the Guimet Museum in Paris, carried out training courses for the museum's curators that were begun by the Italian firm IsIAO in 2002.

In April/May 2003 and March 2004 a UNESCO expert, Bertille Lyonnet, undertook one-month missions to Kabul at the Afghan authorities' request in order to train staff from the National Museum in Kabul in the restoration of the ceramic collections.

Summary of international cooperation and funding for rehabilitation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage

Complementing its operational activities, UNESCO promotes existing normative instruments while developing new ones for the legal protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Given that the prevention of illicit excavations and illicit trafficking is a major challenge in contemporary Afghanistan, UNESCO supports the efforts of the Afghan government to ban illicit excavations and control its borders to prevent smuggling of illicitly acquired movable cultural objects.

In conclusion, it can be stated that to date, funding and other forms of assistance well exceeding the \$7 million pledged during the Kabul Seminar held in May 2002 have been given for cultural projects in Afghanistan. To summarize, the UNESCO Funds-in-Trust programme has been entrusted with the following amounts from donor countries: \$1,815,967 from the government of Japan for the conservation of Bamiyan; a further US\$ 969,000 from the government of Italy for the monuments of Herat, Jam and the Kabul Museum; US\$ 705,000 from the Italian government for the Ghazni museums, plus US\$ 67,460 for a Cultural Heritage Seminar to be held in Kabul in May 2004; US\$ 138,000 for Jam and US\$ 250,000 for Bamiyan from the Swiss government; and US\$ 850,000 from the German government in 2002, through ICOMOS Germany and the German Archaeological Institute, for the restoration of the Babur Gardens and to train Afghan archaeologists, as well as US\$ 119,780 in 2003 for the retiling of the Gowhar Shad Mausoleum.

Besides these Funds-in-Trust donations, bilateral contributions include US\$ 5 million from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture for the restoration of the Babur Gardens and the Timur Shah Mausoleum in Kabul, and for the rehabilitation of traditional housing in Kabul, Herat and other cities. The Greek government has also earmarked \$750,000 for the restoration of the Kabul Museum building, and the US government has contributed US\$ 100,000 to this project. The French Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan has carried out preventive excavations. The French Musée Guimet and the Italian IsIAO team have conducted several training courses for the staff of the Kabul Museum, while the British Museum has restored three rooms at the Kabul Museum for the installation of a conservation laboratory. In addition, UNESCO has provided \$400,000 under its Regular Budget for the biennium 2002/03 for cultural activities in Afghanistan. In September 2002, UNESCO concluded a contract with the French NGO Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement (ACTED) for the emergency repair of the protecting roof of the nine domes of the Hadji Pyada mosque in Balkh – the oldest mosque in Afghanistan – in order to preserve it from the harsh winter weather.

All UNESCO activities are being implemented in accordance with the recommendations of the International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage.

UNESCO would like to take this opportunity to thank all of these generous donors for their invaluable contributions. It should also be emphasized

that these cultural funds come from specific cultural budgets. As such, they have not been taken from humanitarian funds, but instead constitute a supplement to them. If activities such as those described above are to continue, further financial support will have to be found.

Résumé :

Le mandat de l'UNESCO et ses activités récentes pour la réhabilitation du patrimoine culturel de l'Afghanistan

Christian Manhart

Le patrimoine culturel afghan a subi des pertes irréversibles au cours des deux dernières décennies de guerre. L'UNESCO a contribué à la protection de ce patrimoine pendant de nombreuses années et continue à tout mettre en œuvre pour assurer sa sauvegarde. En janvier 2002, l'UNESCO a été mandatée par le gouvernement intérimaire afghan pour assurer la coordination de l'ensemble des activités internationales en faveur de la sauvegarde de ce patrimoine, un rôle qu'elle assume par le biais du Comité international de coordination pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel afghan. Ses activités concernent des secteurs clés tels que le développement d'une stratégie sur le long terme; le renforcement des capacités locales par la formation et l'équipement; l'application des conventions internationales; la documentation et la création d'inventaires nationaux; la reconstruction du musée national de Kaboul avec son laboratoire de conservation; la réhabilitation des musées de Ghazni; la consolidation des fondations du minaret de Djam; la conservation des quatrième et cinquième minarets et du mausolée de Gawar Shad à Herat; la conservation des fragments des deux Bouddhas à Bamiyan ainsi que la consolidation des niches et falaises et la protection des peintures murales dans les grottes.



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Buddhist caves in Bamiyan



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Bamiyan - Niche of Large Buddha



(Photo Sergio Colaone)

Emergency stabilisation works of the 5th minaret of Herat



(Photo François Langlois)

Jam – Gabion protection of the base of the minaret, carried out by UNESCO