

Nation Protects Storied Bactrian Treasure



The Cybele Plaque, among the Bactrian treasure on display at the presidential palace in Kabul

LONDON, (CAIS) -- By Golnaz Esfandiari - More than two decades of war and conflict in former Iranian province, today known as Afghanistan had a catastrophic effect on the region's rich and unique cultural and historical heritage. But some ancient works of art survived unscathed. They include the famed Bactrian gold collection. The cache lay dormant under the Hill of Gold, or Tillya-tepe, for 2,000 years until Soviet archeologists exposed it shortly before the 1979 Soviet invasion. Decades later, it was rediscovered and unveiled in 2003 to ease fears that it had been plundered during wartime. This news-article examines the storied Bactrian gold -- and why Afghans and the rest of the world must wait to see it.

Afghanistan's parliament -- eager to protect what remains of the country's heritage -- in May rejected a proposal to send the Bactrian gold on a world tour. The priceless collection has been displayed only rarely, and very few people have ever seen it. But the director of Kabul's national museum, Omara Khan Massoudi, is among the lucky few.

"They are very delicate pieces," Massoudi says. "Gold pieces constitute most of the treasure, and they doubtlessly have great value in shedding light on the history of land and its elegant arts. We are proud that we still have the collection with us."

Found at a 2,000-year-old burial site, Massoudi says the collection contains thousands of pieces of gold jewelry, figurines, funeral ornaments, and personal belongings.

The hoard was discovered in 1978 and 1979 by a group of Afghan and Soviet archeologists led by a Greek-Russian archaeologist named Victor Saryannidis.

"The Bactrian treasure was found in Jowzjan Province in six graves that belong to the first century BCE and the first decade of the Common Era calendar," Massoudi says. "It totaled 21,618 pieces. It was delivered to the National Museum the same year, in 1979."

Out Of Sight, Not Mind

About a year later, some of the pieces were displayed briefly in an exhibition at the museum in Kabul. But with the arrival of Soviet troops and other threats, the treasure was hidden away in the museum.

In 1988, the gold pieces were transferred to a highly secure vault within the central bank at the compound of the Afghan presidential palace. The treasure was viewed only once in the next few years -- when President Mohammad Najibullah wanted foreign diplomats to see that the Soviets had not absconded with (eds: stolen) it.

"During the rule of Dr. Najibullah, we had a one-day exhibition of these works in the Arg Palace," Massoudi says.

Years of civil war followed, during which a significant portion of Afghanistan's historical heritage was looted or destroyed.

Loyal bankers thwarted efforts by various sides in the ensuing years to even see the Bactrian gold. But such secrecy also spawned speculation that the treasure had been lost, stolen, or perhaps worse: melted down.

Cache Found

Finally, after the central bank's vaults were opened in 2003, the country was assured that the treasure was safe.

An internationally aided inventory followed, and the 22,000 pieces were photographed and catalogued in Dari and English.

In 2004, several items were displayed to selected guests -- including President Hamid Karzai, cabinet ministers, foreign diplomats, and some media.

National Museum Director Massoudi says security concerns, inadequate facilities to house the treasure, and a lack of expertise conspire against the Afghan public, which will have to wait to see the Bactrian gold:

"It is very difficult for me to predict [when the Bactrian gold might be displayed publicly]," Massoudi says. "As you know, Kabul's National Museum was severely damaged during the civil war -- [about 70 percent of] its items were looted. Following the fall of the Taliban, with the Culture Ministry and the help of international organizations -- especially UNESCO -- we have done our best to restore the museum. But we are still facing many problems."

Protected For Posterity

The world will also have to wait to see the ancient Iranian treasure. The parliament in May rejected a proposal to exhibit the collection in a tour of European and U.S. museums.

Parliamentarian Shukria Barekzai tells that too many risks are involved to allow this iconic treasure to travel.

"Lack of strong insurance from a reliable company was one issue. There were also concerns that these objects could be destroyed or damaged," Barekzai says. "Their packing was also of concern -- and [there were fears] that they could be replaced with replicas. All of these led to the decision [not to tour it]. We don't want to lose what is left of our historical heritage. We have lost enough of our archeological heritage. We have to do our best to preserve what is left."

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