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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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Reasons to rejoice: A famed trove of 2,000-year-old Bactrian gold—including an ornate belt (right)—recently surfaced in a Kabul vault, and clay faces from an ancient Buddhist temple were retrieved from looters. With untold numbers of Afghan artifacts lost forever, each new recovery is a triumph.

ALL ARTIFACTS PHOTOGRAPHED WITH PERMISSION OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN, KABUL



# saving

Against all odds, a country shattered by more than two



decades of upheaval begins to rescue its ancient treasures.

afghan  
culture

by andrew lawler • photographs by kenneth garrett



h e feared for his life, all because he found an inscribed slab of stone near his village. Mohammed Mokhtar Ahmadi had challenged a warlord's demand that he turn over the valuable object, and so he was hiding out in Kabul, afraid to return to his home in the central highlands of Afghanistan. "Everywhere I walk, I worry they will kill me—kill me!" he said as we plowed slowly through the capital's traffic of honking cars, belching trucks, ramshackle donkey carts, and daring pedestrians.

Ahmadi's trials began in 1995 when he and his brother stumbled on an ancient Buddhist shrine near their small town of Tangisafedak. Inside they found a stone box with a book, gold coins, and a gemstone; an outer wall bore an inscription with strange letters. Word of the discovery spread, and soldiers loyal to the local warlord, Abdul Karim Khalili, took away the box and its contents.

After the stone inscription was removed from the wall, Ahmadi, a village leader, held on to it for safe-keeping. By 2002 Khalili had become a vice president of the post-Taliban Afghanistan, and his private militia returned to demand the stone. Ahmadi only relented when they agreed to give him a receipt. Then he promptly went to Kabul to notify the Ministry of Information and Culture. When Khalili was questioned by local media, he initially denied knowing about

## Gold Rush

As civil conflict loomed over Afghanistan in 1978, Soviet archaeologists uncovered the find of a lifetime: six gold-laden tombs of Bactrian nomads. They sped the treasure to Kabul, but as chaos seized the country, the priceless trove vanished—until now. In August 2003, with the Taliban ousted and Hamid Karzai's  
*(Continued on page 33)*





Evidence of a cultural crossroads, a brooch nicknamed the "Bactrian Aphrodite" shows Greek, Indian, and Asian influences; horned lion heads (opposite) curve into bracelets.



either the box or the stone. A Kabul newspaper, however, published a copy of the receipt backing up Ahmadi's story, and Khalili delivered the stone to the National Museum. The whereabouts of the box and its contents remains a mystery—and Khalili has refused to discuss the matter.

Ahmadi was afraid that the artifacts from his country's breathtaking cultural heritage would be sold and vanish from Afghanistan forever. In an interview before the October elections, a senior government official shared his concern, saying that Khalili was only one of many warlords with a taste both for antiquities and vengeance. Upstanding citizens who complained about looting, he added, could face arrest or worse. Ahmadi was right to fear for his life.

And Afghans are right to fear for their country's treasures. Yes, in a stunning piece of good news last April, the famed Bactrian gold—more than 20,000 pieces feared to be missing—emerged intact from a sealed underground vault at the presidential palace in Kabul (see "Gold Rush" sidebar). But still at risk are thousands of works of art and archaeological artifacts—evidence of the area's rich and complex history.

Long a hub of trade flowing from east to west and north to south, Afghanistan is where caravans of bundled Chinese silk passed camels loaded with glass from ancient Rome. It's where classical Greek art fused with the sinuous sculpture of India. The storied city of Balkh at the foot of the central highlands is the legendary home of the great prophet Zoroaster, who lived here centuries before Alexander the Great arrived. And it was in this region that Buddhism was transformed into a vibrant world religion.

Nowhere is the past so evident as the remote valley of Bamian, northwest of Kabul at the edge of the Hindu Kush mountain range. A vast Buddhist community of devout monks and nuns thrived here in the early centuries A.D. Two giant Buddhas once towered over the valley and its sprawling monasteries, gleaming in gilt and bright paint, possibly gesturing with wooden arms and attracting pilgrims from as far away as China. Rain and snow and marauders robbed the Buddhas of their faces and arms, but they remained magnificent sentinels of the province until 2001, when the ruling Taliban blasted the Buddhas into dust, causing a global outcry.

"We want to see the statues rebuilt," says Abdul Halek Zaliq, deputy governor of the



"We just hoped the





(Continued from page 30) interim government in place, officials found six locked safes in a vault in Kabul. Many suspected that these safes held the Bactrian gold.

After months of legalities, a team assembled last April (left) for an old-fashioned safecracking to solve the mystery. Since the keys had disappeared, a workman applied a hammer, a crowbar, then a power saw to the first safe. Sparks flew amid an

anxious crowd that included Viktor Sarianidi, with white hair at center, who first discovered the Bactrian graves, and Sayed Raheen, the minister of culture, at left with hands on the safe. I was there, second from right, on behalf of the National Geographic Society, which had agreed to inventory the findings—if any. (The National Endowment for the Humanities also pledged funds.) At last the door

opened, and we saw gold! One by one the safes revealed the entire trove—some 20,000 glittering objects restored to the world.

*Fredrik Hiebert*  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC FELLOW



heat wouldn't melt anything.” —*Fredrik Hiebert*



An intricate crown of gold—easy to disassemble for travel—adorned the skull of a highborn Bactrian nomad in her grave. Part of a clasp inlaid with turquoise (above) helped fasten one of her inner garments.





Neglect, theft, war, and vandalism have long plagued Afghan antiquities. In Kabul's National Museum (left) a conservator pieces together smashed Buddhist sculptures. Pockmarks deface a portrait of Buddha (right) at Bamian, where 80 percent of the paintings have been ruined.

A banner over the National Museum proclaims, **“A Nation Can Stay Alive When Its Culture Stays Alive.”** It's a quixotic

region, eyeing the battered niches hopefully. “We're confident Bamian will become a tourist center.” Such a reconstruction is unlikely, since rebuilding ancient sites is frowned upon by archaeologists and preservationists.

Zaliq's zeal for tourists, and the revenue they bring, is understandable. What is less clear is how to attract them. Three years after the Taliban were ousted by U.S.-led forces, the country is still badly in need of money and security. Nearly a quarter century of invasion and civil war have transformed archaeological sites into barren wastes of looters' pits, left ancient buildings in ruins, and destroyed or scattered thousands of statues, carvings, and paintings. “Illegal digging is going on in many provinces—even around Kabul,” says Abdul Wasey Feroozi, former director of Afghanistan's Institute of Archaeology. “It's difficult to stop it. We have 2,800 known sites, but I think there are more than 4,000. Many sites have yet to be registered. We need to explore and survey these.”

Warlords and their militias control most areas outside Kabul, and Afghanistan is once again the world's leading opium producer. But while poppies may be Afghanistan's prime export, UNESCO officials warn that antiquities—looted and illegally spirited out of the country—may be second on that list. A single Buddha statue can bring tens of thousands of dollars in the art markets of London, Paris, New York, or

statement in a poor land devastated by invaders and ideologues.

Tokyo. And unlike poppies, antiquities are harvested in all seasons, and cannot be replanted.

**S**aving antiquities can appear an irrelevant luxury amid the hardships of daily life in Bamian, which one U.S. State Department official calls “the Appalachia of Afghanistan.” Most of the farmers in this impoverished province are ethnic Hazara, a Shiite Muslim people long at the bottom of the Afghan tribal hierarchy. In 1999 the Taliban—largely ethnic Pashtun who practice Sunni Islam—damaged or destroyed a third of all the houses in Bamian. Crops were burned, livestock stolen, and four out of five people fled. Some of the homeless found shelter from the brutally cold winters in the many cliff caves where the two big Buddhas stood.

In May 2002 Bamian provincial officials—fearing that poor people living in the caves might put off prospective tourists—evicted 105 families, giving them tents and promising to build houses. After a scramble by international aid organizations, the homes finally were finished









Beside the remnants of a giant Buddha blown up by the Taliban in 2001, Italian workers prepare to stabilize the fragile Bamian cliff face with injections of cement. Buddhist monks carved the 125-foot-tall statue and the surrounding monastic caves in about the fifth century A.D.

## The question facing Afghanistan is this: Can a country in such turmoil really afford to save its heritage—or must it choose between feeding and housing its people and preserving its history?

last year. In the meantime another batch of 85 families—most of them from provinces outside Bamian—had moved into the caves. In October 2003 the government sent troops to evict another set of cave dwellers.

Sayed Nabi was among the second group to be evicted. "I know the caves are historic, and it's not right to stay in such an old place," said the short 40-year-old man as he leaned on a rough wooden staff. "But we had no other hope for shelter." As winter approached, with temperatures dipping far below freezing, Nabi and dozens of other families were camped out in makeshift tents in a desolate valley a few miles west of the city of Bamian. "They took us out by force," he said. "One of us died from the cold. Now our kids are sick, we are hungry, and the government has given us nothing yet. We may all die from the cold." The government had promised to sell them parcels of land for 5,000 afghanis apiece—about \$115. "But we don't even have money for food or tents," he said. A few weeks later, Nabi and his compatriots scattered to seek sturdier shelter for the winter.

Zaliq defends the evictions as necessary. "We gave them warning," he says. "No one has the right to stay in such historic places. It's better to endanger 85 families than destroy something of historical value for the whole world." But the incident aroused outrage among international aid workers—and UNESCO—bringing into

focus a central question facing Afghanistan as it struggles to salvage its past while forging a new future: Can a country in such turmoil really afford to save its heritage—or must it choose between feeding and housing its people and preserving its history?

"Culture is not just monuments. It's a living thing. Without people these caves are dead," says UNESCO's Christian Manhart, as he scrambles up the crumbly cliffs. UNESCO scientists working to save what's left of the site got along well with the cave dwellers, he adds. "We employed some of them, and we had them on our side."

In Bamian UNESCO is leading the effort to shore up the unstable Buddha niches and save what remains of the statues and the vibrant paintings that once decorated the huge circular halls, balconies, and stairways that honeycomb the cliffs. Wooden doors and iron padlocks now secure 24 of the caves. Within, only a few of the hard-to-reach walls and ceilings still show faded Buddhas in reds and blues, standing out against the pale rock. Most of the paintings have been looted in the chaos of the past decade:



Robbers' knives and chisels were found by Japanese archaeologists working to restore the few remaining. The archaeologists also stumbled on broken bits of images scattered on the floors.

Meanwhile Italian experts have been working with UNESCO to stabilize the fragile cliff face around the smaller of the two Buddha niches. It is no ordinary task. Seasoned climbers must rappel down the high mountain, attach a heavy piece of equipment to a large fissure in the cliff face, and then inject a cement mixture into the crack. Heading the project is 57-year-old Gedeone Tonoli, an engineer who worked on the successful effort to stabilize the Tower of Pisa. Passing by spent bullet casings littering the base of the Buddha niches, Tonoli climbs up the steep interior stone stairs and points to a crack—a massive block of cliff face that threatens to crash to the valley below. The first step is to attach sensors to measure any change in the crack. Then steel bolts must be inserted 50 feet into the cliff to strengthen the rock. "But this is difficult rock to anchor," he says, rubbing the pebbly conglomerate inside the stairwell. Looking out through the cracks at the mound of rubble below, it's hard to imagine that the glorious Buddhas of Bamian will rise again.

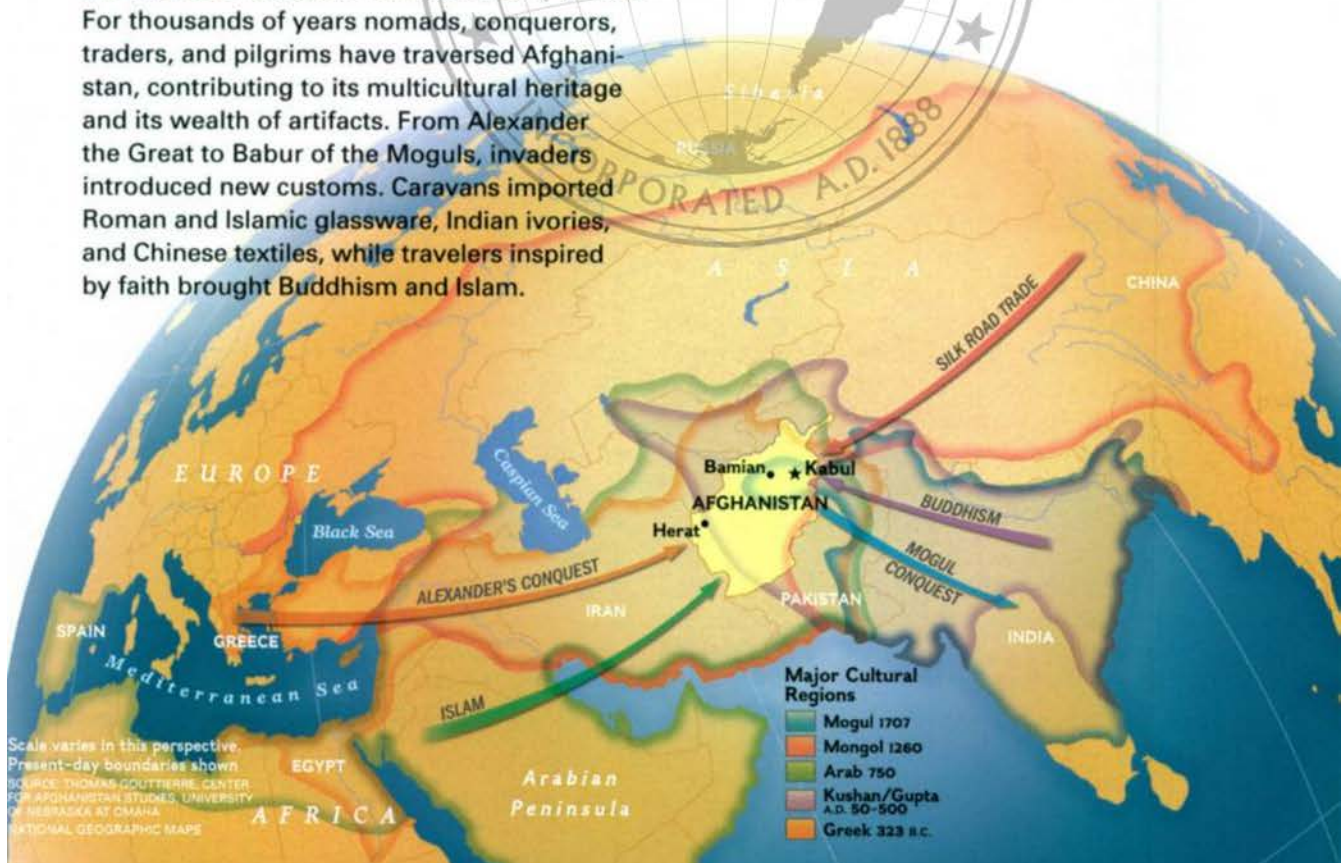
In the western city of Herat, UNESCO's Manhart has kicked off the most ambitious restoration project in Afghanistan—hoping to prove in the process that it's possible to straddle humanitarian and cultural needs. Thanks to a \$120,000 donation from the German government, some 60 young men, ranging in age from 16 to 22, are learning the craft of mosaic tilemaking. They earn \$34 a month, on par with wages for adult government workers.

Led by Mazhar Wahidi, director of Herat's monuments office, the workers will turn out 200 square feet of tile to repair part of Herat's Musalla complex, commissioned in the 15th century by one of Islam's most celebrated women, Queen Gowhar Shad. At the center of what was once a magnificent garden stands her mausoleum, a boxy building that conceals three domes, the outer one mostly bare of tiles. Only a few flashes of blue and white hint at its original beauty.

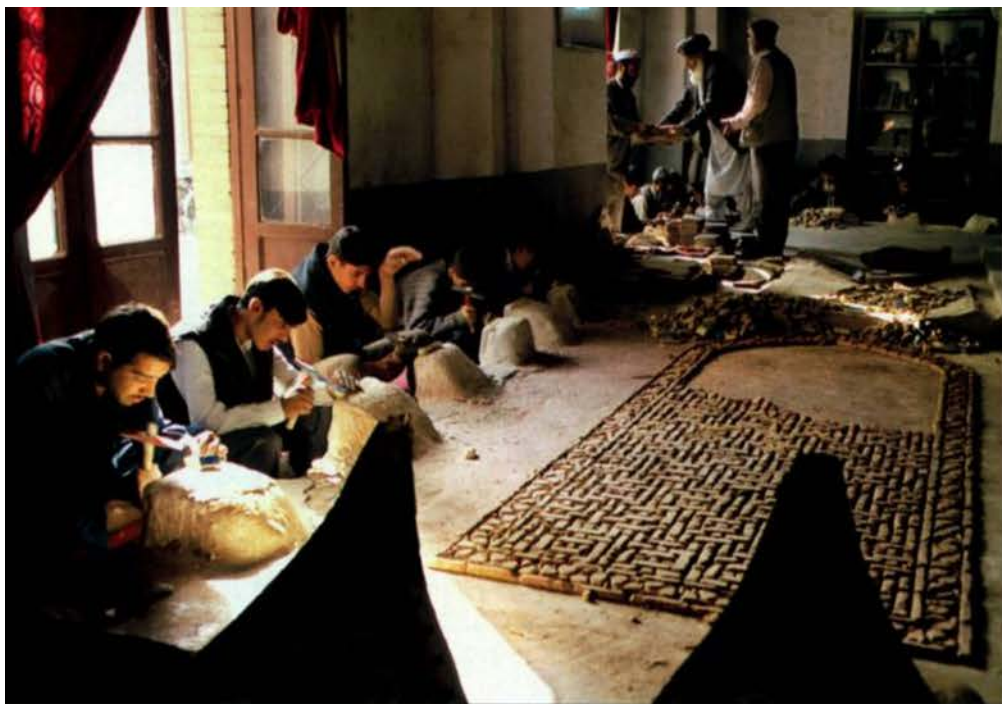
On this morning the apprentices are busy shaping individual tiles into complex patterns in a cavernous workroom, sunlight filtering in to illuminate the glazed tiles fired in an adjacent courtyard. The Gowhar Shad project is both a cultural and aesthetic challenge. Finding the right shade of blue is particularly hard, says

## Where East Meets West

For thousands of years nomads, conquerors, traders, and pilgrims have traversed Afghanistan, contributing to its multicultural heritage and its wealth of artifacts. From Alexander the Great to Babur of the Moguls, invaders introduced new customs. Caravans imported Roman and Islamic glassware, Indian ivories, and Chinese textiles, while travelers inspired by faith brought Buddhism and Islam.







Using traditional techniques, apprentices in Herat (left) shape new ceramic tiles to restore the mausoleum of Queen Gowhar Shad, a 15th-century patron of the arts. Repairing a nearby minaret, now supported by steel cables, will take modern technology and money.

## Earthquakes toppled four of the minarets. One survivor, shot at by a Soviet tank, came perilously close to collapsing.

**“It’s a miracle it hasn’t fallen,”** says a UNESCO official.

Manhart. But perhaps more difficult is his request that the Afghans choose the best 30 apprentices to work on the new line. Each will receive \$100 a month on top of his current salary. “With \$100, oh we are very happy!” says Touryalay Kalandari, a 17-year-old apprentice who has been chosen as a team leader. But he and Wahidi are reluctant to name the top 30. In a tribal culture influenced by socialist Soviets, the concept of an individual receiving more pay for better work does not come naturally.

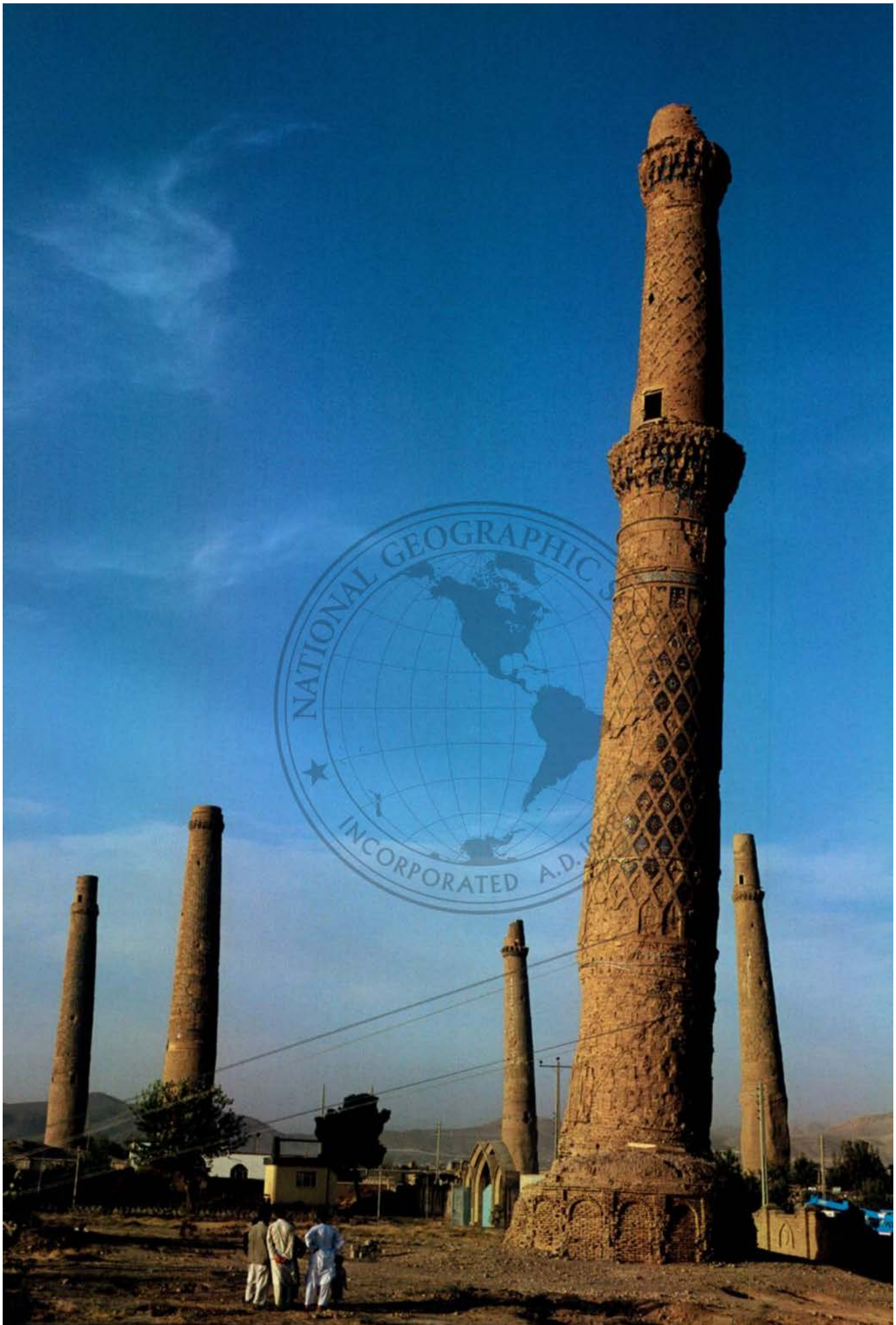
Unlike in remote and poor Bamian, the greatest threat to cultural heritage in Herat is not refugees or poverty, but economic progress. “Take a picture, quick!” yells Manhart as we walk on the outskirts of the city. A heavily laden truck is lumbering between four massive towers the size of modern-day smokestacks—all inlaid with delicate diamonds of blue. The road is supposed to be closed to protect these fragile, leaning minarets of the Musalla complex, a hint of what was a pinnacle of Islamic architectural achievement. Instead, an Iranian contractor is widening the road that leads to the Iranian border. British cannon, Soviet tanks, and centuries of decay have taken their toll on these magnificent buildings. Now the more mundane ravages of commerce threaten to destroy even these remnants. “At the end of the Taliban time, the road was closed, but now it is reopened—the Iranians want

the quickest route into Herat,” explains Ghulam Haidar, the grizzled caretaker of the Musalla.

Relative to the rest of the country, Herat is blessed with signs of peace and prosperity, in part because of the trucks, which pay hefty tolls as they pass from Pakistan toward Russia or Iran and back. But there is good reason to fear that truck vibrations will mark the end of the magnificent minarets. A century ago there were nine, but earthquakes have since toppled four of them. A few hundred feet away, a fifth minaret is secured with cables to arrest a dramatic lean. Shot at by a Soviet tank during the 1980s, the structure in recent years came close to collapsing. “It’s a miracle it hasn’t fallen,” says Manhart.

Armed with the digital picture of the truck passing between the minarets, Manhart goes to see the mayor, Mohammad Rafiq Mojaddadi, who invites him into his reception room. After pleasantries, Mojaddadi bristles at the suggestion that the road through the minarets is open to anything but the occasional small car. When he sees the picture, he shifts tactics. Too many children were being killed in the road’s circuitous







detour around the monuments, he says, so some vehicles are allowed to pass. He vows to look into the matter.

The next day Mazhar Wahidi of the historical monuments office dismisses that promise as empty. "The mayor wants to connect Herat and Iran with a highway," he says, fuming. A small man with a black beard and striking sky-blue eyes, he has already complained about the road to the governor of the province. "I said it was equal to destroying the Buddhas of Bamian," he says.

**F**ame and notoriety may save what is left of the Musalla minarets and Bamian's paintings, though security concerns have suspended all UNESCO work in Bamian until after the 2005 parliamentary elections. Afghanistan's minister of information and culture, Sayed Makhdoom Raheen, has finally won a promise from the Herat government to divert the road around the minarets. Raheen has also pledged to send 500 armed guards to safeguard other important monuments. For

many sites, however, it is too late. Ai Khanum, a city built by Alexander the Great's followers in the fourth century B.C. that boasted the largest gymnasium in the Greek-speaking world, is now a pockmarked field of holes. The once bustling town of Robatak, a Buddhist center in the first century A.D., is covered in fresh bulldozer tracks made by well-equipped looters eager to turn up salable artifacts. Never scientifically excavated, its secrets are now irretrievably lost.

And even at Balkh, which remains an inhabited town, men with a ladder removed tiles from an ancient religious school a mere hundred yards from a security post. "Now you tell me who is involved," says a frustrated government official in nearby Mazar-e Sharif. "It's like the Mafia. We need rule of law, not guns." He fears the consequences if the looting continues. "If something isn't done, we'll lose our historical sites," he adds. "I'm angry. My heart is burning."

The passion to rescue Afghanistan's rich heritage must contend with the harsh realities of a country still on the edge of chaos. One senior





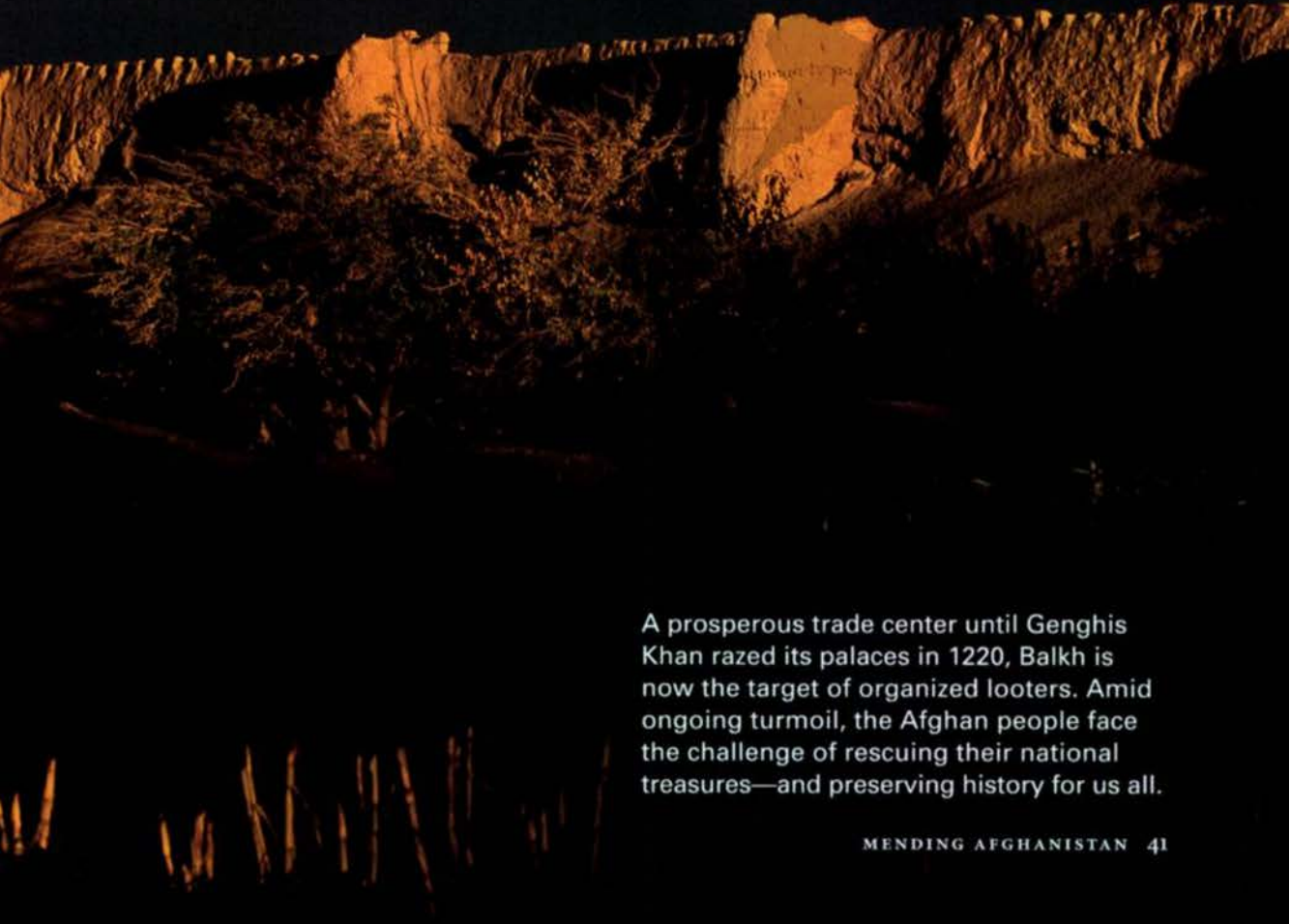
official says that prominent members of the government are clearly involved in looting. That fact makes citizens hesitant to report acts of destruction. "If they are fearful, then no one will give us information," laments the official.

Mohammed Ahmadi is one of the few who have been willing to step forward. But his courage has come at a price. He has received some financial assistance from anonymous donors. Government officials offered him a job as police chief in his region, but he said local leaders loyal to Khalili refused to let him assume the position.

"I'm confused," Ahmadi said, as we stopped to let him out of the car following our interview. "Everyone knows my story, but I don't know what to do. These objects are for all Afghans. Right now they're under the control of the people with guns," he added, before vanishing into the maelstrom of Kabul's bustling downtown. My interpreter turned to me. "He's a dead man," he said. (Ahmadi has since fallen ill and fled the country with his family.)

Down the road at the National Museum, scarred by rockets and gunfire, a banner over the entrance proclaims "A Nation Can Stay Alive When Its Culture Stays Alive." It is a quixotic sentiment in a poor land devastated in turn by invaders, ruthless warlords, and religious ideologues. I recall a night in Kabul when I attended an evening of traditional music—a cause for celebration itself given that the Taliban forbade such exhibitions and destroyed musical instruments. The crowd of men and women, foreigners and Afghans, were delighted when a child of no more than five played the lute-like rebab with amazing skill and beauty. Spontaneously, a handsome young man rose and spun gracefully to the sounds, smiling softly. For that moment, the guns and the greed seemed far away, and Afghan culture seemed very much alive. □

**SAFECRACKING, LOOTING, AND TREASURE** Get the inside story of rescued gold in a video interview with photographer Ken Garrett; then view a gallery of his images and a list of related websites at [nationalgeographic.com/magazine/0412](http://nationalgeographic.com/magazine/0412).



A prosperous trade center until Genghis Khan razed its palaces in 1220, Balkh is now the target of organized looters. Amid ongoing turmoil, the Afghan people face the challenge of rescuing their national treasures—and preserving history for us all.