INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan's Challenge

"All we are breaking are stones."
—Taliban leader Mullah Omar, March 2001, on the destruction of Afghanistan's statues

On my first afternoon in Kabul, I threaded my way through packs of dirty children and decaying concrete high rises to thank a British aid worker who had helped arrange my journey. The power was out, the cramped apartment was stifling, and she was preoccupied with tracking down jailed, abused, and abandoned women across the country. Her stories were harrowing.

Scientific research seemed superfluous in such a place, and worries about ancient sites or looted museums appeared an irrelevant luxury amid such misery. But she was gracious: "We aid people only deal with half the human." The other half—the part that requires culture and beauty—also needs care and attention, she added quietly. That eloquent comment is echoed in a banner across the entrance to the wrecked National Museum that says, "A Nation Can Stay Alive When Its Culture Stays Alive." Printed in English, a language incomprehensible to all but a tiny number here, it is undoubtedly a plea and challenge aimed at affluent visitors.

Many nations responded to that plea at a conference on cultural heritage held in Kabul in May, and some have since come through with money and expertise—notably Germany, Italy, and Japan. Others, such as Greece, have so far not honored the pledges they made to help. More shocking, other wealthy countries such as the United States have offered little assistance.

Archaeology offers a way to bring Afghanistan back into the scientific mainstream. Foreign missions can assist in training a new generation of Afghan researchers, and, if done smartly, new digs might replace looting as a source of income for impoverished villagers and discourage the illicit antiquities trade—second only to opium smuggling in financial reward. Restoring museums, rebuilding collections, and reinvigorating schools and universities will rekindle vigorous domestic support for archaeology, to ensure that the devastation of Bamiyan is never repeated.

All of this will provide visiting scientists with new data that promise to enrich our understanding of Central Asia, from prehistory to modern times, and its impact on the rest of the world. Globalization was in practice in Afghanistan long before it became a fashionable 21st century term. Here Greek thought met Chinese philosophy, Indian gardens inspired Persian poetry, and four major religions—Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—were either born or transformed.

Now, in a time of religious and cultural upheavals, the study of a place that for so long has mingled so much of human culture—through force, curiosity, trade, and spiritual endeavors—can benefit more than Afghans and a few scholars. Last year's reply by the international community to Mullah Omar's cynical remark and destructive actions is, perhaps, evidence of this truth.

–ANDREW LAWLER

CONTENTS

NEWS

Science

CREDITS: (LEFT TO RIGHT) CHAPUIS PATRICK/GAMMA; ANDREA BRUNO

8 November 2002

Science

Vol. 298 No. 5596
Pages 1123–1286 $9

Reclaiming Afghanistan's Past

American Association for the Advancement of Science