

Since 2002, Afghanistan is trying to find sustainable solutions to protect its very rich cultural heritage in a post-conflict context where at the beginning everything had to be rebuilt, to start with the administration in charge of culture. In 2016 it is possible to make an evaluation of the results and to assess:

what had been successful

what is still to be properly addressed.

Through three case studies we shall see

what had been implemented,

what are the results

what should be further developed.

Nothing really sustainable can be achieved without discussions with all the partners involved and meetings such as this one are excellent opportunities to broaden the number of partners and to have a more consistent dialogue. I therefore want to express my thanks to all those who have been involved in organizing this event, giving us the opportunities to share experiences (positive or negative) and analysis.

I Balkh

Since 2003 archaeological works had been resumed in Balkh province and specifically in Balkh itself and its oasis. The most obvious problem there was to find a way to stop the most visible threat to the cultural heritage which was the looting of archaeological sites. First visits on the site of Balkh were showing extensive looting made by the local communities in order, through the illegal trade of antiquities, to get a meagre additional income. After many talks with the leaders of the communities it had been possible to organize archaeological excavations on a selection of looted sites showing evidences of high scientific potential. One of the prerequisites to the field work was to help the communities to build a school for the children of the potential workers. The workers hired to do the basic field works being for a good part of them the previous looters of the site only 30% of them were able to sign their name which gives an idea of the rate of illiteracy. Up to a hundred had been employed for 6 to 8 weeks during 4 years. The payment was made in cash every Thursday with as a consequence a considerable increase in the sales of bicycles the days following the first week of work. The salary they were getting being a little bit more than what they could expect from the looting.

Beside the very important scientific results it came out that the looting did stop and also that the involved communities gained, up to a certain point, a proper awareness of the value of cultural heritage understood as a common property. This had been clearly expressed by the members of the communities who asked to have a local museum where the results of the excavations could be shown.

But the main result of these operations had been to have a precise vision of the effects of the looting on stratified sites and the long term consequences which they did involve. If

the trenches or the pits excavated by the looters were the most visible evidences of the looting and had been a major cause of decay for the built structures the tunnels seems to have been even more noxious as most of them collapsed destroying the stratigraphy of the deposits under which they have been dug, and if on the surface few destruction are visible the damages in the deep levels are enormous.

These observations had been made all over the site of Balkh and even in the Balkh oasis where hundreds of tepe are still visible, all of them being looted. As a consequence of these looting archaeological sites were no more considered as “ protected” and many of them used to get material or illegally integrated to private property. At Balkh itself a specific survey funded by the State Department had been dedicated to the mapping of the encroachments on the City wall and does show that in the area where the wall is still existing major destruction are occurring. In this issue the afghan law about archeological site is very clear (it is forbidden to build on archaeological sites or to take possession of them as a private property)unfortunately the capacity of the afghan administration to look after a proper enforcement of the law is not sufficient.

Observations made during the excavations as well as during the survey in Balkh or the oasis but also the analysis of satellite imagery had also shown clearly that the worst of the destruction were the consequences of the erosion and specially the erosion due to the water flow.

Balkh oasis is showing a very complex irrigation system and the existing archaeological sites are scattered along or in between streams of various size whose variations even slight can hit archaeological site. This system does seems to have been developed by those who where settling in this area at least since the Bronze age and reached his maximal extension just before the moghol invasion in the XIIIth century AD. As it is now it is certainly smaller than the pre-moghol one suggesting that there is less water available now than in the medieval time and if we consider that nowadays mechanic pumps are used to get water from the water-table the quantity of water potentially available is much smaller than before and even much more if we include the development of urban areas which implies that less agricultural land needs irrigation for cultivation.

It is also clear that there is a need for redeveloping agriculture in this area both for providing food for the population but also to redevelop the local economy through the trade of the excess of production or the development of the cultivation of species which could be used in local industries such as cotton.

We also know from various experiences that anthropic interaction with complex irrigation systems unless very carefully planned can have disastrous consequences for the environment and more specifically for the archaeological sites. We have also to consider another factor which is the effect of the global warming which could have disastrous effect on fragile environments such as the one one may observe in Balkh and its surroundings.

Considering all these elements it is very clear that the degree of integration of the safeguard of the archeological site in any plan to care about the redevelopment of the irrigation system is going to have very positive feedback for the whole environment. We are not here discussing rules but simply of information and training and learn from experience. A radical change in a system which had been working for thousand years is obviously going to have radical consequences for the environment and these consequences could totally unpredictable if the variants which could

be used to create models are constantly changing as we can foresee from what is going to happen with the global warming whose effects are already visible.

II Mès Ainak

An update about Mès Ainak excavation will be given by Rafael Sequeira but as an archaeological operation the works done today on this site are a very good illustration of how to deal with an archaeological site in an area which is on the verge to be developed.

Excavation started there in 2009 and the context here is very different from Balkh, here the main issue to address was to explore and clear a huge archaeological site in an area rather well defined where a copper mine should be developed. This area is also known to be politically unstable and the economic and social environment rather complicated. The first plans to clear the archaeological area were planning a duration of 12 month of field work with a work force of almost one thousand workers. With a better understanding of the capacities of the site and discussion with the different partners it became clear that more time was requested. It became also clear that it was no more a question of clearing of an archaeological site but, due to the quality of the results and the gradual commitment of more and more partners along with significant financial support, it was in itself a major issue different from the mining project but also as fruitful an positive for Afghanistan than the copper bonanza which is here but still to be exploited.

For the moment in Mès Ainak issue, what had been addressed was the emergencies but also a proper evaluation of the scientific but also patrimonial value of the site. The on-going works are providing new elements as well as the different preliminary publications and it is clear that Mès Ainak is going to be a reference site for the history of Afghanistan but also globally for the periods which are documented there. Given the opportunities it would have been a site worth to be kept untouched for the future generations but this idealistic situation doesn't fit with the reality. Prior any archaeological works the site had been looted up to 2004 at least and the attempts made by the Institut of archaeology to work on the site and to protect it failed due to security reason. Excavations were made possible once the security was restored following the agreement signed by the Chinese company MCC and Ministry of Mine of Afghanistan in 2008 and it is very clear that without the mining project the site would have been looted to its complete destruction as it is the case in Kharwar few kilometers to the south where a Buddhist site known in the historical records is in danger of complete destruction being obviously very rich in statues and item easy to sell and out of limits for the archaeologists for security reasons.

The consequences for the local communities of this operation are also very important. Mès Ainak and the neighbouring villages are kilometers away from the main road from Kabul to Gardez and in this area around 2000 m height with poor agricultural capacities everyday life is difficult specially during the winter season. That does explain also that a good part of the population went abroad during Moudjahiddins and Taliban times, most of them in Pakistan, and returned only recently in the area where practically little possibilities were offered for a proper settlement and where the issue of the ownership of the land was very disputed.

Hundreds of people being employed some of them since 2009 is creating proper conditions for the development of the communities involved in the archaeological works even if this activity in itself is not supposed to be sustainable. Discussions with the workers are showing very clearly that they are supporting the archaeological operation and are also asking for a local museum where the results of their works could be shown. The profit for the communities which is clearly visible with tangible results both in term of income but also in term of results of the excavation is the best illustration of an evolution of the mentalities among the communities.

Whatever the evolution of the excavation one enormous problem to address is the way to deal with the results of the digs. They can be divided in two kind of remains: the architectural ones, such as the buildings and the mines galleries, and the proper archaeological finds and documentation.

For first kind of items the *in situ* conservation had never been seriously considered as all the available informations were showing clearly that the mining process was going to take place exactly where most of the archaeological areas were located and those which were apart from the mining area would be automatically destroyed by the activities connected to the extraction of copper ore. Then from a strictly archaeological point of view it was making sense to excavate the site to the bottom of the anthropic deposits and to dismantle all the built structure in order to get a better understanding of their history but also check if any previous deposit or feature was not covered by them. Nevertheless this is acceptable if there is no ways to protect the remains in situ as it does seems to be the case at Mès Ainak.

If the option of a total or partial conservation *in situ* of the built remains is considered first it will imply a substantial change to the mining program but also to set up a comprehensive implementation and management plan for which many factors are unpredictable first of all being security. Basic issues such as the long term funding of the maintenance of the archeological remains will need to be addressed as well as a plan to develop the access of the public. Sustainability of such a project is not impossible but will need real improvements in the conditions and the expertise existing now.

We have already a good illustration of the complexity of the management of the archeological finds which had been already excavated and it is also clear that whatever the future of Mès Ainak this is going to be a major issue.

In term of museological treatment what had been already found on the site is much more than what the capacities of the national Museum of Afghanistan can deal with, in term of conservation treatment, long term storage and display. It is of the outmost importance that the strategy of excavation should be closely connected to what is going to happen after. The choice which are going to be made on site are going to have enormous consequences for the curators in charge of the collections in the museums.

In term of scientific exploitation and publication of the results Mès Ainak could be a unique opportunity to upgrade the afghan researchers involved in any work on the data coming from the excavation. A proper association of foreign expert and afghan professionals is the only way to do so. This is what had been already started and what should be pursued.

Finally, we have to consider that the development of this project had also been possible due to the interest of the afghan audience for this topic and also partly the international audience. Part of the sustainability of what had been undertaken is relying on the quality of the information which had been released to the medias and then publicized to the larger audience.

III Lashkari Bazar

Lashkari Bazar is a huge Islamic site located in what are now the southern suburbs of Lashkar Gah, administrative capital of the Helmand province. The site had been very partially explored in the 50's by DAFA who had been able to date the settlement from the Ghaznevid and Ghorid periods. Lashkari Bazar being the winter residence of the Sultans.

The site had been suffering from lootings during the last thirty years but is now threaten by a very specific phenomenon which is illegal occupation by refugees who fled from conflict areas.

An NGO, HAFO, is already working on site in very difficult conditions. A small shrine had been already restored with the support of US Embassy showing clearly that it is still possible to work there but obviously much more should be done even if whatever the project its implementation will be very complex.

Considering the site if there is no plan to deal with the today situation the major buildings of the Islamic era are going to be destroyed or altered in a way that nothing of their original function will be visible.

Already major building disappeared if we consider the different aerial photographs available and we can predict that it will be the same for other monuments.

The main interest of Lashkari Bazar was it had been retaining until now the structure of an urbanistic complex dating from the XIIIth century. Sooner or later if nothing is done this will ne be the case and we are going to have isolated monuments without any logical links scattered in an unformal city fabric.

The most visible threat is the illegal occupation which is developing, of course, without any plan.

Therefore what needs to be address is a social, economic, urbanistic and cultural problem, and without caring of all these factors altogether as the component of the problem solutions will be hardly successful.

Then with solutions at hand and subsequent funding a question is still pendant: who is going to implement them.

Considering all these elements of course we have in mind some solutions the most obvious one being to involve the people who are now settling in the ruins to work on their

preservation and through the salary they should get to do so to help them to find new places to stay and this basic model can be applied with as many variation necessities.

But what is sure is that if nothing is done we are condemned to be the witness of a well foreseen cultural disaster.

We are here to found solutions to provide sustainable answers to the threats cultural heritage is facing in Afghanistan. Because, in spite of everything, solutions does exist as in the three cases studies I choose to present which are my contribution to the on-going debate. In each of them the local communities are playing a key role and it would have been impossible to achieve anything without their adhesion.