

CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION PROJECTS IN AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

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On December 31, 2022, the three Afghan cultural heritage grants carried out by the Chicago Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation (located within ISAC), with funding from the US Department of State and the US Embassy in Kabul, came to an end. In 2022–23, the focus of our heritage preservation efforts shifted north to two Central Asian heritage projects based in Uzbekistan and supported by the US Embassy in Tashkent.

AFGHANISTAN

In 2022, we carried out the final year of our cultural heritage projects in Afghanistan in partnership with the National Museum of Afghanistan and the Archaeology Institute of Afghanistan (AIA). These efforts were funded by three grants from the US State Department and the US Embassy in Kabul: Core Operations (in particular the Hadda Sculptural Project), the Mobile Museum Outreach Project, and the Afghan Heritage Mapping Partnership (AHMP). Our key partners in the US State Department were cultural heritage program manager Dr. Laura Tedesco and grants management specialist Jaqueline Viselli.

Hadda Sculptural Project

In spring 2001, before demolishing the two monumental standing Buddha statues in the Bamiyan Valley, the Taliban systematically worked their way through the National Museum in Kabul, smashing every statue they could find, including hundreds of sculptures that had been recovered by archaeological excavations at the Early Buddhist monastic center of Hadda near the Khyber Pass in southeastern Afghanistan. At great risk to themselves, the museum’s curators secretly swept up and stored thousands of sculptural fragments. From 2016 to 2022, the Hadda Sculptural Project worked to document, conserve, and reassemble hundreds of rare early Buddhist Gandharan-style sculptures from Hadda, while also training the National Museum’s conservation staff through in-person sessions and online workshops. Our conservators and museology specialists sorted, conserved, identified, and documented more than 7,600

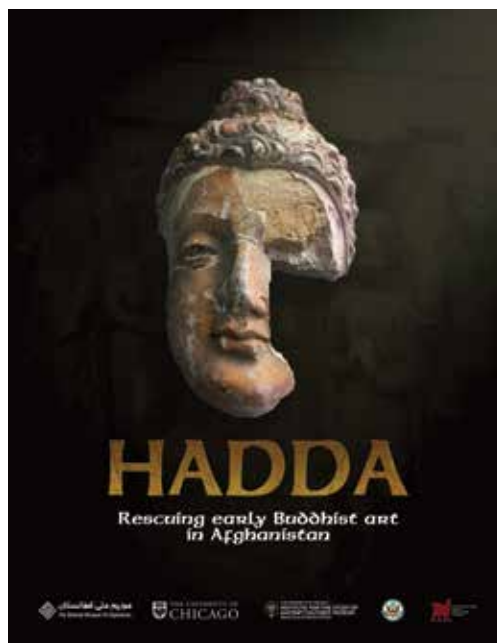


Figure 1. Poster for the documentary film *Hadda: Rescuing Early Buddhist Art in Afghanistan*, produced as part of the Hadda Sculptural Project.

sculptural fragments and have partially reassembled more than 480 of the sculptures that had been smashed by the Taliban. We made 3D digital models of the 40 best-preserved, partially reassembled sculptures and used these models to recreate the sculptures digitally. We also pulled together thousands of images and whatever records survived of the Hadda sculptures into a searchable digital assets management database as a resource for both cultural heritage documentation and scholarly research.

As part of our work, we produced a short documentary film titled *Hadda: Rescuing Early Buddhist Art in Afghanistan*, which is freely accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/@C3HP> (fig. 1).

Afghan Heritage Mapping Partnership

The AHMP with the AIA focused on three key areas:

1. Discovery and spatial inventory of archaeological sites across Afghanistan using remote-sensing satellite imagery
2. Detection and monitoring of looting of heritage sites
3. Training the AIA staff in geospatial techniques for heritage preservation

In 2021, the AHMP entered a collaboration with the University of Chicago’s Research Computing Center (RCC) to develop an artificial intelligence (AI) deep-learning model that taught the RCC computer to scan the remote-sensing images and identify the archaeological sites. In 2021–22, the RCC developed the AI deep-learning model, and our project used its data of thousands of site identifications to train the model to identify the main archaeological site types—mounds, caravanserais, forts, and qanats (underground water channels) (fig. 2). AHMP data analysts then visually checked the computer’s site predictions to verify their accuracy. By the time the grant ended in December 2022, our collaborative work had identified and verified a total of 29,624 locales with cultural heritage significance.

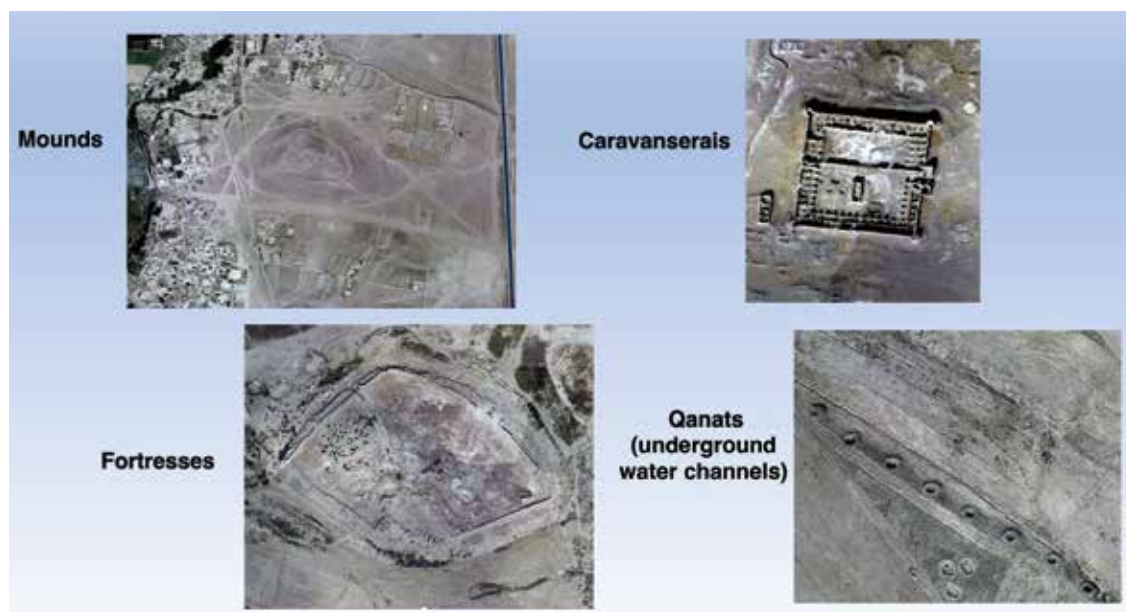


Figure 2. Main archaeological site types in satellite images. Of the 29,624 archaeological sites identified in remote-sensing imagery of Afghanistan, the main types were mounds, caravanserais, fortresses, and qanats (underground water channels).

Mobile Museum Outreach Project

In 2022, ISAC's Mobile Museum Outreach Project published *A History of Afghanistan in 100 Objects: Treasures from the National Museum of Afghanistan*. The National Museum is the world's most important repository for the artistic masterpieces and objects of daily life that exemplify Afghanistan's 50,000-year history and role in world cultural heritage. The 100 objects presented in the book illustrate the creativity and cross-cultural connections that shaped Afghan culture through the millennia (figs. 3 and 4). The chapters are organized by chronological period to highlight the key transformations in Afghanistan's history, from the stone tools of the Ice Age to twentieth-century ethnographic collections.

Figure 3. Cover of the e-book *A History of Afghanistan in 100 Objects*, designed to highlight the National Museum of Afghanistan's cultural treasures for the general public. Available as a free download from the ISAC website: <https://isac.uchicago.edu/research/projects/preservation-cultural-heritage-afghanistan>.

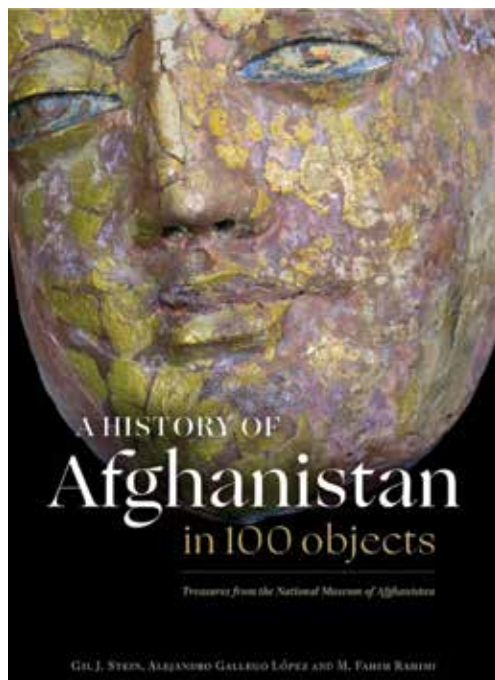


Figure 4. A gold and iron dagger with a four-lobed, turquoise-encrusted scabbard, bearing East Asian-style lion and dragon designs. The dagger, from the first-century CE "Bactrian Treasure" nomadic elite cemetery at Tillya Tepe in northern Afghanistan, is one of the objects featured in the e-book *A History of Afghanistan in 100 Objects*.

CENTRAL ASIA

Two cultural heritage projects are currently underway in Central Asia: Cultural Heritage and Economic Development (CHED) and our Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation grant, "Conservation and Restoration of the Langar Ota Timurid Mosque, Qashqadaryo Province, Uzbekistan."

Cultural Heritage and Economic Development

CHED is a two-year advanced-training initiative whose work started in 2022. The first workshop in this capacity-building program brought together heritage specialists, museum professionals, and Ministry of Culture staff from the post-Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to learn strategies for preserving heritage sites while at the same time promoting economic development. The workshops focus on two key strategies for site preservation: inscription as UNESCO World Heritage sites or their development as national archaeological parks. The workshops take place in cooperation with the State Museum for the History of Uzbekistan in Tashkent and the Institute of Fine Arts at the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences. We have been fortunate to work in partnership with the State Museum's director Ms. Jannat Ismailova and deputy director Dr. Otabek Aripdjanov and with Dr. Shakirjan Pidaev of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences.

CHED seeks to share best practices for the development and implementation of "protected heritage spaces" for sites in ways that ensure their sustainability while maximizing their benefits for attracting internal and international tourism, economic development through improved infrastructure, and job creation and the strengthening of civil society in the Central Asian republics. The first CHED workshop took place in the city of Termez (southern Uzbekistan) from October 24 to 30, 2022, and was taught by preservation architect and workshop coordinator Bill Remsen and UNESCO World Heritage site inscription expert



Figure 5. Participants in the first CHED workshop at the Termez Archaeological Museum.

David Micheltore. Remsen and Micheltore have deep experience in successfully conducting integrated projects for the development of economically sustainable protected heritage spaces for both tourism and economic development. The workshop utilized the excavated first- to fifth-century CE Early Buddhist site of Kara Tepe as a case study for the on-site practicum. Eleven participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan attended the workshop. Dr. Shakirjan Pidaev and Dr. Otabek Aripdjanov were also present to contribute their expertise (fig. 5).

The workshop focused on two main areas. Micheltore presented a detailed overview of the process of UNESCO World Heritage site inscription and gave an in-depth analysis of two successful proposals for inscription: the Erbil Citadel in Iraqi Kurdistan and sites associated with the life of the Buddha in northern India. Remsen's presentations focused on key issues in site preservation, restoration, and development for tourism.

Mornings were devoted to workshop presentations, overviews, and discussions. Afternoons were spent in the field, on visits to archaeological and historical sites in the Termez region as real-life examples where participants could compare successful site preservation efforts with problematic attempts. In the most important and innovative aspect of the in-field component of the workshop, Remsen developed and conducted two field practicum sessions at the site of Kara Tepe (figs. 6 and 7). Workshop participants were divided into teams tasked with (1) conducting condition assessments of the site to identify and map preservation problems using architectural plans, topographic maps, and remote-sensing images; and (2) developing plans and maps for infrastructure aimed at protecting the site while simultaneously facilitating site access for tourism through pedestrian walkways, parking areas, and a visitors' center. On the mornings after the in-field practica, each team presented its assessments and maps for review and general discussion.



Figure 6. In-field exercise: CHED participant teams conducting conservation condition assessment mapping at the Early Buddhist (first- to third-century CE) monastery site of Kara Tepe, outside the modern city of Termez in southern Uzbekistan.



Figure 7. CHED instructor and workshop coordinator Bill Remsen and workshop participant evaluating the results of a field exercise to plan for tourism infrastructure development at the Early Buddhist monastery site of Kara Tepe near Termez. The site development plans prepared by the three participant teams were posted for discussion, comparative evaluation, comments, and recommended improvements.

At the conclusion of the workshop, participants were asked to fill out evaluation forms. The comments we received made it clear that the CHED workshop's integration of in-class discussions with in-field practical experience was a highly effective approach to training and capacity building.

Organizational Meeting for the Council of Central Asian National Museums

In parallel with the workshop for preservation planning and economic development, a second part of CHED focused on establishing the Council of Central Asian National Museums, since national museums not only are key institutions for preserving heritage but also function as major attractors for tourism in the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). To maximize the effectiveness of these institutions, the council's mission would be to develop a framework in which the museums can cooperate in exchanging exhibits and developing best practices for curation, conservation, registration, and storage in keeping with internationally recognized principles.

In December 2022, the leadership teams (directors, deputy directors, and head curators) from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan convened in Tashkent for an organizational meeting to discuss and vote on their intent to establish a Council of Central Asian National Museums. A second important group of participants in the meeting was a team of international guest panelists specializing in international best practices for museums. The guest panelists were Fabio Colombo (object conservation), Michael Fisher (registration databases), Stuart Gibson (best practices and international museum cooperation), Angie Morrow (international exhibits and loans), and Alison Whyte (conservation at the nexus of museum operations).

The meeting began on December 18 with welcoming remarks presented by Dr. Abdukhalimov Bakhrom (vice president, Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences), Sarah Talalay (US Embassy in Tashkent), and Gil Stein (project principal investigator). Each delegation then presented an overview of the assets and challenges facing its own national museum. In the afternoon, the international guest panel presented overviews of key areas of best practices for museums (fig. 8). On December 19, the delegation discussed goals for the planned council, target areas for cooperation, ideas for the council's general governance structure, and the next steps to be taken. A draft joint letter of intent was then written, projected on-screen, and edited by the participants. The final draft was presented for a vote, unanimously accepted, and signed by the four delegations (fig. 9). The project will continue to work with the national museums to help them see the organizational process through to completion in 2023.

Figure 8. National Museum of Tajikistan director Zafarsho Ibrohimzoda discussing the museum's program of 3D artifact scanning.

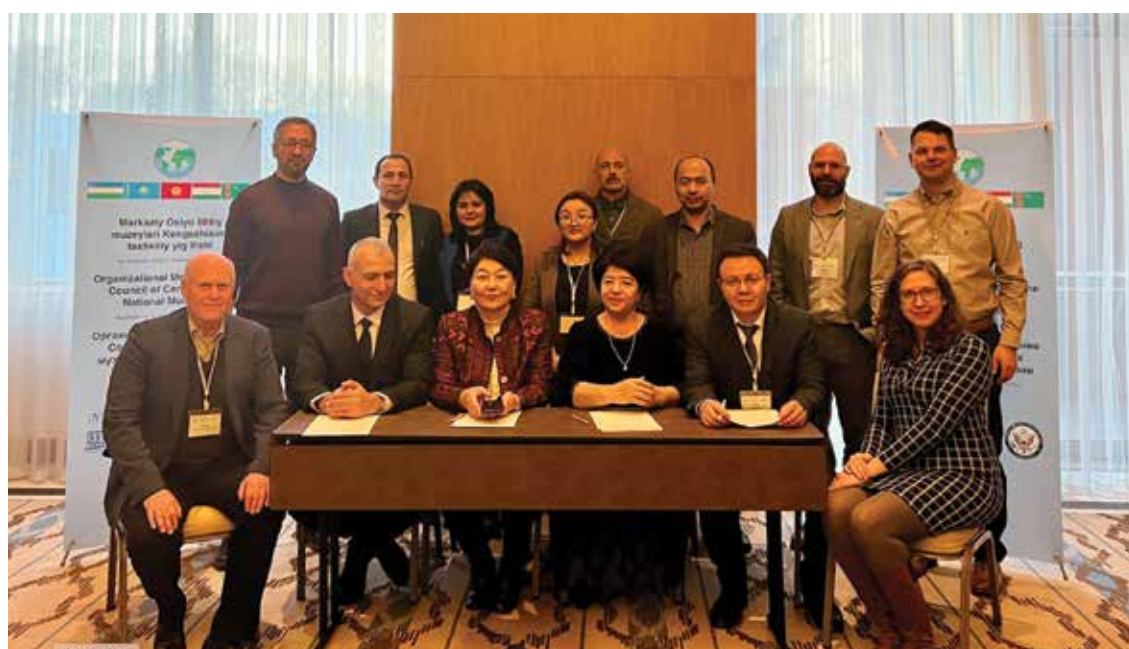


Figure 9. Museum directors and the international panel of museum specialists at the signing ceremony for the joint letter of intent to establish the Council of Central Asian National Museums.

Ambassador's Fund Grant: Conservation and Restoration of Langar Ota

The goal of this project is to assess, conserve, and restore as necessary the historic Langar Ota mosque/Sufi shrine in Qashqadaryo Province, southern Uzbekistan. The mosque is located on a mountain spur overlooking two deeply incised valleys at the outskirts of the small, isolated mountain village of Langar Ota. The mosque was constructed in the late fifteenth century in the reign of the Timurid ruler Ulug Beg and has played an active role in the religious life of the local and regional community as a Sufi shrine and religious pilgrimage destination for the past six centuries, now attracting about 1,000 pilgrims every month. The condition of the mosque has declined over the years, however, and ongoing problems with water leakage,

significant cracking in the walls, damage to wooden columns and roof beams, and the slow collapse of the beautiful cut-tile mosaic have reached the point where the shrine's survival is now threatened. In 2022, preservation and conservation specialists Bill Remsen (architectural preservation), Fabio Colombo (tile conservation), and Ian Stewart (architectural wood) conducted a detailed conservation assessment of the mosque. The team evaluated the building's condition, documented the location and forms of site damage, and identified the three most urgent priorities for conservation in 2023–24 (figs. 10–12). The two-year project will conduct conservation interventions to

1. remove the site's damaged old roof and construct a new roof,
2. conserve and stabilize the interior tile work, and
3. stabilize or repair as needed the structural wood elements requiring the most urgent treatment.

These three top-priority conservation interventions represent the most urgent first stage of a series of measures that will be necessary to ensure the long-term preservation of the Langar Ota mosque.



Figure 10. Current condition of the existing metal roof, brick parapet, and walls of the Langar Ota mosque. Preventing further water damage to the structure is the top priority. The leaking metal roof will be removed and replaced with a thicker-gauge, corrugated metal roof with waterproof sealing and improved rain gutters.



Figure 11. Upper register of glazed ceramic tiles with calligraphic inscriptions at the top of the walls immediately beneath the timbered ceiling of the Langar Ota mosque's interior. Note the extensive water damage and partial buckling of the tiles. The tile-work register will be stabilized using Japanese paper and linen with removable adhesives to prevent collapse and breakage during the harsh winter at the site. More extensive conservation of the upper tile register and the glazed cut-tile mosaic will be completed in June and July 2024.



Figure 12. Beamed ceiling of the Langar Ota mosque. Although the structural wood is stable, decorative elements such as the original fifteenth-century multicomponent carved wood capital in the exterior portico of the mosque are at risk of collapse due to water damage from rain and winter snows at the shrine in its isolated location in the mountain village of Langar Ota.

CONCLUSION

Our cultural heritage projects in Afghanistan and Central Asia span a range of complementary foci but share the common themes of preserving cultural heritage by collaborating with and training local museum specialists and conservators in methods and approaches to preserve their own heritage. In tandem, we are also focusing on projects that emphasize the concept of “preservation through documentation” of objects, monuments, and sites.