

British Museum's Afghan exhibition extended due to popular demand

ITM correspondent

The British Museum's exhibition **Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World** has been extended until 17 July due to popular demand.

Ancient gold treasure



The exhibition highlights some of the most important archaeological discoveries from ancient Afghanistan. On display are precious and unique pieces on loan from the National Museum of

Afghanistan in Kabul currently undergoing reconstruction.

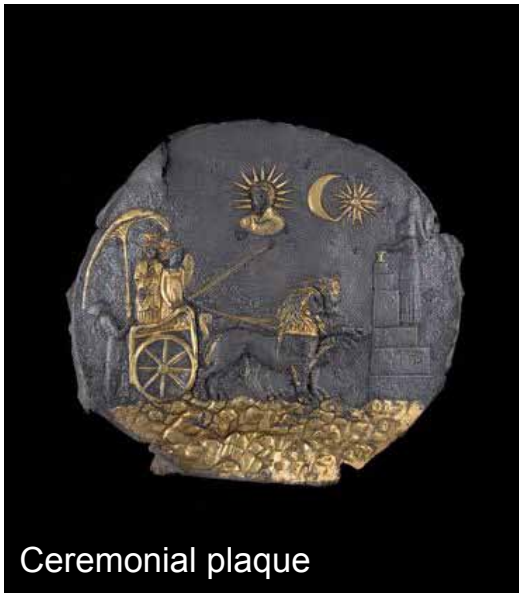
The geographical position, overland connections and history ensured that Afghanistan was a region which enjoyed close relations with its neighbours in Central Asia, Iran, India and China, as well as more distant cultures stretching as far as the Mediterranean. Bank of America Merrill Lynch is supporting this unique opportunity to see rare treasures of Afghanistan's cultural heritage in the UK.

President Hamid Karzai who attended the opening of the exhibition said it was nothing less than a miracle. "Priceless artefacts

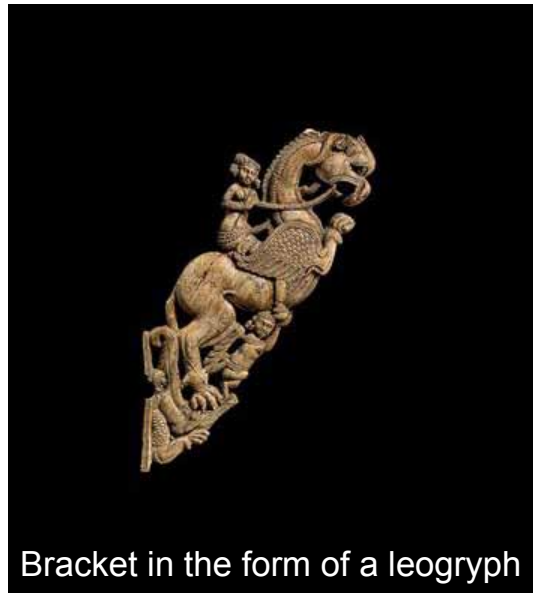
were hidden throughout Kabul, including wells and behind false walls. Miraculously our cultural inheritance was preserved and protected by a brave and selfless group of Afghan heroes".

To illustrate the theme of destruction and renewal, the exhibition opens with a statue of a youth. Discovered in 1971 it was pieced together by archaeologists, smashed in 2001 by the Taliban who objected to all representations of the human form and recently restored by Afghan conservationists, though without its head.

The exhibition showcases over 200 stunning objects belonging to



Ceremonial plaque



Bracket in the form of a leogryph

Glass fish



the National Museum of Afghanistan, accompanied by selected items from the British Museum. The artefacts range from classical sculptures, polychrome ivory inlays originally attached to imported Indian furniture, enamelled Roman glass and polished stone tableware brought from Egypt, to delicate inlaid gold personal ornaments worn by the nomadic elite. Together they showcase the trading and cultural connections of Afghanistan and how it benefited from being on an important crossroads of the

ancient world.

All of these objects were found between 1937 and 1978 and were feared to have been lost following the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the civil war which followed, when the National Museum was rocketed and figural displays were later destroyed by the Taliban. Their survival is due to a handful of Afghan officials who deliberately concealed them and they are now exhibited at the British Museum to highlight to the international community the importance of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan

and the remarkable achievements and trading connections of these past civilisations.

The earliest objects in the exhibition are part of a treasure

found at the site of Tepe Fullol which dates to 2000 BC, representing the earliest gold objects found in Afghanistan and how already it was connected by



Goblet depicting figures harvesting dates

The bombing of the historic book market



trade with urban civilisations in ancient Iran and Iraq. The later finds come from three additional sites, all in northern Afghanistan, and dating between the 3rd century BC and 1st century AD. These are Ai Khanum, a Hellenistic Greek city on the Oxus river and on the modern border with Tajikistan; Begram, a capital of the local Kushan dynasty whose rule extended from Afghanistan into India; and Tillya Tepe, (“Hill of Gold”), the find spot of an elite nomadic cemetery.

According to Victor Ivanovich

Sarianidi, the archaeologist who discovered these graves “the gold of Bactria shook the world of archaeology due to an originality of beauty, craftsmanship and style”.

All of these objects, found between 1937 and 1978, were hidden away at an unknown location after the Soviet military pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989.

Yet despite the occasional reference to Soviet invasion, it becomes clear that not only were the majority of the finds discovered by joint Afghan-Soviet

archaeological teams but the only risk to the artefacts occurred because of the unmentioned Western support for the "freedom fighters" who later metamorphosed into the Taliban.

Martin Bayly founder of the Afghan Studies Group at the department of war studies, King's College

The car at the entrance to the Imperial War Museum



London pointed out it is encouraging that the exhibition shows how international support is promoting new archaeological work. "Less encouraging is that all of these sites are in the north. Meanwhile, the security situation in the south continues to show mixed signs of progress. The lack of a voice from the south is a depressing reflection on the present situation. It is precisely this part of the country that would benefit most from a growth in scholarly understanding, and precisely this area in which it is least likely to happen at present. Adding to the worry is that in the past 12 months the insurgency has shown signs of spreading to the north, threatening a greater number of Afghan livelihoods and also the continuation of this important work".

Commenting on the exhibition St John Simpson, the British Museum's curator, said: "To me, what these



The wreck as art

objects speak of is the world of the steppe. These are nomads who are migrating possibly on a seasonal basis. The finds from Tillya Tepe open up the wealth of these nomads. These are all personal possessions, made to be worn on the saddle. This whole idea of personal ornaments stitched onto cloth is a steppe tradition, so too is the lavish use of turquoise.”

The British Museum is the ninth

host of the exhibition which arrived in Bonn. It opened in Paris in 2006 and has already toured Italy, the Netherlands, the US, Canada and Germany. After remaining in London for four months it will move to its next venue which is still under negotiation.

Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World

3 March – 21 July 2011

Room 35

Admission charge