Two New Books on Afghanistan: A Brief Review

By Jonathan Mark Kenoyer


After reading the newest edition of “The Archaeology of Afghanistan” and then combing through the detailed site lists and data of the “Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan: Revised Edition” the common nickname for Afghanistan, as the “Graveyard of Empires” should be dramatically revised to call it the “crossroads of Asia” as suggested by the editors of the first volume. It could even be called the “Crossroads of Globalization” because of its critical role in major global interactions from the past to the present. Together, these two books provide a totally revised and updated perspective of the archaeology and early history of a region that has come to be at the center of so much modern history. They are definitely not light reading, but are essential for anyone who is working in the region or dealing with issues related to this part of the world.

The first edition of The Archaeology of Afghanistan was published in 1978 (Allchin and Hammond 1978) and it was without doubt one of the most important summaries for this region. This newly edited version expands the coverage to newly studied sites and topics and more details about discoveries that were just happening when the first volume went to press. Although the recent political instability has hampered widespread archaeological research in Afghanistan, it is important to note that even in the face of great personal danger, Afghan and foreign scholars have continued to document, preserve, conserve and write about the archaeology, architecture and arts from all the different regions of the country.

The new edition has nine comprehensive chapters that cover the archaeology of Afghanistan from the Palaeolithic to the Timurid Period that have been significantly updated and profusely illustrated in color, with new maps, chronological charts and a comprehensive bibliography. The old and new data presented in this important new edition show that Afghanistan has been an important crossroad connecting East Asia, South Asia and West Asia beginning in the Palaeolithic Period, more than 30,000 years ago. It is not surprising that archaeologists, geologists, historians, antiquarians, politicians and more recently multinational corporations looking for valuable mineral resources have had an intense interest in the region since the 18th Century. This relatively modern attention pales in comparison to the attention that this region had to earlier civilizations. Important trade networks that can be dated back to then Neolithic Period 7000 BCE and earlier, connected northern and Southern Afghanistan with Iranian, Mesopotamia and Arabian regions to the west and south. Trade networks also linked the region with the Indus Valley.
and peninsular South Asia to the southeast as well as to western China in the north and east.

At the height of the Indus Civilization (2600-1900 BCE) there is evidence for an Indus occupation at the site of Shortughaï in northern Afghanistan near to the famous lapis lazuli mines of Bada-khshan. The mining and trade of this valuable blue stone linked Afghanistan to Mesopotamia, Arabia and even far off Egypt and the Mediterranean. The Achaemenid Empire conquered the region for its resources in the mid-sixth century BCE, followed by Alexander the Great and his general Seleucus. The Kushana Empire centered in Afghanistan and the northern Indian subcontinent became the first major political and economic power to link East Asia, South Asia, Arabia and North Africa, West Asia and the Roman Empire. Due to its rugged geography and multiple access routes the region has been difficult to control, but it remained an important crossroads through the conquests and destruction by Genghis Khan in the 13th century and once again became a major center of power under Timur the great-grandfather of the Mughal Emperor, Babur who reigned from Kabul to Agra (1526–1530). This new edited volume will provide the reader with all the important details of this long and complex history, through the archaeology of major sites and regional surveys, numismatics, manuscripts, architecture and arts.

This new edition has important color photos and color maps of all regions of Afghanistan, including the geography and color photos of the earlier excavations that were only published in black and white before. Generally speaking the chapters have retained the original author and much of the text, but additional authors have been included with significant revisions and new content, including additional photographs and maps, and updated summaries. All of the authors are leading scholars of Afghanistan from foreign countries, but this new edition includes a foreword by a young Afghan scholar, Mohammad Fahim Rahimi, Director of the National Museum of Afghanistan. The important new work being carried out in Afghanistan by local Afghan scholars is reported in some of the chapters, but hopefully a supplement to this volume could be developed in the near future to include the most current work in the country.

The concluding chapter provides important summaries that help the reader to pull together the many different threads of evidence to show some recurring patterns that eventually define the character of the region known today as Afghanistan. There is still a strong emphasis on the importance of Hellenistic influence in the arts, but they do acknowledge the importance of Iranian, Indian and to some extent East Asian influence as well. They also point out that it is the unique blend of outside and local traditions that has made Afghanistan such a rich region for understanding cultural interactions over the ages. Some discussion of the major contributions of local Afghan scholars could have been added to this concluding chapter since they are the ones doing the most in terms of new surveys, conservation and excavation. The issue of repatriation of looted finds and the establishment of archaeology departments and museums throughout Afghanistan is also a topic that could have been discussed since the future lies with the Afghan youth and future generations.

In summary, I found this book to be extremely useful with important new chronologies and data on ancient and historical Afghanistan. It helps confirm the importance of this region to the history of Asia and the world as a whole. Overall the volume is extremely well written and edited, and has the
most up to date information available at the time of publication. I recommend it at the highest level for individuals who are studying Afghanistan and for all major university libraries since it is going to be an essential reference volume for many years to come.

The second volume discussed here is the “Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan: Revised Edition.” This book stands alone as a major scholarly resource but can also be used as a supplement to further investigate the many sites discussed in the first book discussed above on archaeology of Afghanistan. Originally published in 1982 (Ball and Gardin 1982) this new edition is significantly expanded with updated maps and research aides. It begins with a chronologically list and table that provide an overall framework for the sites discussed in the text. The introduction provides a very detailed and personal discussion of the contents and how they were complied and how they can be used. The main body of the text is an exhaustive list of 1271 entries from the first volume followed by a Site Catalogue Supplement with sites numbered from 2000 to 2292. In total there are 1563 entries, which the editor estimates at around 2100 different sites for the whole gazetteer. According to the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (La Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan) (DAFA), more than 5000 sites have been documented in their ever growing database (Cailloce 2018) so there are many more sites that will need to be added in future supplements.

Each site entry begins with a list of the original coordinates and new properly referenced coordinates that can be entered into Google Earth or any other GIS software to locate the sites precisely. The precise geo-coordinates are derived from digital satellite imagery and provided by the Heritage Mapping Partnership at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. The general coordinates are ones published in the original Gazetteer. The information for each site includes its geographical location and nearby modern cities. Many of the site entries have small maps or plans of important buildings associated with them. When possible, the current state of preservation or conservation is also included with a brief description of the major features of the site topography. The major dates for the site are presented, along with a brief description of the major discoveries, often with some detail on aspects of architecture, site height and size, and specific discoveries. The museum or institution where the artifacts from the site are stored is also listed, along with the main dates for the excavations or survey and the scholars or institutions that carried the work out. Sources of information are also listed that can be found in the comprehensive general bibliography at the end of the volume.

One of the important new features of this gazetteer are the new maps where sites are presented chronologically and then by region. There are 22 maps by period, beginning with the Palaeolithic (50,000 to 8000 BC), Neolithic (8000-4000 BC), Bronze Age (4000-1500 BC), and the Iron Age (1500-700 BC). From the 4th Century BC a map is presented for each 100 year period until Timurid period AD 15th Century. A key is provided to compare the numbers of sites in this volume and on the maps with those used in the first edition published in 1982. After the general period maps there are 76 detailed maps of each region showing the precise location of the sites with local topography and city locations indicated. This is an important contribution and will also be useful for scholars to accurately develop their own maps of
different important sites for publication purposes.

Appendix 1 provides a chronological concordance that links the name of the site and its site number to a specific detailed map. I think that it would have been much more useful to have this list opposite the map itself as this would have made it easier to locate site names on each map. Appendix 2 provides a concordance of collections of archaeological artifacts located in different museums and institutions both in Afghanistan as well as in foreign countries. The author points out that not all collections have been confirmed and the list is probably not very complete, but it does provide some reference to the major locations of Afghan antiquities in general. Appendix 3 the fieldwork concordance arranged by year of survey or excavation beginning in 1833, with a major gap in reporting between 1979 and 1994 during the Afghan-Soviet war and the subsequent period of political instability and warfare. Major projects once again commenced beginning around 2002 after the displacement of the Taliban Government by NATO. The final projects covered in this volume were undertaken by the Afghan Institute of Archaeology Afghan Cultural Heritage Consulting Organization, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Appendix 4 provides a Glossary of the non-English words and their English equivalent. This is useful for the average reader but since there is no page number listed it does not really provide any link to the content in the text. Appendix 5 is the Subject Index that provides links to all the specific sites that have one or more topics listed. For example the entry Stupa, lists all of the archaeological sites that have stupas, and the same site may also be an Urban site, or have a Reclining Buddha, so there are multiple ways to look for specific topics or subjects. The following section is the Subject Bibliography that has been slightly modified from an earlier classification system for subjects that was developed in the 1980s and used in the first edition of the Gazetteer. For each subject entry there is a list of bibliographic references that are found in the final section, which is the General Bibliography. This Subject Bibliography section is useful for a scholar who is looking for the most recent references to a specific topic or period.

The final section, which is the General Bibliography is very extensive and has the most recent publications just prior to the volume going to press. This bibliography is significantly updated from the first edition and each bibliographic entry has the site reference number of the main sites that it refers to in the Gazetteer. This is a very useful way to find references and also link them back to the actual site. If a library purchases the digital version of this book then these links can be searched very easily by the user. It is almost like having a digital database of the archaeology of Afghanistan. Digital databases of sites, maps, artifacts and all types of cultural heritage of Afghanistan are continuously being developed and updated by many different research groups, including the Afghanistan Institute of Archaeology, UNESCO, the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan (La Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan) (DAFA) and the Afghan Heritage Mapping Partnership through the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, and others (Thomas et al. 2008). Although there is no discussion of the development of this type of resource in the gazetteer, this type of digital database is of course the next step in making this information accessible to scholars. There are many who argue that public access to such a database also allows the looters to know exactly where the sites are, but in the case of Afghanistan, the looters already know where the sites are located and it is often by
looking for recent pitting that scholars have been able to find previously unknown sites using aerial photography and satellite imagery.

I strongly recommend that all major university libraries purchase either the hard copy or the digital E version of this gazetteer, as it will be an invaluable resource for students of at their institutions. This gazetteer covers sites from all periods of history and many different topics are linked to these sites, from Palaeolithic archaeology to Islamic art and architecture. It is equally important for scholars and universities in Asia as in the rest of the world where archaeologists and historians study the subjects of global interaction, culture change and the ebb and flow of civilizations.

Bibliography


