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THE AFGHAN DISCOVERY OF BUDDHA: CIVILIZATIONAL HISTORY AND THE NATIONALIZING OF AFGHAN ANTIQUITY

Abstract
Through their interactions with French archaeologists from around 1930, Afghan historians formulated a new official historical identity for Afghanistan based on its pre-Islamic past. This article provides the first analysis of this process by tracing the emergence of the new historiography through the career of its chief promoter, Ahmad 'Ali Kuhzad, as curator of the National Museum (founded 1931) and director of the Afghan Historical Society (founded 1942). Through placing Kuhzad in these official institutional settings and reading his major works, the article shows how traditional Persianate historiography was challenged by an imported and amended version of world civilizational history. In the decades after independence in 1919, this new historical vision allowed the young Afghan nation-state to stake its civilizational claims on an international stage. In these previously unexcavated historiographical strata lie the roots of the Taliban’s iconoclasm, which are revealed as a dialogical response to the state cultural institutions that remade Afghanistan as Aryana.

Keywords: archaeology; cultural history; historiography; intellectual history; museums

In March 2001, the Taliban’s detonation of the Bamiyan Buddhas announced a new era of the Islamist destruction of antiquities that has since spread to Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere. Shortly afterwards, posters celebrated the Taliban leader Mullah Omar as butt-shikan (idol breaker), an epithet previously associated with the medieval Ghaznavid ruler Mahmud (r. 998–1030) as well as the founder of the modern Afghan state, 'Abd al-Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901). This rhetoric of continuity conceals a more complex picture of plural and competing visions of the past that emerged in Afghanistan in the course of the 20th century. The revival of an exclusively Islamic vision of the Afghan past was only one of these competing historiographies. The other was the construction
of a national history for Afghanistan that drew on the Buddhist and wider pre-Islamic past. In a radical revision of its historical identity, between around 1930 and 1960 Afghanistan was transformed from an Islamic Amirate and a Pashtun dynastic dominion into a monarchical nation-state that was the heir to the ancient land of “Aryana.”

Constructed in dialogue with French scholars who from 1922 pioneered excavation in Afghanistan, this history became the official version of the Afghan national past through the appointment in 1942 of its chief spokesman, Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad (1907–83), as the founding president of the Afghan Historical Society (Anjuman-i Tarikh-i Afghanistan). Before the empowerment of Islamist ideologies with the triumph of the mujāhidīn and the Taliban following the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s, and particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, the pre-Islamic past was placed at the center of Afghanistan’s official national historiography. Although this important period in Afghan intellectual history has been entirely overlooked, it reveals both similarities and divergences with the writing of history in Egypt, Iran, and India/Pakistan. Filling this gap of coverage between the Middle East and South Asia, this article traces the emergence of a new approach to Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic past between the 1930s and 1960s. During these halcyon decades of intellectual nationalism across the region, French archaeologists and their Afghan interlocutors transformed the ways in which the Afghan state constructed its collective past and promoted it through public outreach.

As a result of their encounter with French archaeologists and Indologists, Afghan historians positioned their collective past for the first time amid a more culturally diverse and chronologically deep world civilizational history. Beginning in the interwar decades that James Goode has designated an era of “negotiation” between European archaeologists and Middle Eastern nationalists, this Franco-Afghan interaction was characterized more by dialogue and appropriation than by simple domination. This essay traces the new cultural institutions that provided official platforms for the emergence of this new historiography, before turning the focus to Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad, the most influential historian of pre-Islamic Afghanistan whose writings during his twenty-year directorship of the Afghan Historical Society formulated a new historical identity for his fellow citizens. Through a reading of Kuhzad’s major works, the following pages reveal the strategies by which an imported and amended version of world civilizational history came to challenge an older Persianate historiography of dynastic or genealogical tā’rīkh (history).

As Robert Crews has written of Afghanistan in the 1930s, “at a moment when a wave of intense nationalism swept across the European continent and the globe, Afghans faced the test of demonstrating their right to belong in this world of nation-states by articulating a national language, culture and past.” This task of aligning the Afghan past with the “civilizational” historiographical norms that spread from Europe to its colonies and then to anticolonial nationalists fell above all to Kuhzad, whose vision was promoted by Afghanistan’s official cultural institutions. In these unexcavated historiographical strata lie the unseen roots of the Taliban’s iconoclasm. For the detonation of the Bamiyan Buddhas, and the wrecking of Kabul’s National Museum that accompanied it, was not merely a physical attempt to destroy the material past. It was also an ideological bid to erase evidence for a more recent historiographical past that had remade Afghanistan as Aryana. In Afghanistan no less than Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Middle East, the recent rise of transnational Islamist movements with attendant views of antiquity...
as pagan *jāhiliyya* must therefore be seen as dialogical responses to earlier nationalist policies. Before the bulldozers came battles of ideas.

**FRENCH ARCHAEOLOGY AND NEW AFGHAN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS**

With the armistice of August 1919 that ended the Third Anglo-Afghan War, Aman Allah Khan declared Afghanistan’s independence from Britain and soon opened the first Afghan embassies in European capitals. Pursuing a “third power strategy” to escape British and Russian influence, his government developed close relations with Germany and France. As part of the cultural diplomacy that accompanied this policy, in September 1922 France and Afghanistan signed a convention that granted the newly formed Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA) a thirty-year monopoly on excavation. It was also in 1922 that Aman Allah agreed to the foundation of a French-style lycée, known initially as Maktab-i Amaniya (Amaniya School) and renamed as Lisay Istiqlal (Lycée Indépendence) in 1931. As we will see, Afghanistan’s premier ancient historian, Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad, would be one of the school’s earliest graduates.

The person selected as the head of DAFA was Alfred Foucher (1865–1952). Having begun his career as early as 1895 with investigations in northwestern India that led to his foundational 1905 study on the “Greco-Buddhist” art of Gandhara, by 1922 Foucher was an experienced and internationally respected researcher. Under his direction between 1923 and 1925, DAFA sent a team comprising André Godard (1881–1965), Joseph Hackin (1886–1941), Jules Barthoux (1881–1965), and several of their wives to survey the Kabul and Bamiyan countryside. In November 1923, the DAFA team passed through Bamiyan en route to Balkh. However, Foucher stayed on in Bamiyan, spending eighteen disappointing months trying to use the records of Chinese pilgrims which Aurel Stein and others had used so effectively in uncovering Buddhist sites in Chinese Central Asia. The rest of the team, meanwhile, focused on Bagram and Jalalabad. Formal excavations began in the 1926 season, focusing on Hadda, near Jalalabad. There, between 1926 and 1928, Jules Barthoux worked on a site containing the ruins of eight monasteries and around 500 stupas. They yielded approximately 15,000 sculptures, only a relatively small portion of which were removed to the National Museum in Kabul and the Guimet Museum in Paris. By 1928, Godard left Afghanistan after being appointed director of the newly formed Iranian Archeological Service by Reza Shah, a position he would retain until 1953. However, he maintained his interest in Afghan archaeology, particularly in Bamiyan.

In 1930 Joseph Hackin began a formal survey of Bamiyan together with his wife Ria Hackin and the architect Jean Carl. This involved drawing plans and taking photographs of the surviving wall paintings, after which they turned to other Buddhist sites around Kabul. After 1934, when Joseph Hackin was appointed director of DAFA, he led excavations at Qunduz, Shuturak, Fundukistan, and again Bagram (the site of the ancient Kapisa), together with assistant DAFA director, Jean Carl. It was at Bagram in May 1937 that Hackin uncovered the celebrated Bagram ivories and Bagram glassware. With him was Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad (Figure 1).

After a lull during World War II, when several DAFA archaeologists were called to active service (including the Hackins, who drowned in a German torpedo attack off the
Faroe Islands), DAFA resumed its activities in 1946. Under the directorship of Daniel Schlumberger (1904–72), excavations were carried out at Bactra near Mazar-i Sharif and Surkh Kotal. The latter, which Schlumberger excavated between 1952 and 1964, emerged as the most important Kushan site. Although 1965 saw the establishment of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology and the following years saw DAFA excavate the Bactrian Greek city at Ai-Khanum (discovered in 1964), this essay focuses on the decades leading up to this point. It was during those decades, specifically between 1942 and 1961, that the pioneering ancient historian Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad served as director of the Anjuman-i Tarikh-i Afghanistan (Afghan Historical Society), the state foundation that formulated an official historiography for Afghanistan.

That new historiography drew deeply on French research. Although DAFA began its activities in 1923, its first years did not yield substantial publications and it was not until 1928 that Hackin and the Godards issued their pioneering study of Bamiyan. DAFA publications only started to really flow in the mid-1930s. The most important of these were Jules Barthoux’s reports on the Buddhist site of Hadda and Joseph Hackin’s reports on Begram. In a manner that closely echoed the impact of the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948) on Iranian historians in the 1920s and 1930s, these French
works provided Kuhzad with digests from which to construct his own works in Persian.\textsuperscript{23} Vicariously, DAFA publications also introduced Kuhzad to earlier British scholarship on Graeco-Buddhist history from colonial India.\textsuperscript{24}

However important DAFA and colonial European archaeology more broadly was to the emergence of the new Afghan historiography, it was not in itself a sufficient cause of the latter. Of equal importance was the foundation of three new Afghan cultural institutions, namely the Muza-yi Milli (National Museum) in 1931, the Anjuman-i Adabi-yi Kabul (Kabul Literary Society) in 1931, and the aforementioned Anjuman-i Tariikh-i Afghanistan (Afghan Historical Society) just over a decade later in 1942. Kabul’s National Museum had its origins in the collection of manuscripts and weapons assembled at the royal palace in 1919, but with the foundation of DAFA in 1922, its director Alfred Foucher was charged with rearranging and, through partage, adding to its holdings by means of excavation.\textsuperscript{25} By the time it moved into its new building in 1931, the museum housed substantial amounts of pre-Islamic statuary, collections which expanded dramatically through subsequent DAFA excavations between the 1940s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{26} When the museum reopened in its larger premises in 1931, it contained 2,000 items of Graeco-Buddhist statuary just from Jules Barthoux’s excavations at Hadda.\textsuperscript{27} Pre-Islamic antiquity was from this moment institutionalized as the acme of the Afghan past: the museum would not open a hall dedicated to Islamic antiquities until 1958.\textsuperscript{28}

The pattern of Afghanistan’s archaeological and museological development reflected somewhat earlier developments in the Ottoman Empire (where the Mûze-i Hûmayun [Imperial Museum] had been founded in 1868) and somewhat later developments in Iran (where the Muza-yi Iran-i Bastan [Museum of Ancient Iran] was founded in 1937).\textsuperscript{29} However, the direct influence came from France via the early mastermind of Afghan nationalism, Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933). Having served as Afghanistan’s first foreign minister after independence in 1919, in 1922 Tarzi became the Afghan ambassador to France, from where he helped set in motion the archaeological convention with DAFA.\textsuperscript{30}

The second key cultural institution was the Kabul Literary Society, established by Nadir Shah (r. 1929–33) in 1931 on the model of the Académie Française with which he had become familiar during his own years as ambassador to France.\textsuperscript{31} As Vartan Gregorian has noted, the purpose of the Kabul Literary Society was broader than its name might suggest, being charged with “four aims: to study and clarify the Afghan historical heritage; to study and promote Afghan literature and folklore; to study and promote the Pashto language; and to spread knowledge about Afghanistan and its culture.”\textsuperscript{32} After the Kabul Literary Society was disbanded in 1940, the Afghan Historical Society was established in 1942 to centralize efforts to promote an officially sponsored vision of the Afghan past.\textsuperscript{33} According to its government charter, the primary purpose of the Afghan Historical Society was the “compilation of a complete history of Afghanistan—from prehistoric times till today.”\textsuperscript{34} Its governing council included the minister of education, the minister of information and culture, and the deputy education minister.\textsuperscript{35}

In contrast to the Kabul Literary Society, whose first two presidents were highborn associates of the royal family, the Afghan Historical Society represented a greater move towards the professionalization of history. In Afghanistan as in colonial India, the Middle East, and Soviet Central Asia, this professionalization took place according to European models.\textsuperscript{36} The founding president of the Afghan Historical Society was the aforementioned Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad, who by 1942 had already positioned himself as the
country’s first professional historian of antiquity. Born in Kabul in 1907 to a minority Qizilbash (and thereby Shi’i) family, Kuhzad was one of the earliest students to graduate from the French lycée founded in Kabul in 1922 and from which some 500 young men had graduated by 1928. Since the school in its early decades followed French principles of laïcité, it may have had a formative influence on Kuhzad’s pioneering sensitivity to Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic religions. What is certain is that the French he learned at the Kabul lycée would serve as a gateway language for accessing European scholarship, including French translations from languages such as Greek, Sanskrit, and Chinese that he could not read.

Kuhzad was subsequently attached to the government’s Sha’ba-yi Ta’alif wa-Tarjuma (Office of Compilation and Translation), where from the mid-1920s he was seconded to work as DAFA’s official translator. A photograph from 1930 shows him crouched beneath the architect Jean Carl during the latter’s survey of Bamiyan with Joseph Hackin. By the following year, Kuhzad had become a founding member of the Kabul Literary Society, through which he made the first Persian translations of DAFA publications.

Soon Kuhzad was promoted to the position of director of the Literary Society’s Department of History. He began to pen his own articles on ancient Afghanistan, or rather “Aryana” as he termed it. Though he also served from the early 1940s until 1957 as curator of the National Museum, it was in his role as the founding director of the Afghan Historical Society in 1942 that he would have greatest influence. His selection for the post—which he would hold until 1961—points to the preeminence that pre-Islamic history rapidly acquired within two decades of its introduction to Afghanistan through the founding of DAFA in 1922.

**KUHZAD AND THE KABUL LITERARY SOCIETY**

As late as the reign of Aman Allah Khan from 1919 to 1929, historical writing in Afghanistan comprised dynastic and genealogical works modeled on the traditional Persianate ṭaʿrīkh. Albeit with novel methods of source criticism, traditional historiography was still being written by the court historian Fayz Muhammad Katib (1862–1931), who continued the lineage of dynastic works written since the 18th century *Tarikh-i Ahmadshahi* of Mahmud al-Husayni in which Afghan history was synonymous with that of the Saduza’i and Muhammadza’i dynasties. The early volumes of Katib’s *Siraj al-Tawarikh* (Torch of Histories) were published in Kabul between 1913 and 1919 and he continued to work on later volumes throughout the 1920s, albeit out of royal favor for political (rather than intellectual) reasons. As the country’s most celebrated historian, Katib was also still producing works of genealogical history, such as his *Nizhadnama-yi Afghan* (Genealogy of the Afghans). Although it followed such Mughal-era histories as the early 17th-century *Tarikh-i Khan Jahani* (Khan Jahan’s History) to trace the tribal and ultimately Qur’anic ancestries of the leading Pashtun tribes, *Nizhadnama-yi Afghan* was not published until 1933, right on the cusp of the new archaeology-based vision of the past promoted by Kuhzad.

It is important to keep this historiographical landscape in mind as we turn our focus to the 1930s, the decade after the arrival of DAFA. For these years saw Afghan historical writing radically transformed by Kuhzad’s introduction of new methods, models, and chronologies for constructing a national past that was broader and deeper than either
the dynastic or genealogical historiographical models that preceded it. As late as 1936, French archaeological findings had still not been incorporated into the national history being constructed as one of the core charges of the Kabul Literary Society. This would soon change through several major publications that Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad prepared under the aegis of the Literary Society in response to the spectacular discovery of ivories and glassware at Begram, around sixty kilometers north of Kabul, in May 1937.

As France’s chargé d’affaires noted in a letter from Kabul that September, “For the first time, perhaps, the Afghans seem truly interested in the work of our [archaeological] mission. The excavations at Begram have been visited by several ministers . . . the king himself visited the exhibition mounted at the Kabul museum.” Kuhzad seized this unique moment of royal and ministerial excitement about pre-Islamic history. Over the following months, he launched himself into the writing of the articles and monographs that would elevate him to the position of Afghanistan’s most influential historian. And Begram would take center stage.

So it was that between 1937 and 1938 Kuhzad wrote his major early monographs. The most important was on Begram, with two other books pursuing the related topics of the hitherto-ignored Kushan Empire (of which Begram was capital) and the historical insights provided by pre-Islamic coins (as distinct from the Islamic manuscripts used by previous Afghan historians). Having finished his translating apprenticeship, in 1938 he published his own book on Begram under the imprint of the Kabul Literary Society. Recognizing the opportunity lent by the official excitement about Begram, for the first time in Afghan historiography Kuhzad devoted a book to the focused study of a single archaeological site. Moreover, he himself had played at least a supervisory part in its excavation, having been present at the discovery the previous year of the famous ivories and glassware.

Drawing on new source techniques adapted from European scholars, Kuhzad began his monograph with a section on the geography of Begram—or rather, ancient Kapisa—as described by Greek, Roman, Chinese, and Sanskrit sources. Untrained in these languages, he necessarily derived this information from European scholars such as “Kaptan Kanangham,” who, since Kuhzad cited his Jughrafiya-yi Qadim-i Hind (Geography of Ancient India), was presumably the British numismatist and pioneer of Indo-Buddhist archaeology, Alexander Cunningham (1814–93), author of The Ancient Geography of India: Part I: The Buddhist Period (1871). Drawing on such works, Kuhzad paid particular attention to the etymological links between Begram and the name of the Hindu god-hero, Ram. After describing the climate and present-day inhabitants of the region (and attempting to link them with its ancient peoples), he turned to a description of the various ruins of the site and their various periods of Greek, Kushan, and Buddhist settlement. In the next chapter, Kuhzad turned away from ancient written sources to focus on the folklore of Begram. Here he recounted the Persian versions of several of the stories (such as the legend of Marwan and Parwan and Noah’s Flood) that would later appear in the book Légendes et Coutumes Afghanes that he authored with Ria Hackin. By taking seriously these “traditional tales” (afsâna-hâ-yi mahalâ), and placing them in a pioneering monograph of ancient history, Kuhzad appears to have been attempting to find a way of connecting the region’s present-day inhabitants and their own sense of a historical identity to the undoubtedly unfamiliar history that he was otherwise presenting. Working on the unpublished final volumes of his Siraj al-Tawarikh (Torch of
Historically, in the mid-1920s, the official state historian Fayz Muhammad Katib was still relying on the court histories and chancery documents that had been the stock-in-trade of Persianate historians since the time of Baihaqi nearly a thousand years earlier. Just over a decade later, Kuhzad was now introducing Afghan readers to new sources, methods, and timescales for the study of a past that he expressly claimed was their own national heritage.

Kuhzad turned next in his Begram monograph to the reports of ancient travelers (including the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, ca. 602–64) about the Kushan ruler Kanishka. Then he tried to connect their reports to the folklore and customs of Begram’s present inhabitants. The following chapter turned to the conquests of Alexander, albeit again with a penchant for the stories recounted in the Greek sources, by drawing on earlier British authors such as H. H. Wilson. Kuhzad then turned to the Kushtan period on which he had already written his first monograph the previous year, detailing the reigns of the main Kushan emperors. Next, he devoted a chapter to the Buddhist heritage of Begram, referring to the distinct schools of Hinayana and Theravada Buddhism, and describing the importance of the various excavations of Buddhist sites of worship (ma’bad).

Although the earlier chapters had all been illustrated with images of the Begram ivories found the previous year, only in the final chapter did Kuhzad turn to describing the archaeological excavations at Begram. Beginning with the amateur digs of Charles Masson (1800–1853) in search of ancient coins during the 1830s, Kuhzad focused mainly on the French excavations directed by Foucher. Here his earlier chapters on textual sources reached their dénouement as he explained how Foucher had used his readings of Xuanzang’s ancient travelogue to identify Begram as an important potential site. Building dramatic tension, Kuhzad then explained how the French became distracted by their excavations at other sites around Afghanistan, such that they did not return to Begram until 1936. Then, through the efforts of Carl and Meunier, excavations in the ancient bazaar of the old city revealed Kanishka-era coins that proved the strata belonged to the Kushan period. Further excavations at Foucher’s request led to the discovery of glassware, and Kuhzad provided a descriptive inventory of the chief items. Turning to the excavation of the so-called “new royal city” (that is, the second Kushan capital), Kuhzad gave a dramatic eyewitness account of how Joseph and Ria Hackin had unearthed the painted glass and carved ivory and bone treasures in rooms that, of all the possible rooms in the “new royal city,” they had somehow decided to excavate. The motifs on these treasures, he explained, proved that Begram had been in contact with the whole ancient world, from Rome to India. Turning to the voluptuous nudes depicted on the ivories (and used again as illustrations in his book), Kuhzad explained that these beautiful and artful carvings were supreme expressions of the art of Mathura in central India, adding (drawing here on the authority of Hackin) that they likely represented the artistic zenith of the Gupta era (Figure 2).

Kuhzad ended his 1938 history of Begram with an account of the dramatic discoveries of the previous year in which he himself had participated. Until the discovery in 1978 of the 1st century BCE gold treasures at Tillya Tepe, the Begram ivories would remain Afghanistan’s most important archaeological discovery. Such was the excitement that a large exhibition dedicated to them was held at the Musée Guimet in Paris in the summer of 1938. At the same time in Kabul, Kuhzad was publishing his pioneering Persian
history of Begram. His association with what rapidly became world-famous treasures would serve him well. Riding the wave of royal and ministerial excitement around the discovery of the Begram ivories, by 1939 Kuhzad was promoted to the position of director of the historical section of the recently formed Pashto Tolana (Pashto Academy), though like most members of the new intelligentsia he continued to write in Persian. When the Afghan Historical Society was founded in 1942, Kuhzad was appointed as its founding president.

In the interim period, he had continued publishing through the Kabul Literary Society and in 1939 that society’s journal, Kabul, included an article in which he introduced readers to the idea of ancient Afghanistan as “Aryana,” the homeland of the Aryans. It was a notion that would have lasting influence over the following decades, not least through the establishment of an eponymous journal that would serve as the official publication of the Afghan Historical Society and as Afghanistan’s first periodical dedicated solely to the study of history. We can now turn to Kuhzad’s connections to the Historical Society and its journal to map out the expansion in the 1940s and 1950s of his new model of Afghan history.
KUHZAD AND THE AFGHAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The years between 1942 and 1961, during which Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad served as president of the Afghan Historical Society, marked the zenith of his institutionalized vision of the national past as rooted in the ancient land he called Aryana. His appointment coincided—and was apparently sealed by—his publication early in 1942 of a summary history entitled simply Aryana. In this work, he built on the methods he had learned from his French mentors by drawing on translations of the Rig-Veda, Zend-Avesta, and Greek geographers to paint a glorious picture of Afghanistan’s ancient civilization. From his new institutional platform, he further promoted the study of antiquity, naming the Afghan Historical Society’s flagship monthly journal Aryana in deference to this new temporal rooting of the Afghan past in the deep history of antiquity. Under state supervision, the Afghan Historical Society’s imprint also quickly came to dominate the publication of historical monographs. When in 1946, his position as the society’s director saw him publish an official three-volume work with the definitive title Tarikh-i Afghanistan (History of Afghanistan), two of its volumes were dedicated to the pre-Islamic period from prehistory through the Mauriyas to the Bactrian Greek kingdoms. Officially at least, Afghan history was no longer synonymous with Islamic history, with the latter now comprising only one of its many periods. No less importantly, nor was Afghan history synonymous with Pashtun history, whether in the two-century old format of the post-Durrani dynastic history or the more recent format of Pashtun nationalism. With the foundation of the influential Pashtun nationalist party Wish Zalmiyan (Awaken Youth) in 1947, Kuhzad’s provision of a historiographical foundation for a nonethnic collective nationalism became all the more important.

Kuhzad promoted Afghanistan’s deep history not only through learned publications, but also through the post he maintained as curator of the National Museum. In October 1946 he established an annual salon d’automne, attended by the prime minister and other chief ministers of state, to display paintings by Afghan artists on historical themes. That first autumn season, the most dramatic painting on show depicted a battle scene of Alexander the Great at Artacana in western Afghanistan. Although the jury only awarded it second prize, Kuhzad appointed its painter Khayr Muhammad Khan (1915–90) as the museum’s official artist. In his speech at the salon, Kuhzad explained that with the support of the Afghan Historical Society, “we aim at illustrating the history of Afghanistan and at gathering portraits of ancient kings.” Amid a Muslim society in which many people viewed figurative art (especially oils on canvas) as a dubious import, in a characteristically antiquarian turn Kuhzad reminded the gathered dignitaries that they “should not forget that the art of painting is not new in Afghanistan. As witnesses stand the frescoes of Bamiyan… which after 1,500 years are admired by visitors for their composition and colours.” That same year, Kuhzad pushed his imported cultural ventures even further by writing a play—in French and Persian versions—about Alexander the Great, using drawings of the Begram ivories and the paintings of the museum artist Khayr Muhammad Khan as illustrations. In the speeches that Kuhzad gave him, the Macedonian conqueror reflected frequently on the valor of the local tribes and soldiers he encountered during his adventures in Ariana. Only four years after the opening of Kabul’s first official theatre, the Puhani Nandari (Theater of Learning), in 1942, Kuhzad was attempting to publicly position ancient history at the center of a new national identity.
His writings from this period show the continuation of his interaction with DAFA and their further findings, along with the thematic broadening of his influential scholarship. Unsurprisingly, his own articles featured regularly in the Afghan Historical Society’s *Aryana* journal. We will now turn to an overview of publications during his years as director of the Afghan Historical Society, looking at several representative examples.

Kuhzad’s largest work by far was his aforementioned three-volume synoptic history of Afghanistan, published by the Afghan Historical Society in 1946 as an official statement of national history. While it is impossible to summarize the work within this essay, what was most important was that Kuhzad dedicated two of its three volumes to the pre-Islamic period, celebrating in particular the achievements of the polytheistic, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian civilizations of the Aryans, Bactrian Greeks, Kushans, and others. Again, this was a striking departure from every previous history of Afghanistan, including those written as late as the 1920s, which had reached back either only as far as the founding Pashtun Saduza’i dynasts of the 18th century or else, via scriptural genealogies to the “first Afghan,” the Prophet Muhammad’s companion Qays ‘Abd al-Rashid.

In 1948, similarly through the imprint of the Afghan Historical Society, Kuhzad published another book, which he titled with a Chinese loan-word *Tayan* (*D`ayu¯an* [Pinyin: the Great Ionians]), referring to a Greco-Bactrian colony in the Ferghana Valley. Echoing the techniques he had learned from French and then British scholars of using ancient Chinese sources to understand the Afghan past, he translated sections from the famous *Records of the Grand Historian* (Pinyin: *T`aishˇıgong shu*), to which he referred by their alternative title of *Shˇıj`ı*, completed around 109 BCE. The section on which he focused was the account of Dayuan (or *Tayan*, as he transcribed it into Persian), a kingdom generally accepted as being part of the Ferghana Valley in what was by the 1940s Soviet Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, Kuhzad’s interest in Dayuan derived from the fact that its people were likely descendants of the Macedonian settlers left by Alexander the Great (the “Yuan” phoneme in “Dayuan” being a Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit *yavana* or the Pali *yona*, meaning “Greek”). Thus, as far as Kuhzad was concerned, Dayuan shared its culture with the Bactrian Greek kingdoms of Afghanistan, an interpretation that was likely correct. The section he translated was based on the report by the Chinese emissary Zhang Qian, sent to Dayuan in approximately 130 BCE, which described the geography, rulers, armies, people, and culture of that remote Greek kingdom in Asia. Since Kuhzad had not studied Chinese, he based his Persian translation of *Shˇıj`ı* on a previous French or English version, again drawing on European scholarship to construct his increasingly rich historiographical panoply of Aryana’s glorious past. Here we see how European archaeological and textual scholarship opened windows onto a wider Asian past that had been closed to earlier Afghan *t¯a’r¯ıkh* writers, whose sources were overwhelmingly Arabic and Persian. The writings of Orientalists, then, could be co-opted for nationalist purposes.

This continued to be the case during the mid-1940s, when Kuhzad wrote several notable articles for the official journal of the Afghan Historical Society. In the summer of 1944 alone, during the journal’s second year, he published articles on the goddess Anahita, on Bamiyan’s oldest Buddhist place of worship, which he had helped Foucher discover in 1930, and on the discovery (also in 1930) of several fragmentary Sanskrit manuscripts in a cave in Bamiyan. In all of these articles, he drew extensively on French scholarship, which served as a funnel for the writings of scholars from Britain and even
the Soviet Union, whose colonial domains abutted on Afghanistan. Among his articles for the Afghan Historical Society was one entitled “Anahita: Rabbat al-Naw’-yi Amu Darya” (Anahita: Goddess of the Oxus). It deserves special attention for having been written at a time when, in other regions of the Middle East such as Egypt, archaeological history was experiencing push-back from a new generation of Islamic historians who objected to the veneration of the jāhiliyya (age of ignorance).

In that article, Kuhzad recounted how Anahita was one of the most important goddesses of ancient Aryana from the prehistoric period right up to the end of Bactrian Greek rule. Pointing to numerous discoveries of small statues as far apart as Afrasiyab in Soviet Uzbekistan and the Indus Valley in what was still at that point British India, he explained how the inhabitants of Aryana shared their worship of Anahita with a much wider region. Again, Kuhzad put to use archaeological data by referring to the findings of Sir John Marshall at Mohenjo-daro and the DAFA member Jean Carl at Shahr-i Banu near the northern Afghan town of Khoml. Drawing on a 1940 Russian book on the Bactrian Greeks, he added that mud statues of Anahita found in excavations at Afrasiyab closely resembled those found by Carl. In line with the methodology of his earlier works, he synthesized these archaeological findings with textual evidence (in this case including unnamed English translations of the Pashutan Sunjata (?) and the writings of Clement of Alexandria) to piece together a fuller history of Anahita’s veneration, and transformation, over the longue durée of antiquity.

At the center of Kuhzad’s treatment of the ancient goddess was this lyrical description:

Anahita appears in the form of a beautiful young woman, wearing a golden gown; she is tall, with a beautiful figure, yet showing purity and modesty. She wears a cloak with golden brocade, large square-shaped golden earrings, and a necklace around her beautiful neck. She has tied something around her waist so as to attractively raise her breasts. On her head there is a golden crown with a hundred stars, each of which has eight corners, and all of the stars are joined together on a pretty chain. Her clothes are made of the best otter skin, the color of which bewitches your eyes. Altogether, her clothes lend the impression that a silver net has been engraved onto a plate of gold.

Here Kuhzad built on his daring written praise of the nude Hindu carvings on the Begram ivories (and his publication of their startling photographs) six years earlier in his monograph on Begram and article in the Kabul journal. Published so soon after being granted the presidency of the Afghan Historical Society, the Anahita article showed Kuhzad’s confidence that the support of the state would allow him to write publically about the “pagan” goddess worship of his compatriots’ Muslim forebears.

This was a brave decision. The archaeological reassessment of a past previously regarded as “idol worship” (butt-parast) had faced popular opposition since the earliest DAFA excavations. As early as 1926, Jules Barthoux’s dig at Hadda had been attacked under the orders of a local mullah. Twenty-six Buddhist statues were destroyed in one night. Yet even at that early stage, King Aman Allah’s new nationalist state intervened to uphold the value of the ancient past by deporting the mullah and punishing six of his followers with heavy fines and imprisonment. Even so, a few years later, the 1929 uprising by Habib Allah Kalakani saw the smashing of many other sculptures from Hadda that had been taken to the “safety” of the National Museum (the self-described mujāhidin also destroyed the French library at Kuhzad’s school, the Kabul lycée). And when,
after celebrating Kabul’s Muslim sites in his Urdu diary, the influential Indian religious leader Khwaja Hasan Nizami visited the museum in 1931, he referred dismissively to the surviving Hadda statues as simply “old idols” (qadimī buttān). Although there were multiple Muslim evaluations of pre-Islamic statuary, many Afghans shared Nizami’s views. This was particularly (if, presumably, not uniformly) true of the nonliterate majority of the population, who were not exposed to the new historiography through state education.

A year after his Anahita article, Kuhzad continued his bold celebration of the old religions of Aryana with an article on statues of the Buddha for the December 1945 issue of the Afghan Historical Society’s journal. Entitled “San’at-i Yunani Buda’i, ya Grigu-Budik” (Graeco-Buddhist or Gréco-Bouddhique Art), the article celebrated the artistic value of the Buddhist statuary found across eastern and central Afghanistan. As its partially transliterated title suggests, Kuhzad was again drawing on French scholarship, in particular Alfred Foucher’s foundational two-volume 1905 study, L’art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra, which had in turn drawn on (if substantially modified) colonial British scholarship on the European roots of Indian art. Yet Kuhzad’s titular terminology was not so much a pedantic scholarly acknowledgement of his debt to French researchers as a search for an appropriately positive, or at least neutral, terminology in his own language. The obvious Persian term to use—butt, an etymological derivative of the Sanskrit title of Buddha—carried the pejorative meaning “idol,” thereby evoking precisely the negative Muslim connotations of such statuary that Kuhzad was seeking to dispel. Instead of using this older and obvious vocabulary, Kuhzad chose his words carefully in order to create, effectively ex nihilo in Afghan writings, an art historical discourse of aesthetic appreciation based around nonreligious categories. Deploying a blend of older terminology from Persian poetry with newer comparative world civilizational terms developed in India and Iran, he wrote in the neutral terms of the “temple” (haykal) and “place of worship” (ma’bad) rather than the “idol house” (butt-khāna), and of “sculpting” (haykal-tarāšī) and “statues” (mujassima) rather than “idols” (butt). This is not to suggest that the discourse of “idolatry” in Muslim societies had been entirely static up to this point. In previous centuries, the religious meanings of statuary had varied. Since at least the Abbasid period, artistic imports brought by diplomacy and conquest, then the imagery of Sufi poetry, had fed both aesthetic and ethnographic appreciations of sculptural exotica. Not every previous Muslim evaluation of sculpture was moral and theological, then. But, in an Afghan context at least, Kuhzad’s writings were distinctive for offering an approach to statuary that was civilizational and art historical. And here, his models and interlocutors were not his Muslim forebears, but his French tutors and, by the 1940s, equal partners.

Rather than focus on the religious aspects of this Buddhist statuary, Kuhzad therefore dwelt on the beauty of the carving and the quality of the stone, observations he used to construct a model of Buddhism as a “culture” (tahzīb) rather than a religion. Throughout the article, he drew on the authority of the founding director of DAFA, Alfred Foucher, while also using the latter’s Gandhara book to connect the finds in Afghanistan to discoveries in Turfan and elsewhere in Chinese Central Asia. From the outset, there were nods to a new nationalist pride, with Kuhzad noting for example that the French archaeologists’ finds revealed “the secrets of the soil of Afghanistan” (asrār-i khāk-i afghānistān). Moreover, since Foucher believed that the cradle of “Graeco-Buddhist”
art lay in Afghan Bactria rather than Indian Gandhara, the Frenchman proved a useful international supporter of Kuhzad’s nationalizing claim for his country’s civilizational primacy.

In the years after assuming the leadership of the Afghan Historical Society, Kuhzad wrote numerous other articles for *Aryana*, including a detailed (if belated) obituary in praise of the other DAFA director Joseph Hackin. When the French resumed their activities after the war, Kuhzad continued his intellectual collaboration with a new generation of DAFA researchers. As a result of the excavations initiated in 1952 at Surkh Kotal in Baghlan province by the new DAFA director Daniel Schlumberger (1904–72), in 1954 Kuhzad published a short book on the discoveries at that site. Since Surkh Kotal was quickly identified as a Kushan site, Kuhzad had good reason to be excited, having written his first monograph on the Kushans back in 1937.

Kuhzad’s subsequent book on Surkh Kotal comprised a detailed essay of his own in which he introduced the site and its Kushan context, and his translation of a speech given by Schlumberger at the Kabul French Club. Having in his earlier works written extensively on the Greek, Buddhist, and Hindu heritage of Afghanistan, Kuhzad used the findings at Surkh Kotal to add Zoroastrianism to the Afghan civilizational past. From the outset, he claimed that Zoroastrianism had been widespread in Afghanistan. Championing as ever the importance of archaeology, he went on to explain that before the excavations at Surkh Kotal, the Zoroastrian era of Afghanistan’s past had only been known through legends, folktales, and the occasional reference by early Islamic poets, such as Daqiqi (d. ca. 976). Placing Islam in historically (and terminologically) parallel status with other religions (*adyān*), he explained that although Afghanistan’s history comprised four eras—of element worship (*anāsur-parastī*), Zoroastrian Mazdaism, Buddhism, and Islam—until Schlumberger’s excavations, the Zoroastrian era had been the least known. The discovery at Surkh Kotal of two fire temples, dated by numismatic methods to the Kushan era, had brought that period to light. Moreover, a large statue of the great Kushan ruler Kanishka had been found and presented to the National Museum in Kabul: aside from a similar statue discovered in 1911 near Mathura in India, it was the only statue of Kanishka ever found. Having in this way positioned the new finds within his vision of an Aryana that nurtured all of the great religions of Asian antiquity, Kuhzad turned to his translation of Schlumberger’s speech, which focused on the excavations’ details. Through his translation and framing of the French findings, he had again channeled DAFA’s discoveries towards his mission to glorify Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic past.

The following year, 1955, saw Kuhzad reach out to his fellow Afghans more widely by authoring a popular Persian guidebook to Bamiyan. Drawing on his usual sources by way of modern French archaeological reports and ancient Chinese pilgrim diaries, Kuhzad tried to bring the site to life for his fellow citizens. He focused on the painting of an ancient prince of Bamiyan to emphasize the artistic rather than the religious character of the site. This was not a place of idol worship, but of national culture. As he made clear through careful directions concerning road conditions, distances, and other practical matters, Bamiyan was now a place that was accessible to the emerging middle classes of Kabul. Through the novel Afghan genre of the tourist guidebook, Kuhzad hoped to reach a wider national readership than he could through his erudite essays and monographs. Signaled also in his school and university textbooks around this time, this public outreach coincided with the expansion of higher education and the creation of a
middle class among whom the new conception of “Afghan” as signifying a collective and nationalist as distinct from ethnic and particularist identity was taking hold. The 1964 constitution would later confirm this broader definition of “Afghan.”

Since this middle class readership existed overwhelmingly in the cities, Kuhzad’s guidebook and other works implicitly voiced a new urban valorization of the rural provinces. The decision to celebrate Bamiyan carried particular significance in this context of rural–urban relations. The Hazara inhabitants of the Bamiyan Valley had not only been long deplored as the epitome of rustic primitiveness (and, conveniently, exploited as cheap servant labor). They had also been denigrated and, during ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan’s 1890s jihad, enslaved as Shi’i infidels, particularly by ruling Pashtuns and their clients.93 Kuhzad’s decision to celebrate Bamiyan, then, was not merely an automatic echo of French evaluations of the region’s Buddhist monuments. As a Qizilbash Shi’a publishing his guidebook amid the 1950s heyday of Pashtun nationalism, he was also deliberately valorizing the rural homelands of Afghanistan’s non-Pashtun peoples. Echoing an ethnically plural present, the religiously plural heritage that he described was an attempt to challenge Pashtun historiographical hegemony not by the direct means of an ethnic Qizilbash or Hazara counternarrative (which would only emerge decades later) but through the more subtle and inclusive means of a collective national past.

If Kuhzad’s more private agenda related to Afghan domestic politics, then his public agenda as official state historian required him to address his work to the realm of international politics. As part of the larger Afghan diplomatic push through such new venues as the United Nations, this venture in cultural diplomacy required Kuhzad to use his work as a means of civilizationally “normalizing” Afghanistan on an international stage. In the mid-1950s, a state effort to export the deep civilizational history of the Afghan past saw the publication of short official histories of “Aryana” by Kuhzad in both Italian and English.94 Despite its title, the Italian version focused almost exclusively on the pre-Islamic past, as accessed by archaeology and folktales that wrestled even the great Timurid city of Herat out of Islamic history to place its past in the hands of various ancient founders, whether Alexander or Siyawush.95 Based on lectures Kuhzad delivered in Rome through connections with the influential Italian Buddhologist Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), the book positioned Afghanistan alongside European civilizational history through a chapter on Roman connections with Kushan-era Afghanistan.96

Around the same time, the leading Afghan diplomat ‘Abd al-Rahman Pazhwak (1919–95) published another English-language history of Aryana in London. Though it covered all periods of the Afghan past, Pazhwak’s text framed that history in terms of antiquity, with cover and fly leaf photographs of Begram and a Buddhist statue from Hadda, both excavated by DAFA.97 As an influential Pashtun, Pazhwak shows the success of Kuhzad’s attempt to compete with Pashtun nationalism by means of his more inclusive historical vision. The two men had close links: Pazhwak had a longstanding association with the Afghan Historical Society and had written for Kuhzad’s Aryana journal numerous times.98 He was the perfect candidate to take Kuhzad’s civilizational history of Afghanistan to the Anglosphere, as well as the world at large. For Pazhwak served from 1949 to 1951 as Cultural and Press Attaché of the Afghan embassy in Washington, before being appointed as Afghanistan’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

China was also on the Afghan cultural diplomatic agenda. After Sino-Afghan relations were established in 1955, the Afghan Historical Society published an English edition
of *Tayan*, Kuhzad’s book on ancient Sino-Bactrian contacts. Putting the past plainly in the service of the present, the new edition included photographs of Afghan Prime Minister Da’ud Khan meeting Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing to sign the joint communiqué of October 1957. As Afghanistan partnered with China as a fellow nation-state, it could now claim a civilization of equal antiquity.

That year, Kuhzad surrendered his curatorship of the National Museum in Kabul, though not before signing an agreement with Tucci to allow Italian archaeologists excavation rights. Though the agreement with the Italians ended the French monopoly agreed to in the original 1922 convention, it did not put an end to French engagement with Afghan archaeology. ‘Abd al-Hakim Zia’, Kuhzad’s successor as curator (and later as director of the Afghan Historical Society), held a doctorate from the University of Toulouse, and DAFA carried out some of their most celebrated excavations in the years that followed. As for Kuhzad, he maintained his directorship of the Afghan Historical Society until 1961, a position that saw him increasingly enter the new international politics of the post-European world order. In the next few years, many other concessions were given to foreign research expeditions, whether American or Japanese, with Kuhzad acting as an influential intellectual gatekeeper. These wider collaborations echoed the origins of Afghan archaeology in James Goode’s interwar era of “negotiation” between European archeologists and Middle Eastern nationalists. Having built historiographical capacity, so to speak, through the early monopolist agreement with the French, the Afghans were now able to engage with a broader set of international partners on equal terms. It was a model intellectual venture in nationalist development policy.

In 1960, his final full year at the helm of the Afghan Historical Society, Kuhzad pulled off perhaps his greatest coup by persuading the world’s most famous historian, Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), to lecture in Kabul. Toynbee wrote a travelogue on his Afghan journey as a passage through classical Greek rather than Islamic geography, while the Afghan Historical Society published his lecture on Afghanistan as a prime exemplar of his model of creative civilizational contact. As the doyen of world civilizations, Toynbee was the perfect figure to seal Afghanistan’s entry into the league of historically civilized nations.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Through Kuhzad’s efforts, between the late 1930s and early 1960s the official historical identity of Afghanistan was presented, both domestically and internationally, in terms of the glorious pre-Islamic past of Aryana, or occasionally Bakhtar (Bactria). This conception spread far beyond learned articles in Persian. Admittedly, Kabul did not see the construction of “neo-Kushan” buildings to mirror the neo-Achaemenid architecture that flourished in Iran under the influence of former DAFA member André Godard’s designs for the Museum of Ancient Iran. But the ancient past was celebrated in almost every other sphere of officially sponsored cultural life. In 1932 and again in 1951, the great Buddha of Bamiyan appeared on Afghan postage stamps (Figure 3). In 1939, the name Bakhtar was given to the official Afghan news agency. In the mid-1950s, the Anjuman-i Aryana Da’irat al-Ma”arif (Aryana Encyclopaedia Society) was established to prepare reference works and other educational materials for the country’s growing number of schools and colleges. In 1955, the ancient moniker that Kuhzad had resurrected
became the name for Afghanistan’s first national airline, Ariana, the foundation of which signaled the country’s dual status as a developed modern nation with an ancient civilization as rich as any in the world. And when in the 1960s Afghanistan developed a tourist strategy through a department of tourism, official guidebooks focused primarily on Bamyan and the other archaeological sites uncovered by the French. A central player in this policy was Kuhzad’s younger brother, Muhammad Nabi Kuhzad. As the former editor of the Afghan Historical Society’s European-language journal, Afghanistan, Muhammad Nabi wrote a French tourist guide under the Society’s imprint. Even onomastic practices changed as educated urban Afghans began giving their children pre-Islamic names, particularly Kanishka and Yama for boys, and Anahita and, of course, Aryana, for girls.

At the center of this radical reorientation of Afghanistan’s collective historical identity stood Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad, who constructed his history in dialogue with the French.
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scholars whose language he learned at an incongruous lycée founded in Kabul as an afterthought of the archaeological convention of 1922. After his appointment as DAFA’s translator in 1930, his various institutional positions enabled him to disseminate his ideas widely through learned essays, museum displays, guidebooks, paintings, and even drama. Through these works, Kuhzad constructed the first detailed ancient history of Afghanistan in Persian, the country’s chief written language. And through the appointments that rendered him Afghanistan’s official state historian between the early 1940s and the 1960s, his government contacts and public influence allowed him to spread remarkably widely his vision of the homeland he called Aryana. This inclusive historiography was not without competition, particularly from Pashtun nationalism. But even when Kuhzad stepped down from the directorship of the Afghan Historical Society in 1961, he maintained his influence as an advisor to the Ministry of Education and as a presenter of a regular history program on national radio. Since even for the privileged few, television did not begin in Afghanistan until 1964, Kuhzad’s access to the airwaves gave him the widest possible outreach to what was still a majority-nonliterate population.

Despite what was still widespread (if unquantifiable) support for a religious reading of pre-Islamic monuments as testaments to “idolatry” (butt-parastı) and “ignorance” (jahālat), state support for archaeology and ancient history protected institutions and authors that celebrated such sites. Such official support suggests that the dramatic destructions carried out when the Taliban came to power thirteen years after Kuhzad’s death in 1983 were part of an ideational civil war among Afghans with radically different visions of their historical and thereby collective identity. Although French archaeologists first directed excavations, it was Kuhzad, the Afghan Historical Society, and their government supporters who used textbooks, museum displays, and even theater to transform DAFA’s activities into a new model of Afghanistan’s identity as the heir to the civilization of Aryana as much as Medina.

In 2001, the Taliban not only detonated the great Buddhas at Bamiyan where Kuhzad had begun his career. Under Taliban and earlier mujāhidīn supervision, the archaeological sites of Begram, Hadda, and Surkh Kotal that Kuhzad celebrated in his writings were all utterly obliterated. The Taliban also destroyed the statue collections in the National Museum of which he was curator, including the Buddhist stuccos from Hadda and the Kushan statue of Kanishka from Surkh Kotal. Kuhzad had valorized all these sculptures and their subjects in his writings, which included a biography of Kanishka, the Taliban’s forgotten victim.

As the most famous of modern Afghan iconoclasms, the destruction at Bamiyam was the dialogical counterpoint to the official history that Kuhzad created half-a-century earlier. Despite their opposition, both Kuhzad’s and the Taliban’s evaluations of the pre-Islamic past possessed transnational dimensions that reveal the complexity of modern Afghan history. As early as the 1950s, Afghan ‘ulama’ were exposed to Egyptian Islamist thinkers through their studies in Cairo, where a new “anti-pharaonic” Islamic historiography had been developing since the 1930s. Although Taliban historiography remains to be studied, this essay suggests their iconoclasm was neither an unmediated response to an offensive pagan past nor a uniformly indigenous rebuttal of the Western penchant for Buddhism. Instead, the Taliban’s acts were part of an internal struggle to define Afghanistan that drew on multiple sources of external support. We have seen here how in the decades before dynamite and hammers felled the Buddhas of Bamiyan, an
Afghan scholar drew on such foreign resources to build a new history for his homeland. Although many stages of debate and discourse remain to be researched between the era of Kuhzad and the Taliban, this essay hopes in small measure to point the way to writing an intellectual history for Afghanistan.

NOTES

Author’s note: Such are the vicissitudes of recent Afghan history that primary materials are scattered and poorly preserved. For providing the sources on which this essay is based, I am therefore extremely grateful to the custodians of the library of the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul; the library of the Musée Guimet, Paris; the Arthur Paul Afghanistan Library at the University of Nebraska, Omaha; the British Library, London; and the NYU Afghanistan Digital Library. An earlier version of this paper was presented in May 2016 as part of the Leon B. Poulalla Lectures at Princeton University. My sincere thanks to Cyrus Schayegh for the invitation. I am also indebted to the three anonymous readers and to Ali Mousavi and Warwick Ball for their helpful comments.

1Translation: ALEXANDRE: Do you have storytellers, legends of your heroes, songs of warriors? How do you recount them? SANAK: Certainly! We have many heroes and many legends.


4On such developments in the region more broadly (excluding Afghanistan), see James F. Goode, Negotiating for the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism, and Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1919–1941 (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2007).


6Goode, Negotiating, 1–18.

7Kuhzad is discussed briefly in Grevemeyer, “Bericht,” 31; and Senzil Nawid, “Writing National History: Afghan Historiography in the Twentieth Century,” in Afghan History through Afghan Eyes, 195, 200.


9Ludwig W. Adamec. Afghanistan’s Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century: Relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 1974), chap. 1.

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12Individual memoirs of French cultural activity in Afghanistan during the decades covered here are collected in Anon., Une ambassade à Kaboul (Kabul: Ambassade de France en Afghanistan, 2008), 9–120.


17On Godard’s Afghan career, see Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 82–87.

18For surveys of European (and to a lesser extent Muslim) interest in Bamiyan in the preceding centuries, see Pierre Centlivres, Les Bouddhas d’Afghanistan (Paris: Favre, 2001); and Llewelyn Morgan, The Buddhas of Bamiyan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), chap. 3.


20On the Society’s ideological profile after Kuhzad stepped down, see Nawid, “Writing National History.

21André Godard, Y. Godard, and Joseph Hackin, Les antiquités bouddhiques de Bamiyan [Mémoires de la Délégation Archéologique Francaise en Afghanistan, henceforth MDAFA, vol. 2] (Paris-Bruxelles: Éditions G. van Oest, 1928). For the factors behind the slow pace of publication, see Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 75–79. The earliest DAFa publication was an overview of a brief surface inspection at Bamiyan. See Alfred Foucher, “Notice archéologique sur la vallée de Bamiyan,” Journal Asiatique 102, 2 (1923): 352–68.


27Centlivres, Les Bouddhas, 71.

28Ibid., 72.

29On Ottoman and Iranian developments, see Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, and Edhem Eldem, eds., Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914 (Istanbul: SALT, 2011); Ali Mousavi, Persepolis: Discovery and Afterlife of a World Wonder (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012);

30On Tarzi, DAEA, and the museum, see Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 23.


34The charter is translated in ibid., 17–19.

35Ibid., 18.

36For the richest case study regarding India, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

37For graduation figures, see Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 35.

38On the school’s laïcité and broader policies, see ibid., 23. However, Benoit (“Modern Education,” 53, 58) claims the students also received classes on religion by local mullahs.

39The photograph appears in Andrée Godard, Madame Godard, and Joseph Hackin, Asar-i Atiqah-i Buda’i-yi Bamian, trans. Ahmad ‘Ali Khan [Kuhzad], 2 vols. (Kabul: Anjuman-i Adabiyyat-i Kabul, 1315/1936), unpaginated image. Note that this and subsequent works by Kuhzad were dated according to the Afghan calendar.


41On his appointment as director, see ibid., 12–13.

42The complex and staggered publication history of Siraj al-Tawarikh is described in R.D. McChesney, “The Bottomless Inkwell’: The Life and Perilous Times of Fazyl Muhammad ‘Katib’ Hazara,” in Afghan History through Afghan Eyes.


44Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 118; translated by Nile Green.


47Kuhzad, Bigram, 2–4.


49Kuhzad, Bigram, 31–34. For earlier French translations of Chinese accounts of Afghanistan on which Kuhzad apparently drew, see Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 50–51.

50Kuhzad, Bigram, 46–62. Kuhzad appears to have been drawing, inter alia, on H.H. Wilson, Ariana Antiqua: A Descriptive Account of the Antiquities and Coins of Afghanistan; with a Memoir on the Buildings called Topes, by C. Masson (London: East India Company, 1841).

51Kuhzad, Bigram, 63–76.

52Ibid., 77–86.
66Ibid., 30.
67Ibid., 32.
69On the theater, see Green, “Introduction,” 19.
70Kuhzad, Ta’rikh-i Afghanistan. See n. 63 for the details of each volume.
73On the scholarly Muslim challenge to “pharaonism” in 1940s Egypt, see Donald Malcolm Reid, Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums, and the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2015), chap. 10.
74The references to the Pashtun Sunjata (?) and Clement are in Kuhzad, “Anahita,” 17 and 20. I have been unable to identify the former text: my transliteration of the title is based on Kuhzad’s Persian spelling.
75Ibid., 18.
76Gorshenina and Rapin, De Kaboul à Samarcande, 146; Olivier-Utard, Politique et archéologie, 85–86, 92–94.
77Ibid., 93.


84 Ibid., 22–23.

85 Ibid., 21.

86 Ahmad ‘Ali Kuhzad, “Danishmand-i Faransawi-yi Zhuzif Hakin,” *Aryana* 3, 9 (Qaws 1324/November 1945): 8–16. The article was based on an obituary in the *Paris Review*, the publication of which was delayed until after the liberation of France due to Hackin’s opposition to the Vichy regime.


90 Ibid., 4–5.

91 The Schlumberger section is numbered separately as ibid., 1–21.


97 Abd al-Rahman Pazhwak [sic], *Aryana (Ancient Afghanistan)* (London: Afghanistan Information Bureau, 1995–[sic]).


103 Goode, *Negotiating*.


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106 Talinn Grigor, Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs (New York: Periscope/Prestel, 2009).
109 Mohammad Nabi Kohzad, Les sites touristiques de l’Afghanistan (Kabul: Historical Society of Afghanistan, 197–[sic]). On the impact of European tourism on Egyptian archaeological policies, see Reid, Contesting Antiquity, chap. 5.