

THE CRISIS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IN AFGHANISTAN

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& LEBANON: A "NAGAYA*" OR

"ROW OF HOUSES" IN A DOWNTOWN AREA

6

*A Japanese "Nagaya" or "row of houses" (or even a "long house") are popular collective dwellings in downtown areas of Japanese cities and are associated to legendary realms of mutual or communal assistance.

This article on the crisis of cultural heritage in Afghanistan and Lebanon was first published in Japanese in the evening edition of the Yomiuri on July 13-15 1998.

In part one (July 13), the author describes the critical phase in the current Afghan Civil War, mentioning the appeal which was drafted and proposed by the author himself and carried at the general assembly of the Japanese Society for West Asian Archaeology.

In part two (July 14), the author describes the postwar phase in Lebanon where an emergency program for archaeological excavation has been in progress as an integrated part of the city's reconstruction project.

In part 3 (July 15) the author discusses possible crisis mitigating action that might be taken by Japan.

Damage and loss in Afghanistan

It is now common in Japan to hear of cultural heritage being critically damaged throughout the world. We also know about the measures being taken against the destruction and looting of sites and cultural objects by international organizations like UNESCO, governments, universities, institutes, various concerned learned societies, N.G.O.s and the media. Above all, we the archaeologists working in the Middle and Near East, are greatly concerned and thus concentrate our attention on events in Western Asia. To most Japanese citizens and even a handful of archaeologists studying the antiquities of that area, these problems are far removed from their own peaceful existence, though I do not necessarily regard my country as being really "peaceful".

An appeal for the "Preservation of Cultural Heritage and the Restoration of Peace in Afghanistan" was carried at the 3rd General Assembly of the Japanese Society for West Asian Archaeology, held on 6th of June 1998, at Tsukuba, Japan. Possible contributions towards aiding Lebanon's efforts to preserve and restore its cultural monuments were also discussed at the assembly. As one of the proposers of the appeal, I would like to outline to the readers our opinions and views on the cultural heritage in those countries today.

Afghanistan's heritage is world-famous for its monuments and sites as well as its historical cities which symbolize the existence of the Silk Road, a historical inland East-West trade route through Eurasia. Unstable political conditions created by the civil war after the Soviet evacuation in 1989 brought tragedy to the people of the Afghanistan. We hope for an immediate cease-fire and the restoration of peace to this country. At the same time, we are deeply apprehensive because the irreplaceable historical and cultural heritage of Afghanistan is facing a major crisis. Kabul Museum, Bamiyan and other sites were bombed

and illicit antiquities were taken from the museum as well as various other sites and these have already emerged in antique markets around the world.

“We” the appeal states, should look squarely at the reality of this disastrous situation in which Afghanistan’s cultural heritage has been placed and ought to contribute towards the prevention of more widespread damage and toward the restoration of damage already incurred. We confirm that the cultural heritage of Afghanistan is irreplaceable both for Afghans and the world in general. We are convinced that the respect for other nation’s cultures and heritage as well as the scientific study of them are an important part in the realization of world peace and we therefore declare a firm resolution against whatever hinders this path”.

That such an appeal was carried at all is rather exceptional in our country. On this matter, however a number of learned societies in Europe and America as well as international organizations have published similar appeals in recent years. The Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage (SPACH) has made a large contribution in researching damaged archaeological sites and in the relocation and salvation of the collections from the bombed and looted National Museum to the safer niche of Kabul city centre.

Not long ago, archaeology was considered a rather lofty area of study, but nowadays archaeologists regularly face crises in political, military, economical and other domains. We are obliged to take these matters seriously in order to discover where they might lead us.

Rescue Archaeology in Lebanon

There was tremendous loss of life and property in Lebanon during the civil war which lasted 17 years (from 1975 to 92). Beirut the capital and other regional cities, all of which had flourished as commercial centres, resorts and university towns, were severely damaged during this period. Reconstruction work is currently being carried out in all of these cities.

Beirut, due to its ancient origins, is reminiscent of other old cities like Rome, Athens and Kyoto. Wherever one digs one is bound to encounter ancient relics of the city’s past. The history of Beirut dates back to the Bronze Age (3rd millennium B.C.). Beirut had kept her city status continuously throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. However, the war had a profound effect on modern Beirut which had widely spread beyond the boundaries of the ancient city. At the end of the war, the Lebanese General Dept. of Antiquities instigated restoration work on the severely damaged National Museum in Beirut. The work was completed in the autumn of 1997 and soon after reopened to the public. The most difficult task which the DGA has faced so far, was how to carry out research and preservation of the cultural property exposed by the destroyed cities in conjunction with a massive and urgent city-redevelopment plan.

Without foundation work, archaeological relics, if found on a building site, will inevitably suffer some form of damage. City planning must include comprehensive scientific research of any archaeological remains under any proposed redevelopment site, particularly in a country where cultural heritage is of such importance. In accordance with the original plan drawn up by the DGA and the specialists both from Lebanon and abroad, UNESCO and the Lebanese government agreed in November 1992, to pursue a project to excavate and salvage the archaeological relics in Beirut before the reconstruction of the city. The project consisted of 3 phases of work and covered a total of 1,800,000 square meters. To accomplish the project, a fund was established by the Lebanese government, UNESCO, UNDP and the Hariri Foundation. The salvage excavation project was started in the spring of the following year; however, due to the scale involved, outside help was called upon.

Similar international co-operation was organized as for the salvage operations involving the archaeological sites on the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates valleys, preceding the constructions of dams. Groups of archaeologists and museologists from the U.K., France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and other countries were sent to the Lebanon to work in co-operation with local teams of archaeologist from the Lebanese Univ., the American Univ. of Beirut,

THE CRISES OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

8

the French Institute for Middle Eastern Archaeology and more than 200 students of various nationalities. Regrettably, Japan or Japanese archaeologists have played no part in this important project so far and only a few specialists in Japan are aware of these events.

The project to salvage sub-surface-urban archaeological relics in Lebanon was very successful. One important result found by the archaeological team from Tübingen Univ. in Germany working at the BEY020 site, was to establish that the oldest part of the city of Beirut was built in the Early Bronze Age, as previously mentioned. The Lebanese Univ. team discovered evidence of an earthquake in the BEY004 site in central Beirut and, in terms of ceramic typology, identified a trace of the disaster which, according to historical records, destroyed most of the city around the 6th July 551 A. D. A great number of new discoveries have also been made under war-debris in other historical cities including Tyre (ancient Tyros) and Saida (ancient Sidon). The history of the eastern Mediterranean will therefore be revised and expanded in the near future.

What should be done?

War has tragically affected Afghanistan. Without any proper supervision for 19 years, its historical heritage has been damaged by destruction, illegal diggings and looting. Illicit exports of stolen antiquities are reported literally in the "present progressive form". There are fears that Japan might, in the near future, become an international trade centre for stolen or illegally exported cultural objects, because it has not ratified, accepted or approved any of the conventions signed at the Hague, Paris (UNESCO convention) and Rome (UNIDROIT convention). In Lebanon, on the other hand, the 17 year-long civil war ended in 1992 and the country has entered a revival phase.

An analogy can be drawn between today's Afghanistan and an ailing patient bravely fighting a severely debilitating disease. His relatives and friends eagerly want to help and cure him, but his high fever keeps them at bay. Lebanon, on the other

hand, can be seen as a convalescent who, although emaciated from the fight, has overcome a long and equally debilitating illness. The patient must have quantities of nourishing food in order to recover the necessary vitality, but this is costly. Wishing for a speedy and complete recovery, his relatives and friends often visit donating a small gift from their own possessions or contribute some necessary help in maintaining his source of income. In the near future, Afghanistan will also overcome the disease and will revive as Lebanon has now. With this future prospect in mind, a better understanding of how Lebanon managed its own recovery is extremely important.

Often a choice must be made between what is and isn't possible or between what should or should not be done. We must of course opt for the possible as well as what ought to be done. The concept of "we" is a very wide term covering a few individuals, a small local community or even a trifling association of individuals like our Society for West Asian Archaeology and even includes the local inhabitants of a village, a city or a prefecture. We can encompass a nation, a group of nations and even the entire human race.

Originally, I first began to consider the problems of cultural heritage when it was described by a fellow member of the Archaeological Society as being similar to a "Nagaya" or a row of houses in a city center. However, in the course of analyzing collected information and then discussing it with other members, I became aware that it was beyond the scope of our small association or other such grass-roots movement with their "Widows mites" gifts. These are not effective solutions to the problems.

The question that poses itself to us is: "What can a pacifist nation like Japan do or ought it to do?" Japan has a great respect for the various cultures of the world and this has been enhanced and broadened through its participation in organizations such as the PKO, PKF as well as Japanese international contributions since the Gulf War in 1991 when it aligned itself with the multinational forces. The most suitable contribution from an archaeological perspective would be to dispatch specialists and expert technicians on site where they could apply their practical skills where it is most needed.

Requests from abroad for such assistance is often made through diplomatic channels. Diplomacy is an access tunnel between one state and another. However ordinary citizens have greater and more opportunities than any government institution to engage in, make and maintain contacts.

With this in mind and returning to the analogy of the “row of house” in a city center, the houses represent the world and its tenants are the individual states. Therefore every tenant ought to invest in the Lebanon's health with a small gift or by sending a representative to help in the convalescence.

As for Afghanistan, still in battle with the disease, nothing can be done at the present time except to make a cautious approach under the leadership of the chief tenant (UNESCO), and to help the attending physician in his attempts to win the battle by providing the necessary equipment and supplies. In Japan, ordinary citizens are expected to act as Good Samaritans if and when necessary. Whether such assistance by the neighborhood should be called international contribution, a patron-favoring term, or common-sense, or even community spirit, we can easily differentiate between friends, namely by their behaviour towards fellow nations. Japan's role ought to be one of a friend in need.