

Restoration of the reclining Buddha of Ajina Teppa, National Museum of Antiquities, Dushanbe

Tajikistan's State Museum of Antiquities in Dushanbe showcases the remarkable role played by the Central Asian country as a trading center and crossroads of cultures from the time of Alexander the Great through the Islamic period. Displays include artifacts from the Bactrian civilization, the Silk Road city of Panjakent and the ancient metal working center of Sarazm.

But the most remarkable piece in the collection is the 14-meter reclining Buddha of Ajina Teppa, dating from around the sixth century, which occupies a room of its own on the second floor. Restored in 2001, partly with a grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, it is the most significant Buddhist statue remaining in Central Asia.

The statue was discovered in 1966 at the archeological site of Ajina Teppa, in southern Tajikistan. While murals and smaller statues from the site were shipped to the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, in Russia, the Buddha was considered too large to be moved such a long distance. Instead it was cut into about 100 pieces and stored in the basement of a museum in Dushanbe.

The restored statue was revealed to the public on September 7, 2001, during Tajikistan's 10th independence anniversary celebrations and just six months after the Taliban had demolished the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, about 300 kilometers from Ajina Teppa.

The Buddha was a product of the Kushan civilization, an empire that thrived from the first to the sixth centuries of the current era, ruling parts of what is now Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and India. The Kushans were the first to give the Buddha human representation, rather than using symbols such as the stupa or the wheel. Parts of the clay Buddha's face, robes, feet and one hand remain intact.



The U.S. grant also provided for secure display cabinets and climate control equipment in other parts of the museum, regarded as one of the finest in Central Asia.

Alongside Buddhist artifacts, the museum's collection shows how Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Hellenistic culture found a home in pre-Islamic Tajikistan. A statue of the Hindu god Shiva and his consort Parvati, recovered from the Sogdian city of Panjakent, is the northernmost evidence of Hinduism yet discovered in Central Asia.



Reconstruction at the Khoja Mashhad Madrassa and Mausoleum, Shahritus

At Shahritus, about 100 kilometers south of Dushanbe, the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation is supporting a three-phase project to restore the mausoleum and mosque that were once attached to the Khoja Mashhad Madrassa, built about 1,200 years ago and among the oldest Islamic sites in Tajikistan. Little is now left of the madrassa, but a surviving portico and remnants of its walls show that it was a large building. The mosque and mausoleum, twin structures at the rear of the site, are mostly intact, with fine domes and intricate brickwork.

The initial grant was used to improve drainage and strengthen the foundations of the buildings. Under the next two phases, restorers will install a new damp course and restore the above-ground structures. Work on the mosque is continuing as archeologists excavate the mausoleum, removing graves to an outside cemetery before renovating the walls and dome.

"We are not sure exactly when the complex was built, or who it was named after," says Rahmatjon Salomov, the architect in charge of the restoration. "But it was a very important site for the early spread of Islam in this part of the world. The graves inside the mausoleum may belong to early Muslim missionaries in the region. The mausoleum dates to the ninth century, and the mosque to the 11th."

The madrassa, which stood at an important site straddling the road between Iran and Afghanistan, was a center of education in the 10th century, and its students included Nosir Khusrau, a famous Tajik poet and traveler who helped to spread Islamic culture in the region. The site, which lies in a field outside the town, has long been a pilgrimage center, attracting groups every Friday and Wednesday.

"We are trying to replicate the original brickwork as far as possible," says Salomov. "We are not sure, but we think we have discovered the original technique for making the bricks." The modern version of the technique consists of mixing a certain clay with plant fiber, pressing it into bricks, sealing it in plastic for two days, then firing it for a week with coal.

Ultimately the team hopes to rebuild the madrassa that was abandoned about 200 years ago.



Support to the Sarazm archaeological site

ying in far western Tajikistan near the border with Uzbekistan, Sarazm is one of the most important ancient sites in Central Asia. Discovered in 1976 after local farmer Ashorali Tailonov stumbled across an axe head in a field outside the modern city of Panjakent, the settlement has been under excavation for 30 years.

"This is the oldest city site in Central Asia, nearly 5,000 years old," says Abdurrauf Razzoqov, the archeologist in charge of the site. Objects found here suggest links between Sarazm and parts of what are now Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Turkmenistan.

With its prosperity based on agriculture and animal husbandry, the settlement developed into a major center of metallurgy, ceramics and jewelry. Mining and bronze working became important activities, utilizing nearby deposits of copper, tin, gold and silver. High quality ceramics were produced and jewelry was crafted using lapis lazuli, cornelian and shells from the Indian Ocean.

A grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation to the Sarazm Archeological Museum to renovate the field museum and create new storage facilities at the site has improved conservation, augmented public understanding of the site's significance, and benefited a remote part of Tajikistan approximately 250 kilometers from the capital, Dushanbe.

The grant supported renovation of the site's field museum, which had fallen into disrepair. This included installation of display cabinets to showcase a wide range of artifacts including a bowl from Baluchistan, the neck of a jar from Iran and a hook fashioned from flint, whose use and origin are uncertain.

Some of the grant funds were used to create secure, climate-controlled storage facilities for the more than 10,000 artifacts excavated from the site after fire destroyed the previous storage facility at the city's archeological museum. "These priceless artifacts were being stored temporarily in the mayor's office," says Razzoqov. "We really needed proper storage for them."

Funds were also used to produce pamphlets, a website and a short documentary on the history of Sarazm.

