

**Report on
Mission to Evaluate
the State of Conservation of
The World Heritage Site of TAXILA
(Pakistan)
1–5 October 2000**

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Report on Mission to Evaluate the State of Conservation of The World Heritage Site of TAXILA (Pakistan)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mission to the World Heritage Site of Taxila was carried out mainly to ascertain the situation which arose after the construction of a stadium in the middle of one of the sites, the Bhir Mound. This new construction had threatened the authenticity and integrity of the World Heritage Site. The UNESCO World Heritage Centre (WHC) was informed that work on the stadium had been stopped on the direct instructions of the President of Pakistan, and part of the wall had already been demolished. The Pakistani authorities, and in particular the staff of the Department of Archaeology, should be congratulated on the progress made in this regard. However, development of the Bhir Mound should be undertaken as a matter of priority to prevent similar interventions in the future.

During the mission, the concerns of the WHC about illegal excavations and the need for impact assessment studies, possibly involving nomination of the site for inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger, were also examined. Impact assessment and coordination of site management with the development and planning agencies of Taxila valley should be considered as a matter of priority. This would prevent conflicts of this nature in the future resulting from work being carried out by developers and planners with little or no regard to the heritage. At the present time illicit excavations do not pose serious threats to the site. Nomination to the List of World Heritage in Danger can, however, be proceeded with if the Pakistani authorities wish to do so.

In addition to the above, several observations were also made which it is also believed will be helpful for the future activities and monitoring process of the WHC and ICOMOS. Among these, the need to prepare a management plan and guidance for the public should be considered as priorities. Ten recommendations have been made for consideration by the WHC and the Pakistani authorities.

1. THE MISSION

On the request of the ICOMOS Secretary-General, the writer carried out a reactive monitoring mission from 1 to 5 October 2000 at the World Heritage Site of Taxila, Pakistan. Ms Junko Taniguchi (Programme Specialist, UNESCO World Heritage Centre) accompanied the writer during the entire mission. The World Heritage Site of Taxila is a complex of several sites located within a large geographical area but without any formal links to one another. Attempts were made to visit all the individual sites, apart from those under direct military control.

The main site in question (the Bhir Mound), where there had been an attempt to build a football stadium, was examined closely. Travelling between numerous sites gave an insight into development activities in the area. Some of the remote sites had been subjected to vandalism.

Discussions took place with officers of the Department of Archaeology, including the Director-General.

1.1 *Terms of Reference*

The purpose of a reactive monitoring mission is stated in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (para. 75) as follows:

Reactive monitoring is the reporting by the World Heritage Centre, other sectors of UNESCO and the advisory bodies, to the Bureau and the Committee on the state of conservation of specific World Heritage Properties that are under threat. It is also foreseen in reference to the properties inscribed, or to be inscribed, on the List of World Heritage in Danger as set out in paras 86–93 of the *Operational Guidelines*.

The intentions and outcomes of the present mission are indicated in the letter dated 2 August 2000, addressed to the Government of Pakistan by the Director of the World Heritage Centre, Mr Mounir Bouchenaki. Its main focus was the issue of the stadium that was under construction in the middle of the World Heritage Site of Taxila. In addition, references had been made to the illegal excavation of archaeological properties and the impact assessment studies around the monuments of the Taxila valley. Finally, the question of whether or not the site should be nominated to the List of World Heritage in Danger had also been raised. Based on these points, the goals of the mission were set out as follows:

- i. To ascertain the status of the football stadium constructed on the Bhir Mound (600 BC–AD 200), one of the prime sites of Taxila.
- ii. To inquire in to the question of illicit excavation of archaeological sites.
- iii. To ascertain the need for impact assessment studies around the sites, covering the entire valley.
- iv. To decide whether or not the site should be inscribed in the List of World Heritage in Danger.
- v. General observations.

2 OBSERVATIONS

1.1 Status of the football stadium constructed on Bhir mound

The World Heritage Site of Taxila consists of a number of individual sites located in a large geographical area. The football stadium in question has been built in the middle of the site known as the Bhir Mound, which is recognized as the earliest recorded historic settlement of the Taxila valley. It is the most centrally located site in the rapidly growing modern city of Taxila; it is also situated in close proximity to the well known Taxila Museum.

Sir John Marshal had excavated a portion of the site in the first half of the 20th century, but the unexcavated area is much larger; at the present time it is a protected site under the Pakistani monuments legislation. Surface archaeological remains are widespread on the site, and recent excavations in the middle of the proposed stadium have proved the existence of important remains beyond any doubt. However, this flat, barren land with very little vegetation is in a neglected state, a situation which doubtless tempted the developers to consider this site to be an ideal place for a stadium. Even today it is an informal playground for large numbers of youngsters.

The decision to build a stadium was a serious mistake. It displays a lack of respect for one of the most important archaeological sites in the country.

The Curator of the Museum, who is also responsible for the maintenance of the site, assured the mission that the present Government had ordered the construction work to stop and the walls already built to be demolished. It was, however, brought to the notice of the mission that there is an inquiry pending; as soon as it is over, the walls will be demolished (this was confirmed by the Director-General of the Department of Archaeology). According to the Curator, such an inquiry would take about three months.

The two walls on the northern and western sides (which can serve as boundary walls to the site) and the rooms that have been built can remain, but a serious effort must be made to demonstrate to the general public that the site bears an important testimony of the past and requires protection.

In addition to the areas excavated by Marshall, the Department has recently undertaken some more excavations. The remnants of walls, pathways, drains, etc are the main visible features so far exposed. These are made of stone blocks and are bound together by mud at present. Most of these have been consolidated, but continuous deterioration and the invasive vegetation need to be controlled on a regular basis. Efforts must be made to present those excavated areas to the public so that the importance of the site can be emphasized. It is still debatable to what extent the public are aware of these remains and visit them. Nevertheless, it is understood that the Department has planned to carry out another major excavation this year.

The need to show tangible evidence of sites of this nature to the public is unquestionable, but it is very doubtful the excavation of more areas is the appropriate strategy. What has already been excavated by Marshall and the Department is sufficient to demonstrate the importance of the site, provided that these excavated remains are properly presented.

The enthusiasm and interest shown by the archaeological authorities in protesting against the construction of the stadium was commendable.

2.2 Illicit excavation of archaeological sites

Illicit excavations were noticed in one of the very remote sites. Only a few of the sites are totally neglected, and the authorities can easily take action to arrest the situation in relation the World Heritage monuments. Nevertheless, the looting of archaeological properties and illicit export of cultural materials, particularly in view of Pakistan's volatile borders, cannot be

underestimated. However, its global nature and the few specific situations in the Taxila area do not seem to threaten the World Heritage site drastically.

2.3 *Impact assessments studies around the sites covering the entire valley*

Taxila is a fast-growing area owing to the expansion of the military industry and other development activities in the valley. Rapid development activities were noticed, with the expansion of settlements and some of the existing villages near the archaeological sites. Since the sites are scattered over a large geographical area, it is possible that the monuments might be affected by the various development activities that are taking place. An impact assessment of these activities on the monuments seems to be a prudent precaution at this stage before it is too late to take mitigatory measures, if any are possible. This will no doubt be a monumental task and will require substantial funding. The mission was not aware of the existence of a law in Pakistan that would permit such impact assessments to be carried out. If this is not practicable, at least the areas around the identified sites should be the subject of some form of assessment of the impact of new activities.

There are potential advantages for the archaeological sites to be derived from the current development activities if the authorities can coordinate their efforts. Most of the archaeological sites in the valley require infrastructure developments. It should be possible for the present development activities to take those requirements into account and to provide necessary infrastructural services for the World Heritage monuments, which would enhance the value of the area. On the other hand, any delay in entering into this dialogue could lead to unnecessary conflicts with the developers and planning agencies, with irreversible effects.

2.4 *Possible inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger*

The implications of adding the site to the List of World Heritage in Danger were explained in detail to the Director-General of Archaeology by the mission. He was requested to consult higher authorities and communicate with the World Heritage Centre if they wished to nominate the site for the Danger List.

2.5 *General observations on the site*

The following general observations made on the sites are recorded for the benefit of the ICOMOS in its future activities and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in its monitoring process.

2.5.1 *The dispersed nature of the site*

The Taxila World Heritage site is composed of over thirty smaller sites. The whole Taxila valley has an unbroken history from the 6th century BC to the 7th century AD. There are several settlement sites, Buddhist monastic complexes and several individual monuments. As a whole, they represent a fascinating chronological sequence for over one thousand years, which probably why Marshal decided to conduct massive excavations there. The settlement sites speak for themselves of a continuous history with varying international, regional, and local influences. Even the Buddhist monastic complexes have different stories to reflect and different characters to exhibit, with hardly any repetition. Nevertheless, the distances between the sites and the nature of individual sites do not reflect any physical or spatial relationship to each other. Individual sites seem to have been selected on their own merits and their suitability for the purpose envisaged. This does not necessarily mean that there were no roads or linkages between the sites: these will be brought to light in future archaeological investigations. It merely suggests the impossibility of conceiving any type of zoning to cover even a few sites; it is essential to consider the World Heritage sites of Taxila as a collection of individual sites situated in the Taxila valley (the distance from the centrally located museum to the sites vary between 300m and 15km). This situation is also different from that of serial nominations.

The identification and preparation of the boundaries, buffer zones, and management plans required by the Convention becomes much simpler and easier if the individual sites are considered separately. The links between the individual sites needs only to be established through the provision of a road network, a well planned visitor information service, and guidebooks.

2.5.2 Boundaries and buffer zones

There is detailed documentation available for the major monuments of all the sites (provided by Marshall), and most of them have boundaries fixed. However, detailed sites plans are an urgent need for proper protection, to identify possible buffer zones and to control the development activities in the vicinity. This work can be done on the basis of individual sites.

2.5.3 Visitor centre/ guidebook

As mentioned above, the complex nature of the site can only be presented to a visitor by means of a proper visitor centre, giving an idea of the distances between different sites and the linkages that existed. As it is, any visitor to Taxila is totally lost unless properly guided.

The museum, located in a central place together with its superb collection of artefacts, can act as the focal point for developing a visitor centre, so that visitors will be given information about the items to be seen and the distances to be travelled.

A guidebook is probably be the most urgent need in this context.. The guidebook that has appeared this year, written by Professor A H Dani, could be a useful model provided that it incorporates a proper map giving the distances and directions.

2.5.4 Conservation and maintenance

It was interesting to note that most of the sites exposed by Marshall were consolidated using the practices prevailing at the time. As archaeological sites, the present state of conservation of the buildings is very reasonable. The presentation of sites, however, needs considerable improvement. Only very few sites have been neglected in terms of consolidation and regular maintenance.

Nevertheless, this situation is deteriorating and will become worse unless an overall strategy for the management of the World Heritage Site is in place.

In this regard, attention is drawn to the two reports prepared by earlier UNESCO missions, one in 1995 and the other in 2000.

2.5.5 Shelters

This valley has made a very significant contribution to the birth and development of the school of Buddhist sculpture that emerged in the adjoining area known as Gandhara. There are many precious sculptures and small structures, which are well protected by different sorts of shelter. The service rendered by those shelters in protecting these priceless sculptures and structures notwithstanding, it has to be said that more sympathetic designs could be evolved for them so as to enhance their relationship with the environment. This is, however, not an urgent need: as a long-term policy the authorities should be helped to design a new set of shelters to replace the present structures.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The mission was convinced that the work on the stadium had been stopped and that the demolition of the walls would soon be commenced. Action should be initiated to change the impression that the Bhir Mound is not an unwanted or neglected site in the middle of the town, but an important element of the World Heritage site of Taxila. Whether or not more excavations would help this purpose is not clear as there is no proper strategy for the development of the site.

It was a serious mistake to have decided to construct a stadium on this site, and it is important that such mistakes should not be repeated at the other World Heritage Sites of Pakistan.

An impact assessment study of the valley will be a massive effort, but the archaeological authorities should be helped to carry out this important task. Use can be made of some of the development activities to provide the much needed infrastructure for the archaeological sites. For this purpose, a great deal of coordination with planning and development agencies will be required. However, if this is not done as a matter of priority, the consequences in the future will be much harder to be resolved.

Illicit excavations and the export of antiquities do not constitute a major threat to the World Heritage monuments. However, the national programme to prevent illegal excavation and illicit trafficking of artefacts should extend its attentions to this site, rather than leaving the task to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

If the nomination of the site to the List of World Heritage in Danger can bring some technical and financial assistance, the authorities may consider proposing this option to the World Heritage Committee.

For identifying boundaries buffer zones and preparing management plans and maintenance programmes, the sites should be understood singly and not as a group. However, by means of a visitor centre and publications, the general public should be educated on the linkages that existed between individual sites and about the broader picture of the World Heritage site of Taxila.

The authorities take an approach to these sites that goes beyond the purely monumental and try to identify broader areas for the sites and their buffer zones.

The archaeological authorities could be helped to design suitable shelters to protect valuable sculptures and structures as a long-term programme.

An overall strategy for the management of the World Heritage Site must be drawn up by the authorities.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Request the Pakistani authorities to inform the World Heritage Centre when demolition work is over.
2. Request the Pakistani authorities to draw up a programme for the development of the Bhir Mound as a matter of priority rather than undertaking *ad-hoc* excavation/conservation exercises.
3. The archaeological authorities to establish a dialogue with the development and planning agencies of the Taxila valley and make representations regarding the need to safeguard the monuments and their surroundings. Obtain assistance for the development of infrastructure for the benefit of the monuments. Impact assessments could be a part of this process.
4. Request the national programme on preventing illicit excavation and trafficking of artefacts to be extended to the World Heritage site of Taxila.
5. Nominate the site to the List of World Heritage in Danger if the Pakistani authorities wish to do so.
6. Request the authorities to demarcate boundaries where these are not present and define buffer zones for individual sites. Formulate a mechanism to control the development around individual sites.
7. Develop a visitor information services to the public in the form of a visitor centre and guidebooks.
8. Priority to be given to the presentation and initial protection of individual sites rather than the excavation of further monuments.
9. Help the Pakistani authorities to design suitable shelters to protect various elements in archaeological sites.
10. Help the Pakistani authorities to draw up a management plan for the World Heritage site.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Junko Taniguchi, Programme Specialists of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, not only joined me during the mission but also helped me to establish contact with the Pakistani authorities and to make arrangements for my visit through the UNESCO Sub-Office in Islamabad. Many issues facing the site were discussed together with her, and also with the authorities, and I am very deeply indebted to her.

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