

Digging deep: Archaeology from the Silk Road in Afghanistan

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Image 1. Necklace from the first century. It was part of the Bactrian Hoard, a collection of more than 20,000 artifacts found in 1978 at Tillya Tepe, an archaeological site in northern Afghanistan. The Bactrian Hoard was thought to be lost. This necklace and the rest of the Bactrian Hoard was found in 2004 in the collection of the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

In 2004, archaeologist Fredrik Hiebert waited in Afghanistan's presidential palace. He and other archaeologists suspected a treasure trove was locked inside a safe. Unfortunately, the safe was locked and there were no keys. Nobody knew what was inside for days and days.



Eventually, someone opened the safe with a saw. Hiebert looked on nervously, wondering if the heat from the saw might melt the gold inside.

"When the first safe opened, it was an amazing moment," Hiebert says. "My heart was beating, and when the door opened, out popped these bags with little gold pieces in them. They were so beautiful I was leaping for joy."

Hiebert, like other archaeologists, studies ancient objects to learn about the past. These objects are called artifacts.

Hiebert helped rediscover the Bactrian Hoard, which includes 20,000 gold, silver and ivory artifacts. It dates back thousands of years and is a part of Afghanistan's heritage. Bactria is the name of an ancient region in Central Asia. It covered parts of several present-day countries. These include Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Bactrian Hoard was hidden for 14 years as war destroyed the country of Afghanistan.

Gold ornaments from the Bactrian Hoard were part of a National Geographic traveling exhibit. The exhibit was called "Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures From the National Museum."

It must have been thrilling to see the artifacts. For Hiebert, that wasn't even the most exciting part. It showed that strong economic and social links existed between ancient cultures.

"We don't actually search for treasure," Hiebert says. "We search for knowledge — that's our real gold."

"Three-thousand years ago, 4,000 years ago and even 5,000 years ago, people were just as interconnected as we are today," he says. "You look at these artifacts from Afghanistan, and you say, wow, they look Greek. They look Roman. They look Indian."

The Bactrian Hoard shows that even in ancient times, people traveled around, he said.

Connected Cultures

Hiebert has discovered artifacts showing how past cultures were connected. He helped find the wreck of a 2,300-year-old trading ship in the Black Sea off the coast of Bulgaria. He discovered the ship with Robert Ballard. Ballard is best known for discovering the Titanic, a huge ship that hit an iceberg and sank in 1912.

On the shipwreck site in Bulgaria, the team uncovered an amphora, which is a ceramic container. It was full of catfish bones from a completely different area.

The ship was used along the Silk Road, a series of trade routes by land and sea. The Silk Road led across Asia all the way to Rome. The ceramic containers were made on the south coast of the Black Sea and the catfish were from the north coast of the Black Sea. The ship sank on the west coast of the Black Sea, on its way to the Mediterranean.

Hiebert discovered that the Silk Road was used much earlier than people thought.

Hiebert feels that archaeology helps connect modern and past civilizations. A discovery he made on Egypt's Red Sea coast is a good example.

He was excavating a merchant's house, and the house was in good shape. The wood was preserved, and there were many traded goods in it from India and China. On the last day of the dig, he pulled up a mat in front of the building. Under the mat was the key of the merchant who lived there. It had his name written on it.

Hiebert said he felt a strong connection to the merchant. Can you imagine finding the key to someone's house that is 800 years old?

Fast Facts:**Trying To Make Textbooks Out-Of-Date**

"We are in one of those rare fields where our main job is to try to make the textbooks go out-of-date. That's my goal. My goal is to find something new ... because history is a living thing." — Fredrik Hiebert

Golden Discovery

Viktor Sarianidi, a Russian archaeologist, discovered the Bactrian Hoard in 1978 at Tillya Tepe, an archaeological site in northern Afghanistan. He was digging for artifacts from the Bronze Age, about 4,000 or 5,000 years ago. He found the grave of a wealthy family who lived about 2,000 years ago.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Connected Cultures."

Which detail from the section gives an example of how artifacts can show that different cultures interacted with each other?

- (A) He discovered the ship with Robert Ballard. Ballard is best known for discovering the Titanic, a huge ship that hit an iceberg and sank in 1912.
- (B) The ship was a snapshot of the Silk Road, a series of trade routes. The Silk Road led across Asia all the way to Rome.
- (C) The ceramic containers were made on the south coast of the Black Sea and the catfish were from the north coast of the Black Sea.
- (D) On the last day of the dig, he pulled up a mat in front of the building. Under the mat was the key of the merchant who lived there. It had his name written on it.

2 Read the following paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-10].

Hiebert helped rediscover the Bactrian Hoard, which includes 20,000 gold, silver and ivory artifacts. It dates back thousands of years and is a part of Afghanistan's heritage. Bactria is the name of an ancient region in Central Asia. It covered parts of several present-day countries. These include Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Bactrian Hoard was hidden for 14 years as war destroyed the country of Afghanistan.

Which detail from this paragraph BEST supports the conclusion that conflicts can put artifacts at risk?

- (A) Hiebert helped rediscover the Bactrian Hoard, which includes 20,000 gold, silver and ivory artifacts.
- (B) It dates back thousands of years and is a part of Afghanistan's heritage.
- (C) Bactria is the name of an ancient region in Central Asia. It covered parts of several present-day countries.
- (D) The Bactrian Hoard was hidden for 14 years as war destroyed the country of Afghanistan.

3 What is the relationship between archaeology and our knowledge of history?

- (A) Archaeology can change what we know about history by revealing new artifacts and connections between ancient cultures.
- (B) Our knowledge of history is based completely on the artifacts that archaeologists have discovered on digs in different countries.
- (C) Archaeology allows historians to confirm that what we know about history will always be true.
- (D) Our knowledge of history has been proven to be completely wrong by archaeologists on recent digs.

4 According to the article, how was the Bactrian Hoard originally found?

- (A) Sarianidi discovered the Bactrian Hoard when he was digging for artifacts from the Bronze Age.
- (B) Hiebert discovered the Bactrian Hoard after finding a merchant's house key under a mat.
- (C) Sarianidi discovered the Bactrian Hoard in Russia among the graves of a wealthy family.
- (D) Hiebert discovered the Bactrian Hoard in a safe in Afghanistan's presidential palace.