



# The Buried Treasures of Afghanistan

A 52' documentary by **Louis Meunier**  
Produced by **Arte France & Les films d'ici**

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## PITCH

Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a Buddhist city of incredible wealth, from which they are unearthing thousands of treasures. However, their time is running out, the government having ceded the rights to the copper mine to a Chinese company, threatening to destroy everything...

The ancient city of Mes Aynak, literally «the source of copper», built its power on the precious metal present in its subsoil. On this site, active for more than a thousand years, the monks did not just carry out religious activities. They abandoned their currency and created a banking network throughout the

region. It is this wealth which gave them the means of an intense cultural production, as evidenced by the many treasures found by archaeologists: more than three thousand statues, but also parchments, pieces of goldsmith's work, jewels, pottery...

The Mes Aynak site offers a unique opportunity to explore Afghan Buddhism, a period of history that still has many secrets to reveal. The remains could allow archaeologists to understand in what ways the religion of Buddha, born in the plain of the Ganges, was shaped here, in the heart of Central Asia, before spreading to the rest of Asia.

# TREATMENT

The film is constructed as an investigation through the centuries, with the archaeologists establishing the leading theme. The filming is spread over two seasons of excavations: 2020 and 2021. The filming arrangement is flexible, discreet and light in order to remain faithful to a desire for immersion. Great attention is paid to the frame, to produce the most stable and fluid image possible. In the action, the sequences are filmed with the camera over the shoulder to express the idea of movement and sometimes of urgency. The interviews, posed, are filmed with a tripod and shot in the situation, on the scene of the action.

Whatever the circumstances, particular care is taken with the quality of the image to meet an aesthetic ambition and to reproduce with all its beauty the magic of Afghanistan, its very special light, its magnificent landscapes, its unique faces... The photography is entrusted to cinematographers such as Gelareh Kiazand (Nomades d'Iran, L'Instituteur des Monts Zagros), Laurent Fleutot (Océans, Le peuple migrateur...) or Antoine Marteau (L'odyssée du loup, Il était une forêt...).

In addition, the treatment of this documentary is based on the following principles:

- a warm and calm audio commentary providing contextual information and giving the story the substance of great epics;
- the computer graphics and other information appearing on the screen participate in a strong visual identity around the field of adventure and scientific exploration: backgrounds made from old maps, icons recalling the different eras crossed, graphic characters borrowing from the Kufic script;
- images shot from a drone restore the beauty of the Afghan landscape and give an overview of the sites filmed;
- contemporary images show atemporal scenes that echo those of the past, allowing for transitions in the narrative: camel caravans in the southern desert, monuments in their original state or renovated, etc;
- The story also relies on videos and archive photos. On the photos, parallax effects highlight certain details and elements to make the narrative as vivid as possible;
- Designed by the company ICONEM, 3D reconstructions allow both to immortalize virtually the works and to appreciate the architecture of the buildings and works that have disappeared, as on the site of Mes Aynak. Animations can complete these reconstructions to reinforce the feeling of immersion.



# SYNOPSIS

## MES AYNAK- the Afghan Pompeii



The exceptional aspect of this site, where life has been frozen by time under a layer of loess, is that it is built on the second largest copper deposit in the world. The monks were not simply engaged in religious activities: they had settled on this treasure to mint their coins. The remains are spread over more than 4 km<sup>2</sup> and include several monasteries. It is this wealth that gave the monks the means for an intense cultural production, as shown by the numerous treasures found by archaeologists: stupas, remarkably preserved frescoes, thousands of statues, parchments, goldsmith's and silversmith's items, jewelry, pottery...

At the Kabul Museum, the archaeologists begin their investigation by studying the statuary of the site. All the statues found in Mes Aynak come from ancient Buddhism as founded by Gautama Siddhartha. They prove the close links that existed between India and Afghanistan at the beginning of Buddhism, but they also testify to the very strong influence of the Greek world. Indeed, at the time of the arrival of Buddhism in Afghanistan in 300 BC, the country was divided between two zones of influence: Greek in the West and Indian in the East. This meeting between the Mediterranean and Eastern cultures gave birth to the "Greco-Buddhist" civilization, also called Gandhara. Moreover, the technical refinement of the statues indicates either that the artists who made them knew the techniques of Greek sculpture, or that Greek communities were directly involved in their design ...

One of the statues found on the site is of particular interest to archaeologists. It is a representation of a warrior. Its presence allows to think that the monks had guards, or that they called upon mercenaries to defend themselves in case of an attack.

As discoveries were made, Mes Aynak became a major site on the Silk Road. Thanks to its location at the crossroads of trade routes, it was able to capture some of the wealth of the merchants who came to buy the artifacts built in the many workshops around the monasteries. The site could also count on devotees, who sometimes came from far away to make a pilgrimage and leave offerings. Thanks to this money and its copper networks, the masters of the city were able to finance a military power that allowed them to resist the Muslim conquerors longer than the other Buddhist kingdoms.

Beyond its treasures of statues and jewels, the richness of the site of Mes Aynak is due to the numerous manuscripts that are discovered there every day, texts of the 5th century written in Brahmi, the ancestor of most of the writings of the Indian subcontinent and of China. Parent of all the writing systems of the Indian subcontinent, it is in a way the equivalent of Greek for European languages. Moreover, its numeral system is the origin of Arabic numerals. This language is thus the starting point of a scriptural saga that has lasted for 2300 years but, paradoxically, until the discovery of the Mes Aynak manuscripts, there were very few traces of it.

## BALA HISSAR - KABUL

The imprint of the Buddhist heritage is felt throughout Afghanistan: more than 5,000 archaeological sites have been listed throughout the country but only 200 have been excavated... One of them will help archaeologists to better understand the organization of a city such as Mes Aynak. It is the Bala Hissar of Kabul, literally the perched fortress. The site was, like Mes Aynak, erected as a stronghold and surrounded by walls. Here, they are still standing because they have been reinforced by successive occupants, while in Mes Aynak, they have disappeared.

Another site in Kabul allows us to understand that the city was made up of a set of Buddhist sites built on all the hills and mountains of the region. These places were both strongholds and monasteries connected to each other as a gigantic defensive system at the heart of which was the Bala Hissar. Kabul was in fact one of the Buddhist kingdoms of Afghanistan, along with Mes Aynak and Bamiyan, but it was the largest and most important.

These new findings reveal that Buddhism accompanied the economic development of the region.

## THE BAMIIAN VALLEY

An essential pilgrimage center for many centuries, it was also an important stopover point on the Silk Road. The caravans, which transported gold, rubies, spices and textiles between China, the Roman Empire and India, made the fortune of the valley. Classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, archaeologists are still conducting excavations there to provide further evidence of Afghan Buddhism, particularly its transition to Islam.

Elsewhere in the valley, archaeologists are revealing the erosion taking place at sites, most of which are made of raw earth. Their travels in the country are an opportunity to update the map of Buddhist sites in Afghanistan and to search for stolen Buddhist works. In the north, they meet the warlord Abdul Rachid Dostom, who maintains a fantastic collection of objects.

Some of them date from the Buddhist period and could provide rich subjects for study. The archaeologists try to convince him.

The inhabitants could travel from one kingdom to another to trade. The monasteries were spread throughout the territory and served as relays in an immense geographical space, which took several days to cover, on foot or on horseback. The monasteries cashed their currencies and acted as a long-distance banking network. It was through this network that a financial union could be established, which in turn allowed the long-term development of Buddhist thought. Ideas were not imposed by military conquests, but spread by trade routes.

This place is interesting in more ways than one, for it may also house one of the edicts of Ashoka (an Indian emperor), who made Buddhism a state religion in the third century BC. These edicts - the earliest historical documents to mention Buddhism - were engraved all over his empire. The discovery of one of them in the heart of the largest monastery in Afghanistan at the time would prove that the communities were organized under the same political and religious banner. This would demonstrate the existence of a uniform thinking at the scale of a space however fragmented by the geography of the mountains.



## A POLITICAL MATTER

Beyond their investigation of Afghanistan's Buddhist past, the archaeologists' approach is part of a larger initiative to list all the country's sites, indicating for each of them their characteristics, their periods of occupation, the dates of any excavations, the artifacts discovered, the stealing, the photos available... All this information feeds into a large archaeological map that is of interest to the Afghan government. The current president of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, has many pressing priorities. His country, one of the poorest in the world, has been the scene of armed conflict for four decades. Despite this, he actively supports cultural

projects. With a doctorate in anthropology, he sees in the archaeological heritage the opportunity to build a great national narrative which reconciles all the peoples making up the Afghan mosaic. He is particularly interested in the discoveries made on the site of Mes Aynak, whose developments he personally follows. Interviewed, he explains that the exploitation of the copper mine is a vital operation for all Afghans because the country needs foreign currency to support its development. He is looking for a way to reconcile the mining project with the preservation of the remains...

### Mes Aynak and its lessons for today

New elements allow them to progress in their investigation, especially concerning the dates of occupation of the site, which would have been inhabited until the 13th century. The question that remains is that of the interruption of the exploitation of the copper deposit because the site was abandoned while it still contained much ore. For archaeologists, Mes Aynak, the «source of copper», was abandoned as a result of excessive exploitation of resources. The processing of copper requires wood, the trees that once covered the hills of this region were cut down, the rivers dried up, fuel had to be imported from ever more distant places, until one day it was no longer possible... This insight should serve as a lesson, as the exploitation of the copper mine threatens to resurface.

Afghanistan has always been a land at the crossroads of civilizations and religions. In this country at war, archaeology is a complicated mission. When it is not the financial appetites, it is the stealing of smugglers or the destruction of extremists that threaten the remains. What will remain of Mes Aynak in a few years? The «copper source» is only beginning to reveal its secrets and promises many discoveries that could increase our knowledge of Buddhism. But the site is doomed to destruction, and it is difficult to know if the archaeologists will have time to unveil all the mysteries that still sleep in its soil. Resigned to this uncertain future, they take advantage of the reprieve they have been granted to prolong, as long as possible, this investigation into the Buddhist civilization that once flourished in this part of the



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