

Kabul Journal
by
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Chapter 15 – Journey to Alexandria

I must admit that I really didn't know much about Afghanistan before coming here. I had seen the Rambo movie, the one where he goes to help the Afghans fight the Soviets and blows up Russian helicopters, but it really didn't provide much insight.

But, one thing I did know about Afghanistan was that Alexander the Great build a city here, one of several he founded in Central Asia, and the most eastern of all the Alexandrias. The Greeks that settled here intermarried and became integrated into the local population. These cities of Central Asia including the one in Afghanistan became the multicultural Bactria Kingdom that blended Greek and eastern thought, philosophy, architecture and art.

A couple of years ago I saw a *Eurasian Empires* documentary on Afghanistan's Alexandria. Better known as Ai Khanoum, the city was once located on the banks of the river that now separates Afghanistan and Tajikistan. In the documentary, the film crew crossed the river in a small wooden row boat because they could not travel to the area from within Afghanistan.

My first few months here I asked both Afghans and expatriates about Alexandria (or Ai Khanoum), and no one I talked to had heard of it. Alexander built several forts and outposts in Afghanistan – “*was I confused*” they'd ask. It was hopeless that I'd ever see Ai Khanoum, I concluded, since I did not even know where the city was located combined with the difficulties of my restrictions and traveling in Afghanistan.

May 3, 2006

I sit eating breakfast in the mess hall at the Kunduz PRT. A very clean and orderly mess hall as you would expect from the Germans. I flew up to this regional city in North Afghanistan yesterday morning on PRT Air, and spent the afternoon in meetings and field site visits to solve the flooding problem in the city (see Chapter 14 – *Saving the City of Kunduz from Flooding*). Today, I'm going out with the FAO to see some of their EIRP (Emergency Irrigation Rehabilitation Program) projects in Takhar Province.

I sip my coffee and munch on a slice of German black bread and a piece of cheese while reviewing our revised itinerary for today which was emailed to me last night.. There's an addition stop that wasn't on the previous itinerary with the note: “*time permitting we'd see the headwaters of the Amu Darya river and the site of an ancient city.*”

The Journey

At 6:45 am, I'm standing just outside the barbed and barricaded entrance to the Kunduz PRT. It's a pleasantly cool morning, but the intensive sunshine hints of the heat that will come in the afternoon. Two UN vehicles arrive at 6:47AM to pick me up, just two minutes late.

My host today is Sharif, the Chief Engineer on the EIRP program and an Afghan. He speaks excellent English which he learned in Pakistan. He has made his career in Afghanistan, working as a water and irrigation engineer over the last 20 years of war, turmoil, persecution and bloodshed.

I ride in the lead car with Sharif and the EIRP District Engineer for the Kunduz region. In the second car are additional EIPR local staff. No guards accompany us. The UN security office has designated this as a secure region. Still, UN personnel must submit itineraries for approval one day in advance that include exact GPS coordinates of each site to be visited. Drivers must check in by radio once each hour.

We head out of the city of Kunduz, heading east to Takhar Province. For the first hour, we travel on an excellent paved road along the Kunduz River Valley with long and dramatic vistas of mountains shaped by geological processes in to textured mosaics, covered by a patchwork of greens, grays and browns.



The mountains look surreal and are rich in color, deep reds and grays, and are overlaid with a quilt of color from the rectangular fields planted in winter wheat, all which seem to be in different stages of growth. Portions of the scenery reminds me somewhat of the Texas Cap Rock region and the canyons of West Texas, but grander.



At the Takhar provincial capital of Taluqan, we turn off the paved road and onto a back-jarring and bone-crushing dirt road, the second worst road I've ever been on. For the next two hours we suffer as we're slammed around by the deep potholes and jarred by washboard and bumps as the driver attempts to avoid the worst of it. I ride shotgun, gripping the handhold until my fingers become sore.

Following Embassy rules, I wear my flak jacket. The stupid flak jacket and its steel plates don't provide any cushion and bruise my back. The main concern when riding in an unarmored vehicle like the UN's SUVs are IEDs and the flying shrapnel they cause or may contain. But, it's obvious that there is little likelihood of an IED on this remote road, so I remove my painful back cushion.



After 1½ hours, we pause at a high point overlooking the Kokcha River Valley and take a break. We cannot see the actual river itself from this vantage point. Sharif points out the mountains in the distance which are in Tajikistan, the mesa in front of the mountains which is in Afghanistan, and between the mesa and the mountains runs the Panj River, which forms the border between the two nations. At the left tip of the mesa is where the Kokcha and Panj Rivers join.

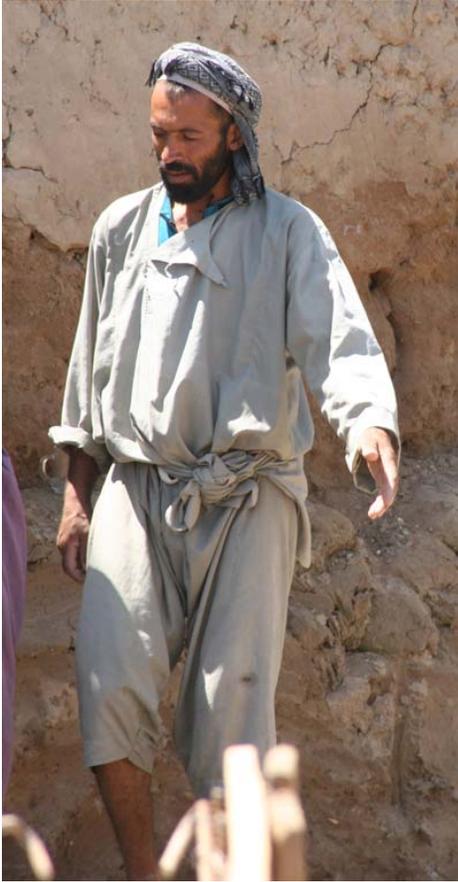
We continue driving another 30 minutes and arrive at our first stop, an EIRP project in the village of Kawaja Ghar. The EIPR is well designed and hits all the bases. The FAO has established five regional offices where local engineers are trained “by fire” in project design and management. Local contractors are hired, and the district project staff oversee the work. Sarif and others of the national staff go out with district engineers to check on progress and provide in-the-field training. Villages must provide at least 10% cost share of the total project costs, usually by providing labor.



This particular project will stabilize the wash that goes through the middle of the village and includes an aqueduct that will replace the rusting pipes currently used. Sharif inspects the work and points out problems to the district engineers, the contractor and workers. The work is hard, but the workers are in good spirits and ask me to take their photos.









We continue our journey and stop to inspect another project before crossing the Kokcha River – then head northwest into Yangi Qala District. Just downstream from the bridge are the ruins of a hydro plant and pumping station, a part of a huge development experiment attempted by the Germans decades ago.



We climb out of the Kokcha River gorge and pass the ruins of the German town, now turning into dust. We pass rusting machinery and large leveled fields sitting high and dry with no pumps or power to lift the water from the Kokcha River below. No water means people can not live here and the houses are long abandoned and ignored by the Afghans.



We continue northwest following the Kokcha River and 30 minutes later reach the town of Dashi Qala. The town looks like it has seen better days; main street is a tree-lined boulevard divided by a medium that was once landscaped, but now sits dry and lifeless.



We stop at a local restaurant for a lunch of skewers, afghan rice and bread, and lamb and potatoes stew. Sharif also orders a plate of sliced red onion. He says he always has lemon or onions with meals he eats in village restaurants in order to keep from getting sick. It's interesting that Coke and Pepsi are fighting for the "hearts and wallets" of Afghans, with Pepsi apparently winning the battle in this remote town.



While we eat, an old man stops by and tells us stories. Sharif translates: *“He says that this is the only part of Afghanistan that the Taliban didn’t conquer. The local people stopped them from crossing the Kokcha River. The local people are very proud.*

After lunch we head north through town and then turn into a maze of houses and compounds. The other UN vehicle takes the lead and stops three times asking for directions. Finally a teenager hops into the other car to show us the way.

We eventually leave the maze of compounds and the road turns north again. The road is etched into the high banks above the narrow strip of floodplains along this side of the river with great views of the Kokcha River. Across the river and as far as I can see is a vast area of irrigated cropland. Vast areas of irrigation supplied by simple diversion dikes made out of mud and straw and jetting out into the river; irrigation practices like people have been doing here for thousands of years (see Chapter 14 – *Saving the City of Kunduz from Flooding*).





The road winds up a steep slope leading us to the top of the mesa. At the top of the mesa are eroded trenches that run along the entire ridge, dug during the war against Soviet occupation. Shells and rusting artillery are scattered all around.





From the top of the mesal, the view is spectacular. Directly north is the Panj River forming the border with Tajikistan. To the west is the grand Kocha River flowing from the south and joining the Panj River. This confluence of rivers marks the beginning of the Amu Darya, one of Central Asia's great rivers, flowing out of the Afghan and Tajik mountains. The Amu Darya irrigates vast areas, and supports the economy of Central Asia.

The Amu Darya once flowed 1400 miles, all the way to the Aral Sea. However, so much water is now diverted for irrigation that water no longer reaches the Aral Sea. The drying and the dieing of the Aral Sea has caused the largest and most severe man-made ecological disaster on our planet.



Alexandria

As I look down from the mesa at the vista and confluence of the rivers, the place is strangely familiar. Sharif points out below, on the flat plain along the Panj River countless holes dug by artifact hunters, treasure seekers and thieves. I realize with a shock that this is the site of Al Khanoum, the eastern most Alexandria! The place I thought that I never would see!

Once there was a metropolis here surrounded by a wall several miles long containing Greek monuments, a gymnasium, a 6,000 seat theatre, a stadium, public baths and temples. Now, little exists and few artifacts remain, as the site has been unprotected for years.

We linger here for about an hour. The holes trace out the extent of the city and I can imagine where the walls and main gate once existed and the river traffic linking the Ai Khanoum to the other cities of the Bactria Kingdom.





No, there is scant physical evidence of the city that once existed here. But the memory remains, almost as if the memory floats up out of the countless holes where the city once stood; the memory of an adventurous young conquer who took his wife in Afghanistan, the memory of his soldiers who settled and married here, and the memory of the Greek bureaucrats and merchants who came here to make a new life, resulting in significant advancement in social evolution as the west and east blended.

We continue our trip and inspect more EIRP projects as we make our slow way back to Kunduz. We stop once again on the overlook of the Kokcha Valley. I now know that on the other side of the mesa in the distance is where Alexander built Ai Khanoum. I wonder if Alexander the Great paused at this exact location to survey his route east.

We arrive back at the PRT around 7 PM. Today, I had a 12-hour journey that took me through two provinces and two millenniums back in time.

After dinner and a shower, I stop in at the PRT bar and order a German beer. I'm pensively philosophical tonight. Alexander was just one of many conquerors that came to Afghanistan over the centuries, great warriors who are now just a memory. Now we are here...



“Alexanders Children” is the affectionary term used for fair hair and skin children born in Aghanistan