

**A NOTE ON *MIR ZAKAH* TREASURES AND THE ENIGMATIC '*ALEXANDER*
MEDALLION'**
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It is a story which deserves to be shared with our readers. Hence an attempt is made here to provide a brief note about these enthralling treasures. The name Mir Zakah (Lat: 33° 46'N, 33.766667° N / Lon: 69° 29'E, 69.483333°) inside Paktia Province in Afghanistan evokes awe and curiosity among archaeologists and numismatists not because of its grandeur of its monuments or ancient history but because of the discovery of massive coin hoards. This nondescript village, 55 km North - East of Gardez, is in a mountainous area of eastern Afghanistan. It lies along the ancient highway that connects Ghazni in modern Afghanistan to Purushapura of Kushan rulers. Purushapura is now known as Peshawar in present day Pakistan.



It is said that in the year 1947, a villager in Mir Zakah came across a gold coin while drawing water from a depression used as a well. On hearing the news, other villagers rushed to the well to corner the rest of the treasure (hereafter MZ-I). But the exact circumstances about the discovery remain unknown to this day. Later in that year the French archaeological mission in Afghanistan excavated about 11,500 silver coins and sent

half of it to Kabul Museum and the other half to Musée Guimet in Paris which has preserved it. But most of the coins in the Kabul Museum were looted during the political disturbances in the early 1990s.

A spectacular and much larger second treasure (hereafter MZ-II) was found and plundered from the same place in 1992 by the peasants and probably by the Afghan warlords. Incidentally, MZ-I and MZ-II are accepted as being two finds at different times from the same hoard from the same well. It is also said that the recovery from MZ-I was incomplete in 1947. It was partly due to the manual excavation in a water filled well and limited availability of equipment like pumps. The tragedy about MZ-II is that the entire treasure was looted before they were ever seen by any archaeologist or museum curator. Illicit trade in plundered artifacts from Afghanistan is second only to drug trafficking. Deaths and violence among those involved in digging the Mir Zakah hoard earned a reputation for being cursed among local peasants.

Several versions of the events that unfolded after the discovery of MZ - II has appeared so far. They can be summarised as follows.

- The coins from the hoard are diverse in their chronology, with some of the earliest ones dating to the 5th century BC, going up to the 2nd century AD. Prof. Christie Osmund Flavian Boppearachchi who teaches Central Asian and South-Asian Archaeology and Art History at the Sorbonne University, Paris observed in an interview to a newspaper (*Sunday Times*, Colombo 25 September 2011) as follows: The composition of the hoard is so diverse that you get everything – from North India to Southern Uzbekistan and North Afghanistan. He also speculates that the treasure may have been plundered by Sassanians from treasuries and temples. Later, when they faced “sudden challenge from a rival group” they “would have been forced to ditch their loot before going to battle. If so, clearly they lost and their treasure was left to languish unclaimed for centuries”

- The MZ - II is “believed to contain roughly 550,000 coins alongside hundreds of other, larger objects” (Sunday Times, *op.cit.*). Obviously a head spinning figure for a coin hoard.
- Tim McGrik wrote in an article (‘A Year of Looting Dangerously’, *The Independent*, 24 March 1996) “Numismatists value the Mir Zakah trove at over \$60 million in its entirety and the villagers of Mir Zakah sold their share of the haul to dealers by the kilo”.
- It is published in an article (‘Kabul Museum’, *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*) that the “Mir Zakah hoard consisted of over 12,000 Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Kushan coins from the 4th century BCE to the early 3rd century CE. The collection also included a large number of Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian, and other pre-Islamic and Islamic coins”.
- In a review of a book in French by Osmund Bopearachchi and Philippe, the reviewer Flandrin Wolfgang Fischer-Bossert observes in *American Numismatic Society Magazine* that the “hoard allegedly contained three to four tons of gold and silver coins and roughly 200 kg of jewellery, silver vessels, gemstones, and votive plaquettes”.
- In a paper entitled ‘Late Indian Punchmarked Coins in the Mir Zakah II Hoard’ published in Royal Numismatic Society website (www.royalnumismaticociety.org) Robert Tye observes that the “huge MZ-II hoard from south-east Afghanistan reportedly contained over three tons of coins from at least as early as the late fifth century BC to at least as late as the first century AD. Most probably it was a royal treasury which accumulated over several centuries, before apparently being dumped down a well”.
- In a note entitled ‘UNESCO’s fight against illicit traffic of cultural property, questions relating to restitution and needs of museums in developing countries’, Christian Manhart, Chief of Museums and Cultural Objects Section in UNESCO, states that the Mir Zakah treasure was offered to the organisation in 1993 by an Afghan art dealer in Peshawar for the amount of US \$ 600,000. But the world body was not willing to be seen as validating looting and illicit trade. Moreover it lacked the necessary funding, has neither storage nor conservation facilities. Even Museums were not ready to acquire them even secretly. Hence the coins disappeared and re-emerged some years later in the market in Switzerland and recent reports suggest that a large number of them still are in that country. Again they were offered for US\$1 million, and again UNESCO could not make the purchase and the silver coins disappeared. A smaller percentage was sent to the United States, where several hundred kilograms were melted down in order to produce fake jewellery;
- Frank L. Holt writes in an article entitled ‘The Marvels of Mir Zakah’ in *Saudi Aramco World* that in 1993 a Pakistani journalist spotted the now famous Alexander / elephant gold medallion in a potato sack bulging with treasures from Mir Zakah, managed to procure it from the owner and pass it on to a private collector in London.
- In the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (‘Looting and destruction in the Kabul Museum’, 23 September 1995) it is mentioned that the contents of the Mir Zakah hoard spanned four centuries and numerous civilizations from Rome to China. The most damaging statement is that while Middle Eastern collectors are looking for Islamic coins, the famed Buddha statue from Bamiyan is now in Japanese hands.



- More than one writer confirms the role the Japanese, English and Americans played in squirrelling the looted artefacts from Afghanistan, particularly the treasures from MZ–II paying millions of dollars.

The plunder of MZ–II treasures continued and began to flood the grey market of Peshawar. “It was here that Osmund first encountered the treasures of Mir Zakah in person” in February 1994 and saw so many coins, sack after sack, in a brief space of time. He says that he “began to sort the coins into groups according to the issuers, e.g. early Indian, Greek city states,



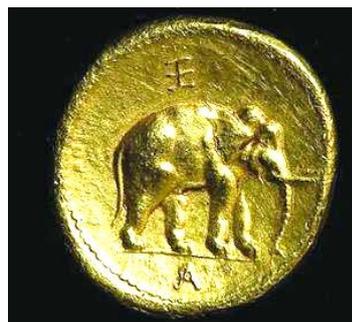
Seleucids, Indo-Greeks, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians, and Kushans”(Sunday Times, *op.cit.*). Bopearachchi admits that his knowledge of this hoard is limited to coins in private collections and the six sack full of coins, each weighing at least 50 kg. He believed that he had found in the Mir Zakah hoard the only gold medallion with the portrait of Alexander the Great and “that was in circulation while the great military leader was alive, which has been preserved to date” (<http://www.grreporter.info/en/>). He excitedly proclaimed that “It’s exactly Alexander, there is no doubt about that”. It is not clear

where he had seen the medallion. Probably it ought to be in the private collection in London where the medallion is said to be available now. It is also not clear who has provided the photograph of this medallion to various publications. It is said that travelling in the company of a French journalist and 12 bodyguards, Bopearachchi made his way to Mir Zakah village in 2004 probably to have the feel of the site and meet the locals who had the opportunity to see and pick up the coins from the now famous well. In the evenings, he would show them pictures of coins in the possession of a Japanese museum and ask them whether they recognized any in the album. (Sunday Times, *op.cit.*).

The details of the medallion of Alexander found in various sources are given below.

The medallion is made of gold alloy and weighs 16.75 gms and the die axis orientation is 12:00.

On the obverse, the head of Alexander covered with elephant’s scalp; he wears an aegis or the shield of Zeus and the ram’s horns of Ammon. The reverse shows an elephant walking to the right, with the letters BA said to mean *Basileos Alexandrow*. The medallion



is surmised to have been struck in India in Alexander’s life time after his victory over Indian king Porus on the banks of the Hydaspes River (= Jhelum) in 326 BCE. Bopearachchi assumes that a small number of such medallions were minted to commemorate this victory and were given as a gift to his generals and this is the only surviving example. Bopearachchi is tempted to label it as “the missing link that explained the baffling appearance of an Asian elephant on

coins minted in countries where there were none about” (<http://www.davecullen.com/forum/>). This specimen is inferred to have served as a “prototype for coins struck by Ptolemy using his image”.

The outcome of Bopearachchi’s study of this medallion was a book by him in association with Frank Holt --- ‘The Alexander Medallion: Exploring the Origins of a Unique Artefact’ (published by the authors, 2011). It is true that Bopearachchi’s identification was seen in positive light by his co-author Frank Holt (‘Ptolemy’s Alexandrian Postscript’ , *Saudi Aramco World*, Volume 57, No 6 , 2006) and

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Andrew Stewart (*Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993).

However, no theory or discovery is accepted without close scrutiny or criticism by discerning scholars. It is part of the game and Bopearachchi cannot be an exception to this reality. Besides labelling the medallion as "modern forgery", the attribution of the medallion to the most acclaimed Greek hero is also "contested" (See the review of the above book by Robert Bracey, in: *Numismatic Chronicle*, 2011).

Andrew M.Chugg argues in his paper ('is the Gold Porus Medallion a Lifetime Portrait of Alexander the Great?' in: <https://www.academia.edu/7105016>) that if it is genuine, it should be called as Porus medallion since "it bears the characteristic combination of AB and Xi monograms and because the elephant design on the reverse matches the elephant on some of the smaller silver Porus Medallions closely... [also] The gold Porus specimen seems to be in near mint condition".

The story of Mir Zakah treasure is yet to be told fully. As and when some numismatist comes across a rare coin from the hoard, we may expect unknown facts about Indo-Afghan history from the fifth century B.C., down to first century A.D.

[Photos courtesy: Mir Zakah well (exagorefsis.blogspot.com); view of part of the hoard (*G R Reporter*); examination of coins by Prof. Bopearachchi (exagorefsis.blogspot.com); Alexander medallion, forums.collectors.com).