

Penn Museum and Afghanistan

BY RICHARD
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PENN MUSEUM HAS LONG had a part in revealing Afghan archaeological history. In 1953, at Director Froelich Rainey's instigation, Rodney Young, Curator of the Mediterranean Section and Director of the Gordion exca-

vations, conducted excavations at the ancient city of Bactra, modern-day Balkh. Young was drawn to the site because the great city on the Oxus had featured in Alexander the Great's eastern adventures, before becoming the capital city of the Euthydemids in Hellenistic times, and then, according to the Romans, a fabulously rich place in the centuries after Christ. Young's excavations enabled him to phase the topographic outlines of the city, which he concluded were "three times as big as Gordion...and ten times as big as the mound of Troy, a city...not entirely without reputation" (*American Journal of Archaeology* 59 [1955]:267-276). Balkh-Bactra is but one small glimpse of the extraordinary archaeology of Afghanistan, a country that was for millennia an interface between East and West.

The Afghan war rugs from the Textile Museum of Canada, featured in the Penn Museum's new exhibition *Battleground: War Rugs from Afghanistan* (April 30–July 31, 2011), affirm the axiomatic place of this troubled country as a bridge between East and West, but from the standpoint of our era. These extraordinary rugs tell an indigenous story through their vivid and harrowing iconography of invasions over the past 30 years. What was once an uncomfortable story for British colonial forces in the earlier 20th century has become in modern times uncomfortable for first the Soviet Union, then, since 2001, for the coalition of NATO countries now entangled in a complicated struggle. These exquisite objects invite us to reflect, of course, on this struggle, but our greater hope is that this exhibition, like Rodney Young's excavations, will encourage our audiences to consider the extraordinary



Froelich Rainey (on camelback) in Afghanistan, 1952.
UPM Image # 48652

history and culture of this country. Iconographically—as I believe all visitors to this exhibition will agree—these war rugs are masterpieces by peoples who have for the most part been “without history” (i.e. unable to comment themselves in written texts) but continue to play an important role in on-going East-West relations. 🏠

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