

# Testimony of Dr. Soren Stark before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee on the Proposed Creation of a US-Uzbekistan MOU

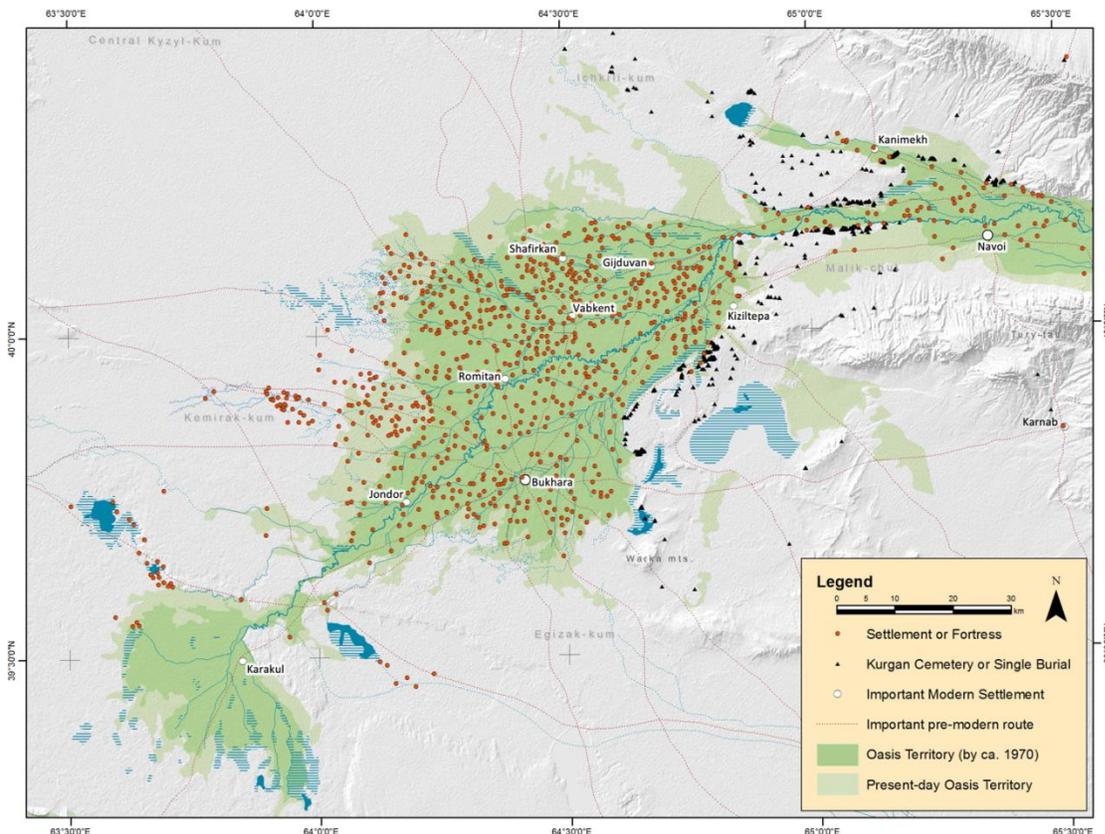
January 30, 2023

## 1. My Work Background in Uzbekistan

I am co-directing a joint Uzbek-American Archaeological Project that has operated in the Bukhara Region (*Uzbek-American Expedition to Bukhara/UzAmEB*) since 2011. In collaboration with the *National Center of Archaeology* (previously: *Institute of Archaeology*) at the *Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan* we have conducted and continue to conduct there archaeological surveys and excavations on several dozens of archaeological sites dating between the Final Bronze Age and the Middle Islamic period (ca. 1500 BCE – 1200 CE) in the Provinces of Bukhara and Navoi. With the exception of 2020, I have worked in the region in person every year, so I am quite familiar with practical conditions on the ground, the institutional/academic landscape, and specific threats from looting. On behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology, I present the following testimony in support of the proposed Memorandum of Understanding between the US and Uzbekistan for the protection of the latter's.

## 2. Threat of Uzbekistan's Archaeological Sites from Looting

Uzbekistan is exceptionally rich in archaeological sites and assemblages from the Paleolithic to the modern period. In the region of Bukhara alone many hundreds of sites are identified (Fig. 1).



Many of these sites are threatened by looting. A particular problem are illegal soundings by metal detectorists (the equipment is now easily available in Uzbekistan). Example: In the area where our work is currently concentrated—a landscape in the Kyzylkum desert just to the west of the present-day oasis with very important Bronze Age through Medieval sites (a large Final Bronze Age production center, a unique cluster of Hellenistic settlements, many Medieval sites, and the site of Varakhsha which housed the fabled palace of the early medieval rulers of Bukhara)—there are at least two “family businesses” which have in the last ca. 10 years systematically plundered many hundreds of hectares in and around archaeological sites (with many thousands of coins and other metal artifacts retrieved from their original contexts). They are ‘advised’ by a former schoolteacher in the region (from Jondor, now in Tashkent), who started to collect antiquities for his private collection many years ago and has a decent knowledge of the Russian-language academic literature, and therefore of the location, dating, and character of these sites. In 2021 I was shown around by two of these plunderers, which made it clear that this is a very well-organized enterprise: they know exactly where and what kind of material can be found, and use expensive modern four-wheel-drive cars to drive to sites which are otherwise difficult to reach (because of shifting sand dunes).

These activities are well-known to scholars and collectors in Bukhara and Tashkent. Of course, they can only happen with the knowledge and silent consent of local authorities. Unfortunately, there is a local, national, and international market for these artifacts. Some end up on the local bazaar in Bukhara (Fig. 2), others are systematically purchased by Uzbeki



Figure 2: Looted Material at Display in the Bazar of Bukhara. Left: Elements of middle Islamic metal vessels (10th-12th centuries), belt fittings and buckles (9th-12th century), and antique period arrow heads (2nd cent. BCE – 1st cent. CE). Right: Coins dating between centuries around turn of common era antiquity, the 5th-6th centuries, and the Islamic period, mixed with modern coins.

businessmen in Bukhara and Tashkent. In addition, many artifacts—especially coins—end up with coin dealers in the US and on *EBay* (random search: [https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?from=R40&trksid=p2334524.m570.11313&nkw=asbar+%2Bbukhara&sacat=0&LH\\_TitleDesc=0&odkw=asbar+%2Bcoin&osacat=0](https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?from=R40&trksid=p2334524.m570.11313&nkw=asbar+%2Bbukhara&sacat=0&LH_TitleDesc=0&odkw=asbar+%2Bcoin&osacat=0)).

### 3. Internal Protection of Uzbekistan’s Cultural Heritage

To the best of my knowledge, Uzbekistan has the legal framework to protect its cultural heritage. The problem remains local enforcement. For example, there is now less direct destruction of sites by new construction, and sites are no longer harvested in search for fertilizer for agricultural fields and by brick factories (which was a real problem some 20 years ago). However, there is still a lot of destruction going on. For example, significant parts of the few remaining section of Bukhara’s famous Late Antique/Early Medieval Oasis wall—a monumental Long Wall System, once encircling the entire oasis at a length of ca. 250 km—in form of a major gate structure were destroyed as recently as 2018 (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Remains of Bukhara’s Oasis Wall East of Kiziltepa.

### 4. Role of Import Restrictions by the U.S.

I see import restrictions as an indispensable part of a larger strategy. If imposed, they would signal to the Uzbeki government and the rest of the world that the US is serious about protecting Uzbekistan’s heritage. Just as important, however, is an MOU’s support for education about these issues on the local level. In tandem, import restrictions and increased internal efforts such as education would further decrease looting. Local communities are, at the moment, usually not aware of or uninterested in these issues. This could effectively be achieved in collaboration with local museums (see below).

## 5. Collaboration and International Exchange

Uzbekistan is open to foreign scientists and researchers studying its cultural resources, and making exhibits of its archaeological materials available to international scientific exchange. Our own project is a successful case in point. Our work in Uzbekistan is very well supported both on the local and on the national level. On the local level we collaborate with archaeologists who are specialists of the archaeology of the region as well as restorers from local museums. Also, one of my doctoral students was given full access to the storage rooms of the museum in Bukhara to work with heritage data which subsequently formed an important part of her doctoral thesis. On the national level our work has been actively supported by the leadership both of the *Archaeological Center at the Academy of Sciences* and the *National Museum* (both in Tashkent). First of all, we benefited from an amazing openness to provide export licenses for numerous samples – these include C14 samples, paleo-botanical samples, zoo-archaeological samples, glass and ceramic samples –, which is noteworthy, especially if compared to other countries, such as Turkey or Egypt. In addition, we repeatedly benefited from the openness of the leadership of the National Museum in Tashkent to provide information about (published and unpublished) materials in its fonds.

With regard to exhibits, I've recently discussed with the director of the *Ark Museum* in the citadel of Bukhara – visited by thousands of national and international tourists every year – the possibility of generating a new exhibit with our finds (which cover almost the entire history of the region) according to present-day pedagogical standards together with a printed museum catalogue and a website, and there was a great appreciation and openness to do so. Unfortunately, I was repeatedly unsuccessful in reaching out to the U.S. embassy in Tashkent in search for consultation about possible ways to support such an undertaking.

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