

The Current Conflict

DISCUSSING THE THREAT TO CULTURAL HERITAGE IN
AFGHANISTAN WITH DR. LAURA TEDESCO

When Dr. Laura Tedesco first arrived in Kabul on July 25, 2010, she did not fall in love with the city. “Kabul is a tough place to love,” she recalls. “It is like a complicated boyfriend, with so many things you like, and yet so many things you wish were different.” Since then, she has made almost fifty trips in nine years to Afghanistan and has made peace with the fact that some aspects of that country will be eternally inaccessible to a Westerner. And that is part of its beauty.



Dr. Laura Tedesco sitting on a plateau in Ghazni, Afghanistan. Photo courtesy of Laura Tedesco.

Laura, who is now back in South Carolina, had been hired by the US State Department to help guide cultural preservation projects in Afghanistan. An archeologist, she was tasked with identifying ancient Afghan sites in need of restoration. Over twelve years, the State Department, alongside international partners, invested \$15 million in archeological and cultural preservation in Afghanistan, including the restoration of the Herat Citadel, dating back to 330 BCE.

Because of her work in Afghanistan, Laura was invited to the White House in 2014 during the screening of *The Monuments Men* movie for President Barack Obama and his administration. Although the stellar cast attended the event, meeting Harry Ettlinger, “a real Monuments Man,”

is what made that evening a “memorable experience.” Witnessing President Obama’s genuine focus and interest on the subject validated Laura’s oftentimes lonely work, seven thousand miles away from her country and two small children.

With the withdrawal of US troops, the biggest threat to the cultural heritage of Afghanistan is not, in Laura’s view, the Taliban, but the flight of a population of caretakers that had been trained to look after its own cultural heritage—gifted young men and women, whom she met in their early 20s and shaped into skilled professionals committed to the preservation of culture, in the broadest sense of the term.

Laura’s time in Afghanistan is the subject of a new podcast series titled “Monuments Woman” by producer/director/writer Christian D. Bruun. Far from being a history lesson, these thirty-minute conversations between Laura and oral historian and writer George Gavrilis focus on the beauty of Afghanistan and its people and culture, as well as on transcendental questions, such as, “What does it mean to preserve the past for the sake of an uncertain future?”

