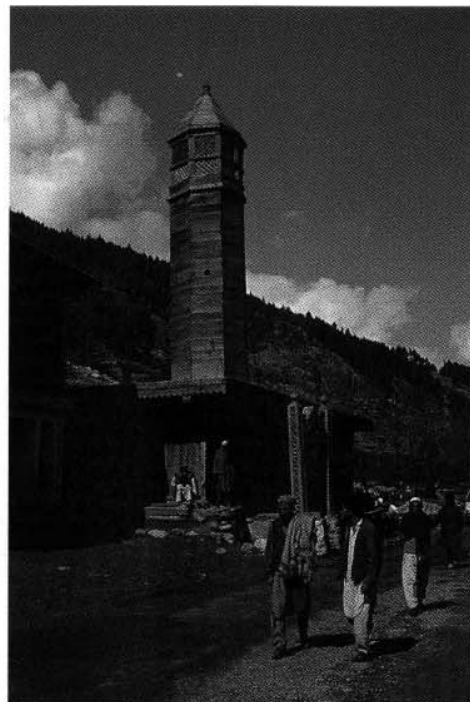


FOR CENTURIES, WE HAVE BELIEVED ourselves to be the rightful guardians of the world's culture; our museums are crammed full of third world objects that might have been destroyed had we not the foresight to preserve them for posterity. But more recently, we have had certain misgivings about our celebrated "robber barons" who gave their treasures to our state museums. To assuage our guilt, we have even made token amends by quietly, with the minimum of publicity, returning a few objects, such as the Royal Stool to the Ashanti people.

And yet, the steady stream of cultural objects being taken from their indigenous countries has not slowed down. Instead, what began as a trickle in the eighteenth century has turned into a flood in the twentieth. Our aristocratic benefactors acquired Assyrian reliefs, Mayan stelae, Egyptian pharaohs and other objects too numerous to list. As a result of inexpensive air fares providing us with the same opportunities to travel, many of us have demands for souvenirs as equally voracious as our forebears.

The exceptional *objets d'art* previously available to our ancestors are now mostly in state museums, but we are greedily purchasing all the leftovers – euphemistically called architectural salvage. This involves the total or partial destruction of a historic building and the sale of its constituent parts to foreign tourists and dealers. Especially popular are the carved doors, frames and fretwork screens that are such a feature of the traditional vernacular architecture of the Indian sub-continent. Accommodating local merchants will normally assist with the export of these objects. And for the convenience of those tourists who do not want the bother in arranging their export, there are local dealers who will export them to fashionable shops in the West End and in cities all over Europe.

I have recently returned from a trip to the north-west frontier of Pakistan, where I was advising the government on the preservation and listing of its historic buildings. To assist me I used Professor Dani's book, *Timber Architecture of Northern Pakistan*, an exemplary work of scholarship that has recorded most of the significant wooden buildings. The



In poverty-stricken Pakistan, villagers are selling off their architectural heritage bit by bit. Mosques and mansions are being torn down. The villagers' loss, says Giles Quarme, is ultimately our own

ability to preserve those buildings has not, however, extended beyond the pages of his book. I was devastated to see that most of the buildings he illustrates have been torn down and sold for salvage.

The small town of Bahrain, which is unique in the Swat Valley for its collection of carved woodwork was formerly the proud possessor of the Swat mosque. The carved columns and geometrically patterned pujali screens were of a quality more typical of the urbane and sophisticated grandeur of the province's capital Peshawar than of an isolated mountain valley. My visit revealed that the whole mosque had been torn down, the

best carved columns and all the screens already sold to a dealer. What was left was neatly stacked for sale. The mullah advised me that I could purchase one of the remaining columns for 3,000 rupees (£800). The other mosque in the town was partially dismantled. Lack of funds had delayed the demolition work, but once the columns and carvings had been sold it was just a matter of time before the work would be complete.

Further up the valley, the architecturally important Loi Jumate mosque at Kalan had been totally rebuilt, though at least some of the carved columns had been reused. It had also suffered the indignity of an extra floor. However, given that all the local members of the congregation were sporting kalashnikovs, I felt it politic not to enter into a detailed discussion on conservation ethics.

In Chitral, the story was slightly more encouraging. Although the mosques in the Kalash valley of Bumburet, Shikanande Pain and Shikanande Bala had been reconstructed without their carved work and the Bumburet mosque had lost its extraordinary wooden minaret, they did at least retain their original columns. The other mosques in the main Chitral Valley were mostly intact, but with the new main road under construction it was only a matter of time before they too would succumb to "modernisation".

The threat to the architecture of the province cannot just be laid at the feet of architectural salvage dealers. In part, the local mullahs and their congregation are responsible. They have an understandable desire to modernise their mosques; it was explained to me that they needed the money to pay for the new work which was "to the Glory of God and the Prophet".

Their remoteness previously protected the valleys of Chitral, Swat and Hunsa from the depredations of tourist and antique dealer alike. With the new roads providing greater accessibility, the threat to the indigenous art and culture of the area encroaches at an ever increasing rate. Of course, new roads bring wealth and economic activity, including tourism, to these poor and underdeveloped areas and should be welcomed for the benefits they will bring to the people. However,

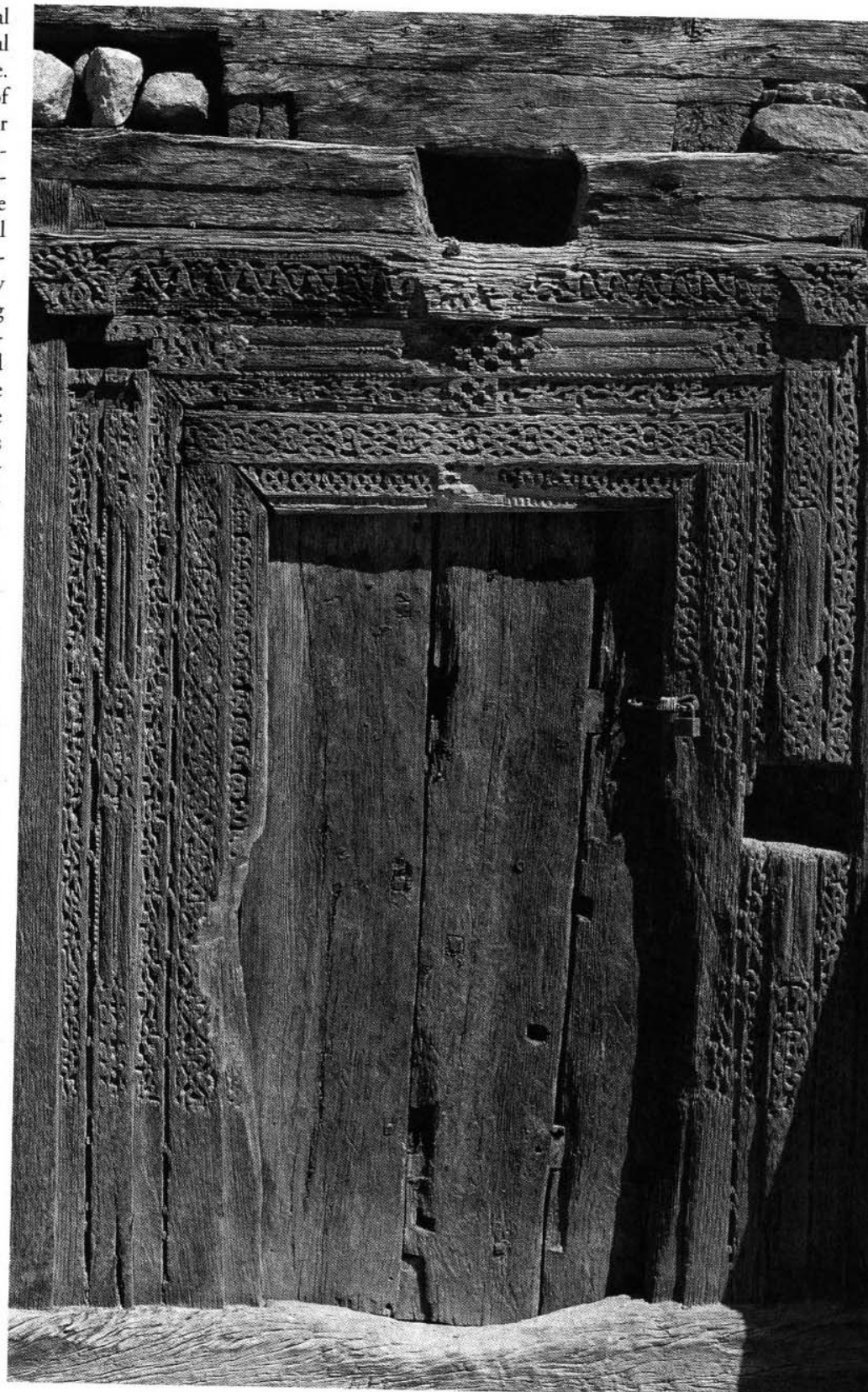
GILES QUARME
ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY/HOLMES

the sale of the area's cultural and architectural heritage will deprive it of the very special qualities that attract tourists in the first place.

My colleague, Farook Kahn, the director of the project management unit responsible for the conservation and listing of historic buildings in the province, explained that education and not legislation was the answer; large areas of the province lay within the tribal areas where Pakistani law either did not apply or could not be enforced. It would only be possible to achieve results by raising awareness of the issues rather than by coercion. If demand for the objects from abroad could be slowed down, then there might be a reasonable chance of success. However, the opening up of the tribal areas to mass tourism inevitably provided an enormously increased threat to local culture and it would only be later that the benefits of tourism would accrue.

The destruction of Pakistan's timber heritage is a microcosm of what is happening all over the Indian sub-continent. Despite the conscientious effort of conservationists in India and Pakistan, they have neither the resources nor finance to stop this traffic. In Peshawar, the recent demolition and sale of one of the famous mansions of the Sethi Mohallah has galvanised the educated middle classes to take steps to protect their indigenous architecture, even though they do not have extensive conservative legislation. But in the mountains, where local people are faced with grinding poverty, the choice between feeding your family and selling part of your house for a "mess of pottage" is an unenviable one to make.

Britain pursues an enlightened policy of preserving objects of national importance in their historic settings. It is time we took a similar attitude abroad and left architectural salvage in its proper historical and cultural setting. The architectural heritage of the Indian sub-continent is at no less risk of extinction than the snow leopard, Bengali tiger or African elephant. We do not allow foreign tourists to strip our buildings of their architectural features; we should help other countries to protect their buildings – if for no other reason than their loss is ultimately our own. □



Trafficking in treasures

This timber minaret (opposite) and carved door frame (above) are typical of the architecture of the north-western province of Pakistan. The export of such treasures to Europe is a tragedy for the country's architectural heritage