

Taxila: Centuries Old Monuments Damaged by Stone-Crushing Plants

It feels like it's almost every week we're reporting on a heritage site somewhere in the world coming under threat from land developers or big industry. Taxila, in the Punjab province of Pakistan - which contains fragile ruins dating back as far as 2,600 years - is the latest, and the reason is almost laughable: local plants digging and blasting for gravel, of all things. Seriously, were the prize a precious resource like oil or gas you could almost understand. But surely chucking a new bed of chips on folks' driveways isn't a matter of immense urgency, worth risking the destruction of centuries-old monuments?



Okay, so it's not as simple as that, and lots of jobs are undoubtedly dependent on the plants. But what price can be put on a finite resource like a country's physical heritage? Not an especially high one in this instance, it seems, because the Pakistani powers-that-be have practically invited the predicament. Taxila is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and has been protected under Pakistani Federal law since 1982. Yet, presumably under pressure from the gravel mining industry, officials have repeatedly reduced the borders of the conservation zone, in 1984, 1986, and 1989, to allow heavy trucks and huge machines practically onto the doorstep of ancient Buddhist temples and stupas.



Every major monument in Taxila has shown signs of fractures and stresses from the shockwaves emitted by blasting and quarrying, according to a Pakistan Environment Protection Agency report, quoted on the website of Pakistan's oldest English-language newspaper Dawn. "Continuous quarrying and blasting in close proximity of these ancient sites for the last many decades have caused substantial loss to these monuments," it reads. "A slow degradation can be observed in all 24 excavated archaeological sites and monuments of Taxila valley, cracks and inclination in the structures are quite visible." Even the Taxila Museum has suffered, with shock waves causing precious artifacts to fall off shelves and break.

The Pakistan EPA has made a strong appeal for all work in the area to cease immediately, and for the stone crushers to vacate the area. It's their hope that the land, specifically the Margalla Hills range, can be turned into a national park, and developed with public facilities - running and cycle tracks and the like - giving people a vested interest in the area. How easy gravel-hungry big-business will prove to shift remains to be seen.

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By Malcolm Jack

Malcolm Jack is a freelance arts and entertainment journalist based in Glasgow, Scotland. He graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2004 with an MA Honours Degree in History.

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