

Baltistan in 1891 and 1912: The Smithsonian's Baltistan Collections from two Expeditions by American Naturalist William Louis Abbott

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an important group of unpublished ethnographic and archival materials deriving from two expeditions to Baltistan by the American naturalist collector William Louis Abbott (1860-1935), the first in 1891-1892 and the second in 1912. This paper presents Abbott as a particular type of scientific explorer (the American “naturalist”), re-assesses the importance of this region to him and to Smithsonian scientists of the time, and publishes here for the first time a record of his observations and ethnographic collections from Baltistan. These ethnographic collections, alongside archival correspondence and field notes, form a little-known resource at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. This paper also summarizes the role Abbott and other “naturalist” collectors of this period played within the history of anthropology and museums, and points to some of the many new 21st-century uses of “legacy” collections and records of the kind he assembled about this region. Present-day museums often reach out to the descendants of peoples among whom such historic collections were made, inviting them to help interpret and display these artifacts. Museum collections can also thereby help preserve endangered cultural traditions.

Key Words: **Baltistan, William Louis Abbott, Archival Materials, Smithsonian, Expeditions**

Introduction

This paper introduces an important group of unpublished ethnographic and archival materials deriving from two expeditions to Baltistan by the American naturalist collector William Louis Abbott (1860-1935), the first in 1891-1892 and the second in 1912. The paper was developed using only museum and archival study, supplemented by Taylor’s brief interviews with Balti participants at a workshop held in Islamabad (April 2017). Certainly future field studies in Baltistan would add much more to the information presented here. Nevertheless, given the relative paucity of historic data about the ethnography of Baltistan, and particularly its material culture, the collection and archival record summarized here is well worthy of this record. In general, we can also profitably assess collections in light of goals of the collector who assembled them, and that person’s

principles of collecting and documentation. Consequently, this paper¹ also summarizes the role Abbott and other “naturalist” collectors (i.e., experts in “natural history” which in America includes anthropology and geology as well as biology) played during this period for the history of anthropology and museums. It concludes by pointing to some of the many new 21st-century uses of “legacy” collections and records, of the kind Abbott assembled about this region.

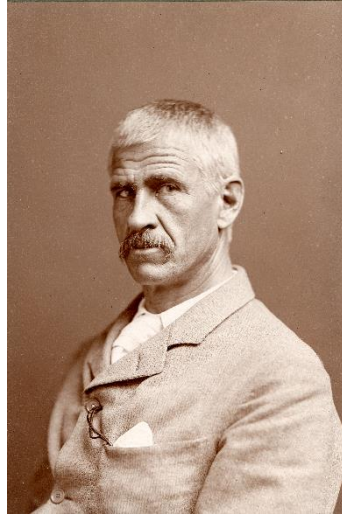


Figure 1. William Louis Abbott (1860-1935). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

At the time of his death in 1936, Dr. William Louis Abbott had the distinction of being the largest single donor of collections to the United States National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution). This millionaire Philadelphia native, who learned but never had to practice medicine (M.D., U. Pennsylvania, 1884), eschewed publicity and published almost nothing himself. This paper is largely drawn from the author’s archival research and compilation of Abbott’s widely scattered field-notes and correspondence (see Taylor, *in press*), primarily with his family and with Smithsonian officials, regarding his lifelong series of expeditions which began in East Africa, and continued in South and Central Asia. Many of his greatest collecting years were spent in the tropics of Southeast Asia before returning again to the Indian Himalayas.² William Louis Abbott’s collecting and donating were entirely self-financed, since at the age of 26 (in 1886) Abbott received a large inheritance upon the death of his father. His papers are now found in two of the Smithsonian’s major archives (National Anthropological Archives, and the separate Smithsonian

¹ Some information presented here about Abbott’s background and that of his Smithsonian correspondents is drawn from material previously presented in regional reports on Abbott’s Indonesian, Thai, and Madagascar collections (Taylor 2002; Taylor 2014; 2015a, 2015b) and on his Turkestan expedition of 1893-1894 (Taylor 2016), as well as a broader survey of collections from Kashmir and Ladakh (Taylor 2017). This paper adds new information for the cultural history of Baltistan.

² All transcriptions of original archival correspondence are from the 4-part compilation, (Taylor, *in press*). Original documents within Smithsonian archives can be located within Abbott’s correspondence by referencing the date and correspondents’ names as given in the text. Letters Abbott sent “home” were to his mother, S.F. Abbott.

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Archives which include early Registrar's records for the National Museum of Natural History), and in field records stored in the Smithsonian's Mammals Library and its Botany Library; all four of these repositories contain archival material relating to his travels in Baltistan. These archives and the biological and ethnographic collections represent an under-utilized and little known research resource for the cultural history of that region.

The American Naturalist

Information about Abbott's collecting mission and purposes can be inferred from his archival correspondence and field notes, alongside the collections he assembled. As Taylor (2015, p. 29-31) has noted, Abbott considered the role of the naturalist collector as separate from that of the naturalist who was a curator and scientist. Just as biologists "wrote up" descriptions of the new species of birds and mammals he collected, he seems to have expected ethnologists (not himself) to describe and study the ethnographic materials. In a 1911 essay "The American Hunter-Naturalist," published in the popular magazine *The Outlook*, the U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt praised the typical unpaid volunteer spirit of America's explorers and naturalists. Yet he compared Abbott unfavorably with naturalist and author Charles Sheldon, upbraiding Abbott for recording but not publishing his notes:

It is exasperating to think of certain of our naturalists and hunter-naturalists the value of whose really extraordinary achievements will wholly or in part die with them unless they realize the need of putting them on paper in the proper form. [...]

Dr. Abbott's feats as a naturalist and explorer in Africa and in Asia have been extraordinary, but they have not been of more than the smallest fraction of the value that they should have been, simply because they have not been recorded. There are very few men alive whose experiences would be of more value than his, if they were written out (Roosevelt, 1911, p. 855).

Efforts by Abbott's Smithsonian correspondents encouraging him to publish formal accounts of his expeditions were to no avail, though Abbott continued an extensive personal, handwritten correspondence. On March 2, 1896, for example, mammalogist F.W. True sent Abbott a letter following up on suggestions from Smithsonian Assistant Secretary Goode, about preparing "some account of the results of your explorations in Africa and Asia published in the Report of the Museum." True offered Abbott an outline of such a narrative. Sending with his letter a copy of W.W. Rockhill's (1895) "Notes on the ethnology of Tibet: based on the collections in the U.S. National Museum," which had recently been published by the Smithsonian, the mammalogist inquired whether Abbott might consider authoring a similar account of his travels including Kashmir and Ladakh, which could be published alongside papers like those True himself had published on mammals (True 1895) and other papers then still in preparation on the region's birds (Richmond 1896) and its butterflies and moths (Holland 1895).

In this letter, True also referred to Abbott's correspondence with the Smithsonian's curator of anthropology, Otis Mason, about material he was sending from Kashmir. Mason's research on basketry weaving techniques within his studies of the evolution of human societies encouraged Abbott to assemble collections of basketry and plaiting wherever he traveled. True proposed that Abbott author this multi-part narrative of his collection, for which "Each separate expedition would be taken up in turn, and the scientific results in every connection dwelt on at sufficient length to bring out their importance." Into this narrative, the various zoologists could insert lists of species, and specialist reports "on the new forms discovered by you."

Assistant Secretary Goode must also have written to him directly on this (original letter not located); Abbott responded to him from Trang in lower Siam (Goode to Abbott, July 15, 1896), "I must thank you very much for your kind letter of last January, in which you spoke of publishing some of my work in book form. I sent you from Penang a month ago, the notes of my Turkestan trip, they are the only notes of any of my trips that I had with me & have mislaid the others." That field journal of Abbott's travels via the Ladakh route to Turkestan is in fact the only such journal among Abbott's papers (Taylor, 2016); other expeditions are known from his archived correspondence, object labels, and collections, but no field journals.

From his Baltistan expeditions, in the absence of any field journals, we have Abbott's correspondence to his family and to museum scientists about his expedition, portions of which are quoted below in discussing the wider regional context or the interpretation of objects he collected. More broadly, we find among his archival correspondence a letter written to Smithsonian anthropologist Otis Mason, upon Abbott's return to the Vale of Kashmir in April 1892, looking back on and assessing his first Baltistan expedition and its results:

Dear Sir,

I forwarded a box to the Smithsonian a few days ago, & trust before the lapse of many months it will reach its destination. There are a number of things for your department, but not nearly so many as I had hoped. Kashmir proper is too saturated with Hindu civilization & British imitation to yield satisfactory ethnological objects. I passed the winter in Baltistan, or Little Tibet, as it was called in the older geographies. There the Tibetan influence is more marked than the Hindu. But the majority of the people are too dreadfully poor to have many articles, & the [illegible] ones come or came from Kashmir proper. Was up there Ibex & Markhor shooting with very poor success. The country is covered with immense mountains, barren & treeless. The scanty population struggles for existence in the deep ravines or valleys, which themselves are from 8,-11,000 feet above sea level. It can scarcely be considered an attractive region, & I saw it at its worst in mid winter. But the wild & rugged scenery, hugh mountains, deep gorges repaid me for my trip. Several of the largest glaciers in the world excepting those of Alaska exist there. [...] The inhabitants of every valley differs [*sic*] more or less from those its neighbors, in costume, & probably customs, & language, nature has so separated them— & the appearance of the inhabitants considerably. I sent several articles of costume mostly the labels will explain these sufficiently (W.L. Abbot to Otis T. Mason, April 11, 1892).

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Interestingly, this letter to the Smithsonian anthropologist confirms that his ethnographic collecting activity was subsidiary to his primary purpose, a combination of sport-hunting and scientific collecting, to shoot ibex and markhor (“markhoor”), two types of rare Himalayan wild goat prized by sport-hunters. The letter also presents one of many indications that Abbott was seeking the most isolated and remote areas, with as few influences of civilization (including Hindu and British civilizations) possible, in the remote Himalayas of Baltistan as he would later do also in remote jungles of Southeast Asia. We see here his evolutionist perspective, seeking societal forms that survive like “living fossils” from an earlier era, a common meme among nineteenth-century collectors and explorers. One also finds in this letter a theme repeated many times in Abbott’s nine expeditions to the Himalayan regions between 1891 and 1916 – the idea that for people interested in either biological or cultural evolution, the presence of isolated valleys provide opportunities for independent evolution and divergence of both biological species and cultural forms. This made such places worthy of collecting and comparative study for the development of theories of the evolution of biological species as well as societal forms, within the evolutionary approaches of anthropologists at that time.

The historic context of Baltistan in 1891 and 1912: The Great Game

Baltistan in the nineteenth century represented an important strategic holding due to its location along British India’s northern frontier, which included several prominent mountain passes that were accessible and utilized by Silk Road merchants for centuries. The region has long been a place for migrant settlers to engage in economic opportunities (Jettmar, 1990, p. 802). Chinese sources from the first century AD record a densely populated Buddhist state ruled in the Western Himalayas, whose writing was in Sanskrit and whose rulers emulated the style of Kusana emperors (Chakravarti, 1953-54, pp. 229-31; Pelliot & Hambis, 1959, p. 91). Brahmi inscriptions dating to the seventh century AD in the Shigar Valley also describe a primarily Buddhist population during the first millennium AD in Baltistan, although cultural and religious practices were not uniform within the dozens of inhabited mountain passes and valleys (Jettmar, 1990, pp. 804-805; Minorsky, 1970, p. 93). One of the most prevalent religious practices in the region was *Bonchos*, which divided the world into three realms: the upper realm of the gods, the worldly realm of humans, and the lower realm of the water-spirits. Both the upper and lower realms were ruled by kings, while the human realm contained a large tree, called the “earth-mother”, whose branches reach the godly realm and whose roots are firmly entrenched in the water-spirits world (Francke, 1986, pp. 40-42). August Hermann Francke’s 1907 missionary account of Baltistan notes that every village he encountered in Baltistan told a slightly different version of this three- realm relationship as part of their local history (Francke, 1986, p. 43), even as these valley communities were loosely connected politically through marriage and shared similar religious, cultural, and linguistic linkages (Zain, 2010,

pp. 181-183). It appears that by the fourteenth century, when Sufi Islam was introduced to Baltistan from Persia and Central Asia (soon after becoming the predominant religious expression in Baltistan), local religious practices remained geographically diverse (Osmaston et al., 1997, p. 189).

Nomadic groups from Tibet were also present in Baltistan as early as the fifth century AD to engage in commercial opportunities with local Mon and Dard farmers. Over time, these interactions led to marital partnerships between Tibetan merchants and local communities, which Francke (1986) argues were the origins of a powerful Tibetan Empire that controlled economic and religious activity throughout much of Central Asia until the sixteenth century. There remained in Baltistan, however, a spirited local resistance to foreign powers since at least the eighth century AD, when Chinese political incursions first entered the region. Balti resistance was particularly pronounced during the Tibetan era, and continued local resistance during the sixteenth century was one of the reasons for the decline of Tibetan influence in the Western Himalayas (Francke, 1986). The retreat of Tibetan influence in Baltistan provided opportunities for other groups to permeate into the economically lucrative mountain passes. The northern trade routes linking Central Asia to China were especially profitable for Sikh and Dogra merchants, which inspired repeated attacks on independent Balti valley states throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

From 1839 until the 1860s, Dogra and Sikh military forces competed for control in Baltistan. After the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-1846), a portion of Baltistan seceded from Sikh and Dogra control to the British East India Company and became part of the princely state of British India known as Jammu and Kashmir. The British continued to affirm Baltistan as part of Jammu and Kashmir until Pakistan independence in 1947, however the actual political situation locally was murkier than British claims at the time (Bakshi, 1997, p. 158; Kaul & Kaul, 2004, p. 88; Sökefeld, 2014, pp. 112-116). Abbott arrived in Baltistan in November of 1891 during a period of heightened political and diplomatic Anglo-Russian imperial tensions often referred to as the 'Great Game'. British and Russian mistrust derived from mutual concerns over economic and military expansion in Central and South Asia (Ewans, 2012; Ingram, 1984). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Russian inroads into the Karakoram and the western Himalayas led to energetic British political disputes concerning their colonial strategy going forward (Adelman & Aron, 1999). In Britain, Conservatives championed the "Forward Policy", which argued for expansion and annexation of territories bordering British India. The Indian Commander-in-Chief, Frederick Roberts, argued in an 1886 Memorandum that the Russian effort of territorial advancement in the 'northwestern frontier' required a new policy approach (Agha, 2001, p. 14):

It is of such vital importance that we should get hold of the tribes, that I strongly advise a reconsideration of the policy which has guided us during the last 38 years, and which has resulted in our knowing little more about our neighbours in the hills, than we did when first we occupied the Panjab, and in our being absolutely uncertain as to whose side they would be upon, in the impending struggle between Russia and England. Such an unsatisfactory state of affairs should not be allowed to continue longer (Roberts Memorandum, 1886).

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Britain established the Gilgit Agency in 1889 to monitor the northern princely states of Gilgit, Hunza, and Nagar.³ Gilgit Agency officials reported to the British Resident in Srinagar and were equipped with military forces from Jammu and Kashmir, who frequently interacted with valley communities in Baltistan on behalf of British economic interests (Schofield, 2003, pp. 12-13). While preparing for what would become his first trip into Baltistan during the summer of 1891, Abbott describes the districts of Gilgit, Astor, and Gurais as being closed to Europeans due to Russian attempts to “advance their boundary towards the Kashmir & Afghan frontier, so the British are preparing for the war which must one day come, probably in the distant future however.”⁴

The Forward Policy required significant investments in administrative and military resources, which British Liberal politicians argued would leave India vulnerable (Hopkirk, 2006, pp. 358-359). These investments included economic subsidies to tributary communities in Baltistan, which were classified generally into three geo-ethnic groupings: Dards; Pathans and Kakars; and Baluch (Agha, 2001, p. 14; Qayyum, 2013, p. 42).⁵ Bangash (2010) suggests that British rhetoric surrounding the Russian threat in Baltistan was perhaps exaggerated. Nearly all of the mountain passes leading in and out of Baltistan were narrow and impassible for half the year due to snow (“On the Hindustan side of the mountains the fall is tremendous.”),⁶ which meant a military invasion from the north would have been unlikely (Lockhart, 1889, p. 275).⁷ Political hyperbole emphasizing the Russian threat remained a useful British message however for justifying territorial expansion and control in Baltistan (Qayyum, 2013, p. 26).

Abbott as Museum Collector and Ethnographic Observer in Baltistan

British and Russian officials both undertook several cartographic, reconnaissance, and eventual road-building campaigns to complement their expansionary efforts in Baltistan (Hopkirk, 1992; Meyer, 1999). Surveying and mapping expeditions led by scientific teams and adventurers contributed to a growing body of colonial knowledge about local communities, customs, and space. These expeditions aided in the development of museum collections and scientific knowledge (Edney, 1997, p. 319), in addition to their political objectives to map colonial frontiers and

³ The Gilgit Agency was originally founded in 1877 before closing in 1881. It wasn't until 1889 that the Agency was re-established in 1889 with Algernon Durand as the Political Agent (Qayyum 2013, footnote 37; Ingram 1993). The Agency divided the region into four sub-units: *Gilgit, Ladakh, Skardu* and *Kargil* (Lorimer, 1976, p. 226).

⁴ In the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838-1842) and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), Britain attempted to control the Afghan territory in order to cut off Russian encroachment into India. In 1919, the Third Anglo-Afghan War transpired, but lasted only from May to August (Personal Correspondence from W.L. Abbott to S.F. Abbott, Patalwan [*sic=Pahlwan*] Nullah. Central Kashmir, July 18, 1891).

⁵ Gilgit officials grouped together numerous communities who inhabited the region from Dir to Kohistan as Pathans (Agha 2001, 14).

⁶ Personal Correspondence from W.L. Abbott to S.F. Abbott, Skardu, Baltistan, January 25, 1892.

⁷ Although Abbott notes that “there is but little snow, all passes up to 14,000 are passable all winter” near Skardu, where he set up camp during the 1891-92 winter months (Personal Correspondence from W.L. Abbott to S.F. Abbott, Skardu, Baltistan, January 25, 1892).

inquire about exploitable natural resources (Schmitt and Glaubrecht, 2013, p. 339). Botanical and faunal collection occurred during these exploratory expeditions, often with the assistance of local informants (Raj, 2007). As an American naturalist and ethnographic collector, Abbott's activities in Baltistan benefit ongoing scholarship about the role that such collectors played in the history and development of museums and anthropology.

Abbott's first expedition to Baltistan (Figure 2) began in November 1891, as he was awaiting a Chinese passport (requested from the American minister at Peking) to visit Yarkand and Kashgar the following year. On November 1, 1891, he wrote from Srinagar to Smithsonian Assistant Secretary G. Brown Goode, "Am now about starting for Baltistan, the northern province of Kashmir, & pass the winter," listing some of the rare game animals he hoped to shoot in Baltistan, including ibex, urial, and markhor, since he was having such poor results hunting in the rest of Kashmir. He followed up with another letter to Goode the next day confirming that he had given up on his earlier idea of traveling to Africa during that period and repeating that he hoped to visit Yarkand and Turkestan the following summer (as he did in fact, see Taylor, 2016), seeking his help in obtaining permission to enter China, then set out for Skardu. From Skardu he set out on collecting expeditions to areas around Askole in the Braldu Valley, camping and collecting for weeks at a time before returning to Skardu in January, 1892. Abbott headed northwest near Haramosh for another outing in February and early March of that same year, before making the 26 day, 350 mile march back to the Vale of Kashmir. Arriving on April 2, 1892, he on that day wrote the letter to Otis Mason, quoted above, assessing this first expedition Balt.

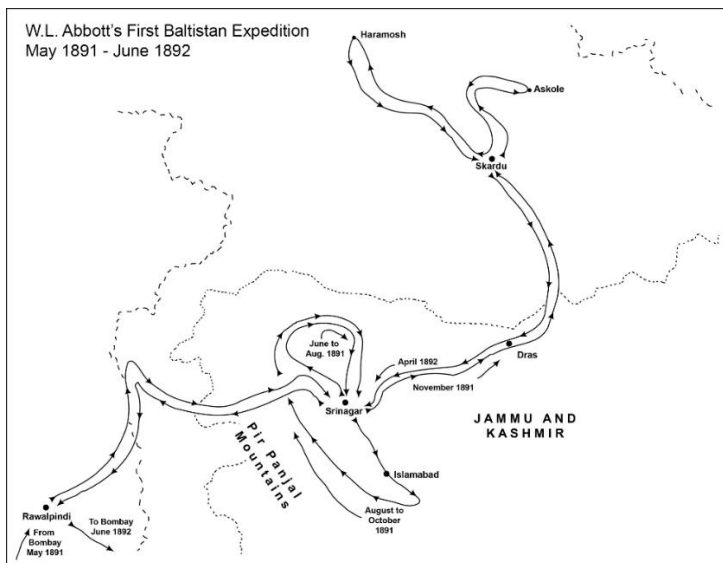


Figure 2. Abbott's first expedition to Baltistan, 1891-1892.

Abbott was initially unimpressed by the Baltistan landscape, probably in part due to a scarcity of large game in the region, which "was almost exterminated by

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the severe winter of a year ago [1890-91]" (W.L. Abbott to G.B. Goode, November 1, 1891).

Am in midst of very different surroundings to those when I last wrote you, a more complete change in natural scenery could not be imagined; instead of the forestclad hill sides & villages surrounded by groves & orchards, gorgeous in their autumnal tints, here are bare stony hillsides, or rocky gullies, scarcely a vestige of vegetation—nothing growing without irrigation—an almost rainless region. The scenery in the Sind valley leading up from the Vale of K. was very fine, especially at Sonamarg (lit. golden meadow), splendid mountains on every side buried in heavy snow for most part, & the narrow plain below where the peasants were threshing wheat by the primitive means of driving bullocks over it. (W.L. Abbott to S.F. Abbott, on the road to Skardu, November 9, 1891).

During his second expedition to the Himalayas and Central Asia (1893-1894), two years after his initial trip into Baltistan, Abbott learned about the onset of Madagascar's war of independence from France. Upon hearing this news Abbott rushed to Calcutta and bought supplies to take with him to Madagascar, where he volunteered to fight alongside the indigenous Hova (Merina) in their unsuccessful battle to maintain independence from the French (see Taylor, 2015a), before returning again to Kashmir (September 1895 to January 1896), his third trip in the region. His letters home are filled with evidence of his anti-colonial stance. From a collecting station in southern Thailand, between his third and fourth trips to the Himalayas, Abbott received news in May 1896 of the recent victory of indigenous Ethiopian forces over Italian troops in the battle of Adwa, where an estimated 7,000 Italian troops were massacred. Using the derogatory American slang word "Dagos" (meaning Spaniards or Italians), Abbott wrote to his mother on May 6, 1896:

Was immensely pleased with the news of the defeat of the Dagos in Abyssinia. I wish every white man in the continent of Africa was butchered the same way—none of them have any business there—only to rob, plunder & steal—& what is more nearly every one who has been in Africa admits the truth of it when he is cornered up—unless it be some lying hypocrite [...]. Every European power is looking for some weaker nation which it may bully & rob with impunity [...]

By 1893-1894, Abbott had passed through Ladakh on his way to and from Chinese Turkestan. This was followed by a short four-month expedition to Srinagar and Bandhipur from September 1895 to January 1896. Abbott then returned to Kashmir again from June to July 1897, between the first two of his trips to Southeast Asia. After that visit, he briefly rushed back to America to join in fighting the Spanish-American war (1898), then returned to Southeast Asia and began an intense and productive decade of tropical collecting in the schooner *Terrapin*, mostly in Indonesia until 1909 (see Taylor & Aragon, 1991; Taylor & Hamilton, 1993; Taylor, 2002).

Abbott's fifth trip to the Himalayas extended from May to December 1910, more interested now in scientific collecting than trophy game hunting, and at age 50 hoping to recover some of the health he had lost in years of tropical collecting. His interest in the comparative study of biological speciation (and ethnic

diversity), within a large region's separated valleys, led him to collect in a series of radiating expeditions to surrounding areas. Though his collecting focus in his fifth through ninth trips seems entirely to be on biological specimens, his ethnographic observations and fieldnotes continued. His explorations of the valleys in Kashmir included the central Karakoram and the Deosai Plains (May-July), the Wangat (July) and Sind Valleys (August), before returning to Srinagar in September. Then he set out for areas east of Srinagar (October-December), returning to Srinagar in January 1911 before setting out to collect in the Lolab Valley, north of the Wular Lake in the northeastern part of the Vale of Kashmir. After a brief return to Srinagar, he traveled south to Khistwar from March 1911 until July 1911.

Though Abbott's travels in this period cannot properly be considered an expedition to Baltistan, we can consider that his visit to the Deosai Plains from May to July of 1910 surely must have included some parts of the region within the boundaries of present-day Baltistan. He also records in a letter of July 12, 1910, visiting a village with some Balti inhabitants. This tangential visit to Baltistan, alongside his earlier expedition of 1891-1892, surely encouraged his idea of another expedition to Baltistan in 1912. Abbott's sixth trip to the Himalayas was therefore essentially his second expedition to Baltistan. It had begun by July 1912 and continued to December that year, though there is a gap in his correspondence in all repositories examined, from January 1912 (when he had stopped in London en route to India) until his next letter written July 25 at "Dassoo. Tormik nullah" [*Dasso, Turmik nullah*], Baltistan. He returned from Baltistan to Srinagar in November, from which he left (December 1912) for Germany, having received his permission to visit Ladakh beginning in the following May.

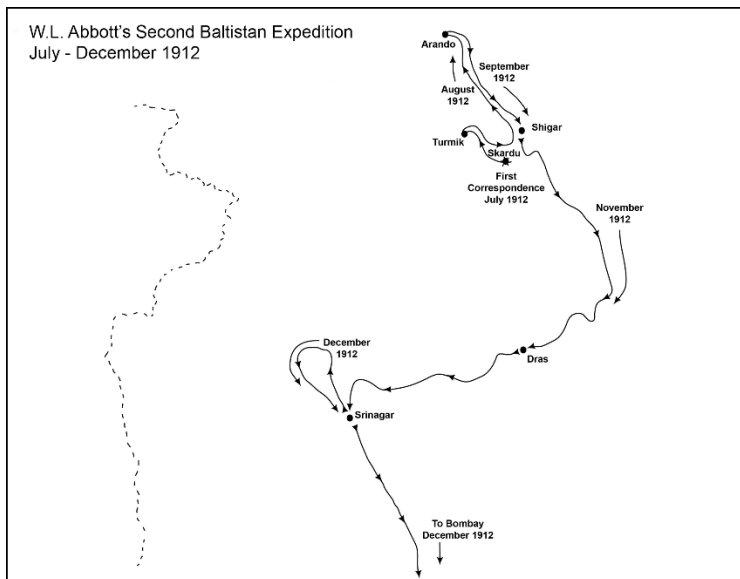


Figure 3. Abbott's second expedition to Baltistan, in 1912.

Abbott's mother had passed away sometime between when he saw her in London ("very feeble," as he wrote in a letter from there Jan. 20, 1912), and his return to India, so his previous frequent correspondence to her ends, leaving us

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without the detailed accounts of his travels and observations that we have for earlier trips. From Srinagar on Dec. 15, 1912, Abbott responds to a letter he has just received from his sister Gertrude, telling her he is “glad the funeral went off satisfactorily.” But he adds, “On no account ever do anything of the sort with my body if I die abroad, as in all probability I shall. Let my body lie where I die, & no religious service.” The last sentence quoted, however, was completely crossed out (perhaps by his sister Gertrude), sometime before it arrived with his other family correspondence donated by her to the Smithsonian’s archives.

By the time that Abbott returned to Baltistan in 1912, he had come to enjoy and admire the region. Writing to his sister, Gertrude, Abbott’s descriptions of his own engagement with the Balti landscape and its people often oscillates between reflective and poetic:

Left Skardu on July 20th intending to march up the East bank of the Shigar Valley. But the rivers are extremely high due to the melting glaciers by the warm summer, & we found a high rocky spur entirely impassable for the loaded coolies, so there was nothing to do but march back to the Indus which we had crossed that morning by boat. Then rather than go back to Skardu I determined to march down the Indus Valley, 4 marches, to this nullah, the Tormik. It contains the most easterly jungle (forest) north of the Indus. Except that it is pretty hot, it was an interesting march. It is 21 years since I did it, & that was in winter. The road is rather better than it was then & is now not very bad. Ladders in one place only. It is very wild & beautiful in a way. The great naked mountains on both sides [*sic*] the narrow valley or gorge. Every few miles a beautiful patch of green where a side nullah enters & a village is placed. All cultivation is irrigated, & the Baltis terrace up the hill sides at these points in a succession of narrow steps or terraces—frequently as high as broad—5-15 feet. Here they grow the most surprising crops of grain, now yellowing for the harvest. There are quantities of apricots, poplars, walnuts & willows—& these green oases are beautiful fertile spots amongst the surrounding deserts of stones & naked mountains. This nullah is a pleasant surprise. It flows into the Indus through a narrow gorge 1500 feet below. Up here is the first village Dassoo—& higher up still where the valley widens out, there are wide terraces of grain, grassy slopes—& fruit trees growing luxuriantly. Higher up still is scrub & birch trees—11,000 feet or more. I walked up this a.m. for a “look see”. The head of the valley is snow & glaciers, & like all these streams, the torrent is rushing down—pea soup, with the discharge from the glaciers, fairly clear in morning, thick as soup in afternoons. (W.L. Abbott to G. Abbott, July 25, 1912).

Though his ability to explore the region as a sport hunter or collector scientist benefitted from Britain’s colonial presence in Baltistan,⁸ Abbott often lamented the effects of modernity that resulted from colonial encroachment. His expedition into Baltistan occurred during a period of rapid change and development in Kashmir⁹ and Ladakh; Abbott worried that colonial programs aimed at modernizing the region including railroads, deforestation, and road-building would ruin the area’s

⁸ When writing to his sister, Gertrude, to describe the history of the fall of the Sikh Empire in Baltistan after 1849, Abbott uses the term, “pax Britannica” to describe the political situation up until the present (Personal Correspondence from W.L. Abbott to G. Abbott, October 21, 1912).

⁹ Throughout Abbott’s letters, he refers to Baltistan as a part of larger Kashmir.

natural beauty and limited governmental interference.¹⁰ Overall, despite tensions between Britain and Russia in the region, Abbott suggests that the political climate among the Baltistan valley communities to be less oppressive than Kashmir, where it was “unpleasant to be in a place where there are laws, rules, & governments, one does not feel free.”¹¹ This theme is found often in Abbott’s correspondence about Central Asia, as well when describing his experiences in Africa and Southeast Asia. This author has elsewhere provided perspectives on this travel within the lifelong context of his worldwide collecting beginning in Africa (Taylor 2015a) and extending mostly in Southeast Asia (Taylor, 2002, 2014, 2015b) and with reference to his nine expeditions (1891 to 1916) to the Himalayan region and Central Asia (Taylor, 2016, Taylor, 2017).

The Legacy of Abbott’s Smithsonian Collections and Their Usefulness in the Twenty-first Century

As mentioned above, the archival records of Abbott’s collecting expeditions are spread among multiple locations including the National Anthropological Archives, the separate Smithsonian Archives (which stores the Registrar’s records for the National Museum of Natural History), the Mammals Library and the Botany Library. To this we may add the handwritten labels, including many that can still be found that seem to be in Abbott’s original handwriting, tied to the ethnographic and biological specimens themselves. While some standardized information from those object labels (especially date of collection and locality) has been recorded within currently used digital databases of museum collections, other non-standard information, including local folk names for objects, birds, or mammals, has not been recorded and can only be found by seeking out the objects in collection storage.

The Baltistan collections within the Anthropology department of the Smithsonian have not previously been published and have had little visitation or use. The move of the collections from the main museum building in Washington, D.C. to a dedicated, spacious research and storage facility (the Museum Support Center) in Suitland, Maryland, involved extensive conservation work and rehousing of the collections, however, during a period in which the use of paper catalog cards was superseded by digital databases allowing for easier public search of collections, making access to information about these collections much easier and more efficient.

The digital databases for ethnographic collections are currently stored within a museum resource management system; this records information about each cataloged “object.” However one catalog number is sometimes given to a set of similar objects or a set of objects thought to belong together. Therefore the total number of actual objects exceeds the number of catalog entries (Taylor, 2006b

¹⁰ “They [Gilgit officials] are extending the R.R. [rail road] through Quetta, in Baluchistan, towards Kandahar, in Afghanistan; & in this direction are building a military road to Gilgit” (Personal Correspondence from W.L. Abbott to S.F. Abbott, Patalwan [*sic*=*Pahlwan*] Nullah, Central Kashmir, July 18, 1891).

¹¹ Personal Correspondence from W.L. Abbott to G. Abbott, The Lolab valley, Kashmere, July 12, 1891.

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discusses this in detail with reference to Smithsonian collections from a 1926 expedition to the Netherlands East Indies.).

Abbott's ethnographic collections from Baltistan all came from his first expedition (1891). When he returned to the Himalayas after the decade of tropical collecting, he continued to make ethnographic observations and notes, but only biological collections (primarily mammals and birds); this was true of his 1912 expedition to Baltistan as well. Perhaps this is partly because Otis T. Mason, Abbott's primary correspondent within the Museum's anthropology department, who had always so actively encouraged his ethnographic collecting, had died in 1908.

Much important information about this collection is not currently within the digital databases. Abbott's original labels are generally still found attached to the objects themselves, often giving the cultural or ethnic group of the people who made it, using contemporaneous terminology from Abbott's day, and sometimes locality or date along with other information. In this way, the handwritten labels Abbott tied to ethnographic objects are very comparable to the labels tied to the bird, mammal, or other biological specimens collected. Other very important forms of information come from studying the still-unpublished archival correspondence and documents, which often supplement or even correct information written on these labels.

Abbott's overall collections said to have come from "Kashmir" (a name which Abbott sometimes used in correspondence and labels to include Baltistan) contain a wide range of ethnographic materials, including musical instruments; household utensils such as cups, spoons, a teapot, a rope, baskets, and slings for carrying items; engraved stones; wood carvings; wooden masks; religious items such as prayer wheels and rosaries; a small sword; and numerous textiles and articles of clothing, including boots, shoes, socks, a pair of "ear-protectors" (or warmers), caps or hats, lengths of woolen cloth, a "woman's cloak," a "woman's dress," pair of "woman's trousers," and many other items (Taylor, 2017). Such telegraphic terms used in museum's catalogs can lead to much better understanding when fuller sources of information are added, ideally within the context of historical and ethnographic study.

However, closely examining his labels, within this broader "Kashmir" category, we find only eight ethnographic objects collected by Abbott that are definitively from Baltistan, each of which now bears a catalog number beginning with "E" as part of the Smithsonian anthropology department's "Ethnology" collections. Four of these could even be counted as "one" object, since they are parts of an interconnected chatelaine of tools and utensils, which as a unit does not have a catalog number though four components have been given separate catalog numbers. The set is shown in Figures 4a and 4b; the brass spoon (catalog number E164957), also seen in Figure 5a, has been removed from its leather holder which still has the original handwritten label in Abbott's handwriting (Figure 5b).



Figure 4a. Assortment of tools and utensils attached to chatelaine, which hung from the waist. All objects were collected by W.L. Abbott in Baltistan, 1892 and are housed in Smithsonian collection storage. Moving clockwise from the top: (1) Balti door-key or *Linēek* (catalog no. E164960); (2) Spoon or *Plōwan* (E164957); (3) Comb or *Som Ong* (E164958); (4) Knife or *Jheé* made from iron with wooden handle (E164959), shown here removed from the sheath that is attached to the chatelaine.

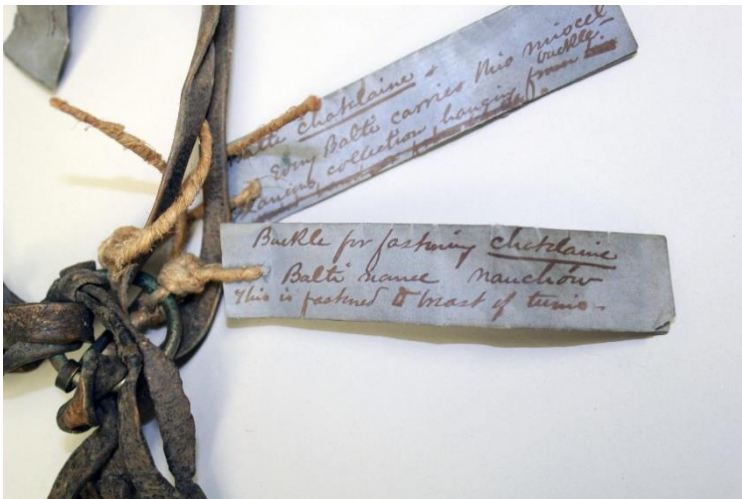


Figure 4b. One of the original paper labels written by Abbott states: “Balti chatelaine. Every Balti carries this [illegible word] buckle – [illegible word] collection hanging from [four words crossed out in ink].” A second hand-written label records, “Buckle for fastening chatelaine Balti name mauchow This is fastened to breast of tunis – [illegible character/symbol] most of times.”

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Figure 5a. Brass Spoon or Plowan, seen in Smithsonian collection storage. Collected by W.L. Abbott in Baltistan, 1891-1892. Catalog no. E164957. Length: 18cm. Above the object in the upper image is a paper label with bar code and catalog number (from a recent inventory).



Figure 5b. Original handwritten paper label, handwritten by W.L. Abbott: “Balti Spoon or Plowan” (label of spoon in Figure 4a, catalog no. E164957).

Another item attached to this same chatelaine is the Balti knife or *Jheé* made or iron with a wooden handle (Figure 6a) (catalog no. E164959), which like other elements has Abbott’s original handwritten label as well (Figure 6b). The chatelaine also contains the lock mechanism seen in Figure 7.



Figure 6a. Balti knife or *Jheé* made from iron with wooden handle, seen in Smithsonian collection storage. Collected by W.L. Abbott in Baltistan, 1891-1892. Ethnology catalog no. 164959. Length: 20cm.

In addition, Abbott collected a triangular soapstone lamp (catalog no. E164964) at Skardu, Baltistan, on this 1891-1892 trip. In April 11, 1892 letter to Smithsonian anthropologist Otis T. Mason (1838-1908), Abbott describes his fascination with this specific object: “The most curious thing which struck me was the 3-cornered soap stone lamps, which are almost exactly like those of the Greenland Esquimaux [*sic*=*Eskimos*]. Only here in the absence of animal oil, they burn oil expressed from the pips of apricots. This fruit growing in great quantities, every village is buried in orchards of it.”



Figure 6b. The original paper label for the Balti knife shown in Figure 6a, in Abbott’s handwriting, records “Balti knife or *Jheé*”.

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Figure 7. Balti door-key or *Linēek*, seen in Smithsonian collection storage. Collected by W.L. Abbott in Baltistan, 1892 (Catalog no. E164960). At top are a paper label with bar code and catalog number (from a recent inventory), along with the original paper label with Abbott's own hand-written notes: "Balti door-key of house (for wooden lock) Balti name *Linēek*."



Figure 8a. Triangular soapstone lamp (catalog no. 164964) collected at Skardu, Baltistan, on this 1891-1892 trip. Length: 11cm, Width: 8cm. Above the object in the upper image is a paper label with bar code and catalog number (from a recent inventory).



Figure 8b. Base of triangular soapstone lamp.

The ethnographic collection from this trip also contains one pair of Baltistan “boots” (Figure 9), one pair of winter stockings (Figure 10a, 10b), and a goat-hair blanket (Figure 11a, 11b), all illustrated here as well, thus providing this additional data on the material culture of Baltistan in this period, since so little information on that topic is available. Balti participants at a workshop in Islamabad (April, 2017) indicated that blankets of the kind shown in Figure 11a are still made, and have the Balti name *chara*. Sometimes they are used for special guests as flooring to sit or sleep.



Figure 9. Balti boots, seen in Smithsonian collection storage. Collected by W.L. Abbott in Baltistan, 1891-1892. Ethnology catalog no. 164978. Above the object in the upper image is a paper label with bar code and catalog number (from a recent inventory). The original label was written by Abbott and states: “Boots ([illegible word]) Baltistan, [illegible two words], this boot is only used in Shigar Valley.”



Figure 10a. Balti winter stockings or *Kánséh* (catalog no. E164982), collected in Baltistan, 1891-1892.

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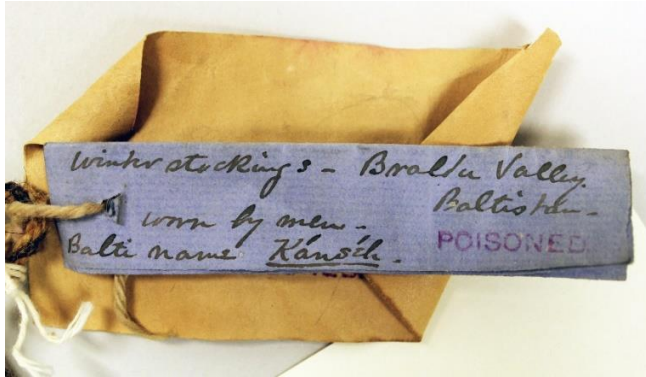


Figure 10b. The original paper label for the stockings shown in Figure 10a, handwritten by Abbott: “Winter stockings – Braldu Valley. Worn by men – Balti name Kánséh.”



Figure 11a. Balti blanket made from goat's hair (catalog no. E164983). Collected by W.L. Abbott in Baltistan, 1891-1892.



Figure 11b. Original paper label with Abbott's hand-written notes: "all over this region (Kashmir). As sleeping mats, horse blankets, and particularly for packing loads on ponies or yaks load bring sewn up in either end + laid across back."

Abbott himself (like his Smithsonian correspondents, Mason and his successor Walter Hough) misunderstood the changing research priorities within contemporary anthropology, especially the strong movement away from studying material culture (and stages of societal evolution) that had begun by the turn of the century. This trend is observed in a proportional decline in museum anthropologists, and the rapid decline after 1900 of the percentage of anthropological publications concerned with material culture (Sturtevant, 1969, pp. 623-7). Abbott's vast ethnographic collections, like many others but quite unlike his and other biological ones from this period, have largely remained unstudied and unknown.

Yet as Taylor (2016, pp.269-270) points out, a productive recent mode of scholarship consists of taking images and information about legacy collections (including those by naturalists) back to descendants of those who produced them, engaging them with their re-interpretation and presentation (Ames, 1980, 1990; Rosoff, 1998). "Re-visiting" historic expeditions now (Taylor, 2006a, 2006b) provides opportunities to ask such descendants to help interpret objects, photographs, and archival narratives. Taylor (2014, p.164) points to many studies of Southeast Asian material culture using historically documented museum specimens to discover new ethnographic information and interpretations. Abbott's collections from Baltistan and elsewhere would benefit greatly from reassessment with new ethnographic fieldwork (see examples of such reassessments of Abbott's and other legacy collections from Madagascar, in Taylor, 2015a, pp.41-42). Using legacy collections within studies of material culture now challenges us to interpret how historical textiles or objects participated within the formation and expression of social relationships and within a wide range of symbolic and socio-cultural contexts, and to explain how some historic practices continued and transformed in new contexts while others did not survive.

The transcription, study, and publication of Abbott's archives and collections will bring new interpretations and uses for these legacy ethnographic and

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biological collections he assembled. Hopefully contemporary ethnographers of Baltistan, as well as the descendants of the people Abbott visited and studied there, will be able to use this research resource in the region.

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