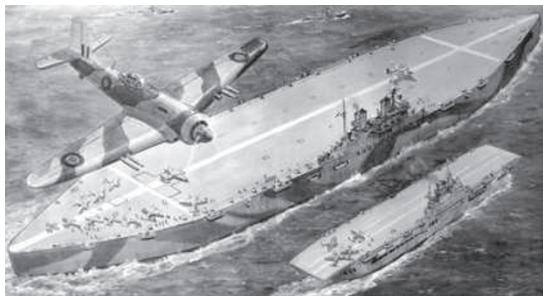


Yet the Habbakuk story, however entertaining, seems tacked on. It is not central to the plot even though it supplies a framing device: Meadows recounts his wartime exploits while on board an ice ship built in 1980 for an Arab sheikh. When Meadows joins Pyke in wartime London only to see the Habbakuk project terminated, it feels like a cul-de-sac. One could carp at a few other points of creaky plotting or narrative, but that seems churlish given how splendidly the book animates a buried story of scientific endeavour and triumph.

One must also ask whether the author succeeds in creating scientists who are fully fleshed individuals. Foden complicates his task by making Meadows callow and withdrawn as a result of a childhood trauma in Africa.



Secret wartime plans included building giant ships from ice.

Meadows's fixation on his research and his social awkwardness could make him a caricature of the diffident scientist. Brecher also refracts everything through the prism of his own research topic of blood, while Ryman is the crabby boffin and Pyke the dotty one.

But Foden has a motive in shaping Meadows this way, using him to capture a sense of the dour, buttoned-up character of wartime Britain. And unlike so many fictional scientists, Meadows is believable: his discourses on turbulence and hydrodynamics are assured, even uncompromising, without the breezy 'beginner's guide' flavour that is the usual hallmark of undigested authorial research. Here Foden had the immense benefit of advice from his father-in-law, Julian Hunt, a leading expert on turbulence and meteorology and, fittingly, a recipient of the Lewis Fry Richardson medal for nonlinear geophysics. Skilfully balancing fact and fiction, *Turbulence* is dramatic, intelligent and convincing. ■

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Bling of the Bactrians

Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Until 20 September

Desire for gold has driven people out of their homes and out of their minds. So Soviet archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi cannot have been surprised when a crowd gathered to gawk at a mound he was excavating in northern Afghanistan in 1978. Tillya Tepe, the Hill of Gold, dates to the first century AD, when the land was known as Bactria, and contained the graves of six nomads — a chieftain and five women — buried with more than 20,000 golden and bejewelled belongings, some of which are now on show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Sarianidi sent the treasures to the National Museum in Kabul and returned to Moscow. Then came the wars. The Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the National Museum was nearly destroyed by shelling in 1994, and in 2001 it was ransacked by the Taliban. Yet museum guards had hidden the treasures in secret vaults in the presidential palace and kept their location secret for some 25 years.

Afghanistan portrays the tremendous challenges of preserving a country's heritage in the face of war. "All of these artefacts were supposed to have been lost," says curator

and archaeologist Fredrik Hiebert, who was invited by the Afghans in 2003 to catalogue the crates when they were rediscovered. "Every time we opened a box, it was like a miracle." Along with the Tillya Tepe gold, the guards had concealed nearly all of the treasures from Kabul's museum.

The exhibition displays artefacts from four archaeological sites, each focusing on a major stage or civilization in Afghanistan's history. They reveal the multiple influences of the Roman, Indian, Greek and Chinese cultures that infiltrated the ancient nation. A second-millennium gold bowl unearthed at the Bronze Age settlement of Tepe Fullol in the northeast of the country is decorated with

bearded bulls, a motif from distant Mesopotamia. The third-century-BC Greek-style city of Ai Khanum, founded after Bactria's conquest by Alexander the Great, yielded two sophisticated sundials: one, carved from limestone in the form of a throne balanced on two lions' legs, was designed for Ai Khanum's latitude; the other, a unique cylindrical design, was calibrated for ancient Syene (Aswan) in Egypt. Another mechanical marvel comes from Begram, a city on the Silk Road that thrived in the first and second centuries AD. A green bronze basin is filled with sinuous metal fish, their moveable fins and tails wired to small weights that would make them 'swim' when the bowl was filled with water.

But the gold of Tillya Tepe is the most alluring. Its pastoralist owners ploughed their profits from sheep- and goat-herding into shimmering trophies ornamented with symbols of diverse cultures: Aphrodite with an Indian dot on her forehead, a dagger handle topped with a Siberian bear, Chinese-style boot buckles, Roman coins, resplendent gold jewellery and a folding gold crown composed of five 'trees' adorned with rosettes and birds. That such valuables survived "is an amazing testament to the Afghans' ability to keep a secret", Hiebert says. "The Communists came through, the mujahedin came through, the Taliban came through, and these poor underpaid museum people didn't tell them, ever. I want to tell that story to my children." ■

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Museum staff hid this folding gold crown from Afghanistan's looters for years.