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Cultural Value of Bamyian Buddha- An overview

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Abstract

Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to Insight into the true nature of reality. Buddhist practices like meditation are means of changing yourself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. The experience developed within the Buddhist tradition over thousands of years has created an incomparable resource for all those who wish to follow a path- a path which ultimately culminates in Enlightenment or Buddhahood. An enlightened being sees the nature of reality absolutely clearly, just as it is, and lives fully and naturally in accordance with that vision. This is the goal of the Buddhist spiritual life, representing the end of suffering for anyone who attains it. Because Buddhism does not include the idea of worshipping a creator god, some people do not see it as a religion in the normal, Western sense. The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical: nothing is fixed or permanent; actions have consequences; change is possible. So Buddhism addresses itself to all people irrespective of race, nationality, caste, sexuality, or gender. It teaches practical methods which enable people to realize and use its teachings in order to transform their experience, to be fully responsible for their lives. There are around 350 million Buddhists and a growing number of them are Westerners. They follow many different forms of Buddhism, but all traditions are characterized by non-violence, lack of dogma, tolerance of differences, and, usually, by the practice of meditation.

Buddhism was expanded in northern Pakistan and northeastern Afghanistan became a center of Buddhist learning and culture, in particular, innovative sculpture, under the Kushans. The Buddha statues of Bamiyan, with their Roman draperies, belong to the Gandharan idiom, as do the numerous stupas scattered throughout the Afghan mountains.

Key Words:

Bamiyan Buddha, Cultural value, Monumental Buddhas, Attacks on the Buddha's statue, Destruction, Developments, rebuild, Reconstruction of Bamiyan Buddha.

1. Introduction

In the 1st to 5th centuries AD and the kingdom of Gandhara in northern Pakistan and northeastern Afghanistan became a center of Buddhist learning and culture, in particular, innovative sculpture, under the Kushans. The Buddha statues of Bamiyan, with their Roman draperies, belong to the Gandharan idiom, as do the numerous stupas scattered throughout the Afghan mountains, built to house relics of the Buddha and of later saints. Guldara, in a remote valley southeast of Kabul, is a noteworthy example with Hellenistic features; a more typical one is the stupa of Tope Darra, in the mountains north of the city.

Evidence suggests that Buddhist monks settled in the Bamiyan Valley early in Kushan times, and it quickly grew into a major monastic center, repeatedly mentioned in Chinese texts from the 5th century AD onwards. The pilgrim Fa Hsien passed through in about 400 AD, and witnessed a ceremonial conclave of a thousand monks in the presence of the king. The celebrated traveller Xuanzang visited in 632 AD, and described that same solemn assembly. He was impressed by the monks' devotion, and mentions the giant standing Buddhas. A century later a monk from Korea, Huichao (727 AD) describes Bamiyan as an independent Buddhist state, perhaps under Sassanian suzerainty. An indigenous dynasty that adhered to Buddhism survived until 970 AD.

2. Cultural Value of Bamiyan Buddha

The Bamiyan Valley, enclosed in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush in central highlands of Afghanistan, was a vital link in the trade routes that spanned from China to India via ancient Bactria (present-day Afghanistan). The valley, at an altitude of 2,500 meters, follows the line of the Bamiyan River, and has been inhabited since at least the 3rd century BC. The passage of merchants through this natural corridor from the earliest days of the Silk Roads brought languages, beliefs and traditions together here, and contributed to its development as a major religious and cultural center throughout the middle Ages (Finbarr Barry Flood, December 2002).

The rise of Bamiyan was closely connected with spread of Buddhism across Central Asia, and that in turn was linked to the political and economic currents of that time. Early in the first century AD, a semi-nomadic tribe called the Kushans swept out of Bactria, overpowering the rulers of the hill-tribes and what remained of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdoms. They established a large empire that endured for three centuries and reached from the shores of the Caspian Sea deep into northern India. The Kushans made themselves the unavoidable middlemen between China, India and Rome, and prospered on the revenues of the Silk Road. In so doing, they fostered a syncretic culture, in which tribal traditions from Central Asia fused with artistic conventions derived from the Hellenized Mediterranean and with the ideologies coming from Buddhist India, as reflected in the remarkable cultural legacy to be found in Bamiyan.

Buddhism was expanding rapidly in the 1st to 5th centuries AD, and the kingdom of Gandhara in northern Pakistan and northeastern Afghanistan became a centre of Buddhist learning and culture, in particular, innovative sculpture, under the Kushans. The Buddha statues of Bamiyan, with their Roman draperies, belong to the Gandharan idiom, as do the numerous stupas scattered throughout the Afghan mountains, built to house relics of the Buddha and of later saints. Guldara, in a remote valley southeast of Kabul, is a noteworthy example with Hellenistic features; a more typical one is the stupa of Tope Darra, in the mountains north of the city.

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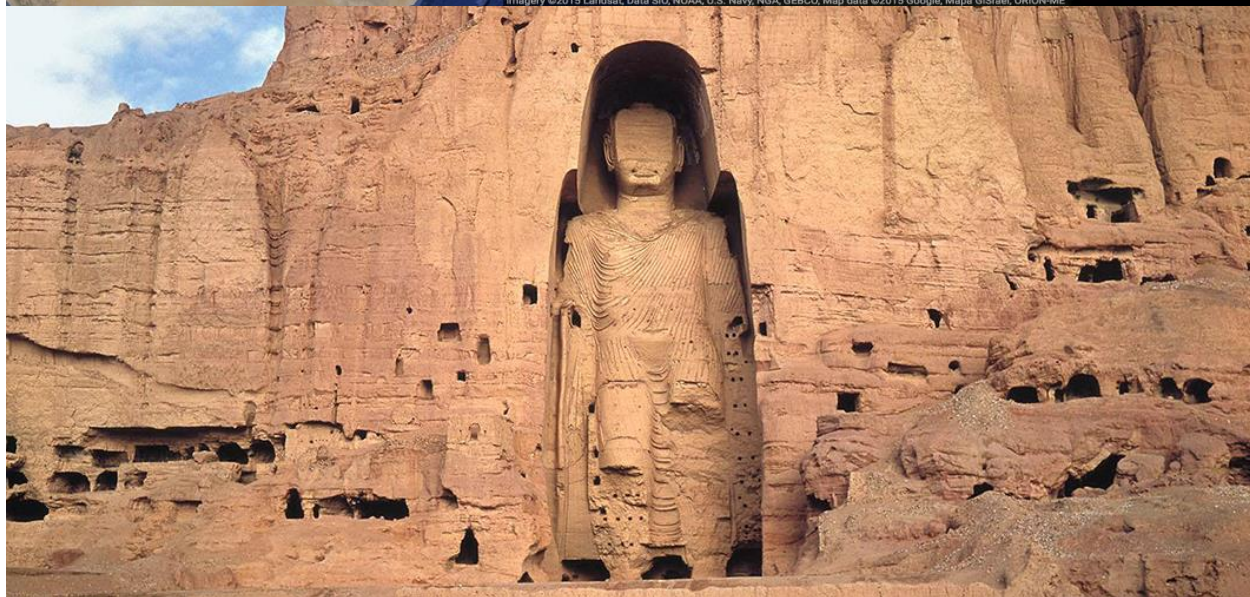
Traces of this Buddhist heritage in Bamiyan can be most clearly seen in the two colossal niches in the cliff side that contained large standing Buddha figures, thought to date from the 5th century, and standing 55m and 38m high respectively, which were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. The niches are flanked by dozens of artificial caves, many adorned with frescoes, all part of a huge monastic ensemble dating from the 3rd to 5th century AD. Scholars have discerned stylistic influences from Gupta India and Sassanian Iran, as well as Hellenistic artistic styles, a testimony to the diversity of influences that shaped the region. In several of the caves and niches, often linked by galleries, there are remains of wall paintings and seated Buddha figures. In nearby valleys, over one hundred other caves have been found, including the *Kakrak Valley Caves*, some 3 kilometers south-east of the Bamiyan, containing fragments of a 10m tall standing Buddha figure and a sanctuary with painted decorations from the Sassanian period (Llewelyn Morgan, 2012).

In 970 AD, Bamiyan was conquered by the rulers of Ghazni (in southern Afghanistan), who brought Islam to their domains. Muslim kings then ruled for another two centuries, their reach at times extending to the Oxus river, and Islamic art and architecture reached its pinnacle in the city in the 11th century AD, under the rule of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (998- 1030). Subsequently, the Ghurids, who ruled the city from 1155 to 1212, constructed a new royal residence, the fortified citadel on the plateau facing the two Buddhas, whose ruins are now known as *Shahr-i-Ghulghulah*, (variously translated as the City of Silence, or of Screams). Bamiyan was protected by watchtowers and by two massive outlying fortresses.

Despite these fortifications however, the city was entirely destroyed at the hands of the Mongols in 1221, and the Buddhist monasteries looted. Recovery was slow; it was not until the 15th century that rebuilding took place, under the Timurid kings, and the valley subsequently became a stronghold of the Afghan monarchy. The giant statues were defaced in the 17th century by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, and the valley abandoned to the use of local herders and farmers by the 19th century (Deborah Klimburg and Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989).

Bamiyan is located between the Indian subcontinent (to the southeast) and Central Asia (to the north), which made it an important location close to one of the most important branches of the Silk Route. The Silk Route was an ancient series of linked trade routes that connected the East to the West and carried both material wealth and ideas. Bamiyan's central location along the Silk Route, along with its fertile plains amid harsh terrain, made it an ideal location for merchants and missionaries to stop during their travels. Many of the missionaries and merchants in this area during the middle of the first millennium were practitioners of the Buddhist faith. Buddhism had long been an important religion in the region, having been introduced during the early Kushan period.

Prior to their recent destruction, the 6th-7th century, rock-cut Buddha sculptures in the Bamiyan Valley of central Afghanistan were considered the largest in the world. Known collectively as the Bamiyan Buddhas, the two monumental sculptures have amazed both Buddhist and non-Buddhist visitors for more than a thousand years. Like many of the world's great ancient monuments, little is known about who commissioned the Bamiyan Buddhas or the sculptors who carved them. However, their very existence points to the importance of the Buddhist faith and the Bamiyan Valley during this period (Llewelyn Morgan, 2012).



West Buddha surrounded by caves, c. 6th-7th c C.E., stone, stucco, paint, 175 feet high, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, destroyed 2001

Buddhism spread, in part, because it was not location specific. Believers did not need to worship at a particular temple or at a particular site as part of their practice. Worship could take place anywhere and at any time. This freedom resulted in the emergence of Buddhist cave architecture throughout Asia. Indeed, if one visits Bamiyan today, one will see nearly 1000 Buddhist caves carved along 1300 meters of cliff face. It is against this backdrop of carved caves that the two monumental Buddha images were carved.

Bamiyan lies on the Silk Road, which runs through the Hindu Kush mountain region, in the Bamiyan Valley. The Silk Road has been historically a caravan route linking the markets of China with those of the Western world. It was the site of several Buddhist monasteries, and a thriving center for religion, philosophy, and art. Monks at the monasteries lived as hermits in small caves carved into the side of the Bamiyan cliffs. Most of these monks embellished their caves with religious statuary and it was a Buddhist religious site from the 2nd century up to the time of the Islamic invasion in the latter half of the 7th century. Until it was completely conquered by

the Muslim Saffarids in the 9th century, Bamiyan shared the culture of Gandhara (Deborah Klimburg and Medio, 1989).



Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley (photo: © UNESCO/G. Gonzales Brigas)

3. Monumental Buddhas

Prior to their destruction in 2001, two monumental Buddha sculptures could be seen carved into the cliff facing the Bamiyan Valley. The larger of the two figures, located on the western end (on the right in the photo above), measured 175 feet in height. The art historian Susan Huntington has argued that it represented the Buddha Vairochana. The smaller of the two monumental statues, located to the east, depicted the Buddha Shakyamuni. This figure was also enormous and measured 120 feet in height.

Both images were carved into niches of the cliff side in high relief. The area near the heads of both Buddha figures and the area around the larger Buddha's feet were carved in the round, allowing worshippers to circumambulate. Circumambulation, which is the act of walking around an object such as a stupa (a reliquary mound) or an image of the Buddha, is a common practice in Buddhist worship.

The two large Buddha images reflected the international environment of the Bamiyan Valley and were influenced by the art and cultures of India, Central Asia and even ancient Greek culture. For example, both Buddhas wore flowing robes and have been described as having wavy curls of hair. This hairstyle and the flowing drapery are elements rooted in early Gandharan Buddhist imagery that combined Hellenistic Greek traditions of representation with Indian subject matter (Llewelyn Morgan, 2012).

4. Heavenly deities:

Much of what we know about the monumental Buddha sculptures comes from the Chinese monk Xuanzang (Hsuan-Tsang) who traveled to Bamiyan in 643 and documented his travels in the text *The Great Tang Records of the Western Regions* (Da Tang Xiyu Ji). As the earliest text describing the Buddha images, Xuanzang's writings provide us with remarkable descriptions of the sculptures and the vibrant communities that inhabited the region.

When merchants coming and going happen to witness visions of heavenly deities, whether as good omens or as predictions of disaster, they worship the deities to pray for blessedness. There are several tens of monasteries with several thousand monks, who follow the Hinayana teachings of the Lokottaravada School. To the northeast of the city, there is at a corner of the mountains a rock statue of the Buddha standing, one hundred forty or fifty feet in height, a dazzling golden color and adorned with brilliant gems. To the east there is a monastery built by a previous king of the country. To the east of the monastery there is a copper statue of the Buddha standing, more than one hundred feet tall. It was cast in separate pieces and then welded together into shape (Deborah Klimburg and Medio, 1989).

Xuanzang's descriptions of the Buddhas provide us great insight into not only what they might have looked like in the 7th century but also how they were engaged with the community around them. Perhaps most surprising to our modern experience with Buddha imagery is that the monumental rock-cut sculptures are described by Xuanzang as being adorned with metal, color, and gems—not stripped down as we often see them in museums and galleries.

Scholars agree that both images were covered in pigments of various hues so that they appeared to be made of metal and other materials, but that they were not cast entirely of "copper" as Xuanzang suggests of the smaller Buddha image. However, scholars such as Deborah Klimburg-Salter have argued that both of the monumental Buddhas' faces were constructed of masks made of wood clad by a thin layer of brass, which were inserted onto ledges that appeared above the lower lips of both images.

While there is debate over the material and treatment of the Buddha's faces, we know that pigments were applied to the stucco that covered the stone surfaces of the sculptures. Stucco helped to even out the textured rock surface. One can imagine what a powerful impression these monumental Buddhas would have made on passersby and worshippers (Finbarr Barry, December 2002).

5. Attacks on the Buddha's statue:

In 1221, with the advent of Genghis Khan, "a terrible disaster befell Bamiyan. Nevertheless, the statues were spared. Later, the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, tried to use heavy artillery to destroy the statues. Another attempt to destroy the Bamiyan statues was made by the 18th century Persian king Nader Afshar, directing cannon fire at them.

The enormous statues, the male Salsal ("light shines through the universe") and the (smaller) female Shamama ("Queen Mother") as they were called by the locals, did not fail to fire the imagination of Islamic writers in centuries past. The larger statue reappears as the malevolent giant Salsal in medieval Turkish tales.

Afghan king Abdur Rahman Khan destroyed its face during a military campaign against the Shia Hazara rebellion.



6. Destruction of Buddha

Mullah Omar ordered Taliban forces to demolish the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. The destruction was complete. Only outlines of the figures and a few details remain. The direction to destroy the Buddha images was motivated, in part, by the Taliban's extreme iconoclastic campaign as well as their disdain for western interest and funding that had gone to protecting the images while there was an intense and growing need for humanitarian aid in the region. The Taliban's claim that destroying the Buddha sculptures was an Islamic act is belied by the fact that Bamiyan had become predominantly Muslim by the 10th century and that the sculptures had up until 2001 remained a largely intact.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a huge loss for our understanding of human history. However, even in darkness light has a way of emerging. Since their destruction several new discoveries have been made near the sites of the Bamiyan Buddhas including the discovery of fragments of a 62-foot long reclining Buddha.

The two most prominent statues were the giant standing sculptures of Buddhas Vairocana and Sakyamuni, identified by the different mudras performed. The Buddha popularly called "Solsol" measured 53 meters tall, and "Shahmama" 35 meters—the niches in which the figures stood are 58 and 38 meters respectively from bottom to top. Before being blown up in 2001 they were the largest examples of standing Buddha carvings in the world (the 8th century Leshan Giant Buddha is taller,^[10] but that statue is sitting). Since then the Spring Temple Buddha has been built in China, and at 128 m (420 ft.) it is the tallest statue in the world. Plans for the construction of the Spring Temple Buddha were announced soon after the blowing up of the Bamiyan Buddhas and China condemned the systematic destruction of the Buddhist heritage of Afghanistan.

It is believed that the monumental Buddha sculptures were carved into the cliffs of Bamiyan between the 3rd to 6th centuries AD, while the cave complex in the east, including the 38 meter Buddha, a stupa was built in the 3rd or 4th centuries AD. The 55 meter Buddha is believed to date from the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Historic

documentation refers to celebrations held every year attracting numerous pilgrims and that offers were made to the monumental statues. They were perhaps the most famous cultural landmarks of the region, and the site was listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site along with the surrounding cultural landscape and archaeological remains of the Bamiyan Valley. Their color faded through time.

Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang visited the site on 30 April 630 AD, and described Bamiyan in the *Da Tang Xiyu Ji* as a flourishing Buddhist center "with more than ten monasteries and more than a thousand monks". He also noted that both Buddha figures were "decorated with gold and fine jewels" (Wriggins, 1995). Intriguingly, Xuanzang mentions a third, even larger, reclining statue of the Buddha. A monumental seated Buddha, similar in style to those at Bamiyan, still exists in the Bingling Temple caves in China's Gansu province. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas became a symbol of oppression and a rallying point for the freedom of religious expression. Despite the fact that most Afghans are now Muslim, they too had embraced their past and many were appalled by the destruction (Finbarr Barry, December 2002).

Abdul Wahed, a Taliban commander operating around the area, announced his intention to blow up the Buddhas in 1997, even before he had taken control of the valley. In 1998 when he battled off the Hizb-i-Wahdat militia from the area and took control of Bamiyan, Wahed drilled holes in the Buddhas' heads for explosives. He was prevented from taking further action by the local governor and a direct order of Mohammed Omar, although tyres were later burned on the head of the great Buddha. In July 1999, Mullah Mohammed Omar issued a decree in favor of the preservation of the Bamiyan Buddha statues. Because Afghanistan's Buddhist population no longer exists, and the statues were no longer worshipped, he added: The government considers the Bamiyan statues as an example of a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors. The Taliban states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but protected. In early 2000, local Taliban authorities asked for UN assistance to rebuild drainage ditches around tops of the alcoves where the Buddhas were set.

However, Afghanistan's radical clerics began a campaign to crack down on "un-Islamic" segments of Afghan society. The Taliban soon banned all forms of imagery, music, and sports, including television, in accordance with what they considered a strict interpretation of Sharia. In March 2001, the statues were destroyed by the Taliban of Mullah Omar following a decree issued by him. The Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar explained why he ordered the statues to be destroyed in an interview:

I did not want to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha. In fact, some foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct the repair work of the Bamiyan Buddha that had been slightly damaged due to rains. This shocked me. I thought, these callous people have no regard for thousands of living human beings - the Afghans who are dying of hunger, but they are so concerned about non-living objects like the Buddha. This was extremely deplorable. That is why I ordered its destruction. Had they come for humanitarian work, I would have never ordered the Buddha's destruction. Information and Culture Minister Qadratullah Jamal told Associated Press of a decision by 400 religious clerics from across Afghanistan declaring the Buddhist statues against the tenets of Islam. They came out with a consensus that the statues were against Islam.

According to UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura, a meeting of ambassadors from the 54 member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) was conducted. All OIC states—including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, three countries that officially recognized the Taliban government—joined the protest to spare the monuments. Saudi Arabia and the UAE later condemned the destruction as "savage". Although India never recognised the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, New Delhi offered to arrange for the transfer of all the artifacts in question to India, "where they would be kept safely and preserved for all mankind. These overtures were rejected by the Taliban, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf sent Moinuddin Haider to Kabul to try to prevent the destruction, by arguing that it was un-Islamic and unprecedented.

According to Taliban minister, Abdul Salam Zaeef, UNESCO sent the Taliban government 36 letters objecting to the proposed destruction. He asserted that the Chinese, Japanese, and Sri Lankan delegates were the most strident advocates for preserving the Buddhas. The Japanese in particular proposed a variety of different solutions to the issue; these included moving the statues to Japan, covering the statues from view, and the payment of money. The second edition of the Turkistan Islamic Party's magazine *Islamic Turkistan* contained

an article on Buddhism, and described the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan despite attempts by the Japanese government of "infidels" to preserve the remains of the statues.

A statement issued by the ministry of religious affairs of the Taliban regime justified the destruction as being in accordance with Islamic law. Abdul Salam Zaeef held that the destruction of the Buddhas was finally ordered by Abdul Wali, the Minister for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bamyan>).

Dynamiting and destruction by Taliban, March 2001



7. *Developments since 2002 during the Government of Hamid Karzai*

In April 2002, Afghanistan's post-Taliban leader Hamid Karzai called the destruction a "national tragedy" and pledged the Buddhas to be rebuilt. In September 2005, Mawlawi Mohammed Islam Mohammadi, Taliban governor of Bamiyan province at the time of the destruction and widely seen as responsible for its occurrence, was elected to the Afghan Parliament. He blamed the decision to destroy the Buddhas on Al-Qaeda's influence on the Taliban. In January 2007, he was assassinated in Kabul.

Swiss filmmaker Christian Frei made a 95-minute documentary titled *The Giant Buddhas* (released in March 2006) on the statues, the international reactions to their destruction, and an overview of the controversy. Testimony by local Afghans validates that Osama bin Laden ordered the destruction and that, initially, Mullah Omar and the Afghans in Bamiyan opposed it. A novel titled 'An Afghan Winter' provides a fictional backdrop to the destruction of the Buddhas and its impact on the global Buddhist community.

Since 2002, international funding has supported recovery and stabilization efforts at the site. Fragments of the statues are documented and stored with special attention given to securing the structure of the statue still in place. It is hoped that, in the future, partial anastomosis can be conducted with the remaining fragments. In 2009, ICOMOS constructed scaffolding within the niche to further conservation and stabilization. Nonetheless, several serious conservation and safety issues exist and the Buddhas are still listed as World Heritage in Danger.

In the summer of 2006, Afghan officials were deciding on the timetable for the re-construction of the statues. As they wait for the Afghan government and international community to decide when to rebuild them, a \$1.3 million UNESCO-funded project is sorting out the chunks of clay and plaster—ranging from boulders weighing several tons to fragments the size of tennis balls—and sheltering them from the elements. The Buddhist remnants at Bamiyan were included on the 2008 World Monuments Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites by the World Monuments Fund.

In 2013, the foot section of the smaller Buddha was rebuilt with iron rods, bricks and concrete by the German branch of ICOMOS. Further constructions were halted by order of UNESCO, on the grounds that the work was conducted without the organization's knowledge or approval. The effort was contrary to UNESCO's policy of using original material for reconstructions, and has been pointed out that it was done based on assumptions.

The statues were destroyed by dynamite over several weeks, starting on 2 March 2001. The destruction was carried out in stages. Initially, the statues were fired at for several days using anti-aircraft guns and artillery.

This caused severe damage, but did not obliterate them. During the destruction, Taliban Information Minister Qudratullah Jamal lamented that, "This work of destruction is not as simple as people might think. You can't knock down the statues by shelling as both are carved into a cliff; they are firmly attached to the mountain. Later, the Taliban placed anti-tank mines at the bottom of the niches, so that when fragments of rock broke off from artillery fire, the statues would receive additional destruction from particles that set off the mines. In the end, the Taliban lowered men down the cliff face and placed explosives into holes in the Buddhas. After one of the explosions failed to completely obliterate the face of one of the Buddhas, a rocket was launched that left a hole in the remains of the stone head.

On 6 March 2001, *The Times* quoted Mullah Mohammed Omar as stating, "Muslims should be proud of smashing idols. It has given praise to Allah that we have destroyed them. During a 13 March interview for Japan's *Mainichi Shimbun*, Afghan Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel stated that the destruction was anything but a retaliation against the international community for economic sanctions: "We are destroying the statues in accordance with Islamic law and it is purely a religious issue."

On 18 March 2001, *The New York Times* reported that a Taliban envoy said the Islamic government made its decision in a rage after a foreign delegation offered money to preserve the ancient works. The report also added, however, that other reports "have said the religious leaders were debating the move for months, and ultimately decided that the statues were idolatrous and should be obliterated.

Then Taliban ambassador-at-large Sayed Rahmatullah Hashemi said that the destruction of the statues was carried out by the Head Council of Scholars after a Swedish monuments expert proposed to restore the statues' heads. Hashimi is reported as saying: "When the Afghan head council asked them to provide the money to feed the children instead of fixing the statues, they refused and said, 'No, the money is just for the statues, not for the children'. Herein, they made the decision to destroy the statues"; however, he did not comment on the claim that a foreign museum offered to "buy the Buddhist statues, the money from which could have been used to feed children.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas despite protests from the international community has been described by Michael Falser, a heritage expert at the Center for Transcultural Studies in Germany, as an attack by the Taliban against the globalising concept of "cultural heritage. The director general of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Koichiro Matsuura called the destruction a crime against culture. It is abominable to witness the cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people, and, indeed, of the whole of humanity.

After the destruction of the Buddhas, 50 caves were revealed. In 12 of the caves, wall paintings were discovered. In December 2004, an international team of researchers stated the wall paintings at Bamiyan were painted between the 5th and the 9th centuries, rather than the 6th to 8th centuries, citing their analysis of radioactive isotopes contained in straw fibers found beneath the paintings. It is believed that the paintings were done by artists travelling on the Silk Road, the trade route between China and the West.

Scientists from the Tokyo Research Institute for Cultural Properties in Japan, the Centre of Research and Restoration of the French Museums in France, the Getty Conservation Institute in the United States, and the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) in Grenoble, France, analysed samples from the paintings, typically less than 1 mm across. They discovered that the paint contained pigments such as vermilion (red mercury sulfide) and lead white (lead carbonate). These were mixed with a range of binders, including natural resins, gums (possibly animal skin glue or egg) and oils, probably derived from walnuts or poppies. Specifically, researchers identified drying oils from murals showing Buddhas in vermilion robes sitting cross-legged amid palm leaves and mythical creatures as being painted in the middle of the 7th century. It is believed that they are the oldest known surviving examples of oil painting, possibly predating oil painting in Europe by as much as six centuries. The discovery may lead to a reassessment of works in ancient ruins in Iran, China, Pakistan, Turkey, and India.

Initial suspicion that the oils might be attributable to contamination from fingers, as the touching of the painting is encouraged in Buddhist tradition, was dispelled by spectroscopy and chromatography giving an unambiguous signal for the intentional use of drying oils rather than contaminants. Oils were discovered

underneath layers of paint, unlike surface contaminants. Scientists also found the translation of the beginning section of the

original Sanskrit Pratītyasamutpāda Sutra translated by Xuanzang that spelled out the basic belief of Buddhism and said all things are transient.

On 8 September 2008, archaeologists searching for a legendary 300-metre statue at the site announced the discovery of parts of an unknown 19-metre (62-foot) reclining Buddha, a pose representing Buddha's Parinirvana.

8. Commitment to Rebuild

Though the figures of the two large Buddhas are almost completely destroyed, their outlines and some features are still recognizable within the recesses. It is also still possible for visitors to explore the monks' caves and passages that connect them. As part of the international effort to rebuild Afghanistan after the Taliban war, the Japanese government and several other organizations—among them the Afghanistan Institute in Bubendorf, Switzerland, along with the ETH in Zurich—have committed to rebuilding, perhaps by anastomosis, the two larger Buddhas.

Bamiyan is an extremely poor and remote land in one of the world's most underdeveloped countries. The Buddha statues were once a major tourist attraction, but Afghanistan has been at war virtually nonstop for more than three decades. The fighting drove away the tourists years before the Taliban blew up the statues.

The restoration project is designed to rebuild the historic site, as well as bring back the tourists. The project has the support of Habiba Sarabi, the popular provincial governor. And there are reasons to be hopeful. Bamiyan is now considered one of the less dangerous places in Afghanistan. Yet others, like human rights activist Abdullah Hamadi, say the empty niches where the Buddhas stood are a reminder of the Taliban's fanaticism, and should be left as they are. The Buddha was destroyed," said Hamadi.

Hamadi is from the nearby district of Yakawlang, where the Taliban massacred more than 300 members of a minority group, called the Hazaras, in 2001. Those killings took place just two months before the Taliban blew up the Buddha statues.

While Bamiyan is much safer today, the Taliban can still strike. Recently, Taliban insurgents kidnapped and beheaded Jawad Zahak, the head of the Bamiyan provincial council, while he was driving his family toward Kabul, about 150 miles to the southeast. Some in Bamiyan say they would rather see the money for the restoration project go toward services like electricity and housing, which are in desperately short supply.

1-8. Reconstruction of Bamiyan Buddha

After fourteen years, on 7 June 2015, a Chinese adventurer couple Xinyu Zhang and Hong Liang filled the empty cavities where the Buddhas once stood with 3D laser light projection technology. The projector used for the installation, worth approximately \$120,000, was donated by Xinyu and Hong, who were saddened by the destruction of the statues. With the desire of paying tribute, they requested permission from UNESCO and the Afghan government to do the project. About 150 local people came out to see the unveiling of the holographic statues on Sunday, 7 June 2015.

December 15, 2017. The world watched helplessly in March 2001 as the Taliban destroyed two colossal stone Buddhas that had been a silent, benevolent presence in the Bamiyan valley for centuries. The Buddha was beloved guardians of the valley and part of a complex cave network historically used by Buddhist monastics. The Taliban used multiple rounds of artillery and explosives to reduce the 130 and 170 foot statues to rubble.

Now that the Taliban no longer control the Bamiyan valley, the Afghanistan government has requested the reconstruction of at least one of the Buddhas on behalf of the people of Afghanistan. This possibility was one of the chief topics of the 13th Bamiyan expert working group meeting. The working group met in Munich in early December to discuss future safeguarding actions for the Bamiyan Buddhas site and the surrounding cave complex.

The proposed reconstruction of either of the Buddhas is complicated. In 2011, at a meeting in Tokyo, UNESCO decided not to reconstruct the statues, as any proposed recreation would violate the terms of the 1964 Venice Charter adopted by the second international congress of Architects and specialists of historic buildings. The charter is a code of professional standards embodying certain principles that include recognizing and integrating a monument's history into any restoration, and at the same time can be distinguished from the original. In the 2011 meeting on Bamiyan UNESCO representatives decided that to recreated the Buddhas would be false, in artistic terms, and damage the integrity of the monument. Most of all, it was felt that replacing the Buddha with replicas would falsify their history, there would be greater meaning and poignancy in leaving the niches empty of all but the damaged remains (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bamyan>).

The meeting of the working group in December of this year provided an opportunity to revisit the discussion of reconstruction, and brought together the governor of the Bamiyan province, the Deputy Minister of Culture of Afghanistan, and other high-ranking officials from the government of Afghanistan, 20 international experts, as well as representatives from donor countries including Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.

In September 2017, an international symposium on "The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues: Technical Considerations and Potential Effects on Authenticity and Outstanding Universal Value" will take place in Tokyo to further revisit the issue

of reconstruction and preservation of the site. The symposium will consider how reconstruction and restoration related to the Outstanding Universal Value of the property and will compose a final set of recommendations for the Afghanistan Government.

In addition to the considerations of the Buddha's reconstruction, the group assessed the state of conservation of the site and determined that there were urgent needs for the stabilization of the Western Buddha niches, formalized the donation of scaffolding from the Messerschmit Foundation used in the Eastern Buddha niche for conservation, and noted the need for a revision of the Cultural Master Plan.

The UNESCO Expert Working Group on Afghan cultural projects convened to discuss what to do about the two statues between 3–4 March 2011 in Paris. Researcher Erwin Emmerling of Technical University Munich announced he believed it would be possible to restore the smaller statue using an organic silicon compound. The Paris conference issued a list of 39 recommendations for the safeguarding of the Bamiyan site. These included leaving the larger Western niche empty as a monument to the destruction of the Buddhas, a feasibility study into the rebuilding of the Eastern Buddha, and the construction of a central museum and several smaller site museums.

Work has since begun on restoring the Buddhas using the process of anastomosis, where original elements are combined with modern material. It is estimated that roughly half the pieces of the Buddhas can be put back together according to Bert Praxenthaler, a German art historian and sculptor involved in the restoration. The restoration of the caves and Buddhas has also involved training and employing local people as stone carvers. The project, which also aims to encourage tourism to the area, is being organized by UNESCO and the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

The work has come under some criticism. It is felt by some, such as human rights activist Abdullah Hamadi, that the empty niches should be left as monuments to the fanaticism of the Taliban, while NPR reported that others believe the money could be better spent on housing and electricity for the region. Some people, including Habiba Sarabi, the provincial governor, believe that rebuilding the Buddhas would increase tourism which would aid the surrounding communities (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/208>).

9. Conclusion

The Bamiyan Buddhas were 4th- and 5th-century monumental statues of standing Buddha carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamyan valley in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan, 230 kilometers (140 mi) northwest of Kabul at an elevation of 2,500 meters (8,200 ft.). Built in 507 CE (smaller) and 554 CE (larger), the statues represented the classic blended style of Gandhara art. They were 35 (115 ft.) and 53 meters (174 ft.) tall, respectively.

The main bodies were hewn directly from the sandstone cliffs, but details were modeled in mud mixed with straw, coated with stucco. This coating, practically all of which wore away long ago, was painted to enhance the expressions of the faces, hands, and folds of the robes; the larger one was painted carmine red and the smaller one was painted multiple colors.

The lower parts of the statues' arms were constructed from the same mud-straw mix while supported on wooden armatures. It is believed that the upper parts of their faces were made from great wooden masks or casts. Rows of holes that can be seen in photographs were spaces that held wooden pegs that stabilized the outer stucco.

They were dynamited and destroyed in March 2001 by the Taliban, on orders from leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, after the Taliban government declared that they were idols. An envoy visiting the United States in the following weeks explained that they were destroyed to protest international aid exclusively reserved for statue maintenance while Afghanistan was experiencing famine, while the Afghan Foreign Minister claimed that the destruction was merely about carrying out Islamic religious iconoclasm. International opinion strongly condemned the destruction of the Buddhas, which in the following years was primarily viewed as an example of the extreme religious intolerance of the Taliban. Japan and Switzerland, among others, have pledged support for the rebuilding of the statues.

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