

Sacred Sites Series: The Bamiyan Buddhas

In March, 2001, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, two 6th century statues carved into a cliff in the Bamiyan valley and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, after they were declared to be idols. Their destruction marked a turning point in heritage conservation after the international community had long lobbied for the Buddhas' protection.

The Bamiyan Buddhas

- The Bamiyan Buddhas were two immense statues carved into a sandstone cliff face in the Bamiyan Valley in the 6th century A.D. The Bamiyan Valley sits on one of the branches of the ancient Silk Road, in ancient Bactria, between China and Rome in the Hazarajat region of Afghanistan, lying some 264km west by road of Kabul.¹ The larger statue (which measured 55m) was estimated to be built between 554-595 A.D. and the smaller statue (which measured around 38m) was estimated to be built between 507-644 A.D.^{2,3} Before it was destroyed, the larger statue was the tallest standing Buddha carving in the world. They are believed to have been built by the Kushan⁴ Empire, which ruled Afghanistan for four centuries, and were one of Afghanistan's main tourist attractions.
- UNESCO designated the Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley as a World Heritage Site in 2003. The valley also contains numerous other sites which represent the artistic and religious developments from the 1st to 13th centuries of ancient Bactria, examples of Gandharan art in caves and extensive Buddhist monasteries built into the cliffs.⁵

The Destruction of the Buddhas

- When the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist political movement, took charge of Afghanistan in 1996, they swiftly implemented a strict interpretation of Shari'a law and later issued decrees against pre-Islamic artefacts and un-Islamic idols and idolatrous images.
- In 1998, a Taliban commander, Abdul Wahed, threatened to destroy the Buddhas, even reportedly going so far as to drill holes into the Buddhas' heads, and rockets were also fired at the groin the larger statue.⁶ However, in 1999 the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar, issued a decree to protect the sites, citing that as there were no Buddhists left in Afghanistan they were not a threat to false worship.⁷
- The international community, including all 54 member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (notably including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan, all of which had previously recognised the Taliban government) protested to spare the monuments.⁸

"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 the statues shall not be destroyed but protected."
Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban, in a July 1999 decree to preserve the statues.

"The destruction was done in a highly professional way."
Paul Bucherer, Bibliotheca Afghonica

- Despite these efforts, on March 2, 2001 the Taliban destroyed the Buddhas over a number of weeks with explosives, tanks and anti-aircraft weapons.⁹ The decision to destroy the Buddhas was reportedly taken in line with Islamic law and followed a gathering of 400 of Afghanistan's religious leaders,¹⁰ and followed an edict issued on February 26, 2001 ordering the destruction of non-Islamic statues.¹¹

- In addition to claims that the Taliban were destroying the statues for their idolatrous

representation, there is also evidence to suggest a political reason for destroying the statues. In February 2001 the UN had imposed further sanctions on the Taliban regime, which had been requesting aid and humanitarian assistance. Reports indicate that Taliban officials were angered by offers from museums,¹² Japanese and other funders to move or help restore the statues,¹³ but that states were still not planning to pledge aid to help the Afghan people.¹⁴

Restoration

- According to archaeologist Paul Bucherer, who visited the Bamiyan site in 2002, absolutely nothing remained of the Buddhas.¹⁵ While UNESCO has assisted in preserving the niches in which the Buddhas once stood¹⁶ and has undertaken other preservative and restorative projects in Afghanistan, it took the decision not to initiate a reconstruction project for the Buddhas.^{17,18} UNESCO reacted furiously to reports in 2014 that a team of German archaeologists had partially re-built one of the statues.^{19,20}

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