

BAMIYAN: A damaged world heritage site

by Di Dunlop

Bamiyan is one of the most important historical sites in Afghanistan. It is situated about 250 km north west of Kabul and was linked to the Silk Road.

Buddhism was introduced to the region by Asoka and by the third century the city of Bamiyan became an administrative centre for caravans, and subsequently the location of a great monastery. The monks settled in the rock caves cut into the cliff to the north of the city.

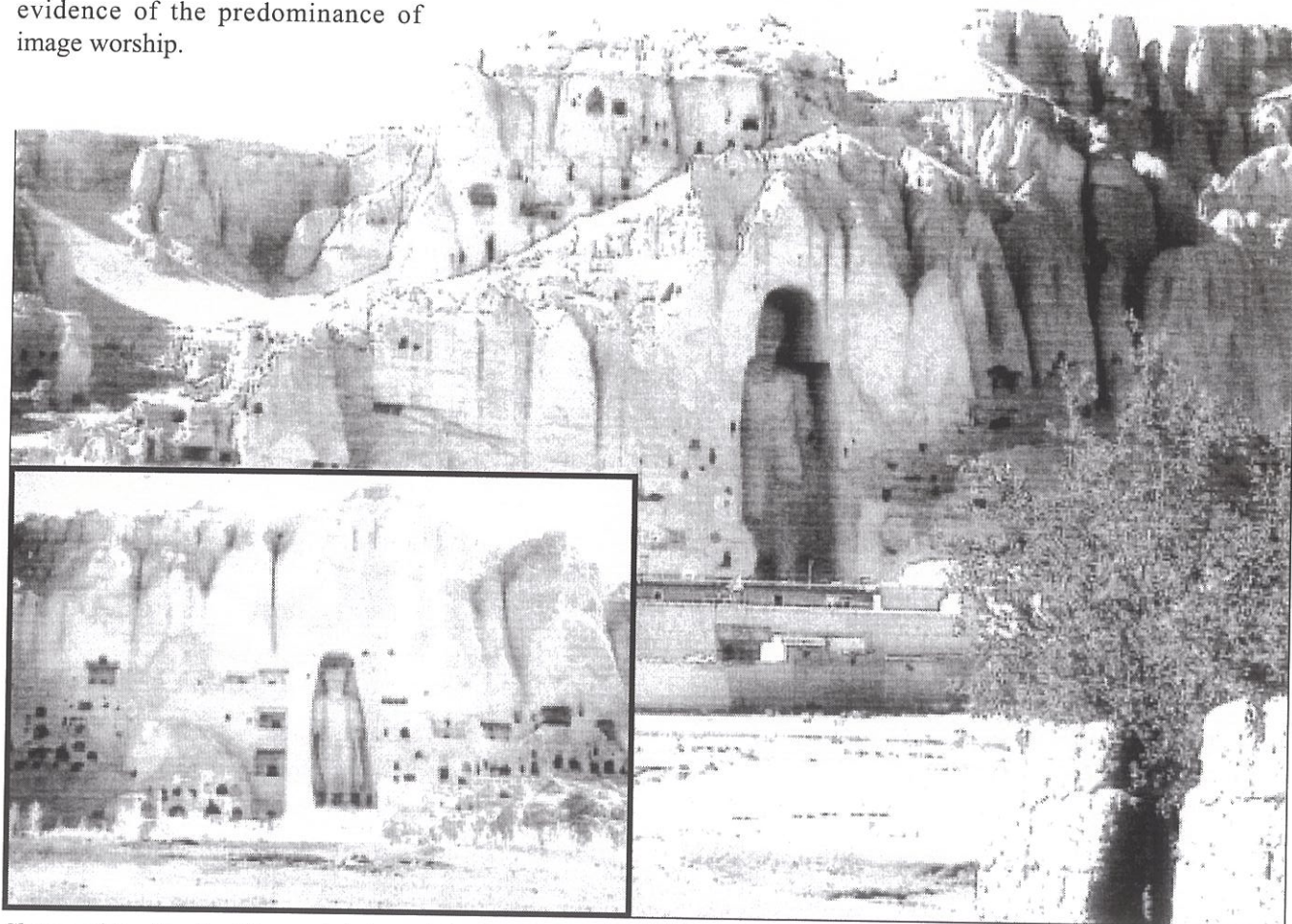
Two gigantic statues and hundreds of shrines were scooped out of the rock. Devotees flocked to the city to meditate and to worship.

The Kushan Empire saw the emergence of the Gandhara School of Art, whose stamp on the Bamiyan landscape was unmistakable. The two images were regarded as supernatural and were made the tallest in the world 'as if filling the firmament like the cosmos itself'.

Inside the shrines, the niches were evidence of the predominance of image worship.



Although the stupa is not in evidence here, it does appear in the paintings and their shapes.



Shrine of the Big Buddha and shrine of the Small Buddha (inset)

THE SMALL BUDDHA

This one was 38 metres high and was sheltered within a vaulted niche. It was carved out of the rock on three sides, in Gandhara style:

- ❑ the wavy folds of the garment in mud-plaster
- ❑ pointed in bronze
- ❑ heavy body proportions
- ❑ the schematic drapery
- ❑ the standing posture with the right hand in *abhayamudra* (protection).

Although the face was damaged, the total affect was still enough to inspire reverence.

Both the ceiling of the niche and the walls were covered in paintings of human figures, with the Sun-god on a chariot in the centre. Worshipping families were depicted flanking the images of Buddha on the ceiling.

THE BIG BUDDHA

This is believed to have been created earlier than the Small Buddha, but in the same style. The face has also been mutilated and vandalised.

The ceiling of the curvilinear roof of the niche, along with the side walls, were originally painted with divine and human figures framed in architectural designs, with worshippers floating in weightlessness.

The style of painting is distinctly Indian and the figures bear a strong similarity to the paintings in the Ajanta caves.

This Buddha stood 53 metres high and was considered to be the most remarkable representation of the Buddha anywhere in the world.

These statues were destroyed by the ruling Taliban in 2001.

Japan, Switzerland and UNESCO, among others, have pledged support for the rebuilding of the statues.

The Kabul decree declared:

‘Based on the verdict of the clergymen and the decision of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) all the statues around Afghanistan must be destroyed. All the statues in the country should be destroyed because these statues have been used as idols and deities by the non-believers before. They are respected now and may be turned into idols in future too.

Only Allah, the Almighty, deserves to be worshipped, not anyone or anything else.’



The taller Buddha towered five storeys high

Information and Culture Minister Qadratullah Jamal told Associated Press of a decision by four hundred religious clerics from across Afghanistan declaring the Buddhist statues against the tenets of Islam. ‘They came out with a consensus that the statues were un-Islamic,’

Although the figures of the two large Buddhas are almost completely destroyed, their outlines and some features are still recognisable within the recesses. Visitors are still able to explore the monks’ caves and the passages which connect them.



BAMIYAN – ACTIVITIES

🦋 Explain why **Bamiyan** is a World heritage Site.

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🦋 On a map of South Asia, locate and mark in

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| — the Bamiyan Valley | — Afghanistan |
| — Kabul | — Pakistan |
| — Hindu Kush Mountains | — the old Silk Road. |

🦋 Who was responsible for the introduction of Buddhism to this region? Write a brief report on his significance in South Asia.

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🦋 Research and report on the emergence of Islam in this area. List 5 important facts about this.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

🦋 Who are the Taliban? What measures did they introduce into Afghanistan?

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BAMIYAN – ACTIVITIES

On 18 March *The New York Times* reports 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, while a million Afghans faced starvation. *The New York Times* 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 (and current Yale non-degree program student) Sayed Rahmatullah Hashemi said that the destruction of the statues was carried out during the famine in Afghanistan after a Swedish government earmarked money to be provided to restore the statues and refused to allow it to be used to aid Afghan children.

Hashimi is reported as saying: 'When the Afghani 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.'

On 19 April 2004, in an interview to a Pakistani journalist Mohammad Shehzad, Mullah Mohammad Omar said the following: 'I did not want to destroy the Bamyán Buddha. In fact, some foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct the repair work of the Bamyán 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 Buddhas' destruction.'

🔗 Read the above quotes and briefly explain the reasons that these people gave for the destruction of the Buddhas.

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🔗 How does this differ from the Kabul decree in the article?

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🔗 How do you feel about this act?

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🔗 Explain why other countries tried to stop the act.

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