

AFGHANISTAN

Actions of ICOMOS for Heritage at Risk in Afghanistan

In the years of the civil war and under the Taliban regime the rich cultural heritage of Afghanistan met with tremendous losses, and many monuments and sites could only be saved from total decay if rescue operations were started immediately. For that reason UNESCO and the Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan organised a first International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (Kabul, 27–29 May 2002). Under the guidance of UNESCO and thanks to the funds of 500.000 Euro provided by the German Foreign Office in 2002 for the safeguarding of endangered cultural goods in Afghanistan, ICOMOS was able to work successfully despite difficult circumstances and used these financial means for a number of projects.

One of the financial focuses in cooperation with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) has been the Babur Park project in Kabul, a project for which ICOMOS has been able to contribute to the conservation concept together with the German Archaeological Institute. In all probability this project will not be finished before 2004. In Kabul ICOMOS, once again in cooperation with the AKTC, could also support the rehabilitation of the quarter of Ashekan wa Arefan, a highly dilapidated quarter which, however, was spared by the war and has four mosques and some very interesting historic building substance. ICOMOS will report about these projects in the following *Heritage at Risk* reports.

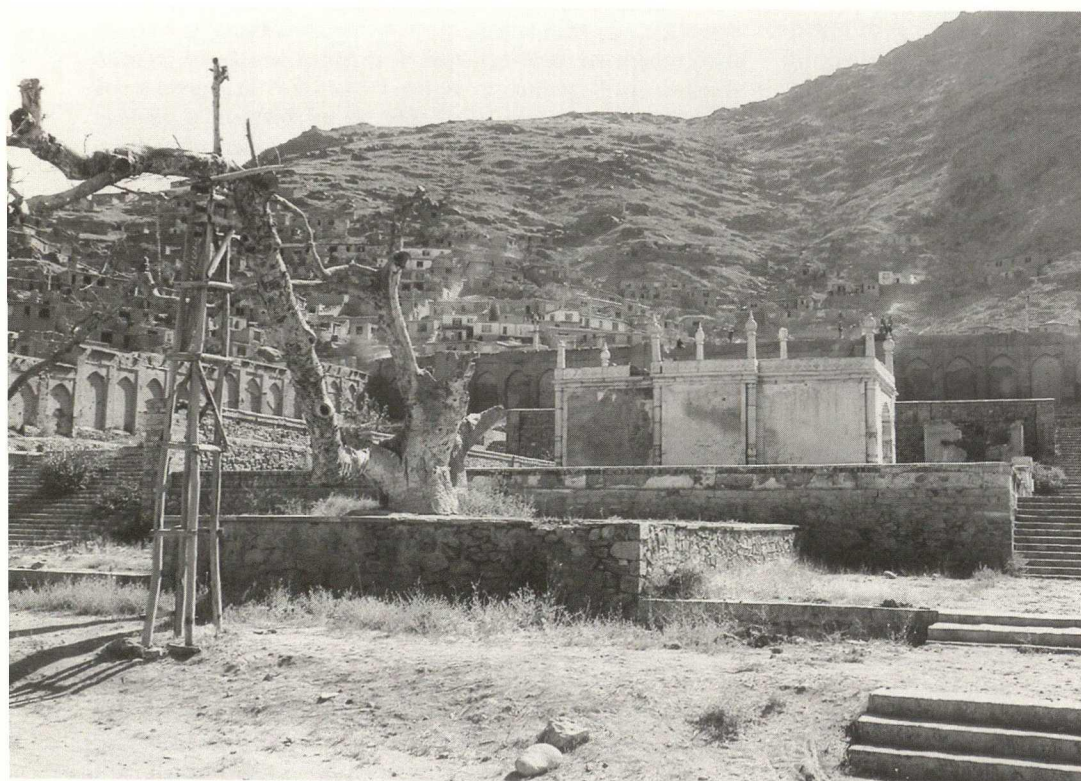
Furthermore, in close cooperation with UNESCO an ICOMOS team has also developed concepts for securing the remains of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, blown up by the Taliban. During the most recent joint UNESCO/ICOMOS mission in October 2002 the ICOMOS funds were used for cleaning the important drainage system on the hill above the Buddha niches, for hiring men to guard the historic site and for repairing a group of buildings, including a small mosque, next to the Great Buddha as well as covering the fragments of the Buddha statues, – all in preparation

for further safeguarding measures, such as stabilising those parts of the rock that are threatened to fall off and securing fragments endangered by decay. A wealth of new insights was gained at the UNESCO meeting of the Expert Working Group on the Preservation of the Bamiyan Site in Munich (21/22 November 2002), organised by ICOMOS (see Recommendations, p. 19–20).

In addition, ICOMOS and the Technical University of Aachen have put together a databank of all monuments and historic sites in Afghanistan, first presented at the UNESCO workshop in Munich at the end of November 2002. This databank was made on the basis of all available written sources. In the coming months this material, crucial for all future conservation work in Afghanistan, is meant to be complemented on the spot by checking and documenting the present state of the sites.

A Conservation Concept for the Remains of the Buddhas of Bamiyan

The blowing-up of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001, against which ICOMOS protested in vain together with ICOM (for the text see *Heritage at Risk 2000*, p. 39), was an incredible act of vandalism pointing like a beacon at the various risks and threats with which our cultural heritage is confronted. Without a thorough investigation of the condition one had to assume that of these sites in the middle of a spectacular cultural landscape only rubble and dust had remained after the explosion. Under these circumstances considerations at the UNESCO seminar on the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (Kabul 27–29 May 2002) still went into two directions: preserving the



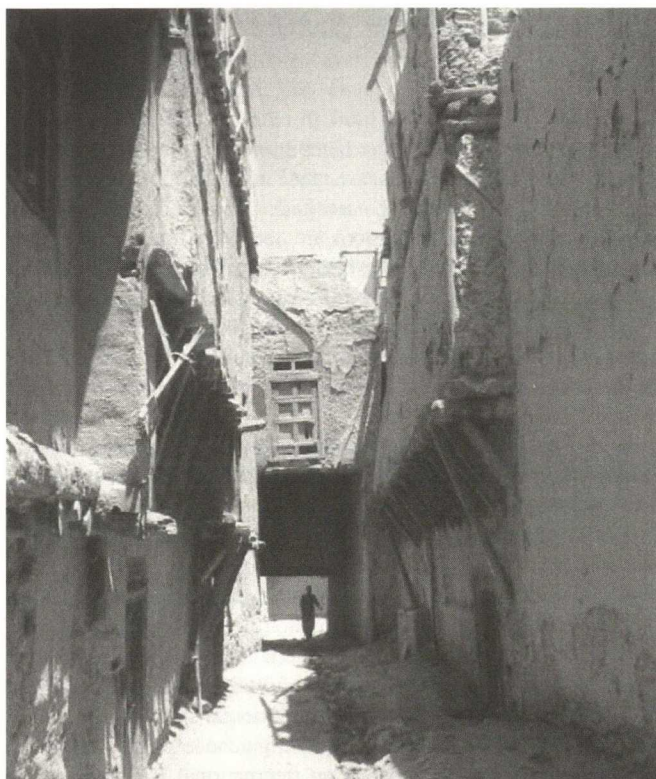
Kabul, a typical street in the old quarter Ashekan wa Arefan

Kabul, Babur Park

state after the destruction or reconstruction of the state before the destruction.

- Preserving the state after the destruction could be combined with the idea of refraining from any intervention, keeping this site unchanged as a kind of memorial to the act of vandalism by the Taliban, which upset the world. However, it soon became clear that if only for the sake of the safety of future visitors those parts of the rock affected by the explosion need to be consolidated and the existing remains of the sculptures and the remains of the paintings inside the caves have to be preserved.
- After every loss ideas of reconstructing the state before the destruction suggest themselves, ideas which were considered by the Afghan government also in view of using the site for tourism in the future. In the public media this led to a number of variations on a “reconstruction” of the Buddhas: reconstruction of the state before the destruction (see among others a “model” by the Swiss Polytechnic in Zurich based on photogrammetric measurements before the destruction) or even of an “original” state (e.g. a complete Buddha with a gold coating as mentioned in early sources?); reconstruction in traditional techniques in which case the niches would have to be made considerably deeper to allow for the Buddhas to be cut out of the remaining rock surface; or reconstruction with modern materials (a new Buddha made of concrete?); or at least its evocation with laser techniques in the context of a future sound-and-light show – a suggestion which after the disaster and under the present circumstances seems rather misleading.

Some of these suggestions would in fact lead to a destruction of what was spared by the barbaric act of the Taliban. At the same time they point at the basic dangers of every process of reconstruction – a topic that was often discussed in the European conservation theory of the last century. In a preservation context reconstruction generally is related to the re-establishment of a state that has been lost (for whatever reason), based on pictorial, written or

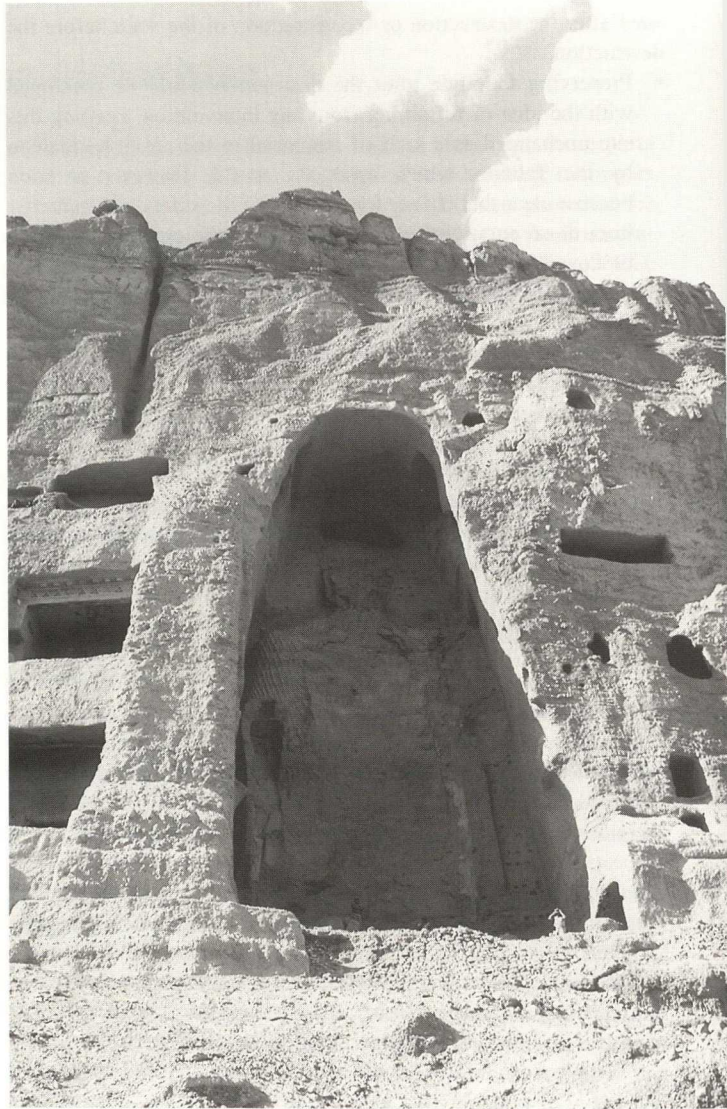


material sources; it can range from completion of elements or partial reconstruction to total reconstruction with or without incorporation of existing fragments. A necessary prerequisite for either a partial or a total reconstruction is always extensive source documentation on the state that is to be reconstructed; nonetheless, a reconstruction seldom proceeds without some hypothesis. One of the criteria for the inscription of cultural properties in UNESCO's World Heritage List according to the 1972 convention is that “reconstruction is only acceptable if it is carried out on the basis of complete and detailed documentation on the original and to no extent to the conjecture.” Thus, reconstruction is possible in principle, but it requires a sound scientific basis. Although reconstruction is not “forbidden”, the pros and cons must nonetheless be very carefully weighed. Just as a reconstructed completion that is based on insufficient evidence or questionable hypothesis in fact falsifies a monument, so an unverified “creative reconstruction” cannot really reconstitute a lost monument, not even formally – and certainly not in its historical dimension.

Independently of the scepticism of many colleagues towards the various suggestions for a reconstruction of the Buddha statues the UNESCO/ICOMOS mission to Bamiyan in July 2002 focussed on practical and technical solutions to secure the existing remains with limited funds and thus to preserve these world-famous historic sites as places of memory for future generations. As part of the ICOMOS initiative to help save endangered cultural properties in Afghanistan, we were able to carry through a first investigation of the situation in Bamiyan by request of UNESCO. Putting questions of reconstruction aside, the aim of this investigation was to consider all possibilities for a necessary consolidation of the rock surface. The members of this team, who tried to produce a first survey in a few days, were, apart from the author of this report, Prof. Dr.-Ing. Michael Jansen, a member of ICOMOS Germany with years of experience at archaeological sites in this region, Dipl.-Ing. Mario Santana-Quintero, member of ICOMOS Venezuela, Dr. Jörg Fassbinder, geophysicist at the Bavarian State Conservation Office, and the Chinese colleague Dr.-Ing. Zou Yazou, geo-engineer, with whom we had already worked together some years ago during a cooperation between Bavarian and Chinese colleagues to consolidate the Great Buddha of Dafosi (see *Der Grosse Buddha von Dafosi*, ICOMOS-Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees, vol. XVII, Munich 1996). The first aim in Bamiyan is of course to consolidate the rocks immediately around the two niches and the traces and remains of the Buddha statues which are still visible like silhouettes on the back walls of the niches. The heaps of rubble stretching as far as to the side rooms at the foot of the niches are not just “dust” and indefinable debris, but include big fragments, – quite obviously still the entire material of which the Buddha statues consisted before they were blown up. Just as much as the still visible remains of the figures on the back walls of the niches this is historic material that should be protected, salvaged layer by layer and assigned to the various parts of the statues. Particularly these heaps of fragments, themselves depressing witnesses of the destructive frenzy of the Taliban, were the focus of the measurements and photographic documentation of our ICOMOS team.

In contrast to the above-mentioned ideas of a reconstruction, uttered without detailed knowledge of the situation and highly problematic for the reasons mentioned above, these fragments are pointing at a conservation concept called anastylosis which is common practice at many archaeological sites world-wide. This method developed in the field of classical archaeology but also applicable for partially destroyed monuments of later epochs, is referred to in article 15 of the Venice Charter: “All reconstruction work should however be ruled out a priori. Only anastylosis, that

is to say, the reassembling of existing but dismembered parts can be permitted. The material used for integration should always be recognisable and its use should be the least that will ensure the conservation of a monument and the reinstatement of its form.” Even if the task may seem unusual in view of the enormous dimensions of the giant statues (the Great Buddha being 55 m, the Small Buddha 38 m), anastylosis is quite common in conservation practice and in this case seems even urgent if one wants to save the entire historic substance still extant. During the preliminary work for the anastylosis, which should go ahead at the same time as the consolidation of the rock to enable a sensible co-ordination of the steps of work, a whole range of technical details would have to be solved. Fortunately, in front of the Great Buddha there is enough space for the construction site, where all layers of fragments could be spread out. In front of the Small Buddha where the terrain drops very steeply such a plane surface would have to be created provisionally. Assigning the stones to the various parts of the colossal statues will be made easier by the different stone layers. On the other hand the necessary work for fixing and stabilising cracks as well as for reassembling the fragments, all of which



Bamiyan, niche of the Small Buddha and adjoining caves (July 2002)

require very special methods, are made more difficult by the partly crumbling rock resembling *nagelfluh*. Besides, as with every anastylosis special considerations are necessary for an inconspicuous load-bearing frame in the background, which in this case for obvious reasons could be of steel. Whereas every imaginable kind of reconstruction would interfere with the walls of the niches more or less drastically, only simple anchors would be necessary to hold the load-bearing frame for the anastylosis. The frame would stand free in front of the back wall, the latter preserved in its condition after the destruction and therefore showing the traces of the destroyed figures like a silhouette so that the memory of the disaster would be kept alive.

During our technical investigations in Bamiyan in July 2002 this conservation concept of securing the existing remains in conjunction with an anastylosis preserving all traces of history, including the memory of the destruction in 2001, was almost self-evident. From the author's point of view this is the only appropriate solution for this unique place. Any imaginable type of “brand new” Buddhas would only harm the authentic spirit. In the meantime we can only hope that under the guidance of UNESCO the successful cooperation between an international ICOMOS team,

Bamiyan, niche of the Great Buddha (July 2002)



Afghan colleagues and a regional workforce will continue. It would be highly desirable if colleagues from India could also contribute, especially since the last comprehensive restoration work was executed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Considering the extraordinary importance of this world-famous historic site the safeguarding of the Bamiyan Buddhas should not be the achievement of one nation only, but instead a joint effort of many implemented step by step. However, as far as securing the most dangerous parts threatened to fall off and the consolidation of details such as historic plasters on the remains of the Small Buddha are concerned, there is a great urgency to start as soon as possible.

(abridged version of Michael Petzet, *Anastylosis or Reconstruction – the Conservation Concept for the Remains of the Buddhas of Bamiyan*. In: *ICOMOS 13th General Assembly*, Madrid 2002, pp. 189–192)

UNESCO Expert Working Group on the Preservation of the Bamiyan Site Munich, 21–22 November 2002

Recommendations

1. Consolidation and preservation

Recognizing the results of the expert groups that worked at the site of Bamiyan in May, July and September 2002, the participants at the international “Expert Working Group on the Preservation of the Bamiyan Site” which was held in Munich on 21 and 22 November 2002, recommend that:

- a) The Bamiyan site, consisting of the Northern cliff of the Bamiyan Valley, with its caves, especially the niches of the monumental Buddhas, the remains of the blown-up Buddhas themselves, and the area in front of the cliff for, at least, 100 meters, should be consolidated and preserved. Further cultural area within the main Valley, including Foladi and Kakrak, should be identified and protected after adequate archaeological research;
- b) an appropriate infrastructure be established for the conservation and preservation of the monuments;
- c) the entire site be fully documented;
- d) monitoring of the cliff and the existing fractures be performed;
- e) emergency actions be executed immediately, according to priorities;
- f) an execution plan be drawn up according to available data, together with new information, as necessary;
- g) training of local people and their involvement in the activities be carried out;
- h) the treatment and conservation of the loose fragments of the monumental Buddhas should include:
 - documentation;
 - geological investigations;
 - the professional placement of the remaining fragments of the Buddha statues according to stratigraphic identification;
 - protection of remains/fragments in a protected lapidarium.

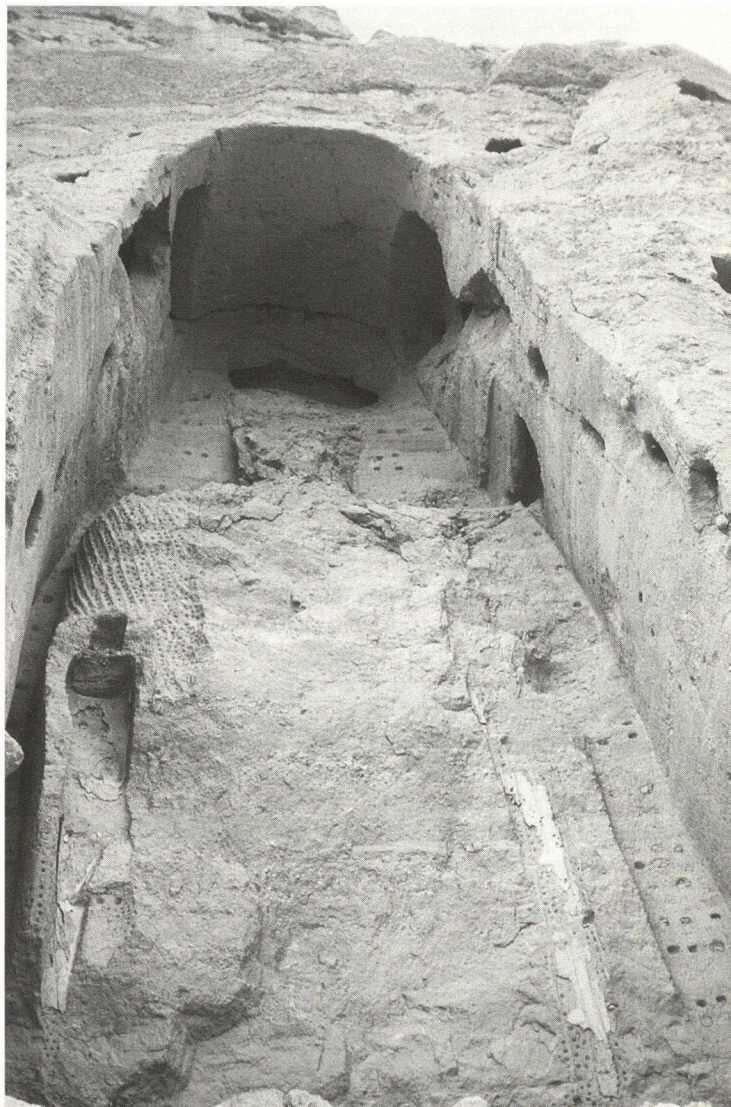
Activities should be carried out simultaneously, if possible, in order to optimise the time work schedule. Safety, especially in the niches, should have priority.

2. Wall paintings

Regarding the conservation of the wall paintings, the participants further recommend that:

- a) A mission of experts on wall painting conservation, including a specialist in documentation, be sent to Bamiyan with the engineering specialists, in order to assess the state of preservation of the caves’ structure, as well as the wall paintings still *in situ* and the damage caused by vandalism to 25 selected caves in Bamiyan, Foladi and Kakrak;
- b) A detailed plan of intervention for the conservation of the structure of the caves and their wall paintings, establishing priorities for intervention and a work-plan, be drawn up;
- c) Inventory and full photographic and graphic documentation of the paintings and comparison with existing/former documentation be completed;
- d) Samples for analysis in order to determine the technique of execution be collected, the deposits found on the surface of paintings and the most suitable and compatible materials to be employed for their correct conservation be carried out;

Bamiyan, view onto the remains of the Small Buddha (July 2002)



- e) In collaboration with the archaeological team, the fragments scattered on the floors of the caves that were vandalised together with those under the niches and the fragments of the two colossal Buddhas, shall be collected, inventoried, classified, catalogued, conserved, packed and kept safely stored;
- f) A safe depot be built for the preservation and storage of wall painting fragments, as well as for a small laboratory and working area;
- g) Caves with wall paintings be protected by temporary sealing (barriers, doors, etc.) and watchmen for their surveillance be contracted;
- h) Trainees be selected and formed of a team from Kabul and from Bamiyan, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology, etc. of those desiring to undertake training in conservation/restoration;
- i) Emergency intervention be carried out on dangerously detached/separated renders, in order to prevent their complete loss;
- j) Fragments of wall paintings be re-composed, assembled and re-installed. This should not be considered a priority and should be postponed for the future.

3. Archaeological projects

Regarding archaeological projects, the participants further recommend that:

- a) Archaeological explorations and excavations in the Bamiyan Valley and its surroundings should be carried out by experts in agreement with the Government of Afghanistan, in order to specify the extension of the archaeological zone and the cultural area to be protected.
A topographic map of the area should be prepared for this work.
Geophysical explorations should be carried out.
- b) The archaeological sites and monuments should be identified and protected. The programme for their future scientific investigation should be prepared, for example for the monastery complex, the royal residence, the parinirvana Buddha, and others.
- c) Clearance of the fragments from the niches should take place according to archaeological standards.

4. General recommendations

Cooperation between UNESCO and the CIMIC Group North (CGN) aiming to safeguard Afghanistan's cultural heritage, should be established in order to execute cultural projects efficiently in Afghanistan. The assistance and expertise of the CIMIC Group North, together with its functional specialists, its centre of expertise (COE) and its military capacities, in particular of equipment, should be extremely helpful in this regard.

The CIMIC Group North is ready to contribute within the framework of an agreement for cultural cooperation that should be established between UNESCO and CIMIC Group North as soon as possible.