



The Great Buddha of the valley of Bamiyan (7th/8th century)

AFGHANISTAN – HERITAGE @ RISK!

After more than two decades of warfare, Afghanistan is a country today, whose entire cultural heritage is endangered most directly by arbitrary acts of destruction. Its heritage at risk is not only the world-famous Buddhas of Bamiyan, those huge statues cut into high cliff-faces, which have been severely damaged by grenade attacks. Such destruction, which must be regarded in the context of fundamentalist “iconoclastic ideology”, favours the reckless exploitation of the country’s cultural heritage for the sake of the art market. Not only are archaeological sites being sacked, but also the outstanding collections of the Kabul Museum, hit by a rocket in 1993 during a battle between rival Mujaheddin groups, were pillaged, and the objects finally showed up on the international art market. Besides man-made disasters in Afghanistan, there are also risks of earthquakes, land slides and the occasional flooding of rivers. The minaret at Jam, for example, whose foundation walls are endangered by a nearby river, needs urgent safeguarding.

Considering the desperate situation in Afghanistan, UNESCO has tried to react with emergency plans, also involving the International Committee of the Blue Shield. The Society for the Protection of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage (SPACH) is especially committed to the rescue of the sites and cultural property of Afghanistan. SPACH has also published more detailed information in its regular Newsletter (Issue 6, May 2000). The well-informed report on Afghanistan in *Archéologia*, No 365, March 2000, pp 14-29, is also to be recommended.

The following quote is taken from the summary report of James Lewis: “Afghanistan: the wounds of war”, in *Sources*, May 2000, No 123, pp 13-14:

Two decades of war – first against the Soviets and then against each other – have left Afghanistan’s cultural heritage in tatters. At the UNESCO world heritage site of Herat, for example, the last remaining minaret of the college of Queen Gohar Shad, which boasted, in the words of British travel writer, Robert Byron, “the most delicate tilework ever devised by man”, was destroyed in fighting in 1983, while one of the 3rd century megalithic statues of Bamiyan has been blasted by dynamite and rocket-propelled grenades. Yet the evidence suggests that, with only a few notable exceptions, the physical damage of warfare is secondary to that inflicted by human negligence and, in the case of rogue excavations encouraged by arts and antiquities dealers, greed. It is the systematic plundering of ancient sites which has caused world-wide concern for the safeguarding of its heritage.

A number of sites have been singled out for particularly cruel attention by treasure-hunters. At Bamiyan, once a thriving centre of Buddhist culture and home of the largest statues of the Buddha in the world, the damage has been severe. Priceless frescoes which decorated the statues and surrounding walls, having survived in place for over 1500 years, have been systematically stripped from the walls. At the site of the 3rd century Buddha, no trace remains of the wall-paintings which displayed a unique mingling of artistic styles, and had no parallel elsewhere.

The valley of Bamiyan with the two Buddhas, the Great Buddha being 54 m, the Small Buddha 35 m tall

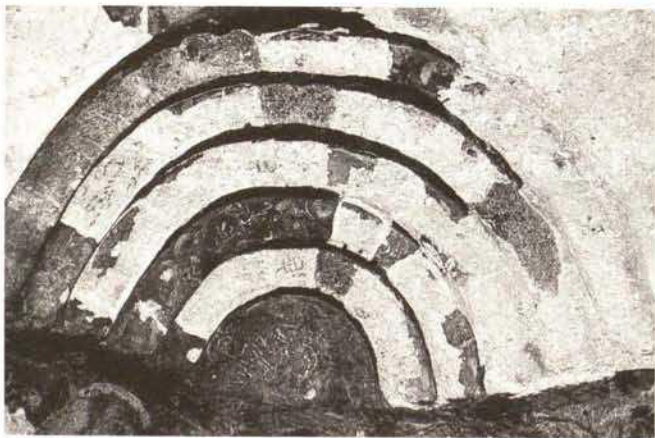


At Mir Zakah, in the province of Paktiya, unofficial excavations in 1997 yielded huge quantities of gold jewellery and statues, as well as an estimated two to three tons of gold and silver coins – the largest ever discovered, anywhere, according to a leading numismatist. The entire find was smuggled from the country, and is now believed to be in the hand of Japanese collectors.

Efforts to enlist the help of foreign governments to prevent the importation of stolen artefacts have been hampered because Afghanistan is not a signatory either to UNESCO's 1954 convention and protocols on the protection of cultural property during war, or its 1970 convention concerning illicit trade in objects of cultural heritage. As such other states-parties are not obliged to help recover property that has been stolen and spir-

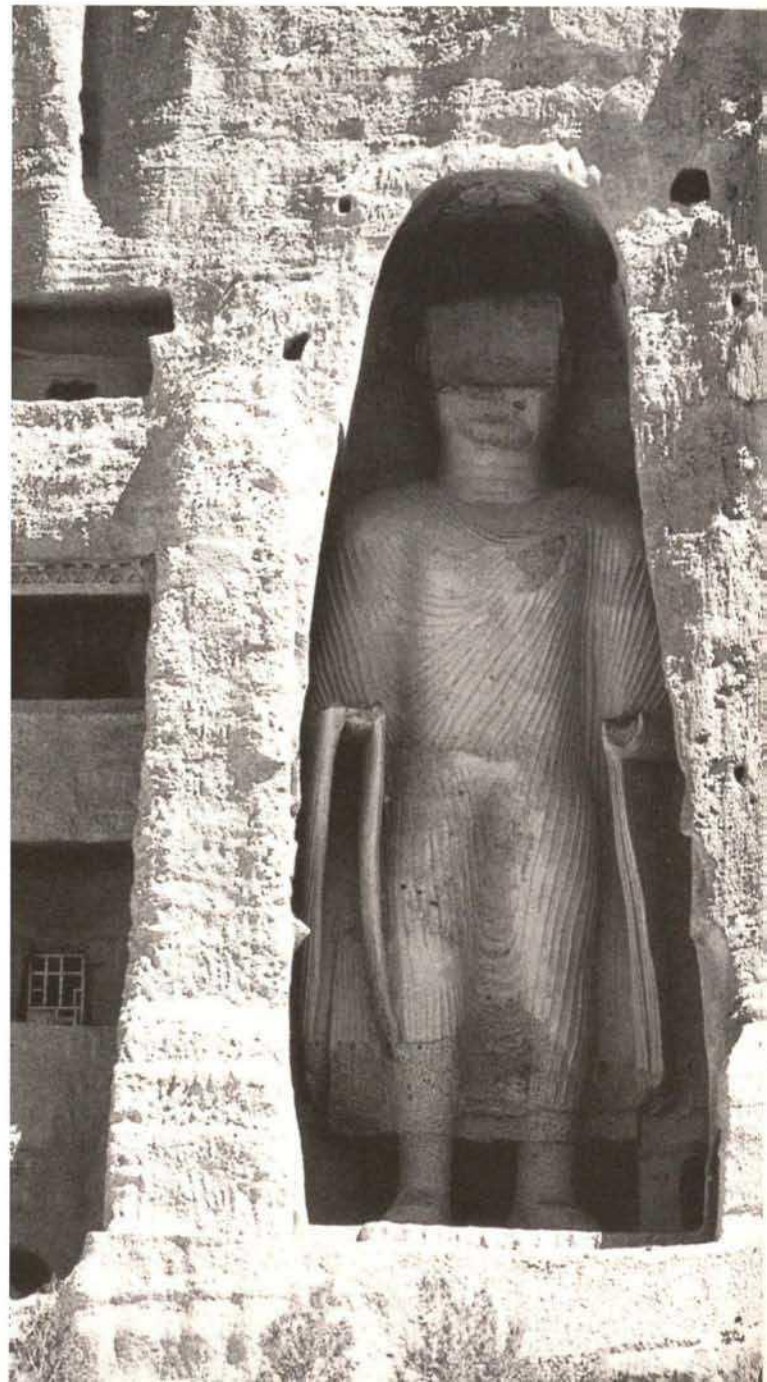


The blown-off head of the Small Buddha (photo 1999)



Frescoes in the niche above the head of the Small Buddha, mostly removed, probably sold piece by piece

The Small Buddha of Bamiyan before its destruction (photo 1995)



ited out illegally. Nor can any of those responsible for the wanton destruction of property in battle be brought to account.

This is a real tragedy for the "entire generation of Afghans, that has grown up in exile without the slightest conception of the wonders that once existed in their nation", points out Nancy Dupree, the vice-chair of SPACH.

But not for them alone. No other country was more traversed in antiquity, or was the meeting place of so many cultures and civilisations – Iranian, Indian, Central Asian and Far Eastern. At times they clashed, but at others they blended with unparalleled creativity, yielding rich fusions of artistic styles unknown elsewhere: Graeco-Bactrian, Indo-Parthian, Sino-



Buddha of Kakrank (5th/6th century), south of Bamiyan, seriously endangered by the destruction of the sculpture's base



The Minaret in Jam

-Siberian, Kushano-Sassanian. The loss of this heritage is a loss for us all.

The Buddhist monastic complex of Hadda has been entirely denuded of its statues and sculptures by both war damage and theft, and at Ay Khanoum, the site of the eastern-most Alexandrian city ever discovered, bulldozers and tunnels have been used to pillage the site. At Balkh, once a trans-continental caravanserai and one of the oldest continually-inhabited cities in the world, photos taken for the independent Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage (SPACH) show the

homes of wealthy military commanders decorated with two-thousand-year-old marble capitals (the upper part of a pillar); others have built villas incorporating portions of gigantesque fluted columns unearthed during rogue excavations.

Although the illegal traffic in antiquities in areas under control of the Taliban has slowed, the activities of dealers elsewhere remain beyond the reach of a single government.



Looting of the Museum in Kabul