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Anastylosis or Reconstruction – Considerations on a Conservation Concept for the Remains of the Buddhas of Bamiyan (2002)¹

The blowing-up of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001, against which ICOMOS protested in vain together with ICOM (see p. 37),² 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 in Kabul in May 2002 still went into two directions: preserving the 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.³ 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 that at least the existing remains of the sculptures should 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 this most famous historic site of the country for future tourism. In the public media the idea of reconstructing the Buddhas has come up time and again ever since:
 - reconstruction of the state before the destruction in the sense of a 3 D-virtual computer reconstruction and physical models of the Great Buddha on the scale 1:200 and 1:25 (shown in the Swiss pavilion of the World Exhibition in Aichi, Japan) by Prof. Armin Grün, ETH Zurich, based on photogrammetric measurements made in 1970 by the Austrian professor Robert Kostka (Graz University)⁴ or even of an 'original' state (e.g. a complete Buddha with a gold coating as mentioned in early sources?);
 - reconstruction of one of the Buddhas in traditional techniques, i.e. hewn from the rock and coated with loam plaster, in which case the historic substance of the existing niche would suffer considerably – a project of the Afghan sculptor Amanullah Haidersad;⁵

- or reconstruction with modern materials (a brand-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 strange, for example, the laser project discussed in 2005 by the Japanese media artist Hiro Yamagata (see p. 83).

Some of these suggestions would in fact lead to a destruction of what was spared by the barbaric act of the Taliban. Also 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.*⁶ Thus, reconstruction is possible in principle, but it requires a sound scientific basis. The comments in article 9 of the Venice Charter are in a sense also valid for reconstruction: *The process of restoration is a highly specialised operation. It is...based on respect for original material and authentic documents. It must stop at the point where conjecture begins ...* Besides, reconstruction is not expressly forbidden by the Venice Charter, as is often maintained. However, based on the Charter's highly restrictive overall attitude also in regard to replacements, we can conclude that the authors of the Charter were certainly very sceptical of all reconstruction work: 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. In addition, there is often confusion about the materials and the technical and artistic execution of the lost original.

Independently of the scepticism of many colleagues towards the various suggestions for a reconstruction of the Buddha statues the first ICOMOS mission to Bamiyan in July 2002 focussed for the time being only 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, I was able to carry through with my colleagues a first investigation of the situation in Bamiyan. Putting questions of reconstruction aside, the first aim was to consolidate the rock structure of the two niches and especially the traces and remains of the Buddha statues which are still visible like silhouettes on the back walls of the niches. As historic monuments these traces are of utmost importance. Compared to my tasks in Dafosi/China (see p. 43), which in some respects were more difficult since a giant cave with three statues of up to 20 metres height had to be made earthquake-proof, in Bamiyan we were well aware right from the beginning that not the entire cliff – which for centuries has been affected by weathering and decay – and its innumerable caves could be secured, but only certain areas and dangerous cracks etc. which have widened since the explosions.

The biggest surprise for me was to see the heaps of rubble stretching as far as to the side rooms at the foot of the niches – not at all just ‘dust’ and indefinable debris, but at least some very big fragments of several tons and 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 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.* According to this method, the fragments of an ashlar stone building – for instance a Greek temple – found on or in the ground could be put together again; the original configuration is determined from the site and from traces of workmanship, from peg

holes, etc. If extant, the original foundations are used in situ. Such a re-erection demands preliminary work in building research; an inventory of all the extant building components, which must be analysed and measured exactly, results in a reconstruction drawing with as few gaps as possible, so that mistakes with the anastylosis can be avoided. A technical plan must also be worked out to preclude damage during re-erection and to address all aspects of conservation, including the effect of weathering. Finally, the didactic plan for an anastylosis must be discussed, with concern also being given to future use by tourists. In order to be able to show original fragments – a capital, part of an entablature, a gable, etc. – on their original location and in their original context as part of an anastylosis, there is of course a need for more or less extensive provisional structures. The fragments in an anastylosis should only be conserved and presented as originals; they are not completed as in a restoration or embedded in a partial or complete reconstruction. The limits of anastylosis are reached when the original fragments are too sparse and would appear on the provisional structure as a sort of ‘decoration’. Anastylosis, an approach which can indeed serve to protect original material in certain circumstances, also illustrates the special role of the fragment in archaeological heritage management as well as the particular significance of conservation work in this context. These are some general reflections on anastylosis in my *Principles of Monument Conservation*,⁷ which can also be applied to the case of the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

Even if the task may seem unusual in view of the enormous dimensions of such giant statues of 55 m and 38 m height, anastylosis, quite common in conservation practice, in this special case seems urgent if one wants to save the entire historic substance still extant. As early as 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. It starts with the installation of a construction site, for which instead of a modern crane that could probably only be transported to the site with the greatest difficulties one could perhaps fall back upon wooden constructions or a properly anchored hanging scaffold with a movable platform. In front of the Western Buddha there is enough space for the construction site, where all layers of fragments could be spread out. In front of the Eastern Buddha where the terrain drops very steeply such a plane surface could be created provisionally. Assigning the stones to the various parts of the giant statues will be made easier by a comparison with the different stone layers. On the other hand the necessary works for fixing and stabilising cracks as well as for reassembling the fragments, all of which require very special methods, are made more difficult by the partly crumbling rock that resembles *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 should be of steel. Whereas every imaginable kind of reconstruction could 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 could 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, seemed almost self-evident. From my 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, such considerations seem to have found the consent of UNESCO, but of course we have to wait for further decisions of the Afghan government. So I can only hope that under the guidance of UNESCO this cooperation started in 2002 between an international ICOMOS team, 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 be 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. Furthermore, the stone fragments filling even some of the side caves need to be blocked off by a fence in front of the niches to avoid visitors being injured but also to ensure that none of that material is removed, especially not during any uncontrolled 'clearing work'. Instead, the removal of every layer of the stone piles must always be under the control of experts.

Naturally, our first considerations on a conservation concept presented here in a very sketchy manner need to be further elaborated. Besides, this concept touches many principles of our profession and questions that are not only being dealt with in the Venice Charter, the foundation document of ICOMOS, but also in several Charters and Guidelines; e.g. the aspect of authentic material, which in the case of an anastylosis using only original fragments will even satisfy the strictest 'substance fetishist'. There is also the question of reversibility, which should at least be kept as a possible option, and finally the question of intangible values, which have become increasingly important in the past years. The latter are being guaranteed by a strong *genius loci* in a spectacular cultural landscape with all the witnesses of Buddhist and Muslim traditions, also constituting the cultural wealth of present-day Afghanistan. Taking this great tradition into consideration the Afghan government's wish to reconstruct to a certain degree what has been lost is quite understandable. Because in conjunction with the deep-felt human concern that arises over rebuilding after catastrophes, there is always the additional issue of the perceptible presence of the past at the monument site, an issue that involves more than extant or lost historic fabric.

◁ Eastern Buddha niche with remains of the statue, 2002

Notes

- 1 Revised 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; abridged version in: *Heritage at Risk 2002/2003*, pp. 16–19. – See also M. Petzet, *ICOMOS's Concept and Measures to Safeguard the Remains of the Bamiyan Buddhas*, in: Preserving Bamiyan, Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Protecting the World Heritage Site of Bamiyan', Tokyo, 21 December 2004, Tokyo 2005, pp. 93–99.
- 2 For the text see also *Heritage at Risk 2000*, p. 39.
- 3 In particular Prof. Ikuo Hirayama, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, pleaded at the International Seminar in Kabul (27–29 May 2002, cf. p. 39) for leaving the site as it is and for investing the money in humanitarian aid for refugees rather than in a reconstruction, *There are other world cultural heritages that memorialize atrocities (Auschwitz ... the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima). I suggest that the Bamiyan caves be preserved as a symbolic reminder of the barbaric destruction of culture by human beings.*
- 4 Cf. Grün, A.; Remondino, F.; Zhang, L., *The Reconstruction of the Great Buddha of Bamiyan, Afghanistan*, in: ICOMOS 13th General Assembly, Madrid 2002, pp. 49–55.
- 5 *Die Rückkehr des Buddhas von Bamian*, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 April 2002.
- 6 Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, 2005, paragraph 86.
- 7 Michael Petzet: *Principles of Monument Conservation/Principes de la Conservation des Monuments Historiques*, ICOMOS-Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees, vol. XXX, Munich 1999, pp. 43/44. – Michael Petzet, *Principles of Preservation/An Introduction to the International Charters for Conservation and Restoration 40 Years after the Venice Charter*, in: *International Charters for Conservation and Restoration (Monuments and Sites I)*, 2nd edition, Munich 2004, pp. 7–29.

▽ Western Buddha niche, measurements with total station carried out by Mario Santana

