

II AFGHANISTAN – HERITAGE AT RISK

In the first volumes of its Heritage at Risk series, started in 2000, ICOMOS already pointed out the dramatic threats to the Afghan cultural heritage.¹ After more than two decades of warfare, the entire cultural heritage of Afghanistan was endangered by arbitrary acts of destruction. Heritage at risk were not only the world-famous Buddhas of Bamiyan, those giant statues cut into high cliff-faces and severely damaged by grenade attacks. Such destruction in the context of fundamentalist ‘iconoclastic ideology’ also favoured the reckless exploitation of the country’s cultural heritage for the sake of the art market. Many archaeological sites were sacked. 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.

Considering the desperate situation in Afghanistan, UNESCO has tried to react with emergency plans, also involving the International Committee of the Blue Shield. The special commitment of the Society for the Protection of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage (SPACH) regarding the rescue of the historic sites and cultural properties of Afghanistan needs to be pointed out. SPACH has also published more detailed information in its regular Newsletter.²

Before the final decision to blow up the Buddhas of Bamiyan in March 2001 ICOMOS and ICOM had protested in vain against the disastrous consequences of the edict of the Islamic Emirate issued on 26 February 2001:

SAVE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF AFGHANISTAN APPEAL BY ICOMOS AND ICOM

ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and ICOM (International Council of Museums) learned with great shock of the new decree issued by the Taliban leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar ordering the systematic destruction of all statues in the country. This decision breaks the commitment made by the Taliban leadership in 1999 to protect all cultural heritage in Afghanistan and in particular the giant Buddha figures at Bamiyan.

Adding to the dishonour of breaking a commitment to preserve the ancient and diverse heritage of Afghanistan as part of that of the whole of mankind, such an act of destruction would be a total cultural catastrophe. It would remain written in the pages of history next to the most infamous acts of barbarity.

For many years, ICOM has alerted the world on illicit trade in cultural objects from Afghanistan. ICOMOS, in its 2000 World Report on monuments and sites in danger (see http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/afgha_2000.htm), pointed out in detail the dangers to cultural heritage in Afghanistan, in particular the pre-islamic figures of the Buddha in Bamiyan. This decree of Mollah Mohammad Omar confirms the imminence of this danger.

As world-wide non-governmental organisations, ICOMOS and ICOM call on all people, governments, International Organisations and associations to take immediate action to prevent this cultural catastrophe from happening. A dialogue should be established with the Taliban leaders to ensure adequate protection of all Afghan heritage, whether pre-islamic or islamic. This is a matter of the highest importance and the greatest emergency.