2004

Only after the work of the Italian company RODIO, which had started in 2003, had been finished (see report Margottini, p. 175 ff.) and the rear walls of the niches had been secured by steel nets in June 2004 to avoid the risk of falling stones, the salvage of the decaying fragments of both statues could begin. Thanks to funds provided by the German Foreign Office the ICOMOS team in co-operation with the Afghan authorities and the UNESCO office in Kabul made considerable progress between end-June and end-October 2004. At first it was most appropriate to safeguard those fragments of the Buddha Statues which show signs of original surface and to store them in a place protected from rain and snow. The restorers, Edmund Melzl and Engelbert Praxenthaler, as well as engineer Georgios Toubekis (Technical University Aachen) made the site ready and carried out various tasks. Shelters were built in a suitable location in front of the Buddha niche to store the stone material, whilst finds of original plaster had to be secured and stored in boxes inside the mudbrick buildings near the Western Buddha, which had already been restored by ICOMOS in 2002. Parts of these buildings are now used as local office of the Department of Historical Monuments.

The new shelter structures consist of two rooms of 11 m x 9 m and 35 m x 9 m, both 3.80 m high and open to the front of the Western Buddha niche. The area has been secured by a surrounding fence with an entrance gate between the two buildings, so as not to obstruct the view towards the Buddha niche. To harmonise with the reddish appearance of the overall cliff-face and the general traditional architecture of the valley the construction was done in mudbrick with stone foundations and plastered with red mud. Care was taken not to disturb any archaeological sub-surface deposits. The lightweight roof construction was designed in such a way that it can be easily removed to give full access to the individual compartments. The work was executed entirely by a local Bamiyan company. Two employees of the national Monuments Department assisted in the entire process of the project. They supervised the local workers and were acquainted with international standards in documentation and conservation.

The niche of the Western Buddha measures approximately 300 cubic metres and the pile of rubble rises to 8 m above ground level so that about 1600 cubic metres are to be moved. Sand and crumbling pieces of rock have been moved by hand and shovel and placed near the Buddha niche. A layer was laid down separating original ground surface and the niche material so as to be able to distinguish these materials from each other in the future. All pieces were checked for signs of original surface.

Security aspects determined all activity as it was known that the area of the niches served as ammunition stockpile in the years before the destruction. Throughout the progress of the works finds of battle as well as exploded and unexploded ordnance came to light. A de-mining expert assisted the works daily to remove dangerous artefacts and to check the metal finds.

The Western Buddha niche in 2004

All the debris was examined shovel by shovel by the workers in search of remains of mud plaster and then carried by wheelbarrows to the western side of the fenced area. Pieces of stone showing signs of original surface were transferred to the shelters and stored on wooden pallets. Heavy fragments of rock were moved by a fork lifter or by a 30-ton crane to the shelters. The transport and movement of stone pieces had to be carried out very carefully because of the generally delicate condition of this material. Wooden boards placed between the steel rope and the boulders successfully prevented damage to the rock surface during movement. By using a fork lifter in combination with wooden boards, medium-sized fragments of up to about eight tons could be lifted and carried without damage.

These fragments have been documented describing size, find location, surface condition, signs of carving and physical characteristics. Any original surface on smaller pieces could be identified by a change in colour whereas bigger fragments show holes of almost identical conical shape which used to hold wooden spikes anchoring the surface mud plaster.
The analysis of some mud plaster remains, carried out at

the Leibniz Laboratory, Kiel University under Prof. Grootes, revealed the composition of the original plaster surface of the Buddhas: *The six ^{14}C ages for the Great Buddha cluster between 1440 and 1460 years BP with a simple average of 1452 ± 7 and those for the Small Buddha between 1495 and 1540 years BP with an average of 1513 ± 23. The age difference of 60 ± 24 is statistically significant (2.4 σ). The sample from the niche wall of the Great Buddha shows with 1505 ± 15 years BP an age similar to that of the Small Buddha. The ^{14}C ages fall, unfortunately, in two ^{14}C age plateaus of the radiocarbon dendro-calibration curve, namely AD 540–600 for the Small Buddha and AD 600–640 for the Great Buddha, which results in calibrated age ranges of AD 60–640 and AD 535–600 (2 σ, 95 % probability) for the Great and Small Buddha respectively. Thus the Small Buddha was constructed before the Great Buddha* (cf. also pp. 231–235).

Besides, the larger plaster fragments from the clothing of the Small Buddha, which are still *in situ* on the rear wall of the niche, have been provisionally consolidated by Engelbert Praxenthaler, a safeguarding action at the last minute, because the precious plaster fragments were severely threatened. In 2004 only about a third of the fragments could be saved from the niche of the Great Buddha. The consolidation of the rear walls, so far only provisionally secured with the help of steel nets, is also extremely urgent.

M. Pz.

Afghan and international experts at the Bamiyan site, 2004