

NEWS

Buddhas May Stretch Out, If Not Rise Again

A UNESCO team finds that at least the larger of the destroyed Buddhas could be salvaged, although the smaller one is mostly powder

KABUL—Monks took decades to carve the enormous Buddhas that for more than 1500 years greeted travelers to the Bamiyan Valley. But they disappeared in a few brief seconds in a scene etched on the world's consciousness. When the Taliban regime dynamited the magnificent statues in March 2001, to comply with their strict ban on human or animal representations, experts assumed the destruction was absolute. But an international team of scientists and engineers who visited the site last month found to their surprise that enough pieces remain of the larger Buddha to reassemble the shattered statue—at least on the ground. Once the winter snows of the Hindu Kush begin to melt next April, workers will start sorting through the debris, as well as reinforcing the two giant niches where the Buddhas once stood watch, and rescuing the few ancient murals left on the walls of caves surrounding the site.

This preliminary effort will likely take 3 years and cost \$1.5 million, according to Christian Manhart of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), who led the team. The Japanese government has already pledged

\$700,000 and might double that grant. Only after the project is complete can the national and provincial government face the controversial issue of whether to rebuild one or both of the massive statues. How much that would cost is anyone's guess.

For the 15 centuries since they were carved from the rock face, the statues have weathered many storms. Although pockmarked with bullet holes, shorn of much of their faces, and devoid of the bright polychromatic hues that originally adorned their surface, the 38- and 55-meter-high Buddhas dominated the fertile valley of Bamiyan—until the Taliban came along. Now UNESCO and the Paris-based International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) are trying to assess the damage. During its early October visit, the expedition, which included archaeologists, mural specialists, and structural engineers, made the first comprehensive assessment of the site. "There's much more left of the Buddhas than we thought," says ICOMOS chief Michael Petzet. "Some reports were that there was only dust and rubble."

Pieces of the large Buddha, especially, are for the most part still salvageable. "All the fragments are still there. You could lay them out on the ground rather easily," Petzet says. Reports of trucks shipping fragments of the Buddhas—with Taliban complicity—to Pakistan for sale on the antiquities market were "absolutely wrong," he says.

The smaller Buddha, however, did not fare so well. "Much of it has turned to powder," says Manhart. A large section—10 by 20 meters—of the smaller Buddha's niche was virtually hanging in midair during the team's visit and "could fall anytime," Manhart adds. Stabilizing the niches will involve grouting, anchoring struts, or some combination of the two. In the short term, ICOMOS arranged to repair a drainage system on the cliff top, built by India in the 1970s, to reduce water penetration.

Under a UNESCO contract, the organization is also hiring a guard to provide at least minimal security for the site. But that precaution is too late for most of the murals that once covered the walls of 25 caves near the niches. Japanese experts on the mission who had surveyed the collection in the 1970s estimated that only 15% to 20% of the murals survived the civil war and Taliban depredations. The remainder have either been destroyed or re-

moved and sold. Those that survive are blackened by fires and require meticulous cleaning.

And the looting apparently has continued even after the overthrow of the Taliban last year. Petzet says that several wall paintings have vanished since then, based on reports of what survived when the Taliban left. According to Manhart, UNESCO intends to fit secure doors on those caves to ensure their protection.

Whether to rebuild the statues in their niches is a hot-button topic. The ethnic Hazaras in the Bamiyan region and some wealthy Japanese are keen on reconstruction, but officials in Kabul and archaeologists and preservationists abroad are quietly skeptical. One compromise might be to create an outdoor museum with the Buddha remains laid out on a platform on the ground and covered by a roof for protection from the elements,

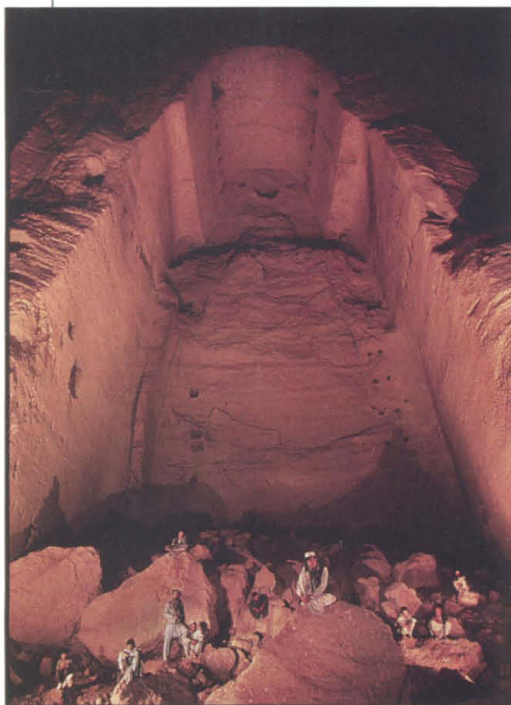


Caved in. Looters have stolen most of Bamiyan's ancient religious paintings.

says Jim Williams, a UNESCO official based in Kabul.

Meanwhile, there won't be any work at Bamiyan during the harsh winter, where temperatures drop to -30°C . But scholars will be scrambling to dig up as much information on the Buddhas—including measurements and photographs—as they can from other sources. Petzet's organization tentatively plans a workshop in Munich, Germany, later this year to bring together specialists from many universities to pool existing data before the snow melts. The ancient monks of Bamiyan would undoubtedly be pleased at the efforts being made to honor their creations.

—ANDREW LAWLER



Fallen giant. The largest of Bamiyan's Buddhas lies in a heap under spotlights.

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