

The Image of Heritage
Changing Perception, Permanent Responsibilities

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Edited by
ANDRZEJ TOMASZEWSKI, SIMONE GIOMETTI



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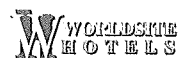


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The Bamiyan Buddhas, performative iconoclasm and the “Image of Heritage”

On March 11th 2001, the two giant Buddha statues (37 and 55 m high) from the 6th century AD in the mountain valley of Bamiyan in north-central Afghanistan were dynamited by the local Taliban regime (Fig. 1).

The international community condemned the incident as an act of vandalism and barbarity, defended the concept of heritage in the name of humanity and proposed ideas for the reconstruction of the Buddhas. What makes the case of Bamiyan so important for this conference on the “image of heritage” are the following three hypothetical observations: 1) It is the tenor of this paper that the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was not an act of barbarian vandalism, but the first large scale live-act of performative iconoclasm against the physical and mental image of heritage in the age of the internet. 2) The case

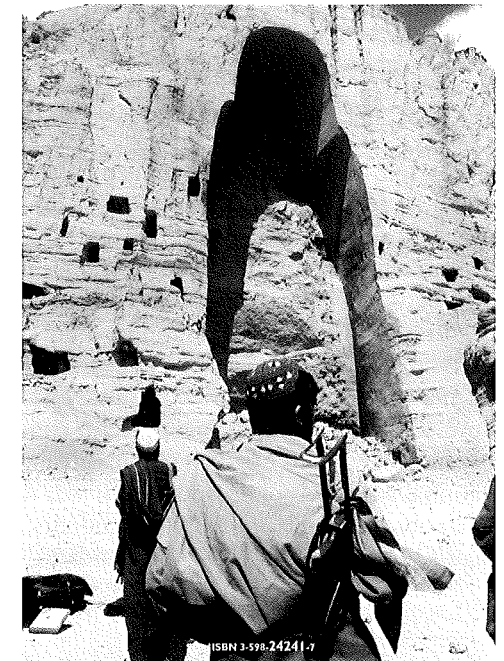
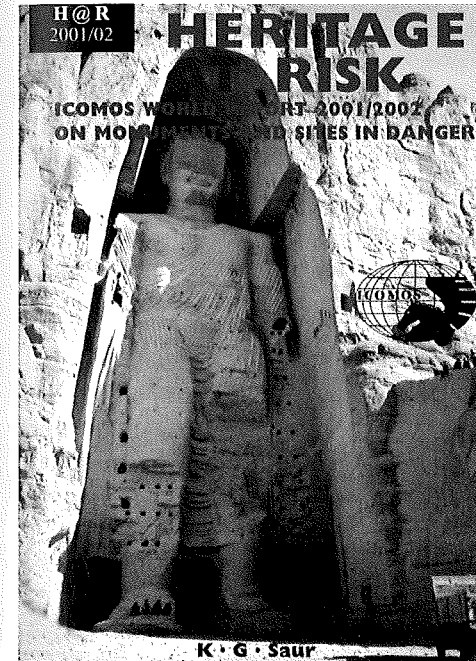


Fig. 1. One of the Bamiyan Buddhas before and after the destruction on March 11th, 2001. (Bumbaru, Dinu *et al.*, eds. *Heritage at Risk. ICOMOS World Report 2001-2002 on Monuments and Sites in Danger*. Munich: 2001, front and back cover).

of the Bamiyan Buddhas has exposed the fragile status and reputation of cultural heritage as an intellectual concept defined by the West and points to the need for a more responsible use of images on the part of the international preservation community for its propagation of the concept of cultural heritage, especially in mass media. 3) Whereas conservation experts have begun to think about options of the physical resurrection the destroyed Buddha statues, this paper tries to show that it is the very religious character of early Buddhist sites along with the circulation of virtual images in our mass media that makes this physical reconstruction superfluous.

Preliminary definitions: approaches to the term "image of heritage"

The term image stands in the centre of this conference and it is worth taking a closer look at its different and wide ranging meanings: "Image" as a) a mental picture or idea, b) a general impression of a person, firm and product in the public; its reputation, c) as a figure of speech, a metaphor, d) as the appearance of something in a mirror or through the lens of a camera, and e) as the copy delineating the shape of a thing with close likeness (effigy, simulacrum).

Combining these definitions with the term "heritage" forms the threefold focus of this paper: a) "image of heritage" as the Western mental concept of so-called "cultural heritage" and its impression on ethnic groups and movements that do not share the roots of the concept, b) as the visual representation in two-dimensional images and lately three-dimensional renderings and multi-media models of cultural objects, and c) as the physical appearance of cultural objects, original or copies.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas: the late climax of an international conflict

This tragic incident of the Bamiyan Buddhas did not emerge over night, but has its roots in the Afghan conflict from the 1970s onwards. Even if Afghanistan was already a buffer zone of imperial interests in the so-called Great Game between Russia and the British Empire in India during the 19th century, the conflict escalated during the Soviet-Afghan War between 1979-1989 when Mujahedin resistance parties based in Peshawar at Pakistan fought with military supplies from the USA against the Soviet invaders. After the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989 with the USA being the winner of the Cold War, the former great powers ignored the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan. The great political vacuum could not be filled by a peaceful regime. Internal fighting started between rivalling Mujahedin factions originally more oriented towards local tribal codes than towards international standards of democracy.¹ It was this political vacuum that led to the emergence of an obscure militia of religious students, or so-called Taliban, lead by Mullah Mohammad Omar, who called for thousands of volunteers from religious schools and refugee

¹ Books on that topic among many others: Marsden, Peter. *The Taliban. War, religion and the order in Afghanistan*. London/New York: 1998. Griffin, Michael. *Reaping the whirlwind. The Taliban movement in Afghanistan*. London: 2001. Tanner, Stephan. *Afghanistan. A military history from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*. Cambridge, Mass.: 2002.

camps from Pakistan. If it is accepted that Afghan Mujahedeen were over a long time sponsored by the USA, one must accept that the Taliban came as the radical offspring of this involvement of the west. In the 1990s, the Taliban successfully fought against the so-called North Alliance and occupied Kandahar and finally Kabul. In order to restore order, they imposed puritanical and brutal restrictions in everyday life to stem what they saw as corruption and luxury from the west. The actions of Taliban increasingly provoked the humanitarian and democratic concerns of the west. During the following years, books about the Taliban as the fundamentalist *Islamic-Other* came on to bestseller-lists. Whereas the Taliban were barely recognized as the legal government of Afghanistan, the USA brought it in direct terrorist connection to the Al-Qaeda of Osama bin Laden who was suspected to be a protected guest in Afghanistan. In 1999, the Taliban controlled the great majority of the country, including the valley of Bamiyan, 230 km northwest of Kabul. It is a hypothesis that the two decrees issued by the Taliban leader Mullah Omar (later a most wanted phantom in the international politics) in 1999 were intended as a means towards obtaining political recognition for the Taliban:

Decree A (concerning protection of cultural heritage)

All historical cultural heritages are regarded as an integral part of the heritage of Afghanistan and therefore belong to Afghanistan, but naturally also to the international community. Any excavation or trading in cultural heritage objects is strongly forbidden and will be punished in accordance with the law.

Decree B (concerning preservation of historic relics in Afghanistan)

[...] 6. The famous Buddhist statues at Bamiyan were made before the event of Islam in Afghanistan, and are amongst the largest of their kind in Afghanistan and in the world. In Afghanistan there are no Buddhists to worship the statues. Since Islam came to Afghanistan until the present period the statues have not been damaged. The government regards the statues with serious respect and considers the position of their protection today to be the same as always. The government further considers the Bamiyan statues as an example of a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors. Further, international Buddhist communities recently issued a warning that in case the Bamiyan statues are damaged, then mosques will be damaged in their regions. The Muslims of the world are paying attention to this declaration. The Taliban government states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but protected.²

Illegal excavations and illicit trade in antiquities in Afghanistan did decline sharply after the decrees and even the war-destroyed National Museum in Kabul reopened its doors for some time. In 1999, the UN did not recognize the Taliban, but rather imposed severe trade sanctions that were even strengthened in 2000. On January 26th 2001 – the international sanctions reached their maximum level – Omar revised his plans with a new decree:

In view of the fatwa (religious edict) of prominent Afghan scholars and the verdict of the Afghan Supreme Court it has been decided to break down all statues/idols in different parts of the country. This is because these idols have been gods of the infidels, who worshipped

² Decrees by Mullah Omar, Head of the Taliban Government. In: SPACH Newsletter 6 (May 2000), p. 18 (As transcribed by Prof. Sinding-Larsen during a meeting at the Ministry of Culture, July 1999). In: <<http://spach.info/documentation/newsletters/Issue%206.%20May%202000.pdf>> (accessed May 2010).

them, and these are respected now and perhaps may be turned into gods again. The real God is only Allah, and all other false gods should be removed.³

This public announcement of the destruction of non-Islamic statues – and that included the Bamiyan Buddhas – led to an immense international protest that altogether can be called a “Chronicle of a Death Foretold”. UNESCO sent a first appeal to the Taliban via the Islamabad office in Pakistan, issued international press releases and interviews, international petitions including those by Arab countries and finally a personal letter by UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura to Mullah Omar calling for suspension of the edict to destroy the Buddha statues. For many days, media journalists and the Taliban authorities issued conflicting accounts to the public about the status of statues. Western institutions and museum directors, such as Philippe de Montebello from the New York Metropolitan Museum, offered to buy the statues: “Let us remove them so that they are in the context of an art museum, where they are cultural objects, works of art and not cult images”.⁴ All in vain. Both Buddha statues were dynamited by the Taliban on March 11th 2001, in front of the heritage community. Later, the destruction was put on the internet by journalists who filmed the destruction in situ (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The blowing-up of the Bamiyan Buddhas as a live happening in the internet. (YouTube-Video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aa6XX5_ijklY&feature=related> [accessed May 2010]).

Additionally, the Kabul Museum was looted and Buddhist and other art objects were destroyed. Some days later, the Taliban invited journalists to Bamiyan to take photographs of the giant empty niches that circulated around the world and filled the front pages of international newspapers.

“Crime against Culture”, barbaric vandalism or performative iconoclasm?

UNESCO called the incident a “dreadful crime against culture” and a “cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people, and, indeed, of the whole of humanity”.⁵ ICOMOS called it, as I have cited, an “incredible act

³ Quoted from: Krieken-Pieters, Juliette van. *Dilemmas in the cultural heritage field: The Afghan case and the lessons for the future*. In: Id., ed. *Art and Archaeology of Afghanistan: Its fall and survival. A multidisciplinary approach*. Leiden: 2006, pp. 201-225, here 210. For this quotation compare: Archaeological Institute of America, Online News: Destructive Frenzy in Afghanistan (March 2nd, 2001). In: <<http://www.archaeology.org/online/news/afghanistan/taliban.html>> (accessed May 2010).

⁴ Flood, Finbarr Barry. “Between cult and culture: Bamiyan, Islamic iconoclasm, and the museum”. In: *The Art Bulletin*, 2002/84, 4: pp. 641-659, here p. 568.

⁵ Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO in 2001, quoted in: Warikoo, K., ed. *Bamiyan. Challenge to World Heritage*. New Delhi: 2002, p. ix.

of vandalism” and an “act of barbarity”.⁶ These terms of a “crime against culture”⁷ have remained the attributes of this incident in global collective memory until today. But was that really the right definition? The crucial difference between iconoclasm and vandalism⁸ is the existence or non-existence of a motive: in general, vandalism against all kinds of objects is judged as an arbitrary, spontaneous, ignorant and destructive act without a motive of a higher order. Today, the use of the term iconoclasm has been semantically extended from its original meaning to encompass the intentional destruction or resistance against images and art works in general. In a higher sense, the term iconoclasm includes the attack against and the intended destruction of institutions and doctrines that are judged illusive and offensive. Therefore, iconoclasm is to a large extent an aggressive act against the concept and value structure behind an object. Vandalism is often judged as an isolated neurotic and pathological act of destruction. Iconoclasm comes with a carefully planned announcement and attention-seeking orchestration, that must be considered as an independent means of communication in its own right, with a view to a higher political goal.

Out of these short definitions, the Taliban incident at Bamiyan and Kabul cannot be reduced to a primitive vandalist act attributable to a supposedly ever recurring Islamic medievalism.⁹ On the contrary: tragic as it may sound, I would call the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas the first large-scale live-act of performative iconoclasm – and together with the looting Kabul Museum – directed against the Western mental concept of cultural heritage in the age of the internet. In this context it is important to recall that the concept of cultural heritage, together with norms of conservation and practices of protection. Along with display modes of heritage in museums is –like the term of vandalism itself – a product of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It was, for example, Alexandre Lenoir, the later founder of the *Musée des monuments français*, who in 1793 defended the French royal tombs in St.-Denis cathedral as art objects against the so-called revolutionary vandals of culture. In that European climax of *heritage destruction*, the concept of *heritage preservation* was formulated as a supposedly universal and humanitarian concept and later transferred to Asia and the rest of the world through the agency of colonialism.

In the case of Bamiyan, the attack was planned, announced to the world media, and even documented in all its phases until the ultimate destruction. The reproduction techniques of the mass media with its world-wide publicity (of the announcement of the destruction) and free circulation of digital images and film sequences of the final bombing in the internet – both highest achievements of western societies – added a new

⁶ Michael Petzet, then president of ICOMOS International. In: Bumbaru, Dinu et al., eds. *Heritage at risk. ICOMOS world report 2001/2002 on monuments and sites in danger*. Munich: 2002, p. 13.

⁷ Francioni, Francesco; Lenzerini, Federico. *Afghan cultural heritage and international law: the case of the Buddhas of Bamiyan*. In: Krieken-Pieters 2006 (quote 3), pp. 265-292, here p. 267.

⁸ Well-known publications in English and German on iconoclasm, vandalism and the destruction of art include: Warnke, Martin, ed. *Bildersturm. Die Zerstörung des Kunstwerks*. München: 1973; Freedberg, David. *Iconoclasts and their motives*. Maarsen: 1985; Pickhaus, Peter Moritz. *Kunstzerstörer. Fallstudien: Tatmotive und Psychogramme*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: 1988; Demandt, Alexander. *Vandalismus. Gewalt gegen Kultur*. Berlin: 1997; Gamboni, Dario. *The Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and vandalism since the French Revolution*. Chicago: 1997.

⁹ For this question see: Hawting, G.R. *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam. From polemic to history*. Cambridge: 1999.

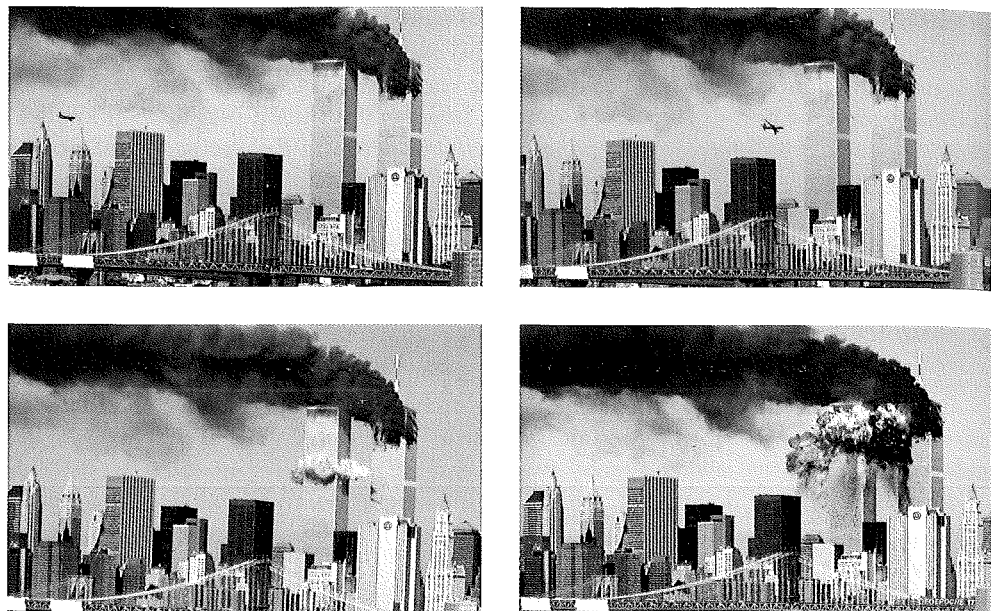


Fig. 3. The attack on the New York World Trade Centre on September 11th, 2001 (exactly six months after the Bamiyan incident), as a sequence of images in *Geo Epoche* 7/2001 (*Geo Epoche*, no. 7/2001: pp. 16-17, photographer Thom Eichinger).

actuality and shattering effect to cultural terrorism and politically motivated iconoclasm. Even today, 10 years later, the term “Bamiyan” typed into “YouTube-Broadcast Yourself” brings up numerous video versions of one and the same live destruction. As regards performative iconoclasm, the live-destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas as icons of cultural heritage bears a certain affinity with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York as an icon of the capitalistic west,¹⁰ exactly 6 months later, on September 11th, 2001. *Geo* published, like hundreds of other journals in 2001-2002 worldwide, various versions of the airplanes crashing into the skyscrapers (Fig. 3) in a strikingly similar aesthetic as the Bamiyan destruction (compare Fig. 2).¹¹

Ironically, the Taliban, labelled by the west as pathological vandals who adhered to medieval moral codes, were motivated to make the public announcement and to execute the performative act by the knowledge of the explosive effect of the internet – a high-tech-instrument of cyber speed circulation of images invented by their declared and helpless Western enemies.

¹⁰ Wharton, Annabel. *Icon, Idol, Totem and Fetish*. In: Eastmond, Anthony; James, Liz, eds. *Icon and Word. The Power of images in Byzantium*. Aldershot: 2003, pp. 3-11.

¹¹ *Geo Epoche*, no. 7/2001 (Der 11. September 2001. Der Tag, der die Welt veränderte).

“From Cult to Culture”: the fragile concept of cultural heritage and its role in mass media

That brings me to the second point of my paper: the fragile status of the “image of heritage” as a western mental concept and the appeal for a more responsible use of propagated ‘images’ of cultural heritage. After the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the French journalist Jean-Michel Frodon stated in the newspaper *Le Monde* under the title “The War of Images – the Paradox of Bamiyan” that the Taliban’s iconoclastic outburst was a peculiar modern phenomenon, an act, “under the cover of archaic justifications, functioning according to a very contemporary logic”.¹² To my understanding, this contemporary logic has two sides: first, the act of iconoclasm at Bamiyan was not directed against religious worship, but against an imposed Western concept which viewed these works as “cultural heritage of humanity” (can that be defined as secular idolatry towards cultural objects?). Second, the destruction showed us the Janus- or double-faced concept of so-called cultural heritage with its symbiotic character of preservation (that is: appreciation) and destruction (that is: devaluation).¹³

The revised decree of Mullah Omar and the final destruction of the statues had less to do with a supposedly eternal theology of Islamic idol-breaking. Three facts underline this hypothesis: First, the Holy Quran itself does not mention any verses that postulate the destruction of another religion’s idols and Mullah Omar indirectly reconfirmed that in his first two decrees in 1999. Second: There were no Buddhists left in Afghanistan to worship the Buddhist statues at Bamiyan and third, the Taliban destruction of art comprised of a much larger iconoclastic program that also included other sites and the National Museum at Kabul. Omar’s words that “these idols have been gods of the infidels, who worshipped them, and these are respected now and perhaps may be turned into gods again” were not directed against a Buddhist or any other religious community, but against a) the intellectually and politically imposed Western concept of cultural heritage, and b) against the institution of the museum. Both terms emerged in the 18th century as products of European Enlightenment. The iconoclastic reflex of the Taliban was “a narcissistic self-assertion” against the international preservation community whose moral rhetoric of universal values and world heritage (*nota bene*: Bamiyan was not yet on the World Heritage List in 2001, being nominated only in 2003¹⁴) and of cultural heritage as “heritage of the whole of humanity” might have sounded hypocritical to Mullah

¹² Frodon, Jean-Michel. “La guerre des images, ou le paradoxe de Bamiyan”. In: *Le Monde*, March 23rd, 2001, p. 15. In this context, some publications also spoke of “archaeological terrorism”, compare: Cloonan, Michèle. “The paradox of conservation”. In: *Library Trends*, 2007/56:1 (Preserving Cultural Heritage), pp. 133-147. Also: Centlivres, Pierre. *Life, death, and eternity of the Buddhas in Afghanistan*. In: Latour, Bruno; Weibel, Peter, eds. *Iconoclasm. Beyond the image wars in science, religion, and art*. Cambridge, Mass.: 2002, pp. 75-77. In general: Schildgen, Brenda Deen. *Heritage or heresy. Preservation and destruction of religious art and architecture in Europe*. Basingstoke: 2008.

¹³ Rambelli, Fabio; Reinders, Eric. *What does iconoclasm create? What does preservation destroy? Reflections on iconoclasm in East Asia*. In: Boldrick, Stacy, ed. *Iconoclasm. Contested objects, contested terms*. Aldershot: 2007, pp. 15-33. In relation to the ambiguous effects of UNESCO World Heritage nominations, see: Gamboni, Dario. “World heritage. Shield or target?”. In: *The Getty GCI Newsletter* 16.2 (Summer 2001), <http://getty.museum/conservation/publications/newsletters/16_2/feature.html> (accessed 15th May 2010).

¹⁴ See the Bamiyan nomination dossier on the webpage of the UNESCO World Heritage Center, <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/208>> (accessed 15th May 2010).

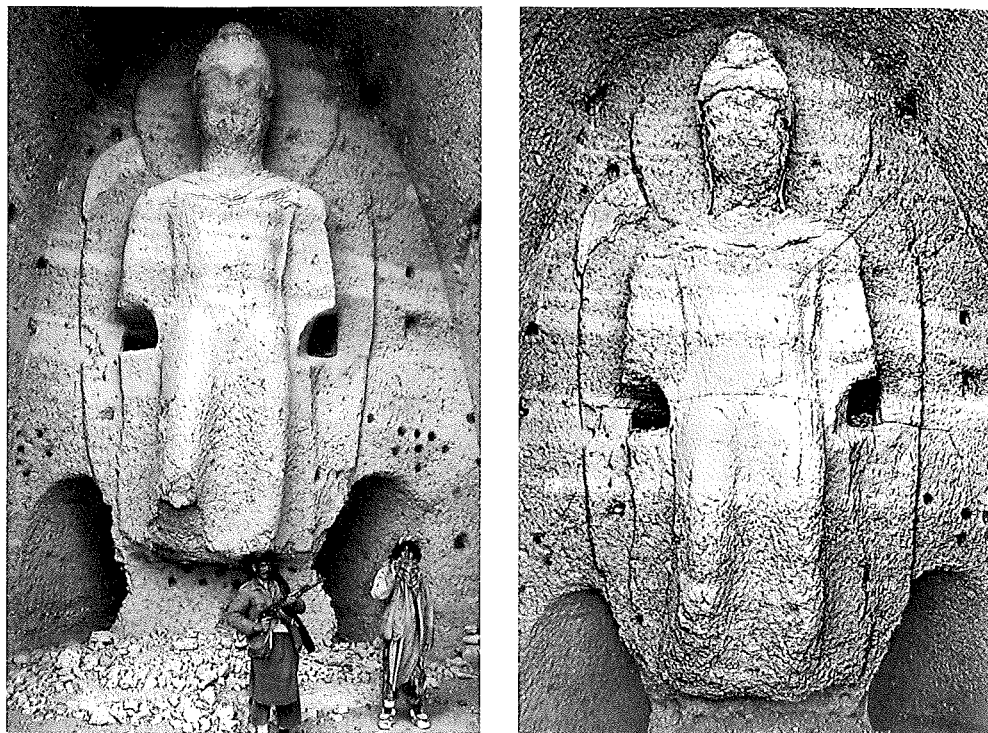


Fig. 4. The Buddha statues of Kakrak in 1977 (left) and in 2000 (right). (left: Bumbaru, Dinu *et al.*, eds. *Heritage at Risk. ICOMOS World Report on Monuments and Sites in Danger*. Munich: 2000, p. 41. Right: Tari, Zemaryalai. *L'architecture et le décor rupestre des grottes de Bamiyan*. Paris: 1977, vol. 2, p. 76).

Omar's ears at a time when the same United Nations imposed sanctions as a collective punishment against the whole Afghan nation. And concerning the claimed term of "humanity", one has at least to admit in a humanitarian perspective: the indeed inhuman Taliban massacre of the local Shiite minority, the Hazara population, in the Bamiyan valley found no mention in the western press whereas the later dynamited Buddhas shocked the world. Mullah Omar's words and the Taliban iconoclastic actions in the Kabul Museum were not directed against the religious objects themselves, but "westwards to European and American museum directors seeking to ransom the ill-fated images"¹⁵ for museums that were perceived as Western containers of secular idolatry.

The Janus- or double-faced concept of so-called cultural heritage no doubt embodies well-meant preservation efforts, but may in special cases even provoke iconoclastic reactions of fundamentalist movements. This ambivalent reception of cultural heritage pro-

¹⁵ Flood 2002 (note 4), p. 652. Another brilliant text on the topic: Poulot, Dominique. *Revolutionary 'vandalism' and the birth of the museum: The effects of a representation of modern cultural terror*. In: Pearce, Susan, ed. *Art in Museums*. London: 1995, pp. 192-214.

duced a kind of *iconoclasm* (a term introduced by Bruno Latour¹⁶) of over-simplified images and stereotypes of the good 'own' and bad (in this case supposedly Islamist) 'other'¹⁷: best examples of this iconoclasm can be seen in the *Heritage at Risk*-publications of ICOMOS right before and after the Bamiyan incident. In the edition of the year 2000, an impressive list of the threats to cultural heritage was published. Afghanistan was represented in a separate country report and here the risk of heritage destructions was correctly placed "in the context of a fundamentalist iconoclastic ideology".¹⁸ However, the reader of the report could see two images of ferocious Taliban warriors in front of the Buddha statue at Kakrak near Bamiyan (Fig. 4 left) and inside the Kabul Museum (Fig. 5).

The image in the museum was captioned "Looting the Kabul Museum", but looking at the image itself, one might not be so sure whether the Taliban members had just broken the art object or were just placed next to the object in order to prevent further looting. In the other image, the two Taliban gave the impression that they had just demolished the Buddha image. Comparing the statue with a photo of 1977 (Fig. 4 right) one can see that the state of preservation was quite the same, except for some parts at the bottom. This comparison might seem somewhat over-intellectualized, but it may show that also we as a preservation community – intentionally or unintentionally – are part of the war of images and therefore complicit with the production of oversimplified messages of a "clash of civilizations".¹⁹ The cascade of associative images of "turban – machine gun – Taliban – empty Buddha-niches" has been inscribed into the universal collective memory after the Bamiyan incident until today (Fig. 6).

As an instant reaction to Mullah Omar's iconoclastic decree in 2001, ICOMOS and ICROM published their appeal "Save the cultural heritage of Afghanistan" on the internet. Motivated as the following sentences no doubt were by the intent to prevent further destruction, they may have sounded all the more motivating to fundamentalist iconoclasts:

[ICOMOS resp. ICOM, the international committees on monuments and sites resp. museums, M.F.] 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



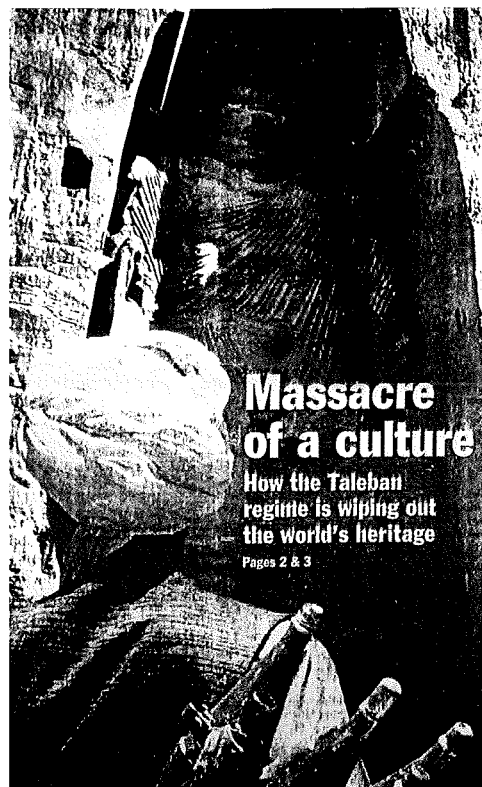
Fig. 5. Iconoclasm? A scene in the National Museum in Kabul around 2000, subtitled "Looting the Kabul Museum" in the ICOMOS *Heritage at Risk* report in 2000. (Bumbaru, Dinu *et al.*, eds. *Heritage at Risk. ICOMOS World Report on Monuments and Sites in Danger*. Munich: 2000, p. 42).

¹⁶ Latour, Bruno. *What is iconoclasm? Or is there a world behind the image wars?*. In: Id. 2002 (note 12), pp. 14-37.

¹⁷ Goody, Jack. *The Taliban, the Bamiyan and us – the Islamic other*. In: Id. *Islam in Europe*. Cambridge: 2004, pp. 146-160.

¹⁸ Bumbaru, Dinu *et al.*, eds. *Heritage at risk. ICOMOS world report 2000 on monuments and sites in danger*. Munich: 2000, p. 39.

¹⁹ Huntington, Samuel P. "Clash of Civilizations?". In: *Foreign Affairs* 1993/72:3, pp. 22-49.



Leere Hülle, einsturzgefährdet: Auf dem oberen Bild sieht man die größere der beiden Höhlen, in denen die Buddhastatuen 1500 Jahre lang standen. Unten ein Foto von 1997: Es zeigt schüttsche Soldaten der Hizb-i-Wahdat-Armee, im Hintergrund ist deutlich die kleinere der beiden Buddha-Statuen zu erkennen. Foto: Reuters

Fig. 6. Images in world media of the established canon “Taliban warrior – machine gun – turban – empty Buddha niche at Bamiyan” (left: *The Times*, March 7th, 2001; right: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of October 28th, 2009, Photo: Reuters).

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 mankind, such an act of destruction would be a total cultural catastrophe. *It would remain written in the pages of history to the most infamous acts of barbarity.*²⁰

It is my interpretation that not only the words “dishonour” and “barbarity” were an open affront to tribal codes of honour which the Taliban subscribed to. Also the final sentence must have worked as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: In a transcultural perspective, we might compare the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, labelled as World Heritage, with

²⁰ Bumberu, Dinu *et al.*, eds. *Heritage at risk. ICOMOS world report 2001 on monuments and sites in danger*. Munich: 2001, p. 26. Also: Archaeological Institute of America, Online News: *Destructive Frenzy in Afghanistan*, March 2nd, 2001. In: <<http://www.archaeology.org/online/news/afghanistan/nongov.html>> (accessed May 2010, accentuation M.F).

the European story of Herostratos who destroyed the Artemis temple in Ephesos in the 4th century BC that counted among the Seven World Wonders: Is it not the highest *goal* of any religious fundamentalist or calculated iconoclast to remain written in the eternal pages of history and memory of mankind with his destructive act?

In the *Heritage at Risk*-Volume of 2002, the real destruction of the Buddhas and the looting of the Kabul Museum were described as “incredible acts of vandalism” and “acts of barbarity”.²¹ On the book cover and even on a double page inside, the reader could see the ‘fundamentalist other’ in person and the same sequence of the destruction as published in the internet (see Fig. 1). These formulations about vandalism (and not iconoclasm) and the image installations also had a considerable impact on us as the western preservation community: it might have helped absolving us (as the Western conservation community) from any joint guilt in the Bamiyan incident and helped preventing us from any further self-critical discussion about the fragile status of cultural heritage as a European concept. Such formulations do not foster a deeper understanding of the iconoclastic motivations of fundamentalists in relation to the new tendencies of iconoclasm in mass media.

Physical reconstruction or the absence of the Buddha Image?

Last but not least, the final hypothesis: the religious character of early Buddhist sites and the circulation of virtual images through the internet make a physical reconstruction (that solution was for example promoted by the former president of ICOMOS International)²² of the lost Buddha statues superfluous. What is meant here?

Bamiyan developed at the intersection between great Asian cultural spheres and trade routes connecting Europe and Asia that were later summarily named the Silk Road. It was the powerful empire of the Mauryas with King Asoka between the 4th and 2nd century BC that patronized the religion and art of Buddhism in central and northern India. The first depictions on Buddhist reliefs that survived between 300 BC and 200 AD show us a very interesting phenomenon: As it was the case in the two other great monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam, also early Buddhism was marked by an aniconic phase. Even if the physical depiction of Buddha was not explicitly forbidden in Buddhist texts, Buddha himself was not physically imaged in early narrative scenes even if he was symbolically present through a throne, footprint, tree or wheel. Differently so in central Asia where rival emperors invariably sought to represent their political power through their images in combination with local gods. These images circulated along the Silk Route. Alexander the Great reached Afghanistan, the farthest region of Hellenistic expansion in the 4th century BC, and it is not surprising that early coins of his successors combined their images with the depiction of Greek or other gods. When King Kanishka established his Kusana-Empire in central Asia until the 3rd century AD, also the image

²¹ Bumberu 2002 (note 6).

²² Petzet, Michael, *Anastylosis or reconstruction – the conservation concept for the remains of the Buddhas of Bamiyan*. In: ICOMOS 13th General Assembly and International Symposium: Strategies for the world’s cultural heritage. Preservation in a globalised world: Principles, practices and perspectives, 1st-5th December 2002. Madrid: 2002, pp. 189-192.

of Buddha (or 'Boddo') emerged on coins to provide legitimacy to monarchical power. In the 2nd century AD, in the area called Gandhara – the region that is today northern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan – a unique art developed that blended Hellenistic iconography with local interests to depict Lord Buddha in person. The result was the birth of the Buddha image in a Graeco-Roman artistic attitude.²³ The latest and also largest example of this unique artistic blend is represented by the two giant Buddha statues from the 6th century AD in the monastic valley of Bamiyan. The invasion of the White Huns at the same time marked the definite endpoint of Buddhist culture in Afghanistan until today. However, the statues survived until 2001 even if their faces were partly destroyed, probably due to early iconoclastic acts of the invading Arabs. Today, the physical 'image' of the Buddhas is lost. In ancient times, their glorious image and reputation was praised and circulated along the Silk Road by thousands of pilgrims and later by travellers and writers. Today, the ancient communication network of the Silk Road seems to be replaced by a more effective information network between east and west. Today, the Buddha Statues of Bamiyan cannot disappear anymore, even if they became in effect late victims of the Cold War. In the course of their pending and live destruction, their images were circulated around the world in seconds by the internet and were stored in the collective universal memory forever. There is no need to reconstruct their physical images for touristic reasons, they are still present in the outline of their niches and can be remodelled by western technology in the virtual world. And finally and most important: there is no need to reconstruct the images for the living community of worshipping Buddhists outside of Afghanistan – at the tragic place of Bamiyan they may return to their own roots where Buddhist worship and art began: with the absence of the Buddha image, being just represented with its footprint.

Closing comment

A transcultural message of the Bamiyan case of iconoclasm may be that the globalised heritage community in the new age of mass media and the internet has to reconsider the multi-layered dimensions of 'image' and 'image-breaking'. It seems necessary to reframe the intellectual and concept of 'cultural heritage of humankind' that has its roots in European Enlightenment, and now assumed to be universally valid. Today, this concept is applied and even imposed globally, even as it is – like we saw in the case of Bamiyan – not necessarily shared by everybody. This does not mean that fundamentalist and destructive cultural practices have to be accepted or even incorporated into a larger concept. It would only mean that in the cases of an impending (and even announced) destruction of

²³ For a general overview on this art, see: Harle, J.C. *The art and architecture of the Indian subcontinent*. Yale: 1994. One of the first detailed studies: Rowland, Benjamin Jr. "Note on the invention of the Buddha image". In: *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1/2 (Jun., 1948): pp. 181-186. More recently: Klimburg-Salter, Deborah, ed. *Buddha in Indien. Die frühindische Skulptur von König Asoka bis zur Guptazeit*. Milano: 1995.

cultural heritage diplomatic interventions would need to react with greater sensitivity and perception to the ideological circumstances in situ. "Let us buy your Buddhas for our museum" was definitively the wrong offer for UN-sanctioned fundamentalists. And the continuing branding of the Taliban as medieval vandals will not help protecting Afghan heritage in the future; *nota bene*: the Taliban are even today a influential movement in the country and might come back to power some time.

As the self-proclaimed and re-affirmed guardian of the 'heritage of humanity', UNESCO may have to reconsider its own role in globalized power relations. And if we really talk about protecting a heritage that encompasses all of humanity, we should first protect its regional stakeholders. In the case of Bamiyan that was and still is not the case: in 2001, the local population was massacred by the Taliban without any global protest and today, at the same time when Western scientists are back on the spot to promote Bamiyan as UNESCO World Heritage, the former inhabitants of the caves around the Bamiyan Buddhas were resettled in a truly inhuman living environment. Finally, if we talk about 'cultural heritage', we always have to 'provincialise' the European roots of its concept²⁴ and promote a more sensitive use of media images of heritage around the world, even more so in zones of ideological and fundamentalist conflict.

Because Bamiyan can be everywhere and any time.

²⁴ This term was introduced in a wider sense by: Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton: 2000.