

# UNESCO TAKES ON THE TALIBAN

## The Fight to Save the Buddhas at Bamiyan

Eleanor Boggs

*“Their golden color sparkles on every side,”  
said a traveler of the two vast standing Buddhas.  
For fifteen centuries they had stood here—  
towering above the valley, with their battered faces,  
broken-off arms and all, undisturbed  
in their cusped sandstone niches  
hewn out of the sheer cliffs of the Hindu Kush,  
spangled with a honeycomb of monasteries  
and chanting stupas—as a stairway to heaven.*

*“We don’t understand why everyone is  
so worked up; we are only breaking stones,”  
chuckled the soldiers as they blew up  
the statues, leaving a gap in the world.  
The fabled Silk Road hangs in tatters now.  
The wind howls in the poplars as it did once  
when the valley was trampled underfoot  
by the Great Khan and his avenging horde.  
Who will stop the Hun from knocking on **our** door?*

R. Parthasarathy

In early March 2001, the Taliban destroyed the two giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan under direction from Mullah Muhammed Omar. The Buddha statues, constructed fourteen centuries ago, were the largest Buddhist statues

in the world.<sup>1</sup> In September of 2000—less than a year before the destruction—Mullah Omar ordered the same statues protected due to their importance as significant artifacts of Afghan

1. Llewelyn Morgan, *The Buddhas of Bamiyan (Wonders of the World)*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).



cultural heritage and also because they were a source of income for the country's tourism industry.<sup>2</sup> However, on February 26, 2001 Mullah Omar reversed his declaration of preservation and sentenced the religious statues to destruction "so that no one can worship or respect them in the future."<sup>3</sup> The Taliban's team, along with Pakistani and Arab engineers, drilled holes into the two statues and detonated explosives including dynamite and anti-aircraft weapons.<sup>4</sup>

In his poem "Stones of Bamiyan," Indian poet R. Parthasarathy indicated the Bamiyan Buddhas' cultural importance. Although the statues no longer held significance as religious icons to the entirely Islamic nation of Afghanistan, they had stood in the Bamiyan valley for over a thousand years physically commemorating the lasting impact of Buddhism and the Silk Road economy that transformed Bamiyan into a meeting point of different cultures. Given the cultural significance of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the destruction of the statues was meant to display the Taliban's power in Afghanistan in response to the lack of

recognition of the Taliban government by the majority of world powers.<sup>5</sup> Before eradicating the Buddha statues at Bamiyan, the Taliban came into conflict with the international community on a variety of issues including women's rights, providing refuge for terrorists, and international aid to Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> The Taliban rejected criticism with the proclamation that outsiders had no right to protest Afghanistan's internal affairs and that the government's Islamic system was above secular law.<sup>7</sup>

As the world community learned of the Taliban's plan for the Bamiyan Buddhas, attempts to protect the icons and prevent their destruction emerged from global agencies, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO worked to prevent the destruction by bringing global attention to the Buddhas and communicating with the Taliban. However, the Taliban's religious agenda, determination to gain international recognition, and influence from Al-Qaeda blocked these efforts, which resulted in the agency's failure and the demolition of the giant Buddha statues.

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2. Morgan, *The Buddhas of Bamiyan (Wonders of the World)*.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. The engineers were brought in at a later point in the destruction process. Locals were forced to place explosives in the drilled holes by dropping down the sides of the Buddha statues by rope. The people of Bamiyan are chiefly Shi'a, whereas the Taliban is an aggressive movement of Pashtun and Sunni peoples—the religious and ethnic differences between the groups is the source of the Taliban's detestation of the locals.

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5. Thomas Barfield, "Idol Threats," *Religion in the News* 4 (Summer 2001). The only countries that recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan were Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

## How UNESCO Functions

UNESCO acts as an agency of the United Nations to protect world heritage. The organization is the first-responder of sorts to threats to cultural heritage such as Mullah Omar's orders to destroy the giant Buddhas.<sup>8</sup> Founded during World War II, UNESCO's mission is to encourage scientific ties between nations on a global scale, to promote the accessibility of education, and to protect cultural heritage in order to strengthen acceptance of different cultures.<sup>9</sup> The agency was founded after the allied governments expressed concern for the educational institutions in Europe that suffered due to World War II.<sup>10</sup> The organization expanded their focus on education to include cultural and scientific international cooperation in 1944 and 1945.<sup>11</sup>

The main body of UNESCO is the General Conference, comprised of representatives from the nations that hold membership in the United Nations, which meets every two years to decide on policies, focused lines of work for the organization, and the budget.<sup>12</sup> The Executive Board, with fifty-eight members elected by the General Conference,

carries out the decisions of the General Conference as well as functions assigned by the agency's constitution and agreements with the United Nations and its other specialized organizations.<sup>13</sup>

UNESCO works to form legal policies that protect culture and promote worldwide support for the preservation of global cultural heritage.<sup>14</sup> The agency holds conventions, such as The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), that incorporate the shared values of international leaders into treaties that govern the protection of cultural heritage.<sup>15</sup> UNESCO includes "ancient archaeological sites, intangible and underwater heritage, museum collections, oral traditions and other forms of heritage" in the agency's definition of cultural heritage.<sup>16</sup>

## UNESCO's Efforts to Save the Bamiyan Buddhas

UNESCO's efforts to communicate with the Taliban and amass global support to preserve the Buddha statues demonstrated the role of UNESCO as an international force protecting world heritage. The agency's efforts failed due to the Taliban's quest for international recognition, an agenda that was shaped by religious ideals and rejection of

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8. UNESCO, "Introducing UNESCO," Accessed November 10, 2013, <http://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>.

9. Ibid.

10. Gene M. Lyons, "International Study of UNESCO," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 31 (April 1978): 5-16.

11. Ibid.

12. UNESCO, "Governing bodies," Accessed November 10, 2013, <http://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>.

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13. Ibid.

14. UNESCO, "Protecting Our Heritage and Fostering Creativity," Accessed November 10, 2013, <http://en.unesco.org/themes/protecting-our-heritage-and-fostering-creativity>.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

Western influence and influenced by Al-Qaeda. Even though UNESCO did not prevent the demolition of the Buddha statues at Bamiyan, the event acts as a case study of how UNESCO defines world heritage sites and the extent of its authority over these sites.

The Buddhas of Bamiyan met UNESCO's standards of world heritage because the statues physically represented the enduring influence of the Silk Road, a series of trade routes that spanned approximately 7,000 miles connecting the east to the west from 200 B.C. to the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>17</sup> The Bamiyan valley became a meeting point of clashing cultures and a center of Buddhism by the fourth century A.D. due to its location at the intersection of roads from China, India, and Persia. Its location provided a pathway for Buddhism to travel along the Silk Road and spread into the area that is now Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> The cliffs of Bamiyan were Afghanistan's most valuable archaeological sites, exhibiting the largest Buddha statues in the world. The Bamiyan caves also claimed cultural and historical value through Buddhist mosaics, lesser statues, and evidence of monks living in the caves.<sup>19</sup>

The larger statue, on the western side of the cliffs, stood at

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17. Subhakanta Behera, "India's Encounter with the Silk Road," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (Dec. 21-27, 2002): 5077-5080.

18. Behera, "India's Encounter with the Silk Road."

19. Takayasu Higuchi and Gina Barnes, "Bamiyan: Buddhist Cave Temples in Afghanistan." *World Archaeology* 27 (Oct. 1995): 282-302.

fifty-five meters high in its niche in the cliff; the other statue of the Buddha at thirty-eight meters was shorter on the eastern side.<sup>20</sup> Stupas were built throughout other Buddhist centers in Afghanistan, but not Bamiyan—the giant sculptures represented a break from former Buddhist tradition.<sup>21</sup> The departure from building stupas was evidence of the Silk Road's impact on Bamiyan: large sculptures came from western culture, in Egypt, Greece, and Rome.<sup>22</sup> Without the merger of cultures at Bamiyan through the Silk Road, Buddhism would not have come into contact with such decorative architecture. The appearances of the statues also bore western characteristics seen in classical sculpture. The Buddha statues wore a robe similar to a toga, they had a straight nose and distinct brow, and their hair was wavy.<sup>23</sup> There were Buddhist influences as well, seen through eyes with heavy lids, elongated ears, and a plump face.<sup>24</sup> The giant Buddha statues represented a period of transition for Buddhism and also for Bamiyan as the valley came into contact with the non-materialistic trade of the Silk Road, and experienced an influx of differing cultures.

Once Mullah Omar announced the destruction of the Buddha statues, UNESCO recognized the Taliban threat to Afghan culture and reached out

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20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Behera, "India's Encounter with the Silk Road."

24. Ibid.

to organizations in Japan and Switzerland to arrange for the protection of Afghan artifacts of cultural significance.<sup>25</sup> The agreement with Switzerland proved to be especially helpful. Three years before the Taliban's actions at Bamiyan, a museum opened in Bubendorf, Switzerland to harbor Afghan artifacts. According to the museum's founder, as stated in an article published by the Archaeological Institute of America, the museum and exhibitions came second to protecting Afghan cultural objects. Artifacts donated and transported to the museum from Afghanistan included 2,300-year-old bronzes from the reign of Alexander the Great and first-century A.D. Begram Ivories.<sup>26</sup>

Architect Paul Bucherer-Dietschi founded the Afghanistan Museum in Bubendorf, Switzerland in 1998 by negotiating an agreement between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance.<sup>27</sup> It was the same year Mullah Omar initially declared the Buddhas at Bamiyan and other items of Afghan heritage would be protected.<sup>28</sup> In 1999 the Swiss government met with the director of UNESCO's World Heritage Center, who approved of the idea for a cultural sanctuary. However, UNESCO

was still bound to its 1970 convention and did not officially support the museum until July of 2001, though it was established in 1999.<sup>29</sup>

Although the agency did not directly support the Afghanistan Museum from its beginning, UNESCO managed to create a way for cultural objects to find protection there. UNESCO developed a policy that permitted the removal of cultural objects under serious threat—with the country of origin's permission and under the condition that the items would be returned.<sup>30</sup> The Afghanistan Museum and the methods behind its establishment demonstrated the limitations of UNESCO in a cultural crisis, as well as how UNESCO handled these restrictions.

Following the release of the Taliban's decision to destroy the statues at Bamiyan, UNESCO launched a campaign to garner global support to save the Buddha statues. UNESCO also

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29. Romey, "The Race to Save Afghan Culture." The museum violates UNESCO and the international community's "near-sacred policy of keeping objects of archaeological and cultural importance in their country of origin." The museum's existence and activities are possible because even though Afghanistan and Switzerland are both members of UNESCO, neither countries have signed the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property—the convention that forbids the transfer of cultural artifacts out of their country of origin without approval.

30. Romey, "The Race to Save Afghan Culture." This "special" policy allowed UNESCO to support a Japanese program dedicated to saving Afghan cultural artifacts as well. UNESCO ambassador in Tokyo, Ikuo Hirayama, sponsored the program.

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25. Christian Manhart, "The Afghan Cultural Heritage Crisis: UNESCO's Response to the Destruction of Statues in Afghanistan."

26. Kristin M. Romey, "The Race to Save Afghan Culture," *Archaeology* 55 (May/June 2002): 18-25. These items are not on display for preservation reasons.

27. Ibid.

28. Morgan, *The Buddhas of Bamiyan* (Wonders of the World).

attempted to communicate with the Taliban. The agency created an online petition to lobby for the protection of objects of Afghan cultural heritage and started a special funds-in-trust account to finance safeguarding efforts.<sup>31</sup> After Mullah Omar's intention to demolish the Buddha statues became public, UNESCO made initial attempts at communication with the Taliban. The organization intended to sway the Taliban's decision with multiple appeals and press releases. Christian Manhart, Chief of the UNESCO Section of Museums and Cultural Objects, reported that UNESCO issued two appeals to the Taliban, the first of which was distributed to the Pakistani and international press. They also published three other press releases; however, it is unclear where these statements were distributed. The Director-General sent a personal appeal to Mullah Omar through the Taliban ambassador in Islamabad to plead for the Buddhas. A special representative of the Director-General, Pierre Lafrance, also met with the Taliban Foreign Minister in Kandahar and the Taliban Minister of Culture.<sup>32</sup>

After the appeals, the UNESCO Director-General met with ambassadors from a number of Islamic nations including those who acknowledged the Taliban government. Ambassadors from nations such as Pakistan and Egypt gave their support to UNESCO's efforts to stop

the destruction. At UNESCO's request, Muslim religious leaders from Egypt, Iraq, and Pakistan took part by issuing fatwas—Islamic religious rulings—against the Taliban's plans for Bamiyan.<sup>33</sup> Despite UNESCO's efforts to save the statues, the Taliban carried through with the demolition of the monumental Buddhas.

After the destruction of the Buddha statues, The Executive Board drew up a draft resolution in June of 2001 that labeled the destruction as a crime against humanity's shared heritage and challenged UNESCO to develop better methods of protection of cultural heritage.<sup>34</sup> The resolution acknowledged the Buddhas of Bamiyan as a world heritage site, therefore solidifying its value to the international community.

## **The Taliban's Religious Reasoning and Agenda Behind the Destruction**

The religious motivation behind the Taliban's decision to destroy the statues at Bamiyan stemmed from abhorrence toward idolatry. Mullah Omar's timing of the destruction reflected one of the most religiously significant periods in the Islamic lunar year, the Hijri calendar and was observed throughout Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Called the Hajj

33. Manhart, "The Afghan Cultural Heritage Crisis: UNESCO's Response to the Destruction of Statues in Afghanistan." Unfortunately, I was unable to find translations of the original fatwas or any reactions from the Taliban to these religious rulings.

34. Ibid.

35. Jamal J. Elias, "(Un) making Idolatry:

31. Manhart, "The Afghan Cultural Heritage Crisis: UNESCO's Response to the Destruction of Statues in Afghanistan."  
32. Ibid.

pilgrimage, Muslims celebrate Abraham's rift with his ancestors' practices of idolatry as an act of heroism from March third to March sixth by taking the pilgrimage to Mecca or vicariously participating in rituals.<sup>36</sup> The holiest day of the Hijri calendar, Eid al-adha, was the last day of the Hajj pilgrimage; demolition work was suspended to celebrate this day.<sup>37</sup> By demolishing the Buddhas during this religiously sensitive period, the Taliban actively honored the memory of Abraham in the Qur'an. The Taliban's strong Islamic ideals acted as justification for the destruction to Mullah Omar and other members of the Taliban.

Mullah Omar demonstrated these religious values in his reaction to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's offer to pay for the removal of all transportable Afghan artifacts during the Hajj period.<sup>38</sup> Mullah Omar responded by asking his fellow Muslims, "Do you prefer to be a smasher of idols or a seller of idols?" His answer outlined the hypocrisy of a religion profiting from idolatry while simultaneously condemning the practice of idol-worship.<sup>39</sup> Mullah Omar's rhetorical question echoed the words of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, an Afghan who sacked

the Shiva temple at Somnath, Gujrat in 1025 A.D.<sup>40</sup> The Sultan became a legend for refusing to accept ransom for the temple's main icon by declaring to be a smasher of idols, not a seller of them.<sup>41</sup> Omar's point also reflected another justification used by the Taliban, which claimed that UNESCO was willing to pay for the statues but did not offer any money to help the Afghan people.<sup>42</sup> By attempting to stop the destruction of the Buddha statues, UNESCO unintentionally offended the Taliban. The Taliban interpreted the organization's actions as idolatry—at the very least, they interpreted it as preserving another religion's idols instead of providing aid to Afghanistan.

The source of Islam's distrust of idolatry and iconoclasm arose from the religion's avoidance of shirk, a word that originally meant affiliating other deities with God and later became a term for polytheism.<sup>43</sup> However, in medieval Islam absolute destruction of idols was not common.<sup>44</sup> The head and face of an idol were targets for transformation or physical damage—similar practices occurred in Roman, Byzantine, and early Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Recognizing the similarity between Muslim iconoclasts with

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From Mecca to Bamiyan." *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 4 (Winter 2007): 12-29.

36. Ibid. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas started March 1<sup>st</sup> 2001.

37. Ibid.

38. Elias, "(Un) making Idolatry: From Mecca to Bamiyan."

39. Ibid. Mullah Omar's rebuttal came on the eve of Eid al-adha, the holiest day of the Islamic year.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid. The U.S. government dismissed the Taliban's claim on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

43. Finbarr Barry Floyd, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84 (Dec. 2002): 641-659.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.



iconoclasts of other cultures and religions avoided the stereotype of Muslim hatred towards idols. To further illustrate this point, Arabic and Persian texts from the tenth to thirteenth centuries revealed the Buddhas of Bamiyan as wonders rather than idols that needed to be obliterated.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, assuming that the destruction of the Buddha statues stemmed from a long-term hatred of idols is incorrect. The Taliban's destruction of idols such as the giant Buddhas comes from the group's more modern and extreme Islamic ideals enacted to reject the Western world.

Mullah Omar's declaration of the plans to destroy the statues indicated that the Taliban wanted the world's attention—attention to the Taliban's authority in the face of a Western world that had sanctioned their government for harboring Osama bin Laden.<sup>47</sup> The Taliban's escalation prior to the incident at Bamiyan provides evidence of bin Laden and Al-Qaeda's influence in Afghanistan. Arab fighters from Al-Qaeda were instrumental to the Taliban's capture of Bamiyan and much of northern Afghanistan, which only solidified the relationship between the two groups.<sup>48</sup> According to the director of the Kabul public library, the Taliban removed inappropriate books under the direction of an Arab member of Al-Qaeda.<sup>49</sup> The Al-Qaeda movement started with

international goals whereas the Taliban featured more domestic interests until the destruction of the Buddha statues.<sup>50</sup> This difference between the two groups demonstrated how the Taliban's agenda changed to reflect the more aggressive and expansive Al-Qaeda.

Mullah Omar's political agenda became increasingly concerned with international attention due to the influence of Al-Qaeda.<sup>51</sup> After the announcement to destroy the Buddhas went public, the Taliban maintained the spotlight by bringing in Western reporters to Bamiyan to document the results of the destruction.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the Taliban invited foreigners to Bamiyan reinforces the idea that the group's target was not just the statues, but also a global audience. The Taliban's agenda, inspired by religious zeal, manifested in a desire to capture global awareness of its power—a goal that was met with international attention and despair towards the destruction of the giant Buddha statues.

## Conclusion

Although the giant Buddhas no longer stand, their significance as symbols of the lasting impact of the Silk Road on regional religions and cultures remains in Bamiyan. The giant sculptures overlooked the Bamiyan valley

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46. Floyd, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum."

47. Ibid.

48. Morgan, *The Buddhas of Bamiyan (Wonders of the World)*.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Morgan, *The Buddhas of Bamiyan (Wonders of the World)*. According to a U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Omar "became a bin Laden convert, a believer in bin Ladenism."

52. Floyd, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum."

for centuries, and UNESCO did not give up on the Buddhas even as they lay in pieces. A little over a year after the Taliban's destruction of the statues, UNESCO sent an expedition to Bamiyan to assess the damage and determine if the statues could be reconstructed.<sup>53</sup> They discovered enough of the larger Buddha's pieces to make a reconstruction feasible.<sup>54</sup> According to Christian Manhart, who headed a team of scientists and engineers, reassembling the Buddhas would take approximately 3 years and \$1.5 million dollars.<sup>55</sup> UNESCO also made a contract with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) to provide a security guard at the site.<sup>56</sup> However, it is up to the Afghan government, not UNESCO, to decide whether or not to reconstruct the Buddha statues—demonstrating the boundaries of UNESCO's jurisdiction over world cultural heritage sites.

The demolition of the giant Buddha sculptures at Bamiyan in 2001 devastated the international cultural community. The event served as an example of how UNESCO functions to protect cultural heritage, as well as its limited ability to succeed in that goal. Before the destruction, UNESCO attempted communication with the Taliban through multiple appeals and contact with Islamic ambassadors

and religious leaders, such as the Taliban ambassador in Islamabad, the Taliban Foreign Minister in Kandahar, and the Taliban Minister of Culture. When direct communication did not work, UNESCO amassed global support online and worked with organizations in Japan and Switzerland, particularly with the Afghanistan Museum in Switzerland. However, the Taliban's political agenda under the influence of Osama bin Laden was concerned with proving that the Western world had no influence in Afghanistan. That ambition, together with a religious condemnation of idolatry, proved to be a disastrous combination when non-Islamic objects of Afghan heritage became a focus for the Taliban government. Even though UNESCO was not able to deter the Taliban from destroying the Buddha statues, its mission to protect Afghan cultural heritage did not end after the events of March 2001. The agency's continued interest and efforts in Bamiyan, post-destruction, not only provide evidence of the value of the monumental Buddhas to the world, but also demonstrated UNESCO's value as an international force in preserving cultural heritage, and in the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the physical reminders of humanity's past and progress.

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53. Andrew Lawler, "Buddhas May Stretch Out, If Not Rise Again," *Science* 298 (Nov. 8, 2002): 1204.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eleanor Boggs is a recent graduate of Virginia Tech and also a rising first-year graduate student. Although this paper is focused on fairly current events and Middle Eastern international relations, Eleanor's historical interests lie much closer to home as she tends to concentrate on Appalachia for the majority of her research. Eleanor was drawn to the story of the Buddhas at Bamiyan due to their cultural heritage and historical significance as symbols of the Silk Road, which was an intersection of culture and diversity in the heart of Afghanistan.