

Rebuilding the Bamiyan
Buddhas
**The new Afghan
government hopes to
restore the
archeological treasures
destroyed by the
Taliban**

Then and now: A gap in a cliff is all that remains of the Bamiyan Buddhas--shown here in a 1997 file photo--after the Taliban demolished the celebrated statues last March

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Dec. 31 - According to Buddhist belief, the human incarnation of Buddha gathered a group of 500 monks around him in 543 BC to bid them farewell. He asked the gathering three times whether there were any doubts about his teachings. No one answered. He left this final message: "All things change. Nothing is permanent. Work hard to reach salvation." In post-Taliban Afghanistan, those words now have a strange new resonance.

NINE MONTHS AFTER Afghanistan's fundamentalist rulers caused a global outcry by demolishing the renowned 5th-century Buddhas of the Bamiyan valley, their successors are planning to rebuild their country's greatest archaeological treasure. At the same time, new details about the destruction of the giant statues are emerging from local residents who witnessed the event.

The Taliban's plan to destroy the statues was carefully detailed, they say. The regime commissioned Arab, Sudanese and Bangladeshi demolition experts, as well as Chechen sappers, to do the job. Local residents of Bamiyan—Shiite Hazaras persecuted by and fiercely resistant to the Taliban—were forcibly evacuated ahead of the March destruction. The Taliban, they say, gave them a simple choice: become a Sunni Muslim or leave. Many fled to the nearby mountains.

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The idea of destroying the Buddhas was so repugnant to most Afghans that even the Taliban's regional culture minister even disobeyed the order to participate. Some locals who did stay were forced into grunt labor during the two-week scheme. "People couldn't resist the Taliban," says Nowruz, 25. For three days, Nowruz was forced to dig, alternately using his hands or a pick, in order to pack explosives around the 114-foot Buddha—the smaller of the two statues flattened by the Taliban. He still bears scars on his knuckles from the digging and a scar on his knee where rock fragments hit him after an explosion.

Nowruz is now one of hundreds of refugees living in the caves carved out of the cliffs alongside the Buddhas. Those caves were once inhabited by thousands of monks who had come on pilgrimages to see the famous statues. During the sixth and seventh centuries AD, the monks—many from China and India—would gather to hear sermons amplified through the nostrils of the larger 165-foot statue.

When the Taliban destroyed the statues last March, residents hiding in the mountains at the time say they heard explosions for three or four days. Members of Hizb-e-Wahdat, the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance faction in Bamiyan, reported heavy radio traffic, mostly congratulatory messages, between Taliban soldiers in the days following the explosions. Fifty cows were sacrificed at the site and Taliban dignitaries were flown in by helicopter for the celebration.

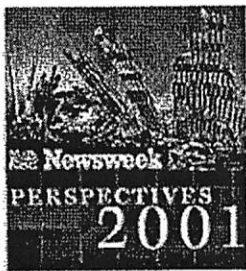


The Pakistan-based Al-Rasheed Trust, thought to have links to Osama bin Laden, even printed a memorial calendar detailing the destruction. Today, all that's left of the Bamiyan Buddhas is rubble. And even the rubble isn't left to rest in peace. Bits of rock from the statues, which were not included on the list of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites because of the chaos within Afghanistan, have been smuggled out to Pakistani art dealers and made their way as far as Japan. "When the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed, it felt like Afghanistan lost a child,"

says Deputy Culture Minister Mirheydar Motaher.

But, like the cycle of birth and death fundamental to Buddhist thought, the statues may be getting a chance at reincarnation. Culture Minister Raheen Makhdoom officially announced plans for the reconstruction of the Buddhas yesterday. "The world should set an example to show extremists that today there are possibilities to reconstruct, and there is the will to reconstruct, such edifices after they are destroyed," Paul Bucherer-Dietschi, UNESCO's representative in the reconstruction effort, told NEWSWEEK during a survey mission of the Buddha site last week. A conference is tentatively scheduled for next May to hammer out the details.

Historical purists may disagree with the idea of reconstruction, but, for the moment, dissenting voices are getting drowned out by the lure of tourist dollars. "Reconstruction won't have the same historical value," says Motaher. "But it's a positive step for the country and could bring thousands of tourists." The reconstruction plan, if approved, will begin with the sale of 20-inch replicas of the Buddhas to collect funds. A scale model one-tenth of the actual size will then be constructed to work through technical difficulties. For example, designers will have to figure out how to stand the larger Buddha on two legs, since its own were missing for centuries. The final reconstruction will use the most accurate measurements of the Buddhas available, with less than a one-inch margin of error, taken by an Austrian mountaineer over thirty years ago.



Afghanistan's new authorities also hope to reinstate some of their country's other cultural artifacts. The Kabul Museum, a dark and dusty shell littered with statue rubble, lost approximately 2,750 works of art during Taliban rule. But hundreds more survived, smuggled out to Switzerland by members of the Northern Alliance and more moderate Taliban supporters. Bucherer-Dietschi, who opened the Afghanistan Museum in Bubendorf, Switzerland, a year ago, hopes the items will soon be sent back to Kabul for display at a new museum location.

Like almost everything else in Afghanistan, cultural revitalization will depend on cash. For the Buddhas of Bamiyan, there is no scarcity of donors. Japan, China and other countries with large Buddhist populations have offered their help, but this raises thorny religious issues. "The Buddhas must be rebuilt for their historical, not religious, value," says Motaher.

Other Afghans hold similar views. "The Taliban did a very bad thing destroying the Buddhas," says Sadeq, a 24-year old Bamlyan merchant whose general goods store looks out on the empty niches where the Buddhas once stood. "They thought people worshipped them. But it wasn't a holy site, it was a historic site."

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