

SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AFGHANISTAN'S CULTURAL HERITAGE

S P A C H

Survey of the Buddhist monuments in Bamyan

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VISIT TO THE BUDDHIST REMAINS IN BAMYAN

*A survey by Robert Kluyver, SPACH representative in Afghanistan
August and September 2000*

Introduction

The Buddhist remains in Bamyan - in the main cliff, in Foladi valley and near Kakrak - have been extensively described in the past. They were surveyed first by the DAFA: by Foucher between 1922 and 1926, by Godard in 1923, by Hackin in 1924 and by Hackin and Carl in 1930 and 1933; later they were surveyed twice by Japanese teams, led in 1969 by Kotera of Nagoya University, and between 1974 and 1978 by Higuchi and Miyaji, of Kyoto University. Hackin and Carl excavated in 1930 and 1933, while an Afghan/Indian mission led by Sengupta completed a considerable preservation programme around the Small Buddha between 1969 and 1975.

All these previous studies have been summarised most usefully by Zemaryalai Tarzi, the then Director of Archaeology and Conservation of Historical Monuments in Afghanistan, in his doctoral thesis, published in Paris in 1977. A very useful description of the Buddhist sites at Bamyan, following the same numbering system, is to be found in Nancy Dupree's 1977 "Historical Guide to Afghanistan". I refer the reader to these and similar works, for I could not undertake to describe the surveyed sites without making this report very lengthy. Instead, I have followed a purely comparative approach as is evident in the table summarising the findings.

Accessibility and Extent of Survey

Besides the differences noted in the table, some changes have occurred since Dr. Tarzi's survey (around 1973), notably in the accessibility of the caves.

- Providing one knows the path, the Buddha in **Kakrak** is still easy to climb to.
- The site of **Foladi** ("discovered" in 1957) is easily accessible, but getting to caves E and F is difficult, since the cliff has crumbled even further under the ceilings, whose northern half now hangs precipitously over the void. Sites A, B, G, I and J are easy to get to, and accordingly are or were used as granaries, bread-ovens and bomb-shelters.
- Not far from the **Small Buddha**, and straight in front of it, is a Taleban military post, and no people were seen near the site, which I could visit at leisure and undisturbed. The entrance given by Tarzi (which leads to caves Lower A) is difficult to find and arduous to reach, while the one that comes out behind the recent buttressing wall is now again open (leads to caves D1)¹. The rest of the passage between caves that was restored by the Afghan-Indian Archaeological Mission is still in good condition, and all caves can be reached.
- **Group E**, to the West of the Small Buddha, is now extremely difficult to reach.
- The caves in the **middle of the cliff**, at the foot of groups H and J, are inhabited by displaced families. The presence of women made it impossible to even come near the caves, though I did take some pictures of the niche of the "Big sitting Buddha". Caves I (the "Small sitting Buddha") and K are completely inaccessible.
- The caves at the foot of the **Big Buddha**, which one can reach by truck, are still used as ammunition depot, so they're off-limits to visitors. So is cave XI, in the backyard of a military compound. With an authorisation one can visit the gallery around the Buddha's head, and climb up to caves XII to XV. I could only find cave XV.

The required tight timing led me to neglect the groups F and G east of the small Buddha, where there are no paintings. For the same reasons I did not visit H, I and J in Foladi or some of the caves of group E. Nor did I visit or look for any Buddhist remains in Bamyan (mostly empty caves) not described in Tarzi.

Description of Findings

The findings are resumed in the following table.

¹ Nancy Dupree in the 1977 edition of the Historical Guide to Afghanistan gives as entrance a staircase leading to Lower A from the east side of the Small Buddha. I found no trace of it.

Conclusions

The Buddhas

The small Buddha has lost its head, shoulders, and most of the draperies on the upper half of its body. It now also has a deep hole in its underbelly. Both explosions must have seriously damaged its internal structure, which shows cracks on the surface

Damage to the big Buddha is very minor; the traces of fire on its face can be removed easily and the few missing parts of the mud-plaster robe seem to be victims of erosion.

The Kakrak Buddha is intact.

The Caves

Rock architecture has in general not been damaged. The major threat is perhaps the erosion of the soft sandstone cliff. There is no point in trying to steal or destroy the architectural details hewn in the rock so there's no reason that rock architecture should suffer from looting or the war.

Decorative sculpted elements such as friezes also seem to be intact except where they represented living beings (I could not identify any of those given by Tarzi). Only in the sanctuary D-2 the decorative elements of the ceiling disappeared. Unfortunately I could not visit the caves I, V, XI and XIII around the Big Buddha, which have unique sculpted features.

The Paintings

The paintings have suffered heavily. It is a great tragedy that the compositions in the niches of the Small Buddha ("the solar king"), in that of the sitting Buddha of group E ("the beautiful Bodhissatva") and around the Big sitting Buddha of group H have completely disappeared. As far as I could discern from the foot of the cliff, the same fate seems to have befallen the "small" sitting Buddha of group I, which had the most complete decoration of all niches. Only the paintings in the niche of the Big Buddha remain largely intact.

In the caves the situation is a bit better. Around the Small Buddha the paintings have been all but removed in Lower A-2 and the "Passage Room", but they are still largely extant in groups C and D. The unique flat painted ceiling of "the vestibule" D-1 has happily not deteriorated any further, but the interesting scenes on its walls have been damaged and covered by graffiti. Unfortunately I could not visit the group J to ascertain the condition of the vividly coloured paintings uncovered by Hackin in 1930.

In Foladi practically none of the paintings have suffered, with the exception of one interesting composition on the ceiling of cave E which seems to have been cut out.

Recommendations

The most urgent task is now to preserve the paintings in the niche of the Big Buddha and in the caves of group C and D. It would be wise to put the caves around the Small Buddha off-limits to public. The security at the entrance to the gallery around the head of the Big Buddha should be kept extremely tight, because from the top of the head it is easy to reach the paintings.

The Big Buddha must be preserved the fate of his smaller companion. To minimise danger, the ammunition depot in the caves around the feet of the Big Buddha should be relocated as soon as possible. Ammunition depots have accidentally exploded before, and there are many alternative locations in other caves. The Buddha must in no manner be a military target.

The whole facade of the main cliff should ideally be put off-limits to casual human presence, and new accommodation found for the displaced families living at the foot of caves H and J.

Projects which could be undertaken in the short term

Basic conservation measures for the paintings could be undertaken by an international specialist accompanied by several Afghan conservationists (and trainees). Security is quite sufficient for the time being.

A potentially useful intervention would be sifting through the heap of rubble lying at the Small Buddha's feet, to recover pieces of (painted) plaster and other interesting parts remaining of the head and shoulders and lower abdomen. We might also find parts of the painted ceiling. These could be used in a future reconstitution. A team led by the most competent among Afghanistan's present-day archaeologists and conservationists (arguably, Dr. Rasuli) could do this.

As soon as circumstances permit, the sites should be carefully surveyed by a professionally led team, preferably with members who have an intimate knowledge of Bamyan or similar Buddhist rock architecture. In the meanwhile, central and local authorities should encourage the visit of as many

specialists as possible, asking them for their opinions as to the condition of the sites and possible remedies.

TABLE DESCRIBING THE PRESENT CONDITION OF BUDDHIST SITES
IN AND AROUND BAMYAN

This table has been made using Dr. Tarzi's doctoral thesis "L'Architecture et le Décor Rupestre des Grottes de Bamyân" Volumes 1 and 2, published by La Bibliothèque du Centre de Recherches sur l'Asie Centrale et la Haute-Asie in Paris, 1977.

Like him I follow the numbering of caves established by J. Hackin of the DAFA in the 1930s. All caves with interesting features are listed, although I was not able to visit each one.

Photos are available at SPACH of these and many other of the listed features.

DESIGNATION	MAIN POINTS OF INTEREST	PRESENT CONDITION	PHOTOS
THE BUDDHAS			
The "Small Buddha" (of 35 meters)	Monumental sculpture	- Head and neck blown off by a multiple dynamite charge ² . Shoulders also damaged - Rocket hit in the underbelly - Many parts of stucco robe fallen off	Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
The niche of the "Small Buddha"	Paintings : the "Solar God" on his chariot and surrounding figures	- All paintings disappeared without a trace.	Figs. 4, 6
The "Big Buddha" (of 53 meters)	Largest Buddha in the world	- Structure still in same condition - A few parts of the draped stucco robe have fallen off - Head blackened by fire	Figs. 8, 9, 10
The niche of the "Big Buddha"	Paintings: - west side: flying figures - east side: flying figures - east side: sitting Buddhas & decoration - west side: sitting Buddhas & decoration - top: Bodhissatva B1 - top: Bodhissatva B2 - top: Bodhissatva B3 - top: Bodhissatva B4 - top: Musicians A1 - top: Bodhissatva E1 - top: Bodhissatva E2 - top: Bodhissatva E3 - top: Bodhissatva W1 - top: Bodhissatva W2 - top: Bodhissatva W3 - top: Bodhissatva W4	- present - present - present - present - minor damage, bullet holes? - upper right genie chiselled out - present - present - present - present - present - present - present - present - minor damage, bullet holes? - large chunk fallen off in centre - present - in same condition	Fig. 7 Fig. 7 Fig. 11 Fig. 12 Fig. 13 Fig. 14 Figs. 14, 15 Fig. 15 Fig. 15

² According to international expats working in the area since a long time.

DESIGNATION	MAIN POINTS OF INTEREST	PRESENT CONDITION	PHOTOS
CAVES AROUND THE SMALL BUDDHA			
Cave 1	Dome on a square base	OK	
Cave 3	Dome on an octagonal base	OK	
Cave 4	Octagonal cave with special ceiling	OK	
Cave 5	Octagonal cave with Laternendecke ceiling on round basis and sculpted sitting Buddhas	OK but sculpted sitting Buddhas not noticed	
Cave 6	Dome on square base	OK	
Lower A-2	- Dome on square base - Paintings	- Covered in graffiti and footsteps - Under layer of soot and removed	Fig. 20
Higher A-2	Dome on square base with many niches	OK but covered in footsteps and layer of soot	Fig. 18
Higher A-3	Laternendecke ceiling on a round, then 16-sided base in octagonal cave	OK	
B-2	Dome on square basis	OK	
B-5	Unique kind of ceiling	OK	
B1-2	Dome on elevated drum above square room	OK	
"Passage Room"	Paintings	All removed; only faint traces remaining	
C-2	- Round room with many niches - Decorative painting as backdrop to previous statues	- OK - OK, might be slightly damaged	
C-3 (Vestibule)	Paintings on the walls and above the doorway	Present but covered with graffiti	Fig. 16
C-4	Fragments of paintings on the dome	Present but diminished	
D-1	- Painted facade on cliff side - Painted Buddhas on wall - Painted ceiling	- Seems OK from far away - Present but diminished - Present	
D-2	- Octagonal room with many niches - Ceiling with painting and sculpted features	- OK - Structure still present but almost all decoration has disappeared	Fig. 19
D1-2	Largest cave, with an elaborate rock architecture	OK	Fig. 17
E-8	Dome on square base	OK	
E-12	- Dome on square base - Paintings	- OK - Disappeared under layer of soot? Plaster still extant	
E-13: "Sitting Buddha of Group E"	Stone basis for the formerly clay sitting Buddha	OK	
Niche of E-13	Painting of "the Beautiful Bodhissatva"	Only a few small fragments remain on the western side of the niche	Fig. 25
F-2	Dome on octagonal cave with many niches	Not visited	
F-5	Laternendecke ceiling decorated with small Buddhas	Not visited	
F1-1	Remain of dome on square cave	OK	
G1	Special transition between octagonal cave and dome	Not visited	
G2	Special facade	apparently OK (not visited)	
G3	Big cave, special painted ceiling under a layer of smoke	Not visited	

DESIGNATION	MAIN POINTS OF INTEREST	PRESENT CONDITION	PHOTOS
CAVES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CLIFF			
H-1: "The Big Sitting Buddha"	Remains of the big sitting Buddha	OK	Fig. 23
Niche of H-1	Paintings	Only small fragments left	Fig. 23
Cave I: "The Small Sitting Buddha"	No remains of Buddha except pedestal	Idem but not visited	
Niche of I	- Niche paintings almost intact - Painted circumambulatory gallery	- Apparently all gone (not visited) - not visited	
J-2	- Dome on square base - Paintings	Not visited (dwellings with women)	
J-4	- Dome on square base - Fragments of paintings	Not visited (dwellings with women)	
K-3	- Paintings sighted in the 1930s but possibly not visited since then	Not visited (inaccessible)	
CAVES AROUND THE BIG BUDDHA			
Cave I	- Dome on double circular base with niches above octagonal cave - Sculpted decoration - Remains of decorative painting	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave II	Dome on double circular base with niches above octagonal cave	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave III	Dome on 16 sided base above octagonal cave	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave IV	Dome on octagonal base above square cave	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave V	Finely sculpted Laternendecke ceiling above square cave with niches	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave VI	Dome above square cave	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave VII	Dome above octagonal cave with niches	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave VIII	Dome above circular cave	Not visited (ammunition depot)	
Cave XI	Special dome with sculpted relief above octagonal cave with niches	Not visited (behind military base)	
Cave XIII	- Gupta-style cave with sculpted decoration - Remains of paintings	Not visited (not found/inaccessible)	
Cave XIVa	- Remains of Laternendecke ceiling	Not visited (not found/inaccessible)	
Cave XV	- Laternendecke ceiling on special square pyramidal base	OK	

DESIGNATION	MAIN POINTS OF INTEREST	PRESENT CONDITION	PHOTOS
KAKRAK			
The Kakrak Buddha	6 to 7 meter high standing Buddha	OK, no visible changes	Fig. 24
FOLADI			
Cave A	Laternendecke ceiling above square cave	Reused as bomb shelter and under a layer of soot but in same condition	
Cave B	Laternendecke ceiling on truncated pyramidal base with "1000 Buddhas" paintings	No damage	Fig. 22
Cave C	- Fragments of paintings on walls - Traces of paint in the staircase - Laternendecke ceiling	- No, or very minor, damage - Still extant	
Cave C-1	Dome above square cave	Used as bread-oven, thick layer of soot	
Cave E	Laternendecke ceiling with 9 painted small domes	At least one painting removed	Fig. 21
Cave E-1	Painted Laternendecke ceiling adapted to rectangular shape	OK	
Cave E-2	Small Laternendecke ceiling	OK	
Cave E-3	Small Laternendecke ceiling	OK	
Cave F	Laternendecke ceiling with 5 painted small domes	Extant	
Cave F-1	Barrel-vaulted plastered ceiling	OK	
Cave F-2	Barrel-vaulted plastered ceiling	OK	
Cave G	Barrel-vaulted ceiling on long cave	OK, reused as granary and bread-oven; new wall built	
Cave G-1	Barrel-vaulted ceiling on cave with niches	OK, reused as granary	