

Case #10: The Buddhas of Bamiyan

The two huge Buddhas of Bamiyan, which stood 15 stories and 10 stories respectively, had survived wars and the elements for 1500 years. Their cultural importance had even resulted in Genghis Khan refraining from causing them harm. In March 2001, however, they fell victim to the Taliban. The Taliban government ordered explosives placed at the feet of these statues; over weeks of repeated shelling, they reduced the sacred relics of central Afghanistan to rubble ranging in size from 90 ton boulders to dust.

Religion is most often cited as the primary reason for destruction. The pre-Islamic artifacts were reportedly destroyed as dictated by Islamic law to prevent the adoration of idols.

Cultural experts are divided over what should happen with the Buddhas and the Bamiyan site in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. With the focus on what was one of Afghanistan's primary tourist attractions, suggestions include rebuilding the Buddhas by anastylosis – i.e. reassembly from the remaining fragments, incorporating new materials where necessary, supervised by qualified archaeologists. Some favor funding preservation of the site, but leaving the rubble as evidence of the cultural destruction. Some argue for a solar- and wind-powered laser system that will project the images of the Buddhas on the cliff where they stood. Some archaeologists are delighted with the new findings that have been possible only because of the destruction, and want to use this opportunity to further dissect the site for the historical knowledge that can be derived.

Considering that the population of Afghanistan is poor and war-torn and that present-day Afghans are Muslim rather than Buddhists, others suggest that money that would fund anything related to the Bamiyan Buddhas would be better spent on Afghan children.