

The Big Buddhas of Bamiyan



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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When I was in India in the 1970s I thought of going to Afghanistan specifically to see the great Buddhas of Bamiyan. I had the time, the money and certainly the interest. As it happens, I kept putting this trip off and in the end never got around to it. If the various schemes for resurrecting the Buddhas ever comes to pass; constructing copies, projecting some sort of hologram onto the niches where they once stood, etc. I probably won't go. Looking at a reproduction of an original has always seemed to me to be rather pointless. For me, the great Buddhas once fascinated the world but now they've gone forever. Recently I browsed through Llewelyn Morgan's *Buddhas of Bamiyan*, (2012, 221 pages) which despite containing nothing new and being padded with a lot of the usual commonplaces about "the Silk Road", is not a bad account of these great ancient marvels. The 'Further Reading' section is excellent. The truth is that we know very little about the history of the Buddhas, hardly enough to fill a pamphlet, not enough to fill a book.

The most detailed account, merge though it is, of Bamiyan and its Buddhas is found in the travelogue of the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang with a few extra facts included in his biography. "To the northeast of the royal city there is at a corner of the mountain a rock standing statue of the Buddha one hundred and forty or fifty feet high, a dazzling golden colour and adorned with gems. To the east here is a monastery built by a former king of the country. Further east of this monastery is a standing statue of the Buddha in copper more than a hundred feet high. It is made of separate pieces which were then welded together. In another monastery two or three *li* east of the city there is a recumbent image of the Buddha depicted attaining Nirvana more than a thousand feet long. It is here that four times a year the king holds an assembly in which he offers everything from his queen down to the national treasury to the monks. When everything has been given he then gives himself to the monks and then his officials pay the monks a ransom to get himself and his queen back."

The second statue at Bamiyan was not made of copper as Xuanzang supposed, but rather was sheathed in copper plates. In 2008 archaeologists announced that they had discovered the remains of the reclining Buddha mentioned by the pilgrim. There is a much defaced large sitting Buddha in Bamiyan too which Xuanzang did not mention; perhaps because it was constructed after his visit. He did mention however, that there were ten monasteries in and around Bamiyan housing several thousand monks, two of them, Aryadasa and Aryasena, revered for their deep learning. When Xuanzang first turned up in the city, the king and the inhabitants were amazed to that he had come all the way from China and they treated him with great hospitality and guided him around all the sights.

There are a few very brief mentions of the great Buddhas by Islamic travellers and historians, the longest by the great polymath Al Kindi (801-873). In his *Kitab al Fihrist* he writes: "They have two idols, one of which is called the Gold-red Buddha and the other White Buddha. Their forms are carved out of the sides of the great valley, cut from the rock of the mountain. The height of each one of them is 80 cubits, so that they can be seen from a great distance... [The] people of India go on pilgrimages to these two idols, bearing with them offerings, incense and fragrant woods. If the eye should fall upon them from a distance, a man would be obliged to lower his eyes, being overawed by them."

Parts of Afghanistan were conquered by Arab armies by the end of the 8th century but in the eastern region Buddhism may have lingered for another 300 years. Arab sources speak of Bamiyan being "converted to the true faith" at least three times: in 754-75; again in 775-85; Then in 870 an Arab strongman captured the city and sent as loot to Baghdad "fifty idols of gold and silver", suggesting that the monasteries were not just surviving but thriving at the time he arrived. Even in an inscription dated 1078 a local official was able to describe himself as a "monastery keeper". What finished off Bamiyan's Buddhism was the Mongol invasion of 1221 which left not just the city and the monasteries but the whole region devastated.

The Taliban were by no means the first people to try to destroy the Buddhas, Islamic iconoclasts had been hacking away at them for centuries. The Emperor Aurangzeb ordered cannons to blast the statues, as did a Persian king in the 18th century. Both attempts damaged but did not destroy the statues. In 1847 the then king of Afghanistan Dost Mohammad Khan succeeded in having the faces cut off. Holes were made in the front of the heads and wooden pegs were hammered into them until finally huge slabs with the facial features on them split off and crashed to the ground. The only reason the images were never completely destroyed was that they were simply too big and the iconoclasts lacked the technology.

While I think that the final destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan was a tragedy from a cultural and archaeological point of view, I don't think it was significant as far as Buddhism is concerned. What keeps Buddhism secure and vibrant is not big Buddha statues, but a pious and learned Sangha and a devote, active laity. In fact, I am not a great fan of big Buddhas. I see them a waste of resources that could and should be better used for Dhamma activities and charity. Grandiose monuments are no substitute for projects to clarify and promote the Dhamma and to help those in need.