The Buddha of Bamiyan

The Buddha of Bamiyan looked over the Bamiyan Valley in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan for fifteen centuries. The two statues were carved into the side of a sandstone cliff at the foot of the Hindu Kush Mountains of central Afghanistan in 507 and 554 CE in the valley 140 miles northwest of Kabul. The Taliban destroyed them in March 2001—six months before the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City—in an attempt to cleanse the country of idolatry.1

Afghanistan is home to pre-Islamic historic treasures from its days as a key stop on the Silk Roads and a strategic battleground for conquerors dating back to Alexander the Great and before. Despite appeals from the international community for their preservation, the Taliban destroyed the statues—considered by the world to be masterpieces—because of “an interpretation of the Muslim faith that is not recognized anywhere else in the world,” said Koichiro Matsuura, chief of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).2 Matsuura had convened an emergency meeting of members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in February 2001 to try to stop their destruction by the Taliban government.

The Taliban, a movement of Sunni Pashhtun religious students educated and trained in Pakistan, seized Kabul in 1996 and imposed strict Sharia law on citizens. The government, headed by the group's spiritual and military leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, rigidly enforced laws influenced by Islam and Afghan tribal customs. They also provided refuge for Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and similar Islamic militant groups. ■

Learn More about the Buddha of Bamiyan and the History of the Region


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