

Bordering on the criminal

A clash of expertise in Bamyan, Afghanistan

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The idea that cultural heritage is increasingly under threat has ushered in a new era for heritage expertise. One example where various regimes of heritage expertise converge is at the site of the destroyed Bamyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. Clashes between these conflicting realms of expertise have resulted in a 'stalemate' over the future of preservation work at the eastern Buddha and affected how local groups understand and relate to the site. As the preservation of damaged heritage is increasingly mobilised as a feature of international post conflict reconstruction programmes, this scenario asks questions about the role of experts and expert knowledge in such heritage interventions.

Heritage 'at risk' and expertise

While the destruction of the Bamyan Buddhas by the Taliban in 2001 was treated as a new phenomenon, cultural property has often been subject to intentional acts of destruction and iconoclasm. Indeed, 'heritage' and destruction are deeply intertwined because damage to the material and immaterial past often inspires heritage designation.¹ A common response from heritage agencies and professionals to the destruction of the Buddhas was to organise awareness raising initiatives and academic conferences aimed at mitigating threat to heritage. However, asserting such conventions and mechanisms for protecting heritage, which are common in the aftermath of such spectacular attacks, empower the idea that heritage is increasingly endangered which, in turn, provides legitimacy to the construction of specific forms of preservation knowledge, agendas, and policies.²

The notion that heritage is under threat gives power to a dominant global approach to heritage preservation that results from an 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (AHD),³ a hegemonic discourse that promotes an idea of heritage as monumental, material and permanent, and something to be cared for by trained 'experts'.⁴ Here, I will outline how the significant amount of international heritage expertise attracted to the preservation challenges of the Buddha niches – a high profile site that is still perceived to be at risk – affects how local groups understand and relate to this heritage site.

The authority of experts

The Buddha niches are part of the designated 'Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamyan Valley' inscribed on the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List and World Heritage in Danger List in 2003, two years after their destruction by the Taliban. Due to this designation, any conservation work on the niches must comply with the Operational Guidelines of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972 (also known as the World Heritage Convention) and preserve the Outstanding Universal Value of the site. From the beginning, the conservation efforts at this site have been concerned with the management of international expertise. In Munich in November 2002 the 'Bamyan Expert Work Group' (BEWG) was formed by UNESCO and the National Committee of Germany of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS Germany). Since 2002, this group has met approximately every 18 months in a different city around the world (although only once in Afghanistan in 2005), to debate and discuss plans for the future of the Bamyan valleys' heritage. A small number of Afghans are included at each meeting while the majority of the group consists of international experts from UNESCO, the Japanese National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, the Italian Institute for Protection and Environmental

Research, Italian firm RODIO, Aachen University, Munich Technical University and ICOMOS Germany.

Since 2002, under the umbrella of UNESCO, experts from these heritage agencies and organisations have implemented a highly technical programme of conservation, largely funded by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The focus has been on surveying, measuring and logging of data relating to the niches and the surviving fragments from the blasts, and stabilising the niches of both the eastern and western Buddha. Hundreds of fragments with a recognisable sculpted surface have been recovered, numbered and documented, and are currently housed in temporary buildings constructed at the foot of each niche. Japanese conservators and archaeologists have undertaken an adjunct programme of laser scanning of the remains of the mural paintings. The 'safeguarding' project has so far received US \$6,345,807 of funding.⁵ To date, these interventions at the niches have been technical with an emphasis on the role of the international expert or consultant who visits Bamyan for short periods, rather than longer-term investments focused on either understanding local regimes of heritage value, or on training for Afghan conservators or engineers.

A conflict of expertise

In July 2002, upon the arrival of the first ICOMOS Germany mission to the valley, the governor of Bamyan province expressed his urgent wish to 'reconstruct' the Buddhas.⁶ While reconstruction, without the correct documenting evidence, is not permissible under paragraph 86 of the World Heritage guidelines and its principle of authenticity,

during my field research in the valley Afghans continually expressed a desire to reconstruct at least one of the Buddhas in some shape or form. However, the international 'experts' seem split between two camps over the future of the niches: the group of experts from ICOMOS Germany based at the Munich Technical University, led by ex ICOMOS President Michael Petzet, recommend anastylosis, a method of reconstruction that involves reassembling and restoring the many boulders and fragments to their original positions on the monument, possibly with the use of a foundational structure as support, while Japanese donors and consultants and UNESCO largely advocate for the niches to be stabilised but remain empty. One supporting argument here is that the niches were inscribed on the World Heritage List after the destruction of the Buddhas, therefore any change to the integrity of the site as it has been inscribed would be considered to detract from its authenticity.

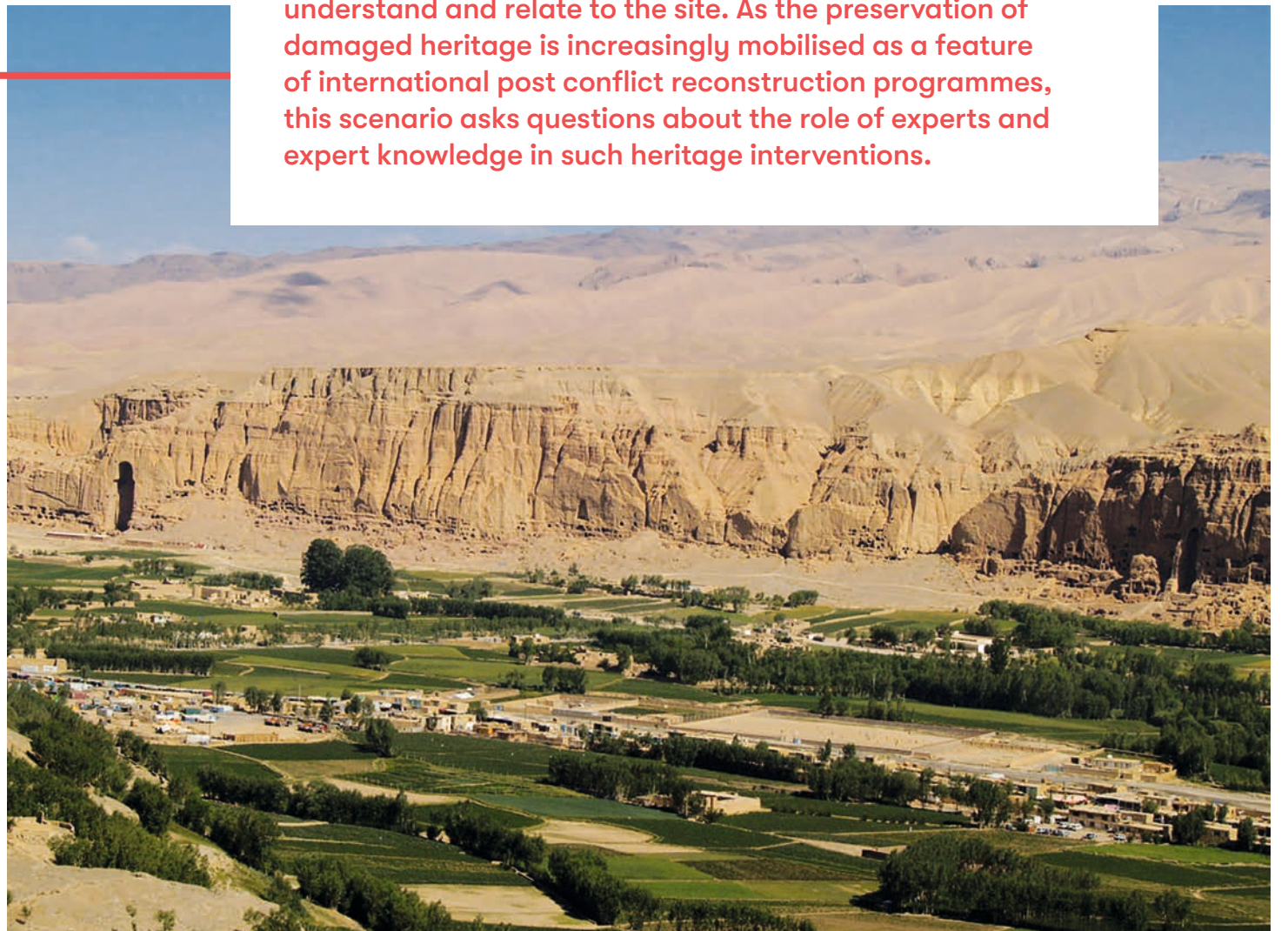
At the 10th BEWG meeting, which took place in Tokyo in 2011, it was announced that neither Buddha statue was to be totally reconstructed. This determination was followed by a recommendation from the Expert Working Group that the large western niche be left empty "as a testimony to the tragic act of destruction" while a study is undertaken to see if a "partial reassembling of fragments of the eastern Buddha could be an option". Afghan local, national government and Bamyan residents were disappointed.

What followed reveals a difference in agenda and a lack of communication between the two giants of international heritage policy and practice. In 2013, experts from ICOMOS Germany were contracted by UNESCO to build a platform to structurally consolidate the rear face of the Eastern Buddha and protect the public from falling rocks. During their work at the site to build this platform, ICOMOS consultants fashioned two structural supports to the eastern Buddha niche that were constructed with iron rods, reinforced concrete and bricks. As the work progressed, these half-built

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pillars, which stuck out at the bottom of the niche began to resemble the Buddhas destroyed feet. ICOMOS consultants maintain they were merely following UNESCO's instructions and constructing a protective platform to improve access to the site. However,

UNESCO understood the appendages as an opportunistic attempt by ICOMOS to reconstruct the eastern Buddha's feet as a means of instigating its preferred conservation strategy of anastylosis, and was outraged at this apparent deliberate flouting of World Heritage conservation doctrine. In an article by *The Art Newspaper* from February 2014, a consultant architect for UNESCO accused ICOMOS Germany of carrying out work that was "bordering on the criminal", "wrong on every level" and taking place without their knowledge or permission. As a response, in July 2014, UNESCO terminated ICOMOS Germany's



The Bamyan Valley showing the two Buddha niches. Photo by Bert Praxenthaler.



The eastern Buddha with the 'feet' concealed behind plastic sheeting in 2015. Author's photograph.

contract to work in Bamyan, accusing the organisation of making new constructions that threatened the Outstanding Universal Value of the site.

Since the debacle, the Japanese government has withdrawn funding support and two independent international heritage consultants were sent to Bamyan to assess the situation at the eastern Buddha. These experts subsequently sent a report recommending that the 'feet' be carefully removed, a solution that is not possible due to local sensitivities around any further destruction at the site. Currently, the unfinished appendages stick out at the bottom of the Buddha, partially covered by a brown plastic sheet that flaps in the wind around the ungainly ankle-like structures. This controversy, which was played out in the international media, in which photographs of the supposed, and unfinished, 'feet' were included for everyone to make their own judgment, demonstrates the power of the monument for international heritage organisations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS Germany to attract publicity, leverage themselves and undermine each other's work. Since this wrangle in 2013 between the two international organisations there has been no further conservation work at the eastern Buddha.

However, this deadlock had an interesting effect locally. Interviews that I conducted as part of my field research with members of the local community in the valley during 2015 suggested that ICOMOS's construction of the 'feet' or structural platform was exactly what the majority of local residents expected, and that this incident was widely interpreted locally as the start of the much-anticipated rebuilding of the Buddhas. Interestingly, local groups do not seem to perceive the differences between the various international bodies who are seen instead as interchangeable foreign experts. Several residents expressed disappointment that the 'foreigners' had started to rebuild the Buddhas and then stopped without undertaking any more activity at the site.

So far, the processes of preservation and clashes between conflicting realms of international expertise at the Buddha niches have worked to largely sideline local systems of heritage value and ideas of ownership at the site. This scenario illustrates the territorial manner in which international bodies persist in dealing with the Buddha niches while paying lip service to Afghan ownership and participation. One result is that local groups and individuals relinquish responsibility

of the valley's heritage as they understand international agencies and experts as having control: "it is a World Heritage site – we don't have a role" explained one informant.

However, several recent local initiatives reveal interesting counterpoints to UNESCO's expert led interventions at the Buddha niches and their attached notions of authenticity. One such happening is 'One Night with Buddha', an annual event organised by The Bamyan Tourism Association to commemorate the destruction of the Buddhas. This ceremony takes place on 2nd of March, the date of the beginning of the statues' destruction. Students and younger residents of Bamyan attend the event, during which participants walk with candles around the site and read poetry. While the Bamyan Expert Working Group recommended that the niche of the western Buddha remain empty in order to bear witness to the Taliban's act of destruction, 'One Night with Buddha' is a way for local groups to momentarily reclaim the site from international heritage agencies and undertake acts of memorialisation and commemoration of their own.

Another such event happened in 2015 when Bamyan was declared the first cultural capital of the South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation (SAARC), an initiative aimed at promoting trade and regional economic development. Visiting filmmakers from China sponsored a 3D laser projection of images of a life sized Buddha into the niche of the western Buddha at night as part of the festivities, using a huge projector transported from Kabul. The principal Buddha hologram projected into the niche was one of a totally different Buddha, which has no direct relationship to Bamyan but rather resembles a statue of a generic Gandharan Buddha from southern Afghanistan or Pakistan, enlarged to fill the niche. The niche of the western Buddha, which had been occupied by a vast scaffolding and closed off to locals throughout the long years of preservation efforts, was suddenly activated by this intervention. This popular event represents another use of the site by 'non experts' and is revealing as to the range of possible 'authentic' Bamyan Buddhas.

Will 'revitalisation' happen?

Under pressure from an Afghan government keen to rebuild at the Buddhas, UNESCO organised the 14th Expert Working Group Meeting in Tokyo in September 2017 for which proposals for the statues' 'revitalisation' were sought. This call revealed the hierarchies of knowledge inherent in such meetings: in an accompanying document, Afghan participants are referred to as 'Afghan authorities' and international consultants as 'international experts'. The partially rebuilt 'feet' have been a catalyst for several local movements that support reconstruction of the statues. For example, Shukria Neda, an Afghan civil society activist that currently lives in Bamyan, launched a pioneering campaign to collect two Afghans from local residents (four US cents), with the aim of collecting enough to pay for the reconstruction work. However, at the meeting itself, some forms of authority and expertise were deemed more acceptable than others and Shukria Neda was excluded from speaking in the main public symposium where the international proposals from Japan, Germany and Italy were discussed. These international proposals included a range of propositions for the future of the valley: ongoing work on the remaining fragments; a lapidarium of fragments; a rammed earth Buddha; a marble Buddha; and, a plastic Buddha situated on the cliff opposite the niches.

The recommendations that followed the Expert Working Group meeting in Tokyo advocate for "the establishment of a working committee for reviewing proposals for the Bamyan Buddha statues". As negotiations for the future authenticity of the site continue, it remains to be seen what role local expertise and civil society will play in authenticating reconstruction.

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Notes

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