

ANASTYLOSIS OR RECONSTRUCTION - THE CONSERVATION CONCEPT FOR THE REMAINS OF THE BUDDHAS OF BAMİYAN

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The blowing-up of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001, against which ICOMOS protested in vain together with ICOM,¹ was an incredible act of vandalism pointing like a beacon at the various risks and threats with which our cultural heritage is confronted. Without a thorough investigation of the condition one had to assume that of these sites in the middle of a spectacular cultural landscape only rubble and dust had remained after the explosion. Under these circumstances considerations at the UNESCO seminar on the Preservation of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage in Kabul in May 2002 still went into two directions: preserving the state after the destruction or reconstruction of the state before the destruction.

- Preserving the state after the destruction could be combined with the idea of refraining from any intervention, keeping this site unchanged as a kind of memorial to the act of vandalism by the Taliban, which upset the world. However, it soon became clear that if only for the sake of the safety of future visitors those parts of the rock affected by the explosion need to be consolidated and the existing remains of the sculptures and the remains of the paintings inside the caves have to be preserved.
- After every loss ideas of reconstructing the state before the destruction suggest themselves, ideas which were considered by the Afghan government also in view of using the site for tourism in the future. In the public media this led to a number of variations on a "reconstruction" of the Buddhas: reconstruction of the state before the destruction (see among others a "model" by the Swiss Polytechnic in Zurich based on photogrammetric measurements before the destruction) or even of an "original" state (e.g. a complete Buddha with a gold coating as mentioned in early sources?); reconstruction in traditional techniques in which case the niches would have to be made considerably deeper to allow for the Buddhas to be cut out of the remaining rock surface; or reconstruction with modern materials (a new Buddha made of concrete?); or at least its evocation with laser techniques in the context of a future sound-and-light show - a suggestion which after the disaster and under the present circumstances seems rather absurd

Some of these suggestions would in fact lead to a destruction of what was spared by the barbaric act of the Taliban. At the same time they point at the basic dangers of every process

of reconstruction - a topic that was often discussed in the European conservation theory of the last century. In a preservation context reconstruction generally is related to the re-establishment of a state that has been lost (for whatever reason), based on pictorial, written or material sources; it can range from completion of elements or partial reconstruction to total reconstruction with or without incorporation of existing fragments. A necessary prerequisite for either a partial or a total reconstruction is always extensive source documentation on the state that is to be reconstructed; nonetheless, a reconstruction seldom proceeds without some hypothesis. One of the criteria for the inscription of cultural properties in UNESCO's World Heritage List according to the 1972 convention is that "reconstruction is only acceptable if it is carried out on the basis of complete and detailed documentation on the original and to no extent to the conjecture." Thus, reconstruction is possible in principle, but it requires a sound scientific basis. The comments in article 9 of the Venice Charter are in a sense also valid for reconstruction: "The process of restoration is a highly specialised operation. It is based on respect for original material and authentic documents. It must stop at the point where conjecture begins" Besides, reconstruction is not expressly forbidden by the Venice Charter, as is often maintained. However, based on the Charter's highly restrictive overall attitude also in regard to replacements, we can conclude that the authors of the Charter were certainly very sceptical of all reconstruction work: Although reconstruction is not „forbidden“ the pros and cons must nonetheless be very carefully weighed. Just as a reconstructed completion that is based on insufficient evidence or questionable hypothesis in fact falsifies a monument, so an unverified "creative reconstruction" cannot really reconstitute a lost monument, not even formally - and certainly not in its historical dimension. In addition, there is often confusion about the materials and the technical, skilled and artistic execution of the lost original.

Independently of the scepticism of many colleagues towards the various suggestions for a reconstruction of the Buddha statues the UNESCO/ICOMOS mission to Bamiyan in July 2002 focussed on practical and technical solutions to secure the existing remains with limited funds and thus to preserve these world-famous historic sites as places of memory for future generations. As part of the ICOMOS initiative to help save endangered cultural properties in Afghanistan, for which

the German Foreign Office has provided us this year with EUR 500.000, I was able to carry through a first investigation of the situation in Bamiyan by request of UNESCO. Putting questions of reconstruction aside, the aim of this investigation was to consider all possibilities for a necessary consolidation of the rock surface. The members of my team, which tried to produce a first survey in four days, were Prof. Dr.-Ing. Michael Jansen, a member of ICOMOS Germany with years of experience at archaeological sites in this region, Dipl.-Ing. Mario Santana-Quintero, member of ICOMOS Venezuela, Dr. Jörg Fassbinder, geophysicist at the Bavarian State Conservation Office, and the Chinese colleague Dr.-Ing. Zou Yazou, geo-engineer, with whom I had already worked together some years ago during a co-operation between Bavarian and Chinese colleagues to consolidate the Great Buddha of Dafosi.²

In the meantime Mr Zou, who, as far as this was possible without a scaffold, examined the condition of the rocks, old and new cracks, parts threatened to fall off as well as indications of decay, has produced a comprehensive report. In the first place our aim is to consolidate the rocks immediately around the two niches and of course the traces and remains of the Buddha statues which are still visible like silhouettes on the back walls of the niches. As historic monuments these traces are of utmost importance. Compared to our task in Dafosi, which in many respects was more difficult since a giant cave with three statues of up to 20 metres height had to be made earthquake-proof, in Bamiyan we were well aware right from the beginning that of course not the entire cliff - which for centuries has been affected by weathering and decay - and its innumerable caves could be secured, but only certain areas and dangerous cracks etc. which have widened since the explosions. Mr Zou took samples of the partly very varying rock formations. The framework for Mr Zou's suggestions, which cannot be explained in detail in this context, is being provided by the measurements of our colleagues Jansen and Santana: they produced a three-dimensional survey of the entire territory with the help of a «total station», following a method specially developed for archaeological sites. Furthermore, as another basis for future work there are the results of our colleague Mr Fassbinder, who was the first to take magnetometer measurements in Afghanistan. Despite the most difficult circumstances, for instance metal pieces scattered all over and impairing the measurements, Mr Fassbinder achieved surprising results that have made subsoil building structures so far unknown recognisable. However, due to the fact that the mine-clearing in this area has unfortunately not yet been completed Mr Fassbinder had to restrict his survey to the area of approximately one hectare immediately in front of the Great Buddha.

The biggest surprise for me was to see the heaps of rubble stretching as far as to the side rooms at the foot of the

niches - not at all just «dust» and indefinable debris, but instead some very big fragments of several tons and therefore quite obviously still the entire material of which the Buddha statues consisted before they were blown up. Just as much as the still visible remains of the figures on the back walls of the niches this is historic material that should be protected, salvaged layer by layer and assigned to the various parts of the statues. Particularly these heaps of fragments, themselves depressing witnesses of the destructive frenzy of the Taliban, were the focus of the measurements and photographic documentation of our ICOMOS team.

In contrast to the ideas of a reconstruction, uttered without detailed knowledge of the situation and highly problematic for the reasons mentioned above, these fragments are pointing at a conservation concept called anastylosis which is common practice at many archaeological sites world-wide. This method developed in the field of classical archaeology but also applicable for partially destroyed monuments of later epochs, is referred to in article 15 of the Venice Charter. "All reconstruction work should however be ruled out a priori. Only anastylosis, that is to say, the reassembling of existing but dismembered parts can be permitted. The material used for integration should always be recognisable and its use should be the least that will ensure the conservation of a monument and the reinstatement of its form." According to this method, the fragments of an ashlar stone building - for instance a Greek temple - found on or in the ground could be put together again; the original configuration is determined from the site and from traces of workmanship, from peg holes, etc. If extant, the original foundations are used in situ. Such a re-erection demands preliminary work in building research; an inventory of all the extant building components, which must be analysed and measured exactly, results in a reconstruction drawing with as few gaps as possible, so that mistakes with the anastylosis can be avoided. A technical plan must also be worked out to preclude damage during re-erection and to address all aspects of conservation, including the effect of weathering. Finally, the didactic plan for an anastylosis must be discussed, with concern also being given to future use by tourists. In order to be able to show original fragments - a capital, part of an entablature, a gable, etc. - on their original location and in their original context as part of an anastylosis, there is of course a need for more or less extensive provisional structures. The fragments in an anastylosis should only be conserved and presented as originals; they are not completed as in a restoration or embedded in a partial or complete reconstruction. The limits of anastylosis are reached when the original fragments are too sparse and would appear on the provisional structure as a sort of "decoration". Anastylosis, an approach which can indeed serve to protect original material in certain circumstances, also illustrates

the special role of the fragment in archaeological heritage management as well as the particular significance of conservation work in this context. So far some general reflections on anastylosis in my *Principles of Monument Conservation*,³ which can also be applied to the case of the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

Even if the task may seem unusual in view of the enormous dimensions of the giant statues (the Great Buddha being 55 m, the Small Buddha 38 m), anastylosis is quite common in conservation practice and in this case seems even urgent if one wants to save the entire historic substance still extant. As early as during the preliminary work for the anastylosis, which should go ahead at the same time as the consolidation of the rock to enable a sensible co-ordination of the steps of work, a whole range of technical details would have to be solved. It starts with the installation of a construction site, for which instead of a modern crane that could probably only be transported to the site with the greatest difficulties one could perhaps fall back upon wooden constructions to be erected by local workers, for instance in the niche of the Great Buddha a properly anchored hanging scaffold with a movable platform.. In front of the Great Buddha there is enough space for the construction site, where all layers of fragments could be spread out. In front of the Small Buddha where the terrain drops very steeply such a plane surface would have to be created provisionally. Assigning the stones to the various parts of the colossal statues will be made easier by the different stone layers. On the other hand the necessary work for fixing and stabilising cracks as well as for reassembling the fragments, all of which require very special methods, are made more difficult by the partly crumbling rock resembling *nagelfluh*. Besides, as with every anastylosis special considerations are necessary for an inconspicuous load-bearing frame in the background, which in this case for obvious reasons should be of steel. Whereas every imaginable kind of reconstruction would interfere with the walls of the niches more or less drastically, only simple anchors would be necessary to hold the load-bearing frame for the anastylosis. The frame would stand free in front of the back wall, the latter preserved in its condition after the destruction and therefore showing the traces of the destroyed figures like a silhouette so that the memory of the disaster would be kept alive.

During our technical investigations in Bamiyan in July of this year this conservation concept of securing the existing remains in conjunction with an anastylosis preserving all traces of history, including the memory of the destruction in 2001, was almost self-evident. From my point of view this is the only appropriate solution for this unique place. Any imaginable type of “brand new” Buddhas would only harm the authentic spirit. In the meantime the considerations of the ICOMOS team have found the consent of UNESCO, but of course we have to wait for further decisions of the Afghan government. So I can

only hope that under the guidance of UNESCO this co-operation between an international ICOMOS team, Afghan colleagues and a regional workforce will continue. It would be highly desirable if colleagues from India could also contribute, especially since the last comprehensive restoration work was executed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Considering the extraordinary importance of this world-famous historic site the safeguarding of the Bamiyan Buddhas should not be the achievement of one nation only, but instead a joint effort of many implemented step by step. However, as far as securing the most dangerous parts threatened to fall off and the consolidation of details such as historic plasters on the remains of the Small Buddha are concerned, there is a great urgency to start as soon as possible. Furthermore, the stone fragments even filling some of the side caves need to be blocked off by a fence in front of the niches to avoid visitors being injured but also to ensure that none of that material is being removed, especially not during any uncontrolled “clearing work”. Instead, the removal of every layer of the stone piles must always be under the control of experts.

Naturally, the conservation concept presented here in a very sketchy manner needs to be further elaborated. Besides, this concept touches many principles of our profession and questions that are not only being dealt with in the Venice Charter, our foundation document, but also in a number of our Charters and Guidelines; e.g. the aspect of authentic material, which in the case of an anastylosis using only original fragments will even satisfy the strictest “substance fetishist”. There is also the question of reversibility, which should at least be kept as a possible option, and finally the question of intangible values, which have become increasingly important in the past years. The latter are being guaranteed by a strong *genius loci* in a spectacular cultural landscape with all the witnesses of Buddhist and Muslim traditions, also constituting the cultural wealth of present-day Afghanistan. Taking this great tradition into consideration the Afghan government’s wish to reconstruct to a certain degree what has been lost is quite understandable. Because in conjunction with the deep-felt human concern that arises over rebuilding after catastrophes, there is also always the additional issue of the perceptible presence of the past at the monument site, an issue that involves more than extant or lost historic fabric.

The barbaric destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas at the beginning of this century was a signal not to be ignored that efforts should be increased to save our cultural heritage threatened world-wide. If ICOMOS with its concept for the conservation of the remains of the Bamiyan Buddhas does not only make a theoretical contribution, but thanks to its own funds is actually able to help solve the problems (which in view of the desolate situation many colleagues have thought was almost impossible), then in the sense of a necessary “back to the roots” of our organisation this may be a positive signal for the future.

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- 1 For the text see *Heritage at Risk 2000*, p. 39.
 - 2 Cf. *Der Große Buddha von Dafosi*, ICOMOS-Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees, vol. XVII, Munich 1996.
 - 3 Michael Petzet: *Principles of Monument Conservation / Principes de la Conservation des Monuments Historiques*, ICOMOS-Hefte des Deutschen Nationalkomitees, vol. XXX, Munich 1999, pp. 43/44.

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