

THE LOST BUDDHAS OF BAMMIYAN

Picking up the pieces in Afghanistan
By Matthew Power

Near sundown, atop TV Hill in Kabul, I am surrounded by a squabbling group of children, bright-eyed, rotten-toothed, dressed in ragged *salwars* with hands out, crying: *Howdy! Howdy! Howdy!* I root through my pockets and find nothing but a handful of American coins, pennies and nickels, and lint, and I hold them up and point at Lincoln and Jefferson and FDR and say, *America*, and they echo, *Merik, Merik*, and push each other, laughing and grabbing for the unspendable coins. Their tiny hands, filthy, cracked like mud plaster, deeply etched by sun, are far older than mine, are scale models of crones' claws. In the falling breeze, a boy tries with one hand to maintain the loft of a paper kite played out on a length of audiotape, twisted helically like a strand of DNA, while his other hand thrusts into the elbowing throng around me.

Matthew Power's last article for Harper's Magazine, "The Poison Stream," appeared in the August 2004 issue.

The sun, obscured all day behind a ceiling of low-slung clouds, splits the bank a finger's breadth above the horizon and floods the Kabul Valley with



ethereal light, sharply tracing the shadow of the ridgeline far across the grid of streets below: Chicken Street, Flower Street, Passport Lane (the city is named practically, as TV Hill's broadcast towers attest).

A handful of construction cranes perch like watchful herons across the valley floor. The nacreous light, shocking, fleeting, vanishing, casts the leafier enclaves (where DynCorp contractors and Fox News reporters

pay Manhattan rents to ex-Taliban landlords in Peshawar) in deeper shadow. The new mud-brick slums that inch up the hillsides, built by some of the city's 1.5 million returnees since the fall of the Taliban, are imbued with a magnificence that would not stand up to closer inspection. It is as if the day's allotment of beauty were compressed into a few moments, before another night falls with its punctuation of barking street dogs, rumbling Humvees, the echoes of muezzins, and the occasional slamming door of a rocket attack in another part of town.

Howdy! Howdy! Howdy! And the children scatter through the dusk like poplar leaves. Line upon line of peaks, spurs of the Hindu Kush, catch the light and reveal themselves at theatrical distances, relentlessly unfurling like rows of sharks' teeth. Somewhere beyond them, hidden in a valley a hundred miles into the wall of mountains to the northwest, is the question mark, the

rubble pile, the twin emptiness and stone keyhole I came here to peer into: Bamiyan.

The images have haunted me since March 2001, a time now part of another age, when an obscure one-eyed cleric named Omar gave the order that the massive 1,500-year-old Buddhas of the Bamiyan Valley be destroyed. Hadn't the Prophet himself, the old iconoclast, smashed the idols in the Kaba'a? There was a grainy news loop, and an international condemnation, and a great fluttering of op-ed pages. There was Mullah Omar taunting: "All we are breaking are stones."

And then there was September, and the world found more pressing concerns with Afghanistan. Sometime that fall I saw a wall painting in a gallery in lower Manhattan of two giant Buddhas standing in the smoking pits of the World Trade Center towers. Perhaps it was a stretch to make a parallel: two temples of commerce, two long-abandoned symbols of worship. The monuments of civilizations in their twilight and their loves.

I arrived in Kabul on the Ariana flight from Delhi, where I had come across the stewardesses smoking cigarettes by the bathroom as we crossed the Hindu Kush, and on landing I watched from the window of the plane as a de-mining team underwent its work alongside the runway. I was soon met by my guide and translator, a young Afghan medical student named Najib, possessor of an infectious laugh, recurrent malaria, and a rockabilly pompadour. There was a crush at arrivals, herded by Afghan soldiers in smart new uniforms and bootleg Oakleys: sunburned, walrus-mustached, pot-bellied "defense consultants" from Virginia smoked by the carousel; women in burkas and high heels milled about; old bearded men in turbans just back from Mecca carried 5-gallon jugs of holy water; an Afghan businessman in a sharp suit waited to see how badly his golf clubs had been treated by the baggage handlers. (The grassless greens of the Kabul Golf Course are once again open for business. Players carry a section of Astroturf with them on the course.) All have arrived at

this caravansary of the jet age, a Silk Road stopover of the New World Order, to place their bets on the future.

Afghanistan is a shattered country, a place that has never properly been whole, the crossroads of marching armies and the overlapping frontier of rival empires. Osama bin Laden might be the best thing that's happened to the country in years: he prodded the Western world once again to halfheartedly invest in its construction. Terror was the Afghan oil: it seeped

IN A KABUL SHOP WINDOW THERE IS
A RUG WITH A TABLEAU OF THE TWIN
TOWERS SUPERIMPOSED OVER A MAP
OF AFGHANISTAN

from the ground, it brought the world's notice. Despite all the nation-building rhetoric of the international community, few Afghans expect this degree of engagement, limited as it is, to last for long. But while the game is in town, the locals want nothing more than to get back to their centuries-old pastime of cleaning out every foreigner who passes through.

Kabul has reinvented itself to a remarkable degree in three years. Whereas early invocations of Paris in the twenties may have been wishful hyperbole, plasma TVs, satellite dishes, and even a single temperamental ATM have all popped up in the city like Martian landers. When Afghanistan's only ATM is out of commission, there is the currency bazaar, where traders at open tables stacked with Vegas-size sheaves of bills sit with calculators and satellite phones to compute up-to-the-second exchange rates for rials, dollars, rupees, euros, and afghanis. Behind the gruesome wheelbarrows of sheep's heads at the Titanic market, a thousand jerry-rigged stalls in the drought-cracked bed of the Kabul River, a cinephile can pick up *Titanic*, *Rambo III*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and a host of other pirated DVDs for 100 afghanis each.

Kabul supports a glut of construction projects, restaurants, car dealerships, and a dual economy sustained by the

thousands of international aid workers now living in the city. Afghans, though not benefiting nearly as much as the hordes of Westerners who have come here to work, are getting as big a piece of the pie as they can. Particularly the elite expat returnees, many of whom bring home the money and business acumen of twenty-five years in London, Sydney, Toronto, or Los Angeles. The average income of an Afghan may be forty dollars a month, but a lone U.N. worker can easily spend that much on dinner at one of the Thai, Italian, or Croatian restaurants that have sprung up in Kabul. There are ten-dollar margaritas at The Elbow Room, and a martini-shaped pool at the Peacock Lounge. All the best restaurants hunker behind iron gates with armed guards in the tonier neighborhoods of Wazir Akbar Khan and Shar-e-Naw. After a speakeasy-style window slides back and one's foreignness is ascertained, a pleasure garden of tiki torches, pretty waitresses, and imported wine manifests like an opium dream, with dinner conversation in a half-dozen languages and the bill going to the NGO's expense account. But sorry, no credit cards yet.

There are plenty of places to spend money in Kabul, as a walk down Chicken Street illustrates. Once the destination for stoned backpackers hopping overland along the K's (Kabul, Kashmir, Kathmandu) to Kuta in Bali, Chicken Street is now a treasure trove of Soviet kitsch, overpriced carpets, and racks of rusting Enfield rifles from the 1800s supposedly given to the mujahedeen by the CIA. In a shop window there is a rug woven with a tableau of the twin towers aflame superimposed over a map of Afghanistan, the planes in poor perspective crashing into them, with an aircraft carrier sliding up to the towers' base, launching a missile. Lest anyone be confused over the political intent behind the iconography, an American flag and an Afghan flag are joined by a dove bearing an olive branch, beneath the curious inscription: THE TERRORS WERE IN THE AMERICAN AFGHANISTAN.

When the Taliban abandoned the city in November 2001, the Western press delighted in stories of the people of Kabul digging TV sets up from their

back yards and blasting Bollywood music, of liberated women casting off their burkas, and of children flying kites with impunity. Kabulis became the clichéd poster children for the successes of the war on terror, the backdrop for Bush's pseudo-Lincolnian invocations of a new birth of freedom in the Muslim world. There were celebrations, and Najib describes people filling the streets, riding on the roofs of trucks, shouting. The Taliban vanished like smoke in the night, but the burkas, for the most part, have not come off, and Najib tells me that 60 percent of women in Kabul, and 98 percent outside, still wear the coverings in public.

Women in burkas beg throughout the center of town, lean billowing into sudden dust storms, squat by the kebab stands thrusting sickly infants at well-heeled passersby, tug on shirtsleeves calling out, *Baksheesh, baksheesh*. This is nothing new, I'm told, but the numbers have risen in direct proportion to the foreign presence here. An extraordinarily persistent burka trails me for twenty minutes through a traffic jam, tapping at the taxi window like a pigeon in a behavioral experiment.

But as mendicants, the "shuttlecocks," as a Pakistani journalist I meet calls the burka panhandlers, are not alone: in June, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the NATO secretary-general, told member nations at a summit meeting in Istanbul that he felt "like a beggar," that Afghanistan had a sixth of the NATO forces provided to Kosovo. Afghanistan may be the first NATO mission outside Europe, but its inability to provide peace-keeping forces for the bulk of the country is a mark of shame upon the operation. The vast majority of the 8,000-strong international military presence here, called ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), patrols only within the city limits. The 16,000 American troops in the country are largely headquartered at the former Soviet airbase at Bagram (the

one place in the country that has built a Burger King). Germans, Canadians, Greeks, Poles, Latvians—there are thirty-six countries represented. At the U.S. compound, gangs of grubby street kids beg for pens and candy outside a blast wall of dirt-filled containers built by Kellogg Brown & Root, while inside, a series of well-tended neighborhood streets houses the occupying armies, and Afghan gardeners tend rosebushes and apple trees. The press conferences in front of a forest of international flags are a good show, but there is little doubt that if they could, the Western nations would gladly sweep the fragments of Afghanistan back under the rug once again.

Today, all assessments of the situation in Afghanistan are framed in terms of *inside* Kabul and *outside* Kabul. *Inside*, Kabul is growing and relatively safe. There is real cultural ferment and progressivism in the city, with a growing indigenous press and a Top 40 station sponsored by a condom company that enjoys over 80 percent market penetration. Radio Arman, which means "hope" in Dari, was founded by three Afghan siblings who grew up in Australia and Japan during the years of war. Despite the fact that they had



no experience running a station, they decided that radio was the way to go in a country with 66 percent illiteracy. With a Top 40 list of Bollywood and Ricky Martin and J-Lo lorded over by Ahmad Zahir, the Afghan Elvis, Radio Arman echoes throughout the capital, in every taxi, every bazaar stall, every transistor radio dangling from a bike's handlebars.

Outside Kabul, a vast and lawless country the size of Texas belongs to a medieval collection of fiefdoms, where guns rule and the economy is built on an annual harvest of 3,600 tons of raw opium. And forget poppies: dozens are killed in tribal wars fought over the annual pistachio harvest. Six dollars a kilo for pistachios is no joke

in Afghanistan. The rebuilding of the country has begun in Kabul, but there are few indications that it will spread much farther anytime soon, particularly from whatever central government is formed in the capital. For all their cruelty, the Taliban are the subject of a whispered nostalgia in some quarters, because of the relative stability they offered to 90 percent of the country.

But even in the city, echoes of the dark years are everywhere. Najib takes me across town to the soccer stadium, where many of the Taliban's amputations and executions were conducted. Olympic rings are now hung on its facade, and a group of boys in mismatched uniforms kick a ball across the heavily irrigated field. It is the first green grass I have seen in Afghanistan. I had once seen a picture from this very field (grassless then) of a laughing boy holding up a bouquet of severed hands, tied together at the thumbs. Najib tells me of an afternoon here, not four years ago, when he and his friends came and sat in the stands, as a woman in a burka was led out onto the field and made to kneel, and how a Taliban had put a Kalashnikov to her head and "crack, she fell like a sack of flour dropped from a truck."

The election, America's great experiment in Afghan nation-building, is on everyone's mind. Later I have a conversation with Hafeez Mansor, an opposition-newspaper editor and spokesman for a loose coalition of warlords ("I do not prefer the term 'warlords,'" he tells me. "They are 'tribal leaders.'") He catches the anti-Karzai skepticism precisely: "Karzai is like a can of Coca-Cola whose Coca-Cola has been drunk, and now keeping the empty can will just be self-deceiving, not anything else. We'll have more insecurity, the reconstruction will be hurt, the international community will be ill-reputed even more, and it is possible Afghanistan will be converted to another Iraq. The result is clear—someone who cannot make one step without his foreign bodyguards, how would he get the votes of the people?"

At a voter-registration station on the outskirts of the city, a lone guard sits smoking by the gate, his Kalashnikov leaning against a wall. Throughout the summer, election workers

around the country have been attacked, from poll workers gunned down in far-flung provinces to a busload of women bombed on the way to a registration center. Inside there is a roomful of men lining up to register, making their thumbprints and getting Polaroids for voter I.D. cards. There is another room for the women, almost all in burkas, and they lift them briefly to get their photos snapped. Some refuse, forbidden by their families to have a portrait, and are given I.D.'s with only thumbprints. U.N.-designed election posters festoon the walls, showing men and women balanced on scales, both slipping votes into locked boxes; another shows a line of women in burkas, amputees, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns casting their lot for democracy. It all seems unimpeachably good and just, the stuff of heartwarming political advertisements, and in Bamiyan, on October 9, in the shadow of the enormous empty niches of the twin Buddhas, thousands lined up in an early autumn snowstorm to mark their ballots.

We leave Kabul at sunrise, the first light catching on the still-shuttered shops that line the road out of town. Everywhere there are huge billboards of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance leader killed by Al Qaeda just before 9/11, who in his martyrdom has become some combination of Che, Patton, and Bob Marley. Someone clearly hopes for some of the star power to rub off on Karzai, whose billboards are almost always adjacent to Massoud's. It is a classic exercise in brand building, as broad recognition of Karzai's face will be key when the largely illiterate populace stamp their votes next to their selected candidate's portrait in October.

The road is perfectly smooth fresh tar, built on contract by the Americans to connect Kabul with Bagram air force base, but at the city's edge the delimitations of the Western reconstruction are immediately apparent. Shattered houses, walls, and granaries line the road for mile after mile across the Shomali Plain, which was the scene of some of the worst fighting under the Soviets and the Taliban. Land-mine warnings dot the roadside, with paint-

ed check marks on walls meant to declare areas cleared. With 10 to 15 million mines, not to mention unexploded mortar shells, cluster bomblets, and artillery rounds, Afghanistan is among the most heavily mined countries in the world.

Everywhere along the road new infrastructure is built upon, or out of, the fragments of three decades of war. A bridge crossing a clear stream is anchored by the bombed-out shells of Soviet armored vehicles filled with rocks. A prefab Bailey bridge built by the U.S. Army spans a river above the skeletal remains of its predecessor. Gardens of sunflowers are edged with whitewashed artillery shells; tank treads lie unfurled across the road through villages as speed breakers.

We make a sharp left off the main highway and leave whatever has recently been made new in Afghanistan far behind. The road, if it can be called that, is an unpaved nightmare of potholes, frost heaves, and hummocks that screech along the underbelly of the van. It is like driving up a creek bed, and we rarely break ten miles an hour. The road winds up narrow valleys as the peaks of the Hindu Kush loom overhead, and men with mountainous turbans and creased faces lead donkeys by the roadsides. Mud-brick tribal compounds rise up in grim medieval solidity, rifle ports at their corners. Life is concentrated around water, a thin green line between the unrelenting aridity of the mountains and the culture that has subsisted here for centuries. The logic of the poppy trade, in a country where so little can be grown, is hard to miss.

To instill real change in a place so determinedly traditional, with so little unifying infrastructure, seems nearly impossible. Whenever we pass a burka-clad woman walking by the roadside, alone or with her husband, she stops and turns away, looking out over the orchards and fields of the valley bottoms. In the villages turbaned merchants sell almonds and dried mulberries and apricots from piles spread on burlap sacks. Often along the route, the rusting hulks of Soviet tanks lie frozen, their barrels still pointed in ambush at a far bend of the road, the words AFGHAN TOURISM ASSOCIATION, BAMYAN HOTEL stenciled on their sides

in testament to a resurgence of entrepreneurial spirit. The makeshift billboards mark every tank for fifty miles, in an ironic enticement for the trickle of weekend U.N. workers, journalists, and NGO people who travel to Bamiyan during the summer months.

The valley bottoms, cut into fertile steps planted with walnuts and almonds and apples, are surrounded by dun-colored sandstone cliffs. Hazara boys, the Shia Muslim and Asiatic descendants of Genghis Khan, stand by the roadside, holding out bags of fresh apricots, running after the van in clouds of dust. I buy a bag, the fruit so perfectly ripe that the stone rattles inside like a drum.

In a Pashtun village farther on, there is not a single woman on the streets, and crowds of fierce-looking Pathans with black beards and mascara-ringed eyes stare at me. "Don't worry, you look like a Panjshiri," my guide tells me, but despite my month's worth of beard I'm not fooling anyone. We take tea and horrid sugar-coated mulberries and make small talk with the men. Boys riding sidesaddle idly switch donkeys down the street, and merchants fan the flies away from heaps of raisins. A child swings from the barrel of a blasted Soviet tank like a jungle gym. I ask the owner of the tea shop why there are no women walking around the town. "Why do they need to go out? If they want something, we bring it for them. If they want to see somebody, we arrange a visit. That is our duty."

Up toward a high pass, we scramble through unrepaired washouts from the spring rains. The difficulty of the road drives home the primary fact preventing Afghanistan from being truly unified or modernized. The geography is mind-bogglingly severe, the easiest way between two points scarcely ever a straight line. The road from Kabul to Herat requires a thousand-mile detour through Kandahar. For all its illustrious history as a crossroads of civilization and artery of the Silk Road, today's Afghanistan has scarcely any sealed roads tying it together, which only serves to compound the regionalism, tribalism, and warlordism that dominate the country. The driver, clearly irked that his new van is being pounded to pieces on the road, curses loudly in Dari every time the chas-

sis bottoms out on a rock, and stops frequently to inspect the damage. Finally, after eleven hours of driving, a red sandstone precipice rises hundreds of feet above the road, topped by the ruined ramparts and citadels of the ancient fortress of Shahr-i-Zohak, which has guarded the entrance of the Bamiyan Valley for 800 years.

When the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang reached the Kingdom of Bamiyan in A.D. 632, he found a thriving commercial and religious nexus of the Silk Road. Situated in a high valley in the center of the Hindu Kush, Bamiyan had strategic control over a number of mountain passes that connected trade routes from China, India, and Persia. Buddhism had thrived in Afghanistan since the second-century rule of the Buddhist convert and philosopher-king Kanishka and had reached its apogee by the time of Hiuen's arrival. I imagined him arriving on a bell-clear afternoon like this, walking with a staff down a dirt trail along the valley's lower contours and coming over a rise to see for the first time the wheat fields and orchards, a teeming bazaar of Indian spices and Chinese silks and dried fruits, strings of Bactrian camels and yaks at rest. Above it all, carved into a sandstone cliff face towered over by 18,000-foot peaks, stood the colossal Buddhas: the universe, mapped in the human form, cut from the living rock.

To the northeast of the royal city there is a mountain, on the declivity of which is placed a stone figure of Buddha, erect in height 140 or 150 feet. Its golden hues sparkle on every side, and its precious ornaments dazzle the eyes by their brightness.

—the journals of Hiuen Tsiang

The enormous Buddhas were gilded and decorated with lapis or perhaps ocher. The whole matter, even of their original appearance, is cloaked in mystery, and the conclusions of scholars are largely inferential. The arms were wooden armatures covered over with stucco and painted, the hands in one of the Buddha's mudras, symbolic hand gestures that indicated the lesson the Buddha meant to impart: *dharmacakra*, the gesture of teaching;

varada, the gesture of compassion; *abhaya*, the gesture of fearlessness. Some art historians believe that the great alcoves in which they stood were painted with frescoes of the heavens, an eternally blue sky cut from stone. The colossi could have been adorned with sheets of reflective mica, or had stanchions of flame planted on their shoulders during ceremonies.

The world stood then, as it does now, at a momentous juncture. The very same year that Hiuen entered Bamiyan and described its wonders in his journal, the Prophet Muhammad died in Mecca at the age of sixty-three. Within a few centuries the lapping tide of Islam swept over Afghanistan, and by the tenth century Buddhism had been abandoned in the Hindu Kush. But the colossi remained for a thousand years, sentinels of a world that had vanished, their golden hues scoured away by drifting snows, the painted heavens of their frescoes, with their flights of geese and red clouds blistered by the swell of frosts, chipped away by the steel arrowheads of Genghis Khan and the cannons of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The stone ears (from which once depended bright jewels brought by caravans as tribute for the right of passage) echoed with the passing drumbeats of the British and Soviet empires in their ruin.

The Buddhas stood, carved in deep relief, 125 and 180 feet tall, dressed in stucco tunics cut in the fashion of the armies of Alexander, which had passed through the region a millennium earlier en route to the Khyber Pass. Bamiyan was a fusion of Greek, Indian, Persian, and Chinese, at its peak as vibrant a marketplace of ideas and goods as existed anywhere on the planet. How different is today's Kabul, again a frontier of the clash of civilizations, a destination for mercenaries and visionaries and refugees returning home?

Meaning faded with the years in the cliff kingdom of Bamiyan, and the Buddhist monasteries and their handed-down rituals passed away and withdrew to the high Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau. The great statues, recast in local memory, were thought to be the pagan kings of a vanished empire, an Ozymandian at-

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tempt at immortality that decayed a bit with each passing season. Locals called the larger Buddha Solsol, meaning “year after year.” The smaller, which they imagined to be a woman, was called Shahmama, the kingmother. The living decide upon meaning, and the Hazaras of Bamiyan (their name, derived from a Persian term for the Mongol hordes, means “thousand riders”) presided over a valley of ghosts. The heavily mined ruins of Shahr-e-Gholghola, the City of Screams, watches over Bamiyan from the east; in 1221 it was betrayed by the king’s daughter to Genghis Khan, who in turn massacred every last inhabitant. When a group of archaeologists came to the valley in the 1950s to study the Buddhas, they found the base of the larger one walled in with mud brick, turned into a sheepfold and granary by local farmers, whose flocks bedded down in the echoing alcove.

Fifteen centuries they stood, the largest rock-cut figures of the standing Buddha in the world, until March 2001, when the decree of a Taliban jirga stated that they were idolatrous and un-Islamic. The final straw, it was reported at the time, was an offer by a group of European envoys for money to protect and preserve the sculptures. The Taliban, then one of the world’s most isolated regimes (recognized only by the Saudis, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates), craved legitimacy more than anything else, and in a blind fury that the West cared more about a bunch of crumbling stones than a million starving Afghans, called for the Buddhas’ immediate annihilation. Days of antiaircraft and cannon fire were followed by placed dynamite charges that tore the statues from the cliff face. The Taliban were so proud of their handiwork that they brought a Western press junket into Bamiyan, and within weeks they were selling photo calendars of the destruction in the bazaars of Kabul and Kandahar. Fifty cows were slaughtered at the site to atone for the delay in the statues’ destruction, and rumor had it that Bin Laden himself had come to watch the final demolition.

Even prepared by hours of expectation, I am shocked by my first view of the town of Bamiyan. Around

a bend of road the valley opens wide amid shining fields of wheat, and past copses of willow and poplar the cliff-face city reveals itself. There are hundreds of caves along the mile-long facade, a latticework of temples, galleries, and monastic residences eroded to resemble Swiss cheese. At the center of the complex, set half a mile apart, are the huge empty alcoves, cast in deep shadow by the dazzling mountain light, like arched doorways into the heart of the mountains.

The presence of absence is overwhelming, like returning to New York in the final smoking months of 2001, before the meaning of Ground Zero was hijacked by jingoistic sentiment, political opportunism, and the selling of ghoulish tchotchkes. It was palpable: the vibrations of collapse reverberated between Bamiyan and New York like the humming tines of a tuning fork. At the bottom of each alcove lay a compact pile of sandstone rubble like the sweepings of some monstrous broom. T. S. Eliot’s heartbroken summation of the role of poetry in the modern world comes to mind: “these fragments I have shored against my ruins.” There is nothing against the back walls of the alcoves but ragged, crumbling sandstone and the ghostly outline of the Buddhas’ forms.

At the Bamiyan Hotel, the satellite dish sits propped up by the white-washed cog of a tank wheel. Out back, a half-dozen tanks rust in a wheat field, with wildflowers poking up between their treads. The hotel proprietors are building a row of yurts to offer the hoped-for swarms of tourists a more authentic Bamiyan experience (even though yurts aren’t native to this part of the Hindu Kush). There are few other guests, except for a shy, friendly U.S. State Department employee with a vague job description, a side arm, and a cortege of Nepali Gurkhas shadowing him at all times. The quiet Americans have returned to the Hindu Kush.

At dinner I meet Edmund Melzl, a fedora-wearing and walrus-mustached German restoration expert. Melzl is employed by ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a U.N. agency that works to preserve and protect world heritage sites. Bamiyan, in a textbook example of bureaucratic afterthought, was named

a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2003 and listed as “threatened.”

Melzl is here to coordinate a team of international experts in the restoration of the Buddhas. This will involve, in a humpty-dumpty exercise without parallel, the sorting and cataloguing of every fragment in the niches. The sedimentary stone of Bamiyan, laid down by millions of years of floods and then carved out by the valley’s river, has a geologic profile, a map of layers as precise as DNA, by which the fragments can be reordered. In the alcove of the 180-foot Buddha, there are more than 4,000 fragments, some weighing as much as 100 tons. So the first work is counting the pieces, then figuring out how to put them back together. Melzl’s goal, ultimately, is to rebuild the Buddhas as they were in early 2001, using only the pieces from the niches, in accordance with UNESCO’s 1964 Venice Charter. “Even the parts that have been reduced to sand we will use.”

I ask why, when so much of Afghanistan is barely functioning, when there are no roads, health care is abysmal, and the entire country is reverting to medieval narco-statehood, the international community should be concerned with so costly and difficult a project. “Reconstruction like this is a crucial part of identity and reconciliation,” he tells me. “The Taliban wanted to erase history here. If the Afghans have no sense of their past, they will have no future. The Frauenkirche in Dresden was finished fifty years after the end of the war. The sixteenth-century Mostar bridge, in Bosnia, has now been rebuilt using traditional methods. The people here want the Buddhas back.”

The desire to rebuild, and quickly, has led to a host of suggestions with varying degrees of viability and an air of argument reminiscent of the debate over the 9/11 memorial. A photogrammetrist in Zurich has created a near-perfect 1/200th scale model of the great Buddha by using software to turn archival photographs into a 3-D map. The governor of the province, a former warlord, has threatened to reconstruct the Buddhas in concrete to boost tourism, calling the sculptures his people’s introduction to the

world. An Italian sculptor wants to carve the Buddhas anew farther along in the cliff. A mysterious Japanese billionaire is said to have his own rebuilding plan: to commission an installation artist to project the sculptures as holograms into the empty niches. There are, of course, no Buddhists around to ask, but for most people in Bamiyan the prospect of rebuilt sculptures attracting even a fraction of the town's former tourist bounty is extremely tempting.

However far-fetched a tourism renaissance seems now, the people of Bamiyan are holding out hope. The prevailing logic in town is *if you build it, they will come*. In the new bazaar half a mile from the mine-sown ruins of the medieval market destroyed by the Taliban, they sell grainy postcards of the Buddhas in the sepia light of a foliage-tinged autumn in the 1970s, and the Lonely Planet guidebooks have re-released their Central Asia guide, urging backpackers to *get there first*. There is a refreshing brand of hucksterism in Bamiyan's bazaar, the natural tendency of a marketplace to do the things that it was meant to do: buy, sell, argue, have tea, engage in the commerce of living. But the alcoves can be seen from the market, and everyone says the same thing from behind their piles of walnuts or money or DVDs: bring them back.

Melzl's restoration plan for the Buddhas is painstaking and dangerous work. The Taliban had anti-aircraft emplacements in the cliff face, and had planted hundreds of mines around the Buddhas and in the network of paths and caves that surrounded them. Melzl tells me that the Taliban, in destroying the Buddhas, also placed antitank mines at the bottom of the niches so that falling pieces of stone would hit them and be further pulverized, making the restoration work a de-mining project as well. Even the empty niches, fissured by earthquakes and the high explosive blasts that brought the Buddhas down, were threatened with collapse last winter, when a team of Italian engineers came and shored up the walls with tons of concrete and injected epoxy resin. It is a deeply ironic endeavor that resonates throughout the rebuilding of Afghanistan: the struggle to save empty holes from disintegration.

The problems of rebuilding, even if all the extant pieces can be reordered, are immense. The greater Buddha had been missing its legs for centuries, so even among the fragments there would be nothing to create static support for the thousands of tons of stones above. They certainly couldn't be anchored to the brittle sandstone at the back of the niche, so Melzl envisions some sort of steel support armature to hold the massive weight. "Normally," he says, "everything is possible." He shows me a packet of pictures he took on his first trip here, in 1958. The 180-foot Buddha looms in towering perspective, the stucco folds of its tunic as even and delicate as ripples on a pond. Parked at the base is Melzl's Volkswagen bug. "The road was actually better then," he tells me.

Across the valley at his office in a disused mosque, Melzl gives me a pair of jeweler's glasses and a fragment of the stucco lathe that once formed the Buddha's garment. It is a fragile lime plaster, mixed with filaments of straw and wool to give it tensile strength. I hold in my hands the work of some laborer 1,500 years past, the wool of a sheep and the straw of a threshed harvest from not long after the fall of Rome.

Little is known about the Kingdom of Bamiyan at its peak, not even the precise dates of the carving of the Buddhas. The vast wooden scaffolding, the echoes of hundreds of picks and chisels realizing the huge bodies from the stone, can only be dimly imagined. Besides the journals of Hiuen Tsiang and a few others, there are no historical accounts. Almost all that is known has been inferred and theorized by scholars working from art-historical evidence: fragments of frescoes and rock carvings. Fieldwork in Bamiyan was almost impossible after the Soviet invasion, and after the Taliban's depredations most of the evidence was lost forever. Carved fragments from the rubble piles are said to have turned up on the black market in Tokyo, Zurich, and Los Angeles. The cultural, economic, and religious life of the valley is largely extrapolated from other Buddhist centers in China and India, but the enormity of the original undertaking implies the im-

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portance of Bamiyan, with countless workers carving the statues and monastic cave complexes over decades.

In his description of the colossal Buddhas, Hiuen Tsiang also mentions a third Buddha at Bamiyan: "To the east of the city... there is a [monastery], in which there is a figure of Buddha lying in a sleeping position as when he attained Nirvana. The figure is in length about 1,000 feet or so." There is nothing anywhere in the valley that fits this description, a prostrate Buddha the size of the Chrysler Building, represented at the exact moment of his death. A journalist I met in Kabul thought the story was apocryphal, or perhaps it was a natural rock formation that looked like the Buddha in a certain slant of light. Half a mile from Melzl's office, near the empty niche of the smaller Buddha, the Afghan-French archaeologist Zemaryalai Tarzi leads a dig beneath a buckwheat field in an attempt to find the third Buddha.

Tarzi is a compact, clean-shaven man, with a floppy hat and fingerless bicycling gloves. He speaks perfect French—Tarzi has lived in France since before the Soviet invasion. He leads me around the dig site, a grid of square holes occupied by a small army of dust-covered local laborers armed with shovels, picks, and brooms. "We have found the wall of the monastery mentioned in the journals," he says, pointing to a swept-off ridge of mortared river stones. So far the dig has uncovered fragments of pottery and seven terra-cotta Buddha heads. If his calculations are correct, the remains of the huge sculpture—which was likely built of mud brick—extend from where we stand for a thousand feet eastward. "Perhaps we are near its feet."

The Hazara diggers in their pits, Tarzi tells me, have moved down through time, past the Islamic period and into the Buddhist, brushing away layers of history and the accretions of centuries. The newly dug holes are time machines, the piled dirt tells a story in layers of meaning, revisited for the first time in millennia. All Afghan history, Sikander and the terrible Khan and all who have gone to their gods like soldiers, all of the frail human mark against unraveling time, can be read like a core sample in the cut bank of soil. The tanks sinking

into the wheat fields are just the newest additions to the archaeological record. Tiny fragments of fired clay turn up like flotsam tangled in seaweed. But shards of pottery can never really recall the totality of human loss, the heft of hammers and shovels, the fearful gathering up of family and belongings to flee one direction or another from the onrush of history. I kick up a .50-caliber shell in the soil, perhaps Soviet, perhaps Taliban, and when I shake out the dust and blow across its top it makes a low whistle.

Tarzi was in France when he heard that the Buddhas had been destroyed. "On that day I became a militant for Afghan culture." I bring up the reconstruction project going on less than a mile from here, and Tarzi sneers. Melzl had mentioned that the two men weren't on speaking terms. Tarzi is opposed to any reconstruction. "In a conference I said we have to leave the two niches empty like two sinister pages of Afghan history. To underline the folly of human beings, and for the future generations to see what happened here. You could reconstruct them in Las Vegas—you have more tourists there."

The planners of the memorial at Ground Zero, two voids left where the towers had stood, came to essentially the same conclusion as Tarzi. Often in Buddhist art, the presence of the Buddha is indicated by the placement of other figures in relation to a void in the picture, a reflection of the emptiness that is the essence of the Buddha's nature. The towering voids in the cliff face exude a presence and a mystery in their emptiness, visible from everywhere within the valley. In the niche of the smaller Buddha, all that remains besides the 125-foot shadow is a fragment of the Hellenistic robe, carved rippling in stone high on the wall, a shred caught on a thorn in a giant's passing.

A worker from the hotel, a toothless, sunburned old man named Abdul Hamid, has driven with us out to Tarzi's dig. An ethnic Hazara and a Shia, Hamid says his tribe suffered extensively under the Taliban, with thousands killed in Bamiyan and Mazar-e-Sharif in reprisals when the fortunes of the civil war shifted. One of a handful

of Hazaras who had returned to Bamiyan after it fell, he says he had seen Arabs and Pakistanis, dressed in white in the days before the sculptures were destroyed, and that the Taliban had done it to please them.

"When the Taliban exploded the Buddha idols, I was living in Bamiyan. Inside the city we own a small café, and that's where I was, about a kilometer away. At first, the Taliban had placed their artillery on the hill. Every day they were shooting more than twenty shells at the idols, but they did not destroy them completely. Hazara men were hung by ropes from above and forced to place explosives in the holes in the idols' sides. One of them suffocated because of the rope, the way he was hung. The others I don't know what happened. At that time we were in the city, and we climbed on the roofs of our houses and watched. There was a thunderous sound, and the dust raised to the sky. This is something that we never expected."

Whatever the Taliban had in mind in Bamiyan, nine months later they were routed and left Afghanistan in essentially the same state they had left the Buddhas. Today the Afghan people and the international community have plenty of ideas on how to put things together, but hope and reality have diverged. The flawed elections, in which Karzai swept to victory on the wings of Blackhawk helicopters and the American P.R. machine, were nevertheless crucial to a sense of Afghan reconciliation and unity. Karzai, declared a victor at the same time as Bush, won 55 percent of the national vote, but in Bamiyan the electorate swung three to one to Mohammed Mohaqeq, a Hazara chieftain who immediately after the election vowed never to recognize the legitimacy of the Karzai government.

The elections were in a sense concrete Buddhas: a quick, sloppy fix, a deep compromise of possibility, a nice postcard to show the folks in the swing states at home. But how many ways can you rearrange a pile of rubble and call it whole? How can a country so broken be made complete? In Bamiyan, where the shattered plaster folds of the Buddhas' robes were echoed in the burka pleats of the women who lined up in the snow to vote, the election was a movement—fitful,

stumbling, uncertain—into a new era. But what is the alternative? It is an existential dilemma: something must be done; nothing can be done. The world cannot afford to let Afghanistan lie in ruins as a monument to darkness.

We walk up from the dig site, along the base of the cliff. In a few places along the way we climb paths and enter the caves. Inside, a series of galleries contain fragments of devotional frescoes. The faces and hands of the figures in the paintings have been methodically shot off, the bullets reducing the plaster to powder and gouging deep into the sandstone walls. Enough of the remaining painting has been left to indicate the handiwork of vandals, as if defacing made the message clearer than wiping the stone clean. So few clues to reconstruct a world: a fold of robe, a tracing of cloud, a pair of disembodied feet surrounded by chewed-up rock.

At the bottom of the 180-foot Buddha, behind a chicken-wire fence, the pile of shattered stones is ten feet high, some the size of Melzl's Volkswagen. The Sisyphean nature of Melzl's task is immediately apparent: to reorder this, to make of this once more something whole, something comprehensible—how could that be done? It is a broken pile of rocks, seemingly interchangeable with the broken rocks that litter this entire country. The outline of the Buddha, fifteen stories high, is traced against the back of the alcove like a photonegative, a radiation shadow left by an atomic blast. Abdul leads the way, and we follow a series of switchbacks up a scree slope.

Just off the path are small stones painted red. *Uncleared mines*. Evil little things, injecting fear directly into the earth, like a lottery of ill luck and desolation. They make the ground itself traitorous. A U.N. pamphlet I read earlier noted the warning signs: overgrown paths, untilled fields, orchards of ripe fruit dropping unpicked to the ground. I imagine the moment a mine seizes the body and tears it like fresh bread, and I follow exactly in Abdul's footsteps.

Climbing higher up the cliff face, we enter a doorway carved into the stone wall of the cliff and step out of the

brilliant light of the Hindu Kush. Following a tunnel carved by hand centuries ago, the old man ahead moves through bands of light and darkness as he passes narrow slits cut in the wall. The daylight behind fades, and we are in full darkness, feeling our way farther into the mountain. And then we come out to a ragged hole in the stone, 180 feet high in the back of the vast alcove, above where the Buddha's head had been. Far below lies the rubble pile, its meaning shattered and now in the process of being remade. Looking out, the frame of the alcove's arch perfectly composes the scene: ruins of the mud-brick bazaar, the new market, high-walled compounds and stands of willow by the winding river, waving green-gold wheat fields, smooth sandstone foothills towered over by the saw-edge peaks of the Hindu Kush that tear the clouds like raw silk.

Perhaps Hiuen Tsiang, whose writing outlasted the stone he described, had stood just here atop the Buddha's house-size head. Hiuen would have looked out from under the great stone arch beneath the painted branches of a bo tree, or maybe a painted heaven, contemplating its twin sky arching over Bamiyan. So much and so little has changed. There is a fresh cut in the hillside across where the Bamiyan Hotel is building an annex for the tourists who have not yet returned. A boy with a donkey passes below and a woman in billowing burka carrying water. I am looking out from where the Buddha's gargantuan head had hung. Over a thousand years ago the monks of a vanishing order had ascended here in prayer, echoing the Buddha's life journey in a rite of circumambulation, a walking circle that was meant to renew the world. And even then, across a thousand miles of mountains and desert, at Mecca the Kaba'a was similarly circled, in a covenant with the great unknown.

Maybe the Buddhas were just stones, carved by an empire that would shortly be swallowed whole by history, and whose true motives and dreams have since been lost. Built with tributes offered for safe passage along the trade routes, perhaps they were an attempt at status and immortality by a forgotten emperor, or just a skill's draw for the

passing caravans. They were images of God but they were built by humans, with the frailties and desires of humans.

Bamiyan had witnessed the great mixing of the world, the cross-pollination of civilizations. Maybe the reconstruction now can re-create the genius of that vanished moment; maybe the signal of Radio Arman will make it even out here. Today there are as many people of goodwill who have arrived in Afghanistan wanting to help as profiteers who have come to get their cut. For every journalist-trainer brought by nonprofits like the Institute for War & Peace Reporting there is a contractor who has come to build a compound. Whether the interests of both, and the will of the Afghan people, can bring something out of the wreckage remains to be seen. So afraid of ideas, the Taliban didn't even understand what they were wrecking. The Buddha can't be killed. Something of humanity and eternity had been put into the statues, and had remained, and, even destroyed, still remains. Omar, with his dynamite and artillery, could no more tear it down than Kellogg Brown & Root can build it back up.

A scattering of sand and pebbles, kicked loose by my foot, rattles down the empty cliff face and falls on the pile below, my own accidental contribution to entropy, the rearrangement of particles and meaning. The landscape of the Bamiyan Valley, of all Afghanistan, is defined by erosion: the slow wearing of wind and water and the rapid dissolution of war. In their niches, the statues had been protected from one and not the other, but they would have come to the same place eventually: the final victory of gravity and time. The huge alcove catches an edge of the wind, seeming almost to breathe, and I sit a long time looking out. In the stillness, it is difficult to conjure the fire and the smoke, the whistle of the shells and the thunder of collapse, the wash of blood that has rippled out from Afghanistan like a pebble dropped into a well. A cliff swallow glides in to the sheltering alcove and rises on an updraft without a wing beat. It levitates a moment, as if painted into the landscape, before returning to its nest of mud and straw built just where the Buddha's head had been. ■