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# Odyssey

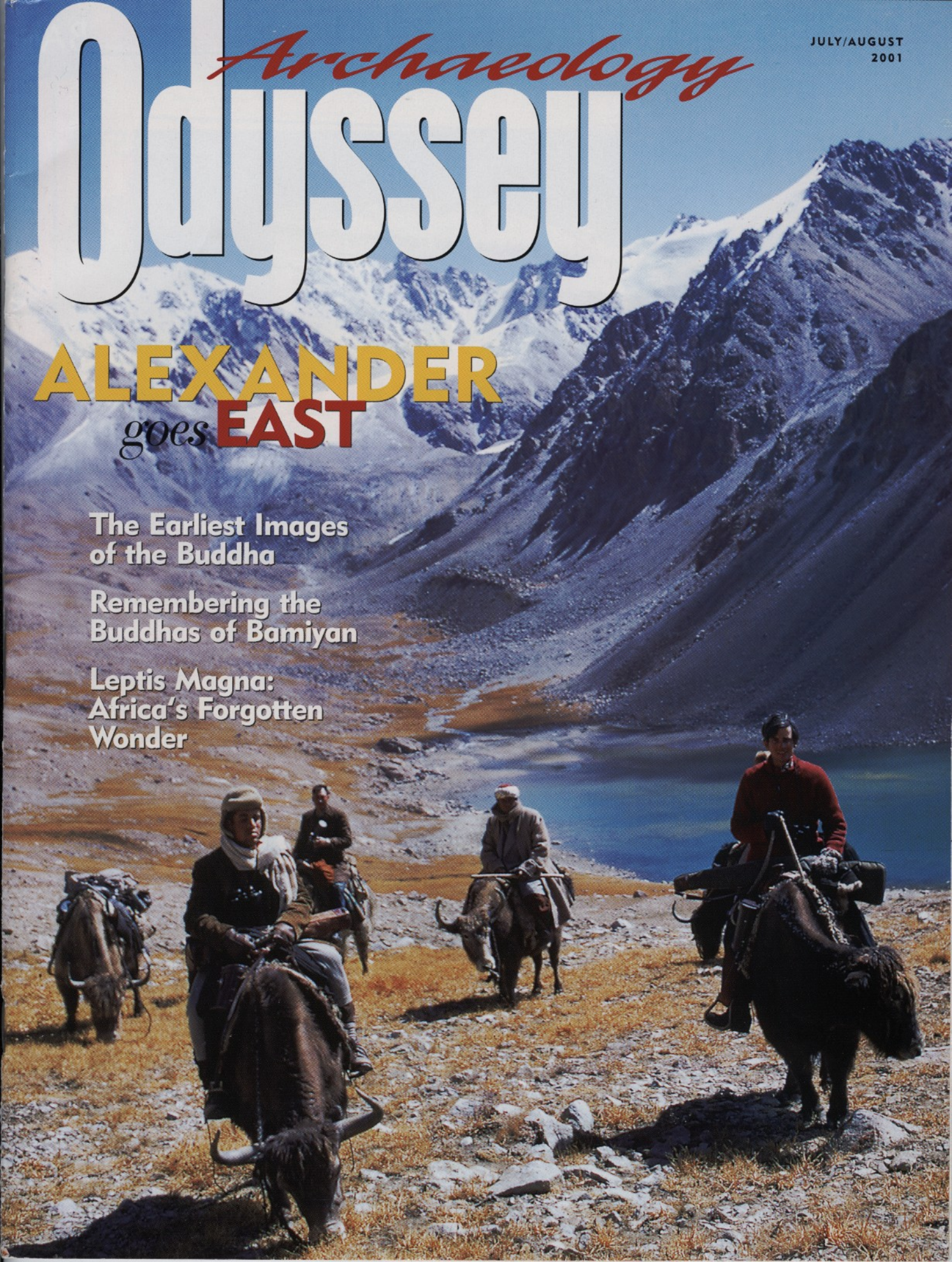
## Archaeology

## ALEXANDER goes EAST

The Earliest Images  
of the Buddha

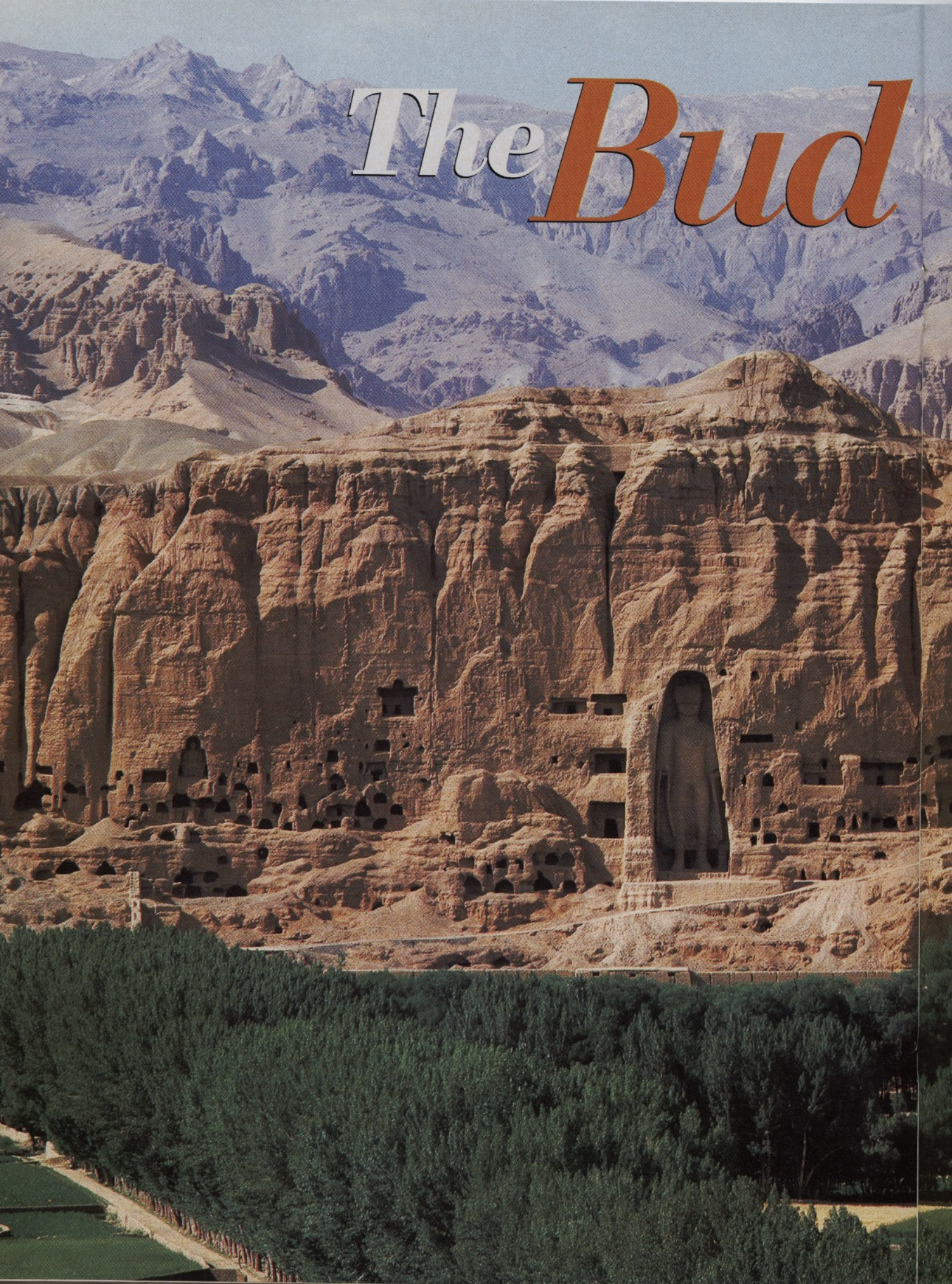
Remembering the  
Buddhas of Bamiyan

Leptis Magna:  
Africa's Forgotten  
Wonder





# *The Bud*







# *dhas* *of Bamiyān*

JOHN C. HUNTINGTON

*Legendary Bamiyān!* As our car neared the valley, I had no idea what to expect. Afghanistan and its friendly people promised a magnificent climax to the 18 months I had spent in Asia in 1969 and 1970. It was an up-and-down ride, crossing three or four high passes. Eventually ruined forts, villages and the rocky Afghani landscape gave way to a broad plain with a simple two-story hotel and some yurts, circular tents made of yak hair or horse hide. The yurts belonged not

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Last March, despite pleas from the United Nations and the stern disapproval of other Islamic governments, Afghanistan's Taliban destroyed the great Buddhas of Bamiyan with artillery. The photo on the preceding pages looks north over the Bamiyan valley to the largest (170 feet high) of the Buddhas, also shown opposite. At the eastern end of valley, a 120-foot-high Buddha once stood. These immense sculptures were carved out of the Gandharan cliff side in the sixth century A.D. to suggest the immensity of the Buddha's spirit. The sense of emptiness caused by their destruction is caught in *The Empty Niche* (above), a painting by author John C. Huntington's son, Eric Huntington.

to wandering nomads but to the hotel, and we stayed in them during our time at Bamiyan.

Once settled in, I asked the driver to take us to the Bamiyan site. He informed me that by the time we reached the caves it would be too dark to see much. "But," he said, "you can see the Buddhas from here." We walked a few hundred yards and the plain fell away to give a breathtaking view of the Bamiyan valley.

It was green and lush with summer crops and running water. From our vantage point on the southern cliff, we could see the entire breadth of the cave site—stretching for about a mile from the 175-foot-tall Buddha at the west to the 120-foot-tall Buddha at the east. Between these mammoth, 1,400-year-old sculptures were hundreds of caves cut into the rock. As I peered across the valley, I gradually became aware of the sheer size of the carvings. The smaller caves at the base of the cliff were human habitations and temples. The Buddhas, even to someone used to American cityscapes, were overwhelming.

The next morning we drove to the base of the largest Buddha. The road was lined with poplar trees and the Buddha flickered in and out of view, growing more and more vast with each sighting. Then it emerged from the trees. All first-time visitors must have the same reaction: "They can't be that big!" And yet they are. One could drive a truck into the central cave at the base of the niche.

On the rounded ceiling of the niche are the remains of paintings that presumably once adorned the entire surface of the walls. Although pockmarked by the gunfire directed at them over the past two centuries, the paintings are on such a large scale that they retain much of their former beauty. These spectacular paintings depicted beings emanating from the universal Buddha. According to Buddhist teachings, from every pore of the universal Buddha emerge 84,000 rays of light, each of which contains 84,000 Buddhas. Each of these Buddhas in turn presides over a separate world, leading its people to enlightenment.

The people of Bamiyan told me that their ancestors painted these paintings and sculpted these Buddhas. They are justifiably proud of these great images in stone.

Now the Buddhas are gone—they are nothing but piles of sandstone rubble and clay plaster. Last March Afghanistan's ruling Taliban destroyed the magnificent Buddhas with artillery. They simply shot at the statues until they were obliterated. The Taliban are also collecting and destroying other images in Afghanistan, such as ancient statues and relief carvings. They claim the Buddhas violate the Islamic prohibition against sacred images: They are false idols that must be destroyed.

Carved in the late sixth century A.D., the Bamiyan Buddhas were inspired by a Buddhist movement based on the teachings of the Avatamsaka (Flower Garland) sutra, which swept eastwards and inspired other grand monuments. The Avatamsaka sutra conceives of the Buddha as a vast, luminous presence—as suggested by the endlessness of space. The carving of huge images of the Buddha is meant to express this conception of infinite being. The earliest surviving monument inspired by the Avatamsaka sutra is a late-fifth-century A.D. carving of the Buddha at Yungang in northern China. Other Chinese monuments include the spectacular Fengxian Temple at Longmen, which was dedicated in 675 A.D.

The movement continued to spread east and south, bringing magnificent monuments to Japan and southeast Asia. In the mid-eighth century, the Japanese emperor Shomu completed a series of monumental images of the Buddha at the Todai Temple, in Nara. The whole movement came to a fitting conclusion with the construction of the largest monument in the Buddhist world, in central Java: The magnificent ninth-century A.D. Meru-stupa at Borobudur is 115 feet high and more than 300 feet long and wide.<sup>1</sup>

Situated along the ancient Silk Road, the monks and patrons of Bamiyan were fortunate enough to live in one of history's most fertile and productive intellectual and



social periods. Goods and people moved across central Asia at the speed of camel or horse caravans. With them traveled ideas—not only ideas about the meaning of life and man’s place in the universe, but ideas about how to give material expression to these things in extraordinary art.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang visited Bamiyan in about 630 A.D. Xuanzang’s account of his travels is preserved in *Record of the Western Countries at the Time of the Great Tang Dynasty*, compiled by the monk Bian Ji, who was a disciple of Xuanzang. The account tells of a thriving Buddhist community of monks and of two great standing Buddhas sculpted into the cliff. It also describes a third Buddha—a huge image of the Buddha’s *parinirvana* (or “complete cessation,” the Buddha as freed from endless cycles of birth and death) that was 12 or 13 li (4-5 miles) east of the cliff-side carvings, though this sculpture is not known today:

Traveling about 600 li or so, we leave the country of Tukhara [in modern Turkmenistan] and arrive at the kingdom of Fanyanna, or Bamiyan. Situated in the midst of the snowy mountains, the kingdom is about 2,000 li from east to west and 300 li from north to south ... The country produces spring wheat but yields few fruits and flowers. The place provides a good pasture for sheep and horses. The climate is wintry and the people’s ways are hard and uncultivated. Clothes made of furs and skins are the most suitable for the region. The written language, customs and currency are the same as those of Tukhara country. Although there is a little difference in their spoken language, the people of the two countries closely resemble each other in appearance. They are particularly remarkable among all the neighboring countries because in their heart-minds they are of pure faith [in Buddhism].

On the declivity of a hill to the northeast of the capital city [Bamiyan]



COURTESY OF JOHN C. HUNTINGTON





MICHAEL FREEMAN

As in Bamiyan, monumental Buddhas were carved throughout eastern and southeastern Asia to celebrate the all-pervasiveness of the Buddha. The ninth-century A.D. pyramid-like shrine at Borobudur (above) in central Java is composed of nine superimposed terraces, whose inner walls are elaborately carved with reliefs depicting Siddhartha's life. At the top of the shrine are images of the enlightened Buddha—both freestanding and inside the bell-shaped stupas (signifying the Buddha's death and enlightenment). The magnificent Fengxian Temple (opposite) in Longmen, China, with its huge seated Buddha, was dedicated in 675 A.D.

is a standing image of Buddha made of stone. It stands 140 or 150 [Chinese feet] high. The golden color [of the stone] sparkles on every side and precious ornaments dazzle one's eyes. To the east there was a Buddhist monastery built by a former king of the country. To the east of the monastery was a standing image of Sakyamuni Buddha made of tushi, or metallic stone. It is more than 100 [Chinese feet] high. The different parts of the image have been cast separately and then joined together into one figure.

Some 12 or 13 li east of the capital city is a monastery that houses a recumbent image of the Buddha at the moment of his complete cessation [parinirvana]. It is about 1,000 [Chinese feet?] long. Every time the king assembles the great congregation of the wuzhe [assembly], known as moksha mahaparishad [a ceremony in which a

Buddhist king gives away his worldly goods and becomes destitute], having sacrificed all his possessions from his wife and children down to the country's treasures, he then offers himself.<sup>2</sup> His ministers and low-ranking officials afterwards redeem the valuables from the monks, and the utmost concern is shown in such matters as these.<sup>3</sup>

Little is known about the history of the site after the time of Xuanzang's visit. With the Islamic conquest of Afghanistan in the ninth century, the site fell into disuse. Over the centuries, the Buddhas were victims of decay and some deliberate damage—though not as much as has recently been reported. For example, above the mouth of the larger Buddha, the face had fallen off, but this was not due to an act of iconoclasm. Rather, the original sculptors had constructed the face out of other materials, probably wood and clay or stucco, and then attached it to the



stone statue. The Buddha's face was thus particularly vulnerable and did not last through the centuries. Until just a few months ago, however, the images remained largely intact.

In destroying the Buddha statues, the Taliban claim to be acting as good Muslims. They claim that such images are against Islamic law and must be destroyed—though all other Islamic states in the world have voiced objection to this view.\*

The fact is, however, that the images are not idols; they are simply reminders of the Buddha and Buddhist teachings.

Controversies over sacred images have arisen numerous times in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world.\*\* The Second Commandment of the Hebrew Bible prohibits the making of "graven images," and this prohibition was carried over into Christianity and Islam. Periods of iconoclastic fervor, for instance, erupted in late seventh-century B.C. Judah and in the Christian Byzantine period. This deep ambiguity over the propriety of such images, however, is not characteristic of Eastern forms of worship. It is especially foreign to Buddhism.

In Buddhism, there is no Abrahamic (Judeo-Christian-Islamic) God. Such a notion is simply not addressed anywhere in Buddhist literature or practice. Rather, the Buddhist notion of salvation is for each individual to attain ultimate release from the eternal cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). This enlightenment (*bodhi*) is achieved through a series of steps (*bhumis*). In general, to reach nirvana one must perfect his or her own wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*). Once *bodhi* is attained, two avenues are open: One may choose com-

plete cessation (*parinirvana*), the final death after which there is no rebirth. Or the enlightened being may elect to be reborn again to help others achieve salvation.

Attaining enlightenment involves following Buddhist teachings known as Dharma. The word "Dharma" is often translated as meaning religious law, but it is in fact better understood as referring to certain kinds of essential behaviors practiced as steps toward enlightenment. For example, a student follows the essential behaviors of a student, and a teacher follows the essential behaviors of a teacher. These Buddhist "behaviors" are taught by gurus, or teachers, and are represented in Buddhist art as stylized gestures, or *mudras*. The Buddha images, then, are not idols; they serve as pointers or illustrations (*uddeshaka*) for the Buddha's teachings. Viewing a Buddha image is a matter of seeing and experiencing the Buddha's Dharma, not venerating a god.

Nor are Buddhists worshiping when they press their hands together and bow before a sculpture of the Buddha. This is a traditional gesture of respectful greeting (*namaskar-amudra*) throughout south and southeast Asia. Bowing Buddhists are simply greeting their great teacher. Buddhist priests tell disci-

ples that the Buddhas are not "out there" but "in your own heart." As one of my Buddhist priest friends puts it, "The Buddha is you. How can you possibly worship yourself?"

In other words, when Buddhists see a Buddha image, they are not only reminded of the Buddha Sakyamuni and his teachings; they are also looking into a deeply penetrating mirror.

The vastness of the scale of the Bamiyan Buddhas is an expression of the vastness of one's own Buddha nature. Since at least the first or second century A.D., Buddhist texts have explained the Buddha's enlightenment as a universally pervasive principle, encompassing all space and time. The sculpting of great, massive Buddhas, such as the ones at Bamiyan, is a powerful expression of this idea. Buddhist texts describe some of these large Buddhas as thousands of days' journeys tall.

Thus what we have lost to ignorance and fanatical destructiveness are not just sculptures of immense size. We have lost an extraordinary expression of the ideal of human perfection.

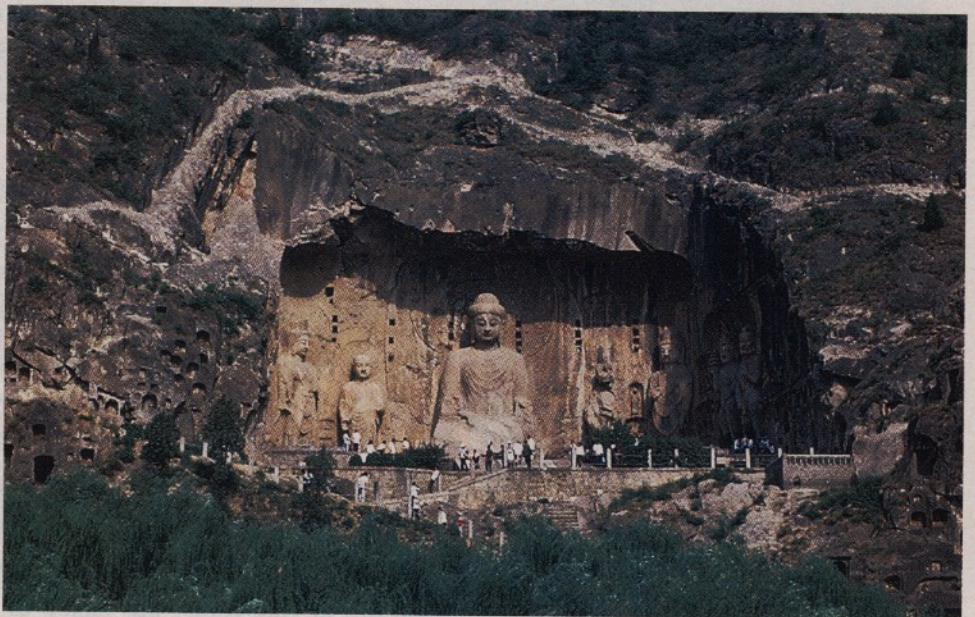
ENDNOTES APPEAR ON PAGE 58

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\*The 108th surah of the Koran reads: "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent and Merciful. / Say! O Disbelievers! / I worship not that which ye worship; / Nor worship ye that which I worship; / And I shall not worship that which ye worship. / Nor will ye worship that which I worship. / Unto you, your religion; and unto me, my religion. (Revealed at Mecca.)" This surah would appear to demand an attitude of tolerance. According to some press reports, the Taliban have indeed allowed Afghani citizens who are members of Jain, Hindu and other groups to continue to practice their religions.

\*\*See Robert Schick, "The Image Destroyers," *Archaeology Odyssey*, November/December 1999.

COURTESY OF JOHN C. HUNTINGTON







NATALIE R. MARSH

A Buddhophile, John C. Huntington ("The Buddhas of Bamiyan," p. 34) is a professor of Asian art at Ohio State University. In collaboration with his wife, Susan Huntington, he has published *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu and*

*Jain* (John Weatherhill, 1985). He is currently working on a catalogue of Buddhist meditational art for an exhibition to be held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2003.

## Bamiyan Buddhas

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

<sup>1</sup> Other enormous depictions also exist, especially in Tibetan cultural areas. There we find vast seated images of the Bodhisattva. Such images are still being constructed in Tibetan cultural areas by Chinese and Japanese Buddhist communities. One Buddha now under construction by the Indian Maitreya Project will be the largest image in the world (see the Web Site at [www.maitreya-project.org](http://www.maitreya-project.org)).

<sup>2</sup> This ceremony is a reenactment of the Vessantara Jataka, the last rebirth of the being who was to become Siddhartha, or the historical Buddha. Thus the king acted out and attempted to assure his own future Buddhahood.

<sup>3</sup> This passage was translated from the Chinese for this article by Ohio State University graduate student Wei Lin.