
• Video at Khan Academy
• Prior to their recent destruction, the 6th-7th century, rock-cut Buddha sculptures in the Bamiyan Valley of central Afghanistan were considered the largest in the world. (There were two and are known as the Bamiyan Buddhas)
• little is known about who commissioned the Bamiyan Buddhas or the sculptors who carved them
• an important location close to one of the most important branches of the Silk Route
• Bamiyan’s central location along the Silk Route, along with its fertile plains amid harsh terrain, made it an ideal location for merchants and missionaries to stop during their travels. Many of the missionaries and merchants in this area during the middle of the first millennium were practitioners of the Buddhist faith
  ○ Buddhism spread, in part, because it was not location specific. Believers did not need to worship at a particular temple or at a particular site as part of their practice. Worship could take place anywhere and at anytime. This freedom resulted in the emergence of Buddhist cave architecture throughout Asia
• nearly 1000 Buddhist caves carved along 1300 meters of cliff face
• Western Buddha was the largest: 175 feet in height, the second was 120 feet in height
• Thought to be the Buddha Vairochan (western) and the Buddha Shakyamuni
• Both images were carved into niches of the cliff side in high relief (nearly 3 dimensional but connected to the cliff)
• The area near the heads of both Buddha figures and the area around the larger Buddha’s feet were carved in the round, allowing worshippers to circumambulate. Circumambulation, which is the act of walking around an object such as a stupa (a reliquary mound) or an image of the Buddha, is a common practice in Buddhist worship.
• The two large Buddha images reflected the international environment of the Bamiyan Valley and were influenced by the art and cultures of India, Central Asia and even ancient Greek culture. For example, both Buddhas wore flowing robes and have been described as having wavy curls of hair. This hairstyle and the flowing drapery are elements rooted in early Gandharan Buddhist imagery that combined Hellenistic Greek traditions of representation with Indian subject matter
• the monumental rock-cut sculptures are described… as being adorned with metal, color, and gems—not stripped down as we often see them in museums and galleries
  ○ Scholars agree that both images were covered in pigments of various hues so that they appeared to be made of metal and other materials, but that they were not cast entirely of “copper” as Xuanzang suggests of the smaller Buddha image.
  ○ However, scholars such as Deborah Klimburg-Salter have argued that both of the monumental Buddhas’ faces were constructed of masks made of wood clad by a thin layer of brass, which were inserted onto ledges that appeared above the lower lips of both images.
  ○ Finbarr Barry Flood argues that the cuts to the faces were a later iconoclastic act
  ○ While there is debate over the material and treatment of the Buddha’s faces, we know that pigments were applied to the stucco that covered the stone surfaces of the sculptures. Stucco helped to even out the textured rock surface.

• Destruction
• Mullah Omar ordered Taliban forces to demolish the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001. The destruction was complete. Only outlines of the figures and a few details remain. The direction to destroy the Buddha images was motivated, in part, by the Taliban’s extreme iconoclastic campaign as well as their disdain for western interest and funding that had gone to
protecting the images while there was an intense and growing need for humanitarian aid in the region. The Taliban’s claim that destroying the Buddha sculptures was an Islamic act is belied by the fact that Bamiyan had become predominantly Muslim by the 10th century and that the sculptures had up until 2001 remained a largely intact.

- The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a huge loss for our understanding of human history. However, even in darkness light has a way of emerging. Since their destruction several new discoveries have been made near the sites of the Bamiyan Buddhas including the discovery of fragments of a 62-foot long reclining Buddha.