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# Bamiyan: Professor Tarzi's Survey and Excavation Archaeological Mission, 2003

**Zemaryalai Tarzi**

*The Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg*

The Bamiyan Valley is one of the sites most often referred to in studies regarding the history and archaeology of Central Asia. It figures especially in studies of the expansion of Buddhism, thanks to the region's strategic location between India and China. Bamiyan is best known for its two giant standing Buddha statues, carved into the rock of the great cliff dominating the north side of the peaceful valley. One statue was 55 meters high and the other 38 meters high. The destruction of these two colossal statues by the Taliban in 2001 was headline news in all the international media.

Ever since the signature of the Archaeological Convention between the French Republic and the Afghan kingdom in 1922, French archaeologists have expressed an interest in Bamiyan. In his first report on the archaeological remains of Afghanistan, Alfred Foucher, who had played a major role in drafting the convention, had underlined the importance of conducting archaeological studies in Bamiyan. Some time later a mission was dispatched under the direction of André Godard, accompanied by Joseph Hackin and Jean Carl. A second mission followed, this time under the direction of Joseph Hackin, accompanied by his wife and Jean Carl as his architect. The result of their efforts is in volumes 2 (1928) and 3 (1933) of the *Memoirs of the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan (DAFA Memoirs)*. These two missions studied the colossal statues, their niches' murals and the architecture and décor of the grottos including their reliefs and murals. Only one excavation was opened in the collapsed Grotto G, where, in addition to very old décor, objects such as Greek-Buddhist moldings and wood statues

of the Sui dynasty were also found in a kind of storage pit.

Following World War II several archaeological studies were undertaken in Bamiyan. The most important ones, which provide a clear date for the foundation of Bamiyan and its remains, are those by Zemaryalai Tarzi, Takayasu Huguishi and Deborah Klimburg-Salter. During the 1970s, eager to preserve the grottos of this famous valley in the Hindukush, Afghan scholars were assisted by Indian experts from the Archaeological Survey of India. The major projects were completed during the 1970s under the direction and supervision of Directors of Archaeology and Preservation of Historical Monuments, Chaibai Mostamandy and Zemaryalai Tarzi.

A great deal was accomplished in these studies. One focus of the work was the architecture of the region. Marc Le Berre, then DAFA architect, studied the Hindukush fortifications in the Bamiyan area and its surroundings. The result of several years of surveying, *Pre-Islamic Monuments of the Central Hindukush*, was published in 1987 as a posthumous work in volume XXIX of the *DAFA Memoirs*. In 1965 Paul Bernard, who was also DAFA director, studied the Shahr-e Zohak (the Red City), situated to the east of the Bamiyan Valley. There he found medical manuscripts in Sanskrit dating from the fifth century C.E. Other research focused on the study of ceramics: Jean-Claude Gardin dated ceramics

from the Muslim period found during surveys in the ruins of the Ghol-Ghola city; Bertille Lyonnet and Jean-Claude Gardin studied the ceramics collected by Marc Le Berre in the ruins of the Hindukush fortifications. Until the excavations of 2002-2003, however, no one had attempted to study the free-standing Buddhist monuments and related monumental architecture.

In preparation for this, Zemaryalai Tarzi had undertaken several survey missions during his travels to verify the



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*The head of a Buddhist divinity excavated at Bamiyan in 2003*



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*Overview of the 2003 excavation at Bamiyan*

testimony of the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, who had visited Bamiyan in 632. In a conference at the Guimet Museum in Paris Prof. Tarzi reported on his unfinished research and expressed confidence in the existence of the "Eastern" monastery where Xuanzang saw a reclining 1000-foot-long Buddha statue. The "Eastern" monastery is located to the southeast of the 38-meter standing Buddha statue, somewhere in the lower area of the eastern part of the great cliff and not far from the only Bamiyan stupa. Now a French citizen, Prof. Tarzi was named Director for the French Survey and Excavation Missions in Bamiyan, funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The work began in 2002 but was unfortunately brought to a halt by General Djawad.

In 2003 the team of three Afghans and three French went to Bamiyan to continue the work aborted in the previous year. One goal was better to understand the topography of the terrain, which had been substantially altered by cultivated, terraced fields. The excavation was difficult and dangerous because of the fragility of the layers of heterogeneous sediments, which were extremely damp from intensive irrigation of potato fields. Thus the surveys were done on a large scale, with the installation of a 5-meter grid. The depth of the excavation was generally about 3.5 meters but in some places as deep as 5.6 meters, such as in survey A9 where, however, even at that

depth the floor was not reached.

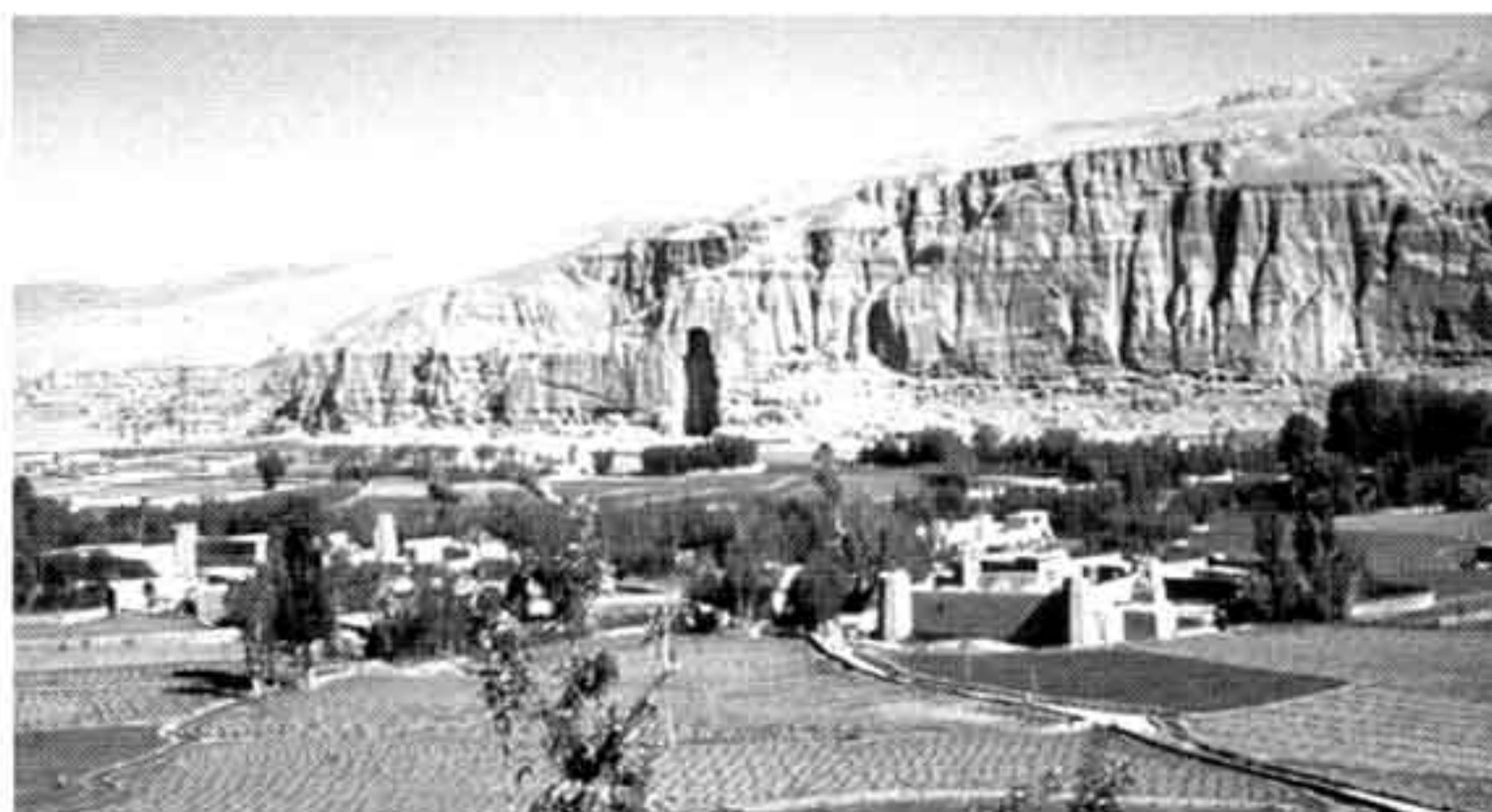
Three large sites were opened: Site A, composed of nine rectangles of 9 x 2.5 meters, along the north-south eastern border of the large (100 x 80 meter) square M; Site B, to the north, west and south the stupa and also part of the large square M; and Site E opened in the large square east of the 100-meter side. These three sites provided data on the geomorphology of the terrain, cycles of flooding, snow melt, the agricultural system, the initial establishment of the Buddhist site and its partial recovery during the Ghaznevid and Ghurid periods.

In the absence of coin discoveries or specific ceramic data, at present the initial establishment of the "Eastern" monastery site cannot be dated with

certitude, although it may be as early as the third century CE. Excavations in 2004 will examine the two-meter accumulation of soil which separates the layer of the initial period from that of the second. The stratigraphic similarity between Bamiyan, on one hand, and Tape Tope Kalan of Hadda and Lalma and Tape Sardar of Ghazni on the other, deserves careful study.

Bamiyan's second period is revealed most clearly around the site of the stupa. There one finds three rooms whose floors were tiled with cut limestone or schist. The final fire, probably initiated in the ninth century C.E. by the well-known Saffarid iconoclast, Yaqub b. Layth, left traces by transforming the limestone tiles into lime. Ceramic shards with relief from the Ghaznavid period (late tenth-eleventh centuries) were collected from around the base of the stupa. And glazed ceramics were also collected in an approximately two-meter thick layer, the oldest shards being from the Ghurid period (late twelfth century).

Finally during survey A9 Prof. Tarzi's team made the most remarkable discovery consisting in a substantial number of clay moldings which had fallen from the upper parts of a monument into a kind of well over an area 9 x 2 meters square and one meter thick. In this heap of fragments and clay statues seven heads or masks of the faces of Buddhist divinities were excavated with some difficulty due to the moist conditions and compression. This discovery confirms that the excavators have discovered the Bamiyan "Eastern" monastery visited by Xuanzang where the 1000-foot-long reclining Buddha statue may yet be found.



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*The Bamiyan Valley (view to the north)*

## About the Author

Born in 1939 in Kabul, Professor Zemaryalai Tarzi completed his studies under the supervision of Professor Daniel Schlumberger, in the process obtaining three PhDs.

From 1973 to 1979, he was Director General of Archaeology and Preservation of Historical Monuments of Afghanistan. He later directed the excavations in Bamiyan and Hadda on the sites of Tape Shotor and Tape Tope Kalan. Exiled to France in 1979, he assumed the post of Professor of Eastern Archaeology at the Marc Bloch University of Strasbourg, France. He is currently Director for the French Archaeological Missions for the Surveys and Excavations of Bamiyan. Prof. Tarzi is the author of some sixty articles and books, he is also President for the Association for the Protection of Afghan Archaeology, Inc. based in San Rafael California.

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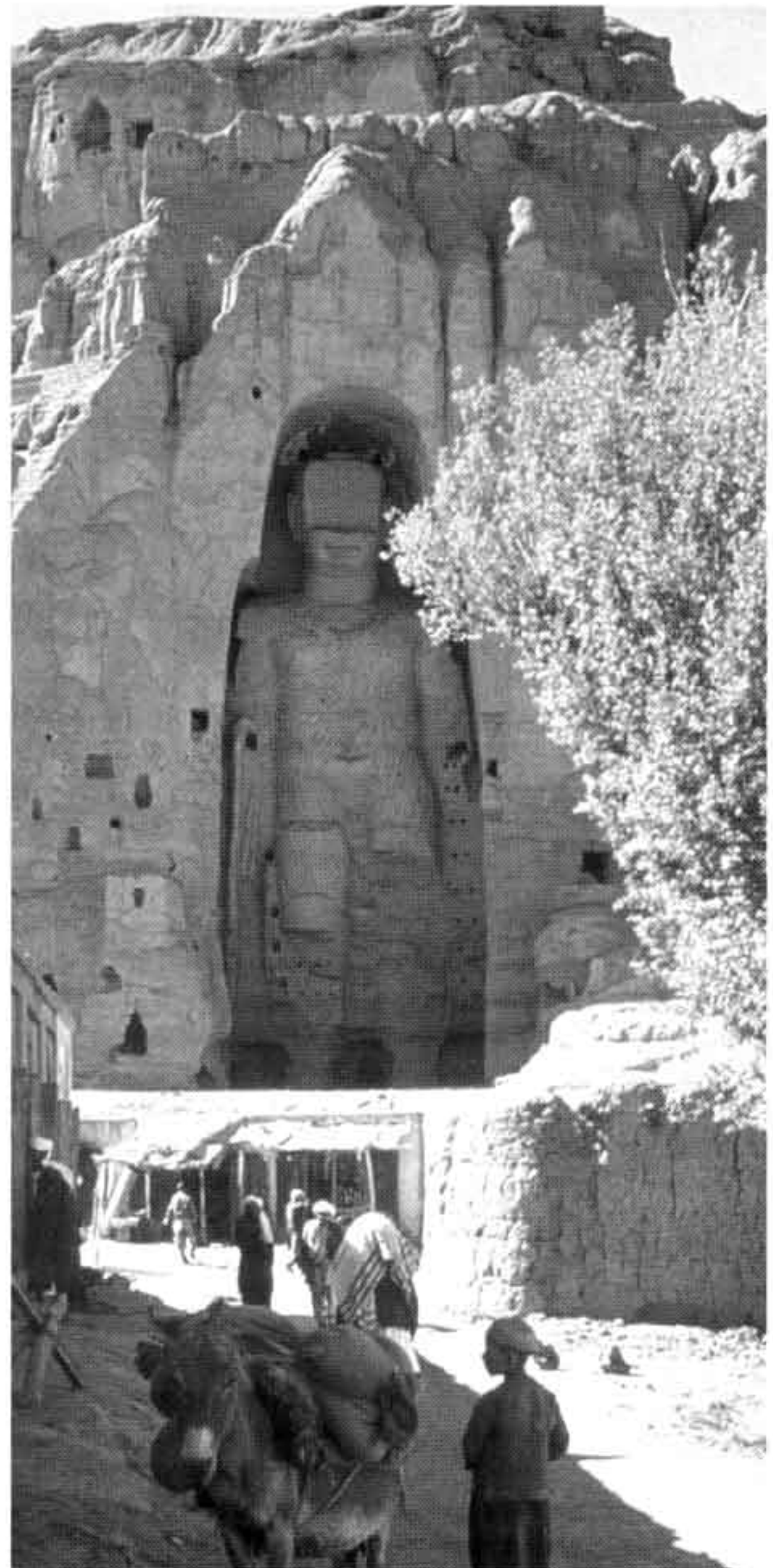
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The 55-meter high standing Buddha at Bamiyan

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