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Buddha at Bamiyan Through the Eyes of Persian Poets and Islamic Scholars

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Abstract: The colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan, carved into the sandstone cliffs of central Afghanistan in the 6th century CE, have long fascinated Persian poets and Islamic scholars alike. Persian literary traditions, particularly during the Ghaznavid and Timurid eras, reframed the image of the Buddha not as a religious rival, but as an aesthetic and symbolic figure. The term bot (idol), common in Persian poetry, often referred to the Buddha's serene beauty—used metaphorically in love poetry to depict divine or unattainable beauty. Poets such as 'Attār and Nizami employed these images as spiritual allegories, embedding them within Sufi metaphysics. Meanwhile, Islamic scholars—ranging from historians like Al-Biruni to theologians in later centuries—engaged with the Bamiyan Buddhas through philosophical and jurisprudential lenses. While acknowledging their artistic grandeur, they debated the permissibility of their existence within Islamic lands, ultimately reflecting broader tensions between art, theology, and cultural heritage. The destruction of the Buddhas in 2001 revived debates within Persianate societies on the preservation of pre-Islamic memory, artistic plurality, and spiritual inclusivity. The convergence of poetic admiration and scholarly reflection reveals that the Buddhas of Bamiyan were never mere monuments but dynamic symbols of a civilization negotiating faith, beauty, and history across centuries.

Keywords: Buddhas of Bamiyan; Persian poetry; Islamic scholars; Sufism; bot-symbolism; art and theology; cultural memory; iconoclasm; Central Asian heritage; Indo-Persian literature.

1. Introduction: Scope, Methodology, and Historiographical Context

The Buddhas of Bamiyan—once carved into cliffs in the Hindu Kush of central Afghanistan—have drawn admiration, political contestation, religious reflection, and cultural memory. Their destruction by the Taliban in March 2001 provoked global condemnation. Yet their significance extends well beyond the moment of demolition. This paper investigates how Persian poets and Islamic scholars have perceived, represented, and contested the Buddhas—not solely as relics of a religion now largely vanished from that region, but as active symbols in intellectual, theological, and poetic discourse.

By “Persian poets,” I mean writers whose main literary medium is Persian (broadly speaking: classical, medieval, modern; Persianate traditions in Central Asia, Afghanistan), who make explicit or implicit reference to Bamiyan or its Buddhas. By “Islamic scholars,” I mean jurists, theologians, historians, and intellectuals in both classical and modern Islamic traditions who have addressed images, religious monuments, or the status of non-Islamic monuments in Islamic law or moral/theological reflection.

Methodologically, I contrast poetic and scholarly modes: poets often employ metaphor, allegory, spiritual or romantic symbolism; scholars more often engage juridical, doctrinal, or historical registers. Key themes considered include memory, absence, reverence vs. condemnation, erasure, reuse.

Historiographically, the work draws on several disciplines:

Art history (especially Buddhist, Gandharan, Central Asian, Persianate art)

Heritage and memory studies

Comparative religion and literary studies

Because many primary sources are fragmentary, unpublished, untranslated, or difficult to access, I rely where necessary on travelogues, lexicons, secondary scholarship, modern translations, and wherever feasible the original sources. The goal is not to make definitive judgments but to map how Bamiyan’s Buddhas have functioned symbolically in Persian-Islamic intellectual culture. In conclusion, I reflect on how these historical and poetic perspectives contribute to contemporary debates on heritage, memory, and the relationship of Islam to non-Islamic monuments.

2. Historical and Artistic Foundations: Bamiyan in Context

2.1 Origins, Influences, and Sculptural Features

The Bamiyan Valley (at about 2,500-2,600 meters elevation) lay along Silk Road routes connecting Bactria, India, Persia, China, and other regions. Buddhism took root there by the Kushan period (approximately 1st–3rd centuries CE). Over subsequent centuries the area became a major center for Buddhist monasticism and visual arts.[1]

The site was dominated by two colossal standing Buddhas carved into sandstone cliffs. The larger “Western” Buddha stood roughly 55 meters high; the smaller “Eastern” Buddha about 38 meters.[2] These statues were hewn directly from the cliff face, then finished with stucco/plaster coatings, painted surfaces, and in some accounts metal sheathing (for example copper) on parts. Their stylings (drapery folds, hair coils, posture) show influences from Gupta Indian art, Hellenistic and Sassanian Persian traditions. Behind and around them was an extensive network of monastic and chapel caves, decorated with murals depicting Jataka tales, devotional and narrative iconography.[3]

2.2 The Larger Monastic Complex

Beyond the two giants, Bamiyan encompassed dozens of caves and sanctuaries scattered in nearby valleys (e.g. Kakrak). Many of these dating roughly from 5th through 9th centuries CE are ornamented with murals and sculptures. The visual program was not merely decorative: pilgrims or monastics moving through these spaces would traverse symbolic cycles—seated Buddhas, bodhisattvas, narrative panels—and meditate in niches. The style is cosmopolitan, synthesizing Gandharan, Central Asian, Indian narrative, and Persian decorative elements.[4]

2.3 Islamization, Transition, and Ruin

From around the 10th century onwards, Muslim dynasties—Ghaznavids, Ghurids, others—came to exert control over Bamiyan. Buddhist practice was already declining. While the monuments decayed physically, they persisted in memory. Muslim travelers, geographers, and historians reported remains or ruins; some expressed wonder, others theological concern or ambivalence.[5]

Damage accumulated over centuries: some accounts attribute damage during Mughal rule (allegedly under Aurangzeb), natural weathering, human vandalism. Ultimately, in March 2001, the Taliban destroyed the two major sculptures. What remained were empty niches and surviving cave complexes—painted walls in varying condition. These voids have been interpreted symbolically as absence, loss, memory.[6]

3. Persian Poetic Perspectives

3.1 Early Mentions in Travel Literature and Lexicons

In early Persianate geographic works, travelogues, and lexica, Bamiyan and its ruins are occasionally noted. Writers describe the gigantic images, the decay, the desolation. These references often evoke awe, antiquity, melancholy. Explicit poetic allusion is rarer in earlier centuries, but imagery of ruined landscape (empty niches, idols fallen) is present.

3.2 Allegory, Romance, Symbolic Use

In the development of Persian poetry (classical through early modern), some poets employ Bamiyan or its Buddhas more explicitly as metaphor. The statues may be gendered (larger male, smaller female), representing lovers or spiritual allies; the ruins as symbols of loss, longing, inner emptiness. The figure of the Buddha is seldom treated in terms of Buddhist doctrine; rather it becomes aesthetic, symbolic, transformed to suit spiritual or romantic vocabularies.

3.3 Modern Poetic Usage: Trauma, Elegy, Heritage

From the 19th-20th centuries into the present, Persian, Dari, and Afghan poetry increasingly evoke Bamiyan as emblematic of cultural loss, religious intolerance, political trauma, fragility of heritage. The empty niches are haunting images; spiritual poets contrast visible idols with invisible Truth; national or heritage-oriented poets lament what ideology, war, neglect have erased. Often the Buddhist identity of the original is less emphasized than the emotional, temporal, aesthetic echo of what once was.

4. Islamic Scholarly Views

4.1 Classical Juridical, Theological, Historical Frameworks

While few classical juristic texts explicitly discuss the Buddhas of Bamiyan, there is a long tradition in Islamic law (fiqh) and theology regarding images (ṣūrah, taswīr), idolatry, and treatment of non-Muslim monuments. Key concerns include whether an image is produced for worship, whether depictions are permissible representation or prohibited veneration, whether non-Muslim pre-Islamic monuments should be preserved or destroyed.

4.2 Local Scholars, Jurists, and the Bamiyan Case

Explicit fatwas or juridical treatises addressing Bamiyan are rare, especially in earlier periods. Under Taliban rule, however, legal-religious arguments were used to justify the statues' destruction, claiming that they were idols and hence must be removed according to Islamic law. At the same time, there have been voices—among Afghan local scholars, Muslim intellectuals more broadly—arguing against such destruction, citing heritage, history, lack of worship, and distinctions in law that do not universally mandate elimination of pre-Islamic art.

4.3 Contemporary Discourse: Heritage, Memory, and Debate

After 2001, the debates have intensified. Islamic scholars, heritage practitioners, intellectuals invoke Islamic precedents for preservation, argue for the value of cultural pluralism. Many assert that religious law contains principles (such as maslaha—public interest) that support caring for historical monuments even if their original religious function has ceased. Critiques are made of extreme interpretations of idolatry. The Bamiyan case thus enters global heritage discourses, UNESCO debates, and national identity narratives in Afghanistan, and appears in poetry, art, and media.

5. Comparative Themes: Overlaps and Divergences

5.1 Poetic Versus Scholarly Modes

Poetry permits ambiguity, emotional paradox, and inner longing; scholars typically aim at clarity, classification, permission or prohibition. Poetic vision might see the empty niche as beauty; scholarly discourse decries loss, illegality, erasure. Yet, overlaps occur: poets draw on religious imagery; scholars sometimes use metaphors of ruin and absence.

5.2 Idolatry, Representation, Sanctity

One major point of tension is whether images are objects of worship, or simply artifacts. Can a statue's public presence imply veneration? Does original religious identity demand destruction? Islamic jurisprudence often hinges on the distinction between ʿibāda (worship) and representation or educational/decorative uses. Poets often blur this distinction, using the "idol" metaphorically as love, memory, spiritual obstacle.

5.3 Memory, Loss, and Heritage Ethics

The destruction of the Buddhas left physical voids, but also symbolic ones. Absence becomes its own kind of presence. Ruins and empty niches serve as focal points for remembrance, mourning, identity. Heritage ethics ask: should restoration be attempted? Should ruin be preserved as memorial? How does one negotiate religious sensitivities, local beliefs, colonial legacies, international norms?

6. Comparative Case Studies & Broader Islamic Contexts

To contextualize Bamiyan, several analogous cases are instructive:

Hatra (in modern Iraq): pre-Islamic site where sculptures survived, and where Islamic and post-Islamic memory interacts with the remains.

Najran (Arabia): a region of religious diversity pre-Islam, later Islamic polemics about idols; some destruction, some preservation.

Cappadocia / rock-cut Christian churches in Anatolia under Ottoman rule: issues of iconography, preservation, destruction, reuse.

These comparanda show that Islamic lands historically have had to grapple with monuments not created by Islam, often with choices between destruction, reuse, reinterpretation, or preservation.

7. Reconstructive Scholarship & Additional Historical Detail

Recent heritage and archaeological scholarship has attempted to reconstruct how the Buddhas looked, the layout of caves, decoration, and the surrounds:

The larger statue is often reported to be about 53-55 meters, the smaller about 35-38 meters.[7]

The coating on the statues included stucco/plaster overlays, mud straw mixtures; painted surfaces; some decorative metal elements.[8]

The niches faced a "honeycomb" of caves and galleries: estimates of several hundred (some accounts ~750) caves with murals and sculptures.[9]

Archaeological surveys, photogrammetry, digital reconstructions have been used to reconstruct colour, texture, architectural layout, walking paths, cave entrances. These reconstructions also shape how contemporary poets, heritage activists think of Bamiyan—not merely as voids, but once fully-adorned monuments embedded in ritual and daily life.[10]

8. Islamic Legal / Juristic Views of Images & Idolatry

Even though explicit medieval fatwas about Bamiyan are scarce, there is relevant legal theory:

Classical juristic discussions of taswīr (depiction) and ṣūrah (image) include distinctions: images meant for worship (idolatry) are disallowed; others (illustrative, decorative, educational) may be allowed under certain conditions.

The recent article "Picture in the Light of Shariah" examines Qurʾanic, Hadith, classical, and contemporary scholar views on when images are permitted, forbidden, considering purpose, context, subject matter.[11]

The distinction between veneration (ʿibāda) and mere representation is central: whether the image was being worshipped, or whether it might lead to shirk; whether law requires removal depends in part on these factors.

Modern arguments for heritage preservation often invoke maslaha (public interest), historical continuity, aesthetic/historical value even when religious function no longer exists.

9. Gaps, Potential, and Known Poetic Sources

Challenges include:

Explicit references to "Bamiyan" in poetry (Persian, Dari, Pashto) are relatively rare in texts readily accessible. Many allusions are indirect (ruined cliffs, empty niches, lost idols).

Local oral tradition and folklore preserve stories—about lovers, the gendering of statues, etc. These are seldom well documented in written sources.

Modern poets frequently evoke Bamiyan in elegiac, heritage-oriented poetry, metaphor rather than strict historical narrative.

A fuller study would require manuscript work, archival searches, oral history, work among diaspora poets, possibly fieldwork in Afghanistan.

10. Conclusion: Legacy, Interpretation, and Future Lines of Inquiry

Despite physical destruction, the Buddhas of Bamiyan remain "present" in poetry, scholarly debate, memory, identity. Persian poets have reimagined them; Islamic scholars have debated their legal status; heritage professionals, artists, activists invoke them in discourses of commemoration and conservation.

There are tensions: between admiration and classification, between aesthetics and doctrine, between loss and preservation. Yet there is also evidence of convergence: both poets and scholars find meaning in absence, memory, and loss, and in the need for preservation—physical, symbolic, and cultural.

Possible future research directions:

1. Discovering, translating, and analysing poetic sources (especially in Dari, Pashto, Persian manuscripts) that directly refer to Bamiyan
2. Documenting oral traditions and legends in local communities.
3. Collecting juridical texts or fatwas (classical or modern) that explicitly mention Bamiyan.
4. Comparative study with other Buddhist (or other non-Islamic) monuments in Islamic lands.
5. Investigating how contemporary Muslim heritage activists, poets, educators are using Bamiyan in art, pedagogy, media, and policy.

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5. Wikipedia, “Buddhas of Bamiyan,” accessed September 2025; Jagran Josh “Buddhas of Bamiyan … Significance and Their Destruction.”
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