

DELIBERATELY BEHEADED and violently broken in half, this statue reveals the tumultuous history of Buddhism in China, from its widespread acceptance to its near disappearance. The figure was most likely damaged between A.D. 574 and 578, during the second of three

severe waves of religious persecution that swept through the country between the fifth and ninth centuries. Even though Buddhism had thrived in China for hundreds of years, it was often considered a “foreign” religion and emperors feared its popularity could undermine their authority. In A.D. 574 Emperor Wudi ordered tens of thousands of Buddhist temples, shrines, and monasteries destroyed; millions of monks and nuns secularized; and countless statues such as this one mutilated and thrown out.

This piece was unearthed at the site of a former Buddhist complex in Xi’an, one of China’s ancient capitals. As Buddhism spread from India to Central Asia around the first century A.D., artists along the way fused local and foreign styles to represent the religion’s deities. For instance, this statue’s jewelry shows influences from the oasis site of Kucha, an important Buddhist center on the Silk Road. The figure’s *dhoti*, or traditional Indian men’s draped garment, also displays a mixture of styles. Instead of clinging to the body and falling fluidly to the ground, as is common in South Asian Buddhist art, the garment is depicted with rigid pleats, reflecting the regional aesthetic.

During the persecutions, Buddhist sculptures were decapitated and the gold-leaf decoration on their skin, jewelry, and clothing was scraped off and reused. Traces of gold are still visible on the hem of this statue’s *dhoti*; it is possible the piece was secretly buried to prevent further damage.

—ETI BONN-MULLER is managing editor at ARCHAEOLOGY. See *Buddha’s “Golden Period”* at www.archaeology.org for an online gallery of related artwork.

WHAT IS IT?

Statue of a bodhisattva (Buddhist saint), possibly Guanyin, popular deity of compassion

PURPOSE

Likely commissioned by a private individual for a local temple

DATE

Northern Zhou Dynasty (A.D. 557–581)

DISCOVERED

Part of a hoard of seven Buddhist sculptures found in Xi’an in 2003

MATERIAL

Limestone with pigment and gilding

DIMENSIONS

25½ inches high

CURRENT LOCATION

The Beilin Museum, Xi’an, China

