The Buddha of Swat, carved on a cliff in the seventh century, was dynamited by the Pakistani Taliban in 2007. Now it has been restored, a powerful symbol of tolerance in the traumatised Pakistani valley.

The holy figure, depicted in a lotus position at the base of a granite cliff in northern Pakistan, was severely damaged by Islamist insurgents in an echo of the Afghan Taliban’s complete destruction of its more imposing counterparts at Bamiyan in 2001.

For some, it was a wanton act of vandalism that struck at the heart of the area’s unique history and identity. It felt “like they killed my father”, says Parvesh Shaheen, a 79-year-old expert on Buddhism in Swat. “They attack... my culture, my history.”

The Buddha sits in Jahanabad, the epicentre of Swat’s Buddhist heritage, a beautiful valley in the foothills of the Himalayas.

There the Italian government has been helping to preserve hundreds of archaeological sites, working with local authorities who hope to turn it into a place of pilgrimage once more.

A decade ago, the militants climbed the 20-foot effigy to lay the explosives, but only a part of them were triggered, demolishing the top of the Buddha’s face.

For Mr. Shaheen, the statue is “a symbol of peace, symbol of love, symbol of brotherhood”. “We don’t hate anybody, any religion — what is this nonsense to hate somebody?” he says.

Luca Maria Olivieri, an Italian archaeologist who oversaw the restoration of the Buddha, says the rehabilitation has not been easy. Carried out in phases, it began in 2012 with the application of a coating to protect the damaged part of the sculpture.

The reconstruction of the face itself was first prepared virtually in the laboratory, in 3D, using laser surveys and old photos.

The last phase, the actual restoration, ended in 2016. Mr. Olivieri says the reconstruction is not identical, but that is deliberate, as “the idea of damage should remain visible”.

Luca Maria Olivieri pointing towards statues in Mingora.

Archaeologist Luca Maria Olivieri pointing towards statues in Mingora.