

SYRIA

The Impact of the Civil War on the Cultural Heritage

Faced with the escalating violence threatening Syria's cultural heritage, Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, expressed "grave concern about possible damages to precious sites" (see UNESCO Media Services March 30, 2012 and July 26, 2012). A first comprehensive compilation of the disastrous damages was provided by the study *Damage to the Soul: Syria's Cultural Heritage in Conflict* of May 2012 by Emma Cunliffe, prepared for the Global Heritage Fund (http://ghn.globalheritagefund.com/uploads/documents/document_2107.pdf). It used all available sources and gave the following introduction to the situation of the historic sites in Syria which continues to be desperate:

Syria's cultural heritage is rich and complex, dating back millennia. Home to a succession of empires, Syria claims some of the earliest cities in human history, if not the earliest. Numerous Bronze Age civilisations left their successive marks, including the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Hittites, to name but a few. They in turn were replaced by the Greeks, the Sassanians, the Persians, the Romans and the Arabs, many of whom chose Syrian cities as their capitals. The European Crusaders came and

left some of the most impressive castles known, and the Ottoman Empire also made its mark. All these cultures co-existed and conflicted, forming something new and special found no-where else in the world.

Today Syria has six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the most recent of which was inscribed only last summer: Damascus, Aleppo, Palmyra, Bosra, the Crac des Chevaliers and Saladin's Castle, and the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria. These sites alone represent at least two thousand years of history. Many more are on the Tentative inscription list for future consideration, and the list of national heritage sites is also impressive. The main authority responsible for the maintenance and preservation of archaeological heritage in Syria is the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (Damascus) and their regional departments. Throughout its existence, the DGAM has played a major role in safeguarding this heritage, but on 15 March 2011, the "Arab Spring" sweeping the Middle East reached Syria, plunging her into on-going civil unrest which affected the land, the people, and the history of the country. As a result, the task of the DGAM has become increasingly difficult as the conflict has widened, and access to many sites has become challenging, if not impossible. (...)

The reported damage to the sites takes multiple forms: as well as direct shelling damage from the conflict, some sites are sim-

The ancient site of Palmyra, concerns about the World Heritage site (photo: Getty Images)



ply suffering collateral damage. Other sites are hit by gunfire, or are damaged by the movements of tanks or bulldozers entrenching positions. In addition to the direct damage, the breakdown in security has led to increased looting, of which numerous reports are beginning to circulate. Some looting is opportunistic: the conflict has left sites unguarded, providing easy access, but other reports suggest some thefts are planned. Further side effects of the conflict include the increase of domestic threats, such as illegal developments onto archaeological sites.

The Blue Shield also expressed its deep concern in a first statement of May 17, 2011 “regarding the safeguarding of the country’s invaluable cultural and historical heritage” and wrote in a second statement of April 17, 2012:

As the conflict in Syria continues to deteriorate, and following its first statement from May 2011, the Blue Shield reiterates its grave concern regarding the safeguarding of the country’s invaluable cultural and historical heritage, and bemoans the great suffering and loss of life that the situation has engendered.

The recent events are great cause for apprehension for the world heritage community. Both the tragedies suffered by the people of the Syrian Arab Republic and the dangers faced by heritage sites and institutions give reason for distress.

Syria’s cultural heritage is endangered on several levels. Information on the besieging of the ruins of Palmyra, recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1980, alongside the numerous worrisome reports concerning other important sites and the alleged looting of museums in Daraa, Hama, Homs and Idlib, have rendered obvious the need for a greater commitment to heritage protection by all those involved in this conflict. This also highlights the necessity for more concrete and detailed information regarding the extent of the damages already incurred and the risks faced by the country’s archaeological, architectural and urban heritage.

The Blue Shield’s concern for Palmyra also extends to other Syrian World Heritage Sites, monuments, ancient cities, archaeological sites, museums and other important repositories of movable cultural heritage. These sites and institutions conserve and provide insight into the country’s historical and cultural identity, introducing national and international visitors to Syria’s cultural wealth. The destruction and disappearance of artefacts greatly impoverish humankind’s collective memory.

The escalation of the conflict situation gives reason for concern and anguish to all those involved in the protection of heritage, rendering evident the precariousness of the situation for collections of cultural institutions and dangers to the integrity of sites and monuments. The protection of cultural heritage is required by international law, in addition to being a shared responsibility. The Blue Shield urges all those concerned to act responsibly, safeguarding the testimony of Syria’s unique history for the enrichment of future generations of its people and of all of humanity.

The Syrian Arab Republic was a signatory of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its First Protocol since 1958, and since 1975, of the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Signatories of these conventions acknowledge and commit to the necessity of protecting and preserving their cultural heritage in the case of armed conflict. The Blue Shield calls on all parties associated with the situation in Syria to fulfil their responsibilities in protect-

ing the country’s precious cultural heritage sites and institutions.

The Blue Shield also calls on the Syrian Arab Republic to abide by its Antiquities Law of 1963, which states that “The establishment of [...] military installations shall be prohibited within half a kilometre of registered non-moveable archaeological and historical property”.

ICOMOS Concerned About Aleppo’s Cultural Heritage

In recent days, and following fighting in Damascus and Aleppo, the conflict in Syria has reached an unprecedented level. On 27 July 2012, the UN Human Rights Chief expressed particular concern about the likelihood of an “imminent major confrontation in Syria’s second largest city Aleppo.”

The Ancient City of Aleppo has been inscribed on the World Heritage List of UNESCO since 1986, as it “reflects the rich and diverse cultures of its successive occupants” and is “an outstanding example of an Ayyubid 12th century city with its military fortifications constructed as its focal point following the success of Salah El-Din against the Crusaders.”

ICOMOS is extremely concerned about the risks of any heavy conflict that may threaten the World Heritage site of Aleppo and the other precious cultural heritage of the city.

By recalling the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, ICOMOS calls upon all parties involved in this conflict to respect and protect the cultural heritage of Aleppo. UNESCO has also appealed for the protection of the World Heritage City of Aleppo.

ICOMOS is also concerned about other World Heritage sites, and cultural heritage properties with national and local values in other parts of Syria, including monuments, ancient cities and villages, archaeological sites, scientific excavations, museums and other important repositories of movable cultural heritage. Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the Blue Shield has also issued two statements for the protection of the country’s invaluable cultural heritage.

Paris, 27 July 2012

See also the following statement by ICOMOS Greece of May 14, 2013 on the critical condition of one of the world’s most precious mosques:

Aleppo’s Umayyad Mosque Extensively Damaged

The Great Mosque of Aleppo (Umayyad Mosque) is the largest and one of the oldest mosques in the walled old city of Aleppo, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Syria. It was built in the 8th century; however the current building has been the result of reconstructions dating to the 11th to 14th centuries. The mosque is purportedly home to the remains of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. The minaret of the mosque, of 45 m height, formed until recently the oldest surviving part of the monument dating back to 1090.

The mosque itself has been extensively damaged by fire and armed conflicts during the Syrian civil war. The fighting between rebels and the Syrian regime left the mosque burned, scarred by bullets, trashed and stained with soot. Antique furnishings and

intricately sculpted colonnades have been charred, valuable Islamic relics ransacked and ancient artifacts – including a box purported to contain a strand of the Prophet Muhammad’s hair – looted.

Although the minaret managed to stand tall above the mosque until recently, in April 2013 it was finally brought down by heavy fighting and shelling. Bashar al-Assad’s regime and anti-government activists traded blame for the attack. The damage in Aleppo is just part of the wider devastation caused by the country’s conflict, which began more than two years ago.

The picture of the mosque today comprises of a pile of rubble and twisted metal scattered in the tile courtyard. The fallen structural material of the minaret remains scattered inside the courtyard and exposed to further looting and shelling attempts. However it is of crucial importance that the authentic fallen material remains in situ and is not removed away from the mosque. The separation of the building material from the monument will undoubtedly deprive the possibility of a future potential restoration and it will therefore distinguish one of the key elements of cultural heritage’s protection values, authenticity.

Five of Syria’s six World Heritage sites have been damaged in the fighting, according to UNESCO, the UN’s cultural agency. Looters have broken into one of the world’s best-preserved Crusader castles, Crac des Chevaliers, and ruins in the ancient city of Palmyra have been damaged. Such incidents, whether targeted or not highlight the difficulty and complexity of protecting cultural heritage in times of war. Monuments and sites are almost impossible to be properly protected under the threat of the raging civil war, when rebel and regime forces set up bases in almost every significant site, including the historic ones. And since culture can only really be protected in peace time, it is important to preserve credible and truthful information of the monument (such as its original building material) in order to be able to safeguard its genuine cultural and historical value.

The Association to Protect Syrian Archaeology has also posted a plea to preserve the debris of the minaret.

It says: *Last night the group Protect Syrian Archaeology and one of the architects responsible for the restoration of the mosque in 2006 launched an appeal on Facebook requesting for the preservation of the debris of the fallen minaret and not dispensing with its remains so that they might be hopefully used in the future for reconstructing the minaret. Any help that archaeologists can offer us in this respect and all other matters pertaining to administering first aid to wrecked sites in order to save what can be saved would be most appreciated.*

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President ICOMOS Hellenic
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ICOMOS Statement on Crac des Chevaliers and the Continuing Destruction of the Cultural Heritage of Syria, July 19, 2013

ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, expresses its deep concern for the on-going destruction of cultural heritage in Syria, and stands with Syrian cultural heritage professionals for the protection of heritage places in the country.



Aleppo, Umayyad Mosque (photo: Reuters)

Aleppo, Umayyad Mosque after its partial destruction (photo: Reuters)



The continuing conflict situation in Syria, which began in 2011, has led to an extensive humanitarian crisis and the destruction of many invaluable cultural heritage places, including World Heritage properties.

New media reports and video footage of the bombardment and damages to Crac des Chevaliers, one of Syria’s World Heritage properties, are of particular concern to ICOMOS.

Once again, by recalling the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, to which the Syrian Arab Republic is a State Party, ICOMOS urges all parties to this armed conflict to respect and protect the cultural heritage. ICOMOS calls upon all parties to refrain from any use of cultural properties and their immediate surroundings for purposes which are likely to expose cultural heritage sites to destruction or damage. The parties to this conflict should refrain from any act of hostility, directed against such places. ICOMOS insists on the demilitarization of all cultural heritage of Syria, including monuments and sites with outstanding universal value. ICOMOS further supports the decision of the World Heritage Committee suggesting that the Syrian Arab Republic consider ratifying the Second Protocol (1999) of the 1954 Hague Convention.

Crac des Chevaliers and Qal’at Salah El-Din represent the most significant examples illustrating the exchange of influences and documenting the evolution of fortified architecture in the Near East during the time of the Crusades (11th–13th centuries). Crac des Chevaliers, with further construction by the Mamluks in the 13th century, is among the best-preserved examples of the Crusader castles.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time during the current civil strife that the Syrian people and the international community are witnesses to the damages inflicted on the World Heritage properties of Syria. Many historic parts of the Ancient City of Aleppo, including its ancient markets (*suks*) and the Great Mosque, have suffered extensive damages, already since 2012.

The reports of illegal excavations in different archaeological sites, and reports of apparently planned and intentional destructions of symbolic monuments have also caused serious concerns.

Because of the continuing threats, all six Syrian World Heritage properties were inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, at the 37th session of the World Heritage Committee, held in Cambodia last June:

- Ancient City of Aleppo;
- Ancient City of Bosra;
- Ancient City of Damascus;
- Ancient Villages of Northern Syria;
- Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din;
- Site of Palmyra.

The state of conservation of Syria's cultural heritage during the on-going armed conflict is among the most urgent concerns for ICOMOS. It continues its efforts to support Syrian professionals and experts by delivering knowledge, providing technical consultancy, raising awareness, and building capacity.

ICOMOS, an Advisory Body of the World Heritage Committee and a founder organization of the Blue Shield, expresses its solidarity with Syrian cultural heritage organizations and professionals, and supports their appeal for the protection and recovery of cultural properties during and after the end of the current turmoil.

It places itself at the disposal of UNESCO for all actions undertaken to ensure the preservation of Syria's six World Heritage properties currently listed as in danger.

Protection of Syria's Cultural Heritage in Times of Armed Conflict: ICOMOS-ICCROM E-Learning Course for Syrian Cultural Heritage Professionals

Press Release of January 9, 2013

ICOMOS, in cooperation with ICCROM and the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria (DGAM), and in coordination with UNESCO, held an e-learning course for Syrian cultural heritage professionals from 7 to 8 January 2013 at the Damascus National Museum. The course was led by the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Risk Preparedness, ICORP.

Since its beginnings in 2011, armed conflict in Syria has reached an unprecedented and dramatic level with huge human loss, hundreds of thousands of refugees, and extensive damage to infrastructure and properties. Cultural heritage in all its forms is continuously suffering from the direct and indirect effects of this on-going conflict. Syria's World Heritage sites together with numerous cultural properties of national and local significance are at serious risk.

The degree and extent of damage necessitates international help, assistance and mobilization for the protection and recovery

of Syria's movable and immovable cultural heritage. ICOMOS is permanently and neutrally monitoring the situation of cultural heritage sites and is in contact with experts from the region. For security reasons, ICOMOS and other international cultural heritage organizations have been unable to undertake assessment and support missions to Syria.

The e-learning course was designed to overcome this obstacle and to improve the ability of Syrian cultural heritage experts to manage and respond to the multi-layered effects of armed conflict on their sites and museum collections, providing essential information about disaster risk management and emergency response, evacuation of collections, assessment of damage, network building, and capacity building for the recovery phase. Timely training towards action and emergency response will increase efficiency now and improve resources later, in the post-conflict phase until peace and stability return to the country.

ICCROM's constructive cooperation and its resource persons played a pivotal role in this initiative. The training materials, which have been developed through ICCROM's international courses on First Aid to Cultural Heritage in Times of Armed Conflict, provided knowledge and built capacity for emergency response.

About 75 DGAM managers, directors, curators, architects and staff, including Syrian cultural heritage researchers and experts of conservation, gathered with Syrian members of ICOMOS, university professors, and a few students from the University of Damascus' Faculty of Architecture at the National Museum of Damascus to follow the lectures and exchange with nine trainers from ICOMOS, ICCROM and the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. The trainers made their presentations from their countries of residence: Canada, Spain, UK, France, Italy, Turkey and India.

The Syrian audience welcomed this initiative as a show of professional solidarity from the international heritage community in what is a particularly dramatic situation.

This initiative in a time of conflict may become a benchmark for a "paradigm shift in how we can build capacity and promote awareness for heritage conservation using new information technology", observes Rohit Jigyasu, President of ICORP, who acted as one of the trainers.

Organised entirely through voluntary contributions by its trainers and coordinators, ICOMOS project management and financial support together with facilities and translation provided by the DGAM, the e-learning course is seen as a first phase in a long-term effort. Further seminars on additional subjects or in other Syrian cities are envisaged, in cooperation with ICCROM and partner organisations. Knowledge, experience and advice may be offered in the recovery phase. Information material gathered will feed into a portal for technical information exchange. Some further activities may however depend on additional international support.

In organising the course, ICOMOS and ICCROM call on all parties associated with the situation in Syria to fulfil their obligations under international law in protecting Syria's precious cultural heritage sites and institutions. A call to abide by the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and to respect museums, monuments and historic cities was repeated at the beginning of the course.

Finally, see also the following article from *The New York Times International Weekly* of March 14, 2014:

Syria's Past Is Being Lost in the War

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

PARIS — For the French archaeologists Pierre Leriche, 73, and Jean-Claude Margueron, nearly 80, who both spent decades uncovering Syria's rich past, it is almost too painful to look at its grim present.

The civil war there has long made work impossible in the ancient cities, houses and temples where they once toiled peacefully to understand long-ago civilizations. Now in Paris, an increasing number of reports are arriving that document the extent of the damage to one of the world's most important historical records, including physical destruction from the fighting, rampant pillaging of archaeological sites, and looting from museums and other collections.

The portrait emerging from scholars, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and experts in Syria is of a country in the process of obliterating its cultural history.

"The situation now is absolutely terrible there," said Mr. Leriche, who worked

Destruction and theft take a painful toll on ancient history.

for more than 25 years at a site on the Euphrates River. "They come with jackhammers. That means everything is destroyed."

Mr. Margueron worked at another Euphrates site, Mari, which dates back 3,000 years. "Mari was one of the first urban civilizations where man lived," he said in his modest apartment filled with traditional Arab furniture and carpets. "If you pillage Mari, you destroy Mari. These are irremediable losses."

Mr. Leriche and Mr. Margueron are just two of many archaeologists from Belgium, Britain, France, Italy and elsewhere who spent years uncovering Syria's ancient history — the world of the

ancient Greeks, the Romans and the early years of Islam in the Levant. Unesco is now trying to catalog and recover stolen artifacts, working with scholars, collectors and law enforcement authorities in bordering countries.

When the fighting began in 2011 there were at least 78 archaeological teams working in the country, said Samir Abdulac, a Syrian who lives in France and is secretary general of the International Council on Monuments and Sites. He is in touch with archaeologists from around the world who worked in Syria and believes they have an invaluable, if necessarily incomplete, reservoir of information about the destruction of the country's archaeological and artistic heritage.

Three types of destruction are occurring, said Mr. Abdulac and Nada Hassan, the chief of the Arab states unit for Unesco: destruction of archaeological sites by fighting; looting and pillaging at sites; and theft from museums — with the latter the least serious so far, although there are reports of thefts at the Hama museum and several others, often carried out by highly professional thieves who have come to seize specific pieces.

Particularly vulnerable to the fighting have been citadels and castles, which were often built on high points so that soldiers in ancient times could spot the approach of their enemy. Rebels periodically claim sites, such as the famous crusaders' castle, the Krak des Chevaliers. Then the Syrian Army fights to get it back, almost inevitably damaging the ancient walls, roofs and carvings.

When the foreign archaeologists left, the local guards, who often were no longer being paid, left their posts. Local residents then broke into on-site museums and stole the windows and doors, the wood used in the buildings' construction, the electrical wire and even pipes.

The archaeologists said they did not blame the residents. "These are poor people in a crisis; one is worried for them," said Agnès Vokaer, the field director of the Belgian archaeological team at Apamea. "There are no telephones, no electricity, there is no fuel for running agricultural machinery, there is no more food."

Foreign fighters soon arrived, and with them criminals who took a more ruthless approach. By late 2011 or early 2012, they were working with mechanized digging equipment. They set up armed guards while the illegal excavators went to work.

"Objects are not just stones," said Irina Bokova, the head of Unesco. "This is about the identity of the Syrian people, and destroying the identity of people is a big blow to their communities."



ZEIN AL-RIFAI/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Syria's civil war has led to the destruction of archaeological sites and looting of museums. Pierre Leriche, an archaeologist, and a student examine maps of Syrian sites. Above, a rebel fighter in an alley in Aleppo.



LAUREN FLEISHMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Daphné Anglès contributed reporting.