

IRAN

Iran is an ancient land with nearly 10,000 years of history documented in the archaeological remains that are scattered across the vast, high plateau of the country. Thousands of archaeological sites date back to prehistoric and historic eras; there are close to 500 living and active cities, most of which feature valuable nuclei and historic fabric, thousands of valuable historic monuments, including houses, mosques, palaces, and bazaars, and some four million movable cultural artefacts that are displayed and deposited in museums and repositories. This entire physical heritage represents precious memories of the great and rich cultures and civilisations that have flourished in Iran. Conservation of this huge cultural wealth requires enormous efforts and resources.

As is the case with many other developing countries in the world, and despite numerous positive initiatives and goodwill, it is fair to say that due to the limited resources that are available for the safeguarding of cultural heritage, the present situation is far from being considered ideal.

Risk Factors

Iranian cultural heritage is at risk due to several factors. The most common deteriorating agents, including climatic factors, air pollution (mainly in major urban areas), and biological mechanisms, are constantly damaging cultural remains. However, there are other agents, which have more critical and determining effects, including natural disasters and especially earthquakes and floods that are major elements of destruction. Even though climatically a large part of the country is arid, there are still instances of flooding. In fact, in our history and also quite recently, a number of towns have been partially or completely destroyed due to this natural factor.

Other factors causing deterioration include:

- illicit excavations,
- smuggling of valuable objects,
- the previous unlawful transfer abroad of archaeological finds unearthed by foreign archaeological teams who were active before the Islamic Revolution,
- rapid urbanisation due to population growth,
- lack of proper planning and standards,
- non-implementation of existing norms and regulations.

The Impact of War

In reference to human-made disasters we need to mention the impact of warfare. Human conflicts are not a new phenomenon in this area, but the recent invasion of the Iraqi troops to Iranian territory had a particularly disastrous impact on the country, and the destruction of cultural heritage was no exception.

On 22 September 1980, Iran was attacked by Iraq from sea, air and ground – without any warning. Defence lasted for 8 years before the occupied areas could be recaptured. During this long and devastating conflict, the country suffered irreparable human, cultural and economic damages. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes, taking refuge in other parts of the country. In the process of the war, tens of cities, cultural and productive units, thousands of villages with their fields and environment, as well as

the unique ancient cultural heritage, some considered Heritage of Humankind, were either destroyed or damaged. The effects of destructive campaigns were not restricted merely to the war zones, but expanded to other parts of the country in different ways. Some of the principal cultural and historical centres of the country, such as: Isfahan, Kashan, Tehran, Shiraz, Hamadan, Qazvin, Boushehr, Tabriz, Kermanshah, Shush, Boroujerd – miles away from the war zone areas – were hit frequently by ground-to-ground missiles or air strikes. In the historic city of Dezful alone, 14,500 cultural, religious, residential or commercial units were either destroyed or severely damaged. Half the protected historic centre of the city, a unique and valuable example of the history of architecture and town planning of the Iranian Islamic period, was devastated and severely damaged.

The complete destruction of Khoramshahr and Abadan, devastation of Qasr-e Shirin and Hoveizeh, destruction of a part of the most valuable historic urban-fabric of Kermanshah, serious damage to the Friday Mosque (*Masjid-e Jameh*) and the surrounding historic structures in Isfahan, devastation of the museum and disturbance of the archaeological site of Susa provide visible evidence of this unfortunate historical event.

More recently, the Gulf War between Iraq and Kuwait had profoundly damaging effects on Iranian cultural heritage in various regions of the country. This was due to the effects of air pollution from burning oil-wells and the consequent increase in processes of deterioration.

Initiatives

The harsh situation imposed by war and other factors have resulted in national reorganisation and planning for various short- and long-term programmes in order to mitigate the potential risks of future disasters. These initiatives can be summarised as follows:

- construction of proper shelters for museum collections in various parts of the country;
- the launch of comprehensive surveys for the documentation of moveable and immovable heritage in order to plan a long-term strategy for protection against future intrusions;
- active implementation of the 1954 *Hague Convention* through a national committee, training of armed forces, and the removal of several military barracks from the vicinities of historic sites and monuments;
- establishment and activation of national committees of ICOMOS and ICOM;
- strengthening scientific relations with overseas institutions, particularly ICCROM, and organisation of joint training and field programmes;
- organisation of regular national conferences on conservation and restoration of cultural heritage, as well as on the history of architecture and urbanisation;
- promotion and development of academic education in the conservation of cultural heritage.