

**Re-Thinking Management and Valorization of Middle East Cultural Heritage in the Post-War period:  
Where Disasters Turn to Opportunity, Development and Growth**

**Georgios G. Giannoulis, Laia Pujol, Thanos Sideris SPAIN; Rob Davies, UK; and M. Ioannides, CYPRUS**

The area including indicatively South Eastern Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Palestine, and Tunis hosts some of the most important historic remains of the human kind. It witnessed the passage of our first ancestors from Africa towards Asia and Europe. It was homeland to many great civilizations. It is also the birth place of the three major living monotheistic religions. Finally, during the modern era, it allowed contact between various European and North African populations and cultures, producing new architecture, cities, monuments, literature, music, and traditions. As a result, the Middle East hosts a unique palimpsest of tangible and intangible heritage of utmost importance for all the humanity.

This extensive region had already been severely ravaged by ferocious wars taking place in different countries during 4 decades. Yet, the situation has definitely been worsened in the last 5 years by the worst war conflict in the Mediterranean since World War - II, in Syria, the Iraqi wars, and the various conflicts surrounding them. The collapse of the states and their mechanisms of protection, along with the use of mass destruction weapons, have severely damaged the area's cultural heritage.

The most prominent Syrian monuments have been transformed into a battle camp or even destroyed on purpose. These are only are just the tip of the iceberg: Palmyra, the old city of Aleppo, the ancient city of Damascus, Bosra, the Crac de Chevaliers, the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria just to mention the Unesco's listed World Heritage sites. In addition, thousands of local monuments, churches, monasteries, mosques, synagogues, museums have suffered damages, illegal excavations have been conducted, many objects have been looted and they already circulate in the international art market. The Museums and cultural heritage sites have been particularly targeted<sup>1</sup>, even outside of the area of the main conflict, due to their highly symbolic value and the attraction of tourists and international media. The network of archeologists and state services protecting the antiquities has been also under great pressure. Valuable knowledge has been lost, by the disappearance of persons, scientists and the collapse of administrative structures. Similarly the intangible heritage has suffered and is still suffering enormously. Ancient cultures and ethnicities, languages, traditions risk being lost forever.

UNESCO, the international scientific community, as well as local scientists and archeologists have all repeatedly called for action to protect cultural heritage in the regions at war. UNESCO set up an observatory<sup>2</sup> and in collaboration with Syrian and international experts has undertaken a coordination action aimed at the safeguarding of the Syrian cultural heritage<sup>3</sup>. Although these emergency measures are necessary and urgent in order to protect cultural heritage during the conflict, the most important challenge will emerge after the end of the war.

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1. Milbry Polk and Anfgela Schuster, eds. *The Looting of the Baghdad Museum: the Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia* (2005), pp 214-216

2. <https://en.unesco.org/syrian-observatory/>

3. *Syrian and international experts agree on emergency measures to safeguard Syria's heritage* (4 June 2016)  
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1505>

The damaged antiquities and the collapsed public structures offer a pitiful spectacle; but at the same time they constitute a huge opportunity to re-think cultural heritage reconstruction, management, and valorization in a completely new way, using state-of-the-art approaches and techniques. Once the wars are over, the destruction suffered by cultural heritage and traditional management structures can become, hopefully sooner rather than later, a fertile field leading to new policies, in which modern knowledge and experiences are introduced and shared between stakeholders. The local, European and international community related to cultural heritage can contribute to change the landscape in this vast area in essential ways, transferring and exchanging experiences, methods, and technologies, in order to transform war disaster to opportunity, for the cultural heritage and regional development. The new policies could assist and support the Middle East societies, states and scientists to develop a modern CH management system, transforming the world class cultural heritage of the area into a source of national pride, transnational understanding and tolerance, into a local and sustainable economic development factor and a symbol of peace.

Several scientific and policy-making areas are of utmost relevance, and they will serve as topics for the present session. Therefore, we call for papers concerned with the transitional and the post-war period in Middle East, and presenting innovative approaches, examples and ideas related to:

- Tracking of objects and international preventive policies against illegal antiquities trade and recovery actions.
- Damage analysis of monuments. Processes of safeguard and recovery of relevant data for real / virtual restoration processes.
- New digital technologies for the restoration, recovery, protection, valorization and accessibility of cultural heritage (digitalization, virtual reconstruction, multimodal access...) adapted to the needs of the post war period.
- Innovative ways of redesigning the architecture, human landscape and natural environment of the destroyed cities' that include the valorization of Cultural Heritage.
- New approaches to site management and new museological, educational, financial and local development objectives including tourism.
- Cultural heritage preservation / restoration and national identities in the post-war period. Local communities' involvement, political and social awareness.
- National and international funding issues for cultural heritage in a post-war period.
- Intangible heritage damage and new recovery strategies.
- Reconstruction of human networks of scientists and stakeholders in the area: transfer of knowledge, experiences and training.
- Rebuilding and modernizing the human network and organizational structures of scientists, technicians and CH managers, in order to implement state-of-the-art approaches in the process of reconstruction, recovering and management of CH.

Each of the above issues opens a space for reflection and collaborative work, similar to the actions undertaken in Europe after World War II, yet with the knowledge, experience, resources and technologies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The results of this session are expected to serve as a future basis for national and international stakeholders (UNESCO, INTERPOL, ICOMOS, European Union, States, Universities, Research Centers, Foundations, donors...) in order to elaborate relevant policies and actions in the near future. Moreover, the conclusions will feed a debate about the necessity of organizing an International Conference on Middle East Cultural Heritage recovery, protection and valorization in the post war-period as a driving engine for development, peace and growth.

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