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Responses to the Destruction of Syrian Cultural Heritage: A Critical Review of Current Efforts

Abstract

The Syrian civil war has resulted in over 250,000 deaths and several million displaced refugees within Syria and abroad. In addition to this human toll, the conflict has resulted in the devastation of the country's acclaimed cultural heritage sites and the historical fabric that composed the country's social landscape and the identity of its population. In this article, we consider the reaction of the international heritage community to this moment of crisis. To date, the international heritage community has developed three kinds of projects: site documentation projects; public-awareness-raising projects; and emergency training and mitigation projects. Most of these undertakings have prioritized the collection and dissemination of information about heritage loss. Less attention has been given to emergency interventions to support Syrians inside the country and the at-risk heritage. A significant gap exists between international knowledge about heritage in this crisis and the immediate needs of Syrian heritage professionals. Here, we consider some of the reasons for the divergence between on-the-ground-need and international response, along with the intended and unintended outcomes resulting from the documentation and public-awareness-raising projects. In terms of tangible results, there is no substitute for efforts conducted within a humanitarian framework. The challenge is in encouraging the international heritage community to embrace such an approach.

Keywords

Syria
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Introduction

It is well known to the international community that damage has been done to the cultural heritage of Syria as a result of the country's present conflict. In the best of circumstances, interventions that address the destruction of cultural heritage are notoriously difficult to design and implement during any conflict, but the Syrian crisis in particular has presented great difficulties for those heritage professionals who are seeking to offer their assistance. In this article, we offer a critical appraisal of the international responses that have been advanced to protect Syria's cultural heritage during this crisis to date. Appeals to protect Syrian heritage have professed the rhetoric of universality and neutrality in the need to protect cultural heritage. But the outcomes have not matched the appeal. We argue here that the mobilization of the international heritage community and the responses to date have been characterized by what Lynn Meskell has so aptly called 'expert failure', in describing the impotence of professional archaeologists and preservationists to implement positive change in crisis situations.¹ A general poverty of imagination exists in this crisis, among the international community, in developing and implementing responses that would provide tangible benefit to Syrians, Syrian heritage professionals and Syrian cultural heritage. Beginning with this observation as a point of departure, our discussion makes visible the opportunities and limitations that international organizations have experienced since the outbreak of civil war in 2011.

With the halt of archaeological fieldwork in Syria and the difficulty of finding new archaeological projects in the Middle East generally, heritage studies has presented itself as a novel area of research and field work for many international archaeologists. As a result, archaeologists have been forced to grapple with the specialized theoretical literature and research methodologies of the robust field of heritage studies for the first time. Many new projects and organizations have been proposed; only some have found funding; fewer still have made an impact.²

In general, there have been three kinds of responses to the present conflict: efforts to document the damage to cultural heritage; efforts to raise public awareness about the ongoing destruction; and efforts to engage Syrians in training programmes and the implementation of emergency projects inside Syria. Among these, the most common interventions have centred upon documentation and awareness-raising activities. Most documentation efforts rely on satellite imagery, journalistic accounts or social media reports. Awareness-raising campaigns have also been popular, particularly with the rise of social media, but their effectiveness and their ability to reach broad audiences are subject to question. Fewer true emergency-response projects have been implemented; these have often been viewed as infeasible and problematic despite their urgent need. Responses to the Syrian crisis have been less focused on potential humanitarian interventions – those efforts designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity – and, as a result, there may have been missed opportunities for meaningful social action and engagement.³

The Proliferation of Documentation

A characteristic of the present Syrian crisis is the rush to document the loss of the country's cultural heritage. Much like the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban, the spectre of cultural heritage destruction has acted as the focal point where the boundary between global and local events blurs.⁴

The shared experience of heritage destruction has been facilitated by the proliferation and circulation of two forms of media: photographs and reports distributed primarily through social media; and analysed satellite imagery. In both cases, active conflict has made ground-truthing these accounts difficult if not impossible.

As with the political movements across the Middle East during the Arab Spring, the use of social media has been ubiquitous. In the present crisis, it has been Syrian heritage activists who have taken the lead in establishing the complex global connections between their experience of violence and cultural heritage loss and the international audience. Syrian efforts to document damage to the country's cultural heritage appeared on Facebook, shortly after the 2011 public protests were met with armed resistance by the Syrian military and police. The Facebook community page 'Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger' (The Syrian Archaeological Patrimony in Danger, hereafter PASD) was launched in June 2011, and, in the early stages of the conflict, became the principal source of evidence about the damage inflicted on Syrian heritage for the international community.⁵ Relying upon a network of heritage professionals across the country, PASD began regularly posting images of damaged historic and religious sites, museums and archaeological sites. PASD was followed, in 2012, by a Facebook site for the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA), which offered similar information.⁶ Initially acting as a professional association, APSA rebranded itself as a 'business/consulting service' when it partnered with the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) and the US Department of State, on a joint initiative in 2014.⁷ A third Facebook page, Aleppo Archaeology, has focused its efforts on documenting damage primarily to the historic city of Aleppo to a Syrian audience.⁸ The group behind this page is less well known to non-Arabic speakers in the international community. In 2013, and following major assaults on Aleppo, another Aleppine group, the Syrian Association for Preservation of Archaeology and Heritage, was formed. This group of activists worked closely with the Free Aleppo Council and did considerable proactive work on documenting damage in Aleppo and securing portable cultural objects at risk of destruction. They also built security cement-walls around structures in the Umayyad mosque, Madrasa Halawiyya, and other buildings in the old city.⁹

Documentation efforts also began outside of Syria among concerned archaeologists. In 2012, Emma Cunliffe, in conjunction with the Global Heritage Fund, released a report titled *Damage to the Soul: Syria's Cultural Heritage in Conflict*.¹⁰ Drawing largely from the imagery circulated by PASD and other journalistic sources, this comprehensive report circulated in the international cultural heritage community and drew attention to the extent to which Syria's heritage had been damaged by the conflict. Combining global circulation with local sourcing, the report marked the scope and scale of heritage loss, and encouraged the development of other documentation projects and international responses that could address the crisis that the report exposed.

Among these initiatives was a new European Union-based professional society called Shirin, which has undertaken a project to collate known information about Syrian archaeological sites and their present status.¹¹ Formed in 2014, Shirin is an initiative of archaeologists and art historians who have studied the ancient Near East and have experience in Syria. The organization aims to make its members' expertise widely available to the heritage

community that is working on protection efforts, and, to date, it has been working largely among the European archaeological community to prepare Syrian site information and records. Using photographs from PASD and APSA as well as Google Earth imagery, Shirin's members have been preparing individual site-assessment reports for key archaeological sites and making them available on the Internet. Shirin's projects are an outgrowth of archaeological expertise; in many ways, their reports read as up-to-date site records that take into account present conditions in the conflict.

Alongside the efforts at documentation by Syrians and Shirin, a number of international research efforts that rely on the analysis of high-resolution satellite imagery have been launched to record the destruction of cultural heritage in Syria. Beginning in 2013, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) started to release a series of technical reports based upon the analysis of geospatial imagery about damage to UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Tentative World Heritage Sites.¹² These publications were part of a broader research programme on the documentation of human rights violations and the destruction of cultural heritage, and were designed to develop more robust analytical methodology.¹³ In 2014, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research's Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT) released a survey of eighteen cultural heritage areas inside Syria, which recorded 290 locations as damaged.¹⁴ That same year, the US Department of State also partnered with ASOR to undertake a large-scale satellite-based analysis of damage to cultural heritage sites across Syria, and to release weekly reports of damage based upon ground reports and available satellite imagery. This project followed from recent studies in Iraq and Egypt that suggested that the use of geospatial technologies might provide a regular mechanism for archaeological site monitoring during civil strife.¹⁵ The turn towards satellite imagery to document the conflict was also a result of the inability to obtain regular information about site damage and archaeological looting, even with the regular use of social media by Syrian activists. Syria is also the focus of a recent two-year Arcadia Foundation-funded project at the University of Oxford. This initiative is centred on using satellite and aerial imagery and remote sensing methods to document sites and landscapes across the MENA region, and aims at providing adequate information to be used for the protection of endangered sites.¹⁶

The widespread use of geospatial imagery to document the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq posed a number of ethical issues among researchers: namely, the potential unintended consequences of introducing near 'real time' analysis of damage into a conflict where belligerents are purposefully targeting cultural heritage.¹⁷ Would the release of imagery increase the likelihood of site destruction? Would it place heritage professionals trying to protect sites at greater risk? While these concerns were not new to the field of geospatial analysis and humanitarian assistance, they were being applied in a novel context. In May 2015, the AAAS published a cautionary note about the publication of geospatial images of cultural heritage sites in conflict zones.¹⁸ Drawing upon prior work by the Sphere Project's 'Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response', and the International Committee of the Red Cross's 'Professional Standards for Protection Work Carried Out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence', the AAAS called upon research groups using satellite imagery to consider, when disclosing their research findings, the impact upon affected populations; any unintended negative consequences;

and whether disclosure could inadvertently empower or strengthen the position of armed groups or other actors.¹⁹ The AAAS recommended exercising 'extreme caution [...] when using satellite imagery to corroborate on-the-ground or media-reported damage to cultural heritage sites'.²⁰ Although not all research groups involved in the analysis of geospatial imagery have since taken heed of the cautionary note, this statement nonetheless represented an important step forward in heritage ethics, because it underscored the need to consider the impact of research disclosure on populations in active conflict zones.

These ethical issues also raise similar questions about the purpose of ongoing documentation. It is worth asking whether there is an immediate need for the heritage community to direct our analytical gaze at site damage, or whether we are acting as voyeurs anxious to see whether the worst fears of our intellectual community have been realized. Caution is therefore warranted about the reasons given for a documentation project. As it is, there are three commonly cited justifications for the investment in documentation by projects engaged in such work. The first is that documentation raises public awareness about the ongoing destruction occurring inside Syria. Indeed, the first Facebook campaigns in 2011 were designed to draw attention to the extent to which Syrian heritage became an early casualty. There also may be some merit to the idea that constant monitoring of specific sites on Facebook and other media outlets will increase the political cost to the perpetrating group, if those sites were to be damaged. However, it is also possible that the reverse is true – particularly in the case of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – and that increased attention may place sites at greater risk, as we saw in the case of Palmyra, where ISIS carried out a systematic destruction of ancient buildings and monuments after an international media outrage. It may also be possible that there are so many images of site damage in Syria that they do not carry sufficient public impact, unless they are photographs of truly catastrophic damage.

The second common justification is that documentation will assist in future reconstruction efforts. It is absolutely the case that understanding what damage has occurred to a site is a necessary component of a post-disaster needs assessment. But, it remains to be seen if there is any utility in documenting site damage *during* an active conflict for the purpose of reconstruction, particularly because site integrity may change as the conflict develops and, presumably, the site sustains additional damage. An exception may be documentation projects undertaken to further emergency-conservation efforts. In such instances, systematic documentation would serve the purpose of implementing specific emergency salvage, triage and *in situ* stabilization activities. Images of site damage could also be circulated among international heritage professionals, who would offer their views on appropriate emergency interventions. Photographic documentation of whatever emergency-conservation activities are undertaken would also act as one part of a conservation record, and would provide important information for future reconstruction. Prior experience in the reconstruction of post-conflict Beirut – in which large sections of the historic urban landscape were simply cleared away – also suggests the need for at least having plans in place to protect heritage sites.

Finally, a third reason for documenting damage to cultural heritage is the hope that the perpetrators can be held criminally accountable following the conflict. Syria has been party to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its

First Protocol since 1958, and signed the Second Protocol in 1999 (which indicates Syria's intent to ratify the Second Protocol, although it has not done so formally). In principle, these legal instruments apply to any entity claiming to be a successor government to the current Syrian regime, unless they are renounced. Even then, they may provide a basis for prosecutions at a future war-crimes tribunal, if such a court were to receive a charter from the international community. Here is a sure reason for proactive documentation during the conflict. Evidence about heritage damage would need to be collected to the legal standards required for it to be used in future prosecutions – a standard that may not be met in much of the photographic documentation circulating on social media, in which photographs are watermarked and chains of custody are lost. It would also need to be collected now, while witnesses can still be identified and supporting proof can be gathered. The systematic collection of evidence for war-crimes prosecutions in the Syrian conflict is already underway, but it is unclear the extent to which present documentation efforts will contribute to future criminal accountability of cultural-property war crimes. An added complexity for the prosecution of these cases is the context in which these crimes occur. International law provides for a 'military necessity' waiver that permits the targeting of cultural heritage sites if there is an imperative military need. Out of fear that, 'military necessity', will be construed broadly, past experience from the cultural-property war-crimes cases following the Balkan Wars, suggests that prosecutors will select to pursue indictments in which a party is unambiguously at fault and there is no significant armed opposition.²¹ Thus, it may prove difficult to identify any instances of damage to cultural heritage sites in the Syrian conflict that can fulfil these ideal legal parameters. Whether site looting can be prosecuted also remains an open question.

Raising Public Awareness

Another area of response has been in raising public awareness about heritage destruction in Syria. UNESCO has placed itself at the forefront of public response and media pronouncements on this issue. By June 2015, UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova had made no less than nineteen statements deploring the ongoing destruction, calling on belligerents for restraint, or advocating in some capacity for the protection of cultural heritage in the conflict.²² UNESCO also launched the Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage Project, with funding from the European Union and the government of Flanders. The main objective of the project is 'to contribute to restoring social cohesion, stability and sustainable development through the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage in view of the on-going and growing destruction and loss of Syria's rich and unique cultural heritage'.²³ UNESCO proposed doing so through a three-pronged approach: monitoring and assessing cultural heritage damage through an Internet Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage; launching national and international awareness-raising efforts; and providing 'enhanced technical assistance and capacity-building for national stakeholders and beneficiaries'.²⁴ With the exception of the training, which is discussed below, these efforts are all variations of an awareness campaign designed to keep Syrian heritage damage and UNESCO's advocacy in public view. The Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage has become a clearinghouse of selected reports and other media commentary made about

Syrian heritage, especially foregrounding UNESCO's statements. To its credit, in the official meetings to launch this project, UNESCO offered itself as a place of encounter to heritage professionals representing both sides of the conflict.

Certainly, public attention to Syrian cultural heritage is a laudable goal. Yet, there has probably not been a moment since the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in 2003 when there has been so much international attention focused on the ongoing destruction of cultural heritage. For this reason, it is unclear if more public awareness is actually possible. If that is the case, it is uncertain what positive outcomes can be realized from an awareness-raising campaign, especially because the level of disconnect between public statements and the on-the-ground realities in Syria is so vast. To date, Director General Bokova's statements have not led to tangible changes in the behaviour of Syrian belligerents; neither has the presence of the Internet Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage and the attention it has drawn specifically to Syria. UNESCO's heritage awareness-raising efforts remain largely web-based and have not been integrated with NGOs working with war-affected and displaced communities inside Syria. UNESCO has likely reached the limits of effective social change through a focused public-awareness campaign.

A different kind of public-awareness campaign has been launched through the efforts of the joint US Department of State/ASOR initiative. In many ways, this project has represented an alternative to UNESCO; it has made available much more on-the-ground information and been more specific in identifying those parties likely responsible. Each week since August 2014, the initiative has released a report of site damage, through its website and Facebook page, along with a summary of key events in the conflict for that week that have resulted in negative outcomes to Syrian cultural heritage.²⁵ Augmented with material from APSA, the reports contain much detail, which is a product of, and a credit to, their expansive effort at analysing a great deal of journalistic documentation. These reports have been less able to garner widespread public or media attention, raising the sad possibility that a certain degree of violence and cultural heritage destruction has become a routinized and expected part of everyday life in Syria. In being successful at illustrating site damage on a regular basis, it is also conceivable that the US Department of State/ASOR initiative has demonstrated the saturation point for information about cultural heritage damage in a public-awareness and outreach campaign.

In addition to these awareness-raising activities, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has published a pamphlet titled the 'Emergency Red List of Syrian Cultural Objects at Risk', more commonly known as the 'Syrian Red List'.²⁶ Funded by the US Department of State and launched in 2013, the 'Red List' illustrates examples of commonly looted objects of Syrian origin. Copies of the 'Red List' are distributed widely to art collectors and dealers as well as to law-enforcement officers. Its purpose is not to act as a comprehensive list of potentially looted material, but rather to keep public attention focused on archaeological site looting as a significant problem and area of concern.²⁷ In this sense, ICOM's 'Red List' for Syria accomplishes much of its awareness-raising activities specifically within the heritage community, especially among museums and other actors who are involved more directly with the art trade. ICOM also maintains the International Observatory on the Illicit Traffic in Cultural Goods, which predates the UNESCO Syrian Observatory, and has the goal of raising the public profile of the pernicious consequences of the illicit global trade in cultural property. Raising awareness about illicit trafficking has been a long-term interest of ICOM because

it fulfils the organization's mandate to improve the ethical practices of its member museums.²⁸

Engagement with Syrians: Trainings and Emergency Projects

The most tangible response to the heritage crisis in Syria has been in direct training activities for heritage professionals and in the implementation of emergency cultural heritage protection projects inside Syria. In an active conflict, these are also the most challenging humanitarian interventions. UNESCO's response has focused upon providing training and assistance to the Syrian Ministry of Culture's Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM). In general, this coordination follows through the same communication channels as before the conflict, even though the Syrian DGAM employees are currently in a position where they must – either by choice or by circumstance – adopt the Assad regime's official discourse and views on the conflict. Humanitarian actors working on cultural heritage protection outside of the UNESCO framework are obliged to follow the sanctions of their respective governments. The European Union and the United States have sanctions in place against financial coordination with the Assad regime and Syrian banks. In the case of the United States, these sanctions certainly extend to collaborative work with the Syrian DGAM.²⁹ A limited exemption for humanitarian actors exists only for '[a]ctivities to support the preservation and protection of cultural heritage sites in Syria, including, but not limited to, museums, historic buildings, and archaeological sites'.³⁰ In practice, this situation means that actors based in the United States who are seeking to provide assistance to Syrian heritage professionals are legally obliged to forgo working with the Syrian DGAM. The result is that emergency heritage interventions are not, and can never be, as truly politically neutral as humanitarian actors would normally demand.³¹ Coordination with the Syrian DGAM appears to give support to the Assad regime. Working with heritage professionals and former members of the DGAM outside of government-controlled territory appears to give support to the Syrian opposition. These divisions are further reproduced and reinforced by the Syrian civil war and the politics of the international community with a stake in the conflict's outcome.

As part of its broader campaign, UNESCO has been involved in a series of training programmes as part of its Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage Project. By summer 2015, UNESCO sponsored four training courses, one each on combating illicit trafficking, emergency stabilization for built heritage, the protection of moveable heritage, and the recording of intangible heritage. Some one hundred trainees have participated from Syria, as well as Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey, in illicit trafficking training.³² The vast majority of attendees have been based in Damascus, which has seen the least conflict. The central irony of the UNESCO-sponsored training programme thus far is that it has had the greatest impact among the heritage professionals based in the area of the country at least risk.³³ In addition to the UNESCO courses, in 2013, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) offered eTraining courses to the Syrian DGAM.³⁴ Both organizations have also participated in the UNESCO-led trainings, but each has recognized the conspicuous political position their

organizations occupy and have been vocal in their desire to address heritage professionals on all sides in the current conflict.

It has been more challenging to provide similar emergency course-content for heritage professionals in areas of Syria outside the control of the Assad regime. Museum curators and archaeologists in these regions are hampered in their efforts to protect at-risk cultural heritage by the social disruptions brought about by the continuing conflict. Lack of pay, danger of travel, and the inherent risks associated with working in active conflict zones inhibit their ability to attend international training activities, as well as to continue their work. Furthermore, many of these professionals no longer claim an affiliation with the DGAM in Damascus, choosing instead to be neutral actors or to affiliate with local opposition entities. In 2013, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the US Institute of Peace and the Day After Association – a Syrian NGO – partnered to form the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI) Project with the goal, in Syria, of assisting heritage professionals caught in the areas of Syria outside of the Assad regime's control in their efforts to protect important cultural heritage. In June 2014, the SHOSI Project offered a workshop on the emergency care of museum collections for heritage professionals primarily from the Aleppo and Idlib areas, who could then safely leave Syria and cross the border, with permission, into Turkey.³⁵ A similar training was repeated in southern Turkey later that year by Spanish NGO Heritage for Peace.³⁶

These workshops succeeded in delivering much needed training on emergency procedures and, perhaps even more importantly, conservation and preservation supplies in areas of northern Syria. Structural impediments remain in the full realization of emergency projects. The scarcity of financial resources and problems in coordination prevent ramping up emergency activities even in regions where it is possible to engage in humanitarian endeavours. Training efforts on cultural heritage protection can only go so far, unless there is a commitment to follow-up activities and to project-implementation that can overcome the logistical difficulty of transferring financial resources and supplies legally into Syria. To date, few projects have managed to do so. At Tell Mozan, an archaeological site in the Al-Hasakah province, archaeologists from the University of California, Los Angeles – Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati – have supported site guards and local village members since the beginning of the conflict, who, in turn, continue to monitor the site and maintain the site's mudbrick structures.³⁷ This effort represents a continuity of the Buccellatis' existing project. In early 2015, the SHOSI Project completed an emergency protection project at the Maarra Mosaic Museum in Idlib province [Figure 1], which houses a large Late Antique and Byzantine mosaic collection that could not be evacuated to safe storage. Prior training offered through the SHOSI Project, coupled with sufficient financial resources, enabled the museum's curators and conservators, with the assistance of local labour, to coat the mosaics with water-soluble glue and to cover their surface with a protective polyethylene-fibre fabric or cotton sheeting. The mosaics were then sandbagged for *in situ* protection from the potential structural collapse of the historic building.³⁸ Similar emergency intervention has been conducted at the early Bronze Age site of Ebla, a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site. The project's in-country team conducted a systematic looting documentation and applied emergency protection to most endangered structures [Figure 2]. In these efforts, the SHOSI Project hoped



SHOSI Project.

Figure 1: The sandbagging of mosaics at the Maarra Museum, Idlib Province, north-east Syria.



SHOSI Project.

Figure 2: SHOSI in-country team member Ayman Nabu near consolidated structures at Tell Mardikh (Ebla), Idlib Province, north-east Syria.

to demonstrate that specific emergency heritage projects are viable when conducted in direct communication with local stakeholders.

At this stage of the civil war, the value of small-scale emergency preservation and conservation projects has become increasingly apparent. These efforts address near-term risks and share an intellectual kindred and logistical framework similar to other humanitarian efforts designed to meet immediate crisis concerns. They appear to be a logical step for responding to heritage in crisis situations. Prioritizing projects of this kind in Syria represents a shift from perceived needs in earlier stages of the conflict. In summer 2013, the primary issue for the international heritage community appeared to be the restoration of governance capacity either through the Local Coordination Committees, the Free Syrian Army, or through the development of community groups.³⁹ The deterioration of the security situation throughout the year 2014, altered the political landscape significantly. Capacity-building-training activities, which have long been the mainstay of the international heritage community, became less relevant than the immediate realization of small-scale emergency projects. While these efforts result in positive outcomes for the protection of Syria's cultural heritage, they also require more direct logistical coordination to complete, which has become considerably more difficult with the expansion of ISIS and intense fighting near Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Resilience in dealing with the constant changes to the geopolitical Syrian landscape is essential for any protection initiative to come to fruition.

Conclusions

Altogether, these responses represent some of the best efforts of the international community to address the difficult and seemingly intractable problem of protecting cultural heritage in the Syrian crisis. The emphasis on collection of documentation and the distribution of that information through public-awareness-raising campaigns has resulted in a situation in which at least something is known among the scholarly community about site damage – within a timeframe more frequent than the typical peer-reviewed academic publication process. Perhaps these contributions bring some satisfaction in that they help to remove the 'fog of war' and fulfil our collective morbid curiosity to know about the degree of damage and destruction. The difficulty is that documentation and public-awareness projects do not translate easily into humanitarian actions that can safeguard either the professional community of Syrian heritage experts – who are themselves exposed to great personal danger – or at-risk cultural heritage. Thus far, international heritage professionals have placed a premium upon the process of obtaining information about the crisis and distributing it, rather than acting to ameliorate the conditions created by the crisis in whatever small way possible. We have failed as an expert community if we do not demand something more.

It is likely that the present approach to the Syrian heritage crisis is framed by the expectations and the expertise of the international archaeological community, which has been at the forefront of many heritage-protection issues in recent decades. It is therefore not surprising to see a preference for emergency-documentation projects. Archaeologists are trained in accurate site documentation: it is this scientific community's specialization. Moreover, the field's subject matter appears to be at substantial risk from direct targeting, from incidental damage and from looting. Nevertheless, it is

worth remembering that archaeologists do much more than documentation when carrying out a field project. They obtain permits, transfer money across international borders, bring equipment into a country, interact with government officials, coordinate with village leaders and employ local community members. All of these logistical skills match the knowledge required to implement successful humanitarian initiatives. In this sense, perhaps the greatest failure of the international heritage community has been the inability to draw upon its already existing skillset and to translate it into more meaningful social action. Doing so would require a fundamental change in tactics. The international heritage community would need to follow the lead of humanitarian organizations in reaching out to conflict-affected communities and consider the safety of people – together with their culture and identity – to be of paramount importance. This step must be taken not for the sake of artefacts or sites, but to empower those dedicated Syrian individuals and groups who are now trying to protect their heritage in the midst of conflict.

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Endnotes

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