

# Syria : cultural heritage and the local community

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**Fig. 1:**  
Ruins of Aleppo, one  
of the oldest inhabited  
cities in the world.





# Syria

## Cultural Heritage and the Local Community

By Mohamad Fakhro

*Syria is considered a cradle of human civilisation and is home to some of the most valuable monuments in the world, including six Unesco World Heritage Sites. Since the onset of the crisis in 2011, the tragic events overshadowed Syria are adversely affecting all aspects of people's lives, including their archaeological heritage. Along with the human catastrophe, cultural heritage in Syria is one of the countless victims of the Syrian war. The destruction of ancient monuments and museums and the extent of illegal excavations have reached a very high level.*

Most of the World Heritage Sites in the country have been destroyed and looted, including the ancient city of Palmyra, the old city of Aleppo (Fig. 1), Krak des Chevaliers and the dead cities in north-western Syria. Numerous Syrian museums have been affected by the armed conflict. Some museums, such as the ones in Ar-Raqqah, Idlib and Aleppo, have suffered from theft as well as damage and destruction caused by bombardments and the impact of explosives and shrapnel. In addition, illegal excavations and looting have increased exponentially since the beginning of the Syrian conflict.<sup>1</sup> These actions have damaged many historical sites and museums. Important Syrian cultural property has disappeared from the count-

<sup>1</sup> Syrian Archaeological Heritage, Five Years of Crisis, 2011–2015. Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Culture – Directorate General of Antiquities & Museums. Damascus 2016. [www.dgam.gov.sy](http://www.dgam.gov.sy)



ry, only to end up on the black market or in private collections. The latest developments in this painful conflict and the absence of specialized government institutions and archaeological authorities in some regions have contributed greatly to exacerbating the risk befalling Syrian cultural heritage. However, local non-governmental organizations and associations have begun to work towards protecting the heritage and limiting its destruction.

### Heritage and the community

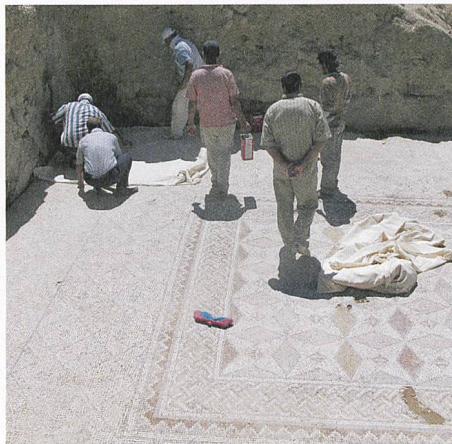
Cultural heritage is the link between past and present and it serves as an inspiration for the future. The social importance of heritage lies in the sense of identity it can create for individuals, giving them a connection to their history, their civilisation and the values of their ancestors. This connection leads to an increased sense of belonging to a country and its culture, and it fosters a sense of cultural identity and pride in one's ancestors contribution to human history, whether it be material heritage such as ancient monuments, or intangible heritage such as traditions and handicrafts. Therefore, destroying Syria's heritage means damaging the soul of its people and the identity of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Irina Bokova, Director-General of Unesco, March 2012.



**Fig. 2:** Protection measures at Aleppo National Museum.

**Fig. 3:** Local people help to transport the Berhalia mosaic.



### The role of the community during the conflict

The importance of the local community in the protection of monuments and heritage has emerged in a significant way during the conflict. The conflict has reached a point where the archaeological authorities and non-governmental organizations are no longer able to protect all sites and museums (Fig. 2). The Syrian people had to get involved in protecting the cultural heritage that has brought them together for millennia. In the absence of governmental authorities in some cities, the social, religious and cultural elite have played a major and vital role in protecting archaeological sites and museums from looters. The policy of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) was to communicate directly with local communities in order to shield sites from the ongoing events and prevent damage. This policy has succeeded in limiting the destruction and has led to the recovery of artefacts from archaeological sites. For example, the local community of Berhalia village in Barada Valley (Fig. 3) discovered by chance a mosaic dating back to the Roman era, informed the local authorities, and helped them to transport the object to the

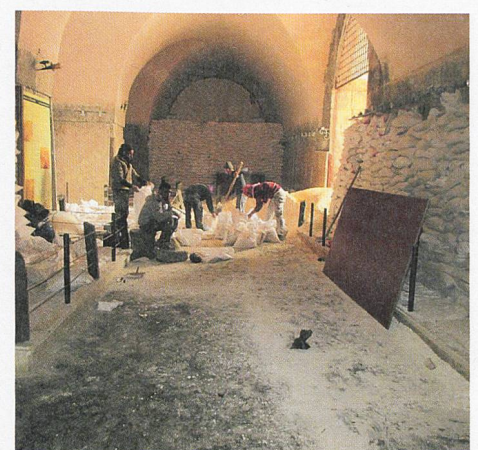
National Museum in Damascus.<sup>3</sup> In areas outside of government control, local groups (so-called «Monuments Men») have played a major role in protecting, preserving and documenting many archaeological artefacts that have emerged through irregular excavations. In addition, museums and archaeological sites have had to resort to extreme emergency protection efforts, such as at the Ma'arat al-Nu'man Museum, where a mosaic of about 1000 m<sup>2</sup> was covered with sandbags (Fig. 4), and at the famous site of Ebla (3rd/2nd millennium BC), where emergency restoration of some mud-brick walls was required.<sup>4</sup>

The Syrian Association for Preserving Archaeology and Heritage has also taken some protective measures, including dismantling the minbar in the Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo to protect some of its parts.<sup>5</sup> In another instance, local authorities in the al-Jazira area represented by the Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities took responsibility for safeguarding archaeological sites from violations through

<sup>3</sup> Directorate General of Antiquities & Museums (2016) [www.dgam.gov.sy](http://www.dgam.gov.sy)  
[www.counterpunch.org/2014/06/13/syrian-students-restore-our-global-cultural-heritage/](http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/06/13/syrian-students-restore-our-global-cultural-heritage/)

<sup>4</sup> Idleb Antiquities Center [www.facebook.com/Idleb-Antiquities-Center-1070868956264699/](http://www.facebook.com/Idleb-Antiquities-Center-1070868956264699/)  
[www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1422772191074372&id=1070868956264699](http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1422772191074372&id=1070868956264699)

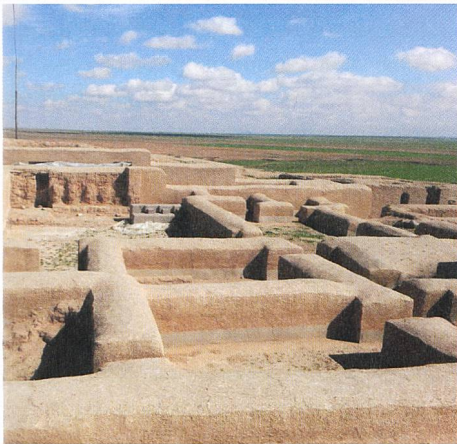
<sup>5</sup> Diana Miznazi. Post-conflict reconstruction of Old Aleppo (2015), [www.iiconservation.org/node/5495](http://www.iiconservation.org/node/5495)



**Fig. 4:** Syrian volunteers cover mosaics in the Ma'arat al-Nu'man Museum.



**Fig.5:**  
Restoration of temple  
A, at the archaeological  
site of Tell Beydar.



observation, documentation and communication with the local population. They also carried out emergency restoration projects in various locations, such as the main niche of the temple A at the archaeological site of Tell Beydar (Fig. 5), and the Byzantine tomb at Al Farahiya.<sup>6</sup> Villagers in Tell Mozan covered the mud-brick walls with sheeting and trellises to prevent degradation, and carried out basic repairs at the site.<sup>7</sup> In addition, people in the city of Bosra, one of Syria's World Heritage Sites, participated in Unesco's Unite4Heritage campaign.

However, since the conflict began groups on both sides have exploited Syria's cultural heritage. Many archaeological sites have been damaged because they were

used as military camps. This includes sites in Aleppo, Palmyra, Daraa and Homs, as well as castles such as Krak des Chevaliers, Samaan Citadel and many others. At the same time, some members of the local communities have also had a harmful impact on conservation efforts. People have conducted extensive illegal excavations in various areas, looking for gold and treasure. Motivated by material gain, these actions have damaged many sites and caused the permanent loss of archaeological layers, as was the case in Dura-Europos and Apamea. Often, networks of dealers work together to sell the artefacts on the black market. Displaced persons also use the ruins as places to live. Some of the worst damage has been done by local peoples breaking down large stones from archaeological sites for use in the construction of new buildings (Fig. 6).<sup>8</sup>

#### **Awareness of the importance of heritage**

The negative impact some members of society have had on efforts to preserve Syria's cultural treasures has highlighted the need to raise awareness of the importance and value of this heritage, as well as the importance of everyone's participation in the preservation and protection of these sites from looting and destruction. Several awareness campaigns on the importance of heritage and the need to preserve it have already been launched. The focus has been on the importance

**Fig.6:**  
Cracking of large  
archaeological stones  
for using in the  
construction of new  
buildings.



and definition of archaeological and historical sites, the correlations between past and present, raising awareness in schools and universities, and collaboration with anyone concerned with the protection of antiquities and human heritage. A national campaign launched by DGAM at the beginning of the crisis set out to draw people's attention to the value of their heritage and their role in its protection. The campaign's message is directed at all 23 million Syrians, with no exceptions, since the main objective is to defend that which unites all Syrian people, something that is, literally, embodied in its antiquities.

Non-governmental organizations such as the Idleb Antiquities Center and the Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities in al-Jazira, have also carried out many activities, such as giving talks to local communities (Fig. 7), schools (Fig. 8) and universities; organizing meetings and workshops on the importance of cultural heritage that are aimed at encouraging the community to actively participate in its protection; and issuing press releases. Similar efforts have been made to educate displaced people in various camps and in diaspora countries. The Pergamon Museum in Berlin, for instance, has started working on introducing

<sup>6</sup> The Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities <http://desteya-shunwaran.com/ar/the-restoration-of-tell-bayder/>; <http://desteya-shunwaran.com/ar/completion-the-restoration-in-al-farahiya-tomb/>

<sup>7</sup> L. Marquez. Archaeologist, villagers protect ancient Syrian city as civil war rages. UCLA Newsroom Website. 23 May 2014. Available at: <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/archaeologist-villagers-protect-ancient-syrian-city-as-civil-war-rages> (02/07/14)

<sup>8</sup> Mattia Guidetti, Silvia Perini. Civil War and Cultural Heritage in Syria, 2011–2015. *Syrian Studies Association Bulletin*, Vol. 20, No 1 (2015), <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/ssa/article/view/3115>



**Fig. 7:**  
Awareness campaigns  
for the community  
on the importance of  
heritage.



Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Germany to archaeological collections from the Near East, and specifically from Syria and Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Such an initiative revives a sense of cultural pride in displaced people and restores a sense of self-esteem by connecting them to the legacy of their ancestors and raising their cultural awareness. These may be the first steps towards creating a public committed to, and being a crucial part of, the reconstruction of Syria's heritage.<sup>10</sup>

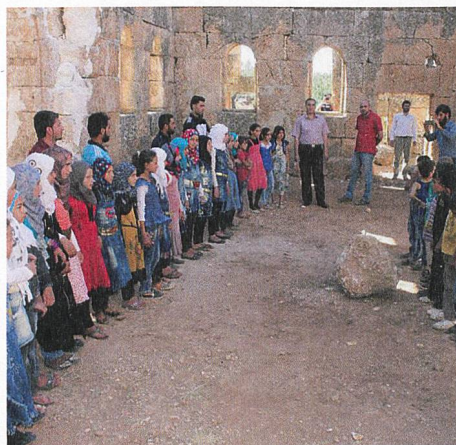
At the same time, here in Switzerland, we try to help Syrian archaeologists working on the ground in Syria through the «shirin Switzerland organisation» which was founded in 2015 in Bern as a part of shirin international (Syrian Heritage in Danger: an international research initiative and network; <http://shirin-international.org/>). Its membership also includes Syrian scholars studying in Switzerland. Considering Swiss neutrality, shirin Switzerland has

the advantage of being able to organise delicate meetings between stakeholders of all involved countries. It has four goals:

- To inform, educate and train Syrian colleagues through the development of partnerships with archaeological and conservation/restoration institutes in Switzerland, as well as with professional associations and organisations, including UNESCO, ICOMOS and ICOM.
- To fight against illegal trade of antiques by utilising its contacts with professionals, the Swiss government and antique dealers.
- To establish a Safe Haven according to Swiss law (i.e. a place to store and exhibit Syrian cultural goods during time of war).
- To encourage networking and the sharing of information in local Syrian communities through social media.

### Conclusion

Cultural heritage is a mirror of the people, so the process of recovery is not just a technical one of reconstructing the physical and economic environment. It also involves helping people to recover socially, politically, and psychologically from the effects of war. Therefore, priorities have to be establis-



**Fig. 8:**  
Awareness campaigns  
for school students  
on the importance of  
heritage.

hed according to what benefits society as a whole. The first priority should be to create the capacity among individuals and institutions in all sectors and levels of the affected society to protect cultural heritage. The significance of heritage for societies in the aftermath of war lies in the intrinsic value that heritage sites contribute to the process of re-establishing connections between people and their ancestors and their memories. Holtorf believes that Palmyra, for instance, is a place that enhances the pride of Syrians and that their awareness of such heritage sites increases their sense of cultural identity and pride.<sup>11</sup>

Preserving Syrian cultural heritage is an important step towards preserving the country's cultural identity, both for those of us who are directly affected by the war, and for future generations. We hope to see an end to this war soon, and with it an end to the human tragedy and the large-scale destruction of cultural heritage in Syria. In addition, we hope that the reconstruction of museums and cultural heritage in the aftermath of the war will play a major role in rebuilding a healthy post-conflict society.

<sup>9</sup> P. Oltermann. Berlin Museums' Refugee Guides Scheme Fosters Meeting of Minds. In: *The Guardian* 27.1.2017: [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/27/berlin-museums-refugee-guides-scheme-fosters-meeting-of-minds#img-1](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/27/berlin-museums-refugee-guides-scheme-fosters-meeting-of-minds#img-1)

<sup>10</sup> Nour A. Munawar. Rebuilding Aleppo: Selected papers from the ICOMOS University Forum Workshop on Authenticity and Reconstructions. Paris, 13 – 15 March 2017; C. Holtorf, L. Kealy, T. Kono (eds.). Paris: ICOMOS, published in 2018.

<sup>11</sup> C. Holtorf. Averting loss aversion in cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21 (4), 2015, pp. 405-421.



## Some questions for Ayman Nabo, Idleb Antiquities Center

### What is the Idleb Antiquities Center, what is its purpose?

The Idleb Antiquities Center, a civil society organisation launched in the second half of 2012, operates in the liberated northern Syrian areas of Idlib, Northern Rif, Hama, and the western Aleppo countryside. It includes a group of archaeologists working to protect heritage and cultural property both materially and morally.

The objectives of the center are:

- The preservation of cultural heritage and with it the memory and identity of the Syrian people and society.
- To engage the local community in managing and maintaining the sites.
- To make the protection of cultural heritage the responsibility of individuals and society as well as civil and religious organisations.
- To enrich human culture by preserving the cultural diversity of all human peoples.
- To highlight the effects of cultural and social values, to make them understood to be a source of education, science, art, society and culture.
- To lay the groundwork for sustainable development in the future.
- To contribute effectively to the development of cultural tourism in the future.
- For the Syrian public to benefit from the effects of tourism and the heightened awareness of the Syrian civilization.

### What are the greatest difficulties you are facing at the moment?

The lack of awareness of the importance of cultural heritage in the local community is one of the biggest challenges that the center faces, making it vulnerable to sabotage and random exploitation by ignorant people who see heritage as a source of income in

the current state of poverty caused by years of war. In addition, the damage suffered by the historical buildings and museums as a result of the bombings by the Syrian state is catastrophic. The lack of resources and support make us unable to carry out the necessary restoration and rehabilitation work at damaged sites at the moment.

### How are you cooperating with the local population?

Cooperation with the community is achieved through two methods:

- through awareness campaigns for the community living in areas close to the cultural heritage sites. This includes seminars and lectures to raise awareness of the importance of cultural property, as well as trips with school and university students to archaeological sites in order to introduce the civilizations that have shaped the region through history and
- by cooperating with local councils and authorities, according to legal procedures. This ensures that cultural property is protected from vandals and prospectors.

### What is needed to raise awareness of cultural heritage and its preservation in the public at large?

Ignorance of the value of cultural property is one of the most dangerous threats to heritage sites in times of wars, revolutions and crises, where the absence of laws and widespread chaos, which negatively affects all aspects of life, leaves the sites vulnerable to theft and vandalism, in addition to bombings and damage caused by artillery weapons.

Raising awareness is therefore imperative in this situation. It is necessary to intensify the awareness campaigns in all areas of society and to create and enforce laws in line with the current situation that ensure the protection of cultural property by the local authorities. It is also imperative for international organisations, especially Unesco, to increase their efforts to take care of the archaeologists working in conflict zones and to provide the necessary means for them to carry out their work. ■



## Resümee

*Seit Beginn des Krieges in Syrien 2011 ist neben der menschlichen Katastrophe das Kulturerbe eines der unzähligen Opfer. Seine gesellschaftliche Bedeutung liegt darin, dass es Identität stiften und eine Verbindung zur eigenen Geschichte sowie zu den Werten der Vorfahren vermitteln kann. Die Zerstörung von Syriens Kulturerbe bedeutet die Beschädigung der Seele seiner Bevölkerung und ihrer nationalen Identität.*

*Sobald der Konflikt ein Ausmass erreicht hatte, wo die archäologischen Behörden nicht mehr imstande waren Ausgrabungsstätten und Museen zu schützen, musste die Bevölkerung dafür gewonnen werden. Die Generaldirektion der Antiken und Museen (DGAM) nahm dafür direkten Kontakt mit örtlichen Gemeinschaften auf, um Stätten zu schützen und Beschädigungen zu verhindern. In manchen Städten spielte die gesellschaftliche, religiöse und kulturelle Elite dabei eine wichtige Rolle.*

*Die Notwendigkeit, ein Bewusstsein für den Wert dieses Erbes zu wecken sowie die Wichtigkeit der Beteiligung aller für seinen Schutz, wurden rasch deutlich. Es laufen verschiedene Sensibilisierungskampagnen für die Bedeutung und Erhaltung des Kulturerbes. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf der Bedeutung archäologischer und geschichtlicher Stätten, den Beziehungen zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart, der Vermittlung an Schulen und Universitäten sowie der Zusammenarbeit mit all jenen, die mit dem Schutz des Kulturerbes betraut sind. Seine Erhaltung in Syrien bildet einen wichtigen Schritt zur Bewahrung der kulturellen Identität des Landes und damit zum Aufbau einer gesunden Nachkriegsgesellschaft.*