

# Palmyra and expert failure

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Since the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, Syrian cultural heritage has suffered extensive destruction resulting from collateral bombing damage, military use, intentional destruction, and looting. As discussed in relation to the international failure to respond to the tragic humanitarian crisis that ensued, the destruction of heritage has created great frustration for the international community of heritage experts, who have focused primarily on obtaining and distributing information about the extent of damage to cultural resources, rather than on the conditions created by the crisis.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, the Syrian heritage crisis represents what Lynn Meskell has called an "expert failure" to describe the ineffectiveness of professional archaeologists and preservationists to save heritage in a time of conflict.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that traditional expert responses to the crisis by international organizations, spearheaded by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), have shown little tangible benefit to Syrians, to Syrian heritage professionals, and to Syrian cultural heritage.

The majority of appeals made in support of the protection of Syrian heritage have endorsed a notion of universality and neutrality to justify the need to protect this cultural heritage. However, the emphasis by UNESCO on coordinating its efforts through governmental communication channels has resulted in an inability to take effective protective actions and puts to question its commitment to neutrality. The ongoing concerns with the fate of Palmyra, as I discuss in this piece and through my research, demonstrates the failure of UNESCO's commitment to building peace in the minds of women and men. It also attests to the failure of international experts to preserve the heritage of Palmyra in any meaningful and sustainable way. I argue that, in these failed attempts, little consideration has been given to local communities and to Syrian experts as main stakeholders in the preservation of this cultural heritage resource.

## Palmyra

Built around an oasis in the Syrian desert, Tadmur—or Palmyra [city of palms]—was one of the most important trade and cultural centers of the ancient world, with a distinctive local culture that was incorporated into the Roman Empire in the first century CE. More than two centuries later, the city gained independence from Rome, and under its famous Queen Zenobia, established the

Palmyrene empire which annexed much of the Roman east. Palmyra's architecture is notorious for its grand colonnade, a 1100 meter-long Roman street that connects a temple to the god Bel with the area known as the Camp of Diocletian. Other archaeological remains in the ancient city of Palmyra today include an agora, a theatre, urban quarters, and other temples that comprise what is generally considered by scholars to be the finest example of surviving Roman architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean. Also, within the archaeological zone of Palmyra stands the Fakhr-al-Din al-Ma'ani Castle. This heavy fortification dates to the 13th century and offers a spectacular view of the site. The site of Palmyra, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980, has a defined place in Syrian historical consciousness. Syrians feel a particular connection to the site and take much pride of the once great merchant city that influenced and ultimately defied the power of Rome. Palmyra stands at the literal crossroads of civilizations as the art and architecture of the city is also a perfect portrait of the Fertile Crescent, which features an incredible blend of cultures and traditions: a dynamic culture and a land of inherent pluralism and *mélange* owing to its Mesopotamian, Levantine, Semitic, Greco-Roman, Persian, and Islamic heritage.

Both the modern town and ancient city of Palmyra were caught in the crossfire that marked the Syrian civil war, first starting during early 2013. In 2014, military forces from the Assad regime fortified themselves within the site, further damaging the ruins. In 2015, ISIS forces overran Palmyra, and committed barbaric and monstrous assaults on the people and cultural monuments and artifacts of the city. Throughout these events, the destruction of Palmyra's magnificent monuments provoked an international outcry and prompted significant media attention. At the center of these events, ISIS executed Khaled Al-Ass'ad, the former director of Antiquities at Palmyra and a devoted outstanding archeologist whose work had

been dedicated to this site. Following this shocking execution, ISIS proceeded to destroy many of the most famous ruins in situ—the Bel and Baalshamin temples, the tower tombs, the monumental arch and standing columns—in addition to plundering the Palmyra Museum and destroying a large number of sculptures and artifacts still inside. In March 2016, the Assad forces backed by Russian military support, recaptured Palmyra and immediately started building a Russian military base within the site. Nine months later, in December 2016, ISIS recaptured Palmyra and this time destroyed the tetrapylon and damaged the theater. The Assad regime forces managed to take it back in March 2017.

During this time, the ancient site also witnessed extensive looting operations, which resulted in many Palmyrene artifacts appearing on the antiquity market or being captured by Lebanese and Turkish customs officers. Looting started in the fall of 2011, closely following the uprising in Syria, and as ISIS took occupation of the site, they established the so-called *Diwan al Rikaz* office, giving digging permits in exchange for a tax, applied only for non-figurative objects. However, it is believed that the looters were handing over only unsellable figurative objects to the *Diwan al Rikaz* (presumably to be destroyed by ISIS fighters), while keeping from ISIS those artifacts in good condition that are to be sold to dealers of antiquities on the black market.

## Heritage and preservation as propaganda

Throughout the different shifts in the control of Palmyra, its monuments and artefacts have been used in appalling political propaganda.<sup>3</sup> While ISIS used the ancient theater to stage dramatic executions for circulation on social media, Russian military forces later staged a music concert at the theater to promote an image of a civilized

Russian savior before losing the site to ISIS forces again. As ISIS was driven out of Palmyra in March 2016, and despite the fragile security conditions, UNESCO released a statement on its future plans for Palmyra on 27 March 2016. In this, the organization announced a telephone conversation between the Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, and President Vladimir Putin of Russia during which they discussed the protection and preservation of the cultural heritage of Palmyra. Offering "full support for the restoration of Palmyra", this diplomatic display was underscored by the fact that UNESCO openly collaborated with a foreign actor in an issue contextualized by an ongoing civil war, making claims on behalf of a devastated nation. UNESCO's statement came at a time when millions of Syrians were, and still are, displaced as a consequence of the bloody conflict and the people of Palmyra continue to experience

active risk to their lives, including possible detention by the Assad government and the destruction of their homes and heritage. This tone-deaf engagement with heritage preservation in the context of active conflict suggests an absence of ethical concerns.

There are, in addition, equally problematic claims surrounding the preservation of Palmyra from other organizations. During the destruction documented at the site, a number of international research efforts were launched to record the extent of damage to cultural heritage resources in various ways. While analysis of high-resolution satellite imagery has typically been used to record the destruction of monuments by the hands of ISIS,<sup>4</sup> technological advancements in 3-dimensional documentation (3D) are used popularly to produce archival information and promote dissemination of information about cultural heritage sites. For example, the Institute for Digital Archaeology at the University of Oxford has created a 3D model of the destroyed Arch of Triumph in Palmyra using structure-from-motion photogrammetry data,<sup>5</sup> which was then printed as a 3D arch and put on display in London and New York. This initiative prompted a heated debate about the purpose of such an endeavor, both its creation and display, especially considering that the reproduced model not only failed to capture the authenticity of the original structure, but moreover showed a lack of relatedness between this initiative and heritage stakeholders in Syria. In this sense, the display was a 'technological hit' that claimed Western custodianship over an endangered heritage and not much else.

## Reconstruction of Palmyra

Throughout my work as an archaeologist concerned with the ongoing developments in Syria I note that, at various levels of authority, groups of international experts engage with problematic uses of heritage preservation claims without a clear concern for the ethics associated with the work of heritage preservation and management. Instead of promoting a better understanding of the way in which Syrian cultural heritage resources and their fate are mobilized for political or sectarian gains, a concern with an idealistic reconstruction of Palmyra de-sensitizes audiences and other experts alike to the context that gives Palmyra its significance: heritage reconstruction as a reconciling and unifying role in post-conflict Syria, with the Syrian people (not monuments) at the core of the reconstruction process. The day for discussions about the reconstruction of Palmyra will come and it will require a period of reflection about what should be rebuilt, how it should be done, and how recent events of the war and occupation by ISIS should be memorialized, if at all. This is a discussion that will invite voices from institutional and disciplinary heritage expertise. I argue, therefore, that this discussion must be undertaken by Syrians on all sides of the conflict and not decided for Syria by international experts and diplomatic organizations.

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### Notes

- 1 Al Quntar, S. & B.I. Daniels. 2016. 'Responses to the Destruction of Syrian Cultural Heritage: A Critical Review of Current Efforts', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5(2):381-397.
- 2 Meskell, L. 2010. 'Conflict Heritage and Expert Failure', in Labadi, S. & C. Long (eds) 2010. *Heritage and Globalisation*. London: Routledge, pp.192-201.
- 3 Eakin, H. 'Ancient Syrian Sites: A Different Story of Destruction' (The New York Review of Books, 29 September 2016); [tinyurl.com/syriansites](http://tinyurl.com/syriansites) (accessed 4 March 2018)
- 4 'Special Report: The Recapture of Palmyra'; [www.asor-syrianheritage.org/4290-2](http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/4290-2) (accessed 4 March 2018)
- 5 [www.digitalarchaeology.org.uk/building-the-arch](http://www.digitalarchaeology.org.uk/building-the-arch)



The Arch of Triumph, Palmyra, Syria. Photo by author.