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Syria's History and Heritage: Forgotten Relics



Damage to Mosque Oumer Al-Nebhani in Syria. (Photo: The Syrian archaeological heritage under threat)

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The news coming from Syria is gloomy on all levels. In the "Land of Civilizations," the longstanding history has not been spared from the war that has been raging there for nearly a year and a half, with the most prominent UNESCO World Heritage sites vulnerable to destruction from the fighting as well as looting.

International missions dedicated to surveying damages to archaeological sites (e.g. the International Committee of the Blue Shield or the missions dispatched by UNESCO) have been unable to enter Syria to provide a detailed report on the condition of these sites on the ground. Currently, the only information available in this regard comes from social networking websites such as Facebook, or the Syrian Arab News Agency and the appeals made by some international organizations. This information was collated by Emma Cunliffe, a PhD researcher at Durham University (UK), in order to produce a report. It was subsequently published by the Global Heritage Fund, in what was the first detailed account of the conditions of archaeological sites in Syria.

The report was entitled "Damage to the Soul: Syria's Cultural Heritage in Conflict," and it documents the damages sustained by ancient sites, arranged according to the causes of destruction, which include shelling, their usage as military positions, and thousands of incidents of merciless looting.

Tel Sheikh Hamad, the modern name of the Assyrian province center Dur-Katlimmu, was transformed into a battlefield between the Syrian army and the militants. There, an ancient Assyrian temple was destroyed. Fierce fighting took place near the Citadel of al-Mudiq in the city of Apamea, where the Syrian army has been stationed. The Syrian army also took position in the Castle of Ibn Maan which overlooks the ancient city of Palmyra. There have been many videos uploaded to the Facebook group [The Syrian Archaeological Heritage in Danger](#) (<http://www.facebook.com/Archeologie.syrienne>) which show the extent of the damage to these sites.

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The report explains that army occupation of archaeological sites, which are then converted into military positions, is exceedingly destructive. For one thing, armies usually have no qualms about deploying their vehicles in these sites, causing them major damage. The enormous weight of military vehicles and their constant movement may spell destruction for the antiquities and structures underground. In addition, soldiers may conduct "illegal" excavations in search of artifacts that they can sell in the antiquities' black market, eliminating in the process any hopes of restoring the sites.

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An additional problem may be the presence of armed forces in major urban centers such as Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and al-Hassakeh. This puts historical buildings and town centers in these cities under risk, as they are converted into military positions. This has been the case with Hisn al Akrad [Crac des Chevaliers], which, owing to its strategic position, has become a focal point for clashes among the various belligerents, as it oversees the trade route that links Homs to the Syrian hinterland as well as Tripoli. The Crac des Chevaliers is considered the largest and most architecturally significant Crusader castle in the Middle East. The reports could not determine the exact nature of the damage to the castle, but according to Dr. Bassam Jamous, Director General of Antiquities in Syria, the militants “drove out all employees from the Castle, and started excavating and looting.”

The damage to the sites was not caused only by army occupation. Destruction has been also caused directly by shelling. Three World Heritage Sites were damaged by bombardment, destroying the original fabric of Byzantine-era buildings in the villages of al-Bara, Deir Sunbel, and Ain Larose, which are situated in northern Syria. In Bosra, also known by its Ottoman name Busra Eski Şam (Ancient al-Sham), one of the richest sites in the Middle East as a vestige of Roman-era urban planning, several buildings were destroyed by the shelling of the city. Religious buildings have not been spared either. In the Monastery of Sednaya, one of the oldest continuously used Christian monasteries in the world, shelling has damaged the oldest section of the structure, which dates back to 574. Damage was also reported in the Umayyad Mosque in Daraa; the mosque is one of the oldest Islamic-era buildings in Syria, having been built in the early years of the Islamic Conquest at the behest of the Caliph Omar Ibn al-Khattab. Jamous said that historic buildings in Damascus, Aleppo, Bosra and Palmyra as well as the Citadel of Salah al-Din have been the targets of terrorist attacks.

Museum Thefts



One theft acknowledged by the Syrian authorities to have taken place involved a golden statue of an Aramaic god from the 8th century BC. The statue was considered one of Syria's most important symbols. A picture of the statue was put on the Stolen Works of Art Red List published by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), while Interpol and the World Customs Organization were also notified. Despite the fact that the statue has been on Interpol's most wanted list since last December, it has yet to be recovered. The Syrian authorities have also reported thefts in the museums of Deir al-Zor, Maarat al-Naman, al-Raqqa and Qalaat Jaabar, and journalists have confirmed that the museums of Homs and Hama were looted months ago. Here, pundits agree that one major drawback is the lack of adequate documentation in place in museum warehouses. With the absence of serial numbers and photographs that confirm items belong to a museum, many artifacts disappear into the market, and there is no real possibility of recovery.

Meanwhile, concerns are looming over other Syrian museums that have not seen thefts yet, such as the Museum of Idlib, which houses the archives of the ancient city of Ebla. These date back to the third millennium BC, and following their discovery, they revealed vital information in the study of human history and the history of the region.

The Museum has endured damages as a result of the shelling. The Facebook page The Syrian Archaeological Heritage in Danger posted

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reports that mentioned that artifacts have been transferred from the Museum of Aleppo to a safe place, which was confirmed later by Hiba Sakhel, Director of Museums in Syria, in an interview in April. Sakhel said that the items were being stored at the Central Bank of Syria. On a different note, Sakhel said that "Syria has not been fully searched by archaeologists so wherever you dig you make a find." She added "I believe those doing the looting are locals drawn by profit and who care little about the importance of the country's heritage."


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The reason for this may be the absence of the central government. Now extensive looting of archaeological sites using bulldozers is taking place, as was seen in satellite pictures. Holes have begun to appear in several sites, with some over 4 meters in diameter - the results of illegal excavations.

It should be noted that the increase in these thefts is the result of large demand in the international antiquities black market, which usually takes advantage of conflicts in certain countries and enters them and buys whatever is being sold there. Syrian antiquities are thus now prevalent in the market, and it is expected that the amount of such objects being supplied will increase in the coming months.

Facebook Groups

Many people are interested in protecting archaeological sites and cultural heritage in Syria, especially those involved in scientific circles. Dedicated groups have been founded by such individuals with the purpose of collecting data on the conditions of archaeological sites and antiquities, relying on both official and unofficial sources. In this context, a group of specialists created the Facebook page The Syrian Archaeological Heritage in Danger, where they upload information, pictures and videos documenting the damages sustained by archaeological sites in the country. According to its creators, the group seeks to spread awareness about the issue to preserve Syria's heritage. In addition, several international groups are making appeals for historic and archaeological sites to be preserved and prevented from being turned into battlegrounds.

The Land of Civilizations

Due to its historic characteristics and archaeological significance Syria is known as the Land of Civilizations. Since the period before human settlement, which excavations have shown to have first begun on the banks of the Euphrates in Syria, this land has been known to be a crossing point for civilizations. Syria occupies a central place in history, and its geography and landscape have given it another unique character. In Syria, there are Sumerian, Aramaic, Phoenician, Roman, and Byzantine sites. Essentially, however, Syria remains the birthplace of the Umayyads, and in Syria too, the Crusaders left behind some of the largest castles they ever built.

To date, Syria has not lost its historic identity. But it is certainly under threat.

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