



The Status of Syrian Antiquities since the Beginning of the Crisis until Feb 1, 2013, and their Protection Measures

The painful events taking place in Syria all through the current crisis have reflected negatively on the Syrian cultural heritage. However, the information being published pertaining to that does not very often match reality. On the contrary, it lacks objectivity as regards the status quo of the Syrian cultural heritage, and it depends upon exaggeration and propaganda at a critical time as we are in desperate need of accurate information. In addition, non-professional bodies are launching a prejudiced attack creating the impression that museums are being looted and the antiques are being stolen.

Hence, the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) confirms that the holdings of all Syrian museums are intact and have been transferred to a safe place. Moreover, it asserts that there is a need to differentiate between museums and archaeological sites, some of which suffer from vandalism and damage. Furthermore, the DGAM, in cooperation with the concerned authorities and the local community, has been making concerted efforts to reduce the impact of the current crisis on these sites and museums. Besides, the Directorate stresses the fact that owing to this cooperation several sites were protected, and stolen items were returned by means of border confiscations as well as raiding gangs' hideouts.

Given that the DGAM is committed to honesty and integrity vis-à-vis the status of the antiquities, we present this report documenting the extent of damage in the



Syrian museums and archaeological sites since the beginning of the crisis till Feb 1, 2013, based on reports and information obtained from the DGAM:

Assessing the Status Quo

a. The Syrian museums

All museums were emptied of artifacts which were wrapped and transferred to safe places; additional iron gates were installed to all museums, and all the important historic documents and manuscripts were transferred to special and secure storehouses to be protected against theft, arson and humidity. Generally speaking, the Syrian museums are all in good condition set aside some damages to the following:

- Thefts were limited to two historic pieces: one of them is a gilt bronze statue, dating back to the Aramaic period, from Hama Museum, and the other is a piece of marble stone from Apamea Museum.
- The National Museum of Aleppo along with Deir ez-Zor Museum suffered from losses such as windows and doors smashing due to bombings in neighboring areas.
- Department of Antiquities in Maarrat al-Nu'man confirms that all Maarrat Museum halls are sound and intact, and its holdings are safe. However, the building was subjected to some damages caused by clashes nearby.
- Taibat *al*-Imam Museum, Hama, has recently suffered from some damages to its windows and doors. Nonetheless, the mosaic panel is in good



condition.

- Folk art museums in Aleppo, Homs and Deir ez-Zor were subjected to minor damages. However, all historic pieces of art were transferred to a safe place.
- Seventeen pieces of pottery as well as some clay dolls were stolen from the exhibition hall in Jaabar Castle.
- The collections of Doura Europos Museum were stolen (replicas not originals). Moreover, the security room in addition to the tickets office were sabotaged.

b. The archaeological buildings and sites

1st- Clashes

- Some castles (Madiq Castle, Krak des Chevaliers, the entrance to the Citadel of Aleppo and its northern tower, Shayzar Castle, Rahba Castle) have undergone minor damages in certain positions.
- Due to clashes, hundreds of historic antique shops as well as goods and new wooden doors were burned down in old Aleppo souks such as Al-zerb, Al-Obbi, Al-Atme, Al-Attareen, Al-Niswan, Al-Soof, Al-Sagha.
- The Great Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo suffered from damages on the inside as well as the outside. In addition, it is still in need of conducting scientific field studies according to archaeological standards and criteria in



order to determine the extent of the damage in terms of its degree in both original and rehabilitated structures.

- Pictures published by some news agencies have shown that Bimaristan Arghun, Aleppo, (also known as the Museum of Medicine and Science) suffered from some damages – which was confirmed by the Directorate of Antiquities in Aleppo. Nevertheless, it seems impossible to determine the nature and extent of the damage due to difficulty in accessing the place for the time being.
- Some buildings in Old Aleppo were damaged as a result of the clashes.
- Um al-Zennar Church in addition to other churches and some old souks in Homs were damaged due to clashes.
- Historic Hrak Mosque in Izraa suffered from damages in its western wall, northern wall and part of its roof. As well, the minarets of both the old mosque in the city of Sheik Meskeen and the old mosque in the town of Mahajja were damaged. Those two latter mosques are registered as traditional non-historic buildings.
- Mabrak el-Naqa building and Nymph Temple (also publicly known as King's Daughter's Bed) in Bosra were damaged. Furthermore, the only remaining lintel above the columns was damaged as well as some old houses in Bosra.
- Some old houses in the town of Nawa were subjected to destruction



2nd- Construction violations

Unlike practices such as secret excavations, vandalism and looting which receive high resistance and are fought against by the local people of the areas surrounding the archaeological sites, the local community does not show the same degree of cooperation with regard to recent construction violations that are prevalent as some people are taking advantage of the state of chaos and due to difficulties in controlling these violations taking place around the archaeological sites.

3rd- Excavating and vandalizing archaeological sites

Antiquities thieves have become active at the far-off archeological sites, taking advantage of the difficulty in ensuring protection and the few number of guards. The followings are the most serious violations:

1- Hasaka:

The Hasaka Directorate of Antiquities pointed out in a report that the archeological sites north of the governorate have so far been in good condition as no illegal excavations took place, especially the important sites where Syrian and foreign missions have been conducting explorations for years. Those sites are (Tell Mozan, Tell Leilan, Tell Beydar, and Tell Arbeed), and they include some of the most significant ancient kingdoms in the region. The directorate also asserted



that Hamokar archaeological site is fine; however, nearby hills suffered from secret excavations. As for (Tell Berry, Tell Brak, and Tell Halaf), they have not been subjected to attacks or sabotage.

The report showed that the absence of vandalism acts at these important sites is the result of the cooperation of the locals and popular protection units in the area, adding that there is no accurate information about the status of archeological sites south of the governorate, due to the difficulty that archeologists and guards face in accessing them.

2- Raqqa:

The Directorate of Antiquities in Raqqa indicated in a report that Jaabar Castel is safe but closed for the time being due to the presence of gunmen in the area and the neighboring villages.

3- Deir ez-Zor:

Doura Europos in Deir ez-Zor has suffered from secret and limited excavations at the site in addition to five construction violations. Moreover, the losses in Doura Europos were merely some equipment theft which belongs to the mission working at the site. Also, the collections of Doura Europos Museum were stolen (replicas not originals) as previously mentioned.

Several sites such as Halabia, Zalabia, Tell al-Roum and Tell al-Kasra have witnessed no violations or secret excavations. However, thieves managed to steal the gates of the entrances to the towers and to Halbia historic site in Deir ez-Zor.



In addition, the excavation tools of the Syrian French archaeological expedition working at the site were stolen as well as a caravan owned by the Directorate of Tourism in the governorate.

There is no accurate information as regards the status of the archaeological site of Mari, though the report of the Department of Antiquities of Deir ez-Zor, on 2-11-2012, stated that some archaeological sites stretching from Maadan west to the city of al-Bukamal in the east suffered from secret digging operations; furthermore, the mission's accommodation and the Visitors Center at the site of Mari were burgled.

4- Idlib:

Illegal digging operations became active at Ebla archeological site by the end of December 2012 after a drop in such activities at an earlier time according to reports by the Directorate of Antiquities in Idlib. The reports also showed that the illegal explorations that Ebla suffered from for months are receding due to the nature of the site on the one hand as it is not easy to detect the places of treasures, and thanks to the endeavors of the villagers that put an end to those acts on the other hand.

Idlib Directorate of Antiquities provided detailed information on the acts of antiquities thieves in Ebla, which caused a lot of damage to the modern facilities of the site such as the cafeteria at the entrance to the northern hill and the newly constructed building southwest the site, which was supposed to be a center to



receive visitors, in addition to the service room and its facilities.

As for the damages at the historic site and its relics, they, for the most part, were caused by weather conditions in winter which affected some walls, annually restored by the archaeological mission working at the site.

As well, the site suffered from damages caused by some people who focused their attention on the following sectors:

-The Acropolis: Random holes spread all over the courtyards of the Royal Palace (G) especially around the archive room. Thieves attempted to enter by means of digging holes below some walls in order to reach older levels not explored yet. Moreover, they partly destroyed the basalt staircase in the administrative suite of the palace with the purpose of penetrating the layers; a number of wells were searched again despite being previously excavated by the expedition there. More historic levels were sabotaged in parts of the Palace (E). Besides, some insignificant diggings took place at the top of the Acropolis.

-The Northern Palace (P) and the Great Temple of Ishtar were subjected to digging operations in some halls, but that posed no real threat. Also, some wells were searched again despite being previously excavated.

-The Southern Palace (FF), located in the slope of the Acropolis, suffered from vandalism and minor diggings which did not affect the building and can be repaired later.

-The perpetrators excavated several sectors in the Temple of the Rock (HH)



which was a significant temple in Ebla during the ancient Bronze Age (the middle of the 3rd millennium BC). Only one hole was dug there, and one well was searched.

-The Royal Palace (Q) in addition to the fences, gates and other sectors of the historic hill were not subjected to any damage.

A detailed report by the Department of Archaeological Parks in Idlib showed the condition of the five archaeological parks in Idlib which were incorporated into the list of World Heritage sites in June 2011 with three other ones in Aleppo- which all represented the historic villages in the Limestone Massif (also known as the Dead cities) north of Syria; moreover, the nature of damage differs from one park to another in accordance with the following:

- 1- Gebel Barisha Park, which encompasses (Baqerha, al-Dirona, Dar Qita, and Kherbet Khatib), did not suffer from any damages, violations or secret excavation thanks to the cooperation of the locals in the region.
- 2- Gebel al-Aala Park, which encompasses (Qalb Lozeh, Qarqabiza, and kfeire), experienced no violations or destruction according to reports by observers, apart from some damages to the iron gates and entrances of Qalb Lozeh Church.
- 3- Gebel al-Woastani Park, which includes (Kafr Oqab, al-Fasuq, Banassra), is, by and large, safe and suffers from no serious violations.
- 4- Gebel az-Zawiya Park/al-Bara, which includes (al-Bara, Wadi Martahun,



Magelya, Batirsa, Bshilla, Baoudeh, Sergella, DeLozeh, Shanshrah, and Rabeea), suffered from violations and vandalism in some parts:

Al-Bara site:

- Three stone sarcophagi inside the pyramid tomb were broken as well as a gate lintel and the door of an olive oil mill. Moreover, four historic crowns were stolen.
- Some local people are living in around 15 caves and refurbishing some others in addition to rock engraved Byzantine tombs.
- Some front parts at the site were tarnished due to clashes. These are the front parts of Abi Sufyan Castel, the pyramidal burial chamber (known as Sawmaa), the eastern façade of one of the five churches, the pyramidal burial chamber (known as Mazuqa) north and south, and the eastern façade of the Monastery.

Sergella site:

- Sign boards were broken as well as the sarcophagus at the entrance of Sergella site.
- Some villagers from Kafr Roma dwell in about 10 historic houses in Sergella.
- The doors, windows, and switches of the entrance to the site were broken. Moreover, the office, the electricity room and the tickets office were broken into.



Wadi Martahun, Magelya, Batirsa, Bshilla, Baoudeh, and DeLozeh sites:

Some people have lived and refurbished 7 caves; in addition, secret excavation took place in scattered spots.

Shansharah and Rabeea sites: No violations took place in these two sites.

5- Gebel al-Zawyia/al-Maara Park, which includes (Jerade and Ruwiha), suffered from secret excavation, and recent building violations reached Jerada site; some façades in Jerade site were tarnished. Furthermore, the headquarters and homes of foreign expeditions were burgled in Idlib.

5- Aleppo:

- Al-Deidariya cave in Mount Simeon suffered from acts of sabotage, which included the excavation area and archaeological sectors previously explored by the mission working there; in addition, the equipment of excavations, wooden columns and boards were looted.

6- Hama:

- Apamea site ranks as one of the most affected sites due to the ongoing secret digging operations in the east, northeast and west of the city.
- A lot of construction stones were stolen from al-Andrine historic site.

7- Homs:



- Illegal excavation acts in unexplored tombs in Palmyra have been put an end to lately, and the situation has become under control and the site under protection.

8- Damascus and its countryside:

- There are no serious damages apart from burgling the accommodations of the National Mission working at Tell Sakka site.

9- Daraa:

- The cultural scene in Lajat site, an open-air museum for Safaitic inscriptions, was distorted.
- Secret and limited excavation works are taking place in other places.

10- Lattakia, Tartus, and Sweida:

- There are no damages according to reports from those cities.

11- Quneitra:

- There were no damages there except for some construction violations at al-Rafid site which were dealt with together with some other construction violations.

The DGAM through this report seeks to provide an accurate account of the archaeological and historic sites which were subjected to damages during the current crisis. Nevertheless, we would like to assert that other sites might have



suffered from damages that were not documented by the antiquities departments of the governorates due to violent clashes in their surroundings.

4th- Antiquities forgery phenomenon

By way of examining samples from some confiscations, it is evident that artifacts forgery has been active lately as antiquities thieves tend to forge pieces of art and sell them as genuine ones such as mosaic panels and Palmyra statues. Antiques forgery has been around for years and it is punishable by the law.

Protection procedures

- Precautionary measures:

- All archaeological and historic pieces of art were amassed in safe and secure places, and burglar alarms were installed in some museums and fortresses. In addition, the number of guards was increased.
- The Interpol was informed about the missing pieces and all the widespread mobile phone pictures believed to be of Syrian historic undiscovered and unregistered treasures thieves dug up illegally.
- Cooperation with international organizations for the purpose of exchanging ideas and visions regarding the current situation of the Syrian cultural heritage has been achieved. Moreover, ICOMOS has organized an e-learning course aiming at enhancing the skills of the Syrian national cadres in “Ways and Techniques for Protecting Cultural Heritage in Times



of Conflict” with the participation of international experts from ICOMOS and ICCROM.

- The Ministry of Culture/DGAM and the specialized authorities (the army, riot forces, police, customs, governorate, municipalities, etc) have taken several measures to protect the historic sites. Thanks to this cooperation, stolen antiques were returned through confiscations in Damascus, Tartus, Palmyra, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, etc. The number of the confiscated items amounted to 4000 including beads, coins, statues and mosaic panels, though some of them were fake.

- Launching a national campaign to involve the local community in protecting Syrian antiquities:

Within the framework of the campaign of the Ministry of Culture "Syria – my homeland", the DGAM has launched a national campaign targeting 23 million Syrians to engage them all in protecting ancient Syrian antiquities and cultural heritage, which they take pride in, against theft, vandalism and distortion as it is everyone's responsibility, and they should work together to protect those antiquities.

The national campaign started its activities on 15-10-2012 by means of putting up road advertisements in all Syrian cities and governorates and showing films on national televisions encouraging Syrians to defend their Syrian cultural identity.

As for interaction with the local community, workers in all directorates of antiquities are collaborating on protecting Syrian antiquities with volunteers, interested people, opinion leaders and intellectual, cultural and religious elites in



order to create a feeling in every Syrian that damaging antiquities is an assault against their civilization, national identity and history.

Prof. Dr. Maamoun AbdulKarim
Director General of Antiquities and Museums

