

## The Impact of Armed Conflict on Cultural Heritage

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The looting of the Baghdad Museum during the war in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent damage to the ancient city of Babylon by the US military reached newspapers around the world, raising public awareness concerning the impact of armed conflict on cultural heritage. More recently, Hollywood - through George Clooney - romanticized the role of World War II Monuments Men (and women) responsible for protecting and recovering works of art looted by the Nazis.

Today, every day, we are witnessing massive and deliberate destruction of built heritage and an industrial level of looting of ancient sites in Syria and surrounding countries due to the economic instability caused by civil unrest. Today's "monuments men" are both archaeologists and concerned citizens, who put themselves on the front lines to protect their heritage, their collective identities, from being erased. Within the last two months, two Syrian archaeologists were killed by Da'esh (also known as ISIS or ISIL), one publicly beheaded in the city of Palmyra. Heritage professionals are documenting sites at risk and destroyed, making inventories of artifacts and monitoring the trafficking of conflict antiquities. They are arranging safe houses for moveable heritage (artifacts) and advising local community members in triage techniques to safeguard immovable heritage sites under physical attack due to barrel bombs, planted dynamite, and looters.

The destruction of heritage is a long-standing weapon used by one force against a people, (the Romans used a tactic against individuals called *damnatio memoriae*) resulting in the erasure of another culture's identity. Used as means through which to dominate local historical narratives, suppress particular communities, and exploit resources (in the form of artifacts) for their own gain, tangible heritage is under continuing threat.

Just as the destruction of heritage can be used as a weapon, its preservation can be used as a tool for healing. The reclamation or preservation of heritage can foster respect and dialogue between cultures that are experiencing continuing trauma caused by the impact of armed conflict. Links to the tangible past can be a first step towards rebuilding a community torn apart by war. A notable example is the rebuilding of the Mostar Bridge in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Built by an Ottoman Turk in the 1500s, the old bridge represented Muslim history in a multi-ethnic city. In 1993 it became the victim -- symbolizing the broken relations between the city's Muslims, Serbs and Croats -- when the bridge was blown up by Croat forces. Today, preservation specialists can study the successes and failures of restoration projects in post-conflict areas - like the reopening of the Mostar bridge in 2004 - to understand how these projects may become a tool for dialogue and peacebuilding.

The following are some examples of preservation organizations working towards peace.

### Italy

#### **Comunicazione Culturale**

Captain Elena Croci is an Italian Army Reserve Officer and a specialist in cultural communication, focusing on military participation in strengthening Afghan national identity at

risk. Her book, *Made in Herat*, documenting the local heritage (tangible and intangible), was published within the city of Herat and circulated to schools and nascent cultural organizations. The initiative, supported by the Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), "was an integral part of the post-conflict reconstruction phase, essential for the stabilization process to foster a spirit of identity and belonging. We are talking about a Nation that has experienced 30 years of war, circumstances in which cultural and historic memory was partially erased." Tragically, soon after the circulation of the book, many of Croci's Afghan colleagues were killed by the Taliban.  
<http://www.comunicazioneculturale.it/en/cultura-della-difesa.html>

### Lebanon

**BILADI** ("my country" in English), is the name of the organisation set up by Lebanese archaeologist Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly in 2005. The concept is simple: young people are taken to visit cultural sites and then taught their historical significance in seminars. BILADI is an N.G.O dedicated to promoting cultural and natural heritage to children, supporting the mission that heritage is unique and irreplaceable. "In post-conflict countries, globalization and psychological barriers have separated youngsters from their heritage."  
<http://daleel-madani.org/profile/biladi>

### Sweden

#### **Cultural Heritage Without Borders**

Created in 1995 in response to the acute need to respond to war in Bosnia Herzegovina, this independent non-government organization promotes conservation and reanimation of cultural property in area ravaged by armed conflict.  
<http://chwb.org/>

### Italy/Syria

#### **Archaeology in Syria Network**

The main goal for creating "Archaeology in Syria" NETWORK is to connect those who are involved or interested in disseminating accumulated multidisciplinary knowledge through continuous archaeological excavation and research in the Near East in general. Now partnered with the Association for Research Into Crimes Against Art (Amelia, IT), the network now documents heritage at risk in Syria and Yemen.  
<http://ainsyria.net/>

### USA

**The Cultural Heritage Action Group** is an organization within the Department of Defense, providing global operations, planning, cultural sensitivity training and reach back support that promotes Cultural Property Protection (CPP) during full spectrum operations for COCOM (Combatant Command) and Joint Force planners and engineers within military installations worldwide.  
<http://cchag.org/index.php/what-we-do/in-theater-training-aids/>