



Archaeological reconstruction attempts in Syria

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Since the beginning of the war in Syria in 2011, the country's cultural heritage has been subjected to different kinds of annihilation. With the conflict nearing some kind of end but external forces still destabilizing the region, ongoing plans for the reconstruction of Syria's archaeological casualties generate a multifaceted debate over when they should be taking place, the motivating factors behind these projects, their purpose and who are the stakeholders coordinating their implementation. The reconstruction of post-conflict archaeology in Syria could be providing a valuable opportunity for sustaining communities through participatory initiatives that appropriate the traces of war.

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Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Syria in 2011, the archaeological landscape of the region, which is made up of more than 6,500 mapped Neolithic-to-Ottoman sites, has suffered from minor to severe combat-related damages and intentional demolitions. Its heritage has been devastated by common warfare activities such as air raids, grenades, gunfire, encampment, the entrenchment of military vehicles and weaponry installations; its museums have been looted, shut down or barricaded and archaeological excavations have been put to a halt.¹ Satellite-based damage assessment reports released in 2017, revealed that one in four sites in the country has been damaged or looted during the war with the type and level of damage differing from one site to the other.² All six World Heritage sites in Syria - the Ancient City of Aleppo, the Ancient City of Bosra, the Ancient City of Damascus, the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din and the Site of Palmyra – are officially endangered since 2013 and as of March 2016, they have been reported destroyed or damaged.

A strategic location and a place that easily receives great amounts of publicity, media reports and propagandas, the ancient site of Palmyra moved from one side to the other and fell into the control of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) twice in less than two years.³ When recaptured in 2016 by government forces, it was revealed that damages were less than feared, with almost 80% of the external buildings having had survived. However, the museum was destroyed, tombs had been broken open and several temples and columns, including the most recognizable landmark of Palmyra, the Arch of Triumph, were lying on the ground.⁴

This unprecedented damage has provoked several ongoing local, national and international reconstruction plans. These vary from anastyloses of fallen columns and local, impromptu initiatives to organized, community-based in situ restorations and digital recreations, such as the 3D-printer replica of the ancient arch at the Temple of Bel at Palmyra.⁵ To purportedly send a message to the Islamic State that technology can discourage and weaken ISIS, the arch was recreated by the Oxford-based Institute for Digital Archaeology in sections in Shanghai, by curving out Egyptian marble with the use of 3D printing machinery. After being finished in Italy, the two-thirds scale model was erected in Trafalgar Square in London in April 2016 and traveled to New York and Dubai to be later moved to Syria. The extent to which a million-dollar project emanating as a result of IS's destructive activities can make them feel they don't have an impact is to be assessed. But there is also an issue of how resources are spent: why spend so much for a replica that will end up in a site which is still impressive and the anastylosis of fallen columns has already revived the beauty of the space to a great extent?⁶

In a war where archaeological casualties are not simply the side-effect, but often a prerequisite or even a goal, the destruction of the tangible past is seen as almost pointed towards erasing or reshaping contemporary ethnic identities. When IS occupied Palmyra, they released a number of very well-publicized videos and photos showing deliberate demolitions and the beheading of statues on the grounds of infidelity. They did so to gain attention and provide a cover for the group's common habit of looting, smuggling and selling antiquities to fund their activities. But another motive was to destroy monuments representing the identity and memory promoted by the government. Considering that the Syrian identity is shaped by a plethora of Greek, Islamic and Roman sites, focusing on the reconstruction of a Roman-period monument already destroyed by radical actors may be facilitating a prolongation of the conflict.⁷

At the other end of the spectrum, smaller-scale public archaeology initiatives such as the Berlin-based association Syrians for Heritage (SIMAT) are focusing on in situ restorations and documentations by prioritizing local stakeholders. For example, through its project in Al Bara, one of the sites of the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, Syrian professionals are documenting damages and utilize the expertise of local workers for applying local traditional building techniques to replace missing limestone, carve new stones and incorporate the materials into the walls. And in its Hekkaya project, SIMAT has organised tours, workshops and an introduction to excavation and preservation techniques for children, to raise awareness and demonstrate the possibilities of reconstructing damaged archaeology. Working

closely with the Idlib Antiquities Center and through setting up a committee consisting of members from the city of Idlib as well as SIMAT, the association initiated the preparation of reports for the assessment of the current condition of the Idlib Museum, which was twice bombed by the government in 2015 and 2016 after its occupation by the opposition. SIMAT coordinated the rehabilitation of the Idlib Museum storage, the preservation of the remaining objects and the re-organizing of its inventory.⁸

The arch replica fails to acknowledge the difficulties of going back to the original value of a building; the recreation of the arch implies that its destruction was a threat towards Syrian history, ignoring the contemporary landscape. On the contrary, projects like those of SIMAT seem to be acknowledging the opposite by making a leap towards transforming destruction into a valuable opportunity for positive change, without sweeping the traumatic memories of war under the carpet of overly interpretative replicas. Projects not strictly limited to on-the-site-reconstructions but which instead focus on listening to and involving local communities are incorporating the contemporary traces of war in a healing rebuilding process that will allow for public access to the new strata and the new stories associated with the conflict-stricken monument. This new narrative might spark an increasing tourist interest on how the Arab Spring or the war affected the country's material culture and the society's relationship with its past.⁹

The Syrian society is divided by a multitude of religious, ethnic and political cleavages where the past is respectively perceived differently. These distinct and often opposing perceptions of the past and aspirations for the future must be taken into consideration when planning out archaeological reconstructions. When the time comes and the situation in the region is stabilized, the recovery of post-war archaeology will certainly necessitate proper planning, preparation, strategy and organization in a timely fashion.¹⁰ In this process, it is important to acknowledge the war-inclusive, ongoing lifecycle of monuments and that authenticity will be established through public engagement. Receptive and inclusive initiatives that will embrace the contemporary and involve local expertise and knowledge for the reconstruction of archaeological sites will hopefully disempower ISIS more effectively than remote projects that attempt authenticity through imitation.

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