

The Syrian archaeological heritage is in danger

An inventory of the state of minarets, mosques, monasteries that were damaged or looted

Appeal to the international community

The archaeological Syrian heritage undergoes various types of damage and degradation to varying degrees on buildings or historic neighborhoods, archaeological sites, museums or places of worship. This destruction began on March 15, 2011, the rise of the Syrian uprising.

Through this appeal, we wish to bring awareness to all about such destruction and invite the international community to support and accompany the inventory and the denunciation of abuses affecting a heritage which is in more than one way about the whole humanity.

We hope that this call could become the basis for future work on the issue of damage to cultural property in the country. It also aims to avoid the recurrence of such serious and widespread destruction as those that occurred during the repression suffered by the city of Hama in 1982, which has seen its historic neighborhoods and its movable heritage devastated, its museum looted, and in general depredations that no one has ever dared to speak about since.

In what follows, we present the first observed damage and dangers to the Syrian historical and cultural heritage (in some cases classified as world heritage). Then we propose a classification of these degradations according to their nature and severity.

The information below comes from various sources: photos and videos transmitted via social media, anonymous testimony of correspondents on the ground and more rarely articles in the press.

1 - Places of worship and religious buildings

After the early days of the revolution in Syria had shown that places of worship were hotbeds of protest, we observed different types of overt and systematic degradation committed by the Syrian army against these buildings.

These degradations were perpetrated against several places of worship, including various mosques in the list of classified cultural property Syrian. We will cite some examples.

1) The Omari mosque in **DER'A**, **BOSRA** and **INKHIL**, buildings that date back to the

proto-Islamic time. They are considered to belong to the oldest mosques of Islam and bear witness to the original plan of Muslim places of worship. The ones in Der'a and Bosra were founded at the time of the Caliphate of Omar bin Khattab in the seventh century.

2) In the city of **HOMS**, the minaret of Qa'ab el-Ahbar in Bab Drib was partially destroyed, as well as the mosque Khaled Ibn Al-Walid, a symbol of the city of Homs, was bombed.

3) In the province of Idlib, the historic minaret of the mosque of al-Tekkiyeh in the city of **ARIHA** and the old mosque in the city of **SERMIN** were bombed.

4) A shell came through the wall in the monastery of Notre Dame de **SEYDNAYA**, whose foundation and initial construction dates back to early Christian times of Justinian in 547 AD.

5) There have been countless impacts of fire throughout the Cathédrale de la Sainte Vierge Umm el-Zinnar in **HOMS**, which dates back to early Christian times.

The aforementioned is due to either the shooting and bombing of the army operating remotely or the direct intervention of troops within the walls of the monuments, as was for the case in the mosque of al-Omari in **DER'A**, where, to make an armory and discredit opponents who had taken refuge in the building, excavations have been performed.

We noticed also the transformation of places of worship in military cantonments.

Finally, we must give some thoughts to the very alarming news received recently about the damage to **DEIR AL-MARCH MOUSA HABASHI** monastery, when armed gangs entered this place in search of Father Paulo, on the pretext that it was hiding weapons. The foundations of this monastery are mentioned for the first time in a Syriac manuscript dated from 575, as a Roman stronghold before it was transformed into a monastery. The remains found in the present monastery date back in the 11th and 12th Centuries.

2 - Looting of the remains or the facilitation of the looting

First, let's mention the official letter from the Syrian Prime Minister to various administrations and ministries of the country. According to this document from the government of Damascus, the country was under threat of infiltration by criminal groups equipped with high technology tools and specialized in the theft of manuscripts and antiquities and in the looting of museums. This letter, dated July 7, 2011 and signed by Adel Safar, is numbered 9575/1. The manuscripts are stored in several buildings in Damascus (al-Assad Library, the center of the historical archives in Damascus, the library of the Grande Mosquée des Omeyyades), but also in most libraries in the country, particularly in Aleppo.

The government's letter can be viewed as a rather unusual document, since it was

released at a time when protest movements were limited. Ahead of many of the events, it anticipates a situation of chaos that was *a priori* unpredictable at the time.

Moreover, illicit excavations conducted primarily in the ancient city of **APAMEA**, resulted in the looting of a valuable mosaic. Added to this is the looting of two capitals of the colonnade of the *decumanus* in the heart of the city.

The security forces began emptying several museums, such as the Museum of **DER'A** and the National Museum of **ALEPPO**, and some of the objects kept in the museums of **QUNEITRA**, **HAMA** and **HOMS**. These collections were transferred either to Damascus or to various other unknown places.

Other major problems also seem to exist in other regions, notably in the region of Idlib, in which the fate of the regional museum is more than uncertain. Equally uncertain is the one of the magnificent museum **MA'ARET EL-NU'MAN**. Finally, in the same region, the looting of archaeological centre of Ebla (**TELL MARDIKH**, a powerful Syrian kingdom of the third and second millennia) has been reported.

The Museum of **DEIR EZ-ZOR** also raises very serious concerns. Regional Centre for conservation of excavations in the provinces of Deir ez-Zor and Jezireh (two regions among the richest in relics), this museum is the custodian of one of the world's largest archive of cuneiform writing dated different periods (from the 3rd to the 1st millennia).

According to local sources the caravan city of Palmyra faces a major danger for its movable heritage because of the incessant troop movements are taking place.

In the province of Hama, the citadel of Shaizar suffered serious damage: the interior has been partially looted after the main door was shattered.

3 - Direct bombing of cultural heritage property

At the time of writing this appeal, several archaeological sites and monuments have suffered direct shelling in several provinces of the country.

- The most violent are those that affect the historic villages of **LIMESTONE MASSIF** (dead cities of the region of Idlib).
- The most targeted are certain sites and monuments of the province of Der'a, particularly the cities of **INKHIL**, **DA'IL**, **DAR AL BALAD**, **BOSRA**.
- In the region of Deir ez-Zor, the site of **SHEIKH HAMAD** (Dur Katlimmu) was transformed into a battlefield between deserters and army.
- Several historic buildings in the city of **HAMA** have suffered, especially in what remains of the ancient citadel.
- Bombing of the citadel of **HOMS**.
- Bombing of the citadel of Qal Al-Hosn (**KRAK DES CHEVALIERS**), including the great medieval mosque in the heart of the citadel.

Finally, the massive and brutal bombardment of the citadel of **AL-MUDIQ**, opposite the ancient city of Apamea

4 - Transformation of some archaeological sites or areas in military camps

Several cities are affected by these changes:

- **DEAD CITIES** of the limestone massif of the province of Idlib;
- Several archaeological sites in the provinces of **DER'A, HOMS, HAMA, BOSRA**, etc., which were turned into camps or military bases.

The citadels in general have been particularly affected by these changes: excavations, etc.

We can classify the cases into major categories:

a) **Excavations** were done in some archaeological tells to make shelters to protect tanks and other weapons parts. Such is the case in:

- **TELL QARQUR** and **KHAN SHEIKHOUN** (two essential sites for the third millennium) in the province of Hama;
- **TELL AFIS**, dug to house several tanks;
- **TELL A'ZZAZ** (Bronze Age, not yet excavated) in the province of Aleppo, which saw the installation of heavy weaponry;
- The ancient city of **PALMYRA**, in the ancient ruins, especially near the burial towers of the necropolis, where tanks and heavy weapons have been positioned and barracks built, especially near the Great Wall.

b) The transformation of several archaeological sites in the **battlefield**. This particularly applies to **DEAD CITIES** between Aleppo and Idlib, but also to several historical monuments, such as the citadel of **BOSRA, HAMA** and **HOMS** and especially Qal'at el-Hosn (**KRAK DES CHEVALIERS**).

The deserters who take refuge in these places are bombed and pursued.

c) **Installation of tanks and heavy weapons** by the Syrian army in the citadels (dominant position) progressively with the deployment of forces of repression:

- **PALMYRE** ;
- **QAL'AT EL-MUDIQ** ;
- **QAL'AT EL-MARKAB** (Banyas) ;
- the remains of **QAL'AT HOMS** ;
- the remains of **QAL'AT HAMA**.

d) The military installation on the sites or within monuments result in **excavations** whose objective is not only the positioning of weapons but also looting. Some parts of the ancient cities and monuments are being degraded because of the **bulk removal of stones** or materials for the construction of the defensive system of the position.

5 - Bribery of officials responsible for the heritage

This aspect represents a major threat to Syrian archeology. In this uprising, these

officials have found the right moment to push through illegal projects (construction in protected areas) or looting of sites. Because they are linked with the secret services, it is difficult to assess today the extent of their illegal actions. If there are documents that could reveal the abuses, they are bound to secrecy by the central government itself.

6 - Clandestine excavations

Clandestine excavations have posed a threat to Syrian history and heritage for many years. Unfortunately, current events have significantly increased this risk. Many groups have attempted to conduct secret excavations, starting by the security forces. We deplore the participation of civilians in these criminal actions. The actors vary by the regions. Previously hidden, these violations are taking place right now in full view of everyone. We have examples found in the provinces of **DER'A, HAMA** and **HOMS**.

The clandestine excavations have become objects of negotiation: they are tolerated by the authorities to anyone who agrees to stay away from lifting or denounces activists. This aspect of the destruction of the heritage joined the issue of corruption. Direct responsibility regarding the progress of destruction weighs on the Ministry of Culture, the DGAMS and its regional offices, as well as the security forces directly involved in looting or those that tolerate in exchange for cooperation. Indirect responsibility in these attacks on the historical heritage burn on civilians who engage in this reprehensible way, which the authorities do not condemn.

7 - Civilian occupations of archaeological

Following the uprising and the weakening of the monitoring of archaeological sites by the officials, many people took the opportunity to implement their construction projects within the protected archaeological areas.

Such actions are documented in the following regions:

- In the province of **DER'A**: Tell 'Ashari, Tell Umm Hauran in Nawa, Tafas, Da'al, the ancient city of Sahm al-Golan, the ancient city of Matta'iya, where entire parts were taken to built elsewhere;
- Many sites in the province of **QUNEITRA**, where local management of the DGAMS took advantage of the situation, in collaboration with the city of Quneitra, to get wild construction projects approved in protected heritage areas;
- In the **LIMESTONE MASSIF**, especially in the province of Aleppo and the Idlib
- In the eastern provinces: in the area of Jezireh, towards **HASSAKEH**, in particularly at Tell Hamukar and several sites near the Turkish and Iraqi borders; in the region of **DEIR EZ-ZOR**, including Tell 'Ashara (former Terqa) , Tell Sheikh Hamad (ancient Dur Katlimmu) and some sites of the classical period of the middle valley of the Euphrates. For example, in Raqqa, the site of Sura (el-Hammam), Sheikh Hassan and other sites for which we have not yet direct evidence.

Conclusion

In virtue of all this, we, the professionals who work in the interests of archaeological heritage and the research related to it (researchers, historians, writers, intellectuals, journalists and all those concerned with historical and cultural areas), we urge the authorities concerned, especially the Syrian authority of the Ministry of Culture represented by DGAMS and its regional offices, but also the international authorities such as UNESCO, the Union des Archéologues Arabes, the Bouclier Bleu, ICROM, Arab museums and in general all museums in the world, Arab universities as well as those around the world:

1) to take a position vis-à-vis the major threat which now affects the Syrian historical and cultural heritage;

2) to recall clearly the responsibilities of the Syrian authorities and condemn all parties that take advantage of the situation to squander the national heritage collection.

Furthermore, we declare that the following sites are sites in major danger:

1 - Cities of the Dead of the Limestone Massif, classified by UNESCO as World Heritage of Humanity in July 2011;

2 - the citadel of El-Madiq and surrounding areas and the site of Apamea, World Heritage of Humanity in 1999;

3 - The city of Palmyra, listed by UNESCO in 1980;

4 - The archaeological sites of Tell Khan Sheikhoun, Tell Qarqur, Tell Afis, Tell Sheikh Hamad, Tell 'Ashari et Tell Hamukar;

5 - Places of worship such as al-Omari mosque in the province of Der'a and historic mosques in the city of Homs.

We urge all institutions mentioned above to work to limit the damage caused to Syrian heritage.

We invite you to sign this call, so that our combined efforts can help bring a halt to the destruction of Syrian heritage, which, as everybody knows, is for the most part a common good of humanity. Or to take the items mentioned here and bring to the attention of all so that they can be denounced.

This call is accompanied by the following:

1 - Some pictures of the sites mentioned;

2 - Some video excerpts of the event, where available;

3 - News gathered from local Arab and international newspapers;

4 - Each site or cultural property mentioned in our recall is accompanied by a general, geographical and historical notice and by bibliographic and Internet references;

5 - For security reasons we refrain for the time being from mentioning the direct sources for this information.

For info :

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