The Role of Local Community in the Reconstruction of Syrian Cultural Heritage

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Aleppo Museum activities with children. Photo by Youssef Kanjou, 2012.

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Introduction

Syria became one of the most important international archaeological fields in recent decades; by the early 21st century, Syria had accepted over one hundred archaeological missions in the country. Stability in Syria was one of the reasons which attracted numbers of well-known archaeological research institutes and universities. The government's construction of the Tabqa, Teshreen, and Hassakeh dams along the Euphrates and Khabur Rivers also facilitated conditions for archaeological work in Syria. Numerous new discoveries at a large number of excavations made Syria one of the most archaeologically investigated countries in the world. Syrian authorities in 1997 declared Syria the 'number one' site for archaeological excavations and discoveries in the region due to both the number of archaeological missions within the country and to the relevance of their discoveries for historical knowledge (Bounni 1997:109, Gillot 2010:5).

Syrian heritage has suffered, as the Syrian people have suffered considerable damage during the conflict which began in 2011. Unfortunately, battles were severe in many of Syria's archaeological sites, including those inscribed on the World Heritage list such as Aleppo, Palmyra and Bosra (Abdulkarim 2013). That has led to the destruction and loss of a part of Syria's heritage, which is important not only to the history of the region, but also for the history of humanity.

Although the primary reason for the destruction of Syria's cultural heritage is years of conflict, other pre-war factors also played a role. For instance, one main factor is the inability of the heritage protection authorities, both national and international, to increase knowledge among the Syrian community of the importance of their heritage. Raising awareness in young people is key because they will have the ability to protect their heritage now and in the future (Kanjou 2014).

Now, after years of war large sections of Syrian heritage are under threat. There are some heavily damaged sites, which cannot be restored and are lost forever. Illegal excavation on archaeological sites is prevalent and various important objects were stolen, thereby losing their provenance and context. Such abuses are ongoing, and the level of destruction is increasing in its severity. The conflict also stopped almost all of the archaeological projects in Syria. The current situation led to the emigration of Syrian archaeologists. International archaeologists are unable to continue their investigations on archaeological sites, but they have also lost the chance to study material excavated from these sites. They have moved their research fields from Syria to other accessible areas such as Caucasian countries, Turkey, Jordan, Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Gulf countries.

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However, these peripheral countries may not provide extensive cultural assets found in Syria and Mesopotamia.

As stated previously, the Syrian community lacks knowledge and resources to save its own archaeological property. This has occurred for a number of reasons, including a lack of cooperation from local and international authorities. Before the conflict there was a tendency to involve the local community in the management and development of archaeological sites through local development projects. However, the war disrupted all of these projects, and the community has become less aware and less knowledgeable about their heritage. In addition, disorder, poverty and insecurity have encouraged international trafficking in Syrian antiquities.

The Present Situation

The Syrian conflict has affected the status of archaeological sites and museums, particularly during the first three years of war, when there was no longer any security or economic support for cultural institutions. Even worse, sites and museums were often located within the areas of armed conflict, as in the cities of Palmyra, Raqqa, Homs, Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor (Abdulkarim 2015). Heritage sites have suffered socially and economically as has the rest of Syria. There has been illegal excavation throughout the country, archeological sites have been used as military bases and have been covered by modern buildings. Finally, artifacts have been stolen, either directly or indirectly (Casana 2015:143).

The Old City of Aleppo suffered destruction due to being the battleground for four years; opposition forces entered Aleppo in July 2012 and left in December 2016. The clashes started immediately inside the Old City and the gradual destruction followed. First, Souq al-Zarb, one part of the old market was burned, after which several parts of the ancient markets and buildings were destroyed.[2] With the intensification of battles and the use of heavy weaponry, the destruction increased, especially during the use of air strikes and the bombing of buildings through tunnels. These two factors contributed significantly to the loss of a number of historical buildings and important parts of the markets (Figure 1).

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[2] Reuters, September 30, 2012, published news article about the burning of the Aleppo Souq.

Figure 1. The remains of the Saray Building, Sultaniya Mosque and Khusruwivah School after the huge destruction near Aleppo Castle. (Photo by A. Zakor)

The damage included all parts of the Old City without exception, especially the most important sites, such as the great Umayyad Mosque and the surrounding area, which are the oldest parts of the ancient city. One of the most important sites that was destroyed was the Minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in February 2013, which represents the symbolic identity of the Old City. Additionally, the northern and eastern corridors of the mosque were burned, and other parts collapsed. The Waqf library, which belonged to the mosque, was also destroyed. Fortunately, the Umayyad mosque's podium and a number of manuscripts were rescued and moved with traditional objects that were present in the mosque's museum to a place that is still unknown (Al-Skaf and Ahmed, 2016).

The situation of Syrian Heritage was even more compromised after the arrival of radical groups like Islamic State, who bombed heritage sites and illegally excavated as was the case with Tell Ajaj, or destroyed archaeological objects, as happened in Palmyra (Danti 2015:134).

Causes of the Destruction of Syrian Cultural Heritage

Monuments in Syria were not well-protected before the war, so it would be incorrect to assume that cultural heritage damage is either only the result of the present crisis, or that it began with the Syrian present conflict. The reality is that damage to cultural heritage sites has been an ongoing process; archaeological sites and monuments have suffered damage sometimes almost similar to the current situation. For example in 2009, illegal excavation was widespread at times when missions were working at important sites such as Mari and Cyhrrus, while the destruction of historical buildings was done for multiple reasons, for example, by authorities to exert their

political and social influence. This was the case with the Saddiek Mosque in Aleppo, (Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) 2013).

A recent study shows the damage over the 50 years prior to the present conflict (1960-2010). Analysis of satellite photographs showed more than 12 types of damage that increased gradually, including bulldozer cuttings, military activity, looting, and the building of new roads and new graveyards (Cunliffe 2014:232).

However, there are other reasons that might be a more important cause of damage, and not the war per se. Basically, the main cause is the utter lack of knowledge of the importance of national and world heritage and a complete ignorance of its significance for both communities and the world (Loosley 2005:590). In turn, that is caused by the responsible national and international authorities that failed to communicate with the local communities. Despite the concept of improving awareness and linking it with government or public institutions, without community participation such an approach leads to an inappropriate response (Figure 2). If most members of a community consider that heritage belongs to the government as a result of government policy regarding heritage (*Syrian Law of Antiquities*, chap. 1), when the government lost control over heritage sites, people attacked them in ways mentioned before. This is what occurred in Syria, where the strategy of the Syrian Government gave the feeling that everything belonged to it and not to the community, including museums, archaeological sites and the contents thereof (Gillot 2010:7).

Figure 2. Protection of large sized artifacts at the Aleppo Museum. (Photo by Kanjou)

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After the initially peaceful protests changed into armed conflict, it was evident there was an absence of any consideration about the protection of heritage (Kanjou 2018). At that time, an urgent requirement for the community to react arose**.** However, owing to a lack of awareness about the importance of heritage, a lack of knowledge in the community, and armed conflict, the local community's role was limited (Watfa and Bashar 2015:6). As the fighting intensified in most sites,

local communities abandoned these areas for the armed groups to take over. They lacked any interest in and awareness of the importance of archaeological sites. In the beginning of the conflict, local communities attempted to protect museums, but these efforts ceased as the fighting intensified but later were renewed when the security situation allowed (Figure 3). This is exemplified by a few limited initiatives, in restricted areas, mainly in Idlib, Aleppo and the Daraa area, where the local community represented by NGO groups like Idlib Antiquity Center and the Syrian Association for the Preservation of Archaeology and Heritage (Aleppo) which attempted to protect the Maarra Museum, and when the local community of Aleppo rallied to protect the Umayyad Mosque inside the Old City of Aleppo (Fakhro 2018:45). These initiatives were led mainly by a Syrian archaeologist in cooperation with Syrian archaeologists and former DGAM staff who are now outside Syria, and an international archaeologist working in Syria before the conflict (Kanjou 2018). Also, it should be noted that initiatives emerged through social networking, the work on the ground or through communication with the local community and international organizations as what can be seen with the activities by Idlib Antiquities Center and Syrian Heritage Center (Al Quntar et al. 2015:155).

Figure 3. The protection activities inside the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo done during the conflict time (Photo by Dellal)

After the massive damage to Syrian antiquities became increasingly apparent, community attention as expressed through social media and the internet, is putting pressure on the combatants and the international community to take action to protect Syrian heritage (Kanjou 2016b). At present there is a great international interest in Syrian antiquities, as demonstrated by the enormous number of internet sites and/or organizations dedicated to the preservation of Syrian antiquities, and as reflected through lectures, conferences and projects in international research centers and universities in Europe, the USA, Australia, and Japan. In addition, there are several projects, such as the Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Heritage project, which is a UNESCO project

sponsored by the EU, ASOR Cultural Heritage initiatives in the USA and Syrian Heritage Archive in Germany. Finally, there are a number of associations, such as the Syrian Archaeology Protection Association and Heritage for Peace (Leckie et al. 2017). However, the difficulty with all of these projects is that they operate outside Syria, without cooperation with the experts on the ground, using high quality satellite images and social networking sites to obtain the information. Furthermore, their main objective is only to document the damage done to cultural heritage site (Danti et al. 2015).

Based on the lessons learned during this war, however difficult, the only effective solution for the future, is to raise local community awareness of the importance of heritage and its protection, because in the end the community must contribute to its protection when state authorities lose control (Kanjou and Tsuneki 2016). At the present and in the future, it is considered fundamentally important to heighten awareness about the importance of cultural heritage. This education is a basic necessity and can be done through museums and schools (Kanjou 2018). Whereas museums can spread knowledge to older generations, schools should educate the new generations on the importance of cultural heritage (Fig. 4). These ways can work together to reach the same objective as the older and the younger generations together form the community with an appreciation for heritage (Alkateb 2013).

Figure 4. Aleppo Museum activities with children in 2012 (Photo by Kanjou)

Final Considerations

There are several ways in which the Syrian community can contribute to the rehabilitation of their cultural heritage:

First, a partnership between the local community and local and international authorities should be formed in order to streamline communication. This would allow the local community to present and participate effectively, by providing them with motivation and incentives.

In a similar vein, there are several factors that can motivate the community to be active during the process of rehabilitation. Motives can be cultural, technical or economic. For example, cultural motivation can emerge through the explanation of the importance of cultural heritage, while an economic motive can be achieved by supporting them financially to restore their houses and shops. At the same time, the authorities should take the community's perspectives on heritage protection into account, whether positive or negative.

Nowadays, one of the biggest challenges that face the Syrian community is the division into different ideological sections, and division due to migration, particularly of professional people. Whether on an ideological base or because of migration, these divisions are a major impediment to effective participation. In this case, community organizations (NGOs) that are still working on Syrian Heritage Protection such as the Archaeology Society of Aleppo (al-Adeyat) will face many challenges which prevent their tasks from being effective due to the nature of the Syrian authorities that prevent any community participation in making new decisions such as the rebuilding priorities.

The reconstruction of heritage cities will help Syrians return to their home communities. We should keep in mind, however, that the Syrian community remaining in Syria has a big role to motivate the Syrian diaspora, and to cooperate with them to rebuild their communities. Without cooperation there will be no positive result. Conversely, good cooperation will encourage diaspora to return.

The local community have their own priorities for rebuilding their cities centered on saving the city's identity. This may be the religious, residential or commercial structures. However, it is the authorities who decide on the priority to rebuild, and this may not concur with the community's priorities. Only through the active cooperation between the community and the authorities can mutual rebuilding priorities be achieved.

Finally, the key question in this situation is what will happen if the local people cannot return to the old cities like Aleppo? This would result in a loss of urban and community identity which could not be regained. The heart of Aleppo would be the new, modern city, leaving the Old City as simply an old suburb. Without people returning to the Old City, it could at best become a living museum; at worst, a slum!

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This paper was presented at the 5th Lemkin Reunion, held in March 2019 and organized by the Shattuck Center at the School of Public Policy, Central European University in Budapest. Each year the Shattuck Center hosts the Lemkin Reunion, a gathering named in honor of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who lost his family in the Holocaust and first coined the word genocide. He campaigned tirelessly during his life to ensure that the crime of genocide was enshrined in international law. The Lemkin Reunion gathers policymakers involved in responding to atrocity crimes and assesses the lessons they learned.

The 5th Lemkin Reunion

March 2019 marks eight years since people in a wide web of villages and cities across the Syrian landscape took to the streets in defiance of the Assad family's rule. Initially responding with gunfire, imprisonment and torture, the regime's strategy evolved into the carpet bombing and mass destruction of whole rural and urban communities, culminating in the forced transfer of all remaining residents from areas such as Ghouta and eastern Aleppo, which remain largely uninhabited. Although the fighting has ebbed, the war in Syria has not ended and a political settlement has not been reached. The near ten million displaced, mainly in harsh conditions in and around Syria, do not feel safe to return to their neighbourhoods and villages. However, the Syrian government has promulgated laws enabling the construction of development projects where displaced communities once resided with no or few guarantees of compensation for displaced property owners. One such project, Marota City, plotted over the demolished informal district of Basateen al-Razi, is already under construction. What will reconstruction under the current conditions serve? Under what conditions can reconstruction in Syria be equitable?

Other publications from the 5th Lemkin Reunion can be found in the papers section of the Aleppo Project website.