

Syria: the hurt and the rebuilding

Many of Syria's key archaeological sites have been damaged through the actions of war, deliberate attack, and looting¹. There have been many attempts to safeguard archaeological sites and material from theft and destruction. Much more appalling is the tragic loss of life. The scale is staggering. More than 1 in 10 Syrians (11.5%) have been wounded or killed since the beginning of the war in 2011, with 470,000 deaths caused by the conflict, either directly or indirectly, and 45% of the population displaced².

It is perhaps hard to talk of one man's death amidst this suffering, but I cannot fail to mention Dr Khaled al-Asaad, the 82 year old Syrian archaeologist who had worked for more than 50 years as head of antiquities in Palmyra: he was beheaded by ISIS on the 18 August, 2015, in Palmyra (Tadmor), ostensibly for not divulging the location of hidden antiquities from the museum³. This highlights Isis's habit of looting and selling antiquities to fund its activities – not just destroying them. My colleague, Dr Mark Altaweel, showed just how easy it was to track down looted material in shops here in London⁴. UNESCO and other conventions on illicit antiquities have existed since the 1970s⁵, and in February 2015, the UN Security Council specifically banned the trade in artefacts illegally removed from Syria since 2011 and Iraq since 1990⁶. But many countries, the UK included, has done much less than it should to enforce this⁷.

In a strange twist, an ancient arch from the entrance to the Temple of Bel at Palmyra is being recreated using a 3D printer, purportedly “a symbol of defiance against terrorists erasing the Middle East's pre-Islamic history”⁸. The arch is being created in sections in Shanghai, finished in Italy, and will be erected in Trafalgar Square (London), to be unveiled during World Heritage Week in April 2016, and then travel on to Times Square (New York)⁹, before going to Palmyra. The 3D computer model was made using hundreds of conventional photographs, taken before the arch was damaged during Isis's destruction of the main temple complex. This is important, as it demonstrates that we do not always require complex 3D scanning (although that is a very valid approach to long-term digital documentation¹⁰), but can work with photographic material collected, often from many sources, over a period of time. In an ideal world we would document monuments comprehensively using the latest technology, but when the heritage is suddenly taken from us (as with the earthquake in Nepal last year) we can use pre-existing material to achieve the 3D models. Indeed, the potential to harness photographic records, potentially collected over time, to create 3D models, has developed rapidly in recent years: for example, see the scale of object modelling being achieved through the crowdsourced *MicroPast*s project¹¹.

All this is vitally important for documentation, but returning to the creation of 3D life-sized reconstructions; do these justify the costs of millions of dollars to create? This is, I stress, not an argument about authenticity. I have no problems with the quality of what can now be achieved with 3D printing, nor with the sophisticated use of materials to recreate textures, etc. Given that these models are going back to an ‘authentic’ point in time in the monuments history (i.e. the moment of documentation) there is no concern about overly interpretative reconstructions. However, there are certainly issues about whether this is the best use of the limited resources available to us to revitalise the communities and places that relate to these monuments.

Roger Michel, of the Institute for Digital Archaeology¹² who is undertaking the Palmyra arch 3D project, stated that “My intention is to show Islamic State that anything they can blow up we can rebuild exactly as it was before, and rebuild it again and again. We will use

technology to disempower Isis.”¹³ Well, that is apart from the fact that it costs millions of dollars to undertake the rebuilding – so perhaps Isis may still feel it is having an impact. In any case, for Isis it is surely more about propaganda at the time of destruction, and as a cover for looting (see above), than the long term cleansing of the past¹⁴.

So the question remains, is this where resources are best spent? Of course humanitarian aid comes first, but the relatively meagre resources for heritage conservation and restoration can be monies well spent – vital to a sustainable tourism industry, lifeblood for the rebuilding of the Syrian economy. But rebuilding facsimiles, however good, of the ruins of Palmyra: the question must be why? The site is still massively impressive – the anastylosis of fallen columns, etc., still creates an amazing vista; the material culture, despite looting and destruction, still outstanding, the scale and beauty of the site still breath-taking. It will still attract huge numbers of visitors, when the situation in the region is stabilised. We should also be careful with littering archaeological sites like Palmyra with replicas. As Ellis Woodman, writing in the *Architect’s Journal* states, “just as Isis’s assault on Palmyra represented an attempt to wipe out one episode of Syria’s past, now the digitally produced copy promises to erase another. In a country where the reductive narratives enforced by successive leaders have resulted in so much suffering, it would be a sad irony if the solution adopted at Palmyra represented a further suppression of the complexity of Syria’s history”¹⁵.

There are better ways to spend our resources: at Aleppo, for example, with its world famous souks and markets lying in complete ruin – these will need to be rebuilt, when the time comes: not to sustain the heritage, but to sustain the communities who live and work in the spaces. Resources will be better spent there: and now, better spent planning how to rebuild the souks with authenticity and quality, with character, and yet in a timely fashion that enables the communities to be rebuilt as well.

Simon Jenkins, writing in the *Guardian*¹⁶, recently stated about Palmyra, “few hold out much hope that this body [UNESCO], to whom all parties pay lip service, will be an agile party to what happens next”. But as an international community, we have to be agile and we need to prepare¹⁷. As Sultan Barakat stated in 2007, “While internationally-led post-war reconstruction has grown exponentially in terms of global relevance and available resources, the protection and recovery of cultural heritage has received relatively little attention. Moreover, efforts to protect and recover cultural heritage in the aftermath of modern warfare have proven ineffective” (Barakat, 2007, 26). He went on to formulate nine critical lessons to a holistic approach to postwar reconstruction, needing a clear vision of future recovery scenarios “as seen by local groups as much as by external actors” (*loc cit*). I would urge anyone seriously concerned with supporting and intervening in the long-term reconstruction of Syria, and the role cultural heritage has to play in this process, to read Barakat’s paper.

Tim Williams, London, March 2016.

References

Barakat, S. (2007) Postwar reconstruction and the recovery of cultural heritage: critical lessons from the last fifteen years, in Stanley Price, N (ed) *Cultural Heritage in Postwar Recovery* Rome: ICCROM, pp. 26-39.

¹ See ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives at: <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/> accessed March 2016; and listen to the *Guardian's* 'Safeguarding the world's archaeological treasures podcast', which covers a number of the issues: available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/audio/2015/sep/07/syria-safeguarding-archaeology-technology> [Accessed March 2016].

² *Guardian* 11 February 2016: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured> Accessed March 2016.

³ *Guardian* 19 August 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/18/isis-beheads-archaeologist-syria> Accessed March 2016.

⁴ Report in the *Guardian*, 3 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/antiquities-looted-by-isis-end-up-in-london-shops> Accessed March 2016.

⁵ Such as the 1970 *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* and the *UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen and Illegally Exported Cultural Objects 1995*.

⁶ See <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12168.doc.htm> and <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/144-bibliographies/52741-un-security-council-banning-all-trade-with-syrian-antiquities.html> Both accessed March 2016.

⁷ The UK belatedly ratified the 1970 Convention in 2002 and has still not ratified the UNIDROIT Convention. See the excellent memorandum submitted by Professor Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn to the Parliamentary Select Committee in 2000: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmcmums/371/0041302.htm> Accessed March 2016.

⁸ *Daily Telegraph* 28 December 2015: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12071316/Replica-of-historic-Syrian-arch-attacked-by-Isis-to-be-recreated-in-Trafalgar-Square.html> Accessed March 2016.

⁹ <http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/the-triumphal-arch> Accessed March 2016.

¹⁰ For example, see CyArk's excellent mission at <http://www.cyark.org/about/> Accessed March 2016.

¹¹ Micropasts: see <http://crowdsourced.micropasts.org/> Accessed March 2016.

¹² See <http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/> Accessed March 2016.

¹³ Quoted in an article by Simon Jenkins in the *Guardian* 29 March 2016: available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/29/palmyra-message-isis-islamic-state-jihadis-orgy-destruction-heritage-restored> Accessed March 2016.

¹⁴ Simon Schama, in a BBC Radio 4 programme *The Obliterators* (available on iPlayer <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b071s6nr>), argued that the key factors are politics ('to wipe out the memory of previous religions and civilisations', said Dr John Curtis), crime and ignorance. I argue that the cleansing of past civilizations and religions is clearly not the primary driver: a bulldozer would have achieved more in Palmyra than the assault on some specific monuments, and selling antiquities is about funding the movement not destroying the countries past.

¹⁵ The Architect's Journal 'Replicating Palmyra's temples with 3D printers will not repair Syria's hurt', 31 March, 2016: <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/opinion/replicating-palmyras-temples-with-3d-printers-will-not-repair-syrias-hurt/10004706.article?blocktitle=Comment&contentID=13641> Accessed March 2016.

¹⁶ See note 13.

¹⁷ For example, see *Heritage for Peace*, an NGO who started a crowd-funding campaign to support their work in Syria - <http://www.heritageforpeace.org> Accessed March 2016.