Civil War and Cultural Heritage in Syria, 2011-2015
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To Padre Paolo Dall’Oglia.
May he come back soon to Deir Mar Musa

This article discusses some of the damages the war erupted in Syria in 2011 has caused to the country’s cultural heritage. It consists of four parts. In the Introduction, a background with a timeline of the events of the Syrian war is given. The first part, Syria’s Cultural Heritage, includes an overview of Syrian cultural heritage (Section 1.1) and the institution in charge of its management, organisation and preservation (Section 1.2). The second part, Damages to the Syrian Cultural Heritage, focuses on four different typologies of war damage, from gunfire (Section 2.1) to military occupation of sites (Section 2.2), occupation of sites by civilians (Section 2.3) and plundering, vandalism and illicit trade of cultural material (Section 2.4). Lastly, in the third part, Protection of the Syrian Cultural Heritage, a brief history of Syrian modern involvement in cultural heritage (Section 3.1) and an analysis of the national and international responses to the Syrian crisis (Section 3.2) are offered.

Introduction. From the Damascus Spring to the Civil War (MG)

To better understand the developments of Syrian (civil) war, it is worth looking back to the last decades. In July 2000, after Hafez al-Assad’s death, his second-born son Bashar al-Assad was appointed as president of the Arab Syrian Republic. The election of a president just 35-years old, grown up in Britain, and, at a first glance, at least, less exposed to the dynamics of Syrian politics, suggested a new season of reforms was about to start in Syria. Indeed, the first moves of Bashar al-Assad’s government confirmed all these expectations. It was the beginning of what was then called the “Damascus Spring”. Open debates on Syrian economics and society showed a certain degree of optimism for a peaceful transition from dictatorship to more democratic forms of government. Several intellectuals assembled into a permanent forum, signing, for instance, a public call for economic reforms that aimed at dismantling the crony capitalism affecting Syrian economy, abrogating the emergency law and the article 8 of the Constitution which assures the Ba’th party the leadership of state and society, and promoting press freedom. The hopes triggered by the presidency of Bashar al-Assad were, however, disappointed quite soon by the first concrete political moves: the reluctance of developing economic and social reforms made the “new” Syria similar to the “old” one. Following protests were suppressed and opposition activists jailed. The old leadership of the Ba’th party prevails against any reformist efforts and the hopes for freedom of association and criticism crushed again.

Ten years later, the stimulus of the Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread, though with different modalities, over countries such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen and Jordan, brought people to demonstrate in Syrian streets. After a shy beginning in February 2011, between March 15th and April 8th, the protest spread all over Syrian cities, including Aleppo and the capital Damascus. The repression by the regime was brutal: demonstrations were dispersed and dozens imprisoned. Though some reforms were promised once again, demonstrations continued. Quickly, the intensity of the repression increased and real significant social improvements were set aside by the government.
As the repression worsened, some civilians and the first deserters of the regular army gathered into the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (July 2011), which started to organize earliest military actions of insurgency. Within a period of twelve months, the scenario had completely transformed: military groups fighting in Syria had multiplied. Non-Syrian fighters joined the battle against the regime in Damascus, military units and sub-groups became dozens. In the first six months of 2012, circa ninety attacks set off against the regime by fighters affiliated to al-Qaida took place. It should be mentioned that the Islamist organization at the beginning of the revolt was not organized in the Syrian territory. The regime’s counterattack and the usage of the aviation to repress the insurgency (August 2012) transformed the revolt into a civil war. Civil war had dramatic effects on the life of civilians: UN data (July 2014) report that ca. 6.5 million Syrian had been displaced, whereas UNHCR (July 2014) registered ca. 3 million of refugees who fled Syria because of the escalation of the bloody events.\(^2\)

The geographic position of Syria, the diversified ethno-religious groups composing it, and its modern history transformed the civil war into an international geopolitical battleground. Turkey took the side of the insurgents, together with Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Russia, which is granted access to the Mediterranean Sea thanks to its naval bases in Syria, together with Iran, supported instead the regime. Foreigner insurgents reached Syria and built up brigades fighting against the regime. In several cases, the latter are groups inspired by a Sunni militant ideology. Starting with May 2013, Shi’i fighters of Hezbollah entered Syria from Lebanon and took the side of the loyalist forces.\(^3\)

Despite the progressive worsening of the civil war, media, shed light on Syria only in specific moments, such as for instance the alleged usage of chemical weapons by the regime in the oriental outskirts of Damascus in August 2013, which was followed by an international crisis on the possible military intervention against Syrian regime, or the collapse of the minaret of Aleppo in April 2013, a sort of symbol of the cruelty of the war in Syria. Liberation or tragic deaths of hostages also attracted media attention.

In January 2014, IS forces (Islamic State, former Isil and Isis; in Arabic Da’ish) entered Syria from Iraq occupying the north-eastern Syrian governorates of al-Raqqa, Idlib, Deir al-Zor and Aleppo. The Sunni, Jihadist and extremist ideology of IS quickly raised an opposition both within and outside Syria. International concerns about the brutal policies of IS towards non-Sunni communities prepared the ground for a military intervention. On September 2014 a multi-national campaign led by the United States started airstrikes against sites occupied by IS and caravans of IS militants. Though theoretically fighting against the same enemy, the multi-national coalition does not coordinate its interventions with the Syrian government, nor asks for its permission or agreement.

Estimates of the deaths following the eruption of the civil war vary according to the source: “The human rights data analysis group”, a non-governmental organization, which data are also used by the UN, has issued a report in August 2014 according to which, from 2011 to April 2014, 191369 people lost their lives. According to “The Syrian observatory for human rights”, the number of dead has largely exceeded 250000 units (February 2015). Figures include fighters and civilians.

**FIRST PART – Syria’s Cultural Heritage**

1.1 **Tangible Cultural Heritage (SP)**

With a background of the recent political events in place, the first section of the first part of this article offers an overview of the Syrian cultural heritage according to both UNESCO and non-UNESCO sources. UNESCO defines “cultural heritage” the combination of the goods that forms the cultural production of a human being. Cultural heritage is formed by tangible and intangible goods. Tangible cultural heritage is made up of movable (i.e. paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts, archaeological objects, etc.) and
immovable (i.e. monuments, buildings, archaeological sites, etc.) properties, while intangible cultural heritage includes oral traditions, languages, music, performing arts, rituals, etc. This article focuses on Syrian tangible, both movable and immovable, cultural heritage. Syrian tangible cultural heritage includes: a) UNESCO World Heritage sites, b) non-UNESCO registered archaeological sites, c) historical buildings, and d) museums and museum collections.

*a) UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Buildings and Monuments*

The UNESCO World Heritage site (WHS) list includes sites that have an “outstanding universal value”, from either a cultural or a natural prospective. The World Heritage Committee, consisting of representatives from 21 of the States Parties to the Convention elected by their General Assembly, is in charge of the selection criteria of the sites. The committee meets once a year and the last meeting (the 38th) took place in Doha (Qatar) in June 2014. Currently, the UNESCO World Heritage List is formed by 1007 properties distributed in 161 countries, among which 779 are cultural, 197 are natural, 46 are in danger, 31 are transboundary, two have been delisted, and 31 are mixed. The UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria are six, and they are all cultural properties, namely:

- **Ancient City of Damascus** (Administrative District of Damascus, inscribed in the WHS in 1979); the old city of Damascus claims to be among the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world (from ca. 7000 BC up until now). Although there are visible signs of Roman occupation, especially in the urban system, the majority of the buildings located within the old city can be dated to the Islamic period. The most important monuments of the old city include the citadel, city walls and gateways, the Umayyad Mosque, Tomb of Saladin, Azem Palace, Azem Ecole, Maristan Nureddin (Hospital), Suq al-Hamidiyya, and Khan As'ad Pasha (Caravanserais).
- **Ancient City of Bosra** (Deraa Governorate, inscribed in the WHS in 1980); Bosra is one of the major archaeological sites in Syria containing ruins from Roman (i.e. the theatre, the Nabatean Arch, and the Monastery of Bahira), Byzantine (i.e. the Cathedral of SS Sergiuos, Bacchus and Leontius), and Islamic (i.e. Al-Omari Mosque and Madrasah Mabrak al-Naqua) times.
- **Site of Palmyra** (Homs Governorate, inscribed in the WHS in 1980); Palmyra, oasis in the Syrian Desert, was a caravan city and a Roman colony. The most important Roman monuments at the site are the Great Colonnade, the temple of Ba'al, the theatre, the Camp of Diocletian and the necropolis, which is located outside the ancient walls.
- **Ancient City of Aleppo** (Administrative District of Aleppo, inscribed in the WHS in 1986); Aleppo competes with Damascus the primate of being is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. The old city is enriched by monument from the Late Bronze Age (i.e. The Temple of the Storm God at the citadel) to the Ottoman period. Of remarkable importance are the citadel, city walls and gateways, the Great Mosque, Al-Madina souq, 17th-century madrasas and caravanserais.
- **Crack des Chevaliers** (Homs Governorate, inscribed in the WHS in 2006) and Qal’at Salah El-Din (Governorate of Latakia, inscribed in the WHS in 2006); the Crack des Chevaliers is one of the best-preserved examples of the Crusader castles in the world. The first evidence of this building dated back to 1031, when it was probably only a small fort. This construction was then considerably expanded during the Crusader period (11th - 13th centuries). Qal’at Salah El-Din (or Saladin Castle or Fortress) is also a Crusader castle. This site has been fortified since at least the mid-10th century and it was the scene of one of Saladin’s greatest sieges in 1188.
- **Ancient Villages of Northern Syria** (different locations between Aleppo and Idlib, inscribed in the WHS list in 2011); the ancient villages of Northern Syria, also known as the Dead or Forgotten cities of the North, comprises the remains of 700 Late Roman/Byzantine deserted town, villages and monastic settlements. According to their geographical location and their proximity with the Limestone Massif they can be grouped into a few areas that have been transformed into archaeological parks. These include Jebel Semaan (jebel in Arabic means mountain), where the
Because of the ongoing conflict in Syria, in 2013, UNESCO included all the six Syrian World Heritage Sites in the List of World Heritage Sites in danger. Along with the six WHS, twelve different Syrian properties have been submitted to the Tentative List:

- Norias of Hama (Hama Governorate, proposed in 1999); Hama is very famous for its norias, a 20 m in diameter waterwheel, that raised water to aqueducts, which supplied water for drinking and irrigation along the Orontes River. They were developed during the Byzantine period. Today only 17 original norias are left unused.
- Ugarit (Tell Shamra) (Latakia Governorate, proposed in 1999); Ugarit is located on the Mediterranean and it was an ancient port city at the Ras Shamra. The Syrian site reached its heyday between 1800 and 1200 BC, when it ruled a trade-based coastal kingdom, trading with Egypt, Cyprus, the Aegean, the Hittites, and much of the eastern Mediterranean cities. The most important discovery at the site are the cuneiform clay tablets written in a Northwest Semitic language (Ugaritic), which represent the earliest evidence of the alphabet that gave rise to the orders of Arabic.
- Ebla (Tell Mardikh) (Idlib Governorate, proposed in 1999); Ebla was the capital of one of the most important kingdoms in Syria during the third millennium BC and the first half of the second millennium BC. Along with the architectonic remains (i.e. temples, palaces, tombs, etc.) the ancient city of Ebla is also famous for its language, Eblaite, which is considered the earliest attested Semitic language, after Akkadian. More than 20,000 tables were found at the site, in both Sumerian and Eblaite languages.
- Mari (Tell Hariri) (Deir ez-Zor Governorate, proposed in 1999); as Ebla, Mari was also the capital of a Bronze Age kingdom. More than 25,000 Akkadian tables were found at the settlement. One of the most important buildings includes the Zimri-Lim Palace (a king of Mari), with more than 300 rooms.
- Dura Europos (Deir ez-Zor Governorate, proposed in 1999); it was a Hellenistic, Parthian and Roman frontier city built on the right bank of the Euphrates river. The most important remains include the Temple of Palmyrene Gods, the Mithraeum, the synagogue, and the Christian church. Dura Europos is also known as the “Pompeii of the East”, because of the high degree of preservation of its buildings.
- Apamea (Arabic Afamia) (Hama Governorate, proposed in 1999); capital of Apamene and third cities of the Seleucid Empire, Apamea has one of the longest and widest surviving monumental colonnade (i.e. cardo) from the Roman East.
- Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (or Eastern Castle) (Deir ez-Zor Governorate, proposed in 1999); it was built at the time of the Umayyad caliphs in the first century in the middle of the Syrian Desert. The settlement consists of the caliph palatial complex decorated with arches and columns, large open courtyards, a surrounding wall with bulwarks and towers, gardens and caravanserais.
- Maaloula (Rif Dimashq Governorate, proposed in 1999); Maaloula is one of the few villages where Aramaic language is still spoken as a living language. It has impressive monastery and church, parts of which are Byzantine.
- Tartus (Tartus Governorate, proposed in 1999); Tartus was founded as a Phoenician colony in the second millennium BC. It became famous in Crusader time as one of the main Crusader towns (and not fortress) in Syria. The original Crusader fortifications consisted of the city and harbour walls and the citadel. Moreover, in the middle of the town stands the very well preserved Cathedral of Our Lady of Tortosa, dated to the Byzantine Period.
• Arwad (or Arado) Isle (Tartus Governorate, proposed in 1999); as Tartus, this tiny island three km off from Tartus, was settled in the early second millennium BC. In the time of the Crusades, the island was used as a staging area by the Crusaders.

• Raqqa-Râfiqa (Raqqa Governorate, proposed in 1999); re-founded after the Macedonians by the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid in the eight century AD. Today there is only little evidence of how this place should have been, and this can be observed at the Bagdad Gate, one of the important monuments of early Islamic architecture, and the Qasr al-Banat (the caliph’s palace), which includes the remains of a large courtyard.

• Mari and Dura-Europos sites of the Euphrates Valley (Deir ez-Zor Governorate, proposed in 2011) (see above).

Moreover, according to the Syrian Directorate-General for Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), at least three more monuments not mentioned in the UNESCO lists should be remembered:

• Khaled Ibn al-Walid Mosque (Homs Governorate); the second most important mosque in Syria and a significant pilgrimage center, includes the tomb of Khalid ibn Al-Walid, the companion of the Islamic prophet Mohammad (Islamic Period).

• Qala'at Ja'bar (Raqqa Governorate); is a castle on the left bank of the Lake Assad (Euphrates River), built probably in the 11th century. The castle consists of a stone-built wall with 35 bastions, partially surrounded by a dry moat.

• Ain Diwar bridge (Hassake Governorate); this bridge was built in the second century by the Romans to give them access to Eastern Anatolia.

b) Other non-UNESCO archaeological sites

A complete list of archaeological sites and monuments is the first step towards the protection of the cultural heritage. For Jordan¹¹ and Iraq¹², for example, an open source, web- and geospatially based information system has been already created, namely the Middle Eastern geodatabase for Antiquities (MEGA).¹³ Cheikhmous Ali, from the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA), argued that “prior to 2011, there were 138 national and foreign archaeological missions excavating on Syrian sites, while there are more than 10.000 tells in the country, and more than 5,000 of those archaeological mounds are scattered in the region of Jazira in northeast Syria”.¹⁴

A complete official list of the Syria’s archaeological sites does not currently exist. However, more recently there have been some attempts towards the creation of an inventory of Syrian archaeological sites. The DGAM, for example, is currently working on compiling an electronic list of country’s archaeological sites.¹⁵ Moreover, a pilot project funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Durham University has facilitated the merging of information from two existing research databases (Fragile Crescent Project, University of Durham, and Paleosyr/Paleolib, Universities of Lyon and Nice) to create a unified database that, in collaboration with the DGAM, will form the basis of an inventory of sites and monuments of Syria. This inventory will include more than 15.000 archaeological sites and monuments.¹⁶ The Deutsche Archäologische Institut in Berlin (DAI) is also working on a similar project (see also Paragraph 3.2).¹⁷

A preliminary set of place marks of the most important sites in the Ancient Near East for Google Earth has been created by the Department of Linguistics and Philology of the Uppsala University.¹⁸ The Pleiades website, a community-built gazetteer of ancient places, also has listed many sites.¹⁹ An interactive map of the archaeological missions as active in Syria in 2010 has been recently uploaded at the Syrian Heritage in Danger: an International Research Initiative and Network (SHIRIN) website.²⁰ The U.S. Department of State’s Humanitarian Information Unit has also produced a map that identifies the locations of over 1000 well-preserved cultural heritage sites and museums in Syria.²¹
For the time being, the DGAM’s lists of archaeological damaged sites provided in the reports published from March 2011 to December 2014 can be used to give an idea of the extensive amount of sites. According to these DGAM reports, the number of damaged archaeological sites and monuments in Syria counts 420 sites.

c) Museums and Museum Collections

Although the exact number of archaeological sites in Syria is still uncertain, museums are much easier to quantify. In Syria, there are 38 museums, two national (in Damascus and in Aleppo); 12 regional (in Bosra, Daraa, Deir er-Zor, Hama Homs, Idlib, Palmira, Latakia, Quneitra, Raqqa, Suweida and Tartus); 11 dedicated to a specific theme (i.e. the Museum of the Arabic Calligraphy in Damascus, or the Museum of Mosaics at Ma’arrat al-Nu’man in the NW province of Idlib), seven of popular arts and traditions, and several minor museums, such as those located nearby important archaeological sites and displayed their collections, such as these at Dura Europos or at Qala‘at Ja‘bar.

1.2 The management of the cultural heritage (SP)

The DGAM, established in 1946 at the end of the French mandate, is the governmental organisation that deals with the management of the archaeological excavations and the conservation and protection of the country cultural heritage. The DGAM is associated with the Syrian Arabic Republic Ministry of Culture and has the main office in Damascus. However, DGAM regional branches are distributed within the country. The DGAM general director is Professor Maamoun Abdulkarim.

The DGAM main objective is to inform national and international community about the history and the recent discoveries that took place in the country. DGAM main responsibilities can be summarised in the following points:
• Establish an inventory of cultural property, immobile and mobile, and keep it updated through research and study of archaeological and historical sites;
• Manage and administer the Syrian museums, organizing exhibitions in collaboration with universities and foreign institutions;
• Supervise the status of archaeological and historical buildings and maintain the necessary measures for their conservation and restoration;
• Participate in the excavation of Syrian archaeological sites, independently and in collaboration with foreign missions, ensuring the study, cataloguing and conservation of archaeological heritage;
• Adopt appropriate measures to prevent theft, illicit excavations, illegal import and export of archaeological material;
• Encourage publications and disseminate research through exhibitions, seminars, and conferences;
• Stipulate and develop research cooperation between institutions and universities in Syria and abroad.

Since the beginning of the ongoing conflict in Syria, DGAM is raising awareness about the status of the Syrian sites and museums through several campaigns, which will be discussed in paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2.

SECOND PART – Damages to the Syrian Cultural Heritage

2.1 Mortar and Gun Fire (MG)
As already mentioned above, Syria features an impressive urban continuity. The downtown areas of several Syrian cities are a sort of palimpsest with traces of different eras of Syrian civilization. Elsewhere, instead, the old nucleus was abandoned and only recently smaller settlements have developed beside archaeological areas (it is the case, for instance, of al-Rusafa, nearby Aleppo). Other important archaeological sites, such as the so-called “dead cities”, remained instead in rural areas where the only human activity carried out today is sheep farming.

This introduction is essential in order to have a full understanding the damages caused by the fighting between the loyalist forces and the insurgents. An emblematical case is the old town of Aleppo, the second city in the country and the largest of the northern region of Syria. Since its inscription in the World Heritage List in 1986, the old town has been repeatedly studied and restored. An important restoration, concluded in 2008, was financed and carried out by the Aga Khan trust for culture with the partnership of DGAM.

The earliest settlement in Aleppo developed in the second millennium BC in the area now known as the citadel of Aleppo. The slow bedding process of the numerous pre-classical urban phases brought to the creation of the distinctive hill (tell) used in the following period as palatial and military citadel dominating the surroundings. Remains of the pre-classical era have been continuously uncovered thanks to archaeological excavations. During the campaigns 1996-2006, for instance, a Syrian-German team brought to light the remains of an important temple dated to the Bronze and Iron ages entitled to the Storm God. Outstanding figurative reliefs, dated to ca. 1400 and 900 BC, portray the God and his court coupled with a local king. Part of the temple material has been reused in the successive eras, including some stone blocks reused in the masonry of a mosque built on the same site during the medieval period. The city of Aleppo developed all around this very old core. Traces of the urban grid established in the Hellenistic period are still recognizable. Under the Seleucid dynasty, developed out of the heritage of Alexander the Great, Aleppo was given the typical Hippodamian layout together with the Hellenistic institutions. Different dynasties have shaped Aleppo according to their religious belief and to the economic resources on a macro-regional scale. During late antiquity, under the Byzantine rule, Aleppo was scattered with dozens of churches, among which the cathedral located on the western side of the citadel. During the Muslim period, starting with the eighth century, a great mosque was built on a burial site nearby the cathedral. Later on, in the medieval period, since the eleventh century on, the sacred
landscape was radically transformed: some churches were converted into mosques (a phenomenon not occurring after the seventh-century Islamic conquest, but rather later on), while new mosques and Muslim theological schools (madrasas) were established.

In the medieval period, Christian minorities, such as for instance the Armenian or the Chalcedonian communities, despite maintaining an important role within the city, were forced to move in specific quarters. The area around the mosque remained pivotal for the commercial activities and the structures built to facilitate trading (souk) were transformed generation after generation. The actual architectural complex belongs to the Ottoman period, and more precisely to the eighteenth century, when monumental sub-unities and corridors to connect the different sectors were erected. The uniqueness of Aleppo marketplace lies in its extension: twelve hectares assigned only to commercial activities. Under the Ottomans the city featured several bathhouses open to citizens. The citadel retains at once military and sacred functions. Despite the Christian churches built on the citadel under the Byzantines were converted into mosques in the medieval period, a general continuity in the worship is visible in the association of one of the mosques with the prophet Abraham. At the same time the citadel was fortified and the peak of its militarization was reached in the thirteenth century, when also the monumental entrance provided with a series of tight turns aiming at driving back the besiegers was set up.

The civil war erupted in 2011 has dramatically transformed the historical centre of Aleppo. By virtue of its elevated position, the citadel, for centuries exploited as a military base – and often so by military forces alien to the local population as in the case of the Turkish-Ottoman soldiers and those from France during the Mandatarian period –, has been elected as the favourite place from where controlling the city by the regular Syrian army. All throughout the city centre, including in the market area, gunfire and armed clashes occurred (Fig. 02). The eighteenth-century structures of the market area were very seriously damaged during the fighting. The peak of the damages took place at about the end of September 2012. Units of the regular army and insurgents clashed within the market area (souk) and around 1500 shops were destroyed (Fig. 03).31

![Figure 2. Fighting and fires occurring at the market area of Aleppo. Photo published online by The Guardian on the 1st of October 2012.](image)
The presence of the regular army on top of the citadel has put in danger the architectural structures of the stronghold. During the month of August 2012, a group of insurgents, collectively known as the Brigades of the Free Syrian Army sieged the fortified citadel. Gunfire and artillery hit the walls and particularly the monumental entry to the citadel. The same congregational mosque of Aleppo (the cathedral mosque in which on Friday historically Muslims gathered) was not left untouched. The mosque was established in the Umayyad period, during the eight century, and since then called the Mosque of the Umayyads. During the following centuries, the mosque was the scenario for popular uprisings and related repressions by the central government. The mosque was damaged and rebuilt several times. In the eleventh century, a square-based minaret was added on the north-western corner, while the rest of the building, especially the sanctuary of the mosque on the southern side, was then heavily reconstructed during the Ottoman period. The presence of a sanctuary devoted to Zachary, father of John the Baptist, makes the mosque of Aleppo comparable to the great mosque of Damascus in which John the Baptist is venerated, constituting one of the sources of sacredness of the mosque. In October 2012, shoot fighting occurred within the perimeter of the mosque. To be damaged was not only the portico of the courtyard – especially on the northern side devastated by a fire – but also the prayer hall or sanctuary, the most sacred area of the building. The effects of the devastation and shootings are well visible in some images taken after the battle (Figs. 04-06).
Figure 4. A fire destroying the northern portico of the courtyard of the Mosque of the Umayyads of Aleppo. Photo published online by the BBC, accessed 16 October, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19952793

Figure 5. The porticoes after the fires. Photo published online by the BBC, accessed 16 October, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19952793
The damages caused by the attack to one of the most sacred mosque in Syria did not pass unnoticed. President Bashar al-Assad issued a decree ordering the constitution of a committee in charge of the restoration of the mosque before the end of 2013. The war in Aleppo, however, continued and worsened. A report from DGAM dated to July 2013 counts 121 sites damaged by the war only in the historic centre of Aleppo. Among the most recent damages to Aleppo cultural heritage, the destruction of the sanctuary of the Ottoman mosque of the Khusrawiya mosque is worth a mention. Built in 1547 by the renowned Ottoman architect Sinan, the mosque is located down the citadel. The great mosque was once more targeted in early 2013, though the peak (so far) of the outrageous acts against the cultural heritage of Aleppo occurred on the 24th of April 2013. During a clash between the loyalist forces and the insurgents, the minaret of the great mosque of Aleppo was destroyed. The minaret was a square-based tower built around the year 1090. The minaret of the great mosque of Aleppo was an icon of Islamic architecture because its structure and decoration displayed some recurrent themes of religious art in medieval Islam (Fig. 07). A Classical entablature, rosette-shaped medallions, polylobate arches and a cornice with a simplified version of the growing technique of muqarnas were all featured on the outer walls of the minaret. Furthermore, an epigraphic frieze, written in Kufic and cursive scripts, praised God, the caliph, the local authority patron of the minaret and Hasan bin Mufarraj al-Sarmani, the man in charge of the team of stonecutters and masons who erected the masterwork. The minaret of Aleppo, erected in the north-western corner of the mosque dominated from its height of 45 meters another medieval building situated just in front of the mosque on its western side. It was the madrasa, a medieval theological school, built in 1124 converting the great church of Aleppo, which had remained for four centuries after the Islamic conquest the most important church of the Christian community of Aleppo.
Figure 7. Minaret of the mosque of the Umayyads, Aleppo. Photo published by Mattia Guidetti, 2009.

Figure 8. The destruction of the minaret of the mosque of the Umayyads, Aleppo, on the 24th of April 2013. Photo published by APSA on Facebook.
Both sides in conflict have declined the responsibility of the tragic destruction. It is possible the minaret was bombed by tanks of the regular army because of the presence of snipers, or that, differently, it has been burst, for unknown reasons, by the group of insurgents in action in the area (Fig. 08). With regard to the insurgents, those active in the area have been identified as militants affiliated to Jabhat al-Nusra, a group within the orbit of al-Qaeda, and as part of the brigades Tawhid, related instead to the Muslim Brotherhood. Local sources contacted by journalists testify how the regular army had already tried in the previous days to destroy the monument. At the same time, government sources posit how the insurgents of Jabhat al-Nusra had cameras ready to record the collapse of the building. This might lead to think that the destruction of the minaret was filmed with the purpose of being used in the media battle, which has developed as part of the Syrian civil war. It is worth noticing that in the year 1982 another medieval minaret was destroyed in Syria. During the repression of the insurgency occurring in the city of Hama, the Syrian army bombed the great mosque of the city in which some insurgents have found refuge. The mosque was heavily damaged and the minaret collapsed. The historical centre of Aleppo – a World Heritage site – is still today a war theatre in which buildings and spaces endowed with a historical-cultural meaning that go well beyond local history to embrace universal values, are currently used illegally and irresponsibly to carry out military actions.

2.2 Military Occupation (MG)
As already emerged in the previous paragraph, it is difficult to differentiate among the causes of damages to Syrian cultural heritage, as they are very often the outcome of concomitant aspects. Damages to the historic centre of Aleppo were also caused by the usage of the citadel as a military base by the regular army. Despite the technological and military developments occurred since its construction during the middle ages, the stronghold of the citadel was selected by the Syrian army for its strategic position and defensive features (Fig. 09).

Figure 9. Entrance to the citadel of Aleppo dated to August 2012. Photo published by APSA on Facebook.

Other medieval fortifications in Syria have been damaged during the civil war: the Crack des Chevalier – a World Heritage site (see paragraph 1.1) – was hit by at least three air strikes in July 2013 (damages to the King, southern, soldiers and entrance towers as well to the chapel and the exterior façade in the
northern area); mortar fires and military operations (including bulldozing) have seriously damaged Qal‘at Mudiq – the fortified citadel built nearby the old city of Apamea – during the month of March 2012; while the fortress of Qal‘at al-Shemis, instead, has been converted into a military base, and, in February 2012, in order to make easier the military operations the square in front of the entrance was levelled by bulldozers. The case of Palmyra and its medieval fortress, called Qal‘at Shirkuh is therefore part of a large case history in which the historical function of the site – the military function – has been “re-established”, despite the new legal status of the monument.

The peak of the Palmyrene civilization during the Roman period has obscured the important urban phase in the early centuries of the Common Era as well as the history of the city during the medieval and the early modern era. Though the population and the urban area undoubtedly shrank, the city of Palmyra remained populated up to the 20th century, when the city was transformed into an archaeological area and a new residential area was established nearby. This process was not different from what happened in other Middle Eastern cities such as Bosra and Jerash. The city of Palmyra, called Tadmur in the local Aramaic language, reached its cultural apogee between the 131 and 161 CE and its political peak in the 3rd century under Odenato, who was given the title of Dux Romanorum.

Palmyra featured a connubial of local and Graeco-Roman forms: the Aramaic coexisted with the Greek language, the god Bel embodies Zeus, and funerary portraiture coexisted with new imported statues in the Graeco-Roman style, Hellenistic paintings and Attic sarcophagi. The city featured all the aspects and institutions of a Graeco-Roman urban centre: a tetrastyle marked the junction of the cardus and decumanus, the wide columned avenue was also a marketplace, a theatre and thermal complexes adorned the city. Wealth flourished in the city thanks to the commercial trade facilitated by its strategic position between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Different subjects within Palmyra had the opportunity to build houses in Roman style. The defeat of Zenobia at Emesa (Homs) against Aurelian marked the end of the kingdom of Palmyra. The defeat meant the end of the golden classical period of Palmyra, though the life kept on in the Palmyrene oasis.

The reuses of classical Palmyra had already started in the 4th century, with the conversion of the temple of Allat, a goddess of Arabic origin introduced into the city earlier on, into a military garrison. Palmyra became one of the late-antique fortresses erected by the Romans and Byzantines along the oriental border of the empire as defensive strongholds in front of the nearby Sasanian Empire. Under Byzantium, as elsewhere in the Mediterranea, Palmyra was Christianized and the finding of numerous ecclesiastic foundations in the area north of the colonnade avenue shows how Christians “gentrified” an area slightly removed from the remains of the town centre during the classical period. The Islamic conquest of Palmyra, occurred during the 7th century, implied new transformations. While the Christian quarter was left undisturbed, the classical colonnade avenue was transformed into a new and huge commercial area.

Despite the function was not modified – the avenue had shops already in the Roman age – the layout of the avenue was transformed dramatically as the new shops were no longer on the sides of the street as in the Roman time when the road was used by chariots, but were built instead of reused material in the middle of the avenue encroaching the passage. Former public spaces were taken over by private commercial activities: a process witnessing the economic vitality of the early Islamic period and a new approach – already started during the Christianization of the Roman cities during Late Antiquity – to the urban layout and the relationship between public and private spaces. The early Islamic phase also meant the construction of a small mosque nearby the new marketplace: built with reused material as well, the mosque differs from the urban context for the different orientation of the building, which is not aligned to the nearby colonnade avenue but rather to the qibla, i.e. the direction to Mecca. Later on, during the Abbaspot period, Palmyra started to be interpreted as a city of the past: Arabic sources attributed its monumental ruins to Solomon, who would have ordered the construction to his jinn (magic spirits).
During the Arabic Middle Ages, the figure of Solomon embodies the image of both the just ruler as well as of the skilled builder able to erect monumental constructions. In the Arabic sources is also possible to find descriptions of proto-archaeologist findings: a medieval anecdote tells the story of how excavating a trench a perfectly preserved hypogeum chamber was unearthed. The treasury was left untouched, because of the presence of a curse against grave robbers. According to another anecdote, the finding of a funerary statue inspired the Arab governor of the city a poetry praising the beauty of the two women portrayed and the marble material of the piece. The huge area of the Temple of Bel (205x210m.), instead, was reused in the 12th century: under the Burids a new urban phase of Palmyra focused on the interior of the ancient temple exploiting the walls of the Roman temenos. The cella of the temple was converted into a mosque, while ancient figurative reliefs were inserted in the entrance gate, probably with an apotropaic function. A few years later, a fortress was built from scratch on top of a hill overlooking the oasis of Palmyra. The patron of such a castle was Asad al-Din Shirkuh (d. 1169), a Kurd who was among the founders of the Ayyubid dynasty. Protected by a deep trench and by the steep inclination of the hill, the fortress offers a sort of palimpsest with interventions dated to different epochs. The original core had an irregular triangular plan, with squared crenelated towers with loopholes for facilitating the defence of the site. The oldest part of the fortress also featured a bent entrance, water cisterns and a vast internal court, as well as vaulted rooms. The aspect of the fortress was then modified, so that, for instance, the original entrance is now englobed into a more recent gate. The most recent building phase dates back to the 16th - 17th centuries and overlaps with the occupation of the site by Fakhr al-Din, an ambitious Druze emir who sought to create an emirate independent from the Ottoman governor, getting as far as making an alliance with the Grand Duchy of Tuscany governed by the Medici. During this period, Palmyra is described in the Arabic sources as a city of gardens, revealing that the water of the oasis was skilfully employed for gardening and cultivation. Successively the oasis declined, though a few decades later the engravings by Louis-François Cassas (18th century) spread in Europe the romantic image of Palmyra and its ruins (Fig. 10). It was the beginning of the “modern discovery” of Palmyra.
The site of Palmyra was enlisted as a World Heritage site in the year 1980. Among the criteria followed by UNESCO to choose the Syrian oasis there was not only the importance of the architectural remains dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries, but also the impact that the “discovery” of Palmyra had on the classicist renewal in Europe. Ironically, the Arab-Muslim continuity of the site was not taken into consideration. Following pure “Western” aesthetic and cultural criteria, the city is presented as a “European” installation (a Roman city in the Syrian Desert) later on re-appropriated by Europe itself, as a source for the (European) neoclassical style.

The city of Palmyra has been constantly under the threat of the effects of the civil war. In November 2011, Palmyra is among the urban centres where protests of the local population against the oppression of the regime were reported. One image shows a scant group of demonstrators using the triumphal arch at the beginning of the colonnade avenue as a theatre for their protests (Fig. 11).
As everywhere in Syria, protests got stronger and were repressed by the army. Military units took position in Palmyra. The museum, located on the verge between the old and the new city, became the base for the army. In early February 2012, the castle of Shirkuh was occupied for the first time by the regular army, and since September 2012, the occupation has become permanent. The position of the castle, overlooking the city from top of the nearby hill was once more exploited by soldiers who started shooting to any suspicious activity down the valley (Fig. 12).
Heavy fighting took also place among the remains of the old city: the walls of the temple of Bel were seriously damaged by mortar fires in March 2012 (Fig. 13).

Figure 13. The Temple of Bel, Palmyra: damages caused by mortar fire, March 2012. Photo published by APSA on Facebook.

Apart from the western and southern facades of the temple, damages are also reported for two columns of the southern arcade. Eventually two more columns collapsed. In the Camp of Diocletian, stone blocks were removed and some illegal excavations carried out. As elsewhere in other archaeological sites, (see the next paragraph) lootings occurred, as the personnel in charge of watching over the site were absent or unable to intervene (Fig. 14). Illegal excavations in Palmyra are said to have taken place in the Valley of tombs, particularly with regard to the tombs in the SE and SW areas. Illegal excavation included the use of motor vehicles and the destruction of part of the architectural remains in order to plunder the interior. While renowned tombs were sealed by burying the entrance by the year 2010, unexplored tombs and cemetery areas were instead attacked.45

The military occupation of cultural heritage sites, such as the museum (which exterior wall was damaged) or the fortified citadel of Shirkuh on top of the hill, constitutes a serious threat for their preservation. Even when we are eventually presented with a genuine will for preserving a specific site with an armed presence (such might be the case of the Museum of Palmyra occupied by the regular Syrian army), the occupation puts the site in danger of a direct aggression by the insurgents. International conventions (see below paragraph 3.1) highlight how cultural heritage sites should be necessarily defended by a third party and not by one of the fighting sides.

In the case of the occupation by the Syrian army of the fortified citadels, the historical function and the new legal status are at odds. Citadels have recovered their original function as places deputed to defence and control of the surrounding areas, although this happened in a completely changed military and technologically context when compared to the pre-modern period. Furthermore, the original function was dismissed in the early 20th century, when concepts such as Antiquities and cultural heritage appeared in Syria. The discontinuity is highly visible in the new function of the site (archaeological and touristic) and accurately defined in legislative terms.

2.3 Civil Occupation (SP)

Human occupation of archaeological sites does not refer only to military or militia, but also to civil population who, often looking for a better and safer place to live, occupy historical buildings and archaeological sites. Civil occupation of archaeological area or ancient building is not a new phenomenon in Syria. The ancient city of Bosra, for example, was occupied by locals before the beginning of the uprising. Since the beginning of the conflict, a deterioration of the situation has led up to the occupation of some ancient sites by the civilians. Obviously, the type of damage that the population is inferring to archaeological and historical properties is much less consistent if compared with military actions.
Looking at the current situation, we can identify three main types of civil occupation, which involve: a) the re-used of ancient building material, b) the occupation of cultural property, and c) the construction of new buildings on archaeological sites. In the first case, the civil export or remove ancient material from the protected site to another location where they re-used it for modern construction. One of the most popular material is of course stone, which has a longer life-span and it is more resistant than other materials (i.e. mudbrick or wood). SAFE, for example, informs that in the Dara’a Governorate, local population are removing stone blocks from the ancient buildings of the sites of Tell ‘Ashari, Tell Umm Hauran, Tafas, Da’al, Sahm el-Golan, and in the ancient city of Matta’iya. In the second circumstance, the occupation of cultural property, takes place when the population decided to abandon their homes and to move to ancient buildings, mainly because they are located in safer areas and they are free to be occupied, since the sites are less protected during the conflict. The most popular areas are those better preserved, located nearby conflict areas, such as the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria. These Cristian-Byzantine villages are located in the Limestone Massif area between the territories of modern Aleppo and Idlib (Fig. 15).


Also known as the “Forgotten cities of the North”, the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria appear today as ghost towns. However, during the Byzantine period they were flourishing settlements famous for their wine and oil production. This area formed in the past the surrounding of the city of Antioch on the
Orontes (now in modern Turkey), one of greatest Roman cities in the Mediterranean world. However, following the Islamic conquest, the political centre of Syria moved from Antioch to Damascus. With this switch, the Antioch region did not manage to sustain its decline, so the population moved somewhere else, leaving their towns empty between the 8th and 10th centuries (Figs. 16-17).

“Not being destroyed by invasions or natural disasters, these towns simply became ghost towns, surviving in some cases almost intact. Consequently, it is still possible to wander along streets, into modest houses and hostelries or grander villas and churches that in many cases are almost perfectly preserved, with only their roofs missing” (Ball, 2006, p. 168).

*Figure 16. Sergilla, two floors “inn”. Photo by Silvia Perini, 2010.*
The Jebel Zawiya Park is one of the most vulnerable areas and is the one suffering the most from the civil occupation (Figs. 18-21).
Figure 19. Laundry within an ancient building in the Jebel Zawiya park (January 2013). Photo by Tracey Shelton, published online at http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/130109/cultural-heritage-casualty-of-war

Figure 20. Civil occupation in the Jebel Zawiya area (January 2013). Photo by Tracey Shelton, published online at https://www.facebook.com/tracey.shelton.56/media_set?set=a.10151643343209698.619709.631539697&type=3
Lastly, in the last typology of civil occupation, namely the construction of new buildings on archaeological sites, the local population decided to expand building construction on historical and archaeological areas. Again, this is happening since a lack of site monitoring. In Quneitra neighbouring, civil occupation of cultural areas has been observed at Tell Ashara (Terka), Jabal Wastani, Sheikh Hamad, Sura e Sheikh Hassan. According to the DGAM reports, many other sites have shown a similar trend. The archaeological site of Tell Ahmar (North Aleppo) for instance, has been subjected to illegal constructions and cultivations in some parts of the acropolis.49

2.4 Plundering, Vandalism and Illicit Trade of Cultural Material (SP)
Plundering, vandalism and illegal trade of cultural material are actions that aim to the damage and weakening of the cultural heritage, both immovable and movable. Plunder (or looting or pillage) means steal goods from a historical and archaeological site, while vandalism involves the deliberate destruction or damage to a cultural area or site. Illicit trade of cultural material (i.e. objects), or illegal trafficking, encompasses the trade in objects illicitly removed from archaeological sites, monuments, ancient buildings or museums, and their illegal export and profit-making business. In terms of Syria archaeological sites plundered, looted and damaged, we are well informed by the DGAM and several organisations, including APSA,50 Heritage for Peace,51 and ASOR.52

Prior the Syrian uprising, archaeological sites were monitored by a local guardian who was paid by the archaeological team working on the site. However, since 2011, the directors of the international teams have stopped paying the local guardians. Without any form of control, the cultural areas are easily target for looters and vandals (and for civil occupation as observed above). In order to avoid this problem, DGAM demands the directors of the archaeological mission of Syrian sites to continue to pay the guardians, since their control is crucial during the conflict.53 This operation, however, is not facilitated by the embargoes and the economic sanctions on the country, which include restrictive measures placed on
financial transactions in Syria and most international banks are now refusing to transfer funds direct to banks located in the country.\textsuperscript{54}

We are sadly too familiar with the looting of the site of Apamea, Ebla, Mari, and Dura Europos, just to mention some of them (Figs. 22-25).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{apamea.jpg}
\caption{Figure 22a and Figure 22b. Apamea, comparison of satellite images: 2007 (on the left) and a detailed of the looting in 2012 (on the right). Photo by Ignacio Arce, published online at http://traffickingculture.org/data/looting-at-apamea-recorded-via-google-earth/}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{mardikh.jpg}
\caption{Figure 23a and Figure 23b. Tell Mardikh (Ebla). Palazzo G before (on the left) and after the Syrian conflict (on the right). On the photo to the right are visible modern graffiti and illicit pits. Photos published online by APSA at https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=406625839444533&set=a.387426678031116.1073741828.324869057620212&type=3&theater}
Since the beginning of the conflict, these sites have been enormously harmed by illicit excavations, not to mention the natural damage of Bronze Age mudbrick sites that are in need of immediate restoration because of the building deterioration caused by the meteorological events. At Mari, for example, despite the modern roof constructed to preserve the buildings from natural erosion, the site has been largely damaged (and the roof too) (Fig. 26).
Illicit trafficking of cultural objects is often a consequence of the destruction and damage of archaeological sites. In order to understand the repercussions of illicit trafficking, one needs to understand the meaning of cultural objects and their context. Cultural objects have a double value: intrinsic and extrinsic. The first is the value that an object has “in itself”, for example, its age or its artistic beauty, while extrinsic is the value in relation with the past and in relevance to the place objects were made, used or found. Extrinsic value is defined accordingly to the condition of the excavation and its documented provenance. When an object is moved from its place of origin and its context, its significance is reduced and becomes more depending on the documentation linked to it. However, these are lacking during illegal excavations. Thus, the objects stolen from illicit dig are more sensitive than those coming from the museums, since no record has been made on them. Illegal dig destroys centuries or millennia of archaeological phases and all the objects associated with those strata lose irremediably and forever their extrinsic value. That means that crucial information about the society, the economy, everyday life, the culture of the civilisation who lived in the pillaged site is completely erased. Since no documentation exists for this material, their cultural and historical value is lost and very difficultly it can be recovered. Therefore, one can understand how archaeological documentation and recording procedure are essential to preserve the fragile link to the past that each cultural object possesses. Looting of archaeological sites in Syria is not a new phenomenon, and it took place even before the beginning of the conflict. After the beginning of the crisis, however, the situation is dramatically worsening and now gangs with international criminal links and considerable expertise are robbing the country with the aid of bulldozers. The current General Director of DGAM, Maamoun Abdelkarim, In August 2014 argued that:

More than 6000 archaeological artefacts have returned during the past three years through confiscations carried out by the concerned bodies (the police, the customs, the governorate, the municipalities and other public bodies) in Damascus, Tartus, Palmyra, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor.55

These objects may turn up at public auction, museums or they may be sold to some private collector. More recently, the traffic of stolen artefacts has found a new way into some websites, such as eBay, where negotiations are faster, and where it is easier to lose the traces of the objects. In July 2013, for example, a Palmyrene bas-relief dated to the I-II century AD known as the “Young patrician cloaked” (Fig. 27) was
found in Turin (Italy).\textsuperscript{56} This sculpture has been analysed by DGAM experts and Italian Carabinieri and they agreed it is an original piece coming from the ancient city of Zenobia in Syria.


According to the DGAM and Interpol, during the 2013 artefacts from Palmyra and other sites have also been smuggled into Lebanon.\textsuperscript{57} In 2012, thirty mosaics stolen from the site of Apamea appeared in the list of stolen goods compiled by Interpol that functions to facilitate the recognition of stolen objects making it more difficult to marketing on the black market.\textsuperscript{58} More recently, in April 2014, the DGAM and the Syrian INTERPOL, in cooperation with UNESCO, have succeeded in withdrawing a rare Syrian artefact from sale at Bonhams in London, a privately owned British auction house and one of the world's oldest and largest auctioneers of fine art and antiques (Fig. 28).\textsuperscript{59}
Figure 28. Stele of the Assyrian king Adad-Nerari III. The upper part is at the British Museum while the lower part was in sell in London. Photo published online by the DGAM at http://dgam.gov.sy/index.php?p=314&id=1210

The artefact on auction, estimated from £600,000 to £800,000, consists of the lower part of a basalt stele, representing the upper body of a royal person with some cuneiform inscription on the side and front parts. German archaeologist Prof Hartmut Kühne who worked at the site of Tell Sheikh Hamad (Dur-Katlimmu) in Syria since 1975, argued that the artefact in auction would correspond with the upper part of a royal stele dedicated to King Adad-Nerari III of Assyria (c. 805-797 B.C.) the Iraqi scientist Hormuzd Rassam found in 1879 at the site and now at the British Museum. Bonhams, however, argued that the piece in questions was sold by a private collector in Geneva and was “given as a gift from father to son in the 1960s”, and later consigned to the auction house. Since archaeologists Rassam and Kühne failed to find the lower section during their excavations, it is argued that the upper part was taken out of Syria illegally by means of illegal excavation and smuggling, probably even before the beginning of the Syrian conflict.

At the beginning of 2014, 334 Syrian artefacts were smuggled to Mardin (Turkey) (Fig. 29). The objects, dated to the Sumerian and Assyrian periods, include cylindrical seals, stone-house-hole necklace beads, beads, bracelet and pendant fragments, cuneiform inscription, decorated ceramics, metal rings, seal cap and stamp seals.


An investigative report by the German broadcaster “Das Erste” documented evidence that antiquities looted by terrorist groups were being sold through German auction houses. The report revealed how Syrian conflict antiquities were smuggled as handicrafts, laundered with obscuring or outright false documentation, and then sold on the open market. On an article published in Cultural Heritage Lawyer on the 6th of October 2014, Rick St. Hilaire analysing the imports of art, collections and collectors' pieces in the USA from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey has noticed a remarkable increment between 2011 and 2013. He argued that: “The Total American imports of ‘HTS 97′ goods from the five
countries rapidly escalated from $51.1 million in 2011 to $95.2 million in 2013, an astonishing 86% rise\(^{66}\) (see Tab. 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>Percent Change 2012 - 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Actual Dollars</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>22,778,794</td>
<td>24,799,487</td>
<td>44,715,936</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>19,546,035</td>
<td>20,201,597</td>
<td>31,383,502</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>4,553,364</td>
<td>4,759,212</td>
<td>11,148,782</td>
<td>134.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>2,871,141</td>
<td>780,688</td>
<td>4,625,057</td>
<td>492.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1,382,136</td>
<td>2,120,696</td>
<td>3,351,462</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOT ($)</td>
<td>51,131,470</td>
<td>52,661,680</td>
<td>95,224,739</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The market for illegally smuggled objects is growing not only in the Western countries. Today there are buyers with big sums of money who are unfortunately buying cultural objects in Gulf countries, especially in the UAE.\(^{67}\) Referring to ISIS in particular, the US Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David S. Cohen, at The Carnegie Endowment For International Peace in October 2014 stressed that ISIS’s finances allow them to generate tens of millions of dollars per month. Some of the tactics used to finance the group included “the sale of stolen oil, the ransoming of kidnap victims, theft and extortion from the people it currently dominates, and, to a lesser extent, donations from supporters outside of Syria and Iraq. […] ISIL rob banks. They lay waste to thousands of years of civilization in Iraq and Syria by looting and selling antiquities […].\(^{68}\)

Very different is the status of the objects stolen from the Syrian museums. DGAM informs that the majority of the museum has been emptied and their collections have been transferred to safer places, such as in the vaults of the Central Bank and underground warehouses.\(^{69}\) In some cases, security gates and doors were built to prevent looting and theft of archaeological material (Fig. 30).
However, these precautions (not all in action since the beginning of the uprising) have not stopped theft and damage to museum properties, especially for those goods that could not be moved away because of their size and weight, such as mosaics and large statues. For instance, the Museum of Popular Tradition in Aleppo has been looted and glassware, antique weapons (some daggers and six spears) and clothing on display in a glass case were stolen. The Qala’at Ja'bar Museum has been also looted, 17 pottery and terracotta figurines were stolen from the entrance of the museum. Objects from the Hama Museum were also stolen, among which of particular importance is the golden statue of the Aramaic period (eighth century BC). This statue appeared in the Interpol list of "most wanted" objects in December 2011, and today has become a symbol of APSA, one of the groups that is fighting for the protection of cultural heritage in Syria (Fig. 31).
To conclude, it is necessary to stress that although damages on sites and monuments are visible on a short-term basis and it possible to record and classify them into different typologies according to the type of documentation available (i.e. video, photograph, etc.), long-term consequences of such damages are much more catastrophic and difficult to estimate for the time being. Michel Al-Maqdissi, former director of the DGAM in Damascus, has observed, for example, that:

In the short term, damage is occurring due to the increasing number of thefts of antiquities, illegal excavations, paralysed and wrecked museums and a halt to fieldwork. In the long term, it will be affected by the massive exodus of trained archaeologists at the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM) and at the Musée National. Their absence will generate dramatic problems when archaeology in Syria returns to normal. There is a deep fear of a brain drain, as a consequence of the emigration of researchers and the decline of scientific infrastructure. This is a disastrous phenomenon, which in both quantitative and qualitative terms effectively implies the disappearance of the DGAM as a scientific institution. This will impede the correct management of the post-war phase.

3.1 Legislation and Laws Protecting the Cultural Heritage (MG)
It should make clear that Syria since the beginning of the modern period experienced a radical transformation of its culture, economy, lifestyle, also including its relationship with the past. It is wrong to think that the pervasiveness of dictatorship periods since the conclusion of the colonial era, which, in turn, took the place of the Ottoman presence in the area, means the Syrian population has never experienced democratic and constituent processes and civic liberties. In other words, it is wrong – as often instead reported by columnists – to consider that Syrian people are only now trying adopting Western modernity. On the contrary, Syria – as many other countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean area – has been living in osmosis with the other side of the Mediterranean Sea since the 19th century and developed a series of modern practices and discourses that, among other things, shaped the attitude of the country (institutions, élites, people) towards its own antiquities.
In Syria, the rise and development of institutions and norms related to the cultural heritage were the outcome of both internal processes and external inputs. During the period of the “Arab renaissance” (nahda) (end of the 18th – beginning of the 20th century), for instance, the “national school” (1863) was instituted in Lebanon. It was the earliest inter-confessional school in which scientific subjects had for the first time a primary role in the curriculum. The belonging to identitarian concepts such as Arabism and Syrian regionalism moved the population beyond the old familiar and religious ties. In the 19th century, the juridical reforms of the Ottoman statist Ahmed Gevdet Pasha (1822-1855) contributed to provide the region with a new legal canon.\(^7 \) Since the first half of the 19th century, Damascus and Aleppo featured impressive urban transformations. Just outside the old city centres, new European-style avenues were planned; wide avenues adapted for motor vehicles. In the case of Damascus, the planning of a large road connecting the railway station to the city centre included the destruction of some historical buildings. Under the reformist pushes proceeding from Ottoman Turkey, Arab cities changed and became modern (roads provided with electric trams appeared in the second decade of the 20th century in Aleppo).

Contextually also the past of the region was perceived in a new way. Following the initiative of the Ottoman-Turkish government and thanks to the German-Turkish alliance, the monuments of Syria were the object of a huge campaign of investigation and documentation coordinated by the “Denkmalschutzkommando”, a unit for protecting the monuments, instituted between 1914 and 1916, after the model of what done by Germany in northern France and Belgium. Despite the political agenda of the Ottoman governor in Syria Jamal Pasha (1872-1922), had a primary concern for the study and recovery of Islamic antiquities, the mapping of monuments of the past included examples from every epoch.\(^7 \)

A further contribution to the modernization of the social and political life in Syria was the drafting and ratification of the early constitutional text. The constitution, dated between 1918 and 1920, was the result of the work of 87 delegates coming from the four regions that constituted Syria at that time (Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria). These two years represent a luminous window in Syrian history. It was a period compressed between the end of the Ottoman Empire and the resolutions of Sanremo conference, which gave Syria and Lebanon to France and Palestine and Jordan to Great Britain. Syria was for almost two years a constitutional monarchy headed by king Faysal. The constitution of the year 1920 is composed of 147 articles that define the nature of the state and the rights and duties of the king, assembly, deputies and citizens. It is significant that the main Syrian museum, the National Museum of Damascus, was established exactly in the year 1919, in order to gather under one single roof the remains and artefacts progressively discovered by archaeological missions. Until then, these were sent to Istanbul or appropriated by private citizens. The museum depended on the Arab Academy and the seat for both was the madrasa al-ʿAdiliyya, a medieval building located in the historic centre of Damascus.\(^7 \)

The new independent Syria emerged at the end of the Second World War. A series of military coups were interrupted in 1950 by the Atassi government that, among other things, had a new constitutional text approved by the national assembly. Between 1954 and 1958, Syria entered an extremely intense phase also featuring free elections.

The Law on Antiquities (Legislative Decree n. 222), dating to 1963, defines and rules Syrian cultural heritage. This law – amended for the last time in 1999 – substituted a previous law dated to 1947. In article n. 2 of the law it is stated the commitment of the state to “preserve, protect, research and use according to the laws” the antiquities of the country. Article n. 7 sanctions whoever damages the antiquities of the country, also including modifications to sites, objects and monuments. Articles n. 24 and 25 define in detail the restrictions in the usage of archaeological areas. It is prohibited, for instance, to dig channels or remove stones, as well as to construct heavy industries and military areas within a circle of 500 meters from archaeological areas and historical buildings. Article n. 28 obliges every natural or juridical persona that should eventually occupy a historic building or an archaeological area to permit the personnel of the Directorate of the Antiquities to enter in order to inspect, study, measure and take images. Chapter 3 of the Law focuses on artefacts and objects and to their preservation, while chapter 4 defines
and articulates duties of those carrying out archaeological excavations within the country. Measures against smuggling are regulated by an emendation dated to 1999 and fix the punishment to 15 to 25 years of detention for those who seek to smuggle artefacts out of Syria, and to 10 to 15 years of detention for those who seek to carry out illegal excavations. For those who try to destroy or falsify features of antiquities, artefacts and monuments, 5 to 10 years of detention is provided. Finally, the article 63 assigns the same punishment for whoever in charge of guarding the antiquities fails in protecting them. It should be remarked that between 2010 and 2013 DGAM has elaborated a draft law on the protection of the Syrian archaeological heritage, which is expected to be presented soon to the Parliament.

Cultural heritage is also briefly mentioned in the most recent Syrian constitution, dated to the year 1973, and inspired to Socialist values and to the search for the political unification of the Arab countries. In the third section, devoted to the cultural and educational principles, article n. 21 decrees that “The educational and cultural system aims at creating a socialist nationalist Arab generation which is scientifically minded and attached to its history and land, proud of its heritage, and filled with the spirit of struggle to achieve its nation's objectives of unity, freedom, and socialism, and to serve humanity and its progress.” The 1963 law on antiquities was issued a few years later Syria ratified the Hague’s Convention (1954), implemented by the United Nations through the UNESCO in order to strengthen the prevention to damages to the cultural heritage in case of armed conflicts. Point 3 of article n. 4 of the convention establishes that the subscribers should act in order to prohibit and prevent any form of looting and vandalism against the cultural heritage. Article n. 8, point 3, instead, makes explicit what is meant by a military use of a historical site: “A centre containing monuments shall be deemed to be used for military purposes whenever it is used for the movement of military personnel or material, even in transit. The same shall apply whenever activities directly connected with military operations, the stationing of military personnel, or the production of war material are carried on within the centre.”

The next point of the same article distinguishes between the presence of a special police in charge of patrolling cultural heritage and the occupation of sites by the regular army. Article 10 of the convention orders that monuments and sites should be identifiable by a special emblem so to be easily distinguishable in the case of armed conflict, while article 16 specifies the emblem should be a white-and-blue shield. The convention of 1954 was amended in 1999 (Protocol II), requiring each country to implement the protection of heritage sites and defining five serious violations to the integrity of cultural heritage. The implementation of Protocol II is valid for international conflicts as well as for non-international ones, as it is the case – at least before the explicit involvement of foreign armies – of Syrian war. Syria, which ratified the 1954 Convention in the year 1958, has not yet ratified the Protocol II and its urgent ratification has been called during a recent meeting devoted to the Syrian cultural heritage organized by UNESCO in Amman.

Syria has also ratified the Convention to limit the illicit traffic of antiquities (“Means of Prohibiting and Preventing Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property”), a multilateral treaty adopted by UNESCO in 1970 and enforced since 1972. This Convention has been successively reinforced in the year 1995 by the Unidroit Convention, which forces the possessor of a stolen artefact to give it back also in the case the purchase was carried out in bona fide. Syria has eventually also signed the Convention for the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage elaborated by the World Heritage Committee. The Convention affirms at point 1 of article 6 that, though respecting the integrity and the territorial sovereignty of each country, member states accept that cultural heritage is a universal concern which protection should be in charge of the international community.

The Security Council of the United Nations has unanimously adopted the resolution 2199 (2015) condemning trade with terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, deciding “that all Member States shall take appropriate steps to prevent the trade in Iraqi and Syrian cultural property and other items of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance illegally removed from Iraq.
since 6 August 1990 and from Syria since 15 March 2011, including by prohibiting cross-border trade in
such items."81

Despite the above-mentioned Syrian and International laws and regulations aiming at protecting cultural
heritage, doubts on the criminal accountability and justice for violations against Syrian world cultural
heritage have recently been raised. Lostal notes that as legal bases for prosecuting individuals for
violations 1954 Hague Convention and the World Heritage Convention are largely absent, prosecution
will be likely carried out by Syrian domestic courts, a process which might be affected by the bias and
unfairness of the “victor’s justice”.82

3.2 National and International Responses (MG and SP)
Since the armed conflict in Syria began, in March 2011, dramatic international calls to ensure the
protection of the outstanding cultural legacy have been carried out, stressing that destroying the heritage
of the country means damaging to the soul of its people and its identity (Irina Bokova, Director-General
of UNESCO, March 2012).83 This last paragraph offers an overview of the national response and the
international actions undertaken towards the protection of the Syrian cultural heritage since the beginning
of the conflict.

As mentioned above (see Paragraph 1.1), within the 759 cultural sites actually inscribed in the World
heritage list Syria features six: the historical centre of Damascus, the historical centre of Bosra, the site of
Palmyra, the historical site of Aleppo, the Krak of Chevaliers and the Qala'at Salah al-Din, and the old
villages of northern Syria (the so-called “dead cities”). All these sites have been irremediably damaged
since the beginning of the civil war in 2011. Indeed infractions to the cultural heritage took also place
before the uprising. However, the scale of the abuses since 2011 obliged DGAM to reorganise its
presence and activity in the country. There are two ambivalent declarations by DGAM showing the actual
state of the cultural heritage in Syria. In the report *Archaeological heritage in Syria during the crisis,
2011-2013* it is said that: “Archaeological sites in Syria have been and are now suffering from serious
damage and gross violations. Old Syrian cities, castles and other buildings have been subjected to damage
and destruction” (p. 15).84

At the same time, the declarations given by DGAM to the conference organised by UNESCO in Amman
posits that:

> The overall situation of Syrian cultural heritage at the time of the meeting was less
severe than reported by the media, at least for the museums and cultural institutions: the
DGAM is continuing its efforts to protect the movable and immovable heritage by
keeping its offices operational throughout the country despite the difficulties; the
awareness raising activities carried out by the DGAM with the local communities since
the beginning of the conflict, allowed limiting the impact of the situation on the cultural
heritage; measures were taken to protect the movable heritage, and most of the
archaeological remains stored in museums were inventoried and moved to safe storages;
the reported number of stolen objects is so far limited (*Regional training on Syrian
cultural heritage*, 2013, 6).85

In the above-mentioned passage from the *Regional training on Syrian cultural heritage* workshop,
DGAM wishes for a greater involvement of local communities in the process of protecting Syrian cultural
heritage. This last aspect seems essential in order to maintain Syrian cultural heritage at the core of Syrian
emergency so to make cultural heritage, in a hopefully near future, one of the pivots of the national
reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. As stated by Miznani, “Post-conflict reconstruction of
significant historic landmarks can have a healing effect, helping conciliation and the restoration of social
and cultural integrity”86.
The protection of great part of public museums is undoubtedly among the encouraging actions of DGAM, a task facilitated by the general good organisation of Syrian institutions devoted to the care of cultural heritage.\(^{87}\) The DGAM has actively collaborated to the above-mentioned meeting organised in February 2013 by UNESCO in Amman and devoted to the illicit traffic of artefacts following the uprising in Syria (Regional training on Syrian cultural heritage 2013). DGAM is reinforcing cooperation with local governmental and non-governmental authorities and strengthen legislation to fight the illicit trade of cultural material.\(^{88}\) DGAM has also published a detailed report about the damages perpetrated against the archaeological sites during the conflict, followed by a series of updates.\(^{89}\) It has raised awareness through national campaign, exhibition, conference and workshops which stressed the importance of safeguarding the Syrian cultural heritage. DGAM has been awarded the “Cultural heritage rescue prize Venice 2014” because of all the initiatives taken in defence of Syrian cultural heritage.\(^{90}\) It should be mentioned that some criticisms towards DGAM have also been expressed.\(^{91}\)

Internationally speaking, many initiatives have been undertaken by many groups and organisations. Four main groups are worthwhile to be mentioned: UNESCO and its partners; Penn Museum, Penn Cultural Heritage Centre and the Smithsonian Institution; The American Schools of Oriental Research; and the German of Archaeological Institute (DAI) with the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin.\(^{92}\)

UNESCO and its strategic partners have been working on creating an Observatory in Beirut for the safeguarding of Syria’s cultural heritage. This project, Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage Project includes damage assessment, mapping and inventories of Syrian tangible heritage. In addition, a roster of experts and entities have been invited to cooperate providing assistance in preserving Syria’s heritage, and to prepare post-conflict recovery initiatives for built and movable heritage, as well as intangible cultural heritage.\(^{93}\) ICOM, moreover, edited a list to identify Syrian objects that are protected by national and international legislations in order to avoid their illicit trafficking.\(^{94}\)

The Penn Museum, the Penn Cultural Heritage Centre and the Smithsonian Institution in cooperation with the Syrian Interim Government’s Heritage Task Force, have come together to offer an emergency workshop, training and support for Syrian Museum Collections.\(^{95}\) In addition, the Penn Cultural Heritage Centre is currently creating a database to document damage sustained by archaeological sites, heritage sites, monuments, museums, artefacts, religious sites, and other cultural institutions as a result of the ongoing civil war in Syria.\(^{96}\)

The US Department of State and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) signed an agreement to cooperate in a project, which targets at identifying immediate and future projects to assist the country’s cultural heritage in danger. The project, called Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria Initiative, aims to document damage; promoting global awareness and plan emergency and post-war responses.\(^{97}\) It also publishes online weekly reports about the status of the Syrian archaeological heritage a risk.\(^{98}\) Lastly, the Syrian Heritage Archive Project, a cooperation project between the German of Archaeological Institute (DAI) and the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, aims to create a digital database of the Syrian sites.\(^{99}\)

**Conclusion**

While the main aim of this article was not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the problem, this work has succeeded in exhibiting the “outstanding universal value” of Syrian cultural heritage. In particular, this contribution has stressed three main aspects. First, the cultural and historical continuity of Syrian cultural heritage that helped at shaping modern Syria and the role undertaken by DGAM since 1946 for its enhancement and management. Second, the type and extension of some of the damages that are affecting the cultural heritage since the beginning of the conflict. Last but not least, the legislative body, which is
dealing with the protection and conservation of the cultural heritage during the conflict, on both national and international levels.

This work should also be utilised to encouraging some considerations about post-conflict involvements that this war is bringing forward. For example, the necessity of reinforcing and coordinating the already existed international bodies formed by professional experts, including heritage management and conservation people, archaeologists and foreign missions working in Syria prior to 2011, historians, architects, restorers, lawyers, etc, who are working on sites and buildings inventory, museums database, damage assessment, restoration projects, security and task force against illicit traffic and art market. Furthermore, more attention should be brought to the international legislative body currently in operation, namely The Hague Conventions and the more recent UN Security Council. Are these tools sufficient to prevent or limit the destruction and/or loss of the country cultural heritage? Can they be implemented? In 2014, at the 60th Anniversary of the 1954 Hague Convention, Bokova stressed how: “Attacks against culture are attacks against people, and this is why protecting heritage must be an integral part of all peacebuilding efforts, to safeguard a heritage of diversity and tolerance – to prepare the ground for reconciliation”. The destruction of Syrian heritage is a loss of a common good of humanity and we should combine our efforts to bring a halt to this devastation.

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3 For a thoroughly reconstruction of the events of the civil war, see Trombetta 2013.


12 MEGA-Iraq, http://megairaq.org/


ANE Placemarks for Google Earth, http://www.lingfil.uu.se/staff/olof_pedersen/Google_Earth/?languageId=1

Pleiades, http://pleiades.stoa.org/


See note 22.


With regard to this, it is worth noticing that a few days earlier, another minaret was destroyed during a battle between the regime and the insurgents. It was the minaret of the great mosque of Dera’a, a town located in the south of the country and one of the starting points of the Syrian uprising. Although not dated to the 7th century as reported by some media, the minaret was part of an important medieval religious complex. “Historic mosque in Daraa destroyed in Syrian army shelling”. Updated 14 April, 2013. Accessed, 30 April, 2013, [link].

One more minaret has almost collapsed: it is the minaret of the mosque of Abu Thar al-Ghafari in Homs, accessed 30 April, 2014, [link].

It should also be said, however, that there is not yet any video available recording the precise moment of the collapse of the minaret.

Nevertheless, it may be possible to route funding through Dubai or Jordan block of international bank transfers. See, for example, “Foreign travel advice for Syria DGAM” [link], “Minaret of historic Syrian mosque destroyed in Aleppo” [link].


Bylinski, J. “Qal'at Shirkuh at Palmyra: a Medieval Fortress Reinterpreted.” [link].


Syria DGAM, [link].

APSA, [link].

Heritage for Peace, [link].

ASOR, [link].

55 “Interview with Maamoun Abdulkarim: more than 6000 archaeological artifacts has returned to Syria
during the past three years”, accessed 15 September, 2014,
http://www.mediteranneoantiguo.com/2014/08/interview-with-maamoun-abdulkarim-more.html. See also
60 “Bonhams Auctions”. Updated 3 April, 2014. Accessed 30 April, 2014,
http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/21926/lot/99/
61 On 25 September 1999, Prof Kühne sent a report to DGAM stating that some unknown person
excavated illegally on top of the mound during the night of 14 September 1999.
63 “Video: Das geplünderte Erbe - Terrorfinanzierung durch deutsche Auktionshäuser”. Updated 20
dokumentation/dokus/videos/das-gepluederte-erbe-terrorfinanzierung-durch-deutsche-auktionshaeuser-
100.html
64 “Conflict and the Heritage Trade: Rise in U.S. Imports of Middle East "Antiques" and "Collectors'
http://culturalheritagelawyer.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10/conflict-and-heritage-trade-rise-in-us.html
65 Harmonized Tariff Schedule of the United States (aka HTS) is the primary resource for determining
tariff (customs duties) classifications for goods imported into the United States. HTS Code 97 is the
customs classification for works of art, collectors' pieces and antiques.
66 See note 64.
November, 2014, http://www.unesco.org/unesco/investigates-sale-of-art-for-self-financing_fd246bb6-b02c-4e8-87d9-802a78b5ce1e.html
68 “Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen at The Carnegie
69 See, Abdulkarim, M. 2013.
art/Works-of-art
arkeology-scale-of-the-scandal/


See note 22.


For a recent overview of the DGAM interventions see, for example, the interview that the Director of Antiquities & Museums of the Syrian government, Maamoun Abdulkarim, has given to Mediterráneo Antiguo (see Note 55).

See note 22.


See, for instance, Ali 2013.


ASOR, http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/

ASOR, http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/weekly-reports/
