

Who is (really) protecting Syria's archaeological and historical heritage?

Corbulo, an officer fighting for the Roman emperor Nero (reigned AD 54-68), once said that a war is won with a pickaxe and not just with a sword. He was referring to how soldiers dug under fortifications and opened tunnels to besiege enemy cities and destroy walls. Free Syrian Army and Islamic Front rebels have for months made tunnels under the old city of Aleppo to reach the Carlton hotel facing the citadel, i.e. the main headquarters for Assad's troops and his so-called National Defense Guard. A little more than a fortnight ago, they managed to implode this Late Ottoman building from below, putting to practice this Latin maxim and causing massive damage to regime ranks. The "war of tunnels" (in Idlib, at Wadi Dayf airbase, in Aleppo) appears to be a new – but long and patient – way of scratching into a regime war machine still prevailing on the ground and in the air.

Yet Corbulo's words can also apply to what is actually occurring as we speak: an attempt by Bashar al-Assad, courtesy of international organizations such as UNESCO and NGOs like Heritage for Peace, to pose as the defenders of archaeology, of Syria's huge historical and architectural heritage, and, why not, of civilisation itself... Bashar's propaganda stunts often portray destructions merely as the result of fundamentalist Islamic armed hordes wantonly reducing historical monuments and sites to rubble, plundering any precious movable relics or destroying them in order to satisfy their "Wahabbi" agenda. If we are to believe the conference organizers, who have screened out any undesirable coverage of an event which has made security and staff at Unesco's Paris premises quite edgy, "plans and grand designs" are under way to restore the unique remains of all periods of Syria's history, from Neolithic to Ottoman. What the Damascus General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) announces it will restore are the buildings obliterated or looted to a large extent by the very regime they are working for and representing abroad.

After three years of devastation, in the wake of the bombing of entire ancient cities from the air or from SCUD launchers, the Assad regime has just sent to Paris a delegation of archaeologists and museum curators to attend a three day conference, from May 26th to 29th. At UNESCO premises at Place de Fontenoy near the Eiffel tower, Assad's civil servants are discussing a budget for some of the country's – damaged, to say the least - architectural jewels, most levelled in the last two years by MIG fighter jets and barrel bombs filled with TNT. Two-and-a-half million dollars (minimal sums, considering the scale of the destruction) have been set aside for a three-year restoration project of Medieval citadels destroyed by the conflict. These so-to-speak drops of water provided by Denmark and Belgium, are to be handed over to "experts" and to a General Directorate staff acting as firemen for a power structure which has – literally – committed arson from the very day its phosphorous bombs reduced to ashes the Middle East's largest Ayyoubid, Mamluk and Ottoman souk in Aleppo in the winter of 2012. Many archaeologists such as Paolo Matthiae, of *La Sapienza* University in Rome and the director of excavations at the third millennium BCE site of Ebla since 1965, are attending and lecturing. It was the very Matthiae who had rewarded Asma al-Assad with an *honoris causa* doctorate from his university in October 2004, during a much media-covered visit to this 55 hectare urban Bronze age centre. Other scholars and prominent archaeologists

have chosen not to respond to UNESCO's calls for a closed-doors symposium whose political agenda appears clearly under the veneer of scholarly workshops and assessments.

Four workshops planned in a program which has been (mysteriously) removed from the conference's website, three dealing with different aspects of heritage in Syria: movable objects (i.e. saving sites and museums from looting and plundering), built heritage (monuments and archaeological mounds), intangible heritage (preserving arts, crafts and traditions for which Syria is famous for, for instance Hama's cotton prints, music and walnut and mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture, or the music and *muwashahat* and *qâsida* poetry that has made Aleppo famous). One of the "bright ideas" put forward by UNESCO was to print hundreds of thousands of flyers to be given to refugees in camps in Lebanon and Syria, to inform them of the value of heritage. Though a substantial number of antiquities do leave the country via Syria and Lebanon, far from being in the hands of displaced refugees, they are the loot of Lebanese, European and Turkish smugglers: a few months ago, a Byzantine mosaic kept in Raqqa (maybe in fact from Dibsi Faraj, an artwork from churches dug in the 1970s during rescue operations on the Euphrates) was destroyed by ISIL extremists because it had aroused the interest of a Turkish antiquities dealer willing to illegally purchase it.

Asma al-Assad in 2006, receiving an *honoris causa* doctorate from the dean of humanities of *La Sapienza* University in Rome



Asma al-Assad touring Ebla with Italian archaeologist Paolo Matthiae



But will conference papers discuss the systematic looting at Syria's largest Hellenistic and Roman site at Apamea, some 50 km north of Hama above the marshy Ghâb valley? Will Dr Mamoun Abd al-Karim, the current director of antiquities, a man hailing from Malkiyeh (Derrik) east of Qamishli (close to Iraq and Turkey's borders) discuss the hundreds of pits dug on both sides of the 1.8 km avenue of spiralled columns and shops (the longest in the Orient), these erected in the aftermath of the 115 AD earthquake, shortly after emperor Trajan's victories in Mesopotamia against the Parthians? Small-scale illicit digging was a problem at Apamea well before the 2011 uprising. Local youth on motorcycles would drive around the site and around Seleucos I's massive Hellenistic walls to show visitors the odd Roman coin, a pottery oil lamp or Roman Samian ware. Osman 'Aidi, a well-known developer of the merchant-military class of the 1980s (who constructed the Sham hotel in Hama over the Keilani quarter's slaughtered inhabitants) had disfigured many of the site's columns by covering them with ghastly, crude, mushroom-shaped capitals of concrete. Still, what has occurred since 2012 is something quite different, a scandal on an industrial scale met only by the silence of many scholars and agencies alike. Since March 2012, officers of the Syrian army have forced local peasants to dig trenches all over the site, creating a lunar landscape similar to other plundered classical and Hellenistic cities of the Orient in conflict zones (Ai Khanoum in Bactriana/Afghanistan and Hatra in Iraq are a case in point). During a visit made by the author in August 1995, Belgian archaeologist Jean-Claude Balty had emphasized how it was difficult to preserve a marble marvel: the *opus sectile* designs of the 6th century AD Eastern Byzantine cathedral, near the second century AD decumanus colonnade. He was then horrified at how entire floors forming intricate geometric patterns were being vandalized after exposure, partly a result of the General Directorate's lack of organization and care in managing and protecting them from the elements. Alas, one doubts whether Dr Mamoun Abd al-Karim, a specialist of classical periods and of Roman centuriations (agricultural land

divisions for taxation purposes) in the area around Homs will raise the issue of Apamea and discuss at UNESCO regime responsibilities in vandalism and looting.

To the right, Opus sectile floor in the Eastern Cathedral of Apamea. To the left, a view of the eastern apse of the same monument (from <http://romeartlover.tripod.com/Apamea2.html>)



Just a few hundred meters to the West, the regime had, a few months earlier, targeted the tell (mound) of Qala'at al-Mudiq, whose latest levels were those of the Crusader border fortress of Fémie. This was a place where the Duke of Antioch Bohemund had confronted Saladin's troops in the 1180s – an episode recalled by Saladin's secretary, the Arab knight Usama Ibn Munqidh of Sheizar castle on the Orontes. An arched bridge, a smaller scale version of the one leading into the Aleppo citadel, was partly damaged by shells, just as two 12th century AD bastions to the west. It is also unlikely that many questions on the artillery bombing of March 2012 will be asked during the UNESCO closed door sessions.

To be presented during these three days are restoration plans of two quasi-intact citadels in the Jebel al-Ansariyeh mountains: Qala'at al-Husn and further north, Saladin's castle (in fact Qala'at Sahyun, derived from the French Saône family responsible for its upkeep before Sultan Salah ad-Dine seized it in 1188). In mid-June 2012, the Sunni enclave of al-Haffeh, above Lattakia, suffered from massive regime bombardment when the Free Syrian Army held it for a few days. Saladin's castle, 6 km uphill, was also hit. Described by Lawrence of Arabia as one of the most beautiful fortresses of the Orient, illustrated in his doctoral dissertation, it is in fact a city bordered to the north by a 30-metre deep moat dug into the limestone around a drawbridge pinnacle, and to the south by a lower town with unexcavated houses lost in a maze of thick bush and thorns. In between, what was standing was a citadel whose foundations go back to Byzantine Emperor John Tzimikès, who when a general reconquered the coastal Levant in AD 982, seizing it from the Shia Hamdanid dynasty ruling in Aleppo. There is precious little information on the current state of a Crusader keep three storeys high where the Southern French Puylaurens noble family resided in the mid-12th

century, nor is anything known of the fate of the hammam (the baths) built by Mamluk sultan Baibars and excavated by a French-Syrian expedition funded by the Agha Khan.



Some of the intact Crusader towers at Saladin's castle

(author's photograph, 2010)

As for Qala'at al-Husn, the Krak des Chevaliers guarded by the Hospitalliers religious order before it surrendered to the same sultan Rukn ad-Dîn Baibars in 1271, it has suffered even more extensive destruction. "Baibar's tower", a 13th century AD underground *hammam* inside the keep, an assembly hall for knights with a famous warning inscription in Latin against "pride", and the chapel – some of the earliest examples of Gothic architecture in the Levant - were targeted on July 13th, 2013, by MIG fighter jets. These dislodged with heavy ordnance FSA insurgents who were using this strategic vantage point overlooking the Homs corridor, the Buqeia of the Crusades.



Regime aerial bombing of the Baibars tower of the Krak des Chevaliers

Pictures showing regime artillery bombing of the entrance to the Apamea Qala'at al-Mudiq medieval citadel in March 2012, and its aftermath (published online by APSA)





A view of Sergilla in the Jebel Zawiya in 2010 (photograph by the author). Since 2012, hundreds of internally displaced families from the region have taken shelter in this almost entirely preserved Byzantine village.

It is unclear whether Unesco, as well as discussing heritage awareness with refugees, plans to resettle the locals who have sheltered in the Late Roman and Byzantine 4th-5th century AD tombs, cisterns and houses of Sergilla, Baoude, Al-Bara, Ruwaiha and other Jebel Zawiye "Dead Cities". Will the issue of why they have taken refuge there in the first place – because of Assad's incessant bombing of civilians, bakeries, infrastructure, clinics in Maaret an-Nu'man, Saraqeb, in the Ghâb Orontes valley and al-Bara – be addressed by this UN institution? The safeguarding of heritage is nothing more than one aspect of a huge list of grievances, at the top of which is the very survival and safety of a population driven home by a state terror campaign from the air.

What do the Roman temple, church and monastery of Deir Cheroubim at 1800 metres above sea level look like now, since the army has used it as a strategic stronghold for tanks and artillery? In early 2013, this mountaintop, a holy Christian site above Saidnaya, some 48 km north of Damascus in the Anti-Lebanon mountains, was used as a military base for Assad's loyalist forces. Even worse, it became a target of fighting between Islamic Front fighters and the regime's army during the Qalamoun battle in November 2013, when anti-Assad forces were dislodged by Hezbollah militiamen and army troops from the nearby towns of Rankous, Deir 'Atiyeh and Yabroud. The entire two-million-dollar UNESCO budget would not even be enough to restore this site 150 metres in diameter, which, though not the focus of Western tourism before 2011, was a popular destination for Syrians on a summer day out from Damascus. Deir Cheroubim is one of these Roman mountain cult sites dotting all slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountains around sacred Mount Hermon (the *Senir* of the Bible and Phoenicians). Another example similar to Cheroubim is for instance Burqush, a place that became inaccessible to tourists after the 2006 war in Lebanon and was threatened even before

the conflict. A huge platform with a temple and Byzantine basilica, the site was already under threat from army camps nearby in this most sensitive of areas near the Lebanese and Israeli-occupied Golan Heights borders. Both sites, on mountaintops with breathtaking views over the Damascus region, are part of a unique territory, elements of a sacred mountain dedicated in Aramaean times to the Storm God Hadad and in the Roman period to Zeus and Helios the sun deity (in Hebbariyeh and Deir 'Ashayer in Lebanon, similar Roman cult-places survive as well-preserved monuments).

And then there are the mounds, the tells. Thousands of them from the Jazira near Qamishli to the Hawran, from Abou Kemal by Iraq to Syria's earliest village at Tell Qaramel north of Aleppo. Those of many cities layered like Black Forest cakes. Those where battles of momentous importance for the history of the Near East were fought. Those whose layers go back to the pre-pottery Neolithic period (PPNA), c. 9000 BCE. Those where wars were won and then celebrated on reliefs at Abou Simbel and in the Theban Ramesseum in Egypt, or on clay tablets and treaties in cuneiform Akkadian from Hattuša, the Hittite imperial capital in modern Turkey. The battle for Qussayr must have greatly affected Tell Nabi Mend, where since 2012 fighting had been heavy. This artificial small mountain of mud brick and stone overlooking the Orontes, a few miles north of the Lebanese border, is of course where the clash of two empires took place, the disputed territory of one of antiquity's most famous battles. In fact Qadesh-on-the-Orontes was where Ramesses II claimed to have saved the day and charged Muwatalli's army on a chariot or where he ran for his life, according to which propaganda – Hittite or Egyptian – one is to believe. Qadesh was where, c. 1286 BCE, the Egyptian army was lured into a trap by spies acting as captured prisoners. These pretended to confess under duress information of paramount strategic importance. The irony is that this Ramesside propaganda echoes that of Assad's claims to victory at nearby Qussayr, a town reduced to rubble in May 2013. Qussair is a battle which was won thanks to Hezbollah mercenaries, with massive losses among Syrian army troops. It seems that Nabi Mend, a site excavated in the 1980s by a British team of archaeologists and now an army encampment, was severely damaged by tanks and trenches.

One could also mention Tell Sheikh Hamed at the other end of Syria, the Middle (1300-1100 BCE) and Late (900-610 BCE) Assyrian city of Dur-Katlimmu, an upper mound and a giant lower city of immense size; in fact this was the largest 7th and 6th century BCE metropolis in Syria. It was resettled in one go by the Assyrian governor Nergal-Eresh, and rebuilt over an artificial canal dug by deportees (the Nahr Dawrin, a 200 km long waterwork feeding from the Habur upstream near Hassake). Since 1979 a "Red Palace" of Nabuchadnezzar's Babylonian empire, a 500-tablet cuneiform archive of the same age discovered in 1998, a Late Bronze Age palace with similar tablets belonging to Assur's king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1241-1207 BCE), are but a fraction of the immensely important discoveries made there by Berlin's Free University Professor Harmut Kuhne and Assyriologists Wolfgang Röllig, Karen Radner and Eva Cançik-Kirschbaum. The site, 40 km west of the Wadi 'Ajj, a gateway into Iraq and a no-man's land, is a strategic crossroad. It therefore became a battle ground between FSA brigades and the Syrian army in mid-2012. Now the region is inaccessible and under the control of the most extreme, fanatic and violent of fundamentalist

militias, ISIL – known to Syrians as Da‘esh. Their black flags of darkness now loom like stagnant clouds over the Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Hassake governorates, and little information on heritage or anything else trickles to the outside...

The means that the regime has used to destroy entire settlements, its disregard both for human life and for the houses and churches and residences and palaces built by tens of generations –those mentioned above in this article are but a minute fraction – should make organizations think twice before inviting Syria’s civil servants and officials to international conferences on heritage and restoration. Museum officials from the Damascus General Directorate, whose denunciations have been selective to say the least and who have indirectly or even straightforwardly lent credit to Assad’s narrative, will never voice any opposition to his relentless bombing campaigns. And they will even less be capable of doing something about looting and destructions affecting sites in areas which have expelled the Syrian dictator’s henchmen.

Those who have extensively documented the damage done to remains, those who have exposed crimes against heritage and barbaric, criminal behaviour towards a resource to be shared by all Syrians and which forms an essential ingredient for future peace and national cohesion, are all from civil society. At great risk for their own lives, they have forwarded countless snippets of information on what has actually occurred to the locations archaeologists had surveyed and cleared for decades. A network of dedicated students, of conscientious volunteers in Aleppo, in the Jazira, in the Hawran, in the Wadi Nessara, in the Orontes and Euphrates valleys and elsewhere, has been documenting the last three years of damage. It is archaeology students at Aleppo University who saved an Ayyubid 12th century wooden *minbar* (a prayer platform) from being obliterated to splinters by shells from the frontline. They are the ones who collected the hewn basalt and limestone stones of the 11th century Aleppo mosque minaret, which collapsed from tank shell bombing when this religious space was on the frontline. Their information and their actions are the infinitely precious pieces of a huge jigsaw puzzle to be assembled when ISIL and the regime, who feed on each other’s actions, hopefully recede into oblivion. These students and youth have witnessed the extent of the tragedy affecting Doura Europos over the Euphrates, a city in the steppe where Palmyrenes, Parthians, Romans, Jews, Mesopotamians and Greeks mingled and where at least six languages were spoken before it fell in AD 256 to the Sassanian Persians. Now Doura, the city of the painted synagogue showing Moses crossing the Red Sea, of the palaces of the strategos and *Dux Ripae* Greek and Roman generals, of the temples of so many local and Greek gods (*Zeus Megistos*, *Zeus hypsistos*, the Gaddê, Nabû god of wisdom and writing...) lies in probably what is now the world’s most unsafe area...



The fortification walls of Doura Europos in the spring, looking northeast toward the Euphrates river valley (author's photograph, 2009)

These brave – one could say foolhardy - Syrians, armed and funded with nothing but good will and passion, were instrumental in the creation of independent NGOs working on a shoestring such as APSA (Association for the Saveguarding of Syrian Heritage) and Ila Souria, a think-tank of architects, historians, lawyers and intellectuals regularly discussing reconstruction. Nevertheless, it is under the pressure of regime officials and their representative at Unesco, Lamia Shakkur, that they were banned from publically exposing the results of their work at UNESCO. Because of what they see as discrimination motivated by a regime whose authority they do not acknowledge, APSA and Ila Souria decided to boycott the event.

The Second century AD Roman temple, reconstructed as a church, within the Deir Cheroubim monastery compound near Saidnaya (author's photograph).



This is not to say that the regime is the only party responsible for the damage to Syria's monuments, cities and mounds. Assad's forces barbarity is paralleled by the local equivalent of the Taliban. Countless examples of ISIL/Da'esh's gratuitous and hysterical violence against any remain from pre-Islamic times abound. One of the latest took place at Tell 'Ajaja, the ancient city of Šadikanni and one of the Middle East's earliest excavations, a place where in 1849 Sir Henry Austin Layard found a *lamassu*, a human-headed bull that guarded Assyrian palaces. Illicit looting has taken place since the Syrian conflict's onset at this 15 hectare site some 25 km upstream from Tell Sheikh Hamed. Assyrian statues and relics found there were seized by Da'esh Jihadis and reduced to dust, a crime recalling the terrible obliteration of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001. The fate of the Deir ez-Zor Museum, which houses a huge fraction of the Mari archive, all the third and fourth millennium BCE finds from the Jazira and those of Roman and Parthian Dura Europos, is unknown. Yet the worse is to be expected in a city to a great extent controlled by this Jihadi movement and whose late Ottoman souks were the scene of heavy fighting in 2013. In the terrorized city of Raqqa, the city ISIL ruthlessly rules since 2013, a unique sculpture preserved in a public garden was smashed to pieces by these fundamentalist extremists. It was a lion inscribed in three languages (hieroglyphic Luwian, Assyrian cuneiform and in the Aramaic alphabet). It had been taken there decades ago from Arslan Tash, an ancient city lying 90 kms north on the Turkish border, where a French team had excavated in the 1930s, discovering an Assyrian "palace" (in fact probably a huge temple). This lion carved by the *turtânu* (general in command) Shamshi-Ilu, ruling the West as a vice-roy for the Assyrian king, was incidentally a proof of the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of northern Syria in the 9th and 8th century BCE.

The destruction of century-old Soufi shrines, and of the graves of Shia *mujtahids* (Islamic law scholars) and saints are also part of Daesh-ISIL's agenda, and indirectly serve that of the Assad regime. The extremist movement led by al-Baghdadi has thus done what the Syrian dictator had dreamt of for months since 2011: plunging the country into a sectarian abyss, which would drive thousands of Iraqi and Lebanese Shias to flock to Assad under the guise of protecting "Sayyida Zaynab"'s shrine. Such crimes against both history and the country's social and religious fabric should be denounced as much as those of the regime, which feeds and thrives on the medieval behaviour of Jihadi militias.

The NGOs APSA and Ila Souria have been very clear in their condemnation of all crimes against heritage and Syria's historical and social fabric. They have been also frank about their refusal to be part of a conference where, as they have pointed out on their Facebook page, they would "merely ... be the audience, as result of pressure exerted by representatives of the Damascus regime, something which was communicated to us by the organizers themselves [UNESCO]". In fact, at the three-day symposium, "none of the experts or representatives of associations working in the regions of Syria not under regime control are to express themselves in this conference, while representatives of the Ministry of Culture and of the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus will be present and giving lectures at all sessions". Their refusal to attend is also a way of protesting against focus on experts who "have carried out no concrete action inside Syria" and against "criteria used for

choosing participants, which are unclear, and have never been made explicit and transparent”. Strasbourg university Assistant Professor Philippe Quenet, who has lived and worked extensively in the field in Syria and Mesopotamia for many years and who is one of the founders of both *Patrimoine Syrien en Danger* and APSA, added that “to refuse to go to a conference where it would be unable to speak out to the audience was a question of dignity”, but this did not imply “absence of cooperation with parties really interested in working on the ground and promoting concrete actions to save Syria’s heritage.” In fact, strategies for cooperation on this matter are to be presented by these civil society NGOs at the next ICAANE conference on Near Eastern archaeology, where a workshop on Syria is planned on June 10th.

Asma al-Assad visiting a trench on the 2450 BCE acropolis of Tell Mardikh/Ebla, near Palace G, close to where 17,000 cuneiform tablets were found in 1974

