Cultural landscapes of Syria in danger

The Syrian cultural heritage is characterised by an extraordinary wealth and has an outstanding international importance. Many of the country’s monuments not only testify on the highest level to the region’s past, but also to that of humanity as a whole. Syria is represented by six entries in the UNESCO world cultural heritage list.

After more than four years of armed conflict, Syria’s unique cultural landscape is now in danger of being irretrievably wiped out. The impending eradication of identity generating and economically viable monuments represents only one aspect of this issue. Another one is the loss of evidence and thereby knowledge as caused by the current disappearance of archaeological and historical data through destruction, theft, looting, and the illicit trade of antiquities.

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Raqqas, excavations by the DAI 1982 to 1994, topographical map and early Islamic drinking horn

Great Mosque in Aleppo 2010 and 2013

Waterwheels in Hama
Bombardments, blasts, explosions

Syria’s unique cultural heritage has been under threat by armed conflict for more than three years. In response, the UNESCO has made arrangements to consider not only the country’s six world heritage sites as severely endangered (Damascus, Alnopol, Birosa, Palmyra, Crac des Chevaliers/Qal‘at Salah ad-Din, and the “Dead Cities”) but also twelve more ancient sites on a tentative list, including the important classical city of Apamea on the Orontes River. However, numerous less renowned archaeological and historical sites are also currently threatened by destruction.

The state in the old city of Aleppo is particularly worrying. Here, numerous prominent religious monuments and historical buildings have been either damaged or completely destroyed. The Great Souk, one of the largest covered markets in the Middle East, was devastated in a fire in 2012 and its remains were almost completely annihilated by a large explosion in 2014. The minaret of the Great Mosque, an exceptional building compound dating back to the Umayyad Period, was also brought down by an explosion in 2013. The Citadel, the city’s most celebrated monument, is located in the centre of the combat zone, and now shows serious impairments at various locations.

Illegal excavations and illicit trafficking

The civil war in the country has given rise to widespread looting, not only at famous archaeological sites like Dura-Europos, but also at a myriad of less known sites. They are often located in remote, or currently disputed zones where they are systematically exposed to the ravages by looters during their hunt for ancient artefacts. The results are not only optically disfigured landscapes riddled with craters, but more so the eradication of any remaining evidence to crucial for the reconstruction of past living environments. Valuable cultural knowledge repositories are thereby irrevocably lost.

In recent times, vandalism has become a particularly alarming problem. The intentional demolition of pre-Islamic monuments and buildings belonging to different groups of faith is ostensibly directed at durably suffocating unwelcome sets of ideas.