

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.



▲ Waterwheels in Hama



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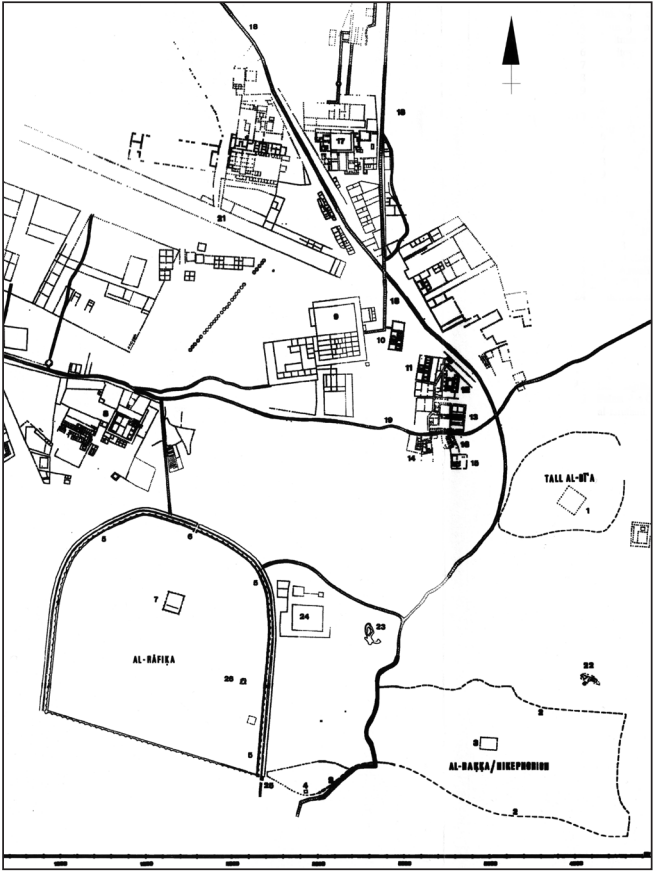


Photos: German Archaeological Institute (DAI), Orient-Department_Design: J. Denkinger / A. Ghanem

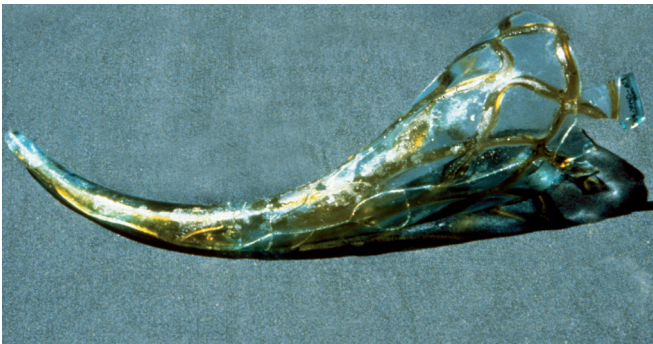
Syrian Heritage
Archive Project



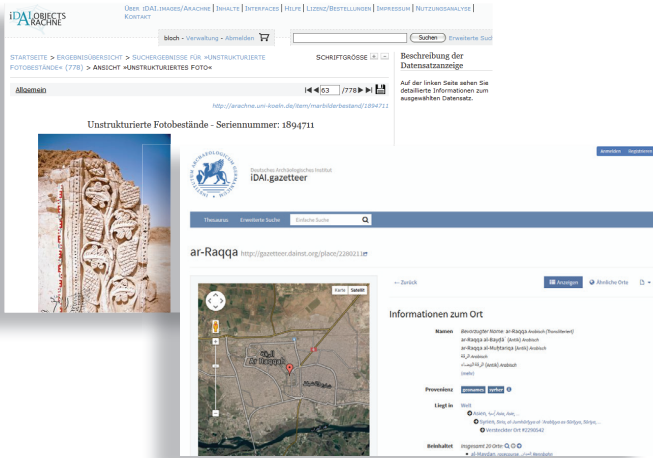
مشروع توثيق
الإرث الحضاري السوري



▲ Raqqa, excavations by the DAI 1982 to 1994, topographical map
▼ and early Islamic drinking horn



▲ Great Mosque in Aleppo 2010 and 2013



Digital Cultural Heritage Archive for Syria

Given the alarming situation concerning the Syrian cultural heritage, it is of fundamental importance to provide research data in order to evaluate current damages as well as to assess the possibilities of a future rehabilitation work on archaeological and historical monuments.

Over the past decades, the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) has set-up a number of databases from field research carried out in Syria. On the other hand, an important academic legacy is being kept at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. In 2013, a digitisation project of this priceless record was launched with the aim of creating a digital catalogue, referred to as the **Syrian Heritage Archive Project**. By aid of the various databases of iDAI.world, images, plans, and texts are digitised and made accessible.

Aims and support

The project is being accomplished by Syrian and German colleagues in a joint collaboration project between the German Archaeological Institute and the Museum of Islamic Art. It is closely linked to other international initiatives aimed at the protection of the Syrian cultural heritage and is generously supported by the Federal Foreign Office.

The digital data generated in the project are essential for future protection and rehabilitation measures as they contain fundamental information about many of the most important archaeological and historical sites in Syria, as for example the old city of Damascus, Raqqa, or Bosra.

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, Aleppo, Bosra, 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.

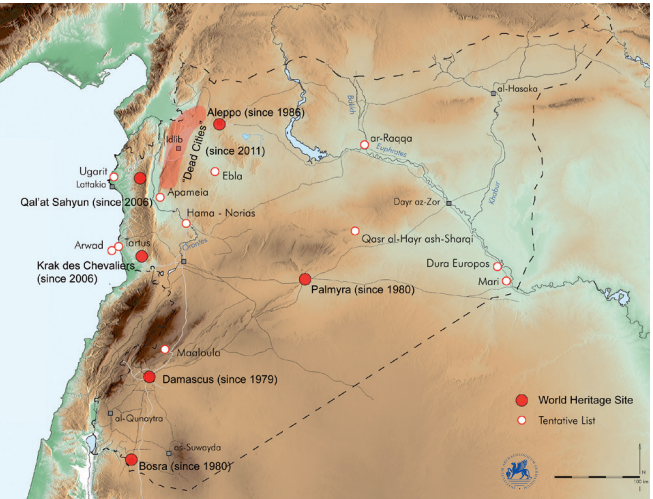
The state in the old city of Aleppo is particularly worrying. Here, numerous prominent religious monuments and historical buildings have been either damaged or completely destroyed. The Great Suq, one of the largest covered markets in the Middle East, was devastated in a fire in 2012 and its remains 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.



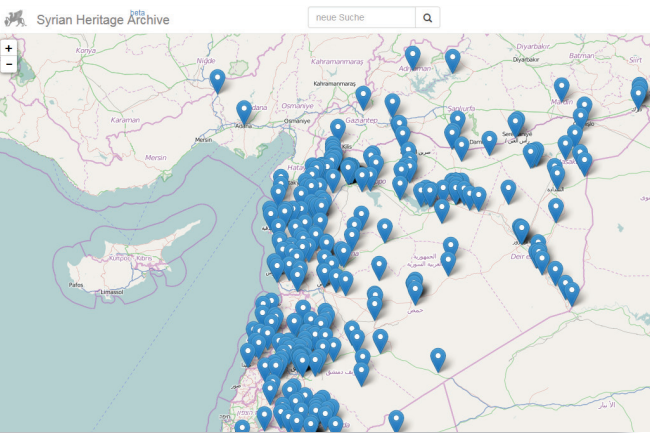
Illegal excavations and illicit trafficking

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 so crucial for the reconstruction of past living environments. Valuable cultural knowledge repositories are thereby irretrievably 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.



For Syria six properties are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. An additional 12 sites are submitted on the Tentative List and are therefore in the nomination process. These include outstanding ancient near eastern sites like Mari, Ebla and Ugarit, but also the water wheels of Hama and the early Islamic desert castle Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi. All entries are on the „Red List“ of the World Heritage in Danger since 2013.



Within the **Syrian Heritage Archive Project** more than 600 geographic feature names have so far been entered into the Gazetteer for Syria. These are connected to about 80,000 identified records (photographs, drawings, plans and written documents). The structured storage in the digital research data environment of the DAI (iDAI.world) allows for a data query with specific sorting and search function.