

# **World Heritage under Attack**

by Dr. Graciela Gestoso Singer\*

*I dedicated this article to Dr. Monica Hanna\*\*, a young Egyptologist, who is working very hard –together with other volunteers- to protect "our Heritage".*

The World Heritage Convention is not the only international tool that UNESCO has made available to support conservation. In fact, since its inception in the aftermath of the Second World War, UNESCO has given life to several conventions in the field of cultural heritage conservation, reflecting the growing concern of the international community for conservation, a concern justified by the threats and destruction – voluntary and involuntary – that have taken place in the past and are witnessed every day. The conventions are: a) 1954 Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (Hague Convention), and its Protocols of 1992 and 1999; b) 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property; c) 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage; d) 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage; e) 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; and f) 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

As part of UNESCO activities in support of heritage conservation during conflicts and in post-conflict situations, the World Heritage Convention has played a significant role in safeguarding sites. World Heritage sites have often been the target of military action, looters and poachers in the lawless situations created by conflict.

Following the intentional destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Afghanistan), in 2003 the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (Hladik, 2004). This Declaration encourages states to become signatories to the 1954 Convention (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/intentional/declare.pdf>). It also requests them to "take all appropriate measures to prevent, avoid, stop and suppress acts of intentional destruction of cultural heritage, wherever such heritage is located", in peacetime or in the event of armed conflict (Boylan, 1993). Article VI stresses in particular that "a State that intentionally destroys or intentionally fails to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish any intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance for humanity, whether or not it is inscribed on a list maintained by UNESCO or another international organization, bears the responsibility for such destruction, to the extent provided for by international law" (*World Heritage Challenges for the Millennium*, 2007: 67).



Muzammil Pasha / Reuters (left); Sayed Salahuddin / Reuters

Before and after the destruction by the Taliban  
Statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan Valley in central Afghanistan  
© Photos: Reuters

Armed conflicts can be triggered by different causes, such as culture, religion, ethnicity, territory, distribution of wealth, or a general breakdown in governance (*World Heritage - Challenges for the Millennium*, 2007: 174). Possible impacts of war include: a) destruction by bombs, shells and subsequent fire of sites; b) loss of stability of buildings, as a result of shelling partly destroying walls and roofs; c) damage to objects, collections and significant interior features and fittings by heat, smoke and combustion byproducts; d) water damage resulting from efforts to arrest fire; e) obliteration of landscape patterns and features through shelling and associated fire; f) danger of future damage to people and property due to buried landmines; g) destruction and/or displacement of animals and their habitats; h) displacement of local communities; i) looting of artifacts; j) breakdown of management, protection, conservation and surveillance programmes; and k) overuse of natural resources (Stovel, 1998: 85).

In some instances, damage to heritage has not just been an outcome of war but it is the heritage itself which has been targeted, for iconoclastic reasons or centuries-old internecine or religious conflicts, and has consequently suffered irreparable damage, as occurred for example in the Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley (Afghanistan), the Old Bridge Area of the Old City of Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the Old City of Dubrovnik (Croatia). In other cases, such as Los Katíos National Park (Colombia), heritage is affected indirectly as the large scale social and economic disruption caused by conflict leads to breakdown in law and order.

Besides encouraging countries to ratify the 1954 Convention and its two Protocols (*World Heritage - Challenges for the Millennium*, 2007: 66-68), the World Heritage Committee has also encouraged measures to celebrate and share the

importance of heritage sites with others (e.g. listing sites in Iraq during times of conflict). World Heritage listing may be one way to reconcile previously polarized communities, breaking down longstanding enmities that can result in attacks on the cultural heritage of another group. The reconstruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina), inscribed in 2005 on the World Heritage List, is a symbol of reconciliation, international cooperation and celebration of the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious communities.

Existing guidelines for reducing the impact of armed conflict advise: a) the inclusion of impact assessments of armed conflicts and opportunities for mitigation in strategic contingency plannings in regions where political instability exists or is likely to occur in future; b) the maintenance of a presence during conflicts and whenever and wherever possible, by conservation organizations in protected areas and other heritage places. This was the case in the five World Heritage sites in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Providing materials and giving moral support to staff should be a high priority to ensure success in maintaining a presence in protected areas in armed conflict; c) collaboration with others in the conservation community and the relief and development sector to increase conservation effectiveness during conflicts; and d) working with the local communities during conflicts and helping them meet their needs to put the least strain possible on natural resources (Oglethorpe *et al.* 2004: 2-8; Stovel, 1998; cf. *The International Committee of the Blue Shield*).

Theft, war, civil disorder, terrorism, neglect and vandalism are human factors in the accidental or willful destruction of our heritage (Teijgeler, 2006). Of these threats, armed conflict remains particularly intractable and disturbing. Regrettably, we have experienced more than once how shocking the effects of a violent struggle can be on the heritage of countries such as the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Statues are blown up because they are considered an insult to the "only and right religion", archaeological sites are occupied by foreign troops and destroyed in the process, and archives are deliberately obliterated as part of an ethnic cleansing policy. Undoubtedly, the final decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century were marked by destruction of heritage on a symbolic scale that has been unrivalled for the past several centuries.

The conflicts in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq demonstrate that cultural heritage remains vulnerable during armed conflict. In Sarajevo the national library was burned, and the facade of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina was pockmarked by snipers; in Afghanistan, objects in the Kabul Museum were defaced, destroyed, or looted and sold abroad, and the great Buddhas at Bamiyan were obliterated; and in April 2003, the Iraq National Museum was looted, and the ongoing lack of security elsewhere in the country allows the continued looting and destruction of thousands of archaeological sites (Wegener and Otter, 2008).

The civil unrest that took place across the Arab world from early 2011 onwards, spreading from Tunisia and also affecting Libya, Egypt, and Syria, led to the collapse of long-standing political regimes in the countries involved and in some cases to prolonged disorder or civil conflict. In Egypt, institutions, including museums and heritage sites, have been at the risk of looting or other damage. While some objects were stolen at the Egyptian Museum, the Egyptian public showed outstanding commitment to the protection of the heritage of Egypt and, for example, formed a human chain around the museum. Although some damage has been done, it could have been much worse without their help (ECHO News, 4/II/2011, in: <http://www.e-c-h-o.org/News/protect.htm>). Also, Egyptian conservators have quickly been mobilized to treat documents that were damaged in the recent fire at the Institute of Egypt

(Unesco News, 20/I/2012, in: [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/egyptian\\_museums\\_one\\_year\\_after\\_the\\_revolution/#.UguoktKBnaE](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/egyptian_museums_one_year_after_the_revolution/#.UguoktKBnaE)).

Since its beginnings in 2011, armed conflict in Syria has escalated dramatically with major human loss, hundreds of thousands of refugees, and extensive damage to infrastructure and properties. Cultural heritage in all its forms has suffered from the direct and indirect effects of this ongoing conflict. Syria's World Heritage sites together with numerous cultural properties of national and local significance are at serious risk. In 2012-2013, the World Heritage Committee has decided to include on the List of World Heritage in danger, in accordance with Article 11 (4) of the Convention, the following sites threatened by armed conflicts: Timbuktu (Timbuktu Region, Mali); the Tomb of Askia (Gao Region, Mali); the Ancient cities of Aleppo, Bosra and Damascus (Syria); the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria; the Crac des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din (the Fortress of Saladin), and the site of Palmyra (Syria) (cf. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/>).



Ancient city of Aleppo, market quarter

© Aleppo Media Center (AMC) and Bassem Mroue, The Associated Press

From time immemorial, war has gone hand in hand with widespread destruction and the "right to booty". Today, man-made disasters strike worldwide. It is estimated that at the beginning of the 21st century nearly a quarter of the world's population was facing some type of crisis or post-conflict situation, and that two-thirds of the poorest countries were suffering as a result of current or recent conflicts. A Disaster Management Cycle should address issues relevant to all phases of the disaster cycle: preparedness, response, recovery, rebuilding, prevention and mitigation (cf. Conservation OnLine, 2005). The disaster cycle could in the event of war be subdivided into actions to be taken before the outbreak of an armed conflict (pre-conflict), during the conflict (peri-conflict) and after the conflict (post-conflict). In terms of international development, most attention is paid to post-conflict situations and not so much to the two preceding phases (Teijgeler, 2006).

The first stirrings of a wish to protect works of art appeared during the Renaissance. The concept was further developed in the 16th and 17th centuries by writers on international law, such as Jacob Przyluski. In his *"Leges seu statuta ac privilegia Regni Polonaie"* (Cracow, 1553), Jacob Przyluski [Jacobus Prilusius] put forward the idea that "every belligerent should show regard for a work of art, but not solely because of its religious nature" (Toman, 1996: 4-5). The protection of cultural property was also considered in non-western civilizations. Under Islamic law, the obligation to distinguish between civilian and military objects is clearly imperative and permits no exception. In accordance with the orders of the first Caliph Abu Bakr (AD 632-634) attacks should be "strictly confined to military targets" (i.e. objects that by their nature or use are intended for the pursuit of hostilities). Thus, the Islamic concept presumes "all objects to be civilian unless proven otherwise" (Toman, 1996).

Over the past sixty years, UNESCO has been a key international player in heritage conservation. The World Heritage Convention, The International Safeguarding Campaigns, and the interventions in conflict and post-conflict areas are testimony to a long and consistent engagement in support of conservation.

Important measures for safeguarding cultural property to be undertaken in peacetime are: the preparation of inventories, the planning of emergency measures for protection against fire or structural collapse, the preparation for the removal of movable cultural property or the provision for adequate *in situ* protection of such property, and the designation of competent authorities responsible for the safeguarding of cultural property (cf. The 1999 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention: [www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html\\_eng/protocol2.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/hague/html_eng/protocol2.shtml)).

Important measures for safeguarding cultural property to be undertaken during armed conflicts are: a) **Risk preparedness**: some institutions saw the violent conflict in their country coming and prepared themselves to the best of their abilities, considering the local circumstances. The institutions that managed to save their collection, or part of it, had prepared themselves before the conflict broke out (Teijgeler, 2006); b) **Closedown**: a normal practice listed in every disaster preparedness plan is to close down the institution as soon as possible in case of emergency (as in Egypt, during the August, 2013 events). This is to prevent casualties rather than to safeguard the collection, as the iron rule in risk management is to put the interests of human beings before those of the collections. Once the doors are shut, the staff can pay full attention to securing the holdings. Three weeks before the American invasion in March 2003, the staff of the Iraq Museum closed the galleries to the public and began the task of protecting the museum and its content. They were able to save important parts of the collections but they could not prevent the looting of



15,000 art objects at the unprotected museum. During the Gulf War (1990-91) the Iraq Museum was closed down only after the Ministry of Communications - located across the road from the museum - was bombed, and the resulting tremors shattered a number of the museum's showcases. Unfortunately, the National Library and Archives of Iraq did not take any precautions before the American troops entered Baghdad; c) **Safe haven:** once the institution is closed there are several options to secure the holdings, depending how much time is left. One option is to move (part of) the collections to safer premises outside the institution (as the transfer of artifacts from the Mallawi Museum, Al Minya, by Museum staff, police, conservators, volunteers, and Egyptologists, as Dr. Monica Hanna, to al-Ashmounein, Egypt, on August, 2013) or even outside the country (as the transfer of artifacts from Beirut to Verdun, during the first years of the Civil War, 1975-90). Of course, such an operation takes time. Again this stresses the importance of a solid contingency plan in which an evacuation is anticipated. Usually the library, archive or museum has sufficient space in a building that is not too far away. An institution in a conflict-prone area should seriously consider relocating the collection outside the region: a project that can be realized with the help of international organizations. However, often the mistake is made of transferring materials to surroundings that do not meet the minimum preservation standards. During the Soviet-backed Najibullah Government (1986-92) the Kabul Museum ordered all objects on exhibit, numbering around 600, to be brought down to the storerooms and prepared to be moved. To minimize the risk of concentrating the objects in one place, some trunks were moved to the Central Bank Treasury vault in the Presidential Palace, others to the Ministry of Information and Culture, while the rest remained in the various depots of the Kabul Museum itself (Grissmann 2003: 71-76); and d) **Safekeeping within the walls:** partly

owing to a lack of time, the big objects will have to be protected *in situ*, while the small ones can be wrapped up, packed and transported to the storage rooms. The wartime story of the National Museum has become part of Lebanese legend. The museum in Beirut was totally unprepared when the Civil War (1975-90) broke out. As the fighting became more violent, the director, assisted by his wife and several employees, took the opportunity during a ceasefire to empty the display cases, took photographs of the artifacts and put them in boxes after having made lists of them. They moved them to underground storage areas, and covered them with earth for camouflage. Only four people in Lebanon knew the location of the ancient artworks (Pharès 2003: 38-43).

The safety and protection of people is the first and foremost priority in any disaster, as is the resilience of their communities in times of disasters. Nevertheless, at armed conflicts our heritage is at serious risk as well. We cannot build a future for the next generations, if we do not care about our past and we do not protect our present. A free nation cannot be built without respect for its own heritage, culture, roots, and ancestors' legacy. But we must remember an emotive event: at recent events in Egypt, a group of students, women, children, workers, and scholars went to the streets to protect the Egyptian Museum, "their heritage", making a "human chain", demonstrating that we can do something to preserve "our heritage", if we are united.



Human chain protecting the Egyptian Museum

© Photo: Agence France-Presse (AFP)

(\*) **Dr. Graciela Gestoso Singer:** Senior Researcher (Egyptology, Heritage, Eastern Mediterranean Interconnections during the Late Bronze Age), Centro de Estudios de Historia del Antiguo Oriente (CEHAO), Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina (UCA); Honorary Member and Former Researcher (Unesco World Heritage Centre).

(\*\*) **Dr. Monica Hanna:** finished a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Humboldt University of Berlin (Nov., 2012). She is specially involved in the protection and conservation of Egyptian Heritage, and during recent events she cooperated with authorities, Museum staff, volunteers, and several organizations, doing a Red List of looted artifacts, transferring several objects to a safe new location, and promoting the Rescue Campaign of looted pieces from Mallawi Museum, at Al Minya, in Egypt (August, 2013).

## References

BOYLAN, P. 1993. *Review of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (The Hague Convention of 1954)*. Paris: UNESCO.

Conservation OnLine (CoOL). 2005. *Disaster Preparedness and Response*. In: <http://cool.conservation-us.org/bytopic/disasters/>

GRISSMANN, C. 2003. *The Inventory of the Kabul Museum: attempts at restoring order*. In *Museum International* 55, 3/4: 71-76.

HLADIK, J. 2004. *The UNESCO Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage*. In *Art, Antiquity and Law* 9, 3, June.

*The International Committee of the Blue Shield:* <http://www.ifla.org/blueshield.htm>.

OGLETHORPE, J., SHAMBAUGH, J. and KORMOS, R. 2004. *Parks in the Crossfire: Strategies for Effective Conservation in Areas of Armed Conflict*. In PARKS 14, 1: 2–8.

PHARÈS, J. 2003. *The National Museum of Lebanon in Beirut*. In *Museum International* 55, 3/4: 38-43.

STOVEL, H. 1998. *Risk Preparedness: A Management Manual for World Cultural Heritage*. Rome: ICCROM.

TEIJGELER, R. 2006. "Preserving cultural heritage in times of conflict". In G.E. GORMAN and SYDNEY SHEP, J. (eds.). *Preservation management for libraries, archives and museums*. London: Facet Publishing, pp. 133-165.

TOMAN, J. 1996. *The Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Directed by Bandarin, F. 2007. *World Heritage - Challenges for the Millennium*. Paris: UNESCO, pp. 174-177.

*War and Protected Areas*. 2004. In PARKS 14, 1, in:

[http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/pubs/pdfs/PARKS/14\\_1.pdf](http://www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/pubs/pdfs/PARKS/14_1.pdf)

WEGENER, C. and OTTER, M. 2008. *Cultural Property at War: Protecting Heritage during Armed Conflict*, in *Conservation Perspectives, The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter* 23, 1.