

POST-WAR CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN SYRIA: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

Yazan Hamed / PhD Student
PÁZMÁNY PÉTER CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY
1 Mikszáth Kálmán tér, 1088 Budapest, Hungary

Abstract. This article analyzes the devastating effect of Syria's civil war on its cultural heritage and suggests a forward-looking post-conflict framework for Cultural Heritage Management (CHM). Based on international models and local realities, it foresees legal, institutional, and community-based solutions for recovery. The article focuses on digital documentation, preventive conservation, and inclusive heritage as means for national reconciliation. Finally, it proposes that heritage protection has the potential to promote social cohesion and global cultural responsibility.

Keywords: Syria, cultural heritage, post-conflict reconstruction, heritage management, looting, UNESCO, digital preservation, community engagement.

1. Introduction

Since civil war broke out in 2011, Syria has witnessed epic devastation—not just of cities and humans but of its world class cultural heritage. As one of the oldest cradles of civilization, Syria possesses millennia of historical assets: from the Bronze and Iron Ages through the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. Locations like Palmyra, Aleppo, Hama, Bosra, and the Old City of Damascus are not merely archaeological gems—they are world heritage. But the destruction caused by armed conflict, intentional iconoclasm, and widespread looting has radically transformed Syria's cultural landscape.

Recovery efforts for and eventual restoration of Syria's heritage should combine pragmatic rubble removal with visionary planning. A future-facing framework of Cultural Heritage Management (CHM) for post-conflict Syria is presented in this paper. The country's pre-war management structures, war-time difficulties, international interventions, and foundation principles for effective reconstruction

are all described. International precedents and suggestions on a multi-levelled implementation roadmap are also considered.

2. Historical Overview: Syria's Pre War Cultural Heritage Management

A Legacy Spanning Millennia

Syria's location at the intersection of civilizations blessed it with a stratified cultural material heritage. The first Mesopotamian connections were seen in Ugarit (around 1400 BCE), which produced the first alphabet; Ebla was an important Bronze Age center, while Apamea, Bosra, and Palmyra became important in Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic settings. In the contemporary period, the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) oversaw more than 200 museums, directed excavations, and offered public programming nationwide (Burns 123).

Institutional and Legal Frameworks

Syria's CHM framework prior to 2011 consisted of legislation (e.g., Law No. 68 of 1969 for the Protection of Antiquities), site protections, controlled excavations, licensing of exports, and educational outreach. Cultural zones were delineated and archaeological surveys were undertaken annually under DGAM, while tourism was a burgeoning economic sector. Syria also nominated multiple UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which helped increase site profiles and funding bids.

3. The Cost of War on Cultural Heritage

Destruction and Vandalism

As fighting escalated, cultural sites were damaged both accidentally and intentionally. Parts of ancient cities such as Aleppo and Bosra were leveled to the ground by heavy artillery. ISIS intentionally destroyed some of the most famous monuments, such as the Temple of Bel, Baalshamin, and Arch of Triumph in Palmyra—cultural destruction as propaganda (Casana and Panahipour 130).

Looting and Illicit Trade

Under institutional breakdown, both local groups and armed militias resorted to looting to finance activities. Museums in Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa were cleared out, and graves and tombs in extensive regions were looted. As Casana and Panahipour point out, geospatial observation from 2011 to 2014 showed the number of looting pits increasing dramatically—almost twofold in heritage areas (129–131).

Institutional Erosion

The DGAM fought to safeguard sites in the face of siege warfare, displacement, and security threat. Regional directorates closed, and personnel were displaced. Looting escalated close to front lines, as documented by Brown University's Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA).

4. International Reaction

Documentation and Stabilization

International intergovernmental organizations and NGOs, beginning in 2012, initiated projects to digitally document and preserve Syrian heritage. UNESCO sent teams to document damage and to promote site protection. The Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) collaborated with CyArk to generate high-resolution 3D models of archeological structures in Palmyra, Bosra, and Aleppo, which can be viewed online (IDA 45-47).

Training and Local Engagement

These initiatives involved capacity-building for Syrian archaeologists in exile, distant learning for local personnel, and dissemination of technical guides on emergency stabilization. Certain training dealt with stone consolidation, emergency shoring of walls, post-restoration planning, and inventory of sites.

Financial and Political Constraints

In spite of technical advances, efforts were held back by low funding. Humanitarian agendas—and dispersed access—reduced UNESCO's potential to send teams to live conflict zones. Additionally, the Syrian state, non-state

authorities, and opposition groups posed jurisdictional obstacles, making heritage coordination across areas more complicated.

5. Core Principles for Post War Cultural Heritage Management

Legal and Institutional Reconstruction

To rebuild CHM, Syria should:

1. Reinstate DGAM under updated legislation, maintaining expert staff.
2. Form regional heritage councils in every governorate, including local authorities, NGOs, academics, and community representatives.
3. Establish strong legal frameworks to criminalize illegal trade, shield whistleblowers, and facilitate restitution—perhaps with the inclusion of fast-track amnesty or restitution policies for looted objects.
4. Develop synergies with judicial offices, customs services, and civil society to implement heritage protection.

Community Engagement and Cultural Identity

Heritage is strongest when it is based on communal identity. Debris removal efforts must train and hire local youths and artisans to benefit economically. Restored schools, communal archaeology programs, and oral history archives will reattach Syrian communities to their ancient heritage, bridging past and present. These models of engagement have worked in Ecuador (Quito's interpretation centers), Bosnia (Mostar workshops), and Afghanistan (site guardianship)—and are now desperately required in Syria.

Youth museums, participatory mapping, oral history initiatives, and pop-up cultural festivals promote ownership, healing, and unity in diverse communities.

International Cooperation and Support

Syria's CHM roadmap must be underpinned by a multilateral Heritage Trust Fund, sustained by UNESCO, ICCROM, donor partners like Norway, Germany, US/USAID, and UNESCO's Global Heritage Fund. A strong coordination board

would provide oversight, accountability, and synergy. Museums around the world—the British Museum, Louvre, Smithsonian, and Pergamon—can act as temporary repositories, training centers, and long-term repatriation partners.

Digital Records and Archives

Contemporary heritage risk management necessitates digital documentation:

- Empowering Syrian archaeologists with UAV drone surveys, multispectral imaging, and remote sensing.
- Expanding CyArk, IDA sites with complete 3D carousel tours and text metadata.
- Creating an open-source channel—perhaps as an Asyla server—linking Syrian universities to outside nodes for duplication.

This digital backbone will preserve heritage in perpetuity and serve as the blueprint for reconstruction.

Preventive Conservation and Training

To shield heritage from future threats, Syria needs:

1. Heritage conservation programs in universities and technical colleges.
 2. Emergency site stabilization teams with cross-disciplinary expertise.
 3. A reactive network of engineers, archaeologists, conservators ready to act in disasters.
 4. Alignment with UNESCO's Risk Preparedness approach.
 5. Incorporation of conservation within urban rehabilitation, prioritizing the development of sustainable tourism.
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6. Learning from Global Post Conflict Models

Cambodia – Angkor (UNESCO, 1995–)

Post-war Cambodia rebuilt Angkor as a major heritage economy. INAH pioneered community-run interpretation centers, local training, and anti-looting patrols via

strong regional offices. Cultural tourism helped rebuild the national narrative and provided a model for Syria's tourism possibilities.

Iraq – Reconstruction after 2003

Iraq's post-2003 heritage response included ordinances for the recovery of ancient artifacts, establishment of provincial antiquities regional governing bodies, and NGO partnerships in restoring sites like Nimrud and Nineveh. Lessons learned include coordinating restoration with humanitarian relief to enhance impact.

Bosnia – Cultural renaissance following the 1990s

In Bosnia, local civil society organizations revived religious, ethnic, and cultural archives that were devastated by the conflict. Memory projects, oral tradition initiatives, and youth-led festivals encouraged cross-community reconciliation. Syria can modify mobile museum initiatives to aid the displaced.

7. Cultural Heritage as a Tool for Reconciliation

Heritage is not just material—it binds identity. Post-conflict Syria is divided along ethnic, sectarian, and political fault lines. Inclusive CHM has the potential to write all communities into a common cultural narrative. The Mother Goddess statuettes of Chalcolithic funerary rites, Islamic Umayyad palaces, and Christian monasteries can all become shared symbolic points of reconciliation. It is essential to defend universality—where the value of heritage is above political affiliation.

8. A 2025–2040 Roadmap

Stage Key Actions

Short-term (2025–2028)

- National and regional damage mapping through satellite and ground surveys.
 - Emergency clearing and stabilization of key monuments (e.g., Palmyra, Aleppo Citadel).
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- Capacity building of Syrian DGAM professionals (training in conservation, forensics, digital tools).
- Creation of regional Heritage Councils.

Medium-term (2028–2035)

- Reinstatement of major public locations and re-opening of principal museums.
- Community projects: oral histories, archaeology classes for young people, village heritage guides.
- Archival digitization and 3D site models.
- Piloting a heritage tourism circuit loop (i.e., Bosra–Palmyra–Aleppo).
- Repatriation of looted collections through international collaborations.

Long-term (2035–2040)

- Incorporate CHM into urban-rural planning; develop sustainable tourism.
- Heritage management graduate programs.
- International exhibitions, interpretive museums, cultural centers.
- Monitoring systems and cross-border heritage coalitions to ensure long-term stewardship.

9. Risks and Mitigations

Political Instability: Syria needs to shield heritage from political transformation by rewriting laws that safeguard CHM irrespective of leadership.

Funding Flux: A specific Heritage Trust Fund with release linked to project milestones.

Brain Drain: Video-based MOOCs, diaspora-funded scholarships, and virtual internships can restore capacity.

Community Distrust: Open decision-making, multi-lingual interpretive signage across religions and ethnicities, and rotating governance board membership.

10. Conclusion

Syria after the war has a long-lasting legacy of violence, yet cultural heritage has the potential to be a keystone for peace, identity, and unity. Management of heritage needs to be holistic, digital, and inclusive—not reconstructing, but reweaving the political and social ecosystem.

By legal renewal, communal agency, and global partnership, Syria can turn loss into opportunity. Its heritage is not merely national—it is the property of every student, family, and scholar; all humanity. To reconstruct Syria's past in a responsible way is to preserve our global future.

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