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PALMYRA, SYRIA

Developing a Recovery Policy for Sustainable Approaches to Conserving the Heritage and Memory of Damaged Archaeological Sites



Research Carried Out between July and September 2022

Head Office of the German Archaeological Institute
by Ousama Rumayed

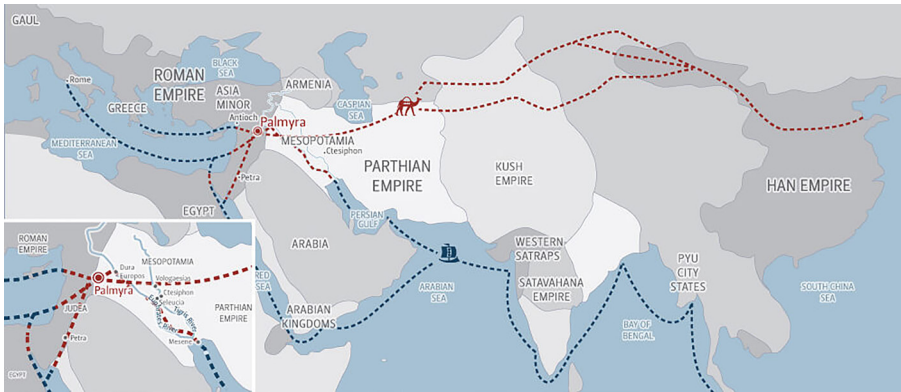


e-FORSCHUNGSBERICHTE DES DAI 2023 · Faszikel 2

Die Zerstörungen, die Syrien während der langen Jahre des bewaffneten Konflikts erlitten hat, haben sich bewusst und systematisch gegen das kulturelle Erbe gerichtet. Palmyra erlitt schreckliche Zerstörungen. Insbesondere der antike Park, in dem sich die wichtigsten prächtigen Denkmäler befinden, war Schauplatz extremer Explosionen, die zahlreiche historisch bedeutsame Denkmäler zerstörten und viele andere in einem Zustand teilweiser oder vollständiger Zerstörung zurückließen. Derzeit haben die am kulturellen Erbe interessierten Gemeinschaften bereits damit begonnen, Vorschläge für den Wiederaufbau nach dem Krieg zu unterbreiten. Es ist notwendig, ausreichende Kenntnisse über die historische städtebauliche Entwicklung der archäologischen Stätte, die Baumaterialien und den urbanen Stil jedes Denkmals entsprechend seiner Identität und Authentizität zu erwerben und zu sammeln, bevor Vorschläge für seine Rekonstruktion oder Restaurierung und Erhaltung gemacht werden (Abdulmawla 2017). Darüber hinaus besteht die Notwendigkeit, die herausragenden universellen Werte des Kulturerbes zu verstehen, was auch eine klare Darstellung der Werte, Qualitäten und

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- 1 This map notes Palmyra was a crossroads for trade in the ancient world around the year 200. (Map: CC BY 4.0, Terpak – Bonfitto 2019)

kulturellen Bedeutung des Erbes erfordert. Der Managementplan für das kulturelle Erbe sollte sich neben dem Management der kulturellen Ressourcen auch auf die Erhaltung dieser Werte konzentrieren. Die kulturelle Bedeutung der historischen Stätte ist somit die Richtschnur für die Managementpolitik und die sich daraus ergebenden Schutz- und Erhaltungsstrategien.

The destruction of Syria's war during the long years of armed conflict has deliberately and systematically targeted cultural heritage. Palmyra suffered terrible destruction. Especially the ancient park, where the most important magnificent monuments are located, has been the scene of extreme explosions that destroyed many significant historical monuments and left several others in a situation of partial or complete destruction. Currently, the interested communities of cultural heritage have already started to give proposals for the post-war reconstruction. There is a need to acquire and gather sufficient knowledge about the historical urban development of the archaeological site, building materials, and urban style of each monument in accordance with its identity and authenticity, before submitting any proposal for its reconstruction or restoration and preservation (Abdulmawla 2017). Furthermore, there is a need to understand the outstanding universal values of cultural heritage, which also require that the values, qualities, and cultural significance of the property be dearly stated. The management plan of the cultural heritage should focus on the issue of the preservation of those values, in addition to cultural resource management. Thus, the cultural significance of the historical site guides the management policy and consequent strategies for safeguarding and preservation.

Historical Overview of Palmyra

- 1 [Palmyra](#)[↗] lies in the heart of Syria, an oasis in the midst of the desert, the iconic site of evidencing human settlement since the Palaeolithic and Neolithic eras, and one of the important cultural centres of the ancient world [1] (Fig. 1).
- 2 The green oasis became a place of rest between Iraq and the Levant and a caravan's trade station between the Arabian Gulf, Persia, and the



2 A tourist map from the archive shows a reconstruction of Diocletian Palmyra (284–305 AD). (Plan: CC BY-SA 4.0, Directorate General of Antiquities and Museum (DGAM))

Mediterranean. It grew gradually on the trade routes from approximately 44 BC to 272 AD, making it the crossroads of several civilisations [2].

- 3 During the 1st and 2nd century, Graeco-Roman techniques, local traditions, and Persian influences interacted together to create the unique art and architecture of Palmyra [3].
- 4 The arch of Triumph, the grand colonnaded street, the temple of Bell, the Agora, the Roman theatre, Diocletian's camp, other temples, urban quarters, and architectural decoration, including unique examples of funerary sculpture are splendid examples of this irreplaceable original Greco-Roman art style [4] (Fig. 2).

The Research Approaches

- 5 On May 21, 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had conducted a systematic campaign of destruction of Palmyra's monuments in an attempt to obliterate the site's history. The ancient city of Palmyra has witnessed the confirmed destruction of many significant landmarks and monuments in a series of major cultural, scientific and human losses, without distinguishing between the cultural, historical and socio-economic significance of these sites.
- 6 The violence of this conflict targeted local people, archaeological sites, museum staff and facilities of Palmyra, causing the displacement of its residents who became homeless. All these events can cause a risk to tangible or intangible heritage.
- 7 Recognising the importance of recovering Palmyra, the revival plan should represent an integrated process of master planning, scientific conservation, the involvement of the local population from the early phase in the assessment and the building of effective partnerships to provide enduring protection while being flexible enough to address the challenges that are demanded by the site.

Policy for Sustainable Development

- 8 Today, sustainable development is the universally agreed goal, and most development policies at the local, national and international levels refer to a



3 The 17 goals of the UN for sustainable development. (Design: Vanessa Paris in ICOMOS 2021, 16)

pattern of resource use that balances the achievement of basic human needs with the wise use of limited resources, which can be passed down to future generations and can be understood in two ways:

1. Ensuring the sustainability of heritage, considered as an end and part of the environmental/cultural resources, that should be protected and transmitted to future generations to guarantee their development (intrinsic).
 2. Heritage preservation can contribute to the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development (instrumental) [5].
- 9 The first approach assumes that the ability to understand the past, through its physical remains, as attributes of cultural diversity, plays a fundamental role in fostering strong communities, supporting the physical and spiritual well-being of individuals, and promoting mutual understanding and peace.
 - 10 The second approach stems from the realization that the heritage sector is an important player within the broader social arena. According to this perspective, protecting and promoting cultural heritage, in terms of its contribution to society, would be a legitimate goal per se.
 - 11 It goes beyond the concept of cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, to become a sustainable resource and developer that supports identity, belonging, memory and a »sense of place« and has a major role in achieving sustainable development. It supports social cohesion, reduces poverty, enhances social welfare, improves the attractiveness and creativity of urban areas and enhances the short- and long-term benefits of tourism [6].
 - 12 Palmyra's sustainable development agenda of the post-war should be integrated with the 2030 agenda for sustainable development adopted by the United Nations in 2015, which is an action plan for »people«, »peace«, and »prosperity«. The suggested comprehensive plan is based on the principle of human rights, literacy, peace, justice, creativity, food security, education, good health, gender equality, environmental protection, natural heritage and cultural landscapes, calling on the interested parties to urgently take effective steps to recover and preserve Palmyra in facing the challenges of displacing its population, overcoming health crises and social and economic inequalities (Fig. 3).



Framework of the Vision, Recovery Policy and Strategy Setting

The Vision

- 13 The vision set out the methods and techniques that should be addressed with respect to the international charters and guidelines that have been adopted for the technical conservation and ongoing care of Palmyra as a damaged world heritage site.
- 14 An effective common vision must be built to understand and synchronise the potential perceptions and expectations of cultural heritage recovery, which are shared by the different actors inside and outside the affected country. This vision should not be assumed by outsiders; rather, this vision must be framed in local political, social, cultural and economic conditions within a national and regional context.
- 15 The failure to build a common vision occurs primarily due to the constraints of responding to enormous basic and essential needs and within tight timeframes. Moreover, in countries emerging from military conflict, the daily challenges of managing and preserving cultural heritage are magnified by the consequences of conflict (displacement and flight caused by clashes, physical destruction of housing and infrastructure and lack of financial, material and human resources, fragility of service institutions, political upheavals, psychological and social trauma).
- 16 Recognising the importance of Palmyra's recovery to current audiences and future generations, the proposed vision should represent an integrated process of master planning, scientific conservation, community engagement and building effective partnerships to provide lasting protection while being flexible enough to meet the challenges that the site requires. In addition to ensuring coordination at the local level, both with the institutions directly or indirectly involved and with other actors involved in the humanitarian response, to share good intervention strategies, practices of operational methods and identified problems and to avoid duplication of interventions in the same areas. Therefore, people's capacity will be positively assessed to identify effective ways to coordinate with institutional sectors, humanitarians, local partners and other initiatives implemented in the same sectors and/or in the same area of intervention [7] (Fig. 4).

4 The relevant aspects of the heritage assets (2016). (Design: Christopher Malapitan and María Foulquié in ICCROM 2016, 20)

Recovery Policy, Strategy Setting, and Implementation

Conserving the Historical Site and Memory of the Heritage

- 17 By signing the convention of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) concerning the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage (1972), Syria is committed to identifying, protecting, preserving, presenting and transmitting its cultural and natural heritage to future generations [8].
- 18 Local cultural awareness is often different from an international world-view. What people choose to keep from their past is dictated by the circumstances and experiences they associate with their memories. For many, what they rescue from their old homes may have both functional and cultural significance.
- 19 We usually think of heritage per se, elements, urban fabric, and sites, but cultural heritage is not just an archaeological site. Rather, it is the activities that take place in and around the site. It is a cultural process that interacts with memory as it is the past that engages or interacts in the future; history is also strictly related to temporal continuity, succession and relations between things [9].
- 20 History and memories are completely different, and history consists of facts that happened and are told in a documented narrative. While memories are subjective and not always trustworthy, memories are not an object. It is a cultural process and the past is constantly being rewritten into the present using our terminology [10].
- 21 Memory is a mixture of emotions that can be viewed differently and heritage memory is a collective and social memory. Memory in a sense is a collective memory that will be created by a group of people to have an identity for themselves through shared memory, rarely thinking about historical continuity [11].
- 22 The idea of collective memory is also associated with the performance of remembrance, and the sense of purpose that people have with the past emphasises the importance of understanding how people position themselves in relation to the future. In this regard, heritage can be understood in relation to the memory of the future as symbols

representing the desired future that reflects both the future past and the past future [12].

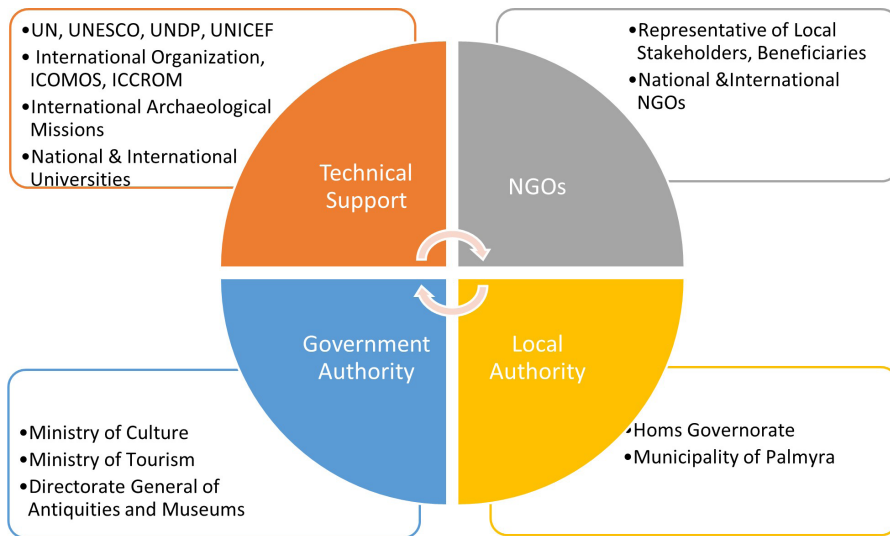
Moreover, it is always useful to remind ourselves that not all societies use the remnants of the past as a means of proving their identity. In some cases where the past has only negative associations, it is the »modernist impulse towards the future« that defines identity [13].

Empowering the Local Community

Community empowerment has been identified as a key component in heritage conservation today. The development of civic engagement tools is essential to enhance participation, mobilise the population and accelerate the reconstruction and recovery process. Among the possible initiatives are the following:

- Organize local awareness campaigns to familiarise the population with the mechanism of national and international initiatives and actions and mobilising support for projects of collective interest and benefit.
- Strengthen mechanisms for the participation of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) and local communities in the decision-making process.
- Promoting technical training, capacity-building programs aimed at managing cultural initiatives and resources, digital archiving and documentation management, construction and restoration work, topographic survey activities, photographic and 2D and 3D digital documentation.
- support cultural community projects that involve the resident population and the displaced people to encourage dialogue, overcome the crisis and raise awareness and social inclusion [14].

The plan should be discussed and negotiated not only with political decision-makers, professional planners, and technical experts but also with affected citizens, businesses, civil society organizations and other representative bodies. When decision-making power is vested in the community, this does not prevent professionals from playing a role in reconciling community expectations with modern conservation needs. But they can offer options regarding a given cultural context rather than appealing to universal principles [15].



5 The networking of the interested parties of Syrian cultural heritage. (Design: Ousama Rumayed)

Management of the Master Plan

26 The master plan provides a framework to guide the recovery phase. It will define the identity, history, authenticity, and outstanding value of the site. In addition to defining objectives, facilitate public and private initiatives in areas in need of rehabilitation. It will focus, in particular, on guiding medium and long-term decisions on-site restoration, reconstruction and rehabilitation by creating the compatible conditions for the investment of funds by private actors and the financial system. As well as focusing on both the scope of the project and the expected costs and outputs [16].

27 Preserving the site as a sustainable process can only be done by starting with an integrated conservation development plan that considers the modern city and its relationship to the site and its region. The modern city should be given high priority by planning actions to encourage residents to return to their city. In May 2015, thousands of Palmyra's 70,000 residents were forced to flee, specifically to Homs's city and elsewhere [17].

28 Accordingly, based on public consultations, the restoration »philosophy« will be adopted, which will adhere to international restoration standards and approaches and will be supported by international expertise. Furthermore, the vision, guidelines, goals, and strategies outlined in the master plan should be based on these topics [18]:

- The successful vision of post-war reconstruction is based on the existence of a broad scientific consensus at the national and international level consisting of national authorities with members of the Scientific Advisory Council, International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), UNESCO, and experts who participated in archaeological missions at the site (Fig. 5).
- Medium- and long-term priorities and initiatives are among the main objectives of the recovery master plan and the sequence of activities necessary for the reconstruction and recovery process will be identified.
- Good archiving and documentation are essential for a full understanding of the site's needs.
- Urgent intervention must be made to stop the secret and illegal excavation in addition to the looting and illicit trafficking of objects.

- Damage assessment, including analysis techniques and materials science assessment, must be completed, both for existing archaeology and for all conservation intervention proposals and materials.
- It is necessary to diagnose and survey not only the archaeological site but also the oasis and the surrounding areas.
- Promote the inclusion of enhanced national and international financial and technical support [19].

Developing Short and Long-Term Integrated Emergency Preventive Conservation

29 The action plan should define short-term objectives in the context of long-term priorities and the overall vision of the site and guiding principles.

Through sustainable planning, several economic processes should be provided to alleviate poverty, promote social and human development and thus improve the quality of life. This is, when properly managed through an important economic initiative, flourish, contributing to the well-being of communities and the preservation of historic urban areas and their cultural heritage while ensuring economic and social diversity and residential function. Failure to seize these opportunities can lead to the destruction of heritage assets and irreparable losses for future generations.

30 The main objective today is to identify archaeological monuments that need restoration or urgent intervention, to take temporary safety measures to strengthen them, and to document their current condition. The restoration of most of the destroyed historic buildings and monuments requires careful studies, design work and reconstruction processes that take time. Therefore, it is necessary and urgent to strengthen the structures in order to avoid further collapses and prepare for future work [20].

31 The master plan cannot cover all aspects of the site before the start of the conservation program to prevent further deterioration. It specifies the need of the site that should include:

- Develop procedures for conservation work, including how to prioritise and develop comprehensive cultural maps, including cultural infrastructure, cultural organisations and activities.

- Create a database on structural and architectural documentation of archaeological sites, monuments and legal and administrative aspects of reconstruction, recovery plans and assessment of damage to cultural heritage.
- Drawing up a short-term contingency plan and preventive conservation of impacts that require urgent repairs due to their structural problems will be the first step to consider.
- Establishing documentation, publication procedures, scientific research and carrying out studies for inventorying procedures of the conservation activities to better understand the buildings.
- Obtaining comprehensive restoration projects for monuments and redesigning and improving existing infrastructure.

32 Attention to the surrounding environment, particularly water and energy consumption, calls for new approaches and models of urban life aimed at promoting sustainability and diversity in urban life. However, many of these initiatives should integrate natural and cultural heritage as resources for sustainable development [21].

Conclusion

33 Cultural heritage gives historic cities a distinctive character and a factor that enhances their attractiveness and competitiveness. Culture is also essential for post-crisis reconstruction and recovery. It stimulates other development sectors and cultural and creative industries also contribute to economic growth, when they are integrated into the process of planning, financing, post-crisis and post-conflict recovery and reconstruction [22].

34 Palmyra's recovery must pass in a way that balances the functional needs of the community and with the prevailing commitment to preserve the historical, environmental and symbolic priority of the site, which is then linked to the broader vision of postwar reconstruction. Post-war sustainable development approaches are seen as a set of interconnected social, cultural, political and economic networks and factors within a multidimensional process, requiring a multidisciplinary approach involving



6 Culture in city reconstruction and recovery framework (2018). (Design: CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO, Jean-Luc Thierry in UNESCO – World Bank 2018, 24)

all relevant actors to solve problems and address the complexities of recovery – not only to stimulate economic and social development but at the same time to create a peaceful environment that prevents a return to violence [23] (Fig. 6).

- 35 These differences are often exacerbated by the simultaneous challenges of humanitarian support by many national and international actors, in an environment of serious insecurity and the absence of the rule of law. Many active actors from the media, donors, various authorities, and national and international bodies to civil society organisations, NGOs and non-profit organisations often lead to conflicting concepts, fears, values, and interests, not to mention escalating differences of opinion within society.

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