

# RESPONDING TO A CULTURAL HERITAGE CRISIS: The Example of the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project

Attendees at the 2015 Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response for Cultural Heritage course practice using GPS units to document damage locations at the IIACH. Photograph by Katharyn Hanson.

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Concerns about cultural heritage feature prominently in the present humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq. With over 250,000 dead and millions displaced, all aspects of daily life have been upended. Destruction of the region's historical sites has prompted an outpouring of international concern. Despite many humanitarian interventions designed to address the current crisis in Syria and Iraq, there have been fewer efforts to protect the heritage that represents the cultural identity of Syrians and Iraqis inside both countries. At the same time, a question keeps returning: What can we do to protect cultural heritage in this crisis? In this article, we discuss how the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI) Project has answered this perennial question.

The international heritage community – what we might describe as the group of archaeologists, museum professionals, historic preservationists, historians, librarians, archivists, and the experts at major international cultural organizations such as UNESCO, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) concerned with heritage preservation – has a great deal of interest in responding to the present crisis in Syria and Iraq. Nonetheless, it is not

well-integrated into the international humanitarian and disaster response community in order to translate this goodwill into action. Humanitarian response is understood to constitute aid and actions designed to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of complex emergencies; it is also expected to act on the basis of need alone, be neutral and non-discriminatory in dealings with affected populations, and implement programming independent of other political, economic, military, or diplomatic objectives (ICRC/International Federation 1994; Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative 2003). The international heritage community can situate itself within this framework. Safeguarding an affected population's cultural heritage – once individual human lives have been protected – shows respect for human dignity by protecting a community's cultural identity and sets the groundwork for a return to a sense of normalcy following a disaster.

## Responding to the Crisis in Syria and Iraq

The attributes of successful humanitarian efforts to protect cultural heritage in emergencies after World War II have yet to receive systematic evaluation or assessment, but positive outcomes appear to be correlated with the participation of local community members who are in the best position to act when a crisis situ-



ation occurs (e.g., Cassar and Rodriguez Garcia 2006; Grissman 2006; Hammer 2014; Kurin 2011). The international heritage community cannot do much to protect cultural heritage inside Syria and Iraq directly, but it can support willing heritage professionals and activists inside both countries who are already doing so. Perhaps the greatest conceptual challenge for the archaeological community is to reimagine heritage protection as one of many humanitarian actions that offer direct support to populations in crisis. Such a step would reflect the next stage in the archaeological engagement with cultural heritage, which has embraced a more community-centered approach over the past two decades in sympathy with theoretical developments in human rights law, critical race theory, gender studies, indigenous rights and recognition, and the decolonization of the academy (e.g., Hodder 2010; Liebmann and Rizvi 2008; Meskell 2010a; Meskell 2010b; Silverman and Ruggles 2007).

Even when adopting a humanitarian approach to heritage protection during conflict, there are other obstacles to the full implementation of emergency heritage projects in Syria and Iraq. Navigating the legal environment for this crisis is complex. The United States and the European Union impose sanctions against activities that involve the Syrian financial system. In the United States, these sanctions also extend to collaborative work with the Syrian government and its instrumentalities, which includes the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM). The Syrian Sanctions Regulations only permit a limited humanitarian exemption under 31 CFR Part 542(a)(5) for “[a]ctivities to support the preservation and protection of cultural heritage sites in Syria, including, but not limited to, museums, historic buildings, and archaeological sites.” American heritage professionals seeking to assist the protection of Syrian cultural heritage are legally obliged to forgo working directly with the Syrian DGAM. The case of Iraq is different, as the United States no longer maintains sanctions against its government. However, there are export controls on certain equipment and goods as well as a need to vet Iraqi nationals, like the Syrians, against the US Department of the Treasury’s Specially Designated Nationals List prior to payment for their work.

Implementing emergency cultural heritage projects inside Syria and Iraq can therefore be summarized as both incredibly difficult and absolutely necessary. This paradox is not irresolvable. Here, we demonstrate that emergency heritage responses are indeed possible inside Syria and Iraq – even in the midst of the present crisis

– using the SHOSI Project’s recent emergency training activities and emergency preservation projects as an illustrative example.

### The Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project

In spring 2013, as the Syrian crisis began to worsen, the Smithsonian Institution convened a meeting to discuss potential interventions that could protect Syria’s cultural heritage. The Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria Initiative, also known as SHOSI, developed following this meeting. SHOSI began with the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania Museum; the Office of the Under Secretary for History, Art, and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution; the Geospatial Technolo-



Figure 1. Attendees at the 2014 Emergency Care for Syrian Museum Collections course in Gaziantep, Turkey, discuss at-risk collections. Photograph by Brian I. Daniels.

gies Project at the American Association for the Advancement of Science; the US Institute of Peace; and The Day After Association (a Syrian NGO) as its core partners. At the time, the civilian situation on the ground had not deteriorated as it would throughout the summer of 2013 and into 2014, and SHOSI proposed implementing a project that would work to restore governance capacity over Syria’s cultural sector in the regions of the country outside the control of the Assad regime through Local Coordination Committees, Free Syrian Army, and community groups (Al Quntar 2013). Similar efforts had already been undertaken by The Day After Association in regard to judicial and civilian infrastructure in Syria. Events on the ground required SHOSI to adapt its plans, shifting away from a focus on developing governance to implementing emergency activities.

In summer 2014, as ISIS advanced into Iraq, SHOSI expanded its ongoing efforts to support Iraqi heritage professionals, and renamed itself the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project. The Iraqi Institute for the Conserva-

tion of Antiquities and Heritage also joined as a core partner. There are key differences between Syria and Iraq in the present crisis. Most notably, Iraq retains some governance capability over cultural heritage in ways that Syria has not, which provides a governance framework for all emergency heritage efforts. However, there is a similar need in both countries to increase the capacity for emergency response among heritage professionals and, where appropriate, to implement emergency preservation projects that safeguard the most at-risk cultural heritage sites and collections. In all cases, the ability of heritage professionals inside Syria and Iraq to act is limited by the conflict, as the personal safety of those engaged in emergency efforts remains a paramount concern. Travel to trainings and the implementation of emergency preservation projects can only occur when safe passage can be reasonably assured. Because of the fluid conditions presented by the conflict, the Syrians and Iraqis working with the SHOSI Project are constantly reassessing their local ability to travel and to access cultural sites, and the in-country project teams and international partners communicate regularly to discuss potential risks and to discourage excessive risk-taking.

line defense in the present Syrian and Iraqi crisis. To date, most of the emergency trainings have been focused on the staff of Syria's Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM). By summer 2015, UNESCO had sponsored four courses, one each on combating illicit trafficking, emergency stabilization for built heritage, the protection of moveable heritage, and the recording of intangible heritage (UNESCO 2015). Approximately 100 trainees had participated from Syria (as well as Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey in the case of the illicit trafficking workshop). Most of the UNESCO courses' attendees have been based in Damascus, which has seen the least conflict. In 2013, ICOMOS and ICCROM also offered eTraining courses through video conferencing to the Syrian DGAM (ICOMOS 2013).

By contrast, less attention has been given to the areas outside of the Assad regime's control, and therefore the areas of Syria most at-risk. By 2014, it was difficult for international heritage organizations to travel into the country, and many Syrian heritage professionals working outside of the DGAM's control had, by that point in the conflict, been caring for collections salvaged from damaged museums and religious institutions. To address

specific concerns arising from caring for portable objects in these conditions, the SHOSI Project led a three-day Emergency Care for Syrian Museum Collections course in Gaziantep, Turkey, in late June 2014 (Daniels 2014). Approximately twenty people primarily from the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib attended this training (fig. 1). Its purpose was three-fold: 1) to offer information on how to secure museum collections safely during emergencies; 2) to provide participants with basic supplies for packing and securing museum collections; and 3) to create a dialogue about emergency responses and needs. Attendees from the course were able to return to Syria with basic supplies and to immediately put them to use.

Following ISIS' attacks in Iraq and occupation of Mosul in summer 2014, the SHOSI Project sought to bring an

emergency heritage protection workshop to an audience of Iraqi heritage professionals similar to the training that had occurred in Gaziantep, leading to its partnership with the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage (IICAH) in Erbil. The IICAH has established itself as the leader in Iraq for cultural



**Figure 2.** Katharyn Hanson and Brian Lione welcome students back to the IICAH for the summer 2015 Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response for Cultural Heritage course in Erbil. Photograph courtesy of the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage.

### Emergency Training Activities

Following complex emergencies, the international heritage community has often responded by offering training programs for the impacted country's heritage professionals. It is therefore no surprise that emergency workshops have been the front-



heritage education and training over the past six years, educating more than 250 graduates in short workshops and long-form academic coursework offered by academic institutions and international NGOs (Johnson and Lione 2013). The IICAH collaborates with representatives from the Iraqi government, including the State Board of Heritage in Baghdad (SBAH) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Directorate of Antiquities. Since December 2010, the IICAH has been managed by a five-member Iraqi Board of Directors drawn from the SBAH and the KRG.

With the support and encouragement of the IICAH, as well as SBAH and KRG representatives, over four weeks during the summer of 2015, the SHOSI Project offered a course on Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Response for Cultural Heritage (fig. 2). The course took place at the IICAH's facilities in Erbil with seventeen participants from throughout Iraq who work in museums management, government administration, at archaeological sites, and in heritage buildings. Many of the participants came from areas affected by current armed conflict and general instability. Crucially, the workshop brought together students representing Iraq's diverse demographic groups: Muslim and Christian, Sunni and Shia, Kurd and Arab, women and men, junior and senior, who were all working toward the goal of heritage preservation. In this way, the Erbil course helped to realize the goal of building a professional cohort that is grounded in strong personal relationships and can be responsive to disaster response as the need arises.

The Erbil course's content drew upon the prior experience of the Gaziantep training. It had three principal goals: 1) to discuss how to identify at-risk cultural heritage; 2) to offer training in site assessment and risk management planning; and 3) to create a dialogue about emergency risks and a response network. In the context of Iraq, translating these goals into practice meant basic instruction in the safe packing and movement of collections, the methods of damage assessment, remote sensing techniques, the process of triage for sites and museum collections, and the design and implementation of disaster response plans. This diverse

content illustrated a broad spectrum of potential responses to hazards and disaster situations (fig. 3).

### Emergency Preservation Projects

In addition to training activities, the SHOSI Project is also implementing emergency preservation projects for at-risk cultural heritage. Following the Gaziantep workshop in June 2014, it became apparent that emergency trainings were insufficient to prompt emergency preservation activities. While the trainings facilitated the exchange of information and increased participants' abilities to implement emergency responses, conservation supplies and funding for labor were urgently required if action was to be taken in a timely manner. Thus, the training workshops became the gateway to a more sustained engagement in the protection of Syrian and Iraqi cultural heritage for the SHOSI Project, rather than an endpoint.

The challenge was not so much ameliorating a lack of expertise on the part of Syrian participants, who were themselves experienced heritage professionals, but in addressing the logistical issues of transferring funds, equipment, and supplies into Syria legally. The June 2015 Erbil workshop exposed many of the same issues in Iraq. While these challenges seem almost insurmountable in a conflict zone, they are precisely what humanitarian interventions must address during complex disasters on a regular basis. Emergency preservation projects are likely only to be successful when implemented within such an overarching

framework. In practice, the SHOSI Project's interventions are prioritized according to immediate need by in-country heritage professionals, and these sites are then assessed according to the present security situation and the degree of likely risk to the collection or to the heritage site.

One example of the SHOSI Project's completed emergency preservation projects is in its work at the Ma'arra Museum. Participants at the 2014 Gaziantep workshop identified the museum as one of the most significant and at-risk heritage sites in the Idlib region. The museum is itself an historic building, a caravansary



**Figure 3.** Iraqi heritage professionals holding the results of their assignment to pack an artifact using only material from their dorm rooms.  
Photograph by Katharyn Hanson.

known as *Khan As'ad Pasha*, which was constructed during the Ottoman period in the sixteenth century C.E. In 1987, the building was restored and opened as a museum devoted to the exhibition of Roman and Byzantine period mosaics. The mosaics were conserved according to Syrian best practices of the era; they are encased within the floor or fixed permanently to the walls with concrete. Located in Ma'arat al-Nu'man at a strategic crossroads, the museum was caught in the crossfire of the Battle of Ma'arat al-Nu'man in 2011. During these clashes, some mosaics and sculptures were damaged and exhibit cases were broken. The building also sustained physical damage. An immediate need existed to safeguard the non-portable museum collection in case the building sustained additional damage.

Following the Gaziantep workshop, the museum's curatorial staff developed a plan to protect the building and mosaic collection in situ, which was further developed by international conservation specialists at the Smithsonian and other organizations. The conservation work began at the museum in October 2014, and was carried out by an in-country team of heritage professionals, which included the museum's staff, archaeologists, and civil society activists from the area. At first, all holes in the roof were cleaned and then filled with bars and cement. Collapsing arches in the caravansary's courtyard were also repaired using local stone in order to match the original building materials. After these basic efforts to shore up the building, the team addressed the mosaic collection. The team first cleaned any accumulated dust from the mosaics, and then applied a layer of water-soluble glue followed by flashspun polyethylene fiber or cotton cloth to fortify and keep the tesserae together (fig. 4). Sandbags were then stacked alongside the mosaics to offer additional blast protection and to minimize potential damage in case of a wall-collapse or shrapnel fire. Altogether, some 1,600 square feet of mosaics were protected in this manner (fig. 5). All the materials involved in this emergency project can also be cleaned or removed easily with-



**Figure 4** (above). The Ma'arra Museum's curatorial staff preparing the mosaics for sandbagging, December 2014. Photograph source anonymous for protection.

**Figure 5** (below). Reinforced and stabilized mosaics at the Ma'arra Museum, December 2014. Photograph source anonymous for protection.



out any lasting negative effects to the mosaics.

These prevention measures were proven to be timely and successful. In June 2015, the Assad regime's air force dropped an explosive barrel on the Ma'arra Museum. The caravansary's mosque and hospice, located in the central courtyard of the main museum building, took a direct hit (fig. 6). The mosque's cupola, lobby, and eastern wall were destroyed and the cupola and the eastern wall of the hospice were seriously damaged. The explosion also caused the destruction of parts of the corridor leading to the eastern wing of the museum. The museum staff survived the bombing as did the most significant mosaics in the collection. The mosaics exhibited in the eastern gallery of the museum were undamaged, surviving the collapse of the wall leading in front of the gallery. The emergency protection of these mosaics by sandbags played an important role in their survival and apparently diffused the full force of the bomb blast (fig. 7). Three small mosaics were severely damaged in the corridor; these represent a less significant component of the collection. A few column capitals and basalt doors displayed in the corridor were partially damaged.

By the end of June 2015, the Ma'arra Museum's staff had started the salvage of the collapsed rubble according to a marked grid removal system with full photographic and video documentation. These activities followed the best practices established by ICCROM for the recovery of historic building materials in a disaster situation. The museum's staff had also initiated the process of evaluating the building's structural damage, especially for those sections that hold the mosaics.

### Taking Action

The SHOSI Project's interventions demonstrate that it is possible to assist heritage professionals caught in a situation such as the present Syrian and Iraqi conflict. Doing so requires the full, collaborative involvement of local Syrians and Iraqis, who are






**Figure 6** (left). The courtyard of the Ma'arra Museum following the barrel bombing on June 15, 2015.

**Figure 7** (right). Intact mosaics at the Ma'arra Museum following the barrel bombing on June 15, 2015. Photographs courtesy of Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger (PASD)/The Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project.

the only people in a position to implement emergency projects. Moreover, they must take the lead, as only they will be able to assess the risks involved in protecting a cultural heritage site. Involving our Syrian and Iraqi colleagues as full partners who have a voice in the decision-making about heritage protection hardly seems novel; indeed, it is a core tenant of community archaeology. Yet, an approach that empowers Syrian and Iraqi heritage professionals in full project implementation is rare. We would maintain that the extent to which the SHOSI Project has experienced any degree of success, it is due to the adoption of this orientation.

Many emergency preservation projects like the SHOSI Project's efforts at the Ma'arra Museum are needed; much work across Syria and Iraq remains to be done. Although archaeologists tend to focus on documenting site damage – a core skill of the discipline, members of the field have the knowledge and ability to do much more. Archaeologists obtain permits, interact with government authorities, export equipment and supplies across borders, and negotiate with local communities for a range of services. All of these activities share a kinship with humanitarian aid projects, providing a template in which the international heritage community and humanitarian community can reach out to Syrians and Iraqis to create joint emergency preservation projects. The future of this region's cultural heritage likely depends on such collaborations.

## Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented by the authors at the 2015 Society for American Archaeology annual meeting. The work discussed here has been supported by the J. M. Kaplan Fund, Sotheby's, and the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development. This article has benefited from conversations with Brian M. Lione, Jesse S. Johnson, Patty Gerstenblith, Laurie Rush, Susan Wolfenbarger, Shaker Shbib, Ali Othman, Mariam Bachich, Lauren Ristvet, Richard M. Leventhal, Amr Al-Azm, and Steven Heydemann. Thanks to Jesse Casana for the invitation to publish in this edition of *Near Eastern Archaeology* and to two anonymous reviewers for their comments. 

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