The Cultural Heritage of Syria in Danger

The Umayyad mosque of Aleppo
Since 2011 the armed conflict in Syria has unsettled and drastically changed the Middle East. Millions of Syrians are displaced, more than 200,000 people lost their lives. The unique Syrian cultural heritage with six UNESCO World-Heritage Sites is severely endangered or already lost - as well as many other very important archeological sites. Heavy artillery, air raids and bombing attacks have erased large parts of the historical centers of Aleppo, Homs and other cities. An entire cultural landscape of diverse intangible heritage with traditional crafts, music, and also a peaceful multi-religious and multiethnic coexistence is going to be destroyed.
A comprehensive digital archive of the material Syrian cultural heritage is missing up to now. Several international initiatives and the Syrian Antiquities Authority are currently working on compiling the numerous researches conducted over the past decades by many scholars.

The detailed documentation of the Syrian cultural heritage facilitates detecting the current destruction and creates the basis for any prospective reconstruction. Raising awareness about a shared cultural heritage can be an indispensable asset for the national reconciliation one day. Any further post-conflict reconstruction initiatives should have a bottom-top-approach by collaborating with the civil society and empowering national capacity.
The Syrian Heritage Archive Project (SyrHer) is currently digitising research data on Syria. As a mutual effort the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin and the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) are cooperating, both being funded by the German Foreign Ministry. The two institutions upload this data to iDAI Arachne image database, which is a comprehensive tool for scientific internet research. More than 100,000 slides, photos and plans about Syria have already been scanned, systematized, and made publicly available. The data of Arachne can be exported via interfaces into other international data platforms. The digital places-dictionary iDAI Gazetteer, which is an open internet-based platform, serves to manage and geo-locate the Syrian sites, places and monuments. As the destruction in Syria is still ongoing, documentation of the caused damage is essential for post-conflict reconstruction. Within the Syrian Heritage Archive Project, detailed damage data from internet sources of activists are collected, evaluated, and linked to the project’s archival materials.
Illicit excavations throughout the country are causing irretrievable damage. The archaeological sites are being systematically looted and illicitly traded with. Thieves are destroying the sequence of layers necessary for this cultural knowledge not to be lost forever.

The looted objects are being offered on the international art market and are sold to collectors worldwide. The increasing demand on such ‘profitable’ trade will definitely secure prolonging the Syrian war.

The SyrHer-team at the Museum für Islamische Kunst is observing the online market and keeping track of this trade by compiling information in lists of the stolen objects. International bodies should be encouraged to take more measures disrupting this trade, also, from the collectors’ end of the problem.
The basar of Aleppo, once the world’s largest covered suq - as it looked like before the war

Considering the amount of monstrous destruction and the urgency of all archival and rescue work, we urge all similar initiatives for Syria worldwide to cooperate at different levels: to establish a thorough database, to geo-locate all significant monuments; to map and evaluate the current damage, as a step towards against the destruction of Syria.

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