



Endangered Cultural Heritage in the Global South Hub (ECHGS)

Reporting Heritage Destruction: A Double-Edged Sword?

At a time of many global challenges, all types of cultural heritage are increasingly at risk from human-made disasters, conflicts, climate change, and natural hazards. As stressed by the former United Nations' Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage is a human rights issue (Shaheed, 2011). As a result, in recent decades efforts have been made to include the protection of cultural heritage during crises and conflicts as part of humanitarian missions.

The increased reporting of heritage destruction has raised public awareness of the risks that threaten societies' cultural assets and helps mobilise public opinion. It also helps researchers, heritage professionals, and international organisations better understand and gauge the nature of current risks and threats before taking protective measures. Accurate, scientific, and impartial reporting on heritage destruction also helps to defuse political and conflict propaganda as well as providing sound, legally robust evidence. Such accurate and scientific reporting should be considered as part of the documentation and monitoring process of endangered cultural heritage and its associated communities.

Within the academic sector, large-scale projects such as the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) have been established to record and monitor cultural heritage sites threatened by war, climate change, and development by using new technologies and remote sensing. Information gathered by these projects is used and cited by governmental and intergovernmental organisations and the media.

In recent decades, the destruction of heritage during armed conflict, especially the deliberate and propagandistic destruction for political and ideological reasons, has become the media's primary focus. In the past two decades, with the development and expansion of social media, heritage destruction has frequently gone viral on social media and attracted millions of users' attention.

During the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of ISIS/Daesh in the Middle East, footage and images of the destruction of cultural and religious heritage were widely broadcast and spread by the media without restriction or consideration of ethical, psychological, social and cultural issues. While mainstream and social media outlets have strict rules for publishing violent and graphic images, and reporting on gender, ethnic, racial, and religious sensitivities has received considerable attention by mainstream media in recent years, reporting on cultural heritage has not received similar attention. There are no restrictions on how to report the destruction of cultural heritage and there is no ethical framework for reporting heritage destruction.

Research on militant and terrorist organisations shows that deliberate destruction of cultural heritage has been an important means for spreading their propaganda, recruiting new members, and expanding their networks (Smith et al., 2016). Although reporting heritage destruction has raised public sensitivity and awareness, the question is, to what extent have

these narratives contributed to political propaganda and served the purpose of terrorist groups? Does reporting heritage destruction take ethical considerations into account, and to what extent is there a connection between academic research and media reporting on the threats to cultural heritage?

Another aspect of reporting heritage destruction is the type of cultural heritage, which receives the most attention from scholars, heritage monitoring projects, and the media. For example, during the recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the destruction of classical archaeological sites and artefacts was highly visible in the media headlines. In contrast, while the destruction of some Islamic world heritage sites or landmarks was reported, less attention was paid to the destruction of cultural heritage with more local value, or of minorities and marginalised groups. This highlights a continued colonial approach to cultural heritage which in itself feeds the political propaganda being made. Local heritage values and community perspectives are often not reflected in international heritage discourse and big narratives in media.

Reporting heritage destruction also has an impact in orienting, or distorting, the way international funds are used to protect and recover effected cultural heritage. While large funders usually respond to big global challenges and international (which may often mean western) public concerns, there is a question regarding how much the relatively more ignored local heritage would benefit from reconstruction funds. Indeed, in a context where reconstruction funds may be linked to soft power diplomacy, greater concern for locally valued heritage may be important. We need to consider more carefully the role of reporting heritage destruction in shaping our understanding of the risks to different types of cultural heritage.

If cultural heritage is a human right issue (UN Human Rights Council, 2018), which is threatened by conflict and terrorism, as well as by climate change (UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, 2020), then what principles and frameworks should be observed for reporting on threats to and destruction of such heritage?

Social media allows citizens and non-journalists, including archaeologists and heritage experts, to directly report destruction and threats to cultural heritage. The role of reporting becomes more prominent as the risks of other global challenges, such as climate change, become more apparent. However, the principles and ethical framework on reporting heritage risks remain valid and relevant questions. Furthermore, does reporting play a sufficient role in later stages, especially during the recovery and reconstruction phase?

To address these questions of heritage destruction reporting, archaeologists, heritage scholars and academics need to join with editors from the media, social scientists, international relations experts, and policy makers, to discuss these issues.

It is proposed to organise a series of talks and workshops in Oxford under the umbrella of the Endangered Cultural Heritage in the Global South (ECHGS).

Why ECHGS?

The Endangered Cultural Heritage in the Global South Hub (ECHGS) is an initiative proposed by the Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa (EAMENA) at the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford in collaboration with other Oxford-based scholars from Anthropology, Geography, and other disciplines. It undertakes interdisciplinary research on how cultural heritage is created, identified, valued and protected both by local populations and by international agencies, experts, and academics. The Hub also considers how heritage is currently threatened by conflict, climate change, and development. The longstanding relationships between the first world and the Global South make cultural heritage both a critical focus for decolonization debates and actions, and central to highly topical discussions regarding UK (and international) Official Development Assistance programmes.

The proposed theme on *Reporting Heritage Destruction* will be one of the thematic discussions under the ECHGS, which will bring together Oxford-based scholars as well as wider participants from the media, policymakers, and government departments, and international agencies. The outcome of this initial series of talks will feed into the Hub's objectives to research on the decolonising and politicising of cultural heritage as well as local heritage values.

Activities

Two activities are proposed under this theme.

- A- Closed scoping workshop in Oxford: with a limited number of UK-based media editors and analysts, and Oxford-based academics. The workshop will discuss the key issues about reporting heritage destruction, understanding risks to heritage in the challenging world, and the necessity of providing a framework and recommendations for reporting heritage destruction. A select and interested number of the participants will continue the work to prepare a set of recommendations.

- B- Online Conference: open to a wider range of participants from academia, media, international organisations, and government departments.

Outputs:

- 1- An ethical framework and a set of recommendations for reporting heritage threats and destruction during conflicts and disasters for heritage scholars and practitioners as well as the media, and policy makers.
- 2- A publication, including select papers from the workshop and the conference.

Scientific and Organising Team:

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