

WHEN PEACE BREAKS OUT: THE PERILS AND PROMISE OF “AFTERWAR”

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On 17 November 2020, Catholicos Karekin II, the supreme head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, made an urgent international appeal. “One of the last remaining regions of our ancient culture,” he warned, “is at risk of destruction.” After weeks of fighting in the South Caucasus territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, several of the world’s oldest monasteries, along with hundreds of medieval churches, sacred sites, and *kachkars*—intricately carved cross stones—had fallen into the hands of Armenia’s archenemy, Azerbaijan. The government of Azerbaijan had a history of destroying Armenian sites, Catholicos noted, and there was now an imminent danger of “cultural cleansing.”¹ Soon after, the Armenian patriarch’s warnings were echoed by Western scholars, with one asserting in the *Wall Street Journal* that “ancient national treasures” were “at risk of complete erasure.”²

At first glance, it was an all-too-familiar story of cultural destruction amid vicious armed conflict. Like other recent wars in which religious monuments have been targeted, the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh was an interconfessional struggle, with Christian Armenians on one side and Muslim Azeris on the other; it involved large-scale human displacement, with an estimated 130,000 ethnic Armenian inhabitants forced to flee to neighboring Armenia, and the potential return of equal or larger numbers of Azeri refugees uprooted during an earlier war; and it was accompanied by telltale forms of ethnic violence, including reports of atrocities and heavily-armed men ransacking towns. Even as Armenians were warning of deliberate attacks on Armenian churches and monasteries, Azerbaijani officials and many Azeris, on social media and elsewhere, claimed that Armenians had been vandalizing Azeri mosques and Muslim graveyards.³ Once again, human populations and centuries-old

monuments—storehouses of culture, faith, and communal identity—had become twin casualties of the modern battlefield.

Yet there was a crucial difference: the war in question had already happened. Karekin was making his plea more than a week after Armenia and Azerbaijan reached a cease-fire agreement. His concern was not the military confrontation itself, but the uneasy peace that followed. In accordance with the terms of the truce Armenia was turning over to Azerbaijan a series of districts around Nagorno-Karabakh containing numerous ancient Armenian sites; their survival would now depend on the good will of a government that was actively hostile to Armenia and for which the scars of war were still fresh.⁴ Conceptually then, the case of Nagorno-Karabakh poses a challenge to the conventional framing of cultural heritage in armed conflict: the crux of the problem is not ongoing military action or extremist activity, but rather a sovereign government taking control of territory to which it has a recognized claim. In particular, the problem concerns threats to cultural and religious heritage that arise once a military conflict has run its course.

If the questions raised by the Armenian–Azerbaijani truce have been little studied, they are hardly unusual. In almost any conflict in which *de facto* or *de jure* boundaries are redrawn, the fate of religious and historical sites that fall within those boundaries is newly at stake. And what happens in the aftermath of war may be as important to determining their survival as the war itself. New threats can emerge, as a victorious power consolidates control over a contested region and local and national identities are forcefully redefined. And in the absence of open warfare, a sovereign government may have greater opportunity to desecrate, repurpose, or destroy the monuments of an unwanted group with little international scrutiny.

In many recent peacebuilding efforts, the extent of such threats has been downplayed. International diplomacy during such transition phases tends to focus on economic redevelopment and basic security; cultural issues are regarded as secondary. At the same time, communities or nations emerging from war are frequently described as “post-conflict” societies, a terminology that may suggest that the struggle in question has ended, or that the overall risk of violent attack is lower than during “conflict” itself. Yet sacred spaces, monuments, and other cultural sites have often become the principal locus of conflict between groups once the shooting stops. In *Violence Taking Place*, a study of cultural heritage in Kosovo after the 1998–99 war, Andrew Herscher adopted the memorable term “afterwar” to describe this process, noting that “the violence of war did not so much end as shift its direction.”

While “afterwar” situations may pose serious new dangers to cultural heritage, they also offer unusual opportunities to save and preserve. Implicit in Karekin’s warning about Nagorno-Karabakh was that the ancient monuments in question were still standing; acts of destruction could still be prevented. In contrast to a “hot” war moreover, foreign intervention is often not only possible but expected. If the fighting

has come to an end through a truce or a peace agreement, as in Nagorno-Karabakh, the terms of the peace typically depend on one or more outside guarantors, as well as the deployment of peacekeepers. In such circumstances, foreign governments, international donors, and private organizations may be able to build and enforce local safeguards for sites and monuments—even when those sites belong to an opposing group or confession. Examples of such engagement have played out in recent years in such different settings as divided Cyprus, the Balkans, Mali, and even, to a limited degree, northern Syria.

Still, a cultural intervention in the aftermath of military hostilities may carry significant risks of its own. As with rescue actions during armed conflict itself, success almost always depends on the involvement of people who live around the sites in question. Without such support, any foreign-supported initiative may backfire. At the root of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and other similar situations, then, is the question of how local populations themselves relate to cultural monuments that do not belong to their own tradition. Whether or not threatened heritage can survive may depend on the extent to which international players can effectively harness locally-driven efforts to prevent new attacks from occurring, while also creating the ground conditions needed—in funds, expertise, knowledge, and even legal arrangements—for a new preservation ethos to take hold.

In recent years, innovative efforts have been made to extend the UN's responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine—the evolving norm that international forces have a duty to intervene when a population is threatened with genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or ethnic cleansing—to imminent threats against cultural heritage. The elaboration of these principles has helpfully reframed our understanding of such threats, bringing new global awareness that attacks on cultural sites are often directly connected to attacks on human populations. Yet the R2P approach has proven extraordinarily difficult to translate into meaningful action to protect heritage, whether in the face of full-blown armed conflict, such as the Syrian Civil War, or in a “peacetime” situation in which a sovereign government is firmly in control, as in China's devastating crackdown on Uyghurs. Nor does R2P offer a durable basis for the preservation of sites and monuments. Peacekeepers may pave the way, but ultimately it is local populations and local authorities who will be in charge. In confronting the limits of current approaches to heritage destruction, the “afterwar” problem suggests an urgent avenue of inquiry. If the long-term survival of sites and monuments almost always depends on the communities that surround them, then any effective approach to heritage protection must give central emphasis to people as well as property. Put another way, under what circumstances can an international responsibility to protect be converted into a local impulse to preserve?

The Flaws of War

Over the past two decades, the international response to heritage destruction has overwhelmingly focused on wartime combatants, nonstate armed groups, and terrorists. Notably, a broad consensus has emerged around the need for effective rules of engagement to prevent cultural crimes during conflict. At the same time, international bodies, including the UN Security Council and the International Criminal Court (ICC), have shown a growing commitment to holding extremist groups accountable for intentional attacks on historical and religious monuments. Yet until now, these policy innovations have had depressingly little effect on the battlefield itself.

The current approach is founded on the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, a treaty spurred by the widespread destruction of museums, libraries, art collections, and historical monuments in Europe during World War II. Taking as its starting point the observation that “cultural property has suffered grave damage during recent armed conflicts,” the convention set out rules of engagement designed to limit or prevent such damage by military forces. International support for the treaty grew slowly, with the United States and the United Kingdom delaying ratification until 2008 and 2017 respectively, well over a half century after its creation. However, the convention has now acquired almost global membership, including by all five permanent members of the UN Security Council and all parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) except Iceland. Joining them are nearly every member of the European Union, twenty-seven countries in sub-Saharan Africa, twenty in Latin America, forty-four in the Asia-Pacific region, and sixteen in the Middle East.⁵ Notably, the list includes most of the countries where military conflicts have taken place over the last three decades.

Significantly enhancing this regime, if less widely embraced, has been the convention’s 1999 Second Protocol. (The First Protocol was written at the time of the original treaty in 1954.) With the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia freshly in mind, the authors of the Second Protocol sought to strengthen the convention in a number of crucial ways. Among its noteworthy provisions, the 1999 protocol tightened a loophole for “military necessity”; updated the treaty’s protections to apply to civil wars as well as international conflicts; added an “enhanced protection” regime for specially designated sites that are “of the greatest importance for humanity”; and set down procedures to prosecute parties or individuals for attacking, vandalizing, or looting cultural sites. Two decades after its writing, the Second Protocol has been ratified by more than seventy countries, though it continues to lack the support of the United States, Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Switzerland, among other states.

Since the early 2000s, the Hague principles have been supplemented by parallel efforts to address purposeful destruction by nonstate armed groups and terrorists. Spurred by the widely-publicized targeting of cultural sites by the Taliban in

Afghanistan, Ansar al-Dine in Mali, and especially the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS or Da'esh) in Syria and Iraq, international organizations and world leaders, up to and including the UN Security Council, have condemned such attacks as a threat to international security and a direct extension of crimes against human populations.

International alarm about extremist groups has also led to some important policy innovations. The ICC, established in 2002, has notably included attacks on cultural heritage among the crimes of war under its jurisdiction, and in 2016 convicted a Malian extremist for the destruction of mausoleums in Timbuktu. Considerable attention has also been devoted to the protection of so-called moveable heritage—including paintings, museum objects, and archaeological artifacts—that may be vulnerable to theft or destruction in regions of conflict or general instability. Interpol, working together with national law enforcement, has sought to crack down on the cross-border trade in looted artifacts from war-torn countries, while other groups, such as the public-private Aliph Foundation, have established resources for emergency rescue actions, including the creation of temporary safe havens for threatened artifacts. Particularly notable has been the effort, explored at length by Thomas G. Weiss and Nina Connelly, to apply the R2P doctrine to cultural heritage threatened with destruction.⁶

Yet this growing international framework has seemingly failed to stop the accelerating destruction of cultural sites. By its own members, the 1954 Hague Convention has often been honored in the breach. The newly-created Republic of Croatia, for example, ratified the treaty in 1992: sixteen months later, Croatian-backed paramilitary forces deliberately targeted and destroyed the sixteenth-century Mostar Bridge in neighboring Bosnia, in what has become one of the most infamous attacks on cultural heritage in recent decades.⁷ In the Middle East, Libya (1957), Syria (1958), Lebanon (1960), Iraq (1967), and Saudi Arabia (1971) ratified the convention soon after its creation, yet they have all since been involved in wars in which deliberate or indiscriminate destruction of cultural heritage has taken place. Still more recent is the case of Ethiopia. In late 2020, five years after it ratified the Hague treaty, the Ethiopian government began a brutal offensive against rebels in the sealed off region of Tigray. According to reports and photographs that circulated widely on social media, Ethiopian forces shelled and looted numerous heritage sites during the campaign, including several historical churches as well as the revered seventh-century al-Nejashi Mosque, which had previously been proposed as a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site.

The American military has also been implicated in damage to heritage sites in the years since the United States joined the convention. For nearly six years (2015–21), US forces backed the Saudi offensive against Houthi rebels in Yemen with munitions, intelligence, logistics, and other forms of support. Though the US military has denied

involvement in the selection of targets, US weapons systems were deployed in a Saudi air campaign that damaged or destroyed numerous Yemeni historical sites, including large parts of the old city of the capital Sanaa, the medieval citadel of Kawkiban in the north of the country, and the ninth-century Jami' al-Hadi in Sa'ada, one of the oldest Shi'ite mosques on the Arabian Peninsula.⁸

Meanwhile, international efforts have had even less impact on deliberate destruction by extremist groups. In the face of diplomatic and political constraints, non-consensual intervention to protect populations from imminent attack has been extremely rare; for cultural sites, taking action has proven even harder. Even where concrete steps could, in theory, be taken, the odds of success are long. Often a threat may emerge only after an attack is already under way, or has been publicized by the perpetrators themselves. And in instances where imminent danger is apparent, international responses may make things worse. As the dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001 by the Taliban, and of the Roman ruins of Palmyra in Syria in 2015 by ISIL attest, international media coverage and/or verbal condemnation by world leaders has often seemed to provoke rather than prevent. Notably, many of ISIL's most devastating attacks on cultural sites in Iraq and Syria occurred months *after* the alarm was sounded by UNESCO, European leaders, and then US secretary of state John Kerry. Lacking a clear path to hindering or preventing such acts, international bodies such as UNESCO, Interpol, and the ICC have largely been limited to dealing with the consequences, whether by policing the trade in already-looted antiquities or seeking individual accountability for the perpetrators. In such cases, though, the damage has already been done.

At the same time, the war-and-terrorism approach to addressing cultural heritage destruction tends to leave out the groups who are most affected: the people who live around the sites in question. Implicit in much of the policy discussion is an opposition between internationally recognized monuments and sites on the one hand, and local combatants or extremists who threaten them, on the other. Even as the Security Council and other international organizations such as UNESCO increasingly link attacks on cultural monuments to crimes against human populations, the prevailing framing often pits international "good guys"—Western governments, security officials, and law enforcement agencies—against local or regional "bad guys" who threaten to blow up temples and bulldoze monuments. However well intended, such an approach may appear condescending or tone-deaf to local communities which are themselves often bearing the terrible human costs of war. While world leaders and the international media lamented ISIL's destruction of the uninhabited site of Palmyra, there was scant mention of the adjacent modern city of Tadmor, where the Syrian government had long kept a notorious prison for torturing political dissidents. As important, the overwhelming emphasis on sites and monuments, rather than the populations around them, may obscure the crucial part that these same local

communities have long played in effective preservation—both during and after war.

Manuscripts in the Canoe

In contrast to international action, local efforts to safeguard sites, monuments, and artworks during conflict have a considerable record of success. Much deserved credit for the recovery of displaced European art collections during World War II has gone to the Western Allies, the Roberts Commission, and the “Monuments Men.” Yet their efforts were often made possible by years of daring work by local officials. In Nazi-occupied Paris, Rose Valland, the curator of the Jeu de Paume art gallery, secretly documented the location of more than twenty thousand looted artworks, allowing for their rapid recovery; in Italy, the museum curator Giovanni Poggi successfully hid many of Florence’s most important treasures and prevented their shipment to Nazi Germany. Particularly remarkable were the efforts of the so-called “Paper Brigade,” a group of Jewish residents of Vilnius, Lithuania who, during the Nazi occupation, managed to rescue a large proportion of one of the most important collections of Jewish rare books and manuscripts in existence.⁹

For much of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), the National Museum of Beirut was on the front lines of battle, marking a frontier between opposing factions. Yet its director, Maurice Chehab, managed to save nearly all of its extraordinary antiquities collection by hiding it in sealed basement storerooms; monumental statues that could not be moved were encased in cement.¹⁰ When the Taliban first took control of Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the director of the National Museum in Kabul was able to hide the Bactrian Gold, the country’s most important collection of ancient Silk Road grave ornaments, in a vault deep under the Afghan central bank. The rare artifacts came out of hiding more than fifteen years later, having survived years of war as well as a Taliban effort to destroy with hammers much of the museum’s collection. In August 2021, at the time of the Taliban reconquest of Afghanistan, the gold was reportedly again in secure storage at the central bank. (Six months before the Taliban retook Kabul, the speaker of the Afghan parliament suggested the Bactrian Gold be sent abroad for safekeeping, but no action was taken.¹¹)

Even in the lethal conflicts in Mali and Syria, local activists were able to save artworks and artifacts from near certain obliteration, often at great risk to themselves. In 2012, as extremists seized control of Timbuktu, local archivists quietly hid and removed tens of thousands of medieval Islamic manuscripts threatened with destruction. The much-celebrated—if somewhat exaggerated—rescue operation involved rice sacks and even canoes to ferry the documents down river to safety in Bamako, the country’s capital.¹² During the Syrian Civil War, activists in Idlib and Aleppo were able to protect the cities’ museums from destruction, even as surrounding areas, and even the museums themselves, were hit by bombs. Youssef Kanjou, the director of the Aleppo Museum at the time, told me he had only \$2,000 to

spend on sandbags and other protective measures, yet that was sufficient to protect immovable works from damage or destruction.¹³ In one extremist-held town in northwest Syria, a local archaeologist persuaded the local leader of the al-Nusra Front armed group (now the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) that the population would rebel if non-Islamic sites were attacked. At Palmyra, Khaled al-Asaad, the site's distinguished, eighty-three-year-old chief archaeologist, managed to evacuate many of the antiquities at the Palmyra Museum before he was captured and killed by ISIL, in what became one of the most horrific episodes of the war.¹⁴

That local activists were motivated to risk their lives to defend Syria's museums and monuments may seem surprising. In the years before the civil war, the government of Bashar al-Assad had a poor record of caring for cultural heritage. Many ancient settlements, including, for example, the ruins of the Semitic city of Mari in the east and those of the Hellenistic city of Cyrrhus in the northwest, had been looted and neglected for years. Nonetheless, the country hosted more than a hundred foreign archaeological missions between the early twentieth century and the start of the war, helping build a substantial reservoir of local knowledge and expertise about the country's rich archaeology and historical monuments. At the same time, there was a small but dedicated cohort of trained Syrian heritage professionals who were prepared to act with the limited resources available to them.¹⁵

Local activism can work both ways, however. In conflicts involving sectarian violence or an uprising against an oppressive government, there may be powerful social forces working against preservation. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein had long appropriated the country's ancient heritage in propaganda by his Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party. Partly as a result, some Iraqi Shi'ites viewed looting the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and plundering archaeological sites as legitimate forms of retribution following the US-led invasion in 2003. Illegal excavations were finally curtailed not by international intervention but by the Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shi'ite cleric, who issued a fatwa or religious ruling against archaeological pillage. As in other cases, local authority proved far more important than international norms.

Remembered today as one of the worst cultural heritage disasters since the Cold War, the US occupation of Iraq also highlights the strategic importance of protecting cultural sites in a volatile "afterwar" environment. Though there were incidents of carelessness by US forces during the invasion, the looting and destruction overwhelmingly occurred after Saddam Hussein's government had been defeated. At the time, a new local order, dominated by the country's long-oppressed Shi'ite majority, was taking shape under American suzerainty. The failure of US forces to manage sectarian tensions—and reluctance to provide security at religious sites—led to growing violence, culminating in the 2006 attack by Sunni extremists on the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, regarded as one of the most sacred Shi'ite shrines in the world. In the exceptionally violent civil war that followed (2006–8), numerous Sunni

and Shi'ite religious sites were targeted while some seventy thousand civilians lost their lives. In the years since the US invasion, much has been said about what American forces might have done to secure Iraq's heritage. What is less often noted is the extent to which attacks on cultural heritage became a driver of new conflict.

If "afterwar" settings offer unique opportunities for international actors to protect and preserve heritage sites, the case of Iraq after 2003 shows how much can go wrong. If intercommunal and interconfessional tensions are allowed to fester, no amount of protection for sacred sites may be sufficient to neutralize continuing threats. Above all, any durable approach will require both local communities and local authorities, like Ayatollah Sistani, to respect and value the sites in question—regardless of whose heritage it is. But how to get there?

A Strongman's Promise

Few recent conflicts have presented as great a long-term challenge for cultural heritage as Kosovo. For a number of years after its 1998–99 war with Serbia, the small, newly independent country served as a cautionary tale. As the latest installment in the brutal breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the Kosovo war played out as a struggle between ethnic Serbs, who are Christian Orthodox, and Kosovo Albanians, who are predominantly Muslim. During the sixteen-month conflict, hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians were forced to flee the region to neighboring countries, while Serb forces devastated hundreds of mosques and Muslim sites in Kosovo, continuing the strategy of ethnic and cultural warfare they had previously undertaken in Bosnia. Sufi lodges were burned down, and libraries containing thousands of rare books and Islamic manuscripts, some dating from the Middle Ages, were destroyed.

With the entry of NATO forces into the war, however, the tables were turned. Following its victory, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) gained possession of a territory that contained dozens of Serbian Orthodox churches and monuments. Among them were several of Serbia's oldest monasteries, including the thirteenth-century Visoki Dečani, a domed, five-nave building featuring one of the largest surviving Byzantine fresco decorations. Having witnessed the Serbs' devastation of historical Muslim sites, Kosovo Albanians now had the fate of some of the most prized Orthodox monuments in their hands. Meanwhile, a large majority of the refugees who had been brutally uprooted by the Serbs were able to return. While military hostilities had ended, the conflict had not.

At the time, Kosovo was nominally under the control of some twenty thousand peacekeepers from NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). While the peacekeepers were able to maintain general order, they were largely unprepared to protect heritage sites. For months after the war, former members of the KLA and other armed groups in Kosovo attacked Serbian historical and religious sites, mostly with impunity. In March 2004, a wave of anti-Serb

violence, led by former KLA leaders, quickly spread across the country. Along with the killing of nineteen civilians, the riots culminated in a devastating series of attacks on Serbian houses, buildings, and religious sites. Faced with overwhelming numbers, KFOR troops put up little resistance. Some thirty churches were burned down, some of them hundreds of years old, while monasteries, graveyards, and hundreds of Serbian homes were vandalized and destroyed.¹⁶

The violence very nearly consumed Visoki Dečani, where there was also a minimal peacekeeping presence. In the end, the monastery was spared not because of KFOR but through the personal intervention of a local strongman. Shortly before the unrest began, then US senator Joe Biden visited the monastery and was told by Serbian monks that there was a growing threat of attack. As Biden recounted in Senate testimony:

Knowing that the territory around Decani is Mr. Haradinaj's political base, I sent him a confidential letter after I returned to Washington. In it I wrote that I was counting on him to personally guarantee and protect the Serbian Orthodox monastery I had just visited. In March of 2004, serious riots against Serbs and other non-Albanian minorities broke out across Kosovo. ... KFOR proved unable or unwilling to prevent this destruction. In fact, in several cases, the outrages occurred while European KFOR troops stood by. One of the few venerable monasteries that remained untouched was Visoki Decani. Mr. Haradinaj had kept his promise.¹⁷

If Biden's account is accurate, the revered Orthodox monument owed its survival in 2004 to actions taken within the community around the site: international pressure on a local figure of authority proved far more effective than any number of blue helmets. It was a powerful lesson in the extent to which the protection of heritage has so often ultimately depended as much on local resolve as on international actions.

Coming shortly after the looting of the Iraq Museum, the Kosovo riots underscored the crucial importance of cultural heritage in postwar stabilization efforts. After the riots, KFOR peacekeepers deployed heavily around Serbian Orthodox sites. There was also a growing push to incorporate the protection of minority cultural sites directly into peacekeeping mandates, as was done in Mali beginning in 2013. In Kosovo itself, protection of minority heritage became one of the formal benchmarks in the country's path toward full independence. Notably, in 2008 the so-called Ahtisaari Plan, the international framework for Kosovo's new constitution, spelled out specific rights and protections for the Serbian Orthodox Church, including the creation of forty special "protective zones" around Serbian cultural and religious sites. These provisions have since largely been incorporated into Kosovo law.¹⁸

In recent years, despite continuing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, the threat of violence against Kosovo's remaining Serbian community has largely dissipated and

some of the churches damaged in the 2004 riots have been restored.¹⁹ The heightened preparedness of NATO's KFOR peacekeepers has played a part. But equally crucial has been the gradual process, in tandem with Kosovo's statebuilding process, of transferring responsibility for the protection of sites to local authorities. While Dečani remains under the protection of KFOR troops, other prominent sites, including Gračanica and the Patriarchate of Peć among other Serbian religious complexes and historical monuments, have been handed over to the jurisdiction of Kosovo's own police forces.²⁰ At the same time, as Kosovo continues to seek formal recognition from numerous countries, its leaders have held up its protections for Serbian heritage as a symbol of its status as an emerging state based on the rule of law.

The complicated experience of Kosovo since the war raises important questions about international efforts to protect cultural heritage. How might its recent successes be replicated, while avoiding the terrible legacy of destruction that preceded them? If international forces alone are not in themselves sufficient to provide durable safeguards, including for monuments of enormous religious and historical importance, what other forms of engagement might be most effective in supplementing them?

Sandbags and Glue

Along with local activism, there has been another common ingredient in many of the successful recent efforts to protect museums and monuments in conflict zones: outside support. When Timbuktu fell to extremists in 2012, the remarkable evacuation of Islamic manuscripts was spearheaded by local librarians. But the costs of the rescue and subsequent storage were supported by an emergency grant of €100,000 from the Netherlands-based Prince Claus Fund; a €75,000 grant from the DOEN Foundation, and €323,475 from the Dutch foreign ministry.²¹ Two years later, during the Syrian Civil War, Syrian activists were able to protect a series of mosaics at the Ma'aara Museum in opposition-controlled Idlib province, encasing them in glue and fabric, and protecting them with truckloads of sandbags. As a result, the mosaics survived a direct hit to the museum by a barrel bomb. Materials and financing for the project were provided in part by the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project (SHOSHI), a US-based consortium which was itself funded by grants from the JM Kaplan Fund and the Prince Claus Fund.

Such rescue actions have provided an important proof of concept of ways that international support can be exploited in conflicts where direct foreign intervention may be impossible. In light of these successes and the growing threat to sites and monuments in numerous recent conflicts, other foundations have begun to support emergency efforts, including the US-based Whiting Foundation and the Gerda Henkel Foundation in Germany. By far the largest and most ambitious player is the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH), which

was founded in Geneva in 2017 by the governments of France and the United Arab Emirates, together with large-scale private funders, and which has raised tens of millions of dollars for local emergency actions in countries experiencing or emerging from conflict. To date, it has funded projects in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Lebanon, among other countries.

For Western governments and international organizations, funding or otherwise supporting local efforts can carry important advantages over more direct forms of intervention. Local activists are far more likely to gain the trust and support of their communities, and even of groups that may otherwise pose threats to sites. And by catering to the needs of groups that are already on the ground rather than bringing in outside experts, such an approach can also avoid the traditional waste and corruption of more traditional international aid efforts. At the same time, as the Dutch support for the Timbuktu librarians demonstrates, small grants may go a very long way, and when they can be delivered quickly, can often make a crucial difference. In recent years, some foundations have also emphasized small-scale actions, seeking projects with limited, attainable goals that may stand a better chance of success. At the same time, foundations may be able to circumvent ordinary legal barriers to international involvement, for example in rebel-controlled regions of Syria. When successful, such targeted interventions bring important local buy-in and reinforce a new understanding of cultural preservation in the context of war. “Perhaps the greatest conceptual challenge for the archaeological community,” the US-based Syrian archaeologist Salam Al Quntar notes, “is to reimagine heritage protection as one of many humanitarian actions that offer direct support to populations in crisis.”²²

Despite some noteworthy achievements, however, the approach may have limited impact in major armed conflicts. Emergency funding alone cannot protect a temple or religious building from damage or destruction. By contrast, in the immediate aftermath of military hostilities, or in a situation in which a conflict has become “frozen,” such efforts may be able to make a significant difference. Many recent projects funded by ALIPH, the Prince Claus Fund, the JM Kaplan Foundation, the World Monuments Fund, and other foundations have been directed not at war zones per se, but at sites that are at grave risk as a result of recent war damage or regional instability.

Though they have received negligible attention in the international media, private funders have been particularly active in Yemen, supporting crucial rescue efforts of buildings and sites even as the conflict has continued to unfold in other parts of the country. Among these projects is the salvage effort for the Dhamar Museum, which housed one of Yemen’s most important archaeological collections and was targeted by an air strike in 2015; and the rehabilitation of the old city of Sanaa, a World Heritage Site in a crucial urban center that has been damaged by both air strikes and frequent flooding. In such cases, private funders can fill crucial gaps where mainstream aid

programs, because of continuing conflict or other logistical limitations, may be unable to intervene.

In some cases, the preservation of threatened religious sites and monuments in an “afterwar” setting can serve as an engine of reconciliation. In Cyprus, for example, a long-frozen conflict has bitterly divided the island between its Greek population, who are predominantly Orthodox Christian, and its Turks, who are Sunni Muslim. Yet over the past decade, stewardship of the island’s diverse cultural and religious heritage has become an important meeting point between the two sides. (Cyprus also has smaller minorities of Armenian Orthodox, Maronites, Roman Catholics, and Jews.)

Peacekeepers have played an important part: for decades, the UN has maintained a force on the island, one of its longest continuing missions in the world, which has prevented open conflict since the 1974 Turkish invasion, controlling a buffer zone between the two sides and maintaining basic stability on the island. But a larger breakthrough came in 2012, during a round of peace talks. While the negotiations failed to make progress toward a political settlement, the parties agreed to establish a joint heritage preservation commission as a way to further relations between the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities. Called the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), the body was designed to include heritage specialists from both sides, and was given a mandate to restore and conserve endangered sites in both the Republic of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus.

Since then, the TCCH has proven remarkably successful. Its funding and support have come from traditional international sources—the European Union, which has provided close to \$20 million, and the UN Development Program, which has contributed technical assistance. However, as with recent foundation-supported projects in other countries, the work has been driven by members of the two communities themselves. The mandate of the TCCH is particularly significant in view of the geography of the Cyprus conflict: when the island was divided in 1974, many Greek churches were stranded in Northern Cyprus, on the Turkish side, while more than a hundred Turkish mosques and religious schools were left in the south, on the Greek side. For the first time, local conservators and officials from both sides could visit and evaluate these sites. To date, the TCCH has restored several dozen historical mosques and churches, as well as Ottoman buildings, Venetian fortifications, and ancient sites, and its efforts have been generally embraced by both the Greek and Turkish populations. Coinciding with these projects has been a series of reciprocal visits by Christian and Muslim leaders to places of worship on both sides of the island.²³ Significantly, when a historical mosque that had been restored by the TCCH in the Greek city of Limassol was firebombed in 2020, the attack was quickly condemned by leaders of both faiths.

While the achievements of the TCCH might seem difficult to replicate among populations emerging from full-scale armed conflict, they may suggest a way forward

as a stable security environment begins to take hold. In Iraq and Syria, for example, an interfaith panel could support urgent interventions for war-damaged Muslim, Kurdish, Christian, and Yazidi heritage, as well secular sites like historical marketplaces and old city centers: such a confidence-building approach could do much to encourage displaced Syrians to return and communities to rebuild. In Serbia and Kosovo, even in the absence of formal relations, a bilateral, technical commission could support endangered Ottoman-era mosques in Serbia and Serbian monasteries in Kosovo, extending the progress on minority heritage that has already been made in Kosovo itself. With the achievement of greater stability and détente, in future years such an approach might also be possible with the handful of Muslim sites in Armenia and Armenian churches in Azerbaijan, as one Azerbaijani scholar has suggested. As in Cyprus, any such effort will need robust outside financing and support, strong local leadership, and the ability to produce meaningful results on projects of local and national significance. It will also need to coincide with other, more traditional forms of stabilization and détente. Conceptually, though, the Cyprus model points to a crucial insight about contested religious and cultural sites: rather than engines of conflict, they can, under the right circumstances, become instruments of peace.

Conclusion: An Impulse to Preserve?

Five months after Catholicos Karekin's warnings about cultural cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had slid into a disturbingly familiar state of "afterwar." In an escalating war of words, each side continued to accuse the other of destruction of cultural sites during the 2020 war, while reports described a tense calm prevailing in the zone of conflict. For the moment, the most important Armenian sites had been left intact, with Russian peacekeepers deployed at Dadivank Monastery; in the spring of 2021, a group of Armenian pilgrims were allowed to visit the complex under the escort of Russian troops.

Yet the outlook for Armenian heritage in the territories newly controlled by Azerbaijan was grim. The Azerbaijan government denied repeated requests by UNESCO to inspect cultural monuments in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and there was scant information about the current status of many Armenian sites. In March 2021, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) investigation was able to confirm the destruction and razing of at least one Armenian church since the war.²⁴ That same month, the leader of Azerbaijan ordered the removal of medieval Armenian inscriptions from churches that had fallen under Azerbaijani control, an act that aimed to remove Armenian claims to its own heritage in the region. (Citing a tendentious national historiography, Azerbaijan's leaders have long asserted that historical Armenian churches in the region are actually "Albanian Caucasian," belonging to distant Christian ancestors of Azerbaijanis and subsequently falsely

appropriated by Armenians. In order to support this theory, all Armenian writing must be removed.)

Such destructive acts might be prevented with the right kind of international pressure, though Armenian sites are widely scattered, and it would be difficult to deploy international peacekeepers at many of them. More challenging, amid the lingering hatreds of an exceptionally brutal war, may be persuading local communities to respect and preserve monuments that represent the culture of their adversaries. As the case of Kosovo suggests, the task is difficult but not impossible. The government of Azerbaijan has also shown that it is not indifferent to international opinion; it has long sought to promote itself as a secular, multifaith state with strong ties to UNESCO. When tensions cool, it may find it more expedient to preserve these vital monuments than to vandalize or obliterate them.

The urge to destroy a defeated enemy's culture is as old as war itself. In 149 BCE, Cato the Elder advised the Roman Senate that a defeated Carthage needed to be razed to the ground. Since the end of the Cold War, the drive has taken on horrifying new dimensions in violent interethnic conflicts from the Balkans to Myanmar's Rakhine State. Yet equally old may be the impulse to preserve, an impulse that has often transcended confessional and ethnic boundaries. The survival of the Pantheon in Rome, perhaps the greatest pagan temple of antiquity, is owed in significant measure to its adoption by the Catholic Church in the seventh century, when much of the city was falling into ruin; the Byzantine Empire's Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, now Istanbul, was left standing through five hundred years of Ottoman history because it was highly prized by Mehmet the Conqueror. Of course these cases involved the conversion, and to some extent alteration, of the original structures, but the monuments themselves survived, despite being controlled for centuries by groups of a different faith. (Notably, until its reclassification as a mosque by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2020, Hagia Sophia also spent nearly a century as a secular monument and museum, an early recognition by a non-Western power of the transcendent value of cultural heritage.)

Nor are such examples of interconfessional preservation—whether on cultural or strategic grounds—absent from conflicts in the modern era. In the Old City of Jerusalem, perhaps no sacred site is more contested than the Holy Esplanade, the complex that Jews refer to as the Temple Mount and Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif. With two of Islam's most revered shrines, the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, built on what is believed to be the site of the Second Temple, the area has been an inevitable flashpoint of intercommunal tensions. Notably, in the spring of 2021, the worst Israeli–Palestinian violence in years was set off, in part, by an Israeli police raid on Palestinian protesters at the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Less well known, however, is the remarkable peace that has held for decades at the Holy Esplanade, largely as a result of Israeli policies adopted after the 1967 Six-

Day War. In its sweeping victory, Israel gained control over East Jerusalem and the West Bank, including the Old City and its Islamic sites. Given their location on the Temple Mount, the dome and the mosque were particularly at risk of destruction. One hardline rabbi proposed to Uzi Narkiss, the Israeli general who led the offensive, blowing up the Dome of the Rock with one hundred kilograms of explosives. Yet Narkiss, and Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan, resisted these efforts, and together with the Israeli government reverted management of the entire complex to Muslim authorities and prohibited Jews from entering the precinct. Most crucially, a few months after the war, dozens of leading rabbis also issued a ruling that Jews should not pray on the mount because the exact location of the destroyed temple was unknown. It was an ingenious solution. As Ron E. Hassner recounts in *War on Sacred Grounds*, Israelis overwhelmingly accepted the government's prohibition on entry to this sacred precinct because of the rabbinical ruling. The result was more than two decades of peace at one of the most contested religious sites in the Middle East, even as other, less significant religious monuments in the West Bank came under frequent attack.²⁵ In essence, local religious authority had effectively shaped a new community understanding that allowed for the preservation of the monuments of a competing faith at one of Judaism's most important sites.

Even after some of the most violent conflicts, the cultural heritage of opposing groups has often been spared harm. Sometimes, sites and monuments belonging to former or present antagonists have been preserved for strategic reasons, whether as a means to long-term stability or as a way to gain international legitimacy. As often, though, many such sites have survived because they speak to the people that live around them, regardless of the identity of their creators. Aided by a growing number of tools for action—whether in the form of diplomatic pressure, funding for local initiatives, or actual peacekeepers—international actors can contribute meaningfully to this preservation ethos. In “afterwar” situations in particular, they may be able to confront or contain the dynamics that lead to attacks on cultural heritage before the damage is done. As the record of recent conflicts amply demonstrates, however, successful intervention will nearly always require the primary engagement of local leaders and the local community. And it must be durable. In the long run, any effort to protect sites and monuments during armed conflict will stand little chance of success without a strategy to preserve them when the fighting ends.

BIOGRAPHY

Hugh Eakin is a senior editor at *Foreign Affairs*. He has written on cultural heritage and international politics for the *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *New Yorker*, and other publications. His work has been supported by numerous fellowships and grants, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Cullman Center for Scholars and

Writers, the Fritt Ord Foundation, and the Dora Maar House. His book *Picasso's War* will be published in 2022.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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NOTES

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