Chapter 13
Palmyra: Bridging Past and Future

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Abstract Targeting and destroying Syria's cultural heritage have become a common concern, especially in the case of Palmyra. The ruined city enjoyed a significant position in the country's history and bore a large share of the violence in Syria's protracted tragedy. Since 2014, militants of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) have committed many acts of terrorism, claiming thousands of lives and shattering others, looting antiquities and destroying historic sites, including World Heritage sites. In 2015, ISIS extremists destroyed Palmyra's major monuments, and, since then, this destruction has been the focus of debates on the academic and professional levels and in the media. This chapter has two parts. The first part briefly reviews Palmyra's long history, in which monuments have been subject to selective narratives and official instrumentalisation. The second part looks at the current debates on Palmyra's heritage loss in the light of the actual conflict, in which the local community has been unheeded. This chapter suggests that future efforts need to (re)consider the role of local communities in heritage debates and the right(s) to their heritage to bridge the discontinuity between the past and the future caused by the terrorism and conflict.

Keywords Palmyra · Heritage targeting · ISIS · Media · Local communities · Human rights

13.1 Introduction

Since its destruction in 2015, Palmyra has been, and continues to be, present in the debates on Syrian heritage. The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a new actor in the protracted Syrian conflict added a new dimension to heritage targeting and damage. This trend is not new. Conflicts and wars have been

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part of human history, and the advance of the arms industry has caused more death and more significant damage. In recent years, armed conflicts have shown how heritage sites have been reconfigured as "material impediments and transformed into proxies for ideological adversaries" (Meskell, 2018, p. 186–187). Indeed, Palmyra was no longer just a historical site but a symbol of the Syrian state authority and the international community, upon which the militant group wanted to impose its resentment. The shock at the broadcasted atrocity in the oasis was immediately framed within a discourse of terrorism, barbarism and iconoclasm. Moreover, raised voices called for lessons to be learned from other conflicts with iconoclastic strife (Korsvoll, 2021; Papaioannou, 2015).

The (Western) media coverage has focused on the ISIS destruction of pre-and non-Islamic sites. However, these atrocities were not the only ones committed by the extremist group. The ISIS militants have also targeted sites of other communities, including those of other Islamic denominations, to eliminate opposing beliefs by removing physical evidence from the landscape (Jones, 2018). The radical group produced and propagated visual materials of their atrocities as a performance intended to re-enact historical iconoclasm and obliterate the historical memory of local communities (Harmanşah, 2015) and even the actual presence of these communities. Nada Al Hassan, the Chief of the Arab States at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, stated that "the inhabitants of Palmyra have been in large part, if not entirely, destroyed, and their voice is silenced" (Margit, 2018).

The destruction in Palmyra has underlined the value placed upon World Heritage sites, especially in the case of armed conflicts. It also prompts the question of how to deal with these sites when they are partially or entirely destroyed. Through the medium of images, opposing publics have also been produced (Joselit, 2020). Several initiatives – framed within a traditional (Western) account – to (digitally) reconstruct the damage in Palmyra emphasise materiality as heritage evidence. At the same time, later changes, even destruction and absence, have been part of Palmyra's long narrative. Besides, Syrian authorities have planned to re-open the historic site in a broader push to revive tourism in the war-torn country (Margit, 2018).

The calls and initiatives tend to be detached from priorities on the ground and the local communities' concerns about peace and socio-economic response and recovery. UNESCO's work to protect culture and preserve heritage amidst armed conflicts contributes to the resilience of communities and the reduction of disaster risks, resonating across many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set up for the Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2018), but little consideration has been given to local communities and to Syrian experts as main stakeholders in the preservation of this cultural heritage resource (Al Quntar, 2018). Consequently, the danger of a binary rose in a dilemma that appears to advocate either caring about ancient monuments and objects or the affected people (Al-Azm, 2018, p. 101).

Through media and the various initiatives and calls, it has been considered that Syria's heritage will have a healing and reconciliation power in the post-war era to come. However, and especially in the case of conflicts, heritage also needs to be viewed from a human rights perspective since heritage is important in itself and in relation to its human dimension (Bennoune, 2016). Thus, conceptualising heritage

through the prism of civil rights rescues its preservation from commodification, bureaucratic calcification and destructive extremist bigotry and reasserts the community's social, economic and environmental wellbeing as integral to the heritage discourse (Rabbat, 2016, p. 272).

Palmyra became a terrain on which several agencies and interests vied for control. Long before the actual Syrian war and the terror attacks of ISIS militants, the oasis has been a field for marching armies and travellers and archaeologists exploring its monuments and ruins. Within the broad viewpoint of "competitive archaeology" (Corbett, 2014), the interest in Palmyra kept showing how different powers have strived for antiquities and used them to create specific narratives and national identities.

Before addressing the actual debates on Palmyra, a short review contextualises the interest in the site, from its (re)discovery in the seventeenth century to the contemporary conflict.

13.2   The Ruins in the Syrian Desert: Heritage and Narratives

Palmyra, or Tadmor, enjoyed the availability of water and arable soil and a strategic location in the Syrian desert. It became a modest centre in the early stages of Roman rule, with a population mainly of Aramaean and Arab origins (Burns, 2017, p. 236). Palmyra reached its heyday when its commercial activities extended along the Silk Road. While incorporated into the Roman province of Syria, Palmyra continued to enjoy sovereignty, especially under Queen Zenobia, who became a provocation to Rome's domination in the region. Aurelian captured and destroyed Palmyra, which his successors reshaped on a smaller scale.

When Christianity gained strength in Palmyra, buildings for the new form of worship started to appear. Early in the fifth century, the Temples of Bel and Baalshamin were turned into churches (Browning, 1979; Burns, 2009). By the end of the Umayyad reign in the eighth century, the oasis was governed from Homs. When the Abbasids moved the capital to Baghdad, Tadmor started to decline (Browning, 1979, p. 51). After being devastated by earthquakes and by the Timurids, it was rebuilt but not to its former grandeur. The Druze ruler Fakhr Al-Din Al-Maani II used Palmyra to control the desert areas, and he reconstructed the castle that had been previously erected under the Mamluks in the seventeenth century.

During the Islamic period, the Temple of Bel's cella was turned into a mosque and used as such until the site's massive clearance in the late 1920s. In the ancient monuments, the locals sought shelter from the frequent nomad Bedouins' invasions. Many of the materials used for the dwellings were taken from other decaying structures and cemented with mud. Defacing sculptures has also been reported (Frank & Brownstone, 1986, p. 140). Although Palmyra never disappeared, its "rediscovery" by European travellers would bring the world's attention to the spectacle of ruins in the desert – as though it only came into being in the seventeenth century.

In 1678, English traders in Aleppo ventured out across the desert to reach the ruins but returned soon after to escape robbers. In 1691, William Halifax headed a new group, including the Dutch artist Gerard Hofstede van Essen, who made a detailed drawing of the ruins. Four years later, Halifax published his account, "Relation of a Voyage to Tadmor". In the mid-eighteenth century, two Englishmen, Robert Wood and James Dawkins, visited the site and documented the most significant monuments. They recruited the Italian architect Giovanni Battista Borra, who made minutely detailed drawings published in Wood's and Dawkins' "The Ruins of Palmyra Otherwise Tedmor in the Desart" [sic], in 1753. The book had a swift and widespread impact on architectural taste in Europe and became a sensation from London to St. Petersburg. A Paris edition reached the Russian court. The French enclave immediately named St. Petersburg "Palmyra of the North" or "Northern Palmyra" (Rostovtzeff, 1932, p. 122) and equated Catherine the Great with legendary Queen Zenobia – who became a motif in operas, literature and arts.

Palmyra was regarded as the most prosperous, luxurious, elegant and "romantic" of Syria's towns (Rostovtzeff, 1932, pp. 120–121). Its picturesque remains were (re) discovered during a romantic period of European history, marked by travel, exploration and the growing emotional effect of classicism. Intriguingly, illegal antiquities trafficking intensified in parallel to the excitement about the ruined town and the new finds – an interest that never ceased.

The twentieth century witnessed excavations at Palmyra's urban centre, temples and primary monuments. Numerous Palmyrene art objects went to several museums abroad. After the First World War, Palmyra attracted experts from various disciplines to work on the site. In 1929, the French started the extensive excavation works for which the local community had to be moved to a new, French-built village next to the site. Rostovtzeff (1932, p. 127) recalled that "the main temple of Palmyra was freed from the hundreds of poor huts built on and around it". During the Second World War, Syria was still under the French administration. At that time, with the agreement of the Vichy French, the Germans started using several airfields in the Syrian territories against British operations, including Palmyra.

By the end of the French Mandate in 1946, the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) undertook the enormous task of coordinating excavations supported by international institutions. Communities regarded the interest in the relics of the past as a tool of cultural imperialism imposed by the West, and it was later wielded as an instrument in service of the Syrian government's plan to impose power and national identity. The growing interest in the past had been "institutionalized by a reification of the past into governmental branding" (Al-Manzali, 2016). The ruins of Palmyra, its theatre and Queen featured on Syrian banknotes and postage stamps and remained one of Syria's main tourist destinations for decades. The thriving leisure industry and the facilities created around it in the oasis secured additional incomes for the locals.

In 1980, UNESCO declared Palmyra a World Heritage Site – a measure of the success of a given state in assuring international assistance in protecting heritage sites within its territory and a successful brand for tourism marketing. Despite

Palmyra's long narrative, worthy of inclusion on its own merit, it was inscribed as "Rome's expansion in and engagement with the East" (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.) without considering its continuity under the Arabs and Muslims.

13.3 Heritage Destruction and Preservation: Instrumentalisation and Propaganda

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, UNESCO has tried to draw more attention to the potential damage that is threatening the country's cultural heritage. This rich legacy includes six sites that have been listed as World Heritage, including Palmyra.

In April 2013, the ISIS militant group expanded into Syria. It declared its new caliphate in June 2014, adopting the name of Islamic State, which has been criticised by Muslim scholars and communities alike. The radicals appointed themselves as defenders of true Islam. The iconoclastic destruction of religious images and monuments went hand-in-hand with the group's efforts to establish an Islamic state. The ISIS extremists' claims of their (religiously motivated) targeting of monuments were based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. In March 2015, UNESCO called for global action to face the systematic destruction of archaeological sites by the ISIS militants and stated that the destruction should be considered a war crime against humanity's heritage and cultural cleansing. In Syria and Iraq, the group demolished several pre-Islamic sites and artefacts, believing that such structures were idolatrous. On the other hand, profits from extensive looting networks helped to fund the group's armed operations.

In May 2015, the ISIS militants reached Palmyra and captured parts of the historic citadel. A few weeks later, the world watched the radicals destroying the Temple of Baalshamin after detonating a massive quantity of explosives inside the building. The Roman theatre, which had hosted the International Festival of Palmyra since 1992, became the stage for a dreadful act when ISIS child executioners slaughtered Syrian soldiers. The atrocities also extended to civilians in Palmyra. In August 2015, ISIS fighters beheaded the renowned archaeologist Khaled al-Assad, who worked for decades in Palmyra. Posthumous tributes paid to him in Syria and abroad. But what of the thousands of nameless residents of Palmyra?

The oasis received internally displaced Syrians from other conflict zones. When the hostilities reached the town, people were more concerned about seeking refuge and fulfilling their basic needs. Most of them left Palmyra when ISIS took over in May 2015, and those who remained fled to other cities when the fighting became too severe. Palmyra remained under the control of the terrorist group until the Syrian government reclaimed the city in April 2016. The ISIS militants occupied Palmyra again in December 2016 and attacked other monuments. The Syrian forces liberated Palmyra for a second time in March 2017 (Abdulkarim, 2020).

The attacks on the monuments of Palmyra were perhaps the most publicised of the extremists' actions, with videos of the temples, statues and museum exhibits being demolished virally circulating on social media. The ISIS atrocities unleashed an international outcry, and UNESCO and other organisations have strongly condemned their acts of terror against World Heritage sites. Several initiatives were set into motion with much enthusiasm to document the damage and recollect the past. Raised voices called for the world to learn lessons from other conflicts with iconoclastic strife – namely, the Taliban's destruction of Bamiyan's colossal statues of Buddha in 2001. However, it is worth noting that Palmyra was a listed World Heritage site for decades before the ISIS atrocities, unlike the Buddhas of Bamiyan that were listed two years after their destruction.

Despite Syria being considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world due to the conflict and Palmyra being littered with mines, the perilous situation on the ground did not prevent groups of foreign experts from travelling to witness, assess and document the damage. In all its types, the media reported continuously and with varying degrees of emotion on the new state of ruination in Palmyra. Furthermore, several Western countries organised special temporary and virtual exhibitions dedicated to Palmyra and its memory and printed corresponding catalogues. Numerous conferences and colloquia, organised and held outside Syria, widely addressed the future of Palmyra as they selectively showcased its past. Furthermore, despite the sanctions on the country imposed by the same powers advocating the safeguarding of Syrian heritage and the international community's failure to end the calamity of millions of Syrians in and outside the country, renowned institutions, such as Le Louvre in Paris, offered asylum to artefacts under threat (Jones, 2015). Immediately after the destruction, not only voices from the political, academic and creative scenes were raised, but heated discussions about the future of Palmyra and its reconstruction also commenced.

Italian experts painstakingly restored sculptures to "erase the act of violence" (Di Donato & Said-Moorhouse, 2017), and digital technologies allowed several teams to resurrect vanished monuments and (virtually) replicate parts of the lost heritage. Experts from Oxford and Harvard Universities and the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) rebuilt a two-thirds scale replica of Palmyra's Arch of Triumph. It was made in Italy from Egyptian marble. The reproduction was displayed in a high-profile political event on Trafalgar in London as an "act of solidarity" (Boyle, 2016), and unveiled by the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, as part of World Heritage Week, before heading to New York and Dubai and eventually, according to the plan, to be relocated in Palmyra to be displayed next to the ruins of the original arch (Bacchi, 2016).

After Palmyra's recapture in 2016, the Mariinsky Orchestra, founded in 1783 under Catherine the Great, came from the (other) Palmyra of the North. The orchestra played music as a celebration at the same theatre in which ISIS child executioners staged their offence a few months earlier. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, praised the liberation of Palmyra in a broadcast from a video screen on the main stage. According to Putin, the concert was dedicated to the sufferers of "international terrorism", which he termed a "terrible evil" (Harding, 2016).

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Russia has supported the Syrian administration of President Bashar al-Assad in the country, first politically and later on a military level. Some Syrian–Russian partnerships started to promote archaeological and heritage restoration projects in the war-torn country and put a basic touristic infrastructure in place, including a project to rehabilitate Syria's ancient city of Palmyra. However, these endeavours have been considered to be mainly for propaganda purposes, using Syrian archaeologists as their representatives to add archaeological legitimacy, and as Russia's attempts to expand its influence and to gain a foothold in the country's vital sectors in Syria, including antiquities and tourism sectors (Bacchi 2016; Margit, 2018; Hardan, 2021).

Voices from organisations, such as the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (APSA), claimed that a rapid and exhaustive reconstruction of Palmyra would also be immoral since it would be serving as indirect rehabilitation for a government broadly accused of massacring its people, whose forces had also been accused of overseeing looting and damaging heritage sites with indiscriminate bombings (Bacchi, 2016).

On the other hand, the replica of the triumphal arch displayed in London has sparked a fierce debate on its political and archaeological implications since the ruins must not be turned into a fake replica of the monuments' former glory (Jones, 2016; Bacchi, 2016). The restoration of Palmyra as programmed by the Syrian government and supported by Russian and other European and Western leaders has been regarded as both ethically and scientifically wrong and amounting to nothing more than "transforming Palmyra into a pro-Bashar theme park" (Bacchi, 2016).

With Palmyra's devastating present and indeterminate future, its glorious past has become a nostalgic refuge. However, endeavours to undo the damage cannot erase the vicious event that caused it. With thousands of images of the destruction and millions of search engine results for the keywords "Palmyra" and "ISIS", forgetting what happened is out of the question.

13.4   Discussion

The violence inflicted through ISIS terrorist attacks has punctuated the oasis in both spatial and temporal terms. Destruction has become a chapter in Palmyra's long narrative, and the destroyed monuments have, themselves, become historical documents. There is an increasing focus on later alteration and transformations of objects and monuments, even on their destruction and absence. The Buddhas of Bamiyan, constantly cited for the similarity of their fate with that of Palmyra, illustrate this case well. The Bamiyan Valley was inscribed on the World Heritage List after the destruction of the Buddhas by the Taliban in 2001. The physical and material absence of the Bamiyan statutes did not reduce their significance, and the debates around them are still ongoing, even after two decades. The focus on materiality often oversimplifies intangible values. Palmyra embodied many identities and

influences. So, if Palmyra is to be reconstructed, which one of its several pasts should be restored, and who would decide?

Today, Western governments and institutions would spend money and share expertise to rebuild Palmyra and rescue its artefacts, but not lift the sanctions or accommodate refugees. To say that traumatised people are disregarded in favour of monuments may sound like an overstatement, yet it is not entirely detached from colonial attitudes and local governments' attempts to create and enforce a national identity.

In this regard:

> instead of promoting a better understanding of the way in which Syrian cultural heritage resources and their fate are mobilised for political or sectarian gains, a concern with an idealistic reconstruction of Palmyra de-sensitizes audiences and other experts alike to the context that gives Palmyra its significance: heritage reconstruction as a reconciling and unifying role in post-conflict Syria, with the Syrian people (not monuments) at the core of the reconstruction process (Al Quntar, 2018).

Despite the calls and attempts to raise awareness about a shared and common (world) heritage, it is not always evident whether all people and communities have received that message and have conceded and prioritised it in the same way. In the World Heritage Convention from 1972, UNESCO defined World Heritage sites as "heritage of mankind as a whole" – a Eurocentric perception based on an all-encompassing and universal view. Local communities are not monolithic in what concerns their heritage. They appreciate their past and its relics differently.

Arabs, in general, wrote about archaeology and ancient history to deploy their narrative in the fight against colonialism (Corbett, 2014, p. 124). A new literary genre, the historical novel, introduced a fresh way of thinking about the past, so Arabic readers could imagine that they were the heirs of a drama that stretched back to antiquity and celebrated old heroes. Beirut journalist, Salim Al-Boustani, wrote an early novel, Zenobia, in 1871. The protagonist was the queen of Palmyra, "whose name deeply rooted Syrian identity and historic Syrian womanhood" (Reilly, 2019, p. 77). Although Palmyra's population probably spoke other languages in addition to Arabic, they are usually called "Arabs" in official Syrian historical narratives. Mustafa Tlass, the former long-serving Syrian minister of defence and amateur historian, wrote Zenobia queen of Palmyra to emphasise the Arab identity of the oasis. The former Syrian president, Hafez Al-Assad, saw himself as a saviour of Arabness and the latest fortress in opposition to the West and its imperialism, squared off against an official interpretation and instrumentalisation of ancient history. Zenobia's rebellion against Rome made her a patriotic symbol in Syria (Sahner, 2014, pp. 134–135), and Palmyra was charged with the secular Arab nationalism propagated by the Syrian administration.

For decades, the use of archaeological heritage to promote national harmony did not enjoy significant success. Consequently, heritage became a target for those who wanted to destroy those states (Jones 2018, p.53). The mindless destruction of monuments and artefacts and targeting local communities by ISIS was meant to turn these areas into the groups' endeavours to establish their Islamic Caliphate. With the increasing violence and the rising toll of victims and displaced persons,

voices criticised international organisations and institutions for caring more about antiquities when people were dying, being forcibly displaced and losing their homes (Westcott, 2016). Nada Al Hassan mentioned that a large part if not all of Palmyra's inhabitants have been devastated, and their voice is silenced, and through the debates of reconstructing Palmyra and reviving tourism, there it is possible that the victims and their trauma would be trivialised (Margit, 2018).

In the light of the protracted Syrian conflict, the growing focus on the destruction of heritage in the country, including Palmyra, has been a blessing and an affliction alike. On the one hand, awareness of the importance of cultural heritage has been raised as a common wealth that brings components of the war-torn country together. On the other hand, the sanctions posed on the country and the fact that several organizations, including UNESCO, work with governmental bodies rather than individuals has created another area of conflict.

Therefore, a more comprehensive approach needs to be taken into account, one which includes not only heritage sites from a material point of view and perspective of experts but also local communities. Through democratic citizenship and through education (SDG4), the sense of continuity and belonging is supported. Moreover, a peaceful environment (SDG16) and a sustainable community (SDG11) could be established through the (active) involvement of the locals in the future plans to bring life back to the oasis and its ruins once their basic needs (SDG1) are fulfilled. Such an approach needs to reconsider heritage preservation as a civil right (Rabbat, 2016) instead of an ideal imposed from above. Accordingly, the significance of cultural heritage will continue to be both a message from the past and a pathway to the future (Bennoune, 2016).

13.5   Concluding Thoughts

Throughout millennia, the fortune of Palmyra rose a little and fell a little. In 2015, Palmyra was demolished in a demonstration of power, and the debates on its future are no less significant than those demonstrations of power. Over the centuries, the local communities have perceived the ruins as continuity rather than something frozen in time. They dwelled in monuments and reused ancient fragments in new buildings. The residents of Palmyra have loved their oasis, literally their home, and they are part of its long account, as much as the ruins and their ancient builders.

Today, with the loss and damage caused by war and terrorism in Palmyra, the pressing question "what should be done next?" It is not easy to separate people's cultural heritage from the people themselves, and a balance needs to be struck between universal and local values of cultural heritage. The oasis could serve as an example for how this balance might be struck.

The world is watching Palmyra. In the context of the 50th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, it is necessary to encourage revisions on how to adopt approaches which aim to integrate cultural heritage and its safeguarding in the life of local communities. For those who experienced the damage of war and reign of

terror, basic living requirements need to be fulfilled, along with education to achieve a peaceful environment and a sustainable community based on democratic citizenship and rights.

By (re)considering heritage and its preservation as a civil right, the way is paved for a more comprehensive approach that actively includes and involves local communities, helping them build more resilient societies and strengthen their awareness of their own heritage in the post-conflict era to come.

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