



# Damage to Syria's Heritage

27 April 2014

This newsletter provides a summary of the most recent reports on the damage to Syria's heritage. It should be stressed that much of this data cannot be verified, but it is hoped that it will assist in the documentation of the damage occurring, and help raise awareness.

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## New from Heritage for Peace



(Photo Copyright: EFE)

### **Heritage for Peace conference gets DGAM and Opposition talking to protect Syria's heritage**

- On the 23rd - 25th April, Heritage for Peace, together with the University of Cantabria and the Spanish National Research Council, held a conference in Santander, Spain - "*Heritage and Conflict: Lessons learned to Safeguard Syrian Heritage*". The conference aimed to bring together a number of

speakers with experience of working in conflict from Lebanon, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Iraq, and Libya to share perspectives and seek ways forward. The full program is available [here](#).

The conference was a success, concluding with a meeting chaired by Heritage for Peace on the Friday where the DGAM and the Opposition sat down and were able to look for ways forward to protect Syria's heritage.

- The event was covered by Reuters:  
"Heritage for Peace, an NGO created a year and a half ago, was responsible for making for the Syrian government and opposition sit down and talk, put aside their differences, and they have agreed, in the conflict, measures to try to preserve one of the world's richest cultural heritages".

To read the full article (in Spanish), *Una ONG une a los sirios en la defensa de su patrimonio cultural único*, in MSN, click [here](#).

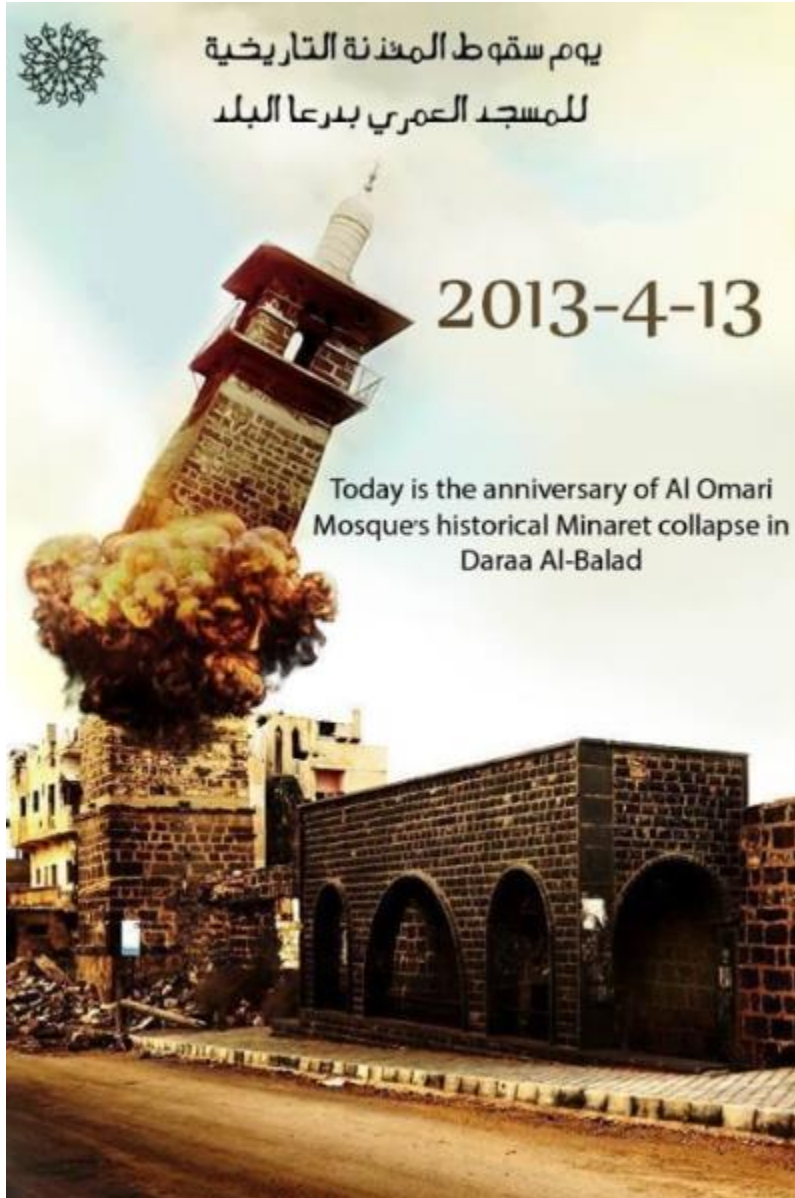
#### **New report published by Heritage for Peace to protect Syrian heritage**

- A new report has been published by Heritage for Peace to enable better co-operation and information sharing between agencies working to protect Syria's heritage. The report, called "*Towards a protection of the Syrian cultural heritage: A summary of the international responses (March 2011 – March 2014)*" lists all (known) actions and contact details for national and international groups working to protect Syria's past.

The press release is available [here](#), and the report can be downloaded from the Heritage for Peace website [here](#).

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## **[Updates on Damage](#)**



(Photo: [the al-Omari Mosque, 13 April 2013](#). Photo copyright: Mahmoud Sulaiman)

#### **Anniversary of the collapse of the al-Omari Mosque's minaret**

- This image marks the 3rd anniversary of the collapse of the historic minaret of the al-Omari Mosque, said by some to mark the beginning of the close involvement of cultural heritage in the involvement.



(Photo: damage to Ma'aloula, April 2014. Photo copyright: [souriabaladi](#))

**Syrian Government retakes Tentative World Heritage Site Ma'aloula and reports on the damage are released.**

- The town was recently retaken by government forces. During a government-led tour of the city "the toll of the past few months on Maaloula was clear, including to Christian sites. It was not clear, however, whether the wreckage to Christian buildings was intentional, or whether the ancient sites were merely caught in the crossfire. ... The church bell and cross were missing from the Mar Sarkis convent, while icons of saints, copies of the holy bible, papers and glass littered the floors".

Read the full article by Associated Press, *Syrian troops choke off rebels north of Damascus*, [here](#).

- An additional report was released on Facebook by Syria TV. The approximate translation from Arabic is:  
The door was blown off St Theklas, and they burned ancient religious icons. Icons on walls were burned and stabbed with knives and shot. The altar was blown up. They looted and stole the contents of the monastery including copper chandeliers and the bronze, gold-plated statue of Christ made by the Russian architect. A second marble statue of Christ which was 5m up was bombed. Copper bells and crosses from domes (10 in total) were stolen, some of which are 1500 years old.

The report is available [here](#), and additional photos can be seen at the bottom of the post.

- According to Joshua Landis, the Director of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, "The town has been emptied out. Two of the great monasteries that had been alive there since the Sixth Century are in ruins, [with] big holes through their domes."

Read the interview, *Devastation of Syria's Culture and Antiquities 'The Price of War'*, in KGOU [here](#).

- Four photos of damage to the town were posted on Facebook by souriabaladi, and shared by the group [Eyes on Heritage](#). They can be seen [here](#).
- See the section [International Activity](#) for further information on actions taken to protect Ma'aloula.



(Photo: Qalat Marqab / Margat Castle, pre-conflict. Photo copyright: [Shayno](#))

## Reports of fighting at the crusader castle of Margat / Qalat Marqab.

- There have been recent reports of fighting at the crusader castle of Margat (Qalat Marqab, the Castle of the Watchtower) in Latakia. An unverified report (in Russian) was released by ANNA News Network and shared by Syria Today. The video is available on You-Tube [here](#), and translates as

"The winding road leads to the ancient fortress of Marqab which stands proudly above the town of Vahness(?). The stern, grand look is given to the fortress by the black volcanic basalt rocks, from which its walls are built. The embrasures and shooting holes\* (\*not sure how to say that in English) of the fortress have been looking out for a thousand years. Even the basalt cannot withstand the destructive influence of hundreds of years. ... It was no accident this fortress was given the name, "Marqab", meaning "Observation Point". From its walls you can observe the surrounding space for many kilometers. The lovely view which is discovered looking out of its towers truly takes the breath away. In 2009, the fortress was restored and became a museum, but it was not only time which proved a destructive influence. Due to its strategically important position, the fortress has not lost its military standing even today. For some time, the fortress has been taken over by fighters, who shot at the nearby lived-in neighbourhoods from its walls. Unfortunately the vandals\* (the word here is more closely translated as "wild people") in whose hands it was, have robbed the museum in a most barbaric manner. They have dragged away all exhibits, even the ones they neither wanted nor valued, damaged parts of the restored walls just because of their insane lust for destruction. The terrorists who took over the fortress were certain of its infallibility and set up stores of weapons and other military equipment. The ancient underground way out, which led out of the fortress to the sea, allowed them to smuggle contraband weapons in secret. But the militants have underestimated the bravery and skills of Syrian soldiers, who, without using heavy weapons so as not to damage this historical object further, managed to storm it with a minimum of losses. Now the fortress is freed and there on duty are \*divisions (military unit) of the Syrian army. The new "camouflage knights" are using this observation point to protect the peace of citizens. The Syrian flag which soars above the walls of the fortress says that barbarians will not be allowed to destroy this cultural monument."

\*List of names - journalists.

(Translation kindly provided by O. Semenova).



(Photo: damage in Old Homs Photo copyright: [Lens Young Homs](#))

#### **Photo of damage to Old Homs**

- A photo was recently released by the citizen journalist group Lens Young Homs showing some of the damage sustained to Old Homs. The original photo is available on [Facebook](#), or on the [group page](#) (NB - this link was down at the time of this newsletter).





(Photo (original caption [Arab Chronicle](#)): *The Turkish military convoy, crossing a rebellion checkpoint, south to Kobane and north to Sarin. (April 23, 2014, via @Avashin).*)

#### **Turkey moves to protect the Tomb of Suleiman Shah**

- According to the Arab Chronicle Turkish trucks, armoured vehicles and pickups entered Syria to “reinforce Turkish military elements inside tomb site as Islamic State of Iraq and Sham fighters were approaching, threatening to destroy the monument as contrary to Islam interdiction to build tombs greater than houses, as they did in others parts of north-eastern Syria.”

The full article, *Turkey army convoy entered northern Syria to protect tomb*, is available [here](#).

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[Updates on Looting](#)



(Photo (New York Times caption): "A member of the Syrian armed forces at the ruins of Palmyra, which previously had been occupied by insurgents. Looters have taken numerous items from the site". Copyright: Sergey Ponomarev for the New York Times)

### **More news of damage to the World Heritage Site of Palmyra**

- According to a recent report in the New York Times, Palmyra continues to suffer.  
"I feel as if I'm dead" said Khalil al-Hariri, an archaeologist and the director of the Palmyra museum, near the ruins. He spends his time waiting for government permission to resume his early-morning explorations, and worrying about the plundering which he says is "destroying culture, destroying civilization." [...] "Fighting came relatively late to this quiet desert town – after protestors were fired on and a prominent army officer fell out with the government, residents say – and flared sporadically for about a year. Many insurgents were locals who hid in the orchards of an oasis adjoining the ruins, residents and security officials said. Shelling and gunfire disrupted harvests and damaged trees. Insurgents occupied the Temple of Bel, museum officials said, and looted a modern guesthouse there. The Hotel Zenobia, built in 1900

among the ruins, where visitors like Agatha Christie woke up to the sunrise striking the columns, stands burned and wrecked.

Now it is the Syrian Army using the ruins for military purposes. A 16th-century hilltop castle is off limits because, security officials said “the army is there,” raising concerns among residents that heavy equipment could damage it. UNESCO says that artillery pieces and tanks have been positioned at the site [...] UNESCO is looking into Syrian government claims on a cache of medieval Islamic coins proposed for sale at Sotheby’s. [...] (One Bedouin insurgent who grew up in Palymra’s ruins, tending camels, said he and his comrades left town to avoid damaging them). [...]

Antiquities have sometimes fared better in areas under the control of local Syrian insurgents, who are more likely to understand and value them, officials said. [...] In Maaraat al-Noman, where rebels occupy the museum full of renowned mosaics, Ms Hassan said, the government pays the fighters to preserve them.

Read the full article, *Syrian War Takes Heavy Toll at a Crossroad of Cultures*, [here](#).



(Photo: Looted object from Tell Ajaja. Copyright: [DGAM](#).)

### **DGAM release pictures of looted objects from Tell Ajaja**

- The DGAM have released a series of pictures of looted objects from Tell Ajaja / Ajajah. The photos were provided by Hasseke Antiquities department. The location of the objects is currently unknown, but the Antiquities department are working with agencies such as Interpol to find them.

To read the full article (in Arabic), *In pictures: the extracted finds from illegal excavations in archaeological Tell Ajaja*, click [here](#).

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## **Reports and Updates from the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums**

- An extensive report was published by the DGAM on 17 April 2014 on damage to archaeological sites in the Deir Ez-Zor area. The Arabic report is available [here](#).  
We apologise for the delay, but we are currently translating it into English and will release an English version soon.

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## **Policy Changes and Updates from Syria**

- None
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## International Activity

### **Symposium 'The Syrian Heritage Under Threat' to be held by the Association to Protect Syrian Heritage**

- "The Association to Protect Syrian Heritage, together with the Institut du Monde Arabe, are holding a conference on protecting the Syrian heritage on 30th April in Paris, France. Participants include: Participants : Sophie Cluzan, Annie Sartre, Samir Abdulac, Michel al-Maqdissi, Cheikhmous Ali, Jacques Montluçon et Anas al-Muqdad.  
Full details (in French) are available [here](#).

### **Exporters reminded of the dangers of handling illegal stolen Syrian antiquities**

- "According to the new European Union regulations, the exporters are breaking the law by handling looted artefacts: "the import, export or transfer of Syrian cultural property... where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that [objects] have been removed [from the country] illegally" was outlawed. Being a part of the European sanctions against Syria's Assad government, this new initiative does not refer to the items exported from Syria before May 2011."

The full article in Beyluxe, *Syrian looted artefacts outlawed by EU*, is available [here](#).

- Arts Council England has also warned UK exporters about handling Syrian antiquities. In a letter to the trade sent last month, the government funding agency advised that new European Union regulations outlaw "the import, export or transfer of Syrian cultural property... where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that [objects] have been removed [from the country] illegally".  
The initiative is particularly aimed at safeguarding items from Syrian museums, archives, libraries and religious institutions. It does not affect items which came out of Syria before May 2011. The regulations represent part of

the European sanctions against Syria's Assad government."

Read the full article, *Warning over Syrian loot*, in The Art Newspaper [here](#).

### **Interactive website launched to preserve Syria's intangible cultural heritage**

- "An interactive website for the project of inventories and database of elements of the intangible heritage of Syria was launched Thursday. The announcement of the launch was made by the people in charge of the project at Khan Asaad Basha in the old city of Damascus. [...] Cooperation efforts included those of the Syrian Society for Culture and Knowledge, the Archaeology and Museums Directorate of the Ministry of Culture and the Unit of Supporting and Developing National Museums and Cultural Heritage Sites. [...] Executive Director of the project Talal Moalla noted the website was launched today after the first stage of the collection of non-material heritage in Syria was accomplished."

The website address is [www.ich.gov.sy](http://www.ich.gov.sy)

The full article, *Website for inventory of intangible heritage of Syria launched*, is available in SANA [here](#).

### **Protecting Aramaic, the language of Jesus, in Ma'aloula**

- "Aramaic, which has been transferred from one generation to another for thousands of years through the inhabitants of Maaloula and their collective memory, could die today because the villagers fled their homes heading toward different destinations as refugees," says Monsignor Makarios Wehbi, a priest at Ottawa's Sts. Peter and Paul Melkite Catholic Church who hails from Maaloula and has been active in preserving his language [...]  
"We are so happy [Maaloula] is free now, but the village is littered with land mines, many parts of it are destroyed and some homes have been torched," says a former resident named Ward, who fled in late 2013 and has taken refuge in Damascus. "Most villagers are poor and I doubt they would have the means to rebuild their homes. And those who have the means are afraid that the general security situation is not stable yet or safe," she added.

Father Wehbi's voice chokes with frustration as he describes the importance of protecting Aramaic, one of the Semitic languages that has various branches, including those spoken east of the Euphrates River – modern-day Iraq and North Syria – and those spoken to the west of the Euphrates, in Syria, in periods of history that predate Christianity.

UNESCO recognizes Aramaic as a "definitely endangered" language, and has called for the protection of Syria's heritage against damages by the civil war. Father Wehbi is working hard to co-ordinate efforts between Canada and Europe to protect the Aramaic language from extinction. He set up a Facebook page this year – Learn the Aramaic, JESUS language – to teach the language. He began the individual effort with some of his close relatives to post short lessons and translations of Arabic, English and Aramaic.

He also connected with a Spanish Facebook page on the subject. "Sometimes we post items of the Aramaic heritage of Syria, we post articles and research. We have friends from all over the world," he says.

Arnold Werner, a professor of Semitic languages at Heidelberg University in Germany, has also researched the Aramaic language for several decades – including spending two years in Maaloula in the 1980s – and has written a dictionary of the language.

"We hope [the violence] ends very soon," says Prof. Werner, who is currently in Turkey carrying out research on languages. "This is a treasure of the world and it needs our help today."

Prof. Werner has set up a charitable association, hoping to raise money to help residents of Maaloula rebuild and resettle there when the violence ends.

"This is my duty," Prof. Werner says. "My children lived in Maaloula and loved it. They are determined to help in whatever way they can. It was a shock for us to see what is happening in beautiful Maaloula. We used to attend its famous festivals and religious celebrations. It is carved in our hearts and minds."

The full article, *Why the language of Jesus is at risk*, is available in The Globe and Mail [here](#).

### **Protecting Syriac - Syriac Gazetteer launched**

- "Key moments in the development and interaction of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religions are being preserved through [Syriaca.org](http://Syriaca.org), an international collaboration edited by scholars at Vanderbilt and Princeton

universities.

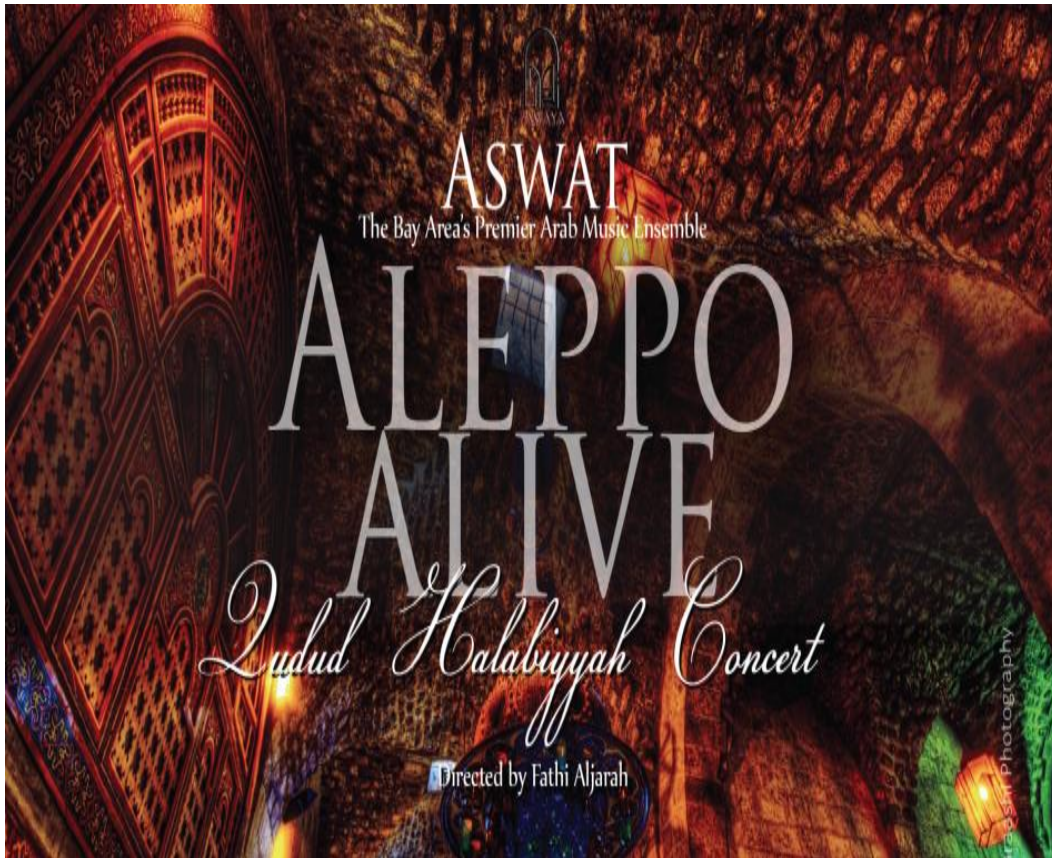
The Syriac Gazetteer, an online geographical dictionary, is the first in a series of reference works launched by Syriaca.org to document and save ancient and medieval Middle Eastern cultural heritage now threatened by civil war and political instability. [...] The Syriac Gazetteer contains descriptions of more than 2,400 places relevant to the study of Syriac. These entries, written in English, Arabic and Syriac, range from ancient centers of Syriac culture such as Edessa, located in what is modern-day Turkey, to Piscataway, N.J., where Syriac scholarship is still being produced by heritage communities.

Syriaca.org's online tools serve a broad audience interested in the Syriac cultural heritage, including researchers and students in Middle Eastern studies, classics, medieval history, religious studies, biblical studies and linguistics. In addition, the online portal is available for use by Syriac heritage communities and the public. All resources of Syriaca.org are published in a free and open format using Creative Commons licenses.

Interested individuals can explore The Syriac Gazetteer by browsing the interactive map. Readers can also search for specific types of places such as churches or topography."

The full article, *'Syriac Gazetteer' preserves endangered Middle East cultures*, is available on the Vanderbilt website [here](#).





(Photo Copyright: [Zawiya](#))

### **Protecting Syria's musical heritage**

- One new program aims to protect the endangered musical heritage - *Aleppo Alive: Committing the Endangered Musical Heritage of Wartorn Syria to Living Memory*. Few details are available, but more, and how to support the campaign, can be found [here](#).

### **Heritage features in UN briefing**

- "[When] asked about threats against the Aleppo Castle, the Spokesman [Stephanie Dujarric] said that the need to protect Syria's cultural heritage had been stressed by the Joint Special Representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, and by the head of UNESCO, Irina Bokova. He added that the destruction of cultural heritage was a destruction of a part of history and made reconciliation harder".

From the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General. 2014. Highlights of the Noon Briefing By Stephane Dujarric, Spokesman for Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon. Friday, 11 April 2014. Available [here](#).

## [News Updates](#)

(Not covered in other sections)

### **Television stories on the damage to Syria's heritage**

- The Age. *Meet a couple who are saving cultural heritage, and lives, in the Middle East.* 17 April 2014. Available [here](#).
- The Guardian. *Save Syria's bombed buildings from the UNESCO ruin fetishists.* 17 April 2014. Available [here](#).
- Wall Street Journal. *Amid Devastation of Aleppo, Syria, Archaeological Museum Fights to Preserve Heritage.* 25 April 2014. Available [here](#) (subscription only).

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