

## **Stillbruch, Kulturmagazin**

URL: [http://www.rbb-online.de/stilbruch/archiv/20150326\\_2215/heritage-for-peace-kunst-zerstoerungen.html](http://www.rbb-online.de/stilbruch/archiv/20150326_2215/heritage-for-peace-kunst-zerstoerungen.html)

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Translation German - English

### **Translation**

*Newsreader:* In Iraq and Syria IS troops systematically destroy cultural heritage of humankind. The rest of the world seems to helplessly watch the destruction of heritage thousands of years old. But a small group of archaeologists and art historians risk their lives, to document at least the destruction and rescue what can be still rescued.

Civil war in Syria. The destruction does not stop short for mankind's heritage. Images taken by mobile phones show the fury of IS militia.

Aleppo, one of the six UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria: the Umayyad mosque burns. Esper Sarbeen, an archaeologist from Damascus watches the images on his laptop in Berlin. Sabreen is the head of the NGO Heritage for Peace.

*Esper Sabreen, Heritage for Peace:*

“In Syria it is war now. And everybody is against everybody. The opposition army and also the islamist ISIS that has destroyed a lot. It is difficult to say who did what.”

Dozens of volunteers across Syria firstly document the destruction using mobile phones and cameras. They send the videos and images to Esper Sabreen. At his place all things come together.

One of his Syrian “Monument Men” is just calling him over Skype. It is dangerous for this person to be recognized in the media. Those who care for cultural heritage live dangerously. Sabreen's volunteers try to rescue what has not been demolished yet – mostly in the places where they live.

*Esper Sabreen, Heritage for Peace:*

“The Monuments Men are in Syria. They are archaeologists, architects, students and local people. There are also many who do not know anything about archaeology but they do believe that it is important to protect cultural heritage.”

Since two months Esper Sabreen’s headquarter is in Berlin. Here he finds competent supporters. He collaborates with Stefan Weber, director of the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin, in the Syrian Heritage Archive Project as well as with the German Archaeological Institute. Sabreen’s monuments men stand at the beginning of the information chain.

*Stefan Weber, director of the Museum for Islamic Art (Berlin):*

“This work is comparable with the Monuments Men in the Second World War. At that time there were also people who protected monuments, who put out the fires at night. Something similar is happening in Syria, where people say: This is our cultural heritage and we will fight for it. Often we do not realize that or it does not land as we only see the images of destruction and think: These people over there, they destroy everything. But there are of course also people who do try to rescue things.”

For example by bricking in monuments and thus protect them from looters. Isber Sabreen’s Monuments Men dress up as antiquity dealers in order to photograph stolen objects before they reach the black market.

*Esper Sabreen, Heritage for Peace:*

”The Monuments Men say: We want to buy the artifacts though of course they don’t have the money to do so. But they are able to take photographs of the illegal objects and send them to me. Later when these objects arrive in Europe we have the image proofs.”

*Stefan Weber, director of the Museum for Islamic Art (Berlin):*

“Objects are looted, destroyed, they are of high value. And everybody who stands against it is in danger. It’s not good to be seen with a camera in war times. At the same time there are strong economic interests.”

The images and information arriving from Syria are transferred to the Syrian Heritage Archive Project, the digital database of Syrian cultural heritage in development.

*Stefan Weber, director of the Museum for Islamic Art (Berlin):*

“Well, here one can see how the minaret of the Umayyad mosque was destroyed”

Together with Issam Ballouz Esper Sabreen feeds the newly arrived material into the database.

*Issam Ballouz, Syrian Heritage Archive Project:*

“For us it is very important that we get the connection via Esper to the frontline and to the bottom of the facts.”

The Syrian civil war: also a war against world heritage. Much of it is irretrievably lost. On computer screens in Berlin the mapping of losses is built up. Concurrently, they also lay the foundations for reconstruction - at least virtually.

The highly dangerous efforts of Sabreen’s Monuments Men, the painstaking work of the archaeologists in Berlin – it has to do with desperation, but also with hope.

*Issam Ballouz, Syrian Heritage Archive Project:*

“If we look, for example, at the old material from Aleppo a lot of monuments have already been destroyed in the past been rebuilt. Some of these buildings have been wrecked at the beginning of the last century and have been reconstructed. If there is a wish to live together than something can grow.”

Esper Sabreen, and all those who help him, really work on reconciliation:

[Heritage for Peace.](#)

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