

Destruction of History and the Syrian Conflict: Upholding the Cultural Integrity of Dura Europos

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Abstract : Since the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the ancient city of Dura-Europos has faced widespread destruction and looting. The site is one of many places in the country the terrorist group ISIS has specifically targeted, allegedly due to its particular representations of Syrian history and culture. However, looted art and artifacts are the extremist group's second largest source of income, only after oil. The protection of this site is important to both academics and the millions who have called Syria a home, as it aids in the nation's sense of identity, reveals developments in the arts, and contributes to humanity's collective history. At a time when Syria's culture is being flattened, this sense of cultural expression is especially important to maintain. Creating an awareness of the magnitude of the issue at hand begins with an examination of the rich history of the ancient fortress city. Located on the western bank of the Euphrates River, Dura-Europos contains artifacts dating back to the Hellenistic, Parthian, and Roman periods. Though a great deal of the art and artifacts have remained safe in institutions such as the National Museum of Damascus and the Yale University Art Gallery, hundreds of looting pits and use of heavy machinery on the site has severely set back the investigative progress made by archaeologists over the last century, as well as the prospect of future excavation. Further research draws on the current destruction of the site by both ISIS and opportunists involved with the black market. Because Dura-Europos is located in a war stricken region, the acquisition of data and possibility of immediate action is particularly challenging. Resources gained from local reports, in addition to technology such as satellite imagery, however, have provided a firm starting point for the evaluation of the state of the site. The Syrian Ministry of Culture, UNESCO, and numerous Syrian and global organizations provide insight into the historic city's past, present issues, and future plans to ensure that the cultural integrity of the site is upheld. Though over seventy percent of Dura-Europos has been completely decimated, this research challenges the notion that physically destroyed sites are lost forever. This paper assesses preventative measures that can take place to ensure the preservation of the site's art and architecture, including examining possible solutions to the damage, such as digital reconstruction, replication, and distribution of information through exhibitions and other forms of publically accessible information. In order to investigate any possible retribution, research also includes the necessary information pertaining the global laws and regulations dealing with cultural heritage, as it directly affects the ways in which this situation can be dealt with. With the countless experts and citizens dedicated to the importance of cultural heritage, the prospect of honoring and valuing elements of Dura-Europos is possible—whether physically preserved or otherwise.

Keywords : antiquities law, archaeological sites, restitution, Syrian Civil War

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