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Frontispiece 1. Al-Qahira Castle, Yemen. Situated on a rocky outcrop high above the city of Taiz, the castle was originally built as a military garrison in 1060 CE. It later became a residence for the Caliphs of the Ayyubid period and subsequently for Turkish military commanders. More recently, during the Yemeni civil war, the structure was taken over by Houthi rebels, bombed by the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, then captured by the Abu Al Abbas Brigades (a Yemeni Salafist militia), before being returned to the control of the Yemeni Government. Its complex architecture was severely damaged by shelling. Between 2022 and 2024, Heritage for Peace, in collaboration with the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums of Yemen, and funding from ALIPH, undertook a programme of restoration. The work involved damage assessment, repair works and training for young professionals. The castle has since been reopened for cultural activities and events intended to contribute to community welfare. Photograph (cropped): Anas Alhajj Photography. CC-BY-SA-2.0 https://www.flickr.com/photos/86455608@N05/15095300476 (login required).



Frontispiece 2. Zaid Ghazi Saadallah, Director of the Mosul Cultural Museum, Iraq, explaining, in 2022, the work of the museum's Rehabilitation Project to a group of local schoolchildren. Back in 2015, just as Iraq's second largest museum prepared to reopen after years of renovation, Islamic State militants captured the city of Mosul (ancient Nineveh) and published a video of their vandalism of the museum and its collections using explosives and hammers. Since the retaking of Mosul in 2017, the museum is gradually being brought back to life through an international alliance between the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, the Mosul Museum, the Musée du Louvre, the Smithsonian Institution, the World Monuments Fund and ALIPH. Their work has involved undertaking a needs assessment and feasibility study, restoring the building, and training and equipping the museum team. As the work proceeds, the museum has sought engagement with local experts and residents, and begun presenting community events, so that the citizens of Mosul can again identify with and learn from Iraq's rich cultural heritage. Image: reproduced with permission, World Monuments Fund. https://www.wmf.org/journal-articles/building-cultural-bridges-community-engagement-mosul-cultural-museum-iraq.

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EDITORIAL

Archaeology in wartime

Sessions about conflict and archaeology were high on the agenda of the recent World Archaeological Congress (WAC-10) in Darwin (22–28 June 2025), and timely, given the contemporary US bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities, the Russian war in Ukraine, the Israeli devastation of Gaza and the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan, to mention but a few examples. Yet, with the notable exception of a core group of archaeologists and heritage professionals actively working on the protection of cultural property, these sessions were conspicuously under-attended and generated few questions. This was a striking contrast with the polarised debate at WAC-5 in Washington DC in 2003, just three months after the US/UK-led invasion of Iraq and related looting of museums and archaeological sites, over the question of whether archaeologists should have collaborated with the military in attempting to protect cultural property[1]. The experience left me perplexed. On the one hand, I am sure that most archaeologists are distressed by the current suffering of so many civilians and dismayed by the often-targeted damage to iconic heritage places, including 'necroviolence' at cemeteries, intended to erase the shared memories, identities and territorial claims of communities. Indeed, many—in and beyond WAC—have been actively condemning violence, calling for peace and reconciliation, and protesting at the actions and inactions of governments. They have been documenting and reporting material evidence of war crimes, heritage destruction and looting, and undertaking research to deepen understanding of the causes and impacts of conflict. They have been fundraising to support heritage protection programmes and impacted professionals, students and communities. And they have been publicising their work across a variety of media, including special exhibitions[2]. On the other hand, along with most people experiencing armed conflicts second-hand via newsfeeds, I suspect that many archaeologists feel overloaded with information, powerless as observers, obliged not to neglect their existing academic and commercial commitments (including research

[1] For example, Stone, P. 2005. The identification and protection of cultural heritage during the Iraq conflict: a peculiarly English tale. *Antiquity* 79: 933–43. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00115054; Emberling, G. 2008. Archaeologists and the military in Iraq, 2003–2008: compromise or contribution? *Archaeologies* 4: 445–59. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-008-9085-5; Stone, P.G. & J.F. Bajjaly (ed.). 2008. *The destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer; Hamilakis, Y. 2009. The "war on terror" and the military–archaeology complex: Iraq, ethics and neo-colonialism. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 5: 39–65. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-009-9095-y

[2] For recent overviews, see, for example, Clack, T. & M. Dunkley (ed.). 2023. *Cultural heritage in modern conflict: past, propaganda, parade*. Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003262312; González Zarandona, J.A., E. Cunliffe & M. Saldin (ed.). 2023. *The Routledge handbook of heritage destruction*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003131069; Dawson, M. (ed.) 2024. *War and the historic environment: the effect of conflict from front line Ukraine to historic Namibia*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003461425

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into the archaeology of conflict in the recent past[3]), justified by the argument that discussion of contemporary conflict and war crimes lies beyond the scope of scientific archaeology, and willing to delegate responsibility to the experts, who have consequently ended up talking among themselves, as demonstrated at the recent WAC sessions.

Below, I offer a short overview of practice and thinking in this area, particularly by archaeologists. For generously commenting on a first draft, I offer sincere thanks to: Kristen Hopper, Ian Kuijt, Peter Stone, Jan Turek and Valentina Vulpi. I begin by attempting to describe, as factually and neutrally as possible, a sample of the wide range of activity that is ongoing. But ironies, politics and complexities can be found in all the examples, including in the frontispieces and figures I have chosen to accompany this article. I highlight some of these tensions in the following two sections, before introducing the Guest Editorial that follows in this issue of *Antiquity*, written by Habab Idriss Ahmed and Geoff Emberling who present the war-torn case of Sudan. Finally, I express my own opinions.

Protecting cultural property

A well-established international group of heritage professionals and archaeologists, as well as other experts such as architects and lawyers, are working in the field of cultural property protection, supported by a variety of funders. Without denying the despair generated by conflict, their efforts offer hope of a better future. Before, during and especially after conflicts and natural disasters, their work involves assessing, inventorying, restoring, recovering, monitoring and redisplaying the material remains of historic sites, monuments, museums and artefacts. Increasingly, they are also enhancing, through training, the capacity of local organisations to manage their own cultural resources and to engage local communities.

Legislation offers hope of justice. And, although some contemporary commentators claim the system of international law is broken[4], heritage professionals still call for it to be better implemented. The primary international treaty continues to be the 1954 'Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict'. This was established in the aftermath of the destruction of monuments and looting of cultural objects during the Second World War. Its two protocols (1954 and 1999) clarify that the armed forces of signatory states are obliged to refrain from directing any act of hostility against cultural property—except in the case of military necessity—and they must strive to prevent the theft or vandalism of cultural heritage. As of June 2025, 138 states had ratified the Convention in one form or another.[5] The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has also been invoked in legal cases involving destruction, including

[3] This includes two Project Gallery pieces published in this issue of *Antiquity*: Konczewski *et al.* Landscapes of enslavement: investigations of Nazi concentration camps in Czyżówek and Karczmarka, Poland. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.68; Kobiałka *et al.* Lamsdorf/Łambinowice: an archaeology of memory. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10127

[4] Kinstler, L. 2025. Broken justice. *The Guardian Weekly* 4 July 2025: 34–9.

[5] UNESCO. 2025. States parties list. https://www.unesco.org/en/heritage-armed-conflicts/states-parties (accessed 3 July 2025).

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Figure 1. An Ansar Dine militant at the World Heritage Site of Timbuktu, Mali in 2012, at the time of the Islamist group's intentional destruction of historic Sufi mausoleums. These were subsequently reconstructed, using local materials and artisans, in a project led by UNESCO and then re-consecrated. Photograph: Magharebia. CC BY 2.0 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ansar_Dine_Tombouctou.JPG.

in 2015 when a jihadist, Ahmad Al Faqi, was charged before the ICC with the war crime of destruction of cultural heritage at the World Heritage Site of Timbuktu in Mali[6] (Figure 1). As a legal precedent, the Mali example has since opened the door for other cases[7].

UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) aims to foster peace and security by promoting international co-operation. (In July 2025, the United States withdrew from UNESCO, referring to UNESCO's decision to admit Palestine as a Member State.[8]) In practice, it continues to set the agenda on various actions. For example, building on its 2003 'UNESCO Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage'[9], the organisation's efforts led in 2017 to UN Security Council Resolution 2347, which focuses on the protection of cultural heritage and its necessity for peacebuilding and maintaining international security[10]. More recently, it has also published assessments of damage to cultural heritage during armed conflicts: as of 27 May 2025, UNESCO has verified damage to 110 sites in Gaza since 7 October 2023, including seven archaeological sites (Figure 2); and, as of 25 June 2025, it has verified damage to 501 cultural sites in Ukraine since 24 February 2022, including two archaeological sites[11]. (The latter figure, perhaps reflecting a methodological bias towards built heritage and satellite imagery, is a major under-representation compared to on-the-ground archaeological observation (I. Kuijt *pers. comm.* July 2025)).

[6] Archibong. J.E. 2019. Destruction of cultural property as a war crime: breaking new ground in the quest for accountability. *International Journal of Law* 5(2): 126–32.

[7] For example, RASHID International, Yazda & the EAMENA Project. 2019. *Destroying the Soul of the Yazidis: Cultural Heritage Destruction during the Islamic State's Genocide against the Yazidis*. Munich, Lincoln (NE), Oxford & Durham: RASHID International, Yazda & the EAMENA Project. https://www.yazda.org/publications/destroying-the-soul-of-the-yazidis

[8] https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/the-united-states-withdraws-from-the-united-nations-educational-scientific-and-cultural-organization-unesco (accessed 23 July 2025).

[9] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000133874 (accessed 16 July 2025).

[10] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000249838 (accessed 16 July 2025).

[11] https://www.unesco.org/en/gaza/assessment; https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco (accessed 16 July 2025). See also, for example: Shydlovskyi. P. *et al.* 2023. The tools of war: conflict and the destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage. *Antiquity* 97. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.159; Andreou, G.M. *et al.* 2024. New investigations in Gaza's heritage landscapes: the Gaza Maritime Archaeology Project (GAZAMAP). *Antiquity* 98. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.68

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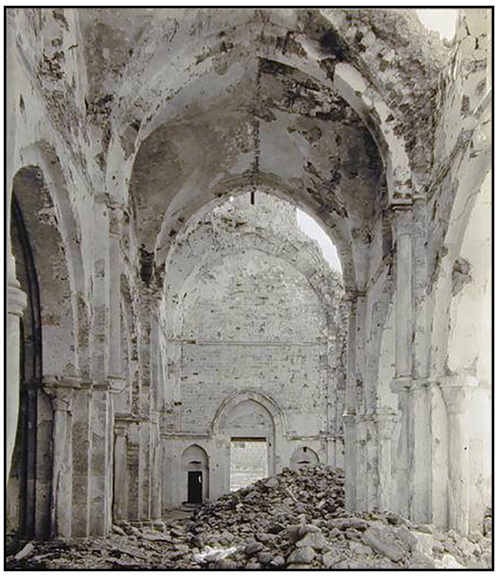


Figure 2. Nave of the Great Omari Mosque, Gaza city, destroyed in 1917 during the British bombardment of Ottoman positions during the First World War, and subsequently restored by the Supreme Muslim Council. It was re-destroyed by Israeli bombardment in December 2023. It is Gaza's oldest mosque, having previously served Philistine, Roman, Byzantine and Catholic worshippers; it also had engravings of Jewish ritual objects. Photograph: K.A.C. Creswell. Public domain https://web.archive.org/web/20120418185448/http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image.jsp?location_id=9934&image_id=63519

Other inter-governmental organisations, such as ICCROM (the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property)[12], and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) and ICOM (the International Council of Museums)[13], are also committed to preserving, conserving and restoring cultural heritage during and after armed conflicts, emphasising the damage to our shared humanity and heritage. A variety of smaller and more distinctive NGOs also occupy this space. The Blue Shield, for instance, works in partnership with heritage, humanitarian and 'uniformed' sectors, focuses on the proper implementation of the Hague Convention in peacetime, has sent missions into countries in conflict and has been lobbying to be fully integrated into NATO's (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's), and similar organisations' 360-degree-awareness approach to military planning[14]. Heritage for Peace is similar but eschews militarist language[15]. It supports heritage workers, indifferent of citizenship or religion, as they work towards the protection of cultural heritage in conflict zones, with an emphasis on promoting capacity-building and knowledge-transfer to create self-sufficiency in heritage management (Frontispiece 1). This approach includes working with local communities living in and around heritage places, starting with political and religious leaders and young people.

International teams of university- and museum-based specialists are increasingly participating in related projects, in the hope of making a difference on the ground and from the

[12] For example, Lambert, S. & C. Rockwell, 2012. Protecting cultural heritage in times of conflict: contributions from the participants of the international course on first aid to cultural heritage in times of conflict. Rome: ICCROM. https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/ICCROM_18_ProtectingHeritageConflict_en_0.pdf

[13] For example, ICA, ICOM, ICOMOS & IFLA 2024. Declaration on the protection of archives, libraries, museums and heritage places during armed conflicts and political instability. https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Declaration-on-the-protection-of-archives-libraries-museums-and-heritage-places-en.pdf (accessed 16 July 2025).

[14] Stone, P.G. 2013. A four-tier approach to the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict. *Antiquity* 87: 166–77. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00048699; Cunliffe, E. *et al.* 2018. *The protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict: unnecessary distraction or mission-relevant priority?* NATO Open Publications. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3235346

[15] https://www.heritageforpeace.org (accessed 16 July 2025).

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air. For example, in 2013, a coalition of US universities, museums and cultural institutions established the 'Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq' (SHOSI) project in response to the-then humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq and the destruction of some of the region's historical sites, with the aim of empowering and supporting heritage professionals and activities inside these countries[16]. Similarly, since 2015, reacting to increasing threats faced by archaeological sites in the MENA region, the 'Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa' (EAMENA) project, based at the UK universities of Oxford, Leicester and Durham, has used satellite and aerial imagery to identify, document and monitor damage and risks to archaeological sites and landscapes, combined with training of professional staff and volunteers in the region and subsequent collaboration with them[17]. One outcome is their assessment of the impact of the Syrian conflict on 340 archaeological sites in Al-Hasakah Governorate through a detailed analysis of satellite images taken between 2004 and 2020[18]. This found that looting and military activity, including bulldozing on elevated tell (mound) sites to create military lookout points, actually represent a small proportion of all damage to sites (9% and 8% respectively), while the main causes of damage stem from modern settlement, ploughing of fields and road construction.

Teams and actions such as these are underwritten by a variety of funders, with different histories, priorities, budgets and aspirations. The New York-based 'World Monuments Fund' has existed since 1965, established by James A. Gray, a retired US Army colonel with a passion for solving engineering problems, particularly for ancient sites such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa[19]. Today, the fund addresses diverse challenges faced by the world's cultural heritage and associated communities, including climate change, under-representation, imbalanced tourism and post-crisis recovery following both natural disasters and armed conflict (Frontispiece 2). Since 2001, the 'Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation' (AFCP), administered by the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, has combined cultural preservation and protection around the globe with the advancement of American foreign-policy goals, which explicitly include countering extremist interpretations of US interests and promoting American values in action[20]. (The fact that AFCP's website has not been updated since May 2025 may confirm suggestions that its federal funding has been cut.) Amsterdam-based 'Cultural Emergency Response', established in 2003, is a foundation for the protection of culture in crisis situations, which offers emergency support including funding[21]. The UK's equivalent, established in 2016, is the 'Cultural Protection Fund'

[16] Al Quntar, S. *et al.* 2015. Responding to a cultural heritage crisis: the example of the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq Project. *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78(3): 154–60. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5615/neareastarch.78.3.0154

[17] https://eamena.org (accessed 16 July 2025).

[18] Mamo, A.R., I.M. Ibraheem, A. Al Kassem, A. Al-Khalil & K. Hopper. 2022. The impact of the Syrian conflict on archaeological sites in Al-Hasakah province. *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2022.103486

[19] https://www.wmf.org (accessed 16 July 2025).

[20] https://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/ambassadors-fund-cultural-preservation (accessed 16 July 2025).

[21] https://www.culturalemergency.org (accessed 16 July 2025).

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*Figure 3. The ancient Temple of Bel, Palmyra, Syria, originally dedicated to the Semitic god Bel or Baal in 32 CE, photographed following the highly publicised destruction of its cella (inner chamber) by the Islamic State in 2015. The temple has subsequently been reconstructed digitally. Photograph: Jawad Shaar. CC BY 4.0 https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/media/1395/01/09/1035193/*آزادسازی-شهر-تاریخی-تدمر-سوریه

managed by the British Council[22]. Another major fund with a similar scope is the Geneva-based 'International Alliance for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Conflict Areas' (ALIPH)[23]. It was established in 2017, initially by France and the United Arab Emirates, on the initiative of Jean-Luc Martinez, then-Director of the Musée du Louvre, who was commissioned by the President of France, Francois Hollande, to draw up 'Fifty proposals to protect the cultural heritage of humanity', following Islamic State's destruction of buildings at the ancient site of Palmyra in Syria (Figure 3) and execution of the site's head of antiquities, Khaled Mohamad al-Asaad[24].

In recent years, academic funding agencies, notably in Europe, have also increased their investment in supporting academics and students 'at risk' and 'in exile'. Their hope is to protect these threatened individuals, preserve their intellectual capital, offer them career development opportunities and promote academic freedom. A leading light in this area is the London-based Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), an NGO which describes itself as a rescue mission for academics around the world who need urgent help to escape discrimination, persecution, violence or conflict, or who choose to work on in their home countries despite serious dangers[25]. Its roots go back to 1933 and the Nazis' expulsion of many leading academics from Germany's universities. Today, their Fellowship Programme is helping academics escape to places of safety, while their regional programmes are also supporting scholars and their institutions at home. In collaboration with CARA, the British Academy established a similar 'Researchers at Risk Fellowships Programme', initially in response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, financed by a consortium of funders including the UK government[26]. The non-governmental Gerder Henkel Foundation, based in Düsseldorf, also offers funding opportunities for threatened and refugee scholars from crisis areas[27]. In addition, a new European Union-funded project called 'Supporting At-risk Researchers with Fellowships in Europe' (SAFE) has just begun[28].

[22] https://cultural-protection-fund.britishcouncil.org (accessed 16 July 2025).
[23] https://www.aliph-foundation.org/en (accessed 16 July 2025).
[24] Turek, J. 2015. Editorial: death of Queen Zenobia's brave grandson. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 11: 337–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/S11759-015-9285-8
[25] https://www.cara.ngo (accessed 17 July 2025).
[26] https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/researchers-at-risk-fellowships/ (accessed 17 July 2025).
[27] https://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/en/scholars-at-risk-eng (accessed 17 July 2025).
[28] https://saferesearchers.eu (accessed 17 July 2025).

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Archaeology-related associations and societies also hope that, by issuing agreed statements that promote adherence to international humanitarian law and advocate for the protection of cultural heritage and civilians, they can influence the warring parties, raise public awareness and exert pressure for peacebuilding. For example, WAC's 2014 'Dead Sea Accord: On the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict' expresses general concern for the damage and destruction caused by armed conflict and calls on all parties to promote its protection[29]. In contrast, in 2022, the Society of Antiquaries of London issued an overt condemnation of one warring party titled 'Statement on the Invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation'[30]. WAC is also moving in this direction, issuing in 2025 an updated 'Statement on the Ongoing Humanitarian and Heritage Crisis in Gaza', which continues to denounce atrocities and violations of human rights committed by both Hamas and the Israeli military, but now accompanied by more explicit criticism of the government of Israel, which they urge "to end all actions that constitute or are suspected to constitute genocide, crimes against humanity, or collective punishment of civilians"[31].

Ethics-based critiques

Despite the intended benefits to countries and communities wounded by armed conflict, these major humanitarian efforts to protect cultural property around the world are becoming increasingly difficult to approach neutrally, both analytically and in practice, since, as René Teijgeler pointed out, the political and economic interests of various stakeholders inform all of them[32]. This, in turn, attracts a range of ethical questions and criticisms.

One of the first ethical debates in this field of archaeological practice was kick-started in 2003 by the question (touched on above) as to whether archaeologists, acting out of a sense of professional duty to protect cultural property in Iraq, should have collaborated with the invading coalition forces by educating them about ancient civilisations and advising them of the locations of important archaeological remains. This debate was heightened by significant doubts over the legality of the invasion, and by the looting of museums and archaeological sites that subsequently took place under the eyes of, and even at the hands of, the military, and later by Islamic State, which eventually led in 2021 to the restitution of more than 17 000 illicitly exported artefacts from dealers and museums in the USA to Iraq[33]. For critics, such as Umberto Albarella and Yannis

[29] https://worldarchaeologicalcongress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/wac_dead_sea_accord.pdf (accessed 16 July 2025).
[30] https://www.sal.org.uk/2022/03/statement-on-the-invasion-of-ukraine-by-the-russian-federation/ (accessed 16 July 2025).
[31] https://worldarchaeologicalcongress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/WAC-Statement-on-the-Gaza-Crisis.pdf (accessed 16 July 2025).
[32] Teijgeler, R. 2011. Archaeologist under pressure: neutral or cooperative in wartime, in P.G. Stone (ed.) *Cultural heritage, ethics and the military*: 86–112. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
[33] Reuters 2021. US to return 17,000 looted ancient artefacts to Iraq. *The Guardian* 3 August 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/03/us-to-return-17000-looted-ancient-artefacts-to-iraq (accessed 16 July 2025).

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Hamilakis[34], archaeologists should distance themselves from collaborating with armed forces and their governments in planning or undertaking wartime military operations, since to do so risks lending legitimacy to a belligerent attitude and loss of intellectual independence, and because, by emphasising the protection of tangible archaeological remains, heritage professionals can fetishise a narrowly defined archaeological record at the expense of concern for the human victims of war.

The prioritising of archaeological and other Western interests over the human rights and needs of local communities, during and after armed conflicts, has subsequently been challenged further by these and other critical thinkers. Maria Theresia Starzmann has argued that the top-down, neo-colonial and capitalist preservation, management and commodification of archaeological heritage by powerful international institutions has exacerbated the disenfranchisement of descendant communities from their sources of identity and the weakening of their local economies[35]. Lynn Meskell and Benjamin Isakhan have also recently extended this criticism to heritage international NGOs working across the Middle East[36]. Similarly, Lynn Meskell reminds us how, as in the history of colonial archaeology in the Middle East, archaeological interests continue to merge with military, political and economic technologies and agendas in "crisis colonialism"[37]. In this, former colonial powers, and their aid-funded specialist teams of archaeologists, conservators and architects, are proliferating a new industry out of post-conflict heritage documentation, training programmes and rebuilding, which ultimately serve the interests of their national security and foreign policy, while sometimes sidelining the human victims of war. Reinhard Bernbeck and Susan Pollock therefore advocate that "there is a principle that is all too rarely talked about by self-proclaimed stewards of the past: saving people's lives must always have preference over the saving of past or present culture in any conflict. This must happen, even while acknowledging that material forms of cultural heritage often have significant value to people."[38] These recently stated positions reaffirm Dominic Perring and Sjoerd Van der Linde's argument that, for archaeologists working in places of conflict, the concept of heritage as 'care' (especially for living communities) is more important than that of 'curation' (of archaeological remains)[39].

Alternatives to mainstream heritage reconstruction projects are possible but they are currently thin on the ground. Inspiration is however offered in Zena Kamash's recent

[34] Albarella, U. 2009. Archaeologists in conflict: empathizing with which victims? *Heritage Management* 2(1): 105–14. https://doi.org/10.1179/hma.2009.2.1.105; Hamilakis 2009.

[35] Starzmann, M.T. 2008. Cultural imperialism and heritage politics in the event of armed conflict: prospects for an 'activist archaeology'. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress 4*: 368–89. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-008-9083-7

[36] Meskell, L. & B. Isakhan. 2024. Reconstruction across the Middle East: UNESCO and the rise of heritage INGOs. *Contemporary Levant* 9: 33–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2024.2338681

[37] Meskell, L. 2020. Imperialism, internationalism and archaeology in the un/making of the Middle East. *American Anthropologist* 122: 554–67, p.564. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13413

[38] Bernbeck, R. & S. Pollock. 2024. Archaeology, military conflict and the ethics and politics of engagement, in B. Hausmair *et al.* (ed.) *Von der Mittelalter- und Neuzeitarchäologie zur Historischen Archäologie. Festschrift für Claudia Theune zum 65. Geburtstag. Sonderband Historische Archäologie*: 307–16, p.314.

[39] Perring, D. & S. Van der Linde. 2009. The politics and practice of archaeology in conflict. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 11(3–4): 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1179/175355210X12747818485321

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book *Heritage and healing in Syria and Iraq*, where the author argues that new projects should focus—humanely and slowly—on bringing built and intangible heritage and people together to think more creatively, including with the help of artists, about what is to be done in the present to recover from trauma and rebuild social relationships[40]. This ethical framework of 'restorative justice' also has the potential to take many forms.

Another critical point raised by a few participants in the WAC-10 sessions on conflict and archaeology, coming from a less Western-centric decolonising perspective, concerns the geo-political inequalities in publicising cultural heritage destruction and in funding post-conflict work. The claim is that there has been a disproportionate emphasis on western organisations investing close to home, in Europe and in former European colonies in the Middle East and North Africa, compared to the under-reporting of the intentional destruction of cultural heritage during conflict in other regions. For example, in Southeast Asia, the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar military has involved intentional heritage destruction[41]; in sub-Saharan Africa, jihadist insurgencies, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, have led to the damaging of mausoleums and other historical structures[42]; and in the South Caucasus region, the border conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has also seen the targeting of cultural heritage[43] (Figure 4).

The complexities of conflict

Such debates and criticisms can sometimes appear too polarised, broad-brush and simplistic. For example, although funders and research institutions oblige university-based teams of heritage specialists to demonstrate measurable 'impact' on heritage management policies and practices and on the lives of associated communities, their commitment and sincerity when working in partnership with local groups should not be underestimated. But, as Paul Newson and Ruth Young point out, with particular reference to Lebanon and Cambodia, we do need to recognise the sheer complexity of archaeological heritage projects and competing stakeholders, agendas and values in post-conflict environments, in addition to the potential for archaeological heritage actions to make things worse for minority groups whose heritage may not be prioritised by victorious regimes and their new political narratives[44].

[40] Kamash, Z. 2024. *Heritage and healing in Syria and Iraq*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
[41] Lee, R. & J.A. González Zarandona. 2019. Heritage destruction in Myanmar's Rakhine state: legal and illegal iconoclasm. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26: 519–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1666294
[42] Bamidele, S. *et al.* 2022. Securing world heritage sites: insurgency and the destruction of UNESCO's world heritage sites in Timbuktu, Mali. *GeoJournal* 87: 2467–78. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-021-10383-9
[43] Mozaffari, A. & J. Barry. 2023. Heritage destruction in the Caucasus with a specific focus on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, in J.A. González Zarandona *et al.* (ed.) *The Routledge handbook of heritage destruction*. London & New York: Routledge, 333–42. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003131069
[44] Newson, P. & R. Young. 2022. Post-conflict ethics, archaeology and archaeological heritage: a call for discussion. *Archaeological Dialogues* 29: 155–71. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203822000253

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Figure 4. The historic Armenian cemetery of Julfa, located in the Nakhchivan exclave of the Republic of Azerbaijan, depicted prior to the intentional destruction of its tombstones by Azeri forces between 1998 and 2006. Image: F.R. Chesney, 1850. The expedition for the survey of the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Volume 1. London: Longman, Green, Brown and Longmans, p.140. Public domain. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/eck3utv4/items.

In contrast to previous legal, professional and ethical approaches to the protection of cultural property before, during and after war, we must also adapt to the diversity of armed conflicts and actors around the world today, encompassing not only major international wars but also civil wars, 'low-intensity' conflicts and criminal violence, each with their own dynamics, death-tolls and destructive impacts on cultural heritage. In this confusing context, where reported crimes are often difficult to verify, we also have to be aware of one-sided narratives, and acknowledge, for example, the damage to archaeological remains caused by all warring parties, not just those 'othered' by Western powers or opposed groups referred to as 'barbarians'. For instance, Susan Pollock has noted that although the Israeli military and settler occupation of the West Bank has led to illegal archaeological excavations in search of Biblical history at some sites and rendered those places inaccessible to Palestinian people, the latter have also damaged archaeological remains considered Jewish or Israeli as acts of resistance[45]. And in Ukraine, where Russian bombing and looting has targeted above-ground cultural

[45] Pollock, S. 2016. Archaeology and contemporary warfare. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45: 215–31, p.222. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102215-095913

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heritage, defensive trench digging has also damaged numerous buried archaeological sites, while the deployment of mines will have significant future impacts[46].

Elsewhere, in post-conflict situations, particularly those with on-going international sanctions, weakened authorities can struggle to protect archaeological sites and museums—some freshly restored—from further destruction and looting. We must also appreciate that many trained heritage professionals have left their countries of origin for personal reasons, not only as refugees escaping ongoing violence but also due to low salaries and poor living conditions.

As Valerie Higgins notes: "Today's fast-moving, complex, interconnected world presents us with a more fragmented scenario that we often struggle to comprehend and that requires a constant reassessment of ethical choices."[47] This is the dilemma WAC and the EAA (European Association of Archaeologists) now face, particularly when issuing statements, sanctions and exclusions.

The case of Sudan

All the above—diverse efforts to protect cultural property in wartime, ethical debates over such actions and acknowledgement of the complexities of conflict—inform this issue's Guest Editorial. In it, Habab Idriss Ahmed and Geoff Emberling provide valuable background and inside information on the current armed conflict in Sudan and its various impacts on Sudanese cultural heritage and on associated institutions and professionals, all substantiated by detail and citations. Their report is potentially a model to be followed in other crisis situations, not least because it acknowledges from the outset the substantial civilian suffering in the conflict and the debate over whether archaeology and heritage should be prioritised during a humanitarian crisis, arguing that "we can protect museums and sites while also supporting people". It also does not shy away from the complicated politics in Sudan and the challenges faced by members of the international community working to assist Sudanese colleagues in protecting their cultural heritage and to sustain archaeological research. Whether you agree with their closing argument—echoing the position of UNESCO and other international organisations dedicated to protecting cultural property—that Sudan's cultural heritage should be valued as "humanity's collective memory", their report is clearly and calmly expressed, informative and—above all—moving.

Concluding thoughts

Most archaeologists have their attention focused elsewhere, rather than on war zones. I have resisted the urge to shout 'wake up!', but the consequences of modern armed conflict for archaeology today are undeniable, growing and coming closer. It is inevitable

[46] Kuijt, I., P. Shydlovskyi & W. Donaruma. 2024. The Russian-Ukraine War has caused a staggering amount of cultural destruction—both seen and unseen. *The Conversation* 23 February 2024. https://theconversation.com/the-russia-ukraine-war-has-caused-a-staggering-amount-of-cultural-destruction-both-seen-and-unseen-221082 (accessed 26 July 2025).

[47] Higgins, V. 2020. Armed conflict and archaeology: ethical issues, in C. Smith (ed.) *Encyclopedia of global archaeology*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 972–77, p.976. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30018-0_2844

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that archaeologists, and organisations such as WAC and the EAA, will be drawn further into these complex conflicts and related debates. It is therefore essential that we continue to think together about what we can and should do, both as an ethically informed and politically aware community of professionals and as a group of generally decent human beings, who—like the civilians of so many regions of the world caught up in armed conflicts—exist through our relations to our colleagues, families, places, possessions and memories. At times of war and peace, we must continue to care for the people who are suffering and for the things that matter to them. Whether our efforts and their restored cultural heritage can subsequently foster dialogue, reconciliation and recovery cannot be accurately predicted but, out of respect for the communities we work among, archaeologists are obliged to try.

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Durham, UK, 1 October 2025

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