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ROUNDTABLE

WHAT IS PRESERVATION? DIVERSIFYING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MIDDLE EAST'S MATERIAL PAST

Introduction—What is Preservation?

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Tangible "heritage" (artifacts, buildings, and sites) has always played key roles in identity and nation-building in the Middle East. As countries in the Middle East face unprecedented disorder and violence we lack more nuanced answers to what preservation was, is, and what it can be in the future. This roundtable—initiated as a session at the Middle East Studies Association's annual meeting in 2016—offers a much-needed perspective and critical voice in a debate that has become increasingly monolithic. In other words, current notions of what "cultural heritage" is and how it should be preserved are limited and often dismiss the limitations, complexities and ironies of iconoclasm. Objects seen as valuable by some but "idolatrous" to others, for example, have sometimes been destroyed precisely because they were considered worthy of preservation by opposing parties. Further, preservation and destruction were rarely exclusive binaries, but rather connected and identified in crucial ways. They are, in other words, two sides of the same coin: Archaeological excavation has destroyed buildings and deposits in strata above selected layers or artifacts, often removing sites that are meaningful in other ways, such as Islamic shrines.

Going beyond conventional norms of how "the past" should be preserved, this roundtable will present a strong intervention by developing a new diachronic, more diverse vocabulary and directions for further debate that recognize cultural difference. "Preservation" can have different, even destructive guises, which go beyond the idea that objects (i.e. excavated finds), must end up in institutionalized practices such as archaeological research or museum trophies without a function (Holtorf and Kristensen 2014); ideals that prove to be increasingly impractical due to lack of space, rising real estate prices, and museological "storage wars" (Kersel 2015).

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European preferences in preservation, however, still hold sway in many ways. Wide-ranging acceptance for the "UNESCO-approach" in preservation practices means alternative methods are often met with resistance or considered a moral taboo.

Taking a different stance, the contributions will deliberately refrain from using the destruction of heritage as a framework of discussion. Such an approach, as Trinidad Rico will show in her essay, puts effusive effort into defining the motivations of the perpetrator. She urges us to define and study heritage value independently of its destroyers to highlight voices that are being sidelined in these debates. Which consequences does the West's "thirst for heritage" have for local inhabitants (and worshipers) and how have they engaged with the past in history?

Equating "The Orient" with destruction and "The West" with salvage, as the current discussion tends to do, presents a troubling recurrence of 19th- and 20th-century tropes: Accepted heritage practices continue colonial legacies which emerged in the 19th century, a fact which remains largely unchallenged in public debate. This lack of historical self-reflection happens at the expense of more nuanced and potentially more effective understanding of how preservation has been determined over time and from different perspectives.

Multiple views of Islam and Islamic presence in heritage making, for example, are usually entirely absent in the discussion; an absence that resonates with the dominant view that Islamic material culture is at odds with Western accepted heritage preservation practices (Rico 2014). A good example is the West African Sudanese *masjid*, subject of Rachel Engmann's contribution. Moving West African Islamic cultural heritage from the periphery to the center, the traditions she critiques are the long-standing, exclusivist Orientalist epistemologies and ontologies, more specifically, ways of classifying and understanding Islamic architectural heritage. Within the context of preservation adobe *masjids*, however, do not remain reliant upon a body of international "experts." Instead, local practices of construction and conservation (e.g. through an annual remudding or reclaying community ceremony), survived as a living tradition.

This roundtable will thus recenter the discourse about heritage in the Middle East to specific and constructive local practices to highlight both the heterogeneous artifacts as well as the practices connected to them: How can practices which do not correspond with established ideals and terminologies in Western heritage preservation be heard in the debate? Ian Straughn, for example, leaves familiar ground in Western academic heritage discourse when examining the relationship between ruins and "jinn"; a set of distinctly

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sentient, yet nonhuman actors that has shaped long-standing affective responses and practical engagements between local (human) inhabitants and their archaeologically rich landscapes in the Middle East and North Africa. Emphasizing the sublime aspects of ruins and the quasi-sacred nature of heritage, he argues that a more inclusive heritage industry is one where practitioners are open to the imaginal realm and its potential for a wider set of hermeneutics for the past and its material preservation.

In the scarce historical literature in this field, local participation and resistance towards European (and local official) forces was long ignored and little attention was paid to the distinct and manifold approaches, and nonelite practices towards preservation by local institutions and people (see articles in Bahrani, Celik and Eldem 2011; Carruthers 2015). Crucially, (ancient) objects have always been fully embedded in the domains of contemporary life, public space, working, farming, places of worship, houses and thus subject to a multisensory manner, including the tactile, not just vision, as we know from rare insular case studies (Hamilakis 2013). Objects were activated multiple times, and thus various "antiquities" of different times coexisted; often in tandem with the material culture of Islam. While local experts and communities always had their own practices and ways of preserving and engaging with heritage, we know almost nothing about community involvement in many of the sites of the ancient past.

Indeed, the preservation and destruction of heritage in the region by different actors (including European archaeologists) is intrinsically linked to anticolonial resistance, Ottoman policies and regional relationships, and the emergence of nation-states that sought legitimation for their own existence through distinct engagements with the past (in some cases by de-prioritizing Islam, and instead favoring a nationalist incorporation of antiquity as identity).

In many cases now famous "heritage sites" were created in a process of segregation from the contemporary world and the people surrounding them. In fact, "heritage" is not only an ideological construct, but often literally constructed: Only few are aware that Palmyra—a site now iconic for destruction—was once a village where inhabitants lived inside the ancient ruins using temples as mosques and even birth clinics while applying local practices of repair. Around 1930 the villagers were expelled by the French forces and the village was destroyed to make way for the reconstruction of the site as a tourist attraction it is known for today (Shaw 2018). Such historical tensions between heritage and social and religious life defy prevailing preservation concepts and practices, and are increasingly acknowledged by actors of contemporary archaeological practice and critical heritage

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studies (e.g. Byrne 1991, Corsane 2005, Smith 2006, Harrison 2010, Bernbeck 2013, Meskell 2014), though such approaches remain an exception. In this roundtable, Katharina Galor takes us into the contested area of contemporary East Jerusalem, for example, where cultural heritage has turned into an increasingly powerful tool caught in the competing narratives of who owns the past. Only rarely did archaeological missions involve local Palestinian communities, their own legacies, and their protection. Rather than focusing on the excavation she addresses the human aspects, questioning the interaction between those who explore Jerusalem's antiquities and those who dwell amongst the surviving remnants.

A revisionist history of archaeology and heritage must, above all, acknowledge the colonial legacies still persistent today through a historically based critique of what constitutes heritage—which, like archaeology, is an "invented construct" shaped by Western ideology and power: Practices concerned with "heritage" and preservation, including the discipline of archaeology itself, emerged through historical trajectories of fieldwork, survey, and museum-building in the colonial and postcolonial Middle East (Meskell 1998, Pollock and Bernbeck 2005). It is these practices, which besides local engagement, must be reassessed through critical engagement with histories of how the material past, its study, and its preservation have been perceived across the region in the era of peak European influence and intervention, from the mid-19th century onwards, but also before. Wendy Shaw's essay on the ancient ruins of Athens takes us back to the colonial origins of Europe's involvement in preservation, the "imaginary colonialism," which is also embodied by technologies of (visual) recording. Preservation, she argues, is built on the idea of worship of an imagined past and continued today by tourists and their own visual practices, all of which replaced the habitation of local populations who once called the ruins their home. Christina Riggs explains how colonial ideas persist today in museum display, exhibition, and debates. Focusing on Italian missions in Egypt, she examines the difficulties of today's museums to display and discuss the history of archaeology without evoking colonial nostalgia for a Middle East and to engage with the extent of the social changes archaeology wrought in indigenous communities. Indeed, the colonial past haunts current heritage initiatives and preservation practices. It sometimes seems as if the ethics of preservation even hinder museums in Europe to engage with their colonial past although the public would be capable of "coping" with such insights (and presumably appreciate them). In his essay, William Carruthers reminds us of UNESCO's International Campaign in Nubia, which removed local populations from its work. He considers parallels with a recent initiative to launch

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cultural property "safe havens": places, which can be used to protect cultural property threatened by terrorism and armed conflict. The essay criticizes this action, particularly in terms of the way in which it removes local populations and human agency from discussion of the potential workings of these locations.

Who should be given a voice? What if "heritage" intervenes with human beings and their local practices, such as burial, religious rituals, or simply habitation? What if the material itself is a challenge and resists classic notions of preservation: think of talismans, relics, and other objects of worship, which are—like many sites—not "eligible" for preservation according to Western standards, because they might not be allowed to be touched, or even to be looked at? Such questions challenge the disciplinary baggage, canons, and categories we use in the current discourses, which in many cases prove inapplicable and restricting for the material in question. We neither have the same kind of written account of "alternative preservation" (used here to indicate something deviating from the dominant, not from the "normal"), for example, nor do many sites correspond with Western and scientific value systems, which often assign prestige to material culture according to their durability (Engmann in this issue). They are simply valuable for different reasons. But rather than exclude such objects from a heritage discourse, we might expand our notion of "preservationist activity," which may reach from remudding ceremonies to nonhuman actors, to show that prevailing archaeology and heritage models are not "universal."

At the center of all interventions here—theoretical, historical, historiographic, and practical—is human local interaction and living experience. In outlining the numerous ways communities of different religions and societies revered the past throughout their material history, the essays were written under the premise that paying attention to the polyvalent approaches to "heritage" in history will also be instructive today.

Finally, several authors also question the morality of preserving and protecting cultural property from destruction while failing to protect populations subject to warfare and violence from the same fate. Our discussion might not help solve this most weighty of all issues, nor will it answer the pressing question, why stones sometimes seem easier to care for than people. Yet it will work against the absence of local voices, physical estrangement, and the increasing segregation of human life from material heritage in contemporary practices and historical narratives. The crises of the present will only change if we tell encounters with the Middle East's material past differently.

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