



## **CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ARMED CONFLICT: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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## Introduction

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, its attacks on Ukraine's cultural heritage immediately made headlines. By December of that year, UNESCO had catalogued 231 sites damaged,<sup>1</sup> and the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense had counted 1189.<sup>2</sup> These estimates include only culturally significant places (including religious buildings, monuments, museums, historic buildings, and libraries) and do not enumerate the individual artifacts and works of art which have been lost, not to mention the damage to untold numbers of unknown archaeological sites.<sup>3</sup> Such damage is likely in violation of international agreements to protect cultural heritage during times of war, such as the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,<sup>4</sup> and reflects what appears to be a deliberate targeting of Ukraine's cultural heritage.

In so doing, Russia is engaging in an unfortunately well-established tactic of aiming at cultural heritage in times of armed conflict. If we define "heritage" as the material manifestations of the past in the present—monuments, artifacts, artworks, archaeology, memorials, museums, historic and religious sites, and similar items or places—it is not difficult to see why it would be targeted.<sup>5</sup> Heritage can be viewed not simply as collections of inert objects, but as an inflection point for social and cultural dynamics: it forms a treasured basis for identities, connects communities to their pasts and their ancestors, and bears religious, historical, educational, political, economic, and other forms of significance for living people. As Rosén (2021, 2) puts it, heritage "articulates [a] sense of belonging."

As a result, its damage, destruction, and theft in times of conflict affects not only heritage itself, but the people for whom it holds deep meaning. Such targeting has implications for not only the morale, religious practice, historical connections, and

economy of the associated community, whether this community is defined in ethnic, religious, national, or other terms. It can also call into question the community's very survival as a culture—its ability to define itself as distinct from others and to pass on its identity to future generations. It is not the mere destruction of objects that is at issue here, but the wide range and depth of values that such objects contain, and the effects of their destruction on living people—as well as attempts to prevent and to remediate such damage.

The destruction and protection of heritage in contexts of armed conflict, as well as remediation after conflict, is therefore a topic of significant academic interest.<sup>6</sup> This brief literature review considers recent scholarship in this field. There is no one disciplinary orientation for this work: scholars in archaeology, anthropology, history, international relations, international law, peace and conflict studies, and other fields have all addressed the topic. Focused on the interaction between tangible heritage and people, this review is generally oriented toward social science literature, especially but not exclusively from the field of heritage studies (which draws particularly on archaeology and anthropology) and from the subset of scholars of international law working on heritage topics. Surveying scholarship in English, it emphasizes work published since 2015. In preference to an exhaustive list of all publications, this review aims to cover the recent trends in the literature. Inclusion in or exclusion from this review does not indicate a judgment on the quality of the research. The review is divided into three sections: it first traces themes in the scholarly literature; briefly aggregates research on specific recent instances of conflict; and, finally, runs down an inexhaustive list of institutions and initiatives active in this research space.

1 <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>. This number includes only sites whose damage UNESCO was able to verify.

2 <https://mkip.gov.ua/news/8414.html>

3 See this review's section on Ukraine for a discussion of various organizations tracking this destruction.

4 <https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention>

5 Cultural heritage can be both tangible (e.g., artifacts, buildings) and intangible (e.g. myths, dances). While many of the issues covered in this review can apply to both forms, the term "heritage" is here used to refer to the material aspects of heritage. This review also uses the term "cultural heritage" rather than "cultural property," mainly for consistency, but for a discussion of the valences of the two terms and their ramifications in international law, see Rosén (2021, 12–15).

6 And policy interest, although this review focuses on the academic literature. Actors involved or interested in the protection of heritage in war include parties to conflict (as an example, the US military has consulted with archaeologists regarding heritage, e.g., in its invasion of Iraq; see Hamilakis 2009), civil society and non-state actors (e.g., Kim 2021), NATO (e.g., Romiti and Folliero 2021), and, of course, the UN system, among others.

## Themes in the literature

### Actors, motivations, and impacts

Which actors in armed conflict target cultural heritage, and why? The introduction of this review mentions the most fundamental reason: attacks on cultural heritage are attacks on the people for whom that heritage is valuable. Much of the work on this topic considers the role of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) (e.g. Geneva Call 2018; Lostal, Hausler, and Bongard 2017; and many of the case-specific studies cited here).<sup>7</sup> The focus is generally on areas such as the Middle East and on Islamist groups; ANSAs in areas such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic have largely been left out of the discussion. Lee and González Zarandona (2020) suggest that overemphasizing ANSAs, however, threatens to ignore destruction perpetrated “from above,” by government forces against their own people, as in Myanmar.

While the question of why and to what ends actors in conflict destroy heritage appears in many of the works covered in this review, one attempt at systematically categorizing their motivations is of note. Drawing on peace and conflict studies, Brosché et al. (2017) identify conflict goals, military-strategic attacks, signaling attacks, and economic incentives as motivations. Of these, the first and third (conflict goals and signaling attacks) appear more in line with most of the scholarship on the social impact of heritage destruction, and the last (economic incentives) is covered in a particular subset of scholarship on the financial aspects that motivate looting and illicit sales (see below). A notable proportion of heritage destruction in conflict involves religious motivations. The damage wrought by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, for example, is often seen through the lens of iconoclasm (Lee and González Zarandona 2020; Clapperton, Jones, and Smith 2017; but see Harmanşah 2015 for a complicating argument). In recent years, a particular motivation for destruction has come to the fore in scholarship: the attempt to destroy a people as a people, that is, the link between targeting cultural heritage and genocide or other atrocity crimes (discussed further below). Such accounts emphasize how heritage destruction attempts to damage societies and to attack people through attacking their culture. At the same time, however, heritage destruction can be an affirmative project of governance. Looking at the destruction of cultural heritage in Mali, Ba suggests that the Islamist group Ansar Dine was attempting to “assert ... their rule over a territory and its

people [and] reconfigure[e] the relations of power” (Ba 2020a, 5). Heritage destruction can be an attempt to not only eliminate one order but to institute a new one.

Another motivation for destruction is economic gain (Basnet Silwal 2021), an aspect increasingly covered in the literature. Looting is a major contributor to heritage destruction in areas subject to armed conflict. The theft of heritage artifacts from places such as museums, along with unauthorized excavations of archaeological sites in order to sell antiquities on the art market, occurred during the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Pollock 2016, 222) and in many other instances. Such looting empties cultural institutions of their holdings, irreparably destroys archaeological sites and knowledge, and transfers collective heritage from public to private hands. It can be opportunistic or subsistence-oriented and carried out by individuals. It can also, however, be systematic, as when IS and other armed groups have used the sale of antiquities to finance their activities, including terrorism—a topic of increasing scholarly interest (e.g. Lostal 2020; Musu 2021; chapters in Finkelstein, Rosén, and Gillman 2021). The economic impact on targeted communities is also relevant: especially in places where heritage tourism contributes meaningfully to local economic systems, the destruction of heritage resources reaches into a future beyond the end of armed conflict to remove the potential for restoration of this revenue stream (Groizard and Santana-Gallego 2018).<sup>8</sup>

Further discussions of heritage, looting, and war profiteering appear in a volume edited by Jorgenson (2020), and specific case studies include work by Almohamad (2021) on the Islamic State and Emtseva (2021) on Yemen. Barker (2018) suggests that overall, existing responses remain inadequate to confront the growing impact of looting. Emtseva (2021) traces potential legal responses to the specific case of looted heritage, and, drawing on the application of new technologies in archaeology, Masini and Lasaponara (2020) suggest that remote sensing via satellite can be effective in identifying looted sites in conflict contexts where it is impractical to make assessments on the ground. There have been calls for the “rescue” of antiquities by purchasing them and moving them to safety in other locations; Jakubowski (2019) also considers the international law context for the creation of “safe havens” for cultural heritage in extraterritorial locations. However, Hardy (2021) argues that this practice of “rescue” actually incentivizes looting, corruption, and further destruction.

<sup>7</sup> Geneva Call (2018, 33–36) also notes instances of ANSAs actively protecting heritage.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, protecting heritage and removing this funding source can be part of a peacebuilding agenda (Vlasic and Turku 2016); see the section on peacebuilding and recovery in this review.

## Global audiences

While the primary target of heritage destruction is clearly the communities associated with it, recent scholarship has zoomed out to consider international and global audiences—a question increasingly relevant in a globalized world with instantaneous digital dissemination of media. Some destruction, argues Pollock (2016, 222), “seems to be orchestrated specifically for a global forum.” This has been argued for the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (an early publication on the topic is Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2003) and for the destruction of statues by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Harmanşah (2015) notes that IS’s destruction of cultural heritage targeted local senses of belonging but was also a propagandistic “power discourse” (Harmanşah 2015, 173) that mobilized international media and techniques of digital dissemination for attention and outrage. Smith et al. (2016) trace how IS used social media to disseminate its destruction as a form of “socially mediated terrorism,” and Cunliffe and Curini (2018) perform a sentiment analysis to understand the specific nature of actual audience responses to IS’s online efforts, finding that publicized heritage destruction is as likely to produce pro- as anti-IS response.

In addition to aiming at local residents, it is also possible for heritage destruction to orient toward international forms of governance. In Mali, after the targeting of religious sites significant to local communities by the Islamist group Ansar Dine, Joy (2016) notes that it was not only local religious practice that Ansar Dine aimed to affect: she argues that another target was the international governing regime represented by UNESCO, which, through assigning World Heritage status and other actions, had intervened in Mali’s Islamic identity. Bamidele et al. (2022) examine the significance of World Heritage status in the insurgents’ choice of which heritage to attack; as Levin et al. (2019) note, armed conflicts are the reason for nearly half the entries on the List of World Heritage in Danger (although these are not necessarily all deliberately targeted).<sup>9</sup>

## International law and justice

The frameworks of international law governing cultural heritage protection are an evergreen topic in scholarship. While formal protections for heritage in war date back at least to the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, recent years have brought more attention to the impact of heritage destruction on people. This has led to a focus within systems of international law and justice on the “human element” of the problem (Clark 2018), and to connecting international heritage law to international human rights law (Francioni and Lixinski 2017). Such an orientation reflects an emphasis on how crimes against property are linked to crimes against people, or even a recategorization of destruction of heritage: from a property crime to a crime against people (see Gerstenblith 2016; but see also Lostal 2017 for a critique of anthropocentrism in this system of international justice).

The approach of international law to cultural heritage in war is three-pronged: it aims to prevent, protect, and prosecute (Moffett, Viejo Rose, and Hickey 2020, 1). Recent years have seen a number of publications on international law, including Blake (2015), Higgins (2020), and Lostal (2018), the latter of whom considers ways to address the holes in existing international legal regimes, with special attention to the World Heritage Convention. Numerous edited volumes are also relevant, including Finkelstein, Rosén, and Gillman’s recent book (2021), which explicitly aims to connect studies of law with studies of cultural heritage, and the Oxford Handbook of International Cultural Heritage Law (Francioni and Vrdoljak 2020). The latter’s purview is not limited to cases of armed conflict, but contains significant material in this area, including work on the major trends identified here such as the issues of cultural genocide and responsibility to protect—paralleled by chapters in Cuno and Weiss (2022).

Recent years have revitalized the topic of heritage protection in the UN system: UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017),<sup>10</sup> proposed by Italy and France, aims to protect cultural heritage from the unlawful acts of terrorist groups. This resolution places attacks on cultural heritage within the context of security (see also the section on security below). While this has been viewed as a “historic milestone” in terms of locating heritage in the security context and integrating it into frameworks of global governance (Jakubowski 2018, 21), the resolution has limitations. Baj argues that it does indeed reinforce global governance cooperation on the issue (Baj 2021). However, she also states that in terms of actual protections it is weak and generic, lacking sufficient routes for action, and focuses excessively on terrorist groups, especially the

<sup>9</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2347-%282017%29>

Islamic State (Baj 2021)—a critique echoed by Gowan (2022), who notes that its impact has not been large.

In addition to looking at prevention and protection, scholarship on law also considers the prosecution of crimes involving cultural heritage. Of particular interest is the al Mahdi case.<sup>11</sup> In 2012, Ansar Dine destroyed various forms of heritage in Timbuktu, Mali (see the Mali section of this report for further discussion of this case from other angles). The leader of Ansar Dine, Ahmad al Faqi al Mahdi, was arrested and charged by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2015 for the war crime of intentional destruction of cultural heritage, and in 2016 was subject to the first instance of a conviction on this as an independent charge. A significant subset of literature specifically considers the Al Mahdi case and the role of the ICC (Lostal 2017, 2022; Ba 2020b; Ellis 2017; Casaly 2016; Green Martínez 2015; Wierczyńska and Jakubowski 2017; Capone 2018; Curci 2019; Drumbl 2019). Other scholarship on the legal system includes work on the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Brammertz et al. 2016). Clark (2018) argues that the ICTY directed important attention to the “human dimension” of crimes against heritage, considering both impact and intent. Additional work on prosecution examines questions such as whether criminal accountability is even plausible—e.g. Lostal’s (2015) consideration of the case of Syria.

## Security frameworks and links to atrocity crimes

Much of the work on prevention of heritage destruction is focused on legal protections. However, the topic has also begun to shift toward other angles. Luck (2018) notes the influence of the “security lens” for looking at heritage destruction. This, along with the “counterterrorism lens,” considers such destruction as a threat to international peace. Along with Russo and Giusti’s (2019) assessment of the growing “securitization” of the topic (see also Foradori, Giusti, and Lamonica 2018 on the impact of this securitization on various states’ policies), Christensen (2022) identifies an increasing amount of literature on this heritage-security nexus. Stating that “the protection of cultural heritage has found its way into rhetoric relating to security politics, thus placing it on political agendas,” Christensen notes that this securitization requires redoubling scholars’ critical capacity for assessing how “securitizing actors” act and the question of who benefits. This challenge has given rise to a number of attempts to reckon with the ethical and philosophical impact of potential intervention, especially that which involves force (Bülow 2020; Frowe and Matravers 2019).

In a parallel development, cultural heritage is increasingly framed as a question of human rights, both within and outside the issue of its involvement in armed conflict (see for example Durbach and Lixinski 2017 or Matthews et al. 2020). Linking heritage destruction to human rights frameworks (see Gerstenblith 2016), viewing it as a crime against humanity (Gottlieb 2020), and invoking the heritage-security nexus open up certain avenues for prevention and remediation.

Recently, a subset of scholarship has pushed to conceptually link attacks on cultural heritage and atrocity crimes against people. This highlights a particular motivation for heritage destruction—erasure of a people as a people by eliminating salient manifestations of their identity and history—and simultaneously mobilizes the humanitarian aspect of heritage protection. In 2014, a UNESCO report considered heritage destruction as “cultural cleansing” in Iraq and Syria (UNESCO 2014); then-Director General Irina Bokova also used the term (Bokova 2015), which continues to be mobilized (Adams 2022). “Cultural genocide” has also gained currency: “the idea that cultural groups may be destroyed by destroying the material expressions or ‘anchorage’ of their culture” (Hamilton 2021, 131). This is not a truly novel development—rather, as Bilsky and Klagsbrun (2018) remind us, it is the return of an idea first advanced by Raphael Lemkin. Cultural genocide was part of Lemkin’s original definition of the term “genocide,” although this was removed from the final text of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Cuno and Weiss 2022; Hamilton 2021). Some have pushed for the return of this term and for connecting the destruction of heritage and the perpetration of atrocity against living people (Cuno and Weiss 2022; Weiss and Connelly 2019; 2017). “Cultural genocide,” Luck (2018, 13) argues, should be used in order to explicitly “stress the linkages between cultural and physical violence.” The term is also increasingly examined in studies of law (Novic 2016; Bachman 2019; Motta 2021), although Nafziger (2020) suggests that it “lacks a secure foundation in international law.”

Drawing connections between violence against heritage and mass atrocities against people shapes possible responses to such destruction. Most notable are the arguments that cultural genocide or cultural cleansing invokes the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Nafziger 2020; Lenzerini 2016; Adams 2022; Cuno 2016; Paauwe and Pittalwala 2021). In this framework, the destruction of heritage puts the international community on notice for intervention to protect both heritage and people. In an argument for R2P, Weiss and Connelly (2019) suggest that protecting people and protecting culture are inextricable goals, rather than requiring a hierarchical sorting. While they note that R2P has faced “considerable political

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.icc-cpi.int/mali/al-mahdi>

headwinds” (Weiss and Connelly 2019, 2), they nevertheless argue that attaching the protection of cultural heritage to this emerging norm is a promising route for confronting both heritage destruction and atrocities against people. Similarly, Collins (2018) argues for R2P as a productive response to the insufficiencies of the current international framework for heritage protection.

However, other work on heritage protection in war has cautioned against uncritically pursuing this goal. Despite the argument that attacks on heritage indicate that attacks on people are next, the strength of this connection remains a matter of debate. Frowe and Matravers note “many examples of damage to heritage ... are not part of or precursors to genocidal campaigns”: recent cases in which protestors have damaged or defaced statues of Cecil Rhodes, Jefferson Davis, or King Leopold II have not preceded attempts at genocide (Frowe and Matravers 2019, 11). If this connection is not reliable, calls for applying R2P become more questionable. Invoking R2P raises significant questions in terms of the ethics of armed intervention, especially in cases where heritage, but not human beings, has been damaged. Frowe and Matravers (2019) argue that protecting heritage should not be put on the same level as protecting people; they suggest that arguments for incorporating heritage into R2P frameworks feature inadequate moral justifications, especially given the significant potential negative externalities of military intervention. Relatedly, Rosén (2020) argues that increasing efforts by international actors to protect heritage can actually “contribute to make cultural heritage vulnerable or even to cause its destruction. The more we talk about cultural heritage and its value and the importance of protecting it, the more interesting it becomes for some groups to target it.”

Whether (and how) to intervene is a matter of discussion at high levels. Despite R2P arguments, it is not clear to what extent peacekeeping and military operations, NATO, the UN, and similar actors have the capacity to act to avert heritage destruction, or the interest in doing so, in many cases. A recent edited volume examining heritage in conflict from the perspective of defense studies contributes a focus on military action (Clack and Dunkley 2022); the topic is also highly salient in discussions of multilateral peacekeeping operations. The goal of protecting heritage has already formed part of interventions such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA),<sup>12</sup> but with limited resources for implementation (Gowan 2022, 519). Advocates of peacekeeping intervention on behalf of heritage protection face an apparent uphill battle (see Gowan 2022), even if Leloup (2019) has argued that heritage protection can contribute to peacekeeping missions’ stabilization mandates. Still, the topic of intervention is

on the agenda at global fora, especially given the increasing framing of heritage destruction as a security issue. UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (see the section on international law above) is one outcome of this, which highlights the actions of terrorist groups. Scholars have examined the implications of the Resolution and of the 1954 Convention for the military operating environment (e.g. Dunkley 2021), along with the “material impact” of peacekeeping operations on heritage (Leloup and Maertens 2022). Given Italy’s role (along with France) in advancing Resolution 2347, scholars have also particularly considered that country’s contribution to the idea of “cultural peacekeeping” (Foradori 2017; Foradori and Rosa 2017; Tercovich 2016). Heritage destruction has been under discussion at symposia on UN peacekeeping, including one meeting held by the Danish Permanent Mission to the UN in 2014, addressing whether the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) should, or has the capacity to, foreground the protection of heritage.<sup>13</sup> NATO, for its part, has also displayed interest in the question. A NATO Advanced Research Workshop produced a book on *The Safety and Security of Cultural Heritage in Zones of War or Instability* (Romiti and Folliero 2021), while an active role for NATO itself in cultural heritage protection has been examined in reports such as Rosén (2017).

## Remediation, reconstruction, reparations

One of the liveliest topics in the recent literature centers around the question of what to do with tangible heritage after it has been targeted in armed conflict. Such targeting can leave varying outlooks: some heritage has the capacity to be rebuilt, while other heritage has been effectively erased. Numerous projects, on scales from local to global, exist to manage heritage after conflict, whether this means pursuing reconstruction, preserving it as ruin, or removing its damaged remains. Indeed, Matravers (2019) argues that the remediation of heritage destruction is actually an ethical obligation—a philosophical position which posits that there is a duty to address and rectify heritage destruction as a form of injustice, and that reconstruction is a method for so doing.

Of greatest relevance to this review are projects involving international actors, such as UNESCO’s interventions in Iraq (see e.g. Isakhan and Meskell 2019). Khalaf (2020) has argued that heritage reconstruction can and should fit into international policy frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, and Alsalloum and Brown (2019) have attempted to develop a specific policy framework to guide heritage remediation and reconciliation

<sup>12</sup> <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/cultural-heritage>

<sup>13</sup> [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8ece4b12abd9a4deae2dad/t/5ab6439c8a922ddf1220afa/1521894303264/UN\\_NY\\_CPP\\_Invitation\\_Par-ticipants\\_ConceptNote.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a8ece4b12abd9a4deae2dad/t/5ab6439c8a922ddf1220afa/1521894303264/UN_NY_CPP_Invitation_Par-ticipants_ConceptNote.pdf)

after conflict. While such heritage-focused projects of reconstruction are often framed as ostensibly apolitical, when international relationships and funding come into play, political considerations are inevitable (see Luke and Kersel 2012 for this argument in a non-conflict context). As a result, post-conflict projects (for varying values of “post”) have been critically assessed in terms of their political valences: how Russia’s involvement in Palmyra, Syria, for example, plays into its assertions of power and attempts to shape international relationships (Plets 2017).

A critique which often emerges is that of a disconnect between international goals and efforts, and the actual needs of people on the ground (Al Quntar and Daniels 2016; Azzouz 2022). Barakat (2021) argues, looking at the MENA region broadly, that an integrated or holistic approach, which views post-conflict remediation as part of a longer-term developmental strategy and attends closely to local conditions and needs, is currently both lacking and necessary. Numerous scholars have attempted to elicit, often through surveys and interviews, the opinions of people whose heritage has been damaged in armed conflict. Such research explores how people have been affected by destruction and their perspectives on what is needed in its wake, along with who can or should go about this remediation, and how. Scholarship on this topic includes work with and on Yazidis in Iraq (Isakhan and Shahab 2020), Syrian and Iraqi Christians (Isakhan and Shahab 2022), residents of Mosul (Isakhan and Meskell 2019) and Aleppo (Mahfouz 2021), and exiled Syrians in the UK along with other members of the British public (Kamash 2017). This also entails the necessary involvement of scholars and experts from and in affected regions along with broader publics (Azzouz 2022).

Notably, reconstruction of heritage is not the only approach available. Moffett et al. (2020) aim to expand the frame of possible responses by arguing for reparations: attending to the needs of affected communities and exploring multiple ways of addressing them, including methods that focus less on material restoration than on heritage-focused compensation, education, and cultural revitalization. The outcome of the Al Mahdi case involved specific provision for reparations; these have been examined by Lostal (2022) and Capone (2018), along with Dijkstal’s (2019) consideration of the outcome within a human rights framework for both victims and perpetrators. Other scholars (e.g. chapters in Finkelstein, Rosén, and Gillman 2021) also consider the physical return of cultural heritage as a form of post-conflict remediation.

## Peacebuilding and recovery

Heritage can function as an aspect of societal recovery after conflict. The International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), for example, has long argued that heritage plays a role in communities’ resilience and ability to recover from trauma, making it an important part of post-conflict plans (Stanley-Price 2007; Harrowell and Selter 2021; Harrowell and Tandon 2022). Organizations focused on peacebuilding research, e.g. the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), have also foregrounded the importance of culture and heritage reconstruction in establishing peace in countries like Iraq (Bourhrous, Fazil, and O’Driscoll 2022). Numerous scholars argue for including heritage in peacebuilding efforts (Vlasic and Turku 2016) and transitional justice (Lostal and Cunliffe 2016).

Efforts to restore heritage, and the negotiations around this process, have come to be viewed as an element of post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation (Kalman 2017). Heritage reconstruction can be part of re-establishing memory and residence in place, especially in the aftermath of forced migration, as Walasek (2019) notes for Bosnia and Herzegovina. A parallel example in Kosovo indicates that reconstruction efforts themselves can be utilized to facilitate dialogue and peacebuilding (Legnér 2018), while Azzouz (2019), in Syria, points out that residents of Homs have engaged in their own heritage-focused efforts which shore up and demonstrate their resilience in the face of ongoing war.

Still, whether the goal of peacebuilding through post-conflict heritage projects is achieved can depend on these projects’ operationalization. Atabay et al. (2022) note that while memorialization can be an essential part of communities’ post-trauma recovery, depending on how memorialization proceeds, it can also reopen wounds and aggravate social division. Indeed, actors in conflicts can continue to contest heritage-focused peacebuilding projects: Walasek (2019) describes how local political contestation, including prevention of heritage reconstruction, prolonged unresolved conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a cautionary and extreme example, Isakhan and Akbar (2022) recount that in 2014, Shia leaders in Iraq “instrumentalized the case of protecting heritage not to advance peace and security, but to create entirely new militias, to recruit thousands of Shia faithful, to mobilize them to fight against the IS, and to engage in violence and human rights abuses.” When led by regimes that continue to participate in conflict, such as the Syrian government, rebuilding projects can simply reinscribe one side of the conflict and assert one actor’s power to control heritage, while also shoring up that actor’s political power based on heritage itself (Munawar and Symonds 2022). Munawar and Symonds (2022), while critiquing Syrian government projects in this arena,



propose an alternative, grassroots-based approach which they argue provides a more genuine opportunity to build peace. This call for attention to the grassroots is also made by scholars such as Matthews et al. (2020), who stress the vital importance of peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts being grounded in the local—rather than imposed by international actors—and attending to local dynamics, such as gender.

## Major recent cases

While the primary target of heritage destruction is clearly the communities associated with it, recent scholarship has zoomed out to consider international and global audiences—a question increasingly relevant in a globalized world with instantaneous digital dissemination of media. Some destruction, argues Pollock (2016, 222), “seems to be orchestrated specifically for a global forum.” This has been argued for the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (an early publication on the topic is Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2003) and for the destruction of statues by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Harmanşah (2015) notes that IS’s destruction of cultural heritage targeted local senses of belonging but was also a propagandistic “power discourse” (Harmanşah 2015, 173) that mobilized international media and techniques of digital dissemination for attention and outrage. Smith et al. (2016) trace how IS used social media to disseminate its destruction as a form of “socially mediated terrorism,” and Cunliffe and Curini (2018) perform a sentiment analysis to understand the specific nature of actual audience responses to IS’s online efforts, finding that publicized heritage destruction is as likely to produce pro- as anti-IS response.

In addition to aiming at local residents, it is also possible for heritage destruction to orient toward international forms of governance. In Mali, after the targeting of religious sites significant to local communities by the Islamist group Ansar Dine, Joy (2016) notes that it was not only local religious practice that Ansar Dine aimed to affect: she argues that another target was the international governing regime represented by UNESCO, which, through assigning World Heritage status and other actions, had intervened in Mali’s Islamic identity. Bamidele et al. (2022) examine the significance of World Heritage status in the insurgents’ choice of which heritage to attack; as Levin et al. (2019) note, armed conflicts are the reason for nearly half the entries on the List of World Heritage in Danger (although these are not necessarily all deliberately targeted).

## Iraq and Syria

The damage wrought by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, especially during its peak in 2015-16, has been the topic of much research. Such destruction was monitored at the time—and attempts at mitigation were put in place—by numerous projects. These include, among others, several programs emanating from a collaboration between the American School of Oriental Research and the US Department of State (Danti 2015 reports on the results of these efforts) and a humanitarian-oriented effort called Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (Al Quntar et al. 2015).<sup>14</sup> However, Al Quntar and Daniels (2016), in a commentary echoed by other scholars, critique many of these international projects which aim to respond to heritage destruction through mitigation, training, and awareness-raising on the basis that they fail to connect international knowledge and capabilities with actual, on-the-ground needs.

The extensive targeting of heritage in Iraq and Syria by the IS is often examined as what Stein (2022) calls “performative destruction,” leading to examinations of its media impact and online dissemination (Cunliffe and Curini 2018; Smith et al. 2016; Harmanşah 2015; Cardoso and Brites 2017), including its visual messaging and interaction with UNESCO discourses (Payntar 2022). Looking at other motivations for IS’s actions, Shahab and Isakhan (2018) have framed them through an anthropological lens as a ritualized group practice, while Almohamad (2021), like Campbell and Paul (2019), directs our attention to IS’s financial motivations, which have driven its engagement in systematic antiquities looting. Considering IS’s targeting of Yezidi heritage specifically, Fobbe et al. (2021) argue that this qualifies as a war crime, crime against humanity, and “evidence of genocidal intent,” dovetailing with the scholarship that increasingly considers “cultural genocide” as a framework. Relatedly, Hill’s (2016) work on possible responses to IS in international law argues for prosecuting its acts of heritage destruction as cultural cleansing and as crimes against humanity.

Given the time frame of the peak of IS’s powers, there has been increasing interest in post-conflict attempts at various forms of remediation of heritage destruction, including reconstruction. Work by Isakhan and Shahab examines local opinion on reconstruction, based on interviews with people from the Yezidi community (Isakhan and Shahab 2020) and with Syrian and Iraqi Christians (Isakhan and Shahab 2022); other works investigating opinions on reconstruction projects include Isakhan and Meskell (2019) and Kamash (2017). At the same time, Azzouz (2022) strongly critiques many post-conflict heritage reconstruction efforts in Syria, especially by international actors, which “turn our [Syrians’] pain and trauma into a ‘heritage project.’” Commentaries like Azzouz’s direct important attention to the ethical and political challenges of external intervention.

14 Another effort in the region worth noting is the Iraq Cultural Property Destruction database (Isakhan 2015)

In Syria, in addition to scholarship on the international legal frameworks available for protecting cultural heritage in the country (Cunliffe, Muhsen, and Lostal 2016), numerous works have covered the social and political aspects of destruction—whether by IS or by the Syrian government regime—and reconstruction. Research includes work on reconstruction projects and the resilience of residents of Homs by Azzouz (2019), who also covers the potential pitfalls, especially political, of reconstruction plans in Syria (2020). Similarly, Munawar examines Syrian heritage reconstruction (2019) and discusses the political valences of reconstruction efforts at Palmyra (2017); the latter topic is covered from another angle—the political agenda of the Russian state’s “strategic manipulation” of heritage—by Plets (2017).

Peacebuilding is explicitly considered as an aspect of rebuilding. Munawar and Symonds (2022), in a critique of Syrian government efforts at reconstruction, argue for an alternative approach that foregrounds the grassroots in order to facilitate peacebuilding and reconciliation; Matthews et al. (2020) also argue for a locally grounded approach in Iraq. The topic is also taken up by Lostal and Cunliffe (2016), who argue for including heritage in Syria’s transitional justice efforts. Vlastic and Turku (2016), from the perspective of law, also state that protecting cultural heritage should be part of a peacebuilding strategy in both Syria and Iraq after IS.

## Mali

In Mali, targeting of Timbuktu’s religious heritage by the Islamist group Ansar Dine in 2012 ultimately led to the first conviction at the ICC for heritage destruction as a war crime. This means that the Mali case study, and the Al Mahdi case at the ICC, holds a landmark place in scholarship on the international-law aspects of heritage destruction. For legal angles that especially consider the ICC’s role, see Ellis (2017) and Casaly (2016), along with Green Martínez’s (2015) examination of whether the events qualify as war crimes or crimes against humanity, and Wierczyńska and Jakubowski’s (2017) discussion of where this case fits in the development of and outlook for the prosecution of crimes against heritage.

Scholars have also considered the crime’s victims and the reparations associated with the outcomes of the case (Lostal 2022; Dijkstal 2019; Capone 2018). Lostal (2017) critically assesses whether the case’s emphasis on damage to local communities is anthropocentric in a way that ultimately compromises future prosecutions by “undermin[ing] the conceptual foundation for the special protection” heritage receives. Ba (2019) argues that in the proceedings, the international community, as personified in UNESCO, emerged as an additional symbolic victim. Other work by Ba (2020b) identifies a disconnect between how the international community, the Malian state, and local Malian communities understand heritage and its value.

Turning away from the ICC to conditions on the ground, Ba, a political scientist, speaks to destruction as a part of the project of governance by Ansar Dine (Ba 2019), while Joy, an archaeologist, investigates the interaction of their projects of destruction with heritage regimes like UNESCO (2016; 2018)—a topic also considered by Bamidele et al. (2022). Leloup (2019) looks at the role of MINUSMA’s peacekeeping forces and the protection of heritage as part of their stabilization mandate.

## Ukraine

As an ongoing and relatively young conflict, Ukraine’s invasion by Russia has produced intense interest but as yet very limited academic publication (but see Pavlyshyn 2022; Iakovlenko 2022). Projects by media outlets such as the New York Times have been important in tracking Russia’s destruction of Ukrainian heritage, both deliberate and as collateral damage (Farago 2022; Farago et al. 2022). The Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab at the Virginia Museum of Natural History, partnered with the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, also has been covering this case by tracking and documenting destruction,<sup>15</sup> as have UNESCO,<sup>16</sup> the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (which launched an interactive map of cultural losses),<sup>17</sup> and the Ukrainian government.<sup>18</sup> Responses to the destruction have included efforts to digitize heritage and preserve the digital footprint of heritage organizations, such as the work of Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO).<sup>19</sup>

15 <https://www.vmnh.net/research-collections/chml>

16 <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>

17 <https://uaculture.org/culture-loss/>

18 <https://culturecrimes.mkp.gov.ua/>

19 <https://www.sucho.org/>. Digitizing heritage is of increasing interest to countries facing threats like conflict and climate change. The island nation of Tuvalu is one example of a nation seeking to build a “digital twin” of itself online; see <https://longnow.org/ideas/the-first-digital-nation/>. Many of these efforts focus on digitizing intangible heritage, such as music (Rakena 2018).

## Institutions and Projects

This section lists a few of the institutions and research projects investigating this topic—conducting/publishing research and/or hosting conferences and other events—to provide an overview of the contemporary landscape. This landscape of research is always shifting, although this review attempts to include only efforts which are ongoing at time of publication, and, most importantly, the list is only a sampling of the many efforts to conduct research on this topic.<sup>20</sup>

- After Islamic State, a partnership of University of Pennsylvania, Deakin University, Princeton University’s Arab Barometer, and local partners in Syria and Iraq<sup>21</sup>
- Caucasus Heritage Watch, a joint effort of Cornell University and Purdue University<sup>22</sup>
- The Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies<sup>23</sup>
- The Conflict Culture Research Network, involving the Penn Museum, Smithsonian Institution, and American Association for the Advancement of Science<sup>24</sup>
- The Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab at the Virginia Museum of Natural History, involving the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative<sup>25</sup>
- The Cultural Restoration Programme for Northern Iraq, involving the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Purdue University, the University of Notre Dame, Indiana University and the University of Duhok<sup>26</sup>
- Destructive Exploitation and Care of Cultural Objects and Professional/Public Education for Sustainable Heritage Management, a joint project of the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research, University of Stirling, and Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, funded by the European Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage and Global Change<sup>27</sup>
- Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa, run by the Universities of Oxford, Leicester, and Durham<sup>28</sup>
- The Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, at the Ralph Bunche Institute, City University of New York<sup>29</sup>
- The J. Paul Getty Trust, which publishes Occasional Papers in Cultural Heritage Policy<sup>30</sup>
- The Manar al-Athar photographic database of cultural heritage in the Middle East, based at the University of Oxford<sup>31</sup>
- Measuring Cultural Property Destruction in Iraq and Syria, based at Deakin University and partnered with the Australian Research Council and Australian Department of Defence<sup>32</sup>
- The Nahrein Network at University College London, Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies and Scientific Research—Cultural Heritage Organization, and the British Museum<sup>33</sup>
- The Nordic Center for Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict, based at the University of Copenhagen<sup>34</sup>
- Research, Assessment and Safeguarding of the Heritage of Iraq in Danger<sup>35</sup>
- Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq, “a consortium of Smithsonian and the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Shawnee State University, The Day After Association, and the U.S. Institute of Peace”<sup>36</sup>
- Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online<sup>37</sup>
- The Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative<sup>38</sup>
- The Ukrainian Culture Foundation<sup>39</sup>

21 <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/afterislamicstate/>

22 <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/>

23 <https://chs-doha.org/en/Research/Pages/Post-war-Reconstruction-and-Development.aspx>

24 <https://www.penn.museum/sites/chc/projects/the-conflict-culture-research-network/>

25 <https://www.vnmh.net/article/the-cultural-heritage-monitoring-lab-chm/2-25-2022>

26 <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2020/cultural-reconstruction-critical-after-islamic-state-occupation>

27 <https://www.stir.ac.uk/news/2023/february-2023-news/heritage-experts-to-study-responses-to-protecting-ukraines-cultural-heritage-and-monuments/>

28 <https://eamena.org/>

29 <https://www.globalr2p.org/cultural-heritage/>

30 <https://www.getty.edu/publications/occasional-papers/>

31 <https://www.manar-al-athar.ox.ac.uk/welcome.html>,  
<https://www.ox.ac.uk/oxford-heritage-projects/oxford-heritage-conflict>

32 <https://adi.deakin.edu.au/research/projects/measuring-cultural-property-destruction-in-iraq-and-syria>

33 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/nahrein/nahrein-network>

34 <https://www.heritageconflict.org/index>

35 <https://rashid-international.org/>

36 <https://global.si.edu/projects/safeguarding-heritage-syria-and-iraq-shosi>

37 <https://www.sucho.org/>

38 <https://culturalrescue.si.edu/>

39 <https://uaculture.org/culture-loss/>

## Conclusion

Recent global events have redirected attention to the destruction of cultural heritage in armed conflict and its impact on affected communities. A focus on how heritage is entangled with people and their identities—rather than simply consisting of inert cultural objects—opens up our understanding of why heritage is targeted in conflict, the effects of such destruction, and routes for both protection and post-conflict remediation. This review has covered some of the trends in the scholarly literature in recent years, from work on destruction itself to the international legal regime, protection and intervention, and discussions of how to confront destruction after conflict as well as to mobilize heritage for recovery. The inexhaustive list of cases included here reiterates the importance of considering heritage destruction and its human aspects within contemporary armed conflicts, in the hope of finding ways to both prevent and remediate heritage destruction itself and its impacts on living people.

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