

**ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for Safeguarding
Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq**

**Special Report:
Current Status of the Raqqa Museum**

S-IZ-100-17-CA021

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January 5, 2018

The Raqqa Museum and its storerooms in nearby Heraqla are dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of the cultural heritage of Raqqa Governorate. Though small in comparison to the museums in Damascus and Aleppo, the Raqqa Museum contains an important collection of excavated remains that date from prehistory to the modern day. Prior to the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the museum was an important local employer and a symbol of civic pride and Raqqawi identity.

The museum is located in the middle of Arafat Square at the southern end of Raqqa's Old City district. It moved to its current location in 1981, a former Ottoman government facility constructed in 1861. In addition to the museum, the building also contains the offices of the Raqqa Governorate division of the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM).

The museum's collections span the entirety of human history in the region, from the Epipaleolithic to early modern times. The wider region contains a wealth of archaeological sites, including Tell Sabi Abyad, Tell Bi'a, Tell Chuera, Tell Munbaqa, Tell es-Sweyhat, Hammam et-Turkman, Halawa, Tell Sheikh Hassan, and Tell Zeidan. The collections also reflect the main periods of occupation of the city of Raqqa, founded in the Hellenistic period as Nikephorion/Kallinikos and successively occupied through the Roman and Byzantine periods. The pre-modern city reached its zenith during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), rising to prominence under Caliph al-Mansur (714–775 CE) and serving as a capital from 796 to 809 CE during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (763–809 CE). The museum housed a large collection of Islamic-period remains, which primarily originate from the Abbasid occupation and from later palaces and fortifications excavated within the city.

The museum's on-site storage consists of two small storerooms on the second floor of the building. The majority of its collections were stored in a series of buildings near the Abbasid-period fortification at Heraqla, located ca. 7.5 km west of the museum. In addition to the storerooms, this location also has the brick kilns that produced the bricks used in the DGAM's reconstruction and restoration activities on the al-Rafiqah City Wall.

The Raqqa Museum and Heraqla Storerooms During the Conflict:

The Raqqa Museum and the Heraqla storerooms have both been heavily affected by the Syrian Civil War. Thieves targeted the Raqqa Museum's collections early in the conflict. ISIS reportedly looted the DGAM storehouses at Heraqla in March 2013. Artifacts from this site and elsewhere were shipped to buyers in Turkey through Tal Abyad. The DGAM attempted to protect the collections by moving them to safer locations, but it was unable to secure all of its materials.¹ The organization occasionally recovered missing artifacts, such as in 2013 when the DGAM found three boxes of antiquities from the Raqqa Museum in the town of Tabqa.²

¹ http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/SYR_DirectorGeneral_appeal_Heraqla_warehouse.pdf

² <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?p=314&id=951>

On November 25, 2014 an explosion, either from a car bomb or an airstrike, detonated near the museum, causing damage to the museum's southern facade.³ On November 14, 2015 local reporting group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS) reported that Russian airstrikes had struck the museum, causing undetermined damage.⁴

The function of the building during ISIS's occupation is unclear. The organization may have housed its Western Police Division near or in parts of the museum.⁵ ISIS reportedly planted explosives in the museum and positioned snipers in the building during the fight to recapture Raqqa. The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which now controls the museum, is clearing mines and debris from the area around the building.⁶ Following the recapture of the area by the SDF, new photographs and video footage emerged that showed the museum's poor condition.⁷

The Current Condition of the Raqqa Museum and the Heraqla Storerooms

In early December 2017, the Authority of Tourism and Protection of Antiquities - Al Jazira Canton (ATPA) published photographs that show the condition of the building's interior and exterior.⁸ Though largely intact, the building's facade has been scarred by the fight for the city. Most notably, a large hole exists at street level in the eastern wall of the building and another hole is present in the roof of the building. The latter was likely caused by artillery.

The interior of the building is full of trash and other debris. The exhibition cases have been smashed open and their contents are gone. However, portions of the museum's collection remain. These are primarily clustered in a few rooms on the second floor of the museum. The second floor also contains both of the museum's storerooms, which were looted. The western storeroom is filled with smashed pottery and other cultural materials. At some point, a large fire burned in this room. This fire may have been the result of the artillery strike that blasted a hole into the building's ceiling. The eastern storeroom is in better condition. Some artifacts are present, but much of its contents have been removed.

The ATPA also visited the DGAM storerooms at Heraqla.⁹ The DGAM attempted to protect their contents by burying portions of them. However, the warehouses were almost completely looted by the end of 2013. The ATPA's inspection revealed that around 150 pieces of mosaics remain in the buildings. Many of these are exposed to the elements due to the poor condition of the buildings.

³ <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1517>

⁴ https://twitter.com/Raqqa_SL/status/665986966782132225

⁵ <https://twitter.com/AzadiRojava/status/897154864857444352>

⁶ <https://anfenglish.com/news/sdf-liberates-the-museum-of-raqqa-looted-by-isis-22135>

⁷ <http://desteya-shunwaran.com/ar/documentation-of-the-archaeological-sites-in-raqqa-2092017/> ; <http://desteya-shunwaran.com/ar/raqa-museum/> ; <http://www.asor-syrianheritage.org/asor-chi-monthly-report-sept-2017/>

⁸ <http://desteya-shunwaran.com/ar/the-situation-of-raqqa-museum/>

⁹ <http://desteya-shunwaran.com/ar/hergla-mosaic/>

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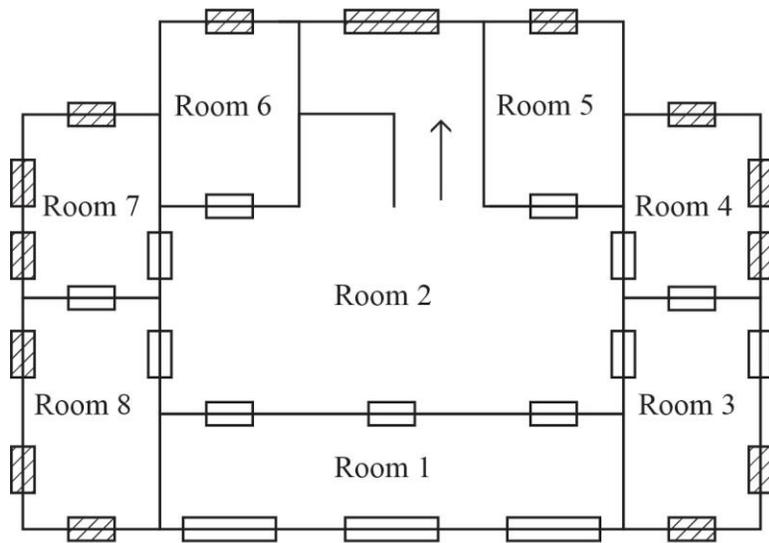
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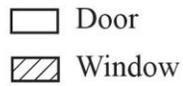
First Floor

Floor Plan of the Raqqa Museum

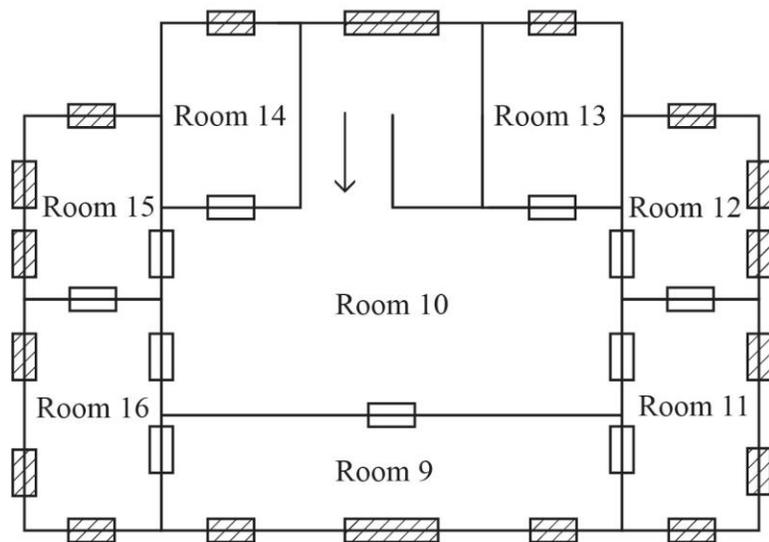
Room Numbers Assigned by ASOR CHI

Not to Scale

D. Ashby



Second Floor



Schematic of Raqqa Museum floor plan, not to scale (by Darren P. Ashby)



The entrance to the Raqqa Museum before the conflict (Syrian Digital Library of Cuneiform)



The exhibits in Room 10 before the conflict, seen from the west (ASOR CHI Source)



The main façade of the museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



The main façade of the museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Exterior of Raqqa Museum, seen from the southeast (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Exterior of Raqqa Museum, seen from the southeast (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Detail of the damage to the southeast wall of the Raqqa Museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Exterior of the Raqqa Museum and garden, seen from the north (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



The main showroom of Raqqa Museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Showroom on the first floor of the Raqqa Museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Damage to the interior of the Raqqa Museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Damage to the interior of the Raqqa Museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Damages inside the Raqqa Museum - pottery fragments (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Damages inside the Raqqa Museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Neglected artifact from the Khrap Sayyar Archaeological Site seen inside the museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Neglected artifacts from the Khrap Sayyar Archaeological Site seen inside the museum (ATPA; December 15, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Entrance

5 / 12 / 2017



Room 1, seen from the northwest (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Entrance

5 / 12 / 2017

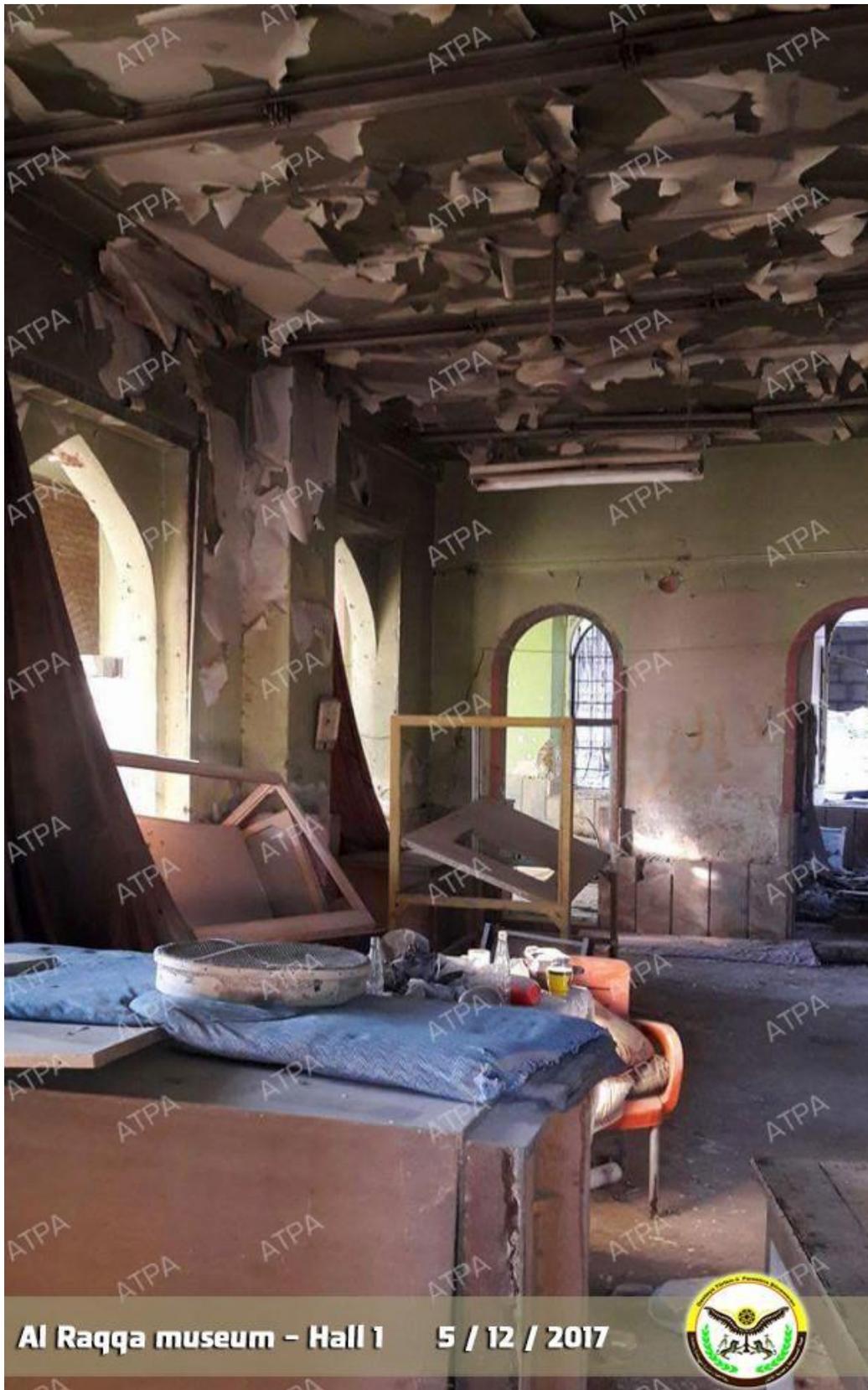


Room 1, seen from the north (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Hall 1 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 2, seen from the west (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Hall 1 5 / 12 / 2017



Room 2, seen from the east (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Management Room 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 6, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Management Room 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 6, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Hall of Tell Sabi Abyad and Hamam Turkman 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 8, seen from the north (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 9, seen from the west (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 9, seen from the northwest (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 9, seen from the northwest. The coffin decorated with a vegetal motif was exhibited in Room 1 prior to the conflict (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 10, seen from the west (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 10, seen from the east (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Damage to the roof in Room 10, seen from the east (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Hall of Tell Aswad and Large Mosque 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 11, seen from the southwest (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - The mosque, Rasafa and Abbasid Sarcophaguses 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 11, seen from the northwest (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Hall of Tell Halawa , Tell Abd and Membaga 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 12, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Depot 1 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 13, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Depot1 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 13, seen from the west (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Al Raqqa museum - Depot2 5 / 12 / 2017

Room 14, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 14, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 15, seen from the southeast (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 15, seen from the southeast (ATPA; December 11, 2017)



Room 16, seen from the south (ATPA; December 11, 2017)