

ASOR Syrian Heritage Initiative (SHI): Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria¹

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Weekly Report 3 — August 25, 2014

Michael D. Danti

Heritage Timeline

- August 19** **DGAM** posted a report on alleged looting and damage at the Basilica of **Qalb Lozeh** in the UNESCO WHS Ancient Villages of Northern Syria. [SHI Incident Report SHI14-021](#).
- August 17** **DGAM** posted a report on **artifacts confiscated** in **Idlib Governate**. [SHI Incident Report SHI 14-020](#).
- **APSA** reposted video showing heavy weaponry at the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Site of **Palmyra**. [SHI Incident Report SHI 14-019](#).

Military and Political Context

During the reporting period, the primary theaters of military engagement and insurgent activity in Syria were:

- 1) Four major IS attacks on the Tabqa Airbase and its eventual capture;
- 2) IS/opposition fighting in the Marea area north of Aleppo;
- 3) Attacks on Hama Airbase;
- 4) IS/YPG clashes in the areas of Hasakah, Jazaa, and near the Yaroubiyah border crossing.²

From August 19–24, IS launched four major attacks on the SARG-controlled airfield at Tabqa, the last remaining regime outpost in Raqqa Governate and a substantial military facility. On August 24, the base fell to IS. This victory facilitates IS access to routes south and west leading to Aleppo, Palmyra/Tadmor, Hama, and Homs. IS continues to consolidate its western front line along the northern portion of the Damascus-Aleppo corridor and now threatens to capture eastern Homs Governate and secure its hold on gas and oil resources in the eastern desert still under SARG control.

IS forces continued their attempts to capture the northern opposition stronghold of Marea and thereby cut off opposition forces from the Bab al-Salaam border crossing into Turkey — the outlet for their key supply line. IS forces allegedly captured the village of Tell Malid southeast of Marea. Clashes continued between YPG units and IS forces in the northeast of Syria. IS strategy seems to be

¹ This report is based on research conducted by the “Syria Preservation Initiative: Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria”. Weekly reports reflect reporting from a variety of sources and may contain unverified material. As such, they should be treated as preliminary and subject to change.

² For a more detailed overview of military and terrorist activity see Institute for the Study of War (ISW) *Syria Update: August 16–22, 2014*.

focused on cutting of YPG access to the Yaroubiyeh border crossing into Iraq and closing the safe corridor between Sinjar and YPG controlled Syria. Fighting was ongoing in Hasakah.

SARG carried out tactical airstrikes on Tabqa, the area south of Deir ez-Zor, and on al-Bab, a major IS stronghold east of Aleppo.

Key Heritage Recommendations and Actions

1) A pattern of looting in the UNESCO World Heritage Site Ancient Cities of Northern Syria is emerging in recent SHI Incident Reports and is supported by heritage monitoring conducted by other groups and anecdotal information.

*As previously discussed by SHI in meetings with DoS, the Dead Cities area will be a main focus of SHI monitoring and mitigation/preservation projects. Recent satellite images from the sprawling area would facilitate the monitoring effort.

2) The fall of the Tabqa Airbase and the imminent collapse of the remaining SARG military base in Deir ez-Zor will likely lead to IS domination of eastern Syria, which includes the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Site of Palmyra. Palmyra and neighboring sites are in grave danger of damage/destruction through major clashes between SARG and IS. Should IS prevail, looting and intentional destructions would be highly likely.

*SHI will focus monitoring efforts on the Palmyra/Tadmor region. Recent satellite images from the sprawling area would facilitate the monitoring effort.

3) An SHI special report on looting activity linked to the Islamic State and other militant groups found that IS engages in looting directly and through second parties. Although difficult to verify, IS probably secures a significant criminal revenue stream through the sale of cultural property, including antiquities acquired through looting and theft. The collection of “spoils” and “loot” — construed to be valuable property of all kinds — is an institutionalized and highly bureaucratized activity within IS infrastructure as well as that of other militant groups operating in Syria modeled on al-Qaeda. IS attempts to project soft power in its territories and improve its image with Sunni populations will likely lead to the curtailment of controversial IS criminal activities such as extortion/protection rackets, kidnapping rings, and outright theft. IS may avoid resultant revenue shortfalls by increasing the looting of archaeological sites and cultural institutions and the seizure of cultural property from those it deems “apostates.”

Incident Reports

SHI 14-019

Report Date: August 24, 2014

Site Name: Palmyra

Date of Incident: 2011 ([video re-release](#))

Location: Palmyra, Homs Governate

Coordinates: ca. 34°33'11.72"N, 38°15'57.06"E

Site Description: APSA re-released a video showing armored vehicles and heavy weapons on the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Site of Palmyra (1980). The exact motivation behind such re-releases of heritage information is often unclear, but may be linked to a recent heritage incident. More likely in this case, the release is probably linked to growing concern over probable future military activity. With the IS capture of the SARG Tabqa Airbase on August 24, 2014 and imminent fall of the last SARG-controlled base near Deir ez-Zor, IS will completely control strategic eastern routes to Aleppo, Palmyra, Hama, and Homs, as well as natural gas facilities and the Mount Sha'er oil producing region in the eastern desert. SARG has allegedly fortified Palmyra and modern Tadmor and will heavily defend this important oasis and transportation hub, thereby placing the built heritage of Palmyra at incredible risk of destruction. Other possible motivations for media re-releases by APSA and similar organizations include maintaining constant public awareness of the heritage situation, even when new reporting is unavailable or organizations are engaged in producing lengthy reports and incident reporting is concomitantly de-prioritized (APSA is currently preparing a detailed report on damage and looting at the site of Apamea).

Site Date: Various, mainly 1st and 2nd Centuries AD

Source of Destruction: Site fortified and used as a military base

Pattern: Tactical/strategic use of built heritage in times of conflict

Monitoring Recommendations and Mitigation Measures: Palmyra should be one of SHI's key foci for monitoring and mitigation and preservation projects.

Sources:

Online Reporting:

Al Jazeera "Islamic State group seizes Syrian air base," August 24, 2014.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/islamic-state-syria-tabqa-base-2014824123659332825.html>

The APSA website — five photos and 3 video.

<http://apsa2011.com/index.php/en/provinces/homs/palmyra/923-palymre-citadell-2.html>

Solomon, Erika. 2014. "Syria's jihadist groups fight for control of eastern oilfields," *Financial Times* April, 28, 2014. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/5346e788-cbd6-11e3-9f27-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3BKFTPDsD>

Scholarly:

Too numerous to list here.



General view of the main ruins at Palmyra (UNESCO).



General view of the main ruins at Palmyra (UNESCO).

SHI 14-020

Report Date: August 24, 2014

Site Name: Idlib antiquities confiscation

Date of Incident: DGAM posted online August 17, 2014

Location: Somewhere in Idlib Governate

Coordinates: Idlib Museum 35°55'58.07"N, 36°38'30.98"E

Site Description: Antiquities were confiscated by the DGAM somewhere in Idlib Governate and handed over to the Idlib Directorate. These antiquities included eight ceramic vessels and an allegedly fake mosaic in imitation of Roman/Byzantine mosaics.

Site Date: Ceramics of the Ayyubid Period

Source of Destruction: Looting

Pattern: Looting in the Idlib region seems pervasive

Monitoring Recommendations and Mitigation Measures: As previously mentioned, the Idlib area, particularly the Dead Cities region, should be a high priority for SHI monitoring and mitigation/preservation projects.

Sources:

Online Reporting:

DGAM website — six photographs and brief description.

<http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1381>

Scholarly:



The confiscated ceramic vessels from Idlib Governate (DGAM).



The alleged fake mosaic from Idlib Governate (DGAM).

SHI 14-021

Report Date: August 24, 2014

Site Name: Qalb Lozeh Basilica, UNESCO WHS Ancient Villages of Northern Syria

Date of Incident: DGAM online report posted August 19, 2014

Location: Idlib Governate

Coordinates: 36°10'8.60"N, 36°34'50.79"E

Site Description: The famous Qalb Lozeh Basilica in the middle of the modern Druze village of the same name in the A'la Mountains. According to Ross Burns (2009: 245),

The church at Qalb Lozeh (in Arabic, 'the heart of the almond'), is one of the most celebrated ecclesiastical monuments in Syria. Though there are earlier churches which survive in reasonable condition, this is the first example which realises on a monumental scale the Syrian model of the broad-aisled basilica church. It anticipates (possibly only by a decade or two) the bold experiment at Saint Simeon and its decoration is of the same order of sophistication. It represents, in short, the full development of a Syrian style as an offshoot from Byzantine models and anticipates many of the features which were to find their way eventually to Europe in the Romanesque period (eg the dramatic entrance arch and flanking towers).

Site Date: Byzantine (460s AD)

Source of Destruction: The DGAM cites clashes and illegal excavation. The photos do not show damage beyond spray-painted graffiti.

Pattern: There is a pattern for looting sites in the Dead Cities region. The DGAM reports this week have not been picked up by APSA or other SOC-linked sites as yet. SARG, FSA, SRF, JN, IF currently operate in the areas north and west of Idlib. See also [SHI Incident Report 14-011](#) on illegal excavations at the nearby site of Al-Kfeir. A pattern is emerging that looters are/were especially active in this area of the Dead Cities.

Monitoring Recommendations and Mitigation Measures: As previously mentioned, the Idlib area, particularly the Dead Cities region, will be a high priority for SHI monitoring and mitigation/preservation projects.

Sources:

Online Reporting:

DGAM website — two photographs and short report.

<http://www.dgam.gov.sy/?d=314&id=1383>

Scholarly Sources:

Ball, Warwick. 2007. *Syria. A Historical and Archaeological Guide*. Northampton, MA: Interlink Books).

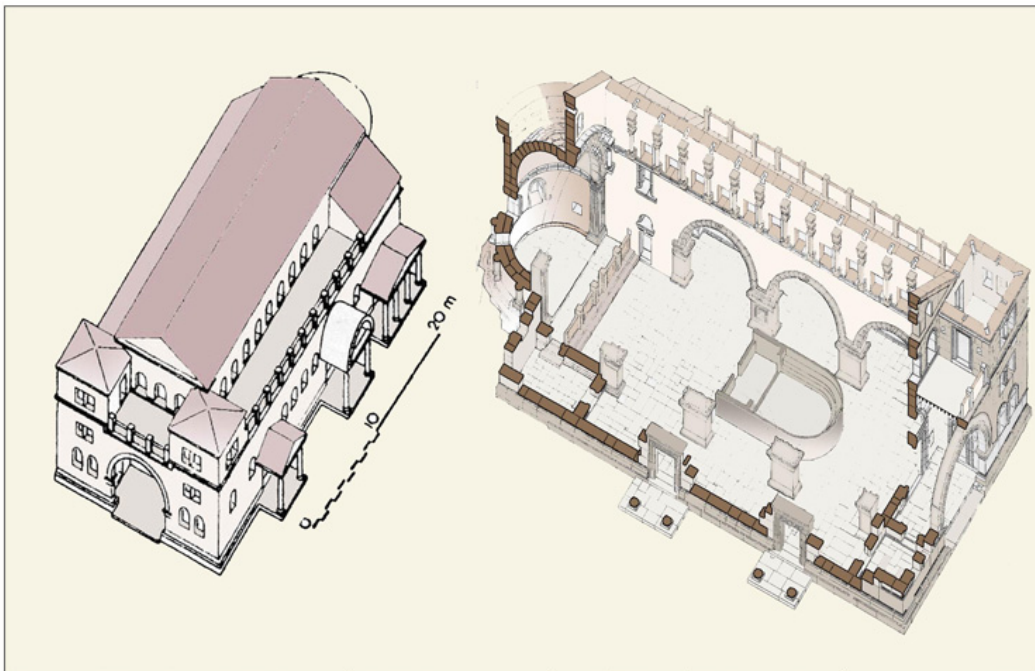
Burns, Ross. 2009. *The Monuments of Syria. A Guide*. (I.B. Tauris), pp. 244–246.

Strube, Christine. 1977. "Die Formgebung der Apsisdekoration in Qalbloze und Qalat Siman," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20: 181–191.

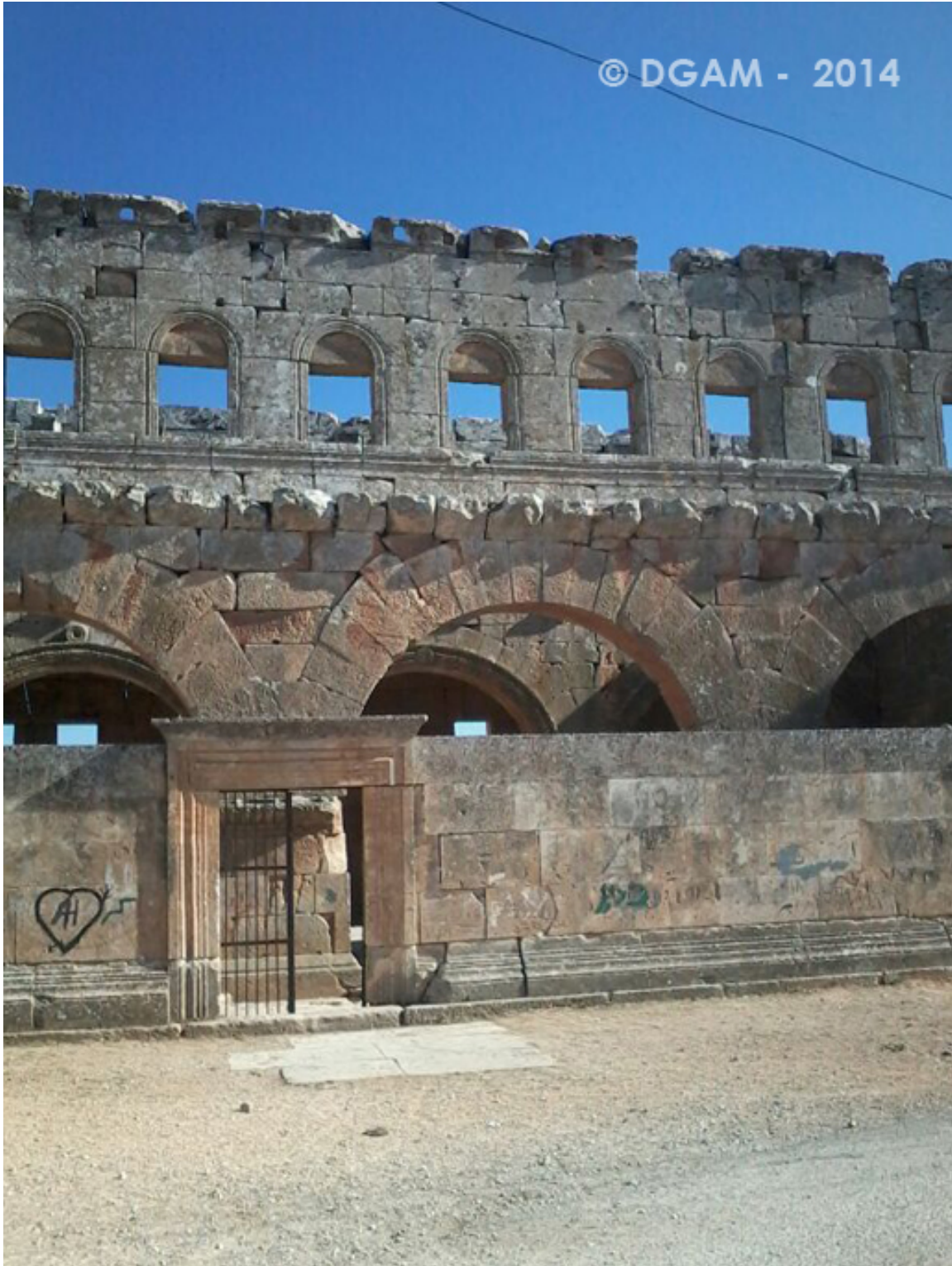
Tchalenko, Georges. 1974. "La Basilique de Qalbloze" *Les annales archéologiques arabes syriennes: revue d'archéologie et d'histoire* 24: 9–15.



The Qalb Lozeh Basilica before the incident (Wikipedia).



University of Aleppo Faculty of Architecture-U.R.A.E	QALBLOZE Church of Qalbloze	Scale	Origine: G.Tchalenko Eglises de village de la Syrie du nord
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Qalb Lozeh Basilica following the alleged clashes and illegal excavation — note the graffiti (DGAM). The damage and looting are not shown in the DGAM photos.



Qalb Lozeh Basilica presumably following the alleged clashes and illegal excavation (DGAM). The damage and looting are not shown in the DGAM photos.