

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

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Weekly Report 4 — September 2, 2014

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Heritage Timeline

- September 1** The blog **Archaeologik** posted *Syrien und Iraq (August 2014)* by **Rainer Schreg**. <http://archaeologik.blogspot.de/search/label/Syrien%20-%20Bürgerkrieg>
- August 31** **Heritage for Peace** posted its weekly newsletter *Damage to Syria's Heritage*.
- August 29** **Eyes on Heritage** released a photo showing extensive damage to Al-Khandak Street in Aleppo. https://www.facebook.com/eyesonheritage/photos/a.349244325169048.81199.349165898510224/718473968246080/?type=1&relevant_count=1
- **APSA** posted a photo showing the intentional destruction of the **Maqam al-Nebi Daoud** by Islamic State forces on Aug. 18, 2014 in the town of **Dowaibeq** (Lat. 36.56365, Lon. 37.27496) in A'zaz District. SHI Incident Report SHI14-022 <http://www.apsa2011.com/index.php/en/provinces/aleppo/monuments/925-azaz-daoud.html>
- August 25** **DGAM** announced on its website the recovery of a stolen limestone Palmyrene funerary slab (*loculus*) with the relief carved portrait of a woman (Amta daughter of Yarha) from Tomb H of Palmyra. SHI Incident Report SHI14-023.
- August 27** **The Pulitzer Center** published *Stealing Syria's Past* by **James Harkin**. The article details the illicit antiquities trade and the looting of Apamea. The article features excerpts from interviews with Syrian Director-General Dr. Ma'amoun Abdul-Karim and Dr. Cheikhmous Ali of APSA. <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/middle-east-syria-war-theft-archeology-assyria>
- August 24–30** The 35th biennial RIMINI Conference was held in Italy and included the event entitled *Archaeology in Syria Nowadays: A Project for Peace* with a videotaped presentation by Syrian Director-General Dr. Ma'amoun Abdul-Karim and talks by Prof. Paolo Matthiae, Prof. Giorgio Buccellati, and Mr. Gazi Alolo (Director of Idlib Antiquities). A second event, *Syria Archaeology Today*, featured presentations by DGAM Antiquities Directors Khalid al-Masri (Aleppo), Elias Suleiman (Qamishli), and Gazi Alolo (Idlib) detailing DGAM preservation efforts.

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.

August 22 **APSA** posted a video documenting damage at **Banqousa Mosque** in **Aleppo**. See SHI Weekly Report 1 and Incident Report SHI14-004.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rkn-JINSbMM>

Military and Political Context

During the reporting period², the primary theaters of military engagement and insurgent activity in Syria were:

- 1) IS intensive artillery bombardment of the SARG Kuweiris Airbase east of Aleppo;
- 2) Clashes in northern Aleppo Governate between IS, Aleppo-based militant groups, and Opposition forces;
- 3) IS troops concentrating in the Deir ez-Zor area in preparation for attacks on the Deir ez-Zor Military Airport;
- 4) The IS seizure of the Tabqa Airbase and follow-up operations against retreating SARG forces;
- 5) Jabhat al-Nusra forces concentrating in the Mahardeh area threatening to cut off SARG access to coastal strongholds;
- 6) Ongoing clashes in the Jobar area of Damascus where the Islamic Front detonated two tunnel bombs against SARG positions and SARG conducted retaliatory airstrikes;
- 7) A coalition of JN, IF, and SRF forces captured the al-Quneitra border crossing.

Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra continued on the offensive with IS territory consolidating in Sunni tribal areas of the Jezireh, eastern desert, and northern and eastern Aleppo Province. JN maintains strength in areas traditionally aligned to Sunni militant groups (viz. the Muslim Brotherhood), especially in Hama Governate and in the far south in Quneitra Governate. Aleppo continues to be highly fragmented between rivaling factions with IS pressing in from the east and shelling the SARG Kuweiris Airbase. IS strategy is focused on cutting off Opposition access to Turkey, reducing SARG capacity for airstrikes, and capturing munitions from SARG military bases. SARG and Opposition forces are generally on the defensive with manpower dedicated to maintaining supply routes, checkpoints, and key border crossing, which places forces at risk of unconventional attacks such as VBIEDs and tunnel bombs — the latter practice is especially favored by the Islamic Front in Aleppo, Idlib, and most recently the Jobar section of Damascus. The threats posed by recent IS territorial gains, kidnappings, and targeted killings continues to motivate disparate Islamist militant groups operating in the south and west of the country to assume higher degrees of tactical and strategic coordination and cooperation.

Key Heritage Recommendations and Actions

1) Islamic State continues to destroy shrines and tombs deemed inappropriate by its strict Salafist sect of Islam. The August 18 incident in Dowaibeq fits a pattern for such intentional destructions in the area of modern Dabiq. Other epicenters of intentional destruction of Islamic cultural heritage include Raqqa and Mosul. IS prominently features these destructions in its online and printed propaganda to promote its ideology.

* While Incident SHI14-022 appears to be an actual destruction, more data is required to verify the particulars. In the past, IS has possibly released misinformation on intentional destructions of built heritage to inspire fear among religious and ethnic minorities and to discredit international monitoring efforts. Some false stories are followed by actual destructions, possibly to intensify the adverse psychological impact of the act and prime the media in advance to maximize achievable

² For detailed coverage of weekly events see Institute for the Study of War *Syria Update August 24–29, 2014*.

exposure. Moreover, IS has on occasion been blamed for intentional destructions of cultural heritage in areas outside its current theaters of operation.

2) Militant groups, especially Islamic Front, continue to employ tunnel bombs in urban areas to eliminate SARG positions — the most recent incidents were two tunnel bombs in the Jobar area of Damascus.

*SHI is currently producing a Special Report on the use of tunnel bombs and the threats this tactic poses to cultural heritage. The use of five tunnel bombs in Aleppo's Old City caused extensive destruction to built heritage (see SHI Weekly Report 1, SHI Incident Report SHI 14-004, and Ross Burns' Website and map). Tunnel bombs not only obliterate standing architecture but also destroy earlier, underlying archaeological deposits. This is particularly troubling since the lost plans of earlier architectural phases might in future have aided in the reconstruction of the destroyed buildings. Moreover, the potential destabilizing effects of tunnel bombs on currently standing architecture near the detonation epicenters have yet to be determined.

3) IS and JN territorial gains will likely correlate with intensified archaeological looting based on previously observed patterns, particularly at sites of the Classical period and Late Antiquity, which seems to be especially targeted.

*SHI is currently concentrating monitoring efforts on sites of these periods and on IS and JN theaters of operation and will likely dedicate additional capacity to these areas in the future. SHI *Special Report 1* found that militant organizations based on the Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) organizational structure likely have organizational units (or co-opted units) specifically dedicated to the theft and marketing of stolen property, and by extension cultural property. AQI and its derivative groups secure(d) large percentages of their operating revenues from theft. Moreover, IS and JN may be compelled to increase revenues from archaeological looting and cultural property theft as their leaders eschew higher risk criminal activities that disorient Sunni populations in their coalescing strongholds, such as petty theft, kidnapping, and extortion/protection rackets. Current evidence of large scale looting in IS- and JN-controlled areas and media reports on apparent trends in the illegal antiquities market fit, but do not confirm, this hypothetical scenario.

Incident Reports

SHI 14-022

Report Date: August 31, 2014

Site Name: Maqam al-Nebi Daoud in Dowaibeq

Date of Incident: August 18, 2014 based on APSA

Location: Aleppo Governate, A'zaz District just northeast of Dabiq

Coordinates: Center of modern Dowaibeq Lat. 36.56365, Lon. 37.27496

Site Description: This *maqam* has yet to be located in Dowaibeq. There is currently no publically available satellite imagery postdating the alleged destruction of the *maqam* by the Islamic State.

Site Date: Unspecified Islamic construction

Source of Destruction: Allegedly IS forces intentionally destroyed the shrine with an earthmover. IS reportedly captured Dowaibeq on August 18, 2014. The Tomb of Umayyad caliph Sulaymān ibn 'Abd and the *Maqam* of Abd Allah ibn Mesaf' al-Qoureshi in Dabiq were similarly destroyed on August 2, 2014 prior to IS capture of the region (see SHI Incident Report SHI 14-002).

Pattern: IS destruction of standing monuments deemed inappropriate to Islam. This pattern is well attested throughout IS-controlled territory, and IS claims responsibility for such acts.

Monitoring Recommendations and Mitigation Measures: SHI will continue to gather data on tombs and shrines in key conflict zones and closely monitor data sources on sectarian motivated destructions of such sites.

Sources:

Online Reporting:

APSA Website — one photo



The *Maqam al-Nabi Daoud* being destroyed by the Islamic State in Dowaibeq in A'zaz District (APSA).

SHI 14-023

Report Date: August 31, 2014

Site Name: Palmyra, Southeast Necropolis, Taibul Tomb (Tomb H)

Date of Incident: August 25, 2014 DGAM announced recovery of a stolen sculpture

Location: Palmyra, Homs Governate

Coordinates: —

Site Description: Tomb H of the Southeast Necropolis of Palmyra (UNESCO World Heritage Site, Site of Palmyra, 1980) is a subterranean tomb of the 2nd–3rd centuries AD. Several tombs were scientifically excavated in this area by a Japanese mission headed by Kiyohide Saito (Archaeological Institute of Kashihara, Nara) between 2001 and 2004. Subsequently these tombs were conserved and used as site museums.

Site Date: 2nd–3rd Centuries AD

Source of Destruction: Theft from site museum. The perpetrators and the circumstances of the original theft and the sculpture's recovery are currently unknown. Cunliffe notes³, "It has been suggested that at Palmyra government troops were involved [in looting], or at least complicit, as from their base in the ruins, any looting would theoretically have been visible to them, although this cannot be verified." The DGAM *Annual Report 2013* states⁴,

Digs are spreading within the southeastern cemeteries area [of Palmyra] previously excavated in an attempt to open some of them. Furthermore, it is not possible, for the time being, to estimate the extent of the damage caused by these digs prior to carrying out detailed inspection as well as removing the dust covering those graves.

In early 2014, the DGAM announced the recovery of large numbers of antiquities⁵, including material from Palmyra,

The DGAM has returned more than 4000 archaeological artifacts during the past year through confiscations carried out by the concerned bodies (the police, the customs, the governorate, the municipalities and other public bodies) in Damascus, Tartus, Palmyra, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, etc. Furthermore, the concerned authorities returned a treasure containing 1600 silver-plated bronze coins, discovered in the region of al-Shaer mountain between Palmyra and Homs, in addition to tens of artifacts which were about to be smuggled since June 2013.

Pattern: Museum and site museum thefts and vandalism posed a special challenge in the early stages of the Syrian conflict with nearly all sides accused of opportunistic looting. Thefts and looting have accelerated as militant groups seize control of territory from the Opposition and SARG. Both Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State are suspected of deriving substantial criminally-derived revenue streams from looting. Large-scale looting is documented at Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine period sites such as Apamea and Dura Europus — both sites lie within territory dominated by al-Qaeda affiliates or IS (and its previous manifestations).

³ Cunliffe 2012: 14–15.

⁴ DGAM 2014: 19.

⁵ DGAM 2014: 23–24.

Monitoring Recommendations and Mitigation Measures: Several incidents of theft are known from Palmyra that occurred prior to the inception of SHI in August 2014 (see esp. the lists of incidents compiled by Emma Cunliffe). The chronology of thefts and their reporting is difficult to disentangle. Numerous Palmyrene objects are likely circulating through the illegal antiquities markets. SHI is currently completing Incident Reports for previous alleged and verified thefts. Palmyrene material culture is well documented and stylistically distinct, and is therefore readily traceable. This poses high risks of prosecution for the dealers and buyers of illicit Palmyrene antiquities. As noted in SHI Weekly Report 3, Palmyra is at high risk for extensive damage to its built heritage through intensified combat in the area following the IS capture of the Tabqa Airbase and the imminent IS capture of the SARG airbase in Deir ez-Zor and the Kuweiris Airbase east of Aleppo. IS movement into the Palmyra area also poses the risk of systematic, extensive looting, as documented at the site of Dura Europus and Apamea. As previously recommended, SHI will request updated satellite imagery for the Palmyra area and will carefully monitor events.

Sources:

Online Reporting:

APSA website covered the recovery of nine Palmyrene sculptures by the Palmyra Department of Antiquities.

<http://www.apsa2011.com/index.php/en/provinces/homs/palmyra/794-nine-statues-seized-by-the-palmyra-department-of-antiquities.html>

DGAM Website — one photo and short report.

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The recovered *loculus* from Tomb H of the Southeast Necropolis at Palmyra.