

ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq¹

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Weekly Report 44 — June 9, 2015

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Executive Summary

During the reporting period, reported heritage damage declined markedly relative to rates documented for the previous two months. It is too early to determine the cause for this decline and to determine whether it is linked to an actual decline in heritage incidents or, instead, represents an aftereffect of the recent hyper-focus on the capture of Tadmor/Palmyra by ISIL and/or the reduced capacity of many in-country monitoring groups linked to the expanding footprints of ISIL and other extremists. Palmyra continued to receive attention as unverified reports of alleged ISIL looting and destruction of sculptures surfaced. Critics among the media continue to raise concerns over the high degree of media coverage given to heritage issues relative to human atrocities, loss of life, and the humanitarian situation more broadly. It should be noted that the media itself generally sets the agenda for coverage, solicits comment from heritage experts, and edits interviews to highlight particular themes. Cultural heritage experts generally prioritize the human tragedy of the conflict and present the cultural heritage crisis as a subcomponent of the larger humanitarian crisis. The end product of interviews often does not reflect this emphasis.

In Iraq, unconfirmed reports of ISIL deliberate destructions at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Assur continue to surface, alongside unconfirmed reports of the deliberate destruction of historically significant religious sites by ISIL. Assur lacks significant standing architecture, so the potential targets remain ambiguous except for an Ottoman structure formerly used as a site museum, ancient Assyrian remains preserved as foundations and wall stubs, and reconstructed ancient features.

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.

Heritage Timeline

June 8, 2015

The Washington Post published an article titled “**Islamic State isn’t just destroying ancient artifacts – it’s selling them**” (by Loveday Morris). The article discusses ISIL’s increasingly organized effort to fund its activities through the selling of artifacts looted from archaeological sites and museums in Syria and Iraq. It includes commentary by **Qais Hussein Rasheed** (Deputy Minister for Antiquities and Heritage, Iraq), **Aymenn al-Tamimi** (Middle East Forum), **Michael Danti** (Academic Director, ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives), **Deborah Lehr** (Antiquities Coalition), and **Amr al-Julaimi** (Mosul University).

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/islamic-state-isnt-just-destroying-ancient-artifacts--its-selling-them/2015/06/08/ca5ea964-08a2-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html

June 7, 2015

Artlyst published an article titled “**Syria Monument Destruction Worst Cultural Disaster Since WW2 Says British Museum.**”

<http://www.artlyst.com/articles/syria-monument-destruction-worst-cultural-disaster-since-ww2-says-british-museum>

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Conflict Antiquities published a blog post titled “**Was the plaque in Finland sold on the French market with an accurate description and estimate, then resold into the Russian market with an inaccurate description and estimate**” (by Sam Hardy). The post attempts to disentangle and verify some of the claims that have been made (see below, June 5, 2015) about a plaque that was seized recently by authorities in Finland.

<https://conflictantiquities.wordpress.com/2015/06/07/syria-finland-russia-iran-france-trafficking-policing-capacity/>

June 6, 2015

On its Facebook page, *Bayırbucak News Agency* published a **video that purportedly shows ISIL transporting sculptures looted from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra**. The location and date of the video are uncertain, and the video itself does not provide any indication of exactly who is being shown transporting the sculptures.

<https://www.facebook.com/PalmyraNewsUpdates/posts/898834250155541>

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UNESCO issued a press release titled “**UNESCO Director-General commends national efforts to curb smuggling of antiquities from Iraq and Syria.**”

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco-director-general-commends-national-efforts-to- curb-smuggling-of-antiquities-from-iraq-and-syria/#.VXXgqVxVhHx>

- *The Telegraph* published an article titled “**Digital Monuments Men wage online war against Islamic State looting**” (by Ben Farmer). The article describes an effort by an anonymous group of former intelligence workers, academics, and linguists – known as the Committee for Shared Culture – to track the flourishing online trade in antiquities looted from Iraq and Syria.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11656182/Digital-Monuments-Men-wage-online-war-against-Islamic-State-looting.html>
- June 5, 2015
- *BBC News* published an article titled “**British Museum ‘guarding’ object looted from Syria.**” The article refers to an object (whose identity cannot be revealed) that was illegally removed from Syria and is now being held by the British Museum until it can be safely returned in the future.
<http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-33020199>
 - *The International Business Times* published an article titled “**‘Isis looted’ Syrian Ottoman ceramic bound for Russia seized in Finland**” (by Umberto Bacchi).
<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-looted-syrian-ottoman-ceramic-bound-russia-seized-finland-1504712>
 - *Yle* published an article titled “**Isis-looted treasures seized en route to Russia.**”
<http://yle.fi/uutiset/isis-looted-treasures-seized-en-route-to-russia/8048193>
 - *The Washington Post* published an article titled “**The world may be ignoring the destruction of cultural treasures in Yemen**” (by Adam Taylor).
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/06/05/the-world-may-be-ignoring-the-destruction-of-cultural-treasures-in-yemen/>
 - *The Times* published an article titled “**British Museum guarding antiquity looted in Syria**” (by Kaya Burgess).
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article4460896.ece>
 - *The Christian Science Monitor* published an article titled “**British Museum ‘guarding’ looted Syrian artifact**” (by Denise Hassanzade Ajiri).
<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2015/0605/British-Museum-guarding-looted-Syrian-artifact>

- **APSA** posted a series of images showing the current condition of the site of **Serjilla** (Idlib Governorate), part of the **UNESCO World Heritage Site Ancient Villages of Northern Syria**. **ASOR CHI Incident Report SHI 15-0094**.
<http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/idlib-limestone-massif-actual-state-of-serjilla-04-06-2015/>

June 4, 2015

Middle East Eye published an article titled “**UN unable to stop IS relic-smuggling from Iraq and Syria**” (by James Reinl).
<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/un-unable-stop-relic-smuggling-iraq-and-syria-2015625246>

- *Illicit Cultural Property* published a blog post titled “**Bauer on the Implications of the Destruction in Syria and Iraq**” (by Derek Fincham). The post draws attention to an article titled “**Editorial: The Destruction of Heritage in Syria and Iraq and Its Implications**” (by Alexander A. Bauer), published in the *International Journal of Cultural Property* (Volume 22, Issue 1, February 2015) and available for free download from Cambridge University Press.
<http://illicitculturalproperty.com/bauer-on-the-implications-of-the-destruction-in-syria-and-iraq>

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=9673385&jid=JCP&volumeId=22&issueId=01&aid=9673380>

- *National Geographic* published an article titled “**Saving an Ancient ‘Lost’ City in War-torn Syria**” (by Andrew Lawler). The article describes ongoing efforts by local men who worked as part of the excavation team at Tell Mozan (ancient *Urkesh*; Hasakah Governorate, Syria) to protect the site from the elements (rain, snow, and extreme temperatures). **Giorgio Buccellati** (University of California, Los Angeles), who has directed excavations at Tell Mozan since the 1980s, hopes to return as soon as possible and complete his plan to transform the site into an eco-archaeological park that will attract tourists.
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/06/150604-urkesh-syria-mozan-buccellati-archaeology/>

June 3, 2014

Huffpost Live aired a segment titled “**Syrian ‘Monuments Men’ Race to Save Art from ISIS.**” The segment includes commentary by guests **Christopher Marinello** (CEO, Art Recovery Group), **Amr al-Azm** (Associate Professor of History and Anthropology, Shawnee State University), and **Michael Danti** (Academic Director, ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives).
<http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/syrian-monuments-men-race-to-save-art-from-isis/54e7956d02a760006900022c>

- **The Blue Shield** issued a statement on the humanitarian crisis and the destruction of cultural heritage in Yemen, titled “**Blue Shield – Statement on Yemen.**”
<http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/topics/cultural-heritage/blueshieldstatementyemen.pdf>
 - *National Geographic* published an article titled “**Engineering Marvel’ of Queen of Sheba’s City Damaged in Airstrike**” (by Kristin Romey).
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/06/150603-Yemen-ancient-Sheba-dam-heritage-destruction-Middle-East-archaeology/>
- June 2, 2015
- Al-Araby al-Jadeed* published an opinion piece titled “**Palmyra: when the world stopped and noticed**” (by Diana Darke). The author discusses the recent media frenzy surrounding the potential destruction of the site of Palmyra and draws particular attention to the fact that earlier damage done by government troops at the site was largely ignored.
<http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/6/2/palmyra-when-the-world-stopped-and-noticed>
- May 26, 2015
- WNPR* published the transcript (and associated audio clip) of an **interview with Stefan Simon** (Director of the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, Yale University), titled “**Yale Institute Director on Protecting Cultural Heritage in Times of Armed Conflict**” (by Diane Orson).
<http://wnpr.org/post/yale-institute-director-protecting-cultural-heritage-times-armed-conflict#stream/0>

Military and Political Context

The main theaters of military operations during the reporting period in Syria were:

1. Hasakah Area, Hasakah Governorate
 - During the reporting period, clashes between ISIL and the Syrian government took place around the city of Hasakah in government-controlled zones (but mostly not in zones under Kurdish administration).²
 - During the reporting period, several coalition airstrikes hit ISIL positions around Hasakah.³

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/07/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKBN00N0AX20150607>; AFP, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/06/07/Syria-army-pushes-is-back-from-Hassakeh.html>; AP; <http://news.yahoo.com/fighters-gates-northeastern-syrian-city-154622549.html>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/03/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKBN00J0RA20150603>

³ http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airstrikes6.html

2. Western Idlib Governorate
 - During the reporting period, Islamist rebel groups (including al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front) made gains against Syrian government forces in the countryside of western Idlib Governorate.⁴
3. Northern Aleppo Governorate
 - During the reporting period, ISIL fighters continued to clash with rebel groups near the Turkish border north of the city of Aleppo, threatening rebel supply lines connecting Aleppo to Turkey.⁵

The main theaters of military operations during the reporting period in Iraq were:

1. Ramadi Area, Al Anbar Governorate
 - On June 3, ISIL closed almost all of the gates of a dam in the Euphrates River north of Ramadi, which not only threatens irrigation systems and water treatment plants in government-controlled and allied areas downstream but also potentially gives ISIL the tactical advantage of allowing its fighters to cross the Euphrates by foot.⁶
 - On June 6, Iraqi security forces and allied Shiite Popular Mobilization militiamen repelled two ISIL attacks on the government-held town of Husseiba just outside Ramadi.⁷
 - During the reporting period, several coalition airstrikes hit ISIL positions around Ramadi.⁸
2. Baiji Area, Salah ad Din Governorate
 - On June 7, Iraqi security forces and allied Shiite Popular Mobilization militiamen reportedly gained control of the center of the town of Baiji from ISIL.⁹

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/06/us-mideast-crisis-idlib-idUSKBN00M00320150606>; <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/06/the-clashes-continue-in-the-countryside-of-idlib-while-the-regime-forces-keep-escaping-from-their-positions/>

⁵ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/02/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKBN00I13D20150602>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/03/world/middleeast/new-battles-aleppo-syria-insurgents-isis.html?src=xps>; http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/islamic-state-fighters-battle-militants-in-northern-syria/2015/06/02/b819e314-092d-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html; <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/06/clashes-erupt-in-the-northern-countryside-of-aleppo-and-explosion-take-place-in-the-city/>

⁶ AP, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/06/04/world/middleeast/ap-ml-islamic-state.html>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/03/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-water-idUSKBN00J1TN20150603>;

AFP, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/03/isis-closes-ramadi-dam-gates-cutting-off-water-to-pro-government-towns>; <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/04/middleeast/iraq-isis-ramadi/>

⁷ AP, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/06/06/world/middleeast/ap-ml-islamic-state.html>; P. Martin and ISW Iraq Team, "Iraq Situation Report: June 4-5," <http://iswiraq.blogspot.com/2015/06/iraq-situation-report-june-4-5-2015.html>

⁸ http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airstrikes6.html

⁹ AP, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/06/07/world/middleeast/ap-ml-islamic-state.html>; AFP, <http://news.yahoo.com/iraq-forces-advance-strategic-northern-town-133657654.html>; <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/07/middleeast/iraq-forces-baiji/>;

- During the reporting period, several coalition airstrikes hit ISIL positions around Baiji.¹⁰
- 3. Sinjar Area, Ninawa Governorate
 - During the reporting period, several coalition airstrikes hit ISIL positions around Sinjar.¹¹
- 4. Tal Afar Area, Ninawa Governorate
 - During the reporting period, several coalition airstrikes hit ISIL positions around Tal Afar.¹²
- 5. Mosul Area, Ninawa Governorate
 - During the reporting period, several coalition airstrikes hit ISIL positions around Mosul.¹³
- 6. Baghdad Area
 - During the reporting period, bombings in and around Baghdad killed more than a dozen people.¹⁴

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/iraq-struggles-to-revive-military-for-coming-battles-with-islamic-state-1433708543>

¹⁰ http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airstrikes6.html

¹¹ http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airstrikes6.html

¹² http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airstrikes6.html

¹³ http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/Airstrikes6.html

¹⁴ AP, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/06/02/world/middleeast/ap-ml-iraq.html>; AP, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/06/03/world/middleeast/ap-ml-iraq.html>; AP, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqi-officials-say-car-bomb-in-a-shiite-town-kills-14-people-northeast-of-baghdad/2015/06/06/514dc67e-0c6f-11e5-951e-8e15090d64ae_story.html

Incident Reports: Syria

SHI 15-0094

Report Date: June 5, 2015

Site Name: Serjilla (Serjible)

Date of Incident: Ongoing

Location: Jebel Zawiya park, UNESCO World Heritage Site Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, Idlib Governorate

Coordinates:

Site Description: Serjilla is a group of extremely well-preserved standing ruins within the Jebel Zawiya park, the southernmost sector of the Limestone Massif of Idlib. One of the so-called Dead Cities, Serjilla (also referenced as Serjible) includes a basilica church, houses, and baths, as well as other structures.

Site Date: Late Antique/Byzantine–7th century AD (but with ongoing contemporary occupation)

Source of Destruction: On June 5, 2015, APSA published a series of photos showing the current condition of the site of Serjilla.¹⁵ The photos were obtained in cooperation with Step News Agency and provide coverage of a limited number of buildings (specifically an oil pressing site and attached house) within the site. What is most noticeable in the images is the lack of extensive evidence of occupation by IDPs in the portions of the archaeological site shown in the photos; in the distance, however, blue tarpaulins are visible covering other parts of the Serjilla site. Loose stone collapse and soil appear to have been removed recently from around the base of the buildings shown in the photograph, exposing the ancient architecture, but it has not yet been determined whether this is the result of removal for building material or deliberate, pre-conflict excavation/conservation at the site.

Pattern: Since March 2014, the DGAM has reported that Serjilla (as well as other sites within the UNESCO World Heritage Site Ancient Villages of Northern Syria) has been occupied by IDPs and has suffered from looting, damage from occupation, and mining for building materials (see ASOR CHI Weekly Report 12, Incident Report 14-067).

The 2014 UNITAR/UNOSAT Report stated that Serjilla had been extensively occupied, with tent dwellings and new constructions visible among the ruins. According to the report, “[a]pproximately 22 shelters and one new structure had been placed in and around the ruins as of 17 September 2014. Most of these structures were placed between January 2013 and September 2014. The level of damage to the site cannot be determined at this time. However, is it likely the activity has affected the ruins and archaeological levels.”¹⁶

¹⁵ <http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/idlib-limestone-massif-actual-state-of-serjilla-04-06-2015/>

¹⁶ <http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/unitar/downloads/chs/Bara.pdf>

On October 10, 2013, the DGAM listed Serjilla among sites in the Jebel Zawiya threatened by the effects of IDP occupation and published imagery of ancient architectural stonework damaged for building construction.¹⁷ On October 28, 2013, the DGAM published images showing intensive occupation of ancient structures as well as construction of new cinderblock structures at Serjilla.¹⁸ This imagery was supplemented on October 28, 2013, by video published to Youtube by APSA (dated October 15, 2013) showing an extensive occupation of the site.¹⁹

On December 18, 2014, the DGAM relayed a report from Idlib Antiquities Authority that looting and destruction of sites on the Limestone Massif around al-Bara had generally decreased.²⁰

Due to the intensive fighting in Idlib Governorate in early 2015 and the bombardment of the countryside around Idlib, in particular, detailed and accurate assessment of sites in the Jebel Zawiya region is currently difficult.

Monitoring Recommendations and Mitigation Measures: ASOR CHI is continuing to monitor the evolving condition of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Ancient Villages of Northern Syria.

Sources:

Online Reporting:

APSA (June 5, 2015):

<http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/idlib-limestone-massif-actual-state-of-serjilla-04-06-2015/>

APSA (October 28, 2013; video footage):

<http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/idlib-the-limestone-massif-report-on-the-state-of-el-bara-sergilla-and-deir-sunbel/>

DGAM (October 10, 2013): <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1075>

DGAM (October 28, 2013): <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1082>

DGAM (October 23, 2014): <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1466>

DGAM (December 18, 2014): <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1541>

2014 UNITAR/UNOSAT Report (Bara and Ancient Villages section only):

<http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/unitar/downloads/chs/Bara.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1075>

¹⁸ <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1082>

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<http://apsa2011.com/apsanew/idlib-the-limestone-massif-report-on-the-state-of-el-bara-sergilla-and-deir-sunbel/>

²⁰ <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=314&id=1541>



Serjilla, olive oil press (APSA; posted June 5, 2015)



Serjilla, olive oil press (APSA; posted June 5, 2015)



Serjilla (APSA; posted June 5, 2015)



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Serjilla (APSA; posted June 5, 2015)



Serjilla, olive oil press (APSA; posted June 5, 2015)



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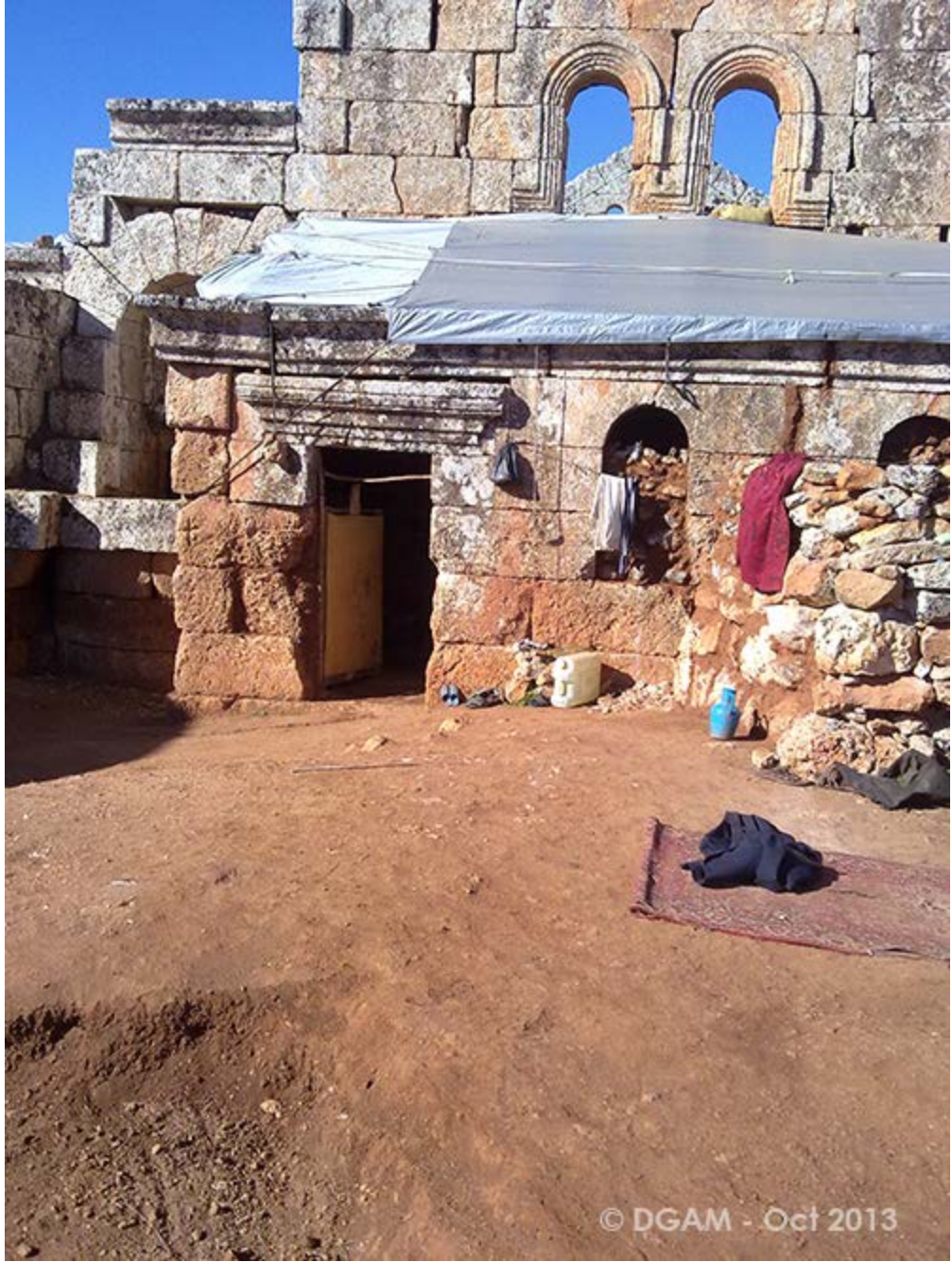
Serjilla (APSA; posted June 5, 2015)



Serjilla, damage to a stone basin (DGAM; posted October 10, 2013)



Serjilla, modern occupation (DGAM; posted October 28, 2013)



Serjilla, modern occupation (DGAM; posted October 28, 2013)



Serjilla, modern occupation (DGAM; posted October 28, 2013)