

WATCH out! Historic Sites under Attack

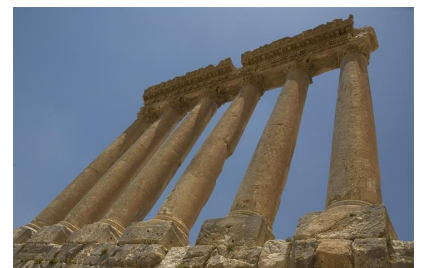
Today's societies require appropriate protective environments in order to protect their cultural diversities, tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Conservation of Cultural Heritage (CH) is "the real and primary investment" of sustainable development of Nations. Cultural Heritage, while physically and mentally located within the artificial boundaries of states, must not be looked at as the property of a single nation, regardless of the moral, racial and religious rationale, that we utilize to justify ownership.



The truth is that Cultural Heritage belongs to Humanity at large. It is part and parcel of the collective consciousness and memory of Mankind. Nations and Cultures who physically "own" a monument or an artifact are entrusted with the responsibility of its protection for the benefit of all. Our duty is to safeguard the inheritance our forefathers have left, so we can hand it over to future generations.

War, armed conflicts and terrorism, that seem to trigger them, have detrimental and irreversible effects on CH. The huge destruction of CH witnessed during World War II has driven to the formulation of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (Hague Convention 1954) and its First (1954) and Second (1999) Protocols were signed by state parties of UNESCO.

Over the following years Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGOs) like UNESCO and ICCROM undertook to determine strategies and policies for the conservation of cultural heritage during times of peace as well as during armed conflict. Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as ICOM, ICOMOS and more recently the Blue Shield, became important partners of both governments and IGOs for the definition and implementation of these strategies and policies. They also contribute to the efforts to contrast the illicit trade or the destruction of cultural objects during peacetime especially in areas of turmoil.



NGOs play an important role in defining and implementing new methods and approaches, as well as in

raising public and political awareness about the importance of protecting cultural heritage. Direct, effective and carefully considered campaigns and events are organized to achieve the expected awareness by using various approaches through education and training programs, conferences, petition campaigns etc. Despite these efforts, at the onset of the new millennium, we continued to witness the huge destruction of CH in the Balkans, Afghanistan conflicts, the Gulf War and Iraq War.

During the military preparations and subsequent implementation of military actions which occurred during the War in Iraq in 2003, many International bodies such as ICOMOS, the Blue Shield International (March 2003), the International Petition Campaign in Turkey, the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) with intensive attempts by Prof. McGuire Gibson from The Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, urged the Coalition Forces and the Iraqi Government to protect and avoid deliberate destruction of historic sites in Iraq. These calls did not prevent that several unique cultural heritage sites and artifacts suffered severe damages or went looted, sacked and trafficked.

As a result, in view of the escalation of tensions in the Euro Mediterranean region during the last two decades, there appeared an idea to create a new international entity, expression of CH stakeholders and civil society at large, to plan and carry out realistic, measurable and effective actions to help with the protection of cultural heritage within areas of actual and potential conflicts.

In the light of these realities, at the “Second International Conference on Archaeology and Conservation” held by the Hashemite University, Queen Rania Institute of Tourism and Heritage under the patronage of Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan and UNESCO on 7–11 December 2003 at the Dead Sea, Jordan, it was decided the foundation of a new international association. Two years after that, in 2005, WATCH (World Association for the Protection of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Time of Armed Conflict) was officially registered in Italy. To–date members from 25 countries are actively involved in the Association. WATCH aims to accomplish the following objectives:



General Objectives:

To contribute to the safeguarding of tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage To develop an early detection system against risks in cases of destruction, vandalism, illicit trade, looting, pillaging before, during and after conflict.

Specific Objective:

To foster the safeguarding of cultural Heritage according to criteria set by The Hague

Convention, by: providing support and assistance in the documentation of CH, providing appropriate training programs, raising public awareness & participation, encouraging peaceful resolutions, promoting inter-cultural dialogue, providing interdisciplinary expertise, developing and assisting in contingency planning, disseminating information, creating and maintaining contacts with Military organizations (liaison).

What Exactly Is WATCH?

It is a global network of Cultural Heritage stakeholders and a non-profit and volunteer world association.

WATCH does not have any political affiliations, religious or national inclinations, and maintains the strong objective to remain neutral in order to gain credibility from all parties involved in conflicts, disputes, or actual hostilities.

Photos: TR, Flickr

<http://www.eyeculture.net>

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