# Preserving Sacred Ground

Responding to the destruction of cultural heritage objects by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

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Introduction

In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) expanded their military campaigns in the Middle East to include the methodical destruction of cultural heritage objects in museums and religious sites across Iraq and Syria. Given the number of World Heritage sites, registered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are at risk, steps to counter this violence are being taken on a number of fronts.

Map of ISIL's influence across Syria and Iraq. The blue squares represent UNESCO World Heritage Sites
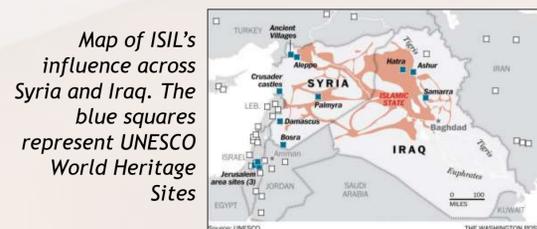
This poster explores the different kinds of projects currently underway, and the questions they pose for the preservation community.

New Social Paradigms

By embracing the online platform of social media to spread information about their efforts, ISIL has set a new precedent for the ways in which the public is capable of engaging with ISIL and their actions.

As a result, social media and online participation takes center-stage in framing the kinds of roles users are able to adopt in responding to ISIL. From viral marketing and hashtags to skill sharing and volunteer efforts, the Internet is reshaping how international conflict plays out and the ways in which the public is able to respond.

Official Efforts

Damage Assessment using Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Satellite imagery being used to assess damage to the ancient city of Aleppo, a UNESCO World Heritage site in northwestern Syria

Unite4Heritage

#Unite4Heritage is a social media campaign released by UNESCO to spread awareness of the destruction of artifacts and protected heritage sites. As an alternative to military intervention, the campaign draws the attention of both the general public and organizations seeking to take action.

#UNITE4HERITAGE

One of several graphic provided in UNESCO's Media kit to spread awareness using social media

Project Mosul

Project Mosul relies on the efforts of volunteers to upload images from sites impacted by ISIL conflict and then digitally reconstructs them. To date:
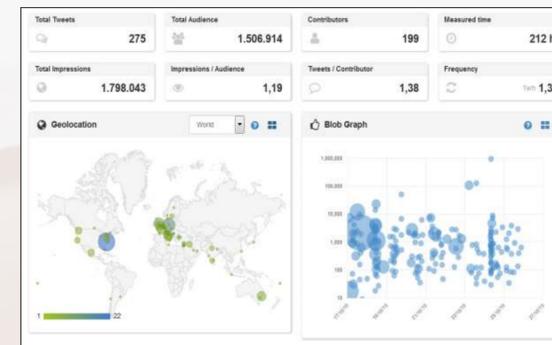- 669 Images to Sort
- 1,679 Images to Mask
- 24 projects in progress

A product of Project Mosul, this lion believed to be destroyed by ISIS, was digitally reconstructed using "crowd sourced photogrammetry."

Impact of these Efforts

#Unite4Heritage Twitter Analytics (10/16-10/25)

| Total Tweets | 275 | Total Audience | 1.506.914 | Contributors | 199 | Measured time | 212 h |
| Total Impressions | 1.798.043 | Impressions / Audience | 1,19 | Tweets / Contributor | 1,38 | Frequency | 1,30 |

Million Image Database Project

Initiated by the Institute of Digital Archeology, the MIDP intends to deploy 5,000 3D cameras to "permit inexperienced users to capture archival-quality scans." The project lends itself to the overarching goal of 3D replication of objects destroyed during the course of international conflict.

From Preservation to Replication

#Unite4Heritage, in conjunction with crowdsourced collaboration and increased access to open source tools, creates the conditions for expanding the scope of preservation projects from documentation to physical replication.

Questions of Authenticity

These hybrid projects, part-documentation, part-reconstruction, call upon the preservation community to clarify how priorities should be set moving forward. Should resources be allocated for storing and securing objects as they currently exist or should they invest their efforts in new reconstructions of endangered, damaged, or destroyed objects?

Risks & Challenges

Organizational efforts
- Philanthropic occupation
- Political/military context
- Uneven institutional support
- Takes time

Technical Processes
- High cost to maintain
- Lack of standards
- Instability of open source technology

Conclusion

Although UNESCO does not engage in direct action against ISIL, its efforts to spread awareness through social media campaigns have created conditions favorable for both institutions and individuals to take action.

Social media will continue to play an important role in not just drawing attention to ongoing conflicts, but also in monitoring these events of cultural significance through online engagement.

ISIL's occupation of the Middle East is a rapidly developing situation. More research is needed as these projects progress over time, in tandem with ISIL's efforts to destroy cultural heritage objects.

Acknowledgments

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