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ARTICLE

Can less be more? Heritage in the age of terrorism

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ABSTRACT

Western civilization does not have a particularly good track record of saving cultural heritage from destruction, but in recent centuries it has surrounded itself with a rather firm ideology of conservation and preservation. This paper is meant as a caution against a fundamentalist ideology of heritage-preservationism. It discusses some inherent contradictions in how heritage is treated in the modern world, some mutually exclusive ways of consuming heritage involving both destruction and preservation, and some double standards regarding the appreciation of drastic destruction in the past and the condemnation of vandalism and iconoclasm in the present. It is argued that the current appeal of preservation is more a product of history than the appeal of history could be said to be a product of preservation. Destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage but part of its very substance. It is not the acts of vandals and iconoclasts that are challenging sustainable notions of heritage, but the inability of both academic and political observers to understand and theorize what heritage does, and what is done to it, within the different realities that together make up our one world.

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, when the Taliban decided to destroy numerous cultural artefacts, including two colossal Buddha statues that they considered incompatible with their faith, a large outcry was heard across the Western world. From the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to the British Museum, and from the Dalai Lama to countless heads of governments, all were united in condemning this act of 'cultural terrorism' that was said to prove nothing but the uncivilized character of the fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan. In retrospect, the episode made the later war against the Taliban regime all the more likely. Now that some of the dust has settled, it may be time to reconsider those events and some of the larger issues concerning preservation. The loss of two mediocre Buddha statues bizarrely seems to have provoked a far stronger reaction than one has come to expect when the same number of human lives is lost due to, for instance, another bomb in Baghdad. What lies behind this unbalanced reaction?

In a long time perspective, Western civilization does not have a particularly good track record of saving cultural heritage from destruction, but in recent centuries it has surrounded itself with a rather firm ideology of conservation and preservation (Petzet, 1995; Lowenthal, 1985). That ideology became explicit in the strong Western reactions towards the blown-up Buddhas. The

cold-blooded act of deliberate destruction in Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley was widely described as challenging the very foundation of world civilization. It went against all of the emotional values associated by Western people with the concept of human civilization itself. For example, Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, was quoted in media reports as supporting a particularly uncompromising perspective:

> Today, we are witnesses once again to our own inefficacy in the face of such mindless aggression to a part of the conscience, history and identity of humankind. (Associated Press, 2 March 2001)

> A crime against culture. It is abominable to witness the cold and calculated destruction of cultural properties which were the heritage of the Afghan people and indeed of the whole of humanity. (Reuters, 12 March 2001)

The mass media feasted for several weeks on the supposed clash of values between Western 'civilization' and Afghan 'barbarians'. But academics are only now beginning to scrutinize the underlying issues (Meskell, 2002; Bernbeck, forthcoming).[1] In the post-September 11 world, much of what has been taken for granted requires urgent reconsideration. At the heart of the ensuing discussion is a re-evaluation of the destruction and loss of cultural heritage.

This paper should not be read as a call for more destruction but rather as a warning about the dangers of the fundamentalist ideology of heritage-preservationism. Although some of the issues at stake are well known and have been discussed for more than a century, the example of Afghanistan illustrates that the matter is of particular currency today. The urgency to resolve the conundrum of preservation has probably never been greater than in the age of pre-emptive wars and global terrorism.

CONTRADICTIONS

It is ironic that modernism with its fetishization of the new and its desire to shape ever-new futures has also been characterized by a particular obsession with maintaining objects of the past in supposedly unchanging conditions (Lowenthal, 1985). All was to be modernized, apart from ancient objects that needed to be conserved as they were and thus preserved for the benefit of humankind. However, the rationale behind preservation is anything but common to all humanity and not without its inherent problems and contradictions. Jody Joy (2004) recently reminded us that historic objects are not innately meaningful but become meaningful only when they are socially constituted in a particular way, for instance through a performative act. Yet few, if any, advocates of preservation seem to concern themselves very much with the specific social contexts and performances it takes, or will take, to appreciate ancient objects in a meaningful way. Many archaeologists and others take for granted that cultural heritage, once preserved, will function in the future as precious historical sources and mnemonics of some kind, for the only reason that they are meaningful now or were once meaningful in the past (compare Lucas, 2001). But will coming generations really reconstruct and remember the past with the help of these objects? How high is the probability that they will remember little else but the conservation techniques and preservation policies of our age, and thus at best remember *remembering* the past? It seems that one thing that cannot be preserved easily is the very reason for preserving cultural heritage.

As a matter of fact, conservation and construction, preservation and destruction are closely interdependent. For example, no other age has, to the same extent as our own age, been transforming the surface of the earth and, at the same time, been valuing and seeking to preserve so many remains of the past. If it were not for the many destructive processes taking place in the modern world, including building development and deep ploughing, many sites and artefacts would have remained in the ground without ever becoming cultural heritage and forming a part of our construction of the past as they do now. It can be argued that it was the unstoppable process of destruction in the name of modernity that has been lending extra impetus to the preference for preservation. One of the contradictions of the preservation movement is thus the close interdependence of preservation and destruction.

Figure 1: A site being deliberately destroyed by archaeologists (Photo: C. Holtorf, 2000)

Most archaeologists now work in contract archaeology, which has been making astonishing contributions to historical knowledge due to fast-expanding development destroying more and more archaeological sites. Within the philosophy of contemporary contract archaeology, it has been commonly accepted that sites can be destroyed and artefacts removed from their depositional contexts, so long as all is replaced by detailed records to be archived for the benefit of future archaeologists (Lucas 2001). Although most of the information a site contains and even most of what is uncovered still ends up on the spoil heap, archaeologists find this practice perfectly acceptable and a price worth paying for being able to contribute to the grand project of modern archaeology giving a place to the past in the present (Figure 1).

Arguably, it can even be an advantage for remembering the past if little or no cultural heritage survives in material form. If heritage is said to contribute to people's identities, the loss of heritage can contribute to people's identities even more. The twin towers were never considered architectural masterpieces nor were they a uniquely important part of New Yorkers' identity given all the other architectural landmarks in that city. But due to their loss they acquired new meanings. One New Yorker has been cited (Jowell, 2005: 6) as follows:

> I'd never really thought about them before. Just part of the skyline. But now they're gone, it's as if they've took away part of me. Like when you lose a tooth, and your tongue never quite gets used to finding the gap.

Similarly, the historical significance of the Berlin Wall can be experienced particularly vividly where no material traces remain today (Dolff-Bonekämper, 2004). Provocatively, the German architecture historian Leo Schmidt (2005: 16–17) argued that:

> The most monumental remnant of the border is probably the vacuum it has left behind, visible and palpable over long stretches: the emptiness produced by its demolition... Therefore even an emptiness can claim to be ... a site of cultural significance.

In other words, less (preservation) can be more (memory). This even applies to instances as sensitive and traumatic as the disappearance of loved ones during the military dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. In a challenging paper, the forensic archaeologist Zoë Crossland (2004) contrasted two very different strategies as to what to do regarding any physical remains of those missing. Whereas some people involved have been advocating the excavation of the unmarked graves to provide closure for themselves and as forensic evidence in trials against those responsible, many of the mothers and relatives of the disappeared have been opposing these excavations. They prefer not only to remember their loved ones as living individuals rather than as dead bodies but also to maintain public absences rather than allow excavated physical remains to reside in tightly enclosed spaces. Filling such spaces, now empty, with bones of the deceased gained from formalized excavations could be interpreted as reproducing the structures of institutionalized power that created the absences in the first place. Similar arguments might be made regarding the excavation and preservation of the physical heritage of apartheid, genocide and Cold War threats of a nuclear holocaust. Some aspects of the twentieth century might thus be remembered more appropriately through a vast absence rather than a presence of some bones and rusty artefacts in – at times – remote places.

Preservationists are running the risk of reproducing the same logic that governed many human rights abuses, wars and genocides in the

past. Should heritage, too, be about managing material resources, claiming disputed spaces, and constructing wished-for collective memories? Are conflicts about preservation the very final battle of material in the modern age? What is the world going to look like when that battle is over? Few appear to have been asking such questions, not to mention having given any answers.

CONSUMPTION

Once recovered, ancient objects are not normally allowed to be damaged so that, it is said, they can keep their value. But the connection between the value of heritage and the prevention of damage and destruction is not as straightforward as it may seem. The conservation and preservation of cultural heritage can be destructive processes in themselves. As the art historian Dario Gamboni demonstrated in his insightful study of *The Destruction of Art* (1997), conservation and elimination cannot therefore be separated from each other.

What is more, fundamental conflicts between intended preservation and desired use can arise. This does not only refer to the common circumstance that a preserved feature inconveniences certain users. Far more seriously, some uses may actually use *up* the feature. In some cases, such destructive consumption nevertheless preserves the long-standing function and character of an ancient object. For example, there has been some controversy in Australia when Aboriginal people supposedly 'defaced' and 'irreparably damaged' ancient rock art when they themselves believed that they had repainted some art according to traditional custom (Bowdler, 1988). By the same token, the South African archaeologist Sven Ouzman (2001) showed how southern African rock engravings were traditionally hammered, rubbed, cut and flaked. Such practices allowed producing sounds, touching numinous images and rocks, and possessing, or even eating, pieces of potent places. To our own predominantly visual culture and the conventional way of appreciating art it seems foreign, even regrettable, that such sites are seemingly being diminished in this way. But arguably, the engravings have always been a part of ways of life that were less sensually impaired and less fixated on material preservation than our own. What is a loss to us has been a gain to others. Ultimately, the question is the same in all such cases: what is more important, the preservation of a few relics of the past, or the active continuation of a living culture (Bowdler, 1988: 523)?

What some would call destruction might thus be a way of consuming heritage in a way that others are simply not used to or choose not to approve of (compare Latour and Weibel, 2002). Take, for instance, the wooden Jingu Shrine at Ise in Japan. Since the seventh century AD, they have been torn down and totally reconstructed every 20 years (that is, more than 60 times). Since the forms and building materials of the previous structure were carefully copied each time, arguably the shrine's authenticity has been preserved over the centuries (Jarvis, 2003: 162–164). A similar example is provided by the thorough restorations of the *stupas*, repositories for a relic of the Buddha in southeast Asia. For outside observers, the restorations appear to have been detrimental to these common religious monuments, but they were highly significant for believers (Byrne, 1995; Wijesuriya, 2001). These ancient buildings have been built for more than 2000 years, and some have been comprehensively rebuilt several times. When that happened, the destruction of the old, physical substance of the *stupa* has been very much a precondition for the preservation of its spirit. Crucially, a *stupa*'s authenticity does not rely on freezing their original fabric and form. Indeed, ageing *stupas* have regularly been looted by Buddhist believers seeking valuable amulets and treasures. Since the (religious and monetary) value of these objects is independent of their in situ context within *stupas*, such looting is neither sacrilege nor unmotivated vandalism (Byrne, 1995: 275–276).

Questions about the destruction of cultural artefacts are ultimately questions about specific sets of values and ideals governing the consumption of heritage. What is considered consumption by some is, however, condemned as destruction by others. Repainting rock art and hammering rock engravings cannot be combined with preserving the very same rock surfaces unchanged for the benefit of future

Figure 2: Three artefacts from my personal collection: a Punic arrowhead, a mosaic stone from Ostia, and a piece of the Berlin Wall (Photo: C. Holtorf, 2004)

generations. Similarly, every attempt at preserving heritage will necessarily deny the legitimacy of certain uses and engagements with that heritage. Yet since you cannot treat one and the same object in two mutually exclusive ways at the same time, it is impossible to keep all options open. Looting a *stupa* and rebuilding it from scratch cannot be reconciled with preserving its authentic material substance. The preservation of Buddha statues in Afghanistan and a religiously motivated ban of idolatry in the same country cannot both be maintained simultaneously (compare Bernbeck, forthcoming). In each case there is much to be said for both available alternatives. That discussion needs to be listened to in full before statements condemning either side are being made.

A similar argument can be made regarding illicit antiquities. For example, as part of my personal collection of mementos and souvenirs, I own a Punic arrowhead from Segesta on the island of Sicily (see Figure 2). I received this artefact, which is in all likelihood an illicit antiquity smuggled out of Italy, as a present for Christmas 1984. This little token of Carthaginian history was for years an item of great pride and metaphorical significance to me, and I have never speculated much about the damage my indirect support of the antiquities trade may have done to future archaeological research. Indeed, I have long felt far less proud about owning a single mosaic stone from the Italian site of Ostia, which I picked up as a souvenir during a visit in 1987 (Figure 2). What was I thinking – only one year before I began studying archaeology at University? Today I am confident in admitting my satisfaction about actually possessing a piece of ancient Ostia, which is authentic because I picked it up myself (or were the managers of ancient Ostia more cunning than I thought?). Yes, if every visitor did the same, in a matter of years there would not be much left of sites like this. But in another sense it would also mean something quite wonderful, that a site continues to exist despite being delocalized: distributed in the minds and on the shelves of so many proud tourists around the world. Rather than worrying about a possible slippery slope that may, or may not, lead from tiny mementoes of individual visits to widespread anarchy on heritage sites, we may want to ask first why we, or the heritage, should *not* get carried away. Does the past really belong to us all, as they say, if de facto it belongs to none of us?

I also own a tiny piece of the Berlin Wall, which I collected back in January 1984, sneaking onto GDR territory that actually began one metre in front of the wall, scraping with my fingernails (Figure 2). Since then, of course, the unique value and aura of this piece has been somewhat reduced by the historical events of 1989 and their material implications (Dolff-Bonekämper, 2004; Schmidt, 2005). The Berlin Wall has indeed become a fine example for a historical site of great significance that has now largely disappeared from its original location and whose parts have been dispersed around the world, each one making a considerable impact in its new context. Just like so many others, I value all the pieces in my collection for the contexts within which they were recovered and collected, and for the precious memories that I associate with them.

It is incorrect and somewhat naïve to insist that looting makes ancient artefacts as good as worthless by for ever disassociating them from their precise original context within the given stratigraphy of the archaeological site from which they derive. This is a position that can only be understood within a very specific Western academic way of thinking anyway. In fact, often it is exactly the original context of these artefacts that makes them valuable in people's

lives as precious commodities and invests them with significance as authentic artefacts – to an extent that artefacts remaining in the academic and public domain will struggle hard to even come close (Thoden van Velzen, 1996). Although illicit tomb-robbing can harm all sorts of local interests too, it is impossible to condemn all resulting destruction of archaeological sites or objects categorically, both with Western connoisseurs and with local 'subsistence diggers' in mind. Many people gain legitimate benefits from the destructive practices associated with looting. For example, on St Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea digging for artefacts arguably strengthens the Islanders' connections with the past: 'Artefacts are regarded as gifts left by the ancestors that, if they allow themselves to be found, are meant for use in today's world' (Hollowell, 2006: 88). Archaeologists and those relying on their work seem to be those suffering most from looting, and that mainly because, as argued earlier, they would prefer to apply archaeological methods of destruction instead. Julie Hollowell (2006: 86) asks the very appropriate question whether there is not a risk of applying double standards when archaeologists vilify relic collectors or subsistence diggers as 'looters' but are perfectly amenable to the idea that they get the chance to rescue a small part of an archaeological site before developers pour a lot of concrete on top of it.

Stopping looting and other destructive practices of the consumption of heritage means in each case interfering with people's genuine engagements with the past and its remains. Preservation may lead to the creation of a different kind of heritage and a different kind of past, preventing certain practices from taking place in the future. Preservation is thus not necessarily categorically different from destruction, as both processes transform a site in fundamental ways. A certain degree of heritage destruction and loss is not only unavoidable but can indeed be desirable in order to accommodate fairly as many genuine claims to that heritage as possible.

CHANGE

History is about change. The life history of archaeological sites and artefacts includes all kinds of reinterpretations, reuses, cases of vandalism, and other modifications (Holtorf, 2000–6: 5.13; Holtorf, 2003). A wide range of responses and behaviours acted out in relation to cultural heritage can also be expected to continue in the future. History as such does not benefit from increased preservation, nor can it be harmed by excessive destruction. Whatever happens to cultural heritage is historically equally significant as a manifestation of a certain way of engaging with it, whether that means preserving or altering past remains (Lowenthal, 1985). The former editor of *Pagan News* magazine, Julian Vayne

Figure 3: The Gollenstein of Blieskastel, Germany (Photo: C. Holtorf, 1995). The niche was carved into the prehistoric monument probably to house the statue of a Christian saint. The horizontal line indicates where the stone broke when it was brought down at the start of World War II, and where it was fixed again in 1951. The graffiti are from the last few decades. In all these instances the question is: has heritage been damaged or history been made?

(2003: 14), recently expressed this general point with the following words:

> The history of the site is not 'damaged' when something is added or taken away. If I lose [or remove! (C.H.)] a button from my coat I have not 'damaged' its history. History is not a fixed thing but a continuum, a process.

A classic example are the graffiti with which some monuments are being adorned during the night-time and which some citizens deplore deeply in the light of the day. But are graffiti threats to the appreciation of heritage or are they 'part of the site's narrative' (Schofield, 2005: 76)? It is precisely this kind of continuous history of change over many centuries that made Diocletian's Palace in Split a World Heritage Site and enchants visitors of historic cities like Rome (see also Figure 3). Admittedly, in some cases this logic may be hard to accept, for example when continuous hammering and flaking of rock engravings may eventually lead to their complete disappearance. As this example illustrates, in some cases historical change can mean that some heritage disappears. That must not be seen as a substantial problem though, as arguably both history and the past are reinvented by every generation. Like heritage itself, they are renewable resources (Holtorf, 2005: Chapter 8).

How cultural heritage has been defined and created, and how it was to be treated, has always depended on the people involved and their specific preferences and agendas. Cultural heritage has often been controversial and disputed. Even in the Western world, the preservation ethic constitutes a radical departure from a long-standing previous historical practice and may, by implication, at some point give way to an alternative set of values yet again (Byrne, 1995: 275). The current appeal of preservation is in fact more a product of history than the appeal of history could be said to be a product of preservation.

History can literally be made through vast acts of destruction. An obvious example is the dropping of nuclear bombs in 1945 on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which created an immense historic legacy without which the second half of the twentieth century simply cannot be understood. Another case in point was the attack on 11 September 2001 against the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. Arguably, their collapse created far more history and heritage than it destroyed (Meskell, 2002). Far more people have been visiting the historic hole in the ground than ever came to climb the towers when they were still standing.

Intriguingly, the Western world has long been characterized by a fascination for what has entered the long path of decay (Woodward, 2001). The value of ruins is still today directly dependent on the degree to which their destruction is visible, for that allows their very status as cultural heritage to be experienced directly. Destruction is particularly appreciated when caused by forces of nature. There is little we find more romantic and appealing as heritage than ruins grown over by a lush vegetation and artefacts with visible cracks and a thick patina. That rule applies not only to ancient ruins but even to abandoned twentieth-century sites. On abandoned airbases, for example, it is the decaying control towers that veterans return to, for it is here that they can feel a sense of the past (Schofield, 2005: 171).

At the World Heritage Site of Hue in Vietnam, natural decay processes through the influence of vegetation or erosion are accepted and even valued as part of the nature of heritage. However, the collateral war damage at the site from the Vietnam War is not commonly accepted as a part of that nature of heritage. As many tourists come to appreciate the ancient site of Hue, preservation activities that are intended to guarantee these appreciations for the future threaten the war heritage that is deliberately hidden and even undone. The anthropologist Mark Johnson (2001) showed, however, that US war veterans and their families visiting Hue are keen to appreciate precisely that rubble of war, being as it is very much a part of their own heritage. The destruction of parts of Hue by American bombs, therefore, undid the Vietnamese heritage but at the same time made history in itself, changing the character of the site. In effect, the US bombs created a new heritage, reminding visitors of one of the most defining events both in numerous American family histories and in American history as a whole. Using the example of world heritage and war heritage at Hue, Johnson argues further that destruction is an inevitable part of every

(re)construction, whether that destruction is material (what we are looking at) or merely in our minds (what we are looking for). You are always going to lose some things and gain others – while people may disagree strongly about the relative merits of what is lost and what is gained.

Johnson effectively relativizes destruction. He calls for all claims to places, sites and histories to acknowledge, and account for, the silences, suppressions, and acts of vandalism that go together with their particular (re)constructions and representations (Johnson, 2001: 89). One person's destruction can be another person's preservation, and vice versa (Latour and Weibel, 2002). Even preservation implies loss. Even destruction implies creation.

CONCLUSION

Destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage but – as has been argued in this paper – part of its very substance. What appears to be missing in the West is a concept of heritage that is able to embrace the powers and potentials of wilful destruction and irretrievable loss. If history is about change, change involves loss, and loss in turn can make history, it does not suffice to reduce heritage to preservation issues. This becomes all too clear when we return to where we started, Afghanistan. As the archaeologist Lynn Meskell (2002: 561) described the evident dilemma:

> For the Taliban, the Buddhist statues represented a site of negative memory, one that necessitated jettisoning from the nation's construction of contemporary identity, and the act of erasure was a political statement about religious difference and international exclusion. For many others today that site of erasure in turn represents negative heritage, a permanent scar that reminds certain constituencies of intolerance, symbolic violence, loss and the 'barbarity' of the Taliban regime.

So what then was to be preserved? The archaeologist Reinhard Bernbeck argued in a provocative essay (forthcoming) about the Western discussion of the destroyed Bamiyan Buddhas that archaeologists and other heritage professionals are theoretically and mentally unprepared to deal with 'negative curation' and 'heritage erasure'. In the post-September 11 world, I suspect that this lack will be increasingly strongly felt. For it is not the acts of iconoclasts and vandals that are challenging sustainable notions of a world heritage of humankind, but the inability of academic and political observers to understand and theorize what heritage does, and what is done to it, within the different realities that together make up our one world.

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ENDNOTE

1. See also the 'Archaeology of Destruction' conference, scheduled to take place in May 2006 at the Department of Archaeology, University of York, UK, organized by Lila Rakoczy.

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