Syria: Past, Present and Preservation

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August 2011
The pleasure of food and drink lasts an hour, of sleep a day, of women a month, but of a building a lifetime

~ Arabic Proverb ~
Carchemish

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Threat Level: At Risk

Carchemish was an important Mitanni, Hittite and Neo-Assyrian city on the edge of the Euphrates. Partially excavated by Leonard Woolley in the early twentieth century, it now lies in the no-man’s land between Syria and Turkey. Approximately 40% of the lower town lies in the Syrian side of the border, whilst the main tell, and rest of the lower town are in Turkey.

The Turkish side has a military border outpost on the top of the citadel, and large parts of it were mined, but mine-removal was completed in 2010, paving the way for an era of accessibility. Excavations are intended to start there soon, and plans are currently being drawn up to turn it into a large archaeological park to boost tourism in the area. The lower town on the Syrian side has been damaged by the expansion of the nearby town of Jerablus. Since the 1960s the town has expanded inside the old city walls, destroying the ancient settlement. A few features remain, however, and are still visible today. Those parts of the lower town not under the modern urban fabric are now part of a heavily irrigated intensively farmed agricultural area which is composed of fields and orchards, and the city walls are being bulldozed to extend the fields.
The orange lines indicate the extent of the ancient town of Carchemish, and the lower town, upper town, and citadel. The pink boundary indicates the extent of the town of Jerablus in 1967, taken from historic Corona satellite imagery. The red line is the extent of the modern town, taken from 2009 Geoeye imagery. The extent of the orchards and irrigated fields are also visible.
Ancient Villages of Northern Syria

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**Threat Level: At Risk**

In June 2011, the Dead or Forgotten Cities of Syria were inscribed onto the World Heritage List as eight Archaeological Parks, covering the 40 best preserved (of several hundred) villages. The villages dated from the 2nd to the 10th centuries, by which time they were all abandoned. However, they still retain many of their monuments and original buildings, including dwellings, pagan temples, Christian churches, funerary monuments, bathhouses and other public buildings.

Whilst the villages are mostly well preserved, they are at risk from the conversion of the land to olive orchards, which necessitates large amounts of stone clearance, and from uncontrolled development.

Park 4, for example, contains the ruins of al-Bara (left), which was planted with olive orchards in the 1960s. Large parts were cleared for the orchards, and the stone was reused for orchard walls. The soil is thick with crushed pottery.

Park 4 also contains Serjilla (right), one of the best preserved villages. Over the last ten years several orchards have been planted in the middle of the ruins of the town. Satellite imagery shows they were planted around 2004.
Ancient Villages of Northern Syria: Location of Archaeological Parks (2000 Landsat Imagery)

1. Ca'at Sem'an, Jabal Sem'an
2. Agricultural plateau in Jabal Sem'an
3. Olive groves and pasture in Jabal Sem'an
4. Byzantine Villages in north of Jabal Zawiya
5. East of Jabal Zawiya
6. Narrow plateau on Jabal al-A'La
7. Jabal Barisha
8. Northern part of Jabal Wastani
Crak des Chevaliers and Qa’lat Salah El-Din

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Threat Level: At Risk

Designated a World Heritage Site in 2006, the castles of Crak des Chevaliers and Qal’at Salah El-Din are among the most important preserved military castles in the world. Crak des Chevaliers was originally an Arabic castle, but it is best known as the stronghold and headquarters of the Knights Hospitaller. The castle was never taken by force, but eventually fell to a deception by the Sultan Baibars. Qal’at Salah El-Din, even though partly in ruins, represents an outstanding example of this type of fortification, both in terms of the quality of construction and the survival of historical stratigraphy. It retains features from its Byzantine beginnings in the 10th century, the Frankish transformations in the late 12th century and fortifications added by the Ayyubid dynasty (late 12th to mid-13th century).

Extensive restoration work was undertaken by the Aga Khan Development Network on Qal’at Salah El-Din. Restoration work was also carried out at Crak des Chevaliers earlier last century, largely in concrete. Original paintwork still remains in some rooms, but it is degrading quickly.

Graffiti, inappropriate restoration, and damp at Crak des Chevaliers (July 2010)
Features of Qal‘at Salah El-Din, WorldView Imagery 2010, over Google Earth terrain.
Bosra

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Threat Level: At Risk

Bosra was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1980. It was the capital of the Roman Province of Arabia: the most famous feature is a 2nd century theatre inside the 13th century Ayyubid fortress, but large parts of the city are well preserved. There are also many Nabatean and Byzantine ruins; the city became a pilgrimage centre in the Islamic period, and an important stopover on the Ancient Route to Mecca. Christian churches jostle with pagan temples, and ruins coexist with operational mosques and madras.

The city has been continuously inhabited, but as part of the conservation of the site, many residents have been evicted from living amongst the monuments, and the hippodrome has been cleared of the gardens which covered it. Large parts of the city have been reconstructed, sometimes with concrete. The modern city on the edge of Bosra is also expanding, directly and indirectly threatening the integrity of the ancient city. Although tourism numbers are (comparatively) not high, much of the city remains unexcavated, and visitors are wearing away the ground, damaging the unexcavated features beneath.
Extent of Bosra: 1967 Corona Satellite Imagery (UNESCO Core Zone marked)

Extent of Bosra: 2009 WorldView Satellite Imagery (UNESCO Core Zone marked)
Palmyra

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Threat Level: At Risk

Palmyra was one of the most important cities in ancient Syria. Its location by an oasis in the desert made it an important stop on trade routes as far back as the second millennium BC. It carried on to be an important Roman, Byzantine and Islamic town, and although the city fell into disuse in the 16th century, the ruins are still extremely well preserved, and display a distinct blend of cultures. At the time of their discovery in the 17th and 18th century, they went on to influence the revival in classical architecture. They are said to have a haunting, mystical property, making them one of the most popular destinations for tourists in Syria today. In 1980, the site was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

However, the UNESCO inscription notes “There is an on-going need for a conservation and restoration plan to be developed that addresses fully the complex issues associated with this extensive multiple site and will allow for coordinated management, clear priorities and a cultural tourism strategy and address the issues of expansion of the nearby town”.

![Castle and Ruins](Wikimedia Commons)

![Decumanos and Tetrapylon (restored)](Wikimedia Commons)

![Visitor erosion](Wikimedia Commons)
Palmyra, with the Temple of Bel in the foreground (Nov 29 2010 Quickbird Imagery)
Apamea

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Threat Level: At Risk

Apamea was added to the Tentative World Heritage List in 1999. Previously known as Pharmake, Apamea was fortified and enlarged by Seleucus Nicator in 300BC, who named it after his wife Apama. The citadel of Qal’at al-Mudiq was originally the acropolis of the ancient city, but was destroyed by the Romans in 64BC. Most of what remains is a 12th century Arab fort built by Nur Ad-Din: Hellenistic stones are only visible on some of the lower levels. It is still inhabited by local people. The main street of the city is 1.85km long, and was originally lined with 1,200 columns, of which 400 have been restored and re-erected. The parts of the site which have not been excavated are subject to heavy farming and stone clearance. Although the site sees few visitors, visitor erosion is also becoming a problem. Satellite imagery can be used to monitor the threats to the site, such as the encroachment of local farming.


Levels of rebuilding at Qal’at al-Mudiq

Stone clearance of town into fields for farming

Inappropriate reconstruction

Visitor erosion of unexcavated mosaics
Dura Europos

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Threat Level: At Risk

Dura-Europos was a Hellenistic, Parthian and Roman border city built by the Euphrates River, and is extremely important archaeologically. As it was largely abandoned after its conquest in 256–7, nothing was built over it and no later building programs obscured the features of the ancient city. Its location on the edge of empires meant for a co-mingling of cultural traditions, evidence of which was preserved. Some remarkable finds have been brought to light, including numerous temples, wall decorations, inscriptions, military equipment, tombs, and even evidence of the siege during the Roman period which led to the site's eventual abandonment.

Most finds have been removed to museums for proper preservation, however the walls and foundations are of an impressive scale. The city has been excavated for most of this century, but the exposed walls are mostly mudbrick, and are eroding slowly. The city is also at risk from earthquakes, which have damaged the city several times in antiquity.

The site was looted in the 19th century, and in 1989, a surface survey of the site by the MFSED listed 25-27 previous illegal excavations in the site (intra-muros). Outside the city on the plateau is the necropolis. Some graves have been opened recently, though it is difficult to record them due to the extent of the necropolis. Many tombs were also excavated in the 1930s as part of the Yale-French academy expedition.

Many of the finds, particularly from the recent excavations, are stored in the Deir Ezzor museum. The area has been involved in the unrest in Syria: the current state of the finds and the museum is unknown.
Ebla (Tell Mardikh)

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Threat Level: At Risk

The city of Ebla dates back at least 5000 years. It is famous for the discovery of its library of cuneiform tablets, but it was a major commercial centre, and several temples and palaces have been identified and excavated. The city was destroyed twice, leaving it well preserved, archaeologically speaking.

At present most of the city is under farmland, up to and inside the walls. Only the main citadel acropolis is unfarmed, most likely due partially to the steeper terrain, and partially due to the presence of archaeologists. Whilst not particularly destructive in the short term, in the long term farming can lead to major erosion.

Where old mudbrick features are preserved, the upper levels of soil are usually compacted, and of little archaeological value: farming does not harm them. If the features are near the surface, however, stratigraphy can be easily destroyed. Conversion to orchards is also a risk: it is a common practice in Syria, and often reaches down into the lower levels of the soil, damaging or destroying archaeological features. Those features which have been excavated are eroding rapidly, but the archaeological team on site is working to conserve them.
Mari (Tell Hariri)

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Threat Level: **Rescue Needed**

Mari (modern Tell Hariri, Syria) was an ancient Sumerian and Amorite city on the western bank of Euphrates river, some 120 km southeast of Deir Ezzor, Syria. It is thought to have been inhabited since the 5th millennium BC, although it flourished with series of superimposed palaces that spans a thousand years, from 2900 BC until 1759 BC, when it was sacked by Hammurabi, a fate from which it never recovered. The final sack of the city led to exceptional preservation, with mosaics and even food remains preserved in situ.

Mari has been extensively excavated, although less than a third of the city has been uncovered. Parts of the palace, which originally contained over 300 rooms, have also been reconstructed. In order to preserve them, finds are removed to museums offsite. The uncovered mudbrick walls are eroding, and large parts of the excavated site are now unrecognizable. Part of the palace was roofed to protect it, but due to the size of the city, it was considered unfeasible to cover it all, and the reconstructions are also eroding.
Masyaf Castle
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Threat Level: At Risk

Masyaf is a city in Syria, in the Hama Governorate, notable for its large medieval castle. The Castle dates to the Aramaic Era (8th Century BC), with the latest building phases dating to the Ismaili occupation in the 12th century. The citadel became famous as the stronghold from which Rashid ad-Din Sinan, known as the Old Man of the Mountain ruled. He was a leader of the Syrian wing of the Hashshashin sect and an important figure in the history of the Crusades.

The Castle has been extensively restored by the Aga Khan Development Network. Restoration was carried out in close collaboration with the Syrian Department of Antiquities and included rehabilitation of the physical structure, excavation of rain-water harvesting systems, preparation of visitor facilities, and the injection of local lime mortar - replacing cement used in previous restorations - which lasts up to 800 years.

However, a lack of proper monitoring has led to problems with damp and graffiti inside the castle. The town around it, which comes right up to the walls, is often regarded as one of the uglier towns in Syria, spoiling the historic integrity of the castle. However, the Aga Khan Network have launched a program of renovation and revitalisation in Masyaf city, using cultural heritage and the built environment to catalyse social and economic development in Masyaf.
Norias of Hama

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**Threat Level:** At Risk

Hamā is a city on the banks of the Orontes River in central Syria north of Damascus. The city is renowned for its norias used for watering the gardens, which—it is claimed—date back to 1100 BC. Though historically used for purpose of irrigation, the 17 norias remaining exist today as an almost entirely aesthetic traditional show. They were called "the most splendid norias ever constructed"\(^1\). The norias of Hama were submitted as a tentative World Heritage Site by the Syrian Arab Republic in June 1999.

The norias have been rebuilt multiple times in their history: a recent Syrian news article\(^2\) commented that the most recent restoration “included redesigning the noria’s structure and using insulating materials to increase its resistance to the climatic changes.” The norias are also accessible to the general public who regularly climb on them.

Hama was a centre of the unrest in Syria in the 1980s: the city was heavily damaged when the uprising was put down. In 2011, due to recent political turmoil, it has once again been exposed to extensive shelling again, as a result of further unrest. The current state of the norias is unknown.

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Raqqa and al-Rafiqa: the Abbasid City

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**Threat Level:** At Risk

Ar-Raqqa was added to the World Heritage Tentative List in 1999. The oldest part is Tell Bi’a, a bronze age tell to the east of the modern town. The Seleucid city Kallinikos was built here between 246 - 225BC: although the Persians sacked it, it was rebuilt between 543 – 565AD. It developed into an important monastic pilgrimage centre, becoming known as ar-Raqqah. In 771-772 the Abbasid Caliph built a neighboring garrison city called ar-Rafiqah and over time the cities merged. The city’s heyday was the 9th century, when it became the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate.

The western surface of Tell Bi’a was heavily looted until the 1970s, when the Syrian Antiquities Department installed a full-time guard to protect the site. At the turn of the twentieth century, many of the original city features, such as the Abbasid palaces, city walls, and even the hippodrome could still be seen, but most were destroyed in the 1950s and 1960s to make way for the expanding urban conglomerate. With the implementation of intensive agricultural irrigation projects in the following decades, the archaeological features outside the city were also heavily damaged or destroyed. The remains of the Abbasid city are now mostly in protected archaeological parks, but many are eroding or threatened by the expanding town.