

THE ERASURE OF US

The Alarming Increase in the Destruction of Cultural Heritage is Robbing Us of Our Future

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The tremors of war have reached ancient sites around the world. Days after the bombs fell on Falak-Ol-Aflak, a similar attack in Iran damaged the 19th-century Golestan Palace. On March 24, 2026, 2735 km away, the Ukrainian government reported that a Russian drone strike damaged the 18th-century Bernardine Monastery in Lviv. On the other side of the world, the century-old border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, in part over the ownership of the nearly 1600-year-old Preah Vihear Temple, brought armed conflict to the complex's feet, causing hundreds of casualties and reportedly damaging the site. In 2023, during Israel's ongoing war in Gaza, Israeli forces shelled and bulldozed the site of the ancient port of Anthedon, founded around 520 BC and occupied until the 12th century. All of these sites were either UNESCO World Heritage Sites or, as in the case of Anthedon, on the tentative list to become one.

As armed conflict sweeps the globe in the 2020s, inherited archaeological, architectural, religious, and traditional practices – collectively known as cultural heritage – have become both a common casualty and a direct target of state violence. Although this devastation has not yet reached

the European Union, much of the continent still bears the scars of 20th-century war in its collective memory and cultural heritage. Malta, which endured one of Nazi Germany's most punishing bombing campaigns during World War II, offers sobering lessons for this more volatile era.

MALTESE MEMORY OF CONFLICT

In 2005, Prof. Charles Farrugia, who heads UM's Department of Library Information and Archive Sciences, realised he had a problem. 'We came up with this idea to publish a set of six very basic postcards, focused on landmarks in Maltese political development. My idea at the time was to find six photos of the main events – Independence, Freedom Day, and Republic Day. I was so shocked that I did not find those photos in the government archives. I had to get them from private collections.' From that experience, Farrugia and his colleagues created the Memorja Project, a 'public memory project' focused on gathering the lived experiences and oral histories of everyday Maltese people during major events in the country's history for documentation in the then-nascent National Archives.

While the Memorja Project started small, it eventually had to document the

oral cultural heritage of WWII. Malta is a nation well acquainted with attacks on cultural heritage. From 1940 to 1943, the Axis powers unleashed on Malta what may have been the heaviest aerial bombardment by weight per square mile in history – 6,700 tons of bombs in April 1942 alone. All told, the Axis attack resulted in the damage or destruction of 30,000 buildings, including, among others, the Royal Opera House, the museum at the Auberge d'Italie, the Birgu Clock Tower, 11 churches, and 36 theatres. Many Maltese people still remember the conflict, and the Memorja Project sought to document their oral history of the destruction.

Farrugia recounted his experience building the project. 'One of the things that surprised us was the emotional aspect of the Second World War. There were still some older people who played down the war because they were pro-Italian [...] You had the other side, the pro-British, who still look at the nationalists of those times as traitors to the country, and that level of emotion is something which impressed us.'

Now, as new conflicts arise across the globe, the necessity of protecting

The Falak-ol-Aflak Castle, also known as Shapur Khast, has towered over the Iranian city of Khorramabad since at least the 7th century. It is a monument to Sasanian-era defensive architecture and has, since the 1960s, had an attached museum for visitors to the site. In late February of 2026, 1500 years after it was built, US-Israeli bombs fell from the sky, damaging Falak-ol-Aflak and completely destroying its museum.

archival heritage is on Farrugia's mind. 'I think this war [the US-Israeli war on Iran] is bringing the reality home that no country is immune, considering that we have a military base just a few miles away from Malta in Sicily.'

THE POST-WAR ORDER AND INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION

Coined by the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, the term cultural genocide did not survive the treaty negotiations that immediately followed WWII. It cannot be found in the United Nations 1948 Genocide Convention, for instance. Nevertheless, destructive acts targeting cultural heritage did make it into the Geneva Conventions (1949) and the Rome Statute (1998), both of which define damage to or destruction of cultural heritage as war crimes.

In 1954, UN member states ratified the Hague Convention, the first international treaty dedicated to safeguarding cultural property during armed conflict. It singled out monuments, museums, archives, and sacred spaces as needing special protection because their destruction harms civilians and societies long after the fighting ends. However, the

crime of cultural heritage destruction took somewhat of a back seat in the post-war period and was resurrected within the international community following the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s. This was the first time the International Criminal Court (through the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia or ICTY) recognised the crime of the destruction of cultural heritage.

Many organisations took up the cause of protecting international cultural heritage, including the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), Blue Shield International, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and UNESCO, to name a few. Among those organisations is the International Council on Archives (ICA), a group dedicated to the management and protection of the world's archival heritage. Farrugia was the chair of EURBICA – the ICA branch that oversees its European operations – when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

MODERN CONFLICT AND THE BENEFITS AND LIMITS OF OUR PROTECTIVE SYSTEMS

'I was in an uncomfortable situation. You had two countries that are at least geographically in Europe. Russia faced sanctions from the UN, and the ICA

suspended both Russia and Belarus from its membership. I had mixed feelings because we have an amazing network of archival colleagues all over the world, and we know Russian archivists who collaborated with us and whom we had to stop contacting, not because they had any blame whatsoever, but because they were part of the machinery of government.'

Despite the difficulties of managing an international NGO with membership from two warring states, Farrugia believed there was a small but important silver lining to the war. 'The Ukrainian archives exploded in energy,' Farrugia says. 'They started massive digitisation efforts, establishing 50 labs after the war broke out and rushing to digitise their archives. They realised that if the whole country is destroyed, the only remaining assets that can be preserved are the archives.'

Not all countries were so fortunate as to experience the same result. 'The situation is completely different when it comes to Gaza since there was no United Nations position on the situation. Latin American archivists made a motion at the General Assembly of the ICA to condemn the Israeli government. We finally arrived at a statement, which is on the ICA website, encouraging both sides of the conflict to protect their archives. However, the ➤



Left: Prof. Charles Farrugia with Anatoli Kromov, Director of the State Archives in Ukraine

Middle: Dr Roberta Metsola, President of the EU Parliament, visiting the National Archives on 29 October 2024

Right: The Central Repository of the National Archives in Rabat, Malta

Photos courtesy of National Archives of Malta

big dilemma is that the IFLA, ICOMOS, and ICA are NGOs, so they cannot impose on a country other than by kicking it out of the organisation.'

As of 2023, the ICA reported no member archives in Israel but did have member archives in the West Bank. Israel's assault on Gaza has resulted in cataclysmic devastation. Within the first five months of the conflict, Gazan authorities reported that Israel had destroyed 200 archaeological sites. Included among these were two 5000-year-old ancient Egyptian settlements, the aforementioned port of Anthedon, churches, monasteries, mosques, cemeteries, museums, and libraries. As of February 2026, UNESCO had verified the destruction or damage of 157 cultural sites in Gaza. Next door, in the West Bank, the war has allowed massive looting; researchers at the Institute of Archaeology at Al-Quds University and the Tourism and Antiquities Police Directorate in Ramallah documented nearly 3000 pits dug by looters of massively varying sizes. While 85% of

the surveyed sites had experienced looting prior to the start of the war in 2023, operations have expanded significantly since then. Within the first year of the conflict, 70% of the sites surveyed had experienced looting, with 309 sites suffering destruction that impacted 70% of their total area.

THE FUTURE

Taken together, all of these global losses make Farrugia's warning even more urgent: 'We need to rush and take risk management seriously.' In the Maltese case, that preparedness looks like updated archives and better preparation for a new age of warfare. 'One of the things that this Iranian war taught us was the use of drones. It's something that one never imagined would completely re-engineer warfare.'

'A top priority for Malta is having a new building to host the archives; a building that has been promised for the last 15 years by successive governments. I've spent my whole career working at the archives, and most of our day is wasted fighting

the buildings themselves, water, high humidity, and unstable structures.'

While the hurdles to protecting cultural heritage are massive, Farrugia is hopeful. 'I strongly believe in these international organisations having a network of people who can offer support by visiting and giving training. One of the best things that happened for us with Ukraine, for example, was that the international community of archivists rose to the occasion to help.'

What the last decade of conflict has taught – painfully – is that the protection of heritage cannot be separated from the politics of power. A world that wants to preserve its cultural heritage must be willing to confront those who mean to erase it. Otherwise, the treaties and declarations that we have spent the better part of the last century building and refining will become like archaeological artefacts themselves – cast aside and worn away by the sands of time, only to be studied centuries later. **T**