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Abstract

For centuries, Palmyra and its ruins have fascinated archeologists, historians and artists. Yet, Palmyra has been a terrain for struggles as well. The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a new actor in the Syrian conflict has pushed the damages of heritage monuments and sites to a greater extent, and has also added further ideological meanings to targeting cultural heritage. As a consequence, these atrocities have unleashed debates on a broader level. Several initiatives and projects worldwide have started to document the damages in Palmyra, and to prepare plans for its restoration. This paper focuses on the case of Palmyra, in the light of the atrocities committed by the ISIS militant in summer 2015. Destruction has become a part of Palmyra’s long history, and reconstructing the damages cannot erase the event that inflicted the destruction.

“Palmyra review — smashing fable about power, ego and war”. I could hardly find better words to eloquently tell the story of Palmyra and its actual tragedy, than those of Lyn Gardner (2015), on the show called Palmyra at the Edinburgh Festival. The ruins’ oasis has always been an illustration of exchange between East and West, and a site “captured and recaptured by powers, commanders and armies, all seeking to show off their performances” (Yazdi and Massoudi 2017), that came from elsewhere, and contributed to Syria’s cultural wealth. On the other hand, they contributed in forming a clash and fusion of religions and cultures.

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Before 2011, the notion of heritage in Syria had been externally influenced. Archaeology has long been regarded by a large part of the society as a tool of cultural imperialism by the West, and later as an instrument in the service of the Syrian government to impose an official national identity, and to improve the tourism industry. Ever since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, Syria’s heritage has been brought starkly into focus. The main parts of the conflict have not only caused damages to the built heritage, they have instrumentalized it too. Besides, illegal excavations and looting have reached a great extent. Moreover, the emergence of the ISIS, as a new actor in the conflict, has pushed the damage to a greater extent and given another ideological meaning to targeting cultural heritage. It has written a fatal chapter in the allegory of Palmyra.

Despite the Western sanctions on the country and its people and the international community’s failure to put an end to the human tragedy of Syrians, voices have been raised to save the relics of the ancient times. It is not an overstatement to say that the whole world is talking about Syria’s heritage, and about recapturing the losses in Palmyra. But why would this necessarily become an international concern for a country ravaged by war and societal split and with urgent humanitarian needs? Whose heritage is it anyway? And who gets to decide its future?

**Between East and West: Heritage in a Globalized World**

Buildings and monuments have undergone changes throughout history. Even before the late-modern heritage boom, they were demolished, and also conserved (Harrison 2013: 203). They were torn down, altered, or had their function modified to fit a more recent purpose. The actual language of heritage that pervades the world is Western, for the most part. The ways of valuing the past that arose in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe and were bolstered by nationalism and populism have spread worldwide (Lowenthal 1998:5, 13).

Developed firstly in Europe, the modern study of archaeology was later exported throughout the world in the nineteenth century as part of colonialism (Byrne 1991: 269). Even the current international heritage conservation doctrines, and their adaptation to various non-Western countries, are in themselves postcolonial trends, or at least remnants
of Western influence. For instance, the designers of the Venice Charter focused on two main facets: the great examples of European development that led to “the rise of civilization”; and the monuments that remained of the great “lost” civilization of the Near East (Sullivan 1993: 16, 24).

The Middle Eastern monuments, that fascinated the West, have emerged as financial patrons for monument preservation as part of a ‘universal’ heritage, even when the natives of those countries-mainly Muslim, do not share the same recognition of the value of these monuments (Alsayyad 2008: 262). Moreover, Western models are financially and technically expensive, and are based on assumptions about priorities and concerns out of touch with the local conditions. Paradoxically, the new heritage management and the changes it seeks to impose, are themselves made necessary by the modernization or development of non-western countries, itself imported from the West (Sullivan 1993: 17).

On the other hand, many Arab countries adopted a sort of ‘heritage business’, as tourism has been eagerly encouraged as a means of income, by turning the historical areas into museum-like or tourist destination (Rabbat 2016: 271). Yet, the great wealth of archaeological material in the region, promoted for the revenues from western tourism, is set within a context of an Islamic society, that does not sympathize, to some extent, with the West’s influence and intervention (Lafrenz Samuels 2009: 73). Many locals are unable of imagining an archaeological site or historical monument serving any purpose other than tourism and an attraction for foreigners. The success of preservation projects has not been necessarily an evidence of people’s awareness of their cultural heritage, rather a reflection of repressive authorities of corruptive, totalitarian governments (Ben Hamouche 2013: 194).

Nevertheless, and to be fair enough, it does not mean that non-Western countries have no appreciation to their past(s). They do, but simply in a different way. The diversity of people in Syria, for instance, has produced a varied scenery of customs, oral traditions, traditional outfits, performing and culinary arts, traditional skills and handicrafts, practices of ideas and values shared by the different groups, and transmitted mainly through oral communication and practices. All this could be gathered under folklore or intangible heritage, that is strongly connected with believes and language. Even built heritage has been seen differently. Many historic centers remained inhabited and adapted to the ever-changing needs of the
societies. A fact that made many Syrian centers internationally known for being among the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the world.

Heritage, when sometimes taken for granted, seems to be most cherished when it is at risk of being lost, in terms of (physical) existence, or belonging and control. Yet, heritage preservation in peace circumstances, or following natural disasters, is not the same as in cases of armed conflict. The latter has an author, and usually involves an intention of horrifying, dominating or eliminating the opponent other(s). In the case of heritage destruction by armed conflicts and, especially, by rogue regimes, Western rhetorical approaches resort to an aesthetic revaluation of the ‘lost’ item. In such cases, all what the profession of restoration can provide or promise, can reach the extremes of their potentials (Bernbeck 2013). When destruction reaches places of particular significance and representation, it unleashes contested debates that exceed local clashes to reach a broader level. The case in Syria seems to be no exception.

This work focuses mainly on Palmyra. I try by no means to cover all aspects of its long fabulous narrative, and I simply cannot. Volumes have been written about the ruins’ oasis and its history; thus, it serves no great purpose to go over that ground in details. However, it still warrants the following couple of words.

**Palmyra Between East and West**

If history can be described as the recorded past of humanity, then the Middle East has more history than any part of the world (Goldschmidt and Boum 2016: 12). In Syria, the cultural contributions from East and West spread over five thousand years.

In the heart of its desert, Palmyra existed as an isolated oasis between two great empires; the Parthian (later the Persian) from the East, and the Roman from the West. It developed a community within an interactive setting of regional identities, some traces of which are among the most spectacular monuments of the ancient world.

One of Asia’s most spectacular caravan cities, it revolved, as well as its history, around trade and being a commercial crossroad. For the water that it possessed, controlling Palmyra and its springs meant taking control over the trade routes (Ball 2010: 213-214). Different empires changed on
it before it became under the Roman Empire in the first century AD. King Odaena, who defeated the Persian Empire on the behalf of Rome, was succeeded by Queen Zenobia, who rebelled against Rome and established the Palmyrene Empire.

The Temple of Bel was one of the most important religious buildings of the first century AD in the region. It underwent many reconstruction works and alterations. During the Byzantine Era, it was converted into a Christian church. During Arab times, it had been partially reinforced and converted to defensive purposes (Burns 2009: 210-211). Parts of the structure were modified by Arabs in 1132 which preserved the structure and converted the Temple into a mosque. The Temple of Baalshamin was another ancient temple in Palmyra. Its earliest phase dates to the late 2nd century BC, and its altar was built in 115 AD (Stoneman1994: 65). The temple was to a large extent rebuilt in 131 AD, and with the spreading of Christianity in the region in the 5th century AD, the temple was converted to a church (Darke, 2010: 271). The Amphitheatre, dating back to the second century CE, is another highlight in Palmyra. Emperor Nero is said to have placed his statue in the niche of the regia of the theatre at Palmyra (Kernodle 1989: 127). The Arch of Triumph in Palmyra is a monumental arch built during the reign of emperor Septimius Severus, 193 to 211 AD. It linked the main street of the Colonnade and the Temple of Bel (Stoneman 1994: 192). It was believed to be built to commemorate the Romans’ victories over the Parthians.

Following the Palmyrene Empire, the caravan city underwent an extensive demolition, and had then prospered under the Umayyads (661-750) before moving to the Abbasids. Its castle was built under the Ayyubids (1171-1252), by Shirkukh II (Burns 2009: 208, 243), and Palmyra came later under the rule of Mamluks (1250-1517). During the Ottoman era, Palmyra was a small village in the courtyard of the Temple of Bell. In 1630, it came under the authority of Fakhr-al-Din II, who renovated the castle, that was named after him. Later on, Palmyra became a home to an Ottoman garrison to control the Bedouin. The French Mandate forces built in the 1930s military barracks, that continued to be used during the 1980s, to be known as “Tadmor Prison”. During World War II, the French Mandate came under the authority of Vichy, who gave permission to Nazi Germany to use the airfield at Palmyra (Watson 2003: 80).
Despite the changing of rulers and society in Palmyra, it became a highly romanticized destination for European travelers and archaeologists over the centuries, and its ruins never stopped fascinating tourists and scholars from all over the world.

The Fascination of Ruins

Pietro della Valle (1586-1652) and Jean-Baptist Tavernier (1605-1689) were among the first Europeans to visit Palmyra (Southern 2008: 13). In the late 1690s Abednego Seller wrote ‘The Antiquities of Palmyra’ with an appendix on the names, religion, and government. Yet, the first documented western encounter with Palmyra (Tadmor) was the journey of thirty men heading from Aleppo and arriving on the morning of 4 October 1691 in the ancient city. The accounts of this travel were attentively recorded, and brought back to London, to get published in *Philosophical Transactions* in 1695.

William Halifax (1695: 84-91), who mainly preferred the classical monuments, described the Castle of Palmyra as “no Old Building, retaining no foot-steps of the exquisite Work-manship and Inginuity of the Ancients”. The sight of the locals living among the monuments and ruins, estimated between thirty and forty families, even the mosque, seemed to be a disappointment to him: “Certainly the World itself cannot afford the like mixture of Remains of the greatest State and Magnificence, together with the Extremity of Filth and Poverty”. So was the ‘mythical, legendary and unreachable city found again. Despite inconsistency, the knowledge coming from Palmyra spread on the European level, showed an international appeal and initiated an abundant network of scholarship (Astengo 2015:1-11).

Indeed, Palmyra increasingly became present in travel accounts, such as ‘Voyage au Levant’ by Cornelis de Bruyn (1714), and ‘The Ruins of Palmyra’ by Robert Wood (1753) upon his expedition with James Dawkins. This expedition was commemorated in the painting of the Scottish artist Gavin Hamilton ‘James Dawkins and Robert Wood Discovering the Ruins of Palmyra’, today at the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. The earliest and largest known depiction of Palmyra’s is that of the Dutch painter Gerard Hofstede van Essen, who spent a major part of his career in
the Ottoman Empire and Persia, hosted at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. During his voyage into the Ottoman Empire in the 1780s, the French landscape painter Louis-François Cassas produced a plan of the city in 1801 (Southern 2008:13). In 1864, the French photographer and naval officer Louis Vignes was the first to photograph part of the complex of the Temple of Bel. In the 1920s The French printing office Hélio-Vaugirard S.A., located at the 15th arrondissement in Paris, issued in photogravure postal stamps with many Syrian historical monuments including Palmyra.

Palmyrene cultural artifacts became collectors’ items. Museums and private collectors alike, began to acquire objects from Palmyra. The “Palmyrian Tariff” was discovered in 1881 by the Russian traveler and amateur archaeologist Prince S.S. Abamelek-Lazarev, during his journey through Syria. The first publication of the inscription, in Greek and Aramaic, appeared in his book entitled “Palmyra. Archaeological Studies” in 1884. Afterwards, in 1901, the slab was gifted by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II to the Russian Tsar and remained since 1903 at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. In addition to the British Museum and the Louvre, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen hosts the largest collection of Palmyrene funerary portraits and busts outside of Syria. The museum’s is built around the collected works the Danish brewer and art collector Carl Jacobsen (1842–1914) who bought the Palmyrene artifacts for his collection.

Palmyra’s first excavations were conducted by the German archaeologists Otto Puchstein and Theodor Wiegand, in 1902 and 1917 respectively. In 1929, Henri Arnold Seyrig, the French general director of antiquities of Syria and Lebanon began large-scale excavation of the site. The villagers who lived there, were moved into the new French-built village of Tadmur, to make the site available for excavations (Stoneman 1994: 12). Since 1958, the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Polish expeditions have excavated the site (Darke 2010: 257), with the significant contributions of Syrian scholars, like Adnan Bouni and Khaled Al-Asaad. Following the unrest in 2011, most of the foreign archaeological expeditions have limited or stopped their work in Syria.

Still, Palmyra has, in addition to its ruins and artifacts, a romantic history dominated by a beautiful desert queen who humbled Rom, and was a source of inspiration in arts and literature.
A Charm Beyond Monuments and Relics

Zenobia has always had a rare charm, whose only rivals in the ancient world were Helen of Troy, Cleopatra of Egypt, Semiramis of Assyria and Elissa of Cartage. Both, the city and its queen, exceeded the realm of archaeology. I am not about to provide an exhaustive list of all works containing Palmyra and Zenobia. The following are just vignettes from different periods of time and different countries.

Palmyra and its glorious queen took a centre stage in appreciable works including Gioachino Rossini’s Opera “Aureliano in Palmyra” which premiered at Teatro alla Scala (La Scala) in Milan in December 1813. Mary Jobran, one of the earlier female singers in Syria, sang in the mid 1950s a song on Palmyra and Zenobia written by Zuhair Mirza and composed by Zakia Mohamed. The Lebanese and Arab Icon, Fairuz, featured Zenobia in a musical sketch written and composed by the Brothers Rahbani in the early 1970s. The Syrian television series “The Revenge of Al-Zabba’a” in 1974, was also inspired by ruins’ oasis and its queen. Later on, in 1977, the Lebanese actress, Nidal Al-Ashkar, performed Zenobia in the play “Zenobia Queen of Palmyra” directed by the Jordanian Adnan Al-Remhi.

“Al-Ababeed”, 1996, was another Syrian television series, written by Riyad Saflo and directed by Bassam Al-Malla. The series was well known for covering many cultural aspects of daily life in Palmyra, and was starred by the renowned Syrian actress Raghdha in the role of Zenobia. In spring 2007, the epic musical play “Zenobia”, written and composed by Mansour Rahbani, directed by Marwan Rahbani, and starred by the Lebanese actress and singer Carole Samaha. It was performed first in Dubai, and later in summer 2007 during the International Festival of Byblos.

In literature and art, Palmyra and its queen have also been present. William Ware wrote in 1837 the historical romance “Zenobia of the Fall of Palmyra”. “Zenobia” was part of Haley Elizabeth Garwood’s Warrior Queen Series in 2005. Libbie Hawker wrote in 2015 the historical fiction on Zenobia “Daughter of Sand and Stone”. Two paintings are worthy being mentioned as well. The first one is “Queen Zenobia addressing her soldiers” by Giovanni Battista Tieplo (1725-1730) within the Samuel H. Kress Collection at the National Gallery
of Art in Washington. The second, is “Queen Zenobia’s last look upon Palmyra” by the English painter Herbert Gustave Schmalz (1888) at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide.

Whether Zenobia ended her days in Palmyra or was taken to Rom as a prisoner of war and eventually died there, the evidence is still unclear (Raja 2017:14). Though imperial ambitions of Palmyra’s queen were short-lived, the memory of the provincial coup endured.

**Dichotomy of Meaning and Use**

Rulers and governments have known how to use the past as a new tool of repression, and how to selectively reproduce it as propaganda (Yazdi and Massoudi 2017). Palmyra, the pearl of the desert, and its queen make the point very well.

Zenobia committing suicide in Al-Ababeed (1996)
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lDN5NG8TbZ0)
Zenobia played a new role in identity and national representation in modern Syria. The revolt of Palmyra has often been regarded as some form of ‘Arab revolt’ and an independence movement (Ball 2010: 29, 216). The Syrian state’s self-understanding as the final bastion of resistance against the West, extended to its interpretation of ancient history, and used it to accredit his authority. In view of that, Zenoubia has become a nationalistic symbol in Syria and “an Arab nationalist avant la lettre who threw off the yoke of imperialism and Western Tyranny” (Sahner 2014: 134-135). Her picture featured on the Syrian banknotes and postal stamps, along with other historical sites and celebrities. However, and like all other state-managed heritage sites, they were merely instruments for two main purposes: the nation-building propaganda and the flourishing tourism industry.

Palmyra’s National Museum, or Palmyra’s Archaeological Museum was first opened in 1961, and since the late 1970s, the Syrian authorities carried out major excavations and restoration projects in large parts of Palmyra. The ruins’ oasis has another museum dedicated to folklore and traditions, hosted in an Ottoman khan restored between 1983 and 1992 for this purpose. The Festival of Palmyra took place in
In 1992 for the first time, and has been held on a yearly basis in May. This event included a wide range of folklore activities, with local, regional and international groups performing in its Roman theater. As a major tourist destination, Palmyra has several hotels, even the military airport of Palmyra, has been used for civil purposes.

On the other hand, Palmyra holds another meaning among Syrians, far away from just the famed ruins and attractions. Palmyra’s prison, or “Tadmor Prison” was known for harsh conditions, extensive human rights abuse, torture and summary executions. It was also the stage of a massacre in the 1980s, that granted its reputation. The prison was closed in 2001 and all remaining detainees were transferred to other detention and penal centers in Syria. It remained a symbol of the brutality, and a focal point of several memoirs of formers prisoners who survived their detention in Palmyra. Some of them were not only Syrians, but Lebanese, Jordanians and Iraqis as well. Many of them had been arrested on suspicion of membership of the Muslim Brotherhood. The prison was reopened following the uprising in 2011, and like Palmyra itself, it has been affected by the conflict.

**In The Light of The Conflict: Encounter and Scope**

Numerous monuments and sites have also been involved in the Syrian conflict. The Syrian government and the rebels traded accusations. And the emergence of the ISIS militants as a new part of the conflict, has added insult to injury.

Places of heritage have also been stages of brutal events. In summer 2015, ISIS militants set off a large quantity of explosives inside the Temple of Baalshamin, and spread a video showing the complete destruction of the monument. So was the fate of the Arch of Triumph too. Palmyra’s amphitheatre hosted in summer 2015 a tragic play, in which 25 ISIS Child executioners appeared in a video showing the brutal slaughter of 25 soldiers of the Syrian Army. The ISIS video spread in...
media outlets shows the soldiers lined up on their knees on the stage of the Roman amphitheatre. Even the prison of Palmyra, was captured by the ISIS members who released a video of its interior, before razing the complex in May 2015.

The atrocity committed in Palmyra in summer 2015 by the ISIS militants, took the world back to Spring 2001, in a sort of déjà vu, to another act of violence and iconoclasm: the Taliban blowing up the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Despite the failure to inscribe the statues throughout their ‘presence’ onto the World Heritage List, only their destruction achieved this purpose. The absence of the statues and the circumstances leading to their absence became embodied to their official recognition as a World Heritage; oddly enough, not their existence.

Unlike the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Palmyra was already inscribed since 1980 onto the World Heritage List. Yet, the criterion iv (to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history), focused only on selective parts of the site as ‘Rom’s expansion in and engagement with the East’ (http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23), without taking into consideration its continuity under the Arabs and Muslims. Moreover, unlike the Buddahs of Bamiyan, and their reconstruction that is still subject of a complex discourse, the devastation in Palmyra has paved a way to a resurrection race.

There have been in the media a growing number of calls not only to condemn ISIS destruction in Palmyra, but also with a sort of competitive and joint race to save and reconstruct. “What Do We Want to Save in Palmyra?” (Gronlud 2015), “Problems in Palmyra: How should we rebuild our ancient ruins?” (Sayer 2016), “After Palmyra, the message to Isis: what you destroy, we will rebuild” (Jenkins 2016), and the list goes on. Yet, there is a (legit) question to ask here: who is, or are, “We” in these calls?

The Feverish Haste of Reconstruction

Despite all the calls to save Syria’s heritage, the damage is shocking. Efforts were increased, with the feelings of duty and obligation to protect and preserve the World Heritage that belongs to the whole of humanity. Although considering Syria one of the most dangerous countries of the world, experts have been on site to assess the damage and to plan, ahead, the reconstruction.

Experts from Oxford and Harvard universities, and from the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) rebuilt, using 3D images produced from photographs, a two-thirds scale replica of Palmyra’s Arch of Triumph, that have risen again in London’s Trafalgar Square in London in an “act of solidarity”, before moving afterward to New
York and Dubai, and eventually to Palmyra (Boyle 2016). Experts from the University of Warsaw, were the first specialists to visit Palmyra after it was taken over by the Syrian army, and spent a week working and assessing the damage at the museum of Palmyra (www.hurriyetdailynews.com). The French company “Art Graphique et Patrimoine” travelled to Palmyra as well, equipped with the latest scanning technology to scan the rubbles of the Temple of Bell in order to create a plan for its restoration, within the framework of a comprehensive cooperation project under the supervision of UNESCO (www.dgam.gov.sy).

Plans for the restoration had been also prepared by Russian experts, who created a 3D model of Palmyra on the basis of aerial photography done in situ in September 2016. The model will help assessing the condition of each architectural object, discussing opportunities for restoration without making field trips, and even in case of new destructions in Palmyra (www.tass.com). Swiss archaeologists had also their share in preparing for post-war Syria in collaboration with Syrian scholars (Stephens 2016). Some the Palmyra sculptures, disfigured by ISIS fighters have been painstakingly repaired by Italian restoration experts, allowing to “erase the act of violence”, and to return them eventually back (Di Donata and Said-Moorhouse 2017). In addition to several exhibitions, dedicated to Palmyra, in several Western countries.

Even Tadmor Prison, has come as well into focus. The images and footage of ISIS militants blowing up the Prison, spread across the social media, along the other footage of destruction of heritage made by the same group. Ironically, and while the whole world was condemning ISIS the destruction of World Heritage, the group itself has been cheered for the destruction of the prison. “One IS action that many Syrians may actually praise (or want to do themselves)—the destruction of Tadmor Prison” as mentioned in a tweet (Loveluck 2015). Elsewhere, the demolition of such an iconic symbol places IS in a potentially favorable light with the local residents of Palmyra. (www.gutsandgore.co.uk).
In a “surreal moment” (Pleitgen 2016) in May 2016, Russian soldiers and Syrian and Russian dignitaries gathered in Palmyra. The Russian conductor and opera company director Valery Gergiev led St. Petersburg’s Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra in the concert “Pray for Palmyra: Music Revives Ancient Ruins” dedicated to victims of the terrorist group. Before the concert started, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke live via video link, describing the event as a remembrance of all victims of terrorism and a sign of hope in the face of international terrorism.

Concluding Thoughts

To reconstruct heritage damaged by armed conflicts, even how to do so, is not a question simply answered by yes or no. Reconstructing, especially in the literal sense of the word, may or may not be the proper response to the perplexing question of “what comes next?”. The predicament does not lay only in what model will or shall be applied, but also in the scope and scale of the decision making-process, and its consequence on the intimate, and confusing, relation between heritage, memory and community.

Destruction is now a significant part of Palmyra’s history, and there is no way to preserve and undo the event at the same time. But why is this race to save and reconstruct Palmyra? Perhaps because the ISIS militants today in Syria, as the Taliban before in Afghanistan, have challenged the Western hegemonic definition of heritage as a highly materialized fact, frozen through conservation, in the Western way.

To stress the war on Islamic terrorism, by emphasizing that the crime of ISIS in Palmyra is a usual response to non-Islamic relic, overlooks the coexistence for centuries between the ruins of Palmyra and the local community, mainly Muslim, who was proud possessing this heritage. On the other hand, and though many of Palmyra’s ruins were inhabited at the moment of their ‘rediscovery’ by the Western scholars, for the latter this ‘continuity’ was only regarded as an abandon
and decay, here again from their own Western perspective.

To ask again: whose heritage is it? And who gets to decide its future? The first that may come to mind is the locals and why they would rebuild, or not. Yet, limiting the heritage discourse to experts and politicians, and assuming that Western experts are more heritage-sensitive, seems to be a cut off with the affected people, to whom this heritage ethically belongs.

Syria is still going through a painful labor towards a, hopefully, peaceful future. The colossal task of reconstruction in the post-war era, yet to come, is beyond the technical and financial capacities of a country exhausted by war and community’s devastation. To speak about regaining the lost to bring back an important tourist destination, thus source of income, does not sit well with the whole human tragedy in Syria. There is a moral dilemma when it seems that the artifacts of an ancient civilization would come over lives of their descendants.

When societal damage takes place, searching for a national identity in the (devastated) relics of the past seems to be a challenging task. To rebuild or not to rebuild is not the question, the dilemma is much more serious. Syrians seem to have lost, or better, are in a danger of losing an opportunity to express “themselves” and their connection to “their” past, while their present and their future seem to be out of their hands. Finally, it seems that Palmyra and its ruins are doomed to remain an unending fable of power, ego and war.

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