Who Owns the Past?
Archaeological Heritage between Idealisation and Destruction

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On the 23rd of August 2015 Daesh blew up the 2,000-year-old Baal-Shamin temple in the world-famous Greco-Roman site of Palmyra. This event triggered a profound emotional reaction in society at large, and the ruins soon became an iconic symbol of world heritage in danger. The appalling images of the ruins of Baal Shamin reinforced the perception, especially among western observers, that protecting cultural and natural heritage is yet another duty in the fight against terrorism. A similar international outcry occurred in 2001, when the Buddhas of Bamiyan fell to Taliban dynamite in Afghanistan, and when Iraqi museums and sites were ransacked and looted providing two of the most recent and vivid examples of destroyed heritage in the so-called War on Terror which was launched by the U.S. government after 9/11. Following the destruction at Baal-Shamin, UNESCO declared that the deliberate destruction of Syria's cultural heritage was a war crime, and put into motion several projects and actions aimed at preserving endangered Syrian archaeological heritage. At the same time, alongside income gained from the sale of drug and weapons, the trafficking of antiquities from Syria and Iraq worldwide provided a major source of revenue for Daesh[1].

The dichotomy that is inherent in antiquities – which are either perceived of as the embodiment of freedom, democracy and other values that western society considers too often its own domain, or as a very profitable commodity to be traded illegally– calls for a more accurate reflection upon the notion of cultural appropriation and ownership of the past and its material remains, as well as on the role that globalised scientific archaeology plays in this process.

Certainly, discussions on ownership of the past, its traces and their connection to different identities do not apply only to Syria and Iraq. Among the most well-known cases of controversial heritage, one related to the Palestine-Israeli conflict holds a particular position.[2] A few months ago, in July 2017, Israel rejected once again the presence of Palestine at the UNESCO council, stating that this was an outrage in terms of its ownership of the Holy Land. To be sure, membership of UNESCO certainly implied that Palestine had been internationally acknowledged as a state in its own right. Most recently Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital has generated on the one hand Palestinians and Arab outrage, and on the other concern

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[1] S. Heißner, P.R. Neumann, J. Holland-McCowan & R. Basra, Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes, Report 17/02/2017. http://icsr.info/2017/02/icsrey-report-caliphate-decline-estimate-islamic-states-financial-fortunes/ accessed 13 December 2017
[2] M. Gori, The Stones of Contention: The Role of Archaeological Heritage in Israeli–Palestinian Conflict. *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 9 (1) 2013: 213-229.

among Washington's western allies. As a result, UN Security Council felt compelled to vote in favour of a resolution calling for Donald Trump to rescind his declaration.

Tensions concerning heritage ownerships and its symbolic value manifest in several different forms. Following the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, heritage places that materialised conflicting ethnic identities during the conflict, such as the Mostar Bridge or the Sarajevo Gazi-Husrev-beg Library, were transformed into reconciliation symbols. This change occurred mainly as bottom-down process and in the overwhelming majority of cases did not succeed in replacing the significance as ethnic markers that these heritage places acquired during wartime.

In October 2017, the Hindu Government of Uttar Pradesh in India decided to remove the Taj Mahal from the official leaflets for tourists, as the world-famous monument had been built by a Muslim emperor during the seventeenth century. This decision reflected the pivotal role played by heritage in the long-standing tensions between Hindu and Muslims that dramatically characterize India's recent history.

Figure 1.The arch of Palmyra's Temple of Baal-Shamin reconstructed by the Digital Archaeology Department at the University of Oxford (London, May 2016, iStock Getty Images ID532270230).

The Colosseum is another iconic heritage site that can be best understood as an archaeological feature used to stimulate collective and individual memory, as well as to promote multi-layered historical associations. In September 2017, the Muslim community of Rome organized a public prayer to be held in the centre of the city, with the intent of raising their voice against the terrorist attacks in Barcelona. Significantly, the area chosen by the Muslim community for the public gathering was located next to the Colosseum, as a way to manifest materially their sense of belonging to the Italian State and their affinity to the political and social values of western countries. The public

prayer, however, never took place. Due to security issues officially raised by Italian police authorities, the ban seemed to be rather an unofficial response to the right-wing parties' strong criticism of the event. In their eyes, Muslims gathering around the Colosseum represented an inacceptable appropriation of Italian symbols and the Italian identity held by that community.

In the light of these events, when applied to the past the word ownership takes on multiple shapes and meanings. Is it thus possible to draw a line between different owners, be they private or public, of cultural heritage? What about the property that is seen today in the myriad of images at our disposal which depict sites and monuments? The spread of 3D and other digital technologies has greatly contributed to making monuments more accessible and democratize heritage. Potentially, everybody can now reproduce cultural objects, own a copy and exploit it for different purposes. In this sense, the photo portraying Palmyra's Arch of Triumph crafted using cutting-edge 3D printing and carving techniques – here on display outside the National Gallery of London (Fig. 1) - brings us back to where we started. Who owns the past and its replicas?

The present issue of Ex Novo contains five papers that explore the various ways in which the past is currently being appropriated, remembered, recovered, (re)created, and used. Caroline Sandes and Nour Munawar discuss the Syrian conflict and issues of reconstruction, adopting two very different points of view. Emily Hanscam, Ivan Marinov and Nicolas Zorzin address processes of creation and appropriation of past narratives in identity construction along the eastern border of the European Union, in Bulgaria and Romania. Augusto Palombini tackles the difficult connection between authenticity andthe (re)production of cultural heritage, and the implications that this raises for archaeological research and museum studies. The appropriation of the past in identity building processes is also addressed by Rachele Dubbini in her review of the Museo Federico II in Jesi. Lastly, the political value of heritage is assessed by Munawar in his review of the UNESCO Experts Meeting held in Berlin in 2016.