

# **Heritage Under Threat**

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## **Background**

This speech was originally delivered as the opening speech of Model United Nations, Cals College Nieuwegein, 'Historical Influences' on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2020.

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Delegates of CalsMUN 2020!

Two weeks ago US- president Mr Trump startled the world with a tweet in which he called for a crime of war, by threatening to attack Iranian cultural heritage. If you have not read his message yet, please read it now.

“...targeted 52 Iranian sites (representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago), some at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD. The USA wants no more threats. (Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [January 4, 2020](#))”

In the conflict between US and Iran, back-and-forth, already many threatening statements have been made, and provocative actions carried out. What happened after this incident?

It certainly was world news. In no time, academic researchers and other professionals of history, archaeology, art and culture, based in national museums and universities all over the world, reacted in horror to the president's threat to target Iranian sites. They rejected Trump's call as contrary to the Hague convention of 1954, and to the protocols of the Geneva conventions of 1949 and 1977, confirmed by the

International Criminal Court considering the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage as a crime of war. Moreover, only very recently, in 2017, the USA itself had in the United Nations Security Council consented with a resolution initiated by UNESCO, that condemned the destruction of Syrian heritage by Islamic State as a war crime.

The US ministers of foreign affairs and defence started damage control straight away. Minister of foreign affairs Mark Pompeo rushed to assure that the US would uphold to international law, and the Pentagon underlined that the deliberate violence on cultural heritage without military function would have no military function and thus be a crime of war, which the US was not planning to commit. This word-storm has passed, for the moment, and Trump's threat will hopefully never come true. However, the very issue of deliberate violation of heritage in circumstances of war, is as topical and urgent as ever.

The subject of my speech today is not the conflict between US and Iran, in which already, back-and-forth, many threatening statements have been made and provocative actions carried out. In my speech, I enter into the question why specifically the violation of heritage may cause so much indignation, why people from across the world are so sensitive to the destruction of heritage, and especially to its deliberate destruction in times violence. So, why did—out of the flow of belligerence between the US and Iran—specifically this presidential tweet attract so much attention? No misunderstanding, it was immediately and worldwide interpreted as a threat to Iranian cultural heritage. Why did it cause such a shock, and revulsion?

I will, in a bird's-eye view, take you into the concept of heritage, and into the importance and urgency of our engagement with heritage that is under threat, because of war or warlike circumstances. I do this on behalf of the Centre for Global Heritage and Development, the joined heritage centre of the universities of Leiden, Delft and Rotterdam. 'Heritage Under Threat' is one of its key research themes.

Let us start with the question: what, actually, is heritage? Heritage is our legacy from the past, handed over from one generation to the next, it is something we want to preserve, something that has historic and cultural value to us. The physical remnants of the past—they can be objects, buildings, places and landscapes (everything you can see or touch)—we call tangible heritage. In addition to this tangible, material heritage, there are practices of heritage that we call intangible: these can be language, music, arts, stories, rituals, and customs. Intangible heritage practices may be related to

certain places or landscapes, or to certain societal groups, or countries. Think, for instance, of religious rituals in temples or churches. Fireworks at the turn of the year. Or, for the Dutch among you, of the now controversial tradition of *Sinterklaas* and Black Pete. Both tangible and intangible heritage can shape our ideas about the past, the present and the future.

So, heritage has to do with history, but heritage is not the same as history. Heritage happens now, is something of the present. Heritage is what we, in our time, value as important objects, buildings, landscapes, stories and practices, handed over to us from the past by our ancestors. They are the fragments of history that we find worthy of protection and want to keep for future generations. To make things even more complex: next to official heritage that is designated by governmental institutions, we may also cherish unofficial heritage, on an individual or collective level.

All this means that what we call heritage is not a static or objective given, nor clearly defined; heritage is ambiguous and plural. What we value can change over time, and different individuals or social or cultural groups may choose their own heritage. Heritage is closely related to identity in two ways: heritage is formed by cultural identity and by personal and collective memories, but, in turn, heritage can also construct and develop identities. Heritage and identity are in continuous interaction.

Back now to the global context in which you, delegates, are operating today and tomorrow. How does the international community—in a globalising world—deal with the ambiguous and plural concept of heritage? And how do we deal with 'heritage under attack'? Is there any 'common ground'?

I can reassure you. Yes, there is common ground! In the course of the 20th century a body of international legislation on cultural heritage has been developed. For instance the Geneva Convention of 1949, an international convention containing specific statements that forbid intentional or gratuitous damage to undefended cultural heritage by invading or occupying forces. One of the most important steps in the realm of heritage was taken in 1945, just after the devastations of the Second World War, with the foundation of UNESCO as an organisation for international cooperation in the fields of education, science and culture.

In 1972, UNESCO's work on heritage led to the adoption of the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which is by now ratified by 193 countries. By signing the Convention, each country commits itself to conserve not only the World Heritage sites in its territory, but also to protect its national heritage. The World Heritage Committee was established in 1976 and already in 1978 the first sites were inscribed on the World Heritage List. Since then, important legal instruments on cultural heritage have been developed by UNESCO and adopted by its member states. To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal (so 'world') value and meet one or more selection criteria from the official UNESCO guidelines.

The world heritage list now contains more than 1100 world heritage sites. More than 50 of them are listed as 'in danger'. There are many reasons for this 'danger', from air pollution and natural disasters to armed conflicts. UNESCO monitors the situation of enlisted heritage sites and, if necessary, takes a stand on abuses, and encourages and facilitates international cooperation to save heritage that is in danger. During the last century huge steps have been made to build an international system of heritage protection, both national and international. The importance of heritage for the cultural identities—and thus the futures—of people is widely recognised. Many measures have been taken to safeguard heritage across the world.

Still, there is a lot of work to do in this field, varying from further reflection on the meanings of heritage, to the actual preservation of heritage sites and practices in the reality of everyday life. To promote this is an important duty to all of us.

I end my speech with an iconic, dramatic example from recent history: the ravaging of the ancient UNESCO world heritage site of Palmyra in Syria. This famous archeological site has suffered enormous destruction during the periods of occupation by IS, from 2015 to the beginning of 2017. Pictures of subsequent devastations went across the world. To make things even worse, IS used the ancient theatre of Palmyra for executions.

Shortly before the Syrian army recapture Palmyra at the turn of 2017, IS severely damaged its Roman theatre, and the monument called Tetracylon along the

colonnaded street of Palmyra. On that occasion UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova made an impressive statement, that I would like to share with you:

“This destruction is a new war crime and an immense loss for the Syrian people and for humanity,” she said “This new blow against cultural heritage, just a few hours after UNESCO received reports about mass executions in the theatre, shows that cultural cleansing led by violent extremists is seeking to destroy both human lives and historical monuments in order to deprive the Syrian people of its past and its future. This is why the protection of heritage is inseparable from the protection of human lives, and we must all unite to put this at the centre of all efforts to build peace.”

I recall her words, because of the striking way she links respect for human life to respect for cultural heritage as a core value of humanity: the right to keep your identity, the right to own your past and future. These values should be inalienable.

The international community of the United Nations is convinced of these rights, as international law shows. But reality is often unruly, especially in times of tension and war. Still, it is good to see how the international community can and does contribute to prevent destruction of heritage and to limit or redeem the damage done, as can be seen in the case of Syria. As for president Trump's tweet we started with, we can only hope it will turn out to remain a 'paper tiger' and that the US will stick to international rules.

I come to a conclusion. We all have our roots, narratives, and places of memory and history. All of us are part of communities that value objects, places and practices as inheritances that are closely related to our identities, and that we want to preserve for the future. Cultural heritage—whether tangible or intangible—is crucial as a mediator between the past and the future. It helps us to build, maintain and develop our identities. It can also be of help to understand other people, people from different backgrounds—to learn about their history, and their stories. This is—in my opinion why it is so important to recognise, respect and safeguard cultural heritage—not only the heritage that is yours, but as much the heritage of others.

Delegates of CalsMUN2020, I do hope you will start, and never stop, to discover and interpret the plural meanings of history, and to care for the traces of

history that are everywhere around you, in your own environment and worldwide. I wish you a great and inspiring CalsMUN!