

¹³ See <https://www.archinitaly.org/#triumphal>.

¹⁴ See <http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/washington-dc>.

¹⁵ See <http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/bern>.

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The second coming of Palmyra. A technological prison

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Not too long ago, I argued that the untethered proliferation of digital documentation and management strategies in heritage preservation debates and approaches was indicative of a crisis of identity in heritage and preservation studies (Rico 2017). On the one hand, the field has recognized and taken steps to empower marginalized forms of expertise, and on the other hand, it has reinforced expert-led management strategies that are characteristic of technocratic safeguarding measures. At the heart of this tension is a pervasive rhetoric that argues that archiving *is* saving. But this is not true: having detailed blueprints for a monument may aid in preserving *information* on its aesthetic, historic and scientific values, but it does not commit to supporting its continuous existence *in situ*, nor does it recognize its relation to its built and cultural landscape, its communities or its place in history. The reconstruction of the Roman Arch of Septimius Severus in Syria after its destruction in 2015 by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a good case in point. Efforts to complete and archive detailed documentation over the years, which included 3D scanning, are confronted with the reality of the disappearance of the arch as a casualty of war. Its destruction stands as proof that documentation and reproduction of a site are unrelated to the act of safeguarding it in all its complexity.

The second coming of Palmyra's Arch of Triumph takes the strange shape of a reproduction that is one-third of its original size, made in Italy and put on display across unfamiliar urban landscapes such as Trafalgar Square in London, Madinat Jumeirah in Dubai and Neimënster Abbey in Luxembourg, amongst others. The replica was supposed to head to Syria next, to be unveiled in the city of Tadmur at an undisclosed time, but the COVID-19 pandemic may have interrupted its trajectory. Reactions to the reproduction and circulation of this replica are diverse across the academy, reflecting a struggle in heritage studies as a field that attempts to balance its preservationist legacy with a more recent concern with heritage rights. Perhaps reflecting this tension, while Stobiecka presents a thorough overview of the relative authenticity, hyper-reality and global belonging of this extravagant product, her heritage preservation narrative is missing a more intimate engagement with Syria and Syrians. Without this consideration, a critical discussion of the ethics and politics of technocracy in post-colonial cultural remediation falls short.

Interestingly, despite the relative obscurity of a local beneficiary in this narrative, the collaborative project – which also included the University of Oxford, Harvard University, the Dubai Future Foundation and UNESCO – won the Public Engagement with Research Award, sponsored by the vice chancellor of the University of Oxford (Dubai Future Foundation 2017). Engaging with a plethora of audiences, mostly in Western cities, and countless spectators across the world through its online presence, the travelling Arch of Triumph can be seen as an effective tool for underscoring the significance of preservation in diplomatic transactions and peace-building missions (Meskell 2018). But the way in which a coalition of experts selected each

host city, funded different stages of the project and managed the technical aspects of the reproduction – even reproductions have a maker (Thompson 2018) – are also crucial details in discussions of technological (de)colonization. Stobiecka's examination could benefit from a closer look at agency that comes from a deeper involvement with the artefact's itineraries. A focus on itineraries considers that objects have 'no real beginning other than where we enter them and no end since things and their extensions continue to move' (Joyce and Gillespie 2015, 3).

There is no doubt that the trajectory and influence of Palmyra extend historically far beyond the borders of Syria, but the carefully crafted circulation of a replica that claims to represent Syrian interests today must confront specific concerns with the ethics of representation in contemporary heritage studies. First, the destruction narrative that is represented in the reproduction of the arch is not representative of the widespread destruction of diverse cultural sites that took place across Syria during this rampage (Mulder 2016). Likewise, the representational form of the arch cites a very selective period for this monument, which includes being used as a mosque and a church at different moments in its life history (Mulder 2020). Second, the visible rejection of Syrian refugees across many European countries, contemporary with the free circulation and consumption of the replica, undermines efforts to construct a global discourse that addresses the human scale of the Syrian conflict (Cunliffe 2016; Thompson 2017). Third, the apparent applause that this replica has received across the world evokes the strong rejection of the reproduction of the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, Iraq, which was disassembled through excavation to be reassembled in Berlin in the 1930s. A scaled replica, built in Babylon by Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s, has been used as a textbook example of heritage inauthenticity and politically motivated deceit. Destruction, and its presumed resolution through digital reproduction, continue to be politically motivated.

Stobiecka's article offers important debates that invite us to revisit what it means to 'save heritage' in the 21st century. Her discussions also act as a reminder that heritage debates that fall under a 'heritage-at-risk' rhetoric enable less critical examinations of the means and purposes of representation (Rico 2015). Therefore calling for decolonizing practices in heritage preservation must revolve around an exploration of the channels of authority and expertise that give shape to specific safeguarding narratives, rather than focus on repackaging preservation strategies under new codifications and techniques that result in the same colonizing process of heritagization nonetheless.

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Hijacking ISIS. Digital imperialism and salvage politics

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On 8 April 2017, I came across the replica arch in Piazza Signoria. If you were not paying attention, it was easy to miss. A small, rather unimpressive copy, out of scale with its surrounding Florentine architecture, but also with the Syrian site of Palmyra. The replica drew scant attention from the lunchtime crowds. It was largely an exercise in public relations for the G7 meetings being hosted in Florence: Italy was celebrating itself. The marble came from the legendary Tuscan quarry of Carrara, close to the spot where Michelangelo selected his marble for *David*. The Roman arch was built during the reign of Septimius Severus in the third century A.D. The copy was made