

Archaeological Dialogues (2021), 28, 121–123
doi:10.1017/S1380203821000155

Preservationist doctrines as theological propositions in secular clothes

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More than a decade ago – this would be prior to the Egyptian revolution of January 2011, when Hosni Mubarak was still in power, and it seemed likely that rule would pass to his sons – I was in Cairo thinking about potential new archaeological projects. I spent some time with an Egyptian colleague who was the chief inspector for the archaeological preserve that encompassed what remained of the undeveloped urban space that was once Fustat, the early Islamic precursor to metropolitan sprawl that is today's Cairo. Walking the site together, I quickly understood what it meant to do heritage work in an under-funded, authoritarian system where non-monumental ruins held little value as easily exploitable resources. Instead, the site attracted dead-of-night visits by construction firms that would punch through its retaining walls to illegally deposit their building refuse rather than pay fees at ex-urban landfills. Elsewhere, government contractors bulldozed debris from neighbouring hills that were being graded to build a new museum, sporting club and park into the ever-shrinking archaeological reserve, despite efforts by the state-employed inspectors to use dummy excavations to mark and police the boundaries. However, it was the story of the pile of marble columns, carved ashlar and other architectural fragments that most impressed upon me the challenges of translating the Western universalized doctrines of heritage that Rico discusses in this important essay to the realities of the modern Middle East.

Adjacent to the Fustat archaeological preserve is the Mosque of 'Amr ibn al-As, the first mosque to be founded on the continent of Africa, and one of the oldest still extant in the Muslim world. Administratively it is not part of the preserve today, yet it is historically and archaeologically connected to the site as the spiritual and cultural centre of what was a major new urban foundation – *misr* in Arabic – by the Muslim community that would settle in Egypt following the region's conquest in the first half of the seventh century C.E. My colleague shared with me that the heap of marble fragments that now littered the site was the result of a recent renovation of this original congregational mosque. I use the term 'renovation' purposefully here as an alternative to 'conservation' or 'preservation', doctrines and practices which Rico cogently argues operate as core principles of universalized Western approaches to heritage. It turns out that the recent work done to the Jami'a 'Amr was financed and overseen by Saudi Arabia working through the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments – about which I will offer a few remarks at the end of this commentary) and not the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA). When I first learned of this situation, I was appalled at what appeared to be a Salafi-oriented programme to, literally, whitewash the historical fabric of this grand monument as a way to undermine its heritage value lest it become a distraction to the believer's devotion according to the Islamic juridical principle of *sadd al-dhara'iah* (blocking the means to deviation from divine truth). This principle has been a hallmark of long-standing iconoclastic impulses among various Muslim (particularly Sunni) fundamentalist groups to legitimate the destruction and desecration of sacred and religio-historical spaces ranging from Shiite shrines to monumental Buddhist statues. Among those groups, the KSA, since the early 19th century,

has been chiefly responsible, whether directly or indirectly, in much of these efforts. Sites, no less holy in the Islamic tradition than the Haram al-Sharif in Mecca, have borne witness to such forces.

More recently, however, this anti-heritage doctrine with respect to places of religious significance has merged with an argument about the necessity for modernization in certain cases, the mosque of 'Amr one of them. The forms of preservation so sacred to the universalized heritage discourse that emerges from the European Enlightenment and its secularizing impulse are themselves re-formed through arguments that places of worship still in use require renovation rather than museumification in order to best serve the needs of the faithful. Were this not cover, in most cases, for ideological and doctrinal statements about who counts as 'believers', I would be sympathetic to this as a critique of the dominant heritage logics of UNESCO and others. Indeed, when it comes to religio-historic sites that continue to serve the needs of a large community of worshippers, the heritage industry has a very poor track record in respecting the wishes of those communities with its top-down approach to 'religion' as compartmentalizable and secondary to heritage work.

Rico articulates this well when she argues that 'the interrelated agendas of religion and politics shaped the ideological trajectory of preservation away and isolated from a productive engagement with sacred and religious heritage' (p. 114). I would go further and state that the concept of preservation as developed within modern heritage discourse is its own form of sacralizing doctrine. At its core is an effort to reproduce the sacred, just without recourse to any specific scripture or revelation. Such divine texts and the ways in which they shape believers' engagements with space, place and the material world should have no authority to dictate to the heritage practitioner. As Rico notes in her reference to Lowenthal's genealogy of heritage value as an object of study shaped by the rise of secularism starting in the 16th-century Reformation, secular and materialistic practices of remembrance take precedence (Lowenthal 1998). I would qualify this by noting that what emerges is a particularly Protestant conceptualization of heritage that is very much theologically driven, with its own salvific narratives, ritual practices and conceptions of divinity. Salvation still exists in this secular modernity, only now it is achieved through preservation and nationalization of the past. Here I side with Latour in arguing that we have never been modern. The ensuing heritage movements, however, are anti-clerical in their doctrine and practice. Popes, imams, rabbis, high priests of Isis, cannot be allowed to serve as the authority when it comes to heritage acts of preservation, precisely because they are assumed not to have that universalist and cosmopolitan appreciation of the past and its sacredness outside their theological blinders. Thus they, and those who are members of their flocks, must be compartmentalized and marginalized in order for the state (whether in the form of a single nation state or supra-state institutions) to do the work of preservation. Rico signals this so well when she notes that so many of the heritage manuals 'assume that any religious value is accessible to expert assessment, able to be made public, and translatable to a global audience' (p. 115) Nothing of importance, nothing that a museum cannot house and represent, is the exclusive domain of such religious authorities.

The present article offers an important critique of contemporary heritage practices for the ways in which their universalizing approaches to culture and the past fail to account for the ways in which many sites connected to religious or spiritual traditions have communities that value them not for their designation as loci of world heritage, but as places of specific practices of worship and divine meaning. In her conclusion Rico directs us to consider the seeming incompatibility of Islam and practices of heritage preservation as witnessed by headline cases such as Hagia Sophia, Bamiyan or ISIS, and she poignantly asks, 'how can one counter the dominance of this "Western gaze" for the broad and diverse region of the Middle East and North Africa (and beyond)?' (p. 119). One alternative is the model of Saudi-funded and -managed renovation projects such as historic mosques in Egypt and elsewhere. The danger there is: which sites get renovation and which get demolition? That all depends on which claims to orthodoxy within a religious tradition can implement their demand for the latter over the former and vice versa. Do the voices of opposition within that tradition, whether sectarian, diasporic or non-state-sanctioned, have any alternative in such cases but to seek refuge in universalist heritage doctrines to counter those assertions of religious authority particularly when they come from the state? Here

is where a careful study of the nationalization of the various *awqaf* across the Muslim world (stating with colonial reorganizations of the 19th century and then the rise of new nation states in the 20th) can provide context and the possibility for an alternative. What would such new religious foundations look like? The Agha Khan Trust for Culture has positioned itself as one possibility, yet it remains closely aligned with Western preservationist expertise tempered with a commitment to local communities and training them in the heritage arts. Even then, it too must operate within the framework of national authorities, thus lacking the level of independence, at least in theory, from the state that defined the *awqaf* of the premodern period. Similarly, its tight connection with the Isma'ili community, a Shi'i minority within the broader Muslim world, raises concerns among Sunni religious authorities wary of how its connections and control over certain heritage resources can grant it legitimacy and even political power within the Muslim 'Umma. As increasing numbers of heritage professionals from the region get their training in Western institutions or those within the Middle East founded on the universalized principles of heritage practice, these questions may be moot. My hope is that they will engage with the critiques that Dr Rico has presented here and recognize that alternatives can exist, particularly ones rooted in a long history of varied Muslim (and regional non-Muslim – e.g. Coptic, Syrian Orthodox, Jewish) engagements with the heritage of their material and spiritual past, present and future.

Archaeological Dialogues (2021), 28, 123–124
doi:10.1017/S1380203821000167

Heritage preservation and religious sites or a selected history of UNESCO?

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The stated aim of this paper, to 'consider tensions between heritage preservation practice and religious traditions that share the same landscape or material culture' (p. 111), is one that will greatly interest many heritage practitioners and academics. We know the power of religion, heritage and religious heritage, and exploration of the many tensions is a rich subject area ready for careful and nuanced debate and Rico does raise many areas and issues that I think would be very interesting to pursue further. The external view of heritage in the MENA region has focused on a history and analysis of UNESCO work and impact here.

UNESCO has undoubtedly had a major impact on global heritage since its inception, and it has also been the subject of a great deal of analysis and critique (e.g. Huber 2021; Labadi 2013; Meskell 2018). The challenges to ideas such as a global heritage and the expert voice in heritage (Smith 2006) have allowed many of us to question the value and role of UNESCO, particularly outside Europe. I include myself in this group (Young 2019), and am aware that it is definitely time to move the agenda on and start asking different questions and finding different perspectives. Some questions that Rico has touched on in this paper that I think could usefully be a starting point for debate include: why has UNESCO endured? And what is the actual impact of UNESCO World Heritage listing in many parts of the world? Are there quite specific local impacts and values to listing? The differences in the ways in which sites linked to living and extinct religions are

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