HERITAGE AND IDENTITY:
ISSUES IN CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION

Syria's Monuments: Their Survival and Destruction

Michael Greenhalgh

BRILL

Syria's Monuments: their Survival and Destruction examines the fate of the various monuments in Syria (including present-day Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel) from Late Antiquity to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. It examines travellers' accounts, mainly from the 17th to 19th centuries, which describe religious buildings and housing in numbers and quality unknown elsewhere. The book charts the reasons why monuments lived or died, varying from earthquakes and desertification to neglect and re-use, and sets the political and social context for the Empire's transformation toward a modern state, provoked by Western trade and example. An epilogue assesses the impact of the recent civil war on the state of the monuments, and strategies for their resurrection, with plentiful references and web links.

Michael Greenhalgh (PhD 1968) is Emeritus Professor of Art History at the Australian National University. He has published widely on the survival of the Roman world, including most recently *Destruction of the Cultural Heritage of 19th-century France: Old Stones versus Modern Identities* (Leiden, 2015).

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Syria's Monumental Past
The Art of Construction
Michael Greenhalgh

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By

Michael Greenhalgh

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Cover illustration: Serjilla, seen here in 2003, is in the Jebel Riha, some 80km southwest of Aleppo, and is one of the many "Dead Cities" travellers described in north and south Syria. Thriving in Late Antiquity, growing grapes and olives, it had houses, villas and public baths. Some structures were decorated with mosaics and frescoes; all were built from the limestone on which the town stood. Like other sites, Serjilla declined and was then largely abandoned; the possible reasons are discussed in the text.

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Syria's Monuments: Their Survival and Destruction

Heritage and Identity

ISSUES IN CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION

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Introduction

> For what was Syria so remarkable? The lustre of its early glories, the vicissitudes of its fortunes, and the blood that has drenched its soil. It was also noted for its admirable fertility, the variety of its climate, and the advantageous position which it occupied in the very heart of the ancient world, which rendered it the chosen abode of early commerce and civilization.[1] [1846]

The answers given above appear in a primer for students, *Geography and sacred history of Syria, including Phoenicia, Palestine, or the Holy Land, with Idumea, made interesting*, which is a mine of information and prejudgments, such as on the Arabs who live in Syria and Palestine: "little firmness and stability of character... covetousness, ingratitude, jealousy, faithlessness, and indolence."[2] Or Casola's 1494 (post-) judgment on the Muslims in Jerusalem: "I declare that they may be as great and as learned as you like, but in their ways they are like dogs."[3]

Such texts provided ready-made opinions for armchair readers back home, but the majority of travellers who visited Syria (and there were hundreds of them) as well-educated pilgrims, traders, diplomats, scientists, soldiers, sailors and eventually archaeologists offered richer and more subtle assessments of the locals they met and the monuments they admired. This book is based on their accounts, because these offer the only possible entrée for Westerners into what was for centuries a strange and alien world. Literate and knowledgeable visitors write at length to explain many aspects of Syria, from the people (Arabs, Bedouin, Turks, Druze, Christians, Jews) and the physical environment (agriculture, drought, marshes) to the pressures on the built environment (earthquakes, dilapidation, taxation, communications). All these elements are essential to framing the context in which the ancient architecture of Syria survived, tottered or disappeared completely. Some mediaeval sources in Arabic (translated into Western languages in the 19th century) write a little about local architecture, but none do so in detail, and our travellers' accounts offer us the only comprehensive (and sometimes encyclopaedic) picture of what they saw. Some of this is long gone; some is in danger (see the Epilogue for this century's civil war), but plenty survives for us to echo their amazement at the huge quantities of ancient churches and housing that survived into the 19th century. Today the "Dead Cities" near Aleppo survive to entrance us, each like a deserted Pompeii yet these are but a small fraction of the ancient

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towns and villages our travellers saw, most now gone thanks to the march of modernisation.

European travellers in earlier centuries naturally had an ethno-centric approach to the Middle East, offering assessments of the locals while describing cities and monuments that would disappear or change over the course of the centuries. This book presents a broad synthesis of how Greater Syria "developed" from Late Antiquity onward, concentrating on the state of the area in recent centuries, and providing travellers' detailed information on many of her sites, as they travelled through these lands before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

As we shall see, our travellers were remarkably diverse in origins, interests and opinions. If, to those aficionados of that 20th-century post-colonial lament, many accounts seem "orientalist," this is far from being the case. Most judgments do indeed end up canted in favour of the West, which without any debate at all had better agriculture, building practices, trade and governance. But such conclusions are far from pre-judged, because most travellers did not arrive with such a facile check-list of prejudices. Instead, they spent time on the ground, and some observers were equipped with the necessary languages to discuss matters with the locals. "Orientalism" implies a standard list of attitudes, which visitors could check off one by one in the countries they visited. What follows will demonstrate that our travellers had far too many diverse views to be strapped into such a 20th-century straightjacket. A very few had attitudes that were indeed imperialist; a very few thought (like Napoleon) the area ripe for invasion and yet fewer still for colonising; some were fixated on gaining trading advantage (often in antiquities) over their European rivals; some concentrated on agriculture; but many focussed on antiquities in the study of which they could use their classical education to advantage.

Religion was and remained for some a problem, as well as a focus. Syria was a Christian land long before the Islam arrived, and much of the Western animus against that newer religion was because Christians (and Jews) in the Ottoman Empire were officially treated as inferior and, for centuries, rigorously prohibited from visiting some Muslim religious buildings. This book concentrates on ancient architecture in part because of such restrictions, and in part because few travellers were equipped (as they indeed were for structures Greek and Roman) to deal with Islamic architecture from well-grounded knowledge. Thus although they admired Aleppo for its orderly life and clean streets, they have very little to say about its markets and mosques, nor much about the conspicuous citadel, usually barred to them because it was a military installation.

This Introduction sketches for the reader the features of the country as seen by travellers, introducing the reasons for considering a "Syria" larger than her present-day borders, and outlining why accurate mapping of parts of the country (and hence knowledge of its monuments) took so long to achieve. The book then falls into three sections plus an epilogue. Chapters 1–3 discuss the state of the country and her ancient monuments, and the trials and tribulations travellers encountered there, concentrating on the 19th century, and demonstrating how foreigners learned about the area via pilgrimage, war, diplomacy, trade and the benefits of a classical education. Because travellers did not take much account of them, and because so many had over the centuries been converted into mosques, apart from their mosaic floors little appears below about churches.

Chapters 4–10 offer a gazetteer of towns and other sites, divided geographically into Aleppo and the North, Damascus and the Centre (including Palmyra), Bosra and the South, and Palestine and present-day Jordan. Our travellers did not visit or at least comment at length on ancient sites on or near the Euphrates (such as Raqqa, Resafa, Deir al-Zor), so these are omitted. A chronological division into Roman, Byzantine and Muslim would have been confusing, since most Byzantine settlements were originally Roman, and there are few exclusively Muslim settlements (Anjar is an exception). In any case our travellers, although usually able to distinguish Byzantine from earlier Roman, generally lacked any knowledge of the historical development of settlements after Rome, and usually gave much less attention to Muslim buildings than to earlier ones, because spectacular mosques were generally inaccessible to non-Muslims.

Before the general Conclusion, the third section (just Chapter 11) might be called the European Carve-Up, because this terminology is richly deserved. Syria, in a key location with Mediterranean access, and with plenty of fertile soil which would support a much larger population, had long been eyed by Europeans for a takeover, via trade and even settlement. It first mentions the attempted occupation of Egypt via Syria under Napoleon, because this brought the two countries to European attention together with a host of documentation for Egypt. It also deals with the plunder of the country for Western museums. But it concentrates on the true carve-up by the Western powers of the defeated Ottoman Empire, examining the effect of the ensuing Mandate (French and British) on archaeology, museums and monuments.

The Epilogue provides an outline sketch of the present state of Syria's monuments, together with ample Internet references, so that the reader may pursue in detail individual sites and, in some cases, monuments. Needless to say,

the monuments have often suffered as an echo of the sufferings of Syria and her people.

Syria boasted many very old monuments, known through ancient authors, and still contained many towns with Roman layouts.[1] Indeed, "when Greece was in her infancy, and long before Rome had even been founded, the coast of Syria was covered with magnificent and wealthy cities," but these had disappeared.[4] Artefacts from the earliest centuries have survived.[2] This book might have included extended discussions of international strategy, because Western visitors were generally alert to Syria's location at an important point between Asia and Africa, as Beaujour noted in 1829.[5] This was an element which came into prominence during the First World War and its aftermath.[6] These factors are touched on in Chapters Eleven and Twelve, but to try and locate them in the context of European diplomacy would have made a very different book, as would any attention to the religious divisions and attitudes throughout the Empire.[3]

Nearly 240 years earlier than our primer Sandys, travelling in 1610, had passed judgment over the whole of what he calls the Turkish Empire:

> Those rich lands at this present remain waste and overgrown with bushes, receptacles of wild beasts, of thieves and murderers, large Territories dispeopled, or thinly inhabited, good Cities made desolate, sumptuous buildings become ruines, glorious Temples either subverted, or prostituted to impiety; true Religion discountenanced and oppressed, all Nobility extinguished, no light of learning permitted, nor virtue cherished; violence and rapine insulting over all."[7]

Gibbon found that "Palestine is a territory scarcely superior to Wales either in fertility or extent," and Newman in 1864 noted as particular problems "frequent changes of government, the rapacity of officials, the insecurity of property, the religious animosity of rival sects, the barbarian ignorance of the peasantry as

1 Segal 1988 for town planning: deals with Philadelphia, Gerasa, Bostra and Philippopolis. With 176 illustrations. Some good photos from earlier decades, on ground and aerial, e.g. from 1930s. Valuable for bringing together many earlier town plans and reconstructions. Neglia 2009 47–75: Il paesaggio urbano della Siria ellenistico-romana, including roads, colonnaded streets.

2 *Ebla to Damascus 1985* for an overview; 365–440: Hellenistic and Roman periods; 442–474: Byzantium; 476–532: Islam.

3 Maclean & Matar 2011, 79–123 Chapter Three: British factors, Governors, and Diplomats; ibid, 156–197, Chapter Five: The Peoples of the Islamic Empires. For Sunni, Shi'a, Christians, etc.

to the enlightened principles of agriculture."[8] This was, after all, the so-called Unchanging East (which we shall encounter again), with an ancient church, prehistoric monuments which "still illustrate the rural superstitions of the dim ages," and mountains which "still shelter in their fastnesses the rites and descendants of ancient paganism."[9] Such opinions are not universal but, as this book will demonstrate, Western travellers from the 17th century found many aspects of the Ottoman Empire (with its multiple interactions with the outside world[4]) inferior to conditions at home, especially agriculture, population, public safety and manufactures, many like Sandys emphasising how strange it was that such rich lands should be under-exploited, and opportunities for improvement (not to mention Western commerce) missed. As we have already seen, Westerners could also relay standardised prejudices about Syrian peoples: the Druze were warlike, the Maronites industrious but superstitious, the Muslims fanatical, and so on.[10] As for exactly what happened in Palestine since the Ottoman conquest of 1516, "historians are mining Ottoman archives for insights into the political, economic, and social changes."[5]

The cause of Syria's degradation was unanimously attributed to the unreformed attitudes of central government, and to the lax and sometimes non-existant control of the further reaches of the Empire, such as Syria. In 1796 the lugubrious Volney (of olympic-class pessimism) wished to investigate the reasons for decline and fall,[11] and he saw in Syria a terrible warning, a presage of what might happen when Europe declined:

> No where perceiving aught but robbery and devastation, tyranny and wretchedness, my heart was oppressed with sorrow and indignation. / Every day I found in my route fields abandoned by the plough, villages deserted, and cities in ruins. Frequently I met with antique monuments; wrecks of temples, palaces, and fortifications; pillars, aqueducts, sepulchres.[12]

He compared what he saw with what he read in Josephus and Strabo, and abandoned settlements and traces of agriculture confirmed for him that their estimate of a population of 12m in their own day must have been correct:

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4 Atassi 1986 for the 18thC; Faroqhi 2004 for an excellent briefing and large bibliography.

5 Baram & Carroll 2002, 140: "Avoided, ignored, or misrepresented, the Ottoman period for Palestine (1516–1917) is thus a contested era. In the vast sweep of prehistoric to Biblical to the Classic Eras, archaeologists present the dynamics of change and transformation. But for the centuries of Ottoman rule are seen as an exception, either as desolate or passively engulfed by Western triumph."

> Every where one might have seen cultivated fields, frequented roads, and crowded habitations. Ah! what are become of those ages of abundance and of life? What are become of so many productions of the hand of man?[13]

Similar reactions were evoked a century earlier by the ruins of Egypt.[14] Archaeologists today have also turned to the "afterlife" of towns, investigating reasons for decline and abandonment.[6]

The Extent of Syria

The Syria of today joins the Mediterranea Sea from south of Antioch (south of the Turkish border) and down to south of Tartous, where Lebanon begins, and then Israel. On a high plain, to the east of the Lebanon mountains, the country extends in a narrow fertile strip from north of Aleppo through Hama, Homs and Damascus to Deraa in the south (beyond which is Jordan, with Jerash and Amman). Palmyra, some 235km NE of Damascus, is well into the desert, and to Deir al-Zor, on the Euphrates, which forms the boundary with Iraq, is another 205km. Isidore of Seville, the Spanish encyclopaedist (c.560–636), knew a lot about Syria; it included Palmyra and Tyre, Apamea and Edessa, Antioch and Gaza, and Galilee and Jaffa as part of Palestine.[15] For the Crusaders, Syria stretched as far east as the Tigris and Euphrates, and "there are three Palestines, which are parts of Greater Syria."[16] For Affagart, travelling in 1533–34, La Grande Syrie consisted of five parts, from the River Tigris in the east, to Palestine on the coast.[17] In 1907, "used in a broad sense the term Syria means the narrow strip of land at the east end of the Mediterranean, about 400 miles long and ranging in breadth from 70 to 100 miles."[18] That was one opinion; another in 1883, demonstrating the flexibility of the nominations, was that

> on désigne souvent sous le nom de Palestine toutes les régions comprises depuis l'Egypte jusqu'aux confins de l'Asie-Mineure et de la Mésopotamie, avec la Phénicie, la Coelé-Syrie, l'Idumée, l'Arabie Pétrée et une partie de l'Arabie Déserte.[19]

Lebanon and its creation provide yet another view of boundaries.[7]

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6 Christie & Augenti 2012 for eleven case studies from the classical world, although none from Syria.

7 Salibi 1988, 57–71: Talking Geography.