

Preservation of cultural heritage: Palmyra

[Premodern Digital Cultural Heritage Network](#)

Teacher's Guide

- The modern history of the ancient site of Palmyra in Syria is a good case study to use to introduce important cultural heritage issues related to ancient and medieval sites.
- Cultural heritage as defined by UNESCO falls into two broad categories: 'tangible' heritage (for example buildings, monuments) and 'intangible' heritage (for example oral traditions, local knowledge). The heritage at risk in Palmyra is 'tangible' or 'built' heritage', as well as 'intangible' heritage.

Ancient Palmyra

- Palmyra, in modern-day Syria, was an oasis city at the eastern limits of the Roman Empire. It prospered between the **1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE**. Palmyra became a **major city on the trade route** connecting the Roman Empire with Persia and the **Far East**.
- The **2nd century CE** witnessed the embellishment of the city with many **buildings**, along a colonnaded street, including temples dedicated to local deities. Palmyrene architecture is a mixture of Graeco-Roman, local, and eastern influences. Among Palmyra's most prominent edifices were the **Temple of Bel** (a local equivalent of Zeus), begun in 32 CE, and the **Temple of Baalshamin** (a sky god), dating to 130 CE.
- During the 3rd century, the city briefly was independent under Queen **Zenobia** (266/267–272) but soon was reconquered by the Romans, marking the end of its peak era of prosperity. In the 7th century, the city came under Arab rule.
- The ruins of the ancient city were rediscovered by European travellers in the 17th and 18th centuries, and played an important role in the development of the neoclassical style.

Modern Palmyra

- Since **1980** Palmyra has been a **UNESCO** world heritage site. Since 2013 it has been inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to the war in Syria.
- The city was captured by the terrorist group ISIS (the so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria', or Daesh) in **2015**, who destroyed **several major buildings** that have survived since antiquity, including the Temples of Bel and Baalshamin, and damaged monuments in the site museum, killing the head archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad.
- ISIS's motivations for destroying buildings and artworks at Palmyra were complex: they wanted to destroy 'pagan idols', deface the multicultural history of the city, and gain international notoriety through publicity (see [Stuart Manning's 2015 article](#)).
- The city was recaptured by the Syrian Army in 2017.
- Opinions on whether to rebuild the destroyed buildings and monuments are divided; meanwhile, the war in Syria and the refugee crisis it created continue (as of 2022).

Bibliography

[Abdelkarim, Maamoun. "Restoring Syria's Pearl of the Desert: A Reason for Optimism amid the Storm of Terror." *The Guardian*, March 26, 2016, sec. opinion](#)

[Colledge, Malcolm Andrew Richard, and Josef Wiesehöfer. "Palmyra." In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012](#)

[Dearden, Lizzie. "Isis Driven out of the Only City They Have Taken Twice." *The Independent*, March 2, 2017, sec. news](#)

[Manning, Sturt. "Why ISIS Wants to Erase Palmyra's History." *CNN*, September 1, 2015](#)

[UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Site of Palmyra."](#)

Palmyra - Temple of Bel (destroyed 2015)



Palmyra - Temple of Bel. September 2010. Andrew Wilson/Manar al-Athar [ID 99204]



Palmyra - Temple of Bel. March 2007. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 99244]



Palmyra - Temple of Bel. March 2011. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 99613]

- Begun in 32 CE; completion and additions until the 2nd century.
- Built of limestone.
- Dedicated to the supreme god Bel (local equivalent of Zeus), Iarhibol (sun god) and Aglibol (moon god)
- The temple was massive: situated on a large platform (ca. 55 x 30 m) within an walled precinct (205 x 205 m). The *cella* (inner chamber) was ca. 39 x 13 m and 14 m in height.
- It combined **Graeco-Roman architectural elements** like the Ionic and Corinthian orders **with Near Eastern design**, for example different internal rooms (shrines) for different deities.
- The temple was built by Greek, Roman, and Palmyrene craftsmen.
- It was a manifestation of Palmyra's wealth and status, and it represented a significant investment.
- The temple was largely **blown up** by ISIS in **August 2015**.



Palmyra - Temple of Bel. Autumn 1932. Geography Collections, Radcliffe Science Library, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 51927]

Read more:

[Becker, Jeffrey A. "Temple of Bel, Palmyra." Smarthistory, August 8, 2015](#)

More images before the destruction:

[Palmyra - Temple of Bel – exterior](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Bel – interior](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Bel - monumental entrance \(propylaea\)](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Bel - north chamber](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Bel - south chamber](#)

Bibliography

[Allen, Paddy, Paul Torpey, and Kareem Shaheen. "Palmyra after Isis: A Visual Guide." *The Guardian*, April 8, 2016](#)

Palmyra - Temple of Baalshamin (destroyed 2015)



Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin - southwest courtyard. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar. [ID 100521]

- Completed by 130 CE.
- Dedicated to the Palmyrene sky god Baalshamin.
- Also exhibited a **mix of Graeco-Roman and Near Eastern elements**.
- Graeco-Roman elements: tetrastyle prostyle ground plan, i.e. the temple had four free-standing columns in front of the façade, with four pilasters at the sides and at the rear; Corinthian order.
- Near Eastern elements: side windows in the *cella*
- The temple was another manifestation of Palmyra's wealth.
- Also **destroyed** by ISIS in **August 2015**.



Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin. March 2007. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [142035].

More images before the destruction

[Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin - northeast courtyard](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin - southwest courtyard](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin - architectural fragments](#)

[Palmyra - Temple of Baal Shamin - altars](#)

Read more:

[Becker, Jeffrey A. "Temple of Baalshamin, Palmyra." *Smarthistory*, December 19, 2015](#)

Palmyra – Monumental Arch and Tetrapylon (destroyed 2015 and 2017)



Palmyra - colonnaded streets - Great Colonnade - sector B. April 2010. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 101410]



Palmyra - Monumental Arch. April 2008. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 98796]. Destroyed 2015

- Like in many Roman cities, Palmyra had **colonnaded streets**.
- The city is traversed by a main colonnaded street that runs east-west.
- Approximately in the middle of the street, at the intersection of another street, rose a **tetrapylon** (a four-fold arch), built in 150 CE.
- The tetrapylon was made of **granite columns** crowned by **Corinthian capitals**. It was destroyed by Daesh in January 2017.
- On the main street, closer to the Temple of Bel, stood a **monumental arch** built by Emperor Septimius Severus around 200 CE. It was **destroyed by ISIS** in 2015.
- Using **3D technology**, the UK-based Institute for Digital Archaeology created a smaller sized **marble replica** part of the arch in 2016.
- The replica has been shown in several cities around the world.



Palmyra – Tetrapylon. March 2011. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 98628]. Destroyed 2017.

Bibliography

[Allen, Paddy, Paul Torpey, and Kareem Shaheen. "Palmyra after Isis: A Visual Guide." *The Guardian*, April 8, 2016](#)

[Shaheen, Kareem. "Isis Destroys Tetrapylon Monument in Palmyra." *The Guardian*, January 20, 2017, sec. World News](#)

[The Institute for Digital Archaeology. "History of the Arch."](#)

[Turner, Lauren. "Palmyra's Arch of Triumph Recreated in London." *BBC News*, April 19, 2016, sec. UK](#)

Watch:

[Guardian Culture. *Palmyra's Arch of Triumph Replica Erected in Central London, 2016*](#)

Read more:

[The Institute for Digital Archaeology. "Building the Arch."](#)

More images before the destruction

[Palmyra - Monumental Arch](#)

[Palmyra – Tetrapylon](#)

[Palmyra - colonnaded streets - Great Colonnade - sector B](#)

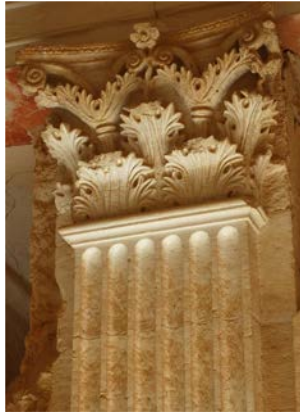
Palmyra – Tower Tomb of Elahbel (destroyed 2015); Palmyrene funerary sculpture



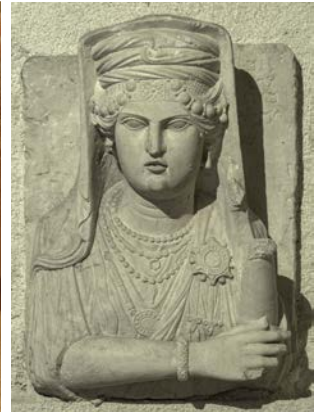
Palmyra – Tower Tomb of Elahbel. April 2009. Ludi Lochner/Manar al-Athar [ID 99921]



Palmyra – Tower Tomb of Elahbel. September 2010. Andrew Wilson/Manar al-Athar [ID 99981]



Palmyra – Tower Tomb of Elahbel. December 2005. Jane Chick/Manar al-Athar [ID 100041]



Palmyra funerary monument of 'Ataran, daughter of Iamlè, Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Daniel C. Waugh/HEIR Project [ID 74792]

- A characteristic Palmyrene type of architecture not seen in the Roman West are the **tower tombs** (from ca. 50 BCE to the mid-2nd century CE).
- The multi-story towers are situated outside of the city walls in the Valley of Tombs; built of sandstone or limestone.
- Each floor had rows of *loculi* (wall graves) for burial of members of an extended family.
- The graves were sealed with **relief portraits** depicting the deceased. The portraits represent the deceased according to their wealth and status.
- **Inscriptions** in Greek and the local Palmyrene language give information about the name and family connections of those buried in the tombs
- The tombs and portraits reflect the **multilingual and multicultural diversity** of the people of Palmyra.
- Palmyrene funerary reliefs exist in great numbers and are second only to those of Rome in quality.
- The best preserved tower tomb was the **Tomb of Elahbel**, built in 103 CE. The Tomb of Elahbel and five other tombs were **destroyed by ISIS** in 2015.
- Some relief portraits were damaged or destroyed in the site museum as well.

More images

[Palmyra - Valley of Tomb](#)

[Palmyra - Tower Tomb of Elahbel](#)

[Tower Tomb of Iamblicus \(Tomb 51\) \(destroyed 2015\)](#)

For more **funerary portraits**, please explore the [HEIR project](#)

Watch (7 min):

[The Getty. Faces of Ancient Palmyra, 2017](#)

Bibliography

[Bailey, Dominic. "Palmyra: Islamic State's Demolition in the Desert." *BBC News*, October 5, 2015, sec. Middle East](#)

[Zucker, Steven, and Jeffrey A. Becker. "Palmyrene Funerary Portraiture." *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015](#)

Palmyra: Cultural heritage at stake

” “ISIS commits cultural heritage atrocities to shock the world, allowing ISIS to demonstrate its ability to act with impunity and illustrating the impotence of the international community to prevent them” (Amr Al-Azm, 2015).

” “[ISIS] seeks to destroy diversity and enforce narrow uniformity. Evidence of a tolerant, diverse past is anathema...Such cultural cleansing deserves condemnation, but attention is what ISIS craves. What it fears is memory and knowledge, which it cannot destroy.” (Stuart Manning, 2015).

” “What is never legitimate is to rebuild ancient monuments using modern materials to replace lost parts – to essentially refabricate them – even though today’s technology makes that seem practical... The temptation to “fix” Palmyra and make it look like it did...is understandable. This fascinating place has been subjected to a barbaric onslaught, the thinking goes. Surely it should be as if Isis never did their worst. History is not like that. The Isis attack on Palmyra...really occurred. This 21st-century tragedy is part of Palmyra’s history now. This too, for the sake of truth and as a warning to the future, must be preserved.” (Jonathan Jones, 2016)

ISIS’s motivations for destroying ‘built cultural heritage’ at Palmyra:

- Religious motivations – a strict, violent interpretation of Islam; desire to destroy ‘pagan’ buildings and artworks (‘idols’), and to destroy image of a vibrant multicultural ancient site like Palmyra
- International media attention – allowed ISIS to promote their message
- Financial gain – while ISIS destroyed some ancient artworks, they also sold antiquities on the black market to fund their military campaign

The broader context

- Intentional destruction of ‘built heritage’, as at Palmyra, destroys our collective human history as well as the rich history of the Syrian people.
- While media attention has focused on destroyed buildings, arguably less attention has been paid to the refugee crisis created by ISIS and the Syrian war. However, these crises are one and the same.
- **Heritage reconstruction can also serve political aims:** the statue of the lion of al-Lat, defaced by ISIS in 2015, was restored by the Syrian government in 2017 as an act of victory.
- Current restoration efforts at Palmyra are being led by Syria’s Russian allies, rather than the European and American archaeologists who worked there previously, as Western countries continue to sanction the repressive regime of Syria’s president, Bashar al-Assad.
- The replica of the monumental arch from Palmyra (see p. 4) has been celebrated by some, but criticized by others as a gimmick that does little to support the Syrian people or their cultural heritage.

Further reading:

[Al-Azm, Amr. "Why ISIS Wants to Destroy Syria's Cultural Heritage." *Time*, October 8, 2015](#)

[Jones, Jonathan/ "Palmyra Must Not Be Fixed." *The Guardian*, April 11, 2016](#)

[Manning, Stuart. "Why ISIS Wants to Erase Palmyra's History." *CNN*, September 1, 2015](#)

[Mudie, Ella. "Palmyra and the Radical Other. On the Politics of Monument Destruction in Syria."](#)

[Otherness: Essays and Studies 6, no. 2 \(2018\)](#)

Cultural heritage under threat; Digital projects

Intentional destruction for political or religious reasons is not the only danger to cultural heritage. Agriculture, modern construction and development, natural erosion, and looting also lead to the loss of cultural heritage.

- Ploughing and modern irrigation methods can have destructive effects on archaeological sites.
- Housing and commercial developments have a major impact.
- Erosion and natural changes in the landscape can uncover or submerge whole sites.
- Illegal excavations and looting are particularly damaging because they lead to the loss of valuable information about the historical development of a site. Looted objects are removed from their contexts and stripped of their history.

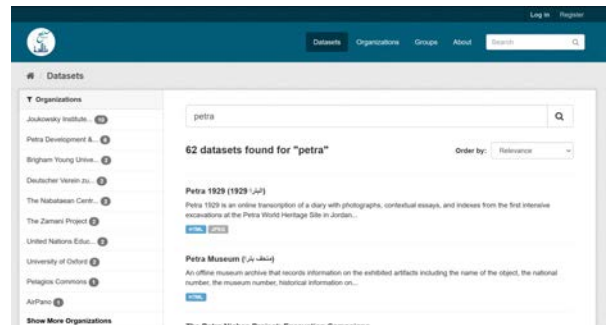
More resources on threats to built heritage, from EAMENA

[EAMENA: "Agriculture."](#)

[EAMENA: "Construction."](#)

[EAMENA: "Looting."](#)

Heritage preservation projects aim to monitor the situation, creating digital databases to map cultural heritage and to facilitate its protection. Two examples of digital projects are:



[Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa \(EAMENA\)](#)

"EAMENA's primary aim is to rapidly record and evaluate the status of the archaeological landscape of the MENA region in order to create an accessible body of data which can be used by national and international heritage professionals to target those sites most in danger and better plan and implement the preservation and protection of this heritage."

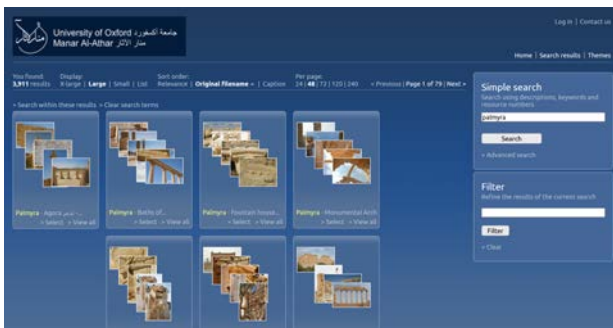
[MaDiH: Mapping Digital Cultural Heritage in Jordan](#)

"contribute[s] to the long-term sustainable development of Jordan's digital cultural heritage, identifying key systems, datasets, standards, and policies, and aligning them to government digital infrastructure capabilities and strategies."

Digital projects and cultural heritage

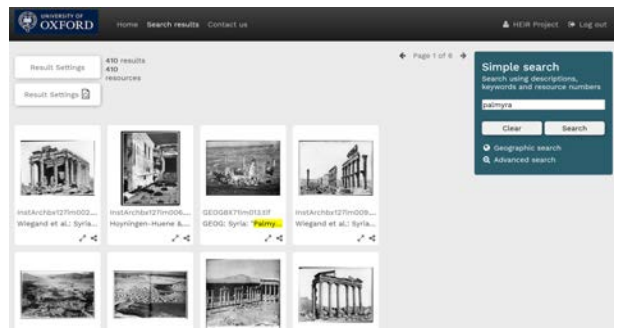
- Digital archives of photographs make it easier to study and research ancient buildings, like those at Palmyra. Photographs are useful because they document buildings at various times in their history.
- Historical photographs can document a building before, during, or after its modern cleaning, restoration, or reconstruction, or (in the case of Palmyra), its destruction
- Photographs can allow specialists to recreate lost buildings as 3D models or physically (as in the case of the Palmyra arch).

Photos documenting the buildings and monuments of Palmyra before their destruction can be found in photo archives like the Historic Environment Image Resource (HEIR) and Manar al-Athar.



[Manar al-Athar \('Guide to Archaeology'\)](#)

"provides high resolution, searchable images for teaching, research, and publication."



[Historic Environment Image Resource \(HEIR\)](#)

"contains digitised historic photographic images from all over the world dating from the late nineteenth century onwards."



[Heritage Gazetteer of Libya](#)

"The aim of the Gazetteer is to record, and to provide with Unique Identifiers, locations and monuments within modern Libya which are of significance to the history of the area up to 1950".

Palmyra is an example of an ancient city known by more than one name—the city was also called Tadmor. Many ancient sites have had multiple names over time. Online resources like the Heritage Gazetteer of Libya can help document all the names of ancient sites.

Class discussion

Questions for discussion

Palmyra

- Where is Palmyra? What is it famous for?
- What made Palmyra wealthy? When was it most prosperous?
- What elements characterize Palmyra's architecture and sculpture? (a mix of Graeco-Roman, local and Eastern influences)
- What do Palmyrene funerary architecture and sculpture look like?
- Name some of the buildings in Palmyra that were intentionally destroyed.

Cultural Heritage

- What are the two main types of cultural heritage? ('tangible' and 'intangible')
- Why is cultural heritage intentionally destroyed? (for example, at Palmyra?)
- What are some other dangers to 'built heritage'? (agriculture, construction, development)
- Why is cultural heritage important? What does its destruction mean? (for example, loss of collective history and memory, and local identity; revenue from tourism)
- Discuss the media outcry regarding the destruction of monuments in Palmyra in the context of the war in Syria and the resulting refugee crisis. How are these two crises connected?
- Is reconstruction of cultural heritage always a good idea? Under what circumstances should cultural heritage be reconstructed? Should it be reconstructed during an ongoing war?