

# ICOA1808: THE SYRIAN HERITAGE ARCHIVE PROJECT IN BERLIN

## Subtheme 03: Protecting and Interpreting Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Empowerment

**Session 2:** Use of Digital Technology for Dissemination and Interpretation

**Location:** Silver Oak 2, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 16:30 – 16:45

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**Abstract:** The Syrian Heritage Archive Project (SHAP) started in 2013 as a digitizing project of the collections of materials from renowned German scientific researchers. The project was located at both the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) and the Museum of Islamic Art (SMB) in Berlin, financed by the German Foreign Office, currently for the 5th project stage.

The project group at the Museum of Islamic Art consists of a multidisciplinary team of different professionals of mostly Syrian and of German background. In addition to the basic database work, over the course of several years of dialogue and discussion within the core team, the emphasis has also been brought to other crucial focus points related to the material culture of Syria.

In 2015, with a growing number of Syrians reaching Germany, the idea for the Multaka Project came up - an award-winning art education project enabling young Syrians guiding refugees through the collections of Berlin museums. In 2016, due to the worsening devastations caused by the ongoing Syrian war, an affiliated damage assessment project with regard to the historic monuments of Aleppo evolved, which, among others, develops a special app for professionals on spot.

The paper shall give an overview of the ongoing activities of the Syrian Heritage Archive Project progressing from digitizing, networking and public outreach to awareness raising and capacity building.

**Key words:** *digital resources, conservation, dissemination, accessibility*

## **Initialization and Implementation of the Project**

The Syrian Heritage Archive Project (SHAP) was initiated in 2013 in Berlin. At this time in Syria, war had caused a humanitarian catastrophe. Regarding the field of culture, it had led to the loss of some of the country's most valued monuments and sites, e.g. the medieval minaret of the Great Mosque of Aleppo in the heart of the Ancient City, a designated national monument of Syria and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There was a strong need to become active. In a joint effort, the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) and the Museum of Islamic Art (SMB-SPK – Berlin State Museums - Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) founded the Syrian Heritage Archive Project as a digitization project. Both institutions, having strong and long-standing ties with Syria, are storing relevant analogue material like excavation documentations or slide collections of German scientific researchers.

Main project goal was to create a digital cultural heritage register for Syria. This was meant as a contribution to the digital documentation and virtual safeguarding of the country's extraordinary rich and diverse archaeological, architectural and art historical heritage. Therefore, implementation aimed at integrating the institutional partner in Syria, the DGAM - Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums, that the Syrian Heritage Archive Project started to cooperate with in 2014. The project has been funded by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and is still within the Office's Cultural Preservation Programme, presently working in its fifth project phase (2017).

Storage of and access to generated datasets is supported by Arachne, the central object database of the German Archaeological Institute and the Archaeological Institute of the University of Cologne. It enables the embedding into a comprehensive IT environment, which was originally created for archaeological research and which is publicly available. Within this so-called iDAI.welt, the iDAI.gazetteer is a central tool for recording and searching place names, for georeferencing virtual places and for interconnecting data. Via standardized interfaces data can be cross-linked internationally.

## **The Syrian Heritage Archive Project Group at the Museum of Islamic Art**

In general, documenting and archiving of collections is the main objective of the Syrian Heritage Archive Project. Regarding the data generating process, several steps for the preparation of the datasets are carried out by the project group at the Museum of Islamic Art before submitting them to Arachne for final processing. Each of the collection's items like photos, drawings and texts are inventorized, then digitized (if not already existing in digital form), named and filed, inserted into a folder structure and given metadata in form of descriptive tags.

Ten thousands of digital reproductions have already been treated in this manner. Parallel to this, several hundred new places have been created, contributing to the existing Syrian place ID's of iDAI.gazetteer. Furthermore, place names are recorded on basis of a standardized, easy-to-read transliteration of the Arabic alphabet following the system of IJMES («International Journal of Middle East Studies»). All additional information being linked to a digitized reproduction is based on a pre-determined thesaurus for metadata.

The easydb database of the Museum of Islamic Art was designed for internal data management. A special feature is the integration of the iDAI.gazetteer, which thus secures the interconnectability with other registers. This also allows database research by both places and collections. The design of easydb foresees an in-depth and detailed description of each object and view under the application of defined value lists, which terms are linked to the controlled vocabulary of the AAT - Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online (Getty Research Institute).

The experts of the Syrian-German project group at the Museum of Islamic Art – all of whom having close personal and professional contacts with Syria – got diverse backgrounds such as architects and archaeologists or as restorer, civil engineer, building historian, as a historian, archivist and photographer or an art historian and cultural educator. Being part of an interdisciplinary team some colleagues were not specialized in digitization work – according methods and processes first had to be established, as is often the case with such projects. Flat hierarchies and open communication were key factors contributing to the working group's profile. Collegial advice and discussion were both challenging and rewarding factors, which produced positive interdependencies and synergetic effects.

The project group from an early stage on has been following a sustainable approach towards the implementation of the new project. One of the project's primary objectives apart from documenting and archiving is awareness raising. Public outreach is made through website, flyers and media coverage as well as publication of articles and contributions to meetings and conferences.

Networking is another important objective, resulting in collaborations and cooperation with heritage projects or individual persons on a national and international level. Subsequently, photo collections from individuals in other countries like France or Syria were included in the archiving process. In 2015, the Syrian Heritage Archive Project was a founding member of ArcHerNet - Archaeological Heritage Network, an extensive German network created to pool expertise for the preservation of cultural heritage. A central point of discussion within the core team has always been how to make the digitized and processed data usable considering the actual situations in Syria and a general public respectively. Given this approach, some team members also worked on the planning and implementation of related projects in favour of the promotion and dissemination of the project's mission.

### **Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums**

Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums is both name and programme to a project, which has started at the end of 2015. The initial idea resulted from the particular situation in that year, when hundred thousands of refugees – especially from Syria – did arrive in Germany. Young Syrian and Iraqi citizens with personal and professional interest for cultural heritage received training as museum guides to provide tours in Arabic. Multaka's tours and workshops give visitors free access to four participating Berlin museums.

The basic consideration was to take directly advantage of the material resources of the Museum of Islamic Art, one of the leading institutions in its field. It houses a unique collection of archaeological and art historical monuments and objects covering ca. 1400 years of material cultural heritage e.g. from late antique Syria and Jordan or medieval Spain, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Director of the Museum of Islamic Art, Prof. Dr. Stefan Weber, was actively supporting the concept at the institutional level.

Apart from the Museum of Islamic Art, two further museums of the Berlin State Museums were taking part in the ongoing initiative: the Museum of the Ancient Near East (SMB-SPK) and the Museum of Byzantine Art (SMB-SPK). In addition, the German Historical Museum (DHM), Germany's national historical museum, cooperated. Of great importance was also the cooperation with the Department of Education, Outreach and Visitor Services of the Berlin State Museums and the Department of Education and Communication of the German Historical Museum.

At a time when museums and artifacts from Syria and Iraq are affected by destruction, looting and illicit trafficking, it is crucial to refer to the nature and complexity of cultural heritage since the value of an artifact cannot just be measured in money. Enabled through a dialogical-participative communication format, the guided tours and workshops of Multaka lead not only to a dissemination of cultural and historical information but also to a raising awareness about various values of historical monuments and objects and ways of negotiation and interpretation.

Another aspect, of course, is to welcome new visitors from outside and to provide a space for exchange and discussion between them and other individual museum visitors for a better mutual understanding and that of their shared cultural heritage.

Multaka turned out to be a very popular project. It was given several prizes – the latest being the online portal's zenith Photo Award for the outcome of a photography workshop covering all of the four museums involved. Its events are well visited by the public and discussed in the social web as well as its concept is much noted by national and international media and cultural organisations, institutions and foundations.

### **The Aleppo Built Heritage Documentation Project**

The rapidly progressing destruction of Syrian monuments and sites encouraged the implementation of damage assessment of built heritage within the frame of the Syrian Heritage Archive Project at an early stage. Considering the archive's high number of related resources, the Aleppo Built Heritage Documentation Project was initiated in 2016, due to the devastating impacts of the armed conflict on the monuments of the Ancient City of Aleppo.

DSDS - Digital Spaces Datasheets was developed as specific web-based database for collaborative digital documentation. Damage assessment files are generated in connection with datasets collected in easydb, being supplemented by historical and art historical data, plus actual information from different sources like satellite imagery or damage news from the media including the Internet. Apart from being documented, monuments and buildings are classified by damage categories as a fundamental basis for professional rehabilitation and conservation in the future.

The projects responsible are very conscious of the model function of such an open inventory for Syrian built heritage, which can be easily accessible to everyone interested. And they put emphasis on the application of common standards, centered around the European standard of Conservation of Cultural Property - Condition survey and report of built cultural heritage (EN 16096) which is complemented by UNESCO forms for rapid assessment. All related resources are made available in three languages, i.e. in German, English and Arabic. Considering all, the particularly developed method can be used as heritage management tool by private and official initiatives on spot in Syria.

Special attention to capacity building was given in various ways. Two young Syrian professionals get training on the job through this project, completed by thematic workshops to learn about state-of-the-art methods and standards of damage assessment and building documentation as well as art historical foundations. A cooperation with experts from Aleppo, being involved as trainers and multipliers, is intended.

This subproject was implemented thanks to funding by the German Federal Foreign Office. It is placed under the roof of “Stunde Null” - A Future for the Time after the Crisis, which constitutes the first joint project of the ArcHerNet - Archaeological Heritage Network.

## **The Aleppo Catalogue**

Also facing the postwar situation of historic centres of major Syrian cities like Homs or Aleppo, an accompanying project that aims at medially supporting and enacting the reconstruction process of ancient Aleppo got some priority in 2017 – the Aleppo Catalogue. It was developed by a teammate, a committed Ph.D. student, and is currently in its pilot phase, generously funded by Gerda Henkel Foundation (GHS). Through short films and texts, the project aims at reaching people of Aleppo in their mother language, to highlight the importance of their old city and their relationships to their heritage. It is a chance to start an inclusive discussion about a common understanding of the Ancient City of Aleppo and its rebuilding process. Based on the rich documentation and archive of the built heritage of the city, the project partners will gradually develop a catalogue of the most important sites and buildings.

At first, some monuments, which are heavily destroyed, are going to be presented via films, images, plans and texts of architectural, historical, art historical and other contents on the online platform L.I.S.A. - the Science Portal of the Gerda Henkel Foundation, starting with the Mosque-Madrassa al-Khusrawiyya, which has been totally lost.

## **Exhibition at the Museum of Islamic Art**

The Syrian Heritage Archive Project is currently planning to present its work to the wider public within the frame of an exhibition at the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon museum in Berlin. The working team is looking forward to giving an overview of different aspects of the project, including resulting or affiliated projects and approaches to interpret the archived data.

Yet, the project is still working on the documentation of the Syrian material cultural heritage, archiving data from related objects. Regarding the future of this data, there are various sustainable applications conceivable, empowering both in the field of scientific research and practical utilization and both for professional and general public according to actual need and human commitment.

## **The Syrian Heritage Archive Project and Related Projects Presented**

The Syrian Heritage Archive Project:

<<https://syrian-heritage.org>>

<<https://www.facebook.com/Syrher.ISL/>>

<<http://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/collection-research/research-cooperation/syrian-heritage-archive-project.html>>

<[http://www.auswaertiges-  
amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/Themen/KulturDialog/09\\_Kulturerhalt/160217\\_Syrian\\_Heritage\\_Archive\\_node.html](http://www.auswaertiges-<br/>amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/Themen/KulturDialog/09_Kulturerhalt/160217_Syrian_Heritage_Archive_node.html)>

<<https://arachne.dainst.org/project/syrher?lang=en>>

Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums:

<<http://multaka.de/en/startsite-en/>>

<<https://www.facebook.com/MultakaTreffpunktMuseum/>>

<<http://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/sammeln-forschen/forschung-kooperation/multaka-treffpunkt-museum-gefluechtete-als-guides-in-berliner-museen.html>>

The Aleppo Built Heritage Documentation Project:

<<http://www.archernet.org/index.php/2017/05/31/damage-assessment/>>

The Aleppo Catalogue:

<<https://lisa.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/teamwork?language=en>>

# ICOA1808: LE PROJET D'ARCHIVE DU PATRIMOINE SYRIEN A BERLIN

## **Sous-thème 03: Protéger et interpréter le patrimoine culturel à l'ère de l'autonomisation numérique**

**Session 2:** Utilisation de la technologie numérique pour la diffusion et l'interprétation

**Lieu:** Silver Oak 2, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 16:30 – 16:45

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**Résumé:** Le Projet d'archives du patrimoine syrien (SHAP) a débuté en 2013 en tant que projet de numérisation des collections de documents de chercheurs scientifiques allemands renommés. Le projet était situé à Berlin à l'Institut archéologique allemand (DAI) et au Musée d'art islamique (SMB), et financé par le ministère allemand des Affaires étrangères : on en est actuellement à la 5ème phase du projet.

Le groupe de projet du Musée d'art islamique se compose d'une équipe multidisciplinaire formée de différents professionnels, principalement d'origine syrienne et allemande. En plus du travail basique concernant la base de données, au cours de plusieurs années de dialogue et de discussion au sein de l'équipe opérationnelle, l'accent a également été mis sur d'autres points cruciaux liés à la culture matérielle de la Syrie.

En 2015, avec l'arrivée en Allemagne d'un nombre croissant de Syriens, est apparue l'idée du Projet Multaka : un projet d'éducation artistique primé permettant aux jeunes Syriens de guider les réfugiés à travers les collections des musées de Berlin. En 2016, en raison de l'aggravation des ravages causés par la guerre en cours en Syrie, un projet affilié d'évaluation des dommages infligés aux monuments historiques d'Alep a évolué, qui, entre autres, développe une application spéciale pour les professionnels sur le terrain.

Le document donnera un aperçu des activités en cours du projet d'archives du patrimoine syrien qui progresse de la numérisation, du réseautage et de la diffusion auprès du public à la sensibilisation et au renforcement des capacités.

**Mots clés:** *Ressources numériques, conservation, dissémination, accès*



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Syrian H  
Arch

The Umayya



The basar of Aleppo, once the worlds larges covered suq - as it looked like before the war

Considering the amount of monstrous destruction and the un-  
cued work, we urge all similar initiatives for Syria worldwide to co-  
establish a thorough database, to geo-locate all significant mo-  
te the current damage, as a step towards against the destructic

Team at Museum für Islamische Kunst (SMB-SPK): Hibba Al-Bassir, Eva Al-Habib Nmeir M.A., Dipl.-Ing  
Hajjar, Zoya Masoud M.A., Diana Miznazi M.Sc., Esper Sabrine M.A., Hansgeorg Schöner, Cornelia Webe