



FORUM: Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee (SOCHUM)

TOPIC: Reviewing the Protection of Cultural Heritage Sites in Conflict and Post-war Zones

STUDENT OFFICER: Amalia Parianou

POSITION: Co-Chair

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear Delegates,

My name is Amalia Parianou and I am a 11th grade student at Arsakeio Tositseio Ekalis School. It's my utmost honour to be a Co-Chair in AMLMUN's 2026 conference in the Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee. This will be my first time chairing in MUN and my 5th conference overall.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate all delegates on your initiative to participate in this conference and make clear that I look forward to meeting you all and helping you construct resolutions. I hope we all have a productive and fun time working together!

Secondly, I would like to mention what MUN means to me. Throughout my experiences as a delegate, I've made many good memories in the committees I was in, which is what I also want to do as a chair. Personally, MUN has blossomed into something more than just an extracurricular activity, it has grown to be a community of friendships, knowledge and thought-provoking debates. Through my participation in these conferences, I've been able to grow as a person: develop my synergistic skill set, become more confident in myself and make my love for politics more resolute.

In this year's Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee, we are faced with the issue of "Reviewing the Protection of Cultural Heritage Sites in Conflict and Post-war Zones". This study guide aims to assist you in thoroughly understanding this issue through providing historical context, treaties and conventions or past efforts in order for you to be able to participate in fruitful and productive debates throughout the duration of this conference! Despite that, I do encourage you to do your own research as well and find a few of your own solutions based on your assigned country on how we can tackle this matter.

I eagerly await to meet you all and make this MUN experience unforgettable for everyone! If anybody has any questions, do not hesitate to contact me by email.

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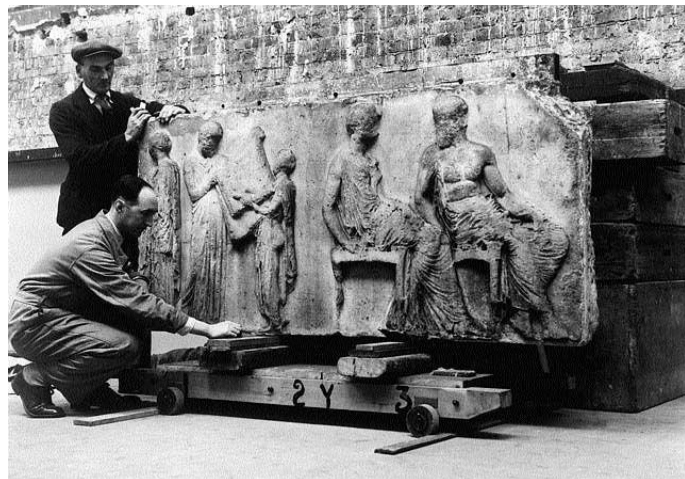
TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is a rather unbounded and conditional concept, as it is a resource of identity and cohesion of communities, representing the inheritance of ancient artifacts, cultural traditions or practices that are imparted from multiple generations within a

community. UNESCO defines heritage as the destination for spaces on Earth that are of outstanding value, as well as a set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group. Such properties can be expressed through art, beliefs, religions, lifestyle or literature.

Heritage may come in many forms, one which may be tangible heritage (monuments, archaeological sites, museums, religious sites, etc) or intangible traditions (music, languages, community bonds, contemporary art forms, etc). Both enrich our livelihood and encourage the creation of innovative and powerful communities, while tangible elements can be found in intangible practices. This phenomenon appears due to intangible heritage being constantly recreated; hence the concept of “authenticity” cannot be applied to World Heritage properties that are listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Cultural heritage educates future generations, promotes intellectual dialogue, helps communities recover after conflict, shapes national and community identity, supports tourism and preserves history.

Although cultural heritage is one of the most important pillars of our society, we continue to face pressing challenges, such as vandalism and lack of awareness about the importance and value these sites hold for the identity of people. Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to our future generations. It enriches our daily lives in countless ways, whether we experience them directly or indirectly. When faced with war, cultural property is particularly threatened by armed conflicts and, in some cases, by any resulting occupation. When there is a broken community, cultural heritage helps rebuild it through art, expression, history and tradition. The safekeeping of cultural heritage is protected under international law and covered under human rights law, cultural law and criminal law.



The Parthenon Marbles being aggressively removed¹

Projects to safeguard or restore conflict-affected cultural heritage have major social impacts, and participation of local communities is key to success. Cultural heritage may be used in conflict narratives and thus can fuel conflict, such as when it is used as exclusive national heritage by a certain party in order to exclude others, erase shared pasts or justify territorial claims and violence. In post-conflict communities undergoing recovery projects, memorialisation is of great importance.

¹ The Greek Herald. “On This Day in 1801, Lord Elgin Removed and Stole the Parthenon Marbles from Greece.” *The Greek Herald*, 30 July 2020, greekherald.com.au/culture/1801-lord-elgin-removed-stole-parthenon-marbles-greece/. Accessed 30 July 2026.

As cultural property may be damaged or destroyed in the event of armed conflict, it is necessary to undertake all appropriate measures against foreseeable procedures of armed conflict in peacetime operations. It may well be that cultural property might be located in occupied territory, damaged or otherwise affected by military operations. For this reason, the occupying power must, as much as possible, support the national authorities of the occupied territory in safeguarding and preserving its cultural property. It is necessary to prohibit, prevent and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, misappropriation and vandalism against cultural property in order to prohibit reprisals.

Furthermore, organized criminal groups are increasingly involved in trafficking of cultural property, both through legitimate markets such as auctions and the internet, especially during armed conflicts. Illicit trafficking of cultural property involves several acts that may ultimately result in the loss, mass destruction or theft of irreplaceable artifacts. For instance, many relics and monuments from past generations stay underground or destroyed through looting, resulting in archaeologists being unable to discover information about the past. All these crimes deprive people of their history and culture, weakening social cohesion in the long term, fuelling organized crime and contributing to the financing of terrorism.

High demand of antiques and artworks, combined with weak regulation, makes the market highly lucrative, especially during times of weak instability, war and social upheaval when shifting priorities often leave archaeological sites and museums unguarded. In fact, the retail value of trafficking in cultural property is estimated at \$1.2 to \$1.6 billion annually.² Organized criminal networks take advantage of crises, operating through complex supply chains and profiting from both the legal and black markets.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Tangible

“Tangible is an item that is capable of being perceived especially by the sense of touch. It is a material and something substantially real. Specifically tangible cultural heritage is the monuments, museums, artifacts, antiques, or art in its physical form that a community of people shares.”³

Intangible

“Intangible is something impossible to touch, to describe exactly or to give an exact value. Usually, its value is solely mental and it is passed down from generations through rituals, festivities, music, language and art.”⁴

² “Six Ways to Strengthen the International System to Protect Cultural Property from Crime.” UNICRI, [unicri.org/News/Strengthen-System-Protect-Crime](https://www.unicri.org/News/Strengthen-System-Protect-Crime). Accessed 22 Aug. 2026.

³ “Tangible.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tangible. Accessed 30 July 2026.

⁴ UNESCO, ich.unesco.org/en/home. Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

Provenance

“Provenance is the place of origin, source, or the documented history of ownership or custody of an item over time.”⁵

Looting

“Looting is the goods usually taken during war that are of considerable value; it may also be something appropriated illegally often by force or violence.”⁶

Restitution

“Restitution is the act of restoring or a condition of being restored or a legal action serving to cause restoration of a previous state.”⁷

Ethnocide

“An ethnocide is the deliberate destruction of an ethnic culture.”⁸

Due diligence

“The care that a reasonable person exercises to avoid harm to other people or their property.”⁹

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

“Intangible Cultural Heritage includes the traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed down on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and identity or the skills to produce traditional crafts.”¹⁰

Black Market

“A place (online or physical) where Illegal trading of goods that are not allowed to be bought and sold, or that there are not enough for everyone who wants them, takes place”¹¹

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Cultural Heritage as a Target of War

The systematic destruction of heritage often forms part of strategic acts of “ethnocide”. Great examples of this are the obliteration and theft from Jewish and Roma peoples throughout Nazi-Occupied Europe during World War II and the vandalism of Greek-orthodox churches by the Ottomans. These types of losses are particularly flagrant because culture is central to a person’s sense of belonging, since it anchors, locates and orientates a

⁵ “Provenance.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/provenance. Accessed 30 July 2026.

⁶ “Looting.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/looting. Accessed 30 July 2026

⁷ “Restitution.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/restitution. Accessed 30 July 2026.

⁸ Ethnocide Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnocide. Accessed 30 July 2026.

⁹ Due Diligence Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/due%20diligence. Accessed 30 July 2026.

¹⁰ UNESCO, ich.unesco.org/en/home. Accessed 30 July 2026.

¹¹ “Black Market.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/black-market. Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

person in time and space. Armed groups have increasingly used the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage as a tactic of war to erase cultural identity, spread fear and gain international attention. Other motivations include the vandalism of religious symbols, the removal of authoritarian symbols or opportunistic and organised looting.

The Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property

Trafficking of cultural property is the illicit trade that results in the loss or removal of irreplaceable items such as art, antiques, fossils, archaeological cultural property and heritage. It is classified as a serious transnational crime. Any person who deliberately destroys or damages cultural property, in addition to paying compensation, may face up to ten years of imprisonment. Usually, this crime follows a similar supply chain as seen in other illicit trafficking trades. The process starts with illicit excavation, looting or theft of archaeological sites, museums, archives, places of worship or private collections. The main reason why criminal groups are able to evade with such ease is due to weak border controls. Detecting the trafficking of cultural property may be difficult by virtue of the structure the market has.

Cultural property has been traded freely for centuries without requirement of due diligence checks about where such items came from, meaning many objects' histories have been lost over time. Due to the structure of the market, criminals are able to fabricate provenance for illicit items and sell them in legal markets such as auctions. Additionally, the lack of databases on trafficked historical property, paired with inconsistent international laws, makes it difficult to evaluate the scale of the problem and coordinate responses. A notable example of this is the Roman coin looting in Spain, where a criminal group used metal detectors to illegally excavate thousands of ancient Roman coins from protected sites such as Cáceres and afterwards, trafficked them online via social media platforms.

Post-Conflict Recovery and Reconstruction and Recovery

Post-Conflict and post-disaster reconstruction became an increasingly important issue after the destruction of cultural heritage sites in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Nepal, Syria and Yemen. Many more sites are globally at risk, so developing cultural heritage frameworks and guidance are key to addressing the multi-faced challenges of reconstruction. For instance, the Timbuktu reconstruction of the museums; Since the site was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 2012, the World Heritage Committee has been working on the rehabilitation of the monument. This is an outcome of the deliberations of the workshops done regarding this issue.

Post-conflict economic recovery aims to establish sustainable economic growth and human development while addressing the factors that could lead to a recurrence of conflict. Post-conflict recovery is mainly about transformation, requiring a mix of far-reaching economic, institutional, legal and policy reforms that allow war-torn countries to re-establish their foundations for self-sustaining development. The challenges faced by post-conflict countries are more serious in several respects than those faced by financially unsustainable but peaceful developing countries.

Current Challenges in International Protection

The displacement of populations is a key factor to this issue. More people than ever before are on the move, with migration rates rising. When a nation is faced with increased migration numbers, its government usually focuses on enforcing binding immigrant laws rather than implementing strong protocols for preserving their cultural property, whilst allowing cultural expression.

Climate change, in addition to conflicts and disasters, is able to destroy many monuments, places of worship, artifacts and antiques. Weather conditions like freeze-thaw cycles, acid rain and humidity are able to damage or completely destroy cultural property.

Most importantly, the increasing destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones has exposed the shortcomings of current crisis response frameworks. Traditional state-led mechanisms have struggled to address the complexities and rapid development of modern warfare. In recent years, the increasing destruction of cultural heritage in conflict zones has called for a fundamental shift in how crisis responses to heritage protection are conceived and implemented. Intentional, direct attacks on such significant aspects of a society's identity means an attack on human expression and on the soul existence of people, resulting in long lasting horror on trauma.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

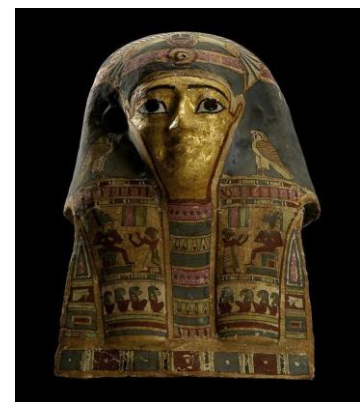
Afghanistan

The Taliban's sudden return to power in August 2021 has renewed cultural preservation experts' fears for the preservation of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage. In 2001, the regime destroyed the monumental 1400-year-old Bamiyan Buddha statues, declaring them as "idolatrous".

Egypt

The Rosetta Stone was discovered by the French forces in Egypt in 1799 and was afterwards transferred to Britain in 1801, after the defeat of Napoleon under the Treaty of Alexandria. Its presence in the British museum remains to be a debatable topic, with Egypt calling for its return.

Furthermore, an archaeological area containing monuments such as the Temples of Ramses II at Abu Simbel and the Sanctuary of Isis at Philae is located in Egypt.¹² An event that aroused particular international concern regarding the site was the decision to build the Aswan High Dam, which would have flooded the valley containing the Abu Simbel temples, a treasure of an ancient Egyptian civilization. In 1959, after an appeal from the governments of



Egyptian Mummy¹³

¹² Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. "Nubian Monuments from Abu Simbel to Philae." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/list/88. Accessed 30 July 2026.

¹³ *Journey to Eternal Life: Ancient Egyptian Artifacts, Mummies, and Pyramids* | Smithsonian Institution, www.si.edu/spotlight/ancient-egypt. Accessed 30 July 2026.

Egypt and Sudan, UNESCO launched an international safeguarding campaign, which lasted until 1980, and was deemed successful.

Greece

The removal of the Parthenon Sculptures by Lord Elgin and their current location at the British Museum remains a major cultural heritage debate between Greece and the United Kingdom. The Parthenon Sculptures are a collection of different types of marble architectural decoration from the temple of Athena (the Parthenon) on the Acropolis rock. It was made between 447BC and 432BC, but the removal of the marbles by the British was not the only destructive intervention it went through. The building has a quite long and complex history with many alterations and damages throughout the years of its glory. Around 500 AD it was converted into a Christian Church and, when it was conquered by the Ottoman empire in the early 1460s, the Parthenon became a mosque. By 1687, Athens was under Venetian occupation and the sacred temple was used as a gunpowder storage unit, causing a huge explosion that destroyed a large portion of the roof and of the remaining sculptures.

Additionally, during World War II (1941-1944) and the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) many artifacts were looted, illegally excavated and afterwards sold to art markets. Since then, irreversible damage has been done to many museums, archaeological sites, artifacts and antiques. However, the destruction done during the civil war was much more extensive than the one during World War II.

There have been many efforts done to restore and project all these sacred artifacts of Greek history. For instance, the committee for the Conservation of the Acropolis Monuments (1975-present) which was established by the Greek government to supervise the conservation and restoration of the Acropolis monuments. The United Nations have also offered assistance by recognising Acropolis as cultural heritage through its addition to the World Heritage List in 1987. It is worth noting that in 1986 the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri addressed the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures not being returned to their place of origin by making it clear that it is not simply just a matter of ownership, but also of cultural unity and historical continuity. She argued that the separation of the sculptures weakened the integrity of Greece's cultural heritage, resulting in the nation still advocating for reunification through international dialogue and cooperation.

Iraq

Iraq has also faced many attacks like Syria has. In both nations, local terrorist groups, knowing the market value of the artifacts that are there, engaged in the methodological and massive looting of museums and archaeological sites in the areas it controlled. In 2003, for instance, during a conflict, there was museum looting, which resulted in the loss of priceless historical artifacts. A number of historical artifacts were stolen and then returned, but between 7,000-10,000 are still missing.¹⁴

¹⁴ "Iraqi Looted and Stolen Artifacts." *FBI*, 12 July 2016, www.fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/art-crime/fbi-top-ten-art-crimes/iraqi-looted-and-stolen-artifacts. Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

Mali

As of 17 January 2012, the ongoing armed conflict in the territory of Mali persisted between the government forces and different organized armed groups, particularly the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, MNLA), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine and the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, MUJAO) and 'Arab militias'. During the 2012 armed conflict in Timbuktu, extremist groups such as Ansar Dine deliberately destroyed 14 of Timbuktu's historic Sufi mausoleums.

Sufi mausoleums are ancient historic shrines for Sufi saints which were a place for pilgrimage for centuries.¹⁵ The urban space containing the three mosques and 16 mausoleums has outstanding value as a testimony of historical, architectural, and urban development in a region of the Sub-Sahara, which does not present many relics of the past. Additionally, to the UNESCO valuation that is solely geared towards the buildings, the 285.000 manuscripts (still today mostly in private possession) have not only tangible, but also intangible value as part of a long tradition of Islamic scholarship and learning, and of manuscript and scribal culture from 1200 to today.¹⁶ Fortunately, the Sufi mausoleums have been restored after the armed conflict.

Netherlands

The Netherlands funded a project named Fund-In-Trust (NFIT) that aims at providing updated information on the activities launched by UNESCO and its partners. Additionally, it aims at strengthening support to Member States in planning for the reconstruction and restoration of World Heritage properties, in order to assist communities in healing and building resilience. Under this Funds-in-Trust arrangement, the Government of the Netherlands made available an amount of over US\$ 10 million over a period of 20 years.¹⁷

Syria

Recent events in Syria have highlighted the multiple threats to cultural heritage during the crisis, including deliberate attacks and its destruction as collateral damage in fighting. Moreover, the greed of unscrupulous traders and collectors, as well as vandalism by factions that seek to erase the achievements of past cultures have hindered the situation. The Syrian war caused catastrophic damage and widespread looting throughout many historic hubs of the country like Palmyra, Aleppo and Apamea.

¹⁵ UNESCO, ich.unesco.org/en/RL/annual-pilgrimage-to-the-mausoleum-of-sidi-abd-el-gader-ben-mohammed-sidi-cheikh-00660. Accessed 30 July 2026.

¹⁶ "Timbuktu and Premodern Traditions of Learning: A UNESCO Heritage Site in Danger." Dr Anja-Silvia Goeing, goeing.scholars.harvard.edu/timbuktu-and-premodern-traditions-learning-unesco-heritage-site-danger. Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

¹⁷ "NFIT Projects for World Heritage 2024 Budget." Project: NFIT Projects for World Heritage 2024 Budget Details | Core Data Portal, core.unesco.org/en/project/519GLO4005. Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

Ukraine

The ongoing war in Ukraine resulted in vandalism and theft of the cultural property of the nation. Over 1,700 artifacts from museums, archaeological sites and monuments have been damaged, destroyed, or taken by Russian forces.¹⁸ On the 10th of February 2026, Japan donated \$3.8 million to support Ukraine's recovery in the fields of culture, education, communication and information.

United Kingdom (UK)

The United Kingdom is currently part of the World Heritage Convention, playing a significant role in the protection of cultural heritage by providing funding for heritage conservation projects. At the same time, the United Kingdom is involved in international discussion over the ownership of many artifacts held in the British museums, including the Rosetta Stone and the Parthenon Marbles. These debates have highlighted the importance of implementing strict protocols over cultural heritage as it affects identity, history, and further discovery of the past beyond what we know of it today.

United States (US)

The United States has assisted the return of one of many cultural artifacts to their motherland. The most important example is a fired clay vessel, bracelet and two-cylinder rollers that were kept in the US Embassy, which were gifted to an American soldier by the Thai government.

In 1966, an American College student named Stephen Young tripped and landed over a partly buried earthenware pot. At the time, he had no idea that a simple mistake would trigger an archaeological study that would ultimately rewrite the history of South-East Asia. Almost 60 years later, Godec, an American ambassador, recounted this serendipitous discovery at a ceremony of Thailand's national museum. As Godec said in the ceremony, "Now is the right time to return these precious items back to their rightful home."¹⁹ Such an act shows the US support of the return of ancient artifacts back to their motherland.



Ban Chiang artifacts of Thailand²⁰

¹⁸ Ukraine : Japan Provides Additional \$3.8 Million to Support UNESCO's, www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-japan-provides-additional-38-million-support-unescos-action-heritage-education-and-access . Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

¹⁹ "A Pot Unearthed; a Legacy Restored: U.S. Returns Ban Chiang Artifacts." *A Pot Unearthed; a Legacy Restored: U.S. Returns Ban Chiang Artifacts*, www.unesco.org/en/articles/pot-unearthed-legacy-restored-us-returns-ban-chiang-artifacts-thailand. Accessed 30 July 2026.23

²⁰ "A Pot Unearthed; a Legacy Restored: U.S. Returns Ban Chiang Artifacts." *A Pot Unearthed; a Legacy Restored: U.S. Returns Ban Chiang Artifacts*, www.unesco.org/en/articles/pot-unearthed-legacy-restored-us-returns-ban-chiang-artifacts-thailand. Accessed 30 July 2026.23

Yemen

It is evident that the destruction of Yemen's culture directly affects the identity, dignity and future of the Yemeni people. According to UNESCO, cultural heritage sites in ancient cities such as Sana'a, Aden, Taz, Zabid, Saa'da and Marib have been heavily affected in the conflict of Yemen. Sana'a, for example, has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years. The religious and political heritage can be seen in the 103 mosques, 14 hammams and over 6,000 houses, all built before the 11th century.²¹

Blue Shield International (BSI) Organization

The Blue Shield International is an organization dedicated to protecting heritage in crisis. Their mission is the preservation of cultural property and it is concerned with the protection of cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, in the event of armed conflict, natural or human-made disaster. As the General Director of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Yves Daccord said "Protecting cultural heritage against the devastating effects of war unfortunately remains a humanitarian imperative, today perhaps more than ever."

This movement is made up of a small international team known as the Blue Shield International (BSI), supported by more than 30 national committees globally with many more countries looking to join. BSI is an independent, neutral, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, established under Dutch law. It is overseen by a partly elected representative international Board.

One of its most important missions was in April 2003, where during the Iraqi war, BSI was formally established by military veteran and archaeologist Corine Wegener to improve relations between cultural experts and military staff.

International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

The International Council of Monuments and Sites is a non-governmental organisation working to conserve and protect cultural heritage sites around the world. They are the only worldwide NGO dedicated to applying scientific techniques, theories and methodology to the conservation of both tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage places. It is a global network of professionals and experts working together as a diverse membership network covering the whole range of heritage specialisms. ICOMOS' strength and impact stems from its ongoing interdisciplinary exchanges and conversations, which decide all its approaches and activities.

International Council of Museums (ICOM)

The Heritage Protection Department of ICOM works at the forefront of safeguarding cultural heritage worldwide, particularly in times of crisis. It coordinates international efforts to prevent the illicit trafficking of cultural property and supports emergency response for museums and heritage institutions, while developing tools and standards to enhance protection practices. Through collaboration with global partners, law enforcement, and

²¹ "UNESCO Launches Plan to Safeguard Yemen's Cultural Heritage Sites | UN News." *United Nations*, news.un.org/en/story/2015/07/504822. Accessed 13 Aug. 2026.

heritage professionals, the department plays a key role in raising awareness and strengthening capacities to preserve cultural heritage for future generations.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

ISIS deliberately and systematically stole, looted or destroyed with bulldozers and explosives ancient artifacts. For instance, ISIS occupied the city of Manbij and its countryside from January 23 to 12 August in 2016. After many fierce battles for control of oil wells, bakeries, power stations and other facilities, antiques were soon recognized as another potential income source. Additionally, ISIS in late August 2015 released a video showing the Temple of Baalshamin, one of the best preserved ruins of Palmyra, Syria being blown up. Yet, these are still some of the actions ISIS has taken for the destruction of cultural heritage as a whole.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

The notion of culture has greatly evolved over the last 75 years. UNESCO, via its work, demonstrates the many ways in which culture can strengthen our sense of self; from the awareness of the necessity to protect heritage from destruction at the end of World War II, to the realization of the concept of living and intangible heritage and the launch of international campaigns so as to safeguard World Heritage sites.

Moreover, UNESCO has compiled a catalogue of cultural and natural places deemed of outstanding universal value to humanity, called the “The World Heritage List”. It comprises 1248 properties, which include 972 cultural, 235 natural and 41 mixed properties in 170 States Parties. Nations lobby hard to get this stamp of approval on their unique buildings, wildernesses, and historic ruins that brings prestige, tourist income, public awareness, and most important—a commitment to save the irreplaceable.²²

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	EVENT
1801-1812	The Parthenon Marbles were removed from the Acropolis in Athens by Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. While the British Museum maintains that they were acquired legally through an Ottoman permit, Greece officially views their removal as an act of theft.
May 14, 1954	Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.
November 16, 1972	UNESCO World Heritage Convention.

²² Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. “World Heritage List.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/list/. Accessed 30 July 2026.

March 26, 1999	Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention.
April 10 and 12, 2003	Looting of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, after US-led forces entered the city. After 36 hours of lawlessness, roughly 15,000 of priceless artifacts were completely destroyed or stolen. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Extremist groups destroyed 14 of Timbuktu's 16 UNESCO world heritage mausoleums. The main wave of destruction occurred between June and July 2012 and later in December of the same year. It was mainly carried out by Islamist militant groups who viewed the veneration of saints at the shrines as idolatry.
October 17, 2003	UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
June-July and December 2012	Extremist groups destroyed 14 of Timbuktu's 16 UNESCO world heritage mausoleums. The main wave of destruction occurred between June and July 2012 and later in December of the same year. It was mainly carried out by Islamist militant groups who viewed the veneration of saints at the shrines as idolatry.
March 5, 2015- January, 2017	ISIS destroys major heritage sites (Palmyra, Syria, Nimrud, Iraq).
March 24, 2017	UN Security Council Resolution 2347 is a landmark international measure focused entirely on condemning and preventing the unlawful destruction, looting and smuggling of cultural heritage and religious artifacts during armed conflicts by terrorist groups.

February 24, 2022	Russian forces extensively looted, damaged and vandalized Ukrainian cultural property, including museums, historic buildings, libraries, and monuments. International bodies like UNESCO verified hundreds of site destructions characterizing many incidents as deliberate violations of international humanitarian law.
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RELEVANT UN TREATIES, CONVENTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

1954 Hague Convention (1954)

The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of armed conflict was adopted in 1954, under the authority of UNESCO. It is now known to be the first and the most comprehensive multilateral treaty dedicated exclusively to the protection of cultural heritage in times of peace and conflict.

There are certain obligations that have to be followed by the Member States that are part of this convention. These commitments made by the state parties aim at preserving cultural heritage through the implementation of these measures, some of which are the following;



U.S soldiers recovering looted painting from Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany during WWII²³

- Adopting preventive steps, such as preparing inventories, planning emergency measures to protect property against the risk of fire or the collapse of buildings, while preparing for the relocation of cultural property to places of safety.
- Developing initiatives which guarantee respect for cultural property situated on their own territory or on the territory of other Member States. This involves refraining from using such property in any manner that might expose it to destruction or deterioration

²³ aia press. "News - the 1954 Hague Convention and Preserving Cultural Heritage." Archaeological Institute of America, 19 Oct. 2010, www.archaeological.org/the-1954-hague-convention-and-preserving-cultural-heritage/. Accessed 30 July 2026. Hague convention

in the event of armed conflict, and by refraining from all acts of hostility directed against it.

- Establishing special units within the military forces responsible for the protection of cultural property.

First Protocol (1954 Hague Convention)

The First Protocol of the Hague Convention was adopted in 1954 in response to the systematic pillage of cultural property of the occupied territories during the Second World War. The States Parties to the first Protocol agreed to undertake the following measures:

- Prevent exportation of cultural property from an occupied territory in the event of armed conflict.
- Take into custody cultural property imported into its territory directly or indirectly from any occupied territory.
- Return to the competent authorities of the aforementioned occupied territory the exported cultural property, if such has been transferred in contravention of the principles of the 1954 Hague Convention.
- Pay indemnity in good faith to the holders of any cultural property which has to be returned in accordance with the First Protocol.

The World Heritage Convention (1972)

The idea of creating an international movement of protecting heritage emerged after World War I. The 1972 Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was developed from merging of two separate movements, the first focusing on the preservation of cultural sites and the other dealing on the conservation of nature.



The most significant feature of the 1972 World Heritage Convention is that it links together in a single document the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties.

The Convention defines the kind of natural or cultural sites which can be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List.

Parthenon marbles from the East Pediment²⁴

The convention, other than setting the duties of the Member States, identifies potential sites and their role in the World Heritage List. By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated in its territory, but also to protect its natural heritage.

²⁴ Lavelle, Moira. "The Parthenon Marbles Debate: Timeline." *Tovima.Com*, 3 Dec. 2024, www.tovima.com/culture/the-parthenon-marbles-debate-timeline/. Accessed 30 July 2026.

1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property

By the 1950s, as more States were gaining independence, newly established nations sought to create an international treaty to combat the illicit trafficking of cultural property. Their concern was mainly related to the growth of the black market during this time and, in particular, to the dismemberment of monuments and ancient sites to meet the demand.

Therefore, the aforementioned Convention was signed by 149 member nations and submitted at the sixteenth session of the General Conference of UNESCO, which was held in Paris from October 12 to November 14, 1970. It provides a common framework for the trafficking of cultural property, while advising the States Parties on the measures to be taken to prohibit and prevent the import, export and transfer of cultural property. The return and restitution of the cultural property is central to the Convention and its duty is not only to remember but to fundamentally safeguard the identity of populations, while promoting peaceful societies whereby their solidarity will be strengthened. This Convention has made UNESCO a pioneer in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural property. Thus, the 1970 Convention is fully in line with the Sustainable Development Goals defined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda.

Second Protocol of 1999

During the 1980s and 1990s, there had been many criminal acts committed against cultural property in the course of conflicts, highlighting the need to refine and strengthen many aspects of the 1954 Hague Convention. Therefore, the Second Protocol of the Convention was created with the aim of expanding and complementing its provisions, establishing a second level of protection, beyond what the Hague Convention originally covered for its Member States. More specifically, the protocol enhances the reactivity of the Convention, by means such as outlining sanctions to be imposed for serious violations with respect to cultural property and determining the conditions in which individual criminal responsibility shall apply.

UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)

This Convention was adopted in 2003 after 60 years of work in this domain. The Convention is the international community's first binding multilateral instrument intended to safeguard and raise the profile of heritage. Its goal is to encourage countries to care for and protect their ICH at present, as well as their cultural properties. At national level, Member States are asked to take the necessary measures to safeguard their ICH on their territory.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

UNESCO Heritage Emergency Fund (HEF)

During emergencies, culture and cultural rights are particularly vulnerable due to their inherent fragility and symbolic significance. However, culture also plays a crucial role in fostering resilience and recovery. It contributes to social cohesion, economic development, psychological healing and reconciliation within communities. To offer a lifeline for culture in

times of crisis, UNESCO established the Heritage Emergency Fund (HEF) in 2015. The HEF is a flexible and rapid-response mechanism designed to support Member States in order to mitigate and respond to emergencies affecting all spheres of culture, including the situations of armed conflict and disaster caused by natural and human-made hazards. Lastly, UNESCO further supports missions in regions impacted by armed conflicts, and there have been multiple instances where cultural heritage sites have been recovered and reinstalled for visiting due to these actions.

International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecution Of Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi (2016)

Ahmad was found guilty and sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment for direct attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion, including nine mausoleums and one mosque in Timbuktu, Mali. The most important part of this trial was that, along with his arrest for a serious crime, Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi was, reportedly, the first person convicted specifically for the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime.

UNESCO'S UNITE4HERITAGE Campaign (2015)

#UNITE4HERITAGE is a social media campaign that emerged in response to unprecedented attacks on the Arab region's cultural diversity and heritage. The international destruction of ancient sites and the looting of cultural objects in Iraq and Syria are examples of intolerance, hatred and violations of human and cultural rights. The #UNITE4HERITAGE campaign seeks to counter this propagation of hatred with messages of unity, tolerance and solidarity, aiming to show that culture has and always will remain to strengthen societal bonds.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Strengthening Documentation and Emergency Protocols

Although there already exist conventions against the destruction of cultural property, such as the First and Second Protocol of the Hague Convention, they are reported to face issues of weak enforcement and poor compliance. In order to tackle this situation, Member States require constant technical assistance for establishing a more robust international system that prevents the trafficking of cultural property. As a result, it is imperative to improve documentation of provenance and establish digital catalogues for tangible cultural heritage, for which detailed 3D scanning can be used. Museums, galleries, and auction houses must be required to verify the provenance of cultural objects before buying or selling them.

Furthermore, inadequate border control mechanisms are a major contributing factor to the illegal trafficking of artifacts. Hence, it is crucial to improve border controls and customs inspections. Emergency protection of culturally significant sites and their post-conflict restoration is also key, which can be achieved by emergency response teams with the aim to protect endangered heritage during conflict. Lastly, employing satellite imagery to monitor locations of important cultural heritage might be an additional alternative.

Building on United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) work

UNDP has made significant contributions to this issue through peacekeeping and reconciliation in places such as Cyprus, by restoring 160 shared heritage sites. Moreover, the

programme has aided post-disaster and post-conflict areas via stabilizing endangered monuments, providing archaeological equipment and rehabilitating historic city centres. All in all, it helps war-torn countries reestablish and showcase their culture, artifacts and traditions.

International cooperation

International collaboration is crucial for such issues, since nations need organised systems to communicate and combine efforts, so as to safekeep cultural artifacts. Additionally, improving cooperation between national authorities and international organizations, such as UNESCO and INTERPOL, is necessary, in order to facilitate the exchange of information, coordinate investigations and ensure accountability for violations. For instance, accountability could be enhanced by the strengthening of sanctions targeted to trafficking organizations and terrorist groups which destroy, loot and steal artifacts.

Education and raising awareness

Educating the public and raising awareness about the importance of cultural heritage is important in order to reduce demand for illegally trafficked artifacts. This could be implemented by promoting campaigns that highlight the value of people's culture and of preserving heritage for future generations. Such campaigns are able to raise awareness to the youth, whose action to protect cultural heritage for the future is urgent and indispensable, especially in light of the danger posed by those that consider heritage a target for destruction.

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