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IL RECUPERO DEL PATRIMONIO URBANO DI MOGADISCIO

Gestione del patrimonio urbano: recupero del villaggio di Al-Bara, Siria

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Il documento propone una strategia per sensibilizzare e promuovere il senso di appartenenza, responsabilità e vigilanza da parte delle comunità siriane nei confronti della conservazione del loro patrimonio archeologico. Tra i suggerimenti per il recupero, la rivitalizzazione dei siti e la ripresa post-crisi si evidenzia il coinvolgimento delle comunità e l'adozione di pratiche sostenibili.

Introduzione

Per l'ingente numero di siti archeologici, la provincia di Idlib (nella Siria nord-occidentale) è considerata un'area di immensa importanza storica che custodisce un ricco patrimonio culturale in cui si intrecciano civiltà diverse, dalle epoche più antiche al periodo islamico.

Secondo i dati forniti dal Centro per le antichità di Idlib, la provincia vanta 760 siti archeologici sparsi sul territorio; circa 40 di questi – distribuiti in cinque parchi, riconosciuti nel 2011 Patrimonio dell'umanità – si sono sviluppati lungo un arco temporale lunghissimo che va dalla preistoria all'età classica, dal vicino Oriente antico alle civiltà tardo-islamiche (Khalifa 2021).

Sempre nella provincia di Idlib, a Jabal Al-Zawiyah, si trova l'antico villaggio di Al-Bara che riveste un ruolo di notevole importanza storica e culturale.[1] Per gli abitanti, infatti, la storia di questo villaggio è motivo di orgoglio poiché, se da un lato consente di ancorare il loro sapere alle prestigiose tradizioni del passato, dall'altro, preservando e promuovendo questo patrimonio culturale, possono mantenere intatta la propria identità.

Durante gli anni della guerra, dal 2011 a oggi, il centro storico di questo villaggio – assieme agli altri del Jabal Al-Zawiyah – è stato oggetto di bombardamenti aerei per opera del regime di Assad (e dei suoi alleati russi). Fino al 2024 Al-Bara era sulla linea del fronte (al confine con l'area delle forze del regime) ed è sotto il controllo dell'opposizione armata.

Purtroppo, questa devastazione ininterrotta di infrastrutture e servizi di base servizi – quali acqua, elettricità e fognature – arreca gravi difficoltà alla vita quotidiana della comunità, oltre ovviamente a provocare la morte di molte persone e la distruzione di gran parte delle loro abitazioni.

Antico villaggio di Al-Bara

Classificato come 'villaggio morto', a causa del suo stato di abbandono, Al-Bara possiede tuttavia un notevole valore storico e archeologico grazie al cospicuo repertorio di elementi, ancora *in situ*, che forniscono una gamma estesa di conoscenze in merito alla vita rurale condotta fra la tarda antichità e il periodo bizantino.[2]

La sua fondazione, nei pressi di un *wadi* a circa 90 km a sud-ovest di Aleppo, risale al IV secolo dC, ma l'epoca della sua prosperità si attesta attorno al V e VI secolo e, senza subire l'influenza della conquista musulmana nel VII secolo, proseguirà ancora a lungo. I Crociati conquistarono il sito nel 1098 e lo tennero sotto il loro dominio fino al XII secolo, quando passò sotto l'egida dei Mamelucchi. Sfortunatamente, nel 1157, un terremoto rese non più abitabile la città.

Il villaggio di Al-Bara presenta ancora diverse vestigia ben conservate – strutture residenziali, edifici civili e religiosi, cisterne e bagni pubblici – che offrono una panoramica del tessuto sociale e culturale della comunità che vi era insediata (Fig. 1). Tali resti, oltre a essere testimonianza del buon livello raggiunto nel settore dell'edilizia rurale, comunicano, per la qualità insita nelle sue costruzioni civili e religiose, la grande sapienza costruttiva acquisita dai suoi abitanti nell'arco temporale che va dall'età classica al periodo bizantino (ARCHNET).

Anche il paesaggio che abbraccia il villaggio contribuisce in modo significativo ad accrescere il valore storico del sito dato che per 1000 anni, e durante tutto il XX secolo, grazie alla mancanza di lavorazione della terra, all'assenza di riutilizzo della pietra e all'assenza di interventi di restauro o ricostruzione, ha conservato un livello significativo di integrità e autenticità.

Le vestigia di Al-Bara, e di ciò che resta del suo paesaggio culturale, hanno dunque un valore eccezionale le cui caratteristiche soddisfano, per i seguenti motivi, i diversi criteri stabiliti dall'UNESCO per ottenere il riconoscimento di Patrimonio dell'umanità:[3]

- offrono una straordinaria testimonianza degli stili di vita e delle usanze culturali praticate dalle civiltà rurali insediate in Medio oriente;
- forniscono una prova notevole delle caratteristiche architettoniche presenti nelle abitazioni rurali, così come negli edifici civili e religiosi, durante i periodi successivi dell'era classica e per tutto il periodo bizantino;
- rappresentano un esempio significativo di un insediamento rurale sostenibile realizzato fra il I e il VII secolo (UNESCO 2011).

Attori di governo coinvolti nelle attività legate al patrimonio prima della guerra

La gestione temporanea di Al-Bara, come degli altri villaggi siriani, è stata affidata alla DGAM (Directorate-General for Antiquities and Museums). Tuttavia, è attualmente in corso un piano provvisorio per stabilire un quadro di gestione completo per ogni sito storico. Questo quadro prevede l'istituzione di otto parchi dedicati, ciascuno corrispondente a un sito specifico, nonché la creazione di due centri di gestione responsabili del coordinamento generale delle azioni mirate alla conservazione del patrimonio. Per garantire uno sviluppo economico, sociale e turistico di successo, in linea con la conservazione e la valorizzazione dell'Eccezionale valore universale del sito di Al-Bara, è di fondamentale importanza affiancare alla DGAM anche il Ministero del Turismo e i governatorati provinciali.

Queste entità sono attualmente in fase di istituzione e collaboreranno strettamente con i comuni per garantire la compatibilità di

Managing Urban Heritage: Recovering the Village of Al Bara, Syria

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Abstract: Preserving and managing cultural heritage in post-crisis urban centers is crucial for recovering and revitalizing affected communities. Heritage management plays a fundamental role in post-conflict recovery by protecting cultural identity and preserving the historical significance of urban spaces. In Syrian cities devastated by conflict, conserving and restoring architectural heritage is essential to rebuilding local communities and fostering continuity and resilience. The recent armed conflict in Syria has severely impacted archaeological sites—most notably the village of Al Bara, an abandoned Byzantine settlement dating to the sixth and seventh centuries. A lack of awareness within the local community regarding the consequences of site degradation, compounded by deliberate bombardments by the Syrian regime, has caused extensive damage to these ruins. This study analyzes the war's impact on the surrounding community and its consequences for archaeological sites while addressing the challenges posed by post-crisis urban expansion and agricultural encroachment. Adopting a recovery-oriented heritage management framework, this research examines the local community, maps Al Bara's heritage, evaluates past conservation efforts, and engages local stakeholders to develop effective recovery strategies. Ultimately, it highlights the importance of heritage management in post-crisis recovery, focusing specifically on archaeological preservation and the sustainable reuse of displaced stone masonry.

Keywords: Syrian heritage, Conservation, Community engagement, Destruction, Recovery

1. Introduction

Idlib Province in northwestern Syria is renowned for its dense concentration of archaeological sites, making it a region of immense historical significance. Spanning diverse civilizations from antiquity through the Islamic period, the province contains 760 recorded archaeological sites according to the Idlib Centre for Antiquities.

Among these are 40 archaeological villages distributed across five parks, all designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These settlements represent a vast spectrum of historical eras, including prehistory, the Classical Age, the Ancient Near East, and the late Islamic period (URL-5).



Figure 1. *Restoration of the monastery walls at Deir Sobat.*

The Modern Urban Center of Al Bara

The historic village of Al Bara is situated in Jabal Al Zawiya in the Idlib Governorate. The Jabal Al Zawiya massif consists of two primary ridges separated by a valley in which Al Bara lies. Today, approximately 20,000 people reside in the modern town adjacent to the ancient ruins. The local economy is widely known for producing olives, grapes, cherries, and figs.

Significance of Ancient Al Bara to the Local Community

Historical Significance: The village's rich past serves as a source of local pride, connecting residents to their historical roots.

Cultural Significance: Preserving and promoting local cultural heritage enables the community to maintain its distinct identity and traditions.

Economic Significance: Cultural tourism generates economic opportunities for the local community and raises international awareness of the region's heritage.

The Conflict Context

Throughout the conflict that began in 2011, the populated town of Al Bara and surrounding settlements in Jabal Al Zawiya were subjected to intense bombardment by Syrian regime and Russian forces. Located on the front lines adjacent to regime-held territory, Al Bara currently remains under the control of opposition forces.

Impacts on the Living Community

Loss of Life and Displacement: Direct shelling resulted in heavy casualties, destroyed homes, and widespread displacement.

Infrastructural Collapse: The destruction of basic utility networks (water, electricity, sewage) created severe daily hardship for remaining residents.

2. Case Study: The Ancient Village of Al Bara

Al Bara is an ancient site in northern Syria categorized among the "Dead Cities" due to its historical abandonment. It holds exceptional archaeological value, offering vital insights into rural life during Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period.

Founded in the fourth century AD near a *wadi* roughly 90 km southwest of Aleppo, the settlement prospered during the fifth and sixth centuries. It largely maintained its character following the seventh-century Muslim conquest. During the Crusades, forces captured the site in 1098 and held it until the twelfth century, when it fell to the Mamluks. A devastating earthquake in 1157 ultimately rendered the city uninhabitable.



Figure 2. *Location map of Al Bara*

The site preserves diverse structural remains—including residential complexes, religious structures, and agricultural installations—that illustrate the social and economic fabric of the era. These remains showcase rural architectural styles spanning successive phases of the Classical and Byzantine periods (URL-6).

Key architectural features of Al Bara include:

Pyramidal Tombs: Two notable tombs with stone pyramidal roofs:

A larger, ornate tomb containing rich decorations and five sealed sarcophagi.

A smaller, well-preserved tomb with simpler ornamentation.

Churches: Five basilicas aligned along the central axis of the site.

Monasteries: The two-story monastery of *Deir Sobat* (sixth century) on the southern edge, alongside the *Deir Debbane* and *Al Deir* complexes.

Fortifications: The medieval fortress of *Qalaat Abu Safian* on the northeastern perimeter.

Agricultural Installations: A severely degraded wine press building and a rock-cut, semi-underground vaulted press (URL-6).

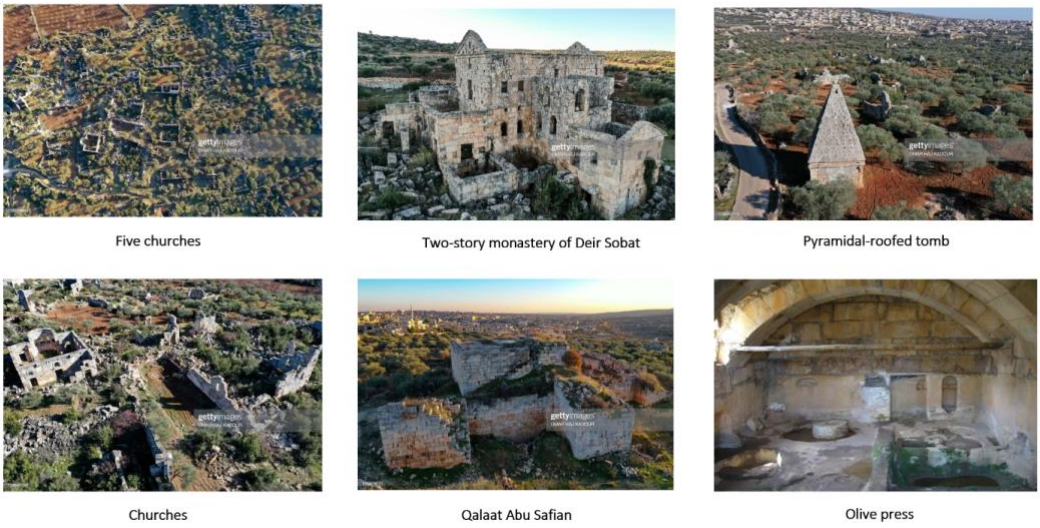


Figure 3. *Architectural buildings and ruins of the village of Al Bara*

3. Values and Significance

Tangible and Intangible Values

As part of the "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria", Al Bara preserves well-kept architectural remains dating from the first to seventh centuries AD, including houses, temples, churches, cisterns, and public baths. These sites document the transition from the pagan Roman Empire to Byzantine Christianity and reflect advanced ancient agricultural practices, such as terracing and defensive enclosures. Historically, Al Bara offers an authentic picture of rural life in Late Antiquity. The site retains a high degree of integrity due to the completeness of its religious, domestic, and agricultural structures and its intact surrounding landscape. However, recent agricultural expansion across the limestone massif threatens this integrity. Authenticity remains high due to centuries of abandonment, minimal historical stone robbing, and the absence of intrusive 20th-century restorations. Nevertheless, recent rural displacement risks compromising this authenticity. Careful landscape management—guided by ancient field patterns—can help restore and maintain the site's authentic context (URL-2).

Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)

Al Bara fulfills three UNESCO World Heritage criteria:

Criterion (iii): Exceptional testimony to the rural lifestyles and cultural traditions of Middle Eastern late-antique civilizations.

Criterion (iv): Outstanding illustration of rural domestic, civil, and religious architecture from the late Classical and Byzantine periods.

Criterion (v): An extraordinary example of sustainable rural land use and settlement patterns from the 1st to 7th centuries AD (URL-2).

International Financial Support and Institutional Frameworks

Between 2014 and 2017, UNESCO guided emergency safeguard initiatives for Syrian cultural heritage to foster social cohesion, stability, and sustainable development. These projects encouraged local stakeholders to restore religious buildings, houses, and small monuments (URL-4). Other international bodies have provided funding for stabilization, documentation, and capacity-building, though funding specifically earmarked for Al Bara remains limited.

Before the conflict, temporary management of Al Bara was entrusted to the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), with long-term plans to establish eight heritage parks and two regional coordination centers. Site management involved multiple state entities (UN-Habitat, 2021), including:

Ministry of Culture
Ministry of Local Administration and Environment
General Directorate of Land Affairs
Ministry of Public Works and Housing
Ministry of Services
Ministry of Tourism

Since 2017, administrative oversight of Al Bara and adjacent archaeological areas in opposition-held Idlib has fallen under the de facto control of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG).



Figure 4. *Governance structure involved in urban heritage management post-2017*

4. Legal Protection and Property Ownership

Legal Protection

Cultural heritage protection is governed by Syrian Antiquities Law No. 222 (1963, amended in 1974 and 1999), which covers all monuments and sites over 200 years old. This law requires municipalities to incorporate heritage protection zones into local development plans and topographic surveys. It strictly prohibits unauthorized construction within 500 meters of protected sites and mandates that all recovery activities occur under DGAM supervision (UNESCO, 2011).

Property Ownership

Public Property: Comprises primary monuments, churches, historic structures, and archaeological sites (managed by the Ministry of Culture), alongside state-owned land reserves surrounding the sites (managed by the Ministry of Agriculture) (UNESCO, 2011).

Private Property: Consists of privately owned family homes and cultivated agricultural terrain within or bordering the site buffer zones (UNESCO, 2011).

5. Conflict Impacts on Heritage and Community

Impact on the Living Urban Center

Aerial bombardments, artillery shelling, and urban warfare caused widespread destruction in modern Al Bara. Beyond loss of life and injury, the conflict destroyed housing stock and utility infrastructure, driving mass displacement. Economic collapse, job losses, and declining household incomes severely worsened local poverty rates.



Figure 5. *Combat zones and bombardment areas in Al Bara*



Figure 6. *Structural destruction resulting from regime and Russian airstrikes*

Impact on Archaeological Sites

Displacement forced thousands of civilians to seek shelter within ancient structures and caves at Al Bara (URL-7). This population influx led to informal construction, structural alterations, and waste accumulation directly inside protected zones.



Figure 7. *Displaced populations sheltering within archaeological ruins*

The most acute physical threat stems from the systematic dismantling of ancient structures. Displaced stone blocks and dressed masonry are frequently extracted, resold, or reused to build modern housing, terraces, and field enclosures (Tsuneki et al., 2018). Removing key structural components (such as lintels, piers, and arches) leaves surviving ancient walls at high risk of collapse.



Figure 8. *Spolia extracted from archaeological ruins used in modern construction*

Unregulated agricultural expansion also poses a major threat to site integrity. Land clearance and deep plowing destroy subsurface features and disrupt historical spatial layouts. A striking example is the ancient Al Husn Church: its structural footprint has been largely erased after the interior was converted into a fig orchard.

6. Documentation and Emergency Interventions

Photogrammetric Documentation (Tsuneki et al., 2018)

To address rapid heritage loss, researchers applied photogrammetry techniques to document and preserve Al Bara digitally. Using over 3,600 high-resolution aerial (drone) and ground-level photographs processed through Agisoft PhotoScan Pro, the team created a detailed 3D model of Church 4. This digital reconstruction enables remote structural assessment, monitoring, and analysis without risking field teams in active conflict zones.

The SIMAT Initiative (2017)

In 2017, the Syrian Initiative for Safeguarding Antiquities (SIMAT) launched an emergency stabilization project focused on the *Deir Sobat* monastery (URL-3). Key interventions included:

Structural Consolidation: Rebuilding collapsed masonry walls using traditional hand-carving techniques and lime mortar to prevent imminent structural failure.

Use of Local Expertise: Employing local master stonemasons and sourcing matching limestone locally to preserve original construction methodologies.

Community Engagement: Recruiting workers from nearby villages to foster local ownership, while coordinating with local administrative councils to raise heritage awareness.

7. Strategic Framework: Community-Led Conservation

Because heritage degradation often stems from economic hardship and a lack of public awareness, long-term site preservation requires sustained community engagement alongside emergency physical interventions.

Short- to Medium-Term Awareness Strategy (1–4 Months and Ongoing)

Raising awareness must not be treated as a one-off event; it requires a continuous campaign integrated into local governance and education. Key actions include:

1. **Targeted Campaigns:** Utilizing social media, local press outlets, community meetings, and educational institutions to communicate the historical value and economic potential of Al Bara.
2. **Educational Integration:** Collaborating with local schools and institutes to add regional history and conservation principles to school curricula, supplemented by interactive student workshops.
3. **Guided Visits and Site Interpretation:** Conducting organized tours for residents and visitors led by expert guides, complemented by interpretive materials (brochures, signs, audio guides).
4. **Cultural Events and Festivals:** Organizing local heritage days, festivals, and exhibitions within buffer zones to build community pride and cultural ties.
5. **Agricultural Partnerships:** Working directly with local farmers to establish sustainable agricultural practices that minimize physical impacts on archaeological ruins while preserving livelihoods.

8. Results and Discussion

Using a cross-impact matrix to evaluate conservation strategies yields the following insights:

Awareness Campaigns (Highest Active & Passive Impact):

With the highest Active Sum (**AS = 10**), awareness campaigns serve as the primary catalyst for all other interventions. They strongly influence local behavior, policy adoption, and community cooperation. However, their high Passive Sum (**PS = 8**) indicates that their effectiveness relies heavily on support from educational programs, community events, and farmer outreach.

Educational Programs (AS = 4, PS = 6):

Formal education exerts a lower direct active influence on other immediate drivers in the short term, but it is vital for long-term behavioral change. Its overall implementation relies moderately on broader community initiatives.

Community Events and Festivals (AS = 8, PS = 7):

Events drive strong public engagement and foster local economic activity through modest tourism, making them a powerful tool for building collective stewardship.

Guided Tours and Interpretive Materials (AS = 6, PS = 5):

These tools moderately influence on-site visitor behavior by offering direct, immersive experiences that deepen appreciation for the ruins.

Collaboration with Farmers (AS = 4, PS = 7):

Direct outreach to farmers has a specialized focus—mitigating agricultural damage. While its direct influence on other matrix actions is low, its success depends heavily on broader community awareness campaigns.

9. Recommendations and Action Plan

To reconcile economic survival with heritage preservation, conservation efforts must offer practical, tangible benefits to the local community.

1. Controlled Infrastructure: Water Harvesting and Irrigation Channels

Water scarcity is a major challenge for local agriculture. Instead of allowing farmers to clear ancient stones haphazardly, loose and fallen archaeological stones can be systematically repurposed to construct low-impact water harvesting systems and surface irrigation channels.

Implementation Steps:

Rainwater Capture Structure: Install gutters, downspouts, and storage tanks on non-historic support structures to collect runoff without damaging historical integrity.

Permeable Surfaces: Design pathways, courtyards, and open spaces with permeable materials to allow rainwater infiltration and recharge local aquifers.

Planning Irrigation Canals:

Main Channels: Construct surface channels using loose archaeological stones along natural terrain contours using shallow depressions to minimize site disturbance.

Secondary Channels: Build smaller secondary channels branching off main lines to deliver water to specific cultivated plots.

Water-Control Structures: Erect small stone check dams and sluice gates to regulate and distribute water flow effectively.

Low-Tech Manual Irrigation: Assess and adapt low-impact techniques (e.g., bucket irrigation, traditional ceramic pots) that fit the historical context and minimize modern machinery usage.

Benefits: This approach provides low-cost agricultural infrastructure, reduces reliance on municipal water networks, deters stone destruction, and engages local masons in heritage-compatible work.

2. Construction of a Commemorative Garden

A commemorative garden can serve as a focal point for targeted activities and public programs during community events and heritage festivals. By recalling the shared history of the community and emphasizing the importance of preserving archaeological sites, the garden fosters a more immersive and emotionally resonant experience for participants, strengthening their connection to the event and its underlying message.

Hosting community gatherings and festivals within the commemorative garden creates a vibrant and stimulating atmosphere that can attract visitors, thereby contributing to the local economy through cultural tourism. Incorporating performances, art exhibitions, and traditional craft displays enriches the visitor experience, establishing the garden as a meaningful destination for both residents and tourists.

Constructing a commemorative and contemplative garden—primarily utilizing damaged archaeological stones—offers an effective approach to honoring the past, promoting collective healing, and providing a quiet space for reflection. As a tangible symbol of local identity and pride, the garden highlights the community's resilience and capacity to rebuild despite severe adversity, instilling a renewed sense of unity and strength. This collective pride positively reinforces social cohesion and community bonds while simultaneously establishing a cultural landmark that supports economic recovery through sustainable tourism.

Key Implementation Steps:

Selection and Preparation of Stone Masonry: Carefully identify, survey, and select damaged archaeological stones that can no longer be integrated into original structures, preparing them to serve as the primary landscape material.

Strategic Placement and Layout: Position the selected stones deliberately throughout the garden, taking into account their scale, geometry, and structural integrity. Utilize the masonry to construct pathways, low retaining walls, seating areas, and architectural focal points that form a cohesive, aesthetically harmonious design. Ensure all stones are securely anchored to withstand weathering and guarantee visitor safety.

Conclusion

The preservation and management of cultural heritage in post-conflict Syria play a vital role in community recovery and urban revitalization. Focusing on the archaeological site of Al Bara, this study examined the strategic importance of heritage management in post-crisis recovery, paying dynamic attention to archaeological preservation and the sustainable reuse of displaced stone masonry.

The findings emphasize that engaging the local community through structured awareness-raising campaigns is essential to protecting archaeological sites and sustaining cultural heritage. Encouraging residents to contribute their ideas, resources, and traditional expertise guarantees the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of conservation practices. Ultimately, by repurposing damaged archaeological stones into functional, community-centered infrastructure and reflective spaces, post-conflict societies can foster resilience, protect their historical memory, and support sustainable socio-economic recovery.

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