Heritage Under Threat position paper (May 2020)

The ‘heritage under threat’ research cluster gathers scholars from different disciplines based at the Leiden University, Delft University of Technology and Erasmus University Rotterdam (LDE Alliance). Collectively, the group reflects the diversity of approaches to heritage under threat from disciplines including archaeology, law, criminology, anthropology, history, languages, geo-engineering and geophysics.

Heritage may be under threat by various causes, most notably armed conflicts, natural disasters or the illicit trade. Over the last decade, since the conflict and destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East, heritage protection features high on the agendas of international organisations. As such, heritage under threat and its protection has become a matter of peace and security and has been acknowledged as of importance to sustainable development. Among the Sustainable Development Goals the “safeguarding of the world’s cultural and natural heritage” as well as the “appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” are listed.[[1]](#footnote-1) In other words, both the active protection as well as the educational aspects of heritage protection feature as SDG goals. Another example of this interrelation of cultural heritage with sustainable development can be found in the Council of Europe Framework Convention, that emphasises “the value and potential of cultural heritage wisely used as a resource for sustainable development and quality of life in a constantly evolving society”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As a group we believe that through creative thinking and dialogue across disciplines, we can contribute to innovative research that foster these aims. Given the backgrounds of the affiliated scholars this contribution may be on a technical level (in terms of physical or digital protection) or on the ‘normative’ level (in terms of protection schemes). With regard to the technical side, by adopting an original approach to the topic through the use of new techniques and social media, for example. Data, imagery and audio-visual material can record sites and objects, invaluable in (post-)conflict situations. While physical destruction may not be preventable, we can at least ‘save’ data and images. On the other hand, for the development of effective protection schemes, a critical evaluation of existing norms and systems is needed. This concerns research into the legal and ethical frameworks and its blind spots, a description of traffic routes of the illicit trade in antiquities and other cultural objects, and research into ownership and governance structures (who is the owner and who is in charge of protection).

The aim of this multidisciplinary group is to bring together scholars on these two themes as we believe this will enrich academic discourse in this field.

1. UN GA 25 September5 2015 (A/Res/70/1), Goals 4.7 and 11.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Preamble of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for

Society, Faro, 27.X.2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)