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# Editorial Introduction: The Archaeology of Trauma

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# Editorial Introduction

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## The Archaeology of Trauma

Experience shows that the destruction of cultural heritage accompanies times of social upheaval, or what might be referred to as trauma. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “trauma” as a wound or external bodily injury caused by an extrinsic agent. For our purposes the *wound* is the destruction of the archaeological record and the *extrinsic agent* is almost anything either cultural or natural, as the following article by Krysta Ryzewski and John Cherry highlights. Practicing archaeology in the shadow of the looming volcanic landscape on the island of Montserrat presents serious challenges for the local community and the Survey and Landscape Archaeology on Montserrat (SLAM) project. The “traumascape” of Montserrat threatens those who inhabit the island and offers an interesting example of how archaeologists increasingly consider “heritage” as integral to survey. Recent global events—both natural and manmade—have produced other archaeologies of trauma in places like Egypt, Greece, Japan, Libya, Syria, West Africa, and post-Katrina New Orleans.

The response to cultural heritage during times of distress can be constructive and proactive, with archaeologists—and survey archaeology especially—leading the charge to protect, preserve, and uncover the past. Yet it is difficult to implement a rigorous research pedagogy with those groups likely to be part of the rescue and mitigation teams (e.g., governments, lawyers, militaries, and big business). Enterprising individuals and governments have a history of exploiting traumascapes: looting, wanton destruction of sites and monuments, and deliberate targeting of cultural properties as a means of ethnic cleansing. In the aftermath of World War II and the devastation to the built and movable environments in Europe, Japan, and North Africa, in 1954 the global community under the aegis of UNESCO signed *The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*; this international treaty entered into force on August 7, 1956. It has since been ratified by more than 90 countries including the United States in March 2009. The first of its kind, the 1954 *Hague Convention* aims

to protect cultural heritage during times of armed conflict.

The preamble of the 1954 *Hague Convention* states, “Considering that the preservation of the cultural heritage is of great importance for all peoples of the world and that it is important that this heritage should receive international protection”; cultural heritage that includes both movable and immovable items like works of art, archives, manuscripts, scientific collections, monuments (secular and religious), and archaeological sites and artifacts (see Chapter 1, Article 1 of the 1954 *Hague Convention* for a full catalogue of covered items). The 1954 *Hague Convention* is rooted in the premise of mutual respect and a common interest in protecting the global cultural heritage. States Parties (those who have ratified the 1954 *Hague Convention*) agree to not pillage or steal cultural items from countries with whom they are at war or whom they occupy and to avoid damaging cultural property, except in cases of military necessity (as defined by each State and perhaps representing a loophole in the *Convention*). As part of the 1954 *Hague Convention*, countries are also responsible for the protection of their own domestic cultural heritage against harm from potential armed conflict. States Parties are asked to compile lists of important cultural heritage, creating national disaster plans and marking these sites by placing a Blue Shield, a recognizable (like the Red Cross) symbol of cultural heritage (Wegener 2010).

Unfortunately, in some instances the Blue Shield is not viewed as a protective measure, but instead as a beacon for armies wishing to eradicate a troublesome enemy. Early reports and rumors out of Libya suggested that Gaddafi’s troops were using the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Leptis Magna (definitely a Blue Shield site) as a storage depot for munitions and other military hardware. If these rumors had proven to be true, NATO forces could have targeted this famed archaeological site out of military necessity. Fortunately, the rumors were not substantiated and NATO forces equipped with information on the location of important monuments and sites as a result of interagency cooperation under the 1954 *Hague Convention* were able to avoid the

Blue Shield site (Mission Report 2011). Other cultural heritage sites have not been so lucky. In November 1993, a 16th-century Ottoman bridge, at the time the largest single stone span bridge in existence, was shelled during the war in Bosnia. The Stari Most, or Old Bridge, once a symbol of ethnic pluralism—in a Bosnia that included Muslims, Jews, Croatian Catholics, and Serbian Orthodox (Dodds 1998)—was targeted as an important cultural site and a means of ethnic cleansing. Reconstruction of the bridge paralleled reconciliation between local residents of all backgrounds, and the bridge remains an important icon of a shared cultural heritage.

A landscape of cultural trauma (WWII) made the ratification of the 1954 *Hague Convention* necessary, but ongoing cultural and natural incidents confirm it as an indispensable resource. The need for such a binding agreement is a clear indicator that under times of duress not all individuals and governments act as they should. The 1954 *Hague Convention* and other legislative and programmatic efforts are not merely reactive; they contain proactive elements that should be instituted to ameliorate loss during times of

trauma. Inventories, lists, and records of existing cultural heritage, collections, archives, and monuments are key elements in our efforts to protect the past for the future. The work of SLAM on Montserrat is one such program. By carrying out survey, creating inventories, and conducting small scale excavations in collaboration with the local community to record the disappearing landscape, SLAM team members have learned to navigate trauma in order to better understand the past. It is primarily a race against nature for those interested in protecting the past of Montserrat.

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