

Nellie Seale

University of Melbourne

Syria: Ancient History—Modern Conflict

Syria: Ancient History—Modern Conflict, the exhibition currently on display at the Ian Potter Gallery at the University of Melbourne, is based around the archaeological Syrian-Australian research collaboration project, to which the University has contributed significantly.¹ The project commenced in 2008, following several decades of combined international efforts of rescue archaeology in Syria. These salvage excavations were made requisite by developments in infrastructure in places of significant cultural and heritage value, most prominently the Tishrin Dam. Curated by Dr Andrew Jamieson, archaeologist and senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, and curator of the Classics and Archaeology collection at the Ian Potter, the exhibition explores what has been a long personal and professional connection to Syria for Dr Jamieson, through the archaeological discoveries that were made over the course of the three decades of excavation and research that he has been a part of. The exhibition presents only a fraction of the work that has been completed in Syria by the University, the scope of which lies beyond the purview of a single excavation. The University's work has been immensely useful in contributing to research about the history of the areas, and in developing possibilities for engagement with elements of culture that would have otherwise been lost.

The fieldwork and materials presented cover excavations at El Qitar, Tell Ahmar and Jebel Khalid, as well as recent developments around one of Syria's most

1 The exhibition will run until 27 August 2017.

valuable ancient sites, the city of Palmyra. The sites of El Qitar, Tell Ahmar and Jebel Khalid were each of great historical significance. The discovery of a Bronze Age Fortress at El Qitar in the early 1980s, on the west bank of the Euphrates river, was the first in the series of excavations featuring a team from the University of Melbourne. It was followed by the excavations at Tell Ahmar in the late 1980s and 1990. This site which was occupied in Late Antiquity and had its origins as a provincial capital of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Finally, a long series of excavations beginning in 1986 were undertaken at the Hellenistic site of Jebel Khalid, another major settlement on the bank of the Euphrates, this time in partnership with the Australian National University. The information gathered from these sites has been invaluable to studies of the ancient Near East. This despite the fact that the excavations were incomplete when the projects were suspended due to recent instabilities and conflict.

Skirting around some of the more distressing aspects of the modern conflict in Syria, the exhibition's focus on the destruction of the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra brings a solemn note to the gallery space. The duality of presenting years of successful archaeological work along with reminders that much of what has been uncovered and learnt may not be recoverable is striking, and serves a reminder of just how fragile history can be, despite perceptions that it is immutable. The destruction of Palmyra in particular is evidence that since the commencement of hostilities began in Syria, its archaeological resources have suffered a great deal of damage, which has significantly impaired the potential for further discovery at many sites. Unsanctioned and deficient excavations, active and systematic destruction of sites and the bellicose targeting of museums in particular has resulted in countless objects of historical and cultural significance being either destroyed or lost to the black market. This is likely the fate of much of the material that was uncovered in the final season of University fieldwork in Syria, after the suspension of projects in 2010.

Although projects in the field have been halted, there remains an ongoing international effort to help maintain the cultural heritage. SHIRIN International

(Syrian Heritage in Danger: an International Research Initiative and Network) is proof of this, and many who contributed to the exhibition are members of its Australian sub-committee. An international project focusing on preserving and salvaging Syrian heritage, SHIRIN members are helping to rebuild Syrian archaeology by documenting the destruction and moving towards a point at which restoration could be an option.

This exhibition demonstrates that this point may not be as far away as we might imagine. Although many of the archaeological technologies and tools presented as part of the exhibition are very traditional—trowels, munsel charts and range-finder cameras just to name a few—they are presented alongside some of the newest and most modern technologies and digital strategies that can be applied to the practice of archaeology, like 3D printing and photogrammetry. The city of Palmyra, now in ruins and containing the remnants of what were once great monuments. The Arch of Triumph, erected under the rule of Septimius Severus, was destroyed in 2015 in a deliberate and hostile capture. This destruction represents a broader pattern of cultural violence that has resulted from the conflict in Syria. Yet its presentation in the exhibition is in the context of hope. The arch has since been recreated from photographs and sketches of the original, combined with 3D digital reconstruction at the Institute of Digital Archaeology in the UK. Although the destruction of the Arch of Triumph at Palmyra represents an irreplaceable loss, the presentation of the reconstruction, showing the extent of the successful archaeological recording of the site, in this regard provides a degree of hope. The ability to digitally model and then physically reconstruct lost archaeological objects and sites, presents opportunities for engagement with cultural materials that have been lost, and the potential for a continued existence of these aspects of history, despite the fact that their original elements no longer exist. This development in object based research and conservation has implications for learning about fragmented distant paths, as well as for the integrity of monuments such as the Arch of Triumph as the digital files could provide a model should any degree of restoration or reconstruction eventually take place.

Balancing between a melancholy reflection of the history that has been lost, and a celebration of past and potential future years of successful archaeological work, the exhibition explores what once was the tangible past of Syria, but is now something far more fragile. By combining these two aspects, and presenting them alongside some of the newest technology available in preservation heritage practices, the exhibition is tinged with a hopeful sentiment. Through exploring three decades of Australian fieldwork at various historically significant sites in Syria, as well as delving into the recent advancements in digital technology and the possibilities they can create, *Syria: Ancient History—Modern Conflict* expresses our continuing commitment to the past, present, and future of a country currently experiencing a devastating level of cultural destruction.