A Future for the Time after the Crisis

The situation in Syria

Barbaric acts of destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq by the so-called Islamic State dominate the reporting and the perception of current affairs. Images of the carefully stage-managed demolition of the temples at Palmyra have a powerful impact. Meanwhile little attention is paid to the ongoing devastation of Syrian towns and cultural assets under way since 2011 – or to the associated question of how acceptable living conditions can be restored in Syria once the crisis is over.

It is essential therefore that the reconstruction of Syria is approached in a manner that encompasses not only rebuilding towns and cities but also safeguarding ancient sites.
**Basics: Research and data collection**

The German Archaeological Institute (DAI) has pursued a broader approach since 2012, comprising capacity building, the preservation of artistic and artisanal traditions and the development of international networks for cultural preservation. One of our initiatives is the Syrian Heritage Archive Project (SHAP), supported by the Federal Foreign Office. In cooperation with the Museum für Islamische Kunst (SMB), we are carrying out systematic digital documentation of the full spectrum of data that has been gathered on Syria’s cultural heritage over more than 100 years. This will provide Syrian colleagues with a secure documentary basis for the reconstruction of cultural heritage in Syria and will also facilitate identification of looted objects that are being traded illegally on the art market.

**The Stunde Null project**

The German Archaeological Institute, one of the biggest archaeological research institutes in the world, decides on policy according to priorities that are practical, not symbolic. An illustration of this is the project “Stunde Null: A Future for the Time after the Crisis”, the idea for which was born of a wish to harness existing expertise and create synergies. The project has been set up with partners from the Archaeological Heritage Network (ArchHerNet), the Directorate-General for Culture and Communication at the Federal Foreign Office and the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Funding from the Federal Foreign Office’s Migration fund supported by the German Federal Parliament will contribute to the project being implemented in the next few years.

**The challenge today**

The temples of Palmyra are important monuments of Syrian cultural heritage. But the reconstruction of Syria must take into account other sites and other measures of cultural preservation. Urgent action is required if Syrian cities with their ancient monuments and historic quarters are to be saved and preserved. What to do about the temples at Palmyra is therefore not the only question to be answered: we also have to decide what should be done about – for example – the bazaar of Aleppo, a UNESCO world heritage site, which was destroyed back in 2012. Should the historic city centre of Aleppo be preserved in its original structure and partly rebuilt or should it be replaced by a newly planned city? Syrian experts are working with German colleagues on developing adequate planning processes which they will ultimately be able to implement.

**Training**

Central to the Stunde Null (“zero hour”) project is the training of Syrian architects, archaeologists, heritage conservationists, construction history specialists, town planners and above all craftsmen with a variety of skills. A large part of the basic and further training will take place in neighbouring countries that have taken in Syrian refugees. For university graduates, scholarships are available for Master’s degree courses in monument conservation at Helwan University in Cairo and at the German Jordanian University in Amman. In addition, local workers benefit from vocational training on monument conservation projects in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey and receive further training to become experts in their craft. The project thus complements humanitarian aid: it creates jobs, and through vocational training it improves career prospects in the field of reconstruction and hence preservation of important monuments in the region.

Stunde Null is the first project to be carried out by the Archaeological Heritage Network, a network promoting cultural heritage preservation. The network and the project are both sponsored by the Federal Foreign Office.