



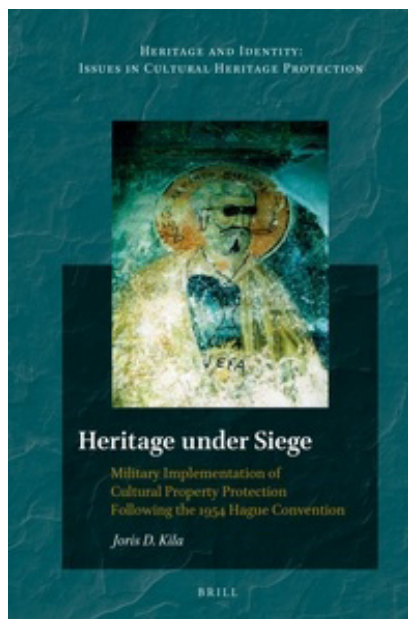
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*Online Journal in Public Archaeology*

## REVIEWS



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**Heritage Under Siege.  
Military Implementation of  
Cultural Protection Following  
the 1954 Hague Convention**  
[Joris D. Kila]

*Brill*  
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318 pages

The destruction of works of art and antiquities as a result of armed conflicts has always been present throughout history. For a long time it has also been seen as a reward of the winning side. From the nineteenth century, the concept of cultural heritage has become something socially rooted; the devastating effects of wars on cultural heritage will try to be mitigated. The protection of the Prado Museum treasures during the Spanish Civil War, followed later by the actions of a military unit called «Monuments Men» during the Second World War, is a manifestation of this change in attitude in the first half of the twentieth century. This concern about the conservation of cultural heritage in wars will reach its peak in the Unesco Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflicts, signed at The Hague in 1954.

This convention based its recommendations on past war experiences that were already obsolete when signed. The characteristic air raids of the Second World War had given way to the nuclear threat of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall and bloc politics paved the way for other military confrontations where the ghost of a nuclear planetary holocaust was replaced by the crude reality of genocidal extermination of the enemies.

The bloody dismemberment of Eastern Europe, with the Bosnian war in the background, and later on the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the civil wars in Libya, Syria and Mali, are the best-known episodes of armed conflict at local level, in which the ethnic or religious components have had a transcendent weigh in its genesis, or have served to mask underlying political and economic interests.

In this new scenario, military confrontation does not seek to subdue the enemy, but its moral and physical elimination. The goal is to erase any trace of his memory, including the material remains that identify him or serve to keep his memory alive.

This deliberate pursuit of total genocide shall be added to the effects of collateral damage, as well as the opportunity offered by the war chaos to increase the plunder and theft of antiquities and works of art destined for the markets of developed countries.

The 1954 Hague Convention sought to adapt to these post-Cold War threats on cultural heritage in wartime through the Second Protocol, signed in 1999. However, there has been little interest in the international community to follow the rules and recommendations of this Second Protocol.

The so-called 'Arab Spring' has added new threat scenarios for cultural heritage, as riots and popular uprisings are used by some groups to plunder and damage cultural property, as happened in Egypt, according to Kila.

In accordance with this brief description of conflict, the role of the armies has also undergone some changes. In many cases, the armed forces involved in the field are not combatants, but carry out humanitarian missions or peacekeeping, under the umbrella of the United Nations or other international organizations.

Among experts there is great concern about the relationship between the military and cultural property. Concern that has had its epicenter in the destruction of cultural centers and archaeological sites, and the looting of antiquities that accompanied the invasion of Iraq by a multinational contingent of troops led by the United States and the United Kingdom in 2003.

This issue has led to a broad international debate through forums, journals and books. In this respect, the position taken by the World Archaeological Congress (WAC is a non-governmental, not-for-profit

organization, and is the only elected international body of practicing archaeologists as well as one that places particular emphasis on archaeological ethics) before a possible invasion of Iran in 2008 or the recent episode in Mali, calling on the parties in conflict to avoid war and seek other, nonviolent ways of resolving problems, should be highlighted ("The view here is that providing advice and expertise to the military during the war planning against Iran would offer cultural credibility and respectability to the military action", said Professor Claire Smith, President of the WAC at that time). During the WAC-7, met in Amman in February 2013, a draft of a Declaration on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict has been submitted to the Assembly for consideration, in order to enhance compliance with the observations of the 1954 Hague Convention.

The book by Joris D. Kila falls squarely in the heart of this international debate from a perspective based on personal experiences, but no less complete and comprehensive. The book is divided into three parts: a preface, four chapters, which include a number of case studies, and appendices with documents relating to the protection of cultural property during armed conflict. An important part of this book is devoted to describing the main issues relating to the protection of cultural heritage in conflict areas or during popular riots, offering each of them a useful set of key concepts which not only establish definitions but also provide an accurate picture of the theoretical and practical complexity embedded in them. These theoretical considerations are illustrated through several case studies in which the author has been involved or known from the bibliography.

The key idea, present throughout the book, is to increase the interest and ability of armies to protect cultural heritage in order to prevent further episodes of destruction and pillage like the one in Iraq during the occupation of 2003. Kila summarizes the total lack of sensitivity to the protection of cultural heritage with Donald Rumsfeld's response to widespread looting in Baghdad: "Stuff happens". To improve these capabilities, it is necessary not only to raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage, but also to promote specific training, field work in which the author has worked in recent years.

For Kila there is a responsibility for archaeologists and other cultural heritage specialists to attempt to mitigate the damage done to cultural heritage wherever there is conflict, as this cultural heritage could be an essential building block of the aftermath reconstruction process.

However, in practice, military commanders are often not very convinced about the need to implement the capability of the armed forces in the protection of cultural property, neither in theatre nor during previous training. Awareness of the implications of the Hague Convention of 1954 should be considered a key aspect of military preparedness to undertake the necessary transformation of the armies' mentality that must shift from justifying or consenting to the cultural plunder to participating actively in its preservation. This low priority over the protection of cultural property is the main cause of the destruction occurred in recent times and that could be prevented, according to the author, if the proper training had been provided.

It is surprising that Kila criticizes international agencies, mainly the UNESCO. Kila complains about not only its politicization, but also its slow response to specific crises, such as the recent ones in Egypt, Libya, or Syria. This criticism reflects the tension between agencies already established, such as UNESCO, with broad interests in education and culture, and new ones, more specifically devoted to the central theme of the book: the protection of cultural property during armed conflict, such as Blue Shield or the International Military Cultural Resources Working Group (IMCuRWG), of which Kila himself is Chairman.

In this regard, it should be noted that the book has a strong personal component. This is not the place to highlight the achievements of UNESCO in the field of cultural heritage protection, but its support and endorsement in any of the areas that are subject to statutory interest is a guarantee, essential to make a success of any initiative or project. The difference between the results of Kila's expedition during the Egyptian revolution and those from the subsequent visit of representatives of UNESCO is a clear example of the importance of this United Nations body in the international arena. This does not mean that there can be an agreement with Kila on the need to streamline the administrative bureaucracy of UNESCO and wean the organization off its political interests. But nothing and no one guarantees that other agencies, such as those mentioned above, are exempt from the same political interests, taking also into account that their work is more opaque than that of UNESCO or openly pro-military, as M CuRWG.

Ultimately, this work by Joris D. Kila is undoubtedly interesting because of its stimulating and enlightening content, even if not fully agreeing with its principles.

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