

Leptis Magna: "a heritage in war uniform" to be protected

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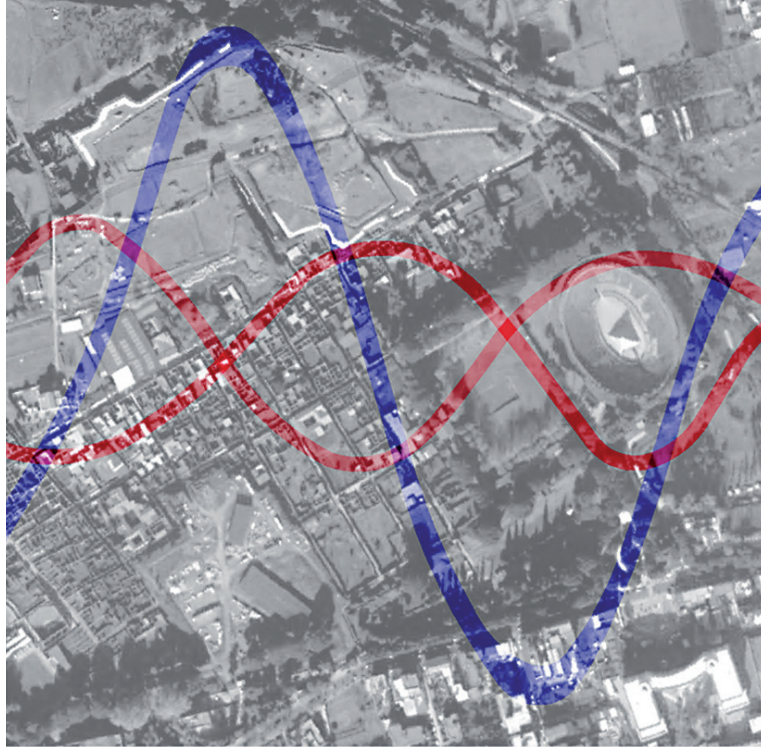
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ARCHITECTURE HERITAGE and DESIGN

Carmine Gambardella

XVII INTERNATIONAL FORUM

Le Vie dei  
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**ARCHITECTURE HERITAGE and DESIGN | 4**  
Collana fondata e diretta da Carmine Gambardella

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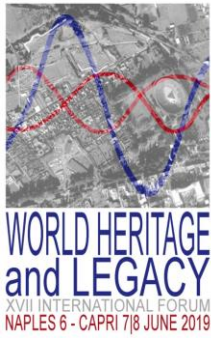
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# WORLD HERITAGE and LEGACY

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Naples 6 - Capri 7/8 June 2019

## Leptis Magna: "a heritage in war uniform" to be protected

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### Abstract

As stated by former Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bokova, "the heritage protection is the best way to create resilience in society, to recognize the past, but also to look to the future, as it is closely linked to the concept of identity. Without respect for the identity of peoples, it is not possible to achieve peace or reconciliation or even hope for the future".

This important warning that appeals to culture as an instrument of cohesion, leads us to reflect on the theme of preservation of cultural and historical heritage in war zones and - more generally - towards the protection of endangered cultural heritage.

Currently, more than 50 UNESCO sites are included in the list of the heritage of humanity at risk, of which more than half due to wars and ruthless interests of terrorist networks. In 2016 the UNESCO commission has included in this list the ancient city of Leptis Magna, along with four other important sites in Libya, due to the massive damage caused by the civil wars that followed the fall of Gaddafi (in 2011) and due to threats that still weigh on these settlements.

Result of a particularly fertile historical sedimentation, Leptis Magna remains an exceptional archaeological site for wealth and diversity. We cannot interrupt scientific research focused on this important heritage; everything that can be carried out in terms of documentation, cataloging, survey, restitution, can be used to compensate the injured assets and restore their identity when the conflicts will be over. All this, in respect and in favor of the broader "peace building" process supported by UNESCO.

**Keywords:** heritage in danger, armed conflicts, culture, cohesion, peace building

### 1. World Heritage in Danger

The Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1972, sanctioned the birth of an international and *super partes* body, committed to the identification, census and protection of the cultural, artistic and environmental heritage of humanity.

The work of almost fifty years has brought the "catalogue" to a total of 1092 sites, of which 845 are cultural, 209 natural and 38 mixed, present in 167 countries of the world [1].

In this large collection coexist, side by side, monumental complexes, archaeological sites, anthropized environments, small and large urban settlements, temple centers, individual monuments of art, pristine natural areas, which together constitute an ideal path through history, cultures and multi-faceted creative expressions of humanity and the earth's environment [2].

The accession of such a large number of countries to the World Heritage Convention highlights the importance of this legal instrument of protection; historically and culturally diverse societies have chosen to share responsibility for the protection of all protected goods, at a global level.

The 1972 Convention, in Articles 1 and 2, also defines the possibility that an object may be included in the List of World Heritage in Danger (if the state of the object corresponds to at least one of the cases described in paragraphs 179 and 180 of the Operational Guidelines) [3].

This list contains today 54 sites, for the conservation of which more protection actions are required [4]. The main aim is to raise international awareness of threats to cultural heritage and to encourage appropriate conservation countermeasures.

Hazards to natural and cultural sites may include armed conflict, uncontrolled human development, insufficient maintenance of the sites themselves, changes of owners or changes of cultural property protection laws in different countries [5].

On the official UNESCO site it is possible to consult the interactive map that, among all the sites declared World Heritage sites, shows in red those in danger [6]. According to the division into regions adopted by UNESCO, the largest number of sites at risk are to be found in the Arab countries (22 sites, 6 of which are in Syria and 5 in Libya) [7].

## 1.2 The situation in Libya

UNESCO has declared five sites in Libyan territory World Heritage: Cyrene, the important Greek and then Roman colony of the Mediterranean, Leptis Magna, one of the largest and best preserved cities of the Roman Empire and the Phoenician city of Sabratha, a coastal site where there is an important and well-preserved Roman theater, all registered since 1982; in 1985 was included the prehistoric site of Tadrart Acacus, the year after the oasis city of Ghadames, called "the pearl of the desert".



**Fig. 1:** The five Libyan sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage List: **a.** Cyrene ; **b.** Leptis Magna; **c.** Sabratha; **d.** Tadrart Acacus; **e.** Ghadames.

Since July 2016, all five sites have been included in the list of world heritage at risk, after the Icom, (International Council of Museum), had submitted to the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris a "red list" of Libyan antiquities at risk due to the advance of the so-called Islamic State. The Emergency Red List of Libyan Cultural Objects at Risk was intended to warn customs officials, the police and the art market of the possibility that works of art that had been plundered might be put into circulation and then sold [8]. Plundering and vandalism were continuous and the advance of the Islamic State (Isis) risked further worsening the situation (already in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the armed gangs had demonstrated that they had no problem getting their hands on valuable pieces of history to finance their own rise. Or, more simply, to rub the cultural identity of those countries).

In March 2001, the Taliban destroyed the two giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, ancient statues carved into the rock. The war in Iraq had led to looting and the archaeological site of Tell Umm al-Aqarib had disappeared. The damage suffered by Syria in years of civil war was invaluable: regions such as Aleppo, Damascus, Raqqa and Palmira, had all suffered bombing, attacks and looting [9]. These dramatic precedents spread the fear that the "iconoclastic" Jihadists might repeat their exploits in North Africa. In the absence of a central control authority, Libya's historical legacy had undeniably appeared in danger.

In 2011, with the end of the Jamahiriyya (the so-called obscurantist dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi), which had never done much to enhance the traces of the glorious past, it seemed that a greater





**Fig. 2:** The monuments destroyed by the jihadists: **a.** the two giant Buddhas carved into the rock in the province of Bamiyan (Iraq) were blown up with dynamite; **b.** Palmira (Syria) before and after the ISIS.

awareness of the cultural identity of the country and the conviction that Libya could develop strategies to protect and enhance its heritage had emerged [10].

In reality, more than seven years have passed since the end of Gaddafi's regime and Libya appears increasingly in chaos, both political and military [11]. The regions of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania are the most exposed to the devastation of internal civil wars and strongly threatened by those who want to strike at the cultural identity of a place so rich in charm and history. The most recent investigations and news leave no hope on the volume of illegal trafficking in antiquities, even from areas not affected until a few years ago, in the total absence of legal measures to protect museums and excavation sites. There is little time left to hope to save what remains of Libya's magnificent archaeological and cultural heritage.

## **2. Archaeological missions in Libya: a brief history of excavations and restorations**

«...It emanates from Libya a particular charm, which comes from its landscapes, but also and above all from its inhabitants. No one has been able to stay on these beaches of Sirte, even for short

periods, without being involved. The importance of the vestiges of the past is not indifferent in creating this alchemy that is renewed and bewitches the sensitivity of all visitors»: this is the preface to one of the most important books on the charm of Libya for the general public, written by the French professor André Laronde [12].

The result of a particularly fertile historical sedimentation, the Libyan historical heritage remains exceptional for its richness and diversity. For 10 thousand years, its geographical position has made it a land of nomads, migrant populations and great Mediterranean powers: a place of trade, a place of conquest, a centre of power for the entire *Mare nostrum*.

The excavation campaigns started in the 19th century by French, Italian and British archaeologists, and then continued in large numbers by European, Canadian and Japanese institutions, have enabled hundreds of archaeological sites of considerable interest to be surveyed and identified. This land, which has known many peoples and religions, is home to a great ethnographic, anthropological and architectural heritage [13].

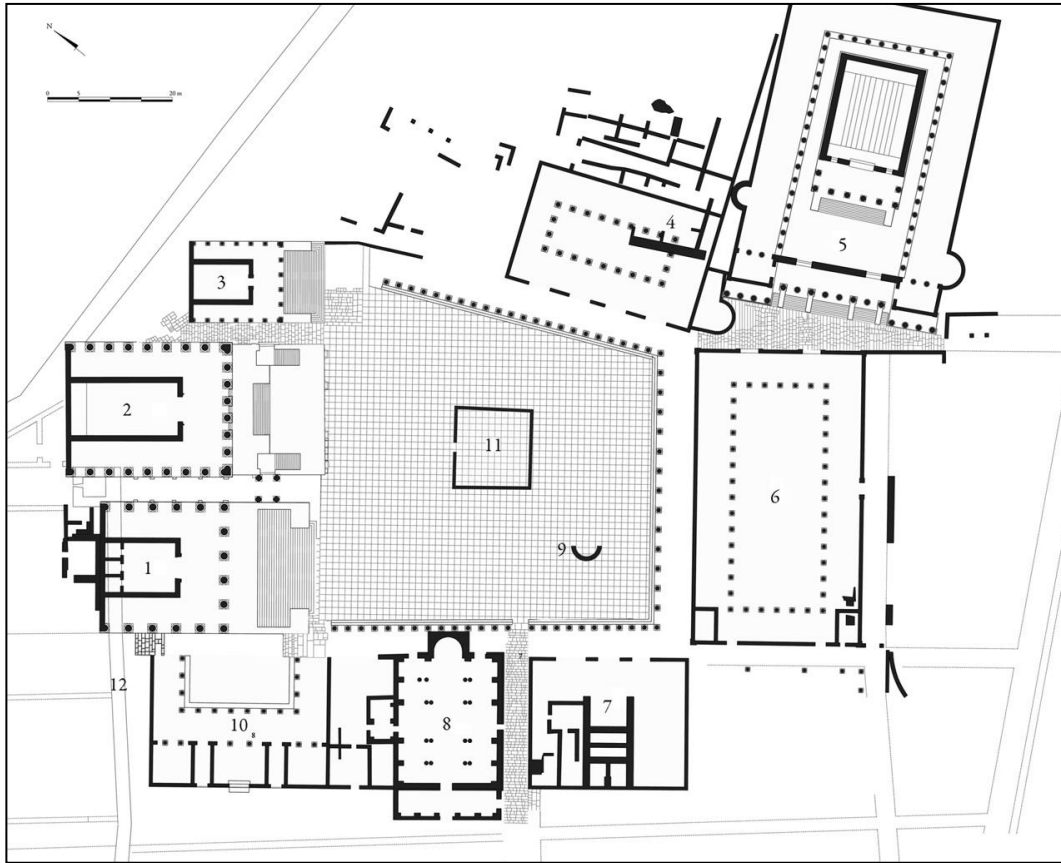
The precise historical reconstruction of the events and those responsible for the discovery and reconstruction of the Libyan archaeological heritage, made by Matteo Balice in 2010 with his volume on the Italian excavations in Libya [14], is very interesting. From the first mission of Federico Halbherr in 1910, to the excavations and restorations of Giacomo Caputo until the immediate post-war period, this book gives an organic retrospective view of all the superintendencies and all the men who have marked the evolution of the Italian excavations in Libya, from Salvatore Aurigemma to Pietro Romanelli, Renato Bartocchini, Giacomo Guidi and Giacomo Caputo [15]. The exceptional amount of work done by Italian archaeology scholars in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica can be better understood if one considers the strengthened policy of protection initiated by Law 364 of 1909, together with the scientific results achieved at the end of the 19th century, which in fact produced practical action in the field of archaeology. Law 364, the result of a long normative genesis, presented avant-garde solutions regarding the right of the State to intervene to guarantee measures of protection or enhancement of the whole national territory; the legislative measures valid at home were then extended also to the territory of the colonies [14].

After the independence achieved by Libya in 1951, the Italian interest in continuing research and excavations on the territory of the former colonies in Africa seems legitimized by the commitment lavished over many years of works of civilization and economic development, without forgetting the important archaeological discoveries and subsequent works of restoration and enhancement of such a vast heritage [16]. The important task of witnessing and certifying this commitment and the action of civilization carried out over the years of colonialism, is entrusted to a series of publishing initiatives - from the Notebooks of Archaeology of Libya to the publishing project entitled Italy in Africa - that hope to a renewed role of management by Italian bodies on the territory of Libya.

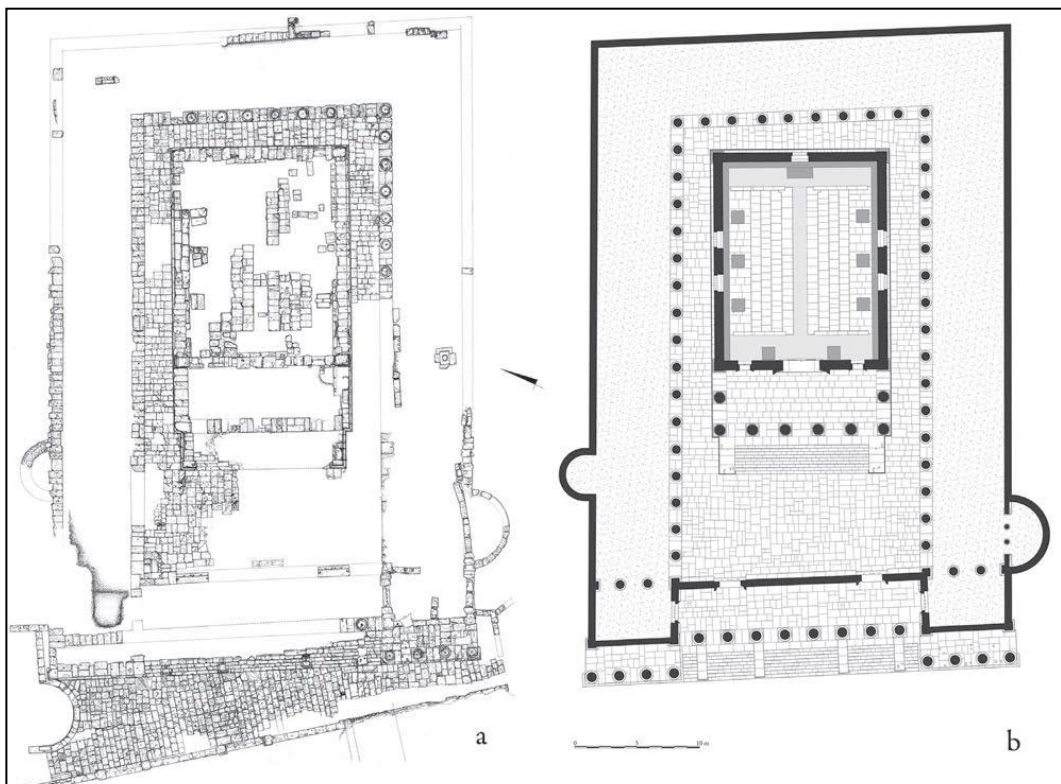
In 1965, in Florence, the Research Group for the Antiquities of North Africa was established, composed of a group of scholars of North African archaeology very heterogeneous in interests and experiences, who were entrusted with the continuation of Italian archaeological activities not only in Libya but also in Tunisia and Algeria, as well as the publication of the excavations remained unpublished. The publication of the researches not yet disclosed had to be carried out not only for scientific reasons, but also for reasons of responsibility and moral debt towards Libya itself. In 1966 the Group included the "Centre for the documentation of archaeology in North Africa", created by Prof. Antonino Di Vita, with funds from the CNR [17].

## **2.1 The missions in Libya from 2008 to 2010: from Leptis Magna to Sabratha to discover the archaeological jewels of humanity heritage**

In 2008 I participated in an archaeological mission led by Professors Giorgio Rocco and Monica Livadiotti of the Polytechnic of Bari, in collaboration with the Centre for Documentation and Research on North African Archaeology of the University of Macerata and with the Department of Antiquities of Tripoli, the institution responsible for the management of archaeological and monumental heritage in Libya, to study some monuments of the Old Forum of Leptis Magna. [18]. As requested by Prof. Di Vita, with the mission of 2008 began investigations aimed at understanding the architecture of the Curia, with the aim of providing additional data to clarify the aspects with which the architectural influence of the Roman world in Tripolitania, already strongly imprinted on the Hellenistic-Alexandrine culture, has been made explicit. The investigations continued until 2010. The activity carried out concerned the instrumental and detailed planimetric survey of the monument, defining the criteria for the drawing up of a detailed catalogue of the relevant architectural fragments. In addition, an extensive photographic survey of the structures was completed. The mission was also an opportunity to visit the main monumental complexes of the ancient city of Leptis Magna: the Arch of Septimius Severus, the Thermal Baths of Hadrian, the Nymphaeum, the Severan Forum, the Severan Basilica, the Old Forum, the Monumental Arches, the Chalcidicum, the Market, the Theatre, the Amphitheatre, the Hunters' Baths and the Racecourse; the ruins of the ancient city of Sabratha and the Archaeological Museum of Tripoli. [19].



**Fig. 3:** Leptis Magna, planimetry of the Old Forum; the building of the Curia is n. 5 (design Masturzo N., in DI VITA, LIVADIOTTI (ed.), *I tre templi del lato nordovest del Foro Vecchio*, 2005, table I), Source: LIVADIOTTI M., ROCCO G., 2012.



**Fig. 4:** Leptis Magna, Old Forum, Curia: a) map of the current state, scale 1:50 (survey by R. Netti, L. Boccardi, M. De Sario, F. Giannella, G. Mazzilli, A. Nitti, A. Fino, L. Schepisi, F. Cow); b) hypothesis of graphic restitution of the planimetry (drawing R. Capriulo, T. Demauro, S. Fiorella, A. Liuzzi, V. Moscardin, A. Nitti, based on hypothesis of M. Livadiotti and G. Rocco). Source: LIVADIOTTI M., ROCCO G., 2012.



**Fig. 5:** Leptis Magna: **a.** the Arch of Septimius Severus; **b.** the Thermal Baths of Hadrian; **c.** the Market; **d.** the Severan Forum; **e.** the Severan Basilica; **f.** the Theatre; **g.** the Chalchidicum; **h.** the Curia; **i.** the Old Forum.



**Fig. 6:** Sabratha: **a. b. c. d.** the Forum; **e.** the Thermal Baths; **f.** the Mausoleum of Bes; **g. h. i.** the Theatre.

### 3. Initiatives taken to safeguard Libyan Heritage

«Looting and illegal trafficking of archaeological finds deepens the wounds of Libya. These actions cannot be seen only as side effects, but are targeted attacks against an artistic and cultural heritage to threaten social cohesion and foment violence and division of society» said Irina Bokova, former director general of UNESCO, a few years ago [9].

Various initiatives have been put forward by international institutions and bodies such as UNESCO, Iccrom (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) and Icomos (International Council on Monuments and Sites) to safeguard the Libyan heritage: starting with the "Blue Helmets of Culture", a motion also carried out by the former Italian Minister of Culture Dario Franceschini. However, in Italy there is already a nucleus of Carabinieri oriented to the protection of cultural heritage: it has already operated in Iraq during the Ancient Babylon mission between 2003 and 2008. But these special contingents need adequate training and cannot be used in emergency situations, a condition which currently does not seem to be applicable in Libya [10].

In March 2017 the Member States of the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Italo-French resolution no. 2347, which makes use of the important technical contribution of the Carabinieri Corps, dedicated exclusively to the protection of cultural heritage at risk in war-torn territories. The adoption of this instrument testifies to the full mobilization of the international community towards the theme of the preservation of cultural and historical heritage located in war zones and - more generally - towards the protection of cultural heritage in danger of extinction, in accordance with international law. Audrey Azoulay, French Minister of Culture and Communication, stated during the meeting that the protection of heritage is a question of civilization, an ethical question, but it is also a problem of security (the illicit trafficking of plundered cultural goods finances terrorist networks, representing a factor in the development of armed conflicts). Heritage also plays a leading role when peace is restored, as a factor of resilience and gathering of abused populations. For these reasons, it is necessary for the international community to mobilize [20].

In the last seven years since the outbreak of the civil war, hundreds of videos and thousands of photos show the world the degradation and destruction of Sabratha, Lepris Magna, Tripoli and Apollonia and many international conferences have dealt with the subject, attributing responsibility for this devastation of Libyan heritage to the persistence of an endless conflict.

What is emerging in a preponderant way is the need to question and more involve universities and all those scholars who for a long time have been concerned with knowing and protecting this heritage. As Luisa Musso, professor of Archaeology of the Roman Provinces at the University of Roma Tre and since 1990 director of the archaeological mission in Leptis Magna and Tripoli, states, «archaeology should not be placed in the empyrean, but should be rooted in social and political initiatives» [10].

According to the academic, it would be useful to have an online register of the monuments and the main mobile artifacts of Libya, implemented by a team of archaeologists that is able to monitor contextually the situations of degradation and danger, also available for consultation by heritage experts.

On the occasion of the international meeting *Tripoli's Red Castle and the Museums of Tripolitania*, held in Zarzis (a city in Tunisia, almost on the border with Libya) in 2015, which was attended by Libyan archaeologists and scholars, was discussed a program for the digitization of mobile finds - therefore easily removable - kept in museums and warehouses in Tripolitania.

The database is designed in three languages (Arabic, Italian, English) and aims to be a knowledge tool for the protection. The creation of this digital archive would also allow to continue the collaboration with Libyan colleagues, giving them the opportunity to access the archival archaeological documentation, often drawn up in the colonial period and largely kept in Italian archives and institutions. Cooperation in the field of information technology, including the reading of high-resolution satellite maps recently developed for military purposes and useful for identifying destruction and building abuses near the sites, is one of the ways to go waiting to return to Libya. Welcoming Libyan colleagues in Italy, collaborating in training projects for students on the other side of the Mediterranean, organizing discussion tables between the two countries to define possible ways of intervention: these are some of the possible actions to not interrupt the dialogue with Libya [10].

So, a huge job of planning, cataloguing, digitizing, controlling and securing.

As the archaeologist Savino Di Lernia explained in an interview (Di Lernia has worked in Libya since 1990 before being forced in February 2011 to stop his research because of the conflict) «Protecting the memory of the past is a struggle that is worth doing in all circumstances. Certainly a discussion about cultural riches may seem out of place in a war-torn country, but I think that scientific research in Libya should not be abandoned. As declared by UNESCO, culture has a fundamental role in creating social cohesion and contributing to reconciliation and peace» [9].

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