

# SHIRIN Newsletter. November 2015

SHIRIN International has now been in existence for one year and five months. After the committee meeting in Bern last June ([http://SHIRIN-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/SHIRIN-report-assembly\\_25062015.pdf](http://SHIRIN-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/SHIRIN-report-assembly_25062015.pdf)) it is a good time to review the situation and to discuss what we can aim to do in the coming months and years.

The executive board.

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## What has been tried, what has been done?

Since the creation of SHIRIN, we have focussed on raising awareness about its existence, particularly via its website. Members of our organisation have communicated our aims and activities in meetings, congresses, conferences, publications and letters. We have also offered to work collaboratively with other institutions (DGAM, Syrian National Council, UNESCO, PennMuseum/Smithsonian Group, ASOR, SHAP/MIK) and associations (APSA and Heritage for Peace).

Most recently we have been occupied with the following endeavours:

- 1) Working together with DGAM: sharing information about excavated sites, excavation store rooms and facilities, museums and information systems.

We must consider the constant and remarkable action of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria (DGAMS) since the conflict began. Continuing to pursue its fundamental mission of public service of the State, the management team of the DGAM has not only kept the institution in operation by its own means, but it has also ensured the preservation of a large number of objects in museums and the protection of some sites and monuments. This has been aided by DGAM's own development of new methods to manage and analyze heritage through the computerization of inventories and GIS mapping. It also ensured communication with the Syrian public, and internationally, both in "mainstream" media and through the scientific community. It is also noted that in recent years DGAM officers have continued their field research wherever possible. The

directorates have always kept their communication channels with foreign teams open in order to share information and this should be commended.

We must at the same time emphasize the presence and strong involvement of Syrian colleagues in many initiatives outside Syria – an involvement maintained in constant cooperation with research stakeholders. These collaborations are essential to the continued participation of the Syrian team in global discussions.

2) Syrian National Council for Collaboration: Attempts to contact the Syrian National Council for Collaboration did not receive any answer.

3) Damage Assessment Files: About half (60) of the 120 directors of excavations from seasons beginning in 2010 contacted to ask them to file damage assessment files on the sites they were excavated, and to encourage them to pay the field guards, responded.

4) Acquiring images of the sites for damage assessment: Recent satellite imagery is a good tool for damage evaluations. We had discussions with UNOSAT to obtain the image files for analysis by directors of excavations who are after all experts on those sites. It will soon be possible to get 2013-2014 images (complemented by the use of Google Earth or Bing images). Discussions are still ongoing and we are still having some difficulties obtaining the most recent files.

5) Liaising with UNESCO and adjusting the way to work together: A first presentation about the SHIRIN project was very well received by the "Patrimoine mondial" team in a meeting in Paris last November. During a second meeting organized last February by the Beirut UNESCO team for Syria who manages the 3 years European Union fund "Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage", we agreed to collaborate in the development of sites and museum objects databases, and in the creation of a group or "task force" for expertise about medieval monuments. However, effective cooperation on these projects failed as UNESCO team had to choose priority targets according to its goals, team involvement capacity and funding capacity.

Lending support to the DGAM team and engaging in projects with them is currently the priority target. We have been invited by UNESCO team to attend a number of meetings (eg July 30<sup>th</sup> and August 20-21<sup>st</sup> 2015 in Berlin) aimed at prompting reflection and input about these issues. While these projects are clearly collaborative and do not provide the necessary framework that would allow SHIRIN to develop independently they are still highly fruitful and worthwhile. These partnerships will allow us to build up a communal resource for the safeguarding of Syrian heritage where knowledge and skills can be pooled together for the benefit of the wider community..

The initial announcement describing the organization of a roster of experts for Syrian Heritage in which the international scientific community, including SHIRIN, would have had an operative place, was not yet materialized: it is still a project for the future.

6) Working together with national scientific communities: SHIRIN National Committees were created in Belgium, Australia, France, and soon to be in Germany (27<sup>th</sup> November 2015), Switzerland (25<sup>th</sup> November 2015) and USA. The formation of National Committees is an important step in the organization's development and there is a need

to encourage other SHIRIN representatives to form National Committees: national initiatives for Syrian Heritage are more numerous than international ones. SHIRIN can give an international echo to these dispersed initiatives. The sharing of information is important to avoid duplicating previous efforts and thus losing valuable resources and time.

In many countries, state, local administrations and universities have launched actions to protect heritage in war torn countries. These initiatives require local interlocutors. The National Committees are recognized as qualified and informed interlocutors by national institutions. They can then aid in launching actions in support of Syrian colleagues and students in exile. Part of their function is to help to assess the inventories and scientific archives concerning Syrian heritage in various countries. National Committees can also provide options for the many volunteers who want to "do something" for Syrian Heritage. These committees are also essential in raising awareness of Syrian heritage to a more general audience. Finally, National Committees are the best medium for contacting our colleagues, and for launching campaigns for affiliation to SHIRIN. They provide a way to get the minimal independent funds which we need to maintain a basic functioning of the association including website maintenance and travels for representation (Remember that half part of the fees paid to SHIRIN come back to the legally declared national committees).

Two examples of such committees are the Belgian and French ones.

The initial goals of the Belgian committee are to analyze the damages to archaeological sites and to bring expertise on the trafficking of heritage objects by keeping in contact with auction houses.

The French committee have stated that they are working towards gathering and disseminating information on its various initiatives while also centralising the information on its research programs, the documentation of missions and their archives in harmony with DGAM. Through its knowledge of the Near East accrued over multiple years of involvement these institutions constitute a collective and unparalleled expertise. Their aim is to contribute to the definition and the proper development of the actions being prepared by various French institutions for the protection of heritage of countries in conflict. Like their Belgian counterparts they are also analyzing the damage to archaeological sites and bringing in their expertise on the trafficking of objects. As an institution they are able to foster the coordination of actions in France in support of Syrian archaeologists, heritage representatives, colleagues and students. They are already working on the reception, training and preparation of Syrian specialists who will be in charge of managing the restoration and reconstruction at the end of the conflict. Finally, they hope to provide answers and advice to the practical questions of our Syrian colleagues in exile.

These goals match those of the international organization on a local level. Permanent feedback between national and international committees is needed to maintain this connection.

## Future actions and projects

After spending a year working out proposals for many concrete projects in a variety of fields, it is now time to select which of these we plan to launch in the near future. The projects initiated must be engaged in fields not yet developed by others to avoid unnecessary and useless duplication of efforts. For each initiative the committee must first build a suitable pilot project so that an evaluation can be made of its viability. Projects are only to be maintained if an appropriate team and funds are available for it.

Our project providing regular updates on Syrian Museums was abandoned in light of these restrictions, because it replicated the efforts of DGAM who had already produced a well-organised information system on the matter. The monument and building task force was similarly abandoned because it was not tenable given personnel and financial restraints.

We have chosen to maintain the following projects:

- Paying the guardians of sites and excavation houses
- Reporting damages on excavated sites and maintaining an interactive map to display this information: we will contact in the next weeks all the directors of excavations for an update of the damage assessment file of their site.
- Maintaining the sites and monuments record for Syria (SMRS): A pilot project exists, to build a general site database and gazetteer open to the international scientific community that is independent of the DGAM one, but sharing information with it will still be a necessity. A funded PhD student will work on the project starting in January 2016. Within this scheme the Durham team is applying to be co-investigators for phase 2 of the EAMEAN Oxford project. They would then be in charge of data from Syria and Iraq.
- Creating a general inventory of artefacts in the museums of Syria: A pilot project "Digitizing the official inventory of the Museum of Deir az-Zor", supported by the Free University of Berlin and funded by the Foreign Ministry of Germany works since July 2015 in close cooperation with the DGAM under the umbrella of the "Emergency Safeguarding of the Syrian Cultural Heritage" Project of the UNESCO to produce an illustrated list of the officially registered objects in the Museum of Deir az-Zor. A meeting of the stakeholders (FU Berlin, UNESCO, DGAM, DAI, ICOM-CIDOC) sponsored by UNESCO was held in Berlin on August 20-21, to organize the cooperation and to decide on further steps. Another meeting between the DGAM, DAI and FU Berlin is planned in Berlin on November 15-21, 2015.
- Assessing damage, restoration and reconstruction: In some countries projects have been developed for training Syrian experts in restoration techniques, in the archaeology of the post war period (Australia, France, Germany, UK, USA), in assessing damages with formal tools opening the possibility to get comparable estimations of the scale of damages across various initiatives (SyrHer), and in

using cut hedges computer techniques (3D tools mainly) for monuments or objects reconstruction hypotheses.

- Further developing the SHIRIN website as the main link with the community: Details about all the initial SHIRIN projects are provided on the site. Our colleague André Tomé maintains the website. The website remains the best tool for our communication and must be updated regularly. Please don't forget to send us information about activities and initiatives concerning the Syrian Heritage.
- Providing expertise concerning illicit traffic in antiquities: This involves staying in contact with the Art Market as the experts on such matters. Illicit trade is a serious problem and difficult to address. We suggest that the work around illicit trafficking is best coordinated at the level of the National Committees, the nearest interlocutors for the local selling companies. At the international level it is very difficult to establish SHIRIN as an interlocutor, for example with Interpol. We recommend that National Committees provide feedback and reports on their expertise on illicit trafficking to the International Committee.

New projects must be continuously developed by all SHIRIN members and will be promoted via our website and public presentations throughout the year. Please provide feedback about any initiative.

**SHIRIN cannot develop without minimal funds for functioning! All our funds come from our members: Please launch affiliation campaign in your respective countries. Remember that half part of the fees comes back to the national committees (if regularly declared). In case of a member's affiliation to both SHIRIN and Rashid the fee is reduced to the half.**

## Calender of past events attended by SHIRIN

**Date: 18 May 2015**

Event: International Council of Museums (ICOM) International Museum Day

Location: University of Melbourne

<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/events/>

A. Jamieson: SHIRĪN - Syrian Heritage in Danger: an international research initiative and network

**Date: 25 June 2015**

Event: 61e Rencontres Assyriologiques extraordinary session "Strategies of Reconstruction and Restoration".

Location: Bern Switzerland

M. Lebeau: The Shirīn Initiative: Science vs. Darkness – A Utopian view?

**DATE: 16 July 2015**

Event: Archaeological and Anthropological Association of Victoria (AASV)

Location: Museum Victoria

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/aasv52015-SHIRIN-syrian-heritage-in-danger-an-international-research-initiative-and-network-tickets-17242196875?aff=erelexpsim>

A. Jamieson: SHIRĪN - Syrian Heritage in Danger: an international research initiative and network

Notes: Invited paper, in the lecture series on the Archaeological and Anthropological Association of Victoria (AASV)

**Date: 31 July 2015**

Event: Syrian Cultural Heritage Initiatives

Location: Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst

F. Braemer, P. Laidler: SMRS Project: Sites and Monuments Records for Syria

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**Date: 15 October 2015**

Event: Heritage Destruction in the Middle East: Beyond the Media Hype

Location: Deakin University, Melbourne

<https://www.deakin.edu.au/alfred-deakin-institute/events/heritage-destruction-in-the-middle-east-beyond-the-media-hype>

A. Jamieson: SHIRĪN - Syrian Heritage in Danger

Notes: Invited paper, part of a half-day symposium focusing on the recent heritage destruction in Syria and Iraq by ISIS. Presentations included a variety of interpretations on the factors driving the destruction and the challenges of mounting effective responses. Convened by Dr. Benjamin Isakhan and Prof. Tim Winter

## Calender of future events

**Date: 25 November 2015**

Event: meeting of the SHIRIN Switzerland formation committee

Location: Bern

Contact: P. Michel <patrickmaxime.michel@unige.ch>, M. Novak <miroslav.novak@iaw.unibe.ch>

**Date: 27 November 2015**

Event: meeting of the SHIRIN Germany formation committee

Location: Berlin

Contact: H. Kühne <hartmut.kuehne@fu-berlin.de>

**Date: 28 November 2015**

Event: Rashid international formation meeting and first general assembly.

Location: München

Note: Rashid ('Research Assessment & Safeguarding of the Heritage of Iraq in Danger') was created as a SHIRIN sister association for Iraq on April 26th, 2015. The president is Simone Mühl, contact <simone.muehl@gmail.com>

**Date: 3-6 December 2015**

Event: International Syrian Congress on Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (ISCACH)

Location: Beirut, Rotana Hotel

Notes: . The event is organized by the Japanese Society for West Asian Archaeology and the Lebanese Archaeological Mission working in Syria. A special session of the congress will be devoted to "Thinking future of Syrian Cultural Heritage" on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup>.

The program will be soon published on the SHIRIN website.

**Date: 10-11 December 2015**

Event: ASOR AIA Syrian Cultural Heritage Summit

<http://www.asor.org/news/2015/10/summit.html>

Location. Washington DC

Notes: During the summit, representatives from organizations engaged in collecting data on the cultural heritage of Syria will agree upon ways to cooperate and reduce duplication of effort.

**Date: 24-29 April 2016**

Event: 10<sup>th</sup> International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE).

Location: Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna

Notes: SHIRIN will be present at the CIPA workshop on "Saving the Heritage of Syria".

This will be also the location of the next SHIRIN Assembly.

These events will provide a good opportunity to raise awareness about SHIRIN and promote SHIRIN initiatives. They also serve as forums where SHIRIN representatives can meet and discuss activities.