

Cultural sites are the roots which have supported the tree of civilization since its conception. They are places that house ancient records of human knowledge and cultural achievement. Whether it be the derelict ruins of Machu Pichu in Peru or the beautifully preserved city of Petra in Jordan, cultural sites can yield immense insight into the ideas, practices, and principles that governed our societies centuries ago. Additionally, millions of people globally reserve deep-running sentimental value for these regions, be it for hereditary or religious reasons. Hence, the international community believes it is of the utmost importance to protect these locations. On the 4th of November, 1946, the United Nations formed UNESCO: an organization dedicated to sustaining these homes of history. Thousands of locations from across the world are protected by the laws of the United Nations, which uphold sites sacred to many nations and ethnic groups. However, these regulations have failed to enforce order in areas of the world that are embroiled in chaos and civil war. In 2016, the International Criminal Court found radical Islamist Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi guilty of the destruction of several holy shrines in Mali in 2012. This was the first time the ICC declared the destruction of cultural heritage a triable offence. This groundbreaking case in international law poses an interesting question. Should the destruction of cultural sites be considered a war crime?

According to the Rome Statute, which came into effect in July 2002, any attacks deliberately directed against sites of profound cultural value can be considered war crimes. But why is this the case? What about culture is so important that society so valiantly feels the need to retain it?

Culture is the foundation of civilization. Since the dawn of time, people have communicated their thoughts and feelings through various forms of art, including the mesmerizing architecture of famous cultural sites. Ancient art serves as a living document of our history, from which we can learn of both our most laudable triumphs and our grave mistakes as a species. For instance, the walls of ancient Egyptian tombs have allowed us to decipher the intricacies of hieroglyphics, unlocking the mysteries of life in the Nile River valley from thousands of years ago. Through old texts, we have acquired an unimaginable wealth of information, detailing topics ranging from the basis of modern geometry to the agricultural revelations which brought about the birth of civilization. The factual wealth we can attain from ancient cultural sites is highly valuable, but it can be documented, allowing the data to outlive its source if it is destroyed. However, even if we have learned all we can from a cultural site, there is still a far more profound reason for which we value them, and why we should mourn their loss.

Imagine that one day we woke up and heard that the Great Pyramids of Giza had been destroyed. What emotional response would that invoke from society? The public outcry that would ensue is not something that can be explained away by logic. We have already harvested nearly all the knowledge we can from these ancient structures, yet their loss would be unimaginably heart wrenching. Why is this so?

As human beings, we have a fragile and limited time on this planet. Our legacy is determined by what we make of our short lifespans. What we build and achieve in our lives serves as a testament to human spirit and perseverance. The most significant marks we make on this Earth are how we are remembered. Art is a physical manifestation of the human conscience, and its creation serves to spread a message further than its designer ever could. The versatility of art allows it to convey nearly every emotion one can conceive. Even in times of division, such as the partition of Berlin during the mid 20th century, citizens chose to display their emotion with vibrant works of graffiti on the wall dividing the city. Be it our finest hours or our darkest days, art has been and forever will be how people display their feelings to the world.

To have our society's most prized work fall to ruins within a matter of days is one the most disturbing thoughts imaginable. The destruction of that which we worked so hard to create is an unforgivable injustice to both the architects of the cultural sites and the millions of people who share an emotional connection with them. To destroy one's cultural achievement is to destroy the mark of their life on this earth. This is why it is imperative to consider any intentional harm of these sites as an internationally punishable war crime. By punishing those who choose to harm human records of cultural achievement, we can better protect areas of significant importance and ensure that those who are foolish enough to bring any harm to cultural sites are met with swift and decisive justice. The value of art and culture is something that can never be replaced.

When asked about his value for the arts in 1938, Sir Winston Churchill stated that "the arts are essential to any complete national life. The State owes it to itself to sustain and encourage them. Ill fares the race which fails to salute the arts with the reverence and delight which are their due."

Art in all its forms, be it literature, music, or the architecture of cultural sites, is never to be forgotten. As a modern, globalized society, it is our duty to preserve these epicentres of human creation for the generations to come.