Editorial: “Death of Queen Zenobia’s Brave Grandson”

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In the time of peace, it is unusual to start editorial by an obituary. Unfortunately, the civilised world is currently in war on terror and evil spirit of the so-called Islamic state. The obituary is dedicated to a very brave man who recently sacrificed his life in protection of archaeological monuments in Syrian site Palmyra. As we respect him as a hero of the world archaeology, we would like to dedicate whole this issue of *Archaeologies* to his memory.

Khaled Mohamad al-Asaad خالد الأسعد (1934–18 August 2015) was a Syrian archaeologist and the head of antiquities for the ancient city of Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He held this position for over 40 years. Al-Asaad was publicly beheaded by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). He was born 81 years ago in Palmyra (Tadmur, Syria), and he connected his professional, as well as, private life to this amazing site. He was the father of 11 children (Figure 1).

He devoted his career to the excavations and restoration of Palmyra. He was the principal custodian of the Palmyra site since 1963. His own expeditions focused on the late third Century walls of Palmyra. He also cooperated with American, French, German, Polish and Swiss archaeological missions. Thanks to his initiative, now Palmyra is on the prestigious list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Since 1974, he organized Palmyra museum collections into public exhibitions. Not only he was a recognized specialist in his own country, but he used to regularly attend international conferences. His knowledge and passion for the ancient history of Palmyra was well known. He called the local people including himself grandchildren of Palmyra’s Queen Zenobia. When retired in 2003, his son Walid replaced him in his position and continued in his work.

In May 2015, Palmyra and the adjacent modern town of Tadmur were captured by the warriors of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Khalid Al-Asaad helped evacuate the objects from the City museum prior the ISIS’s occupation. Soon after that, he was detained by the ISIS terrorists and he refused to disclose the location of the ancient artefacts that he and his colleagues hide. On 18th August 2015, Khalid Al-Asaad was cowardly murdered by a jihadist masked swordsman. This atrocity was later celebrated by Islamic State supporters on social media.

Figure 1. Khaled Mohamad al-Asaad (photo released on 18th August, 2015 by the Syrian official news agency SANA)

Qassem Abdullah Yehya (age 37), the Deputy Director of the DGAM Laboratories, was also murdered 6 days before Al-Asaad as he protected the Palmyra site.

UNESCO general director Irina Bokova condemned al-Asaad's murder and said: "They killed him because he would not betray his deep commitment to Palmyra. Here is where he dedicated his life". Egyptian archaeologist Zahi Hawass said: "His death should rise people's interest in protection of Syrian heritage".

In his martyrdom, he sent the message to his murderers that he has not surrendered and that he has won the moral victory over the primitive and brutal iconoclasm.

To all of us, he left that we should never give up fighting against sectarian obscurantism.

Let us honour his memory.

Palmyra 2015

In May, when ISIS seized Palmyra, its fighters abused one of the city's grand buildings, the reconstructed Roman theatre, using it as the venue for

Figure 2. Palmyra, Baal Shamin temple in 2007 (photo by Jan Turek)

the execution of over twenty capture pro-Assad foreign warriors. Then the destruction of archaeological zone started.

After the Bel's temple (built in 32 AD), the Temple of Baal Shamin (Figure 2), the second most important temple of Palmyra, was destroyed in explosion (built 132 AD). Besides these temples, ISIS destroyed a reconstructed the statue of a lion guarding the entrance gate to the Palmyra Archaeological Museum, the tombs of two Muslim holy men. Further on, ISIS militants blew up the Elahbel and another two similar three tower tombs, built between 44 and 103 AD (Figure 3).

The first Muslims of the Ummayyad caliphate in the seventh century AD used part of Bel's temple as a mosque, which was well visible on its later interior elements. They obviously did not have the need to destroy the temple entirely. It means that ISIS is now erasing, then, not just pre-Islamic culture, but the Islamic heritage, too.

Mike Pitts, *British Archaeology* editor, said that Palmyra could be reconstructed to look almost like the original. However, he adds: "I think that would be wrong. Isis will one day be history. Palmyra will be its permanent lesson, about the darkness into which oppression, ignorance and corruption can sink. To over-restore the ruins would be to create a fiction, denying the tragedy and devaluing what had genuinely survived".

Figure 3. Elahbel, Palmyra, a Nabataean tower tomb in 2007 (photo by Jan Turek)

Terror on the World Heritage

Most archaeologists, who are not involved in direct protection of heritage in armed conflicts, may feel that they cannot contribute towards the protection of ancient monuments and fight against the illicit trade with archaeological artefacts. However, this is not entirely true. We can all influence the general public meaning in our home countries by correctly informing about the destruction of world heritage in armed conflicts and about the crime of illicit trade with ancient objects. Every one of us can help disseminate the message about the irreversible damage and loss of historical monuments and archaeological knowledge.

People worldwide may start understanding how damaging is war not only for human lives but also for their environment including cultural heritage. They may also realize that trading and collecting looted ancient artefacts is immoral and that they should be in museum collections in the countries of their origin. Then may be all remaining countries would ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the

Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols. Unfortunately, there are still countries, including some powerful countries with well-established democracy, who are refusing to sign such document. We have to ask how is this possible in such civilised countries? Are there so powerful lobbying companies who are profiting from the illicit trade with looted antiquities? Such companies and individuals should be publically ashamed and the same goes to immoral collectors, who feed their private collections with antiques stolen from currently unstable countries. Such illegally traded antiques should be confiscated and stored in temporary collections until their repatriation would be safe.

With the current global terrorist threat, we find ourselves in a hybrid war that makes many countries to change their security policy and legislation. At the same time, we should also develop an effective procedure how to protect the world heritage, so it survives this turmoil period and remains available also for future generations.