

A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace

By Lynn Meskell. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
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From May 2015 to March 2017, the Islamic State intermittently occupied the ancient Roman ruins of Palmyra, subjecting the site to destruction and defacement. Palmyra became a figurehead for cultural heritage in danger and an archaeological martyr to ISIS's vandalous war crimes. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) vowed to correct the senseless destruction of this World Heritage Site. But was the destruction truly senseless? *A Future in Ruins* posits that it was not and that until UNESCO is willing to truly engage with fraught issues of conservation, the organization is powerless to fulfill its mission "to build peace through international cooperation in Education, the Sciences and Culture."¹

Author Lynn Meskell is an archaeologist and anthropologist, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, professor at large at Cornell University, and honorary professor at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa). She also has personal experience with UNESCO's impact on heritage sites as an archaeologist and consultant, which she draws on for the book. Meskell's other significant primary sources are the United Nations (UN) archives, personal papers of British academics and diplomats involved in the early years of UNESCO, and individual conversations with contemporary diplomats and UN staff.

A Future in Ruins is an examination of how political realities hobble UNESCO, and its stable of World Heritage Sites, from fully living up to its utopian mission (p. xvii). The World Heritage designation, created to preserve and conserve locations of "outstanding universal value,"² can inversely be the catalyst of danger and destruction to listed sites. Meskell criticizes UNESCO for focusing on "technical" aspects of physical preservation instead of tackling more challenging holistic issues about the social, political, and economic impacts of an internationalist approach to cultural conservation.

A Future in Ruins is divided into two parts delineated by the introduction of the World Heritage List, which came into effect in 1972. The first two chapters examine UNESCO's founding in the aftermath of the destruction of World War II and UNESCO's great success salvaging the ancient Egyptian sites of Abu Simbel. Meskell simultaneously explores the lack of international consensus about archaeological standards and the exclusion of research from UNESCO's mission priorities. The rest of the book is organized by broad themes, jumping

(dizzily) across continents and time, and it focuses specifically on the impacts of World Heritage. Meskell argues that the World Heritage List, controlled by politicians and ambassadors rather than by heritage experts, functions less as a mechanism for cooperation and the preservation of exceptional sites and more as a venue for “soft power” to advance the national agendas of member states (pp. 79, 123).

Meskell raises a number of interesting questions about the effects of World Heritage listing for selected sites. Does World Heritage status actually endanger them? She cites the ravages of tourism on hotspots like Venice and how the cachet World Heritage status increases property values and spurns interest in development. This capitalization of culture frequently threatens the integrity of the sites themselves (p. 106). The impact and attention-grabbing nature of World Heritage status can also make sites more attractive targets for intentional destruction and terrorism. Most significantly, what role should UNESCO, whose mission is to promote peace through education and mutual understanding, play in response to conflict generated by the nomination process? Meskell gives examples of member states using the nomination process to stake claim to contested border areas and to form economic alliances with other governments, and for despotic isolated states to reenter international politics. When member states see UNESCO as an arena to exercise soft power and conduct proxy negotiations for bigger issues, rather than as a preservation organization, where does that leave heritage, conservation, and protection?

A Future in Ruins poses a number of thought-provoking questions, but some critical weaknesses undermine its narrative and arguments. The intended audience for this book is unclear. The text appears to presuppose a level of knowledge about archaeology, the history of UNESCO, and the organization itself. Terms are not defined, acronyms are rarely explained, historic sites are name dropped as supporting evidence and then never referenced again. I spent almost as much time on Wikipedia as I did reading the book itself, trying to understand the significance of a throwaway reference to the environmental challenges of Borobudur or the innate cultural significance of Old Town Quito. Given how much of the book is spent analyzing its contemporary impacts, a deeper exploration of the founding of the World Heritage List (similar to the level of background given on the founding of UNESCO as a whole) would have provided much needed context to understand how far the list has diverged from its original goals.

Other reviews³ note that archaeology is a discordant element within the broader themes of *A Future in Ruins*. Meskell spends a significant portion of the first chapter exploring the failed history of international archaeological consensus-building. She mentions archaeology’s undersized role in Abu Simbel in chapter 2 and Moenjodaro, Pakistan, in chapter 3, and then abandons the subject

until almost the end of the book. She is deeply critical of UNESCO's choice to focus on preservation and conservation rather than on research. Meskell's archaeology arguments undermine each other and create strange blind spots. Meskell argues that the inclusion of archaeology at World Heritage Sites would result in better cooperation between Euro-centric UNESCO and non-European stakeholders; at the same time, archaeology at Abu Simbel and Moenjodaro relied on a system of partage, where Western labor and expertise were paid for with artifacts extracted from non-Western sites. (Anyone familiar with the repatriation movement in museums can understand why this approach would be unpopular with local stakeholders.) It is not clear if Meskell is arguing that old "spoils" systems resulted in more research at heritage sites, or if she is merely stating historical fact. The implication seems to be that archaeological research may have to be paid for with finds, which is an interesting accompaniment to Meskell's other criticisms of UNESCO and its member states.

Meskell's arguments for the inclusion of archaeology fail to acknowledge the issues archaeology has historically caused and feel antithetical to the stated anthropological bent of *A Future in Ruins*. Meskell states that UNESCO was founded in response to the cultural destruction perpetrated by the Nazis. However, she does not examine whether the Nazis' enthusiasm for archaeology as an ideological tool perhaps contributed to UNESCO's founders' corresponding lack of enthusiasm for the discipline. Meskell points out that European archaeologists used classical sites like Palmyra to bolster their colonial interests, creating a narrative of Western occupation in the Middle East that excised a thousand years of Islamic occupation. This history, according to Meskell, made sites such attractive and meaningful targets to the anti-imperialist ideology of ISIS.

Another issue is this: *A Future in Ruins*, despite its author's assertions, is not an ethnography. Ethnography is a qualitative research method using long-term participant observation in the "field" or location of study, whether that is Samoa or the dining room of the local Waffle House. Ethnographers immerse themselves in the culture, location, and society being studied. Because of the sensitive nature of international diplomacy and UN bureaucracy, I am not sure how one could do traditional participant-observation of UNESCO's bureaucracy and culture without being a diplomat or staffer themselves. Some sections of the book make an earnest attempt to do a traditional ethnographic analysis of the World Heritage List nomination process, but *A Future in Ruins* spends far more time exploring the machinations of member states, which must be interpreted using diplomats' carefully parsed public pronouncements rather than firsthand observation of candid conversations. *A Future in Ruins* reads much more like a political history with some interdisciplinary anthropological elements. It is possible that the author's time spent at open-to-the-public meetings and UNESCO sites is meant to stand in for traditional methodology, but, ultimately, the limitations of Meskell's sources hamstring true ethnographic analysis.

Other than conversations with diplomats and the personal papers of a few mid-twentieth-century British diplomats, *A Future in Ruins*' chief primary source is the UN archives. Anyone familiar with government archives understands the disconnect between the "official" record filed away for posterity and behind-the-scenes politicking or the undocumented reactions of faraway locals. Additionally, Meszell faults UNESCO for failing to account for the voices of Indigenous and local stakeholders living near heritage sites but, in relying so heavily on UN records for *A Future in Ruins*, repeats the offense in her own analysis. She includes no direct quotes from stakeholders outside the UN. *A Future in Ruins*' bibliography includes no archival or publication sources that document the perspectives of affected communities.

Ultimately, what are the lessons of *A Future in Ruins* for archivists and other stewards of history and cultural heritage? Most broadly, they are that conservation and preservation do not happen in a vacuum and the interests of politics and economics can be powerful influences and stakeholders. History is a tool. It is a tool for education, for community-building, for peace-making, and for cultural appreciation. It is also a tool for ideology creation, nationalism, and economic enrichment. Historic sites can be coopted to rewrite historical narratives, stake border claims, and exploit the already disenfranchised.

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NOTES

- ¹ "UNESCO in Brief—Mission and Mandate," UNESCO, December 20, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>, captured at <https://perma.cc/5KXK-JVST>.
- ² "The Criteria for Selection," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria>, captured at <https://perma.cc/UW7U-J94T>.
- ³ William Carruthers, "'A Future in Ruins' by Lynn Meszell," review, *History of Anthropology Review*, May 25, 2019, <https://histanthro.org/reviews/a-future-in-ruins>, captured at <https://perma.cc/C87C-84MZ>.