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Expanding the 'Islamic' in Islamic heritage

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In 2017, in the aftermath of the highly mediatized destruction of museum objects and heritage sites in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), I edited a special issue of the *International journal of Islamic architecture* that aimed to explore Islamic attitudes to the material remains of the pre-Islamic past (Mulder 2017). The special issue asked whether, particularly in the premodern period, we can discern an 'Islamic' notion of heritage value that pre-dated the modern Western European idea of heritage, and in particular it aimed to lay out an initial conceptualization for several distinct types of heritage value accorded by Muslims to pre-Islamic objects, places and localities. In my editorial essay, I advocated for an effort to define the particularities and contours of an 'Islamic' heritage. Also in 2017, the first volume of Trinidad Rico's important new series Heritage Studies in the Muslim World was published: an edited volume whose aim was to disrupt established discourses about Islam and heritage. Rico's collection explicitly sought *not* to promote an idea of 'Islamic' heritage as a definitional category, but rather took a processual approach in examining what contemporary practices of designating heritage value mean in the context of Islam (Rico 2017b, 2). In particular, Rico argued, Turnbridge and Ashworth's (1996, 20) definition of heritage as 'a contemporary product shaped from history' has not been brought fully to bear in mapping Islamic heritage. In other words, the present-centredness of all heritage, including 'Islamic' heritage, is largely unacknowledged, particularly in disciplines outside critical heritage studies.

In this article, Rico narrows that broader critique to focus specifically on the question of the uncomfortable relationship that the contemporary Western heritage discourse – as an ostensibly 'secularized' one – has had with religious practice more generally and its discomfort with the valorization of the religious heritage of *Islam* in particular. Rico makes a trenchant and insightful analysis, arguing that 'two forms of knowing and acting upon historic resources (a universal/secular and a local/spiritual one) have not been acknowledged enough in the literature of contemporary and critical heritage studies' (p. 111) – thereby pointing to the fact that the modern, Western universal/secular practice of acting on historic resources is frequently seen as neutral, objective and value-free, when in fact it is laden with preconceived notions of value and significance that inevitably guide the work of heritage practice though the support, funding and visibility of the work of international bodies like UNESCO and other preservation and heritage organizations. I echo Rico's assessment that 'experts of a global heritage preservation industry are able to easily mobilize a very selective politicization of religious authority' (p. 113), a critique that is well founded, important and compelling. Here, I'd like build on Rico's analysis, focusing my response on some thoughts as to how this critique could be further developed if our aim is to move toward a more consistent, egalitarian and just model of heritage practice.

As an art historian and a practising archaeologist who has spent the majority of my career working in Syria, I bring my own disciplinary perspective, one developed over many years in the field alongside Syrian colleagues and heritage specialists. Rico's observations build on her

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own work and that of observers like Lynn Meskell, Wendy M.K. Shaw, Okasha El Daly, Ömür Harmanşah, David Lowenthal and others, who point to the central role that the MENA region has played in the history of European preservation movements – both as a site of origin of many aspects of 'Western' identity formation (particularly for the heritage of the classical and Christian pasts) and as a problematic site of othering (for 'Islamic' heritage). Rico thus raises important questions about the accountability of organizations like UNESCO when it comes to the political and institutional structures that guide the decisions made in heritage and preservation fields and – importantly – which then influence and determine the media and general public response to, and support for, preservation initiatives. Examples of these histories abound in Rico's essay – including the long and fraught history of the creation of Hagia Sophia as a museum, and in particular her illuminating exploration of the proposed creation of an International Center of Cultural Cooperation in the Near East, which was met by UNESCO's paternalistic inability to allow these organizations to have local control or become sites of genuine exchange.

Yet Rico's proposal that there are 'two forms of knowing and acting upon historic resources (a universal/secular and local/spiritual one)' (p. 111) has some limitations: this framing implies that the production and valuation of heritage are determined largely by external Western hegemonic heritage discourses as actors upon a local religious community in the MENA region. My concern is that this proposal has been drawn a bit too dichotomously here, and I wonder whether both Western institutional producers of heritage value like UNESCO, and the field of critical heritage studies, might not benefit from a more entangled and, indeed, sometimes contradictory picture of the work being done on the ground by local MENA communities, who also act to produce and valorize heritage – Islamic or otherwise – in the region. Put differently, while I find this critique of Western heritage organizations' discursive hegemony and paternalism to be important, productive and beneficial – and I wish to underscore yet again that I think it is necessary – the dichotomy drawn here between Western and local MENA understandings risks representing heritage workers in the MENA region as absent of agency and as passive recipients of Western heritage agendas, rather than as architects of their own heritage values which, sometimes, intersect and align with the interests of Western institutional powers and sometimes, on the other hand, actively reject or push back against them. My concern here is that in setting up this either–or framing, those thinking through a critical heritage lens risk *themselves* being paternalistic by seeing the production of heritage in the MENA region as primarily or typically externally imposed, when in reality, on the ground, the agency of local actors in the production of heritage is highly visible and locally – and often even internationally – meaningful.

One example of this problem of agency is Rico's description of the designation of Hagia Sophia as a museum in 1934, a process that occurred in the context of continued lobbying for the building's preservation by Western European preservationist and Christian organizations, ongoing since at least the mid-19th century. As Rico demonstrates, the movement to restore Hagia Sophia also reflected European Christian anxieties about how the site had fared during its lifetime as a mosque in 'Islamic' hands, serving as a key touchpoint in Western preservation history and creating a narrative of the 'inability' of Muslims to care for heritage in conformity with Western heritage values that still haunts the field (and popular understanding) today. Yet while it's true that Hagia Sophia became the focus of much anxiety in European preservationist communities, it is equally true that Hagia Sophia was likely not turned into a museum *because* of Western or Christian preservationists. In fact, Hagia Sophia was made a museum because it served Turkish president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's interests to use the site as a symbol of the nation in his new regime of secular nationalism (Özlü 2010; Shaw 2007; Katipoğlu and Caner-Yüksel 2010). The increase of Western preservationist and Christian anxieties around the building in the 19th and early 20th centuries – while Atatürk was certainly aware of them – were likely secondary in these calculations. Indeed, in the declaration made by the Turkish Council of Ministers on the day of Hagia Sophia's conversion into a museum – the same day Atatürk was declared president – the ministers explicitly declared that its conversion 'will please the entire Eastern world' (Ousterhout forthcoming). In short, Hagia Sophia was made a museum not in acquiescence

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to Western pressures, but because it served *local* interests to make it so. While Hagia Sophia may loom large in the history of the field of heritage in Europe and the United States, Atatürk, one might argue, couldn't have cared less what European preservationists thought. He had his own agenda. It was a local one, to serve local interests.

The point here is not that we shouldn't critique the 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD) as hegemonic heritage discourse that leads to a distorted and unequal allocation of heritage value and resources (we should), but that in making the AHD the main focus of our critique we also, perhaps ironically, risk according it more value than it actually possesses, certainly in local communities. One complement to a necessary critique of any hegemonic narrative is to build alternate narratives, and defining a notion of the 'Islamic' in heritage helps build and give depth, value and visibility to a local model for heritage preservation practices (Mahdy 2019). Yet it is important to clarify a still frequently misunderstood point: that in its current usage 'Islamic' does not *only* refer to spiritual practice or religious faith alone but to the long, 1,400-year history of the entirety of cultural production in the lands that fell under the rule of Muslim sovereigns. As Shahab Ahmed and Wendy M.K. Shaw have recently argued, in this context, heritage sites and objects that were created by Christians, Jews, Hindus and others can justifiably be called 'Islamic' (Ahmed 2015; Shaw 2019). Thus, as has recently been argued, the classical heritage of the Middle East and Europe was and continues to be claimed as a crucial factor in shaping Islamic heritage (Munawar 2019). And this troubling of the 'Islamic' also challenges the tidy orthodoxies we use to define the 'West' – since Islam always was, and continues to be, a vital shaping force in the history of the West – indeed, a critical part of the history of the European Renaissance in which Western heritage values ultimately find their roots (Trivellato 2010). As Ahmed puts it, 'Islam contains multitudes'; it has always been a vast sea of competing, sometimes contradictory, discourses. Its long history equally embodies a range of complex traditions with respect to heritage preservation (Rico 2020a; Mulder 2017). To define a site as 'Islamic' is not to fix it, then, within the narrow limits of a spiritual tradition – in fact, that narrow view of Islam is one forged by the Western intellectual tradition, and one I am certain that Rico would agree we'd do well to stop reinforcing. It's our notion of 'Islamic' that needs to be expanded, and in doing so, our understanding of Islamic heritage must expand along with it.

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In support of hybridity. A response to Stephennie Mulder, Ian Straughn and Ruth Young

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It is a very exciting time for the critical study of heritage discourse and practice for the MENA region, and the diverse and critical responses to my article stand as proof. In this article, I proposed to confront the challenges of studying and supporting regional traditions of heritage preservation in the era of heritage internationalism that sees the emergence and dominance of UNESCO as an authoritative and far-reaching ideology. It is true that there are other ideologies and institutions that we could and do consider in our work. As Mulder and Straughn point out in their interventions, our field-based observations continue to capture heritage making at different

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