

**CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE PROBLEM OF PRIORITIZATION**

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*Культурна спадщина та проблема пріоритетів*

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Моніторинг впливу на культурну спадщину під час збройного конфлікту чи стихійного лиха часто покладався на перелік пріоритетів. Ці списки ранжують культурні об'єкти за відносною важливістю. Незважаючи на те, що моніторинг культурної спадщини народжується з практичних мотивів, моніторинг культурної спадщини на основі списків пріоритетів часто сприяє структурним упередженням, вибірковому збереженню та припущенням про важливість спільних цінностей. Недавні зусилля з моніторингу культурної спадщини застосували альтернативний підхід, який виходить за рамки визначення пріоритетів. Замість моніторингу найвищих пріоритетів у списку сайтів цей альтернативний підхід використовує технологію для моніторингу багатьох культурних об'єктів одночасно. З постраждалих ділянок, визначених за допомогою цього альтернативного підходу, лише невелика кількість увійшла б у традиційні списки пріоритетів. Сюди входять об'єкти місцевого значення, репрезентації регіонального чи етнічного різноманіття, недавні об'єкти спадщини та сільська спадщина. У цьому дослідженні ми пропонуємо модель моніторингу без пріоритетів, у якій визначення пріоритетів відбувається на етапі втручання, а не служить початковою точкою. Усунення пріоритетів як початкової точки мінімізує потенціал неспостережуваних впливів і, як наслідок, неявні рішення, які необхідно прийняти для пом'якшення цих впливів. Ми демонструємо поточну цінність цього підходу в моніторингу культурної спадщини в Україні.

**Ключові слова:** культурна спадщина, пріоритетний перелік, моніторинг культурної спадщини, українська спадщина.

### Introduction

Cultural property is a type of physical (or “tangible”) cultural heritage. The task of monitoring is fundamental to the protection of cultural property during destructive events such as armed conflict or natural disaster. Monitoring involves the use of cultural property inventories to identify damage to individual sites. Yet monitoring at the national or multinational level presents fiscal, technical, and categorical challenges, chief among them, the sheer quantity of sites. Cultural properties, which include archaeological sites, historic buildings, museums, libraries, archives, monuments, memorials, cemeteries, and more (Daniels and Golden 2018: 2), often reach tens or hundreds of thousands of sites at the country scale.

To overcome these challenges, heritage professionals tasked with monitoring cultural heritage during conflict and disaster have traditionally relied on priority lists. Priority lists—lists of cultural sites and objects ranked according to their importance—are used to establish significance and focus limited resources (Myers 2016). Priority lists are typically built for practical reasons, but they impose hierarchies that often inadvertently prioritize preservation of sites based on economic interests, political and ideological values, or research potential. Strict adherence to priority lists can lead to significant bias, and the selective preservation of certain types of sites over others.

In this essay, we offer an alternative model to monitoring cultural property. Rather than focusing monitoring efforts on a small set of “high-priority” sites, this alternative model uses technology to identify impacts to a wide range of cultural properties in a given region. We argue that removing prioritization from monitoring avoids implicit biases about which sites should be saved. We highlight the applicability of this approach through a case study from the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab’s (CHML’s) ongoing work in Ukraine.

### A New Model

Priority lists are often built for practical reasons, but are shaped by underlying considerations. Priority cultural properties are often compiled by a range of individuals and groups, from government cultural heritage professionals, to inter- and non-governmental organizations, academic experts, and members of local communities (Stone 2013). Priority lists range in their content, and sometimes differ markedly in how they rank the same sites and objects (*ibid.*). As such, the use of prioritization in cultural heritage monitoring often inadvertently fosters structural biases, selective preservation, and assumptions of shared values of significance. Producing a priority list is an articulation of the inherent values of the organizing entity, a value hierarchy typically imposed from the outside or the top down. Regardless of the choice of selection, the outcome is the same; priority lists suggest that some cultural properties are more important than others.

Until recently, attempts to monitor all or the vast majority of cultural properties in a country were simply too overwhelming to be successful. However, recent advances in technology, alongside a growing recognition of the vulnerability of all forms of cultural property, have led to changes in the process of monitoring. When eliminating priority lists from the monitoring phase of cultural property protection, there are two overarching considerations. The first is a practical consideration—the fiscal, technical, and administrative capabilities required to monitor thousands of geographically-dispersed cultural properties simultaneously. The second concerns the process of cultural heritage monitoring itself—the structural biases of prioritization lists and the legacies of the decisions made from implementing them. Because the inclusion of priority lists is often a decision made in the inventorying phase before monitoring begins, this will be discussed in the context of cultural heritage inventory development.

#### *Practical Considerations*

The ability to monitor thousands of cultural heritage sites is a recent development, enabled by technological advancements. In the past 15 years, improved geospatial technologies and expanded access to high resolution satellite imagery have enabled new solutions for managing large datasets of cultural properties, as well as for monitoring the status of individual sites. With respect to managing large cultural heritage datasets, it is now common for government entities to maintain Geographic Information System (GIS) databases containing the identity, location, and

status of cultural properties within their administrative boundaries. Alternatively, dedicated heritage inventory platforms (e.g., Myers et al. 2013; Zerbini 2018), and more general web GIS tools, provide low-cost, accessible solutions to curating heritage inventories. With respect to monitoring, satellite technology now allows cultural heritage practitioners to monitor otherwise remote or inaccessible cultural properties around the world from any location (Parcak 2007, 2015; Stone 2008, 2015; Hanson 2011; Wolfinbarger et al. 2014, 2015; Casana 2015; Parcak et al. 2015; Casana and Laugier 2017). Together, these advancements have allowed heritage practitioners to overcome two obstacles: the sheer quantity of sites and the necessary labor to monitor many sites simultaneously.

### *Considerations for the Monitoring Process*

Over the past 60 years, legal debates about prioritization have often centered on archaeological sites (Carman 2013; Myers et al. 2013), though are broadly applicable to cultural property. A common feature of cultural property laws and governmental policies—particularly in Europe, the United States, and Australia—is a requirement to identify the impacts to cultural sites before an evaluation of significance or priority takes place (Carman 2013). A no-priority approach to cultural property protection follows this legal trend. In contrast to approaches that use priority lists as a starting place for monitoring, a no-priority approach takes a different, three-step approach. First, sites within a potential impact area (e.g., conflict zone, natural disaster area, or planned development project) are identified and inventoried. Second, identified sites are evaluated for signs of impact. Third, all identified impacts or threats are communicated to appropriate stakeholders (particularly the local and national cultural institution), so that they may make determinations about significance and prioritization. Of key importance in this third point is that decisions about significance should be shaped by the stakeholders of cultural heritage more so than the heritage practitioners performing technical tasks.

By removing prioritization from monitoring efforts, stakeholder groups can work together to determine which monuments to prioritize in the intervention phase. Different stakeholder groups may prioritize different sites based on their own agendas for preservation, recovery, or legal accountability. One example of this approach is the recent response from the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI) Project. As noted in their report, the SHOSI Project's interventions were "prioritized according to immediate need by in-country heritage professionals" and sites were "assessed according to the present security situation and the degree of likely risk to the collection or to the heritage site" (Al Quntar et al. 2015, p. 157). As this example demonstrates, prioritization of certain sites is often necessary, but decisions about prioritization are most effective when they are made at the intervention phase, and in consultation with stakeholder groups, rather than serving as a starting place.

### **Ukraine: Implementing a No-Priority Model for Monitoring**

In April 2021, the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab (CHML) began monitoring threats, impacts, and other issues involving cultural heritage in eastern Ukraine (Koropeckyj 2022). In advance of the February 2022 invasion, and in partnership with the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative (SCRI), CHML developed a countrywide inventory of over 28,000 tangible cultural heritage sites. This included places of worship, cemeteries, monuments, memorials, historic structures, archaeological sites, museums, cultural centers, libraries, archives, and public art. The rapidly developing threat required several decisions to implement a monitoring effort. The first decision concerned the range of objectives for monitoring cultural heritage in Ukraine. The second decision concerned

what cultural heritage could be feasibly monitored with the resources available. The third concerned the stakeholders of the monitoring.

Taking these three questions into consideration exposed a contradiction in the normal approach to cultural heritage monitoring. The issue was, how could a small team: 1) select a manageable number of cultural properties to monitor; 2) identify the criteria for making that selection; and 3) account for the range of objectives, stakeholders, and unknown developments in monitoring cultural heritage during the conflict? The team determined that the only path forward was to eliminate site selection or prioritization, and to account for all observable impacts to the entire inventory of cultural heritage. To do so, the Lab went beyond the visual inspection of satellite imagery alone, and leveraged a number of remote sensing capabilities to guide the country-wide detection of potential conflict-related impacts, allowing the team to focus its time on the laborious task of impact confirmations through visual assessments of satellite imagery (Koropecykij et al. 2022).

Utilizing remote sensing allowed for the continuous monitoring of the full inventory at regular intervals. This approach enabled the Lab to generate frequent reports on potential and confirmed impacts to heritage sites, and in turn allowed for the timely distribution of results to stakeholders (Bassett et al. 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). Additionally, this model captured the widest possible dataset, without the limitations inherent to priority-based monitoring. This led to hundreds of potential and confirmed impacts to cultural heritage, and the identification of impacts not reported by news or social media, as well as confirming—or, at times—correcting, these sources. In recording and reporting all detectable impacts, a single monitoring effort became relevant to multiple stakeholders with different priorities. Such a no-priority framework allowed government entities, NGO's, professional organizations, local interest groups, and others to receive a more complete picture of impacts, which in turn, allowed these groups to focus on their own priorities. Among other benefits, this approach eliminated much of the external bias in preservation or response efforts that followed.

In monitoring the spectrum of cultural heritage in Ukraine, regardless of scale or preconceived notions of significance, a number of key insights have come to light. It has become apparent that the greatest number of conflict-related impacts has been to sites that would likely not be included in priority-driven monitoring efforts: sites of community-level significance, such as small monuments and local museums, rural or remote cultural heritage, as well as sites that may not typically be listed as “cultural heritage,” such as recently erected memorials to Ukrainian cultural and military figures of the past decade. Properties of this type and scale often reflect a country or region’s greatest variation in the expression of identity, beliefs, and shared values. As such, the loss of these types of tangible heritage, whether incidentally or by design, removes the physical reflections of cultural or ethnic specificity (Golden 2020). In recording impacts at this scale, it is possible to observe geographic, temporal, or thematic patterns of impact. In this way, inclusive monitoring allows heritage practitioners to go beyond questions of what heritage is impacted, providing opportunities to gain insight into why specific cultural heritage is vulnerable in modern conflict.

## Conclusion

The fundamental question of any monitoring mission is: what heritage is accounted for, preserved, or potentially ignored in war and disaster? While this question might not be immediately apparent in monitoring efforts, one need only look to the goals of cultural heritage monitoring to see its scaffolding. Monitoring is conducted for the identification of impacts, threats, and vulnerabilities. During conflict or following a natural disaster, the identification of impacts shapes the scope of

resourcing, interventions, restoration, and safeguards. Decisions made at the inventorying and impact identification phases therefore determine the sequence of documentation, preservation, or accountability actions to follow. The fundamental danger in using prioritization lists as a starting place is not knowing what has been lost, and as a result, not recognizing the series of implicit decisions that shape what will be triaged and saved, and what will not.

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## ***Cultural Heritage and the Problem of Prioritization***

*Monitoring impacts to cultural heritage during armed conflict or natural disaster has often relied on priority lists. These lists rank cultural properties by relative importance. While born from practical motivations, cultural heritage monitoring based on priority lists often fosters structural biases, selective preservation, and assumptions of shared values of significance. Recent cultural heritage monitoring efforts have taken an alternative approach that moves beyond prioritization. Rather than monitoring the highest priorities on a list of sites, this alternative approach uses technology to monitor many cultural properties simultaneously. Of the impacted sites identified using this alternative approach, only a small number would have been ranked on traditional priority lists. This includes sites of local significance, representations of regional or ethnic diversity, recent heritage sites, and rural heritage. In this essay, we advance a no-priority monitoring model, in which prioritization occurs at the intervention phase, rather than serving as the starting place. Eliminating prioritization as a starting place minimizes the potential for unobserved impacts, and as a result, the implicit decisions that must be made toward mitigating those impacts. We demonstrate the current value of this approach in monitoring cultural heritage in Ukraine.*

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, priority list, monitoring of cultural heritage, Ukrainian heritage.

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