# Part 1: Cultural Heritage and Values

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This volume begins where all serious investigations about any topic should, namely “values.” Part 1 comprises six distinctive essays, each exploring the perceived value of cultural heritage by individuals who identify with or against it, as well as of threats against such heritage.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, the distinguished philosopher from New York University’s School of Law, has long explored the nature and complexity of the value of identity. In his 2006 book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, he argued that the connection through a local identity is as imaginary as the connection through humanity. “The Nigerian’s link to the Benin bronze, like mine, is a connection made in the imagination; but to say this isn’t to pronounce either of them unreal. They are among the realest connections that we have.” Twelve years later, in his book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*, from which two passages are here reproduced, he argued that identities—racial, religious, ethnic, and political—matter: “not only does your identity give you reasons to do things, it can give others reasons to do things to you.” Few thinkers have examined the complexities of identity with more precision than Appiah. This is why we begin this book with his question, “Who Are We? Identity and Cultural Heritage.” Appiah’s question provides insights into what follows in subsequent chapters: the appalling and numerous examples of mass atrocities and cultural heritage destruction as well as the range of normative, legal, and military responses that seek to attenuate the worst aspects. Much of what divides human beings—and leads to mass atrocities and cultural heritage destruction—are shallow parochial views that fail to capture the extent to which all of us possess multiple human identities, the extent to which all cultures are a hodgepodge or combination of other influences, languages, and cultures. Thus, reinterpreting and reforming excessively narrow notions of circumscribed identities are essential tasks for human solidarity, which makes it possible to cooperate and govern societies—or at least not commit atrocities and destroy the cultural heritage of others. We desperately need to rediscover and stress those commonalities that constitute, as Appiah tells us so eloquently in his book’s title, “the lies that bind” rather than divide us.

Chapter 2 asks, “Why Do We Value Cultural Heritage?” This thorny question, as well as some thought-provoking answers, emanate from Neil MacGregor, former director of the Humboldt Forum Berlin, the British Museum, and London’s National Gallery. For him, cultural heritage is meaningful not because of its economic value but rather because of its association with a community of individuals who see in it narratives about themselves and earlier generations with whom they identify. Preventing or limiting a loss of or damage to cultural heritage is “the purpose of this book,” MacGregor reminds us. It requires our understanding that, as the American writer Joan Didion pointedly puts it, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.” MacGregor judges the most essential and yet controversial aspect of cultural heritage to be the assumption that it reflects a community of shared values. He builds his case on two recent examples—the statues and images of slave traders and colonial champions following the 2020 demonstrations about Black Lives Matter, and the cultural heritage of postwar Eastern Europe in the 1990s following the implosion of the Soviet Union. What matters is not the artistic value of sites or artefacts but the communal or political narratives that they sustain. MacGregor asks whether an offensive narrative and its symbols must be destroyed for the society to become what it could and should be; whether the political importance of destroying the symbols of disgraced ideologies—no matter how important for collective memory—may override the legal, moral, or normative considerations of protecting them. In MacGregor’s terms, it is the “embedding of meaning that makes an archaeological site, a building, or a monument into a piece of cultural heritage.” He muses about the applicability of the classical economist Joseph Schumpeter’s theory of “creative destruction” to the realm of cultural heritage. Does getting rid of the old to make way for the new mean that authorities and dissidents are faced with decisions about editing or censoring the past, about what and how to remember and protect, and what and how to forget and rebuild?

Chapter 3 is aptly titled “Cultural Heritage under Attack, Learning from History.” Hermann Parzinger is the president of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and an authority on the culture of the ancient Scythians. He begins his essay by pointing out what should perhaps be obvious, but is not always, namely that there are a host of motivations behind the impulse to destroy cultural heritage. Some are perhaps more easily understandable than others, but the main motivation is cultural erasure as official propaganda. “It may not always be possible to clearly differentiate between the various reasons driving the destruction of cultural heritage,” he notes, but such motivating factors must be parsed correctly if we are to formulate appropriate international policy proposals, explore feasible political mobilization, and take meaningful action. The intertwined motivations driving destruction range from notoriety to plunder, from iconoclasm (for religious, racial, or ethnic purposes) to appropriation for conversion, from ideological subjugation to crass economic profit. The last motivation is often overlooked, even if “economic reasons always stand behind.” In this respect, Parzinger’s overview begins with Ancient Greece and Rome, then continues to Byzantium, the Protestant Reformation, and the French Revolution before the early twentieth-century destructions during British colonialism, the Bolshevik and Chinese Revolutions, and the Third Reich. He concludes with an assessment of recent attacks on the cultural heritage of communities caught in the crosshairs of armed conflicts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Parzinger characterizes contemporary wars, often fought among nonstate actors, as constituting a distinct departure from earlier threats because today’s attacks can so readily be exploited for propaganda purposes: “the most fundamental distinction relative to earlier times” results because their destruction can “play out in front of a global audience.”

In Chapter 4, Glen Bowerstock, professor emeritus of ancient history at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, examines “The Cultural Heritage of Late Antiquity.” He begins with the Peloponnesian War and the Thracians attacking Mycalessus, sacking its houses and temples and butchering its inhabitants. He then describes the Romans’ deliberate and systematic assault on Corinth, followed by the attack by King Mithridates and his army and their massacre of eighty thousand Roman citizens in the space of a single day. Among the lessons Bowersock extracts from his insightful historical overview is the difficulty of formulating meaningful generalizations, including the anomalous absence of atrocities and large-scale heritage destruction, despite numerous conquests, during the first four centuries of the Roman Empire. Determining whether this period was the exception that proves the rule is further complicated because of two prominent exceptions during this period of Roman rule. They involved deliberate and fierce assaults on monuments precisely because of their religious significance—the Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the Serapeum in Alexandria and its library. An encouraging lesson for Bowerstock is the resilience of peoples across time and place. Individuals tenaciously maintain their cultures and rebuild their cultural institutions despite the high costs of resistance in the first place and of efforts to rebuild amid threats and repression. He observes that “there is no single answer as to what causes damage or loss where cultural heritage is at risk, and so there is no single answer to the question of how to preserve such heritage.” He concludes, after an account of the deliberate destruction of so much of Palmyra by Da’esh (ISIS), that “those of us who struggle, as many try to do, to protect and conserve the cultural heritage of peoples, must try to defeat and crush a group such as Da’esh with the same tenacity that we bring to annihilating an invisible natural enemy,” like the plague or climate change.

The following essay, Chapter 5, is Sabine Schmidtke’s comprehensive look at threats to “The Written Heritage of the Muslim World.” One of Bowersock’s professorial colleagues at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, she explores the written heritage that is menaced throughout the contemporary Middle East by conflicts ranging from Bosnia-Herzegovina (in the former Yugoslavia) especially in 1992 to Iraq and Iran, and from Yemen and Syria to Libya. Her in-depth investigation focuses on Muslim authors writing in Arabic, but her detailed descriptions of the centuries-long threats in the Arab world also are directly relevant for the destruction of such Muslim manuscripts as those in Timbuktu (Mali) in 2013, Sukur (Nigeria) in 2015, and Mosul (Iraq) in 2015. Schmidtke concludes by noting an additional threat to libraries holding books that are judged to contain “deviant views,” as they “are targeted for destruction,” as are numerous historical monuments, shrines, and religious sites that have been “destroyed over the past few decades by Muslim extremists in an attempt to ‘purify’ Islam.” In short, intolerance, sectarianism, and numerous types of censorship pose distinct threats to Islamic cultural heritage worldwide and not simply in the Arab world. Narrow notions of what is allegedly authentic is a conscious strategy of Wahhabism, Salafism, and jihadism in a wide variety of locations.

Chapter 6 offers the final perspective of Part 1. “Valuing the Legacy of Our Cultural Heritage” represents the analytical perspective of Ismail Serageldin, emeritus librarian of the Library of Alexandria and former vice-president of the World Bank. Applying his economist’s lenses to our concerns, he pushes the reader to ask tough questions about assigning a specific “value” to cultural heritage under siege, not as measured by the subjective variables of humanists but rather the more concrete ones of harder-nosed financial analysts. He explains why: “the purposeful actions of nonstate armed groups, militias, despotic governments, or invading armies in attacking tangible cultural heritage inflict losses that far exceed the mere physical destruction of monuments or the disappearance of objects.” He applies tools that were developed for the deterioration of sites—for example, from environmental degradation, myopic decisions about investments, or the misguided use of development assistance—that ignored many shadow costs. Serageldin argues that the destruction of tangible and immovable cultural heritage inflicts significant externalities, which, if appropriately calculated, entail costs that dwarf those of their physical disappearance. Arguing that “destructive actions are akin to cultural and social genocide,” he asserts that the true value, measured in both use and nonuse terms, of such heritage would justify substantial expenditures. They would be defensible to maintain as well as to protect cultural heritage from destruction during wars or civil unrest, and to rebuild it afterward. But at least as powerful from Serageldin’s perspective are the cosmopolitan and humanistic values attached to local and national identity, self-confidence, and pride. Maintaining the links to the past are essential for all populations to design their own futures; they are especially necessary for the survivors of attacks by the murderous perpetrators of atrocities.