

PRESERVATION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF THE SYRIAC CHRISTIANS IN THE 17th ABDIN: PROCESSES AND VARYING APPROACHES

17th ABDIN'DEKİ SÜRYANİ MİMARİ MİRASININ KORUNMASI: SÜREÇLER VE FARKLI EĞİLİMLER

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Abstract

After explaining the significance of the architectural heritage of the Syriac Christians in 17th Abdin in south-eastern Turkey, this article focuses on the extensive renovation and building projects in many churches and monasteries of this region after 2001 up until the last year. Since these buildings belong to an ethnic and religious minority in a politically sensitive part of Turkey, the investigation of the emotional connections and the decision and application processes behind the construction activities can be useful in developing better strategies for protection. After mentioning the different views on this heritage and discussing some particular cases, the paper argues that there is a need for a new approach to deal with this heritage in the light of the discussions about heritage studies in the past ten years. This new approach should prioritize the meanings of buildings rather than fossilising them and should emphasize the symbolic importance of these buildings and their restorations. However, engagement of professionals, without sacrificing the involvement of the community, must also be secured.

Keywords: Minority, Identity, Conservation, New Heritage Theories

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Özet

Bu makale, Güneydoğu Anadolu'da yer alan Tur 'Abdin bölgesi'ndeki Süryani mimari mirasının öneminden bahsettikten sonra, 2001 yılından geçen yıla kadar bu cemaate ait kilise ve manastırlarda devam eden onarım ve yapı faaliyetlerine odaklanacaktır. Bu yapılar, Türkiye'nin problemlili bir bölgesinde yer almaktadır ve etnik ve dini bir azınlığa aittir. İnşa faaliyetlerinin arka planındaki duygusal bağları, karar ve uygulama süreçlerini incelemek bu mirası korumak için daha iyi stratejiler geliştirmek için öğretici olacaktır. Bu miras hakkındaki farklı görüşlerden bahsederek ve bazı dikkat çekici örnekleri tartışarak, bu makale, kültürel miras çalışmalarında son on yılda yapılan tartışmalar ışığında Süryani mimari mirasını değerlendirmek için başka türlü bir bakış açısı geliştirmenin gerekliliği üzerinde durmuştur. Bu yeni bakış açısı yapıları fosilleştirmek yerine anlamlarını önceliklendirmeli, bu yapıların ve onları restore etmenin sembolik önemine vurgu yapmalıdır. Ancak bunu yaparken topluluğun katılımından taviz vermeden profesyonellerin de sürece dahil olması sağlanmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Azınlık, Kimlik, Koruma, Yeni Kültürel Miras Teorileri

Introduction

In the diverse population of south-eastern Turkey, the Syriac Christians stand out both as a religious and ethnic minority. The population of the Syriac Christians has been concentrated in the city of Mardin and in the villages of a limestone plateau to the east of Mardin which is called the ʿAbdin. This community is historically called Syrian Orthodox but terms like West Syrians, Suryoye, Syriacs are also used to define the community¹. Syriac Christians still speak a dialect of Aramaic and are proud to be speaking the language of Jesus. It is not surprising that the community, its language and its written heritage attract international attention. However, the architectural heritage of this community is not less important.

In Mardin and the ʿAbdin there are remains of more than two hundred Syriac churches or monasteries, dating to various periods. In this paper, our focus will be mainly on the ʿAbdin. Neglect by state authorities coupled with emigration of the Syriac Christians due to political insecurity in the region had left many of the buildings unattended and in ruins. This article will focus on a period of about fifteen years up until last year, when the situation changed dramatically. In the first part, we shall briefly present the features that make the architectural heritage of the Syriac Christians unique and important. In the second part, we shall focus on the remarkable change that this heritage has undergone in the last years. We shall explain the processes of change through a number of examples, which show the varying approaches of the Syriac Christian community and the state authorities towards the architectural heritage. In the third part we shall emphasize the complexity of this heritage, composed almost exclusively of religious buildings, belonging to an ethnic and religious minority. In this part, the heritage of the Syriac Christians will be contextualised within the recent discussions about approaches to cultural heritage.

Why is Syriac Christian Architectural Heritage Important?

The churches and monasteries of the ʿAbdin are important on many different levels. Archaeologically, three periods stand out. The first is the Late Antique period, before the Arab conquest of the region. Texts mention the foundation of monasteries in the region as early as 4th century but the earliest Christian remains date to the 6th century. The region seems to have been a refuge for the Miaphysite Syriac Christians who did not agree with the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). However, it sometimes also attracted the benefactions of

emperors, either because they favoured the Miaphysite cause or because they wanted to unite the church and invest in this region for security reasons. The latter was mainly due to the fact that it was close to the frontier with the rival Sasanian Empire. Two remarkable examples of imperial benefaction are the Dayr al-Zaʿfaran monastery with spectacular sculpture which is highly classical in character (Mundell 1981) and the monastery of Mor Gabriel, which contains one of very few 6th century wall mosaics that have survived to the east of Constantinople (Mundell and Hawkins 1981). These buildings can be considered amongst the earliest surviving Christian monastic architecture in the world.

The second period spans the first one and a half centuries after the Arab conquest of the region in 640 AD. In that period, many churches and monasteries were built or rebuilt and certain architectural features began to be faithfully repeated, forming an architectural vocabulary that can be associated with the Syriac Christians (Keser-Kayaalp 2013). Thus the foundations of a specifically Syriac architecture were laid. Mardin and the ʿAbdin were ruled by various Muslim Arab dynasties until the Artuqid Turks came to power in the 12th century. The Artuqids were great builders and have been considered tolerant to their Christian subjects. John of Mardin who was the Syriac bishop of Mardin between 1125 and 1165 is known for his many construction works (Vööbus 1975: 212- 220). In 1293, the patriarchate moved to the monastery of Dayr al-Zaʿfaran and stayed there until 1932. The Medieval Period can be considered as the third important phase where we start to find artistic encounters between Christian and Islamic buildings. Although there was sporadic building activity, there did not take place the systematic building or rebuilding in the later Medieval period. In the early twentieth century, missionary activities resulted in the construction of some churches, especially in the city centre of Mardin. ʿAbdin was not affected by this development but remained predominantly Christian.

Diaspora communities of Syriac Christians are building churches in the countries in which they live (Rabo 2013). However, they accord greater symbolic importance to the churches in the ʿAbdin. These churches are not only monuments testifying to a glorious and ancient history but also part of a holy landscape. The patriarch of the Suryani, Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, said: “As Patriarch of the Syrian Church, we regard ʿAbdin as a holy site, second only to Jerusalem, and look on our visits there as pilgrimages” (Hollerweger 1999: 7). Yet in the eyes of the Syriac Christians the importance of the ʿAbdin extends beyond religion. It has gradually gained ethnic connotations. It is the homeland with whom the Syriac Christians associate and identify themselves, and about

¹ See Teule 2012 for various contemporary terms that are used to identify this community.

which they teach their children. Thus the architectural heritage in the Țur 'Abdin with its churches and monasteries defines their roots. As Teule has determined, one could even say that “the disappearance of a Suryoyo presence in the Țur 'Abdin would mean the end of a Suryoyo identity”(Teule 2012: 56).

At the beginning of the 20th century, when Gertrude Bell recorded the churches and monasteries of the region, most of the churches were active but some were already in ruins (Bell - Mango 1982). Naturally, those which were active had already undergone several repairs. Migrations of Syriac Christians out of Țur 'Abdin started mainly in the 1950s and increased dramatically in the 80s and 90s because of economic and security reasons. Today there are around two thousand four hundred Syriac Christians in Mardin and Țur 'Abdin. The decrease of the number of the members of the community resulted in an increase in the number of abandoned churches and monasteries. In the 90s, thanks to initiatives of the community, some renovations and building works were done in some of the structures. In Mor Gabriel monastery, there are many old restorations and additional buildings recorded in the inscriptions (Bilge 2011: 305-331). However, these repairs and building activities are minor when compared to those undertaken in the last fifteen years.

Overview of the Changes in the Region and the Restoration Processes

South-eastern Turkey has been a volatile region since the early 80s. After the arrest of the head of the PKK in 1999, there had been a relatively peaceful period, despite some interruptions, until the summer of 2015. Since then conflict escalated again. There has been serious destruction of heritage in the past year in the region, including some also in the Syriac churches. Between approximately 2000 and 2015, the Syriac Christian heritage has seen the most dramatic and extensive change since the early Middle Ages. At least fifty monuments have been repaired and many annexes and bell towers have been added to the churches and monasteries.

The return of the emigrated Syriac Christians has been on the agenda since the beginning of these fifteen years, when the then prime minister Bülent Ecevit invited them to come back and said that their rights would be guaranteed by the state. The numbers of those returning were exaggerated by the press. Gabriel Akyüz, the priest of the Forty Martyrs Church in Mardin, says that around forty families may have returned. Nevertheless, their mark on the landscape has been remarkable, especially in the village of Kafro. The newly built villas in this village were criticised by some and defended by others (Oberkampff 2012: 134). The wave of returning Syriac Christians or in fact the rumour that they were returning created a positive atmosphere in the region. However, the most important factor for the change in Syriac Christian architectural heritage seems to be the impact of the diaspora community.

Over the years the diaspora community has achieved social, economic and educational stability. The Syriac Christians who left for Istanbul or Europe have started to come and visit the churches and monasteries that they left behind. Some built new houses, others renovated the old. Those who do not have houses anymore stay in one of the many guest houses recently built next to the churches or monasteries (Figs. 1 - 2). Syriac Christians coming to the region faithfully visit as many churches and monasteries as they can and repeat this ritual almost every year. They want to see their heritage in the Țur 'Abdin thriving and they have started to contribute in this end. Their involvement has resulted in a considerable change in the heritage during the last fifteen years. In the following section, we will try to shed some light on this complicated international process.



Figure 1 - Guest House of Mor Abrohom Monastery, Midyat. / *Mor Abrohom Manastur'ın Misafirhanesi.*



Figure 2 - Guest House of the village church of Sare. / *Sare'deki köy kilisesinin Misafirhanesi.*

Although there are a few exceptions, which we shall deal with in some detail below, funding for most of the repairs/renovations came from the diaspora. The money was usually collected by foundations named after the villages from which their members come. The collected money usually went to the repair of the church in that particular village or was sent directly to the bishopric of Tur 'Abdin to be used where the bishopric thinks appropriate. It was a collaborative initiative with input from many people, whose names usually remained anonymous; as was

involved" (Brock 2012: 193).

Sometimes the names of the people who undertake the whole construction or of those who contribute to the construction of an architectural element, such as a staircase, a guesthouse have been recorded on tiny plaques or carved as an inscription (Fig. 3). A remarkable exception is found in the church of Mor Gevargis in the village of Qal'at Almar'a located to the east of Mardin where the benefactor placed his bust in the courtyard of the church

and the grave of his wife just below the bust, both facing the monastery of Dayr al-Za'faran (Fig. 4).



Figure 3 - Building plaque from Dargeçit recording the name of the person who renovated the walls. / *Dargeçit'te duvarı restore eden kişinin adının kaydedildiği levha.*

In many cases, the churches that were restored are those that had been abandoned and had remained closed for thirty to forty years. After the restorations which cost hundreds of thousands of liras, these churches were opened with big celebrations. For example in 2010, two thousand people celebrated for two days the opening of the Mor Eshoyo and Mor Kuryakos churches in Anhel. Syriac Christians from Iraq and Syria also attended



Figure 4 - Bust of the benefactor in the background in the church of Mor Gevargis in the village of Qal'at almar'a. / *Qal'at almar'a köyündeki Mor Gevargis kilisesinde kiliseyi onaran kişinin arkaplanda görünen büstü.*



Figure 5 - Additions to the church of the village of Be Qustān near Hāh. / *Hah yakınlarındaki Be Qustān köyünde kiliseye eklenen yapılar.*



Figure 6 - Entrance to the monastery of Mor Ya'qub at Şālāh. / *Şālāh'taki Mor Ya'qub manastırının girişi*

the celebrations. The community who participated in the opening emphasized the symbolic importance of these restorations which would keep alive the hope that those who migrated to various countries of Europe might return. The participants also claimed that until now, the repairs and works had been due to personal initiatives but that from now on it would be rather a collective act of those who wanted to come back and live in their land².

In the churches and monasteries, two main construction activities could be seen: the building of annexes and bell-towers, and the repair of existing structures. The annexes were usually guest houses, reception halls, dining halls, water tanks, offices and burial chambers which result from the needs of the local and the visiting community. They were usually done in the same style, made of concrete covered with stone cladding. They are usually decorated with stone carving which is still an active profession in Mardin and Midyat (Fig. 5). The constructions were often undertaken by the local workmen groups under the supervision of the head monk of the monastery or the priest of the church. The critical decisions were also taken by them.

In the repair of the old churches, there seemed to be some unwritten rules, for example removing the plaster and exposing the brick or stone construction work. White cement was commonly used between the stones to strengthen the walls. In some cases, the newly built structures have an old look. To achieve this, mud is applied on white limestone to make it look yellowish, the colour that the limestone will take after some time (Fig. 6). Most of the bell towers built in the last ten years look as if they were built in medieval times. Unfortunately, in some cases, like in Dargeçit, the quality of workmanship and material was so bad that after a few years, the renovated churches deteriorated again. Another contributing factor is the absence of the community to take care of the churches whose keys are kept in the municipality for the rare visitors.

² News dating to 23 Ağustos 2011. <http://www.suryaniler.com/haberler.asp?id=786> (last accessed on 03.06.2016).



Figure 7 - The old and the new in the monastery of Mor Ya'qub at Şālah, from north. / *Kuzeyden bakınca Şālah'taki Mor Ya'qub manastırında eski ve yeni.*



Figure 8 - The church and annexes in the monastery of Mor Ya'qub at Şālah. / *Şālah'taki Mor Ya'qub manastırının kilisesi ve ek binaları.*

In some important churches or monasteries the new structures compete with the old churches in scale. For example the three-storey guest house in Mor Ya'qub at Şālah is higher than the 6th century church next to it and together with the gigantic water tower, it affects the silhouette of the monastery dramatically (Figs. 7 and 8). Although these large concrete structures were built next to it, the spectacular 6th century church in the monastery was left untouched. It was acknowledged that it should receive professional attention. The monks in charge of the construction work have great dedication and emphasized that in the past they were ashamed of the bad state of their buildings. In the case of the church of el Adhra at Hāh, defined as the “crowning glory” of the Tur 'Abdin by Gertrude Bell, projects were prepared for the construction of an additional building to the church. However, some of the members of the diaspora community asked the

headman of the village not to let any sort of intervention without the involvement of professionals. Unfortunately, the church suffered some damage in the explosion in May 2016³.

Almost all the construction work in these buildings were in fact done with official “permits” received from the Superior Council for the Conservation of Cultural Properties. These permits were usually for “simple repair work” but what is done usually has a much greater scope. The reason why the Syriac Christians preferred such an approach is the complexity and usually unapproachable nature of the bureaucracy. As a result, under the title “simple repair work”, bell-

towers, water-tanks, and guest houses are built. Mutual trust seems to have vanished.

Approach of the State Authorities

To protect the heritage of the Syriac Christians has not been the priority of the state authorities. They nevertheless criticize the Syriac Christians for seeing these structures as “their own” and complain that they are “damaging the heritage of humanity (or world heritage) by doing unscientific repairs.” In 2012, more than ten years after their construction, the Superior Council for the Conservation of Cultural

³ <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/jandarma-karakoluna-bombali-aracla-saldiri-40109018>.



Figure 9 - New constructions in the village of Zāz / Zāz köyündeki yeni yapılar.



Figure 10 - Guest House in İdil. / İdil'de Misafîrhane.

Properties decided on the demolition of the bell-tower and the annex built in the courtyard of the church of the village of Zāz (Fig. 9)⁴. The decision was not executed.

⁴ News dating to 11.06.2012. <http://www.suryaniler.com/forum.asp?fislem=cevaplar&kategoriid=4&ustid=5373> (last accessed on 03.06.2016).

In another case, the Diyarbakır Regional Council for the Conservation of Cultural Properties agreed on the demolition of the guest house in the courtyard of the Virgin Mary Church in İdil (Fig. 10). This was not a sudden decision. In 2005, the Diyarbakır Regional Council for the Conservation of Cultural Properties wrote a report on the project submitted to them stating that the guest house should be built a single storey and in a different location. However, the construction in the site started following the old project. Having noticed this, the Conservation Council took the decision to destroy the building. Although this decision was not carried out, it caused a great concern among the diaspora in Europe and the academics of Syriac Studies. According to the state authorities, the fact that these buildings were never demolished and that Syriac Christians feel free to do repairs and changes in the buildings is proof of a “positive discrimination” towards the Syriac Christians.

The inclusion of the state authorities in the preservation of the Syriac heritage has until recently been limited to the decisions related to the destruction of annexes. As we shall discuss in the next section, the authorities seem to have lost their credibility in the eyes of the Syriac Christians although they were trying to take some positive steps. The villages of Acirli (Derizbin), İzbırak (Zāz), Anıtlı (Hāh) and Gülgöze (‘Ayn Wardo) have been declared preservation sites. Although this may be considered a positive step, it was perceived as an attack by some people from the community (see below). Archaeological excavations have been initiated by the Museum of Mardin in the church of Mor Sovo at Hāh and the church of Mor Ya qub at Nusaybin. The latter has been added to the temporary list of the UNESCO World Heritage list through the efforts of the Museum of Mardin. Last year, the Syriac family taking care of the building had to leave Nusaybin because of the recent clashes and the faith of this building in the future is unknown.

Approach of the Syriac Christians

Heritage provides a physical representation and reality to the ephemeral and slippery concept of ‘identity’ (Smith 2006: 48). In the case of Syriac Christian heritage, we have mentioned the importance of the Tur ‘Abdin. If the heritage is in good condition, it means that the community is thriving and present in the region. Thus, not only the heritage but also its restoration and maintenance are symbolically loaded. It has been argued that “it is the act of conservation itself that makes an object part of the cultural heritage, not the cultural heritage that demands conservation” (Munoz Vinas 2005: 176) and that the ultimate goal of conservation is not to conserve the churches but to retain their meaning for people (Munoz Vinas 2005: 213).

When the Conservation Council took the decision to destroy the guest house in İdil, Şemon Gösteriş, the director of the Syriac Christian foundation in İdil, did not conceive this decision as a step to preserve Syriac Christian heritage. He argued that while they had expected to receive praise, they were faced with the demand to undo their work. He claims that the building contributes to the development of tourism in İdil where there is not a single hotel and he adds: "They have to reconsider the decision. Otherwise we will think that this action is part of the pressure that the members of other religions have been experiencing in the past years. It is a fact that in the last few years there is considerable pressure on the Syriac Christians."⁵As mentioned before, the Conservation Council stated that the guest house should be built single storey and in a different location. Their decision was not taken into consideration. Gösteriş's comments show that although the Conservation Council's decision may be well-intended, it may resonate differently in the ears of the Syriac Christians.

It is only natural that the Syriac Christians want to see their monuments in good condition. As Harrison has observed (Harrison 2010: 245), the architectural heritage is something that binds minorities to their homeland and to the new places in which they settle. However, as we have mentioned the state authorities are not seen as partners. In a recent book on Mor Gabriel and court cases against the monastery, Tozman argued that the Turkish state uses the cadastral planning of lands and preservation orders as instruments of discrimination (Tozman 2012). In 2000s new cadastral plans were initiated and this caused serious problems for Syriac Christians who lost some of their monuments and lands to the State Treasury. The Mor Gabriel case is one of the many examples. One would assume that having preservation orders is a positive step to protect the monuments of the region, however, Tozman and the people he interviewed see it as an attack on their spiritual foundation (Tozman 2012: 147).

Tozman interprets preservation orders as an instrument for state who wants these monuments to decay because all repairs, even minor would be due to a permission from the Directorate General of Foundations. He is astonished by the fact that the "entire village is declared an archaeological site". Although this would have been seen as a totally positive step elsewhere, it is seen as an offence by some members of the local and diaspora community. The

local Syriac Christian community, especially some of the monks and priests, are extremely sensitive about criticism levelled against their construction works. They find it rude, belittling and lacking in empathy and understanding. An interviewer of Tozman said "It would be our money we would be spending, so what does the state want? If they got experts to help us, send them, they are welcome! Or send us an official to observe what we are doing but give us the permission to do something" (Tozman 2012: 150). This statement shows that they are not against the involvement of professionals or state authorities but want to have a say on their heritage.

On the other hand, some members of the diaspora community emphasize that these churches and monasteries are not only theirs and that they should be seen as world heritage. The community in Istanbul in particular has been advocating the importance of the involvement of professionals in the process and of the application of "universal and scientific" rules of conservation, although this is not always well defined. In his chapter entitled "A brief excursion to the real world" in his influential book entitled "Contemporary Theory of Conservation", Munoz Vinas talks only about the problems between the scientists and conservators (Munoz Vinas 2005: 80) but the absence of professionals does not present itself as a problem in the West.

Some members of the Syriac Christian community started to see the absence of professionals in these processes as a real problem. The community in Istanbul has been involved in the restoration of several churches in Mardin city centre. As they migrated mostly from Mardin, their involvement has focused on the churches in the centre of this city and on Dayr al-Za'faran, the seat of the bishop of Mardin only 3 km away from the city centre. They have criticised the works done in the Tur 'Abdin by the community in Europe. Their biggest initiative was the restoration of Dayr al-Za'faran monastery. For that, they approached the European Union for funding. The union funded the project with €620,000. The project and application were done by professionals. It is the only restoration project in the region submitted to the Superior Council for the Conservation of Cultural Properties and approved. Control of the implementation was done by academics from Middle East Technical University on behalf of the European Union.

The architect in charge of the restoration was a successful and experienced architect who, amongst

⁵ News dating to 15.03.2011. <http://www.suryaniler.com/haberler.asp?id=747> (last accessed on 03.06.2016).

other important projects, was also in charge of the restoration of the Süleymaniye Mosque in İstanbul. She considers the restoration of the monastery successful in many ways. Similarly the Syriac Christian community in İstanbul who initiated the project is proud of the project which they think should set an example for the random repairs done in the ʿAbdin region. However, some members of the community were not happy with the result and criticised the restoration harshly.

They thought the stone and brick of the construction should have been exposed and the thin layer of white plaster in the church, which was a conscious and difficult decision taken by the architect, should not have been applied. The other problem they mention is that the roof which is now covered with earth could not be used any more. This may give the impression that no communication was established with the users of the building. However, the architect explained that she was very careful about the needs of the users.

While the Syriac Christian community in İstanbul shows interest in the churches in Mardin city centre and Dayr al-Zaʿfaran, the community in diaspora focused on the churches and monasteries in their villages of origin. Until very recently, they sent the money and did not follow up what was done with it. The repairs were done according to the decisions of the monks or the bishop with local workmen. However, in the last years, perhaps influenced by the awareness about heritage and caution in the treatment of historic buildings in the western countries that they live, they have started to feel concerned. They have started to stipulate that when a repair or construction is done in these structures, professionals should be involved.

In 2006, a foundation called “Friends of St. Lazarus Monastery” was established in Sweden for the preservation of the monastery of Mor Loʿozor in the village of Habsenus (Mercimekli). This foundation collaborated with an organisation called “Cultural Heritage Without Borders” in developing a learned approach to the protection of this monastery which has suffered from deterioration and looting in the past years. This organisation paid for the drawing of the survey projects in 2009 and supported the organisation of two meetings (in Midyat in 2010 and in Gothenburg in 2013). The meeting in Midyat brought together all the civil society organisations and representatives in the village in order to discuss the fate of a Christian building. The main theme was “dialogue.” The conversion of the monastery into a dialogue centre has also been discussed. This is a radical and exceptional

situation when the attachment of the Syriac Christians to their holy sites is considered. A factor for such a suggestion may be the ownership problems of the monastery which today belongs to the State Treasury as a result of a mistake in the cadastral plan. Nevertheless, opening the floor to discuss the use of Syriac Christians heritage for different purposes is a remarkable step.

Need for a Change in Approach

Contemporary conservation theory puts emphasis on the symbolic meanings of an object or a building for groups of people (Munoz Vinas 2005: 175). Rather than asking how and with which method we should conserve our heritage, the discussions on heritage have started to put the people and human values at the centre and emphasize that heritage should be inclusive not exclusive. This new understanding pays more attention to interaction and interpretations and meanings with which people charge their heritage. In this respect, the Council of Europe’s Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society is significant and different from previous conventions of the Council of Europe. Having come into force in June 2011, it emphasizes the cultural meanings and values and the involvement of every single person. According to it, heritage should serve the society and contribute to a peaceful and democratic society and life style (Holtorf and Fairclough 2013:198-200). The articles of the Faro convention are highly relevant for South-Eastern Turkey which has been a region of conflict for years. In August 2013, when the monastery of Deyr Ghazelke in Badibe was reopened after decades of abandonment and six years of restoration, the district governor (*kaymakam*) of Nusaybin, the mayor, the high ranking soldiers, a member of parliament, and representatives of civil society organisations were present and gave messages related to peace, multiculturalism and brotherhood⁶. This kind of approach, seeing heritage as a meaningful part of current social issues, is more useful than “authorized heritage discourse” which fossilises heritage (Mydland and Grahn 2011: 584).

In this new discourse about heritage, it has been emphasized that instead of insisting on conservation, one should embrace creativity and the reproduction of the heritage by communities who attribute to them new meanings. The buildings should not be turned into “cult objects” or treated as if they were frozen in history (Smith 2006: 48, Holtorf and Fairclough 2013: 199, 200). In that respect, as Smith argued,

⁶ News dating to 27.08.2013. <http://www.suryaniler.com/haberler.asp?id=1037> (last accessed on 03.06.2016).

“the idea of ‘heritage’ cannot be reduced to a concern with materiality; rather, heritage is more usefully understood as a discourse that frames a set of cultural practices that are concerned with utilizing the past for creating cultural meaning for the present.”(Smith 2015: 459). These ideas are especially relevant for the heritage of an ethnic and religious minority in a disadvantaged part of a developing country. While talking about the heritage of Syriac Christians, the discussion should go beyond good or bad restorations but include how the community identify themselves and continue their lives both in the region and in diaspora. Most of the Syriac Christians find the approach of the state authorities rigid and lacking in empathy.

Heritage is produced by people according to their contemporary concerns and experiences and it is about present (Harvey 2010: 320). It is not only about the people who live in or close to these places or use them regularly but also for those in the diaspora. As has been pointed out by Harrison, it is important for diaspora communities to create heritage “to bind themselves both to their homeland and to the new places in which they settle”. Thus not only the heritage but also its restoration and maintenance are symbolically loaded. It has been argued that “it is the act of conservation itself that makes an object part of the cultural heritage, not the cultural heritage that demands conservation”(Harrison 2010: 245) and that the ultimate goal of conservation is not to conserve the churches but to retain their meaning for people (Munoz Vinas 2005: 213). However, one should not forget that these theories are produced when the absence of non-professionals is not an issue. As Winter has pointed out, how heritage is studied should be pluralised and the western approach should be widened (Winter 2014). As we have shown, in the case of the preservation of the architectural heritage of Syriac Christians, western approaches are not enough to explain the complex processes or to solve the problems.

Conclusion

The architectural heritage of Syriac Christians is not only historically and archaeologically important, it is also strongly related to the present and to the identity of the modern community. In the past fifteen years, although interrupted last year, heritage has been recreated in the region through the extensive renovation and building projects. The changes in the churches and monasteries are dramatic and usually similar. With a few exceptions, all the renovations and restorations are done with the financial support of

the Syriac Christian community by a group of stone masons without the involvement of a professional. State authorities have criticised some of these actions and in a couple of cases, they, in fact, ordered the demolition of the additional buildings.

Given the problems Turkey faces in dealing with heritage in general, it would be unrealistic to think that any steps to protect these listed buildings or to initiate a discussion forum with the engagement of the community would be taken. Additionally, the situation in the region since the summer of 2015 does not provide much hope for the near future. That is why it seems that preventing the decay of these buildings is only up to the community for whom the well-being of these buildings have a great symbolic value, as by renovating their buildings, the community in diaspora revitalise the glorious past that they teach to their children.

Keeping the recent discussions in heritage studies about not turning buildings into cult objects but understanding the meanings attributed to them in mind, the preservation of the architectural heritage of Syriac Christians in Turkey should be discussed in a different way. Engagement of the community is an important element in the preservation of the heritage. Its absence presents itself as a problem in the Western context where professionals almost naturally get involved in the project and where the engagement of the community is desired. In the context of the heritage of Syriac Christians in Turkey, engagement of professionals is required without destroying the spirit of the already engaged and persevering community.

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