

The third report

Cultural heritage situations in Sudan

Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI)

Isber Sabrin, Ismail Hamid, Mahssin Yusef, Tomoni Fushiya, Andrea Urralburu

8 August 2024

Political and humanitarian situation:

Since the war started in Sudan, back in April 2023, millions of people have seen their lives threatened by violence and the consequences of it. The on-going war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), began in April 2023 when both factions clashed violently in Khartoum and other parts of the country. Allies since 2019, [their relationship deteriorated due to international pressure to transition towards a civilian government and integrate RSF into the national army](#), triggering the RSF's violent revolt.

Both the SAF and RSF have garnered support from different groups and countries. The Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement have allied with SAF, while the Tamasuz movement has joined forces with the RSF. One of the most [recent violent outbreaks include RSF attacks in Sennar and ongoing combat in El Fasher](#), North Darfur, in June 2024. Human Rights Watch has reported that crimes against humanity are being committed.

The conflict has resulted in massive displacement, ethnic violence, and numerous human rights violations. As of May 2024, over 16,000 individuals have been officially declared dead, with the true number likely much higher. Nearly 10 million people have been displaced, creating the world's largest displacement catastrophe. The UN continues to call for additional aid, with over 25 million people needing humanitarian relief. Food security threats are causing the greatest hunger crisis in history, with over [750,000 Sudanese facing imminent famine](#). More than 8 million people across 14 of the 18 states in Sudan are experiencing food insecurity, risking malnutrition and death. Both sides have been blocking access to food and humanitarian aid.

Sudan's infrastructure is being destroyed by the conflict, with hospitals, schools, and other facilities targeted by air strikes and shelling. Moreover, culture and heritage sites are being dangerously affected



by the conflict. On the other hand, health officials warn of the spread of malaria, dengue fever, and cholera due to the deteriorating health conditions and lack of cleaning drinking water.

Despite international efforts, the situation shows no signs of improvement. The UN Security Council adopted a resolution on March 8, 2024, calling for an immediate end to hostilities. Mediation efforts, including indirect talks facilitated by Turkey and Libya, have failed. [Recent reconciliation talks in Cairo on July 6 between the Democratic Bloc and Taqaddum factions](#) ended without joint sessions. The conflict continues, with regional and international actors taking sides, making mediation attempts fruitless.

News from Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative

On April 18, 2024, Tomomi Fushiya from the Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI) presented their work at a conference organized by UNESCO's Regional Office for Egypt and Sudan, in collaboration with Arab states. The expert meeting aimed to assess the impact of the war on Sudanese cultural heritage. Tomomi's contribution, titled "Update of the Efforts by the Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative on Safeguarding Sudan Heritage, this conference was particularly useful in providing updates on the current situation of cultural heritage in Sudan.



Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI)

- Founded in April 2023 as a part of NGO Heritage for Peace
 - Response to the conflict in Sudan from the civil society
- SHPI team: Ismail Hamed, Mahssin Yusef, Isber Sabrin and Fushiya
 - Coordination of at global and local levels
 - Assessment of the SHPI's work priorities
 - Assessment of the need on the ground
- SHPI collaborators Sudanese heritage professionals, researchers and volunteers
- Working groups



Isber Sabine from SHPI presented the current state of the situation of cultural heritage in Sudan and the need to act and to support Sudanese cultural heritage workers in different international events:

1. Heritage for Peace promoted the efforts of SHPI and emphasized the need to support the protection of cultural heritage in Sudan during the 70th anniversary of The Hague Convention on May 14-15, 2024, in the Hague. This was achieved through participation in the UNESCO networking Agora, where we highlighted our network's efforts to strengthen preparedness and advocate for heritage protection in conflicts.

2. Isber Sabine from SHPI presented the work of the Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI) at the annual Gonzaga Law Human Rights Conference in Florence, Italy, where the theme was "Cultural Heritage as a Human Right." The Heritage for Peace presentation focused on "Using Cultural Heritage as a Tool to Foster Human Rights in Conflicts: The Case for Heritage for Peace." His presentation highlighted Heritage for Peace's various initiatives, including SHPI, emphasizing the importance of using cultural heritage as a tool to foster human rights in conflict zones. It concluded with lessons learned and recommendations for future efforts in this area.



The Sudan Heritage Protection Initiative (SHPI) work on documenting the destruction of cultural heritage in Sudan was mentioned in a new article by Middle East Eye titled "War in Sudan is Ravaging its Rich History." For more information about this important article, visit the [Middle East Eye website](#).

Updates on Damage

- **Museums**

Museums in various regions have suffered significant damage due to the conflict:

- Khartoum state: Sudan Ethnographic Museum, Khalifa House Museum, Sudan National Museums, Military Museum and Republican Palace Museum.
 - Sudan National Museum: two structures on the museum's campus are damaged as stated in the [Second Report](#). A structure containing the ancient Egyptian Temple of Buhen and another structure containing a section of a wall from the ancient Egyptian Temple of Aksha.
 - Sudan Ethnographic Museums: the northernmost building in the museum has been damaged, which coincides with damage to vehicles and other buildings within a two-blocks radius of the museum.
 - Beit el khalifa Museum: [There is damage caused by rebel militias in the museum](#). There have been thefts of the leaders' belongings, particularly rifles, along with rare historical utensils and manuscripts, such as one recording donations for the establishment of Gordon Memorial College that was found abandoned. In the patio of the house, glass cabinets containing the artifacts were also destroyed. This museum is registered as National Heritage site and receives great attention from the public interested in antiquities. Destroying this museum attacks the identity and history of the Sudanese people. More recently, restoration works started here, and some stolen items have been returned by officers from the Sudanese army.







o Gezira state:

- SAF confirmed the security of the museum, and they urged citizens to visit it and review its content.

- [Video about Madani Museum situation.mp4](#)
 - Darfur region: Darfur Museum in Nyala and Sultan Ali Dinar Museum in El Fasher were reported partially damaged.
 - Northern State: Various facilities have been affected.
 - Kerma Museum: documentation and storage work are taking place here. Moreover, items from the Damir Museums have been transferred to Kerma for photographic documentation and entry into the museum's database. A plan has been put in place to store items from inadequately secured Museums in the galleries of the Kerma Museum, along with the storage of artifacts from field sites.
 - In Eastern Deffufa, argue storage facilities have been assessed by the Swiss mission for documentation, transfer, and storage at the Kerma Museums
- **Archeological sites**
 - River Nile State

Naqa Archaeological Site and Musawwarat es-Sufra have been exposed to vandalism, destruction, [looting](#), and theft by various groups. Fighting broke out at these sites in December 2023 and again in January 2024. The site was under the category of direct impact by war. Moreover, it was in an active crossroad coming from Butana, Madani, and Khartoum to the Shendi area. It is not the first time it has this role as it has a strategic geographical location, which has become a crucial element in the current war. On the other side, the house and the storerooms of the German mission at the site have been broken. All rooms of the house were found open, and the doors were broken. It was notified that armed forces were present in the area.

There were fights in November, December 2023, and January 2024 both at and surrounding the location. According to letters from the tourism police to the director of the River Nile State's Regional Antiquities Office, they confirmed on December 7, 2023, that the tourism police force had evacuated from the sites at Naqa and Musawwarat following the RSF attack at Naqa because the area had turned into a battlefield. On January 14, 2024, they also announced a second battle following the appearance of RSF forces in images and videos posted on the social media from the Naqa location. The situation at Naga has affected

the site at Musawwarat and now both are surrounded by landmines and there are several military camps around the area.



Condition of Naqa Monuments (February 2024)



Musawwarat monument condition (February 2024)



Appearance of Armed Forces at Naqa in January 2024 (photo from social media)

The Meroe Pyramids:

The near collapse of the site monitoring and maintenance effort at the Meroe pyramids is one example of the indirect effects of the ongoing violence in Sudan that began on April 15, 2023. Additionally, the increasing number of uncontrolled visitors to the monument sites and the widespread construction of homes in the property's buffer zone are clear indicators of the mass displacement of Khartoum's citizens and its detrimental effects. The negative impact of these visitors is witnessed in the writings on the walls of the pyramids and the climbing of the pyramids, which results in the collapsing of stone blocks.

Currently the main threat to the pyramids is the accumulation of sand dunes in the royal cemeteries at Meroe that causes enormous abrasion of the original ancient surfaces. High winds and sand circulation have and continue to erase substantial drawings, etchings and paintings that tell the story of the place and, therefore, part of its authenticity and integrity.

This can be seen in pyramid Beg. N. 12, where the northern wall of the chapel has gathered sand. On the same wall, we can see that the sandstone blocks are damp, and there is white salt present on the wall as well as crystals forming out of these blocks. Following the recent rainy season in September 2023, during which the Meroe region experienced its highest rainfall and most severe food shortages on record, the issue of sand accumulation became evident. The sand surrounding the chapels retained moisture, causing rainwater to seep through the gaps in the walls. This resulted in the exposure of walls adorned with inscriptions and distinctive images.



Wet Sandstone Blocks and Presence of Salt in Beg. N. 12.

The collapses of sandstone chunks from the top of some of the pyramids indicate the most severe effect of the intense rain and the irresponsible attitude of the visitors.

On the other hand, [UNESCO calls on parties not to target or use these sites for military purposes](#). UNESCO also calls for the vigilance of law enforcement agencies, art market players, and all cultural professionals to refrain from acquiring or participating in the import, export, or transfer of ownership of cultural property when they have reasonable cause to believe that the objects have been stolen, illegally alienated, covertly excavated, or illegally exported from Sudan, given the high risks of looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property due to reduced security capacity at Sudanese heritage sites.

The Royal city of Meroe:

In the Royal City of Meroe, the Amun Temple is in a severely deteriorated state. It has become a destination for uncontrolled visitors from surrounding villages, which have been overpopulated due to displacement from Khartoum State following the war. Currently, there is no interpretation or presentation of the heritage at the site, leaving visitors without guidance on how to navigate it.

Natural elements, such as rain, have also adversely affected the conservation of the site. The rain has led to the growth of trees throughout the site and its monuments. A major issue is the absence of drainage systems in Meroe Royal City, which poses a direct threat to the monuments and contributes to the uncontrolled proliferation of vegetation.



Amun Temple Condition (February 2024)

- **Archives**

- The archive of the National Television and radio of Sudan has been exposed to damage. March 12, 2024, General Al-Burhan issued an order to form a technical team to collect the radio, television and cinema archives after they were vandalized by the RSF (as stated in the order). The archive materials were collected and placed in front of the gates (according to AWN 31/3/2024). The committee did not issue any statement, nor about how the archive was collected or how and where it was transferred. Nevertheless there are sections, such as the space keeping documentaries, that have not suffered, as the video shows: [Video of the Archive of National Television and Radio.mp4](#)



Omdurman Radio, published by Noor News

- The Arab World News Agency published on March 21, 2024, about the destruction of a building belonging to the judiciary, which includes several criminal and civil courts, as well as an archive of all cases that have been considered since the establishment of the court.
- **Universities, historical architecture, libraries, religious institutions, research centers, artists' works, art exhibitions, and private art collections** have also suffered damage.

The Old Republican Palace: It shows significant damage, including extensive debris and charring on the ground around the building. The debris is predominantly concentrated near the south door and portico, which lead to a terrace and ornamental gardens.

Abdul Karim Mirghani Cultural Centre: After 11 months of conflict, the Abdul Karim Mirghani Centre in the Wad Nubawi neighborhood of Omdurman, west of the Sudanese capital, now lies in ruins. .





Abdul Karim Mirghani Cultural Centre *The Evangelical Presbyterian Church* in Wad Madani was set on fire on January 13, 2024. A statement issued by the church stated that the fire destroyed the main library, which contains historical documents dating back more than a hundred years, in addition to destroying the great hall for hymns and prayers.

Al-Atab Mosque in Al-Fasher, was bombed on July 29, 2024



- **Natural Heritage**

Dinder National Park: One of the most significant and largest natural reserves in Africa, it is currently surrounded by intense fighting.

Jebel Dair Reserve: Situated amid ongoing battles, the reserve is affected by conflicts occurring from various directions.

The situation poses a severe risk to the biodiversity and ecological balance of these vital natural heritage sites, needing urgent action to protect and preserve them.

Updates on Looting

- The national Radio and Television of Sudan has been looted and some of the materials and equipment have been sold in a special market for looted items. The Sudanese journalists' union regrets this irresponsible behavior, which exposes the country's historical legacy in danger of destruction, ruin and falling apart forever. Other news agencies were also looted such as the canal Sudania 24 and the BBC's office in Khartoum.
- UNESCO has recently issued a call to combat the trafficking of cultural property stolen or illegally exported from Sudan during the ongoing conflict. Since the crisis began in April 2023, strengthening measures to protect Sudan's cultural heritage has become crucial. This includes enforcing the UNESCO 1970 Convention against illicit trafficking of cultural property and other relevant international instruments. UNESCO, in collaboration with partners such as UNIDROIT, UNODC, INTERPOL, WCO, and CINOA, urges the public and professionals involved in the cultural property trade to avoid acquiring, importing, exporting, or transferring ownership of items if there is reasonable cause to believe they have been stolen, illicitly removed, clandestinely excavated, or illegally exported from Sudan. For more details, visit [UNESCO's call to action](#).

Updates on Intangible Heritage

There has been a noticeable increase in the death rates among Sudanese artists and creatives. This rise can be attributed to two main factors: their inability to leave conflict zones or their return to these areas, and the financial difficulties many face, which render them vulnerable to dangers and limit their access to essential care.



International activities

Despite ministerial orders limiting international activities, local measures have been implemented to protect, evacuate, and document cultural heritage. The Sultan Ali Dinar Museum remains at high risk due to ongoing clashes and shelling

In April 2024, NCAM, in collaboration with the Polish Center for Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA, UW) and the French Archaeological Mission to Sudan (SFDAS), organized a workshop at UNESCO's Regional Office in Cairo. The Workshop, entitled "[Update of Crisis Response, Risk Mitigation, and First Aid for Sudan's Heritage](#)", aimed to devise strategies to protect Sudan's cultural heritage. Recommendations included establishing a funding mechanism, continued monitoring and capacity development, integrated cross-cutting collaboration, a vision for rehabilitation and restoration, and the formulation of detailed action plans.

Following the workshop, [on April 18, 2024 UNESCO's Regional Office for Egypt and Sudan, along with Arab states, organized an expert meeting to assess the impact of the war on Sudanese cultural heritage](#) . The meeting delved into findings from questionnaires distributed among key stakeholders.

UNESCO, through its Heritage Emergency Fund, is acting to protect nine components at two World Heritage properties ("Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region" and "Archeological Sites of the Island of Meroe") and five Museums designated as priorities by NCAM. Efforts include emergency inventories of Museums collections, comprehensive risk assessments, and awareness campaigns to prevent illicit trafficking of cultural pro poetry. Additionally, UNESCO is creating safe workspaces for Sudanese artists in Port Sudan.

Regarding the Gebel Barkal, here a project was being carried out by a team of international and national professionals thanks to a large Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. This grant is funded by the U.S. Department of State, and it aims to improve conservation, site protection and community engagement at Gebel Barkal and to do so in a fully collaborative way, with projects led jointly by Sudanese and foreign team members. But the situation changed with the war. However, this fund provided Sudanese professionals with a salary, and they have been able to allocate more money into on-site work since foreign teams are not traveling to Sudan. Moreover, the site is receiving more visitors because of the displacement, which made them focus even more efforts into the outreaching and education objectives by organizing learning activities for children, on-site walking tours and multiple community events. On the other hand, archaeological work was resumed in October 2023. The dramatically increased



foot traffic from displaced people does pose risks to site protection and preservation, but site protection projects have also sped up.

[In May, there was an online workshop in Japan entitled “Protecting Sudan’s intangible cultural heritage and living heritage”](#). This workshop was an activity of the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research project “Cultural Heritage Research to Realize Cultural Diversity and Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Countries”, headed by Satoshi Ishimura, Director of the Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and is held at the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties. The event was organized by the Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage, co-sponsored by the UK's SSLH (Safeguarding Sudan's Living Heritage) project and supported by the Department of International Relations and Organizations and National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums.

In this online workshop, they connected experts involved in various activities in Sudan and abroad, shared information and held discussions on how to overcome this difficult situation. Some of the participating experts had problems with difficult Internet connections. However, even in the difficult situation of armed conflict, it was a great achievement to be able to bring together so many experts online.

On June 12-13, 2024, UNESCO held a workshop at the Beja Cultural center in Port Sudan, funded by Japan. The workshop focused on the [“Preservation and Accessibility of Ancient Manuscripts in Sahel”](#), aiming to protect Easter Sudan’s cultural heritage through digitization and preservation of ancient manuscripts.

A workshop will be held from August 11 to 13, 2024, coordinated by ALECSO, with facilitators from Sudan, Egypt, and Tunisia covering how to preserve cultural heritage during emergencies; and sharing experiences among the participating countries on protecting cultural heritage in emergency situations.

News update

Several new outlets ([Azza Press](#), [Middle East Eye](#), [The Tahrir institute for Middle East Policy](#), [The Guardian](#), [The New Arab](#)) covered the current situation of cultural heritage in Sudan.



Acknowledgements

This report was compiled together with our collaborators currently in Sudan, including archaeologists, historians, archivists, librarians, publishers, artists, university professors, students, and volunteers. For security reasons, we do not mention their names in the report, except for those who wished to be acknowledged.

We would like to express our gratitude to the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) for their crucial assistance in completing this report. Special thanks go to Dr. Galia Garelnabi, the Director General of NCAM, Dr. Iklas Abdulatif, the Director of Museums at NCAM, Mrs. Ali Nour (collaborator with NCAM), and Dr. Mahmoud Suleiman Muhammad Bashir, Director of the World Heritage Site, Meroe Island.

