

Public pictures can do more than preserve the memory of world heritage

Archaeologists from the UK are calling on members of the public to help them preserve the legacy of some of the world's most important monuments and historic sites, including those most at risk in Syria and Libya. Researchers from the Universities of Birmingham, Bradford, St Andrews and University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), have joined forces with regional specialists to build a comprehensive online resource to digitally reconstruct archaeological sites that have been destroyed or are under threat as a consequence of recent conflict, cultural vandalism, neglect and natural disaster. Named Curious Travellers, the project will seek out real life curious travellers from around the world who have previously visited ancient sites or monuments that are now at risk or have been damaged, who are

willing to share their photographs and videos to help build the resource. The project will initially highlight threatened or damaged sites in North Africa, including Cyrene in Libya, as well as those in Syria and the Middle East but is open to threatened historic sites around the world. The public are invited to upload material to the [project website](#).

The researchers will combine publicly donated content with other freely available resources drawn from travel blogs, the wider web and social media to recreate 3D models of monuments and ancient sites. All reconstructed content is placed in context using relevant site and landscape data.

The Bradford Visualisation team, based in the School of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Bradford will lead in the reconstruction of monuments as 3D models, while computer specialists from the School of Computer Science, Nottingham will lead on web and data-mining. Site context reconstruction will be led by remote sensing specialists from the School of Earth Sciences at the University of St Andrews.

Ultimately the project will provide an important framework for government bodies and heritage organisations that can be used for interpreting, presenting, conserving and managing other heritage sites around the world.

The project has received £305,000 in funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson said: “Destruction of our world’s monuments is a deliberate attempt to undermine a community’s cultural identity. Thanks to

the UK's technological advances, our holiday pictures could now help rebuild and preserve these great ancient sites for future generations.”

Dr Andrew Wilson from the University of Bradford said: “Curious Travellers is a strategic response to tragic circumstances. We now have the opportunity to harness digital documentation methods, crowd sourcing and novel web applications to better serve the conservation and management of globally important heritage. Contributions from members of the public are vital to the success of this project and we very much hope people will sift through their own collections for useful material.”

Professor Vincent Gaffney, Anniversary Chair in Landscape Archaeology at the University of Bradford explains: “The immense media coverage relating to the destruction of prominent sites in Syria hides the true scale of cultural destruction due to conflict, looting and other forms of cultural vandalism.

Recently, specific sites have also been targeted in Libya and if we look back over time, we can identify the widespread loss of other sites, for example those throughout Afghanistan in the early 2000s where the Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed.”

Dr Chris Gaffney, Head of the School of Archaeological Sciences at the University of Bradford said: “This project is unique as it collates both public data and generates heritage information that can be used where archaeological evidence has been damaged or destroyed.. The long-term legacy of this project is the establishment of a framework that can

be used anywhere in the world to help preserve vital information about historic sites.”

Dr Richard Bates, Senior Lecturer in Earth Sciences at the University of St Andrews said: “We will never be able to physically rebuild all the monuments affected by recent conflicts, or natural disasters, but we hope to do more than preserve their memory through this project. We hope that people across the world will come together and respond with their images to be part of this project.”

Dr Eugene Ch’ng, University of Nottingham, said: “This project uses state-of-the-art Big Data methodologies to mine the web and social media for images and text, alongside opportunities for the public to engage with the project through crowd-sourcing activities. The project is designed to provide rapid and substantive output that will be of immediate value to international heritage, conservation and site management.”

Dr Richard Cuttler, UK-based International Heritage Consultancy MOSPA, said: “By integrating 3D heritage models into a spatial framework developed as a historic environment record tool we are providing the infrastructure for antiquities departments, museums and local authorities to be able to catalogue and manage heritage assets into the future.”

Dr Gareth Sears, Senior Lecturer, University of Birmingham said: “The ancient site of Cyrene in Libya offers an important test case for us. Whilst the current stability and security of Libya remains fluid and travel advisories warn against all travel, we can benefit from

previous systematic and detailed archaeological investigations at this world heritage site. A public appeal for imagery allows us to compare the accuracy of photographs against measured records, including 3D site scan data.”

Notes for editors

About Curious Travellers

The Curious Travellers project has received £305,000 funding from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council. The name “Curious Travellers” is taken from a letter written by the eighteenth century art historian, Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford to his friend Sir Horace Mann in 1774 - *“At last some curious traveller from Lima will visit England, and give a description of the ruins of St. Paul’s, like the editions of Balbec and Palmyra”*.

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