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This photograph shows the façade of the Abu Simbel Temple, which was designed and constructed in the 13th century BC during the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II of Egypt. The temple is located along the Egyptian border with Sudan and commemorates the victory of Ramses II at the Battle of Kadesh.

ABU SIMBEL: THE BEGINNINGS OF WORLD HERITAGE

By L. Olivia Womack

With the April 2019 fires in Notre Dame Cathedral, the world was once again reminded of the depth of intangible loss when an iconic site is destroyed. People all over the world responded to the tragic loss with tributes to the Notre Dame and memories of their travels there. Not only that, but public and private donors had amassed close to one billion dollars in a matter of days for the restoration of this beloved cathedral.¹ The displays of nostalgia and goodwill regarding Notre Dame illustrate that people all over the world recognize some places as embodiments of shared human heritage.

Due to the global nature of sites such as the Notre Dame Cathedral, many believe that they should be protected by the international community and preserved for generations to come. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) aims to achieve these goals through the World Heritage Committee and the World Heritage Site List. In this essay, I demonstrate that preserving world heritage is a worthwhile goal for the international community, even though there are many problems in the current UNESCO World Heritage system. I begin by exploring the history of Abu Simbel as a demonstration of successful world heritage preservation. I then analyze the present UNESCO World Heritage system, and finally I provide commentary on factors that are limiting the effectiveness of these efforts.

To begin, Abu Simbel is an ancient monument that has been visited and studied for centuries. Construction on the Abu Simbel temple site began around 1270 BC, and it contains a temple to Ramses II and a temple to Queen Nefertari, the first wife of Ramses II. The main temple at Abu Simbel is 115 feet in length and 98 feet in height, and it was

¹ Aurelien Breeden, "Millions in Notre-Dame Donations Pour In as France Focuses on Rebuilding," *New York Times*, April 17, 2019.

constructed precisely so that the first rays of sun would enter into the entrance of the temple twice a year.² The site also highlights Egyptian stone work, with areas cut as deep as 180 feet into the rock.³

The purpose of Abu Simbel was to memorialize the legacy of Ramses II for both the earth and the afterlife. Ancient Egyptians believed very strongly in life after death, and they wanted to preserve themselves through both mummification and memorialization. This was especially true of the Pharaohs, who were considered gods on earth.⁴ The main job of the Pharaoh was to act as a mediator between the gods and Egypt. If the gods were pleased with Egypt and the Pharaoh, then Egypt would prosper. One of the ways that Pharaohs proved their worth to the gods was to build monuments and temples to demonstrate their accomplishments. Paintings and carvings on the inside of the temple at Abu Simbel depict the heroic deeds of Ramses II, including his victory in the Battle of Kadesh.⁵ Overall, Abu Simbel was a physical monument to the spiritual importance of Pharaoh Ramses II.

Ramses II intended Abu Simbel to memorialize himself for the ages, and it has remained well preserved through the millennia, due to the arid conditions of the Egyptian desert. However, in 1946 a proposal by the Egyptian government threatened the existence of this ancient monument. The plan was to build the Aswan Dam on the Nile river, which would provide hydroelectric power for Egypt and improve irrigation for seven million acres of land too arid for agriculture.⁶

² William MacQuitty, *Abu Simbel* (London: Macdonald and Co. Publishers, 1965),15.

³ *Ibid*, 17.

⁴ Salima Ikram, *Ancient Egypt: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 117.

⁵ William MacQuitty, *Abu Simbel* (London: Macdonald and Co. Publishers, 1965),88.

⁶ MacQuitty, *Abu Simbel*, 141.

However, the Dam would lead to the destructive flooding of many ancient sites, including Abu Simbel.⁷ It was a difficult choice between ensuring a prosperous future and preserving the magnificent past. This decision was also difficult to make due to economic factors. The Dam would require 56 million cubic yards of materials, and would end up costing about one billion dollars.⁸ At first, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the World Bank offered to help fund the Aswan Dam and the preservation of affected ancient sites, in order that President Nasser might align Egypt with Western countries in the ongoing Cold War. It soon became clear that even this large sum would not buy the loyalty of Egyptian President Nasser, and they eventually withdrew the offer to fund the Aswan Dam.⁹ President Nasser then decided to nationalize the Suez Canal to raise money for the Aswan Dam construction, and he turned to the Soviet Union for assistance. As the construction began in 1960, Nasser and Khrushchev threw the first rocks of the project, and this moment became a symbol of the underlying Cold War tensions that permeated the time period.¹⁰ With proxy wars, political hostility, and military posturing taking place all over the world between the United States and the Soviet Union, it is no wonder that Egypt became another front in Cold War. Egypt and the Soviet Union began work on the Aswan Dam downstream on the Nile, meanwhile UNESCO and Western countries were attempting to save the endangered monuments upstream, especially Abu Simbel.¹¹ Essentially, an iron curtain fell upon Egypt, divided by the Dam.

⁷ Ahmed Kadry, "Salvaging Egypt's Nubian Monuments," *Ambio* 12, no. 3/4 (1983): 206-209.

⁸ "Aswan High Dam," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified March 14, 2019.

⁹ Lucia Allais, "Integrities: The Salvage of Abu Simbel," *Grey Room* no. 50 (Winter 2013): 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

A global movement to save the Nubian monuments like Abu Simbel began, and many scholars devoted countless hours of research to the cause. The UNESCO Director-General called on the international community to support the effort. In the publication, *The UNESCO Courier*, the Director-General's message was sympathetic towards Egypt's decision to prioritize "the needs and welfare of their people," but also emphasized the importance of saving these sites that "belong to humanity as a whole."¹² To incentivize countries to provide assistance, the Director-General mentions that Egypt has agreed to allow some "lesser" monuments to be given to countries that contribute.¹³

As funds were being collected, teams of scholars from around the world began creating plans to save Abu Simbel. The French proposal advocated for the construction of a second dam around Abu Simbel that would hold back the rising water. This plan was rejected because it would require a large pumping station and indefinite maintenance.¹⁴ It was also the most expensive plan, at 82 million dollars.¹⁵ Another plan was created by an Italian team that proposed cutting the two temples from the rock, encasing them in concrete, and raising the whole site one centimeter at a time with 650 synchronized hydraulic jacks.¹⁶ This plan was ultimately not chosen because of concerns that the jacks would not be able to support the temples and concrete structure, which would weigh

¹² Vittorino Veronese, "A Message from the Director-General of UNESCO," *The UNESCO Courier* 13 (February 1960): 3.

¹³ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁴ Lucia Allais, "Integrities: The Salvage of Abu Simbel," *Grey Room* no. 50 (Winter 2013): 15.

¹⁵ William MacQuitty, *Abu Simbel* (London: Macdonald and Co. Publishers, 1965), 151.

¹⁶ Lucia Allais, "Integrities: The Salvage of Abu Simbel," *Grey Room* no. 50 (Winter 2013): 16.

about 250,000 tons.¹⁷ Still another plan was put forth by a British team. This plan involved allowing the monuments to be flooded by the rising waters, and then creating underwater glass tunnels through which visitors could view Abu Simbel in its original site.¹⁸ Because of the impurities of the Nile river, this plan would require a purification dam to be built so that the water would not chemically damage the structures.¹⁹ Although a very unique idea, this plan was eventually discarded.

Finally, a Swedish team from a geological engineering firm came up with the strategy in 1963 that would be used for saving Abu Simbel.²⁰ The Egyptian government requested specifically that this Swedish group create a plan for Abu Simbel because they had constructed the hydroelectric power facility for the Aswan Dam.²¹ This plan involved cutting the temples into blocks of about 20-30 tons each, moving each piece, and carefully reconstructing Abu Simbel 208 meters away and 65 meters up from the original site.²² This plan was about three times less costly than the other proposals, but many UNESCO experts were very opposed to this plan because it involved cutting ancient monuments.²³ The United States supported this plan because it involved heavy use of local labor, which would need to be paid in Egyptian pounds. This is an important fact because the United States had accumulated Egyptian pounds through the Food for Peace program, in

¹⁷ William MacQuitty, *Abu Simbel* (London: Macdonald and Co. Publishers, 1965), 159.

¹⁸ Lucia Allais, "Integrities: The Salvage of Abu Simbel," *Grey Room* no. 50 (Winter 2013): 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ Allais, "Integritie," 23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Ahmed Kadry, "Salvaging Egypt's Nubian Monuments," *Ambio* 12, no. 3/4 (1983): 206-209.

²³ Lucia Allais, "Integrities: The Salvage of Abu Simbel," *Grey Room* no. 50 (Winter 2013): 20.

which surplus American food crops were sold at a discount to the Egyptian government. The program required that the money made by the United States from these sales be used for Egyptian development projects, and using the money for the preservation of Abu Simbel seemed unlikely to raise controversy.²⁴ Furthermore, President Kennedy stated that the United States would contribute 30% of the funding for this project.²⁵ Ultimately it was decided that this Swedish plan would be the official plan for saving Abu Simbel.

Deconstructing and reconstructing the temples of Abu Simbel proved to be a very tedious task. As the site was cut into blocks, no cuts were made into the faces of statues or other intricately designed areas of the temples.²⁶ Different types of saws were used for different parts of the site, and sand became a very important material as a filler, a shock absorber, and a buffer between stone blocks.²⁷ In order to reconstruct the temple, mortar was made out of local Nubian sand so that it would resemble the original site. In the end, the salvage of Abu Simbel lasted 4 years from 1964 to 1968.

The Abu Simbel project was part of a larger effort to save many Egyptian monuments threatened by the construction of the Aswan Dam that spanned 20 years and saved 22 sites.²⁸ Overall, a total of 80 million dollars was donated by 50 countries and other organizations.²⁹ A special

²⁴ Allais, "Integrities", 21.

²⁵ Ibid, 22.

²⁶ Ahmed Kadry, "Salvaging Egypt's Nubian Monuments," *Ambio* 12, no. 3/4 (1983): 206-209.

²⁷ Allais, "Integrities," 24.

²⁸ Ahmed Kadry, "Salvaging Egypt's Nubian Monuments," *Ambio* 12, no. 3/4 (1983): 206-209.

²⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage," opened for signature November 16, 1972, *United Nations Treaty Series* 1037, no. 15511 (1975): 151.

group of countries even received the status of “Ambassador of Egyptian Culture,” and they were given an ancient Egyptian monument to take to their home country, fulfilling Egypt’s original promise.³⁰ This group had contributed in Egyptian pounds, which greatly stimulated the local economy. Included in the monuments that were given as a gift were the Tafa temple to Holland, the Debod temple to Spain, the Dendur site to the United States, and the El-Lissia to Italy.³¹ The campaign to save the Nubian monuments was also greatly publicized. Every step of the plan was not only documented but also “enhanced, annotated, presented, represented, narrated, edited, and dramatized in order to be showcased across the world.”³² By the end of the project, 600 research essays had been written about the project, and the site became an international phenomenon.³³ In 1979, the “Nubian Monuments from Abu Simbel to Philae,” as they are collectively known, was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Site List for the criteria of creative masterpiece, cultural tradition, and association with a belief system.³⁴ This campaign was the first and most successful international effort to save world heritage, and it inspired the international community to strengthen their commitment to the protection of globally important sites.

Saving Abu Simbel and the other monuments was a widely celebrated campaign, but it was not without its critics. Dr. Jotham Johnson, the head of the Department of Classics at New York University stated, “Let the Nile have it... another sacrifice on the altar of

³⁰ Allais, “Integrities,” 13.

³¹ Ahmed Kadry, “Salvaging Egypt’s Nubian Monuments,” *Ambio* 12, no. 3/4 (1983): 206-209.

³² Allais, “Integrities,” 28.

³³ Ahmed Kadry, “Salvaging Egypt’s Nubian Monuments,” *Ambio* 12, no. 3/4 (1983): 206-209.

³⁴ “Nubian Monuments- Egypt,” African World Heritage Sites, accessed March 25, 2019.

progress.”³⁵ His argument was that the site had no new information to offer, and therefore the funds should go to studying new sites. Other scholars questioned the importance of the temples, claiming that they were not outstanding examples of Egyptian art or architecture, and merely represented a vain Pharaoh’s effort to memorialize himself.³⁶ Despite these criticisms, saving the Nubian Monuments brought world heritage to the international stage, and inspired UNESCO to take steps to further preserve other sites that have global value.

The idea of maintaining sites of significant international renown has long been a discussion of international bodies, especially after World War II. UNESCO was created as a United Nations agency in 1945 in order to promote peace and avoid global conflicts through education, science, and culture. Following the destruction of European art and cultural treasures during World War II, the Hague, the center of international law, adopted the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954 in order to protect cultural sites and property from being destroyed during war.³⁷ Continuing this idea, the term “world heritage” was coined at the 1965 US White House Conference. The idea for a World Heritage Fund was also discussed.³⁸ All of these ideas and themes came together to form the most important document regarding the protection of cultural properties: the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

³⁵ “Let Abu Simbel Drown, NYU Professor Says,” *The Science News-Letter* 81, no. 13 (March 31, 1962): 196.

³⁶ Allais, “Integrities,” 23.

³⁷ The Hague, “Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,” opened for signature May 14, 1954, *United Nations Treaty Series* 249, no. 3511 (1956): 215.

³⁸ Lynn Meskell, “State of Conservation: Protection, Politics, and Pacting within UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 219.

The World Heritage Convention created the present World Heritage system, and contains 38 Articles. Article One of the Convention defines cultural heritage as monuments, sites, or groups of buildings that have Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).³⁹ Article Two of the Convention defines natural heritage as physical and biological formations, habitats of threatened species, or natural sites with OUV.⁴⁰ Articles Four and Five obligate state parties to protect sites in their own territories. Article Eight creates the World Heritage Committee, and describes the duties of this body. Article 15 sets up the World Heritage Fund, which is a trust fund that receives compulsory and voluntary contributions made by state parties in addition to gifts from other public and private organizations from around the world. Signing states agree to pay every two years, and the amount paid is voted on by the UNESCO General Assembly. The World Heritage Convention of 1972 was signed by 195 states.⁴¹

The World Heritage Committee is the primary governing body over cultural and natural heritage. Decisions about site nominations, financial assistance, and the World Heritage in Danger List are all under their power. The Committee is made up of 21 member states that are elected at the UNESCO General Assembly. The Committee serves for four years, and Committee meetings usually last about 10 days a year.⁴² In the past, many of the Committee members were experts in the fields of

³⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,” opened for signature November 16, 1972, *United Nations Treaty Series* 1037, no. 15511 (1975): 151.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 151.

⁴¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 151.

⁴² Lynn Meskell, “State of Conservation: Protection, Politics, and Pacting within UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 235.

preservation from their respective countries, but there has been a recent shift towards states choosing to send lobbying politicians to represent their state.⁴³ The World Heritage Committee also relies upon various Advisory Bodies made up of experts that provide monitoring and reporting on the World Heritage sites. These organizations include The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).⁴⁴

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has greatly impacted the preservation of cultural and natural sites. As evident in the case of Abu Simbel and the Nubian sites, success and international cooperation in world heritage campaigns are possible. However, as time has passed, the World Heritage Committee and the World Heritage Site List have become less respected and less successful because of the Eurocentric bias and the influence of economics and politics on Committee decisions. The World Heritage Site List disproportionately represents sites in the global North, especially Europe. Of the 1,092 total sites, 514 are in Europe, which is 47.07% of the World Heritage List.⁴⁵ Even after initiatives such as the 1994 Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced, and Credible World Heritage List, there were still a record number of European sites added to the World Heritage List.⁴⁶ In 2002, the Committee attempted again to address this problem by imposing nomination quotas of one Site nomination per country per year. However, this policy was still biased

⁴³ Meskell, 220.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁵ “World Heritage List Statistics,” United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, accessed March 15, 2019.

⁴⁶ Christoph Brumann, “Anthropological Utopia, Closet Eurocentrism, and Culture Chaos in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2018): 1211.

towards the European region which contains a large number of countries.⁴⁷

Not only does the List and nomination process favor Europe, but the Advisory Bodies also have a higher number of experts from Europe and North America. The ICOMOS Panel is made up of 25 members and 14 of those are from Europe and North America as of 2018.⁴⁸ Evidence also suggests that the Committee is likely to be more lenient towards European nominations who need further improvements than other countries' nominations because there is a sense that European countries are able and more reliable to correct the issues.⁴⁹ Overall, the World Heritage Committee is losing credibility as it becomes less representative of *world* heritage and instead favors one region. I recommend that the World Heritage Committee impose limits on the number of nominations from each of the world regions, with a smaller number allotted for Europe. This would not immediately solve the regional inequality of the World Heritage List, but over time it would create a more representative List. Additionally, it would motivate states to work together within their world regions to use their limited number of nominations for the truly universal and outstanding cultural and natural sites in their respective regions.

In addition, World Heritage Committee decisions and efforts are greatly impacted by economic and political considerations. Meskell argues that World Heritage Sites have become “transactional devices” by

⁴⁷ Christoph Brumann, “Anthropological Utopia, Closet Eurocentrism, and Culture Chaos in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2018): 1215.

⁴⁸ “ICOMOS World Heritage Panel 2017-2018,” International Council on Monuments and Sites, accessed March 23, 2019.

⁴⁹ Christoph Brumann, “Anthropological Utopia, Closet Eurocentrism, and Culture Chaos in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2018): 1220.

which states are able to gain direct economic advantages.⁵⁰ Many states covet world heritage inscription and the economic benefits that come along with this status. This is especially true of states who do not have many, if any, World Heritage Sites. Increased tourism, global awareness, and access to global aid are all economic incentives that push states to seek inscriptions of sites in their territory. Because of these economic aspects, states are highly motivated to obtain a World Heritage Site inscription for their home state, and decisions about site nominations are becoming increasingly political in nature.

There has been an overall downward trend of the World Heritage Committee following the recommendations of Advisory Bodies between 2002 and 2012.⁵¹ The political nature of Committee decisions is also evident based on who is serving on the Committee. Between 1977- 2005, 42% of the 314 new World Heritage Sites inscribed in this time frame were located in states that served on the World Heritage Committee during their nomination decision.⁵² For a body that should be serving the global interests of heritage, this statistic demonstrates that the Committee's decisions are greatly influenced by national and political interests instead of expert opinions and objective assessments of universal value.

One of the reasons that the decisions of the Committee are so influenced by political and economic factors is that there is not a truly clear definition of what counts as cultural and natural heritage with OUV. There are 10 criteria that a site can possess in order to be

⁵⁰ Lynn Meskell, "State of Conservation: Protection, Politics, and Pacting within UNESCO's World Heritage Committee," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 224.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 226.

⁵² Meskell, 227.

nominated, but even these criteria lack an operational definition.⁵³ The scope of culture and OUV are so broad that almost anything counts, and this allows states the ability to sway decisions. Perhaps if the World Heritage Committee created a more specific and detailed definition of what constitutes world cultural and natural heritage, then it would be more difficult for decisions to be so impacted by politics of the Committee.

Despite these shortcomings, the goal of preserving cultural and natural heritage still remains a noble and worthwhile goal. The Abu Simbel campaign confirmed that cooperation and success in World Heritage preservation are possible, and inspired the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the creation of the World Heritage Committee. The World Heritage system has brought awareness, financial assistance, and protection to sites that would have otherwise been lost to time or other forces. In an increasingly divided world, places that remind us of our shared heritage become even more important, and they should be protected by the international community.

⁵³ Christoph Brumann, “Anthropological Utopia, Closet Eurocentrism, and Culture Chaos in the UNESCO World Heritage Arena,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2018): 1210.