

# The Damage Done: The “Arab Spring”, Cultural Heritage and At-Risk Archaeologists

*by Ammar Abdulrahman*

## Abstract

The Arab uprisings have not only affected politics of Middle Eastern and North African countries. Instability and militant power struggles also endanger the preservation of the cultural heritage in these regions. The field of archaeology faces tremendous challenges to secure valuable artifacts of historical eras particularly in Syria, but also in Iraq, Egypt and Libya. The author argues that the cultural heritage of this region is much more than a local issue – as a global matter, it concerns all of humanity.

## Academia in Transformation

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The Damage Done: The “Arab Spring”, Cultural Heritage and At-Risk Archaeologists

## About the Author



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## About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between European and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional, but rather have reflected and accelerated broader global trends. Moreover, the importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance is being felt outside the MENA region. Taking a transcultural perspective, the Transformation Working Group of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to improve understanding of these trends. The working group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange, and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA region can be improved.

## The Damage Done: The “Arab Spring”, Cultural Heritage and At-Risk Archaeologists

The spread of radical organizations such as al-Qaida, al-Nusra and the Islamic State (Daesh) throughout the Middle East poses a clear threat to our cultural heritage. Deemed “idolatrous” by these organizations, many cultural artifacts that predate Islam have been destroyed or are targeted for destruction. This war against cultural memory began in 2001, when the Taliban demolished a Buddha statue in Afghanistan in a highly publicized explosion. More recently, Daesh publicly ordered the demolition of Raqqa’s Lion sculptures, and radicals in Iraq explicitly targeted ancient Assyrian artifacts in the Mosul Museum, publishing a video of their destruction online in 2015. Subject to targeted bombings and deliberate bulldozing at the hands of Daesh, much of the archaeological site of Nimrud – the location of the ancient Assyrian city of Kalhu with its palaces and sphinx-adorned temples – were also destroyed in 2015. The world’s most renowned ancient city, Palmyra, was the site of deliberate obliteration as Daesh systematically destroyed its art and architecture – publicly. Having survived centuries of shifting power dynamics, wars and religious battles, the loss of these cultural artifacts is unprecedented.

Cultural heritage in areas of violent struggle involving radical Islamist groups<sup>1</sup> has been utterly abandoned to fate. The fate of these precious antiquities is not limited to destruction. Indeed, many artifacts are smuggled into the black market, where they yield high returns used to finance the radical groups’ military campaigns. There are cases of organized crime networks being involved in illegal archaeological digs (e.g., Mari/Tell Hariri) or the raiding of facilities storing antiquities (e.g., Haraqia). And many of those desperate to survive the crushing economic impact of ongoing conflict have taken advantage of the lack of protection and surveillance in broad areas along the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Most of the artifacts illicitly traded find their way into markets in European and other Western countries.

This archaeological massacre is taking place in plain view of all civilized societies. International organizations tasked with the protection of cultural heritage, such as UNESCO, ICOMOS and ICOM<sup>2</sup>, have limited their response to denunciations. Political leaders in Western countries have provided no meaningful response. The global archaeology community thus faces massive challenges in stopping the destruction of sites of cultural heritage and their artifacts throughout the Middle East. Focusing on Syria as a case study, I explore here these challenges and what’s at stake for our shared cultural heritage and the field of archaeology specifically.

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<sup>1</sup> This was, for example, discussed at the 2016 UNESCO conference in Berlin, as well as in statements by its Director-General, Irina Bokova. See: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1338/>; <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/safeguarding-syrian-cultural-heritage/>; <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1495/>

<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations: UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) and ICOM (The International Council of Museums)

## ► Syria – Cultural Heritage for Humankind

Since the 18th century, the Middle East has attracted Western archaeologists, adventurers and missionaries alike. Thanks to the discovery of a wealth of ancient sites, archaeologists began organizing missions to explore the area in earnest (Mithen 2006: 40f). The geographical area currently comprising Syria quickly became a focal point of archaeological study as archaeologists sought to identify the cradle of human civilization and explore its relation to modern human culture. This archaeological research – which includes the excavation, identification, classification and preservation of this heritage – has been a major contribution to humankind.

Humans have inhabited Syria for more than one million years. The territory witnessed the earliest passage of prehistoric man, *Homo erectus*, from Africa to Europe. Moreover, the Dederiyeh site in northwestern Syria was home to an important branch of the so-called Neanderthal man, which later developed into *Homo sapiens*. Around 10000 BC, a number of small groups settled in the Euphrates valley, where they pioneered agriculture (Moore et al. 2000) by planting seeds, domesticating animals and building homes.

By 4000 BC several major cities began to emerge in the Jazira region in northeastern Syria, including Habuba Kabira on the Euphrates river (Strommenger 1980) and Hamukar. As these transit and trading hubs began to accumulate wealth, their inhabitants erected large monuments marking their power but also to serve as housing for their ever-increasing populations. During this period, we see as well the development of iconography and the shift toward cuneiform writing as key intellectual innovations.

An urban culture emerged in the Early Bronze Age, when much of northern Syria was under the control of the city of Ebla, until its defeat by Sargon, the king of Akkad (Frayne 2008). Its language, Eblaite, is considered the second earliest confirmed Semitic language (after Akkadian). Today, the site is most famous for the Ebla tablets, an archive of around 20,000 cuneiform tablets dating to around 2350 BC. Written in both Sumerian and Eblaite using Sumerian cuneiform, the archive has allowed for a better understanding of the Sumerian language (Matthiae 2013: 37). This is also where the oldest discovered bilingual dictionaries have been discovered enabling scribes in Mesopotamia and Syria to understand each other.

During the Middle Bronze Age, these urban centers gradually formed the nuclei of small states, in particular Aleppo (ancient Yamahad, see Abdulrahman 2009), Mumbaqaat (ancient Ekalte), Jarablus (ancient Carchemish) and Mishrife (ancient Qatna). Thanks to the thousands of cuneiform script tablets that have survived to date, we have documentation of daily life in these states, including the details of highly-developed social relations and regulations. These tablets have also given us insight into the kingdom's foreign and local relations, helping us, for instance, trace back the roots of

complex relations between increasingly bureaucratic states and pastoralist populations. As a center of trade and hegemonic state, the city of Mari (modern day Tell Hariri) played a key role throughout the second and third millennium BC, a fact well-documented by the archive of thousands of tablets found there (Parrot 1953). An archive of more than 25,000 tablets from the period have survived documenting details regarding the kingdom, its customs, and the names of people who lived during that time. More than 3,000 of the tablets are letters documenting their social customs, events, and interactions. The remaining tablets document administrative, economic and judicial matters in the city. According to André Parrot (1953), the discovery of these tablets in the 20th century has prompted a complete revision of the historical record of the ancient Near East and provided more than 500 new location names, enough to redraw the geographical map of the ancient world.

As towns and other cities serving as power centers, i.e., Alakh, Emar (modern-day Tell Meskene), Ekalte (Mubaqat), Qatna and Ugarit emerged across Syria in 2000 BC, intellectual life and the product of its labors flourished. The architecture of houses and palaces was perfected and multiple-storeyed temples were decorated with paintings, sculptures and statues of humans (goddesses) and animals. Around 1400 BC we see scribes in Ugarit advancing written communication by using letters that correspond to sounds in what appears to be the invention of a Ugaritic alphabet. Inscribed on clay tablets and cuneiform in appearance (i.e., impressed in clay with the end of a stylus), the Ugaritic alphabet bears no relation to Mesopotamian cuneiform symbols. While the letters show little or no formal similarity, the standard letter order (preserved in the Latin alphabet as A, B, C, D, etc.) shows strong similarities between the Phoenician and Ugaritic alphabets, suggesting that these two systems were not wholly independent inventions. These were later transferred to Greece, providing the role model for many other alphabets.

During 1000 BC, seafaring peoples invaded Syria and destroyed most of the cities and empires, particularly those along the coast. New city-states such as Sam'al (Zincirli), Tell Tayinat, Gindaros (most likely Kunalua), and Til Barsip (Tell Ahmar) emerged in their place (Bunnens 1997; Orthmann et al. 2013). Expanding the reach of their administration into outlying areas, these city-states developed extensive administrative, military and economic systems. These developments brought about a resurgence in architectural art as palaces, city walls and monumental buildings that were adorned with massive gates and stone sculptures.

In short, modern-day Syria has been a site of trade and cultural exchange since humankind began engaging in such activities. Excavation sites throughout the country have yielded innumerable artifacts of this cultural heritage. Urban centers such as Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Bosracan, marked by a multiculturalism that has embraced a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds, have featured sound city planning in which diverse inhabitants have lived in harmony – until recently.

## ■ The Threat to Artifacts

As we enter 2017, much of Syria has been twisted by the destruction of war. This devastation, inflicted by a variety of actors, has created immense damage to the shared cultural heritage entrusted to the Syrian people.

Few would dispute the catastrophe-in-process regarding Syria's archaeological sites. Unauthorized excavations, plundering, and trafficking of stolen cultural artifacts in Syria is an acute and escalating problem that threatens our cultural heritage as the number of objects lost or destroyed grows day by day.

As the Syrian crisis broke in 2011, the number of archaeological activities in the country dropped dramatically. Most foreign missions have since been terminated, though the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission in the Marqab citadel has continued. National missions are confined to the governorates not subject to imminent threat, which includes primarily those located along the coast and in the south (Sweeda) as well as in rural areas surrounding Damascus (e.g., Latakia, Tartus, Homs and Hama). Excavations and research conducted in these areas are carried out on behalf of Syria's Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria (DGAM), which is charged with safeguarding and restoring all antiquities in Syria and putting them on public display. For many years, there have also been foreign missions in Syria from various institutes and universities; there were nearly 70 such missions operating in 2011. These missions normally partnered with the DGAM with regard to excavation, restoration and scientific publishing.

Currently, there are only five excavation sites in the country still underway. Archaeological activity in the country is primarily focused on preserving and restoring monuments that have been damaged in the conflict. All of these activities are financed by the DGAM, in a few cases in collaboration with UNESCO. These efforts to preserve and restore monuments have been undertaken by DGAM experts with the support of university students. From the start of the conflict, the DGAM has pursued a non-partisan policy in its attempts to shield cultural heritage sites from damage.

Although the sources of damage are diverse, looting poses the greatest threat to the country's cultural heritage. Looting is rampant and carried out by actors from many sides of the conflict, though there are three key types with specific motives:

1. Locals who live in lawless areas. Desperate for income in the absence of gainful employment, these individuals dig in archaeological sites and sell looted artifacts to private speculators.
2. Members of organized crime networks. These individuals engage in illicit digging and smuggling for their own gain/profit.
3. Islamist extremists seeking to eradicate any trace of the "idolatrous" past. Daesh and Al-Nusra are the key actors here, though Daesh represents the biggest threat because it controls more than 2,000 archaeological sites in Syria (and twice as many in Iraq).

The connection between organized crime networks and religious extremist organizations in this area must be noted, as Daesh is involved in the looting of antiquities principally to finance its military activities. There have been occasional reports of cooperative looting agreements between Daesh and Al-Nusra (Syrian Arab Republic – Ministry of Culture. Directorate-General of Antiquities & Museums 2015b and 2016a).

After six years of ongoing conflict in Syria, which is now the third largest market for illegal cultural goods worldwide (United Nations 2014), it is difficult to single out one factor behind the destruction of archeological sites. Indeed, various factors have become intertwined and are now fostering each other. The following examples illustrate the extent of the damage done.

Due to its location near the Turkish border, **Aleppo** has served as an important frontier city for various factions in the current conflict. Having taken refuge in historical buildings, souks and mosques, Al-Nusra fighters have used these structures to deter Syrian armed forces from entering the area. Al-Nusra fighters have also been accused of blowing up the minaret of the Umayyad mosque and of stealing all the manuscripts which were stored in this mosque (Syrian Arab Republic – Ministry of Culture. Directorate-General of Antiquities & Museums 2016b). A devastating fire in 2012 gutted the city's vast labyrinthine souk. Also, the exceptional Aleppo Citadel was partially ravaged by bombings which damaged the passageway leading to the entrance of the citadel.

Located in southwest Syria, **Bosra** is the country's second UNESCO heritage site. As a prosperous provincial capital under the Romans, Bosra remained administratively important throughout the Islamic era. Located at the frontline between Al-Nusra and the Syrian army, Bosra has been subject to repeated clashes and bombing that have destroyed or damaged traditional houses as well as the Mabrak al-Naqa monument and the Fatimid mosque. The militias of Al-Nusra took control of the city. Until early 2017, the extent of the destruction inflicted remains unclear. Many Syrian archaeologists are deeply worried about the status of the city's Roman theater, considered to be the most significant theater in Syria.

**Apamea**, which is not under the Syrian government's administrative control, ranks as one of the most affected sites due to ongoing illegal digging operations in the east, northeast and west of the city. Most of the looters are interested in tombs and mosaics. Recently, with the help of several scientific institutions including the British Museum and in cooperation with Google Earth (see Trafficking Culture. Researching the global traffic in looted cultural objects n.d.), satellite images were taken of various sites in the city, showing massive damage. Many artifacts have clearly been transported out of the country. Indeed, many of the mosaics seized on Lebanon's black market in 2013 and 2014 have been traced back to Apamea. The neighboring Al-Madiq Citadel, which was built during Muslim rule in the 12th century, was also damaged by heavy clashes between the Syrian army and armed groups (mostly from Al-Nusra, who entrenched themselves in the citadel).



Among international observers, the destruction of the ancient city of *Palmyra* is the most well-known. After Daesh invaded the site, Palmyra faced an unknown future. The damage inflicted by Daesh to Palmyra can be termed an assault not only on the cultural heritage of Syrians, but on human civilization more generally. The DGAM has received eyewitness accounts of Daesh's systematic destruction of the site's key monuments (Danti & Prescott 2014). In addition, the Baal-Shamin Temple, the sanctuary of the Bel Temple and six tower tombs have also been demolished (Danti et al. 2015). Witnesses also informed the DGAM that Daesh militants destroyed the Arch of Triumph on Sunday, October 4th 2015. When reports were confirmed that Daesh set up explosives around several historical monuments of the city, the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums announced:

We feel frustrated as we see the failure of the international community in achieving the UN resolution #2199, issued in February 2015, stating "that countries ensure that their nationals and those in their territories not make assets or economic resources available to ISIL<sup>3</sup> and related terrorist groups" and "Condemning the destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria, particularly by ISIL and the Al-Nusrah Front." Our call a few days ago to the international community to stop ISIS's progress towards Palmyra was ignored. As in other conflicted areas, i.e. in Idlib and Bosra, we count on the local community and political figures to neutralize<sup>4</sup> the ancient city and its museum, in the hope that they can stop these fanatic groups, who only believe in killing, robbery and destruction. Our solidarity goes to the city, its citizens and the local staff members of DGAM, who have defended their heritage during the last 4 years with all their abilities. We call all national Syrians for solidarity and unity for the sake of heritage protection against these barbaric attacks." (Syrian Arab Republic – Ministry of Culture. Directorate-General of Antiquities & Museums 2015a)

Thanks to the devotion of DGAM staff members and the cooperation of the related local authorities, hundreds of Palmyrean statues and museum objects have been transferred to safe locations outside of the city. Tragically, Daesh did not hesitate to kill archaeologist Khalid Al-Asaad. The DGAM commemorated him with these words:

It is with great sorrow we announce the murder of our colleague, the well-known archaeologist Khalid Al-Asaad (former Director of the Palmyra Antiquities department) who was beheaded by the terrorist members of ISIS today, Tuesday the 18th of August 2015. According to reports, his body was crucified on the Palmyrean columns (which he himself had restored) in the centre of Palmyra, after being beheaded in the museum's courtyard. Mr. Asaad started his career at DGAM in 1963 as a Director of Palmyra Antiquities, he was an inspirational and dedicated professional who was committed to DGAM even after his retirement. (Syrian Arab Republic – Ministry of Culture. Directorate-General of Antiquities & Museums 2015c)

Since reclaiming the territory including Palmyra in late 2016, Daesh has called for the destruction of monuments, rendering the future of the town and its archaeological sites unclear. In general, the armed conflicts in the Arab world have had a devastating impact on the science of archaeology. They have tremendously reduced or outright prevented excavation activities on many sites. This is true not only for Syria; we can also see this in Iraq, especially in areas such as Nimrud, and in the Sinai in Egypt, where fighting between militants and the Egyptian army continues. In addition, Libya has witnessed a complete abandoning of excavations due to the insecure situation. Within Syria, since the beginning of the crisis the field of archaeology has been heavily disrupted.

<sup>3</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

<sup>4</sup> The term "neutralize" here refers to the idea that these sites be protected as neutral territory. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

## ► Impact on the Field of Archaeology

This has mainly been due to security concerns which resulted in the abandonment of the most important sites in Mari (in the east) – Dora Europos and Terqa, in the Idlib region (in the west) – the sites of Ebla and Tell Afis – and in the Aleppo district – the sites of Jarablus and Tell Amarna. The archaeological missions engaged in these sites tried to direct the world's attention to these priceless, historically unique places in order to prevent their damage and destruction. These efforts highlighted the unique value of Syrian cultural heritage to the rest of the world and how important and urgent it is to protect and safeguard this heritage.

Because radical groups have threatened and even killed archaeologists like Khalid Al-Asaad, an increasing number of professors and archaeological scholars have been unable to pursue their work. Many have left the country; some have remained in Syria and are in safe areas protected from confrontations with the militants but isolated from the main sites. The number of enrolled students across all fields of study has fallen dramatically since 2011 (by more than 75%), even though academic programs have continued at all universities except Idlib and Deir ez-Zor. Students have suffered from the insecure situation and their mobility is restricted due to road checkpoints. Moreover, radical groups often consider students to be allies of the official government.

In this context, it is important to note that all foreign archaeological institutes in Damascus have closed, including the American Centre for Culture in Damascus, Institut Français du Proche-Orient (Ifpo), the German Archaeological Institute in Damascus (DAI), the Danish Cultural Centre and the Italian Cultural Institute. All of these institutes offered essential resources for students and senior scholars. All excavation activities carried out by or in collaboration with foreign institutions have been postponed indefinitely.

The unstable situation has also prevented routine but urgently needed restorations to several monuments, including Hosn Suleiman in the coastal mountains (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut 2001) and Al-Rahba citadel in Deir ez-Zor. Indeed, ongoing conservation work in archaeological sites in areas of conflict has been abandoned. The museums in these unsafe areas have been emptied of their holdings, with the archaeological artifacts transported to secure locations. In addition, burglar alarms were installed in some museums and fortresses, and the number of guards and patrols has been increased.

In the midst of this devastating situation, local communities have also taken measures to guard against the destruction of their heritage. While there are locals among the fighters and looters, archaeological authorities have worked for decades to build an understanding of the value of the cultural heritage in these communities. Often, this effort has been thwarted by the dire conditions inflicted by the crisis. However, in a few cases we have witnessed collaborative and individual efforts to safeguard Syria's cultural heritage. In 2012, local elites in Idlib, for example, demanded that all

military units (radical groups in particular) keep archaeological sites and museums out of the battle zone and refrain from using these sites as shields or fortifications. Such intervention was successful with regard to the Ma'arra Mosaic museum: when militants tried to take control of it, the museum's curator immediately asked the local community, his relatives, and friends to encircle the museum and prevent them from entering or taking any action that could damage the museum. Moreover, in Wadi Barada in the countryside about 45 km northwest of Damascus – which is not under the control of the government – locals discovered a large piece of a mosaic dating back to the Roman period. These locals contacted the DGAM and reached an agreement allowing DGAM experts to remove the mosaic and store it in a warehouse. The DGAM awarded these locals with a prize for their demonstration of civic commitment.

At the same time, archaeologists have had to expand their outreach. The DGAM held a workshop in Damascus titled “Fighting against illicit trafficking of cultural property: capacity-building and awareness-raising” in 2013. The workshop brought together ministry and government authorities involved in the protection of Syrian cultural property to discuss the problem of antiquities smuggling with NGOs, members of the local community, scholars, artists and authors. In 2014, more than 4,000 archaeological artifacts were returned to the DGAM – including three busts from Palmyra dated from 200 AD – that had been confiscated by police, customs agents and the governorates.

The scourge of looting and smuggling also means that Syrian archaeologists must solicit the assistance of international actors beyond the world of scholarship. The DGAM is increasingly coordinating with INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization. This collaboration is carried forward by sending reports and photos of what has been lost as well as what is found in neighboring countries and believed to be of Syrian origin. This cooperation with INTERPOL and the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities has been somewhat successful in fighting the trafficking of Syrian antiquities. For example, in 2014, 18 Syrian mosaic panels were confiscated at the Lebanese borders and 73 Syrian artifacts smuggled into Lebanon to be sold by antique dealers were confiscated.

Archaeologists must also act as lobbyists for their causes. On July 3rd 2013, the DGAM called upon international organizations, members and heads of foreign archaeological missions, archaeologists, and intellectuals worldwide to act together in establishing efficient mechanisms able to deter those involved in the destruction, looting and smuggling of antiquities from continuing such activity. The DGAM has also asked UNESCO to pressure neighboring countries to reinforce security measures, improve the monitoring of borders and thereby fight the trafficking of archaeological property, and to combat illegal excavation activity within their own borders.

It has become clear that concrete actions are urgently needed to safeguard our shared cultural heritage. The DGAM has tried to make this clear to its partner institutions. The responses from international organizations such as UNESCO, ICOM, ICOMOS and INTERPOL have been mostly

positive. They have, in particular, offered guidance on strategies for preservation and restoration under the difficult circumstances. In a promising move, the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin (DAI) has offered to work in direct cooperation with Syrian experts and concerned specialists at the DGAM through the “Stunde Null” projects. The idea behind this effort has been to set up a database of all archaeological sites in Syria that will facilitate restoration and rehabilitation work once such activity can be resumed. In this context, UNESCO held an international conference in July 2016, in cooperation with the DAI, on safeguarding the cultural heritage of Syria.

### ► The Future of Syrian Archaeology

Syrian archaeologists currently living abroad can support students of archaeology inside Syria through their scientific networks and thereby help establish the next generation of experts. In addition, networks of local and foreign experts must be maintained. In November 2016, with the support of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA), a workshop on Maaloula, an archaeological site in the rural area outside of Damascus, was held in the German city of Tübingen. This workshop brought together archaeologists from the DGAM, a local expert from Maaloula, and experts in restoration and cultural heritage from various European universities and institutions. During the workshop, a productive arrangement was agreed upon to help locals in Maaloula rebuild their homes. Furthermore, the University of Heidelberg agreed to aid the re-opening of the Aramaic institution in Maaloula in order to resume teaching this ancient language (which is still spoken in the area).

We must also be aware of the most recent developments on the ground and adapt our strategies accordingly. While, for example, Daesh was expelled from Palmyra by the Syrian army in 2016, the site fell back into their hands only a few months later and the fate of Palmyra’s historical monuments is as uncertain as ever.

A final point concerns the reconstruction of Syrian cultural heritage once fighting has ceased. The shared cultural legacy embodied in these artifacts must be made clear to all affected parties in the current conflict if the preservation of cultural heritage is to succeed in peacetime (Cunliffe et al. 2016). Heritage authorities must be enabled to complete the infrastructure and to stop all kinds of criminality. After all, Syrian cultural heritage is much more than a local issue; as a global matter, it concerns all of humanity.

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