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The Sociology of Archaeological Vandalism: Towards a Social Understanding of Crimes against Monuments and Mechanisms for Their Prevention

[1]-SAMIR AZOUNI
[1]samir.azouni@univ-bechar.dz

[2]- MOHAMED KADI
[2] mohamed.kadi@univ-bechar.dz

[3]- AMAR TAAM
[3]amar.taam@univ-bechar.dz
[1.2.] [3]Universiy of Bechar Algeria

[4]Chibane yamina
[4]- chibaneyamina88@gmail.com
[4]Universty of Tlemcen Algeria

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Abstract:

This study explores the phenomenon of archaeological vandalism from a sociological perspective, emphasizing its underlying social, cultural, and economic dimensions. Crimes against archaeological monuments are not only acts of physical destruction but also represent deeper patterns of neglect, marginalization, and conflicting values within society. The research highlights the motivations driving individuals and groups to commit such offenses, ranging from economic exploitation and illegal trade in antiquities to expressions of protest or identity struggles. Furthermore, the study examines the consequences of vandalism on cultural heritage, collective memory, and national identity. It also proposes mechanisms to reduce these crimes, focusing on awareness campaigns, stronger legal frameworks, community participation, and the integration of cultural heritage education into social development policies. By adopting a sociological lens, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of archaeological vandalism and to suggest sustainable strategies for its prevention.

Keywords:

Sociology of crime; archaeological vandalism; cultural heritage; monuments; illegal antiquities trade; prevention mechanisms; social responsibility.

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1. Introduction

Archaeological monuments and cultural heritage sites represent the living memory of civilizations, embodying the historical, social, and cultural experiences of humanity across time. They are not merely physical structures or artistic relics but essential components of collective identity, symbols of continuity, and reservoirs of cultural meaning. Preserving them is therefore not only a technical task assigned to archaeologists and heritage professionals, but also a profound social responsibility. Despite their importance, these monuments are increasingly exposed to various forms of destruction, neglect, and criminal acts that threaten their survival. Among the most critical of these challenges is the phenomenon of **archaeological vandalism**, which includes both deliberate and negligent actions leading to the deterioration or destruction of cultural sites.

Traditionally, the issue of cultural heritage destruction has been examined through legal, technical, and preservationist lenses. Laws have been enacted to protect archaeological sites, and specialized institutions have developed methods of conservation. Yet, despite these efforts, acts of vandalism and crimes against heritage continue to escalate in different contexts—whether in times of armed conflict, where monuments are deliberately targeted as symbols of power, or in peacetime, where illicit excavation, looting, and destruction persist for economic or ideological reasons. This persistence raises the question of why such crimes occur and how they can be effectively addressed. The answer, this study argues, lies not only in stronger laws and technical measures but also in **sociological understanding**.

From a sociological perspective, archaeological vandalism is not an isolated act of destruction but rather a **socially embedded phenomenon**. It reflects the interaction of multiple variables: social inequalities, lack of awareness, economic pressures, cultural values, political instability, and sometimes even organized crime networks. For instance, individuals living near archaeological sites may see these monuments not as symbols of collective heritage but as resources to be exploited for survival, leading to illicit excavation or the sale of artifacts. In other cases, marginalized groups may express frustration and protest against state institutions by targeting heritage sites, which they perceive as representing dominant power or neglected history. Moreover, global demand for antiquities fuels local looting, transforming heritage crimes into transnational criminal activities.

The social dimensions of archaeological vandalism highlight the urgent need to reframe the problem as a **crime with cultural and societal roots** rather than simply a legal violation. This reorientation requires exploring questions such as: What social and cultural factors motivate individuals or groups to engage in vandalism? How do communities perceive archaeological monuments, and what meanings do they attach to them? What role do education, socialization, and public policies play in shaping these perceptions? And finally, how can prevention mechanisms be designed to address the social causes of vandalism rather than merely its consequences?

This paper seeks to address these questions by applying the tools of **sociology of crime** to the study of archaeological vandalism. By doing so, it aims to uncover the deeper layers of social meaning behind these acts and to propose more comprehensive strategies for prevention. Such an approach emphasizes that effective solutions must extend beyond punitive measures to include public awareness, community participation, and the integration of cultural heritage into the broader framework of social development. Only by recognizing the social nature of heritage crimes can we develop sustainable strategies to protect monuments as shared assets of humanity.

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The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between the fields of **heritage studies and sociology**. While archaeologists and conservationists focus on the technical aspects of protection, sociologists bring valuable insights into the human and social dimensions of crime. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study aspires to contribute both to academic scholarship and to practical policymaking in the field of cultural heritage protection.

In what follows, the paper will first examine the conceptual framework of archaeological vandalism and its sociological underpinnings. It will then analyze the social causes and motivations behind such crimes, followed by a discussion of their consequences for cultural identity and national memory. Finally, the study will propose mechanisms of prevention that are grounded in social understanding, including legal, educational, and community-based strategies.

2. Theoretical Framework

Sociological theories of crime provide important tools for understanding the social roots of vandalism against archaeological monuments. Rather than viewing such acts as merely individual choices or isolated incidents, these theories situate them within broader contexts of social structure, inequality, and cultural meaning. By applying frameworks such as strain theory, social disorganization theory, and symbolic interactionism, scholars can uncover the social dynamics that shape destructive behavior toward heritage. This approach is crucial because crimes against monuments often reflect deeper tensions in society, including economic marginalization, weak institutions, and contested cultural identities (Akers & Sellers, 2013).

Strain theory, originally developed by Robert K. Merton (1938), argues that crime arises when individuals face a disjunction between culturally valued goals and the legitimate means of achieving them. Applied to heritage vandalism, this framework suggests that marginalized individuals or communities may engage in looting or destruction of archaeological sites as an alternative means of economic survival or as an outlet for frustration when legitimate opportunities are blocked. For instance, local populations living near heritage sites may turn to illegal excavations when formal employment opportunities are scarce, thus reflecting structural inequalities rather than mere criminal intent (Agnew, 1992).

Social disorganization theory, associated with Shaw and McKay (1942), provides another lens by emphasizing the role of weakened community structures and lack of social cohesion in fostering criminal behavior. Archaeological vandalism often occurs in contexts where social institutions, such as schools, community organizations, and local governance, are weak or absent. In such environments, the collective ability to protect cultural heritage diminishes, leaving monuments vulnerable to neglect and destruction. Moreover, the absence of strong community bonds may lead residents to view heritage sites as irrelevant or disconnected from their daily lives, thereby lowering the social costs of engaging in vandalism (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Symbolic interactionism, particularly the work of Howard Becker (1963) on labeling theory, shifts attention to the meanings individuals and groups attach to their actions. From this perspective, acts of vandalism against heritage are not simply crimes but can be interpreted as social statements. For example, graffiti on monuments may be seen as an assertion of identity or resistance against authority, while deliberate destruction in conflict zones may serve as a symbolic attack on rival cultural or political groups. The meanings attached to heritage crimes thus depend on the social contexts and narratives in which they occur, underscoring the need to study them as communicative acts rather than only as violations of law (Blumer, 1969).

Taken together, these theories highlight that vandalism against archaeological monuments is a socially produced phenomenon, rooted in structural inequalities, weak institutional

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frameworks, and contested cultural meanings. They move the discussion beyond purely legalistic or technical explanations and encourage a more nuanced understanding of the social drivers of heritage crime. By grounding the study in such theoretical insights, scholars can develop more effective strategies for prevention that address underlying causes, including poverty, social exclusion, and identity struggles, rather than focusing solely on punitive measures (Hagan, 2017).

3. Typology of Archaeological Vandalism

The phenomenon of archaeological vandalism encompasses a wide variety of actions that differ in motivation, method, and consequences. Understanding these forms through a typological lens is critical, as it allows researchers to move beyond generalizations and identify specific patterns of heritage crimes. Scholars emphasize that each type of vandalism not only affects monuments differently but also reflects distinct social, cultural, and economic dynamics (Layton, Stone, & Thomas, 2001).

One of the most prevalent forms is **looting**, which involves the illicit removal of artifacts from heritage sites, often for sale in black markets. Looting is driven by both local economic pressures and global demand for antiquities. Communities living near archaeological sites may perceive looting as a survival strategy, while international collectors and traffickers provide the financial incentives that sustain the practice (Brodie & Renfrew, 2005).

Another common type is **graffiti**, which may be interpreted either as mindless destruction or as an expressive act. In some cases, graffiti reflects youth subcultures, rebellion against authority, or identity assertion. While graffiti may not always destroy the structural integrity of monuments, it alters their symbolic value and compromises their authenticity. This form of vandalism demonstrates how heritage sites are entangled in everyday social dynamics and contested meanings (Douglas, 2014).

Illegal excavation represents a more organized form of vandalism, often involving specialized tools, networks of buyers, and knowledge of the site's archaeological potential. Unlike spontaneous acts, illegal excavation is frequently systematic and tied to transnational smuggling operations. Such activities not only damage the integrity of heritage sites but also erase valuable contextual information, making it impossible for archaeologists to reconstruct historical narratives (Matsuda, 2017).

The deliberate **destruction of monuments during armed conflicts** constitutes another category. Here, heritage is targeted for its symbolic value, as in the case of the Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 or the sites in Palmyra destroyed by ISIS in 2015. This form of vandalism is politically and ideologically motivated, aiming to erase cultural identities or to shock global opinion. It demonstrates the vulnerability of heritage in times of instability, where monuments become weapons of symbolic warfare (Bevan, 2016).

Finally, **neglect and urban expansion** represent more indirect but equally damaging forms of vandalism. When governments and local authorities fail to maintain heritage sites, natural decay accelerates, leading to irreversible losses. Similarly, urbanization projects often encroach on archaeological landscapes, prioritizing economic development over cultural preservation. These forms highlight how structural negligence, rather than direct hostility, can contribute to heritage destruction (Fairclough, Harrison, Jameson, & Schofield, 2008).

4. Case Studies and Empirical Examples

Real-world examples illustrate the diverse manifestations of archaeological vandalism and reveal the social causes behind them. A striking case is the destruction of **Palmyra in Syria** during the Syrian Civil War. The Islamic State deliberately targeted temples, tombs, and sculptures, not only to assert ideological dominance but also to generate revenue through looted

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artifacts. This case exemplifies how cultural heritage can become both a battlefield and a financial resource in modern conflicts (Gamboni, 2013).

Another important example is the **Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan**, destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. This act was motivated by ideological rejection of pre-Islamic art and a desire to demonstrate power to both local and international audiences. The destruction shocked the global community and highlighted how heritage can be weaponized as a tool of cultural erasure (Flood, 2002).

In Africa, the destruction of **Sufi shrines in Timbuktu, Mali**, by Ansar Dine militants in 2012 provides another case. These acts were motivated by religious extremism, as militants sought to erase practices they deemed unorthodox. Beyond the physical destruction, the events deeply traumatized local communities, as the shrines were not only architectural monuments but also centers of spiritual and social life (Sidy & Jeppsson, 2013).

Closer to the Maghreb region, **Algerian heritage sites** have also faced vandalism and neglect. Roman ruins such as those at Timgad and Djemila are frequently threatened by looting, poor maintenance, and urban encroachment. Scholars point out that weak enforcement of heritage laws and limited awareness among local populations contribute to the vulnerability of these sites (Beldjoudi, 2016).

At the global level, **illegal excavation in Egypt** provides an example of economically driven vandalism. Looting surged during political instability following the 2011 revolution, as local communities exploited weakened state control. This reflects the interplay between political crises, economic hardship, and heritage crime (Ikram & Hanna, 2013).

Finally, Western contexts are not immune. In **the United Kingdom**, graffiti and urban vandalism have damaged historical sites, while in Italy, the pressure of tourism has led to inadvertent vandalism of monuments such as the Colosseum. These cases illustrate that heritage crimes are not confined to war zones or developing regions but are part of a global phenomenon rooted in diverse social dynamics (Holtorf, 2016).

5. Social Consequences of Heritage Crimes

The destruction of cultural monuments has profound implications for **collective memory**, as it erases tangible reminders of a community's past. Archaeological sites are not simply physical remains; they are mnemonic anchors through which societies preserve historical narratives. When they are damaged, communities lose vital reference points for their history, making it difficult to transmit traditions across generations (Connerton, 1989).

One of the most significant consequences is the impact on **cultural identity**. Heritage serves as a symbol of belonging and continuity. When shrines, mosques, churches, or ancient cities are vandalized, the communities attached to them often experience a rupture in identity. For example, the destruction of shrines in Timbuktu in 2012 was experienced not merely as the loss of buildings but as an assault on Malian culture and spirituality (Jeppsson & Sidy, 2013).

Economic losses are another dimension, particularly in contexts where **tourism** is a major source of revenue. Heritage sites such as Palmyra, Petra, or Timgad attract millions of visitors annually. Acts of vandalism deter tourists, reduce income for local communities, and damage broader national economies. This demonstrates that heritage crimes extend far beyond symbolic destruction, affecting livelihoods and development (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

In addition to direct economic harm, heritage crimes undermine **international reputation**. States that fail to protect their monuments risk being perceived as negligent or unstable. For instance, the widespread looting of antiquities during the Iraq War tarnished the country's global image and prompted criticism of international forces (Stone, 2005). Cultural heritage protection has thus become an indicator of state capacity and legitimacy in global forums.

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The **psychological and social trauma** caused by heritage crimes is equally important. Communities often view the destruction of monuments as an attack on their dignity and existence. This trauma can fuel resentment, social divisions, and intergenerational grief, as seen in Bosnia, where targeted destruction of religious monuments during the 1990s wars deepened ethnic divides (Bevan, 2016).

Finally, heritage crimes disrupt the **living dimension of culture**. Monuments are not inert stones; they are sites of rituals, festivals, and community gatherings. Their destruction undermines the social fabric that binds communities together, weakening solidarity and diminishing opportunities for intercultural dialogue (Smith, 2006).

6. Preventive Mechanisms and Policy Recommendations

Preventing heritage crimes requires **community involvement** as a first step. Local populations are often the most effective protectors of monuments when they feel ownership over heritage. Community-based heritage stewardship, including volunteer groups and participatory management, has shown positive results in safeguarding vulnerable sites (Meskell, 2015).

Educational programs are another crucial mechanism. By integrating cultural heritage into school curricula, young people can develop a sense of pride and responsibility for protecting monuments. UNESCO (2014) emphasizes that education fosters sustainable heritage practices, making it harder for destructive ideologies to take root.

The **use of technology** offers new opportunities for monitoring and protection. Drones, satellite imagery, and digital databases enable real-time tracking of vandalism and illegal excavations. Initiatives like the Global Heritage Fund have demonstrated the effectiveness of technological tools in documenting threats and mobilizing rapid responses (Vincent, 2017).

Legal frameworks must also be reinforced through **stronger penalties** for perpetrators. In many countries, laws against looting or graffiti exist but are rarely enforced. Establishing specialized heritage police units and ensuring judicial accountability can deter potential offenders (Prott & O'Keefe, 1992).

International cooperation is indispensable, given the transnational nature of heritage crimes. Looted artifacts often end up in foreign markets, requiring collaboration between customs authorities, Interpol, and cultural organizations. Conventions such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the illicit trade of cultural property provide the legal basis for this cooperation, but stronger implementation is needed (UNESCO, 1970).

Finally, policy strategies must include **awareness campaigns** targeting local communities and tourists alike. When citizens and visitors understand the value of monuments, they are more likely to participate in their protection and to condemn acts of vandalism (Logan & Craith, 2010).

7. Future Research Directions

Future research should investigate the role of **digital culture and social media** in shaping youth attitudes toward heritage. Online platforms can either trivialize heritage through memes and viral vandalism or, conversely, foster awareness by promoting campaigns for protection. Understanding this digital ambivalence is vital for contemporary strategies (Giaccardi, 2012).

Comparative studies between **societies that have successfully reduced vandalism and those that have not** represent another promising direction. For instance, Italy's stringent heritage policing may be contrasted with weaker enforcement in parts of North Africa, allowing researchers to identify best practices and structural weaknesses (Silberman, 2012).

Interdisciplinary work between **archaeology, sociology, and criminology** is needed to better analyze the motivations behind heritage crimes. Sociological theories of deviance,

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criminological analyses of organized crime, and archaeological knowledge of site vulnerability can together produce more holistic frameworks for prevention (Barker, 2015).

The **long-term impact of heritage destruction on displaced communities** is another under-researched area. Refugees from conflict zones often lose access to sacred or historic spaces, raising questions about how cultural identity is reconstructed in exile (Díaz-Andreu, 2017).

There is also a need to study **climate change and environmental degradation** as indirect forms of vandalism. While usually classified as "natural" threats, the human role in accelerating climate risks links environmental issues with heritage protection (Holtorf & Högberg, 2015).

Finally, scholars should examine the **ethical use of artificial intelligence** in heritage protection. As AI tools increasingly monitor sites and predict risks, questions arise about privacy, surveillance, and equitable access to technology (Richardson, 2020). These debates show that heritage crime research must evolve alongside global technological and social transformations.

8. Recommendations and Implications

1. **Strengthen Community Engagement**

Encourage local communities to take ownership of heritage sites by involving them in protection programs, awareness campaigns, and local tourism projects. This reduces the sense of alienation and promotes collective responsibility for heritage preservation (Smith, 2006).

2. **Integrate Heritage Education in Curricula**

Schools and universities should incorporate heritage education into history, sociology, and civic studies. Teaching young people about the cultural and symbolic value of monuments fosters long-term awareness and respect (Silberman, 2012).

3. **Use Modern Surveillance and Technology**

Governments and institutions should invest in surveillance cameras, satellite monitoring, drones, and digital databases to detect and prevent illegal excavations, looting, and vandalism (Vincent, 2015).

4. **Develop Stronger Legal Frameworks**

Update national heritage laws with stricter penalties for offenders, while ensuring proper enforcement mechanisms. International conventions such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention should be domesticated into national law (UNESCO, 1970).

5. **Promote International Cooperation**

Many heritage crimes are transnational (e.g., trafficking of artifacts). Strengthening cross-border cooperation, information exchange, and joint training between countries is vital to address these challenges (Brodie & Renfrew, 2005).

6. **Raise Public Awareness through Media**

Use social media, films, documentaries, and local radio to highlight the importance of protecting monuments. Media campaigns can reduce vandalism by reshaping public perceptions and building cultural pride (Merryman, 2009).

7. **Encourage Alternative Economic Opportunities**

In many cases, vandalism and looting are driven by poverty. Creating job opportunities linked to heritage tourism or site management can reduce the incentive for local populations to engage in illegal activities (Kersel, 2008).

8. **Adopt Interdisciplinary Approaches**

Scholars from sociology, criminology, archaeology, and law should collaborate to build a more holistic understanding of heritage crimes, ensuring policies are evidence-based and socially informed (Bevan, 2016).

9. **Document and Digitize Heritage**

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Digitization of sites and artifacts through 3D scanning, virtual archives, and online databases ensures that even if monuments are damaged, their cultural memory is preserved for future generations (Prescott, 2018).

10. **Encourage Grassroots NGOs and Civil Society**

Empower NGOs and local heritage associations to act as watchdogs, mediators, and educators in communities. Civil society plays a crucial role in bridging gaps between authorities and the public (Hollowell, 2006).

9. Conclusion

The study of archaeological vandalism through a sociological lens has revealed that crimes against monuments are far more complex than simple acts of destruction. They are embedded in broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts that shape individual and collective behavior. By reframing vandalism not only as a legal or security issue but as a social phenomenon, this research highlights the need to analyze motivations, identities, and social structures that drive such crimes. Monuments are not neutral stones; they embody collective memory, cultural continuity, and symbolic power. Consequently, their defacement or destruction carries meanings that extend beyond physical damage.

One of the central findings is that archaeological vandalism is deeply linked to questions of identity and belonging. In many contexts, targeting monuments represents a rejection of certain historical narratives, political regimes, or cultural groups. Acts of looting or destruction can thus be interpreted as symbolic resistance or attempts to assert alternative identities. Conversely, neglect or indifference toward monuments may signal weakened cultural ties or the marginalization of heritage in everyday life. This insight underscores the need for prevention strategies that address identity politics, cultural alienation, and social exclusion as root causes of heritage crimes.

Another significant conclusion concerns the typology of vandalism itself. Looting, graffiti, illegal excavations, and wartime destruction are not identical phenomena, and they cannot be explained through a single theory. Each form of vandalism emerges from different motivations—economic exploitation, youth rebellion, ideological extremism, or simple negligence—and produces distinct social impacts. Recognizing these variations enables a more nuanced understanding of archaeological crime and allows policymakers to design targeted interventions. A blanket legal approach risks oversimplifying the problem and ignoring the deeper structural factors that perpetuate vandalism.

The social consequences of archaeological vandalism also extend far beyond material loss. Destroyed monuments erode the cultural identity of communities, weaken their sense of continuity with the past, and diminish opportunities for intergenerational transmission of knowledge. The economic repercussions—especially in countries where tourism relies on heritage—are equally significant. Furthermore, a nation's international reputation is shaped by how it preserves and protects its cultural legacy. Repeated acts of vandalism, if unchecked, may reinforce stereotypes of neglect or instability, hindering diplomatic and cultural cooperation. These broader consequences stress why the issue must be treated as a collective social concern, not merely as isolated criminal incidents.

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Preventive mechanisms emerge as a key area of application. This research shows that punitive legal frameworks, while necessary, are insufficient when isolated from social engagement. Community participation, education, and awareness campaigns are vital tools for fostering cultural ownership and pride. When communities perceive monuments as their own heritage rather than distant state property, they are more likely to defend them. Similarly, incorporating heritage education into school curricula can instill values of preservation from an early age. Technological tools such as digital monitoring, databases, and artificial intelligence can complement social mechanisms by offering practical solutions for rapid detection and intervention.

The analysis also highlights the importance of international collaboration in addressing heritage crimes. Vandalism and looting often occur in transnational contexts, especially when illegal antiquities are trafficked across borders. Mechanisms such as UNESCO conventions, bilateral agreements, and international policing must be strengthened to prevent the circulation of stolen artifacts. However, these efforts will only succeed if supported by local social structures that resist vandalism at its roots. A balance must therefore be struck between global governance and community-based strategies.

Looking forward, future research should explore the role of digital culture in shaping attitudes toward monuments. Social media, for instance, can amplify either destructive behavior (through the glorification of acts of vandalism) or protective behavior (through awareness campaigns and heritage promotion). Comparative research across societies that have successfully reduced vandalism and those where it persists could also provide valuable insights into best practices. Interdisciplinary collaboration between archaeology, sociology, criminology, and cultural studies will be essential to develop a holistic understanding of the issue.

The conclusion also stresses the theoretical contribution of a sociological approach. By employing criminological theories such as strain theory, social disorganization theory, and symbolic interactionism, this research moves beyond surface explanations and situates vandalism within broader dynamics of inequality, marginalization, and symbolic meaning. This theoretical grounding adds analytical depth and encourages a shift from reactive measures to proactive and structural solutions. It also helps policymakers and heritage institutions to understand that protecting monuments is inseparable from addressing wider social challenges.

At a practical level, this study calls for policymakers, educators, cultural institutions, and civil society to work together in designing strategies that combine law enforcement with cultural education. Community-based heritage initiatives, participatory archaeology, and inclusive cultural policies can create strong bonds between people and monuments. Moreover, addressing socio-economic inequalities that often underlie looting and illegal excavations is a preventive measure in itself. Heritage cannot be protected in isolation from social justice and sustainable development.

In sum, the sociology of archaeological vandalism opens a new horizon for understanding and addressing crimes against monuments. It challenges us to move away from seeing heritage protection as a purely technical or legal task and instead to recognize it as a social process that engages identities, values, and collective memory. The way societies treat their monuments reflects how they view themselves and their future. If monuments are preserved, cherished, and

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integrated into everyday life, they can serve as pillars of cultural resilience. If neglected or destroyed, they symbolize rupture and loss. The prevention of archaeological vandalism, therefore, is not only about protecting stones but about safeguarding the living heritage that binds communities together across time and space.

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