Preservation by record

written by Jeremy Huggett | 25/05/2015

Preservation by record is very much in the news at the moment in relation to attempts by ISIS to destroy cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria in places like Nineveh, Nimrud, Hatra, and the present threat to Palmyra. In some instances, the archaeological response has entailed excavations, in others it has been to begin to use crowd-sourced imagery to digitally reconstruct the heritage that has already been destroyed, or to use satellite and aerial imagery to map unrecorded and endangered sites.

Laser scanning at Merv
(original by CyArk, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Emma Cunliffe, from the *Endangered Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa* (EAMENA) project, has suggested that "in some extreme, and particularly devastating, cases, the records may be the only thing left of a culture, in which case we owe it to them to preserve something, anything". Hard to argue with that, and the article goes on to suggest that one approach to preservation of these sites is the use of archaeological technology to record monuments in high resolution in those areas which are still accessible (Foyle 2015).

But what are we doing when we record a site? Do we risk exaggerating the value of the record by over-emphasising what it is capable of through under-representing its shortcomings? Is recording not determined – and hence restricted – by the research questions, whereas a focus on the need to preserve raises questions about what is being preserved and whether the technologies are up to the job being asked of them? Are these technologies in effect doing little more than driving data gathering largely within a vacuum? We've certainly been here before. 'Preservation by record' is a term that has been frequently used in relation to the records resulting from archaeological excavation, survey and recording of sites threatened with damage or destruction and which subsequently which stand as proxy for it. In theory, these records remain available into the distant

future to allow the site to be interpreted and reconstructed at a later date through these descriptions of field observations. But the reality is that more and more data are collected about more and more threatened sites, while examples in which these data are re-examined, analysed, re-used and reinterpreted to reconstruct these sites are still quite rare. The value of this approach, common though not uncontested in the UK since the 1980s, is for the most part arguably unproven.

And yet 'preservation by record' lives on in the perception that digital data point clouds captured from historic sites can be seen as proxies for the sites they represent. The CyArk organisation, for example, is "on a mission to save these cultural heritage sites digitally before more are ravaged by war, terrorism, arson, urban sprawl, climate change, earthquakes, floods, and other threats". Ambitious, commendable, certainly – but can it seriously be claimed that laser scanning a site, at whatever resolution, can in any sense 'save' a site? A technologically-derived dataset is captured and retained, but, just as with excavation records, we know that these data are a poor proxy for the original structures, and that the particular perspective they capture is partial, tool-bound and, for the most part, lacking in interpretation. Nor is the value claimed for these data easily demonstrable. For instance, Cyark suggests that its scan of the Kasubi Royal Tombs (Uganda) prior to a fire in 2010 means that the model can be used for reconstruction following the disaster. Other than a reference to extensive documentation, the UNESCO description emphasises that it is the continuing practise of traditional architectural craftsmanship in the locality that enables the building to be reconstructed rather than specifically the existence of a digital three-dimensional record. The absence of such a record is certainly no barrier to reconstruction or renovation: for example, there is no 3D scan of the interior of Glasgow School of Art's iconic Mackintosh Library which was destroyed by fire last year, although there is an extensive public photographic record. Would future reconstruction be significantly aided by a 3D point cloud surface in addition to the extant plans and photographs? And what would be the limitations of such a record? Are we over-promising what can be delivered?

As Larry Rothfield has recently observed:

> "It should be clear … that what we lose when we are left with mere records rather than the things themselves is not just the materiality of the things but the knowledge that materiality may hold. A hi-res photograph captures only the visible and only certain aspects of the visible. It is much better than nothing but not a perfect substitute, regardless of whether one values authenticity."

Here, though, the question is not so much about authenticity, rather a concern about the way in which the digital data are presented and the claims often made for them: that they provide a clear and unambiguous view of the past. Somehow, simply possessing a georeferenced 3D point cloud seems to be seen as sufficient for a neutral, objective record of a site or of an object. If these data are captured without serious consideration for their subsequent interpretation and use, then their value is significantly reduced, in part through a failure to recognise their limitations. And, whether recognised or not, that interpretation starts even before the recording is begun, while those wielding the laser scanners (or cameras for image-based modelling, for that matter) interpret whilst they record. Simply recording the data in the hope that they will be useful at some point in the future denies the contingent, situated and partial nature of the data. As has been argued in the context of a debate about the more traditional forms of preservation by record:

> "The presumption that archaeology can operate simply as a descriptive and recording procedure denies the centrality of research to the discipline and removes the interpretative demand to write history … when this occurs the prime purpose of archaeology is lost." (Andrews, Barrett and Lewis 2000, 527).

Something is indeed better than nothing, but we need to be clearer about what that something actually is and what it is capable of representing.

References

G. Andrews, J. Barrett & J. Lewis 2000 'Interpretation not record: the practice of archaeology', *Antiquity* 74, 525-30).

J. Foyle 2015 'Is it time to rethink our ideas about preserving world heritage?', *Financial Times*, May 22, 2015.