

## Book Review: A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace by Lynn Meskell

Patricia M. Muhammad

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Muhammad, Patricia M. () "Book Review: A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace by Lynn Meskell," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 96 : Iss. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol96/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

**Meskeil, Lynn. *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace*. Oxford University Press, 2018. 400 pages. Paperback, \$19.95.**

War and upheaval have been a part of human history, just like peacetime and international cooperation. It is only in the aftermath of armed conflict, where the government and the most vulnerable stand to see the devastation that humanity has implemented and incurred, whether it is the loss of life or personal property. However, the international community evolved to recognize the necessity for preserving historic sites and artifacts. The League of Nations is recognized by many experts as the first international body in modern history whose primary concern was for international law and human rights as a global issue. According to Lynn Meskeil, Professor of Humanities and Sciences in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University, the League of Nations and the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), UNESCO's predecessor, were the primary international bodies concerned with the archeological preservation of ancient sites—beginning with those of Upper Egypt.

*A Future in Ruins* begins with the professor's candid discussion of the theory of "one-worldism" and how the United Nations as an instrumental body, within the context of archaeological preservation, embodied not only those of various disciplines but of a number of nation-states to achieve these worldly endeavors. The first portion of the text primarily discusses the conundrum of preserving the Abu Simbel ancient ruins of Lower Egypt. Meskeil details the conflict among nations regarding funding pledges but also allocation. The interested parties present their endeavors as a form of humanitarian work, achieving that which the locals were unable to do themselves without the proper guidance of this global body. She is careful to note that the colonial overtones regarding this project, as the delegations primarily hail from European nations and each would seek to *carve* out a portion of artifacts to be on display in museums in their respective countries. Though interested parties possessed the common goal of removing and raising the site from the inevitable floodwaters of the Nile River, each had

competing opinions as to the most important strategy. These included engineers, scientists, and archeologists all with competing industry-specific interests. The author discusses the international community's utopian goals as member states of UNESCO, into primarily an "intergovernmental organization" where political clout is the primary factor as to how properly execute preservation of historic sites were to be made. The professor thus guides the reader from "internationalism" to politics, to "technocracy" and throughout these projects, the inevitable bureaucracy which nearly endangers preservation of these ruins.

From Egypt to India, to Paris, France, and Turkey, Meskell outlines the ever-evolving contentious nature in which these and other nation-states vie for the World Heritage Committee to inscribe sites within their respective borders onto the globally recognized protective list. The author carefully researches records of meetings comprised of delegations and how UNESCO became more pliable due to internal pressure from member states with greater clout to list some sites over others. She later delves into the notion of conflict as it pertains to two interested parties within the same region, that of the holy site of Jerusalem and archaic buildings of Aleppo, Syria. The professor outlines two evolutions, one within the nature of the sites to be protected from being ancient to that of being a memory of conflict; resulting in a bureaucratic war between those who proffer and other countries who would object due to the offensive implications of such listing. The second is what Meskell characterizes as a devolvement of the purpose of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO and the United Nations itself, to help facilitate respect for other cultures, emphasize education while fostering international cooperation to accomplish common goals. Professor Meskell continues to navigate the global community's response to *potential* natural disasters that could destroy historic ruins and their proactive approach for nation-states to prepare for an adequate and timely response to preserve these sites, the World Heritage Committee provides a list of ruins through nomination to UNESCO for consideration.

Although the author's text is not primarily a legal one, she does mention the tiers of anthropological conflict within the context of the 1972 World Heritage Convention and the United Nations charter. Specifically, Meskell mentions the issue of territorial jurisdiction and each nation state's right to self-determination though each most likely relies on the assistance of the international community in order to facilitate the herculean task of preserving revered sites by means of excavation, relocation, or restoration. The inevitability of future conflict becomes the undergirding theme for UNESCO's purpose to preserve historic sites which often influences the World Heritage Committee's consideration of placing particular ruins on its list.

Lastly, Meskell focuses on the International Criminal Court's (ICC) use of jurisdiction to prosecute war crimes. However, these are not crimes against humanity which obviously fall within the subject matter jurisdiction as outlined in the Rome Statute. These war crimes are framed as "heritage crimes"; the wanton destruction of historic sites within a nation-state that has availed itself of the jurisdiction of the ICC; thus allowing *individuals* to be charged under U.N. Convention and international law. The author emphasizes a continued disparity in which the accused hails from a less influential nation-state under the guise of further UNESCO's ideals, while member states who are Superpowers evade prosecution though they fall within the similar jurisdictional reach of the ICC.

*A Future in Ruins* provides a critical examination of the international community's efforts to salvage revered historic sites and the development and regression of the primarily recognized mechanism, UNESCO, to further these worthy endeavors in the future despite its own bureaucratic and political limitations. Professor Meskell skillfully summarizes her research and detailed accounts after each chapter to guide the reader through the gravity of the material she presents. This book is suited for students and practitioners of diplomatic relations, public international law, archeology, and political science.

Patricia M. Muhammad, B.Sc., J.D.  
Attorney/Consultant (International Law, Human Rights, Civil Rights)  
Researcher (Legal History)