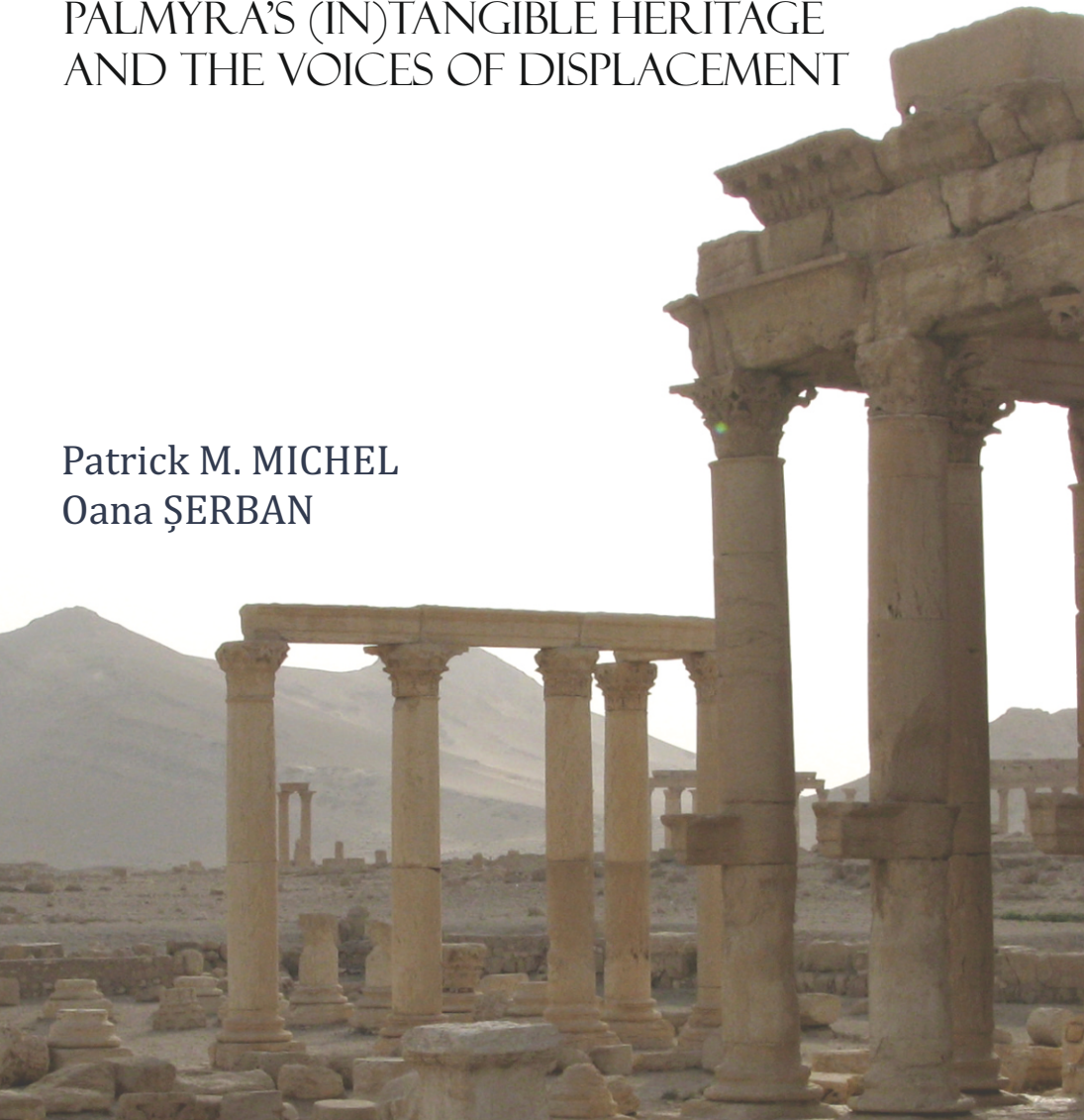


# IMAGINING HOMELAND

PALMYRA'S (IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE  
AND THE VOICES OF DISPLACEMENT

Patrick M. MICHEL  
Oana ȘERBAN

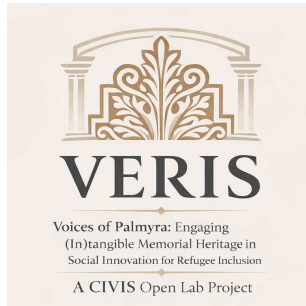


# IMAGINING HOMELAND: PALMYRA'S (IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE AND THE VOICES OF DISPLACEMENT

This volume is a monograph of the virtual reconstruction projects of the Temple of Baalshamin, one of the significant forms of tangible heritage belonging to the Syrian community, destroyed as a result of terrorist operations. The virtual reconstruction is documented, through a series of workshops with Syrian communities (refugees, displaced persons, and individuals subjected to forced or voluntary migration), as a process that supports social inclusion and the reconstruction of cultural identity.

The CIVIS Open Lab VERIS project (*Voices of Palmyra: Engaging (In)tangible Memorial Heritage in Social Innovation for Refugee Inclusion*), developed by the University of Lausanne, the University of Bucharest, and the University of Glasgow (through Professors Patrick M. Michel, Oana Șerban, and Brittnee Leysen), in conjunction with the SMOC project (*Sustainable Management in Cultural Organizations*), developed by the UNESCO Chair for Interculturality, Good Governance and Sustainable Development, hosted activities that involved interactions between vulnerable target groups and professionals addressing the biopolitical and memorial implications of the visual reconstruction of destroyed heritage forms.

This album, in turn, constitutes a visual archive of the VERIS project, whose aim is to create a connection between the (in)tangible cultural heritage of the Temple of Baalshamin and the civilization of Palmyra Civilization, on the one hand, and the narratives of refugees from the Middle East whose countries have been affected by wars, on the other hand, in order to strengthen the social inclusion of these vulnerable non-European groups across Europe and to raise awareness of the essential role of culture in building bridges and connections between communities marked by historical trauma.



This album is supported by the Open Lab CIVIS Project **VERIS** – *Voices of Palmyra: Engaging (In)tangible Memorial Heritage in Social Innovation for Refugee Inclusion*.

This album was developed in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair on Interculturality, Good Governance and Sustainable Development, within the SMOC – *Sustainable Management in Cultural Organizations* project.

This album is meant to be a research-based project narrative.

**Unil.**



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# IMAGINING HOMELAND: PALMYRA'S (IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE AND THE VOICES OF DISPLACEMENT

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Patrick M. MICHEL  
Oana ȘERBAN



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(Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>)

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# CONTENT

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|                                                                                                                             |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| I. Foreword. Curating Memories, Lives and Identities: a Project to Share Alive Endangered Heritage (PATRICK M. MICHEL) .... | 7  |
| Why Palmyra? .....                                                                                                          | 7  |
| The Collart-Palmyre Project of the University of Lausanne. A Genesis ....                                                   | 9  |
| FAIR Principles .....                                                                                                       | 14 |
| A Geography and Chronology of Work on (In)Tangible Cultural Heritage .....                                                  | 14 |
| <i>Voix de Palmyre</i> Programme .....                                                                                      | 16 |
| Collaborative Development of Arabic-Language Teaching Materials ...                                                         | 18 |
| Creating Embroidery Workshops (2020-) .....                                                                                 | 19 |
| Tangible and Intangible Heritage .....                                                                                      | 22 |
| The Origin of the Pattern .....                                                                                             | 23 |
| Embroidery as “Connective Thread” and “Agent of Cultural Memory” .....                                                      | 24 |
| Sustainability and Cultural Heritage .....                                                                                  | 26 |
| The Series of Workshops (2020-2025) .....                                                                                   | 27 |
| UNDP-Syria (2020) .....                                                                                                     | 27 |
| Dealing with the Past – DwP .....                                                                                           | 29 |
| Azraq Camp Activities with InZone from the University of Geneva (2020-) .....                                               | 29 |
| Cultural Heritage Programme (2020-) .....                                                                                   | 30 |
| Field Visit to Petra (2025) .....                                                                                           | 30 |
| The Day After (2022, 2024) .....                                                                                            | 32 |
| Établissement Vaudois d’Accueil des Migrants – EVAM (2023-2024) ...                                                         | 33 |
| Mishwar (2025) .....                                                                                                        | 34 |
| Jesuit Refugee Service in Bucharest (2025) .....                                                                            | 35 |
| References .....                                                                                                            | 36 |

II. Curating Concept and Methodology ..... 39

Curating Concept ..... 39

Methodology ..... 41

    Social Impact of Research ..... 42

    Inspiration ..... 43

    Consent of the Participants ..... 44

III. Events and Works of Art: (In)Tangible Cultural Heritage ..... 47

    UNDP-Syria Collaboration, Syria, 2020 ..... 47

    Azraq Camp, Jordan, 2022 ..... 49

    Idlib, Syria, 2022 ..... 61

    Azraq Camp, Jordan, 2023 ..... 63

    Lausanne Collaboration with EVAM, Switzerland, 2024 ..... 65

    Idlib, Syria, 2024 ..... 71

    Nahr el Bared Camp (Tripoli), Lebanon, 2025 ..... 75

    Azraq Camp, Jordan, 2025 ..... 86

    Bucharest, Romania, 2025 ..... 91

    Field Visit to Petra, Jordan with InZone, 2025 ..... 110

IV. Afterword. Capital for Curating Memories, Lives and Identities:  
Biopolitical Insights on Virtual Reconstruction of Endangered  
Heritage (OANA ȘERBAN) ..... 119

Reterritorializing Memory: from Biopolitics to Necropolitics and Back.  
The Bare Life Beyond (In)Tangible Heritage ..... 120

(Anti)Modern Perspectives on Overcoming Uprootedness: Embroidery  
and Virtual Heritage as Biopolitical Art ..... 124

References ..... 130

Acknowledgments ..... 133

Illustration credits ..... 135

# I.

## FOREWORD. CURATING MEMORIES, LIVES AND IDENTITIES: A PROJECT TO SHARE ALIVE ENDANGERED HERITAGE

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### Why Palmyra?

The site, located in the Syrian steppe, was one of the most significant urban centres of the ancient Near East (Raja, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. Known as Tadmor in Semitic languages, Palmyra rose to prominence as a major caravan city strategically positioned at the crossroads between the Roman Empire, Persia, India, and Arabia. Its geographical location rendered it a critical node within long-distance trade networks, facilitating the circulation of silk, spices, and other luxury commodities. From the Hellenistic period onward, and particularly under Roman rule, Palmyra developed into a complex urban and cultural centre characterized by intense mobility, exchange, and interaction.

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and most notably between the first and third centuries CE, the city flourished as a

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<sup>1</sup> Giving a bibliography on Palmyra is not an easy task as many publications have been produced. For a synthesis you could refer to Rubina Raja, 2022. For a recent contribution on Palmyra and Heritage in Conflict, see for example Sylvie Crogiez-Pétrequin, 2025.

pluralistic urban environment. It functioned as a space of sustained cultural encounter, hosting diverse populations and religious communities, including Judaism, and accommodating multiple linguistic traditions. Although formally incorporated into the Roman imperial system, Palmyra retained a degree of political and administrative autonomy, expressed through its own civic institutions and local governance structures. This status contributed to the emergence of a distinctive Palmyrene identity that negotiated imperial affiliation and local traditions.

Palmyra's tangible culture reflects this entanglement of influences, combining Greco-Roman, Aramaic, Persian, and Arab elements in its artistic, religious, and linguistic expressions. Architecturally, the city stands out for its synthesis of classical Greco-Roman forms with Near Eastern spatial and symbolic traditions (Sommer, 2020). The archaeological remains include monumental colonnaded avenues, the Agora, funerary tower tombs, Roman-style theatres, and, most notably, the Temple of Bel. Dedicated to the first century CE, the Temple of Bel constituted one of the most significant religious complexes in the ancient Near East, embodying a profound syncretism between local deities and Roman religious practices and serving as a focal point of communal and ritual life.

From a heritage studies perspective, Palmyra's significance lies not only in its classical phase but also in its *longue durée* of occupation, transformation, and reuse. The city did not vanish following the decline of Rome. Christian communities are attested in later periods, reappropriating and adapting earlier monumental structures. During the Islamic era, the Temple of Bel was converted into a mosque, while archaeological evidence points to continued urban activities, including artisanal workshops, underscoring the site's dynamic and layered history.

In the present day, Palmyra is inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized for its outstanding archaeological value and for the exceptional fusion of architectural and artistic traditions it embodies. Despite the extensive damage inflicted by recent armed conflict, the site remains a powerful testament to cultural resilience, historical continuity, and cross-cultural interaction. At the same time, Palmyra represents a major challenge for contemporary heritage policy, raising critical questions about conservation, reconstruction, memory, and the political instrumentalization of the past in post-conflict contexts (Gillot, 2025; see also David & Schmitt, 2020).

### **The Collart-Palmyre Project of the University of Lausanne. A Genesis**

The University of Lausanne's Collart-Palmyra project was initiated in 2017, in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the archaeological site of Palmyra (Michel, 2019). Conceived within a heritage studies perspective, the project responds to the urgent need to preserve, reactivate, and critically engage with archival materials following the loss of monumental heritage. The Temple of Baalshamin, dedicated to the "Lord of the Heavens", had been excavated between 1954 and 1956 by the Swiss archaeologist Paul Collart. Today, Collart's archival corpus, preserved at the University of Lausanne, constitutes the most comprehensive and authoritative source for the documentation and potential reconstruction of the Baalshamin sanctuary, which has since been entirely destroyed.

The archive comprises an extensive and heterogeneous body of material, including photographs, drawings, architectural plans, and excavation notebooks, all of which have been preserved and mobilized for research and heritage purposes. Between 2003 and 2004, the Swiss Institute for the Conservation of Photography

(ISCP) digitized more than 3,000 original flexible negatives produced by Paul Collart. The original negatives are currently housed in the archives of the University of Lausanne and are accessible online. In parallel, photographic prints have been preserved in albums meticulously compiled by Paul Collart with the assistance of his wife, Madeleine, highlighting the personal and material dimensions of archaeological knowledge production.

Funding for the initial phase of the project was provided by *Memoriav*, the Association for the Preservation of Swiss Audiovisual Heritage, with additional support from the Swiss Confederation. Beyond the photographic documentation, Collart's archives also contain scientific material relating to archaeological work conducted in Greece, as well as excavations at Baalbek in Lebanon and at the Baalshamin sanctuary in Palmyra, Syria. All original materials – including albums, negatives, excavation notebooks, and plans – are stored in controlled conditions, protected from light, catalogued at the University of Lausanne, and made accessible for consultation. The systematic indexation of the archive was carried out by P. Michel and his team over two major phases, between 2003–2004 and 2017–2020.

Following the destruction of the Temple of Baalshamin by explosives on 23 August 2015, the Collart archive has acquired an unprecedented heritage value, having become the sole surviving source for the documentation of the sanctuary. Its significance is particularly pronounced in relation to prospective restoration initiatives, including anastylosis, the identification of dispersed or displaced stone blocks, and digital or physical reconstruction processes, notably through the use of 3D technologies. In this sense, the archive functions not merely as a repository of past archaeological practice, but as an active agent in post-destruction heritage strategies.

The digitization process of the archive involved the systematic scanning and post-processing of visual materials. Best practices and established standards were followed wherever possible, while maintaining a flexible and adaptive approach in response to the heterogeneous nature of the documents. All materials have been indexed within a dedicated database accessible online via Tiresias.unil.ch, the database of the Institute of Archaeology and Ancient Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Lausanne, thereby ensuring long-term accessibility, scholarly reuse, and the continued transmission of endangered heritage knowledge.

Building upon the archaeological archives preserved at the University of Lausanne, a three-dimensional model of the Temple of Baalshamin was produced in 2018 in collaboration with ICONEM<sup>2</sup>. This phase of the Collart–Palmyre Project was grounded in the principles of virtual archaeology as a recognized heritage practice, adhering to international standards that emphasize methodological rigour, transparency, and scholarly accountability.

From the outset, the 3D reconstruction was conceived not as a definitive restitution of the destroyed monument, nor as a substitute for its physical presence, but as a critical digital surrogate. Its purpose is not to recreate the Temple of Baalshamin “as it was”, but to document, interpret, and make explicit the processes through which archaeological knowledge about the sanctuary has been produced. In this sense, the model foregrounds the interpretative nature of reconstruction and acknowledges the epistemological uncertainties inherent in any attempt to re-materialise lost heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> This phase of the project was financed by ALIPH Foundation, the Foundation for the University of Lausanne, the La Fondation d’aide sociale et culturelle (FASC) and the Federal Office of Culture in Switzerland.



In order to ensure methodological transparency, the research underpinning the 3D reconstruction was made publicly available through the online database of the Technische Universität Darmstadt, developed by the Digital Design Unit and known as the *Reconstruction Argumentation Method*. In compliance with the London Charter and the Seville Principles for Virtual Archaeology, this platform documents the sources, hypotheses, and interpretative choices that informed the modelling process (Michel, 2023). By rendering visible the chain of reasoning behind the reconstruction, the project enhances the intelligibility, critical assessment, and long-term credibility of the digital model.

The 3D reconstruction thus functions as a reflexive research device rather than as a finished or authoritative object. It materialises uncertainty instead of concealing it, and invites scholarly debate by exposing the limits and assumptions of archaeological interpretation. Within this framework, the digital model operates simultaneously as a tool for documentation, a platform for hypothesis testing, and a medium for the transmission of endangered heritage knowledge.

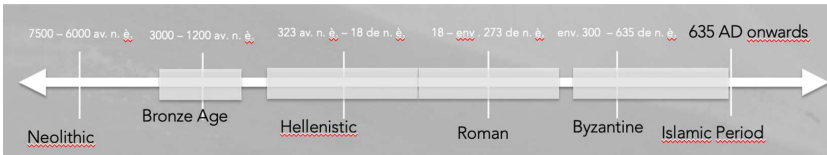
In line with open heritage and knowledge-sharing approaches, the project relied on open-source online viewers such as Potree<sup>3</sup> enabling third parties to reuse and extend the functionalities developed during the reconstruction process. The same coherent dataset was deployed across multiple platforms, including Sketchfab (see Figure 16), as well as Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality environments. This multi-platform dissemination strategy facilitated the production of complementary tools serving both scientific research and cultural mediation<sup>4</sup>, while ensuring interoperability and long-term accessibility<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Potree is a free open-source WebGL based point cloud renderer for large point clouds.

<sup>4</sup> The first VR experience was created by Ubisoft on a 3D model generated in collaboration between the University of Lausanne and ICONEM in 2018.

To preserve and communicate the multiple historical layers of Palmyra, a chronological timeline was integrated into the interactive web viewer dedicated to the Temple of Baalshamin (<https://interactive-baalshamin.unil.ch/>). This interface provides access to successive three-dimensional reconstructions of the sanctuary, allowing users to explore the monument diachronically (see Michel, 2022, 129–144) and to apprehend processes of transformation, reuse, and destruction over time<sup>6</sup>.



The chronology of different eras attested in Palmyra, since the Neolithic onwards  
© UNIL – Collart-Palmyre Project

By emphasizing temporal depth rather than a single moment of architectural “completion”, the digital environment resists narratives of a fixed or singular past.

In post-conflict contexts, where physical reconstruction is often entangled with political agendas, identity claims, and processes of memorialisation, such digital surrogates offer an alternative mode of engagement with loss. The Baalshamin 3D model does

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Later, a new VR experience was created as a collaboration between Archeovision and the University of Lausanne. Finally, the AR was created by NowHere Media for the University of Lausanne.

<sup>5</sup> Following FAIR Principles, see below.

<sup>6</sup> The reconstitutions are based on archaeological evidences. No reconstruction of the monument as it could have been in Antiquity has been provide. We published through 3D models the archaeological remains corresponding to each historical period of time. The tools allow however to understand the evolution of the Sanctuary's morphology through centuries.

not function as a prescriptive blueprint for rebuilding, but as a space for documentation, reflection, and dialogue. By articulating continuity and rupture, presence and absence, it situates digital heritage as a critical intermediary between archaeological research, ethical responsibility, and collective memory.

### *FAIR Principles*

We sought to ensure compliance with FAIR principles. Using the *Tiresias* database from the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Sciences of the University of Lausanne facilitates the archive to be: *Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable*. The documents and (meta)data are, in fact, searchable and findable online. There is a clear policy in place to define access rights, and standard formats are used. These formats also include clear conditions for citing and reusing data.

### *A Geography and Chronology of Work on (In)Tangible Cultural Heritage*

2015: Destruction of the Baalshamin Temple by Daesh (so-called Islamic State)

2017: Launch of the Collart-Palmyre Project

2018: First 3D model of the Baalshamin Temple (with ICONEM)

2018: *Age Old Cities*<sup>7</sup> Exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, and later at the Smithsonian, Washington, DC

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<sup>7</sup> Available online at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20181010-middle-east-matters-virtual-reality-palmyra-aleppo-yemen-landmines-lebanon-cedar-trees>, last time accessed on November 18, 2025.

- 2019: Article by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet (Schmidt-Colinet, 2019, 477-85) on textiles in Palmyra
- 2020: UNDP Embroidery Activity in Syria
- 2021: *Zoom Around Palmyra* with Università di comunicazione e lingue – IULM, Milan
- 2022: Workshops in Azraq Camp, Jordan
- 2022: Workshops in Idlib, Syria
- 2023: *Voix de Palmyre* Exhibition at Musée romain de Nyon, Switzerland
- 2023: Workshops in Azraq Camp, Jordan
- 2023: Workshops with migrants in Lausanne – EVAM, Switzerland
- 2024: Workshops in Idlib, Syria
- 2025: Workshops in Nahr el Bared, Lebanon
- 2025: Workshops in Bucharest, Romania
- 2025: Field trip with Azraq students in Petra for the *Cultural Heritage Programme* with IPFO and InZone.



### **“Voix de Palmyre” Programme**

The social and educational programme *Voix de Palmyre* was launched in 2023<sup>8</sup> alongside an exhibition at the Musée romain de Nyon (MNR)<sup>9</sup>, Switzerland.

Initiated several years after the beginning of the digitization process and the production of 3D models, the project progressively revealed the need to move beyond a strictly academic framework. Sharing this heritage with local communities, therefore, became both a responsibility and a central objective.

The creation of a digital twin of the Baalshamin sanctuary enabled the preservation and transmission of the memory of the monument's appearance across time. However, rather than freezing this memory, the programme sought to integrate the living, personal narratives associated with the site. *Voix de Palmyre* thus focuses on the voices of communities connected to Palmyra, acknowledging that the monument and its landscape are embedded in multiple layers of meaning, imagination, and lived experience.

Understanding the social significance of Palmyra required listening to individual stories and exploring how the site contributes to identity construction. In this perspective, the programme aimed to support displaced people, migrants, and refugees in the preservation of cultural memory, recognizing their role as active custodians of heritage rather than passive recipients.

To reach refugee communities, partnerships with local stakeholders – including NGOs and academic institutions – were

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<sup>8</sup> Educational activities were developed in the Project since 2019, but this specific programme was born and named in 2023. This phase of the project was possible thanks to the support of the University of Lausanne, *Dynamisé par Interface* programme and the Fondation du Domaine de Villette.

<sup>9</sup> Available online at: <https://www.mrn.ch/expositions/voix-de-palmyre/>, last time accessed on November 18, 2025.

essential. Developed through a collaboration between the University of Lausanne and InZone (University of Geneva), and carried out with the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (IFPO), the *Cultural Heritage Programme* was specifically designed for Syrian refugees. It explores the lost heritage of Palmyra and its connections with neighbouring Jordanian sites, engaging participants in reflections on cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging within the host country.

At the European level, and supported by the CIVIS European Alliance, the VERIS – *Voices of Palmyra Programme* was launched in 2025 through a partnership between the University of Lausanne, the University of Bucharest, and the University of Glasgow, with the support of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

Workshops promoted a shared approach to the past as a means of overcoming social and identity-based divisions. By working on historical narratives that are sufficiently distant to constitute common ground, participants were encouraged to engage in dialogue beyond contemporary fractures. In parallel, educational activities aligned with UNDP Syria's Dealing with the Past programme (2020) focused on prominent female figures in Syrian history, contributing to women's empowerment and self-esteem.

To ensure accessibility and relevance, educational materials were produced in Arabic through a participatory translation process involving workshop participants themselves. This approach facilitated a more accurate use of vocabulary and concepts and enhanced the direct assimilation of content. Within a collaboration with IULM University in Milan, participants produced their own visual interpretations of Palmyra, later compiled into an Arabic booklet used in various workshops.

The integration of participants' narratives extended beyond printed materials. Testimonials collected were incorporated alongside

texts and images produced by residents themselves. These voices were also embedded within an immersive virtual reality experience.

### *Collaborative Development of Arabic-Language Teaching Materials*

In continuity with the conceptual framework outlined in the previous chapter, this section examines the practical and methodological implementation of the social and educational objectives of the *Voix de Palmyre* programme. Particular attention is given to the development of participatory educational tools and to the ways in which heritage knowledge was co-produced with participants.

Educational materials accessible in Arabic were developed in order to support workshop activities and facilitate engagement with historical and cultural content. The active involvement of participants made it possible to identify appropriate terminology, vocabulary, and conceptual references, ensuring that the translated materials were both accurate and contextually meaningful. This collaborative process supported a more direct assimilation of content during the workshops.

Within this methodological framework, and as part of an earlier collaboration with IULM University in Milan, the workshop *Zoom Around Palmyra* was launched in 2021. The workshop introduced participants to simple, open-source digital tools for the creation of photo montages. Under the guidance of an art therapist, participants produced their own visual interpretations of Palmyra (see Figures 13-15 and 18). These visual productions were compiled into an Arabic-language booklet, which served as a pedagogical support in workshops conducted in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon.

As the programme expanded, the production of educational materials evolved to incorporate participants' own narratives and perspectives. In the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan (from 2020 onwards)

and in Syria (2022), texts and images created by participants were integrated into a second edition of the booklet. While the initial version established a shared historical framework concerning ancient Palmyra and the sanctuary of Baalshamin, subsequent editions reflected the lived experiences and interpretations of residents, situating heritage knowledge within contemporary social contexts.

In parallel, these narratives were integrated into an immersive virtual reality experience dedicated to the sanctuary of Baalshamin<sup>10</sup>.

Testimonials collected in Azraq and in Syria were embedded within the virtual environment, allowing users to encounter community voices directly during the virtual tour. By situating these narratives within the 3D digital reconstruction, the immersive experience operates as a form of narrative mediation, in which tangible heritage, memory, and personal experience intersect.

This approach highlights the potential of digital heritage environments not only as tools for visual reconstruction but also as platforms for inclusive heritage-making, dialogue, and the transmission of cultural memory.

### *Creating Embroidery Workshops (2020-)*

According to Elisabeth Williams (2008) from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, imported silks, in Palmyra, entered a thriving textile industry that had developed remarkable technical sophistication from an early period. The city's artisans were well known for their weaving, dyeing, and embroidery, and the integration of Han silks (China, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE) into local production raises compelling

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<sup>10</sup> In collaboration with the MA students from the University of Lausanne: Camilla Proto, Anne-Caroline Niklaus and Gabriel Nicolas Verdes Bellon, and thanks to the support of Nadia Spang Bovey.



questions about how technology, aesthetics, and economic value shaped Palmyrene tastes<sup>11</sup>. In addition to imported silk, locally woven silk was also produced and used.

Stauffer (2000, 247-251) suggests that the presence of both gummed and ungummed silk among the finds at Palmyra indicates that Chinese producers were exporting raw silk specifically intended for further weaving and finishing in Palmyrene workshops (see also Williams, 2008, 10). This evidence reinforces the distinctly Han origin of many of the silks discovered in the city, a point further supported by parallels with Han-period textile remains in China (Xia, 1983). During the height of trade between East and West – particularly under Augustus and his successors, when both the Roman Empire and Han China experienced unprecedented political stability and economic expansion – luxury goods such as silk travelled along long-distance routes that linked the two great empires.

These textiles were commonly used in the daily life of the inhabitants of Palmyra; they accompanied them also in the afterlife. Linen fabrics came from the East and were decorated with dyed wool coming from the Mediterranean coast. Some of the wool fabrics were combined with silk, which was later identified as coming all the way from China.

The decorated textiles recovered from tombs such as that of Elahbel in Palmyra<sup>12</sup> (103 AD) raise the question of whether their prestige is derived from their visual beauty, the difficulty of obtaining them, or the cultural meanings attached to foreign materials used

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<sup>11</sup> A warm thanks to Elisabeth Williams (2008) from MFA – Boston for sharing her knowledge with the authors.

<sup>12</sup> According to Schmidt-Colinet 2000, 159 sq. in the tomb were found: 34 linen pieces, 22 pieces of cotton, 45 pieces of wool, and 31 silk fragments of multiple techniques (Han Damask and plain weave). Han Damask is defined by Williams as warp-faced tabbies with warp floats (Williams 2008).

in funerary contexts. The embroidered motifs – often flowers, clouds, and other designs typical of Han decorative repertoire – were not only admired for their visual richness but also for the tactile effects created by their combination of embroidery and plain-weave grounds. Similar textiles in Han-period burials confirm the eastern origins of these techniques and motifs, making clear that the silks wrapped around Palmyrene elites had travelled far, carrying with them the artistic traditions of Han China and assuming new layers of significance within the social, economic, and ritual life of Palmyra.

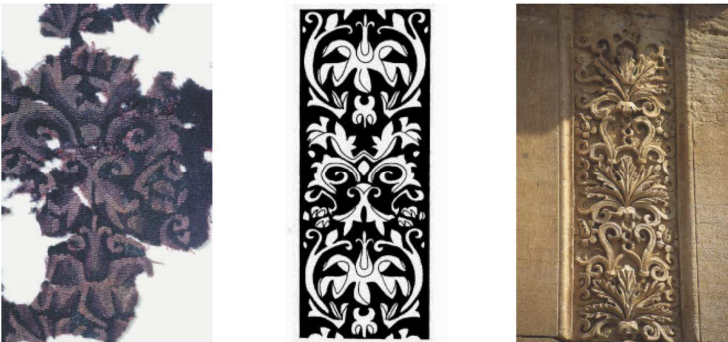
In addressing issues of cultural memory preservation, the members of the Collart-Palmyre Project have taken into account the importance of linking tangible and intangible heritage together using embroidery. As stated by Aksamija, embroidery “depicts personal history of migration, and creation process, which facilitates transcultural exchange. [...] [and these textiles] represent the iconographic and ornamental expressions of their respective civilization” (Future Heritage Lab, MIT). As Palmyra was on the Silk Road and as fabrics have been found in different tombs, the idea of developing an activity centred around this art and tradition was therefore especially relevant.

The embroidery activity was not a random choice. In fact, it was inspired by the antique tradition that Schmidt-Colinet (2019) explained. He showed the popularity of the Palmyra embroidery patterns during Antiquity, underlining the evolution of the patterns embroidered on the clothes. In particular, he suggests how the patterns were designed for the clothes carried by the living; then, out of fashion and popularity, they were copied on the sculpted clothes of the funerary busts and statues. These patterns became so popular that they were drawn and etched on the walls of the monuments as decorative motifs. The Collart-Palmyre Project's activity wished to echo this antique tradition. However, the approach was the opposite: we took the pattern from a

monument which does not exist anymore, and the design patterns of a merlon from the Baalshamin Temple were to be applied to textiles; thereby reactivating the memory and aura (symbolic resonance) of the pattern back to life. Working on such patterns directly linked the embroidery activity with the Syrian cultural heritage, which was key to the activity's success and overall relevance.

### *Tangible and Intangible Heritage*

While reflecting on the issue of preserving cultural memory, we came to the conclusion that intangible and tangible heritage should be combined. We decided to use ornamental designs from the destroyed Baalshamin Temple to produce embroidery patterns. As A. Schmidt-Colinet (2019, 479) has shown, the iconographic patterns of the ancient city of Palmyra were sometimes the same for architectural features and textile products.

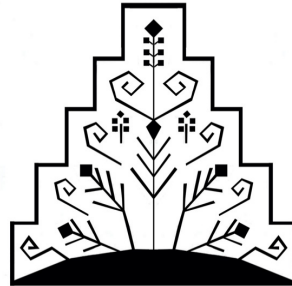


©A. Schmidt-Colinet (2019, 484)

We therefore produced models and canvases that are now used for embroidery in refugee camps and schools, and our Arabic booklet

serves as an educational resource containing a detailed explanation of an embroidery activity. Using such patterns for embroidery actively inspired a range of activities that consider tangible and intangible heritage. These activities demonstrate the value of the heritage of the Baalshamin Temple as part of Syria's collective past. The local embroidery tradition enables cultural expression through applied arts and helps to keep memory alive.

### *The Origin of the Pattern*



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The motif was created based on ornamental elements from the Temple of Baalshamin to provide a means of preserving and passing on cultural memory. While textile patterns were used to decorate monuments in ancient times, as stated by Schmidt-Colinet (2019), we propose using a vegetated merlon motif found in the Baalshamin sanctuary as an embroidery pattern. The motif alludes to a tree of life. This powerful symbol of rebirth and resilience is thus employed.

*Embroidery as “Connective Thread” and “Agent of Cultural Memory”*

The practice of embroidery constitutes a powerful mode of transmission of intangible cultural heritage, while simultaneously foregrounding the historically multicultural character of the ancient city of Palmyra. Situated at the crossroads of long-distance trade routes, Palmyra was a place where silk arrived from China and where sartorial practices were shaped by Persian influences. In this sense, embroidery may be understood not merely as a decorative craft but as a historically embedded practice that reflects cultural circulation, exchange, and hybridity. As a social and cultural activity, it also emerges as a meaningful starting point for the reconstruction of social cohesion in contexts marked by displacement and rupture.

This perspective resonates with recent curatorial and heritage research that examines embroidery and weaving as strategies for maintaining cultural memory in exile.

“I am examining embroidery and weaving as a strategy for maintaining cultural memory in exile”.

“Embroidery plays a critical role in expressing and preserving cultural identity and heritage by serving as a ‘living archive,’ a ‘connective thread’ to heritage, and a way for communities to ‘tell stories about their creators’ and their ‘collective identity’ through its traditions and symbolism. It creates a physical connection to the past and offers a way to maintain and communicate cultural memory across generations” (Alida Jekabson, MAD – New-York, curatorial assistant, 2025).

As articulated by Alida Jekabson, embroidery plays a critical role in the expression and preservation of cultural identity by functioning as a “living archive” and a “connective thread” linking individuals to their heritage. Through its traditions, motifs, and symbolic repertoires, embroidery enables communities to narrate stories about their makers and to articulate a shared collective identity. In

this way, the embroidered object establishes a tangible connection to the past while offering a means to maintain and communicate cultural memory across generations (Jekabson, 2025).

From a technical perspective, embroidery consists of decorating fabric or similar materials through stitches executed with a needle and thread. These stitches may be combined to produce a wide range of figurative or abstract motifs, including representations of animals, plants, human figures, and symbolic forms. While embroidery allows for considerable variation in materials – such as metallic threads, pearls, beads, feathers, or sequins – it relies on a relatively limited repertoire of fundamental stitches, including chain, loop, blanket, and satin stitches. This combination of technical simplicity and expressive richness has contributed to the durability of embroidery as a handicraft practice across cultures and historical periods.

However, within the framework of participatory heritage practices, the significance of embroidery extends beyond its technical and aesthetic dimensions. The notion of a “connective thread” becomes particularly salient through lived experiences in embroidery workshops, where the act of stitching positions the practitioner as an active agent of cultural memory. These shared spaces reveal how embroidery transcends verbal narration, activating social bonds through gestures, rhythms, and forms of proximity that are often silent yet deeply expressive. Memory, in this context, is not only represented but embodied: personal recollections are interwoven with those of others, producing a collective fabric of experience.

Through the materiality of thread and textile, embroidery enables memory to circulate between individuals and across generations. The thread does not merely bind pieces of fabric; it connects individual trajectories with shared histories, giving rise to relational forms of remembrance and to genuine social relationships. In this sense, embroidery operates as a form of living heritage, in which cultural memory is continuously produced, negotiated, and transmitted

through practice. Rather than preserving heritage as a fixed legacy, it sustains it as a dynamic process grounded in interaction, care, and the continuity of human ties.

### *Sustainability and Cultural Heritage*

As part of the *Voix de Palmyre* programme, new training activities are being developed at the intersection of cultural heritage, digital technologies, and environmental responsibility. These initiatives extend the project's participatory approach by integrating technological skills into heritage practices. In this context, the Azraq Camp HUB in Jordan has been equipped with new virtual reality devices, including 3D glasses, and, more significantly, with a 3D printer (FLSUN V400<sup>13</sup>), thereby enabling hands-on engagement with digital fabrication technologies.

The primary objective of this initiative is to allow the three-dimensional replication, at a reduced scale, of architectural elements from the sanctuary of Baalshamin (see Figures 63-64). Beyond their representational function, these miniature replicas serve as mediating objects through which participants can engage materially with architectural heritage that is otherwise inaccessible. Particular attention has been given to the sustainability of this production process. To this end, the project is currently establishing an eco-responsible production line that integrates principles of the circular economy into heritage-making practices.

The plastic filaments used for the fabrication of the Baalshamin elements are produced from recycled PET bottles, within the framework of the initiative referred to in French as the *PET-rimoine*

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<sup>13</sup> See <https://function3d.xyz/en/product/petalot/>, last time accessed on 18 November, 2025.

project. This approach deliberately links environmental concerns with heritage practices by transforming everyday waste into materials for cultural transmission. To produce these recycled filaments, the *Voix de Palmyre* programme team employs the PETALOT machine. Notably, this device is itself made from recycled PET and functions by melting PET bottles in order to generate filaments that can be directly used in the 3D printer. In doing so, the process establishes a closed-loop system in which material reuse becomes an integral component of heritage production.

In order to test and refine the production protocol prior to its implementation in the Azraq camp, the project benefited from the support of the NUCLEUS centre of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Lausanne. The centre acquired a 3D printer and a PET recycling system, enabling comprehensive testing of the technical and pedagogical workflow. In parallel, an *Antiquity and Digital* course allows master's students to engage critically with these practices, fostering reflection on the sustainability of digital heritage technologies. This pedagogical dimension is particularly significant in contexts where resources are limited, and waste management constitutes a major challenge, reinforcing the relevance of environmentally responsible approaches to heritage transmission.

## **The Series of Workshops (2020-2025)**

### ***UNDP-Syria (2020)***

UNDP is the acronym for the United Nations Development Programme. As the UN's lead development agency, the UNDP works to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals – defined by the UN member states. The programme is thus active in the fight against poverty, the protection of the planet, and the implementation of solutions



enabling human beings to live in peace and prosperity. Through its activities, UNDP promotes the protection of human rights and the active participation of women.

In the summer of 2019, members of the Collart-Palmyre Project met with Mrs. Sarah Chardonnens – later the Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding Advisor for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – to talk about the embroidery activity developed within the framework of the Collart-Palmyre Project.

For UNDP-Syria, this activity possessed both social and pedagogical value and was designed for members of the Syrian community. Mrs. Chardonnens strongly supported this plan. Six months later, several members of the Collart-Palmyre Project had worked on the design of the embroidery patterns, gathered the necessary material for the implementation of the activity, and sent it to Mrs. Chardonnens, who brought the equipment with her to Syria. This included the Arabic booklet on the history of Palmyra, its multicultural aspect, and the importance of the textiles in the history of the city, as well as embroidery tools.

In the summer of 2020, a year after the Collart-Palmyre Project and the staff of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Syria first met, the embroidery activity was conducted in Syria. Despite the extreme difficulty of setting up any activity in Syrian territory, this embroidery project was developed. Thanks to the hard work of our partners, the project was launched in five Syrian cities: Aleppo, Hama, Damascus and its suburbs, Sweida, and Quneitra. UNDP-Syria organized thematic days on ‘Women’s Empowerment’ and linked the embroidery activity to the history of Palmyra’s renowned Queen Zenobia. This initiative sought to raise awareness of the importance of Syria’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Since then, the activity has also been offered in the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan, in Nahr el Bared in Lebanon, and in Idlib in Syria, as well as in Romania.

*"Dealing with the Past" – DwP*

UNDP has developed an approach called "Dealing with the Past" (DwP), which aims to establish a culture of accountability, a system of laws, and reconciliation. In 1997, the Commission on Human Rights approved a set of principles from four different areas that are now recognized as the pillars of a holistic approach to DwP: *the right to know; the right to justice; the right to reparation/reconstruction; and the guarantee of non-recurrence.*

In 2019-2020, the Collart-Palmyre Project and UNDP-Syria collaborated to create a project offering activities that link local traditions, ancient history, and social reconstruction to women, men, and children in Syria. This collaboration was born out of a shared concern for the reconstruction of Syrian identity following recent conflicts and the destruction of heritage by Daesh. The UNDP was the first partner to enable the implementation of activities and to work directly with local communities.

*Azraq Camp Activities with InZone  
from the University of Geneva (2020-)*

The University of Geneva's InZone programme and the University of Lausanne have partnered to offer Syrian refugees in Jordan's Azraq Camp an academic introduction to the historical and cultural heritage of Palmyra and its relevance to contemporary Syrian culture.

This collaboration began in 2020 within the framework of UNIL's Collart-Palmyre Project, with InZone becoming the project's first academic partner. Despite the constraints of the pandemic, the *Cultural Heritage Programme* was launched as a non-formal learning initiative and gradually expanded into a series of jointly delivered workshops and history modules.

Initially, the partners developed virtual sessions, later moving to in-person teaching following a successful pilot phase in 2022. This was accompanied by the creation of Arabic-language learning materials. IFPO joined the programme in 2024, further consolidating and strengthening the collaboration.

*“Cultural Heritage” Programme (2020-)*

The *Cultural Heritage Programme* is tailored specifically for Syrian refugees. Its aim is to explore the lost heritage of Palmyra and its connections with neighbouring Jordanian heritage, encouraging participants to reflect on cultural identity and helping foster a sense of belonging in the host country.

After several months of online instruction and two in-person sessions at the Azraq HUB in Jordan, students gained a deeper understanding of both the differences and the shared features of Petra and Palmyra, considering aspects such as political and social organization and the details of religious and funerary architecture.

To consolidate and demonstrate their learning, each student developed an individual research project focusing on a monument in ancient Petra. In November 2025, the group travelled to Petra to present their work on site. This immersive experience reinforced their knowledge and offered a rare opportunity to step outside their daily routines and engage more fully with cultural heritage.

*“Field Visit to Petra” (2025)*

At 7 a.m. on 4 November 2025, the bus left the Azraq camp. A group of ten students and six accompanying adults was on board. Heading south, the bus reached Wadi Moussa four hours later. After buying

tickets to enter the site, the group set off to study the first tombs visible before the entrance to the Siq. They also stopped at the dam, where the students were asked to identify the hydraulic installations and votive niches containing betyls in the Siq. After a 30-minute walk, there was great excitement when the Treasury revealed itself before their eyes. The group then continued to the theatre and Qasr el Bint, after which they enjoyed a well-deserved lunch break. Afterwards, the group split in two; one group headed towards Deir while the other studied the Temple of the Winged Lions and the Colonnaded Street. They then met up again to study the theatre and the Madbah (at the bottom of the stairs). The group left the site at nightfall under a beautiful full moon.

Throughout the day, at various stages of the trip, the students were invited to share their thoughts, expectations, and impressions. These contributions will be included in a report currently being produced. The importance of real immersion in the site was a key takeaway from this trip. The students emphasized the unexpected grandeur and majesty of the site's design. In addition, visiting the ongoing excavations carried out by our French colleagues emphasized that the site has not yet revealed all its secrets and is constantly evolving as new discoveries are made. The visit also enabled the students to escape the reality of the camp and immerse themselves in the site, focusing on the value and importance of historical heritage. Numerous authorisations had to be obtained to enable the young people to enjoy a day of study outside the camp. Although the process was sometimes complicated, the result was significant. After several months of online classes and two face-to-face sessions, the students presented their personal research projects and received valuable feedback from Micheline Kurdy (IFPO) and Patrick Michel (UNIL). Finally, before leaving, all the students received their certificates for participating in and completing the

*Cultural Heritage Programme* in front of the Khazneh. It was a moment of great pride and celebration.

From these experiences, we can conclude that this was a sustainable project that overcame the challenges of the past and will benefit future generations. It expanded from Switzerland to Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan over more than five years. Workshops were also held in Switzerland and Romania. In total, we have supported, shared with, and learnt from more than 120 women and dozens of young adults. We have tried to provide peaceful and safe spaces for learning, preserving, and forging bonds. We incorporated the needs and significance of this cultural heritage throughout the project to ensure that the voices of its guardians could be heard. Finally, we were able to leave the reality of the Azraq camp behind and discover the magnificence of Petra together.

### *The Day After (2022, 2024)*

The Day After (TDA) is a Syrian NGO, run by an all-Syrian Board members, which aims to implement the recommendations presented in the TDA report. The Day After is an independent, Syrian-led civil society organization working to support a democratic transition in Syria. TDA is registered in Turkey as a non-profit organization. In addition to TDA's staff members and over 65 activists (communicators, interviewers, lawyers) who are contracted with TDA in ten provinces inside Syria, TDA employs a large network of lawyers and consultants for various Transitional Justice and Rule of Law related projects inside Syria.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more information about TDA, please visit [www.tda-sy.org](http://www.tda-sy.org), available online, last time accessed on December 17, 2025.

The workshop was hosted at the Cultural Heritage Protection Center in Maarrat Misrin, a prominent hub in the northern region of Idlib Governorate. This centre serves as the administrative core of a sub-district that encompasses numerous villages and towns. Maarrat Misrin is renowned for its exceptional urban planning and aesthetically pleasing architecture, constructed in compliance with advanced public safety standards. Notably, an earthquake protection system has been in place since 1998.

The city's residents engage in a diverse range of activities, including carpentry, blacksmithing, and construction. Additionally, it is home to several thriving industries, such as soap production, tahini sweets manufacturing, sesame oil extraction, hand-woven rug crafting, and poultry farming, which is particularly prevalent around the city. The area also features a factory specializing in olive pomace oil extraction.

The Collart-Palmyre Project partnered with TDA to implement embroidery workshops in the Idlib region in 2022, 2024 and 2026. More than 35 women participated in these lessons and workshops.

### *Établissement Vaudois d'Accueil des Migrants – EVAM (2023-2024)*

Between 2023 and 2024, the sewing workshop at the Établissement Vaudois d'Accueil des Migrants (EVAM) in Lausanne collaborated with the Collart-Palmyre Project, following a visit to the *Voix de Palmyre* exhibition in Nyon (Switzerland)<sup>15</sup>. The EVAM sewing workshop contributed to preserving the memory of the Baalshamin Temple's beauty by offering exchange and embroidery workshops, and by embroidering motifs from these decorations onto creations presented at the 'mode-récup' fashion show (see figure 31). Over the course

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the investment of Susana Tobias.

of several weeks, a group of around twelve women from Syria, Sudan, Iran, Georgia, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Senegal, and Sri Lanka embroidered patterns developed within the project onto second-hand clothing, as well as producing garments entirely from recycled fabric. The workshops culminated in a fashion show where the participants presented their creations. On this occasion, the atelier showcased the textile creations produced since its opening. Some of the models presented were embellished with ornamental embroidery created during collaborative workshops with the University of Lausanne and the Collart-Palmyre Project.

Sharing ideas enriches creativity and can transform a garment, repair a textile, or embroider a pattern. These women have risen to this collective challenge in the workshop time and again. The women who took part in this workshop did not necessarily know each other, nor did they all speak the same language. Nevertheless, the facilitators emphasized how communication unfolded beyond words, to the point that their presence during the sessions became almost unnecessary. Bonds were formed on other levels. Creativity flourished freely, and the participants embraced complete artistic freedom. The results were compositions and creations of remarkable artistic quality, reflecting both their diverse origins and the experience of working together.

### *Mishwar (2025)*

For more than a week, workshops took place in the Naher Al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Akkar, Lebanon. Covering an area of one square kilometre, the camp is home to around 45,000 people. It is one of the camps that hosted many displaced Syrians and Syrian Palestinians from across Syria during the war. This particular workshop was held at the Najdeh Social Relief Association Centre,

a feminist, secular, democratic organization founded in 1976. Najdeh primarily works with Palestinian refugee women and girls, and through them, with other marginalised groups in Palestinian society. Najdeh also works with impoverished groups of other nationalities living in camps and settlements in Lebanon. During the workshop, the 20 or so participants spent a day learning about Palmyra and its history before creating T-shirts, cushions, and scarves decorated with patterns from the project's repertoire.

All workshops, whether in Jordan, Syria, or Lebanon, are conducted in the same way and according to established procedures. Cultural mediators, who have been trained by the Collart-Palmyre Project's manager, use the provided documentation. Prior to the workshops, local organisers arrange venue hire and purchase necessary equipment. Those selected for the workshops can decide whether or not to participate after being informed of their schedule and objectives. The first day or days are devoted to studying the history of Palmyra and the role of textile production, use, and trade in ancient Palmyra. Next, there is an introduction to cross-stitch. Finally, the origin and meaning of the motifs used are explained. Participants can then draw inspiration from these and adapt them as they wish. There are no restrictions on the use of colours, giving free rein to the imagination or desires of the participants.

### *Jesuit Refugee Service in Bucharest (2025)*

The target group of the workshop in Bucharest, organized under the auspices of the CIVIS project, "VERIS – Voices of Palmyra", developed in partnership between the University of Lausanne, the University of Bucharest, and the University of Glasgow, was identified with the support of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). The meeting was hosted by the UNESCO Chair for Interculturality,



Good Governance, and Sustainable Development at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bucharest and comprised two stages.

In the first stage, participants virtually visited the reconstruction of the Temple of Baalshamin, closely observing how the reconstruction of heritage evokes particular memories related to exile, personal identity, or the relationship with their original community. Subsequently, participants engaged in an embroidery workshop where they transposed the motif of the tree of life in a merlon onto pieces of Aida cloth and T-shirts, materials that will be included in an exhibition to be organized on the occasion of CIVIS Days 2026 at the Rectorate of the University of Bucharest.

In the second stage, participants attended a storytelling workshop with a therapist, Adrian Socol, a psychologist and trauma expert, who discussed with refugees and migrants aspects related to the relevance of the virtual reconstruction of heritage destroyed during conflicts or violence, the role of culture as a therapeutic factor in processes of uprooting, and the axiological implications of uprooting – the re-signification of vital, moral, and aesthetic values. The responses serve as the foundation for a scientific article dedicated to the relevance of digitizing (in)tangible heritage in post-traumatic social inclusion processes in biopolitical contexts of forced migration, as well as competitive narratives on uprooting.

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## II.

### CURATING CONCEPT AND METHODOLOGY

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#### **Curating Concept**

This album was conceived as a medium for embedding years of applied research, workshops, and field analysis on endangered and destroyed cultural heritage. Through digital reconstruction, this heritage could be reactivated and shared with people who are emotionally and nationally connected to it, while also granting diverse academic and non-formal audiences access to scientific insights into the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage within a biopolitical framework. Although the album emerged at the intersection of the long-standing, committed work carried out by Patrick Michel and his team on the heritage of Palmyra and the engagement developed within the CIVIS project VERIS, together with Oana Șerban, Brittnee Leysen, and Liliana Dumitrache, it must be acknowledged that this publication functions primarily as a visual tool situated at the crossroads of science and the arts. Its purpose is to demonstrate how a methodological approach to such a delicate subject can be replicated and traced in new postmodern contexts, framed biopolitically and intensified by the urgency of fostering inclusion, solidarity, community-building, and social bonding.

The photographs were carefully selected by the authors from Patrick Michel's personal and public archives, with particular emphasis on the practical activities carried out during workshops, especially in contexts marked by conflict, trauma, and displacement. Oana Șerban approached these results from a biopolitical perspective, focusing on the effects that the digital reconstruction of the Temple of Baalshamin exerts on the memory and identity of three target groups: displaced persons, refugees, and migrants. The selected images reflect the interactions with workshop participants, significant moments from the embroidery workshops, the visual imaginaries through which symbolic and tangible artefacts were created, as well as key scenes from the immersive experiences that enabled participants to digitally revisit their native places, especially the temple. The overarching aim was to curate memory through identity and to heal trauma through art and virtual heritage reconstruction. Every effort was made to offer living memories of our work at the highest possible resolution, while strictly respecting all deontological standards and the sensitive nature of the information related to our working groups. The photo legends were carefully crafted to document with precision the lived experiences, the hosting sites, and the actors who shaped them.

The album was also conceived as a strategic dissemination tool for this creative work within the framework of the CIVIS project, with a prospective book launch at the CIVIS Days scheduled for 2026 in Bucharest. It is both a duty and a joy to share with diverse academic communities – from different traditions in education, the arts, and the humanities – how years of passion and meticulous work can sustain a project in which experts in archaeology, ancient history, philosophy, cultural heritage, geography, and cultural memory develop a common language. Together, they curate *imagined homelands* for *displaced people*, refugees, and migrants, while dismantling competitive narratives of suffering and martyrdom,

uprootedness and exclusion. Curating fragments of lived experience, affect, and belonging proved to be one of the greatest challenges of this interdisciplinary journey. The curatorial narrative is structured around the tension between tangibility and intangibility: between columns, temples, and reliefs on the one hand, and memories, unspoken trauma, and silences on the other.

At the core of the project lies a strong ethical commitment to counter both the aestheticization of virtual reconstruction and the moral instrumentalization of migration narratives. Homelands are reimaged at the intersection of virtual and real experiences, while the voices of Palmyra are heard and represented as multiple moral agents who, through their participation in the project, recall their origins, their loved ones, and their duty to persevere in existence. Beyond offering a living memory of our contingent interactions and profound cooperation, the album ultimately proposes a powerful and transferable methodology for all scholars who have the courage to give voice to those who, at some point in their lives, were forced to abandon their homelands and to imagine new ones.

## Methodology

The methodology is situated within broader debates in heritage studies concerning contemporary modes of preservation and transmission. It addresses the challenges of disseminating knowledge, developing skills, and safeguarding heritage in ways that are both sustainable and dynamic. The approach is grounded in participatory practices aimed at reactivating memory while providing participants with appropriate emotional, social, and technical support. By bridging tangible and intangible heritage, the project foregrounds the creation of personal objects as narrative devices that mediate between individual experience and collective memory. These embroidered

objects function as material carriers of stories, emotions, and embodied knowledge. The embroidery workshops, conceived as spaces of co-creation and shared learning, enabled the reactivation of situated memories and the revival of a lost monument's presence. Through this process, memory is not merely preserved but actively produced and reinterpreted, highlighting the role of material practices, craftsmanship, and artistic engagement in the ongoing construction and sustainability of cultural heritage.

*Definitions: refugee, migrant, diaspora*

"A refugee is defined by international law as someone forced to flee their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, or violence, and is unable to return home.

A migrant is a broad term for any person who moves from one country or region to another for any reason, including work, study, or family.

Diaspora refers to communities of people who have left their country of origin but maintain cultural and social ties to it".

*(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs)*

## ***Social Impact of Research***

The project demonstrates how research initially conceived as a purely scientific endeavour – drawing on advanced technologies such as photogrammetry, 3D modelling, image processing, and immersive experience design – can evolve into an initiative with significant social impact. This transformation highlights the potential of digital heritage research to extend beyond technical innovation and contribute meaningfully to communities connected to the heritage under study. The experience underscores the idea that fundamental academic research can, and arguably should, engage with social realities, fostering dialogue, inclusion, and shared ownership of heritage narratives.

By integrating community members into the creative and interpretative processes, the project challenges traditional top-down models of heritage production and instead promotes participatory and reflexive approaches. In doing so, it reveals how technological tools can serve not only documentation and reconstruction, but also social cohesion, memory work, and the reactivation of cultural meanings.

### *Inspiration*

This approach finds its conceptual and ethical grounding in international heritage frameworks, notably the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*<sup>1</sup> and the Council of Europe's *Faro Convention*<sup>2</sup> (2005). Together, these texts emphasize, on the one hand, the central role of intangible heritage – practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills – and, on the other, the social value of heritage as a resource for community identity, participation, and well-being. They have profoundly shaped the development of *Voix de Palmyre*, providing both inspiration and a methodological framework that foregrounds the human

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the importance of the intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development, as underscored in the UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989, in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001, and in the Istanbul Declaration of 2002 adopted by the Third Round Table of Ministers of Culture.

<sup>2</sup> The Faro Convention emphasizes the important aspects of heritage as they relate to human rights and democracy. It promotes a wider understanding of heritage and its relationship to communities and society. The Convention encourages us to recognize that objects and places are not, in themselves, what is important about cultural heritage. They are important because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent.



dimension of heritage. By recognizing heritage as a living, socially embedded process rather than a static collection of objects or monuments, these conventions have guided the project towards an inclusive understanding of heritage-making, one that prioritises memory, lived experience, and the active involvement of communities in the construction and transmission of meaning.

### *Consent of the Participants*

In order to conduct the workshops with the highest level of respect for participants, a rigorous ethical protocol was established, reflecting best practices in heritage studies and participatory research involving potentially vulnerable populations. A consent form is provided several days prior to the start of the activities, allowing participants sufficient time to understand the scope and implications of their involvement. This document clearly sets out the objectives of the workshops, as well as the modalities for the collection, use, and dissemination of data, with particular attention to images and photographs produced during the sessions. Participants are explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage, up to the final moment, without any obligation or negative consequence.

The consent form also details the potential risks associated with participation and includes provisions enabling individuals to request the anonymisation of their personal data, thereby safeguarding their privacy and agency. In accordance with the collaboration agreements, mediators are required to read aloud and explain the content of the consent form and all accompanying documentation, which are written in Arabic, ensuring linguistic accessibility and comprehension. The terms of participation are presented orally in a clear and accessible manner, and participants are given several days to reflect on them before deciding whether to attend the

workshops. At the beginning of each workshop, mediators reiterate the key ethical considerations and request participants to sign the consent form only after this renewed explanation. Through this multi-stage and dialogical consent process, the project adheres to a strict ethical framework designed to prioritise the safety, autonomy, and well-being of all participants, while fostering a relationship of trust essential to meaningful heritage engagement and memory work.



### III.

## EVENTS AND WORKS OF ART: (IN)TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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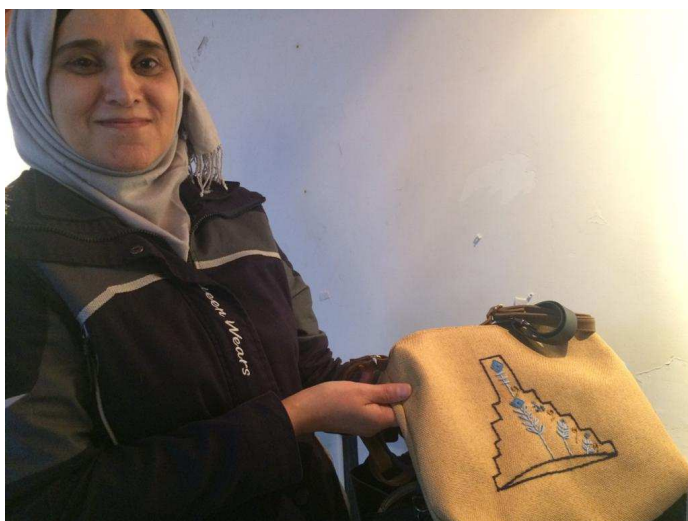
### UNDP-Syria Collaboration, Syria, 2020



Fig. 1. First production ever featuring the tree of life in a merlon from the Baalshamin Temple, together with messages sent by participants to Lausanne and UNDP



*Fig. 2. Women working together on a handbag*



*Fig. 3. Women showing the pattern on the handbag*

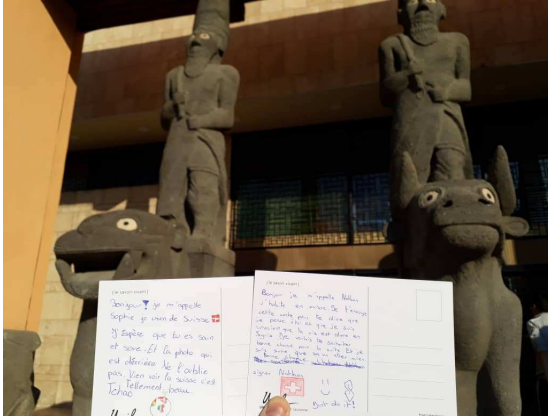


Fig. 4. Postcards written by students from schools in Switzerland to students in Aleppo. The cards have been delivered by UNDP on the occasion of a day trip to the Aleppo Museum

## Azraq Camp, Jordan, 2022



Fig. 5. Road sign to the main entrance to the refugee camp, taken by P. Michel on his first visit to the camp



Fig. 6. Exterior painting on the walls of a shelter in Azraq Camp





*Fig. 7. Panoramic view of village 3 of the refugee camp*



*Fig. 8. Panoramic view of village 3 of Azraq, taken on the way to the hub*





*Fig. 9.* Ludic and playful visual expressions drawing on the walls of the shelters



*Fig. 10.* Outdoor artistic painting showing a Bedouin character in the refugee camp



*Fig. 11. Living conditions and domestic water supplies for refugees*



*Fig. 12.* Outdoor drawings, traditional coffee making, and the children's hope for a better life

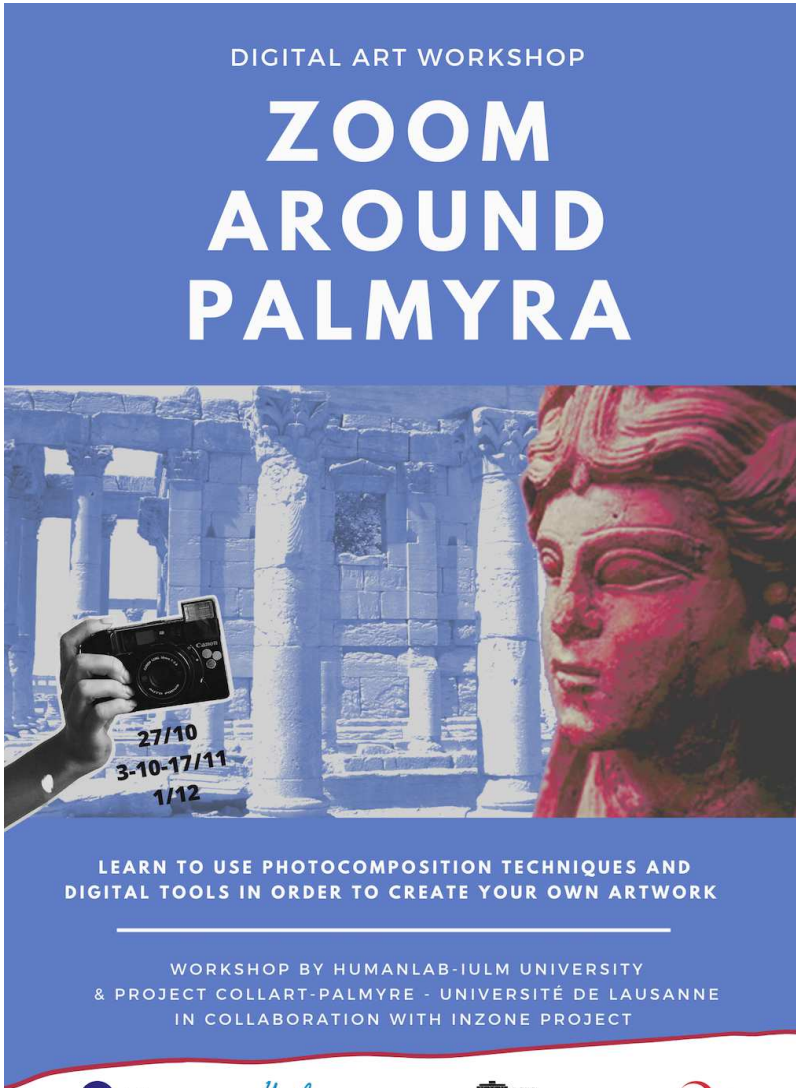


Fig. 13. Zoom around Palmyra flyer

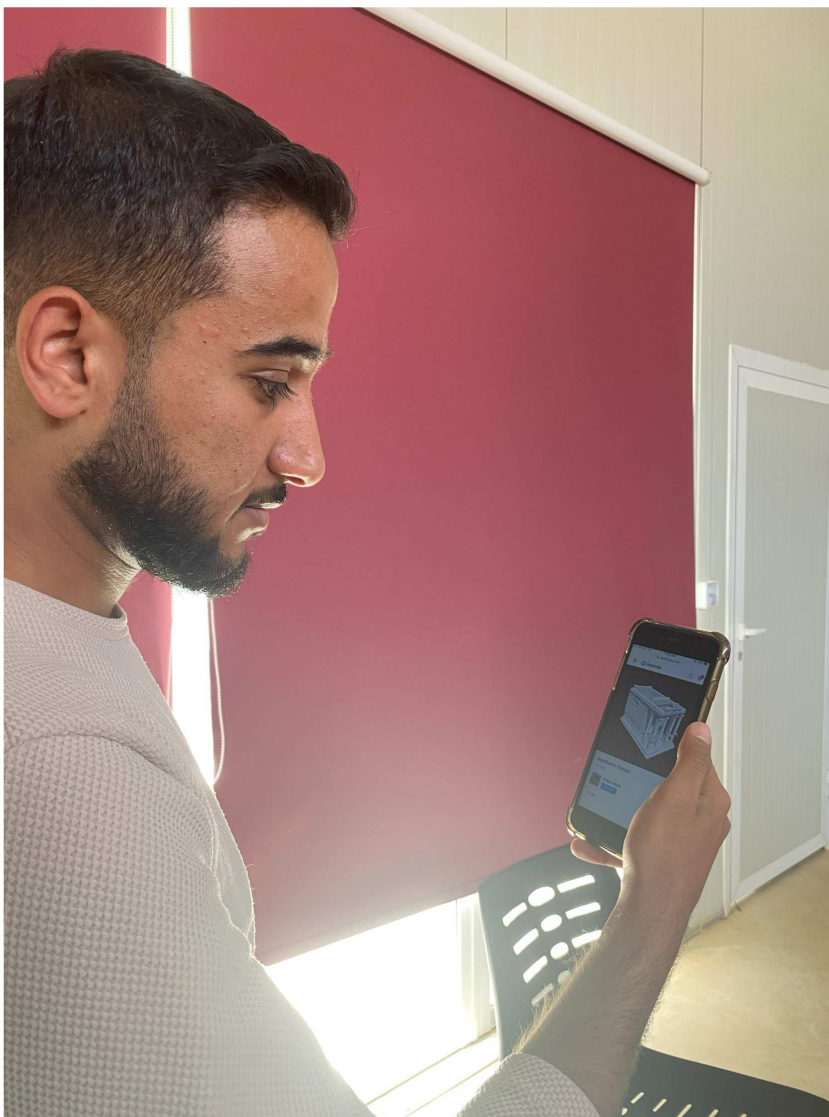


*Fig. 14.* The booklet produced together with Syrian refugees from Azraq. This Arabic booklet is used as a pedagogical tool during workshops of the Collart-Palmyre project within the *Voix de Palmyre* programme





Fig. 15. Omar Al Zoubi together with P. Michel on the occasion of the first print of the Arabic booklet



*Fig. 16.* Ayham Mysar Al Ghali testing the 3D model of the Baalshamin on Sketchfab



Fig. 17. A lesson about heritage with the presentation of the virtual reconstruction of the Balshamin Temple. Photo taken in the hub (Azraq Camp)





*Fig. 18. Fatima Al Dweesh presenting her artwork in the Arabic booklet*

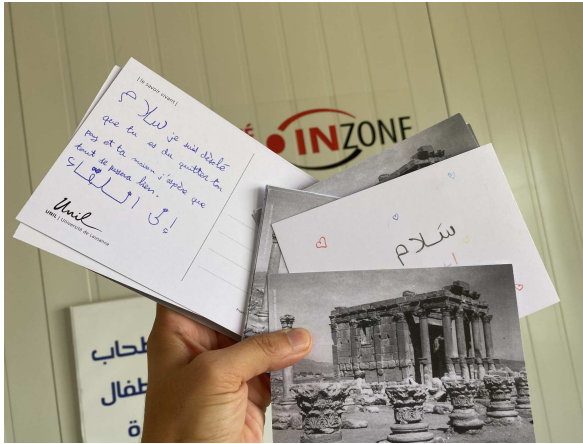


Fig. 19. Postcards written by children from schools in Switzerland and given to refugees in Azraq by P. Michel. Most of them bear the writing “salam” (peace) in Arabic and the picture of the Baalshamin Temple on the other side (picture from P. Collart)

## Idlib, Syria, 2022



Fig. 20. Working group engaged in designing embroidery symbols



*Fig. 21. Embroidery engaging symbols of Palmyra*



*Fig. 22. Target group of women in Idlib showing the end of a day work on embroidery*

## Azraq Camp, Jordan, 2023



Fig. 23. P. Michel giving a lesson in Azraq camp and presenting to the participants the setting of the *Voix de Palmyre* exhibition held in Nyon (Switzerland) with contributions of refugees



Fig. 24. P. Michel with the working group and students in Azraq



*Fig. 25. Patrick Michel with the target group and InZone team members (University of Geneva) in Azraq. From right to left: Fatima Mousa Al-Mousa, Fatima Klief Al- Mahmoud Al- Ali, Vivien Kühnen, Patrick Michel, Bahaa Mohammad Abdallah Ali Saleem, Lou Pisani, Giulia Celentano, Emanuela Sebastiani*



**Lausanne Collaboration with EVAM, Switzerland, 2024**



*Fig. 26. Embroidery with the tree of life in a merlon pattern on a modern T-shirt*



*Fig. 27.* Embroideries produced by migrant women in Lausanne on cotton cloths. Patterns consist of flowers and the tetrapyle, freely inspired and produced by the participants of the workshops



*Fig. 28.* Embroideries of merlon pattern on a bag and on *deux-pièces*.  
The embroideries are a mixed technique of chain stitch, knot, and cross-stitch





*Fig. 29. Behind the scenes of the embroidery atelier: Hevin Mohamad at work*



*Fig. 30.* Final works with documentation showing the origin of the designs



*Fig. 31.* Frame from the fashion show featuring clothing items produced in the embroidery workshops with the Baalshamin Temple on the back. The bag bears the name "Palmyra" in colourful letters. (model: Merve Koker)



*Fig. 32.* Outstanding piece of embroidered dress showing palm trees and Palmyra landscape

## Idlib, Syria, 2024



Fig. 33. Shop in the Souk where material has been bought before the workshops

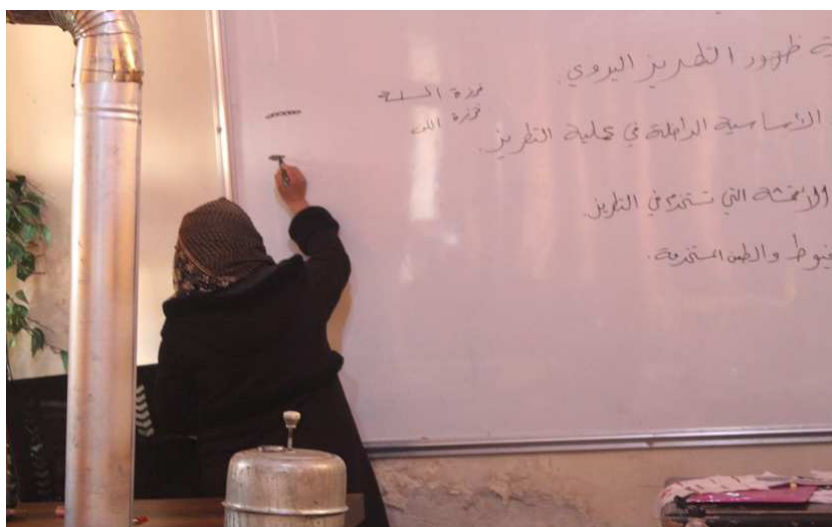


Fig. 34. Detailed explanation of embroidery stitches





*Fig. 35. Working directly on the embroidery hoops (called “tara” in Arabic)*



*Fig. 36. Hands-on session to draw the patterns and practice the stitches and techniques*

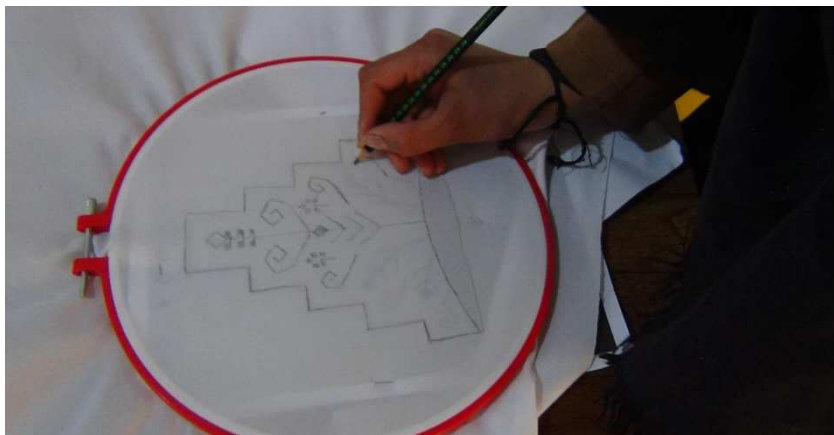


Fig. 37. Drawing the pattern with the tree of life in a merlon motif

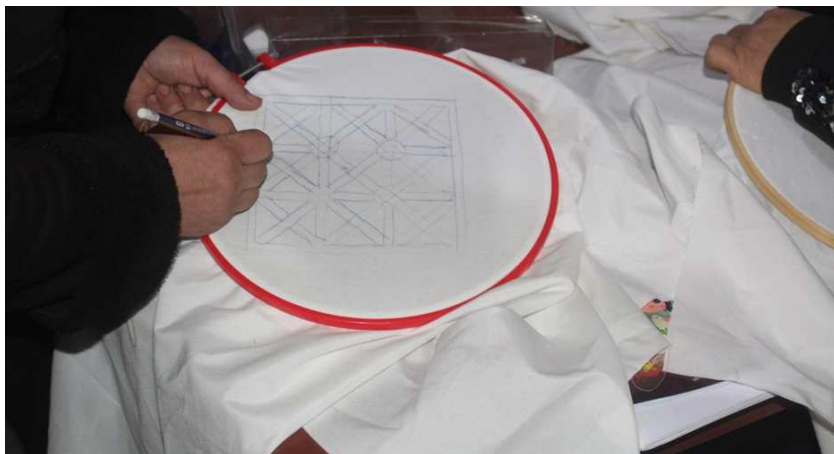


Fig. 38. Drawing the *claire-voie* (clerestory) of Baalshamin Temple as a pattern, adding variety to the designs



Fig. 39. Embroidery of the tree of life with golden thread

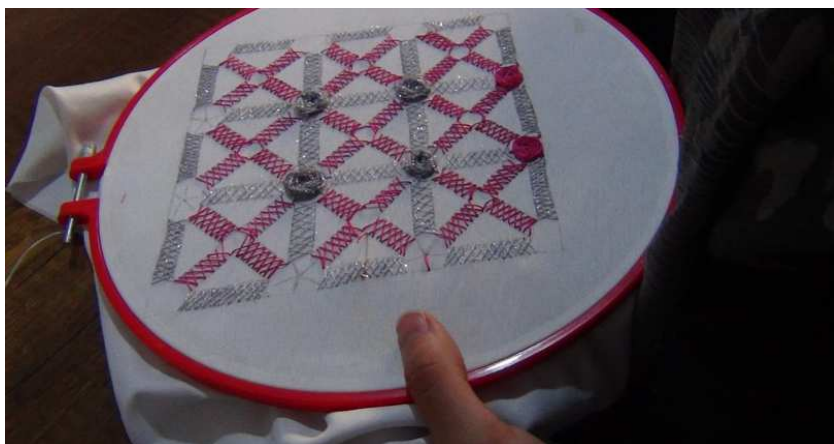


Fig. 40. *Claire-voie* (clerestory) embroidery detail with red and metallic gray thread

## Nahr el Bared Camp (Tripoli), Lebanon, 2025

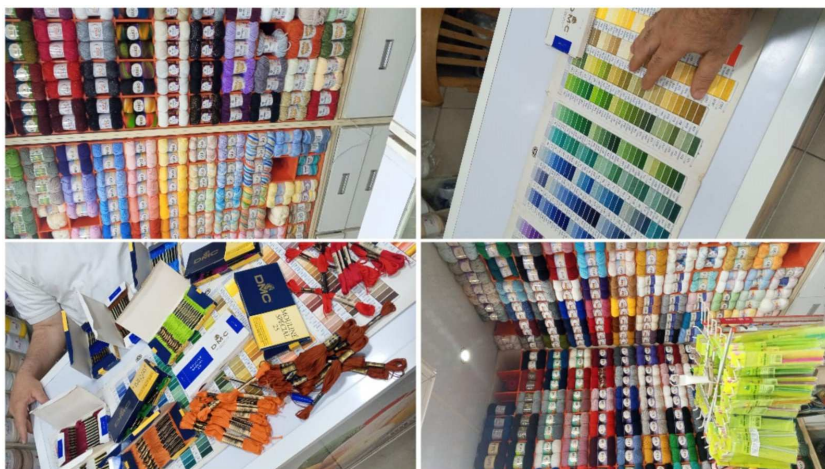


*Fig. 41. Materials needed for the embroidery workshop, frame from shopping time in Tripoli Souk*

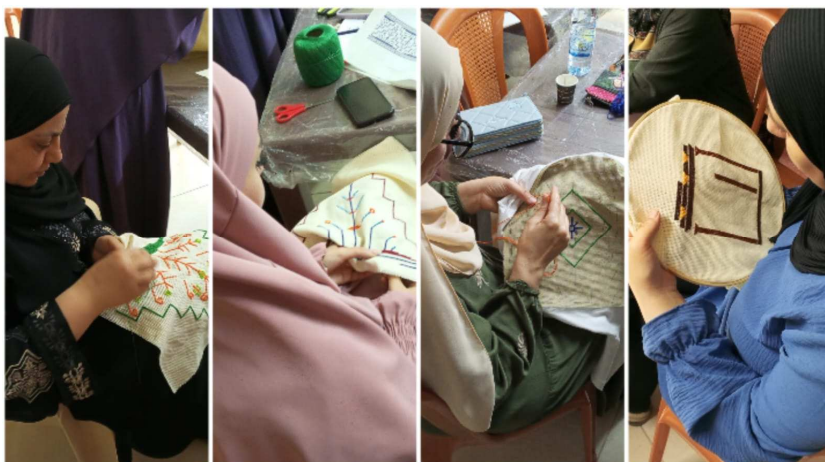


*Fig. 42. Mouliné thread and embroidery hoop or stitching*





*Fig. 43. Colour palette of the mouliné threads*



*Fig. 44. Photo collage capturing the work-in-progress moments of the embroidery workshop*



Fig. 45. Images from the embroidery workshop performed by women



Fig. 46. Working groups translating allegorical motifs into embroidery



*Fig. 47. Women working together and creating various motifs inspired by Palmyra history*



*Fig. 48. Choosing embroidery colours based on the allegorical motifs and the emotional impact of the designs*





Fig. 49. Embroideries with different patterns and designs, guided by the senior members of the group for transgeneration know-how transmission



Fig. 50. Embroideries executed under supervision



Fig. 51. First stage: cutting the fabric in the souk

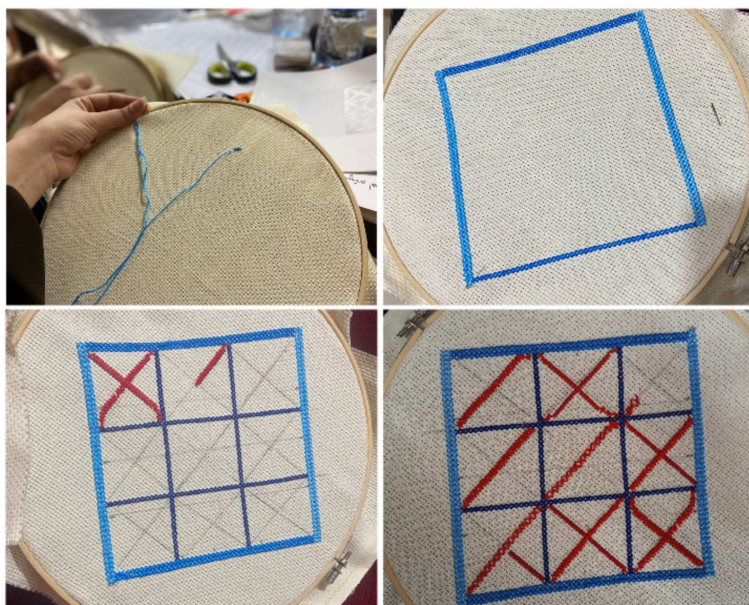


Fig. 52. Different stages in the embroidery of the *claire-voie* pattern



*Fig. 53. Detail on the work in progress of the tree of life pattern*



*Fig. 54. Photograph of the target group during the workshop*





Fig. 55. Alongside the trainer during the embroidery workshop



Fig. 56. Discussions with the trainer about the progress of the embroidery stitches



Fig. 57. Completion of the embroidery pieces and discussions before the exhibition



Fig. 58. Embroidery featuring the image of the Temple of Palmyra





*Fig. 59. Exhibition of all the embroidery pieces from the workshop, showcasing symbolic variations from the tree of life to the Temple of Palmyra Baalshamin, the temple and its components*



*Fig. 60.* Collection of all embroidery pieces created at the embroidery workshop shown at the last day exhibition

## Azraq Camp, Jordan, 2025

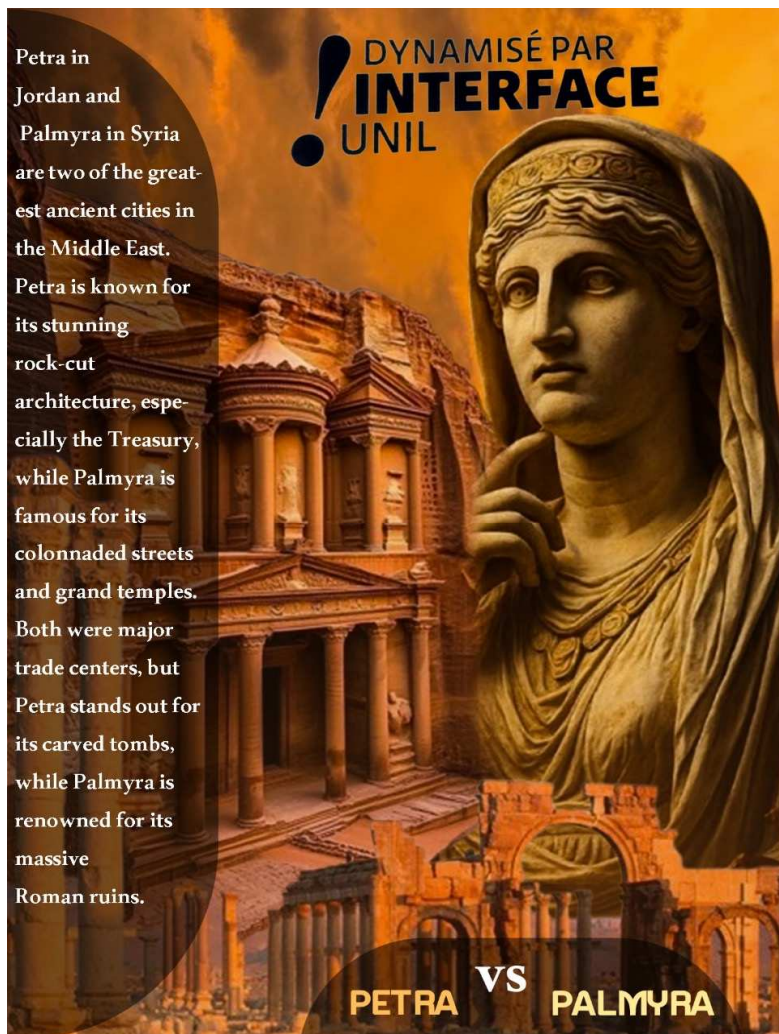


Fig. 61. Poster for a workshop on the comparative approach to cultural heritage: Petra vs. Palmyra (by Mohammad Saleh Alali)



*Fig. 62. Lesson in the Azraq camp's hub  
on the comparative ancient history of Palmyra and Petra*



*Fig. 63. 3D printing of the columns of the Temple of Palmyra*



*Fig. 64.* 3D printing of a column of the Baalshamin Temple





*Fig. 65. Use of the booklet during the lessons*



*Fig. 66. P. Michel and Micheline Kurdy alongside the working group*

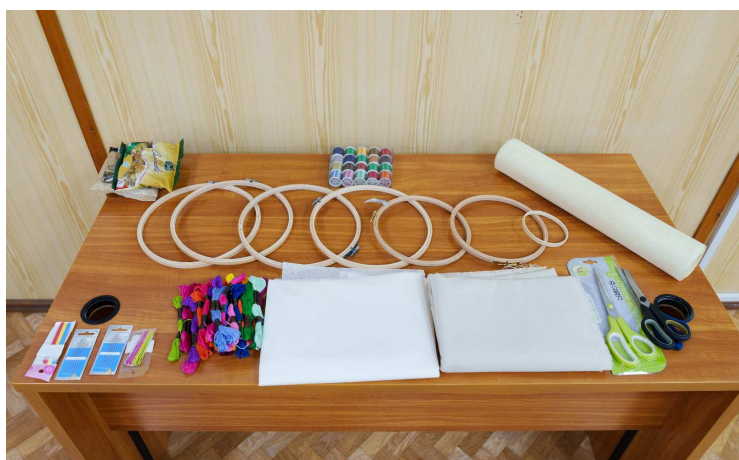


*Fig. 67. P. Michel and Micheline Kurdy working with the target group on the recycling of pet plastic bottle for 3D printer*

**Bucharest, Romania, 2025**



*Fig. 68. Coloured mouliné threads, both silver and plain*



*Fig. 69. Materials used for the embroidery workshop*





*Fig. 70. Coloured mouliné threads, prepared for both Aida fabric and Damask cotton canvases*



*Fig. 71. Brochures for the training in preparation for the immersive experience of visiting the virtually reconstructed Temple of Palmyra*



Fig. 72. Syrians living in Romania, reading the Arabic booklet



Fig. 73. Patrick Michel and Oana Șerban, presenting the CIVIS OPEN LAB, VERIS – Voices of Palmyra; Engaging (in)tangible memorial heritage in social innovation for refugee inclusion



Fig. 74. Patrick Michel presenting VERIS and the CIVIS experience to the target group

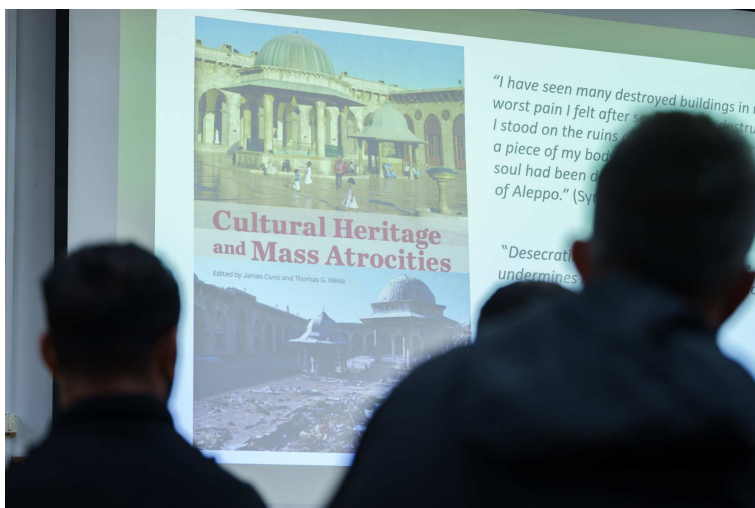


Fig. 75. A biopolitical approach of cultural heritage and mass atrocities



*Fig. 76. Exploring the brochure and answering questions*



*Fig. 77. The VR experience. Virtually visiting Palmyra*



*Fig. 78. Travelling back in time to Palmyra*



*Fig. 79. Visiting the altar of the Temple and the surroundings*





*Fig. 80.* Inside and outside the Temple: sightseeing in Palmyra



*Fig. 81.* 3D Model of the Temple of Baalshamin (Byzantine era reconstruction)  
as available in the immersive VR experience  
© UNIL – Collart-Palmyre Project in collaboration with Archeovision





*Fig. 82.* 3D model of the inside of the Baalshamin Temple (Roman era)  
as it was before the blast

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*Fig. 83. Brittnee Leysen (University of Glasgow), performing the VR experience*



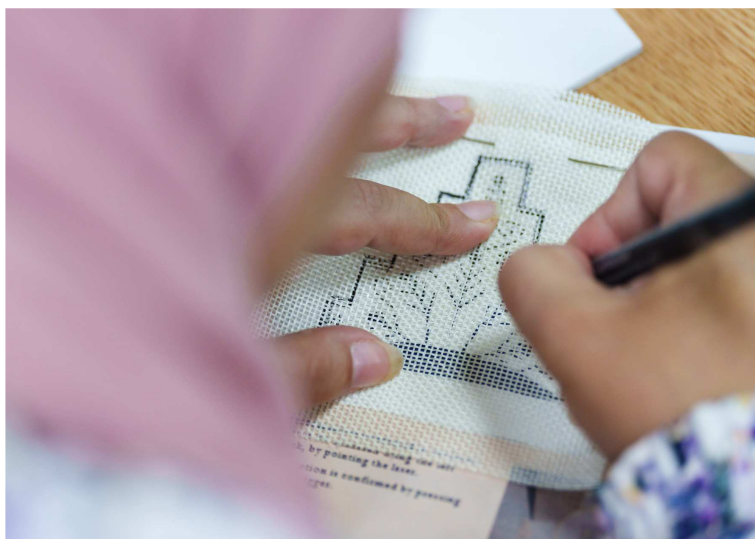
*Fig. 84. Oana Șerban and Patrick Michel, discussing the aesthetic imaginary of the altar*



*Fig. 85. CIVIS students immersing themselves in a virtual visit to Palmyra*



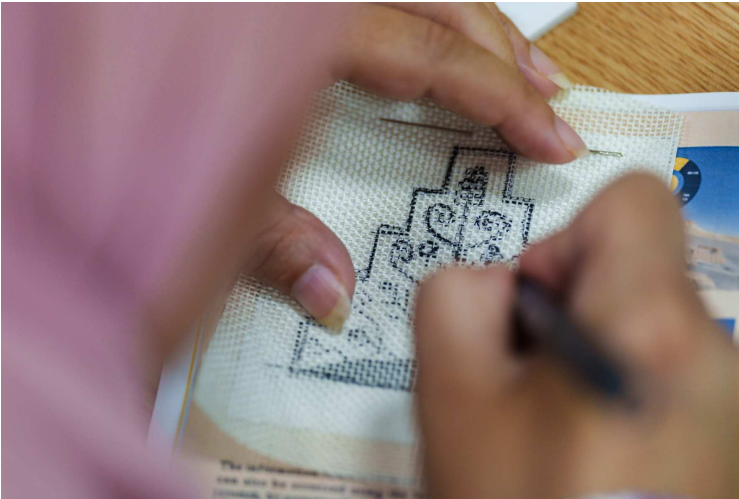
*Fig. 86. The tree of life, an embroidery motif*



*Fig. 87. Drawing before performing embroidery*



*Fig. 88. Masterpiece of embroidery pattern performed by a Syrian man*

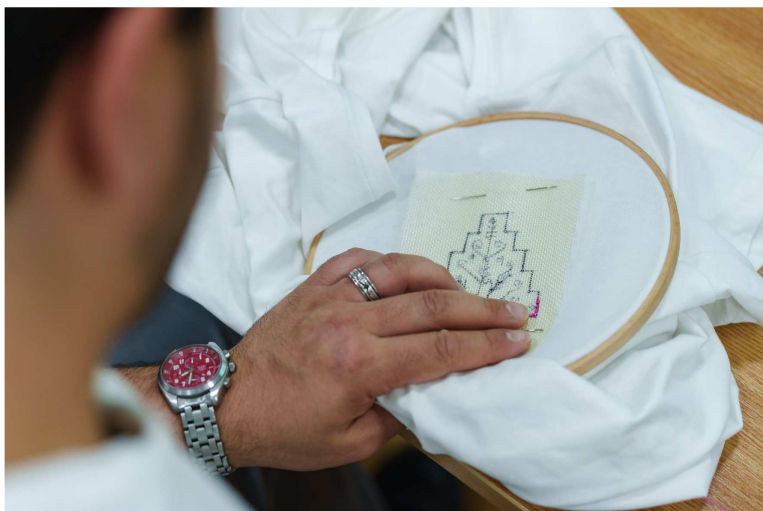


*Fig. 89. Translating allegorical motifs onto Aida fabric*



*Fig. 90. Securing the design onto a modern T-shirt before embroidery*





*Fig. 91. Classic stitches*



*Fig. 92. Patrick Michel mentoring the embroidery atelier*



*Fig. 93. Adapting chromatics*





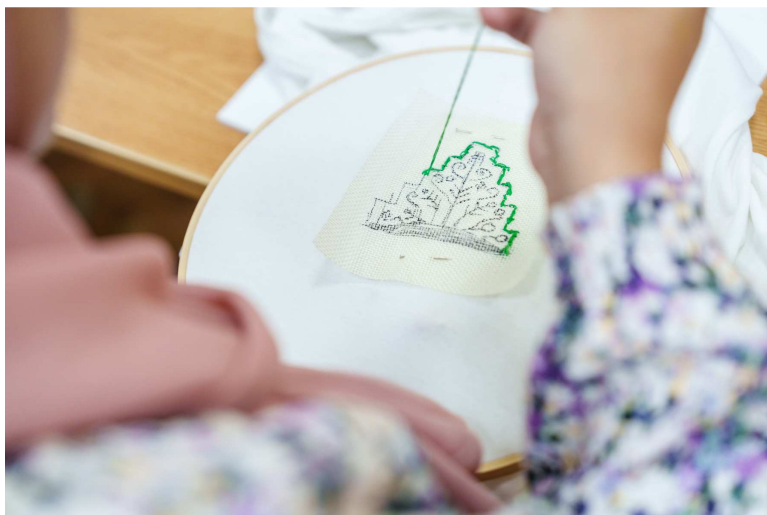
*Fig. 94.* Syrian men and women performing embroidery techniques



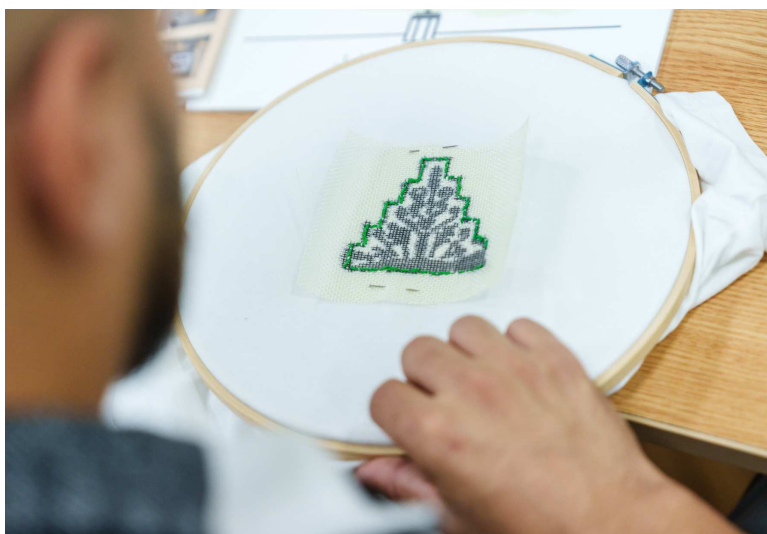
*Fig. 95. Complex stitches, traditional motif*



*Fig. 96. Outlining the base of the motif*



*Fig. 97. Work in progress: the green tree of life*



*Fig. 98. Completing the outline*



*Fig. 99. Blending colours*



*Fig. 100. Confronting theory and practice*

## Field Visit to Petra, Jordan with InZone, 2025



*Fig. 101.* The cohort in the bus from Azraq to Petra



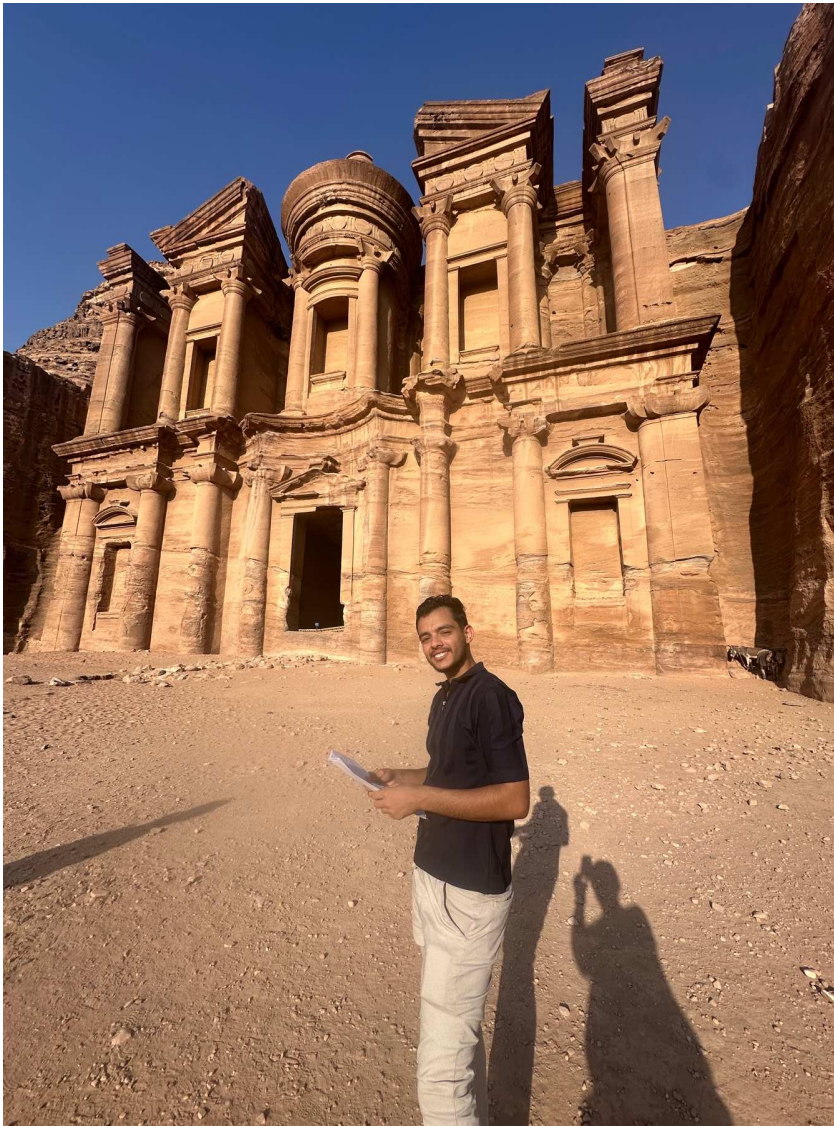


*Fig. 102.* Students discovering the Khazneh while walking through the Siq

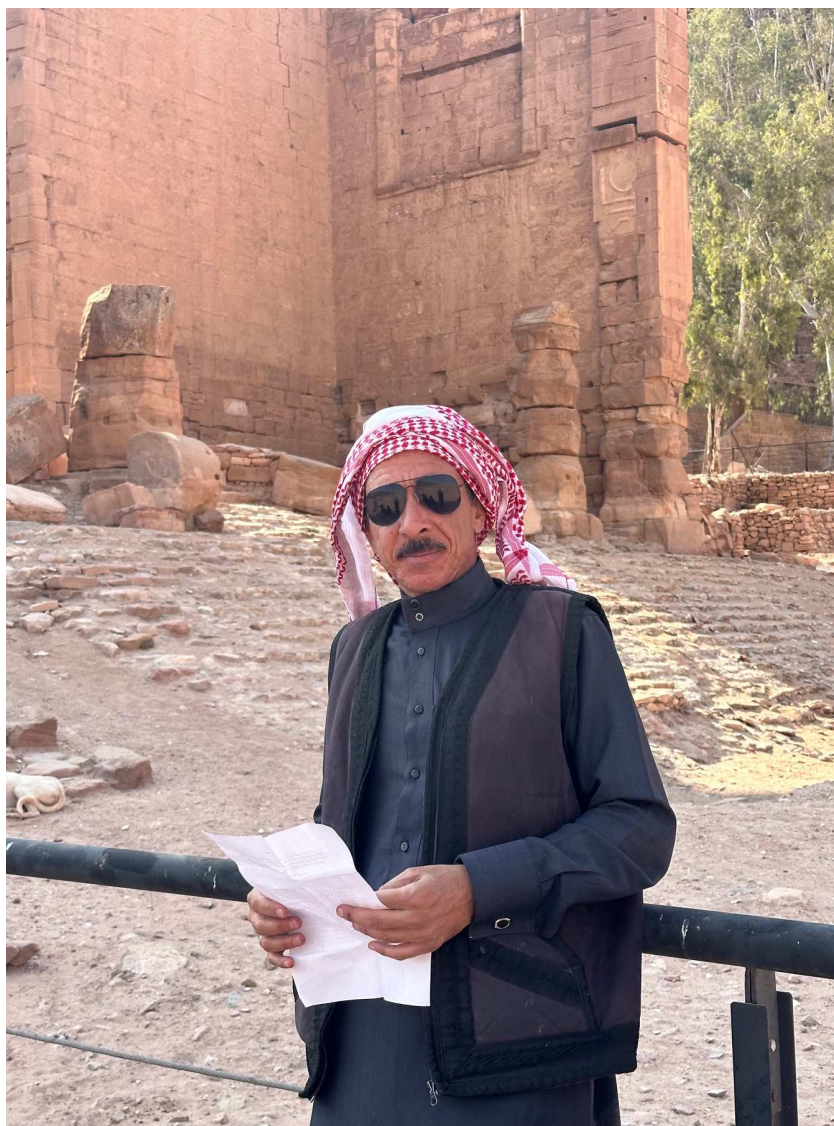


*Fig. 103.* Students leaving the Roman theatre of Petra





*Fig. 104.* Mohammad Saleh Alali presenting his paper at Deir



*Fig. 105. Zaher Dham Al-Asaad presenting his paper at the Qasr Al Bint*



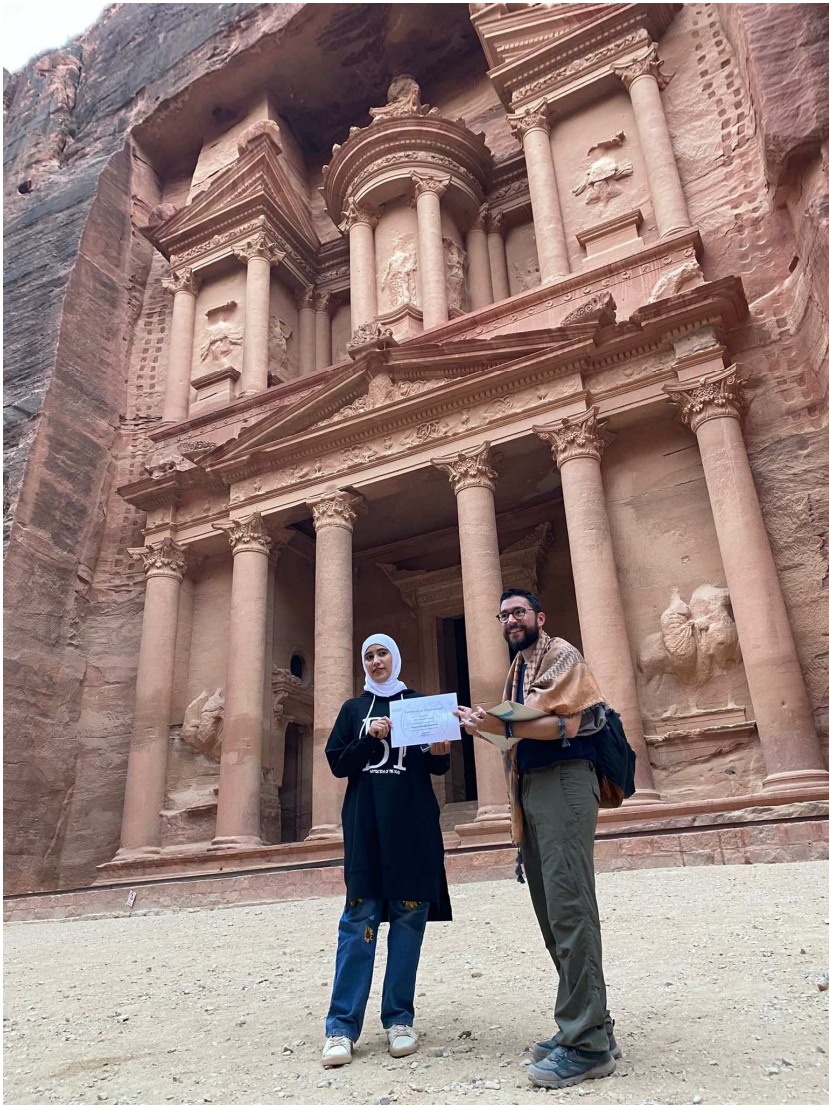


Fig. 106. Eman Hussien Al-Ahmed receiving her attestation  
for the *Cultural Heritage Programme*

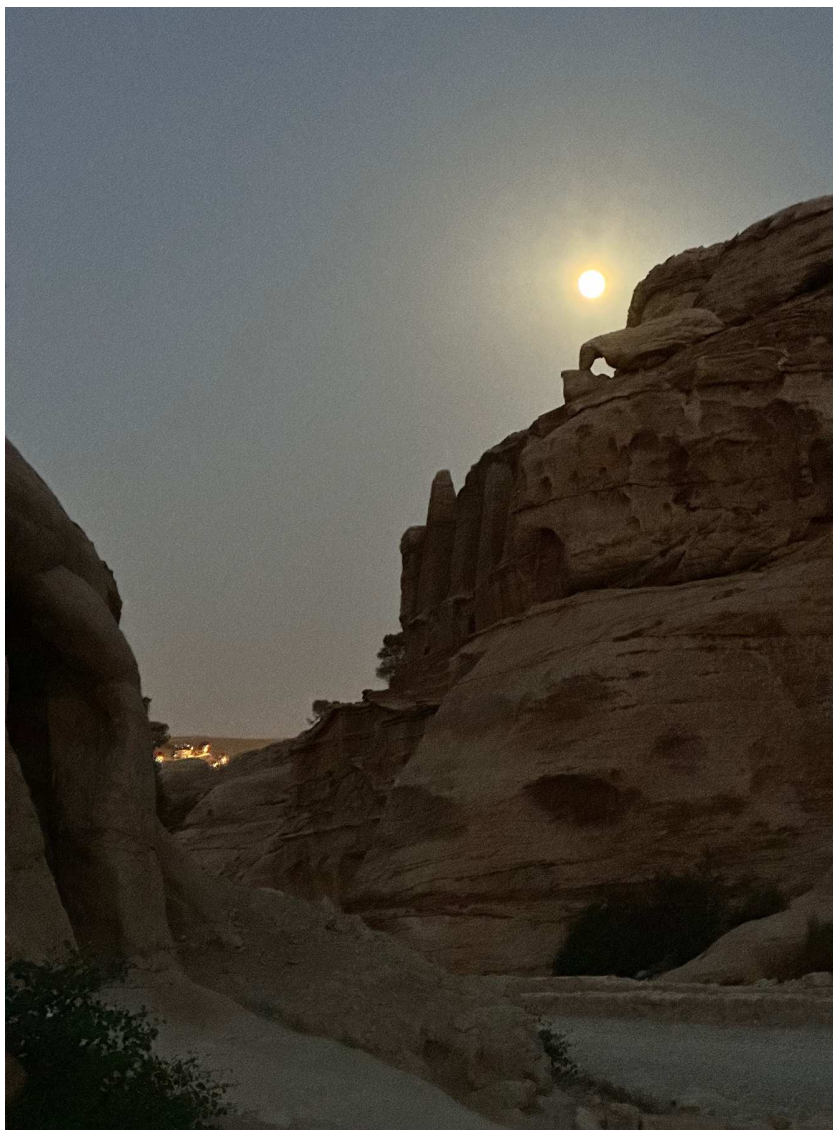


Fig. 107. Nisreen Hithm Hadrous receiving her attestation  
for the *Cultural Heritage Programme*



Fig. 108. The cohort holding their attestation for the *Cultural Heritage Programme* with InZone and IFPO colleagues





*Fig. 109.* Full moon over Petra on the way back after a wonderful journey

## IV.

### AFTERWORD.

#### CAPITAL FOR CURATING MEMORIES, LIVES AND IDENTITIES: BIOPOLITICAL INSIGHTS ON VIRTUAL RECONSTRUCTION OF ENDANGERED HERITAGE

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In biopolitical times, we find at the heart of the crossroads of erased tangible heritage and endangered intangible heritage a profound sense of belonging that people perform in their attempt to preserve biological life (*zoē*) and to secure and develop their non-organic life (*bios*), defining culture as a living organism. This precise entanglement between *zoē* and *bios* reflects a continuous effort by displaced people, who have suffered from discrimination, exclusion, and forced migration, to immunize themselves against violence and orchestrated death. Syrians have transgressed multiple *states of exception* (Agamben, 2005) throughout their troubled history. This term, as defined in Agamben's biopolitics, refers to historical occurrences that deviate from the normal social contract and imply, in contexts of improper life – such as wars, calamities, and pandemics – the state's monopoly over the governance of life. The destruction of the ancient cultural site of Palmyra by Daesh represents a particular



biopolitical sequence through which the control of life through heritage was undermined, and the Syrian identity was subjected to destruction. Negating Syrian life was part of a negative biopolitics that uprooted and isolated people from their connection with the past.

Years after the nightmare of Palmyra began, a positive biopolitical project emerged, aiming to digitally reconstruct the Temple of Baalshamin. This project rehabilitates the people's need to consciously engage with their past and resurrect what was taken from them, primarily for (bio)political reasons. At first glance, the Collart-Palmyre Project and its collateral platform, *Voix de Palmyre*, blend archaeology, cultural history, and geopolitics. However, it is, in fact, a mixture of biopolitics, cultural heritage, and the moral and aesthetic undertakings of archives that organize the sense of belonging and the paths of a troubled history. This project secures not only the cultural identity of the Syrian people but also their remembrance throughout history<sup>1</sup>.

### **Reterritorializing Memory: from Biopolitics to Necropolitics and Back. The Bare Life Beyond (In)Tangible Heritage**

The Collart-Palmyre Project was a resounding success from this standpoint, as it provided many displaced people, whether organized in diasporas or as refugees, the opportunity to reconnect with a living memory where identity, passions, values, beliefs, and the spirit of community were preserved. When Daesh struck, their intent was to erase the core of Syrian identity, which was visibly and undeniably

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<sup>1</sup> For those interested in the Collart-Palmyre Project, an English version is available at the following link: <https://wp.unil.ch/collart-palmyre/a-propos/the-collart-palmyre-project-english-presentation/>, last time accessed on November 11, 2025. To find out more about the Voices of Palmyre, please consult: <https://palmyrenevoices.org/>, last time accessed on November 11, 2025.

intertwined with ancient Roman and Greek culture, as well as Oriental history. By negating the right to live in a particular place and enjoy the historical merit of residing in Palmyra, Daesh effectively denied the Syrians' biological and cultural way of *being-in-the-world*. The digital reconstruction of the ancient site represented a biopolitical reversal: affirming life (Şerban, 2025) and demonstrating that intangible heritage has the power to preserve *zoē*, with all the unique characteristics of Syrian life. The Collart-Palmyre Project combined virtual technologies of surveillance, preservation, and 3D reconstruction, thereby enacting a politics of visibility.

This ambitious project, distinguished with the ICCROM Award, exemplifies successful practices in governing remembrance and underscores the urgency of critically engaging with the instincts of populations to design narratives of civilization in our complex geopolitical times. It highlights the educated impulse of dominant or ostracizing communities to *discipline* (Foucault, 1975) populations that either embed minorities or reflect marginal subjects, traumatized, struggling with the atrocities of history, especially at the level of their cultural life, within the limits of certain tolerated, accepted, and sometimes false cultural narratives. The story of forced migration can be told in multiple ways by victims and oppressors of different ideological and religious convictions, with varying life experiences and levels of education.

This is precisely why we must understand that these ingenious attempts to reconstruct compromised cultural heritage through digital means allow us to reconsider the competing narratives of martyrdom, migration, and suffering, and to evaluate the role of cultural heritage in governmentality by regulating life through knowledge. Otherwise, as Foucault (1991) warned, although in a context unrelated to virtual reconstructions of cultural heritage but pertinent to the origins of biopolitics as a contemporary discipline, governmentality has been wrongly reduced to a simplified perspective

on political power (see Foucault, 2004). More specifically, it has been reduced to the monopoly of power that the state claims to hold – sometimes within a blurry constitutional framework, as Agamben would put it – during *states of exception* (2005).

Governmentality is the art of managing life through its tangible and intangible resources, meaning by engaging both *zoē* and *bios*. On the other hand, Agamben (1998) advanced the concept of *bare life* as an authentic perspective on the qualified, entitled life to be preserved, from which *zoē* often emerged in opposition to *bios*. However, it is not sufficient to have Syrians secured and kept alive. They also need a social space where they can express their sense of belonging and reflect on their origins and duties to life, recalling that cultural life completes the biological perseverance into existence. In times of political tension, we tend to overlook this connection to values, traditions, and beliefs, focusing only on the bare life to maintain the survival of a community. Oppressors always consider that if *bios* is not eradicated, *zoē* is never fully destroyed. At the heart of this paradoxical perspective through which victims and oppressors relate to bare life, we find the resources to view cultural heritage within a biopolitical framework. This understanding reveals that both tangible and intangible heritage can illuminate the true narrative of annihilation and the real resources for preservation.

Consequently, there are several biopolitical insights that the virtual reconstruction of Palmyra reveals, which have not been explored before.

First, heritage preservation is a biopolitical tool because it always confronts both tangible and intangible elements, aspects related to *zoē* and *bios* that can never be fully isolated but are entangled, even at the level of *bare life*.

Secondly, the so-called *lieux de mémoire*, as Nora (1997) called them, are not anarchic; they must also be considered from the

perspective of their governmentality, while heritage itself needs a refreshed definition as the regulation of collective life.

Thirdly, there is a subtle border between life and death, and many policies theoretically performed to secure life or end a conflict often become, in practice, responsible for the deaths of different people. Therefore, biopolitics often prospects contexts of *necropolitics*, and in the particular case of Palmyra, the destruction of heritage is a necropolitical act.

Fourthly, the immersive experience that Syrians can now enjoy as displaced people, returning to an imaginary homeland, reveals the power of videos, photographs, and artistic undertakings to extend a scenario of biopolitics 2.0 (Chandler, 2020) and to express curatorial practices as governmentality practices. More or less, archives become instruments of power, surveillance, and preservation, through which Syrians turn to their identity and react to Daesh oppression.

Fifthly, it is time to understand that digital humanities, which offer the generous background for all these ingenious and interdisciplinary undertakings, create a biopolitical *dispositif* that Syrians can use to protect life and promote intangible heritage beyond their destroyed temples and historical buildings. It is not sufficient to curate objects but also memories and identities, and this is a biopolitical examination of life in the world of virtual life, digital wars and criminalities, and real death.

Last but not least, the virtual reconstruction of heritage is now considered a therapeutic practice<sup>2</sup>. Far from undermining the therapeutic potential of this endeavour, what I want to highlight is that beyond this lies something even more delicate: an attempt to regain the cultural legitimacy of displaced people and to hold, by

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the concept of "therapeutic landscapes", provided by the virtual reconstruction of heritage sites in post-conflict areas, in Di Franco *et al.*, 2025.

biopolitical means, a management of grief by revisiting, online or offline, (in)tangible cultural heritage.

Another significant biopolitical insight on the virtual preservation of cultural heritage reveals how the Syrian narratives on identity, suffering, and displacement have been *reterritorialized*, to use Deleuze's (1987) term, by non-Oriental institutions (mainly Western, if we consider the institutional actors that made the Collart-Palmyre Project possible), but also with global responsibility on heritage relevant to mankind (such as UNESCO). At first glance, their common efforts were to safeguard visual memory, but it is more than this: the reconstruction was, from the beginning, a battleground where ruptures, traumas, marginalities, and despairs were translated through an imaginary that orchestrates a regime of visibility, thus creating a space to narrate Palmyra and its civilizational evolution. As the virtual reconstruction of Palmyra reterritorializes the Syrian narratives on displacement, it equally restores the narratives of Greco-Roman heritage intertwined with the ruins of this crucial site for intercultural and interreligious exchange.

### **(Anti)Modern Perspectives on Overcoming Uprootedness: Embroidery and Virtual Heritage as Biopolitical Art**

Given this background, my aim is to explore the brilliant methodology that Patrick Michel and his colleagues and project team have advanced in reconnecting displaced Syrians with their cultural and religious identity. This album visually documents the Syrian history of resistance by reimagining cultural heritage and deriving ingenious means to curate memory and identity from therapeutic performative art, such as embroidery. Knowledge surveys were conducted to test intergenerational reflections on Palmyra and to observe what Palmyra means to people of different

ages, genders, and life experiences. For some, Palmyra represents the heart of a civilizational ecosystem, while for others, it is a pale memory recovered through narratives borrowed from third parties rather than through direct experiences of religious or cultural belonging by visiting one temple or other compromised parts of Palmyra.

Therefore, this quantitative research, which sociologically sets up the level of cultural and communal engagement, philosophically translates a framework to explore the gaps between tangible and intangible heritage and to understand how people relate to prior uprootedness, long before the Daesh invasion. Interviewed Syrians expressed that they are either powerfully connected with Palmyra as a homeland or lack precise and accurate memories due to early migration, leading many of them towards a diasporic attitude rather than a refugee status<sup>3</sup>.

The Syrian target groups (either as refugees or migrant people, who succeeded in accommodating in Europe and starting a life from the beginning) were then invited to participate in practical workshops on embroidery, exploring how this rare skill reconnects them with the cultural past of their society. Traditional craftsmanship skills were revisited as a means to bridge generations and bond individuals, whether they were conservatory-educated or had limited knowledge of national art production. Weaving was explored both historically and artistically, while embroidery was discussed as a craft through which class status, *habitus*, and the territorialisation of power were genealogically reconstructed. Participants learned that different cloth pieces were tailored for various social and political roles through embroidery. Elegance was performed for royalty and nobles, and over time, it became a performative art for

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<sup>3</sup> An important report documenting the reaction of Syrian target groups on experiencing the virtual reconstruction of the temple is available and inspired by Patrick Michel's work. See Maggi, 2021.



people from different social classes, transmitting diverse values and beliefs through a powerful and subtle imaginary.

As the target group began their embroidery, a community was instantly formed by an implicit and silent consent to return to their roots, despite their varying levels of artistic knowledge. Embroidery gained the allure of *biopolitical art*. On one hand, it symbolized a return to the *bios* that held all these people in their common cultural identity, beyond their contrasting destinies and ways of life. It was a way to immunize against evil, to recreate a social contract based on cultural norms and practices, through which they all engaged in a traditional craft. On the other hand, they selected motifs to design under the emotional impact of revisiting the virtually reconstructed Palmyra site or images of traditional craftsmanship and artistic performances. Both connections to a compromised, troubled past were performed as Syrians, as locals, as natives, historically and culturally entitled to do so. Symbols incarnated the past, portrayed the present, and embodied a collective identity, curating memories based on the emotional attachment and affective engagement each individual had, depending on their experience as displaced people.

Exploring embroidery as an exemplary biopolitical art is crucial because it reflects the intersection of embodied cultural capital and the governance of artistic reproduction. This art form transcends narratives of displacement, uprootedness, and marginality, while simultaneously expressing life through symbols that have been rerouted, reterritorialized, or reimagined. Embroidery pieces often feature motifs such as the tree of life, and agrarian symbols or plants symbolizing eternity, peace, or purity. This performative workshop immerses people with different displacement experiences into an art traditionally associated with femininity, offering a context to revisit values like stillness, kindness, docility, patience, and domesticity. These values and virtues have historically gendered

artistic behaviours, even though art is universal, transcending gender, culture, and religion.

Embroidery also disciplines the body through various techniques, repetitive gestures, and the training of reflexes and corporeal memory to perform an aesthetic routine. Participants develop a habit, regulating a bodily practice, which is, by itself, a biopolitical act. Engaging in embroidery means becoming aware of one's own body – culturally depicted as Syrian in this case – while educating attention, stimulating self-care, and fostering care for others. The pedagogical transmission of craftsmanship is ensured through this process. Some authors (see, for example, Dronkers, 2024), argue that slow stitches in different embroidery styles depict and curate a political choreography of time, offering multiple ethnographic insights. These insights include valuing the time invested in embroidery, relating to the person who will wear it, and the affection, attachment, or love invested in this fine art. Beyond personal labour, embroidery reproduces the social and cultural life of a belonging community, gently developing textual memories of people revisiting their past and imagining their future.

Methodologically, I am very curious about taking such an interactive workshop to the next level of performing social inclusion. This would involve confronting non-Syrian people with the embroidered symbols, expecting them to imagine a story about why the author/artist chose a particular symbol or experienced a particular emotion during this artistic endeavour, and also to consider the future of that piece of art once it is worn. I would be equally interested in understanding how people of different cultures perceive the emotional power of certain colours, and how the blending of shape, colour, and symbolism creates different hermeneutical openings and assumptions for various audiences.

However, until a new step is taken to deconstruct all these intercultural entanglements, it is important to note that well-

reputed scholarly articles have been published to raise awareness of the role of this tradition in embodying identities. Verclyte and Destrooper (2023) recently observed that Syrian women often choose embroidery symbols that express their ideas and ideals on social justice. Hanania (2020) highlights that embroidery involves visual storytelling through which Syrian women depict loss and hope. Recurrent visual elements – such as round geometrical constructions symbolizing the sun, or the abundant use of green, mirroring hope in different layers – turn a silent speech on resilience into a valid, loud testimony on harm and grief. As experimental as it might seem, these workshops have developed co-creative artistic undertakings, stimulating reflection on disruptive life and the limits of trust for future generations. Embroidery has helped in meaning-making and memorialization (Mansour, 2018) and has become valued as “a non-verbal memorialization of complex collective trauma” (Destrooper & Verclyte, 2022, 570).

But embroidery has an even greater biopolitical effect. It allows people to represent stories in patterns that “do narrators justice” (Eastmond, 2007, 260). This is why the sequence of immersive experiences into the reconstruction of Palmyra is so important. It stimulates a way to perform truth-telling without being disciplined or oppressed and offers a way to return to a safe place, often observed by stitching the temple. It becomes a responsive way to social engagement, recognizing, especially in displacement, “art as language” and “embroidery as dialect” (Ghnaim, 2018, 84). By texturizing resistance and engaging biopolitical art in social justice, these workshops transgress historical injuries and local monopolies on reterritorializing the Syrian narratives that different hosting societies have performed.

Lastly, it is important to reflect on how embroidery as biopolitical art responds to the immersive experience of visiting the virtually reconstructed temple of Palmyra. There is a gap between

real and virtual experiences in curating and consuming cultural heritage, which often mirrors the incomplete responsibility that people take over these behaviours from online to offline environments. Scholars have expressed concerns about “the texture style transfer during the 3D reconstruction” (Chen *et al.*, 2025), but embroidery is also instrumentalized here as a way to recover an authentic, tangible heritage and connection with belonging communities after virtually visiting their homeland. In fact, embroidery, performed as a cultural and emotional reaction to an immersive experience, raises awareness of the need to protect and preserve items that are not just decorative but that capture historical sequences of belonging.

As Michel rightfully argued, the virtual reconstruction of the Temple of Baalshamin is also meant “to participate in fighting the illicit trade of cultural goods” (Michel, 2023, 1069), to combat the displacement of artifacts, and ultimately to raise awareness that not only the temple but also other tangible items that together create the true spirit of Palmyra belong to the Syrians. The whole process of “digitally reconstructing Palmyra’s ghost images from rubbles” (Denker, 2017, 20) is a way to overcome the absence of cultural holding, property, or engagement – in short, to combat cultural ghosting and avoid another traumatic experience for people consumed by the hypothesis of how their world would have looked if Palmyra had not been destroyed. In turn, embroidery offers tools to avoid the vulnerability arising from the absence of any relation with the (in)tangible cultural heritage of Palmyra, which displaced people might question at certain moments in their lives.

Ultimately, this biopolitical art form underscores the importance of preserving and curating memories and identities, ensuring that the legacy of Palmyra and its people endure despite the challenges they face.

This is the main reason why this album is a living chronicle of multiple attempts to reconnect people with their cultural roots,

to engage digital humanities in alleviating the traumatic experiences of forced migration and violent displacement, and mainly to tackle the biopolitical implications of developing archives and ecosystems of visualized uprootedness and symbolized social injustice, mapped by allegorical patterns and motifs that transgress local heritage.

I conclude my critical analysis of the multi-level and multi-scale micro- and macro- research that frames VERIS as a CIVIS Open Lab project and the impressive efforts behind it, which represent years of dedication and hard work by Patrick Michel and his team. I strongly believe that this ethos is ideal for strengthening the biopolitical practices of curating identities and memories of displaced people and for overcoming uprootedness by addressing the inclusive and healing potential of both real and virtual (in)tangible heritage.

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### **Online Resources**

Université de Lausanne, Institute of Archaeology and Classical Studies. (n.d.). *The Collart-Palmyre Project* (<https://wp.unil.ch/collart-palmyre/a-propos/the-collart-palmyre-project-english-presentation/>).

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## HUMANITIES

“Through this transformative initiative, communities re-embroider patterns that first inspired Palmyra’s monuments, reconnecting tangible and intangible heritage, sustaining cultural memory in exile, and reaffirming heritage as a living practice.”

Younna Tabet, UNESCO World Heritage Centre

“The Voices of Palmyra project demonstrates that cultural practice, when it is concrete and sustained over time, can become a space for innovation and resilience, enabling the preservation and transmission of memories under threat within vulnerable or displaced communities. Essential.”

Yves Daccord, Board Member of the Fondation of the Domaine de Villette and former General Director of the ICRC

“I am honored to be part of Patrick Michel’s project, which uses art as a powerful way to preserve heritage and give voice to stories that must not be forgotten. Through this work with refugees, we create space for resilience, identity, and human connection, transforming lived experiences into a shared cultural legacy.”

Ahmad Joudeh, artist, ballet dancer

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