

## Report: Heritage in danger: Cairo landmark burnt and looted



Dr. Joris Kila, chairman of the International Cultural Resources Working Group (IMCuRWG) and adviser to the Austrian Committee of the Blue Shield and ANCBS<sup>1</sup> spent a week (February 5-11<sup>th</sup>) in Cairo where he received an urgent message from US Blue Shield (USBS) president Corine Wegener. The USBS in its turn was alerted by the US Lawyers Committee for Cultural Heritage Preservation. The case concerned a call for help initiated by Dr. Peter Lacovara, a US Egyptologist working in Luxor, concerning the Casdagli Villa on Midan Simon Bolivar (formerly Midan Kasr el Doubara) in Cairo. Apparently the villa was burned on Friday February 1st, and not until the early hours of Saturday morning (2<sup>nd</sup>) was the fire put out by the Cairo fire department. The Midan Simon Bolivar is very close to the Tahrir Square. It was reported that later several adolescents set fire again in the interior of the villa, and they were chased away by casual passer-by's. According to the message of Dr. Lacovara dated 4 February 2013 the fire department had been able to get to the fire only through actions by the security forces to clear the square, for demonstrators were doing everything possible to stop the fire department from putting out this fire.

Fire was still smoldering in the upper floors, and smoke coming out through the windows, as of 4:30 in the afternoon of February 4th. At the same time there seem to be plunderers at work ripping out anything of value still in the interior. Dr. Lacovara asked the Fire Department to revisit the premises, but they refused to do so as there was no roaring fire apparent, and they didn't want to venture out and possibly cause another violent demonstration. They believed they would need protection to undertake this job, and the security forces were disinclined to break the calm, that has prevailed in the area over the last 36 hours counted from February 4th.

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<sup>1</sup> Association of the National Committees of the Blue Shield

On Saturday February 9<sup>th</sup> Joris Kila together with Tilly Mulder who is an advocate for Blue Shield in Egypt went to the Midan Simon Bolivar to find the building unprotected and consequently open for looters since most antique fences as well as the gate were already stolen. Later they were joined by Ahmad Al-Bindari an Egyptian architectural researcher. The team went inside and looked on all floors and the devastations were terrible. The Byzantine hall in which Saint George was so well depicted in both the celestial ceiling and the hall's extraordinary cloister or chapel is severely damaged. The monumental staircase is completely destroyed by fire and completely lost. Marble ornaments and fire places are broken in pieces and scattered around. Everywhere in the building useable parts are stripped and stolen.



Old interior picture Villa Casdagli Hall and Chapel photo Jeremy Young



The situation on February 9<sup>th</sup> Photo Joris Kila

The second floor was found completely burned and ravaged.



Villa Casdagli second floor. Photo Joris Kila.

The team tried to get more information about who created this destruction and looting but this was difficult. One has to realize that the Villa is close to the Tahrir Square and more or less in a sort of riot zone also there is no police so everything is left unguarded. Unconfirmed rumors blame criminal elements who are also kept responsible for looting and damaging the lobby of the nearby Intercontinental Hotel. The website Egy.com states: "the solitary winner here is the villa's latest owner who will no doubt sell this prime real estate to Qatar or replace it with a lucrative high rise". The fact that the Casdagli Villa was an official monument did not make much difference as last year another Cairo monument the luxuriously furnished villa of Kevork Ispenian on the Pyramids Road was looted and destroyed despite being on Egypt's heritage list.

### **Back ground of the Villa Casdagli**

The Villa Casdagli is a listed historic monument and for Cairo is an irreplaceable architectural landmark with distinguished architecture, European-style paintings, mosaics and special inlays. It was built during the first decade of the 20th century by Austrian architect Edward Matasek (1867-1912) reportedly for account of Emanuel Casdagli, a British educated Levantine family of Georgian-Central Caucasia origins, dealing in the lucrative Manchester trade. According to some sources it is possible that the house was originally built for banker Felix Suares and, following his death in April 1906, his heirs sold it circa 1909 to the Casdaglis. One of Villa Casdagli's pre WW-II tenants was the American Embassy. The building is situated next to the plot where the current US embassy is located. Later the Villa became a school for girls named after Sudanese revolutionary "Ali Abdelatif". In 2006, the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), now the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA), placed the villa on Egypt's heritage list as an Islamic monument. In 2008, the SCA, in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the American Research Centre in Cairo (ARCE), developed a comprehensive restoration project for the building. The project was funded by the US Department of State's Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation with a \$5 million grant. After restoration the monument would become a new Institute of Museology, established by the Ministry of State for Antiquities Affairs to train curators on modern technology as used in world renowned museums. Courses would include museum presentation and exhibition design, restoration, museum studies and heritage management and the institute would offer MA and PhD programs.

On February 10 Dr. Kila and Ms. Mulder attended a meeting of the so-called "Friends of Manial Palace Museum". This NGO has good relations with the Antiquities Ministry (formerly Supreme Council of Antiquities) proof of this is that the meeting was held in the premises of this Ministry in Zamalek. During the meeting it was understood that the ownership of the Casdagli villa was transferred from the Ministry of Education to the Antiquities Ministry which makes real-estate speculation less likely.

According to an article in Al Ahram on ligne published 13 February and on the occasion of a symposium on the "Islamic view on cultural heritage", the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture" (IRCICA) issued the "International Declaration of Cairo", which protects Islamic as well as Pre-Islamic heritage. Among the participants were the Grand Mufti of Egypt, the Sheikh d'Al-Azhar and the Minister of *Waqfs*. The Grand Mufti announced that he is going to publish a book on short notice that collects all fatwas on the protection of heritage. The use of Fatwa's to prevent abuse and destruction of Cultural Property also happened in Iraq. In May 2003, just after the American invasion of Iraq had begun Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani was asked by the archaeology inspector of Dhi Qar province in southern Iraq to announce a fatwa. The request was granted and Al-Sistani proclaimed that digging for antiquities is illegal; that both Islamic and pre-Islamic artefacts are part of Iraqi heritage; and that people with antiquities in their possession should return them to the museum in Baghdad or Nasiriya. Copies of the fatwa were distributed widely in the south, and published in the Iraqi press. As a result some of the looting stopped. Islamic leaders can have a major positive impact on protecting cultural heritage.



The exterior on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2013. Photo Joris Kila

### Sources

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