

## THE CONSCIOUS DETERIORATION AND DEGRADATION OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper aims to present the different forms of vandalism resulted from the human activities and manifestations that harm the environment and/or put in danger the cultural heritage assets. For this purpose, we selected a number of relevant cases in the field in order to identify the real reasons behind these actions that have often mutilated the artifacts. The results revealed that anthropic factors are just as dangerous as the natural factors for the cultural heritage, and that there are many different manifestations, controllable or uncontrollable, based on intention, imprudence or omission.*

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; conservation; vandalism; destruction; graffiti; demolition

### **Introduction**

It is known that the evolutive effects of deterioration of the physical condition and the degradation of the quality of the component materials render the cultural heritage assets in precollapse (partial reversibility) or collapse (irreversibility) states. In both cases, the artefact loses material, changes its shape and structure, and therefore, loses the artistic and historical messages which it carries. In this context we have to mention that the *deterioration* is the effect incurred by an artefact through the structural-functional change of its state under physical-mechanical actions, assisted or not by climatic factors. This effect evolves from the centres with minimal resistance toward any direction with minimal structural stability, and is based on processes of microscopic or macroscopic destruction. It is often a singular physical or cinematic effect, with a single result, but with one or multiple causes [1, 2]. On the other hand, the term *degradation* represents the effect of the change of the material nature under the action of many factors (chemical, electrochemical, biochemical, microbiological, radiative/thermic, etc.). The effect is based on the processes of alteration of the chemical components and it is a cumulative one [3, 4].

At the same time, the conservation status of the artefacts depends on two groups of factors: endogenous or internal, and exogenous or external [5-7].

The internal factors are linked to the quality of materials and to the technologies used in the making process, correlated with the artistic techniques, and with the natural or induced defects of the component materials [6-9].

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External factors are more and can be grouped into:

- *environmental or climatic factors* (humidity, temperature, atmospheric pressure, natural and artificial lighting, air currents and precipitation);
- *natural and anthropic pollution* (chemical, thermal, sonic, and radioactive);
- *microbiological factors* (fungal and xylophage attack, etc.) and *macrobiological factors* (plants and rodents).

Even if wide researches and studies were made and continues to be undertaken for understanding how the *internal and natural factors* act, respectively to counteract the evolutive effects of deterioration and degradation of cultural heritage assets which they determined, the *anthropic factors* (resulted from the human activities and manifestations that harm the environment) are considered the most dangerous for the cultural heritage [5-7, 10, 11]. With respect to the anthropic factor, with direct action on the artefacts, we refer to three activities: (i) inadequate displaying, handling and storing, (ii) unauthorized preservation and restoration interventions, and (iii) vandalism (the last one being the most serious and often with irreversible consequences) [12-14].

Considering the above, the paper presents the forms of vandalism in a point-by-point manner, mentioning the generatory reasons and their effects in the current geopolitical context, specifically European and international.

### The manifestations of vandalism

Regardless of the context in which it is found, an artefact can become at any moment the target of an *intentional act*, *by imprudence* or *by omission* of vandalism, controllable or uncontrollable, which can take several forms (Fig. 1).

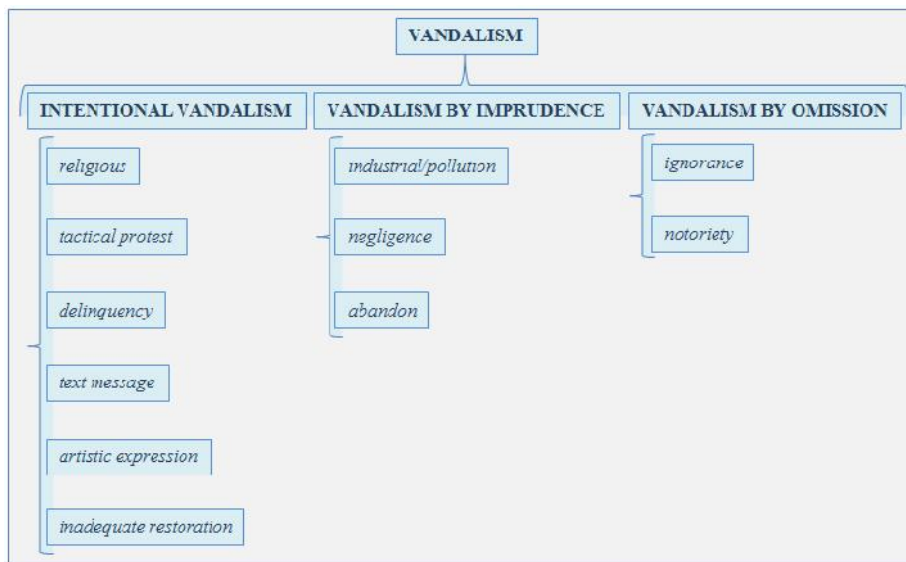


Fig. 1. The forms of the vandalism

If the manifestations of the intentional vandalism are based on a strong awareness of the effects produced by those who initiate them, the forms of vandalism by imprudence or by omission are generated by ignorance, neglect, disinterest, or inattention.

The *intentional vandalism* includes all actions initiated deliberately, intentionally and consciously on the works of art, in order to destroy entirely or remove parts of them using violence or by applying paint, graffiti, etc. In the dedicated literature there are few references

regarding the motivations that drive these kinds of actions, but we have identified the following forms:

- *Religious vandalism*

Based on dogmatic/religious and/or cultural beliefs, intolerance, strict notions of morality or ethical rules, this form of vandalism is manifested by violent destruction (detonation, fire, cutting, etc.) of those artefacts that do not correspond to the convictions of those who act.

In this situation, the acts of vandalism can take place between different confessions or inside the same confession. As examples we can mention the corresponding period of iconoclasm (726–843) or the decision taken by Pope Paul IV to destroy or modify the artworks by covering or removing the genital organs of the nudes painted or sculpted. Or later the request of Pope Innocent X to cover with leaves the genitals of nude statues from Vatican (figure 2).

- *Vandalism by tactical protest*

This form of manifestation is based on desire to demonstrate the power through revolutionary movements, acts of violence, terrorist attacks and even war, actions that lead to the destruction of cultural heritage assets. A very recent example is represented by the destruction of works of art from Iraq and Syria by the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL). In figure 3 we can see a photo published on April 2016, on the website [www.on.rt.com](http://www.on.rt.com), showing pictures of the *Temple of Baal* from Palmyra, before and after the ISIL attacks.



**Fig. 2.** *Meleager and the Calydon Boar*, Vatican Museum  
[Photo source: <http://tinyurl.com/hoby3uy>]



**Fig. 3.** *Temple of Baal*, Palmyra, Syria:  
before and after the ISIL attacks  
[Photo source: <https://on.rt.com/78y3>]

- *Vandalism by delinquency*

Misappropriation of the artefacts (or component elements of them) from museums, public or private collections, or even of the public monuments to use them for personal purposes or to introduce them into the circuit of illegal trade with works of art, outlines another form of vandalism that can be adequately called *vandalism by delinquency*.

Illicit trafficking in cultural assets (often influenced by private collectors) is an important issue in the field, and it is very present in times of war or other kind of conflicts. Here's how, the situation from Syria and Iraq presented above can be included also in this form. In this respect, ISIL has destroyed a considerable number of heritage assets, and then, to obtain more funds necessary to purchase weapons, they undertook illicit trade in heritage objects (which now have become more valuable for private collectors).

Throughout time, this issue has been addressed frequently by the representative organizations in the field such as UNESCO or the International Council of Museums (ICOM),

treated in documents like: *UNESCO International Code of Ethics for Dealers in Cultural Property* (1999) or in *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (2006), and discussed at numerous international events in the field such as: *Seventh International Symposium on the Theft of an Illicit Traffic in Works of Art, Cultural Property and Antiques* (in 2008), *Seventh Meeting of the Interpol Expert Group (IEG) of Stolen Cultural Property* (in 2010).

- *Vandalism by text message*

A very common form of vandalism is manifested by incised messages, scratches, writings made with different instruments desiring in this way to communicate with the divinity and/or a possible public. In Orthodox Christian cult this sort of message can be frequently found on the walls of churches (figure 4).



**Fig. 4.** *The Church of the Humor Monastery: a (a.1- a.4).*

Details with incised messages on the external fresco of the church [Photo source: Personal archive, 2014]

- *Vandalism as artistic expression*

In this case we encounter a spontaneous manifestation, by virtue of impulse, or premeditated that sometimes may even take the form of a protest so expressed.



**Fig. 5.** *Fountain at the entrance of the Church of Saint Spyridon, Ia i (1754):*

a, a.1. Details with decorative elements covered with yellow paint

[Photo source: Personal archive, 2015]



Applying paint of different colours, making graffiti on the walls of a monument or of a common building is increasingly more present in the largest cities of the world, and is often associated with a modern form of artistic expression.

In figure 5 we can see how some details of the fountain which is next to the bell tower of the *Church of Saint Spyridon* in Iasi are covered in yellow paint.

- *Vandalism by inadequate restoration*

The failure to comply the specific ethical principles of scientific conservation process (that are strongly supported by the international community in the field) is highlighted through unauthorized interventions. In these situations, special attention must be paid to the restoration process that is related to a series of actions and principles focused on maintaining the authenticity that categorically differentiate it from repair, renovation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, rebuilding, or replication. The restoration activity means restoring an artefact through structural, ambiental and chromatic reintegration, while rehabilitation seeks to restore a functional or technological system — for example, rehabilitating the heating or air conditioning system [2, 15-19]. However, often the imposition of a personalized point of view of a specialist (architect, scientific conservator, restorer, etc.) or of a school during the interventions, leads to significant changes of the structure and overall appearance of the artwork. These situations we have classified as *vandalism by inadequate restoration* or *unauthorized intervention*.

For example, wishing to modernize and increase the comfort level inside, various heating systems, electrical installations, audio, etc. have been installed in old cult buildings across Romania. Often, for their installation there were irreversibly sacrificed artistic and structural components. As we can see in figure 6, for installing the piping needed for the heat systems, the walls were drilled, through saints painted on the walls for hundreds of years. These renovation solutions have irreversibly destroyed the overall appearance of the artwork directly affected, and led to big losses of the artistic and historical material from three monuments: the *Batistei Churh* from Bucharest (figure 6a) and the oldest place of worship in Constanta, the *Greek Church* (figure 6b), both monuments of national interest, and the *Trinity Church* (figure 6c), a historical monument of local interest from Cilibiu, Gol e ti, Iasi County.



**Fig. 6.** Inadequate installation of heat and power systems inside of the historical monuments:

a. *Batistei Churh* (1763), Bucharest (detail);

b. *Greek Church* (1865), Constanta (detail);

c. *Trinity Church* (1800 -1850), Cilibiu, Gol e ti, Iasi County (detail)

[Photo source: a. <http://tinyurl.com/j9t9tuq>; b, c Personal archive, 2015]

The *vandalism by omission* is based on *notoriety* of the cultural heritage objectives or by *ignorance* of the people.

With respect to the notoriety, we have to mention that the more known and more attractive are some cultural heritage assets in terms of their uniqueness, the more are exposed to several risks. Tourist promotion of cultural objectives of this type results in attracting an excessive number of visitors over time that causes significant microclimate changes with a big impact on the artefacts. The *Lascaux Cave* (Dordogne) in France is a good example in this regard.

The *vandalism by imprudence* can take three forms as follows:

- *Vandalism by industrial and/or domestic pollution*

The increased level of pollution in the atmosphere (by the release of pollutants resulting from industry, from the use of vehicles with combustion Otto or Diesel, and other means polluting nearby or worse, of those who do not respect the norms regarding the emissions) may be the main cause of loss of adhesion and cohesion of the elements of monuments exposed outdoor (for example the calcium carbonate is attacked directly when the carbon anhydride from the atmosphere is dissolved by rainwater, forming expanded crusts) [7].

Here are included the initiatives of the public transportation companies which set routes too close to monuments and in this way, over time, could endanger the facades and the resistance structures due the vibration and pollutant emissions they produce.

In the same manner the construction companies involved in the real estate business and which raise new buildings very close to historical sites bring huge prejudices by generating pollutants and vibration (during construction), by changing the microclimate, the environment and the overall image of the historic site.

- *Vandalism by neglect*

As the name suggests, this form of aggression results from ignorance, inexperience, neglect or financial interests conducting improper intervention on cultural heritage assets.

A good example in this sense we can find at the historical monuments burdened with cables and installations from different providers (electricity, gas, telephone, internet, etc.), still active on the market or not.



**Fig. 7.** House with Lions (1898), Constanta:

a.1, a.2, a.3 and a.4 - Details of mounted cables from different service providers  
[Photo source: Personal archive, 2015]

Installing these cables on external walls of monuments, not only destroys their overall aesthetic image, but cause great damage to the resistance structure which usually already is in an advanced stage of deterioration and degradation. An example is given by the *House with Lions (Casa cu Lei)* from Constanta (figure 7). Once a symbol of the city, this monument is currently in an advanced state of deterioration and degradation and burdened with all kinds of cables.

- *Vandalism through abandonment or tacit passivity*

Very often both buildings included in the list of Historical Monuments, and those that are not yet mentioned in this list, but represent important evidences from historical, cultural and artistic point of view are abandoned and left derelict because the owners or managers are in financial incapacity to maintain them.

There are also situations where the monuments have not been effectively abandoned (although they are sometimes in a pre-collapse state), which are still in use and open to the public, even if it knows that the precarious state they are represents a danger for the public/visitors.

A very recent example in this regard is represented by tower of the *Evangelical Fortified Church, Rotbav* from Brasov that simply crashed in the evening of February 19, 2016 (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8.** The Tower of the *Evangelical Fortified Church, Rotbav*, Brasov:  
 a. The church tower before collapse; b. The church tower after collapse  
 [Photo source: a. *Țetcu Mircea Rareș*, 2013; b. <http://tinyurl.com/j5tre9g>]

## Conclusions

The anthropic factors are just as dangerous as the natural factors for the cultural heritage and the human activities and manifestations have to be in attention of any professional in the field.

The effects of deterioration and degradation generated by different forms of vandalism presented in this paper are, in the majority of cases, irreversible, and this is why is very important to know the reason behind the actions. By knowing the motivations we can develop strategies to prevent and monitor the human activities and manifestations (made intentionally or not) that endanger the cultural heritage assets.

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