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BSEC-GHF: Cultural Heritage Across Borders

A History of World Heritage Sites, a History of International Co-operation.

The Conference that we have opened today addresses topics relating to Regional and cross border co-operation using cultural heritage as a gateway to bilateral, regional and international interaction and the socio-economic significance of such co-operation.

I am frequently asked, why heritage? What is it actually worth in the modern world?

I am fortunate to have been born in an island, not troubled with successful invasion since 1066. I have a history of my family which goes back to the mid 14th Century. This luxury of history enhances my security and wellbeing as a citizen of my country, The British Isles have changed in occupation and invasion in ancient times, and there has been enough history for the nation to assimilate all comers and to take a pride from all of the influences that contributed to the culture of the Island. Be it Saxon, Roman, Scandinavian Viking or French, all of the sites remembering the cultures which have influenced the progress of Britain, are equally celebrated and cherished.

In other places, this symbiosis has not yet occurred and countries, often recently emerging Republics, concentrate on threads of 'original' culture while paying less attention to the cultural additions of neighboring countries and in the most extreme conditions destroy cultural remains that do not follow the prevalent political status quo.

Heritage sites are both tangible and intangible, states, religions and philosophical ideas all contribute to the richness of difference between people and until these are protected across borders, understanding, security and peace are not encouraged.

World Heritage Sites and the World Heritage Convention which proposes regulation for inscription were born out of General concerns for the preservation of the best examples of heritage sites in various countries of the world.

The general concept for the preservation of historic places was not properly born until the late 19th Century, with societies like the British, Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, was formed around the philosophies of William Morris. SPAB was not just formed to protect ancient buildings against decay and misuse; it also fought to prevent adaptation of ancient buildings by architects in the Gothik movement.

In 1959 The Egyptian Government announced that it was going to build the high dam at Aswan. The lake formed by the dam would flood a valley full of ancient treasures especially the temples of Abu Simbel and Philae. UNESCO launched a worldwide safeguarding programme and both temples were taken to pieces and moved higher up the valley for their continued survival. Of the \$80 million required to complete the works,

\$40 million was raised by 50 States parties within UNESCO. The Abu Simbel project received wide acclaim.

Further safeguarding campaigns followed, saving Venice and its lagoon in Italy, the ancient archaeological city of Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan and the Temple complex at Borobodur all receiving international attention.

UNESCO together with ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites set about drafting a convention to protect the cultural heritage of mankind.

The United States of America proposed that cultural conservation should be linked to the conservation and recognition of natural sites. A 1965 conference in Washington and supported by the White House called for the establishment of a “World Heritage Trust” to preserve “the world’s superb natural and scenic areas and historic sites for the present and the future of the entire world citizenry”.

Similar proposals were drafted in 1968 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and these were presented at the United Nations conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972. On 16th November 1972, at the 17th session of the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris, “the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” was adopted. This is now commonly called the World Heritage Convention.

In 2006 there were 830 inscribed as World Heritage Sites on the UNESCO list, these are both tangible places and intangible forms. 664 Cultural places, 164 Natural Places and 24 mixed properties; each site has a unique identification number. Each World heritage site is the property of the country in which it is located, even if the site was developed by a neighboring or other country or civilization. World Heritage Sites are deemed to have ‘Outstanding Universal Value’ for the future generations of humanity.

Cross border or Transboundary sites have tended to focus only natural sites which, in Europe include:

- Belfries of Belgium and France.
- Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park. Belarus and Poland.
- Caves of Aggtelek and Slovensky kras. Hungary and Slovakia.
- Cultural landscape of Ferto/Neusiedlersee. Austria and Hungary.
- Curonian Spit. Lithuania and the Russian Federation.
- Frontiers of the Roman Empire, Upper Rhine, Rhaetian lines and Hadrians Wall. Germany and United Kingdom.
- High coast and Kvarken archipelago. Sweden and Finland.
- Historic centre of Rome. Italy and Holy See.
- Muskauer Park/Park Muzakowski. Poland and Germany.
- Pyrenees, Mont Perdu. France and Spain.
- Struve Geodetic Arc. Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

Transboundary World Heritage Sites have contributed greatly to the spirit of co-operation between host Governments but perhaps more critically to the sense of human unity between ordinary people.

This paper started with my expression of thankfulness to have been born in a relatively stable island, to have been given the security and self respect provided by a long cultural and family history. If a member of the former Soyuz Sovietski is asked about the origin of their family, even only two generations ago, many will simple not know their precise ethnic or regional origins, they can be impoverished without a secure sense of “past” and “culture”.

More and more, transboundary co-operation is discussed, especially where it relates to neighboring countries and regions where strife, misunderstanding, historical rivalry and bitterness cause political difficulties, suffering and hard hearted nationalism.

Where borders are insecure or even closed, then cultural heritage cross border initiatives are often safe and small ways for States Parties to open and improve general dialogue, while at the same time benefiting from the Socio-Economic advantages that such co-operations often bring to regional and local populations.

Transboundary co-operation can be the gateway to understanding and the rich dividend of peace, understanding and good relations.

Fin. John Hurd.