On the 5th and the 6th of November the American Academy in Rome hosted the conference Saving Cultural Heritage in Crisis Areas. The conference was held at the amazing venue of Villa Aurelia, built by Cardinal Girolamo Farnese atop the Gianiculum in the seventeenth century and now property of the American Academy. This event, organised by C. Brian Rose, James B. Pritchard, Lucy Shoe Meritt and Laurie Rush with the support of the Getty Foundation and of the Andrew Mellon Foundation brought together a number of experts and leaders in the field of cultural heritage to explore case studies and new actions to prevent damage and protect culture and cultural heritage in times of crisis.

The welcoming statement of the Ambassador of the United States to the Republics of Italy and San Marino was followed by a first session dedicated to the topic of Disaster response. Aparna Tandon (ICCROM Project Specialist) opened the session with a moving presentation of the activities carried out by ICCROM in Haiti after the earthquake. She vividly described the situation found upon her arrival and illustrated the numerous challenges she had to face to set up an ICCROM training course trying at the same time to take advantage of the opportunity to rescue art and artifacts collections.

The second speaker, Patrick Daly (Asia Research Institute, Senior Research Fellow) explored the ways in which Cultural Heritage could and should be part of a coherent post disaster action. Bringing as a case study the impact that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami had on the cultural heritage of Indonesian affected areas, he explored examples of response and recovery that saw the involvement of the community and integrated cultural heritage in response and recovery actions. What I personally found interesting was the comprehensive approach of this paper that looked at the problem from different angles and took into consideration all cultural aspects of the community life, for instance, including in the picture considerations on intangible heritage, religious and gender...
After this session dedicated to disaster response, the conference moved in a different direction and dedicated the following sessions mainly to the presentation and discussion of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Conflict Zones. A number of papers looked at this topic from a range of different perspectives, presenting studies from Iraq, Libya and Albania, or looking at Prevention and Protection through Education and Documentation.

It is in this context that His Excellency Omar S. Sultan, Afghan Deputy Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, spoke about the preservation of cultural heritage in Afghanistan and in particular of the Early Buddhist Site of Mes Aynak. In his talk he introduced a number of issues related with site protection and management to prevent the illicit traffic of antiquities and the widespread looting of archaeological sites. His Excellency proudly spoke about the importance of cultural heritage in the promotion of national integrity and identity. His presentation showed a series of stunning images of the most recent archaeological discoveries in the Logar province and discussed the preservation strategies for the archaeological sites threatened by mining development. This talk gave a lot more than a mere description of the current situation in Afghanistan it also sent a positive message about the efforts made nationally and internationally to help Afghanistan stressing the importance of cultural resources as much as any other resource. As his excellency said “A well-functioning national management of cultural heritage is a crucial element of rebuilding the Afghan national state.”

The first day of the conference was closed by a contribution from the General Pasquale Muggeo (Comandante, Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale). The General described to the audience the unique experience of the Carabinieri in the protection of Cultural Property and stressed the importance of international agreements and cooperation.

The second day of the conference featured a number of unique presentations. Many were related to the different strategies adopted to include Cultural Heritage Protection in military training. Lieutenant Colonel Hodzic, as chief of the Education and Training Development Department, spoke about the programmes of the Peacekeeping Institute of Sarajevo (Bosnia-Herzegovina). While Brian Rose and Laurie Rush illustrated the various training tools adopted to train the US troops about cultural heritage issues both before and during deployment.

More incredible images were shown by Sarah Parcak and Roberto Nardi. Both internationally recognised professionals constantly dealing with archaeological sites in danger. The first one illustrated how the application new technology like remote sensing and satellite imagery can help monitoring archaeological sites affected by heavy looting. The second one described how an amazing archaeological site, like Zeugma in Turkey, can be rescued and preserved by the raising waters of the Euphrate Dam even when working against time and in extremely difficult conditions.

In the afternoon James Lessard and Christine Luke brought again the ‘local communities’ into de debate, presenting their personal and professional experience in mediating and engaging with local communities to achieve knowledge raise awareness and be able to complete their extremely diverse projects. Each single session was followed by a lively debate and stimulating discussion.