'Postcard to Palmyra': bringing the public into debates over post-conflict reconstruction in the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of the 'Postcard to Palmyra' project, which was run alongside the controversial installation of a replica of the triumphal arch from Palmyra in Trafalgar Square in 2016. The thoughts and feelings expressed here are those raised by the visitors to the replica arch. These complement critiques and discussions that already exist on the replica arch and bring in a new and much-needed additional element: public opinion. The postcards have given us an opportunity to see how the man and woman on the street felt about the replica arch, the potential of reconstruction in the future and the event itself. Various issues arise in the postcards concerning aesthetics, authenticity, authority, colonialism and how to run a public engagement event. In addition, the postcards have given voice to people from the Middle East, who are often not heard.

Introduction

This paper contributes to the difficult, on-going debate concerning post-conflict reconstruction in the Middle East by presenting the results of the 'Postcard to Palmyra' project, which was run alongside the controversial installation of a replica of the triumphal arch from Palmyra in Trafalgar Square in 2016. The thoughts and feelings expressed here are those raised by the visitors to the replica arch. These complement critiques and debates that already exist on the replica arch (for example Burch forthcoming on the arch and the fourth plinth; Bevan 2016 on the question of reconstruction; Factum Foundation 2016 on issues over the accuracy of the replica) and bring in a new and much-needed additional element to this contentious issue: public opinion.

I will open by briefly outlining the event and my role within it, before moving on to discuss the feedback from the event. The postcards have given us an opportunity to see how the man and woman on the street felt about the replica arch, the potential of reconstruction in the future and the event itself. Various issues arise in the postcards concerning aesthetics, authenticity, authority, colonialism and how to run a public engagement event. In addition, the postcards

have given voice to a small group of people from the Middle East, particularly Syria and Iraq. While these people are often discussed the are not frequently heard in current discussions. My conclusions will be formed by some of these voices.

'Postcard to Palmyra' and the Trafalgar Square event
In June to October 2015 the monumental arch from Palmyra (Tadmor), Syria (Figure 1) was destroyed by terrorists. A replica of this arch, made from marble and machine cut from a digital model, was set up for three days in Trafalgar Square, London, from 19 to 21 April 2016 by the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) (Figure 2). The replica arch was placed centrally at the bottom of the steps leading up to the National Gallery. My role was on the sidelines of this project but not funded by it, and involved asking visitors to share their thoughts and feelings about the arch and any memories of Palmyra. This was part of my 'Remembering the Romans' project, which was running when the arch was erected; this project, funded by the AHRC, was a public engagement project aimed at creating new memories from objects associated with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.[1] Together with my undergraduate and MA students from the Department of Classics, Royal Holloway, I attended each day, all day, for the duration of the event.

Figure 1: The monumental arch in Palmyra (Tadmor), Syria in 2004; note the ornate Corinthian capitals (photo: author).

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[1] https://rememberingromans.wordpress.com Ethical approval was granted on 12.01.2016 (Full-Review-45-2016-01-12-09-35-UALC004)

In all, 345 people wrote postcards. The postcards were written in English, Arabic and Spanish. Nationalities, as mentioned by the writer of a postcard or identified by the language used on the postcards, included English (323), Syrian (7), Iraqi (2), Arab (5), Spanish (3), Brazilian (1), Domenican Republic (1), Mexican (1), South Korean (1) and Trinidadian (1). These numbers relate largely to the languages in which the postcards were written, therefore, it is possible that English is over-represented as a nationality here. While many people were incidental tourists who happened to be visiting the square on those days, some mentioned verbally that they had deliberately travelled to see the arch (one Iraqi man, for example, visited from Southampton) and three postcards mentioned travelling deliberately to visit, one describing it in terms of a 'pilgrammage' (sic) (cards 0071/61718; 0078/61787; 01588/61851).

Figure 2: The replica arch on the day of its unveiling in Trafalgar Square, 19 April 2016. Standing in front of the arch (l-r): Roger Michel (Executive Director, IDA), Boris Johnson (then Lord Mayor of London), Dr Maamoun Abdulkarim (Director-General for Antiquities and Museums in Syria), Dr Alexy Karenowska (Director of Technology, IDA). Note the capitals are either blank or have fish-scale-esque protrusions (see Factum Foundation 2016 for more observations concerning accuracy) (photo: author).

Following the event, the postcards were scanned and transcribed as part of the joint UCL/British Museum crowd-sourcing project, MicroPasts. As well as

making the scanned postcards available via Flickr, the MicroPasts project set up a platform through which participants were invited to transcribe the postcards.[2] The numbering system of the postcards employed here relates to this transcription.[3] Each postcard was transcribed five times to ensure reliability and consistency of transcription; I have undertaken subsequent checking. Remarkably, all of the transcription was completed within one week. Including the transcription in the project allowed more people to be involved, including those who were not able to attend the event itself, and helped immensely with the speed at which the analyses presented below were able to be carried out. The wording, spelling and punctuation given in the transcriptions here follows that on the original postcards, regardless of any mistakes.

Responses to the replica arch
A total of 169 postcards made explicit reference to the arch. Of these 98 (58%) were broadly positive, but there was also a significant number of mixed (37; 22%) and negative (31; 18%) responses. Three responses were hard to interpret. In what follows, I will draw out some examples of each category which facilitate some consideration of why people liked or disliked the arch and why.

Many of the positive responses were quite simple reflections, for example card 0151/61741: 'It's lovely to see it, isn't it'. Others made more substantive comments and felt that the replica arch had an important role to play in raising awareness, for example card 0122/69135: 'This is great just to show the world of what beauty is being lost' and card 0075/67156: 'It keeps people talking about the situation in Syria – we need that.' These cards raise key points about the power of objects to open up discussions, but as this article reveals, potentially could have been done at the event to bring this important aspect out more explicitly. Of the positive responses, ten mentioned defiance against terrorism and seven solidarity with Syria, as a reason to support the arch.

Some of the mixed responses raised important questions especially over for whom this replica arch has been made and why organisations like the IDA are undertaking these projects:

> 'Is the arch a symbol, an artefact, or a landmark of home? Are we rebuilding or remaking it for the residents of Palmyra, the archaeological world, or the global community? I keep thinking of Berlin or London after WW2 bombings – people getting on with their lives, countries reckoning with destruction, and the world trying to find a new "normal" -> are these different perspectives compatible?' (double-sided card 61999/62000)

The writer of this postcard rightly brings up what we might learn from responses to past conflicts, as does card 0244/61981, which makes reference to

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[3] Numbers in the format 6**** relate to the numbers generated by the MicroPasts transcription; numbers in the format 0*** relate to the numbers given on the Flickr site. Most postcards have both of these numbers. A small number of postcards (numbers 1-38) were not posted on Flickr and in MicroPasts as these were deemed to include sensitive content or used materials, such as glitter, that would damage the scanner. These postcards have been included in the analysis presented here.

Mostar in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina, a place that suffered significant destruction in the 1990s conflict. We might also look as well to the Beirut National Museum, where a conscious decision was made to restore what was still standing, rather than build anew (Hakimian 2010, 183). These are important questions that the international heritage community has not, perhaps, sufficiently addressed yet, as discussions below reveal.

The negative responses were more openly critical and raised questions again about for whom the arch has been made: 'Is it for self-gratification or remembrance?' (card 0077/61778). In addition, some postcards addressed thorny issues of authenticity: 'Very interesting to see print out, but lacks the authenticity of being real' (card 0196/61824). This is a major issue that needs to be considered carefully in any potential future attempts to reconstruct sites in the Middle East region and is closely related to the aesthetics of the replica arch.

Sixteen postcards directly addressed the aesthetics of the replica arch; of these five were positive and eleven negative. Although an admittedly small sample, it does seem significant that the replica arch was not appealing aesthetically to the majority of people who commented on that specific aspect (this is not to say that people did not find it appealing for other reasons). The positive comments referred to the replica arch as 'beautiful' (cards 0048/61956; 0076/61766; 0138/61825; 0224/61928). Amongst the negative comments, the complaints were that it was 'too new' (card 0065/61933) and 'too small' (cards 0023/61907; 0079/61798; 0086/61870; 0127/61978; 0148/61957). The latter comment on size picks up on the fact that the replica arch was two-thirds life-size and, therefore, was not as faithful a replica as it might have been (see also Factum Foundation 2016). Other negative comments included: 'ridiculous', 'grotesque', 'Disney' and, a more mixed, 'almost as good' (cards 0223/61913, 0006/61703, 0150/61729, 0162/61906 respectively). Many of these negative feelings relate to the perceived authenticity of the replica arch. Authenticity is, of course, itself a slippery concept, which has no fixed definition, leading to plural and multidimensional authenticities, such as genuineness, originality, accuracy and truthfulness (Theodossopoulos 2013). Holtorf (2013) encourages us to think about 'pastness' rather than age when thinking about the authenticity of archaeological objects; pastness is about perception, about how people experience the historic environment (see also Jones 2009, 136). Holtorf (2013, 432-435) lays out three requirements for pastness that do not seem to have been met for all in the case of this replica arch. Firstly, there is a need for material clues (wear, tear, decay and disintegration). The problem with the replica arch is that it only mimics these, it does not have any of its own; it is 'too new'. Secondly, pastness requires a correspondence with the expectations of the audience. The disappointment expressed over the size of the replica arch, for example, suggests it did not meet these expectations. Finally, and crucially, pastness needs a plausible and meaningful narrative. As is discussed further below, the lack of signage and information at the event stripped the arch of its story and so also of its pastness.

To reconstruct or not to reconstruct?
Some of the postcards (n = 66) reflected on the question of whether Palmyra should be reconstructed. Again, many were broadly positive (36; 55%), but important issues were raised in the mixed (20; 30%) and negative responses (10; 15%).

The overwhelming sense from cards that were positive about reconstruction was that the technology on show was 'amazing', 'incredible' and 'cool' and, therefore, was the way forward. The feeling gained from these cards was that those viewing this replica arch and its technology were enchanted by it in the sense of Gell (1992); the significance of this enchantment is discussed below in relation to misunderstandings over the technology used. In addition, card 0146/61936 commented on how great the accuracy was, though Factum Foundation (2016) have shown this not to be the case in several different ways (see Figures 1 and 2 to compare original and replica).

A third of the positive responses to reconstruction commented on preservation, often in hyperbolic language: 'replacement'; 'enables wonderful archaeological places to continue to enthrall'; 'restored & protected'; 'important to preserve'; 'bring you back to life'; 'rise again'; 'immortalised'; 'resurrect you'; 'the resurrection'; 'keeping heritage alive'; 'preserve and conserve' (cards: 0069/61706, 0156/61808, 0024/61919, 0107/61980, 0119/61890, 0236/61896, 0017/61817, 0281/61859, 0209/61710, 0147/61945 and 0146/61936). These comments demonstrate that there is a worrying misunderstanding over what reconstruction is and what it can do: reconstruction is not preservation; it is not keeping anything alive or bringing anything back to life; it is a representation and a proxy for an original that no longer exists and will never exist again in its original form. This misunderstanding is reflected in the language used in the media in their coverage of the replica arch and its various installations: 'destroyed building resurrected with 3D printing' (Urban Developer 2016); '3D imaging is helping us save history' (Creighton 2016); 'Fake it till you remake it: the lost masterpieces that are returning – digitally' (Ruiz 2016); 'Palmyra Triumphal Arch Comes to Life in 3D Printed Display' (Akl 2016). This suggests that a lot more work needs to be done on how we present projects like these to the public; we are duty bound not to mislead and should be very wary of the language we use as laid out in the London Charter and the Seville Principles of Visual Archaeology (2011: principle 4) (the lack of information at the Trafalgar Square event itself is discussed further below). The consequences of not getting this right in our communications with the wider public is that complacency can begin to set in, seen not only in the selection of media headlines outlined above, but also in the postcards: 'Let's rebuild art, over and over again!'; 'It makes me feel optimistic that if something is destroyed it can be rebuilt.' (cards 0159/61866 and 0020/61864). This is a dangerous precedent to set over the disposability of archaeology: it does not matter if it is destroyed, by terrorist groups, by infrastructure projects, by farming practices, because we can just build it again. Archaeology is not, however, replaceable, it is a finite resource; we must not develop a culture of obsolescence.

While many of the postcards were enchanted by the idea of a technological solution, four of the positive postcards tempered their wish for reconstruction with a request that it be the original reconstructed i.e. anastylosis (cards 0163/61918, 0243/61979, 0131/61738, 0148/61957). Furthermore, even where modern or future technological solutions were embraced, three cards (0222/61899, 0243/61979 and 0187/61977) requested that any reconstruction be under the auspices of specific, trained bodies: the British Museum, United Nations and so on. This raises a key question of who should be in charge of any potential efforts to reconstruct and shows a strong need for input from well-established, professional institutions, who can demonstrate a clearly defined remit for cultural heritage protection. A balance would also need to met here of making sure that regional voices are heard, whether they be experts or not, and incorporated into the decision-making process made by these bodies.

One of those in the 'for' category did represent these much-needed voices of people directly affected by current conflict:

> 'Really glad you have been "re-created" here & Really hope to see
> the some of destroyed Mesopotamia being "re-created". Thank you
> for looking after our heritage, (an Iraqi)' (card 0181/61916).

Potentially, a key word here, though, is "some"; indeed, card 0245/61985 made an explicit request for any restoration to be minimal.

Another issue raised by some of the more mixed responses is that we need to make it clear 'what has been done & WHY IT WAS NECESSARY' (card 0059/61854; emphasis original). Without these key questions of context being addressed, any such action would be irresponsible and potentially would have the effect of 'air-brushing' away an uncomfortable part of the site's history. This brings us into the thorny question of memory. The delicate nature of this issue is encapsulated by card 62003:

> 'Memory is a large part of what makes us human, so by
> reconstructing the past we would be going against that process and
> stopping history from becoming just that, and absence leads to
> appreciation. It's sad it's gone, but it's sadder if we don't let it go.'

This is a powerful critique of any efforts to reconstruct sites like Palmyra and needs careful consideration (see also Bevan 2016, and cards 0229/61799 and 0274/61770). Particularly in relation to modern traumatic events, we have a moral duty to the victims of history when we re-present it and that duty includes uncomfortable heritage, remembering both atrocities and achievements (Borić 2010, 20; Sandis 2014,13). In addition, the duty to preserve something need not necessarily be the same as a duty to preserve something in physical existence (Sandis 2014,13). Furthermore, due to the mutability of the processes of remembering and forgetting, we must be extremely careful which parts of history might be remembered or forgotten through reconstruction. Similar problems have been faced with other examples of negative or dissonant heritage that exist in the space between transformation and erasure, such as the Bamiyan Buddhas and the World Trade Center (Meskell 2002). Meskell (2002, 571) argues that only time can transform negative heritage, in which case reconstruction would disrupt that process as suggested by card 62003. In addition, there are potentially more creative forms of reconstruction that may

play a more meaningful and substantial role in the process of memory and healing, for example the miniature model of Palmyra in kebab sticks by Syrian refugees Mahmoud Hariri and the Art from Zaatari group (Dunmore 2016).

Finally, one card (0141/61874) is firmly against all efforts to rebuild: '…use the money more wisely to help humans who survive.' This is an argument that is often faced, not just in discussions over reconstruction, but also in protection of cultural heritage during conflict (see Willits 2016). While I have sympathy with such a position and would not advocate that buildings, monuments and archaeology should take precedence over human life (see also Meskell 2002, 564; Hamilakis 2003), people and their heritage are not mutually exclusive, but bound up together and interwoven in myriad ways. For the people living near or with these sites, these are their lives, they are their picnicking spots, the places of celebration for weddings, the views they have grown up with. To take these away is to take part of these people away, akin to losing a limb. If there is any doubt over the intimacy of this relationship, over this lived experience, one need only read the quiet voices presented at the end of this article.

Clearly, there are no clear-cut, easy answers to the reconstruction question, but what the postcards do show is that people have informed opinions and balanced views that deserve to be heard. In addition, there seems to be a need for a clearer set of guidelines over the audience, aims and scope of any potential reconstruction efforts.

Responses to the event
When the replica arch was erected in Trafalgar Square, some very strong critiques were expressed by the academic community, dubbing the replica amongst other things the 'toy arch' and 'Archy McArchface'. I will draw out some key tweets here; the full threads are publicly available on Twitter. @GabeMoshenska commented on the 'wildly imperialist setting' (19 April 2016) and on the presentation of the arch: 'Palmyra Arch in Traf Square without a shred of info for visitors. Crowd of baffled tourists mostly asking what it is [photo of the arch]' (20 April 2016). @Eleanor_Robson commented that the 'HUGELY EXPENSIVE toy arch says exactly how much we value faux antiquity over helping living people [sad face]' (19 April 2016; emphasis original). The postcards give us an opportunity to explore whether these academic concerns were felt also by the wider public. In the following section, I will begin by discussing the lack of information about the arch and any ensuing confusion, followed by the politics surrounding the arch, including suggestions of colonialism and, last but very much not least, the balance between people and object at the event.

Firstly, there were some major issues over information provision, both before and during the event. Before the event the IDA stated that the replica to be installed would be the entranceway to the Temple of Bel, rather than the monumental arch, and that the technology used in the reconstruction would be 3D printing (de Bruxelles 2015; Gayle 2015; Richardson 2016). While changes in plan (from Temple of Bel to the monumental arch) were no doubt unavoidable, there was still some confusion over what part of the site had been reproduced

when the replica arch was installed in Trafalgar Square. One card (0260/61865), for example, explicitly refers to the replica arch as 'the Temple', which suggests that the message over what was standing in the square had not been sufficiently transmitted to all visitors. More significantly, even, is the confusion over what technology was used. The replica arch was not 3D printed, but machine cut from a block of marble using a digital model as the template.[4] This message was even more poorly communicated to visitors with twelve still referring explicitly to 3D printing in the postcards, as well as hazier references to 3D mapping and digital technology; it has even been published as a 3D print in *The Photogrammetric Record* (2016, 114). Although it should be noted that TORART, who physically produced the arch, were on hand during the event to answer questions, not enough was done in other parts of the event or through press releases to clear up this problem. Both of these problems could have been easily overcome, by the use of signage and information panels at the event to tell visitors what had been reproduced, why and by what technology.

The significance of this lack of information over the technology lies in the enchantment mentioned earlier. Numerous people viewing the arch seemed to be dazzled by it and particularly by the technology it represented, in the same way that Gell (1992) discusses the enchantment of Trobriand prows and his own enchantment by a matchstick model. Crucially, Gell (1992, 46-53) states that it is not the being of an art object that casts the magic spell, but its becoming, the transubstantiation, the alchemy of one substance becoming another. Key here is that 3D printing technology seems magical to many, probably more so than machine cutting a piece of marble; 3D printing is less well understood and to the uninitiated seems to involve the magical transubstantiation of liquid to solid object. One wonders whether people would have been quite so enchanted had they been made fully aware of the technology used. Masking the technology to make it seem magical and so to take on the role of "occult technicians", to use Gell's term (1992, 49), may not have been the deliberate intention of the IDA, but this seems to be the end result of the lack of information.

These problems concerning information provision run further even than this. The organisers at IDA provided a large marquee for the event that was filled with tables and large banners, which advertised their company and associates (Figure 3). The main tables across the back of the tent stood empty for the whole three days and the banners contained no information about the event, the arch, the conflict or Palmyra. This was not just noticed by academics like Gabe Moshenska, but also by the wider visiting public: 'Why is there no information? A missed opportunity to educate' and 'Why is there no sign on the arch…What is it called?' (cards 0133/61761 and 0231/61827). Context is key at such events, otherwise it leaves organisers open to accusations of staging publicity stunts. Visitors deserve to be given information, so that they can come away and be able to make informed opinions about what they have seen. This is made clear in MacManus' (2000) study on written communication to visitors, in which she demonstrates that 71% of visitors noticed something that they would not have observed

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[4] A 25-cm high 3D resin print of the triumphal arch was made by the IDA from images in their Million Image Database and was shown at 'The Missing: rebuilding the past' in London, April 15-May 7 2016, but this was not what was on display in Trafalgar Square (Jessica Carlisle 2016).

without additional text (109), as well as stating that 'visitors must not be left with unanswered questions' (101) and that taking visitors into account is 'an expression of care for them' (111).

Fig. 3: View of the central tables and banners inside the IDA marquee at the Trafalgar Square event (photo: author).

Moving on then to the politics surrounding the event. The events leading up to the installation, in particular the destruction of parts of Palmyra, were, of course, driven by politics in Syria and the wider Middle East. In addition, the event in Trafalgar Square itself was political in quite an obvious way with the replica arch being unveiled by the then Lord Mayor of London, Boris Johnson (see Figure 2). Furthermore, one of the postcards was written by a Member of Parliament: 'Palmyra – the most beautiful site from antiquity I have been privileged to visit. Welcome back to the civilised world!' (card 0264/61912). The wording of this card is somewhat awkward and open to different interpretations; unfortunately, the used of the word 'civilised' does bring up a spectre of colonialism, though this may not have been the intention of its author.

Six of the postcards addressed this issue, for example: 'F*** this arch and all the colonial b*****ks it stands for' (card 0118/61877). The sentiment on this card probably requires no further explanation. Other, slightly less outspoken, postcards also reflected on this problem. The setting, in the UK and, more specifically, in Trafalgar Square, caused some concern. One card commented on the 'politics of reproducing in London imagery from the Orient' (card 0093/61758). Notwithstanding the use of the now-outmoded and heavily critiqued term 'Orient', this card does reflect the feeling amongst some visitors that this was not necessarily an easy setting and, at the very least, required some discussion and justification, which again could have been facilitated by some signage. Another card, which was broadly positive about the reconstruction, commented that keeping the arch in Trafalgar Square 'may feel colonial' and asked 'why isn't this stopping off first in countries w/ the highest concentration of Syrian refugees?', noting that 'what should happen next should be up to Syrians, not Londoners' (card 62001/62002; double-sided; original written in block capitals with underline for emphasis). This issue was exacerbated by the choice of location: Trafalgar Square. Trafalgar Square, with its monuments to Nelson, military might and the monarchy, is a notoriously imperial space, and yet also strongly associated with protest and anti-imperialism, leading to it being

described as a 'paradox' and even 'schizophrenic' (Mace 1976; Driver and Gilbert, 1998, 27; Kahane 2017, 244). While one card (0220/61871) noted that it liked the juxtaposition of ancient and modern, another (0035/61789) drew the arch together with Nelson's Column in a way that for some might make that juxtaposition uncomfortable (Figure 4). In an interview, Michel has referred to Trafalgar Square as the 'crossroads of humanity', likening it to Palmyra (cited in Murphy 2016). This link seemed lost on visitors. Again, to insert a monument into this space required more explanation to visitors, more opportunity for discussion.

Fig. 4: Postcard 0035/61789: drawing of the replica arch and Nelson's Column with the caption 'Greetings from Nelson'; original in gold pen.

These postcards that address the issue of colonialism also highlight a tension breaking out between people and object at this event, for example: 'It's very Westernised. A Western portrayal and importance on stuff' (card 0089/61708). As already discussed above, it is not simply a matter of people versus objects, but even so, a balance needs to be struck and that balance can only be struck by making sure that people are included in a meaningful way in events such as this. Without this, as one visitor observed, the arch has no heart: 'There's no personal story with the arch. It's amazing but you need a sense of emotion' (card 0070/61709). People, their stories and their voices, need to be embraced fully by actions and activities at these kinds of events. This is most powerfully expressed by card 0002/61699:

> 'I have been struck by how little attention the Institute for Digital Archaeology have paid to the human stories behind the arch, Palmyra and everything which they represent. I met several people today whose personal memories and stories, I think, were much

more worth preserving. It is sad when a unique object is destroyed but it is truly devastating when we neglect and forget the human actions and thoughts behind them.'

Conclusions

The aim of this article is to demonstrate, through the postcards gathered by 'Postcard to Palmyra', that we are only at the beginning of any discussions over the fate of sites and their communities that have suffered in the current conflicts in the Middle East (see also the recommendations by the Blue Shield: https://www.ifla.org/node/10413). While we, as the academic community, are right to speak out when we see a pathway that we firmly believe needs more consideration, we must also be at pains to make sure we have conversations with the wider public, both the local communities and those who feel connected more broadly, about their concerns, their wishes and their hopes. These postcards demonstrate the worth, I believe, of these forms of engagement, and their value in making sure that we make informed decisions for the future; visitors should be co-developers of understanding through their opinions, comments and questions (McLean 2003, 5). This is just the start of these conversations. I would encourage people to make use of these postcards in their research and to provoke further discussion. We need more debate, both in scholarly settings such as this journal, but also in the wider world; we need to get people talking, we need to hear those voices. I would like to conclude, then, with some of the quiet voices that we listened to in 'Postcard to Palmyra'.

The 'Quiet Voices'

The 'Quiet Voices' were written by people who have felt directly the power of their heritage and the pain of its destruction. They need to be heard; the last words belong to them.

'I'm from Syria. It's so painful to say a memory from your country has destroyed and rebuild in somewhere else. Stop the war… 5 years of pain is enough..' (Figure 5)
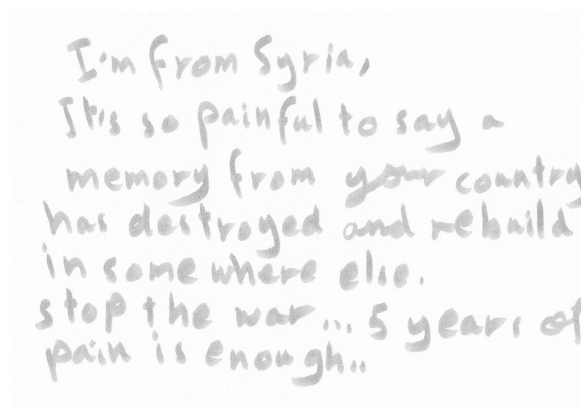

Fig. 5: Postcard 0007/61704; original in green pen.

'We are returning despite the length of time.' (trans. Z Kamash; Figure 6)
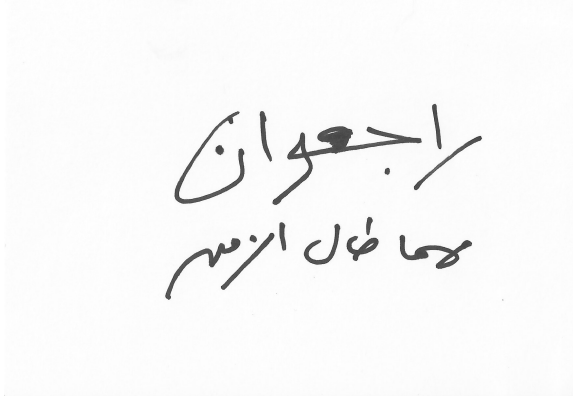

Fig. 6: Postcard 0001/61698.

'Tadmor [Palmyra] the eternal...the green shoot of beauty, you will remain with us forever.' (trans. Z Kamash; Figure 7)
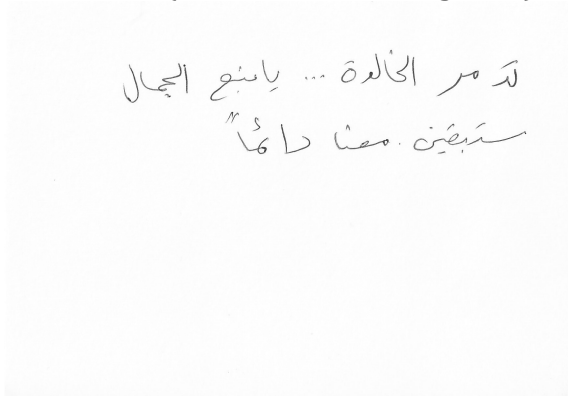

Fig. 7: Postcard 0219/61856.

'We think of you every day, every hour, every minute. Stay steadfast. Our country will return as it was, despite the length of years. We think of Syria always.' (trans. Z Kamash; Figure 8)
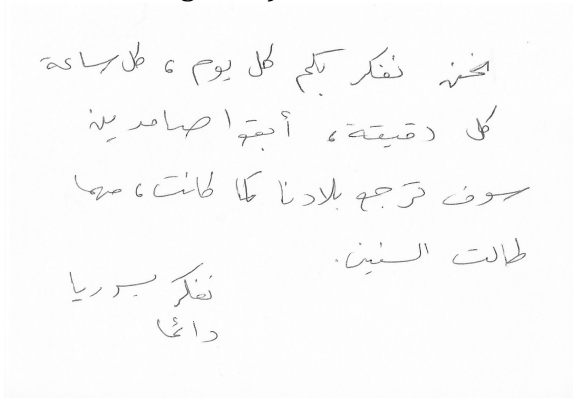

Fig. 8: Postcard 0282/61873.

'Many thoughts passed through my memory when I decided to write about Tadmor [Palmyra] and I don't know where to begin…. I am lucky I am from a country which has history and civilisation and I am sad because my country is wounded and bleeding. I don't wish what happened to my country to happen anywhere… I wish we learn the lesson…or they, the politicians, learn the lesson… With my love [name].' (trans. Z Kamash; Figure 9)

خواطر كثيرة مرت ببالي عندما
تردت ان اكتب عم تدمر ولاادري
من اين ابدأ ....
محظوظة انا لاني من بلد له تاريخ وحضارة،
وحزينة انا لان بلدي جريح مينزف
لا اتمنى ما حدث ببلدي ان يحدث لاي
كان .. اتمنى لو نتعلم الدرس ...او ان نتعلم
السياسيون الدرس ... مع حبي

Fig. 9: Postcard 0288/61949.

'Dear Palmyra I miss you' (Figure 10)

Fig. 10: Postcard 0005/61702.

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took the time to talk to us at the event and to write us a postcard – thank you. We are listening.

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Notes on contributor

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