PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE
AS A SIGN OF CIVILIZATION

Civilization is the human societies’ ability to survive the biological extinction of its individuals by transmitting the values, virtues and the best practices of the present generation and the predecessors’ to the successive generations. Civilization means heritage; it is the constant trace that mankind engravés onto the surrounding world. Human civilization is not only the output of the interaction of individuals in a certain society, in a certain place and at a certain time, but it is, above all, the interaction of past societies with one another and with our present societies. There is no civilization without heritage. Therefore, heritage does not belong to a society or a generation, but to all generations. The heritage that our generations left before us is not ours at all but it belongs to all generations, to those that exist no more, to us and to the coming ones.

The appropriation of cultural heritage bequeathed by the past generations from a certain generation is equally unfair and unlawful as the appropriation of public wealth by a particular individual. No generation can have the authority, and much less the monopoly of judging the heritage bestowed upon us by the past generations. The temporary cannot judge the permanent; fashion cannot judge beauty; and the present society cannot judge the heritage of the former generations. This heritage is not to be judged, but to be understood, appreciated and passed on to future generations. We can enrich this heritage with the seal of our times but we do not have the right to wipe out the traces of our forefathers.

Cultural heritage cannot be recreated in contrast with the history that can and should be rewritten. However, in order for the history to be rewritten in compliance with the process of developing and expanding the scientific horizon, the heritage of the past must be as complete as possible, with its shadows,
with all its nuances and of the time that has acted upon it. New perspectives can only be built upon past edifices. Wherever you look in the history arena the view is the same, monotonous, cannot be rewritten or redefined. The contact with the past and its cultural heritage is one of the most important elements fostering diversity of perspectives, stimulating freedom of thought and serving as a hearth of democracy. That is why one of the totalitarian regimes’ features is the ideological trial of cultural heritage and the adjudication of the past generations in the perspective and shortsightedness of the present generation. In this way, ideology grabs the torch of barbarism aiming at undoing civilization and making the past uniform by wiping out any traces because it considers the heritage echo as an obstacle to the unification of minds and as a challenge to the totalitarian power.

Of all kinds of barbarism clashing with civilization, the ideological barbarism is the most repulsive, the most destructive and the most barbaric one. Throughout history, different societies have clashed for power, and in these confrontations there have been attempts to undo the past and destroy the adversary’s heritage. As Tacitus says, not rarely do certain powers call the destruction of their adversaries’ heritage peace (ubi desertum faciunt, pace appellant). Rome coming out victorious from the war against Carthage flattened and razed the thriving city to the ground. Beyond the symbolism carried and conveyed by this action, a pragmatic goal should be noted that aimed at eliminating the reestablishment of the Carthaginian power.

Rome suffered a similar fate centuries later during the peoples incursion, when the flourishing Roman and Illyrian cities were flattened to the ground by the peoples raiding in the Mediterranean civilization dreamlands. No matter how paradoxical the destruction of that culture and civilization that had fascinated and lured those peoples may seem, we should not forget that the foundation of the barbaric attack against that civilization was their inability to appropriate the most sophisticated Mediterranean civilization and the power that the heritage of that civilization exerted over the raiding populations. The fear of drowning their barbarism in the sea of civilization gave these peoples a chance to avoid this “danger” by drying this sea
of civilization at even the very high cost of recreating everything from scratch. Again, this was not an ideological action stripped of functionality. Those raiding peoples in the dreamland destroyed only what they considered “dangerous” for their “barbarism” in the Mediterranean civilization, even though what they considered dangerous turned out to be so great as to eventually transform the civilized landscape of Europe.

The opposite happened on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, where the ancient Mediterranean civilization modeled in the Roman spirit was confronted with two challengers who, in contrast to the eastern steppe raiders, remodeled this Mediterranean civilization by preserving its best assets and adding their assets: Christianity and Islam. Similar to his brother, Jesus (Isa a.s), who entered the temple of Jerusalem not to destroy it, but to cleanse it from the rascals and usurers, Muhammad a.s, entered peacefully in Mecca, after years of exile and persecution and did not destroy the Kaaba but cleansed it of the idols that had filled it with ignorance. Civilization does not destroy; it upgrade, develops, increases and enriches the heritage of the past and, above all, civilization protects and conveys the heritage of past generations to the coming generations. The civilization founded by the one who preserved Mecca and cleansed the Kaaba followed this example and preserved the Hellenic and Roman antiquity cultural heritage, and enriched with cleansed faith, conveyed it centuries later to the raiding peoples that had only destroyed it.

It is the time element that, with its alchemy, changes into a treasure for successive generations what they commonly consider to be ordinary. A small and coarse copper coin dating back centuries or millennia ago is worth millions of dollars or ounces of gold today. Likewise, the time element not only highlights the values of the past, but it also identifies the mutilation caused by barbarism of the past. The ideological barbarism spent in vain the sweat and hardship of the Albanian people in billion-dollar defenceless bunkering projects, and did not forget to destroy the priceless cultural heritage: the churches, the mosques, the bazaars, the public baths, etc. The scholar, Machiel Kiel has estimated that the level of destruction of the poorly perceived and misrepresented Ottoman architectural heritage in Albania amounts to 98 percent.
Such a level of destruction is unmatched and is worse than the destruction of the Carthaginian civilization by the Romans, or the destruction of the Roman and Illyrian civilisations by the raiding peoples of the late antiquity. The ideological barbarism seems more tragic and sinister than the Roman destruction of the capital of Carthage, or the barbarian’s destructions of dangerous fortified military bases.

The ideological barbarism was not targeted against any military barracks or rival power centers, but against the temples and against everything not fitting the rigid mold of ideology. The Shkodra Bazaar, one of the largest in the Balkans and the economic center of the Sandzak capital, and later, of the only Vilayet remaining inside the Albanian borders was flattened to a meadow. Everything was destroyed for nothing. The temples are gradually being reconstructed from their foundations but can never replace or restore the heritage that was lost due to the short-sightedness of a generation proclaiming itself the plenipotentiary judge of the society, of the cultural heritage and of the history. What we learn from the forever-lost heritage is how barbarous the verdicts of the trial of the temporary versus the permanent and of the ideology versus the heritage can be.