

## Colonialism, history and the making of heritage

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German Historical Institute London  
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The relationship between colonial power structures, the 'making' of modern archaeological / architectural heritage and the writing of histories of colonised societies since the early days of modern European colonial empires has for some time been the subject of scholarly interest. Taking the cue from Edward Said's theorising on orientalism, one major focus of such studies has been on the hegemonic nature of colonial practices in the making of monuments and the writing of histories of colonised societies. Recent research has for instance drawn attention to the appropriation of local sites by colonial officials, archaeologists and historians from local groups and communities and the re-framing of the histories of these sites in such a way as to serve the interests of colonialism. The ultimate goal was to emphasise the stabilising, civilising and guardianship role of colonial rule in preserving the cultural heritage, history and thus the social fabric of the colonies in order to provide legitimation for colonialism.

Comparatively less attention has been paid in studies of colonial archaeology, preservation and heritage to the fact that colonialism itself was "neither nor omnipotent" (Cooper and Stoler, 1997). Despite the discursive thrust of colonial heritage thinking and history writing, in practice colonial officials and archaeologists were often circumscribed in their endeavours. This limitation on the autonomy of colonial regimes came from various sources: local communities and social practice on the spot, but also groups of heritage thinkers in the imperial metropolises and outside, all of whom engaged in various different and asymmetrical ways with preservation, heritage practices and conceptualising the past. At the same time, the "making" of heritage in colonised societies was also taking place against the backdrop of thinking about heritage in a global sense. Colonial systems on the one hand acted as major agents of such global ideas of heritage and enforced these in the colonies. On the other hand, colonialism was itself part of the chequered and contested history of globalised ideas of heritage, and colonial authorities often found themselves having to stave off the invasion of global heritage thinking, often by resorting to the argument of specificity of local practice.

The aim of the conference is to understand colonial practices of rewriting the past of colonised societies and heritage-making on the interface of the global and the local. Some of the questions that will be addressed are:

How did colonial systems position themselves between the global and the local?

How malleable were these categories? What kind of dialogue emerged

between the local and the global in defining heritage and its practice in colonial contexts?

In what precise ways did these categories define and restrict the autonomy of colonial officials?

To what extent did they allow room for local agency and a more flexible application of heritage ideas from metropolitan sites?

The conference will seek to address these questions by examining colonial structures in a comparative context, by trying to problematise the metropolitan connections in debates on colonial heritage and by looking at the postcolonial implications of colonial heritage thinking that was caught between the global and the local.

The conference is being organised by the German Historical Institute London and is open to researchers at all levels who wish to present work on archaeology and heritage thinking in modern colonial systems. Please send a paper title and abstract (150-200 words) by 7th December 2008 to [isengupta@ghil.ac.uk](mailto:isengupta@ghil.ac.uk)