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Research Article

19th-century heritage preservation practices: Nation-building, cultural influence, and reclaiming heritage

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ABSTRACT

The destruction of historical buildings and monuments in Paris during the French Revolution triggered a state-led preservation movement that initially spread across Europe and subsequently to the rest of the world. In each nation, legal and institutional measures undertaken by the state reflected different motivations in terms of their objectives. While preservation practices served as instruments for the construction of national identity in newly established post-revolutionary nation-states, in European imperial powers they became a strategic component of cultural influence and legitimacy efforts in regions such as South America, the Mediterranean, and East Asia. Meanwhile, these cultural hegemony policies sparked a cultural awakening in countries subjected to imperialism and colonialism, prompting official measures to safeguard their local heritage. This study aims to present state-led antiquities preservation initiatives in the 19th century across different regions, along with the motivations driving these initiatives, from a comparative perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Each national historiography offers different accounts of how the concept of heritage was "invented" and whether it evolved from a grassroots movement into a state-controlled system, or the other way around [1]. Efforts to protect both natural and man-made urban environments from the pressures of rapid urbanization, vandalism, warfare, and revolution exhibit distinct goals and motivations depending on national contexts. These variations stem not only from local dynamics but also from transnational interactions and policies of cultural influence. The organization of these practices ranges from centralized state regimes to private civic initiatives, and from identity-building projects to strategies of cultural expansion.

This paper explores the state-led organizational models of modern preservation that emerged after the French Revolution and expanded globally during the 19th century. These organizations were driven by three primary motivations: creating shared values for new nation-states, serving the cultural expansion of imperial powers, and developing self-defense mechanisms against such external influences. The research asks: "How did heritage preservation practices differ nationally as modern preservation consciousness

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emerged in various regions?" It argues that the traditional Eurocentric narrative often overlooks the local and national impacts in other parts of the world. To address this, the paper uses comparative historical analysis to examine examples from Europe, the Americas, East Asia, and the Mediterranean.

Literature Review

One of the most comprehensive studies on the history of modern preservation is Jukka Jokilehto's 1986 doctoral dissertation, titled *A History of Architectural Conservation: The Contribution of English, French, German and Italian Thought towards an International Approach to the Conservation of Cultural Property.* Jokilehto provides a detailed overview of the Eurocentric preservation movement by examining national preservation models in Italy, England, France, and Germany from the Renaissance to World War II. In her 2013 book, *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789–1914*, Astrid Swenson addresses both official and civic preservation initiatives from the French Revolution to World War I through a comparative perspective. Published in the same year, Miles Glendinning's *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation: Antiquity to Modernity* traces the development of architectural conservation from antiquity to the modern era, illustrating how respect for the past evolved into an ideological movement. In this context, Glendinning critically examines the global heritage concept that emerged toward the end of the 20th century.

Shifting away from a strictly Eurocentric approach, Paul Betts and Corey Ross's *Modern Historical Preservation: Towards a Global Perspective* (2015) stands out as a study that approaches preservation history from a global, comparative scale. Betts and Ross highlight how the preservation of antiquities became a tool of competition among imperial states in the 19th century, while offering a broad perspective on how heritage was localized and integrated into national identities in diverse geographies such as Mexico, Japan, India, and Egypt. The fundamental approach of our research is to make visible the motivations that drove state-led preservation activities in various geographies beyond Europe—an area that currently remains limited in the existing literature.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative historical research design, utilizing a comparative analysis method to evaluate the global evolution of architectural conservation. The methodology of this research is designed to understand the Eurocentric development of the modern preservation movement at both local and national scales, as well as the motivations behind its emergence in North and South America, the Mediterranean, and North and East Asia through transnational interactions. By employing this comparative approach, the study identifies the similarities and differences between cultural heritage movements across diverse geographies. The research framework focuses on tracing the flow of preservation ideologies and institutional models, analyzing how these were adapted, resisted, or transformed within different political and cultural contexts. To ensure a robust analysis, data were gathered from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including imperial decrees, early conservation bulletins, and contemporary academic literature.

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN PRESERVATION CONSCIOUSNESS

The traditional approach, where a historical building was preserved only as long as it retained its functional value, changed during the Renaissance, which emerged in Florence in the first decade of the 15th century and spread across the Italian peninsula by the end of the century [2]. During this period, ancient ruins became symbols of Rome's grandeur; they served as structural learning models and were widely imitated. While these developments prompted measures to sustain ancient and medieval works in England and Germanic countries, the French Revolution is cited as the definitive event that gave rise to modern heritage consciousness [3]. Although the roots of this modern political interest in heritage can be traced back to *the 1666 Swedish Royal Decree*—which declared ancient monuments royal property—and the founding of *the Society of Antiquaries in England* in 1717, a conscious claiming of the past and a global heritage awareness emerged as cultural byproducts of the French and Industrial Revolutions. With the French Revolution, the transfer of royal, aristocratic, and church properties to the state triggered efforts to construct the history of the new French nation. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution shaped 19th-century cultural life through the establishment of national museums, cathedral restoration projects, and the birth of the national park movement. As industrialization spread to other parts of Europe and North America, the impulse to protect the remains of the past from the destruction of modernization spread along with it [4].

Preservation Practices in the Construction of National Identity

In France, the preservation movement became an integral part of central state policy and became part of the state's ideological framework. Revolutionary institutions issued conflicting decrees that simultaneously called for preservation and destruction. Between 1789 and 1792, a process unfolded in which royal and church properties were confiscated and transferred to the nation. This period played a critical role in establishing the idea that monuments constitute a nation's collective heritage. However, from 1792 onwards, as the Revolution became more radical, an ideologically driven campaign of destruction began [5].

In narratives concerning the birth of the modern preservation movement following the Revolution, this destruction is often depicted as a "national awakening" that triggered protectionism. These accounts identify the origins of heritage *(patrimoine)* consciousness through key moments: Alexandre Lenoir's resistance against revolutionaries to rescue statues and tombstones from the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis (Fig. 1), Abbé Grégoire's rhetoric against vandalism, and Victor Hugo's influential text, *War on the Demolishers* (Guerre aux démolisseurs) [1].

The Commission des monuments (The Monuments Commission) established in October 1790 under the committees of the French National Assembly and in part by the Paris municipality, was tasked with the maintenance of artworks and the preparation of inventories [3, 5]. A systematic preservation bureaucracy was formed in October 1830 with the establishment of the *Inspecteur général des monuments historiques de la France* (Inspectorate General of Historic Monuments of France) by Interior Minister François Guizot, and the appointment of Ludovic Vitet as the first General Inspector. Vitet, who regarded monuments as historical documents that revitalize national memory [3], was made responsible for overseeing restoration projects in addition to preparing a complete list of historic monuments. In 1837, *the Commission des Monuments Historiques* (Historic Monuments Commission) was established to support the General Inspector in classifying buildings and determining priority restoration works [3, 5]. Viollet-le-Duc, who structured restoration as a modern concept, became one of the institution's most significant figures [3]. Viollet-le-Duc's approach to restoration, based on *stylistic unity,* was not limited to France; it spread first across Europe and then beyond through the Paris World's Fairs of 1867 and 1889 [1, 3].

While it is generally accepted that France held the lead in the inventorying and registration of historic monuments, similar legislative activities occurred in Denmark (1807) and Greece (1834) [4]. The centralized monument preservation orientation that developed early in France served as an influential reference in 19th-century Europe. Similar centralized structures, where cultural heritage was institutionally managed by the state, emerged in new nation-states and multi-national empires such as Italy and Austria-Hungary. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Camerlengato and the Treasury—the general administration of the Papal States—were the official bodies responsible for the protection of cultural assets, as well as the excavation, restoration, and maintenance of monuments [3]. Following the annexation of the Papal States by the French Empire on May 17, 1809, the first decrees regarding historic buildings and ancient monuments in Rome were dated between August 5 and September 3, 1809. *The Commission des monumens et bâtimens civils* (Commission of Monuments and Civil Buildings) was established as a heritage protection unit by the decree of July 9, 1810. The *Accademia di San Luca,* an authoritative institution for determining and registering the heritage value of a work, began to play a direct role in the preservation of ancient monuments during this



Figure 1. The Transfer Ceremony of Antoinette's Remains to the Basilica of Saint-Denis, by J. D. Dugourc. (Paris Musées Collection).

period [3]. Under French rule, Rome underwent not only a military occupation but also an intensive process of cultural appropriation.

Post-revolutionary developments in France were closely monitored by the German states [1]. The Prussian Law of 1794 granted the state the right to preserve buildings of historical significance [6]. Furthermore, the Napoleonic invasions triggered a form of national heritage awakening in Prussia. Immediately following the Napoleonic era, Karl Friedrich Schinkel began efforts to inventory monuments. Emphasizing Prussian identity, Schinkel advocated for the appointment of a specialist for the preservation of each region, and in 1843, he mentored the young architecture student Ferdinand von Quast, who became Prussia's first monument conservator [6, 7]. Following Prussia, states such as Baden, Hessen-Darmstadt, Oldenburg, Lübeck, and Bremen also enacted notable laws throughout the 19th century. However, the heritage emphasis within the developing preservation consciousness of the German states remained at a local and regional level rather than a unified German heritage [6].

In Austria, the movement for the preservation of antiquities—as in other European countries—developed as part of the process of re-exalting and legitimizing the monarchy following the Congress of Vienna in 1815. *The K. k. Zentral-Kommission für Erforschung und Erhaltung von Baudenkmalen* (Imperial and Royal Central Commission for the Investigation and Preservation of Architectural Monuments), established in 1853, adopted similar preservation principles; however, in practice, it followed the dominant restoration approach of 19th-century Europe (Fig. 2) [7].

All these developments were influential in the emergence of the *Denkmalpflege* (Monument Preservation) movement within the states of the German Confederation *(Deutscher Bund)*, particularly in Austria and Prussia. The origins and implementation of *Denkmalpflege* in Germany were spearheaded by the educated middle class, who acted with national consciousness in the early 19th century. With the establishment of the German Empire in 1871, alongside the processes of industrialization and modernization, the *Denkmalpflege* movement began to receive widespread public support. This newfound interest in the German past and culture also led to an intensification of legislative activities directed toward monument preservation [8].

In North America, unlike the nation-building processes in Europe centered on ancient and medieval history, a nation-building process led by revolutionary heroes and nature prevailed. Through civic initiatives, the homes of heroes—such as George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello—were placed under protection [5]. In addition to the construction of a collective heritage, there was a growing awareness aimed at preventing the destruction caused by urbanization and industrialization, particularly its negative impact on nature. In 1872, Yellowstone was declared the world's first national park, pioneering state-centered initiatives for nature conservation. In the British-controlled regions of North America (Canada), preservation consciousness lagged behind the United States, with the first national park established in Banff in 1885 [5].

Preservation Practices in Cultural Influence Strategies

Imperialism played a significant role in shaping the modern heritage discourse. This situation was a result of the imperialist doctrine of terra nullius (nobody's land),

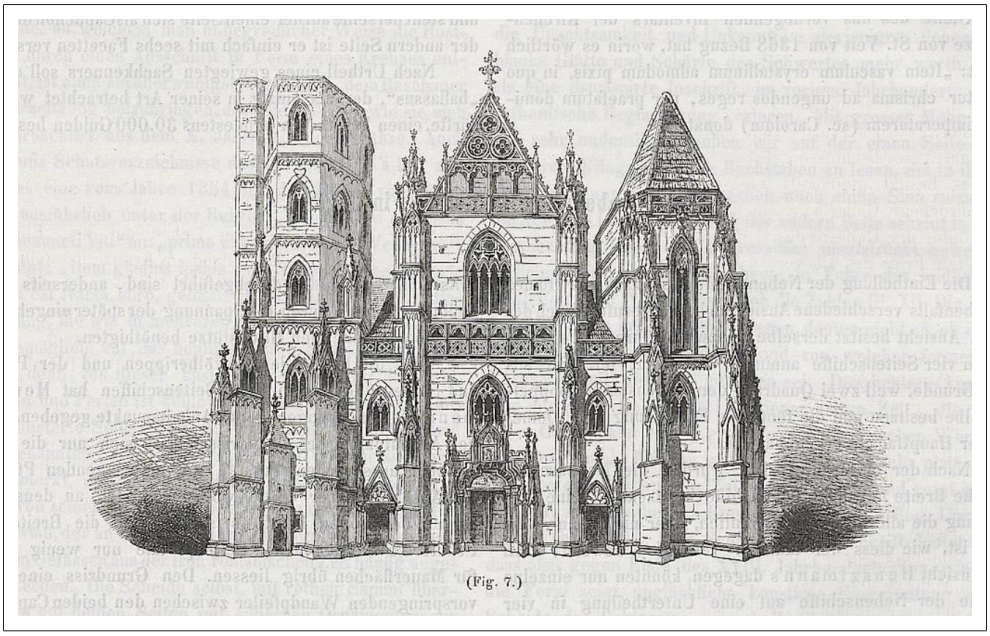


Figure 2. Engraving of the facade of St. Elisabeth Cathedral in Hungary, from the 1857 bulletin of the K. k. Central-Commission. (Heidelberg University Digital Heritage Collections).

which considered most non-European territories as lacking civilization and, consequently, labeled their inhabitants as "peoples without history." In the 19th century, the Germans, French, and British competed with one another, utilizing preservation activities as a tool to demonstrate imperial power and administrative competence. In colonized regions of South America, North Africa, and the Mediterranean, legal regulations were enacted, and institutes were established for the inventorying, research, and preservation of antiquities.

The organization of the ancient past and architectural heritage of India, one of Britain's colonies, became a primary field of interaction between the imperial state, the colonial administration, and the local populations in specific Indian regions [4]. Established in 1861, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) conducted excavations and explorations, followed in the 1880s by *the Department of the Curator of Ancient Monuments in India*, which oversaw preservation and restoration activities (Fig. 3) [9]. These bodies functioned as strategic institutional mechanisms for Britain. Between 1898 and 1905, Lord Curzon, acting as the decision-making authority for the preservation of India's architectural heritage, initiated efforts under British supervision to return monuments to their original functions [10].

The French, acting as *the guardians of civilization*, appropriated local heritage sites such as *Angkor Wat* in Cambodia as part of the French national heritage *(patrimoine)*. By undertaking the preservation of these monuments, they aimed to justify colonial rule. Established in 1898 in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh) as *the Mission Archéologique Permanente* (Permanent Archaeological Mission) and renamed the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* in 1901, the institution sought to collect information on local cultures and preserve antiquities to increase French influence within society. The roots of this institution, which took over all restoration works in the Angkor region in 1907, can be traced back to similar structures in Athens and Cairo [11]. Although the *École française d'Athènes*, founded in 1846, was initially focused on scientific research, it began organizing archaeological excavations after 1868 [12].

The Russkiy Arkheologicheskiy Institut v Konstantinopole (Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople), established in Istanbul in 1894, represents another example of imperial institutionalization, particularly through its studies tracing Byzantine works within the Ottoman geography. Attempting to position themselves as the representatives of Eastern Christianity, the Russians pursued a strategy of being the first of their kind in Istanbul rather than the last among European institutes in Athens. The institution, which organized excavations in Istanbul and Anatolia, ceased its activities with the onset of the First World War in 1914 [13].

Preservation Practices for Reclaiming Heritage

While state-led institutional structures in Europe utilized heritage consciousness as an ideological tool for nation-building and imperialist policies, the first official regulations for the protection of antiquities in non-European states emerged as a defensive initiative against colonialism and the illicit trafficking of antiquities. Throughout the 19th century, colonial cultural looting triggered the adoption of legal measures in countries such as the Ottoman Empire, Greece, Mexico, Japan, and Peru to prevent the export or dispersal of ancient artifacts. In the Ottoman Empire, three separate *Asar-ı Atika (*Antiquities) regulations were enacted in 1869, 1874, and 1884. Although the 1869 regulation prohibited the export of excavated artifacts—excluding coins—the 1874 regulation saw a retreat from this stance. However, the scope of the 1874 regulation was expanded to include immovable property; it specified that excavations could not be conducted in temples, dervish lodges, madrasas, graves, or waterways, and established penalties for those who demolished historical buildings. In the 1884 regulation, the concept of antiquity was clarified, and it was decreed that all excavated artifacts belonged entirely to the state. This 1884 regulation was further expanded in 1906 to include residential houses under protection [14].

In Japan, the preservation movement first began during the *Meiji Restoration*, a period of transition from the feudal

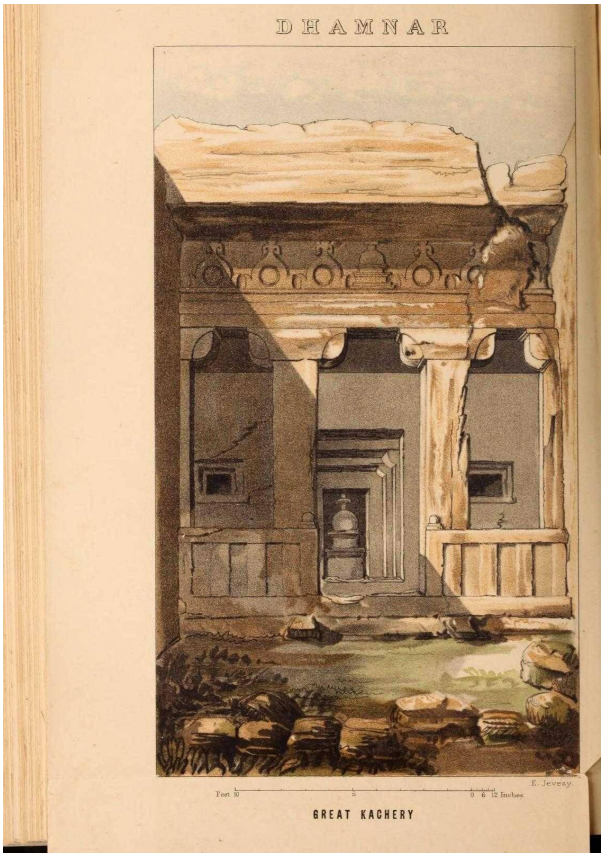


Figure 3. Lithographic print of the Court Hall of Dhamnar Temple, prepared by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI Reports 1862–1865).

Shogunate government to a centralized nation-state with a constitutional monarchy. Following the establishment of a new government in 1868 and the opening of the country to the outside world, a great interest in Japanese art developed overseas, the depletion of antiquities from Japan. To prevent this cultural loss, *the Koki Kyūbutsu Hozonkata* (Decree for the Preservation of Ancient Artifacts), which protected movable heritage, came into force in 1871. This was followed in 1897 by the proclamation of *the Koshaji Hozonhō* (Ancient Shrines and Temples Preservation Law), which focused specifically on the architecture of Shinto and Buddhist temples [15].

The Spaniards, who arrived in Peru starting in 1532, systematically looted precious metals like gold and silver, as well as ceramics, from many Inca graves and settlements. During the revolution against Spain in the early 19th century, the protection of ancient ruins and artifacts became a priority. Under the *Decreto Supremo* (Supreme Decree) of 1822, ancient monuments and their contents were declared the property of the Peruvian nation, and their export from the country was strictly prohibited [16].

CONCLUSION

The transition from a traditional approach—where buildings were maintained as long as they held functional value—to a conscious concept of collective heritage began with distinct dynamics in each nation. While the post-revolutionary developments in France were not the inaugural to protect historical monuments, they were the most systematic and influential. Throughout the 19th century, preservation practices evolved beyond the mere act of keeping a structure standing; they were transformed into ideological, political, and strategic tools. Newly formed nation-states utilized preservation to emphasize national identity and to construct shared values for their societies. In these states, Ancient Rome and the Middle Ages were adopted as the historical periods constituting a common past.

On the other hand, imperial powers such as Britain and France used preservation activities as instruments of legitimacy and cultural hegemony in South America, East Asia, and the Mediterranean. These initiatives, which began with scientific research and travel, continued through archaeological excavations. The primary goal of these efforts was to acquire knowledge about local cultures to facilitate administrative control over colonized regions. Over time, this situation triggered the emergence of legal initiatives in those regions aimed at protecting local heritage. Legislative regulations that emphasized state ownership of artifacts and prevented their export became particularly prominent during this period. These state-led preservation practices were eventually supported by civic initiatives, leading to the rise of numerous civil organizations by the end of the 19th century.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ETHICS

There are no ethical issues with the publication of this manuscript.

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