



OPEN LETTER

Concerning the dire situation at the Acropolis, Athens World Heritage Property

Berlin, 12 May 2023

Honourable Director-General of UNESCO
Your Highness President of the World Heritage Committee
Honourable Members of the World Heritage Committee
Dear Director of the World Heritage Centre

we implore you to put the World Heritage property "Acropolis, Athens" on the agenda of the 45th Session of the World Heritage Committee under Item 7B as a matter of utmost urgency, and discuss its State of Conservation. Furthermore, since the activities at the property are a direct threat to its Outstanding Universal Value, the Committee should decide to inscribe the property in the List of World Heritage in Danger.

The construction activities on the site, both already implemented and planned for the near future, are so massive and extensive that they are altering its appearance and character to an extent that will deprive the property completely of its authenticity and integrity. The result will turn a monument which has inspired countless generations for its elevating spirit and beauty into a shallow backdrop of must-see locations for selfie photos. Greece will have lost its soul and be no longer be considered a stalwart of archaeology and cultural heritage, and the world will have lost a site to which humanity has looked up to in enchantment.

Since the end of 2020, the plateau of the Acropolis of Athens has been paved with reinforced concrete, covering extensively the living rock. This implementation circumvented the Greek legal frameworks and international standard-setting instruments concerning the preservation of cultural heritage monuments. The measures gave rise to a huge outcry on a national and international scale, for the irreversibility and scale of the implementation, and for the aesthetic and practical damages inflicted on the site.

At the same time, two more projects were announced by the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports: 1. the project of covering the rock with new structures in the form of levelled terraces and 2. the construction of a new flight of steps at the west access, which claims to reconstruct the form of a Roman flight of marble steps originating in the 1st century AD. Both projects, if implemented, would deprive the Acropolis Rock of its authentic character as an historic monument on its own, according to the evaluation of UNESCO.

A World Heritage Centre / ICOMOS Advisory mission which visited the Acropolis Athens from 27 to 29 April 2022 found itself faced with a *fait accompli*. It was clear that what was done was practically impossible to correct. The mission members, inexplicably, took the explanations of the Greek State Party about the reversibility of the interventions at face value, merely repeating them in their report, and accepted without due diligence the false statements of the Greek government that they had been approved by an international Conference. The Mission limited itself to suggesting a considerable number of essential and substantial improvements.

In view of the fact that the Mission, composed of very experienced international experts, never challenged statements which were in such obvious and stark contradiction with the reality on the site, and having been provided with information submitted to them by independent experts and civil society, gives rise to speculation that non-technical considerations may have had an impact on their findings and report.

As far as it concerns the two projects announced as forthcoming, that is the covering of the rock at the Acropolis plateau and the so-called reconstruction of a flight of Roman steps at the western access to the Acropolis, the Advisory Mission's recommendations are very clear that, prior to any implementation, the three successive stages of studies (preliminary, final and implementation) prescribed by Greek law must be submitted to the Greek authorities for approval.

No further works must be carried out without Heritage Impact Assessments undertaken in advance of approval or work commencing, based on detailed documentation with argumentation, plans and drawings, and without formal notification being provided in line with § 172 of the Operational Guidelines. All information should also be shared with the Committee for review by the Advisory Bodies, prior to commencing implementation. Since no Management Plan or Tourism Plan have ever been submitted for the Acropolis, such plans would have to be done, and the Acropolis implementation projects should be inscribed in them. It is also clear that any new implementation should not clash with the 1964 Charter of Venice, and the 2003 ICOMOS Charter on Principles of Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage.

As soon as the Advisory Mission's report was uploaded on the WHC website, the Greek Ministry of Culture declared that the Report praises the works on the Acropolis, including the recent cement pavements, as a model on an international scale, thus 'giving the green light' for the implementation of the two planned projects of covering the rock and "reconstructing" the flight of steps. The Prime Minister even asked the critics of the works on national TV to ask forgiveness for having opposed the works! It is clear that the Greek Ministry of Culture misrepresents the Mission Report as an approval of its works and plans by UNESCO.

Under the pretext of implementing a drainage system, a net of strong reinforced concrete is being planted in the earth very close to the monuments and the living rock on the Acropolis plateau, but also around the foot of the Acropolis Rock and the neighboring archaeological sites. Archaeological research and documentation before the implementation of this drainage system have been carried out using fast-track procedures, with unpredictable losses of archaeological information. This makes obvious that the planners and perpetrators of the recent works on the Acropolis do not care at all about conforming with Greece's obligations under the World Heritage Convention and its other international commitments.

The correct interpretation of the Mission Report is that nothing should be done on the Acropolis before the completion of the procedure prescribed by the Convention and national law, as mentioned above, and the final approval by the World Heritage Committee.

Ignoring activities which are so obviously and blatantly destructive, and turning a deaf ear to the widespread criticism expressed by hundreds of international experts and civil society, will further erode what is left of the **C**redibility of the World Heritage Convention, devalue it as an instrument of **C**onservation, put its legitimacy for **C**apacity-building in question, render all efforts of **C**ommunicating its values obsolete, and negate its commitment to **C**ommunities.

When will the World Heritage Committee act if not now? The world is standing to lose the value of one of its most iconic buildings – the one which stands as a symbol of cultural heritage itself and in fact of the organization which you all are a part of. We remind you that the Acropolis of Athens is the heritage of all humankind, and the world community expects you to live up to your duty to protect and safeguard it on behalf of all of us.

It is imperative that the following actions be taken immediately and decisively:

1. The "Acropolis, Athens" World Heritage Property must be put on the agenda of the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee.
2. The World Heritage Committee must request from the Greek State Party:
 - To stop all practical activity on the site immediately until the WH Committee has taken a decision about the implemented and planned works;
 - To submit a Management Plan and a Tourism Plan for the Acropolis, Athens, developed with full participation of civil society, before any other interventions on the site can be considered;
 - To remove the reinforced concrete pathways and other inappropriate installations implemented since 2020 and restore as much of the damages caused to the site since then.

With the expression of our highest considerations

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "St. Doempke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Stephan Doempke
Chair