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FROM UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES TO LOCAL PRACTICES IN HERITAGE CONSERVATION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ARAB WORLD

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Abstract
This paper explores the complex relationship between universal conservation frameworks and the evolution of heritage practices in the Arab world. It focuses on the conflict between internationally standardized principles and cultural values. It analyzes how foundational global charters, such as the Athens and Venice Charters, have shaped conservation approaches worldwide while challenging specific values across cultures. Through comparative analysis of cases from Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, the paper demonstrates that conservation practices in the Arab World contribute to global discourse by emphasizing continuity, adaptive reuse, and the integration of tangible and intangible heritage while preserving diverse values. Detailed case studies, including the Nubian monuments relocation, the archaeological sites of Petra and Jerash, and Bait Alnabooda and Faya Palaeolandscape World Heritage Site in Sharjah, illustrate both achievements and challenges of tourism pressures, policy implementation gaps, and the need for enhanced community participation. The paper advocates for context-sensitive conservation models that institutionalize participatory governance while keeping key ethical principles, such as minimal intervention and reversibility. Building on frameworks like the Nara Document on Authenticity, it reinforces the importance of embracing an ethically contextualized approach that recognizes authenticity and integrity as concepts that are deeply rooted cultural and local contexts. Additionally, it contributes to decolonizing conservation theories and advancing an inclusive and sustainable stewardship of heritage that respects cultural diversity. The findings demonstrate that meaningful conservation requires frameworks that are adaptable to local contexts while meeting global commitments.

Keywords: *Authenticity; Integrity; International Charters; Contextual Conservation; Arab World heritage*

Introduction

Heritage conservation deals with the critical issue of balancing universal principles and the rich and diverse cultural heritage in different contexts. Applying universal standards is always facing huge challenges when it comes to local conservation practices in the field. From the early 20th century, when international conservation standards were created, they were challenging to apply. Both practitioners and theorists have been questioning how the globally recognized frameworks can accommodate the diversity of cultural values, material traditions, and social priorities that characterize heritage across different regions [1]. This ongoing tension between universal and contextual perspectives was

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witnessed within the Arab world. In which this region was formulating its local traditions, mixed with colonial legacies, rapid modernization, and nationalism [2].

The international conservation movement was formalized through a number of key charters, including the Athens Charter (1931) and the Venice Charter (1964). These charters focused on what have been considered foundational principles, mainly authenticity, integrity, minimal intervention, and reversibility [1], [3]. These frameworks came as a result of post-war reconstruction in Europe. Some scholars call this period Enlightenment Rationalism [4]. Scholars consider it a cornerstone in paving the way for the beginnings of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention of 1972. However, the globally agreed-upon principles and ethics in the field of heritage conservation and management caused a huge and continuous debate in local contexts. This debate is framed with imperialism, professional authority, and the nature of heritage itself [5], [6], [7], [8].

Due to the richness of its heritage and civilizations and its long history of local conservation practices, the Arab World provides an interesting context for exploring such tensions. The Arab world holds outstanding heritage legacies from the ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Nabataean civilizations to Islamic heritage. The rich and extraordinary cultural heritage and large-scale and diverse monuments and exquisite artifacts attracted international attention. It is mentioned by many scholars that this attention has imposed colonial frameworks that extracted artifacts, executed external interpretations, and marginalized local knowledge systems [9], [10]. Thus, contemporary practices of heritage conservation in the Arab world shifted their thinking and practice by balancing international standards with considerations of their cultural knowledge and preservation requirements. This shift tried to ensure meeting community needs and enhancing their benefits, especially to face the development pressures [9].

Despite having several comparative studies in literature, they are still referring to local adaptations of international charters as deviations and non-compliant practices. This universality lens is not respectful and shortsighted towards acknowledging the need for non-Western perspectives to contextualize the international frameworks and interpret them in accordance with their own legal frameworks, cultural values, and local practices [11], [12].

This paper explores three interrelated issues. First, trace the development of Western conservation thought and debates from the nineteenth century to contemporary value-based frameworks. Second, explore how the Arab world adapted these frameworks into their own contexts by reviewing legislation and conservation practices. Third, synthesize comparative insights to identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities for more inclusive and effective conservation approaches that respect both universal ethics and cultural specificity.

The paper focuses mainly on five case studies from Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. These cases were chosen due to their diversity in heritage types, conservation practices, application of international frameworks, and impact of national development strategies, and they seek to balance modernization with the preservation of cultural identity.

Through this comparative lens, the paper supports moving beyond universal frameworks and advocates for a hybrid approach. This means that the rigid approaches such as minimal intervention and reversibility must be interpreted with some flexibility based on different cultural contexts and their understandings of authenticity, integrity, and significance.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative methodology to examine how universal principles are reinterpreted within the Arab context, mainly in the field of heritage conservation. The study aims to bridge the gap between these universal principles and the Arab world's context.

The study draws on a literature review to understand the evolution of conservation theories and philosophies from the mid-19th century, including the Romantic approach, stylistic

movement, philological conservation, and scientific conservation, up to the second half of the 20th century during which value-based and holistic approaches emerged. It also covers the evolution of international frameworks, including the Athens, Venice, and Nara Charters, as well as the Burra Charter.

This research also highlighted the legal frameworks related to the management and preservation of cultural heritage in the Arab region, mainly covering Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, to identify how they dealt with international principles and frameworks. Therefore, to achieve this, five case studies were selected based on geographical diversity, historical depth, and contextual variety. This gave the study enough breadth and depth to allow for comparative analysis and a balanced view of the Arab region. Figure 1 below summarizes the research framework, and Fig. 2 summarizes the methodology of this research and its critical synthesis of the various aspects. The study uses a different perspective, unlike many comparative heritage studies that rely primarily on doctrinal analysis or isolated case descriptions. This methodology integrates the historical evolution of conservation theory, legal frameworks, and case studies to examine how universal principles in conservation are interpreted and adapted to local contexts.

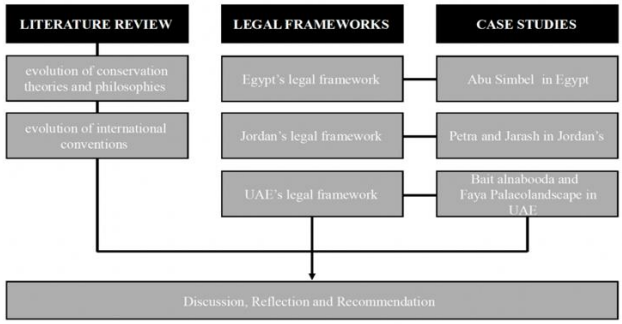

Fig. 1. The Research Framework (Created by the authors).

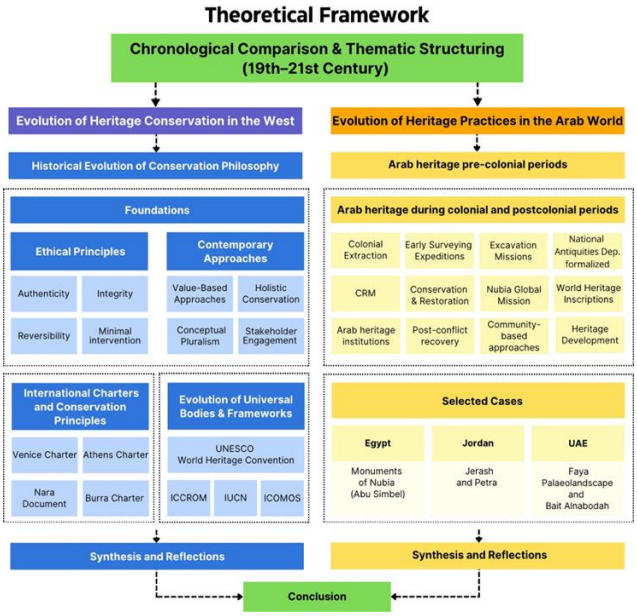

Fig. 2. Theoretical Framework (Created by the authors)

Philosophical Thoughts: Description and Historical Narrative

The intellectual framework of modern conservation philosophy can be seen as a reflection of the thoughts and philosophies of the past and mainly of the 19th century. This period witnessed the emergence of two debating schools of thought, the Romantic Anti-restoration movement and the Rationalist approach of stylistic restoration [13], [14].

The Romantic approach to architecture was based on the high respect and appreciation of the past, which was looked at as unrepeatable and untouchable by its emotional power [14]. For proponents of this view, a historic building was not merely an object but a living document holding immense information and knowledge of history even in its physical decay. The English theorist John Ruskin (1819–1900) was the most powerful figure of this philosophy. In his famous book, Seven Lamps of Memory (1849), Ruskin presented a famous argument against the practice of restoration, which he considered removing materials and replacing deteriorated stones with new ones is considered forgery [15]. In Ruskin's view, the value of a building is not reflected by its complete appearance without damage but by what its material and shape are telling us [14].

In contrast, the stylistic movement centered in France was represented mainly by the architect and theorist Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879). He saw restoration not as a preservation of buildings as they existed but as completing them to their original style. He defined restoration as rebuilding or even creating new additions that originally did not exist [4].

On the other hand, in Italy, Camillo Boito (1836–1914) developed the philological conservation movement, or historical conservation, and Gustavo Giovannoni (1873–1947) founded scientific conservation. Both contributed to strengthening the relationship between authenticity and scientific methodologies. They both had influenced significantly the international doctrine [16].

In 1883, Boito drafted the Italian Charter of Conservation, which shaped the codes of conservation principles [4]. The charter established principles that balance preservation and intervention, including minimal intervention to avoid misleading alterations, with a clear difference between the new and the original parts, with full documentation of all interventions [17]. Boito's guidelines considered any later changes or additions to be part of history and need to be preserved [18].

Later, Giovannoni strengthened the principles of Italian conservation by establishing the scientific and analytical approach to studying historic buildings. In his approach, he stressed the importance of conducting research and documentation to have full understanding [16]. Giovannoni believed in using modern techniques when it is necessary and agreed with Boito that restorations should not be visible [19]. His ideas contributed to the formulation of the Athens Charter (1931) [20]. It is considered that this Italian framework laid the ground for contemporary practice by highlighting the importance of technical knowledge and of differentiating between additions and the original fabric, in addition to respecting all historical periods. This practice considers that conservation decisions should involve both the facts and values [16].

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a shift in heritage conservation theories from focusing on material authenticity and expert-based interventions to values-based and holistic approaches. This means that now it endorses the importance of inherited values and community participation. Meanwhile, new ethical founding principles appeared, including respecting original materials and context, referred to as "authenticity"; wholeness and intactness of monuments and sites, called "integrity"; and limiting actions to what is necessary, "minimal intervention," which also can be removed, "reversibility" [21-23].

Scholars like Jukka Jokilehto (1938–2023) studied and explained the development of such principles. Authenticity expanded to include form, design, function, tradition, technique, spirit, and feeling. Integrity evolved to include physical integrity as the intactness of the fabric; visual integrity as represented in the coherence of its appearance and setting; structural integrity as in stability; and the integrity of the relationships between an object and its context [1].

Also, Bernard Feilden (1919–2008) stressed that minimal intervention is key to respecting the existing fabric and patina as traces of time. It prioritizes conservation over replacement. Feilden justifies reversibility to keep decisions also for future generations who may have better information or techniques than our current limitations. This means future generations can reverse our work and conduct new conservation options. However, the limitations in achieving this concept, it became acceptable to have some flexibility to include repeatability which means that an intervention should not prevent future treatments even if the original intervention cannot be undone [24].

Fielden presented the values of heritage monuments as artistic, symbolic, and social meanings that are important to society. He argued that their preservation is fundamental in safeguarding and enhancing these meanings, not just preserving the materials [24]. He categorized heritage values into three main groups, which are key in guiding heritage preservation decisions and practice. First, emotional values related to identity, continuity, and a sense of place. Second, cultural values, including historical documentation, artistic achievement, and symbolic significance. Third, use values of practical functions and community uses.

Together, these principles created a strong framework for conservation. However, they were later challenged and expanded by the emergence of value-based and holistic approaches. Since the late twentieth century, conservation theory has adopted value-based and people-centered methods. In this stage it shifted its focus to maintain heritage significance rather than only protecting its physical materials. In addition, local communities became a main player in decision-making, which is not limited anymore to the experts [25], [26]. This shift moved conservation to a new level of a comprehensive lens of considering all types of values. Additionally, this changed conservation practices of international institutions with the development of charters and conventions.

Evolution of international conventions

During the course of time, several contemporary issues and trends have evolved along with the framework of conservation theories, which included some key concepts and regional themes. These theories influenced mainly the Athens Charter and the Venice Charter. Due to several gaps in these charters, the need became necessary to develop new charters and frameworks to mainly address regional and local issues that are unique to various nations [20].

The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments was adopted at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in 193. It marked the first international effort to articulate and systemize conservation principles [27]. The Charter came to life with the League of Nations and concerns about protecting monuments post-World War I. In this sense the Charter focused on technical aspects, material preservation, and preventive maintenance. It advocated for regular maintenance so there is no need for major interventions, using modern techniques and materials if the traditional solutions are not enough, and respecting the monuments and their historic character. For the Charter, authenticity is defined by preserving the physical structure and original fabric, with no real consideration to the cultural and social aspects of heritage buildings. Thus, in the post-colonial era, it became obvious that the

charter had many limitations to address cultural diversity, community participation, and the values of heritage. However, it established an important foundation for international cooperation and professional standards [14].

In 1964 the Venice Charter significantly expanded the scope of the Athens Charter. Since many nations were dealing with the aftermath of World War II, tensions started between reconstruction and heritage preservation. The Venice Charter expanded the definition of monuments by including settings, urban or rural, not only single structures, and stressed protecting all aspects of monuments, including artistic and historical components [28]. Moreover, it adopted the approach of making a distinction between the old and the new additions and preserving all historical periods, which means rejecting Viollet-le-Duc's approach of restoring buildings to a hypothetical ideal state. The charter prioritized authenticity of materials, establishing the minimal intervention, reversibility, and comprehensive documentation principles. It is considered the foundation for ICOMOS and influenced conservation practices globally. However, the Charter was criticized a lot for its Eurocentric and Western views and assumptions, in addition to its focus on material aspects connected with authenticity and documentary evidence, which led to calls for more culturally inclusive frameworks that consider different heritage values. This could be interpreted as practices that welcome and give the priority to the continuation of use of buildings and sites and even their continuous repair and renewal over focusing on preserving the original material [5]. In response to these limitations, the Nara Document on Authenticity emerged with the lens of cultural considerations and pluralistic approaches. The document was adopted at a conference in Nara, Japan, in 1994. It addressed the criticisms of the Venice Charter's concept of material-based authenticity and neglecting non-Western heritage. The document focused particularly on Asian traditions of continuous renewal and spiritual continuity. The Nara document reframed authenticity as multidimensional and contextual, including aspects of form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors [29]. This pluralistic understanding of authenticity acknowledged diverse heritage expressions and conservation approaches, recognizing that different cultures may prioritize different dimensions of authenticity. It established the formulation of authenticity-based cultural contexts. Thus, heritage values must be understood and perceived from insider perspectives rather than imposing external criteria [30].

On the other hand, the ICOMOS Burra Charter of Australia, first adopted in 1979 and revised in 2013, defined heritage conservation as a values-based approach, making cultural significance the foundation for all heritage conservation decisions [31]. Cultural significance is defined as aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, or spiritual value for past, present, or future generations, which covers a broader range of values than previous charters [32, Article 1.2]. The Burra Charter established a systematic process for heritage conservation decision-making. It helped in understanding cultural significance through research, developed policies based on this significance, and reviewed the results [32]. The Burra Charter has influenced the global practice and understanding by informing values-based methodologies and providing practical guidance for participatory conservation. It facilitated the shift towards people-centered heritage management by its focus on social values and community participation [11].

Throughout history it can be recognized how the evolution of international charters shifted greatly from the physical aspect of cultural heritage conservation to include multiple and diverse cultural significances. Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of international conventions according to five criteria.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of International Conventions (Created by the authors)

Criteria	Athens Charter	Venice Charter	Nara Document	Burra Charter
Intellectual Foundation	A rational perspective that focuses on materiality	Global ethics of preservation with respect for historical layers	Cultural diversity and respect for local context and values	Value-based approach through community participation
Concept of Authenticity	Material authenticity, original form, and materials	Material and historical authenticity through the preservation of additions	Multidimensional authenticity encompasses social and spiritual values	Through consultations, significance is related to use, meaning, and emotional connection.
Approach to Intervention	Modern technologies, Anastylosis, and Structural protection	Minimal intervention and reversibility	Flexible interventions specific to each culture	Minimal intervention, reversibility, documentation, and adaptive reuse
Cultural & Social Dimension	Heritage is seen as physical property only	Limited by Western standards	Fundamental and pivotal; depends on the cultural meanings of each society	Pivotal with strong community engagement and a living heritage
Consideration of Non-Western Contexts	Uniform approach that disregards individual circumstances	Uniform standards but insensitive to diversity	Full recognition of diversity and a call for local approaches	Flexible and applicable in diverse cultural contexts

Heritage Conservation in the Arab World

This section explores the evolution of the legal systems in Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE. Also, it examines shifts in governance, heritage conservation theory, and foundational principles and how they have impacted these frameworks. The study explores Egypt's, the UAE's, and Jordan's cultural heritage legislations through the UNESCO Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws, which was used to identify key legal milestones and relevant historical regulations. Additionally, research verified recent legislation from national gazettes. These preliminary findings helped in the selection of primary sources of laws related to understanding conservation practices and their regulations in the Arab world. Relevant laws were examined from the original Arabic text to ensure accuracy in terminology, dates, and legal formulation. Attention was given to the provisions related to conservation principles, management, and the definition of cultural heritage. The extracted material was analyzed with a context lens and within the broader historical framework of heritage protection in the Arab world. This allowed the study to rely on current and valid legal text rather than depending on summaries or interpretations from literature.

Legislative and Institutional Contexts in the Arab World

Egypt has one of the longest and most developed heritage protection systems in the Arab world. Its legislative efforts are traceable to the early nineteenth century, reflecting the rise of Egyptian nationalism and state control over antiquities [9], [32]. This is represented mainly through the 1835 decree of Mehmet Ali, which banned the export of antiquities without permits, which reflects an awareness of early state-level emphasis on heritage protection [9]. However, the decree was largely ineffective because European agents and diplomats continued exporting Egyptian artifacts to their countries [33]. The year 1858 witnessed the first official establishment of the Antiquities Authority, run under the French director Auguste Mariette; similarly, this allowed him a free monopoly on excavation and exportation in Egypt [34], and the authority has

been under French management for almost a century, comparable to that which the British achieved in Jordan a century later.

Reading through the Compilation of Egypt's Antiquities Laws by Hassan & Feldman of 1926, it is evident that Egypt's legal framework for the protection of antiquities was first formally established on the 16th of May in 1883, when the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, although in Arabic it can be translated as "artifacts," issued regulations declaring that all objects placed under its authority were the property of the state. The law further affirms that all existing ancient monuments and artifacts are to be considered state property. The Egyptian decree of 17 November 1891 strengthened this framework by prohibiting any excavation without an official license from the Director-General of the Department of Antiquities. Unauthorized excavations were explicitly forbidden, and all objects uncovered through excavation were declared the property of the government and must be delivered to the government, with reimbursement to individuals who discovered them. However, in terms of conservation, the decree does not explicitly define antiquities and artifacts; however, it introduces specific provisions for immovable antiquities. It states that such objects must be preserved in their original locations regardless of their conditions. If parts of these structures or artifacts were removed, they were to be returned to their original site to ensure the integrity of the monument [34]. These clauses reflect a clear early attempt to balance the preservation of heritage integrity in line with John Ruskin's philosophy.

The antiquities regulations of Egypt have significantly changed along with the development of Law No. 14 of 1912, by which they were comprehensively revised and expanded. This resulted in formulating a clear, detailed legal definition of antiquities for the first time. The definition encompassed all remains located on or under the ground that were stated and confirmed as state properties, which includes all productions of art, science, literature, and religion, created in Egypt from the Pharaonic, Greek, or Roman periods. It also considered architectural remains and movable antiquities, which also was the first systematic classification in Egyptian law. This law banned and introduced penalties for unauthorized activities and criminalized the destruction, distortion, and illegal excavations [34]. Egypt was considered a leader in the field because its legislation was before the international heritage conservation charters.

The period between 1912 and 1983 had no significant developments of antiquities legislation in Egypt, maybe due to the impact of world wars and political changes. with the exception of the year 1956, a great change when the Antiquities Authority became an Egyptian Government Organization following the withdrawal of the British occupation forces.

The enactment of Law No. 117 of 1983 on the Protection of Antiquities marked a key big shift that redefined antiquities to include any object, site, or structure over 100 years old with archaeological or historical significance. This includes remains of civilizations in Egypt or historically connected to it, remains of human races, and any items designated as antiquities by the Prime Minister [35]. Later, its amendments in 2010, 2018, and 2020 established a comprehensive heritage management framework based on the UNESCO 1970 Convention's principle of state ownership [36]. They aimed to strengthen protection, enforcement, and regulation of procedures for excavation, conservation, export, registration, preservation, and renovation of archaeological sites and historic buildings. The amendments under Law No. 20 of 2020 stressed the penalties for the possession, sale, or export of antiquities to combat illicit trafficking and smuggling of heritage objects [37]. The earlier amendments of 2018 strengthened the role of the Supreme Council of Antiquities with the sole responsibility for the preservation, renovation, and maintenance of both movable and immovable antiquities. Moreover, owners are prohibited from altering or modifying registered antiquities without official authorization, reinforcing conservation measures that bind owners to preserve such heritage, subject to fair compensation [36], and reinforcing a centralized, state-led conservation approach with all authorized work conducted under direct supervision by authority representatives [38].

Moreover, Article 16 empowers the Supreme Council for Planning and Urban Development to regulate real estate adjustments within or adjacent to antiquity sites to ensure the conservation of their aesthetic and general appearance. Properties with historic, scientific, religious, artistic, or literary value must be registered under the law, with owners legally obligated to preserve their integrity, and they are prohibited from making unauthorized changes. Additionally, Article 32 mandates that archaeological missions restore and preserve all architectural and movable antiquities they uncover before concluding their fieldwork, under the supervision of the council. This legislation represents a clear shift toward on-site conservation principles, which is like Giovannoni's scientific and analytical approach by emphasizing the protection of the physical integrity and historical context of heritage assets for future generations.

Finally, although the law introduces enhanced penalties for violations and mandates strict registration protocols, it also promotes public awareness campaigns to foster community involvement in heritage protection. This focus of its principles reflects a great consistency with international charters, such as the Burra Charter.

Moreover, the establishment of the Department of Antiquities in 1923 in Jordan during the British Mandate period [39]. This marked the evolution of the heritage conservation framework, but the development of the legal framework for cultural heritage has evolved significantly from the 1950s. Early measures include Antiquities Order No. 1 of 1953, whose primary purpose was procedural and focused on regulating archaeological sites, controlling trade and export of antiquities, and preventing illicit activities. This order helped formalize administrative procedures for archaeological work and the trade in cultural objects at a moment when archaeological discovery and heritage management were becoming increasingly professionalized [40]. Its procedures focused solely on the preservation of archaeological sites, namely the historic site of Jerash, and forbade any erection of buildings, burning, walking, or climbing on monuments, planting trees, or damaging any monument, mosaic, or other antiquity [41]. In the 1960s, the temporary Law No. 51 of 1966 on Antiquities was issued to provide an interim legal framework for the protection, management, and regulation of Jordan's movable and immovable archeological heritage. This temporary law was designed to define "ancient antiquity" and establish state ownership and control over archaeological finds.

This framework was strengthened by the Antiquities Law No. 21 of 1988, which was amended in 2004. It established comprehensive protection for archaeological sites and movable cultural property. The law broadly defines antiquities, includes provisions for site designation and protection, regulates excavation and conservation activities, and establishes penalties for violations [40]. Like in Egypt, this law designates the Department of Antiquities not only the management of antiquities, archaeological sites, and archaeological reserves but also the responsibility for the supervision, protection, maintenance, restoration, preservation, and enhancement of their surroundings [42]. In addition, it focused on enhancing public awareness of cultural heritage, much like the approach taken in Egypt to align legal frameworks with broader preservation and educational objectives.

In parallel, Jordan developed laws and regulations for immovable heritage, including protections for specific sites, like the 1993 Petra Decision. In addition, the Law on the Protection of Architectural and Urban Heritage No. 5 of 2005 on the Protection of Immovable Heritage establishes the legal framework for the protection, preservation, and regulation of buildings, urban sites, and architectural structures that have historic, cultural, or architectural value and were constructed after the cutoff date used in the country's prior laws, after 1750 AD. This law recognizes heritage in a broader sense than previous texts, reflecting advanced thinking about urban and architectural heritage by considering the legal protection of the urban fabric, historic neighborhoods, and architectural landmarks with cultural identity, historical importance, or distinct building heritage. It safeguards these sites and states in Article 11 that it is prohibited to

demolish, damage, vandalize, or cause any damage to them and their surroundings. Also, in Article 12 it states it is prohibited to change any features of heritage sites or make any additions without official approvals [43]. In general, this law is considered a complementary legal instrument to the antiquities law, and it fills a major gap by protecting urban and architectural heritage that is not considered archeology.

In additions to Jordan's developed legal frameworks in terms of preservation, it has adopted a more strategic approach to heritage governance in recent years. The Management of Jordan's Archaeological Heritage Strategy for 2023–2027 represents a significant evolution by integrating heritage conservation with national economic development priorities while addressing contemporary challenges in archaeological management [44]. The strategy emphasizes three main objectives, including preservation and sustainable use according to international best practices, maximization of economic returns from archaeological resources, and promotion of public awareness. The strategy adopts participatory governance principles, positioning local communities as essential partners in heritage management and reflecting Jordan's alignment with UNESCO conventions and international standards [44], [45]. The Department of Antiquities is the main implementing authority, coordinating with international organizations and community-based initiatives to address identified challenges, including legislative gaps, stakeholder coordination, and technical capacity constraints.

Furthermore, the United Arab Emirates, founded in 1971 as an independent nation comprising seven emirates, experienced later institutionalization of heritage governance than Egypt and Jordan, with federal and emirate-level authorities mainly established in the late 20th and early 21st centuries [46]. Since each emirate is administratively independent, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi have developed their own local legislation on cultural heritage. On a federal level, the first law only came into existence forty-six years after the Union. The Federal Law No. 11 of 2017 on Antiquities established a national framework for the preservation of both movable and immovable antiquities, defining antiquity as any object that was produced, constructed, carved, written, drawn, or engraved within the UAE territory more than 100 years ago and that holds unique or rare historical, artistic, scientific, religious, architectural, or other cultural value reflective of civilizational development. Moreover, the law ensures coordination among emirates through the Ministry of Culture, which acts as the central body to standardize and oversee heritage protection mainly through the establishment of mandates and a National Registry of Antiquities and prohibits any actions that might damage, alter, or change antiquities or their sites, such as unauthorized excavation, demolition, or placement of signs, without approval from the competent authority [47].

On the Emirates level, the first comprehensive legal framework for antiquities predates the federation, with the issuance of Law No. 8 of 1970 on Antiquities and Excavations. The law was issued by His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, later the founder of the United Arab Emirates, when he was the ruler of Abu Dhabi, and therefore its jurisdiction initially applied only to the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The law defined antiquities primarily through a chronological criterion, where any building, instrument, or inscription made or used by humans more than 150 years ago, as well as the remains of any creature dating back more than 1000 years. It also defined excavation broadly as any act of clearing or removing debris covering any structure erected above the ground. The law affirmed state ownership over antiquities and strictly prohibited excavation or digging by individuals or institutions without official authorization, limiting such activities to the Department of Media and Tourism in Abu Dhabi. In addition, it established licensing procedures for excavations and outlined restrictions and obligations intended to protect archaeological sites and cultural property [48].

Forty-six years later, the emirate of Abu Dhabi introduced a forward-looking Law on Cultural Heritage. Law No. 4 of 2016 concerning Cultural Heritage aims to protect, discover, preserve, manage, and promote cultural heritage in Abu Dhabi. It not only recognizes local cultural heritage but also includes material brought from outside the emirate. The law defines cultural heritage into three main categories: tangible heritage, intangible heritage, and cultural

sites; places that contain tangible cultural heritage, whether naturally formed or human-influenced. This broad definition expands heritage to include old or archaeological assets and anything culturally significant by law or the Executive Council. The law considers modern heritage, such as architectural and urban places from recent decades that are culturally, historically, socially, technologically, or aesthetically significant. In addition, it reflects the emirate's recent history, development, identity, and social memory [49].

On the other hand, in Sharjah, the governance of heritage management has expanded rapidly. The Department of Archaeology and Heritage was established in 1986 to provide necessary protection for archaeological and heritage sites under the umbrella of the Department of Culture and Information. Today, this department expanded and operates independently as the Sharjah Archaeology Authority [50]. Only six years later, the Ruler of Sharjah, His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, issued the Archaeology Law No. 1 of 1992, which designates the Department of Culture and Information, specifically the Department of Antiquities and Heritage, as the competent authority. The law defines "antiquities" as anything left behind by previous civilizations or generations, whether movable or immovable. It was crafted, created, engraved, depicted, drawn, or constructed by humans before 1900 AD. This includes caves, coins, pottery, manuscripts, documents, and artifacts that indicate the origins of sciences, arts, crafts, religions, and traditions specific to a civilization or region. It also includes anything related to significant historical events, or anything added or reconstructed after that date. Additionally, human and animal remains dating back to before 600 AD may be considered antiquities. The law also allows any director or administration to consider immovable or movable property dating from a period later than 1900 AD as an antiquity if it is deemed to possess historical or artistic characteristics that represent heritage and cannot be neglected. Antiquities are further categorized into two types: immovable and movable. The law also includes articles on archaeological excavations and activities in the Emirate of Sharjah, including the disposition and distribution of antiquities, licensing requirements, and penalties for violations [51].

Nowadays, Sharjah Law No. 4 of 2020 on Cultural Heritage is one of the most recent in the region and a comprehensive emirate-level framework. The law establishes clear procedures for preservation, documentation, and archaeological excavation, and it mandates three additional authorities for its implementation [52], which highlights the importance of cultural heritage in the emirate. The law also adopts a broad inclusive definition of heritage and does not limit it to antiquities or archaeological remains as before. It extends protections to tangible and intangible heritage. It includes anything that has cultural significance by its nature, such as buildings, complexes, areas, museums, arts, literature, dialects, crafts, beliefs, and traditional sports. However, the law still considers the cut-off date of 1900 AD when defining tangible cultural heritage. The law also acknowledges cultural landscapes, living traditions, knowledge systems, and social practices [52]. Therefore, along with Abu Dhabi's 2016 Law, they both reflect a shift toward value-based approaches that parallel the framework articulated by Feilden [24]. In addition to acknowledging the dimensions of intangible heritage championed by the Nara Document. While the law emphasizes the procedural aspects of heritage preservation, it leaves room for technical interpretation. Article 13 illustrates this by not explicitly defining conservation methods or standards; instead, it delegates the standard of care to 'recognized techniques,' ensuring that specialized practices remain subject to the approval and monitoring of the relevant authority [52]. While providing a strong local regulatory framework, the law could be further developed to incorporate contemporary value-based perspectives and create a more balanced approach to conserving tangible heritage while maintaining cultural identity within a global context.

Conservation practice in the Arab World

In a comparative review of some cases from the Arab region, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, over the decades, it shows that they not only adopted the international frameworks but also actively used local practices through the local contexts and different socio-economic and

development factors. By looking at these examples to understand how these countries adapted the universal frameworks to local contexts. In this sense, three common themes were identified in this research: the relationship between material and authenticity; the engagement of communities within the framework of universal value; the world heritage inscription of sites and their processes and requirements; and the site within its broader context and from a development lens. These cases not only highlight the transfer of global charters but also mark a shift toward the development of local and regional practices. This process of readapting and reinterpreting international guidelines for a more local context, which ensures looking at local practices, narratives, availability of material, social structures, development pressures, ecological conditions, and more, caused the generation of a new context-sensitive approach that challenges the established international conservation paradigms.

Redefining Authenticity: The Material and the Functionality

The Venice Charter emphasizes mainly material authenticity, which gives the practitioners in the Arab region a hard choice between protecting the physical fabric of monuments and their ongoing cultural or social roles from a local context. This is evident from the project of the relocation of Abu Simbel under the UNESCO Nubian Campaign (1960–1980). This project shows the emphasis mainly on the monuments as objects to be rescued. Mobilizing over 50 countries and raising more than $80 million [53], [54], the relocation of Abu Simbel was achieved through the cutting and reassembly of its stone blocks and the careful reconstruction of its solar alignment. The temples were moved 65 meters higher and 280 meters away from their original location [55]. This relocation of the monuments, yes, technically saved the material and form; however, it has completely and fundamentally changed the original environmental and cultural context. The reconstruction of the 22 monuments and complexes on a new artificial hill disrupted their geological and hydrological relationships with the Nile. This alteration in its broader context shaped its meaning [56], [57]. Since this was a global effort, it reflected a strict reading of the Athens and Venice Charters. The project represents a great focus on saving the architectural fabric and prioritizing visual integrity while ignoring its setting.

On the other hand, a different interpretation can be seen in the recent conservation practice in the UAE. At Bait Alnabooda in Sharjah, a traditional courtyard house built in 1845 [58], restoration has focused on reestablishing spatial coherence and cultural use. This means even if it is needed to introduce new materials and the loss of some original fabric from earlier phases of intervention. Located in the heart of Sharjah as part of the "Sharjah: Gateway to the Trucial States" site on UNESCO's tentative list, the house faced significant deterioration. In order to transform its function into a museum to showcase the history of the pearl trade, in the 1980s the work compromised parts of the historic material, interventions that used a mix of traditional techniques and contemporary materials [58], [59]. Some original elements, such as imported Indian wooden columns, were retained, while other components were reconstructed. This highlights a selective approach to material authenticity. This approach does not follow the strict material criteria of the Venice Charter, but it aligns more closely with the Nara Document on Authenticity by recognizing values of spirit, function, setting, and continuity of use [30]. In this case, Bait Alnabooda is preserved not only as a physical structure but also as a repository of local memory and narratives. The work in this house when compared with Abu Simbel shows a regional shift in the Arab world. Authenticity is increasingly seen through a lens of living function rather than just a fabric to be preserved. In other words, the visual coherence and cultural continuity may be prioritized over strict material originality [60].

This change in recognizing and interpreting authenticity stresses that heritage conservation must try to balance the preservation of historic fabric with the need to sustain cultural practices

and functions. This is why conservation practices in the region now reflect a greater integration of tangible and intangible values that give heritage sites their enduring significance, moving from fabric-centered to values-based and people-centered understandings of authenticity.

Transforming Management: From Exclusion to Negotiated Engagement

Another transformation is the shift from Eurocentric, expert-driven management to a more participatory approach. The Nubian Campaign in the 1960s shows how following universal values and practices gave the Pharaonic monuments greater importance than the social and cultural values of communities. The displacement of Nubian populations and the flooding of their vernacular settlements and Islamic history in order to rescue monumental temples exposed a pyramid of values rooted in Western archaeological practices. In this case, ancient stone was of greater significance than present ways of life [9], [61]. In this context, international cooperation, despite its technical success, reproduced unbalanced power relations and gave no importance or value to local memory; some scholars describe this as revealing how universal heritage discourse can marginalize living heritage and reproduce colonial epistemologies [57].

Another example is the relocation of the Bdoul Bedouin community in 1985 from Petra to Umm Sayhoun village near the back exit of the site, which followed a similar sense of exclusion, prioritizing the preservation of the archaeological park over the continuity of local habitation [62]. The site of Petra covers over 264 square kilometers [63], and the site receives almost one million visitors annually [64]. This is creating a significant pressure on these social dynamics. During the 20th century, European and American archaeological missions in Petra focused on excavation, documentation, and monument stabilization, but they neglected broader site management and community impacts [39].

However, the development of the Petra Integrated Management Plan (IMP) in 2019 adopted more participatory principles emphasized by the Burra Charter. The IMP recognizes local communities and highlights their key role in decision-making related to the management and preservation of Petra [65]. The gap between government authorities and local groups still exists [66], [67], but the shift from silence to dialogue with new government tools provides more practical solutions. The IMP highlights that authorities and various international archaeological missions are actively involving communities in the preservation and interventions at the site and offer several training programs. This shows that value is not only for Petra-carved façades but also for the social fabric, local context, and their interaction with the site, reflecting the Burra Charter's values-based, negotiated understanding of cultural significance.

Beyond the Monument: Integrating Landscape and Development

The other dimension of change is shifting from treating heritage as a collection of isolated monuments to considering their broader cultural and natural contexts. This perspective became more evident in the development pressures, which call for more integrated planning frameworks. In Sharjah, the management and preservation of the Faya Paleolandscape moved away from the monument-centered approach of the Athens Charter. Sharjah focused on safeguarding Faya's archaeological remains, reflecting human settlement from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age, alongside desert ecosystems and paleoenvironments. The cultural and environmental values of the site must be inseparable [68]. Interventions are under control to fit with the landscape to preserve the ecological context of the archaeological records. For example, new developments like the Faya Lodge utilize local materials to avoid visual impact [69], [70]. In 2025, Faya-Palaeolandscape was inscribed on the World Heritage List, which highlights the UAE's commitment to sustainable conservation and emphasizes that cultural landscapes have Outstanding Universal Value not only considering isolated monuments.

This holistic approach offers a potential solution to the challenges faced between the ancient city and the modern city of Jerash in Jordan. Here, the struggle is to apply value-based planning to manage the friction between the Jerash archaeological site attracting 300,000 visitors and the city that surrounds it. The collaboration of the Getty Conservation Institute with the Department of Antiquities (2007–2017) prioritized minimal intervention. This can be seen in the restoration of the South Theater [71] and the applied Burra Charter-based significance assessment and policy development. These cases indicate that the region is moving toward the implementation of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach. The Arab world is acknowledging that a site's integrity relies on its symbiotic relationship with its surroundings rather than its separation from them [72], [73].

Discussion and Reflection

The evidence from Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates shows that international conservation principles have not been consistently applied as strict norms in the Arab World. Instead, they are interpreted selectively, shaped by local cultural values, history, and social contexts. In all the cases studied, the main ethical principles from international charters like authenticity, integrity, minimal intervention, and reversibility are not ignored, but they were redefined through local understandings of continuity, memory, landscape, and social use. The main argument in this paper is based not only on theory but also on an empirical analysis of conservation efforts, management strategies, and value-based choices documented in the case studies presented.

The Nubian monuments campaign demonstrates the limits of a solely material view of authenticity as promoted by the Athens and Venice Charters. The technical success of the Abu Simbel relocation preserved form, structure, and solar alignment, but it separated the temples from their original hydrological, topographical, and cultural landscape. This exposed a fundamental tension between preserving the physical fabric and maintaining contextual integrity. This case shows that preserving only the fabric is not enough to protect all heritage values when cultural landscapes and social connections are disrupted.

In contrast, the conservation of Bait Alnabooda in Sharjah provides clear evidence of how local cultural priorities can ethically justify methods that are different from the Venice Charter. The selective reconstruction was guided by the need to restore spatial coherence, continuity of use, and the collective memory linked to traditional courtyard houses and the pearling industry. Here, authenticity was based on functional, typological, and symbolic continuity rather than solely on preserving the original materials. This case reflected a value system in which cultural significance and social understanding are more important than preserving the original material. This approach aligns with the Nara Document's culturally relative view of authenticity and shows how reconstruction can be an ethical response if tradition and identity are maintained.

The Jordanian cases further expand the idea of integrity beyond just the architectural object. In Petra, integrity increasingly involves the cultural landscape and community connections, showing a shift from protecting monuments alone to understanding the significance of landscapes through a social perspective. In Jerash, the Getty and Department of Antiquities program applied Burra Charter principles by assessing significance, managing policies, and minimizing interventions in the urban environment. Here, integrity is characterized by the coherence between archaeological remains, visual surroundings, urban development, and current uses, which is aligned with the Historic Urban Landscape approach.

The inscription of the Faya Palaeolandscape expands this interpretive framework by emphasizing authenticity and integrity through natural and cultural wide settings. Here, heritage value is not focused on built structures but on the long-term evolution of natural systems and

human presence. The case supports a holistic view of cultural landscapes in line with both Nara-based pluralism and emerging environmental ethics in heritage conservation.

Together, these cases show that conservation practices in the Arab world are conducted within an ethical framework where international standards are used as reference points but not as strict rules or laws. Authenticity and integrity are seen as culturally based concepts, influenced by local ideas of continuity, use, landscape, and memory. The interaction between international principles and regional value systems results in a context-aware adjustment of ethical priorities. In this way, the Arab cases do not just demonstrate the implementation of global charters, but they provide empirically grounded insights that enhance modern conservation theory. They emphasize the importance of values-based, culturally responsive, and landscape-focused approaches to heritage management.

To synthesize the empirical findings and clarify how local cultural imperatives influence international conservation principles, Table 2 presents a comparative analytical matrix that maps each case against the key ethical dimensions of authenticity, integrity, and intervention. It also situates the ethical dimensions within the dialogue between international guidelines (Venice, Nara, Burra, HUL) and conservation values. This synthesis shows how the examined cases collectively support a context-sensitive reinterpretation of universal ethical principles and provide empirical support for the paper's theoretical argument.

Table 2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Dialogue Between International Doctrine and Local Cultural Imperatives

Case	International Reference Framework	Local Cultural Imperatives	Ethical Tension	Reinterpreted Authenticity	Reinterpreted Integrity	Theoretical Contribution
Abu Simbel (Egypt)	Athens Charter; Venice Charter; UNESCO salvage doctrine	Monumental symbolism, national identity, solar alignment	Fabric rescue vs. loss of cultural landscape and community	Authenticity as formal and structural continuity detached from place	Integrity as visual and structural wholeness, separated from original environmental and social systems	Demonstrates limits of material-based universalism
Bait Al Nabooda (UAE)	Venice Charter; Nara Document; Burra Charter	Continuity of use, spatial memory, typological coherence	Prohibition of reconstruction vs. the need for cultural continuity	Authenticity as functional, symbolic, and spatial continuity	Integrity as coherence of form, use, and meaning rather than original fabric	Empirically justifies reconstruction as an ethical practice
Petra (Jordan)	World Heritage Convention; Burra Charter	Bedouin cultural association, landscape continuity, living traditions	Monument protection vs. community and landscape values	Authenticity, including social practice and cultural memory	Integrity as landscape-scale coherence of monuments, routes, water systems, and communities	Shifts ethics from object-centered to people-centered
Jerash (Jordan)	Burra Charter; Historic Urban Landscape	Urban continuity, visual setting, city–site interaction	Monument isolation vs. urban and visual coherence	Authenticity mediated by setting and spatial legibility	Integrity as a relationship between archaeological fabric, skyline, and living city	Operationalizes Burra and HUL in Arab urban archaeology
Faya Palaeolandscape (UAE)	Nara Document; HUL; Cultural Landscape doctrine	Ecological continuity, deep-time human–environment interaction	Monument display vs. preservation of natural processes	Authenticity in geological and archaeological context	Integrity as environmental, geomorphological, and cultural landscape unity	Extends conservation ethics to deep-time landscapes

Conclusion

This study shows that the relationship between international conservation principles and practice in the Arab world is not just about simple adoption but involves contextual reinterpretation. In this sense, ethical principles are always negotiated through cultural-based

understandings of authenticity, integrity, continuity, landscape, and the broader context. By using comparative empirical evidence from Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, the paper goes beyond a literature-based critique of universalism. The paper offers a case-based contribution to current conservation theory and practice by exploring different case studies from the Arab Region.

The findings improve the theoretical discussion in three connected ways. First, they practically support the idea that authenticity is culturally relative. The comparison between the Nubian relocation, the reconstruction of Bait Alnabooda, and the management of living archaeological landscapes like Petra and Jerash shows that authenticity is not just about material preservation, but it depends on function, spatial coherence, social memory, and environmental context. This approach applies the pluralistic knowledge promoted by the Nara Document and builds on it with evidence from Arab heritage contexts.

Second, the study advances the theoretical redefinition of integrity as a landscape and system-based concept. The cases of Petra, Jerash, and Faya demonstrate that integrity is increasingly seen as the unity of relationships among monuments, settings, and living communities and not only the physical completeness of isolated structures, which supports the Historic Urban Landscape and cultural landscape paradigms while placing them within non-Western archaeological, desert, and deep-time contexts that have been underrepresented in conservation theory.

Third, comparative synthesis helps present ethical pluralism as a core theoretical issue for modern heritage conservation. International charters should be used as adaptable ethical reference points that must consider local cultural logics, value systems, and historical experiences. This suggests a context-aware adjustment of universal ethical principles, in which material conservation, cultural continuity, social importance, and environmental integrity are balanced according to culturally specific priorities.

Building on these theoretical implications, this study proposes developing an Arab Conservation Charter or region-specific ethical guidelines as a conceptual addition to global conservation theory. Such a framework would formalize the region's proven approaches to authenticity, integrity, reconstruction, landscape, and community involvement, presenting them as a unified ethical model rooted in Arab cultural knowledge while aligning with the core principles of ICOMOS and UNESCO. The Arab world and its historic role in this field should be perceived as a key and active contributor to the ongoing development of conservation ethics and not as a secondary receiver of international ideas. This region proves to be a living example of how universal principles can be enriched rather than diluted through cultural adaptation.

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