



# Heritage management in post-revolutionary Tunisia: a case study from Mhamdia

## La gestión del patrimonio en el Túnez posrevolucionario: un estudio de caso de Mhamdia

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**ABSTRACT** Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has undergone a transformative phase characterized by emerging models of governance that prioritize grassroots initiatives and community participation in local affairs. Despite its manifold challenges, this political renewal has unfolded during political, socioeconomic, and security crises. Through a case study of the commune of Mhamdia, this article aims to examine two key aspects: (1) how communes can approach built heritage amidst the presence of national, international, governmental, non-governmental, profit, and non-profit actors, and (2) how heritage management can pose challenges, occasionally leading to the destruction of historical elements. This qualitative analysis, rooted in practitioner research, explores shifting paradigms and evolving dynamics within traditional and novel practices, shedding light on their impact on built heritage. The results demonstrate that, similar to national players, local elites also leverage built heritage to fortify their legitimacy, albeit through different means.

**RESUMEN** Desde la revolución de 2011, Túnez ha experimentado una fase transformadora caracterizada por modelos emergentes de gobernanza que priorizan las iniciativas de base y la participación comunitaria en los asuntos locales. Esta renovación política, a pesar de sus múltiples desafíos, se ha llevado a cabo en períodos de crisis recurrentes que abarcan los dominios político, socioeconómico y de seguridad. A través de un estudio de caso del municipio de Mhamdia, este artículo tiene como objetivo examinar dos aspectos fundamentales: (1) cómo las comunas pueden abordar el patrimonio construido en presencia de actores nacionales, internacionales, gubernamentales, no gubernamentales, lucrativos y sin fines de lucro, y (2) cómo la gestión del patrimonio puede ser desafiante y llevar en ocasiones a la destrucción de elementos históricos. Este análisis cualitativo, enraizado en la investigación práctica, busca explorar los paradigmas cambiantes y las dinámicas en evolución tanto en prácticas tradicionales como novedosas, arrojando luz sobre su impacto en el patrimonio construido. Los resultados demuestran que, al igual que los actores nacionales, las élites locales también aprovechan el patrimonio construido para fortalecer su legitimidad, aunque a través de medios diferentes.

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## 1. Introduction

The decentralisation process, initiated since the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 and concretized by the holding of the first democratic municipal elections in May 2018, has propelled Tunisian communes into a new realm of challenges linked to their central role in both the management and development of their territories. The issue of local heritage has gained significance for Tunisian communes, not solely due to the decentralized mandate – other national institutions remain key players in this domain – but also owing to the role of heritage in shaping local identities. This heritage has strengthened and solidified local identities, a continuity observed since the Protectorate era (Rey, 2019). The territorial dimension was a driving force behind the Tunisian revolution (Turki, 2014), and matters concerning regional equity and the integration of local specificities into development strategies have emerged as fundamental pillars of the new policies.

The question of the place of built heritage within the policies and actions of new actors – an outcome of the post-revolutionary political transformation and subsequent decentralisation reform – has emerged as a contemporary quandary of paramount significance. Historically, this question has been studied across different political phases. Bacha (2008) argues that the French protectorate was characterized by a commitment to preserving heritage, initially from antiquity and later from Arab-Muslim cultures, where the initial scientific interest gradually gave way to political considerations. Numerous studies that have examined built heritage in Tunisia have focused on state policies in this domain, seeking to establish its relationship with the construction of the newly independent and modern state (Saidi, 2007) and the continuities/discontinuities with the colonial model of heritage.

In its pursuit to establish its authority, the Bourguiba regime opted for a humanistic interpretation of history, depicting Tunisia as a fusion of Western and Eastern civilizations. This approach also emphasised the recent era of liberation (Abbassi, 2005). Scholars have highlighted the strategic alignment of arguments for global recognition and tourism attraction (Bielawski, 2018; Kazdaghi, 2018), set against a context where heritage is ranked and exploited within political agendas (Meddeb, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

This research is driven by how processes unfold locally under the influence of new elites aiming to establish their presence within the newly defined margins of power. The central focus on built heritage stems from the fact that this heritage primarily embodies elements of identity, inherently reflecting the political stances of these emerging players. Additionally, due to the limited resources available to local authorities, heritage is a pivotal avenue for rendering local policies tangible amidst pronounced social demands.

Within this context, our examination centers on the case of Mhamdia, a Tunisian commune where two seemingly contradictory processes are at play: (1) the conceptualisation and execution of a built heritage preservation initiative and (2) the partial dismantling of a historical element within the same urban space. Our primary aim is to dissect the rationale behind local actors' decisions concerning heritage, especially within a period characterized by the increasing prominence of municipal councils and associations.

The paper presents the backdrop of the 2011 Tunisian revolution, the allocation and arrangement of competencies pertaining to built heritage, and the challenges confronting Tunisian communes. Subsequently, it delves into the intricacies of a built heritage project centered on the restoration of Hammam El Bey in the heart of Mhamdia, offering insights into the implementation of such projects in Tunisian communes during a transitional phase marked by decentralisation efforts and enhanced civil society engagement in local matters. Simultaneously, the study probes into events that culminated in the partial dismantling of another significant monument, the Romain Aqueduct, within the same commune. Drawing a comparison between these two processes facilitates the identification of underlying rationales that guide decisions regarding the preservation or demolition of built heritage.

### 1.1. Revolution, decentralisation, and perception of heritage in Tunisia

Tunisia is marked by an important urban and architectural heritage, witnessing the succession of several civilizations. The perception of this heritage has shifted over time, mirroring the distinct strategies of different rulers and socioeconomic changes. Arab-Muslim conquests repurposed Roman columns for mosque construction. Similarly, French colonial urbanisation efforts diverged from traditional medinas (Abdelkafi, 1989). Moreover, post-independence, the state aimed to distance itself from Arab-Muslim heritage (Meddeb, 2021), striving to modernize by challenging the historical significance of the Medina. The establishment of the independent state was characterized by an authoritarian regime (Camau & Geisser, 2003) and the centralisation of power, limiting local institutions' role. This centralisation weakened the Ben Ali regime and promoted decentralisation as a means of rebalancing power in favour of local elites (Belhaj, 2016).

In most cases, urban and architectural heritage management fell under the purview of the central state, along with its specialized agencies such as the National Institute of Patrimoine (INP) and the Agency for the Development of Heritage and Cultural Promotion (AMVPPC). These entities ensured the preservation and promotion of heritage and supervised the activities of other stakeholders in this domain. Notable exceptions, such as the Association for the Preservation of the Medina of Tunis (ASM), highlight instances where local structures played a role in heritage management.

<sup>1</sup>In its quest for modernity, the newly independent state tried to impose a new urban form imported from the colonial period by attempting to break through the Medina (Meddeb, 2021) before retracting and opting for its preservation (Akrouit-Yaiche, 2002).

The Tunisian revolution included an important territorial dimension (Turki, 2014). Regional equity, the emancipation of territories, and the inclusiveness of development policies were among the popular demands, and decentralisation was quickly affirmed as a political response to social demands. Establishing a new legal framework enshrining decentralisation (the Constitution of 2014 and the Local Governments Code abbreviated CCL of 2018) and holding the first democratic municipal elections (2018) were key elements of this reform. This change in the institutional and regulatory context comes after six years (2011 - 2018) of difficult functioning of communes without legitimate political structures for their command and at a time when social tensions - against a backdrop of pressing demands for economic development and equity in access to services - are at their height. Although the transfer of competencies has been slow since 2018, and the means of the communes are weak, the elected councils have gained political legitimacy and a more important place in decision-making. This situation has prompted international technical cooperation actors to multiply their support projects (Bergh, 2021) for the decentralisation process, for Tunisian communes, and for the association that groups all 350 communes in the country (Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes, FNCT).

When it comes to heritage, although the central institutions have continued to retain their competencies, the new situation led to a more assertive positioning of the communes. The communes have a general jurisdiction clause over local affairs (article 18 of the CCL) and share with the state the responsibility for preserving and developing the specificity of the local cultural heritage (article 243 of the CCL). Furthermore, they must be consulted when other stakeholders undertake projects within their territory (article 242 of the CCL) and have to apply citizen participation for their planning and development projects (article 29 of the CCL). Nevertheless, the technical and financial resources of the municipalities were limited - a continuity of the centralised model - and it was difficult for them to engage in significant projects for built heritage preservation.

## 1.2. Limits of heritage management in the tunisian context

One of the main challenges heritage management faces in Tunisia is the lack of coordination among various actors involved in heritage preservation and management (Tira & Türkoğlu, 2023). This includes government agencies like INP and AMVPPC, heritage professionals, communes, local civil society, and national and international funders. The lack of coordination can result in fragmented efforts, duplicated work, and inefficient resource utilisation, undermining the effectiveness of heritage preservation and management. Additionally, the convergences and divergences between the intentions of the various project participants likely played a role in shaping the project. During the implementation of the project, we have observed contrasting cases giving rise to differentiated configurations: convergence and coalitions between different actors around common and sometimes antagonistic goals (civil society and the commune wishing to preserve the Hammam but also the commune, governorate, and population favourable to the partial destruction of a monument). The main national actor, INP, has maintained a permanence in its actions, reflecting more a fear of losing its prerogative in the new decentralisation times.

Another challenge in heritage management in Tunisia is the need for more effective decentralisation. While Tunisia has made efforts to decentralize decision-making to local authorities, there are still significant gaps in this process. This can limit the ability of communes to oversee the heritage in their territory and can also result in a need for more resources and expertise at the local level. The decentralisation reform process faces the inertia of a long-established centralized administrative approach while also contending with citizens' increasing desire to engage in local affairs (Ben Jelloul & Turki, 2018), particularly in heritage preservation and valorisation (Zaiane-Ghali, 2017). This lack of decentralisation is compounded by the loss of cultural input from national public institutions, which have increasingly focused on the commercial and touristic promotion of heritage since Ben Ali assumed power in 1987 (Rey, 2014).

Furthermore, adequate funding is crucial for effective heritage management. However, in Tunisia, funding for heritage is frequently limited, irregular, and subject to shifts in political priorities. This can lead to insufficient resources for maintaining and preserving heritage sites and a lack of investment in research, documentation, and public education about heritage. In the case of Mhamdia, some deterioration of Hammam el Bey was noted in 2022

and 2023 due to the inability of the commune to secure additional resources for preventing water infiltration into the building.

These three reasons are connected to the discontinuity of the political project. Frequent changes in political leadership and shifting priorities can disrupt ongoing heritage preservation efforts and lead to the loss of institutional memory and expertise. This can also result in a lack of continuity in implementing policies and strategies related to heritage management. The discontinuity within the political project has become more pronounced today due to two recent events. The first is the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) dissolution in July 2021. Following this dissolution, the presidency held the legislative power. The new constitution no longer includes a chapter on decentralisation and does not mention citizen participation as a method of governance. The second event is the dissolution of the municipal councils in March 2023. Municipal councils can play an important role in local heritage management - even if this research reveals the logic of the instrumentalisation of heritage by the new elites - and the dissolution of these councils could further limit the ability of the communes to participate in decision-making and resource allocation related to heritage management.

## 2. Methods: combining practitioner-research and case study

Through case studies, researchers aim to understand specific situations and their meanings for those involved. While case studies are sometimes criticised for their limited generalizability, recent literature suggests that insights from a case study can directly influence policies, procedures, and future research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2021). The case study approach is ideally suited for this task because our objective is to evaluate heritage administration in managed and non-managed environments.

The choice of the commune of Mhamdia is appropriate since it has been involved in both (1) heritage management activities and (2) voluntary destruction that affected the Zaghouan-Carthage aqueduct in October 2018. The damage to the aqueduct occurred during floods that affected a district of Mhamdia adjacent to the ancient monument. A breach was intentionally created to facilitate water evacuation, leading to substantial destruction. Notably, this destruction was carried out after an official meeting by local and regional authorities (Jaïdi, 2022).

A qualitative research approach was employed to investigate and analyse the processes involving built heritage in Mhamdia. In the first analysed process - the implementation of the built heritage preservation project - we utilised information derived from our professional experiences within the FNCT. We employed methods such as participant observation and document content analysis. As practitioner-researchers in various roles,

we directly interacted with key stakeholders throughout the project phases. Practitioner research, as Ravitch (2014) describes, holds the unique possibility of "generating local, practice-based knowledge that is deeply contextualized and meaningfully embedded in a specific milieu" while spurring a "counter-hegemonic way of thinking about and approaching theory-research-practice-policy connections and integrations" and "push[ing] against traditional expert-learner dichotomies" (p. 5). Hence, Practitioner research can be conceptualised as a research approach with a set of research methods that generate data upon which transformative actions can be based (Ravitch, 2014).

The rationale behind opting for In such settings, the practitioner-scholar is positioned to rely extensively on observations and personal experiences gained as a participant (Robey & Taylor, 2018). The documents analysed for this paper are the notes of the experts who studied the feasibility and content of these projects. In practice, this direct involvement might introduce some challenges to maintaining complete objectivity in analysis. It is important to note that our research revolves around examining stakeholder practices rather than analysing practitioner actions. This approach facilitated a closer examination of stakeholder practices during project implementation. In the second aspect of the study - the destruction of the historical element within the same commune - we did not engage in any practices related to the event. The methods employed encompassed content analysis of documentation collected from online press sources and interviews conducted in the field.

Mhamdia (Mohammedia or al-Mohammedia) is a commune twenty kilometers southwest of Tunis. The delegation of Mhamdia, with a population of 66,439 inhabitants in 2014 (according to the National Institute of Statistics Population Census 2014), is administratively affiliated with the Governorate of Ben Arous within the Greater Tunis Metropole (Figure 1). The commune boasts archaeological ruins dating back to the Roman era, owing to its location between Zaghouan - a primary water source for the region - and Carthage. Notably, Mhamdia is recognised for its beylical architecture (Faleh, 2021). The city's name is closely linked to Ahmed Bey, who spearheaded the expansion and modernisation of the palace situated in Mhamdia and played a significant role in the military and noble spheres. Hammam El Bey, known as the 'Bath of the Bey', was erected to address the needs of the military personnel stationed within the city during a period characterised by the Bey's endeavour to modernise state institutions, among them the military (Brown, 1974).



Figure 1: Position of Mhamdia in the Administrative Map of Tunisia.

### 3. Results: exposing actors and policies evolution through 2 situations

This case study examines and compares two seemingly contradictory situations: the desire to restore one historic monument and the commitment to destroy another.

#### 3.1. Managing the heritage in International Cooperation: from the circulation of models to the capture of funds

In Tunisia, international cooperation programs predated 2011; however, these programs predominantly revolved around aiding the state in formulating local development initiatives closely supervised by the central government. Following 2011, these programs underwent expansion and diversification. In addition to providing development aid, they sought to aid the state in implementing decentralisation and bolster local administrations in fulfilling their roles in line with the principles of decentralisation and local governance (Yousfi, 2019). Most of these initiatives involved the participation of the association of communes – FNCT – as a partner in executing these programs. However, there was one program specifically geared towards strengthening the FNCT itself and fostering sustainable technical support for communes through this association: the Program of Empowerment of Communes (PEC). FNCT implemented PEC with technical assistance from CILG-VNG International<sup>[1]</sup> and funding from the European Commission. The program aimed to develop and disseminate instruments for local management of municipal-built heritage properties.

The program aimed firstly to enhance the capacity of FNCT staff and develop management tools to support this non-governmental organisation in assuming its mandate. Secondly, the program focused on building the capacity of communes to establish networks, develop guides, training, coaching, and technical assistance, and introduce effective approaches in planning and management, such as GIS, collecting taxes, and managing public spaces. Lastly, the program sought to promote decentralisation through capitalisation and advocacy, including establishing an exchange platform and management tools. A team comprising personnel from FNCT and CILG-VNG International has been set up to execute this program. The PEC program did not initially plan to build heritage projects but rather public space projects. A budget was prearranged to redesign 5 public spaces in 5 different communes. The suggestion to include heritage renovation came from the program team, the PEC project manager in charge of public spaces<sup>[2]</sup> suggested modifying the budget to include 3 built heritage renovations in 3 different cities. The proposal named “Improved Management of Historic Assets for Communes” was approved by the technical committee of PEC<sup>[3]</sup>. Then, the proposal was accepted by the international partners.

The activities of the “Improved Management of Historic Assets for Communes” project led to the implementation of the network “Management of Municipal Historic Assets,” where communes can benefit from each other expertise and create a common space to discuss and improve their activities related to heritage management. The activities also led to the production of guidelines to assist municipal officials in managing historic assets, training and technical assistance for municipal officials. Next to these activities, a call was launched to renovate three historic buildings. More than 46 municipalities applied to benefit from the support to build heritage

<sup>[1]</sup> International Development Center for The Innovative Local Governance (CILG), the regional office for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region of the International Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International)  
<sup>[2]</sup> The first co-author of this paper (Khaoula Stiti)  
<sup>[3]</sup> The second co-author of this paper was one of its members. (Sami Yassine Turki)

<sup>[4]</sup> National Federation of Tunisian Communes. (2020, November 30). Field visit to the renovation and revival works of the Grand Hall of Hammam Al-Bay in Mhamdia. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjuizxYRA9E>

Figure 2: Screenshot from a video of the renovation work of the Hammam El Bey, National Federation of Tunisian Communes (2020).<sup>[4]</sup>



renovation. The main criteria for selection included verifying whether the commune was the legal owner of the historical building and assessing the motivation of the municipal council and the administrative staff to participate in the project. After a long selection process that was carried out by experts from FNCT and CILG VNG, Tabarka, Metlaoui and Mhamdia, our case study was selected.

The building proposed for renovation in Mhamdia is a municipal property known as Hammam El Bey. Portions of the building were repurposed to serve as the town hall. The construction of a new building eventually led to its abandonment. After being closed for several years and partly occupied, the building fell into disrepair. Following its election in 2018, the municipal council swiftly decided to apply for the FNCT project titled "Improved Management of Historic Assets for Communes".

Right from the outset, the commune showcased certain manifestations of commitment to the process. Both elected representatives and the administration fully engaged in capacity-building initiatives and participatory meetings with local associations, addressing the concerns posed by the project. The commune displayed its dedication to built heritage by organizing a visit to a historical palace within the city, emphasizing the importance of its restoration.

When the project started, the national institution in charge of built heritage INP was quick to criticise it, claiming that without the involvement of INP, the project would not meet the necessary standards for heritage preservation. This criticism arose despite the project's strict adherence to all pertinent guidelines, with a meticulous selection of materials tailored to the site. In reality, the project's operational team had engaged with field experts, including civil society-involved engineers from the INP, who contributed to the technical aspects of the project. Despite these efforts, the INP publicly condemned the project and denied having been informed about it<sup>15</sup>. However, as soon as a new dossier was submitted to INP<sup>16</sup>, there was no formal opposition to the project. This suggests that the initial opposition may have been driven more by the preservation of the competencies of the INP than by any genuine concerns about the project's compliance with heritage preservation standards. Figures 2 and 3 show the renovation work and the final result of this project.

In addition to the renovation endeavour, the project's participatory approach and the involvement of the commune led to the design of a booklet (paper and digital, as shown in Figure 4). This booklet was designed to advocate for the Mhamdia heritage. This heritage promotion brochure strives to contribute to forming local identities, which will subsequently serve municipal territorial marketing.

<sup>15</sup> Tunisian National Television (2021, January 14). Noon News Bulletin. Facebook. [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?textid=WA-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN\\_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=YCRy0l&ref=watch\\_permalink&v=315941086458164](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?textid=WA-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=YCRy0l&ref=watch_permalink&v=315941086458164)  
<sup>16</sup> A first dossier was submitted in the commune but not transferred to INP.

Figure 3: The main hall of Hammam El Bey after the renovation.





Figure 4: Photos of the brochure design of the commune of Mhamdia. Atelier Gilbert (2021)<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2. Managing the (threats) of heritage, loss, and destruction

The second analysis concerns the partial destruction of the Roman aqueduct performed in the same city during the same period. The destruction is not in itself a surprising action. Indeed, the archaeological legacy around the Mediterranean basin, Tunisia included, has been subject to diverse phenomena over the centuries. These include destruction, abandonment, continued use, transformation, partial loss, and preserving heritage integrity (Morezzi et al., 2014). In Tunisia, not only the archaeological heritage is at risk of destruction, but also the colonial heritage from the 19th and 20th centuries (Ammar, 2017). This analysis aims to understand actors' logic and their transformation regarding built heritage from one situation (opportunity) to another (risk).

Mhamdia has few neighbourhoods dominated by informal housing. Several dwellings occupy land needing proper rainwater drainage systems. Furthermore, certain constructions impede the functionality of public rainwater pipes. In this context, the imposing nature of the Roman aqueducts can, in specific areas, pose visible hindrances to rainwater flow, which cannot be efficiently evacuated through pipes (either absent or obstructed due to informal constructions and waste).

In October 2018, merely five months after the municipal elections, Mhamdia encountered torrential rains that caused flooding in the vicinity of the aqueduct, particularly in Sidi Ameur. A meeting held on October 18 at the governorate's headquarters (the regional representation of the central government) with the commune's representatives in attendance, leading to the formulation of a series of resolutions<sup>9</sup> including "sending an express request to the Ministry of Culture to destroy part of the aqueduct" to evacuate the stagnant rainwater. A few hours later, the residents<sup>10</sup> proceeded to destroy the upper section of the aqueduct, with a width of four meters, effectively obstructing the flow of water (Figure 5).

<sup>8</sup> Atelier Gilbert (2021, May 6). Illustrations for Fédération Nationale des Communes Tunisiennes – FNCT. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=829453030992529&set=pcb.829453174325848>

<sup>9</sup> Kapitalis. (2018, 19 octobre). Ennahdha derrière la destruction des aqueducs romains à Mhamdia. Kapitalis. <http://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2018/10/19/ennahdha-derriere-la-destruction-des-aqueducs-romains-a-mhamdia/?fbclid=IwAR3QBgD8MgaaxUz8obauD5aYioKabeZjrPKTWSh6s8Jl-S0NpSZYLqqr7UYo>

<sup>10</sup> We interviewed a group of inhabitants to confirm that some material from the commune was used for this purpose. However, it was not possible to verify this information.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Mhenni, L. (2018, October 19). A chaque fois que je me dis c'est bon on a touché le fond on ne va pas pas creuser plus, un nouveau jour se lève avec son lot de mauvaises surprises. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1977446312314568&set=a145926618799889>





Figure 5: A demolished section of the aqueduct of Mhamdia during the floods of 2018. Ben Mhenni, L. (2018) <sup>11</sup>

## 4. Discussion: heritage preservation in post-revolution transition

The political and operational landscape of heritage management exhibits innovation in comparison to the pre-2011 Revolution model of governance. In this evolving context, the rise of margins and territories (Turki, 2014) and plural identities (Pouessel, 2012) and the recognition in the political arena of the imperative to engage decentralisation and regional development (Yousfi, 2017) have ushered in a phase where local action is becoming a novel focal point for institutions and elites. Nonetheless, the post-2011 Environment is intricate due to the emergence of new stakeholders and the comparatively diminished influence of the central state regarding action potential. The policies and actions for protecting, preserving, and promoting the built heritage in Tunisia have undergone transformations. On the one hand, the instability of governments acting mainly for crisis management and the loss of their power of control over local processes of urbanisation and urban transformation have favoured practices of predation towards the built heritage. On the other hand, the development of civil society organisations and the openness to projects of international non-governmental organisations has given rise to new modes of action in favour of built heritage.

### 4.1. Relevance of built heritage as a topic for local action during the first phases of decentralisation

The Mhamdia case study and the experience of other communes under the PEC project illustrate that the engagement of local authorities in preserving, recognizing, and handling heritage is increasing. This is noteworthy even though communes were not explicitly designated, either prior to or following the decentralisation reform, as the principal entity in charge of heritage (Jaïdi, 2022). Regarding PEC, the implementing organisation took the initiative to propose the activity for built heritage preservation, even though it was not the project's primary objective. The main documents of the project, as validated by the donor and the national authorities, focused on supporting the initial phases of the democratic transition and decentralisation. No particular dimension related to heritage preservation was explicitly singled out, given that the overarching project's goal was the application of new principles of local governance across a large spectrum of local affairs. Local development, empowerment of communes, and participatory approaches were the objectives. At the same time, developing built heritage preservation was a domain – among various others – for concretizing the new principles of decentralisation and local governance.

### 4.2. From public space development to built heritage preservation

Originally, the PEC project was intended to support communes in creating public spaces. This initial decision recognized the importance of public space in post-revolutionary political and social transformation (Sebastiani & Turki, 2016). It also illustrated that creating public spaces is recognized as a municipal responsibility and was well-suited to capacity-building activities. The PEC project team dedicated a portion of the funding toward preserving built heritage, driven by several considerations. First and foremost, heritage is closely connected to the concept of public space. Numerous public spaces are in themselves heritage sites or are situated within historical areas. Moreover, heritage holds the potential to shape public spaces and exert an influence on their utilisation, signifying a substantial facet of the commune's identity. Another factor influencing the choice of heritage is its potential as a unifying theme. Heritage is a concept that holds resonance for all, whether through familial lineage, cultural traditions, or local landmarks. By centering on heritage, the project had the potential to engage a wider spectrum of stakeholders and foster a shared sense of purpose and identity within the commune. It is worth noting that those involved's convictions and experiences often influence the specific themes chosen for a project. The operational team working on this project had a particular interest in heritage, which led them to select this theme over others. Alternatively, they may have perceived that heritage needed to be adequately represented or acknowledged in Tunisia and its communes. In this light, they viewed this project as an opportunity to emphasize its importance. Heritage is also closely linked to local development (Vernières, 2011), a significant concern in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The decision to emphasize heritage in the PEC project likely entailed a complex blend of factors, including the broader goals of the project in terms of themes for applying decentralisation principles, the interests of various stakeholders and the experiences of those involved, as well as the specific needs and characteristics of the commune.

### 4.3. Heritage, participation, and legitimacy

The PEC project was based on a participatory approach. It engaged stakeholders, including the municipal council of Mhamdia, the administrative staff of the commune, and local civil society members in decision-making processes regarding municipal heritage. The participatory approach was crucial in reshaping the dynamics between the central authority and the local regions (Kahloun, 2020). It aimed to enhance the role of territories in the decision-making process.

However, there were also limitations to implementing the PEC project using the participatory approach. It turned out to be a time-consuming endeavour in

comparison to other processes. Moreover, power imbalances among stakeholders could affect the effectiveness of the participatory approach. For instance, disparities in power status exist between members of the municipal councils, democratically elected in 2018, the administrative staff overseeing the municipalities from 2011 to 2018, and local civil society members who, although lacking institutional power within the commune, held the legitimacy of their on-ground actions. On the other hand, the process that led to the partial destruction of the aqueduct highlighted that the participatory approach and collaborative decision-making could result in actions that oppose the principles of heritage preservation.

The analysis of the processes in Mhamdia reveals a superposition – rather than an opposition – between two distinct logics. The first logic revolves around preserving heritage, as evidenced by the active engagement of elected officials and the administration in the Hammam project. However, this logic is also interconnected with the elected representatives' urge to take prompt action by providing new services to the citizens, where utilising-built heritage offers an alternative solution.

The second aspect of this reasoning relates to the political use of potential resources to strengthen the political position of the local elites who have gained power through decentralisation. This rationale led the commune to seek funding for the restoration of the Hammam, to repurpose it as a cultural centre, and, if necessary, to consider partially demolishing a historically significant structure.

## 5. Conclusion

This study sought to understand the principles governing two distinct local processes: the preservation and demolition of built heritage. Although these processes may seem in direct opposition, common underlying factors have been identified. This can be attributed to the utilisation of heritage by local institutional actors and elites to bolster their legitimacy in the midst of socio-political shifts. This instrumentalisation occurs either through the promotion of heritage and its transformation into public infrastructure or by endorsing the damage to monuments during times of crisis. The study also showed that decentralization has reshaped the interactions between local and central stakeholders even in its early phases.

Regarding heritage, the Mhamdia case illustrates how local elites shape their actions around heritage, primarily focusing on legitimising their newfound roles. These elements serve as a reminder of the intricate and multifaceted roles that heritage assumes within the context of decentralisation.

In Tunisia, recent political events following July 2021 (suspension of the 2014 constitution, dissolution of parliament, halt to the decentralisation process) can significantly impact heritage management and preservation on one hand and the role of local

institutions on the other. Political instability can disrupt ongoing heritage preservation projects, cause changes in funding priorities, and result in a lack of continuity in leadership. Shifting political agendas can delay, cancel, or modify ongoing heritage projects. Furthermore, political instability can lead to a loss of institutional memory and expertise in heritage management. Changes in leadership and the disruption of ongoing projects are the main risks of losing valuable information and documentation. This can make it challenging to maintain continuity in heritage management and harder to build on past successes. In times of political turmoil, heritage sites may become less of a priority. For instance, since the suspension of the Assembly in July 2021, the National Museum of Bardo, located near the Assembly building, has been closed to visitors.

When it comes to international partnerships in heritage management and preservation, as well as in the support for decentralisation and local development, international organisations may hesitate to invest in projects in politically unstable environments. The international enthusiasm for technical and financial cooperation can fall when fundamental changes are made to decentralisation policies for which previous support was provided.

Political instability has been a defining feature of the post-revolutionary era since 2011 and has persisted beyond 2021. The most significant developments in the past two years at the local level revolve around restricting local elites' influence in decision-making processes. The dissolution of municipal councils has brought about the ongoing trend of re-centralization and the abandonment of participatory approaches.

Ultimately, it is essential to acknowledge that the study's major limitation lies in its execution within the specific context of a cooperation project. The majority of communes need to share this experience. Consequently, we need an in-depth study to assess the challenges and achievements of municipal-built heritage initiatives in Tunisian communes in a broader context.

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