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# DISTINCTIVE MARKING OF CULTURAL PROPERTY

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Rules and practices

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Photo page 2 and 3: The Berlin Wall near Checkpoint Charlie, Germany 2012  
© Anne Lindemann / Wikimedia Commons







**Distinctive emblems are established by international treaties to facilitate the recognition of cultural property. Marking of cultural property with such emblems indicates the cultural value of these objects and their protected status under the law. Their effective use may deter crimes against cultural heritage and reduce the risk of unintentional damage, both in peacetime and in the event of armed conflict.**

**This brochure sheds light on the rules and practice of the use of distinctive emblems on cultural property, as well as on personnel engaged in their protection, as defined under international law.**



## ■ EARLY MARKING OF CULTURAL PROPERTY

### The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907

The aspiration to identify and preserve cultural property in times of armed conflict was reflected in the Hague Conventions I-IX, adopted at the Hague Peace Conventions in 1899, and revised and extended in 1907.



Delegates at the International Peace Conference pose on the steps of the Huis ten Bosch Palace in The Hague (Netherlands) on 18 May 1899.

These treaties prohibit the destruction or seizure of enemy property unless it is a military necessity, prohibit attacking undefended places, encourage the protection of certain buildings, including historic monuments, and recognize the need to identify protected places.

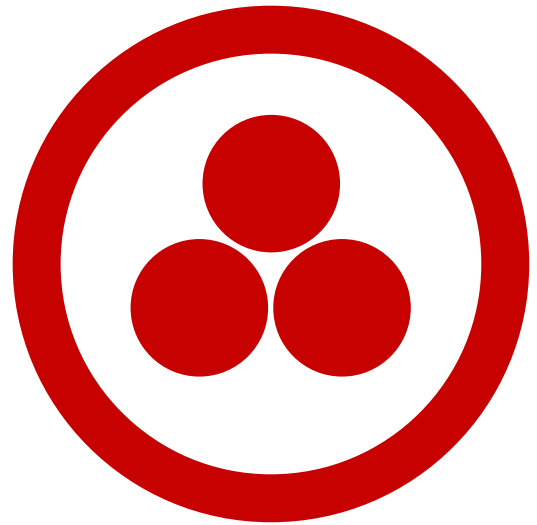


“It is the duty of the inhabitants”, states Article 5 of the Hague Convention (IX) concerning Bombardment by Naval Forces in Time of War, “to indicate such monuments, edifices, or places by visible signs, which shall consist of large, stiff rectangular panels divided diagonally into two coloured triangular portions, the upper portion black, the lower portion white.”

The distinctive emblem for protected buildings (The Hague Convention IX).

## The Roerich Pact (1935)

The Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments, also known as the Roerich Pact, is the first international treaty dedicated exclusively to the protection of cultural property in war. It began as a private initiative of the Russian artist, Nicholas Roerich, in 1904, and ultimately was adopted by 10 American governments in 1935. Article 3 of the Roerich Pact, established a distinctive flag, "in order to identify" protected monuments and cultural institutions.



Banner of Peace sign.



Delegates of second international conference dedicated to the Roerich Pact. Bruges, August 1932. Above them hangs a banner of peace. Public domain

The flag, also known as Banner of Peace, was designed with three magenta spheres surrounded by a magenta circle on a white background, as a symbol of eternity and unity.

The pact is still in effect across North America and in many Central and South American countries.

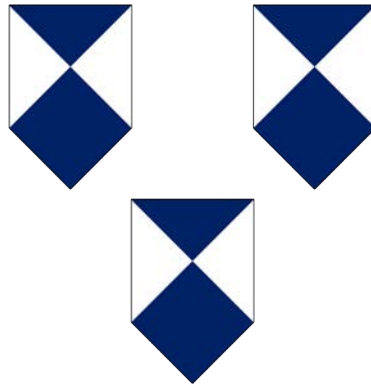
However, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict ("the 1954 Hague Convention"), specifies that, for the States Parties who have also signed the Roerich Pact, the Blue Shield emblem replaces the flag of the Roerich Pact. Today, all 10 States who ratified the Roerich Pact are also parties to the 1954 Hague Convention, so the Banner of Peace should no longer be used. If it is, though, it still denotes a protected site.

## ■ THE BLUE SHIELD EMBLEM

Perhaps the most significant leap in the protection of cultural property under international law came following World War II. Based on earlier texts drafted following World War I, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (“the 1954 Hague Convention”) was adopted in 1954. It was supplemented by its First Protocol in 1954, and a Second Protocol in 1999. In addition to restricting the conduct of hostilities with the aim of protecting cultural property, the Convention created a distinctive emblem known as the blue shield – a shield, pointed below, per saltire blue and white – to facilitate the recognition of cultural property by parties in armed conflict. The distinctive emblem of the Convention is used in three different forms:



Blue shield emblem  
used alone



Blue shield emblem  
repeated three times in  
a triangular formation  
(one shield below)



Blue shield emblem  
outlined by a detached  
external red band

Misuse of the emblem for any purpose other than those in the Convention is explicitly prohibited under international law. In certain circumstances, attacking a cultural site marked with a protective emblem can amount to a war crime.

**The authorisation, placement, and degree of visibility of the distinctive emblem is up to the competent authorities of each State: however, it should be clearly displayed without alterations or embellishments, and accompanied by the authorisation of the State Party. The emblem may be displayed on flags or armlets; it may be painted on an object or represented in any other appropriate form. Each state adopts its own rules and practice on the authorization of the use of the distinctive markings, without prejudice to its international obligations. UNESCO may provide technical advice on the effective use of the blue shield emblem.**

The rules and practice on the use of each of these distinctive markings are explained in following sections of this brochure.



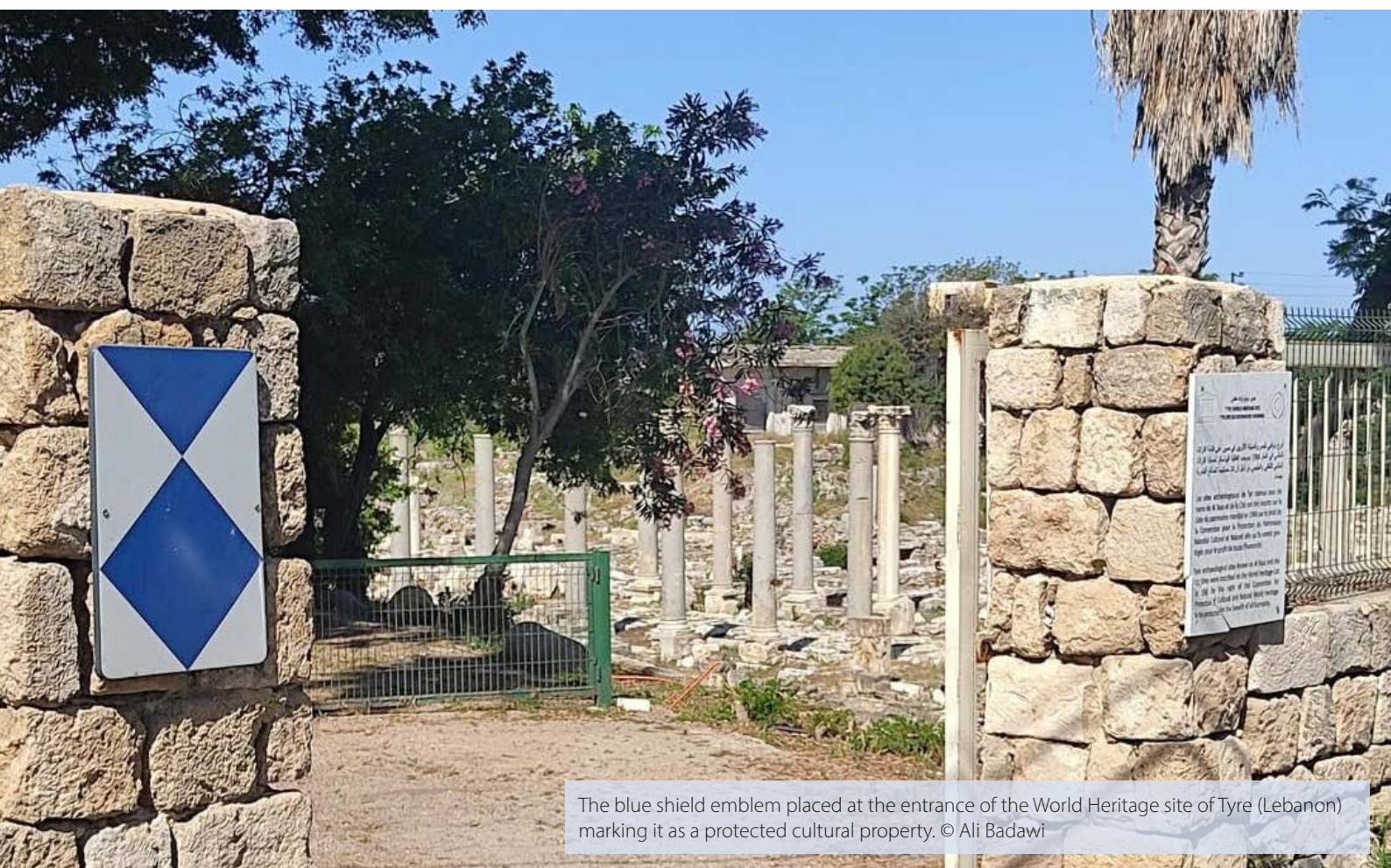
## THE BLUE SHIELD EMBLEM USED ALONE



The blue shield emblem may be used alone to mark cultural property under general protection, or to indicate personnel engaged in its protection or overseeing the Convention's implementation.

When used alone, the distinctive emblem indicates the general level of protection afforded under international law to all objects, structures and sites qualifying as cultural property.

*Cultural property under general protection*



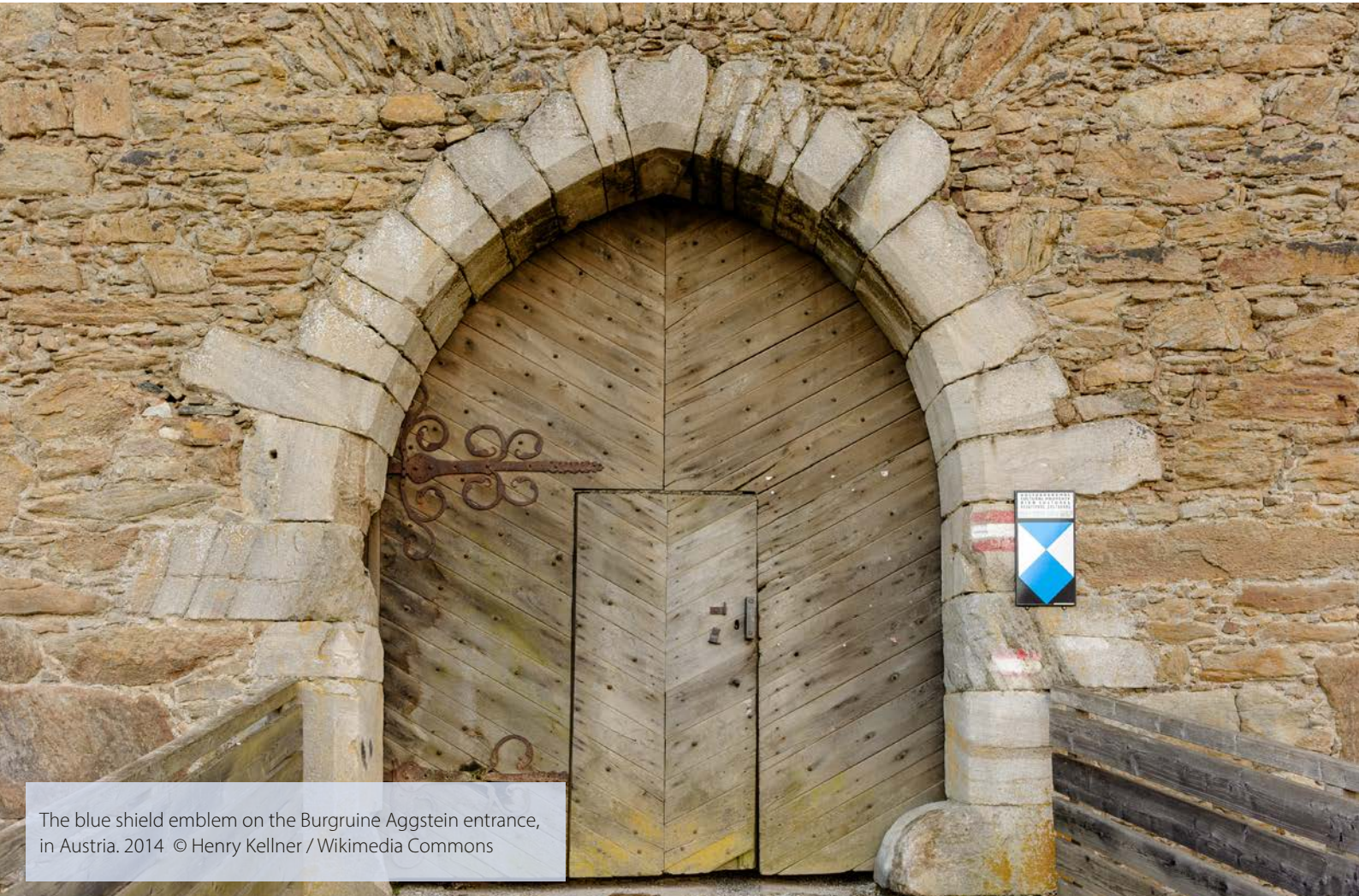
The blue shield emblem placed at the entrance of the World Heritage site of Tyre (Lebanon) marking it as a protected cultural property. © Ali Badawi

“Cultural property” is defined in Article 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention, and means all property “of great importance” to a particular state’s cultural heritage. Whether a specific structure, site, centre containing a large amount of cultural property (referred to as ‘centres containing monuments’), object (or object storage facility) is of such importance is first and foremost a question for the State on whose territory it is situated. It is for the State to determine, in good faith, whether particular movable or immovable property is of great importance to its cultural heritage and deserves protection.

As the practice of designating objects, structures or sites as cultural property varies, the use of the blue shield emblem may facilitate the recognition of protected properties.



**Affixing the blue shield emblem on cultural property is not mandatory but it may prevent unintended damage and deter unlawful targeting of cultural property during an armed conflict. However, the decision to mark cultural property must be carefully assessed as an explicit indication of cultural value may transform it into a target.**



The blue shield emblem on the Burgruine Aggstein entrance, in Austria. 2014 © Henry Kellner / Wikimedia Commons

The practice of using the blue shield emblem is not uniform. The size, position, and even number of emblems affixed on a single property may vary. The authorization to use such emblems in some States lies with national governments; some States have delegated this authority to local governments.

### *Personnel engaged in protection and control of cultural property*

The blue shield emblem may also be used to indicate people with allocated duties overseeing the implementation of the 1954 Hague Convention or personnel engaged in the protection of cultural property, whether military or civilian. They may wear an armband bearing the blue shield emblem, issued by the competent national authorities.







The blue shield armband © UNESCO



**To indicate their authority, such people should carry a special identity card bearing the emblem.**

The card should mention at least their surname and first name, date of birth, title or rank, and the function of the holder. The card should also display a photograph of the holder, his/her signature or fingerprints (or both), and should bear an embossed stamp of the competent authorities. The holder(s) may not, without a legitimate reason, be deprived of this card or of the right to wear the armband. The card's precise appearance is a matter for each State.

FRONT

	
<b>IDENTITY CARD</b> for personnel engaged in the protection of cultural property	
Surname.....	
First names.....	
Date of Birth.....	
Title or Rank.....	
Function.....	
is the bearer of this card under the terms of the Convention of The Hague, dated 14 May, 1954, for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.	
Date of Issue .....	Number of Card .....

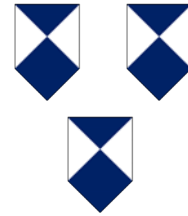
REVERSE SIDE

	Signature of bearer or fingerprints or both	
		
Height	Eyes	Hair
Other distinguishing marks		

Model identity card for personnel engaged in the protection of cultural property

## BLUE SHIELD EMBLEM REPEATED THREE TIMES IN A TRIANGULAR FORMATION (ONE SHIELD BELOW)

The blue shield emblem repeated three times in a triangular formation (one shield below) may be used to mark immovable cultural property, refuges to store moveable cultural property, or certain transports for cultural property that are under special protection.



### *Cultural property under special protection*

A limited number of refuges for sheltering movable cultural property, centres containing monuments, and immovable cultural property “of very great importance” may be placed under special protection under the 1954 Hague Convention. Special protection is granted by entry on the International Register of Cultural Property under Special Protection.

The States Parties undertake to ensure the immunity of such cultural property under special protection by refraining from any act of hostility directed against it, and from any use of such property or its surroundings for military purposes. This immunity may only be waived in exceptional cases of unavoidable military necessity by the officer commanding a force the equivalent of a division in size or larger.

The distinctive marking of cultural property under special protection has practical importance for parties in conflict.



Archaeological Monuments Zone of Xochicalco, Mexico – Special Protection © hdaniel / Flickr.com

**Therefore, the use of the blue shield emblem repeated three times in a triangular formation on such property is mandatory during armed conflict.** When affixed, such distinctive marking should be visible from the ground at regular intervals, clearly indicating the perimeter of a centre containing monuments, and at the entrance to other locations under special protection.



## *Transport of cultural property*

A transport exclusively engaged in the transfer of cultural property may be granted special protection to ensure the safe movement of cultural property. **In this case, the blue shield emblem repeated three times in a triangular formation shall be placed on the transport vehicles so as to be clearly visible in daylight from the air as well as from the ground.**

Like immovable cultural property under special protection, the States Parties undertake to ensure the immunity of the transport by refraining from any act of hostility directed against it.

The Regulations for the Execution of the 1954 Hague Convention detail how to obtain authorization to place a cultural property transport under special protection. If the safety of cultural property requires its transfer so urgently that the formal procedure cannot be followed, as long the transport takes place within a country and not outside it, the transport may still display the special protection emblem. Transport conveying cultural property abroad may not display the emblem unless immunity has been expressly granted.

## *Improvised refuges*

Refuges to shelter cultural property can be very effective to preserve cultural property in times of emergencies. As a good practice, such refuges should be established in peacetime. However, unforeseen circumstances may require the creation of an improvised refuge, which can also be granted special protection according to the conditions laid out in the 1954 Hague Convention. Consequently, they also should display the distinctive emblem repeated three times in a triangular formation.

## BLUE SHIELD EMBLEM OUTLINED BY A DETACHED EXTERNAL RED BAND



The distinctive emblem placed at the entrance of the World Heritage Site of the Tomb of Askia in Gao (Mali), indicating a cultural property under enhanced protection © UNESCO / Modibo Bagayoko

The blue shield emblem outlined by a detached external red band is the distinctive emblem for cultural property under enhanced protection, a mechanism established by the 1999 Second Protocol to provide immunity and protection to a limited amount of cultural property of the “greatest importance to humanity”.

The 1999 Second Protocol itself does not contain any provision on a distinctive marking of cultural property under enhanced protection. The distinctive marking was developed by the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and endorsed by the 6th Meeting of the Parties to the 1999 Second Protocol in 2015, and modalities for use are detailed in the Guidelines for Implementation of the Protocol.

The distinctive emblem for cultural property under enhanced protection is intended to ensure the recognition and identification of cultural property under enhanced protection. Particularly during armed conflicts, its use can ensure the effectiveness of the provisions of the 1999 Second Protocol, promoting the immunity of such property.

**The marking of cultural property under enhanced protection with the distinctive emblem is not mandatory, but it can be an effective measure to ensure better protection.**

The decision to place a distinctive emblem on a cultural property under enhanced protection, and the extent of its visibility, is determined by the concerned State authorities.



## THE WORLD HERITAGE EMBLEM

To identify sites “of outstanding universal value” protected by the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (also called the World Heritage Convention) and inscribed on the World Heritage List, a distinctive emblem, [The World Heritage Emblem](#), was created in 1978 by the World Heritage Committee.

This emblem symbolizes the interdependence of cultural and natural properties: the central square is a form created by humans and the circle represents nature, the two being intimately linked. The emblem is round, like the world, but is also a symbol of protection.

The emblem’s use is strictly regulated and determined by the World Heritage Committee, with guidelines for its use defined in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. It is protected under the international World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Act. States Parties are responsible for taking measures to prevent the emblem from being used for purposes not explicitly recognised by the Committee.



### Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire Site Ambassadeur

#### VAL DE LOIRE PATRIMOINE MONDIAL DE L'UNESCO

Le Val de Loire est inscrit, depuis le 30 novembre 2000, sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial de l'Humanité au titre des paysages culturels vivants. Il s'étend sur 280 km de Sully-sur-Loire à Chalonnes-sur-Loire, intégrant les richesses naturelles et culturelles qui bordent le fleuve.

La Convention du patrimoine mondial de 1972 est ratifiée par 178 Etats dans le monde sous l'égide de l'UNESCO. Les biens inscrits sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial constituent « un patrimoine universel pour la protection duquel la communauté internationale tout entière a le devoir de coopérer ».



#### THE VAL DE LOIRE WORLD HERITAGE SITE

The Val de Loire has been included on the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites since 30 November 2000, as a cultural landscape. This 280-stretch of the Loire Valley between Sully-sur-Loire and Chalonnes-sur-Loire incorporates natural and cultural properties. The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention is ratified by 178 states in the world. The inscribed properties represent "a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate."

Région Centre



## ■ OTHER EMBLEMS

The following international treaties in the field of culture also possess emblems or logos.



To increase the visibility and encourage the promotion of the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970), a special logo has been created.

To learn more [click here](#)



The Protection of  
the Underwater Cultural  
Heritage

To increase the visibility and encourage the promotion of the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001) at the national, regional and international levels, a special logo has been created.

To learn more [click here](#)



Intangible  
Cultural  
Heritage

To contribute to the fullest possible visibility and raise awareness about intangible cultural heritage, a distinctive emblem was created under the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003).

To learn more [click here](#)



Diversity of  
Cultural Expressions

To promote the Convention on the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) and increase its visibility at the national, regional and international levels, in 2013, Parties to the Convention adopted an emblem encapsulating its objectives and principles.

To learn more [click here](#)



**This publication is a joint initiative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Blue Shield International.**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations established in 1946 to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through education, science, and culture in order to propagate further universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the UN Charter.

The International Committee of the Blue Shield, now known as The Blue Shield, was established in 1996, and is composed of an international board and national committees around the world. Under the 1999 Second Protocol it advises the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, and is “committed to the protection of the world’s cultural property, and is concerned with the protection of cultural and natural heritage, tangible and intangible, in the event of armed conflict, natural- or human-made disaster.” Its logo contains the blue shield emblem at its centre, symbolising its roots in the 1954 Hague Convention, but set in a circle to indicate the wider remit of its work.



**For more information:**



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**Protection of  
Cultural Property in  
the Event of Armed Conflict**

**UNESCO**

Culture Sector  
Culture and Emergencies  
[99SP@unesco.org](mailto:99SP@unesco.org)  
<https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage>



**BLUE SHIELD**  
International

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