

ISIS and the Destruction of Antiquities

Written by Michael Barak

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MICHAEL BARAK, OCT 10 2015

The widespread and ongoing devastation by ISIS of ancient sites in Iraq and Syria, annihilating the historical legacy of ancient civilizations like Babylon and Assyria, has aroused anger and alarm among archaeologists and politicians in those countries. Particularly the West is deeply concerned about this destruction in the Middle East. ISIS activists have already destroyed archaeological sites, statues, shrines and antiquities in dozens of locations, among them the ruins of the ancient Assyrian city of Kalakh in Iraq (Tel Nimrud), and Hatra, an ancient city in northern Iraq. Last August, ISIS blew up the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra (today the town of Tadmur), a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most important archaeological sites in Syria.

This deep global concern about the fate of the antiquities is fueled by the propaganda network of ISIS itself, which periodically releases documentations of the systematic destructions. Mamun 'Abd al-Karim, the director of the Syrian Department of Museums and Antiquities, puts horrifyingly that: "The cultural legacy of Palmyra is in dire straits [...];" and that, "the national museum in Palmyra has been converted into a jail and a *sharia* court." In his view, the international community is not doing enough to help save the antiquities, forgetting that they not only represent the historical legacy of Syria, but also of all humanity.

The destruction of historical monuments, however, is not a new phenomenon in human history. In the 12th century, the Mongols, under the command of Hulagu Khan, razed the palaces, institutions and monuments of Baghdad. Its libraries were reduced to ashes, most prominently Dar al-Hikma, which had housed valuable manuscripts of Arabic translations of Greek works. In the year 2001, the then-leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Mullah Omar, instructed his followers to destroy every statue in the country, among them were the two of Buddha, dating back to the 3rd and 5th centuries CE. In this respect, ISIS is no different from modern conquerors that preceded it; nevertheless, the media response to the current destruction of antiquities is far more extensive.

Why, then, is ISIS not only conducting the systematic destruction of antiquities, but widely advertising the fact as well? What does it hope to achieve with this strategy?

Several interrelated reasons can be identified:

- *The religious factor.* ISIS persistently emphasizes the Oneness of God (*Tawhid*). Its faith vehemently forbids polytheism (*Shirk*) or any "partner" to the One God: the believer prays to Allah alone. Hence, every idol, saint's tomb and pagan symbol is viewed as an obscenity, and must be obliterated. In August, ISIS executed Khaled al-Asaad, the chief archaeologist of Palmyra. The sign that was affixed to his body accused him, *inter alia*, of being the "director of idols of archaeological Tadmur [Palmyra]." His murder can be seen as a symbolic act intended to present the Syrian regime as one that sanctifies paganism, and therefore every pagan symbol or representation should be utterly destroyed. Some experts believe that the antiquities ISIS has chosen to demolish have no historical value, since they are merely replicas. 'Abd al-Karim disputes this claim, pointing out that ISIS, which is guided by ideological motivations, is determined to destroy every last statue. Purging the area of pagan symbols is therefore perceived by ISIS as part of a cosmic battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between the believers of Islam and neo-paganism – or between ISIS and the heretics. In its destruction of antiquities, ISIS projects the image of an organization loyal to ancient Islam, thereby reinforcing its legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim faithful.

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- *The political factor.* The intention of ISIS is the removal of any vestiges of the previous regime and culture, as part of its plan to create a new order and declare its authority as the new sovereign over the territory under its control. It sees the antiquities, monuments and museums as part of the national identity of modern states, and a means at their disposal for constructing a collective memory and instilling it in their citizenry. Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq, used to highlight his country's Babylonian heritage in various ways. For instance, he founded an Arabic daily called *Babil* (Babylon), and named two of his military divisions Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi after legendary Babylonian kings. He even compared himself to Nebuchadnezzar II. Museums and historical sites can therefore be perceived as additional battlegrounds between ISIS and the nation-state for hegemony over knowledge and culture, hence it desires to sever the linkage between the nation and the state.
- *The economic factor.* ISIS has created a well-organized system of selling antiquities in the black market in order to finance its activities and pay its fighters. In the Syrian province of Dayr al-Zur, for instance, ISIS established a special department for supervising archaeological excavations (including the allocation of digging licenses to local residents), and the trade in antiquities unearthed in the region. The finds are evaluated by local antiquities experts – most of them ISIS stalwarts – before being smuggled out to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and even Iraq. Last February, in an attempt to eradicate this trade system, UNESCO appealed to antiquity dealers not to trade in valuable items that originated in Iraq or Syria; and in August, the FBI published a similar warning by asking not to help fund terrorists by buying stolen antiquities. There are important Arab players fighting it as well. Al-Azhar, the leading religious institution in the Sunni Muslim world, condemned as erroneous the religious justifications employed by ISIS for the destruction of statues and antiquities in museums like the one in Mosul. It is argued that the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammed, during the campaign of Arab conquest in the 7th century CE, never attempted to destroy the Egyptian pyramids, which stand to this day.

Concluding Remarks

ISIS reaps political dividends from the mere fact of the obsessive concern and anxiety in the West over the destruction of antiquities in Syria and Iraq. The debate has allowed it to establish itself in the global consciousness as an organization that is faithful to the principles of Islam. It is viewed as an organization that does not hesitate to take up arms against its enemies, and thus has become a magnet for many young Muslims. The media spectacle of the destruction of antiquities by ISIS makes a mockery of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, which are shown as impotent to confront it. Western nations are ridiculed as well: they raise a media storm over the issue of antiquities, but their voices are scarcely heard when it comes to the persecution and massacre of minorities, like the Yazidi in northern Iraq. Beyond that, it is worth reiterating, ISIS has successfully leveraged the lucrative antiquities trade into a source for financing its activities.

About the author:

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