

The Destruction of Antiquity in Syria and Iraq: We Ought to Care about a Viable Solution

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The safety of historic artifacts has been in decline and one of the most evident examples of this statement would be the unprecedented destruction of archeological sites, museums, and artifacts within Middle Eastern countries—specifically in Syria and Iraq. There are three generally recurring concerns that archeologists, governments, and journalists indicate as the underlying issues of artifact preservation: the first concern is that looting is rampant as a consequence of terrorist activities and civil war, the second concern is that the desired function of governments and preservation organizations ought to be lessening destruction, and the third concern is that the final fate of the antiquities ought to include an adequate punishment for the criminals. All of these points are being discussed by interested parties in an effort to come up with a long term solution that will benefit the people as well as the history. In this paper we will explore the fundamentalist ideals which fuel the desecration of antiquity, the historic relevance of a variety of damaged or destroyed sites, and we will assert that a long term solution that involves targeting the illegal trade of antiquities, the economic foundation of ISIS, and the withdrawal of aggressive foreign military forces.

A fundamentalist terrorist is a person or group that uses a narrow view of a religious conviction to validate atrocious acts, and they use terror as a tool to facilitate an agenda of radical social and political change.¹ A terrorist will use the fear generated to indicate that no one is safe from them or their ability to take action. ISIS is a terrorist group who, like all other fundamentalist terrorists, exploit terror for their own benefit. In addition to the loss of life and displacement of the local populations, ISIS has taken to destroying ancient artifacts, sites, and books in an effort to eliminate from the world what they perceive as idolatrous religions.

These artifacts offer perspective on our collective human history and they have contributed greatly to our understanding of both the ancient and the recent past. History primarily relies upon written records and documents to interpret the broad strokes of previous lives and events, and archaeology provides another source of information for these time periods and allows us to perceive a time before written language to understand how earlier humans

¹ Karima Bennoune, interview by Michael Enright. Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here. CBC Radio. July 17th, 2015.

interacted with their world. Among the damaged or destroyed fragments of antiquity that we will be discussing are the City of Apamea, the Citadel of Aleppo, the Minaret of the Umayyad Mosque, the cities of Dur-Sharrukin and Nineveh, the Central Library of Mosul, and the Mosque of Jonah.

Satellite imagery has helped with pinpointing the areas that have undergone the most destruction. UNITAR, the United Nation's Training and Research arm, using commercially available satellite images, compared new images of Syria's cultural sites with earlier images. It found that a variety of churches, mosques, and religious shrines are being targeted. Of them, 24 sites have been completely destroyed, 189 have been severely or moderately damaged, and 77 have possibly been damaged.² Since looters know the rich historical value of artifacts they skillfully and carefully choose the right sites to start excavating, and as a result Syria and Iraq have transformed immensely in only a few short years. Satellite images of Apamea, the remains of an ancient city near Hama, show a pockmarked landscape with 15 000 crude holes covering 50 per cent of the site which were dug by looters intent on pillaging its treasures. It has also been reported that holes are being dug sporadically around the land, and their lack of care is destroying existing landmarks. Some of the first records of ancient civilizations are being affected, such as The Citadel a castle that dates back to 3000 BCE has been damaged, and The Minaret of the Umayyad Mosque was toppled by military forces.³



Fig 1. Dr. John Casey, 2010. Digital Picture

This was the Citadel in Aleppo Syria as seen when it was a model of antiquity by a tourist in 2010. Despite being in use since the 3rd century BCE as a fortified palace, temple, and public meeting area, it has maintained an exquisite and distinct façade. Alexander the Great was among the most prestigious historic

² Jean Shaoul, "Reports Reveal Scale of Destruction of Syria's World Historic Heritage."

³ John Dennehy, "Stealing From History: The Looting and Destruction of Iraqi and Syrian Heritage Concern Us

figures to conquer this landmark. At the time it was in the Seleucid Kingdom, and it was these people that initiated a process of restoration. Despite a series of conflicts between Byzantines and Muslims, the structure endured until the dawn of the Crusades. Another restoration occurred during that time in which additional fortifications were built. Their effort most definitely shows. Unfortunately, it is our century that would see these achievements laid to waste by an ideological civil war.

Aleppo, Syria's largest city has been a target for this destructive force as well. It once occupied a strategic location towards the end of the Silk Road route to China, being close to the Mediterranean ports and the markets of Europe.⁴ Such a hub for early trade is a prime location to learn about how ancient peoples interacted with one another in the growing complexity of society, but those with fundamentalist goals care little for increasing knowledge about antiquity.

The city of Dur-Sharrukin, located in Iraq, was built by Sargon II during his reign, 722-705 BCE, in his time it was meant to be his unrivalled palace. The city was built from 717 to 707 BCE, during which the King was out on military campaigns. He was, by way of surviving letters to his son, directly involved with the construction. To Sargon II building his new city was akin to a new beginning or a rebirth for his people. Despite his efforts to secure the empire and enjoy his envisioned city, Sargon II died in battle; it was thought that the gods had forsaken him. The city was abandoned, and it succumbed to fire during the fall of the Assyrian Empire.⁵



Fig. 2. The Citadel,2015, Digital Picture.

The above depicts the Citadel in its more current state of disrepair after a pipe bomb exploded. The area leading up to the landmark used to be a gathering area for the public with walk ways, benches, modern lighting, and tourists—now it is reduced to its current state of desecration. Its once distinct features are

⁴ Jean Shaoul, "Reports Reveal Scale of Destruction of Syria's World Historic Heritage."

⁵ Ancient History Encyclopedia. s.v. "Dur-Sharrukin."

marked by rubble. While the primary structure is still intact, we can only expect that it will be a focus of further conflict because it is a landmark of antiquity which housed a variety of peoples with an array of different beliefs. Though, perhaps there is some small chance that we will be part of the century that will undertake the next great restoration rather than another great atrocity.

Long after the city was forgotten Khorsabad was established and excavations began in 1873 CE by Paul Emile Botta. During excavations and transport many artifacts were lost to the sea due to armed conflict. Today, this site is in the control of the group known as ISIS, and the Assyrian International News Agency has it listed as a high risk for looting.⁶ The fear is that more artifacts will be sold on the black market and further violence will be funded. Nineveh is also a historic city that used to be the capital of the Assyrian Empire, though today the site is located at Mosul in Iraq.



Fig. 3. ISIS Detonates Large Parts Of Nineveh Historical Wall, Iraqi News, January 28, 2015.

The grand scale, of the primary fortifications, is difficult to comprehend, yet it was thousands of years ago that it was constructed with technology far distant from our own modern methods. This was once the glistening capital of the Assyrian Empire at a time that our species was still developing the ability to write. This was the bustling metropolis of its time well before the dawn of Athens or Rome. According to the news article, this was a section of the wall that sustained the brunt of the damage. However, given that the explosions were very recent and this area is currently occupied by ISIS, we were unable to locate updated images showing the full extent of the damage.

It was settled as early as 6000 BCE, and it became the capital of the Assyrian Empire during the reign of Sennacherib (704 – 681 BCE), Sargon II's son. During this time, it was common for the gods to have home cities, and Nineveh was Ishtar's. Sennacherib did not simply move the capital though; he added many elements of grandeur to the existing area. His betterments included great walls, improved structures, public parks and gardens with a system of aqueducts and irrigation ditches to ensure a plentiful supply of water. It seems unclear whether

⁶ Michael Jansen, "A Common Heritage at Risk."

he was emulating his father or trying to compensate for his father's transgressions against the gods. Sennacherib also created an environment in which his son, Esarhaddon, would create the first known library. Esarhaddon reigned from 681- 669 BCE, and during which Ashurbanipal's famous library came into existence consisting of over 30 000 clay tablet. That cultural ideal did not last long, as years of instability and warfare followed the death of Esarhaddon. The final result was that Nineveh was sacked and the region depopulated sharply until the city became little more than a ruin within the earth.⁷

It was not until the late 1840's that Austin Henry Layard excavated some of the ruins, and while it remains mostly beneath a great mound of dirt this reality has not deterred vandals or urban development. ISIS had threatened earlier this year to destroy part of the wall at Nineveh, and in the time it took to write this paper that event came to pass. Despite the historic value, it seems that very few media outlets found it important enough to write about until after the fact.⁸

In more modern times, The Central Library of Mosul contained roughly 2000 books which included stories, philosophy, and poetry, and it was reminiscent of Ashurbanipal's Library. Mosul boasted a large population of educated people that desired the preservation of its cultural sites. To ISIS the artifacts promote an idolatrous practice against the will of Allah, so they packed the books into refrigerated trucks in the middle of the night.⁹ While the fate of the items is not known, it is speculated that these artifacts are being sold on the black market, and the money earned is most likely fueling further aggressive behaviour by enabling further purchasing of arms. Despite this seeming benefit to the organization, their goals are to displace and destroy the culture and history of the local populace, and to send the message that nothing and no one is safe. Militants from the Islamic State have also obliterated the Mosque of Jonah, a holy site for Muslims which dates back to the 14th century. They closed the mosque and wired it with explosives—it has literally been reduced to rubble.¹⁰ It is hypothesized that it was destroyed because it was also a sacred site for Christians, and ISIS is intent on destroying everything related to Christianity. Although Jonah is mentioned in the Bible, he is also considered a prophet to the Muslims, and this makes it a holy site for both religions. Since they are willing to destroy things held sacred even to the Muslims, they are causing a division within their own people in a way that does not suit their supposed goals.

The sites that are being looted and damaged boast some of the earliest records historians and archeologists have with which to understand the

⁷ Ancient History Encyclopedia, s.v. "Nineveh."

⁸ Abdelhak Mamoun, "ISIS detonates large parts of Nineveh historical wall."

⁹ Sinan Salaheddin, "ISIS Burning Books at Iraq Libraries and Loading Artifacts onto Refrigerated Trucks at Night, Residents Say."

¹⁰ Justin Moyer, "After Leveling Iraq's Tomb of Jonah, the Islamic State Could Destroy Anything in the Bible."

beginning of human civilization; the destruction of these sites indicates a degree of ignorance that is almost unparalleled in modern times. The archaeological heritage in Iraq and Syria are among the richest in the world because their historic treasures range from the ancient empires of the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, followed by the Romans, shrines for both Islamic and Christian adherents, and UNESCO World Heritage Sites.¹¹ Destroying ancient artifacts and books is a devastating blow to our collective cultural beginnings because it erases our past, and then our historic treasures are ultimately doomed to be forgotten by future generations. Even if that does not appear to be a good reason, this is an important modern issue to deal with because without the intrigue of ancient civilizations the remaining villages and communities in the area will not be able to benefit economically from tourist activity.

Luckily, other countries have seen the destruction taking place and realize that this is a serious issue. Germany, the EU, and the USA have already put into motion some ideas they think might help preserve the history of those sites. Germany has passed new laws regarding the antiquities trade as proposed by Monika Grütters, the Cultural Affairs Minister, who supports a law stipulating that artifacts should only be bought and sold in the future only with clear documentation on proof of origin and export licensing from the country in which the objects were housed.¹² The FBI of the USA completed an Intelligence Threat Study sent to the US Congress that is considering new legislation with sanctions for dealing in looted antiquities from Syria.¹³

Before we propose additional solutions based on our findings, we would like you to consider two things: consider that conflict and destruction of artifacts in this region is not a new phenomenon. We bring up this point to ground this discussion in realistic terms because in order to be objective we must realize that ISIS is not the first, nor the only, group that has used the destruction or sale of antiquities to achieve personal religious goals. Also, consider that we do not try to put out fires with fuel. This is particularly critical because our actions in the world elicit responses. If the ultimate goal is to put out a forest fire, than we will try to douse it with water: we will not attempt to make it worse. We can say that we have been trying to stop the death and destruction in Syria and Iraq, but we cannot say that we have not fueled the conflict.

As with any complicated issue, the initial steps must be small and resolute especially since we want to see a lasting solution: for the future economic viability of the region, and the continued academic study of its past. In the present, if local forces were to regain control over the economic resources that ISIS controls this would begin the decline of their economic foundation, and as this crumbling begins the international community would be able to follow

¹¹ John Dennehy, "Stealing From History: The Looting and Destruction of Iraqi and Syrian Heritage Concern Us All."

¹² Matthias V. Hein, "Germany to Crack Down On Antiquity Theft."

¹³ Franklin Lamb, "The Greatest Threat to Cultural Heritage in Syria."

Germany's lead in putting forth preventative legislation. At the same time, withdrawal of foreign military forces would also reduce the number of reasons that ISIS uses to justify its actions—jihadist groups see the interference of foreign powers as a direct attack on Islam. Thus, foreign withdrawal would decrease the likelihood of some avoidable casualties. We find that there comes a point at which shooting at a problem is not a viable solution, and it is the opinion of the authors that foreign military intervention causes more damage to the future we wish to preserve. If executed properly we will find that facilitating economic suffocation of terrorist cells both locally and internationally along with the removal of the perceived foreign military threat would allow local forces to reach a better conclusion than the obliteration of our collective cultural heritage. While the situation can be alleviated, we will not be able to recover the uncountable and unknown volumes of history that have already been lost.

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