Devastation of Cultural Heritage and Memory in Syria and Iraq: Component of a Multi-level Provocation Strategy?

Prof. Dr. Andreas Dittmann
Department of Geography, Anthropogeography
Justus Liebig University of Giessen, Giessen
Germany

Associate Prof. Dr. Hussein Almohamad
Department of Geography, Anthropogeography
Justus Liebig University of Giessen, Giessen
Germany

Abstract

The ongoing destruction and looting of cultural heritage in Mesopotamia is being carried out by activists of the so-called Islamic State (IS). While on the one hand complete eradication of archaeological sites and findings is aimed at gaining the attention of the international media, on the other hand the trade in historical artefacts is one of the group's main sources of funding. The destroyed objects include unique and irretrievable cultural heritage from ancient times, which hold the record of the dawn of mankind. These were attacks on memory, society and civilization. Several centres of the early phase in the development of writing as well as places of origin of state buildings have been razed to the ground or are endangered. In international discourse, such demolitions are often described as a barbaric form of the destruction of idols. In contrary to this view, this article gives background information on the role of such demolitions as the final step of the IS strategy to provoke reactions.

Key words: Cultural heritage, Islamic State, destruction, looting, provocation, Mesopotamia.

1. Introduction

Trying to explain the process of cultural destruction in Iraq and Syria solely as barbarism or destruction of religious icons is not sufficient. Therefore, the current destruction of cultural heritage may be presented in multiple stages. The destructive activity carried out by Islamic State represents the final stage as part of a comprehensive provocative strategy.

Evaluation of the recent destruction of mankind's cultural heritage in Mesopotamia may be incomplete. Nevertheless, Figure (1) attempts to give an overview of the most important sites in different categories: Destroyed–partly destroyed, looted and endangered. Table (1) also includes those acts of destruction for which IS cannot be blamed. This was done mainly for two reasons: First, in order to emphasize that the destruction of cultural heritage in Mesopotamia predates IS. Second, as a reaction to official sources that often document the IS crimes against UNESCO-world cultural heritage sites and forget others. The table lists the UNESCO-world cultural heritage sites and also sites that applied for the status (Husenmann, 2011; Schmitt, 2011, UNESCO, 2015a, b, c, d).

Overall, the conscious and extensive destruction of historical sites carried out by the IS in Syria and Iraq at present adds a new dimension to the monstrous crime against human heritage—for instance, the stealing, looting and destruction of Assyrian treasures in the Mosul Museum (Schmökel, 1963), the Ziggurat and its temples, whole cities as the Parthian Hatra (Stierlin, 1987), icons in the Christian monasteries of Maloula, Tells of Mari and Dura Europos on the Euphrates (Akkermans § Schwartz, 2004; Al-Souky, 1995), the Crusader fortress from south West Homs (Kennedy, 2001) or some of the old buildings in the city of Raqqa, known as the 'Capital of the Islamic State'.
.

2. *The exploitation of archaeological sites by IS: Plundering, cleaning, and blasting*

The IS has been described by senior U.S. officials as one of the best-funded terrorist organizations.

The self-proclaimed Islamic State is a hybrid jihadist group with the declared goal of establishing a 'lasting and expanding' caliphate. Its strategy for survival and growth blends military, political, social, and economic components. The most important sources of income for the IS differing in their extent, range and scope over time:

- Selling crude oil and oil products to the Assad regime, rebels and world market through Turkey.
- Donations from financially strong individuals, who are mainly from countries in the Arabian Peninsula.
- Bank lootings and extortions.
- Ransom from kidnapping of journalists and other people from western countries.
- Returns from the sale of abducted women and girls.
- Trade in stolen cultural heritage.

The donations and revenue from the sale of crude oil continue to be the major source of income, while the funds from kidnappings and bank lootings have declined markedly in recent months. The number of Western journalists is getting fewer and fewer. In fact, large numbers of Kurdish and Yezidi civilians have managed to escape from the grip of the IS. Therefore, the other lucrative source of finance is the growing looting and sale of Iraqi and Syrian antiquities, and indiscriminate plundering of archaeological sites. IS began to enforce punishments for looting without a license in 2015. According to local Syrian activists, IS grants licenses (20%) for the excavation of ancient sites through its 'Diwan al-Rikaz'—a governing body for overseeing resources in the 'caliphate'. The group is starting to hire its own archaeologists, digging teams and machinery. Artefacts are displayed on the Internet for a higher price. The trade is lucrative enough for the IS to invest in it.

Many archaeological treasures, especially statues, artworks, manuscripts, ancient figurines, shrines, and seals and coins have been smuggled out from the region through middlemen to traffickers of art and illegal antiques markets. The buyers of looted cultural heritage from Mesopotamia come mainly from the West, China and wealthy Arab Gulf states. The largest trade of antiques goes on in Western markets, where there is a big demand for such items as well as the possibility of earning huge profits. Without these markets, the trade of antiques would not be such a thriving business.

The demand is enormous, and the market and resources seem inexhaustible. The rise in the number of smuggled artefacts on the Syrian-Turkish border is associated with the increased intensity of the conflict in Syria and Turkey. Thousands of ancient artefacts are now locked in museum vaults in Gaziantep, Urfa, Hatay and Mardin. They will be returned when the right time comes (Parkinson, At-Bayrak § Marvin, 2015). It is almost impossible to estimate the number of artefacts that were not discovered or not confiscated during border transfer. It is difficult to establish the source of looted Syrian antiquities whose illicit origins are obscured by unscrupulous middlemen, and this is likely to allow many to be traded in the West. The horrific explosions at archaeological sites have literally made archaeologists, historians, restorers, and all those interested in culture and history to burst into tears. The actors of Islamic State have developed a multi-stage strategy to enable them to take full advantage of archaeological sites. These bombings represent the final stage of destruction and are preceded by other stages of looting and 'religious cleaning'.

2.1 Level 1: Plundering

First, the easily transportable, smaller and lighter artefacts are usually in the forefront of the lootings in northern Mesopotamia. Such artefacts include coins, vases, and other ceramics, shards with paint residues and, above all, mosaic cones or even entire sections of wall mosaics. Outside of northern Mesopotamia, there have been increasing robberies of mud bricks with cuneiform characters in Iraq—for instance from Nimrud. When the material is not freely accessible or cannot be easily removed from sites of archaeological excavations and museums, IS activists resort to sabotage. In addition to the looting of cultural treasures, this also results in inflicting the greatest damage to archaeologically significant sites by approaching them improperly with heavy equipment. IS is not the sole actor in this phase. Territorial control over archaeological sites has changed several times. Before the arrival of the jihadists, criminals, profiteering soldiers and refugees had been looting these artefacts and taking advantage of the anarchy to make profits. According to Casana (2015), more than 212 archaeological sites in Syria have been looted from 2012 to 2015. The assessment of looted sites in other parts of Syria assessed, show that 82 (38.7%) of looted sites in ISIS-held areas, compared to 63 (29.7%) in opposition-held areas, (35)16.5% in Syrian regime areas, and only 32 (15%) in Kurdish areas.

Today, the pillaging of cultural heritage sites shows up on satellite maps that are pockmarked with hundreds of recent illegal excavations as in Mari, Resafa, Dura Europos, Tell Mardikh, Apamea and many other sites. For instance, Between July 2011 and April 2012, satellite imagery (Fig. 2) shows that Apamea site was extensively looted. Media reports concentrated on the looting and subsequent sale of artifacts from the site, which benefitted the Assad regime and rebel groups and criminals. Another example is Mari; Satellite analysis shows that Mari has been extensively looted. Between August 2011 and March 2014, 165 new pits were observed. The spatial distribution of these features was uneven, with most pits appearing on the north slope of the tell, especially to the east of the Palace of Zimri-Lim (ASOR, 2014), as shown in Figure 3. Looting activities was confirmed by imagery acquired on 11 November 2014, which showed a dramatic increase in both the number of looters pits and the rate of excavation. While the looting that occurred between August 2011 and March 2014 resulted in 165 visible pits over a period of 965 days (an average of 0.17 pits formed per day), activities between 25 March and 11 November 2014 yielded approximately 1,286 pits over 232 days (Fig. 3), an average rate of 5.5 pits dug every day over the seven month period (AAAS, 2015). All of this seems to have occurred since IS held those areas, which could be evidence of state-sanctioned looting operations.

2.2 Level 2: Cleansing

When the IS can take nothing more from an archaeological site, the site is razed for religious or ideological reasons. It is primarily done to destroy the so-called idols in accordance with a number of verses in the Koran. The Koran calls upon its followers to stop worshipping idols and destroy them (Surah 2, verse 30, and Surah 5, verse 90). Prophet Muhammad had carried out multiple and large-scale campaigns against polytheism in the early stages of his work, especially against the worship of idols and called for their destruction. The IS justifies its actions with these hadiths as well as with the narrated story that Prophet Muhammad had commanded the destruction of statues (or, to be precise, idols) surrounding the Kaaba in the eighth year following his conquest of Mecca. These instructions relate to some of the cultural heritage with links to previous religious beliefs based on idolatry and polytheism. These destructions rarely make a distinction between religiously relevant objects and secular statues or pictures. But then, one cannot expect such fine differentiations from 'jackhammer jihadists'.

The IS not only destroyed some statues, mostly of secular nature, in Hatra in Iraq in the spring of 2015 (Fig. 4) but had also attempted to destroy what remains of Hatra, which was once the capital of the Parthians. In this case, the Koranic terminology appears to differentiate between a mere secular statue (timthal) and an idol or statue that is worshipped (sanam) and therefore should be destroyed.

Moreover, the IS theory of 'shirk' or idolatry not only extends to other religions and pre-Islamic sites but also to Islamic heritage that does not follow its strict Sunni interpretation of Islam. The IS targeted holy sites belonging to the Shiite sects, such as the blasting of holy shrines like the tomb of Prophet Jonah (Yunus) in Iraq in June 2014, and destruction of the grave of leading Shiite imam an-Nawawi in Syria or the arbitrary acts in two Christian monasteries in Maloula in Syrian Anti-Lebanon mountains in north-east of Damascus.

In case of the IS attacks on the holy shrines in Najaf and Karbala, the consequences are incalculable and would trigger a massive and open intervention by Iranian forces in the clashes against the jihadist outfit in Iraq. In present day context, these statues only represent human heritage, without any link to religion or ethnicity. In other words, they do not represent our immediate past but the ancient past of all mankind.

2.3 Stage 3: Blasting

The next stage applies to the valorisation of the conquered world heritage: The cinematically documented and internationally broadcasted destruction of cultural heritage and valuable archaeological sites in high-publicity events. The main objective of these barbaric acts along with other provocative strategies is to provoke the West.
In multiple stages of the Islamic State's strategy, small artefacts have been robbed and sites cleansed on the basis of the elimination of paganism, followed by the final stage of deliberate and complete destruction of the heritage sites.

The roughly seven-minute-long video shows the destruction of what experts confirm is the northwest palace at Nimrud (Romey, 2015), built in the ninth century B.C. by the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (Fig.5).The ancient ruins of the Iraqi Assyrian city of Nimrud, which dates back to the 13th century, B.C. were destroyed using sledgehammers, drills and barrel bombs. The expertly edited video purportedly shows the IS destroying the relics before bulldozing and blowing up the ruins, thereby completely obliterating the historic site as well as destroying statues and other artefacts in a museum in Mosul.

UNESCO has revealed that Hatra, another ancient city 70km to the south of Mosul, was blown up and bulldozed in early March 2015. In June and August 2015 the IS blew up ancient shrines and the Temple of Baal Shamin in Palmyra, which the militants regarded as pagan and sacrilegious. All these barbaric acts are as projected as part of its religious campaign to eliminate pagan and sacrilegious symbols.

3. *Cultural destruction as part of an IS-provocation strategy*

Apart from the fact how one may judge terrorist and violent actions, it should be kept in mind that there are certainly some serious practicing Muslims among the IS activists who evaluate the essential guiding principles of their trade and religious motives. Works from this genre can be derived directly a further incentive for wanton destruction of cultural heritage.

This is a conscious and deliberate effort to provoke western actors with the aim for more direct military intervention in the Middle East, in particular in the fight against the IS. Many pious warriors are convinced that the greatest happiness can be achieved when a person dies a 'martyr' in the fight against nonbelievers.

An IS supporter wrote on Twitter: 'When you give up your powers from airstrikes, you will find us waiting for you in Dabiq.' Till now, the American doctrine has been 'No boot on the ground', which excludes the use of ground troops against the IS. This policy has frustrated potential and willing martyrs because they have reduced opportunity for directly fighting against 'infidels'. Moreover, some believers are convinced that the saviour will come (return) only after a final malahim (apocalypse). They also believe that the prophecies contained in the Islamic tradition (hadith) would now begin to be fulfilled. For Muslims, the hadith, which is a collection of sayings and actions attributed to Prophet Muhammad, is just as binding as the contents of the Koran.

And according to one hadith, the place where this final malahim will occur of all places in Dabiq in northeast Aleppo. This is where the armies of devout Muslims and nonbelievers will finally face each other, and the infidels will be destroyed. And this is why the name of Dabiq is frequently invoked by IS recruiters. The unbelievers are called 'Rum'—an old Arabic term for Europeans or Westerners with Roman roots.

In ancient oriental traditions, for example, Europeans were associated with Rome or the Romans. The name 'Rum' derives from the early Nabataea Arab times, and it has been preserved in some writings up to the present day. This name is still used despite the fact that all Western people may not be associated with the Romans, particularly Americans and northern Europeans.

However, this does not mean that the invocation of Dabiq and A`maq, and the narrative that the IS seeks to offer through them are not problematic and cannot be challenged. The narrative can be contested on two grounds: First, the IS narrative that the current conflict in Iraq and Syria refers to the 'End of Time' as prophesized in many of the hadiths and that they represent the party of truth is, at best, an interpretation on their part and not a divine decree. There is no definitive scriptural evidence to back the IS contention that the current conflict is related with the prophecy of apocalypse and the group represents the party of truth. Second, there are many authentic hadiths that also prophesize the emergence of deviant and heretical groups from the east of Arabia and Iraq as some of the signs indicating the 'End of Time' (Hassan § Bahri, 2014).

Many Muslim scholars say that the IS philosophy is similar to the principles of the Kharijite, which are considered to be some of the most extreme and dangerous in Islam. For instance, it dictates takfir (excommunication) of other Muslims merely because they belong to other sects (in Iraq/Syria)[1]. These authentic hadiths specifically describe the most extreme groups whose characteristics can be applied to Kharijites (Myers and Stanovsek, 2014). Al-Baghdadi was able to co-opt the battle cry of Dabiq very intelligently to establish an impression of the IS's cosmic destiny by combining an eschatological account of coming battles gleaned from popular apocalyptic literature, the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, prophecies and modern tactics borrowed from the Salafi-Jihadist strategic literature. Taken together, this mix is intended to capture the imagination of young warriors and inspire them to come and fight for IS and boost their struggle. Though this presentation will not solve the array of challenges facing the IS, it may probably help to attract more young recruits.

---

[1] Kharijites were a former Muslim sect who set themselves apart from Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims with their radicalized ideology. They refer to the Islamic groups that rebelled against the third and fourth caliphs, Uthman and Ali, and the rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates (Myers and Stanovsek, 2014).

But the West's doctrine of 'No boots on the ground in Syria' has deprived the jihadists the opportunity to die as martyrs in the apocalyptic battle of Dabiq. To achieve their long-term objective, terrorists pursue a variety of strategies. Scholars have suggested a number of typologies of terrorist strategies and tactics over the years. Some may see one means of engaging with an increase in provocations. Of course, one would not be able to attract troops solely with the desecration of monasteries and destruction of archaeological sites, but such acts would certainly add to a long list of cultural provocations. In other words, the staged destruction of world heritage sites is only one of the many possible means of provocation. Besides the kidnappings and executions of Western journalists, the attempted genocide against the Yezidis, the enslavement of captured women and girls as well drawing media attention by displaying the severed heads of Coptic and other Christian victims, and the ongoing cultural destruction comprise the modular components of a general strategy to provoke.

The motives and reasons for criminal behaviour, pious religious practice and military manoeuvring are often closely interlinked. The unfortunate cooperation of terrorists and modern media are described repeatedly (Glaab, 2007).

4. *The tradition of destruction of cultural heritage sites in Mesopotamia.*

The looting, transporting and destruction of cultural heritage from Mesopotamia by other cultures have a long tradition in history.

Treasure hunters and grave robbers had long ago dug out the numerous historic sites in the region; objects made of precious metals were melted down; others were torn from their context and graves were looted before the advent of first scientific expeditions in the late 19th century. Long before the arrival of the first archaeologists, the underground tombs of Ugarit on the Syrian Mediterranean coast (Curtis, 1986) were about as empty as the niche graves in the dead towers in the oasis of Palmyra, the ancient city of Tadmor in the Syrian Desert (Akkermans § Schwartz, 2004; Browning, 1979) or the abandoned Christian monasteries in the area of the so-called Dead Cities in north-western Syria. Even Alexander the Great had pulled down the superstructure of Babylon's famous tower in order that it might be rebuilt with greater splendour. But he did not live long enough to bring his project to completion.

Over the centuries, its scattered bricks have been cannibalized by peasants to fulfil humbler dreams. All that is left of the fabled Tower of Babel is the bed of a swampy pond. This is probably the oldest unfinished building site in the world. But the large-scale state-organized cultural robbery began only at the time of the study of the archaeological ruins by Europeans, which was partially due to the well-intentioned pretext of protecting and preserving cultural heritage. These robberies of archaeological sites first began during the Ottoman regime and after the First World War, and then amplified with ancient artefacts being shipped from the French mandated territories of Lebanon and Syria and the British region of Iraq to Europe. They vied to discover the greatest possible and impressive ancient oriental culture that could then be exhibited in museums in European capitals. Historical representations in Basra show rafts transporting the winged statues of the gods Ashur and Nineveh over the Euphrates downstream towards British ships (Schmökel, 1987). They show the comprehensiveness of this early form of organized robbery of cultural heritage.

But even in the period between the demise of the Ottoman Empire (1918) and the archaeological excavations until (2011) in Iraq and Syria, the destruction of cultural heritage happened as a result of a greed, ignorance, cultural ignorance or collateral damage and even reflected conscious and scheduled cultural destruction. As an example, some cultural heritage sites in this context will be mentioned briefly here

The extermination of cultural sites such as the destruction of the Tell of Nimrud may have inadvertently occurred years earlier during the course of the first Gulf War between Iraq and Iran, probably due to firings and bombings by Iranian warplanes. Generally, fused fragments of artefacts were dug out of the mud bricks lining the Ziggurats during archaeological excavations until the early 1990s. This was part of the elimination of enemies through cultural destruction. This approach was adopted by Saddam Hussein when he dehydrated the swamps in marshy areas inhabited by Shiite Arabs in order to deprive them of what was essential to their culture (Thesiger, 2007).

A similar tragedy unfolded in one of the oldest cities of Uruk (Postage, 1994) in south of Mesopotamia. It is significant that the official listings on destruction of cultural heritage sites in Syria and Iraq do not refer to Uruk. Its destruction is not attributed to IS troops (seen as 'evil and barbaric') but from US troops ('good and liberating').

The heavy destruction of the partially reconstructed Sumerian city of Uruk at that time was the result of bombardment by US warplanes during the Second Gulf War in an attempt to weaken the regime of Saddam Hussein. The destruction was a collateral damage resulting from an attack on an Iraqi air base, where radar and air defence systems had been installed near the archaeological sites of Uruk, about 2.5 km away. This Iraqi air base was perceived as a cultural landscape-destruction mainly before the outbreak of fighting. An air attack on a weapons depot near Ctesphion caused serious cracks to develop in the 4th century A.D. arch at Ctesiphon, the largest vaulted arch in the world created without a keystone centring device. Tell al-Lahm, a 6th century B.C. site south of Ur that was likely a major centre for the Chaldeans (11th Neo-Babylon dynasty) was partially razed by U.S. bulldozers to create firing positions. (This site has never been excavated extensively, and probably never will be after the 1991 incident.)

And, in the most often-cited example, brickwork on the famous ziggurat at Ur was damaged. Five large bomb craters were created around the ziggurat's tower, and some 400 holes appeared in a reconstructed wall of the tower, all collateral damage resulting from an attack on a nearby Iraqi air base that dated back to the British occupation in the early 1920s. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, after Coalition bombing began, looters descended upon the site which is now pockmarked with hundreds of ditches and pits. The Sumerian heartland in southern Iraq has been hit the hardest. Whole "tells" or ruin mounds have been reduced to pockmarked moon landscapes due to the frantic digging activities of looters, e.g., Tell Jokha (ancient Umma) (Fig 6) , Ishan Bakhriyyat (ancient Isin), etc, though 15,000 objects were stolen in the aftermath of the invasion. Approximately only half of the stolen objects could be recovered. Cultural buildings were damaged from their use by the military, including the utilization of the National Museum by the Iraqi army as a fortified fighting position, with the building becoming a shield of protection, in clear violation of international law (Nisbett, 2007).

5. *Cultural Heritage Rescue for Peace: Syria's 'Monument Men'*

Syrian as well as foreign archaeologists have been shocked by the ruthlessness and barbarity of the destroyers of ancient sites in Syria. They has formed an organization called 'Heritage for Peace' to advocate their responsibility for preserving cultural treasures. Heritage for Peace's mission is to support heritage workers as they protect their collections, monuments, and archaeological sites during and after armed conflicts (Parkinson, Albayrak § Mavin, 2015). This group can be likened to World War II's 'Monuments Men' (Düker, 2015), who were a small group of academicians who helped save Europe's cultural heritage from the Nazis. Heritage for Peace is a non-profit, non-government organization with its office in Girona, Spain, where it was registered on March 1, 2013, as an NGO under Catalan law. The group currently works on projects to save Syria's heritage during the present crisis.

It is dangerous work involving traveling across the country—through areas held by the Assad- regime, opposition forces, or IS militants—to remove artefacts for safekeeping or attempting to secure museums with sandbags. Syrian volunteers have covered mosaics housed in the Ma'arra museum in Idlib province with a protective layer of glue and cloth, and then laid out several truckloads of sandbags to protect the mosaics from damage due to further attacks

The work of the Syrian 'Monuments Men' may be restricted to relatively small, movable cultural heritage, such as the loot from illicit excavations or stocks of artefacts endangered by looting of museums, and to educate all military forces of their obligation to protect Syria's precious cultural heritage under international law. However, the protection of larger objects, buildings or even entire archaeological sites is not possible due to limited resources and transport facilities as well as the lack of guarantee for the workers. Even after individual objects or entire collections are secured, the bigger question that arises is of the safe storage of the objects in alternative accommodations for the time being. Usually, however, the work of about 200 activists is limited to photographic or cinematic documentation of the harm caused by illegal excavations. Sometimes, the hiding of archaeological inventory or GPS data storage for the purpose of later retrieval would succeed in a peaceful future. Rapid action—with and without fully ripened concept—is often the order of the day, which can lead to securing irreplaceable cultural treasures.

In this manner, a group of 'Monuments Men' were able to rescue a trove of artefacts inside Palmyra's museum in July 2015, shortly before the arrival of thousands of IS fighters in the 4,000-year-old oasis city. The trucks pulled up outside the museum and the staff rushed out to load the crated artefacts as the Syrian army's last defences crumbled. But they could not protect the vast archaeological site itself, with its rows of stone columns, Roman amphitheatre, ornate tombs, and myriad temples. Cultural heritage groups had tried in vain to persuade the U.S.-led coalition to conduct air strikes on the invaders as they stormed towards Palmyra's magnificent ruins.

But in contrast to other battles in Syria and Iraq, where warplanes carried out hundreds of precision bombing runs, there was no airstrike on Palmyra, since this would have amounted to an indirect support for Assad. Owing to this silly decision of not intervening in the fighting in Palmyra, the destiny of the oasis city was sealed that led to the destruction of the local cultural heritage at the same time. IS announced, 'We will pulverize the idols in Palmyra', a few hours later on the relevant Internet platforms.

6. *Finally Palmyra*

Besides Palmyra's status as a UNESCO-certified cultural site, the city is also a key strategic location for IS as it is linked with a highway to a number of important cities in both Syria and Iraq and it is also close to oil and gas fields. After taking control of the ancient city of Palmyra, the IS adopted two approaches in dealing with archaeological treasures.

First, the great temples and statues, which were difficult to be traded overseas, were destroyed with the excuse that they were the manifestations of heresy and idolatry. This was in complete contrast to early Muslims, who are considered to be role models for IS, as they maintained the temples or turned some of them into mosques rather than destroying them. On June 22, 2015 IS a published photo depicting the destruction of Islamic shrines near the settlement of Tadmor. The Shiite Shrine of Sheikh Mohammad ibn 'Ali (Fig. 7) was demolished between March 1, 2015 and May 22, 2015 based on observations of Digital Globe satellite imagery. IS destroyed the Sufi Tomb of Shagaf/Nizar Abu Behaeddine between June 15, 2015 and June 26, 2015 based on Digital Globe satellite imagery (ASOR, 2015).

IS has carried out a sustained campaign of destruction of temples. On 26 and 27 August 2015, the IS published images showing militants placing barrels and small containers, presumably containing explosives, into the temple of Baal Shamin and Bel, as well as on its columns. The images also showed a large explosion as the temple was blown up, and then the pile of rubble at the location (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). Satellite images have confirmed the destruction of the main building of the temple of Baal Shamin and Bel as well as a row of columns in its immediate vicinity (UNITAR, 2015), by providing satellite images from before and after a powerful blast. These temples dated back to more than 2000 years. The temple of Bel later served as a church and a mosque. Last but not the least, the IS has blown up several of Palmyra's famous tower tombs as it continues its spree of destruction at the UNESCO-listed world heritage site.

Second, small statues, artworks, manuscripts, ancient figurines, shrines, seals and coins, which are easily portable, were looted and smuggled by the jihadist group. The looting of archaeological treasures now goes on in an institutional manner and the IS has also taken control of the already existing practice of illegal excavation. IS has started to hire its own archaeologists, digging teams and machinery. The trade in artefacts is lucrative enough for the militant outfit to invest in it, and profiteering from plundered antiquities has helped to make it the most cash-rich terror group in the world.

There is yet another cultural aspect to this destruction of historical artefacts: The return of the looted cultural heritage (Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2009). The debate is over the question of who should actually possess the cultural goods and whether they are likely to be kept in the museums of the capitals of former colonial powers. This debate particularly focuses on celebrated artefacts like the bust of Nefertiti (Egyptian Museum, Berlin) or prominent treasures such as Priam (Berlin Museum), winged Assyrian deities from Nineveh (British Museum, London) and several other examples. The destruction of heritage by IS extremists has also triggered a bitter debate over whether Western museums should be returning disputed artefacts to the lands of their origin, a practice known as repatriation.

Today, Russia's military intervention also means that Russia has to be added to the list of countries and groups responsible for the destruction of the cultural heritage under the pretext of combating terrorism. According to activists, Russian Air forces bombed the city's ancient citadel in Palmyra. The 13th-century fortification is known as Qalaat Shirkuh or Qalaat Ibn Maan, and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage site.

Reference

AAAS, (2014). AAAS Analysis Shows Widespread Looting and Damage to Historical Sites in Syria: High-resolution satellite images reveal the condition of six ancient Syrian sites with major historical and

cultural significance. [Online] Available: http://www.aaas.org/news/aaas-analysis-shows-widespread-looting-and-damage-historical-sites-syria (December 17, 2014)

Akkermans, P.M., § G.M. Schwartz (2004). The Archaeology of Syria: From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (c. 16,000-300 BC) Cambridge, (Cambridge World Archaeology).

Al-Souky, M.A. (1995). Dura-Europos: Al-Salhieh. Damaskus.

Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany (Hrsg.) (2009). Rescue treasures in Afghanistan. The collection of the National Museum in Kabul. Bonn. (German)

ASOR, American Schools of Oriental Research, (2015).Cultural Heritage Indicatives: Update on the Situation in Palmyra. NEA-PSHSS-14-001. [Online] Available: http: //www.asor-syrianheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Palmyra_UpdateReport_FINAL4reduced.pdf (05.11.2015)

ASOR, American Schools of Oriental Research, (2014). Extensive Recent Looting Revealed [Online] Available: http://asorblog.org/2014/11/14/extensive-recent-looting-revealed/(November, 2, 2015)

Browning, I. (1979). Palmyra. New Jersey.

Casana, J (2015). Satellite Imagery-Based Analysis of Archaeological Looting in Syria. Near Eastern Archaeology, Special Issue 2. American Schools of Oriental Research, 78(3), 142-152.

Curtis, A.H. (1985). Ugarit: Ras Shamra (Cities of the Biblical World). Cambridge: Lutterworth.

Di Vita, A., G. di Vita-Evrard § Bacchiello, L. (1999): Ancient Libya. Forgotten sites of the Roman Empire. Cologne. (German)

Düker, R. (2015). Destroyed World Heritage Site. The battle of the archaeologists. Die Zeit 11. [Online] Available: http://www.zeit.de/2015/11/archaeologie-islamischer-staat-kultur-erbe (12.3.2015)(German)

Glaab, S. (Hrsg.) (2007). Media and terrorism - In the footsteps of a symbiotic relationship. Berlin.

Hassan, M.H § Bahri, M. (2014). Islamic State Seeks Legitimacy From Dabiq And Its Narrative – Analysis. Eurasiareview. [Online] Available: http://www.eurasiareview.com/11122014-isis-seeks-legitimacy-dabiq-narrative-analysis/Husemann, D. (2011). Treasures mankind: Destroyed robbed, missing. Stuttgart. (German)

IS Social Media, (2015a). Islamic State destroys ancient city of Hatra on the basis of the Quran and Hadith [Online] Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmzyTco7R40 (September 8, 2015)

IS Social Media, (2015b). Remove polytheism landmarks in the city of Palmyra - the state of Homs. [Online] Available: http://www.csnw.tk/2015/06/133.html (October10, 2105)

IS Social Media, (2015c). The bombing of the Temple "Baalchmin" pagan improvised explosive device in the city of Palmyra- the state of Homs. [Online] Available: http://www.csnw.tk/2015/08/1k.html (October10, 2105)

Kennedy, H. (2001). Crusader Castles. Cambridge.

Myers, E § Stanovsek, J. (2014). ISIS and Kharijite Approaches to Understanding Islam: The Concepts of Khilafah and Jihad. Morocco World News. [Online] Available: http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2014/12/145920/isis-and-kharijite-approaches-to-understanding-islam-the-concepts-of-khilafah-and-jihad/ (July, 4, 2015)

Nisbett, M. (2007). The end of history? The impact of the Gulf Wars (1990–1991 and 2003-present) on Iraq's cultural heritage. Sheffield Hallam University.

Parkinson, J., A. Albayrak und D. Mavin (2015): Culture Brigade. Syrian „Monument Men "Race to Protect Antiquities as looting Bankrolls Terror. Wall Street Journal. [Online] Available: http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-monuments-men-race-to-protect-antiquities-as-looting-bankrolls-terror-1423615241 (February 12, 2015).

Postgate, N. (1994). Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History. London.

Romey, K. (2015). Why ISIS Hates Archaeology and Blew Up Ancient Iraqi Palace. National Geographic.[Online] Available: http://news.nationalgeographic.com-/2015/04/150414-why-islamic-state-destroyed-assyrian-palace-nimrud-iraq-video-isis-isil-archaeology/ (April 14, 2015)

Schmitt, T.M. (2011). Cultural Governance. On the Cultural Geography of the UNESCO World Heritage Regime. (Erdkundliches Wissen Bd. 149), Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart. (German)

Schmökel, H. (1963). Ur, Assur, Babylon. Three millennia in Mesopotamia. Stuttgart (German)

Stierlin, H. (1987).Cities in the desert - Petra, Palmyra and Hatra, Trade centers on caravan route. Stuttgart, Zurich.

Thesiger, W. (1964). The Marsh Arabs. London.

Tucker, D, 2009, Brutal Destruction of Iraq's Archaeological Sites Continues (Photo gallery). uruknet.info, information from Middle East.[Online] Available: http://www.uruknet.info/?p=58169

UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2015a): Safeguarding Syrian Cultural Heritage. [Online] Available:www.unesco.org/new/en/safeguarding-syrian-culturalheritage (June 30, 2015)

UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015b): UNESCO Office for Iraq. [Online] Available:www.unesco.org/new/en/iraq-office/culture/iraqi-world-heritage (June 30, 2015)

UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015c): Tentative Lists. [Online] Available: http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists (June 30, 2015)

UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015d): World Heritage List. [Online] Available: http://whc.unesco.org/en/list (June 30, 2015).

UNITAR, United Nations Institute for Training and Research, (2015) UNOSAT Confirms Destruction of Palmyra Temples in Syria. [Online] Available: http://www.unitar.org/unosat-confirms-destruction-palmyra-temples-syria (October 20, 2015)
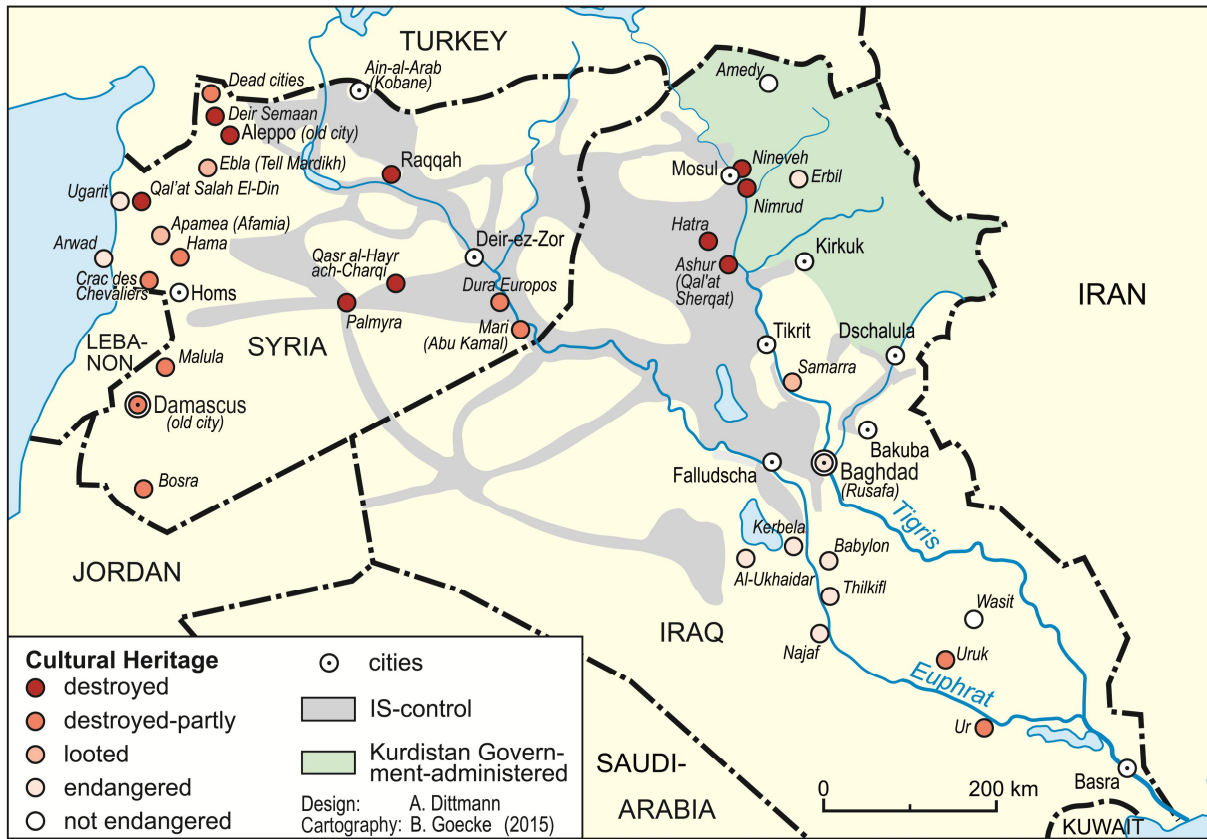
Figure 1: Destruction- and endangering levels of UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria and Iraq

Table 1: UNESCO World Heritage sites in Syria and Iraq

Country	Name	Coordinates	UNESCO World Heritage status since	On the at Risk sites since	Situation(extent known)
Syria	Old city of Damascus	33°30'41"N, 36°18'23"E	1979	2013	-
Syria	Old city of Bosra	32°31'5"N, 36°28'54"E	1980	2013	Battlefield / damaged by fighting
Syria	Palmyra	34°33'36"N, 38°16'2"E	1980	2013	Battlefield / looting / partial destruction by IS
Syria	Old city of Aleppo	36°11'59"N, 37°09'45"E	1986	2013	Battlefield / destruction by explosives
Syria	Crac des Chevaliers	34°46'54"N, 36°15'47"E	2006	2013	Damaged by air strikes and siege by armed groups
Syria	Qal'at Salah El-Din	35°35′45″N, 36°3′27″E	2006	2013	Looted
Syria	Dead Cities in north-western Syria	36°20'3"N, 36°50'39"E	2011	2013	Damaged by armed groups
Syria	Water-Wheels. (Norias) in Hama	35°8'6"N, 36°45'11"E	1999[(T)]		Probably burned
Syria	Ugarit (Tell Shamra)	36°36'7"N, 35°47'8"E	1999[(T)]		Partially looted / illicit excavations
Syria	Ebla (Tell Mardikh)	35°47'56"N, 36°47'55"E	1999[(T)]		Illegal excavations
Syria	Mari (Abu Kamal)	34°32'58"N, 40°53'24"E	1999[(T)]		Illegal excavations / armed groups
Syria	Dura Europos	34°44'51"N, 40°43'48"E	1999[(T)]		illegal excavations / vandalism
Syria	Apamea (Afamia)	35°25'12"N, 36°24'4"E	1999[(T)]		illegal excavations / armed groups
Syria	Qasr al-Hayr ach-Charqi	35°4'26"N, 39°4'16"E	1999[(T)]		?
Syria	Malula	33°50'41"N, 36°32'47"E	1999[(T)]		Illegal excavations / vandalism
Syria	Tartus: The city fortress of the Crusaders (Arwad)	34°53′00"N, 35°53′00"E	1999[(T)]		Endangered
Syria	Raqqa: the Abbasid city	35°56'58"N, 39°1'13"E	1999[(T)]		Damaged by IS / looted
Syria	Arwad Island	34°51'22"N, 35°51'30"E	1999[(T)]		Endangered
Iraq	Hatra	35°35'17"N, 42°43'6"E	1987		Destroyed by IS
Iraq	Ashur (Qal'at Sherqat)	35°27'32"N, 43°15'35"E	2003	2003	Partially destroyed
Iraq	Citadel of Erbil	36°11'28"N, 44°0'33"E	2014		Partially destroyed in hostilities
Iraq	Samarra (archaeological site)	34°20'28"N, 43°49'25"E	2007	2007	Partially destroyed by IS
Iraq	Amedy	37°05'33"N, 43°29'14"E	2011[(T)]		?
Iraq	Babylon (cultural landscape and archaeological site)	32°32'11"N, 44°25'15"E	2003[(T)]		Illegal excavations
Iraq	Ancient Ruins in Rusafa (Baghdad)	33°20'17"N, 44°23'23"E	2014[(T)]		Endangered
Iraq	Nimrud	36°5'53"N, 43°19'44"E	2000[(T)]		Blasted by IS / looted beforehand
Iraq	Nineveh (Tell)	36°21'34"N, 43°9'10"E	2000[(T)]		Destruction of the walls by IS / damaged Museum of Mosul
Iraq	7. Al-Ukhaidir	32°26'25"N, 43°36'9"E	2000[(T)]		Endangered
Iraq	Marshlands of Mesopotamia	31°-32°N, 46°5'-47°5'E	2003[(T)]		Dried up under Saddam Hussein
Iraq	Site of Thilkifl	32°13'37"N, 44°22'2"E	2010[(T)]		Endangered
Iraq	Ur	30°57'44"N, 46°6'16"E	2000[(T)]		Looted
Iraq	Uruk	31°19'2″N, 45°38'1″E	-	-	Destroyed by US air strikes (2nd Gulf War)
Iraq	Cemetery in Najaf (Wadi Al-Salam)	32°0'0"N, 44°18'59"E	2011[(T)]		Partially destroyed
Iraq	Wasit	32°14'0"N, 46°18'0"E	2000[(T)]		?
(T)= UNESCO status requested (Tentative List)					
Source: UNESCO 2015 [a,b,c,d]					

Figure 2: A Digital Globe/Google Earth image from July 20, 2011(top), April 4, 2012 (middle) and march 6, 2014 (bottom), prove extensive looting all over Apamea in April 2012 and extensive looting in the northen and north-eastern part of Apamea, 2014

Figure 3: The Bronze Age site of Mari (Tell Hariri) on the Euphrates River in eastern Syria appearing in a satellite images from April 11 , 2011(top), march 25, 2014(middle) and November 11, 2014 (bottom). The upper mound of the site, surrounding the excavated palace of Zimri-Lim, has been severely looted during 2014 during the occupation of the site by IS. Source: ASOR, (2014)

Figure 4: IS destroys statues in in Iraq's ancient city of Hatra. Source: As published by IS in the social media networks; (2015a)

Figure 5: The destruction of the ancient Nimrud archaeological site near the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Source: Romey, K. (2015)

Figure. 6: Detail of looters' pits amid house foundations at Umma, photographed in August 2003. Photo courtesy of carabineri T.P.C., Italia.
Source: (Tucker, 2009)

Figure. 7: The Shiite Shrine of Sheikh Mohammad ibn 'Ali during bombing. Source: As published by IS in the social media networks; (2015b)

Figure 8: The temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra during its destruction in August 2015
Source: As published by IS in the social media networks; (2015c)

Figure 9: The temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra after its destruction in August 2015.
Source: As published by IS in the social media networks; (2015c)