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Why ISIS Is Plundering the Ancient World

BY LUCY WESTCOTT 3/13/15 AT 2:33 PM

They're among the oldest artifacts in Iraq, but to the Islamic State (ISIS) they're nothing more than stones and precious metals forged to honor false gods. Over the past week, ISIS has reportedly begun looting and razing the ancient Assyrian capital of Khorsabad, known for its statues of lamassi, bulls with wings and human heads.

The destruction of the 2,700-year-old city, located northeast of Mosul, is the latest in a spate of ISIS attacks on cultural heritage sites across Iraq. Antiquities experts say destroying artifacts is often a prelude to ethnic cleansing, and many fear Libya may be next on ISIS's path of destruction.

"It's an eradication of culture," said Deborah Lehr, chair of the Washington, D.C.-based Antiquities Coalition, a group that works with governments to protect ancient sites and materials. "It's a part of striking at those beliefs that differ from [ISIS's] extremist view: views of tolerance, views of religious freedom, views of expression,"

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The Khorsabad attack came days after ISIS militants blew up and bulldozed a 2,000-year-old archaeological site in Hatra, and similarly desecrated Nimrud, a 3,000-year-old ancient Assyrian city, according to reports. In late February, ISIS released a video purporting to show militants taking sledgehammers to artifacts in the Nineveh Museum in Mosul, some of which are 6,000 years old.

“The bulldozing of Hatra is kind of a turning point in understanding the mentality and what is behind [ISIS’s actions],” said Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, the U.N.’s educational, scientific and cultural agency. “Hatra is the capital of one of the first Arab states. These were the first glories of the Islamic civilization. It was about science, astronomy, philosophy, mathematics.”

There are many unanswered questions about Hatra, including the sources of its “stupendous wealth,” that could now forever remain a mystery, according to John Grout, a Ph.D. student in Syrian and Iraqi antiquities at London’s Royal Holloway University. Grout has been studying Hatra and other sites “virtually as they are being destroyed” for the past five years and handed in his last thesis chapter, on Hatra, a week before ISIS attacked it. “I would say my reaction is overwhelmingly one of resignation,” he said. “I’m sad and upset, of course, and angry, but overall I would say my reaction has been a lot more quiet and contemplative than I would have thought.”

ISIS has been justifying its destruction through religion, calling the targeted statues and shrines “false idols.” But Cairo-based Al-Azhar, the leading religious authority on Sunni Islam, said ISIS’s actions were “a major crime against the whole world.” And the jihadist group has been selling some of these antiquities to private collectors, a lucrative trade and one that has nothing to do with religion.

Other authorities may agree. Hatra is on the UNESCO World Heritage list, and Nimrud is a proposed UNESCO World Heritage Site; Iraq has submitted an application requesting its recognition as a fully fledged site. Destroying artifacts in both cities could be considered a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, according to Bokova and Lehr. The court did not comment in time for publication.

UNESCO is continuing to assess the destruction at the various sites, but no one has been able to confirm what and how much has been damaged, for security reasons. “We still need to assess more precisely,” said Bokova of the Hatra site. “Even if one of these statues was broken or damaged, it still is a huge tragedy.”

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, UNESCO has been trying to get various countries to help protect heritages sites. But with the death toll rising, few seemed to be paying attention. Some even criticized the agency for caring about antiquities when people were dying. “There was a huge humanitarian loss and people who were dying, refugees and internally displaced persons,” said Bokova. “This message was difficult to pass.”

Now, Bokova says, the link between protecting people and their heritage is better understood.

“This isn’t a choice between people or stone,” said Lehr. “Culture is part of who these people are, and this, ironically, is the cradle of civilization.”

While ancient sites in and around Iraq and Syria remain at risk, cultural heritage advocates now fear Libya could be ISIS’s next target. The country is turning into a hotbed of Islamic militancy. ISIS set up a training camp in the port city of Derna in December, beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in February and kidnapped nine foreign oil workers this week. The country also has a number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the archaeological sites of Cyrene, a Hellenic city, and Sabratha, an ancient trading post.

“We’re very concerned,” said Lehr. “We’re starting to hear reports of threats, of things happening in Libya.”

If she’s right, the group could be one step closer to taking Libyan lives.

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