

## ANTIQUITIES DESTRUCTION AND ILLICIT SALES AS SOURCES OF ISIS FUNDING AND PROPAGANDA

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The crimes of the Islamic State Organization (often called by its older name of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or ISIS) against important archeological sites and museums in Iraq and Syria are major and ongoing cultural catastrophes. ISIS leaders have stated that they are destroying pre-Islamic artifacts and structures because they are idolatrous, but their motivations and actions are significantly shrewder and more nuanced than this ultra-radical and propagandistic formulation. ISIS seeks spectacular acts of terrorism and defiance to bring in new recruits and to help intimidate opponents on the ground. It also seeks to project strength in order to limit potential resistance in the areas under its control. Beyond these concerns, the organization must generate funds in spite of U.S.-led efforts to bankrupt it. By both destroying and selling antiquities, ISIS is therefore seeking to meet some of its most important goals for organizational survival beyond its current battlefield setbacks.

While ISIS is not the only group looting sites in Syria and Iraq, ISIS actions are significantly more destructive than those of other groups, and in early July 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) warned that ISIS looting was taking place on an “industrial scale.” The funds obtained from the illicit sales of these items have correspondingly been estimated to be quite significant, although they are difficult to calculate with exactitude. ISIS’s ability to loot cultural heritage sights expanded dramatically in 2014. Early in that year, ISIS became the dominant anti-government opposition group in Syria by defeating the al-Nusra Front (now called the Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) throughout northern Syria and bringing the city of Raqqa under their complete control by January 13, 2014. Then, in June 2014, ISIS electrified the world with its northern Iraqi offensive when it captured a large expanse of new territory that included some of Iraq’s most important archeological sites and museums, bringing them under

its control. Although attacks on Iraq’s ancient heritage were somewhat slow in coming, by January 2015 militants had plundered the Mosul library and burned a number of books in front of the students in a foretaste of future actions.

While ISIS had been involved in opportunistic looting, their policy of destroying ancient sites as a propaganda event had not fully developed until they seized northern Iraq in 2014. This situation changed by late February 2015, when the organization released a short internet video showing the destruction of a number of ancient artifacts with sledgehammers and electric power drills at and around the Mosul Museum. This video was posted for its perceived propaganda value and its potential for impressing prospective recruits with spectacular acts of defiance against more cosmopolitan values. In March 2015, ISIS moved forward with its destructive policies using bulldozers and explosives to destroy the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud, southeast of Mosul. ISIS then vandalized the ancient city of Hatra 1 or 2 days after bulldozing large portions of Nimrud. ISIS members were seen searching for coins and other small items before the destruction with the bulldozers began. Later, looting was to become much more comprehensive, sophisticated, and well-organized.

Another important site that was vandalized in this time-frame was Nineveh, the oldest of the Assyrian cities. Also in 2015, ISIS vandalized the ancient Assyrian city of Khorsabad, which is north of Mosul, and also looted and destroyed large numbers of small and less well-known sites. ISIS did not immediately destroy the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria and initially promised not to do so in an apparent effort to gain the loyalty of the nearby citizens of Tadmur, who were known to oppose the Assad regime. This restraint did not last long, and as ISIS consolidated its rule, it began to destroy key structures, including two important temples within the ancient city. They were

somewhat disrupted in their capacity for looting, however, since most of the small and transportable objects had been removed from the city before it fell. ISIS fighters in Palmyra also seemed particularly unsophisticated and were excessively concerned with finding gold that was not there. The city was retaken by Syrian government forces in March 2016, but then lost again when ISIS captured it in December while the Syrian government was directing its attention to the fighting in Aleppo.

The ISIS leadership has been exceptionally alert for ways to improve its finances due to its ongoing needs for cash. The importance of black market antiquities sales would correspondingly become magnified as other sources of income produced results that were more limited or had dried up completely. U.S. and Iraqi efforts to weaken and then ultimately destroy ISIS have made clear progress, particularly regarding the interdiction of black market oil. Complicating matters further for ISIS, U.S. Government spokespersons have indicated that ISIS territory has shrunk from its maximum expansion, approximately 40-45 percent in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria, by May 2016. These areas have continued to shrink since then, and by January 2017, Iraqi forces had re-taken all major Iraqi cities and large towns except for the western half of the city of Mosul, which remains in ISIS hands.

As it struggles to remain in control of key areas in Iraq and Syria and to keep its organization alive, ISIS will continue to seek significant infusions of income to finance its operations, propaganda, recruiting, and administration of captured territory. ISIS fighters (and especially non-Iraqi and non-Syrian fighters in those countries) are well paid when the organization is flourishing, and the prospect of acceptable pay is usually among an array of incentives for some Middle East recruits with few options for living outside of poverty other than joining ISIS or another such group. Cutting off this avenue of funding is now especially important because of ISIS setbacks in transporting oil and imposing "taxes" on captive

populations. If ISIS can be impoverished, it will be a much easier adversary for friendly forces to defeat in the field. Nevertheless, ISIS resilience and resourcefulness must be carefully monitored as it seeks other ways to expand its revenue base that are just as unlikely as their project of antiquities smuggling once seemed. Additionally, the difference between defeating ISIS and eradicating it is important. A defeated ISIS can still function as a terrorist organization even after suffering significant defeats and sweeping territorial losses. A single important source of funding can at least allow the organization to maintain itself as it waits for opportunities that may once again allow it to expand. Whatever antiquities remain in ISIS hands or can still be stolen by ISIS can therefore be sold as an important part of an ISIS strategy to remain operational and relevant.

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