DEATH OF HISTORY

Witnessing Heritage Destruction in Syria and Iraq

Cultural heritage is the physical manifestation of a people's history and forms a significant part of their identity. Unfortunately, the destruction of that heritage has become an ongoing part of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. With the rise of ISIS and the increase of political instability, important cultural sites and irreplaceable collections are now at risk in these countries and across the region.

Mass murder, systematic terror, and forced resettlement have always been tools of ethnic and sectarian cleansing. But events in Syria and Iraq remind us that the erasure of cultural heritage, which removes all traces of a people from the landscape, is part of the same violent process. Understanding this loss and responding to it remain a challenge for us all.

Map of Syria and Iraq

Exhibit credits:
Smithsonian Institution
University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
American Association for the Advancement of Science
U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield

A Syrian inspects a damaged mosque following bomb attacks by Assad regime forces in the opposition-controlled al-Shaar neighborhood of Aleppo, Syria, on September 21, 2015.

(Photo by Ibrahim Ebu Leys/Anadolu Agency/ Getty Images)

A still image from an ISIS propaganda video in March 2015 shows the demolition of standing neo-Assyrian ruins dating between 1300 BC and 610 BC at the ancient site of Nimrud, Iraq.

A still image from an ISIS propaganda video shows extremists destroying a Neo-Assyrian sculpture dating between 800 BC and 600 BC from the ancient site of Nineveh in Mosul, Iraq.

HISTORY LOST

Conflict in Syria and Iraq

Recent violence in Syria and Iraq has shattered daily life, leaving over 250,000 people dead and over 12 million displaced. Beginning in 2011, civil protests in Damascus and Daraa against the Assad government were met with a severe crackdown, leading to a civil war and creating a power vacuum within which terror groups like ISIS have flourished.

This conflict has taken a devastating toll on the region's famed cultural heritage. The Syrian air force has dropped explosive barrel bombs, leveling ancient cities like Aleppo and other historic sites. ISIS has demolished historic and religious buildings across Syria and Iraq and smashed objects it has deemed idolatrous. Cultural objects have also been stolen and sold into the illicit antiquities trade.

HISTORY LOST

Looted Sites

Political and economic instability lead to the pillage of archaeological sites. Objects found by looters usually disappear into the illicit antiquities trade. Finds with little perceived value are often destroyed. This loss of remains and context is detrimental to the ability of archaeologists to understand and reconstruct the ancient past.

The devastating impact of site looting can be seen at the Roman frontier city of Dura-Europos in Syria, home to the earliest known depiction of Jesus Christ and to one of the oldest synagogues in the world. By April 2014, 76 percent of the area within its ancient city walls had been pillaged. Outside the walls, looters opened some 3,750 pits between 2011 and 2014. Dura-Europos is now under ISIS control.

Extensive looting inside and outside the ancient wall of the Roman city of Dura-Europos is visible in this image taken April 2, 2014.

(DigitalGlobe/U.S. Department of State/NextView License/Analysis by AAAS)

Silver coins, possibly from the Umayyad period, recovered during the Abu Sayyaf raid in eastern Syria.

(State Department photo/Public Domain)

A page of the leather-bound Christian manuscript, with a cross and a possible Aramaic inscription, recovered during the Abu Sayyaf raid in eastern Syria.

(State Department photo/Public Domain)

Artifacts recovered during the Abu Sayyaf raid in eastern Syria. The inset shows an Iraq museum number, indicating the object was part of Iraq's national collections.

(State Department photo/Public Domain)

HISTORY LOST

Plunder for Profit

Throughout this conflict, there have been many reports of ISIS's involvement in the illicit antiquities trade. In May 2015, U.S. Special Operations Forces found definitive evidence and recovered hundreds of archaeological and historical objects in a raid to capture the ISIS leader Abu Sayyaf in eastern Syria. Many of these artifacts were stolen from the Mosul Museum in Iraq, which is under ISIS occupation.

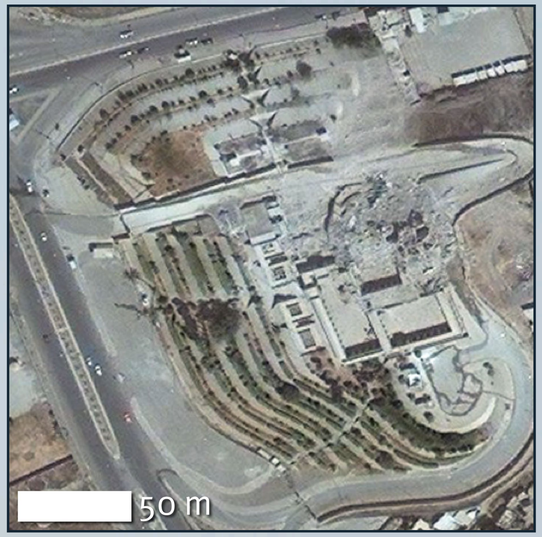
Although it can take years for looted cultural property to surface, the FBI has received credible reports that recently pillaged objects from Syria and Iraq are entering the international art market. An FBI advisory has warned art collectors and dealers to avoid purchasing objects that might have been looted or sold by terrorist groups.

HISTORY LOST

Erasing Culture and Identity

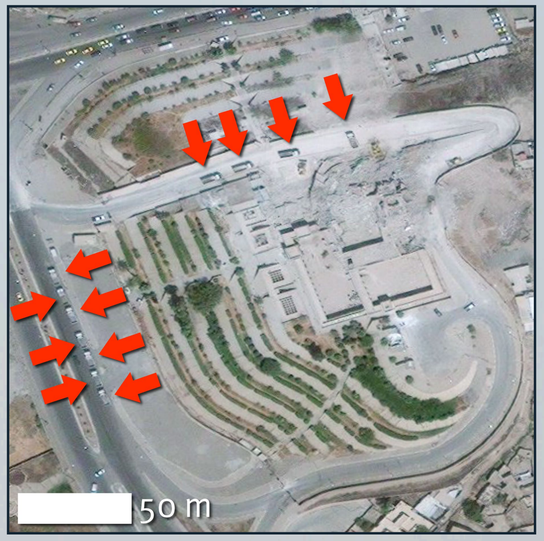
The intentional destruction of cultural heritage aims to terrorize civilian populations. ISIS employs this tactic widely. The terror group has leveled churches, mosques, and other shrines vital to minority communities. Their targets have also included rare standing Assyrian ruins at Nimrud in Iraq and standing Roman temples at Palmyra in Syria.

ISIS even tries to erase the fragments of what it destroys. Attempts to cleanse the landscape can be most clearly seen at Mosul, Iraq. In July 2014, ISIS targeted the Tomb of the Prophet Jonah for demolition. Following the explosion of the building, ISIS brought in earthmoving equipment to wipe the site clean.



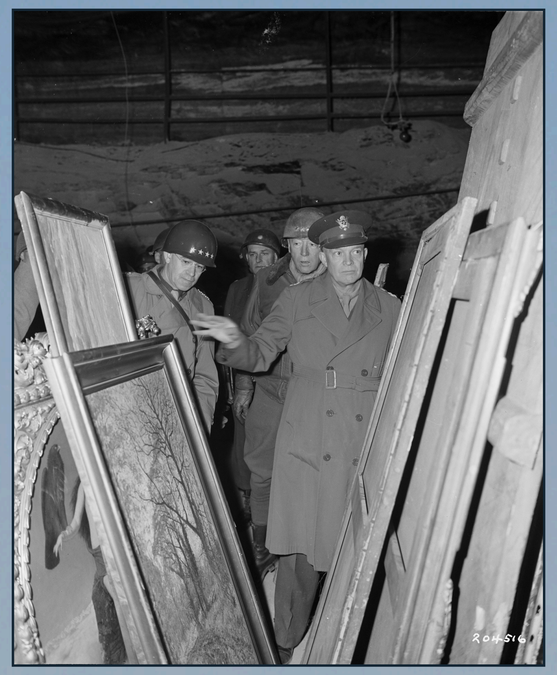
Destruction of the Tomb of the Prophet Jonah (Nebi Yunus) is shown in this July 30, 2014, satellite image.

(AAAS Geospatial Technologies Project)



Red arrows point to heavy trucks that ISIS brought to remove any trace of the Tomb on August 2, 2014.

(AAAS Geospatial Technologies Project)



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower (foreground), Lt. Gen. General Omar N. Bradley (left), Lt. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr. (right), and Maj. Irving Leonard Moskowitz (back center) examine artwork in the Merkers salt mine in Germany on April 12, 1945.

(National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD)

The international symbol of the Blue Shield, representing protected cultural property, is seen on the roof of the National Museum of Iraq in this 2004 photograph.

(Photo by John Russell)

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Protecting the Past during Conflict

Historically, the United States has led efforts to protect cultural property during periods of war. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued General Order No. 100, also known as the Lieber Code, which prohibited the intentional targeting of museums and art collections. These instructions became the basis of future international treaties to safeguard cultural property during conflict.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower followed this tradition during World War II, ordering the Allied Expeditionary Force to protect cultural sites whenever possible. Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives teams also worked to return artworks looted by Nazi Germany. This wartime experience led to the adoption of the 1954 Hague Convention and the introduction of the Blue Shield as the marker of protected cultural property.

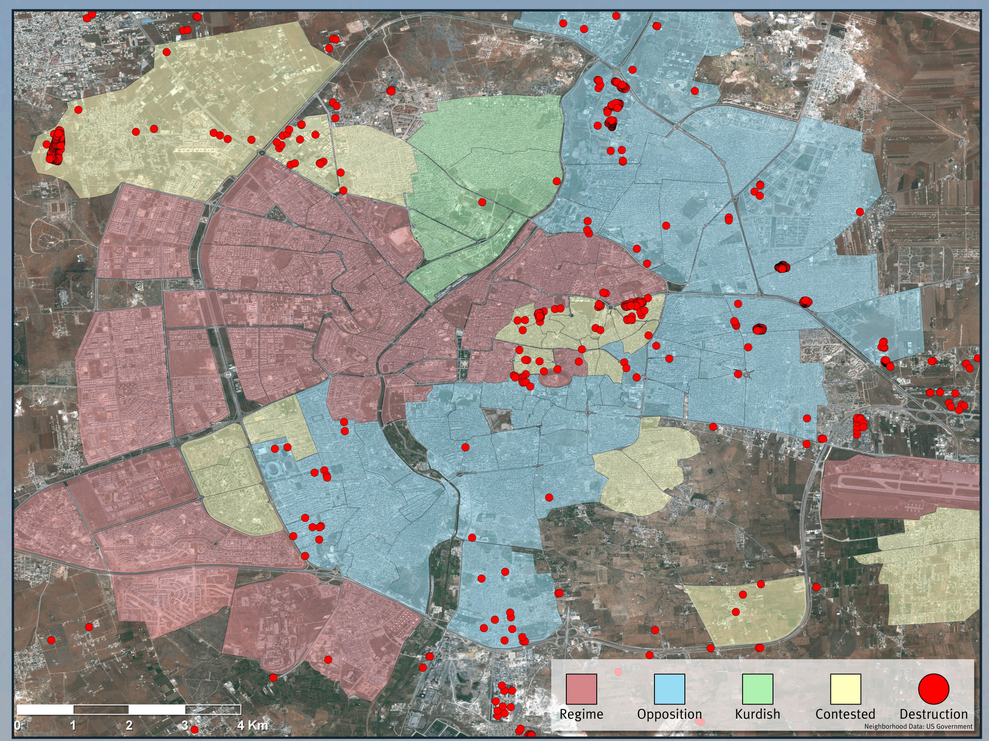
WHAT CAN BE DONE

Identifying Sites, Documenting Damage

The 1954 Hague Convention, which the U.S. ratified in 2009, requires that all Parties avoid targeting cultural heritage except in cases of imperative military necessity. The U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield provides the U.S. military with inventories of important sites to avoid.

Efforts are underway to monitor damage and analyze extremist motives. With National Science Foundation support, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Smithsonian Institution, and University of Maryland are studying intentional heritage destruction and extremist violence.

The U.S. Department of State has joined with the American Schools of Oriental Research to track looting at archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq. UNOSAT and the University of Oxford are also documenting looting and damage in the region.



Analysis by the Geospatial Technologies Project of the AAAS, showing distribution of destruction in Aleppo, Syria, in 2013. Pink areas are under Syrian regime control. Blue areas: opposition control. Green areas: Kurdish control. Yellow areas are contested. Red dots indicate visible damage or destruction.

Iraqi heritage professionals in a 2015 training workshop present the results of their assignment to pack artifacts using only materials from their dorm rooms.

(Photo by Katharyn Hanson)

This December 2014 photograph shows the efforts of curators at Syria's Ma'arra Museum to protect their Byzantine mosaic collections with the assistance of the SHOSI Project.

(Photo by the SHOSI Project)

Extensive use of sandbags allowed the Ma'arra Museum's mosaic collection to survive bombardment by the Assad air force on June 15, 2015.

(Photo by the SHOSI Project)

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Taking Action on the Ground

Syrian and Iraqi heritage professionals are struggling to protect museum collections and important cultural sites. In 2013, the Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI) Project was formed in order to offer support. To date, this initiative has provided disaster preparedness training to Iraqi and Syrian museum curators and has supported on-the-ground emergency preservation projects, including an effort to protect the mosaic collection at the Ma'arra Museum in Syria.

In June 2015, the Ma'arra Museum was hit by an explosive barrel bomb dropped by the Syrian air force. Although the historic museum building experienced significant damage, sandbags placed during the emergency project diffused the blast force and saved the mosaics.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Restricting the Illicit Antiquities Trade

The United States addresses archaeological site pillage by restricting the import of commonly looted archaeological and ethnological objects. These trade controls are designed to decrease the incentive to loot by eliminating markets for undocumented material. ISIS may be profiting from the illicit antiquities trade through imports to the U.S.

In February 2015, the U.N. Security Council called upon all countries to restrict the import of cultural property looted from Syria and Iraq. Existing U.S. law controls the trade in Iraqi cultural property, but it does not cover Syrian material.

Looters at the site of the ancient Roman city of Dura-Europos, Syria, in April 2014.

(Photo by the SHOSI Project)