

## Beyond Cultured Fear: Combating Terrorist Antiquities Looting in Syria and Iraq

After seizing territory stretching from Aleppo to Baghdad in early 2014 and establishing its extremist caliphate, the Islamic State (known also as IS, ISIS, or ISIL) has wrought destruction on major archaeological and historical sites in Syria, namely at Apamea, Dura-Europos, Raqqa, and Palmyra. They improperly “excavate” archaeological sites, eliminating possibilities for scholarly advancement due to the loss of context. Palmyra, named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980 (Harmanşah 2015), is the most famous of these not only because of its archaeological significance, but also because IS has made it the poster child for its destructive agenda. IS also controls the illicit antiquities market in its region, and has looted over 1,000 historical sites to date.

Perhaps more disturbing to an archaeologist than this is Ömür Harmanşah’s statement that “the Islamic State has developed an unusual practice of deliberately damaging archaeological sites and museums, alongside its continued attacks on local shrines and holy places that are dear to local communities” in order to further their extremist agenda (Harmanşah 2015). There is substantial evidence not only that IS uses the illegal transport and sale of antiquities to fund their nefarious doings, but also that this makes up a significant percentage of their budget (Bogdanos 2011; Moody 2014). The recent push by archaeologists, anthropologists, and classicists to protect the Middle East’s cultural heritage is merely the beginning of how academics can educate the public about an issue we find to be abhorrent.

Despite the fact that the ruins of Palmyra now literally lie in ruins, the site may not yet be beyond help. In early October 2015, UNESCO approved a suggestion put forth by Italy’s culture minister, Dario Franceschini, to send out their infamous Blue Helmets

to protect heritage sites worldwide, Palmyra included. The Blue Helmets are peacekeepers, not necessarily soldiers in the sense that they go on the offensive. Their deployment is a preventive and reactionary measure, not an act of war. UN peacekeepers may not even be an effective solution to the problem of IS and Islamist militants (Gowan 2015). The 2003 bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad destroyed the UN's projected impartiality in that even a neutral, peaceful organization could be targeted by terrorist organizations. UN peacekeepers would not be able to fight back and protect the sites or people they are protecting because they do not all possess the equipment and training to combat terrorists and insurgents.

As scholars of the classical world, we can use our positions as educators to raise awareness about antiquities looting, the importance of cultural heritage, and the connection between terrorist financing and the illicit antiquities market. We have an opportunity to actually act as stewards of cultural history and heritage, as Childs and Sullivan suggest in *Our Collective Responsibility*. They remark that archaeological stewardship requires that we preserve and protect existing and emerging collections (Childs and Sullivan 2004). With this in mind, scholars may now raise awareness about this issue. They may also be able to help create better, more comprehensive policies that protect antiquities, or at the very least do not allow them to be used for such heinous acts of barbarism and inhumanity as they are used by IS. Those who believe in the protection and preservation of cultural heritage must now unify in order to combat the illicit antiquities trade, perhaps we need not create a savior. It is time to stand behind a principle, an idea, that our heritage is worth saving and that it does not deserve to be pawned and spoiled by those who would use it for their own nefarious purposes.

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