

Reasons and Aims Behind the Islamic State Destruction of Ancient Mesopotamian Cultural Heritage Sites

Dominika Pawlina

International Leaders Forum Foundation, Poland

This paper deals with the problem of devastation of cultural heritage by the Islamic State. The great emphasis is put on distinguishing reasons and aims of such behaviours and devastation performed on the ancient Mesopotamian artefacts, monuments, and artistic relics of the past civilization. The focus was put on Akkadian, Assyrian, and Sumerian heirloom due to its immense impact on the consecutive cultures of the region, neighbouring lands, and several distant societies. Problem of destruction is presented alongside with the short history of the Islamic State group emergence and its characteristics. Furthermore, this paper recalls the UNESCO definition of the term “cultural heritage”.

Keywords: Islamic State, Mesopotamia, destruction, cultural heritage, armed conflict

Introduction

Since the very beginning of humankind, culture has been a core feature of its history. People were decorating walls of caves since 33rd century B.C. (Smithsonian Magazine, 2016). It is said to be done not only for the artistic expression but also as memoir for future generations. Knowledge and memory about ancestors, their life, faith and social capabilities, gives a solid foundation for understanding who we are as communities and nations in the present times. History and heritage of country gives a substantial bedrock for establishing a common identity of a nation and it brings together its society. For centuries, people cherished and analyzed rites, places of worship, and the impact on culture. Common heritage brings people together; ideas, understanding of life, traditions and history create in individuals the feeling of affiliation to a greater group.

Cultural heritage has a wide range of social values. Relics that survived over the years are not only the monuments of the past but also objects that modern communities look up to. This strong emotional value that brings people together is remarkable; it is noticeable throughout the history of humankind countless times. From tribal peripheries, ancient civilizations, antique to the 1st and 2nd millennium, culture was a component of the human identity throughout centuries.

This paper will examine the case of devastation of cultural heritage. It will focus on Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its acts in the area of Syria and Iraq, where the bedrock of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations started. First, it is crucial to define the phenomenon of mankind legacy and explain the meaning behind the phrase “cultural heritage”. Further, the paper will display targets, scale, and character of current destructions in the region. General overview of targeted objects will be outlined with following in reference of

destroyed ancient Mesopotamian sites, monuments, and relics, that are a victim of ISIL ideology. Later, the reasons behind groups' decisions to wipe out any other culture or beliefs than Salafi ones will be explored. In the closing parts, the aims set by ISIL considering cultural heritage sites in the region are going to be presented and analyzed.

This is a very important subject not only for Middle East but for the entire world. Ancient sites that are located in the region are the foundations of the civilizations that spread all around the world. Apart from that, it is an irreparable loss for future generations and scholars to not see and examine relics of the past from this region.

During armed conflicts, devastation of cultural heritage and monuments can have several reasons. Alberto Frigerio (2014) in his paper stated that the most common reasons are: "military necessity, psychological warfare, inter-ethnic hatred, religious radicalism, and planned/opportunistic looting". Sometimes archeological sites are destroyed because of the military character of the place in the past and the possibility of its usage during the current war or in the future. Predominantly the decision behind destruction of cultural heritage is much more simple—to break the spirits of society engaged in the conflict but also to have a stable and fresh foundation in the future for setting the assailant ideology. That was also an issue with ISIL during their fights in Syria and invasion of Iraq. First to wipe out any remains—of the culture, religion, beliefs—in general any relic of the past that was before or is not compatible with current ideology of ISIL. Further to have a fresh environment for setting their own culture, history, and statehood.

Short Characteristics of the Group

Islamic State, through the decades was changing its overall form, name, and members, but invariably has stayed as one of the more dangerous armed groups. Known under several names such as "Islamic State", "ISIS", or "ISIL", Islamic State, is an armed group that has emerged out of al-Qaeda, which began to diminish in terms of power in Iraq, and which was created by Sunni fighters, following the invasion that was led by the United States forces (BBC, 2018). IS formerly participated in the rebellion that was performed against Bashar al-Assad, the current President of Syria (BBC, 2018).

During Syria's "Arab Spring", Bashar al-Assad declared an amnesty in the fall of 2011, among the prisoners who were jihadists and religious extremists. In fact, the investigation of the intelligence officers of the United States and Jordan has shown that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a member of al-Qaeda at the time and who was sent to Syria government by CIA, was among the prisoners that were discharged by Bashar al-Assad (Warrick, 2016, p. 334). He came from Jordan to pledge allegiance to Osama Bin Laden, who founded al-Qaeda in Iraq, or "AQI" in 2004 (BBC, 2015). After Osama Bin Laden's death in 2006, AQI formed a subsidiary group which came to be titled as Islamic State in Iraq, or is also known as "ISI" (BBC, 2015). Until Baghdadi's ascendance, who was a detainee in the US, to ISI's leadership, the group was significantly weakened by the strikes of the US military. ISI gained a major power again with Baghdadi and in April 2013, Baghdadi declared the creation of ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) (BBC, 2015). It also became known with the initials ISIL, mostly recognized in European countries (BBC, 2018).

The leader of the group, a young scholar who is a professor of Islamic law that holds doctorate degree, as Warrick states, "was new to the job" (Warrick, 2016, p. 335). Grown up as Ibrahim Awad al-Badri, he decided to use his jihadist name "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi" (Warrick, 2016, p. 336). Baghdadi, whose real full name is Ibrahim bin Awwad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Qurayshi and who is from the Bobadri tribe, rose to the leadership

in 2010 (Atwan, 2001, pp. 104-105). He is suggested by Atwan depending on his hearings from the people that met Baghdadi in person, that he is a quite influential leader in terms of his charisma, and he is indeed a very intelligent person (Atwan, 2001, pp. 105-106).

Until December 2013, ISIL stayed mostly on the territory of Syria, but at the end of 2013, it started performing attacks in Iraqi cities such as Falluja, Mosul, and Baghdad (BBC, 2015; 2018). IS announced the forming of a caliphate and replaced its name with “Islamic State”, establishing its network among the cities over which it gained control (BBC, 2015). In 2014, the group enclosed a large size of territory in northern and western Iraq, and demanded the formation of a “caliphate”, later becoming known as “Islamic State” (BBC, 2015; 2018).

Islamic State has charged itself with a supposedly sacred religious duty. It officially announced its establishment of a “caliphate”, which is a state that is governed through Islamic law. The primary objective of IS is to exterminate the entirety of obstacles that are standing in the way of the restoration of God’s rule on Earth and to provide maximum amount of defense and support for the Muslim community (BBC, 2018). One of the tools used by ISIL is destruction of cultural heritage and historical sites of the invaded nation, region, community for the further implication of Salafism, which is a radical branch of Sunni Islam¹.

Definition of Cultural Heritage

Appellation of “cultural heritage” expresses the ways of living developed of a community and its passing on from generation to generation, that also includes customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions, and values².

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the term “cultural heritage” is divided into two categories: tangible and intangible.

Tangible cultural heritage:

- Movable cultural heritage (paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts);
- Immovable cultural heritage (monuments, archaeological sites, and so on);
- Underwater cultural heritage (shipwrecks, underwater ruins and cities).

Intangible cultural heritage:

- Oral traditions, performing arts, rituals³.

Targets, Scale, and Characteristics of Destruction

The main common component of targeted places, buildings, objects is their religious character. Anything considered as *shirk*⁴ should be destroyed, that does not only apply to pre-Islamic commodities, but also every religion other than Salafism, including religious minorities such as Yazidis, Kurds, and Christians that are placed at the territories occupied by Islamic State (Romey, 2015b). Jihadi fighters have destroyed a great

¹ “*Salafism*”. Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, August 2016. Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-255>.

² “*What is cultural heritage*”. Culture in Development. Retrieved from http://www.cultureindevelopment.nl/Cultural_Heritage/What_is_Cultural_Heritage.

³ “*Definition of cultural heritage*”. UNESCO. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/illicit-trafficking-of-cultural-property/unesco-database-of-national-cultural-heritage-laws/frequently-asked-questions/definition-of-the-cultural-heritage/>.

⁴ *Shirk* (Arabic: “making a partner [of someone]”), in Islām, idolatry, polytheism, and the association of God with other deities. The Qur’ān (Islāmic scripture) stresses in many verses that God does not share his powers with any partner (*sharīk*). Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/shirk>.

number of mosques, churches, tombs, antique palaces, and places of worship. After estimating the losses, researches stated that most of destroyed historical and cultural sites are connected with Shia and Sufi sects (Romey, 2015b).

Ruining such sites has also an important role in further spreading of the only right branch of Islam. When all *shirk* cult places will be destroyed, it will be easier to convert people living in occupied area to Salafism.

When it comes to the extent of devastation caused by ISIL, this paper will show the scale of ravages committed on Ancient Mesopotamian archeological sites and objects. Syria and Iraq are the cradle of civilization understood as such. Great Sumerian Empire that arose in the basin of Tigris and Euphrates left great amount of archeological treasures, one of the oldest languages and unique culture (Bielicki, 1966, p. 48), that was later a bedrock of Assyrian strength (Van De Mieroop, 1997, p. 95). Relics from this period were mostly demolished and looted in Iraq.

One of the archeological sites occupied and destroyed between 2014 and 2016 was Nimrud, called in ancient times Kalhu⁵. Situated at the east bank of Tigris, it was established in the 14th century B.C. but not until early 8000 B.C., the city was said to be administrative capital under the reign of King Ashurbanipal II (Williams, 2015a). Iraq's Vice-Minister of Culture for Antiquities and Tourism Affairs said that "An estimated 80 percent of the site has been reduced to rubble". Qais Rasheed stated that among destroyed relics was nearly 2,900 years old construction of the royal ziggurat, of which destruction the world was provided with the horrible information in April 2015. Among bulldozed constructions that were afterwards pushed into the Euphrates, ISIL also wiped out palace of Ashurbanipal II (Buffenstein, 2017). Palace walls were covered in reliefs from 879 B.C. and inscriptions about achievements of first king of Kalhu⁶.

In the year 2014, ISIL fighters started occupation of Nenevah (Williams, 2015b). Situated in modern day, Mosul has proofs of human settlement dated back in 6000 B.C. It was a religious centre of love and war goddess name Ishtar⁷. During the period of occupation, many symbols of both modern and ancient Mosul were destroyed including the palace of Assyrian King Sennacherib. One of them was part of the fortification called "Adad Gate", that was dated to be more than 2,500 years old (Buffenstein, 2017) and the statue of Lamassu⁸ guardian of Nirgal Gate (Curry, 2015).

Mosul is surrounded with ancient artefacts and archeological sites, only few miles distance from the suburbs of the city with Khorsabad—an ancient Assyrian city that was ruled in 8th century by King Sargon II. Inside the palace, archeologists found very well preserved and remarkable statues and relief representing royal processions and victories of Assyrian kings and armies. Most of the antiques were transported to Europe in the mid-19th and beginning of 20th century (Curry, 2015).

The biggest loss among ancient archeological sites in Syria was on the other hand archaic city Mari (modern day Tell Hariri) that was situated in the eastern part of the country, at the west bank of Euphrates river. Established in the bronze age, the city was an important player on ancient political arena between 3000 and 1600 B.C.⁹. Because of the uncertain atmosphere in the region, most information about destruction of the site was

⁵ "The Nimrud Project" at Oracc.org. Retrieved from <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/nimrud/index.html>.

⁶ "Ashurnasirpal II". Ancient History Encyclopaedia. Retrieved from https://www.ancient.eu/Ashurnasirpal_II/.

⁷ "Nineveh". Ancient History Encyclopaedia. Retrieved from <https://www.ancient.eu/nineveh/>.

⁸ Lamassu—The famous Assyrian winged bull-man who adorned palaces and temples to frighten off the forces of chaos. The Lamassu were protective spirits who were sometimes depicted as the Bull-Man (human above the waist and bull below) but, more often as a human-headed bull or lion with wings. Retrieved from <https://www.ancient.eu/article/221/the-mesopotamian-pantheon/>.

⁹ "Mari". Ancient History Encyclopaedia. Retrieved from <https://www.ancient.eu/mari/>.

taken from satellite images that showed evidence of extensive looting, especially in the area of royal palace (Curry, 2015).

Reasons for Devastation

There are multiple reasons behind ISIL devastation of cultural heritage. Adoration of idols is indicated as the main motive in terms of destruction of ancient relicts. Christopher Jones who is a PhD student at Columbia University said “By invoking the sins of *shirk*, or idolatry, the Islamic State is trying to establish their legitimacy as the proper heirs to the legacy of earlier ‘destroyers of idols’ (...)”. Mr. Jones was documenting scale of destruction at the archeological sites destroyed by ISIL fighters in Iraq (Romey, 2015b). Followers of Salafism believe they practice the purest version of Islam. This branch of Sunni supports Sharia law, is against any form of idolatry (believes that even tombs and shrines are symbols of idolism), and refuses to introduce any religious innovations or changes and also considers Sufis and Shites as heretics (Romey, 2015a).

Subsequent reason that also has its roots in religious ideology is to protect Muslim community (BBC, 2018). However, this apply only to people following Salafism; worshipers of any other branch of Islam are called “near enemy” (Romey, 2015b).

When it comes to ancient monuments and archeological sites, the fact that they are not religiously worshipped and are only relics of the past history and culture does not matter for ISIL fighters. According to Islamic State beliefs, pre-Islamic sites have been destroyed because of “disbelieving in Allah and His messengers”. Another truth spread by the group is connected with archeology as such, that any other culture, history, relics that were before Islam “should not be excavated and restored, but viewed with ‘disgust and hatred’” (Romey, 2015b). That means that people of Syria and Iraq and any other region that is under ISIL control should not be proud of its history, achievements, unique art and should not be consider as a cultural heritage in the eyes of Islamic State.

Aims Behind ISIL Actions

In the materials published by Islamic State, one of the jihadis says openly that “Whenever we take control of a piece of land, we remove the symbols of polytheism and spread monotheism in it” (Romey, 2015b). That is why Islamic State and its followers are taking actions to “eradicate visual evidence of belief systems that don’t follow its strict interpretation of Islam” (Conant, 2014). Apart from the obvious aim which is the destruction of everything connected with any other culture, religion, heritage, historical sites than Salafism Islam ones, there is a list of more practical ones when it comes in terms of war and occupation of land. There are three main aims that can be listed as an outcome of ISIL actions.

Panic and terror is a very powerful measure that can keep local communities under the heel of invader. ISIL uses psychological forms of implicating their regime at occupied areas. Instability that is created by violence is a powerful tool that jihadi group takes advantage of. Scared population seeks only to a survival and is trying to adapt to current situation, so the rebellious moods are reduced to a minimum (Romey, 2015a).

The scale of destruction especially in Syria is enormous. People are living in extreme poverty and in constant fear. For many of them, religion and prayers are comforting way to somehow survive the war. That is why ISIL and its information network propaganda tools are convincing population that West and the rest of the world care only about ancient artefacts and not the local mosques that are being destroyed. This is also a tool to possess more followers, that is standing behind the aim of Islamic State army enlargement (Romey, 2015b).

ISIL is in constant fights in the Middle East since early 2010's. Fights are very costly not only in terms of money but also human resources. Group leaders for example used the destruction at Nimrud archeological site as a tool of destruction (Romey, 2015b). The massacre on ancient artefacts was an aftermath of the defeat of ISIS in city Tikrit in the Spring of 2015¹⁰.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate ISIL motives and aims that are standing behind violation of cultural heritage in the occupied area. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant motivates its actions mostly with religious causes. The hatred towards any idolatry images is strongly rooted in the radical branch of Islam—Salafism.

The destruction on the other hand is multidimensional and impacts many different expectations. Jihadists not only celebrate their triumphs by devastating archeological sites and later posting it in internet but also are trying to draw the worlds and its supporters' attention from their defeats by doing exactly the same thing. In the days of digital data and information, this is the quickest way to spread the propaganda among their followers.

Summing up, there can be listed five main aims for the devastation:

- (1) Fighting with idolatry;
- (2) Spreading panic and terror;
- (3) Tool to possess more followers;
- (4) Drawing attention away from defeat;
- (5) Ensuring fighters in the strength of ISIL.

References

- Atwan, A.-B. (2001). *Islamic State: The digital caliphate* (New edition). London: Saqi Books.
- BBC. (2015). *What is 'Islamic State'?* December 2, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144?fbclid=IwAR0-RPGrlWQFudwv7TSG6vmfEtXRMekNngE0P7HfX_6ZZmxcjOiYgzWtU
- BBC. (2018). *Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps*. March 28, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>
- Bielicki, M. (1966). *Zapomniany Świat Sumerów*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Buffenstein, A. (2017). *A monumental loss: Here are the most significant cultural heritage sites that ISIS has destroyed to date*. Artnet News, May 30, 2017. Retrieved from <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/isis-cultural-heritage-sites-destroyed-950060>
- Conant, E. (2014). *Q&A: Why Sunni extremists are destroying ancient religious sites in Mosul*. National Geographic, August 1, 2014. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140802-iraq-mosul-christian-muslim-islamic-state-syria-history/>
- Curry, A. (2015). *On ISIS's path of ruin, many sites of global importance*. National Geographic, March 12, 2015. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/03/150312-isis-destruction-looting-ancient-sites-iraq-syria-archaeology/>
- Frigerio, A. (2014). *Heritage under attack: A critical analysis of the reasons behind the destruction of cultural property in the event of armed conflict*. Aedon. Rivista di arti e diritto online, numero 2, 2014. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/8412716/Heritage_Under_Attack_A_Critical_Analysis_of_the_Reasons_Behind_the_Destruction_of_Cultural_Property_in_the_Event_of_Armed_Conflict

¹⁰ The Second Battle of Tikrit—began on March 2 and lasted until April 4, when Iraqi commanders confirmed that the last pocket of Islamic State militants in the city had been eliminated.

Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lessons-from-the-second-b_b_7049430?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnVnbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAABDckwOrL89tZsghpII_xi3AFBb014x_Lot1pRtaJQ2eW1wRtiLWCf0yJTtBOIsfaYx7W_5Am_iQ8F5c3ga9bN_kNqSArhqj4LT7k50Yj-1uLZZYSH2bHdLzcOE7wPKweIaci-9Lba599VVYfUL5CkxvSgj4x5obJ-TEsJgoD8J

It was also a very important city for the Islamic State fighters from the physiological perspective since it was a hometown of Saddam Hussein. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31689433>.

- Romey, K. (2015a). *ISIS destruction of ancient sites hits mostly Muslim targets*. National Geographic, July 2, 2015. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150702-ISIS-Palmyra-destruction-salafism-sunni-shiite-sufi-Islamic-State/>
- Romey, K. (2015b). *Why ISIS hates archaeology and blew up ancient Iraqi palace*. National Geographic, April 14, 2015. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150414-why-islamic-state-destroyed-assyrian-palace-nimrud-iraq-video-isis-isil-archaeology/>
- Smithsonian Magazine. (2016). *A journey to the oldest cave paintings in the world*. January 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/journey-oldest-cave-paintings-world-180957685/>
- Van De Mierop, M. (1997). *The ancient Mesopotamian city*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Warrick, J. (2016). *Black flags: The rise of ISIS* (Reprint edition). New York: Anchor.
- Williams, A. R. (2015a). *ISIS bulldozes one-of-a-kind ancient palace in Iraq*. National Geographic, March 6, 2015. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/03/150106-isis-bulldozes-assyrian-palace-nimrud-iraq-archaeology/>
- Williams, A. R. (2015b). *ISIS smashes priceless, ancient statues in Iraq*. National Geographic, February 27, 2015. Retrieved from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/02/150227-islamic-militants-destroy-statues-mosul-iraq-video-archaeology/>
- Wright, E. A. (2015). *The destruction of cultural heritage sites in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant*. Museum Studies Department, SUNY Buffalo State College, December 14, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/33152451/The_Destruction_of_Cultural_Heritage_Sites_in_Iraq_and_Syria_by_the_Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_Levant