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ISIS Bulldozing of Ancient Nimrud Site in Iraq Stirs Outrage

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By RICK GLADSTONE and SOMINI SENGUPTA MARCH 6, 2015



A relief of a mythical creature in the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Nimrud, Iraq. Militants used bulldozers and other vehicles to vandalize the site. DeAgostini/Getty Images

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News that Islamic State fighters had bulldozed and vandalized the ancient city of Nimrud in northern [Iraq](#) provoked outrage on Friday, as archaeologists despaired that the militant group was systematically destroying priceless antiquities in a wellspring of civilization.

Islamic religious scholars joined

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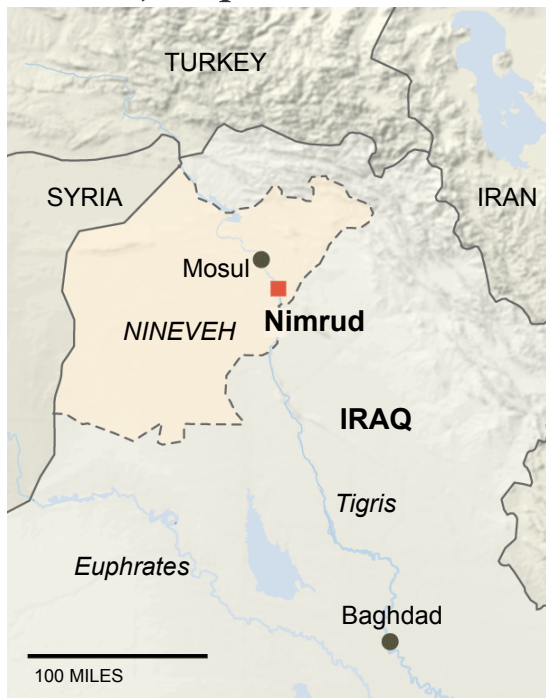
common cause with governments, museums and other international preservationists to denounce what they described as an odious affront.

Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam’s leading religious institution, based in Cairo, called the destruction “a major crime against the entire world.”

The top cultural official at the United Nations called the destruction a war crime that should be taken up by the International Criminal Court, and she vowed to do “whatever is needed” to stop the plundering by the Islamic State, also known as [ISIS](#) and ISIL.

“This is yet another attack against the Iraqi people, reminding us that nothing is safe from the cultural cleansing underway in the country,” said the official, Irina Bokova, who is director general of [Unesco](#), the United Nations organization for education, science and culture.

Nimrud, Iraq



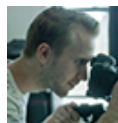
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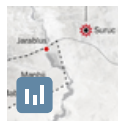
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targets human lives, minorities, and is marked by the systematic destruction of humanity’s ancient heritage,” Ms. Bokova said in a [statement](#) on the [Unesco](#) website.

[Iraq’s](#) Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities [confirmed on Thursday](#) that Islamic State militants had used bulldozers and other heavy vehicles to vandalize an important archaeological site at

Nimrud, about 18 miles southeast of Mosul, the northern Iraqi city seized by the group in June.

Nimrud was founded more than 3,300 years ago as a central city of the Assyrian empire, and today is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in the world. Its remaining statues, frescos and other works are widely revered.

“Every person on the planet should pause after yesterday’s violent attack on humanity’s heritage and understand [ISIS](#)’ intent not only to control the future of humankind but also to erase and rewrite our past,” said Deborah M. Lehr, chairwoman and co-founder of the Antiquities Coalition, a Washington-based archaeological advocacy group.

“We must unite with global intention to preserve our common heritage and resist ISIS’ effort to steal not only our future freedom but also our history, the very roots of our civilization,” she said in a [statement](#) on its website.

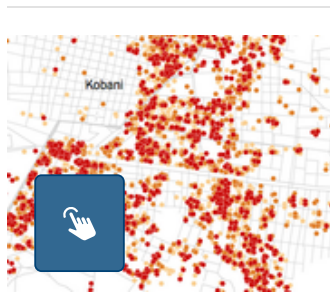
The Nimrud destruction came a week after Islamic State militants videotaped themselves [marauding through Mosul’s museum](#), using sledgehammers and torches to destroy statues, artifacts and books. “They’re taking us back to the dark ages, those people,” said Mohamed Alhakim, Iraq’s ambassador to the United Nations. “They are thugs.”

Ms. Bokova, who was visiting the United Nations headquarters in New York on Friday to attend a Security Council meeting over the plundering of artifacts in northern Iraq, said in an interview that “protecting cultural heritage is not a luxury, it’s an imperative.”

Asserting that she had not been taken seriously over worries about cultural looting and destruction at the start of the Syrian conflict four years ago, Ms. Bokova

expressed hope that governments around the world, spurred by a [Security Council resolution passed nearly four months ago](#), would now strengthen customs officers and courts to crack down on pilfered antiquities.

Ms. Bokova said Unesco had been working with auction houses, Interpol, and officials from several countries to track the trade in stolen objects.



Graphic: From Syria, an Atlas of a Country in Ruins

Islamic State leaders have sought to justify the cultural destruction by asserting that statues and other artifacts violate Islamic prohibitions on idol worship. But religious authorities have called all such destruction barbaric and anti-Islamic.

Archaeologists and antiquities experts have also accused the Islamic State of profiting from many

plundered antiquities. Some have said the looters take small objects that they can sell, and destroy those that are too heavy to be easily smuggled.

Abdulmir al-Hamdani, an Iraqi archaeologist who specializes in Mesopotamia at the Department of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, said in a telephone interview that Mosul residents had seen Islamic State fighters removing artifacts in order to sell them. He expressed alarm that the next target could be the ruins of Hatra, about 68 miles southwest of Mosul, which is also within the area controlled by the Islamic State.

Hatra, thought to have been founded in the third or second century B.C., became an important religious center that was ruled by a succession of Arabian princes, and is one of several Unesco [World Heritage sites](#) in the region.

“I’m really worried about Hatra now,” Mr. Hamdani said. “ISIS has a plan to destroy them one by one.”

Susan Ackerman, a religion professor at Dartmouth College, where the Hood Museum of Art is home to a number of Assyrian artifacts, said she feared that Khorsabad, another ancient Assyrian city north of Mosul, also was imperiled.

Asked why Islamic State fighters would loot some artifacts and destroy others, she said, “I don’t have much of an answer except to tell you they’re hypocrites.”

“They’re willing to be self-righteous and ideological about the things that are too big to move, and ruthlessly opportunistic about the small things they can smuggle on the black market,” Ms. Ackerman said.

Ms. Bokova said her agency did not have specific information about who was trading in looted artifacts, except that previous incidents, namely in Mali, suggested that they were part of the networks that raise money for extremists by trading in oil, drugs and guns.

“They’re the same criminal groups,” she said. “They’re not, how to put it, admirers of art.”