

Palmyra's Ancient Arch, Destroyed By ISIS, To Rise Again In London



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April 18, 2016 4:10 PM ET



A replica of Palmyra's 2,000-year-old Arch of Triumph is constructed in London's Trafalgar Square on Monday. The arch, a replica of a monument demolished by ISIS, was made using 3-D imaging produced from photographs.

Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Armed with a 3-D printer and a computer-guided stonecutter, cultural heritage advocates are taking on the jackhammers of the Islamic State and its destructive ideology.

When Islamic State militants seized the Syrian desert town of Palmyra last May, an orgy of demolition began. Using dynamite, fire, bulldozers and pickaxes, the wrecking crew targeted 2,000-year-old Greco-Roman temples, monuments and stone statues. Palmyra's 20-foot-tall Arch of Triumph, a symbolically important monument, lay in ruins.

For ISIS, it was a frenzied attempt to erase the past — and profit from the illicit sale of the leftovers.

Now, the destroyed Arch of Triumph will rise again, thanks to advances in photogrammetry, which turns photographs into 3-D models. A 12-ton replica of the arch, made of stone, will be installed in London's Trafalgar Square on Tuesday, with plans to bring it to New York later this year.

The reproduction is "completely indistinguishable from the original," says Roger Michel, an American lawyer and archaeologist and the founder of Britain's [Institute for Digital Archaeology](#), a joint venture of Harvard and Oxford universities and Dubai's Museum of the Future.

Really? Just as good? Though it may look indistinguishable, its value may lie primarily in raising awareness of Syria's rich heritage, culture advocates say.

The dust had hardly settled in recaptured Palmyra, liberated from ISIS last month, when new debates began: How much should the ruins be restored, and by whom? Archaeologists raged against Michel's plan to install his 20-foot-scale model of the Arch of Triumph in the wreckage of Palmyra within six months, arguing that a re-created arch would alter the historical meaning of the ancient site.

But there is no debate about Palmyra's importance in the public imagination.



The remains of the Arch of Triumph, shown here in a March 31 photo, stand in the ancient Syrian city of

Palmyra, a World Heritage Site. The arch and other monuments were destroyed by ISIS last year.

Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images

"This is the silver lining," says Barry Threw, director of the [New Palmyra Project](#). "It takes someone to go in and blow it up for people to care. Anything that keeps attention on this space, I'm fine with. At least it's keeping this alive in a different way."

Threw works with activists and archaeologists to preserve Palmyra's culture digitally. In collaboration with MIT, the New Palmyra group has launched an online collection of images of 3-D models of the city, building on the work of Bassel Khartabil, a Syrian software developer and advocate for open-source technology.

Khartabil created some of the first 3-D renderings of ancient Palmyra. He was arrested by the Syrian regime in 2011 and disappeared in Syria's vast prison system.



A combination of images shows a general view (top) taken on June 19, 2010, of Palmyra's Arch of Triumph — before it was destroyed by Islamic State jihadists in October 2015 — and the remains of the structure after government troops recaptured the ancient city from IS fighters on March 27.

Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images

The New Palmyra effort is just one in a profusion of recent projects to reconstruct and restore the destruction wrought by ISIS — at least digitally. The director of Russia's State Hermitage Museum, Mikhail Piotrovsky, declared that Moscow will lead any project to restore and reconstruct Palmyra's temples. The Hermitage has a long link to Palmyra through a large collection of artifacts from the city

A 3-D reconstruction produced by the privately funded Cultural Capital Group of Nimrod, an ancient Iraqi city mentioned in the Bible, will soon be available on the Oculus Rift, a virtual reality headset.

And TheEconomist magazine [is using virtual reality](#) to bring back the treasures of Iraq's Mosul Museum,

targeted by ISIS.

"This is the irony of destruction," says John Jay College assistant professor Erin Thompson, a specialist in art crime. She has worked for decades to raise the alarm over looting and destruction of cultural heritage around the world. "Nobody cared, but as soon as you link it to terrorism, then I'm on CNN," she says.

"I feel grateful to ISIS," she says, smiling ever so slightly as she offers her view on the paradox when we meet in New York. ISIS has touched a nerve, she explains, which has attracted more students and more private funding for cultural preservation.

Looting is no longer considered a victimless crime. Now, Thompson says, "Looted antiquities are translating directly into human atrocities" in areas under ISIS control.



Men recover burned ancient manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Centre for Documentation and Research in Timbuktu, Mali, on Jan. 29, 2013. Islamists torched the building, which housed thousands of the manuscripts, and destroyed mausoleums and monuments in the city.

Eric Feferberg/AFP/Getty Images

The past year has seen some modest progress against looting and destruction in the legal realm. The International Criminal Court is currently prosecuting the first case in which the destruction of cultural property is deemed a war crime. Ahmad Al-Mahdi Al Faqi, a suspected Islamist militant, is accused of destroying nine mausoleums and a mosque in Mali's ancient city of Timbuktu in 2012.

On April 13, the U.S. Senate [passed a bill that had cleared the House last year banning the imports](#) of virtually all ancient art and artifacts from Syria. And [the FBI warned last summer](#) that looted artifacts were showing up in the U.S. market and buyers could be prosecuted for providing financial support to terrorists.

But is this all too little, too late?

"Nothing changed yet," says Deborah Lehr, who heads the Antiquities Coalition, a private advocacy organization in Washington. "There is more political will and attention, but the legal infrastructure is inadequate to the modern challenge."

It took more than a year to convince U.S. officials that ISIS had transformed "what started as a localized effort into a full-scale transnational business" and advertised its attacks on supply to drive up demand, says Shawnee State University professor Amr Azm, a former museum official in Syria and a trained archaeologist. "ISIS tapped into a well-established market that predates them. They institutionalized it," Azm says.



A giant Buddha statue stood for 1,500 years in this cliffside niche in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The Taliban blew the statue up, along with a companion Buddha figure, in 2001. There is debate over how and whether to restore the Buddhas.

Shah Marai/AFP/Getty Images

"We had to convince the FBI; it wasn't easy," says Azm. He is a key figure in demonstrating the link between looting and terrorism and has documented the ISIS business model through his contacts with Syrian activists and archaeologists on the ground.

Cultural vandalism is not new to the Middle East; nor is militants' targeting of ancient sites there and elsewhere in the world. The Taliban blasted Afghanistan's colossal Bamiyan Buddha figures to rubble in 2001. And militants destroyed mosques, mausoleums and ancient manuscripts in Timbuktu in 2012.

But ISIS has raised the stakes, says Lehr. Unlike other militant groups, the Islamic State has created a "Ministry of Antiquities" in areas under its control. "We've never seen it on this scale," Lehr says. For the U.S. and for governments in the region, "It's a national security issue."

ISIS has created a dangerous model for other militant groups — demonstrating the power of destroying culture to intimidate local populations, while reaping millions in profits from the looting.

Lehr's Antiquities Coalition, the Asia Society and Middle East Institute recently released [a task force report](#) advocating a more robust U.S. government response.

In the meantime, with no quick fixes, some institutions, such as Princeton University, are opting for a more defensive strategy and investing in the study of collections already in hand.

In the 1930s, Princeton archaeologists participated in an expedition to the ancient Greek and Roman city of Antioch, in what is now southern Turkey. The dig produced prized mosaics, still on display across campus. But the minor objects from the expedition — pottery shards, lamps, coins and other artifacts — were stored unexamined until a few years ago.

ISIS's actions have played a role in the university's decision to open new research and digitize the findings, says Michael Koortbojian, a Princeton art and archaeology professor. "There's no doubt that everyone feels spurred by the wanton destruction over the past few years," he says. "We should make the good effort to provide an account of what does survive."



A picture from March 31 shows the remains of the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra. Jihadists of the Islamic State destroyed much of the site last year. Syrian troops backed by Russian forces recaptured Palmyra from ISIS on March 27.

Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images

But it doesn't mitigate the loss. And that brings us to the unveiling of the 3-D replica arch on Trafalgar Square on Tuesday. Expect to hear that technology is defeating ISIS.

"My intention," said Michel ahead of the arch's unveiling, "is to show Islamic State that anything they can blow up, we can rebuild exactly as it was before, and rebuild it again and again. We will use technology to disempower ISIS."

But most specialists say it doesn't add up. The replicas of the Palmyra arch, the virtual reality renderings of the lost treasures of Iraq, document memory and loss, but don't bring anything back. "It is tragic," says Koortbojian, "that these things are becoming known as they are becoming extinct."