

# On trial: the destruction of history during conflict

From [Al Jazeera](#) - August 22, 2016

When the Roman Emperor Jovian ordered the burning of the Library of Antioch in the 4th Century AD, there was nobody around to make him answer for what ancient Syrian culture buffs deemed a "barbaric act", according to records.

Modern history is littered with cases of wartime razing, from the levelling of Dresden to the Taliban's Buddha-demolition at Bamiyan. Politicians have been slow to crack down on ruinous acts, but experts hope that this month the curve will bend in the right direction.

Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi is expected to plead guilty to war crimes at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague after allegedly destroying holy and historic sites in Timbuktu as his al-Qaeda-linked group swept across Mali in 2012.

For heritage lovers, it is a watershed moment. The first ICC prosecution (PDF) solely for tearing down monuments will deter other wreckers, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group, they say.

"The case sets an important precedent by demonstrating, once again, that these attacks on heritage are really attacks on people," said Tess Davis, a director of The Antiquities Coalition, which seeks to end ISIL-style racketeering.

"We have seen it before, from the Nazis to the Khmer Rouge and the Taliban, and we must end impunity for these crimes."

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## **Destroying the history of Timbuktu**

The ICC has probed the events in Mali since 2012, when Tuareg rebels seized swaths of the country's northern deserts and desecrated mosques, shrines and monuments in Timbuktu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. French and Malian troops pushed them back in 2013.

According to prosecutors, al-Mahdi, a former teacher in his 40s, led an anti-vice squad called al-Hesbah, which acted for the Islamic court of Timbuktu, while he was a member of Ansar Dine, a Tuareg rebel group allied with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

He is accused of directing attacks on nine mausoleums and the Sidi Yahia mosque in Timbuktu, a trade hub that became Islam's "intellectual and spiritual capital" in Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries, according to UNESCO.

In broad daylight, pickaxe-wielding men tore down mud-brick walls in front of television cameras. Al-Mahdi himself spoke on screen, using the alias Abu Tourab, to declare the structures "forbidden" under Islam.

Some 4,000 ancient manuscripts were lost, stolen or torched during the group's reign. ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda decried an "irreplaceable" loss of history "felt by the whole of humanity, and at the expense of future generations".

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### **Losing the cradle of civilisation**

Al-Mahdi, from Agoune, 100km west of Timbuktu, the so-called "City of 333 Saints", was later detained by officials in neighbouring Niger and handed over to the court in the Netherlands, where he is in custody.

He is expected to plead guilty at the start of a week-long trial, which can be seen online. It will hear from lawyers, expert and character witnesses and a representative of nine victims before its three judges retire to consider the outcome.

If convicted, al-Mahdi faces jail, a fine and reparation payments to victims. Lawyers contacted by Al Jazeera estimated sentences of between four to 10 years, but said it was hard to predict how the ICC would balance the needs of justice in its first plea bargain.

According to heritage buffs, the case is needed now more than ever.

The Middle East hosts many ancient and valued sites.

"In a matter of days, weeks and months we have lost entire chapters of history and sites and objects that had survived for millennia. We are losing so much from the cradle of civilisation on our watch," said Davis.

ISIL famously destroyed The Temple of Bel and other sites among the 2,000-year-old ruins of Palmyra, in Syria, and smashed up many statues from the ancient Assyrian era after seizing the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2015.

But less well-known strikes on buildings belonging to Shia Muslims and Yazidis - groups that ISIL views as heretics - are more worrying to Davis, who sees heritage-trashing as a "red flag of an impending genocide".

According to Lisa Ackerman, an official of the World Monuments Fund charity, heritage destruction in the modern-day Middle East compares to Europe's intra-Christian violence of the 16th and 17th centuries.

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