

THE HAGUE CONVICTS A TOMB-DESTROYING EXTREMIST WITH SMART DESIGN

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ON WEDNESDAY, JUDGES at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, found Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi, a member of an extremist group with connections to Al Qaeda, guilty of the destruction of nine mausoleums and a mosque door in Timbuktu. Al Mahdi was the first person tried for the destruction of cultural heritage by the ICC, and the first to plead guilty before the tribunal since it started in 2002.

He didn't contest the charges in large part because the evidence against him was not only vast but compellingly assembled, presented to the judges via an interactive digital platform that combined videos, photos, satellite imagery, and panoramas to show how Al Mahdi systematically and deliberately destroyed those historic sites. Video from the trial shows prosecutors clicking around a satellite map that charts exactly where the crimes occurred and presenting video and photo evidence that documents the sites before, during, and after the crimes. They even have a 360-degree view of the aftermath. In one video the prosecutors showed, men standing atop a pile of rubble swing pickaxes into the side of a centuries-old Mausoleum. In another, they swing axes into the side of a building.

The platform itself isn't advanced, technologically speaking. It looks like a late-1990s homebrew website. That's not its strength. "What we did here was, in some ways, quite simple," says Brad Samuels, co-founder of Situ Research, the Brooklyn design studio that developed the presentation tool with the ICC. Samuels and his team listed the destroyed monuments on the tool's left-hand side. Selecting one from the list splits the area right of the list into three windows. The top left window displays photographic, videographic, and diagrammatic evidence. The top right window shows before-and-after satellite imagery, which the user can switch between with the aid of an image slider. The bottom window presents a panoramic view of each destroyed site.

From a rhetorical standpoint, the tool can have a huge impact. Prior to Situ's platform, lawyers would present evidence piecemeal, calling up each video, photo, or satellite image on a screen one at a time, almost as though they were surfing the internet. "It works, but it takes more time and you still need in the end to try to rebuild all the links between all the pieces of evidence," says Gilles Dutertre, senior trial lawyer for the Al Mahdi case. Dutertre says most of the cases he sees at the ICC could benefit from a tool that allows for an uninterrupted narrative. Ultimately, a more cohesive presentation of evidence helps judges to see the broader picture of a case more clearly. "The beauty of such a platform is that it speaks for itself," he says.

But this kind of presentation works especially well in a case like Al Mahdi's—one with a huge amount of visual evidence, much of which the criminals themselves created for propaganda purposes. "The destruction of cultural property leaves a very tangible record," says Tess Davis, executive director of the Antiquities Coalition, an organization dedicated to tracking and preventing the destruction of cultural heritage. A wealth of evidence isn't always easy to organize in a compelling way, but Davis believes Situ's solution could fix that problem, and ultimately become standard procedure in similar trials. "This evidence will lead to more prosecutions," she says. "While this may be the first time this technology is used, it won't be the last."

For his crimes, Al Mahdi is facing up to 11 years in prison—a sentence the judges will hand down in September. In the meantime, Situ is working to adapt the platform for a case surrounding the burning of villages in South Sudan, and Samuels figures the platform will gather even more interest now that the Al Mahdi case has closed.

