

Ancient Syrian Sites: A Different Story of Destruction

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Among the major turning points of the Syrian conflict, few have been laden with as much symbolism—or geopolitical posturing—as the recapture of the ancient city of Palmyra on March 27, 2016. After a weeks-long campaign by Russian bombers and Syrian regime soldiers, the withdrawal of ISIS forces from this extraordinary desert oasis was celebrated as bringing an end to an infamous reign of barbarism.

Connecting Rome and the civilizations of the Mediterranean with Mesopotamia and the empires of the East, Palmyra had been one of the great trading centers of antiquity; for centuries, its incomparable ruins had stood as monuments to Arab glory and Levantine cosmopolitanism. Over the previous ten months, however, the jihadists had reduced to rubble its most important shrine, a soaring, exquisitely decorated first-century-CE temple dedicated to the Mesopotamian god Bel, who was central to Palmyra's religious cult.

ISIS also blew up a second temple, dedicated to the other supreme Palmyrene deity, Baalshamin; it toppled the triumphal arch on the colonnaded main street, which may have commemorated a Roman victory over the Parthians in the late second century CE; demolished several of the city's distinctive tower tombs; and sacked the archaeological museum at the site. Most chillingly, it executed the eighty-one-year-old Syrian archaeologist, Khaled al-Asaad, who had for decades been in charge of the site.

At the end of his moving new book, *Palmyre: L'irremplaçable trésor*, which is dedicated to al-Asaad, the French archaeologist Paul Veyne describes one of the extraordinary artworks on the Temple of Bel that was lost:

Last July...one could still have seen, in bas-relief, a procession of people coming to venerate the god Bel. At the front approached the men, but behind them, huddled together, as if immobilized by the artist, were a group of women veiled from head to foot in an arabesque of billowing fabric, a beguiling and astonishing cluster of wavy silhouettes blending into each other.... It's an abstract composition... [in which] the artist has suddenly broken with the logic of his subject and with realism. This image has no equivalent that I know of in ancient art.... What seems likely is that the sculptor, faced with all the possible styles inspired by the West and the East, has decided to amuse himself by inventing his own.

The frieze was destroyed, along with nearly all of the temple itself, in August 2015.¹

But after its victory this March, the Assad regime could assert that civilization had won. Even before ISIS had been chased out, Maamoun Abdulkarim, Syria's director-general of antiquities and museums in Damascus, was vowing that the temples would be "rebuilt" and that the ancient city would "rise again." Almost immediately, world leaders and international officials clamored to take part. On the day of the recapture, Russian President Vladimir Putin was on the phone to Irina Bokova, director-general

of UNESCO, the UN's cultural agency, offering to help in the "preservation and reconstruction of the cultural heritage of Syria." Over the next few days, Germany's Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation offered "every form of help" to the reconstruction effort, while a team of Polish archaeologists was flown in and given a few hours to "assess" the site; and a US State Department-funded monitoring project released a report on the damage sustained.

A few weeks later, in London's Trafalgar Square, a group of experts from Oxford's Institute of Digital Archaeology erected a replica of the destroyed triumphal arch—designed with the aid of a 3D computer model. And then on May 5, at Palmyra itself, in an act of cultural propaganda that seemed explicitly aimed at contrasting the jihadists' brutality with the victors' enlightenment, the Russian conductor Valery Gergiev led St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Orchestra in an open-air concert at Palmyra's still-standing Roman amphitheater. To witness the performance, which included the Chaconne from Bach's second unaccompanied violin partita and Prokofiev's First Symphony, the Kremlin flew in one hundred Moscow-based international reporters—including for The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, the BBC, and many other Western news organizations. (The journalists, under heavy military protection, were whisked in and out of the site as hostilities continued nearby; Gergiev said the musicians "heard explosions" as they were rehearsing.)

Conspicuously absent from these events were the residents of Palmyra themselves. In 2011, the modern city of Tadmor (also the original name of the ancient city), which is adjacent to the archaeological site, had a population of some 50,000 residents; in the first years of the war it swelled to as many as 60,000 or 70,000, as refugees from other areas sought protection there. As the Syrian government militarized the city and then abandoned it to ISIS, however, all but a few thousand of the population fled, seeking escape from fast-deteriorating living conditions and ISIS's rule of terror. Now, with much of the city reduced to rubble, and provision of security, food, and water still far from certain, few have been able to return. "The city is empty. Most of the houses of modern Palmyrenes have been destroyed," Cheikmous Ali, a Syrian archaeologist who lives in exile in France, told me in June.

For all the pageantry, the retaking of Palmyra has served as a powerful reminder of how detached from reality the international campaign to save Syria's endangered cultural heritage has been. Chastened by the damage wrought in recent wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali, Western leaders, cultural officials, UNESCO, and even the UN Security Council have for several years now devoted unprecedented attention to the threats to sites in Syria by ISIS and other extremist groups. Millions of dollars have been spent to document, with the best satellite technology available and other resources, the current condition of archaeological monuments in the areas of conflict; legal scholars have called for war crimes prosecutions against those who intentionally damage historic sites and monuments; while top officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry and French President François Hollande, have long warned of the cost of Western inaction. Above all, a continuous series of initiatives have been aimed at cracking down on the international trade in looted Syrian antiquities, often described as a major revenue source for ISIS.

But there has been depressingly little to show for these efforts. ISIS documents recovered by US Special Forces in May 2015 suggested that the group has an organized system for imposing taxes on the trade in looted antiquities, and the plunder of sites continues to be a very serious concern. However, so far, few Syrian objects of significant value have been identified in the West, and the overall looting situation, in which many different groups, including the regime, appear to be involved, remains murky. (The US government recently estimated that ISIS has earned “several million dollars from antiquities sales”—making it a modest part of its overall income—rather than the tens or hundreds of millions that have often been mentioned in the press.)

Meanwhile, the US and its allies have seemed helpless to make a difference where it matters most: before the damage or destruction occurs. As long ago as December 2014, well before ISIS captured Palmyra, the United Nations released a report showing that nearly three hundred historic sites in Syria had been damaged since the beginning of the war, most of them by groups other than ISIS. Of these, twenty-four had been “totally destroyed” by different militias or by the Assad regime itself, including twenty-two in Aleppo alone. As of this year, all of the six sites in Syria that were supposedly protected by UNESCO World Heritage status have been damaged, including, along with Palmyra, the Krak des Chevaliers, Syria’s most important crusader castle, the remains of the Hellenistic city of Dura-Europos, on the Euphrates, and the Roman city of Bosra. A number of the destroyed monuments, like the Temple of Bel frieze at Palmyra or the majestic, eleventh-century minaret in Aleppo, toppled amid fierce fighting in early 2013, were unique works with no known parallels.

For many Syrians, the international response has been baffling. While speaking constantly of ISIS, whose destructive acts they can do little about, Western leaders and cultural officials have mostly overlooked the grave damage that is occurring in many other parts of Syria—often in areas where preventive steps can be taken. And for all the extraordinary expressions of concern for the fate of the country’s museums, monuments, and artwork, hardly anything has been said about the relation of these sites to the communities surrounding them, which are often deeply attached to them. (One of the few Western scholars who has is the historian Glen Bowersock, who observed last year in the *NYR Daily* that there is a “tradition of Palmyrene achievements that really means something to the Arab world.”²)

Even as UNESCO has begun speaking of the destruction of cultural sites and shrines as a “crime against humanity,” the human beings who live closest to them—particularly in opposition areas held by neither ISIS nor the Syrian government, where much of the conflict has played out—have largely been ignored. (Because it is required to work with the recognized sovereign government in Damascus, UNESCO is nearly powerless in the areas that most need its assistance.) This is a double tragedy, for not only have residents of the communities in question long been shown to be the first and most important line of defense in protecting sites and museums in times of conflict. In the case of Syria, many of these local preservationists have also been, and continue to be, in serious danger themselves—both from extremist groups and from the regime.

In the account of Palmyra that has been told by the Syrian government and repeated in the international press, the devastation of the site began with the arrival of the jihadists in May 2015. Before the takeover, Syrian officials had managed to remove a large number of free-standing sculptures and antiquities, and Tadmor, despite the collapse of its tourist economy, was considered a safe haven. Then ISIS came and began blowing up monuments and staging mass executions in the site's Roman amphitheater.

According to Syrians themselves, however, the story is more complicated. On May 20–21, 2015, when ISIS militants took over Tadmor—a predominantly Sunni town on a highly strategic road to the capital—they did not, as many world leaders and Western archaeologists expected, immediately attack the ancient site. Instead, their first major act—along with summary executions of soldiers and alleged collaborators—was to “liberate” and then destroy Tadmor Military Prison, an infamous detention facility used for decades by the Assad regime to torture and sometimes kill thousands of political prisoners and Islamists. (In 1980, Syrian forces conducted a notorious mass execution of hundreds of suspected Muslim Brothers at the prison.) Though this was hardly mentioned in the international press, it was widely reported in Arab social media, and carried powerful meaning for some Syrian dissidents and intellectuals.³

In fact, during the initial months of the uprising against Assad in 2011, the Syrian government had reopened the “prison of the desert” to punish several hundred military defectors and supporters of the opposition. And in early 2012, as the war became more violent, Syrian forces turned the ancient site and the town, which had considerable sympathy for the opposition, into a garrison. (One local rebel group called itself the “Grandchildren of Zenobia,” in honor of the third-century Palmyrene Queen Zenobia, who resisted both Roman and Persian imperial rule.) It was during this time that the ancient city was initially damaged—by the Syrian army itself.

In a report published by the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology, a watchdog group largely run by Syrian archaeologists, together with the American Schools of Oriental Research, Cheikmous Ali, the Syrian archaeologist who is now in France, reviewed what the Syrian army had done during its three-year occupation of the site. Drawing on local eyewitnesses and photographic evidence, the report describes the installation of tanks and rocket launchers near the medieval citadel and in the northern necropolis area; the building of roads through the archaeological park for tanks and military vehicles; the removal of ancient stone blocks and funerary towers “to protect tanks, rocket launchers, and other armored vehicles positioned in the archaeological area”; the “complete or partial” removal of the foundations of some tombs; looting and shell damage to several temples, including the Temple of Bel; and looting in the valley of the tombs. And while the regime claimed that hundreds of objects from the Palmyra museum were removed to safety—it remains unclear how many—the local inhabitants who worked at the site and the museum were left to fend for themselves.

Of all the terrible attacks on cultural heritage by ISIS, none has shaken the world more than the beheading, on August 18, 2015, of Khaled al-Asaad, the archaeologist who had been the director of Palmyra for forty years, from 1963 to 2003.⁴ Yet the fate of nearly a dozen other Syrians who worked at the site and its

museum, and who also were under threat for their lives, has been almost entirely overlooked. Among them was a woman who managed the database of the Palmyra museum, as well as a man who worked at the entrance of the archaeological park and another who had been a docent at one of the temples destroyed by ISIS. Salam Al Kuntar, an archaeologist and former employee of Syria's state antiquities administration now at the University of Pennsylvania, told me the harrowing story of their escapes.

The docent, who was on a wanted list for his close connections to Khaled al-Asaad, was the first to flee, managing to reach Turkey shortly after the ISIS takeover. Then, during the summer of 2015, as ISIS consolidated its control, the other staff went into hiding in the town and neighboring villages. One by one, they began to leave, often going first to Deir Ezzor—a much larger town at the time even further into ISIS territory—to avoid attracting attention. From there, they eventually made their way north to the Turkish border. Now five of them are stuck in Gaziantep, Turkey, unable to work. They were supported by a modest monthly stipend raised by Brian Daniels, a colleague of Al Kuntar's who is director of research at the Penn Cultural Heritage Center.

The exiled Palmyra staff brought with them not only direct knowledge of the site, but also considerable documentation concerning the Palmyra Museum, Al Kuntar told me, including its fate during the initial weeks of ISIS control. Because they feared retribution by the Syrian government—which has arrested a number of Tadmor residents for collaboration with ISIS—they have been unable to return to Tadmor; nor have they until now been included in international meetings about Syria's heritage. According to Al Kuntar and Daniels, it was impossible to find US universities or museums willing to sponsor US work visas for them. "They are stuck in Gaziantep, like any other refugees," Al Kuntar told me.

3.

In the eighteen months since ISIS circulated a horrific video showing militants smashing statues at the Mosul Museum, and then, four months later, took over Palmyra itself, a powerful view of cultural heritage destruction in Syria and Iraq has taken shape: that it is a deliberate strategy, perfected by ISIS, aimed above all at assaulting Western values and terrorizing local populations. According to the April report "[#CultureUnderThreat: Recommendations for the U.S. Government](#)," sponsored by the Middle East Institute, the Asia Society, and the Antiquities Coalition:

Daesh [ISIS], the Al-Nusra Front, and Al-Qaeda have now institutionalized cultural crimes as an instrument of war, using them to erase the collective memory, culture, and accomplishments of a people and replace it with their own ideology.

As the report continues, "The fight to protect the peoples of the [Middle East and North Africa] region and their heritage cannot be separated."

And yet the report mainly confines itself to addressing damage that has already taken place: it calls for a further crackdown on the antiquities trade in Western markets, and improved legal remedies for what it calls "cultural crimes." In doing so, it follows closely the general international response so far. Thus, in February

2015, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution banning all trade in Syrian antiquities, while the US Senate passed a similar bill in April 2016. At the same time, legal scholars and some cultural property specialists, citing the unprecedented documentation we now have of such acts of destruction, have pushed for expanded powers to prosecute them as war crimes when the Syrian conflict is over.

But as Robert Bevan, the architecture critic for the London Evening Standard, observes in a revised edition of his groundbreaking study of cultural heritage in zones of conflict, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, current laws are ill-equipped to do that. (A documentary film based on Bevan's book was released this summer.) In late August, the International Criminal Court in The Hague obtained a landmark guilty plea from a Malian jihadist for the destruction of shrines of Muslim saints in Timbuktu in 2012 and 2013. Yet neither Syria nor Iraq is party to the ICC, putting the prospect of similar prosecutions for acts in those countries in doubt.

Meanwhile, the few preventive measures that have been widely discussed have proven impracticable. In November 2015, French President François Hollande announced that France was ready to provide a “refuge” for threatened Syrian antiquities, seemingly unaware of the apparent implication that his country might be more interested in protecting antiquities from Syria than actual Syrians, who were finding it increasingly difficult to gain asylum in France and Europe generally. The April task force report, “#CultureUnderThreat,” in one of its few recommendations aimed at preventing damage, calls for “military air strikes...against targets threatening known heritage sites,” a controversial option that the US and its allies are extremely reluctant to pursue.

What these responses have almost entirely missed are the Syrian and Iraqi populations who are closest to the destruction, and who are often best positioned to prevent, or at least limit, the damage before it happens. In almost every major modern conflict in which efforts to save art and historical monuments have had substantial success, they have depended on the actions of local curators, art historians, and activists rather than international laws or foreign interventions.

During the civil war in Beirut (1975–1990), when the National Museum of Beirut was on the front lines of the conflict, it was the museum's own curator, Emir Maurice Chehab, who saved much of the collection, including Phoenician sarcophagi and monumental statuary, by encasing them in concrete in the basement. In Afghanistan, the Bamiyan Buddhas were lost, despite huge international outcry; but the National Museum's Bactrian Hoard—more than 20,000 extraordinary gold, silver, and ivory objects from a Bronze Age burial site—was quietly saved, thanks to the courage and ingenuity of a group of Afghan curators who kept them hidden for years in a vault under the Central Bank in Kabul. And in Timbuktu, when jihadists overran the city in 2012, intent on wiping out the city's extraordinary medieval Islamic heritage, it was local librarians who spirited away to safety thousands of rare manuscripts—by truck and canoe.

Though little noted, local preservationists have already proven crucial in the Syrian conflict itself. One of the most striking cases is the Ma'arra Mosaic Museum in a region of Idlib Province in northwestern Syria that has been bitterly fought between various rebel groups and the regime. The museum, which occupies a historic Ottoman Caravansarai, was hit twice by the regime in a barrel-bomb attack in June 2015 and in a second air strike in May of this year. But its collection of large-scale Roman and Byzantine mosaics—including an extraordinary series depicting the life of Hercules—has largely survived because of the efforts of a group of local activists, who had encased the works in protective glue and sheeting, covered by

sandbags, a few months before the first attack, and resandbagged before the second one. A similar project is now being pursued a bit further south, at the mosaic museum attached to the important Hellenistic site of Apamea.

In both cases, the activists are part of a heritage initiative run by the Day After, a Syrian NGO that aims to support a democratic transition in Syria; they have received training and modest support from Western sources but are entirely Syrian-run. According to Amr al-Azam, a US-based Syrian archaeologist who has helped coordinate the efforts, the initial Ma'arra project cost \$15,000 and the subsequent intervention another \$2,800—tiny investments compared to what has been spent by foreign governments on satellite imagery to monitor archaeological sites. Yet it took a year to secure the \$6,500 funding needed to protect the Apamea Museum. “It’s a very, very important collection,” al-Azam said. “Getting in there before any damage is done is crucial.”

Sometimes activists have successfully confronted extremist groups themselves. When the jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra took over the town of Idlib in northwestern Syria in March 2015, a local archaeologist and activist named Ayman Nabu confronted the city’s Nusra-appointed mayor and told him that if anything happened to the Idlib Museum, they would have to kill Nabu as well. “Ayman may be the bravest person I know,” said Brian Daniels, whose program had given Nabu training in Turkey in 2014 for managing heritage in conflict. “As of now the Idlib Museum is intact.”

Astonishingly, hardly anything has been said about this local activism; the task force report aimed at the US government in April makes no mention of it. By contrast, many archaeologists have been dismayed by the intense international interest in “rebuilding” Palmyra amid a continuing war. In April, a group of Western and Syrian archaeologists wrote a petition to UNESCO opposing “any hasty reconstruction initiated by UNESCO and carried out by parties directly involved in the Syrian tragedy”—a thinly veiled reference to the Russian military and the Assad regime.

Responding to such criticism this spring, Maamoun Abdulkarim, the director of Syria’s antiquities administration, sought to distance the Syrian regime from the more extravagant reconstruction plans—though he also said that the government was determined to press ahead with restoration as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, UNESCO officials have begun to collaborate with groups working in non-regime-held areas of the country, including at an international conference it convened in Berlin in early June. But Syrians I spoke to on the margins of the conference are skeptical that the huge international bureaucracy of UNESCO, established in the cold war and beholden to traditional sovereign states, can contribute meaningfully to the rescue of monuments in Syria.

Even as the Berlin conference was taking place, some of the same powers that had “rescued” Palmyra were causing significant new damage of their own. During the retaking of Palmyra in March, Russian bombs hit the medieval citadel overlooking the site; and in May, shortly after the Russian orchestra performance, reports surfaced in the Western press that a temporary Russian military base had been installed inside the archaeological park. On May 12 and again on June 16, the fifth-century Byzantine church of Saint Simeon Stylites, northwest of Aleppo, was heavily damaged by Russian air strikes. UNESCO, which depends on

Russian support, remained silent. “Unfortunately, the international institutions are held hostage by politics,” Cheikmous Ali, the Syrian archaeologist, told me. He said that there are many sites that are threatened and urgently in need of protection—and Syrians, some of them deep in ISIS areas, are struggling to do what they can. “But the international institutions aren’t supporting them.”

- 1 For more on what was destroyed in 2015 together with a selection of historic photographs of Palmyra, see Ingrid Rowland’s “[Breakfast in the Ruins](#),” NYR Daily, September 17, 2016. ↩
 - 2 See Glen Bowersock, “[The Venice of the Sands in Peril](#),” NYR Daily, May 25, 2015. ↩
 - 3 For an account of the prison and its prominence in Syria dissident literature, see R. Shareah Taleghani, “Breaking the Silence of Tadmor Military Prison,” Middle East Report, Spring 2016. ↩
 - 4 According to numerous press accounts, al-Asaad was executed for refusing to reveal the location of hidden Palmyrene “treasures.” But Syrian archaeologists told me that al-Asaad, who came from a powerful family with ties to the regime, was initially detained and tried by an ISIS court in June 2015 on seven charges—including collaboration with the regime and with Iran—unrelated to the alleged treasure. At the time, he was pardoned and released, but insisted on staying in Palmyra, where he was subsequently denounced and executed, on the preposterous charge of hiding “gold” (though the seven initial charges were also reinvoked). ↩
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