POST–COLONIAL RUINS: Archaeologies of political violence and IS

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On the basis of her personal and professional experience researching and curating heritage in Palestine and Syria, Chiara De Cesari here reflects on the phenomenon of heritage destruction in Iraq and Syria by the Islamic State. By setting in place the building blocks of national narratives, do certain archaeological practices also carry the seeds of the destruction of the very heritage they aim to conserve? As De Cesari suggests, this relates to the use of archaeology 'for the obscene display and production of state power'. Ed.

Fig. 1. *Destruction of the Baalshamin temple in Palmyra.*

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The spectacular, carefully choreographed and hypermediated acts of destruction at a number of world-famous archaeological sites in the area now controlled by the Islamic State (IS) across Syria and Iraq have often made the headlines in recent months. These spectacles can indeed be counted among IS's hallmark performances and visual markers of identity, boosting the caliphate's popularity among radicalized Islamists as well as waves of global outrage and horror. The ancient cities of Palmyra, Nimrud and Hatra, and the Mosul Museum, but also local shrines and saints' tombs – the heritage of popular religiosity and of Christian, Shia and Yazidi communities – have all been the object of IS's wrath. The 80-year-old former head of Palmyra's antiquities was beheaded.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and a number of pundits have framed these acts as 'cultural cleansing' and likened them to war crimes, drawing a direct link between the destruction of heritage and the annihilation of the minority communities perceived to be connected to such heritage (in other words, the annihilation of cultural and religious diversity). In the mainstream media, they have largely been interpreted as an expression of IS's medieval, barbaric iconoclasm and of the fight against idolatry of this extremist brand of jihadi Salafism. Public reactions have often been couched in civilizational terms, representing this seeming war on the remains of the 'cradle of civilization' as the ultimate proof and symbol of IS barbarism and its repudiation of civilization itself.

Instead, I offer here a different reading that highlights the long-standing link between archaeology and (empire and) state building in the Levant. I argue that we cannot understand IS 'spectacles' of destruction (Harmanşah 2015) without unravelling Near Eastern archaeology's deep entanglement with *both* the history of Western colonial and neocolonial interventions in Iraq and Syria *and* the political projects of the local variants of Arab

nationalism that in several ways (including the cult and use of archaeology) reproduced the colonial legacy (see Massad 2001). I argue that in spite of the apparent break represented by IS acts, there is a continuity running through the history of Iraq (and Syria, although to a slightly lesser extent) in the political mobilization of antiquities, which have been used for the symbolic display and the enactment of state power long before this past year.

My point is not to contribute to what some describe as 'Western apologists' characterization of [IS] terrorism as an expression of anti-imperialism' (Weiss & Hassan 2015: 27). As understanding (not justifying!) is traditionally the goal of anthropological knowledge, I look to situate these spectacles of destruction by a criminal entity historically within a specific political genealogy. I propose to understand them not only as hyperviolent expressions of multiple long-standing grievances and of the geopolitical catastrophe produced by over a century of conflicting imperialisms and hegemonic regional projects, as well as the recent Wahhabization of Sunni Islam propelled by Saudi petrodollars (Cockburn 2015), but as symbols of the failure of the post-colonial state – or rather, as the hallucinated reversal of a certain state-building logic.

Moving beyond ahistorical theological explanations, my point is to think through the layered specificity and the intertextuality – its multiple referents and resonances – of this kind of 'violence' directed against archaeology. Such violence, although incommensurable with the violence perpetrated against people – the Syrian and Iraqi victims of the war – still plays a key symbolic role within IS's visual and moral economy and its visual communication, and has, as such, very material effects on the people themselves.

The aim of this article is thus to illuminate the complex genealogy of a gesture that has surely religious motives and referents but is largely overdetermined. In other words, to fully grasp the politics at play in the dynamiting of the palace gate of Nimrud and the

Arch of Triumph or the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, we must juxtapose these images with those produced by Saddam Hussein's obsession with ancient Mesopotamian antiquities as props for his power (see Figs 4 & 5). It is also useful to recollect not only the looting of the Baghdad Museum but also, especially, the powerful images of American boots stationed in the middle of ancient Babylon, which the US military turned into Camp Alpha or 'the Ruins' in 2003 with the professed purpose – to the dismay of many archaeologists – of protecting the site from destruction; looting and heritage destruction have been ongoing since 2003 (Bahrani 2006).

What is being destroyed?

Although a full, detailed assessment of the recent loss of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria is of course not available at the moment, plenty of evidence – videos, satellite imagery and personal testimonies – points to the fact that it is extensive (for available data and updates, see among others, the observatory set up by UNESCO).[1] Such loss of heritage is due to three different factors: looting, deliberate targeting, and the use of heritage sites for military purposes.

The devastated alleys of the old souq of Aleppo are an example of the latter category. Looting and the illegal trafficking of antiquities inflict the greatest damage and are encouraged if not directly carried out by IS.[2] According to professor of art crimes Erin Thompson, 'the Islamic State, of course, hides its participation in the sales of antiquities, which contradicts its proclaimed understanding of the Prophet's orders to destroy all idols. … The destruction of [heritage] is not a footnote to a brutal war. The Islamic State's treatment of art is a *crucial piece of its recruitment and financing strategies*' (Thompson 2015; emphasis added).[3] There are several reports that IS hands out 'excavation licences' and charges taxes on such activities. Thus, for IS, selling antiquities on the black market (with the US and Europe being the major consumer markets) provides a major source of

finance after oil smuggling revenues.

According to US Department of State officials, evidence uncovered during the raid on the compound of key IS man and finance manager, Abu Sayyaf, shows not only a well-established antiquities trafficking network but a fully-fledged 'ministerial' infrastructure. The Islamic State has created an 'Antiquities Division', formerly headed in Syria by Abu Sayyaf himself, as part of its 'Diwan for Natural Resources', and has subdivided it into several departments – excavation, marketing, exploration, research and administration – which look, on paper, uncannily similar to those of state heritage agencies all around the world.[4]

Yet, both IS and mainstream Western media have directed their attention to the intentional acts of destruction of pre-Islamic antiquities. I call these 'spectacles' because mediation and re-mediation, or the 'production of the show' (Harmanşah 2015), are key to how these acts are produced and circulated, their images propelled by social media and global outrage, and to how they produce effects too. These acts were committed in order for their images to be virally circulated, as shown by the various IS men caught photographing and filming their fellow militants at work with sledgehammers in the famous video of the destruction of statues at the Mosul Museum. IS has raided the ancient cities of Nineveh and Hatra, it has devastated the Mosul Museum and many of its statues, and has blown up or bulldozed not only the gate of the Assyrian palace of Nimrud but also late Roman monumental tombs, two major temples and the Roman triumphal arch of the late antique World Heritage site of Palmyra, among others.[5] However, IS attacks have indeed taken the heaviest toll on undocumented Islamic heritage – militants having destroyed not only churches but also many Shia, Yazidi, Sufi, and even Sunni shrines – but this heritage loss has received much less media attention. For experts, this might be the 'greatest systematic eradication of Islamic sites in modern history' (Romey 2015).

For archaeologists and many others, these represent attacks against the precious vestiges of the 'cradle of civilization' (see e.g. Turek 2015) because IS has targeted very important sites in the prehistory and early history of the so-called Fertile Crescent that nurtured not only the beginning of agriculture but also writing, urbanism and complex societies. What have been especially targeted for destruction are some of the most iconic symbols of ancient Mesopotamia, namely, the *lamassu* or huge stone statues of winged bulls and lions with human heads, which used to guard the cities and gates of ancient Assyria as icons of power. (Strikingly, a *lamassu* appeared on the logo of US Forces – Iraq, the last military command to leave Iraq in 2011; see Fig. 2). The idea that these acts represent a quintessential clash of civilizations – or the annihilation of civilization and humanity by its very opposite – appears in a range of commentaries.

These images of destruction have become one of the most powerful symbols of IS's 'barbarian', 'evil' nature. For some commentators, 'this cultural cleansing has spread like a virus beyond Iraq and Syria to infect Libya, Yemen, Mali, and Egypt and is threatening nearby Lebanon and Jordan. Extremists have even called for the destruction of the Sphinx and Pyramids' (Lehr & Chamberlin 2015). Indeed, the archaeological Bardo National Museum in Tunis and Egypt's iconic ancient Karnak temple were also the targets of terrorism, probably because they are major attractions for Western tourists (for a discussion of the links between heritage, tourism and terrorism, see Meskell 2005).

Press coverage in Europe, the US and the major international media outlets has largely framed these spectacles of cultural heritage destruction as iconoclasm and has provided a religious explanation, a return to a medieval religiosity, in line with the dominant interpretation of the IS phenomenon among pundits and think thanks (Wood 2015; but note that for some IS is a very 'un-Islamic state', see Rabbani 2014). In the religious interpretation, IS targets pre-Islamic antiquities as anthropomorphic idols that could nurture polytheism, and destroys them just as the Prophet Mohammed did in Mecca at the beginning of the Islamic era. This is indeed the message conveyed in several IS videos of these acts of destruction. And yet scholars of Islam have pointed out that there is no straightforward reading of the Prophet's deeds, and that as Islam is no unified doctrine and has multiple authorities, iconoclasm is, and has been, an object of contentious debate and interpretation throughout Islamic history (Flood 2002). Moreover, the religious interpretation does not help explain why IS does not just destroy human representations and temples, but ancient gates and arches as well. The main point I want to make here is that religion is but one of several dimensions that help make these hypermediated spectacles of destruction a key marker of IS visual identity.

Calling attention to the fact that IS particularly targets the heritage of ethno-religious minorities,[6] other commentators have argued instead that these attacks constitute an attempt to obliterate the diverse history of Iraq and Syria together with the living cultures of the Assyrian and Syriac people, the Christians, Yazidis and Shia of the region. Members of Iraqi minorities have also seen it this way, as in the following statement delivered in a hearing of the US congress on these issues:

> Beyond its barbaric human rights violations, ISIS has further sought to destroy these [minority] communities by erasing their cultural and religious heritage – attacking churches, mosques, shrines, and ancient sites. By targeting Assyrian archaeology, ISIS goes beyond ethnic and religious cleansing to further wipe out any historical trace of the people it has displaced. Because these sites hark back to a flourishing and pluralistic past that legitimizes the histories of religious minorities, such sites are seen as a threat to ISIS and are summarily destroyed. The group believes that it cannot control the future until it controls the past.[7]

This reading is the one adopted by UNESCO, which defines IS's acts of cultural heritage destruction as 'cultural cleansing … to deny the identities of Others, to erase their existence, to eliminate cultural diversity and to persecute minorities'; for UNESCO's Director-General Irina Bokova, they constitute a 'crime against humanity'.[8]

This cultural violence framework clearly helps explain some of the acts of destruction, and illuminates the link between such acts and one of the hallmarks of IS ideology, namely, its Sunni sectarianism and takfirism. What is deeply problematic, however, is the taken-for-granted equation between attacks against people and attacks against things, that grounds much of the 'cultural violence' narrative. Indeed, this subtext has stirred angry reactions among Iraqis and Syrians due to the perception that people in the 'West' care more for Middle Eastern archaeology than for its people. Some pundits have even suggested that an association with UNESCO and the 'World Heritage' label turns a site into a visible and powerful target, in a paradoxical reversal of UNESCO's chief goal of heritage preservation (Gamboni 2001; Meskell 2002).

The relationship between the destruction of a nation's past and the destruction of its future is foregrounded in the commentaries of a number of Syrians, such as Amr al-Azm, a pro-opposition former Syrian antiquities official. For him, once the conflict is over 'Syrians … will look to common denominators that helps them identify what makes a Syrian Syrian – the incentives that make them live together. And they're going to look for the symbols that help hold their society together, and cultural heritage in general is one of the few areas they do agree on, that they can rally around and use as a focal point to rebuild and restructure their lives' (Shaheen 2015). For Bokova as well as al-Azm, the destruction of cultural heritage puts reconciliation and

Fig. 2. *Logo of the United States Forces – Iraq.*
Fig. 3. *An IS militant destroys an Assyrian winged bull or* lamassu.

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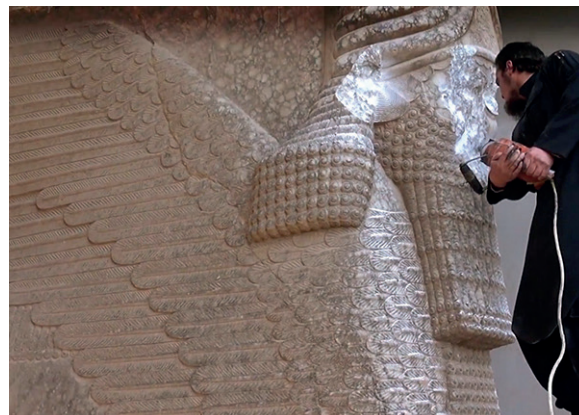
any future national unity in danger, precisely because this heritage is the 'pride of Syrians of every sect' and is perceived as providing people with a thick sense of national identity and as providing the imagined community of the nation with a soul and substance without which it would vanish.

Archaeology and state spectacles

Both ordinary Syrians and IS iconoclasts are aware of the deep relationship between heritage and (national) identity. While nationalist movements and nation-states all over the world have mobilized heritage in the service of nation and state building (see e.g. Anderson 1983; Hamilakis 2007; Kohl 1998), Middle Eastern oppressive nationalisms – and especially Saddam Hussein's own brand of Baathism – offer very good examples of how archaeology can be used for political legitimation (for Syria, see Valter 2002; for Israel, see Abu El-Haj 2001; for Jordan, see Maffi 2014). Scholars have pointed in particular to the centrality of references to ancient Mesopotamia in the reproduction of Iraq's Baathist regime and in promoting the cult of Saddam as the latest incarnation of a lineage of Mesopotamian heroes and kings (Abdi 2008; Davis 2005) (see Fig. 5).

According to Eric Davis (2005), Iraqi political history in the past century has been characterized by a long-standing struggle between competing visions of political community, and cultural production and heritage making have provided important terrains where this struggle has been played out. While Iraqist nationalists have supported a pluralistic, inclusive vision of a united Iraq, this has not been the case with pan-Arab nationalism that has been dominated by the country's Sunni minority and has historically envisioned Iraq as part of a much larger Arab nation (where Sunni would form the majority population). In the original pan-Arab ideology, this larger nation should unite what the colonizers had once artificially divided.

The Iraqi Baath party and Saddam Hussein's own brand of pan-Arabism reformulated a national narrative which placed ancient Mesopotamia at the beginning of a continuous 'Semito-Arab' civilization (Abdi 2008), 'to give Iraqis a sense that they were the most "civilised" Arab people' (Davis 2005: 273). The Baath party in Iraq launched a major 'Project for the Rewriting of History' in the 1970s and 1980s putting unprecedented, massive, oil-derived resources into archaeological excavations and museums, archaeological journals and conferences, and Mesopotamian-themed cultural festivals, among other schemes.

An important endeavour was the reconstruction of the ancient city of Babylon – much criticized by archaeologists – as a *mise-en-scène* for public events (and for Saddam's palace): the bricks that went into the reconstruction works bore Saddam's name in inscriptions reminiscent of those of ancient Mesopotamia. Plenty of popular icons represented Saddam as a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. His genocidal, rapacious regime of lawlessness and brutality was thus dressed up in Mesopotamian gear. A similar heritage politics, though much less extensive (with little oil rev-

enues), characterized Syria's Baath party too (Valter 2002).

A key point I want to make here is that this earlier use of archaeology resonates in IS acts, which explicitly cite the Prophet Muhammad's deeds but refer to Saddam Hussein's as well. This is all the more plausible if we consider that IS, while it originated from al-Qaeda in Iraq, has absorbed and monopolized the Sunni resistance and with it many former Iraqi Baathist officials who constitute an important part of its middle and upper cadre and who are surely familiar with the older practices and spectacles of power (Cockburn 2015; Weiss & Hassan 2015).

Analyzing the crucial role of symbolic politics for Syria's Baath party, Lisa Wedeen contends that 'ideologues use spectacles to revise resonant symbols so as to convey current political messages' (1999: 49). As archaeology can be seen as such a symbol, I argue that a politics of 'symbolic reconstruction' is at work also in its ongoing destruction in Iraq and Syria, which appears as the product of a recombinant visual communication bringing together religious and political referents – which need not be mutually exclusive.

In spite of the Baath party's anti-colonial ideology, this mobilization of heritage continued a tradition of the former colonizers, but in the name of national redemption. Post-colonial nationalism in several Middle Eastern countries reproduced colonial discourse and practices in archaeology. For example, the departments of antiquities set up in the colonial period remained largely the same after independence, while Western archaeologists kept on running most archaeological excavations without much change in terms of the division of labour and work patterns (see Daher & Maffi 2014; see also Colla 2007 for Egypt).

Thus, while co-opted into the cultural nationalism of the elites and resignified as a means of national liberation and aggrandizement, the cult of antiquities and of the ancient civilizational past – with its legacy of violence – has a distinctive colonial genealogy. Mesopotamian ruins had been discussed for centuries by Arab writers as objects of marvel and wonder, but it was during the colonial period that they turned into the sites of a specific politics. Then, Near Eastern and biblical archaeology with their focus on the pre-Islamic period and the accompanying discourse of the Middle East as the 'cradle of [Western, Judeo-Christian] civilization' worked as handmaidens to the European colonial project (Abu El-Haj 2001; Bahrani 1998; Bahrani et al. 2011). The colonial discourse established a break between the civilizational past of the Middle East (whose legacy was inherited by the 'West') and the region's perceived contemporary 'decay' as essentially unmoored from, if not radically other to such a great past, thus appropriating, both physically and discursively, local cultural resources (see Meskell 2005).

According to Ann Stoler (2008: 198) 'colonialisms have been predicated on guarding natural and cultural patrimonies for populations assumed to be needy of guidance in how to value and preserve them. This sort of atten-

tion to ruins chronicles a present landscape and people already found wanting'. It is no wonder then that the narrative of rescuing antiquities has resurfaced at key historical junctures: it has been deployed, for example, in US public discourse to legitimize military interventions in Iraq, such as in 1991 and 2003 (Pollock & Lutz 1994; Hamilakis 2009).

The continuity between colonial practice and post-colonial nationalism is made explicit in some commentaries on the destruction of antiquities published in *Dabiq*, the IS online propaganda magazine. In an article significantly entitled 'Erasing the legacy of a ruined nation' the anonymous author states:

> The kuffār [disbelievers] had unearthed these statues and ruins in recent generations and attempted to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity that the Muslims of Iraq should embrace and be proud of. Yet this opposes the guidance of Allah and His Messenger and only serves a nationalist agenda that severely dilutes the walāʾ [loyalty] that is required of the Muslims towards their Lord. (*Dabiq* 8: 22-23)

And further, in a different article on history:

> The various apostate puppet regimes set up by the crusaders after the colonial era all have modified versions of the first flag designed by Mark Sykes, sometimes using three of the four original colors. The 'Arab Revolt' flag was the father of flags that today represent different Arab nationalist states … These jāhilī [ignorant of divine guidance] flags essentially represent the crusaders, their apostate agents, Arab nationalism, and the puppet [regimes] loyal to the crusaders. (*Dabiq* 9: 22)

Building on a long-standing narrative with deep roots in the Arab world, the author of this latter article traces a colonial genealogy for the modern Levant as the product of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 which divided the spoils of the region among the French and the British and ultimately 'Muslims' lands into nationalist states' (*Dabiq* 9: 20). For IS, nation-states such as Iraq and Syria are essentially artificial, spurious entities created by the 'crusaders' or Western colonialists with no consideration whatsoever for local culture and social-sectarian geographies. Yet, this narrative of the 'artificial state' (as if other nation-states were very different) is not new: it not only draws on the hyperviolent 'fantasy of ethnosectarian homogeneity as the foundation of stable statehood' but is also itself of colonial origin, as Sara Pursley (2015) has recently argued.

The history of heritage and archaeology in the Levant is indelibly marked by its interplay with both colonialism and nationalism.[9] From the 19th century onwards, Near Eastern archaeology has been dominated by Euro-American archaeologists, often deeply involved in formal and informal ways in the imperial project as well as in the scramble for antiquities that accompanied colonial rivalries and plundered Mesopotamia while filling Western museums (Bahrani et al. 2011; Malley 2011).

Continuing the 19th-century tradition, it is striking that many early 20th-century archaeologists were at the same time colonial agents who played an important role in both the con-

Fig. 4. *Medal with the emblem of the 1987 Babylon International Festival including images of Nebuchadnezzar and Saddam Hussein.*
Fig. 5. *Iraqi state-sponsored billboard near Mosul, photographed in 1990, showing the seizure of Jerusalem by ancient warriors while modern-day fighters celebrate in the front; Saddam is depicted under the Iraqi flag next to Saladin, who defeated the Crusaders, and Nebuchadnezzar, the Neo-Babylonian king who conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC.*
Fig. 6. *Gertrude Bell at the 1921 Cairo Conference together with, among others, Winston Churchill, then colonial secretary, and T.E. Lawrence as well as other key British colonial officials. At the conference the Kingdom of Iraq was created.*

solidation of European power in the region *and* in drawing the national boundaries of Iraq and Syria – borders that IS dismantled as its first symbolic act. The search for antiquities in the 'cradle of civilization' in the 19th and even in the 20th century helped legitimize the colonial projects of those who claim(ed) to be the true heirs and saviours of these great civilizations and their heritage.

The 'woman who invented Iraq' (Irving 2014) in the early 20th century, Gertrude Bell, a British agent who 'installed a king loyal to the British, drew new borders – and gave us today's ungovernable country'[10] was herself an archaeologist who ran the country's first department of antiquities, promulgated the first heritage law, and set up the Iraqi national museum (Bernhardsson 2005). Lawrence of Arabia who was famous for leading the Arab Revolt and for weaving its flag – the 'father of the [national] flags' stigmatized in the *Dabiq* quote above – was an archaeologist too. In the colonial period, archaeologists and Orientalist scholars were hard to distinguish from the military and colonial administration (see Fig. 6).

In post-colonial times, 'the rot remain[ed]' (Stoler 2008; 200), sustained by the alliance between a (neo-)colonial science – Near Eastern archaeology – and the local national elites, for whom that very archaeology, excavated by foreign missions, provided a key legitimating tool. 'Post-colonial' archaeology in the broader Middle East has been consistent in many respects with the tradition of colonial archaeology (see Bernbeck & Pollock 2004; Pollock 2010; Starzmann 2012). A strong school of Iraqi archaeology had emerged post-independence, with ties to the Iraqist nationalists, but this archaeology was soon to be co-opted into Saddam's project of rewriting history.

Overall, Western archaeologists have continued to dominate the discipline. Until recently, attention has been focused almost exclusively on antiquities and the pre-Islamic period: Islamic layers and material culture, when encountered, have often been bulldozed away.[11] Being involved in the displacement of many local communities as part of major infrastructural development projects such as big dams (cf. Meskell 2005; Mitchell 2002), post-colonial

archaeology reminded many of the 'enmeshment of imperial schemes and national elites, as each disregarded the poor, nature, and the wellbeing of future generations' (Tsing 2005: 223-4, and I would add heritage to this list).

While working in Syrian heritage in the late 1990s, I was deeply struck by the persistence of the colonial order that characterized the work and life of the Euro-American archaeological missions. As in the colonial period, there was a strict, hierarchical division of labour between the archaeologists from the global North and the workers, drawn from the local villages, subjected to exploitative labour conditions (see also Gillot 2010; Pollock 2010; Starzmann 2012). I have personally witnessed the removal, without much consultation, of the old tomb of a local sheikh because it was hindering the inspection of archaeological layers (this incident finally moved me to go and work elsewhere). For many villagers, then, the archaeological ruins represented an ambiguous site – both a source of living and pride, and a site where their subjugation was daily enacted.

Providing a detailed historical analysis of iconoclasm in the Muslim world, Finbarr Barry Flood (2002) has commented on the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001 by criticizing dominant Western media representations of this act as the product of

an unchanging theological attitude peculiar to Islam and of a kind of 'cultural pathology' harking back to the Middle Ages – a narrative that we find again in mainstream media discussions of the destruction of cultural heritage by IS today. According to Flood, we need a historicizing analysis of what are both religious and political acts responding to specific circumstances, as it has been in the past too.

Commenting on the same event, Reinhard Bernbeck (2010) has suggested the possibility of reading this act by the Taliban as a form of negative *Kulturpolitik*, a 'cultural policy' based on the 'excision rather than [the] inclusion of past monuments in the service of a state ideology' (ibid.: 31). These insights can be applied to IS spectacles of archaeological destruction too while taking into consideration the political salience of archaeology throughout Iraqi and Syrian history.

'Ruination' started well before IS's iconoclastic gestures (see Stoler 2008). Archaeological sites in the Levant are imbued with the presence of colonialism and its persisting legacy in the oppressive nationalisms that followed: they are a sign of the ultimate failure of the emancipatory project of the postcolonial nation-state. Their destruction thus emerges as an act of spatio-political production, 'productive of the very identities and agencies

that supposedly bear on it as causes' (Herscher 2010: 7); it emerges as an attempt to 'impose novel forms of order through the production of place' (ibid.: 14), making visible, materializing – even if by a negative act – the power of the Islamic State as a radically new political agent unmoored from the fraught legacy of the past and in fact borne out of its annihilation. We can begin to understand these acts of destruction if we realize that archaeology has worked hard to disseminate the logic of empire and later that of the nation-state, which the caliphate rejects in the name of a truer pan-Islamic, or better, pan-Sunni community.

But the creation of an 'Antiquities Division' by an entity that claims to be building a state should make us ponder. The carefully choreographed public executions staged in Palmyra's amphitheatre – uncannily reminiscent of national festivals in their iconography and the mobilization of youth – points also to the paradox of simultaneous reversal and continuity in the use of archaeology for the obscene display and production of state power in Iraq and Syria. ●

Chiara De Cesari

Chiara De Cesari
University of Amsterdam
C.deCesari@uva.nl

Chiara De Cesari is an anthropologist and Assistant Professor in European Studies and Cultural Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on heritage, memory and broader cultural politics and the ways in which these change under conditions of globalization. She is currently finishing a book titled Heritage and the Struggle for Palestine.

1. https://en.unesco.org/syrian-observatory/ (accessed 29 July 2015). See also the September 2015 special issue of the journal *Near Eastern Archaeology* (78.3) entirely devoted to the cultural heritage crisis in the Middle East, especially the contributions by Michael Danti and Jesse Casana.

2. For how the system works, see Schatz (2015); see also Francis (2015).

3. See also http://theantiquitiescoalition.blogspot.it/ (accessed 20 June 2015).

4. See http://www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/rm/2015/247739.htm (last accessed 28 October 2015).

5. See https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2015/04/22/what-is-isis-media-strategy/. A number of destroyed statues and reliefs in the Mosul Museum seem to be replicas of items held elsewhere, however, the loss – especially for what concerns an understudied aspect of Near Eastern history, namely, the Parthian and Hatrene cultures – appears 'catastrophic' to experts; see https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2015/02/27/assessing-the-damage-at-the-mosul-museum-part-1-the-assyrian-artifacts/ (accessed 23 June 2015).

6. See the UNESCO Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage and Romey (2015). See also http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-ancient-communities-under-attack-isis-s-war-religious-minorities (accessed 23 June 2015), especially the statements by Dr Katharyn Hanson and Hind Kabawat. Also see https://gatesofnineveh.wordpress.com/2014/06/12/mosul-cultural-heritage-under-threat-news-roundup/ (accessed 23 June 2015).

7. http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-ancient-communities-under-attack-isis-s-war-religious-minorities (accessed 23 June 2015), statements by Hind Kabawat.

8. See http://en.unesco.org/news/state-secretary-kerry-and-director-general-bokova-call-end-cultural-destruction-iraq-and-syria#sthash.HhBXXcWA.dpuf (accessed 23 June 2015). The wars in the Balkans in the 1990s and the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia represent an important moment in the development of this discourse linking violence against people to violence against things, with heritage being seen as their surrogate and targeted as such. For example, the tribunal considered deliberate heritage destruction in Kosovo as a war crime, as a 'form of the crime of persecution' (Herscher 2010: 1; see also Gamboni 2001).

9. A good example of the nexus colonialism-nationalism-heritage is Israeli archaeology which has played a crucial role in cementing the power of the Israeli state by refashioning the colonization of Palestinian lands into a project of return to the ancestral Jewish homeland (see Abu El-Haj 2001).

10. Interestingly, in such commentaries we see the narrative of the 'artificial state' resurfacing (of course as the mistaken product of a woman's mind!) that appears to bring together such unlikely bedfellows as IS ideologues and Western pundits (see Pursley 2015).

11. I thank Robin Boast, my discussant at the workshop on colonial ruins where I first presented this paper, for reminding me that archaeology is always a destructive endeavour, with some instances however – as in the case of Near Eastern archaeology – much more 'culpable' than others.

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